

SOME PROBLEMS IN EARLY ISLAMIC GLASSWARE

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Many recent discussions of Umayyad and Abbasid glassware have under-utilized the well-excavated, well-stratified, and published glass from the inland Levant, particularly the Transjordan (Fig. 1). A corpus of material from all of the excavations at Gerasa, for example, has been published for more than a decade, as well as material from Aqaba and Quseir al-Qadim,¹ and the Abbasid material from Pella has been in print for just under a decade.² Yet such material has been ignored when discussing 'well-dated finds that have served as guidelines for the evaluation of early Islamic glass'.³ It is no wonder that observations linking distribution patterns from Mesopotamia to Egypt have found few 'local peculiarities'. The sites used are basically from within the Mesopotamian *koine*, with the addition of Fustat, which, as a base for caliphate rule in Egypt, is not really likely to have been isolated from the former. What emerges from a glance at Umayyad and post-Umayyad glass across the inland Levant, away from coastal ports, is quite a different picture.

Material excavated within Syria-Palestine and the Transjordan frequently has used, or can use, well-documented mid 8th-century earthquakes as *termini ante quem* or *termini post quem* for material culture. At Gerasa, a date of AD 747 has been postulated, although the collected broken hanging lamps suggest that an earthquake occurred before the second, major collapse.⁴ At Pella, two 8th-century destructions are attributed to AD 717 and 747 or 750.⁵ And at nearby Beth Shean, the final Umayyad collapse is seen as having taken place in AD 749 rather than 747, especially on coin evidence.⁶ All of this strongly argues against a major destruction at neighbouring Pella as early as 747, but for typological purposes, the difference between AD 749 (or 747) and 750 is immaterial.

It may now be possible to isolate 7th from 8th-century Umayyad glassware. Archaeologists are well aware of the typological and decorative continuity of late Byzantine and early Umayyad material culture within this region, so much so that, as with the pottery, glassware of the early 7th century is simply 'Byzantine-Umayyad'. But the distinction between early and later Umayyad glass may be getting clearer. At Pella's Byzantine cavalry fortress on Tell Husn, for example, early Umayyad use of some, but not all, of the buildings appears to have continued only until a sudden collapse of many of them c. AD 660, perhaps as a result of an earthquake rather than human agency, given the lack of burning.⁷ Such chronological phasing as is provided by the unfortunate sequence of major earthquakes in the region of Umayyad Bilad as-Sham further helps to demonstrate, rather than assume, the overall conservative nature of forms, and to fine-tune Umayyad changes when they do emerge.

Most important, the evidence from Pella provides clear and demonstrable datable evidence for Abbasid glassware.

There was no post-Umayyad occupation of the citadel area on Husn, although occupation in the excavated portions of the main tell appears to have been maintained in a reduced but not necessarily impoverished area after the mid 8th-century earthquake. A new complex of buildings and street (Area XXIX) was built in a previously unoccupied valley

