

Israel Exploration Journal

VOLUME 34

NUMBER 4

1984

A Pottery Neolithic Site near Tel Qatîf

CLAIRE EPSTEIN

Department of Antiquities and Museums

AT the end of 1973 a small trial excavation was carried out in the coastal strip south of Gaza, between Deir el-Balaḥ and Khan Yunis, some 300 m. north of Tel Qatîf (map ref. 0842 0900), where Neolithic sherds and flints had been found on the surface.¹ The sounding was made in a vineyard immediately east of a new coastal road which cut through the dunes sloping down gradually towards the east. The excavation covered only a limited area, but surface observations indicate that the site extends westwards to the present shoreline and that it has suffered from erosion from the sea. The Neolithic remains lay close to the surface, which had been severely disturbed over the centuries. Despite this, and notwithstanding the very restricted nature of the probe, the results have been considered sufficiently interesting to warrant their publication; it is hoped that they will contribute towards a fuller understanding of the period, of which far too little is known.

THE EXCAVATIONS

Two 5 × 5 m. squares some 15 m. from one another, both in the cultivated vineyard area, were arbitrarily chosen for excavation. However, it soon became clear that it

¹ The excavation was one of several soundings made along the line of the new coastal road. The expedition was headed by A. Biran, then Director of the Department of Antiquities and Museums; see Tell er-Ruqeish to Tell er-Ridan (Notes and News), *IEJ* 24 (1974), p. 142. The excavation was directed by the writer assisted by J. Zias of the Department of Antiquities and Museums. Patricia Smith, of the Hebrew University — Hadassah School of Dental Medicine, assisted in the cleaning of the infant burial and determined the age of the skeleton. Subsequent excavations were carried out at the site on behalf of the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer-Sheva; *Hadashot Arkheologiyot* 74–75 (1980), pp. 52–53 (Hebrew).

would not be possible to examine more than one square adequately; work was therefore concentrated in the more northerly of the two, Area A (Fig. 1; Pl. 25:A). This area was subsequently extended southwards and westwards as far as the road. On its eastern edge a trial trench (5 × 1.5 m.) was dug to a depth of 1 m., though virgin soil was not reached. At different levels throughout the area were found hearths made of hand-moulded lumps of pinkish-red clay which contrasted with the light, sandy-coloured soil. Embedded in them were pieces of *kurkar*, beachrock, broken querns and sherds (Pl. 25:B); in one instance thickware sherds from a large vessel had been used as hearth material. The hearths did not appear to have a predominant shape; all showed signs of burning and the debris round them contained ashes, pieces of coarse pottery, the remains of fragmentary animal bones, flint tools and debitage. Incorporated in one of the hearths was a rounded, elongated piece of brick-like material; it is possible that originally other hearths were made of similarly shaped pieces and that the heat of the fire had reduced them to coagulated lumps. The hearths were relatively short-lived and once they had crumbled — often with the pots placed upon them — new ones were built close by to replace them. Adjoining one of the hearths was a paved area made of fragments of broken beachrock querns which may have been a workplace; a flint knife found close by supports this suggestion (Pl. 25:C). The remains of hearth material were found all over the area investigated, including the trial trench at the edge of the excavation, where they occurred at different levels at intervals of some 20 cm., together with sherds, flints, fragments of animal bones and pieces of broken querns.

Interspersed between the hearths were yellowish living surfaces of hard-packed sand mixed with beachrock particles, remains of which could also be seen in section in the trial trench. In the southernmost of the two squares (Area B, which was only summarily examined), part of a large rectangular living space was uncovered. In the main area of excavation (Area A), two circular living spaces were found (diameters 35 and 90 cm.). Examination of the larger of the two showed that it was made up of superimposed layers containing intermittent sherds to a depth of some 30 cm.; below them were signs of burning and a hearth (probably associated with a lower living surface). No building remains were found associated with the living surfaces. Post holes were found in different parts of the excavated area, two of them (diameter 10 cm.) set in what appears to have been another living surface (Pl. 26:A), which had a number of hearths around its perimeter. The indications are that these hard-packed surfaces served as floors for tents or shelters.

