

## Beyond the Roman Annexation: The Continuity of the Nabataean Pottery Tradition

### Introduction

The continuity of the Nabataean culture beyond the Roman annexation of AD 106 is well attested in the archaeological record, including inscriptions (for a survey see Graf, in this volume) and texts (for example the Petra Church Papyri, see Frösén, in this volume). When dealing with pottery, however, and especially during surveys, this distinction between “cultural” and “political” domination is often ignored. Added to this are the obvious attributes of the Classical Nabataean pottery: “fine”, “painted”, “rouletted”. These very distinctive characteristics have at times resulted in chronological misinterpretations. Outstanding examples are the “Fine Byzantine Wares” that have often been classified as “Nabataean” (Gishon 1974) and the “Cream Wares” sometimes misinterpreted as Islamic ('Amr 1992).

### Factors to be Considered in Discussing the Continuity of the Nabataean Pottery Tradition

1. Instrumental Neutron Activation Analysis (INAA) has shown that the local potters in the Petra area used the same clay sources (probably from the 'Ayn at-Ṭinah “mine”, see 'Amr 1997) and similar processing techniques from the “Late Hellenistic” up to the “Late Byzantine” period (circa second century BC up to the sixth century AD) ('Amr 1986; 1987: 198).
2. Provenience studies have indicated that painted Nabataean wares — excavated at various sites — originated from a single source or at the most two closely related sources in the Petra region ('Amr 1987: 198; Gunneweg *et al.* 1991: esp. 325, 342).
3. The az-Zurrāba pottery workshop, which is the best-known “Nabataean” pottery production center up till now, functioned from the first up to the sixth century AD (Zayadine 1986: 188; 'Amr 1991: 313; Zayadine and 'Amr 1997).
4. From the first and up to the sixth century AD, the pottery tradition as seen at az-Zurrāba (and other southern Jordanian sites) was quite distinct, having such a clear

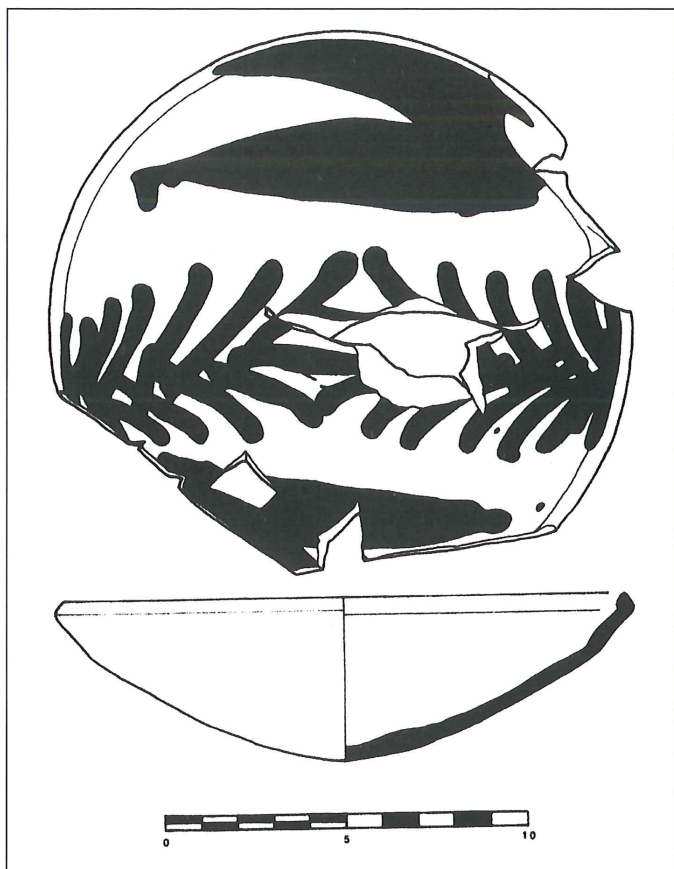
development of forms and wares that it is possible to “date by development” (see for example 'Amr 1991: 321). This observation may be traced back to the earlier first century BC products, and applies to most ceramic products, including strictly utilitarian vessels such as water pipes ('Amr and al-Momani 2001: 270).

5. *This paper will be restricted to the development of the painted wares.* These are chosen here because they are the most characteristic of the Nabataean wares, even though they are only a small group within the Nabataean repertoire. At az-Zurrāba, painted wares form around 9% of the pottery found in “Classical” late first — early second century AD strata. The figure goes down to circa 2% only when dealing with later strata, a substantial amount of which is actually residuals from earlier productions (unpublished data).

### Az-Zurrāba: The Production Centre

Up till now, twelve pottery kilns ranging in date from the first to the sixth centuries AD have been recorded at az-Zurrāba (Zayadine 1981: 350-351; 1982: 380-393; 1986: 185-187; 'Amr 1991; 'Amr and al-Momani 1999; 2001: 261-262). The discovery of the first kiln at az-Zurrāba in 1979, and adjoining rooms in 1981, gave a good indication of the late Nabataean painted ware production, when waster stacks of painted bowls were discovered in contexts dated by coins and ceramics to the beginning of the fourth century AD (Zayadine 1982: 382-386 and Pl. CXXXII,2).

