

## PROBLEMS IN DEFINING A PREHISTORIC CULTURE : AN EXAMPLE FROM THE SOUTHERN LEVANT

Anna BELFER-COHEN\*

### INTRODUCTION

In the 1980's the major trends of the Upper Palaeolithic research in the Levant encompassed the assumption that two techno-typological macro-traditions were responsible for the prehistoric cultural variety observed in the sites of that period. The term Ahmarian has been used for the lithic assemblages with blade orientation and the term Levantine Aurignacian for the so called 'flake' assemblages (Gilead, 1981 a, b; Marks, 1981). Though originally "Levantine Aurignacian" was a name of a prehistoric culture, defined and described from sites in the northern Levant, it has been expanded unto a macro-tradition term to encompass assemblages from the southern Levant (for detailed bibliography see Bar-Yosef and Belfer-Cohen, 1988; Gilead, 1991). Though opinions varied concerning this issue, the lumpers' attitude won the day and the tag of "Levantine Aurignacian" was attached to every flake-dominated Levantine assemblage, provided it could be assigned to the Upper Palaeolithic time-frame (see Fig.1).

### DISCUSSION

Almost all of the southern assemblages grouped under the rubric of "Levantine Aurignacian" tradition lacked the basic elements of the original definition found in the northern assemblages, namely, "Aurignacian" retouch, nosed and shouldered endscrapers, endscrapers on Aurignacian blades, particular ratios of flakes/blades in the debitage as compared to those among the tool blanks (not to mention the worked bone/horn-core items recovered from the northern Aurignacian sites) (Belfer-Cohen and Bar-Yosef, 1981; Bergman, 1987; Garrod and Bate, 1937). Yet, as **some** such items were recovered as surface finds from the Negev, the 'lumpers' claimed that it is just a matter of time till this particular northern variety will be reported from an *in situ* site in the Negev as well.

Indeed, such finds were reported also from the slopes of a rockshelter in Machtsh Ramon, Central Negev. As the origin of the lithics on the slopes could be traced to prehistoric layers in the rockshelter, it seemed that finally an *in situ* Aurignacian site was found. Thus Gilead, Rosen, Goring-Morris and myself decided to resolve this issue and excavate the site (Belfer-Cohen et al., 1991). The results of a short season of excavations were indeed remarkable. Apparently, the so-called Aurignacian tool-types formed an integral part of an Epipalaeolithic,

\* The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Inst. of Archeology, Mount Scopus, 91905 Jérusalem, Israël.

namely Ramonian (previously named Negev Kebaran) lithic inventory (dating to ca. 13,000 B.C.; Goring-Morris, 1987; Fig.2).

The lithic studies are as yet at a preliminary stage, yet it is clear that we are dealing with an Epipalaeolithic industry which used on a standard basis the microburin technique, as evidenced by the many microburins and the microburin scars retained on part of the backed microliths, especially the Ramon points (see Figs.3-4). Of interest to note that while the microlithic component (which comprised the majority of the lithic assemblage, as befits an Epipalaeolithic industry) was shaped on translucent flint (chalcedony), the heavier components (which include the items, mostly endscrapers, with the 'Aurignacian' retouch) were shaped on flint with a high content of limestone. This phenomenon was observed for other Ramonian (as well as Late Natufian) assemblages from the Negev (Marder, 1994).

When previously reported occurrences from the Negev, with typical northern Aurignacian elements were checked in the light of this discovery, it appeared that all of them were reported from find spots presenting an admixture of Upper Palaeolithic (i.e. the Aurignacian items) and Epipalaeolithic elements (the latter always being identified as typical Ramonian microliths)...

The so-called mixed sites include the Ramat Matred sites M 190 and 141 recovered by T. Noy (Yizraeli, 1967: Figs.1,2) and rejected as mixed by Bar-Yosef (1970); similar sites were reported also from the area of Har Harif in the Negev: K 9A and G 11. Both sites were recovered and separated into two assemblages by the SMU archaeological expedition headed by A.E. Marks (Larson and Marks, 1977:Figs.8-3,8-5; Marks and Simmons, 1977:Fig.10-8).

