

A LATE ROMAN SOLDIER'S GRAVE BY THE DEAD SEA

by
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Introduction

In 1976 a cemetery was discovered at el-Ḥaditha on the eastern shore of the Dead Sea. Many graves were illicitly robbed, but fortunately several intact graves were excavated by the Department of Antiquities. A short report on this excavation, which was never published, is on file at the Department of Antiquities Registration Centre. The only previously published information about this excavation is the following short notice in the Arabic section of *ADAJ* 22 (1977-1978) p. 28 (here translated into English):

"Ghor el-Ḥaditha (The Southern Valleys).

In the beginning of 1976, Mr. Sami Rabadi, the Karak Inspector, made an excavation in the Byzantine cemetery area in the Ghor el-Ḥaditha. There he found some pottery sherds and glass. At present these are exhibited in the Karak Museum."

In fact, the author's examination of the photographs in the archive at the Registration Centre revealed that the excavators found a number of whole ceramic vessels, several complete glass vessels, an iron helmet, a bronze jug, and several other metal artifacts. The graves appear to have been vertical shafts cut into the soil. The shafts, from one to two m. deep, opened into stone-lined cists into which the dead were inhumed. The cists were sealed by oblong stone slabs.

One grave is of special interest, as it contained an adult human skeleton, two imported fine ware ceramic vessels, and an iron helmet. These three artifacts were preserved and displayed at the Karak Museum, where they were noticed by the author. In 1992

one of the ceramic vessels was loaned to the Institute of Archaeology at Yarmouk University in Irbid, where it currently remains on display.

In May 1993 the author, with the kind permission of Dr. Safwan Tell, Director-General of the Department of Antiquities, was granted permission to study and publish these two ceramic vessels and the helmet. This research was funded by a Travel to Collections Grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities and a Faculty Research Grant from the College of Humanities and Social Sciences of North Carolina State University. Mary Mattocks produced the drawings of these artifacts. The research was also facilitated by Dr. Pierre Bikai, Director of ACOR, Dr. Zeidan Kafafi, Director of the Institute of Archaeology, Yarmouk University, and Mr. Nabil Beqa'in, Inspector of the Karak District of the Department of Antiquities. The author is grateful to all these individuals and organizations for their support of this research.

The Site

The site of el-Ḥaditha is situated ca. 3.5 km east of the eastern shore of the Dead Sea on the south bank of Wadi ibn Ḥammad at an elevation of ca. -200 m below sea level. The site lies just above and east of Ghor el-Ḥaditha and overlooks the bay formed by the north arm of the el-Lisan peninsula. The ancient site of el-Ḥaditha may be identified with the "Ruins" marked on the K737 1:50,000 series map sheet 3152 IV, located at 432/638 on the Universal Transverse Mercator grid and at 028/778 on the Palestine Grid. El-Ḥaditha is ca. 4.5 km northeast of el-Mazra'a, ca. 20 km

northwest of Karak, ca. 18 km west of Rabba, and ca. 30 km NNE of Ghor eṣ-Ṣafi (Zoara).

The Pottery

The grave contained two shallow bowls registered as H 1976, B.III.XII, no. 41 and no. 42.

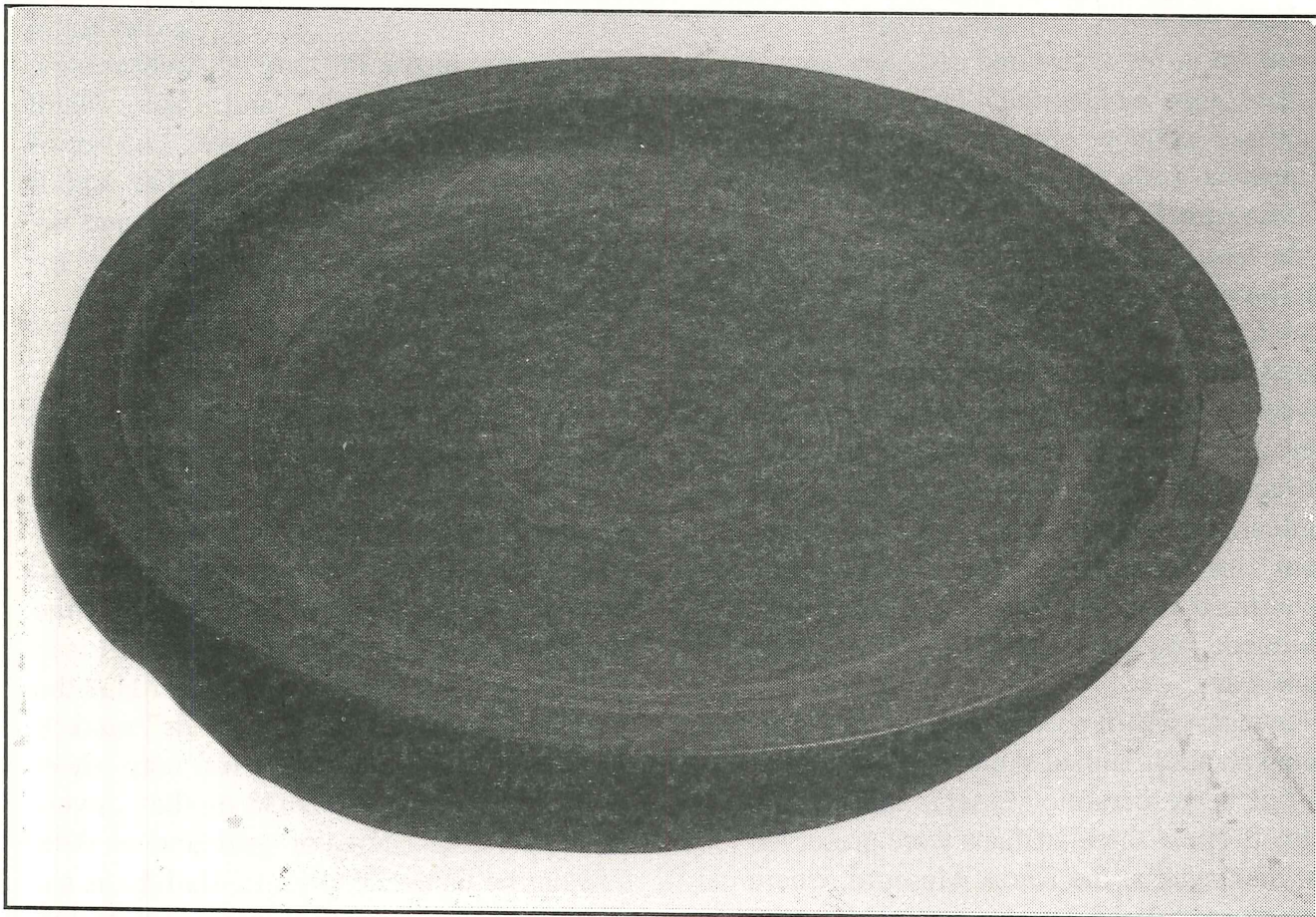
Vessel no. 42, (Figs. 1-3) is a shallow bowl of fine red ware with a flattened, elongated rim. It is decorated by a glossy red slip covering the interior surface and most of the exterior side wall, but not the base. It also displays a complex stamped decoration in the center of the interior surface.

