

MACIEJ MIŚCICKI

Faculty of Archaeology, University of Warsaw

mmiscicki@uw.edu.pl

ORCID: 0000-0003-4833-4926

MARKS ON LATE-MEDIEVAL TURNED WOODEN VESSELS – MAKER’S SIGNATURES OR SYMBOLS OF OWNERSHIP?

ABSTRACT

Symbols scorched or incised into late-medieval turned wooden vessels are frequently recorded among archaeological finds and are referred to as marks. While their precise meaning has never been conclusively explained, scholarly literature generally assumes that they served to indicate either the maker or the owner of the item. The diversity of marks found on vessels can be classified into three groups: scorched marks, marks incised in a regular linear pattern, and marks incised in a complex, decorative pattern. To date, however, no studies have addressed whether the occurrence of marks is more

frequent on single-sided turned vessels or those turned on both sides, nor whether the presence of a mark was influenced by other technological features or by the choice of raw material. Moreover, it remains to be investigated whether there is a significant difference in marking patterns between vessels turned in small and large towns. To address these research questions posed, an analysis was conducted of assemblages of turned vessels bearing marks from Elbląg (68 specimens), Gdańsk (19 specimens), and Puck (7 specimens).

Keywords: archaeology, marks, wooden turned vessels, late-medieval and post-medieval period, Baltic towns.

Turned wooden bowls and plates were popular vessels at the late medieval table, as evidenced by numerous iconographic, written, and – increasingly – archaeological sources. Due to natural decomposition processes, finds of artefacts crafted from organic materials are not particularly common. Nevertheless, the substantial collection of artefacts recovered and documented in the literature reveals the range of vessel types in use, techniques of manufacture, and the wood species sought as raw material.¹ On some of these vessels, incised symbols, referred to as marks, can be observed; these have been interpreted in various ways, primarily as identifiers of a specific person or group associated with the item. Existing literature indicates that the function of marks placed on turned vessels has been addressed on multiple occasions. However, determining what or whom a specific mark denoted remains a challenging task, with important aspects of the subject still distinctly under-studied. Little atten-

tion has been paid to the style and diversity of marks on turned vessels, or to the significance of this variation within the context of archaeological assemblages. Additionally, despite the abundance of source material, scholars have rarely considered whether marks appear to the same extent on single-sided turned vessels compared to those worked on both sides.

The considerable variety of marks, which nonetheless share certain features, calls for the establishment of a systematic classification. Such a classification could serve as a foundation for further, more detailed analyses and subdivisions. Until now, no attempt has been made to correlate the presence of a mark on a turned vessel with specific types of goods or particular manufacturing techniques. This leads to another question: might the presence of a mark on the bottom of a bowl or plate be linked to the value or quality of the artefact itself? The fact that not all vessels were marked suggests this

¹ Neugebauer 1975, 127–135; Nawrołscy 1986, 630–632; Buchholz 1994, 64; Müller 1996, 139–147; Polak 1997, 230; Falk 2002, 423–425; Kostrouch 2009, 493; Robben 2009, 175;

Kasprzak 2010, 175–176; Bobik 2012, 186; 2016, 148; Rakoczy 2016, 94; Bucka 2017, 167; Starski 2017, 146–149; Szajt, Wieczorek-Kańczura 2018, 329–335.

possibility. Starting from this premise, it may become easier to approach the question already present in the literature: did marks on turned vessels indicate the maker or the owner of the item?

Preliminary Issues

In descriptions of late-medieval and early-modern marks on wooden vessels, two main interpretations are most commonly cited. The first identifies the marks as signatures of craftsmen, sometimes referred to as ‘maker’s marks’. Such designations appear in relation to both turned and stave-built vessels.² The symbol – usually incised on the outer side of the base – is thought to have identified the workshop from which the vessel originated and attested to the high quality of its workmanship.³ In contrast to coopered wares, however, there are no known references to guild regulations or municipal statutes mentioning the practice of marking turned products.⁴

The second popular interpretation described these symbols as “private” marks, specifically those of the owner or user of the vessel.⁵ This view relies on the assumption that bowls and plates were intended for personal use and that multiple families often resided within a single household. Since these items often possessed fairly standardized forms, marking them is presumed to have been a method to prevent confusion or theft.⁶

A frequent issue in discussions of ‘private’ and ‘craftsmen’s’ marks is the rather free and interchangeable use of terms such as ‘ownership marks’⁷ and ‘maker’s marks’,⁸ resulting in the conflation of these two distinct interpretations – even though they refer, in principle, to different phenomena. Although this may appear confusing, it is not without justification. A mark frequently functioned as a form of signature, as evidenced by numerous written sources (for example, the register of the town council of Puck,⁹ which is discussed later in this article). In the literature, such signs are often referred to as ‘house marks’ (*Hausmarken*).¹⁰ Consequently, it is highly probable that a craftsman employed the same mark both to identify his products and for private purposes. In such cases, a distinction between a ‘private’ and a ‘craftsmen’s’

mark can only be made based on context, which is often difficult to ascertain.

A particularly interesting example in this context is a group of wooden bowls from Göttingen, bearing marks of the local shoemakers’ guild, which have been interpreted as identifying either the owners or the clients who had commissioned the vessels.¹¹ This would, therefore, represent a case where, although the mark was likely applied by a craftsman, it was done on commission and according to a design specified by the intended user. These should therefore be clearly regarded as ownership marks.

Another example of archaeological finds bearing ownership-related marks comes from excavations at the Augustinian monastery in Freiburg, where 163 turned bowls and plates with marks on the exterior of the base were recovered. More than half bore a scorched majuscule letter “A”. Based on the palaeographic analysis of the letter’s stylistic features, it was established that this mark was applied to vessels over a period of at least one hundred years. For this reason – and given the context of the find – the most likely interpretation is that the mark indicated vessels belonging to the Augustinian community; similar practices are known from other monasteries, and on some plates and bowls, additional marks were noted, presumably indicating previous owners (if the vessel had been donated) or specific users among the monks.¹² A very different situation is observed in Wismar, where 35 wooden vessels with marks interpreted as ownership symbols were found in a cesspit associated with the Beguine convent. However, except for two, each vessel bore a different mark.¹³

In terms of style, ownership-related marks do not differ significantly from those considered craftsmen’s marks; they also consist of more or less geometric lines incised into the base of the item. When dealing with single finds, it is therefore difficult to determine the type of mark involved. Nevertheless, attempts are sometimes made to distinguish them based on the quality of execution: those more carefully incised are presumed to be craftsmen’s marks, whereas cruder examples are interpreted as belonging to private individuals – or as holding no specific meaning.¹⁴ These are, however, often subjective

² Holl 1966, 62; Scholkmann 1982, 128; Buchholz 1994, 66; Morris 2000, 2260–2261; Falk 2002, 423; Nawrońska 2009, 90; Bobik 2012, 186; 2016, 148; Rakoczy 2016, 94; Rembisz-Lubiejewska 2021, 111; Szajt 2021, 22.

³ Falk 2002, 423.

⁴ Bogucka 1963; Tandecki 1983.

⁵ Holl 1966, 62; Scholkmann 1982, 128; Müller 1996, 140; Polak 1998, 254; Baran 2005, 433–434; Kasprzak 2010, 173; Bobik 2012, 186; 2016, 148; Haak, Russow 2012, 162; Rakoczy 2016, 94; Bucka 2017, 167; Starski 2017, 134; Szajt, Wiczorek-Kańczura 2018, 327; Szajt 2021, 74.

