

Trade in the Life of Pella of the Decapolis

In recent years information about the history of Pella has increased vastly.¹ Although by virtue of its Decapolis associations Pella is still popularly associated with the Roman period, excavations conducted by the College of Wooster and University of Sydney during the past two decades have revealed that the city and its vicinity were occupied from the Palaeolithic through the early Islamic period. This extremely long history makes the question of trade at Pella particularly relevant for the history of Jordan. It should be noted at the outset that the subject involves a number of interrelated topics. One can, among other things, attempt to identify the various places with which Pella traded, but for reasons of space I shall touch only incidentally on that matter. There is also the question of the extent to which Pella may have been more commercially oriented than other cities in Transjordan and Cisjordan. This latter subject, which is particularly significant because of the widespread assumption that Pella owed its existence to trade, is one that I particularly want to address here, even though my observations must necessarily be subjected to continued testing and refinement.

Although ancient texts give us relatively little information about commerce at Pella,² a large quantity of potentially relevant data has been recovered through excavation. A full picture is not, of course, automatically provided thereby, not only because the archaeological evidence is uneven in nature but also because trade must be considered in light of many interrelated factors in a city's life, among which are geophysical conditions, political circumstances, economic factors, cul-

tural configuration, and state of technology, the last of which includes the kind and quality of roads over which goods can be moved and the means of transportation available.

The city's location was determined at a very early time by the presence of a perennial spring that still flows strongly at the base of the mound. Unlike some settlements of the coastal plain, highlands and valleys, Pella was not situated directly astride any major trade route. The site is, in fact, tucked away in the hills, a full kilometer from the natural route that skirted the eastern side of the Jordan Valley, and many kilometers west of the King's Highway on the Transjordanian plateau. The surrounding hills made the city invisible from most of the highlands and the Jordan Valley alike. The only proven major route that went directly past the city was a relatively late Hellenistic-Roman road which descended in a northwesterly direction from Gerasa to Beth Shan, the latter being situated 7 km northwest of Pella across the Jordan River.³ Pella doubtless dominated the surrounding vicinity, from which it took much of its physical sustenance, as did every ancient city to some extent; that fact does not, however, have great bearing on the question of the role of trade in the city's life.

Excavations have shown that in almost every period the inhabitants of Pella were using some raw materials or manufactured goods brought from elsewhere. Among the still scanty remains of the Neolithic period, for instance, is an 8 cm long, flattened oval stone of polished olivine diabase—a kind of rock that is not found within 30 km of Pella.⁴ The stone had nine parallel striations incised on one side, a pattern which appears to be a proto-Sumerian ideogram for wool or woollen cloth. Again, one finds in the Chalcolithic period an ample use of basalt, a rock which must have come from a distance