Larson and Marks wrote (1977:173): "*Site K9A is one component of Site K9, which consisted of two prehistoric components - a large surface concentration of Epipalaeolithic materials (Marks and Simmons, this volume) and a smaller but overlapping concentration of Upper Palaeolithic materials*". The separation of the Epipalaeolithic and Upper Palaeolithic components was done on the basis of the different raw materials utilized, as most of the Epipalaeolithic component was shaped on chalcedony. Yet even though it seemed that the separated samples were as pure as possible, the authors stated that the technological and typological studies must be viewed with some caution - particularly those concerning bladelet production and their proportional occurrence. Thus while endscrapers and burins comprise in K 9A 69.8% of the recovered lithic material (ibid.), the sample from K9 was dominated by backed bladelets and had quite a high number of mbt (133 as compared to 391 tools all in all) (Marks and Simmons, 1977).

Of interest to note a comment made by Phillips (1987:109): "*...The second technocomplex, the Levantine Aurignacian, is found in the more northerly areas of the Levant, except for two sites in the central Negev (Marks 1976, 1977)*"..

We can add to this list of "mixed" sites the surface "Upper Palaeolithic" sites from Wadi Sudr, Western Sinai (Baruch and Bar-Yosef, 1986). There were five surface occurrences which the excavators thought demonstrate possible affinities with the Levantine Aurignacian. Besides carinated endscrapers and

other flake tools, the authors mention bladelets and lunates with Helwan retouch which were considered as intrusive elements. Also there were microburins and microburin technique products which are not known from anywhere else in the Levantine Upper Palaeolithic.

All of this demand of course a thorough investigation as well as a detailed re-appraisal of cultural designations based on vaguely defined lithic characteristics and "guide fossils", without supportive evidence of stratigraphical or chornological nature.

The study of the material from the Nahal Neqarot rockshelter is but the first stage in this enterprise. The preliminary results provide an excellent opportunity for a much needed in-depth study of technological aspects and reduction sequences pertaining to the issue of prehistoric culture definitions in general and those of the Levantine Upper Palaeolithic traditions in particular.

In the ensuing discussion I would like to restrict myself to the Upper Palaeolithic assemblages dating between 40 and 20 k years. I would also like to avoid the issue of synchroniety between the Ahmarian and its Upper Palaeolithic contemporaneous entities. Suffice it to say that the Ahmarian predated to some extent the northern Levantine Aurignacian assemblages and apparently also those ascribed as such from the Negev (Gilead, 1991; Bar-Yosef et al., in press). It seems that for some time, those lithic traditions were contemporary and while the Levantine Aurignacian disappeared from the north, in the south, the non-Ahmarian Upper Palaeolithic entities continued their existence, but the temporal relationship between those later entities and the Late Ahmarian entities is yet to be resolved. While previously, it was claimed that they were contemporaneous (Marks, 1976), it seems that due to scarcity of dates, it is not possible to deal satisfactorily with the problem of cultural parallelism in the Late Upper Palaeolithic in the whole southern Levant (Gilead, 1991; Goring-Morris, 1987).

While defining and clustering Upper Palaeolithic assemblages into two discrete macro-traditions, the Ahmarian and Levantine Aurignacian (Gilead, 1981a,b), Gilead suggested that it is preferable to leave assemblages unnamed rather than to lump them into cultures on the basis of specific *typological* similarities (1989 : 242), yet he himself did it on the basis of specific *technological* similarities. Actually he had mixed his criteria. Thus while for the debitage his criteria for separating between Ahmarian and Levantine Aurignacian entities were the relative frequencies of the blade/bladelets and flakes, for the tools the criteria were the percentages of endscrapers and burins versus retouched, backed and pointed blades. He rejected the criticism expressed by Belfer-Cohen and Goring-Morris (1986) as to the use of the taxon Levantine Aurignacian being misleading and inappropriate. The latter advised not to include every flake dominated assemblages within a "Levantine Aurignacian" tradition, since some of them do not retain the typical Aurignacian characteristics (Bar-Yosef and Belfer-Cohen, 1981).

