

# THE CHALCOLITHIC CULTURE OF THE GOLAN

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*The Chalcolithic period in Palestine—although still obscure—is characterized by scattered and sparsely populated settlements, but discoveries in recent years have added to our knowledge of this period. These groups now are known to have shared a common material culture, an agricultural economy, building plans, and cultic pillars.*

During recent years several Chalcolithic sites have been discovered which confirm the evidence for the diffusion of this culture in different parts of the area, including Sinai and the Negev, central Palestine and the north. Nevertheless, the overall pattern—still far from complete—remains one of scattered, sparsely populated settlement. It is generally considered that the Ghassulians, as they are sometimes called (after the first important site excavated in the 1930's at Teleilat Ghassul, northeast of the Dead Sea), arrived in the area during the course of the 4th millennium B.C. with a fully developed way of life. They can be divided into distinctive regional groups, perhaps indicating a tribal organization. Each group, however, apparently came from a single homeland. This is indicated by the shared elements in their material culture, basic economy, building techniques, and cult practices.

## **The Rectangular-Building Plan**

In 1973 a previously unknown Chalcolithic group came to light in the Golan, and the excavation has added considerably to our knowledge of this culture. At a number of sites in the central Golan, rectangular structures were found (average size: 15 x 15 m.) built on the natural basalt rock which characterizes the region. The walls, in dry-stone technique, are preserved to a height of some 1.5 m., and the floors are roughly paved.

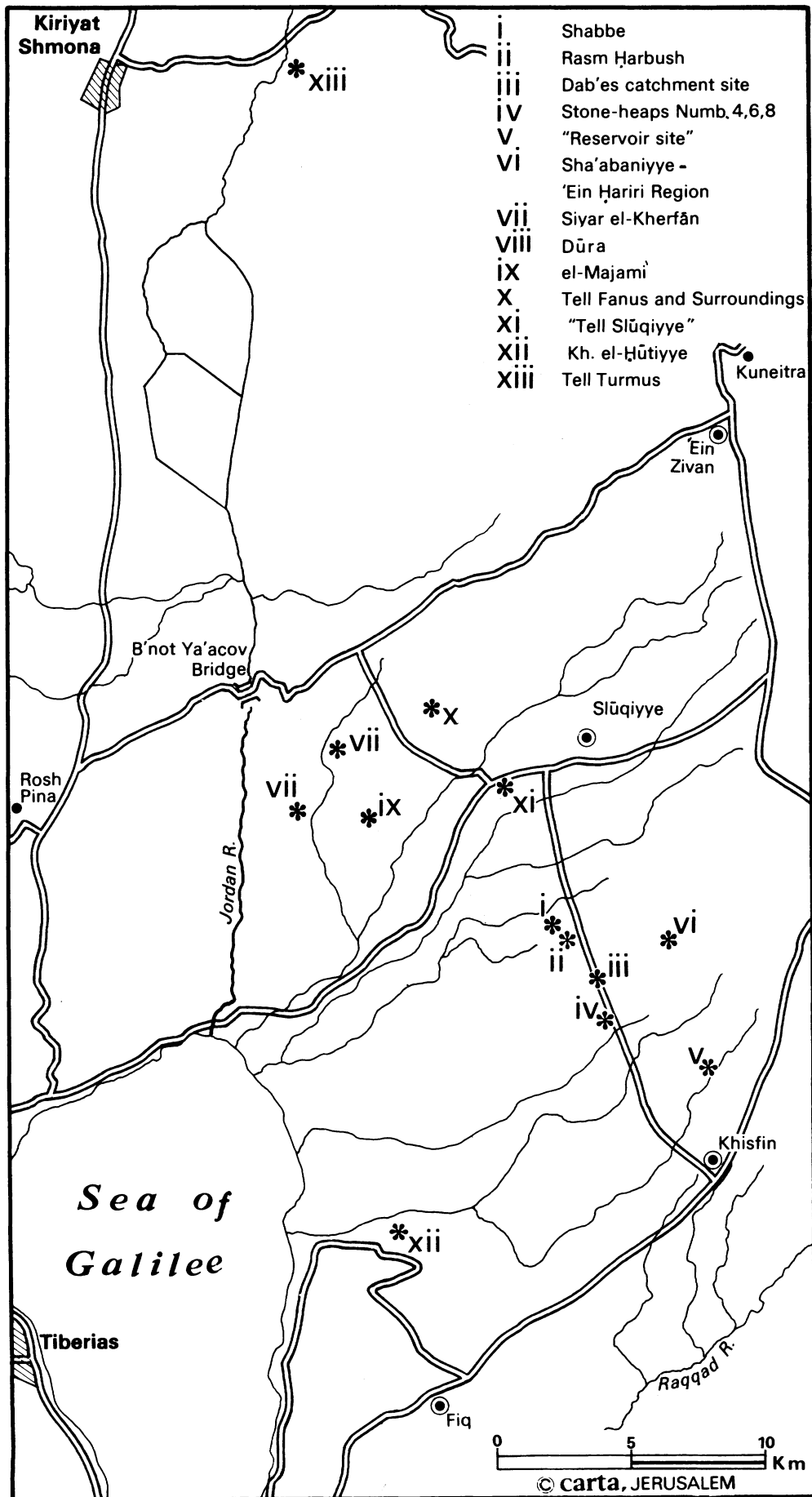
Oriented east to west, with the entrance in the south long wall, most of the structure is taken up by the courtyard, while in the west there is usually a small broad-room. The buildings were used for agricultural work and, above all, for the storing of crops and harvests; this can be inferred from their position in relation to the cultivated tracts and from the assemblages which contained many storage vessels, sickle blades (often shiny from use), various kinds of digging tools, agricultural implements, and grinding stones. The internal arrangements differ from structure to structure; they include shelves along the walls, low

