TELL QRAYA: HIGHLIGHTS OF THE 1981 EXCAVATION SEASON

Tell Qraya is predominately a late-fourth millennium B.C. (herein referred to as Protoliterate) site which astrides a natural conglomerate rock promotory on the west bank of the Euphrates River, just five kilometers north of the large second millennium B.C. city of Tell Asharah (ancient Terqa). (See Figure 1) The site was once characterized by a relatively steep-sided conical mound, before the reduction of its height by over four meters as a result of modern activity to prepare living space for the current inhabitors. Today only about 30 percent of the mound itself is exposed for archaeological investigation, and only the southeastern side is free enough for extensive excavations.

The site was first recognized as a Protoliterate settlement during the 1977 reconnaissance of the Terqa countryside by Olivier Ronault and William Shelby. (See Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1978:6-7) They discovered an abundance of ceramic materials identifiable with mid-second millennium B.C. (parallel the main period at Tell Ashara), Late Uruk (Protoliterate C), and Late Ubaid (early fourth millennium B.C.) cultures.

The importance for further archaeological investigation was established as a result of excavations in 1979 by Kay Simpson along the east side of the mound. (See Simpson 1983:455-500) Simpson was able to determine that much of the mid-second millennium occupation had been bulldozed over the side and into the Euphrates River, thereby exposing the Protoliterate settlement below. In a 4 by 4 meter square, she uncovered the remains of a Protoliterate house and a sequence of Protoliterate deposits composed of three distinct building phases and 13 associated floors.

In the Fall of 1981, a small archaeological team under my direction excavated at Tell Qraya for eight consecutive weeks. (I would like to thank the International Communication Agency of the U.S. State Department for providing me with a Fulbright-Hayes grant to conduct my research at Tell Qraya for the year 1981-1982.) A series of 1 by 2 meter test trenches were systematically explored to determine the extent and depth of the Protoliterate settlement, as surface findings can reveal little due to the drastic alteration of the former contour of the mound. In all, 23 test trenches were dug in the more exposed southeastern area (see Figure 2). Test trenching revealed, in grid square S12, an area comparatively free of modern

