

# SHALLOW Umayyad Painted Pottery Bowls from Rujm el-Kursi Excavations

by  
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## I. Introduction

The excavations at Rujm el-Kursi, which were carried out by the Department of Archaeology of the University of Jordan under the direction of the writer, have produced important Umayyad pottery specimens (Figs. 1-3). The importance of these examples, which are mainly of domestic large bowls, lies in the fact that they were securely dated by coins and an ostrakon (Fig. 3:17) to the early seventh century A.D.

The Umayyad pottery found at Rujm el-Kursi is generally wheel-made, well levigated, evenly fired and made of well prepared clay with tiny mineral inclusions. The bowls in question are of buff, buff-creamy, whitish or pinkish ware with white or cream slip, painted in red or brown colours in loops (e.g. Fig. 2:14), spirals (Fig. 1:2, 8), wavy lines (Figs. 1:4, 5, 9, 10; 2:13, 16) floral designs (Fig. 1:5, 7) and geometric patterns (Fig. 1:3, 8).

A painted Kufic inscription was found on a bowl fragment which has yellowish-cream slip (Fig. 3:17). Although the inscription is incomplete, the remaining words suggest that such bowls were possibly used as vessels at social occasions (e.g. wedding celebrations). Besides, twelve of the twenty eight characters of the Arabic alphabet are present on an excavated specimen, thus augmenting our knowledge of early Arabic letters of the seventh century A.D. (Fig. 4).

The early Islamic pottery of the Umayyad period has not received much profound study, and has even been classified sometimes as Byzantine. For example, Schneider illustrated Umayyad pottery examples found at Siyagha which bear similarity to the bowls under discussion, and dated them to the 6th and 7th centuries A.D. (1950: 47, 65, 81, 96, 135). Harding,

who also published similar specimens from Amman (1951: 7-16, Fig. 5, 70-75), suggested that "the pottery relates much more closely to Byzantine times than does the Mefjer material". Another broad designation has been given to similar Umayyad pottery from Dhiban uncovered by Tushingham (1954: 16 and note 12), who published them without including their illustrations. He has confirmed that "the pottery is of a type known from the excavations at Mt. Nebo. The most common ware was "red, red-on-white" which is dated at Nebo from the end of the sixth to the eighth century". Furthermore, Reed (1964: 56; Pl. 67.7, 19 and note 16) has studied similar bowls from Dhiban and attributed them to the Byzantine period: "A number of sherds were found having a cream slip, and brown painted wavy line decoration (Pl. 67.7, 19); they are Byzantine, comparing favourably with specimens found at Nebo."

This study, therefore, seeks to fill the requirements for cataloguing and correlating parallel examples of such Umayyad painted pottery bowls.

## II. Descriptions

1. A bowl fragment (Fig. 1:1):  
Diameter: 17.8 cm.  
Rim thickness: 0.8 cm.  
Body thickness: 0.5 cm.

Rim thickened, sharp on top, slightly tapers towards base. Light whitish-green ware, well levigated, evenly fired. External and internal surfaces coated with whitish-creamy slip. Straight and zig-zag lines in dark brown paint depicted internally.

