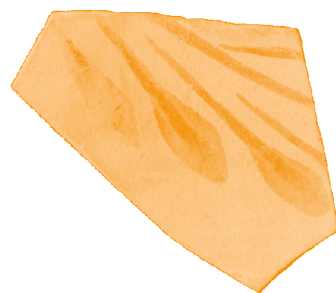


# Note on the pottery finds from the Nabataean harbour of al-Qusayr (al-Wajh, Saudi Arabia) on the Red Sea



**Abstract:** Al-Qusayr is located 40 km south of modern al-Wajh, roughly 5 km from the eastern Red Sea shore. The site has been known since the late 19th century, when the explorer R. Burton described it for the first time, in particular the remains of a monumental building so-called al-Qasr. In March 2016, a new survey of the site was undertaken by the al-‘Ula–al-Wajh Survey Project. This survey focused not only on al-Qasr but also on the surrounding site corresponding to the ancient settlement. A surface collection of pottery sherds revealed a striking combination of Mediterranean and Egyptian imports on one hand, and of Nabataean products on the other hand. This material is particularly homogeneous on the chronological point of view, suggesting a rather limited occupation period for the site. Attesting contacts between Mediterranean merchants, Roman Egypt and the Nabataean kingdom, these new data allow a complete reassessment of the importance of this locality in the Red Sea trade routes during antiquity.

**Keywords:** al-Qusayr, Saudi Arabia, Red Sea, Nabataeans, pottery, maritime trade, port, amphoras

In March 2016, the al-‘Ula–al-Wajh Survey Project (UWSP), directed by Dr. Zbigniew T. Fiema (University of Helsinki), undertook an archaeological survey of the western part of the Wadi al-Hamd in northwestern Arabia (Fiema 2020, in this volume; Fiema et al. 2020). At the very end of this wadi, on the eastern shore of

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the Red Sea, lies the site called al-Qusayr, located around 40 km south of the modern port of al-Wajh, close to cape Kurkumah [Fig. 1]. The site is known from

the late 19th century when the British explorer Richard F. Burton discovered there the remains of an ancient monumental building—the so-called al-Qasr—

