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Edited by Francesco Raffaele, Massimiliano Nuzzolo and Ilaria Incordino (ANSE)

First Dynasty wine jars inscribed with the floral sign Šmꜥj

Edwin C.M. van den Brink

Introduction

In an earlier paper¹ I consciously excluded four groups of “legible” signs incised prior to firing on early dynastic wine jars from a discussion of all other and in the main less intelligible potmarks incised on a variety of vessel types including wine jars. These four groups consist of : a) *serekh*-signs, b) a group marked with floral signs [‘g.t] Šmꜥj or ‘Upper Egyptian [barley]’, known in their full form only from contemporary *ink* inscriptions², c) *hw.t-s3-h3* estate-signs of A[ne]djib³ and d) domain-signs of Semerkhet.⁴

Table 1 indicates the number of available records of each sign group set against the greater part of ‘other’ potmarks incised exclusively on wine jars from a selected number of early dynastic cemeteries.

Table 1. Total numbers of pre-firing incised wine jars grouped according to van den Brink 1992 basic sign groups 1-77 (here treated as a single unit: others) and 100-103 (see below) from selected cemeteries.

Basic Sign Group	100	101	102	103	1-77	
Site	Serekh	[‘g.t] Šmꜥj	<i>hw.t-s3-h3</i> Adjib estate	Semerkhet domain	Others	References
Abydos	13	15	55	116	882 ^A	Petrie 1900, 1901
Saqqara	1	52				Emery 1938, 1949, 1954, 1958

1 van den Brink 1992: 267.

2 Kaplony 1963: 266-267, 973, note 1515.

3 Helck 1987: 192; Kaplony 1963: 817-819, note 810.

4 Helck 1987: 193.

Minshat Abu Omar	6	6	3	1	90	Kroeper 2000
Kafr Hassan Dawood	2 ^B	3	-	-	49+ ^C	Tassie et al. 2008
Helwan	4	15	4	5	119+ ^D	In preparation
Tarkhan	3	4	-	1	67	Mawdsley 2006

A) For Abydos, this number is only an educated guess based on the total number of potmarks (1763) published by Petrie (1900, 1901) and the observation that in other published Early Dynastic cemetery pottery assemblages the number of potmarks appearing on wine jars usually constitutes around 50% of the total number of potmarked vessels. In the Early Dynastic cemetery of Kafr Hassan Dawood, for instance, potmarks found on wine jars account for 47% of the total of potmarked vessels (Tassie et al. 2008: 205) and in Abu Roash for 47.1% (van den Brink 1992: 269 and note 17). B) The two *serekhs* derive from KHD graves 1008 (*serekh* of Ka) and 210 (*serekh* of Nar[mer]). A still unpublished and likely third *serekh* was uncovered in KHD grave 913 (cf. Tassie et al. 2008: note 5). C) These 49 potmarked wine jars were uncovered during excavations seasons 1995-1998 (directed by F.A. Hassan; Tassie et al. 2008). The + indicates a still unknown number of additional potmarked wine jars that were uncovered at Kafr Hassan Dawood in several excavation seasons directed by M.S. el-Hangouri prior to 1995-1998 campaigns. These will be published at least partially in the proceedings of the Origins 3 conference (J. van Wetering pers. comm.). D) This number (119) concerns only potmarked wine jars retrieved from Operation 3, Tombs 1 and 3. The wine jars uncovered e.g. in the still ongoing Operation 4 excavations are excluded from this count.

Partial amends for this inattention have been made in a number of subsequent publications of incised *serekh*-signs to the exclusion of other types of potmarks⁵, while I have also begun to add these four sign groups to the list of 77 basic signs on the international potmark workshop's website: www.potmark-egypt.com.⁶

They are assigned numbers 100, 101, 102 and 103 respectively. Slots 78 to 99 are left open to accommodate any newly discovered and thus far unpublished signs. By way of further redemption I take the opportunity kindly offered by the organizers of the first international ANSE conference to briefly discuss Basic Sign Group 103, the floral sign *Šm'j*, well known from the publications of e.g. Petrie⁷ and Emery.⁸

5 E.g. van den Brink 1996, 2001.

6 van den Brink 2008.

7 Petrie, 1900: Pl. 51: 594-604; id., 1901: Pl. 55a:179-182.

8 Emery, 1938: Pls. 41:285-300, 42:301-329; id. 1949: Fig. 60: 48-50; id. 1954: Fig. 102: 158-59; id., 1958: Pl. 76:57-58.

