

## PROBLEM

# 5

## The Neolithic of Arak

Curtis Runnels

Soon after taking a position as assistant professor of Near Eastern archaeology at the state university, you receive the following letter:

INTERNATIONAL LIGHTWEIGHT RESEARCH FOUNDATION  
15 L'Enfant Plaza  
Washington, D.C.

Mon., 4 Jan. 19--

Dear Colleague:

Professor Rhys Pelaf's archaeological expedition was forced recently to terminate its important excavation of the neolithic site of Tell Al-Felafel in the country of Arak, near the capital of Taboule, because of deteriorating political conditions and indigestion. Before the end of the excavation, the archaeologists were confident they had discovered an important site showing evidence of surprising social and economic complexity. The site is located on the Arakian dry upland, and even today this area is good for farming and herding. The site is far, however, from sources of exotic raw materials such as Persian Gulf shells, Sinai turquoise, lapis lazuli (an azure blue semiprecious stone) from Afghanistan, and Turkish obsidian (fig. 5.1). Professor Pelaf and his assistant, the Arakian archaeologist Dr. Olive Tahini, were able to clear only part of the site, revealing stone foundations of a massive wall and a number of buildings. After clearing enough fill to expose the plans of the buildings (fig. 5.2), they had time only to dig three rooms in building A, one room each in buildings D and E, and most of the small building J (fig. 5.3). To the southeast of the site a cemetery was discovered and partly excavated by Professor Pelaf's other assistant, Dr. Rich Humus (fig. 5.4). Some of the graves were provided with abundant grave goods (e.g., fig. 5.5).

Unfortunately, Professor Pelaf and the other expedition archaeologists, after their experience in Arak, have decided to go into other professions and have left their rough field notes and sketches unstudied and unpublished. The Foundation supported this expedition and needs an assessment of the data in order to determine whether additional work would be desirable. Members of the Foundation are afraid to go to Arak themselves, and, frankly, we don't know what to do next, except to write you this letter. Knowing your expertise in this area, the Foundation would be grateful if you would analyze the Pelaf expedition field notes and sketches and submit a report at your earliest convenience.

The important question for the Foundation is this: evidence from other sites indicates that soon after the appearance of agriculture, settlements began to

increase in size and complexity (much like the Foundation!). Why did this happen? Do the Tell Al-Felafel data suggest any connection between agriculture, or anything else for that matter, and increasing cultural complexity? The Foundation is only interested in the broad outlines, since we are worried that we might have to pay to dig lots of sites up. We want your observations and generalizations based on the limited data we have enclosed. I suspect that the Trustees will vote you the usual minuscule fee upon receipt of your report. Do keep this brief; their attention span has been somewhat abbreviated by *anno domini*.

With our thanks in advance for your assistance, I remain,  
Sincerely,

Ethelbert Milquetoast  
Bureaucrat

Enclosures: Pelaf Expedition field notes and drawings.

PROFESSOR RHYS PELAF'S FIELD NOTES (SLIGHTLY EDITED BY E.M).  
DAY BOOK OF THE EXCAVATIONS IN THE ROOMS (FIGS. 5.2 AND 5.3).

*Building A, Room 1.* Began clearing possible shrine today. Three female figurines, one in a soft stone (see fig. 5.3) on a low clay platform at one end of room. One resembles figurine found by Humus yesterday in cemetery? Two