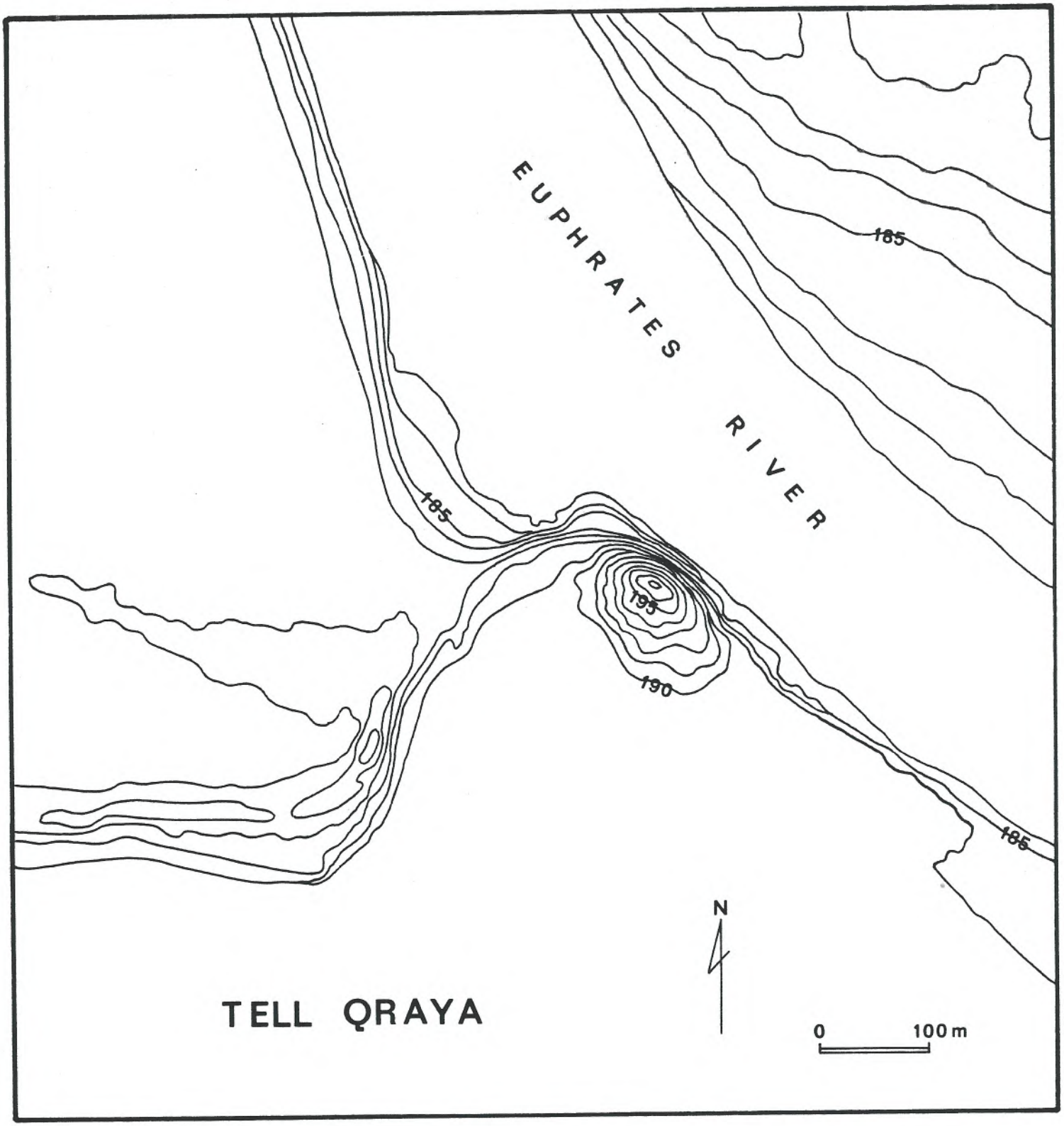

Figure 1 - Map of Tell Qraya and Surroundings

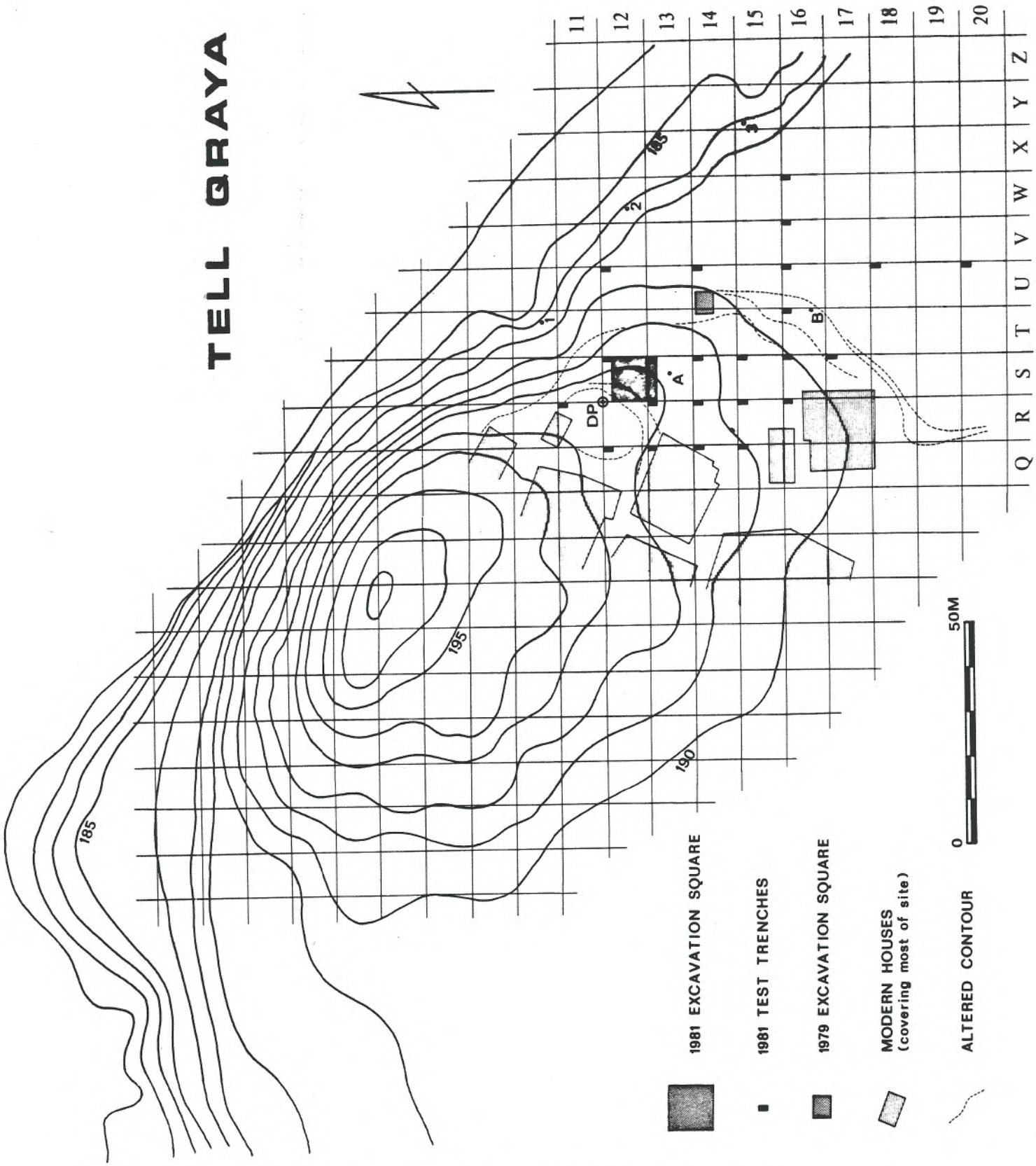

Figure 2 - Grid Map with Location of Excavated Areas

overburden, and a 10 by 10 meter square was opened next to our fixed datum point (see Figure 2).

Extent of Protoliterate Habitation

The test trenches revealed that the Protoliterate site extended considerably to the southeast. Test trenches on the mound itself (Q12-Q15, R11, R13-R16, S12-S17, and T16) had a thick layer, 1 to 2 meters, of loose earth considerably mixed with mid-second millennium B.C. and Protoliterate pottery sherds; only at considerable depths did traces of undisturbed brickwork appear. Test trenches (U14, U16, U18, U20, V16, and W16) in the surrounding agricultural plain had a thick plow zone, under which an abundance of Protoliterate ceramic types and indications of mudbrick architecture were discovered. Test trench U20, located about 40 meters from the original edge of the mound, had an intact oven area with associated brickwork in good Protoliterate contexts ca. 1.5 meters below the surface. Test trench U14 was taken down to virgin soil; starting at 2.75 meters below the present plain level, 50 centimeters of sterile gravel bed was removed. Not only is the Protoliterate settlement much more extensive than suggested by the present size of the mound, much of it probably lies buried beneath the surrounding plain.

Protoliterate Phases and The Architectural Sequence

Excavation in the main square yielded a Protoliterate deposition of almost four meters, divisible into eight stratigraphic phases in association with three different building phases (see Figure 3). On the basis of architectural features and associated small finds, it is possible to distinguish various types of activity areas, such as a kiln work station, an open court, and oven/hearth areas; the locations of which persisted over many phases.

Phase I was much disturbed by late burials and modern pits, and we could salvage only three ovens with pottery sherd surfaces and noted some indication of brickwork which may have been second millennium rather than Protoliterate. Phase II was a thick layer of dark, ashy depositions which overlaid the entire square. Phase III contained the first of a sequence of five kilns built in approximately the same location, one on top of the other. There was a hard, bricky layer which protected the first building phase below. Phase IV represents the first building phase (see Figure 3). There were at least three

