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THE TRANSITION FROM THE MIDDLE TO THE UPPER PALAEOLITHIC IN THE EGYPTIAN NILE VALLEY

by

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1. MIDDLE PALAEOLITHIC

In order to understand the transition from the Middle to the Upper Palaeolithic industries in the Egyptian Nile valley, one has to look first for the characteristics of the Middle Palaeolithic industries. Only few sites belonging to this technological stage have been excavated and nearly all are functionally oriented towards chert exploitation. As retouched tools are rare, only debitage technology suggests the existence of different complexes (VAN PEER, VERMEERSCH, 1987). A first one, the C-group, is characterized by a nearly exclusive utilization of the classical Levallois technology. Such C-group material has been collected at the site of Nazlet Khater-2 (Fig. 1) (MERTENS, 1984) and Nazlet Sabaha (VERMEERSCH *et al.*, 1986). A second complex, the N-group, represented e.g. at Nazlet Khater-1 (Fig. 2) and Nazlet Khater-3, attests a predominance of the Nubian core type-1 (GUICHARD, 1965). Flint supply came from the Nile cobble terraces and derived wadi deposits. At one location we observed intentional exploitation in shallow pits, dug in a Nile terrace deposit with selection of appropriate chert cobbles for debitage on the spot (VERMEERSCH *et al.*, 1986).

The environmental indications in relation to Middle Palaeolithic sites always suggest a wetter climate than the present one. All recent evidences suggest that such a climatic period came to an end before 80,000 years ago (SCHILD, WENDORF, 1986; PAULISSEN, VERMEERSCH, 1987), which is by far older than the traditional period of transition between Middle and Upper Palaeolithic.

Up to now we have no idea which man was the maker of those Middle Palaeolithic industries. The claim that the Wadi Kubbanyia skeleton was of neandertal type has not been fulfilled. A recent study made clear that the skeleton was much younger and that its type fits into the general type of the Mechtoïds (WENDORF, SCHILD, 1986).

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2. UPPER PALAEOLITHIC

In the Egyptian Nile Valley nearly all excavated sites of Upper Palaeolithic industries are posterior to 21,000 years ago, creating thus an important chronological hiatus when related to Middle Palaeolithic industries. Only two sites could be situated in this time hiatus: Nazlet Khater-4 (VERMEERSCH *et al.*, 1984a, 1984b) and Shuwikhat-1 (PAULISSEN, VERMEERSCH, VAN NEER, 1985).

Nazlet Khater-4 is a chert mining site firmly dated at about 33,000 years ago. The exploitation organization is already complex. Blades (Fig. 3) have been manufactured by a simple hard hammer technique from cores with one striking platform. Tools are rare. They are of normal Upper Palaeolithic type with the exception of the presence of some bifacial axes. The Nazlet Khater man (THOMA, 1984), a fully modern man with some archaic traits, can be associated with this exploitation.

Shuwikhat-1, a small hunting campsite, has a TL-date of 24,700 ± 2500 years (OxTL.253). At Shuwikhat-1 (Fig. 4) large blades of good quality have also been obtained by a hard hammer technique from cores with two opposed platforms after preparation of long crests. Bladelets are absent. The most common tools are denticulated blades, burins and endscrapers. Backed blades are rare. Ouchtata bladelets are lacking.

The for the Egyptian Nile valley rich Late Palaeolithic sequence starts with the Early Kubbaniyan (21,000 - 19,000 B.P.) (WENDORF, SCHILD, 1986: 46). It is characterized by a bladelet technology for the production of mainly backed bladelets, perforators, notches and denticulates.

In none of those earlier Upper Palaeolithic industries is there any evidence of Levallois debitage. This poorly documented period from about 35,000 to 19,000 years ago, in fact, testifies of the presence of industries, where only blade technology has been utilized by modern man. In the light of these data the characteristics of the early Upper Palaeolithic in the Egyptian Nile valley are fully conform with those of the other circummediterranean areas where blade technology is introduced from about 40,000 years ago. The frequently cited conservatism of the Egyptian Upper Palaeolithic has to be questioned; on basis of the available evidence it can no longer be maintained.

