

TILBESHAR – A Bronze Age City in the Sajur Valley (Southeast Anatolia)

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The region between the middle and the upper Euphrates, between Syria and Turkey, the Euphrates bend and its immediate neighborhood has, these last years, been the object of intensive research and new data have completely renewed our knowledge of that area. Tilbeshar, one of the largest settlements, is situated in a humid basin of the Sajur, a western tributary of the Euphrates. It is located 20 km south-east of Gaziantep, near the smaller town of Oğuzeli. Carchemish lies about 50 km to the south-east, Aleppo less than 100 km to the south and Ebla is 140 km away (fig. 1).

Research began at that site with a first survey in 1994, completed by soundings in 1995 and excavations from 1996 to 2000. They were carried out under the responsibility of the Gaziantep Museum, and we received a grant from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Since then, several study seasons have taken place before a possible new phase of excavations in the near future. This paper aims to develop a short synthesis of the results and the main lines of research¹.

The site is shaped irregularly; its total surface is 56 hectares. It includes an upper city of about 6 hectares, preserved to a height of forty meters and a lower city that expands to the north and to the south to a height of 2 to 7 m. The irregularity of the perimeter, which has no clear form, shows that the settlement was expanded and displaced at various times (fig. 2).

The information gained from the surveys and from different written sources had enabled us to sketch a picture of a site that was occupied irregularly from Chalcolithic times to the Middle Bronze age, and again during the Medieval period. The excavations have supplemented this image. Occupied since the Neolithic period, the site developed during the Early Bronze age and was abandoned at the end of the Middle Bronze age. We have also stated some sporadic and limited reoccupations during the Achemenid and Byzantine periods. Moreover, the vast extent of the Medieval reoccupation led us to elaborate a specific project concerning the best-documented periods of the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries, when, at the time of the Crusades, the Counts of Edessa took up residence at the site - then known under the name of Turbessel - for fifty years, before it was taken over by the Ayyubids².

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¹ Preliminary results have been published regularly either in *Anatolia Antiqua* or *Kazi Sonuçları Toplantısı*.

² This specific program was placed under the direction of Alastair Northedge with the collaboration of Marie-Odile Rousset.

In undertaking the excavations in Tilbeshar, we were looking for a link between north Iraq and Syria and southeast Turkey; more precisely, we aimed at documenting one of the large cities of the third and second millennia from Upper Mesopotamia. Moreover, the beginnings of this city's development, which go back to the very early Bronze age and even to the Late Chalcolithic age, were also under investigation.

The history of southeast Anatolia, between the upper Tigris and the upper Euphrates, can be interpreted in relation with that of the areas located in the middle and lower valleys of the two rivers and their tributaries. But only recently have the data from north Syria, north Iraq and southeast Turkey begun to be compared. Contacts between southeast Anatolia and Mesopotamia, whether commercial, ethnic, military or political, were established early. Well before the Uruk expansion, we find pottery from the Obeid period as far as the upper Euphrates and beyond. Actually, throughout the third millennium and in certain cases as early as the fourth millennium, all cities of upper Mesopotamia, from northern Iraq until southeast Anatolia, are involved in trading-networks, both regional and long-distance, according to their strategic position and their potential in raw materials.

Environment of Tilbeshar and its potential

Tilbeshar is located in a vast depression irrigated by the Sajur and by many springs and subterranean water courses. The Aynifer, a branch of the Sajur, the Kweik and the Afrin are in the near neighborhood. These rivers are rarely mentioned on archaeological maps. However, through the Sajur, Tilbeshar is directly connected to the valley of the Euphrates; in the south, it is connected to Aleppo and Ebla through the Kweik river. In the west, the Afrin leads to the Amuq plain. Thus, Tilbeshar benefits from an especially privileged strategic location.

The depression of Tilbeshar is surrounded by a series of hills that separate it to the north from the Taurus and to the south, from the great plains that extend towards northern Syria. To the west, mountains separate it from the small plains of the Amuq and Islahiye; to the east, it is bordered by the Euphrates. Some of these limestone elevations are covered with basalt outpourings.

The current richness of the agricultural soil is a recent phenomenon, due in large part to irrigation. The non-irrigated slopes, where arboriculture (olive trees, pistachio trees and vineyards) or dry cereals culture is practiced, are more likely to look like the ancient landscape, although a rough irrigation is probable as early as the fourth millennium. As for the ancient fauna, during the Chalcolithic and the Bronze age periods, attestations of wild species are rather rare; the wild boar was the most important hunted animal. The presence of stags and roe deer suggests a more wooded environment than is now the case in the surrounding area.

In a generally hospitable environment it is not surprising to find a rather dense ancient occupation; most of the archaeological sites seem to have been inhabited in the Chalcolithic and the Bronze ages. Romano-Byzantine and Islamic sites are also well documented. The complete valley seems also to have experienced some periods of decline; in the Late Bronze and Iron ages as well as during the Hellenistic period, the valley seems practically abandoned. Similar observations have been made in neighboring areas such as the Kweik valley and, more recently, the Euphrates valley. Before our activities at Tilbeshar, none of these sites had ever been excavated. However, the Sajur valley in Turkey was surveyed, together with the area around Gaziantep, by an Italian team under the direction of A. Archi, P.E. Peccorella and M. Salvini, more than thirty years ago, and a little bit later in its Syrian portion by a team headed by P. Sanlaville.

Main results

Surveys, soundings and extensive excavations in different areas of the northern (area D) and the southern lower (area J) towns as well as a stratigraphic trench (area E) on the citadel yield several hypotheses concerning the development of the different settlements from the beginning of the Early Bronze until the end of the Middle Bronze period. They determine a first chronology of the site which should be completed by future operations.

