

THE BURIAL GROUND OF AR-RAḤA AL-MU'ARRAJAH

by

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The burial ground of ar-Raḥa was studied during a survey and excavation effort in 1998. It lies at a height of 850 m above sea level on a plateau stretching northwards, north of a small settlement of families called ar-Rushaydah, which is located east of the Christian village of as-Smakiyyah. This 700 to 800 m wide plateau can be reached over a sandstrip that winds upwards from the main road directly on to the plateau just before the road leads down to the deep valley of Wādī al-Mu'arrajah. The drive to the plateau is, at some places, very arduous but is worth it in the end, not only because of the archeological remains but also because of the view over the valley through which the river, Wādī al-Mūjib, and its tributaries run. The extremely arid region still allows the inhabitants of ar-Rushaydah the cultivation of wheat and barley. However in 1998, grain did not ripen fully due to poor winter rains. In this connection, it is worth mentioning the almost uncountable number of stone tools scattered over the whole plateau, which are noticeable at every step to even an untrained eye.

G.M. Miller, who during his time located and described a number of "cairns", visited this plateau during his survey of Moab (Miller 1991: No. 44, 45, 46, 48, 49, 50, 51, 125, 126, 130)¹. In 1998 most of the 60 graves could be exactly located and cartographed with the help of GPS measurement. At this time, attempts were made to differentiate typological classifications, which could be identified from the recognizable but varied architectural construc-

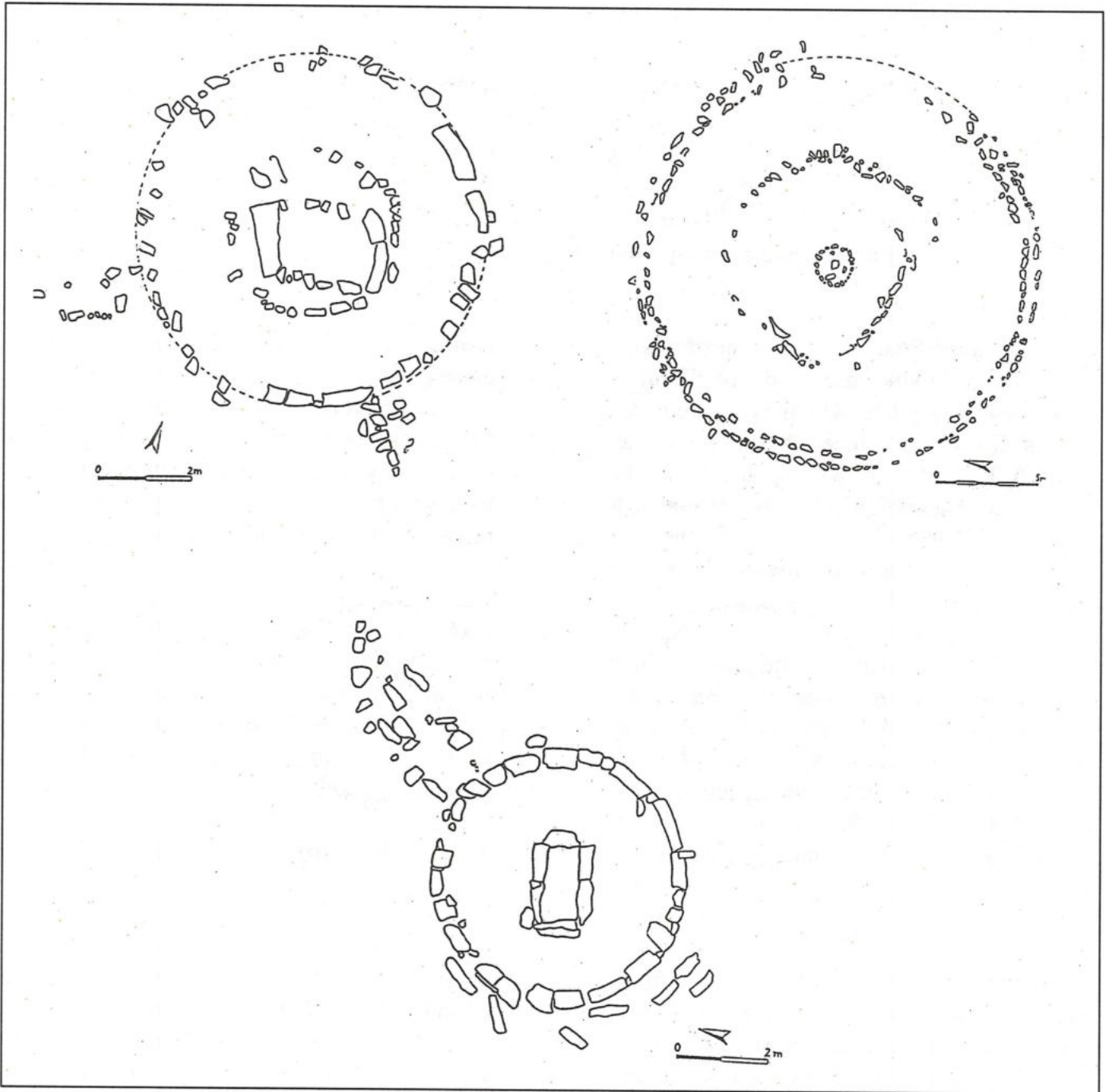
tion forms of the individual graves. The method used was that the actual structure of the burial chamber in a burial mound (tumulus) was exposed on the surface, so that a clear typological classification was possible. Due to erosion or the plundering of graves the structures were more easily recognizable (Fig. 1). In addition, the accompanying distinctive characteristics of the grave structures which became apparent in this extended burial ground were noted, but of which no clear statement could be made about the chronological classification. However, the architectural classification of these distinguishing marks like "beams or rays", "boxes", "circles" and "memorials of stone" lead to the assumption that they all belong to the same period.

