

PRELIMINARY RESULTS OF THE FIRST SEASON OF THE JOINT
JORDANO-FRENCH PROJECT AT ABU ḤAMID

by

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Abu Ḥamid is situated in the Jordan Valley, 16 km NW of Deir 'Alla on the terrace constituted by the marls of the Pleistocene Lake Lisan at a mean altitude of 250m below sea-level (Fig. 1). In that region annual precipitation nowadays is about 200mm; dry-farming is possible but irrigated farming is more reliable.

The site was discovered in 1975 and dated to the late Neolithic/early Chalcolithic period by M. Ibrahim, K. Yassin, and J. Sauer¹ during the first year of their survey of the Jordan Valley, it was revisited by Z. Kafafi in 1982² but had not been excavated. Unfortunately the site was partially bulldozed since then to facilitate agro-industrial development.

A first season of excavations took place in January-March 1986 under the auspices of Yarmuk University (Jordan), the French Center of Scientific Research and the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Great support was given by the Department of Antiquities and a grant received from the National Geographic Society (Washington)³.

The goals of our first season were:

- 1) To establish the extent and nature of this late 5th or most probably first half of the 4th millennium settlement.
- 2) To precisely define, both chronologically and ecologically, Abu Ḥamid's position and role relative to other contemporary sites of the region such as Shunah North, Neve Ur (on the West Bank), Pella, Megiddo (w. b.), Beisan (w. b.), Farah (w. b.), Ghrubba, Ghas-sul, and outside the region to the sites of the Gaulan and Ḥauran to the north, to the ones of the coastal plain and southwards to the sites of the Negev such as Gilgath, Abou Maṭar, Safadi, and Shiqmim among others.
- 3) To excavate an area large enough to understand the nature of the structures and their spatial relationship in order to answer to the following questions:
 - Was Tell Abu Ḥamid a permanent settlement? Were the populations settled or partially settled, or were they nomadic?
 - What were the subsistence practices and

1. Ibrahim *et al.*, 1976.

2. Kafafi, 1982.

3. The participants to the 1st season of excavations were C. Andrews (Yarmuk Univ.), M. Biewers (Univ. Lyon II), S. Cluzan (Univ. Paris I), E. Coqueugniot (CNRS, URA 17), J. Desse (CNRS, CRA), G. Dollfus (CNRS, ER 317), M.G. Froidevaux (CNRS L.P. 5500), M. Jamra (Yarmuk Univ.), Z. Kafafi (Yarmuk Univ.), N. Kayser (Univ. Paris VI), F. Le Mort (CNRS, ER 376), R. Neef (Groningen Univ.), D. Rahimi (Univ. of Pennsylvania), I. Suleiman (Dept. of Antiquities of Jordan), A. 'Omari (Yarmuk Univ.), M. Qedi, N. Qedi (Yarmuk Univ.), K. Wright (Yale Univ.), I. Zu'bi (Yarmuk Univ.)

We owe a great deal of gratitude to René Saupin (Ingénieur des travaux IGN), who spent many of his week-ends mapping the site. The

flint drawings are the work of A. Deraprahmian (CNRS, URA 17).

We would like to express our special thanks to Dr A. Ḥadidi, general director of the department of antiquities, Dr A. Badran, president of Yarmuk University, Dr M. Ibrahim, director of the Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology, Ph. Guillemin, sous-directeur des sciences sociales et humaines DGRCS, P. Leclercq, ambassadeur de France, H. Le Breton, attaché culturel de l'ambassade de France à Amman, G. Tate, directeur de l'IFAPO, F. Villeneuve, secrétaire scientifique de l'IFAPO à Amman, for their constant help in the different steps of the project.

Our gratitude goes also to the Museum of the University of Pennsylvania and to the Fulbright fellowship foundation who gave the possibility to D. Rahimi and K. Wright to join the expedition.

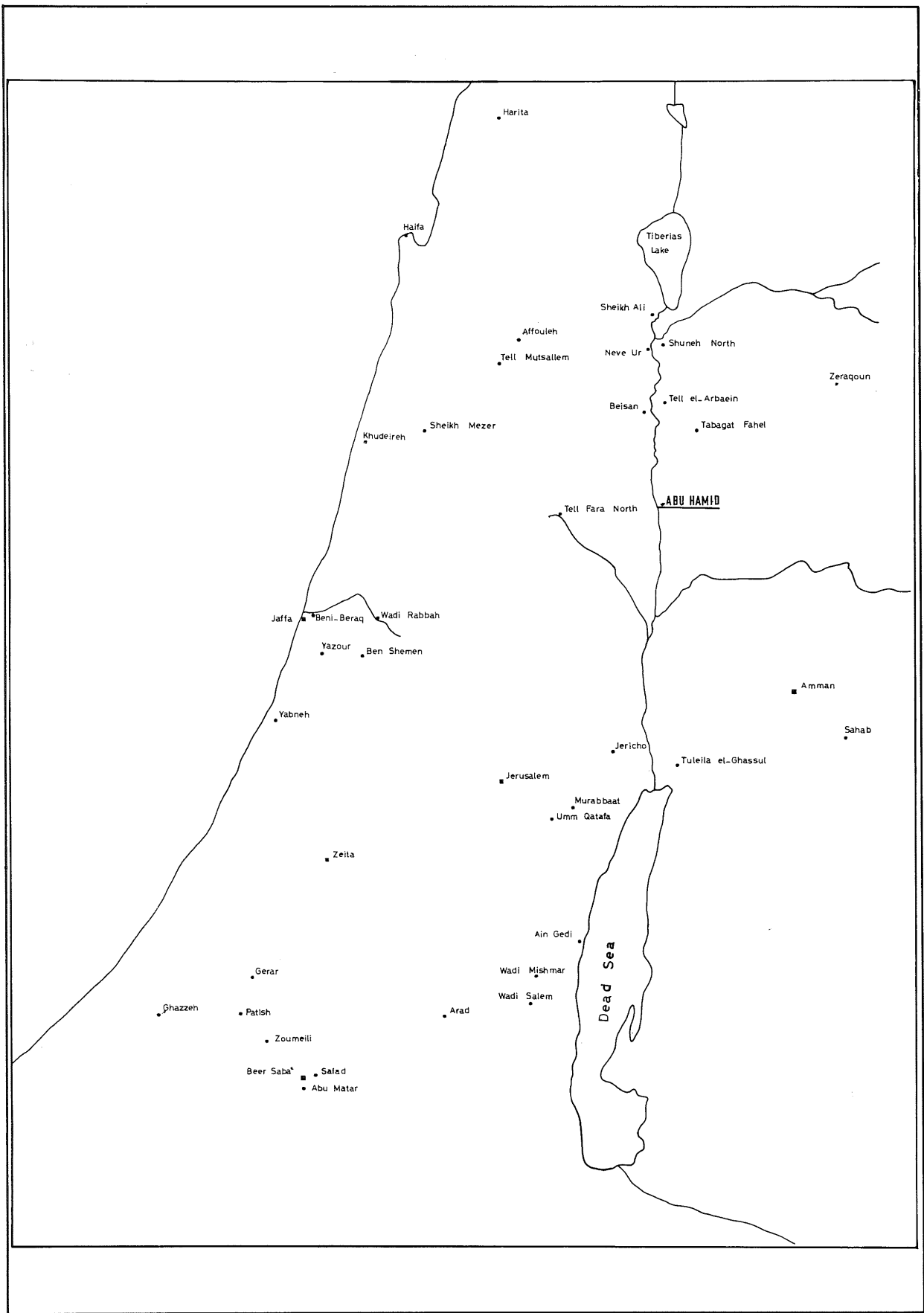


Fig. 1 Abu Hamid 1986. Map of situation.