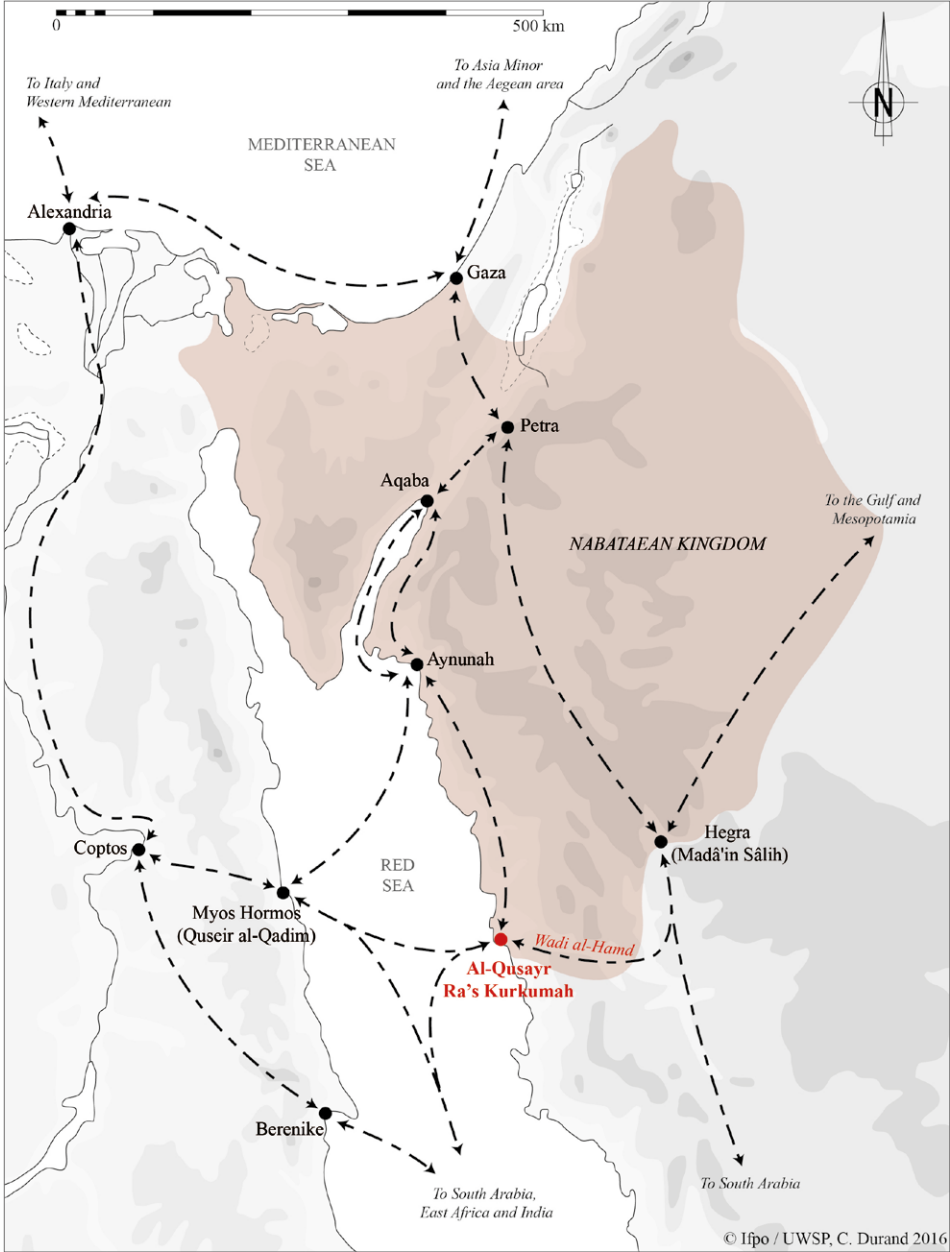


Fig. 1. The Nabataean kingdom and the Red Sea trade networks (UWSP/Ifpo | drawing C. Durand)

that he described very precisely and related to “Classical culture” (Burton 1879: 219–233; see also Starcky 1966: col. 912 and Cuvigny 2003: 28–30). This building was excavated in the early 1990s by the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage, under the direction of Ali al-Ghabban, who identified the presence of typical Nabataean architectural elements—in particular Nabataean capitals—and interpreted the building as a Nabataean temple (al-Ghabban 1993; 2017; for a reassessment of the building, see Fiema 2020, in this volume; Fiema et al. 2020).

Undertaking the new survey, the UWSP focused not only on al-Qasr but also on the site around it, in particular the area located south of the monumental building [Fig. 2]. This area comprises many little mounds with the widespread scattering of pottery sherds and archaeological artifacts clearly manifesting the presence of an ancient settlement. Burton had already described this area and he even tested one of the mounds: “We opened one of the many mounds that lie behind the Gasr, showing where most probably stood the ruined town; and we found the interior traversed by a crum-

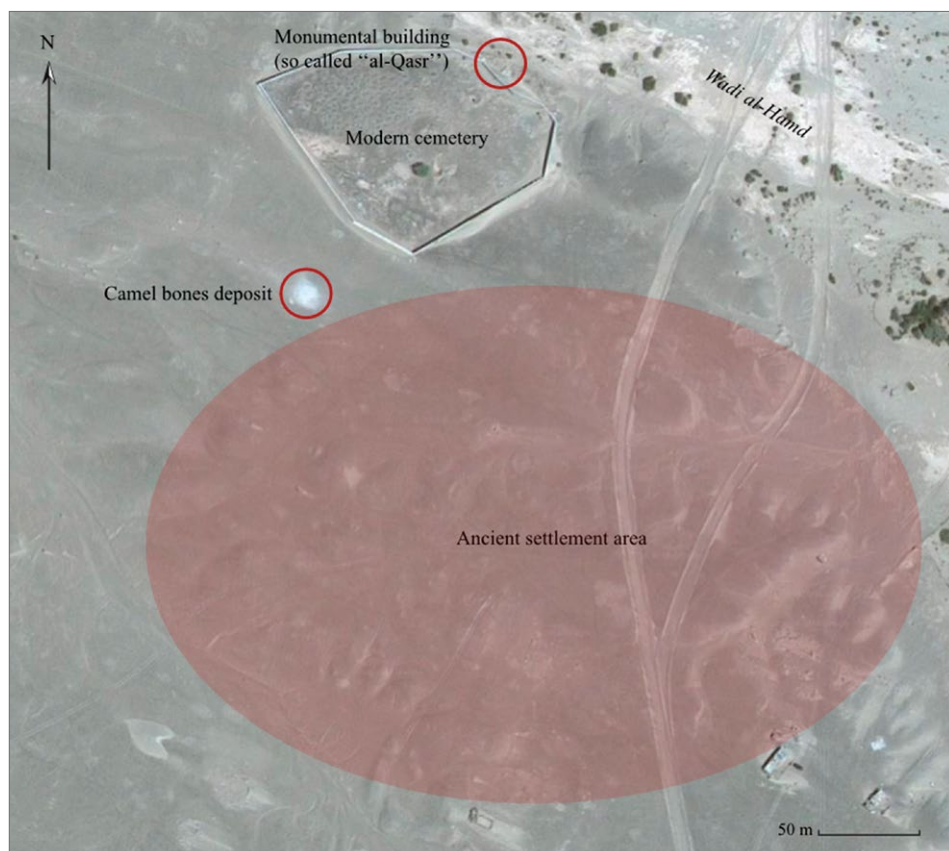


Fig. 2. Satellite view of the al-Qusayr site (source: Google | processing C. Durand)

bling wall of cut alabaster. Regular excavation may someday yield important results” (Burton 1879: 232). The UWSP survey yielded about 100 pottery sherds collected from the surface, including

about 50 diagnostic profiles. This pottery material, presented here in detail, has provided important new information regarding site chronology and the nature of the occupation.

