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POTMARKS FROM TELL EL-MURRA
AND TELL EL-FARKHA CEMETERIES
(SEASONS 2011–2016)

Abstract: *The Necropolis at Tell el-Murra site, situated in the north-eastern part of the Nile Delta just several kilometres east of Tell el-Farkha, contains 22 marked vessels distributed in nine graves. The tall jars discovered there (wine jars and jars decorated with half-bows) were the most commonly marked items, but signs were also found on other types of vessels: broad-shouldered jars, a barrel-shaped jar, small jars with broad-shoulders, red-coated plates and a bowl. In the course of excavations carried out between 2011 and 2016 at Tell el-Farkha cemetery four vessels with potmarks were found. Marks from both cemeteries correspond with signs published in corpuses from other sites dated to the Early Dynastic period: Tell el-Farkha, Minshat Abu Omar, Kafr Hassan Dawood, Abydos, Abu Roash and others.*

Keywords: *Potmark; cemetery; graves; Tell el-Murra; Tell el-Farkha; signs; vessels; wine jars; Early Dynastic*

Tell el-Murra (Jucha 2009; Jucha 2010a; Jucha 2010b; Jucha 2013; Jucha *et al.* 2013; Jucha *et al.* 2014; Jucha *et al.* forthcoming a) and Tell el-Farkha sites (Ciałowicz *et al.* 2014), situated in the north-eastern part of the Nile Delta just several kilometres from each other, are being investigated by Polish expeditions from the Jagiellonian University and the Archaeological Museum of Poznań. Remains of settlements as well as funerary structures discovered on both sites are dated from the Predynastic,

through Early Dynastic, to the Old Kingdom Periods (at Tell el-Murra even until the 6th Dynasty).

The main purpose of this article is to publish potmarks retrieved during the excavation seasons 2011–2016 at Tell el-Murra (Kazimierczak 2014; Kazimierczak 2016a; Kazimierczak 2016b; Kazimierczak forthcoming)¹ and Tell el-Farkha (Jucha 2012) cemeteries, discovered in graves as well as in the areas outside the graves but in close vicinity to them. In the case of Tell el-Murra this is the first presentation of these kinds of marks. Potmarks from graves explored at Tell el-Farkha up to season 2008 had already been published (Jucha 2008), thus the signs presented below are to supplement those from earlier seasons.² The potmarks presented in this paper come from completely preserved or reconstructable vessels.

Potmarks from Tell el-Murra

The cemetery at Tell el-Murra contains 38 graves discovered up to the 2016 season, 21 with pottery vessels among the assemblages. Vessels bearing incised signs on their exterior surfaces were found in nine of them, representing about 23.7% of the total graves excavated so far and 42.9% of all graves with ceramic assemblages. 12 more graves had ceramic offerings but none of these carried potmarks. Pottery from the graves involved 140 ceramic vessels, and 22 vessels were engraved with potmarks, which amounts to 15.7% of the total volume. The shapes of jars on which signs are present are varied and include the following types:

1. Tall jars. They were made of fine or medium category Nile clay tempered with fine to medium sand and straw; the surface of the jars was smoothed, and in some cases self-slip is visible on the surface below the shoulders. All the vessels discussed below have thickened rims, short necks and flattened, slightly convex bases. Based on additional features (Kazimierczak 2014, 105–106; Kazimierczak 2016a, 7–10; Kazimierczak forthcoming) we can distinguish within this group:

1.1. Tall slender wine jars with narrow shoulders, tapering bodies,

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² This presentation is also a kind of report concerning potmarks from vessels discovered at cemeteries on both sites during work carried out between 2011 and 2016, in which the author of this paper has taken part.

and one applied band on the shoulders (Pl. 1: 1–3);

1.2. Tall shouldered jars with two applied bands (one on the shoulders and the other above the base) (Pl. 1: 4–8).

In both cases potmarks were situated below the band on the shoulders.

1.3. Tall shouldered jars decorated with impressed half-bows on the shoulders.³ Potmarks occur beneath the half-bow decorations (Pl. 1: 9–12).

2. Broad-shouldered, ovoid-shaped vessels with thickened rims, and rounded or flattened bases (Pl. 2: 1–2). They were made of medium quality Nile clay, tempered with fine to medium straw and sand; they usually have a rough, sometimes slightly smoothed surface. Signs appear on the shoulder or slightly lower, on the body below the shoulders (Kazimierczak 2016a, 10).

3. Barrell-shaped jar with thickened rim, angular transition between short neck and shoulders, and a flat base (Pl. 2: 3). The vessel is of better quality; it was made of fine Nile clay with a small amount of sand as a temper, has a smoothed surface of cream-yellow-white colour and is covered with a large amount of black. These colours are probably the result of the pot being burnt. The jar could imitate a stone vessel. One jar from grave no. 20 had potmarks on the shoulders (Kazimierczak 2016a, 13).

4. Small jars with slightly thickened rims, slightly angular transition between the neck and broad shoulders and a concave lower part of the body narrowing towards a flat base (Pl. 2: 4–7). In all cases potmarks were engraved on the lower part of the body, above the base. All of these small, broad-shouldered jars were classified as medium-to-rough ware, and in all cases the upper part of those jars (rim and neck) was finished by slow turning, while the middle and lower parts were scraped. They were made of medium category Nile clay, and tempered with fine-to-medium grain sand and straw (Kazimierczak 2016a, 13–14).

