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THE ‘BASEBALL’ *SIGLUM* ON BLACK GLOSS POTTERY
FROM VESCOVADO DI MURLO

IL SIGLUM ‘BASEBALL’ SU CERAMICA NERA LUCIDA
DA VESCOVADO DI MURLO

Eóin O’Donoghue, Rex Wallace

ABSTRACT: In 1960, two chamber tombs were discovered during construction in the Tinoni area of Vescovado di Murlo. Many examples of black gloss pottery were recovered from the tombs, 43 of which were scratched with alphabetic and non-alphabetic *sigla*. One *siglum* stands out for the frequency with which it occurs (12 times) and for its unique shape; it resembles the form of a baseball. In this paper, we investigate the ‘baseball’ *siglum*, discussing its placement on the interior of the pottery and describing its variation in form. Given the frequency and the unique form of the *siglum*, we suspect that it had a special function for family members buried in the Tinoni tombs. We conclude the paper by speculating about this possibility.

KEYWORDS: Vescovado di Murlo; Tinoni tombs; black gloss pottery; non-alphabet *sigla*; ‘baseball’ *siglum*.

RIASSUNTO: Nel 1960, due tombe a camera sono state scoperte durante la costruzione dell’area di Tinoni a Vescovado di Murlo. Vari esempi di ceramica nera lucida sono stati recuperati dalle tombe, 43 dei quali sono graffiti con *sigla* alfabetici e non. Un *siglum* si distingue per la frequenza con cui ricorre (12 volte) e per la sua forma unica; assomiglia alla forma di una palla da baseball. In questo articolo indaghiamo il *siglum* ‘baseball’, discutendo la sua collocazione all’interno della ceramica e descrivendone la variazione nella forma. Data la frequenza e la forma unica del *siglum*, sospettiamo che avesse una funzione speciale per i membri della famiglia sepolti nelle tombe dei Tinoni.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Vescovado di Murlo; tombe Tinoni; ceramica nera lucida; *sigla* non alfabetici; ‘baseball’ *siglum*.

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THE 'BASEBALL' SIGLUM ON BLACK GLOSS POTTERY
FROM VESCOVADO DI MURLO

*Eóin O'Donoghue, Rex Wallace**

1. In 1926, Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli, the famed Siense archaeologist, visited Murlo and was presented with archaeological materials recovered from the area. Included in these were objects that had been discovered in two chamber tombs in a small olive grove in the Tinoni area of Vescovado di Murlo approximately 10 years previously¹. He describes the tombs as being of the *a forno* type; containing two urns, one made of travertine, and the other of a friable tuff². One of the urns is said to have had a house shaped lid; neither urn is noted as having an inscription. The description of the grave goods included what sounds like black gloss pottery and perhaps some red figure, which at the time Bianchi Bandinelli interpreted as imports from South Italy. The materials no longer survive but attest to the existence of a cemetery in the area. This supposition was confirmed in March 1960, when, during the construction in the same area of Vescovado di Murlo, two chamber tombs were discovered³. Giorgio Monaco, the director of what was then the *Soprintendenza alle Antichità dell'Etruria*, together with Anna Talocchini oversaw the excavations. From the surviving materials it appears that as many as four burials were excavated. The materials recovered are now kept in

* Gabriel Appelbaum, Brad Lidge, and Anthony Tuck contributed to this paper. Their contributions are acknowledged in the *Appendix* before the photographic and graphic documentation.

¹ BIANCHI BANDINELLI 1926, pp. 165–166

² The *a forno* type of tomb, most likely represents a small and simple chamber tomb cut into the local tuff rock. The same typological designation derives from Bronze Age Sicilian rock cut tombs of the same name, also known as *tombe a grotticella*.

³ The first report of the tombs' discovery is noted by TALOCCHINI 1960, pp. 445–446.

Museo Archeologico di Murlo, having previously being held in the archaeological museums in Florence and Siena. The burials contained an abundance of material, and some human remains, comprising nearly 300 objects in a relatively good state of preservation. The assemblages consisted mostly of ceramics, but also some bronze and iron objects, a few fine fragments of gold jewellery, and other objects. They range in date from the early 5th century to the late 3rd century BCE.