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partitions, stone "worktables," an oval installation of standing stones, and a cup-mark in the floor. By and large, however, all conform to the same plan, and it is likely that the small broad-room in the west, a recurrent feature, served as sleeping quarters. In one such room there is a broad stone shelf which may have been used for a bed, while a half meter above the floor a number of



flattish stones project from the inner face of two of the walls, these being no doubt supports for wooden struts placed at an angle against the opposite wall used as a framework for a lean-to roof. On the other hand, in the courtyards there are no signs of roof supports of any kind, and it can be assumed that they were open, the solid walls (65 cm. to 1 m. thick) being considered adequate protection for the stored crops. In view of the heavy winter rains in the Golan and the general orientation of the courtyards in the direction of the natural water flow, it is possible that the buildings were only in use during the agricultural season in the spring and summer months.

In plan, the structures described above are similar to many of the houses at Teleilat Ghassul where, owing to different local conditions, the walls were constructed differently: here, the foundation courses were of stone and the superstructure of mud brick covered with plaster (often painted with cultic frescoes). The basic house-plan, however, is the same and consists of a small broad-room at one end and an adjoining rectangular courtyard, with an irregularly shaped yard attached (probably used for auxiliary agricultural purposes, for animals, etc.). Buildings of similar plan are known from other contemporary sites, among them a house at Meser and the sacred enclosure at En-gedi.

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*The rectangular structures are similar in plan to the houses at Teleilat Ghassul.*

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Thus it would appear that in the Chalcolithic period building according to a rectangular plan was customary, whether in the pre-village community of Ghassul or in the farmsteads of the Golan. Another common feature is connected with agriculture: among the botanical remains found at Ghassul were olive stones



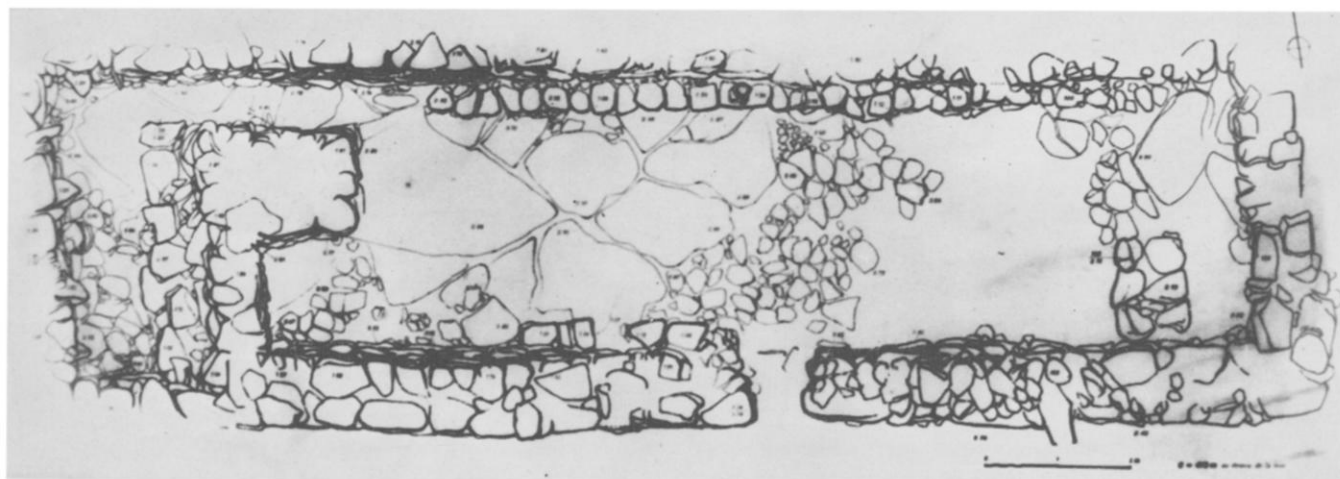
Courtyard with broken house-god figure as found (center right) set up opposite entrance in south wall (left—prior to clearance).

