

# NABATAEAN POTTERY FROM THE 'CISTERN': SOME FINDS FROM THE BROWN UNIVERSITY EXCAVATIONS AT THE PETRA GREAT TEMPLE

by

Laurel D. Bestock

## **Abstract**

*During the 1997 and 1998 seasons of excavation at the Petra Great Temple a room thought to have been built as a cistern was cleared. In addition to unexpected architecture, this room yielded a surprising number of artifacts. The most significant finds from the cistern were ceramics; over thirty complete pottery vessels were recovered. While many of the forms in this assemblage are typical, a few are unusual and hence deserving of note. Also significant is the fact that the pottery has all been dated to the first century CE or earlier. The light which this discovery sheds on our understanding of the Temple itself, is as important as the pottery itself. The presence of certain types of vessels may help explain the function of the building, and certainly the early date of all the pottery helps to establish a *terminus ante quem* for the construction of the temple. A secure date for this important building is vital to the understanding of Nabataean monumental public architecture on the eve of Roman domination.*

## **Introduction**

During the 1996 season of excavations at the Petra Great Temple, the tops of two typically Nabataean arches were exposed directly south of the East Exedra. This discovery was made at the end of the season and therefore excavation of this feature was postponed for a year. In the meantime, the tops of the arches were consolidated to make it safe to work beneath them. The 1997 season of excavation delineated the outline of a

room over which the arches had extended. This excavation determined that there had originally been seven arches. Over the course of the 1997 and 1998 seasons, this room was all but completely excavated.<sup>1</sup> Both the room and the artifacts within it are remarkable.

The function of the room is still not completely understood, although its architectural features suggest that it may have been intended for use as a cistern. There are no conclusive signs of water and even if a cistern was intended, it may not ever have been used in this fashion. What is certain is that, post-cistern or later, the room was used as a dump primarily for plaster, pottery and shells. This occurred not long after 100 CE, at a time when the rest of the Temple building was still in active use.

## **The Context**

The room within which the deposit was found is a rectangle of 3.1 m north-south by 10 m east-west. The room was originally vaulted with a series of seven arches. The walls and arches of this room bond with those of the East Exedra making it almost certain that the two were constructed at the same time. In the eastern part, the floor of the room is composed of bedrock with a plaster bed on top. In the western part, the floor is four centimeters thick with the plaster poorly laid on top of large stones and earth fill; in the middle of a trench excavated in that area, the plaster floor is not present and appears to have been disturbed. The area where there is no plaster was the *in situ* position of many artifacts including frag-

1. A balk was left in the south-west corner of the trench. The earth which remains supports two drums from the easternmost pronaos column which collapsed over the forecourt and part of the

area which had been the cistern. This collapsed column will not be removed and so the excavation of the cistern is as complete as it ever will be.



ments of bronze and the earliest painted wares from the trench. These were all found at approximately the same level as the plaster floor; the fill below that was completely barren. In the north-west corner of the trench is a stairway of seven roughly cut stairs which connect to the large East Stairway of the Temple. These stairs, unlike any others at the Great Temple, were found completely intact. They do not reach the plaster floor but stop approximately a meter above it. The construction of these stairs and the plaster floor indicate that originally this area may have been intended as a cistern.

Whatever its original purpose, it seems that this room was filled in soon after its construction and long before the Temple went out of use. The very bottom layers of debris have pottery sherds all of which have been dated by Yvonne Gerber to before 100 CE. These strata are level over the entire trench and are very thin. Directly above those are the dump layers which held the majority of the pottery and other finds such as shells and plaster. These layers are heavily sloped down from the west to the east, suggesting that objects were dumped into the room by someone standing on the stairs. There is great differentiation between these strata, with some being almost white from plaster residue and others being black from fire remains. However, the pottery from all of these sloped strata is very similar in form and date. This multi-layered deposit is several meters thick in the western area near the stairs, but is only about 0.75 m thick in the eastern area. The dates from the pottery suggest that it was discarded into the cistern in the early second century CE. The dates for complete vessels are corroborated by the reading of the sherds done by Yvonne Gerber. Pottery dated to later periods is not found except in the uppermost strata of the trench; this soil was washed down the hill and accumulated over the entire temple after the building was no longer in use.

