

Tradition, Innovation, and Imitation in the Material Culture of Islamic Jordan: The First Four Centuries

Introduction

Excavations at Pella of the Decapolis (Ṭabaqat Faḥl) by the University of Sydney, Australia,¹ from 1979 to 1990 have produced a comprehensive corpus of early Islamic ceramics and other classes of material culture (metalwork, glass, and worked bone for instance) from a stratigraphically controlled context. The recovery of copper, silver and gold coins of the period has permitted the construction of a historical framework for this material. The aim of this paper is to provide an up-to-date classification of early Islamic ceramic forms found at Ṭabaqat Faḥl and to trace their developments from about AD 660 into the 10th century. Aspects of this work has already appeared in various journals and books,² but no integrated study has yet been offered which focuses on the artistic and technological evolution of pottery in Jordan during the first four centuries of Islam. Particular attention will be paid to matters of continuity and change as a reflection (however imperfect) of modifications to the social and economic structure of Jordan in the early middle ages.

Archaeological Contexts

The source material for this paper mostly originates from two areas of the Pella excavations: Area IV on the central mound (Khirbat Faḥl) and Area XXIX in Wādī al-Khandaq (FIG. 1). A brief discussion of the progress of work in these areas and the archaeological results will as-

sist in placing this material in its stratigraphical and chronological context.³

Area IV

The area excavations of Area IV were undertaken between 1979 and 1983, exposing around 1700 square metres of an extensive residential/commercial quarter in continuous use from the second quarter of the sixth century until the catastrophic earthquake of AD 747/8 (FIG. 2).⁴ At first the two-storied houses of stone blocks and clay bricks conformed to a grid pattern of gravelled streets, but in the later seventh century the configuration of the quarter underwent a major remodelling. The principal east-west street of Area IV was blocked off and the existing architecture converted into three sizeable houses, each facing outwards onto a large open courtyard. Ceramics from this rebuilding phase were associated with coins from the reign of the Byzantine Emperor Constans II (AD 641–68), which strongly indicates that the earthquake of 659/60 initiated this programme of reconstruction.

The final destruction of the Area IV residential quarter resulted from the very powerful 747/8 earthquake, which caused extensive damage at Pella/Fiḥl.⁵ The rich collection of artefacts from the sometimes two-metre thick destruction level is firmly coin-dated by Islamic issues as late as AH 126/AD 743–4.

¹ The Joint Sydney-Wooster Excavations at Pella proceed only through the active support and encouragement of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan. Renewed activity in the field during 1992 after the lull of the previous year is due to the positive assistance of Professor Safwan Tell, then Director-General of the Department. The Sydney seasons were sponsored by the Australian Research Council of the Department of Education, Employment and Training, Canberra; the Australian National Gallery, Canberra; The University of Sydney; and the University of Queensland, Brisbane. The very strong support of Australia's former Ambassador to Jordan, H.E. Mr R. Bowker, is greatly appreciated.

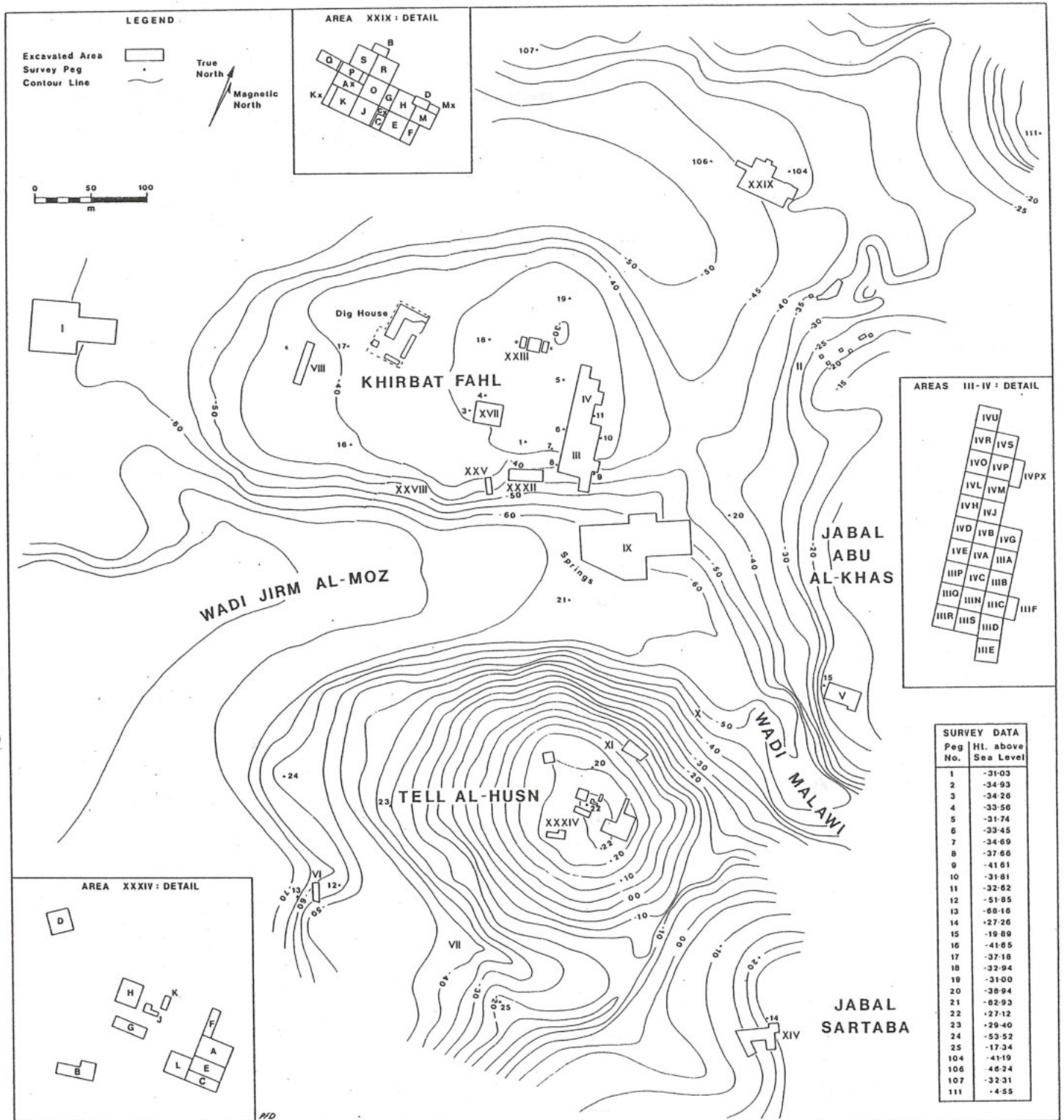
² See in particular: A. G. Walmsley, 'Abbasid Fiḥl: Implications for the Cultural History of Jordan', in M. A. Bakhit and R. Schick (eds.), *The History of Bilad al-Sham in the 'Abbasid Period: Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference*, Amman, The Committee, 1991, pp. 135–159; *id.* 'Pella (Ṭabaqat Faḥl)', in D. Homès-Fredericq and J. B. Hennessy (eds.), *The Archaeology of Jordan 2: Surveys and Field Reports*, Leuven, Peeters, 1989, pp. 406–441;

id. 'Pella/Fiḥl after the Islamic Conquest: A Convergence of Literary and Archaeological Evidence', *Mediterranean Archaeology* 1 (1988), pp. 142–159; *id.* 'Umayyad Pottery and its Antecedents', in A. W. McNicoll, R. H. Smith and J. B. Hennessy (eds.), *Pella in Jordan I: First Interim Report*, Canberra, Australian National Gallery, 1982; A. W. McNicoll *et al.*, 'Preliminary Report on the University of Sydney's Seventh Season of Excavations at Pella (Ṭabaqat Faḥl) 1985', *ADAJ* 30 (1986), pp. 155–198.