TILB III A1 (3100-2900) and III A2 (2900-2700) *Settlement limited to the citadel (ca. 6 hectares)*

The oldest levels excavated until now at Tilbeshar date from the second half of the fourth millennium and are only attested in a deep sounding carried out on the citadel. Above them, the stratigraphic trench allowed us to unearth a rather well-preserved level of occupation, III A1. Several parallel walls, including a buttressed one, were excavated. They all consist of large rectangular mud-bricks (50 x 30 x 10 cm) arranged in headers and stretchers. To the south of the trench, a much larger wall corresponds to an enclosure wall³. We unearthed it to a height of 3,5 meters and a width of over 4 meters, without even reaching its southern limit. To the north, it is connected to a certain number of floors coated with plaster. Some buildings were built directly against the enclosure wall suggesting a rather dense occupation.

The ceramics found there comes from the destruction layers and is mostly “local”; it belongs to the Amuq F tradition and is comprised of fruit-stands with tall pedestal bases and band rims as well as of cups with sinuous sides, usually called *cyma-recta*, but also includes some types of ceramics thought to be of Uruk origin, such as reserved slip ware and a very small number of bevelled rim bowls (fig. 3). The radio-carbon analyses situate this level between 3100 or 3200 and 2900, and are more or less contemporaneous with

³ Kepinski-Lecomte 2001, fig. 1, 2, 3 p. 208-209.

part of those obtained at Arslan Tepe VIA⁴. However Arslan Tepe seems to belong to the Late Chalcolithic period, while the pottery assemblage from Tilbeshar III A1 is rather of the Early Bronze I. In that case, it could lie between Arslan Tepe VI A and Norsuntepe, phase 30.

Above the collapsed level from the transition between the fourth and the third millennium B.C., we reached what seems to be a more modest level IIIA2, also belonging to Early Bronze I and dating between 2900 and 2800/ 2700. Only the citadel is involved in this occupation. Two fragmentary rooms with walls preserved in one to three layers were built not long after the abandonment of the previous buildings, judging from the thickness of the layer representing the collapse of the walls. The enclosure wall does not exist anymore and the construction techniques are quite different; there are no more mud-bricks arranged in headers and stretchers and buttressed walls. This stage of architectural impoverishment seems to correspond to one known as Arslan Tepe VI B. Moreover, according to the Birecik and Carchemish salvage excavations, this period is very well documented by many villages from the Euphrates valley⁵.

The destruction layers yielded several stone tools including polished stone axes⁶. Finally, the ceramics have much in common with those of the previous level; only the percentages of the wares differ from one level to the other.

TILB III B1 and B2 (2700-2500)

Citadel and northern lower town (ca. 30 hectares)

In the second quarter of the third millennium B.C., Tilbeshar's citadel saw the construction of a terrace or platform that covered the previous levels. It consists of several mud-brick layers preserved to a height of at least 7 meters. This exceptional structure was cut later during the Byzantine period by some settlements on the slope⁷. We are unsure of its size in relation to the whole of the upper city, but many arguments lead us to speculate that this terraced construction is limited to the western end of the citadel. The uppermost level uncovered lay about 20 meters above the base of the citadel; it occupies the entire width of the trench, approximately eight meters, and we have not yet discovered its northern edge.

The occupation spread to the foot of the citadel, at least in the north, where a sounding in 1996 permitted us to locate this period (III B1), illustrated by a well-preserved floor just before reaching virgin soil (fig. 3)⁸. Above it, another level (III B2), from which we do not have any clear ceramic assemblage, is regularly cut by later pit graves

⁴ Di Nocera, 2000, fig. 2b. It is partly the reason why we have first dated this level to the Chalcolithic period (see *Anatolia Antiqua* VIII, p. 222 and *Anatolia Antiqua* IX, p. 213)

⁵ See Rothman 1998.

⁶ Kepinski-Lecomte 2000, fig. 10 p. 221.

⁷ See Kepinski-Lecomte 1999, fig. 1 p. 247.

⁸ See Kepinski-Lecomte 1997, fig. 2 p. 338.

containing a great number of pots and some bronze pins. No contemporaneous levels have been exposed in the south but it is attested in the stratigraphic trench of area E.

The ceramic assemblage associated is radically different from the previous ones and, for the first time, includes some metallic ware as well as several shapes and wares which will be imitated or adapted later. This period is the most scantily documented one of the third millennium and we would like to focus our attention on it in the future.

TILB III C (ca. 2500-2300)

Citadel, northern and southern lower towns (ca. 56 hectares)

Around the mid-third millennium, the settlement extended from the citadel to the north and, for the first time, to the south as well, and Tilbeshar reached its largest expansion. From that time until the end of the Middle Bronze age, several cities will be constructed one upon the other and the same orientation will be kept during seven to eight centuries. All these levels are domestic; no monumental building has been uncovered to date. Between them, there are some changes but the same orientation is kept suggesting that the same network of streets is preserved and that the site has never been abandoned for any length of time.

The walls have foundations of medium-sized stones covered with a thick coating of whitewashed clay. Small units are contained within two parallel walls, belonging to attached houses⁹. Several entrances of different types show us that we have probably elements of at least three houses; one of the doors has buttresses. Some remarkable domestic structures are to be noticed including a small stone staircase and a horseshoe-shaped fireplace (*andiron*). The diversity of the funerary practices, as all along the Euphrates valley, seems to emphasize the confrontation and mixture of people of different origins. Domestic and funeral spaces are closely linked and the dead, mostly children, are sometimes buried in collective pits beneath the floor of the houses, and in one case, in a small cist grave. All the skeletons are associated with pots.

