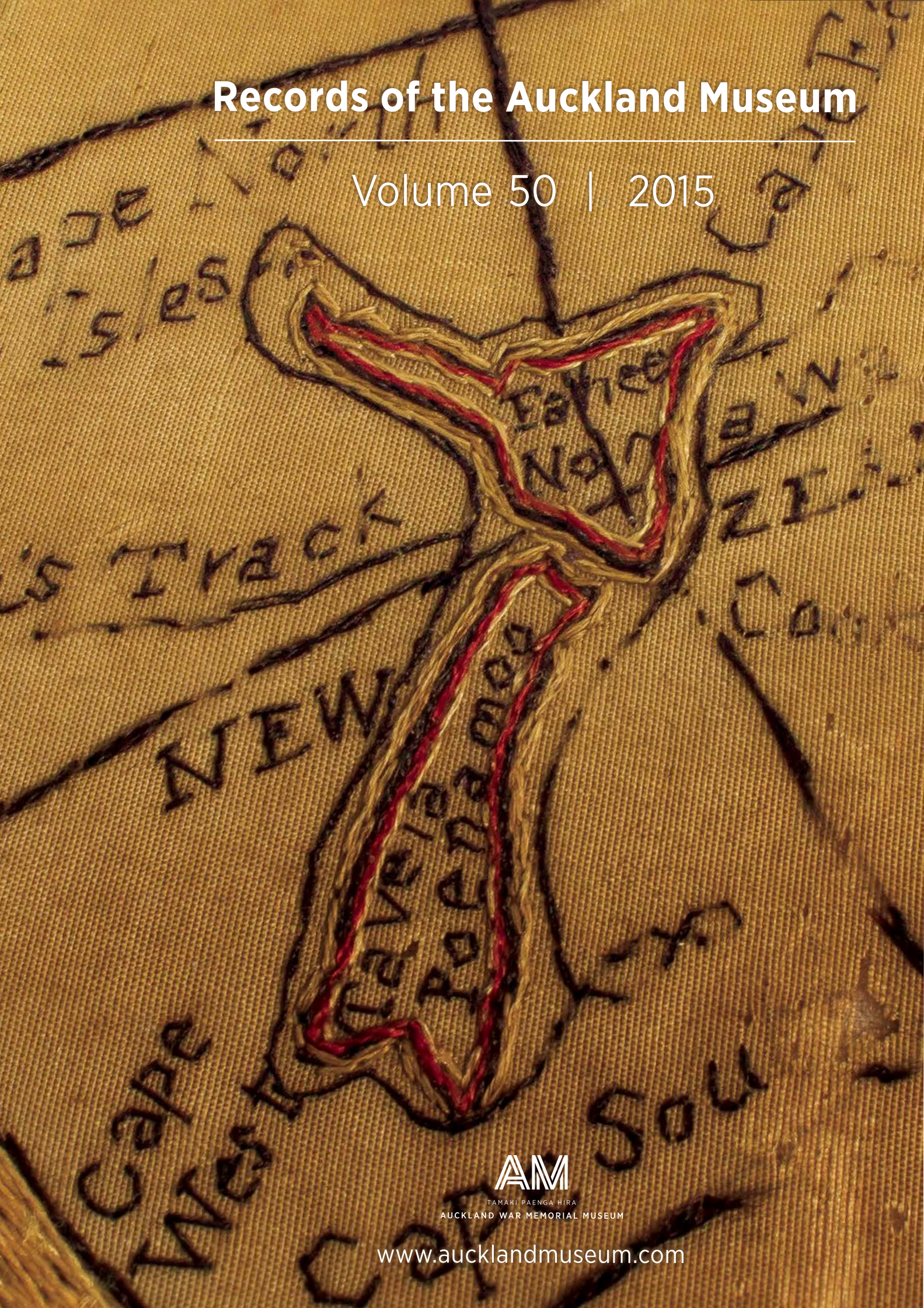


# Records of the Auckland Museum

Volume 50 | 2015



TAMAKI PAENGA HIRA  
AUCKLAND WAR MEMORIAL MUSEUM

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Cover image: Detail from sampler sewn by Martha Gibbons showing New Zealand and the use of Te Reo placenames. 1784. Image courtesy of the Auckland War Memorial Museum, Tamaki Paenga Hira. 2014.1.1.