This chronological range indicates the burials overlap with the ancient community of Vescovado di Murlo reflected in excavations carried out in 2006⁴ and 2015–2018⁵. These efforts revealed traces of domestic and industrial spaces to the northwest of the Tinoni district, along the east facing slope of the town's Colombaio neighborhood. The evidence of manufacturing associated with this community means that some of the ceramics recovered within the Tinoni tombs were likely produced locally, although further elemental analysis is needed to confirm this. However, it does allow for the possibility that the *corpus* of vessels marked with the *siglum* considered in this study were manufactured and consumed within the community itself. If so, any motivation for its application on vessels recovered from the burials is one likely driven by local concerns. However, the chronological range of ceramics marked in this fashion, which is discussed below, would suggest this concern was likely multi-generational.

2. 166 black gloss ceramic vessels – bowls, cups, and dishes – were recovered during excavation of the Tinoni tombs at Vescovado di Murlo⁶. Two stemmed dishes, **nr. 045** and **nr. 046**, were inscribed around the vessels' tondo with the onomastic forms *caúsu* and *calnśu*. Presumably, both are mis-spellings of the name *calśu*⁷. 43 vessels were scratched with alphabetic or non-alphabetic signs, collectively

⁴ TUCK *et Alii* 2009.

⁵ TUCK *et Alii* 2016: 135–147 and TUCK 2021: 84–89.

⁶ For discussion of the black gloss pottery, see HERRING Forthcoming 2023.

⁷ The names were emended by RIX to *calśu* and *cal{n}śu* for the first edition of *Etruskische Texte* (ET AS 2.4 and AS 2.5). See WALLACE Forthcoming 2023a for discussion of these and the other inscriptions found in the tombs.

referred to as *sigla*⁸. Non-alphabetic *sigla* were scratched on 33 vessels⁹. In most cases, they were scratched with a single *siglum*, but a few pieces were marked with multiple signs¹⁰. The forms of the non-alphabetic *sigla* attested on the pottery from the Tinoni tombs are generally represented elsewhere in the *corpus* of Etruscan *sigla*¹¹. However, one *siglum*, which we refer to as the 'baseball' *siglum*, stands out because of its distinctive shape, and because it is the most frequently attested *siglum* in the Tinoni *corpus*. The 'baseball' *siglum* was scratched¹² on 12 black gloss bowls and dishes, thus appearing on over 35% of the black gloss vessels incised with non-alphabetic *sigla* (Table 1)¹³.

3. The 'baseball' *siglum* has the shape of a circle divided in half by a vertical line. Each half of the circle is sub-divided by an arc¹⁴. The

⁸ For the term *siglum* (pl., *sigla*), see DE GRUMMOND – BARE – MEILLEUR 2000, pp. 25-26, BAGNASCO GIANNI – DE GRUMMOND 2020, p. 113, and BAGNASCO GIANNI 2020, pp. 256-257. For additional references to articles on *sigla*, consult the bibliography in the last two papers.

⁹ WALLACE Forthcoming 2023b is survey of the alphabetic and non-alphabetic *sigla* on the black gloss pottery from the Tinoni tombs.

¹⁰ The total number of occurrences of non-alphabetic *sigla* is 37.

¹¹ The cross-mark, which is a common *siglum* in Etruscan, was incised on 6 pieces of pottery. Numeri-form *sigla* in the form of lines of varying length, also a common type of *siglum*, were incised on 11 vessels.

¹² All 'baseball' *sigla* were scratched on black gloss pottery after firing.

¹³ The 'baseball' *siglum* appears on 28% of the pottery incised with alphabetic and non-alphabetic *sigla*.