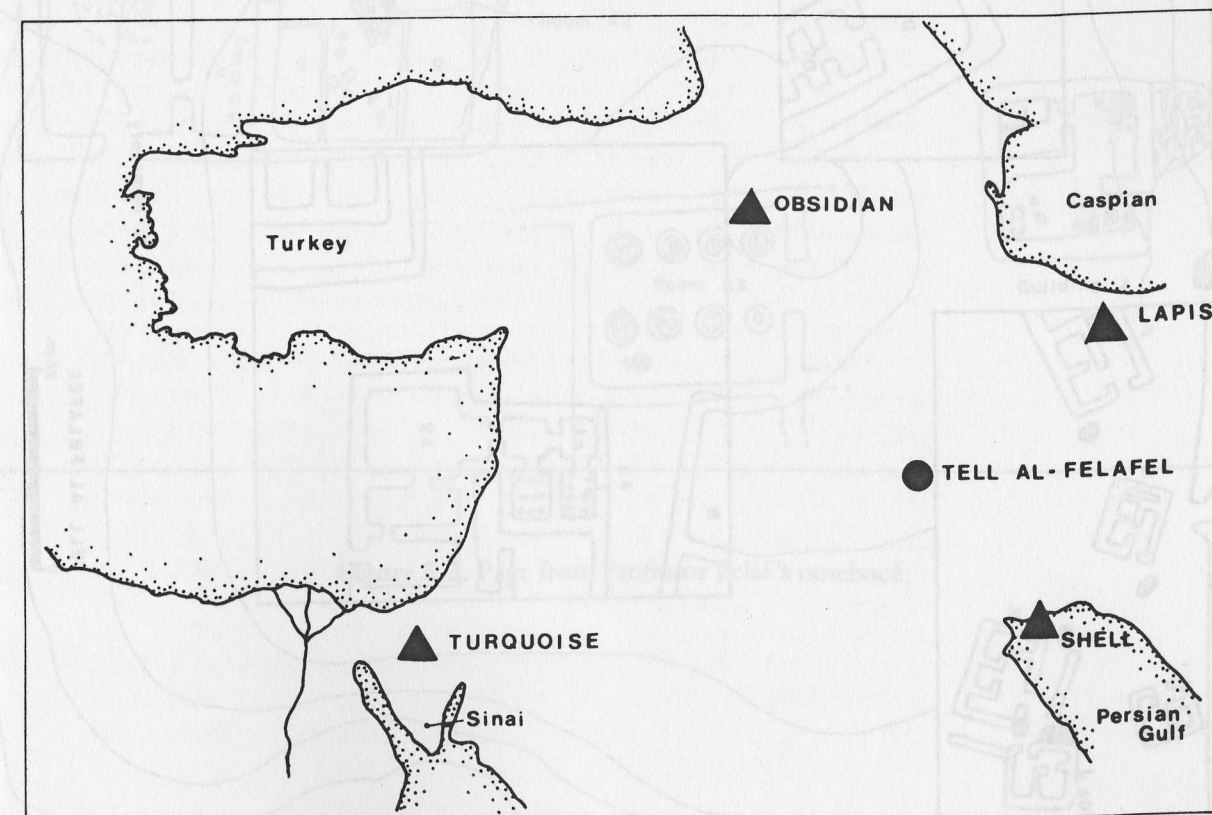


Figure 5.1. Map showing the location of Tell Al-Felafel and of sources of exotic materials.



Figure 5.2. Plan of Tell Al-Felafel (insets are at 2x overall scale).

