

## Pella/Fahl in Jordan during the Early Islamic Period

In 635 AD/AH 13 one of the critical battles in the spread of Islam was fought in the northern Jordan Valley near the Byzantine town of Pella<sup>1</sup>. The Muslims, victorious over a Byzantine army, took control of the city immediately after the battle<sup>2</sup>; in the following year at the Yarmuk River a second decisive victory ensured their control of Palestine and Trans-Jordan.

Although we are reasonably well-informed about the major historical events of this period, we know much less about the material aspects of the society of the time and its economy. What were the results of the Muslim conquest in social terms? What effects did it have materially on the lives of the indigenous inhabitants?<sup>3</sup>

The Sydney-Wooster excavations at Pella in Jordan commenced in 1979<sup>4</sup>, and have now uncovered more than 1,000 sq. m. of dwellings and courtyards on the *tell* dating to the seventh and eighth centuries. The following paper deals with the archaeology and finds of the Early Islamic period<sup>5</sup> uncovered during the University of Sydney's sessions in 1979 and 1980<sup>6</sup>. It should be emphasised that the conclusions reached in this paper are tentative, since much work on the material remains to be done.

Firstly, the architecture. Here two distinct divisions can be

made in the Early Islamic period. These we have termed provisionally (1) Early Phase, subsequent to the Islamic conquest, and (2) Late Phase, characterized by a low concentration of settlement.

### 1 Early phase

The advent of Islam does not appear to have been accompanied by widespread destruction at Pella; rather, in two major areas so far tested, there appears to have been uninterrupted use of the pre-existing Byzantine buildings. What does appear to have altered radically in one area at least is the use to which buildings were put, as will be apparent from the description of the principal building so far unearthed.

This large edifice (FIG. 1) stood on the south-east edge of the *tell*, overlooking the Wadi Jirm; its origins may lie as far back as the fifth century, if the large number of pre-Anastasian reform *nummi* that were found in the collapsed *pisé* deposits within the room is anything to go by. Its use in the Byzantine period is attested by a Maltese Cross carved on the keystone of the internal arch of a large room. The building's original extent remains uncertain; Probably its western limits lay outside the area so far excavated. Incompletely uncovered though it is, it was clearly originally a building of considerable grandeur, covering well over 600 sq. metres. On the south side it overlooked the steep terraced and built-over slopes leading down to the springs for which Pella was famous (or, in the report of some, infamous<sup>7</sup>), while outside its north wall ran a pebble paved street. Its extent east and west is not yet known.

The technique of the building's construction was typically Byzantine. Large rough-hewn blocks of stone, sometimes with comb-teeth dressed faces, were laid to form two faces, and the interior of the wall and the interstices of the blocks were packed with mud and small stones (FIG. 2a & b). Above about 2.00–2.50 metres height the walls were built of *terre pisée*, in contrast with the southern slope of the *tell* where dark grey mud bricks (0.33 × 0.33 × 0.09–0.13 metres) have been found. In general the rooms were fairly small internally, e.g.

<sup>7</sup>Pliny NH 5.16.74 'Pella rich in water'; Stephanus Byzantinus *Ethnica* 104 'Pella', the water of which is unhealthy'.

<sup>1</sup>For the Arab historians' accounts of the Battle of Fahl (=Pella) translated into English, see R. H. Smith *et al.* *Pella of the Decapolis* (Wooster, 1973), pp. 69–74.

<sup>2</sup>As is recounted by Balādhuri—Smith *op cit.*, pp. 72–73.

<sup>3</sup>Balādhuri (in 2, above) states that the inhabitants of Pella/Fahl surrendered to the Muslims on condition of paying a poll and land tax.