⁶ Baran 2005, 433.

⁷ Neugebauer 1975, 122; Śledź 1979, 354; Schäfer 1992, 60; Müller 1996, 140.

⁸ Bobik 2012, 186; Bucka 2017, 167.

⁹ APGd. 519/41.

¹⁰ Homeyer 1870.

¹¹ Scholkmann 1982, 128.

¹² Müller 1996, 138–139, 144–146.

¹³ Buchholz 1994, 62–64.

¹⁴ Müller 1996, 140–141; Falk 2002, 423; Bobik 2016, 148.

criteria, and it is worth considering the basis upon which the level of care in a mark's execution is assessed. No stencil was used in their creation (except for scorched marks), and they were most commonly cut by hand using a knife.

Turned vessels are not the only category of wooden artefacts on which marks are recorded.¹⁵ They also appear in great numbers on barrels; in the case of coopered wares, these are usually considered to be merchant marks. This is, naturally, related to their function: the barrel served as a container for various goods, and the mark was closely tied to the organization and operation of trade. Turned vessels, by contrast, were personal items used for dining, implying that the marks recorded on them likely possessed a different meaning. For this reason, it is generally assumed that the marks found on wooden bowls and plates most likely represent either craftsmen or private owners.

Despite several possible interpretations found in archaeological literature, it is rarely possible to determine with certainty what type of mark is present on a given wooden vessel or to whom it belonged. In the analysis of any archaeological find, the context of discovery is essential; it may indicate the function of the artefact and, above all, help establish its dating. It must be borne in mind that simple linear symbols such as marks could have been used by different individuals at different times.¹⁶ Moreover, the duration of use of a particular mark is often difficult to determine; it could serve only during the owner's lifetime, period of professional activity, or for a shorter or longer duration depending on circumstances. Medieval written sources attest to the practice of inheriting marks within a family. In some cases, a mark was transmitted from father to son without alteration, while in others it underwent various modifications across successive generations, either as a result of gradual transformation or to differentiate between siblings using the same mark.¹⁷ Comparable examples from the 19th and 20th centuries show that marks used by Pomeranian fishermen were subject to modification within the same family across generations.¹⁸

Analysis of the Finds

The study analyses 94 turned wooden vessels bearing marks, dated from the mid-14th to the mid-16th century,

recovered during archaeological excavations in Elbląg, Gdańsk, and Puck (modern-day Poland). Although only artefacts bearing marks are described in detail here, many observations have been made in relation to the entirety of the turned vessel assemblages from the relevant excavations. The selection of source material is justified as these centres developed within the same region, undergoing similar historical processes, while maintaining individual characteristics determined by each town's status.¹⁹ This enables comparative analysis among finds from culturally comparable urban contexts within the medieval landscape, reflecting different levels of urban wealth – from major centres like Gdańsk and Elbląg to a small town such as Puck.

Of 522 turned vessels from Elbląg, 68 bear marks: 55 were turned on both sides, and 13 were single-sided. These come from archaeological investigations conducted over approximately 30 years in the Old Town area.²⁰ The artefacts are currently housed at the Museum of Archaeology and History in Elbląg. The analyses described here are based on drawn documentation and direct examination of selected artefacts.

Nineteen turned vessels, dated between the 14th and 16th centuries, were selected from the available assemblages – specifically excavations at Powroźnicza Street in Gdańsk, a survey of the Archaeological Museum in Gdańsk, and published sources.²¹ Of these, 12 were double-sided and seven single-sided; this is admittedly a small and likely incomplete sample, particularly in light of the extensive archaeological work conducted in this city over many years. The complexity of Gdańsk's archaeological context, with excavations conducted by numerous institutions, complicates efforts to broaden and synthesize the source base.²² For this reason, more detailed analyses and statistical summaries are presented for the assemblage from the Powroźnicza and Długi Targ areas (69 turned vessels in total, 8 of them bearing marks), as full access was available to all wooden finds from that site and the field documentation.

In the course of extensive and long-term excavations within the chartered town area of Puck, 55 turned wooden vessels were recovered, yet marks were recorded on only six double-sided and one single-sided specimen.²³ Despite the small size of this collection, it reflects several important phenomena that will be discussed further.

¹⁵ Neugebauer 1975, 117–137; Schäfer, Patzelt 1992, 48–49; Buchholz 1994, 62–89; Polak 1997, 230; Falk 2002, 422–434; Ansoerge *et al.* 2003, 133; Robben 2008, 77–86; Kasprzak 2007, 9; 2010, 173; Ossowski 2014, 260–261, 271–274; Bobik 2012, 186; 2016, 148; Bucka 2017, 167; Starski 2017, 134–137; Rembisz-Lubiejewska 2021, 111; Miścicki 2022, 401, 408–409, 413.

¹⁶ Robben 2009, 176; Możejko 2014, 68–69.

¹⁷ Homeyer 1870, 189–192; Ruppel 1939, 34–41.

¹⁸ Namysłowski 1925, 121.

¹⁹ Biskup 1967; Czaja 2000.

²⁰ Fonferek *et al.* 2012, 16–19; Nawrońska 2012, 20–23; 2014, 44–50.

²¹ Kasprzak 2007, 9; 2010, 173; Miścicki 2022, 401, 408–409, 413.

²² Paner 2006, 11–88.

²³ Starski 2017, 134–137.

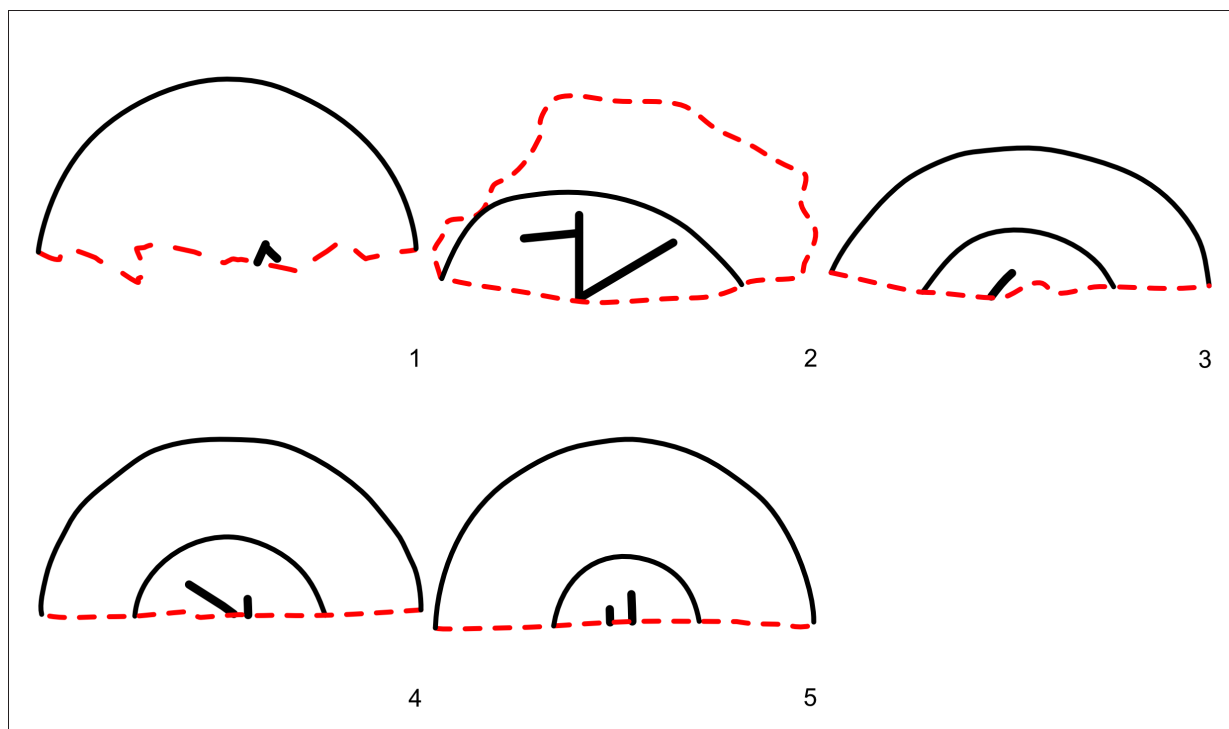


Fig. 1. Illegible marks. Gdańsk (1–2), Elbląg (3–4), Puck (5). Vessel turned from one side (1), vessels turned from both sides (2–5). The 2nd quarter of the 14th cent. (1), 14th to 15th cent. (2–4), 15th cent. (5); (compiled by M. Miścicki).

