

TEL SHIMRON WEST: A PROTO-HISTORIC AND BRONZE AGE RURAL SITE

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In December 2010 and January 2011, a trial excavation was carried out alongside Road 75, near Nahalal Junction (map ref. 21925–60/73410–20), within the boundaries of the registered archaeological site known as Tel Shimron West (Fig. 1).¹ The site is located 500 m southwest of Tel Shimron, one of the largest tells in the Jezreel valley. In the 1970s, in the course of the Nahalal Map survey, Avner Raban observed, in a long, narrow infrastructure trench here, a layer (c. 1 m thick) of small stones, with predominantly Middle Bronze Age and some Early Bronze Age and Chalcolithic pottery (Raban 1982:65, xxi, Site 75; Fig. 1). Raban raised the possibility that this layer was the *in-situ* remains of a rural occupation subordinate to the Middle Bronze Age town of Tel Shimron, but due to the



Fig. 1. Location map.

extremely limited exposure he was not able to discount the possibility that it was simply debris that had been washed down from the lower town.

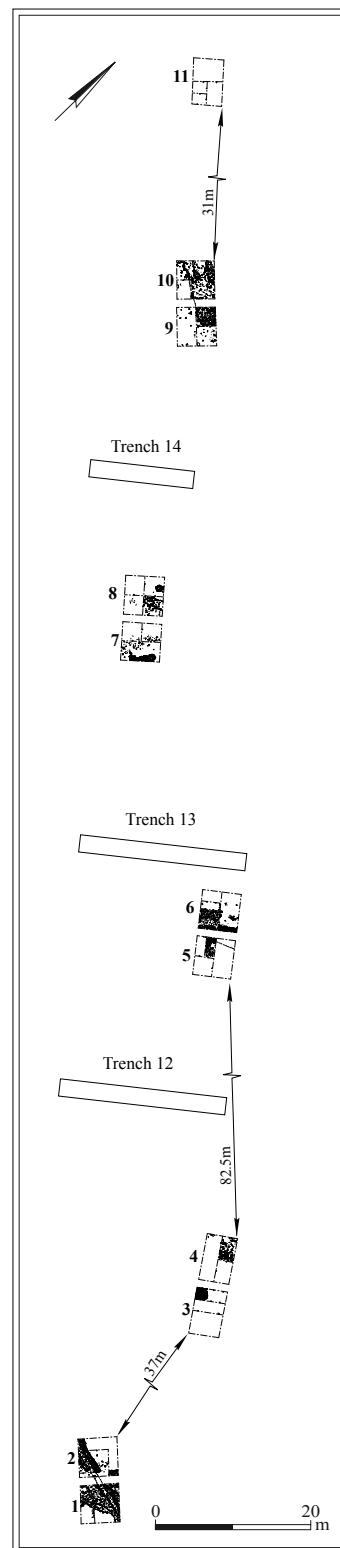
In the present excavation, five double and one single squares (Sqs 1–2, 3–4, 5–6, 7–8, 9–10, 11; 275 sq m in total; Plan 1) were opened along the long strip designated for widening Road 75 (300 m long, 18 m wide), where archaeological traces had been observed in mechanically dug trial trenches. In addition, three trenches oriented northeast–southwest (Trenches 12–14; 13–20 m long, c. 1.6 m wide, c. 3.5 m deep; Plan 1) were dug mechanically in the spaces between the squares, in order to obtain data from the deeper layers of the site, which were not reached in the excavated squares.

The predominant remains in most of the excavated squares consisted of living surfaces made of hard-packed small stones overlain by occupation accumulation layers containing significant quantities of unweathered Middle Bronze Age pottery sherds,² as well as many animal bones and flint artifacts. Although no walls or buildings were uncovered, the remains were evidently of an *in-situ* Middle Bronze Age rural occupation, confirming Raban's tentative interpretation of Site 75.

Small probes dug below the Middle Bronze Age layer in some of the squares exposed limited evidence of Neolithic, Chalcolithic, and Early and Intermediate Bronze Age occupations. A concentration of a few Late Bronze Age sherds close to the surface may reflect a more ephemeral presence, possibly burials.

Layers (c. 6 m long, 0.6–1.5 m thick) of small stone fragments were revealed in Trenches 12 and 13. At first, Oren Ackermann suspected them to be river-deposited sedimentation, but the angular nature of the stone fragments led him to conclude that they were formed by stone-working rather than by colluvial activities. Ackermann proposed that the site's location on clayey soil, which is characterized by an unstable undulating surface due to seasonal swelling and shrinking, may have led the early inhabitants to lay the pebble-paved surfaces in order to stabilize the site (Ackermann 2011). In Trench 14, brown alluvial soil devoid of archaeological remains was exposed.

The archaeological layers, including references to the ceramic, stone, flint and faunal remains are presented by periods, from early to late across the site. The layers were not allocated strata numbers due to the limited remains from



Plan 1. Schematic plan of the excavated area.

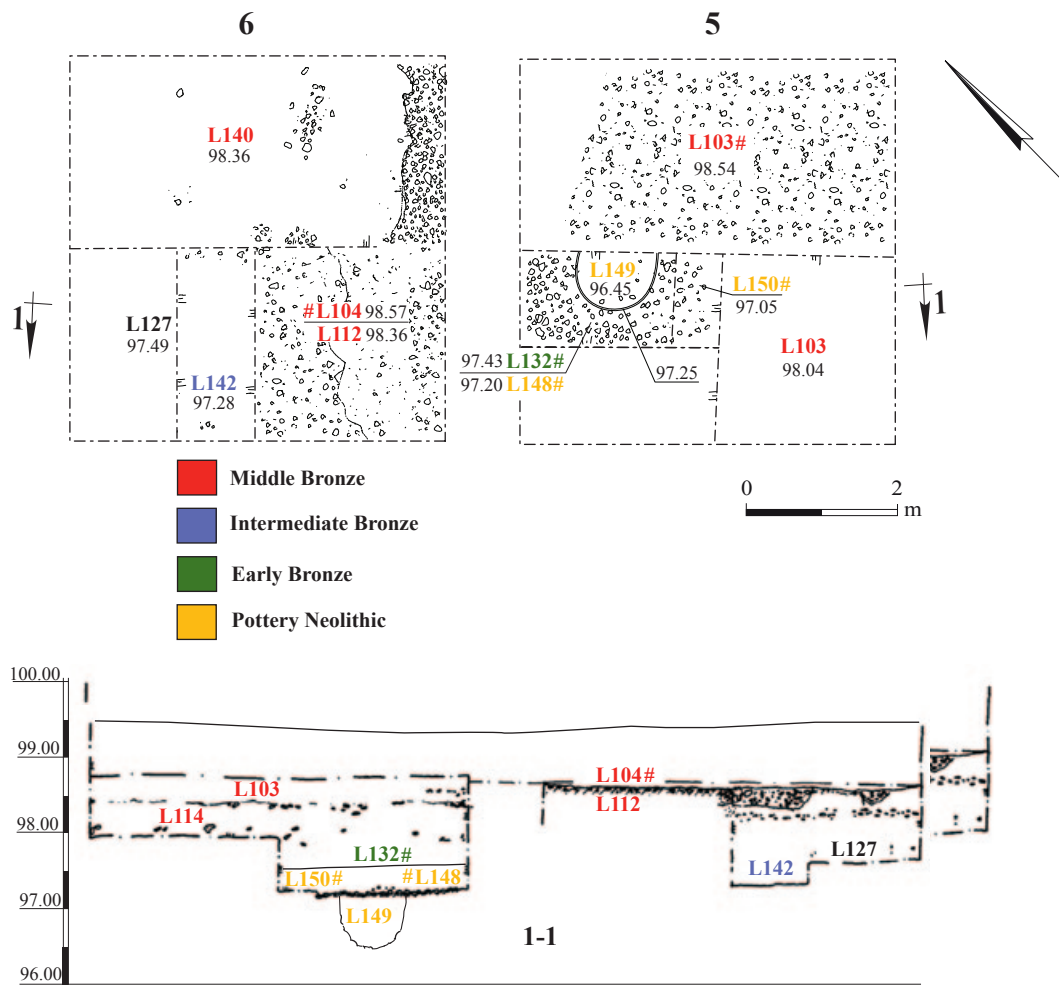
most of the periods (for the lithic assemblage, see Shemer 2015; for the archaeozoological remains, see Agha 2015).