In his summary of the Upper Palaeolithic Period in the Levant (1991), Gilead is modifying some of his previous statements (1981 a, b, 1989:234). Thus he says (1991 : 128-129) that the northern Aurignacian sites such as Ksar Akil, Kebara,

Hayonim Cave, el-Wad, etc. have very few blades and relatively numerous Aurignacian endscrapers and blades. There are more bone tools than in the Ahmarian assemblages, especially at Ksar Akil and Hayonim Cave. These sites probably represent a culture that prevailed in the Mediterranean zone of the Levant between 32,000 and 22,000 B.P. "Another possible cultural unit (which) occurs in the Negev.... It is characterized by a poor blade technology, few blade tools, and many endscrapers, burins, or both. It differs from the Antelian in having few real "Aurignacian" elements (Belfer-Cohen and Goring-Morris, 1986:56\*) and it is probably later." (ibid.: 128). According to Gilead (1991) this entity includes the Negev sites of D 14, D 18, Arkov (=D 22), D 26, D 27A, RMI, G 11, K 9A and- HHI. Still, he includes all of these sites also among the "Levantine Aurignacian Lithic Assemblages" (as detailed in Table VI (ibid.:127).

There is a detailed technological work done by Ferring on the Upper Palaeolithic assemblages of the Negev (Ferring, 1988). Its conclusions state that while both the Ahmarian and the so called "Levantine Aurignacian" of the Negev exhibit multiple reduction strategies, the assemblages of these two traditions are technologically distinct. As yet, no technological study of similar magnitude was done on the Levantine Aurignacian assemblages from the north. Thus the technological data concerning these latter assemblages presented here (Table 1) was obtained through preliminary observations only (Belfer-Cohen, Bar-Yosef, 1981, in preparation).

It can be observed that there are major differences in the technological as well as typological aspects of the so called Levantine Aurignacian assemblages from the south as compared to those from the north. Though blade tools (by the original definition of Gilead, see above) are low in numbers in the north, the use of blade blanks for shaping other tool categories is very high and some times the tools made on blades outnumber those made on flakes. The picture is quite different in the southern assemblages. Unfortunately the tool blanks were not specified in the detailed studies made by Gilead (1981). Still if we accept his own statement (1991:128), RMI is similar to the so called Levantine Aurignacian sites from the Negev. Indeed, in all of those sites there are no Aurignacian elements to speak of, and most of the carinated endscrapers are lateral ones. There is also quite a difference in the percentage of bladelet tools and while in the north the endscrapers always outnumber the burins, it is the reverse for the south (see Table 1).

A.

North		TOOLS on				DEBITAGE	
	I. Aurig.	I. Blad	Bl.	Fl.	Bl/Bld.	Fl.	
<u>Kebara</u>							
Layer I (N=167)	25,7%	10,2%	32,3%	27,5%	-	-	
Layer II (N=88)	20,5%	3,4%	34,1%	25,0%	-	-	
<u>Hayonim</u>							
D1-2 (N=430)	20,7%	6,5%	50,7%	49,3%	32,1%	67,9%	
D3 (N=313)	21,7%	5,4%	51,3%	48,8%	32,5%	67,5%	
D4 (N=101)	18,8%	5,9%	29,9%	70,5%	30,6%	69,4%	
<u>South</u>							
<u>Arkov (D22)</u>							
Area A (N=166)	9,6%*	10,2%	24,1%	52,4%	24,9%	39,9%	
Area B (N=148)	8,8%*	4,1%*	18,8%	48,3%	25,4%	50,7%	
D27A (N=457)	8,8%*	5,7%*	29,5%	50,1%	18,7%	53,6%	

Tab. 1: Upper Palaeolithic assemblages - "Levantine Aurignacian " (North and South)

I.Aurig. = Endscrapers on Aurignacian Blades + carinated+nosed+Aurign. Blades

I.Aurig\* = without Aurign. blades or scrapers on Aurign. blades

I.Blad. = Retouched and backed blades + el-Wad points

I.Blad.\*= without el-Wad points

B.