The cistern must have gone out of use when the dump was established. The pottery

suggests that this happened early in the second century CE, a time when we know that the rest of the building was in use. Unfortunately securely datable deposits are extremely rare at the Great Temple and hence it is difficult to sequence the closing of the cistern in relation to other phases in the use of the Temple. It is known, however, that the building did undergo at least one major reconstruction (see Joukowsky in this issue) during which time the inter-columnar walls and the theatron were constructed. It seems quite possible that the closing of the cistern coincides with this remodeling, and also that the dump deposits were materials from around the Temple. Thus, the author suggests that the material found in the cistern can tell us a great deal about the decoration of the building prior to remodelling and the types of vessels which were in use. We can now make a reasonable assumption about the types of vessels which were used in large Nabataean religious or civil complexes prior to the rule of the Romans.

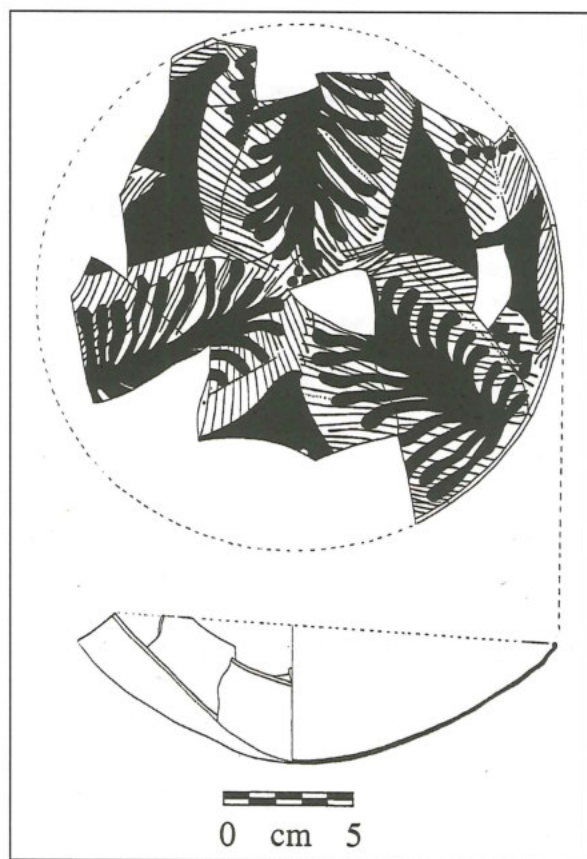
As the painted wares show, this pottery collection becomes much more interesting when related to its context. The dating of the pottery from the cistern is vital to our understanding of the construction of the Great Temple. It is possible that this collection helps in dating a major phase in the construction of the building: the addition of the theatron in the central area. Certainly the earliest deposits in the cistern were laid after the original structure had been built; this guarantees that there was a monumental structure, of which the East Exedra and cistern were part, prior to 100 CE. At the outset of excavation at the Great Temple it was not thought that the exedrae were part of the original structure. The pottery from the cistern, however, suggests that either the exedrae were part of the first monumental building on the site or the original building was much earlier than previously believed. The excavation of a collection of pottery from a setting which was not domestic, funerary or commercial is re-



