



APPLIED POTMARKS BETWEEN LEBANON AND EGYPT IN THE EARLY BRONZE AGE

Metoda Peršin

Freie Universität Berlin

ABSTRACT

Although potmarks were discovered at many archaeological sites in the Near East and Egypt, interpretations of their functions vary. Despite the diversity of techniques used in potmark production (e.g. incised, painted, impressed, applied), applied potmarks were especially neglected in research, and attracted attention mostly through the so-called ram's head applications. A recent systematic study of potmarks from the Bronze Age contexts in Lebanon has revealed not only that applied marks do exist, but they appear frequently and come in a variety of forms and combinations. Contacts between the Levant and Egypt in the Bronze Age are known both from written sources and analysis of archaeological material. The latter includes ceramic vessels imported to Egypt, some of which bear applied potmarks. This paper investigates the Early Bronze Age applied potmarks in Lebanon through a contextual lens, as well as applied potmarks found on imported vessels in Egypt. As a result, this paper offers new insights on the function of applied potmarks and the exchange practices between Egypt and Lebanon in the Early Bronze Age.

KEYWORDS

Potmarks, Early Bronze Age, Lebanon, Egypt

INTRODUCTION

Potmarks have been found at numerous archaeological sites and interpreted in many different ways. They may have been related to the manufacturing process of the vessels,¹ or used to identify a workshop,² a family,³ gender or age,⁴ ownership,⁵ the destination of the vessel,⁶ or its origin.⁷ Furthermore, their functions could be related to the content of the vessels,⁸ branding,⁹ administrative purposes,¹⁰ exchange process,¹¹ funerary practices,¹² or libation.¹³ Although these interpretations vary considerably from one another, it is highly likely that potmarks acquired different roles across different areas and in different time periods, meaning that any of these interpretations may be plausible at a certain point in time at a certain place.

Potmarks are in general defined as isolated signs incised, excised, painted, or impressed on ceramic vessels.¹⁴ Applied potmarks are rarely mentioned in literature,¹⁵ on the one hand due to the fact that potmark application was not the most frequent potmarking technique, and, on the other, since such applications are sometimes not recognized as potmarks. An applied potmark is created by forming a small piece of clay into the desired form and attaching it to the vessel before firing. This is in contrast to other potmarking techniques that allow mark creation after firing, as in the case of painted or incised marks.

One of the most known groups of applied potmarks are the so-called ram's head applications. They were documented at several sites in Lebanon,¹⁶

in the Southern Levant¹⁷ and in Egypt.¹⁸ Their interpretations often vary in publications; sometimes they were considered as decoration,¹⁹ other times as part of a marking system.²⁰ This paper considers ram's heads applications as potmarks that were part of a marking system in use in the Early Bronze Age and reveals that the ram's head applications are far from being the only type of applied potmarks in Lebanon. Although marked vessels are very rare compared to unmarked vessels in general and applied potmarks are not attested as frequently as other types of potmarks, a recent systematic study of Bronze Age marks from Lebanon unveils that there is a substantial amount of such marks present in the area and that they materialize in many different shapes and combinations. The results presented in this paper are preliminary thoughts on Early Bronze Age potmarking practices in Lebanon and will be discussed in more detail in the author's Ph.D. dissertation that analyzes potmarks from Bronze Age contexts in Lebanon.²¹

In addition to the applied potmarks found in Lebanon, three applied potmarks discovered in Egypt and believed to be of Lebanese origin are included in this study. All three of these marks originate from cemeteries in Giza, which provides very different contextual information to the applied marks documented in Lebanon. They were included in this study both to add fresh data to the analysis of the functions of potmarks in Lebanon and to investigate their meaning in their final deposition place, the Egyptian tombs.

APPLIED POTMARKS IN LEBANON

Applied potmarks in Lebanon were found at six sites (FIG. 1), namely Tell Arqa, Tell Koubba, Tell Fadous-Kfarabida, Yanouh, Byblos, and Sidon. A total of 160 individual potmarks bearing an application were analysed for this paper and the signs can be classified in 28 groups. Some of the signs appear more frequently while some are attested only once. The five most common signs are: ram's head application (see FIG. 2:6), one applied knob (see FIG. 2:7), one incised line with an applied knob next to it (see FIG. 2:8), snake application (see FIG. 3:1), and one incised line with two applied knobs on each side (see FIG. 3:2).

