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PITHOS-TYPE VESSELS FROM CHHÎM: PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT OF FINDS FROM 1996–2009*

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Abstract: *Pithoi* (the typological difference between a *pithos/dolium* and storage container is not clear) were found in abundance (second only to amphorae) in the excavated remains of the Roman–Byzantine village of Chhîm in Lebanon, where their presumed function was the storage of agricultural produce. The article discusses the forms and types of these vessels present in the assemblage, as well as a limited series of decorated examples of *pithoi*, bearing impressed or incised motifs on strips of applied clay or on the body itself. The *pithoi* sherds were dated for the most part contextually by well-known and dated forms of Late Roman C/Phocaeen and African Red Slip wares dating from the end of the 4th to the 7th century AD.

Keywords: Chhîm, *pithos*, Roman–Byzantine, storage vessels, coarse ware

The term *pithos* describes a large storage vessel with thick walls and broad, massive rim.¹ Its main purpose was storage of large volumes of foodstuffs: liquids, such as olive oil, wine, or even water, and dry goods, that is, grain of all kinds, seeds and flour. Owing to their large dimensions *pithoi* were usually a permanent, immobile element of the furnishings of a house or storage room.

Abundant archaeological evidence collected during the excavations conducted by the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology at Chhîm indicate that the Roman–Byzantine village was a well-established rural centre, in all likelihood active until the 7th–8th century AD

(Waliszewski, Ortali-Tarazi 2002). This impression finds confirmation in the ceramic finds (see Wicenciak 2002).

Among the various vessel types found at Chhîm, *pithoi* constitute the largest functional group after amphorae. Their impressive number can be related most probably to agricultural production and storage of agricultural goods.

Over 1500 vessel fragments corresponding to various forms of *pithoi* were found to date, most of them diagnostic fragments selected in the course of archaeological works. A register of over 400 fragments of *pithoi* has been created, cataloguing various types of rims, bases, handles, and decorated body sherds.²

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¹ The typological difference between a *pithos/dolium* (definition in Hayes 1997: 35–36) and ‘storage jar’, another term frequently used in the literature, is not clear.

FORMS AND TYPES

Pithoi have a characteristic ‘barrel’ shape, a large, rounded body and a nearly flat or conical base. Only conical bases were identified as *pithoi* in the material from Chhîm. Other distinctive features of these vessels include absence of a defined neck, a broad, massive rim and thick walls, massive handles, and a body diameter far greater than that of the rim.

Most *pithos* fragments found in Chhîm are small and damaged, the majority being plain body sherds, easily recognized owing to a distinctive fabric and wall thickness. There were a few decorated body sherds. The material included ten or so bases, many rim variants and some fragments with preserved handles. No complete *pithoi* have been excavated on site thus far. However, based on contemporary finds, the height of a Roman and Byzantine vessel is estimated at approximately 0.80 m [Fig. 1].²

The *pithoi* fragments from Chhîm can be divided into at least two groups by rim shape as well as fabric. Type I is characterized by a thick, triangular-sectioned rim and is the most common and the most distinctive type of *pithos* on site. Rim fragments [Fig. 2] and body sherds [Fig. 3:14, 15, 18, 19] of this type have been recognized to date, but no bases or handles. The fabric is very peculiar: it is fine-grained and sandy, color varying from light brown or yellowish-brown to beige. It contains fine (approximately 1 mm in diameter) white, grey, yellow and light grey particles. In fragments with a clearly smoother surface the inclusions are different: grey as well as

