

## Research Report for National Geographic Society Grant #6530-99

By  
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### Excavations at Boztepe

The site of Boztepe is located some eight kilometers east of the modern town of Bismil in Diyarbakir Province, southeastern Turkey [figure 1]. In spite of its modern location only about five hundred meters south of the modern Diyarbakir to Batman highway, in antiquity its position was quite precarious. Boztepe is in an unprotected plain close to, but separated from the, then formidable, Tigris river by an ancient limestone outcropping. Although Boztepe is relatively close to the Assyrian provincial capital in the region it is disconnected from that and the other Assyrian strongholds in the area by virtue of it being on the opposite side of the river. Boztepe's advantage lay in its command over the productive farmlands of the relatively limited low-lying plains surrounding the Tigris river course in southeastern Anatolia. Another advantage of the site was that, since prehistoric times, the low natural mound upon which the site was founded was directly bordering a spring or small pond whose geologic origin is certainly the same as the many sink holes still active in the region today.

Boztepe is a small, relatively low mound. In spite of the fact that in some areas cultural debris measure as much as three meters in depth, its facade against the rolling terrain and neighboring hills make it almost indistinguishable from the surrounding landscape [figure 2]. A preliminary evaluation of the cultural history of the site based on an analysis of the reconnaissance survey data from the Tigris-Euphrates Archaeological Reconnaissance Project's initial survey of the region pointed to several preliminary conclusions that made research at this site not only appealing and urgent, but also risky.<sup>1</sup> To begin with, the reconnaissance survey data suggested that this was a single period Iron Age site that was directly influenced by, if not the result of, the Assyrian conquest of the region which began, according to the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal, in 882 B.C.<sup>2</sup> Urgency was added to the archaeological equation, not only by the construction of the Ilusu dam whose completion is still perhaps seven years away, but also by the fact that since the original survey of the region Boztepe has sustained considerable damage. The nature of the damage to Boztepe is the factor that adds some element of risk to archaeological research there: in recent years a village was constructed at the site, but what is worse, since the initial survey of the site the modern village at Boztepe has been burned, raised and in some places possibly even bulldozed thus disturbing many of the archaeological remains at the site. These factors combined with the impending likelihood that Boztepe and many other archaeological sites in the Upper Tigris River region will soon be under cotton, as

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<sup>1</sup> Preliminary reports from the Tigris-Euphrates Archaeological Reconnaissance Project's surveys of the region are published in Algaze 1989 and Algaze et al. 1991. Also see Algaze and Parker 2000 (forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> For a narration of the history of this period see Grayson 1982. For Ashurnasirpal's inscriptions see Grayson 1991.

many of the fields in the region already are, put this site at the forefront of my project's agenda.

Archaeological investigation at Boztepe began in earnest in early July 1999 at which time we opened four five by five meter trenches in two separate areas of the site [figure 3]. Work also began on an intensive survey of the site and the surrounding area, which included making a topographic map [figure 4]. By the end of the season, the number had expanded to eleven trenches and two soundings.

Based on the data recovered in these operations the following historical outline can be reconstructed:

The cultural history of Boztepe began in the middle or late Halaf Period (ca. 4500 B.C.). Although our exposure of levels dating to this period is relatively small due to their depth below several meters of cultural debris, enough prehistoric remains were recovered to make some general conclusions. Sometime during the mid-fifth millennium B.C., a small community of people belonging to the so-called "Halafian" cultural sphere settled at Boztepe.<sup>3</sup> The remains of a living surface dating to this period founded on virgin soil, and containing pig bones and a wide variety of Halaf painted and rough ware ceramics [figure 5] were discovered at the bottom of a deep sounding in area B.

Near the center of the mound in area A trench 1 at depth of about 2.25 meters below the surface, we also reached remains dating to the Halaf Period. However, in this case, we did not find living areas but instead a cemetery. The significance of the burial goods [figure 6] contained in the first two graves in addition to the discovery of another burial protruding from the wall of the trench was persuasive enough to warrant expansion of the original exposure to this level. The final result was an 10.5 square meter exposure of the Halaf cemetery which contained a total of four burials [figure 7] and a large number of grave goods including several beautifully decorated pots [figure 8] and a stamp seal [figure 9].<sup>4</sup>

Due to the fragile nature of human remains of this age, every effort was made to record these discoveries as they lay *in situ*. The bones were then removed and await analysis in our lab/depot at Dicle University in Diyarbakir.

