

2007

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Repository Citation

Hirschfeld, N. (2007). Potmarks. In T. J. Barako (Vol. Ed.), *IAA Reports: No. 32. Tel Mor: The Moshe Dothan excavations, 1959-1960* (pp. 183-190). Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority.

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POTMARKS

NICOLLE HIRSCHFELD

INTRODUCTION

Twelve potmarks¹ have been recorded among the finds from Tel Mor (Fig. 6.1). They are all simple marks, and only one may possibly be part of a longer inscription. They are incised, mostly into handles. At present, we do not know enough about the potmarking practices of the Late Bronze Age Levant to ascertain whether the assemblage recovered from Tel Mor is typical or unusual.

POTMARKS IN THE LEVANT

Potmarking practices varied widely in the different regions of the Bronze and Iron Age eastern Mediterranean. Pottery circulating within the Late Bronze Age Aegean was almost never marked.² However, Egyptians and Cypriots marked the vases they used, though only certain shapes, with certain kinds of marks. Mycenaean pottery imported into the Levant occasionally bore incised or painted marks, most likely made by Cypriot traders en route to the Levantine coast (Hankey 1967, 1970; Hirschfeld 2002:108, n. 61). The situation changed in the transition to the Iron Age, when the practice of marking pottery fell off in Cyprus but seems to have gained currency in the Levant.

The marked pottery found at Tel Mor that can be securely dated is mostly from the Late Bronze Age. The extent to which the inhabitants of Late Bronze Age Palestine marked their pottery is not clear. Very few potmarks appear in the published catalogues of local coarse wares from Late Bronze Age strata, a dearth that may simply reflect oversight by archaeologists. In general, potmarks receive attention as a by-product of other studies: when there is some reason to associate the marks with inscriptions or (proto-) writing; and when the marks happen to appear on vases that are under study for other purposes (e.g., imported Mycenaean pottery). But many potmarks do not garner such attention. They tend to comprise very simple patterns (i.e., impressed

dots, series of parallel grooves, incised X's, crosses) and appear on coarse utilitarian vases.

In every instance where I have been invited to look more closely at the collections or field notes from a Late Bronze Age excavation in Palestine, some potmarks have come to light.³ Yet at present, we do not know the range of marks, the kinds of vases marked or the distributions of the markings. The topic needs concentrated study. Single-site studies of solitary marks, especially simple ones, rarely tell their own story. Simple potmarks can be understood only through analysis in quantity. The larger pattern of potmarking practices in Late Bronze Age Palestine remains to be understood; this report on the marks found at Tel Mor is a beginning.⁴

THE POTMARK ASSEMBLAGE

The size of potmark assemblages tends to increase when attention is paid to utilitarian wares. The Tel Mor assemblage is a good example. Only one mark appears on a decorated vase (No. 2), another is on a small thin-walled body sherd of a vessel of indeterminate shape and fabric (No. 12), but the rest of the marked finds are plain and coarse.

Number 2 is the only mark that appears on a definite import, a Cypriot Bichrome jug. It is likely that No. 1 is also a Cypriot import; it is possible that some of the marked storage jars are also imported, perhaps also from Cyprus (e.g., Hadjicosti 1988; Jones and Vaughan 1988; Sugerma 2000). Whether a marked vase is an import or a local production is vital in the interpretation of the possible reasons for marking a vessel. The small number and the uncertain origin(s) of the marked vases found at Tel Mor provide evidence neither for nor against a local marking practice. There is no pattern, spatial or chronological, to the find-spots of the potmarks.

Despite the aforementioned limitations of the evidence from Tel Mor, there are points to be made

about this material. It should be noted at the outset that it was not possible for me to inspect the marked pottery from Tel Mor firsthand. This report is based solely on examination of digital images and/or drawings, and descriptions provided by the author of this volume. One crucial aspect of the marks cannot therefore be addressed here, namely, whether the marks were made before or after firing. It can be a difficult distinction to make, but it remains an important one, because marks made before firing must have been incised at the place of production. Marks incised into wet clay are easy to identify by a characteristic ridge raised on either side of the incised groove, the result of clay being pushed aside by the incising tool. Even if wear reduces the visibility of the ridge on either side of the incised groove, evidence of the ridge will remain in the junctions. But it is much more difficult to differentiate between signs incised into clay at the leather-hard stage and those cut into fired clay. Ten of the twelve potmarks found at Tel Mor have been photographed; none show evidence of pre-firing ridges. Based solely on visual inspection of the images, it seems likely that seven of these ten marks were made after firing (Nos. 1–6, 8). No determination could be made for the others.