Due to the available source base, most observations are based on finds from Elbląg dated to the 14th and 15th centuries, although the artefacts from Gdańsk and Puck display similar characteristics. In all cases, the mark is located on the outer side of the base, and among double-sided turned vessels it appears almost exclusively on items with a raised foot. Marks on such objects tend to be better preserved in archaeological assemblages, as their bases are generally smaller, thicker, and flatter. In post-depositional conditions, the thinner and protruding vessel walls are more susceptible to cracking and deformation. Moreover, turned vessels were made from a single piece of wood, meaning they do not fragment in the same manner as multi-component stave-built vessels. Unlike barrel staves, which were often reused (for example, to line yards),²⁴ turned plates and bowls were typically discarded after use, reducing the likelihood of markings being worn away. Nonetheless, five marks in the analysed set remain unidentified due to their fragmentary state of preservation (Fig. 1).

Based on the analysed material, three categories of marks on turned vessels can be distinguished, identified

according to technique and style of execution. The first group comprises scorched marks, noted on only three specimens: two from Elbląg and one from Gdańsk (Fig. 2:1–3). Among published archaeological finds, scorched marks are significantly less common than incised ones and are more often found on small bowls and stave-built vessels than on barrels. There is no consensus whether they functioned as guild or craftsman's stamps, marks of ownership, or carriers of decorative or symbolic meanings²⁵. The remaining marks were incised with a sharp tool, most likely a knife. These incisions are typically narrow and vary in depth. Within this group, a second category can be identified: diverse marks of compact composition, consisting of several straight, broken, and intersecting lines in generally regular and legible arrangements. Many display an axial structure resembling an arrow or with one or two ends terminating in a hook-like form, sometimes accompanied by diagonal or perpendicular bars. Others comprise geometric shapes with additional lines; unlike marks on barrels, similarities between marks on turned vessels are more commonly observed. A partially preserved symbol in the form of an elongat-

²⁴ Polak 1996, 332; Bobik 2016, 153; Blusiewicz 2017, 99, 115–116; Starski 2017, 134.

²⁵ Scholkmann 1982, 128; Müller 1996, 140–141; Falk 2002, 422–423; Kostrouch 2009, 493; Szajt, Wieczorek-Kańczura 2018, 327.

ed semicircular shield with an “X” in the centre appears on three Elbląg artefacts dated to the 14th–15th centuries (Fig. 2:6–8). Marks in the form of a simple “X” also recur in various variants in both Elbląg and Gdańsk, often with hook-shaped terminations or one side closed (Figs. 2:9–14; 3:1–8). Marks of this kind are particularly difficult to identify when not fully preserved, as variations in the termination of the arms could result in different representations.²⁶ Arrow-like marks with additional lines, found among artefacts from Elbląg and Gdańsk, are quite frequent and similar in appearance, differing in axis of symmetry or number of cross-incisions (Figs. 3:10–15; 4:1–8). The remainder form a varied set of broken and intersecting lines (Figs. 3:9; 4:9–15; and Figs. 5–7). Comparable linear symbols may differ slightly in the angle of intersection of straight lines, though it is difficult to determine whether these are distinct marks or the same mark rendered more carelessly. For very similar symbols, it is also possible that the mark functioned within a single family, with specific modifications indicating a particular family member.²⁷ However, such analyses would require a larger corpus of comparable marks and written sources linking them to individuals or surnames. One broken-line mark with additional incisions, found on the foot of two similar vessels from Elbląg, can be considered the same mark despite minor differences (Fig. 7:6–7). In the case of several faint lines, the possibility that they were created unintentionally during archaeological excavation cannot be excluded.

The turned vessel assemblage from Puck comprises only seven artefacts. One specimen bears a fragment of two parallel lines, which do not form a complete mark. In the remaining cases, the marks are legible and either fully preserved or sufficiently so to allow reconstruction (Figs. 1:5; 6:4; 7:5, 8–11). Four of these were recovered from a single urban plot located approximately 20 m east of the chartered town’s market square. All four bear the same mark in the form of a cross standing on the letter “W” (Fig. 7:8–11). The vessels are not of the same type: two are deep plates with an S-shaped profile and a wide, flared rim; two others are U-shaped bowls, one of which has a wide base and a flat, pronounced rim. A similar mark appears on the base of a barrel found in the same plot. These finds are dated to the 15th century, suggesting that they may have belonged to a single household.²⁸ Wood species analysis indicates that all these items were made of limewood. Among the four double-sided turned vessels without marks from the same context, three were also made of limewood.²⁹ The similarity in mate-

rial, form, and dating may point to a single workshop, though associating the mark with a craftsman may be premature in this instance. Since only some vessels are marked, the symbol could just as well identify the owner. A similar mark, dated to the 14th–15th centuries, was recorded on a double-sided turned bowl from Elbląg with an S-shaped profile and a broad, flared rim. However, in this case, the mark takes the form of a letter “T” (rather than a cross) standing on a “W” (Fig. 3:8).

Apart from the mark from Puck described above, only two other cases were recorded in the analysed material where similar marks appeared on different double-sided turned vessels from Elbląg (Figs. 2:2, 6; 5:1–2; 7:6–7). Among the remaining marks from Elbląg, Gdańsk, and Puck, it is difficult to identify analogous symbols, though some bear partial similarity. The similarities, however, are never unequivocal, and there is no basis to consider them the same mark or variants thereof. This is especially true for simple marks, where apparent likenesses do not necessarily indicate any link between their users.

The third group of marks identified in the analysed sample consists of highly patterned, complex, regular, star-shaped, or multi-branched symbols that differ entirely from the previous groups. These were noted on one double-sided turned vessel from Elbląg and one single-sided turned vessel from Gdańsk. It is worth considering whether these might represent a form of decoration rather than a mark in the sense described earlier (Fig. 2:4–5).

Results

Marks of the second group clearly dominate the analysed collection, appearing on 89 out of the 94 artefacts discussed. This trend contrasts with the stylistic diversity of marks on barrels, which are much more varied. A significantly higher frequency of marks is observed on double-sided turned vessels (73 specimens), compared to only 21 single-sided ones.

It is worth noting that single-sided turned vessels, typically worked from the inside, dominate late-medieval assemblages. This is attributed to high demand and the fact that single-sided turning required less labour, allowing for quicker and larger-scale production.³⁰ Artefacts from Elbląg, Gdańsk, and Puck conform to this model, though the disparities are not pronounced. Of the 522 turned vessels from Elbląg, 312 are single-sided

²⁶ Homeyer 1870, pls. XV and XXIV.

