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CHALCOLITHIC POTTERY FROM A CAVE IN WESTERN GALILEE

Rafael Frankel and Ram Gophna

Since the first discoveries at Teleilat Ghassul almost fifty years ago, a detailed picture of the rich and varied culture of the Chalcolithic period in Palestine has gradually been emerging. Until recently, however, our knowledge of this culture was limited almost entirely to sites in the south and centre of the country: the lower Jordan Valley (Teleilat Ghassul), the northern Negev (Beer-sheba), the Judean Desert and the coastal plain (Perrot 1968; de Vaux 1970; Elliot 1978).

It is only during the last two decades that discoveries in northern Israel have shown that the Ghassulian and Beer-sheba assemblages represent only variants of a widespread culture that flourished during this period throughout most of the Levant. The assemblages from Delhamiya in the central Jordan Valley (Stekelis 1967; Amiran 1977) and Neveh Ur (Perrot, Zori and Reich 1967), for example, are clearly related to those of Teleilat Ghassul and Beer-sheba. The variant first reported at Tell Turmus in the upper Jordan Valley (Dayan 1969) and subsequently investigated at several sites on the Golan Heights (Epstein 1978) likewise has much in common with Teleilat Ghassul and Beer-sheba, albeit characterized by many unique features. Pottery typical of these Golan sites has recently been found further west in the Dishon Valley of Eastern Upper Galilee¹ (Fig. 1).

One region in which comparatively little of this period has been discovered so far is Western Upper Galilee. Although, some finds have been reported from Ḥorvat 'Uṣa (Ben-Tor 1966) and Bet Ha-'Emeq (Frankel and Kempinski 1973), the culture of these sites has not yet been defined nor correlated to that of the neighbouring areas.

In the winter of 1979 a survey team working in the Western Upper Galilee came across some Chalcolithic sherds that may help to clarify this relationship.² These sherds were found in a pile of earth that had been thrown aside by workers from Abu-Sinan digging a pit at the northern outskirts of their village (map coordinates 1664/2631) (Fig. 1). The earth, presumably the fill of a cave, was reached after hacking through a metre of rock. The entrance to the cave was not uncovered nor was there any possibility of excavating the cave itself, but the survey team did manage to collect a number of sherds from the dump. On examination, they proved to be quite similar to some that came from the lowest stratum of Bet Ha-'Emeq, about one km. west of Abu-Sinan.

1 We thank G. Bruder for calling this site to our attention.

2 The survey of Western Galilee is conducted under the auspices of the Society for Archaeological Survey of Israel, sponsored locally by the district councils of Ga'aton and Sulam Tzur and the kibbutz movements. Directed by Rafael Frankel, the team includes Nimrod Gitzov, Shmuel Baer, Shlomo Grotkirk and Ezra Segali.