This vessel is an African Red Slip bowl best classified as Hayes Form 59B. He describes Form 59 generally as a "flat-based dish" with a broad, flat, nearly horizontal rim. The rim "is stepped up in two fasciae, the outer (which is broader) bearing either a groove or a slight upward roll at the lip."

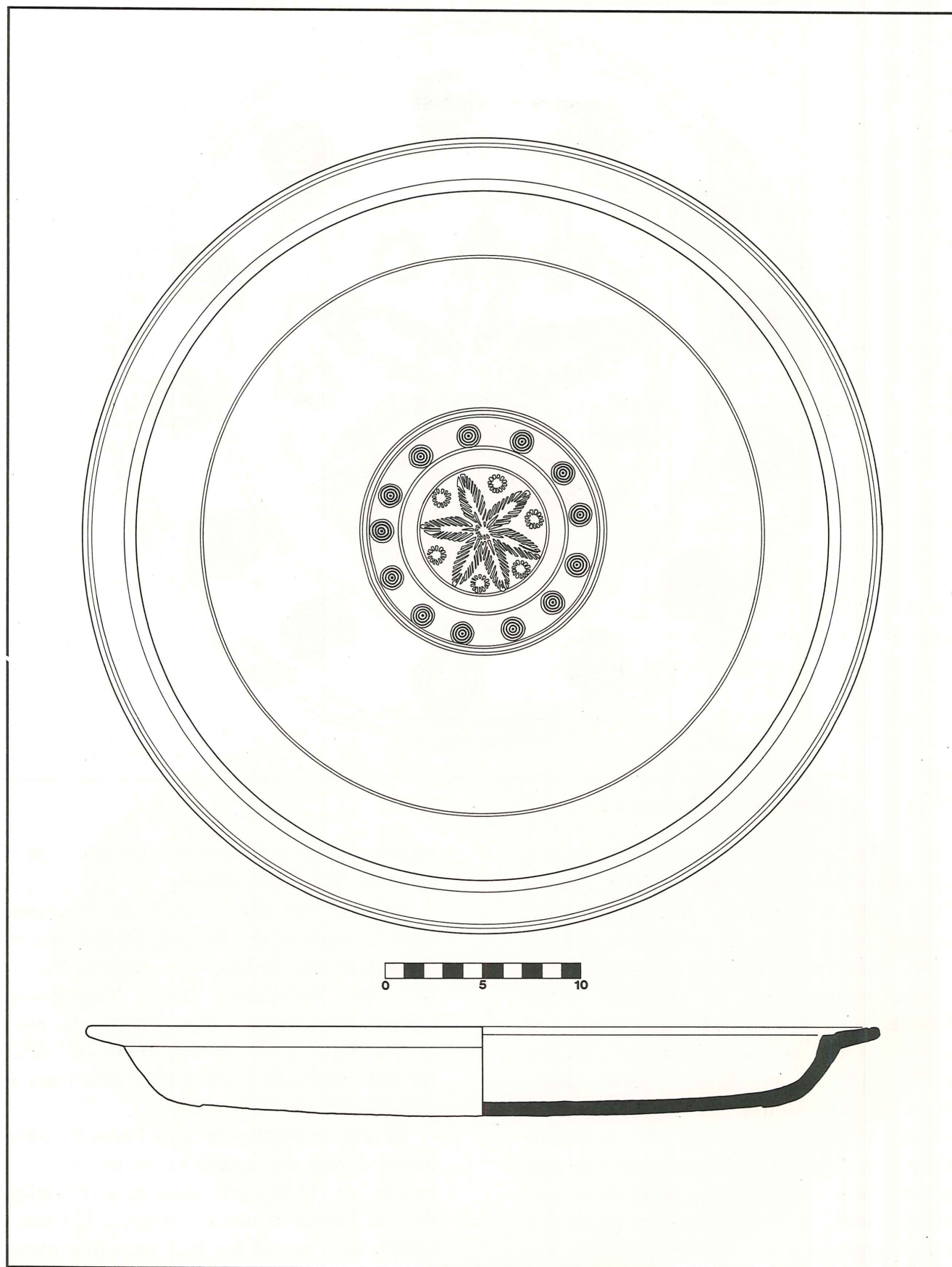
He notes that these vessels are generally large, with a curved side wall. The lower part of the wall provides the resting surface. The wide and slightly hollowed base is marked off by a small inset. On the inside surface a corresponding offset, generally combined with a small groove, is usually found at the edge of the floor (Hayes 1972: 96).