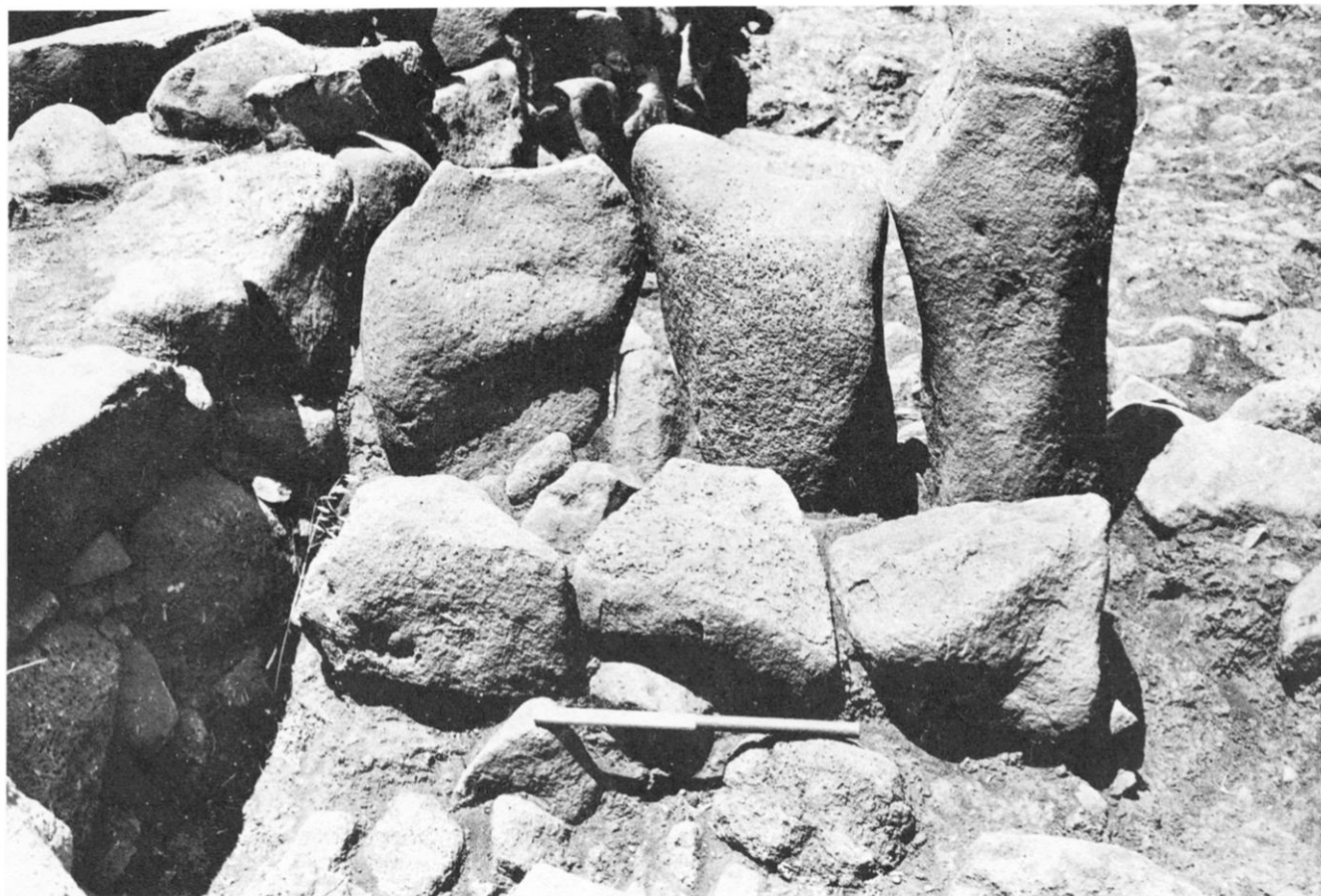
which were preserved owing to the exceptionally dry climate prevailing there, and in the Golan burned wood fragments have been analyzed as cultivated olives (three specimens found in 1974 were analyzed as *Olea europaea* and carbonized seeds as *Pisum sp.*), providing evidence for the beginnings of a developed agriculture in both regions. On the other hand, at Ghassul grain pits were dug in the courtyards, whereas in the basalt areas of the Golan the digging of silos was an almost impossible task. This accounts for the comparatively large number of pithoi and large storage jars.