³ For a review of the late Antique-early Islamic urban development of Pella, see: A. G. Walmsley, 'The Social and Economic Regime at Fiḥl (Pella) between the 7th and 9th Centuries', in P. Canivet (ed.), *Actes du Colloque "La Syrie de Byzance à l'Islam"*, Damascus, 1992, pp. 249–261.

⁴ I remain thankful for the tremendous backing of the Late Anthony McNicoll in this endeavour.

⁵ See: Walmsley, 'Social and Economic Regime' for a recent summary.



1. Map of Tabaqat Fahl. Area II-IV: Domestic Quarter; Area XXIX, Abbasid Centre.

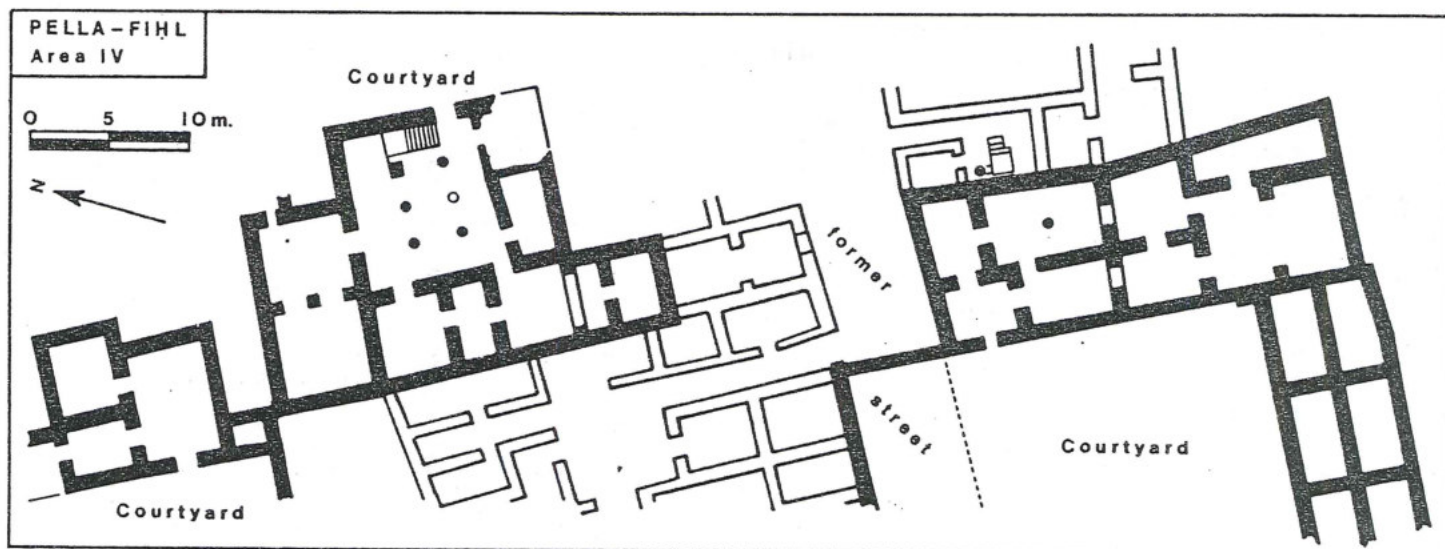
Area XXIX

The partial exposure of two stone-built complexes in Wādi al-Khandaq, 300 m north of the central mound

(FIGS. 1, 3), began with soundings in 1985 and continued with large-scale excavations in 1989 and 1990.⁶ Each complex is roughly rectangular, and originally consisted

⁶ A final season of excavations took place in October 1993, clarifying many issues, but the results of this work are too undigested to be included in this paper. Area XXIX is now (1994) being consolidated and preserved through a

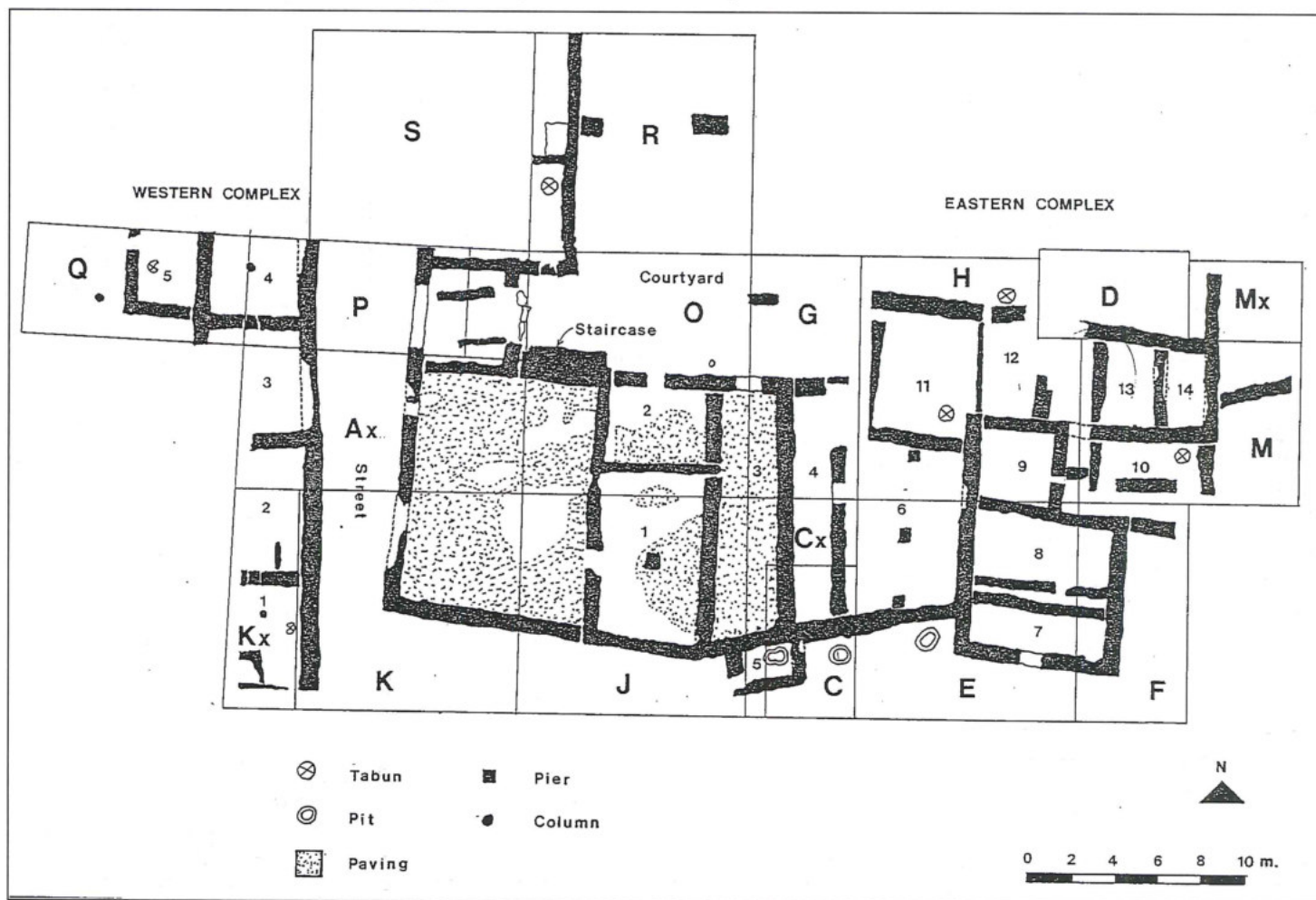
very generous grant from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and the support of the Minister Mr G. Evans is most appreciated.