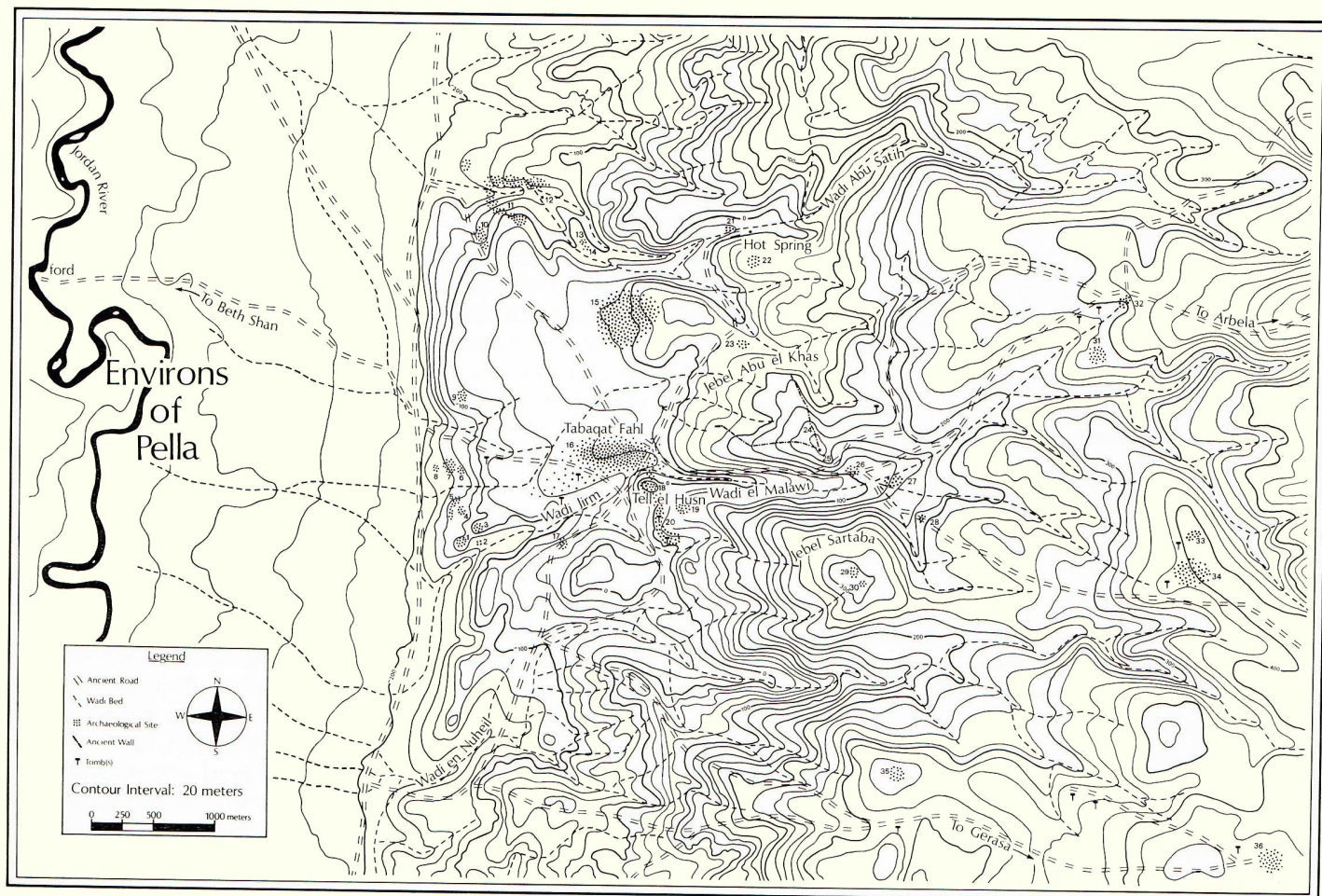
¹ On the excavations at Pella see Robert Houston Smith, *Pella of the Decapolis, Vol. I: The 1967 Season of The College of Wooster Expedition to Pella*, Wooster, Ohio: The College of Wooster, 1973; Anthony W. McNicoll, Robert H. Smith and J. B. Hennessy, *Pella in Jordan, 1: An Interim Report on the Joint University of Sydney and The College of Wooster Excavations at Pella, 1979–1981* (Canberra: Australian National Gallery, 1982); annual reports in the *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan*, commencing with vol. 24 (1980) and in the *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, commencing with number 240 (1980).

² The approximately one hundred ancient texts which mention the city provide little useful information regarding the role of trade in Pella's life. Pella appears a number of times in Egyptian conquest lists from the 15th through the 13th centuries BC (Smith 1973, pp. 32–33), in contexts that imply cultural contacts and the payment of tribute to Egypt, but the lists provide no information concerning commercial relations. From Eusebius's *Onomasticon* (*ibid.*, pp. 58–59) one can draw only very limited inferences about the Roman roads in the vicinity of the city.

³ This road, which leads to the village of Kefr Abil then continues towards Gerasa, was in existence by the Early Roman period, when a cemetery began to grow up on its eastern flank; prior to that time there may have been only a donkey path leading southeast to outlying villages. In the Hadrianic era the road was improved and milestones were erected. A portion of the route is still traced by a path from the Wadi Jirm to Kefr Abil. No evidence of a trade route directly northward has been found, where the rugged terrain was unsuited for roads. Portions of a well-designed roadway, some bits of stone curbing of which yet survive, exist along the south side of Jebel Abu el Khas, ascending due eastward, but the road may have been made suitable for extensive commercial use only in the Byzantine period. (See accompanying map.)