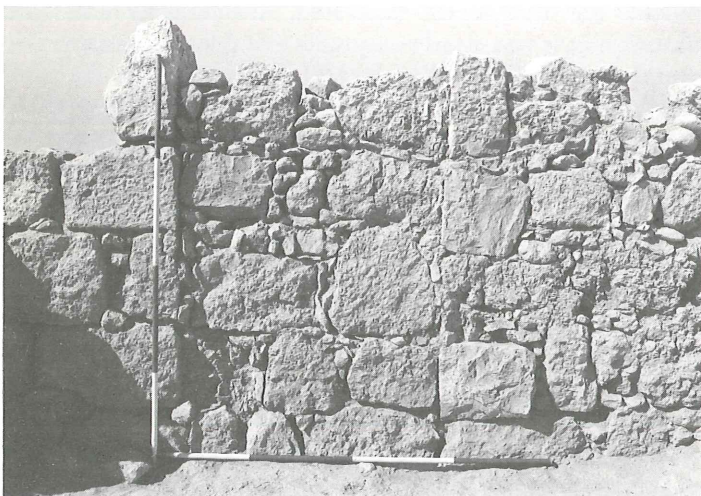
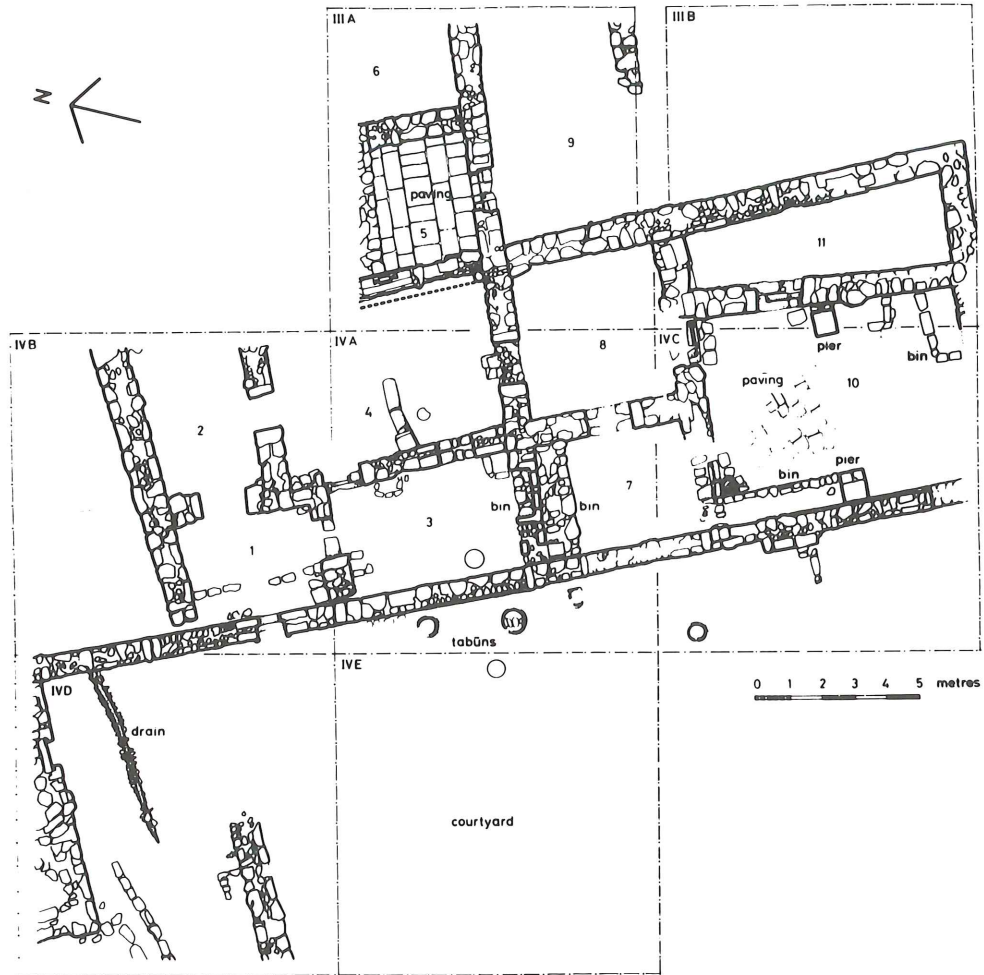
<sup>4</sup>The joint Australian American excavations are being undertaken by teams from the College of Wooster, Ohio (Director: Prof. R. H. Smith) and from the University of Sydney (Directors: Prof. J. B. Hennessy and Dr Anthony McNicoll; Field Director: Alan Walmsley). Each team is undertaking excavations of different areas of the *tell* and environs in separate sessions. The principal contributors in the excavations are as follows: Wooster session: College of Wooster, National Geographic Society of America National Endowment for the Humanities. Sydney session: Australian Research Grants Council, Australian National Gallery, University of Sydney.

