

# A First Dynasty Egyptian wine jar with a potmark in the collection of the Australian Institute of Archaeology

Lisa Mawdsley

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**Abstract** : A unique incised potmark may hold the key to the identification of provenance for a First Dynasty storage jar in the collection of the Australian Institute of Archaeology.

## Introduction

The recent unpacking of artefacts at the Australian Institute of Archaeology in preparation for permanent storage and preliminary cataloguing into the new database has revealed a wealth of unexpected surprises, particularly in relation to the Institute's collection of Predynastic-Early Dynastic Egyptian pottery.<sup>1</sup> One exciting discovery is a large First Dynasty storage jar with a pre-fired incised potmark. The mark was created by a technique that involved the use of a blunt or sharp stick or flint tool to incise a sign or group of signs upon a vessel while the clay was wet and before the vessel was fired. The documentation provided to the Institute does not indicate a provenance and the jar does not have an excavation or tomb number. In most circumstances this would make the identification of provenance almost impossible but in this case the unique composition of the mark itself may cast light on the possible origins of the jar.

## The vessel

The Institute's vessel is an intact elongated storage jar commonly referred to as a wine jar (Figure 1). While the name suggests a particular function, these jars would have been used for storing and transporting such commodities as oils, liquids and grains and are often found in burials containing the residues of fats, resins or ash (Serpico 2004: 1017-1019). The jar has one horizontal ridge imitating a rope between the rim and shoulder and another at the base of the vessel. This form corresponds to Petrie's (Petrie *et al.* 1913: pl. LVI) type 76m but with a ridge above a more rounded base as seen on type 76g (Petrie *et al.* 1913: pl. LVI). Petrie's type 76m appears in the chronological sequence of wine jars from the mid-First Dynasty. The type was dated to S.D. 80-82 (Petrie *et al.*

1913: pl. LVI)<sup>2</sup> and falls within Hendrickx's (1996: 65) Naqada IIIC-D. The middle and lower part of the vessel was handmade while the neck and rim were made from a separate coil and finished on a turning device. The exterior has been coated with a brown-red slip and the body has been finished with vertical burnishing. The vessel is made of a Nile Silt fabric. There is some pitting to the lower half of the body and evidence of salt damage. The vessel is 650 mm in height with a maximum diameter of 200 mm and a rim diameter of 120 mm. The potmark is deeply and neatly



**Figure 1:** The storage jar IA1.2111.  
(Photo: H. Huggins and Drawn: C.J. Davey)



**Figure 2:** *Incised mark on storage jar IA1.2111.*  
(Photo: H. Huggins).

incised below the horizontal ridge in the upper body. The mark is composed of a square containing two vertical lines running from the top to almost the bottom of the frame and a secondary sign that appears to be an inverted U (Figure 2). The mark also appears to have been infilled with a white pigment, perhaps a calcium or calcium sulphate mixture. The vessel has recently been accessioned as IA1.2111.

### Acquisition of the vessel

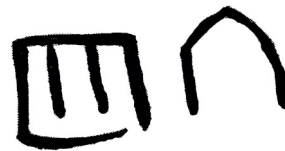
In 1949 the Institute acquired four cases of antiquities originating from Flinders Petrie's excavations at Tell el 'Ajjul, and Egypt. The first president and founder of the Institute, W. J. Beasley, purchased the artefacts for £100 from the British School of Egyptian Archaeology.<sup>3</sup> Correspondence from Hilda Petrie to Beasley's agent, Mr McKay, documents how 15 boxes of artefacts from University College London were distributed to the Institute, the University of Sydney and to a biblical museum in the United States.<sup>4</sup>

In a letter to Beasley dated 22 October 1949, Hilda Petrie indicated that the four boxes for the Institute had been dispatched and that she was forwarding a more detailed box list. The list provided a layer by layer outline of the material contained within the boxes. The first box contained 56 pots from Egypt, including Late Predynastic and First Dynasty cylinder jars and vessels dating from the 9th Dynasty to the Late Period. In the bottom layer of the first box the list recorded three large specimens of First Dynasty storage jars. There was no detail provided regarding the provenance of these vessels and in Hilda Petrie's letter to Beasley she made the comment that the list was "not a very efficient guide to unpack by, as it is mostly by groups rather than by dates or history. It is 20 yrs since we left Egypt, and I am rusty."<sup>5</sup>