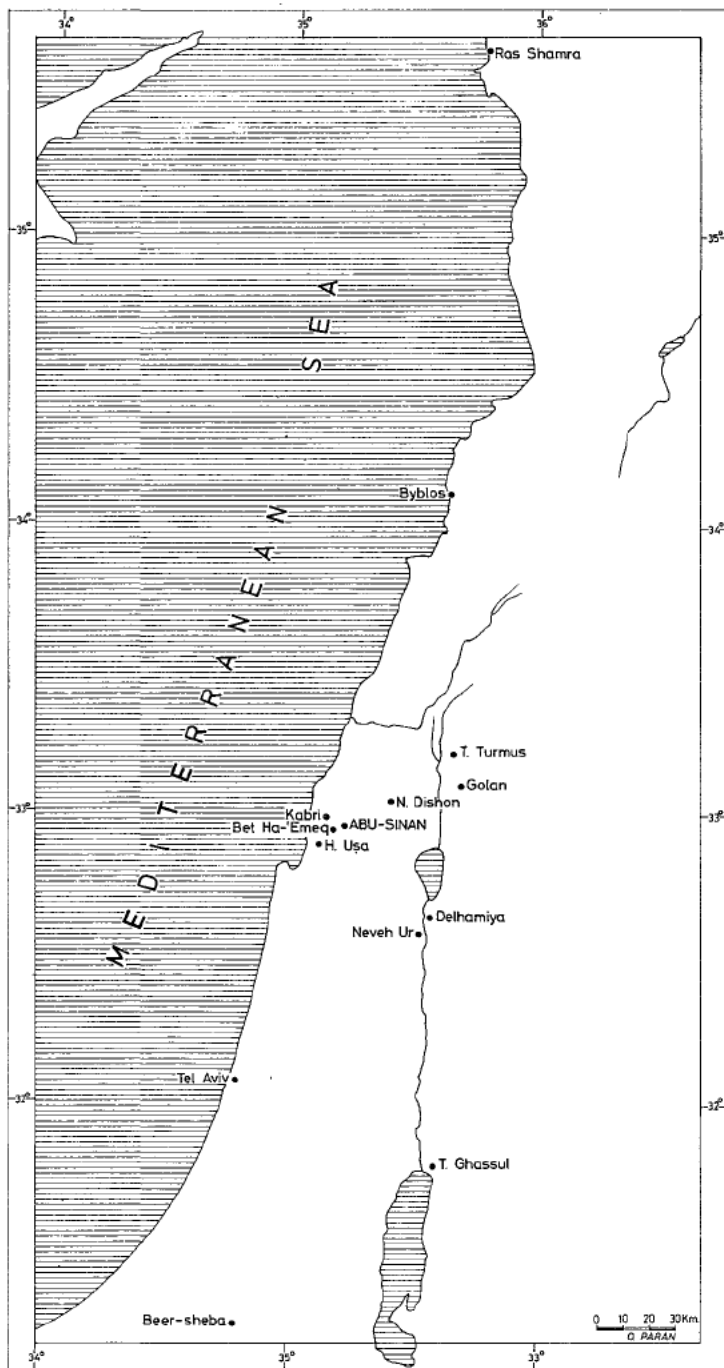


Fig. 1. Main Chalcolithic sites in the Levant.

The sherds from Abu-Sinan fall mainly into two categories, unpainted (Pl. 22) and painted (Pl. 23), although there was one sherd (Pl. 23:12), differing in both ware and decoration, that is typical of the Chalcolithic pottery of the Golan Heights (Epstein 1978:Figs. 9–12).

The unpainted pottery, made of a clay containing numerous white grits, includes tapered rims (Pl. 22:2), flat bases (Pl. 22:7), lug handles (Pl. 22:6), plastic rope decoration (Pl. 22:3, 4) and triangular-sectioned handles (Pl. 22:8, 9), all of which are common at Teleilat Ghassul and Beer-sheba. On the other hand, the smeary brown-and-grey wash and the string imprints (Pl. 22:1, 5) that characterize the Abu-Sinan variant are not seen in the southern assemblages.

The sherds of the second category have red (or brown) painted decoration on either a white or cream-coloured slip.

Any suspicion that the painted and unpainted wares do not belong to the same assemblage was dispelled by the presence of a sherd that had smeary brown wash on the outside and cream wash and red decoration on the inside; apparently both wares were produced locally.

Decorative patterns similar to those used on the painted ware are known throughout Mesopotamia and the Levant and are indicative of Ubaid influence (Mallowan 1970). The exact date when this influence first appeared, the manner in which it spread and the extent to which it left its mark, however, varies from region to region.

Although at Teleilat Ghassul there are some vessels decorated with Ubaid-like motifs (Hennessey 1969:Figs. 5:5; 6:1, 6), this type of decoration has not been found at any of the other Chalcolithic sites in Israel. In view of the strong Ubaid influence on the painted ware of Abu-Sinan in the Upper Galilee, we felt we should look to the north for parallels. And, indeed, we found that the straight-and wavy line pattern (Pl. 23:10) and the hanging loop design (Pl. 23:3) of Abu-Sinan appear in one of the sub-strata at Ras Shamra³ together with examples of the string imprint that is present on many of the unpainted sherds of Abu-Sinan (Pl. 22:1, 5).

Although the Abu-Sinan assemblage does have some features that link it with both the Ghassulian–Beer-sheba and Golan Heights cultures, it should be regarded primarily as a southern off-shoot of the Chalcolithic culture of the northern Syrian coast – in spite of the great distance that separated Abu-Sinan from the major site of this culture, Ras Shamra.

3 The closest parallels to the Abu-Sinan ware came from Stratum E (3.8–4.0 meters) in the sondage made west of the Temple of Baal in 1953 (Courtois 1962a:380:Fig. 41; 367: Fig. 33; sherds I and K appear on both figures). Other sondages at Ras Shamra that reached strata corresponding to those reached in 1953 are: 1954–1955 (Kuschke 1962), 1955–1960 (Contenson 1962), 1959 (Courtois 1962b) and 1962–1968 (Contenson 1970). For the correlation between the results of these excavations, their significance, absolute date and the stratigraphical terminology used in the publications, see Schaeffer 1962, North 1973 and Courtois 1974. For the correlation between the Chalcolithic period of Palestine and Syria, see Wright 1951, Kaplan 1960 and Contenson 1963; 1964.

It should not be overlooked, however, that the excavations of the contemporaneous Chalcolithic stratum at Byblos revealed a ceramic culture of quite different nature – even though a pottery churn of the type common in the Ghassulian culture was discovered there (*Byblos V*:Pl. CLI:No. 32258).

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