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AN INVESTIGATION INTO
THE POTTERY FLASKS
AT THE SANANDAJ
ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

Abstract: Pottery has a significant bearing on the reconstruction of ancient regional and transregional interactions. Flasks represent a pottery type that was more ubiquitous in the historical period. The present study examined 16 pottery flasks stored at the Sanandaj Archaeological Museum in order to address three research questions: Which historical period can this pottery be dated to? What is the geographical range over which they were manufactured given the available excavated comparanda? What types are represented in the sample under study in terms of manufacturing technique, surface treatment, decoration, and form? The results showed that the flasks were primarily produced in two varieties, round shouldered and angular shouldered, with their exterior coated in a slip or a buff, turquoise, and light or dark green glaze. Judging by their appearance (surface finish and decorations), they were produced in the Hellenistic and Parthian period. It was found out that they have parallels among assemblages from west and southwest Iran and Mesopotamia. The study adopted the descriptive-historical and comparative methods.

Keywords: Hellenistic; Parthians; Mesopotamia; Sanandaj Museum; Pottery flasks

Introduction

Bearing in mind that an excavation or a survey will furnish merely a small sample of objects from a given site or region (Darke 2000, 62), our current understanding of the Parthian and Sassanian periods is extremely incomplete (Riccardi 1997, 49). The time from the Parthian period up until the early Islamic times has been the subject of a wide range of scholarship, including the description of monumental buildings and archeological investigation on sites with major architectural remains. Although our knowledge about a number of these is steadily growing, the progress in the case of smaller objects might be slower. While the majority of these, including pottery, are not significant in themselves, they are of particular importance with respect to dating and making further use of archaeological finds (Maurer 1986, 49). The pottery industry in the Parthian period was influenced by the imperial political structure (feudal system), and consequently exhibits variations across the kingdom (Mohammadifar and Arab 2013, 58). It was for this reason that in 1982 E. Haerinck, through broad studies and participation in various excavations across Iran, attempted the first classification of the Parthian pottery, dividing present-day Iran into nine regions depending on the type of pottery of the Parthian period found therein (Haerinck 1997, 25). However, this division is not without its critics (see Volgelsang 1985, 162), who have, among others, questioned the flawed chronological scope of Haerinck's study in some regions, including western Iran, which came under the Parthian rule much later than the eastern regions. Another argument concerns his failure to take into account the geographic extent of the empire, thereby confining its sphere of influence and power to what is modern-day Iran (Mohammadifar 2011, 274). Before excavations covered the Parthian sites, it was quite hard to distinguish Parthian pottery from that of the previous and following periods, because the Parthians embraced the Achaemenid cultural and artistic trends, and in turn acted as a vehicle to hand them down to the Sassanians (Tohidi 2013, 174). Used as portable receptacles by travelers, flasks were a ubiquitous Parthian pottery form (Tohidi 2013, 178). Parthian flasks were fitted with angular shoulders and covered in glaze. The drum-shaped or flattened discoid type became dominant in the late Parthian period (Tohidi 2013, 184). The archaeological Museum of Sanandaj hosts 16 pieces of such vessels, whose precise provenience and date remain uncertain. Yet, the western part of Kurdistan Province, i.e. the counties of Marivan and Baneh, appears as the most plausible findspot for the assemblage, since reports by provincial cultural heritage experts mention

the discovery and confiscation in the same region of such vessels with close affinities in form, shape, and even paste over the past decades. They are also among the items kept at a number of private museums in the region.

Research Objectives and Importance

The main objective of the study is to estimate the manufacture date and place of these receptacles by means of typological analysis and comparison with similar excavated specimens. The secondary objective is to promote knowledge about this relatively little-known pottery type.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Regarding the sample under study, the following questions arise: 1) Which historical period can these flasks be dated to? 2) What is the geographical range over which they were manufactured given the parallels from the other excavated assemblages? and 3) What typological classes are represented, and in which historical (Parthian) cultural spheres do they have parallels?

