

**BASQUE EXPEDITION TO LABRADOR, 1985**

Dr. Jose Antonio Hernandez Vera  
Juan Jose Bienes Calvo  
Julio Nunez Marcen  
Irene Zumalde Igartua

INTRODUCTION

The whaling tradition of the Basque Country can be traced to as early as the XIIIth century, when the first accounts of this activity are recorded. In those days, the whales were captured in the Gulf of Biscay, where these cetaceans came regularly. Gradually the whales started moving further and further away, so that the Basque fishermen had to travel greater distances to capture them, first to the Galileean and Austurian coasts and, later, to the North Sea, Ireland and Iceland.

The discovery of the New World opened new possibilities for the development of the whaling industry. Though the belief that the Basque fishermen had arrived on the Newfoundland and Labrador coasts before 1492 is still unproven, it does in no way shadow the historic consequences of their presence. With the exception of the Vikings, whose previous arrival in North America didn't have any historic or economic consequences for Europe, the Basque whalers were the first Europeans that systematically explored and exploited the whale resources of the Labrador waters. The efforts of the Breton fisherman, who had arrived there before the Basques, were mainly aimed at the cod fishery and theirs was never as big an enterprise as that of the Basques.

Before 1497, John Cabot, an Italian navigator working for the English king, surveyed the Strait of Belle Isle, gauging its economic possibilities and bringing over to Europe the news of its existence.

At that time the Strait was a route for a great number of whales that annually migrated south towards the Gulf of St. Lawrence, as still happens nowadays, although their number has considerably diminished. The descriptions

and reports the Breton mariners brought with them were one of the reasons for the affluence of the Basque whalers who, with better technical knowledge and superior skill, soon monopolized the whaling activities of that area, a monopoly they maintained during the second half of the sixteenth century.

During the last decade of the sixteenth century the Basque whaling activity declined due to several different and convergent factors. The main one was the disaster the Spanish Armada inflicted on the Basque fishing fleet, that was, in great part, sunk in English waters. This together with the frequent embargoes the Spanish Crown ordered over the Basque ships to employ them in the Cerrera de las Indias made them lose their competitiveness against other fleets engaged in the same enterprise, mainly the Dutch and English ones. Another factor recorded in the documentation, was the shift towards the south of the Inuit population, that lived in the northern part of Labrador. Their hostility towards the Europeans made dangerous the harbours the Basques were using, forcing them to move to other places. Finally the opportunities the new fishing areas in northern Europe offered the European whalers caused their abandonment of the Labrador coasts, in order to work on new and less dangerous banks. But even so, the first mentioned cause must have been the determining one. Since then, the arrantzales probably hired their services to other countries, whose fishermen soon learned the whaling methods, relegating the Basques to a secondary position.

The signing of the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, with the division of Newfoundland between France and England, definitively pushed the Basque whalers away from these latitudes.

#### RECENT RESEARCH

Although only during more recent years has research work been done on this subject there are earlier works, some of them of great merit, that have studied the Basque whalers' history.

Lope de Isasti's book (1850), written in 1625 gives important references to the conditions in which the whalers fulfilled their work. Fernandez de Navarrete (1829) and Fernandez Duro's (1846) works - though they have valuable references - are biased when talking about the documentary bases; a problem

that we can also find with P. Landhe's (1971) book - further compromised by his overuse of anecdotal and superficial details which frequently veil reality. T. Guiard's (no reference) book is a more serious and important study of primary sources though he didn't consult all the documentation available. Ciriquiain Gaiztarro's (1961) contribution is a well-done and honest synthesis of the subject. Basas Fernandez (1963) started a new stage in the research around the whalers history, studying a series of original and important - though not numerous - documents.

On the Canadian side, R. Belanger (1980) brings some new interpretations. His research - more related to the codfishing than to the whaling - lacks a good analysis of historical facts.

It has been only during the past two decades that a bigger effort has been made to trace scientifically the history of the Basque whalers along the Newfoundland and Labrador coasts. The two components of recent research are: exhaustive research of the written documentation and an archaeological study of the sites where the Basques used to live and work.

