

Mid Fourth-Fifth Centuries AD Stamped Pottery from the Hippodrome of Gerasa

I. Introduction

The intention of this paper is to give an overall view of a special pottery group of Early Byzantine date, characterised by stamped motifs. This fine red slip ware was locally made at Gerasa, as evidenced by the Hippodrome excavations. In keeping with the large tradition of pottery studies, I propose the name "Jarash Red Slip" ware for this new pottery production.¹ The pottery group presented here is a selection from the large body of ceramics excavated by the late Dr A. Ostrasz at the Hippodrome of Jarash.²

Bowls and several discarded sherds were recovered from Early Byzantine contexts in some chambers of the ancient Hippodrome. This building was constructed sometime in the mid-second century AD but it was used and modified during the Late Roman and Byzantine periods by the inclusion of several potters' shops, amongst other industrial establishments (Ostrasz 1989: 71; Kehrberg and Ostrasz 1997). The stamped ware finds come from chambers W.1 and W.2, underneath the Late Byzantine pottery dump. On the eastern side of the building, finds were recovered chambers E.8, E.27, E.40 and E.44. There is fair evidence for ceramic production in chamber E.8 and E.40, where traces of an Early Byzantine kiln fire box were detected (Kehrberg and Ostrasz 1997: 170).

Regarding the chronological framework of this ware, the stratigraphy at the Hippodrome provides valuable dating evidence. In view of their total absence in second-third century AD contexts, the early stage of the ware can be placed some time in the fourth century AD. Nevertheless, the end of the ware poses some problems. All that can be said at present is that there is not a single fragment that can be dated after the end of the third quarter of fifth century AD. This dating is supported by other pottery

and objects found in the same contexts, including Jarash lamps and coin hoards.³ The coins recovered from chambers E.8 and E.27 were minted between the mid-fourth and early fifth centuries AD. Additionally, some bronze coins of fifth century AD were found in chamber W.2 together with a stamped sherd of the later series (see below, Third Decorative Group).

II. Characteristics of the Ware

All sherds belong to a more or less uniform group. The body clay is fine with a slightly granular appearance. The most common inclusions are fine lime grits. These lime particles sometimes appear on the vessel surface, causing scratching during turning on the wheel and spalling during firing.

Most of the vessels were fired in an oxidizing atmosphere. It is difficult, however, to ascertain the regularity of this firing due to the discoloured and blackened surfaces of the discarded pieces, a typical feature of kiln dumps. The ware colours range from dull orange (Munsell 2.5YR 6/4; 5YR 6/4, 7/4; 7.5YR 7/3-7/4) to a reddish tinge (2.5YR 7/3; 10YR 6/6). Some sherds show grey cores in section (10YR 5/1; 10R 7/1) and discoloured surfaces which are obviously products of uncontrolled firing.

The bowls are wheel-made. Traces of turning marks are visible on the thin walls of vessels. Surfaces were wet-smoothed with a brush. This finishing technique was not done carefully enough, since tool marks are noticeable on the outer surfaces. Before removing the vessel from the wheel, one or more sets of circular grooves were made by a compass while the wheel was still rotating. During the drying process, the still wet bowls were laid on a rough surface, since traces of grass or straw impressions are visible on the underside. This is a distinctive feature of the

¹ Most of the Red Slip wares adopted the name of the geographical region where they were produced, such as the African, Egyptian or Cypriot Red Slip wares. However, in the case of the Hippodrome Red Slip production there is strong evidence for its Gerasene origins. So this new fine ware deserves the name of Jarash Red Slip Ware.

