

## CHAPTER II

### THE EXCAVATION AT SESKLO

The site of Sesklo is situated at 39°21'30"N and 22°50'50"E in the region of Thessaly, district Magnisia – 9 km to the West of the modern town of Volos and the sea shore.

In order to evaluate the discoveries at Sesklo properly, we will first have to consider the circumstances in which they were found. Therefore we will mention briefly the history of the excavations and afterwards we will discuss more extensively the excavations which have provided us with the material for our study. Within the latter framework we will consider in particular the circumstances in which the Early Neolithic material was found. Although the material to be discussed here originates exclusively from the recent research by D.R. Theodoridis (1956-1977), the contribution of the famous excavations by Tsountas must be remembered. The results of the latter investigation have been memorable.

#### II. 1. *The excavation by Christos Tsountas*

The Akropolis (fig. 3), or Kastraki, was, as far as we know, first mentioned by Sir William M. Leake (1835 IV, p. 399). Staïs rediscovered Kastraki when he was excavating the site of Dimini, in 1901. He ascertained that the Akropolis dated back to the Stone Age and informed Christos Tsountas – at that time Professor at the University of Athens – who went directly to Sesklo to see it with his own eyes. From surface finds (sherds and other artefacts), he judged it extremely important to investigate the mound. He started the excavation – made possible by a grant from the Archaeological Society of Greece – in the same year, 1901, and finished it during the following summer (Tsountas 1908, pp. 69-70). The whole excavation was directed with great skill and an understanding of the site and its problems,

which may be considered remarkable – certainly at this early stage of prehistoric settlement excavations. Although using big pickaxes, he was very careful to retrieve even the smallest traces left by the Neolithic people: animal bones, shells and even carbonised seeds were recovered. The latter were identified by Prof. Wittmarck of the University of Berlin as *Triticum dicoccum* and *Panicum miliaceum* (Tsountas 1908, pp. 359-360). The publication on the “Akropolis of Dimini and Sesklo” (Tsountas 1908) still retains much of its initial value.

Tsountas restricted himself to the Akropolis, which had an accumulation of three to six meters of deposit. Three stratigraphical periods could be discerned: Bronze Age, Later and Earlier Neolithic. The Bronze Age deposit was not entirely uncontaminated and it was not clearly separated from the older deposits: much Neolithic material was discovered on the surface or directly below it. Tsountas supposed that the main reason for this contamination was the Middle Bronze Age cist graves which had been cut as deep as 2.40 m.

The Neolithic deposits were not of the same thickness everywhere (Tsountas 1908, p. 73). In the middle and on the northeastern side of the Akropolis, where the deposit was thickest, it could be divided into five strata, of which the upper two belonged to the Later and the lower three to the Earlier Neolithic. Tsountas thought it difficult to make a clear separation between the two, since it seemed to him that the change from the Earlier to the Later was gradual rather than abrupt. However, he was entirely convinced that the earlier period had been of a far greater longevity, since the deposit was much thicker – over three meters (Tsountas 1908, p. 74). He noticed that the fill of the earlier period was far from homogenous. The lowest stratum contained practically no painted sherds at all, whereas they

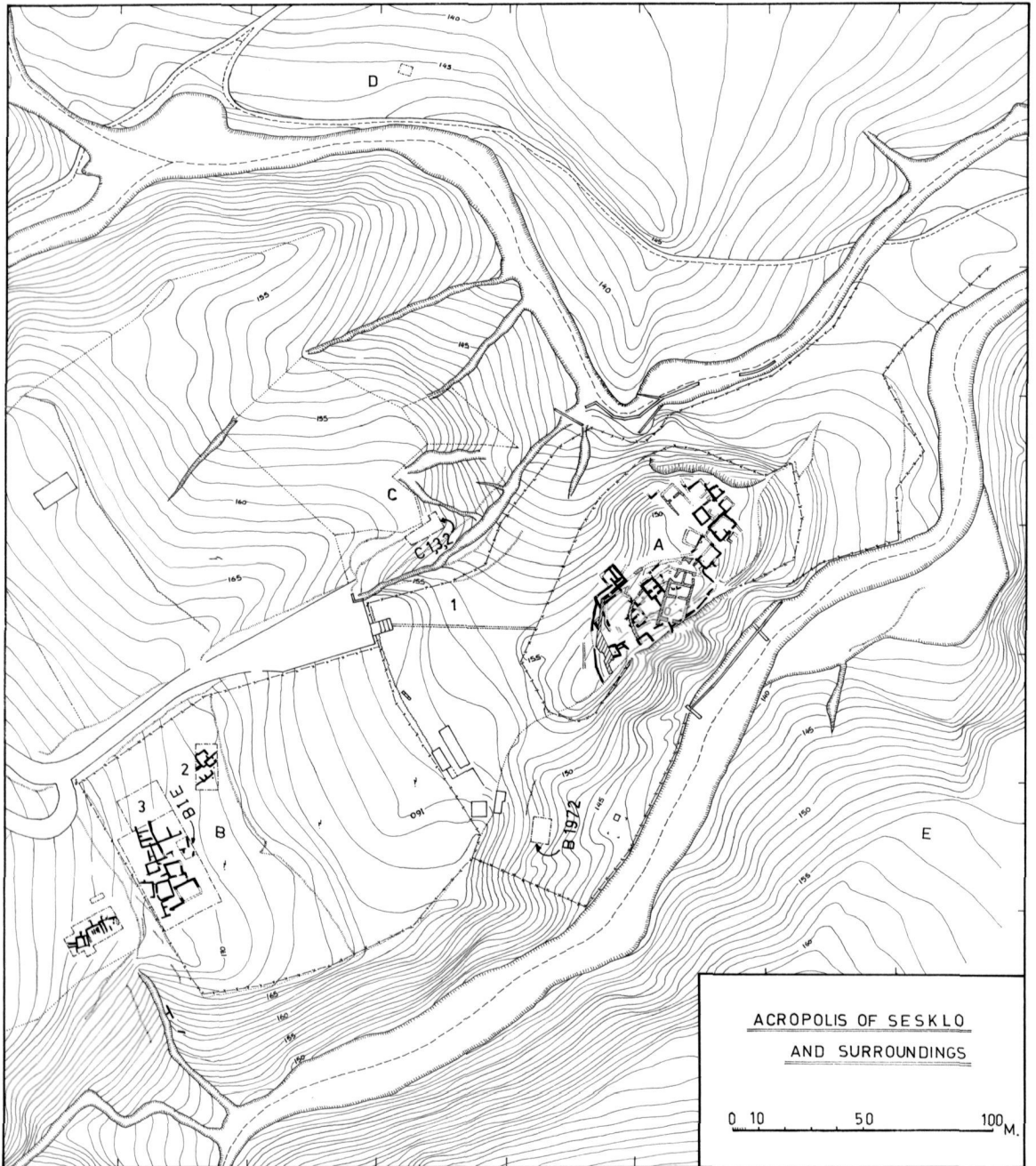


Fig. 3 Sesklo: Area of the neolithic settlement with identification of the different sections and trenches.