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# A Predynastic vessel with a potmark in the Auckland War Memorial Museum

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## Abstract

A unique potmark was identified on a ceramic vessel (49357) in the Auckland War Memorial Museum Tamaki Paenga Hira. The vessel was acquired by Lt. Col. F. Waite in Egypt during the early twentieth century. Potmarks are found on ceramic vessels from the Predynastic and Early Dynastic periods of Egypt. Previous studies have examined potmarks to identify what they may refer to. The previously unrecognised potmark on 49357 has no direct parallel in existing corpora. The existence of this potmark raises issues regarding the interpretation of potmarks on ceramic vessels and the interpretations that can be drawn from them.

## Keywords

Potmark; pre-dynastic Egypt; museum collections; Fred Waite.

## INTRODUCTION

A previously unrecognised potmark was identified on the ceramic vessel 49357 in the Auckland War Memorial Museum Tamaki Paenga Hira, New Zealand (Fig. 1). Potmarks occur frequently on ceramic vessels and sherds from the Badarian period onwards (c.4500-4000 B.C.E.) (Bard 2008:88). Generally considered as different from decoration, a potmark is a small symbol on the surface of the vessel. The mark can be inscribed when on the vessel pre or post firing, or painted. While a potmark could have a decorative purpose, they are interpreted as having the purpose of conveying a specific meaning.

The interpretation of meaning varies, but to date they are thought to be either a potter's mark (e.g. Tassie *et al.* 2008), to indicate the contents of a vessel or the owner of the contents (e.g. Wengrow 2006: 236-9; Tassie *et al.* 2008), or where the vessel was made (e.g. Wengrow 2006: 238-9). Potmarks are also related to symbolic development, particularly the development of writing (e.g. Bard 1992; Wilkinson 1999: 33-4; Tassie *et al.* 2008: 217). The interpretation of a particular potmark is inferred based on the form of the vessel it is on and how it was inscribed on the vessel. For example a potmark on what is interpreted as a storage vessel is likely indicating the contents of the vessel or owner of the vessel, while a potmark applied to the vessel pre-firing is likely a potter's mark or indication of where the vessel was made. Meaning is also assigned to potmarks based on how stylistically similar they are to dynastic hieroglyphics (e.g. Bard 1992).

Typically potmarks encountered in archaeological excavations are published together in a corpus of all examples of potmarks found from a particular site or area (e.g. Petrie 1900). These are fitted into typologies based on the form of vessel particular marks are usually found on and the perceived complexity of the potmark (e.g. Tassie *et al.* 2008).

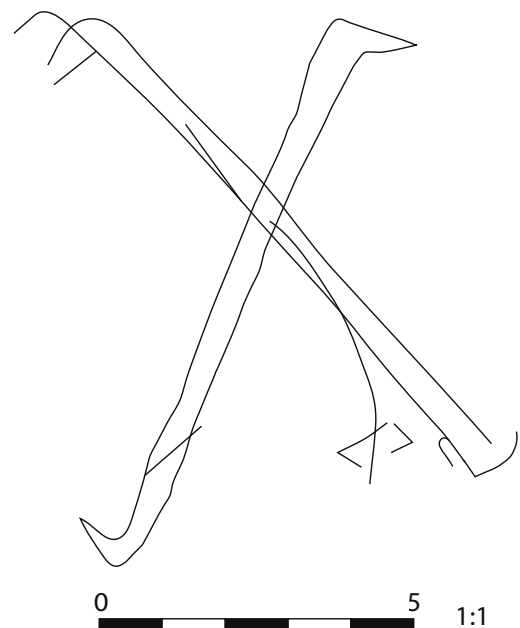


Figure 1. The potmark identified on 49357.