Hayes divides Type 59 into two subtypes: 59A is decorated by distinctive "vertical gouging on the exterior wall". This feature is lacking in this vessel, which thus must fall into his Type 59B, "with plain wall". Hayes also notes that these vessels range in size from 21 to 42 cm in diameter, so no. 42, with a diameter of 40 cm, falls within the high end of the normal range.

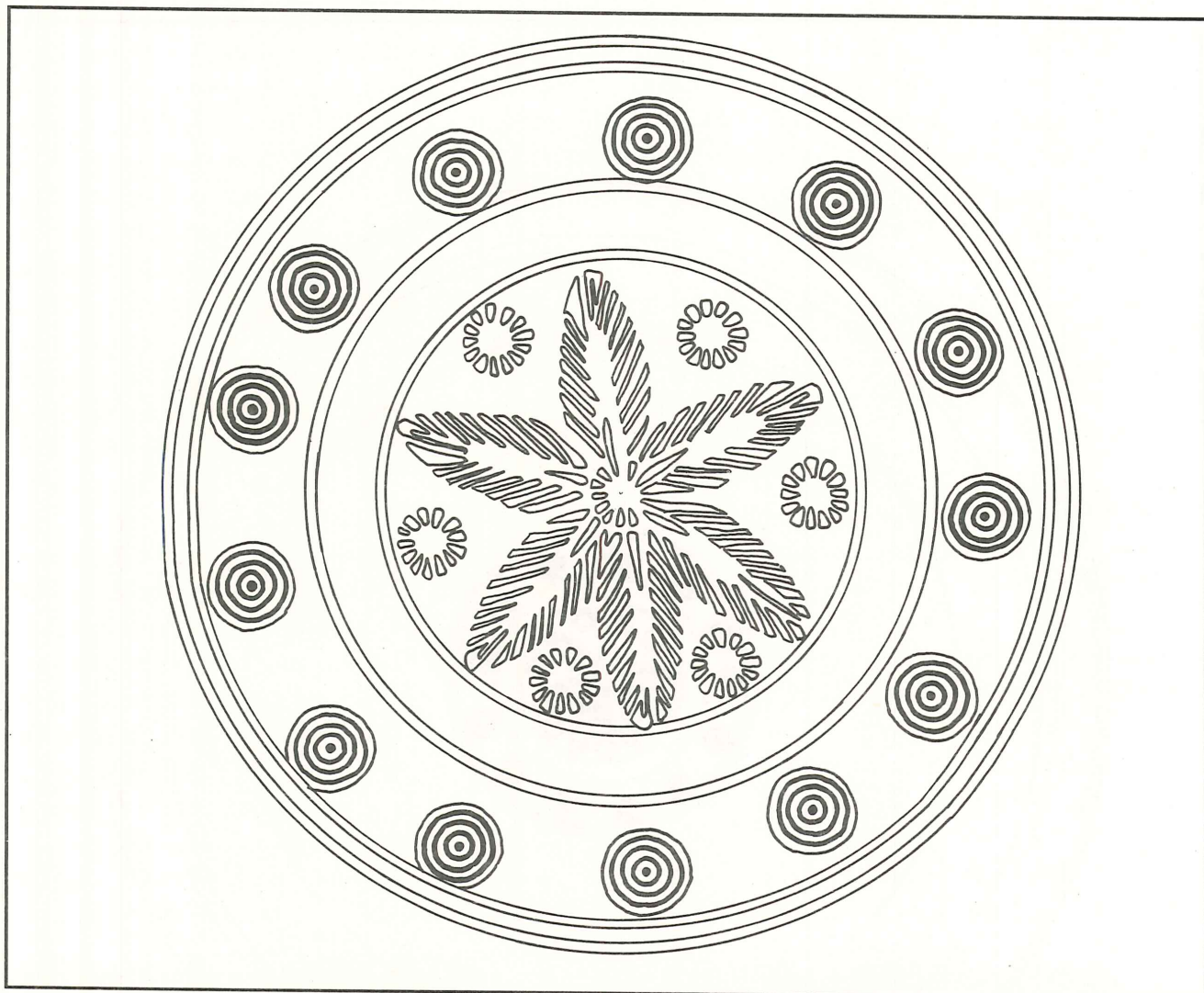
Stamped decoration, surrounded by grooves, is normally found on the floor of the vessel. In fact, ARS Form 59 "is one of the earliest forms to bear stamped decoration."



1. Vessel no. 42 from el-Haditha.



2. Vessel no. 42 from el-Haditha.



3. Detail of central stamp of vessel no. 42.

tion". The decoration consists of geometric and floral designs termed Style A (Hayes 1972: 99). Specifically, the stamp design consists of a series of concentric circular bands. The innermost band contains "a star-shaped arrangement of radiating palm-branches or petals", with small rosettes or circle motifs in the interstices" (Hayes 1972: 218, cf. pl. XIIA). These palm-branches are similar to Hayes Type 3 (Hayes 1972: 229-230, fig. 38). A middle narrow band is without decoration. The outer band is filled by thirteen small circle motifs at slightly irregular intervals. These motifs, formed by four concentric circles, are Hayes Style A (ii) 27 (Hayes 1972: 234-235, fig. 40:27h). The elements of this com-

bination of decorative motifs seem best dated to the late fourth century.

