

OBSERVATIONS ON THE NEOLITHIC VILLAGE IN WADI SHU'EIB

by
Gary O. Rollefson

Introduction

In 1957 Zeuner briefly mentioned "Site 44" near the bridge in Wadi Shu'eib which was characterized by a Pre-Pottery Neolithic plaster floor and flint implements situated on a "red soil mixed with gravel".¹ This passing reference occurred in the first of a two-part article on prehistoric sites in Jordan, and presumably Zeuner would have expanded his comments on the site in the second part of his report, but unfortunately Zeuner died before the concluding section was submitted for publication.

In his synthesis of the Neolithic period in the Near East, Mellaart also mentioned the settlement in Wadi Shu'eib, but his comments only briefly touched on the presence of white ware at the site and the abandonment of the village at the end of the 7th millennium².

Recently attention has been directed again towards the vaguely known Neolithic site in Wadi Shu'eib, particularly regarding the potential size of the settlement³. Since the site has never been adequately described, and also because it has sustained considerable damage due to the widening of the road that passed along its south and east margins, a short reconnaissance was undertaken in the summer of 1986 to obtain a clearer impression of the circumstances of the Wadi Shu'eib Neolithic community.⁴

Site Setting and Description

The village is located approximately 22 km west of Amman on the Salt-Shuna road at coordinates 2188E, 1534N (Levant Palestine Grid, Sheet 50.J.26 Shunat Nimrin). It is situated on the north bank of

Wadi Shu'eib at *ca.* 375 m elevation; it rests on a slope of moderate steepness that, near the wadi margin, plunges suddenly into a gorge. The region receives approximately 400 mm of rainfall during the year,⁵ and the site today is the location of a broad field cultivated under dry-farming conditions.

The new roadcut reveals that cultural deposits are 2 m or more thick in some parts of the site, thinning out on exposed bedrock in the SW portion. Presently the site appears to be "saddle-shaped" in cross section (SW-NE), although the depression in the center of the site might reflect the development of a relatively recent erosional channel.

The cultural deposits include characteristically gray ashy sediments mixed with rubble, flint artifacts, animal bones, and architectural features. The deposits rest on a red-brown clay which also contains dense quantities of rubble, and no artifactual material was noted during a brief examination, suggesting that the site was not the locus of pre-Neolithic habitations. Near the bedrock outcrops in the SW section, a deposit of very fine yellowish clay was noted, reminiscent of similar deposits near bedrock at 'Ain Ghazal.⁶ The upper limits of the archaeological sediments are difficult to define, for the ashy cultural layers grade into post-occupational erosional layers of a dark brown soil containing the ubiquitous fragments of limestone rubble. The brown soil does not appear to contain any evidence of human occupation, indicating that post-PPN presence was brief and sparse at best.

The cultural deposits in the roadcut can be traced for approximately 350 m in a SW-NE direction, and while it was not

1. Zeuner 1957, p. 23.

2. Mellaart 1975, pp. 63, 68.

3. Rollefson 1987, p. 31.

4. I would like to express my gratitude to Colin

Gillet for making the visit to the site possible.

5. Beaumont 1985, Fig. 2.

6. Rollefson and Simmons 1986.

possible to determine the NW-SE dimension, the site probably does not exceed 6 or 7 hectares in extent; more likely the area of the village falls into the 4-5 ha range. This estimate would place the Wadi Shu'eib site in the same size class as Beida and Jericho.⁷

As many as 10 plaster floors were visible in the sections at Wadi Shu'eib, including a series of three superimposed floors separated by 10-20 cm. The floors were generally relatively thin (3-5 cm) and appeared to be made of poor quality plaster with a decided granular texture. One floor bore evidence of a replastering episode. None of the floors examined was in a good state of preservation, so it could not be determined if the floor surfaces had been polished and/or painted. Stone walls of several other buildings were also visible in the roadcut, but there did not appear to be any floors associated with them. From what could be seen in the sections, no structures appeared to be larger than 4-5 m in maximum dimension.

Artifacts

It is apparent that the density of artifacts exposed in the section was very low, at least in comparison to the sections at 'Ain Ghazal. Animal bone was occasionally visible in the deposits, and this material appeared to be well preserved. One broken slab of sandstone may have been a quern fragment (sandstone outcrops are very numerous higher up the wadi), but no grinding stones of limestone or basalt were noted, nor were any pieces of white ware in evidence.

A handful of flints was taken from the bulldozer scree at the side of the road. Of the 19 pieces collected, four were flakes (including three tools), 14 were blades (6 tools) and a single core trimming element (*lame à crete*). All the blades had punctiform platforms with the exception of one that was broad but quite thin; technologi-

cally, the small sample reveals a range of attributes that compares favourably with characteristic PPNB sites in the region. The raw material was dominated by a good quality brown flint (9 pieces), although purple and pinkish-gray resources were also well represented (three and four artifacts, respectively); two pieces were of gray flint, and one was too badly burned for determination.

The flake tools included a denticulate, a dihedral burin, and a burin on a concave truncation (both burins were of considerable size). The core trimming element had been fashioned into a double burin on an oblique truncation. Among the blade tools, three were transverse burins, two were knives, and one indeterminate tool (broken) that included backing retouch on both lateral margins. No sickle blades or projectile points were found during the brief survey.