	Retouched bladelet	Endscrapers	Endscrapers/Burins
<u>North</u>			
<u>Kebara</u>			
Layer I	16.8%	28.1%	>
Layer II	21.6%	27.3%	>
<u>Hayonim</u>			
D 1-2	7.7%	34.7%	>
D 3	14.1%	34.8%	>
D 4	2.0%	40.6%	>
<u>South</u>			
<u>Arkov (D 22)</u>			
Area A	2.4%	18.1%	<
Area B	2.0%	23.0%	<
D 27 A	-	24.5%	<

Some of the southern assemblages are indeed unique and are open to various groupings. This is the case for example with the site of D27B (Sde Divshon), where the tools on blades outnumber those on flakes (42.6% versus 39.8%) while in the debitage the blades constitute but 21.5% while the percentage of the flakes is 50.1%. The endscrapers outnumber nearly twice the burins and there are 7.7% el-Wad points. No retouched bladelets or Aurignacian blades were recovered (Ferring, 1976). While Gilead assigned this assemblage to the Levantine Aurignacian (1991, Table VI), Marks considered it as an Ahmarian entity (1981).

Another example is the site of Ein Aqev (D 31) (Marks, 1976). In most of its 12 levels (with the exception of levels 3 and 4), blades outnumber flakes as blanks for tools. Endscrapers outnumber the burins and there are Dufour bladelets as well as other retouched bladelets. Yet it is generally accepted that it belongs to the very last stages (if at all) of the Upper Palaeolithic as it is dated to ca. 17-18, 000 B.P.!! All of the assemblages relegated to the Levantine Aurignacian and discussed above, both from the north and the south, are assigned to the Early Upper Paleolithic which is dated to ca.40,000- to 20,000 B.P. (Gilead, 1991; Bar-Yosef et al., in press).

## SUMMARY

Undoubtedly, some of the differences detailed above between the northern and southern "Levantine Aurignacian" assemblages can be explained by a differential exploitation of the immediate environment which differs rather dramatically between the north and the south of the country. Still, what is the justification for defining as Aurignacian, lithic assemblages lacking (for whatever reason) most if not all of the attributes by which the 'Levantine Aurignacian' was defined in the first place ?!

The story of Nahal Neqarot should be used as a cautionary tale. The recognition of a Prehistoric entity, especially if it is based on lithic criteria is a loaded issue. From past experience we should know by now that the very validity of such a definition lies in the use of many and different criteria. The presence or absence of one attribute is not enough to relegate a specific assemblage to any particular entity. General similarities can be used as a common denominator but for a very general, loose grouping. At the present stage of prehistoric research in the Levant, this is not enough.

The brief re-evaluation of some southern assemblages presented above clearly indicates that there are indeed many differences between the so called Levantine Aurignacian assemblages from the south as compared with those from the north. While there will always be a need for a general frame-work of reference, in order to understand and follow the Upper Palaeolithic processes in the Levant, still one should try to be aware of the differences among the various geographical regions comprising the Levant. This should end the search for the hypothetical southern *in situ* site with an Aurignacian lithic industry similar to those recovered in the north. Effort should be invested in understanding the

differences and reconstruction of the processes involved. At least for the present it seems as if the splitters attitude won the day !

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my colleagues I. Gilead, N. Goring-Morris and S. Rosen for using the material from our joint excavations at Nahal Neqarot. Special thanks are due to N. Goring-Morris for the map drawings.