1. The Typology of the Graves of ar-Raḥa

For the typological and chronological classification and categorization of the graves in ar-Raḥa it is essential to note that in spite of their differences in appearance, all graves are located along the edge of the plateau or on the narrow ridges that lie along the west side of the plateau that goes down into the valley of Wādī Gwayr. There were no graves or burial mounds (tumuli) discovered on the plateau itself. Some graves were positioned so close to the eastern edge of the plateau that today, because of water erosion, they deviate from their circular forms and parts of the external borders, facing eastwards, have fallen into the valley. These individual, typological characteristics

1. The grave structures mentioned by Miller are usually described as "several cairns" (Miller 1991:

No. 45, p. 46). During the survey a differentiation was not made.



1. Various types of graves at ar-Raḥa. (Drawing by A. and H. Domke).

of the different grave constructions enable one to, make an early conclusion about their chronological simultaneity, whereby the different but simultaneously built grave-types could point to the different social classes that the buried persons belong to.

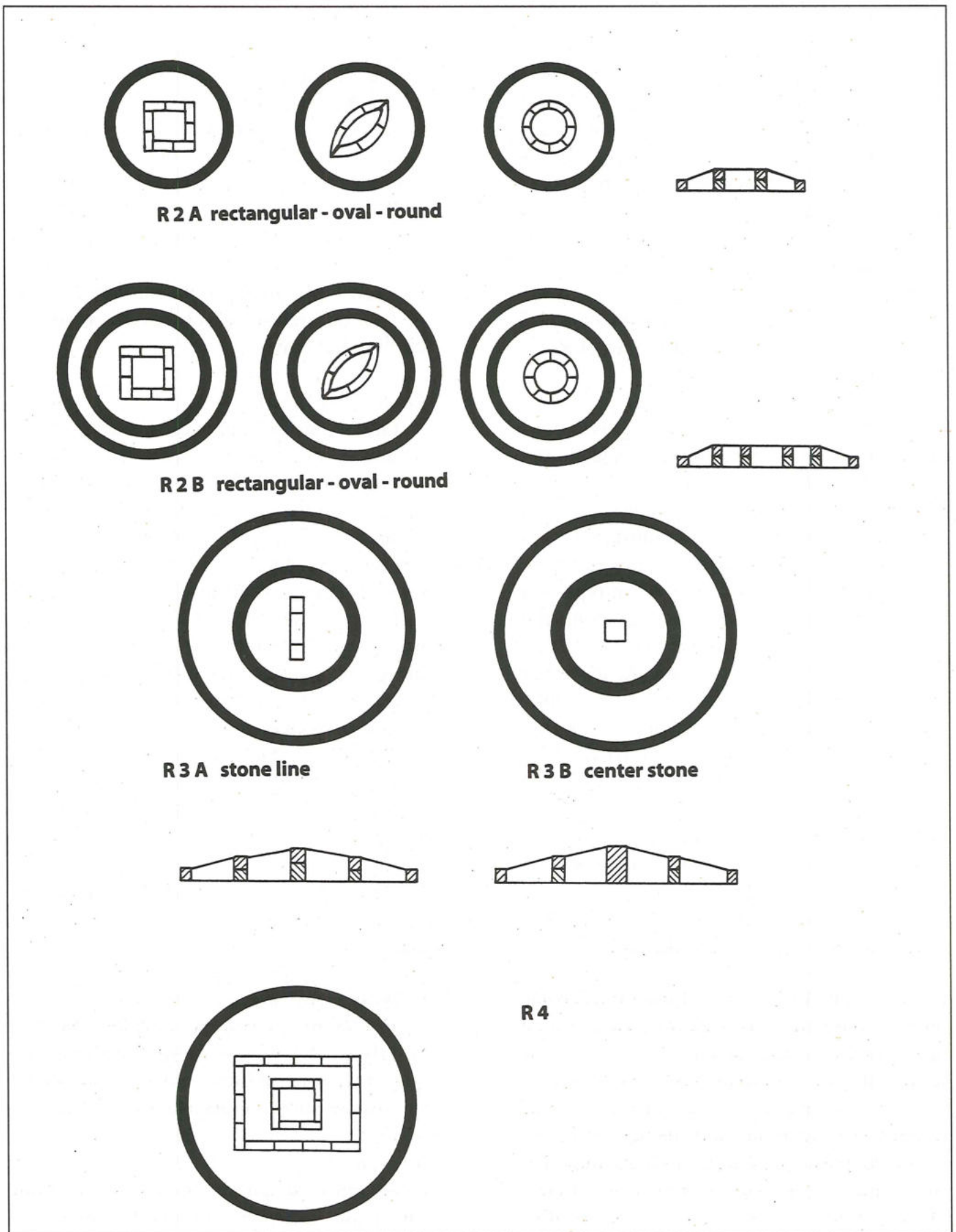
In the burial ground of ar-Raḥa three basic types of graves were differentiated, which in their construction forms have different but recurring architectural identification forms (Fig. 2).

Type R1

Refers to the simple circular grave, of which up to this day no specimen has been discovered in ar-Raḥa, but in other regions of Ard al-Karak (Worschech 1985:32).

Type R2A

Refers to a grave with a grave chamber encircled by a stone structure (diameter of about 3 to 5 m). This type itself can be further differentiated on the basis of its cham-



2. Schematic Classification of graves at ar-Raḥa. (Drawn by Domke).