²⁷ Homeyer 1870, 189–192; Namysłowski 1925, 121; Ruppel 1939, 34–41.

²⁸ Starski 2017, 146–149.

²⁹ Kozakiewicz 2017, tab. VII.2.

³⁰ Barnycz-Gupieniec 1959, 46; Szajt, Wiczorek-Kańczura 2018, 330.

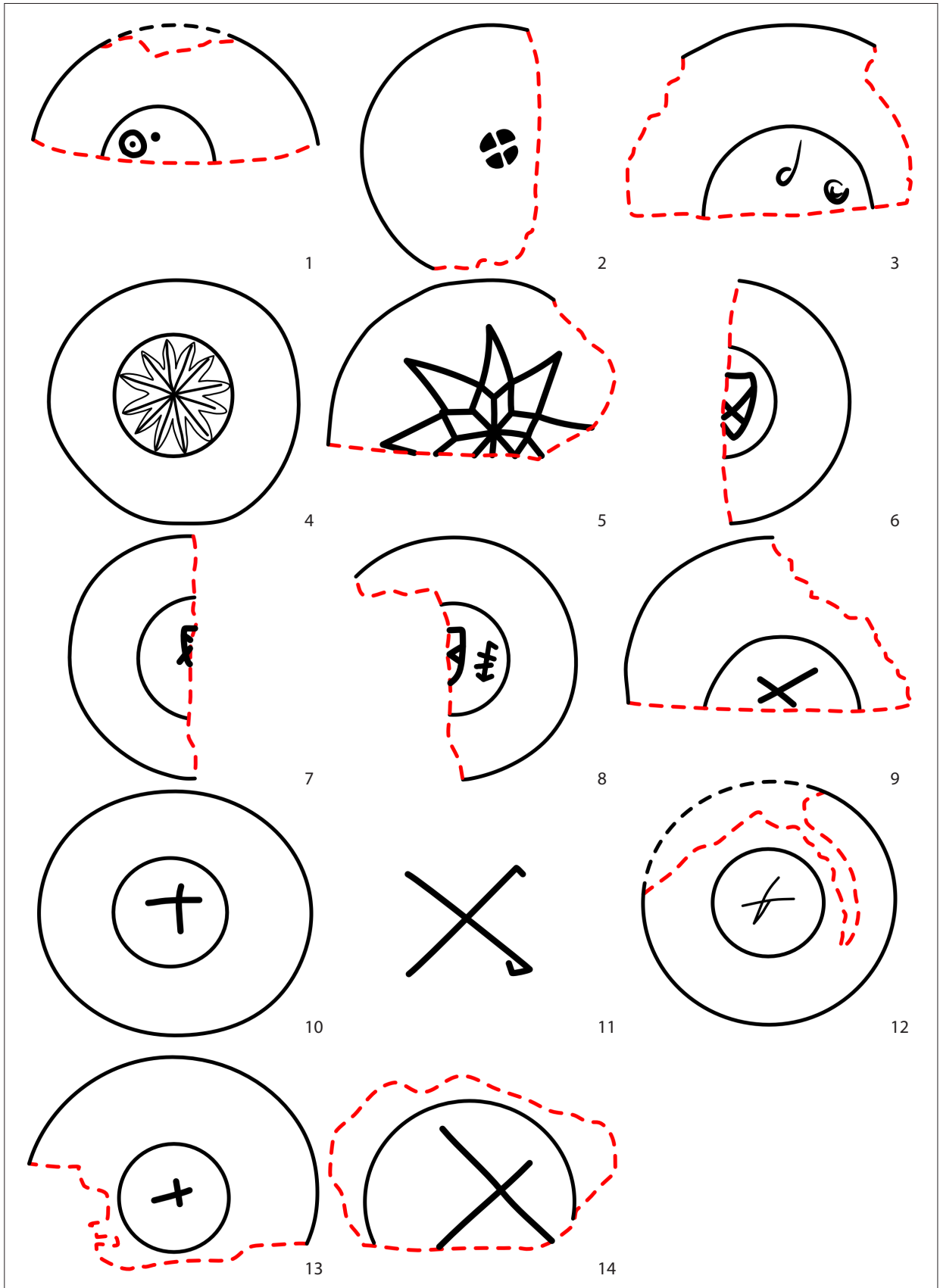


Fig. 2. Scorched marks (1–3), ‘decorative’ marks (4–5), carved marks (6–14). Elbląg (1–2, 4, 6–14), Gdańsk (3, 5). Vessels turned from both sides (1, 3–4, 6–10, 12–14), vessels turned on one side (2, 5, 11). The 14th to 15th cent. (6–11), 15th cent. (1–2, 4, 12–14), 15th/16th cent. (3, 5); (compiled by M. Miścicki).