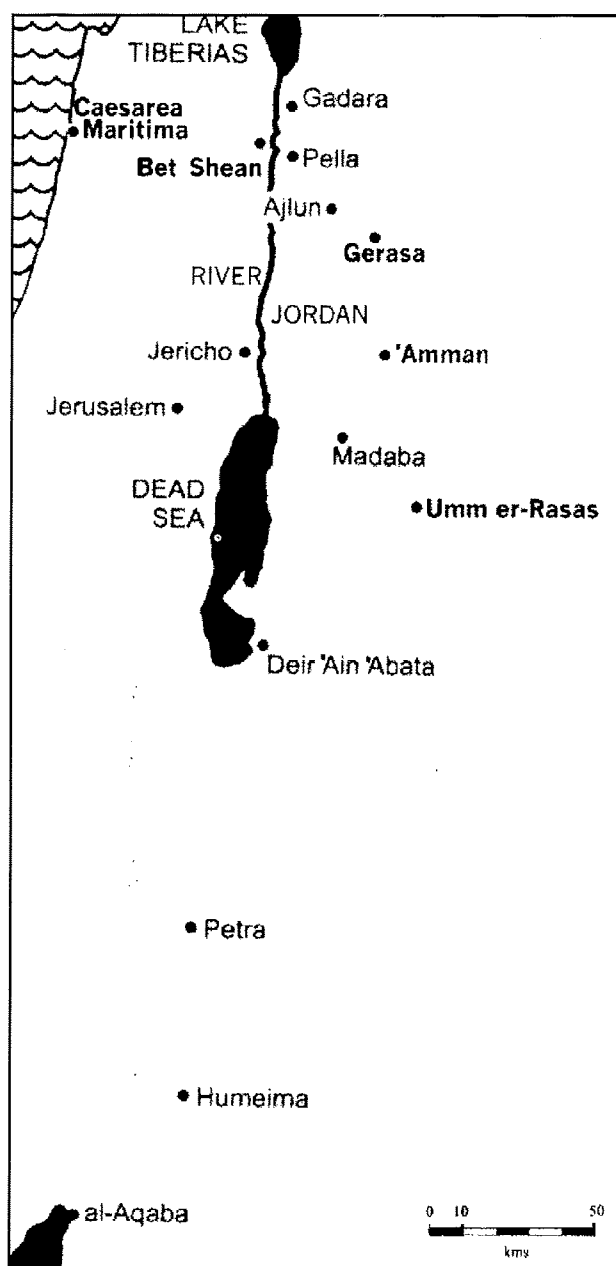


Fig. 1 Map of some major sites in Syria-Palestine

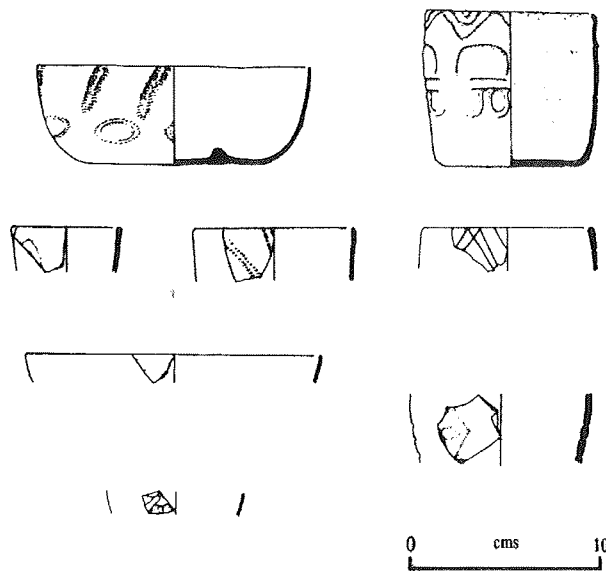


Fig. 2 Early Abbasid glass from Area XXIX, Pella, Jordan; scale 1:4

just north of the tell soon after the earthquake. The dating is based on coins and pottery.⁸ This new foundation isolates very early Abbasid from very late Umayyad glassware found in the main earthquake destruction. In fact, the Abbasid complex seems to present *two* phases, the earlier with predominantly nipped and trailed decoration, especially on beakers (Fig. 2), and the other with pincer decoration that was common if not ubiquitous (Fig. 3). The date of abandonment for the complex is still imprecise, but typologically it is likely to be early Fatimid at the latest.

Approximately 10% of the glass from usefully datable contexts comes from either the Umayyad earthquake collapse or from the downslope clearance or wash of burned soil, glass, and other artifacts from that major destruction. A thick layer of blackened debris can still be seen sloping down the northern and southern faces of the main tell. This is a sizable part of the glass corpus. While earlier forms were undoubtedly mixed into the downslope clearance of the earthquake collapse, the *absence* of glass forms from these contexts must surely be a useful tool for identifying new, post-Umayyad forms when combined with the data provided by Pella's Abbasid complex. Pella's Umayyad destruction phase unequivocally lacks the nipped beakers found in Area XXIX (Fig. 2) and in rebuilt areas of post-Umayyad occupation on the main tell, which contrasts oddly with their attribution to the terminal Umayyad phase of earthquake-hit Beth Shean.⁹

As noted previously, this material, as well as corroborating material from Gerasa to the east and Umm er-Rasas in the Madaba region,¹⁰ has been published for nearly a decade. Still, there are sites, notably Caesarea Maritima, whose ceramic phasing has not followed the revised differentiation of Umayyad and Abbasid finewares,¹¹ upon which glassware on site is identified. Without a careful revision and understanding of the new, demonstrable ceramic typology, the overall picture of the similarities and differences between Umayyad and Abbasid material west of the Jordan will continue to be a blurred one.

