

# Marks on Egyptian Festival Pottery

The use of pot marks in the context of Osirian rituals

at Umm el-Qaab, Abydos

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## Abstract

To interpret specific sets of pot marks, one relies on the context of the pottery vessels: the find spot, dating, shape and ware of the specific vessels. A specialised and site-specific use of pot marks seems to be attested in Pharaonic Egypt for the New Kingdom within the frameworks of festivals (see Hope 1999). This paper presents exemplarily pot marks on New Kingdom vessels functioning as votive gifts and connected with festivals and rituals embedded in the cult of Osiris at Umm el-Qaab, Abydos. It aims to illustrate possible reasons why similar and even identical marks appear both on painted festival vessels (Budka 2008; Budka 2013) and votive pots of a type that is commonly found in settlement contexts. As work is still ongoing, only a selection of pot marks from Umm el-Qaab will be discussed.

## 1 Introduction

The German Archaeological Institute Cairo has been excavating at Umm el-Qaab since 1977. The site, which is the earliest burial ground for the kings of Egypt,<sup>1</sup> became an important sacred place since the god Osiris was believed to be buried there. From at least the early Middle Kingdom onwards, the tomb of Djer (First Dynasty) was interpreted as the tomb of Osiris.<sup>2</sup> The royal necropolis lies not isolated on its desert plateau in front of the major *wadi* in the area, but it is connected with several temples and tombs by means of processional routes (Fig. 1).<sup>3</sup>

In 2006, a new project directed by Ute Effland with a focus on the cult of Osiris was started, examining all remains at Umm el-Qaab post-dating the Early Dynastic Period.<sup>4</sup> The major material remains of the cultic activities connected with this tomb

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\* The investigation of the ceramic material from Umm el-Qaab was undertaken under the auspices of the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut (DAI) Research Cluster 4 in the context of the project “The Cult of Osiris in Abydos,” initiated in 2006. First of all, I wish to thank Ute Effland as the project director. I am especially grateful to Andreas Effland for constant support, advice and exchange of thoughts. He also kindly gave permission to use Fig. 1 in this paper. Eva Engel kindly shared her ideas about pot marks from Abydos. I wish to thank all fieldwork assistants for drawing pottery at the site: Nicole Mosiniak, Julia D. Preisigke and Federica Facchetti. Daniela Wölfl kindly assisted in digitalizing the pot marks and vessels illustrated in this paper. Last but not least, I am thankful to Kenneth Griffin for improving the written English of this paper.

1 Dreyer (1999: 109-114; 2007: 193-197); O’Connor (2009: 137-157).

2 Amélineau (1899); for recent work, see Effland, Budka & Effland (2010); Effland & Effland (2013); Budka (2014).

3 Cf. Eaton (2004: passim); Effland (2014: Pl. 6).

4 Effland, Budka & Effland (2010); Effland & Effland (2013).

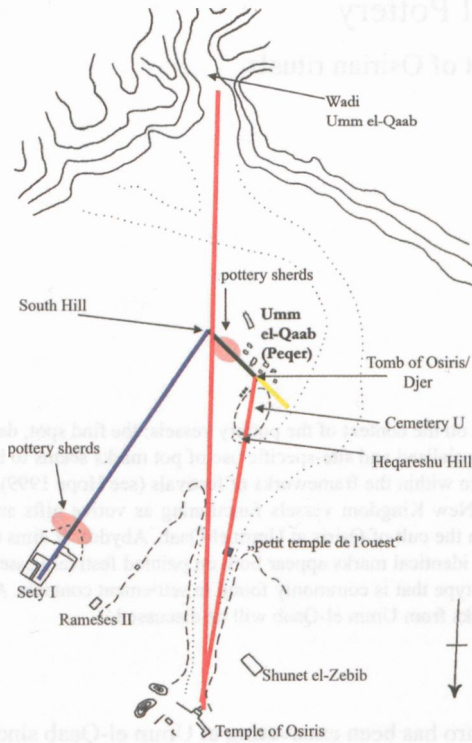


Fig. 1: Map of central Abydos with cultic and processional ways (Drawing: U. Effland). After: Effland (2014: Pl. 6).

In most cases, pottery vessels hold several functional meanings within a variety of spheres and the interpretation of respective pot marks is therefore complex. The primary purpose of the votive ceramics at Umm el-Qaab makes this material an ideal case study for assessing the function of pot marks.

## 2 Pot marks from Umm el-Qaab

The large corpus of several hundreds of pot marks on votive vessels from Umm el-Qaab comprises mostly geometric and a few figural motifs that covers the period from the Middle Kingdom to the Late Period. The amount of marked vessels can only be estimated, reaching several thousands of pots. The documentation is still ongoing and only a representative selection will be presented here. All of the marks in questions have been applied to the vessel prior to firing.

are millions of sherds and pots.<sup>5</sup> These ceramics also include a substantial amount of vessels marked pre-firing.

The main types of the votive pottery at Umm el-Qaab are beer jars, so called *qaabs* (small offering cups), incense burners and several types of jars including wine amphorae from different regions (see Budka in this volume for Oasis wine containers). There was a first heyday of activity during the Thutmoside era, then the Ramesside Period and finally a revival in cultic activity at the site in the Late Period, especially during the Twenty-Fifth Dynasty.<sup>6</sup>

It is important to stress that all of the seemingly functionally diverse vessel types share one common theme: they are all votive vessels for Osiris, dedicated either by identified persons or by anonymous donors. This shared functional use of millions of pottery vessels spanning a time period of 3000 years offers much potential for the assessment of pot marks.