In relation to these questions, the following hypotheses are proposed:

1) Their appearance, the comparanda, their glazing as well as their decorations all suggest that the vessels most probably date back to the Parthian period. The occurrence of related vessels in both the preceding and subsequent periods seems to be quite natural, as cultural traditions have been in constant transmission throughout history, and hence related pottery forms survive into the Islamic period. Since the security measures excluded XRF and XRD characterizations, the materials used along with the morphology of the pieces are the only available clues as to the relative chronology of the sample under study.

2) While the exact provenience of the vessels is unknown, Haerinck's Region II (west Iran, and in particular, western Kurdistan province viz. Marivan and Baneh) appears as the most plausible findspot judging by the comparable specimens from the region, which even have a similar paste. Nonetheless, at the same time they reveal influences from the Southwest Region (in Haerinck's pottery map) and Mesopotamia, and Region II probably served as a crossroads between southwest and northwest Iran and Mesopotamia.

3) Flasks were a widely used pottery form in the Parthian period. Yet, no systematic excavation has so far covered any Parthian site in western

Iran, and in Kurdistan Province in particular, and the vessels in question were obtained during clandestine excavations mostly at Parthian burial sites in the western parts of the province. Therefore, the paucity of strictly local comparisons might justify our attempt to draw upon comparanda from Parthian sites in neighboring regions.

Research Method

The study adopts descriptive-historical and comparative methods. The selected specimens were then photographed and drawn, classified and analysed typologically by comparing them with assemblages of the historical period excavated in other centers.

Pottery Flasks in the Historical Period

Pottery flasks dating to the historical period occur among assemblages excavated in centers across Iran as well as Mesopotamia, including, most notably, Godin Tepe, Susa, Nimrud, Seleucia, Qal'eh-i Yazdigird, Melian, Qasr-e Abu Nasr, Tureng Tepe, Siraf, the Damghan plain, Kish, Nineveh, Tell Halaf, Tell Billa, Balawat and Sultantepe. From Godin II associated with Iron III pottery comes a flask (Young 1967, 139), which is comparable in form to the Parthian round shouldered variety (Young 1967, 140, Pl. 70). In southwest Iran, excavations at the palace of Ardashir II in Susa between 1970 to 1976 yielded related vessels comparable to the flask from Kish in Mesopotamia (Boucharlat 1976, 39) (Pl. 1: 1). Yet, the most distinctive red colored flask belongs to the Seleucid period. Also remarkable are such vessels recovered at Nineveh, Tell Halaf, Tell Bila, Balawat and Sultantepe which are comparable to the pottery of the Nimrud region, which is related to the Hellenistic period (Thompson 1929, 67). Glazed flasks from a burial at Nimrud bear a green and sometimes light blue glaze (Toll 1943, 252). The paste consists of dark brown or purplish brown sandy clay. The specimen from Nimrud, which is comparable to the material from the Seleucia region (Oates 1961, 34), is in a glossy clay paste (Mallowan 1947, 141, fig. 18) (Pl. 1: 2). The incised decoration on the Hellenistic flasks differs from common decorations of such vessels in the Parthian and Sassanian periods.

While the Parthian and Sassanian sites in Mesopotamia have been widely excavated and surveyed, a clear archaeological picture of the region in these periods is still lacking. The absence of pertinent excavations in the Iranian plateau complicates the problem to a great extent. It has not been

a long time since the study of the pottery assemblages from such sites and regions as Qal'eh-i Yazdigird, Malian, Qasr-e Abu Nasr, Tureng Tepe, Siraf, the Damghan plain and southeast Iran significantly improved our understanding of Parthian and Sassanian pottery (Azarnoush 1997, 183). However, Tell Mahuz in North Mesopotamia has produced pottery assemblages spanning the Parthian period up until the early Islamic times (Venco Ricciardi 1970, 427). Attested among them are glazed pieces ranging from white to turquoise. Horizontally ribbed glazed vessels represent the Sassanian material (Venco Ricciardi 1970, 431) (Pl. 2: 1).