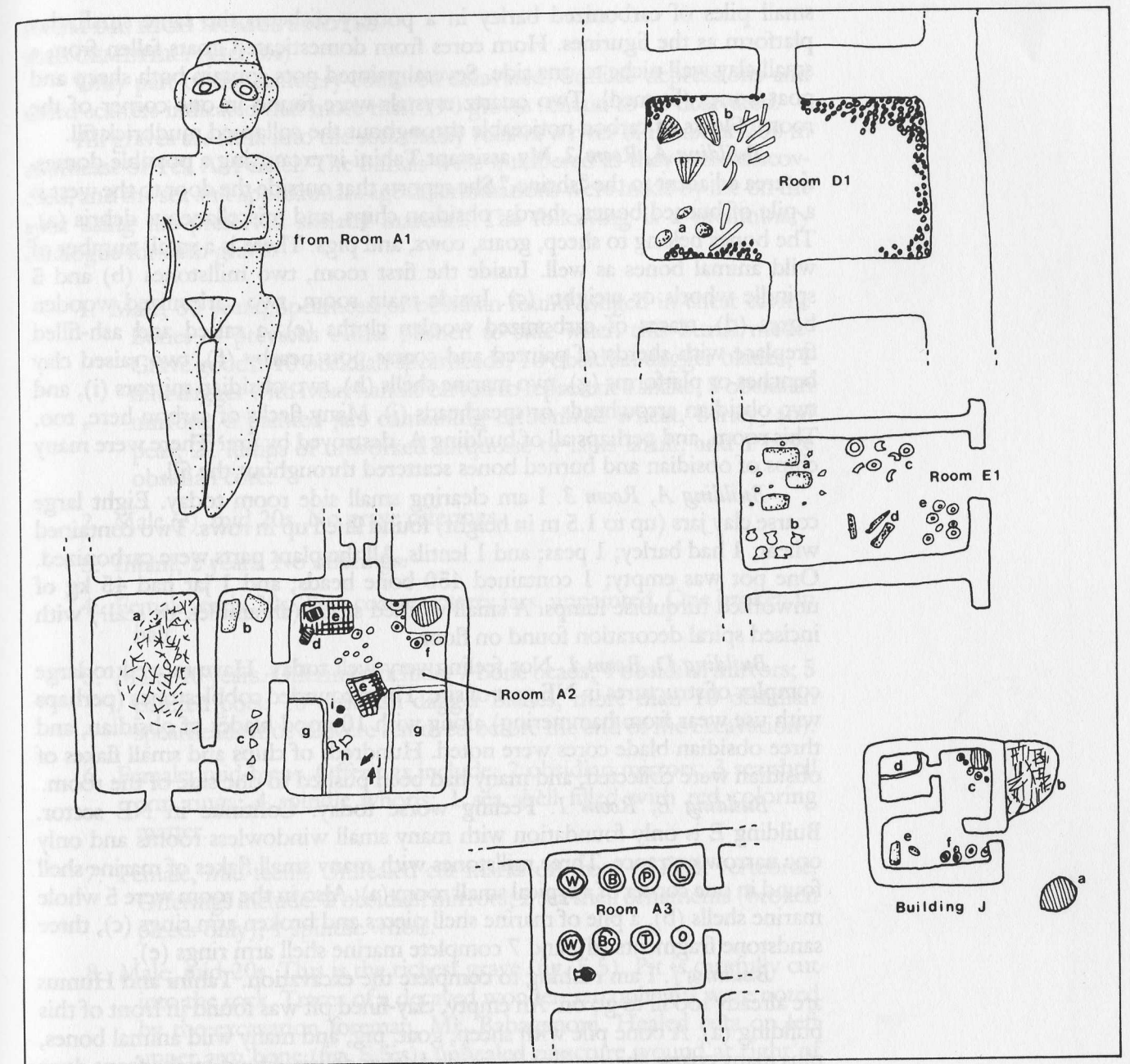
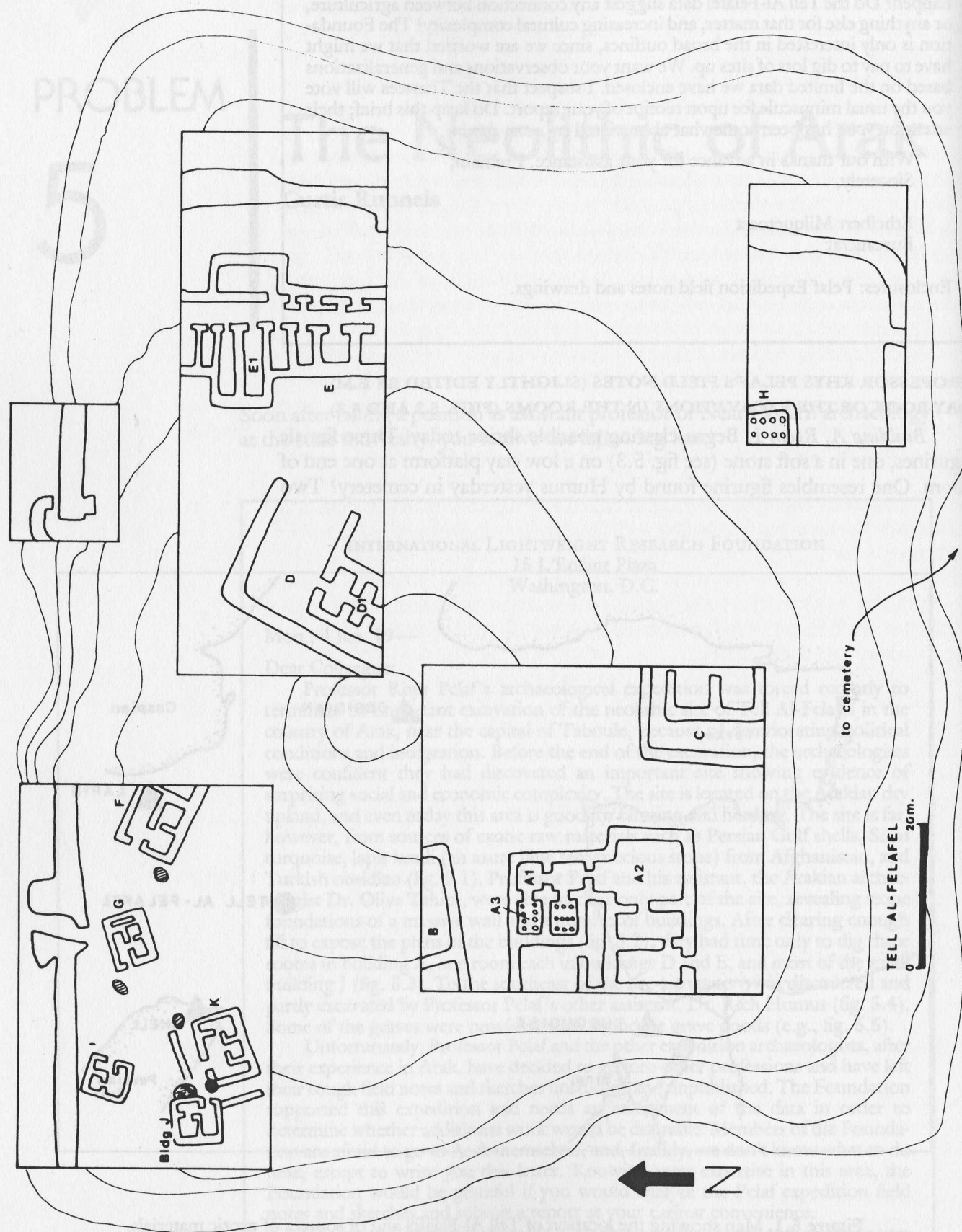