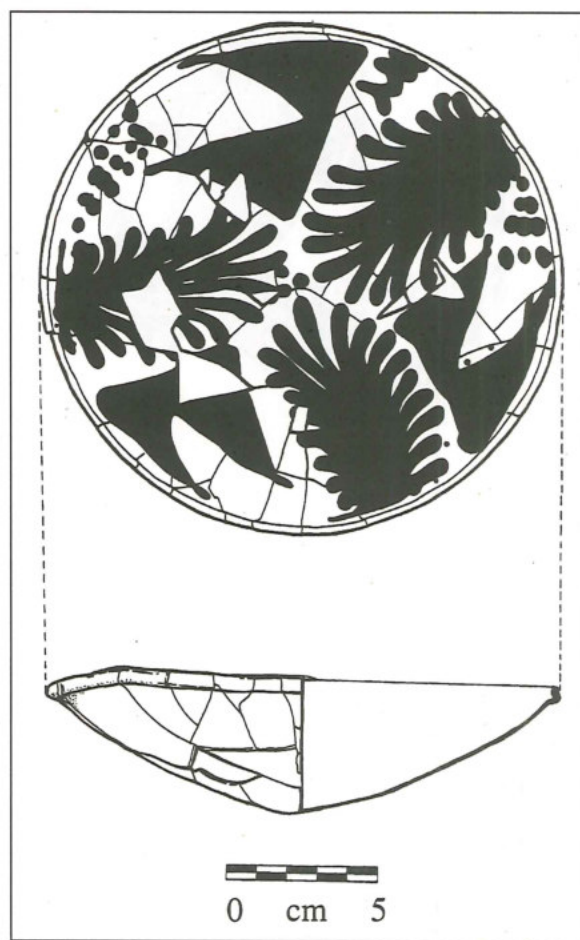
markable. That it helps establish a date and a phasing rational for the Petra Great Temple lends even greater interest to the pottery recovered from the cistern.

**The Pottery (Figs. 1-13)**

A significant percent of the pottery from the dump strata in the cistern is Nabataean fine ware, of stamped, painted and un-decorated varieties (Figs. 1-4 and 6-8). Of the tens of thousands of sherds found, 34 vessels were either unbroken or could be reconstructed well enough to give a complete profile of the vessel. The most common forms were the ridged cups or vases (Fig. 5) of which nine complete examples were



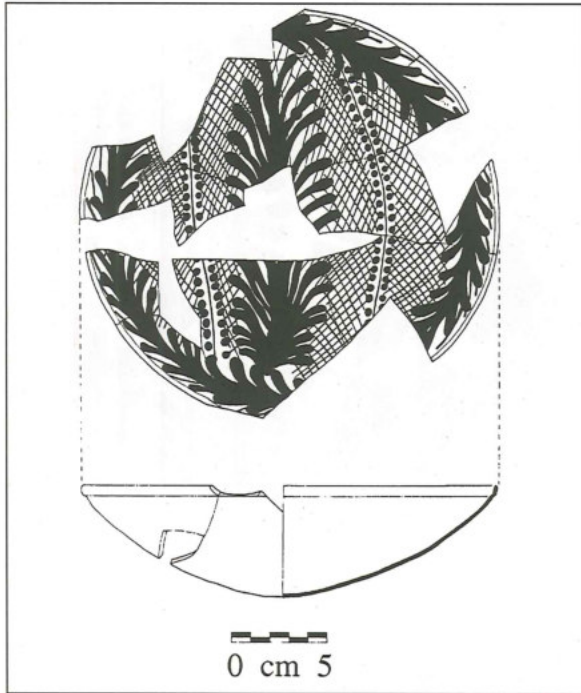
1. Painted Bowl:  
 Shallow rounded base, inverted rim  
 Dimensions: diameter: 20.5 cm  
 height: 5.5 cm  
 Colors: ware: 2.5 YR 5/8  
 interior slip: 2.5 YR 5/8  
 interior paint: 10 R 4/6  
 exterior: no slip  
 core: uneven, black



2. Painted Bowl:  
 Shallow  
 Dimensions: diameter: 17 cm  
 height: 4.5 cm  
 Colors: ware: 5 YR 5/6  
 interior slip: 5 YR 5/6  
 interior paint: 5 YR 4/3  
 exterior slip: 5 YR 5/6  
 core: even

found, and unguentaria of varying sizes (Fig. 9), of which eight complete examples were found. Many of the reconstructed vessels were of the same type and this article seeks only to represent one of each type of vessel found.

