

# VII MILLENNIUM POTTERY SEQUENCE AT TELL HALULA: NEW LIGHTS FOCUSED ON STRATIGRAPHICAL AND CHRONOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF SECTOR 30.

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*Este artículo presenta el análisis pormenorizado del material cerámico del sector 30 de Tell Halula (Valle del Éufrates, Siria), datado de a primera mitad de VII milenio aC. Con el objetivo de caracterizar las primeras producciones cerámicas en relación a la arquitectura y así contribuir a las precisiones estratigráficas y cronológicas de la amplia superficie excavada.*

Tell Halula, Cerámica, Arquitectura, Neolítico Final, Siria.

*This paper presents the detailed analysis of the ceramic material of sector 30 of Tell Halula (Euphrates valley, Syria), dated from the first half of VII millennium BC. With the aim of characterizing first pottery productions in relation to the architecture and thus contribute to the stratigraphic and chronological precisions of the recovered surface.*

Tell Halula, Pottery, architecture, Late Neolithic, Syria.

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## INTRODUCTION

The VIIIth millennia, known with the generic name of the Late Neolithic Period and also known as the Pre-Halaf period is one of the more interesting and less traditionally studied chronological phases. The archaeological activity in the last 20 years has expanded significantly the amount of available data coming from archaeological sites with high precision and documental richness. One of these sites is Tell Halula, which was continuously excavated over many years. This allowed a complete documentation of this temporal phase by recording new data.

The excavation at sector 30 between 1992 and 1997 answered the necessity of incrementing the knowledge from the Late Neolithic occupation phases at Tell Halula, which documents the appearance and consolidation of

the first's ceramic productions. The sector's place in the tell was very interesting from a strategic point of view given that it was at the central and flat area of the site and near the sectors where archaeological layers from the same horizon had also been located, both in the southern slope (Sectors 2/4), the oriental slope (Sector 7), and the occidental slope (Sector 1). Therefore, an extensive excavation documented the habitats and the structures, and the material culture from the period was characterised (Fig. 1).

The advance of the excavation, the stratigraphic analyses, the absolute dates and the archaeological materials (mainly pottery), allowed to gain knowledge and study the general characteristics of a habitat area in the 6600-6300 cal BC (approximately) (Molist ed. 1996; Molist 1998; Molist coord. 2013). The preliminary study from the pottery in this chronological horizon (Faura 2013,

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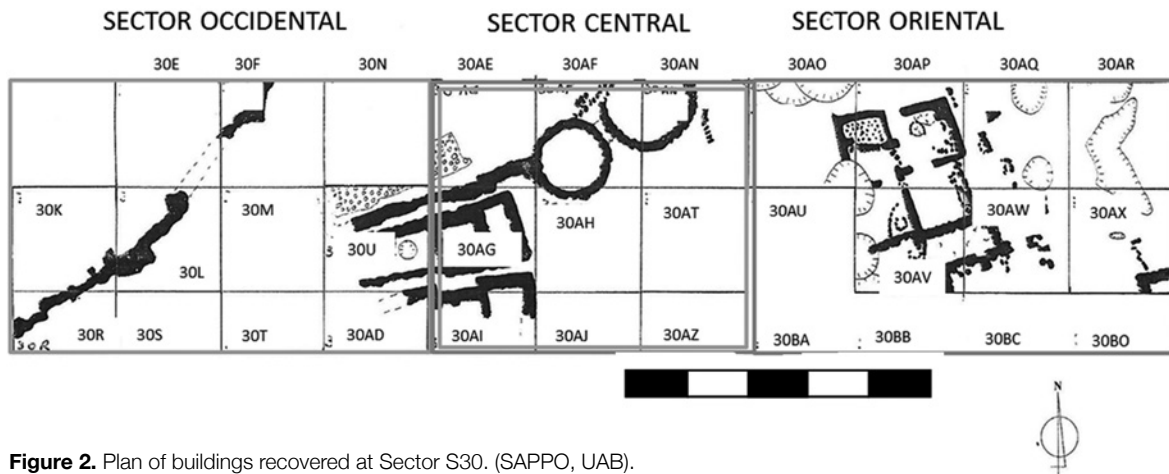


**Figure 1.** Sectors location at Tell Halula (Euphrates valley, Syria) (SAPPO, UAB).

2016, Faura/Molist 2017) was specifically important because it used a morphotypological approach, which, in association with the stratigraphic characteristics of

this sector, provided a set of guidelines for a sub-sector division based on its chrono-cultural<sup>1</sup> attribution. This is the idea which will be developed in this brief paper:

1. Results from higher layers corresponding with the Halaf period are not presented here. For general information regarding the layers from this period refers to: Gómez-Bach 2011, Cruells, 1996, 2013, Molist /Vicente 2013.



**Figure 2.** Plan of buildings recovered at Sector S30. (SAPPO, UAB).

a more complete analysis centred on the first ceramic products in the occupations belonging to the first half of the VII millennia both at the morphotopological and stratigraphic level which will yield a more precise approach to the first ceramic productions in the site and the definition of its chronological sequence.

### BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE STRUCTURES AND SECTOR 30 STRATIGRAPHY

It should be remembered that the overall excavated surface in sector 30 comprised a total of 524m<sup>2</sup> and the sedimentary depth was explored up to 1.3 m, below which the preceramic layers were located. The stratigraphic and ceramic analyses performed today have distinguished two contiguous spatial units with a variable surface and with specific stratigraphic characteristics: in the first place, the “Occidental area” covers squares E, F, N, K, L, M, U, R, S, T, AD AI, AJ, AZ, AG, AH, AT, AE, AF and AN, which add up to 455 m<sup>2</sup>; in the second place, the Oriental sector covers squares AO, AP, AQ, AR, AU, AV, AW, AX up to a surface of 260 m<sup>2</sup>. In the easternmost part of the “Occidental area” a wide space close to also 260m<sup>2</sup> has been named “Central area”. The best preserved habitat structures which will be analysed in this paper are located in this third sector (Central area: squares U, AE, AF, AN, AG, AH, AT, AI, AJ).

Regarding the stratigraphy, five successive occupation layers were detected in sector 30. The stratigraphic sequence is complex and diversely excavated and analysed. Partially published archaeological structures are of high importance: they consist of several square and round (tholos) buildings, as well as some constructions with a collective use maybe associated to those also located in sector 1, specifically structure 101, the wide terracing wall (Molist/Vicente 2013; Molist *et al.* 2014).(Fig. 2).

### WEST AREA

The west area of the excavation is where the five differentiated layers (S30-I to S30-V) can be detected with the highest degree of detail. S30-I names the most recent one and S30-V the oldest (Molist/Vicente 2013;

### S30-I AND S30-II

The first two layers, S30-I and S30-II, were assigned to the Middle and Final Halaf periods and presented the remains of a mudbrick wall, its associated occupation and destruction layers, and partial remains of a probable tholos with a partially preserved stone wall. The layers also present some excavated ditches with abundant archaeological materials (ceramics, lithic industry, etc.).

### S30-III AND S30-IV

The two following layers are the ones corresponding with the VII millennia horizon (Pre-Halaf). Therefore, below the previous layers, a third level called S30-III is characterized by the construction, use and abandonment of some structures from a domestic habitat. The set of excavated and studied buildings are in the eastern part of the sector, which is composed of circular constructions (*tholoi*) which are contiguous to two rectangular buildings with a multicellular plan (Fig. 2).

This structures, although only partially preserved, are composed by four rooms (a mean of 1x 2,40 meters) in each house, all of them with interior beaten earth floors. The preserved wall basement indicates that it was built in stone with construction earth and was plastered with clay in the internal side and limestone in the external side. The domestic structures (hearths) are outside, were a succession of occupation floors have been located. The detection of two burials located in two pits excavated below the floor in two small rooms (one in each house) should be noted. They are two child burials

where the corpse is located inside a big jar in one case and a ceramic vase covered by another one in the other case.

Layer S30-IV was excavated exclusively in the most occidental side of the sector, therefore leaving the aforementioned architecture “in situ”. Then, this lower layer is composed by a set of strata associated to a wide stone wall measuring at least 10,5m in length and 0,5m in height which presents a SW-NE orientation and has been interpreted as a more recent reconstruction of the terracing wall E101 from sector 1. Finally, in the last documented layer (with a PPNB chronology) the extension of the wall in sector 1 effectively continues into sector 30.

### EAST AREAS

In the eastern area, the stratigraphic sequence is less abundant given that, when the superficial layers are not considered, only one layer has been detected. This one is composed of a set of strata associated with the construction, use and abandonment of a habitat area which presents a big exterior space where an important number of excavated ditches were found associated to domestic multicellular buildings built with mudbrick over a stone basement. The building is an almost complete house which occupies a global surface of 45m<sup>2</sup>. It presents a multicellular plan with five ordered rooms and variable measures: from 6.5 to 2.3 m<sup>2</sup>. The construction presents a complex “life” comprising 4 subphases, which generate a certain degree of variation in the building’s structures and the amortization or redistribution of the spaces (blocked corridors, room construction, etc.). In the most recent phase, an extra room was added to the southern side. The room also presents a rectangular plan and stone walls limiting a surface of 4m<sup>2</sup>. In general, its floor was made from beaten earth defective in quality. Two combustion structures were also detected, one inside and the other outside.

The correlation between layers S30-III in the central sector and S30-IV was performed firstly using stratigraphic data and secondly through the preliminary analysis of the ceramic productions. The existence of two different layers, the oldest being the one in the east where remains of the S30-III layer were not detected, was verified using the pottery characteristics and it composes a significant part of the analysis that will be presented below.