After this brief florescence during the mid to late Halaf Period, the site of Boztepe was abandoned until the Iron Age (ca. 1000-500 B.C.). Contrary to my original assumptions about the site based on the reconnaissance survey data, I no longer believe that Boztepe was part of the settlement system belonging to the indigenous culture of the Upper Tigris River region during the Iron Age. To begin with, Boztepe's location in the low plains close to the Tigris river does not fit with the profile of the indigenous settlement system which centers instead on the more easily defensible terraces surrounding the Tigris valley. Second, and more importantly, excavations at Boztepe revealed that the ceramic

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<sup>3</sup> For a recent discussion of the Halafians see Watson 1983.

<sup>4</sup> The grave goods included several whole pots and a stamp seal.

assemblage there contains few, if any, sherds belonging to the indigenous assemblage.<sup>5</sup> Instead, the Iron Age ceramic corpus from Boztepe shows great influence from Assyria. Furthermore, the fact that the ceramics from Boztepe contain no examples dating to the Early Iron Age, confirms that this site was established after the Upper Tigris River region was annexed to the Assyrian empire.

It is well known that Assyrian foreign policy included the mass deportation and resettlement of huge numbers of people to and from all corners of the empire.<sup>6</sup> In this context it is worth noting that the recent reinterpretation of a text from the reign of Tiglath-pileser III suggests that after the annexation of the Upper Tigris River region to the Assyrian empire and its incorporation into the Assyrian province of Tushan with its capital at Ziyaret Tepe<sup>7</sup> (some seven kilometers from Boztepe), huge numbers of people were deported from cities on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean and settled in the Upper Tigris River region.<sup>8</sup> In light of this text, it is almost too convenient to see such artifacts as in Figures 10 and 11 as linking the inhabitants of Boztepe to those far away Levantine cities.

The Iron Age levels at Boztepe yielded an Iron Age house [figure 12] composed of mud brick walls with associated surfaces and storage pits. This structure witnessed two main building phases, during which the load bearing walls of the house changed orientation slightly, and several sub-phases documented by various partition walls and floor levels. The later more substantial Iron Age house was eventually destroyed in a catastrophic fire that brought debris, probably from an upper story, crashing onto living surfaces and a kitchen on the ground floor. Whether or not the thick layer of ash documenting this disaster is indicative of a larger destruction of the site that took place as a result of hostile intrusion,<sup>9</sup> or even the demise of the empire itself, or whether it is a localized destruction, is unclear at the moment.<sup>10</sup> What is certain is that after this collapse the ceramic assemblage is characterized by the so-called "Post-Assyrian" assemblage.<sup>11</sup> The discovery of a group of Post-Assyrian ceramics sealed beneath a cobbled surface in trench B1, and the parallels from this group found scattered in the highest levels in area A is significant since the very existence of this assemblage, not to mention its stratigraphic position after the standard Iron Age assemblage has, until now, only been theoretical.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the indigenous ceramics and settlement system see Parker 1997; 1998 and 2000 (forthcoming).

<sup>6</sup> See especially Oded 1979.

<sup>7</sup> For the location of Tushan see Parker 1998.

<sup>8</sup> This text is contained in Tadmor 1994. For interpretation see Parker 2000 (forthcoming).

<sup>9</sup> In this context note the many letters in the Neo-Assyrian correspondence that record impending threats to this part of the frontier such as ABL 506 11-22 which reads "...three [Urartian governors] are gathered with their pack animals opposite us...all the people are inside the fortified places; the oxen and the sheep are on this side of the river. We are standing by and keeping watch for [an impending attack]."

<sup>10</sup> More precise dating of the Iron Age destruction layer awaits the analysis of several C-14 samples recovered in that layer at Boztepe.

<sup>11</sup> Wilkinson and Tucker 1995; Curtis 1989.

<sup>12</sup> Note that Wilkinson and Tucker put a question mark in the title of their subsection about this ceramic assemblage (Wilkinson and Tucker 1995: 117).