### Pillar Figures

In addition to the ceramic and lithic material, a unique type of house-god statue was found in the courtyards, known only from the Golan. Schematic in style, these figures, made of the local basalt, are in the form of small pillar. It is likely that their circularity had a

Plan of rectangular building.





Domestic altar in corner of courtyard.

Basalt house-god figures.





Basalt house-god figures.

cultic significance, being considered an attribute of the godhead, and as such, symbolizing fertility. Pillar figures placed in the courtyards have been found at several sites; others have been found on the surface in different parts of the Golan, possibly from secondary usage. Of the dozen or so pillar figures known to date, some have animal characteristics, but most are human in form. The upper part of the pillar is treated as the "head" which terminates in a shallow offering bowl. Below it, on one side, different features are represented, such as eyes, ears, nose, beard,

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*A unique type of house-god statue was found in the courtyard.*

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hair, or horns. Many of the figures are sculpted with a large and protuberant nose which is the dominant or, alternatively, the sole facial feature. In the Chalcolithic period a nose was frequently added in nonfacial contexts to various kinds of cultic artifacts. It occurs on ossuary pediments from the coastal region and on metal objects

found in the "Cave of the Treasure" in the Judean Desert; a prominent nose is likewise characteristic of clay and ivory figurines from the Negev and appears on monster-like representations painted on the walls of the Ghassul houses. The emphasis placed on the nose points to the great importance attached to it, and it may well be that in contemporary terms it was regarded as the seat of the breath of life and hence a symbol of the life-giving force, believed to be endowed with apotropaic qualities.

It would appear that pillar figures representing the appropriate tutelary godhead were customarily set up in the farmsteads and shepherds' huts in the belief that by virtue of suitable offerings (or libations) placed in the

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*The prominent nose characterizing the cultic artifacts of this period was regarded as the seat of the breath of life.*

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bowl at the top, their protection would be ensured. By this means it was hoped to guarantee successful crops and harvests on the one hand and the fertility of the flocks on the other. For, as elsewhere in the Chalcolithic period, agriculture and pastoralism were the two main branches of the economy.

### Pottery and Artifacts

At all the Golan sites where soundings and surveys have revealed Chalcolithic material, the ceramic and lithic assemblages are similar in range. They include types known from other parts of the country, but many are new to the repertoire. The vessels are handmade, with some use of the tournette on rims and necks; the fabric is made from the local red volcanic clays and contains a high percentage of grits, including many basalt particles. In contrast to other localities, coil-building is not found, neither are there mat impressions on the bases. The pottery includes a wide range of large storage vessels and medium-sized pots, among them pithoi, jars, jugs, spouted and hole-mouth vessels, and bowls of all shapes and sizes; there is also a squat juglet and part of a miniature pithos. Cornets and churns, however, which are common at more southern sites, are completely absent.

Most of the pottery is ornamented with impressed rope-pattern bands or punctured and incised decoration used horizontally—as is common on contemporary wares; but there are, in addition, many variations, including groups of oblique bands, circles and ovals, looped garlands, and filled oblong panels. Among the basalt vessels there are mortars, basins, and grinding stones of different shapes, flowerpot-shaped and rounded

bowls, as well as large unworked stones with a smoothed hole in the center. Among various kinds of agricultural instruments—likewise of basalt—whose precise use is not always clear, there are hafted hoes similar to those found

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*Among the flint remains, a unique multiple-pointed, star-shaped tool was recovered.*

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at other Chalcolithic sites. The flint tools include forms which are typical of the period, such as adzes, borers, sickle blades, and fan-scrapers. There are also perforated circular scrapers, known especially from northern sites, including the Hauran, and a unique multiple-pointed, star-shaped tool, also perforated and made of tabular flint. Multiple-pointed tools have been found at other contemporary sites, but their exact function is uncertain. It has been suggested that they were used in connection with the preparation of wool. If so, they confirm the evidence for sheep and goat husbandry which is adduced from the sheep and goat bone fragments (mostly teeth) found on the courtyard floors and probably the remains of meals, from the presence of spindle whorls, often made of cast-off sherds, and, above all, from the horned house-god pillar figure .

