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SELECTED POTMARKS FROM THE SETTLEMENT AT TELL EL-FARKHA

The occupation of the site at Tell el-Farkha was divided into 7 main phases dated from the Lower Egyptian Culture (regarding the Central Kom) till the beginning of the Old Kingdom (the Eastern Kom).¹

The pottery material comes from the cemetery and settlement. The most important category of artefacts are potmarks. The following work aims at describing potmarks which were excavated during fieldworks on the Western Kom between seasons 2006 and 2009. They are dated to the Protodynastic and Early Dynastic Period (until the beginning of Dynasty I), which is related to phases 4 and 5 of the settlement.

A corpus of potmarks has already been created for the necropolis by M. Jucha.² I am going to report the results of work with the potmarks which were retrieved on the settlement. This is only a preliminary report which intends to present in the future a corpus of potmarks of the whole settlement at Tell el-Farkha and to compare them with the material characteristic for the cemetery. I am not going to interpret the potmarks but to present them in order to increase the corpus of those marks of the settlement site.

There are a lot of potmarks which were engraved on walls of vessels. They were predominantly made on wet clay before firing but there are also ones done after firing. The potmarks were applied on selected types of vessels and consist

¹ M. A. Jucha, *Tell el-Farkha II, The Pottery of the Predynastic Settlement*, Kraków-Poznań 2005:19; M. Chłodnicki, K. M. Ciałowicz, *Polish Excavations at Tell el-Farkha (Gazala) in the Nile Delta. Preliminary Report 1998-2001*, *Archeologia* LIII, 2002: 63-66

² M. A. Jucha, *The Corpus of "Potmarks" from the Graves at Tell el-Farkha*, [in:] S. Hendrickx, R. F. Friedman, K. M. Ciałowicz, M. Chłodnicki, (eds.), *Egypt at its Origins. Studies in Memory of Barbara Adams. Proceedings of the International Conference, Origin of the State. Predynastic to Early Dynastic Egypt*, Kraków, 28th August- 1st September 2002, Leuven-Paris-Dudley 2004: 131-148

of one sign or a combination of 2 -5 marks.³ Frequently, they were made using a sharp or blunt instrument on wet clay.⁴

Although the research on potmarks has increased in the last few years⁵, the interpretation of particular signs is still difficult to comprehend entirely. However, there are various suggestions for explaining their meaning. Firstly, the potmarks could have indicated the property of an individual potter or a workshop. Secondly, they might have meant destination of production. It is also possible that the marks relate to capacity of vessels or the exact amount of ingredients being preserved inside a pot. Not only they could have associated with the owner of a pot but also indicated the name of the potter.⁶ Furthermore, potmarks played a significant role in the function of the Protodynastic and Early Dynastic administration.⁷

The excavations on the Western Kom on the settlement at Tell el-Farkha provided us with a great number of pottery sherds. During the mentioned above seasons, we have discovered about 20 thousands fragments of diagnostic sherds and 160 more or less preserved whole vessels. However, only a limited number of sherds contains potmarks. Most of the ceramic material from the settlement site is very fragmentally preserved. Not only potsherds but also the patterns of potmarks in most cases are in a poor state of preservation. This is compounded with interpretation and a possible collocation of particular signs in a group.

Potmarks from the settlement were divided into two categories. The first one is prepared according to ceramic typology (differentiation in temper and types of ware) and distributed among classes R1 (rough coarse ware), R2 (rough ware), S (smoothed ware) and P (polished ware). The second one is based on the first group and relates to the preliminary marks' typology.

The first group consists mainly of potmarks which were engraved on bread moulds. The rest of them applies to potmarks engraved on jars, bowls and unidentified fragments of potsherds. At the settlement site 58 potmarks have been found.

