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The Middle Phases at Abū Ḥāmid and the Wādī Rabāḥ Horizon

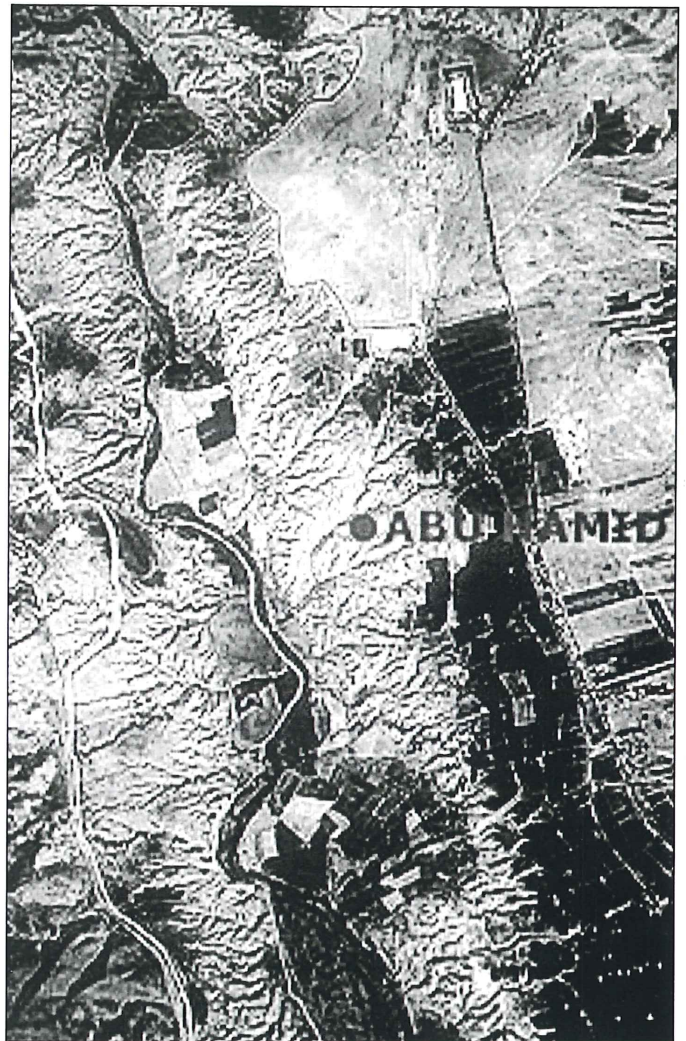
Introduction

Current statements regarding the fifth and fourth millennia BCE in the southern Levant appear to be pre-occupied with grouping sites as cultures or variant cultures. This seems an unwarranted and premature exercise that has been largely based upon inadequate or inconsequential data. This paper addresses this issue through an examination of the sequence at Abū Ḥāmid (FIG. 1) which promises new insights into regional chronology.

It is striking how different the material collected at Abū Ḥāmid is from other late Chalcolithic assemblages of the Jordan Valley. Whereas Tulaylāt al-Ghassūl has a very homogenous and gradual typological development (Lovell 2001), Abū Ḥāmid appears to contain very distinct assemblages and the differences between the three major phases (Basal, Middle and Upper) are very clear. And whereas the Pella sequence has some parallels with other sites (Lovell 2000a), the Abū Ḥāmid sequence is clearly paralleled at many different sites across the region, including the Beersheva group (Roux and Courty 1997) in the case of the upper levels.

Background

In the 1950s Joseph Kaplan excavated a number of sites west of the Jordan river with a material culture which began to be called “Wādī Rabāḥ”, after the area in which it was first found (Kaplan 1958a; 1958b; 1959; 1969; 1972). This assemblage included carinated bowls, bow rimmed jars and red and black slipped and burnished pottery with surface manipulation. At first these sites appeared to cluster in the north west of the southern Levant, but it is now known that this type of distinctive burnished ceramic material appears over a wider area. The excavation of Munhata by Jean Perrot (1968) provided additional material for this assemblage, as well as placing it in relation to the Yarmoukian sequence it follows. This site can now be considered the best exemplar of the Wādī Rabāḥ material because of its near complete publication (Gopher 1989; Gopher and Orrelle 1995; Garfinkel 1992; 1995).



1. Aerial shot showing location of Abū Ḥāmid.

Many recent studies (e.g. Gopher and Gophna 1993; Gopher 1995) have argued for the existence of regional variants of what is called the Wādī Rabāḥ culture. Some

of these variant cultures, as they are called (Gopher 1995: 208), are said to be defined on the basis of their whole material culture but most rely heavily upon ceramics. The word culture appears frequently in archaeology, and even more frequently perhaps in late prehistoric studies. Here the term is often employed to subdivide groups in an attempt to socialise the purely mechanical taxonomic exercise of classifying material even if overtures are made to archaeological theory (e.g. Clarke 1978).

Partly the use of the word can be explained because archaeologists, and anthropologists alike, are in need of a vocabulary in which to talk about differences, but in the case of Wādī Rabāḥ it appears that some of the distinctions drawn between ceramic assemblages are artificial. This is because the type cultures are often the least published, and most enigmatic. The introduction of larger scale radiocarbon sampling of longer lived sequences will eventually make these kinds of discussions obsolete. It is the aim of this paper to carry forward this process by carefully articulating the long Abū Ḥāmid sequence complete with radiocarbon dates (see below).