ber construction. The chamber was either set with upright slabs of stone or was built-up of two to four layers of square stone blocks and/or square stones masoned together. The different forms of these grave chambers made out of flat stones set together or built-up walls are classifiable under three categories: rectangular, oval, or circular.

Type R2B

Refers to a grave with two stone circles and a diameter of 4 to 8 m. The types of grave chambers correspond to those of R2A.

Type R3

Refers to an extraordinary grave construction: two concentric stone circles located next to each other give this type of grave an appearance similar to a stairway from afar, which under certain circumstances can also occur with the above mentioned types. A distinctive feature of this grave type is a three to four layer high stone set along the diameter, and made up of heavy megalithic square stone blocks which divide the inner circle in two halves resulting in two semi-circular chambers. The diameter of the whole structure is usually 8 to 10 m. This type of grave is found only in a built-up or masoned form, whereby it is not differentiated whether the grave walls are built of square stone blocks or of big boulders. The building material for the existing graves made of square stone blocks were delivered from the many, natural crumbling stone formations on the cliff side of the plateau. This type of grave is less often found in ar-Raḥa than the previously described simple circular grave encircled with stone. However, Type R3A is the most conspicuous and impressive grave type on the plateau. This type was also found in an elaborate design (referring to size, height of walls and roof construction) in the survey area on the slope down to the Dead sea and in the region of Wādī Ibn Ḥammād and Wādī al-Gharra (Worschech 1985:32-34). Research in this area is still be-

ing conducted.