5. Red-coated plates made of medium category Nile clay (Pl. 2: 8–9). The vessels have only an interior surface slipped with red coat and polished or burnished. The outer surfaces were uncoated and smoothed (Kazimierczak 2016a, 15). One of them, a plate from grave no. 20, also has an outer surface decorated with two incised lines beneath the rim. All these plates have signs engraved on the outer surface on or near the rounded base.

6. Red-coated bowl with convex walls, a slightly thickened rim, and a flattened base (Pl. 2: 10). The vessel was made of good quality clay

³ The author uses the term wine jars with reference to tall jars with bands. Therefore, tall jars with half-bows are described separately.

and tempered with a small amount of very fine sand and straw; its surfaces were slipped with red coat and polished. One of this kind of bowl found in grave no. 40 has a potmark inscribed on the base.

Potmarks occur the most frequently on tall jars (wine jars with bands and jars decorated with half-bows). They were attested on seven of 15 wine jars with bands, which constitutes about 47% (46.7%) of that kind of vessel and 35% of all marked vessels from the graves. Potmarks are also present on all the four tall jars with half-bows discovered so far. Together all the marked tall jars (wine jars with bands and jars with half-bows) constitute 50% of all vessels with potmarks. This corresponds to the statistic and distribution of potmarks amongst pottery types at other sites (Klasens 1959, 48–50; van den Brink 1988, 79, figs. 13–14; van den Brink 1992, 269; Kroeper 2000, 214–215; Jucha 2008, 141; Tassie *et al.* 2008, 203, 210; Mawdsley 2009, 202) and correlates with observations of scholars regarding occurrence of potmarks on a few specific types of vessels, principally wine jars (van den Brink 1992, 267, 269).

Potmarks from these pottery types (wine jars with bands and jars with half-bows) are the most complex; the 12 marks on tall jars, six are composed of two different signs, including square (*hwt*), floral, *k3*, animal-like, fish, cross, criss-cross, triangle and curvilinear strokes (Pl. 4). Linear marks used as single signs do not appear on the wine jars. The composition of signs and single marks on the tall jars (wine jars with bands and jars with half-bows) from Tell el-Murra show a strict affinity to especially (among others) signs from vessels discovered at Abydos and described by W. F. M. Petrie:

1. Square (*hwt*) (Pl. 5) (Petrie 1900, pl. LVI: 1123–1145; van den Brink 1992, 282, tab. 2, Group I);
2. Fish and square (Pl. 5) (Petrie 1900, pl. XLIX: 466; cf. van den Brink 1992, 285, fig. 6, Group I.30);
3. Square and *k3* (Pl. 5) (cf. Petrie 1900, pl. XLVII: 249; van den Brink 1992, 285, fig. 6, Group I.28);
4. Square and horizontal line (Pl. 5) (cf. Petrie 1900, pl. LVI: 1133);
5. Floral (Pl. 5) (cf. Petrie 1900, pls. LV: 994–1010, LVII: 1302; van den Brink 1992, 282, tab. 2, Group IV);
6. Floral and curvilinear sign (Pl. 5) (Petrie 1900, pl. LIV: 75, 980–982, 987–988; van den Brink 1992, 294, fig. 15, Group XXXIV.2);
7. Animal-like (Pl. 5) (cf. Petrie 1900, pl. XLIX: 381, 384; van den Brink 1992, 282, tab. 2, Group IX);
8. Triangle and other sign-probably square (cross-cross/*hwt*) (Pl. 5) (cf. Petrie 1900, pl. LV: 1037);

9. Different curvilinear signs (bow and vertical zig-zags) (Pl. 5) (Petrie 1900, pl. XLVIII: 346–376; van den Brink 1992, 288, fig. 9, Group VII.11);

10. Curvilinear sign (bow) and four diagonal lines (Pl. 5) (Petrie 1900, pl. LIV: 922, 924–925, 933; cf. van den Brink 1992, 284, tab. 2, Group LX);

11. Criss-crosses (Pl. 6) (Petrie 1900, pl. LVIII: 1373–1374, 1376, 1378);

12. Criss-cross and cross (Pl. 6) (Petrie 1900, pl. LIV: 866; cf. van den Brink 1992, 288, fig. 9, Group VIII.20).

Other types of vessels: ovoid jar, barrel-shaped jar, small jars with broad shoulders, bowl, and plate were usually marked by a single potmark consisting of a single sign: *hwt* (square), cross, criss-crosses, or a composition of two or more lines or strokes (Pl. 7). The most frequently occurring signs (as a single mark or composed with another) on vessels from Tell el-Murra cemetery are crosses (three times), criss-crosses (three times), *hwt* sign – square (at least four times) curvilinear lines (four times) and different combinations of lines, strokes and dots (seven times).

Most of the potmarks found at Tell el-Murra were applied on the vessel before firing in wet (or dry) clay using fingers or a pointed instrument such as a sharpened stick, reed, fine flint point or maybe even a bone (Tassie *et al.* 2008, 20).