Recently Yosef Garfinkel, published a book which aims to present an overarching ceramic sequence for the southern Levant in the "Late Neolithic" and "Chalcolithic periods" (Garfinkel 1999; see also Banning 2001; Lovell 2000b). The volume addresses the problem of the very thin typological understanding of the ceramics of these early periods, which cover a span of over 1500 years. What is evident is that we have been working with short lived settlements and unrepresentative publications for too long. Sites with longer lived sequences and good radiocarbon dates, which can anchor these smaller sites are desperately needed. Abū Ḥāmid is just such a site.

Abū Ḥāmid: the Stratigraphic Context

The site of Abū Ḥāmid lies 15km north west of Dayr

'Allā, on a natural spur overlooking the Jordan River. It was excavated from 1986 to 1992 by a joint Jordano-French expedition based at Yarmouk University and CNRS/MAE, France (Dollfus and Kafafi 1986; Dollfus *et al.* 1986; 1988; 1993). Stratigraphically three major phases have been identified which we call the basal, middle and upper levels (see FIGS. 2 and 3, TABLE 1).

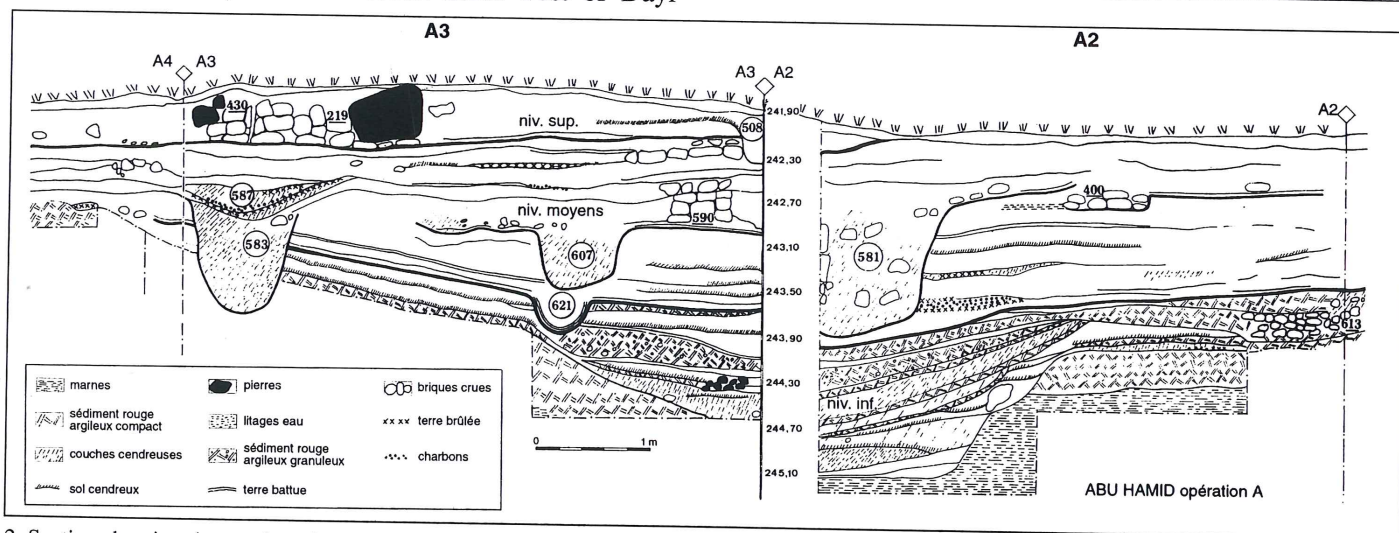
The site covers ca. 6 ha, of which over 2200m² of the upper-most levels (A1 and A2) have been excavated. This broad exposure revealed large rectangular structures of mud brick which, in some cases, had stone foundations. A great number of pits were present in these upper levels.

In 1991 it was discovered that an earlier phase containing rectangular mud-brick architecture was present below this (FIG. 3). The ceramic assemblage from these middle levels (A3a and A3b) contained what was originally termed Dark Faced Burnished Ware (DFBW)—a very fine ceramic with a high red or black burnish and a wall about 3mm thick. Slipped pottery was also found in coarser fabrics.

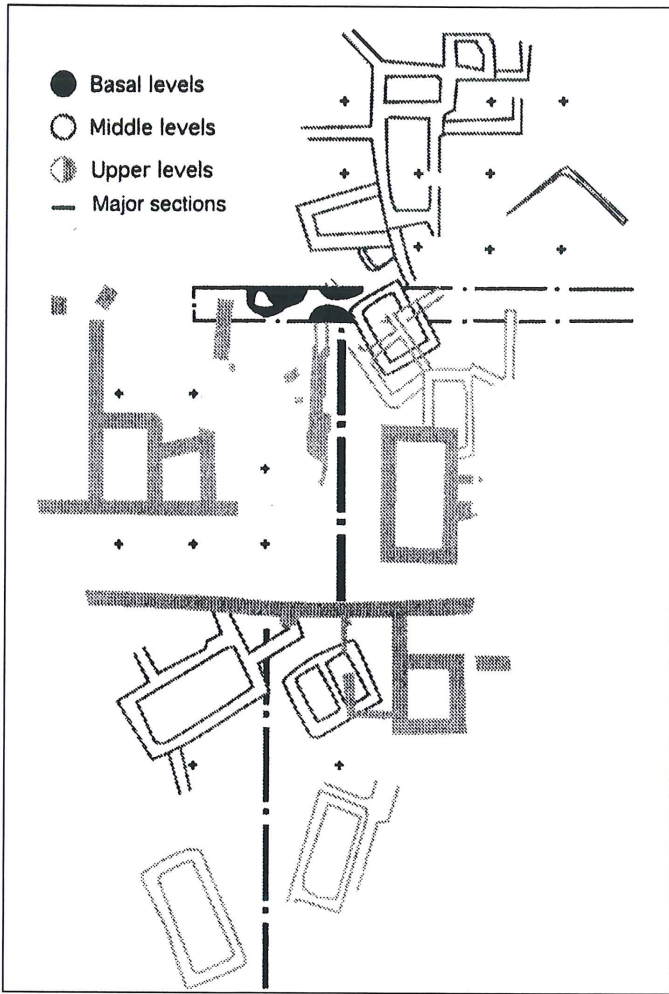
Under these levels there are layers, ca. 50-80cm thick, that at least in the excavated area, do not show any trace of architecture but layers of ashes, hearths, plaster-coated basins and pits (A3b). These lay on top of a layer of com-

