

The Origins of Non-Written Administrative Technologies in the Near East:

The example of late Neolithic Tell Sabi Abyad

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During the Neolithic, small geometric-shaped *clay objects* appear across the Near East. It is commonly assumed that from their inception c. 10,000 BC, that *clay objects* acted as mnemonic accounting “tokens”, invented specifically for this purpose, with the meaning held in their shape and size recognised across the Near East for millennia. Recent research demonstrates these commonly held pre-conceptions are largely unsubstantiated for much of the Neolithic period. It is not until the late Neolithic c. 6,000 BC onwards that the earliest evidence for the use of *clay objects* within the administrative sphere of small village economies appears. It is during the sixth millennium BC in upper Mesopotamia that increasing evidence of the use of clay objects as administrative tools appears. Tell Sabi Abyad (north Syria) offers the earliest, and most extensive evidence of this trend. This paper presents data from three discrete zones of settlement at late Neolithic Tell Sabi Abyad. The evidence of tokens, sealings, stamp seals, storage and ritual activity is strikingly similar at each. This critical time period, predating the advent of writing by more than two thousand years, yet with complex villages demonstrating advanced agricultural economies, sophisticated craft production and the beginnings of specialisation demonstrates the need for and potential uses of tokens as accounting tools.