These assemblages contain pottery flasks, often with two handles that run from below the neck to the shoulder, and rather simple decorations in the form of a single incised line, occasionally with parallel lines on the shoulder. The published specimens from Tell Mahuz include handled flasks (Venco Ricciardi 1970, 432, figs. 92–94). From Kish comes a collection of intact and striking Sassanian pottery which dates from between the 6th and 5th centuries AD (Langdon and Harden 1934, 124). A flask from Kish has a long neck, an outturned rim, opposite large irregular handles, and incised circular designs on both sides of the body (Langdon and Harden 1934, 126, figs. 24, 25) (Pl. 2: 2). An excavated flask from the Parthian cemetery of Marian in north Iran (Talesh) is identical to the Sassanian specimens. It has a pair of opposite small rounded handles on the upper body, which is flattened on one side and slightly bulging on the other. Made in a buff paste, it has a simple outturned rim (Ghaffari 2020, 98) (Pl. 3: 1). A common pottery form in the late Sassanian and early Islamic periods is the so-called “equestrian flasks.” The stamped decorations on these vessels are often roundels resembling a radiating sun (Fahrvvari 2009, 9) (Pl. 3: 2).

Another distinguishing feature of early Islamic flasks are the inscriptions on the body. Studies reveal that apart from the varieties handed down from the Parthian period, a new type is attested mainly in the late Sassanian contexts. Related specimens are known from Kish and Tell Mahuz. This type is characterized by a distinct production method that involved two separately moulded discs that were attached together to form the flask. The type is attested even in the early Islamic period. Therefore, three types of pottery flasks have been recorded in the course of excavations in the Parthian and Sassanian territories.

Typology of the Study Sample

The Sanandaj Museum hosts a wide array of objects from prehistoric times up to the Islamic period and the present era. The present study is an attempt at a typology of a group of Parthian pottery vessels at the Museum. The sample under study comprises a collection of 16 flasks, whose exact provenience and dating remain uncertain. Through a meticulous study, the paper seeks to propose a clear hypothesis concerning the place and time frame of their manufacture. Classification of pottery can be based on several criteria such as form, function, firing, decorations, surface color, surface finish, glaze, and manufacturing technique. Selecting from among these criteria will be a function of factors like local pottery traditions and styles, research objectives, and types and quantity of the collected data (Orton 2001, 77). As long as the actual data allows for it, one may conjecture that a given style might have a somehow geographically defined scope of diffusion (Haerinck 1978, 85). According to previous publications, wherein the vessels in question are often designated as pilgrim flasks/bottles, the Parthian period marked the culmination of this pottery form. While such vessels were in use both in the preceding and subsequent periods, in the existing archaeological assemblages they are principally associated with Parthian material culture (Debevoise 1934, 87). The sample considered here splits into two morphological classes: one with round shoulders (lenticular flasks), and the other with angular shoulders (drum-shaped or discoid flasks).

Flasks with Round Shoulders

This smaller subclass is represented by only 5 pieces. They tend to have an everted to outturned rim, and vary in height from 18 to 31.2 cm. The rim diameter ranges between 8.2–8.6 cm. In most cases, the rim top slants at 30° relative to the horizontal. The surface is decorated with a thin red or gray slip. The lenticular, somewhat bulging body measures between 15.8 and 25.8 cm in diameter, pointing to a higher capacity in the case of this subclass. The symmetrical carrying handles adjoin the body. They display slight variations in the size of their central perforation or opening. Decorations are absent (Table 1). Round shouldered flasks are known in west Iran from Haerinck's surveys. Elsewhere they date back to the Iron Age (vanden Berghe 1964, 18). During the study of pottery from Shahr-i Qumis (Building 5), a few flasks were identified which in appearance closely resemble Iron Age

pottery. They are in a greyish black and sometimes red paste. They have been absolutely dated to the mid-Parthian period (Stronach 2019, 228–230). In our sample, Flasks 599, 890, and 892 have parallels in the Qumis region (Pl. 3: 3). This variety of flasks seem to have gradually disappeared in southwest and west Iran in the latter half of the 2nd century BC in favor of the angular shouldered type, whereas the lenticular type persisted in northeast Iran (Haerinck 1997, 114).