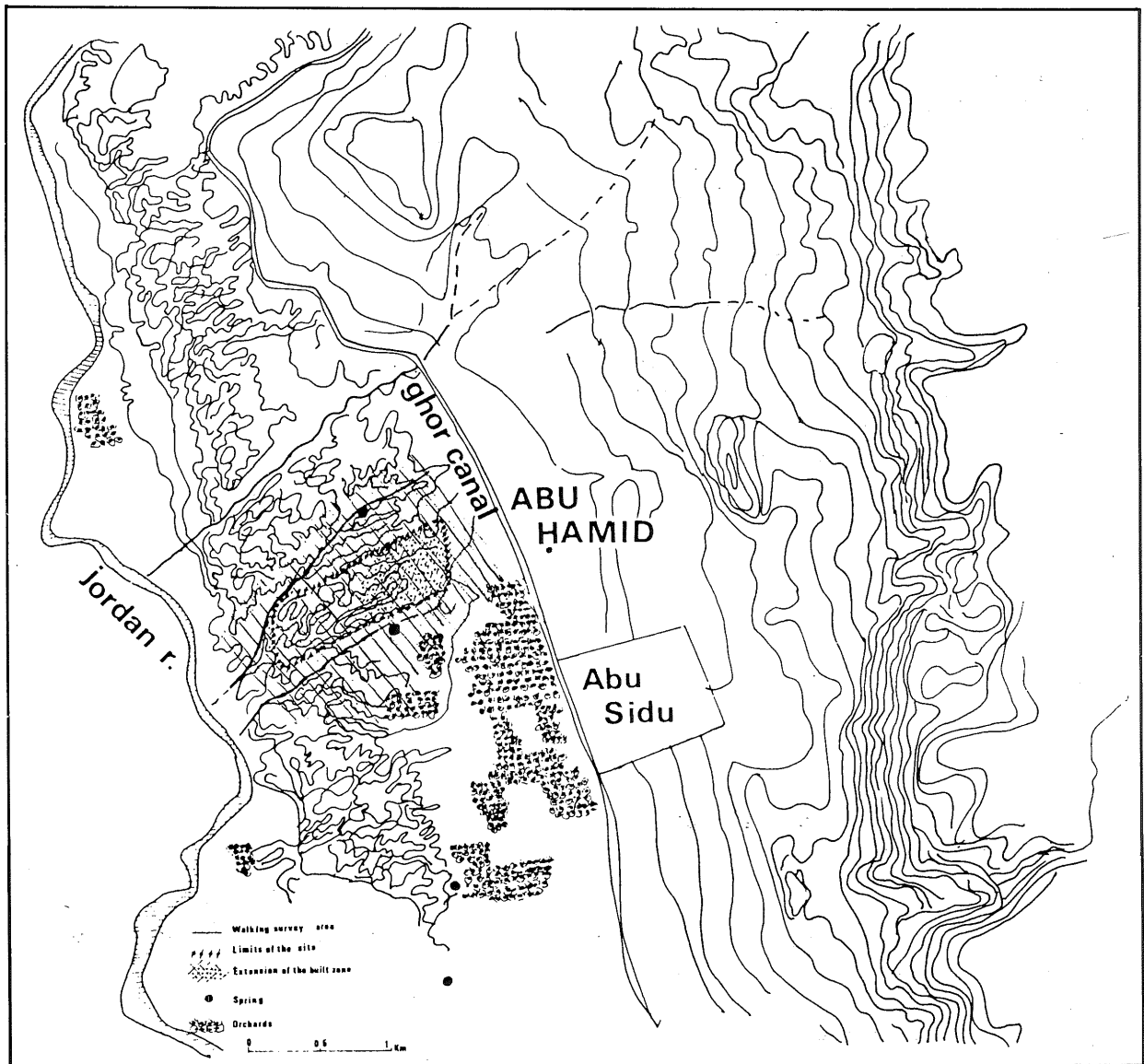


Fig. 2 Abu Hamid 1986. Map of the surveyed area and of the extension of the site.

diet of this group?

- Finally did the settlement which appeared quite large from the survey come to be a point of exchange and interaction between the Jordan river, the highlands and the Eastern Plateau? A possibility suggested by its situation.

History of the excavations and first results

- A. Our first task was to make a general walking survey over a 20 hectare area, to determine with a reasonable degree of confidence the limits of the site. During that operation, only the diagnostic artifacts were picked up.

This survey showed that:

- Pottery sherds, lithics, flints, ground stone tools cover an area of 5.6 hectares (1,400 m E-W; 0,4 km N.S.) (cf. Fig.2).
- The site is limited on its southern and northern sides by two deep valleys in which are located two perennial springs. With the Jordan river also nearby, access to water was definitely not a problem for the inhabitants.
- The site is located near two fords of the Jordan river. Fords and wadis coming on the eastern side from the 'Ajlun mountains, on the western side from the Samaria hills provided the population with natural routes to move back and forth in the area (Pl. LXXIX: 1-3).

- The site has been dissected by many erosional gulleys. A good geomorphological survey is badly needed. Such a survey is scheduled for the fall of 1986.
- B. Our second step was to put in some small soundings to see if all the site had been inhabited (Fig. 3). These soundings showed very clearly that 2.5 hectares (including the part which has been bulldozed) at the most was covered with permanent or semi-permanent buildings. We can then conclude that either the western part of the site was only the location of very temporary dwellings (tents, bush or reed shelters) which disappeared completely with deflation and erosion,⁴ or alternatively, that this part of the site was not built up but was only an area of outdoor activities or of enclosures for the herds.
- C. Then, according to the grid and preliminary to the excavations, we proceeded to systematically map and pick-up all the artifacts over an area of 2000 m² which seemed to be the best preserved.

Our purposes were:

- 1) To document as much as possible the duration of occupation and particularly the final phases of occupation of the site despite the erosion and deflation that has affected the structures of the last periods of the settlement.
- 2) To have the data in order to compare, in a coming stage of our research, the nature of the materials found on the surface with those from the excavation; this will enable us to figure out the degree to which surface material found on surveys can be taken as an indication of ancient community size and organization for this kind of site which is common in the Jordan Valley.
- D. We opened about 300 m² (Fig. 3) in three main operations: the first two in the area where we did the systematic

pick-up (Pl. LXXX:1); the third on another spur (Pl. LXXXII:1), a little lower in altitude in a zone where lines of stones (Pl. LXXXII:2) and delineation of pits were still visible on the ground. Also several sections exposed by erosion were cleaned.