³ E. C. M. van den Brink, *Corpus and Numerical Evaluation of the "Thinite" Potmarks*, [in:] R. Friedman, B. Adams (eds.), *The Followers of Horus. Studies dedicated to Michael Allen Hoffman 1944-1990*, Oxford 1992: 267

⁴ B. Adams, N. Porat, *Imported Pottery with Potmarks from Abydos*, [in:] J. Spencer (ed.), *Aspects of Early Egypt*, London 1996: 98

⁵ L. Mawdsley, *Unprovenanced and Provenanced Potmarks from Tarkhan*, CCdE 11: 19-36; L. Mawdsley, *The Corpus of Potmarks from Tarkhan*; <http://www.origins3.org.uk/abstracts.html>; E. C. M. van den Brink, *Potmark-Egypt.com*. CCdE 10: 5-8

⁶ Adams, Porat, *Imported Pottery with Potmarks...*, 98; van den Brink, *Corpus and Numerical...*, 276; K. Kroeper, *Corpus of Potmarks and Inscriptions from the Pre/Early Dynastic cemetery at Minshat Abu Omar (Northeastern Delta, Egypt)*, [in:] L. Krzyżaniak, K. Kroeper, M. Kobusiewicz (eds.), *Recent Research into the Stone Age of Northeastern Africa*, Poznań:2000: 216