## NABATAEAN POTTERY

The Nabataean “identity” of the site being well established since the SCTH excavations, it is not surprising that a large part of the surface pottery collection represents Nabataean pottery.

A few fragments of Nabataean painted fine ware coming from the al-Qasr excavation are currently exhibited at the Riyadh National Museum (al-Ghabban 2017: 11). The recently collected sherds have added unpainted fine ware and a rather large number of common wares to the already known repertoire of painted fine ware. A macroscopic examination of the fabrics, coupled with very characteristic vessel profiles, has suggested that this pottery group was imported in its entirety from the Petra region. It is well recognized in-

deed that Petra was not only the capital of the Nabataean kingdom, but also an important pottery production center (see, for example, ‘Amr 1986; ‘Amr and al-Momani 1999), distributing fine and common wares throughout Nabataean territory. The al-Qusayr examples of Nabataean painted fine ware can be dated from the mid-1st century BCE to the beginning of the 1st century CE (phases Schmid 2a and 2b; for comparison from Petra: Schmid 1996: 202–205; 2000: Figs 78–88) [Fig. 3]. This matches the dating of the sherds exhibited in the Riyadh National Museum. Interestingly, the one published Nabataean painted sherd found in Myos Hormos, Egypt (Whitcomb and Johnson 1982: Pl. 21:d) belongs to the same phase.

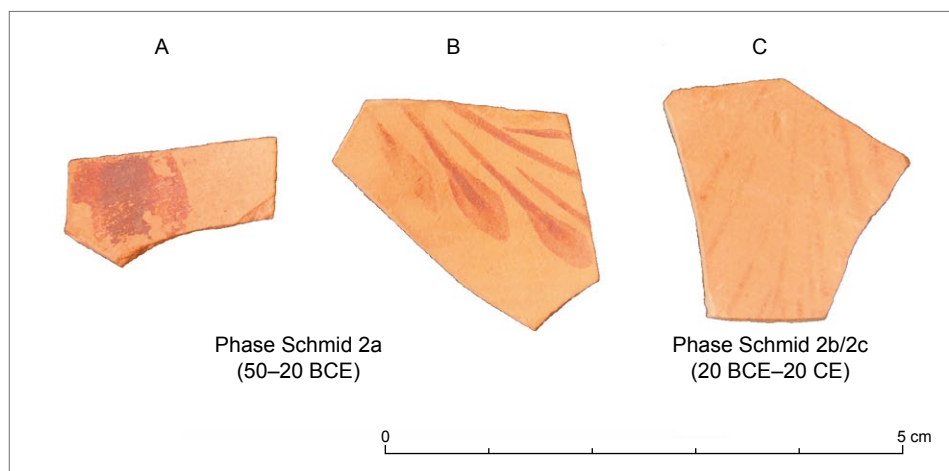


Fig. 3. Nabataean painted fine ware (UWSP | photos Z.T. Fiema, layout C. Durand)

The rest of the assemblage is composed of Nabataean common ware: cooking pots [Fig. 4:A–D], jugs [Fig. 4:E–F], and Nabataean unpainted fine ware, mainly bowls and small pots [Fig. 4:G–S], sometimes with rouletted decoration (for comparison from Petra, see Schmid 2000: Fig. 215).

The significant quantities of not only fine ware but also utilitarian pottery most probably produced in the Petra area suggests a rather important Nabataean settlement at al-Qusayr, directly linked to the Nabataean capital. In chronological terms, the whole group of Nabataean pottery—fine and com-