Finally, an analysis of the ceramics recovered at Boztepe conducted in late August 1999, showed that a considerable percentage of the ceramics from the upper levels at Boztepe, especially those from trenches B1 through B4 belong to the Hellenistic Period. In spite of this no architectural remains dating to this period were discovered. In fact, area B trenches encountered extremely deep levels of fill containing mixed deposits of Hellenistic, Iron Age, and in some cases modern cultural remains. This is where an examination of Boztepe's recent past comes into play. As mentioned above, the ceramic sequence from Boztepe suggest that during the Hellenistic period, the site contained a small Hellenistic settlement, possibly a farmstead. However, the archaeological record indicates that this settlement, which probably stood at the center of what was then a slightly taller mound, was leveled during the construction of the modern village. This process destroyed the Hellenistic structures at the top of the mound, pushing the Hellenistic remains towards the margins of the site, making the site appear larger than it actually was, and at the same time mixing the Hellenistic and Iron Age remains.

### **The Talavash Survey**

Talavash Tepe is located about 15 kilometers east of the modern town of Bismil only a few kilometers northeast of Boztepe [figure 1]. In spite of the fact that Talavash Tepe is, like Boztepe, an Iron Age site, the archaeological profile of Talavash Tepe is quite different from that of Boztepe. First, Talavash Tepe is quite a bit higher than Boztepe. It is located above the 550 meter contour line on a natural hill overlooking a seasonal stream, a part-time tributary of the Tigris called the Moradan çay [figure 13]. This location offers Talavash Tepe natural protection from at least two sides. Furthermore, the intensive survey conducted as part of this project have shown that Talavash Tepe exhibits a much different material culture than Boztepe. To begin with, Talavash Tepe has a different chronological range. Contrary to the data recovered in the reconnaissance surveys, this summer's intensive survey showed that occupation at Talavash Tepe began in the Late Bronze Age and continued through the Early Iron Age and into the Assyrian Imperial Period when occupation at Talavash Tepe came to an abrupt end. During the Hellenistic Period and possibly again in the Islamic Period, the ruined mound of Talavash served as a cemetery.

Regarding the Iron Age occupation at Talavash Tepe, it is extremely important to note that the ceramics dating to that period recovered at Talavash Tepe are very different from those unearthed at Boztepe from the same period. None of the Assyrian imperial ceramics were recovered at Talavash Tepe. Instead, the assemblage is restricted to the indigenous Iron Age ceramics of this region.<sup>13</sup> The survey and topographic map made at Talavash Tepe also gave valuable information about the size of the site during the various periods it was occupied and the parts of the site in which the majority of the remains from these periods are focused. This data confirms that Talavash Tepe remained relatively small throughout the periods it was occupied. Although occupation at Talavash shifted across

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<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of the indigenous ceramics of the Upper Tigris River region see Parker 1998 and Parker 2000 (forthcoming).

the mound during the course of the centuries, the site was never more than a few hectares in maximum extent.

This combined data including: the location of the site far from the river's flood plain on a high naturally defensible position; the chronology of occupation at the site which shows not only that Talavash Tepe was occupied long before the Neo-Assyrian empire annexed the region, but also that occupation there stopped some time during the Neo-Assyrian Imperial Period; and the fact that the Iron Age ceramics recovered at Talavash Tepe belong to the indigenous culture of the Upper Tigris River region, strongly suggests that this site was neither a colony nor a garrison of the empire, but instead belonged to the indigenous culture of the region.

## Conclusions

The combined evidence from this summer's research at Boztepe and Talavash Tepe point to some general conclusions regarding the nature of settlement in the Upper Tigris River region during the Mesopotamian Iron Age. In the last centuries of the second millennium B.C., and in the beginning of the first millennium B.C., the Upper Tigris River region of southeastern Anatolia was home to a flourishing indigenous culture that exhibited a unique material culture and distinctive settlement system. In spite of the fact that this material culture is shared among the indigenous settlements of this and the neighboring river valleys,<sup>14</sup> the fact that the indigenous settlement system prior to Neo-Assyrian intervention contained little or no settlement hierarchy suggests that the political integration of this culture was relatively low. In other words, this area was home to several ideologically linked yet politically autonomous chiefdoms.<sup>15</sup>

After 882 B.C. these sub-state political formations came into direct contact with, not just a state level society, but a full-fledged territorial empire. Once the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal had constructed a fortified garrison center and provincial capital at Tushan (Ziyaret Tepe), the Assyrians began the process of integrating the surrounding valley into their imperial structure. The exponential population growth taking place in the Assyrian heartland at this time meant that the Upper Tigris River Valley, which was directly linked to the Assyrian heartland by the Tigris river, was a prime location for Assyrian agricultural development. This process, what I call "agricultural colonization", saw huge numbers of foreign peoples deported from their homelands and resettled in various parts of the empire including the Upper Tigris River Valley (now called the province of Tushan) for the purpose of agricultural production.