Slightly south of the large circular living surface, and possibly connected with it, a jar burial was found some 5 cm. below the present ground level (Pl. 26:B); it contained the skeleton of an infant aged about one month. A broken storage-jar had been used to contain the tiny body, which lay on its side with knees flexed, covered by overlapping sherds from the same vessel (Pl. 26:C). There were no funerary gifts either in or near the jar, nor was there any evidence to suggest that it had been buried below one of the living surfaces. However in view of the disturbances at the site, such a possibility cannot be ruled out; it is possible that the surface as found does not represent the uppermost level

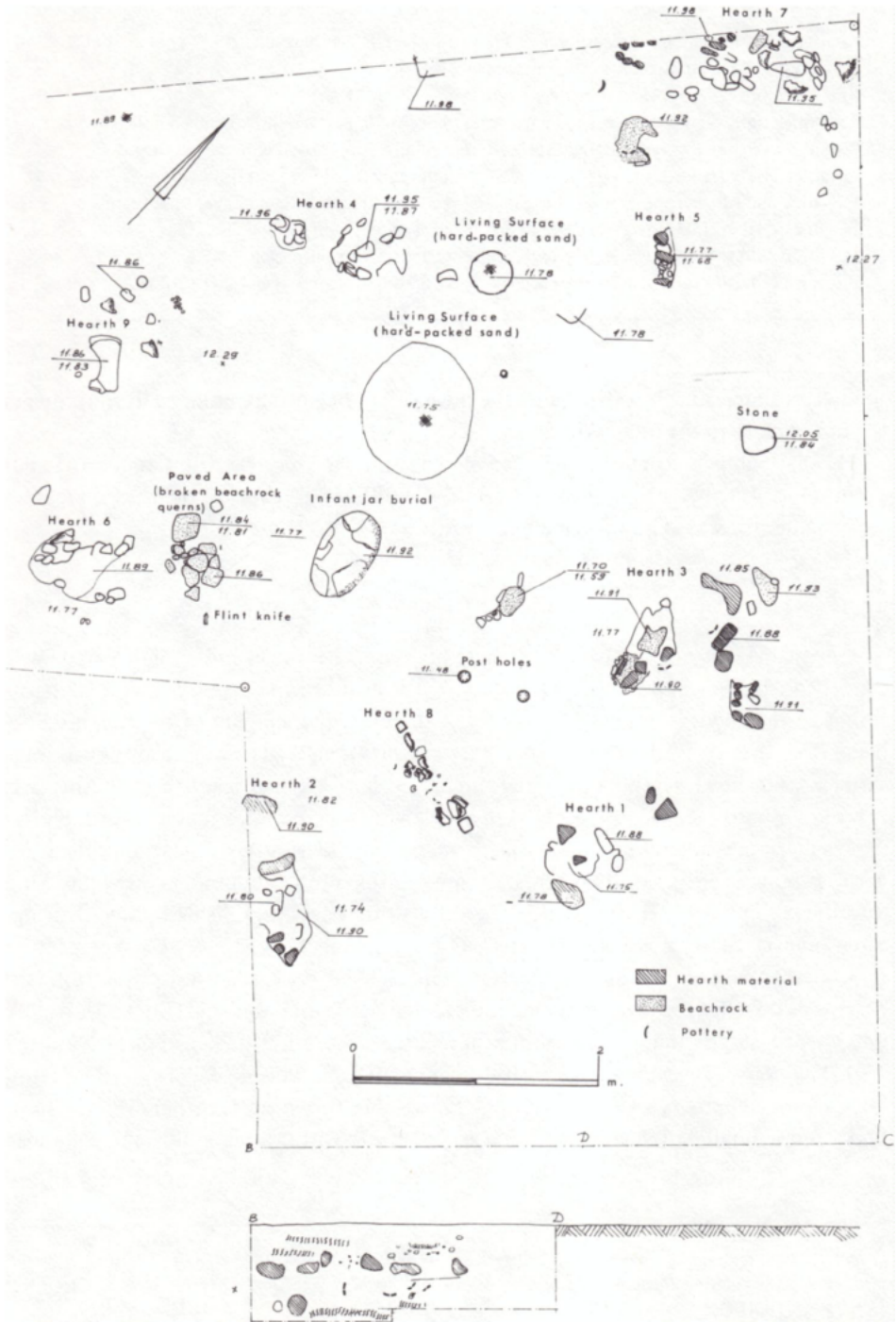


Fig. 1. Plan and section of excavated area.

Fig. 2.

1. Rim, coarse reddish-brown ware; rough uneven surface inside and out; occasional air bubbles; straw negatives; oblique striated finger impressions below rim.
2. Rim, thick brown ware; sand particles.
3. Rim, thick buff well-fired ware; sand particles; red decoration on rim and oblique bands on body.
4. Rim, thick dark red ware; smoothed surface; applied finger-impressed band below rim.
5. Jar, thick coarse reddish-orange ware; grey core, unevenly fired; hard but brittle fabric.
6. Jar, thick pinkish-red, poorly fired ware; black-grey core; oblique striated finger impressions below rim.
7. Jar, thick coarse pinkish-red ware; grey core, unevenly fired; many straw negatives.
8. Jar, thick reddish-brown ware; grey core, unevenly fired; straw negatives.
9. Jar, thick reddish-brown ware; grey core, unevenly fired; grass-smoothed outer surface.

of ancient times. On the other hand, the position of the jar may point to the interment of the infant close to the family dwelling place.²

The assemblage from the area examined contained pottery, flint tools, two bone points (Fig. 4:6, 11), a small stone bead (Fig. 4:12) and remains of ochre and amber, as well as querns, pestles and fragmentary bowls.

