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Tell Qaramel: Preliminary Report on the First Season, 1999

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TELL QARAMEL

PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE FIRST SEASON, 1999

Ryszard F. Mazurowski

The archaeological research on Tell Qaramel is the result of an agreement between Warsaw University represented by the Polish Center of Archaeology and the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums in Damascus.¹⁾ The Institute of Archaeology of Warsaw University has also provided financial support. The excavations lasted from March to May 15, 1999.

¹⁾ I would like to express our thanks to Prof. Dr. Sultan Muheissen, Director General of the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums in Damascus, for his kindness, continuous help and friendly support. Expressions of gratitude are also due the staff of the Regional Directorate of Antiquities at Aleppo, especially the Director, Dr. Wahid Khayyata. On the Polish side, the team comprised Dr. Ryszard F. Mazurowski, co-director; Dr. Witold Gumiński, Ms Joanna Pyzel, Mr. Łukasz Rutkowski, archaeologists; Ms Ewelina Chrobak, Mr. Piotr Karczmarek and Ms Renata Maskowicz, students of archaeology from Warsaw University. Participating in the fieldwork on the Syrian side were: Mr. Bassam Jamous, co-director, and Mr. Samer Abdel Ghafour, photographer.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTIC OF THE SITE

Tell Qaramel is located in the basin of the River Qoueiq, c. 25 km to the north of Aleppo and 30 km to the south of the Turkish border and the Taurus Mountains. The site is situated on the right (western) bank of the Qoueiq valley, which is limited by the limestone plateau rising about 20 m above the riverbed. Nowadays, the tell is about 80 m away from the river.

The mound is 18.7 m high, of ovoid outline with the north-south longer axis equal to 190 m and the east-west one to 160 m (*Fig. 1*). The south slope of the tell is less steep than the others. The bottom

part of the western slope has been destroyed by the building of a village road and now disused railway, as well as by the activities of the inhabitants of the modern village of Qaramel digging in search of stone and soil. The northern slope has suffered similar damage effecting the discovery of a big mudbrick wall. The tomb of the 3rd millennium BC explored this year was also uncovered in the same manner.

A British team first surveyed the site in the 1970s. According to the explorers²⁾ all the settlement periods from the Pre-Pottery Neolithic A (PPNA) to the Helle-



*Fig. 1. Tell Qaramel. View of the tell from the south
(Photo R.F. Mazurowski)*

²⁾ J. Matters and others, *The River Qoueiq, Northern Syria, and its Catchment: Studies arising from Tell Rifa'at Survey 1977-79*, BAR, International Series, 98 (1981).

nistic period are represented on the tell. Of biggest importance for our research is L. Copeland's statement concerning the presence of a PPN flint industry "closely comparable to that of the Mureybet II and III phases".³⁾ J. Cauvin listed Tell Qaramel among the Mureybetian-type sites⁴⁾ and

R.F. Mazurowski's 1998 survey of the middle and lower part of the southern slope yielded flint artifacts that showed PPNA characteristics. This gave reason to believe that Tell Qaramel was one of the most important Early Neolithic sites in the northern Levant.

