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The Flint Assemblage from Ashqelon, Afridar (Area E-2)

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This report presents the assemblage of 227 flint items recovered during the renewed excavations at Ashqelon, Afridar (Area E-2; see Golani and Paran, this volume). The flint was manually retrieved and the sediment was sieved through a 1 × 1 cm mesh only when it came from loci of stratigraphic significance. In addition to technological and typological descriptions, the report contains an analysis of metric characteristics, edge damage and particular technological attributes of Canaanean blade products. This data can be useful for evaluating functional variability within this group of artifacts, particularly of items with and without gloss. Similarly to the other areas excavated at the site, the assemblage contains a distinctive bladelet-based industry typical of the Chalcolithic period (Zbenovich 2004a; 2004b). In an attempt to identify the origin of these items, their distribution was analyzed through comparison with Canaanean blades and tools. The finds are presented according to strata (Stratum III, Stratum II, mixed Strata III and II) and topsoil layer.

Raw Material.— Several distinctive types of flint material were observed: high-quality homogeneous brown-beige flint of Eocene origin, used mostly for the production of Canaanean blades and tabular scrapers; beige-grayish flint with bright spots or impurities, used for the production of ad hoc tools; and smooth, homogeneous, fine-grained, semitranslucent or matt flint, beige, gray or brown-gray in color, which was primarily associated with the bladelet-based industry.

The Finds

Stratum III

Technological Composition

Stratum III yielded 50 flint items: 32 (64%) represent debitage, 11 (22%) are tools; and 7 (14%) consist of chips and chunks.

Table 1 shows that the majority of the debitage comprises flakes (43.8%), whereas blades constitute 21.9%. Four primary elements comprise the third-most prominent group (12.5%). Three cores were found, two of them for flake removals and one is a mixed flakes/bladelets core (Table 2). The rest of the debitage comprises one core trimming element (CTE), one

Table 1. General Composition of the Assemblage according to Strata

	Stratum III		Stratum II		Strata II & III, Mixed		Topsoil and Mixed Debris		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Primary Element	4	12.5	5	11.9			3	12.5	12	12.2
Flake	14	43.8	16	38.1			18	75.0	48	49.0
Blade	7	21.9	5	11.9			1	4.2	13	13.3
Canaanean blade	1	3.1	1	2.4					2	2.0
Bladelet	1	3.1	7	16.7			2	8.3	10	10.2
NBK	1	3.1	2	4.8					3	3.1
CTE	1	3.1	1	2.4					2	2.0
Core	3	9.4	4	9.5					7	7.1
Burin Spall			1	2.4					1	1.0
Total Debitage	*32*	*100.0*	*42*	*100.0*			*24*	*100.0*	*98*	*100.0*
Chips	2	28.6	10	16.9			5	62.5	17	23.0
Chunks	5	71.4	49	83.1			3	37.5	57	77.0
Total Debris	*7*	*100.0*	*59*	*100.0*			*8*	*100.0*	*74*	*100.0*
Tools	11	100.0	26	100.0	4	100.0	14	100.0	55	100.0
Total	*50*	*100.0*	*127*	*100.0*	*4*	*100.0*	*46*	*100.0*	*227*	*100.0*

Table 2. Core Types

	Flakes, Two Platforms	Flakes, Amorphous	Bladelets, One Platform	Bladelets, Mixed	Total
Stratum II		1	3		4
Stratum III	1	1		1	3
Total	*1*	*2*	*3*	*1*	*7*

bladelet and one Canaanean blade blank. The debitage items in this stratum vary in raw material: the cores and the majority of the flakes and blades are made on local beige-grayish flint with impurities; the Canaanean blade blank is made on high-quality homogeneous brown Eocene flint; and the bladelet is of smooth, fine-grained, semitranslucent flint, which often characterizes Chalcolithic bladelet assemblages (e.g., Shimelmitz 2007; Yaroshevich 2019).

Table 3. Tool Composition according to Strata

	Stratum III		Stratum II		Strata II & III, Mixed		Topsoil and Mixed Debris		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Retouched flake	2	100.0							2	100.0
Retouched blade	2	28.6	3	42.9			2	28.6	7	100.0
Retouch or nibbled Canaanean blade	3	27.3	5	45.5			3	27.3	11	100.0
Microlith			6	66.7	1	11.1	2	22.2	9	100.0
Endscraper							1	100.0	1	100.0
Tabular scraper	*1*	50.0					1	50.0	2	100.0
Multiple tool			1	100.0					1	100.0
Notch/denticulate			1	50.0	1	50.0			2	100.0
Borer			1	50.0			1	50.0	2	100.0
Burin					1				1	100.0
Sickle blade	3	17.6	9	52.9	1	5.9	4	23.5	17	100.0
Total	*11*	*20.0*	*26*	*47.3*	*4*	*7.3*	*14*	*25.5*	*55*	*100.0*

Typological Composition

Eleven tools were found in Stratum III, comprising three sickle blades, three retouched or nibbled Canaanean blades, two retouched flakes, two retouched blades and a tabular scraper (Table 3).