POTTERY SECTOR 30		
Temper	Sherds	%
Plant temper	3.885	57
Mineral temper	2.887	43
Plant and mineral	2	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>6.774</b>	
POTTERY SECTOR 30 EAST		
Temper	Sherds	%
Plant temper	1.961	68
Mineral temper	885	32
Plant and mineral	2	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>2.848</b>	
POTTERY SECTOR 30 CENTRAL		
Temper	Sherds	%
Plant temper	2.060	51
Mineral temper	1.967	49
<b>Total</b>	<b>4.027</b>	

**Figure 3.** Number of pottery sherds belonging to the Pre-Halaf horizon. Total number of Pre-Halaf sherds from the central area of Sector 30. Number of Pre-Halaf ceramic sherds in the oriental area of Sector 30.

In fact, a recent extensive analysis has been performed on the ceramic characteristics in these two sectors (Faura 2016). The methodological priority has been the study of its morphological, typological and metric characteristics using the data registered in an intense fieldwork study performed before the year 2000<sup>2</sup>.

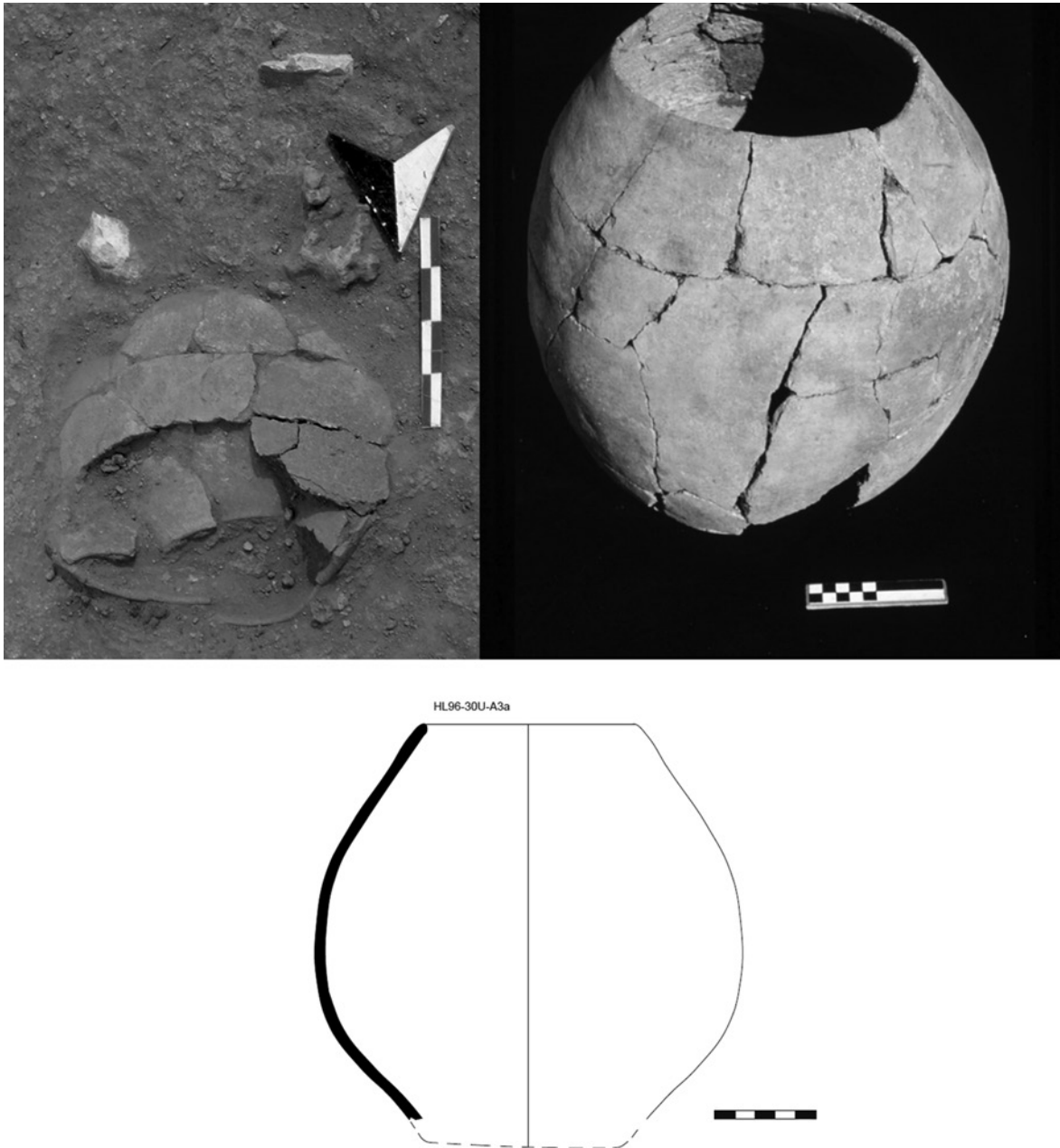
### POTTERY PRODUCTIONS FROM SECTOR 30

As a result of the first excavation campaigns in this sector, a total amount of 6774 fragments of pottery belonging to the Pre-Halaf and Halaf horizons in coherence with the recovered structures have been found<sup>3</sup>. The high quantity of pottery that this sector yielded motivated a meticulous study looking at the pottery assemblage layer by layer given that such a detailed study will help better understand not only the ceramic productions but also the occupation model and their spatial/temporal characteristics.