3. MIDDLE/UPPER PALAEOLITHIC TRANSITION ?

There is no known lithic sequence in the Egyptian Nile valley, which shows a gradual transition from the Middle Palaeolithic Levallois technology into an Upper Palaeolithic blade industry. This is due to the fact that there still exists a very long gap in the Egyptian prehistoric record, partly coinciding with that transition period. As it seems unlikely that the Egyptian Nile valley lacked any kind of human occupation during that period, the gap probably originates from problems in dating the prehistoric remains and the related deposits, which cover this transition period. Indeed, very often late Middle Palaeolithic and Upper Palaeolithic related deposits are indistinguishable both in the field and in the laboratory. Another hypothesis could suggest that the relevant deposits are not exposed and are mostly covered under the arable land.

In their 'Prehistory of the Nile Valley' WENDORF and SCHILD (1976) mention the existence of some Late Palaeolithic sites in which the Levallois technology still occurs. However, a critical review of the litterature and the stratigraphy of these sites reveals that some of them are not securely dated (PAULISSEN, VERMEERSCH, 1987). The Khormusan of the Sudan has already been reconsidered and a new absolute chronology had been proposed (WENDORF, SCHILD, 1976: 238; WENDORF, SCHILD and HAAS,

1979). It is now believed that the Khormusan is much older than was originally thought and lies beyond the range of conventional radiocarbon dating. With its Levallois technology it can better be understood as a Middle Palaeolithic industry.

Idfuan sites, such as E71P1 (WENDORF, SCHILD, 1976: 243), which are characterized by a high Levallois index, were claimed to have an age of 15,000 B.P. The lithics (Fig. 5) of the Idfuan display at the same time characteristics of Middle and of Upper Palaeolithic technology, whereas tools include typical Upper Palaeolithic types such as burins, endscrapers and backed elements. Association between the archaeological material and the 14C dates however remains unclear. Therefore, the Idfuan should better be considered tentatively as a transitional industry, which could be situated in the time lapse between about 80,000 and 35,000 years ago (PAULISSEN, VERMEERSCH, 1987; VAN PEER, VERMEERSCH, 1987). Similar arguments can eventually be put forward for the Older Sebilian.

4. LATE PALAEOLITHIC

According to F. WENDORF and R. SCHILD (1980: 261) the Levallois technology is occasionally attested in the Kubbaniyan and also in some other Late Palaeolithic industries (WENDORF, SCHILD, 1976) from about 18,000 B.P. on. The impact of that debitage technique remains, however, very modest. As Levallois technology is apparently not present in the early Upper Palaeolithic, the question arises how this reappearance around 18,000 B.P. is to be interpreted. A first hypothesis would be that the Kubbaniyan reinvented the Levallois technique for some special purpose. Such a reinvention hypothesis is obviously not very popular in archaeological models. Another hypothesis would consider this reappearance as being intrusive. Taking into account the lack of evidence for Levallois technology at that time in the Late Palaeolithic industries from the regions north, east and west of the Nile Valley, the only source area could be the south. And indeed, in East Africa Levallois technique seems to continue well into some Late Palaeolithic groups. In this hypothesis the first Nile cataract near Aswan could be considered as a frontier between an East African world in the south and a circummediterranean world in the north. In the south the Middle Palaeolithic techniques continue to be utilized, whereas in the north leptolithic tradition did appear from at least 33,000 years ago.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Before we can document more fully the processes which have led to the abandonment of the Levallois technology and to the introduction of a purely leptolithic tradition in the Egyptian Nile valley north of Aswan, we surely need more good sites which date from the period between 80,000 and 35,000 years ago.