## BACKGROUND OF THE VESSELS ACQUISITION

The vessel in the Auckland War Memorial Museum was donated by Lt. Col. F. Waite, an honorary keeper of Middle Eastern Archaeology at the Otago Museum (Green 2012). Waite first visited Egypt when he was training for the Gallipoli Campaign during World War I (Green 2012). During World War II Waite was based in Cairo from 1941-1944 as the overseas commissioner for the National Patriotic Fund Board (Green 2012). It was during his time in Egypt that Waite obtained a number of artefacts that were subsequently transported back to New Zealand and are now housed in the Otago Museum, Auckland War Memorial Museum, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa, and Canterbury Museum.

The artefacts collected by Waite came from a number of sources. Some were obtained from Guy Brunton from Badari, and King Farouk gifted 100 artefacts from Helwan (Fig. 2) (Skinner 1952). In addition to these, Waite collected a number of artefacts from antiquities dealers around Egypt (Skinner 1952; Collins 1952). Waite (*undated*) became skilled in identifying forgeries and was cautious not to send any such items back to New Zealand. The artefacts gifted by Brunton to Waite are recorded in the distribution lists of excavation reports under those sent to Dunedin (Otago Museum) (Brunton 1927; Brunton and Caton-Thompson 1928).

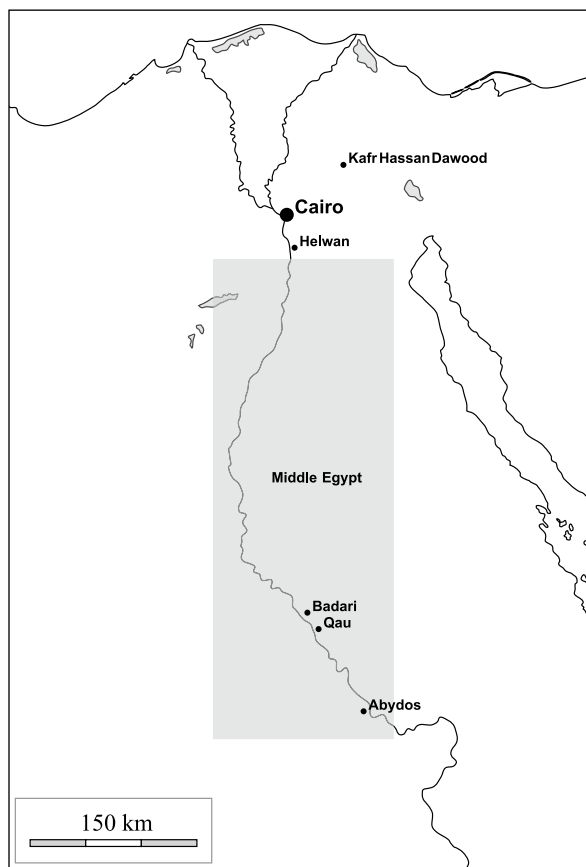


Figure 2. Map of Egypt with the places mentioned in the text. The area along the Nile River in the grey box is Middle Egypt.

Based on the above it is possible that this vessel was acquired from one of Brunton's digs at Qau or Badari (Fig. 2) (Brunton 1927; Brunton and Caton-Thompson 1928). However, neither the vessel nor the potmark could be identified in the corpus of finds published from those excavations. It is possible that this vessel was excavated by grave robbers and subsequently sold to Waite, who was known to not ask questions about how artefacts were acquired when purchasing them (Bowie 1952). The archaeological provenance of the vessel, whether it was from a village or burial assemblage, is now lost, although the relatively good state of preservation of the vessel may suggest it was likely acquired from a burial context.

