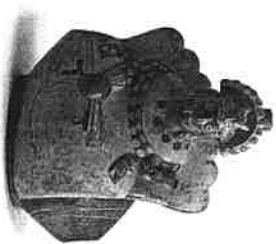


AGENCY

IN ANCIENT WRITING

EDITED BY Joshua Englehardt



UNIVERSITY PRESS OF COLORADO
Boulder

Agency in Death*Early Egyptian Writing from Mortuary Contexts*

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Writing is a way of communicating a variety of messages across boundaries. The most obvious of these boundaries are space and time. The ability to bridge these boundaries was undoubtedly a significant factor in the development of writing, but in the case of Egypt this model can be profitably expanded. In this chapter, I suggest that the mortuary context within which much early Egyptian writing is found indicates a further desire to communicate across the boundary between life and death to maintain the individuality, social position, and agency of certain dead individuals. That writing could function as a key ingredient in the continued functioning of the dead in Egyptian society is not a new suggestion, but that this might have been significant to the very development of writing has not been explored.

The concept of an afterlife was of defining importance in ancient Egypt from prehistory throughout the pharaonic era; that it is today the most recognizable factor of Egyptian society is only partly the result of a differential preservation of evidence that has favored the mortuary sphere. The role of Egyptian writing in allowing the dead to access and enjoy this afterlife, as well as in mediating the relationship between the living and the dead, is clear from periods where

writing was well developed. For instance, the relationship among the dead, living, and writing was enshrined in the standardized offering formula starting in the Old Kingdom. This formula, written in hieroglyphic on the offering area of a tomb, ensured perpetual offerings of tangible things, predominantly food and drink, for the deceased. The writing served both as a text to be recited by living offerers at the tomb and as an insurance policy: in the absence of physical offerings, the words themselves could ensure some level of provision for the dead (Collier and Manley 1998, 36). It is also significant that the formula itself explicitly links the deceased to the king; the formula itself starts with "an offering that the king gives." A search for permanence beyond the threshold of death has also been seen as a principal motivation behind the development of autobiographical tomb inscriptions in the Old Kingdom, one important feature of which was again to stress the favor shown by the king to the deceased official (Baines 1983, 577). Both these genres had a long history in Egyptian mortuary practice, but there are echoes of related uses of Egyptian writing during earlier phases of its development.

Although it is not clear that continual offerings were part of very early mortuary practice, maintaining both personal identity and social position, particularly in relation to the king, was an important factor in the location, architecture, and provisioning of tombs from at least the earliest period of Egyptian kingship, hundreds of years before the Old Kingdom. Writing, which was extremely restricted during this period, was another means of demonstrating and perpetuating both individuality and social relations; personal names and royal names are the two earliest types of writing in private elite tombs. This practice suggests that the need to balance individual personhood and social position in death was in place very early. Although this is clearest for private individuals in the First Dynasty, starting ca. 3000 BCE, it can be suggested with somewhat more caution for kings in earlier generations. This argument rests on the contexts as much as the content of early inscriptions.

To show that specifically mortuary uses were fundamental in the early stages of Egyptian writing's development, I will first present a brief discussion of the contexts within which early writing in Egypt has been found. Following this, I will lay out what I am *not* attempting to do in this discussion and define what I understand "writing" to be in these contexts. I will then turn to specific examples of inscriptions in mortuary contexts and how they allow us to see the continued agency of the dead.

THE CONTEXTS OF EARLY EGYPTIAN WRITING

The formative stages of Egyptian writing in the last centuries of the fourth millennium BCE are best represented in mortuary contexts. Rock-cut inscriptions from the period are also increasingly well-known. Almost certainly, there

are extensive missing contexts, and as such, we remain unsure of the totality of writing's uses at this time. Absolute and even relative dating of many early inscriptions can be difficult except in cases where associated artifacts can be analyzed in terms of well-defined typologies or, somewhat later, when recognizable royal names are present in the inscriptions starting in the Protodynastic period (ca. 3100–3000 BCE). Both rock inscriptions and mortuary inscriptions are currently the subject of intense and profitable work. It is not my goal here to offer a comprehensive survey or discussion of early Egyptian writing and its various contexts and uses. Rather, I will focus on one context—mortuary—and one potential way to understand the inclusion of writing in this context, that is, the continued social agency of the dead. I do not offer this as an exclusive way of understanding these inscriptions themselves or their presence in mortuary contexts. Early writing in general and early mortuary inscriptions in particular have often been the subject of discussion with regard to their administrative and/or ceremonial functions, and neither function is incompatible with a role for writing in communicating across the boundary of death. To the contrary, understanding mortuary uses of writing may make clearer that administrative and ceremonial functions could be linked, particularly as the need to maintain social position, so intimately linked to place in the administration, appears to be key in the ritualized context of the tomb.