In 1991, a special painted bowl was discovered inside Kiln V at az-Zurrāba. The general decoration scheme is well-known in the Nabataean repertoire, and the form is closely related to known Nabataean painted bowl forms (FIG. 1). The ware and finish, however, lack the fine qualities of the Classical Nabataean products. Kiln V at az-Zurrāba belongs stratigraphically to the last phase of the site, dated ca. mid-sixth century AD. The flood of 21 March 1991, which partially destroyed the then-exposed kiln, also revealed the presence of “Late Byzantine” pot-



1. Painted bowl from a sixth century context at az-Zurrāba; reg. no. Zur91.11: red ware, red slip interior, dark grey paint (drawing: Khairieh 'Amr).

tery sherds embedded in the kiln walls ('Amr 1991: 315-318). The logical date for the az-Zurrāba Kiln V bowl is therefore sometime during the sixth century AD. Although the state of preservation of the bowl suggests it was a product of the phase it was discovered in, the slight possibility of its being a residual cannot be totally ruled out considering the profusion of production at az-Zurrāba. And now, after ten years of archaeological work in the Nabataean heartland, this bowl remains unique.

The last phase at az-Zurrāba contains other painted pottery styles, and forms which are obvious developments of earlier, well-documented, fourth century AD forms, as well as some that may be related to fifth century AD Cypriot fine wares (FIG. 2, although it must be noted that az-Zurrāba is notorious for residuals as might be expected from a site with such a profusion of pottery production over a long period of time, see 'Amr and al-Momani 199: 191).

Also belonging to the last phase at az-Zurrāba is the only example — out of several million sherds — of a different pottery tradition that came into southern Jordan during the Late Byzantine period (FIG. 3). Other than being a valid dating tool, the uniqueness of this storage jar

at the site is also an indication of the strength of the az-Zurrāba tradition. The novice tradition is characterized by a new approach to clay processing, which involves the relatively heavy addition of temper, especially sand, to the clay (for similar jars and pottery of this tradition see for example 'Amr 2001: 367; 'Amr and Schick 2001: esp. 110-111, Figs. 5-7 and references cited). This new approach to processing is in opposition to the az-Zurrāba tradition where no temper was added and most non-plastics were removed from the clay before the vessels were formed (as obvious upon visual inspection, for experimental verification see Mason and 'Amr 1990: 300; 'Amr and Mason 1992: 11-12).

#### Gaia: The "Initial" Late Nabataean Painted Wares

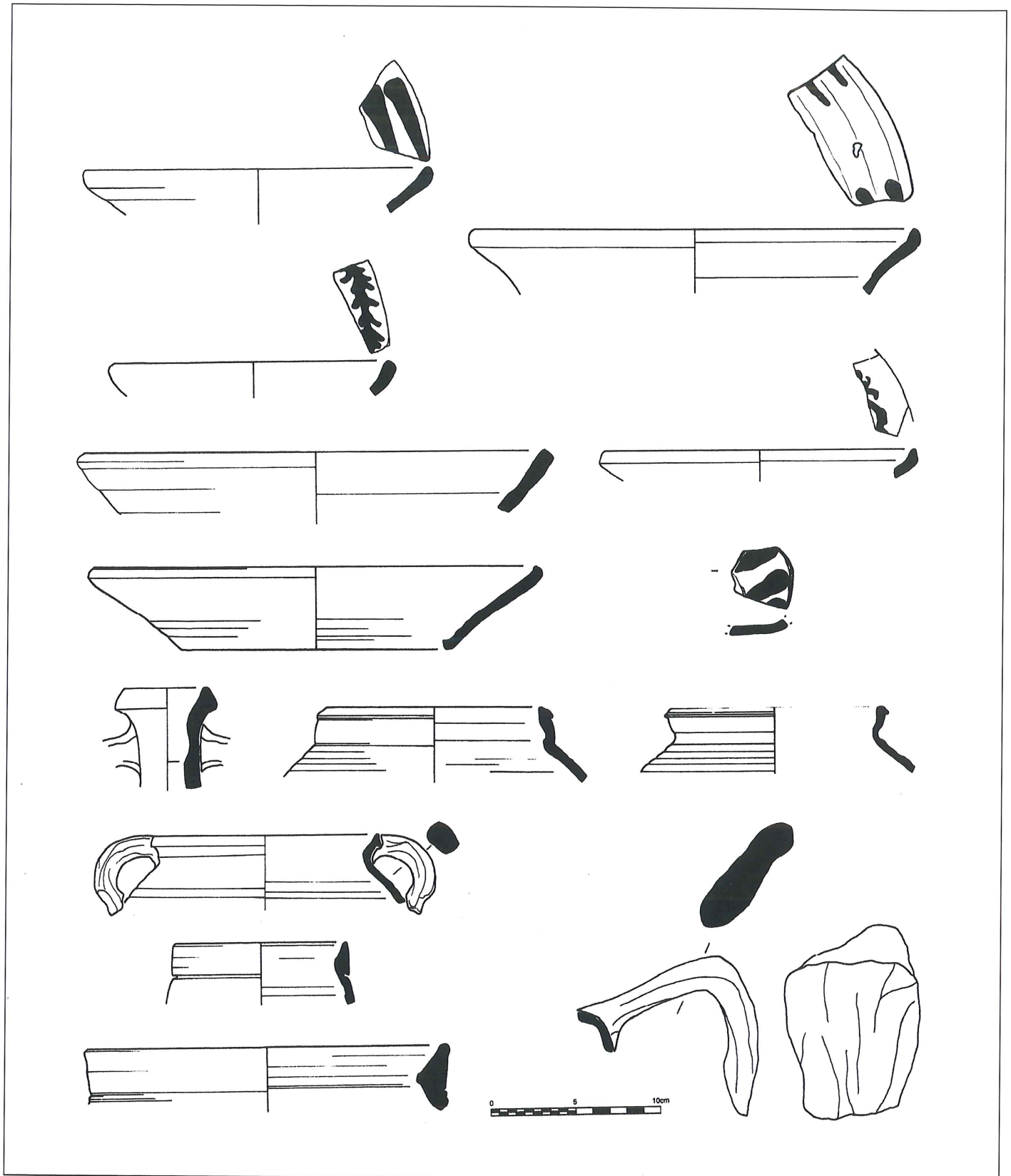
In 1996, a Nabataean villa, abandoned in the late first or beginning of the second century AD, was excavated by the Department of Antiquities in the Wādī Mūsā town centre ('Amr *et al.* 1997; Twaissi 2001). Some time after its abandonment, the ruins of the villa were covered by a dump containing large amounts of pottery and coins dated to the late second and third centuries AD (FIG. 4; for a detailed comparative study of the pottery see Twaissi 2001: Ch. 2). The origin of the dump is not known yet, but it contained many lamps, most of which were intentionally chipped (a feature noted on numerous vessels from this level; FIG. 5), and hundreds of unguentaria, not a single one of which was ribbed as opposed to the five unguentaria found inside the villa, all of which were ribbed (for descriptions and discussion of the unguentarium types, see Twaissi 2001: 120-149). These finds seem to indicate that the dump came from the clearance of a ritual site further uphill, probably the reported "temple" at the site of the current Wādī Mūsā Girls High School, around 50m to the southeast of the villa (see 'Amr and al-Momani 2001: 265).