¹⁴ An anonymous reviewer suggests that the *siglum* is a form of the numeral '100' placed within a circle (*centum in circulo*). We are not convinced because the numeral '100' does not appear in this form in Etruscan inscriptions. The numeral for '100' attested in funerary inscriptions from Volterra (*ET Vt* 1.151) and Tarquinia (*ET Ta* 1.107; *ET AT* 1.64) is in the form, roughly, of an asterisk. The numeral '100' is attested also in a short sequence of numbers (10–100–10) incised on the back side of a quadratic cippus from Tuscania; it has the form of an asterisk (see KAIMIO 2009, p. 251, nr. 67). *Sigla* thought to represent the numeral '100' have the form of an asterisk as well. For the form and the identification of the asterisk as a numeri-form *siglum*, see GOVI

tokens in the *corpus* vary in quality according to the skill of the incisor and the location of the *siglum*'s placement on the vessel. Writing on the interior surface of bowls, cups, and dishes could be challenging due to the size and shape of the space. All 'baseball' *sigla* were incised after firing on the interior of the cups and dishes. Most were placed on or adjacent to the vessel's tondo. Tokens **nr. 019** and **nr. 047** (Figg. 1 and 2) are well-drawn. They serve as 'ideal' versions of the sign. In token **nr. 019**, abrasions to the surface of the ceramic obscure the view of the sign's right arc. In most tokens, one or more of the internal lines of the *siglum* are disarticulated from the circle. See, for example, **nr. 020**, **nr. 038**, **nr. 051**, **nr. 132**, and **nr. 141** (Figg. 3-7). In **nr. 034** (Fig. 8), the vertical bar is disarticulated from the circle at both ends. In **nr. 142** (Fig. 9), the left side of the circular portion of the *siglum* is nearly vertical. One token, **nr. 127** (Fig. 10), is an outlier. It has a squat and oval-shaped appearance, perhaps because of the difficulty of incising the sign on the curved slope of the wall of a stemmed dish. Another token, **nr. 137** (Fig. 11), is incomplete. Several pieces of the interior of the dish on which it was incised were broken off and are missing. Less than half of the *siglum* is visible at one of the breaks. Token **nr. 021** (Fig. 12) is also incomplete. The upper left side of the sign is missing because the ceramic was broken at this point. Very small segments of the circle and the left arc are missing. The vertical bar and the right arc are visible in their entirety.

4. Bowl **nr. 142** was incised with two *sigla*. In addition to the 'baseball' *siglum*, which was incised near the tondo of the bowl, an alphabetic *siglum* in the form of a *pi* was incised on the upper portion of the bowl's interior wall¹⁵. The relationship, if any, between the two *sigla* is unclear. Nor is it evident that the *sigla* were incised at the same time by the same person.

1994, p. 236 (Tav. LIV and Tav. LV) and GOVI – MARTELLI – SASSATELLI 2007, p. 274 and p. 280 (nr. 60 and nr. 64).

¹⁵ We assume that the letter is to be read as left facing in accordance with the direction of writing in Etruscan. However, it is possible to view the letter so that it is right facing, in which case it has the form of a *lambda*.

5. The fact that the 'baseball' *siglum* occurs so frequently in the Tinoni *corpus* and was incised after firing on the interior of black gloss bowls and dishes deserves discussion. The form is unique, or nearly so, within the *corpus* of Etruscan non-alphabetic *sigla*¹⁶, so it is conceivable that the *siglum* served a special function for family members buried in the tombs. We speculate about this possibility in the following paragraphs.

The black gloss bowls and dishes inscribed with the 'baseball' *siglum* were recovered from a funerary context. Presumably, the pieces were deposited in the tomb as grave goods for deceased¹⁷. It is tempting to think that members of the *calśu* family, whose name appears on two black gloss dishes (**nr. 45** and **nr. 46**) in the Vescovado di Murlo *corpus*, etched the sign on the vessels before deposition as an identifying mark. Indeed, the semi-circles in the interior of the *siglum* might be viewed as tokens of the letter *c*, the initial letter of the *calśu* family name. Since the Tinoni tombs were not single-family burials but were in use by multiple families over an extended period, such an identifying mark on the vessels might have been useful for proprietary purposes. One might also imagine that the bowls and dishes with the 'baseball' *siglum* were used as part of a funerary ritual to commemorate the deceased, before being deposited in the tomb¹⁸.