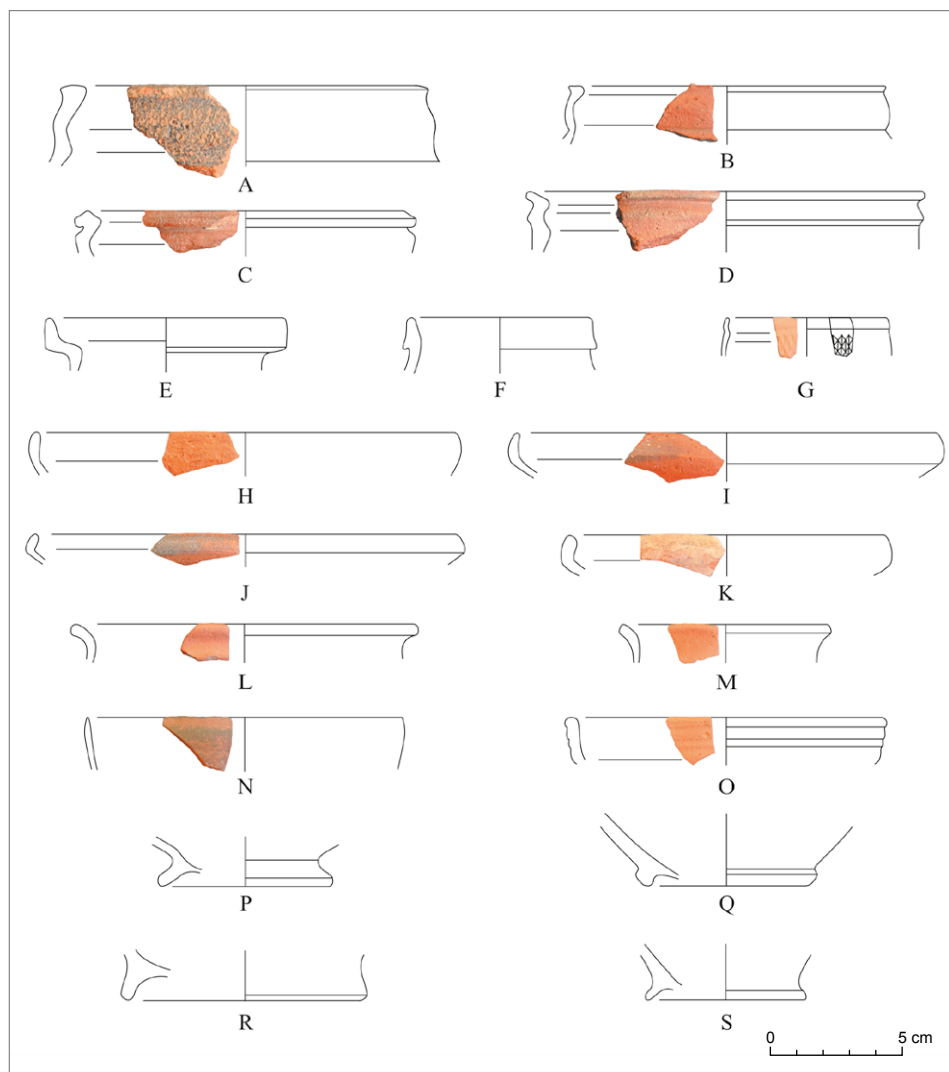


Fig. 4. Nabataean common ware and unpainted fine ware (UWSP | photos Z.T. Fiema, drawing and layout C. Durand)

mon ware—is extremely homogeneous and can be dated between the mid-1st

century BCE and the first third of the 1st century CE.

## IMPORTED FINE WARES

Other imported fine wares were also found on the surface at the al-Qusayr site. About 10 sherds represented Eastern Sigillata A, produced in Asia Minor and widely distributed in the Near East, mainly between the 1st century BCE and the 1st century CE. Two small rim sherds belonging to carinated cups [Fig. 5:A–B], type Hayes 45–46 (Hayes 1985: 34, Pl. VI.11–14), as well as a large ring base of a thick-walled plate [Fig. 5:C], type Hayes 3–4 (Hayes 1985: 14–16, Pl. I:7–12), can be dated between the 1st century BCE and the first half of the 1st century CE. One of the sherds in the sigillata group could possibly be identified as a western product from Italy or Gaul, based on its red fabric and thick, good-quality, red slip. The identification is uncertain owing to the poor state of preservation of the sherd.

Lastly, one rim sherd belonging to a bowl or a cup can be assigned to the “Green-glazed ware” group [Fig. 5:D]. Green-glazed pottery, sometimes referred to as “Parthian”, was produced in the Mesopotamian area and was diffused largely in the Gulf and Indian Ocean regions (Schenk 2007), but also in the Arabian Peninsula. It is rather common in Hegra/Madā’in Sālih in northwestern Arabia, but scarce in the northern parts of the Nabataean kingdom, especially Petra. Another sherd belonging to the same group was found during the al-Qasr excavation (al-Ghabban 2017: 11).

These particular types of fine wares are common in Myos Hormos, where significant quantities of Eastern Sigillata have been found (Whitcomb and Johnson 1982: 64–66; Tomber 2012: 203).