2. A bowl fragment (Fig. 1:2):  
Diameter: 21.0 cm.  
Rim thickness: 1.0 cm.  
Body thickness: 0.6 cm.

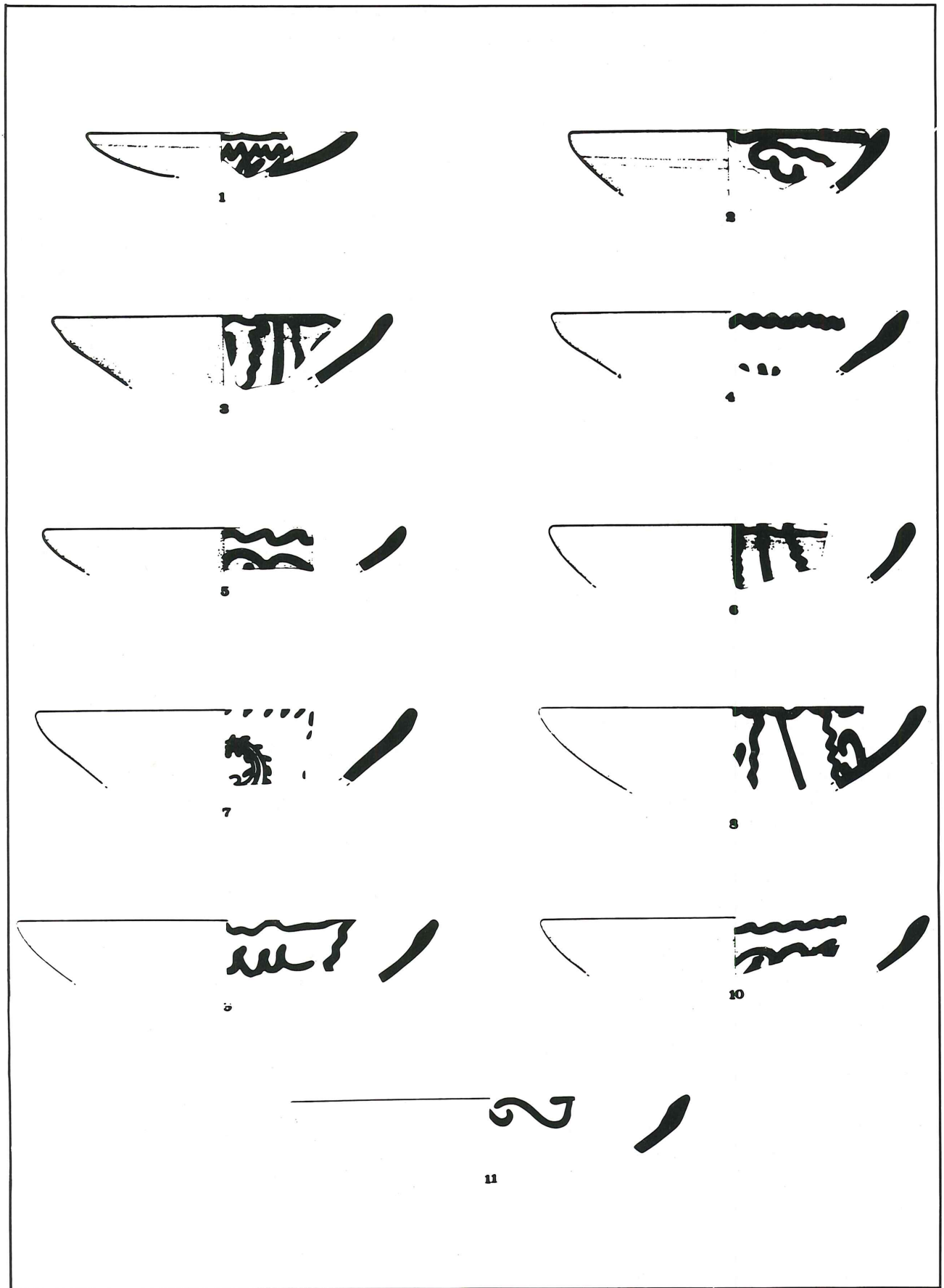


Fig. 1.

Rim rounded on top, slightly tapers towards base. Creamy ware, well levigated, evenly fired. Whitish slip applied internally and to the upper part of the exterior surface. Zig-zag patterns at rim and stylized floral leaves below depicted in dark brown paint internally.

3. A bowl fragment (Fig. 1:3):  
Diameter: 22.3 cm.  
Rim thickness: 0.9 cm.  
Body thickness: 0.6 cm.

Rim rounded on top, gently tapers towards base. Buff ware, well levigated, evenly fired; some calcite inclusions. A creamy-yellow slip applied internally and externally around rim only. Straight and wavy lines of dark brown paint on internal surface springing from centre of bowl to rim; joining to a wavy band of the same colour at rim.

4. A bowl fragment (Fig. 1:4):  
Diameter: 23.3 cm.  
Rim thickness: 1.1 cm.  
Body thickness: 0.4 cm.

Rim of triangular cross-section bevelled internally, probably to receive a lid. Internal ridges defined by potter's wheel. Pinkish-buff ware, some mineral inclusions, evenly fired. Creamy slip applied internally, peeled in places. Zig-zags of dark brown paint around internal rim, traces of the same coloured pattern occur on the central zone.