⁴ McNicoll, Smith and Hennessy, *op. cit.*, p. 30 and pl. 103.5.

Environs of Pella. Map of the immediate vicinity of Pella of the Decapolis, covering approximately 80 square kilometres. Geologist Frank Koucky of the Staff of the Wooster team of the Sydney-Wooster Joint Expedition to Pella identified some three dozen ancient sites in this area, ranging in date from Palaeolithic through Islamic, as well as the most probable ancient roads passing near Pella (modern Tabaqat Fahl). Map drawn by Stephen Mooney.



of many kilometers.⁵ It must be pointed out, however, that such indications of commerce cannot be taken as evidence that Pella necessarily played a distinctive role in trade at those times, for the movement of goods is known to have taken place across large areas during the Neolithic period,⁶ and basalt vessels are frequently found in Chalcolithic settlements.

The Bronze and Iron Ages

It was probably during the flowering of the great Bronze Age cultures of the Levant that the name *Pihil* became attached to the city, conceivably as early as 3000–2500 BC and certainly

⁵ *Ibid.*, pl. 105.9–10 and pl. 7. Fragments of other basalt vessels, as well as oblong mortars of basalt, have also been found.

⁶ Cf. the article by Gary Rollefson in this volume.

no later than 1800 BC.⁷ In that name there may be a clue to an early economic base for the settlement. That word—however it may have been vocalized—designates ‘equid’ in several Semitic languages. The name *Pihil* may have been given because the city was known as a centre for trade in that kind of animal. If the name is as old as the Early Bronze Age, which I think is extremely likely, the equid to which the city’s name alluded would have been the onager, which had been at home in Transjordan for thousands of years and was in demand in Egypt and Cisjordan as a beast of burden. Although perhaps breeding these animals, the inhabitants probably functioned chiefly as merchants, selling onagers that had been trapped

⁷ The earliest references to *Pihil* are in Egyptian execration texts; see Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

by the *bedu* on the grasslands of the eastern plateau and brought to Pella for distribution.⁸

If the name *Pihil* was given to the city when the Middle Bronze II culture commenced, the equid may have been the horse, although there is no known reason why Pella, more than any other Canaanite city, should have been involved in commercial trade in horses. The late Bronze Age reference, however, in Papyrus Anastasi to Pella as a supplier of a special kind of wood for chariot spokes may not be entirely coincidental.⁹ Conceivably some of Pella's wealth in the Bronze Age came from the manufacture of ass- or horse-drawn wagons or chariots, for which craftsmen used various kinds of appropriate wood found in the extensive forests that existed on the hills east of the city.¹⁰ If there was such an industry, it may have evolved from the earlier trade in equids.

Whatever their sources of prosperity may have been, the inhabitants of Pella during MB II and into LB I possessed, along with an abundance of locally made goods, a remarkable quantity of articles imported from Egypt, Syria, Cyprus and elsewhere; among these were steatite scarabs, unguents in alabaster jars, boxes with carved ivory inlays, bronze implements and fine ceramics.¹¹ At the time, however, that Pella was heavily involved with this international trade, many other Canaanite cities, doubtless benefiting from the stability and markets that Egyptian suzerainty afforded, were similarly enjoying imports of high quality. There is no evidence that Pella depended upon trade any more extensively than these other cities.