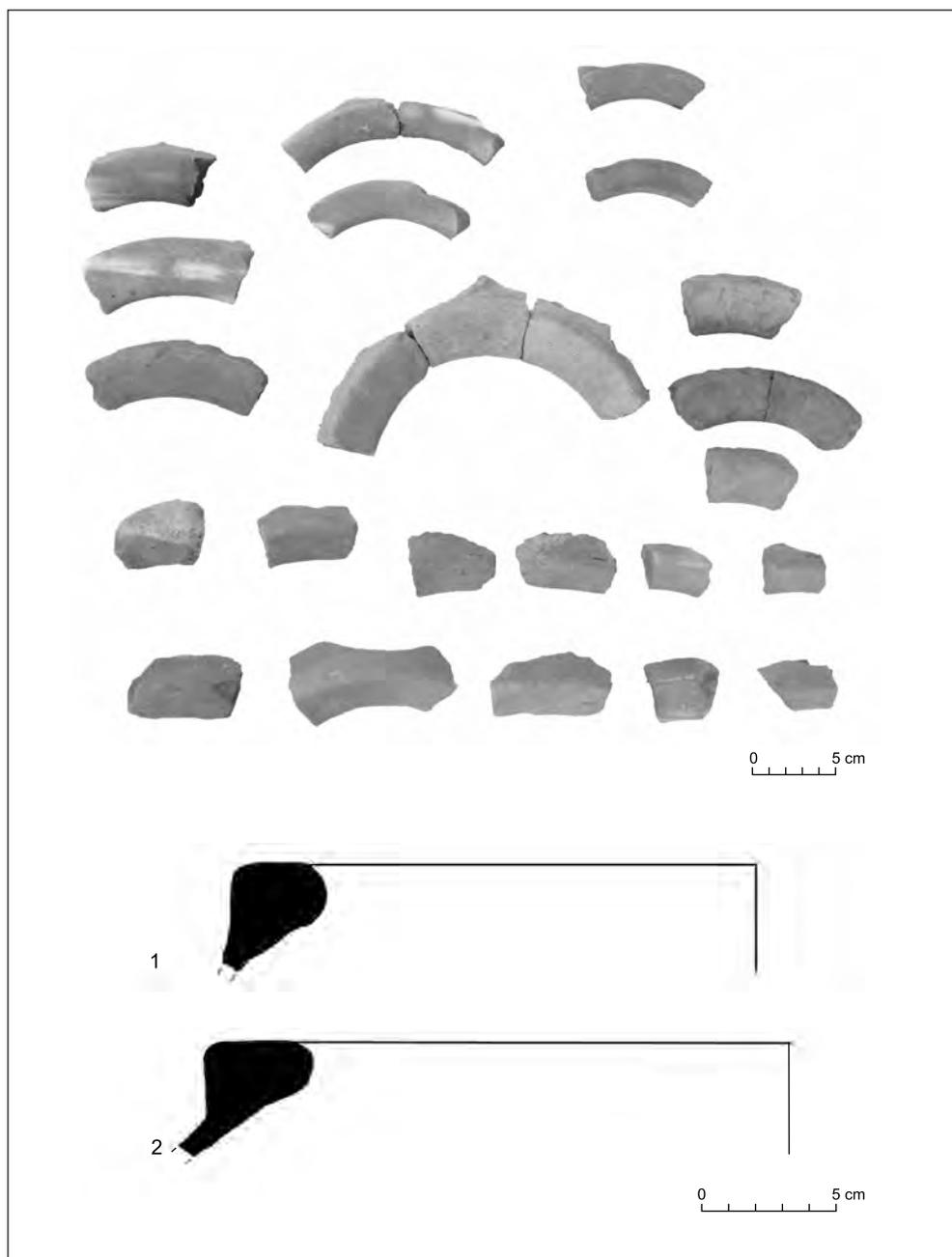
white, light brown and dark grey particles ranging from 1 to 3 mm in diameter.