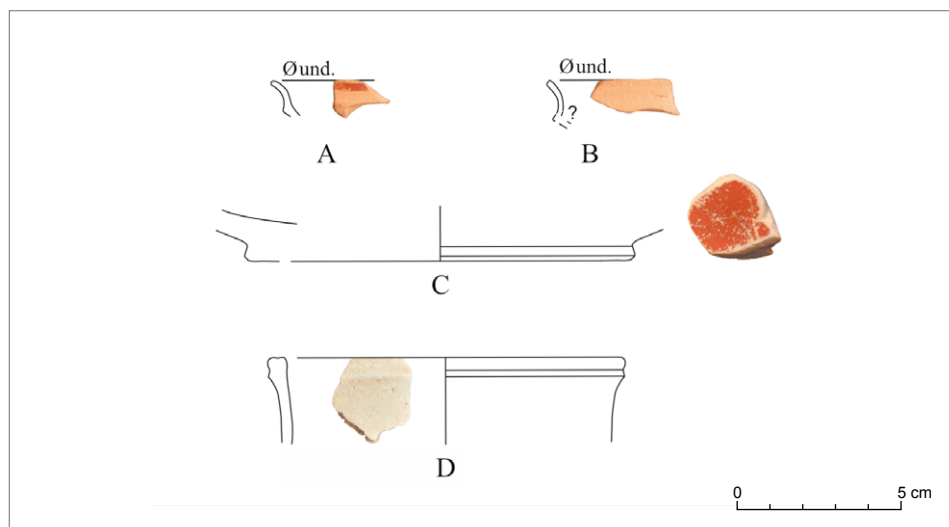


Fig. 5. Imported fine wares (UWSP | photos Z.T. Fiema, drawing and layout C. Durand)

## MEDITERRANEAN AND EGYPTIAN AMPHORAS

A substantial quantity of amphora fragments was also collected from the surface of al-Qusayr. These sherds are of different origin—not all have been securely identified—but for the most part they belong to Mediterranean production groups. First is a group corresponding to Eastern Mediterranean products, coming from the Aegean area, including probably some Koan and Rhodian amphoras [Fig. 7]. The fragments are

characterized by a very fine and dense texture, a pinkish-to-buff fabric with a pale-red-to-whitish surface. Small fragments of similar amphoras were uncovered in Petra and Hegra, mainly in 1st century BCE contexts, but always in much smaller quantities.

Several sherds can be identified as Dressel 6A or Lamboglia 2 amphoras [Fig. 6]. These very similar amphora types were produced in the Adriatic

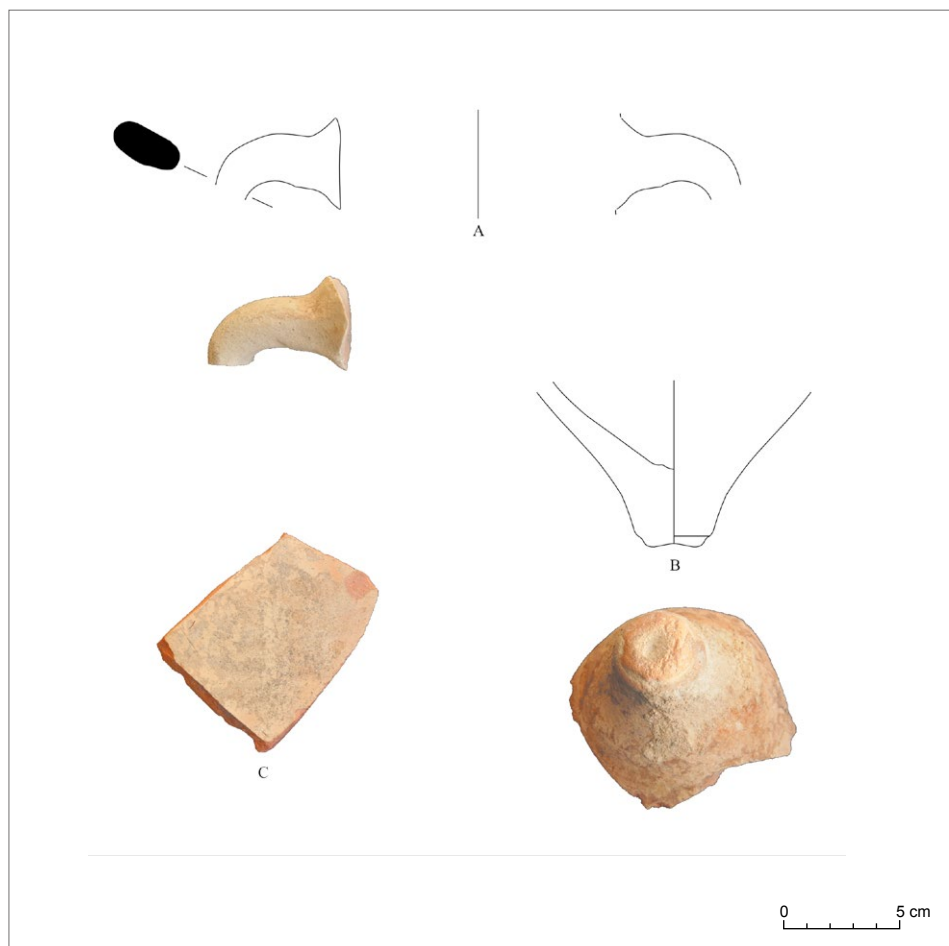


Fig. 6. Aegean amphoras (UWSP | photos Z.T. Fiema, drawing and layout C. Durand)

region and widely diffused between the late 2nd century BCE and the mid-1st century CE (Lamboglia 1955; Peacock and Williams 1986: Class 8; Cipriano and Carre 1989).