⁷ Adams, Porat, *Imported Pottery with Potmarks...*, 107

Selected potmarks from the settlement at Tell el-Farkha

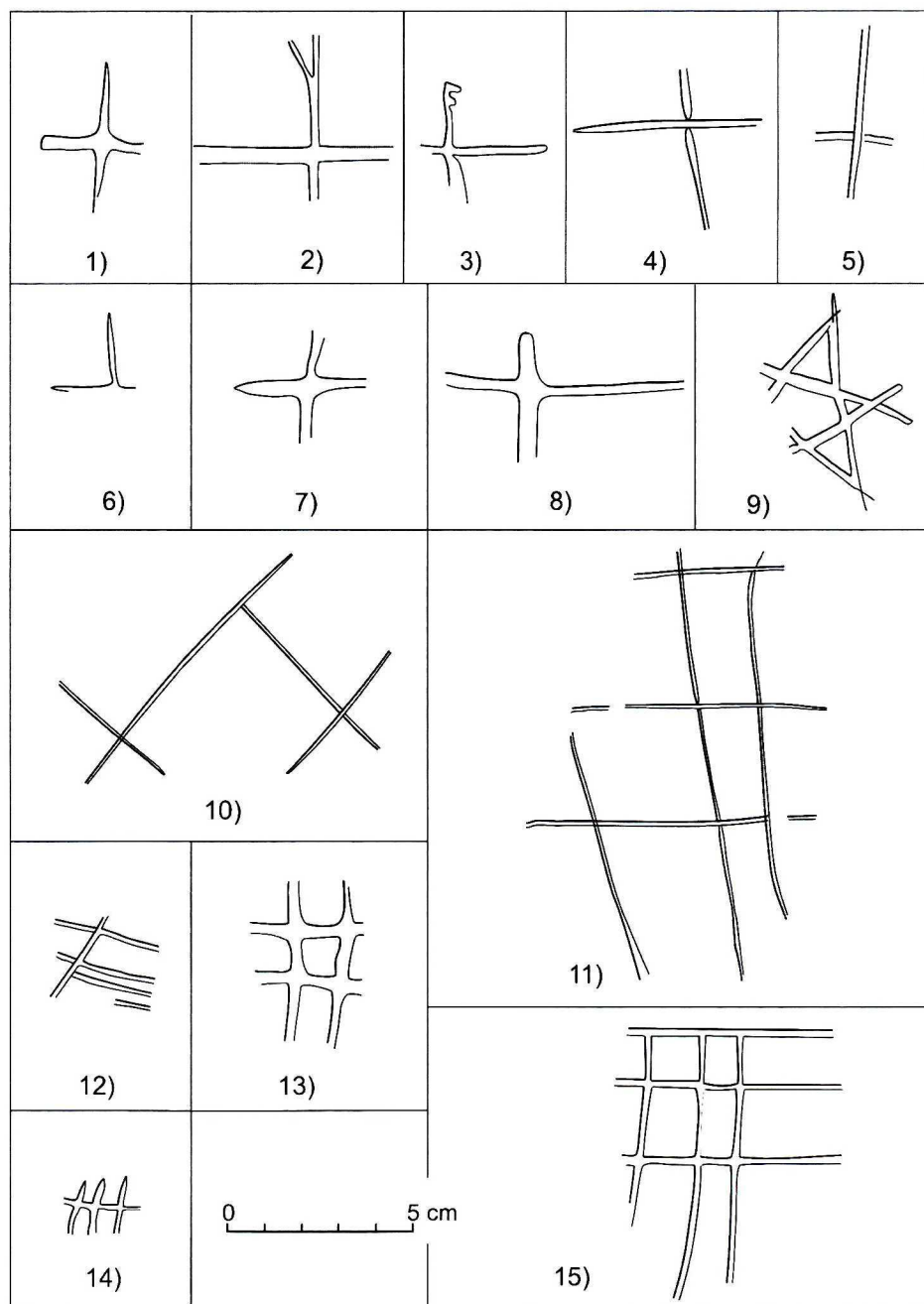


Table I. The potmarks from the settlement, Kom W, Tell el-Farkha.