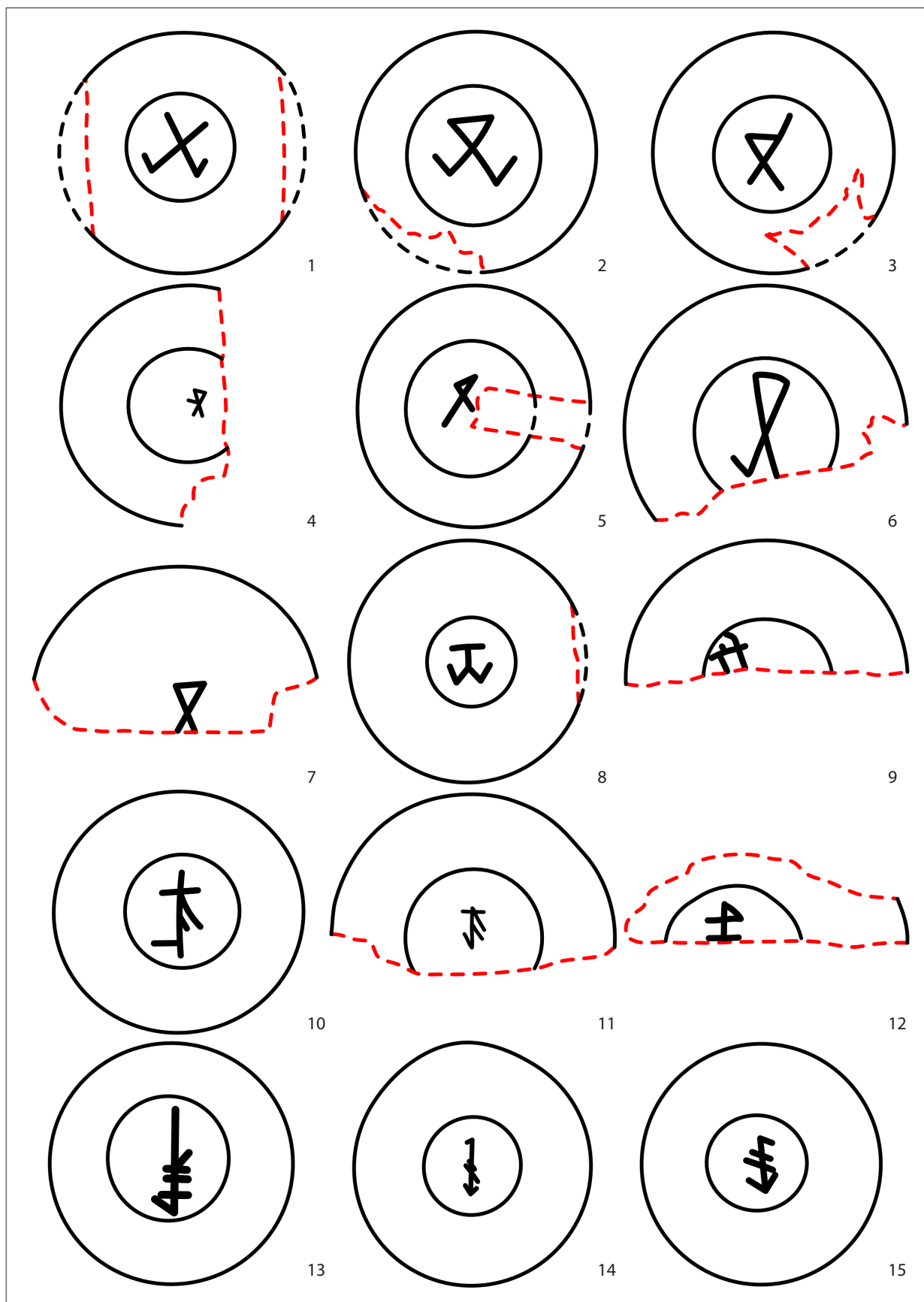


Fig. 3. Marks on vessels turned from both sides. Elbląg (1–6, 8–15), Gdańsk (7). The 14th to 15th cent. (1–4, 8–15), 15th cent. (5–6), 14th to 16th cent. (7); (compiled by M. Miścicki).

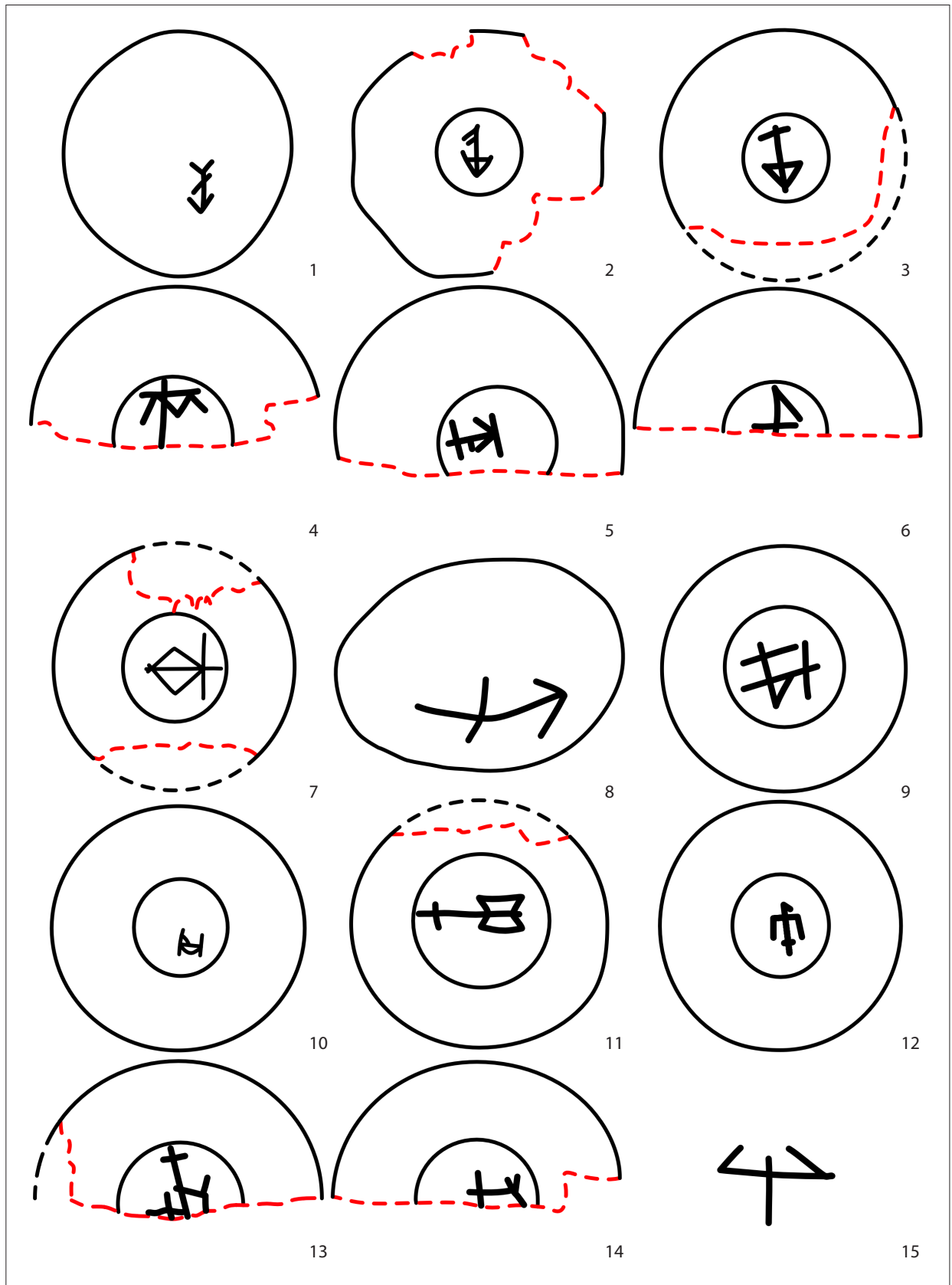


Fig. 4. Marks on turned vessels. Elbląg (1–7, 9–15), Gdańsk (8). Vessel turned from one side (1), vessels turned from both sides (2–15). The 14th to 15th cent. (9–15), 15th cent. (1–8); (compiled by M. Miścicki).