The cultural deposit is thin, varying from 0.30/0.50m in some areas to 1.00/1.20m in others. The sterile soil was reached in pits, in sections and in one sounding⁵. All these exposures suggest that at least in the area which has not been bulldozed, the period of occupation of the settlement was of short duration.

In two of the operations we distinguished two successive main levels of occupation; we might be able in the future to subdivide these on the basis of indications of refectory of walls and floors which were noticed while we were excavating.

The first level, immediately over the sterile soil is consistently distinguished by mud brick walls defining rectangular rooms. So far, we have not yet excavated a complete room, and we do not know the plans of the houses. The walls are definitely built of plano-convex mud-bricks⁶ with neither foundation trenches nor stone-foundations. They are sometimes delineated on one of their sides by a row of small pebbles; one wall shows a niche or an opening marked by four big stones. Associated with these walls are small stone surfaces and packed clay living floors on which pots, flint artefacts, spindle whorls and other debris could be precisely mapped (Fig. 5; Pl. LXXXII:1). During the following occupation, these structures were cut by cylindrical pits. At least one of these pits had its bottom and sides well coated by a smooth yellow-clay plaster and could be considered as a storage bin (Pl. LXXXII: 2).

4. Many big stones that could have been used in temporary structures were found down below on the slopes of the gulleys of erosion.

5. Pits, loc. 115-113 square A 4; section, operation 3 squares AN-AP 09; A6, test pit.

6. The average size of the bricks is 21x15x10/12cm.

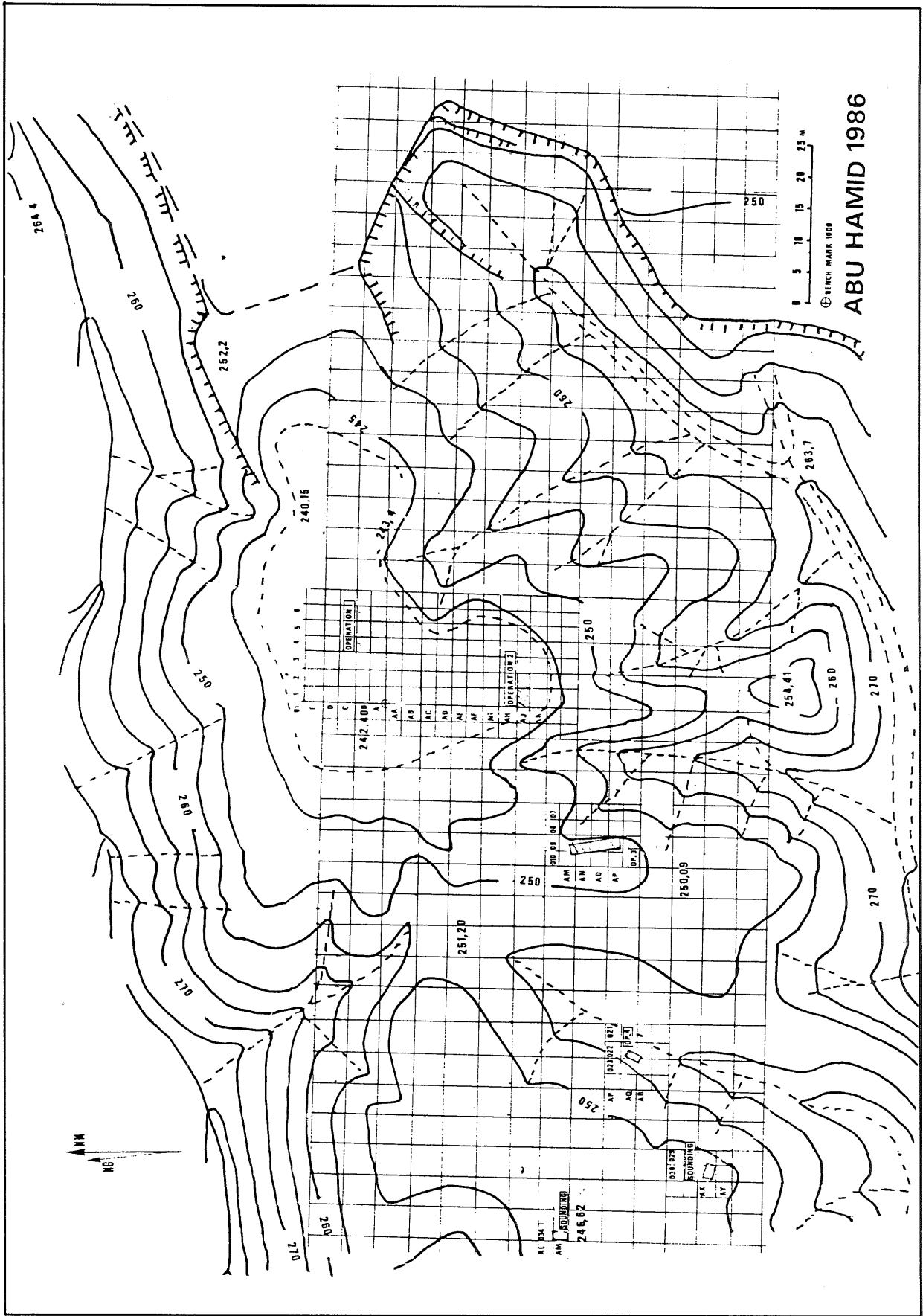


Fig. 3 Abu Hamid 1986. Map of the site with the location of the main operations

In its bottom was uncovered a large stone slab.

Unfortunately, the level from which most of the pits seem to originate is badly eroded. It consists essentially of patchy remains of burnt whitish clayey floors, of mud-brick walls of which only one or two courses of bricks only are usually preserved, of circular clay-lined basins, of small stone-filled fire pits and hearths which sometimes are associated with cooking vessels and jars (Pl. LXXX:3) and of larger pits filled with rubbish or with pebbles, most often cracked by heat (Pl. LXXX:2). Associated with this level are irregular sloping open-areas, sometimes limited by little stones, filled or covered with grey-black organic material and remains of decayed structures of combustion (*cf.* Fig. 4, square B6).

On what appears to be the western margin of the settlement, close to remains of mud-brick stone-lined rectangular dwellings (Pl. LXXXII:2), we noticed a series of large depressions. In order to try to find a stratigraphic link between these kinds of structures and the mud-brick structures we decided to clean a long section beside one of the erosion gulleys which cuts both of them (Fig. 6b; Pl. LXXXII:1). In one of the depressions, we cleared a very regular 1,50m circle of 2 rows of 4 layers of bun-shaped finger impressed bricks (Pl. LXXXIII:2,3) that were protecting the rim of a huge pithos (Pl. LXXXII:3). This jar (diam. 1m; ht. 1,50m) was placed in a deep pit dug into the marl and the underlying conglomerate sand (Fig. 6b). The morphology of the jar (with the exception of the rather unusual inner ledge-handles), the ware, and the relief bands with impres-

sed finger impressions on the outside, are comparable to storage vessels excavated at Ghassul⁷, in the Beisan region⁸, at Sahab⁹, and on chalcolithic sites on the Gaulan¹⁰. Our suggestion is that, in the depressions noticed nearby, there are or were more of these jars and that this area was a kind of storage space for the settlement. This hypothesis has to be proved by future excavations.