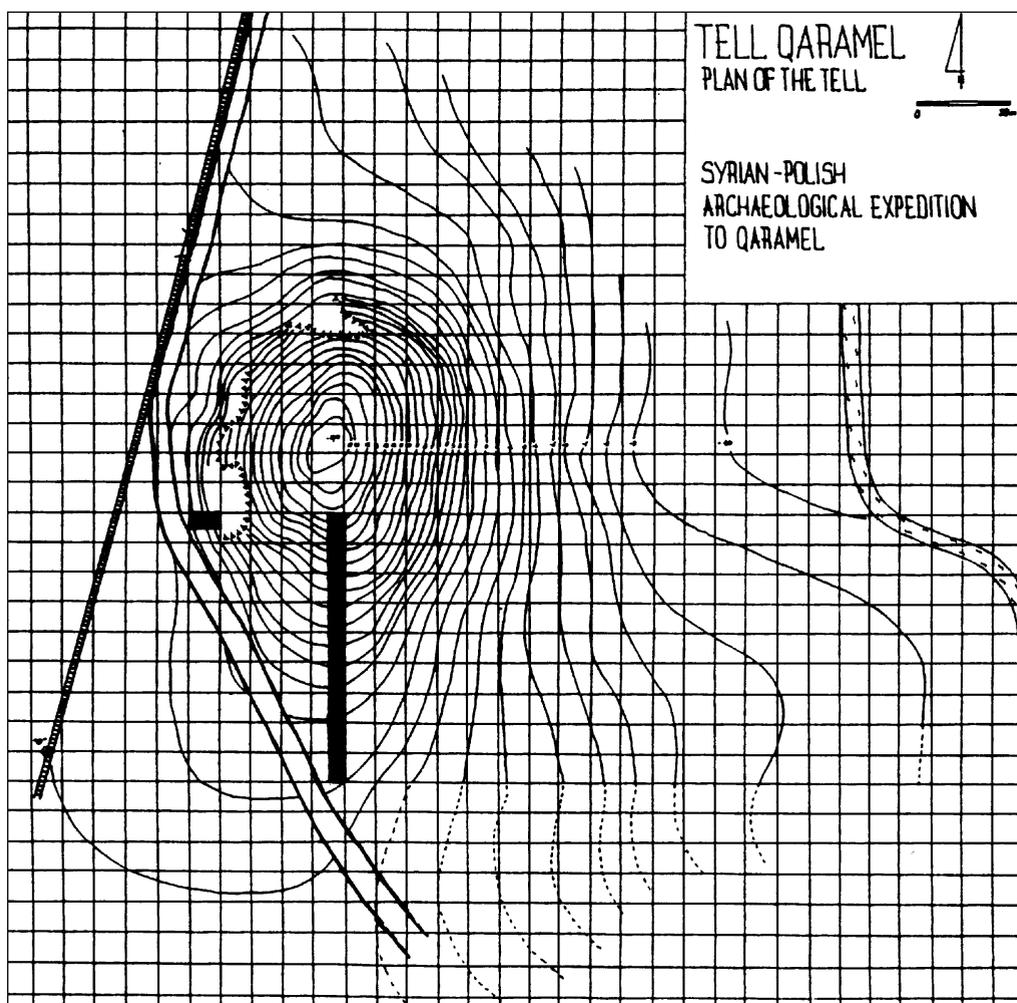


Fig. 2. Plan of the tell with trenches excavated in the 1999 season
(Drawing J. Pyzel and R. Maskowicz)

³⁾ L. Copeland, *The River Qoueiq*, op. cit.

⁴⁾ J. Cauvin, *Naissance des divinités. Naissance de l'agriculture. La révolution des symboles au Néolithique* (Paris 1994).

THE EXCAVATIONS

The first season of regular excavations was devoted to gaining an insight into site stratigraphy and to establishing the actual extent of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic settlement, including its stratigraphical position.

Six trenches (5 x 10 m each) on the lower part of the southern slope form a 60-m long step-trench (*Fig. 2*). The total surface of the explored area here is 150 m². Another trench (E-15 a,b) was opened in the area of the above-mentioned tomb on the lower western slope.

A survey of the nearest surroundings of the tell, carried out concurrently with the excavations pinpointed a large (2.5-3 ha) early Pre-Pottery Neolithic A site, extending to the south and southwest (*Fig. 3*). Only the northern part of the Neolithic settlement seems to be partly covered by

remains of younger occupation forming the present tell. The Neolithic layers appear to be immediately below the topsoil, and since the area is owned by the Qaramel farmers, regular plowing and other farming activities are a source of continuous destruction. Indeed, greening fields prevented the team from tracing the extent of the site to the south. This will be one of the tasks for the coming season.