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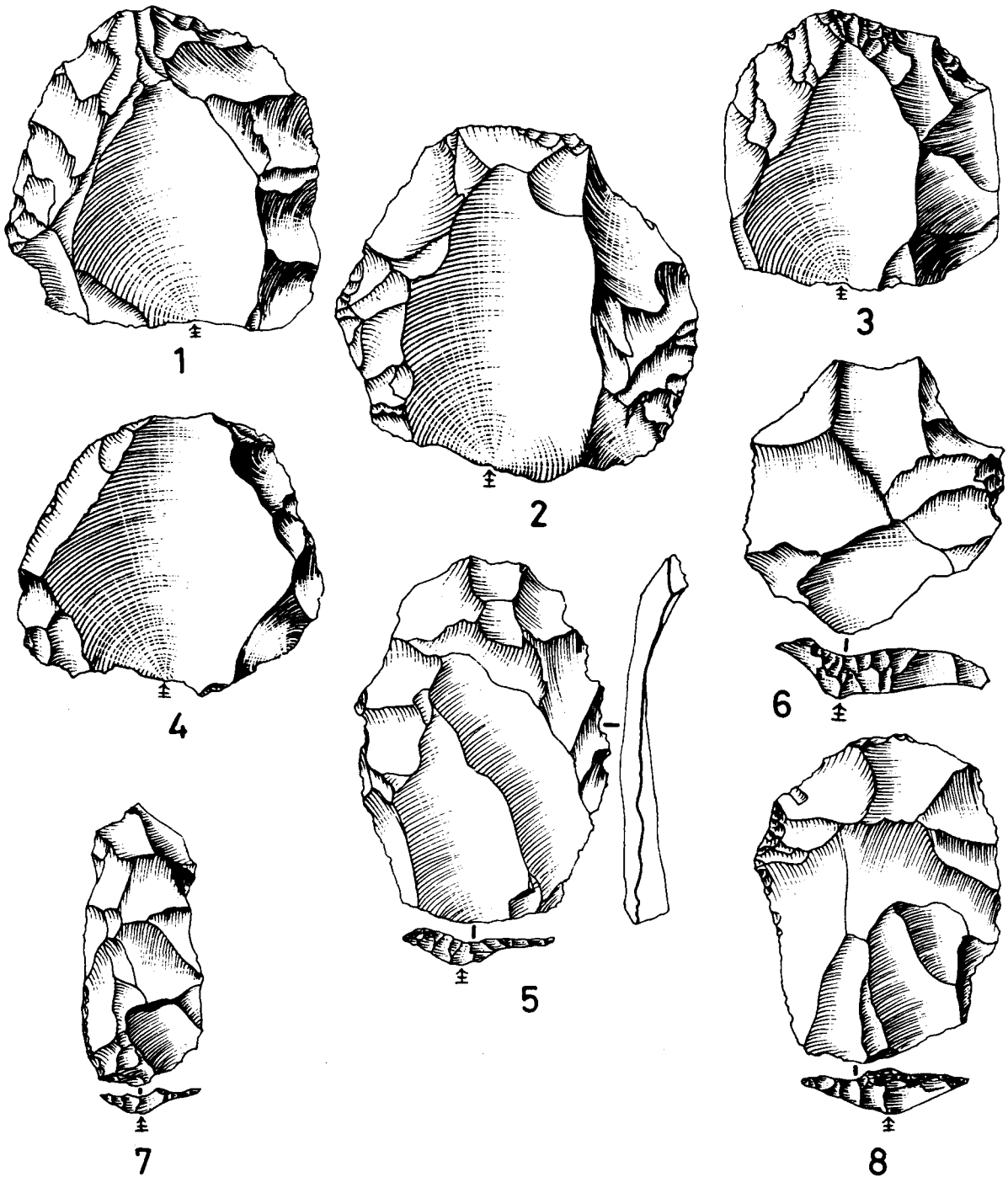

FIGURE 1 — Nazlet Khater-2: 1-4: Levallois cores; 5, 7, 8: Levallois flakes; 6: Levallois blade.