5 Budka (2010: 52-53).

6 Budka (2010: 52-53; 2014: 56-65).



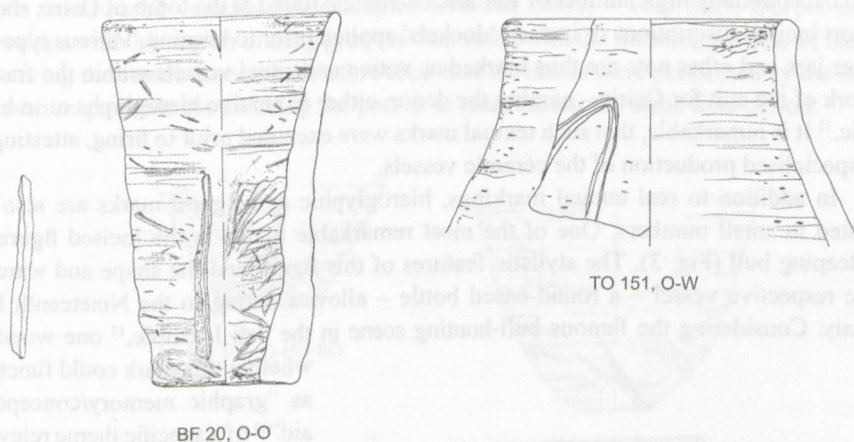


Fig. 2: Characteristic pottery types of the Middle Kingdom from Umm el-Qaab with pot marks.

### 2.1 Middle Kingdom (Fig. 2)

A small amount of Middle Kingdom vessels displays pot marks. These are (1) baggy-shaped jars, made from a distinctive, very coarse Nile clay (Nile C variant), with a mark on the shoulder (TO 150-type) and (2) model beakers (“Brotbecher,”<sup>7</sup> BF 20-type) with simple incised lines, mostly vertical strikes from top to bottom (Fig. 2). Both types are not only attested at Umm el-Qaab, but were also documented from the Senwosret III district at South-Abydos.<sup>8</sup>



Fig. 3: Fragment of Nineteenth Dynasty vessel with incised bull representation. Photo: DAI Cairo.

### 2.2 New Kingdom

A total of 99 pot marks on 138 New Kingdom vessels of a closed shaped were documented in 2012. These are mostly beer jars of various types, but also round based bottles and funnel-necked jars are attested.<sup>9</sup> The vessels are made of medium-to-coarse Nile clays (mostly Nile B2) and find many parallels in settlement and temple complexes of the Late Eighteenth to the Nineteenth Dynasties.<sup>10</sup>

7 “Hyperboloid Miniature and Model Beakers, Direct Rim, Flat Base – Large,” see Seiler (2012: 863, nos. 1-2).

8 Wegner (2007: 264, Fig. 114, nos. 98-109 for the model beakers and 277, Fig. 126, no. 122 for a jar with a pot mark on the shoulder).

9 Cf. Rose’s types SH 8.1, SH 8.2 and SH 9.3, Rose (2007: 241-242, 244).

10 Rose (2007: 241-242, 244); Budka (2010: 47 with further literature).

An exceptionally high number of Ramesside vessels found at the tomb of Osiris shows short incised inscriptions or incised ‘dockets’ applied prior to burning. Various types of beer jars and other pots are thus marked as votive and ritual vessels within the framework of the cult for Osiris – naming the donor, either in cursive hieroglyphs or in hieratic.<sup>11</sup> It is remarkable, that such textual marks were executed prior to firing, attesting to a specialised production of the ceramic vessels.

In addition to real textual markings, hieroglyphic and figural marks are also attested in small numbers. One of the most remarkable marks is the incised figure of a leaping bull (Fig. 3). The stylistic features of this figure and the shape and ware of the respective vessel – a round-based bottle – allow a dating to the Nineteenth Dynasty. Considering the famous bull-hunting scene in the Seti I temple,<sup>12</sup> one wonders

whether this mark could function as “graphic memory/conception aid”<sup>13</sup> of a specific theme relevant for cultic activities at Abydos.

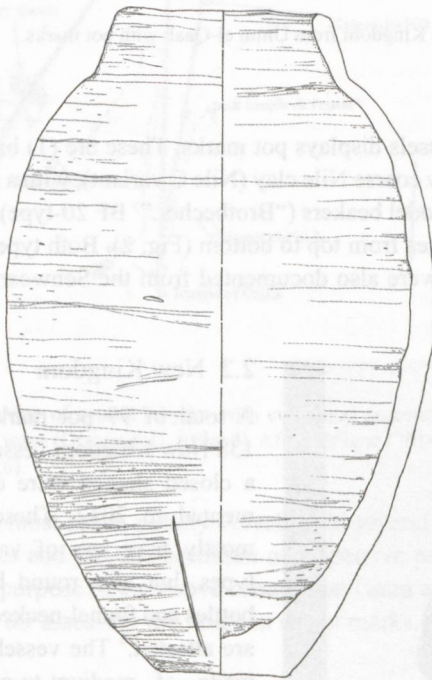


Fig. 4: Characteristic Ramesside beer jar from Umm el-Qaab with pot mark above base (BT 750).