PRE-POTTERY NEOLITHIC A SETTLEMENT ASSEMBLAGE

Flint artifacts collected from the site surface total 3177 in number (*Fig. 4*). The stone is usually brown, slightly transparent, with a thick calcareous cortex. According to Cauvin's classification of the chipped industry, the notch-based points in particular appear to reveal features of



Fig. 3. View of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic A settlement on the southern slope of the tell (Photo R. F. Mazurowski)

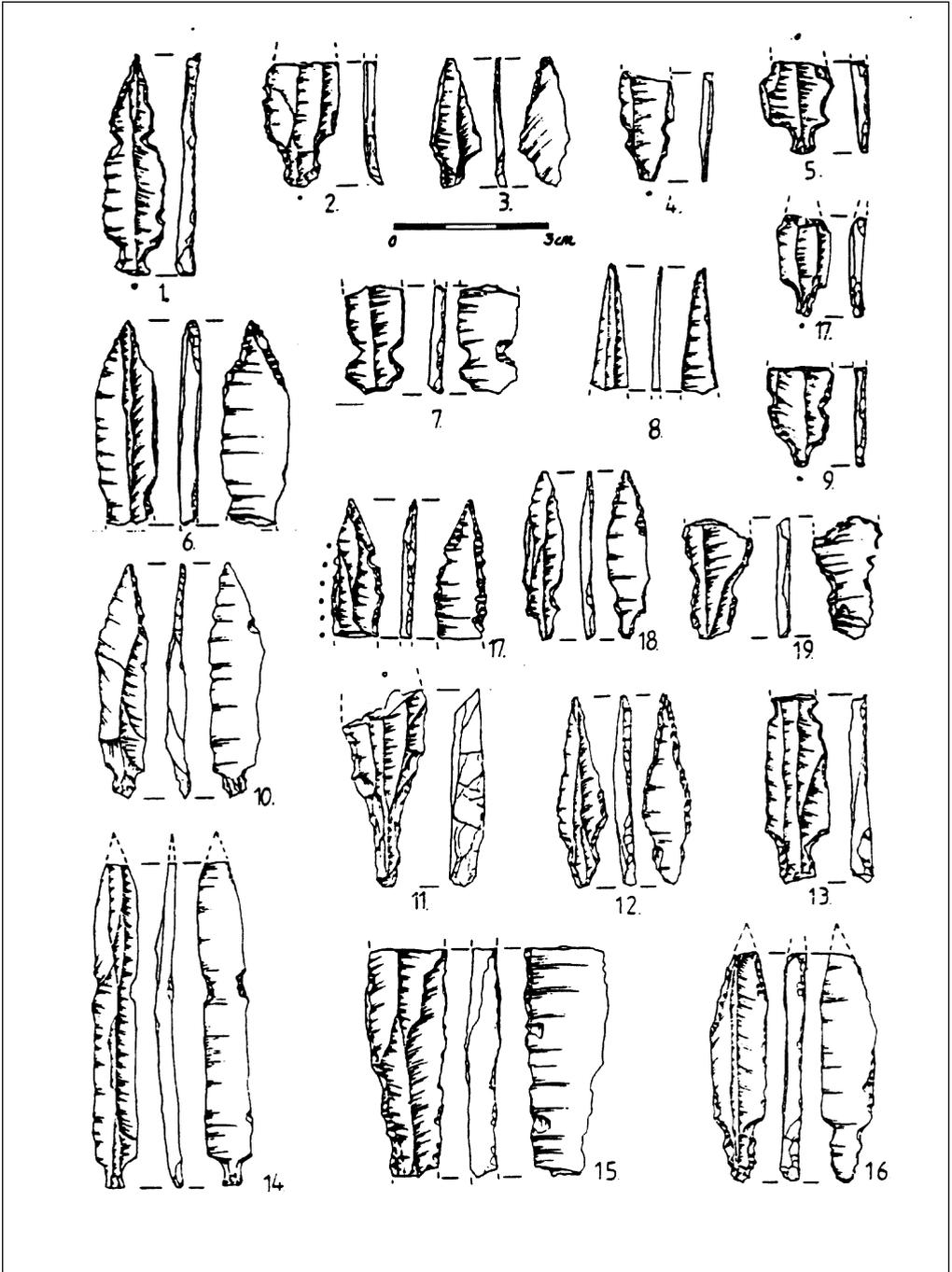


Fig. 4. Flint artifacts from the PPNA settlement
(Drawing R. Maskowicz)