¹⁶ See SASSATELLI 1981-1982: 150-152, nt. 6. The *siglum*, which appear at both ends of a rochetto, is in the form of a cross-mark sub-divided by quarter-circles.

¹⁷ Since the vessels in this collection were tableware, the interior is sometimes marred by signs of wear, perhaps made by prolonged use of utensils. If the 'baseball' *siglum* was incised before the pottery was 'retired' and deposited in the tomb, it would go some way to explain why **nr. 127** was drawn on the interior wall of the vessel. The glazing on the tondo was almost completely worn away.

¹⁸ If one assumes that the drawing within the circle was intended to have symbolic significance, one could imagine that the semi-circles represent the realm of the living versus the realm of the dead, especially if one orients the line dividing the circle horizontally. However, no evidence – either from the burial, the associated materials, or other *sigla* recovered from within this deposit – necessarily points to such a reading of these markings.

The 'baseball' *sigla*, incised as they were on the interior of the ceramics, would emerge as a memorial sign as the liquids and/or cereal offerings were poured from the vessels¹⁹.

If we follow Edward Herring's estimated dating of the ceramics (see footnote 6), which is based on the Morel classification, there is a significant chronological range (over 100 years) in the forms of the vessels with the 'baseball' *siglum*²⁰. It is not inconceivable that a bowl or dish could have been used and kept for more than one generation and deposited in the tomb with other ceramics that had been produced later. Conceivably, this *siglum* could have been used by more than one generation, which would make sense if it served as an identifying symbol for the *calśu* family. It is also possible the *siglum* was incised on pottery belonging to an earlier burial during subsequent visits to the tomb or during later depositions. This might mean that family members incised the *sigla* within the chamber tombs during the funerary ritual and under difficult writing conditions, cramped quarters, bad light, etc. This could explain why some of the 'baseball' *sigla* were poorly drawn. Regardless, the chronological anomaly highlights the challenge of the relative dating system for ceramics more than anything else.

6. The case of the 'baseball' *siglum* is a peculiar one. Multiple examples of the same exceptional non-alphabetic *siglum* were recovered from the same funerary context. Regardless of whether our ideas about the function of the 'baseball' *siglum* are deemed plausible,

¹⁹ One alphabetic *siglum*, the *alpha* of nr. 148, has an unusual form when compared to the other examples of the letter incised on the black-glazed pottery (nr. 129 and nr. 130). The lower portion of the left bar of the letter curves around to the right in a circle that ends near the summit of the letter's upright bar giving the sign a vague resemblance to the 'baseball' *siglum*. One wonders if the person who drew the odd-shaped *alpha* on the interior wall of the bowl intended it in some way as a reference to the 'baseball' *siglum*.

²⁰ See MOREL 1994 for the classification of pottery types and their chronology. Herring's estimated chronology follows the same standard used for the establishment of chronological parameters in the region, notably the closely related Hellenistic tombs from Poggio Pinci at Asciano (MANGANI 1983).

the *siglum* reminds us of the significance of investigating the alphabetic and non-alphabetic signs incised on pieces of pottery.

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APPENDIX

We acknowledge the contributions of Gabriel Appelbaum, Brad Lidge, and Anthony Tuck, without whose assistance this paper could not have been completed.