This dump level contained a few painted vessels, which are coarse and roughly decorated in comparison with the painted wares from inside the villa. Some of these vessels retain the general forms of the earlier Nabataean painted counterparts. The ware, form details and designs, however, show obvious evolution (FIG. 6). Additionally, and for the first time, stylized designs appear on forms that are usually unpainted in the Nabataean repertoire (FIG. 7; this new development — including some designs — may be associated with contemporary Meroitic wares, the subject is currently under study by the author).

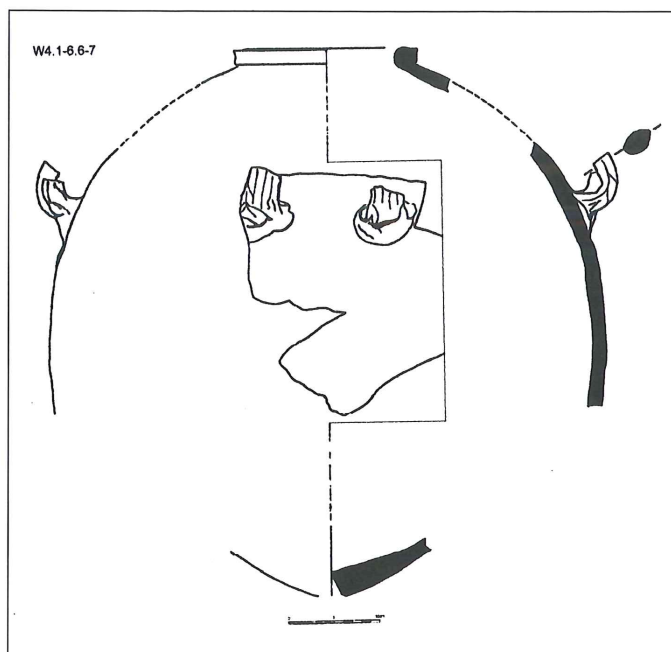
#### Petra: Evidence from the Capital

The University of Basle excavations on az-Zanṭūr produced a wealth of well-studied and published ceramics, including late painted wares in the Nabataean tradition. Like at Gaia, new patterns appear in the late second and up to the end of the third century AD ("dated by evolu-





2. Examples of Late Byzantine products from az-Zurrāba (drawing: Hala Suyuf and Sofinaz Kabaja).



3. Storage jar from the uppermost level at az-Zurrāba; red sandy ware (drawing: Ahmed al-Momani).

tion” by Gerber 2001). Painted wares also come from well-stratified levels securely dated to the fourth and early fifth centuries AD (Schmid 1996: esp. 168, 209; Fellmann Brogli 1996: 236-237; 240-241, 269).