TABLE 1. Basic chronostratigraphic divisions for Abū Ḥāmid.

Stratigraphic division	Nomenclature	Approx. radiocarbon dates
A1	Upper levels	4200 – 3800 BC
A2		
A3a	Middle levels	4600 – 4200 BC
A3b		
A4	Transition	4900 – 4600 BC
A5	Basal levels	5300 – 4900 BC



2. Section showing the stratigraphy of square AH.



3. Overall plan of the site showing different levels.

pact red clay sediment that itself covers large pits (the basal levels, see FIG. 2). Studies of the fill of some of these indicate that they are 'natural' but that at least one of them has been used as a dwelling pit (Hourani 2002).

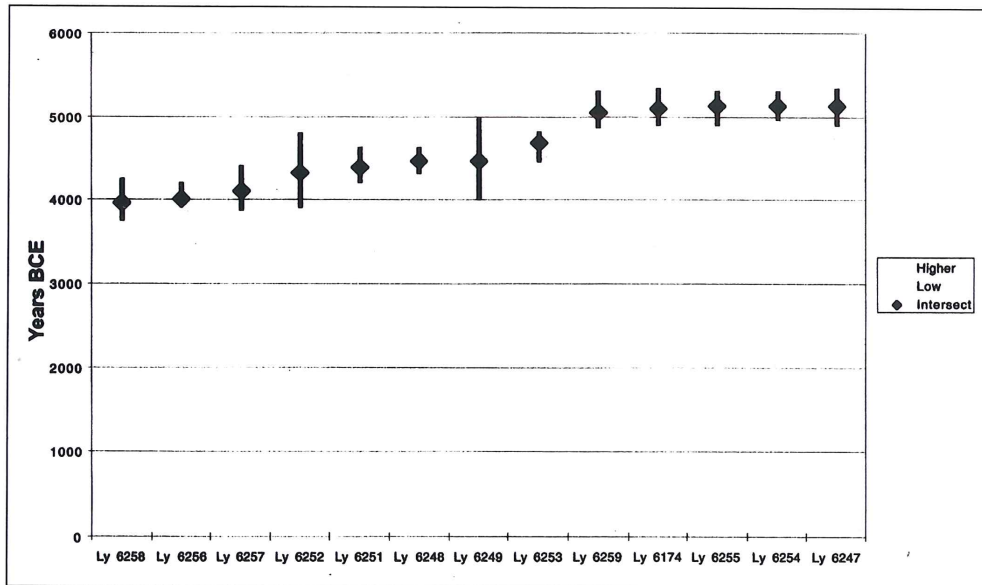
A number of radiometric dates from the site (TABLE 2) clearly show the absolute dates of these phases. Although there may have been some sampling problems (see for instance Ly 6259), which are likely to be due to the large number of upper level pits that cut through the site, there are clearly three distinct phases (FIG. 4).

The Ceramics

The Basal Levels (phases A4 and A5)

Starting now from the base of the sequence, it has been already established (Lovell *et al.* 1997) that, typologically, these levels can be compared with material from Ghрубba (Mellaart 1956) and other small sites. The middle levels, by contrast, can be compared with the Wādī Rabāḥ horizon (Dollfus *et al.* 1993). The fabrics of the basal levels are dominated by an orange-buff colored fabric that has very few inclusions and appears in a very well levigated form (Fabric Group 1), and a more granular, less well levigated form with slightly different proportions of inclusions (Fabric Group 2). These, together, make up about 93% of the assemblage. A hard biscuity red/brown fabric appears in very small amounts, as does a siltier buff colored fabric. The surfaces of vessels appear to have been grass wiped.

For the most part forms are simple in this phase: bowls dominate the assemblage, orientations are often difficult due to the irregular nature of the pottery (see FIG. 5, TABLE 3).¹ Notable are the small bowls, quite crudely made, but often painted in red-orange linear designs rem-



4. Radiometric dates from Abū Ḥāmid.

¹ I thank Nawal Hawari, Rozenn Douad and M. Humbert for their excellent drafting.