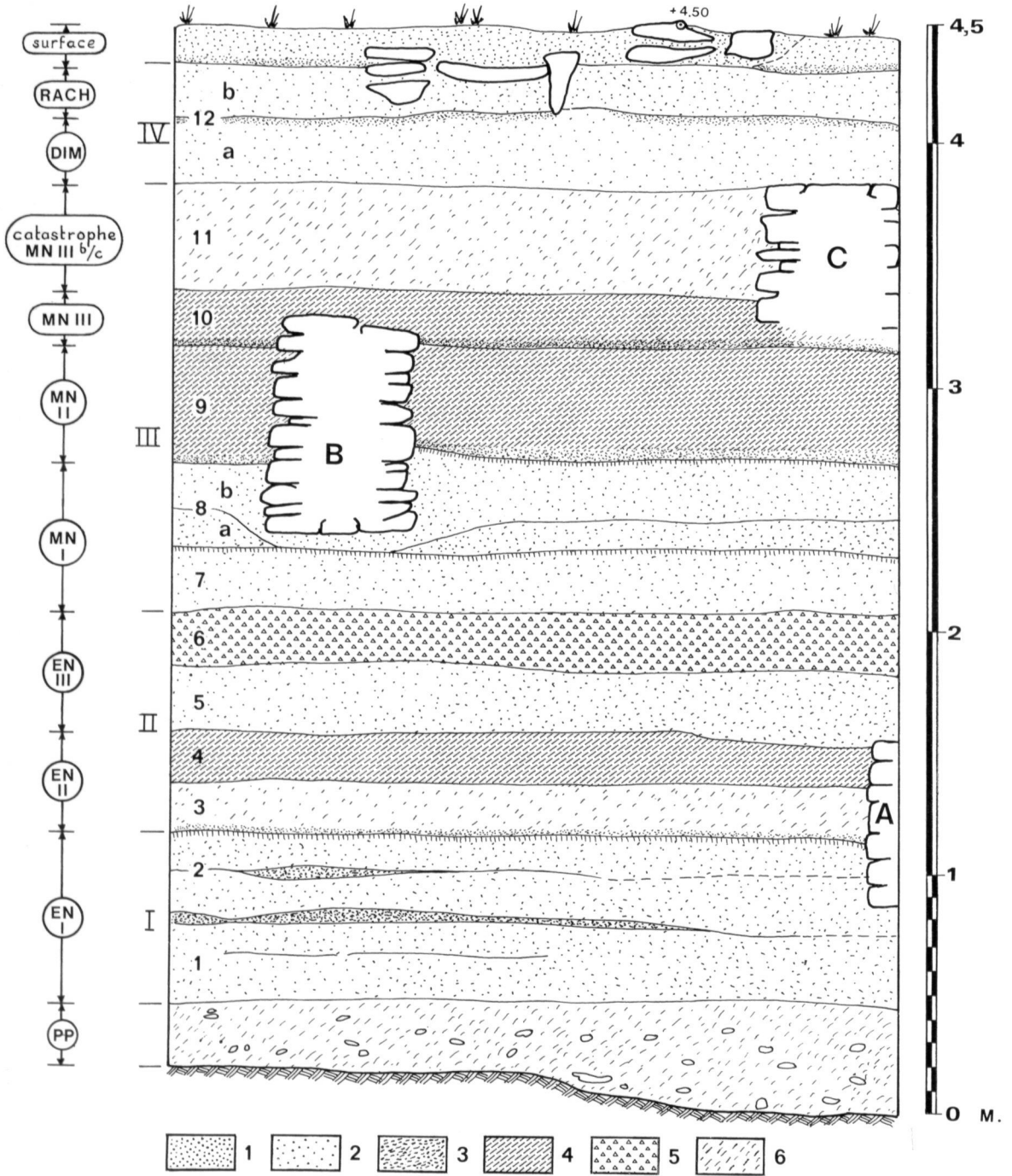


Fig. 4 Sesklo: Stratigraphical section of the 1957 trial trench.

1: clay. 2: burnt clay. 3: ashy. 4: very ashy with chacoal. 5: sterile. 6: ashy carbonaceous.

were rather abundant in the higher strata. Another difference was that stone walls seemed to be virtually absent in the lower strata. Since the fill consisted mainly of ashes and many burned and carbonised particles, he concluded that the walls had probably been built from clay and wood (Tsountas 1908, p. 80).

Although the differences within the strata of the Earlier Neolithic period made him realise that it could probably be divided into two or more phases, he thought it wiser to keep the broad division of Earlier and Later Neolithic for the time being. In the preface to the "Akropolis of Dimini and Sesklo" he said the following: "Possibly another period will be added to them, the earliest of all, which I have not separated off from the first, because I thought, generally speaking, that I should be content with a broader division." He stresses this in his description of the pottery (Tsountas 1908, p. 159): "As we said already above, the pottery of the lowest level of the Akropolis is a simple shaped monochrome ware, whereas in the higher strata we find rather abundant painted pottery. From this it is possible to conclude that the Earlier Neolithic period can be divided into two phases." One of the reasons why he did not proceed with this subdivision was that the simple monochrome ware continued to exist in the higher strata. Moreover, he found just a few painted sherds in the lower stratum as well. Drawings and pictures indicate that this was Early Painted ware.

He saw to it that the remains of stone walls were conserved, so that the Akropolis of Sesklo would remain a monument of Neolithic Greece.