The methodology used in this study has been the same

2. The political and military crisis since 2011 has prevented a new verification of the archaeological material given that this has been distributed between the National Museum of Aleppo and the storage rooms located at the archaeological site.

3. As previously indicated in this work, analysis of ceramic materials is performed on the potsherds from the 1992-1997 fieldwork seasons.



**Figure 4.** Globular shaped ceramic with a child burial, HL96 S30 U A3a (E15- E16). (SAPPO, UAB).

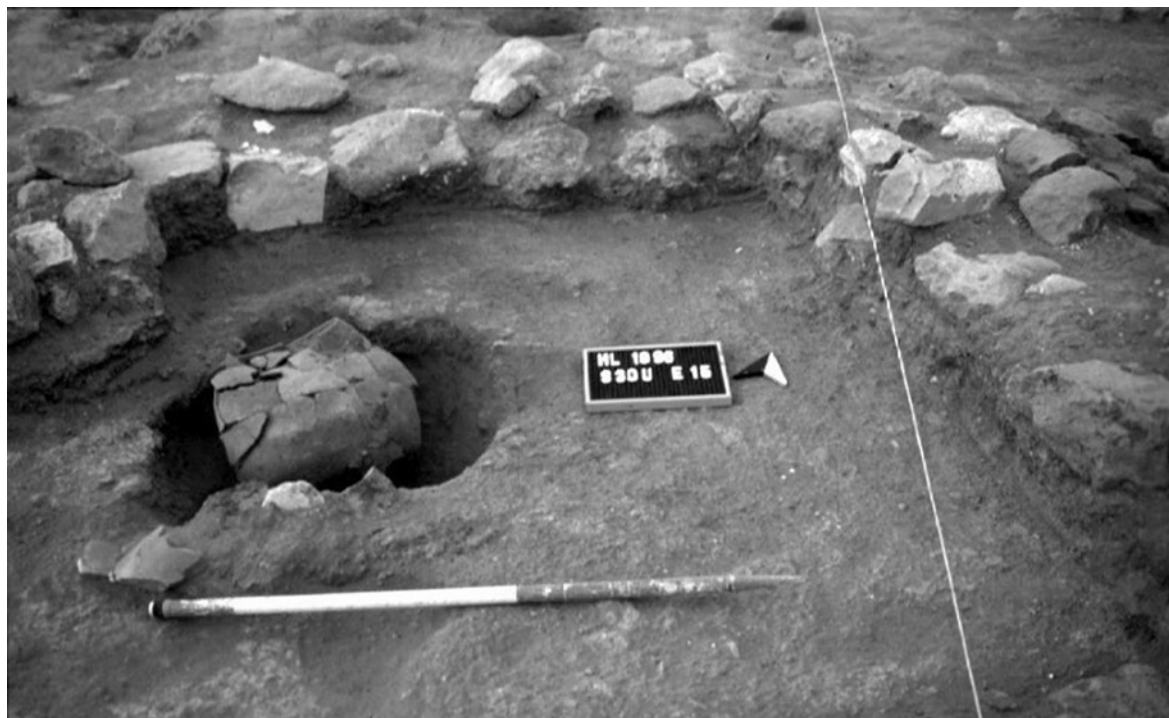
used for the ceramic productions in the Pre-Halaf period in this site (Faura 1996; Faura/Le Mière 1999; Faura 2013). Briefly, pottery has been classified macroscopically based on temper type (mineral, plant or both). This methodology has been applied to all the excavated sectors which, by material and structural coherence, might belong to the same horizon. Other used parameters are the type of surface finishing, the recovered morphology, the decoration and plastic application presence or absence and the cooking atmosphere.

In the clearly Pre-Halaf subsector, Halaf pottery has

been barley detected aside from some sparse intrusions, which yielded a high quantity of material properly isolated and explained in the context of the excavation.

Regarding the study of the Pre-Halaf ceramic productions themselves, a global analysis indicates that, in the first place, the most abundant series is the one with plant temper, which corresponds to 57% (3885 sherds) of the assemblage, followed by the mineral temper series, which represents 43% of the assemblage (2887 sherds) (Fig.3).

Although these are global numbers, they provide an



**Figure 5.** Open ceramic vase containing the remains of a child burial, HL96 S30 AE 7bis.(SAPPO, UAB).

equally global idea of the horizons and ceramic phases where they are ascribed. When separated by excavation area and stratigraphy, the resulting image is more precise and the diversity of the ceramic assemblage can be better understood. As previously stated, three phases in the technological and morphological evolution of the Pre-Halaf pottery have been detected and this is one of the arguments this paper is based on.

### **POTTERY PRODUCTIONS FROM THE WEST AND CENTRAL SECTORS.**

The analysis from the ceramic productions from layer S30-III is presented here. This corresponds to mainly the zone with well-preserved architecture in the Central area (when observing the excavation space), which consists of the materials in squares AE, AF, AN, AG, AH, AT, AY and AJ. As indicated before, this space presents a complex stratigraphy but the analysis has been limited to the strata and layers associated with the structures and, therefore, related with the superior layers. The analysis from the ceramic assemblage in the constructive phase S30-IV was not possible given that the archaeological remains are kept in the inaccessible storage rooms in the National Museum of Aleppo.