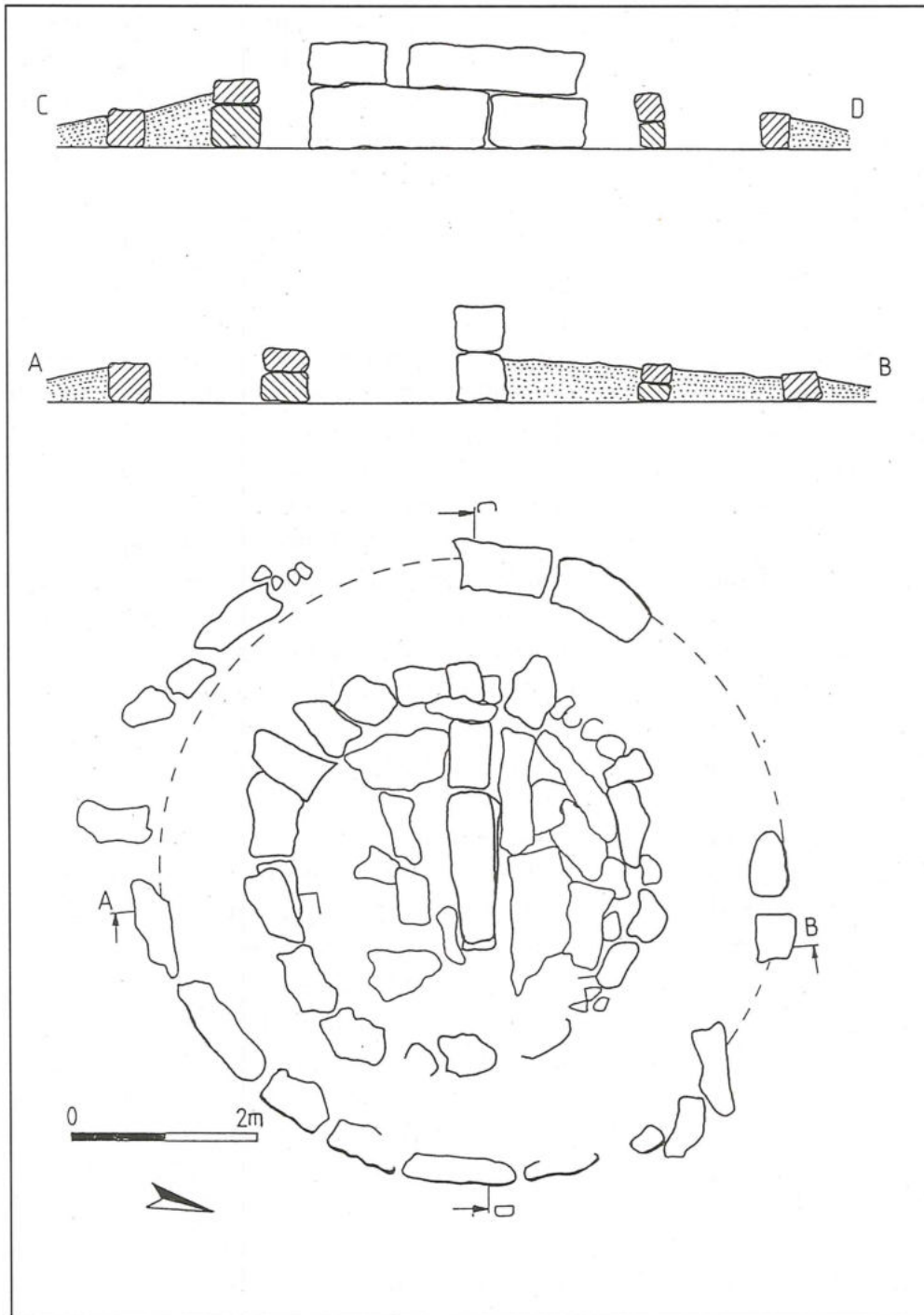
2. Results of the Excavations of Graves 2,5,8 and 9

Graves 2,5,8 and 9 were chosen for closer study, because they are representative of the two most frequently occurring grave types in ar-Raḥa. The study deals with graves which have a dividing line of stone along the diameter of the stone circle, and simple stone mounds of a smaller diameter but with one or two different-sized circles of stone encircling the grave.

Grave 2 (Fig. 3)

Grave 2 has an east-west diameter of 7.23 m and a north-south extension of 8.40 m, and has a slight oval structure. These measurements refer to the outer stone circle around the grave chamber whose inner diameter is about 3.70 m. The stone blocks (height approx. 0.40 m) of the outer circle were set upright on their narrow side which has a width of approx. 0.39 m. The wall of the grave chamber was made of two stone blocks set on their narrower sides with no mortar in between (measurements approx. 0.40 x 0.50 m) The megalithic row of stones (approx. 2.90 m long) that divided the grave in half did not touch the chamber wall leaving, at each end, a space of 0.50 to 0.60 m free.