Although some phases of the Bronze Age are not well represented at Pella, the end of LB and the transition to the Iron Age in the 13th and early 12th centuries BC was a time of vigor for the city. So also were the 8th and 7th centuries.¹² During the intervening three hundred years there appears to have been a decline in population and prosperity, with the result that the city may have occupied largely the eastern portion of the present mound. At all times during the Iron Age Pella maintained a low profile. The city is not mentioned in the Old Testament, and excavated artifacts from the period are predominantly local.¹³ Although its pottery had broad affinities with the Iron Age ceramic traditions of surrounding regions, some forms do not parallel closely those at other Iron Age sites, even one so near as Beth Shan. One reason for this

provinciality may be that Pella had not yet begun to participate in any significant way in commerce between the Arabian peninsula and Cisjordan that was beginning to emerge with the introduction of the camel as a beast of burden.¹⁴ The reason for this insularity may be that by withdrawing into itself and perhaps judiciously paying tribute to any larger political entities that might otherwise have had an excuse to overwhelm it, Pella enjoyed considerable political and cultural independence, preserving Canaanite ways after they had disappeared at many other places.

Hellenistic commercialism

A hiatus in occupation began in the 6th century BC and lasted until well into the Hellenistic Age.¹⁵ The later tradition that Alexander the Great refounded Pella does not have strong textual or archaeological support.¹⁶ While under Ptolemaic control in the 3rd century BC the city made only a modest recovery, as the paucity of Early Hellenistic artifacts attests. By the later 3rd and early 2nd centuries, however, under the political and cultural influence of the Seleucid empire, Pella had begun to rebuild, and for the next hundred years experienced rapid expansion in size and prosperity.¹⁷ Although probably obliged to pay tribute to Hasmonean kings during the latter part of that period, Pella maintained a strongly Hellenistic, anti-Hasmonean stance.¹⁸

Almost all of the material culture of Pella's Hellenistic period is drastically different from that of the Iron Age, from the methods of wall construction to the shape of household loom weights.¹⁹ The pottery of the Iron Age was supplanted by new wares and forms that had their inspiration largely in Hellenism. The availability of coinage meant that, for the first time in their history, the people of Pella did not necessarily have to pay for imports by barter, and hence could extend the range of their trading more easily than previously. With the Greek language to facilitate international trade, by the latter part of the 2nd century BC one-third to one-half of all ceramic vessels used in the city may have been imported, some from distant places.²⁰ Wine was shipped in characteristic amphorae from Rhodes and other Greek islands, fine red-slip plates perhaps came from western Asia Minor, black-glaze fish plates

⁸ I intend to discuss the meaning of the city's name and equid trade more fully in a subsequent publication.

⁹ Papyrus Anastasi was written in the second half of the 13th century BC (see further in Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 33–34), but some of the information in it may date from a slightly earlier time.

¹⁰ That forest still partly survives around modern Ajlun and to a lesser extent in sparse oak forestation on the hills that directly overlook Pella.

¹¹ Evidences of these cultural amenities have been found both in tombs and on the central mound. A very large tomb assemblage will be discussed in *Pella in Jordan*, 2 (forthcoming). An elegant ivory-inlaid box in Egyptian style, found on the tell, is discussed in Timothy Potts' article in this volume.

¹² McNicoll, Smith and Hennessy, *op. cit.*, Chapter 3. See also Robert Houston Smith, 'Excavations at Pella of the Decapolis, 1979–1985', in *National Geographic Research* 1 (1985), especially pp. 474–475.

¹³ McNicoll, Smith and Hennessy, *op. cit.*, pls. 120–125 and some vessels on pl. 126.

¹⁴ The opinion of W. F. Albright (*The Archaeology of Israel*, p. 96) that the camel first appeared as a beast of burden in the Levant at the end of the Late Bronze Age remains essentially correct. See further in Richard W. Bulliet, *The Camel and the Wheel* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), Chapter 3.

¹⁵ See McNicoll, Smith and Hennessy, *op. cit.*, p. 65. More recent excavations have not contravened that conclusion.

¹⁶ Of ancient writers, only Stephanos Byzantios, writing in the 4th century AD, asserts that Alexander founded Pella (Smith, *op. cit.* [1973], p. 33). Regarding archaeological evidence, see McNicoll, Smith and Hennessy, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Chapter 4.

¹⁸ I have mentioned this circumstance only briefly in various articles on Pella, but intend to treat it more fully in a future publication.