The Pottery Neolithic Period

A densely packed pebble-stones floor (L148/L150; c. 0.1 m thick; Fig. 2) and a contemporary circular pit lined with similar small pebbles (L149; diam. 0.9 m, depth 0.8 m) were exposed in a small probe (1.5 × 2.5 m) dug below the Middle Bronze Age floors in Sq 5 (Plan 2). Some bones lying on the floor and in the pit were identified as cattle and as an unidentifiable medium-sized animal (Agha 2015). A few small pottery sherds from this layer, and sporadic residual sherds found in later accumulation layers in other excavation squares, were attributed to the Pottery Neolithic Wadi Rabah culture. Among them were some open bowls and a handled bowl (Fig. 3:1–3). A single arrowhead dating to the earlier PPNB was found out of context in a later, Middle Bronze matrix in Sq 2 (L141; see below; Shemer 2015).



Fig. 2. Square 5: Neolithic-period Floor 148/150 and Pit 149, looking southeast.



Plan 2. Squares 5-6, plan and section.

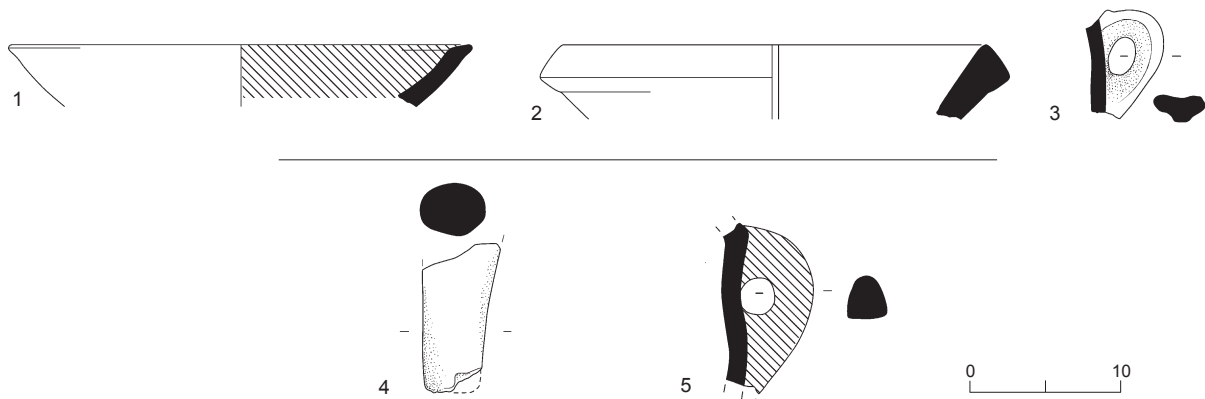
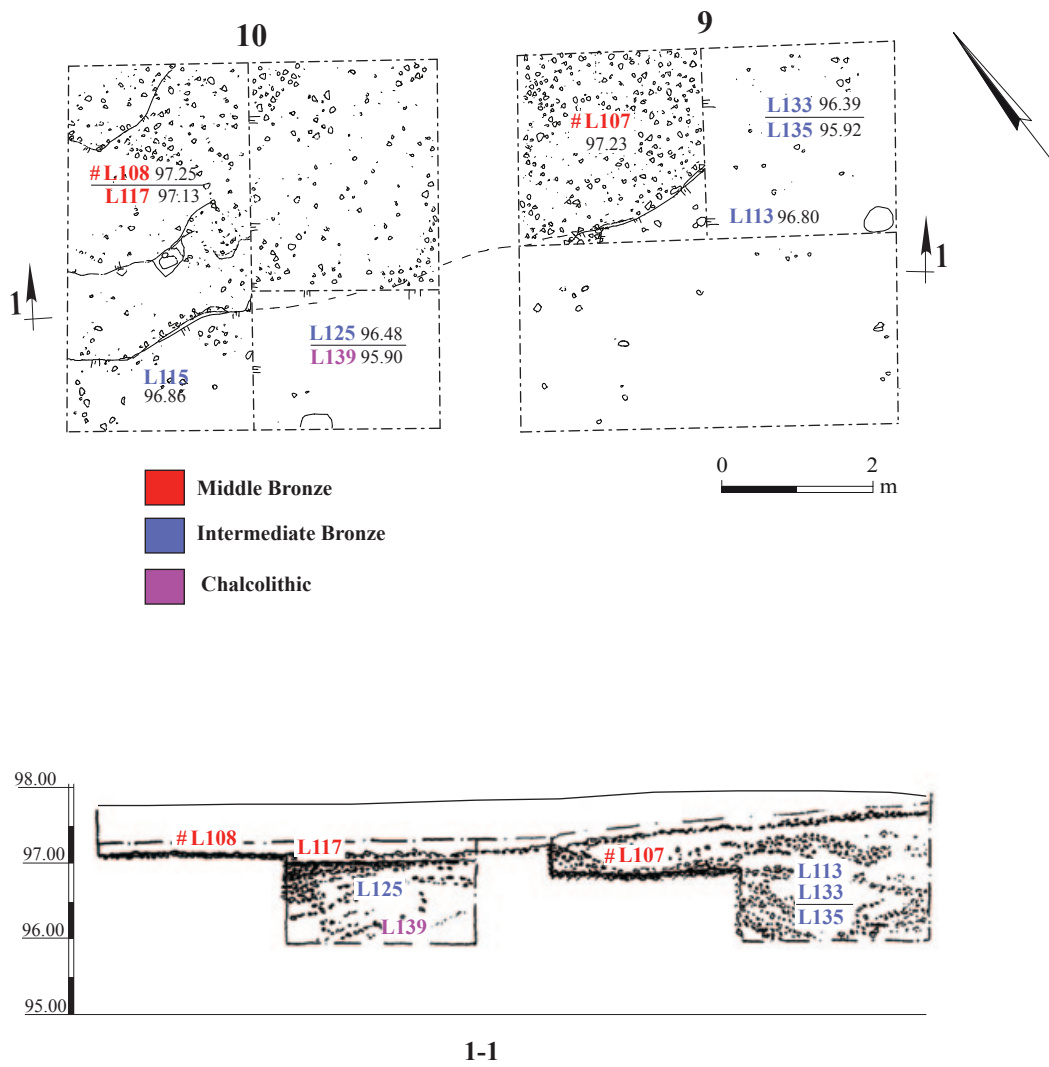


Fig. 3. Pottery of the Neolithic (1-3) and Chalcolithic (4, 5) periods.