The Archaeological Material

Pottery

The mending of the vessels and the preliminary study of the pottery are in process. The data are being computerized¹¹ in order to quantitatively assess the components of the assemblage. Therefore the picture presented here is very impressionistic.

Most of the sherds are covered with lime concretions and the surfaces are very often quite eroded. The colour of the surfaces as they appear when cleaned are generally buff, pink, pale reddish, and sometimes light grey; altogether they look different from the dark red, highly vitrified wares from Ghassul, even if the techniques of manufacture are similar. In the colour of their ware they are, at least in appearance, closer to the ones found in the north of the Jordan Valley: Tabqat Fahl (chalcolithic levels)¹², Shunah north¹³, and Neve Ur (w.b.). Coarse, medium and fine wares were found. Half of the sherds are very gritty; the size of the grit (chert, gypsum, calcite, basalt) which seems to be natural to the clay rather than added on purpose generally vary from 0.5mm to 2mm. In some vessels there are 4-5mm particles of basalt. Small bowls are made of fine ware, the temper of which is usually sand. Use of

7. Mallon *et al.* 1934.

8. Pers. comm. J. Perrot.

9. M. Ibrahim; paper delivered to the 3rd international conference on archaeology and history of Jordan.

10. Epstein, 1982.

11. The computer program chosen for this pur-

pose is Microbase. S. Cluzan is in charge of computerizing the data.

12. Pers. comm. J. Tennisson.

13. Some sherds from Shunah North were on exhibit during the Tubingen workshop on *Prehistory in Jordan*; we were able to compare them to those from Abu Hamid.