African Red Slip Form 59 is very common throughout the Roman Empire and is attested at sites in Morocco, Algeria, Portugal, the Rhineland, Italy, Yugoslavia, Greece, the Crimea, Libya, Egypt, and Syria (cf. Hayes 1972: 96-99; 1980: 501-502, for full citations). Form 59B is dated to ca. 320-420 (Hayes 1972: 100).

Several examples of ARS Form 59 were found during the recent excavations at el-Lejjun, ca. 34 km southeast of el-Haditha, by the Limes Arabicus Project. Unfortunately, only one of the four examples excavated at el-Lejjun derived from a good stratigraphic context. This sherd is from a

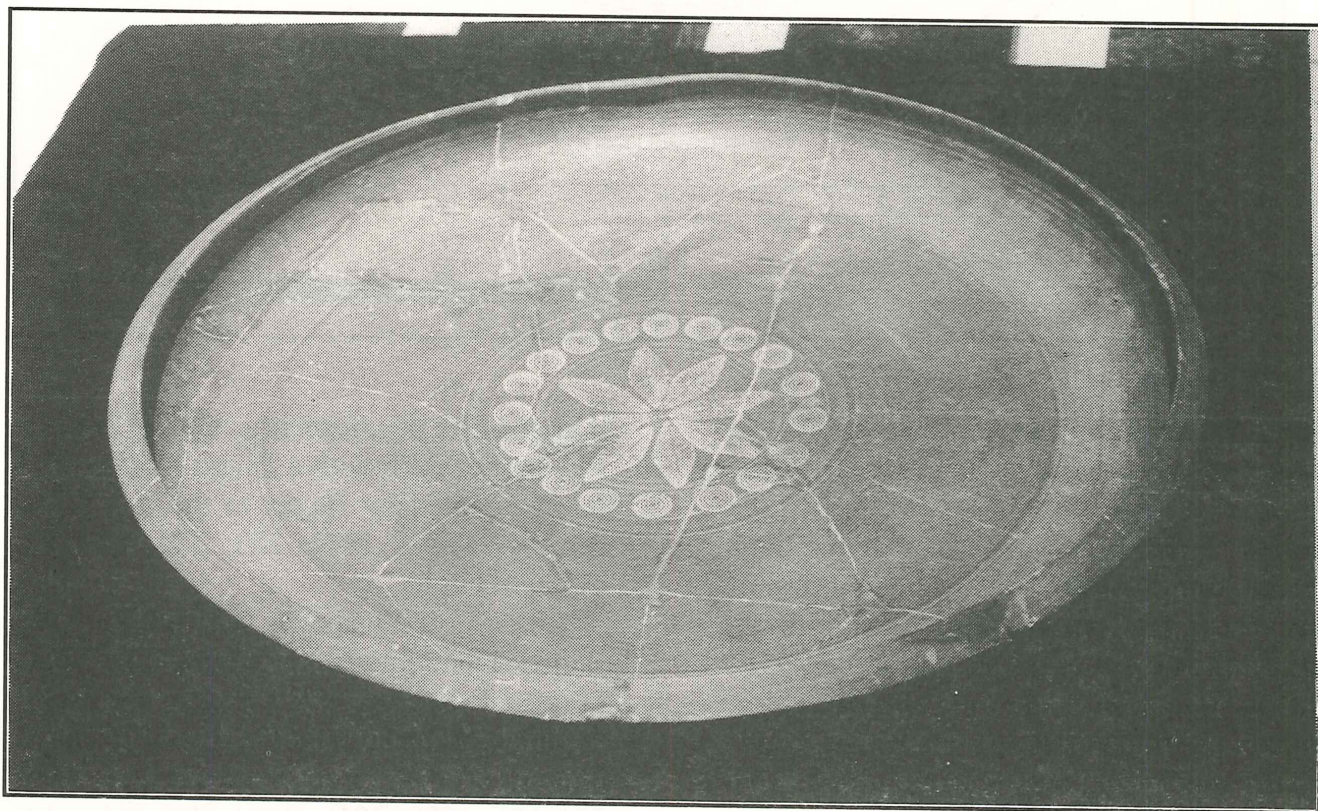
Stratum VA (ca. 363-400) context in the el-Lejjun *principia* (Parker forthcoming). Form 59 is also frequently attested in Palestine. At Jalame examples were found in late fourth century contexts (Weinberg 1988: 146, fig. 7-7:111). Form 59 is also attested at Khirbet Shema (Meyers *et al.* 1976: 234, pl. 7:23.1), Bethany (Saller 1957: 260, fig. 49:3081, 4039), and Nazareth (Bagatti 1969: 290, fig. 227:14-18), among other sites.

Vessel no. 41 (Figs. 4-6) is a shallow bowl of fine red ware with a triangular, incurved rim and nearly flat base. The vessel is decorated with a glossy red slip that covers the entire interior surface and exterior side wall, but not the base. Some horizontal burnish lines are visible on the interior side wall. Like Vessel no. 42, Vessel no. 41 is also decorated by a complex stamped design of palm leaves and concentric circles in the center of the interior surface.