In the same letter Hilda Petrie indicated that many of the pots were from Lahun, Gurob and Harageh and were marked at the base with a L, H, G or GH to indicate the place of origin. The Institute's jar is not marked at the base. There are only three First Dynasty storage jars in the Institute's collection so it is assumed that these vessels were part of the 1949 shipment.

### Identification of the mark

The only published example of the two lines within a frame and inverted U combination was illustrated by Hilda Petrie as mark number 59 on plate XXI of *Tarkhan II* (Petrie 1914: pl. XXI; Figure 3). In Edwin van den Brink's (1992) corpus of 2474 published First Dynasty potmarks, this mark is recorded as a unique example and allocated to sign group II.25.<sup>6</sup> On the basis of this information it would not be unreasonable to suggest that the Institute's vessel originated from Tarkhan. In fact the close similarity between Hilda Petrie's drawing and the potmark (Figures 2 & 3) raises the possibility that she actually drew the vessel the Institute now has. The application of the white pigment may be significant to the identification as three other marks from Tarkhan have also been infilled with a similar substance.<sup>7</sup> This practice has not been commented upon in the literature to date and may have been unique to the site for some unknown reason.<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 3:** *Mark 59 from Tarkhan II depicting a frame containing two lines and an inverted U originally illustrated by Hilda Petrie (Drawn: C. Smith after Petrie 1914: pl. XXI).*

### Tarkhan

Tarkhan is a cemetery in the Memphite-Fayum region almost 60 kms south of Cairo on the west bank of the Nile. With over 2000 burials it is the second largest Late Predynastic-Early Dynastic cemetery in Egypt after Helwan (Köhler 2004: 299). Burials were first interred in the Naqada IIIA period and the cemetery was in use until the end of the First Dynasty, covering a period of time from approximately 3200-2890 BC.<sup>9</sup> The site was excavated by Flinders Petrie during two short seasons between 1911-1913 and two excavation reports known as *Tarkhan I* (Petrie *et al.* 1913) and *Tarkhan II* (Petrie 1914) were produced quickly after each season. Although Tarkhan is often mentioned in the literature it remains poorly studied and has not been re-excavated.<sup>10</sup>

Tarkhan has the fourth largest number of published potmarks after Abydos, Saqqara and Minshat Abu Omar (van den Brink 1992: fig.4; Kroeper 2000: 15).

To date 344 marks from Tarkhan have been identified (Mawdsley 2006: 16). Of this number, 76 are unique to the site. Some of these are listed in van den Brink's (1992) corpus as unique forms of particular marks, while others are recently discovered single examples and have no published parallels. Petrie originally published 282 potmarks in *Tarkhan I* and *Tarkhan II*. The remaining 62 marks have been identified from an examination of Petrie's excavation

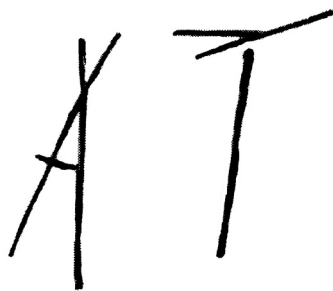
tomb cards and from searching the catalogues of international museum collections (Mawdsley 2006: 20).