A large, three-handled specimen of a *pithos* with triangular-sectioned rim was found during recent excavations in Beirut; it was dated to the Byzantine period (Hayes, ‘Ala’ Eddine 1998–1999: 131, 135 Fig. 7). The Beirut vessel was made from a plain buff/light brown ware. Distinctive wavy

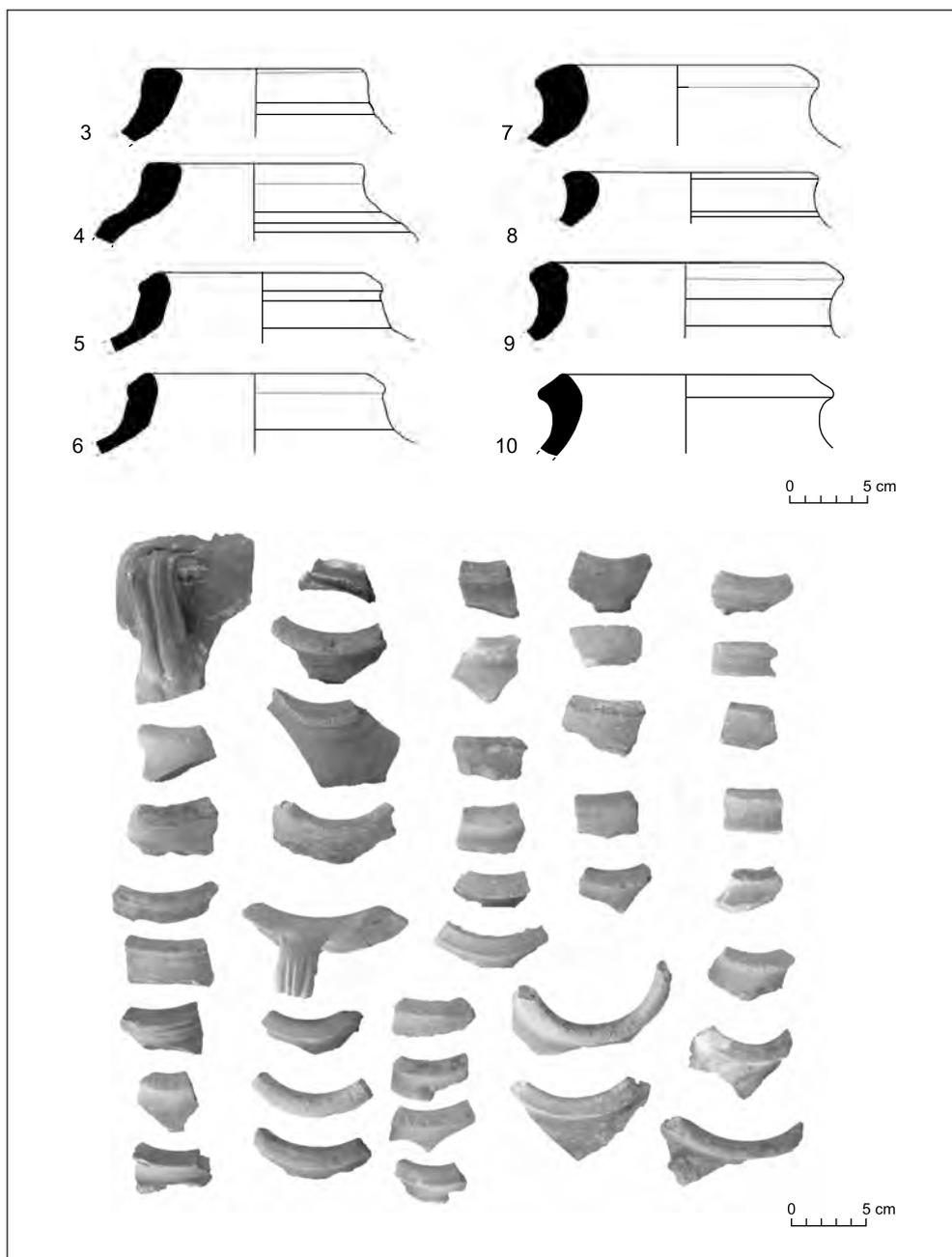


Fig. 1. Modern *pithos*-type vessel from the region (Photo K. Kotlewski)

² Modern counterparts of the *pithos*, observed during a survey of the el Kharroub province conducted by Mahmoud El-Tayeb in 1999, have an average height of 0.70–0.80 m (see El-Tayeb 2002: 10–11).