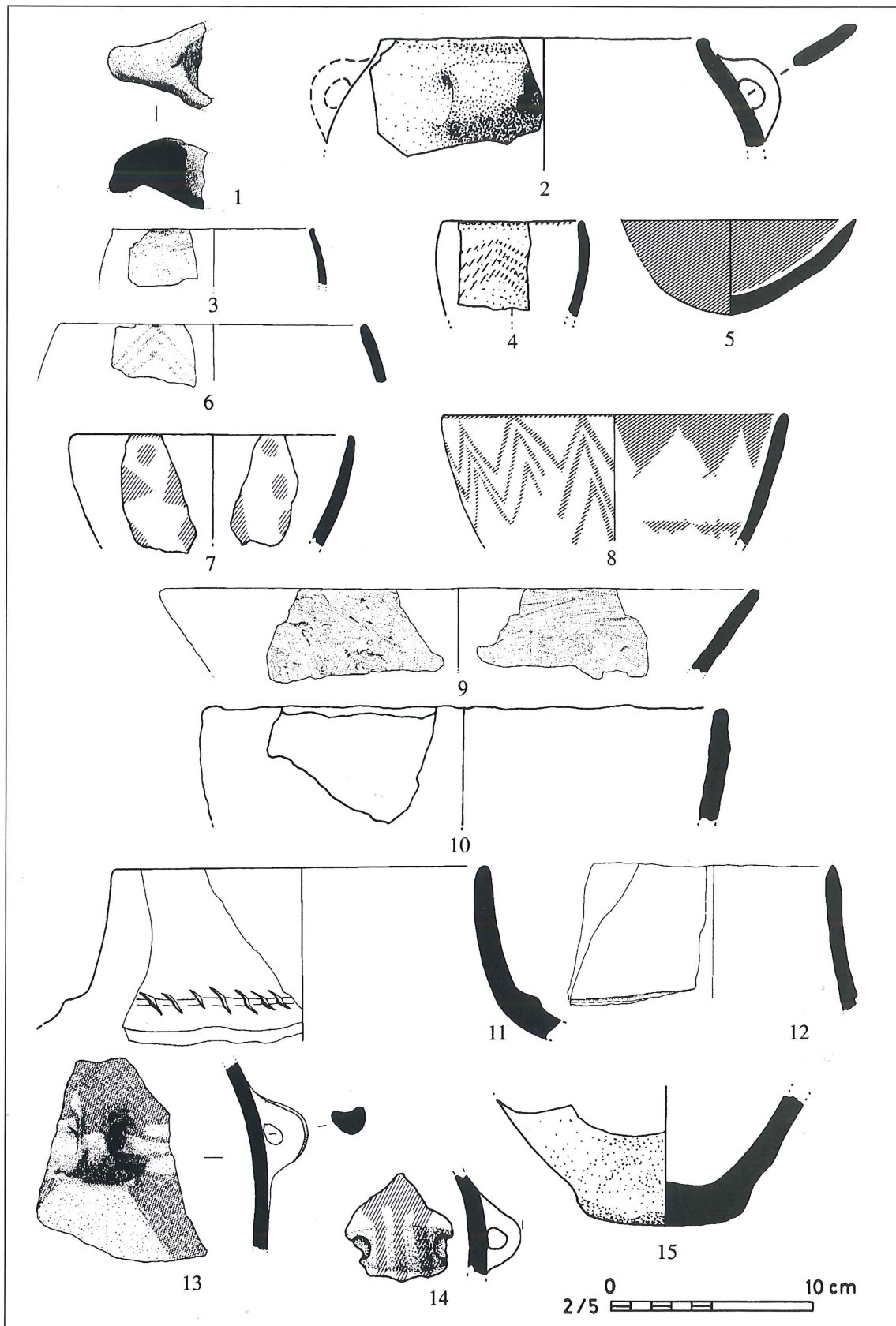
TABLE 2. Radiometric dates from Abū Ḥāmid to 2 sigma.

Lab no.	Age bp	±	Lower	Higher	Intersect	Prob.	Material	Reference	Context
Ly 6258	5205	95	3980	4247	3791	0.994	Charcoal	Lovell et al. 1997:361	Basal Levels Cat. No. 5574-5617
Ly 6256	5230	55	4020	4196	3956	0.865	Charcoal	unpub. date	Middle levels Cat. No. 5118
Ly 6257	5325	140	4110	4402	3916	0.943	Charcoal	unpub. date	Middle levels Cat. No. 5458
Ly 6252	5500	200	4340	4783	3941	0.995	Charcoal	unpub. date	Upper levels Cat. No. 5298
Ly 6251	5580	95	4400	4620	4238	0.977	Charcoal	unpub. date	Middle levels, Cat. no. 5083
Ly 6248	5650	75	4480	4622	4345	0.937	Charcoal	unpub. date	Middle levels Cat. No. 4302
Ly 6249	5655	210	4480	4957	4036	0.992	Charcoal	unpub. date	Middle levels, Cat. no. 4483
Ly 6253	5810	70	4690	4805	4496	1	Charcoal	unpub. date	Upper levels Cat. No.5311-5187
Ly 6259	6135	80	5050	5288	4901	0.938	Charcoal	Lovell et al. 1997:361	Basal Levels Cat. No. 5623
Ly 6174	6200	80	5110	5319	4939	0.994	Charcoal	Lovell et al. 1997:361	Basal Levels Cat. No. 5625
Ly 6255	6160	70	5140	5293	4932	0.98	Charcoal	Lovell et al. 1997:361	Basal Levels Cat. No. 5348
Ly 6254	6190	55	5140	5299	4991	1	Charcoal	Lovell et al. 1997:361	Basal Levels Cat. No. 5327
Ly 6247	6190	80	5140	5317	4928	0.992	Charcoal	unpub. date	Middle level Cat. No. 4301-4393

iniscent of the material from Beisan XVIII and Pits (Fitzgerald 1935) in particular. There are also necked jars and holemouths, some of which are also decorated. There are a wide variety of decoration styles, which include spots and simple geometric patterns paralleling the material published by Mellaart (1956) from Ghрубba. Although making up only 5% of the assemblage, the painted decoration is a striking feature of this phase. Originally this material was compared to the painted decoration found at several sites, including Tall Tsaf and Katarat as-Samra.