Figure 5.3. Page from Professor Pelaf's notebook.



small piles of carbonized barley in a pottery dish on the same small clay platform as the figurines. Horn cores from domesticated goats fallen from a small clay wall niche to one side. Several painted pots contain both sheep and goat bones (burned). Two quartz crystals were found in one corner of the room. Flecks of carbon noticeable throughout the collapsed mudbrick fill.

*Building A, Room 2.* My assistant Tahini is excavating a possible domestic area adjacent to the "shrine." She reports that outside the door to the west is a pile of burned bones, sherds, obsidian chips, and miscellaneous debris (a). The bones belong to sheep, goats, cows, and pigs. There is a small number of wild animal bones as well. Inside the first room, two millstones (b) and 5 spindle whorls or weights (c). Inside main room, two carbonized wooden boxes (d), traces of carbonized woolen cloths (e), a raised and ash-filled fireplace with sherds of painted and coarse pots nearby (f), two raised clay benches or platforms (g), two marine shells (h), two obsidian mirrors (i), and two obsidian arrowheads or spearheads (j). Many flecks of carbon here, too. This room, and perhaps all of building A, destroyed by fire? There were many chips of obsidian and burned bones scattered throughout the fill.

*Building A, Room 3.* I am clearing small side room today. Eight large coarse clay jars (up to 1.5 m in height) found lined up in rows. Two contained wheat; 1 had barley; 1 peas; and 1 lentils. All the plant parts were carbonized. One pot was empty; 1 contained 450 bone beads; and 1 jar had 45 kg of unworked turquoise lumps. A small worked stone (an amulet, or seal?) with incised spiral decoration found on floor.

