

A NEOLITHIC SITE AT WADI EL YABIS

IT appears to be worth while to put on record a Neolithic site discovered by Mr. Trevor Trought at Wadi el Yabis, where a cistern was being dug by the Agricultural Research Station a few months ago.

The site lies in the Jordan Valley between Deir Alla and Kirbet esh Shuneh on the east side of the Jordan, about a hundred yards west of the road. Here a small bluff separates the gently sloping talus terrace from the flat cultivable lands. The cistern was excavated in talus deposits and showed the following section:

1. 30 cm. greyish black A horizon.
2. 60 cm. grey B (Ca) horizon with pebbles—level containing implements.
3. 10 cm. whitish gravel.
4. 30 cm. brown loamy sand.
5. 50 cm. grey gravel.
6. 25 cm. brown loamy gravel.

The two upper levels are a deposit formed in a swampy spring with underwater vegetation covering pebbles, implements and bones with a calcium carbonate crust. The spring water is still oozing out into the excavation for the cistern, but now in layer 6 and not in layer 2 as originally. For this reason and because of the presence of the bluff, the conditions suggested by the incrustation cannot obtain at the present day. At the time of the formation of the Neolithic horizon, therefore, topographical conditions must have been different.

Apart from the Neolithic implements to be described later, a few rough flakes were found. They had no particular characteristics, though their edges were worn. This may argue that an earlier stone industry than the Neolithic is present also. In addition, there was one small potsherd with no diagnostic characteristics except that the ware would be consistent with the Hellenistic period. All these finds had the same lime incrustation as that found on the Neolithic implements.

No Neolithic pottery has been found in the deposits, but this must not be taken to prove that this particular Neolithic belongs to the prepottery phase. In view of the temporary nature of the excavation the number of specimens obtained was small, and it may well be that sherds covered by heavy lime-crusts have escaped detection.

The stone artefacts consist of ground implements and flint tools and cores.

Ground Stone Artefacts. Eight different types can be distinguished, of which examples are illustrated (Fig. 11):

Flat-ended cylindrical hammers (Y1).

Flat-ended cylindrical hammers with shaft holes (Y6), with unfinished hole.

Oblong cylindrical pointed-butt and round-ended objects, possibly pestles (Y8) and (Y7, broken).

Flat-ended conical pestles (Y4, broken).

Pointed-butt celt (Y2).

Flat-based discs, possibly rubbers (Y3).

Stone ring with biconical hole (Y5). This type is usually called mace-head, though it is difficult to imagine how a ring with a biconical hole could be securely attached to a shaft. It is probable therefore that these widely distributed objects served a different function.

Spherical hammer stone, about 8.5 cm. diameter.

The majority of these ground artefacts were made of coarse-grained basalt which contains numerous very small vesicles. There is also a dense porphyritic basalt of which the only polished implement (Y2) is made, and a grey limestone. Except for the pointed-butt celt with its smooth surface, all implements have the characteristic rough surface left by alternate pecking and grinding, and no attempt was made to produce a smooth surface. The coarse basalt would not lend itself to a smooth polish in any case, but the grey limestone would. The flat disc (Y3), which from its shape suggests that it might have been a rubber, has not acquired a polish on its under-side, as it should have done had it been used. This suggests that manufacture took place on the spot and that the specimen is unused. That Wadi el Yabis was a manufacturing site is further supported by two other specimens, a flat-ended cylindrical hammer with an unfinished shaft hole (Y6), and a large trimming flake, 14 cm. long (Y9). On the other hand, it seems that tools were also used on the spot, since broken specimens occurred in numbers (for instance Y4). From this the conclusion may be drawn that Wadi el Yabis was an occupation site where tools were both manufactured and used, and that its location was determined by the position of the spring.

Attention must be drawn to Y8, an oblong cylindrical pointed-butt and round-ended object, nearly a foot long, the function of which is obscure. But as broken fragments of this type were also found the specimen was not unique here. If this type was intended to be used as pestles, one wonders why the end is not more flattened.¹

Flint Implements. The flint implements bear out the conclusions just noted, as there are cores and waste flakes indicating manufacture on the spot, as well as used flakes and blades, and sickle blades with silica polish (Fig. 12).

The cores are chiefly of the cylindrical type, and large enough to produce the rather larger blades to be described shortly. Others, however, are for smaller blades, and one (Y18) is a polyhedral flake core closely resembling a Clactonian core; it is 3.5 cm. long. No tools have been found which may have been manufactured from so small a core.

The following types of tools have been encountered:

Long blades (Y11), evidently used as knives.

One angle burin on a long blade (Y10).

Sickle blades with double saw edges and silica polish on both edges (Y13).

Notched blades (Y14).

¹ Mr. Sadek Nur, Khartoum, has kindly given the information that pestles of this type are used for the pounding of coffee, etc. in wooden mortars. This would explain the absence of flattening.