In looking at some of the known mortuary uses of early writing, I will address context on two levels. First, I am interested in the sites, and components of sites, from which early writing is known. This takes into account not only the presence of writing in cemeteries but also the practical exclusion of writing from graves that are not royal or of people closely associated with kings. Even accepting that we are probably missing contexts in which writing was used, the tilt to the extremely high elite is generally thought to reflect the original uses of script; the limitation of literacy and, to a lesser extent, inscribed objects to the high elite is a fairly constant feature of later Egyptian culture (cf. Baines 1983). Second, at a more minute level of context, I will look at the specific media used for writing and the objects to which writing is attached. Unlike the restricted types of monuments and sites associated with writing, the artifacts associated with script are, in fact, notably diverse.

In this case I will quite intentionally *not* examine in detail what early inscriptions say in the sense of what words are used. Discussions of reading are both extensive and inconclusive, and I hope that by moving away from a focus on specific meaning I will be able to better approach the more general question of the reasons writing is found where it is found. I will also not attempt to catalog every known instance of early Egyptian writing—an extremely difficult task as the corpus continues to grow rapidly—but will instead focus on a limited body of material from two periods, separated by approximately 200 years. The first period is the Nagada IIIa, dated to approximately 3300 BCE; this is the

time from which the first examples of signs universally agreed to be writing are found. The only substantial corpus of material from this period was found in the late 1980s in tomb U-j at Abydos in southern Egypt. The excavation of this tomb was undertaken by the German Archaeological Institute, Cairo, and has been extensively published and discussed in the secondary literature (Dreyer 1998; virtually every discussion of the development of Egyptian writing since the discovery of the tomb has incorporated its evidence). The second period I will consider is the early First Dynasty, ca. 3000 BCE, at which point writing is more common and many more words are legible to us because they are related to more fully developed hieroglyphic writing.¹ Even in this period, however, the recovered contexts of Egyptian writing are extremely limited, with a majority of known inscriptions coming from mortuary contexts and concentrated at the very highest elite level of society.

DEFINING EGYPTIAN WRITING

To demonstrate that early writing can be seen in part as a conscious projection of power and relationships from this world into the next, it is necessary first to define early writing. This is not an easy task; the earliest inscriptions are short, they utilize words but not grammar, and their meaning is often open to debate. Nonetheless, it is generally accepted that writing is present in tomb U-j. The discrete, representationally based signs in the inscriptions found in tomb U-j can be considered part of a writing system because they recur in conventionalized form without substantial variation in multiple iterations (variation in direction is immaterial as later hieroglyphs can be written either left to right or right to left), do not appear to refer to the objects (such as birds) that they are representations of, are found in different orders and combinations using the same signs, and in some cases are recognizably similar to later hieroglyphs. Indeed, the corpus of signs here and the regular way in which they are used have led scholars to conclude that they cannot belong to the first stage of Egyptian writing, which must be somewhat earlier (a discussion and references can be found in Baines 2004, 154).

One complicating factor in defining early Egyptian writing is locating the dividing line between art and writing. Not only is the script representationally based, but contemporary iconography also seems to encode specific meanings, although not necessarily specific words. Writing also comes into being at a time when representational art was in a stage of rapid development and codification. Which symbols are words, which are iconographic, and is it important to distinguish between the two? I hope to show, as a subsidiary point to my main argument, that although it is possible to identify the two types of symbols, they are extremely closely intertwined and should be considered in conjunction with one another. Writing and representational art were used by the same people;

we know of them from the same contexts, often the same objects; and the messages they convey seem to be related. This is true not only of monumental inscriptions such as those on slate palettes, which Baines has described as "an emblematic mode of representation (or textual encoding) that stands between normal representation and writing" (Baines 1983, 576), but also of media such as seal impressions, which can be more closely connected to immediate communication. This should not surprise us: the close relationship between writing and image is well documented from later periods and was clearly something the Egyptians celebrated and played with. That play between text and image was always a part of hieroglyphic writing. Hieroglyphs as a script do not exhibit some of the characteristics noted by Smith (this volume) as characteristic of script development; for instance, hieroglyphic Egyptian never sees a decline in pictographic elements or the imposition of a standard direction of writing. These changes do characterize the more cursive hieratic that was probably in use almost as early as hieroglyphic writing but was used in different contexts. The difference in development between hieroglyphic and hieratic scripts that always left the former more closely related to representational art is relevant to the continued employment of hieroglyphs in ritualized settings such as the tomb. This is true precisely because some images that are not words in tombs were used in ways that parallel and supplement writing. The blurriness of the boundary between text and image was deliberately maintained.