Level III C was abandoned abruptly as the ceramics remained in place on the floors (fig. 4). They represent a great variety of wares and a large percentage of grit temper; thus a characteristic assemblage would include Syrian bottles, Hama beakers, polished ware with a geometrical pattern, typical of the region, and many shapes which correspond to adaptations of metallic ware (see for example fig. 4: 16, 18, 21). Moreover, Tilbeshar displays several imports of Trojan *depas*.

Besides ceramics, domestic stone tools, several flint arrowheads and terracotta figurines, a room contained a great quantity of small tools made of bone, which may have been used for weaving. All these artefacts and domestic structures give us a perspective on everyday life and the economy. Animal bones studied by Marjan Mashkour and botanic samples by George Willcox and Hughes Pessin give some more information.

The paleobotanic study confirms the hypothesis that the environment used to be much more thickly forested. Apparently, during the third millennium, deciduous oak

⁹ See Kepinski-Lecomte 2001, fig. 4, 6, 7 p. 210. Comparable parallel walls have been discovered at Titris Höyük, see Algaze 1995, p. 45.

forests predominated. The Tilbeshar region represents the southern limit of the habitat of this species.

TILB III D (ca. 2300-2100)

Citadel, northern and southern lower towns (ca. 56 hectares)

After level III C, part of the city saw the construction of new buildings, while elsewhere some houses were reoccupied and the ancient floors covered by more recent ones. This level appears underneath the Middle Bronze level or sometimes directly below the surface. Its remains include the foundations of imposing stone walls, composed of enormous, sometimes megalithic blocks¹⁰. The upper parts of the walls, probably in mud-brick or pisé, are not preserved. We uncovered several rooms which seemed to belong to different adjacent buildings. The architecture is quite sophisticated, and one domestic building has a series of buttresses and niches. The floors are covered with different types of mortar, sometimes resting on a layer of pebbles and the walls are plastered. The new city is a very prosperous one, built on terraces forming a north-south slope and facilitating the evacuation of waste and rain waters in a gutter of upright flat stone slabs. In this city, the orientation of the buildings is the same as that of the older level, but some streets are laid out differently. Tilbeshar was a prosperous city at the end of the third millennium when nearby Ebla experienced impoverishment or when some cities from the Khabur area were abandoned and some others experienced severe restriction. In fact, this period is well attested in southeast Anatolia.

TILB III D was also abandoned abruptly, and we exposed undisturbed floors, with tools, weights, sets of bronze tools and large quantities of complete pots, often crushed (fig. 5)¹¹. Some graves under the floors were also uncovered. The assemblage is quite comparable to the previous one. As between III A 1 and III A 2, the differences show rather in the percentages of the various shapes. However, some new shapes are to be noticed, while the wares remain nearly unchanged (fig. 5: 17, 22, 23, 26, 27).

TILB IV A (2000-1800)

Citadel and northern lower town (30 hectares)

During Middle Bronze I, Tilbeshar saw a resettlement, but it seems to involve the northern lower town only and probably the citadel. Level IVA has been reached only in area D and corresponds to the remains of a floor associated with one wall and a large pit. It was absent in the southeast corner. Our attestations of that level are certain, but they remain limited. However, their lack in other parts of the southern lower city should be confirmed or disproved by future investigations.

The assemblage from that level is already very different from the previous one and includes several complete pots, as one can see on fig. 6. If the architectural remains are

¹⁰ Kepinski-Lecomte 2000, fig. 4 p. 218. This practice is also attested at Shavi Höyük, excavated by René Dittmann in the frame of the Carchemish dam salvage excavations program.

¹¹ Kepinski-Lecomte 2000, fig. 6 p. 219.

limited, the associated pottery is quite abundant and pertinent. During the Middle Bronze age the wares are mostly common with mixed temper; they present less variety – for some reason: a loss of technical ability, a new organization of the potters and the workshops themselves, etc. There is neither very fine ware nor burnished slip. The polished ware does not show any regular geometrical pattern as during the Early Bronze age etc. However, several shapes and wares that were developed during the Middle Bronze age, started to appear in the last level of the Early Bronze age (fig. 5: 17, 22, 23, 26, fig. 6: 15, 21). Nevertheless, if confusions are possible with scattered sherds, distinctions between Early and Middle Bronze assemblages coming from well-stratified contexts are very clear.

TILB IV B (1800-1600)

Citadel, northern and southern lower towns (56 hectares)

Located just beneath the surface, the Middle Bronze age walls were partly destroyed by plows, as the lower city was cultivated until the beginning of our excavations. The orientation from the Early Bronze period is kept and the network of streets, at least in part, is comparable to the previous level. Due to the limited surface of the exposed remains, it is difficult to know whether we are excavating elements of a single building or of several buildings. The rooms are generally larger than before and several measure almost twenty square meters. Well-preserved floors provide stratified ceramics as well as some terracotta figurines. The smallest rooms comprise domestic structures such as a *tannur*, and the large ones are filled with large storage jars. One room, probably a courtyard, was paved with wide stone slabs. The architectural principles from that level are of a quality comparable with the previous ones. In level III D and IV A, we particularly note the use of megalithic blocks in foundations.

The settlement seems to expand over most of the lower cities and to cover the older levels. Compared to the third millennium, the regeneration is complete. Thus a limitation of the urban phenomenon occurred only during the first phase of the Middle Bronze (level IV A) but this hypothesis has to be confirmed by future investigations. We do not know whether this city was surrounded by an enclosure wall; some other cities from the Euphrates valley, such as Tell Halawa for example, were not protected by a wall any more.