POTTERY

The great majority of the vessels is made of coarse, heavy, crumbly, hand-made ware, crudely fashioned and exhibiting little variety of shape. The potters were still using primitive techniques for the preparation of the clay, the shaping of the pots and their firing (Fig. 2:1; Pl. 27:B). Most of the ware is straw-tempered (many straw negatives are visible), with local seashore material, including hard-packed sand, broken shells and sand grits, used as a *dégraissant*. Many have rough surfaces, sometimes with blobs of clay adhering, while attempts have been made to smooth others by wiping them over with a bunch of grass.³ Finger pressure marks are common, as are clay finish 'turnovers', not only on rims (Fig. 2:2) but also on bases and inside handles. Firing is often uneven and most sherds have a grey or black core. Vessels are generally undecorated and the colour of the ware varies from dark reddish-brown to pinkish-orange-red. Buff ware is exceptional and painted decoration unusual (Fig. 2:3), while on one or two sherds there is horizontal impressed decoration on an applied band (Fig. 2:4). The limited repertoire consists for the most part of two shapes: (1) a wide-mouthed jar, lacking symmetry, with uneven 'scalloped' rim, thrust-through handles low on the body and a small flattened base (Fig. 2:5-9; Pl. 27:A); (2) a jug with sloping shoulder,

² Compare the infant jar burial found below the floor of an early Neolithic house at Jericho; J. Garstang: Jericho — City and Necropolis, *Liverpool Annals of Archaeology and Anthropology* 32 (1935), pp. 167-168, Pl. LIII:C.

³ This method of smoothing pottery was used at Jericho in the Pottery Neolithic A period; Kathleen M. Kenyon: *Archaeology in the Holy Land*⁴, London, 1979, p. 45.