Many scholars have already published more or less extensive corpora of potmarks from different sites (van den Brink 1992; Jucha 2008; Kroeper 2008; Tassie *et al.* 2008; Mawdsley 2009; Wodzińska 2009), but the functions and meanings of particular signs are still under study. There are various suggestions and interpretations, such as:

1. Content description (Morgan 1897, 165; Amélineau 1899, 199–200; Emery 1949, 154–156), mark indicative of specific product (wine) inside (Helck 1985, 635). Contra (Tassie *et al.* 2008, 215; Kroeper 2009, 216);

2. Potter's marks, which indicate a measure of capacity (Brunton *et al.* 1927, 18, 68);

3. Tax marks (van den Brink 1992, 276, n. 4);

4. Ownership marks (van den Brink 1992, 276, n. 4);

5. Indication of the 'ultimate destination of vessel [...] to facilitate the distribution of commodities to specific [...] institutions: palace, royal tombs, royal mortuary complex, temples, cultic structures, and centres of regional administration' (Mawdsley 2009, 209; Wodzińska 2009, 233–234);

6. Indication of place of production/provenance of the vessels (Petrie and Quibell 1896, 44; Dreyer 1993; Kroeper 2000, 216; Wengrow 2006, 236–239).

The last point refers to, among others, the combination of two signs: square (*hwt*) and additional marks, which together could represent names of place of origin of the vessel. According to many scholars, the double sign of square with fish, which appears on one of the wine jars from Tell el-Murra (Pl. 5), could be associated with some production centre located in East Delta (Tassie *et al.* 2008, 210; Kroeper 2009, 188, 208–209, 216) based on the fact that many sites in Delta have a fish sign in their names (Bietak 1975, 149–177; Kaplony 1981; Tassie *et al.* 2008, 210). Different interpretations consider simple strokes or lines, from the opinion that they could indicate vessel size and volume (Nordström 1972, 79; Kroeper 2009, 216; Mawdsley 2009, 202), place of production (workshop) or potters (Hope 1999, 126; Bréand 2009, 61; Mawdsley 2009, 202), and socio-economic activities (Buche 2004, 683–685; Tassie *et al.* 2008, 218; Mawdsley 2009, 202).

All marked vessels represent forms attributed to the time span covering the 1st Dynasty. They were found in eight (nos. 1, 2, 9, 19, 20, 34, 39, 40) of 11 graves belonging to the group dated to the Naqada IIIC2 period, which constitutes about 72.7% of all graves with pottery assemblage dated to that period. As well, one plate with a potmark was also discovered in grave no. 33 dated to the slightly later period of Naqada IIIC2/D (second half of the 1st Dynasty/first half of the 2nd Dynasty). However, it should be mentioned that the red-coated plate is a type of vessel which also occurs in an chronologically earlier group of graves. In Tell el-Murra cemetery vessels with potmarks do not appear in two graves, no. 3 and no. 21, dated to the earlier period: Naqada IIIB and Naqada IIIC1 respectively, and they are absent from graves (except grave no. 33) connected with Naqada IIIC2/D (second part of the 1st Dynasty/first part of the 2nd Dynasty). Similar data were collected at other sites (Kroeper 2000, 215; Tassie *et al.* 2008, 201) and they correspond with scholars' notes that potmarks became significant during Naqada IIIC (1st Dynasty) and their occurrence seems to increase towards that period (van den Brink 1992, 260, 271, fig. 5; Tassie *et al.* 2008, 201; Mawdsley 2009, 201).

Most of the above-mentioned graves are among the most elaborate discovered so far. The largest number of pottery in the assemblages were in graves nos. 1 and 40 (27 vessels each), and no. 2 (17 vessels). In graves nos. 1, 40, and 20 the largest number of marked vessels were found. Pottery

discovered in graves nos. 1, 2, 40 as well as in nos. 9, 19, 20, 39 consist of: ovoid jars, barrel-shaped jars, small jars with broad shoulders, tall pot-stands, trays, red-coated bowls and plates, and sporadically, beer jars (Kazimierczak 2014; Kazimierczak 2016a; Kazimierczak forthcoming; Jucha *et al.* forthcoming b). Besides, most of the graves with potmarks (except graves nos. 9, 33 and 39) contained at least one tall jar (wine jar or jar with half-bows) decorated with a sign. Furthermore, assemblages of these graves also include cooper and bone items (grave no. 1), seal impression (grave no. 9), cosmetic palette (grave no. 20), limestone beads (grave no. 39) and stone vessels (graves nos. 1, 2, 20, 33, 34, 40). Graves nos. 1, 2, 9, 20, 39 and 40 are located in the central part of trench S3 in close vicinity to each other and share a north-east – south-west orientation. Among these graves two pairs can be distinguished (nos. 2 and 20, and 40 and 39), which show closer stratigraphic relation. In both cases, the first grave mentioned was divided into yet another. In case of grave no. 2, it was proved that it is probably younger than grave no. 20, while the precise chronological relation between the second pair of graves nos. 39 and 40 is still a subject of investigation. Other graves (nos. 19, 33, 34) were situated in the south-western part of trench S3 and were oriented along the north-south axis. The precise locations of the graves in the cemetery cannot be stated, because the borders of the cemetery have not yet been found. Among all graves with potmarks we can distinguish different architectonical structures: simple pit burial (nos. 9, 19), graves with mud-brick walls (nos. 1, 2), one-chambered graves (nos. 2, 9, 19, 20, 33, 34, 39), and a two-chambered structure (nos. 1, 40); some of them were also covered with mats (no. 19), while others contained a pottery coffin (nos. 2, 20, 40).