¹⁹ Loom weights are exceptionally abundant in the Hellenistic stratum at Pella, probably because in the Hellenistic Period clothing was still partly produced within households; see Michael Rostovtzeff, *The Social and Economic History of the Hellenistic World* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1941), p. 1227.

²⁰ See McNicoll, Smith and Hennessy, *op. cit.*, pp. 73–76.

were brought from Greece, *garum* was imported in distinctive bottles from Egypt or perhaps as far away as Italy and Spain, and glass vessels and fictile bowls of Megarian type found their way to Pella from the coastal Levant. Even traditional local wares such as cooking pots and storage jars were not immune to the new culture, sometimes reflecting the aesthetic influence of Hellenistic designs and often attempting to duplicate imported wares.²¹

The source of the city's wealth in the Hellenistic period cannot be determined conclusively from available archaeological evidence. It is likely that enough of the eastern forest still existed for the city to continue to export a considerable quantity of wood and wood products. Furthermore, the city had begun to participate in trade between Arabia and the West, catering to western demands for eastern goods that were regarded as essential to the good life, among which were perfumes, spices, incense, unguents, silk, gemstones and cosmetics. These goods would have been transported increasingly by camels.²²

Impressive as this evidence of foreign trade is, it must be remembered that Pella was not the only city in its larger region that accepted Hellenism and profited from international trade. Excavations at a number of sites—among them Beth Shan, Beth Shearim, Beth Zur, Gezer, Jerusalem, Lachish, Marissa, Roman Jericho, Samaria, Shechem and Tell Anafa—have brought to light assemblages of imports not unlike that at Pella. Unfortunately the data at comparative sites are not comprehensive enough to permit an index of relative Hellenism to be compiled. There is, however, no compelling evidence at present to warrant the conclusion that Pella was notably more trade-oriented than many other cities in the Levant. This period of prosperity and international contacts ended abruptly at Pella with the destruction of the city by the Hasmonean ruler Alexander Jannaeus in 83/82 BC.²³ Although Pella is included in Josephus' list of cities that Pompey liberated in 64 BC,²⁴ the city had not been rebuilt at that time, nor indeed was it revitalized for decades thereafter.²⁵

The Roman period

When reconstruction took place in the 1st century AD the city's material culture was no longer Hellenistic. Streets were given new alignments and some buildings (though not a large number) were constructed in Roman style; among these were an odeum, baths, a nymphaeum, and one or more temples. No great quantity of Early Roman ceramics has been found during excavations, but such evidence as there is shows that ceramics were predominantly local, though displaying the

influence of Roman fictile techniques and design.²⁶ The importation of pottery from distant regions for use as tableware was much less widespread than in the Hellenistic period; so far as can be determined at present, imports consisted mainly of small, relatively costly items such as perfumes, unguents, medicines and condiments, in their distinctive containers.²⁷ The places of origin of these imports also differed from those of the Hellenistic period. Wine came less often from the Greek islands, and moulded ceramic vessels probably were manufactured in new factories in various parts of the Roman empire, some of them in Transjordan.²⁸ Although Nabatean and other traders of the Arabian peninsula doubtless passed through Pella, little or no trace of their presence has been found. This situation suggests that Pella was less a retailer of foreign goods than an *entrepôt* for goods in transit.

In the 2nd century the Roman government constructed, or improved, many highways in Palestine and Transjordan. These roads had primarily a military purpose, but also had commercial utility. As was noted earlier, one of these roads, which was marked with milestones, led from Gerasa to Pella and thence to the Jordan Valley. Such Roman roads permitted vehicular traffic as well as that of animals; nevertheless, the terrain of the hill country east of Pella made the use of wheeled vehicles difficult. Camels were becoming increasingly popular in the eastern Empire, with Arabs their chief drovers. Situated, as texts indicate, close to bedouin ('Arab') territory, Pella must have been visited by an increasing number of caravans. Camels could not, however, be accommodated easily in the limited confines of the mound on which Pella stood. To relieve the crowded commercial facilities the authorities of Pella seem to have constructed a forum-like plaza in the Wadi Jirm, immediately south of the central mound, which would have provided space for caravans and associated activities.²⁹ One road to the city from the Jordan Valley may be conjectured to have climbed due east, following the Wadi Jirm rather than running along the bluffs on the north side of the wadi.³⁰ This road would have led directly to the western side of the plaza, where animals could be tended and, if necessary, wagons could be accommodated. At this stage camel caravans, though becoming ever more commonplace, had not yet reached their zenith.

