

Pot Marks on New Kingdom Amphorae from the Oases

The case of Umm el-Qaab

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Abstract

A substantial amount of ceramic vessels originating from the oases have been excavated during recent fieldwork by the German Archaeological Institute Cairo at Umm el-Qaab, Abydos. Most likely products from Dakhleh Oasis, a large number of New Kingdom amphorae shows pre-fired marks. This corpus of pot marks is presented and possible functional aspects are summarized.

1 Introduction

As early as during the late Eighteenth Dynasty, the large corpus of ceramics associated with the cult of Osiris at the presumed tomb of the god at Umm el-Qaab¹ includes imported amphorae from the oases. The number increases during the Nineteenth Dynasty and most of the vessels probably originate from Dakhleh Oasis.² These Ramesside amphorae are frequently marked pre-firing. The pot marks are presented 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,³ two main types of oases amphorae are differentiated at Umm el-Qaab. Both types were probably used as wine containers.⁴

Type 1 is similar to Egyptian Nile valley amphorae with two vertical handles and a flat base (Fig. 1).⁵ The size can differ and ranges from small to tall. Type 2 is a local Oasis type of un-Egyptian shape. Amphorae of type 2 have a very small rim diameter, a long neck, commonly horizontal handles and a moulded button 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). Sometimes type 2 amphorae are decorated with black paint (black hatched design⁶) and they are very often marked. Type 2 is therefore of key interest for the present paper.

1 For the material evidence of cult for Osiris at Umm el-Qaab, see Effland, Budka & Effland (2010); Effland & Effland (2013); Budka (2014).

2 See in detail: Budka (2015).

3 Marchand & Tallet (1999: 318); Hope (2002); Long (2008: 98, Fig. 1).

4 See Budka (2015).

5 Cf. Aston (2004: 202, Fig. 17).

6 Cf. Marchand & Tallet (1999: 319-320 with further literature).

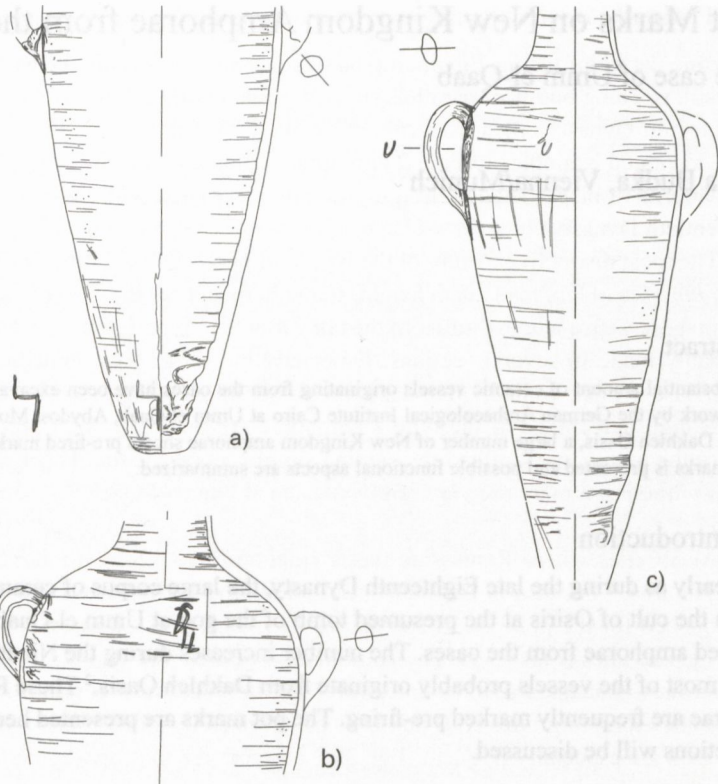


Fig. 1: Type 1 amphorae: a) lower part of small-medium variant with pot mark, scale 1:3; b and c) tall-necked variant with pot mark on shoulder, scale 1:6.