ABYDOS TOMB U-J

The earliest-known uncontested examples of writing from ancient Egypt come from tomb U-j at Abydos, dated to approximately 3300 BCE (Figures 4.1 and 4.2). This tomb was found in 1989 by Günter Dreyer and Ulrich Hartung and lies in a cemetery that had been used only by the high elite for centuries. By the time of tomb U-j the cemetery was so exclusive that it appears only one tomb was built at a time, implying a single individual per generation was accorded burial here and thus, presumably, was to be counted as the sole head of the social hierarchy for the locality or the region. This exclusivity, in conjunction with the architectural complexity of tomb U-j, the wealth of the associated grave goods, and the presence of some iconographic elements that may be linked to later kingship, has led the excavators of the tomb to dub its owner a king (Dreyer 1998).² The tomb was disturbed but not ransacked. Its interpretation is complicated by the fact that no other tomb in Cemetery U had contents nearly as well preserved, nor were previous or immediately subsequent tombs as architecturally complex, meaning that U-j stands as something of a disconnected monument.

Notable in the U-j corpus are the utilization of varied media for inscriptions and the fact that the content of the inscriptions seems in some ways linked

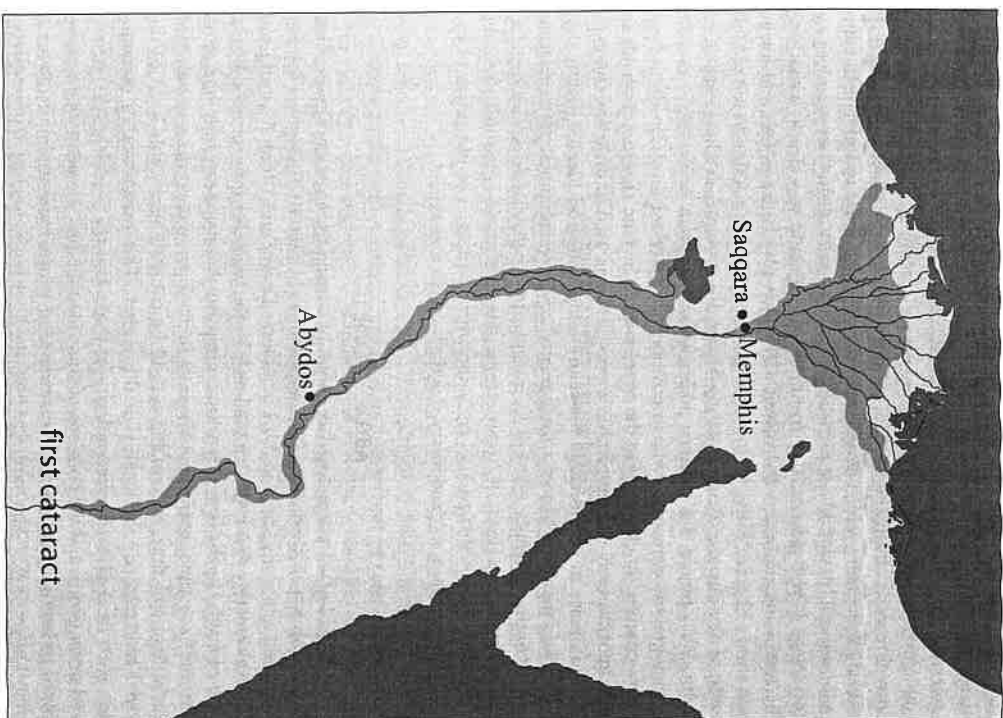


FIGURE 4.1. Map of Egypt showing the location of sites associated with early examples of writing

to the medium employed. This means that there is an interaction between the artifact inscribed and the words of the inscription; together they communicate a more complicated message than either would alone. This is further made clear

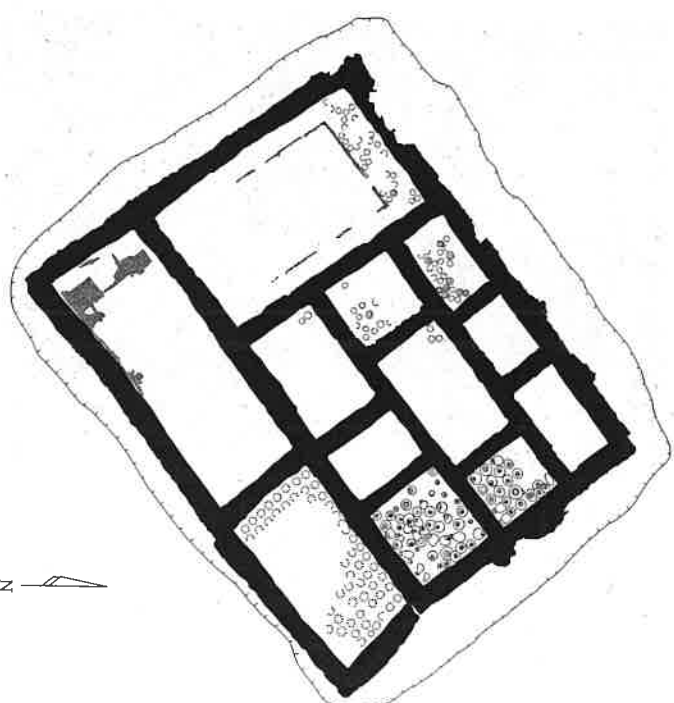


FIGURE 4.2. Plan of the subterranean chambered tomb U-j at Abydos, dated to approximately 3300 BCE. This tomb had preserved remains of inscriptions on multiple media. These inscriptions are the earliest agreed-upon examples of Egyptian writing. Plan based on work by the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Kairo.

by the distribution of types of inscribed goods throughout the tomb; some are found in some places and others elsewhere, with very little overlap.