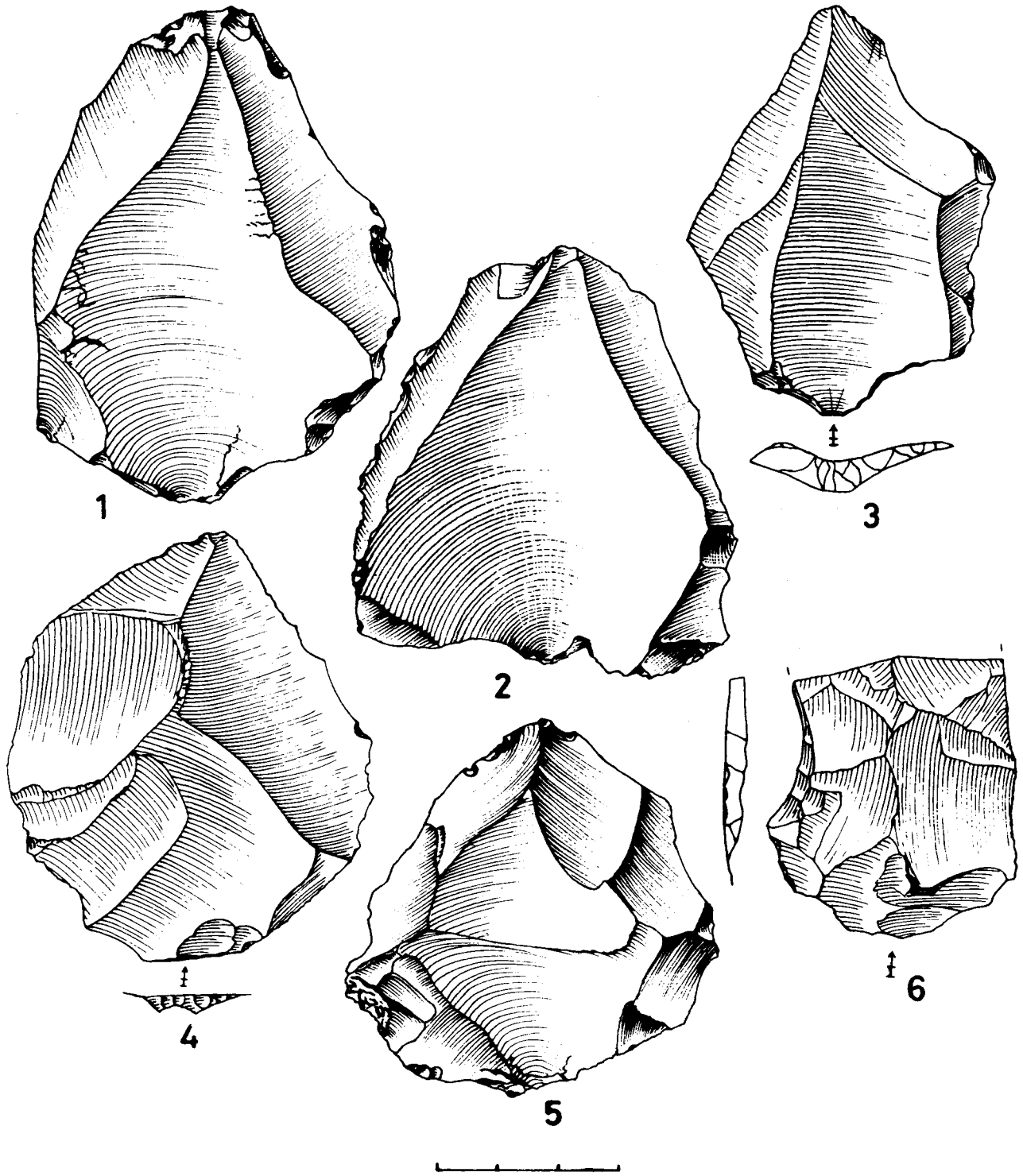

FIGURE 2 — Nazlet Khater-1: 1, 2, 5: Nubian Levallois cores; 3, 4: Nubian Levallois flakes; 6: Notch