1.1 Pot marks of New Kingdom type 1 amphorae (Fig. 1)

Pre-fired pot marks are present, but not very common on oases amphorae of type 1. In general they are mostly of a geometric form and located on the shoulder of the vessels (Figs. 1b-c). A medium to tall jar with a flat base is one of the rare examples with a pot mark above the base. Its mark in the shape of an angular “Z” (Fig. 1a) was incised prior to firing the vessel and closely parallels marks on amphorae of type 2. It might be related to the manufacturing process (see below). Other examples of oases type 1 amphorae bear pre-fired marks on the wheel-thrown shoulder (Fig. 1b and c). The marks are simple geometric forms (Fig. 1c) or almost of a hieroglyphic/hieratic character (Fig. 1b).

As yet, pot marks located on the shoulder of oases vessels are only attested for type 1 amphorae in Umm el-Qaab. This type of amphora also shows considerably more attestations of hieratic docket marks than type 2 vessels.⁷ Such docket marks are frequently located on the shoulder and the pot marks might have a similar function, even if they are done pre-firing (see below).

7 Currently under investigation by Andreas Effland.

1.2 Pot marks of New Kingdom type 2 amphorae (Fig. 2)

The fine dating of the un-Egyptian type of transport vessel called oases amphora type 2 is still ongoing but most parallels suggest a Ramesside origin.⁸ A date from the early Nineteenth Dynasty onwards seems most likely for the variants illustrated on Fig. 2. The decorated examples of type 2 amphorae – painted with linear bands and geometric patterns in black-hatched design – can be associated with the late New Kingdom (Twentieth Dynasty).⁹

The most distinctive feature of the type 2 amphorae, which range in size from small (*amphoriskoi* of less than 20cm height) to medium and tall (54-60cm), is a mould-made button base with a ledge. Similar to the tall variants of type 1, the type 2 amphorae were probably made in several sections. Especially the lower part immediately above the knob base is thick-walled, often depicting finger impressions.

A high percentage of the type 2 amphorae are marked with a pre-fired pot mark above the button, most often representing simple geometric motifs (Figs. 2-3).¹⁰ Lower parts without pot mark are very rarely attested at Umm el-Qaab and seem to be exceptional.¹¹

At all sites where Ramesside oases amphorae type 2 are found, e.g. at Qantir¹² and Amarna,¹³ but also in Dakhleh¹⁴ itself, a similar corpus of geometric signs can be established for the pot marks. The marks are mainly crossed lines and simple strokes and curved lines (Figs. 2-3). The combination of a curved line with one or two vertical strokes is attested several times (cf. Fig. 2d). The most common marks at Umm el-Qaab belong to groups A, B and D as categorized by Ditze.¹⁵ The zig-zag-lines D01 and D03 are especially frequent (Fig. 3).¹⁶ I would like to propose that these are marks specific for the oases with a regional character because similar zig-zag-lines are known as petroglyphs from Dakhleh and in the Western Desert since the Old Kingdom. Kaper convincingly argued that these petroglyphs functioned as personal identification labels in these contexts.¹⁷ Furthermore, such marks are, to the best of my knowledge, not attested on vessels produced in the Nile valley.

In sum, the individual marks on New Kingdom oases amphorae resemble each other at the various sites and the vessels seem to be contemporaneous.¹⁸

8 Cf. Long (2008: 98).

9 Cf. Aston (1998: no. 2208); Marchand & Tallet (1999: 320 with references). New examples from Elephantine (personal observation, publication in preparation) support this dating.

10 Cf. Budka (2015: Fig 6b). Lower parts without pot mark as shown there are very rarely attested at Umm el-Qaab and seem to be exceptional.

11 This includes already the state of preservation – because of the solid manufacture of the amphora bases most of them are well enough preserved to either show or rule out a possible mark. Thus, it is unlikely that a large number of unmarked amphora type 2 vessels have been missed because of a fragmentary state.