However further research has shown that in fact the decorative schema at Abū Ḥāmid is an earlier feature (Lovell 2001).

This earlier linear painted technique is found on rougher ceramics and appears to be executed with less care. As mentioned above it has been found at Beisan XVIII and in pits and Ghрубba and is essentially similar to material found within Jericho PNA layers (Kenyon and Holland 1982). There are also some examples from Megiddo level XIX (Shipton 1939: pl. 18.1-4), which unfortunately ap-



5. Examples of the basal level ceramics.

TABLE 3. Description of basal level ceramics.

Fig	AN	Loc	Cat	Reg	Squares	Description	Fabric	Décor.	Diam	%
4.1	592	584	4430	1	AC3	Spoon	Dense orange		-	-
4.2	254		5530	4	A3	Holemouth, with handles	Hard grey		14	15
4.3	16	612	5617	2	A1 A2	Holemouth, simple	Buff	Pt red	21	5
4.4	3		5632	3	A2	Bowl, small	Fine orange buff	Pt red	7	25
4.5	229		4575	21	A3	Bowl, simple	Red	Pt traces	16	5
4.6	148		4425	2	A2	Holemouth	Fine orange buff	Pt red	10	6
4.7	413	693	5200	1	C4	Bowl, simple	Dense orange (semi. ox.)	Pt red	11	12
4.8	226	-	4575	7	A3	Bowl, simple	Pale buff	self slip, Pt red	17	32
4.9	478	562	4354	1	A3	Bowl, flaring	Dense buff	wash	NA	NA
4.10	384		5225	2	AG2	Bowl, deep	Hard grey / vit. dense buff	white slip	26	10
4.11	479	562	4354		A3	Jar, tall neck	Sandy buff	red slip		
4.12	52	-	5625	1	A2, AA2	Jar, tall neck	Dense brown buff (s.o.)	applied/ incised	17	6
4.13	144		4450	1	A1	Handle, lug	Fine pinkish buff	Pt red linear		
4.14	116	748	5196	2	AH2	Handle, strap	Dense buff + basalt	self slip, Pt red linear	-	-
4.15	28	612	5545	3	A1 A2	Base, disc	Coarse buff		8	100

pear in a very mixed assemblage. The later material, most commonly known from Tall Tsaf², appears only in the form of a few sherds at Abū Ḥāmid, and not until later levels. These few sherds in turn compare very well to similar material at al-Ghassūl which also appears later in the sequence there, phases F–A (Lovell 2001: 40).

Failure to recognise the important differences between these two linear techniques is no doubt the reason that Garfinkel equates the Basal levels at Abū Ḥāmid with the material from Tsaf, thereby assuming that the basal levels at Abū Ḥāmid postdate the Wādī Rabāḥ phase (Garfinkel 1999: 158). If Abū Ḥāmid were a one period site there would be no answer to this argument. However Abū Ḥāmid has a long-lived sequence and “Wadi Rabah-like ceramics” are found in levels, which clearly postdate this

basal material.

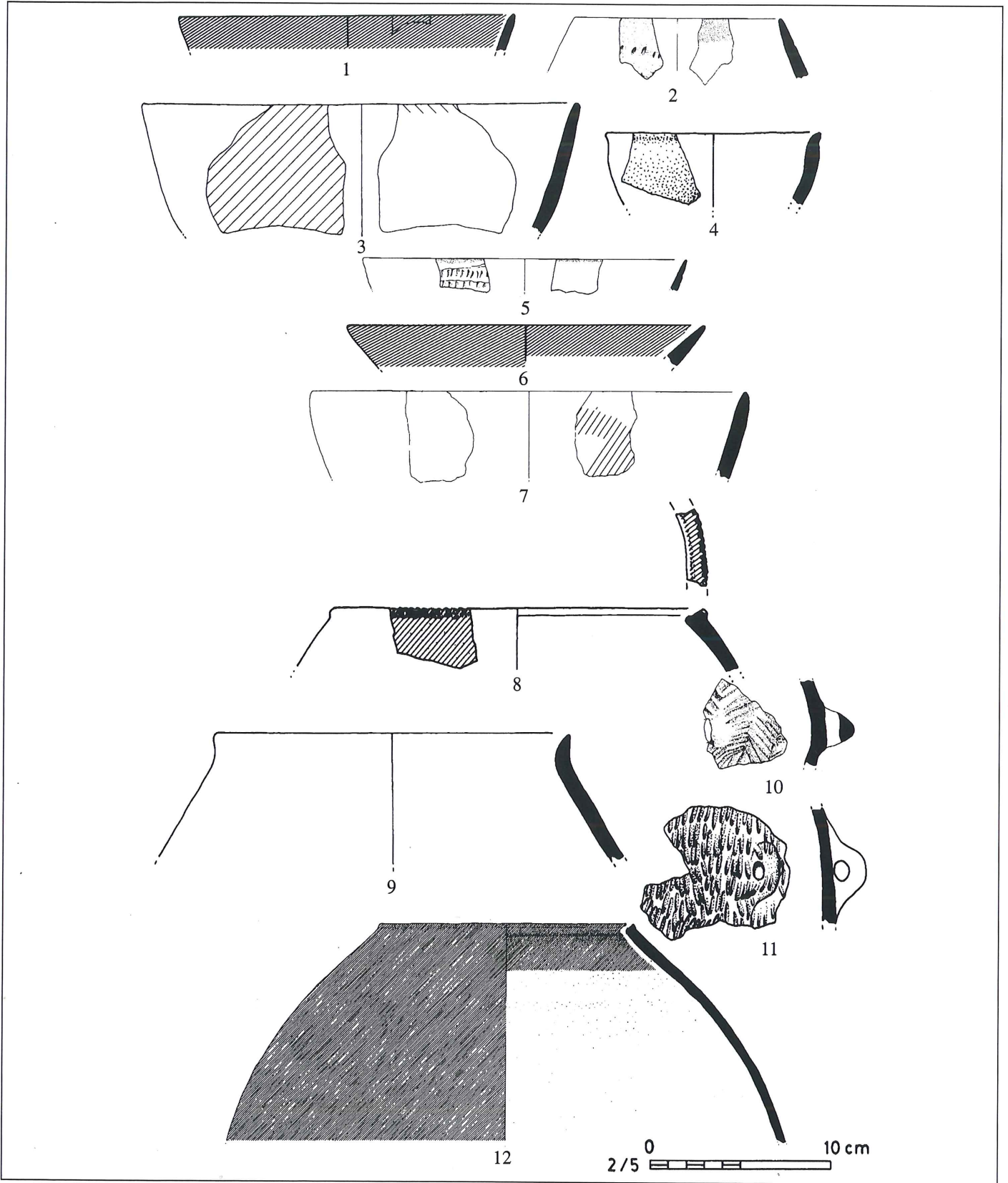
The Middle Levels (phase A3)