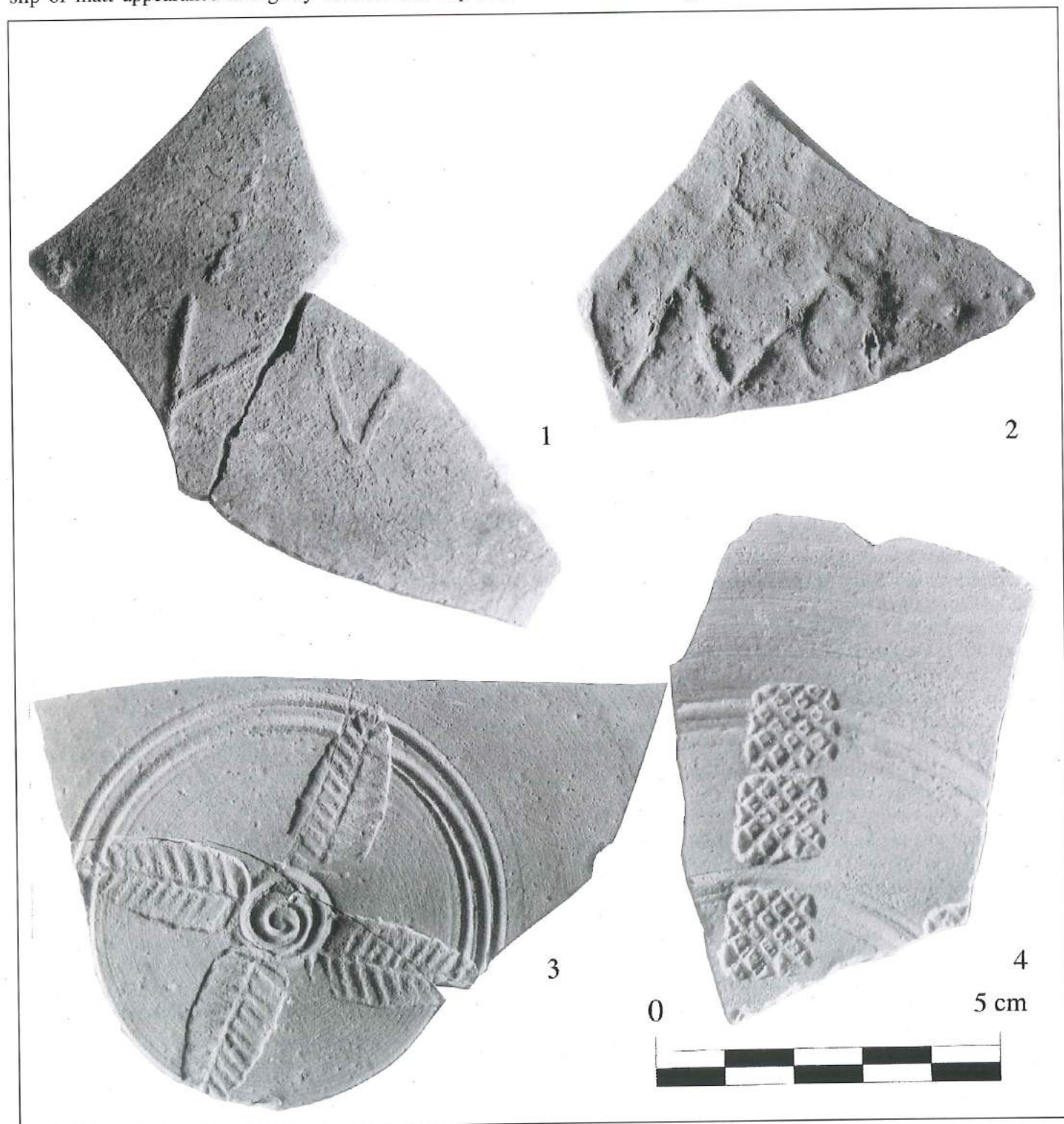
² This study is part of the *New Jarash Hippodrome Research and Publication Project*, directed by Dr. I. Kehrberg and supported by the Department of Antiquities of Jordan.

³ Personal communication with Dr. I. Kehrberg.

ware. The impressed decoration was then applied on the bottom, set in a circular space within grooves (FIG. 1:3). Later, the bowls were covered with an orange (7.5YR 7/3-7/4; 5YR 7/4) or reddish (10YR 5/6; 10R 5/8-6/8) thick slip of matt appearance and gritty texture. The slip was

applied by immersion in a clay solution with the vessel turned upside down. Therefore the exterior is usually unslipped, although some splashes are noticeable near the rim.