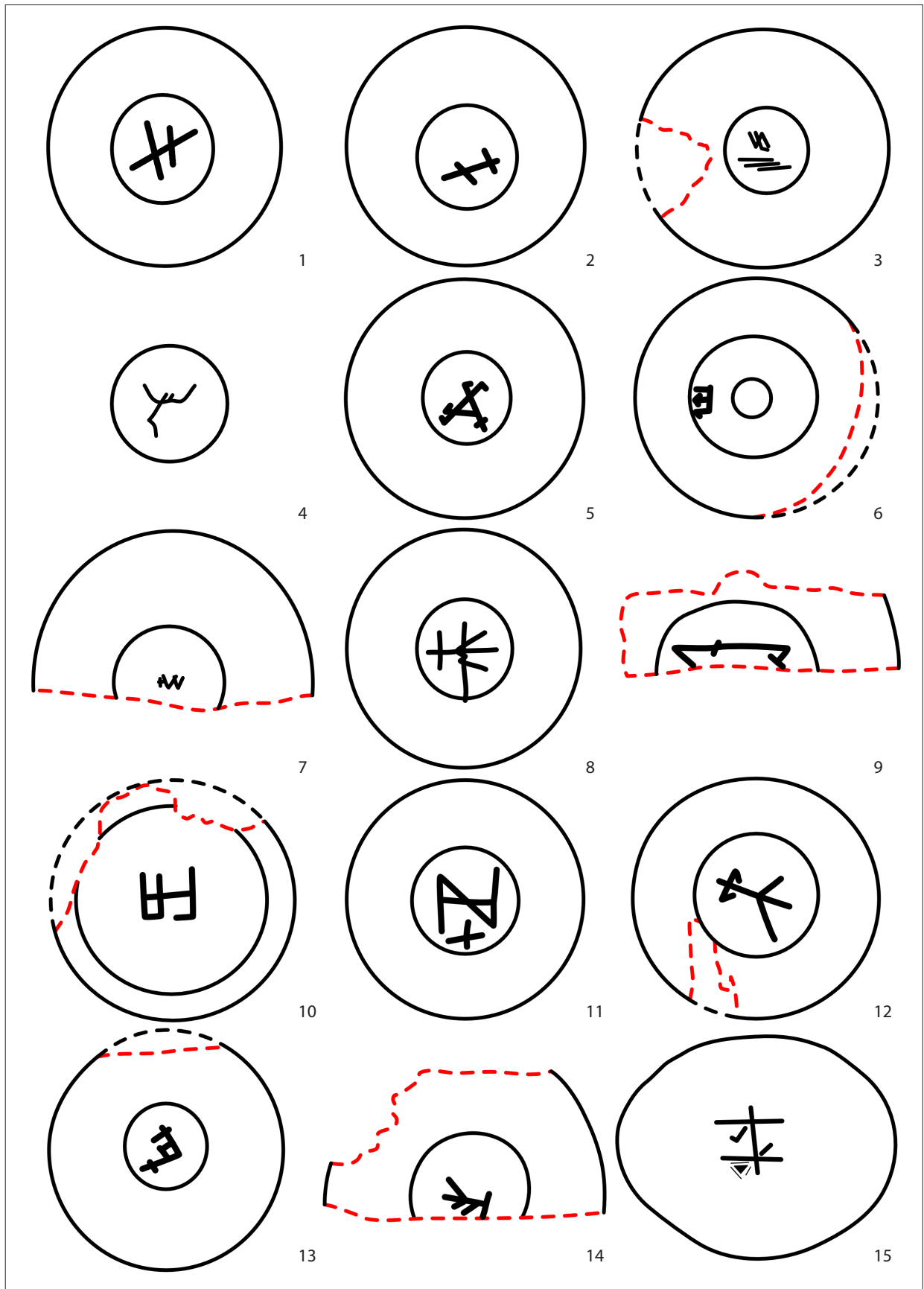


Fig. 5. Marks on vessels turned from both sides. Elbląg (1–14), Gdańsk (15). The 14th to mid-15th cent. (15), 14th to 15th cent. (1–2), 15th cent. (3–14); (compiled by M. Miścicki).

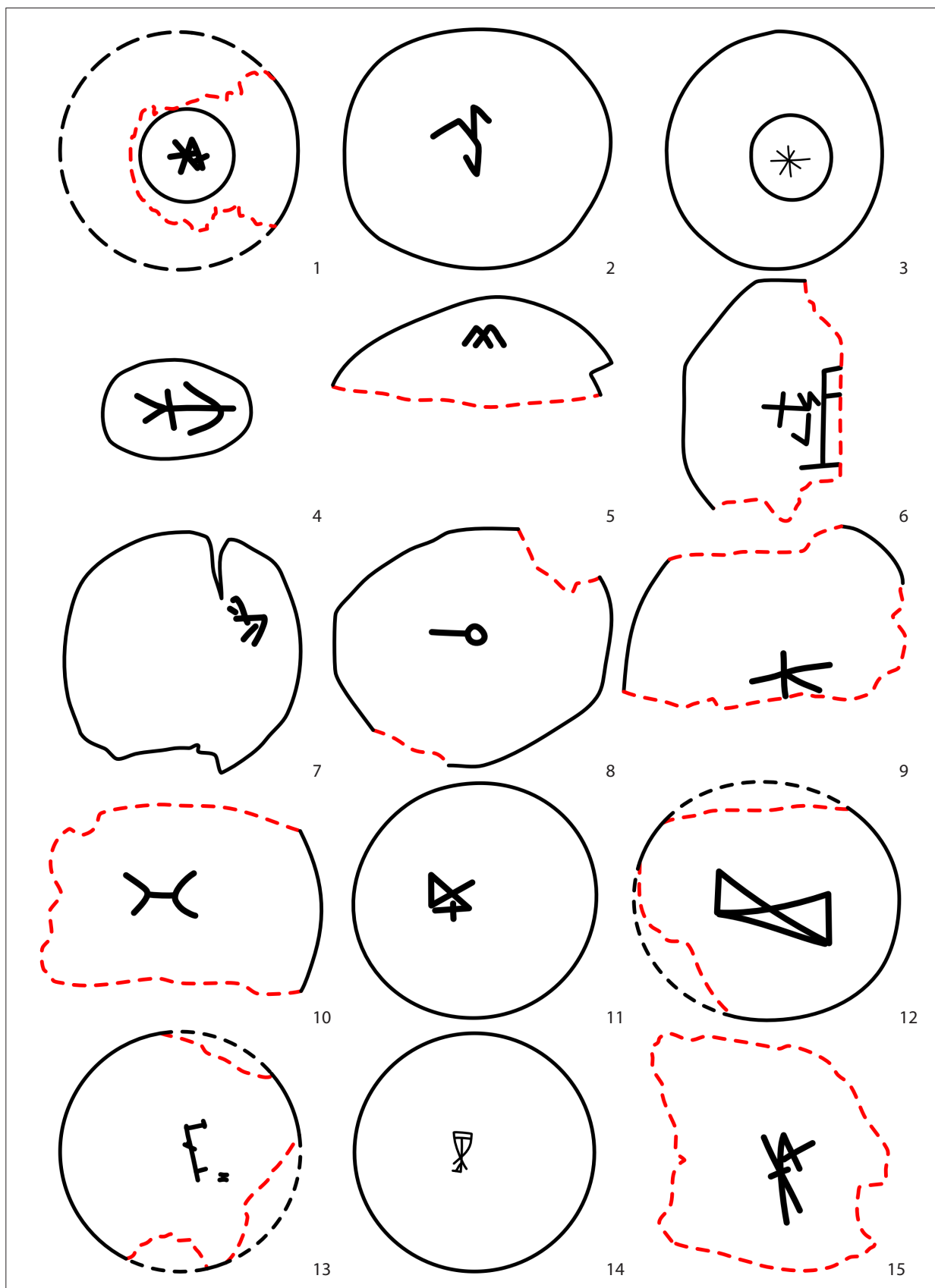


Fig. 6. Marks on turned vessels. Gdańsk (1–3, 5, 7), Puck (4), Elbląg (6, 8–15). Vessels turned from both sides (1–5), vessels turned from one side (6–15). The 14th cent. (6, 8), late 14th to mid-15th cent. (1–2), 14th to 15th cent. (9–12), 15th cent. (3–4, 13–15), 15th to 16th cent. (5); (compiled by M. Miścicki).

