



A set of 2nd millennium BC clay objects from Tell Arbid

MINOR ARTS

The subject of this poster is related to one of the 8th ICAANE sessions: *High and low. Minor arts for the elites and the populace*. It may contribute to the discussion on a category of objects which – if not *sensu stricto* art pieces – are manifestations of some intellectual, social or cult processes rather than items of everyday use. Objects of this kind are known to all archaeologists but, being frequently found singly or in secondary contexts, they often are just another number in the inventories of “small finds”. Hopefully, presentation of sets of such items will open more avenues of their interpretation.

SETS OF FINDS

The presented set of 63 unbaked clay objects comes from the 2010 season of Polish-Syrian excavations at Tell Arbid (Syria). The finds come from a test trench in the north-eastern part of Sector W-east, excavated that year (See *contour map* and *plan*).

Majority of the objects was found in two concentrations, each centered around large, coarse- or common-ware body sherds. Objects registered as “Set 1” were huddled on, and around, a large potsherd. The sherd may have been lined with clay patches interlaid with some organic material (e.g. leaves?, grass?). A smaller sherd supported a clay disc with finger impressions, and yet another – a handmade bowl. On the largest potsherd, at least 10 items were found (as is often the case with objects, which are open to all sorts of

interpretations, the terms in which the separate categories are described - e.g. “spools” or “tokens” - refer to their shape rather than function): a dotted coil, a round “token”, two “bottle-cap tokens” (called so for their shape), three “tokens” with raised edge and three spools. Just next to the sherds, another three spools were encountered, followed on by three more spools and four “tokens” with raised edge a bit further on.

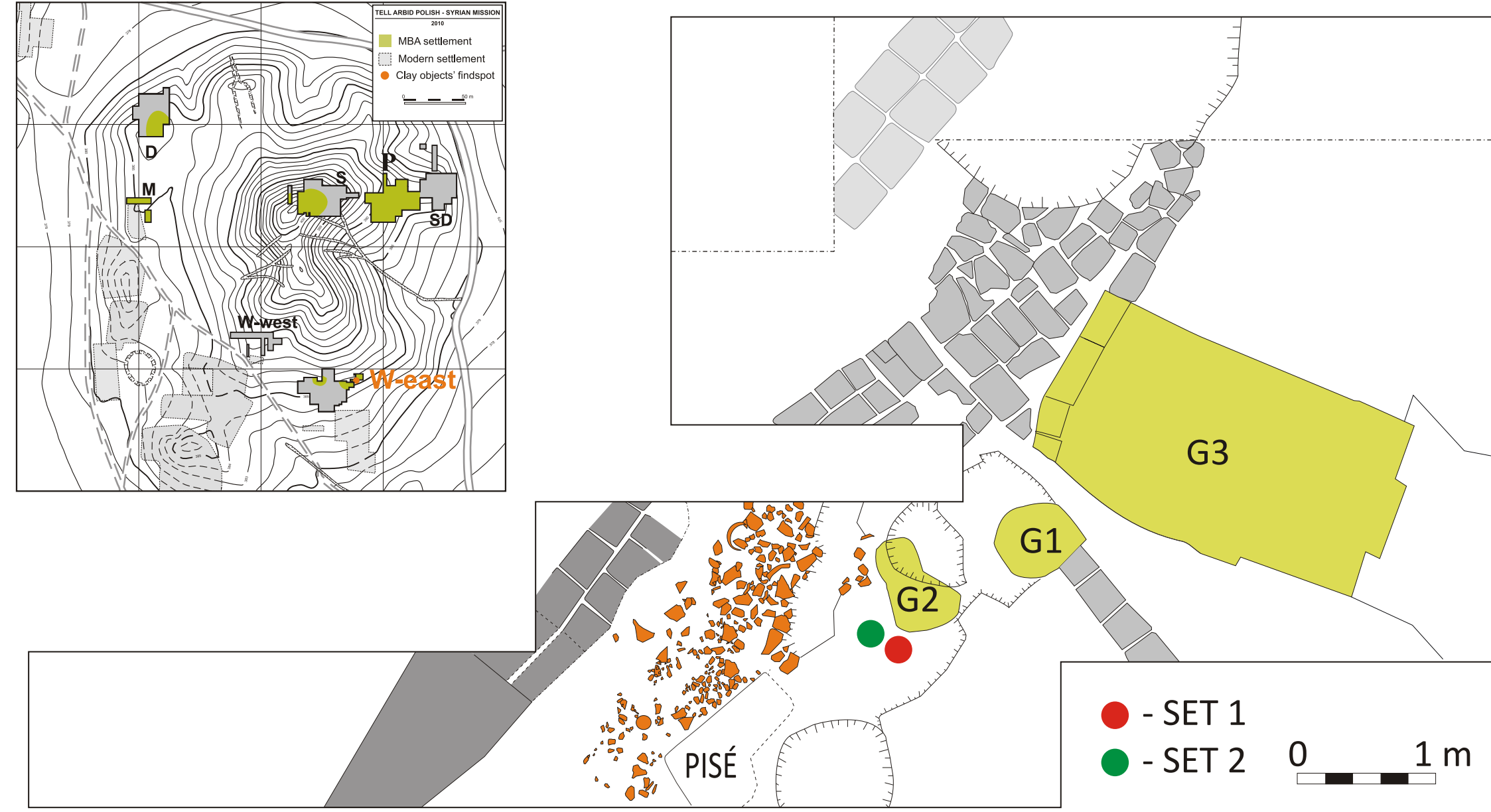
The other concentration of finds, or “Set 2”, also included potsherds upon which more clay objects were found. In one case (*Set 2a*), it was a thin, round disc decorated with two crossing lines and circles at the point where the lines cross and in the quarters of the circle (this cross-and-dots decoration was found on 7 objects). A round “token” decorated with a circular impression was lying on the disc. Another potsherd (*Set 2b*) supported an even more elaborate arrangement: a clay disc with raised edges overlain by a cross-and-dots decorated disc, upon which three “tokens” were resting, one of them also with the same decoration. A miniature bowl with fitting lid(?) was standing on the same sherd. Set 2 included also a model table, various “tokens”, a Z-shaped coil, eight minute tetrahedrons and more spools.