Before firing, some of the bowls were marked by the



1. Jarash Hippodrome Red Slip Ware. Potter's marks and stamps.

potter. In fact, there are two fragments that bear Greek inscriptions. Due to their fragmentary state reading is difficult, and just a pair of letters have been discerned, what seems to be a *kappa*, an *epsilon*, a *lambda* or an *alfa* (FIG. 1:1-2). The originality of these potter's marks is their manufacture method, which is different from other known examples. They were made using a barbotine technique, by applying a very liquid clay solution to delineate each letter. Some drops fell while the potter was drawing the shape of a letter (FIG. 1:1).

III. The Shapes

The main type is an open bowl with straight walls and slightly convex bottom. Seven different forms have provisionally been identified among the hippodrome finds (FIG. 2):

Form 1: corresponds to a curved wall bowl with simple inturned rim.

Form 2: bowl with flaring wall and simple rim. This form bears a potter's mark on the underside (FIG. 1:1).

Form 3: similar to the previous form but walls are thicker and less open.

Form 4: bowl with a short flaring rim. Rims can be slightly curved as on variant 4A or flat and marked by a groove as on 4B.

Form 5: form with a rudimentary horizontal flange close to rim.

Form 6: the main feature is a broad flange on the exterior below the rim. Different variants have been defined on the basis of the general shape of the body and rim.

Form 7: this bowl is characterised by a moulded flaring rim.

Apart from some obvious differences, the general appearance of the forms is linked to some contemporary imported wares, namely the African Red Slip forms of the fourth and mid-fifth centuries AD. For instance, the Hippodrome Form 1 appears to be a derivative of the African form Hayes 62 dated to AD 350-425 (Hayes 1972: 109), while Form 2 resembles Hayes 50B of AD 350-400, although the tiny foot of the African prototype is absent from the Jarash vessel (Hayes 1972: 73). Form 3 is related to Hayes form 50B/64, typical of the first part of the fifth century AD (Hayes 1972: 111 and fig. 18:5). In addition, Form 4B has some typological resemblances to the African Hayes 58 dated to AD 300-375 (Hayes 1972: 96) and Form 7 may be considered as a simplified version of Hayes 60 dated to AD 350-450 (Atlante 1981: 85). More difficult to ascertain is the connection between the early examples of the African prototype Hayes 91 (ca. AD 380-530) and the local series of flanged bowls of Form 6,

which are more likely a local development of the Hippodrome Form 5.

Other finds at Jarash point to the existence of other shapes imitating the African prototype Hayes 67, as evidenced by a sherd from the *macellum* excavations (Uscatescu 1996: 66 and fig. 43:95) and other examples from the South Gate (Villeneuve *fc*).

IV. Decorations

The resemblance between some African bowls and the Jarash Red Slip forms alone is not enough to support the suggestion that the beginning of the stamped series at Jarash is related to the intention of copying imported prototypes. But when it comes to the stamped motifs this hypothesis is ascertained, since many of the stamps proved to be perfect copies of African motifs. Some of the local stamps can hardly be distinguished from the African stamps (FIG. 3). This astonishing resemblance makes difficult, even to an expert eye, to distinguish the original from the copy.⁴

Copying a stamped motif was not a difficult task. Some researchers pointed to the existence of a "punches trade" (Gauthier 1975: 33 and fig. 5). However, there are other easier techniques for copying an imported motif. The simplest way is obtaining a negative from the original imported motif, then a positive of the stamp by means of a clay or gypsum mould. African bowls can be easily found at Jarash since the early third and up till the seventh century AD. So copying an imported motif was always at hand.

The analysis of decorative features and comparative styles points to the existence of at least four decorative groups within the hippodrome workshops. Whether this distinction has chronological differences is at present not very clear in reference to the second and fourth group (FIG. 3).