Put in a larger picture, the evidence from Syria-Palestine points to some regional peculiarities. First, highly relief-cut vessels are next to non-existent outside ports such as Aqaba and al-Mina. Molar flasks are missing in the repertoire of the Transjordanian cities published so far, with the exception of the regional capital at Beth Shean.¹² The series of large 10th–11th-century 'ewers' with relief-carved linear or figural decoration is, outside Iran,¹³ found only in coastal or other emporium sites, including Quseir al-Qadim, or at major centres of caliphate power, such as Fustat, Beth Shean, and presumably Damascus and Jerusalem. Provincial areas within the caliphate therefore seem to have been out of the loop as far as either common production or importation of relief-cut vessels in the Abbasid period is concerned.

By contrast, engraved or scratch-decorated cobalt blue beakers seem to have a pattern of distribution stretching from Persia and eastern Syria to Egypt, but in this case the percolation of such material seems to have sporadically reached inland sites from the northern Jordanian valley, such as at Pella and Beth Shean, south to the Monastery of St Lot at Deir 'Ain 'Abata or Petra.¹⁴

There is as yet little evidence to differentiate stratigraphically glass of the Abbasid (AD 750–945) and Fatimid (AD 970–1078/1079) periods. Regionalism, too, may play a part in the difficulties of tying in typologies from individual sites, such as Mesopotamian Nishapur with Egyptian Fustat and, more importantly, other points in between.¹⁵ The hoard of glass from *Caesarea Maritima* suggests continuous development from the Abbasid period,¹⁶ but typological links to the *Serçe Limani* shipwreck show sunken necks and concave bodies on flasks, both of which may have been regional variations from the less easily identified Fatimid phases of inland Transjordan and Palestine.

The extent of the Fatimid occupation at Pella has yet to be investigated thoroughly. However, on the available evidence, it can be broadly generalized as probably both smaller and more provincial than even the reduced Abbasid township. With the Abbasid civic complex largely abandoned during this period, the majority of Fatimid glass appears in rubbish dumps on the main tell, and it is identified mainly by associated ceramic material rather than by coins. Of the areas investigated at Pella, the most elite centre of 10th and 11th-century occupation may have been near the medieval mosque, which abuts a modern cemetery that necessarily restricts further excavations. Comparable material from the Fatimid palace on the 'Amman citadel is lacking. No forms can be ascribed with any certainty by Dussart to contexts beyond *c.* 800.¹⁷

Nevertheless, the separation of Abbasid material culture from both the preceding and, less clearly, subsequent periods in Area XXIX at Pella, as well as the reasonably elite activities on that site, does provide some interesting observations. First, the isolation of this city from the most elaborate cut glass of the Abbasid and Fatimid periods has already been mentioned. Yet lustre and enamel-painted vessels sporadically do appear in both periods, both here and in less well stratified contexts on the main tell. This contrasts with the glass from Beth Shean, where some cut and incised glasses, but no lustre-painted vessels, have been recorded.