### 2.2.1 Beer jars (Figs. 4-5)

Most numerous in the New Kingdom corpus from Umm el-Qaab are typical Ramesside offering vessels (BT 700, BT 701, BT 730)<sup>14</sup> with pre-fired pot marks, mostly simple linear incised marks like vertical strokes, curved lines and two diagonal lines forming a cross (Fig. 11).<sup>15</sup> The size of these marks may differ, but usually the lines are about 5-12cm long. Only in rare cases there is more than one mark on the vessels.

The marks are simple lines of geometric character, executed with a sharp tool – they are formed by very deep incised lines. It has to be noted that the typical Ramesside beer jar is usually trimmed in its lower part (for

11 These texts are currently being studied by Andreas Effland; for preliminary observations see Effland (2006; 2010).

12 I would like to thank Andreas Effland who was the first to point out the parallel between the pot mark and the bull-hunting scene.

13 See Kammerzell (2009: 286-291).

14 Cf. the predecessors of the late Eighteenth Dynasty from Amarna: Rose (2007: type SH 8.2).

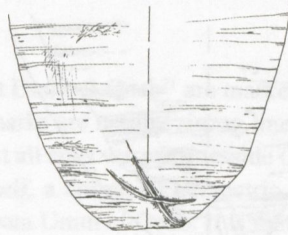
15 Budka (2010: 47, Figs. 27.7, 27.10; 48, Fig. 29.1). For parallels from Qantir see Ditzel (2007: nos. 24 and 42).



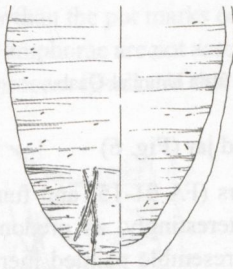
both round-based variants and examples with flat bases) – very often the pot mark overlaps with this region of deep grooves connected with the finishing process of manufacturing the vessel. It seems therefore clear that the marks were performed by the same person responsible for finishing the pots or at least during the same time period.



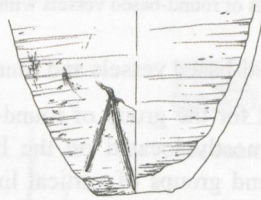
RM 105, O-HN-BO



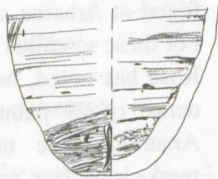
RM 123, O-W



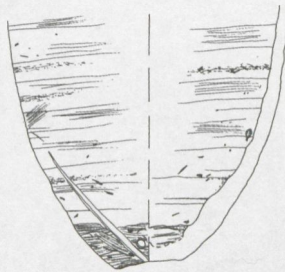
RM 125, K2292



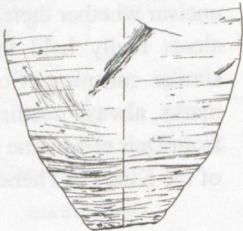
RM 126, O-NNO



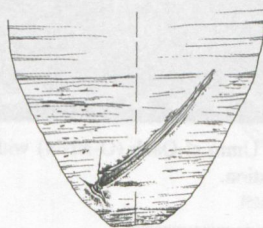
RM 128, O-NW



RM 130, O-O



RM 136, O-NNN



RM 161, O-O

Fig. 5: Lower parts of Ramesside beer jars with pot marks from Umm el-Qaab.

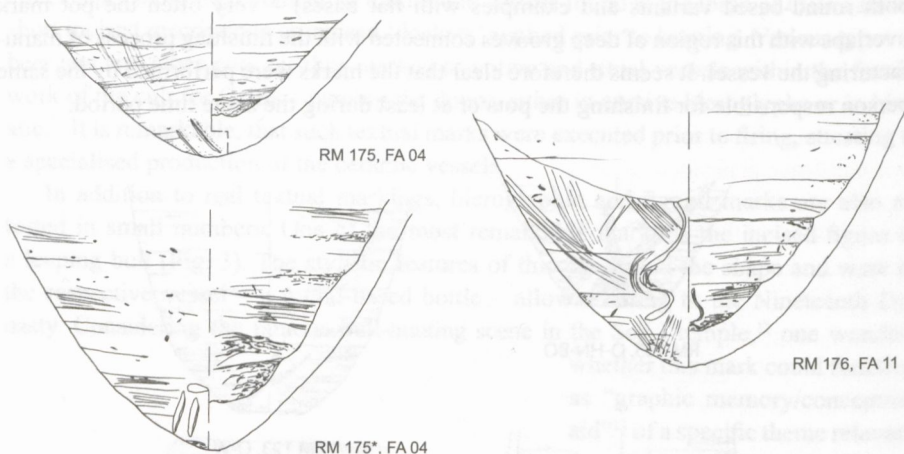


Fig. 6: Lower parts of round-based vessels with pot marks from Umm el-Qaab.

