

# Italic, Latin and Greek Graffiti and Dipinti on Pottery from the Bir Messaouda Excavations 2000/2001

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The study of the following five graffiti (or surmised graffiti) and three dipinti that we present here, has been based upon the graphic and photographic documentation provided by the excavators of the Bir Messaouda site.<sup>1</sup> The pottery fragments stem from the material excavated in 2000 and 2001.<sup>2</sup> With the exception of a Graeco-Italic amphora and a Late Roman 2 amphora the typology of the pottery vessels remained undefined because of their fragmentary state. At the same time, the poor preservation of the graffiti and the dipinti makes their interpretation almost impossible. Concerning the graffiti, which are all but one *post cocturam* or incised after firing, one is faced with the recurrent problem of whether they are to be considered as written on the complete vessel or as an ostrakon.



**Fig. 1.** Oscan graffiti on two sides of Campana A fragment **Cat. 1:** a) exterior, b) interior (R.F. Docter / W.D.J. van de Put).

Cat. 1: BM00/11164, 1 wall fragment of Black Glaze plate (Fig. 1)

Context BM00/5000 (modern, surface layer; for the position of the trench see this volume, p. 161 with fig. 1).

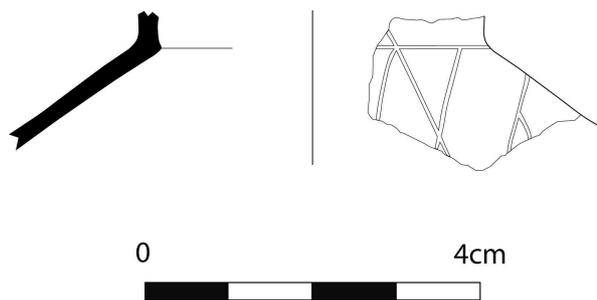
Fabric: Campana A Ware; dimensions 3.7 x 4.4; graffiti (after firing) on both sides.

<sup>1</sup> The description and discussion of the individual fragments, on which the graffiti were scratched and the dipinti were painted, have been made by the excavators. The drawings have been made by Angela Ben Aïssa (La Marsa/Hamburg) and have been digitised by J. Angenon (Ghent).

<sup>2</sup> The campaigns 2000-2001 have been undertaken by the University of Amsterdam under the scientific direction of Roald Docter; see Docter 2002, 2004a, 2004b and, for the final publication, Docter forthcoming. The University of Amsterdam excavations, which had been closely coordinated with the colleagues of Cambridge University, have been applying the transcription 'Bir Messaouda' for the Arab toponym. In the framework of the Tuniso-Belgian project of the INP (Tunis) and Ghent University at the same site, however, it has been preferred to use the transcription 'Bir Massouda'.

The reading of the graffiti on this Campana A wall fragment is puzzling: a name, as occurs regularly to identify the possessor of the vessel, or part of a text (exclamation, wish etc.)? A possibility for the one on the interior side (Fig. 1b) could be a Latin name as [R]VST[IVS] or [R]VST[I] when compared with an example on a juglet found in the Esquiline necropolis at Rome, which is dated to the 3rd or 2nd century BC.<sup>3</sup> Photographs of the graffiti were shown to M. Crawford at the Institute of Archaeology UCL London (February 1st 2005). He suggested reading both graffiti as Oscan. The one on the interior as ...]VVD[...] (but retrograde) and the one on the exterior as ...]CON[...] or ...]KON[...

Cat. 2: BM00/18017, 1 shoulder - neck fragment of fine ware juglet (Fig. 2)  
Context BM00/1087 (Roman Imperial).  
Clay hard fired; diam. wall 7.0, PH 1.8.  
Graffito (after firing).



**Fig. 2.** Graffiti on fragment of fine ware juglet **Cat. 2.**

The incompleteness of the incised letters does not allow for an interpretation that makes sense.

Cat. 3: BM00/18814, 5 joining rim fragments with neck and handles of amphora, (Figs. 3-4)  
Context BM00/6056 (Early Roman: material mainly of first half of 2nd century BC).<sup>4</sup>  
Clay hard fired, pale yellow (5 Y 8/4) - light reddish brown (5 YR 6/3) with some small and large limestone particles, reddish (iron?) bits and quite a lot of small and large black (volcanic) particles; dipinto in orange paint on neck; diam. rim 14, PH 31.9.