The evidence recovered at Boztepe during the 1999 season strongly suggests that Boztepe was, in fact, a village established by the Assyrians as part of the process of agricultural colonization. This theory along with the artifacts recovered at Boztepe also indicates that the inhabitants of Boztepe were neither ethnic Assyrians nor local indigenous peoples, but were rather deportees brought into the region from the Phoenician coast.

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<sup>14</sup> Parker 1998 and Parker 2000 (forthcoming).

<sup>15</sup> Earle 1987; Wright 1984. For a parallel example see Berman 1994.

This evidence has several implications for the study of imperialism and colonialism in the ancient world. First, contrary to the standard picture of colonialism as interaction between two groups, the colonized and the colonizer, colonialism in the Upper Tigris River region during the Neo-Assyrian period included three groups: the colonized (indigenous peoples at sites like Talavash Tepe), the colonizers (the Assyrians administrating the region from sites like Ziyaret Tepe [Tushan]), and the colonists (foreign populations resettled in the region at sites like Boztepe). Furthermore, Boztepe is, in fact, evidence that the Assyrians were colonizing some areas for the express purpose of increasing agricultural production in out-lying provinces as part of a conscious policy to increase supply to the large cities of central Assyria. Given this evidence, the UTARP project may be close to answering one of the most pressing questions in Assyrian history and archaeology, namely, how the imperial authorities supported the burgeoning population centers in the Assyrian heartland in spite of the fact that demand for staple products in the dense population centers of central Assyria far exceeded the carrying capacity of the surrounding land.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> This question was first posed by Oates in 1968 has yet to have a satisfactory answer.

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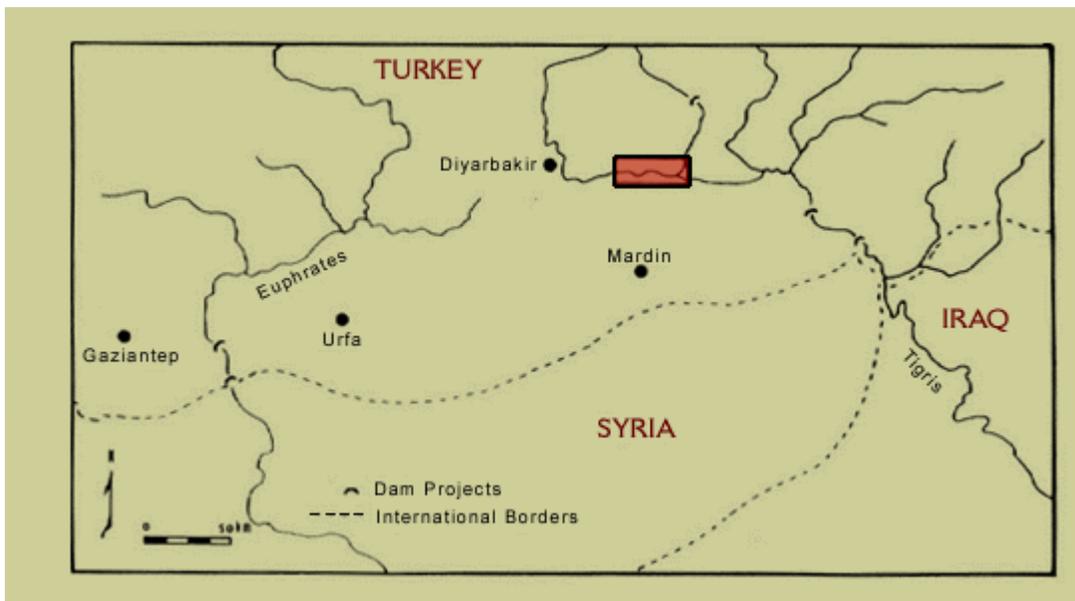
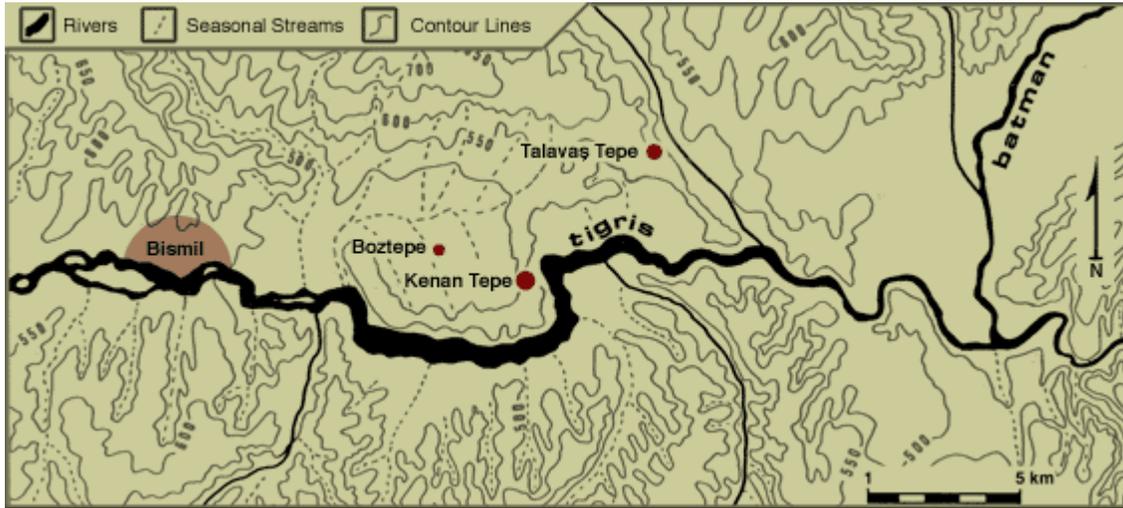
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**Figures:**



