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A NOTE ON EB IV "SYMBOLS" FROM PALESTINE/TRANSJORDAN

Symbols cut into pottery vessels prior to firing are known from Palestine and Transjordan throughout the proto-historical periods, from the Chalcolithic to the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age - and beyond. They are normally given the relatively neutral name of "potter's marks" and no combination or series has ever been arranged in any meaningful way. New evidence from rescue excavations in the Amman area (HELMS & McCREERY, in prep.) may represent this first departure from this lack of understanding.

A comprehensive series of related vessels was found in an EB IV cemetery at Um Bighal, a few kilometers west of Amman. The assemblage is identical with two others from cemeteries in the same area (DAJANI 1967-68; ZAYADINE 1978). Among these vessels, strap-handled jugs and jars were found to bear "symbols". A potentially meaningful pattern emerged when these were arranged in a series according to the volume of the host vessels.

Limiting analysis to repeated "symbols" and signs (Fig. 1:72,16, 17,25,20,26,29,52) the following series - in ascending order - is achieved :

$$\text{upper register :}\quad \frac{X}{[\,]} \times \frac{X}{III} \quad \frac{=}{X} \quad III \quad \frac{=}{III} \gg \frac{IIIII}{III}$$

$$\text{lower register :}$$

Two additional examples lead to a broader interpretation. A large round-based jar from a contemporary context is known from Tyre (BIKAI 1978, plate 54.1) and it bears a "symbol" which may be reduced to "III". Its volume, plotted in the Um Bighal series, corresponds to the vessels with the same "symbol". A vessel from Qedesh in the Huleh Basin (TADMOR 1978, fig.3.70-492) indicates the same relationship.

If the northern pottery assemblages are examined, a remarkably similar volumetric series with associated "symbols" may be constructed. These may represent a contemporary, parallel "familiar" volumetric differentiation system. Compare vessels and "symbols" from Qedesh (TADMOR 1978, fig.4.70-413, 70-223, 70-486, 70-387), Kibbutz Shamir (BAHAT 1972, fig.1.5), Ma'ayan Barukh (AMIRAN 1961, fig.7.10, 13,15,18) and Tyre (BIKAI 1978, plate 54.2). All of these vessels are jugs - like those of Um Bighal - although in a different, regional style.

Should this analysis be valid, then we may be dealing with a rural measuring system which is expressed in a kind of "quasi-numeracy", in a variety of styles or "hand-writing" throughout Palestine and Transjordan during the latter part of the third millennium. The discarded "symbols" in the Um Bighal series (fig.1:19,81,24,23,22)

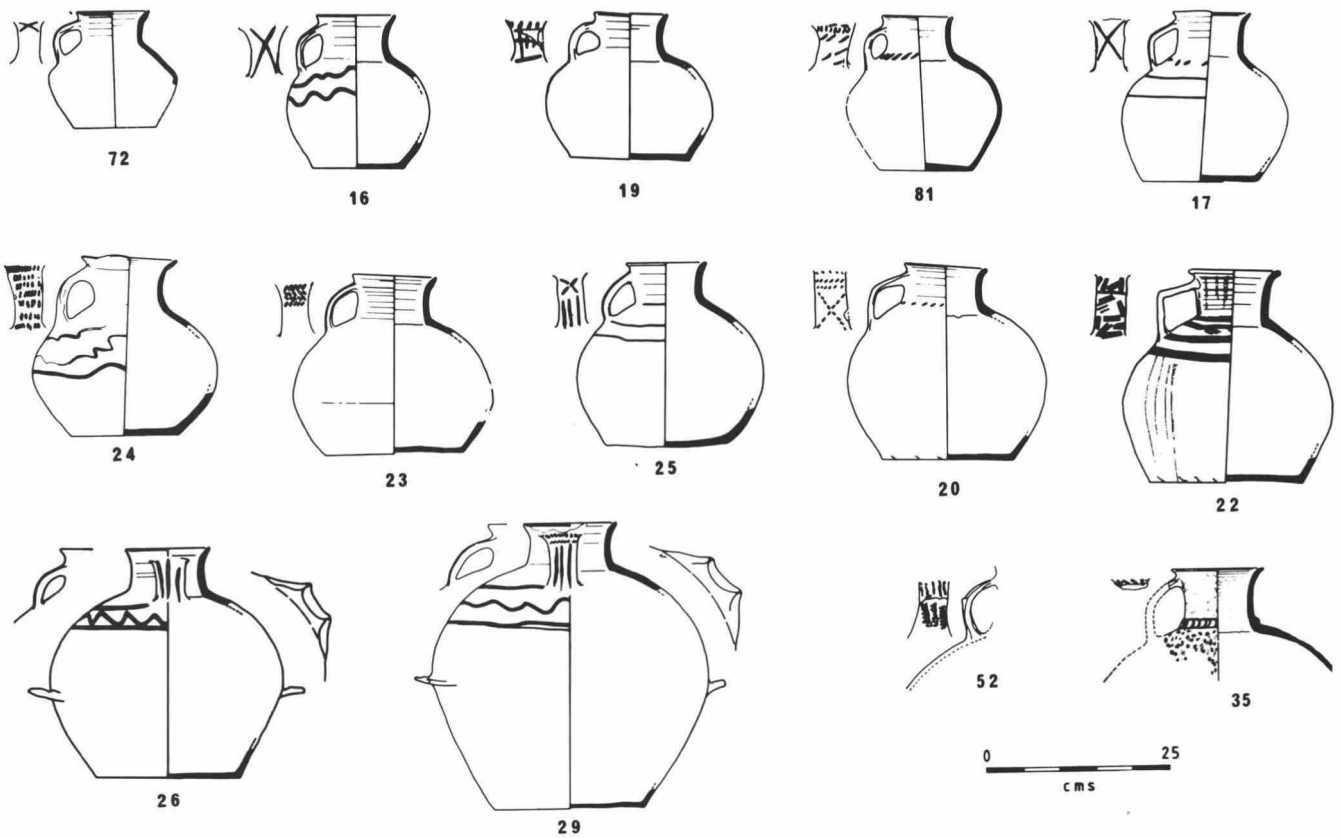

Fig. 1

may represent further "hand-writing". The apparent correspondence of the "III" "symbol" over a wider geographical area, may underline the plausibility of the abstracted series given above, which could have been of more general usage.

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