Discussed are 15 intact wine jars with similar signs (Figs. 1 and 2) from Z.Y. Saad's 9th excavation season⁹ in the Early Dynastic cemetery at Helwan supplemented by six others found in the Early Dynastic cemetery at Minshat Abu Omar (Figs. 3-5).

1. The jars from Helwan

The fifteen intact jars from at least nine separate graves were left on site and moved to one of two subterranean tombs in the Helwan cemetery, re-used by Z.Y. Saad as depots for intact pottery finds.

Their location long forgotten, these 'storage tombs' were recently unearthed by archaeologists from Macquarie University in their Operation 3 (Tombs 1 and 3)¹⁰. Four of these jars lack a tomb registration number and therefore, knowledge of their original grave contexts is lost (Table 2: 8-9, 11-12; Fig. 2:8-9, 11-12).

Thus, links between these four jars and any additional funerary gifts from the same contexts remain obscure. The remaining eleven jars are numbered but in the absence of published plans there is no way of telling where these graves were actually located.¹¹

Of these eleven 'provenanced' jars, four, each from a different grave, were apparently¹² deposited in graves with no additional wine jars (Table 2: 2-3, 10 and 13; Figs. 1: 2-3; 2:10-13). Three jars, each from a different grave, were found with one additional wine jar. In one instance that jar was unmarked (Table 2: 1), while the remaining two bear potmarks (Table 2: 6-7).

Two graves have two wine jars with *Šm'j* signs each (Table 2: 4a-b, 5a-b; Fig. 1: 4a-b, 5a-b). In one these tombs the jars are accompanied by an additional four wine jars with potmarks, in the other, by two wine jars with potmarks (Table 1: 4a/b and 5a/b respectively).

The deposition of the two wine jars Figs. 1:4a and 1:4b in grave 413.H.9 is of interest. Based on their index values as calculated by J.C. Smythe (Table 2)¹³, the jar illustrated in Fig. 1:4a seems earlier (Naqada IIIC2 horizon) than the jar shown in Fig. 1:4b (Naqada IIIC3 horizon), although the exact typo-chronological ranges of pottery vessels ascribed to these horizons is still inadequately understood.

9 The 9th season of excavation took place from October 1st 1950 through May 31st 1951. During that season 1,610 graves were excavated (Saad 1969: 5).

10 Köhler 2004, 2005; Smythe 2004, 2008.

11 No plans are available for work done subsequent to the 5th season.

12 This caveat must be made in the absence of Saad's field records, as it is not inconceivable he kept only complete vessels discarding fragmentary or broken vessels.

13 Cf. Smythe 2008:154-157.

Based on evidence of four additional intact, potmarked wine jars from the same grave, all dating from Naqada III C3, it would appear that at the time of its deposition into Grave 413.H.9, jar Fig. 1:4a was already an heirloom.

2. The Šm'j sign

All known Šm'j signs on wine jars are inscribed either with a finger or a blunt instrument prior to firing.

This is in stark contrast to all other pre-firing applied potmarks (amounting to several thousands) incised by sharp tools such as serrated flint blades or thin, wooden or bone styli.

The reason for this exceptional behaviour is not evident, but clearly it is based on a conscious and deliberate choice of tools. In a closer look at the fifteen individual Šm'j signs, a certain variation in form is easily observable, although the variations do not seem to warrant further subdivision of the basic Šm'j sign.

This variation seems to be the outcome of a progressive schematization of the Šm'j sign. Ten out of the fifteen examples have additional marks, the majority of which consist of plain, short, vertical slashes perhaps indicating numbers.

Two marks are slightly more elaborate (Figs. 1:4b and 2:9), one of which also appears in conjunction with the domain sign of Semerkhet (Fig. 2:9). The same mark accompanying a Šm'j sign is attested on a wine jar deriving from Minshat Abu Omar (Fig. 5:5)¹⁴.

The relatively lengthy inscription on wine jar Fig. 1:6, consisting of at least four different signs is particularly notable as 95% of all published potmarks have a maximum of three signs only¹⁵.

It is the very brevity of most potmarks that rules out the possibility of a (fully enabled) script that would reflect language¹⁶. Since a relatively small group of high-frequency single and compound signs dominate in the inscriptions¹⁷, supplemented by many rare or even unique signs (i.e., singletons) or sign combinations, it is clear the potmark system is composed of few high-frequency signs and compound signs and many low-frequency signs.