The Chalcolithic Period

A small probe (1.5×2.5 m) dug below the Middle Bronze Age floors and the Intermediate Bronze Age accumulations, exposed a light-brown accumulation layer containing many small stones (L139; Sq 10; Plan 3) and a few Chalcolithic sherds. Sporadic residual Chalcolithic sherds were also found in later accumulation layers in other squares. They include a cornet fragment (Fig. 3:4) and a handle that was probably from a 'butter churn' (Fig. 3:5), both characteristic types of the Chalcolithic Ghassulian culture. Some sickle blades and celts (chisels, axes and adzes), which are characteristic of the Pottery Neolithic and the Chalcolithic periods were sporadically found in various loci (Shemer 2015: Figs. 1, 2).



Plan 3. Squares 9–10, plan and section.

The Early Bronze Age

A floor of hard-packed, medium-sized stones with no delimiting walls (L144; Fig. 4), was exposed in a probe (1.5 × 4.0 m), below the Middle Bronze Age floors in Sq 3 (Plan 4). Overlying Floor 144 was a thin accumulation layer containing small Early Bronze Age sherds. Another such layer with a few EB IB sherds (L132), was exposed directly over Neolithic-period Floor 148/150 in Sq 5 (Plan 2), indicating that this area was reoccupied in the Early Bronze Age. Several sporadic residual Early Bronze Age sherds were found in later Intermediate Bronze and Middle Bronze Age layers.

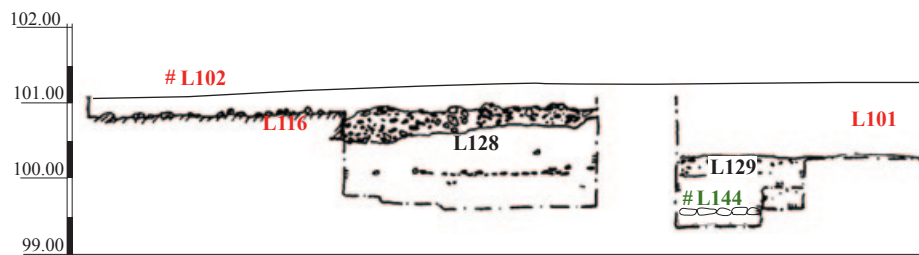
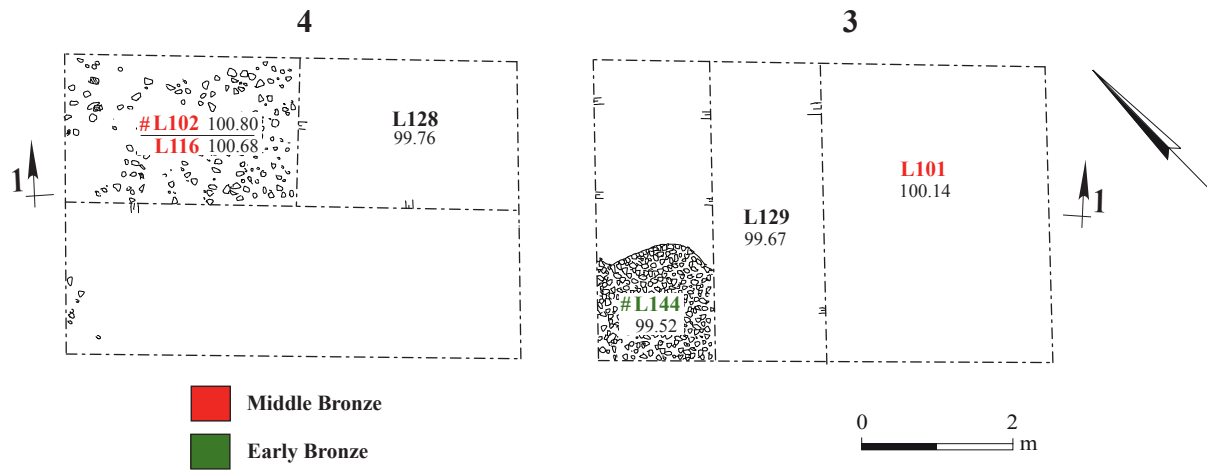
The Early Bronze Age pottery includes a couple of grey-burnished bowls dating to EB IA (Fig. 5:1, 2); a larger quantity of pottery dating to EB IB, including some holmouths and other jars (Fig. 5:3–6); as well as a few platters of metallic ware (Fig. 5:7–9) and a storage jar with an out-flaring rim (Fig. 5:10), dating to EB II. The small quantity of the Early Bronze Age sherds notwithstanding, it may be possible to tentatively suggest that the pottery reflects an Early Bronze occupation of some duration at the site, with a limited presence in the EB IA, a settlement in the EB IB, and again a more limited occupation in the EB II.

The Intermediate Bronze Age

Occupation layers containing some Intermediate Bronze Age pottery underlie the Middle Bronze Age floors in most of the excavation squares. At the western end, a thick accumulation layer (depth c. 0.6 m) comprising several thin and non-continuous surfaces of small stones was exposed (L113, L115, L125, L133, L135; Sqs 9–10; Plan 3). Additional accumulations on thin stone-layers were uncovered in the middle of the excavated area (L142; Sq 6; Plan 2) and at its eastern end (L134, L138, L145; Sqs 1–2; Plan 5). The broad distribution of these layers indicates that the Intermediate Bronze Age settlement may have spread over a large area.



Fig. 4. Square 3: EBIB Floor 144, looking northeast.



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Plan 4. Squares 3-4, plan and section.