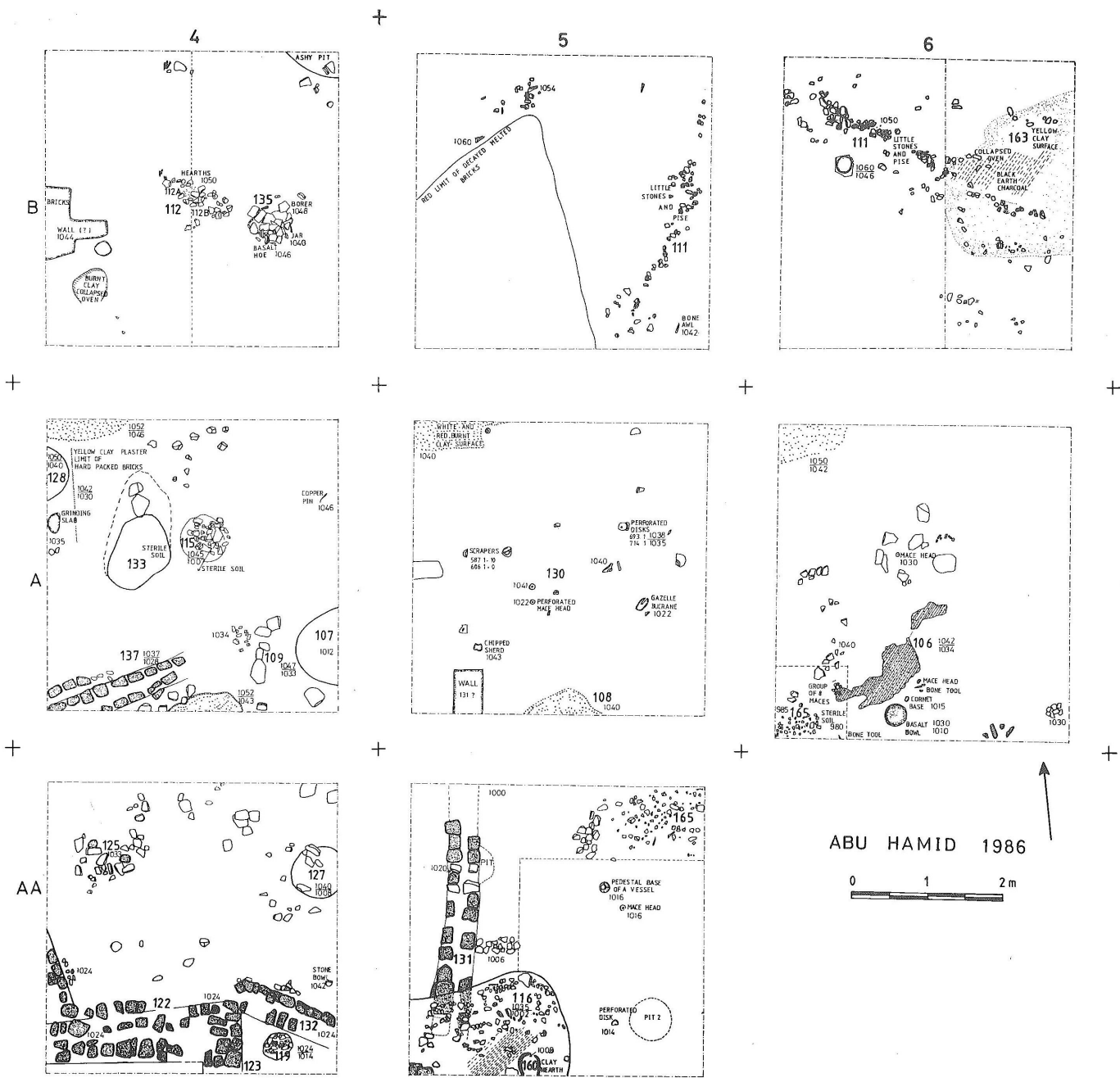


Fig. 4 Abu Hamid 1986. Plan of the structures, operation 1

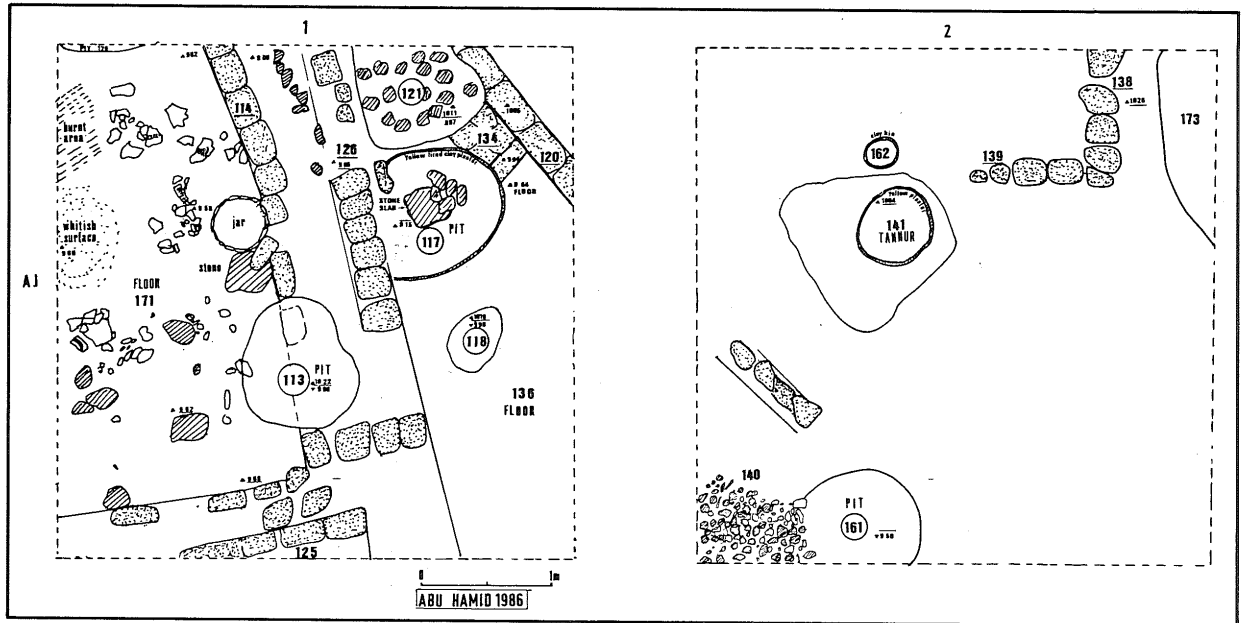


Fig. 5 Abu Ĥamid 1986. Plan of the structures, operation 1, squares AJ 1-2

well levigated clay is not rare. With the exception of the small conical bowls on the inside of which traces of slow-wheel are visible, the pottery is hand-made, sometimes coiled. During their manufacture, the pots were standing on mats or basketry the imprints of which can still be seen on the bases (Fig. 10:20,21; Pl. LXXXV:12-14). The outside surface and often the inside surface of the open bowls was wet-smoothed and/or self-slipped. In general the pottery is hard, and the firing seems well controlled, even for the very large jars. However many vessels are porous.

The decoration of the vessels includes:

a) impressed designs (Fig. 10:1-17; Pl. LXXXV:1-11) made either with the tip of a reed, or of a stick (Pl. LXXXV:1-3,5), or with finger nails (Pl. LXXXV:4,6,7); b) applied clay bands with lunates in relief overlapping each other (Pl. LXXXIV:1,3,6), or with finger impressions; c) associations of these applied coils or finger nail impressions with painted bands or motives of red iron oxide either horizontal, vertical or oblique (Pl. LXXXIV:1,2,6); d) simple geometric painted patterns (Pl. LXXXIV:4) or rare naturalistic designs usually of

plants (Pl. LXXXIV:5); and e) a few, unfortunately very small sherds from the deepest level that are covered with dark red paint and burnished¹⁴.

The main shapes in the category of the open forms are conical bowls (Fig. 7:1-14), the smaller ones with diameters of 8-10cm (with or without a red painted band near the rim), the larger bowls with diameters 13-18cm, and cups on a high pedestal base, often fenestrated (Fig. 7:18-20). Sherds of huge basins with thick walls and applied decoration are attested. Very flat discs with finger-impressed rims could be either large plates or lids (Fig. 7:17). So far only one ogival base of a cup (Fig. 10:18) and what might be a fragment of a cornet (Fig. 10:19) have been found. Among the closed forms, the holemouth jars seem to be by far the most numerous (Fig. 8:1-5); some jars, either globular or ovoid have low-necks (Fig. 8:6,7). One of these deserves special mention. It is a huge pithos or storage jar found intact (Pl. LXXXIII:1) in a pit (*cf. supra*). The general shape is ovoid. The mouth is slightly smaller than the widest diameter (0.85m and 1m respectively), the rim is everted.

14. Most of these pottery fragments were uncovered on the pebble surface loc. 165 in squares AA5 and B6. They look similar to

some of the brown-red burnished sherds found at Munhata (W. Rabah phase; pers. comm. C. Pellerin and J. Perrot).

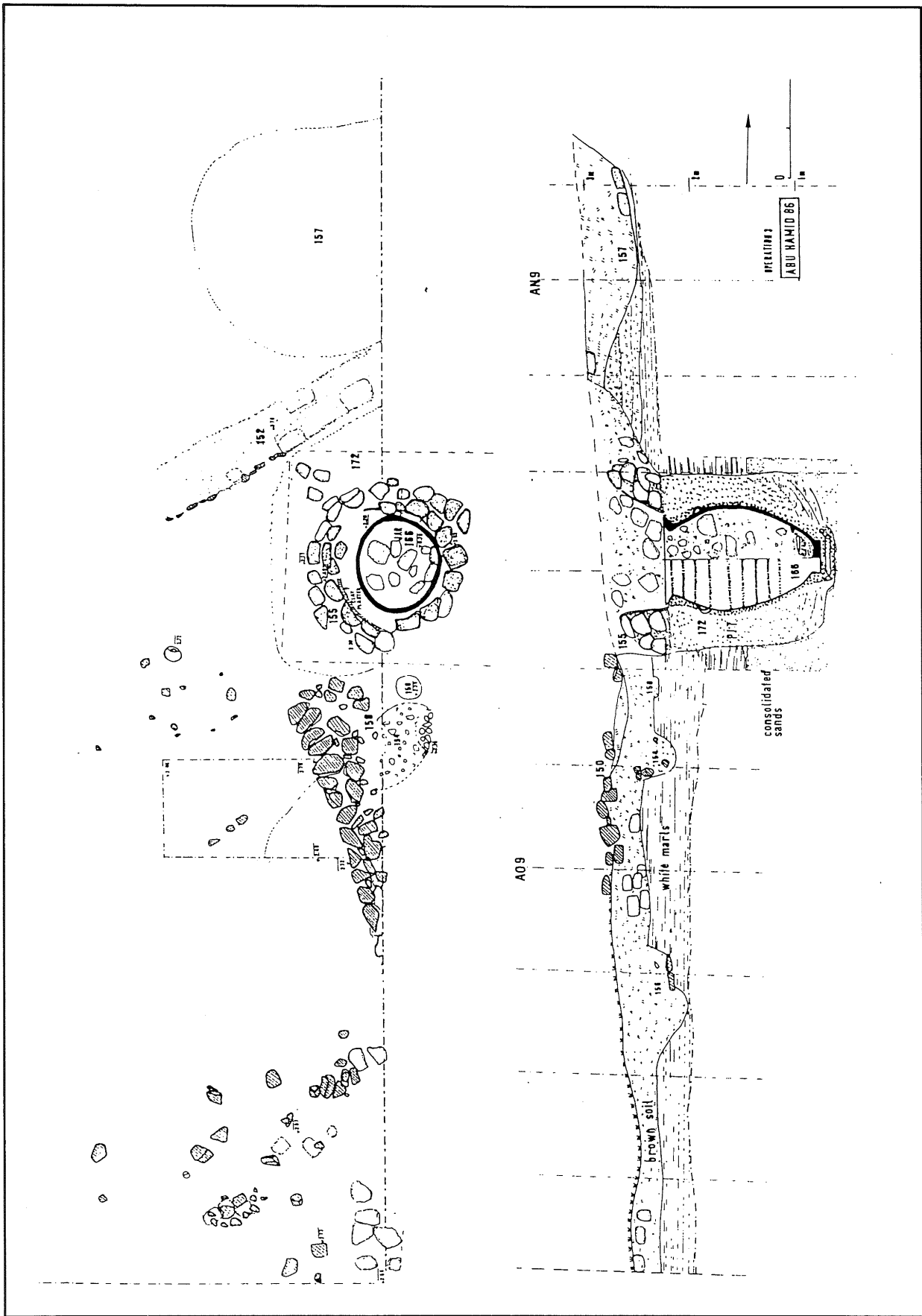


Fig. 6 Abu Hamid 1986. Plan and section of the structures, operation 3 — AN-AO 9

The base is flat and narrow. On the shoulders are two opposed loop handles. In the inside, at 35cm above the bottom, are two ledge handles (Pl. LXXXIII:4). They do not seem to have functioned as handles and it has been suggested that they were used as refill level indicators. The outside wall of the jar is ornamented with nine rows of applied impressed bands. Among the jars, there is a group of very small jars made of fine ware, some of them painted with plant motives. In general, on the jars, the handles (Fig. 9:1-7) are usually vertical lug

handles, but loop handles and even ledge handles occur. Some handles have applied decoration.

