INTERFACES

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THE OLDEST WRITINGS, AND INVENTORY TAGS OF EGYPT

Focal Text:
Günter Dreyer's *Umm El-Quaab I—Das prädynastische Königsgrab U-j und seine frühen Schriftzeugnisse* (1998)

Abstract: Günter Dreyer’s *Umm El-Quaab I—Das prädynastische Königsgrab U-j und seine frühen Schriftzeugnisse* presents comprehensively the results of archaeological diggings in the tomb U-j. It also outlines Dreyer’s claim to have discovered the origin of writing. The primary aspect of this review essay is to draw the attention of accounting historians to Dreyer’s book and to the claim therein to have discovered the earliest known writing. Since this discovery is closely connected to an accounting function (though in a somewhat different way from that of the Sumerian proto-cuneiform writing), a review of Dreyer’s book is well justified. Dreyer’s claim is based on a series of small inventory tags (identifying in proto-hieroglyphics the provenance of various commodities) found in the tomb of King Scorpion I (c.3400 B.C. to 3200 B.C.).1 Another aspect of this review is a discussion of the controversy surrounding Dreyer’s claim and the counter-hypothesis of accounting archaeology, which sees in the token-envelop accounting of Mesopotamia the origin of writing.

Acknowledgment: I am obliged to Dr. Günter Dreyer, Director of the German Archaeological Institute in Cairo, for permission to reproduce the pictures in Figure 1, as well as to the publisher, the Verlag Philipp von Zabern, for the consent to translate some passages of this book into English. Further thanks go to Professor John Baines (Oxford University) for valuable advice, and to the Editor, Professor Stephen Walker, and Professor Denise Schmandt-Besserat for helping to shape this essay. Finally, I gratefully acknowledge support from the Faculty of Commerce and Business Administration of the University of British Columbia and from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

1 King Scorpion I belongs to the so-called “predynastic” kings of southern Egypt; about most of whom little is known. However, Scorpion appears to...