Archival work has been led by Selma Barkham (1977, 1979, 1980, 1982): methodical work this author has done in the European and Spanish archives - especially in the Basque ones - has enabled her to gather an incredible amount of first-hand information drawn out of sixteenth and seventeenth century documents, that together with her strict historical bent, make her the premier authority on this subject.

In the second direction we find the archaeological digs that are being systematically carried out in Red Bay where, since 1979, there are two teams working. On land a Memorial University team, directed by Dr. J. Tuck (1982a,b, 1983, 1984) is conducting a study of the Basque remains on Saddle Island. They have uncovered several structures that sheltered the ovens and cooperages the Basques used to work in. They also found a cemetery which contributed a lot more new information about the conditions in which the whalers worked. A group of underwater archaeologists from Parks Canada, under the direction of Mr. P. Grenier, is studying the remains of a galleon - sunk in about 30 feet of water off Saddle Island - that was originally believed to be the "San Juan", records of whose sinking Mrs. Barkham has discovered to date to the autumn of 1565.

## THE BASQUE EXPEDITION TO LABRADOR, 1985

### A. Objectives

The expedition organized and sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Navigation of Bilbao, Spain, to commemorate its Centenary, was aimed at locating and identifying some of the other harbours that were used by the Basque whalers during the sixteenth century along the coast of Labrador. The length of the coastline, in whose ports the Basque ships had sounded and the concomitant logistical problems forced us to restrict the area of our study to a stretch 80 km long, situated on the northeastern end of the Strait of Belle Isle. Local fishermen in that zone had already produced information about tiles found in some of its harbours. The archaeological characteristics of the sites were unknown, due to the fact that the main archaeological investigations had been restricted to the southern harbours of this coast.

### B. Methodology

The methodology followed during the survey of the selected areas was - similar to the one we use in our regular fieldwork, although the specific remains we were to look for conditioned, somehow, the judgement that directed our work, which had the final aim of locating and studying those places that due to their physical characteristics had the best conditions to harbour the whaling activities. The nature of these activities required the existence of ports with enough depth to sound the galleons and allow the landing of the shallops that hauled the captured whales to shore close to the open sea, where they captured the cetaceans, in order to save the maximum amount of time for their work, which took place roughly between June and November.

For the study of the coast and the selection of the places we were to visit, we used the available cartographic documentation. The first source was the nautical charts of the Canadian Hydrographic Service, that showed with great accuracy the marine depths. The references we gained were completed with other notes taken from the National Topographic survey maps and aerial photographs, of that zone. We also used older cartography, such as the British Admiralty Charts for the Strait of Belle Isle and various sixteenth and seventeenth century maps.

Thus we selected the harbours that seemed to our judgement the most appropriate ones of this sort of activity. We proceeded to examine the sites and look for unequivocal signs of Basque presence.

The clues that were basic in our surveys were the remains of the tiles that had been brought over to roof the tryworks and other structures built there, as it appears in the documents. Nowadays the tiles show clearly along the eroded coastline.

On the three harbours where our survey was successful we proceeded to open  $1m^2$  test excavations, mainly along the shoreline and on different levels, in order to determine the way they used the available spaces, and the distribution of the structures, related to their use and to the topographic restrictions.

### C. Results

The results we obtained in this field season are mainly related to the locating and beginning of the study of three harbours occupied by the Basques during the sixteenth century. There were signs that suggested the existence of Basque remains in some of these harbours, due to references of tiles that had appeared. In fact, in one of the sites there are several "holes" made with not too clear purpose, maybe to remove pieces of whale baleen. However this was the first time that the area was systematically studied for this purpose.

#### 1. Chateau Bay -

This geographical unit is formed by two bays, Temple Bay and Pitts Harbour and four major islands: Whale, Henley, Castle and Stage. It has two well defined areas. The first one, that includes the two bays and Whale Island, blocks the ocean influences that would otherwise affect Temple Bay; the second area is formed by the other three islands: Henley, Castle and Stage. The first two make a natural breakwater that gives the sea arm, that opens between them and Stage, the ideal features of a secure anchorage for the galleons, with direct access from the open sea through a southern entrance and from the east via the American Tickle that separates the basaltic "castles" that crown Henley and Castle Islands, a natural entrance still used.