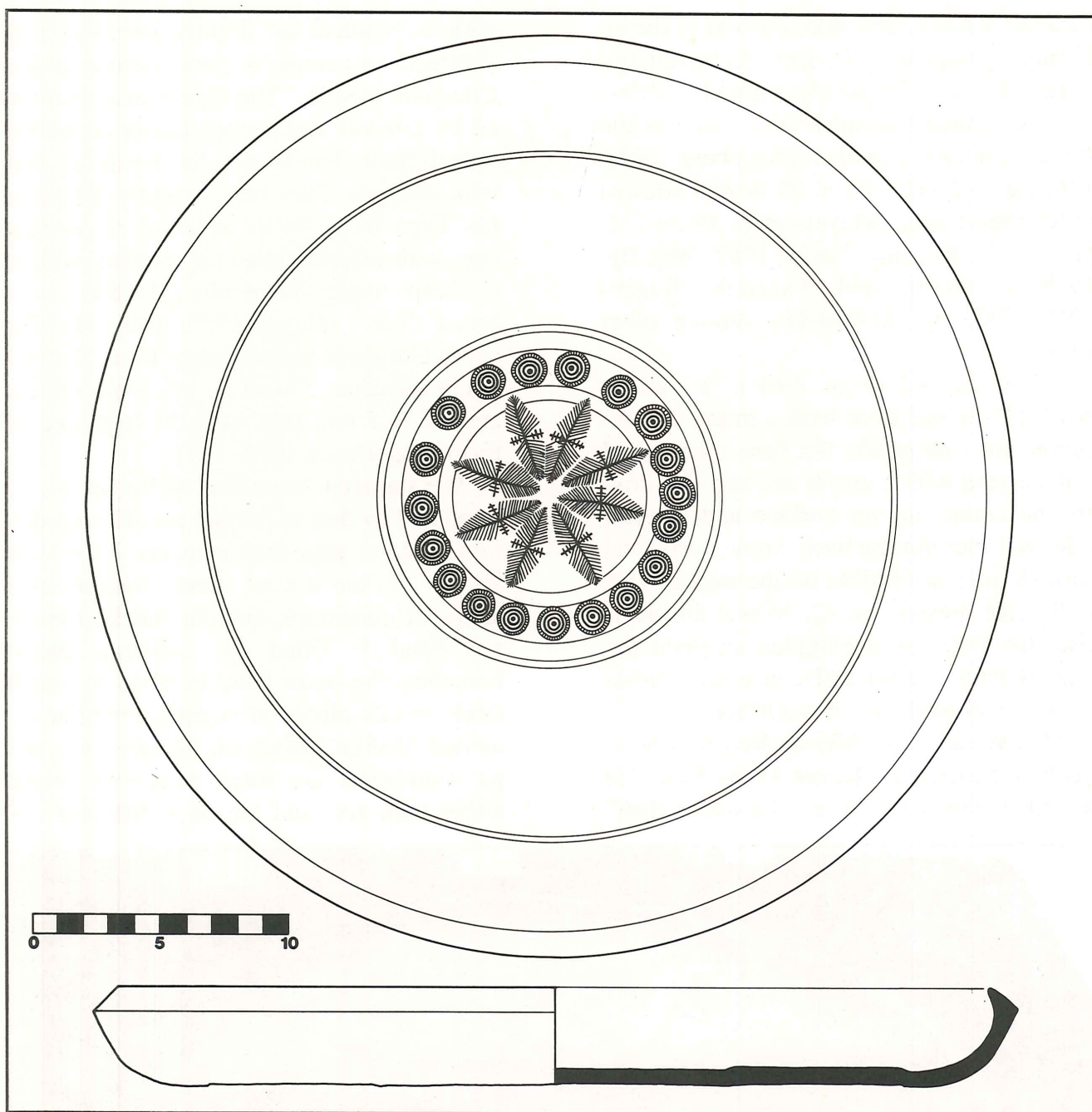
This vessel is an African Red Slip bowl easily identified as Hayes Form 61A. He describes this form as a "flat-based dish"

with a "vertical or slightly incurved rim, flattened on outside to give a more or less triangular profile." The type is also decorated by grooves and stamps (Style A) on the vessel floor. Hayes divides Form 61 into two subtypes. This vessel clearly falls into his Type 61A, "with incurved or vertical rim, with external chamfer meeting wall at a sharp angle. Generally shallow, with broad floor." (Hayes 1972: 100). He also states that these vessels range from 22 to 41 cm in diameter. Vessel no. 41, with a diameter of 36.5 cm, falls near the high end of this range (Hayes 1972: 101).

The stamped decoration of Vessel no. 41 is related to that of Vessel no. 42, but differs in some important respects. Like Vessel no. 42, the central stamp consists of a series of concentric circular bands: the inner band is filled by radiating palm-branches; the outer band is filled by small circle motifs placed at slightly irregular intervals. Unlike Vessel no. 42, however, the palm-branches are more numerous (eight rather than six) and are of a different de-