Unlike the majority of marks illustrated in *Tarkhan I* only seven of the marks in *Tarkhan II* had been allocated tomb numbers.<sup>11</sup> Regarding the origins of the marked vessels Petrie (1914: 12) simply made the comment that the ‘greater part are from the large graves 2050 and 2026 of S.D. 80, and 2038, 1982, 1973 of S.D. 81’. In Petrie’s (1914: 5) discussion of the tombs he indicated that vessels with potmarks were placed outside the mastaba structure of tomb 2038 as offerings, but made no mention of any marked vessels found within the tomb. Petrie (1914: 8) also noted that a large store of big marked jars, which were probably wine jars, stood at the north end of tomb 1973. It is difficult to know how many of the marks illustrated in *Tarkhan II* belong to the above-mentioned tombs and it is certainly not made clear in the excavation report. A further examination of the tomb cards for each of these tombs failed to identify any reference to marked vessels.<sup>12</sup>

### Another vessel of interest

The tentative identification of provenance is strengthened by the presence of another wine jar with an incised potmark from Tarkhan in the collection of the Institute. The vessel is currently on loan to the Museum of Ancient Cultures, Macquarie University.<sup>13</sup> The wine jar was accessioned in the register as IA1.99. It is presumed that this vessel was one of the three storage jars acquired in 1949.<sup>14</sup> The brief description of the jar was accompanied by a drawing of the mark. The mark appears to represent a *mr*-hoe (Gardiner U 6) together with a vertical line surmounted by supporting pole (Gardiner 0 30) or Y-like sign. Once again the only published example of this mark was illustrated by Hilda Petrie as mark number 52 on plate XXI of *Tarkhan II* (Petrie 1914: pl. XXI; Figure 4). The mark is also recorded as a unique example and allocated to sign group XVII.13 in van den Brink’s (1992: 291) corpus of First Dynasty potmarks.

The vessel has been described as an elongated storage jar with a narrow flat base. It has a rib imitating a rope on the shoulder and is an example of Petrie’s type 76m (Petrie *et al.* 1913: pl. LVI). It has a pre-fired mark incised into the



**Figure 4:** Mark 52 from *Tarkhan II* originally illustrated by Hilda Petrie. (Drawn: C. Smith after Petrie 1914: pl. XXI).

upper body. The vessel is made of a Nile Silt B fabric. It is 597mm in height, with a maximum diameter of 210 mm and a rim diameter of 135 mm. The vessel has been identified as originating from tomb 1973 at Tarkhan.<sup>15</sup>

### A brief comment on the function and meaning of First Dynasty potmarks

There is renewed interest in the study of potmarks as they are now recognised as an important source of information for understanding how the administrative system of the First Dynasty may have functioned.<sup>16</sup> With regards to the function of the marks, it has been proposed that marks applied to certain types of pottery could be linked to a centralised administrative body responsible for a commodity distribution or redistribution network possibly connected with funerary practices (van den Brink 1992: 274).<sup>17</sup> It has also been suggested that some marks may represent a pre-mortuary administrative function and would have been used to denote the origin or destination of the original contents of the jar in its first stage of use (Mawdsley 2006: 44).

Attempting to unravel the meaning of the marks is a more difficult task. Visually many incised marks bear a similarity to hieroglyphic signs but the connection between the two remains unclear (van den Brink 1992: 276, 278; Baines 2004: 159-160). It is possible that the practice of marking pottery represented a system of commodity control and identification that eventually developed into an alternate script for administrative purposes. The marks may represent shorthand versions of the names of estates, domains, places, gods, temples and symbols associated with royalty or those with a funerary significance. The marks were designed to convey information relevant to the origins, distribution or destination of the product contained within the vessel and their interpretation was based upon an understanding of context and of the role these marked vessels played within the administrative system.<sup>18</sup>

### Interpreting the mark

In van den Brink’s (1992: 286) corpus the mark has been allocated to sign-group II, which includes 136 published examples of square or rectangular frames containing either one or two vertical lines or a combination of vertical and horizontal lines. The vertical lines within the frame incised on the Institute’s vessel suggests that the sign may be a form of plain *serekh*. *Serekhs* were marks used to denote Late Predynastic and First Dynasty rulers and are believed to represent the architectural design of a panelled or niched palace façade.<sup>19</sup> Square or rectangular frames with between three to six vertical lines have been identified as plain *serekhs* and have a wide chronological range appearing on wine jars from the early Naqada III period to the mid-First Dynasty (van den Brink 2001a: 26). The frame incised on the Institute’s vessel falls outside van den Brink’s (2001a: 26) criteria for a plain *serekh* as it contains two lines; however, there are examples of plain

*serekhs* containing single and double lines from el-Beda and Turah (van den Brink 2001a: 34, 38).