Despite the fact that not all forms usually associated with the classic Wādī Rabāḥ assemblage are present at Abū Ḥāmid, it is clear that the material absolutely relates. For instance, although we have only a few bow-rimmed jars and very few carinated bowls (see FIG. 5: 4), we have all of the classic techniques of surface manipulation and thickened decorated rims found on holemouths and small jars (FIG. 6, TABLE 4). We have a very fine ceramic (ca. 3mm thick) decorated with matte red and black slipped and/or burnished surface decoration. In addition there is a coarser version and it is clear that the finer version was produced by quite a different technique.³ On preliminary

² Material from Tall Tsaf is really a “ware group”, rather than an assemblage. It is based around the presence of finely painted geometric decoration (Gophna 1979 for photographs, Gophna and Sadeh 1988/9) on particularly fine ceramics which was documented at Katarat as-Samra (Leonard 1983) and Abū Hābil (de Contenson 1960: Figs. 23.2, 24.5; Leonard 1992: pl. 22.2, 3, 5). The decoration is usually rendered in red or brown, and has often been likened to Halafian wares. There are also examples from Tulaylāt al-Ghassūl although they are not well illustrated (Mallon *et al.* 1934: pls. 65, 154.1, 2, 5, 9-11, 13-16) and in the middle levels from Area A at al-Ghassūl (Lovell 2001: 40). This fine painted ware is clearly contemporary with the Wādī Rabāḥ horizon and later periods: this painted decoration is found at Munhata 2a (the Wadi Rabah phase)

and is also shown as appearing in layer 2b (Perrot 1968: 416, pl. 845). In conclusion this treatment, which is largely confined to the central valley, has a long history and began in the Neolithic and gradually developed and lasted into the Late Chalcolithic. How this painted material relates to “cream ware” has never been made explicit (the two were originally found together at Gezer).

³ In his study of the “Wadi Rabah-like ceramics” from Kabris, Yuval Goren (in Kempinski and Neimeier 1992: 15*) suggests that the Wādī Rabāḥ ceramics may well have been produced in specialised kilns and workshops and it is possible that at Abū Ḥāmid we have examples of this specialised ware and local imitations of it. Petrographic studies are currently underway at Yarmouk University to investigate this possibility.



6. Middle level ceramics.

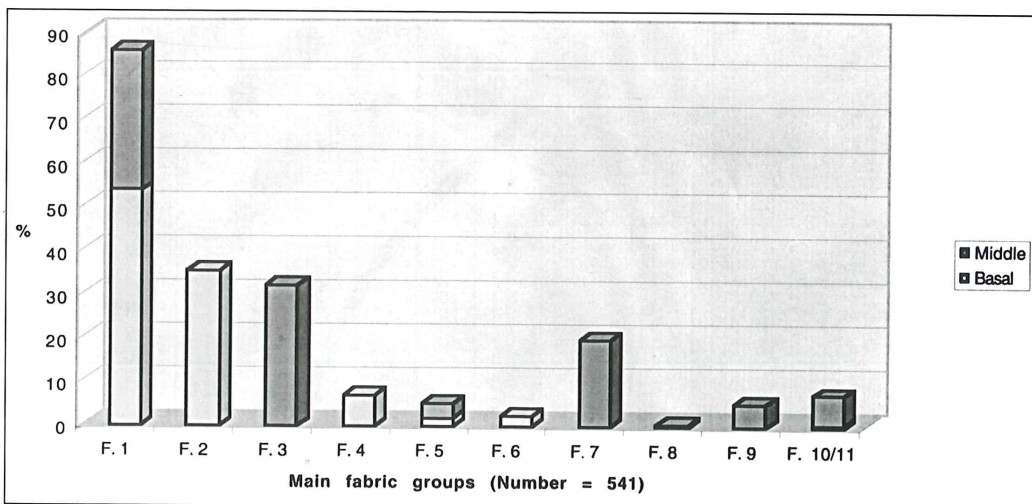
TABLE 4. Description of Middle level ceramics.