Then, part of the northeastern edge of the Akropolis broke away during the tremendous earthquake of 1955 – thus revealing a natural stratigraphic section. Fortunately, D.R. Theocharis, a fervent admirer of Christos Tsountas and his work and at the time one of the few prehistorians in Greece interested in the Neolithic period, had been appointed as epilemetis and later as ephoros of the district of Magnisia, to which Sesklo belongs. He decided that it was necessary to conduct an excavation on the northeast side of the Akropolis, if only for stratigraphic purposes. In this way the excavation at Sesklo was reopened after 53 years. It was to go on for at

least another 21 years!

## II. 2. *The excavation at Sesklo by D.R. Theocharis*

This period started with the excavation of a stratigraphic trench of ca 2.50 x 2.50 m on the northeastern side of the Akropolis, during the winter of 1956 (Theocharis 1957, pp. 151-159). The section (fig. 4) showed that, below the houses of Tsountas' Earlier Neolithic, a deposit of at least 2.30 m thickness remained to be explored before the sterile soil was reached. The lowest stratum did not contain any pottery, only small stone (mainly flint and obsidian) and bone implements. It seemed possible that it belonged to a phase similar to the "Pre Pottery Period" which had been discovered by V. Miložčić at Argissa a few months earlier (Miložčić 1955). The stratum overlying it contained many monochrome sherds, mostly in darker colours and of very simple shapes. They belonged, apparently, to the first ceramic phase. Once this stratigraphic sequence was established, it was decided to reopen the excavation on the Akropolis.

During the summer seasons of 1962-1968, the goal of these excavations was to discover new information not only concerning the Earlier period, but also the Middle and Late Neolithic and to get a better and more up to date knowledge of the Neolithic and the Chalcolithic sequences (Theocharis 1962a, p. 24). At the start it was thought of primary importance to get as much information as possible on the earliest phases and then on the extent of the Akropolis. Despite the sometimes very difficult circumstances of excavation – it was not thought wise to destroy the foundations of buildings belonging to a later period in order to get more information on the earlier periods – the main goal has been achieved. As a result we have a fairly good idea of the Pre-Pottery phase and the artefacts belonging to that period. The same can be said of the Early Neolithic period.

The stratigraphy of the 1956/1957 trench has been confirmed more than once on the northeast side of the Akropolis. Theocharis concluded that the stratigraphic sequence had to be the following (fig. 5):

RACHMANI	(Chalcolithic)	
DIMINI	(Late Neolithic)	
<i>Sesklo period destruction horizon</i> (Middle Neolithic)		
	Middle Neolithic III	
CLASSIC SESKLO	Middle Neolithic II	
	Middle Neolithic I	
<i>Early Neolithic destruction horizon</i> (Early Neolithic III)		
PROTO SESKLO/	BUNTPOLIERTE	(Early Neolithic III)
	EARLY PAINTED	(Early Neolithic II)
FRÜHKERAMIKUM		(Early Neolithic I)
PREPOTTERY		

Upon re-examination, the old “deep section” of Tsountas yielded finds characteristic of the Pre-Pottery phase near the sterile soil (Theocharis 1966, p. 5).

The architectural remains of the earliest strata are scanty. However, soil features led Theocharis to conclude that the houses of Pre-Pottery people consisted of a kind of pit-dwelling, which had been cut into virgin soil (Theocharis 1973a, p. 35). Their shape seemed to be more or less elliptical, as far as could be discerned. The total number of these dwellings discovered on the Akropolis amounts to five. In two cases the dwellings seemed to be surrounded by deep ditches (figs. 6 + 7). In the pits several holes were discovered; these could be postholes, although it is strictly not possible to say what purpose they served.

The Pre-Pottery level yielded a rather large quantity of bone implements (ca. 35), flint and obsidian blades and flakes (ca. 90) – the obsidian ones being the more numerous. The other finds, less abundant, included fragments of stone implements and a few fragments of ceramic figurines. The animal bones, of which 98% belonged to domesticated species (sheep/goat, cattle and pig), and the carbonised seeds, identified as *Pisum sativum*, *Triticum dicoccum*, *Hordeum vulgare* and *Quercus sp.*, showed that the subsistence pattern was agricultural. (Theocharis 1963, p. 43).

Of the subsequent Early Neolithic I-III, the architectural remains are rather scarce and house-plans are non-existent. The rather abundant remains of burnt clay with wood and reed impressions might be an indication of house-building, although it has

also been suggested that these could be remains of a kind of oven or hearth. Only the evidence of the last phase of the Early Neolithic (EN III) indicates without any doubt the presence of houses built of mudbrick and pisé: since at least part of the settlement was destroyed by fire at the end of the period, there is a level consisting almost entirely of burnt wall and roofing debris, making it possible to understand the exact construction of walls and roofs. The nature of the foundations remain guesswork still. Theocharis supposed that the earliest houses were built with pisé walls, resting on a foundation of a single row of stones, but modern evidence shows that this would be disturbed beyond recognition when a house collapses.

The floors were made of clay, which in some cases was probably mixed with small pebbles. They are difficult to distinguish, making a clear separation between the strata impossible. Only the separation between Early Neolithic III and the Middle Neolithic is clear in those parts of the site where EN III is sealed by a level of burnt roofing and wall debris. The stratigraphic division into phases was made on the basis of changes in soil colour: layers of buff building debris – consisting of disintegrated pisé and/or mudbrick – alternate with grey ash-layers.

In the level directly overlying the Pre-Pottery stratum, pottery was still very scarce. The few fragments which have been recovered seem to be a kind of “prototypical”, heavy, coarse ware, which had been fired badly and – according to the excavator – in a few cases not fired at all (Theocharis 1965a, p. 8). In the next level the quality changed rapidly – although occasional “bad” fragments occur: most of the pottery was well made, albeit still monochrome and of simple shape.

The next phase (EN II) saw the introduction of the first painted decoration – the same simple patterns Tsountas had mentioned already as being present in the lowest level of his monochrome phases. The quality of the pottery is good, although the vessel-shapes are still simple.