5. A bowl fragment (Fig. 1:5):  
Diameter: 23.8 cm.  
Rim thickness: 0.8 cm.  
Body thickness: 0.6 cm.

Rim rounded on top, bevelled internally, traces of potter's wheel marks showing internally and externally. Pinkish ware with creamy exterior zones; few white limestone inclusions of medium size. Creamy slip applied internally and around external rim. A wavy band of dark brown paint around internal rim, with traces of petal-like decorations of the same colour below.

6. A bowl fragment (Fig. 1:6):  
Diameter: 24.0 cm.  
Rim thickness: 1.0 cm.  
Body thickness: 0.5 cm.

Rim heavy, rounded on top, slightly tapered below. Creamy ware, well levigated, evenly fired, dark calcite incrustation especially on external surface, traces of potter's wheel marks on internal and external surfaces. White slip on internal surface only. Decoration applied in dark brown paint internally; alternating straight and wavy lines springing from center to rim connected with horizontal wavy line of the same colour at rim.

7. A bowl fragment (Fig. 1:7):  
Diameter: 25.0 cm.  
Rim thickness: 1.0 cm.  
Body thickness: 0.7 cm.

Rim rounded on top and gently tapers towards base. Buff-red ware with light grey core in places; very fine calcite inclusions; traces of potter's wheel marks visible on both internal and external surfaces. Creamy-white slip applied to internal surface only. Internal rim decorated with dark brown paint forming lines and dots, center of internal surface decorated with circular floral design in wreath-like form.

8. A bowl fragment (Fig. 1:8):  
Diameter: 25.4 cm.  
Rim thickness: 0.9 cm.  
Body thickness: 0.6 cm.

Rim rounded on top and slightly tapers towards base. Dull brownish ware, small calcite inclusions, coarse to touch, body stained in places, defined ridges of potter's wheel marks occur internally. Yellowish-creamy slip on internal surface only. Decoration similar to No. 6.

9. A bowl fragment (Fig. 1:9):  
Diameter: 27.6 cm.  
Rim thickness: 0.9 cm.  
Body thickness: 0.5 cm.

Rim rounded on top with triangular cross-section, tapers towards body. Dull brownish ware with grey core, gritty and slightly encrusted, traces of potter's wheel