12 Ditze (2007: nos. 064, 138 and 199; 501 and passim).

13 Pamela Rose in: Hope (2002: 109-113); Rose (2007).

14 Marchand & Tallet (1999: 320, Fig. 14, Ain Asyl); Long (2008, Mut el-Kharab).

15 Ditze (2007: Fig. 5).

16 Ditze (2007: Fig. 5).

17 Kaper (2009: nos. 16-18).

18 Cf. Budka (2015).

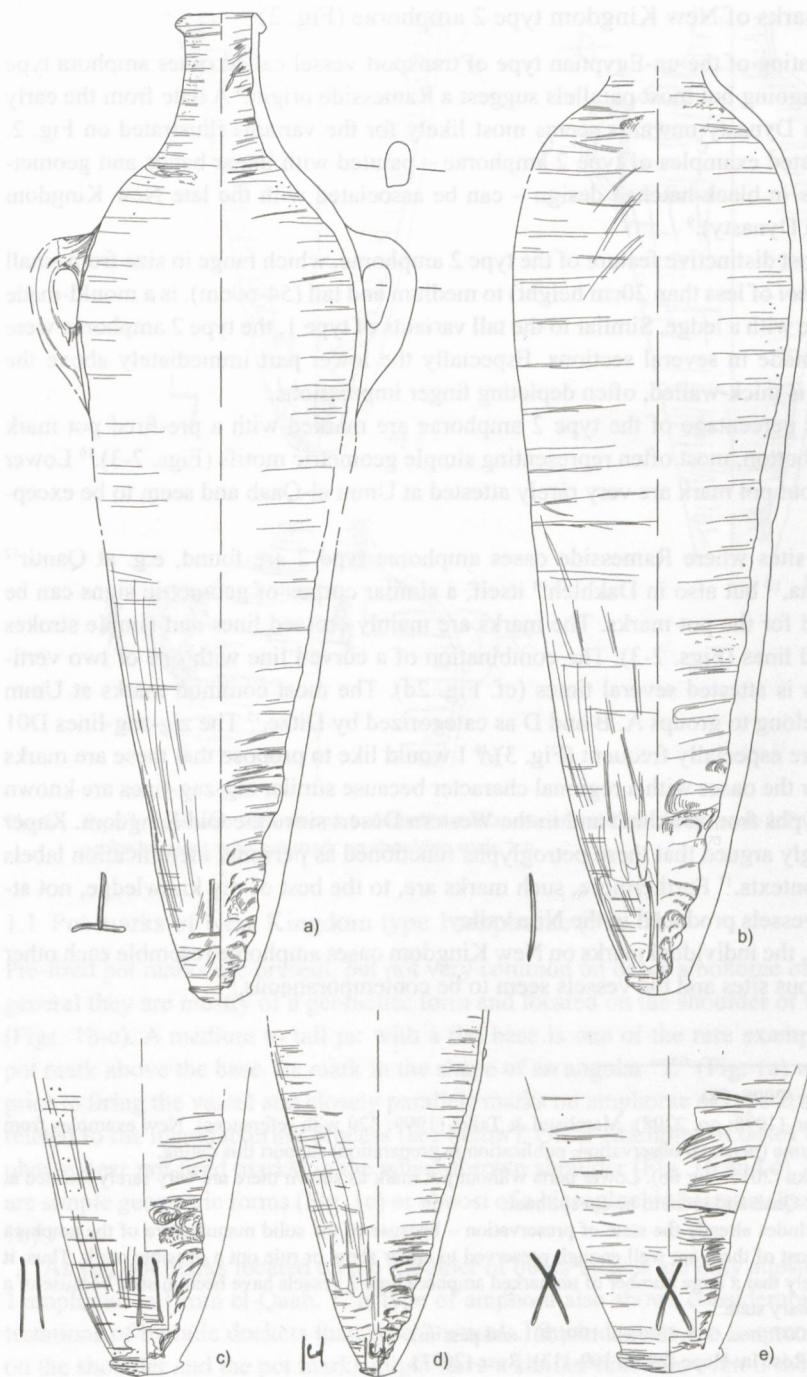


Fig. 2: Type 2 amphorae: a) complete vessel (reconstructed) with pot mark; b-e) lower parts with pot marks. Scale c. 1:3.

3 Possible functions of the pre-fired marks of oases amphorae

The function of the pre-fired marks found on the oases amphorae from Umm el-Qaab is difficult to assess. The rare examples of marks on the shoulders of wheel-made amphorae type 1 may be related to workshops or destinations of the vessel and/or its planned contents (presumably wine). The marked bases of type 2 amphorae, which are most common, are rather unlikely to have the same purpose. This location on the vessel is in general often favoured in the Egyptian New Kingdom. Ditze pointed out that 62% of all the pot marks from Qantir (Nile clay, Marl clay and imported vessels) are located in the lower part of jars.¹⁹ According to her, this position may indicate that the marks were connected with the manufacture process and not with the transport, the destination or the recipient.²⁰



Fig. 3: Lower part of an amphora type 2 example (O-HO) with mark (zigzag-line).