While the range of vessel types from the cistern agrees very well with most major varieties of Nabataean fine wares familiar from other sites, there are some pieces which are of particular interest. One of these is the small globular bowl with stamped impressions around the rim (Fig. 13) which was found in 1997. The rim and decoration of

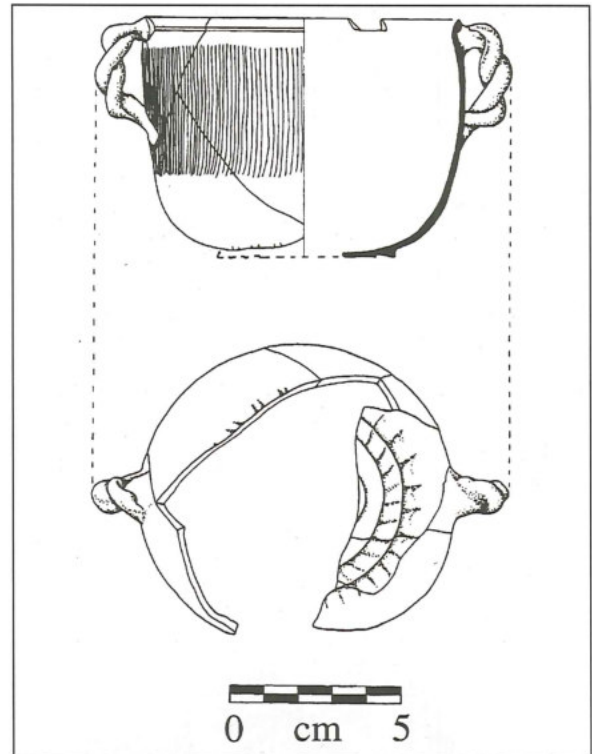


3. Large Painted Bowl:  
Shallow  
Dimensions: diameter: 22 cm  
height: 6 cm  
Colors: ware: 2.5 YR 5/6  
interior slip: 2.5 YR 5/6  
interior paint: 2.5 YR 4/4  
exterior slip: 2.5 YR 5/6  
core: even

this bowl are relatively well known, but it is uncommon to find a complete example. In this instance there is no added base; the rounded bottom of the pot has a ring incised around it but nothing which would have allowed the bowl to sit upright on a flat surface.<sup>2</sup>

Another interesting vessel is the unpainted and un-stamped vase with the horizontal rim (Fig. 11). A few published examples of this form have come from other Nabataean sites but seldom so complete and never without some sort of decoration. A close parallel in form is G. and A. Horsfield's (1942) #343, however their vase has

2. This vessel bears an amusing resemblance to the nw bowls which are so frequently depicted in Egyptian scenes of kings giving offerings. The specific use of this type of vessel has not been determined, but I would suggest that the lack of a



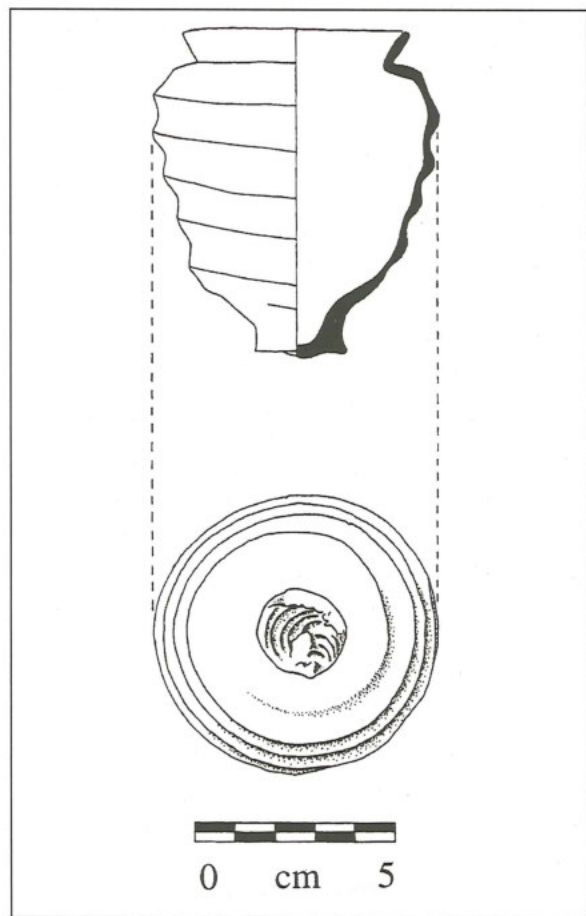
4. Bowl with Twisted Handles:  
Small bowl with vertical sides, twisted handles and rouletted base  
Dimensions: diameter: 9 cm  
height: 7.4 cm  
Colors: ware: 2.5 YR 6/8  
interior slip: 2.5 YR 6/8  
exterior slip: 2.5 YR 5/8  
core: even

paint and an incomplete profile. The only direct parallel for this vessel that I have found also comes from the Great Temple (see Joukowsky 1999, catalog number 94-P-03). The vessel from the cistern is also anomalous in relation to the pottery with which it was excavated; while the medium itself is very fine and has almost no temper, the vessel is much thicker than the majority of the others found and has an orange color which is unique.