*Fig. 2. Selection of pithos rims of Type I
(Photos Z. Kowarska, S. Lenarczyk; all drawings by the authors verifying team documentation)*



*Fig. 3. Selection of pithos rims of type II
(Photos and drawings Z. Kowarska, S. Lenarczyk)*

combed decoration adorns the shoulders and the broad handles feature two thin grooves. Several analogous *pithos* rim shapes were also recorded during excavations conducted at the coastal site of Jiyeh (Porphyreon) (unfortunately from poorly dated surface layers, U. Wicenciak, personal communication). Some examples of a similar

kind of *pithos*, characterized by a thick, triangular-sectioned rim and combed decoration, dated to the Late Roman period, were found also at the site of Panayia Emataousa in Cyprus (Winther Jacobsen 2005: 625–626, 632–633, Figs 5, 6). Three *pithoi* with similar, triangular-sectioned rims were uncovered during excavations conducted in

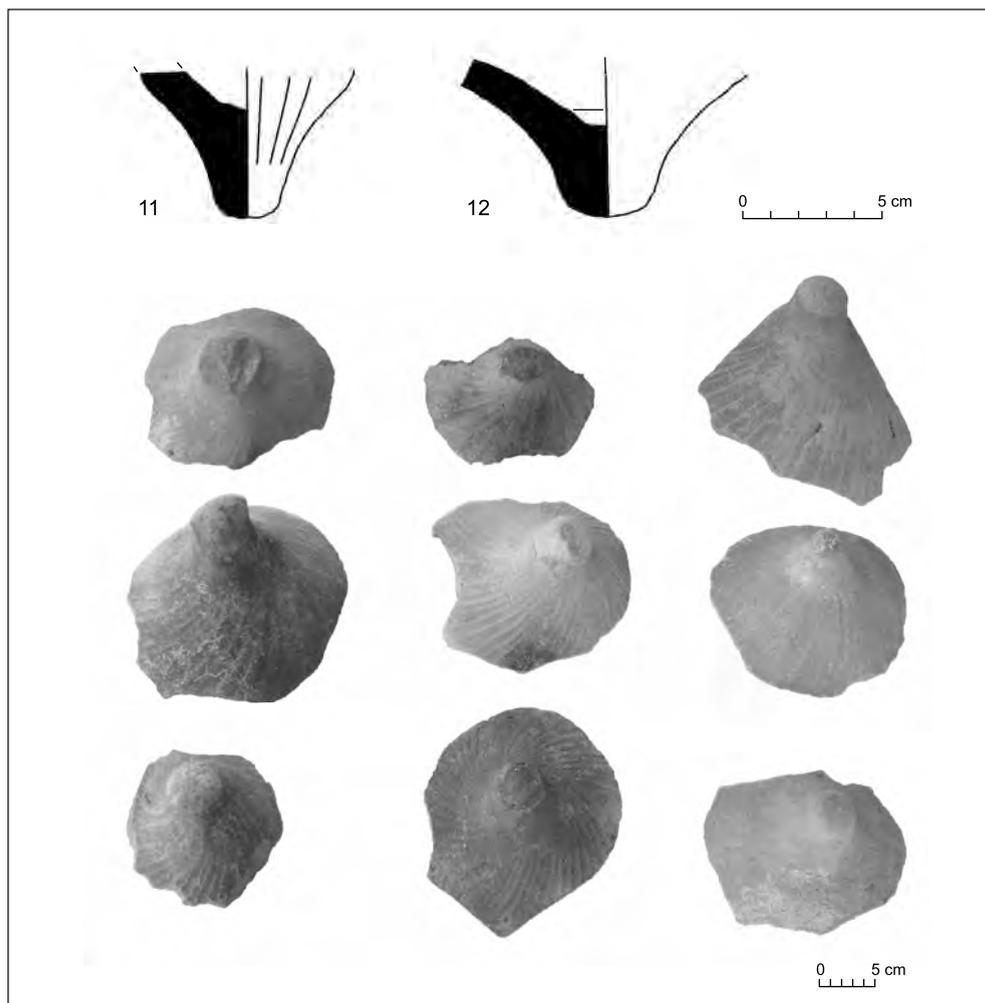


Fig. 4. Selection of *pithos* bases with spirally grooved decoration

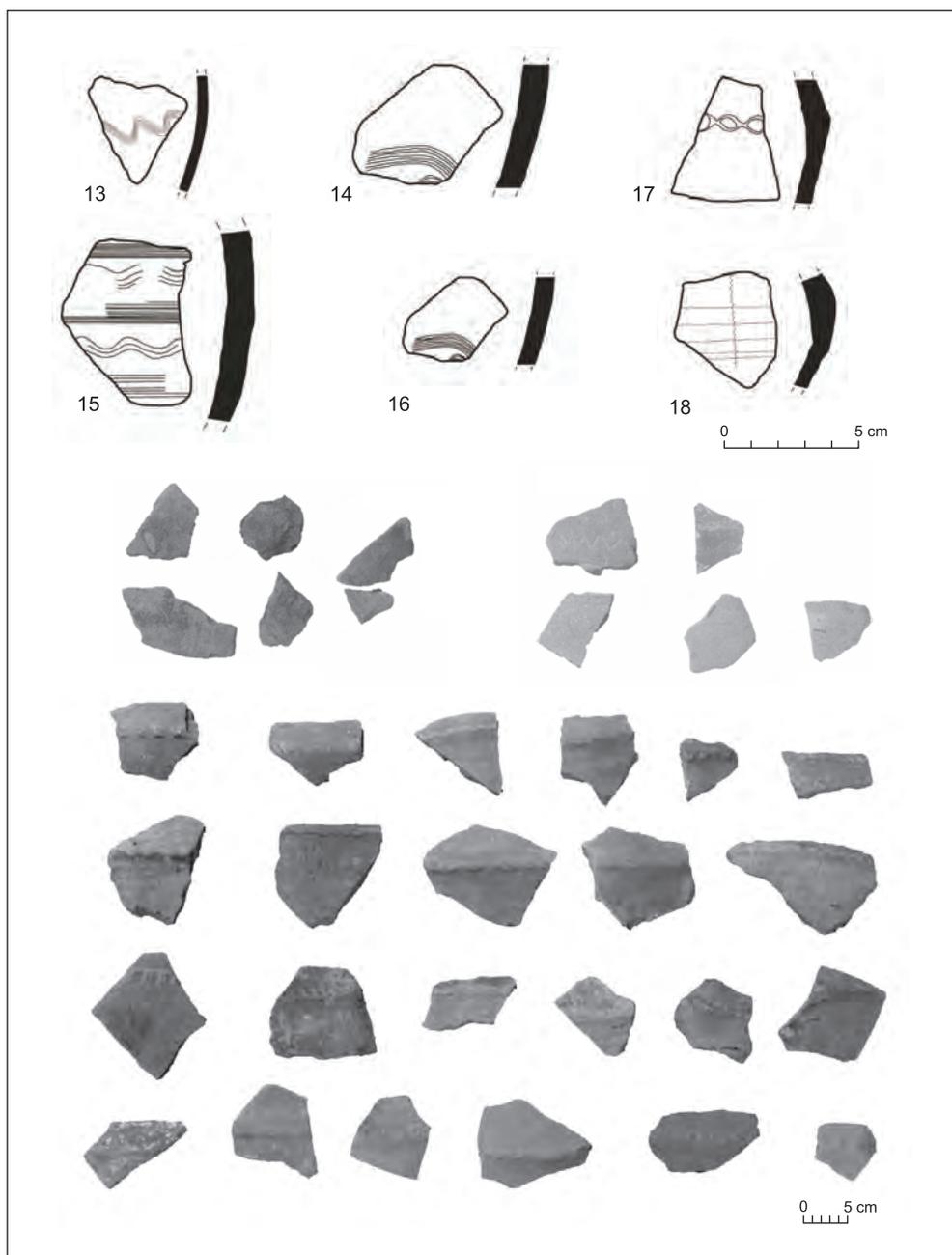


Fig. 5. Selection of decorated fragments

Upper Galilee at the site of Tell Keisan (see Florimont 1984: 29–30). A reconstruction of the shape was possible thanks to one of the vessels, which was found almost complete. It also permitted the base and handles of the vessels from Chhîm to be reconstructed (the vessel from Tell Keisan had a flat base). Also the decoration of the vessels at Tell Keisan, combed wavy lines in the upper part of the body, is very similar to the body decoration of the pithos fragments from Chhîm [Fig. 5:13–16].