Directly opposite az-Zanṭūr, excavations at the Temple of the Winged Lions and “The Petra Household Excavations” revealed painted wares in the layers between the AD 363 and 551 destruction levels, as well as the continuity of “Nabataean forms” up to at least AD 551 (Russell 1990; a few examples are currently on display at the Petra Museum).

Similar findings of late painted wares come from other excavations in the Petra city centre, e.g. the main street (the British School in Jerusalem excavations directed by P.J. Parr in 1958-64, see illustrations in ‘Amr 1987: 314-316), and the “Petra Church” (personal observation).

Further afield, these late wares occur at al-Ḥumayma and Ayla/al-‘Aqaba (personal observation), and as far north as Jarash (A.-M. Rasson-Seigne, personal communication).

### Khirbat an-Nawāfla: The “Last” Late Nabataean Painted Wares

Khirbat an-Nawāfla, in the northeastern sector of the modern town of Wādī Mūsā, was excavated by a team from the Department of Antiquities in 1997-2000 (‘Amr *et al.* 2000). The main site at the *khirba* is a village that was established in the first century AD and continued, with only a few short gaps, up to the Ottoman period.

The site produced “Late Nabataean” painted wares that continue the tradition already discussed at Gaia above

(compare FIGS. 7 and 8), and in the last Byzantine levels, a group of painted bowls already noted in the last Zurrāba phase appear (compare FIGS. 2 and 9). The wares are obviously in the “Zurrāba tradition” of well-levigated red wares, although by now they are far from the finesse of the early painted wares, and in the progression of that same tradition, some show the lighter-coloured surfaces and cores resulting from the elevated temperatures of the improved furnace designs (‘Amr 1991: 321). The main motifs still surviving — in order of frequency — are “elongated splashes”, palmettes and dots, which were executed in dark grey/black paint, sometimes on a red slip, and often badly adhering so only traces remain.

The forms are common well-known Byzantine forms, usually found unpainted (for example az-Zanṭūr forms C9a, C9b and C10a, belonging to Phase Spätrömisch II dated last quarter of the fourth to early fifth century AD, Fellmann Brogli 1996: 237, 240, 261). At an-Nawāfla, they were found in levels sealed by layers containing early Islamic innovations, such as the “Ayla ware” (Whitcomb 2001).

Combining the above evidence, these painted wares certainly continue at least up to the fifth century AD, with a further extension into the sixth century being highly probable considering that “the pottery of southern Jordan in the Byzantine period is notorious for some forms that were produced for centuries with very little change” (‘Amr and Schick 2001: 114 and n. 52).

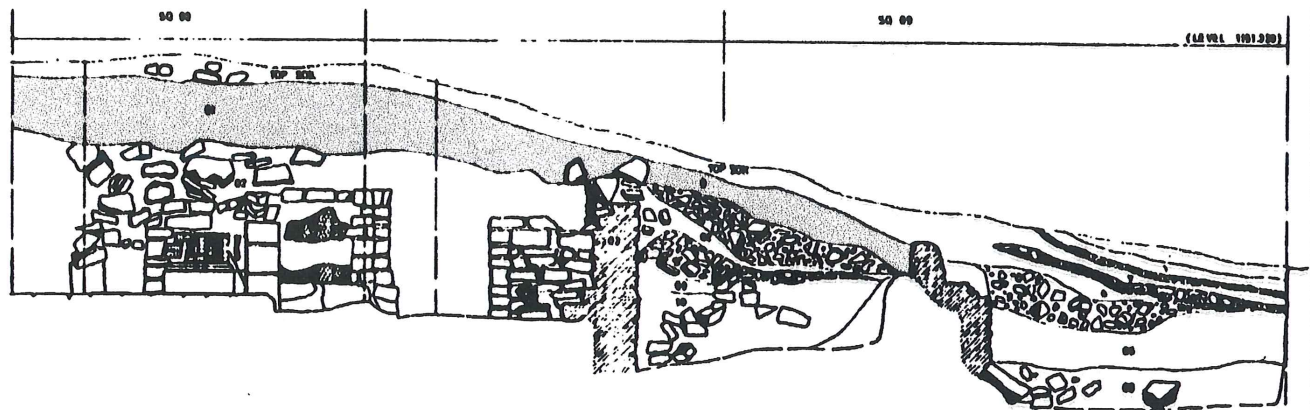
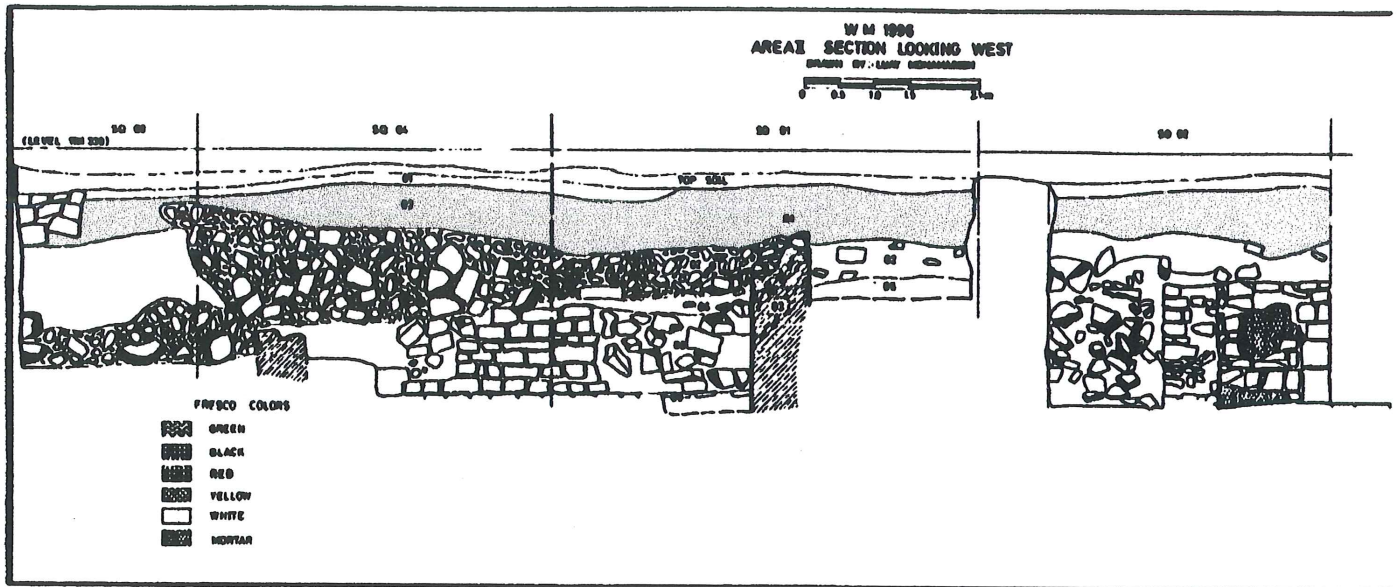
### Discussion