EIP-2  
It is precisely this natural harbour, formed between these three islands, that was the place chosen by the Basque whalers to establish their whaling station. They occupied the eastern side of Stage Island, that provides the optimum conditions due to the presence of a small hill which protects this area from the southern winds, and the basaltic promontories do the same with the eastern winds. This side of the island also has a coastal outline that enabled them to tie up their shallops in a convenient place to allow the cutting of the whale with immediate access to the tryworks areas.

EIP-3  
The small inner pond that is situated in this levelled area provides the drinkable water supply. The ostensible advantages offered by this natural haven were probably the reasons for the affluence of Basque whalers that at some point, must have overpopulated Stage Island. This overflow perhaps motivated the partial occupation of the western shore of Henley Island, despite that the conditions it provided were inferior to those of Stage. A submerged bar running along the shore and not far from it, hindered the approach of the shallops. This problem must have been solved by the use of wooden piers that enabled them to avoid the bar, very like the piers built in the middle of this century.

On the western side of Stage Island we excavated eleven  $1m^2$  test pits. The results we gained showed a dispersion of the occupation along this whole area, located around the pond, a place with wider spatial possibilities. The establishment's distribution is determined by the shoreline, as well as the location of the pond. A set of tryworks is located practically on the edge of the shoreline. Behind this, we found a carpenter's area, answering a clear functional need.

Test pit number two, the closest we made to the sea, is located over a tryworks area, ovens built with local rocks that showed clear signs of calcination, found immediately under the peat layer.

Test pit number five (Plate 1) can be considered representative of all the tests done on carpenters' areas. At 17 cm depth appeared the Basque layer, a result of the remains of a roof fallen directly on top of the shop's floor. In this site we checked that the roofing was made out of tiles set over an assemblage of whale baleen. The floor of the shop was a result of the accumulation of softwood chips and discarded staves directly on top of the

soil, and left there to make a damp-proof layer. Among the wood chips we found several wooden taps, a wooden peg (Plate 4) and some greyware fragments (Plate 5, number 3), and a piece of wool fabric, probably part of an apron.

In test pit number 6 (Plate 2) located on the cooperage area, possibly on one of its extremities, we found an accumulation of what seemed to be barrel staves.

EIAx-3 We also made three test excavations on the western side of Henley Island, whose results have already been mentioned. They indicated to us that there must have been a small sized establishment, that could have been used in a period of great population of the harbour. It is very difficult to evaluate its distribution and characteristics due to the destruction the rockfallings - from the basaltic "castle" - have caused on the site, which lies right below the promontory.

The survey conducted around Chateau Bay showed us the existence, on Castle Island, of a large quantity of whale bone, almost buried under the peat, on a beach just opposite the area we estimate must have been the more active one of the harbour, but far enough removed not to interfere with its activity. We also documented other remains, on Whale and Castle Islands, most likely of Maritime Archaic structures.

## 2. Pleasure Harbour *FaAwri*

The simplicity and exceptional conditions of this natural harbour define the possibilities of its use. The site is limited by the mainland and a small sea wall of about 800m length, slightly oriented towards the northwest. All this creates a broad harbour, completely protected from the open sea; moreover, it has enough depth - especially on its western side - to have allowed galleons the possibility of belaying to the shoreline. A small but copious stream coming from a great inner lake provides the drinkable water supply for the harbour.

These advantages must have permitted an intensive usage of the port. We verified that the site extended over both sides of the harbour, from approximately the middle of its length to its bottom part. It seems as though they used every single bit of space they could, even leaning the structures against the steep cliffs.

It is interesting to point out the existence of a natural cave at the entrance of the harbour. There, some eroded tile fragments were found, but the inner rock falls, made a survey of its interior difficult. Moreover, these fragments appeared loose on the ground, and could have been taken there at any time. Nowadays this harbour is not in regular use; only sporadically fishermen shelter from the storms or the strong swells.