Table 1. Inventory of ‘baseball’ *sigla* at Vescovado di Murlo

Catalogue nr. Morel form	Style of ceramic Chronology	Location
Nr. 019 (Fig. 1) Form 2922b 1	black gloss bowl 300–270 BCE	interior near centre
Nr. 020 (Fig. 3) Form 1262b 1	black gloss bowl 200–150 BCE	interior near centre
Nr. 021 (Fig. 12) Form 1262b 1	black gloss bowl 200–150 BCE	interior near centre
Nr. 034 (Fig. 8) Form 1263a 1	black gloss bowl 3 rd c. BCE	interior near centre
Nr. 038 (Fig. 4) Form 2922b 1	black gloss bowl 300–270 BCE	interior near centre
Nr. 047 (Fig. 2) Form 2535b 1	black gloss dish 200 BCE	interior near centre
Nr. 051 (Fig. 5) Form 2533a 1	black gloss dish 250–200 BCE	interior near centre
Nr. 127 (Fig. 10) Form 1321c 1	black gloss bowl 300–250 BCE	interior wall
Nr. 132 (Fig. 6) Form 1321c 1	black gloss bowl 300–250 BCE	interior near centre
Nr. 137 (Fig. 11) Form 2533a 1	black gloss dish 250–200 BCE	interior near centre
Nr. 141 (Fig. 7) Form 1263a 1	black gloss bowl 3 rd c. BCE	centre
Nr. 142 (Fig. 9)	black gloss bowl	near centre

The black gloss vessels incised with the 'baseball' *siglum* are listed according to the catalogue number assigned by Edward Herring in his chapter on the ceramic vessels from the Tinoni tombs (for the reference, see footnote 6). In the central column, we cite his estimated chronology of the ceramics (see footnote 20). The Vescovado di Murlo archive number and reference information regarding the *cassetta* in which the artifacts are stored in the *Antiquarium di Poggio Civitate Museo Archeologico (Murlo)* are compiled in note 1 to the Table.

Notes to **Table 1**:

1. **Nr. 019** = VdM 19600019, Cassetta C3; **Nr. 020** = VdM 19600020, Cassetta C4; **Nr. 021** = VdM 19600021, Cassetta C5; **Nr. 034** = VdM 19600034, Cassetta E2; **Nr. 038** = VdM 19600038, Cassetta E6; **Nr. 047** = VdM 19600047, Cassetta E15; **Nr. 051** = VdM 19600051, Cassetta E19; **Nr. 127** = VdM 19600147, Cassetta U FP 2; **Nr. 132** = VdM 19600147, Cassetta U FP 2; **Nr. 137** = VdM 19600156, Cassetta U FP12; **Nr. 141** = VdM 19600160, Cassetta U FP16; **Nr. 142** = VdM 19600161, Cassetta U FP17.

2. In addition to the 'baseball' *siglum*, bowl **nr. 142** was incised with an alphabetic *siglum* in the form of the letter *p*. See section 4.

3. Because **nr. 142** is fragmentary, it is not possible to find comparable Morel forms.

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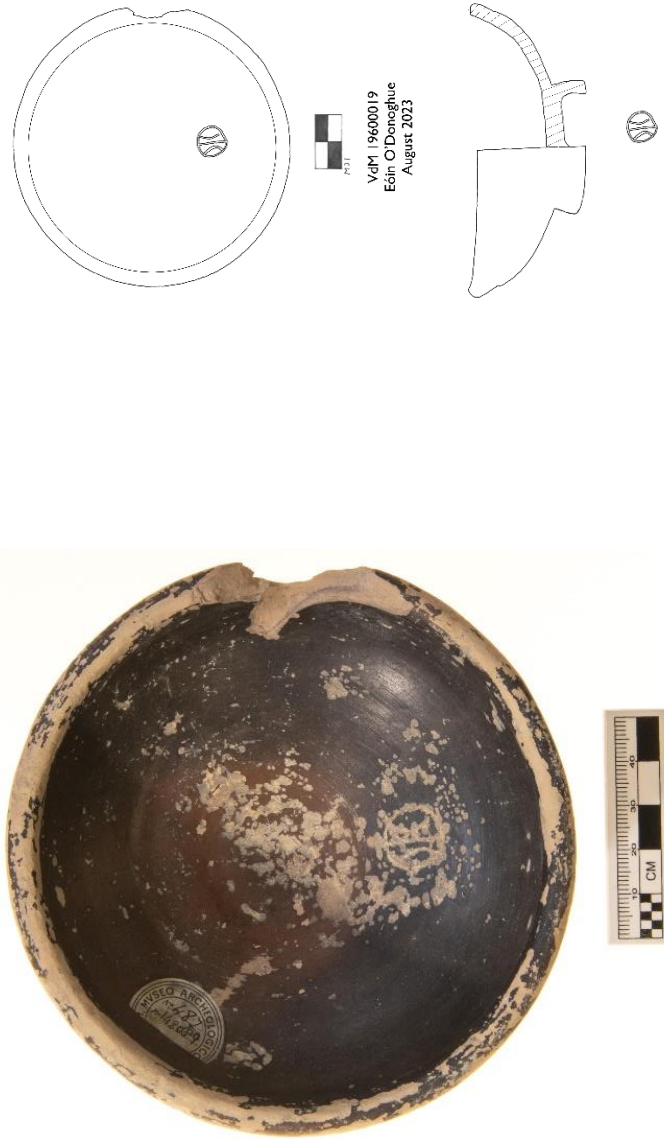