Table 1. Round shouldered flasks (by authors, 2022)

Comparanda	Specifications*	Museum No.
Valtze 1991, 49; Dura 1943, 252	1. Rim broken, 2. wheelmade, 3. adequate, 4. light buff, 5. fine grit, 6. adequate, 7. unslipped	600
Ghirshman 1976, 519; Wenke 1975, 200	1. Intact, 2. wheelmade, 3. adequate, 4. dark buff, 5. fine grit, 6. adequate, 7. grey slip	599
Ghirshman 1976, 518; Stronach 2019, 228	1. Intact, 2. wheelmade, 3. adequate, 4. dark buff, 5. fine grit, 6. adequate, 7. unslipped	890
Ghirshman 1976, 519; Stronach 2019, 230	1. Intact, 2. wheelmade, 3. adequate, 4. dark buff, 5. fine grit, 6. adequate, 7. smoothed and polished	892
Haerinck 1997, 133	1. Intact, 2. wheelmade, 3. adequate, 4. buff (light brown), 5. mineral, 6. adequate, 7. dark buff thin slip	601
Haerinck 1997, 119; Kambakhshfard 1968, 89; Dura 1943, 252	1. Broken rim, 2. wheelmade, 3. adequate, 4. light buff, 5. fine grit, 6. adequate, 7. unslipped	561

Flasks with Angular Shoulders

A large part of our sample (n = 10) belongs to this class. The generally outturned rim ranges from 2.2 to 4.1 cm in diameter. The body is discoid in shape, and exhibits a varying diameter of 7.2–14.6 cm. Because of their particular shape, such vessels could hold a lesser amount of water than the previous class. They were mostly used by traveling equestrians (Haerinck

1997, 149). Most pieces bear a glossy vitreous glaze in buff, turquoise or light or dark green color, and in a single case the surface is partially decorated with a milky glaze. Glazed pottery might have originated in western Iran around the late Parthian period (Kleiss 1977, 139).

This variety has a drum-shaped body, and bears incised underglaze decorations in the form of spirals. Vessels vary from 9.1 to 17.8 cm in height. Thus, these specimens are smaller than those of the previous class, and have a more regular shape. In most cases, handles are affixed to the junction of the body and neck (Figure 10). Flasks with angular shoulders seemingly emerged in southwest Iran in the early Parthian period, presumably in the 3rd century BC, supplanting the round shouldered variety. Discoid flasks occur merely in glazed pottery, a fact that relates to the regions with known local production of glazed pottery. The discoid form is attested not only at the sanctuaries of Masjed Soleyman and Bard-e Neshande, but also in the Parthian deposits at Susa (the mid- and late Parthian levels, and in tombs) (Boucharlat 1987, 148). From the second season of excavations at Qal'eh-i Yazdigird comes a body fragment with deep circular incisions (Khosrowzadeh *et al.* 2019, 123), which likely belongs to a flask. Also, the assemblages from the Kangavar burials, dated to the 2nd and 1st centuries BC on the basis of associated coinage, therefore possibly a reliable absolute chronology, contain a fragmentary flask with angular shoulders (Kambakhshfard 1968, 85). From the above citations, it is clear that flasks with angular shoulders were quite popular at the Parthian centers.

