

## An Artifact Speaks • Artifact Information Sheet

**Artifact Name:** Mesopotamian Tokens

**Time Period of the Original:** c. 8000-3700 BCE

**Culture/Religion Group:** Ancient Mesopotamia

**Material of the Original:** Clay

**Reproduction?** Yes



### **Background Information:**

This information is summarized from the work of Denise Schmandt-Besserat at the University of Texas as written up in her books *How Writing Came to Be* and *Before Writing*.

As farming became the more common way of life in Mesopotamia, plain clay tokens began to be used as representations of specific quantities of common commodities, such as one sheep, a small amount of grain, or a jar of oil. They could be used to represent a contract of goods bought and sold or a record of gifts given at a temple or palace. Around 3500 BCE, new, more complex tokens with incised designs were added to those already in existence. Two methods were devised to prevent tampering with sets of tokens so that the records they represented could remain intact. One method was to pierce the tokens, string them together, then seal the ends of the string with clay that was marked by a cylinder seal\*. The other method was to seal the tokens in a clay envelope. Since the tokens could not be seen once they were in the envelope, the habit began of impressing each token into the outside of the envelope before placing it inside.

It was difficult to make a clear impression of the more complex tokens, so the recordkeepers began drawing the designs of the tokens onto the clay envelope. Over time, the recordkeepers realized that if the clay was fired hard, making it impossible to change the drawings, the tokens inside were unnecessary. The record became the drawings themselves. Eventually, the drawings evolved into signs that became cuneiform writing.

The tokens in this *An Artifact Speaks* box are a combination of plain and complex varieties and represent the following items:

#1 = one ingot of metal

#2 = (one?) sheep

#3 = one garment

#4 = a legal decision

#5 = a length of cloth

#6 = rope(?)

\*A cylinder seal is a stone or shell that has been formed into a cylindrical shape and carved around the outside with a unique picture or picture and text combination. This unique carving served as the owner's signature when rolled across a cuneiform tablet.

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## Sources:

- Besserat, Denise. *How Writing Came About*. Abridged ed. Austin, TX: U of Texas, 2006. Print.
- Besserat, Denise. *Before Writing*. Austin: U of Texas, 1992. Print.
- Damen, Mark. "SECTION 16: The Origins and Invention of Writing." *USU 1320: History and Civilization*. Utah State University, 1 Jan. 2014. Web. 7 Apr. 2015. <<http://www.usu.edu/mark-damen/1320hist&civ/chapters/16TOKENS.htm>>.
- Hirst, K. Kris. "Clay Tokens: The Neolithic Seeds of Mesopotamian Writing." *About Education*, 1 Jan. 2015. Web. 7 Apr. 2015. <<http://archaeology.about.com/od/mesopotamiaarchaeology/fl/Clay-Tokens-The-Neolithic-Seeds-of-Mesopotamian-Writing.htm>>.
- Peterson, Ivars. "From Counting to Writing." *Science News*. Society for Science and the Public, 8 Mar. 2006. Web. 7 Apr. 2015. <<https://www.sciencenews.org/article/counting-writing>>.