The third phase (EN III) has pottery of remarkably good quality, though still with a limited repertoire of shapes. Strangely enough, painted pottery seems to disappear again. The excavator noti-

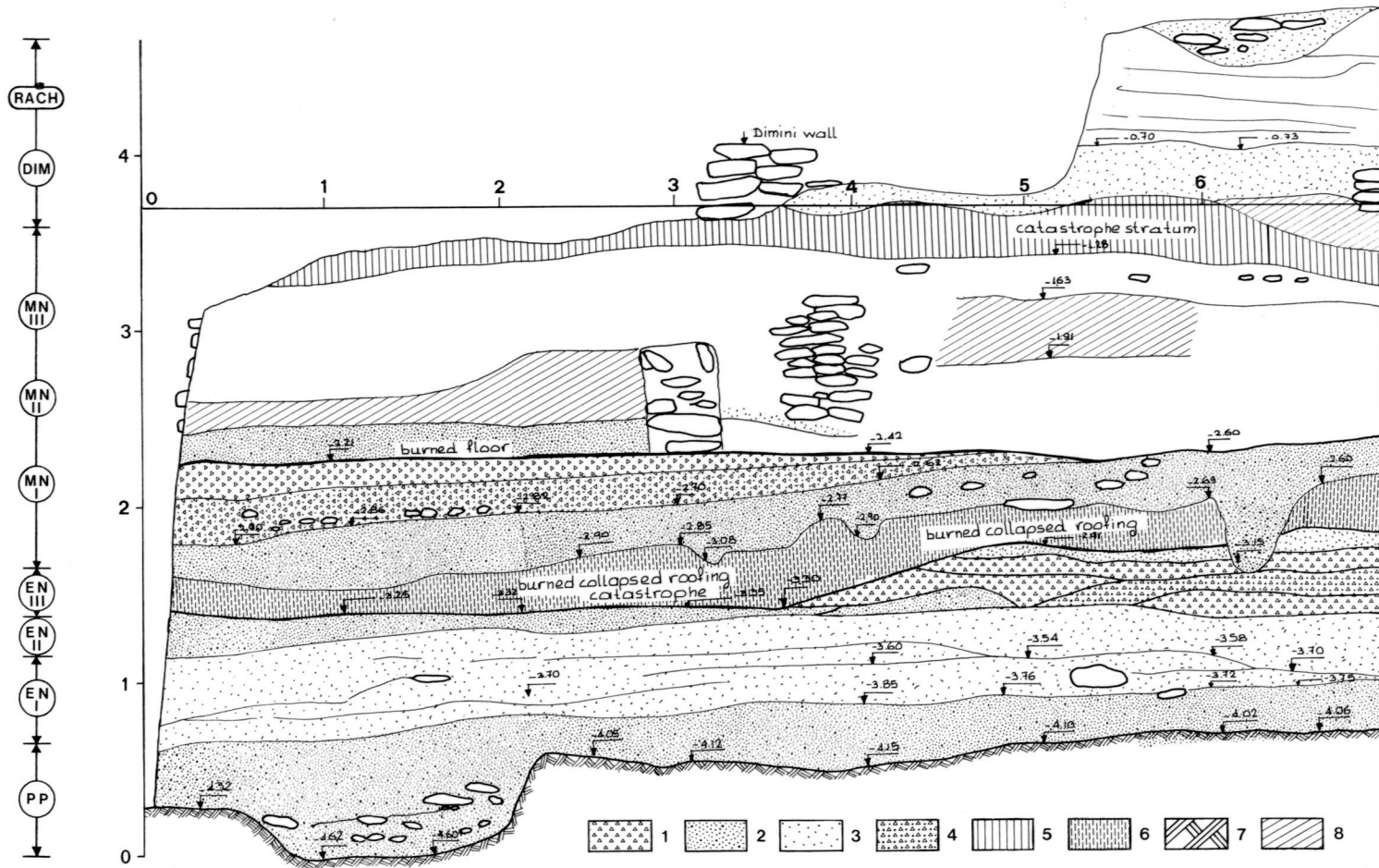


Fig. 5 Sesklo Akropolis: Stratigraphical drawing of the NE-SW section of trench 2 excavated in 1963.

1: clay. 2: ashy carbonaceous. 3: ashy. 4: clay mixed with charcoal. 5: catastrophe (by fire). 6: catastrophe-burnt collapsed roofing. 7: sterile. 8: building debris.

