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BEER JARS FROM TELL EL-MURRA
GRAVES. SEASONS 2011–2015

Abstract: *Over the five excavation seasons conducted between 2011 and 2015 at the Early Dynastic Tell el-Murra cemetery, 17 graves were discovered along with their pottery assemblages. Nine of them contained vessels which are generally considered to be beer jars. Amongst the 18 examples of this kind of jar, a few types can be distinguished that show an affinity to similar vessels from the other Early Dynastic sites of Tell el-Farkha, Minshat Abu Omar, Buto, Helwan, Abydos, and Kafr Hassan Dawood. These analogies indicate that the Tell el-Murra graves should be dated to the Naqada IIIC2/D period and in some cases an even more precise date can be obtained. In addition, the presence of beer jars within the pottery assemblages of the graves also provides us with information concerning the funerary customs of the inhabitants of the Tell el-Murra site.*

Keywords: *Beer jars; graves; cemetery; Tell el-Murra; Early Dynastic*

Old Kingdom tombs are replete with scenes depicting the brewing of beer using slender vessels (Faltings 1991, 104). Due to their frequent appearance in this kind of depiction, as well as the accompanying inscriptions, archaeologists have named them ‘beer jars’. At the beginning of the 20th century, researchers tried to match the ‘beer jars’ from the depictions with real pottery vessels discovered at Old Kingdom sites (Reisner 1931, 212; Balcz 1934, 4). According to D. Faltings (1998, 209), classical beer jars from this period have a rounded base and a short, vaguely distinct neck. Their surface is rough and irregular, they possess horizontal lines on their rim and they are made of clay with a large amount of temper. Although

the origin of the term ‘beer jar’ was initially linked to Old Kingdom imagery and vessels, scholars later began to use the term with regards to Early Dynastic (1st and 2nd Dynasties) vessels with similar features in terms of morphology, manufacture, shape and surface finish (e.g. Raue 1999; Kroeper and Wildung 2000; Köhler and Smythe 2004). Old Kingdom beer jars evolved from Early Dynastic vessels, which had broad shoulders, a short but distinct neck, a simple or thickened rim and an oval or conical shape. They also usually had scratch marks on the lower part of the body and sometimes possessed an uneven surface, especially on their shoulders. In German, a beer jar is known as a *Biertopf*, *Bierflasche* or *Biergefäß* (Kroeper and Wildung 2000, 19–21, 51–52; Hartmann 2007, 82–97) but in English (especially in older publications) it is termed an ‘offerings jar’ (Petrie 1903, 39; Reisner 1931, 212; Reisner 1932; Reisner 1955; Simpson 1961; Eggebrecht 1974). Indeed, Old Kingdom scenes do seem to suggest that these vessels were not solely beer containers (el-Senussi 2013), but multifunctional (Bourriau 1981, 17; Arnold 1993, 16; Wodzińska 2007, 297; Hawass and el-Senussi 2008, 196).

At Tell el-Murra (Jucha 2009a; Jucha 2010), Early Dynastic beer jars have only thus far been found in a cemetery, located in the southeastern part of the tell (trench S3), which has been explored since 2010.¹ In another area (trench T5), situated in the northeastern part of the tell, settlement remains have been discovered. The pottery material collected so far from these structures includes Old Kingdom vessels (Kazimierczak 2015). During the past five excavation seasons at the Tell el-Murra cemetery (2011–2015), 30 graves have been examined, 17 of which contained pottery vessels (Kazimierczak 2014; Kazimierczak forthcoming). Amongst these, eight contained beer jars. These were graves 2, 7, 12, 18, 19, 23, 27, and 31.

The Early Dynastic beer jars from the Tell el-Murra graves are made of medium quality Nile clay fabric tempered with fine to medium large straw particles and fine to medium quantity sand, as well as rounded quartz. The surfaces are usually red, brown or reddish-brown, but their colour is never homogenous. Most of the beer jars, especially on their outer surface, have yellowy-greyish-black stains and discolorations, which is probably the result of a postdeposition and/or a burning/firing process. In some cases, the remains of a yellowish-white covering are visible on the outer surface. It could perhaps be a kind of self-slip/wash, but mineralogical analysis must

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be conducted in order to confirm this.² All of the beer jars from the Tell el-Murra cemetery were mostly hand-made (especially their base and lower parts) and their upper sections (rims, necks) were probably finished on a slowly turning device.

