

The International Potmark Workshop: While at London and After or
How to Progress with the Study of Early Dynastic Potmarks?

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Although the total amount of Early Dynastic (henceforth E.D.) potmarks has almost doubled since the early 1990-ies (cf. Table 1)¹, and general awareness has recently certainly increased concerning the importance and potential of this specific type of records for studying aspects of foremost First Dynasty administration, we are still far from fully understanding individual potmarks, even though the systematic behind the application of such marks are getting more and more clear.

Table 1. Proto/Early Dynastic cemeteries with potmarks (arranged numerically, not geographically)

Site	Total number of potmarks	References
Abydos	2128 (+ca. 2000)*	Petrie 1900; 1901; 1925; Amélineau 1899; 1904; van den Berg 1986; Adams and Porat 1996
Adaïma **	850	<i>Bréand 2005; 2008</i>
Saqqara	754	Emery 1938; 1939; 1949; 1954; 1958; Macramallah 1940
Tarkhan	350	Petrie et al. 1913; Petrie 1914; <i>Boshoff 1996; Mawdsley 2006; 2008; forthcoming</i>
Minshat Abu Omar	322	<i>Kroeper 2000</i>
Abu Roash	204	Montet 1946; Klasens 1958a,b; 1959; 1960; 1961
Kafr Hassan Dawood	200	<i>Hassan et al. in press; Tassie et al. forthcoming</i>
Helwan	148 (+)***	<i>Köhler and van den Brink 2002; Köhler and Smythe 2004; Köhler 2004; Smythe 2004; van den Brink et al. in prep.</i>
Turah	124	Junker 1912; Yaqoub 1981
Abusir	61	Bonnet 1928
Tell el-Farkha	51 (+)***	<i>Jucha in press</i>
Giza	38	Daressy 1905; Petrie 1907; Boghdady 1932
Tell el-Dab'a/Samara	?	
Minshat Ezzat	?	<i>el-Baghdadi 2003</i>
Tell Ibrahim Awad	30	van den Brink 1988; van Haarlem 1996
Ezbet el-Tell	26	van den Brink 1988; Kroeper 1988
Naqada	21	de Morgan 1897
Abusir el-Meleq	16	Scharff 1926
Naga ed-Deir	6	Reisner 1908
el-Beda	4	Clédat 1913
Tell el-Basta/Zagazig	1	Kroeper 1988
Maadi	1	Brunton 1939

* the amount of ca. 2000 additional, still unpublished potmarks from the Royal Cemetery at Umm el-Ga'ab, Abydos is based on pers.comm. by E-M. Engel (see also Engel 2007).

¹ Table 1 is an updated version of van den Brink 1992: Table 1, this time using both published as well as still unpublished information concerning site-specific potmark corpora. Only bibliographical references pertaining to Table 1 that do *not* appear in van den Brink 1992 are presented at the end of this text.

** In contrast to all other listed (cemetery) sites, the Adaïma potmarks derive from both cemetery *and* settlement contexts. Also in contrast with all other listed (E.D.) sites, the Adaïma potmark corpus pertains to both the late predynastic as well as the proto/early dynastic periods.

*** (+) indicates that the (re)excavations are still ongoing here and that the respective potmark corpora will undoubtedly expand in the near future.

Given the severe time limits set for the first formal meeting of the potmark workshop's participants in a semi-restricted session on Wednesday morning July 30th from 9:00am – 10:30am, we better set an agenda before. This could be accomplished in a democratic, still relaxed and organized way via the Forum of the potmark workshop's website, to which all of you have been registered. Apart from brief (15 minutes maximum) presentations/discussions of three announced pre-papers (which concern the potmark corpora of Kafr Hassan Dawood, Tarkhan and Giza, with a further option of brief communications concerning the potmark corpora of Adaima and Helwan), I personally would like to see the following points being raised:

- 1) The potmark website (potmark-egypt.com): does it serve its purpose?; whether and how to maintain and sustain the site
- 2) Typology of the potmark carriers: breaking down the corpus into manageable sub-units based on pottery typology; revisiting relevant musea collections (see further below)
- 3) a. How to organize a paleography of potmarks? But for Helck's 1990 publication such a tool is still non-existent, although the data base of our potmark website could perhaps at least temporarily fill this gap; a potmark paleography would be an invaluable tool in examining the life span of individual potmarks and in researching the development of the early dynastic potmark system as a whole.
- 3) b. The 100% reliability of attribution of potmarked sherds to specific tombs in the E.D. royal cemetery at Abydos has been recently called into question by E-M. Engel based on her own experiences at the site during the re-excavations of the DAIK; this problem could perhaps be alleviated by 'calibrating' the Abydos potmark findings against the perhaps more secure findings of the contemporary elite tombs at Saqqara (cf. Table 2). However, how to fit in the substantial number of potmarks (if not whole potmark corpora) dated in general terms to subphases of the Naqada IIIB and (foremost) IIIC deriving from tombs with potmarked vessels but otherwise lacking inscriptions (like cylinder seal impressions) that could provide data for reliable attribution to a specific king's reign?