The Department of Antiquities, under the direction of Dr Adnan Hadidi, has helped and encouraged us in ways too numerous to mention. Preliminary reports on the 1979 session will appear in *BASOR* 1980 and *ADAJ* xxiv (1980); a brief notice on the early Islamic Architecture is published in *AARP* (Dec. 1979).

<sup>5</sup>We use the term 'Early Islamic' in this paper to cover both the pre-Umayyad Islamic period and the Umayyad. One of our primary aims at Pella is to distinguish the two periods, architecturally and artifactually, wherever possible.

<sup>6</sup>The 1980 session is still in progress at the time of writing.

1. Plan of the Early Islamic remains (Early Phase) uncovered in 1979.



2. Construction techniques:  
a. Byzantine wall with blocks, snecking and mortar, and doorway blocking of the Early Islamic period.

b. Early Islamic wall. Compare the cruder technique with 2a.

3. Plan of the Early Islamic remains (Early Phase) uncovered in 1980.



20.25 sq. metres, 17.80 sq. metres, and a central courtyard (?), perhaps hypaethral or simply trellised, 35 sq. metres. Overlooking the south slope was an internally arched room with a ground area of roughly 50 sq. metres, but the arch effectively broke the area to be roofed into two<sup>8</sup>. The roof was flat, carried on beams with a span of 4–5 metres. The technique of construction and the width of the walls (generally 0.75 metres), make an upper storey of any solidity unlikely, although one would expect that the roof was used for sleeping, recreation and so on. Indeed, in a building north of the road excavated during the 1980 season, we found a staircase leading to the roof (FIGS 3 & 4).

A feature of the building which should be emphasised is the large number of doorways giving access from room to room. Evidently the whole formed a single complex.

The seventh century saw radical changes in the architecture

<sup>8</sup> As is common, for example, at the Byzantine/Umayyad city of Umm al-Jamal; and at the former village of Khirbet Fahl.

of the building. While unequivocal evidence for the date of these alterations is not yet available, it seems not unreasonable to ascribe them to the period of the Muslim takeover or shortly thereafter. Certainly nothing in the material record contradicts this hypothesis.

The major changes are simply stated. Firstly, the area of the building was diminished. A new western wall running roughly north–south was constructed to truncate the building and to form a courtyard outside it on the west. Probably contemporaneously with this truncation there occurred a second change: the blocking of doorways, which drastically altered the character and the function of the building. For by closing off access from room to room, the formerly extensive building was subdivided into at least three units. Furthermore, within two units feed-bins of undressed stones were built, providing evidence that beasts were enclosed rather than remaining outside. The presence of animals within the houses was dramatically attested by the recovery of articulated sheep/goat