Potmarks from Tell el-Farkha

Over the excavation conducted at Tell el-Farkha between 2011 and 2016 only four complete or reconstructable vessels with potmarks were found at the cemetery located on the Eastern Kom. Two of them were discovered in grave no. 137, and two others outside the graves in the cemetery area, in the vicinity of the graves.

Two vessels from the grave consist of two tall jars. One represents an ovoid shaped, quite elongated jar with the rim turned out, a flattened rim-top, and flattened base (Pl. 3: 1). It was decorated with a row of impressed half-bows situated on the shoulders, below which an *ntr* mark (Pl. 8) was engraved (cf. Petrie 1900, pl. L: 505; van den Brink 1992, 282, tab. 3,

Group XI). The other jar has a thickened rim, broad shoulder and rounded base (Pl. 3: 2) The mark of two diagonal lines (Pl. 8) is visible just beneath the rim (cf. Petrie 1900, pl. LVIII: 1459, 1461, 1462). Both these vessels were made of the fine category Nile clay, tempered with a small amount of sand and straw; the surface of the jars decorated with half-bows is partially covered by self-slip, while on the second jar it was smoothed. Based on the pottery assemblage, these two jars among others, grave no. 137 is classified to the first chronologically group distinguished at Tell el-Farkha cemetery and dated to the Naqada IIIB period (Jucha 2012, 77–79).

Two other vessels are tall slender wine jars with narrow shoulders, and a tapering body (Pls. 3: 3–4), one decorated with one applied rope band on the shoulders, the other with two bands on the shoulders. In both cases potmarks situated on the shoulders below the band decoration were composed of two signs. The wine jar with one applied band was marked with a combination of a square and a vertical line (Pl. 8) (Petrie 1900, pl. LVI: 1121; van den Brink 1992, 285, fig. 6, Group I.3), on the vessel with two bands, square and fish signs (Pl. 8) were incised (cf. Petrie 1900, pl. XLIX: 458–460, 468, 472; van den Brink 1992, 285, fig. 6, Group I.30). The vessels were made of good quality Nile clay tempered with fine straw and sand, the surfaces were finely smoothed, and on some part of the body self-slip is visible. Chronology of this type of wine jars is slightly later than the two described above jars from grave no. 137 and connected with the Naqada IIIC2 period (Köhler and Smythe 2004, 129–130; Jucha 2012, 80–83).

Summary

Potmarks from Tell el-Murra cemetery are comparable with signs found at other sites of similar chronology: Tell el-Farkha (Jucha 2008), Abydos (Petrie 1900), Kafr Hassan Dawood (Tassie *et al.* 2009), Minshat Abu Omar (Kroeper 2009), Tarkhan (Mawdsley 2009), Helwan (Köhler and Smythe 2004), Abu Roash (Klasens 1959) and others (van den Brink 1992), as well as to some extent to marks from chronologically later sites (Hope 1999). The same remark applies to the four potmarks presented above from vessels from Tell el-Farkha, which repeat composition and signs recognized and already described in a corpus from 2008 (Jucha) as well as at other sites mentioned above. However, if we compare signs from the two above-discussed sites in the vicinity, it could be noted that at Tell el-Murra complex

signs composed of two marks occur statistically more often than on Tell el-Farkha vessels.⁴

Because studies on the potmarks are still ongoing, the hope is that this publication will be a significant supplement to the previously collected data from other sites.

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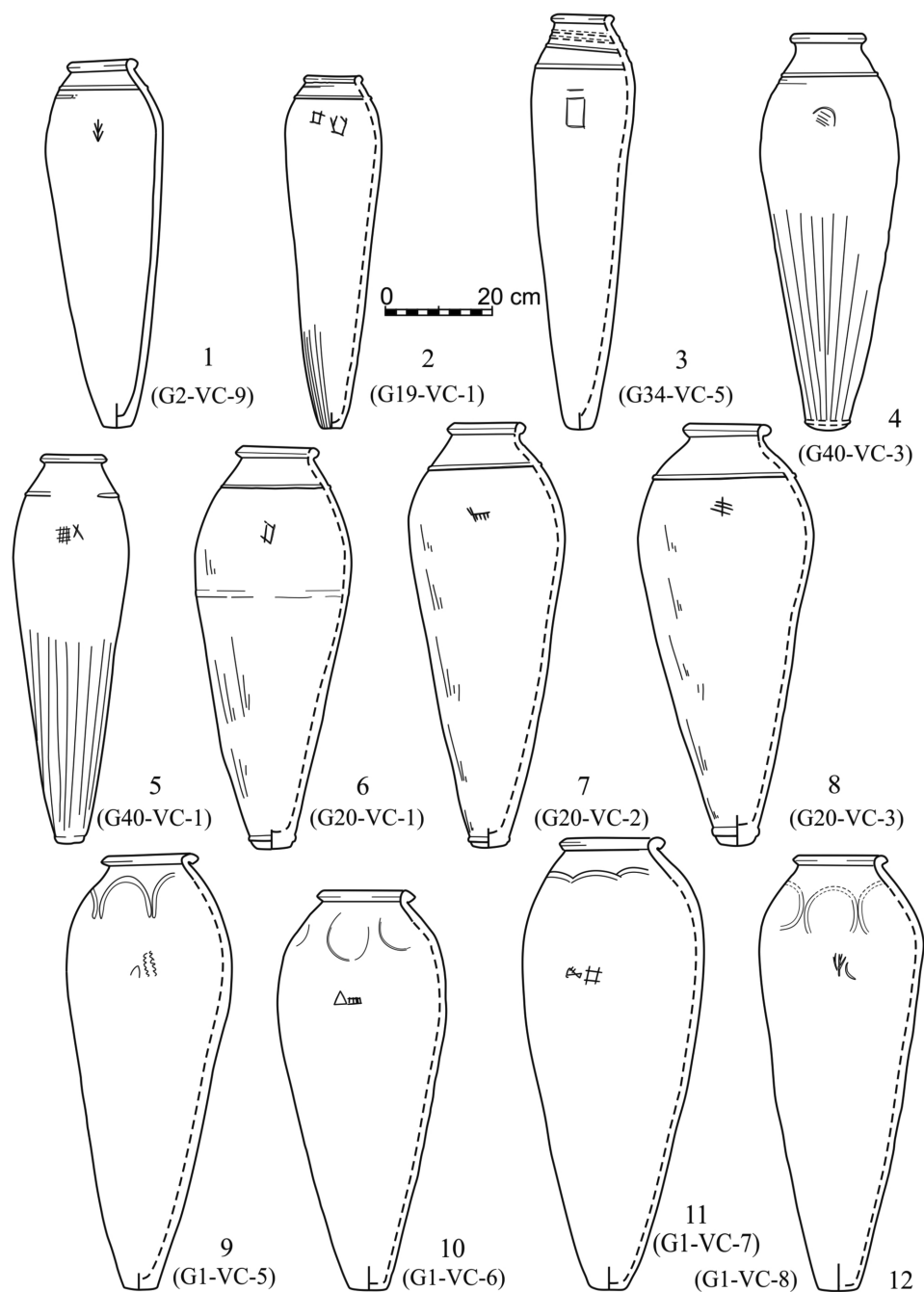
⁴ It concerns potmarks from seasons 2011–2016 as well as those already published in corpus from 2008.