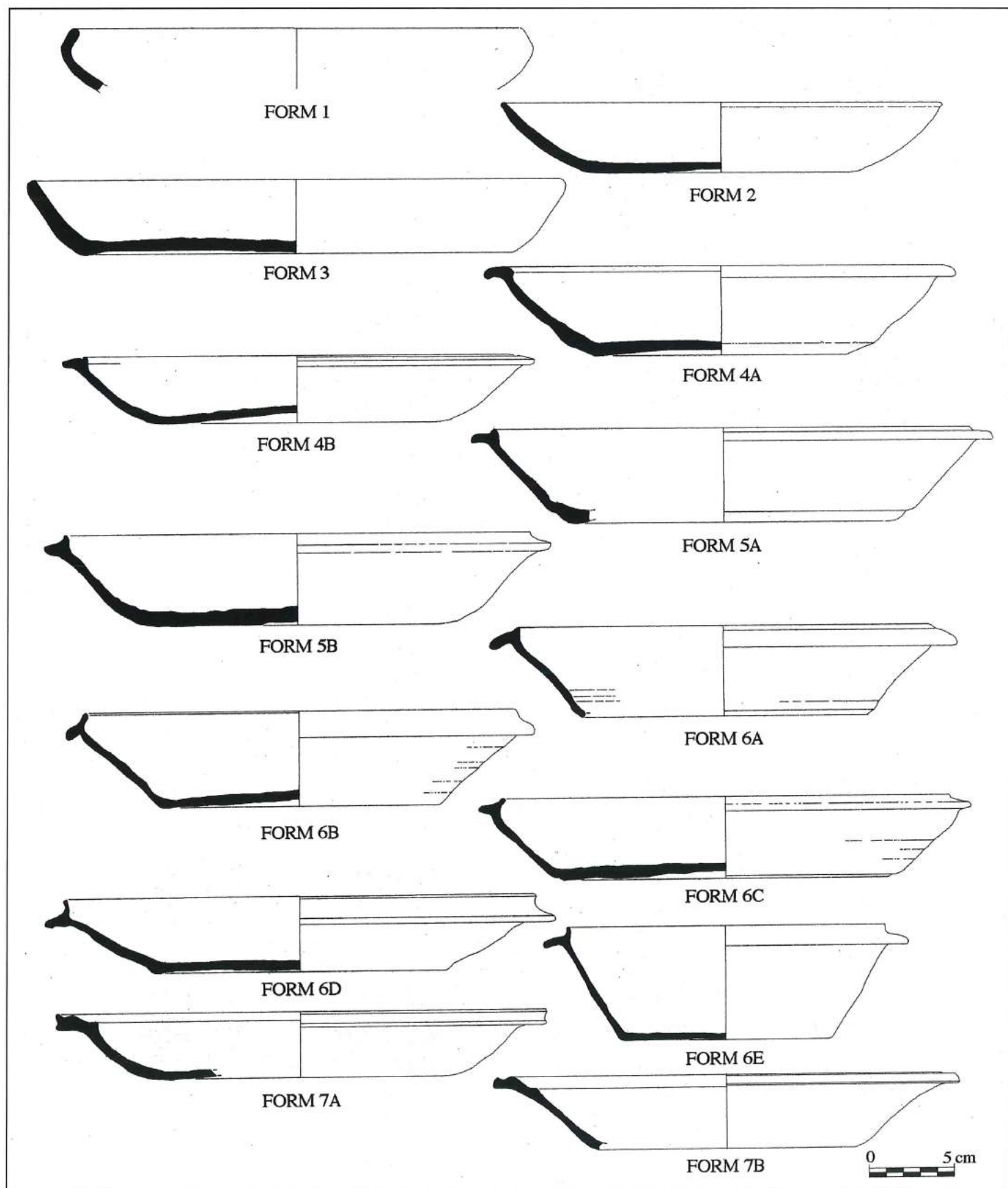
1. First Decorative Group

Stamps were directly copied from the African repertoire, exclusively from the Hayes style A(ii). Motifs include ovoid or triangular palm branches with central rib, as the Hippodrome stamps 2 and 3; rosettes of incused wedges as Hayes motif 44, which corresponds to the local stamp 4; stamps 5 and 6 are a series of small concentric circles and incused or dotted fringes as on Hayes 31 or 32. Also circular and square grillé-patterns as Hayes 70 and 71, identical to the Hippodrome stamps 8 and 9 respectively. The quality of the stamping is poor compared to that of the next groups.



