4. Orthostat wall and staircase to roof.

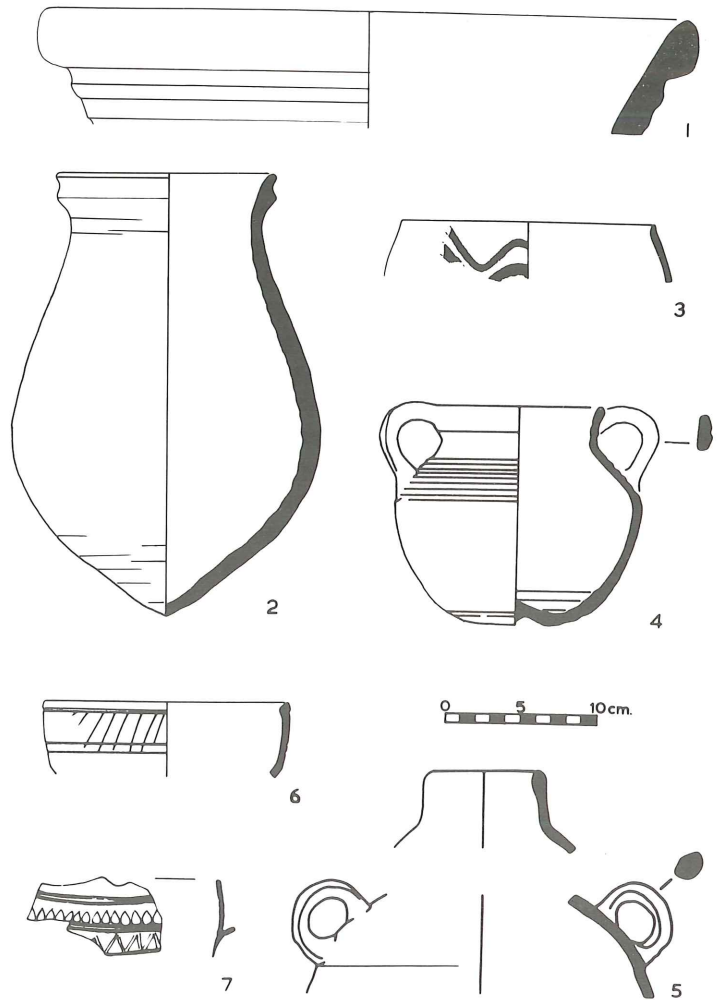


skeletons in the interior courtyard. They were evidently caught in the collapse of the building.

It is of interest to speculate on the nature of the apparently contrasting social groups which occupied this building before and after the modifications. The Byzantine house, roomy and obviously comfortable in both winter (rooms with a southerly aspect) and summer (cool interior courtyard), was probably occupied by a moderately wealthy family with an appreciation of space. Following the alterations, the building could no longer have served its original function but the different requirements of another social group. The economic status of these new inhabitants is suggested by the use to which various of the rooms were put, with both the feed-bins and articulated animal skeletons indicating the stabling of beasts, while the use of potential living space for the accommodation of animals indicates less concentrated human habitation of Pella in the Early Islamic period than in the late Byzantine period. Tentatively then, it can be suggested that the nature of the occupation of the eastern part of the mound in the Byzantine and Early Islamic periods undergoes a radical change with a settled or possibly even semi-sedentary agricultural community occupying the houses earlier given over to more socially 'elevated' families.

The building partially excavated in the 1980 season (FIG. 3) provides a complementary picture of the extensive use of Byzantine buildings and their modification in the Early Islamic period. Of note is the orthostat block technique used in