No. 1. Cypriot(?) Plain Jug

Based on the present state of knowledge, Cyprus is the single region in the Late Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean with a potmarking system characterized by large single marks incised into the handles of medium to large closed containers. This marking system is in some way related to Cypro-Minoan, the writing system(s) in use on Late Bronze Age Cyprus, but the exact nature of the relationship is still unclear and not all the marks appearing on pottery can be identified with signs appearing in the formal texts.⁵ The potmarking system was used not only on vases circulating within Cyprus, but also appears on vases exported from the island or traveling on cargos passing through Cyprus or through the hands of Cypriot traders (Hirschfeld 2002:108, n. 61).

The mark incised on the handle of No. 1 fits the characteristics of the Cypriot potmarking system and can reasonably be identified as evidence of Cypriot handling of this vase. Although the mark itself cannot be identified with any known sign of the Cypro-Minoan syllabary, its form—especially the ‘flag’ or ‘tick’—accords well with the general character of the

signs attested for Cypriot Late Bronze Age writing.⁶ The mark’s manner of application and placement also conform to typical Cypriot practice: a single mark, incised into hard clay, conspicuous in its size and location on the vase. Finally, the shape and fabric of this jug recall the most commonly marked vase type in Cyprus (Plain Ware and Plain White Wheel-Made [PWWM] jugs of medium to large size). In fact, its shape and fabric strongly suggest that it should be identified as a Cypriot import (see Dothan 1960: Pl. 10:5); in the absence of firsthand or scientific (e.g. petrographic analysis) verification, this identification must remain a hypothesis.

No. 2. Cypriot Bichrome Jug

An ‘X’ is incised through the paint and into hard clay on No. 2, and appears to have been made after firing. It is impossible to know whether this mark was cut on Cyprus, at Tel Mor, or somewhere in between. An ‘X’ is a frequent choice for a mark, regardless of time or place. In both the Bronze Age Levant and Cyprus, however, this particular ‘X’ would be unusual. In the Levant, there is as yet no clear evidence for the routine marking of pottery of any kind; and in Cyprus, the custom of marking vases did not usually extend to Bichrome jars.

Nos. 3–9. Storage Jars with Single Mark Incised on Handle

The marks on Nos. 3–9 are all simple: a single line, cross, ‘X’ and pi-shaped mark. Four of the handles can be assigned dates between MB IIC and the end of the Late Bronze Age. The contexts of the remaining three handles are uncertain. While storage-jar handles with large incised marks are ubiquitous at Late Bronze Age sites in Cyprus, the situation on the Levantine coast is not clear.

The marks and jars from Tel Mor fit Cypriot marking practices; thus it is possible that these marked handles may be indicative of some Cypriot connection. Perhaps the jars were imported from Cyprus or Cypriots were involved in some other capacity. But the simple nature of the marks and our uncertain knowledge of the extent to which Canaanites marked their jars preclude definitive conclusions. At this point the primary task is to publish all marked pottery and thus begin to build a corpus on the basis of which it will be possible to

delineate the local use of potmarks in Late Bronze Age and Iron Age Palestine.

Number 5 carries its mark at the base of the handle. Most storage-jar handles are marked in the upper third, as if made to be visible when looking down or straight at the jars. Marks at the base of the handle are rare and almost always very simple in form. This suggests that the marks at the bases of handles and those at the top were made for different purposes. Orientation may also indicate the purpose of marks. Where was the inscriber sitting or standing when making the mark, and what does that tell us about its function? Especially in the case of simple marks, it is often impossible to establish a mark's orientation. In those instances when marks on handles can be identified with signs of the Cypriot writing system, the marks are most often oriented along the vertical axis of the handle, with the top of the sign in the direction of the mouth of the jar. Although it is too simple to be certainly identified with any writing system, No. 8 could be the Cypro-Minoan sign 59 or 78, in which case it is perpendicular to the customary orientation.