In different parts of the Golan the landscape is dotted with irregularly spaced, small stone heaps. Frequently elongated in shape, they are found in close proximity to one another and are almost certainly to be interpreted as the remains of field walls. Built of stones cleared from the demarcated tracts, their purpose was to diminish soil erosion and conserve surface runoff. In many such areas Chalcolithic material has been found, and it seems logical to suggest that the field walls were in fact built by those who made and used the pottery vessels and stone tools, the remains of which lie scattered in the vicinity. In this connection the Chalcolithic site of Majami<sup>2</sup> is revealing indeed: here, several rectangular structures were excavated and the outlines of others

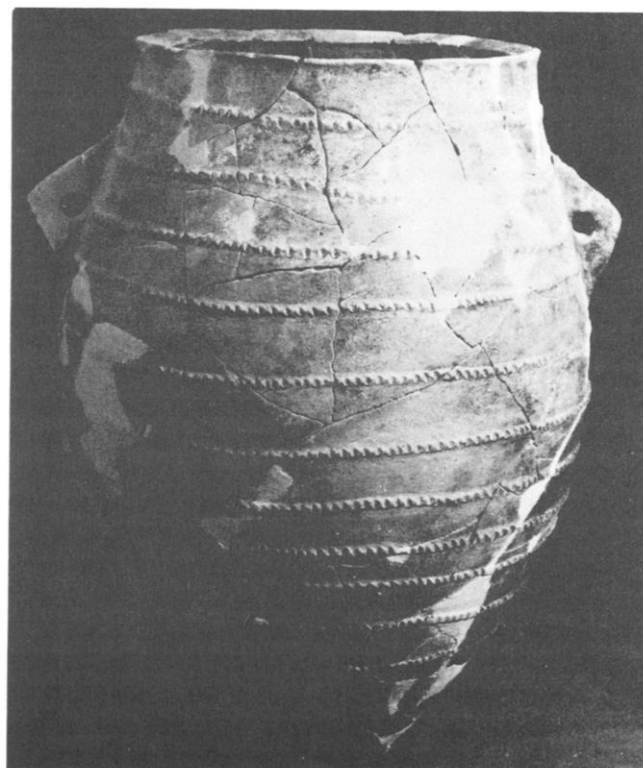
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*There was an attempt at primitive irrigation based on the exploitation of local water resources.*

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distinguished on the surface. Situated at some distance from one another, the farmsteads were erected close to the cultivated fields, in direct relationship to the stone heaps nearby. These were aligned parallel to and across the path of water seepage from the gullies and marsh areas which

Pithoi and large spouted vessel decorated with impressed rope-pattern bands.





abound here, in an attempt at primitive irrigation based on the exploitation of local water resources; it is likely that the crops were sown in the saturated ground.

### Conclusions

Notwithstanding the wealth of artifacts found at all the excavated sites, only a few vessels proved to be reconstructible, while much of the sherd material is weathered and worn. When found, such material was clearly not in its original position and frequently sherds from the same pot were scattered at different levels above the floor. Since there are no signs of destruction at any of the sites, it is likely that the settlements were abandoned, the inhabitants taking with them all movable possessions, including tools and household vessels, and the accumulated discarded wares were washed down annually with the winter rains. Alternatively if, as has been suggested, the buildings were only used seasonally, then at some stage the inhabitants failed to return, and in due course the courtyards became filled with debris. The reason for such an abandonment may have been a change of climate—perhaps a prolonged dry spell—which made it imperative to look elsewhere for the basic environmental conditions essential for existence.

So long as suitable conditions prevailed, however, the bearers of Chalcolithic culture were diffused over the central Golan plateau. This can be inferred from the

Multiple-pointed flint tool.



Pithoi and large spouted vessel decorated with impressed rope-pattern bands.

increasing number of sites recognized, indicating a wide distribution pattern which may eventually be found to extend well beyond the confines of the Golan proper. An illustration of this is Tell Turmus, situated in the north of the Huleh basin, at the foot of the Golan scarp, where the ceramic and lithic material from the upper stratum bears a striking resemblance to that of the Golan, including basalt house-god figures; it is likewise exemplified by the stone and flint material found on the surface near Dera<sup>2</sup>a in the Hauran.

There are good grounds for suggesting that remains of the Chalcolithic culture of the Golan will come to light in regions lying farther east, as well as in northern Gilead. In the Golan itself there is every likelihood that additional sites will be identified, not only in the predominantly basalt areas but also in the south, where the presence of softer rock, such as limestone and conglomerate, made possible a certain degree of diversification in the accepted pattern of daily life.

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