5. Pottery from the Early Islamic (Early and Late Phase) ruins: Wares 5-8.



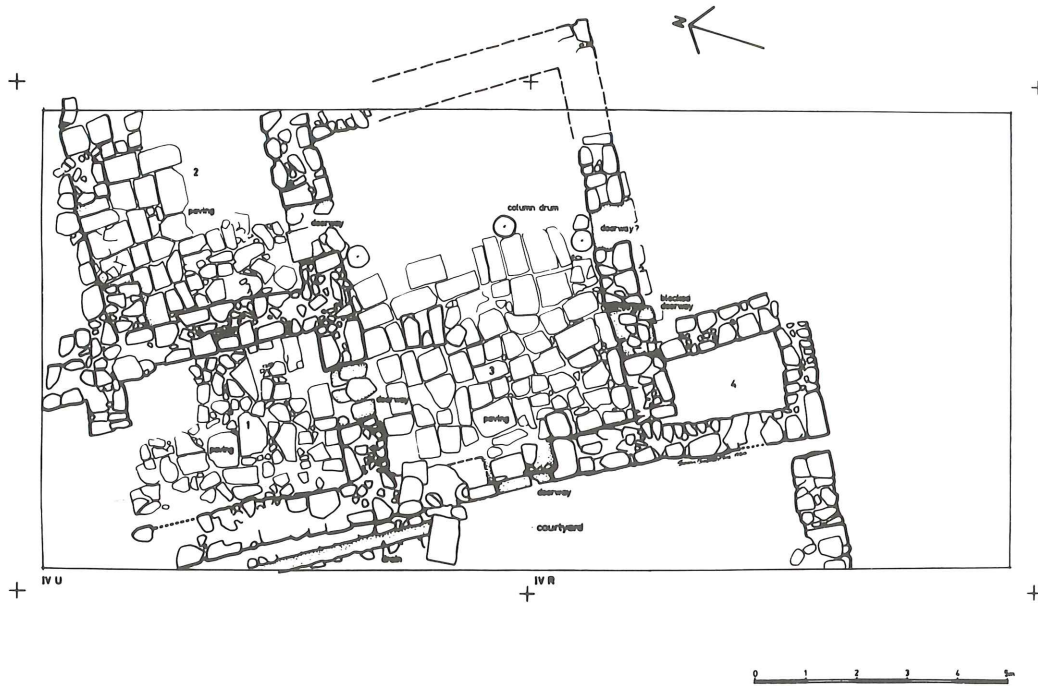
one of the walls to allow the entry of light and circulation of air (FIG. 4). This is well paralleled at the desert city of Umm al Jamal.

As with the sheep/goat found in the room of the building excavated in 1979, so also crushed articulated animal skeletons were found in 1980. In the courtyard or forecourt of this newly uncovered building articulated skeletons of a mature horse, a young cow and a sheep/goat (?) were found beneath the tumbled masonry. In a neighbouring room a crushed and very decayed human skeleton was found.

## 2 Late phase (FIG. 6)

It is apparent that during the Early Islamic period a catastrophic event overtook the rural community of Tabaqat Fahl, an event characterized by the widespread collapse of the modified buildings with both people and livestock being crushed under the falling *pisé*, blocks of stone and roofing. The total absence of burning associated with this destruction points to a natural agent—very likely one of the major earthquakes which shook the Jordan Valley in the first half of

6. Plan of the Early Islamic remains (Late Phase) uncovered in 1980.



the eighth century<sup>9</sup>. The economic—and possibly human—loss must have been considerable for the largely agricultural society; certainly the size of the population after the earthquake was insufficient to initiate rebuilding on a large scale over the whole of the area uncovered. It appears that at this time Pella declined to the status of a village. What building took place after the earthquake was sporadic and possibly short-lived.