2. Plan of the Umayyad Domestic Quarter in Area IV. Solid lines: two-storeyed units; open lines: derelict buildings, although parts still in use.

of numerous stone-built rooms around an expansive central courtyard. The presence of two complexes of similar plan is difficult to explain, but they probably served a

joint commercial/domestic function and met the economic and administrative needs of the later eighth–ninth century town.



3. General plan of the Courtyard Building and domestic units in Area XXIX.

Occupational layers, including sealed pits and refuse deposits, have produced a representative corpus of later eighth to 10th century pottery, iron work, glass, and worked bone. Coins and changes to the pottery assemblage confirms a post-747 construction date for the complexes, and as this is a single-period site the ceramic horizons are uncontaminated with earlier or later material. Two major occupational phases can be distinguished: the initial settlement of the later eighth century, and the subsequent main period of use probably from the mid-ninth to sometime in the 10th century.⁷

Pottery Wares: Types, Forms, and Changes

Analysis to date of the early Islamic pottery from Areas IV and XXIX has identified nineteen wares, not all current at the same period of time (FIG. 4).⁸ Stratigraphically the AD 659/60 earthquake destruction level provides a firm starting point for the corpus. Shortly after this date the range of wares and shapes undergoes the first noticeable change in the archaeological record: five wares fade from the corpus (Wares 1–5) and three new ones appear (Wares 6–8). These changes, however, do not alter the regional character of the assemblage, with local wares continuing to dominate the ceramic inventory after the AD 659/60 earthquake. Imported pottery does not reappear until towards the end of the seventh century (Ware 6). FIG. 4 demonstrates the extent to which the local potting traditions, based on technologies developed in the preceding Roman and Byzantine periods, strongly persist into the ninth century. At this time new ceramic fashions emanating from outside Palestine/Jordan demanded the adoption of quite different potting techniques, including the manufacture of glazed wares.

Wares 1–5 of FIG. 4 have been published by P. Watson,⁹ and will not be repeated in detail here.

Ware 1

Description: Fine terracotta, the “Late Roman” wares of Hayes.¹⁰

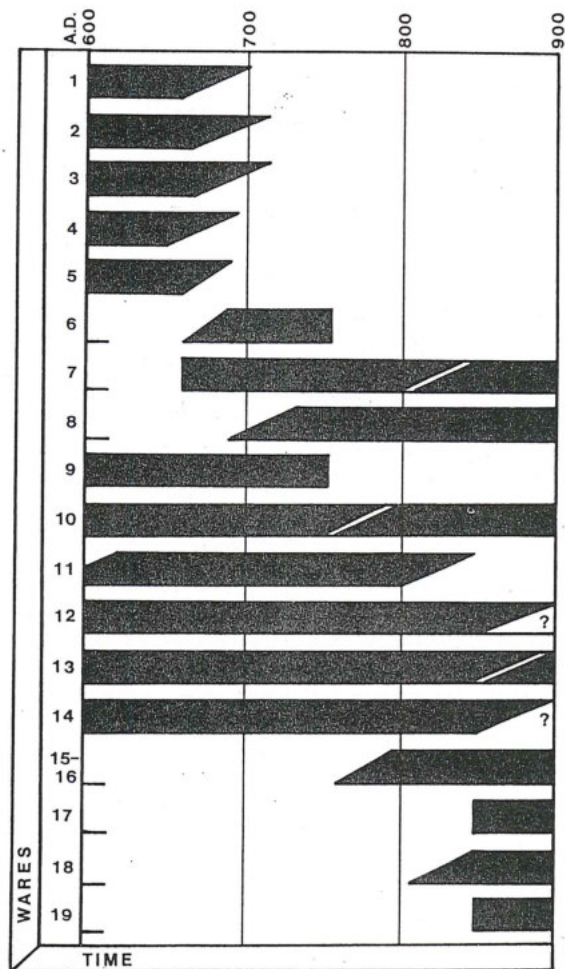
Forms: Plates.

Source: Cyprus, Asia Minor, North Africa.

Chronology: Rare after AD 660; may only be rubbish survival. No obvious ceramic replacement at Ṭabaqat Faḥl.

Ware 2

Description: “Jerash Bowls”; reddish-orange fabric with



4. Occurrence of pottery wares at Ṭabaqat Faḥl, c. AD 600–900. For descriptions see text.

pictorial red and white painted decoration.¹¹

Forms: Plates.

Source: Jarash.

Chronology: A significant fall-off in decorative standards and production after the mid-seventh century.

Ware 3

Description: Solid, gritty fabric similar to Ware 14, but fired a lighter buff–brown hue.

Forms: Hand-made bowls and very large collared storage jars.

Source: Uncertain, but common around ‘Ammān.

Chronology: Does not appear to extend beyond the end of the seventh century at Ṭabaqat Faḥl.

⁷ The absence of coins makes fixing a firm date for the end of the Area XXIX structures difficult, but ceramics from the 1993 season confirm a 10th century presence.

⁸ Final analysis and research of the excavations in these areas is in progress, and will probably require an elaboration of the summary of results to date given here.

⁹ P. M. Watson, ‘Change in Foreign and Regional Economic Links with Pella in the Seventh Century A.D.: The Ceramic Evidence’, *Actes du Colloque*

“*La Syrie de Byzance à l’Islam*”, Damascus, 1992, pp. 233–248 Wares M, L, D, E, and H respectively. Her thorough study also considers the continuation of Byzantine ware types into the eighth century.