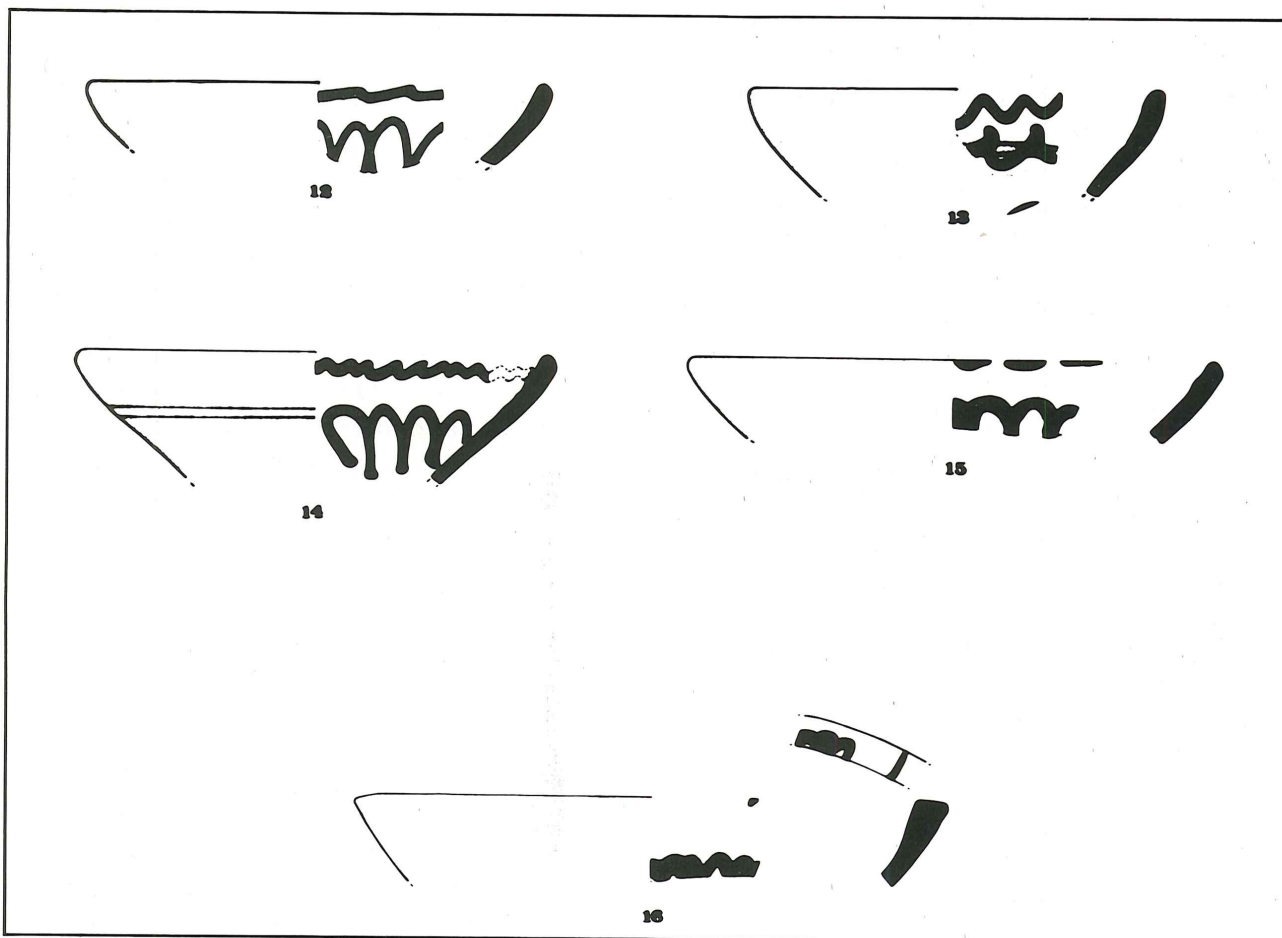


Fig. 2.

marks internally and externally. Creamy slip on internal surface with some streaks and splashes outside. Irregular wavy band of brown paint around and below internal rim.

10. A bowl fragment (Fig. 1:10):  
 Diameter: 25.7 cm.  
 Rim thickness: 1.0 cm.  
 Body thickness: 0.4 cm.

Rim rounded on top and tapers towards base. Buff-red ware, evenly fired, well levigated. White-creamy slip applied to the internal surface only, body sooted and stained. Decoration similar to No. 5.

11. A bowl fragment (Fig. 1:11):  
 Diameter: 26.4 cm.  
 Rim thickness: 1.1 cm.  
 Body thickness: 0.6 cm.

Thickened rim, relatively sharp on top and tapers towards base. Pinkish ware with grey core, slightly gritty with some encrustation in places. White slip on internal

surface only. Upper part of internal rim decorated in reddish-brown paint with half scrolls.

12. A bowl fragment (Fig. 2:12):  
 Diameter: 21.6 cm.  
 Rim thickness: 0.8 cm.  
 Body thickness: 0.6 cm.

Slightly inverted rim, pinkish ware, gritty and evenly fired. Internal surface coated with thick creamy slip, and decorated with dark brown paint; zig-zag line just below rim and successive loops similar to flower petals surrounding the interior base.

13. A bowl fragment (Fig. 2:13):  
 Diameter: 19.7 cm.  
 Rim thickness: 1.0 cm.  
 Body thickness: 0.5 cm.

Rim rounded on top, hemispherical body. Greenish-cream ware, tiny inclusions, evenly fired, traces of potter's wheel marks on internal and external surfaces. Creamy slip applied internally and on the