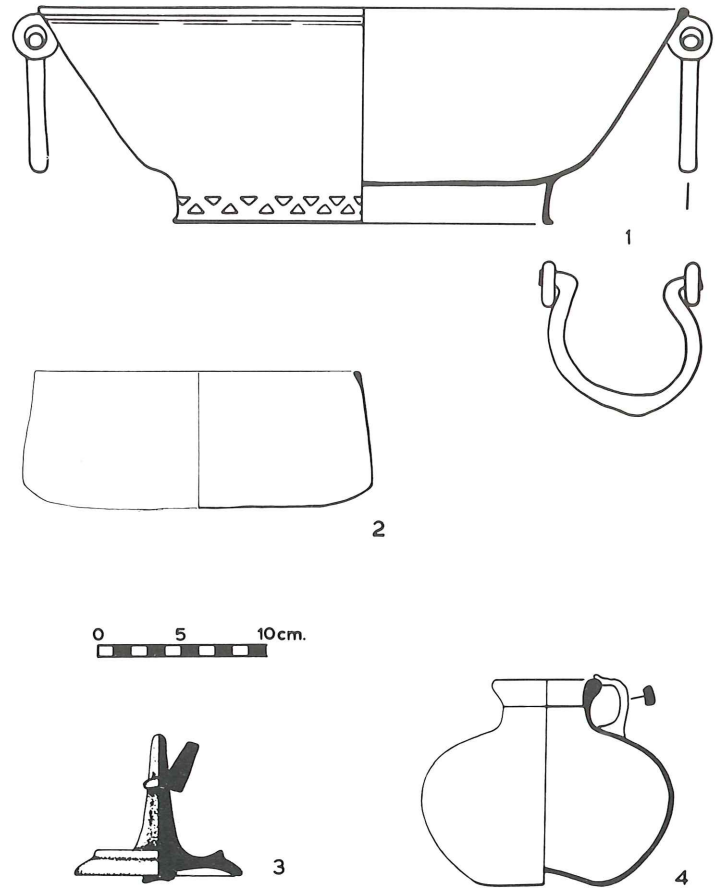
Archaeologically the sequence is plain enough. The remaining population, needing to rebuild, obtained material by robbing out the collapsed Early Phase buildings, as a number of robber trenches testify. Walls were frequently built on existing stubs, or were set in shallow foundation trenches sunk to find a secure footing. Unwanted walls were dismantled, or alternatively the ground level between fallen walls was raised using fill.

Figure 6 shows a Late Phase house consisting of three interconnecting rooms with a fourth, smaller room at the south-west corner. Rooms 1–3 were living rooms, all with mudstone paving. Room 3, the largest, was entered from outside by a doorway on the west side. The southern, blocked doorway perhaps provided access during construction.

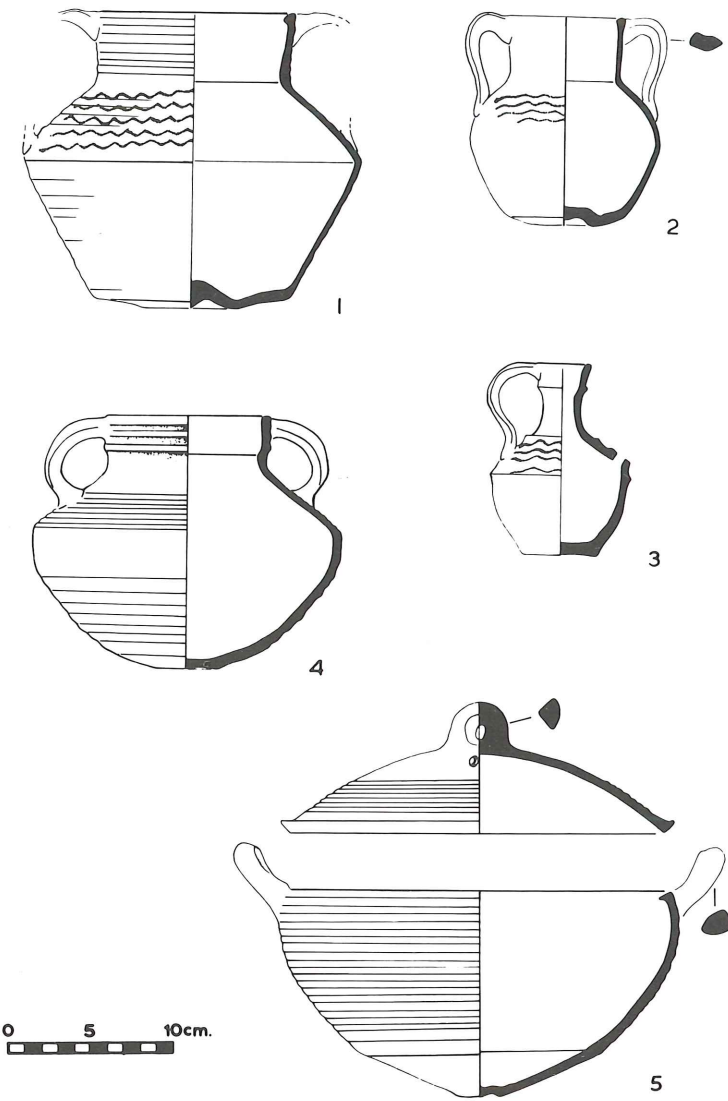
The finds of the more extensive Early Phase constitute an interesting range of artifacts in use in the early eighth century AD. In addition to the splendid intact glass jug (FIG. 7, 4) found in Area IV A Room 4, a few fragmentary glass bowls and juglets were recovered. In an adjoining room 8 two bronze vessels were found, one intact, the other broken (FIG. 7, 1–2).