Sickle Blades.— Two of these are medial fragments and another is a broken truncated item (Fig. 1:8); all three are made on Canaanean blades.

Tabular Scraper (Fig. 2:1).— This is an almost complete, rather thick tool with gentle retouch, made of homogeneous high-quality brown flint, similar to that used for Canaanean blade production. This item was found in debris upon a surface (L584).

Retouched Flakes.— Two small fragments were found, both burned and broken.

Retouched Blades.— Five items were found, all made of homogeneous brown flint; three of them (two medial fragments and one proximal) represent Canaanean blades. One of the fragments has a partial back and two others have natural backs, i.e., they retain cortex along the edge. One of the two remaining items probably represents a Canaanean blade, but the degree and the mode of the breakage prevents a definite identification.

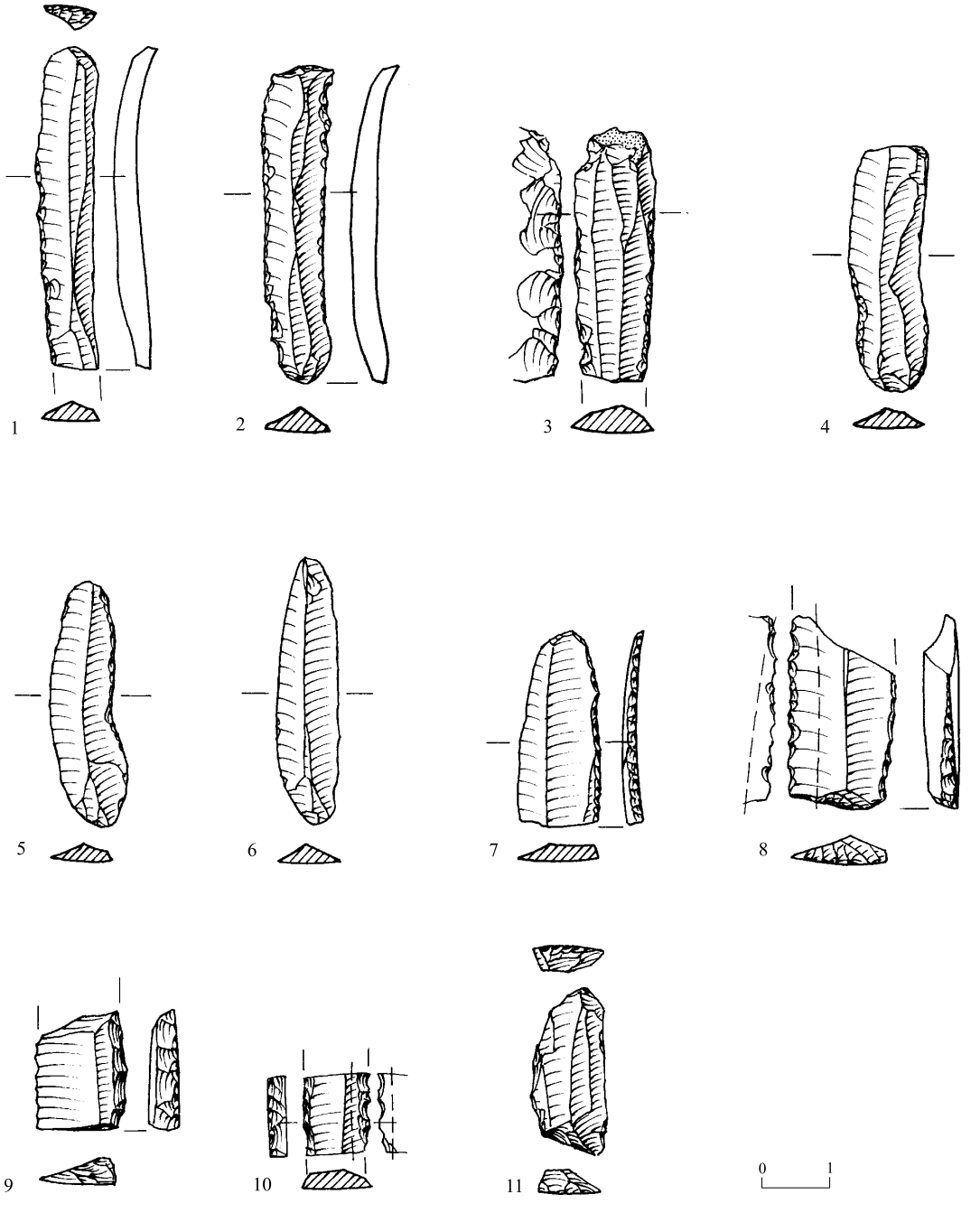

Fig. 1. Microendscrapers (1, 2), retouched bladelets (3–7, 11), backed blade (9), sickle blades (8, 10).

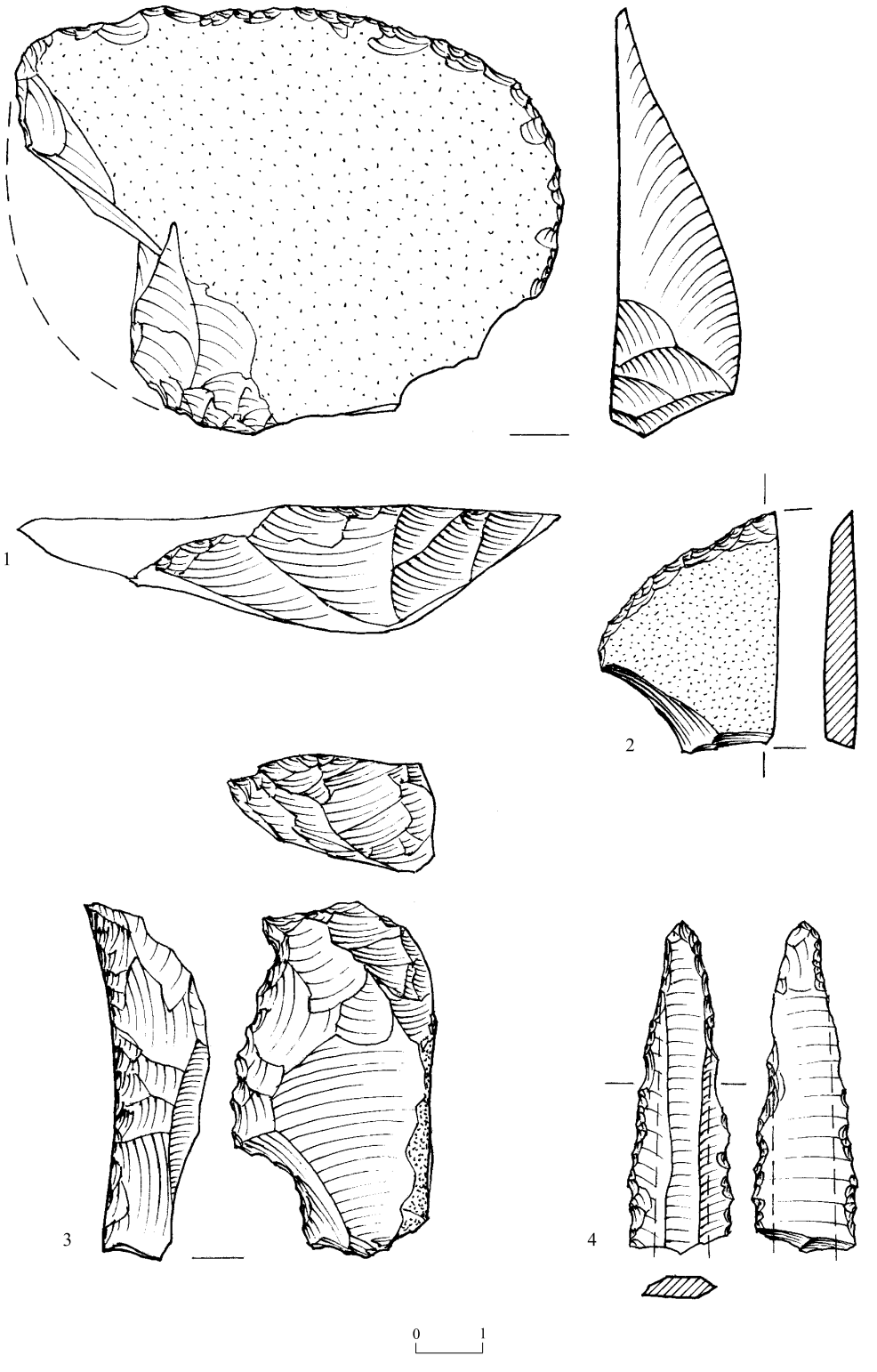

Fig. 2. Tabular scrapers (1, 2), multiple tool (3), borer (4).