<sup>3</sup> Dressel 1880, 268-269 and Tav. d'agg. P, n. 6, 6a.

<sup>4</sup> The fragment and the context will be published and fully discussed by B. Bechtold, in: Docter forthcoming, cat. 1550. I thank the author for providing me with the description and a first typological attribution.



**Fig. 3.** Graeco-Italic amphora **Cat. 3** *in situ* in trench 6 (T. Morton).

The amphora is a late Graeco-Italic type produced in Campania or Central Italy. The type occurs also in the Adriatic amphora production and some examples found in Corinth are to be dated to the end of the 2nd century.<sup>5</sup> The peculiar triangular rim and the long neck and handles announce the Tyrrhenian and Adriatic canonical types of the 1st century BC, i.e. the Dressel 1 and Lamboglia 2 types. The transition has to be situated in the course of the second half of the 2nd century BC, especially in the last quarter.<sup>6</sup> Considering this chronological information in confrontation with the context date of the amphora, a date shortly before the destruction of the city can be suggested. The dipinto in orange red paint reads maybe as a C, but more probably as a P. It may also stand for an Oscan digamma. The dipinto could be interpreted as a series mark (or a figure?).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Romano 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Tchernia 1986, 42-52.

<sup>7</sup> See other examples of dipinti in Márquez, Molina 2005, 351-356, fig. 72-73. Cf. also Vegas 1991, 40, nr. 85.

The following five graffiti and dipinti have been found in two archaeological contexts (BM01/8164 and BM01/8169) that form a rather homogeneous, massive levelling layer, dated to the Vandal period.<sup>8</sup>

Cat. 4: BM01/30625, 1 shoulder fragment of amphora (Fig. 5)

Context BM00/8164 (Vandal period).

Hard fired clay with quartz inclusions and black particles, core brown 'reddish yellow' (7,5 YR 6/6), surfaces pink 'reddish yellow' (5 YR 7/6), dipinto in red paint (10 R 5/8); max. diam. wall c. 26.0, PH 10.0.

The inclination and the large wheel-ridges as well as the dipinto suggest an amphora fragment of Aegean origin. A Late Roman Amphora 3 type seems tentative but is contradicted by the fabric description (lack of mica) and the large wheel-ridges that one rather expects to be on the middle and lower walls than on the shoulder. Moreover, to our best knowledge, nearly no examples of this amphora type bearing dipinti were found up till now.<sup>9</sup> From a typological point of view a possibility could be a Scorpan type XVII, called 'amphore carotte' by J.-Y. Empereur and M. Picon, who seem to have discovered a production site on the southern coast of Asia Minor.<sup>10</sup> Of this dipinto maybe a  $\Phi$  can be read.

Cat. 5: BM01/30693, 1 shoulder fragment of amphora (Fig. 6)

Context BM00/8169 (Vandal period).

Clay with many white, light and dark grey quartz inclusions, core reddish yellow (5 YR 6/6), pink 'reddish yellow' surfaces (5 YR 7/6), dipinto in red paint (10 R 5/8); max. diam. wall c. 26.0, PH 4.2.

The shoulder fragment could possibly be assigned to a Late Roman 2 amphora type. Unfortunately, again little survives of the dipinto (which extends to the lower wall) making it impossible to ascertain if it concerns a measure, a personal name or a religious exclamation as known from examples of the Late Roman 1 and 2 types, and of the Dressel 34 types. The complex cursive style with its sometimes extraordinary decoration curls of this sort of Greek dipinti makes it very hard to distinguish different letters.<sup>11</sup> A possible parallel for the first letter (a  $\lambda$  ?) occurs on an unidentified pottery fragment in Tarsus.<sup>12</sup>