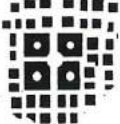










Stamps are always on the base, surrounded by a set of

⁴ It is sometimes difficult to distinguish the Jarash stamps from the African prototypes using drawings and photographs alone. Nevertheless, when examining directly both the African and the Jarash

stamps there are obvious differences between the imported and the local wares.



2. Jarash Red Slip Ware. Form series.

JARASH RED SLIP		AFRICAN RED SLIP	
FIRST GROUP	 Stamp 1	 Hayes 4	
	 Stamp 2a	 Hayes 3	
	 Stamp 3		
	 Stamp 4	 Hayes 44B	
	 Stamp 5	 Hayes 31	
	 Stamp 6	 Hayes 32	
	 Stamp 8	 Hayes 70	
	 Stamp 9	 Hayes 71	
JARASH RED SLIP		AFRICAN RED SLIP	
SECOND GROUP	 Stamp 2b		
	 Stamp 11		
	 Stamp 12		
	 Stamp 13		
	 Stamp 14		
	 Stamp 15		
THIRD GROUP	 Stamp 16		
	 Stamp 18	 Hayes 60	
	 Stamp 20	 Fulford fig.29.75	
	 Stamp 22	 Hayes 87	
	 Stamp 24		

3. Comparative stamp series: Jarash and African Red Slip wares.

circular grooves. A single repeated motif is used on each bowl (FIG. 4:1). The arrangement is somehow irregular in the case of rounded stamps, while square and palm-branch motifs display a radiating pattern (FIG. 1:4). The centre of the base is often occupied by a small spiral or lathe-turned.

For the sake of similarity with African style A(ii), dated to AD 350-420 (Hayes 1972: 218-219), this Jarash group can be dated to around the second half of the fourth century AD. Thus this group may be considered as the first on chronological grounds. This consideration is supported by the Hippodrome stratigraphy, with coins dated to AD 337-393. Not only are the stamps copies, but also the decorative pattern is linked to the African style A(ii).

2. Second Decorative Group

Within this group the African influence is less evident. No imported parallel has been found, which may indicate that this group has original local motifs. The quality of the stamping is good (FIG. 1:3).

Stamps are laid out on a radiating pattern or clustered around a central spiral. A difference between this and the first group is the circular ground, slightly smaller in the second group. The decorative pattern is a single repeated motif or two alternating motifs (FIG. 4:2). The motifs (FIG. 3) consist of oval palm branches of good quality such as stamp 2b (FIG. 1:3). Most of them develop a fine geometric decoration within square grounds, as stamps 13-15. Others can be defined as a windmill or curved radial strokes: stamp 12. This group includes the only zoomorphic stamp recorded: stamp 16, which seems to represent a dove.

As far as the forms are concerned, the only complete profiles correspond to form 6 (FIG. 4:2). This group seems to be partially contemporary with the first group as both share the same form. However, the undeniable originality of the stamps together with absence of any African influence may indicate a slightly later date, around the last quarter of fourth and first quarter of fifth century AD. In chamber E.27 this group was found together with coins, the latest dated to AD 402/408.

3. Third Decorative Group

Within this group a slight influence of contemporary African stamps has again been confirmed. Stamps by no means can be considered as merely copies. Most of them show reminiscences of Hayes style A(iii) and even of early style D (Hayes 1972: 219-221; Fulford 1984: 95).