When considering the beer jars discovered so far at the Tell el-Murra cemetery as a whole, a few groups and types can be distinguished.

Group 1

This first group includes broad-shouldered, conical jars of various height with an angular transition between the neck and shoulder and a flat base. The rims, necks and sometimes the shoulders of these jars are only roughly smoothed. Turning marks are also visible, whilst the surface below the maximum diameter of the vessels has been roughly scraped with vertical or diagonal strokes.

Amongst the beer jars of this group, two types can be distinguished:

Type 1: slender forms with a narrow lower part of the body (grave nos. 2, 12, 18),

Type 2: less slender forms with wide shoulders (grave nos. 7, 18, 19, 23, 31).

This division was made according to S. Hendrickx's (1994, 40) classification of the measurement of vessels. Beer jars with a d/h index (maximum diameter to height)³ lower than 60 were considered to be slender.

The first type contains forms with a simple (direct) or slightly thickened lip-rim, a slightly concave neck and an angular transition between the neck and shoulder. The lower section of the body also narrows towards the flat base and they are slender, with a d/h index lower than 60 (Fig. 1). One small beer jar with the features described above and a simple rim was found in grave no. 2, which was explored in 2011 (Pls. 1: 1, 4: 1). Four other examples of this type, but with a slightly thickened lip-rim, were discovered in grave no. 12 (Pls. 1: 2–5, 4: 2) and two more in grave no. 18 (Pl. 1: 7, 8). These graves were examined in 2013 and 2015 respectively.

The second type is that of a broad-shouldered jar with a slightly thickened lip-rim, a short, slightly concave neck, an angular transition between the neck and shoulder and a flattened base. Beer jars belonging to this type are much wider than the jars mentioned above, with a d/h index higher than 60 (Fig. 1). They also usually have a slightly wider lower section of the body above the base. Two beer jars of this type were found in grave no. 7

² A few beer jar samples have been sent for analysis to IFAO this year.

³ Vessel index $d/h = Md: H \times 100$ (Hendrickx 1994, 40).

Vessel	Measurements (cm)					
	Maximum diameter	Height	Vessel index d/h	Rim diameter	Base diameter	Height of maximum diameter
G2-VC-10	14	24	58.3	8.5	4	18
G7-VC-1	22	34	64.7	9.5	5	23.5
G7-VC-4	23	-	-	10	-	-
G12-VC-1	21	40	52.5	10.2	6.5	30
G12-VC-2	22	40	55	9.7	6.5	30
G12-VC-3	22	38	57.9	9.5	6.5	28.5
G12-VC-4	22	38	57.9	10.5	6.5	30
G18-VC-1	23	35	65.7	11	6	25.5
G18-VC-2	21	35.5	59.1	10	6	26
G18-VC-3	21	35.5	59.1	10.5	5	26
G19-VC-2	25	36.5	68.5	9.9	5.3	24.4
G23-VC-3	22	32.5	67.7	8.9-10.1	5	22
G23-VC-4	22.5	32.5	69.2	9.5	6.5	24
G27-VC-2	21.5	37	58.1	10	rounded	26
G27-VC-3	21.5	36.5	58.9	9	rounded	26
G27-VC-4	-	-	-	-	rounded	-
G31-VC-1	23	-	-	-	-	-
G31-VC-2	22	33.5	65.7	9-12	6	22.5

Fig. 1. Tables with measurements of the beer jars

(Pl. 2: 1), explored in the 2012 season, one in grave no. 19 (Pls. 2: 2, 4: 3), examined in 2014, and one more in grave 18 (Pls. 1: 6, 4: 4). In addition, two pottery vessels found in grave no. 23 (Pl. 2: 3, 4) during the 2015 season can also be termed beer jars and are probably of the type described above with the lip-rim. Both of these jars' preservation was 'complete', but they were crushed, meaning that their measurements had changed. One of the beer jars from grave no. 23 had a hole in its flat bottom. Other probable examples of the same type were discovered in grave no. 31 (Pls. 2: 5, 4: 5), but they had also been crushed, meaning that their original shape and measurements could not be precisely measured.