¹⁰ J. W. Hayes, *Late Roman Pottery*, British School at Rome, London, 1972.

¹¹ The definitive study is by P. M. Watson, *Jerash Bowls: Byzantine Decorated Fine Ware from Jordan*, Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 1992.

Ware 4

Description: Soft, chaff-tempered coarse ware, fired light brown to red/reddish-brown.

Forms: Hand-made flat-based basins and plain-rimmed ring-based storage jars.

Source: Unknown.

Chronology: Uncommon after the mid-seventh century.

Ware 5

Description: Encompasses a number of different vessel types traded for their contents.

Form: Amphorae.

Source: Gaza, Antioch/Cyprus, Egypt.

Chronology: All these amphora types are missing from the archaeological record after AD 660.

Ware 6

Description: Gritty fabric with many white and mica inclusions. 'Sandwich' core with grey-brown centre and red-brown faces.

Form: Biansulate necked jars with fine ribbing on upper body and broad ribbing on lower body (FIG. 5: 1–2).

Source: Very possibly Gaza/Egypt delta region.

Chronology: Appears after c. AD 660, perhaps in place of the Gaza amphora form, but suddenly absent after about AD 750.

Ware 7

Description: Pale cream or greenish to light yellow-brown fabric, aerated, with fine white, orange and/or grey inclusions. Incised decoration if any. Related to Ware 18.

Forms: Medium-thin walled jars in large and medium sizes, jugs, and water flasks (FIG. 5: 3–6, 8). Larger vessels often display broad ribbing. Open, high-walled bowls with incised decoration (FIG. 5: 7). Jar stoppers.

Source: Some jars and flasks probably originate from Baysān.¹² The local Ṭabaqat Faḥl clays are capable of producing this ware,¹³ but no evidence of a potting industry has been uncovered at Ṭabaqat Faḥl.

Chronology: The large ribbed water jars first appear in post-660 deposits, and are joined by the smaller jars, flasks, and occasional incised bowls by the mid-eighth century. Jars of the next century have much taller necks and steep-sloping bodies (FIG. 5: 6), and flasks have a taller, finely ribbed, filler hole and thinner body (FIG. 5: 8).

Ware 8

Description: Light orange fabric, sometimes apparently white slipped, with small and sometimes medium white and grey inclusions. Bold reddish-brown painted decoration of loops, stars, wavy lines, 'arcade' (arched) pattern (FIG. 6: 8), and crisscrossed lines.

Forms: Commonly smooth-bodied jars with ring bases, spouted juglets, bowls, and cups (FIG. 6).

Source: Unidentified,¹⁴ but possibly north Jordan region. Cups were made at Jarash.¹⁵

Chronology: Jars in this ware appear occasionally around the turn of the eighth century, but are quite common in the 747/8 destruction level (FIG. 6: 2). They are joined by 'palace ware' bowls (FIG. 6: 9) and cups (FIG. 6: 3–4) later in the century, and continue strongly into the ninth century when decoration is restricted to loops, bisecting lines, and parallel wavy lines. The ninth century jars have steeply sloping shoulders and a bulbous lower body (FIG. 6: 5–6).

Ware 9

Description: Plain gritty ware fired an even 'biscuit' (light yellowish-brown) hue. Undecorated.

Form: Small one-handed juglet (FIG. 5: 9).

Source: Unknown, but Ṭabaqat Faḥl clays from Wādī Jirm are compatible.¹⁶

Chronology: Predominantly mid-eighth century.¹⁷

Ware 10

Description: Fine table ware ("Fine Byzantine"), compact orange fabric with small white and grey inclusions; pared base and lower body, often with grooved spiral/circle on underside.

Form: Cups (FIG. 5: 10–11).¹⁸

Source: Suggested from the Jerusalem region.

Chronology: Regularly appear in the archaeological record between AD 660–750, becoming more common in the ninth century deposits but without the ring base or incised wavy line.

Ware 11

Description: Fine 'metallic-thin' fabric, coloured patchy orange/brown/grey, slightly gritty with small to medium white and sandy inclusions. White painted decoration of banded wavy lines and strokes on rims and handles; occasional scalloped ridges on body. Handles, colour, and

¹² Watson 'Foreign and Regional Economic Links' p. 243.

¹³ W. I. Edwards, 'A Progress Report on the Pella Pottery Studies', in A. W. McNicoll, P. C. Edwards *et al.*, *Pella in Jordan 2* Appendix 10, p. 293.

¹⁴ P. Duerden and P. M. Watson, 'PIXE/PIGME Analysis of a Series of Byzantine Painted Bowls from Northern Jordan', *Mediterranean Archaeology* 1 (1988), pp. 104–10, sample no. 21.

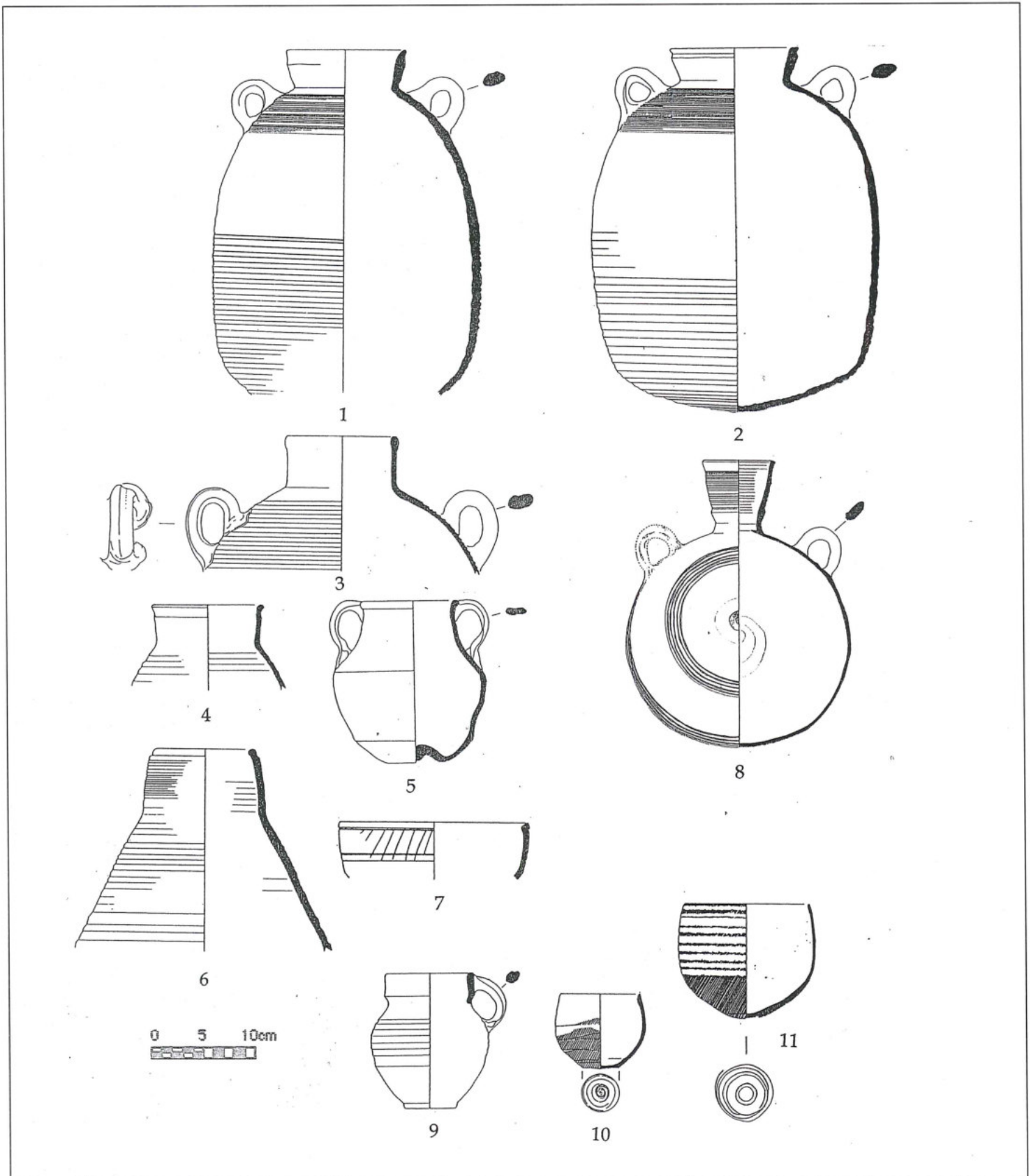
¹⁵ M. Gawlikowski, 'A Residential Area by the South Decumanus', in F. Zay-