While the space between the outer stone circle and the inner circle made up by the wall of the grave chamber was simply filled with fist to head-sized stones, the grave chamber excavated in 1998, in the southern region, shows a particular stratification: sand and fist-sized stones were arbitrarily put over laid grave slabs, i.e., on flat stone slabs of different sizes varying between 0.7 x 0.40 and 0.50 x 0.20 m, which themselves were then laid on top of a filling of fist to head-sized stone boulders to the grave floor. These covered a grey-brown, hardened clay layer, in which bones were embedded, mainly found in the gap measuring 0.54 m in-



3. The architecture of grave 2. (Drawn by Axel Domke).

between the western end of the row of megaliths and the grave wall. Why these skeleton remains, especially pieces of the lower leg and arm bones were found here and not in the big chamber area (a half-oval of approx. 2.90 x 1.60 m) remains a puzzle. The missing pieces of the same skeleton, the skull and the ribs, presumably point to a secondary burial. In close proximity to the lower leg bones embedded in the clay mass,

plant remains were found which, like the bones, were given for further scientific laboratory testing. The grave did not contain any vessels or other burial gifts.

Grave 5

Grave 5 has a total diameter of 9.40m is bigger than grave 2 and corresponds to the circular type of R3A. The opened northern side of the grave shows the same kind of

stratification as grave 2: on the grey-brown clay layer is a layer of fist to head-sized stone pieces reaching a height of 0.60 m, then grave slabs were laid which were smaller in size than those found in grave two, and finally on the top most stone row of the grave mound there is a fill made up of a mixture of sand and fist-sized stones. The architecture of the grave basically corresponds to that of Grave 2. However, the walls of the grave chamber and the outer stone circle are set more clumsily and roughly, an impression that is created because big stone pieces make up the wall in three layers instead of stone slabs. It is worth mentioning that three molars with pieces of the lower jaw, one incisor and a number of ribs were found. However, these items were baked into the soil to such an extent that they could not be removed. But some other unidentifiable bones could be successfully excavated and sent for scientific testing.

The bone and teeth remains were found next to the circular grave with the dividing stone line along its diameter. The absence of the skull or pieces of it and other parts of the skeleton again lead to the assumption that here too a secondary burial had taken place. Accompanying burial gifts were not found.

Grave 8

The most remarkable apparent element of Grave 8 is the double stone circle around the grave mound. The distance between the two circles is about 0.40 m; the diameter, of approx. 9 m, touches the broken edge of the western side of the plateau. The chamber itself is oval with three to four stone layers made of head-sized stones placed one on top of the other (Type R2B). Fist to head-sized stones filled this grave chamber which has a diameter of about 1.30 m. Even during the excavation, broken pieces of bones were found in the mixture of sand and stones. Larger pieces of bones or complete pieces of a skeleton were not found. Even within the grave chamber, in the additionally con-

structed oval lower part that has a width of only 0.40 m, created by the setting of boulders, no bones were found. Here too, no burial gifts were found.