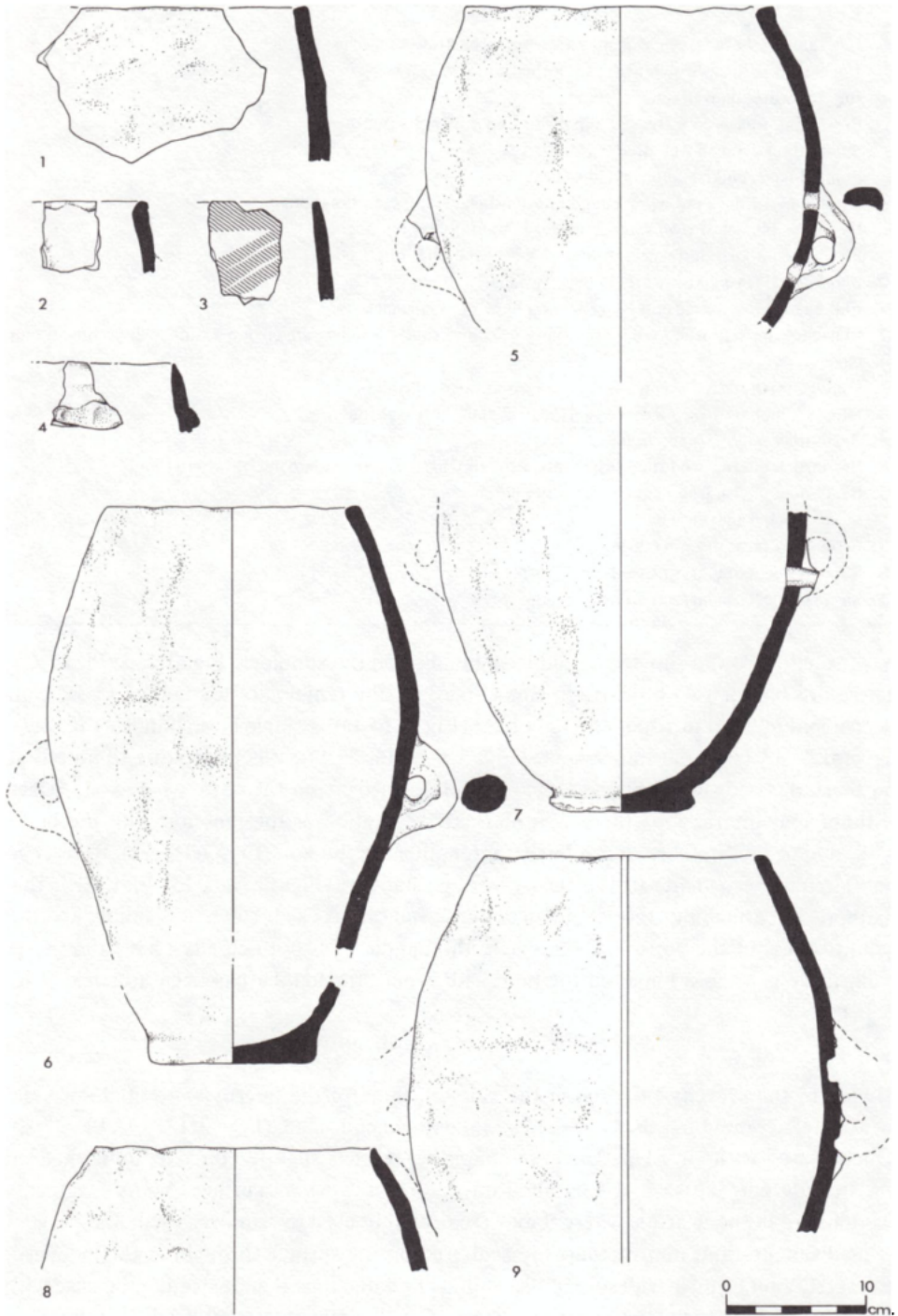


Fig. 2. Pottery.

Fig. 3.

1. Jug, thin red ware; grey core; smoothed surface; straw negatives.
2. Jug, rough reddish-brown ware; smoothed surface.
3. Jug, red ware; uneven outer surface.
4. Bowl, pink well-fired ware; self-slip inside and out; wet-smoothed.
5. Spout, thick reddish well-fired ware.
6. Pointed base, pinkish unlevigated ware.
7. Knob handle, dark red ware; rough uneven surface; finger impressions.
8. Flat base, pinkish-brown ware; grey core; mat impression.
9. Flat base, pinkish-buff ware; smoothed body wall; mat impression.
10. Flat base, thick pinkish ware; uneven surface.
11. Flat base, thick coarse pinkish-red ware; hard sand particles.
12. Flat base, pinkish well-fired ware; many grits and sand particles; finger impressions between wall and base.
13. Handle, thick reddish-brown ware; grey core; thrust through.
14. Handle, thick buff ware; uneven surface; partially thrust through.
15. Beachrock quern, fragmentary.
16. Beachrock quern, two fitting fragments; probably used to consolidate hearth where found.
17. Beachrock quern, fragmentary; red stain patches.
18. Stone bowl, fragmentary.
19. Beachrock bowl, fragmentary.
20. Stone pestle, circular; grooved upper surface.
21. Stone pestle, circular; one side flattened.

out-turned neck and rim and broad loop handles on the shoulder (Fig. 3:1–3; Pl. 27:C). There are one or two bowl fragments (Fig. 3:4), the remains of a spout (Fig. 3:5), an occasional pointed or rounded juglet base (Fig. 3:6) and a single knob handle (Fig. 3:7). Several bases bear mat impressions (Fig. 3:8–9; Pl. 27:D); it is interesting to note that on these the body wall splays outwards and upwards from the base, whereas on bases without mat impressions there is a marked indentation at the junction with the body wall, due to the pressure of the fingers strengthening the join (Fig. 3:10–12). Reference has already been made to the thrust-through handles (Figs. 2:7, 3:13; Pl. 27:F); this method of attaching the rather ungainly handle is a further indication of the primitiveness of the pottery. Even where the handle does not actually pierce the vessel wall, there is often a bulge on the inner side where the handle has been attached (Fig. 3:14).

QUERNS, PESTLES AND BOWLS

Owing to the scarcity of stone in the vicinity, most of the querns were made of local beachrock containing shells, pebbles, sandstone and sand (Fig. 3:15–17; Pl. 27:E). Querns are for the most part oval in shape, sometimes slightly concave, unworked on the outside but flattish and smoothed on the upper working surface. Many fragments were found in the hearths, where they were probably used to reinforce them and prevent their disintegration; many others lay scattered on the surface throughout the vineyard, thus testifying to their widespread use and at the same time demonstrating the ease with which beachrock is liable to split and break. For this reason, no doubt, the pestles were made of stone (Fig. 3:20–21; Pl. 27:G). A small globular stone bowl fragment, with