All the ceramic assemblage seems very close to the ones of the Chalcolithic sites of the Gaulan¹⁵; it presents many similarities with the pottery found in the basal levels of Shunah North and on a number of sites of the Jordan Valley surveyed by Kafafi¹⁶, and many parallels with the pottery from Ghassul¹⁷. Ties definitely exist with sites of the coastal plain¹⁸ and of the Negeb but they seem looser.

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15 Epstein 1982.

16 Kafafi 1982

17 Cf. Mallon *et al.* 1934; North 1960.

18 Perrot and Ladiray 1980.

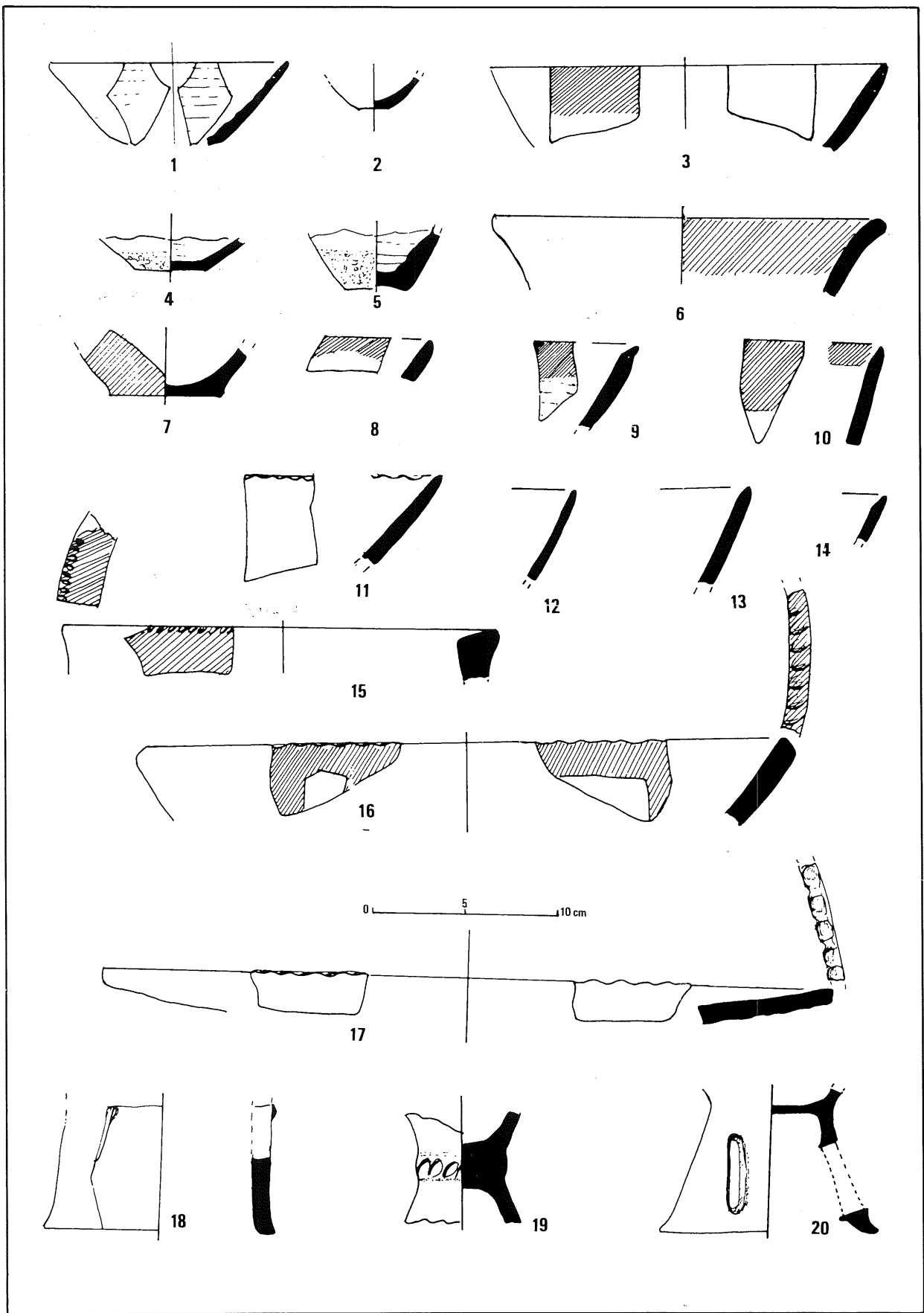


Fig. 7 Abu Ḥamid 1986. Pottery; open vessels: bowls, basins, lid, pedestal bases of vessels