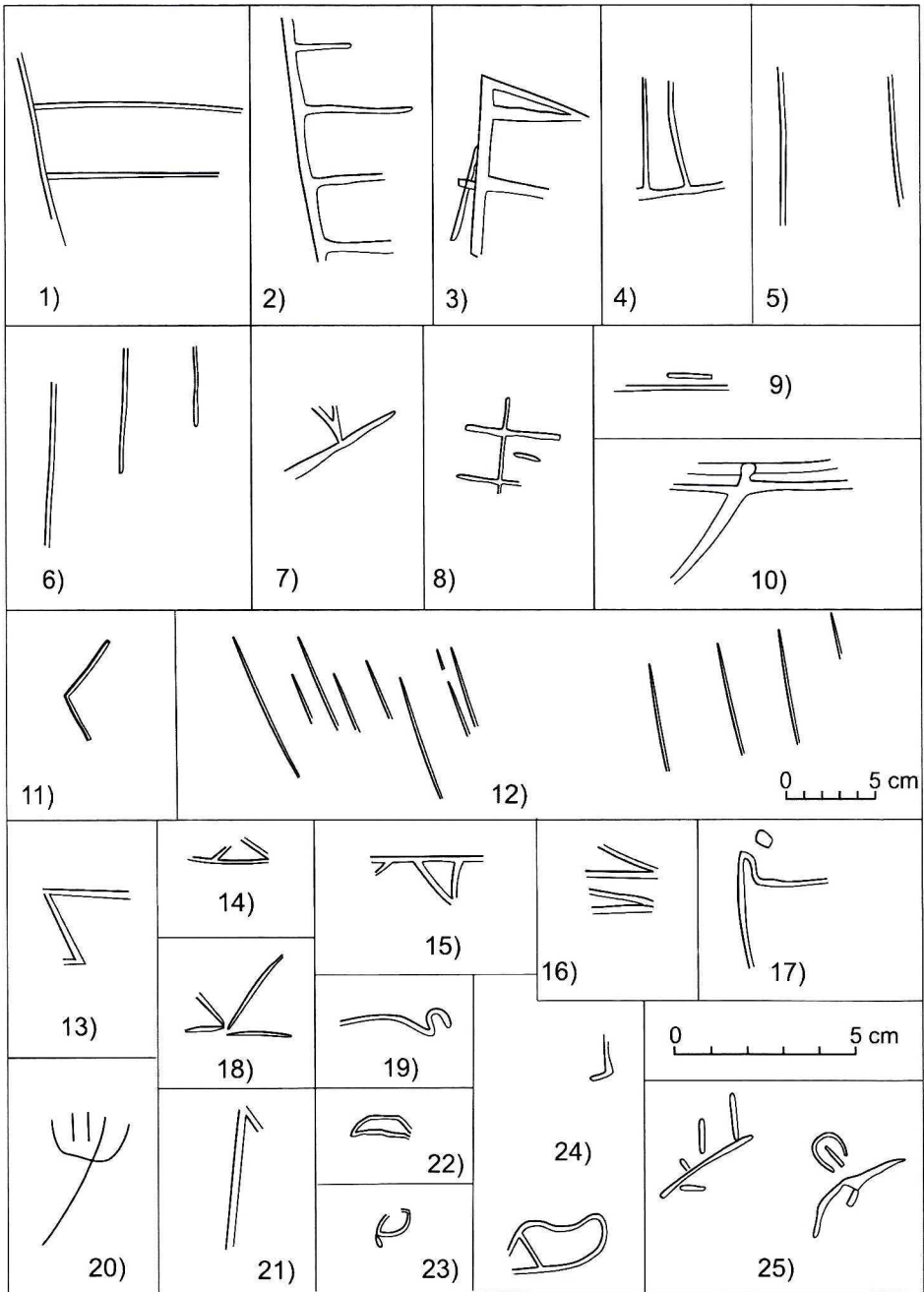


Table II. The potmarks from the settlement, Kom W, Tell el-Farkha.

Bread moulds

Twenty one of the potmarks come from bread moulds.

Thick-walled bread moulds belong to the R1 category. They are made of the Nile clay, tempered with medium-to-coarse sand grains and fine-to-medium chaff or coarse straw. Most of the moulds are shallow with a characteristic rounded base. Sometimes, the ones with flattened bases are also present. Their rims are usually rounded, though examples with flat or slightly concave rims are also recognised. Bread moulds are lightly fired. The colour of their walls' surface varies from red, brown to reddish brown.

A vast majority of marks was engraved on the outer walls of bread moulds but some of them were also found on the inner parts of the walls. Such patterns left a negative on the bread's surface (Tab. I: 2, 3; Tab. III:2, 7). In this case, all of the potmarks were made before firing. In most situations the interpretation of the signs is quite difficult but the results of their analysis state that among the bread moulds we can distinguish patterns such as:

1. crosses (Tab. I: 1-4, 6-7)
2. star-like shaped (Tab. I:9)
3. criss-crosses (Tab. I:10-11, 13, 15)
4. two vertical lines (Tab. II:5)
5. a combination of vertical and horizontal lines (Tab. II: 1-4)
6. animal-like signs (Tab. III:2)
7. plant-like sign? (Tab. III:4)
8. single circles (Tab. III:7)
9. multiple-impressed circles (Tab. III:9-10)

The signs are very simple, mostly in geometric shapes. Most of the bread moulds is covered with signs of crosses. Very rarely, there are small impressed round hollows at the top of the usually rounded rim of the bread mould, lying in a quite regular distance from each other. Bread moulds were the most numerous group of pottery in the Early Dynastic period due to their frequent usage in the daily life and because of the technological quality of their production. Moreover, it is apparent that the quantity of the marks engraved on the bread moulds was the result of massive production of these pots.

Jars, bowls and unidentified forms of vessels.

Thirty seven of the potmarks were discovered on jars and bowls and unidentified potsherds. These potmarks, which belong to identified pots, covered the walls of vessels such as: hole mouth jars (Tab. I:8, II:11), bowls with a rounded rim and straight or rounded walls (Tab III:8, 11-14), jars with a rounded rim with an external extension, and a broaden body (Tab. I:14, III:1), and a storage jar (Tab. II:12-13). Potmarks which were engraved on the vessels are preserved only in fragments. However, most of the potmarks belongs to unidentified forms of vessels. The lack of wholly preserved vessels with patterns prevents us from

saying what kind of form they indicate exactly but the clay and surface treatment confirms that these fragments belong to such a category of pots.

The sherds which belong to the R2 category include fewer organic or mineral inclusions than the R1 class. The S category of fine hard-smoothed wares (S-ware) was made of the Nile clay. It was untempered or with very fine sand inclusions. Some of them occur as a natural constituent of the clay, others are added intentionally. Some pottery assemblage of the Western Kom belong to the P category (Tab. II: 14-15, 24-25, III:1). The ceramic body contains a temper of fine or medium-grained sand and chopped straw. Most of them are light red, red or reddish-brown, coated both inside and outside with burnished or polished surface.