Beer jars from Tell el-Murra graves 2, 7, 12, 18, 19, 23, and 31 seem to represent earlier types of this kind of vessel, which were typical of the 1st Dynasty (type 59h, Petrie 1953, pl. XIII). They may be compared to pottery from the group of graves in Tell el-Farkha dated to Naqada IIIC2/IIID (Jucha 2012, 84), according to Hendrickx chronology (1996, 62, tab. 7). They show a particular affinity to the group of beer jars with a scraped surface dating to Naqada IIIB–C2/D (Jucha 2008, 134; Jucha 2009b, 52–54). Similarities can also be seen in the beer jars found in group IV of Minshat Abu Omar graves (Kroeper 1986/1987, 77, 91, fig. 77; Kroeper 1988, figs. 161–164; Kroeper and Wildung 2000, 111–113, cat. nos. 404/11–15). Beer jars with short but distinct necks, slightly thickened lip-rims, flat bases and scratch marks visible on the surface have also been recorded at the cemetery of Kafr Hassan Dawood (Hassan *et al.* 2008, 47, fig. 4b) and the cemetery from Abydos contains similar objects. Furthermore, at the Umm el-Qaab necropolis, jars with the aforementioned features have been found in the tombs of Den (Petrie 1902, pl. VII/23; Petrie 1953, pl. XIII/59H2), Qa'a (Engel 1993, 25; Engel 1996, 67, Abb. A–C) and probably in the tomb of Semerkhet (Petrie 1900, pl. XLI/20; Petrie 1953, pl. XVI/66M, T).

In Area B at Tell Ibrahim Awad, graves dating to the 1st Dynasty have been discovered. Among the assemblages were 32 beer jars, some of them of the type with broad shoulders, a lip-rim, a narrower lower section near a flat base and scraped surfaces (van Haarlem 1993, pls. 3, 4a, 8a–11; van den Brink 1988, 78–79, 94, fig. 16). The beer jar forms occurring in Tell el-Murra grave nos. 2, 7, 12, 18, 19, 23, 31 may also be compared to the first recorded specimens in the typological sequence of beer jars presented by Ch. Köhler and Jane C. Smythe (2004, 133–134, fig. 2: 1), which date from Naqada IIIA/B. However, this form continued to be produced over a longer period and may have been made at the same time as other types

of beer jars (Jucha 2009b, 50–54). In addition, similar jars have also been found in settlement contexts dating to Naqada IIIC and IIID in places such as Buto, where jars with a scraped surface were attested in Layers IV to VIa. Forms with flat bases appear from the end of Layer III (the end of the Protodynastic period to the beginning of the 1st Dynasty) and become more common in Layer IV (the early 1st Dynasty) (Köhler 1998, 16–17, 52–58, Taf. 5: 1, 7: 4, 7: 7–9). At the Tell el-Farkha settlement, the first examples of this kind of jar were found in the upper strata of Phase 5, but they occurred mostly in Phases 6 and 7, dating to the Early Dynastic and Old Kingdom periods (Jucha 2005, 42–43, pl. 26, fig. 14).

All of these analogies allow us to date the graves from Tell el-Murra containing the types of beer jar presented above. The beer jars and plates from the assemblages of grave nos. 2 and 19 show an affinity to pottery from graves at Tell el-Farkha dating to Naqada IIIC2/IIID (Jucha 2012, 84–86), but the occurrence of other pottery vessels, including wine jars with a rope band and small jars with broad shoulders, could imply that their chronology should be connected with the 1st Dynasty. This permits us to assume that grave nos. 2 and 19 date to slightly earlier than grave nos. 7, 12, 18, 23, 31 in the Naqada IIIC2 period.

The beer jars, red-coated bowls and plates from graves 7, 12, 18, 23, 31 show a particularly close affinity to the assemblages of graves from Tell el-Farkha dating to Naqada IIIC2/IIID, which suggests that these graves should probably be dated to the same period, i.e. Naqada IIIC2/D.