Applied potmarks from Lebanon can generally be dated to the Early Bronze Age II and III. They are rarely attested in Middle Bronze Age contexts and no applied marks from Lebanon dating to the Late



FIGURE 1: Sites in Lebanon where applied potmarks were found (map by author).

Bronze Age are known to the author. All the Early Bronze Age examples from Lebanon come from settlements, where they are related to domestic and public buildings. It should be noted here that there are hardly any documented Early Bronze Age II–III burials in Lebanon,²² which may be the reason for a skewed picture of the extent of applied marks.

One of the more common groups of applied marks are simple applied individual knobs. They consist of a small round piece of clay that measures around 5 mm in diameter, but may reach over 1 cm, especially if the vessel is large. One of the common locations where these knobs are applied are handles, either at their top or at their bottom. Potmarks located at the top of the handle are well known in archaeological literature; in contrast, marks located at the bottom are not frequent. Single applied knobs located at the bottom of the handles (see FIG. 3:3) are restricted to jugs; such examples were found at Tell Fadous-Kfarabida and Sidon.

When the single applied knob is located at the top of the handle, its precise location may vary from one vessel to another. All of the examples discovered at Tell Fadous-Kfarabida have the knob located in the center of the handle (see FIG. 2:7), whereas the vast majority of the examples from Sidon tend to have the knob applied on the left side of the handle (see FIG. 3:4).

Applied knobs are the most frequently used applications appearing in combination with a variety of incised signs. A factor that seems to have played an important role is where exactly the applied knob is located in relation to the incision(s). Different potmarks may consist of the same individual elements positioned in different structured combinations. One such example is the use of one incised line in combination with two applied knobs. In the first case, the vertical incised line is flanked by two knobs (see FIG. 3:2). The second design consists of the same elements, a line and two applied knobs, but with the knobs located at the top and bottom of the line (see FIG. 3:8). Some potmarks made of a combination of incisions and applications bear an applied knob positioned directly on top of the incised sign (see FIG. 3:6, 7).

While most potmarks from Lebanon were located in visible places on the vessels, a new group of potmarks was identified in this study that breaks with this tradition. In this case, the potmarks are located on the round bases (see FIG. 3:5) of vessels usually interpreted as cooking pots. The examination of the wares of these vessels confirms that they were indeed used for cooking.²³ Although potmarks have been previously identified on cooking pots in Lebanon,²⁴ they were always located in prominent positions, mostly around the rims. Examples of the new potmark variant, located at the base of cooking vessels, have so far been documented at Tell Koubba and Sidon. They appear in a variety of shapes and encompass both incised and applied marks. They are most frequently attested in Sidon where they make up about 10% of all the Early Bronze Age potmarks. Sign types, however, are not limited only to the bases of vessels, cooking pots, or even to the site. For example, the potmark consisting of an incised line with two applied knobs at its ends attested several times on the bases of cooking pots in Sidon (see FIG. 3:5) appears also on the neck of a storage jar at Tell Fadous-Kfarabida (FIG. 3:8). Other signs located on the bases of cooking pots in Sidon were documented at other sites in Lebanon

and located in other positions on different types of vessels.

APPLIED POTMARKS IN EGYPT

Although only three applied potmarks found in Egypt and believed to be of Lebanese origin (Sowada personal communication) are included in this study, they add important information to the Lebanese assemblage. First, their contextual information differs greatly from the ones excavated in Lebanon. Second, the large distance between their production and subsequent excavation spots triggers questions related to the connectivity between Lebanon and Egypt, and whether it was only physical objects that travelled across space or were the conceptual ideas behind such potmarks transferred as well.

All three potmarks from Giza discussed here are on storage jars combed on the outside. They are in well visible places, either on the shoulder of the vessel or on its upper body. Even though these three marks differ from each other, they all have parallels in Lebanon. Combed vessels found in Egypt are mostly associated with tombs of royalty or high officials.²⁵ Since such vessels were highly valued, would that mean that the potmarks they bore also had a similar important role? Also, if the vessels coming from Lebanon were not only treasured for their content but reused and circulated after they had been emptied of their original content,²⁶ does that also give a special meaning to the potmark on the vessel, or did the potmark just make it to Egypt as a by-product?