Many tombs in pits, either contemporary or slightly later, were also brought to light. At the end of Middle Bronze II, the settlement is reduced, and the inhabitants would use the ruins of one part of the former city to bury their dead. There was no uniformity in the orientation of the skeletons. The funerary artefacts include one or two pots placed near the head, sometimes a bronze pin and a beaded necklace of carnelian and rock crystal¹².

Some pots from level IV B (fig. 7: 12-16) look exactly like those found all the way down the Euphrates as far as Iraq. This identity underlines the exchanges so well documented by the texts. Mari texts, for example, regularly mention that olive oil or wine, as well as certain types of wood that were sought after in the area of Carchemish and that

¹² Kepinski-Lecomte 2000, fig. 3 p. 218.

Zimrilim bought some lands there to cultivate olive trees and vineyards¹³. In the Ebla texts, olive oil appears as a common product. Food products were transported in pots that precisely determined at least a part of this cultural identity¹⁴. Moreover, our botanist at Tilbeshar has clearly identified the first attestations of olive tree and grape, in the second half of the third millennium B.C. while at Horum Höyük, grape seems to appear as soon as the Early Bronze I period¹⁵.

Conclusion

The whole region south of the Taurus forms an obligatory natural passage for the network of routes that have linked different regions of Upper Mesopotamia since the Neolithic period. Nonetheless, communication is not that easy there. All the depressions and valleys favorable to ancient occupation are separated from one another by mountain ranges which, although not very high, are rocky and arid and covered with scrub, and not easy to cross or to cultivate. This fact explains the dividing-up of the country into many small centers such as Alalakh, the ancient Aleppo, Tell Mardikh/Ebla, Tilbeshar and some others.

Tilbeshar illustrates one of the great cities that developed in Upper Mesopotamia, from northern Iraq to southeastern Turkey, during the Early Bronze age. However, while the first cities from south Mesopotamia extended over several hundred hectares, those of upper Mesopotamia - in the Sinjar, the Khabur area and the Balikh valley - covered up to 100 hectares (Tell Khoshi, Tell Leilan, Khazane Höyük etc.), and the most important cities in the valley of the Euphrates, such as Tell Hadidi, or from the western part of its bend, such as Tilbeshar or Ebla, did not spread over more than 60 hectares.

The first extension of Tilbeshar and the beginning of a lower town in the second quarter of the third millennium go along with a completely new pottery assemblage. From that moment a strong continuity is evident together with a slow evolution and regular introduction of new shapes, wares and differences in the percentage of every diagnostic type. However, between Early and Middle Bronze assemblages, differences are far more abundant than are affinities. Tilbeshar has not illustrated any truly transitional level but a gap between TILB IIID and TILB IVA is plausible.

¹³ Durand, 1997, p. 353.

¹⁴ See Kepinski, 2005, Akkadica

¹⁵ See Pessin, 2004, unpublished PhD.

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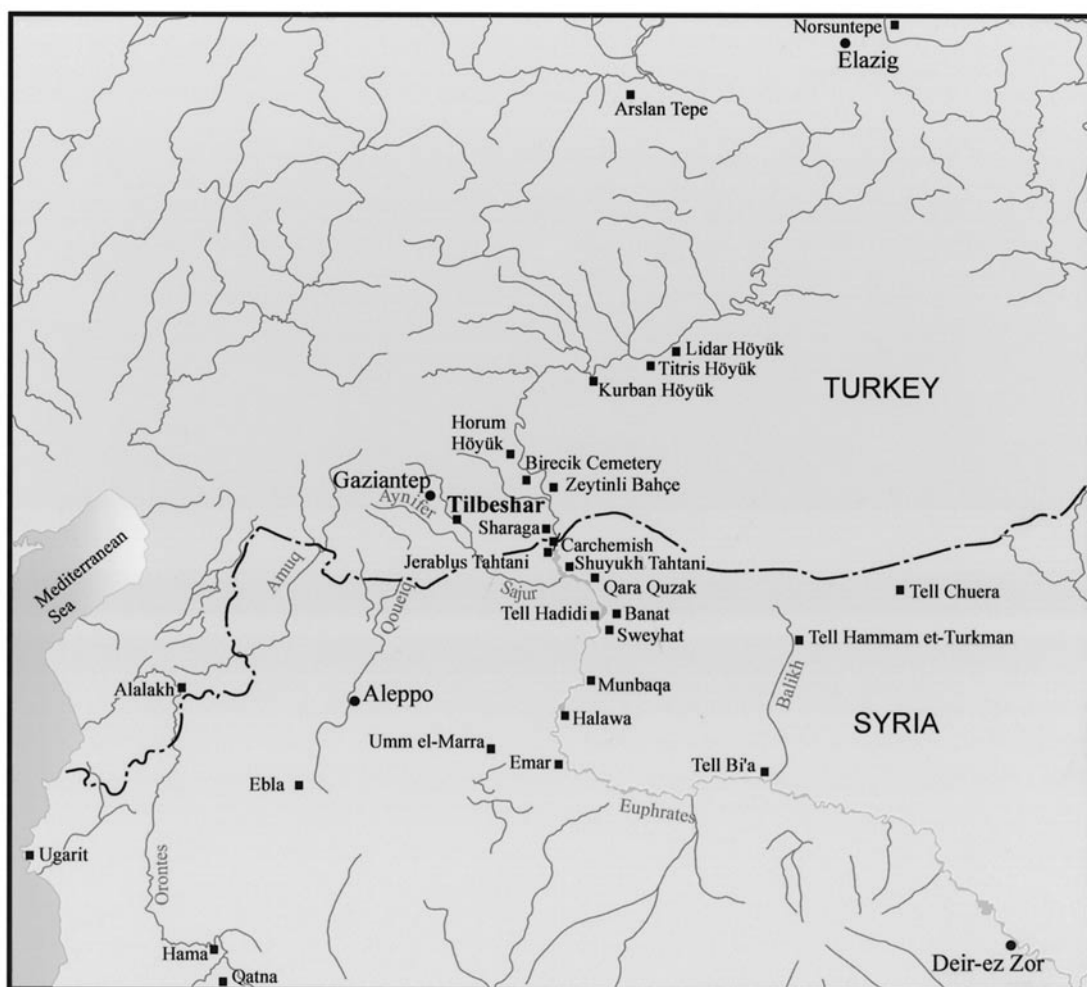