<sup>9</sup> See Smith *op. cit.* 164–167 for a discussion of the date of the earthquakes which damaged and destroyed the western church.

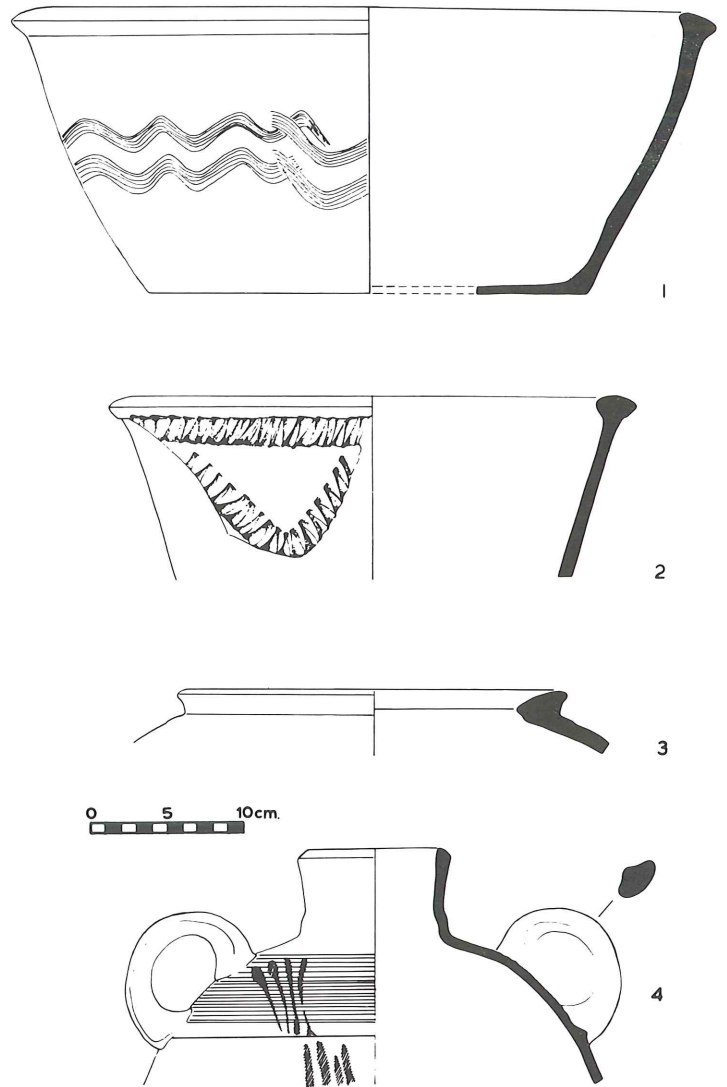
7. Small finds from the Early Islamic (Early Phase) ruins: bronze and glass objects.



8. Pottery from the Early Islamic (Early and Late Phase) ruins: Wares 1 and 2.



9. Pottery from the Early Islamic (Early and Late Phase) ruins: Wares 3 and 4.



It is likely that the vessels all fell from the roof, though, if this is so, the survival of the glass jug must be accounted miraculous!

Amongst the other finds, we may mention numerous large iron nails, usually found close to doorways; fired pottery loom weights, basalt grinding and polishing stones, and a mortar and pestle; and from the arched room (IV c, Room 10) a bronze lamp-holder which hung from the keystone of the arch on a bronze chain; and other bronze objects (FIG. 7, 3).