The attribution of “Nabataean pottery” to a culturally distinct group of people, the Nabataeans, is generally accepted and need not be discussed. The evidence from the Petra region indicates a continuity of a “Nabataean” tradition of pottery making well into the “Late Byzantine” period. This pottery tradition in southern Jordan was later replaced by another tradition having “new concepts of production”.

Excluding the earliest products (Schmid 1996 Phase 1), the production of distinctly Nabataean pottery coincides well with the time period during which the az-Zurrāba workshops functioned. Az-Zurrāba is up till now the only known centre for the production of Nabataean fine painted wares (see Gunneweg *et al.* 1991, where even the earliest examples were found to have originated from the Petra area while an-Naqab/the Negev was excluded as a possible origin despite the discovery of a kiln at ‘Abda/Obodah, see Negev 1974). The equally distinctive Nabataean fine rouletted wares were produced elsewhere (‘Amr 1991: 321), probably at nearby Udhrūḥ (Marie Killick, pers. comm.), but these have a very short production time span.

Going back to the origin, we have to keep in mind that typically Nabataean pottery was first made in the first century BC — well after the Nabataeans were first mentioned





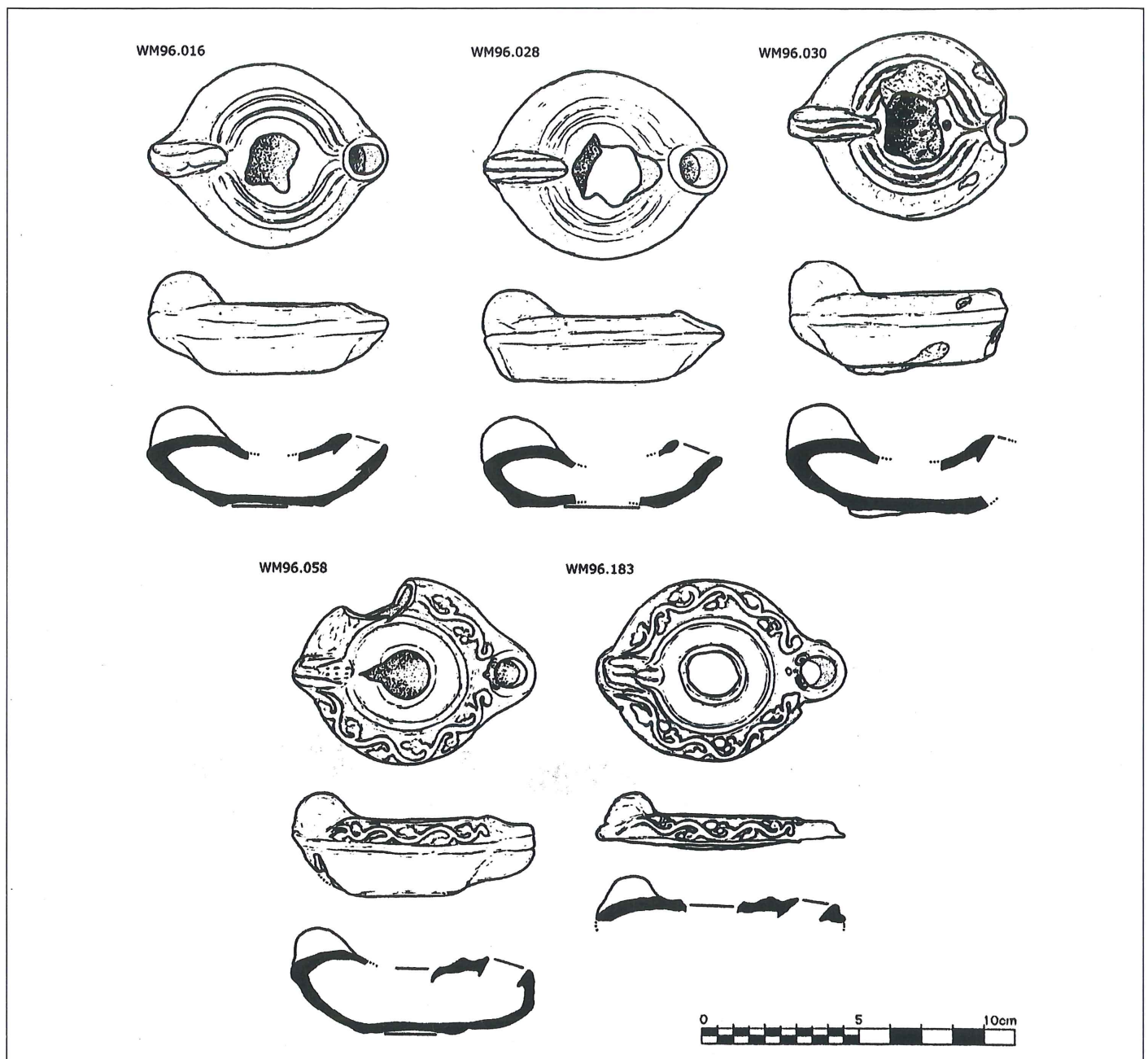
4. Wādī Mūsā 1996: Area I, East Section; shading indicates the late second-third century dump level above the ruined villa (drawing: Luay Mo-hamadieh).