With regard to the decorative scheme, stamps are always set within a series of incised grooves and arranged

in an irregular composition (FIG. 4:3). Many stamps are circular in shape, except stamp 18, which seems to be a square ground with six small circles. Circular stamps have geometric decoration inside, such as a cross with dots between the arms, as on the Hippodrome stamp 20, similar to an African stamp (Fulford 1984: fig. 29:75). Stamp 22 is inspired by Hayes motif 87, although the African counterpart lacks of the small dots around the central motif (FIG. 3).

On the basis of the resemblance with the African decorative style Hayes A(iii), dated to AD 410-470/80, and the Hippodrome stratigraphical sequence (associated with coins dated to AD 457-475) this group seems to have been produced ca. AD 410/20-475.

4. Fourth Decorative Group

This group of bowls is defined by its lack of stamped decoration. Some bowls of form 4A and 5B just bear a spiral groove at the bottom centre (FIG. 4:4). It can be dated to late fourth and early fifth centuries AD.

V. Concluding Remarks

The identification of this pottery group contributes greatly to our understanding of the Gerasa ceramic production, dating to mid-fourth century and lasting till the last third of fifth century AD. In addition, this new evidence offers an overall picture of fine local productions from the Early to the Late Byzantine period at the site of Jarash.

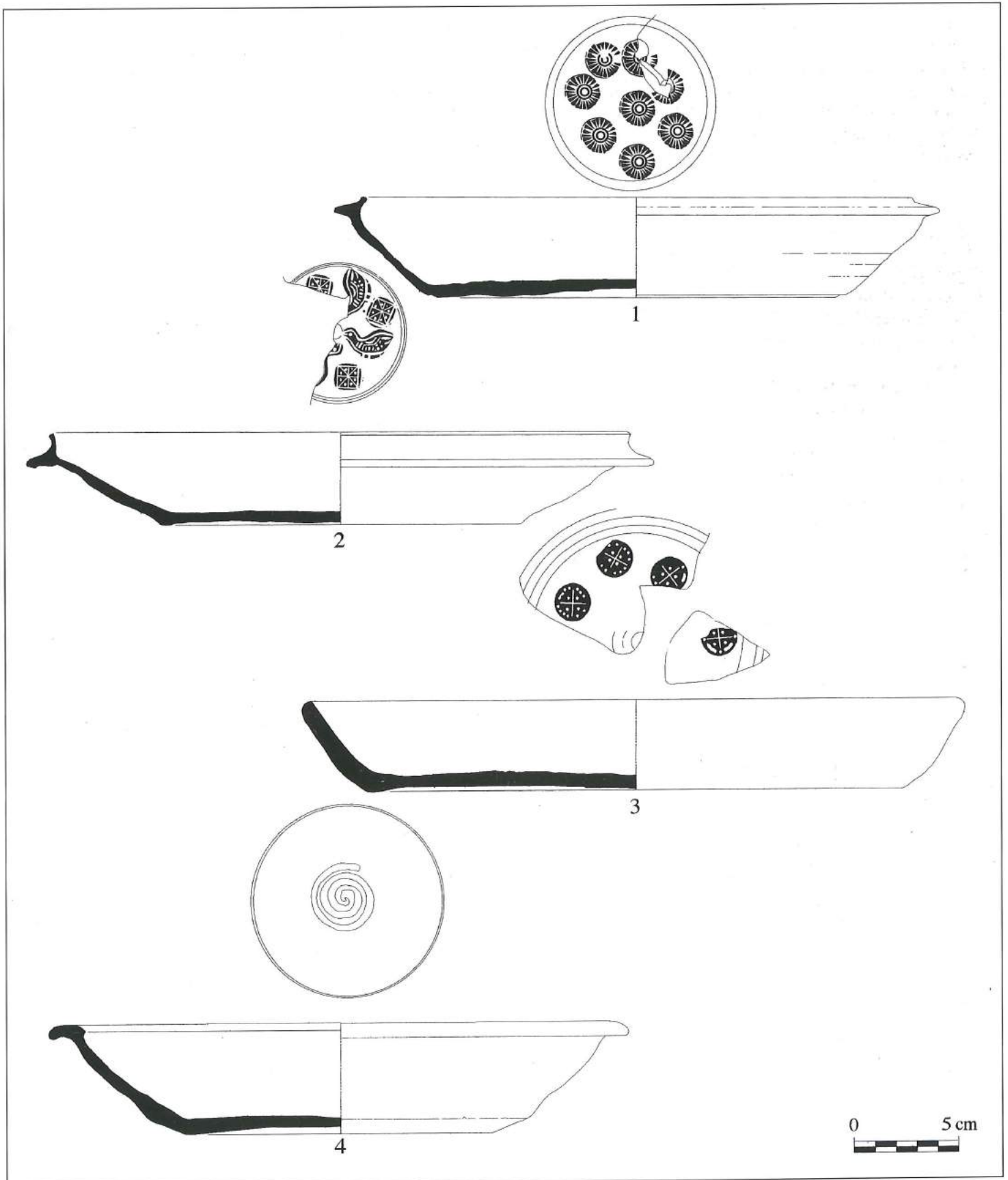
The Jarash stamped ware is a clear forerunner of the Late Byzantine Jarash Bowls.⁵ Although it is true that our actual knowledge of the production has a gap in the sequence of more than 50 years between this Early Byzantine fine ware and the later Jarash Bowls, what is undeniable is that this group can be surely linked to the stamped Jarash Bowls series of the sixth century AD.