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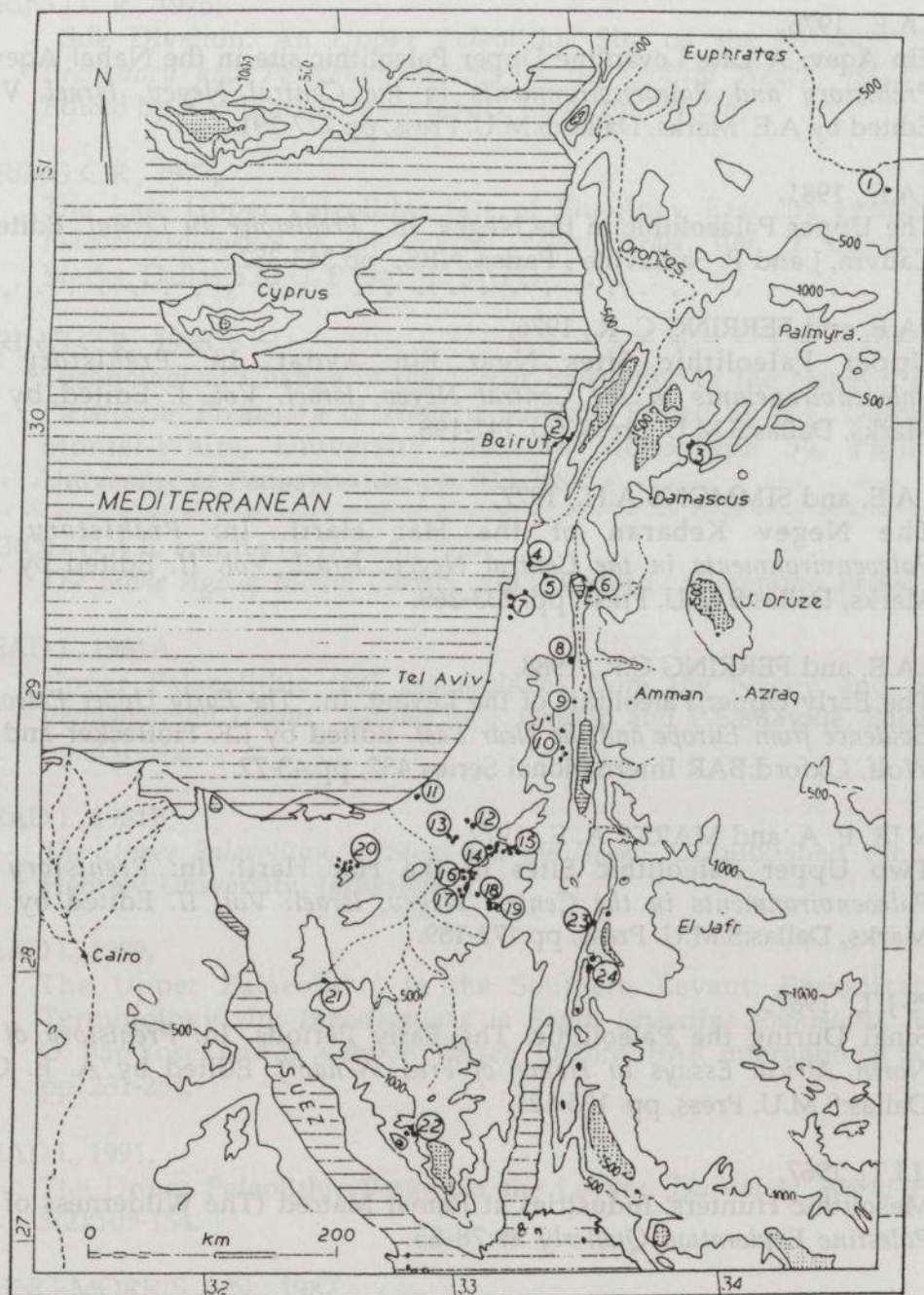


Fig. 1 : A map of Upper Palaeolithic sites in southern Levant (ca. 40-22 k yrs) :

- |                          |  |                                     |
|--------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|
| 2) Ksar Akil, Abu Halka; | 7) Mount Carmel-Nahal Oren, el-Wad; Kebara;                | 16) Qadesh Barnea 9, 500, 601, 602; |
| 3) Yabrud II, III;       | 9) Fazael IX;  | 18) Har Horesha I;                  |
| 4) Hayonim;              | 10) Judean Desert-el-Hiam, Erq el-Ahmar, el-Quseir;        | 19) Har Harif K9, G11;              |
| 5) Qafzeh;               | 14) Ramat Matred I, 141, 190;                              | 20) Lagama V-VII, XI, XII, XV, XVI; |
| 6) Nahal Ein Gev I;      | 15) Avdat/Aqev-Aqov, Boker, Sde Divshon, Ein Aqev, D 27 A; | 21) Wadi Sudr.                      |