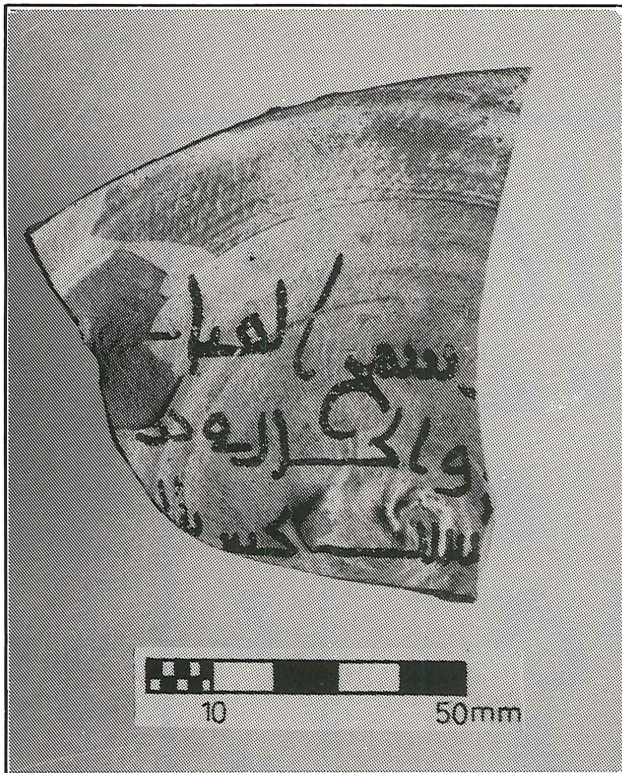


Fig. 3.(A)

upper parts of the external wall. Two wavy lines of dark brown paint on the interior.

14. A bowl fragment (Fig. 2:14):  
 Diameter: 22.4 cm.  
 Rim thickness: 0.9 cm.  
 Body thickness: 0.6 cm.

Rim rounded on top, creamy ware, well levigated, evenly fired. Creamy-white slip applied internally and on the upper part externally. Decoration similar to No. 12.

15. A bowl fragment (Fig. 2:15):  
 Diameter: 25.0 cm.  
 Rim thickness: 1.0 cm.  
 Body thickness: 0.8 cm.

Rim rounded on top, groove below internal rim followed by a ridge. Light grey ware with pinkish core in places, tiny inclusions. Creamy-white slip on internal surface only. Rim decorated with successive dots in dark brown paint, while the lower part of the internal body is decorated with the same coloured loops.

16. A bowl fragment (Fig. 2:16):  
 Diameter: 28.2 cm.  
 Rim thickness: 1.5 cm.  
 Body thickness: 0.8 cm.

(B)

Rim thickened, flattened on top, of triangular cross-section. Cream ware with pinkish core; few calcite inclusions. Cream slip inside and outside. Rim decorated with wavy lines of dark brown paint on top, only the upper part of a petal-like pattern depicted internally remains.

17. A bowl base fragment with kufic inscription (Fig. 3:A,B):  
 Body thickness: 0.4-0.5 cm.

The central bellet or knob surrounded by potter's wheel marks and excess clay. Buff-red ware, well levigated, evenly fired. Yellowish-cream slip applied internally with some streaks and splashes outside. Three incomplete horizontal lines of a Kufic inscription written in light brown paint on the internal center of the fragment. It reads:

..... وسمح العباسـى .....  
 ... والحسان في حد [ يفته ...  
 تسلت كثير [١] بالـليل ...

... and Al-'Abbas permitted....  
 ...and the beautiful women in [his garden]....  
 ...she often slipped through during the [night]....

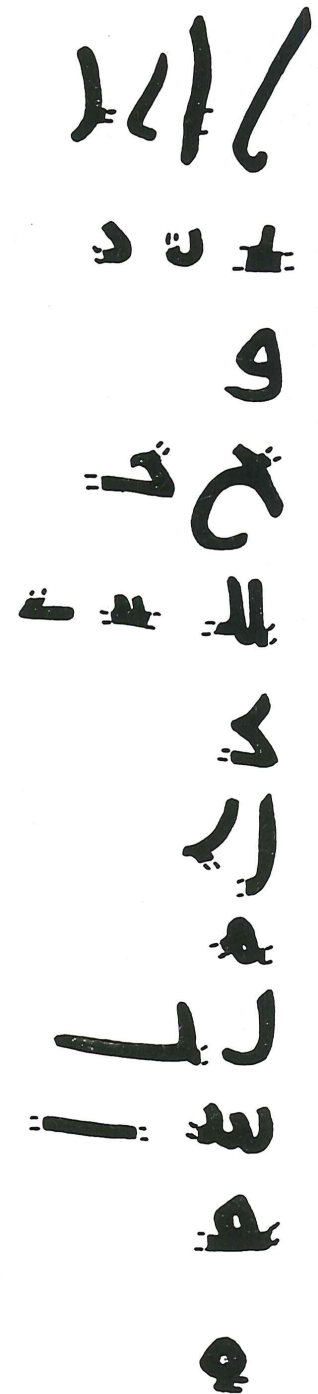
, b w h y k i m n s 6 f		ا ب و ع ي ك ح ن س ل م ر
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Fig. 4.