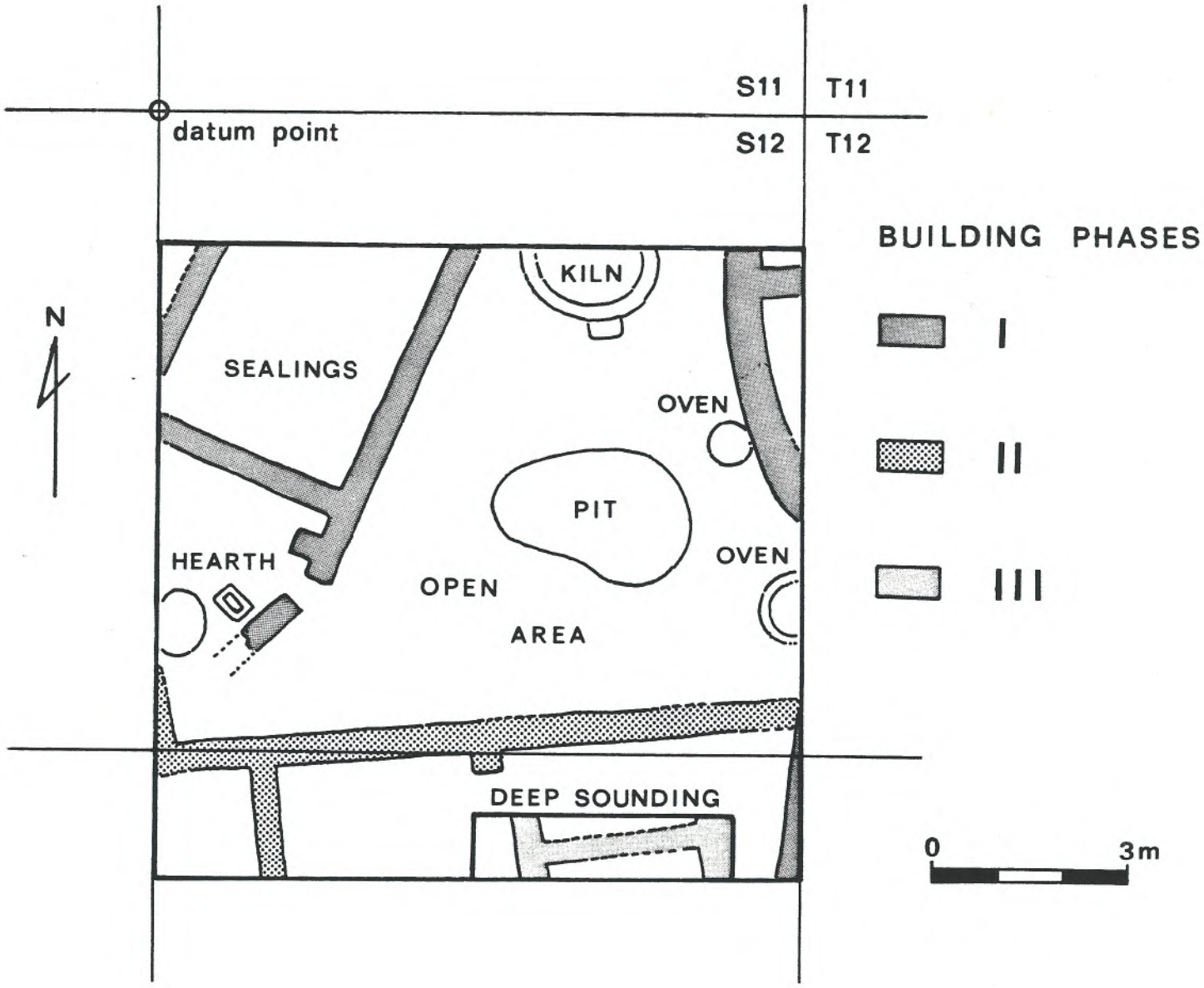

Figure 3 - Plan Showing the Three Building Phases in Square S12

separate structures with associated ovens on the outside. Between the structures was a large open area with a shallow pit in the center. Phase V is the second building phase characterized by a long stretch of wall in the southern side of the square. In the area north of the wall were two, elliptical shaped, fire troughs containing much charcoal. Phase VI is an intermediate layer of dark, ashy deposition which varied in depth throughout the square. There was evidence of much burning, and perhaps this stratum represents a period of brief abandonment of this side of the mound. Phase VII is the third building phase, found only in the narrow sounding along the south baulk (see Figure 3), but with indications of lower walls in the northwestern area of the square as well. Phase VIII is also only in the narrow sounding and is another stratum of dark, ashy deposition containing a circular kiln or oven, most of which is in the south baulk. A hard, crusty surface was cleared at the bottom of the narrow sounding; this marks the beginning of a lower phase which is as yet unexcavated. Phase VIII is down to about the level of the plain.