The ruins of Early Islamic Pella have naturally produced large quantities of pottery. Early Islamic ceramics are a vexed subject: the material has not hitherto seemed amenable to close chronological distinction in the manner of, say, Palestinian, Roman or Hellenistic period pottery. We hope that the site of Pella, with its apparent continuity of occupation in the Byzantine and Early Islamic periods will provide a typology of

shapes, and detailed information on wares, which will contribute to an understanding of Byzantine/Islamic ceramics.

The following list (FIGS 5, 8 & 9) sets out the major wares and vessel types of the Early and Late Phases of the Early Islamic occupation; Appendix 1 sets out the results of a sieving experiment conducted in Early Phase deposits of three *loci* in Area IV H during the last weeks of the 1980 season. Further work along these lines will be continued in 1981.

*Early Islamic horizon pottery from Tabaqat Fahl*

WARE	EXAMPLE OF MUNSELL READINGS	FORMS
1. Gritty terracotta, painted with white wavy-line and swirling patterns.	10 yr 7/6	Small wide-necked jar with two handles and dimple base; spouted juglet with single handle; platter. (FIG. 8, 1-3)

*Early Islamic Horizon pottery from Tabaqat FahI (contd)*

WARE	EXAMPLE OF MUNSELL READINGS	FORMS
2. Coarse terracotta ('cooking pot ware'), often fire-blackened on outer surface.	5 yr 6/6	Rounded and ribbed, cooking pot with neck; squat ribbed cooking pot with lid. Both types with handles. (FIG. 8, 4-5)
3. Metallic grey into buff (grey predominant), frequently with combed wavy-line or horizontal patterns or with chiselled patterns.	10 yr 3/1	Large flat-based mixing bowls, with or without handles, large hole-mouth storage jars with handles. (FIG. 9, 1-3)
4. Ware perhaps similar to (1) but fired at a higher temperature, metallic sounding. Brown slipped, painted with white circle and line decoration.	5 yr 7/6 surface slip 5 yr 6/2	Ribbed zīr (water storage jar), with collar-neck and two handles. (FIG. 9, 4)
5. Hard metallic terracotta, similar to (4), but unpainted.	5 yr 7/6	Small hand cup (not illustrated).
6. Coarse red, with chaff temper, sometimes buff.	5 yr 6/6	Heavy ring-based storage vessel; pointed-based jar, large flat-based mixing bowls (same general shape as (3)). (FIG. 5, 1-2)
7. White slipped, painted with bold red or brown patterns.	N.A.	Bowl and possibly others. Only a few fragments have been found so far. (FIG. 5, 3)
8. White slipped on pink, and white-cream to pale green.	10 yr 8/4	Storage vessels, smaller water vessels with rounded base, with or without handles; small bowls, incised. (FIG. 5, 4-7)

**Appendix 1***Incidence of ceramic wares of Early Islamic (Early Phase) strata from three loci in area IV H recovered by dry-sieving to 1 cm<sup>2</sup>*

WARE	WEIGHTS IN KG. (TO 0.25 KG.)		
	LOCUS 1 LEVEL 1	LOCUS 6 LEVEL 1	LOCUS 5 LEVEL 1
(SEE FIG. 1)			
1. Gritty terracotta painted	—	—	—
2. Coarse terracotta	3.00 (22.64%)	14.00 (36.36%)	6.25 (35.71%)
3. Metallic grey	2.00 (15.09%)	1.50 (3.89%)	0.50 (2.85%)
4. Brown slip painted terracotta	3.50 (26.42%)	6.00 (15.58%)	2.50 (14.28%)
5. Metallic terracotta	0.75 (5.66%)	0.75 (1.95%)	0.25 (1.43%)
6. Coarse red	3.00 (22.64%)	13.00 (33.76%)	6.00 (34.28%)
7. White slip painted	—	—	—
8. Whitish	1.00 (7.54%)	3.25 (8.44%)	2.00 (11.43%)