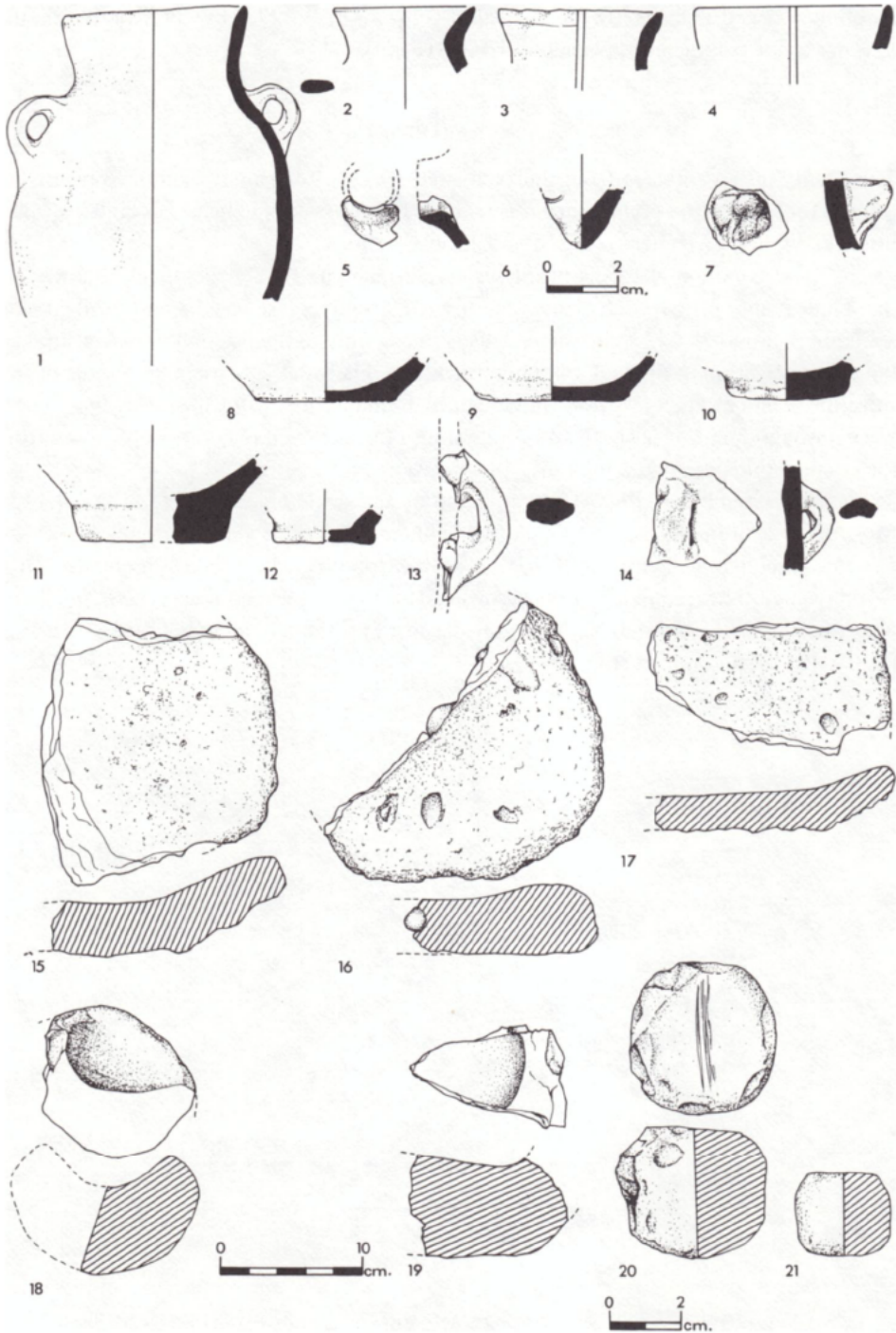


Fig. 3. Pottery, beachrock and stone.

carefully worked but shallow bowl section (Fig. 3:18; Pl. 27:H), was also found, and likewise a tiny fragment of a beachrock bowl (Fig. 3:19).

FLINT ARTEFACTS

The small flint assemblage from the excavated area was originally examined by Esther Mintz-Docter and the preliminary results of her study were published in Hebrew.⁴ The brief description given here is based on her observations.

The most common elements of the waste products are the flakes (40%), followed by the blades and primary elements. Numerous artefacts are crude and broken and sometimes cannot even be classified. This is due mainly to the use of flint of low quality, the effects of fire and the lack of standardization. The small assemblage of tools differs from the waste artefacts since it is made of high-quality light brown or grey flint. These were probably made elsewhere and brought into the site — a phenomenon known from the Chalcolithic period and the Early Bronze Age.