The remaining objects were scattered across an area of less than 1.5 m by 2 m. They included further spools, discs and “tokens” (some cross-and-dots decorated), two fragments of model round tables and what might be tentatively described as a pseudo- or counting-tablet(?) and a counting disc.

CONTEXT AND CHRONOLOGY

The findspot of the objects does not provide many clues towards their interpretation. They were recovered from a ditch or pit, excavated within a narrow test trench (see *plan*). The fill of the ditch(?), which was rich in large potsherds, was disturbed by later pits. The sherds probably came from a neighboring pottery pavement (Akkadian or post-Akkadian in date) damaged by the digging, but the context is dated by Khabur ware sherds. A pit grave (G2) with a few fragments of a male skeleton was found just beside, but slightly below, the two sets. The bones may have come from a Khabur ware period chamber tomb (G3) (unexcavated, but seemingly robbed) beside which another secondary burial of a few bones with small Khabur ware jars was encountered (G1). There is no way of knowing if the burials - perhaps of bones discarded after the grave robbery - have anything to do with the clay objects but, to my knowledge, such a context is unparalleled at other sites.

Nonetheless, these objects must be regarded as found *in situ*. Being fragile, they would not be in such a good state of preservation, and standing one on top of another the right side up, if they had been disposed of by throwing into the pit. Still more remarkably, if the potsherds serving as stands for the objects had indeed been taken from the neighboring pavement, at least some of the clay discs must have been made at the spot. There were also marked differences in clay of which the objects were made. Some are of poorer quality clay than the others; they are often also more awkward in shape than the remaining specimens of the same type. This is the case in the most