Three media with inscriptions or iconographic images are known from U-j: incised small tags, ink on ceramic vessels, and mud seal impressions. The inscriptions utilize a fairly extensive corpus of signs, using them both singly and in larger groupings. Some signs occur in one medium but not the others. The most discussed type of inscription is that on ivory or bone tags (Figures 4.3 and 4.4). Although some tags are blank, most have inscriptions that are numbers or, presumably, words. As the combinations and orders of signs are variable, it has been proposed that the system behind their utilization can be

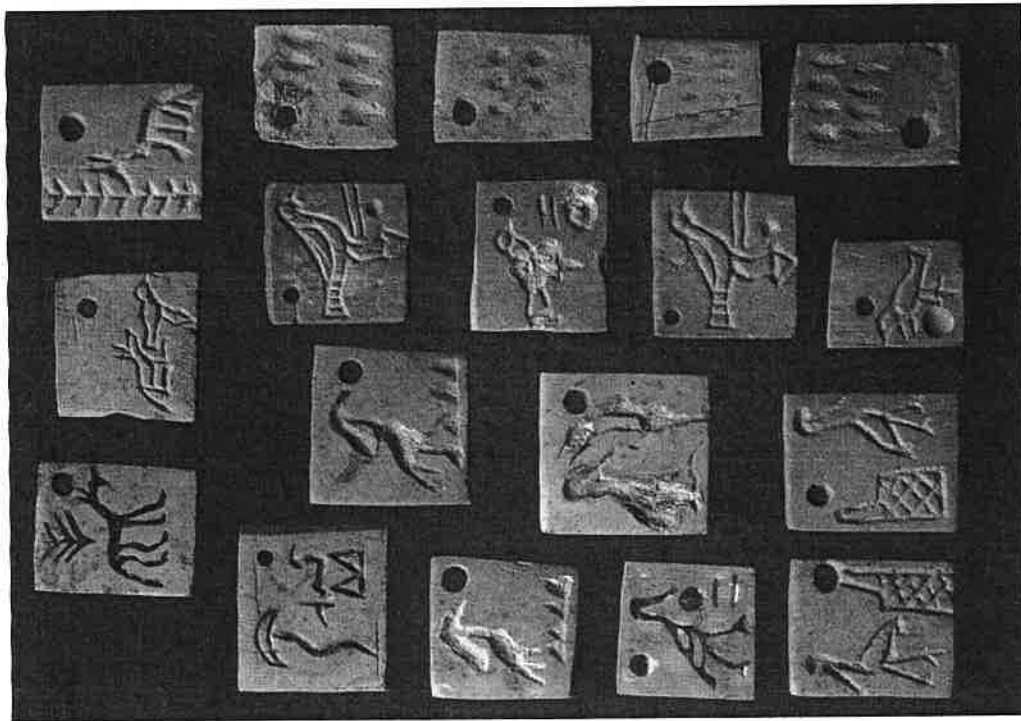


FIGURE 4.3. Examples of the ivory and bone tags found in the southern chamber of tomb U-j. The illustrated tags include both the numeric type and those employing signs in variable combinations. Photographs courtesy of Günter Dreyer and the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Kairo.