Fig. 1. Nr. 019. Black gloss bowl. (Poggio Civitate Excavations)



Fig. 2. Nr. 047. Black gloss dish. (Poggio Civitate Excavations)



Fig. 3. Nr. 020. Black gloss bowl. (Poggio Civitate Excavations)



Fig. 4. Nr. 038. Black gloss bowl. (Poggio Civitate Excavations)

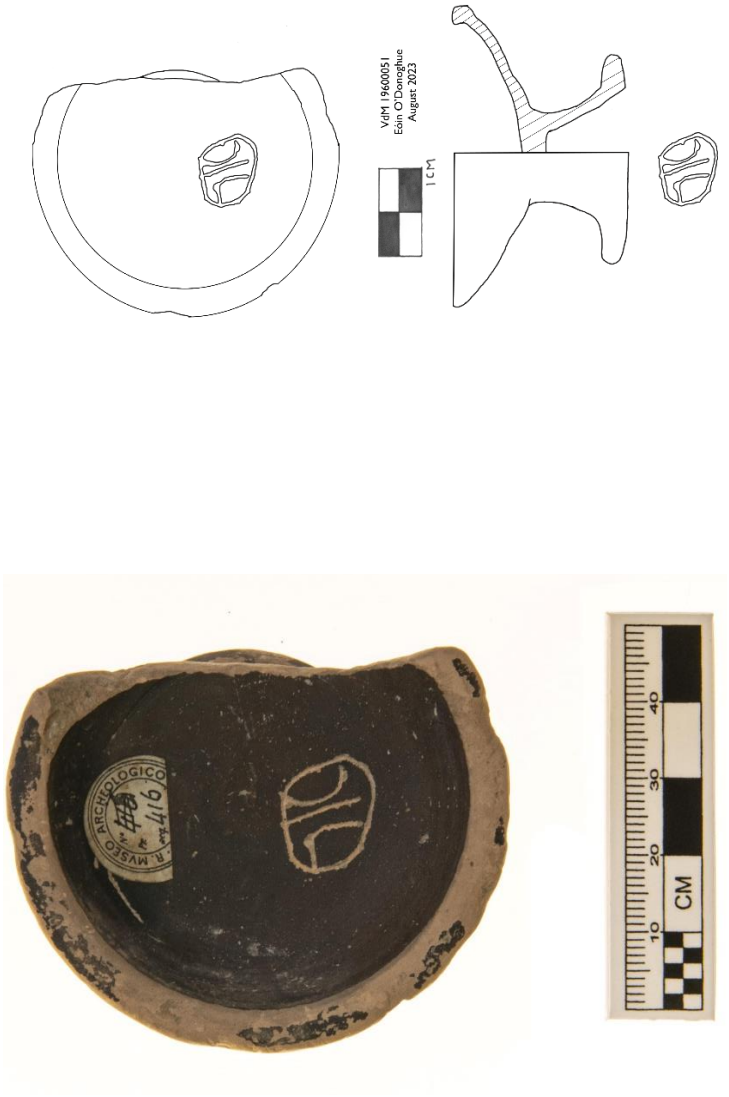


Fig. 5. Nr. 051. Black gloss stemmed dish fragment. (Poggio Civitate Excavations)