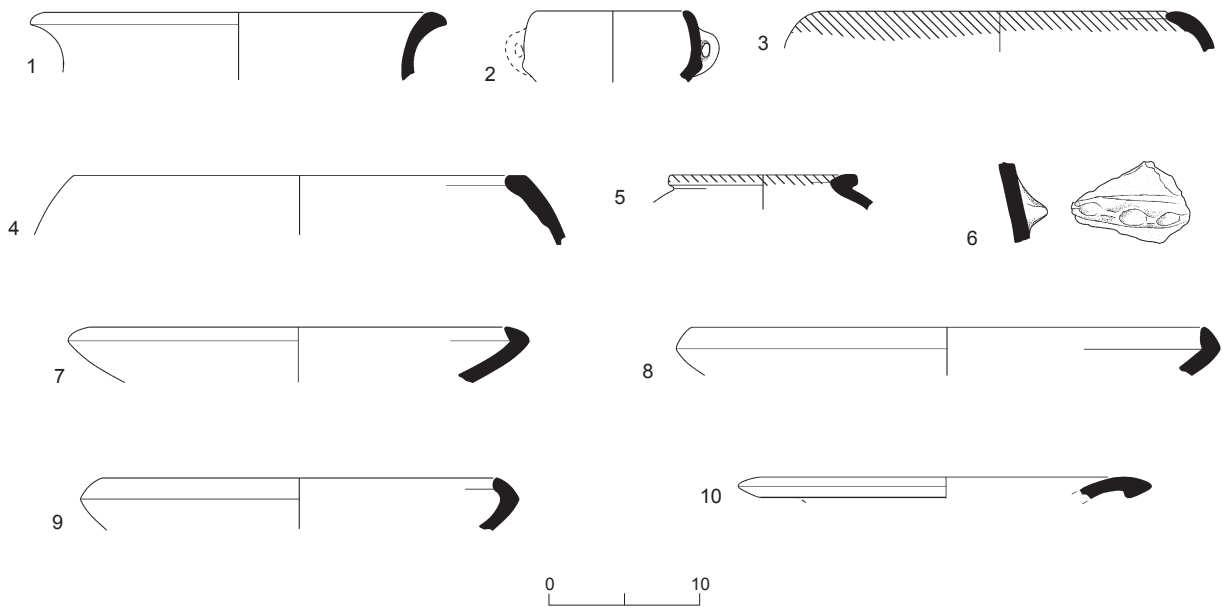
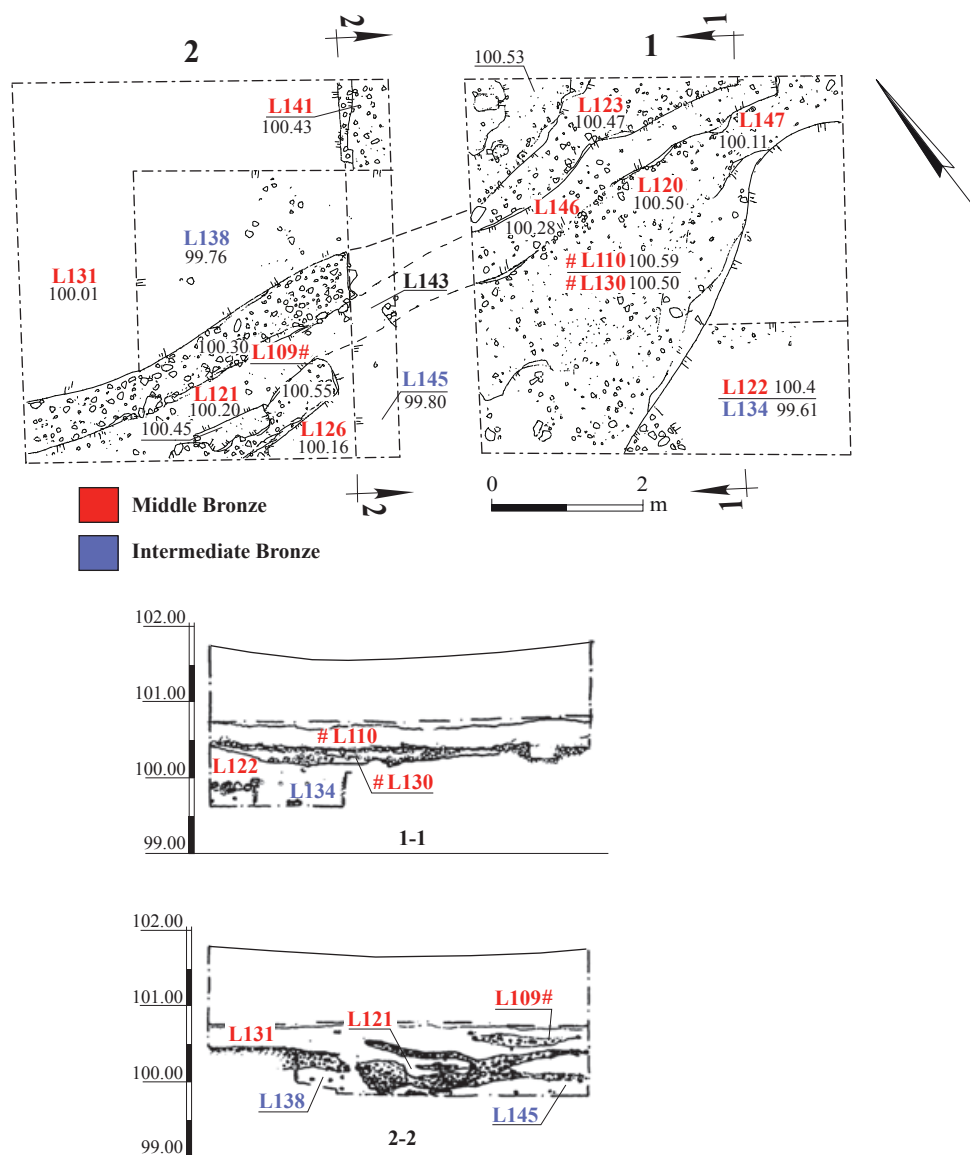


Fig. 5. Early Bronze Age Pottery.



The pottery includes open bowls (Fig. 6:1, 2); a deep holemouth bowl (Fig. 6:3); cooking pots (Fig. 6:4, 5); an amphoriskos (Fig. 6:6); and storage jars, some with folded envelope-like or indented ledge-handles (Fig. 6:7–10). An enigmatic, solid cylindrical clay rod, possibly a figurine (Fig. 6:11), concludes the list of finds. The pottery shows some affinities to the pottery from the small IBA rural site of ‘Ein el-Ḥilu, located c. 3 km to the southeast (Covello-Paran 2009: Figs. 7–9).

The analysis of the limited faunal remains from the Intermediate Bronze Age loci (L125, L133–L135, L138) identified cattle, pig, sheep and goat, with evidence of skinning cattle and butchering pigs and sheep (Agha 2015).