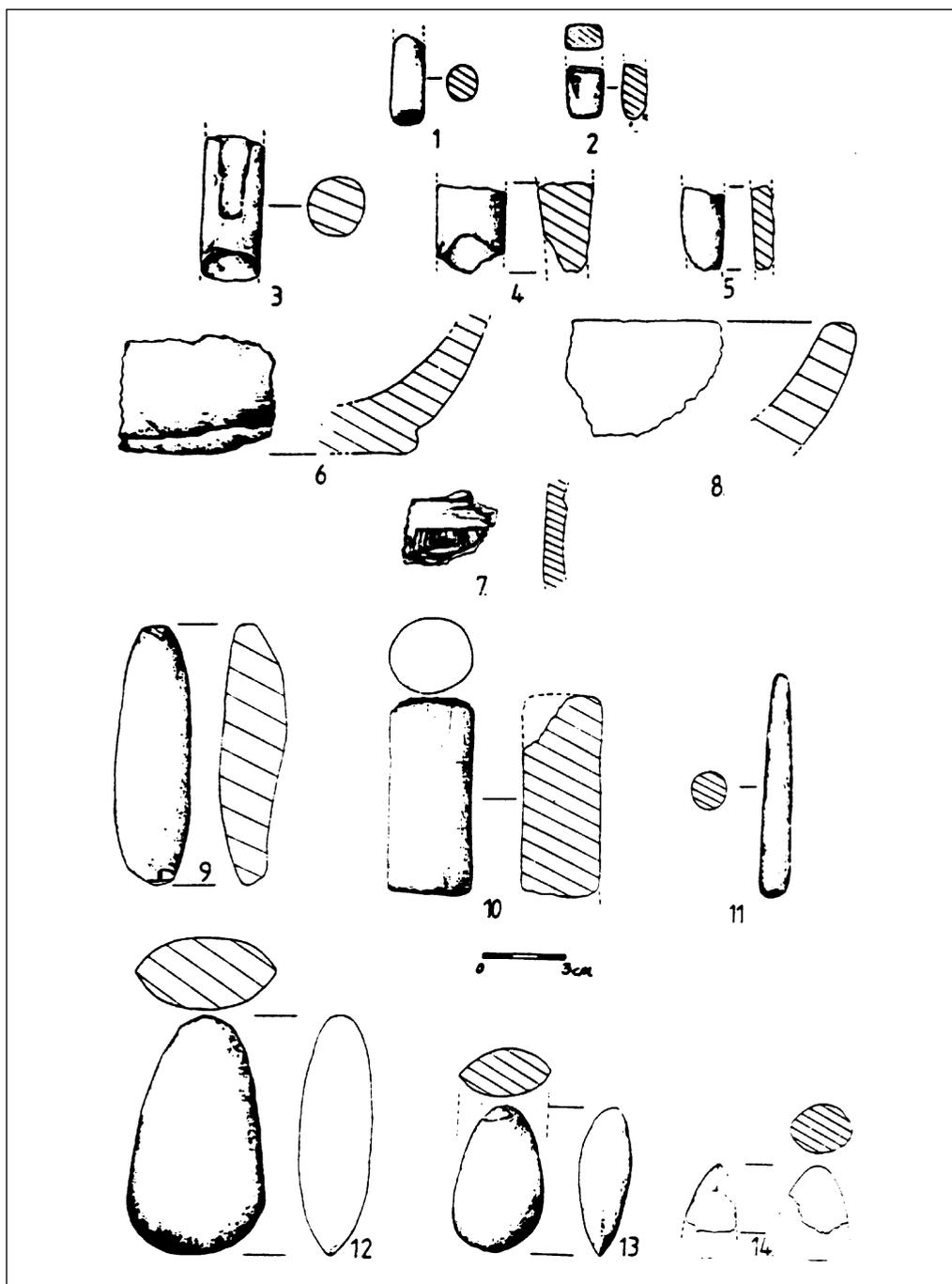


Fig. 5. Ground and pecked stone artifacts from the PPNA settlement
(Drawing R. Maskowicz)

the Mureybet IIIA and IIIB phases.⁵⁾ Moreover, large steep-scrapers, end-scrapers, perforators, bladelets, sickle-blades, as well as unipolar pyramidal and conical cores occur on the site. However, unlike Mureybet, the Qaramel site has not yielded herminettes and navy core forms are only scantily represented.

Obsidian artifacts (25) are few and all of a gray stone that was probably imported from central Anatolia. The finds of ground and pecked stone artifacts (37 in all) are typical of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic⁶⁾ (Fig. 5).

STEP-TRENCH

ON THE SOUTHERN TELL SLOPE

The assemblage from the uppermost squares (J-12, J-11, J-10 and J-9) is generally later and mixed material, mostly dated to the Hellenistic period. Eight different stone walls, of a chiefly E-W orien-