We are clearly dealing with a non-linguistic sign *system* albeit not exclusively a system of non-linguistic signs, as seems indicated i.a. by the very group of *Sm'j* signs under discussion here.

¹⁴ Kroeper and Wildung 1985: Fig. 159.

¹⁵ Cf. van den Brink 1992: 271.

¹⁶ Contra Helck 1990.

¹⁷ van den Brink 1992.

3. The chronological distribution of the Šm'j sign

The earliest application of the Šm'j sign in our collection is apparently found on a single wine jar dating to the Naqada IIIC1 horizon from either the reign of Narmer or Aha.

The chronological attribution of this jar is based on both the index value of the jar (Table 2:1)¹⁸ and the presence of a typo-chronologically sensitive marker, arches incised into the shoulder of the jar (Fig. 1:1; Petrie's type 75s). The latest application of the Šm'j sign in the collection, equally based on index value and typology of the jars, is found on several wine jars of the Naqada IIIC3 horizon.

One example is specifically assignable to the reign of Semerkhet, identified by his domain name, which also appears with an additional mark (Fig. 2: 9), the only occurrence of such a combination known to me. This collection of Šm'j signs also includes several specimens dating to the intervening Naqada IIIC2 horizon (e.g. Figs. 1:5a, 1:5b), indicating it had a range of use throughout the First Dynasty.

Pertinent data from e.g. the early dynastic royal tombs at Umm el-Ga'ab, Abydos and contemporary elite tombs at Saqqara, reinforce this interpretation (see below).

Table 2. Wine jars with floral Šm'j sign from Helwan, Saad's 9th excavation season. Unnumbered, additional wine jars cited in the table were found with the Šm'j jars in the same graves. Excepting two jars (nos. 1:6 and 1:7) they all have potmarks incised on them.

Figs. 1-2: No.	Saad grave #	Macquarie Registration #	Potmark v.d.Brink 1992
1:1	988.H.9	2003P-71	Šm'j
	988.H.9	2003P-72	IV.16
1:2	631.H.9	2003P-517	Šm'j
1:3	983.H.9	2003P-83	Šm'j + ?
1:4a	413.H.9	2003P-465	Šm'j + VI.1
1:4b	413.H.9	2003P-460	Šm'j + ?
	413.H.9	2003P-511	V.17
	413.H.9	2003P-378	II.29 + VI.16
	413.H.9	2003P-512	I.30
	413.H.9	2003P-471	III.2 or III.18
1:5a	545.H.9	2003P-565	Šm'j + ?
1:5b	545.H.9	2003P-514	Šm'j + XV.16
	545.H.9	2003P-582	VIII.1
	545.H.9	2003P-523	VIII.1
1:6	764.H.9	2003P-567	Šm'j + ?

18 Cf. Köhler and Smythe 2004: 131; Smythe 2008: 154-157.

	764.H.9	2003P-585	-
1:7	1091.H.9	2003P-194	<i>Šm'j</i>
	1091.H.9	2003P-112	-
2:8	?	1997P-391	<i>Šm'j</i>
2:9	?	EM03-278	Domain + <i>Sm'j</i> + ?
2:10	407.H.9	2003P-466	<i>Šm'j</i>
2:11	?	1997P-47	<i>Šm'j</i>
2:12	?	1997P-371	<i>Šm'j</i>
2:13	901.H.9	2003P-41	<i>Šm'j</i> + ?

Figs. 1-2: No.	Fabric^A	Vessel index	Petrie type	S.D.	Naqada Hendrickx 1996
1:1	MCFT:A	2.40	75s	78, 79	III C1/ Narmer-Aha
	ASFT:B	2.32	75h	79-81	III C1
1:2	MCFT:A	3.07	76m	80-82	III C2
1:3	MCFT:A	2.75	76c	78-80	III C2
1:4a	MCFT:A	2.55	76c	78-80	III C2
1:4b	MCFT:A	3.12	76j	79, 81	III C3
	ASFT:B	3.21	76g	81	III C3
	ASFT:B	3.12	76g	81	III C3
	ASFT:B	3.02	76g	81	III C3
	ASFT:B	2.99	76g	81	III C3
1:5a	MCFT:A	2.86	76d	80	III C2
1:5b	MCFT:B	3.01	76g	81	III C2
	ASFT:B	2.82	75n	79-81	III C2
	ASFT:B	2.56	75n	79-81	III C2
1:6	ASFT:B	3.28	75o	81	III C2
	ASFT:B	3.12	76g	81	III C2
1:7	MCFT:A	3.08	76d	80	III C2
	ASFT:B	2.80	75n	79-81	III C2
2:8	MCFT:?				
2:9					III C3
2:10	MCFT:A	3.36	76d	80	III C3
2:11	MCFT				
2:12	ASFT:?				
2:13	MCFT:A	3.50	76c	78-80	III C3

A) MCFT stands for marl clay fabric type; ASFT is alluvial silt fabric type (cf. Smythe 2008).

