

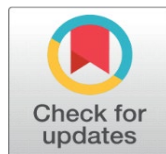
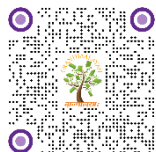


FUNCTIONS AND MESSAGES OF TOKENS & COUNTERS, SEALS, SEALINGS & RELIEFS OF ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA AS REPRESENTATIONS OF NON - LINGUISTIC COMMUNICATION - A SURVEY

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ABSTRACT

There are many ways to communicate non-verbally. Artefacts like tokens/counters, bullae, seals, sealings, figurative representations, reliefs, etc., are as many parts and symbols of non-verbal communication as art, laughter, drumbeats, smoke signals, facial expressions, body postures, appearance, etc. It is a fact that semantic artefacts – objects carrying a meaning – contain no single information since the amount of information that can be obtained from them increases significantly with time. For example, an ear of wheat with a herringbone pattern that stood for cereal communicates information on economy, administration, society, and cognition. This paper identifies and analyses the multi-faceted information communicated by a collection of tokens and counters, seals, sealings and reliefs of Ancient Mesopotamia and surveys them as representations of non-linguistic communication. The functions and messages conveyed by these artefacts are analysed considering their aspects of enumeration, recording, suggestion and symbol for imparting, recording, revealing, demonstrating, or bestowing facts and information in Ancient Mesopotamia.

Keywords: Tokens, Counters, Seals, Sealings, Reliefs, Ancient Mesopotamia, Non-Linguistic Communication, Function Message

1. INTRODUCTION

The use of tokens/counters, seals, sealings, figurative representations, reliefs, hollow clay balls, numerical tablets, etc, displays a complex administrative means of management and organisation. The employment of these artifacts convey a world of untold information and messages without language that eventually resulted in the appearance of writing which can be considered as one of the most interesting and radical novelties of the Uruk period. The process of transforming thoughts into visual symbols and images spanned millennia, as suggested by [White \(1989\)](#) and

[Renfrew \(2001\)](#). While the precise meaning of these early symbols remains speculative, the emergence of writing, broadly defined as a system of visual codes for storing information, marked a significant milestone in human cognitive development. Script and inscribed artifacts played crucial roles as tools for expanding memory capacity and facilitating information exchange across time and space. However, it is crucial to emphasize that understanding the meaning and content of these visual representations, whether in the form of images or words, relies on the presence of a recipient. [Powell \(2009\)](#), 13 aptly stated that "where there is writing, there is a reader," underlining the inherent communicative nature of writing. Consequently, writing is a product of consensus, representing a mutual agreement on meaning attribution. Effective communication hinges on the recognition of the signs used, regardless of whether they represent phonetic elements of language. The specific linguistic attributes of these symbols become secondary to their recognition. For instance, the universally understood symbol 'no smoking' transcends language barriers and is comprehensible to people worldwide [Powell \(2009\)](#), 19.

Mesopotamia possesses not only what may be the first signs of the writing system but also some of the clearest evidence of the non-linguistic communicative system that are precursors to writing. These are available in the form of tokens, counters, seals, sealings, figurative representations, reliefs, hollow clay balls, numerical tablets, etc.

2. OBJECTIVE

The objective of this paper is to survey and analyse the non-linguistic communicative pattern of imparting, recording, revealing, demonstrating, or bestowing facts and information, of Ancient Mesopotamian artefacts in the form of tokens and counters, seals, sealings and reliefs.

3. TOKENS & COUNTERS

Tokens are basically used for record keeping and computation in household and businesses. They come in different shapes and types according to which specific meaning or worth is conferred upon, for the use of private, commercial, or religious purposes [Schmandt-Besserat \(1986\)](#). The use of tokens was first noted by A. Leo Openheim in 1958, at the palace of Nuzi in the 2nd millennium B.C. The system of tokens followed from this time was used to compute and keep records; for example, of animals kept in the herd of the palace. A similar system of recording with tokens was recognised by [Amiet \(1986\)](#) at Susa in the 4th millennium B.C, which according to him stood for commodities with numerical value. For example: a small cone stood for one and a big one for sixty. In the same context, a sheep was represented by a disc with an incised cross.

The Ancient Mesopotamian tokens range from whitish buff to pink and red, grey, and black. Most were made of clay and some of stone. Their common size is 1.5-3 cm. The smallest ones were as small as 0.6 cm and the largest ones were as big as 4 cm. Based on their similarity, quality, colour, etc., the tokens look like they were made in some pottery workshop by skilled artisans. The shapes are of sphere, disc, cone, tetrahedra, biconoids, ovoids, cylinders, bent coil, triangle or crescents, containers, animals, etc, in simple geometric character, which may be called as abstract representations of the commodities represented.

The tokens at Habuba Kabira, situated on the Euphrates, found in a large secular building shows evidence of hearths and food consumption, thus indicating a household, at the same time showing traces of business as revealed by many jar sealings, bullae and tablets. Religious and administrative functions were detected from the temple remains at Jebel Aruda.