in the historical records, and it was much more restricted in its distribution than the known extent of the Nabataean political and economic domination (see also Schmid, in this volume). Peter Parr (1978: 206-207) has argued that the production of fine painted wares may be due to the desire of the Nabataeans, during a time of “new dynamism” in their political history, to gain “cultural respectability” by competing with their neighbours in terms of Hellenization (he also argued that the sudden appearance of the pottery in the Nabataean cultural repertoire is indicative of a single individual potter who was at home in the Hellenistic artistic tradition, which could explain the singular-

ity of az-Zurrāba). Additionally, Stephan Schmid (2001) has very convincingly linked the beginning of the production to the sedentarization of the Nabataeans.

Beyond the evidence given in this paper for the continuity of the Nabataean pottery tradition, a number of art historians have proposed that Early Islamic glazed wares from Iraq (e.g. the early Abbasid blue-on-white) have origins in the Nabataean pottery. This proposal is mainly based on the distribution of designs and the “characteristic palmettes” (see for example Tamari 1995, and the arguments in Parr 1978: 207-208).

What implications may all of the above have con-



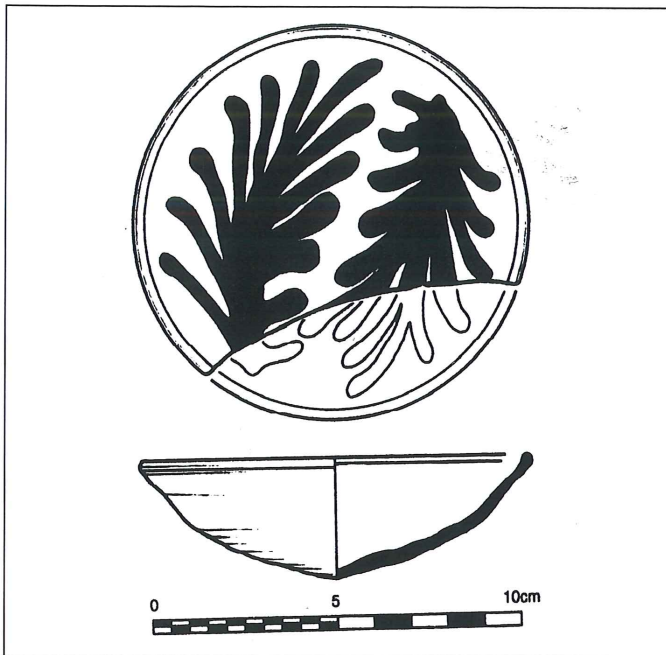
5. Examples of lamps from the dump level in FIG. 4 (drawing: Qais Tweissi).

cerning the identity of the potters? Obviously they invented what became a hallmark of the Nabataean culture, a hallmark that does not chronologically or geographically coincide with the Nabataean state but is still archaeologically considered a definite indicator of Nabataean cultural presence. Were they a single Zurrāba family who carried on the tradition of the original potter “who was entirely at home in the Hellenistic artistic tradition” as proposed by Parr (1978: 206)? If so, was this original potter an “ethnic” Nabataean? Whatever the case, they were def-