It is well known that Jarash was a producer and supplier of pottery for the near regions. There are several sites to which this local ware was exported: Mount Nebo, 'Ammān, Pella,⁶ and perhaps 'Irāq al-'Amīr (Hayes 1972: 410). At Mount Nebo two different stamps have been identified,⁷ both are circular in shape: a central circle surrounded by eight dots on a circular ground (Bagatti 1985: 253, fig.1:4 and photo 5:2), and a four petalled rosette with four dots between petals surrounded by small dots (Schneider 1950: 105, frontispiece no. 5). The first one was found under a narthex mosaic pavement, so it can be dated before the early fifth century AD (Bagatti 1985: 253). The Nebo finds, judging by their descriptions, photographs and the assigned chronology, fit with the Hippodrome finds and can be included in the Hippodrome

⁵ Further information on Jarash Bowl of the sixth century AD can be found in Watson 1989 and Uscatescu 1995.

⁶ Personal communication with Dr. P. Watson.

⁷ As M. Piccirillo informed me, new stamped bowls have been recently discovered at the Nebo excavations.



4. Jarash Red Slip Ware. Decorative schemes.

third decorative group.

Another example came from 'Amman and was published as Palestinian Red Slip ware (Hayes 1972: 410, fig. 92:2). The bowl is an imitation of African form Hayes 67 and the stamps, defined as curved radial strokes, are identical to the Hippodrome motif 12 of the second decorative group (FIG. 3).

With regard to the African influences in the Jarash ceramic production, it is not surprising. Fine pottery imitations occurred in many Mediterranean sites. Pottery centres such as Asia Minor, Cyprus, Egypt, France or Spain began to produce their Late Roman fine wares under the African Red Slip influence. Thus the African production was considered then valuable goods and was the most widespread pottery production during the Late Antique period.