We excavated six test pits all located on the eastern and bottom parts of the harbour. The most significant discovery was that of a trywork, for rendering blubber into oil. In order to get more defined information we enlarged the 1m<sup>2</sup> test pit to a 3 x 1 m trench (Plate 3). The oven is situated on the seaward area of an elevated platform. On its back side there is a free space that allowed themen working enough room to perform their activities: removing the blubber and drawing off the oil to put it in the barrels where they stored it till it was taken over to Europe. This structure was built with blocks of local volcanic rocks, lined with red clay, that had been brought over by the Basques to prevent the waste of heat.

### 3. Cape Charles FbAv-2

This was the last harbour we surveyed and the limit of our survey permit. Past Cape St. Charles the coast turns towards the west, so this area is less affected by the sea; it is also protected by a group of islands separated by narrow tickles that form sort of sheltering skerries. Cape Charles, immediately behind St. Charles River Tickle is the first significant cove that offers, in its middle, the possibility of a place to moor relatively big ships, like galleons. The present settlement has chosen the same area the whalers did - the eastern side of the cove.

This fact has produced almost complete disturbance of all the possible traces remaining from those times. The presence in the cove of huge blocks of rock, that hinder the mooring of boats, provided a problem which was probably overcome by the Basques in the same way as nowadays: wharfs built bottomed on the rocks, that helped to gain the depth needed. The water supply is guaranteed by two torrents descending from the hills at the bottom of the cove. The whaling tradition of this harbour has lasted till recently; there can still be seen some remains of a big whaling factory on Antill's Cove, the



next one to Cape Charles.

The features of this port's repeated occupation make very difficult the correct evaluation and definition of the Basque site itself, because the present buildings stand on top of the Basque remains, and there is only one area free from construction, at the entrance of the cove. The first two test pits were located in this small area near the entrance on a rocky beach cut by a steep and high cliff, where we found some tile remains, apparently not related with any structure. Of all the excavations made during our survey, these were the ones that gave us the most information about pottery (Plate 5, numbers 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7). We also made a third trial excavation outside this small area, close to a new building - built in 1984 - that had destroyed one of the areas still left untouched.

#### CONCLUSIONS

It is evident from our survey that these three harbours must have been subjects of major important activities, as the audience we found suggests remains belonging to tryworks and carpenters' areas, where they assembled the barrels and mended the damage shallops.

The spatial organisation of the structures conform to a very simple and functional system, delimited by the work they did and their temporary use of the buildings. It should be pointed out that the mainland was the working place, while the living and resting places seemed to be the galleons, anchored in these harbours.

Though the brevity of our work implied a great number of limitations that we hope to correct in possible future research, we feel confident that the greater part of the built structures were located near the shore. Around it, the structures appear grouped relative to the available space. Closest to shore they constructed the platforms where they located the ovens built with local granitic and basaltic rocks. The inner parts of the ovens were lined with clay, brought over from Europe. In some places they may have used local clay, when its characteristics were suitable, to make the base of the fireplaces, as we think happened on Stage Island where some of the clay uncovered seems to have come from the bottom of Temple Bay. The tryworks formed sets comprising different numbers of units, depending on the space available.

Immediately behind the ovens, on the same level, we found a free space that allowed the removal of the oil from the caldrons and its storage in the barrels. These were assembled in the cooperages that were probably located just behind these platforms.

This organization, though very simple, adjusted perfectly to its function. This plan could be enlarged or even simplified, depending on the room available for the establishment, as in fact we were able to verify. On Stage Island the structures must have been a lot more complex, as there was quite a space to use between the shoreline and the inner pond. On the western side of Pleasure Harbour, the space is so small, and the profit from its resources so big, that they even built ovens almost hanging from the steep cliffs, while the cooperages were certainly located somewhere else. Nevertheless, these conclusions should be reaffirmed in future investigations.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The problems that four remaining members of the Expedition had to overcome following the departure of other members of the group, because of climatic and professional reasons soon after our arrival to Chateau Bay, were to some extent compensated by the kind welcome and help we were given by the public and scientific authorities of Canada, and especially of Newfoundland and Labrador. We want to state our special thanks to Jane Sproull Thomson and Callum Thomson from the Provincial Museum of Newfoundland, and to Susan Kaplan, from the Peary-MacMillan Arctic Museum. Our work couldn't possibly have taken place without the collaboration of the Stone family, inhabitants of Stage Island in Chateau Bay. They became our main source of information and firm friends.