The tokens disclose the types and quantities of foods generated and accumulated to survive over the winter months by a typical Iranian Neolithic/Chalcolithic village. By their wide extension and endurance over 4000 years, the tokens acknowledge the emergence of an archaic but efficient administration responsible for managing stored foods in early agricultural communities throughout the Near East. More importantly, the tokens speak of the relation between the management of agricultural communal goods and the invention of counting and metrology, the science of measurement and its application. As agriculture progressed and population expanded, the accumulation of unprecedented wealth challenged the human brain to compute larger and larger numbers and greater and greater quantities of food, livestock, and other goods. From the steady progress of these new mental processes grew the development of arithmetic, writing and civilization.

The use of 'Tally Sticks' in Medieval England, as a recognised form of receipt in the British treasury as late as 1826 stands as a proof that tokens are useful in recording and passing messages though it mostly stood for only numbers. Thus, the tokens which started as a simple kind of bookkeeping device standing for units of goods have come into their own with the advent of large-scale trading at about 3500 when they then served as bills of trading and the like along with the use of the bullae, which was an attempt to restraint fraud, have marks outside on it corresponding with the tokens inside.

4. SEALS, SEALINGS & RELIEFS

The ideology regarding the first steps with the state formation in Mesopotamia and Iran, the earliest states of the world, may be better understood from seals/figurative monuments, etc, than from written sources which are not simultaneous with the whole process. [Amiet \(1986\)](#) considers the images on seals as the reflection of the historical reality of that time. In this context, art becomes an instrument of claims of kingship. [Antonova \(1992\)](#) presented one group of seal presentation of the Uruk-Djemdet Nasr period of Mesopotamia and the Uruk period of Susa with different scenes, together called "scenes of everyday life". During this period, for the first time in world art, the various aspects of people's life in addition to hunting scenes became the objects of art concentrated around the themes of "war and peace".

The images that [Amiet \(1986\)](#) said reflect the historical reality of the Uruk-Djemdet Nasr period of Mesopotamia and Uruk period of Susa are seals depicting scenes of hunting, images of potters and store house workers with vessels which are common. The seals depict granaries with people near them and building images of weavers with their looms, etc. These are frequent depictions while wages of field workers are rarely represented. All these seals are marked out from the Susa C (Proto-Urbain II) period. They date from the time of the first civilizations and are shown to be made by town dwellers for town dwellers which may explain the rarity of agricultural scenes.

As cited by [Amiet \(1986\)](#), in Mesopotamia, in the late Protoliterate period, seals having schematic images indicate mass production owned by craftsmen, herdsman,

etc, which is one reason why the 'scenes of everyday life' are not thought to be connected with religious-mythological notions or cult, though some seals show fantastic figures of creatures in situations that are clearly not everyday ones. He pointed out the difficulty in explaining the presence of animal figures near vessels, especially fantastic creatures. Susa seals show a person beside a two-handled vessel near another person sitting with legs apart, with his hands on two goats standing at his sides. This is interpreted as a priestess performing her duties [Amiet \(1986\)](#). It can be analysed that the people sitting near the vessels are not just potters, but people cleaning vessels for sacrifice, and as such can be regarded as scenes in an abbreviated form or more detailed scenes of sacrifice with many people and objects.

There is some significance in the choice of some objects for seal representations such as pottery and weaving handicraft, which are traditionally produce of offerings to gods. The representations in the Pre-Sargonic seals can be divided into two classes, namely, the ritual and the secular seals. Historical and mythological scenes can be distinguished based on the grounds that the former had no images of gods. So, except in cases where the representation suggests possibility of interpretation in a ritual context, there is no doubt about the legitimacy of interpreting the 'scenes of everyday life' as reflections of real life.

The 'scenes of everyday life' may be understood with the help of an analysis of images with a man of a high rank, distinguished by his clothes and head dress, often at the head of the procession of people carrying offerings. This man may be called the chief-priest, bearing in mind the level of a social development. His activity in the scenes on seals and other monuments is of a ritual action by offering something near a cult building, shooting at beasts of prey, etc, because these animals often participate in rituals.

The study analysed how the 'scenes of everyday life', like all the images on the seals of Uruk -Djemdet Nasr and later periods of Mesopotamia and Iran were perceived by contemporaries as having a particular meaning as a result of the connection of seals with the religious-mythological sphere. [Antonova \(1992\)](#) analysis suggests that the images on the seals of the late 4th and the early 3rd millennium B.C demonstrate the special actuality of myths at that time because the images on the seals have peculiarities, not familiar of the later period.

A typology of seal objects including contest seals and banquet scenes as a re-evaluation of seal data can be identified here. The former one shows scenes of humans or other worldly beings defending domesticated animals against carnivores, animals attacked by other animals, human heroes, demons, etc, and the latter ones showing scenes of banquets with one or more person's being waited upon or drinking, etc. After a review of the context of seals in Early Dynastic III burials at Ur, with examples from the Royal Tombs and Pit X graves, it has been suggested that the shell cylinder seals bearing contest scenes were amulets or insignia associated with the men of the city capable of bearing arms or serving the ruler.