The most important production group are the Campanian amphoras [Fig. 8], clearly identified by their typical reddish fabric, full of fine black sand particles (so-called “black sand” fabric), characteristic of the Bay of Naples region (Peacock and Williams 1986: Class 10; Tomber and Dore 1998:

88; Williams and Peacock 2005). In this group, some rim sherds correspond to the Dressel 2–4 type [Fig. 8:A–B], a wine container widely distributed during the Early Roman period throughout the Empire and beyond, especially along the “Erythraean Sea” maritime routes (Tomber 1998; 2008: 43; 2012: 206; for example, in India: Gupta, Williams, and Peacock 2001).

One rim sherd and two handles can be classified as biconical Egyptian amphoras, type AE3 [Fig. 10] (Empereur and Picon

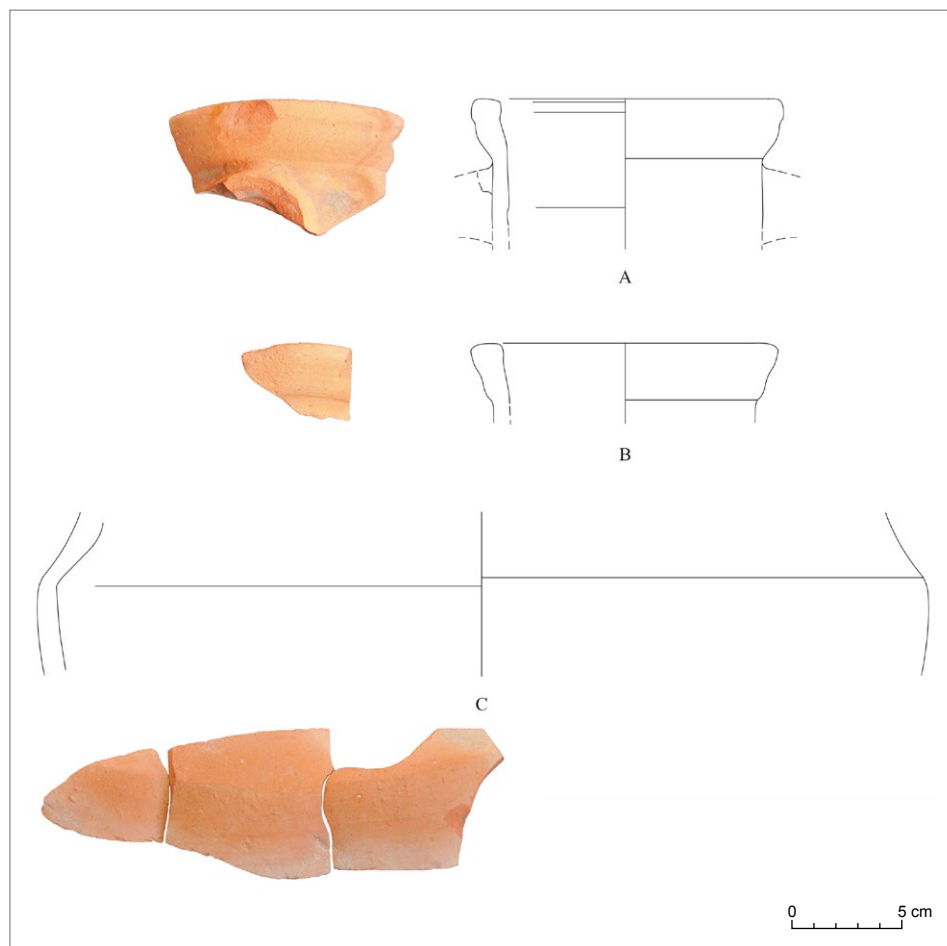


Fig. 7. Adriatic amphoras (UWSP | photos Z.T. Fiema, drawing and layout C. Durand)