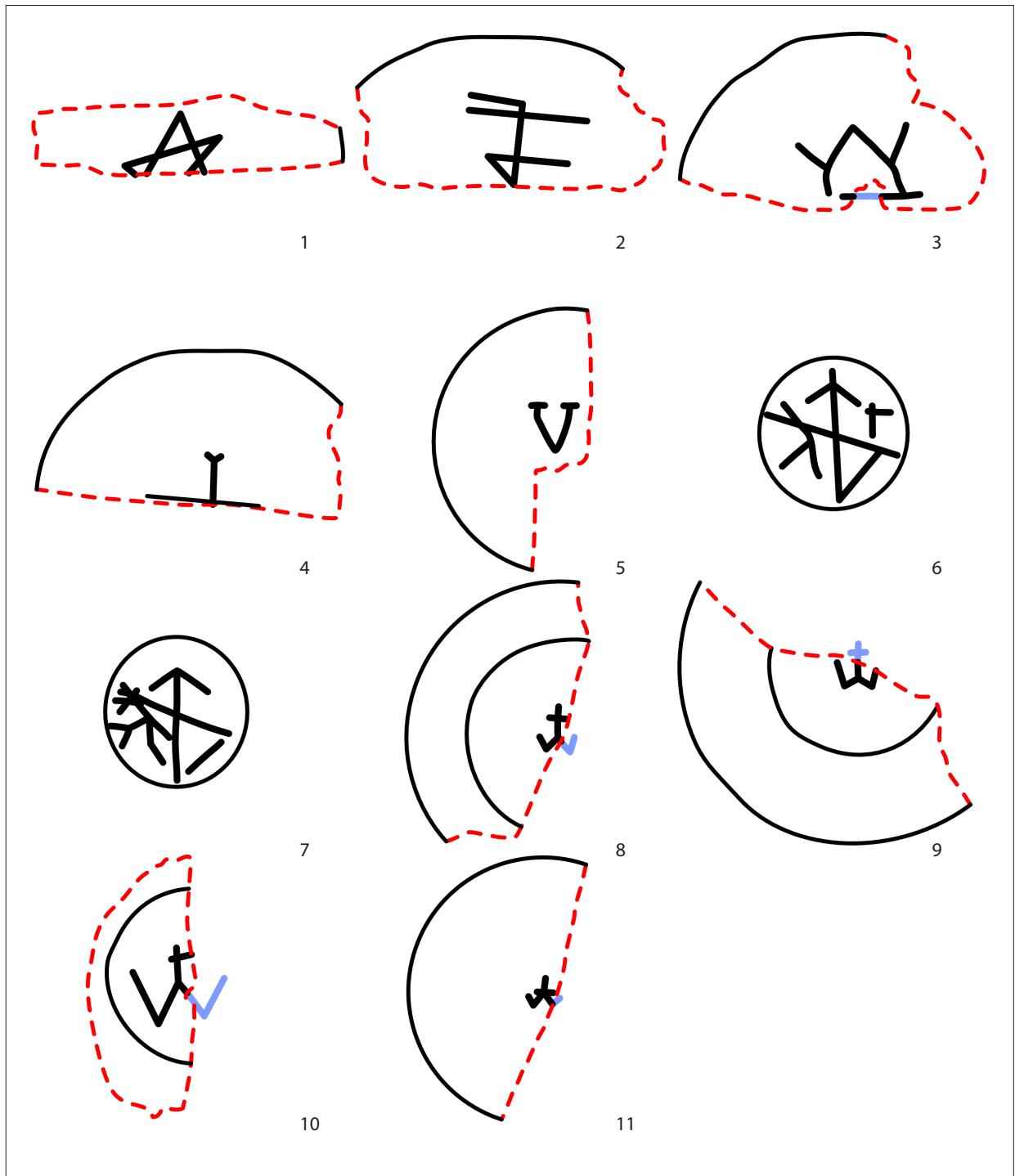


Fig. 7. Marks on turned vessels. Gdańsk (1–4), Puck (5, 8–11), Elbląg (6–7). Vessels turned from one side (1–5), vessels turned from both sides (6–11). The mid-14th cent. (1), mid-14th to early 15th cent. (5), 14th to 15th cent. (4, 6–7), 15th cent. (2–3, 8–11), 15th to 16th cent. (4); (compiled by M. Miścicki).

(59.2%) and 210 double-sided (40.8%). At Powroźnicza Street in Gdańsk, 39 of the 69 finds are single-sided (56.5%), with 30 double-sided (43.5%). In Puck, 34 are single-sided (61.8%) and 21 double-sided (38.2%). The percentage of marked vessels is similar across the towns: 13% in Elbląg (68 artefacts), 11.6% in Gdańsk (8 artefacts), and 12.7% in Puck (7 artefacts).

When considering manufacturing technique, the distribution of marked items is significantly skewed: single-sided vessels – although the majority in all assemblages – were marked far less frequently. In Elbląg, only 13 of 312 single-sided vessels bear marks (4.2%); in Gdańsk, 3 of 39 (7.7%); and in Puck, just 1 of 34 (2.9%). For double-sided vessels, Elbląg shows 55 out of 210 (26.2%), Puck 6 of 21 (28.6%), and Gdańsk 5 of 30 (16.7%). Although the small sample sizes from Puck and Gdańsk limit certainty, these figures still reflect trends comparable to Elbląg.

This clearly indicates that marking was closely linked to the method of manufacture. Whether the type of vessel also influenced the presence of a mark is more difficult to determine. The main categories are bowls and plates; bowls are generally defined as hemispherical or U-shaped deep forms with simple or short rims.³¹ Plates are shallower vessels with wider diameters, more obtuse angles between base and wall, and developed rims – either flat or flared.³² These criteria are subjective and fluid, often leading to inconsistencies or intermediate categories such as “shallow bowls” or “deep plates”.³³ Given these terminological challenges, it is not currently feasible to determine whether marks appeared more frequently on bowls or plates. Based on commonly cited classification criteria, no significant difference in marking frequency between the two types was observed in the analysed assemblage.

Wood species identification was carried out on 23 single-sided and 19 double-sided vessels from the 55 turned finds in Puck, and on all 69 turned vessels from Powroźnicza Street in Gdańsk (no such data is available for Elbląg).³⁴ Single-sided vessels from both Puck and Gdańsk were almost exclusively made of ash (*Fraxinus L.*), with only one beech (*Fagus L.*) example from Puck. Among double-sided turned vessels, 8 from Puck were made of ash, 7 of lime (*Tilia sp.*), while in Gdańsk, 14 were ash and 13 were maple (*Acer sp.*). Other identified species, such as beech, birch (*Betula sp.*), and oak (*Quercus sp.*), were represented by individual artefacts. Marks were found only on vessels made of the most commonly used species – an unsurprising outcome given the size of the assemblage. While small sample sizes from Puck and Gdańsk limit statistical sig-

nificance, the data suggest that wood type had little influence on whether a vessel was marked.

Most vessels were marked with only a single mark, which is the norm in the analysed material. A few Elbląg specimens bear two unrelated marks on the same base (Fig. 5:3), and one mark appears both independently and in combination with another mark on separate vessels (Figs. 2:8; 3:15). A similar practice was noted in the Augustinian friary in Freiburg, where a majuscule “A” indicated that the vessel belonged to the order, while an additional mark identified the specific user.³⁵ However, the limited data make it difficult to apply this interpretation to the finds in question.

As previously mentioned, written sources from the 14th to 16th centuries do not provide direct information about the marking of wooden vessels. Nonetheless, marks are found in various documents and may assist in identifying their users. In the case of Puck, a town council book survives, containing marginal notes with mark-like symbols from the first half of the 15th century.³⁶ Fourteen such marks were recorded, some with precise dates (Fig. 8). Only one matches a mark from a Puck vessel (Figs. 7:8–11; 8:2). Interestingly, three correspond to marks found on 14th–15th century Elbląg vessels (Figs. 3:2; 4:2; 5:10; 8:7, 9, 14). Deciphering the accompanying entries could help link these symbols to individuals, although this would require further work by a historian specializing in such records. It must also be remembered that marks are relatively simple symbols, and some similarities may be coincidental, especially given a potential century-wide dating margin.

Conclusions

This analysis of marks on wooden vessels from Elbląg, Gdańsk, and Puck allows the following conclusions to be drawn. The marking of turned vessels between the mid-14th and mid-16th centuries was a common practice, evidenced by the very low recurrence of identical marks despite the sizeable sample. However, the few similarities observed are difficult to interpret at the current stage of research.