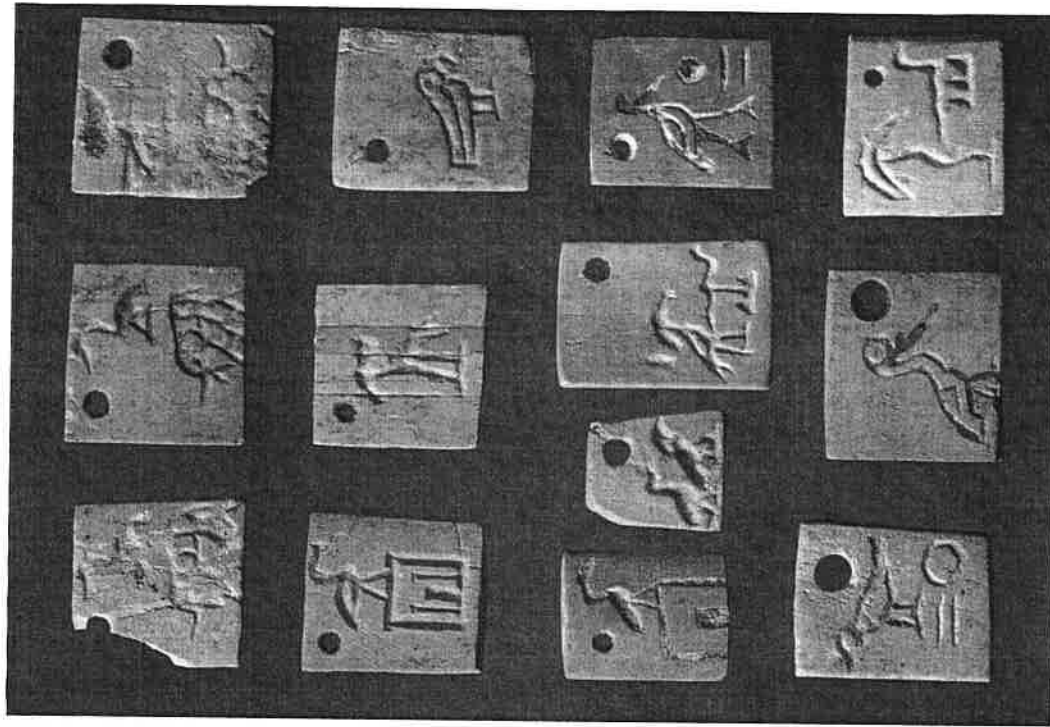


FIGURE 4.4. Further examples of ivory tags from the southern chamber of Tomb U-j. While this is the earliest concrete evidence of Egyptian script, it seems evident from the systematic way signs are employed that this is not the first stage of the development of writing. Photograph courtesy of Günter Dreyer and the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Kairo.

properly understood as a script (Baines 2004, 157). It is generally accepted that the words recorded on the tags are nouns, and the greatest consensus sees them as indicating locations, perhaps places from which either the tags themselves or the goods to which they were attached came (Dreyer 1998, 113–18; Wengrow 2006, 203). Attempts to read royal names in the inscriptions are not universally accepted, and no argument has been made that they represent types of goods. The tags are very small, a centimeter or two to a side, and are drilled at one corner perhaps so they could be attached by a cord to artifacts. We have approximately 150 tags, but we have none of the artifacts to which they belonged. The tags were concentrated in the southern chamber of the tomb (Dreyer 1998, 113–36), suggesting that the artifacts they were attached to were intentionally separated from other goods.

Some indications of the means of the tags' production have been identified. Some scholars have argued for distinguishing different hands on the basis of variability in the formation of some signs, suggesting that we have multiple authors represented (Kahl 2001, 111). Furthermore, many of the tags seem to have been "mass-produced": a longer strip of ivory was inscribed with many signs, and these were then separated into individual tags by scoring and breaking the ivory (Dreyer 1998, 137).³ These two likely facts combined—different authors but also some production in a single time and place—must figure in our assessment of these objects. One suggestion is that the objects receiving tags were labeled in an intermediate stage of collection, not at the point of production (unless numerous items came from each place, we would not expect the tags to have been mass produced at the point of production), but before they were collected as a single group (in which case we might assume a single administrator would have labeled everything). If these rather large underlying assumptions are correct, it could be argued that nothing intrinsic to the object or its initial collection requires it to be labeled; the labeling is necessary during the assemblage into a larger group. The known use of the group is in a grave, where the only person who will have access to it is the deceased. That the deceased was not static but rather was expected to continue to interact with the goods in his tomb is quite clearly shown by the provision of slits that serve as model or notional doorways leading between rooms of the tomb. Although they are too small for a living human to pass through, it is difficult to explain these slits as anything other than doors for the deceased to move around his tomb, which Dreyer and colleagues have interpreted as a model house (Dreyer 1998, 6–7).

The second artifact type bearing inscriptions from U-j is the ceramic vessel, in this case mostly storage jars with wavy handles (Figure 4.5). These bear signs, some of which are found in the tag sign corpus and some of which are not. The signs are post-firing inscriptions in ink and tend to be more cursive in nature than the tag inscriptions. A few signs are predominant in this group,

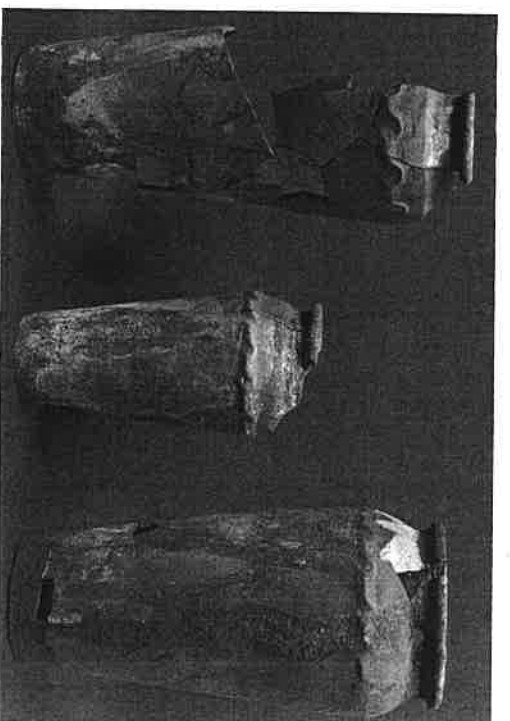


FIGURE 4.5. Ceramic jars with scorpion inscriptions from tomb U-j. Photographs courtesy of Günter Dreyer and the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Cairo.

most notably scorpions. There are over 100 inscribed jars, stored in the two northwest chambers of the tomb. No other Nagada IIIa ink inscriptions are known. There is nothing to indicate at what point the jars were inscribed, save that it was after firing.