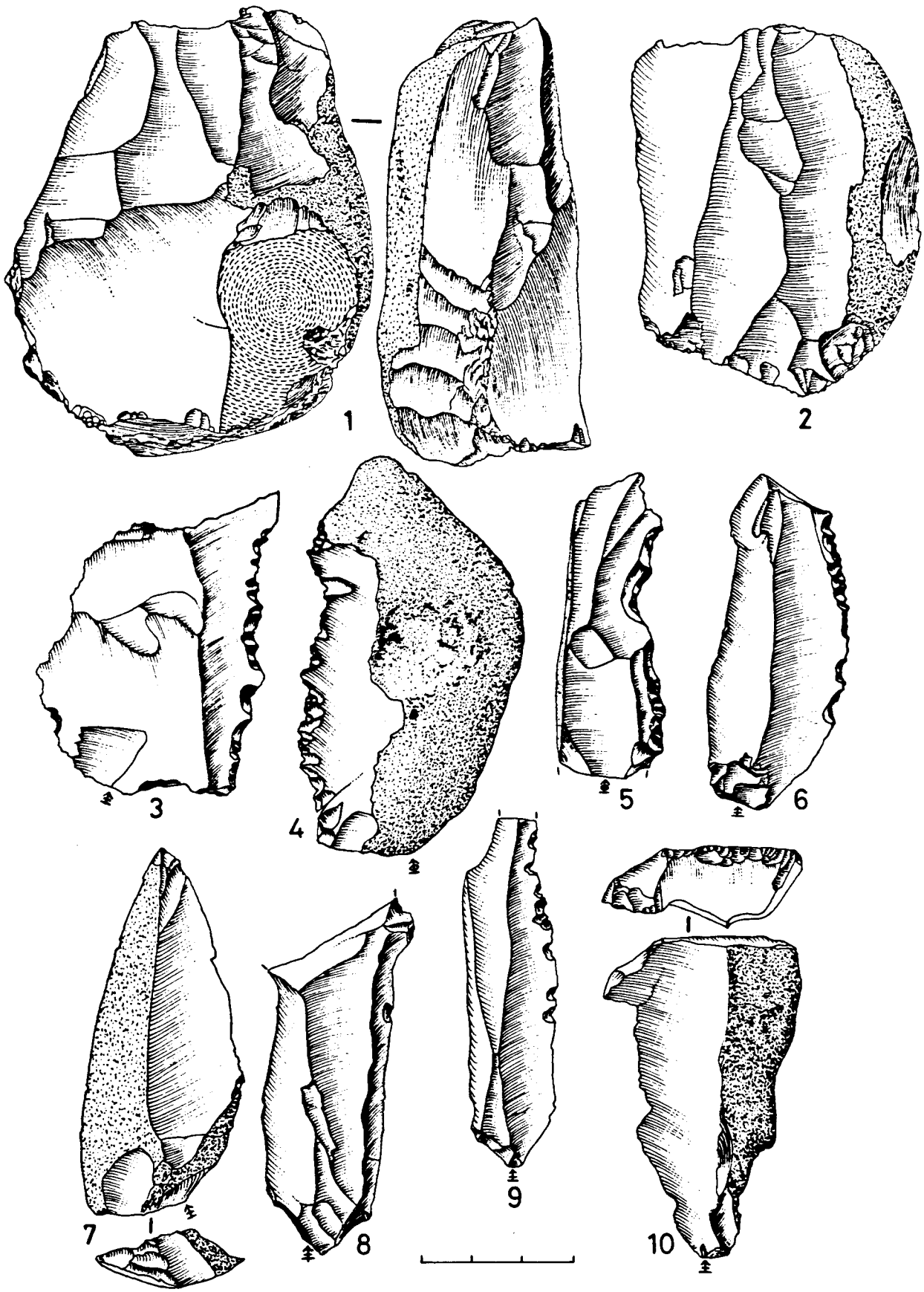

FIGURE 3 — Nazlet Khater 4: 1-2: Blade cores; 3-6, 9: Denticulated blades and flakes; 7, 8, 10: Retouched blades.

