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Chapter 4

The 1999 Excavation at Baaz Rockshelter

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Introduction

Following a short survey season in May 1999 (Chapter 12, this volume), a joint German-Syrian survey and excavation project was founded under the name Tübinger Damaskus Ausgrabungs- und Survey-Projekt (TDASP) to continue research in the Province of Damascus. One of the first objectives of the new research project was to conduct a test excavation at Baaz Rockshelter (Photo 1), which had been located during the May 1999 survey. After a week of preparatory administrative and field work, the excavation began on 9 October and ran until the site was closed down and sandbagged on 16 November. Of the four Syrian and five German crew members, typically seven people worked on the Baaz excavation in the field and in the laboratory. The remaining crew members conducted survey in the Ma'alula region.



Photo 1. *Baaz Rockshelter. Geographic setting with arrow indicating the position of the site, May 1999 (Photo N. J. Conard).*

At the Baaz excavation, finds were plotted using a Leica laser total station and a modified version of the EDM computer program developed by H. Dibble and S. McPherron. As far as we are aware, this is the first use of this kind of computer-aided excavation system in Syria. Following the traditional Tübingen system of Paleolithic excavation, geological horizons (GH) were designated with arabic numbers, and archaeological horizons (AH) were designated with roman numerals. From top to bottom, GHs for the surface layer (S) and horizons 1 through 6 were defined, at times with subdivisions. Below the surface, these geological layers contained finds within eight AHs: I, Ia, II, III, IIIa, IIIb, IV and V. With the exception of apparently sterile sediments in square 20/30, archaeological finds were present in all the strata; thus the geological and archaeological horizons run parallel to each other.

The excavation focused upon a 2 x 2 m area in the center of the rockshelter and a 2 x 1 m area one meter south of the main excavation (Photo 2). The southwestern corner of the excavation was assigned the coordinates 20 m east and 30 m north, and complete profile drawings were made every two meters in each of the cardinal directions. During excavation, lithic artifacts and faunal remains larger than 2 cm were piece-plotted, as were charcoal fragments larger than 1 cm and other finds of interest. All archaeological deposits were screened through 5-mm mesh, while occasional samples were screened through 2.5-mm mesh to facilitate the recovery of smaller finds. Flotation samples were collected from a stratigraphic column in the center of the main excavation. Excavators recorded the dip and strike of artifacts larger than 5 cm, and plotted all limestone pieces larger than 10 cm. All features and taphonomic disturbances were plotted and documented stratigraphically on plan sheets with all other important finds.



Photo 2. Baaz Rockshelter. Overview of the excavation, October 1999 (Photo A. W. Kandel).

Geographic and Stratigraphic Settings

Baaz Rockshelter is noteworthy for its geographic setting on the cliffline above the Jaba'deen Pass in the foothills of the Anti-Lebanon Mountains at an elevation of 1529 m. The site provides an outstanding view of the lowlands to the southeast and ready passage into the highlands located to the northwest. This ecotone setting almost certainly provided access to important organic and inorganic resources from both the highlands and the lowlands of the immediate region.

The Jaba'deen Pass is one of the more prominent connections between the lowland and highland areas in the current region of study, with another one present at Ma'aloula. Lesser passes also occur occasionally where wadis penetrate the cliffline. Without doubt this prominent geographic position was of significance in prehistoric periods. Survey in the Ma'aloula-Jaba'deen region shows that most of the caves and rockshelters along the cliffline have been swept clean by geological forces. The preservation of intact sediments in Baaz Rockshelter directly results from its protected position within a niche along the limestone cliff face. Even in the harshest rain storms, such as the one observed on 25 October 1999, the rockshelter provided complete protection from the elements.

During the initial visit to the site in May 1999, the survey team was struck by the wealth of lithic finds on the surface in and below the shelter and by the complete absence of indications of modern disturbances. This favorable situation stands in stark contrast to many other caves and shelters in the region where archaeological deposits have been destroyed by human activities of recent decades. This initial impression was confirmed at the time of excavation, during which, with the exception of occasional animal burrows, an intact stratigraphic sequence was documented.

The stratigraphic sequence in the main excavation at Baaz can be summarized as follows. The surface is characterized by a gray-brown dusty deposit with many flint artifacts and copious amounts of charcoal. At a depth of about 5 cm, these sediments become more consolidated to form GH 1. This more consolidated horizon, however, shows overall similarities with the surface sediments. Both the surface and GH 1 contain many unsorted limestone fragments with maximal dimensions measuring up to 35 cm. GH 1 typically extends to a depth of 30 cm, and the lower portions of the deposit often include a light gray silt with much fine limestone rubble. This portion of the deposit corresponds to the subdivision GH 1a. Loose limestone debris within a yellow-brown silty matrix is typical of GH 2. However, this layer also contains many gray and brown lenses with and without limestone fragments and organic material. The GH 2 complex extends to a depth of ca. 65 cm. Underlying GH 2 we uncovered a series of diverse deposits belonging to GH 3, 3a and 3b. GH 3 was only excavated over an area of two square meters, but the upper portion is typically a white-brown silt. The underlying GH 3a is noteworthy for its abundance of burnt material and stratigraphic integrity. Under GH 3a lies a hard-packed, red-brown, clay floor designated GH 3b. The 1999 excavation season came to an end upon reaching this stratigraphic marker horizon at a depth of about 75 cm.