*Building D, Room 1.* Not feeling very well today. Have moved to large complex of structures in NE part of site. Three rounded cobblestones (perhaps with use wear from hammering) along with 10 good blades of obsidian, and three obsidian blade cores were noted. Hundreds of chips and small flakes of obsidian were collected, and many had been pushed to one side of the room.

*Building E, Room 1.* Feeling worse today. Continue in NE sector. Building E is only foundation with many small windowless rooms and only one narrow entrance. Three millstones with many small flakes of marine shell found in one corner of a typical small room (a). Also in the room were 5 whole marine shells (b), a pile of marine shell pieces and broken arm rings (c), three sandstone fragments (d), and 7 complete marine shell arm rings (e).

*Building J.* I am rushing to complete the excavation. Tahini and Humus are already too ill to go on. An empty, clay-lined pit was found in front of this building (a). A bone pile with sheep, goat, pig, and many wild animal bones, plus many coarse sherds, flint flakes, and other debris, found by the front door (b). Inside this poorly-constructed building were three rooms: one had 5 coarse pottery jars (f) and 2 millstones (e). Another room has an ash-filled pit in the floor (c) and 6 coarse pottery jars. The last room contained only a poorly built low clay platform (d).

(At this point the notes break off with the words "I don't feel very well-constructed myself . . ."—E.M.)

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# FROM DR. RICH HUMUS'S NOTES:

## THE CEMETERY (FIG. 5.4)

Only part of the cemetery could be excavated. Surface depressions and sherd scatters indicated that more than 190 graves remain to be excavated.

All graves are sunk into the soft chalky rock of a river bluff about 200 m southeast of Tell Al-Felafel. The burials were numbered as they were discovered, and the sex and approximate age determinations were made by me on the spot using the preserved skeletal material. The following is a preliminary catalogue for each grave.

1. Male, 30 years, Spearhead of obsidian found lodged in chest cavity. Bones of previous burial pushed to side when this burial made. Grave goods: 10 obsidian spearheads; 10 obsidian dagger blades; 1 flint dagger with ivory handle carved to represent a snake; 5 obsidian mirrors; 6 painted jars containing carbonized wheat, barley, and peas; 21 lumps of unworked turquoise or lapis lazuli; and 1 large obsidian core.
2. Male (?), mid 20s. No grave offerings.
3. Infant, 2 years. No offerings.
4. Female, early 20s. Two coarse pottery jars, unpainted. One broken in half.
5. Male, 40 years. Offerings include: 7 bone beads; 4 obsidian mirrors; 5 painted pots; 15 obsidian dagger blades; more than 10 obsidian spearheads (not all were removed before the end of the excavation).
6. Female, mid-teens. Offerings include: 2 obsidian mirrors; 3 sea shell arm rings; 4 spindle whorls; 1 sea shell filled with red coloring matter.
7. Female, mid-teens. Unhealed cut marks on front of neck vertebrae. Offerings include: 2 obsidian mirrors; 2 sea shell ornaments (broken pieces only); 1 spindle whorl.
8. Male, mid-20s. This is the richest grave (fig. 5.5). Pit is carefully cut into the rock. Traces of a decayed wooden sarcophagus were noted by the excavation foreman, Mr. Babaganouj. Healed cuts on left upper arm bone (fig. 5.5:s); unhealed puncture wound at right of breast bone (t). Offerings include: headdress of lapis lazuli beads (a); 2 obsidian mirrors (b); necklace of bone beads (c); 2 fine painted jars (d); a pile of human bones from at least two previous burials (e); two shell arm rings (f, i); many little squares of cut and perforated lapis (g); 8 obsidian spearheads (h); a dagger with ivory handle in the form of an animal and with a fine flint blade (j); a soft stone female figurine (k); a lapis lazuli ring (l); 5 obsidian dagger blades (m); 19 bone beads (n); 9 obsidian blades (o); 3 large painted pottery jars (p); 10 lumps of unworked turquoise (q); and 3 marine shells (r).
9. Male (?) child, about 5 years. Grave offerings include: 1 stone female figurine; 1 obsidian dagger with bone handle; 2 obsidian spearheads; 2 lapis lazuli beads.