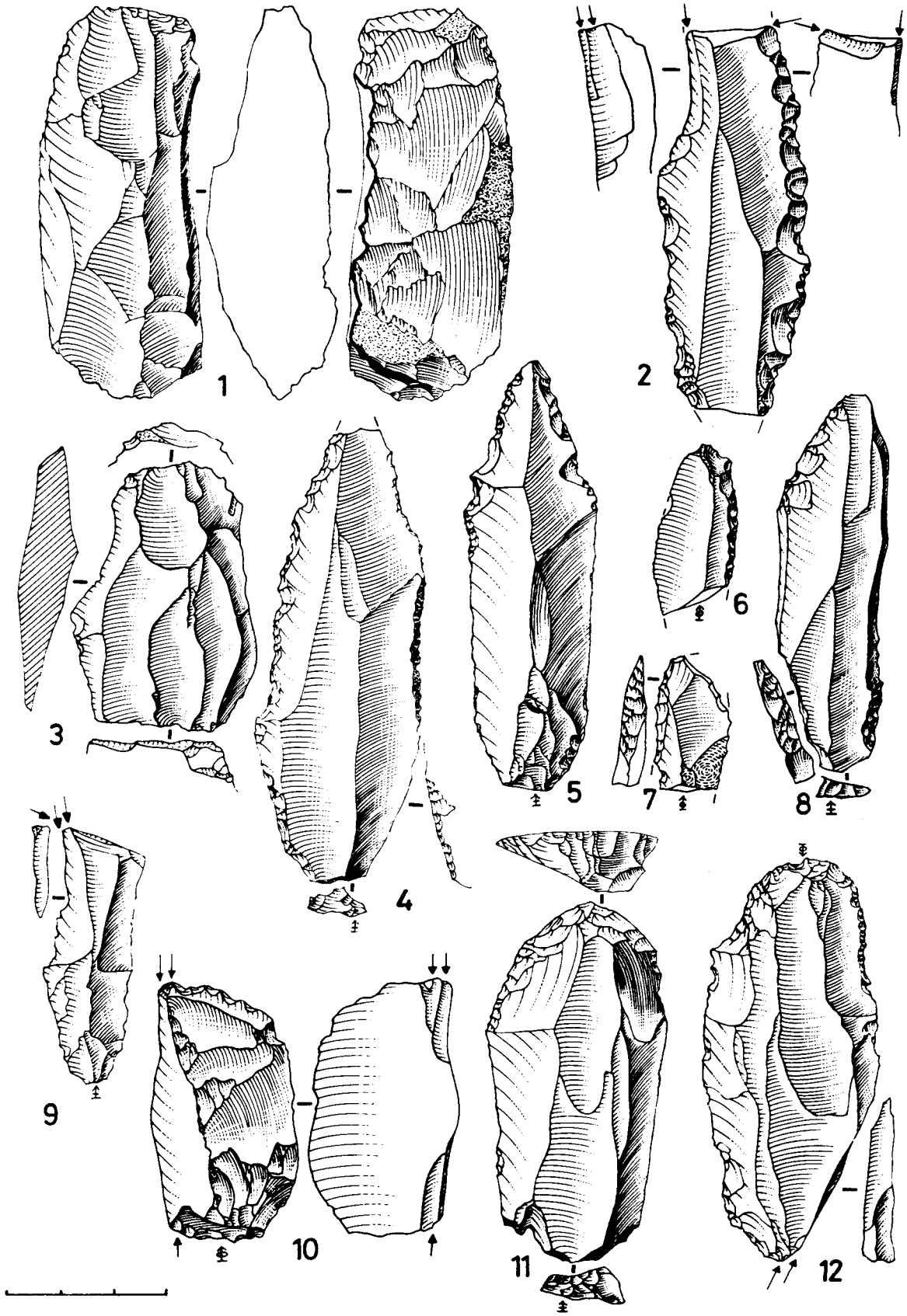

FIGURE 4 — Shuwikhat-1: 1, 3: Opposed platform cores; 2, 9, 10: Burins; 4, 5: Denticulated blades; 6-8: Backed blades; 11: Double end-scraper; 12: End-scraper-burin.