Group 2

The second group of beer jars from Tell el-Murra consists of broad-shouldered jars with a thickened external rim, a slightly concave short neck, a smooth transition from the neck to the shoulder and an almost rounded or slightly flattened base. The outside surface of these jars has been roughly smoothed and scratch marks are visible below the maximum diameter of the vessels. Most of the pottery vessels found in grave no. 27 (Pls. 3: 1, 2, and 4: 6) were beer jars. Amongst them were two complete examples, one of which was of the type described above. The other was only partially preserved from its shoulders to its base without a neck or rim. The d/h index of these jars is lower than 60 (Fig. 1). Similar forms of vessel are also known from Tell el-Farkha's cemetery (Jucha 2009b, 51, 57, fig. 1: 4). They occur in graves alongside other types of beer jars dating to the 1st Dynasty. Analogical material has also been discovered at Buto in the settlement's Layers IV–V (from the middle to the end of the 1st Dynasty) (Köhler 1998, 16–17, 52–58, Taf. 6: 4). This suggests that grave 27, which

has a similar assemblage to those of the group of graves from Tell el-Farkha dating to Naqada IIIIC2/D, should be dated to the same period in the second part of the 1st Dynasty.

Summary

All of the beer jars unearthed so far at the Tell el-Murra cemetery do not greatly differ from each other. However, a few types may be distinguished. Their affinity to similar examples from other sites (where they were found with other types of vessels) allows us to date the beer jar graves to the Naqada IIIIC2/D period and to position them on the chronological map of the cemetery in relation to other graves.

Beer jars found in the graves at Tell el-Murra are also an indication of the funerary practices that took place and can thus provide some insight into their beliefs in the afterworld. The vessels were usually located in the graves, outside the coffin, behind the feet of the deceased or in an additional chamber located to the south of the main chamber. There were only three cases (grave nos. 2, 19 and one beer jar from grave 27) in which beer jars were discovered in the northern part of the chamber or behind the head or coffin. This positioning suggests that the vessels had a relatively low intrinsic value and that their contents were far more important. According to Egyptian beliefs, it was necessary to provide a dead person with the same goods that he required in daily life in the afterlife. One of these was beer, a staple in ancient Egypt. This is confirmed by offering texts from Old Kingdom tombs and other objects connected with the funerary cult (Leprohon 2001, 570). Beer jars were placed in the graves as a symbol of beer or of other goods, but they probably would not have not contained the liquid. However, it is hard to state this for sure, since the original contents of the vessels have not been preserved. The beer jars discovered in the graves at Tell el-Murra were filled with loose soil and in some cases the vessels, especially in their lower section, contained darker soil resembling mud. This usually covered the inner walls and the inner surfaces near the bases.⁴

⁴ Paleobotanical research of the contents of the beer jars is in progress.