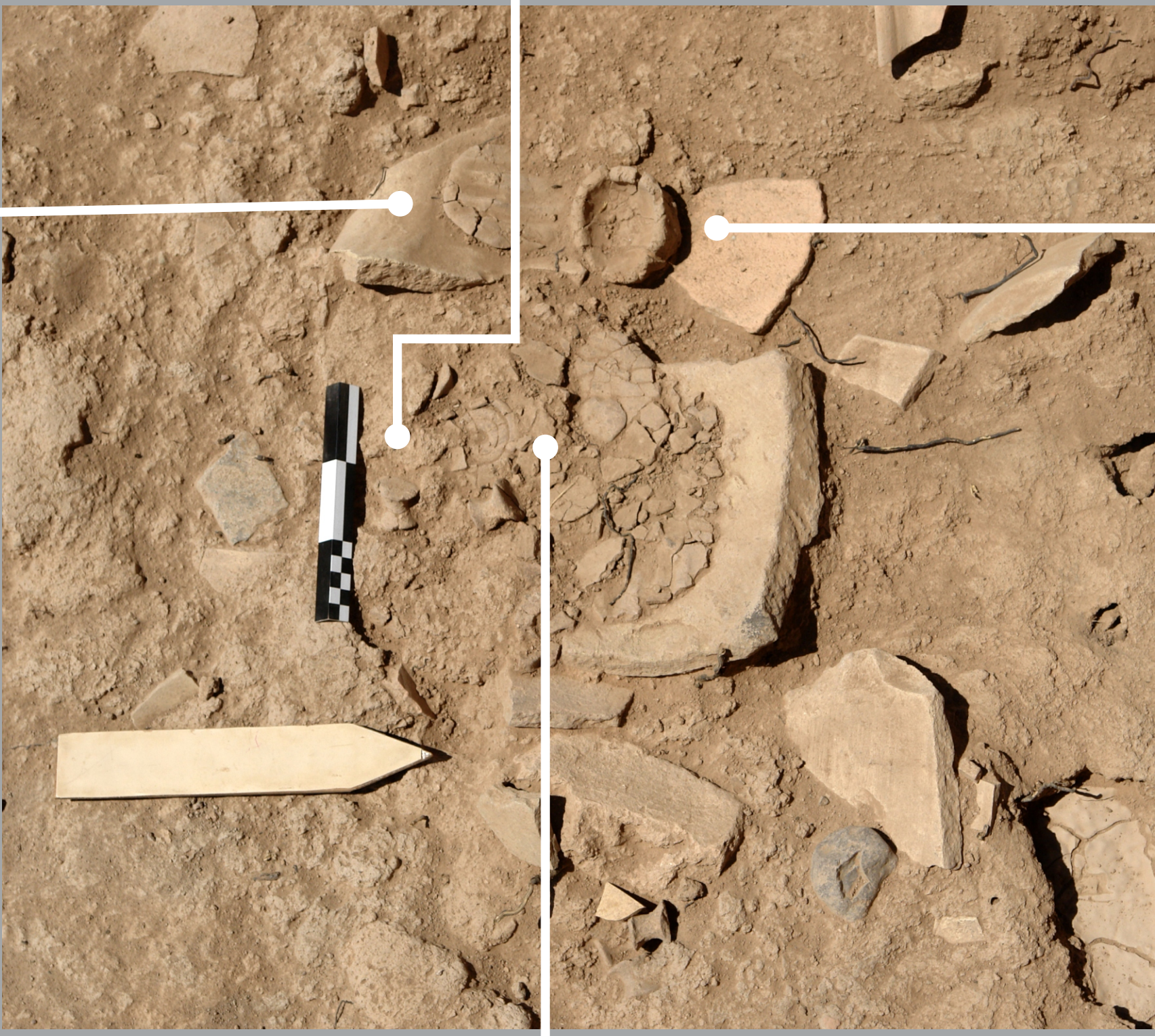
numerous and uniform categories of finds - spools (3 of 15) and “tokens” with raised edge (1 of 8).

This is the second set of unbaked clay objects uncovered in a Khabur ware period context at Tell Arbid. The first one consisted mainly of miniatures and models; the present one contains more pieces/tokens.

Coupled with the presence of what may be regarded as reconing devices (at Tell Arbid no texts but a broken envelope were found, so a pre-literate accounting system is quite in place), both interpretations: as tokens and gaming pieces are possible. However, how the other types of objects fit into the picture will need further deliberation.