STRATUM II

Technological Composition

This stratum yielded 127 flint artifacts (Table 1): 42 (33.1%) represent debitage, 26 (20.5%) are tools and 59 (46.4%) are debris items. The majority of the debris consists of 40 burned chunk items found in L583, defined as "debris upon surface". These seem to be part of a flint nodule that exploded into pieces as a result of exposure to high temperature.

In the debitage group, the flakes are dominant, comprising 38.1%. Blades and primary elements are equally present, each comprising 11.9% of the debitage. One broken primary flake made of high-quality homogeneous brown flint (retrieved from L563, defined as "probe down to sterile sands") resembles tabular scrapers previously found at the site and might represent a fragment of this tool type. Bladelets (16.7%)—the second largest group—are mostly made on a distinctive smooth, homogeneous, fine-grained, semitranslucent or matt flint, beige, gray or brown-gray in color. Four cores comprise 9.5% of the debitage. Three of them are bladelet cores with one striking platform (Fig. 3). Like the bladelets, they are made of smooth, fine-grained, matt or semitranslucent, beige or brown flint. The remaining core is an amorphous one for flakes. One medial fragment of a Canaanean blank blade, two naturally backed knives (NBK) and one burin spall constitute the remainder of the debitage group.

Typological Composition

The assemblage of tools recovered from Stratum II constitutes nine sickle blades, six microliths, five retouched or nibbled Canaanean blades, three retouched blades, two notches/denticulates and a borer (Table 3).

Sickle Blades (Fig. 4:5, 6).— Eight items are made on Canaanean blades, of which one is a proximal fragment and the rest are medial parts. One additional item may, in fact, represent a Canaanean blade, but its breakage prevents a definite ascription.

Retouched or Nibbled Canaanean Blades.— Five items were recovered, of which two are proximal parts and three are medial fragments. Two of these items retain a natural back, i.e., a cortex along the edge (Fig. 4:1).

Microliths.— This group constitutes two microendscrapers (Fig. 1:1, 2) and four retouched bladelets (Fig. 1:4, 5, 7).

Borer (Fig. 2:4).— This item is a recycled Canaanean sickle blade transformed into a drill, found in a sounding that reached sterile sand (L515).

Multiple Tool.— One such item is a combination of a notch/denticulate and an awl (Fig. 2:3). It was found within Pit L573.

Notches/Denticulates.— One tool, made on a thick flake, was recovered from L595, defined as "debris upon surface south of W807".