One plain *serekh* containing three vertical lines has been identified at Tarkhan (van den Brink 2001a: 29). This mark was illustrated as mark number 78 in *Tarkhan II* and probably dates to S.D. 80-81 or the mid-First Dynasty (Petrie 1914: 12, pl. XXI). There are also a further five marks from Tarkhan with between one to three lines within a frame that could be considered forms of the plain *serekh*.<sup>20</sup> These marks were dated to S.D. 80-81 by Petrie (Petrie *et al.* 1913: pl. XXXI; Petrie 1914: 12). It is also interesting to note that secondary signs, frequently in the form of tree or plant-like signs, do accompany plain and named *serekh* marks (van den Brink 2001a: 34, 38). The inverted U or V sign has been found in association with one plain and two named *serekh* marked vessels from Abu Roash, Turah and Abydos (van den Brink 2001a: 28, 37, 43).<sup>21</sup>

If the frame is a form of plain *serekh* it may have been intended to represent the king, or an estate of the king, while the inverted U sign represented the origin or destination of the goods contained within the vessel. If the frame is not a plain *serekh*, it may still represent a First Dynasty royal estate. Even though the sign combination appears to be unique to Tarkhan it does not mean that the marked vessel was manufactured at the currently unlocated settlement associated with the cemetery. It is possible that the marked vessel originated from another centre and was sent to the site for some specific administrative purpose, such as payment for work undertaken on behalf of the king. Once the product contained within the vessel was used, the jar itself may have been kept and later became a burial item or offering for one of the tombs excavated by Petrie during his second season at Tarkhan.

## Conclusion

While the unique composition of the mark suggests that the vessel may have originated from Tarkhan, it must be emphasised that without supporting documentation this proposed provenance remains speculative. Research undertaken on the potmarks of Tarkhan (Mawdsley 2006) and Abydos (Adams and Porat 1996: 100; Gilroy *et al.* 2001: 40) has demonstrated that Petrie did not record or illustrate all of the marked fragments and vessels discovered during his excavations.<sup>22</sup> Given this information it is possible that the incised mark on the Institute's jar represents a second example of the mark illustrated in *Tarkhan II*.