[Rathje \(1977\)](#) initiated a project to show the interrelation between the distribution of seal scenes and artefacts within burials, his main proposition being that the seal scenes were mostly distributed in graves with specific functions within socio-economic systems primarily and secondarily on the basis of personal scene preferences at a period as Early Dynastic III. His study focussed on the seal design subjects, which he thought should correlate in a systematically patterned way with specific types of functional and status marker grave goods, if his proposition is correct. For example, [Woolley \(1954\)](#) report that shows thirty-five burials with seals

and solid gold objects may indicate that the individuals so interred held a special status in access to material resources as well as political and economic power, etc.

Banquet seals are distributed with a wide variety of ornaments and few functional objects, found with much gold, silver and mixed material items, while contest seals occur with few ornaments, but many containers, tools, and weapons, are associated with copper items. This shows the basic differences between them, in relation to questions about hierarchies been deposited during a relatively short period with tight internal correlation in size, material composition and location.

[Winter \(1987\)](#) article throws light on the visual, repetitive, and formulaic arts of the Ur III period which are functional artefacts within the Mesopotamian system. She says that a combined verbal and visual message encoded on one particular set of Ur III seals is a direct consequence of a study of the iconography of Ur III 'royal presentation scenes'.

Studies on seals suggest that the king functioned on a plane, distinct yet parallel to that of the gods similarly represented. There are three descriptive categories of legends on Ur III seals showing seated kings. Usually, a standing individual before the seated king is a part of worship and audience, ritual, and civil petition, sacred and secular, etc, which are not subject to modern divisions. Legends were first systematically added to figural representations on seals in the Early Dynastic III period Ca 2500 B.C.

Although sealings have traditionally been approached from an economic perspective, they are also an important medium of non-written communication. Sealings are the end product of a series of social practices and as such are the material embodiment of agreed identities and relationships between people, objects and events. On the basis of their architectural and artefactual associations, contexts and iconography, it will be argued here that sealings are an important medium for social reproduction and that they can be related to the preparation and organisation of rituals. These rituals, and by extension also the sealings that were produced in this context, played an important role in the legitimation and reproduction of social order. [Jasim & Oates \(1986\)](#)

Identifying sealings, presumably of the parties to the transaction was always found on the clay envelopes, with the recorded form of transaction inside. The discovery of few unbroken clay envelopes led to the suggestion that maybe these documents provide more of recording and storing information than conveying it. In this reality, the non-linguistic modes of communications had several interesting patterns and roles in sending messages of personal statements of ownership as well as of common belief systems.

5. RELIEFS

The significance and intent behind the Warka Vase, measuring 90 cm in height, are conveyed through its three distinct registers. In the initial register, the goddess Inanna is depicted with her enduring symbol—a pair of reed bundles ending in loops and streamers. A priest, in a ritualistic state of undress, presents Inanna with a basket of fruits. In the background, fragmentary remnants suggest the presence of a king and an attendant, with the attendant possibly preparing to offer a tasselled girdle to the king.

The Warka Stele is a commemorative relief showing two scenes of hunting lion, carved in the latter half of the protoliterate period. The hunter's dress is characteristic of a leader by its style. [Antonova \(1992\)](#) analysed that the personage on this seal is the chief priest, a man of high rank, distinguished by his clothes and

head dress. The hunter uses a spear on the upper scene and an arrow in the down one for fighting with the lion.

A study of the text and iconography of the Blau tablets may suggest sale transaction. Both the Blau plaque and the Blau obelisk are representations of human figures, except for the five-line cuneiform inscription on one side of the obelisk. The sale transaction probably dealt with a single field, and the buyer of the field presumably an 'agronomos of the temple household'. The price received by the sellers consisted of the commodities listed on the obverse of the plaque.

The stele of vultures, a Sumerian relief in horizontal registers on both sides of the stone, commemorates the victory of Eannatum, ruler of Lagash, over the state of Umma. He was shown wearing a helmet similar to those found in the tomb of Meskalamdug at Ur, leading his spearmen into battle, driving a chariot at the head of his infantry and afterwards presiding over the ceremonial burial of the dead. The reverse side shows that the victory is symbolically attributed to his god Ningirsu, the warrior god and patron of Lagash. The stele of Ur-Nanshe is a wall plaque carved in relief from Telloh, showing Ur-Nanshe of Lagash carrying a basket of bricks for building a temple, accompanied by his sons and attendants on the side. Down below, he was shown seated before his children, probably talking to them.

6. CONCLUSION

A survey of the cited artefacts displays the function of tokens and counters in recording and enumerating while seals and sealings provided information about certain ideologies and recording on various aspects of life. Reliefs suggest and symbolise important events which shows their success in conveying messages and information with detail without actually using words. Though through words we converse, at the same time, non-linguistic pattern of communication can be imparted, revealed, demonstrated, or bestowed with facts and information through the use of the mentioned artefacts along with many other devices.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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