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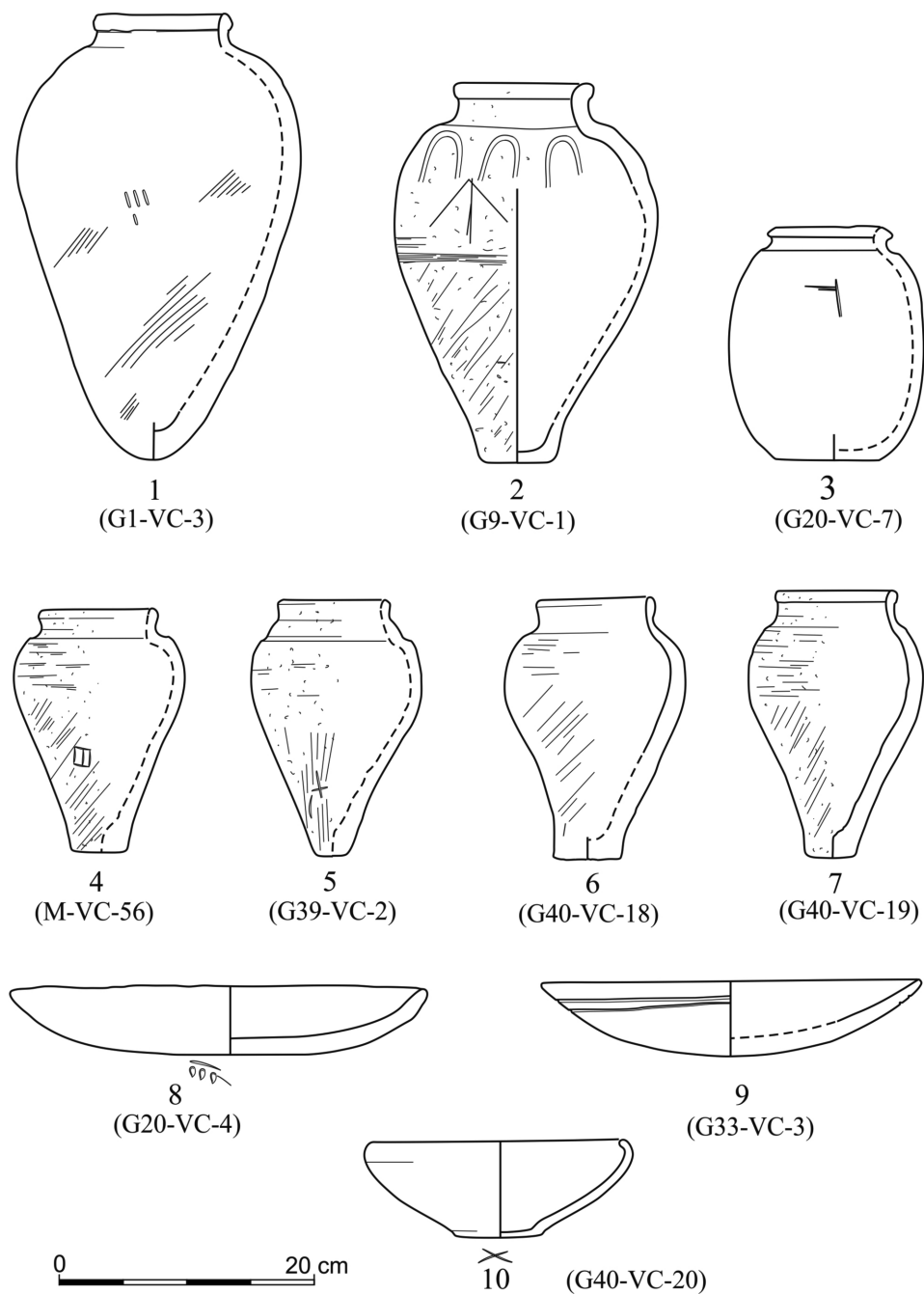
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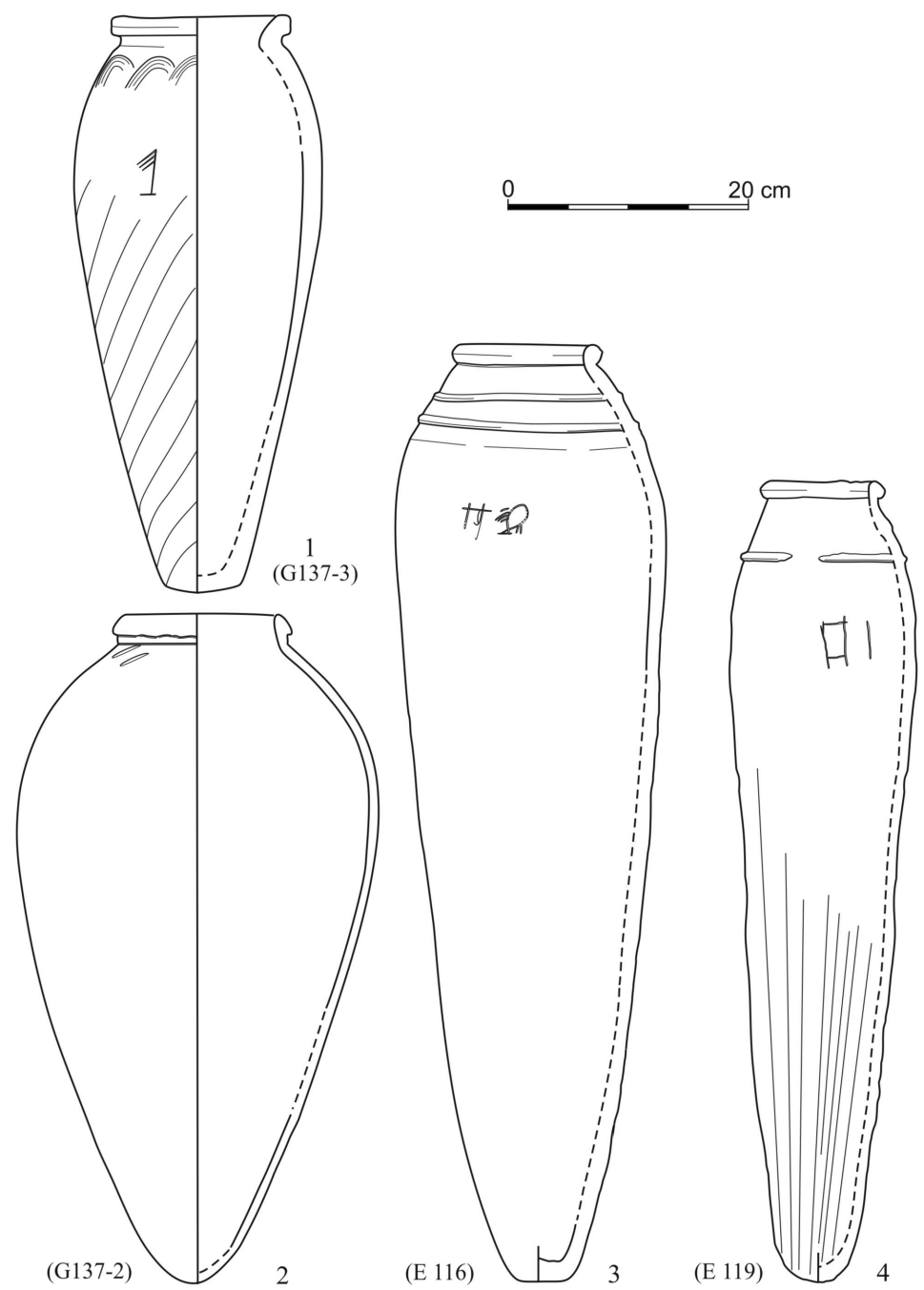