SET 2b



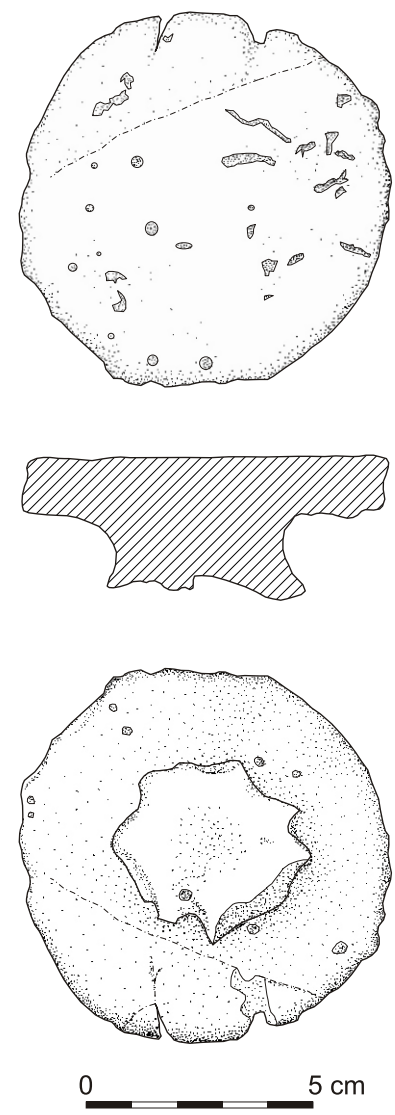
SET 1



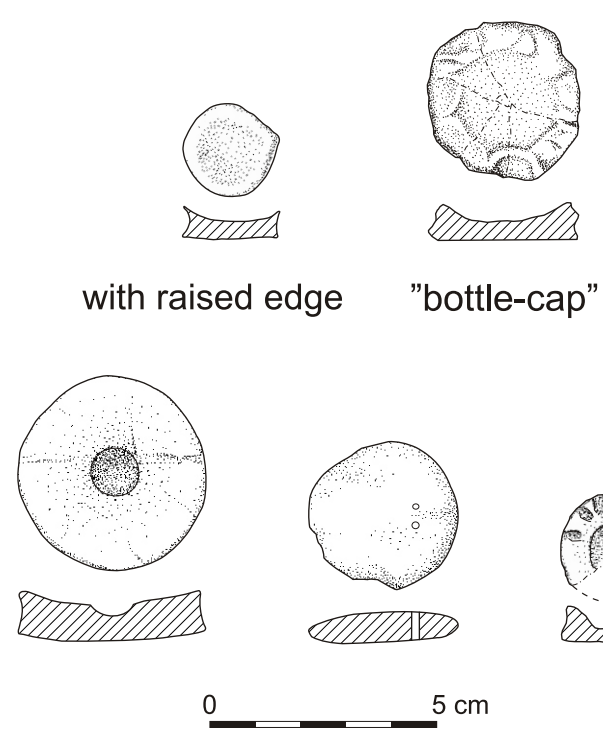
SET 2a



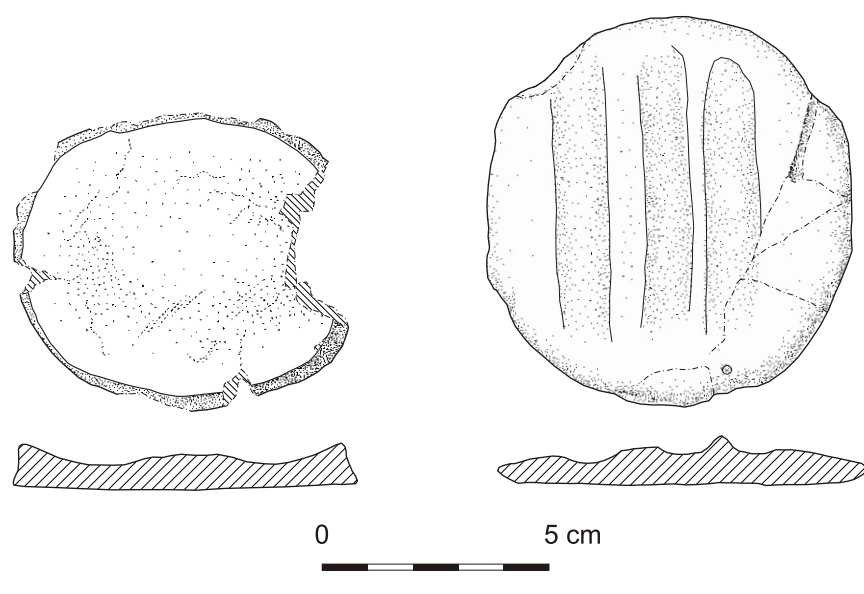
MODEL ROUND TABLE