adine (ed.), *Jerash Archaeological Project 1981-1983*, I, Department of Antiquities, Amman, 1986, (= *JAP I*) p. 117.

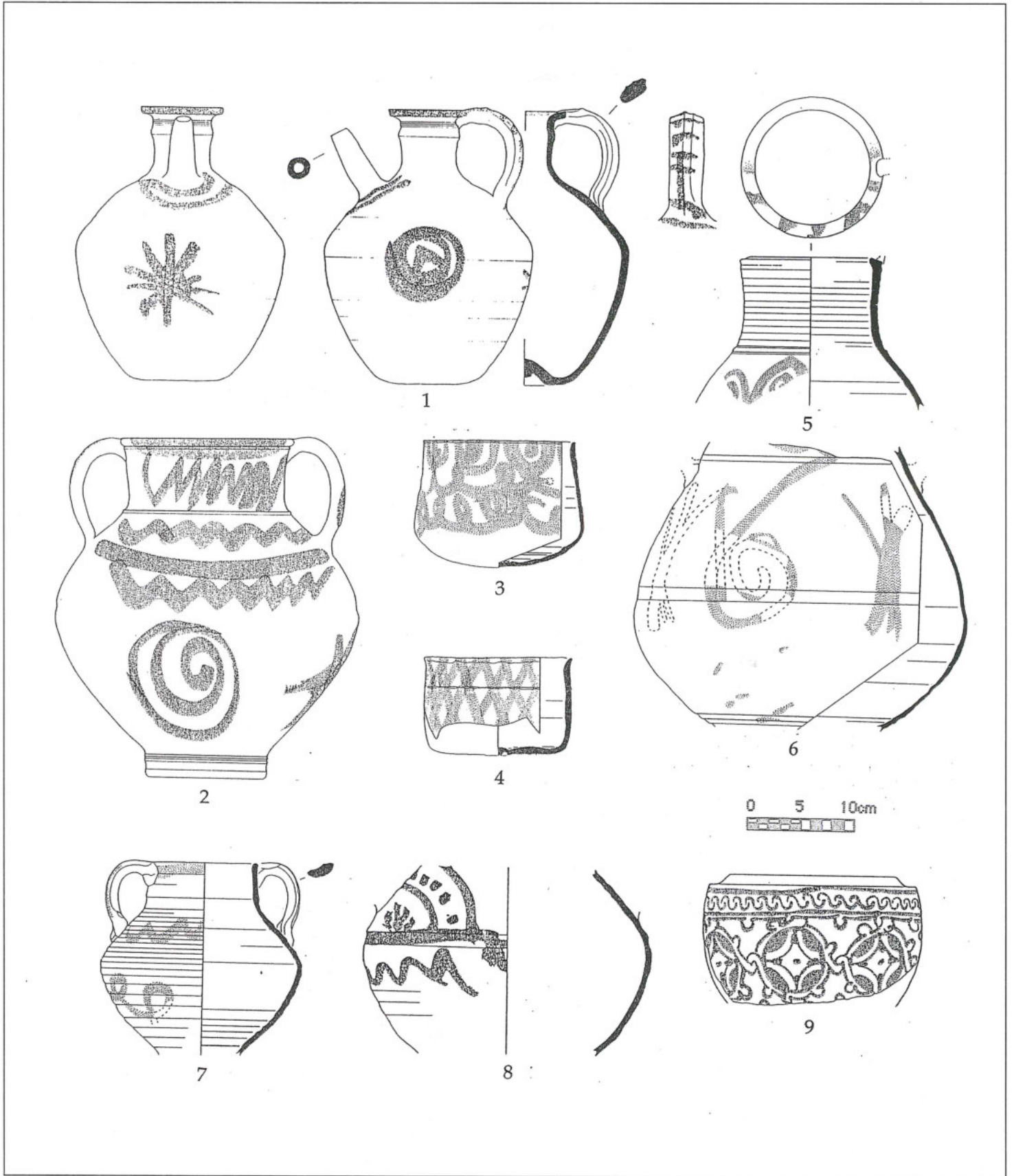
¹⁶ Edwards 'Pottery Studies' p. 293.

¹⁷ An exact parallel is known from Kursi on the eastern shore of Lake Tiberias; see Y. Tzaferis 'The Excavations of Kursi-Gergesa', *'Atiqot* 16 (1983), FIG. 8.4.

¹⁸ Cf. Watson 'Foreign and Regional Economic Links' Ware K p. 242.



5. 1. CN10299, Ware 6, mid-8th c.; 2. CN154, W.6, mid-8th c.; 3. CN10061, W.7, early 8th c.; 4. CN10040, W.7, mid-8th c.; 5. CN10252, W.7, late-8th c.; 6. CN10237, W.7, early/mid-9th c.; 7. CN246, W.7, mid-8th c.; 8. CN16030, W.7, mid/late 9th c.; 9. CN2021, W.9, mid-8th c.; 10. CN16002, W.10, early 9th c.; 11. CN10246, W.10, late 8th c.



6. 1. CN1869, W.8, mid-8th c.; 2. CN2030, W.8, mid-8th c.; 3. CN16053, W.8, early 9th c.; 4. CN16055, W.8, early 9th c.; 5. CN16051, W.8, early 9th c.; 6. CN16060, W.8, early 9th c.; 7. CN16049, W.8, early 9th c.; 8. CN10245, W.8, late 8th c.; 9. CN16001, W.8, early 9th c.

decoration suggest these vessels imitate bronze originals, the white paint representing silver inlay work.