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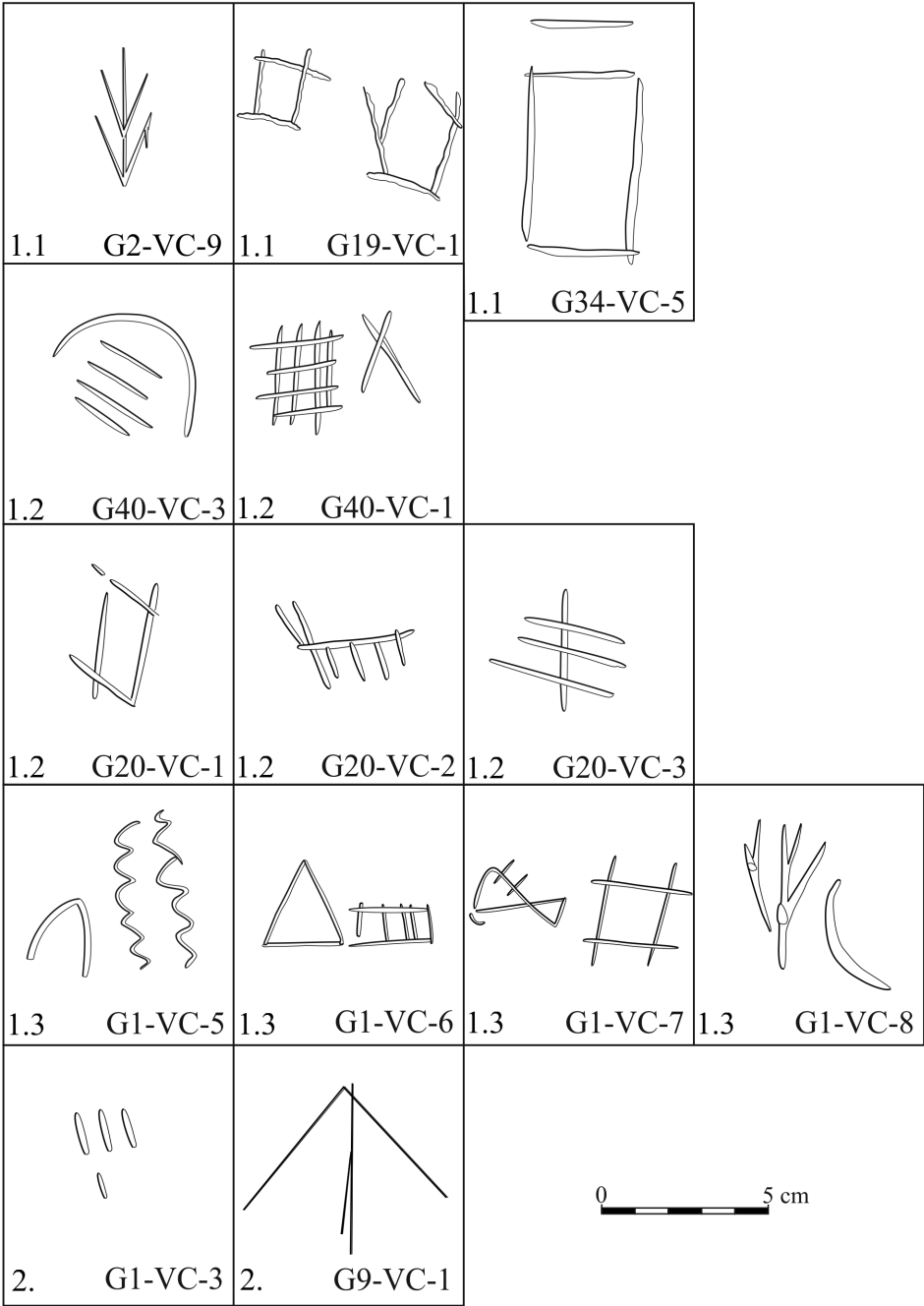
Pl. 1. Vessel types containing potmarks from Tell el-Murra cemetery.
Archives of the expeditions. Digitizing by U. Bāk