The ridged and plain *Sin* together with other letters that appear in various shapes in the text such as 'Alef, Ba, Ha and Ya (Fig. 4) find parallels in an Arabic inscription recently uncovered at el-Kerak, and published by the writer (*ZDPV* 105 (1989), forthcoming).

### III. Parallel Examples

The bowls in question are common at several archaeological sites in Palestine and Jordan and are attested in publications, but mostly without a definite attribution to the Umayyad period.

Jerusalem offered a similar example (Macalister and Duncan 1923: Pl. XXIII.5), identified as an "Arab" pot. Glueck (1939: Pl. 21) in his explorations discerned a similar example and gave it the same broad dating of "Arab". Khirbet el-Mafjar furnished close parallels, published by Baramki (1942: 89, Fig. 9.6-8, 29), who followed the above-mentioned designation of "Arab". Another comparable form came from 'Ain Karim (Saller 1946:106, 184, Pl. 35.2) again classified as 'Arab'. More parallels were found at Siyagha (Schneider 1950:47, 65, 81, 96, 135) and dated to "the 6th and 7th centuries A.D." Amman also offered more parallels (Harding 1951: 7-16, Fig. 5.70-75), dated to "the Byzantine times". Delougaz and Haines (1960: 40-44, Pl. 37. 1-31) uncovered such Umayyad ware at Khirbet el-Kerak with the attribution "undated". Winnett and Reed (1964: 56, Pl. 67.7, 19) provided more similar examples from Dhiban, classified as "Byzantine". Hesban produced more parallels (Sauer 1973: 39-49, Fig. 3.131-132) dated as "Umayyad". The Umayyad stratum of Area I at Pella also produced other comparable pottery (Smith *et al.* 1973: Pl. 30.86, 492, 1101). Besides, Pella offered more parallels published in McNicoll *et al.* (1982: 166, 169, 174-175, Pls. 142.3, 143.1, 144.5, 147.8-9), designated "early Umayyad". Another decorated sherd of the same studied ware was uncovered at

Gergesa of Palestine (Tzaferis 1983: 33-35, Pl. XV.8). The author failed to identify his sherd and, therefore, attributed it to "either late Byzantine or early Arab". Recently Jerusalem produced more parallels (Tushingham 1985: 386-387, Figs. 33.11-12, 34-43), considered "Umayyad". Caesarea, on the Palestinian coast, provided two parallels (Levine and Netzer 1986: 66-74, Fig. 2.5-6, Pl. II.a,c) designated "Umayyad pottery".

### IV. Conclusion

In considering these Umayyad pottery bowls, one notices the following: such pottery is extensively scattered over a wide area of Jordan and Palestine, but little attention has been paid to it in Palestine during the last four decades. The majority of scholars who studied the Umayyad pottery considered it either 'Arab' or 'Byzantine' or even both 'Arab-Byzantine'. This broad designation 'Arab', which is commonly used in the mentioned parallels, is a misleading term. A more precise dating, therefore, should be applied. The importance of this study lies in the fact that the bowls concerned are well dated by coins and an ostrakon, with a well defined Umayyad stratum, all of which indicate a precise date of the late seventh century A.D. According to the form and decoration of these bowls, one would put such an industry in the early Umayyad domestic pottery repertoire. Relying on the translation of the inscribed sherd (Fig. 3:A,B), one wonders whether such bowls were used for special social occasions.

These Umayyad pottery examples are generally of high quality and, therefore, suggest that an urban Umayyad group with a well developed economy lived at Rujm el-Kursi, producing a surplus that made their life prosperous.

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