Figure 1.

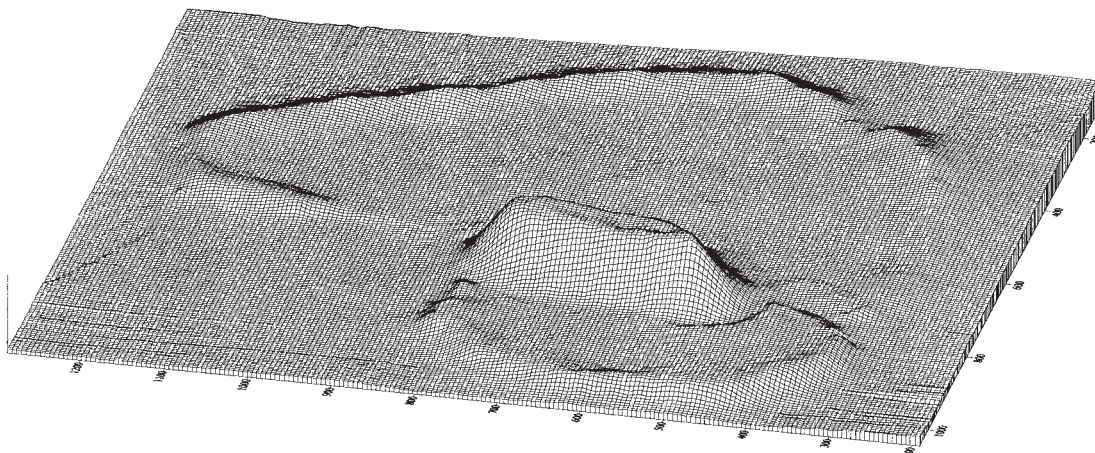


Figure 2.