Deserving special mention, also, is Vessel 10 (Fig. 10), what we called in the field the "Turkish Coffee Pot." This is a small,

suitable base for the bowl, the find of the bowl within a possibly religious building and the parallel to scenes of Egyptian cultic bowls make a ritual use for this vessel at least a possibility.

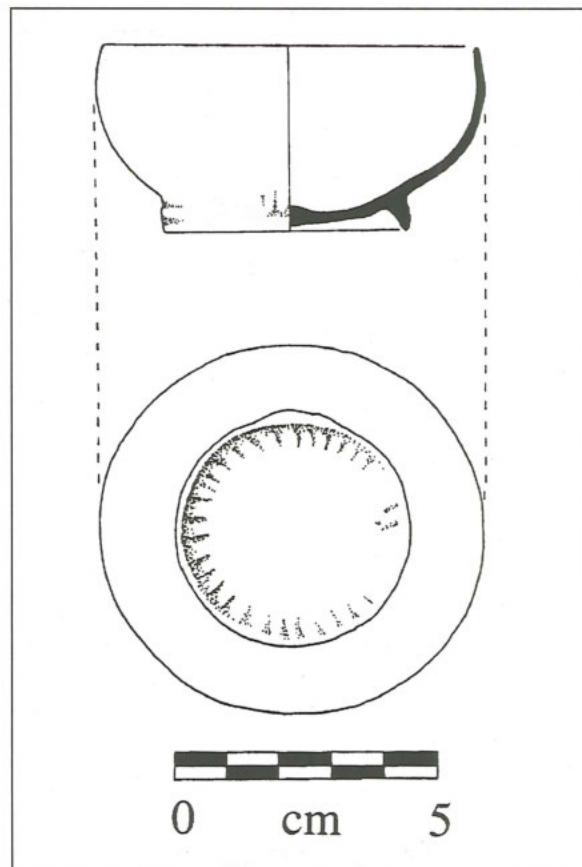




5. Cup or Vase with Ridged Exterior:  
string-cut base, ridged exterior, unbroken  
Dimensions: diameter: 7.1 cm  
height: 8.2 cm  
Colors: ware: 5 YR 6/8  
interior slip: none  
exterior slip: 7.5 YR 6/4 uneven  
core: unknown

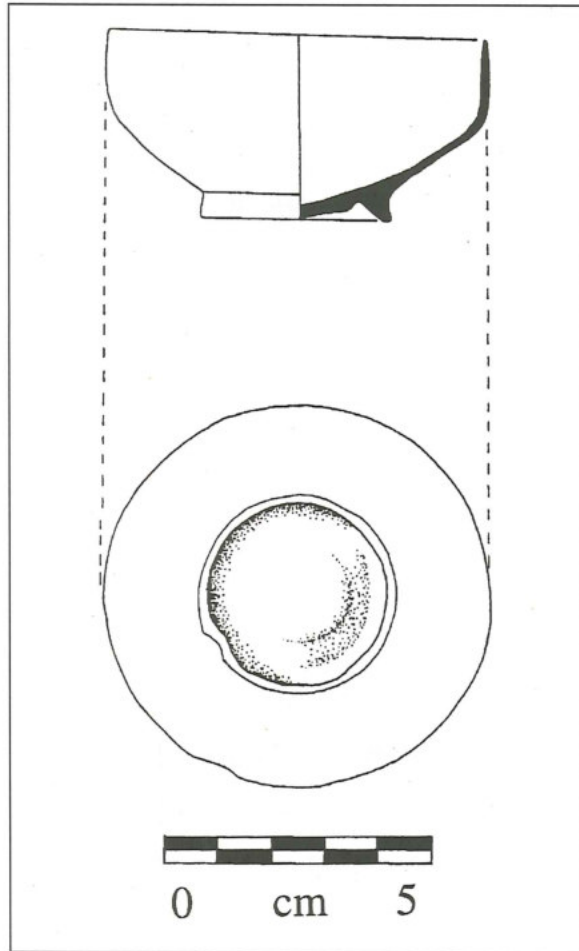
undecorated bowl with a slightly flared rim, a rounded base and a sharp carinated shoulder about halfway up the vessel body. There is a single handle extending from the side of the vessel; this is broken but appears to have come straight out of the vessel and certainly did not attach to the rim. The handle is formed of a hollow tube of clay and was originally thought to be a spout, but upon cleaning it became obvious that there is no hole leading from inside the bowl to the handle. There are no parallels for this vessel and its function is unknown.