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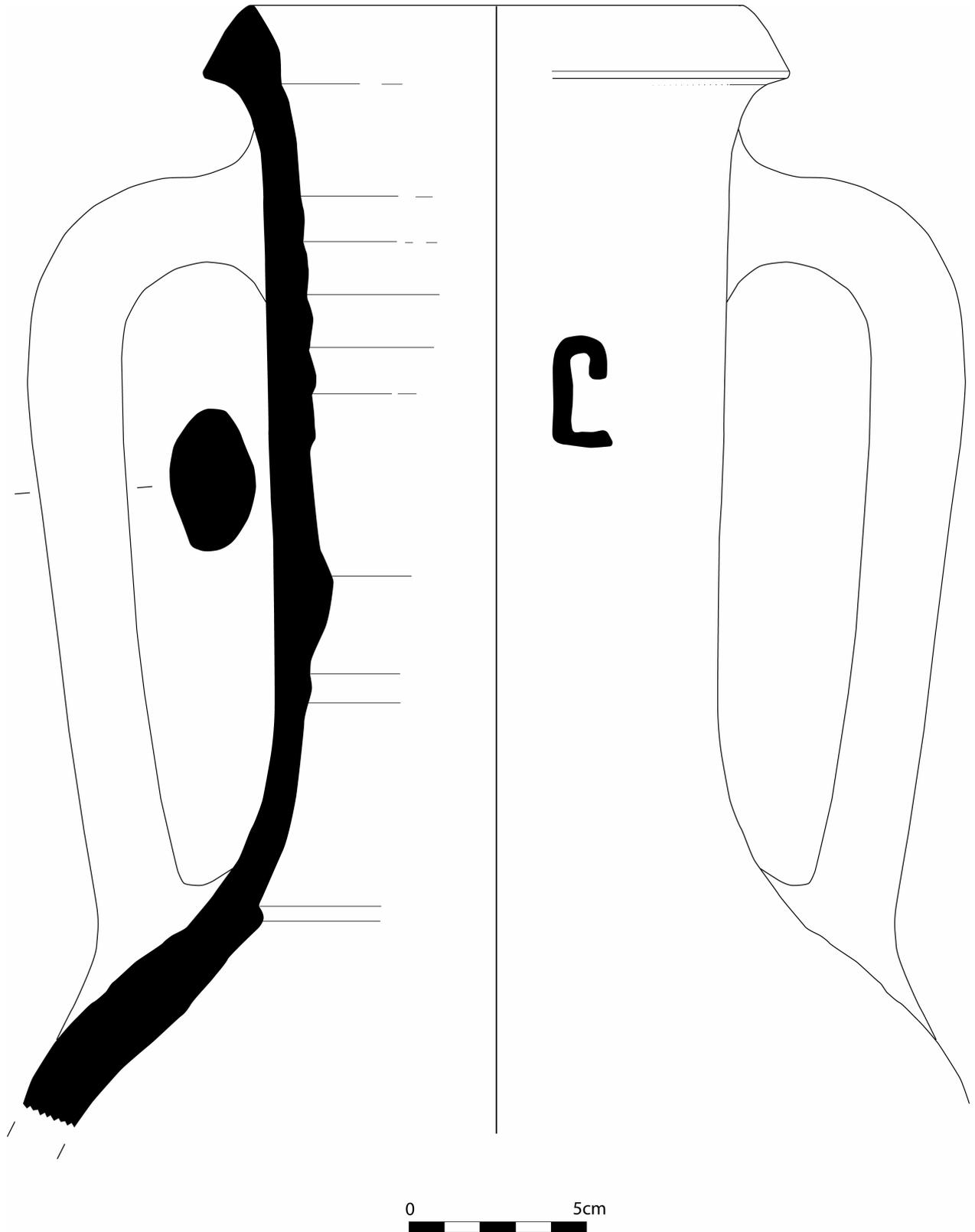
<sup>8</sup> The descriptions of the fragments have been made by Karen Ryckbosch (Ghent University), who will publish the pottery assemblage elsewhere.

<sup>9</sup> Pieri 2005, 94-95. An exceptional dipinto on the shoulder was found on a one-handed predecessor of the type in Fréjus (Pieri 2005, fig. 55).

<sup>10</sup> Scorpan 1977, 283, fig. 23 (examples from Tomi); Empereur, Picon 1989.