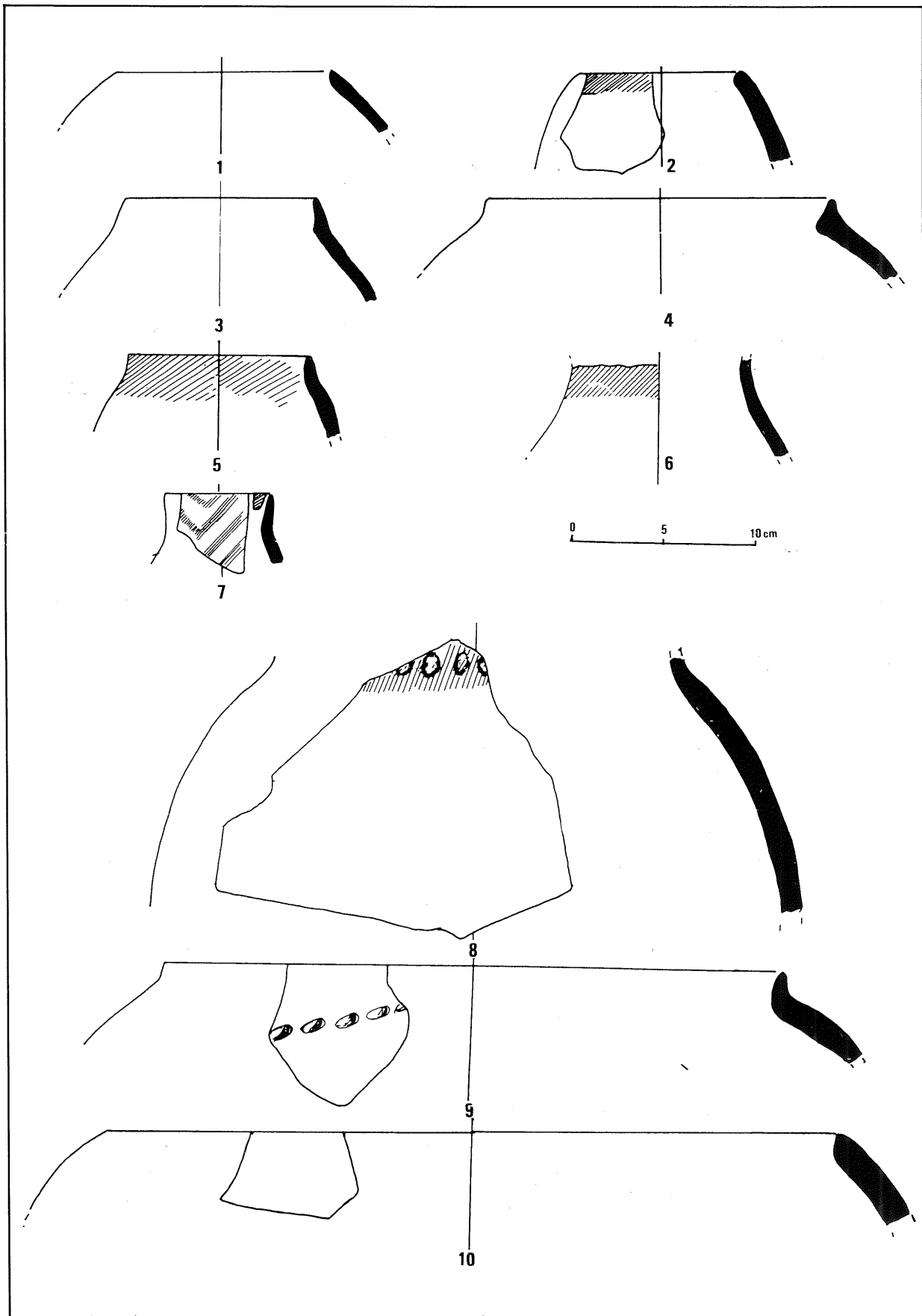


Fig. 8 Abu Ħamid 1986. Pottery; closed forms: holemouth and small jars

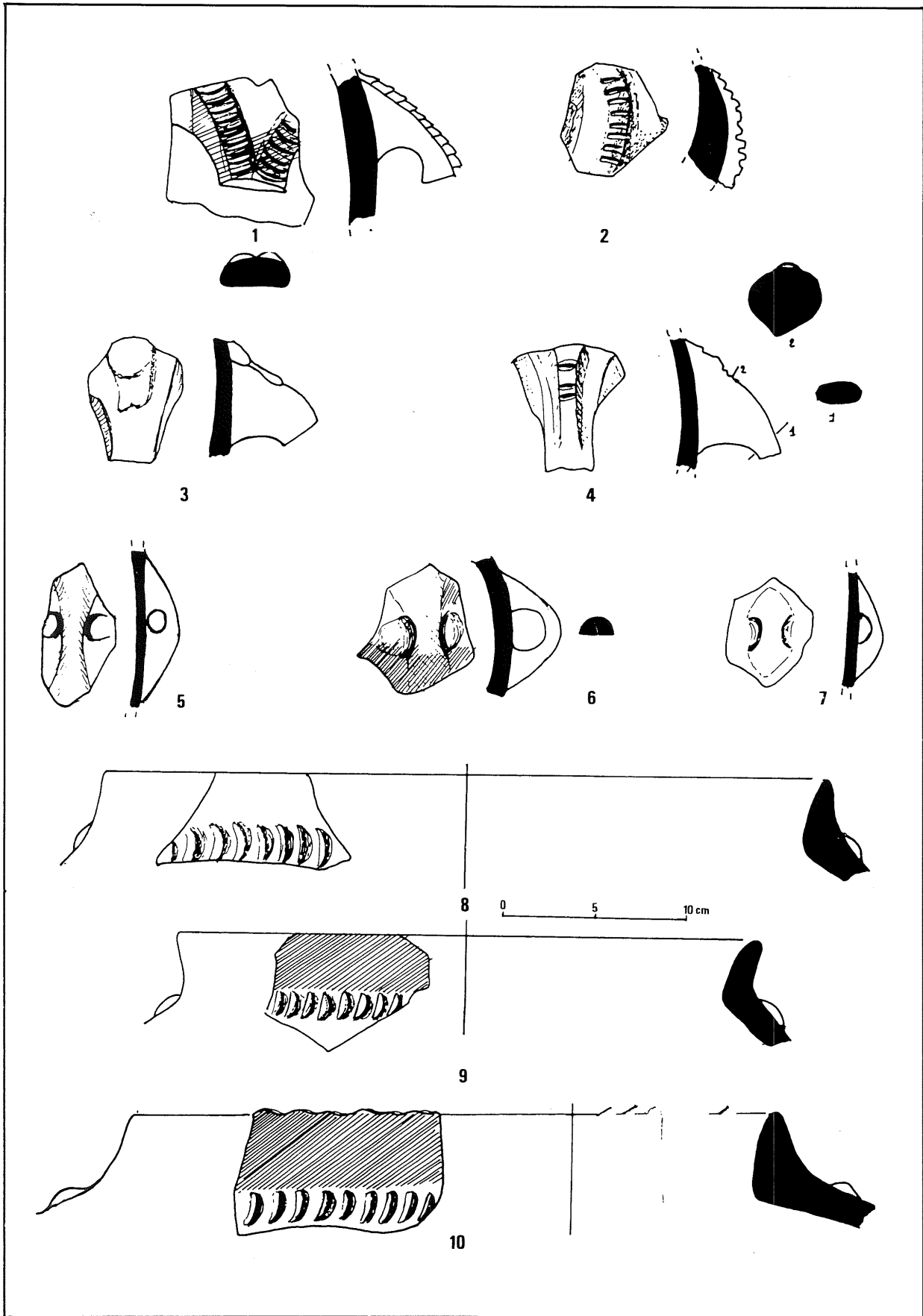


Fig. 9 Abu Ḥamid 1986. Pottery; handles; upper part of big jars.