Other parallels of Byzantine date were recorded during an archaeological survey of sites in Upper Galilee (Horvat Ovesh, Horvat Gov and Horvat Karkara), where they were dated to the 6th century AD, and on coastal sites among ceramic material dated to the Byzantine and Early Islamic periods (Frankel *et alii* 2001: 68, Fig. 3.11:13).

The second *pithos* type in the material from the site is characterized by a thick rim, which can be either everted (at various angles) [Fig. 3:3,4,5,6] or slightly inverted [Fig. 3:7,8,9,10]. This rim shape resembles rims referred to as “storage jars” in the topic literature (see Wicenciak 2002: 71–73; Pieri 2001 [2002]: 117–119, Figs 9–10). The bases attributed to this *pithos* type are shaped like a truncated cone. This specific shape probably made it easier to stand the vessel upright, in specially dug pits in the floor. Some of the bases found at Chhîm are characterized by spirally grooved decoration [Fig. 4].

Pithoi of this type are characterized by a pinkish-beige fabric referred to as *Chhîm pinkish*. The fabric is considered to be of local origin, but this hypothesis has not been confirmed by chemical analyses (see Wicenciak 2002: 62).

Many rim variants resemble type two, some only slightly everted or nearly vertical, others incurved. Therefore, the division into two types or rather groups is preliminary. Some of the rim variants may represent *pithoi* in use during earlier periods.

DECORATION

Decorated *pithos* body sherds constituted a relatively small group of 45 fragments in an assemblage totaling presently about 1500 fragments. Decoration usually covered the shoulders at the point where they meet the body. Typical ornaments included rope impressions, short incised diagonal lines, finger impressions or incised wavy lines, the