Table 2. Flasks with angular shoulders (by authors, 2022)

Comparanda	Specifications*	Museum No.
de Morgan 1900, 60, fig. 20 a26; Boucharlat 1987, 145	1. Intact, 2. wheelmade, 3. adequate, 4. light buff, 5. fine grit, 6. adequate, 7. dark buff slip	901
Ghirshman 1976, 67; Morgan 1900, 60	1. Intact, 2. wheelmade, 3. adequate, 4. light buff, 5. mineral, 6. adequate, 7. dark buff slip, flaked away from burning, 8. Indications of blue decorations on the neck, incised underglaze spirals	576

Haerinck 1997, 202; Khosrowzadeh and 'Ali 2005, 243; Kleiss 1973, Abb. 21: 9	1. Intact, 2. wheelmade, 3. adequate, 4. light buff, 5. fine grit, 6. adequate, 7. loose, dark green glaze, 8. incised concentric circles	578
Haerinck 1997, 120; Kambakhshfard 1968, 89	1. Intact, 2. wheelmade, 3. adequate, 4. dark buff, 5. fine grit, 6. adequate, 7. friable green glaze	580
Haerinck 1997, 121; Khosrowzadeh and 'Ali 2005, 138; Kleiss, 1973: Abb.21:9	1. Intact, 2. wheelmade, 3. adequate, 4. light buff, 5. fine grit, 6. adequate, 7. effaced buff thin slip, and dark green glaze, 8. circular incised motifs	889
Haerinck 1997, 92; Kambakhshfard 1968, 427	1. Intact, 2. wheelmade, 3. adequate, 4. grey, 5. fine grit, 6. adequate, 7. light green (lajvardina) glaze	581
de Morgan 1900, 60; Lecomte 1987,110	1. Intact, 2. wheelmade, 3. adequate, 4. dark buff, 5. fine grit, 6. adequate, 7. green glaze, worn away as a result of moisture and contact with soil, 8. circular incised motifs	849
Haerinck 1997, 119; Kambakhshfard 1968, 103	1. Rim broken, 2. wheelmade, 3. adequate, 4. light buff, 5. fine grit, 6. adequate, 7. flaking green glaze	891
Haerinck 1997, 112; Kambakhshfard 1968, 98	1. Rim broken, 2. wheelmade, 3. adequate, 4. dark buff, 5. fine grit, 6. adequate, 7. light green (lajvardina) glaze	898
Wenke 1975, 178; de Morgan 1900, 60	1. Intact, 2. wheelmade, 3. adequate, 4. dark buff, 5. fine grit, 6. adequate, 7. light green, mainly flaked away because of moisture and temperature fluctuations	556

Discussion

Pottery flasks from the historical period are known from systematic excavations at various sites, including Godin, Susa, Nimrud, Seleucia, Qal'eh-i Yazdigird, Qumis, Malian, Qasr-e Abu Nasr, Tureng Tepe, Siraf, the Damghan plain, Kish, Nineveh, Halaf, Billa, Balawat and Sultantepe. However, the sample from the Sanandaj Museum, obtained from clandestine

digs, lacks a precise provenience. Accordingly, this study set to establish a relative date for these vessels through a detailed analysis and comparison with the known specimens in the assemblages with reliable provenience. Sadly, laboratory analyses were not practicable at the time. As stated earlier, the known pottery flasks from the historical period fall into the following three morphological classes:

1. Round shouldered flasks. These existed since the Iron Age, and there are many specimens predating the Parthian period from Godin II, the Achaemenid Palace of Ardeshir II in Susa, and Nimrud. However, excavations of the Parthian deposits, for example at Shahr-i Qumis (Building V), have uncovered a series of pottery flasks which parallel in appearance the Iron Age material. They bear a grayish and, in cases, a reddish slip. The specimens from Shahr-i Qumis have been dated to the mid-Parthian period (Stronach 2019, 228–230). From the sample under study, six pieces belong to the variety with round shoulders. Three of these are greyish (Flasks 590, 890, 892) (Pl. 3: 3), and closely resemble the Qumis material in form, manufacturing technique, and paste color. The remaining three (Flasks 561, 600, 601) (Pl. 3: 4) parallel the Hellenistic specimens from Nimrud in form and texture (Dura 1943, 252). It is possible, therefore, to attribute a Seleucid and Parthian date to the examples in this class. As stated earlier, in southwest and west Iran this flask type began to disappear and give way to the angular shouldered type in the second half of the 2nd century BC (Haerinck 1997, 114).

