

## THE BURIAL OF NEOLITHIC BLADE PRODUCER

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### Introduction

Tell el-Kerkh is a large tell complex located in the Rouj Basin, northwest Syria. The site was excavated between 1997 and 2010, and the excavations revealed a series of rich cultural sequences from the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B to the Byzantine periods [Tsuneki 2013, Tsuneki *et al.* 2007]. The purpose of our excavations was to understand the Neolithization process and the development of complexities during the Neolithic period. Fortunately, the excavations provided us with significant information about the Neolithic way of life. The settlements of Tell el-Kerkh represent a mega-site, and were as large as 6–16 ha in size, during the late PPNB and the Pottery Neolithic period [Tsuneki 2012a]. During these periods, the settlements were not only merely large, but also reflected complicated societies, including communal storage, craft specialization, long-distance trade, ownership and various ritual practices [Tsuneki 2013]. A Pottery Neolithic communal cemetery, discovered in 2007 and excavated until 2010, also represents these kinds of complexities [Tsuneki 2009, 2010, Tsuneki *et al.* 2011]. The cemetery was discovered in a vacant section of the Rouj 2c (the middle phase of the Pottery Neolithic period) settlement, dating to 6,500–6,200 cal. BC and it produced over 240 individuals. This paper will discuss one of the burials in this Pottery Neolithic communal cemetery, which indicated the occupation of the deceased was a blade producer.

### Blade Producer's burial

Though over 240 individual skeletons had been excavated from the Pottery Neolithic cemetery, Structure 1058 was a burial that was accompanied by grave goods consisting of an assemblage thereby suggesting the individual was a blade producer of siliceous rock. Other than these special goods for blade production, it was an ordinary primary burial discovered in the northern part of the cemetery. The deceased was a large and sturdy middle-aged (35–50 years old) adult male (Fig. 1). He was buried in a tightly flexed position, right side down. A small dark-faced burnished ware (DFBW) bowl was placed at the back of his head (Fig. 2, Fig. 7:1). The placement of a small complete pottery near the skull was a typical funerary custom in this cemetery.

On the other hand, it is notable that a cluster of specific grave goods was discovered near his lower back (Figs. 3, 4). All remains, overlapping each other, were found in a 30 cm square range. This context indicates that these remains were packed in an organic box or bag, later the container was carefully placed near his back.



Fig. 1 Burial of Str. 1058

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Fig. 2 DFBW bowl placed behind his head



Fig. 3 Grave goods discovered near his lower back



Fig. 4 Grave goods discovered near his lower back

The contents of the container were:

1. One Amuq-type point (Fig. 7.2)
2. Five long blades (Fig. 7.3–7)
3. Two burins (Fig. 7.8–9)
4. Three cores (Fig. 7.10–12)
5. Eighteen blades and flakes (Fig. 7.13–30)
6. Five deer (probably fallow deer) horns (Fig. 7.31–33)
7. Three bone awls (Fig. 7.34–36)
8. Two grindstones (Fig. 7.37–38)
9. Two very soft stone hammers (Fig. 7.39–40)
10. One small hand-held whetstone (Fig. 7.41)
11. One flat clay stamp seal (Fig. 7.42)

These burial goods can be classified into three main categories as follows:

a) Chipped stone objects

All chipped stone objects discovered from Str.1058 are made of siliceous rock. They comprise 1) one Amuq point, 2) five long blades, 3) two burins, 4) three cores and 5) eighteen blades and flakes. The Amuq point is the most dominant point type during the period of the Kerkh Neolithic cemetery, i.e. in the Rouj 2c period. This point (Fig. 7.2) was made on a long blade detached from a bi-directional blade core. Its elongated tang was shaped by pressure flaking on the dorsal face and the end of the ventral face. A burin-like retouch was observed on the left edge of the ventral face. As the tip of the point was broken, this piece was probably stored for reduction. Five large blades were also detached from the bi-directional blade core (Fig. 7.3–7). Most of these were suitable as blade blanks for points. A blade with cortex has burin blows on its ventral face (Fig. 7.7). Two burins were made from the broken retouched blades (Fig. 7.8–9). There are three specimens which seem to be bi-directional blade cores (Fig. 5, Fig. 7.10–12). The traces of blade detachment from opposite directions were observed on their working surfaces. Modification of the backs was made by the bi-directional removal of the trimming flakes. Some parts of the working surfaces showed traces of polishing. The most numerous chipped stone objects are eighteen small flakes and blades (Fig. 7.13–30). Some of them have cortex. It is probable that they are core preparation and modification flakes.