It is interesting that while many intact forms were found, including some relatively

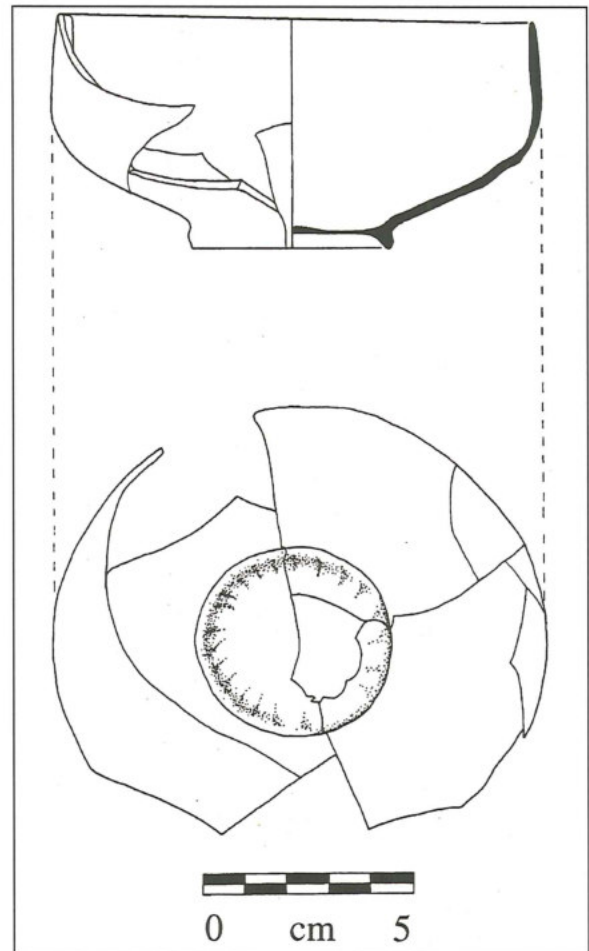


6. Small Bowl with Rouletted Ring Base:  
Dimensions: diameter: 7.4 cm  
height: 3.6 cm  
Colors: ware: 2.5 YR 6/8  
interior slip: 2.5 YR 6/8  
exterior slip: 2.5 YR 6/6  
core: even

thin wares, no intact painted plates were recovered. Two painted plates were able to be almost completely reconstructed; four others were able to be reconstructed enough to have a recognizable pattern and an estimate of size. No large fragments of painted ware were found; the complete plates were in more than 50 fragments and the partial plates were in similar sized pieces. It is quite possible that these plates were either broken when dumped or were dumped because they had already broken. However it is also possible that they were smashed on purpose. Philip Hammond (1962: 173) rejected this use of painted plates on the grounds that more painted sherds would be found in temples than elsewhere were this



7. Small Bowl with Ring Base:  
 unbroken  
 Dimensions: diameter: 7.1 cm  
 height: 3.5 cm  
 Colors: ware: unknown  
 interior slip: 2.5 YR 6/8  
 exterior slip: 2.5 YR 6/8  
 core: unknown



8. Bowl with Rouletted Ring Base:  
 Dimensions: diameter: 11.6 cm  
 height: 5.2 cm  
 Colors: ware: 2.5 YR 5/6  
 interior slip: 2.5 YR 5/6  
 exterior slip: 2.5 YR 5/6  
 core: even