2. Angular shouldered flasks. Ten pieces in the collection from the Sanandaj Museum are placed in this group in terms of form, decoration, and texture. Flasks 556, 578, 580, 889, 849, and 891 bear a green glaze. A related fragment is known in west Iran from Qal'eh-i Yazdigird (Kleiss 1973, Abb. 21: 9), which belongs to a flask (Khosrowzadeh 2020, 123). Further comparisons come from Susa and Miyanab of Shushtar (Khosrowzadeh and 'Ali 2004, 243). The turquoise-glazed Flasks 581 and 898 have parallels at Tell Mahuz of Mesopotamia (Venco Ricciardi 1970, 427). Flasks 576 and 901 show a buff glaze. In southwestern Iran, angular shouldered flasks emerged in the early Parthian period, in the third century BC. This variety occurs exclusively in glazed pottery.

3. Molded flasks. Such vessels are more common in the late Parthian and the Sassanian periods. The predominant designs are incised spirals. This type is represented at Kish and Tell Mahuz (Langdon and Harden 1934, 124). Molded flasks even continued into the early Islamic period, when they were mainly used by equestrians.

Conclusions

The vast territory of the Parthians witnessed the beginning of diverse pottery traditions and types that emerged out of interactions between the imperial culture and the indigenous cultures occupying different parts of their kingdom. Occasionally, certain types gained more prominence, hence their dissemination in other parts of the empire. A case in point is the flask form that – as a pottery diagnostic of the Parthian period – was more ubiquitous in west and southwest Iran, from where it would spread to the northern territories of the empire as well as Mesopotamia. The sample studied here falls into the two varieties of round shouldered and angular shouldered flasks. The sporadic decorations on the body of a number of these vessels, in the form of moderately deep incised circular lines, attest to the use of a potter's wheel. The texture, particularly that of the round shouldered variety, is reminiscent of the Iron III pottery. However, our analysis has revealed that the form and glazes of these flasks relate them to the Seleucid and Parthian periods.

In an attempt to pin down the place and time frame of their manufacture, two major geographic areas of production of this pottery type in the Parthian period were identified in light of systematically excavated points. The first area encompasses the regions that produced only the round shouldered variety (Shahr-i Qumis in northeast and Marian in north Iran), which corresponds to Haerinck's Region VI. The second area is where the two varieties coincide (Qal'eh-i Yazdigird, Kangavar, Shushtar, Qasr-e Abu Nasr, Kish, Tell Mahuz), coincident with Haerinck's Regions I, II and IX. Therefore, one may argue that round shouldered flasks ceased to be produced by the 2nd century AD (earlier phase in Region I) in favor of the angular shouldered variety that began to dominate in the late 3rd century AD.

The angular shouldered variety occur only in glazed pottery (Regions I, II, IX). Those with buff glaze were mainly popular in the early Parthian period, while the green and turquoise glazed pieces emerged in the later phases. These all bear testimony to interactions with centers in west and southwest Iran as well as Mesopotamia, whose inspirations and influences are widely attested in the regional pottery tradition.