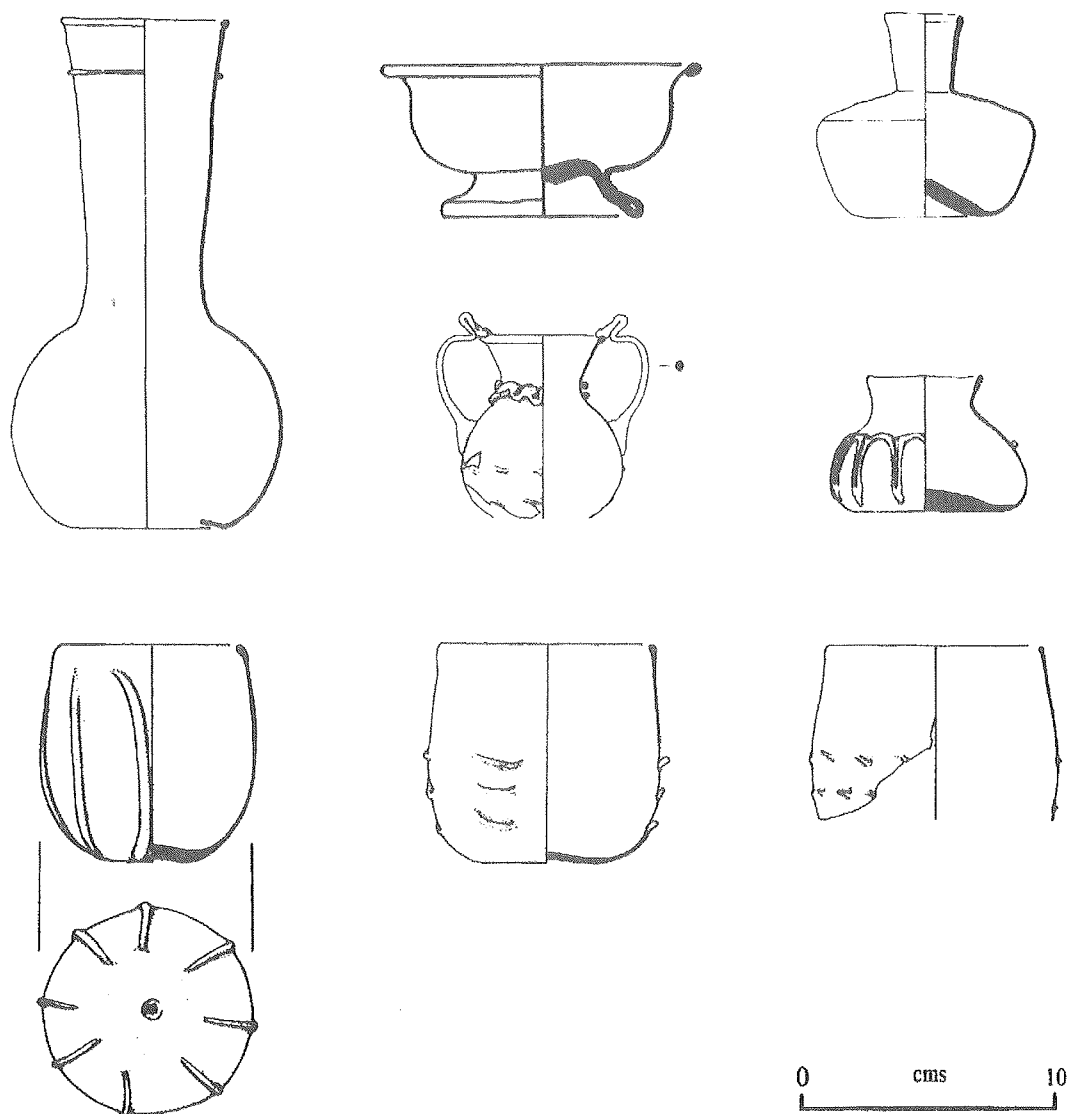


Fig. 3 Abbasid glass from Area XXIX and main tell, Pella, Jordan; scale 1:3

Lustre-painted glass may have developed in the early Abbasid period, commonly in combinations of thick opaque yellow-orange with dark brown on a naturally tinted glass.¹⁸ At Pella, a fragment of stratified Abbasid lustre-painted glass of uncertain form is amber. Its production centre is a mystery, given that faintly greenish glass seems the rule,¹⁹ but its decorative style is closest, not to Syria or Egypt,²⁰ but to Samarra in Persia. All the examples of this early format cited by Kröger are from north-eastern Syria, Persia, and Egypt, or exports to the Far East, and all are painted on greenish or blue-greenish glass. In addition, the monastery at Egyptian Saqqara yielded two fragments, both 'dark yellowish brown' on a yellow ground, but as at Fustat, the vessels themselves are greenish. The published glassware from Saqqara is overwhelmingly Abbasid (pincer-decorated vessels and incised cobalt blue beakers), but it could, typologically, include a little Umayyad material.²¹

Fragments of brown lustre-painted vessels and perhaps an enamelled bowl were also mentioned, without illustration, in the Yale publication on Gerasa.²² Qasr al-Hayr East in Syria yielded fragments in 9th-century contexts, including a 'brown' fragment. But because this has both yellow and

blue 'enamel' work, it, too, varies from the Pella fragment.²³ The later, well dated Fatimid bowl from *Caesarea Maritima* has again a greenish fabric, and in any case its lustre paint is thinner and monochrome.²⁴ A precise parallel for Pella's amber fragment awaits discovery.