Lower strata were only reached in the southern two squares, of which the deeper excavation in square 20/30 provides the better record. Despite its location just one meter south of the main excavation, these squares appear to lack the sediments of GH 2 and 3. Instead, the ca. 30-cm layer of GH 1 is underlain by a 70-cm thick layer of yellow-brown silt containing much limestone debris. The lower portion of the excavation is relatively poor in finds and lacks the many indications of burning typically found in GH 1. At a depth of 90 cm, a coarser layer of limestone fragments corresponds to GH 4. This deposit is about 10 cm thick and is underlain by a finer deposit of yellow-brown silt and limestone debris, designated GH 5. As in the main excavation, the geological and archaeological designations run parallel to each other.

Archaeological Results

The excavation at Baaz Rockshelter provided unexpectedly important results. A total of more than 2500 lithic artifacts and 550 faunal remains, as well as more than 200 pieces of charcoal, were piecemealed (Tabs. 1 & 2). The materials recovered during screening and flotation include an additional 10,000 small lithic artifacts. The surface finds include a wealth of lithic artifacts that seem in large part to postdate the Upper Paleolithic. Diagnostic pieces from the Lower Paleolithic and Levalloisian Middle Paleolithic are absent, but the lithic assemblage could include an Upper Paleolithic component. Locally available brown flint dominates the lithic assemblages from all layers, and numerous other flint types and chalcedony are also represented.

The top of AH I produced several pieces of ceramic, including two sherds which preserve a repetitive slash motif. Lying slightly deeper, but not indicated by a recognizable stratigraphic break, Khiamian lithic artifacts have been recovered (Fig. 1). These finds include three complete Khiamian

points, lunates, numerous pieces with backed retouch and a borer. Charcoal is abundant, but bones are relatively scarce. In square 20/30 a well-preserved hearth is present. Many backed pieces and an end scraper have been recovered from the lower portions of AH I and in AH Ia, but clear Khiamian elements appear to be lacking in these layers.

GH	AH	CORES	FLAKES & BLADES	ANGULAR DEBRIS	TOOLS	TOTAL	% BURNT
Surf.	Surf.	34 (7%)	393 (76%)	66 (13%)	22 (4%)	515	15,2
1	I	15 (2%)	630 (79%)	105 (13%)	46 (6%)	796	17,5
1a	Ia	4 (3%)	127 (82%)	16 (10%)	7 (5%)	154	13,6
2	II	22 (2%)	784 (82%)	75 (8%)	81 (8%)	962	7,9
3	III	2 (4%)	34 (74%)	5 (11%)	5 (11%)	46	10,9
3a	IIIa	2 (10%)	14 (74%)	3 (16%)	-	19	5,3
4	IV	1 (2%)	44 (90%)	1 (2%)	3 (6%)	49	-
5	V	1 (2%)	42 (93%)	2 (4%)	-	45	-
TOTAL		81	2068	273	164	2586	12,4

Table 1. *Baaz Rockshelter. Stratigraphic distribution of piece-plotted lithic artifacts.*

GH	AH	BONES	TEETH	BURNT BONES	CHARCOAL	BEADS
Surf.	Surf.	3	2	-	-	-
1	I	91	3	14	78	3
1a	Ia	26	-	4	20	1
2	II	388	15	55	127	12
3	III	11	1	-	4	1
3a	IIIa	4	-	-	8	2
4	IV	12	-	1	-	-
5	V	10	-	-	-	-
TOTAL		545	21	74	237	19

Table 2. *Baaz Rockshelter. Stratigraphic distribution of piece-plotted faunal remains, botanical remains and beads.*

Archaeological Horizon II yielded more faunal remains as well as diverse flint artifacts. Again, backed elements dominate the assemblage, and lunates, although smaller in size, are present (Fig. 1). Large circular scrapers and end scrapers are also represented among the artifacts. This horizon also produced one portable limestone mortar. The majority of the shell beads recovered also stem from this layer. The underlying AH III is relatively thin and includes the burnt horizon AH IIIa and the packed earth floor of AH IIIb. This well-preserved floor corresponds to the top of an in situ, 20-cm deep limestone mortar and an intact hearth (Photo 3). This hearth is circumscribed by a ring of limestone pieces, which preserve soot and charred surfaces toward the center of the hearth. Two of the limestone pieces exhibit a total of six grooves carved into them. This layer marked the stopping point within the main excavation.