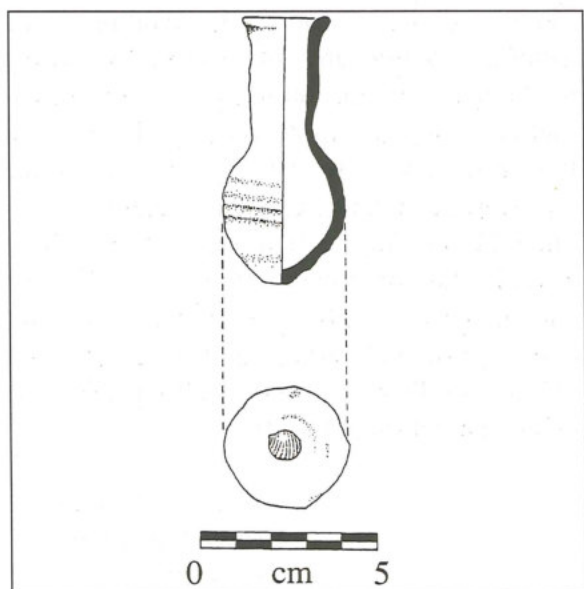
cultic use intended. However multiple uses for painted wares (they are practically ubiquitous and must have served many purposes) are possible and do not exclude a cultic function which may have included their ritual smashing. The only other complete early painted wares which have been found at the Great Temple were also smashed and in association with water works, namely the Lower Temenos subterranean canalization system (Joukowsky

3. Joukowsky does not mention ritual smashing as there was no probable interpretation of the plates in question without further parallels in the Temple.

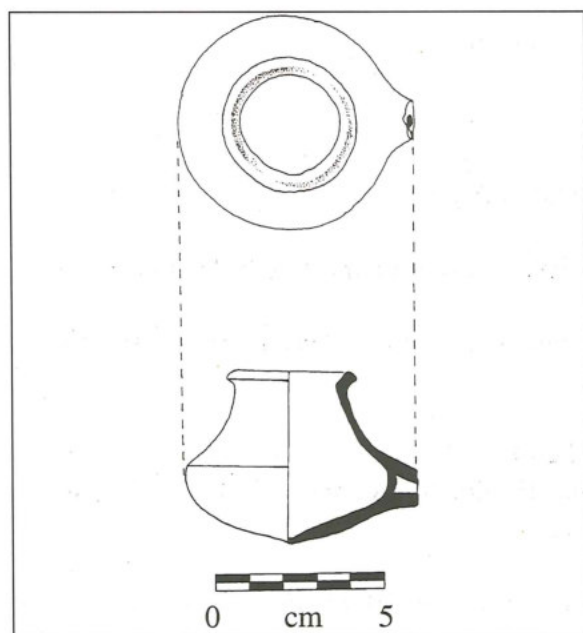
1998).<sup>3</sup>

The pottery recovered from the cistern at the Petra Great Temple is of enormous significance. The pottery itself is beautiful and includes types which are either rare or unknown. The discovery of these forms in the context of one of the most important public buildings in Petra, be it religious or civil, may help us to understand better the usage of certain vessel types. This application works both ways; the pottery is also ex-

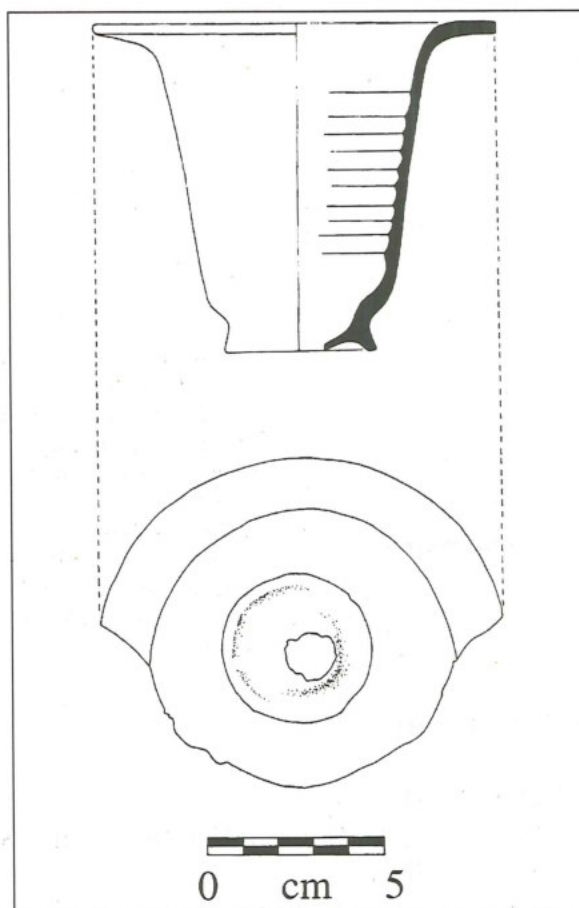
This explanation is by no means certain and was only suggested by the excavation of multiple examples in related contexts.