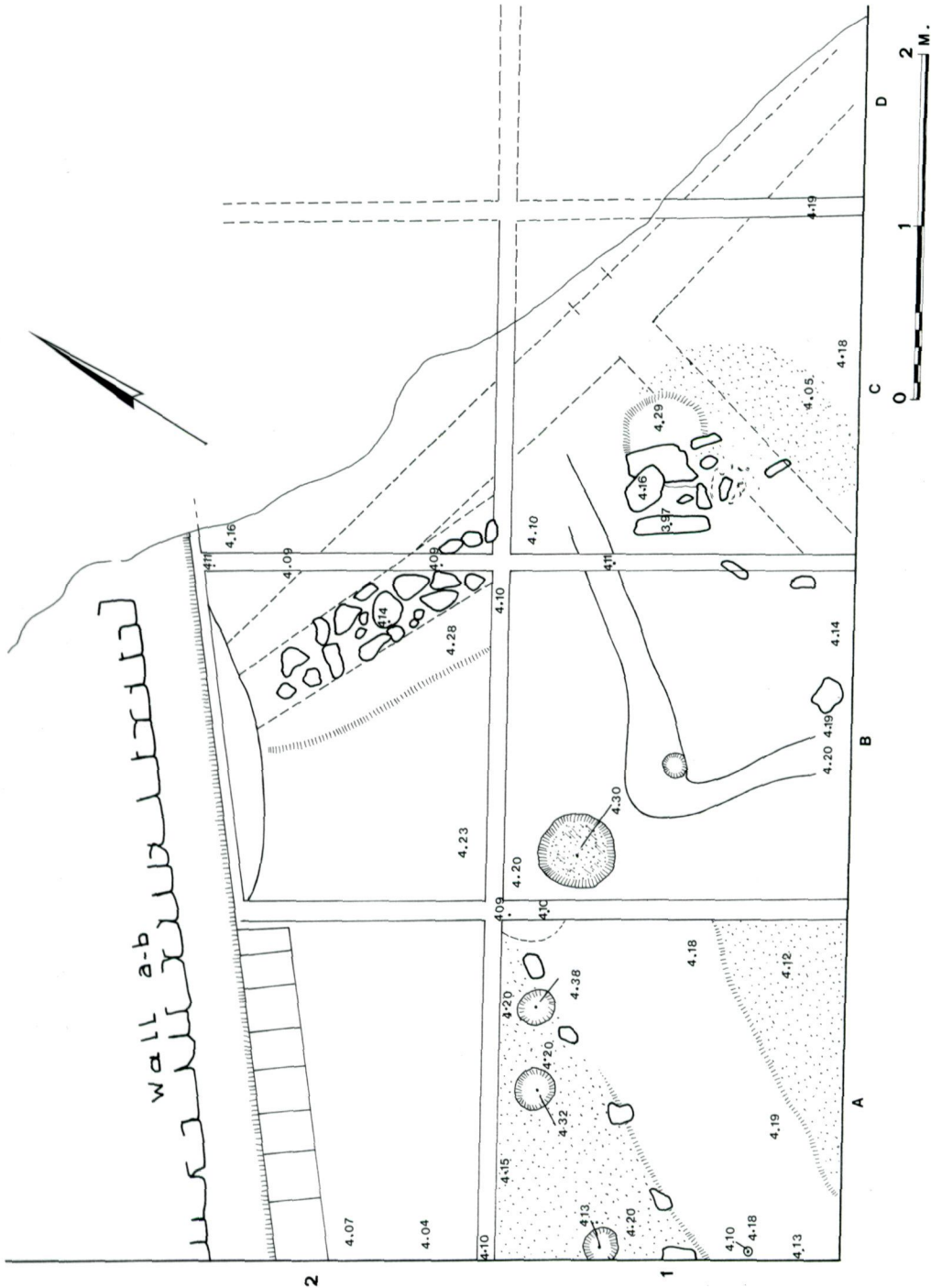


Fig. 6 Sesklo Akropolis: Trench 2 - Plan of the Pre-Pottery stratum.

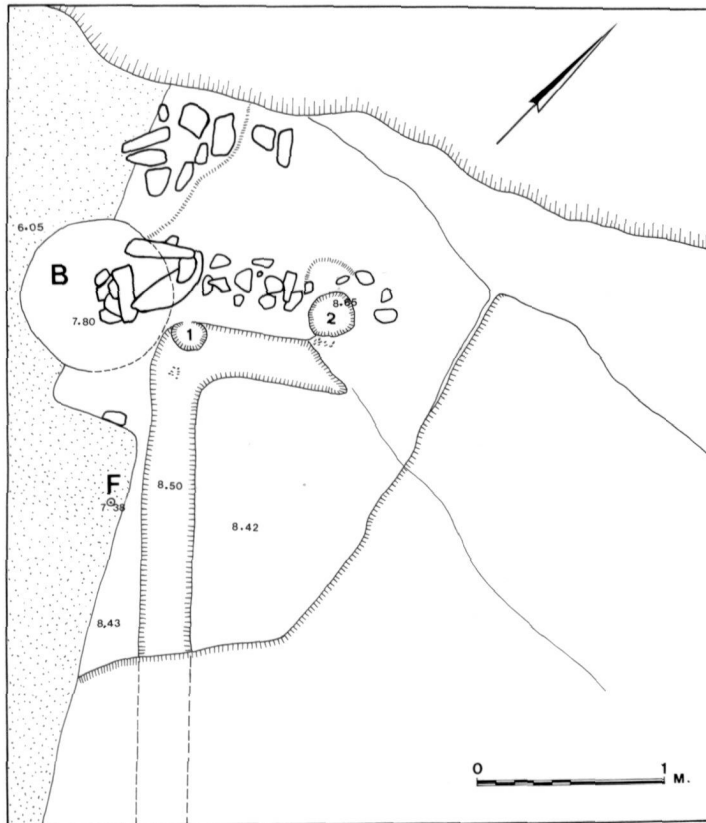


Fig. 7 Sesklo Akropolis: Plan of Pre-Pottery dwelling in pit Thita, excavated in 1962.

ced a certain decline towards the end of the period.

The other artefacts of the Early Neolithic period are marked not so much by a great difference in quality between the three phases as by an ever increasing diversity.

These were, in short, the results of the 1962-1968 Akropolis excavations as far as the Early Neolithic is concerned. But the site of Sesklo was to offer still more data. Remembering that Tsountas had mentioned the presence of sherds in the neighbouring fields, Theocharis undertook some survey walks in the area around the Akropolis. He discovered traces of architectural remains some 150 m West of the Akropolis. On this spot there were cist-graves of the Middle Bronze Age too. Trial trenches, during the

years 1968-1970, confirmed that the remains belonged to the Middle Neolithic period. Based on these results, another series of excavations was carried out outside the Akropolis, between 1971 and 1977 (Theocharis 1971a, 1972, 1973a and 1976). They served to delineate the extent of the settlement and also to identify the periods during which it had stretched beyond the Akropolis. To this end, the area around the Akropolis was divided into four sections: B, C, D and E (fig. 3).

In B, a (by Greek standards) large trench was opened up, measuring 40 x 25 m. Later another 16 x 16 m trench and a few small trial trenches were added to the main trench. A deep section in the main trench revealed that all phases prior to Middle Neo-



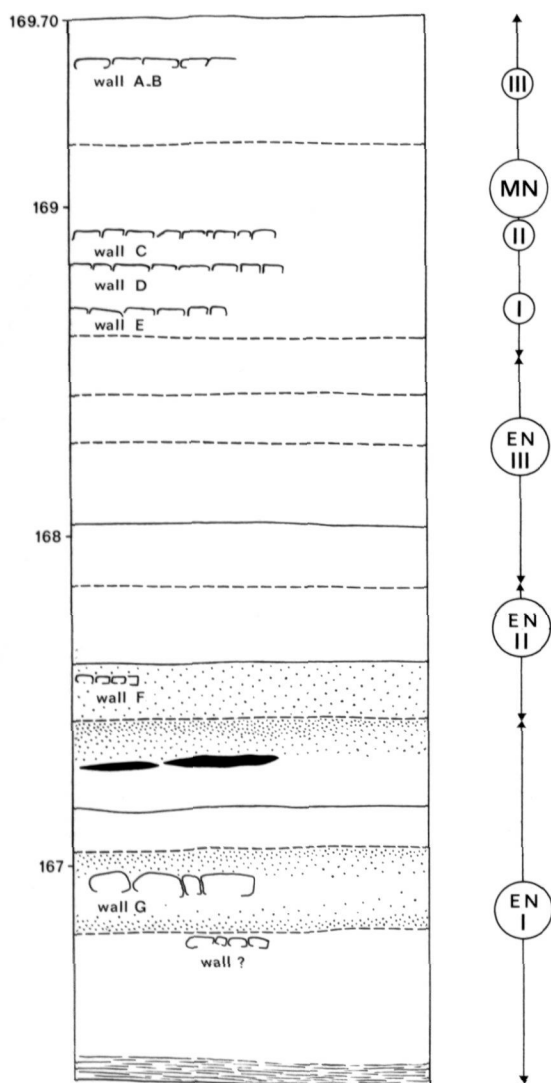


Fig. 8 Sesklo: Stratigraphical section of trench B(I)E, with projection of walls.

lithic III were present, except for the Pre-Pottery (fig. 8). This does not make it absolutely certain that Pre-Pottery did not exist in section B, only that it has not been discovered in this particular part of the area.

