

CERAMIC PRODUCTION TRADITIONS IN THE LATE BYZANTINE–EARLY ISLAMIC TRANSITION: A COMPARATIVE ANALYTICAL STUDY OF CERAMICS FROM PALAESTINA TERTIA

Virpi Elisabeth Holmqvist

Institute of Archaeology, University College London, v.holmqvist@ucl.ac.uk

The Byzantine period was an era of flourishing agricultural towns in southern Transjordan and the Negev. These areas belonged to the Byzantine province of Palaestina Tertia and were connected by various trade routes and an intensive trade network. However, many of the centres in the area were in decline already prior to the Muslim invasion in ca AD 630, after which many of the cities seem to have been abandoned. At the same time, changes in trade patterns emerged. In general, we have only limited information of the cultural and economic situation in these areas following the Muslim invasion. The Byzantine ceramic workshops in the area known to date cease to function by the end of the 6th century AD, thus the nature of the local ceramic traditions, and their possible continuation during the early Islamic period, are not well-known.

ED-XRF, SEM-EDS and petrographic analyses of ceramics from late Byzantine–early Islamic sites in the area were carried out in order to study the ceramic production and distribution patterns, and to enlighten the overall cultural and economic picture. The archaeological sites, Jabal Harûn (Petra), Khirbet edh-Dharih, ‘Aqaba, Elusa and Abu Matar (Beersheva), representing rural, urban, and ceremonial sites, cover different socio-economic contexts across the area of the former Byzantine province.

The results show that despite the decline of the cities and the abandonment of the known Byzantine workshops, the local ceramic productions seem to continue in well-established form also in the transitional–early Islamic period. Food containers and some glazed ceramics appear to be the only exotic ceramics, while the bulk of the pottery was obtained in local markets. Interestingly, the lack of long-distance trade of ordinary ceramics did not preclude the imitation and transfer of styles, as the ceramics from the former Palaestina Tertia share general stylistic features typical of the early Islamic period despite the administrative changes. It thus seems that local potters adapted to new cultural and stylistic influences, reflecting the socio-economic transformation in the area: even though historical sources give the

impression of a general decline, the Byzantine centres continued to function as rural market places. Altogether, the study of ceramics sheds new light on the cultural and economic dynamics of the transition period in the region, for which relevant information was scarce.