Careful articulation of the brickwork revealed a standard manner of brick laying throughout: bricks were laid lengthwise along the outer face of walls and crosswise within. There were three types of bricks. The most common were the standard Protoliterate rectangular bricks, 10-11 by 10-11 by 25-35 centimeters in dimension. Flat, planoconvex bricks, measuring 13-17 by 8-10 by 22-23 centimeters, were used in places for floor pavements. And, there were also some good examples of small square bricks, 6-8 by 8-13 by 10-14 centimeters, found in rows interspersed in wall constructions.

Ubaid Occupation

Even though a substantial number of Late Ubaid sherds, as identified by ware and painted motifs, were found in all Protoliterate levels, no where was there an Ubaid stratum. The actual Ubaid settlement must be located elsewhere, probably to the west deep beneath the modern houses, or it was completely uprooted by extensive and intensive Protoliterate cultural activity.

Protoliterate Material

Outstanding among the artifacts found at Tell Qraya during the 1981 season are 17 fragments of clay objects with seal impressions. Motifs range from simple geometric

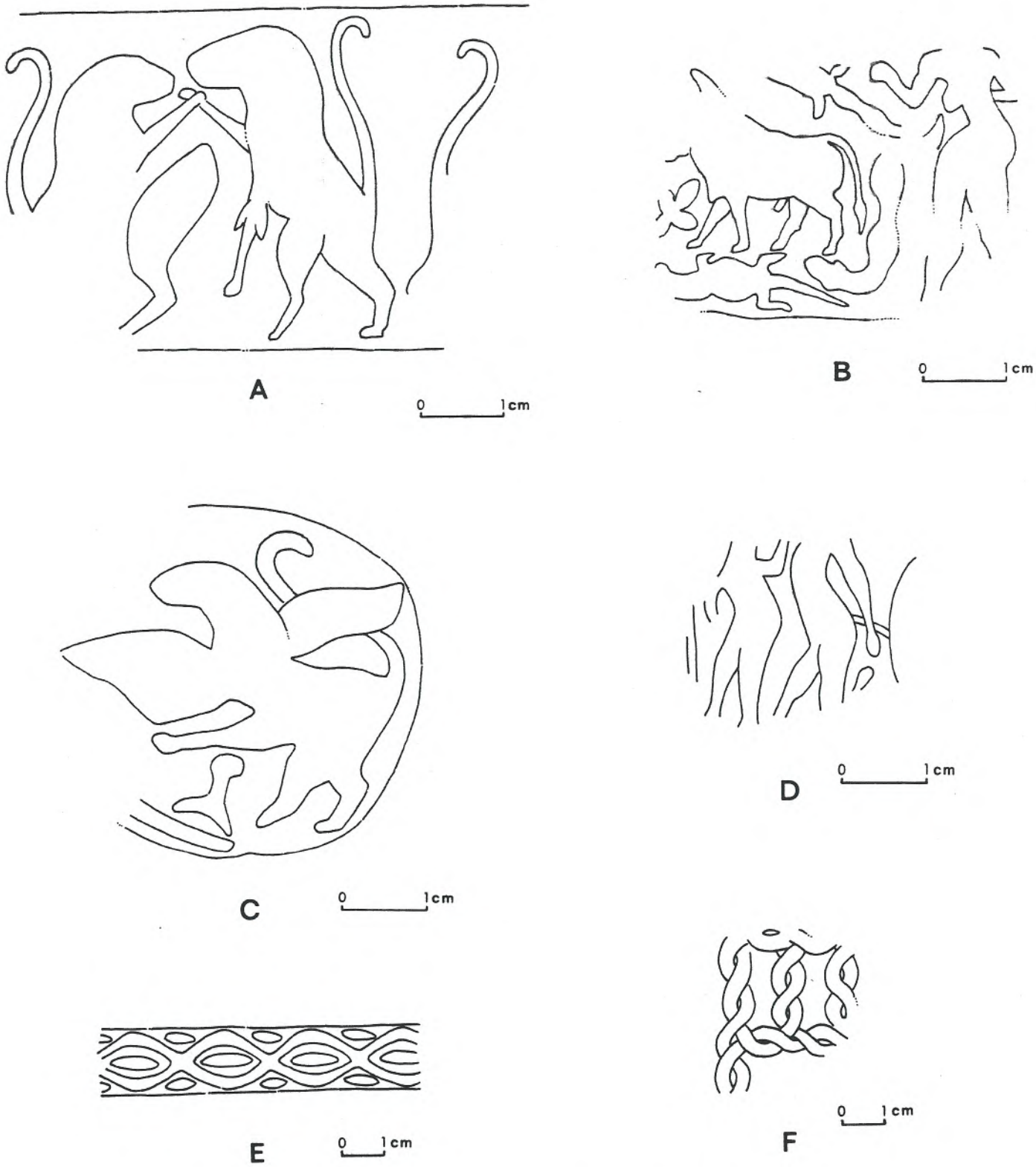

Figure 4 - Protoliterate Seal Impressions

designs such as a grain motif which occurs four times to a complex scene depicting a woman standing behind a bull along with a snake and two lizardlike animals (see Figure 4, B). The most common cylinder seal impression, occurring on seven different objects, is that of two antithetical lions with an animal leg between (see Figure 4, A). Extremely interesting is a stamped sealing depicting a winged feline standing up on its hind legs (see Figure 4, C). There is one cylinder seal impression which shows two human figures standing side by side with the figure on the right appearing to have hands tied behind the back (see Figure 4, D). Other motifs include an example of intertwined ropes (Figure 4, F), a baked lid with two rollings of a row of lozenges in the typical Jemdat Nasr brocade style (see Figure 4, E), and a design which appears to be a row of four-legged animals. These seal impressions are found on clay bullae, conical door sealings, jar sealings (or lids) and bottle jar stoppers. The actual stone cylinder seals and stamp seals were not found.