4) How to organize geographic distribution maps of individual potmarks on both inter- and intra cemetery levels; in more general terms, what are the implications of an observed rigidity in the (re)distribution system of certain commodities? Note for instance the near-total absence of 'wine jars' in Upper Egypt beyond the immediate context of royal tombs at Abydos and Naqada; the (relatively few) receivers of potmarked wine jars (other than members of the Thinite royal family and its officialdom buried in Saqqara) seem mainly based/buried in Lower Egypt.

5) script vs. non-script. Given the brevity of the more than 7000 potmark 'inscriptions' (about 95% of all potmarks consist of up to maximum 3 signs) and their sudden disappearance at the end of Dynasty 1, it seems safe to rule out the possibility of a enabled script reflecting language. A relatively small group of high-frequency signs dominate in the inscriptions, supplemented by many rare or even unique signs. In other words, the potmarks system is composed of few high-frequency signs and many low-frequency signs. We are dealing with a clearly non-linguistic sign system albeit not exclusively a system of non-linguistic signs; to be more explicit, the potmarks don't encode speech, even though some of the, especially high-frequency signs are very similar to near-contemporary hieroglyphic signs.

Concerning point 2) raised above:

In order to organize this sizeable, on first sight perhaps rather monolithic, and still expanding data base of over 7000 records (deriving from just over 20 cemetery sites located in both Lower and Upper Egypt) into more manageable subunits, to such extent that they can be efficiently used to extract information relevant to a better understanding of the potmarks, a subdivision of potmarks based on the recognition of different types of ceramic vessels (e.g. wine jars, ovoid (beer) jars, bowls, bread moulds etc.) to which potmarks were applied seems a first requirement. Recent site-specific potmark corpora have been (e.g. Kroeper 200) or are in the process of being presented (Hassan et al. in press; Mawdsley 2006) along these lines. And although this may seem an obvious approach today, it hasn't been always in the past and there is a serious backlog of site-specific potmark corpora, mainly concerning those published before the 1950-ies, for which a direct relationship between published potmarks and their (unpublished) actual ceramic carriers (or, in the case of mere sherds, their likely attribution to a specific pottery type) is either hard or even impossible to come by at present. A case in point are the nearly 2000 potmarks

uncovered at the E.D. royal cemetery at Umm el-Ga'ab, Abydos published by Petrie in 1900 and 1901, only a handful of which can be directly related to specific vessels illustrated in those very same two publications. However, with proper efforts this negative situation can be amended to certain extent. For instance, recently 722 potmarked sherds and vessels uncovered at Abydos and published by Petrie have been located in the Egyptian collections of seven musea in the U.K. and Canada (Gilroy et al. 2001; van den Brink n.d). These publications enable researchers to access and re-examine these potmarked sherds (only very occasionally are potmarks preserved on still intact vessels) in order to try to establish the original types of pottery carriers to which these marks had been applied. A similar approach relating to 350 published (Petrie et al. 1913, Petrie 1914) and unpublished potmarks deriving from the Tarkhan cemeteries has been followed by Mawdsley (2008), with positive results.

As for tackling this backlog, the question is whether participants (in this particular case especially those based in the U.K.) would be willing/able to revisit some of the potmark collections in order to try to establish potmark/vessel correlations, or, whether participants could come up with suggestions whether and how we could obtain the relevant musea curators' cooperation and support in this endeavour? Stan Hendrickx, for instance, kindly committed himself to look into the possibilities to get the ca. 52 potmarked sherds and 3 intact potmarked jars from Abydos (plus 6 additional potmarked intact jars from Tarkhan) at present kept in the Egyptian collection in Brussel (re-)drawn, accompanied by (in the case of sherds) an attribution of (likely) vessel type.

A next logical step would then be to compare the various ranges of potmarks per individual vessel type, to see whether potmarks overlap (and if so, to what extent) or perhaps are mutually exclusive in different pottery classes; steps in this direction have been taken already on a one site-specific basis (Tarkhan) by Mawdsley (forthcoming). Another aspect to look into more carefully is chronology and the life/time span of individual potmarks.

Table 2. Numerical distribution of potmarks and cylinder seal impressions in the Royal Tombs at Umm el-Ga'ab and in contemporary elite tombs at Saqqara

Royal tombs at Umm el-Ga'ab	Total # of potmarks	Total # of seal impressions	Contemporary elite tombs at	Total # of potmarks	Total # of seal impressions
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Saqqara						
Tomb B	Aha	27	94	S3357	6	217
Tomb O	Djer	216	176	S3471	20	42
				S2185	?	11
Tomb Z	Djed	268	55	S3504	159	225
Tomb Y	Merneith	442	56	S3503	11	
Tomb T	Den	269	227	S3035	329	
				S3036	3	
				S3506	61	178
				S3507	27	
Tomb X	Adjib	127	34	S3038	3	
				S3111	50	
Tomb U	Semerkheth	137	17			
Tomb Q	Ka'a	65	29	S3505	65	
				S3500	0	16
				S3121	0	
				S3120	0	
				S2338	0	
Tomb P	Peribsen	4				
Tomb V		0				
Khasekhemwy						

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