For the oases vessels with their moulded bases this seems indeed as the best explanation – maybe the marks have to do with the joining process of the separately-made sections of the jars. Given the large variety of sizes, one might speculate whether they refer to size groups (“join this small base with a small middle part and a small upper part” etc.) and indicate thus indirectly the capacity of the vessels. However, this remains hypothetical and a multifunctional use is also possible.²¹ Considering the present data, I think that there is a connection of the marks of type 2 amphorae with the manufacture of the base using a mould and the technique of forming the vessels from several sections.

¹⁹ Ditze (2007: 501).

²⁰ Ditze (2007: 501).

²¹ One has to keep in mind that similar types of marks are found on vessels of different sizes – thus, if there is a relation to the capacity, then only within one set of amphorae. Maybe the potter specialized in the mould-made bases produced these bases in different sizes according to demand?

4 Summary

Because of the location of Abydos and the straight route from the site towards Dakhleh via Kharga it is no surprise to find plentiful oases imports there.²² The majority of the vessels originate from the early Nineteenth Dynasty – a period when also other sources attest an active exchange and activity, especially in Dakhleh Oasis.²³

The function of the very regularly marked oases vessels can be established as wine containers for the cult of Osiris at Umm el-Qaab. Possibly, the vessels and their contents were originally used for the temple cult and their deposition at the tomb of the god was a secondary one. This is especially likely for the oasis amphorae type 1 vessels, which are very similar to Marl clay amphorae found around the tomb of Osiris. Other than marked votive vessels at Umm el-Qaab (see Budka in this volume), the pot marks of the oases amphorae are therefore probably not associated with the final use of the vessel at the site. The marks seem rather to be connected with the manufacturing process. Given the specific shape and building techniques of the lower parts of the oases amphorae, this would explain the large corpus of simple geometric marks which differs in quantity and frequency from the contemporaneous amphorae made in the Nile Valley.²⁴

The pot marks on New Kingdom oases amphorae – not only those found at Umm el-Qaab, but also in Dakhleh and at sites in the Nile Valley and the Nile Delta – might serve as a case study to illustrate the regional tradition of marking vessels during the manufacturing process with little or no respect to the destination or function of the vessels themselves. It seems very likely that the oases pot marks from Umm el-Qaab offer an opportunity to observe the most common usage of pot marks within one closed corpus of vessels: marking a workshop/origin with a strong focus on the vessel's contents (amphorae type 1) and marking production related aspects (or maybe vessel sizes) with reference to a specific part of the vessel and its manufacture (amphorae type 2).

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22 Cf. Budka (2015) with further references.

23 For the intensive Ramesside activity in Dakhleh, see most recently Hope & Kaper (2010: 236).

24 Cf. Aston (2004: 184-200).

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There can be no doubt that one of the most important contributions to the study of ancient Egyptian pictorial writing systems has been a series of publications of the differentiating relations between the processes of the individual systems. Calling attention to the numerous variety and the numerous methodical details, the edition of the 2007 *Proceedings of the Conference in Leiden* is quite an important step not only in a general, but also in a specific way in getting information about the specific meaning of signs within the individual systems cannot expect to find real solutions by merely looking into more familiar systems. Due to the respected validity of a message when from other sources, it is of course little surprising that investigations into any individual system may give more specific than answers. This statement holds particularly true of Late Dynastic and Ptolemaic pot marks, which are few in number and poorly documented. Although some of the general characteristics of the material have been highlighted and discussed in more recently published archaeological studies, these preliminary investigations did not go beyond the point of a tentative classification and could not significantly penetrate into the underlying mechanisms of the system. What could be established was the general consensus that the destination of the vessels on which pot marks occur was apparently funerary, as containers of embalming material or liquid substances for the deceased. It is thus probably not useless to return to this problem now, especially since the relatively small

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1. *Antiquities, Nubia & Kommando* (1987-1991).

2. *Schweizer* (2001, 74); *Nubia* (2006, 21-25, 2008, 221-223).