The tool assemblage (Fig. 4) is dominated by the sickle-blades (Table 1; Fig. 4:1–5). Most of these are made on rectangular wide blades with semi-abrupt retouch (in several cases on the ventral face), truncation on both extremities and fine denticulation of the working edge. The frequency of the arrowheads is low; the commonest type is small and pressure-flaked. Also noteworthy are the scrapers on tabular flint (Fig. 4:13, 15), axes (Fig. 4:10, 14) and borers (Fig. 4:8, 9).

Table 1. Tool group frequencies.

	Numbers	%
Scrapers	6	7.59
Burins	3	3.79
Endscraper-burin	1	1.26
Arrowheads	5	6.32
Sickle-blades	23	29.11
Borers	5	6.32
Notches and denticulations	9	11.39
Retouched flakes	6	7.59
Retouched blades	10	12.65
Axes	4	5.06
Varia	7	8.86
Total	79	99.94

⁴ Flint Tools from the Neolithic Site near Tel Qatif, *Mitekufat Ha-Even* 16 (1979), pp. 102–108. The author was unable to contribute this section herself for reasons of ill-health; it was kindly prepared by I. Gilead of the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer-Sheva.

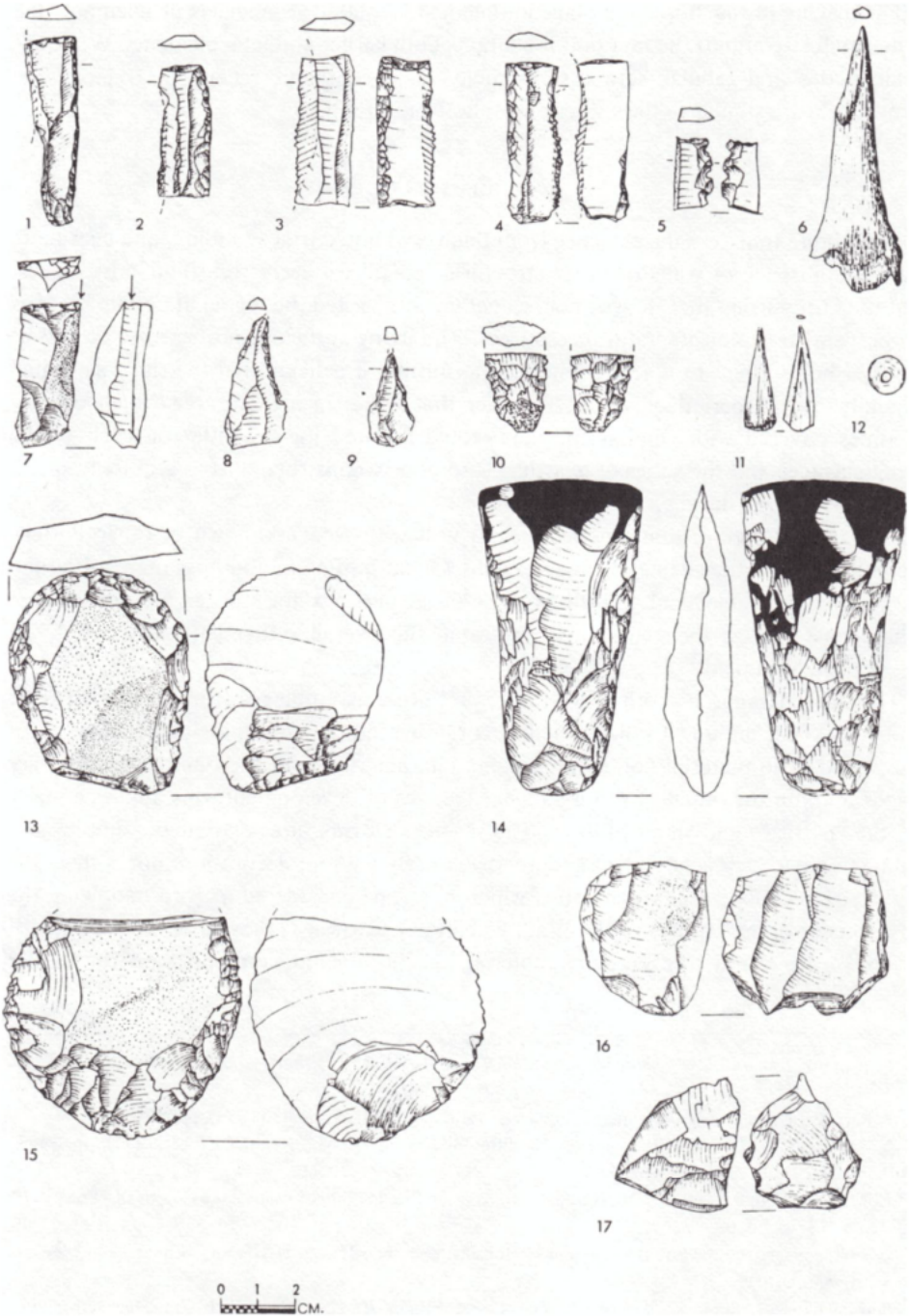


Fig. 4. Flint, bone and stone artefacts: sickle-blades (1-5); bone points (6, 11); endscraper-burin (7); borers (8-9); axes (10, 14); stone bead (12); scrapers (13, 15); cores (16-17).