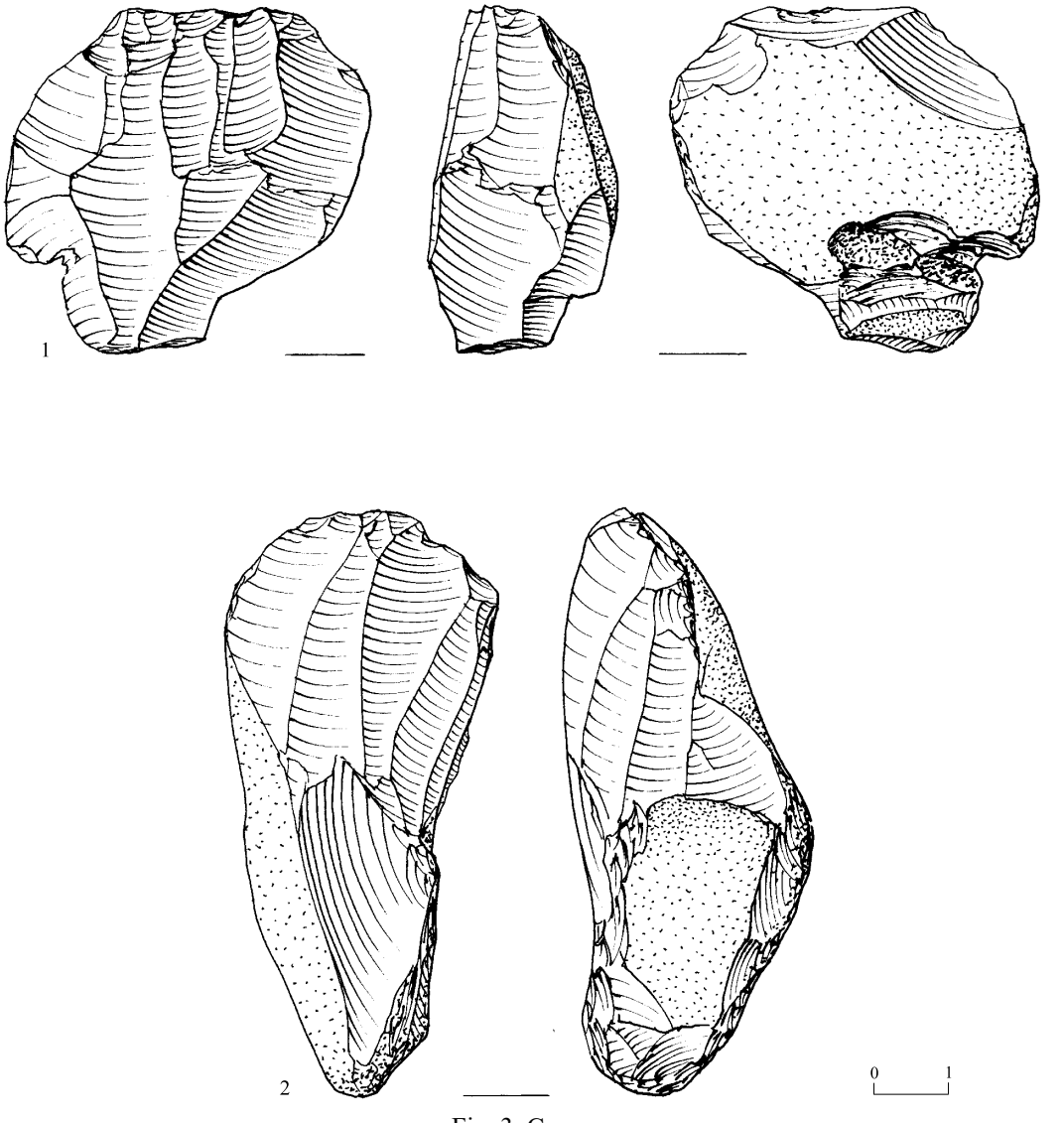

Fig. 3. Cores.

