

Reviewed by

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This is an abridged version of volume 1 of Schmandt-Besserat 1992, dealing with the form and function of the small artifacts from the Ancient Near East which, as a result of her work, are now generally known as “tokens”. These objects, usually made of clay, have been unearthed at archaeological sites in a very broad geographic zone stretching from Israel to eastern Iran, and from Turkey to Saudi Arabia. Much more germane to SB’s interests, however, is the chronological setting of the tokens: They derive from excavation levels that represent the beginnings of the agricultural revolution of the Fertile Crescent in the 9th millennium, and they continue to be found, in increasing density, in successive strata dating down to the final, so-called Late Uruk phases prior to the emergence of the proto-cuneiform system of writing ca. 3200 BCE.

In her 1992 publication, SB presented the results of her work on these objects, which began in the early 70s with research on the pre-pottery use of clay in the Near East. That work, compiled as a synthesis of her research and the nearly two dozen technical articles that derived from it, has been received by specialists with some expression of disappointment regarding both form and content (Damerow 1993, Englund 1993, Michalowski 1993, Zimansky 1993, Friberg 1994, Brown 1996; a striking exception was the highly favorable treatment in Scientific American, November 1992, 92–93). Nevertheless, important parts of SB’s writings have rightfully entered the standard and secondary literature on early forms of iconic communication. Based on the archaeologi-
cal record, she has been able to document the existence of what she calls "plain tokens" (undecorated small geometric objects) in Near Eastern excavation levels as early as 8000 BCE; clay objects that continue to be found into levels representing the centuries immediately before the appearance of true writing in Uruk. In the 4th millennium, decorated (in SB's terminology, "complex") tokens — i.e. objects which had been punched through and so probably were hung on a string, and/or had been decorated with varying numbers of incised hatchings — begin to appear; these too generally cease to exist with the emergence of writing. Toward the mid-4th millennium, plain tokens are encased in sealed clay balls ("envelopes"), thus seeming to form contextually meaningful assemblages of accounting tools. These plain tokens are the precursors of the impressed proto-cuneiform signs used for numerical and metrological notations in the earliest texts to represent numbers and measures of products of a redistributive archaic economy. Until the relevant material is published, we should remain skeptical about SB's claim that bulla TF 1136, cited as evidence for the use of these balls until ca. 2600 B.C., is really from Yahya IV B2 (1992:1:144; cf. the present volume, p. 44).

Thus far, a general consensus of opinion in the field tends to support SB's argumentation. However, her efforts to interpret "loose" tokens — including, in my opinion, all "complex tokens" — have been less successful. Archaeological context makes it very difficult to evaluate the true function of all tokens not found in clay balls. Far and away the great majority of such objects from Near Eastern excavations were unearthed or at least recorded with no convincing administrative context; in some cases, they derive from loci that would seem to undermine any argument for their administrative function, e.g. in the graves of children. Above all, SB's claims that "plain tokens" formed part of an interregionally accepted accounting system dating from the neolithic age, and that "complex tokens" were three-dimensional precursors of the first proto-cuneiform pictograms, have led ancient historians and cuneiform specialists to protest that her central theses are forced explanations of phenomena that could have fulfilled a number of other functions (Lieberman 1980, Sampson 1985:57-51, Jasim & Oates 1986, Nissen et al. 1993:11-15, 126-30). Moreover, her discussion of how the concept of number developed in the 4th millennium has at times seemed confused (Damerow 1993, 1996:291-96, 321-54).

Despite the mixed response to SB's earlier work, the present volume represents a successful abridgment. Apparently aimed at a general audience, the book is, thanks to a very successful editing job, technically more satisfying than Before writing. The deletion here of the second volume of the 1992 work, which comprised a catalogue of the more than 8000 objects reported as used in SB's study, detracts little from the value of the publication, since that catalogue had a wholly inadequate form. (Zimansky 1993:515-16 places the total of objects at just over 7400; see also Friberg 1994:486-491. It remains unclear why the information on all presumed tokens was not entered into a simple data base and included on disk with both publications.) SB has now elegantly compressed her earlier presentation and interpretation of plain and complex tokens, as well as of impressed (elsewhere conventionally called "numerical") tablets; she has dispensed with many sections of improbable speculation, making her earlier interpretations into a much more readable and organized whole. She is to be applauded for this effort, which has made available to laymen and specialists alike a concise version of her substantive research.

However, the volume under review still suffers from a remarkable failure to exploit highly relevant data available in American and European collections. It remains a source of bafflement to many that the sealed clay envelopes, whose contents must form the core of SB's thesis, have still not been opened to allow a physical examination of all associated tokens. Eighty of the 130 known balls are intact, and the contents of only five are known with certainty. The tokens within the remaining envelopes represent the most important evidence in any discussion as to the role that tokens assumed in the development of writing — without question, evidence much more crucial in this debate than the thousands of loose tokens that dominate much of Schmandt-Besserat's argument and fill her typologies. Neither the squeamishness of museum officials faced with breaking an artifact, nor the prospect of future tomographic examinations, offers any justification for this clear hindrance of scientific research. Note that the Choga Mish bullae have now been published fully intact (Delougaz & Kantor 1996), and that some few unbroken Uruk and Susa envelopes have been tomographically examined, with less than satisfactory results (Driilhon et al. 1986, Damerow & Meinzer 1995).

Further, a painful gap in the treatment of the developmental stages between the use of clay balls and the first true writing ca. 3200 BCE is evident in SB's use of numerical and ideographic tablets. A possible link between the two groups, described in extenso more than a decade ago (Dittmann 1986:344-45), is offered by a number of numero-ideographic texts from Uruk and Susiana. These texts share with the numerical tablets the characteristics of simple numerical notations and seal impressions; but they include
one (or at most two) of a group of ideograms, common to both regions, which represent discrete objects (sheep, jugs of beer and dairy fats, strings of dried fruits, textile products). Such object designations represent a measured development of archaic writing which, in accord with our expectations, expanded from a registration of quantities and goods in bound numerical notations to a combination of numerical and ideographic signs. This hypothetical earliest stage of writing precludes the need, in a discussion of proto-cuneiform, to posit an involvement of large numbers of complex tokens which were, with few and questionable exceptions (both the so-called oil token and the crescent can be reasonably explained as derived numerical symbols), never enclosed within the critical clay balls. They probably played no substantial role in the explosive ideographic development of the Uruk IV period.

References


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If a review of this book in this periodical is justified, it is probably because of Fischer’s attention to explaining his procedures, to the weight of his scholarship (238 notes in 39 pages), and to the prominent place of linguistic argument in his work. Familiar abbreviations such as “2.pers.pl.voc., IE, Lesb.ack., Dor.ack., Att., Alb., Lat., OPr.ack., OCS, Hitt., Toch. A, Skt.”, are to be found on many pages. A narrative element, characteristic of this genre, is equally pervasive, but perhaps not so conspicuous. F’s conclusion is a modest claim to have interpreted the text of the Phaistos Disk. But I am not really competent to judge these particular aspects of his work; and since no definitive demonstration of the impossibility of even one of the throes of published Phaistos Disk decipherments has appeared, I cannot keep this one from its fellows. (For comments on other decipherment projects, cf. Bennett 1969, 1964, 1968.)

F begins with an analysis, by “the internal method,” of the text of the Disk in the critical edition of Duhoux 1977. (One should now also refer to the recent excellent photographic editions of Olivier 1994 and Godart 1995.) He