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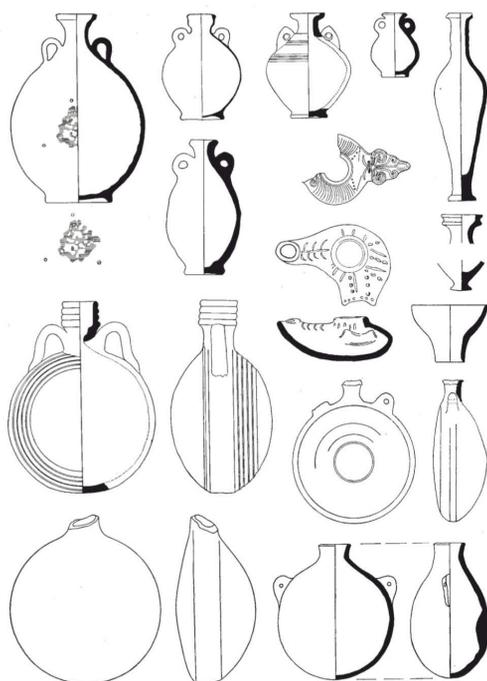
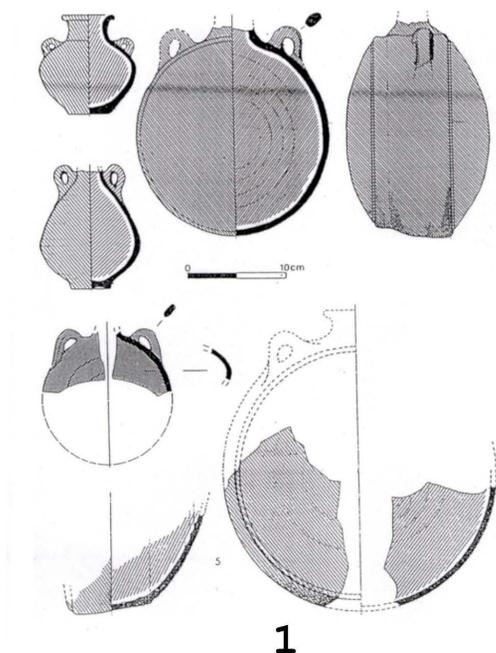
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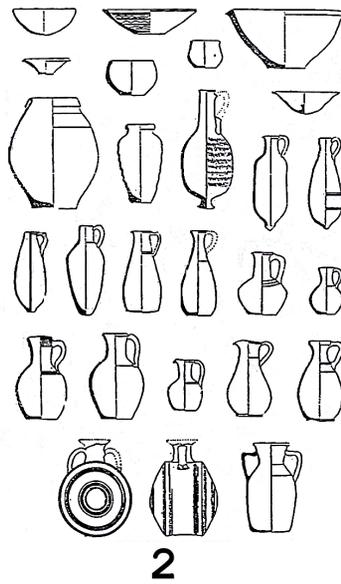
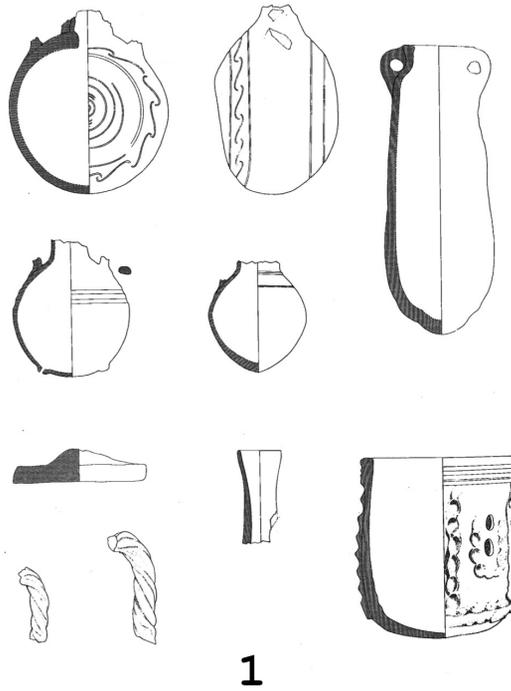
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Pl. 1: 1 – Pottery flask from the Palace of Ardeshir in Susa
(Boucharlat and Labrousse 1976, 123)