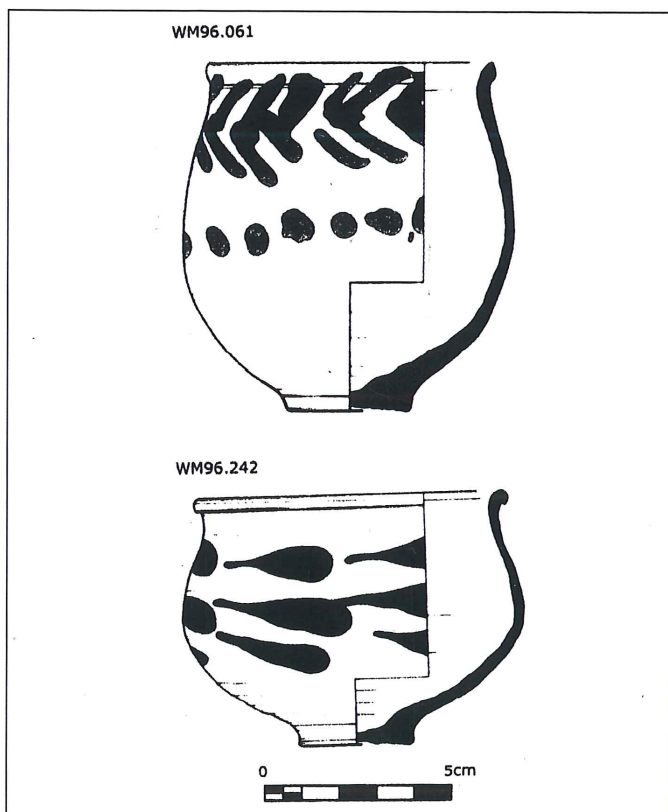
initely “culturally Nabataean”, and as frustratingly typical of other Nabataean cultural aspects, they seem to have suddenly appeared, left a pronounced mark on our cultural history, then mysteriously disappeared.

The question of where did the Nabataeans disappear to has been a subject of discussion. Some historians have argued that they assimilated with the local tribes such as Judhām, and Saleh Hamarneh went further in equating them with *al-Anbāṭ* of the Early Islamic sources (see for example Hamarneh 1990). This equation has been tradi-

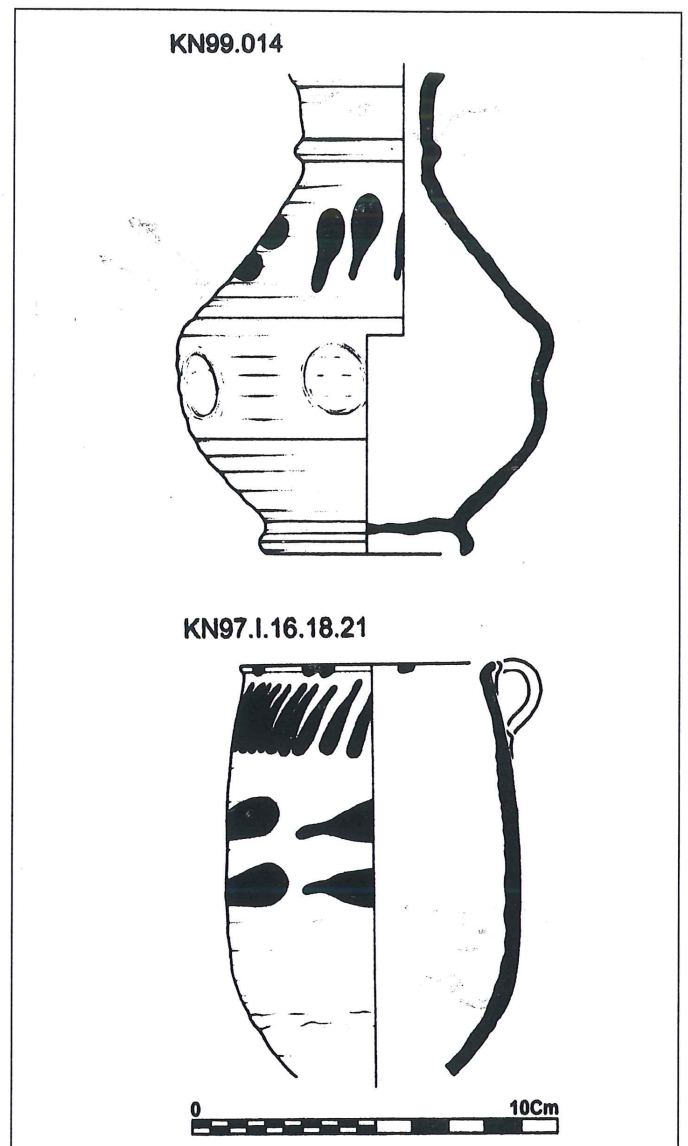




6. Painted bowl from the dump level in FIG. 4; WM96.001/JP 4527: red ware, white band on exterior rim, reddish-brown paint (drawing: Qais Tweissi).