The first mark,²⁷ which represents a curved applied form (FIG. 2:1), can be dated to the mid-Fourth Dynasty. It is not complete, but the preserved part allows for a comparison with complete examples found in Lebanon. One such potmark from Tell Fadous-Kfarabida was applied at the top of the jug handle (FIG. 2:2). Other marks of the same type were also found on storage jars at Tell Fadous-Kfarabida, as well as Sidon. The applied mark from Egypt has its high visibility in common with the same types of marks from Lebanon, yet the locations of these marks on the vessels from Lebanon may vary. As in the case of the jug mentioned above, such marks may appear at the top of the handle; in other cases they are located on the neck or shoulder area of the vessel. The find contexts of these marks in Lebanon are associated with domestic buildings.

The second example of an applied mark found in Egypt²⁸ is represented by two knobs, the lower

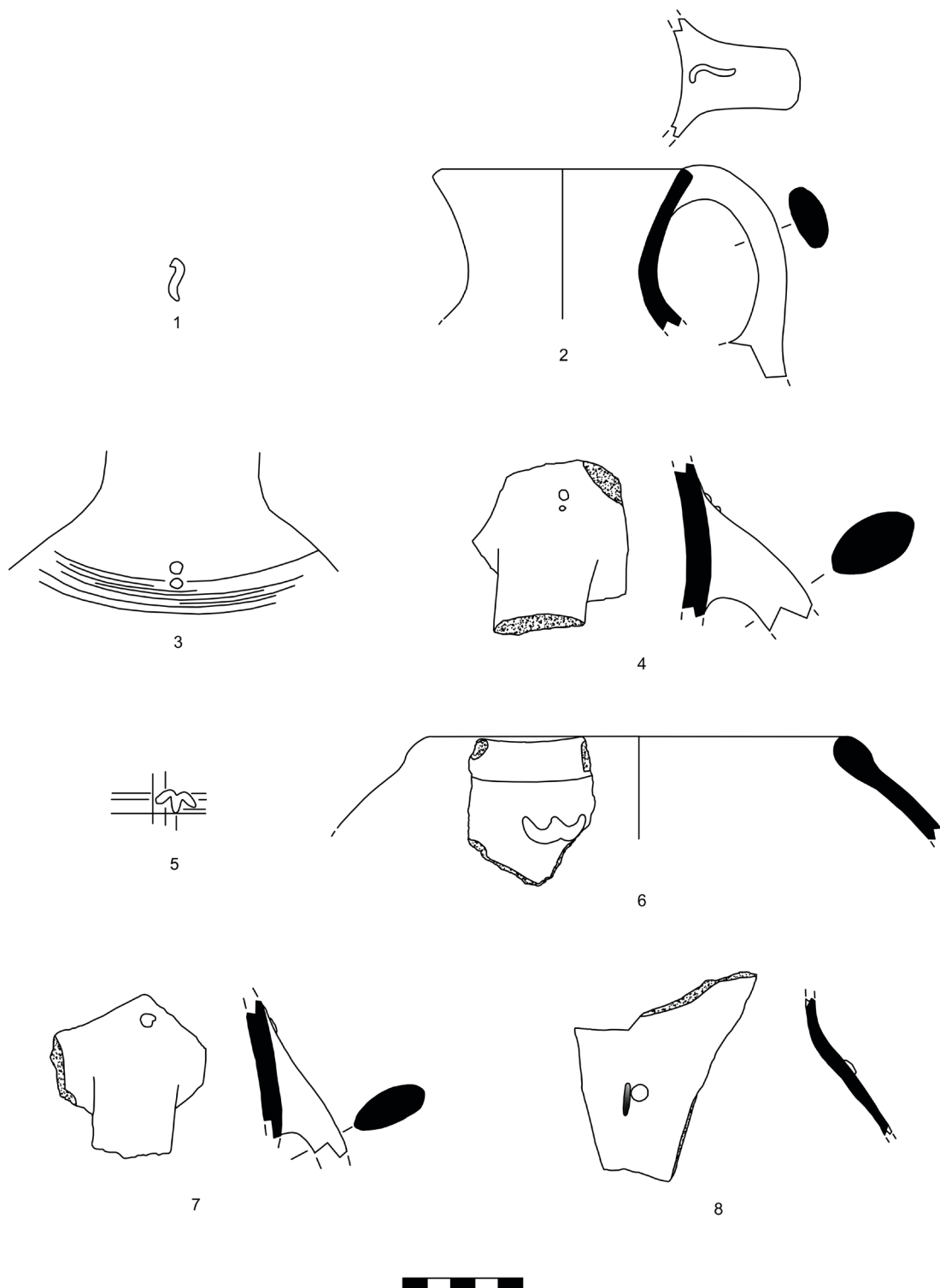


FIGURE 2: Selected applied potmarks from Lebanon and Giza. 1. Drawn after a photograph of MFA 37.2725 © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. 3. Drawn after a photograph of KH 8029 © Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien. 5. Drawn after a photograph of MFA 37.1319 © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; all photographs provided by Karin Sowada).

smaller than the upper one (FIG. 2:3), located on the neck of a storage jar from Giza dated to the Fifth Dynasty. In Lebanon, two knobs can be applied in several different ways—vertically, horizontally or diagonally—and may be of equal size or, as in the case of the mark from Egypt, may consist of a larger and a smaller knob. Only one potmark from Lebanon closely parallels the Egyptian example in both size and position (FIG. 2:4). This potmark comes from Tell Fadous-Kfarabida and the mark is applied at the top of the handle of a vessel.

The third example from Giza is an applied ram's head²⁹ located on the upper body of a storage jar, at the level of the handles (FIG. 2:5). The vessel is dated to the middle- to late-Fourth Dynasty. Applied ram's heads are one of the most frequent groups of potmarks in Lebanon when it comes to the applied forms. They were found at several sites, yet the majority of them come from Sidon. These applications are sometimes located at the top of the handle, but in most cases these are on the body of the vessel. Although they are most frequently attested on storage jars and jugs, they also appear on cooking pots (FIG. 2:6). They can also be applied upside down, as seen in the example.

DISCUSSION

Despite the meager number of applied potmarks discovered in Egypt, their general characteristics show the importance of certain traits. All the discussed examples are located on storage jars. As these are appropriate vessels for transportation, it is not surprising that these are the ones bearing potmarks. On the other hand, all of these potmarks have prominent locations on the vessels and were intended to be well visible to the user of the vessel. It is not possible to say with certainty if the marks and their visibility played a role directly related to trade, but as a high number of vessels coming to Egypt from Lebanon are marked in a very visible location, the marks' location might have been significant.