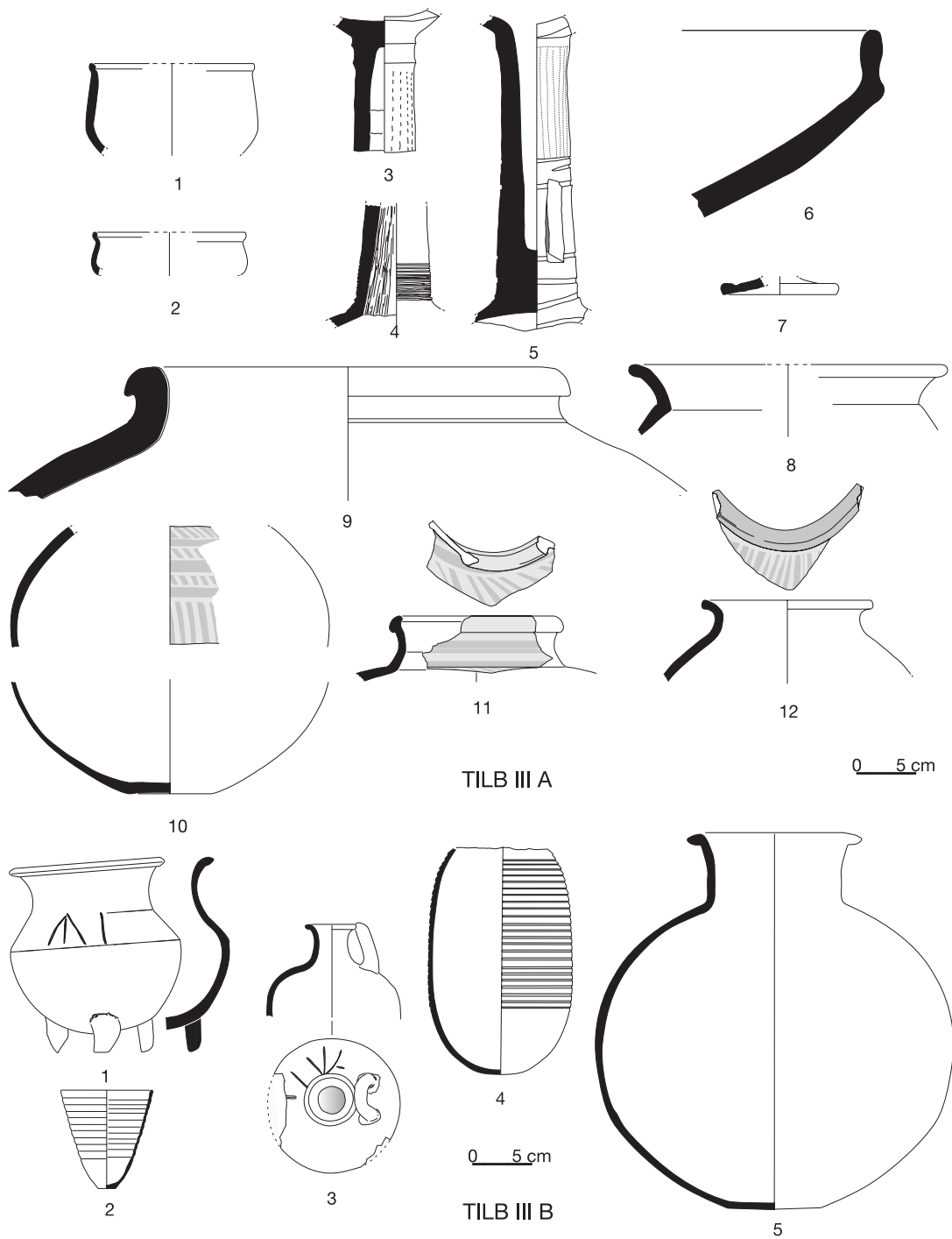


Figure 3. Pottery from TILBESHAR III A1 (3100-2900),
III A2 (2900-2700) and TILB III B1 (2700-2600).

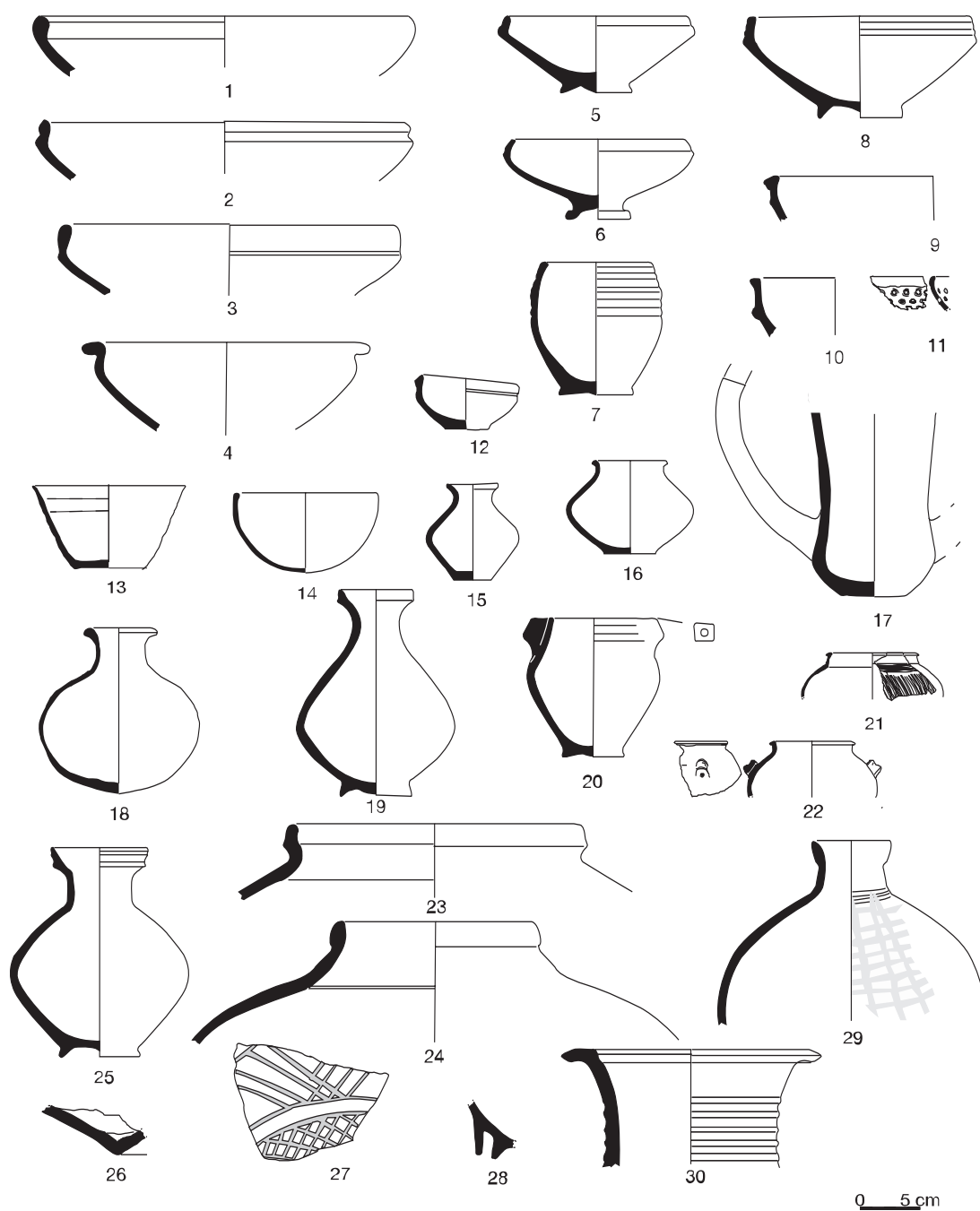


Figure 4. Pottery from TILBESHAR III C (2500-2300).