After analysing the fragments with diagnostic shapes from square AN (which acted as a sample) the following description can be made: the base shapes can be simple or composed, with convex bases, flat bases

with no intersection point (rounded), flat with an intersection point (angular), with vertical or open walls and the presence of a softly marked carination and a closed rim (closed vessels), with vertical necks. The lips are mainly rounded or slightly bevelled in the inside. No plastic decorations have been detected except from a non-perforated nipple.

Furthermore, a child burial container in this sector should also be commented. This is a globular shaped vase with medium dimensions. The vase belongs to the Black Series, a clearly Pre-Halaf typology (Fig. 4 and 5).

A second burial was contained also by another vase, this time an open shape which could be classified as a dish/tray (Fig. 6).

Regarding measurements, the analysis indicates that the width oscillates between 4 and 15mm but vases between 7 and 10mm are the most abundant. The diameter at the lip varies between 10 and 20cm (Fig. 6).

Small inclusions are present in the pottery without plant temper and pottery with it shows small or medium sized inclusions. The clay is compact and brown colours predominate (clear brown, beige and orange). The finishing in coarse ware with plant material is basically a smoothed treatment (38%), which is the same type of treatment practiced in the mineral tempered pottery (34%). The firing atmosphere is mainly oxidant, but reducing and mixed atmospheres have also been detected.

The decorations, which are scarce, can be either impressions in the body or the lip, incisions in the body of the vase, a plastic application in one sample, and also Pattern Burnished Ware (polished decorative motives on pottery always with a mineral temper) has been detected.

Although the percentile difference is small, the typological diversity, both in the plant tempered ware and the mineral tempered ware, this indicates, by analogy with sector 1, that this is a recent phase in the Pre-Halaf horizon.

The presence of slipped fragments, some impressed or painted fragments, polished decorations (Pattern Burnished), Dark Faced Burnished Ware, some Grey Black Ware potsherds and also the small presence of the Black Series certifies the attribution of this assemblage to the Pre-Halaf 2 horizon (Faura/Molist 2017; Cruells *et al.* 2017).

sherds) of the assemblage against 31% of pottery with a mineral temper (885 sherds) (Fig.7). The quantity of pottery assigned to the Black Series (11,41%) regardless of the medium or small inclusions they present should be also noted. Apart from these series, the assemblage presents other already known types which are associated with the same period. These are Coarse Ware with impressed, incised, painted motives or with more neat or slipped decorative motives (Pattern Burnished). In the series with mineral temper, the presence of slips is also documented (DFBW) along with some impressed and incised decorations.

In terms of the most representative shape, bowls, pots and small cups in a simple or composed form present flat bases with no inflexion point (rounded), flat bases with an inflexion point or slightly elevated flat bases.

In a general sense, these are closed or straight vessels with no neck or an incipient one. The lips might be round, straight, with an internal bevel or an external one. Although applied cords have been detected, their presence is scarce, which also appears to be the



**Figure 6.** View with ceramic vase containing the remains of a child burial located in the corner of the room, HL96 S30 U A3a (E15- E16).(SAPPO, UAB).

## POTTERY PRODUCTIONS FROM THE EAST AREA

In this sector, the excavation was performed exclusively in extension. Only one occupation layer in an average conservation state was detected. The observed stratigraphy presents a westward slope and, therefore, it is difficult to detect its stratigraphic correlation given the wide extension excavated and the proximity to the surface. This is why, in this work, the analysis of ceramic productions has been used to better determine correlations between themselves, their morpho-typological composition and their relative chronology.

In the pottery from this area, ceramic remains with plant temper are the most abundant, being 68% (1961

case with handling systems, barely detected and only present with vertical handles and nipples with or without perforation.

The width of the walls oscillates between 4mm and 20mm but there is a major presence of vases with walls around 10mm thick. The rim diameters vary between 10cm and 24cm. These measures indicate that, probably, apart from these closed and more standard vessels, trays with low and open walls were available too.

The inclusion size in both mineral and plant tempers is very thin, measuring equal or less than 0.5mm. In the case of mineral temper, calcite has been detected. Ceramic pastes are compact in most of the cases. The firing is mainly oxidant although fragments with a reducing atmosphere are frequently documented. The



**Figure 7.** General view from sector 30 with tholoi. (SAPPO, UAB).

surface colours tend to be clear, clear browns, beige or orange. The surface treatments are mainly smoothed but also some polished surfaces in pattern burnished wares (scarcely represented) and the use of polished and non-polished slips has also been detected.

Decorations are scarce with incrustrated incisions, polished motives, some painted fragments and plastic applications. Incisions and impressions are located in the rims or the walls of the vase.

The typological and morphological study in this Oriental area in sector 30 has helped performing a chronological approach, situating the ceramic assemblage in a Pre-Halaf horizon clearly ascribed to the ceramic phase 2 in the site sequence, which is comparable to the upper part of sector 7, 14 and 1 in the external part of layer III.