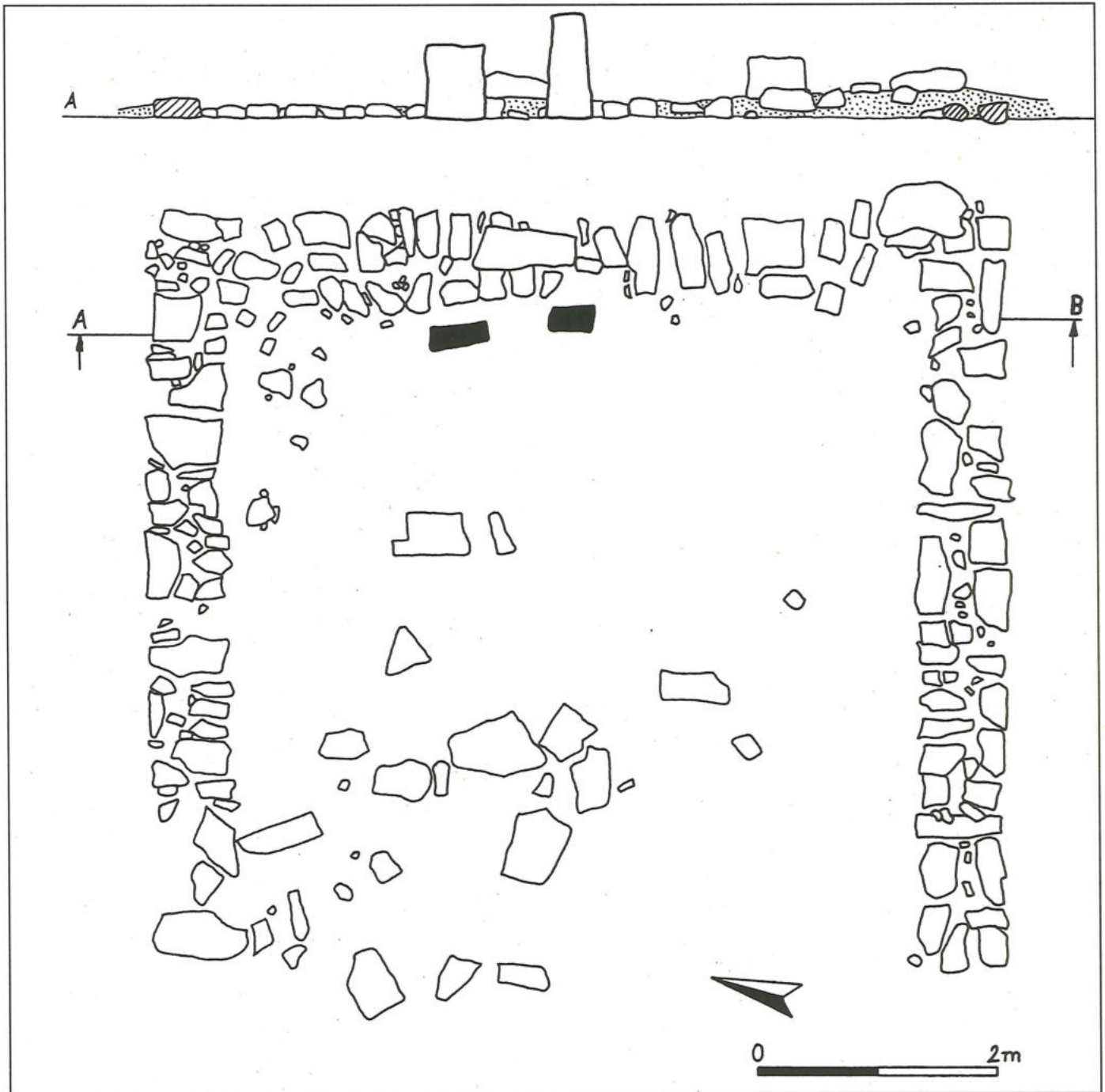
Grave 9

This is the first of four graves of different sizes that were found on the western downhill spur towards the wadi. Grave 9 is similar to Grave 8 because it is circular; only it is smaller (approx. 4 m in diameter) and the chamber is laid in a circular form (R2A). This grave was constructed on a step or terrace of broken limestone; the unevenness of which was levelled through a filling of sand. The smaller grave chamber with a diameter of 1.10 m contained an initial layer of stone blocks and then underneath them another layer of larger boulders which went down to the natural rock formation. No bones or burial gifts were found.

Conclusion

The typology of the graves/cairns described above are suggested to be helpful for further research about similar reported cairns of various sites in Jordan and in Ard al-Karak. In the close vicinity of these cairns there are a number of other installations related to the cairns belonging presumably to the late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age periods as the immense amount of flints dating to these periods suggest. These are the so-called "stone boxes", "lines of stones", "rectangular enclosures" (Fig. 4), "standing stones", and "stone circles", which may be cultic installations as has been suggested by other authors dealing with similar features (Avner 1984:115-131). There is also an elaborate arrangement of (fallen) standing stones, lines of stones, and a rectangular installation ca. 2km north of the village of 'Ader.

The work at ar-Raḥa is continuous as well as the research pertaining to the much neglected studies of burial cairns and connected installations which may have originated in the Neo-Paleolithic period. These in-



4. Rectangular one-layered structure with standing stones. (Drawn by Axel Domke).

stallations may have underwent different interpretations throughout history down to the Iron Age, when some installations became symbolic representations of Ba'al or other Semitic gods. A more detailed discussion about cairns and associated features is in preparation (Worschech 1999/2000).

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