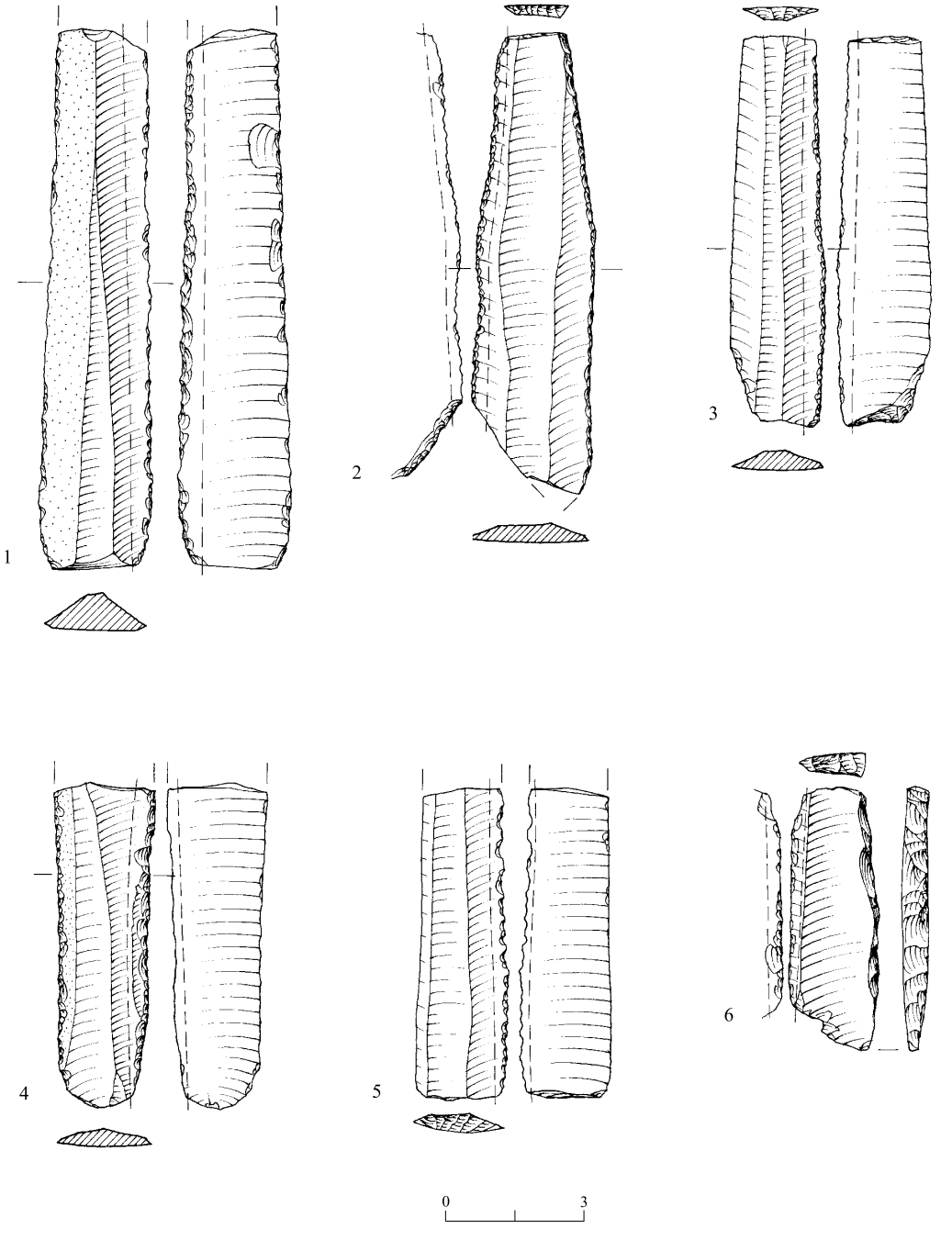

Fig. 4. Sickle blades.

Strata III and II, Mixed Contexts

Four tools were found in L593, a surface makeup that represents mixed Strata II and III deposits. These tools consist of a laterally retouched bladelet (Fig. 1:3) a notch/denticulate, a burin and a sickle blade. The sickle blade is made on a Canaanean blade and has a truncation that removed the bulb of percussion (Fig. 4:3).

Topsoil

Technological Composition

Excavation of the topsoil yielded 46 flint items (Table 1): 24 (52.2%) represent debitage, 14 (30.4%) are tools and 8 (17.4%) comprise debris. Flakes (n = 18) constitute 75% of the debitage and three additional items (12.5%) comprise primary elements. Two bladelets (8.3%) and a blade (4.2%) complete the debitage group. The majority of the debitage items are represented by grayish-beige flint with impurities; some items are made of high-quality homogeneous brown flint similar to the type used for Canaanean blade production and tabular scrapers.

Typological Composition

The tool assemblage recovered from the topsoil includes four sickle blades, three retouched or nibbled Canaanean blades, two retouched blades, two microliths, a tabular scraper, an endscraper and a borer (Table 3).

Sickle Blades.— Three items are made on Canaanean blades; one of them is a double truncated tool (Fig. 4:2), one is a proximal fragment and the third, a medial. The fourth item is a backed and denticulated medial fragment of bladelet dimensions (Fig. 1:10).

Retouched or Nibbled Canaanean Blades.— These include a proximal, a medial and a distal fragment. One of the items is backed through abrupt retouch (Fig. 1:9) and another is naturally backed, i.e., retains a cortex along the edge.

Tabular Scraper (Fig. 2:2).— This tool is represented by a small fragment made of high-quality homogeneous brown flint of Eocene origin, similar to that used for Canaanean blade products.

Microliths (Fig. 1:6, 11).— A retouched bladelet and a truncated bladelet comprise this group.

Borer.— This broken item, possibly representing a drill made on a Canaanean sickle blade, is similar to the item found in Stratum II (see Fig. 2:4).

Endscraper.— This burned fragment was probably made on a blade blank.

Spatial Distribution of Items Representing a Bladelet-Based Industry

In an attempt to identify the provenience of the distinctive bladelet-based industry, the spatial distribution of the flint items was analyzed through comparison with the location of Canaanean blade products (Tables 4 and 5). The majority of the bladelet-related items were recovered from Stratum II, Sqs D–H/9–10, in a variety of loci, including fills within pits and mud-brick debris (Table 4). The distribution of Canaanean blade products (Table 5) shows a similar pattern, primarily in Stratum II, Sqs C–H/9–10. Moreover, on several occasions Canaanean blades and items related to a bladelet industry originated in the same loci (Loci 566, 569, 523, 576 and 593). For example, L569 (fill within pit) yielded two microliths together with four Canaanean blade products—two sickle blades and two retouched or nibbled blades—and in L566 (debris within the upper portion of a large pit), a bladelet was recovered alongside a retouched or nibbled Canaanean blade.