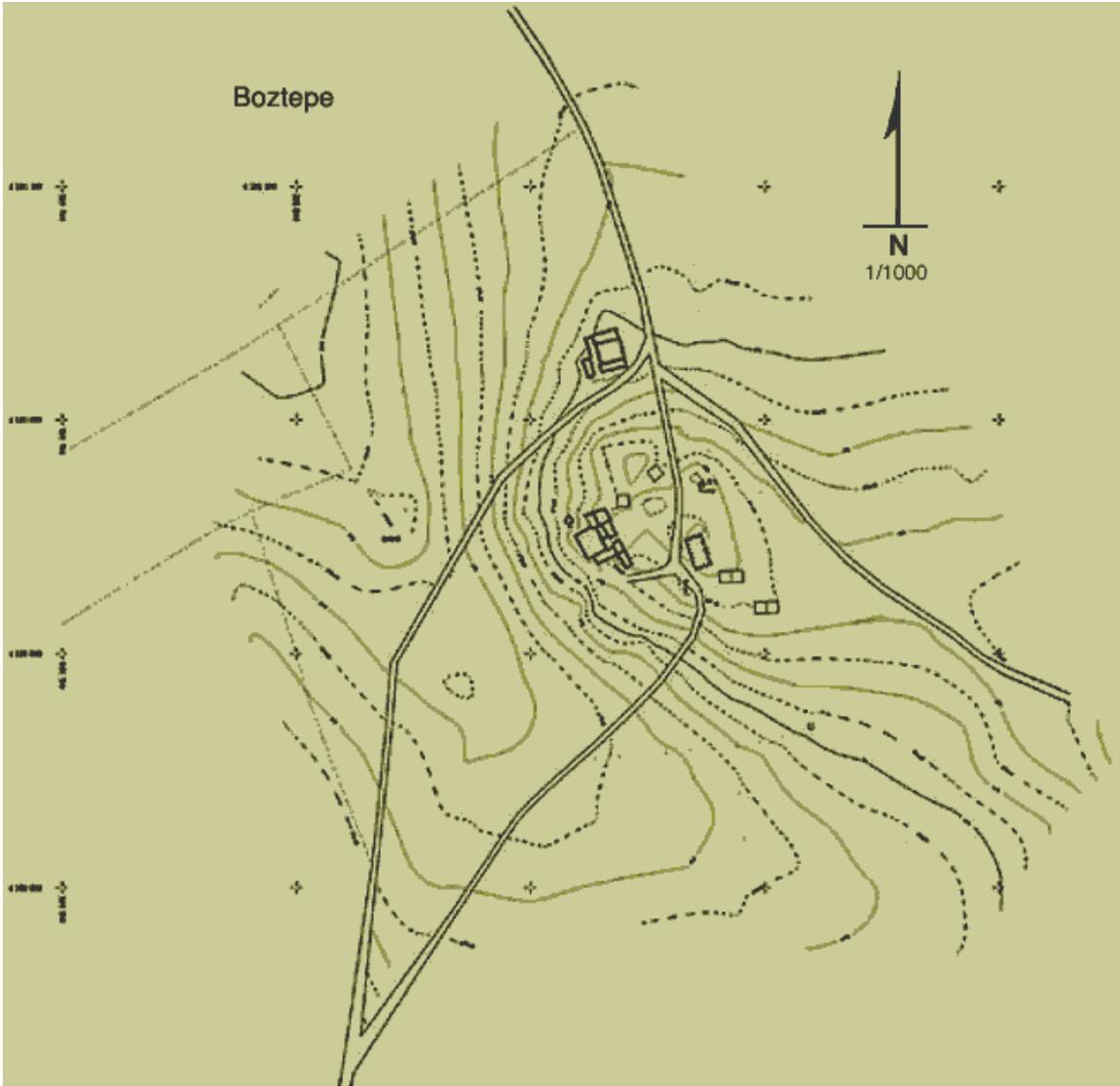
**Figure 1:** Maps of Bismil, located in the Diyarbakir province of southeast Turkey