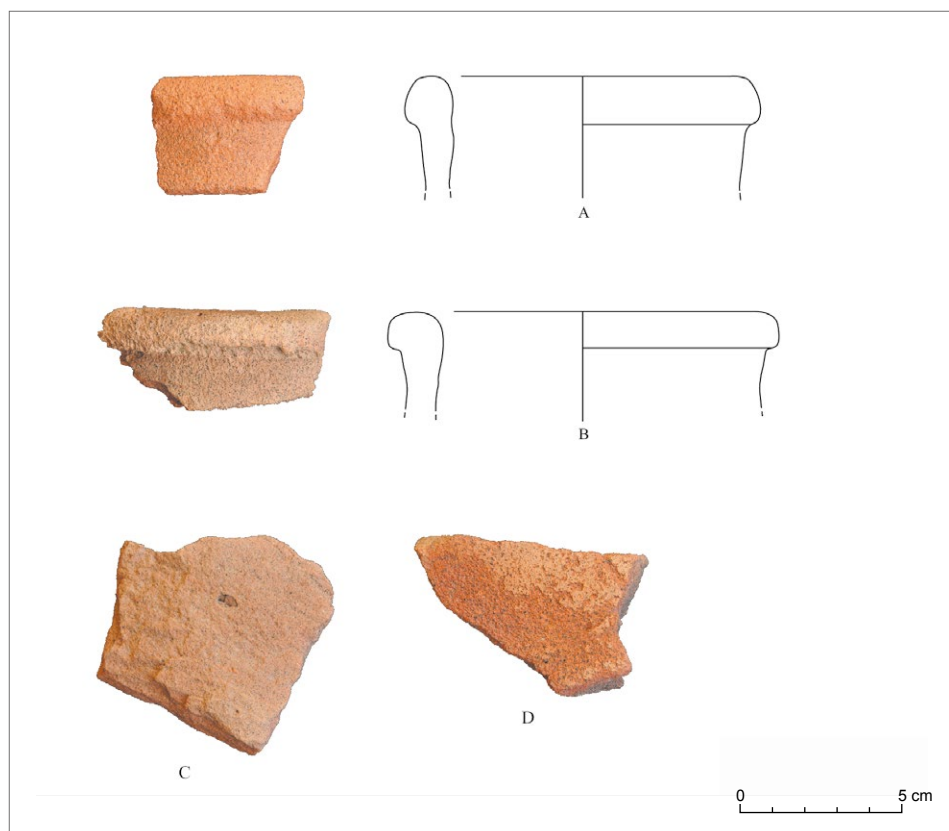


Fig. 8. Campanian amphoras (UWSP | photos Z.T. Fiema, drawing and layout C. Durand)

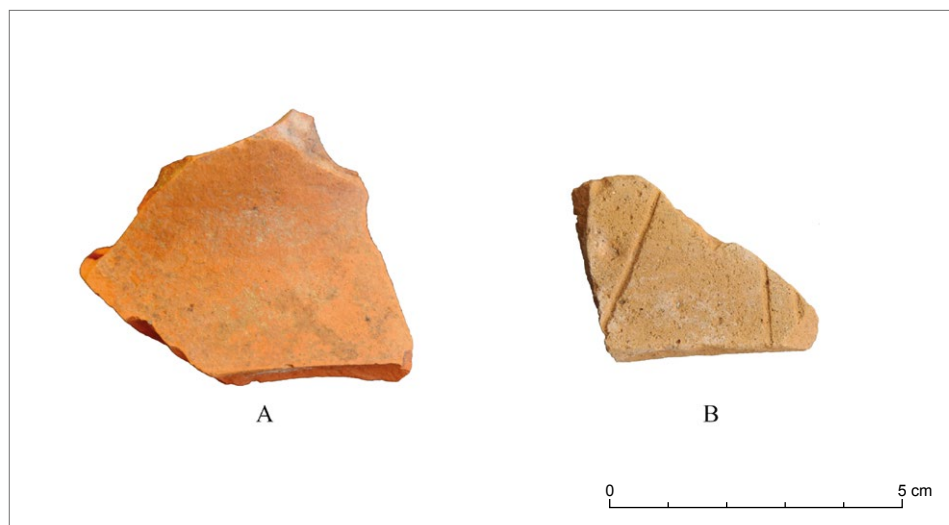


Fig. 9. Inscribed amphoras (UWSP | photos Z.T. Fiema, drawing and layout C. Durand)

1989: 234–235, Fig. 11). These amphoras, produced in the Nile Valley, are characterized by a muddy “chocolate” fabric, an elongated shape and rather thin walls. Interestingly, these last two groups, Dressel 2–4 from Campania and AE3 amphoras, were the two main groups forming the amphora jetty discovered in Myos Hormos, facing Qusayr on the Egyptian Red Sea coast (Tomber 2012: 203; on the

jetty itself, see Blue 2011, not discussing the amphora types).

Lastly, a few amphora sherds show traces of inscriptions, painted (*titulus pictus*) [Fig. 9:A] or incised [Fig. 9:B], unfortunately too fragmentary to be read. Rather common on Roman amphoras, these inscriptions could have indicated the content, origin or destination of the vessels.