No. 10. Storage Jar with Multiple Marks

Number 10 (see Fig. 3.23:12) is remarkable for the number of its marks and their distribution: two parallel strokes at the base of the single preserved handle, an 'X' at mid-belly, another mark of undetermined form also at mid-belly and a series of five(?) parallel strokes just below mid-belly. It is unknown whether these marks were incised before or after firing, or whether the incisions were made by the same tool or in the same manner. Thus, questions of whether these marks were all made at the same time for the same purpose, or are traces of marking at various stages of the jar's production, transfer and use, remain unanswerable. Since two of the marks on this jar consist of series of parallel strokes, it is tempting to interpret the marks as numerical in nature.⁷

Most Late Bronze Age potmarks have been preserved singly on the broken handles or bases of vases. Perhaps by accident of discovery/preservation, the general impression received is of a single mark per vase. This impression is substantiated in most of those few instances where complete vases with marks have been recovered. A second substantial category of preserved marks, also suggestive of single-purpose marking, are the multiple marks that have been incised or painted on

the vase as a 'set' or an 'associated series'.⁸ The few marked, complete 'Canaanite' storage jars, Cypriot Plain ware jugs and Mycenaean decorated vases found in tombs and shipwrecks characteristically display either a single mark or a closely associated set of marks that can be assumed to have been applied simultaneously, for a single purpose. But the archaeological record occasionally preserves traces of different kinds of marks applied to a single vase. So, for example, a piriform jar discovered at Tiryns carries an incised mark on one handle and a painted mark on another.⁹ One handle of a coarse ware stirrup jar found in the storerooms of an Egyptian fortress at Zawyet Umm el-Rakham bears two different marks, clearly not cut by the same tool or for the same purpose (pers. obs.). The scattered and disparate appearance of the marks on No. 10 suggests that it may be another example of a jar marked at different times for different purposes; identification (perhaps possible through firsthand visual inspection) of pre- and post-firing marks would support this hypothesis.

No. 11. Handle with Two Marks

A handle fragment partially preserves two incised marks, one of which is probably a simple cross. The sherd comes from a poor context and its date is uncertain. Its identification as a storage jar is also dubious since the section is unusual for this form. The one sign is too simple and the other too fragmentary for a certain identification with any writing or marking system, Late Bronze Age or otherwise.

In the face of these uncertainties, any discussion of this handle in terms of writing practices is highly tenuous. With that proviso firmly in mind, I will nevertheless suggest the possibility that this handle fragment preserves traces of Cypriot writing. The drawing shows grooves of similar dimensions for both marks, and it looks as if the same tool might have been used to cut them. Of course, the actual marks need to be carefully inspected firsthand and under magnification in order to confirm this hypothesis. This detail is important because two marks associated by location and alignment and method of application (ductus) may be indicative of writing.¹⁰ Furthermore, if the handle is Late Bronze Age in date, it is most likely that such an inscription would be based on the Cypriot writing system. In general, inscriptions on vases are very rare in the Late Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean and,



Fig. 6.1. Potmarks.