The Early Neolithic I (Frühkeramik) debris contained, at different levels, fragments of two stone structures. First, a slightly rounded construction, built of heavy stone slabs, was discovered and 0.20 m deeper a straight wall, made of smaller stones, disappearing unfortunately below the rounded wall. Once again one of the major excavation problems was the inability to destroy any superseding Neolithic structures in order to get a more complete view of the earliest phases.

The overlying strata also contained stone structures. Two of them, a nice straight wall and a strange round construction probably belong to Early Neolithic II; the five remaining walls all belong to the Middle Neolithic.

In the second large trench, material belonging to Early Neolithic I was discovered directly underlying the Middle Neolithic III deposit, with a thin layer of transitional Early Neolithic I-II in between.

In section A, outside the Akropolis, a trial trench was opened in 1972 (B1972). Almost the entire deposit, except for the upper levels in the extreme western corner, belonged to the monochrome Early Neolithic III phase – a deposit of over 2 m thickness (Theocharis 1972, p. 9). Architectural remains were few; they consisted of the traces of a pisé wall, 0.30-0.40 wide, stretching over a length of 4 m; moreover the deposit contained a lot of “burnt house rubble”. The whole area yielded a tremendous amount of material – pottery, figurines, bone implements and lithics – in an infinite variety.

A trial trench in section D revealed the presence of Middle Neolithic III pottery, both monochrome and painted, in rather large quantities (Theocharis 1977, p. 11).

A survey of section E indicated human occupation during Middle Neolithic III and the Early Bronze Age. Trial excavation showed the architectural remains to belong to Early Bronze I (Theocharis 1977, pers. comm.).

In section C three trial trenches were opened for the specific purpose of getting more data on Early Neolithic I. Since the larger part of our material originates from these trenches we will discuss the excavation of this area in more detail.

II. 2. 1. *Section C, excavation and stratigraphy*

Section C is situated West of the Akropolis, across the dry stream-bed. Most of it is situated in a kind of depression, surrounded by something resembling an embankment at the side of the stream. It is possible that the depression is artificial, but we think that this is more likely to be true of the embankment. Since the field is rather barren and very subject to erosion, it could have been made to prevent the field from washing down the slope completely.

In 1972 Prof. Theocharis discovered layers containing Early Neolithic pottery near the top of the slope. Since this is situated at about the same height

as the Early Neolithic I stratum on the Akropolis, it seemed quite possible to him that the Early Neolithic settlement had stretched beyond the Akropolis. Therefore he decided to make a trial excavation at this spot. He started to excavate two trial trenches, 1 and 2, each 5.50 m long, with an intervening space between the two of 4.50 m. The width at its narrowest point was 2.50 m, but since the southeast side of the trenches followed the natural line of the slope, it expanded to nearly 4.00 m. Great care was taken to remain outside the embankment, which actually became the basic southwest-northeast section. Later the intervening space was excavated too, as trench 3. This was partly because Theocharis hoped to

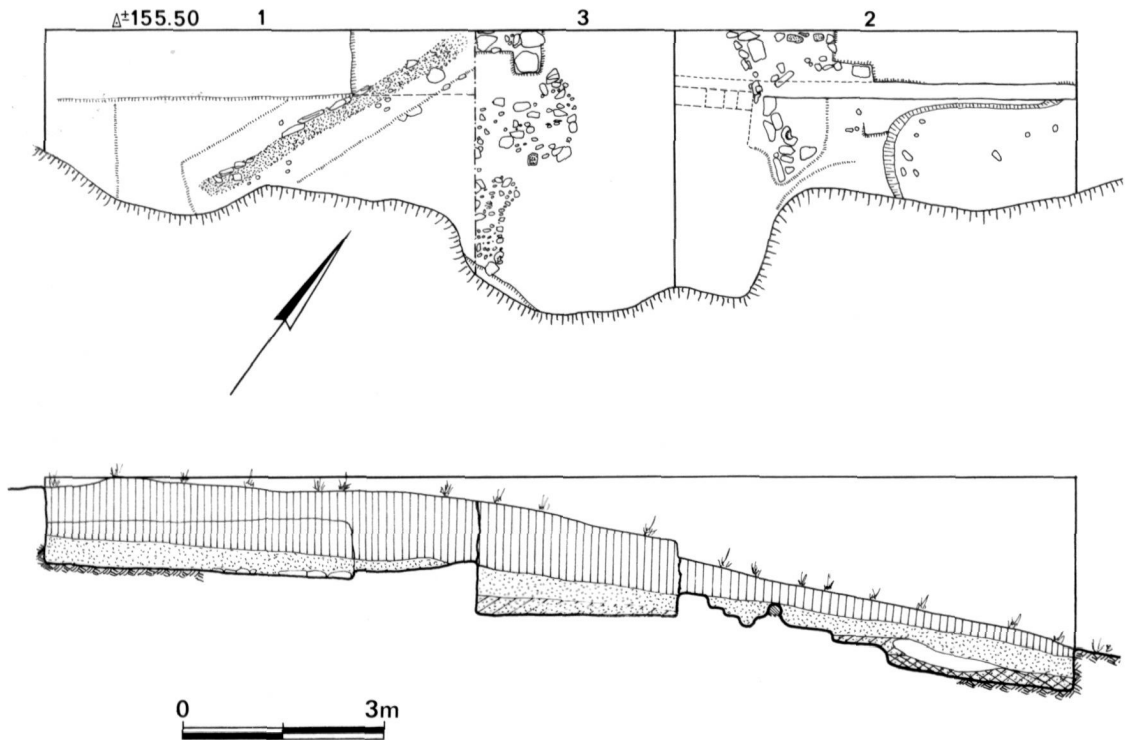


Fig. 9 Sesklo section C, trenches 1, 2 and 3 as excavated in 1972.  
a. plan of the lowest levels. b. stratigraphical drawing of the NW-SE section.