Table 4. Spacial Distribution of Items related to the Bladelet Industry

Stratum	Locus	Square	Provenance	Microlith	Bladelet Core, One Platform	Bladelet, Mixed	Bladelet	Total
III	610	F10	Debris upon surface				1	1
	615	F10	Beaten-earth surface northwest of Pit L603			1		1
	Total					*1*	*1*	*2*
II	520	I11	Probe in southern portion of square	1	1			2
	523	G10	Debris between W802 and W803, above surface	1			1	2
	546	G9	Debris	1			1	*2*
	550	G9	Burned mud-brick debris on surface next to stone pile		2			2
	552	D10	Debris				2	2
	566	D9	Debris within upper portion of large pit				1	1
	569	E9	Debris within pit	2				2
	587	D10	Debris				2	2
	595	H11	Debris upon surface south of W807	1				1
	Total			*6*	*3*		*7*	*16*
II & III, Mixed	593	F10	Surface makeup	1				1
	Total			*1*				*1*
Topsoil	547	D10	Topsoil				1	1
	576	C10	Mixed debris	2			1	3
	Total			*2*			*2*	*4*
Total				*9*	*3*	*1*	*10*	*23*

Table 5. Spacial Distribution of Canaanean Blade Products

Stratum	Locus	Square	Provenance	Retouched or Nibbled Canaanean Blade	Canaanean Blade	Canaanean Sickle Blade	Total
III	594	C11	Debris upon surface(?)	1			1
	603	F10	Debris within pit	1	1		2
	613	F10	Debris upon surface	1			1
	616	G10	Debris upon surface			1	1
	620	E10	Debris east of W816 and below its base in a pit(?)			1	1
	Total			*3*	*1*	*2*	*6*
II	523	G10	Debris between W802 and W803, above surface	1			1
	526	J11	Debris upon surface		1		1
	528	I 10	Debris upon surface			1	1
	544	G10	Debris upon surface next to W802			1	1
	545	G10	Debris upon surface between W802 and W803			1	1
	552	D10	Debris			1	1
	566	D9	Debris within upper portion of large pit	1			1
	569	E9	Debris within pit	2		2	4
	577	D9	Debris within lower portion of large pit			1	1
	609	H10	Debris upon surface south of W807			1	1
	618	E10	Surface makeup	1			1
	Total			*5*	*1*	*8*	*14*
II & III Mixed	593					1	1
Topsoil	509	J11	Topsoil	1			1
	513	G10	Mixed debris above walls			1	1
	531	I 11	Mixed debris and late intrusions above walls	1			1
	576	C10	Mixed debris	1		2	3
	Total			*3*		*3*	*6*
Total				*11*	*2*	*14*	*27*

Canaanean Blade Products: Technological and Metrical Analysis

Both Canaanean sickle blades (items with gloss) and retouched or nibbled Canaanean blades are mostly represented by medial fragments; however, proximal fragments are relatively common among retouched or nibbled Canaanean blades (4 of 11) and rare among Canaanean sickle blades (2 of 14). Natural backing (cortex along the edge) is common among retouched or nibbled Canaanean blades (n = 5) and absent in sickle blades. Truncations were observed only among sickle blades: two exhibit a single truncation and two are double truncated; of these, one shows ventral thinning on its proximal part. The two groups also differ in terms of edge modification. Thus, the majority of sickle blades are serrated, probably as a result of re-sharpening, whereas no items with serrations were observed among retouched or nibbled blades.

Table 6 shows metric characteristics of the Canaanean blade products. The values for Canaanean sickle blades and Canaanean blade blanks are considerably lower than those for the retouched or nibbled items. The differences are especially prominent in terms of width and thickness. Thus, the average width for Canaanean blades and sickle blades is 19.9 mm, whereas for retouched or nibbled Canaanean blades it is 24.2 mm. The values of the standard deviation are also lower for sickle blades, implying that these items are more standardized in terms of their metric characteristics.