The placing of the flint assemblage in the local Neolithic sequence is problematic due to its small size and to the fact that it contains both earlier and later elements. While the sickle-blades and tabular scrapers resemble the 'Néolithique récent' of Byblos,⁵ the arrowheads are similar to the earlier examples from Munhata.⁶

CONCLUSIONS

In attempting to assess the evidence from this very limited trial sounding, and bearing in mind the absence of walls or other structural remains, it seems reasonable to suggest that the group using the site was non-sedentary and visited the region at certain seasons of the year to exploit its natural resources. The living surfaces and hearths, as well as the post holes, point to a semi-nomadic way of life; it is likely that the site was visited annually over a period of years. The fact that it lies in a dune area which quickly becomes covered with wind-swept sand would account for the different levels of the living surfaces and the series of hearths — so poorly constructed as to require frequent replacement, even during a single sojourn.

The general picture that emerges ties in well with what is known of other Pottery Neolithic sites in the coastal plain, especially Giv'at ha-Parsa⁷ and Nişsanım,⁸ although the tool kit is not identical and the practice of jar burial is not attested at either.⁹ As at other coastal sites, the determining factor in the overall settlement pattern was the physical environment.¹⁰

The limited range of both the ceramic and lithic assemblages from this small-scale probe makes it difficult to place them securely within the chronological framework of the period. The material contains elements characteristic, on the one hand, of earlier stages and, on the other, of more advanced stages of development; this applies equally to the pottery and lithic types. The pottery forms are extremely simple and unimaginative, technically inept and almost entirely without decoration; nor is there the slightest indication of characteristics which might be considered as foreshadowing the bow rims or other features of the Wadi Rabah phase towards the end of the Neolithic.¹¹ On the other hand, the ceramic material has nothing in common with the earlier

⁵ J. Cauvin: *Les outillages néolithiques de Byblos et du littoral libanais: fouilles de Byblos IV*, Paris, 1968.

⁶ J. Perrot: La troisième campagne de fouilles à Munhata (1964), *Syria* 43 (1966), pp. 49–63.

⁷ Y. Olami *et al.*: Giv'at ha-Parsa — A Neolithic Site in the Coastal Region, *EI* 13 (1977), pp. 34–37 (Hebrew), p. 291* (English summary).

⁸ Ephrat Yeivin and Y. Olami: Nizzanim — a Neolithic Site in Naḥal Evtah: Excavations of 1968–1970, *Tel Aviv* 6 (1979), pp. 99–135.

⁹ A child's disarticulated bones were found in the earth below a floor at Nişsanım, without a receptacle of any kind, *ibid.*, p. 105.

¹⁰ Tamar Noy: Neolithic Sites in the Western Coastal Plain, *EI* 13 (1977), pp. 18–33 (Hebrew), p. 290* (English summary).

¹¹ J. Kaplan: Excavations at Wadi Rabah, *IEJ* 8 (1958), pp. 149–160; J. Perrot: La préhistoire palestinienne, in *Supplément au Dictionnaire de la Bible*, VIII, Paris, 1972, col. 416.

Yarmukian culture.¹² The many quern fragments, however, and the high percentage of sickle-blades — which constitute the largest group among the flint tools — point to cereal-gathering and probably to some form of agriculture.

In the light of the above, a tentative date in the second quarter of the fifth millennium is suggested for our site.¹³

¹² M. Stekelis: *The Yarmukian Culture*, Sha'ar ha-Golan, 1966 (Hebrew).

¹³ This corresponds to the Middle Neolithic phase proposed by Noy (above, n. 10), pp. 24, 27. It ties in well with Mellaart's dating of the Wadi Rabah phase to slightly later than 4500 B.C.E.; J. Mellaart: *The Neolithic of the Near East*, London, 1975, chart on p. 15, pp. 241–242. It would fall within the earlier part of Moore's Neolithic 4 stage; A.M.T. Moore: A Four-stage Sequence for the Levantine Neolithic, ca. 8500–3750 B.C., *BASOR* 246 (1982), pp. 25–26. Note also the Carbon-14 date from Niṣṣanim of 4790 ± 90 B.C.E.; Yeivin and Olami (above, n. 8), p. 131.