Pottery types are standard for Protoliterate cultures; the bulk being, of course, beveled-rim bowls; 72 of which were whole enough to easily measure for holding capacity. (Beveled-rim bowls have proved to be important for the analysis of resource distribution and culture change during the Protoliterate period; see Shimabuku 1978:335-413.) The pottery corpus at Tell Qraya includes four-lugged vessels, narrow-necked jars (or bottles), everted-rim pots, large oval basins, vats, spouted pots, strap-handle cooking pots, banded-rim bowls (flower pots), and numerous pouring lip bowls. Pottery designs consist of horizontal incisions, cross-hatched incisions, finger-impressed appliques, fingernail impressions, and reserve slip.

Other objects, characteristic of Protoliterate cultures, include four clay cone fragments, spindle whorls, a few highly-fired clay sickles, two small four-legged animal figurines, unbaked clay slingshots, clay tokens, and stone vessels of white marble and alabaster. Bone objects are for the most part simple awls and sharpened bone splinters. Other small finds were two copper pins, an assortment of common groundstone stools, and curious objects shaped from lumps of bitumen. Of considerable note is a single, semi-flexed burial of an adolescent-size individual with two complete Protoliterate vessels near the head and hands.

There was a prolific chipped stone industry at Tell Qraya as evidenced by numerous raw flint nodules, worked

cores and masses of debitage, especially concentrated around the kiln and hearth areas (see Figure 3). There is also a fine collection of large, fan-scrapers which are not found at other Protoliterate sites. Also worth noting is the considerable number of finely-made obsidian blades and flakes (some mocrolithic) which contrast with the much cruder tools made from local flints.

The overall impression one gets from preliminary analysis of the material culture thus far found at Tell Qraya indicates that the Protoliterate inhabitants had close cultural affinities with their relatives in Southern Mesopotamia. And a good case can be made for Tell Qraya being a direct off shoot from major Protoliterate centers in the Uruk area, but finds such as obsidian microliths, copper pins, alabaster bowls, and a small eye amulet attest to their participation in the trade and cultural exchange networks which linked together the entire Mesopotamian basin area during the crucial period marking the transition from village/farming to urban/state societies.

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