



## ABSTRACT SUBMISSION

# The Power of Writing. Cylinder Seals with Pseudo-Cuneiform Inscriptions

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## Abstract

In ancient societies where literacy was a privilege of the few, inscribed objects such as cylinder seals carried significant cultural weight. These objects were more than mere decorative or functional items; they served as carriers of messages, whose meanings varied depending on the audience. While the literate elite could interpret both language and script, the majority of people relied on what might be called “visual literacy”—the ability to understand and decipher the symbolic meaning and social implications of objects within their cultural framework. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the widespread use of cylinder seals with pseudo-cuneiform inscriptions throughout the ancient Near East.

This talk will explore the power of these seals, focusing on their role as objects that combined the appearance of writing with visual symbols understood by all levels of society. Although the inscriptions were often nonsensical or undecipherable, the very presence of writing conveyed authority, legitimacy, or divine sanction. By examining these pseudo-cuneiform seals within their archaeological and social contexts, this paper aims to shed light on their significance as tools of communication, identity, and status, and to demonstrate how their symbolic power transcended the boundaries of literacy in ancient Near Eastern societies.

## Keywords

Levant, Writing, Pseudo-cuneiform, Cylinder seal, Visual literacy

## Session

4. The materiality of inscribed and figurative objects

## Workshop

A16054JL - Beyond Visible Language: Non-linguistic Lives of Cuneiform Writing in Western Asia during the Bronze and Iron Ages

## Type of paper

Oral presentation