Some of the signs on the pottery are treated as a decoration, others as special marks made by a potter. There are also some of the signs that could function as both a mark and a decoration. Most striking is a decorated jar where a votive deposit was found. It was coated with a dark reddish slip and polished. The incised decoration forms triangles on the whole surface of the vessel partly filled with white paste. In the main part of the jar the decoration represents four animals: two gazelles and two ostriches carved in one horizontal line. According to the function of the room ⁸ where the jar was found and the content of the jar we may indicate that this decoration must had played a special role. It may have been applied for sacred purposes. It is also possible to draw a connection between those signs and the objects found inside the jar and in the room.⁹

The potmarks with animals were the most complicated but in this group there is much more variety of patterns. They indicate:

1. crosses (Tab. I: 5, 8)
2. criss-crosses (Tab. I: 12, 14)
3. three vertical lines (Tab. II:6)
4. two horizontal lines (Tab. II:9)
5. a combination of horizontal and vertical straight lines (Tab. II: 7-8, 10)
6. diagonal lines (Tab. II: 12)
7. straight lines forming a part of triangles (Tab. II: 13-16, 18)
8. an angle (Tab. II:11)
9. a kind of wavy lines (Tab. II: 17, 19)
10. a narrow sign with half of a rectangle in the upper part and vertical lines (Tab. II:20)

⁸ K. M. Ciałowicz, From Residence to Early Temple: The Case of Tell el-Farkha, [in:] Kroeper, Chłodnicki, Kobusiewicz (eds.) *Archaeology of Early Northeastern...*, 927-933; M. Chłodnicki, K.M. Ciałowicz, *Tell el-Farkha, Preliminary Report 2006*, PAM XVII, Warszawa 2008:128; K. M. Ciałowicz, *Gazelles and Ostriches from Tell el-Farkha*, [in:] J. Śliwa (ed.) *Studies in Ancient Art and Civilisation 12*, Kraków 2008: 21-34

⁹ M. Sobas, *Tell el-Farkha 2006-2008. Pottery from Cult Room no. 211*, *Studies in Ancient Art and Civilization 13*, Kraków 2009: 25-41