### 2.2.2 Rounded-based vessels and funnel-necked jar (Fig. 6)

Marks attested for the group of round-based jars (FA 01-15) and funnel-necked jars (FU 01) are mostly located on the base.<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, as predominantly curved lines, circles and groups of vertical lines they resemble painted hieroglyphic marks

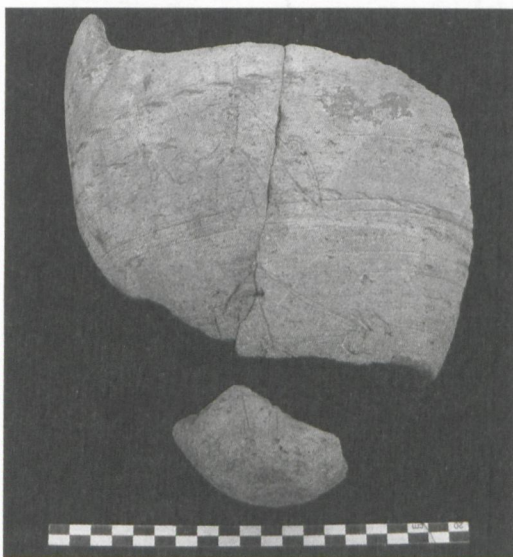


Fig. 7: BT 801 from Umm el-Qaab (O-NNN) with floral incised decoration.

known also from a number of decorated New Kingdom jars, especially blue painted vessels, found at Amarna and other sites.<sup>17</sup> For these so-called painter's marks, Rose has noted, based on the evidence of 29 painted marks from Amarna: "The meaning of the marks is unclear, and they may have served different roles at different sites (Hope 1999, 138-139)."<sup>18</sup> At present, no painter's mark is known from Umm el-Qaab and it remains unclear whether their incised equivalents really held the same or a similar meaning. Comparable pot marks, always postfired, are known from Deir el-Medine and the Valley of the Kings in Thebes.<sup>19</sup>

16 For the vessel types, see Budka (2010: 47, Figs. 27.4 and 27.8).

17 Hope (1999: 138-139); Rose (2007: 24-25).

18 Rose (2007: 25).

19 Aston (2009: Figs. 7-8; 2014: 71, Pls. 67-68).



Another similarity between incised and painted markings can be noted at Umm el-Qaab. In rare cases – at present five examples are known – a floral incised decoration on the lower part of the vessels is attested. This decoration is clearly the incised version of painted floral patterns well-known on blue painted pottery. The motif of BT 801 (Fig. 7) was clearly inspired by floral wreaths which were used to decorate ceramic vessels during festive occasions.<sup>20</sup>

### 2.2.3 Oases amphorae

A high percentage of Oases amphorae found at Umm el-Qaab<sup>21</sup> are marked with a pre-fired mark above the base. These Ramesside marks are mainly zigzag lines and simple strokes and lines (see Budka in this volume). At all sites were Ramesside Oases vessels are found, e.g. Qantir, but also in Dakhlah itself, a corpus of geometric signs can be established which corresponds to the corpus from Umm el-Qaab. It is therefore highly likely that, other than the pot marks on beer jars and other votive vessels for Osiris, the marks on Oases amphorae are not associated with the cult of the god, but rather with the manufacturing process (Budka in this volume).

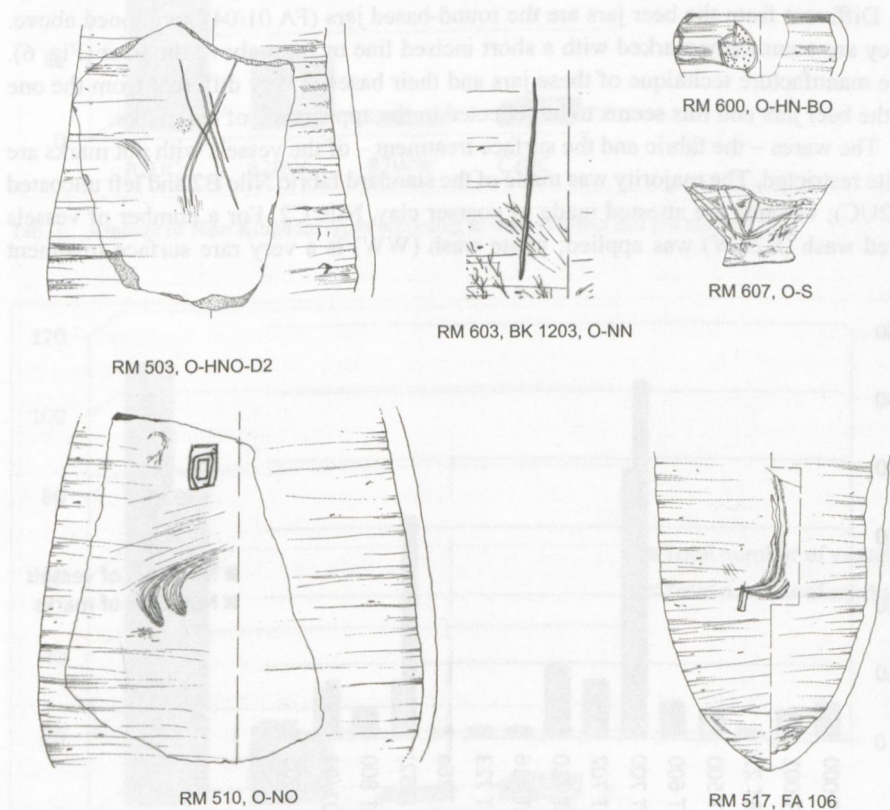


Fig. 8: Examples of Late Period vessels from Umm el-Qaab with pot marks.

20 Cf. Budka (2013: 187 with further literature).

21 Budka (2015).

### 2.3 Late Period

The corpus of pot marks from Late Period vessels discovered at Umm el-Qaab is considerably smaller than the New Kingdom corpus. The most common types, the *qaab* vessels and the so-called Late Period bottles, are sometimes marked prior to firing (Fig. 8).