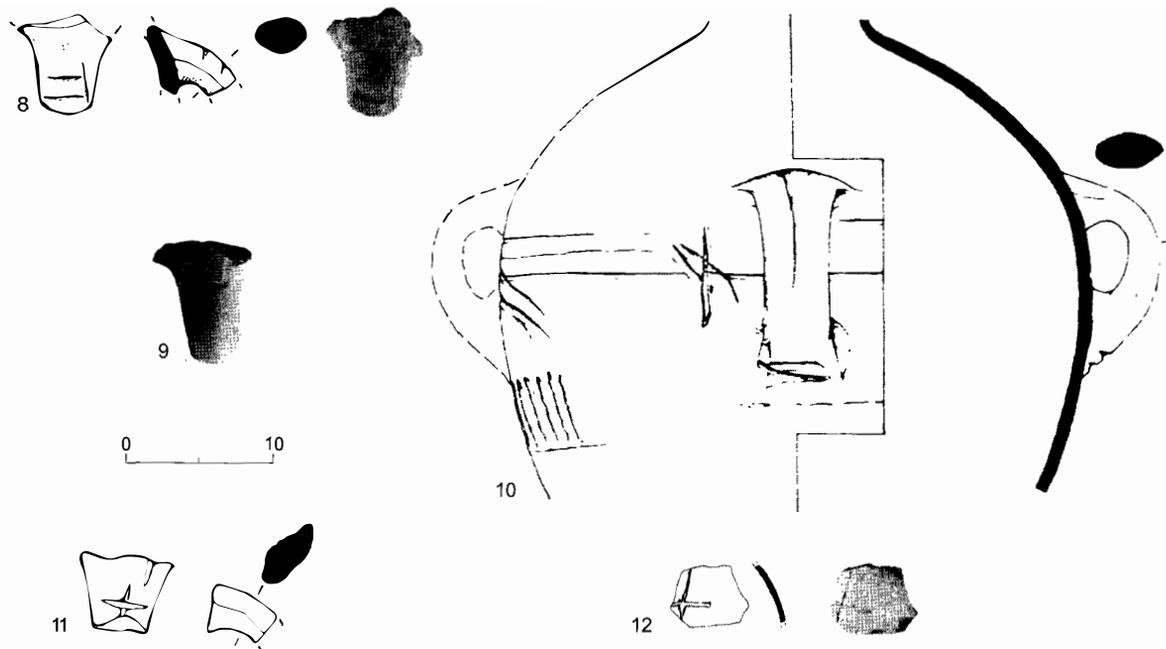


Fig. 6.1 (cont.). Potmarks.

No.	Object	Reg. No.	Context (Stratum)	Elevation (m)	Description
1	Jar	A305	Area 41 (VII)	22.30	N/A
2	Jug	B366	Courtyard 118 (XII)	N/A	See Fig. 5.7:7
3	Storage jar	A30/17	Sq L18 (II)	25.00/24.85	N/A
4	Storage jar	B357/1	Room 63? (VIII?)	N/A	N/A
5	Storage jar	B256/46	Courtyard 118 (XI?)	20.40/20.25	N/A
6	Storage jar	A698/1	Pit 85 (IX)	20.70/20.15	Surface: 2.5YR 7/3 (light reddish brown); fabric: 2.5YR 4/4 (reddish brown); core: dark gray; inclusions: few fine sparkling, few small voids, few small white
7	Storage jar	A699	Pit 35? (VI)	N/A	Surface: 10YR 6/6 (brownish yellow); fabric: same; core: light gray; inclusions: many fine to small voids
8	Storage jar	A375	Pit 55 (Hellenistic)	21.45/20.25	Surface: 10R 7/6 (light red); fabric: same; core: thick, light gray; inclusions: very many fine to small dark, many fine sparkling, few small white
9	Storage jar	B354/4	Subfloor fill(?) under Room 137 (XII-X)	N/A	Self-slip; N/A
10	Storage jar	B33	Room 108 (VII)	22.32	See Fig. 3.23:12
11	Storage jar?	A15/13	Sq L19	25.10/25.00	N/A
12	Jar?	A252	Sq L19 (VI)	23.50/23.35	N/A

when they do occur, they appear on the shoulders or bodies of the vessel. The few inscriptions on handles known to me all follow conventions used by persons employing Cypriot script or Cypriot marking systems. Nothing in the drawing belies an identification of these marks as Cypriot signs, and there is as yet no basis for any alternative explanation within the context of the Late Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean. Identification of the origin of this handle, whether local or imported, is particularly important in interpreting the significance of this possible Cypriot inscription.

The recent publication (Cross and Stager 2006) of 18 potmarks from Late Bronze Age and Iron I contexts at Ashqelon illustrates the impact that a few new discoveries can have on interpretations of the small corpus of known potmarks from the Levant. This is not the forum in which to debate the authors' conclusions, but it is appropriate here to signal one advance and one caution in methodology. Singularly important is the added dimension of petrographic analyses. The origin of a vase is vitally important to defining the possible function(s) of its mark. The Ashqelon study, like the earlier publication of a marked sherd found in Late Bronze Age Tel Afeq (Yasur-Landau and Goren 2004), demonstrates the successful—and here, essential—incorporation of the results of petrographic analysis into potmark inquiry. The caveat lies in the identification of individual marks as signs of writing, or even of a particular script. This can be done only if a mark is complex enough to make identification with a sign of a specific script compelling, or it can be identified as fitting into a coherent marking system with demonstrated (formal and/or historical) ties to a writing system.¹¹ For the Late Bronze Age Levant, we lack convincing or sufficient raw data to identify the potmarking systems used, much less their relationship to specific scripts.