tation and damaged in part by 29 chiefly Islamic graves dug into the subsurface layers, have been found below the topsoil. One of these, from trench J-10 where the walls were found in the best condition, probably enclosed a stone-paved courtyard (J-10b). Another wall, 75-80 cm wide, may be treated as a retaining wall of sorts; it was constructed of medium-size, regular, partly dressed pebbles (J-10d).

The subsurface layer yielded four objects of special interest: a) a square seal with deer-like pattern, made of a black fine-grained stone (Fig. 6:1), dated to the Late Chalcolithic or Early Bronze Age (J-9); b) stamped Hellenistic amphora handle (J-9); c) male terracotta figurine head with applied eyes, beak-like nose and distinctive head dress (Fig. 6:2), probably dated to the later 3rd millennium BC; d) terracotta female figurine in good condition (Fig. 6:3), dated to the 7th century BC.

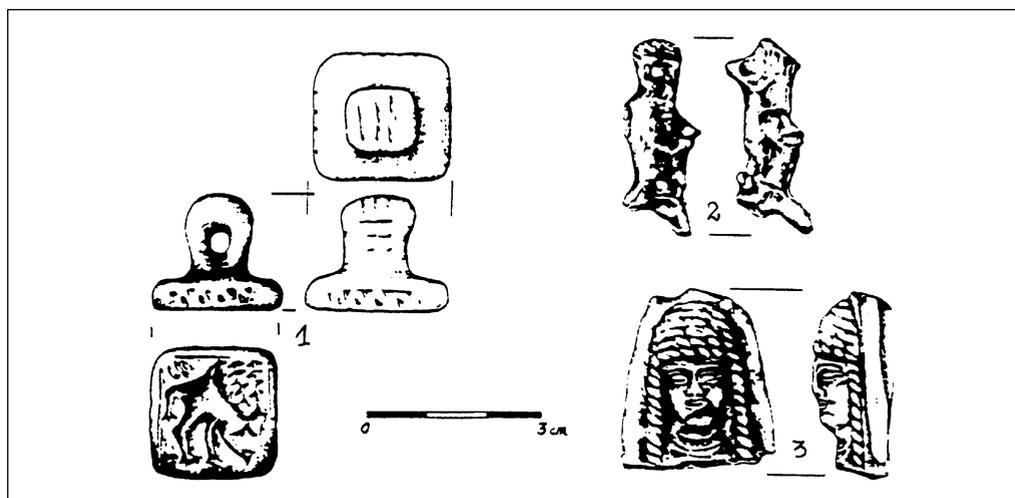


Fig. 6. Objects from the step-trench on the southern slope of the tell
(Drawing R. Maskowicz)

⁵⁾ M. Cauvin, D. Stordeur, Les outillages lithiques et osseux de Mureybet, Syria (Fouilles Van Loon 1965), Cahiers de l'Euphrate, No. 1 (Paris 1978), 3-80.