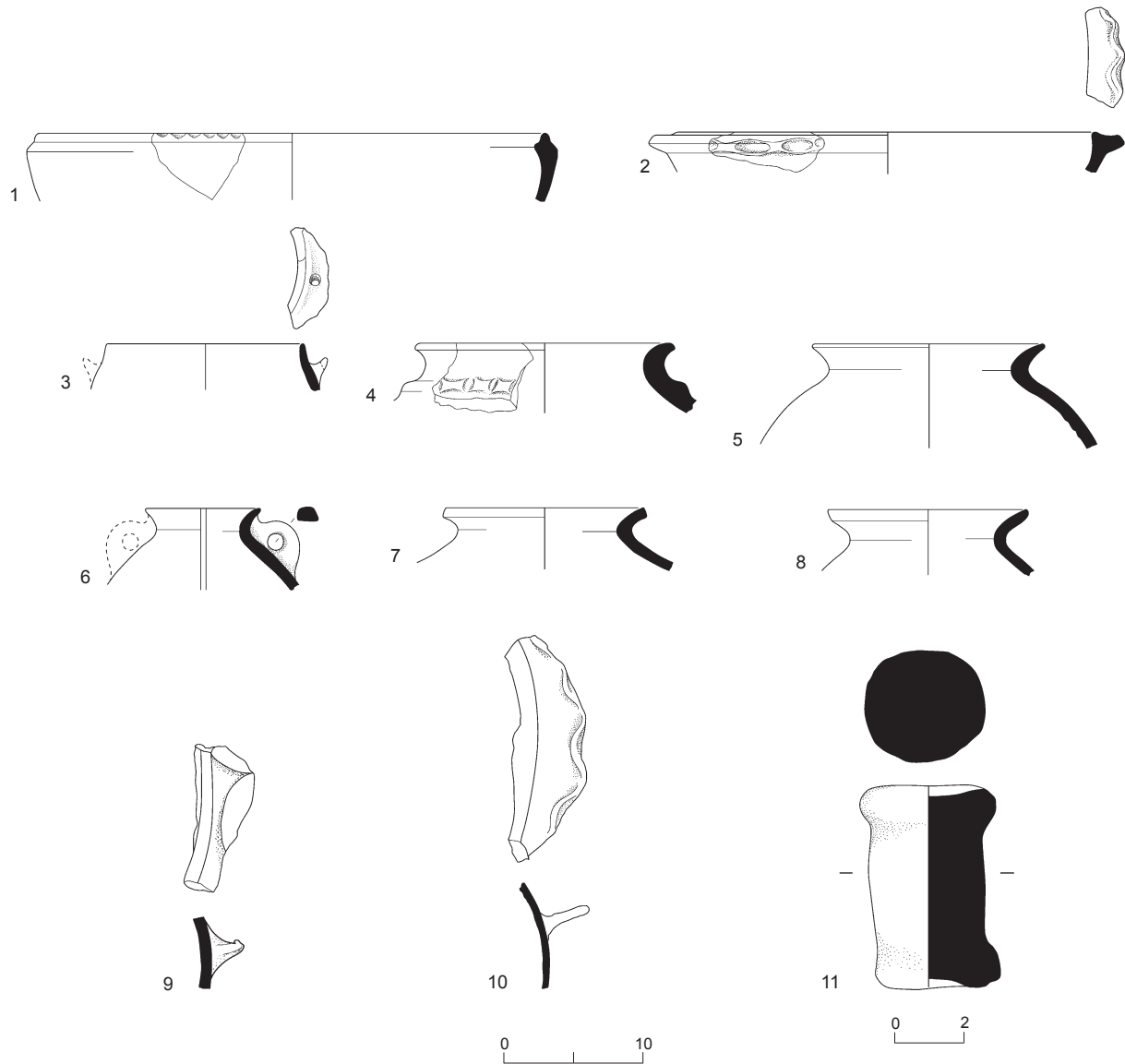


Fig. 6. Intermediate Bronze Age Pottery.

The Middle Bronze Age

Floors of packed earth and small stones, overlain by occupation accumulation layers (0.25–0.50 m thick), were uncovered in most of the excavated squares at a depth of 0.9–1.2 m below the surface. No walls or imprints of walls were associated with these floors. In Sqs 1–2 the floor was densely packed with small stones. Patches of two such superimposed layers were visible, with an occupation layer between them (L109, L110, L120, L123, L130; c. 0.3 m thick; Plan 5). A shallow channel (L121, L146; exposed length 11 m, width c. 0.6 m, depth 0.2–0.4 m; Figs. 7, 8), whose packed-earth sides incorporated many tiny fragments of pottery sherds and bones, was an



Fig. 7. Squares 1–2: Middle Bronze Age Channel 121, looking east.

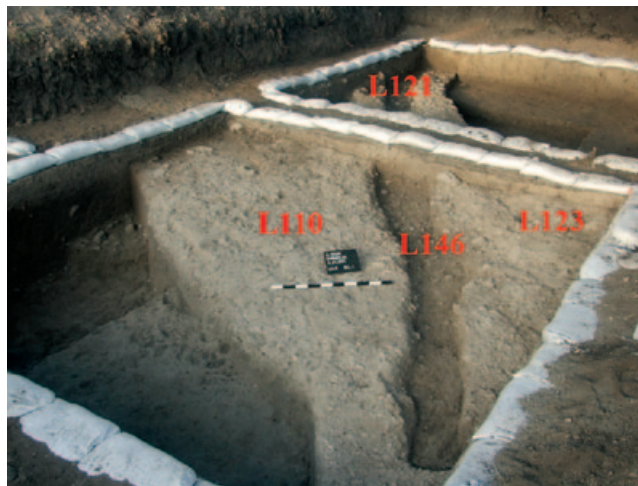
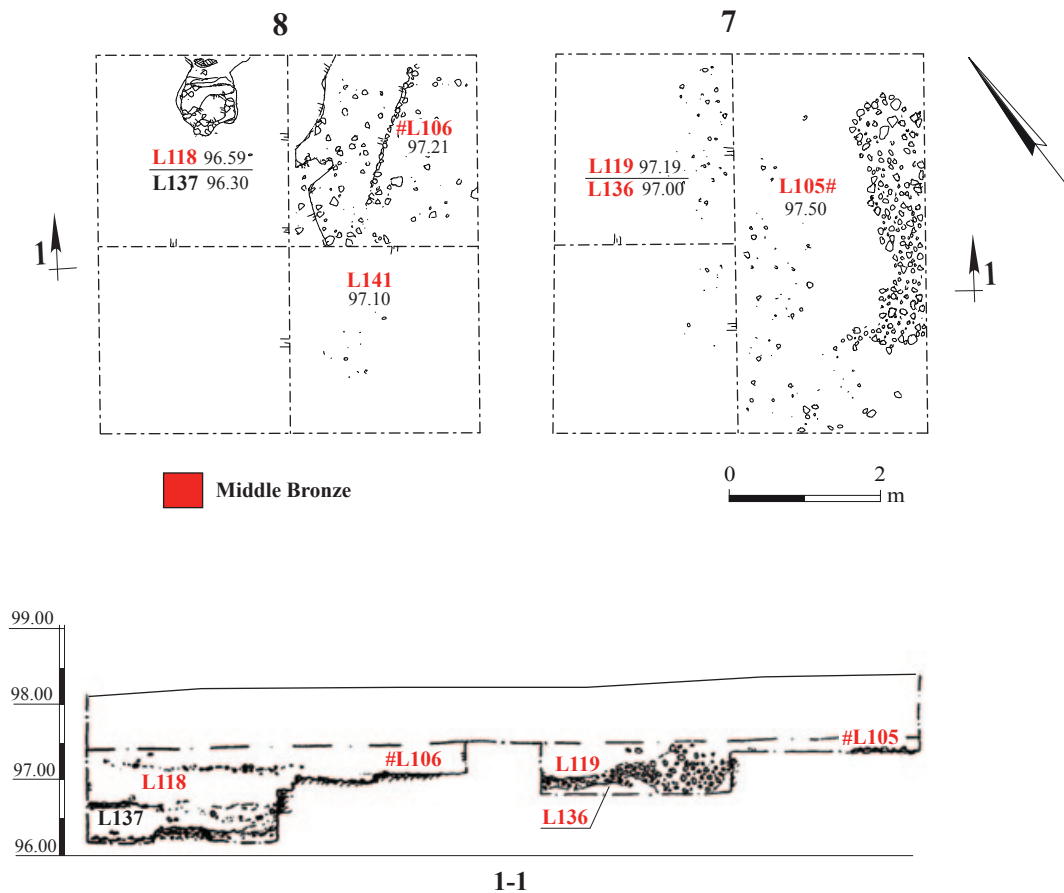


Fig. 8. Squares 1–2: Middle Bronze Age Floors 110 and 123 and Channel 146, looking west.

integral component of this floor; it sloped down gradually from east to west, following the natural topography. In the other squares, the floors and overlying accumulation layers (0.2–0.5 m thick) were made of more loosely-packed, small stones and pebbles (Sq 4—L102, L116 [Plan 4]; Sqs 5–6—L103, L104, L112, L140 [Plan 2]; Sqs 7–8—L105, L106, L118, L119, L136, L141 [Plan 6; Fig. 9]). In Sqs 9–10 the stone layer was thinner (L107, L108, c. 0.13 m thick; Plan 3). The absence of any floors or surfaces in Sq 11 indicates that this area lay beyond the site limits. The finds from the floors and overlying accumulation layers included pieces of basalt grinding bowls, flints, animal bones and numerous pottery sherds. The thinner and less densely packed-stone layers produced fewer finds.