Pl. 1: 2 – Hellenistic pottery flasks from Nimrud (Toll 1943, 252)



Pl. 2: 1 – Pottery flask from Tell Mahuz (Venco Ricciardi 1970, 428)

Pl. 2: 2 – Pottery flask from Kish (Langdon and Harden 1934, 124)



1



2



892



890

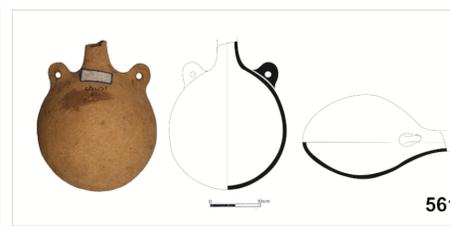


599

3



600



561



601

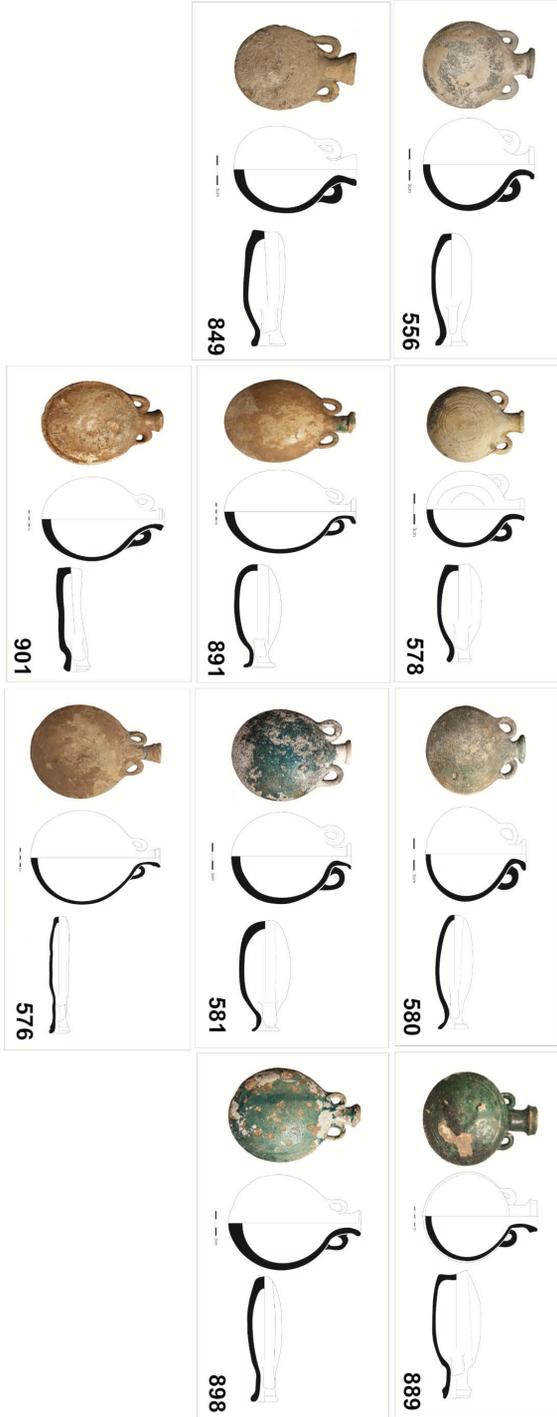
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Pl. 3: 1 – Pottery flask from the Marian cemetery (Ghaffari 2020, 100)

Pl. 3: 2 – Pottery flask from the Umayyad period (Fahravari 2019, 10)

Pl. 3: 3 – Round shouldered flask at the Sanandaj Museum (by authors, 2022)

Pl. 3: 4 – Round shouldered flask at the Sanandaj Museum (by authors, 2022)



Pl. 4 – Flasks with angular shoulders at the Samandaj Museum (by authors, 2022)