Forms: Small to medium-sized biansulate jars; spouted, one-handled juglets; cups (rare); small basins; and small lidded casseroles (FIG. 7: 1–7).

Source: Numerous kilns have been excavated at Jarash.¹⁹

Chronology: Appearing in the first half of the seventh century, this ware becomes extremely common at Ṭabaqat Faḥl by the middle of the eighth, and continues strongly until the start of the ninth century when it is quickly replaced by the jars and jugs in Ware 18. The small basins are only noted in deposits from the second half of the eighth century, and possibly began challenging the Ware 14 types.

Ware 11A

Description: Uncommon variant to Ware 11, but fabric dark grey with many small white inclusions; incised decoration.

Form: Cups.

Source: Probably Jarash

Chronology: A potter's folly?

Ware 12

Description: Hard, thin, grey/brown surfaced fabric, with small to medium white, grey and/or brown inclusions. Freely applied white painted decoration in broad intersecting wavy lines and loops.

Form: Light-weight water collection jars. Water storage was probably the function of the more porous Ware 7 jars as surface evaporation would cool the contents.

Source: Unidentified; possibly Baysān.

Chronology: The plain, uncollared, rims and tall necks of the eighth century continue into the ninth, in which longer necks and a steeply sloping upper body are common (compare FIG. 7: 8 and FIG. 7: 9–10).

Ware 13

Description: Cooking pot fabric, gritty with copious white, transparent and grey inclusions.

Forms: Casseroles with loop-handled lids; necked cooking pots (FIG. 8: 1–4).

Source: Jarash.

Chronology: Neither form displays significant changes between AD 660–900.

Ware 13A

Description: Late variant identified by a redder fabric and a button-handled lid.

Forms: Casseroles (FIG. 8: 5, 6).

Source: Unknown, but probably other than Jarash.

Chronology: Later ninth century, and a possible precursor to the reddish-fabric, clear-glazed Fatimid casseroles.

Ware 14

Description: Dark grey fabric, hand made, with small to medium grey, white and transparent inclusions. Comb-incised and chiselled decoration.

Forms: Large collared storage jars, large basins with plain bulbous rims, small basins/bowls with flat rims, and jar stoppers (FIG. 8: 7–10).

Source: Jarash

Chronology: The overpowering chisel and incised decoration of the later seventh century (FIG. 8: 7) gives way to a few bands of wavy comb incisions in the first half of the eighth (FIG. 8: 8), then a single line or no decoration thereafter. The large ninth century basins have a flatter rim, with a definite pointed finish to the outside edge (FIG. 8: 10).

Ware 15

Description: Thick turquoise or blue glaze on greenish fabric.

Form: Jars.

Source: Unknown.

Chronology: May appear in the later eighth century, but predominantly ninth century. Very rare in the Ṭabaqat Faḥl deposits.

Ware 16

Description: Polychrome glazed on white slip over orange fabric.

Form: Bowls.

Source: Unknown.

Chronology: See Ware 15.

Ware 17

Description: "Coptic glazed" or variant; interior divided into zones by painted black lines with bubbly green and yellow glaze, reddish-orange fabric.

Form: Carinated bowls (FIG. 9: 1).

Source: Perhaps a local production based on Egyptian originals.

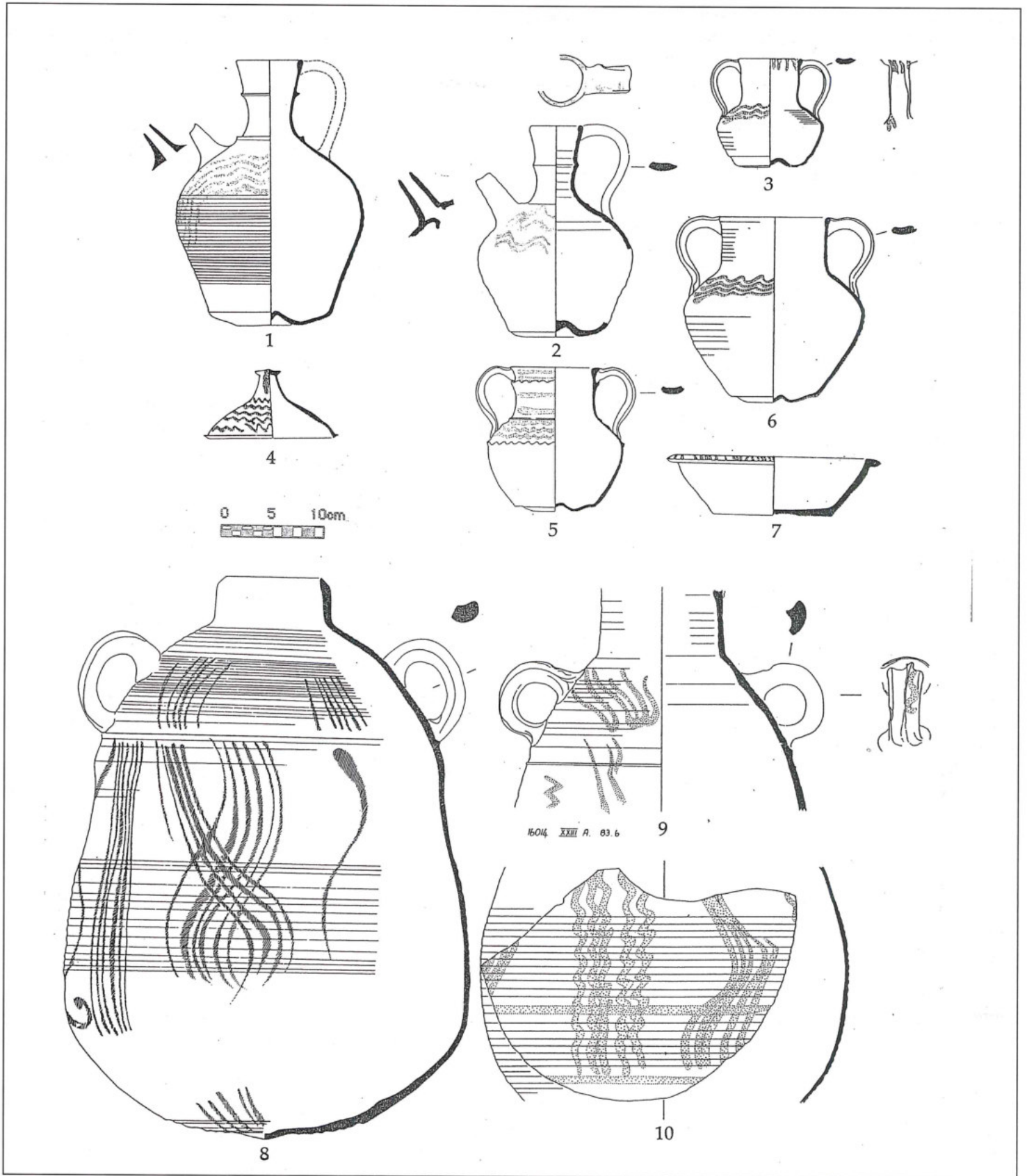
Chronology: Late in the Ṭabaqat Faḥl sequence, seemingly not before the mid-ninth century