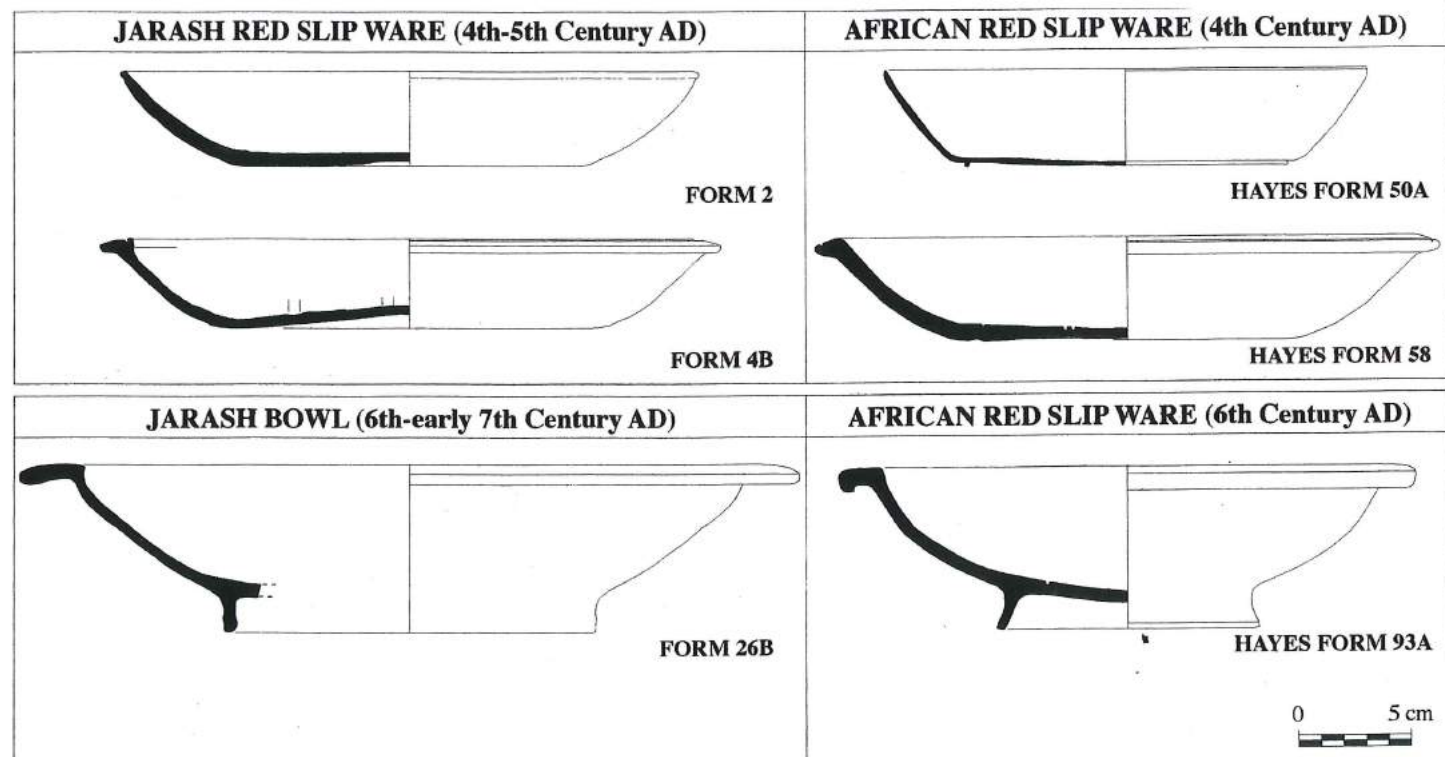
At Jarash, forms and decorative stamps show a stronger African influence than at the above-mentioned Mediterranean sites, spanning a long period of time till the seventh century AD. This fact evidences that the Jarash potters were not isolated. The acquisition of new decorative ideas and pottery fashions points to the close relation between the city and other Mediterranean centres. Actually, many different Red slip imports such as African, Phocaean, Cypriot and Egyptian were easily available at the Jarash markets.

This uninterrupted contact can be seen not only by the presence of pottery imports but also in the local development of shapes. During the fourth and fifth centuries AD

when in the Mediterranean the most popular form was an open bowl with a flat floor, Jarash potters made similar versions of flat based bowls (FIG. 5). When in the sixth century AD the fashionable form was a vessel with a high ring foot, the local potters started to produce the so-called "Jarash Bowl", characterised by a high ring foot (Uscatescu 1995: 384). Is it a mere coincidence? I believe that there are too many coincidences to simply deny the African influence at some stage of this local production. Reasons that may explain the creation of these local imitations must be sought in the Jarash seller's market: they were cheaper than the imported pottery and what is more important, they were always at the local customer's reach. However, the Jarash fine wares always showed their own decorative features and independent new forms developed by the local potters.

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