The later 3rd century brought difficult times to the Roman Empire, particularly along the eastern frontier. Road construction temporarily ceased, routes were no longer so secure as

²¹ *Ibid.*, pls 127 and 131.3–5.

²² Regarding trade goods, see Rostovtzeff, *op. cit.*, p. 1227. On the growing role of the camel, see Bulliet, *op. cit.*, Chapter 4.

²³ Smith, *op. cit.* (1973), pp. 37–39.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 39–40.

²⁵ Smith, *op. cit.* (1985), pp. 476–477.

²⁶ No archaeological remains have been identified at Pella that can securely be dated to the period between 83/82 BC and the first quarter of the 1st century AD.

²⁷ In addition to specialized ceramic containers were probably some of the glass vessels that have been found in tombs.

²⁸ See Michael Rostovtzeff, *A Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1926), pp. 161–169.

²⁹ Compare the forum in Amman, which was constructed on the floor of the *wadi*. Underground drains carried away water that otherwise would have flooded the area.

³⁰ There is a road-size cutting of unknown date in the scarp overlooking the Jordan Valley about 1 km northwest of Pella that was probably part of a road that led more directly to Beth Shan. As it neared Pella it would have led into the city on the west or continued a short distance further, down an easy slope, into the western part of the conjectured plaza.

formerly, and trade began to wane.³¹ Pella was not immune to this Late Roman economic decline. The city may have had a temporary decrease in population; in any case, the inhabitants once again withdrew into themselves.³² Local pottery, utilitarian and limited in repertory, continued to dominate the market, although some imported goods found their way to the city's shops.³³

Byzantine and Umayyad trade

The Byzantine period saw a gradual return of prosperity to Pella. With imperial control centered in Constantinople, a new state religion forming a basis for social cohesion, and economic conditions improving, circumstances favored a revitalized international trade. Pella's population expanded until by the 6th century the city probably had the largest number of inhabitants in its history.³⁴ Camel caravans, still largely under the control of Arabs, were undoubtedly the dominant means by which goods were shipped through Pella. Large houses were constructed, or remodelled from earlier structures, perhaps so that they could serve the dual purpose of dwellings and *entrepôts*.³⁵ Numerous sites in the vicinity of Pella also began to be occupied at this time, some of them, as their locations suggest, serving as observation stations or checkpoints contributing to the smooth, safe flow of trade goods. This increased military vigilance reflected increasing encroachments of the people of the plateau into the hill country and the Jordan Valley.³⁶ At the same time there was almost certainly a changing ethnic configuration in the city; Arabs, formerly only caravaneers and sojourners at Pella, had probably begun to settle in the city and become participants in the trade carried on in the city, a development which could only have increased the city's involvement in international commerce.³⁷

Considerable quantities of trade goods probably came from the Arabian peninsula in transit to the coast and points west; these, consisting of spices and other soft goods, have left few traces at Pella, but merchandise coming from the west has left abundant archaeological remains, among them large quan-

tities of pottery.³⁸ Jars manufactured in Egypt and in the vicinity of Gaza were commonplace, containing olive oil or wine. The plates on which the citizens dined were almost exclusively Byzantine rouletted ware, much of it manufactured in such diverse places as North Africa, Cyprus and Phocaea; some plates in this style were, however, manufactured much closer at hand, along with small bowls, moulded lamps, and hand-made storage basins. At the height of international trade, local vessels may have accounted for only about half of the ceramics in use in the city. In spite, however, of the vigor of its international commerce, Pella appears to have been only slightly more trade-oriented than many other cities of Transjordan and Cisjordan in the same period, where goods similar to those at Pella were also being used.