Fig	AN	Loc	Cat	Reg	Squares	Description	Fabric	Décor.	Diam	%
5.1	69	741	5322	3	A2	Bowl, fine	Buff	red slip	14	4
5.2	663	550	4302	1	A4	Holemouth, fine	Fine silty orange	self slip, burnish, incised	NA	NA
5.3	174	761	5459	2	AF01	Bowl, fine	Dense sandy brown	red slip, burnish, incised	23	5
5.4	357		5433	1	A3 A4	Bowl, carinated	Brown buff	brown slip, burnish	c. 12	3
5.5	476		4217	1	AE1 AE2	Bowl, fine	Very fine buff	Pt red, impressed	16	5
5.6	66	742	5348	4	A2	Bowl, fine v-shape	Dense Brown	brown slip	15	4
5.7	345	532	5062	1	C4	Bowl, simple	Buff (Variant)	self slip/ red slip/ black slip, burnish	22	4
5.8	494	462	5590	1	B4	Holemouth, bevelled	Orange Buff	orange slip, impressed	24	7
5.9	87	690	5151	1	AH2	Jar, short neck	Buff + gypsum	self slip	18	5
5.10	374		5209	2	AF01	Handle, lug	Buff	incised	-	-
5.11	716	-	5054	1/2	A4	Handle, lug	Silty buff	incised	-	-
5.12	499		4511	1	B3	Holemouth, bevelled	Orange Buff + carb.	red slip	17	35

counts, the red and black slip material makes up about 20% of the entire middle level assemblage, while the burnished material makes up about 3.5%. The finer burnish would be less than 1%.

In general, the entire middle phase assemblage shows a wide variation in fabric—in direct contrast with the bottom levels (FIG. 7). It is clear that the middle level fabrics were higher fired which actually created a harder fabric (3). A new buff fabric (7) appears which has a large number of carbonate and some basalt inclusions.

It is clear that at Abū Hāmid we have a phase contemporary with the Wādī Rabāḥ horizon (phases A3a and A3b) and an earlier Late Yarmoukian phase (A4 and A5) that is post classical Sha'ar Hagolan/Yarmoukian and quite possibly corresponds to Perrot's Munhata phase. At present, because of the lack of certain features, it is likely that many would place the material culture of the Middle levels Abū Hāmid within the cultural groups usually defined as "Wadi Rabah Culture Variants". The division of the sites of this mid 5th millenium BCE period into cul-



7. Fabric groups at Abū Hāmid (based upon a limited selection).

tures and variant cultures appears to rely upon which and how many of the classic typological features are present in their assemblages. But, and we wish to stress this, if the type-site itself is somewhat artificially published then no site can ever expect to be included in the core group.

Problem of “Cultures” and Lack of Evidence

The only large corpus available for the Wādī Rabāḥ culture is Munhata (Garfinkel 1992), and there are definite difficulties associated with this sequence. Firstly, the site suffered from extreme disturbance caused by hundreds of pits, which would have caused problems despite the very careful excavation (Garfinkel 1992: 19). Secondly, and perhaps as a result of the fact that the ceramics were published two decades after it was excavated, Garfinkel uses his own typology to “inform” the stratigraphy (Garfinkel 1992: 19-24).

Garfinkel’s first step was to establish a few types, which he believed were reliable. He then used these types as the core of his typology and then, when he encountered what he terms a “mixed deposit”, he discarded it entirely, lest it be contaminated. A typological development is impossible to trace without the intermediate deposits (except if we have clear evidence that the site has been abandoned for centuries) that would have contained transitional, but uncontaminated, material. Whether it was possible to include these elements in the case of Munhata is not clear. However, the result is a didactic and schematic typology that risks including only those sherds fitting a preconceived typological ideal.

It is perhaps unfair to single out this site when there may have been, for various reasons, few other choices available. However, it is precisely this site, which is used as the arbiter of the Wādī Rabāḥ horizon (Garfinkel 1992) and it raises a wider methodological point. The long-lived sequence of Abū Ḥāmid has been processed in order to illustrate typological development and be able to clearly represent the actual proportions of, for example, red slipped and burnished material throughout the sequence. This should allow more meaningful comparisons with other sites. As an example it is interesting to note that while being about 85% of the material illustrated in the Munhata publication, red and black slipped and burnished material makes up only 5% of the total assemblage at the site (Garfinkel 1992: 324, Table 17), a smaller percentage than at Abū Ḥāmid.

These remarks lead more generally to the concept and definition of culture. Scholars who propose cultural groupings (e.g. Gopher 1995: 208) generally use Clarke’s definition of an archaeological culture:

“The archaeological culture when properly defined represents the material culture subsystem of a specific sociocultural system. The culture system and the communities which generate it embody the largest unit with

internally the most richly cross-connected and mutually reinforcing system of information variety, uniting and stabilizing every channel of human interconnection and behavior” (Clarke 1978: 299).

Using only one indicator, ceramics, as an archaeological correlate does not satisfy these requirements. While in the later “Chalcolithic” we have significant data with which to discuss culture provinces (Levy 1995), the earlier periods lack such detailed information. It is clear from any reading of the data available that there is a burnished tradition present at many sites in the middle of the 5th millennium BCE, which, although more concentrated in the northwest, is nonetheless present elsewhere. In other words, “Wadi Rabah-like ceramics” are an aspect of Fifth millennium material culture, but at this stage can not be considered a ‘cultural marker’. What is currently unclear is how far the very fine ware of the Wādī Rabāḥ horizon is spread, and to what precise origin it relates.