Plan 6. Squares 7-8, plan and section.

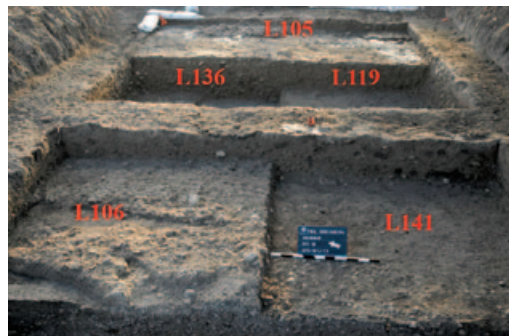


Fig. 9. Squares 7-8: Middle Bronze Age Floors 106 and 141 (foreground) and 119, 136 and 105 (background), looking southeast.

The pottery showed no evidence of water wear. It was mostly attributable to the MB I, and to a lesser degree—to the MB II, with sporadic residual sherds from earlier periods. Although there may have been two or more consecutive occupation phases in the course of the Middle Bronze Age, it was impossible to separate them, since only patches of superimposed floors were observed, and there were no walls.

The pottery includes many medium- and large-sized shallow bowls (Fig. 10:1–6), some of them red-slipped; small carinated bowls, most of them with a fairly pronounced carination (Fig. 10:7, 8), some more rounded (Fig. 10:9), and again several red-slipped; a variety of kraters, some with thickened rims (Fig. 10:10–12) and others

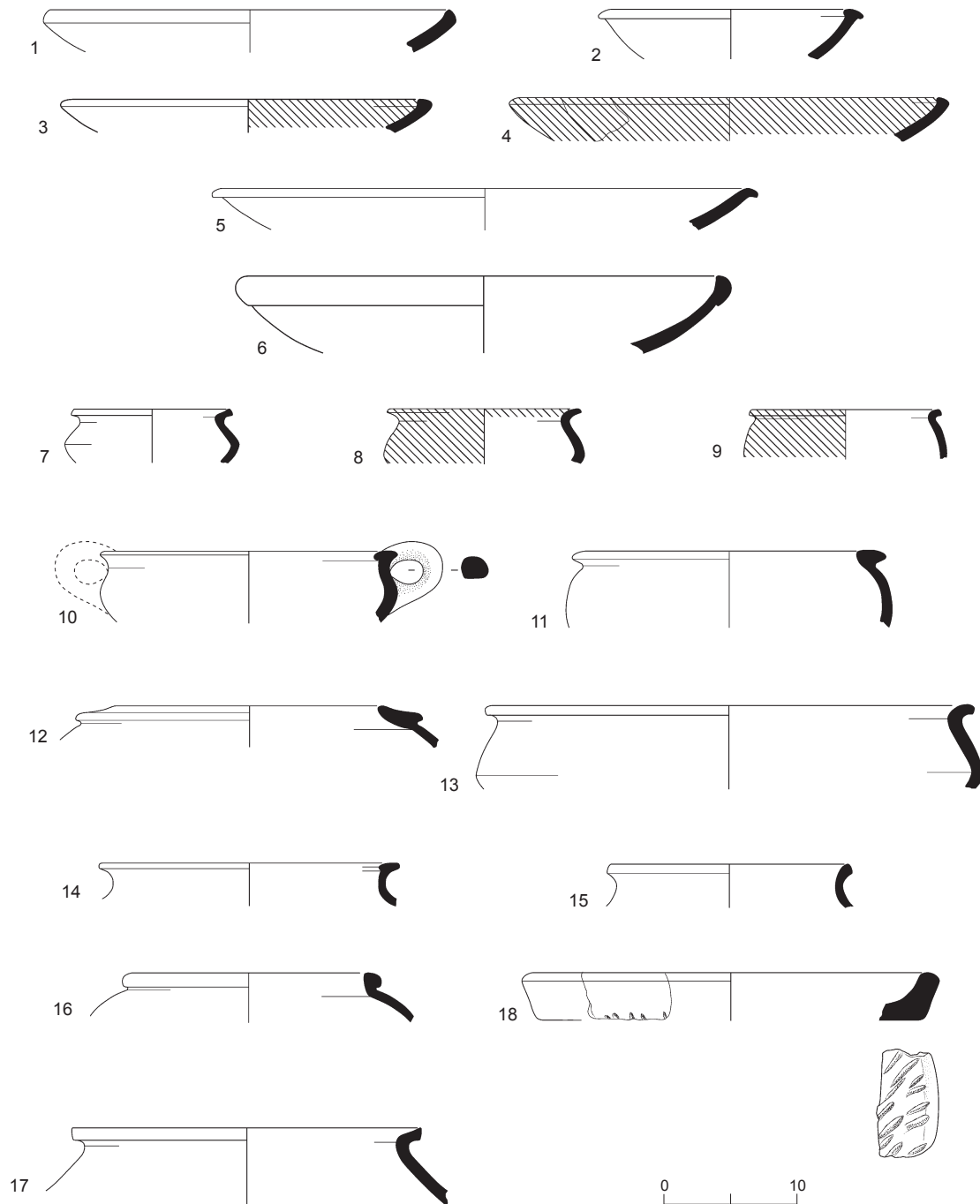


Fig. 10. Middle Bronze Age Pottery.

with out-turned rims (Fig. 10:13); globular cooking pots with out-turned rims (Fig. 10:14–16) and one with a triangular rim (Fig. 10:17); and a coarse handmade baking tray (Fig. 10:18). Storage jars with characteristic rims for the period predominate the repertoire. The types include small jars with either short, profiled rims (Fig. 11:1–4) or elongated, thickened ones (Fig. 11:5), large jars (Fig. 11:6–9) and large pithoi (Fig. 11:10–12). The decoration on the jars was of applied and incised rope patterns (Fig. 11:13, 14). The few juglets (Fig. 11:15, 16) have narrow necks, flaring rims, and handles—sometimes double-strand ones—extending from below the rim to the shoulder. Their body may have been piriform.