A: General view of Area A from east.



B: Hearth No. 7, with pottery and broken beachrock querns, from north-east.



C: Broken beachrock querns reused in paved area, from south-east. Note flint knife below measuring stick.

PLATE 26



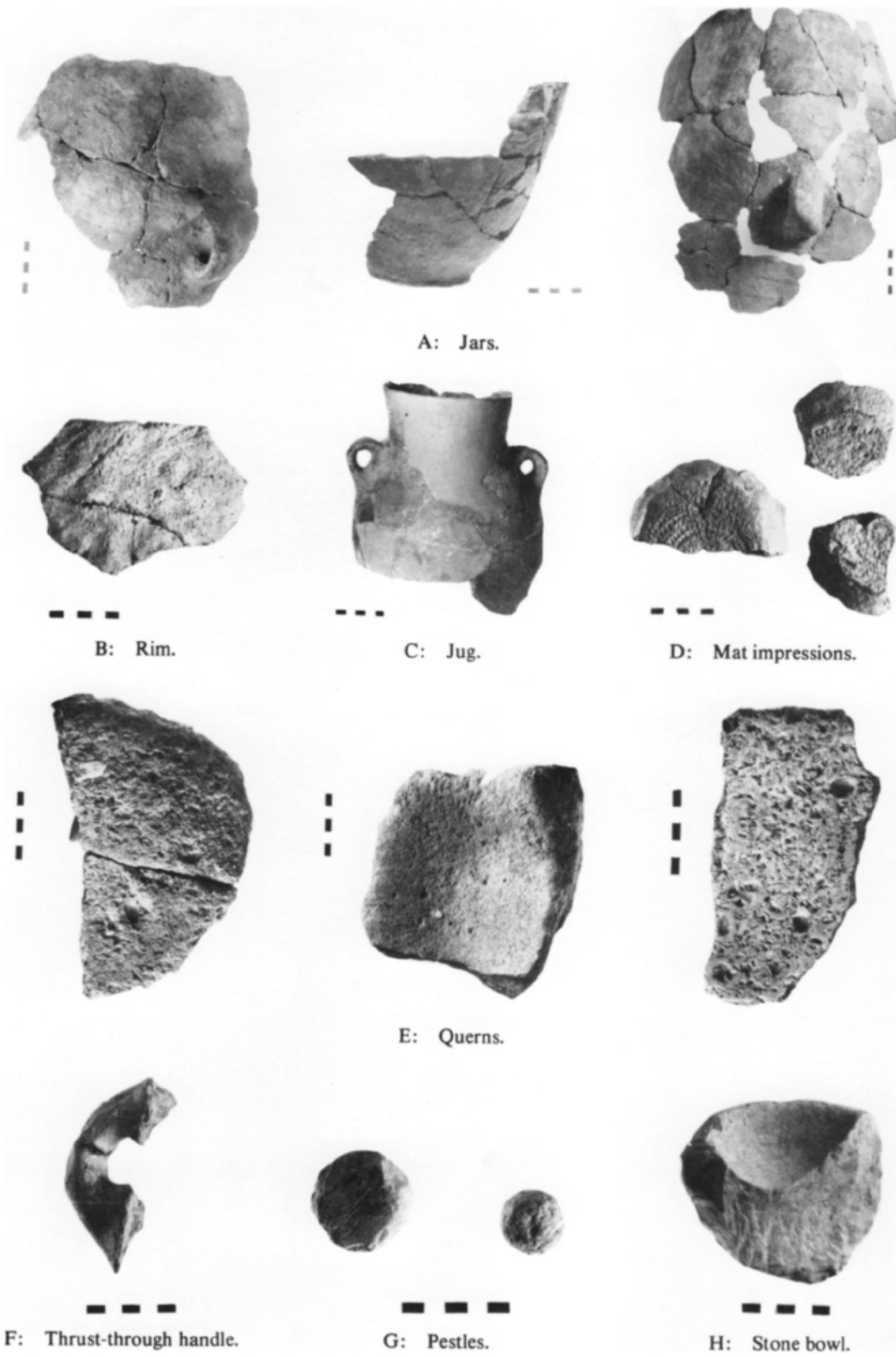
A: Post holes near
Hearth No. 8, from east.



B: Larger living surface
on left and unopened
burial jar on right, from
west.



C: Jar burial with infant's skeleton
after removal of covering sherds.



POTTERY NEOLITHIC SITE NEAR TEL QAṬIF