<sup>11</sup> For other examples of dipinti on Late Roman pottery and amphorae see Lang 1976; Davies 1984, 141-151, fig. 46-52; Hayes 1992, 78, pl. 15; Pieri 2005, *passim*.

<sup>12</sup> Jones 1950, 282, nr. 890, pl. 169.



**Fig. 4.** Dipinto on neck of Graeco-Italic amphora **Cat. 3.**

Cat. 6: BM01/30694, 1 shoulder fragment of amphora (Fig. 7)

Context BM00/8169 (Vandal period).

Clay with many white and grey quartz inclusions and some white particles, core reddish yellow (5 YR 6/6), surfaces very pale brown (10 YR 8/3); max. diam. wall c. 28.0, PH 3.3.

Graffito (after firing).

The inclination and the dense ridging identify this shoulder fragment as belonging with a high probability to the globular Late Roman 2 type. Since only the lower part of both incised letters are preserved, a reconstruction as EY or PY remains tentative, although it seems reasonable to read at least the second letter as an Y.<sup>13</sup>

Cat. 7: BM01/30695, 1 wall fragment of ARS plate (Fig. 8)

Context BM00/8169 (Vandal period).

Hard fired clay with some, mostly transparent, quartz inclusions and some dark particles, core light red (2,5 YR 6/8), exterior surface red (10 R 5/6), interior surface with red slip (2,5 YR 5/6); max. diam. wall c. 12.0?, PH 0.7.

Graffito (after firing) on interior.

Greek letter ε or ω in combination with a preceding letter? Letter E in Latin? Maybe part of the name of the possessor of the vessel.<sup>14</sup>

Cat. 8: BM01/30587, 1 *tessera*, part broken off (Fig. 9)

Context BM00/8169 (Vandal period).

Clay with a few longitudinal voids and many grey particles, core reddish yellow (5 YR 7/6), surfaces pink (5 YR 7/4); diam. 4.0, th. 0.7.

Graffito (before firing).

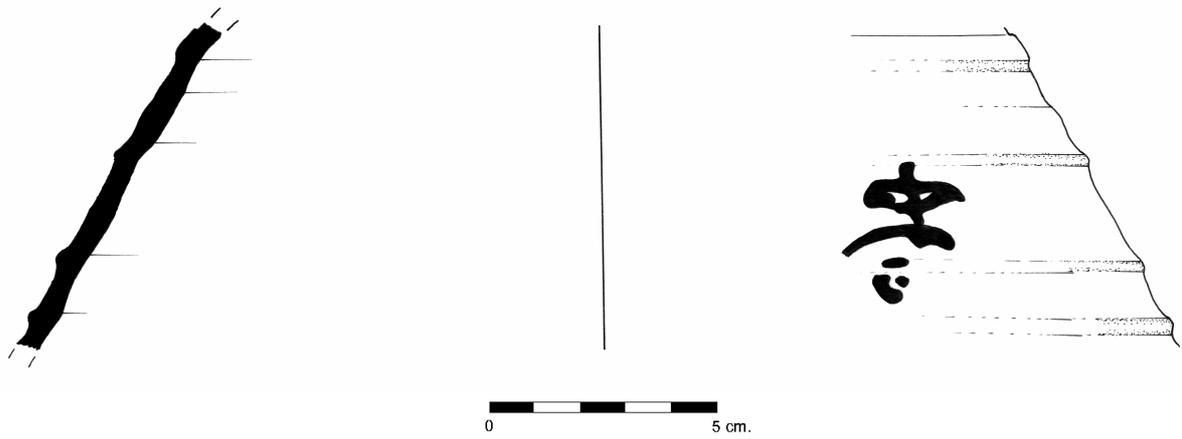
Because the possibility exists that the *tessera* is residual, a possibility of a Phoenician P is not to be excluded, although it can also be read as a retrograde Oscan or Archaic Latin P. The fluent *ante cocturam* incised line seems to exclude a loose mark.<sup>15</sup>