motifs occurring on applied strips of clay (see Pieri 2001 [2002]: Pl. 9) [Fig. 5]. They were typical of *pithoi* of Type II. A comparable type of decoration is found on storage vessels from the Early Bronze Age in the region (Frankel *et alii* 2001: 53–54, Figs 3.4:2, 15).

In several cases the decoration also appears directly on the vessel body. Several fragments feature distinctive geometric ornaments composed of irregular quadrangles linked with lines and filled with dots, as well as straight and wavy lines (Wicenciak 2002: 71, Pl. 9:1254).

CONCLUSIONS

Not many of the *pithos* fragments found during excavations in Chhîm come from securely dated archaeological contexts. Most of them were accumulated in topsoil

or room fill. Nonetheless, well-known and dated forms of Late Roman C/Phocaeen and African Red Slip wares dating from the end of the 4th to the 7th century AD are

the best source of accurate dating for *pithoi* found in Chhîm (see Domzalski 2002: 77–88). Parallels from the region, originating from Upper Galilee and Northern Lebanon, also point strongly to the 4th–7th century AD. It merits note that the shape of rims and handles, and decorative patterns did not change significantly from the Early Bronze Age to the Roman and Byzantine periods. Owing to the size of the vessels — and probably also their price — the same *pithoi* would have been in use for decades. Due to the longevity

and durability of the fabric used in their production, *pithos* fragments could also be reused. This could prove to be a serious obstacle in a precise dating of the different types of this kind of vessels (Christakis 1999: 5).

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