**Figure 2:** *Surrounding landscape of Boztepe*



**Figure 3:** *Trenches at Boztepe*



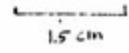
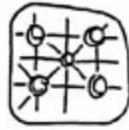
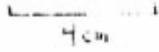
**Figure 4:** *Topographic map of Boztepe*



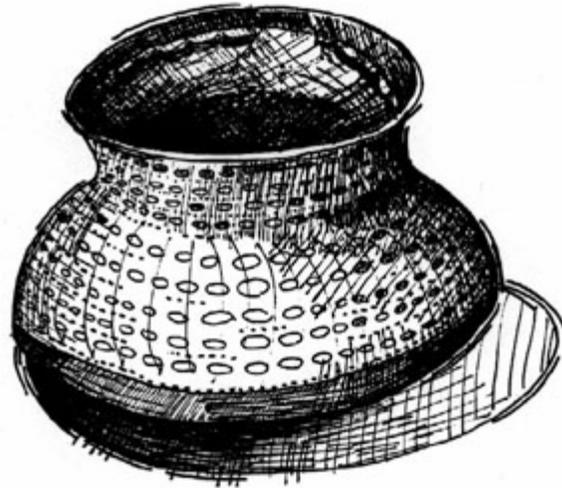
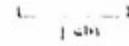
**Figure 5:** *Halaf sherds from area A trench 1*