Ware 18

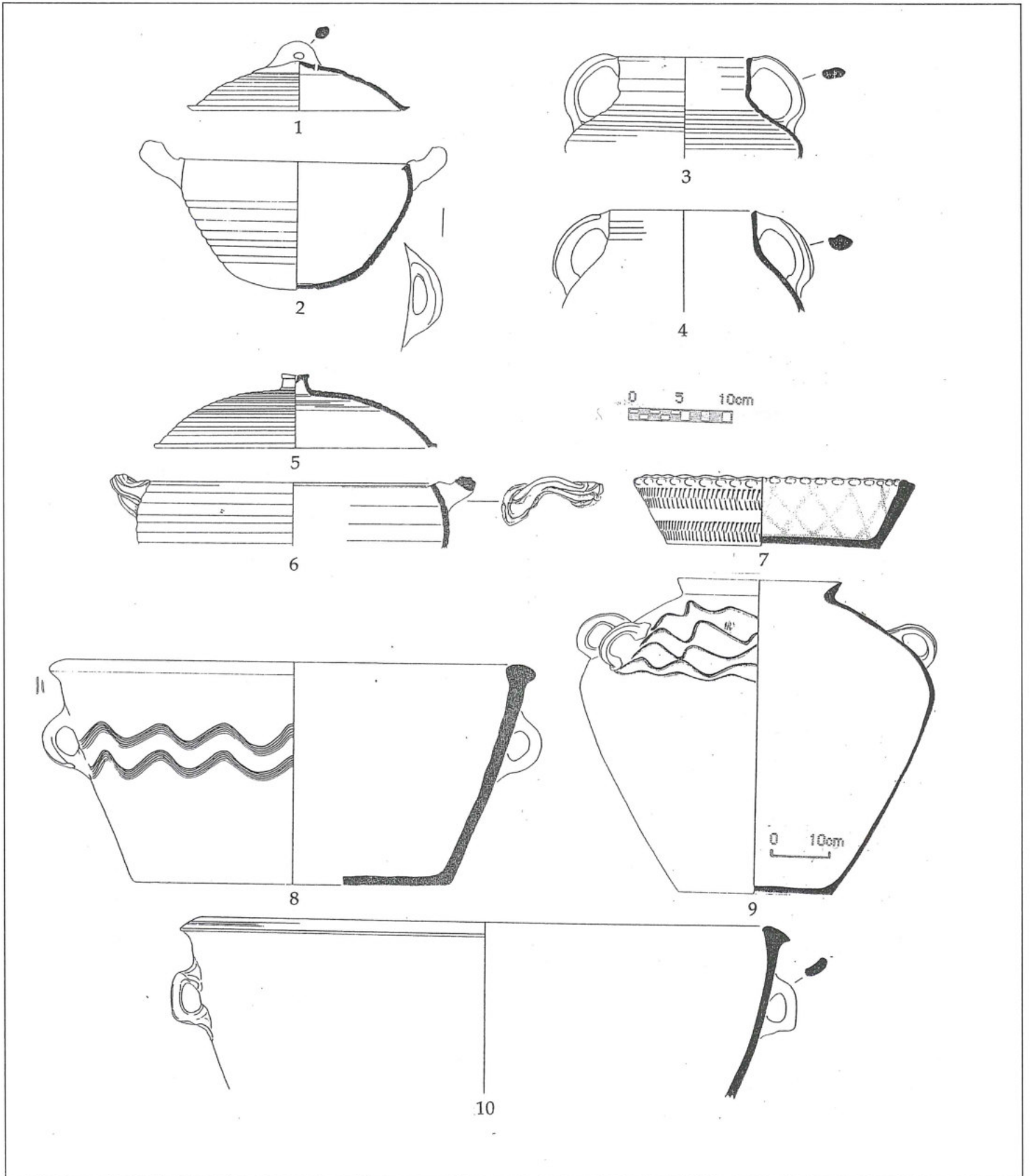
Description: Eggshell-thin, aerated, pale cream fabric with small grey, red (grog?), and clear inclusions. The

¹⁹ R. Pierobon, 'Sanctuary of Artemis: Soundings in the Temple-Terrace, 1978–1980', in 'Gerasa I: Report of the Italian Archaeological Expedition to Jerash, Campaigns 1977–1981', *Mesopotamia* 18–19 (1983–84), pp. 85–111; R. Pierobon, in R. Parapetti, *et al.*, 'The Italian Activity within the Jerash Project 1982–83', *JAP* 1, pp. 184–187; J. Schaefer and R. K. Fal-

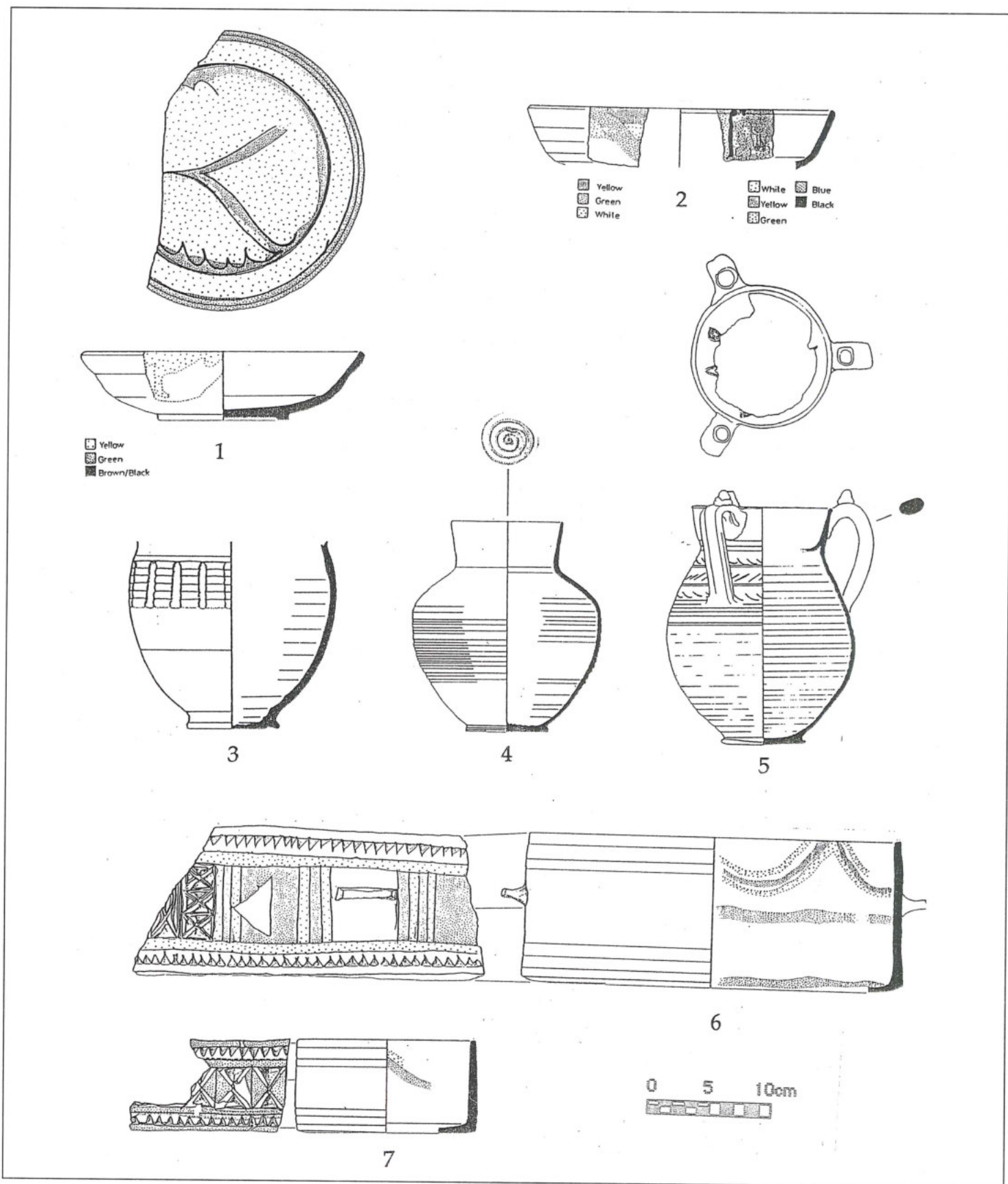
kner, 'An Umayyad Potters' Complex in the North Theatre, Jerash', in *JAP* 1, pp. 411–35; Walmsley, in W. Ball, *et al.*, 'The North Decumanus and North Tetrastylon at Jerash: an Archaeological and Architectural Report', *JAP* 1, pp. 351–357.