In the 7th century, as the Byzantine period came to an end and the Umayyad cultural configuration emerged, Pella continued to undergo change. Many factors, both cultural and environmental, contributed to a rapid decline in both prosperity and population. By the first half of the 8th century many buildings—private, public and ecclesiastical—had been abandoned.³⁹ In the growing dearth of customary urban business activities, caravaneering, farming and animal husbandry became dominant economic activities. Camel caravans continued to stop in the city, and some older buildings, as they were abandoned, were pressed into service as pens for beasts, perhaps in connection with an animal market.⁴⁰ A considerable amount of pottery was still made regionally, but with a relatively narrow range of vessel types that continued, with some modifications, ceramic traditions of the preceding period. A number of new forms of bronze and iron implements, glassware, and ceramic vessels not of local manufacture came onto the market; among the latter were distinctive pilgrim flasks, jugs with small spouts and indented bases, and lamps with animal-head handles.⁴¹ While this new combination of local and eastern artifactual tradition did not exist uniformly throughout Palestine and Transjordan, there is no evidence that Pella was unique in its economic infrastructure, nor in its overall economic decline.

In overview, Pella may be said to have engaged in trade at all periods in its history, but never to have maintained its viability solely on the basis of commerce. In many periods trade was not notably more extensive at Pella than at many other contemporary places in Palestine and Transjordan. Indeed, during the Iron Age the city's trade with other regions

³¹ See Daniel Sperber, *Roman Palestine 200–400: Money and Prices* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1974).

³² Archaeological evidence for the Late Roman Period is relatively scanty at Pella. The fact that virtually the only tombs of this period that have been found are ones that had been cut in the previous period and continued in use since that time suggests cultural continuity. The contents of the tombs also show some evidence of economic decline in the 3rd and early 4th century.

³³ Pella doubtless participated to some extent in the sort of commerce with Egypt that Daniel Sperber discusses in 'Objects of Trade between Palestine and Egypt in Roman Times' in *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 19 (1976), pp. 113–147.

³⁴ I estimate the population of Pella at perhaps 25,000–30,000 persons in the 6th century, but such an estimate must be used with caution because of the impossibility of verification.

³⁵ The sprawling house encountered in Area VIII had at least 15 rooms and its entrance courtyard was outfitted with crude mangers for the watering of beasts. See McNicoll, Smith and Hennessy, *op. cit.*, pp. 123–126.

³⁶ The lintel of the early 6th-century Tomb of Johannes at Pella (Smith, *op. cit.* [1973], pp. 188–191) alludes to Pella's Arab neighbors and probably reflects continuing imperial attempts to maintain safety and order along the eastern borders.

³⁷ Ya'qubi, in his *Kitab al-Buldan*, was probably drawing upon Late Byzantine or Umayyad tradition when he said that the inhabitants of Pella were a mixture of Arabs and non-Arabs (Smith, *op. cit.* [1973], p. 74).

³⁸ The Byzantine pottery of Pella remains largely unpublished except for that in Smith, *op. cit.* (1973), pls. 28–29 and 42 (lower) through 44, and McNicoll, Smith and Hennessy, *op. cit.*, pls. 138–139, but will be given considerable attention in the final reports of the expedition.

³⁹ See McNicoll, Smith and Hennessy, *op. cit.*, Chapter 7.

⁴⁰ Striking archaeological evidence of the importance of camels, along with a reduction in the city's population and an apparent retrenchment into agriculturalism in the mid-8th century, has been found at Pella; see McNicoll, Smith and Hennessy, *op. cit.*, Chapter 7.

⁴¹ See McNicoll, Smith and Hennessy, Chapter 8.

was apparently less than that of many other cities. During the Hellenistic and Roman periods, Pella participated in the trade between east and west that flourished with the increasing use of the camel as a beast of burden, and in the Byzantine

period relied heavily on trade as caravans played a major role in commerce between the east and the west. That role continued, in reduced and altered fashion, during the final Umayyad phase of Pella's existence.