4. Wine jars with Šm'j sign from Abydos and Saqqara

Unlike all but one of the Helwan jars (*i.e.* Fig. 2: 9), relevant wine jars from Abydos and Saqqara can, moreover, be attributed to individual First Dynasty kings' reigns by their names on numerous cylinder seal impressions found in the same royal and elite tombs (cf. Table 3).

At least fifteen Šm'j jars were found at Abydos (Table 1)¹⁹. Two are unprovenanced, three derive from the tomb of Djer, two from the tomb of Djed, six from subsidiary burials associated with the tomb of Merneith, one from Adjib's tomb and one from the tomb of Semerkhet.

At Saqqara at least 52 Šm'j jars were found, the vast majority (45) come from the tomb of Hemaka (Grave S 3035; reign of king Den), two derive from Tomb S3504 (reign of Djed), two from S3506 (reign of Den) and three from S3111 (reign of A[ne]djib).

Table 3. Numeric distribution of potmarked vessels and cylinder seal impressions found together in the royal tombs at Umm el-Ga'ab, Abydos and in the contemporary elite tombs in Saqqara; potmark totals are based on van den Brink 1992: Fig.5; numbers of cylinder seal impressions are based on perusal of Kaplony 1963.

Abydos RT	King	# potmarks	# cylinder seal impr.	Saqqara GT	# potmarks	# cylinder seal impr.
Grave B	Aha	27	94	S3357	6	217
Grave O	Djer	216	176	S3471 S2185	20 ?	42 11
Grave Z	Djed	268	55	S3504	159	225
Grave Y	Merneith	442	56	S3503	11	0
Grave T	Den	269	227	S3035 S3036 S3506 S3507	329 3 61 27	0 0 178 0
Grave X	Adjib	127	34	S3038 S3111	3 50	0 0

¹⁹ Petrie 1900: Pl.LI: 594-604; 1901: Pl. LVa:179-182. Several more were found during the re-excavations of the Royal Tombs at Umm el-Ga'ab, Abydos by members of the German Archaeological Institute (e.g., Engel 1997: 17-19, Abb. 2A).

Grave U	Semerkhet	137	17	-	-	-
Grave Q	Ka'a	65	29	S3505	65	0
				S3500	0	16
				S3121	0	0
				S3120	0	0
				S2338	0	0
Grave P	Peribsen	4	0	-	-	-
Grave V	Khasekhemwy	0	0	-	-	-

5. Incised vs. impressed royal domain signs

A *propos* cylinder seal impressions and the occurrence in particular of pottery-incised Semerkhet domain names such as the one illustrated in Fig. 2:9, it is notable that domain names of Semerkhet's predecessors are usually found on cylinder seal impressions but never incised on pottery.

By contrast, Semerkhet's domain name is incised into pottery jars (at least one hundred of them deposited in this ruler's own resting place, Tomb U at Umm el-Ga'ab, Abydos), but does not occur on cylinder seal impressions.

This indicates an apparent minor (administrative?) change in the handling of a specific class of wine jars during the reign of Semerkhet.

6. Additional *šm'j* wine jars from Minshat Abu Omar

Amongst the 332 potmarks incised into various types of pottery vessels retrieved from the Proto and Early Dynastic cemetery at Minshat Abu Omar²⁰ are six *šm'j* signs incised on wine jars (Table 4; Figs. 3-5).

The six wine jars derive from five individual graves. Four are accompanied by additional marks. As is the case with the majority of Helwan specimens, these marks consist of short dashes or slashes possibly indicating numbers. The accompanying sign on one jar (Fig. 5:5) is a close parallel to Helwan jars (Figs. 1:4b and 2:9), the latter of which (i.e., Fig. 2:9) dates to the reign of Semerkhet.