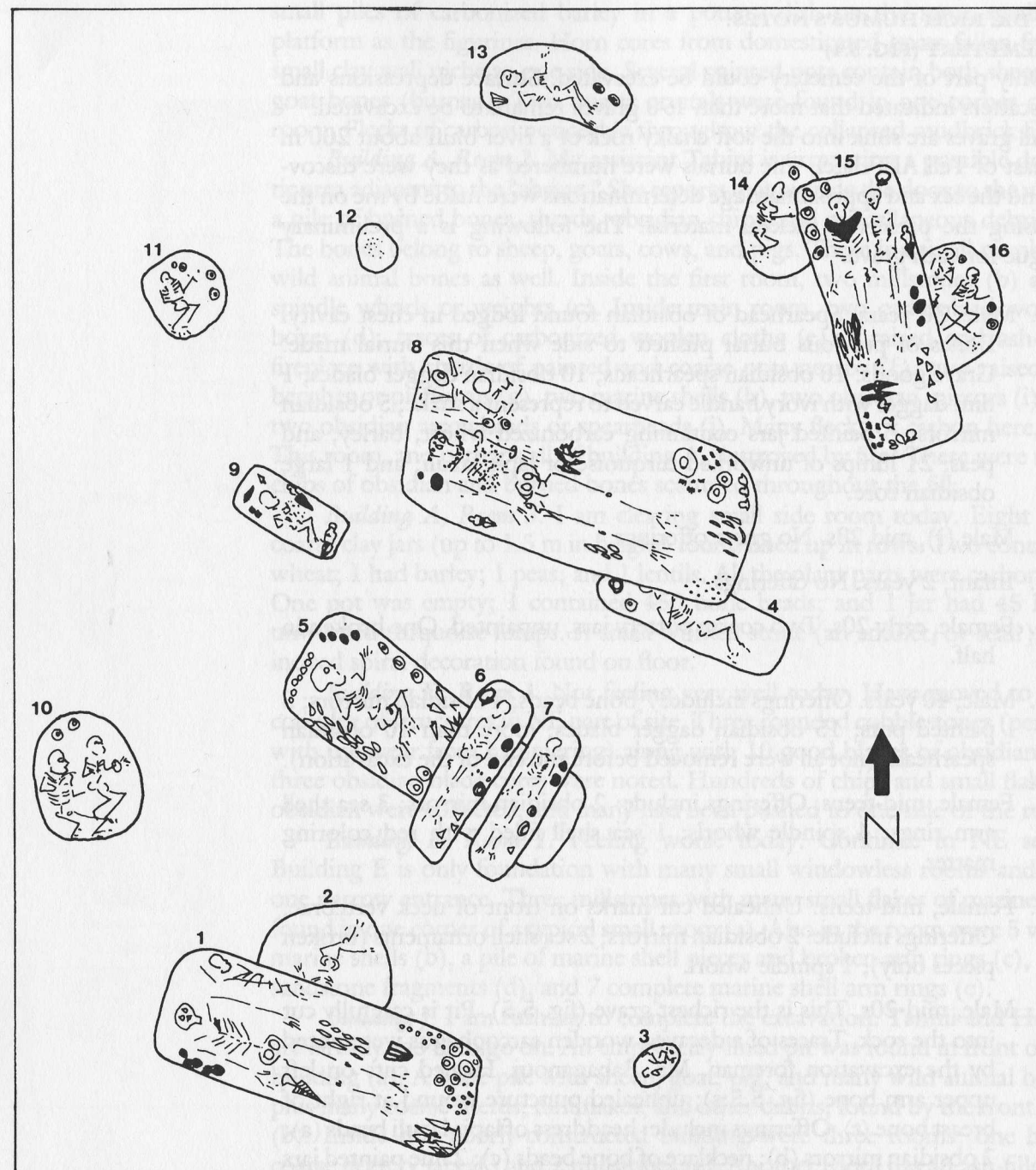
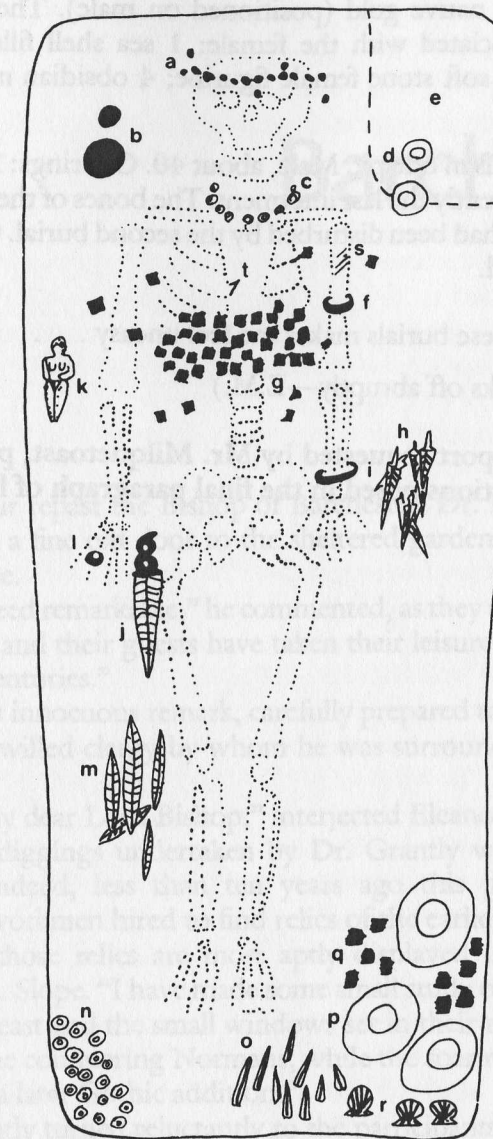