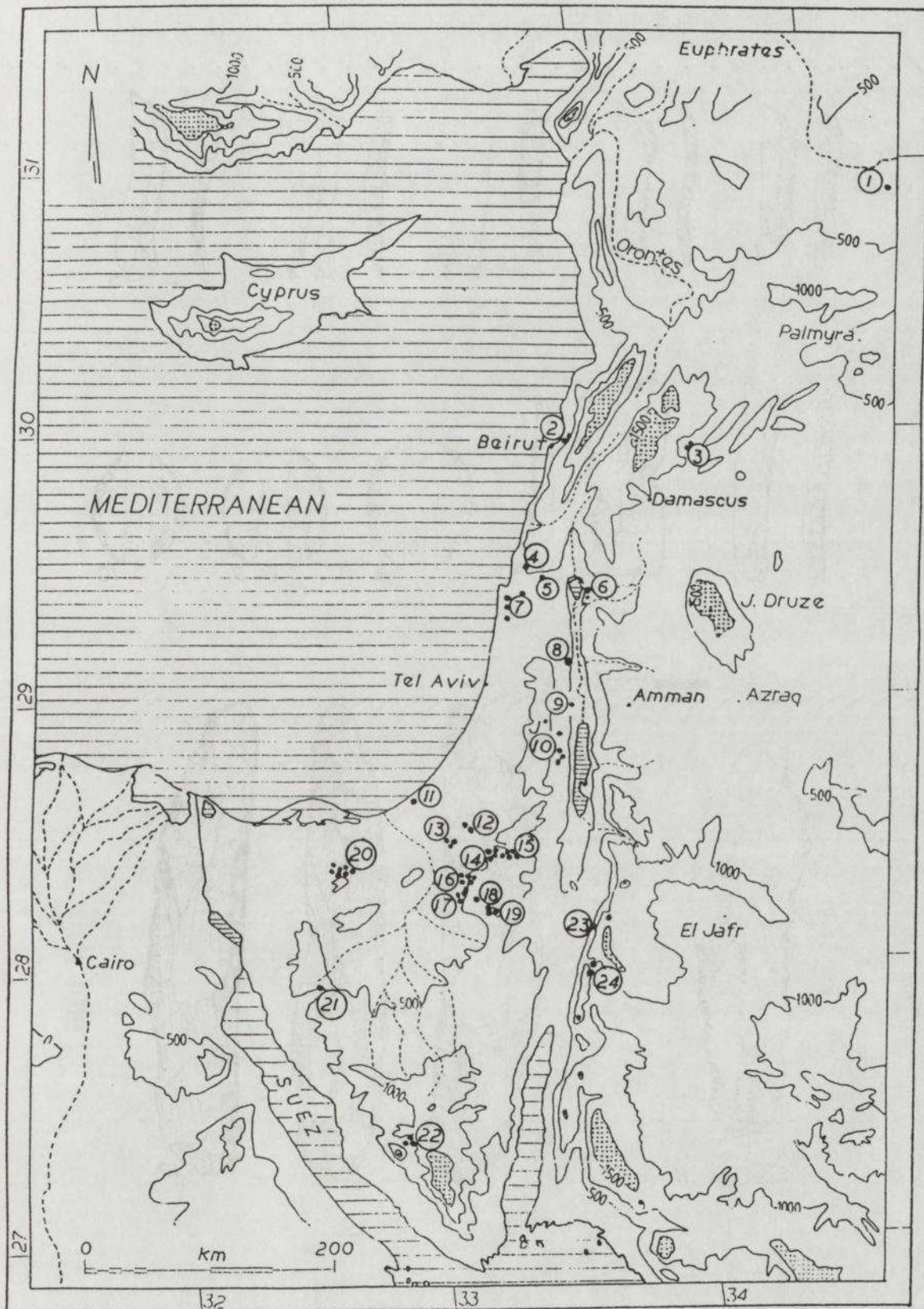


Fig. 2 : A distribution map of Ramonian occurrences in southern Levant