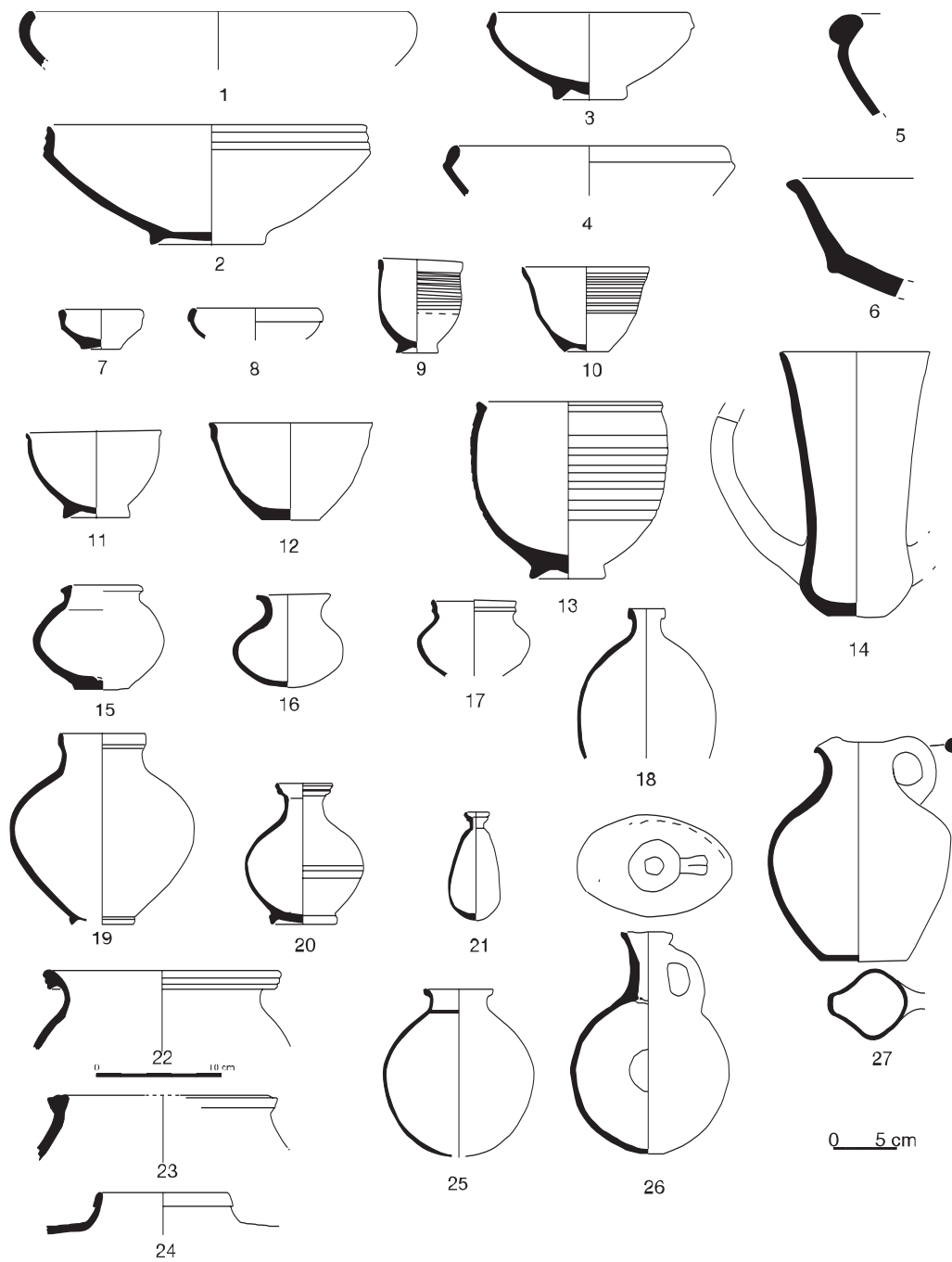


Figure 5. Pottery from TILBESHAR III D (2300-2100).