4. Vessel no. 41 from el-Haditha.

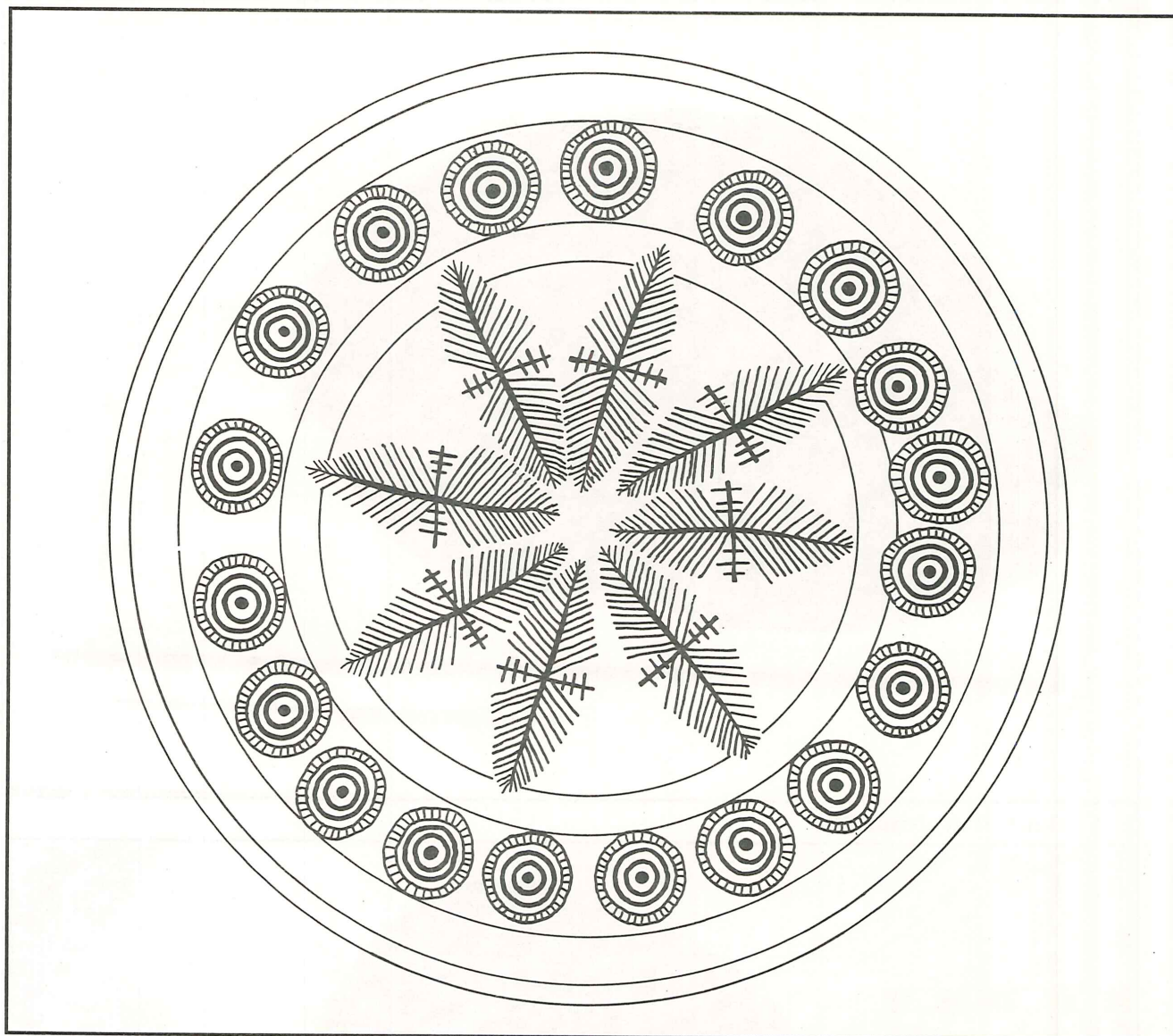


5. Vessel no. 41 from el-Ḥaditha.

sign. Each palm-branch is bisected by a horizontal line with a series of six short perpendicular lines crossing its length. All the leaves of the palm-branch outside the horizontal line turn outward towards the rim of the vessel; all the leaves inside the horizontal line turn inward towards the center of the vessel. These details of this palm-branch seem unparalleled among the examples illustrated by Hayes (Hayes 1972: 230, 232, figs. 38-39). The outer band of decora-

tion consists of nineteen groups of concentric circles, each with a fringe of dots. This motif is dated by Hayes to the late fourth century (Hayes 1972: 223, 234, 237, fig. 40).

Like ARS 59 above, African Red Slip Form 61 is common throughout the Mediterranean. Examples are known from sites in Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Spain, Portugal, Greece, Turkey, and Syria (Hayes 1972: 101-106; 1980: 501). Form 61A is dated to



6 . Detail of central stamp of vessel no. 41.