## THE VESSEL AND POTMARK

The vessel is 14 cm high and 13.5 cm in diameter (Fig. 3). It has a circular rim and is in the shape of an unrestricted conical frustum with a flat base. The vessel has a red slip on it, which was applied with a brush. The slip was also applied over the reduced black top of the vessel. The base and lower quadrants of the vessel are eroded. The vessel has an oxidized body and base with a reduced band around the rim. This black topped style of firing is typical of that found from the Badarian, Naqada I, and Naqada II periods of Egypt (c.4500-3200 B.C.E.) (Baba and Saito 2004; Bard 2008: 88,104). There is no evidence of the characteristic Badarian ripple which occurs on some Badarian vessels. As a result of this it is more likely that the vessel originates from the Naqada II period, and spatially from Middle Egypt (Fig. 2).

The potmark is in the form of a cross with hooks at each end. It measures approximately 8.75 cm in length and 7.5 cm in width from the uppermost point to the lowermost. The mark is a shallow incision, made on the outside of the beaker with a pointed tool. This occurred after the vessel was fired, as the incisions have removed the red slip from the surface. Also, near the black area of the vessel, the incision has revealed the reduced core of the vessel; if the incision was before firing the incision in these areas would oxidized. The bottom right of the potmark has eroded away but appears to have finished in a hook as the other ends do, 1 cm into the eroded area.

In the bottom middle section of the potmark there are four lines which together almost form a rectangle (dark grey, Fig. 4). Across the potmark there are lines which intersect the main lines. Some of these lines may be accidental where the inscriber has run the inscribing instrument off course or too far. In other cases they may be working lines where the inscriber is roughing out a design (light grey, Fig. 4).

## DISCUSSION

The cross potmark is predominantly a simple graphic element of two lines crossing each other, and is ubiquitous throughout the corpora of potmarks. The potmark on 49357 was inscribed post-firing which would suggest that it is not a potter's mark, which were usually applied pre-firing (Friedman 1994: 200). Wodzińska (2009: 244) has noted that prefired potmarks



Figure 3. Vessel 49357 with potmark.

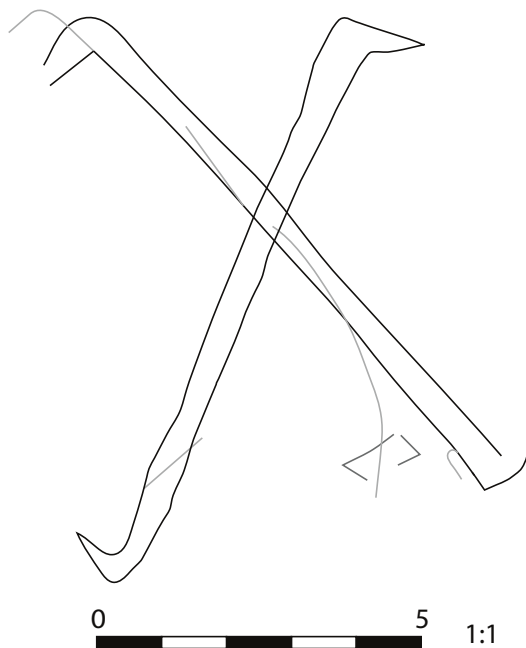


Figure 4. The different elements of the potmark. Black lines are the main symbol, the dark grey lines are the rectangular symbol, and the light grey lines may be working lines or errors.

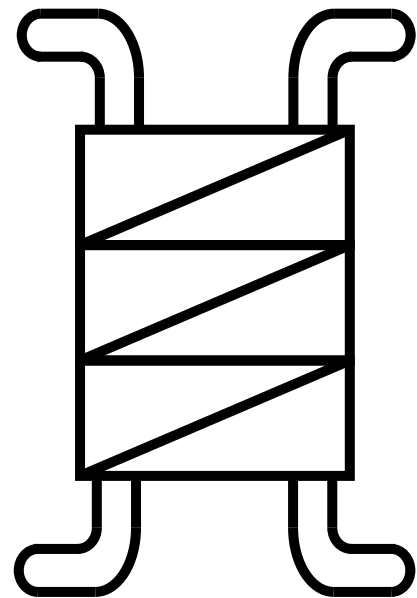


Figure 5. Old Kingdom hieroglyphic symbol for Neith. R25 (right) on Gardiner's (1950:503) sign list.

were part of the pot's creation, and were therefore inevitably linked with the place of production. When the potmark is applied post-firing, this cannot be assumed. It is not known when exactly the potmark was applied to 49357. As the potmark on 49357 continues into the eroded surface, therefore, it is clear that its inscription occurred pre-erosion and is therefore "ancient".