Fig. 8 gives selected examples found in the vicinity of the tomb of Osiris, all made of Nile clays. It has to be stressed that pot marks are much less frequent during the Late Period than in the New Kingdom.

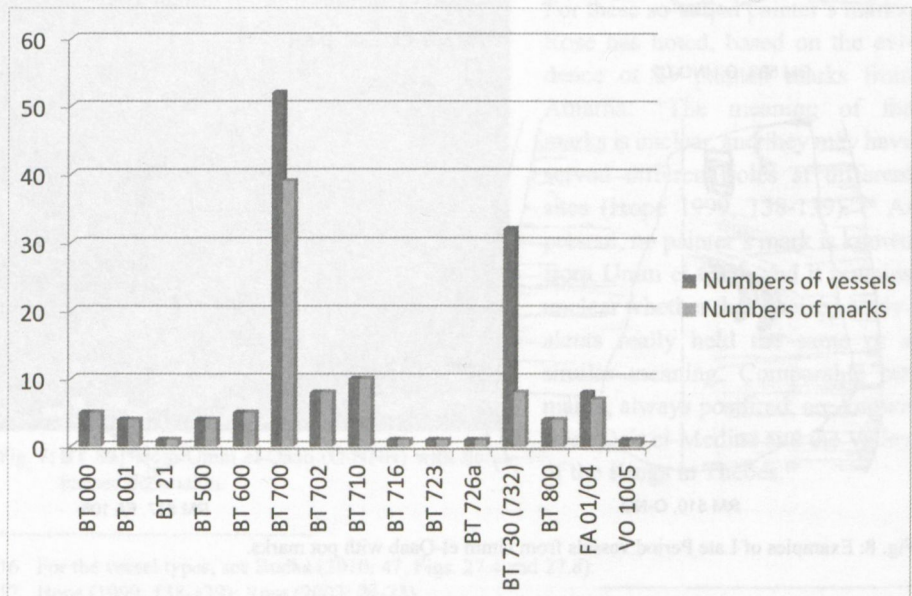
## 3 Quantitative data

### 3.1 New Kingdom vessel types from Umm el-Qaab and the location of pot marks

Table 1 illustrates the quantities and variability according to New Kingdom vessel types. Only in the groups of the most common vessels – BT 700 and BT 730 – the same marks are attested more than once, but here the motif diversity is quite small. Most common are variants of simple crosses (see Fig. 11, RM 105, 125 and 126).

Different from the beer jars are the round-based jars (FA 01/04) mentioned above. They are commonly marked with a short incised line or lines above the base (Fig. 6). The manufacture technique of these jars and their bases is very different from the one of the beer jars and this seems to be reflected in the appearance of the marks.

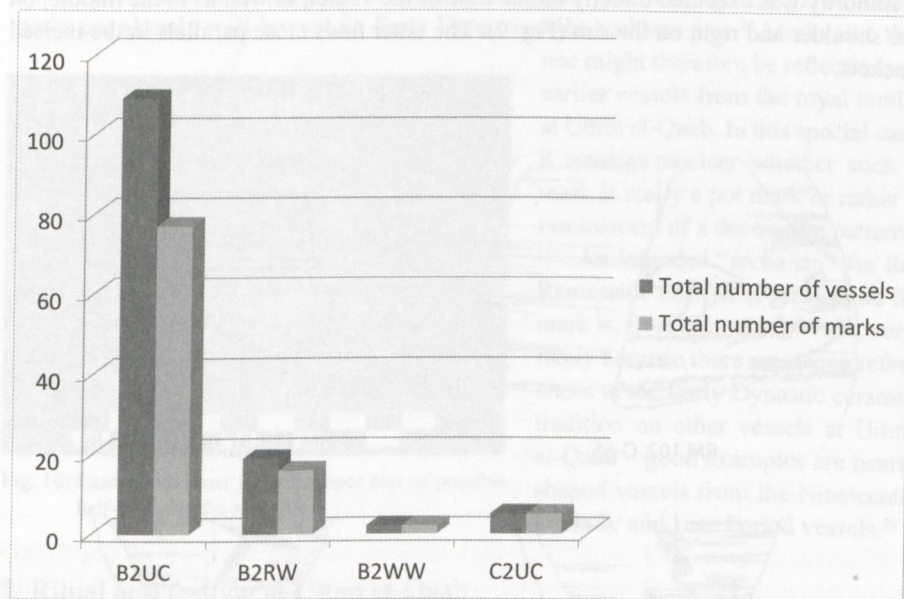
The wares – the fabric and the surface treatment – of the vessels with pot marks are quite restricted. The majority was made of the standard fabric Nile B2 and left uncoated (B2UC); variants are attested made of coarser clay, Nile C2. For a number of vessels a red wash (B2RW) was applied; white wash (WW) is a very rare surface treatment