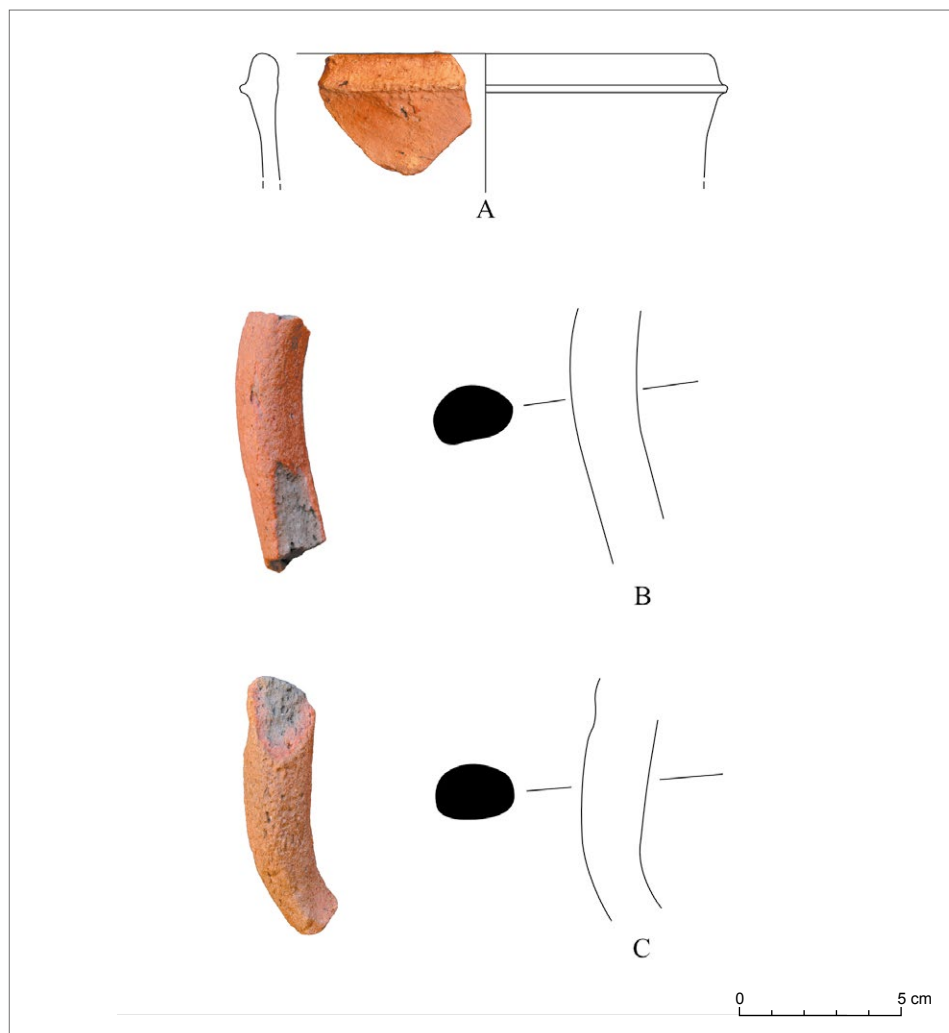


Fig. 10. Egyptian amphoras (UWSP | photos Z.T. Fiema, drawing and layout C. Durand)

## CONCLUSIONS

Analysis of this pottery collection leads to important conclusions regarding the nature and history of the site. First, from a chronological point of view, the pottery collected on the surface at al-Qusayr tends to suggest a rather limited timespan for the occupation: all the datable sherds range between the mid-1st century BCE and the mid-1st century CE. This period can thus be assumed to be the main occupation phase at the site, although this time range should be verified by proper excavations. The large quantities of both common and fine Nabataean pottery, probably imported from Petra, confirms the Nabataean presence in al-Qusayr, already suggested by the characteristic architectural elements from the al-Qasr monumental building. This could reflect settlement by a Nabataean population group, possibly from Petra originally, maintaining regular links with the kingdom's capital.

More importantly, based on the pottery evidence, the site of al-Qusayr appears to be a coastal Nabataean settlement with strong maritime trade connections. The pottery finds suggest regular contacts with the other side of the Red Sea, most probably through the Egyptian-Roman harbor of Myos Hormos (Quseir al-Qadim) located on almost the same latitude. Excavations

at this Ptolemaic harbor have demonstrated the main phase of occupation to be between the late 1st century BCE and the 3rd century CE, with a peak in trade activity during the 1st century CE (Whitcomb and Johnson 1979; 1982; Peacock and Blue 2006; 2011). Nabataean painted fine ware is known from Myos Hormos (Whitcomb and Johnson 1982: Pl. 21:d), although in very limited quantity, and there are several Nabataean inscriptions found in the Eastern Desert of Egypt, especially along the road between Coptos and Myos Hormos (Durand 2012). The large share of typical Roman amphoras (Campanian, Adriatic and Egyptian) as well as Mediterranean fine ware (Western and Eastern Sigillata) in the collection from al-Qusayr supplies the first strong archaeological evidence of direct contacts between Nabataeans settled on the Eastern/Arabic Red Sea coast and the Egyptian harbors of the opposite shore, most probably in the context of trading activities. Ultimately, these discoveries raise the issue of the ancient identification of al-Qusayr—potentially Leuke Kome or Egra Kome—which will not be solved without further archaeological exploration of the site (see the discussion and bibliography in Fiema 2020, in this volume; Fiema et al. 2020).

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