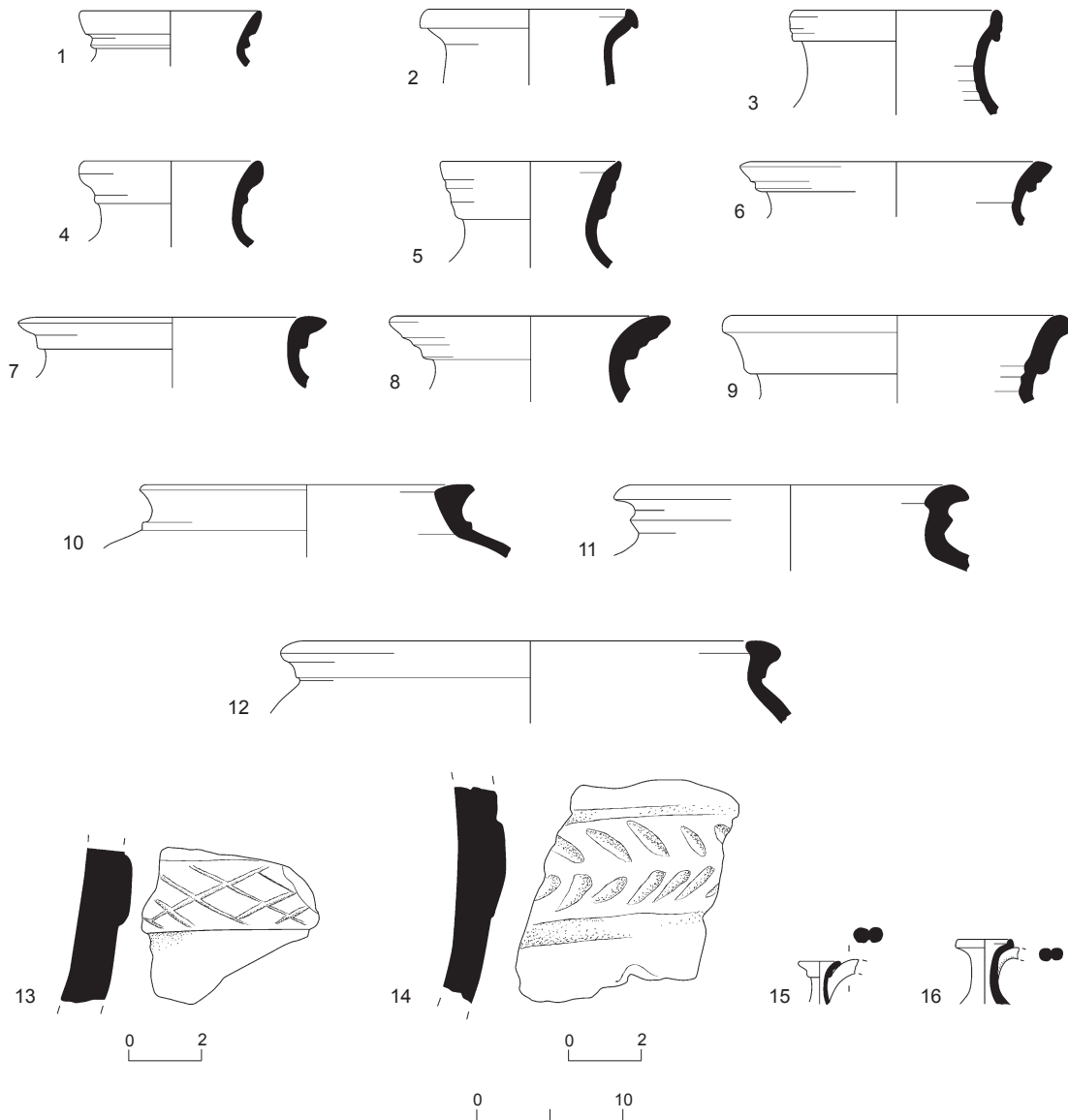


Fig. 11. Middle Bronze Age Pottery.

Most of these pottery forms appear in the MB I and continue into the early MB II, but the small bowls with the rounded profiles (Fig. 10:9) are more characteristic of the MB II. Only a single cooking pot (Fig. 10:17) is characteristic of the MB II–III. The pottery evidence thus points to an occupation in the transitional MB I–II period. Noteworthy in the Middle Bronze pottery is the large quantity of ‘pottery discs’—sherds secondarily worked into roughly circular discs of various dimensions.

A few broken basalt ground-stone vessels were uncovered in the Middle Bronze Age stratum: mortar bowls (Fig. 12:1–4), at least some of them three-legged (Fig. 12:5, 6). A basalt outcrop just south of Tel Shimron may have been the source of the raw material (Raban 1982:xxii). A base of a gypsum-alabaster vessel was the sole ‘luxury’ item (Fig. 12:7).

The flint tools include a few large Canaanean geometric sickle-blades, of a type that was in use from the Middle Bronze Age to the Iron Age (see Shemer 2015: Fig. 3). These artifacts probably came from the Middle Bronze Age settlement.

The analysis of c. 300 bones from the Middle Bronze Age stratum in Sqs 7–8 (L105, L106, L118, L119, L136, L141; Plan 5) reflects an agricultural economy that included animal husbandry (Agha 2015). There is a clear predominance of domesticated animals, including sheep and goats, cattle, pigs and a few equids. The relatively high percentage of mature sheep/goat and cattle compared to their percentage in the faunal remains analyzed from the nearby Middle Bronze Age town-site of Tel Qashish (c. 5 km to the west), led to the tentative proposal

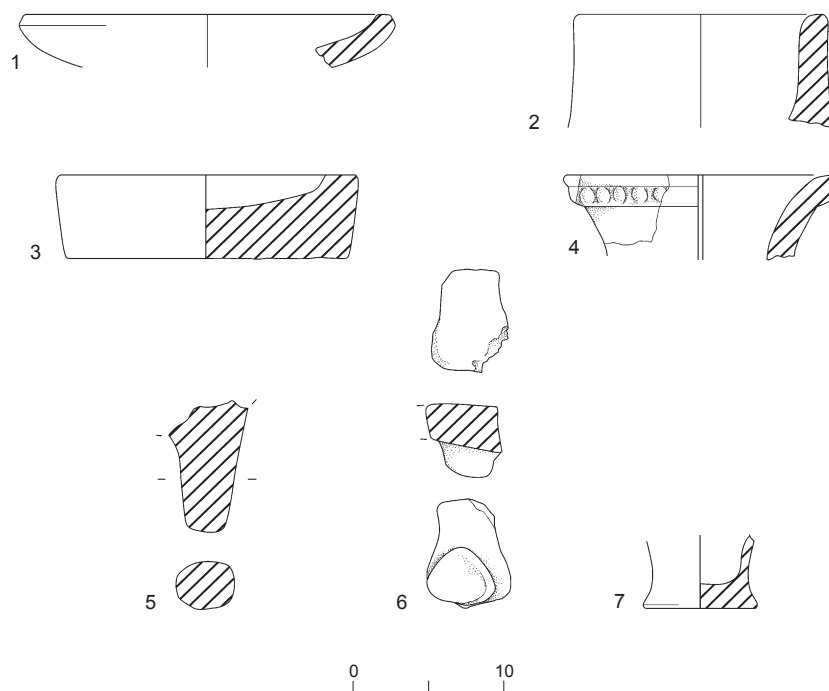


Fig. 12. Basalt Ground-stone vessels (1–6) and a gypsum-alabaster cup (7).

that the rural site of Tel Shimron West may have focused on production of secondary products, such as milk and wool, and possibly supplying the nearby urban settlements with younger animals for meat (Agha 2015).

Transitional Middle to Late Bronze Age

No post-MB II occupation phase was evident at the site, but a few sherds of finer, mostly imported wares, attributable to the MB III or the beginning of the Late Bronze Age were uncovered in the upper levels of the Middle Bronze Age stratum in Sqs 3–4 (L101, L102, L116; Plan 3). These vessels include Cypriot monochrome bowls with round and ‘wishbone’ horizontal handles (Fig. 13:1–3), a Cypriot White-Painted bowl with a wishbone handle (Fig. 13:4), a Chocolate on White bowl (Fig. 13:5) and a couple of Base Ring bowls (Fig. 13:6, 7). These delicate vessels are characteristic grave goods, and although no direct evidence of interments was found, it is possible that the area served for burial in the transitional Middle–Late Bronze Age, after the Middle Bronze Age site of Tel Shimron West was abandoned.

The Roman Period

A few sherds of Roman-period (Third Century CE) storage jars were found in Sq 11 (L111, L124; not illustrated), along with a small cluster of medium-sized field stones.