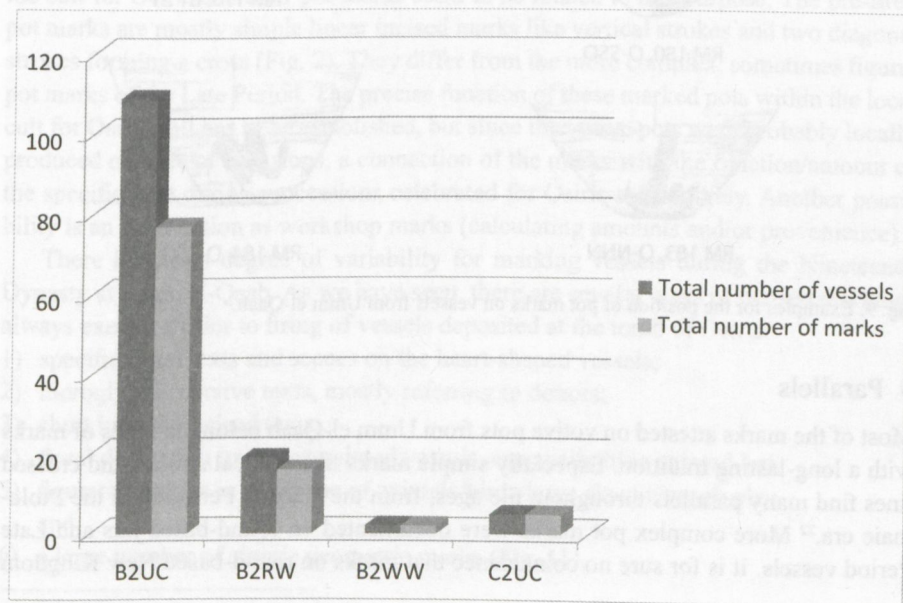
Tab. 1: Amount of individual New Kingdom types (vessels and pot marks).



(Tab. 2). It has to be stressed that this picture corresponds to the general proportions of Ramesside beer jars – most of them are made of Nile B2 with uncoated surface, another percentage is red washed. Thus, there is no clear preferences for a particular ware within the corpus of vessels with pot marks.



Tab. 2: Amount of New Kingdom types according to ware (vessels and pot marks).



Tab. 3: Location of pot marks on New Kingdom pottery types.

Table 3 summarizes the location of the marks on the New Kingdom vessels – the most common one is just above the base (Figs. 5-6). Sometimes the mark continues from the wall of the vessel onto the flat base. Obviously, the marking was done from the base towards the vessel, indicating that the vessel was upside down during execution. A minority was executed directly on the base of the vessel, as well as in the middle, on the shoulder and right on the rim (Fig. 9). The latter finds close parallels in the incised dockets.

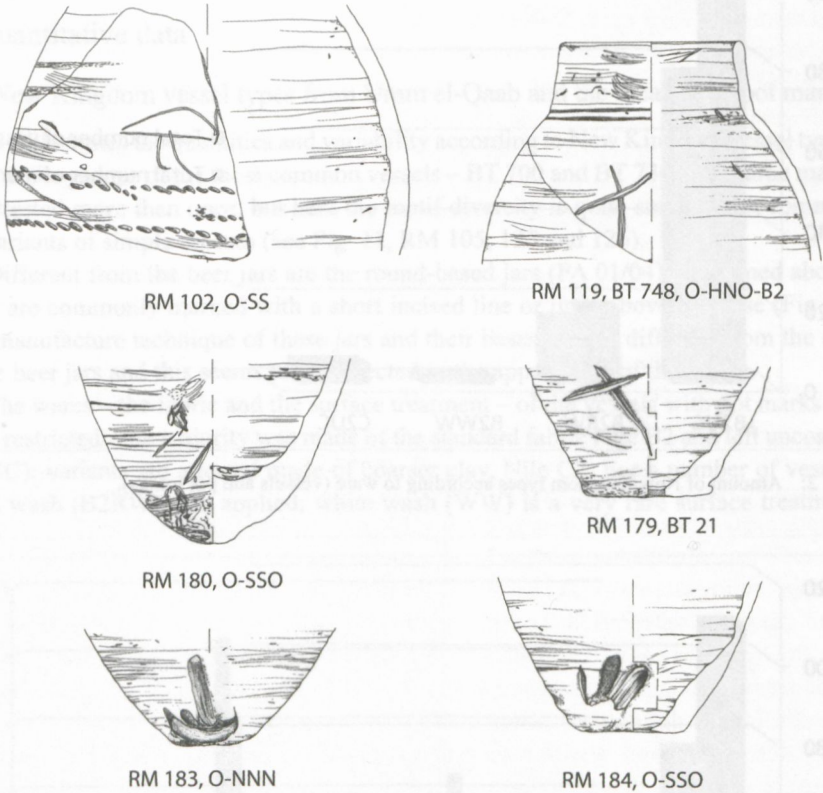


Fig. 9: Examples for the position of pot marks on vessels from Umm el-Qaab.

#### 4 Parallels

Most of the marks attested on votive pots from Umm el-Qaab belong to types of marks with a long-lasting tradition. Especially simple marks like vertical strokes and crossed lines find many parallels throughout the ages, from the Naqada Period until the Ptolemaic era.<sup>22</sup> More complex pot marks were documented on round-based jars and Late Period vessels. It is for sure no coincidence that marks on round-based New Kingdom

22 For similar crosses like on the New Kingdom beer jars from the late Naqada phase, see Bréand (2008: Pl. 1).



jars resemble painted pottery marks and might be indicators of festivals (cf. Figs. 6 and 7).<sup>23</sup>

I would like to highlight an interesting long-lived mark on the shoulder of various types of vessels. A half circle is attested on the shoulder of several Ramesside beer jars (Fig. 10) and finds parallels on Middle Kingdom jars (see Fig. 2, right). Similar marks are already well-known on Early Dynastic wine and beer jars.<sup>24</sup> Marks like this

one might therefore be reflections of earlier vessels from the royal tombs at Umm el-Qaab. In this special case it remains unclear whether such a mark is really a pot mark or rather a reminiscent of a decoration pattern.