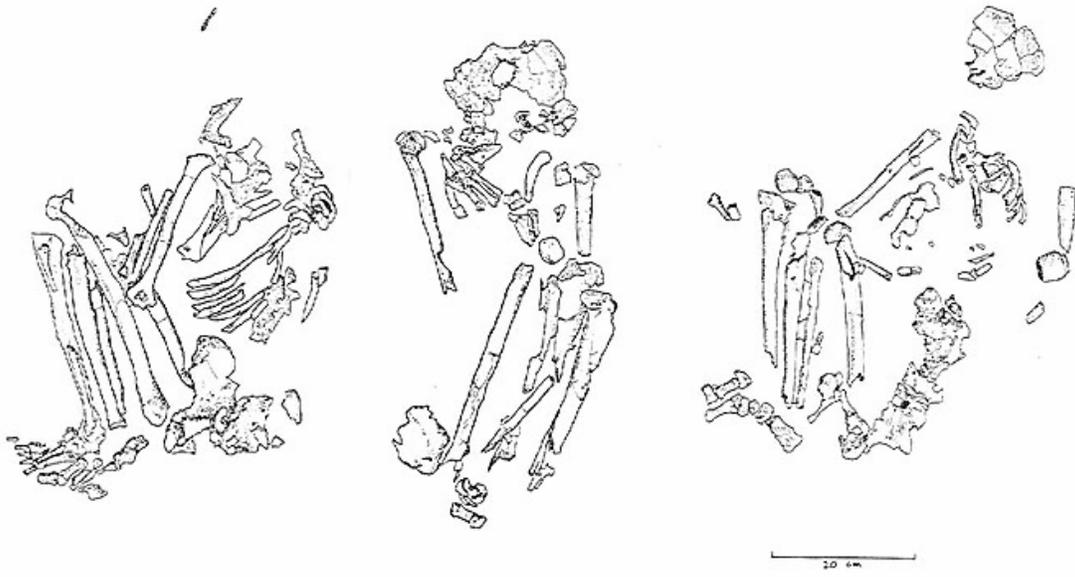
A1, L1003, Bz 1073



Stamp Seal  
A1, L1009, Bz 1054



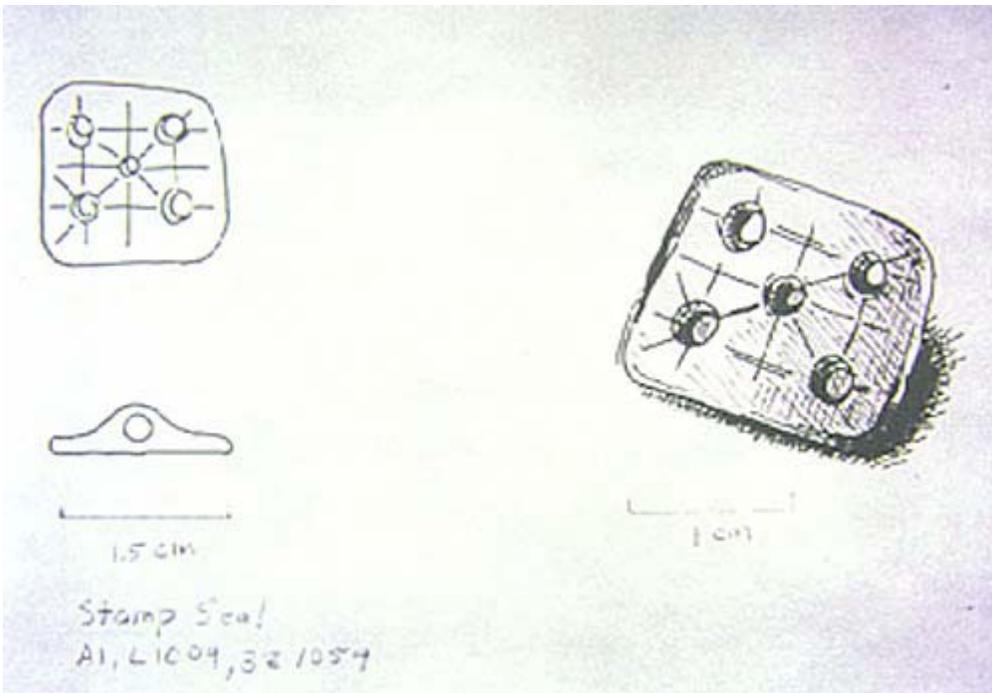
**Figure 6:** Grave goods from Area A, trench 1