In addition to this lustre-painted fragment, Pella has yielded a rare example of a greenish flask with swirled opaque red and silvery white stripes that appear as if they had been enamelled and silver lustre-painted – although it is impossible to tell for certain (Fig. 4). The alternating decorative stripes were presumably applied to the (still hot) parison, followed by a reheating that expanded and thinned the vertical stripes. This is comparable to Ayyubid enamelled glass techniques in Syria.²⁵ The very white and iridescent silver stripes here resemble the silver lustre that is sometimes seen on Middle Byzantine glassware.²⁶ It is paint-thin, unlike the thicker and easily hydrated white glass marvered onto the monochrome bowls and flasks of the late Ayyubid and Mamluk periods at Pella. The brick red is almost as thin, but as with the glass itself, it is scarcely weathered except where it has been abraded. It is tentatively dated by associated ceramics to the Fatimid rather than Ayyubid

period, with no datable associated coins. The plain form is itself generically early Islamic.

This flask might simply have been very finely marvered, then reworked. In terms of decorative effect, it is closest to Abbasid marvered glass flasks,²⁷ which often feature red and white festoons on a dark glass. At Pella, both of the extant marvered fragments are red and white on amber glass (Fig. 4); four from Gerasa are dark blue or olive.²⁸ None has a firm dating. At Pella, a single example of *marbled* marvered glass is, like the early lustre-painted fragment, opaque yellow on amber. Well stratified to no earlier than the Abbasid period,²⁹ it closely resembles in pattern a marbled flask from Abbasid Fustat – in red and white on amber.³⁰ The description of another, perhaps Abbasid, marbled flask in a collection as ‘a sort of hybrid of marvered trails and enamel’ is equally apt for the technique of Pella’s enigmatic red and white swirled flask.³¹ It is, in short, impossible to tell if this is decorated with trails or ‘enamel’ – itself a vitreous substance – since the vessel has been subsequently reheated and rebrown.

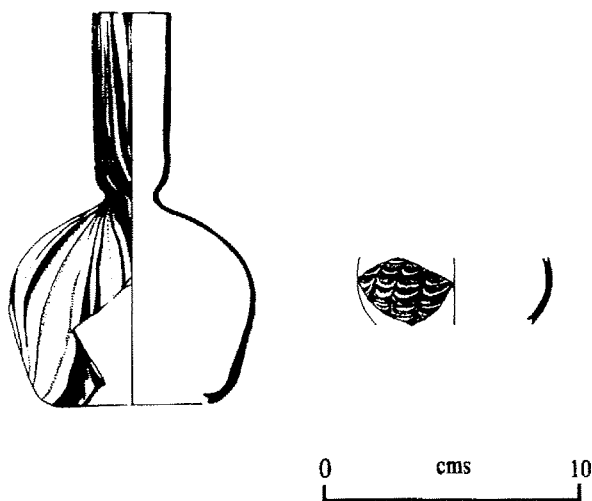


Fig. 4 Abbasid marvered ‘damascened’ glass fragment (right) and Abbasid or Fatimid red and white swirled flask (left) from Pella, Jordan; scale 1:3

The presence of both Abbasid-Fatimid marvered and lustre-painted glass at Pella seems to indicate something more than the rare import. It strongly suggests that the pattern either of imported glassware or of imported decorative traditions varied between painted and cut glass of both periods. In sum, a shift in a Syro-Palestinian market toward glassware with decoration influenced by Persian/Mesopotamian tastes and by northern Syrian specialization, appears *not* to have followed immediately upon the removal of political power to Baghdad from Damascus. Indeed, if anything, the shift occurred, upon present evidence, perhaps in the 9th rather than late 8th century. Even then, the infiltration of both imported decorated glass and imported decorative techniques into the region south of Damascus seems to have been selective. If trade in, or a market for, relief-cut vessels had been widespread in the caliphate of Damascus, their presence would surely be more marked than it is in the archaeological material from urban sites in the region.