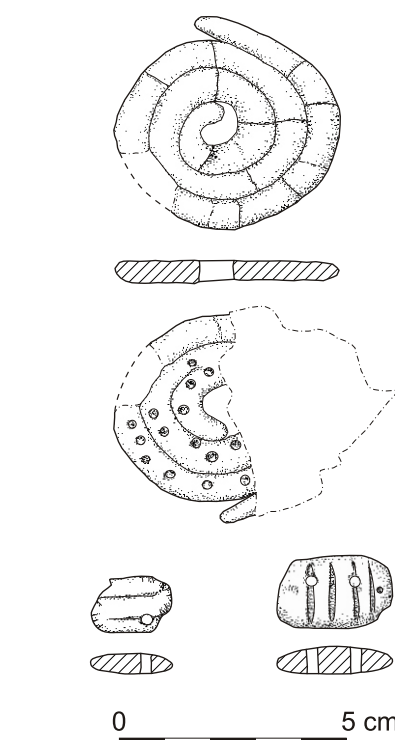
TOKENS / PIECES



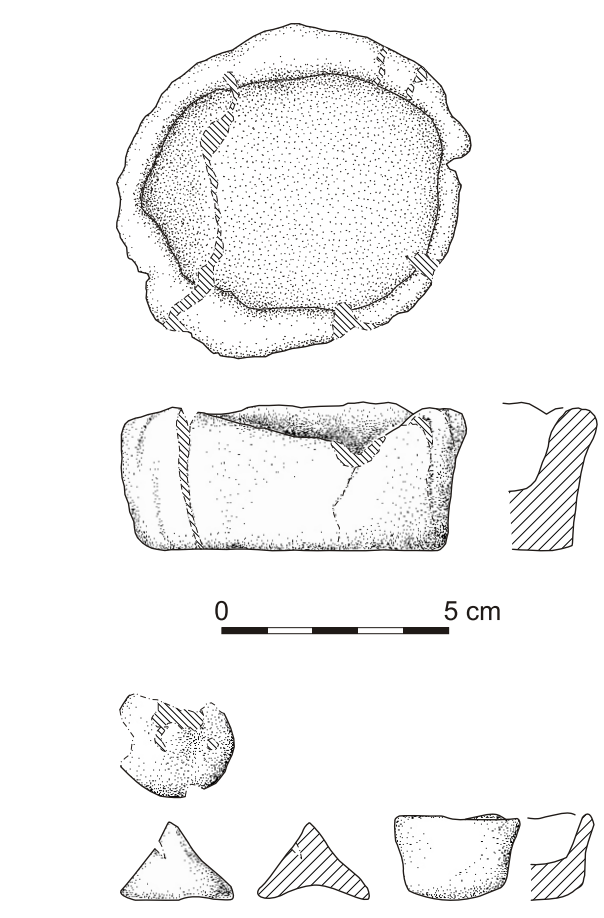
DISCS



COILS



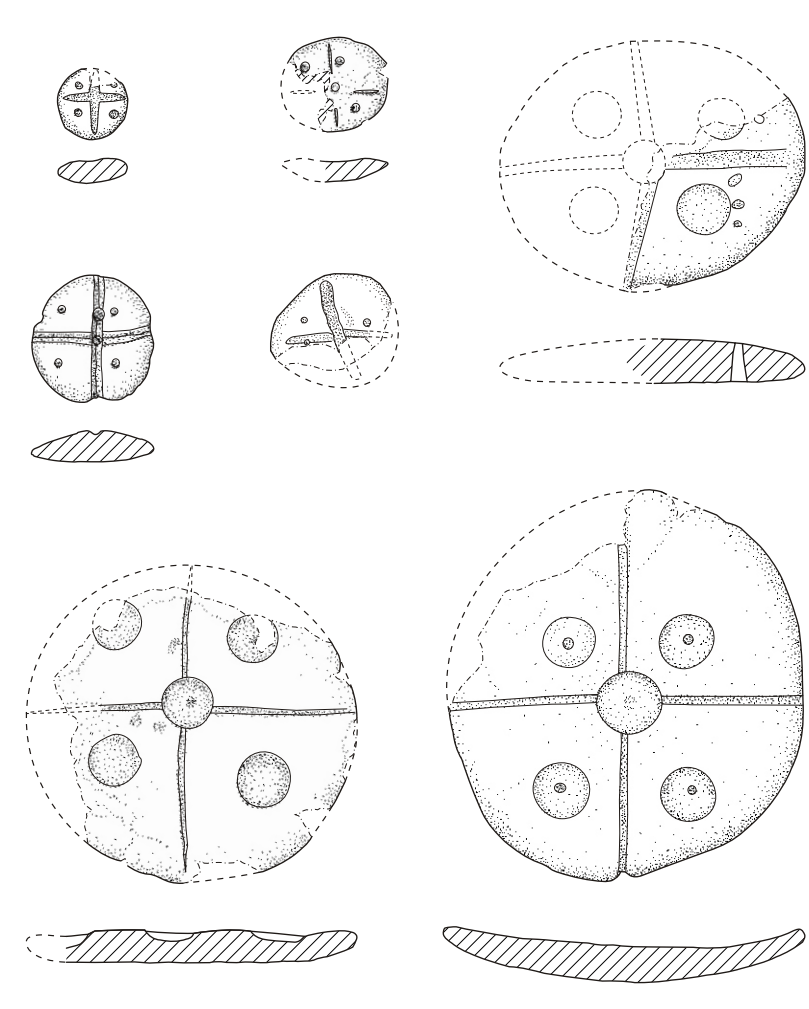
HANDMADE BOWL AND MINIATURE VESSELS(?)