Figure 5.4. Dr. Humus's plan of the cemetery.

- 10. Double burial. Male, 25–30 years. Female, mid-20s. Offerings: 2 coarse jars positioned near the female, and one bone arm ring worn by the male.
- 11. Female, 24–27 years. Four coarse jars.
- 12. Scattered bones of an infant in a shallow pit.



GRAVE 8

Figure 5.5. Humus's plan of grave B.

- 13. Male, mid-40s. Offerings: 2 rounded pebbles (hammerstones?) and one obsidian blade core. Bones of left hand show healed fractures of some phalanges. Evidence of arthritis on post-cranial skeleton.
- 14. Male (?), early 30s. One coarse pot.
- 15. Double burial. Male, late 40s. Female, about 40? Offerings include: 4 painted jars; 23 obsidian daggers; 7 lumps of lapis lazuli; 5 large sea shells; 2 flint daggers with ivory handles; 1 large chest ornament

of beaten native gold (positioned on male). The following items were associated with the female: 1 sea shell filled with coloring matter; 1 soft stone female figurine; 4 obsidian mirrors; 7 spindle whorls.

16. Two burials in one pit. Male, about 40. Offerings: 2 coarse jars. This was apparently the last interment. The bones of the first, a man in his mid-30s, had been disturbed by the second burial. Offerings: 1 large bone bead.

Something about these burials makes me feel uneasy . . .

(The catalogue breaks off abruptly—E.M.)

**Submit the report requested by Mr. Milquetoast, paying special attention to the questions posed in the final paragraph of his letter.**