In summary, all of these chipped stone objects were produced in the process of detaching blades



Fig. 5 Three blade cores

and making points.

b) Tools for stone implement production

Objects in this category are 6) five deer (probably fallow deer) horns, 7) three bone awls, 8) two grindstones, 9) two very soft stone hammers, and 10) one small hand-held whetstone. Deer horns are quite unique as grave goods in the Kerkh Neolithic cemetery. Except for a small complete one (Fig. 4 left, Fig. 7.31), the other four deer horns were broken base parts (Fig. 6, Fig. 7.32–33). It is probable that these deer horns were used as soft hammer for detaching chipped stones. Two soft stone hammers made of hard pumice (Fig. 7.39–40) also could be used for detaching blades and core edge abrade. Two grinding stones (Fig. 7:37–38) and one small hand-held whetstone (Fig. 7:41) were perhaps used to abrade the siliceous rock surfaces. The most enigmatic objects in this category are three bone awls (Fig. 7.34–36). Bone awls are relatively popular grave goods at the Kerkh Neolithic cemetery however they were not discovered in context like Str. 1058. Some of them may have been used as a retoucher and abrader for pressure flaking.



Fig. 6 Four deer horn bases

c) Amulet or personal belonging

Object for this category comprise 11) one small clay stamp seal, which was modified from a fragment of brown-colored DFBW potsherd (Fig. 7.42). Tell el-Kerkh produced over one hundred Neolithic stamp seals until the 2010 season. Most of them were made of various stones, and some were made of bone and clay. Clay stamp seals made of original DFBW potsherds are small in number however they are not rare. As some clay sealings with string and knot impressions were discovered from Tell el-Kerkh, it suggests stamp seals were used for administrative purposes. At the same time, the stamps themselves were personal belongings. Some of them were discovered from burials in the Kerkh Neolithic cemetery, and their context suggests they were used as amulets [Tsuneki 2012b]. Therefore, the clay stamp seal discovered from Str. 1058 may have been placed in the grave-goods container as an amulet or personal belonging.

The inventory of categories a) and b) strongly indicates that all objects were used in the production of chipped stone implements, especially blades and points. As a clay stamp seal was the evidence of a personal possession, these grave goods were the property of the tomb owner, the middle aged man of Str. 1058. So it is highly probable that he must have been engaged in chipped stone production.