⁶⁾ R. F. Mazurowski, Ground and pecked stone industry in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic of Northern Iraq, in: S. K. Kozłowski (ed.), Nemrik 9. Pre-Pottery Neolithic Site in Iraq, vol. 3 (Warsaw 1997).

In trench J-8, two chronological and occupational levels were explored. The first, found immediately under the topsoil, is a compact pavement in the northern half of the trench and a stone wall running E-W to the south of the pavement. A stone axe, geometrically ornamented on both sides, has been found to the south of the wall. The second occupational level consists of three stone walls and the remnants of a fourth, enclosing a rectangular area (12 m²). The destroyed wall, closing the structure on the south, had been erected directly on top of an earlier wall. The eastern and western walls were destroyed by two pits, which contained coarse pottery, flint artifacts, animal bones and charcoal; this suggested household activities dated to slightly later than the fill of the wall-enclosed area. Southwest, there is a rectangular structure made of *pisé* (the wall is 3 m thick and at least 0.5 m high), cut through to a depth of 50 cm by pit no. 3, which contains pieces of pottery, some flints, animal bones, and a shell pendant.

The subsurface structures in the lowermost trench J-7 were poorly preserved, revealing below them a complex building level with the outlines of at least four different structures. An oval stone wall is to be observed in the western part of the trench. Considering the level of the wall, which practically corresponds to the PPNA open-air site, as well as the specific course it takes, it could be one of the oldest, perhaps also from the PPNA period. A chalk and stone surface on the same level as the oval wall is located in the southern part of the trench. There are two large pits dug into it. A lunar-shaped bone pendant with a hole in the center and parallel incisions at both ends was found in the south-

western of the pits. The best visible structure is a corner wall identified in the northern part of the trench. The youngest structure consists of two stone walls with a kind of channel between them, running east-west from the center of the trench and disappearing into the eastern trench wall. Three pits in the northeastern part of the trench cut through these remains.

The pottery from the step-trench, after a preliminary examination,⁷⁾ was dated mostly to the period from c. 1500 BC to Hellenistic times, but with an indication to the later 2nd millennium BC. Admittedly, it is difficult to find clear parallels between the pottery from Tell Qaramel and the well-stratified assemblages from Inner Syria. The subsurface layers in all trenches contained pieces of Hellenistic fine wares, indicating perhaps the presence of Hellenistic occupational strata, probably denuded on the most part. The underlying strata yields assemblages that are from the Middle and Late Bronze Ages, for instance, the rilled bowl rims and body sherds with incised comb decoration, typical of Middle Bronze Age pottery. The carinated bowl, however, so characteristic of the period, is almost completely absent, and instead of it there are bowls with plainly folded rims and plain, often burnished or slipped platters, as well as jars with handles on the widest part of the shoulders, typical of Alalakh IV-I or Amuq M, more suggestive of LB date. In addition, some of our pottery forms resemble examples found at Tell Rifa'at, which has "the same characteristics of LB with MB tradition, rather than being completely MB".⁸⁾ Nevertheless, it should be admitted that a small number of body sherds with painted decoration has been

⁷⁾ Mr. Lukasz Rutkowski has kindly identified this assemblage.

⁸⁾ Matters, *op. cit.*, 371 and figs. 220-226.

recorded, particularly in the lowermost explored layers. The decoration usually consists of brown and reddish bands, resembling Khabour ware. It may be an indication that MB layers are near.