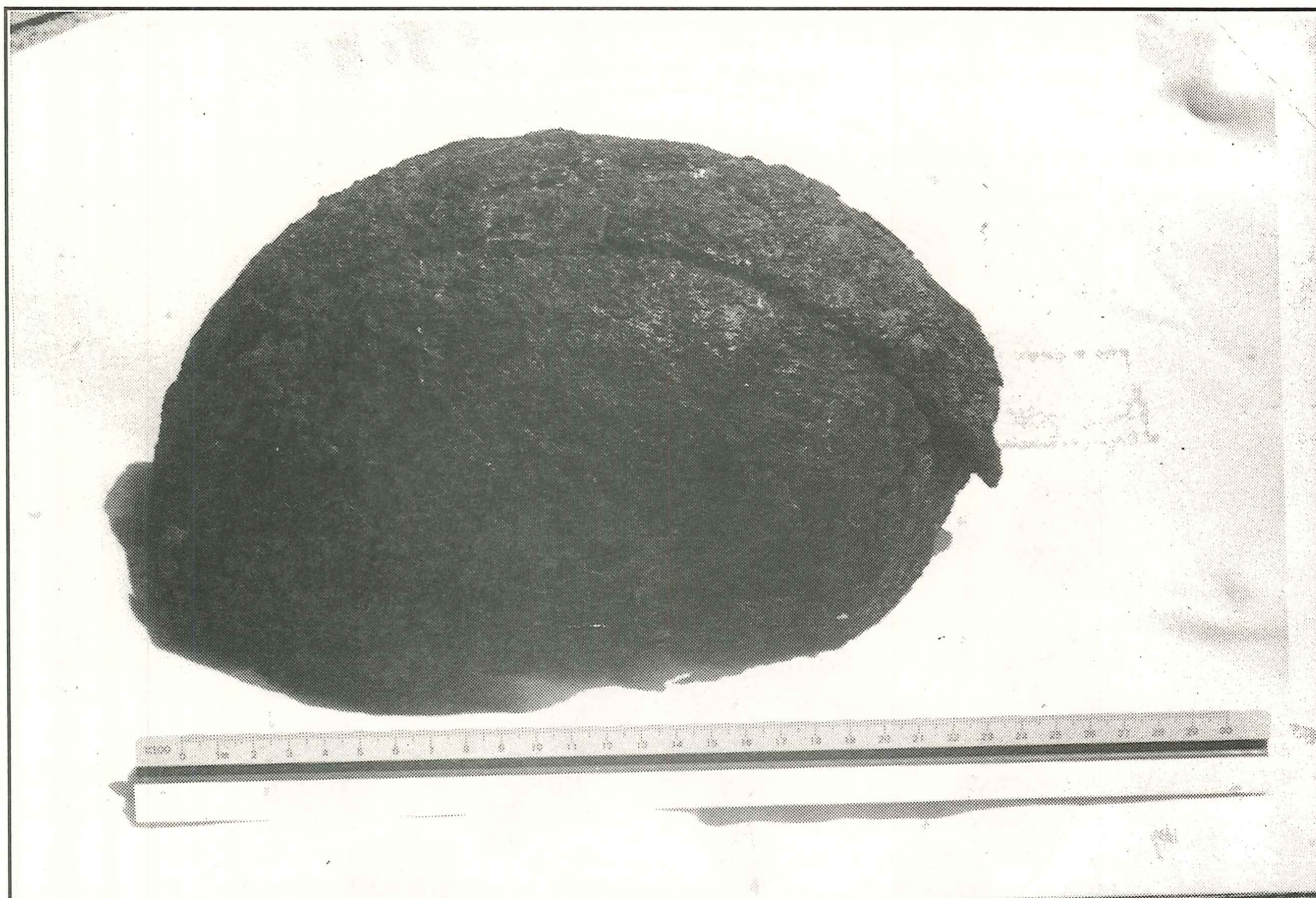
ca. 325-400/420 (Hayes 1972: 107). In Palestine, Form 61 is attested at Jalame (Weinberg 1988: 147, fig. 7-7:113), Samaria (Crowfoot *et al.* 1957: 361, fig. 84:20), and Khirbet Shema (Meyers *et al.* 1976: 14-15, fig. 14:16), among other sites.

Therefore, both ceramic vessels from this grave are African Red Slip imports and both are dated to ca. 320-420. Somewhat closer dating is permitted by analysis of the stamped decorations, both of which seem to fall within Hayes Type A (ii), dated ca. 350-420. Therefore the grave itself and the associated iron helmet probably also date to the same period, i.e. to the late fourth or be-

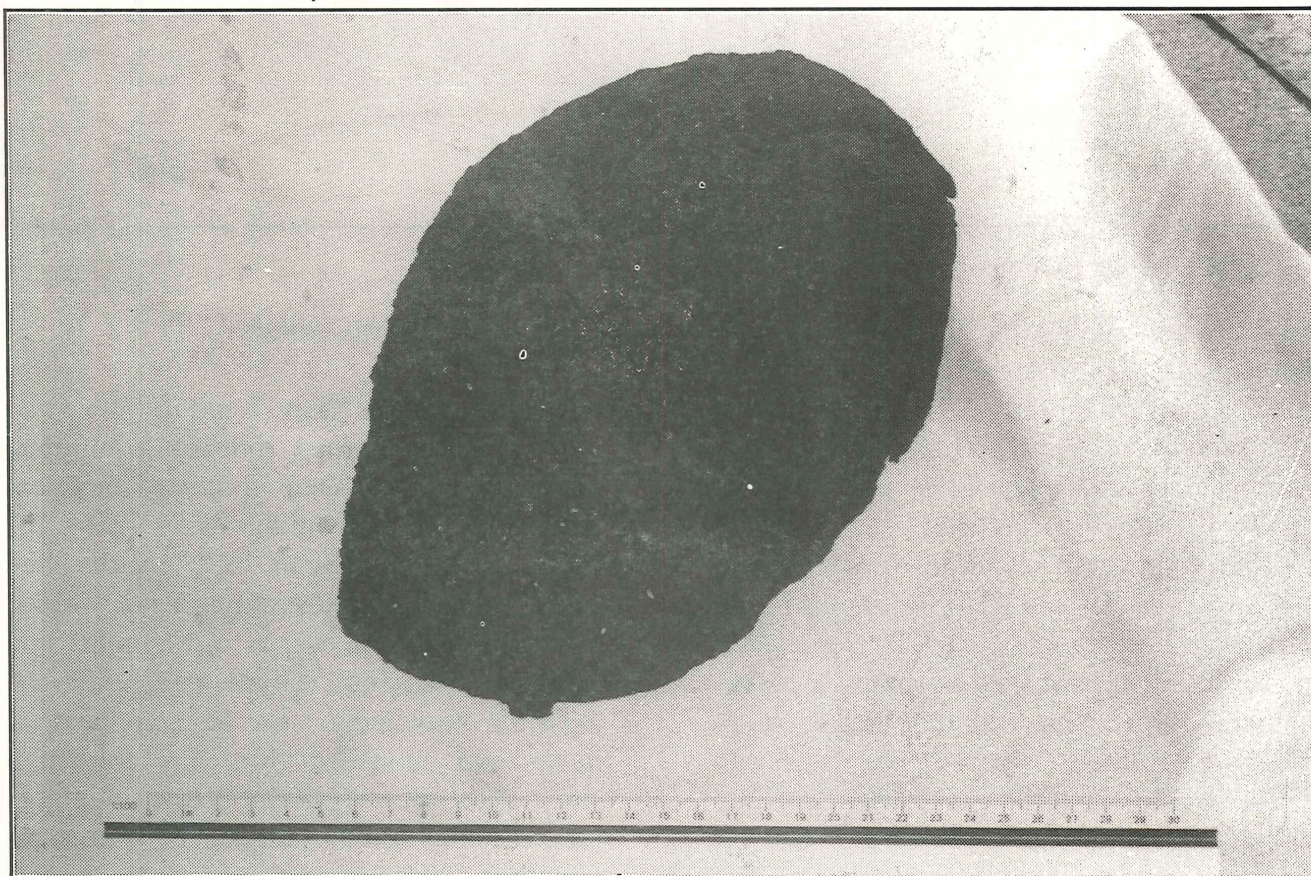
ginning of the fifth century.