Lisa Mawdsley  
Centre for Archaeology and Ancient History  
Monash University

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## Endnotes

- 1 There are 101 Predynastic-Early Dynastic vessels accessioned in the registers with a further 10-15 vessels that have not been accessioned. See also Hope (1982: 29, 33).
- 2 Sequence Date refers to a relative chronological sequence devised for the Predynastic and Early Dynastic periods by Petrie (see Petrie 1901: 4-12; Petrie *et al.* 1913: 1-5).
- 3 Although the Institute was not founded until 22 September 1949, Beasley had corresponded with Hilda Petrie from late 1935 to early 1936. The first letter received from Hilda Petrie is dated 5 March 1936. In return for a contribution to the British School of Egyptian Archaeology Beasley acquired Egyptian antiquities in 1936 and 1937 (Crocker 1990: 65-66). On W. J. Beasley and the collection of the Institute see Crocker (1990: 65-70).
- 4 Institute Correspondence file numbers 740 and 741. Letters from Hilda Petrie (Lady Petrie) to Mr McKay dated 27 and 30 June 1949.
- 5 Institute Correspondence file number 738. Letter from Hilda Petrie (Lady Petrie) to Mr Beasley dated 22 October 1949.
- 6 The corpus produced by van den Brink (1992, 265-266) assigned the 2474 marks into 77 sign groups based upon similarity in design. The marks were obtained from 14 published sites, including Tarkhan, and one unpublished site. The corpus also included the total number of times each sign or combination of signs had been used at the sites under investigation.
- 7 Mark 42 (Petrie 1914: pl. XX) (UC28625); mark 35 (Petrie 1914: pl. XX) (UC28637); new mark (UC28647) (Mawdsley 2006: table 1.11).
- 8 This observation may not be as significant as originally thought as a chance reading of Petrie's (1904) treatise on archaeological methods came across a reference to the practice of photographing artefacts, the comments are particularly relevant. "Any sunk carving or inscription of small size should generally be filled in with whiting...so as to give a strong contrast...Only rather coarse powders should be used, in order to avoid staining the object" (Petrie 1904: 76). If the application of pigment is a modern one, this finding is still of interest as it would lend support to the idea that the vessel originated from a Petrie excavation. Further analysis of the pigment is required before any firm conclusions can be drawn.
- 9 The site was later re-used and contains a small number of burials from the Old Kingdom, First Intermediate Period-Middle Kingdom, Late Period, Ptolemaic and Roman periods (Grajetzki 2004: 44-51). Apart from Grajetzki (2004) these burials have not been studied in any detail.
- 10 See Ellis (1992; 1996) and Grajetzki (2004). Wolfram Grajetzki worked on the Tarkhan material at the Petrie Museum, University College London as part of the Museum's Digital Egypt for Universities project and the writer is currently undertaking doctoral research on the site at the Centre for Archaeology and Ancient History, Monash University.
- 11 Marks 3-6 were found in tomb 1756, mark 7 in tomb 846, mark 8 in tomb 1115 and mark 91 in tomb 1981 (Petrie 1914: pls. XX and XXI). Tomb 1233 was identified as the location of mark 36 (Mawdsley 2006: 18). Two fragments, mark 12 (UC28624) and mark 17 (UC28619) were marked in pencil with the tomb number 2050.
- 12 The lack of detail in the report and on the tomb cards regarding the marks highlights the fact that the second season of excavation was rushed. Petrie and his two assistants mapped and excavated over 1000 tombs from December 1912 to the end of February 1913. The famous T.E Lawrence spent a short time at Tarkhan during the first season before returning to Carchemish (Petrie *et al.* 1913: 1) and his description of work at the site is particularly revealing, "in

our first week have dug out about 100 graves...so twice as many graves are found as we can recover properly; with plenty of time it would be delightful, whereas now we are swamped with the multitude” (Drower 1985: 320).

- 13 The vessel has been assigned a Museum of Ancient Cultures catalogue number of MU 1000.
- 14 The third vessel has recently been accessioned as 1A1.2110. The jar has one horizontal ridge at the base and corresponds to type 75o (Petrie *et al.* 1913: pl. LV). Unfortunately it has been broken since shipment.
- 15 Based on a description for the Museum of Ancient Cultures kindly provided by Colin Hope. The entry in the Institute’s accession register also identifies the tomb of origin as 1973 but with a question mark.
- 16 This interest has resulted in the establishment of the International Potmark Workshop by Edwin van den Brink of which the writer is a member.
- 17 For a chronological listing of the major explanations regarding the meaning and function of First Dynasty potmarks quoted from an unpublished manuscript by Tom van den Berg see van den Brink (1992: 276).
- 18 Baines (2004, 165) has suggested that early writing found on tags and jar inscriptions may have been context-dependent and that an understanding of the inscriptions “relied on the association of context and content.” This statement is particularly relevant to the study of potmarks. Clearly the problem of understanding and interpreting the marks is a modern one.
- 19 For a more detailed discussion on *serekhs* and the origins of the palace-façade see Hendrickx 2001: 90; Jiménez Serrano 2001: 73-78; 2003: 93-142; van den Brink 2001a: 100; 2001b: 103-106.
- 20 Marks 10, 12, 70, 79 (Petrie 1914: pl. XX-XXI) and mark 120 (Petrie *et al.* 1913: pl. XXXI).
- 21 The inverted U has been allocated to sign-group VIII in van den Brink’s (1992: 288) corpus. It appears to have been most frequently combined with a plain square or rectangle (van den Brink 1992: 288).
- 22 It is amazing to note that over 1000 marked fragments from Petrie’s excavations at Abydos were never recorded and are stored at the Petrie Museum, University College London (Adams and Porat 1996: 100).