Table 6. Metric Characteristics of Canaanean Blade Products

Blade Product		Measurements (mm)		
		Length	Width	Thickness
Retouched or nibbled Canaanean blade	Mean	57.9	24.2	6.0
	N	11	11	11
	SD	27.4	4.2	1.8
Canaanean blade	Mean	40.5	19.9	4.2
	N	2	2	2
	SD	20.5	2.5	1.2
Sickle blade on Canaanean blade	Mean	48.2	19.9	4.4
	N	14	14	14
	SD	24.2	3.9	0.8

Discussion and Conclusions

The analysis of the flint items recovered during the 2011 excavation season at Ashqelon, Afridar (Area E-2) indicates four distinctive industries: Canaanean blades, tabular scrapers, ad hoc tools and bladelet-based tools. Observations concerning technological composition as well as raw materials indicate that ad hoc tools and bladelet-based tools (microliths) were produced on site. The absence of debitage related to the production of Canaanean blades indicates that these items were brought to the site mostly as traded or exchanged objects. Gat-Govrin, located c. 20 km from Ashqelon, has been suggested as a center of production and distribution of Canaanean blades to the southern coastal plain sites, including Afridar (Milevski 2011; 2013). The tabular scrapers found at Ashqelon, Afridar (Area E-2) are too few to enable extensive discussion concerning the origin of their production, yet, the similarity to Canaanean blades in terms of the raw material may indicate that these tools represent part of the same reduction sequence.

Canaanean blade products at Ashqelon, Afridar (Area E-2) comprise two main groups: sickle blades, i.e., items with gloss, and retouched or nibbled blades. Comparing the metric characteristics and particular technological attributes of these groups showed that sickle blades are more standardized—a phenomenon that can be explained by hafting constrains. The greater standardization of Canaanean sickle blades compared to items with nibbling has also been observed at the late EB I site of Tel Qashish (Yaroshevich, forthcoming). Different production centers, i.e., Har Ḥaruvim in the case of Tel Qashish versus Gat-Govrin in the case of Ashqelon, Afridar, and slight differences in average width and thickness of the items (with Ashqelon items being slightly wider) underline this phenomenon even more, supporting the hypothesis of function-related hafting constraints.

The technological and metrical differences further suggest that the retouched or nibbled Canaanean blades do not represent sickle blades that were simply not used extensively enough to develop a gloss, but rather a category of tools used for some other function or functions. Use-wear studies show that Canaanean blades during this period were employed in a variety of functions: for cutting plants or working hide, wood and even stone (Gurova 2013) and in ceramic production (Groman-Yaroslavski, Iserlis and Eisenberg 2013).

The assemblage analyzed here is considerably smaller than those unearthed during previous excavations at Ashqelon, Afridar (Zbenovich 2004a; 2004b; Khalaily 2008). It also lacks Neolithic intrusions observed in various other areas of Ashqelon, Afridar (Perrot and Gopher 1996; Khalaily 2004; Zbenovich 2004a; 2004b; Garfinkel and Dag 2008) and Ashqelon, Barneʿa, located slightly farther to the north (Goder-Goldberger, forthcoming), as well as Egyptian traits as identified at Ashqelon, Barneʿa (Goder-Goldberger, forthcoming).

The distinctive bladelet-based industry characterizes all the excavation areas at Ashqelon, with nearly contemporary Ashqelon, Afridar Areas E, F, G, J and M (Baumgarten 2004; Braun and Gophna 2004; Golani 2004; 2008b; Khalaily 2004) representing an early phase of EB I and Ashqelon, Barneʿa dated to mid–late EB I (Golani 2005; 2007; 2008a). While a bladelet-based industry that includes microendscrapers has been found at some

EB I sites (Gilead 1984; Rosen 1997), these items are made mostly on flint other than the fine-grained semitranslucent variants characterizing Chalcolithic assemblages (Gilead 1984; 1995; Shimelmitz 2007; Yaroshevich 2019; see also Vardi and Gilead 2013). The possibility of *in situ* Chalcolithic remains at Ashqelon is strongly disputed by the excavator (see Golani 2013 and references therein), who suggests that artifacts commonly held as diagnostic of the Chalcolithic period actually comprise part of the EB I cultural remains at Ashqelon, indicating continuity between the two periods. The spatial distribution analysis applied here shows that items representing the bladelet-based industry were found in all strata and often in the same loci as the Canaanean blade products. This, however, does not rule out the possibility that the assemblage contains components representing two different periods. The fragment of the narrow backed sickle blade—a type fossil of the Chalcolithic period—recorded here as well as in other areas of the site in significantly larger numbers, may testify to the mixed nature of the assemblage. Recent studies and discoveries attesting that Canaanean-blade industries appear already during the Late Chalcolithic (e.g., Bar and Winter 2010; Abadi-Reiss and Varga 2019) further complicate the possibility to differentiate between the two periods based on particular type fossils. Future excavation projects in the area and subsequent detailed analyses of the material culture will hopefully provide more information about the nature of the bladelet-based industry at Ashqelon in particular and about the emergence of the Early Bronze Age in southern Canaan in general—a subject of increasing attention in archaeological research.

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