The applied potmarks found in Lebanon show that the marks may have had various functions. Potmarks are not restricted to storage jars and are not always well visible. In cases of storage jars and jugs, they tend to have a visible placement, associated with the handles or the neck and shoulder area of the vessel. A number of marks, however, are attested on the rounded bases of cooking pots, which are vessels not very suitable for transportation. The signs appearing on these bases

have counterparts at different sites in Lebanon, and are located in different places on the vessels of different types. It would seem therefore that the marks on these vessels were not necessarily related to trade. Furthermore, as the same types of marks appear on vessels of different sizes, they certainly do not relate to the volume of the vessel.

In Lebanon, many applied potmarks come from domestic dwelling contexts and their use in a domestic environment is furthermore supported by the marks located on cooking pots. Whereas a pre-firing potmark on a storage jar may have lost its original meaning if the jar is reused, most cooking pots were likely originally intended to end up in their find spots. It seems, therefore, that the potmarks were understood and intended to be understood by a variety of users. The fact that the same signs appear on cooking pots used in a domestic setting at one site, as well as on storage jars that may have taken part in trade and are located at sites where such marks are not present on cooking pots, points to a diversified and rather wide audience of the potmarking system.

The Early Bronze Age sites along the Lebanese coast are not large in size and may, in cases such as Tell Fadous-Kfarabida, cover an area as small as 1.5 ha.³⁰ Given that over 80 different types (including applied and incised examples) of potmarks were discovered at this site, it does not seem likely that the marks would denote specific potters or workshops. The evidence against such an interpretation is also provided by the locations of the specific applied marks. Whereas simple applied knobs for instance, when associated with handles of vessels, are at Tell Fadous-Kfarabida always located in the center of the handle, their preferred placement in Sidon is to the left of the handle. In both cases the signs are very well visible, however their specific location would indicate that they were produced by different workshops who chose the locations of the marks individually. At the same time, as the signs are of the same type, their meaning is expected to remain the same at both sites and to both (groups) of producers.