Inside the series with plant temper, the best represented category is pottery with smoothed surfaces and big sized plant temper (Coarse ware) (75%). In this group, other categories are present with lower frequencies and consist of a few pottery fragments with polished surfaces, polished decorative motives (Pattern Burnished) and impressed and incised decorations with a surface treated with paint or slip. The shapes and decorations correspond to open or closed vases with globular shapes and usually elevated flat bases.

In the mineral temper series, the best represented category is pottery with smoothed surfaces (48%) which, along with fine polished surfaces (14%), add up to 62% of the total assemblage. The black series in Halula accounts for 21% of the total amount of pottery. The categories with polished decorative motives, red slips, impressed or incised decorations as well as scarce fragments of DFBW are equivalent to 18% of the total. The shapes correspond to open or closed vessels with no neck and flat or slightly elevated bases (Fig. 5.2).

## SYNTHESIS AND DISCUSSION

The architectonic contributions from the site are significantly important. A type of innovative habitat distribution when compared with previous phases has been detected. Now, the domestic units are located in a disperse way with wide open spaces around them where the domestic areas are located (hearts, waste areas, etc.). This new spatial distribution matches with the detection of technological changes in the wall and floor construction, amongst others. This technological variation can be defined as presenting a lower technological investment, mainly in the finishing side (burnished floors, room morphology, etc.) Nevertheless, the most significant innovation is the appearance of a new type of building with a circular plan which was known as *tholoi*. This innovative morphology is recovered at Tell Halula next to or connected with other buildings with rectangular multicellular plan. This phenomenon is not unique from Tell Halula and it is also found in other sites in the Balikh region such as Sabi Abyad (Akkermans ed. 1996; Akkermans *et al.* ed. 2014).

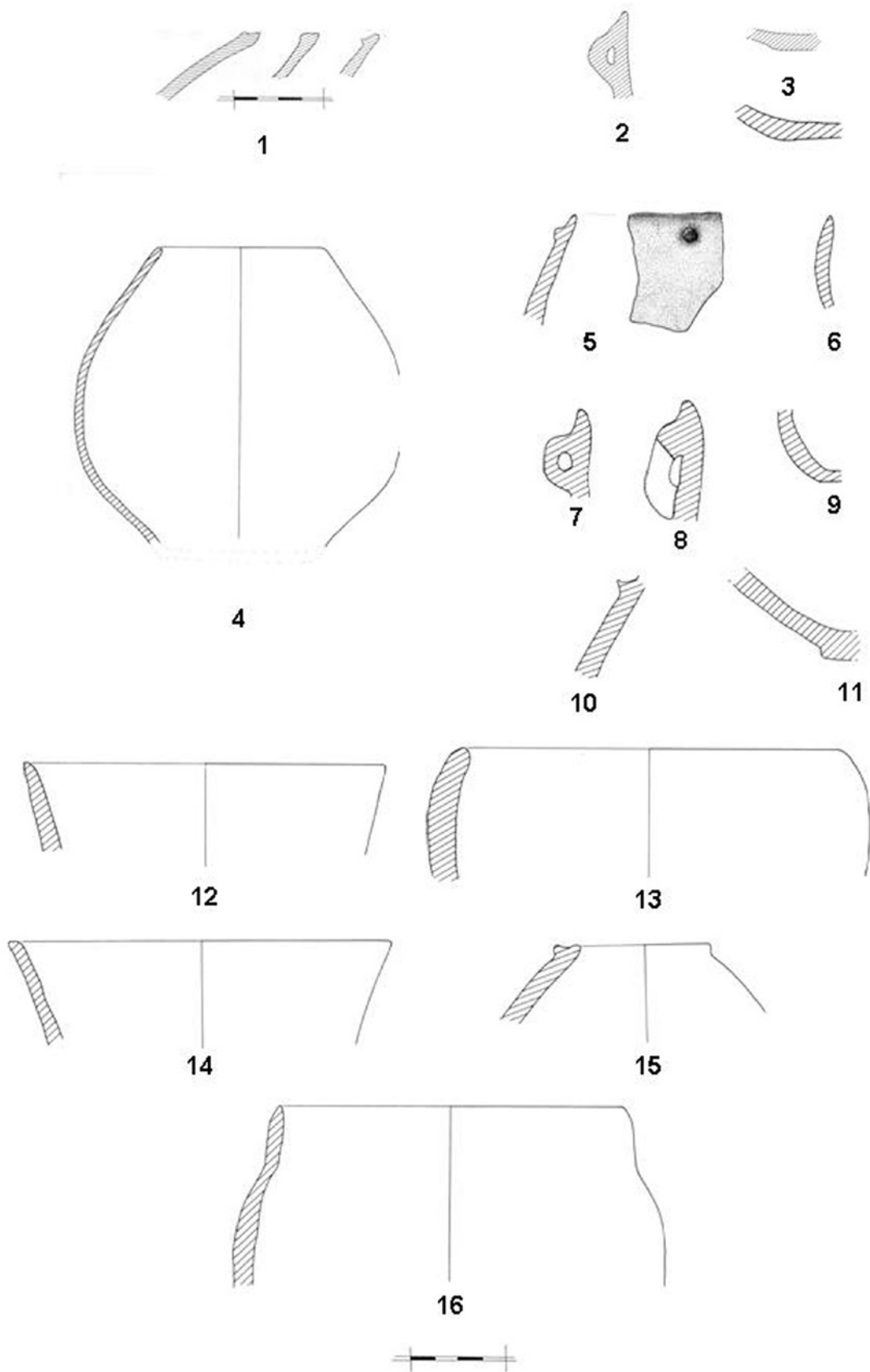
Out of the different *tholoi* type buildings found at Tell Halula in the Pre-Halaf period, the ones from sector 30 are the best defined thanks to its location and the fact that they were fully excavated in extension (Fig. 7).