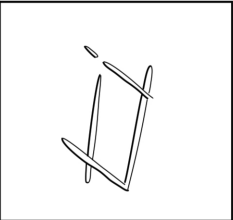
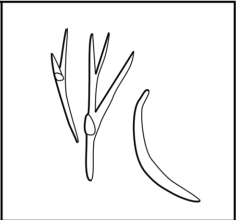
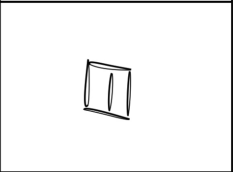
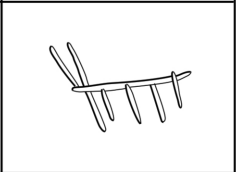
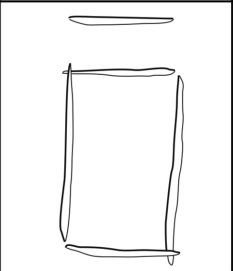
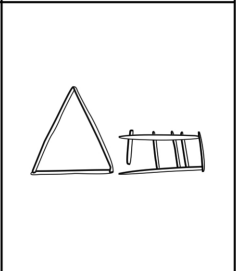
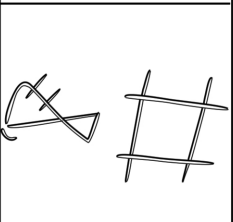
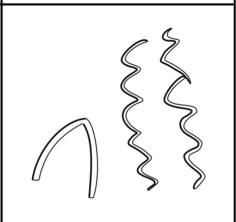
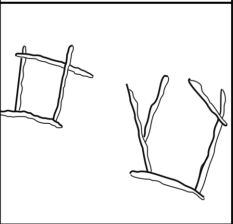
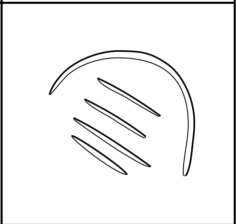
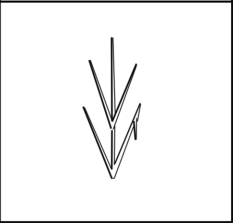