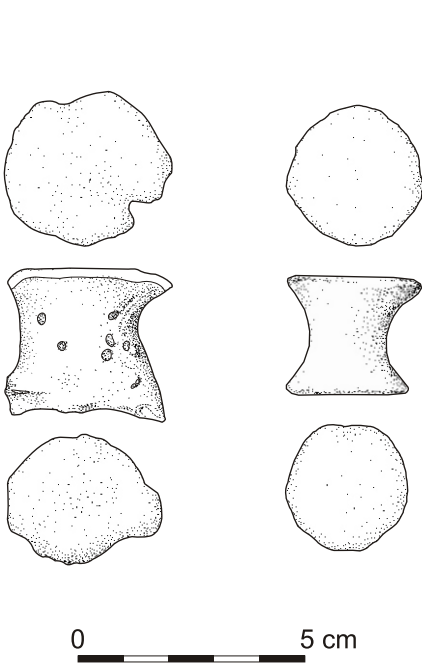
Items like these (bottom row) are often regarded as tokens or pieces. However, these objects have matching diameters which makes them look much like a bowl with a lid.



TOKENS AND DISCS WITH CROSS-AND-DOTS DECORATION



SPOOLS



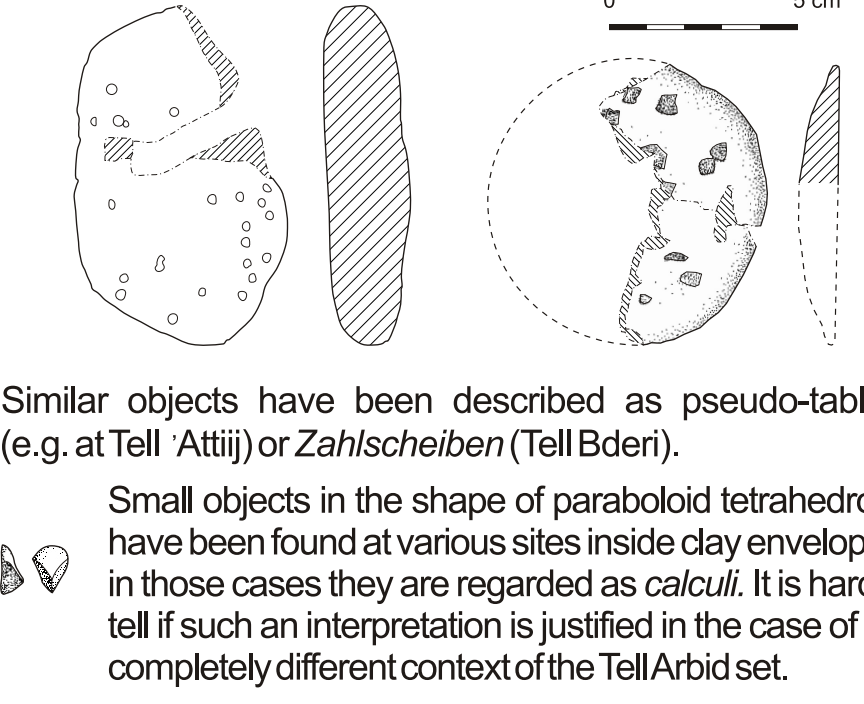
Of the 15 spools, 12 were of similar, good quality clay and workmanship, while three were crudely made, as if added to an incomplete set.



A similar model table was found in another set of clay objects in a Khabur ware period layer from Sector Pal. Tell Arbid.



RECONING DEVICES(?)



Similar objects have been described as pseudo-tablets (e.g. at Tell Atthij) or *Zahlscheiben* (Tell Bderi). Small objects in the shape of paraboloid tetrahedrons have been found at various sites inside clay envelopes; in those cases they are regarded as *calculi*. It is hard to tell if such an interpretation is justified in the case of the completely different context of the Tell Arbid set.



THE SITE

Tell Arbid is located in north-eastern Syria, in the Khabur Basin, between the modern towns of Qamishi and Hassake. Since 1996, the site has been excavated by a joint Polish-Syrian archaeological expedition. The co-director on the Polish side is Prof. Piotr Bieliński from the University of Warsaw, whom I thank for the permission to present this material.

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