The post-firing potmark is called an "owners mark" (Friedman 1994: 200, see Fairservis 1983 and van den Brink 1992). Owner's marks as a name would suggest usually denotes the ownership of the vessel. Post-firing potmarks could also be used to identify the contents of the vessel or where those contents originated from, as has been suggested for vessels with potmarks found in Tomb U-j at Abydos (Dreyer 1992).

With a few exceptions from Kafr Hassan Dawood (Tassie *et al.* 2008), the cross on 49357 is more detailed than any in corpora thus far examined (Brunton and Caton-Thompson 1928; Bréand 2009; Jucha 2008; Kroeper 2000; Mawdsley 2009; Payne 1993; Petrie 1900; Tassie *et al.* 2008; van den Brink 1992, 2001; Wodzińska 2009). The majority of potmarks, both owners and potters, examined consist of lines which combine to make a shape such as a cross. Often they only take up a small proportion of the surface area of the vessel, usually on the shoulder. The potmark on 49357 consists of two polygons which make up the cross. It is a relatively large mark, as well, covering much more area than the usual shoulder. As well as this the hooks on the ends of the crossed polygons are a detail which is not noted elsewhere. Thus, the fact of the mark's size and detail, and that it is on this type of vessel makes the Auckland Museum example rare.

In the corpus of potmarks from Kafr Hassan Dawood (Fig. 2), the cross is categorized as a "preformal hieroglyph" on the basis that it appears to be an ancestor of a later hieroglyphic sign (Tassie *et al.* 2008: 218;). This could apply to 49357 if the hooks on the ends of the crosses are ignored. Another possibility is that it is visually similar to the earliest hieroglyphic forms for Neith from the Old Kingdom (Fig. 5) (Gardiner 1950: 503). 49357 is lacking several key aspects however, namely the shield-like element that is placed in front a hooked cross, making this association with Neith unlikely.

The connection between pot marks and hieroglyphs is often suggested in literature (e.g. Dreyer 1992; Graff 2013; Hassan 1983; O'Connor 2009: 143-7; Petrie 1900: 29-32; Tassie *et al.* 2008). The issue with arguments that attempt to identify a relationship between potmarks and hieroglyphs that later develop is that an interpretation based on a script that is not yet developed is imposed on them. At the time of their creation the potmarks may have formed the beginnings of hieroglyphic symbols, but this is not necessarily a conscious notion by the inscriber, even if we can interpret that association now. By placing potmarks along a line of development in which they develop into the hieroglyphic script, it goes against Time's Arrow by using future events to interpret the past (Finlayson 2013: 133).

Without a secure archaeological context the vessel and potmark from the Auckland War Memorial Museum cannot be used to contribute much to the wider studies of potmarks in Egypt. However, this study highlights issues with some of the ways that potmarks are currently interpreted and studied. Future research into potmarks should focus more on what they mean in terms of their spatial-temporal context and not what they may become. Through this course of study it may be possible to better interpret potmarks on vessels with insecure contexts such as 49357.

## CONCLUSION

The potmark on vessel 49357 in the Auckland War Memorial Museum Tamaki Paenga Hira is a unique example amongst the corpus of potmarks from the Naqada II period. Without an exact provenance of the vessel, it is not possible to establish the original context of this vessel; that it is from Egypt and likely originates from Middle Egypt in the Naqada II period is all the information available. A vessel without an exact provenance and with a unique potmark has limited interpretational value. Only when multiple examples of similar potmarks are found from the same archaeological context is it possible to interpret what these marks may have meant. Likewise, when single potmarks are found within archaeological assemblages, it is not possible to make assessments regarding the trade and exchange of vessels without multiple lines of evidence to support this interpretation, such as residue analysis or sourcing studies which indicate where the vessel was made.

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