Since the funerary contexts of all six jars still await final publication, no specific inferences can be made concerning the time range represented by the six jars.

²⁰ Cf. Kroeper 2000.

Table 4. Complete list of Šm'j wine jars from the Early Dynastic Cemetery at Minshat Abu Omar

Figures 3-5: No.	MAO grave/artifact number	Fabric ^A	References
1	1145/2	ASFT:B	Kroeper 2000: Table 2c, upper row, third from the left; Šm'j sign as well as accompanying marks very similar to Helwan Fig. 1: 5a
2a	1590/75	ASFT:B	Kroeper 2000: Table 2c, upper row, fourth from the left
2b	1590/65	ASFT:B	Kroeper 2000: Table 2c, upper row, fifth from the left and Fig. 7c
3	1040/14	ASFT:B	Kroeper 2000: Table 2c, upper row, fourth from the right
4	2780/12	ASFT:B	Kroeper 2000: Table 2c, upper row, third from the right
5	1030/13	ASFT:B	Kroeper and Wildung 1985: Fig. 159; Kroeper 2000: Table 2c, upper row, first from the right; with accompanying sign very similar to Helwan jar Fig. 1:4b

A) ASFT indicates alluvial silt fabric type.

7. The fabric of the Šm'j wine jars

A final point raised here concerns the clay fabrics of the fifteen jars from Helwan and the six from Minshat Abu Omar. Of the former, thirteen are of marl clay, while only two are of alluvial Nile clay (cf. Table 2: Fabric). Of the latter group, all six are of alluvial Nile clay (cf. Table 4: Fabric).

In light of E-M. Engel's (1997) work that notes all wine jar fragments with Šm'j floral designs found during the re-excavation of the tomb of Qa'a at Umm el-Ga'ab are of marl, and not alluvial Nile clay²¹, she suggests a direct relationship between the application of this type of (floral) design and marl clay wine jars to the exclusion of Nile clay wine jars.

Whether her statements are meant to imply that this would apply also to all similarly incised wine jars found in both earlier and contemporary funerary contexts other than Qa'a's own tomb, or that her inference is restricted only to the latter group, is unclear. In any event, either thesis regarding a relationship of a certain type of Šm'j wine jar to a particular clay type has to be contested on several grounds.

²¹ Engel 1997: 17-19, note 16 and Table 1.

On the one hand the alluvial Nile clay wine jars from Helwan and Minshat Abu Omar cited above clearly indicate that at some point during the First Dynasty such jars were made, while on the other the provenience of the sherds recovered from the Abydene tomb of Qa'a on which E-M. Engel bases her thesis cannot be determined with any degree of certitude. That is because, as indicated by the meticulous re-excavation work of the German Archaeological Institute at Umm el-Ga'ab in several instances some co-joined pottery sherds were recovered from more than one tomb²².

Possible factors responsible for this are ancient or modern looting and Petrie's re-deposition of material subsequent to the excavation. Thus, it is impossible to definitively identify the original provenience of the relevant fragmented pottery vessels from Abydos as they may or may not have been originally deposited in the tomb of Qa'a.

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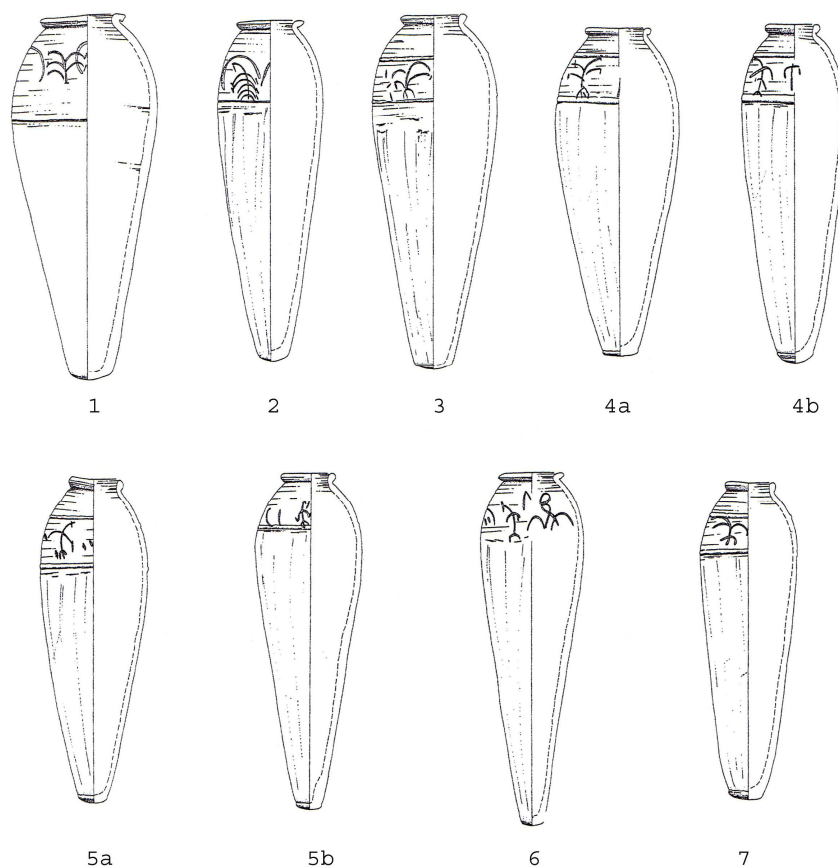