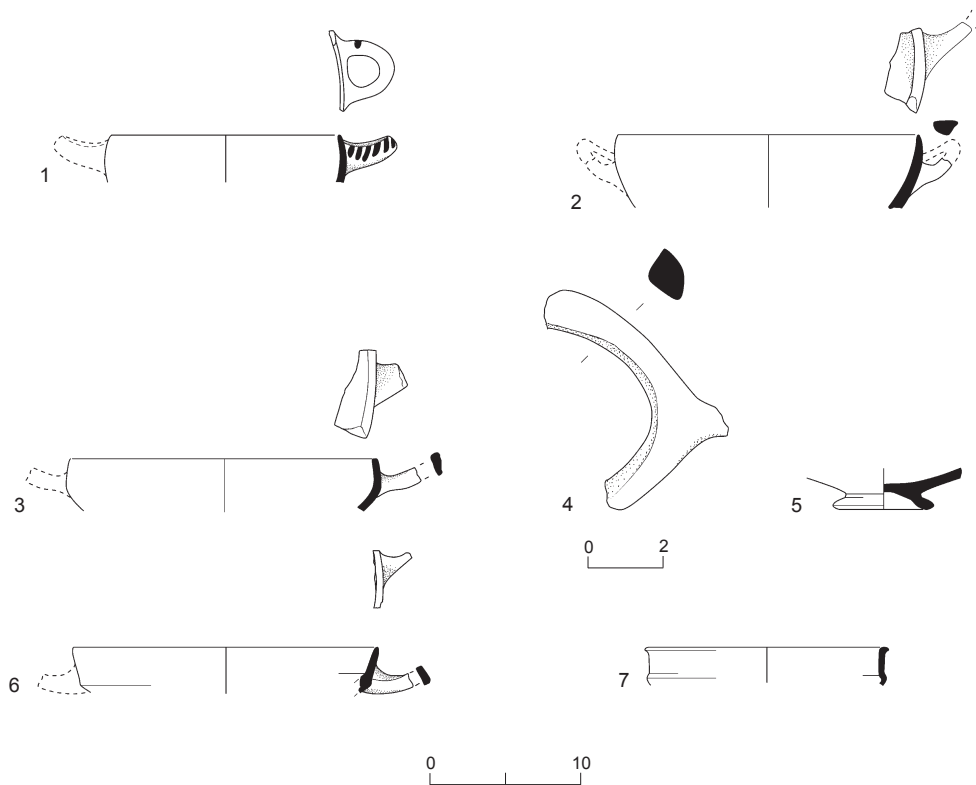


Fig. 13. Transitional Middle–Late Bronze Age Pottery.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The presence of some sherds from the Pottery Neolithic, Chalcolithic, EB IA, EB IB and EB II periods at Tel Shimron West and the exposure of stone-lined floors in small probes dug below the Intermediate and Middle Bronze Age strata, suggest that there was probably some occupation here during these periods. The extremely limited areas exposed, however, preclude an understanding of the nature, extent and duration of these small, rural, possibly short-lived settlements. There is no evidence for water-deposited sediments, and the residual and intrusive potsherds and flint artifacts in the various occupation layers seem to be predominantly the result of recent intensive agricultural and infrastructure activities. The extant remains are consequently understood as the remains of *in-situ* occupations.

The Intermediate Bronze Age occupation consisted of a thin layer of small stones spread over a large part of the excavated strip, with only a small quantity of pottery. It is possible that the exposed surfaces were open spaces on the fringes of the settlement, and that the occupations were seasonal, sporadic and short-lived. The ephemeral remains point to the existence of a small rural site, possibly similar to, but larger than the small hamlet excavated at 'Ein el-Hilu valley, a few kilometers to the east (Covello-Paran 2009). The Intermediate Bronze Age layers across the Tel Shimron West site were sealed by the overlying Middle Bronze Age floors.

The most substantial remains at Tel Shimron West are the Middle Bronze Age floors and overlying accumulation layers that were uncovered over an area about 250 sq m long. These are the *in-situ* remains of a rural settlement that may date to the transitional MB I–II period. The pottery repertoire, which includes a relatively large proportion of bowls and jars but no fine wares, the ground-stone mortar bowls and the limited flint assemblage, all indicate activities of an agricultural community, occupied with food-production and with processing and storage of agricultural produce. The faunal evidence reflects animal husbandry, possibly associated with supplying meat to the adjacent urban center.

The absence of walls and other architectural elements is probably due to the limited excavation and its location: a strip that yielded paved, open working spaces at the outer perimeter of the rural site. According to Ackermann, the construction of stone-paved surfaces was necessary to stabilize the ground. These surfaces would have been used for the agricultural processing activities undertaken at the rural settlement. The dearth of whole vessels and other artifacts suggests that the site was abandoned in an organized fashion.

Indeed, subsequent digging of trenches for relaying infrastructures in the field south of the excavation (supervised by Yotam Tepper on behalf of the IAA), exposed evidence for occupation layers, as well as some stone clusters and concentrations of pottery and other artifacts. This led Tepper to propose a tentative contour of the settlement (Tepper, pers. comm.; see Fig. 1), which located the focus of the rural settlement immediately southwest of the excavated area. The excavated strip would therefore have been on the northeastern outskirts of the rural site.

The Middle Bronze Age rural site of Tel Shimron West, which was situated near the intersection of Nahal Shimron and the Jezreel Valley, must have been a satellite settlement of the adjacent Tel Shimron, the large tell that controlled the major overland trade route from the Mediterranean coast to the Jezreel Valley (c. 200 dunams; peak c. 185 m asl, c. 80 m above the valley floor). The extensive archaeological survey that was carried out in the 1970s recorded occupational remains at Tel Shimron from the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods, from the Early, Intermediate, Middle and Late Bronze Ages, as well as from the Iron Age, and from the Persian, Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, Early Islamic and Crusader periods. A small-scale excavation documented the massive fortifications of the Middle Bronze Age city (Raban 1982:xxi–xxii, 69–76, Site 83), and salvage excavations over the past fifteen years have revealed remains from several early periods around the western and southern periphery of the tell, including small stone-paved areas from the Early Bronze Age and burial areas from the Middle Bronze Age (Shalem and Alexandre 1996; Feig 2007; 2009; Covello-Paran, forthcoming, and see therein an evaluation of the rural landscape surrounding Middle Bronze Age Tel Shimron).

NOTES

¹ The excavation (Permit No. A-6060), on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority and financed by the National Road Company, was carried out in order to examine the archaeological remains in the area designated for the widening of Road 75. The excavation was directed by Yardenna Alexandre, with the assistance of Eyad Bisharat (area supervisor), Assaf Peretz (photography), Rivka Mishayev and Mendel Kahan (surveying), Dov Porotsky (plans), Hagit Tahan-Rosen (pottery drawing), Maayan Shemer (flint), Leonid Zaiger (flint drawing), Nuha Agha (archaeozoology), as well as Karen Covello-Paran, Nimrod Getzov and Yotam Tepper (archaeological and ceramic advice). Dr. Oren Ackermann, geomorphologist at Bar-Ilan University and the Ashkelon Academic College, provided on-site geomorphological advice. The author is grateful to all.

² Terminology employed here: Intermediate Bronze Age (for MB I or EB–MB); Middle Bronze I (for MB IIA); Middle Bronze II (for MB IIB); Middle Bronze III (for MB IIC).

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