The final category of inscribed artifact from U-j is a bit more difficult. Numerous mud jar stoppers have been found here, sealed with cylinder seals. There are impressions from several different seals, all of which are broadly similar. They contain a central plaque area with one or more signs, surrounded by a patterned area (Hartung 1998, 187–217). The pattern can be composed of geometric shapes, animals, or other signs singly or in pairs. The pictures in the central plaque are most often understood to have no word values. It has been suggested that the formal organization of elements on these seal impressions indicates an encoding of information that is at the same time not writing; possibly the uniqueness of each seal is indicative of ownership (Kemp 2000, 234). They utilize a limited corpus of depictions and organize these in ways that apparently have internal logic. Like the tags and sealings, they combine in different ways some of the same elements and were attached to grave goods. I agree that the seal impressions from U-j are unlikely to be writing in the sense of indicating words. But I do think that they were intended to communicate defined messages that depended simultaneously on the symbols employed,

their arrangement with reference to one another, the goods to which they were attached, and—in their final context—the distribution of those goods in the grave. The only person with access to the entirety of this complex message was the deceased himself.

Most of the sealings have been found in connection with a type of jar most often understood as being of Canaanite origin. Although there is some disagreement about the manufacturing location of these jars, the little study of the seals' material that has been done unambiguously indicates that they were made of Nile mud. Petrographic study of the pots led to the conclusion that they were unlikely to have been manufactured in the Levant, and the authors of the study suggested they were, in fact, Egyptian imitations of Levantine forms (Porat and Goren 2001). Neutron activation analysis of the vessels showed the most likely origin for the clays to be the Levant (McGovern 2001). The later study included a test of the sealing mud and concluded it was Egyptian. Further study of these vessels and of clay and temper sources in both Egypt and the Levant is clearly necessary to determine with more certainty the origin of the jars, but the origin of the sealings seems secure. Thus, it is possible that the jars and their contents were imported from the Levant, but the act of labeling them occurred in Egypt—the emphasis in labeling thus being on their collection more than their manufacture or place of origin. This information may lend support to the suggestion that the ivory tags were also placed on their associated artifacts after the point of production and that it is the gathering of the material as much as the material itself that required labeling. If anything, this suggests a reading of the importance of the seals and tags that places them solidly between the supposedly separate poles of administration and ceremony proposed by Postgate, Wang, and Wilkinson (1995). They may best be seen as the marking of goods at their time of collection by the administration for use in the ritualized burial of the king. Administration and ritual are not separate in early Egypt. As such, arguing that these inscribed materials continued to allow the deceased inhabitant of tomb U-j to function in the afterlife in ways similar to those he enjoyed in life complements rather than contradicts an understanding of the same inscriptions having simultaneously administrative and ceremonial functions in life.

FIRST DYNASTY INSCRIPTIONS IN MORTUARY CONTEXTS

All three types of inscriptional material seen at U-j are also present in the First Dynasty (ca. 3000–2890 BCE). All are more complex in their utilization of signs. As they are numerous, I will not go into detail about the artifacts themselves but will confine myself to discussing their contexts.

Tags, inscribed pots, and seal impressions in the First Dynasty are found not only in association with the royal graves at Abydos but also in association

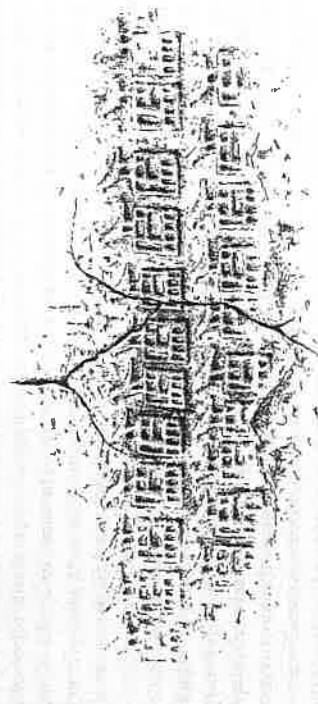


FIGURE 4.6. Photograph and drawing showing the repeated serekh of King Aha of the early First Dynasty. This example comes from a cylinder-seal impression on a jar stopper from a subsidiary grave at Abydos. Photograph by Jason Goodnum; drawing by Krisztilán Vértics.