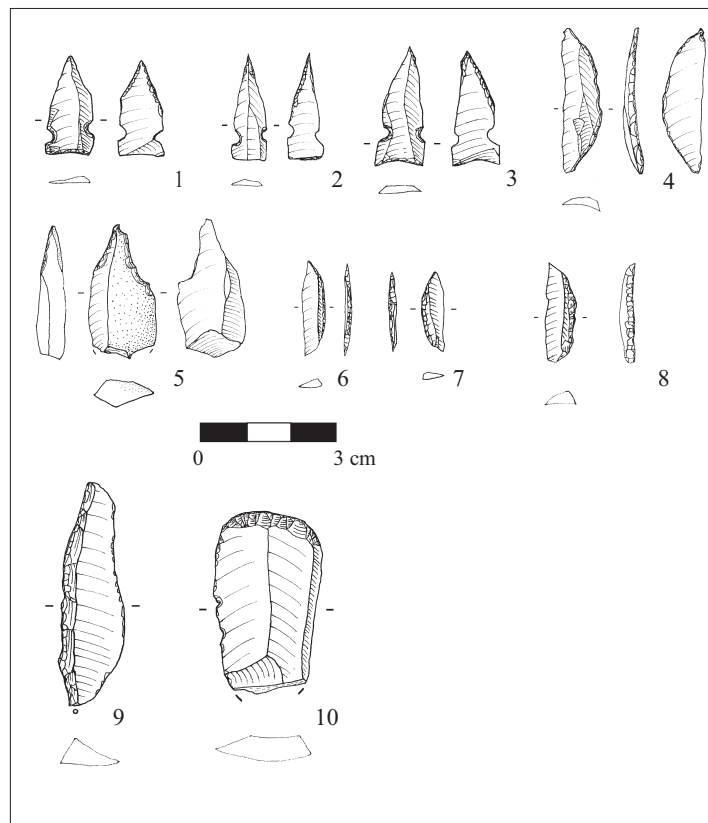


Figure 1. Baaz Rockshelter. Lithic artifacts from Archaeological Horizon I: 1-3) Khamian points; 4) lunate; and, 5) borer; Lithic artifacts from Archaeological Horizon II: 6-7) lunates; 8) backed point; 9) backed blade; and, 10) endscraper. Drawings by T. A. Bluhm.

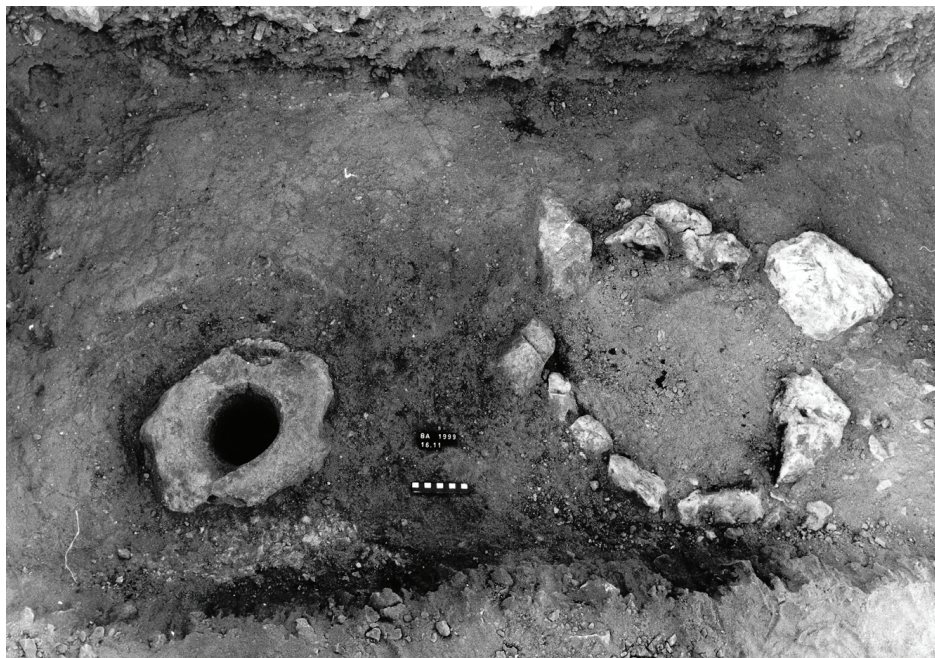


Photo 3. Baaz Rockshelter. Packed clay floor with deep, limestone mortar and hearth from Archaeological Horizon IIIb. Scale points to north, October 1999 (Photo A. W. Kandel).

Archaeological Horizon IV yielded a small assemblage characterized by very fine bladelets and a backed bladelet, while AH V provided a small assemblage with larger laminar elements. Geometric microliths diagnostic of the Kebaran have not been recovered as of yet. Although only typological and stratigraphic evidence is available at present, it seems that the Khiamian and Natufian periods are well represented in the sequence, and that the living floor of AH IIIb correlates with the Natufian. The ages and cultural designations of the underlying layers are uncertain.

Ongoing Research

In the coming year analyses of the organic materials recovered from Baaz Rockshelter are planned. The painstaking screening and flotation promise to provide significant results, and broaden our knowledge of plant use during the periods immediately preceding the development of fully agricultural economies. Similarly, the study of the many fragmentary faunal remains should provide new insight into the use of animal resources by the inhabitants of Baaz Rockshelter. Future excavation will focus on defining the limits of the occupation horizon IIIb and on both deepening and clarifying the stratigraphic sequence.

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