solve some architectural problems in this way. In trench 1 an area of 1.00 x 3.50 m was left unexcavated, after the removal of the surface soil, in order to serve as a "control area". In 1976 this was excavated to get a continuous stratigraphic section and to check the stratigraphic observations. In 1977 trench 2 was enlarged with an extension of 2.00 m to the Northwest; it still remained outside the embankment, since this turns inward at this point. The extension was, at a distance of 0.30 m from its northwest section, heavily disturbed by the recent intrusion of a streambed; this disturbance was for a length of ca four meters. The stream had apparently dried up and the bed had been covered with loose earth from a nearby surface, which contained a little pottery from the Early Neolithic and later periods.

The "horizontal level" excavation technique was adopted. After removal of the surface soil (with heavy pickaxes) horizontal levels of 0.10, and in crucial areas of 0.05 m, were taken off with a small hand-pick and trowel. The depths were measured from a secondary datum point  $\Delta$ , 4.90 m below the central datum point HG (160.40 m ASL) on the Akropolis. When at a later stage it became impossible to use point  $\Delta$  any more, a new datum point was established in trench 1, 1.50 m below  $\Delta$ .

Although in general the spoil was not sieved, extra care was taken when a very ashy level was reached and also when finally a stratum apparently without pottery came to light. The soil from these areas was sieved with a fine mesh. In this way some extremely small obsidian and flint flakes were retrieved. However, tribute has to be paid to the workmen, who managed to discover many a microscopically small fragment without the use of a sieve.

#### *Stratigraphy* (fig. 9)

It was possible to discern four strata, A, B, C and D. Of these the upper three all belong to Early Neolithic I, the lowest to the Pre-Pottery phase.

The virgin soil consisted of very hard, yellow clay, situated at a depth of 1.25-3.25 below  $\Delta$ . It slopes rather sharply downwards from the Southwest in trench 1 to the Northeast in trench 2 and quite gently from the Southwest to the Southeast. The

inclination in a Southwest – Northeast direction is a little less steep than the present slope of the surface, but the Southwest-Southeast inclination is far more gentle. This indicates that the slope has been eroded at a later date. Theocharis' supposition that the stream was made artificially during the Middle Neolithic or even later may be proven true.

#### Stratum D – Pre-Pottery phase.

The earliest evidence of human habitation is a deposit of very ashy debris, 0.30-0.45 m thick, and only present in trench 2. It did not yield a single sherd, though it contained other finds, indicating human habitation. The occupation area consisted of an oval cutting into the sterile soil (fig. 10), at least 3.00 x 4.00 m large, although the exact extent is not known, since the pit is cut by the trench wall on the northeast side and by the slope on the southeast side. Directly next to it was an amorphous mass of sterile yellow clay, resting directly on the sterile soil and having the same colour but not entirely the same structure, and so "worked" in some way. It would seem reasonable to call this kind of dwelling a pit-house.

The finds of this stratum consisted of bone implements, flint and obsidian bladelets, a few grinding stones, bones, shells and some "house rubble". Analysis of the bone material indicated it to be almost completely of domesticated species (Schwartz, Appendix II).

#### Stratum C – Early Neolithic I, building phase 1.

This stratum, consisting of a yellowish grey, rather soft soil, lay partly directly over the sterile soil and partly over the Pre-Pottery deposit. It included levels 11-17 of trench 1 and 3 and levels 3-7 of trench 2. The thickness of the deposit varied between 0.30-0.70 m.

Architectural remains are rather scarce. Some clumsily laid rows of heavy stones, including saddle-shaped querns, have been discovered; although not neatly constructed, they may belong to foundation walls. The numerous remains of burnt clay, mixed with straw – occasionally even with seeds – often had reed impressions, which could be of rather thick stalks. In a few cases they had impressions of

branches or twigs. The number of buildings in the three trenches is uncertain.

Large areas of the lowest level were littered with small stones, including hand-stones. They represent either floors or cobbled yards. At the edge of the trench 1-3 "floor", a rounded fireplace was discovered. In several Middle Neolithic houseblocks a fireplace was situated in the courtyard outside the houses. If this was already the case in Early Neolithic I, this cobbled area would represent a kind of courtyard.

This was the first stratum to contain pottery, apparently already in a fully fledged form. In the lowest levels there were a few sherds, of a very coarse and crude type which were badly fired, mixed with the better pottery. Apart from pottery, the assemblage of finds includes bone and stone implements, flint and obsidian, bone material, figurines and earstuds. Unfortunately almost no carbonised seeds were recovered – the one exception being *Vitis silvestris* (J. Renfrew, 1973, pers. comm. to D.R. Theocharis).

Against the southwest-northeast baulk of the extension of trench 2 a skeleton was discovered, lying in a crouched position. It probably belongs to an adult. Since it lay on the sterile soil and since there are no outlines of a pit visible, we have reason to believe that it belongs to building phase 1 and indeed that it is the first Early Neolithic I burial discovered in Thessaly. There are no grave goods accompanying it.

#### Stratum B – Early Neolithic I, building phase 2

This deposit of very grey, soft soil overlies stratum C in all three trenches. The two strata are very difficult to distinguish from one another, since there is no real change in soil colour nor a clear line dividing them. The deposit has a thickness of 0.20-0.50 m, including levels 3-10 in the northwest part of trench 1 and 8-10 in the northeast part, levels 7-10 in the northwest part of trench 3 and 9-11 in the northeast part and level 2 of trench 2.

The architectural remains of this period are slightly better preserved than those of stratum C, though it remains impossible to discern a house-plan. There are foundations of two walls, consisting of a single row of large stones which probably car-

ried a pisé construction. Pisé is very difficult to detect, but thorough scraping revealed traces in the soil along the foundation. At one end of the wall, in trench 3, a so called pivot-stone was discovered (fig. 9).