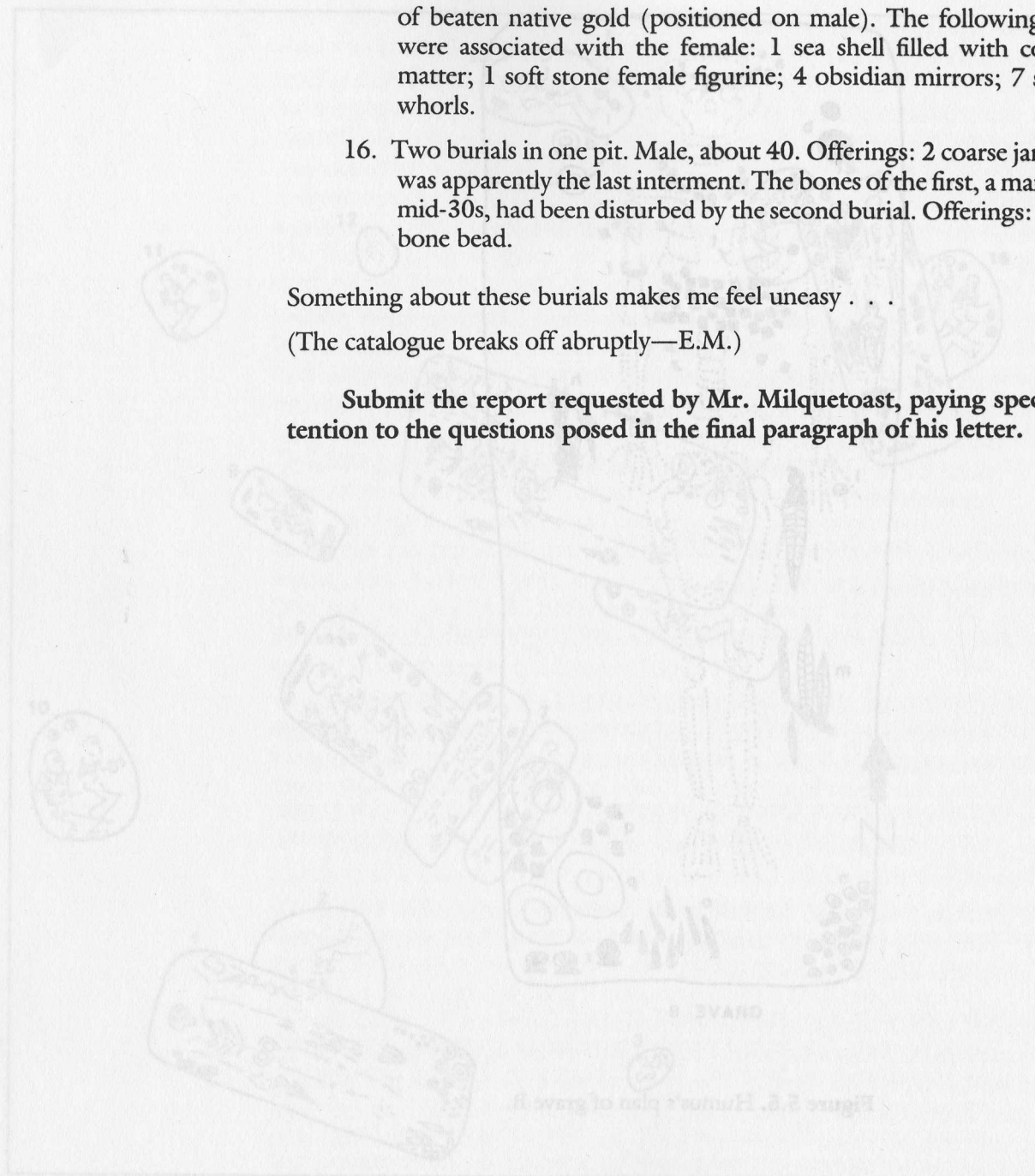


Figure 5.5. Hunter's plan of Grave B.

15. Male, mid-40s. Offerings: 2 rounded pebbles (hammerstones) and one obsidian blade core. Bones of left hand show healed fractures of 2 adjacent phalanges; evidence of violent impact on distal radius. 2 arrow tips and one bone (deer) are also associated with burials.

14. Male (?) age 30s. One coarse jar.

13. Double burial. Male, late 40s. Female, about 40. Offerings include: 4 painted jars; 3 obsidian daggers; 7 lamps of large izumi; 5 large sea shells; 2 flint daggers; 11 spindle whorls; 1 large bone bead.