with private tombs. The royal tombs are very close to Cemetery U Abydos and in some ways constitute a continued tradition of the burial of rulers in this place (Bestock 2009). There is no question at this point that we are dealing with royalty. The individuals buried in these tombs took the title “Horus” and wrote their associated name within a device called a *serekh* (Figure 4.6); Horus is one of the titles associated exclusively with kingship for the next three millennia. The first appearance of the serekh dates to approximately 3100 BCE; its form was regularized over the course of a few generations in what is now often called “Dynasty 0,” in acknowledgment of the fact that kingship as an institution went through a period of rapid growth at this time. The individuals who received serekhs appear first to have been kings only in southern Egypt, but by the early

First Dynasty (ca. 3000 BCE), if not a generation or two earlier, Egypt appears to have been politically united under these individuals. Unsurprisingly, the tombs of these kings have been one of the major sources of inscribed material from the First Dynasty, but as they add little to the interpretation of the presence of writing sketched above concerning tomb U-j, they will not be considered here. The non-royal tombs of the First Dynasty that have yielded extensive inscribed material are of two types, both of which, although belonging to private individuals, are intimately linked with the emerging institution of kingship.

The first of these types of private tombs belongs to people believed to have been the highest administrators; these tombs are located in the cemeteries near Memphis, the capital of the country that was founded either immediately before or during the very early First Dynasty. The majority of these tombs are found at Saqqara (Figure 4.1). These massive tombs are built of mud-brick on a rectangular plan with complex patterns of niches on all four of their faces; this form is reminiscent of the serekh sign, which itself almost certainly represents a type of monumental niched-facade architecture. The mastaba tombs of the Memphite cemeteries were extensively stocked with goods, including luxury objects and furniture carved out of ivory, stone vessels, and pottery vessels. Both the tombs and the goods in them can best be seen as gifts from the king to these individuals; in fact, their size and opulence meant that the original excavator of the Saqqara tombs considered them the "real" royal tombs, consigning the previously excavated Abydos tombs to the place of cenotaphs (Emery 1939). This view has been almost entirely rejected by numerous scholars, starting with Barry Kemp (1966, 1967) and continuing through the most recent work of David O'Connor (2009). Although now considered erroneous, Emery's interpretation of these tombs as royal is still of interest because it indicates the extreme size and importance of these tombs, as well as their many connections to kings, including the common presence of royal names on artifacts in them.

The second group of graves containing such inscribed objects is usually considered subsidiary. These graves are quite small but were clearly prestigious: they cluster around the royal tombs and mortuary temples of the First Dynasty at Abydos. Subsidiary graves are also found around some of the large elite tombs at Saqqara and the other Memphite cemeteries, where they are fewer in number and less often associated with inscribed material. The people buried in subsidiary graves around the royal monuments seem to have been of high status and may constitute the personal retinue of the king. Strong circumstantial evidence suggests they were sacrificed to accompany the king into the afterlife (Bestock 2009; Petrie 1925).

The relationships between the king and these two groups of people—the high administrators and those personally close to the king—thus seem to have been maintained into the afterlife. This is demonstrated, in part, by the location of the tombs—with administrators buried near the seat of administration and

his personal retinue buried near the body of the king—and in part by means of the objects in the tombs, many of them inscribed and many of the inscriptions bearing the king's name (see, e.g., Figure 4.6). The relationships thus maintained are far from equal but do seem mutually dependent. The move of writing and royal iconography out of purely kingly contexts does not indicate a lessening of royal power and prestige but rather shows that the functions of kingship at both the practical and ceremonial levels, both in life and in death, are now complex enough to require the participation of a fairly large and diverse group of people.

Remarkably, there is slight evidence from one of the elite mastabas at Saqqara that the very act of writing, and thus its importance for defining not only goods but also scribes within the emergent royal system, was considered to have a place in the grave and the afterlife. Tomb S3505 had—among a multitude of inscribed objects of many types—at least five blank perforated wooden tags and what appeared to be a blank roll of papyrus (Emery and Saad 1938). If indeed these objects are the tools of the trade of a scribe, known from his tomb's size, location, and wealth to have been a member of the high elite of the First Dynasty, then we may extend the notion of script as enabling individual agency in the afterlife to include the process as well as the product of writing.

In addition to tags, pot inscriptions, and seal impressions, there are several other inscribed media from the First Dynasty. Almost all of these are exclusively associated with the royal, administrator, or subsidiary graves. There is one type of inscription in particular that I would like to end with, because it lends support to my argument that one use of early inscriptions was intentionally mortuary. Many tombs in the First Dynasty, royal and non-royal, were provided in some form with the name of the tomb occupant. This was sometimes true of labels and seal impressions, which could contain the name of both the king and an administrator, most often probably the tomb owner. In most cases in which a specific tomb can be associated with a particular individual, names are known from stelae (Figure 4.7). More than 100 such stelae are known from the royal and subsidiary graves, always in stone, quite fine in the case of royal tombs and quite crude in the case of subsidiary graves.⁴ It is not clear if these were placed in the graves themselves or were above ground locations for the living to present offerings to the dead, but most scholars assume that they were above ground, as were later stelae that served as locations for cult offerings from the living to the dead.