The variety of combinations of incised marks and applications show that the system of applied potmarks is quite complex and as it is not related to specific vessel types, wares, locations on the vessels, or archaeological contexts and sites, the reasons for marking the vessels should be sought elsewhere. The use of specific elements within the repertoire of

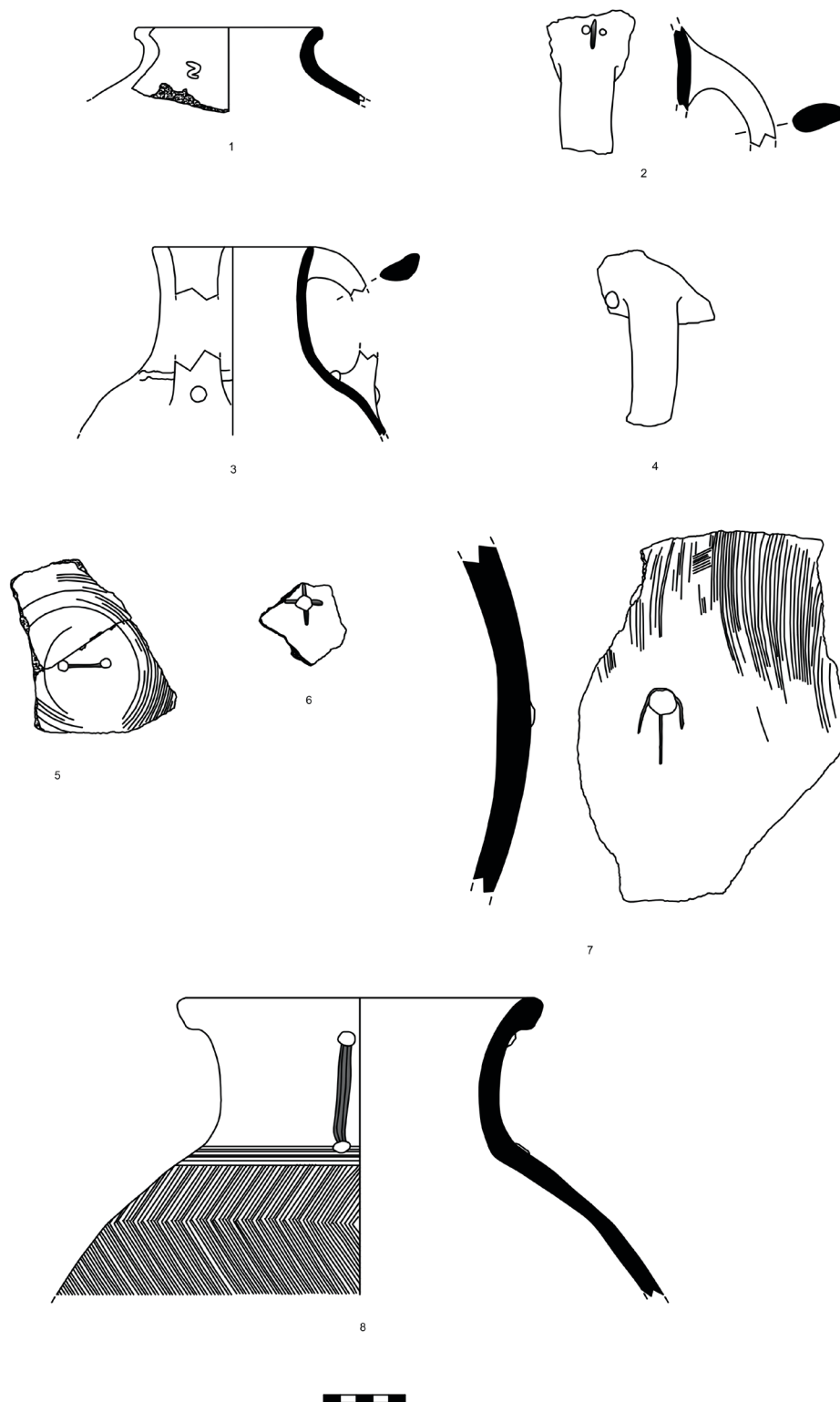


FIGURE 3: Selected applied potmarks from Lebanon.

the applied marks seems to follow certain rules and represents a specific graphic system. As the marks from all the studied sites follow a specific code, it seems that the sites were integrated into a common marking system that was in use in Lebanon in the Early Bronze Age.