Fig. 1: 1. Helwan, Grave 988.H.9; 2. Helwan, Grave 631.H.9; 3. Helwan, Grave 983.H.9;
 4a. Helwan, Grave 413.H.9; 4b. Helwan, Grave 413.H.9; 5a. Helwan, Grave 545.H.9;
 5b. Helwan, Grave 545.H.9; 6. Helwan, Grave 764.H.9; 7. Helwan, Grave 1091.H.9.

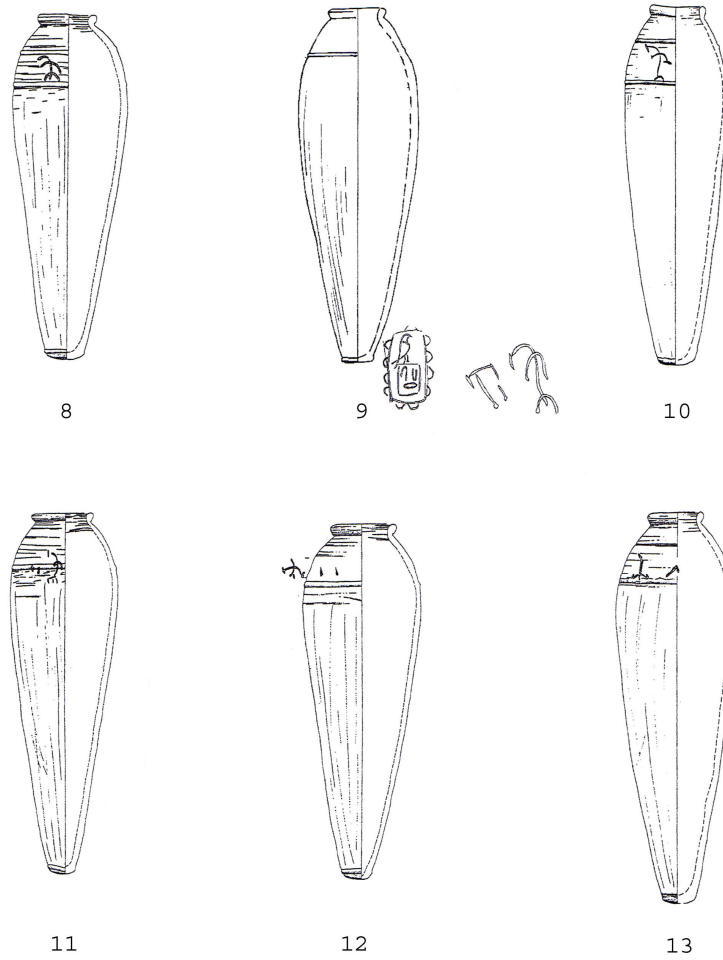


Fig. 2: 8. Helwan. Grave number not recorded; 9. Helwan. Grave number not recorded;
10. Helwan. Grave 407.H.9; 11. Helwan. Grave number not recorded;
12. Helwan. Grave number not recorded; 13. Helwan. Grave 901.H.9.



Fig. 3: 1. Minshat Abu Omar. Grave 1145/2;
2a. Minshat Abu Omar. Grave 1590/75.



Fig. 4: 2b. Minshat Abu Omar. Grave 1590/65;
3. Minshat Abu Omar. Grave 1040/14.



Fig. 5: 4. Minshat Abu Omar. Grave 2780/12;
5. Minshat Abu Omar. Grave 1030/13.