No. 12. Body Sherd

A small thin-walled body sherd preserves part of an incised mark. The breaks make it impossible to reconstruct the shape of the mark; it may be a simple

cross or the edge of a more complex sign. Vase shape and fabric are indeterminate; it appears to be a shoulder fragment. Egyptian amphorae and the Linear B-inscribed stirrup jars from the Aegean regularly carry marks on their shoulders, but otherwise Late Bronze Age vases are rarely marked on their bodies.¹² There is no pattern to the types of mark which do occasionally appear on bodies: five storage jars from the Ulu Burun shipwreck carry incised marks at the sharp shoulder carination;¹³ and a few storage jars from terrestrial sites bear a large painted or incised mark on the belly.¹⁴

CONCLUSIONS

In and of itself, a simple potmark delivers little information. The marks discovered at Tel Mor are simple in form, and the stratigraphic contexts of the marked vases do not clarify the marks' functions or makers. However, as marks at different sites are cataloged, the larger context of the Tel Mor marks will become clearer. The local marking systems of Late Bronze Age Palestine must be recorded in order to understand their regional and chronological limits. This chapter is a contribution to the first step in this process: the publication of the complete corpus of marks discovered at a site.

In closing, two hypotheses can be raised upon examination of the assemblage of marked pottery from Tel Mor. First, marked pottery is rare at Tel Mor and at the other sites in Late Bronze Age Palestine whose potmark assemblages I have examined. No site has a sufficient amount of preserved marks to determine their purpose; there are no significant clusters. Perhaps this scattered distribution is an indication that marks were used for extra-site purposes. In addition, the marks at Tel Mor suggest the possibility of some connection with Cyprus or Cypriots. No single piece of evidence is compelling, but the indications—the Cypriot(?) jug with a characteristically Cypriot mark (No. 1), the imported Cypriot bichrome vase (No. 2), a possible Cypriot inscription (No. 11) and the storage jars marked in characteristic Cypriot fashion (Nos. 3–9)—seem significant when considered together.

NOTES

¹ ‘Potmark’ is a neutral term that can be used to describe a mark applied at any point during the manufacture, exchange, use, purposeful deposit or final discard of a vase. This is different than the term ‘potter’s mark’, which implies that the mark was applied in the course of the vase’s manufacture.

² The coarse-ware stirrup jars with Linear B inscriptions are the single significant exception.

³ Again I thank the many excavators (the list is too long to include here) who have generously shared their material and notes with me.

⁴ I am grateful to Tristan Barako for the invitation to participate in this study.

⁵ For a critique of the commonly cited sign lists proposed in Masson 1974:12–15, Figs. 1–4, see Palaima 1989. For a discussion of the uncertain relationship between Cypriot marks and the Cypriot script, see Hirschfeld 2000:181–182 and 2002:92–94.

⁶ For the Cypro-Minoan sign-list, see Masson 1974.

⁷ Not enough marked jars with sufficient profile preserved to calculate volume have been recovered to test the hypothesis that ‘numerical’ marks may record volume. Nor have marked vases been found in clusters, which could support a hypothesis that the marks represent quantities of vases or batch marks. It is difficult to suggest how the hypothesis that these marks represent value (‘price’) could be confirmed archaeologically.

⁸ It is not always clear whether or not multiple marks on a single vase should be considered as separate marks or as

an associated series. This is the case with many stirrup jars, piriform jars and ‘Canaanite’ storage jars with more than one incised handle. I have adopted the following guideline: two or more marks associated by location *and* alignment *and* method of application (ductus) constitute an associated series rather than individual potmarks.

⁹ Tiryns 27985, most recently published in Olivier 1988:255, 257, Fig. 4; see also Hirschfeld 2000:177, n. 31 for several other examples.

¹⁰ According to Olivier and Godart (1978:34), ‘a group of at least two signs’ is the definition of an ‘inscription’; see also the discussion in Hirschfeld 2000:164, n. 6.

¹¹ As, for example, with the marks incised into LH III Aegean vases (Hirschfeld 1992).

¹² This may be partially a happenstance of recovery, as handles and bases are diagnostic sherds and thus are more likely to be examined and/or saved during excavation. Marks on body sherds are much more easily overlooked.

¹³ KW 93, 130, 1957, 2343, 2353 (unpublished; I thank C. Pulak for providing access to the material).

¹⁴ Ḥazor FN: C 11083 (Yadin et al. 1958: Pls. 89:7, 158:8); Hala Sultan Tekke F 1200, 1209, 1222, 1261 (Hult 1981:7, 27, 31, Fig. 63); Enkomi 718/7 (Dikaios 1969–1971: vol. II, 596; vol. IIIa, Pls. 77:23, 125:4); Mycenae, Nauplion 11454 (Cline 1994:170, No. 308); Zawyet Umm el-Rakham (unpublished; I thank S. Snape for providing access to this material). It is now possible to add Tel Mor to this list of sites.

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