Since it was impossible to discover any floors, we suppose them to have been made of plain earth. In general the soil of the lowest two levels of this stratum is quite ashy, containing a lot of charcoal specks. Moreover, they are relatively rich in finds. An area West of wall A in trench 1 contained, in levels 8 and 9, a large quantity of stones, often covered with some charcoal and with carbonised chaff underneath. A rather large quantity of bones and pottery and quite a lot of obsidian and flint were mixed in. This could indicate that the area was used for cooking or meat preparation. One of the blades, discovered in close association with a bone, showed butchering traces when submitted to micro-wear analysis<sup>1</sup>.

Although the deposit of this building phase is not thicker than that of building phase 1, the total quantity of artefacts is larger, including ceramics, bone and stone implements, figurines and earstuds.

#### Stratum A – Early Neolithic I

Stratum A consists of a deposit of yellow-grey, rather hard soil. Overlying stratum B directly in all three trenches, it has a thickness which ranges between 0.20 and 0.80 m. Only loose topsoil separates it from the surface (thickness 0.10-0.20 m).

No traces of any architectural remains have been discovered in this stratum. It contained only Early Neolithic I material, mostly pottery. In fact we had the strong impression that this stratum may consist of wash from the slope above. Should this be the case, we would expect the finds to consist largely of material of the latest phase of Early Neolithic I. If, on the other hand, it is not wash, but building debris, consisting of disintegrated pisé from the building of stratum B, they would belong to building phase 2 – or the later part of Early Neolithic I.

In addition to a fairly large quantity of sherds, the material from this stratum contained flint, obsidian, bone implements, bone, figurines and an earstud. The quantity is rather small in comparison to strata B and C.

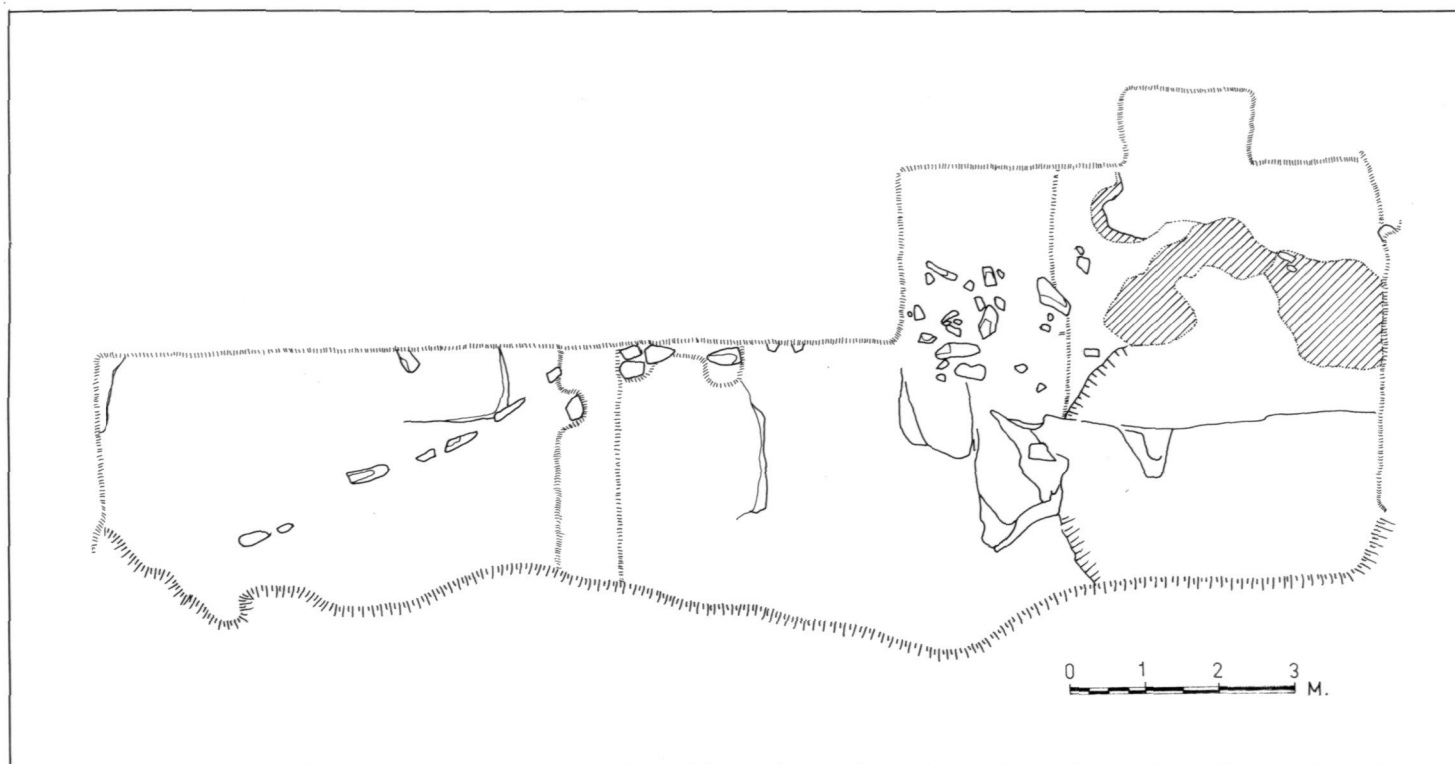


Fig. 10 Sesklo section C, trench 1, 2 and 3: Plan of the lowest levels after excavation and enlarging of trench 2 in 1977.

## II. 2. 2. *Final remarks*

The excavations of 1971-1977 seem to confirm Prof. Theocharis' hypothesis that the settlement belonging to the Neolithic period (not only, as he thought at the beginning of the project, to the Middle Neolithic, but also to the Early Neolithic) is very extensive, covering an area of more than 10 hectares, though at the outset it may have been somewhat smaller. Anyway, the settlement is considerably larger than Tsountas' original estimate of 0.4 hectares. Naturally we do not know whether the entire area was built-up. It seems quite possible that, in between clusters of houses, there were fields or workshops.

Prof. Theocharis thought it possible that at the outset the whole area formed one village, without the Akropolis "towering above the humbler dwellings" (Theocharis 1972, p. 11). He thought that only towards the end of the Middle Neolithic period did part of the Eastern ridge become separated from the rest of the area by the construction of retaining walls and the digging of a ditch. In this way the actual Akropolis would have been created.

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Miss Alexandra Christopoulou has analysed this blade.