7. 1. CN2022, W.11, mid-8th c.; 2. CN3264, W.11, mid-8th c.; 3. CN10251, W.11, late 8th c.; 4. CN546, W.11, ?early 8th c.; 5. CN10051, W.11, mid-8th c.; 6. CN10260, W.11, late 8th c.; 7. CN10247, W.11, late 8th c.; 8. CN8, W.12, mid-8th c.; 9. CN16014, W.12, early 9th c.; 10. CN16015, W.12, early 9th c.



8. 1. CN2052, W.13, mid-8th c.; 2. CN2051, W.13, mid-8th c.; 3. CN10255, W.13, late 8th c.; 4. CN10233, W.13, early/mid-9th c.; 5. CN16028, W.13A, mid/late 9th c.; 6. CN16029, W.13A, mid/late 9th c.; 7. CN2014, W.14, late 7th c.; 8. CN4, W.14, mid-8th c.; 9. CN140, W.14, mid-8th c.; 10. CN16009, W.14, early 9th c.



9. 1. CN16025, W.17, mid-9th c.; 2. CN16036, W.16, mid-9th c.; 3. CN10242, W.18, early/mid-9th c.; 4. CN16022, W.18, mid/late 9th c.; 5. CN16027, W.18, mid/late 9th c.; 6. CN16031, W.19, mid/late 9th c.; 7. CN16032, W.18, mid/late 9th c.

lower body is pared to leave a plain or ridged base. Applied, impressed, and incised decorative techniques are reasonably common in the manufacture of these vessels. Imitation of silver originals?

Forms: Jars and strainer jugs (FIG. 9: 3–5).

Source: The local production centre for these Samarran-style vessels is unknown. A workshop for moulded cream wares is known at ar-Ramla,²⁰ but a closer source is more likely.

Chronology: Appears suddenly in the first half of the ninth century, quickly replacing the jars and jugs of Ware 11. The eighth-century dating of the Ramla assemblage, which also includes glazed and *Kerbschnitt* pottery (Ware 19 below), is clearly erroneous; the Ṭabaqat Faḥl finds suggest an early Fatimid date for the Ramla material.

Ware 19

Description: Cut, incised and painted ware ('chip-carved' or *Kerbschnitt*), brown to orange fabric with many white, yellow, grey, red and black inclusions of various sizes; cut, incised and red and/or painted decoration in panels externally, red and white painted lines internally.

Form: Small basins, hand made with flat ledge handles, resembling the steatite bowls of the eighth century (FIG. 9: 6, 7).

Source: Unknown.

Chronology: Appears simultaneously with Ware 17 — the southern connection?

Comment

The ceramics from Islamic Fiḥl demonstrate a strong persistence of local artistic traditions in pottery making well into the first half of the ninth century AD — nearly two centuries after the Islamic Conquest of the region. The ubiquitous household Wares 10–14 spring from a long Roman/Byzantine tradition, but undergo gradual changes in ware, firing, shapes, and especially decoration during

the later seventh and eighth centuries. Ware 11 particularly stands out, with a abundance of liberally applied white-painted strokes, loops, and parallel wavy lines characterising the eighth century. The simultaneous appearance of Ware 8, with an even more powerful decorative regime of red paint on a pale or white-slipped surface, marks the eighth century as an especially expressive period in the local ceramic technology of Jordan. The post-AD 660 demise of Wares 1 and 3–5, and the appearance of Wares 6–8, can be related to the changing social and economic horizons of Fiḥl. The strengthening of commercial ties with eastern centres at the expense of western contacts probably resulted from political changes at this time, notably the considerable importance of the Damascus–Makka Ḥajj route.²¹ Ware 2 ("Jerash bowls") goes against this trend, but matches the end of "Late Roman" wares throughout the East Mediterranean region.

With the onset of the ninth century, a critical break with the earlier potting technologies is represented by the quite abrupt end of Ware 11 in favour of the thin-walled, Samarra-style pale cream jars and strainer jugs of Ware 18. These quickly dominated the ceramic assemblage of ninth century Fiḥl. Further evidence for change in traditional fabrics is found in Ware 13, where the old dark brown Jarashi cooking vessels are replaced by button-lidded casseroles in a more reddish fabric (Ware 13A).²² This suggests a new source for cooking vessels at Fiḥl. By the middle of the ninth century other previously unrepresented wares make an appearance: the reasonably common *Kerbschnitt* bowls (Ware 19) and very limited quantities of three glazed wares following Iraqi or Egyptian styles (Wares 15–17). The adoption of these new "international" wares represents a major artistic and technological break with the past. It may also reflect a developing preference by the early ninth century communities in the north Jordan Valley for the dominant cultural traditions of the greater Islamic World.

²⁰ M. Rosen-Ayalon and A. Eitan, *Ramla Excavations, Finds from the VIIIth Century C.E.*, Jerusalem, 1969.

²¹ See Walmsley, 'Social and Economic Regime' and Watson 'Foreign and

Regional Economic Links' for initial thoughts on this point.

²² The absence of cooking pots in this ware may be due to the limited sample recovered in Area XXIX.