It is essential to note that numerous PPNA and younger flint artifacts have been discovered in secondary contexts on the tell surface and in the layers excavated on the southern slope. They were often

found inside of mudbricks, blocks of *tauf* (*pisé*) and between blocks in the walls. These as well as the collections of flints from Matters' and Mazurowski's surveys were re-deposited from a PPNA settlement with the mud and topsoil that the inhabitants of successive villages on the tell had carried. The actual PPNA settlement was located outside the tell, the latter perhaps covering only its northern extremity.

TOMB 1

Trench E-15 was meant to uncover the southern wall of the tomb in order to provide the easiest access through the modern opening. Once the stones from the southern wall had been removed, the tomb turned out to be a slightly trapezoidal, elongated chamber with a door opposite the secondary entrance. Modern rubbish (plastic bags, can-

dles) appeared in the fill up to 70 cm above the floor, indicating that the tomb had been robbed not that long ago. Two burials were found below the fill.

The tomb was built of white and pink limestone blocks (*Fig. 7*). This stone is common in the vicinity of the tell even today. The chamber measures 550 cm in



*Fig. 7. View of Tomb 1 from the south
(Photo R. F. Mazurowski)*

length, and from 93 cm wide at the northern end to 210 cm at the southern one in width; the height is c. 160 cm. The ceiling was made of seven large blocks of stone, the first on the south and the only unbroken one measuring 165 cm in length.

The walls were constructed of six or sometimes seven layers of stones (*Fig. 8*), each overhanging the previous one in a kind of false vault. The northern wall around the doorway was built of two oblong slabs, mounted vertically, the entrance space in between blocked from the outside with a huge flat block (158 x 113 x 36 cm). The considerable weight of the walls has deformed the floor, which has two layers (20-25 cm thick) covered with

a compact calcareous plaster. Two pits cut through this floor, one at the original door and another near the secondary entrance, i.e., in the southern part. It is to be suspected that the pits are evidence of modern robbery of the tomb.

There were two burials presumably deposited in the center of the chamber. However, many of the bones are not in anatomical order (*Fig. 9*). The skeletons, which take up most of the chamber's width, belong to a juvenile individual and a child;⁹⁾ the latter's bones seem to be concentrated more to the northeast, between bowl no. 2 and miniature jar no. 11. Many variously shaped beads, made of crystal, carnelian, alabaster, calcite, calcareous, red



Fig. 8. Tomb 1. View of the chamber from the south
(Photo R. F. Mazurowski)

⁹⁾ Anthropological examination of the bones is planned for the future.