Selected potmarks from the settlement at Tell el-Farkha

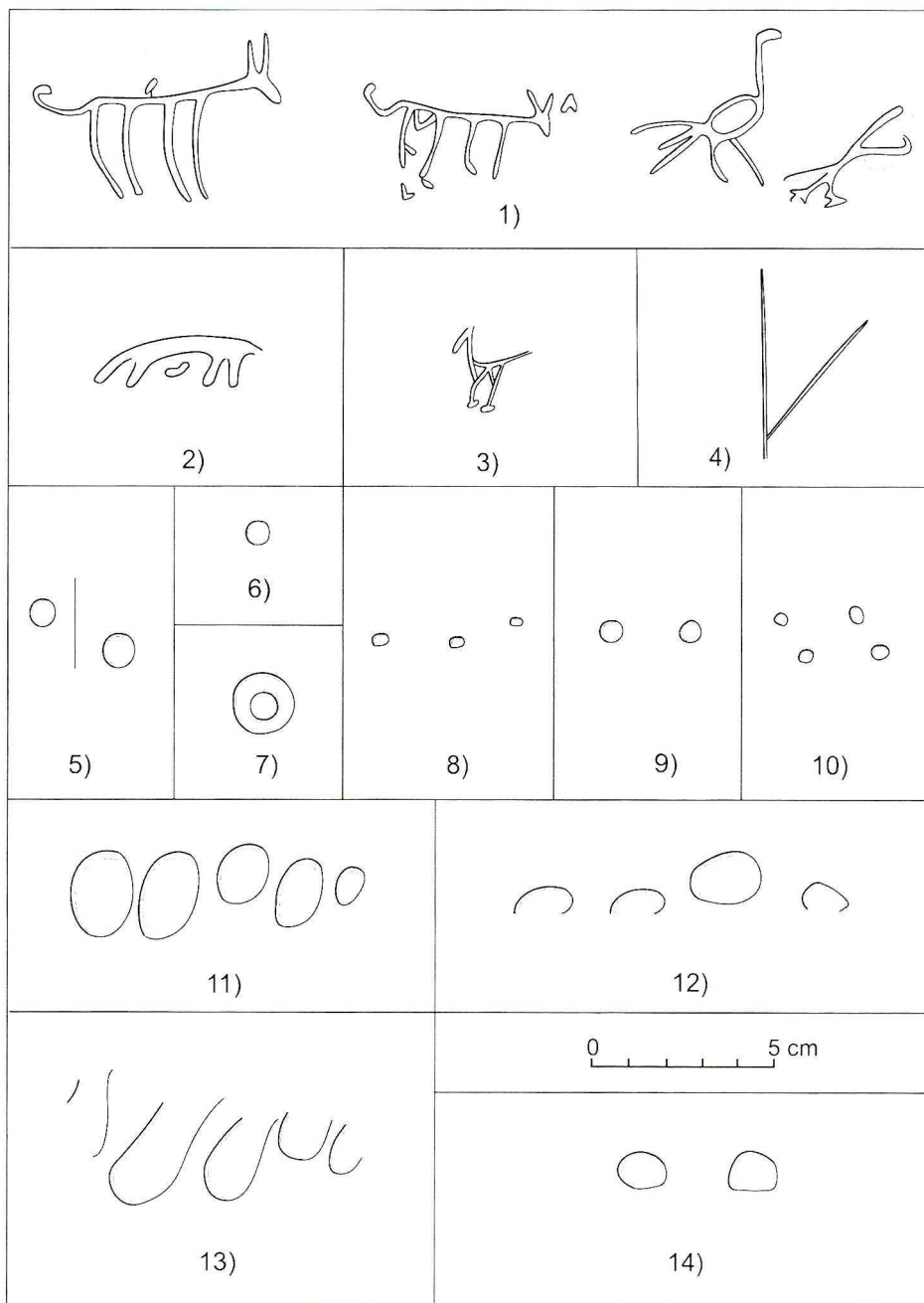


Table III. The potmarks from the settlement, Kom W, Tell el-Farkha.

11. a harpoon-like sign? (Tab. II:21)
12. a part of a plant and a human representation? (Tab. II:25)
13. animal-like signs (Tab. III:1, 3)
14. oval signs with lines (Tab. II:22-24)
15. single circles (Tab. III:5 – inside and outside, 6)
16. multiple-impressed circles (Tab. III:8, here on the bowl's rim)
17. finger impressions (Tab. III:11-14)

All of the signs were made on the outer walls of vessels. There are only a few exceptions of the signs which were engraved inside the walls (Tab. II:8, 11, 19, Tab. III:5).

Comparable but not identical signs were found at many other sites in Egypt, both on cemeteries and settlements. As an example we can mention: Buto¹⁰, Elefantine,¹¹ Elkab,¹² Abydos¹³ and others.¹⁴ However, a vast majority of them was discovered on necropolises. At Tell el-Farkha some of the marks are repeated, but very rarely. They are usually different from one another and these differences are visible between the sites as well. On the settlement the repetition of the signs is significant only on the bread moulds and concerns just one sign: a cross.

At Tell el-Farkha the potmarks are found on both the settlement site and the cemetery but the highest concentration of them is noticeable only in the Western part of the settlement where the administrative and cultic centre was found. Furthermore, the potmarks on the bread moulds appear more often in the southern part of the settlement on the Western Kom. It is likely that the meaning of the signs is closely related to the function of the site where they were made and used. At Tell el-Farkha a workshop has not been found yet but similar signs were probably connected to the specific production on this site with the owner or the producer of the mark. The presence of the potmarks on the settlement site also confirms a connection with the neighbouring sites, which were in a relation to Tell el-Farkha.

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¹¹ P. Kopp, *Elephantine XXXII. Die Siedlung der Nagadazeit*, Mainz am Rhein 2006: Taf. 28

¹² S. Hendrickx, *Elkab V. The Nagada III Cemetery*, Bruxelles 1994: 48, Pl. V.2, VI

¹³ Adams, Porat, *Imported pottery with potmarks...*, 99, 105, Fig. 1, 2

¹⁴ W. Needler, *Predynastic and Archaic Egypt in the Brooklyn Museum*, New York 1984:148, Fig. 33; More we can find on <http://www.potmark-egypt.com>

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