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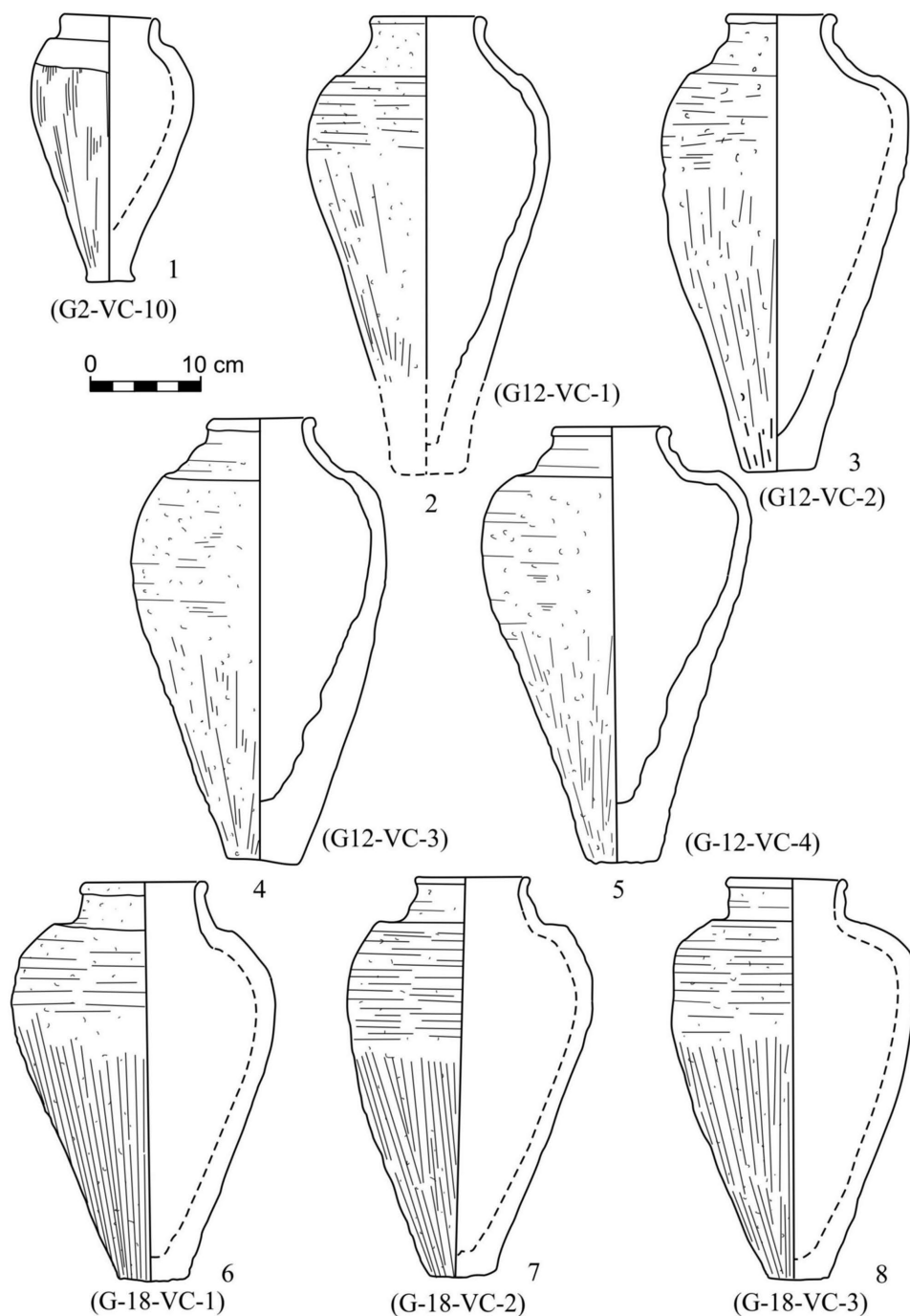
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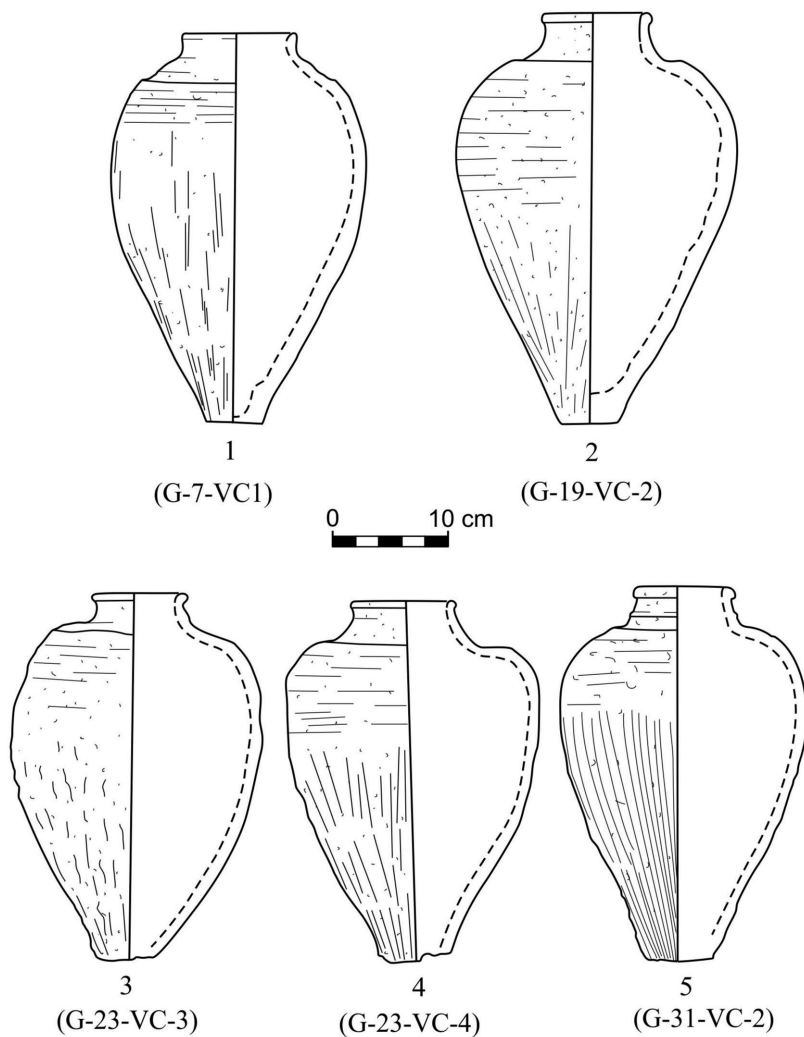
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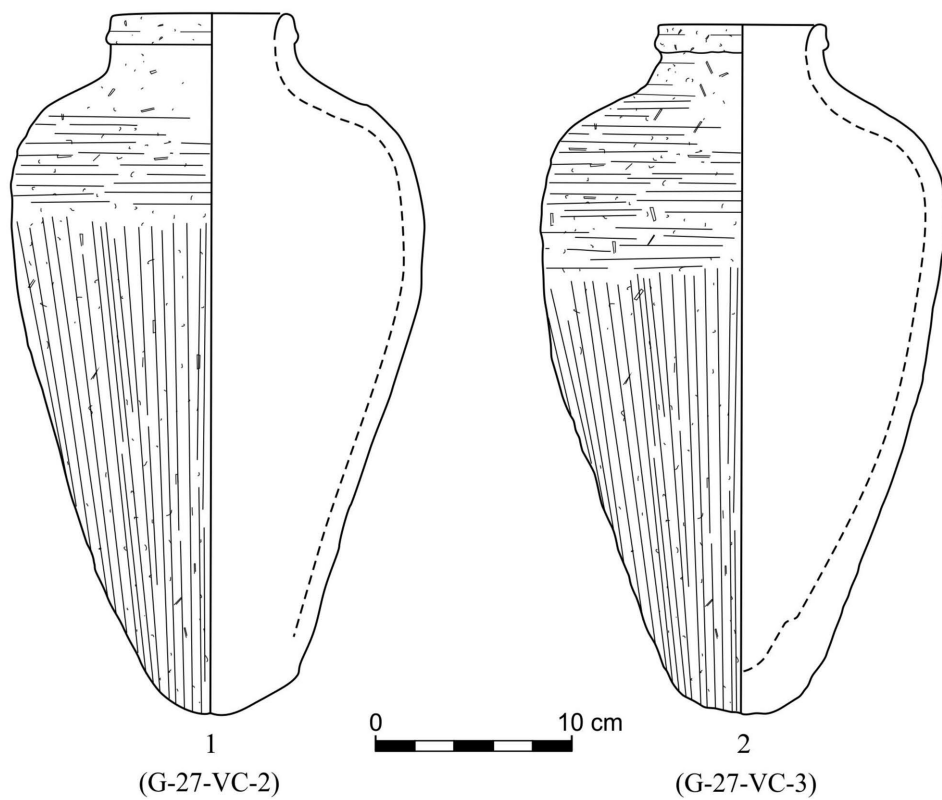
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Pl. 1. Beer jars from the Tell el-Murra graves. Archives of the expedition.
Digitising U. Bąk



Pl. 2. Beer jars from the Tell el-Murra graves. Archives of the expedition.
Digitising U. Bāk



Pl. 3. Beer jars from the Tell el-Murra graves. Archives of the expedition.
Digitising U. Bąk



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4



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Pl. 4. Beer jars from Tell el-Murra graves. Archives of the expedition. Digitizing U. Bāk
1 – Beer jar from grave no. 2; 2 – Beer jar from grave no. 12; 3 – Beer jar from grave no. 19;
4 – Beer jar from grave no. 18; 5 – Beer jar from grave no. 31; 6 – Beer jar from grave no. 27