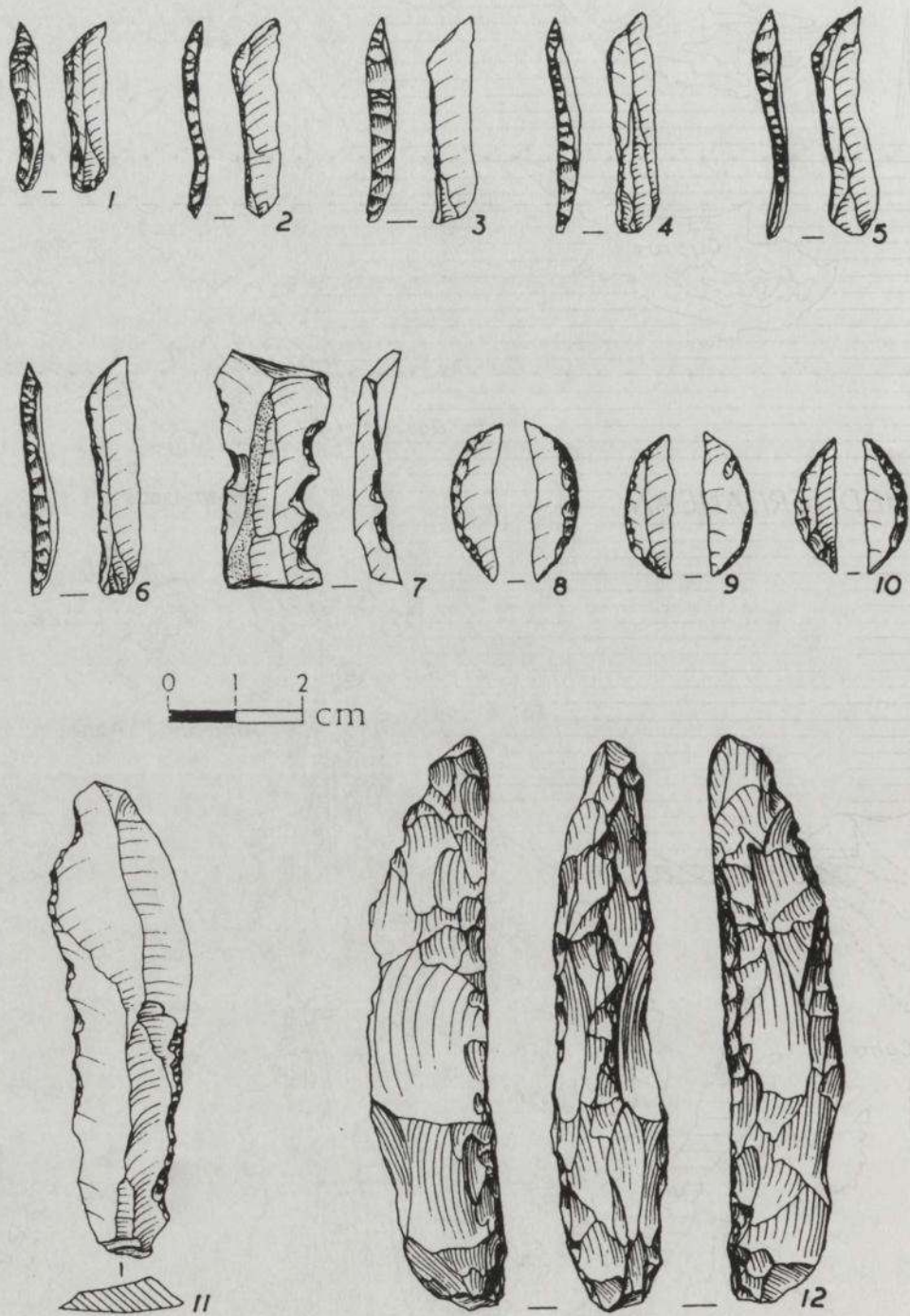


Fig. 3 : Lithic artifacts from the Ramonian site of Nahal Neqarot, Negev.