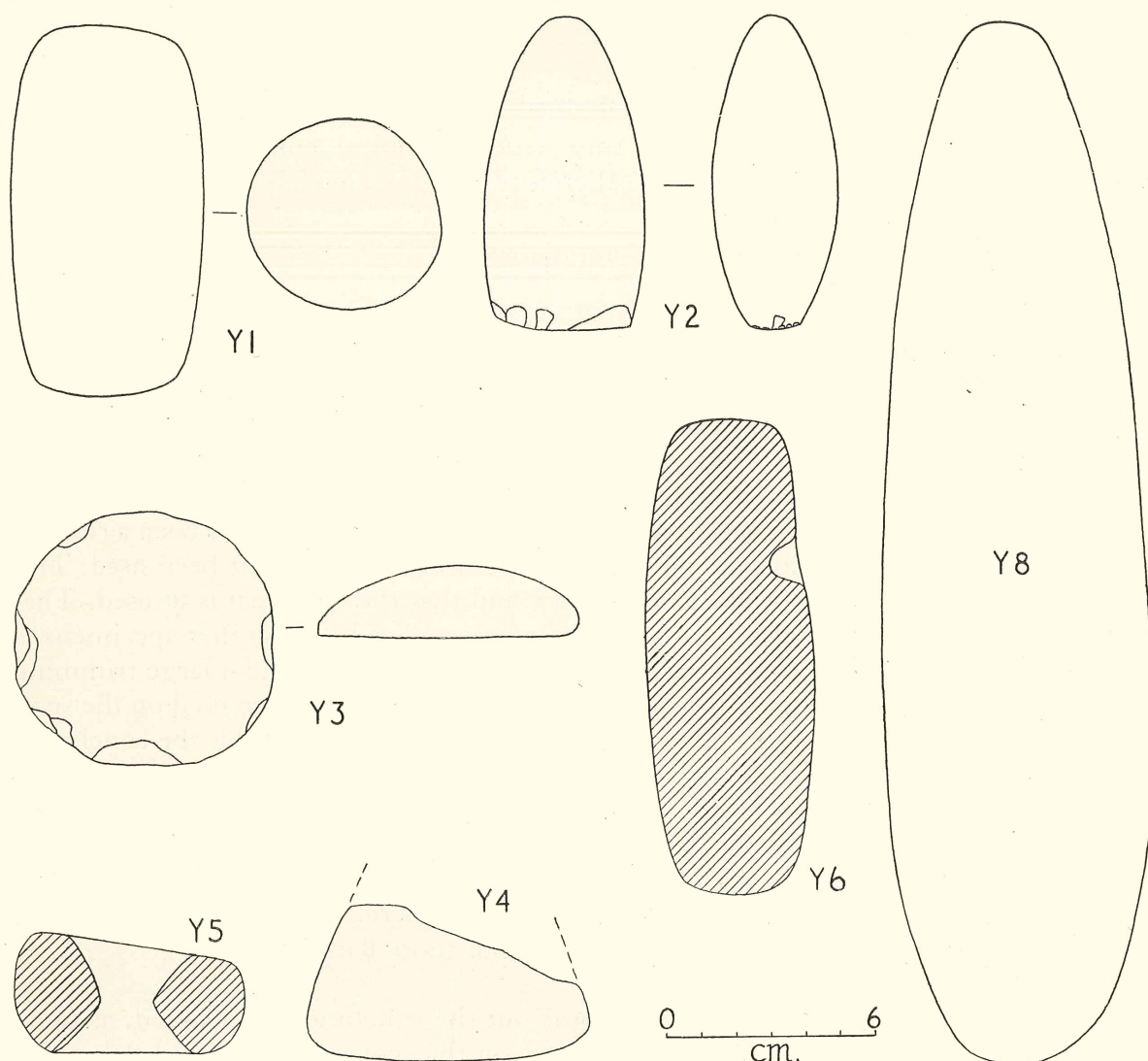


FIG. 11

Tanged long blade (Y12), worked bifacially across the surface of the point, the retouch being extremely flat and reminiscent of the Fayoum Neolithic. This may have been either the tang of a projectile head or, if turned round, it could conceivably be regarded as an awl.

Oval scrapers on short, broad flakes (Y15).

The edges of all these implements are quite sharp and unabraded.

Comparison with Other Sites. From the technological point of view the Yabis industry is Neolithic, though this does not preclude the possibility of it being of Chalcolithic age. It cannot be decided whether the absence of pottery finds is significant owing to the small size of the collection. Few comparable sites have been published. The type site of the Ghassulian, Teleilat Ghassul (Koeppel, 1940) is Chalcolithic and characterized by

