

Pot Marks from Ancient Egypt*

The multiple function of marking ceramic vessels

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Pot marks as one of the more numerous groups of non-textual marking systems were among the earliest recognized in Egypt. Already during the Nineteenth Century, authors meditated about the meaning of marks that were attached to different types of vessels. In course of time, many details were noticed that affected the interpretation: whether the marks were applied prior or after firing of the vessel, whether they were attached to storage vessels or dishes, and so on. Different explanations were put forward in course of several excavation reports, but the interpretations were subsequently usually rejected by other authors: the marks were taken to be those of owners, producers, or institutions, or as referring to content or volume.¹

The researchers neither agreed on the pot marks' function and meaning nor their legibility. Despite their differences, all interpretations indicated that the marks were closely related to vessel or content so that the marks' classification as non-textual marking system is unquestionable.

Until now it seemed impossible to find an interpretation that fits all the different pot mark occurrences. This is not surprising since the vessels come from different contexts, had different functions and span a time span of several thousand years. Therefore, the contributions to this volume also present different solutions for their varying subjects. Nearly all of the previous interpretations were found valid in one or the other case and can be highlighted as follows:

A connection of pot marks to the production process of the ceramic vessel is seen in the case of Predynastic bread moulds from Adaïma in Upper Egypt and Tell el-Iswid South in the Delta. By excluding other possibilities, Gaëlle Breand suggests in her study that the marks were counting aids.

Rita Hartmann describes a group of wine jars from the Early Dynastic tomb of Ninetjer at Saqqara which carry different geometric signs. She discusses a connection of the marks to the volume of the pots but is not quite convinced, so that she also considers the production process as trigger for the application of the marks, especially since some of the marks seem to have had a numeric value.

Julia Budka discusses pot marks on New Kingdom oases amphorae, based on a substantial corpus of vessels found at Abydos/Umm el-Qaab. These marks on a specific type of vessel – wine amphorae – seem to illustrate that marking vessels during the manufacturing process can also have a regional/local tradition. Gabor Schreiber

* We are grateful for several inspiring discussions with Petra Andrásy.

¹ See, for example, tables 1 and 2 in the contribution by Engel for different interpretations of Early Dynastic pot marks (below, p. 216).

recognizes only a rather small number of different signs on First Millennium BC ceramic vessels from Thebes. The vessels form a heterogeneous corpus, so that the author relates the marks to their function or content.

Similar ideas are proposed by Julia Budka for New Kingdom votive vessels found in the context of the tomb of Osiris at Umm el-Qaab. The marks seem to relate to the specific function of the vessel within the sphere of the local cult for Osiris.

While most of the authors concentrate on material from a specific site, Eva-Maria Engel surveys the pot marks on Early Dynastic wine jars in general. The recognizable pattern makes it likely that, in contrast to the other interpretations which see the signs as closely related to the pots or their content, these marks are a result of some institutional practice.

A similar thought is put forward by Teodozja Rzeuska who looks at Sixth Dynasty beer jars from funerary contexts at Saqqara that also carry geometric signs. The author discusses several possibilities, including the idea that the signs might have marked those vessels that were intended to be sent to an institution that was responsible to conduct burials at the site.

Petra Andrásy presents an exception among the topics: She discusses the inscription on an Old Kingdom papyrus discovered at Gebelein that lists a group of potters headed by a scribe, a rare insight into the organization of a work crew. A singular sign is added to this list in a prominent position. Andrásy, therefore, takes this sign as a control mark that might have been repeated later as a pot mark on the vessels produced by this gang of workmen.

Although some of the interpretations are more certain than the others, the articles in the present volume nevertheless prove the potential of hitherto neglected material to the study of Egyptian pottery. It became evident that the long searched for general explanation for all Egyptian pot marks probably did not exist. Instead it appears that ceramic vessels as carriers of information were widely used in different contexts, therefore transmitting different messages. The material's potential also lies in the different frames of interpretation presented in the contributions that do not exclude each other: the marks might as well have had an object related meaning and still could have been part of administrative practice.