An intended “archaism” for the Ramesside beer jar (Fig. 10) and its mark is, from my point of view, very likely because there are strong references to the Early Dynastic ceramic tradition on other vessels at Umm el-Qaab – good examples are heart-shaped vessels from the Nineteenth Dynasty and Late Period vessels.<sup>25</sup>



Fig. 10: Example for beer jar with upper part of possible half-circle on the shoulder.

## 5 Ritual and festival at Umm el-Qaab

Ramesside beer jars functioned as votive and ritual vessels within the framework of the cult for Osiris and their pot marks seem to be related to this purpose. The pre-fired pot marks are mostly simple linear incised marks like vertical strokes and two diagonal strokes forming a cross (Fig. 2). They differ from the more complex, sometimes figural pot marks of the Late Period. The precise function of these marked pots within the local cult for Osiris still has to be established, but since the votive pots were probably locally produced on special occasions, a connection of the marks with the function/amount of the specific pots during processions celebrated for Osiris seems likely. Another possibility is an explanation as workshop marks (calculating amounts and/or provenience).

There is a high degree of variability for marking vessels during the Nineteenth Dynasty at Umm el-Qaab. As we have seen, there are several ways of incised marking, always executed prior to firing of vessels deposited at the tomb of Osiris:

- 1) specific ritual texts and scenes on the heart-shaped vessels;
- 2) hieroglyphic cursive texts, mostly referring to donors;
- 3) short hieratic incised texts;
- 4) floral decoration imitating painted vessels, especially blue painted jars;
- 5) figurative marks in the shape of animals/birds/large sized hieroglyphs;  
and
- 6) a large number of simple geometric marks (Fig. 11).

23 See Hope (1999).

24 I would like to thank Vera Müller for sharing information about the material from the tomb of Den.

25 See Budka (2010: 60; 2014); Effland (2013).

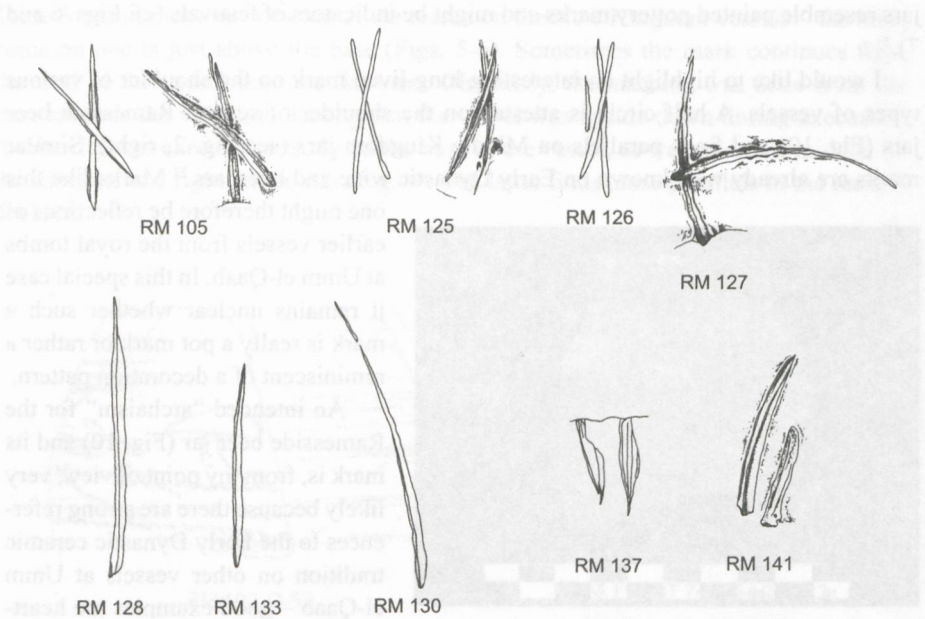


Fig. 11: Selection of most common pot marks from Umm el-Qaab.

The common denominator of all six groups of incised marking is the pre-firing execution. The large amount of votive ceramics for the cult at Umm el-Qaab share features of typical mass-productions and were probably manufactured in near-by pottery workshops, responsible to supply the Osirian festivities. This makes it very likely that the local preference for incised markings and decoration at Umm el-Qaab during Rameside times is connected with the function of the vessels and their use as votive items.

The majority of the material originates from the early Nineteenth Dynasty, the time when Seti I started a new era. His temple of millions of years including the so-called Osireion reflects the beginning of an innovative, complex and extended development of the sacred landscape of Abydos.<sup>26</sup> Keeping the differing numbers of all six groups of markings and especially the predominance of the geometric marks in mind (group 6), the question must be raised whether a common scheme for the variability of marking contemporaneous vessels with six types of incised marking during the Nineteenth Dynasty is indeed possible. Do the various groups share common functional aspects or is each group autonomous?