**Figure 7:** *Burials from the Halaf cemetery*



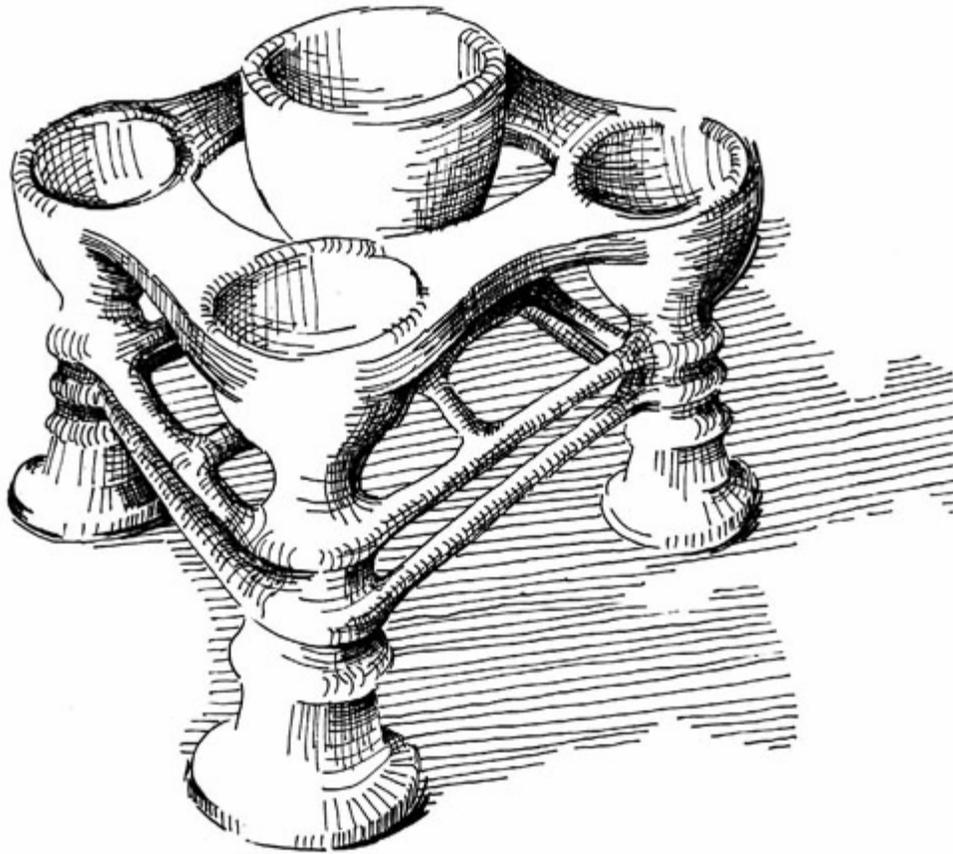
**Figure 8:** Halaf pot from burial 1 in trench A1



**Figure 9:** Stamp seal from burial in Trench A1



**Figure 10:** *Vessels from Boztepe*

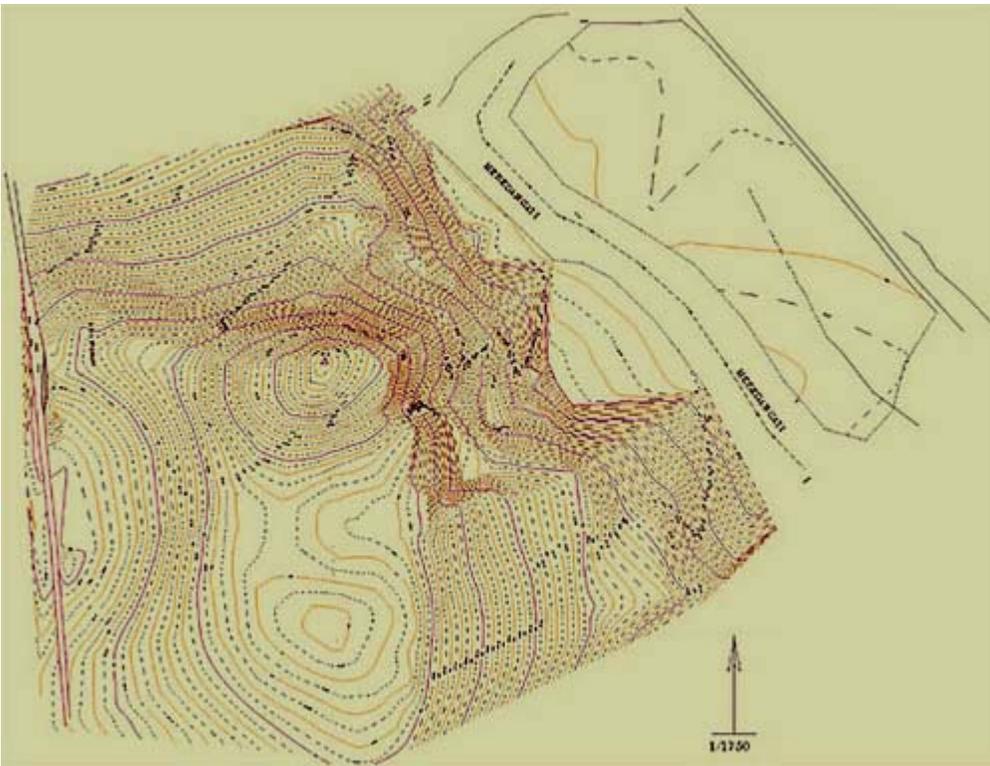


**Figure 11:** *Reconstruction of enigmatic vessel discovered in the destruction layer in trench A2.*





**Figure 12 (two photos):** *Iron Age house with clear mud brick walls from Boztepe*



**Figure 13:** *Topographic map of Talavash Tepe*