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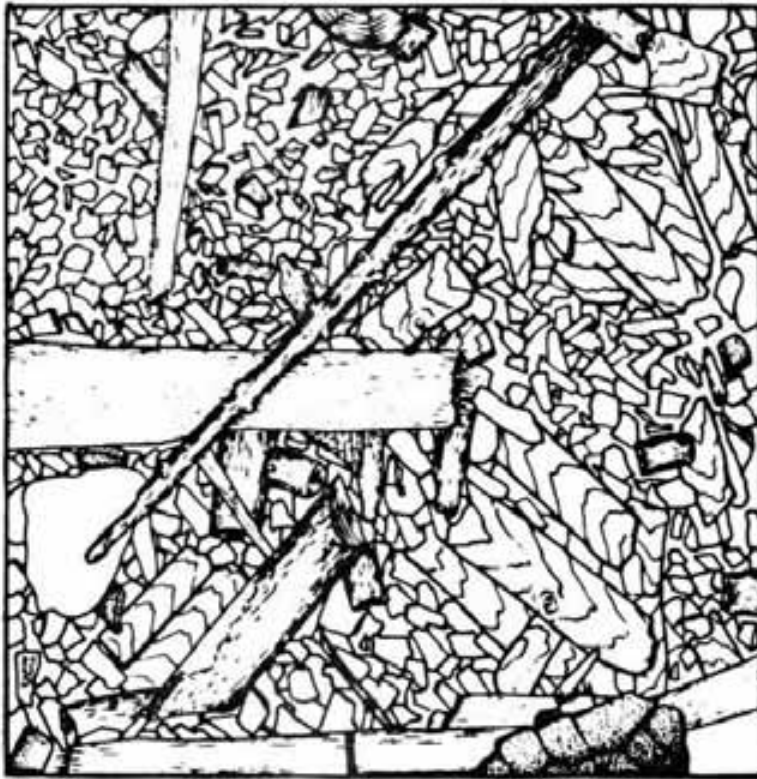
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# STAGE ISLAND



CARPENTER'S  
SHOP:



WOOD-CHIPS



FABRIC



BALEEN



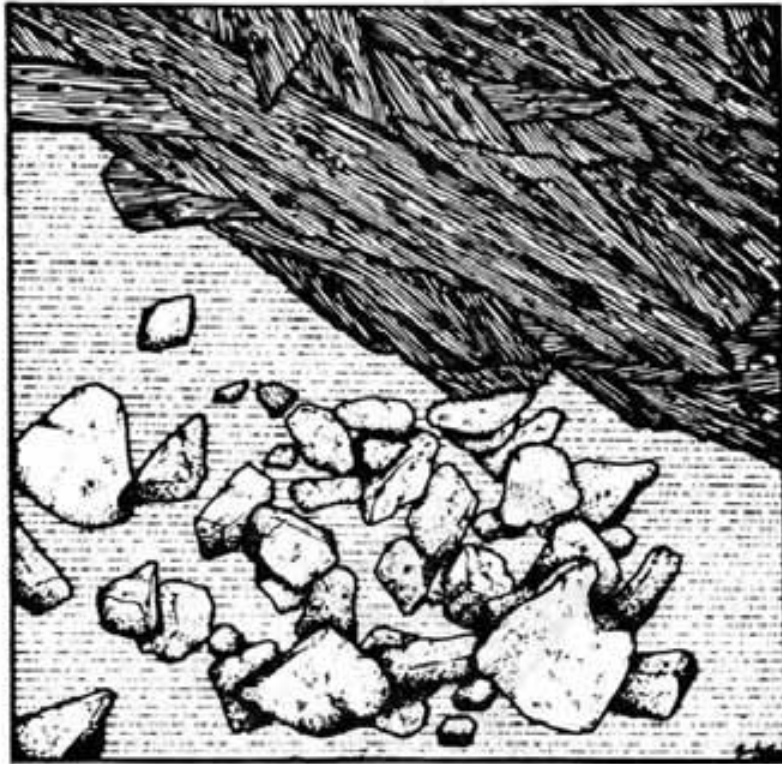
STAVES



TILE

PLATE: 1

# STAGE ISLAND



CARPENTER'S  
SHOP:



# PLEASURE HARBOUR

TRYWORK :



CLAY



FIRE-PLACE



BLUBBER, REMAINS



TILE



PLATE: 3

# WOOD ARTIFACTS

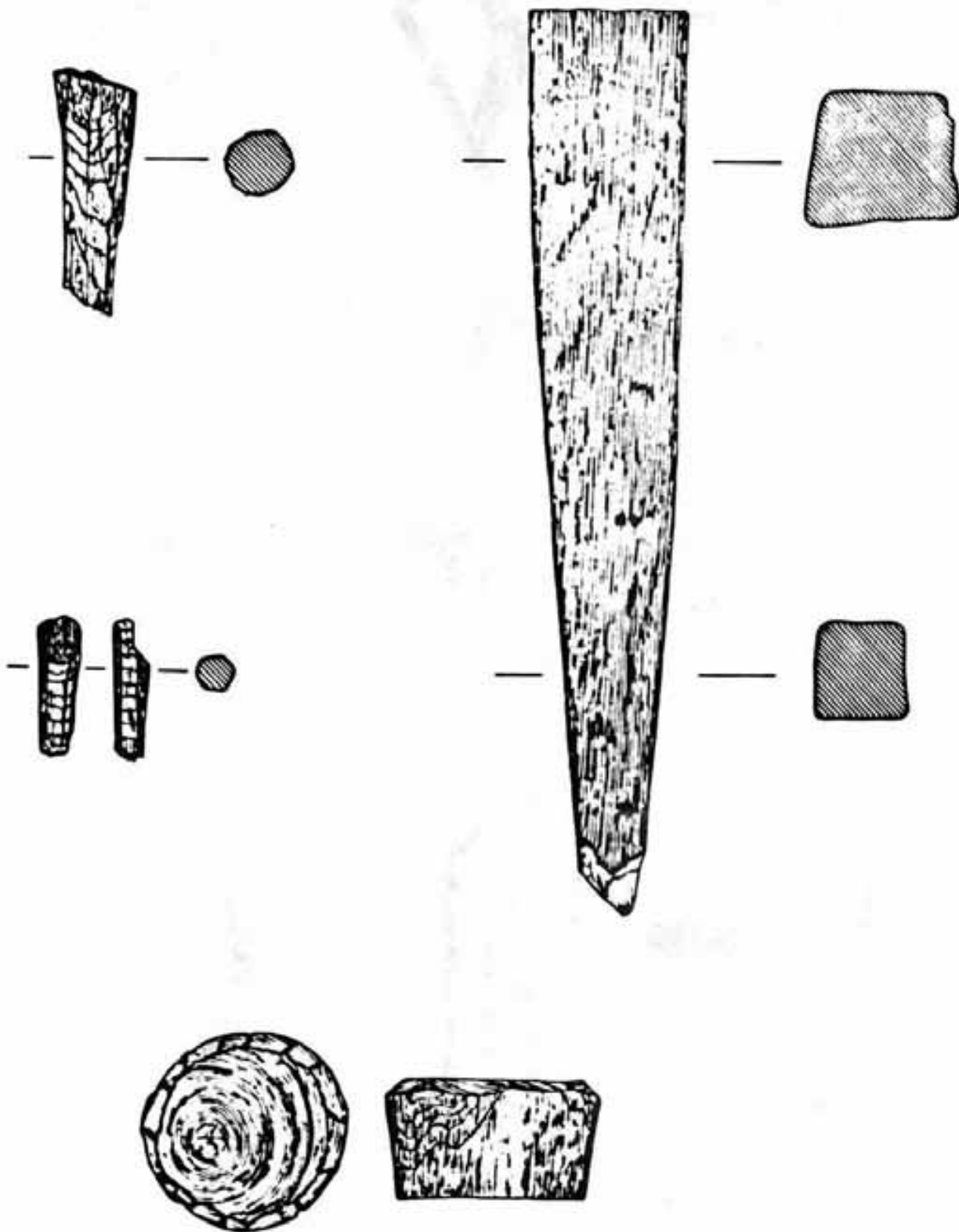


PLATE: 4

# POTTERY