Perhaps polychromy rather than relief expresses regional tastes here. After all, the primary decorative tradition in the Byzantine and Umayyad periods here was that of trailed decoration, often in contrasting glasses, including coloured embedded trails below the rims of bowls and flasks. This is not to downplay the decorative role of colour in the glassware of other regions, where it was never really challenged by other modes of monochrome decoration, save perhaps for mould blowing – and even mould-blown vessels from the Roman period onward were often deliberately coloured. Ease of production may also have played a part here, for the only imported decorative tradition that apparently permeated the inland and more southern areas of Syria-Palestine from outside was that of pincer decoration. Relief cutting, on the other hand, required the acquisition of new rather than pre-existing skills. It is to be hoped that, with further dissemination and study of the repertoire of early Islamic ceramics and dated glassware west of the Jordan River, this picture of regional tastes for, and production of, early Islamic glassware will become clearer.

ENDNOTES

¹Michael Gawlikowski, ‘A Residential Area by the South Decumanus’, in ed. F. Zayadine, *Jerash Archaeological Project, 1981–1983*, 1, ‘Amman: Department of Antiquities of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, 1986, 107–21; Donald Whitcomb, ‘Excavations in ‘Aqaba: First Preliminary Report’, *Annual of the Department of Antiquities, Jordan*, 21, 1987, 247–66. For Quseir al-Qadim, see *idem*, ‘Islamic Glass’, in D. Whitcomb and J. H. Johnson, *Quseir al-Qadim, 1980: Preliminary Report*, Malibu: Undena, 1982, 233–40; *idem*, ‘Islamic Glass from al-Qadim, Egypt’, *Journal of Glass Studies*, 25, 1983, 101–8; and Carol Meyer, *Glass from Quseir al-Qadim and the Indian Ocean Trade*, Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization, 53, Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1992.

²M. O’Hea, ‘Glass from Areas XXXIV and XXIX (Hellenistic-Abbasid)’, in A. Walmsley *et al.*, ‘The Eleventh and Twelfth Seasons of Excavations at Pella (Tabaqat Fahli)’, *Annual of the Department of Antiquities, Jordan*, 27, 1993, 221–7.

³Axel von Saldern, ‘Early Islamic Glass in the Near East: Problems of Chronology and Provenances’, *Annales de l’Association Internationale pour l’Histoire du Verre*, 13, Low Countries, 1995 (Lochem, 1996), 228.

⁴See Gawlikowski [note 1], 115; and Vincent Clark, ‘The Church of Isaiah at Jerash’, in *Jerash Archaeological Project* [note 1], 313. P. V. C. Baur (‘Glassware’, in ed. C. H. Kraeling, *Gerasa, City of the Decapolis*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1938, 521) misdated but noted the piles of church glass debris between the Fountain Court and St Theodore’s.

⁵R. H. Smith and L. Day, *Pella of the Decapolis*, 2, Wooster: College of Wooster, 1989, 71.

⁶Yoram Tsafrir and Gideon Foerster, ‘Bet Shean Excavation Project–1988/1989’, *Excavation and Surveys in Israel, 1988/1989*, 7–8, 1989, 127. See also *idem*, ‘The Dating of the ‘Earthquake of the Sabbatical Year’ of 749 C.C. in Palestine’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 55, pt. 2, 1992, 231–7.

⁷P. Watson, ‘Tell al-Husn (Area XXXIV)’, in Walmsley *et al.* [note 2], 204.

⁸*Ibid.*, 213.

⁹Shulamit Hadad, ‘Glass Vessels from the Umayyad through Mamluk Periods at Bet Shean (7th–14th Centuries C.E.)’, Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1998, figs. 1–19. I am

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grateful to Dr Rachel Pollack for bringing this dissertation to my attention.

¹⁰ Eugenio Alliata, 'Ceramica dal complesso di Santo Stefano a Umm al-Rasas', *Liber Annuus*, 61, 1991, 365–422; *idem*, 'Nota sulla ceramica dello scavo', *Liber Annuus*, 62, 1992, 221–31.

¹¹ M. Peleg and R. Reich, 'Excavations of a Segment of the Byzantine City Wall of Caesarea Maritima', *Atiqot*, English ser., 21, 1992, 137–70.

¹² *Contra* Stefano Carboni, *Glass from Islamic Lands*, New York: Thames and Hudson, 2001, 99. For al-Mina, see A. Lane, 'Medieval Finds at Al Mina in North Syria', *Archaeologia*, 87, 1938, 63, fig. 10e; and Hadad [note 9], nos. 761, 762, and 764.