Group 4 with floral incised decoration imitating painted festival vessels is in this respect highly interesting. Floral motifs have in general connotations of creative aspects and rebirth.<sup>27</sup> Only few examples of early Nineteenth Dynasty vessels with this very specific style of decoration, clearly inspired by real floral wreaths used to decorate ceramic vessels during festive occasions, were found until today. To the best of my knowledge there are no parallels for this peculiar style of vessel ornament from other sites elsewhere in Egypt. Executed prior to firing, the floral motifs are very likely to be

26 Cf. Efland & Efland (2013: 40-55).

27 Cf. Budka (2013: 206 with further literature).



connected with the functional use of the Ramesside vessels – with their purpose as votive gift to Osiris on the occasion of festival processions at Abydos.<sup>28</sup> This corresponds to the readable markings of groups 1-3 and I would like to propose that it also holds true for groups 5 and 6, the non-textual markings on Ramesside festival vessels (Fig. 11).

## 6 Summary

In conclusion, Umm el-Qaab seems to be an excellent case study site for understanding pot marks for several reasons: the material derives from one specific context (including abundant textual sources); large sets of contemporaneous pot marks are available and the complete corpus spans the time from the Early Dynastic Period to the Ptolemaic era.<sup>29</sup> A diachronic development of the frequency of marking pottery vessels can be noted. Besides the large quantity of non-textual marks, there are also important readable marks (including cursive hieroglyphic names and titles) and incised versions of painted decoration, all connected with the general theme of creative aspects.

The vessels from Umm el-Qaab form a heterogeneous corpus as far as their vessel type is concerned. The marks seem, nevertheless, to be always related to their function as votive vessels within the sphere of the local cult for Osiris. Some of the marks might refer to Early Dynastic vessels and thus original contents from the tomb of Osiris – the majority, however, highlights that the relevant cult was particularly carried out during major festivals. These non-textual marks connected with Osirian festivals and rituals complement the textual evidence deriving from hieroglyphic and hieratic inscriptions on votive vessels from Umm el-Qaab.

## 7 Discussion

Work on marked vessels from Umm el-Qaab is still ongoing and the hypothesis presented here for the material from the New Kingdom rests only on preliminary evidence. It has to be stressed that the small size of the corpus studied so far results in a preliminary character of the ideas discussed here. Because of the huge amount of votive pottery from all periods at Umm el-Qaab it can be doubted that absolute amounts and specific data on percentages and proportions of marked vessels will ever be available.

It was argued in this paper that there is no connection between the marks and the size or identity of the content – it can also be doubted that there is a direct link to the type of vessel. Heart-shaped vessels (group 1) and beer jars with readable incised texts (groups 2 and 3) applied pre-firing clearly attest the possibility to design personalised votive pots in the Nineteenth Dynasty.<sup>30</sup> It is worth considering whether geometric pot marks on simple offering jars could be common marks of less ranking priests/groups of priests/institution. Another possibility is that the markings correspond to a specific occasion or festival<sup>31</sup> or as “control marks” to quantities produced for a specific event.

28 Note that some of the painter's marks from Amarna and Karnak North are also of floral character; cf. Hope (1999: Figs. 1 and 3).

29 For Roman and Coptic activities at the site, see Effland (2014). As yet, no pot marks were documented on the Late Antique material.

30 Effland (2010; 2013).

31 For a possible connection of pot marks with jubilees of the king at Malqata and Karnak, see Hope (1999: 121-146).

Coming back to the general interpretation of New Kingdom pot marks and the hypothesis that they served diverse roles at diverse sites<sup>32</sup> – can Umm el-Qaab be regarded as an example that we should always favour a site specific analysis or can we also name some common causes? For now, I believe that the *context* seems to be the most important aspect to consider for interpreting pot marks appearing in different roles at different sites.

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32 See above and Rose (2007: 25). Cf. also Aston (2009).



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As early as during the late Eighteenth Dynasty, the large corpus of osiris-related vessels with the cult of Osiris in the preserved tomb of the god at Umm el-Qaab includes imported amphorae from the north. The number increases during the Nineteenth Dynasty and most of the vessels probably originate from Dakhla's Oases.<sup>1</sup> These Kharsidite amphorae are frequently treated pre-firing. The pot marks are preserved here and possible functions will be discussed.

## 2. New Kingdom oases amphorae at Umm el-Qaab

Following classifications by Marchand and Tallet, Hope and Long,<sup>2</sup> two main types of oases amphorae are differentiated at Umm el-Qaab. Both types were probably used as wine containers.<sup>3</sup>

Type 1 is similar to Egyptian Nile valley amphorae with two vertical handles and a flat base (Fig. 1).<sup>4</sup> The size can differ and ranges from small to tall. Type 2 is a local Quidi type or developed shape. Amphorae of type 2 have a very small rim diameter, a long neck, commonly a flattened shoulder and a rounded bottom base with a distinctive ledge. The general size and especially the base diameter vary from small to medium and large (see below and Fig. 2).<sup>5</sup> Sometimes type 2 amphorae are decorated with black paint (black handled design)<sup>6</sup> and they are very often marked. Type 2a therefore is key material for the present paper.

1. For the earliest evidence of oases in Egypt at Umm el-Qaab, see Effland, Budka & Effland (2010), Effland & Effland (2013), Budka (2014).

2. Marchand & Tallet (1999), Hope (2007), Long (2008-10, fig. 1).

3. See Budka (2013).

4. Marchand & Tallet (1999: 318), Hope (2007), Long (2008-10, fig. 1).

5. See Budka (2013).

6. Cf. Anon (2004: 20, fig. 17).

7. Cf. Marchand & Tallet (1999: 319-320 with bibliography).