Concluding Remarks

Although the visit to the site was brief, it is hoped that the descriptions and discussion provided above have served to increase the awareness of the general nature of the Neolithic settlement in Wadi Shu'eib. Its geographic and ecological location suggest that the site would be of great archaeological interest for comparisons with Jericho to the west and 'Ain Ghazal to the east.

At the present time it does not seem that the site is in immediate danger of additional damage due to construction, although it is inevitable that the recently exposed vertical bulldozer sections will collapse, thereby adding to the loss of information contained in the cultural deposits that have been preserved for the past 9,000 years.

Gary O. Rollefson
Department of Anthropology
San Diego State University

7. PPNB architectural evidence is visible only along ca. 350 m. of the roadcut, but deep and dense deposits of definite Yarmoukian and possible PPNC material extend for some 700 m of the

bulldozer sections, making the later occupational history of Shu'eib as large as or larger than 'Ain Ghazal. Test excavations in 1988 should help to clarify the history of the site.

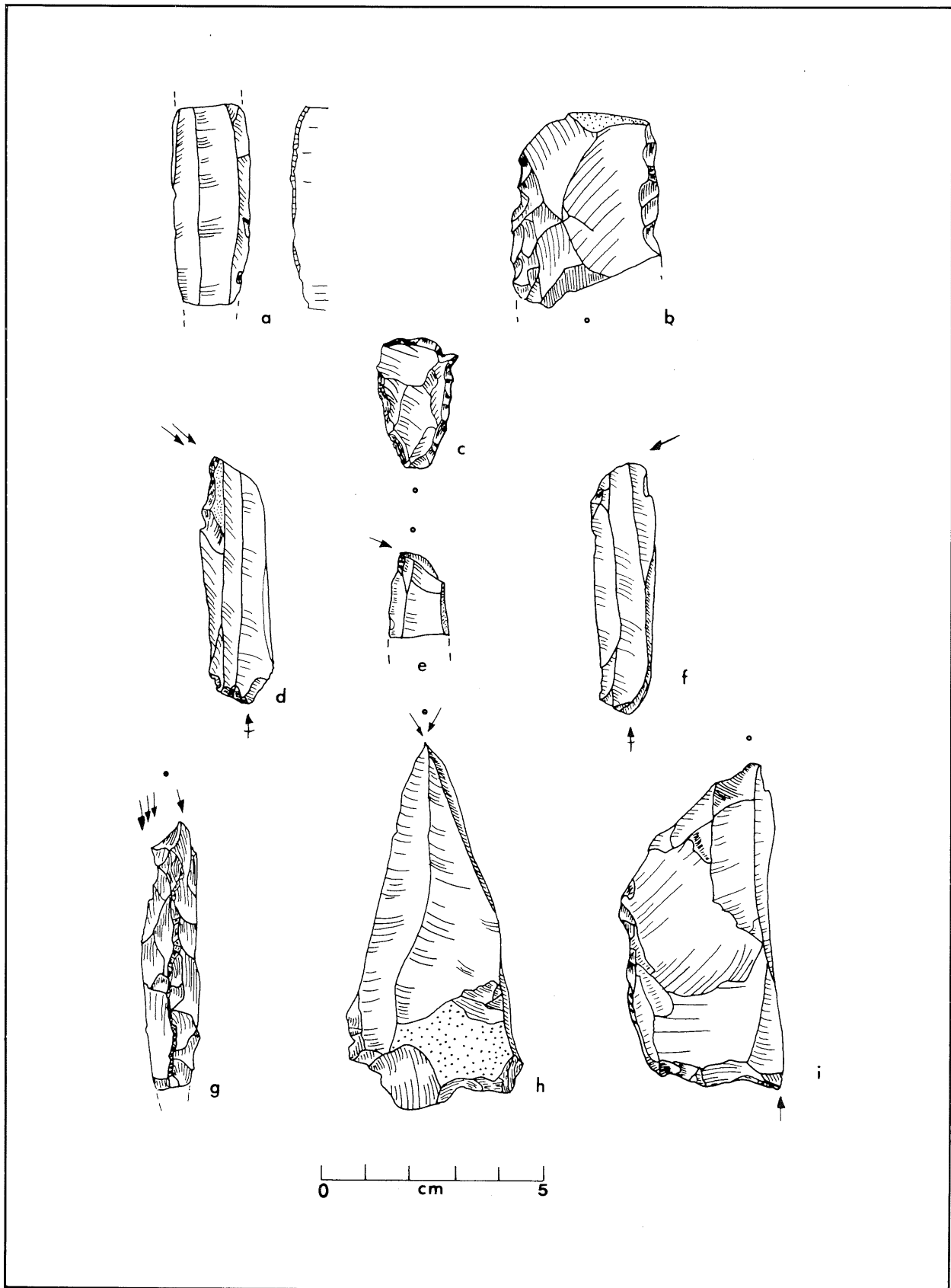


Fig. 1: Chipped stone tools from the Wadi Shu'eib Neolithic village: a) knife); b) denticulate; c) *perçoir*; d-f) transverse burins; g) double burin on concave truncation; h) dihedral burin; i) burin on concave truncation.

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