The relationship between buildings and the ceramic material is interesting because it can shed new light into the temporal and stratigraphic relationship between the discovered dwellings. Through these lens, it can be said that the ceramic materials originating from the archaeological layers at sector 30 are highly homogenous, which clearly locates them in a horizon contemporary to the pottery observed over occidental northern Syria: Amuq (Braidwood/Braidwood 1960) and Ras Shamra (Contenson 1992) and shows contact with that one without losing an specificity unique to the Euphrates region.

Nevertheless, S30 study show that the percentages of pottery with mineral and plant temper are quite different and correspond to pottery phases 2 and 3. This is the main marker which defines the ceramic phases in the site. Therefore, the greater proportion of pottery with plant temper in the oriental sector indicates that, possibly, there might have been a previous habitat sequence recovered in the central sector (Fig. 8: 8.1, 8.2, 8.3).

This research proposal, which stands out from the presented morphological and typological analysis, will need a wider verification through <sup>14</sup>C dates (currently underway) and a deeper analysis of the recovered stratigraphic units. This is a line of further research that will certainly help improve the knowledge of the ceramic productions from the first half of the VII millennia cal BC.





**Figure 8.1.** Main shapes and pottery decorations of Sector 30 (tell Halula): open and closed bowls.

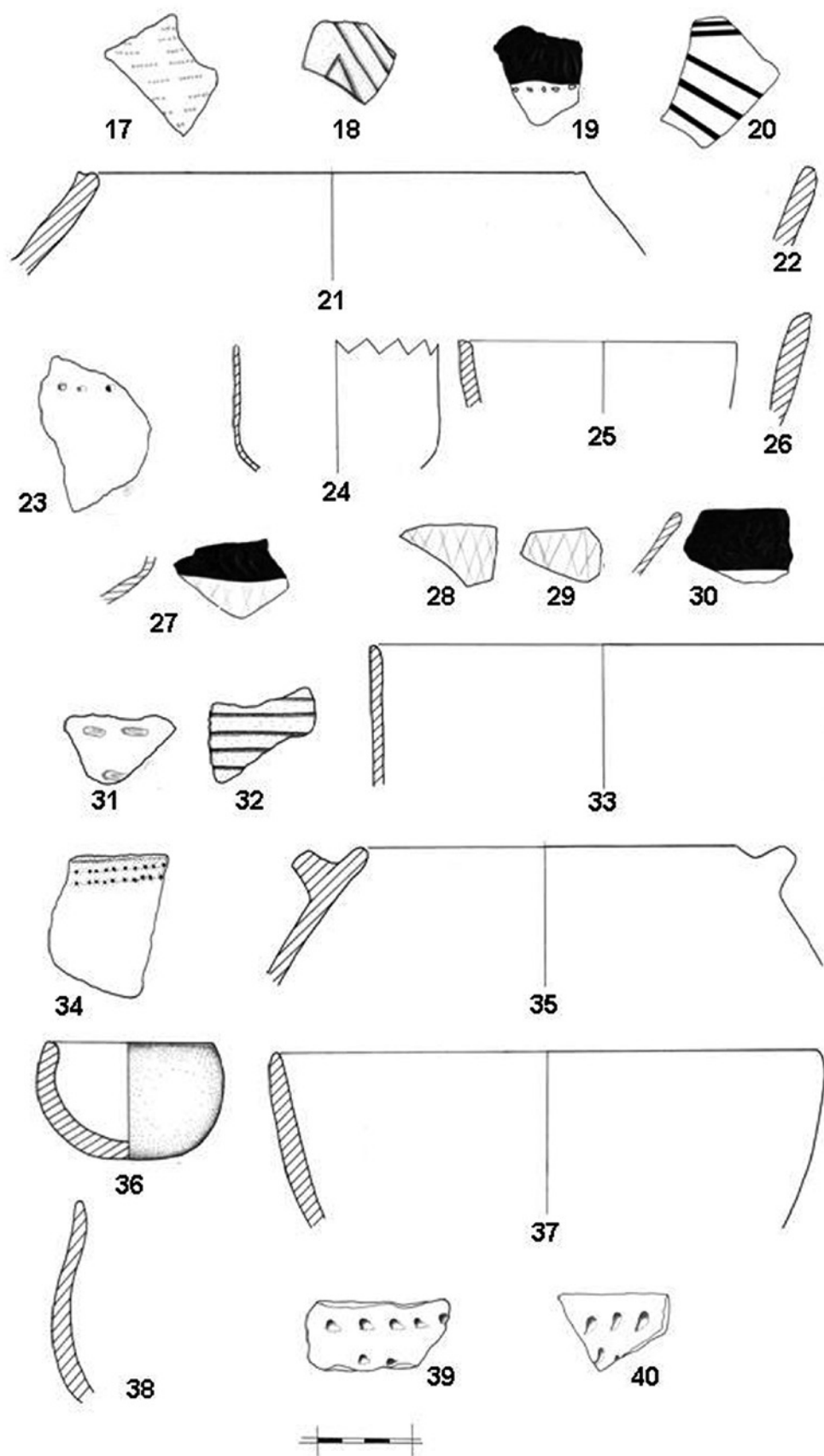


Figure 8.2. Main shapes and pottery decorations of Sector 30 (tell Halula): Set of decorated sherds and related shapes.

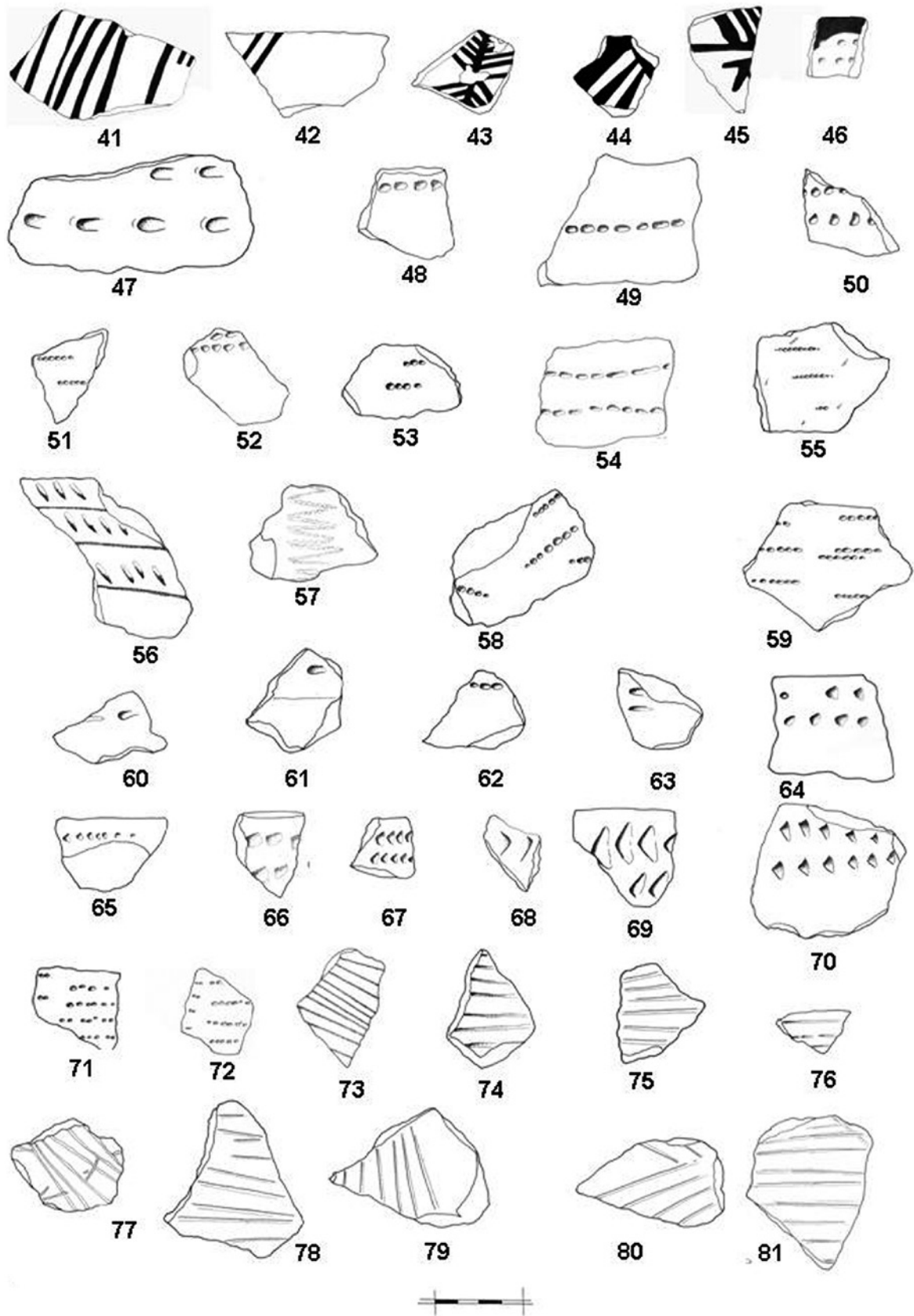


Figure 8.3. Main shapes and pottery decorations of Sector 30 (tell Halula): Impressed and painted sherds.

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