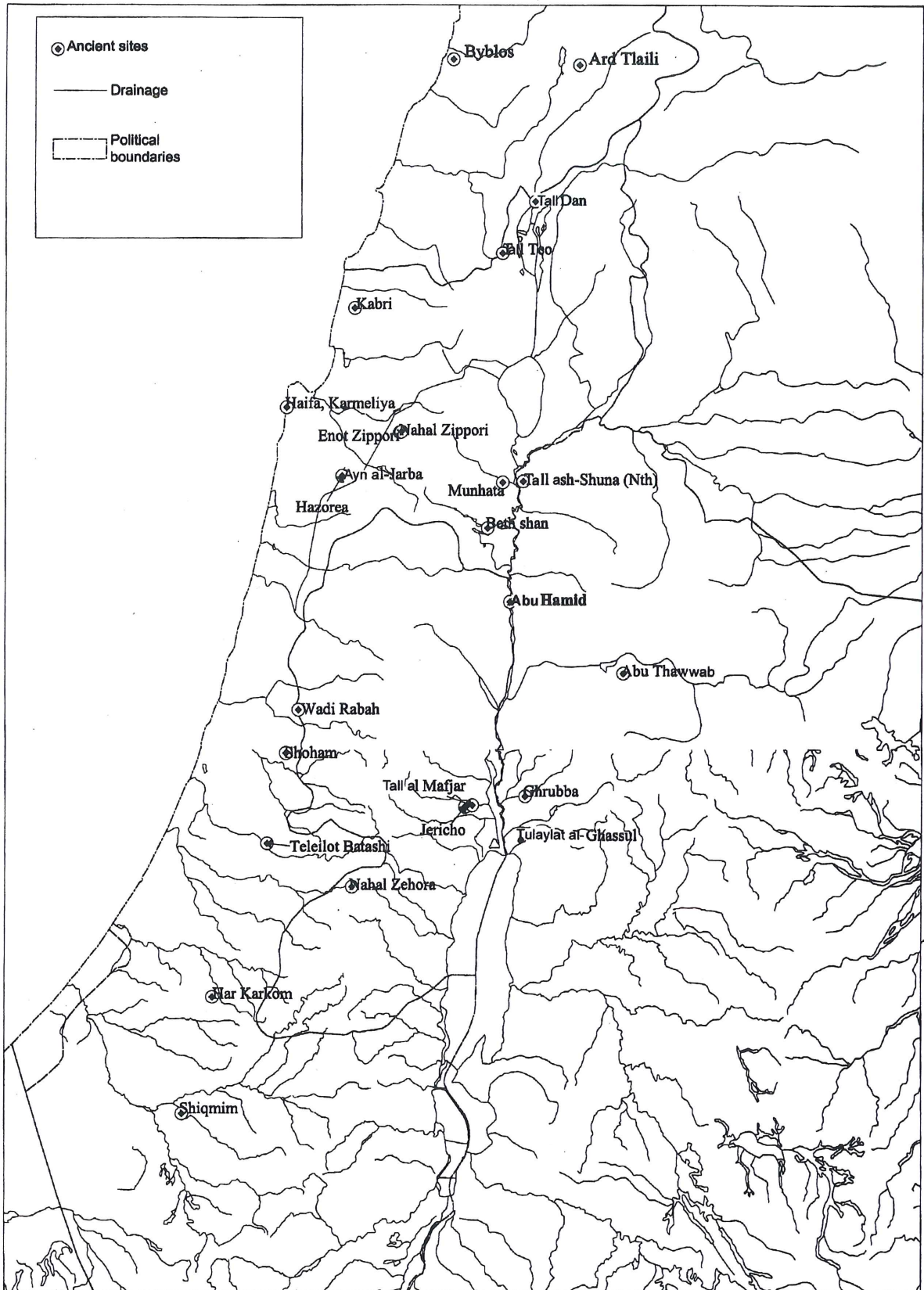
New Developments

The key to this problem no doubt lies in investigating the finer Wādī Rabāḥ ware and its origins. It has been demonstrated that even where Wādī Rabāḥ sherds are well documented, they are made of fabric from a number of provenances (Goren in Garfinkel 1992: 340). The technology involved in the production of such vessels is highly skilled and it is possible that they were made in a specialised workshop (Goren in Kempinski and Neimeier 1992: 14*-15*; Goren in Garfinkel 1992: 339-340). The cruder versions of “Wadi Rabah-like material” and the small number of sherds which have turned up far from the main area of distribution, e.g. at Gilat (Levy and Golden 1996: 153) and Tulaylāt al-Ghassūl, may indicate local attempts at production of these vessels.

Wādī Rabā material and its earlier form, DFBW, was once said to be a northern influence (Perrot 1968). This was also indicated by Kirkbride’s work on the sl-Baq’a valley (Kirkbride 1969) and other long-known northern Levantine coastal sites (e.g. Ras Shamra and Byblos). The recent publication of further Syrian sites with burnished traditions appears to lend considerable weight to a northern origin for the material, e.g. Sukas (Riis and Thrane 1974) and Hama (Thuesen 1988). However, while the coast might well have been one of the routes taken by the carriers of this material, as suggested by Anati and others (Anati 1962: 270; Mellaart 1975: 243), a glance at the map (see FIG. 8) implies that the Orontes and may be Jordan River valleys are also likely to have been important.

Conclusions

What we have tried to show here is that cultural associations often made in the early periods are generally ill founded and poorly defined. Further, when the actual overarching sequence for the southern Levant is only just



8. Map showing sites of the Wādī Rabāḥ Horizon.

now becoming clear it seems that some of the previous associations between small short-lived sites must be revised.

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