

The human face and the origins of the Neolithic: the carved bone wand from Tell Qarassa North, Syria

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The origins of the Neolithic in the Near East were accompanied by significant ritual and symbolic innovations. Earlier traditions of figurative art had avoided the detailed and naturalistic representation of the human face. Fundamental changes occurred during the Pre-Pottery Neolithic with the famous plastered skulls of Jericho and other sites. Statues, masks and smaller carvings also appeared. New light is thrown on the symbolic and social context of these changes by the discovery of a bone wand displaying two engraved human faces from the Early Neolithic site of Tell Qarassa in Syria, dating from the late ninth millennium BC. This small bone object from a funerary layer can be related to monumental statuary of the same period in the southern Levant and south-east Anatolia that probably depicted powerful supernatural beings. It may also betoken a new way of perceiving human identity and of facing the inevitability of death. By representing the deceased in visual form the living and the dead were brought closer together.

Keywords: Syria, Tell Qarassa North, ninth millennium BC, Pre-Pottery Neolithic, human representation, funerary ritual, figurative art, plastered skulls, Neolithic transition

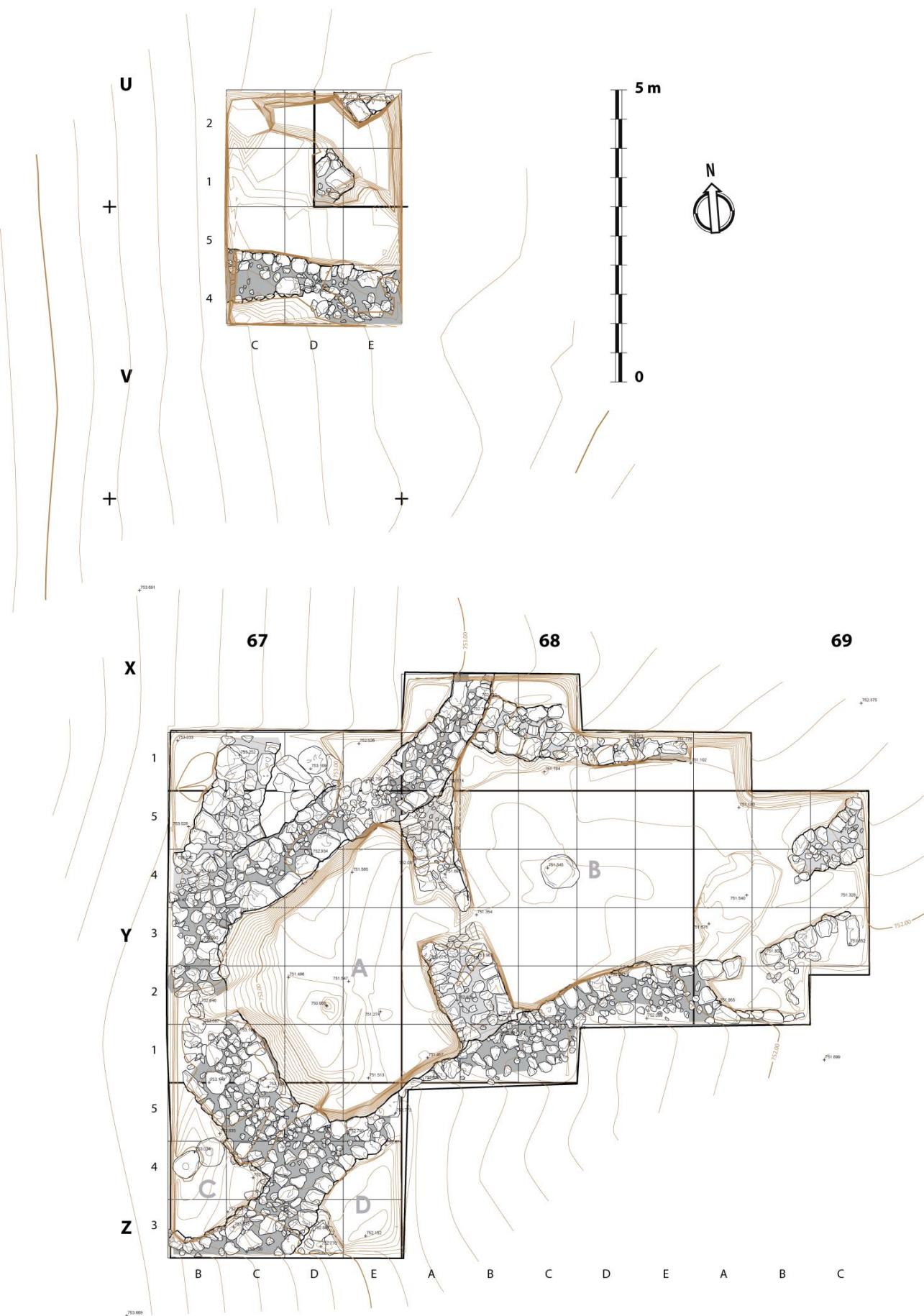


Figure 2 (enlargement). Plan and topography of the architectural remains at Tell Qarassa North, Syria.

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