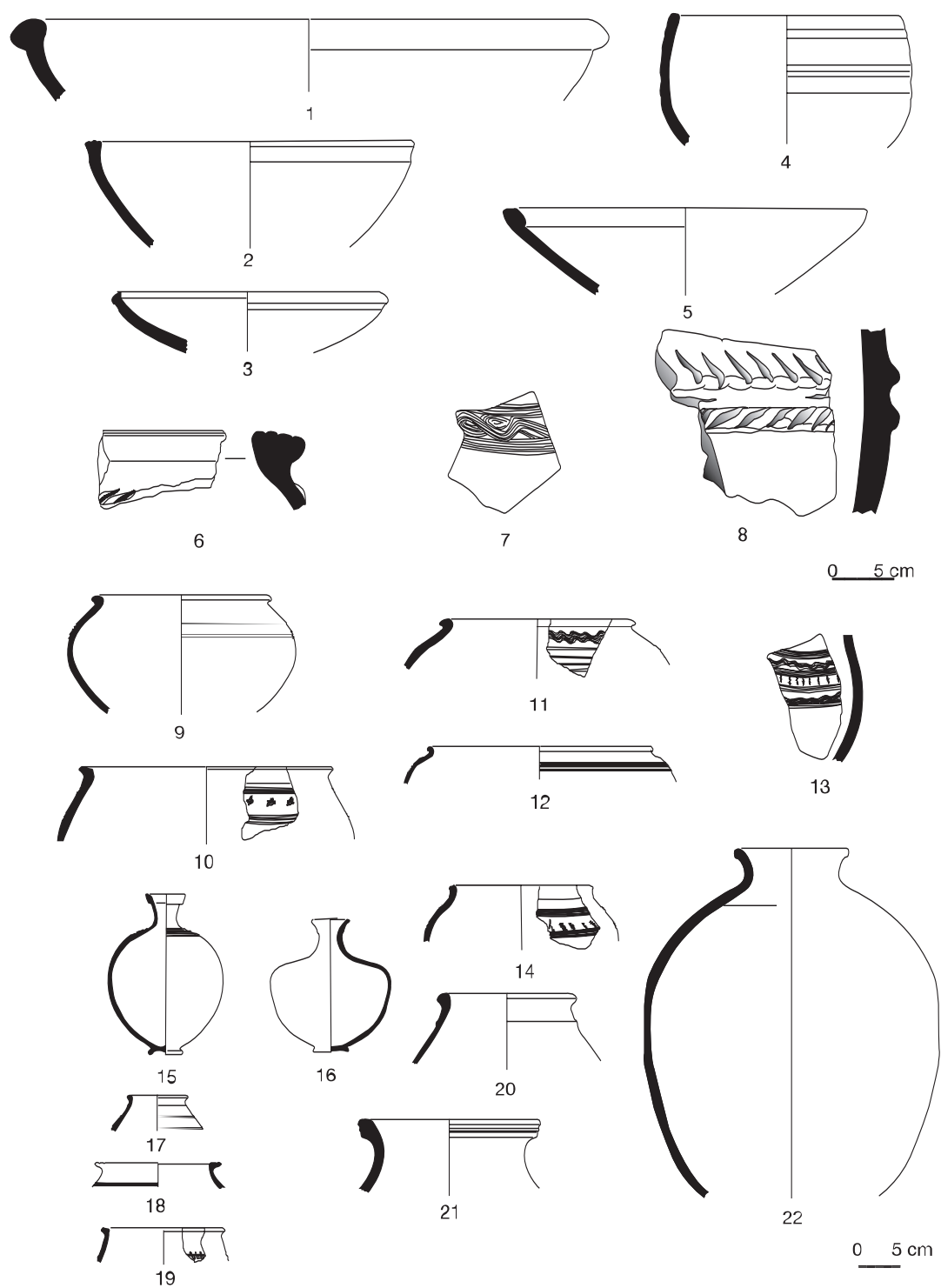


Figure 6. Pottery from TILBESHAR IV A (2000-1800).

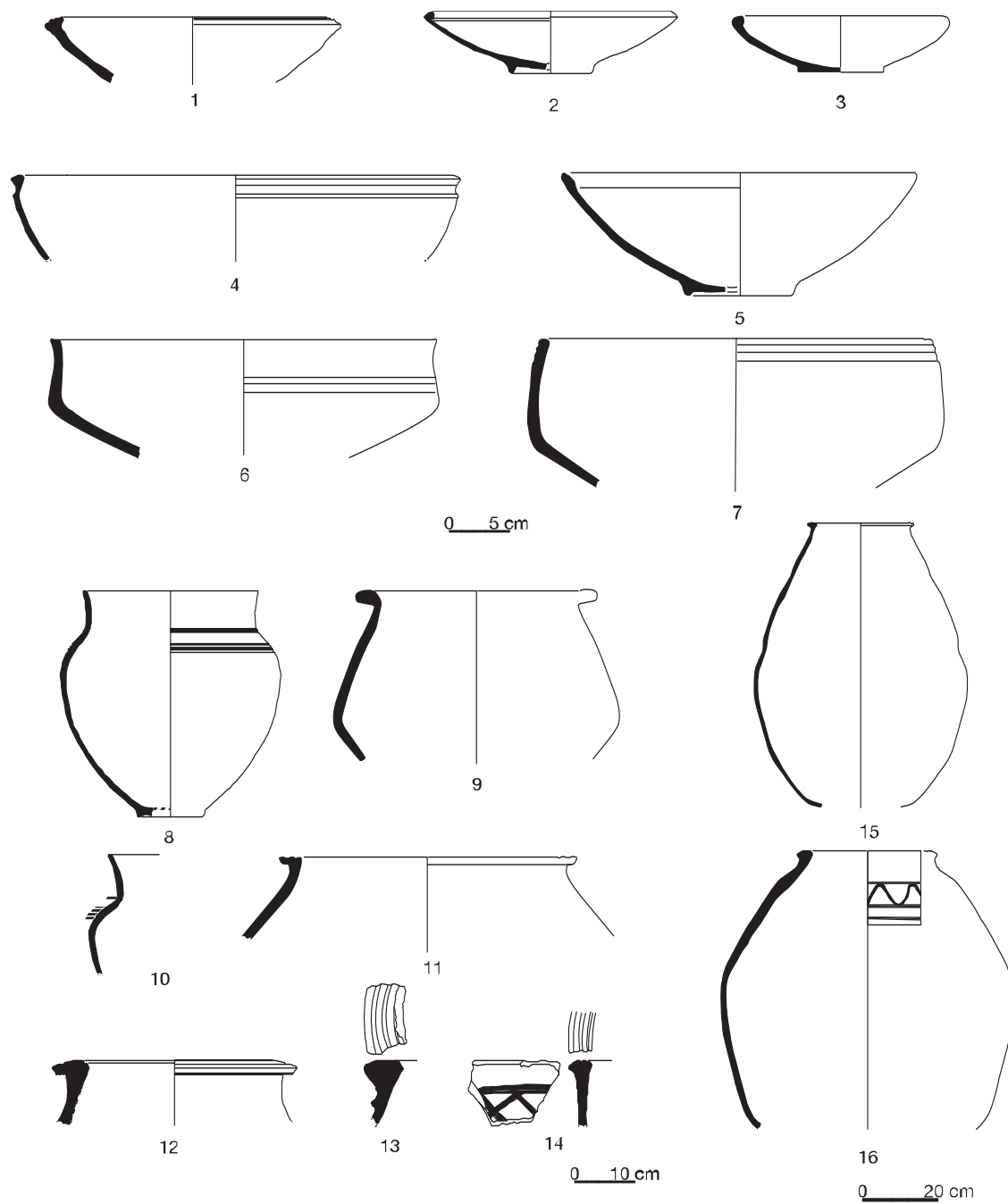


Figure 7. Pottery from TILBESHAR IV B (1800-1600).