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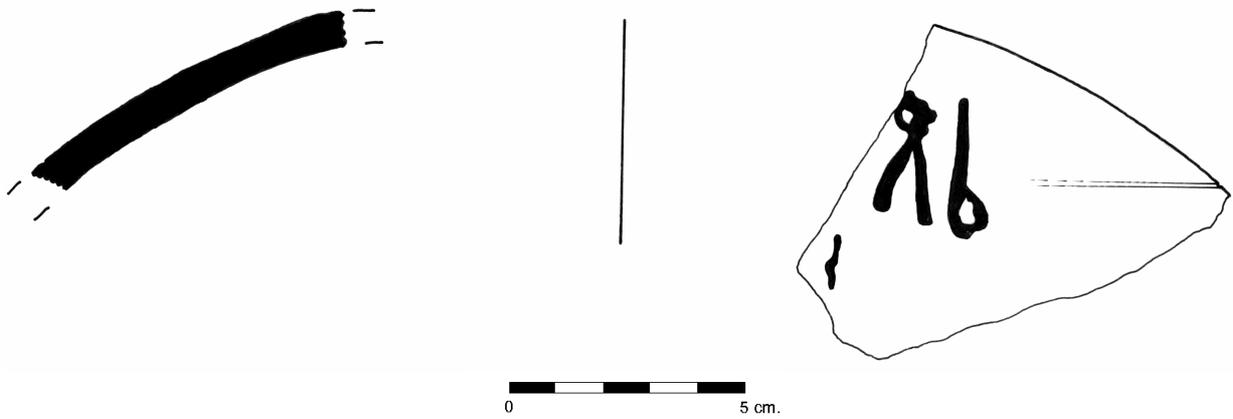
<sup>13</sup> For other graffiti on Late Roman amphorae see Lang 1976; Hayes 1978, 88, pl. 5; Hayes 1992, 78, fig. 28, pl. 15; Davies 1984, 152-154, fig. 54, pl. 6; Pieri 2005, *passim*; especially on Late Roman 2, Hautumm 1981, fig. 20, 23-30 (from the Eupalinos tunnel and cisterns on Samos).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. an ARS with a Latin graffito in Martin-Kilcher 1999, 424, nr. 16, fig. 13: AVITI, '(belongs to) Avitus'.

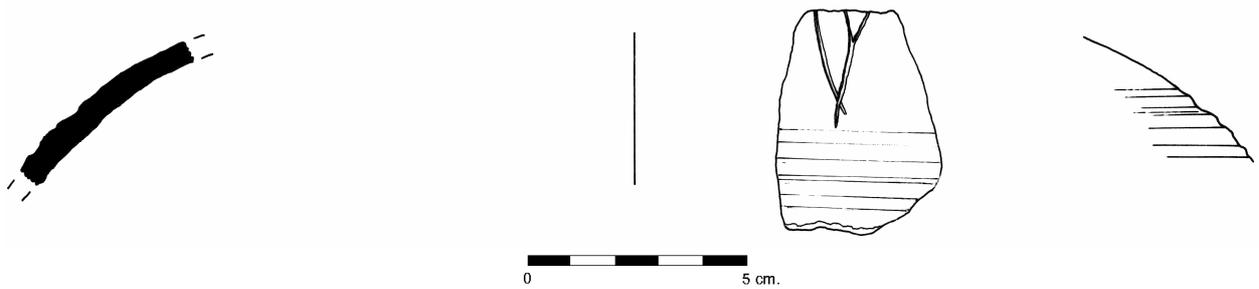
<sup>15</sup> See also examples of *tesserae* in Schmidt 2007.



**Fig. 5.** Dipinto on shoulder of amphora **Cat. 4.**



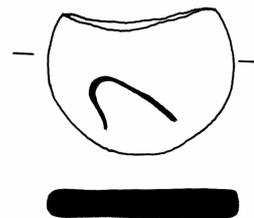
**Fig. 6.** Dipinto on shoulder of amphora **Cat. 5.**



**Fig. 7.** Graffito on shoulder of amphora **Cat. 6.**



**Fig. 8.** Graffito on interior of ARS plate **Cat. 7.**



**Fig. 9.** Graffito on *tessera* **Cat. 8.**

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