The Iron Helmet (Figs. 7 and 8)

Very little Roman military equipment has yet been published from Jordan. Excavations of Roman military sites along the *Limes Arabicus* began only in the late 1970s, and these excavations have yielded only a very small corpus of weapons and military equipment (Groot 1987). To the author's knowledge, no Roman helmets have been published from any Jordanian sites. Thus, the el-Ḥaditha helmet is important not only for its uniqueness in this region, but also because it can be closely dat-



7. Iron helmet from el-Ḥaditha.



8. Iron helmet from el-Ḥaditha.

ed to within a century (ca. 350-420) by the associated ceramic evidence discussed above.

The helmet consists of a bowl formed by two iron pieces joined together by a wide iron strip. Iron rivets surviving near the edge both on one side and on the rear suggest that the helmet once included cheek-pieces and a neck-guard. There is no evidence of a crest.

The helmet from el-Ḥaditha basically falls within the "Ridge Type" attested from Roman military sites along the northern frontiers, such as at Intercisa, Augst, and Worms. This type consists of two iron pieces connected by a central iron ridge and is dated to the fourth and fifth centuries. But the el-Ḥaditha example differs from the Ridge Type in one important respect. The cheek-pieces and neck-guard of the Ridge Type helmets were not attached directly to the bowl. Instead these were attached indirectly by a textile or leather lining stitched into holes located around the edges of both the bowl and the cheek-pieces and neck-guard (Bishop and Coulston 1993: 167-169). The el-Ḥaditha helmet displays iron rivets on the side and rear edges that suggest direct attachment of cheek-pieces and neck-guard.

Recent scholarship suggests that the late Roman Ridge Helmet may derive from Parthian and Sassanian sources. Roman armorers of the Tetrarchy may have found the technically simple ridge helmet easy to produce in large quantities (James 1986). Scholars have long considered the Ridge Helmet to be directly related to the *Spanghelme* or early medieval segmentary helmets (Bishop and Coulston 1993: 172).

Finally, it is interesting to note that the Roman military author Vegetius, probably writing in the early fifth century, claims that protective armor in his day had now been almost completely abandoned by the Roman infantry. He states that "From the

founding of the city (753 B.C.) even up to the time of the deified Gratian (A.D. 375-383) the infantry soldiers were protected by armor and helmets." Vegetius says that because the soldiers were lazy while training, they asked the emperor for permission to discard first their body armor, then their helmets. They thus fought unprotected against such enemies as the Goths. Nevertheless, Vegetius also says about his day that armor was still worn by the Roman cavalry in imitation of the Goths, Alans, and Huns (Vegetius, *Epitoma Rei Militaris* 1.20).

Conclusion

It is unfortunate, of course, that a precise description of the grave structure and the skeleton itself were not available for study. Nevertheless, the presence of two imported fine tableware vessels as grave goods suggests that the inhumed individual was a person of relatively high status. The iron helmet strongly suggests that the individual was a soldier. The associated pottery also provides a fairly close date for the death of this soldier, i.e. between the second quarter of the fourth century and the first quarter of the fifth century.

How did this soldier happen to be buried at el-Ḥaditha? Fortunately, the only complete list of Roman military units still extant, the *Notitia Dignitatum*, dates to this period (i.e., ca. 400). Several Roman units are attested in the region of the Dead Sea. Some were under the command of the *dux Arabiae*, others under the *dux Palaestinae*. Several of these units were based relatively close to el-Ḥaditha. An elite cavalry vexillation, the *equites Mauri Illyriciani*, was stationed at Areopolis (modern er-Rabba) ca. 18 km east of el-Ḥaditha (*N.D. Or.* 37.17). A unit of native horse archers, the *equites indigenae sagittarii*, was based at Zoara (modern Ghor eṣ-Ṣafi, ca. 30 km SSW of el-Ḥaditha (*N.D. Or.* 34.26). The nearest le-

gion, *legio IV Martia*, was stationed at Bethorus (el-Lejjun), ca. 34 km southeast of el-Haditha (*N.D. Or.* 37.22). Further, given the fact that a ford across the Dead Sea via the Lisan peninsula might well have been in use in the fourth century, our soldier might even have been based in a fort on the west coast of the Dead Sea, such as at 'En-Boqeq

(Gichon 1971). Perhaps our soldier was a discharged veteran from one of these units who chose to spend his retirement in the Ghor.

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