¹³ Prudence Oliver, 'Islamic Relief Cut Glass: A Suggested Chronology', *Journal of Glass Studies*, 3, 1961, 9–10. A wide distribution is not the same thing as blanket distribution: David Whitehouse, 'Cut and Engraved Glass', in S. Carboni and D. Whitehouse, *Glass of the Sultans*, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art in association with The Corning Museum of Glass, Benaki Museum, and Yale University Press, 2001, 158.

¹⁴ Hadad [note 9], no. 751; M. O'Hea, 'Glass', in K. D. Politis *et al.* *The Monastery of Saint Lot (Deir 'Ain 'Abata)*, London: British Museum Press, 2002, type no. 18. For an example from Abbasid Pella, see O'Hea [note 2], 225.

¹⁵ Jens Kröger, *Nishapur Glass of the Early Islamic Period*, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1995; R. H. Pinder-Wilson and George T. Scanlon, 'Glass Finds from Fustat: 1964–1971', *Journal of Glass Studies*, 15, 1973, 12–24.

¹⁶ Rachel Pollack, 'Glass Vessels of a Fatimid Hoard from Caesarea Maritima', *Annales de l'Association Internationale pour l'Histoire du Verre*, 14, Venice/Milan, 1998 (Lochem, 2000), 233–7.

¹⁷ Odile Dussart, *Le Verre en Jordanie et en Syrie du sud*, Beyrouth: Institut Français d'Archéologie du Proche-Orient, 1998, 10.

¹⁸ Jens Kröger, 'Painting on Glass before the Mamluk Period', in ed. R. Ward, *Gilded and Enamelled Glass from the Middle East*, London: British Museum Press, 1998, 8–9.

¹⁹ Since I presented this paper, eight fragments with monochrome lustre paint have been identified from Pella. All are of greenish

glass with fine arabesques in thin orange lustre paint and an internal solid and darker red-orange wash. One is also gilded. None is polychrome, and all are likely to be Abbasid-Fatimid. They are discussed in a forthcoming report in the *Annual of the Department of Antiquities, Jordan*.

²⁰ Both were probably centres of Abbasid production. See Carboni [note 12], 52.

²¹ James Quibell, *Excavations at Saqqara*, 4, *The Monastery of Apa Jeremias*, Cairo: Institute Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1912, 43, pl. LII4.

²² Baur [note 4], 515 and, for the bowl, 527.

²³ Oleg Grabar *et al.*, *City in the Desert: Qasr al-Hayr East*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1978, 145–6. Only one example is illustrated: 270, G1, no. 23.

²⁴ Pollack [note 16], 241, fig. 6.12.

²⁵ Oliver Watson, 'Pottery and Glass: Lustre and Enamel', in *Gilded and Enamelled Glass from the Middle East* [note 18], 18, after Gudenrath.

²⁶ David Whitehouse, Lisa Pilosi, and Mark T. Wypyski, 'Byzantine Silver Stain', *Journal of Glass Studies*, 42, 2000, 85–96.

²⁷ The basic work was begun by C. Lamm, *Glass from Iran in the National Museum, Stockholm*, London: Paul, Trench Trubner, 1935, pls. 29–31. See also Carboni [note 12], 291–3.

²⁸ Baur [note 4], 537, no. 73 (604), pl. CXL4; Vincent Clark, 'The Church of Bishop Isaiah at Jerash', in *Jerash Archaeological Project* [note 1], 303–18; Carol Meyer, 'Glass from the North Theater Byzantine Church, and Soundings at Jerash, Jordan, 1982–1983', *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research Supplement*, no. 25, 1987, 183; *idem*, 'Glass from the North Theatre', in *Jerash Archaeological Project* [note 1], 262–3, fig. 23aa (= Meyer, 'Glass from the North Theater Byzantine Church', 213, fig. 13n). For the stratigraphy, see Vincent Clark, 'Part II: The Archaeology of the Roman Theatre', in *Jerash Archaeological Project* [note 1], 237.

²⁹ O'Hea [note 2], 225 and 227, fig. 25:20.

³⁰ Pinder-Wilson and Scanlon [note 15], fig. 44, no. 25.

³¹ Carboni [note 12], 298.

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