The stelae are not, however, the only way that names were attached to graves. Sixteen of the subsidiary graves around the tomb of Djef, third king of the First Dynasty, have names written inside the graves in red paint. None of these graves had stelae associated with them (Petrie 1900, 8, plate LXIII). A name on a wall inside the grave cannot have been the location of offerings by the living. It is conceivable that the painted names were labels, telling the living where to bury whom at the time of the mass funeral. Nevertheless, this

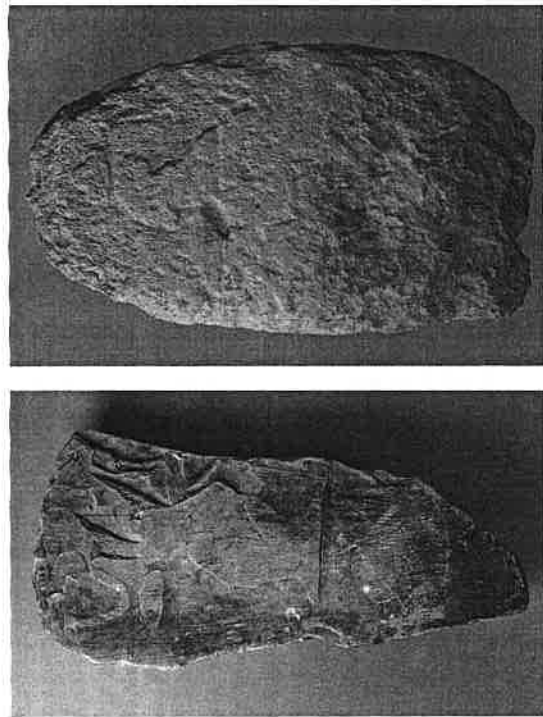


FIGURE 47. Two private stelae from subsidiary graves adjacent to the First Dynasty royal tombs at Abydos (OIM E5869 and OIM 5865). Photograph courtesy of the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago.

seems far less likely to me than that the painted names are related to the stelae, and that both were intended to allow the eternal continuation of the deceased's name. I suggest that the writing of the names on the graves' walls creates a permanent link among the location of the grave, the body of the person in it, and his name. The grave and its contents thus preserve not only the deceased's relationship to the king in the afterlife but also his own identity as an individual; indeed, his continued service to the king must have been predicated in part on the maintenance of his individuality, role, and status.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, I argue that one fundamental use of early writing is not only to reflect in life but also to allow in death the continuity of personhood and social relationships for the king and high elite of Egypt. This is more fully accomplished by using writing and iconography together; the separation between the two is anachronistic. That personhood and social relationships could and should be maintained in the afterlife is a highly visible and fairly static element

of Egyptian culture in succeeding millennia. By examining the contexts of early writing, I believe we can identify this theme as early as we can identify writing.

Writing thus sits at the nexus of two strands that were emerging as inseparable in nascent Egyptian kingship and high-elite culture: the physical control of goods and people and the ideological role of the elite in life and also in death. Our understanding of the rise of the Egyptian state and of writing depends on identifying the multiple uses of writing and seeing these uses as complementary. Some of the distinctions we draw between administration and ceremonial display, and between life and death, appear not to have been such stark contrasts to the early Egyptians. What is clear is that writing was one means by which dead Egyptians continued to exercise agency.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My thoughts on this subject have been greatly inspired by the writings of John Baines, one of the most perceptive and balanced commentators on early Egyptian writing; if I have misunderstood or misrepresented him at points, it is entirely my fault. Of special note is his recent and much more comprehensive overview of the social and functional contexts for early Egyptian writing and its antecedents (Baines 2007). Additional thanks to Kathryn Howley and Simon Sullivan for editorial and bibliographic help with this chapter.

NOTES

1. The most extensive survey of Early Dynastic writing remains Kaplony (1963); the degree of disagreement that persists regarding many of his readings indicates the difficulties that remain in translating inscriptions from this period.
2. Not all elements of this argument are universally accepted; for instance, David Wengrow has challenged the interpretation of an ivory object as the head of a scepter, seeing it instead as an adze (Wengrow 2006, 202). Although the specific title and name of the individual for whom U-j was built and his relationship to the later institution of kingship may be matters of debate, his uniquely high status for his time is not.
3. Further discussion of this potential mass production is given by Wengrow, who does not necessarily see such a practice as indicative of an extensive administrative system at the time (Wengrow 2006, 206).
4. Kaplony gathered the examples known (Kaplony 1963); relatively few stelae have been found since. Geoffrey Martin (2003) is currently systematically studying the private stelae of Abydos.