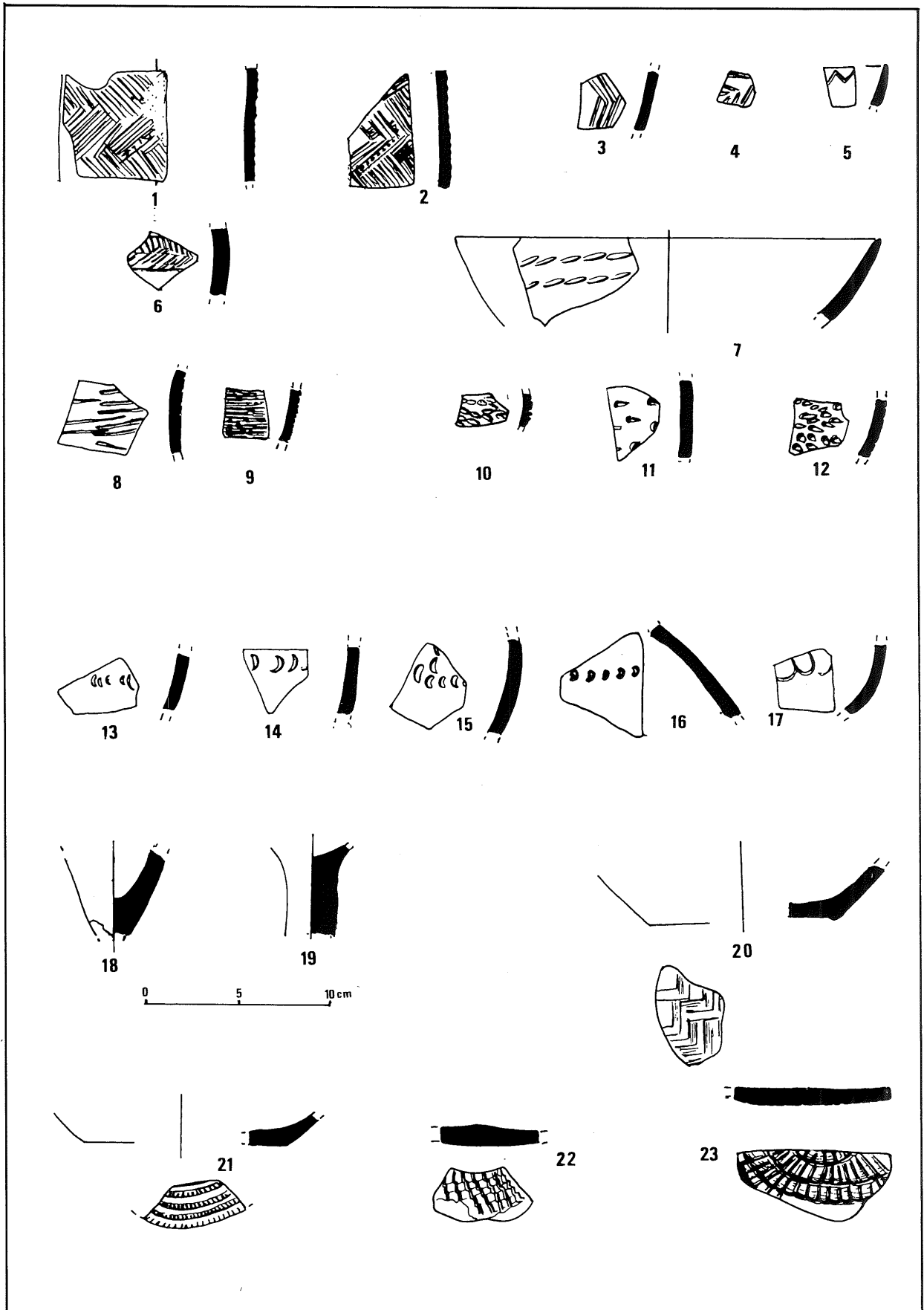


Fig. 10 Abu Ḥamid 1986. Pottery; sherds with incised decor 1-17; base of an ogival base cup (so far unique) 18;

base of a cornet (?) (so far unique) 19; mat impression on a base 20; basket impressions on bases 21.

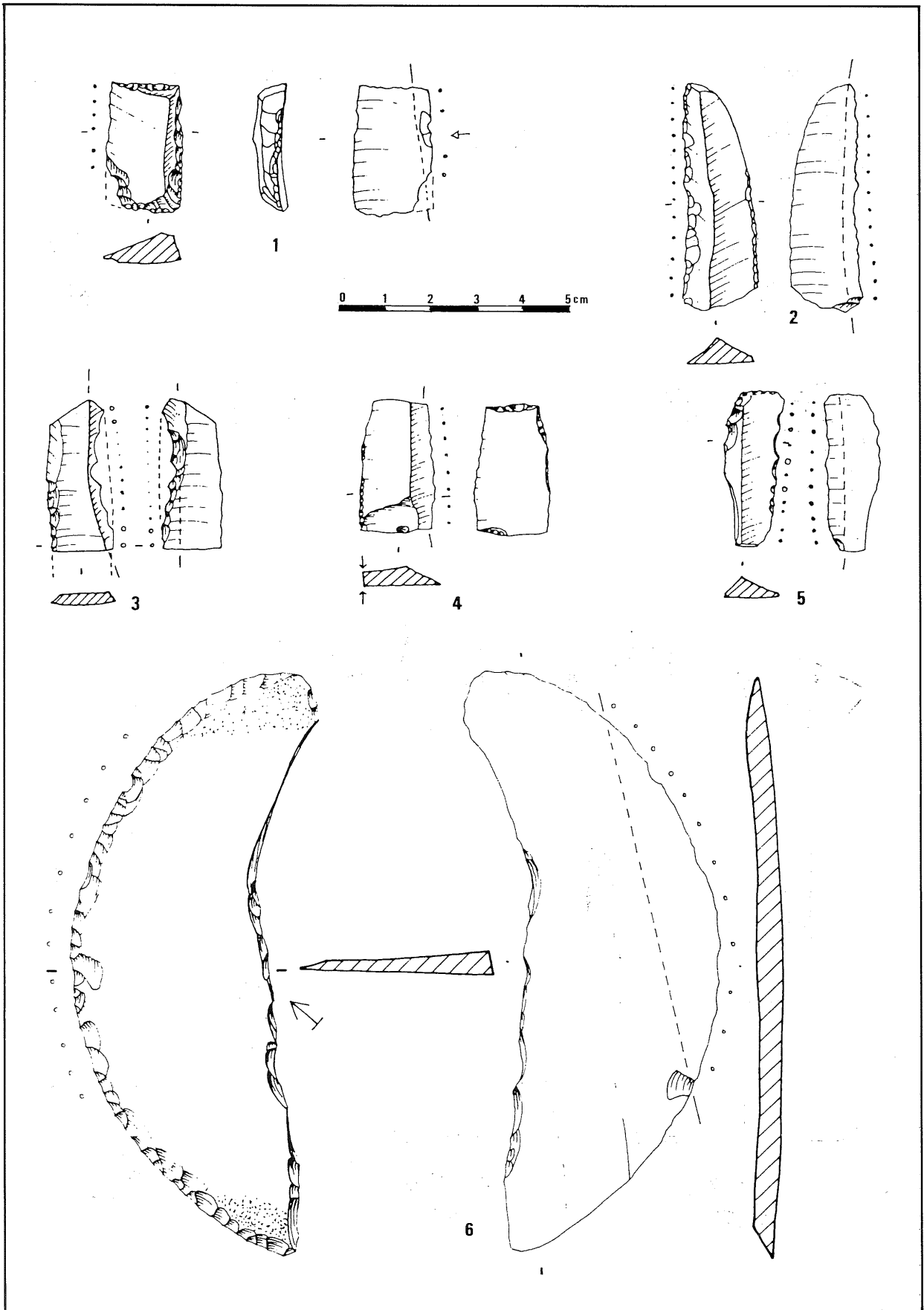


Fig. 11 Abu Ḥamid 1986. Flint industry: 1-5 sickle blades; 8-10 crescent-shaped “scraper” on tabular flint.