The vast majority of marks appeared on double-sided turned bowls and plates. In Elbląg, for example, they occur on around one-quarter of such items. In contrast, only a few percent of single-sided turned vessels were marked. This may suggest that marks were applied to more expensive, higher-quality vessels that required greater skill and effort to produce – namely, double-sided

³¹ Barnycz-Gupieniec 1959, 12–14.

³² Barnycz-Gupieniec 1959, 17; Starski 2017, 145.

³³ Szajt, Wieczorek-Kańczura 2018, 329.

³⁴ Kozakiewicz 2017, 177–192; 2024.

³⁵ Müller 1996, 138–139, 144–146.

³⁶ APGd. 519/41.

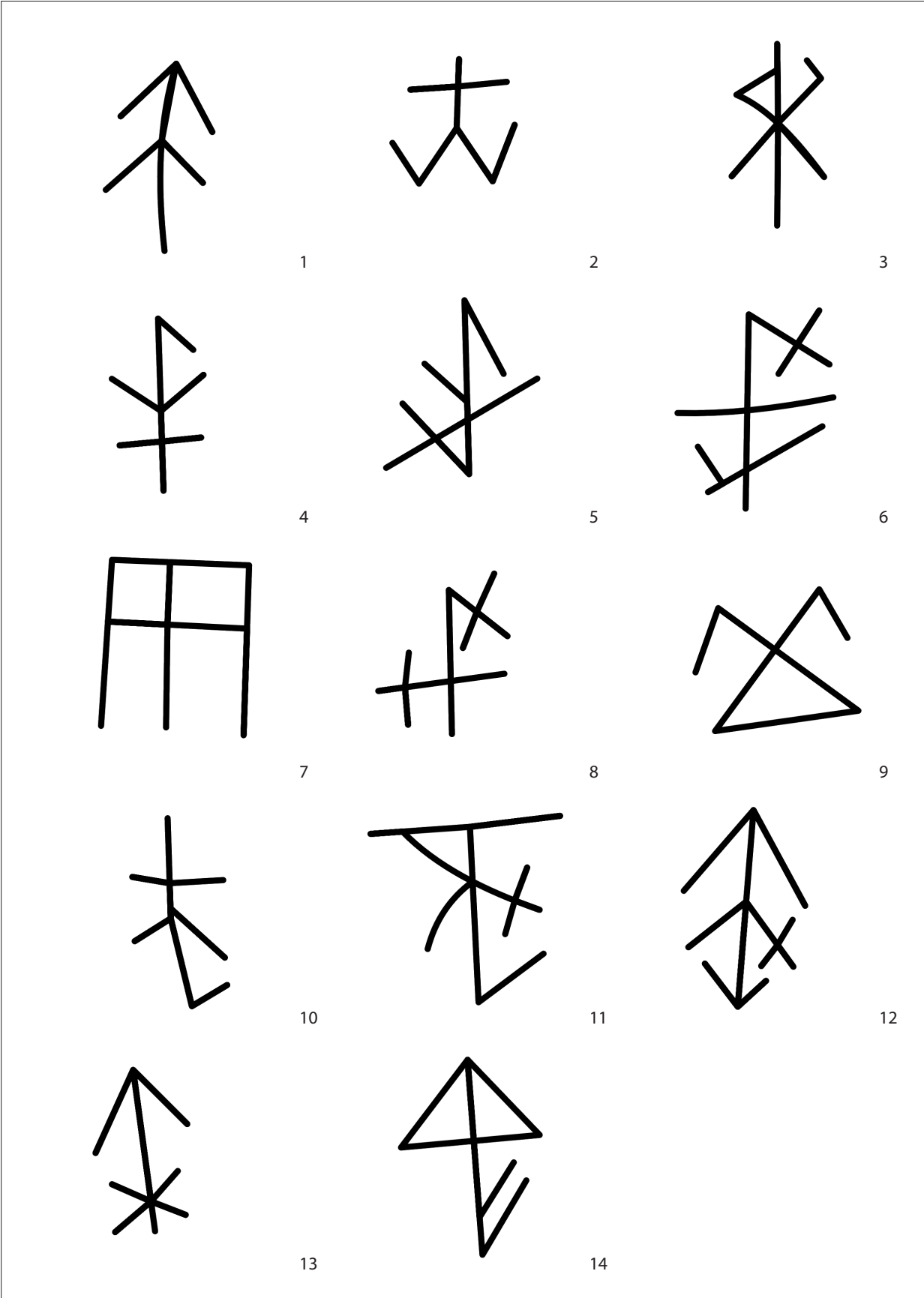


Fig. 8. Marks from the register of the town council of Puck (APGd. 519/41; compiled by M. Miścicki).

turned wares – while simpler, cheaper, single-sided vessels were rarely marked.

The wider variety of wood used for double-sided turned vessels likely reflects the different properties of each species – workability, physical characteristics, and aesthetic appeal.³⁷ These qualities undoubtedly influenced the value of the vessel, though no clear correlation was observed between wood species and the presence of a mark in the analysed sample. This remains a fruitful direction for future research. As for determining whether vessel type influenced marking practices, this would require a standardized typology and clearer definitions, which are currently lacking.

Three groups of marks were distinguished based on the analysed material, with Group 2 – compact, legible, and stylistically simple – being the most numerous. Marks of this type are usually classified as either craftsmen's or ownership marks, indicating either the maker or the user.³⁸ Some have proposed that craftsman's marks were more carefully executed than private ones,³⁹ but neither the current sample nor published examples support this distinction – particularly as most were simply cut with a knife.

An interesting case in this regard is the Puck assemblage, where four double-sided turned vessels from what was likely the same household bear identical marks. All were made of limewood and exhibit high-quality craftsmanship, suggesting they may have come from the same workshop. Yet, similar vessels from the same site lack marks; since one urban plot was often inhabited by multiple families, the mark could instead indicate ownership.

Regardless of interpretation, the current appearance of a mark does not allow for a definitive determination of whether it is a craftsman's mark, an ownership mark, or another type of symbol. The proposed classification of three groups – based on method of execution and style – is useful for organizing and describing such finds, but

is not yet capable of linking marks to specific individuals or groups. This is a separate line of inquiry that must involve historians, palaeographers, and sigillographers. It should also be noted that a craftsman might have employed the same mark for both private and professional purposes, as it functioned as a signature identifying not only the individual but also his family, corresponding to what is described in the sources as a house mark. In such cases, interpreting the intention behind the placement of a given mark on a vessel may be impossible.

In general, mark analysis on wooden vessels raises more research questions than it answers. Even the large corpus of marks from Elbląg, Gdańsk, and Puck does not resolve fundamental issues regarding their identification and function. Nevertheless, this is the first attempt to systematically study so many marks on wooden vessels from multiple urban centres on the southern Baltic coast. The study identifies characteristic features and marking trends on late medieval turned vessels, which require confirmation through a broader source base. Further development of research on marks will depend on expanding the corpus with new finds and producing synthetic analyses of this material.

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³⁷ Stępnik 1996, 264–266; Wysocka 2001, 175.

³⁸ Holl 1966, 62; Scholkmann 1982, 128; Buchholz 1994, 66; Falk 2002, 423; Nawrońska 2009, 90; Bobik 2012, 186; 2016,

148; Rakoczy 2016, 94; Rembisz-Lubiejewska 2021, 111; Szajt 2021, 22.

³⁹ Müller 1996, 140–141; Falk 2002, 423; Bobik 2016, 148.

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