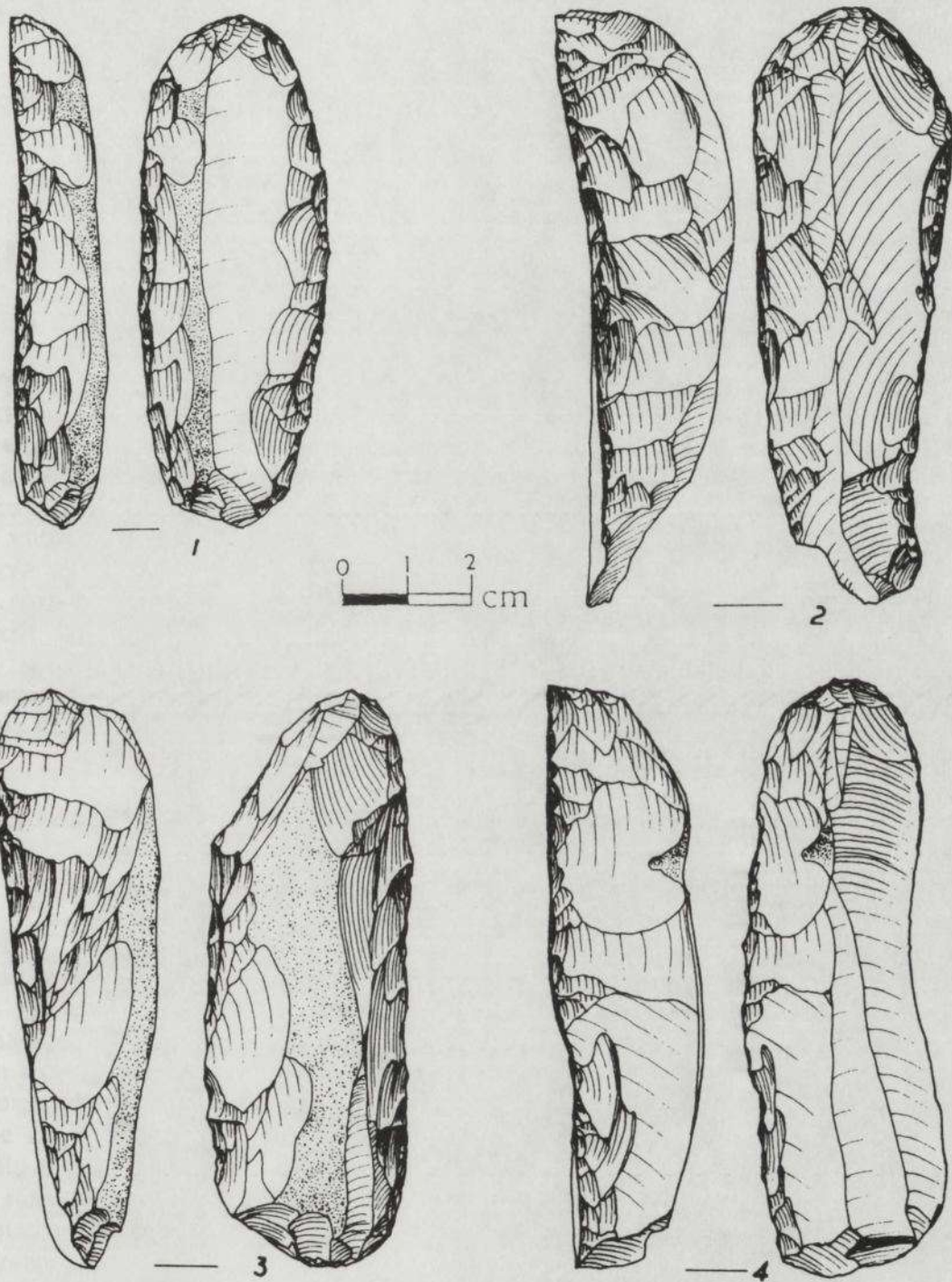


Fig. 4 : Lithic artifacts from the Ramonian site of Nahal Neqarot, Negev.