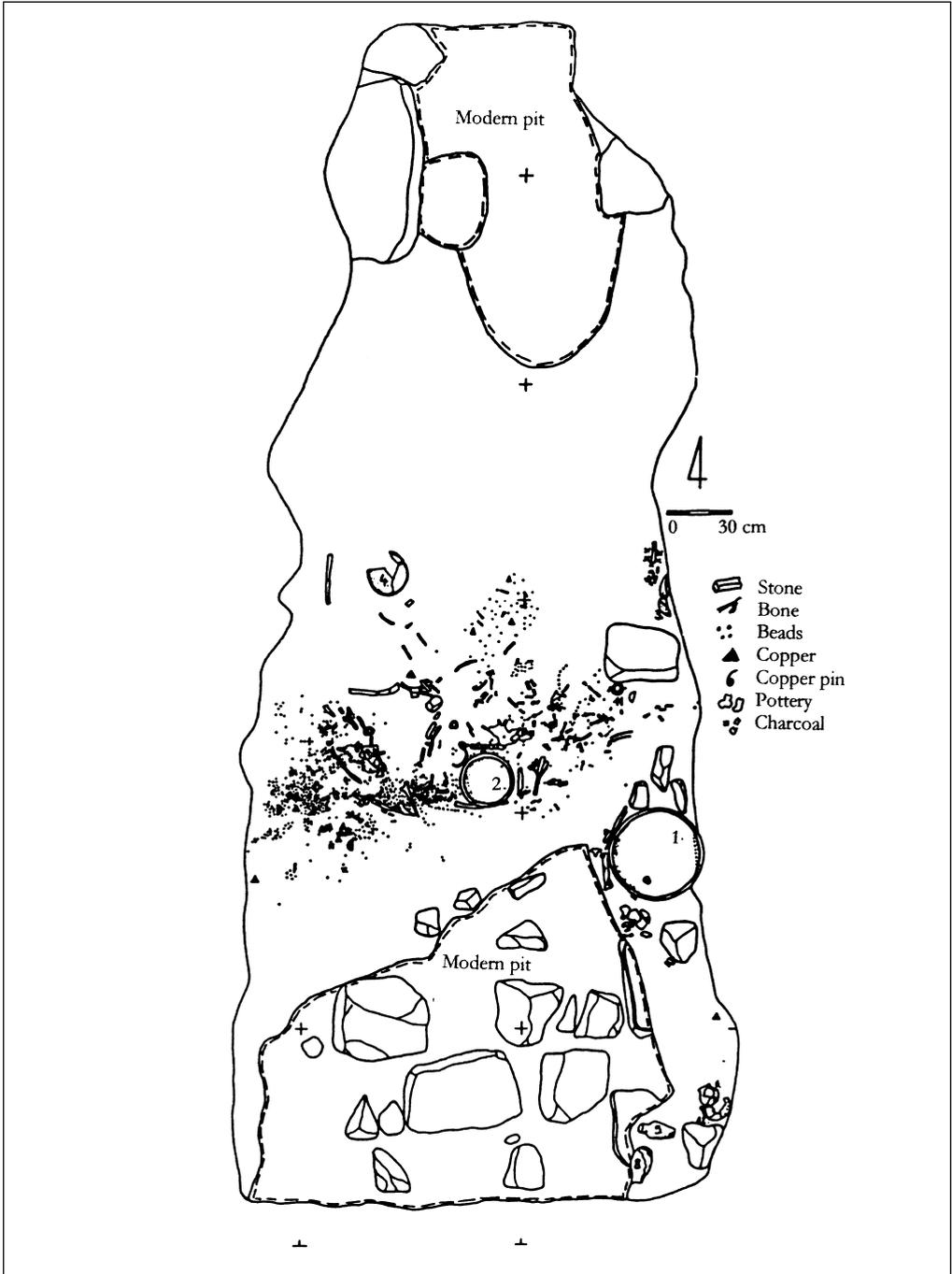


Fig. 9. Tomb 1. Plan of the chamber on the floor level
(Drawing E. Chrobak, R. Maskowicz and J. Pyzel)

hematite, green frit, bone and steatite (a total of 1825), were found together with the main concentration of bones. Some of the beads formed perceptible compositions in shape, size and color; for instance, alternating four white and one red bead, or small white beads together with the child's bones. A small bronze chisel or massive pin, two fragments of pin and two corroded pieces of metal were also discovered. Four vessels occupied the SE corner of the chamber. Other finds from sieving the

earth from the tomb included human bones, beads, a limestone ring and some pieces of corroded bronze (?).

The pottery assemblage from the chamber of Tomb 1 may be dated to the 3rd millennium BC, but at the present stage it is difficult to be more precise. Further investigations should be concentrated on the position of the tomb and its surroundings in relation to tell stratigraphy. Trench E-15 generally yielded some Early Bronze Age pottery.

In the coming season it is essential to start excavating the Pre-Pottery Neolithic A and B settlement to the south of the tell. Secondly, it is necessary to finish the exploration of Tomb 1, including a study of the

stratigraphy and a survey of the nearest vicinity in search of similar structures. Work should also continue on the southern step-trench, especially in squares J-7 and J-8.