Pl. 2. Vessel types containing potmarks from Tell el-Murra cemetery.
Archives of the expeditions. Digitizing by U. Bąk






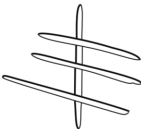


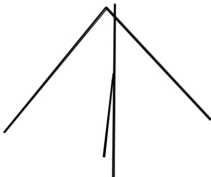





Pl. 3. Vessel types containing potmarks from Tell el-Farkha cemetery.
Archives of the expeditions. Digitizing by U. Bāk



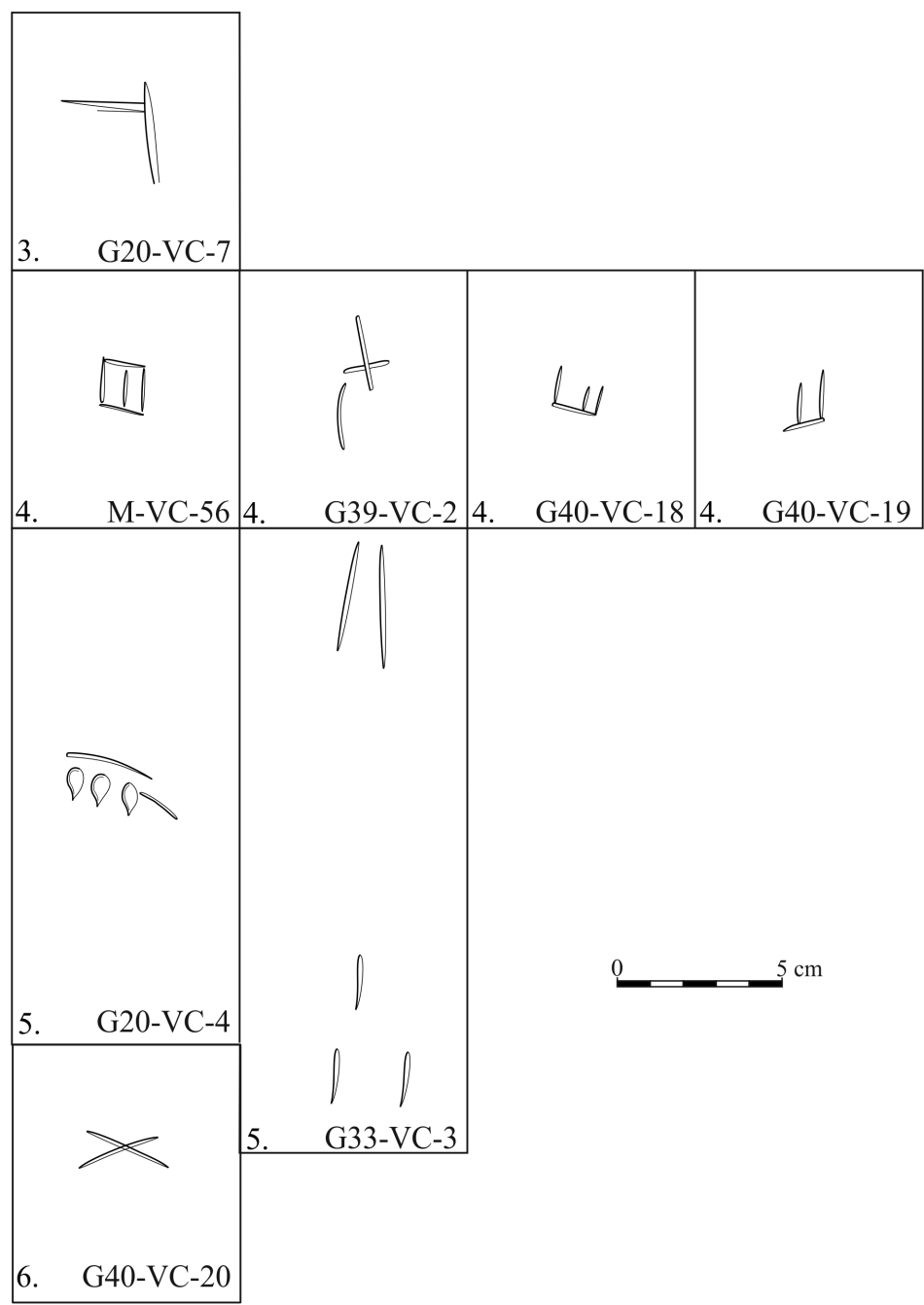
Pl. 4. Occurence of potmarks from Tell el-Murra on certain types of vessels.
Digitizing by U. Bąk

Square (<i>hwt</i>)		Floral with curvilinear	
<i>Hwt?</i>		Animal-like	
Square (<i>hwt</i>) with single line		Triangle with other sign (<i>criss-cross/hwt?</i>)	
Square (<i>hwt</i>) with fish		Curvilinear	
Square with <i>k3?</i>		Curvilinear with lines	
Floral			

Pl. 5. Types of potmarks from Tell el-Murra cemetery. Digitizing by U. Bāk

Cross			
Cross with single line			
Criss-cross			
Criss-cross with cross			
2-5 lines/strikes/dots			
			
			

Pl. 6. Types of potmarks from Tell el-Murra cemetery. Digitizing by U. Bąk



Pl. 7. Occurence of potmarks from Tell el-Murra on certain types of vessels.
Digitizing by U. Bāk

<i>ntr</i>	
Two diagonal lines	
Square (<i>hwt</i>) with fish	
Square (<i>hwt</i>) with vertical line	

Pl. 8. Potmarks from Tell el-Farkha cemetery. Digitizing by U. Bąk