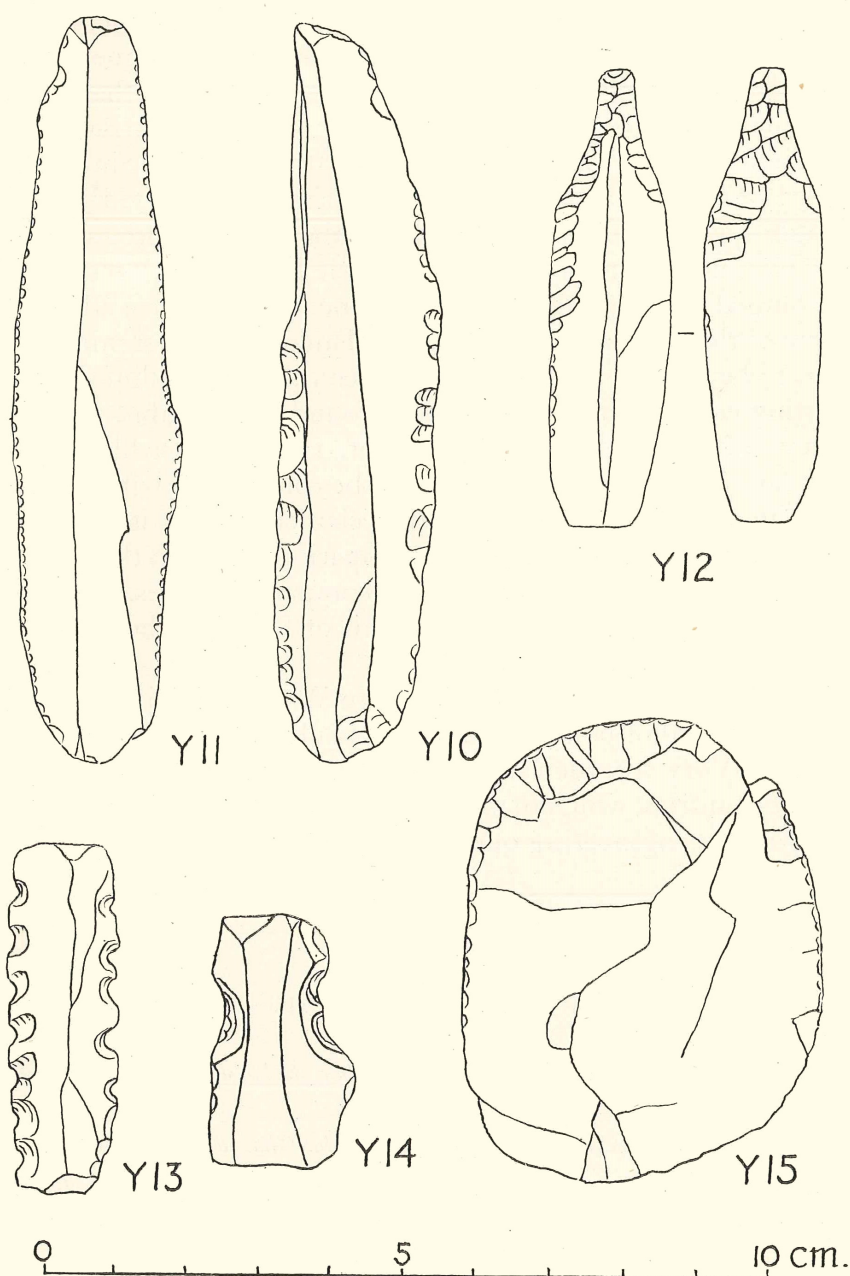


FIG. 12

large numbers of flint chisels, a tool that has not been found at Wadi el Yabis. Similarly, the Ghassulian contains very flat convex and round scrapers with flat marginal retouch, which again are absent at Wadi el Yabis. Of the ground stone tools, however, the 'mace-head' (Y5) with the biconical hole and the pointed-butt celt (Y2) have their counterparts at Ghassul, but these types are by no means confined to the Chalcolithic.

The Yarmuk industry is regarded by Stekelis (1951) as Neolithic, since the flint industry, pottery and art objects differ in type, forms and technique from the leading types of the Chalcolithic culture. It must, however, be pointed out that the herring-bone pattern found on the pottery is well known from the Chalcolithic. Basalt tools from the Yarmukian include pestles and mace-heads as found on the Yabis. Since the ground tool equipment has not been described in detail, comparison is restricted to the flint implements. Every single type from the Yabis occurs at the Yarmuk also, and there are some striking resemblances such as the double-edged sickle blade (Y13) with Yarmuk, Fig. 7, no. 11, and the tanged blade (Y12) with Fig. 7, no. 19. But since all these types range from the Neolithic to the Bronze Age such resemblance is hardly significant. A more important fact seems to be that the Yarmuk industry contains many flint axes, celts and hoes with polished cutting edges which have not been found at the Yabis.

The Tahurian of Neolithic Jericho (Crowfoot, 1935) has yielded polishing stones, celts and pestles of lava and limestone which might be comparable with the Yabis industry, but the flint equipment comprises a microlithic element which is absent at the Yabis. There is little point in going farther afield for comparison, though the Fayoum Neolithic contains the biconical 'mace-head' among other comparable types. The fifty-odd specimens recovered from Wadi el Yabis do not permit of assessing the frequency of implement types statistically.

It is thus not possible to place the industry from Wadi el Yabis in detail, though the absence of pottery finds and of polished flint celts would favour a Neolithic, and possibly early Neolithic, date. Very few such sites, however, have so far been made known from Jordan and adjacent countries, which makes it worth while to put Wadi el Yabis on record, a locality which owing to engineering operations would otherwise be lost to archaeology.

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