Fig. 6. Nr. 132. Black gloss bowl. (Poggio Civitate Excavations)

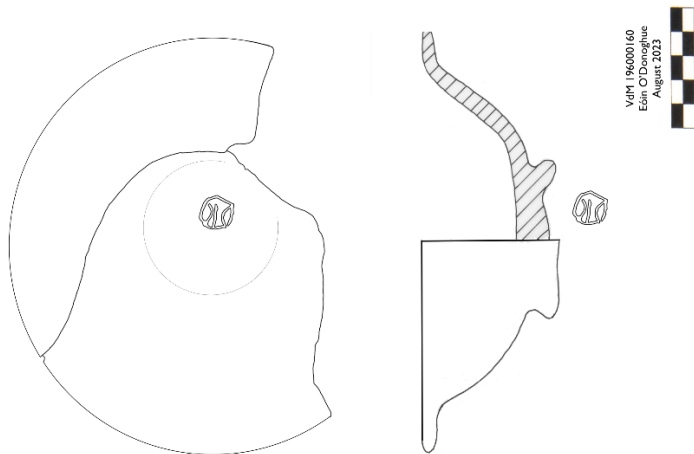


Fig. 7. Nr. 141. Black gloss bowl. (Poggio Civitate Excavations)



Fig. 8. Nr. 034. Black gloss bowl. (Poggio Civitate Excavations)



Fig. 9. Nr. 142. *Black gloss dish.* (Poggio Civitate Excavations)

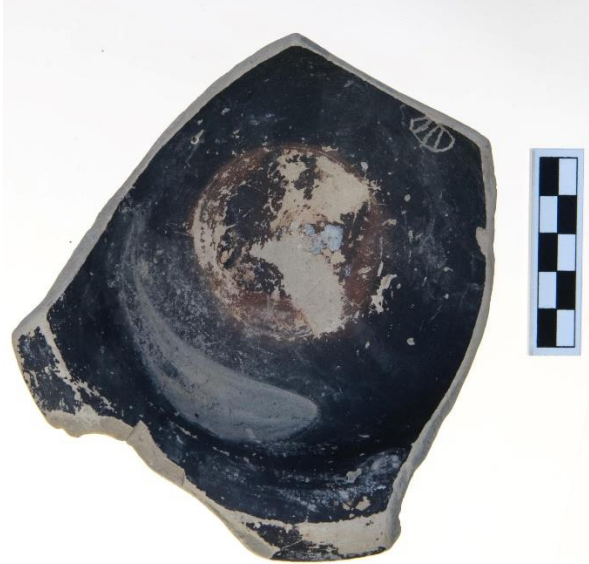
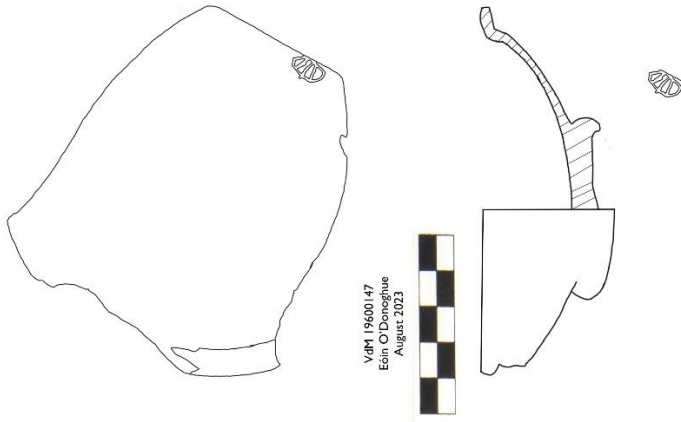


Fig. 10. Nr. 127. Black gloss bowl. (Poggio Civitate Excavations)



Fig. 11. Nr. 137. Black gloss stemmed dish. (Poggio Civitate Excavations)



Fig. 12. Nr. 021. Black gloss bowl. (Poggio Civitate Excavations)