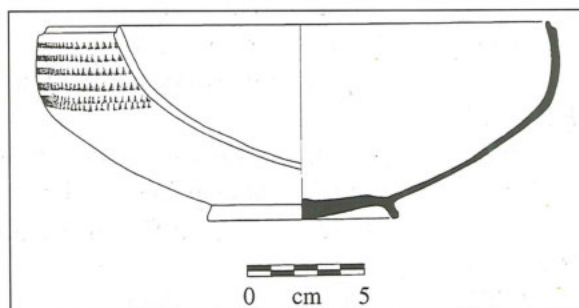
9. Small Unguentarium:  
 Unguentarium, ridged body, string-cut base, unbroken  
 Dimensions: diameter: 3.5 cm  
 height: 7.8 cm  
 Colors: ware: 10YR 5/6  
 interior slip: unknown  
 exterior slip: 10 YR 6/4  
 core: unknown



10. Vessel of Unknown Function:  
 Single broken handle, flaring rim  
 Dimensions: diameter: 6.8 cm  
 height: 5.2 cm  
 Colors: ware: 2.5 YR 5/6  
 interior slip: 2.5 YR 5/6  
 exterior slip: 2.5 YR 5/6  
 core: even

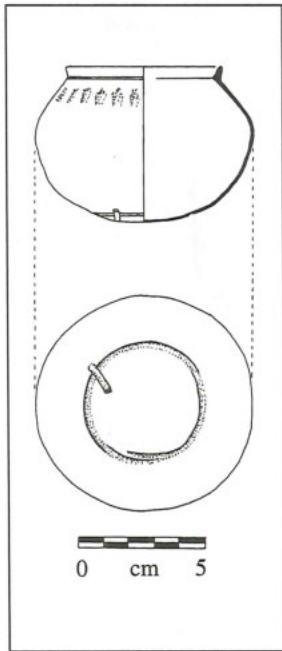


11. Vase with Horizontal Rim:  
 horizontal rim, ring base  
 Dimensions: diameter: 11.4 cm  
 height: 9.5 cm  
 Colors: ware: 2.5 YR 6/6  
 interior slip: 2.5 YR 6/6  
 exterior slip: 2.5 YR 6/6  
 core: uneven, black



12. Large Bowl with Impressed Rouletting on Exterior:  
 ring base, rouletted decor  
 Dimensions: diameter: 22.3 cm  
 height: 8.5 cm  
 Colors: ware: 5 YR 6/6  
 interior slip: 5 YR 6/6  
 exterior slip: 5 YR 6/6  
 exterior paint: 2.5 YR 5/6





13. Stamped Bowl with Rounded Base:  
Small bowl, rounded base, stamped design  
Dimensions: diameter: 8.5 cm  
height: 6.3 cm  
Colors: ware: 10 R 5/8  
interior slip: 10 R 5/8  
exterior slip: 10 R 5/8  
core: even

tremely relevant to our understanding of the Temple. While any suggestions regarding the function of the building are only hypothetical, dates are quite certain. Because of the homogeneously dated pottery from the cistern we can definitively state that the monumental building which we call the Great Temple was constructed prior to 100 CE. We can also reasonably assume that some reconstruction and perhaps a change in the use of the building occurred not long after the original erection of the structure.

Laurel D. Bestock  
Brown University  
Box 4325  
Providence, RI 02912  
USA

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