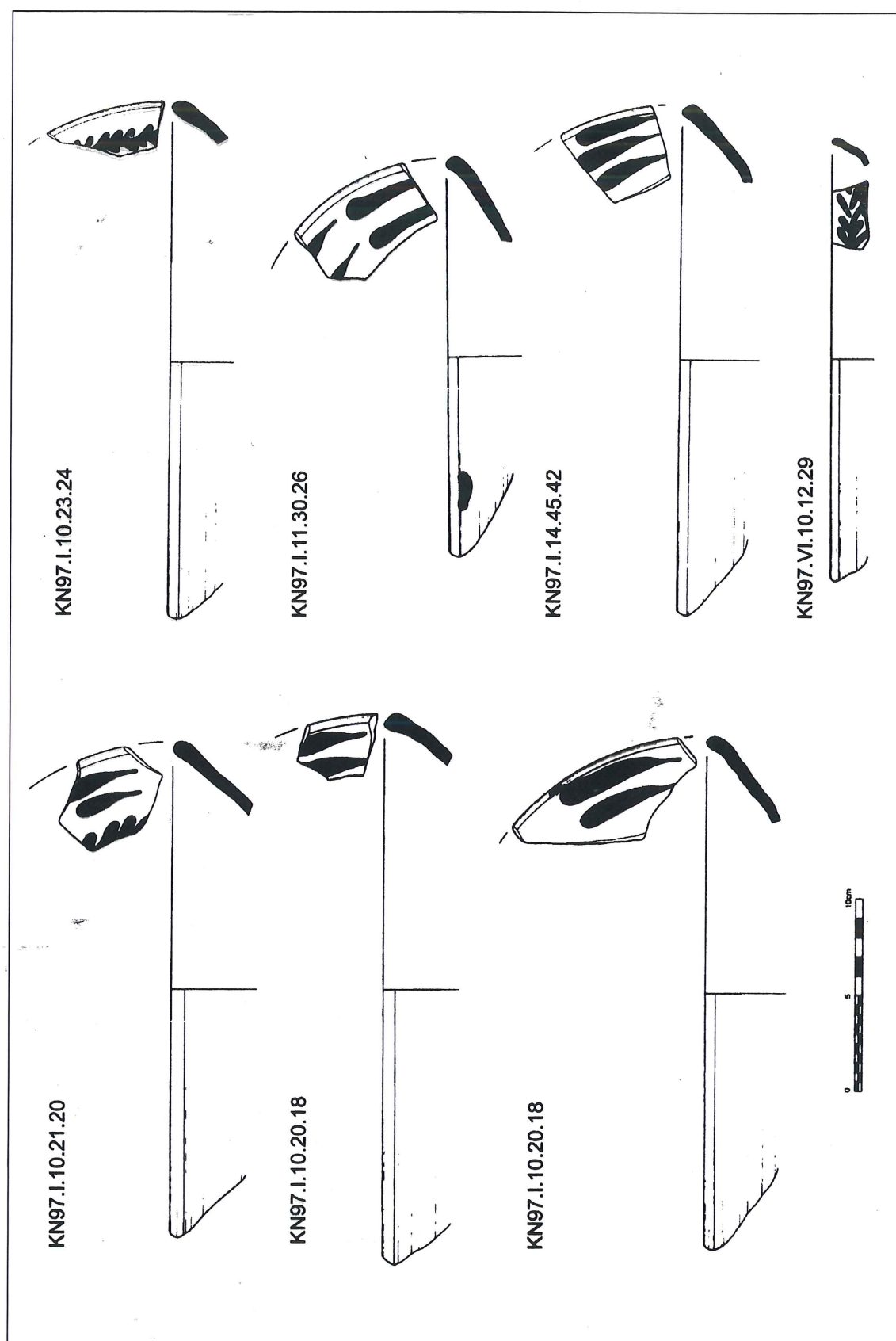


7. Painted cups from the dump level in FIG. 4; *top.* WM96.061/JP 4587: red ware, red slip upper exterior, dark grey paint; *bottom.* WM96.242/JP 4768: red ware with areas fired cream, red slip upper exterior, dark grey paint (drawing: Qais Tweissi).



8. Painted "Late Nabataean" closed forms from Khirbat an-Nawāfla; *top.* KN99.014/JP 5628: jar with dimpled body and omphalos-ring base, red ware, cream outer surface and inner neck, grey paint; *bottom.* KN97.I.16.18.21: red ware, red slip exterior, dark grey paint (drawing: Qais Tweissi).

tionally discarded, mainly because of what we know about the Nabataeans in their earlier history without regard to the fact that people and cultures change over the centuries. The question of whether the "late Nabataeans" formed at least part of the people referred to as "al-Anbāṭ" in Early Islamic history is obviously in need for more evidence and research, and is well beyond the scope of this paper. However, with the increasing archaeological evidence for the continuity of Nabataean cultural aspects into the Late Byzantine period, I believe this equation should be approached with an open mind rather than discarded off-hand.



9. Examples of painted bowls from Late Byzantine levels at Khirbat an-Nawāfla (drawing: Qais Tweissi).



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