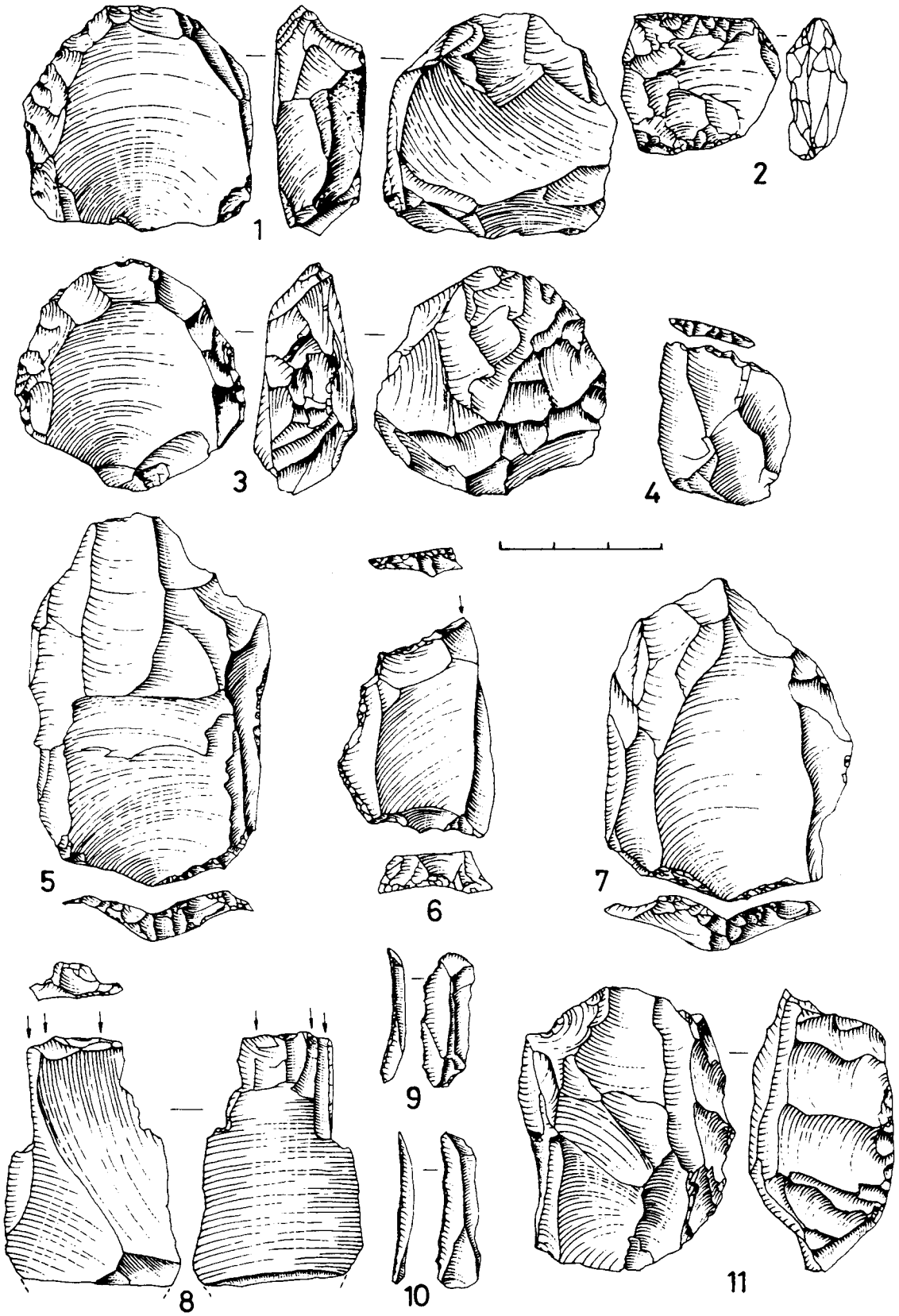

Figure 5 — El Kilh (Edfu) E71P1 (after Wendorf and Schild, 1976, Fig. 164-169): 1, 3: Levallois cores; 2: Scaled piece; 4: Truncated flake; 5, 7: Levallois flakes; 6, 8: Burins; 9: Ouchtata retouched bladelet; 10: Backed bladelet; 11: Opposed platform core.