Analyzing potmarks in Lebanon is still work in progress, and the discussed assemblage of applied marks represents only about one third of all the Early Bronze Age potmarks and about one sixth of all the Bronze Age potmarks from Lebanon studied in the Ph.D. dissertation of the author. Some general interpretations of potmark functions can already be omitted based on the sample included in this paper. Potmarks do not seem to represent a potter, workshop, merchant, volume, point of origin or destination of a vessel. It seems therefore, that the role of potmarks found in Egypt was not directly related to transportation or the final destination of the vessel. Since imported vessels were quite frequently marked, it may be possible that just as the imported vessel was considered a prestigious object, the foreign mark on it would enhance its meaning as an exotic item. The remaining question is whether the potmarking audience in Egypt actually recognized the meaning of such applied marks, conceived at the place of their production. A systematic analysis of contextual data of a larger sample of potmarks both from Lebanon and Egypt, conducted as part of the forthcoming Ph.D. dissertation, will no doubt shed more light on the functions of such potmarks in the Near East, yet some of the questions may remain unanswered.

One of the main questions in studying applied potmarks that cannot yet be answered properly, is why applications were sometimes located on top of incised marks, therefore sealing them in a way. It is clear that any application was produced at the place of origin of the vessel, in contrast to incised marks that could have been created after the vessel was fired and possibly not related to its area of production in any way. Is it then possible that an applied mark certified the origin of the vessel and its content, similar to the concept of branding, well known in the Near East in the Bronze Age,³¹ in contrast to the post-firing incised marks, that could have been forged somewhere on the way.

CONCLUSION

Potmarks studies are often limited to a descriptive level, which is inevitable when dealing with small assemblages and a lack of contextual data. The possible interpretations of the potmark uses are often deduced from excluding the different possibilities to reach different conclusions. At the same time, it is highly likely that different marking systems were in use in different spatial and temporal contexts and it is therefore not to be expected that a uniform explanation of the functions of marks could be reached. In this paper, the author presents a small assemblage of Egyptian applied potmarks of Lebanese origin, as well as a substantial amount of applied potmarks excavated in Lebanon. Through the study of this assemblage, this paper provides new insights on the distribution of applied potmarks, that have been with a few exceptions mostly overlooked in the past, further offers some thoughts about the use of potmarks in general, and highlights the importance of contextual analysis in the study of potmarks.

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NOTES

- ¹ Gallorini 1998, 259; Hirschfeld 2004, 99.
- ² Sconzo 2013, 283–311.
- ³ Aston 2009, 55.
- ⁴ Bréand 2005, 23.
- ⁵ Wodzińska 2009, 245, 246.
- ⁶ Wodzińska 2009, 246.
- ⁷ Tassie et al. 2008, 210.
- ⁸ Genz 2001, 226.
- ⁹ Wengrow 2008.
- ¹⁰ Gallorini 1998, 260, 261.
- ¹¹ Hirschfeld 2006, 86, 88.
- ¹² Hirschfeld 2002, 83.
- ¹³ Hirschfeld 2012, 289, 290.
- ¹⁴ Sconzo 2013, 223.
- ¹⁵ Feldbacher and Fischer 2008.
- ¹⁶ Doumet-Serhal et al. 2006, pl. 174.5–7; Genz and Sader 2007, fig. 13; Genz et al. 2010, pl. 6.3.
- ¹⁷ Paz 2014, fig. 6.9.41–42.
- ¹⁸ Sowada et al. 2019, 9 b.
- ¹⁹ Paz 2014, 250.
- ²⁰ Mazzoni 1987, 148.
- ²¹ Peršin, Forthcoming.
- ²² Genz 2014, 300, 301.
- ²³ Orton et al. 1993, 220.
- ²⁴ Doumet-Serhal et al. 2006, pl. 125.1; Peršin, Forthcoming.
- ²⁵ Sowada et al. 2020, 197.
- ²⁶ Sowada et al. 2020, 200.
- ²⁷ Sowada 2009, 59, fig. 8, pl. 1.
- ²⁸ Junker 1926, 75.
- ²⁹ Sowada 2009, 59, fig. 8, pl. 1.
- ³⁰ Genz et al. 2010, 241.
- ³¹ Wengrow 2008.