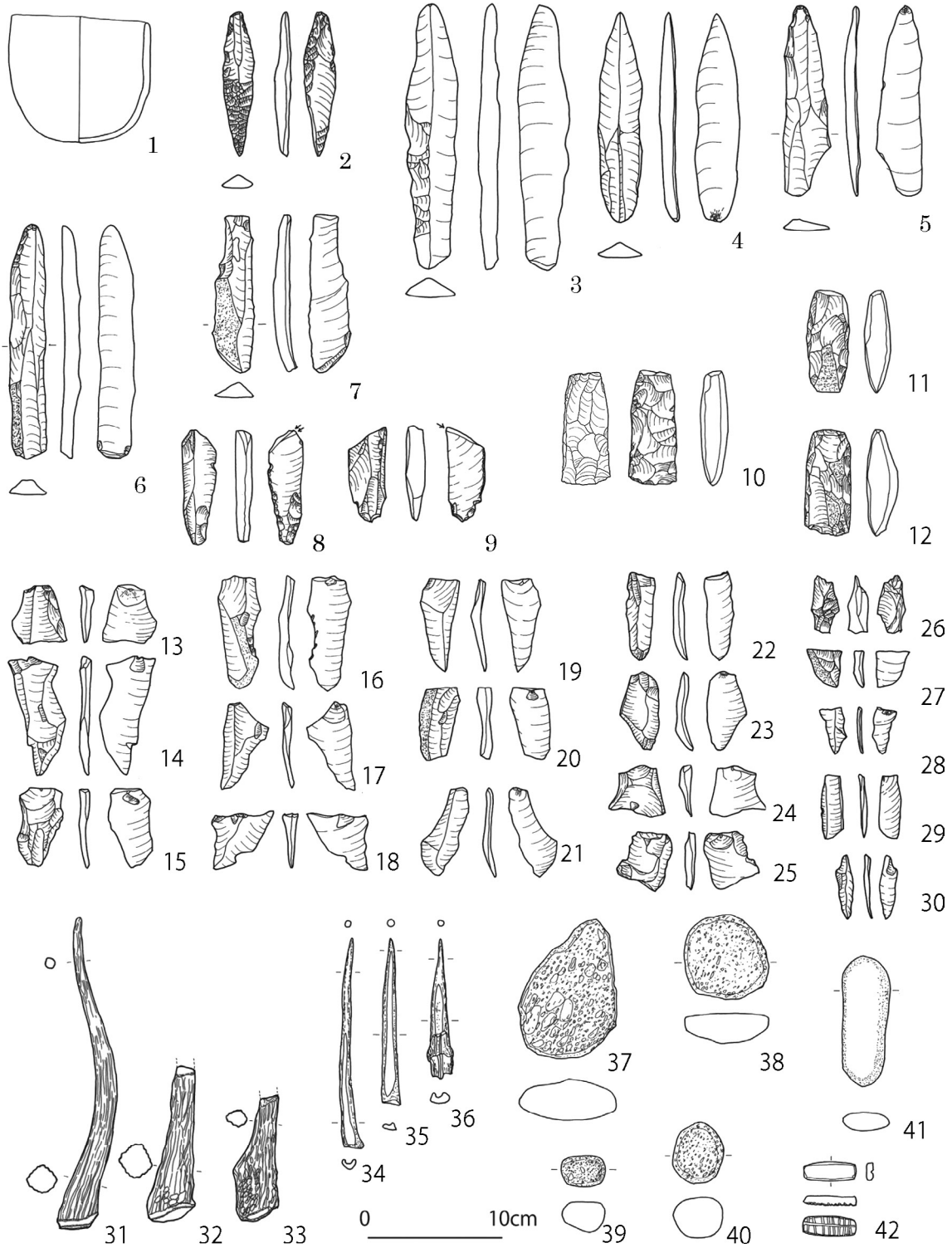


Fig. 7 Grave goods discovered from Str. 1058

**Discussion**

A lot of information about Neolithic way of life was obtained from the burial, Str. 1058, at Tell el-Kerkh. First of all, it provides new insights about lithic technology. Str. 1058 provided a good inventory for prehistoric blade and point production. It allows us to suggest what kinds of tools were used in blade and point production, including Amuq-type points. At Tell el-Kerkh, the technique

of bi-directional blade detachment survived into the Pottery Neolithic period. Amuq points, which prevailed in the Rouj 2c period (middle phase of the Pottery Neolithic period), were created from a long blade detached from the bi-directional blade cores. Archaeologists have often discussed the detachment technique of long blades from bi-directional blade cores. Suzuki and Akazawa [1971] suggest pressure flaking was used and Calley [1986] the indirect detachment technique using a punch and others suggest direct flaking with soft hammers [Wilke and Quintero 1994]. Our evidence gives some hints for ending these kinds of debates.

The burial of Str. 1058 also provides evidence for considering the Neolithic society of Tell el-Kerkh. For example, one burial produced this type of grave goods from over 240 individuals buried in the communal cemetery. So, it is very probable that the middle-aged man in the Str. 1058 burial was one of a few specialists who engaged in chipped stone production. In the Rouj 2c period, there were two other chipped stone production techniques. One was blade detachment from a single-platform blade core for making sickle elements. Another was the detachment of micro blades from bifacial cores, to make drills for boring stone beads. No traces of either technique could be observed in the assemblage of chipped stone objects from Str. 1058. Therefore, we do not know that the tomb owner of Str. 1058 was engaged in the production of just blades and points or all other chipped stone implements. However, it is certain that he was a specialist in chipped stone implement production.

Of importance is the fact that the tomb owner of Str. 1058 was a middle-aged man. Some adult females were buried with grave-goods indicating that these females were engaged in weaving activities [Tsuneki 2011:86]. If this is the case, we can assert that there was a division of labor to some degree based on gender in the Pottery Neolithic society at Tell el-Kerkh. Siliceous rock knapping was the work of men in their societies.

There are very few examples of prehistoric burials of chipped stone producers. The author could not find other such examples in Near Eastern prehistory. In neighboring areas, one such example is a blade knapper's grave discovered from the Neolithic necropolis of Mehrgarh, Pakistan [Inizan 2012: Fig. 2.6]. However, there are very few similar examples. Therefore, the discovery of this grave is not just important for understanding the reconstruction of stone implement production technology, but also for understanding the societies of the Pottery Neolithic period in the northern Levant.

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