THE HAR KARKOM PLATEAU DURING THE PALAEOLITHIC AGES

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Har Karkom was a holy mountain during the Calcolithic and early Bronze Age, when large human groups stayed in the valleys surrounding the plateau. They may be connected somehow with the exodus from Egypt, according to the previous reports of E. Anati (1-2).
Since the first exploration of the mountain in 1980, by the Italian Archaeological Mission to Har Karkom, headed by Prof. Anati, it was evident that the area was settled many times during the Palaeolithic, as the remains of Palaeolithic instalments were found on the surface. During the following years, while the survey of the mountain and the surroundings was focused on the sites of the so called BAC (Bronze Age Complex) period, the presence of several Palaeolithic sites was noticed. These were recorded as previous prehistoric settlements, apparently not related to the cult of the mountain which was performed much later.
The interest for the Palaeolithic sites rose after the consideration that on the top of the mountain there was the major concentration of Palaeolithic instalments so far known in the region, and evidence of a cult of stone during late Palaeolithic. Since the 1990 mission, a team of researchers was charged of a careful survey of the Palaeolithic sites, still going on, with the following purposes:

1) to identify each single settlement, and correlate its topography and structure to the material culture
2) to provide models of living during the different Palaeolithic periods
3) to investigate the reasons for resorting to the mountain during the Palaeolithic Age, if any, other than for hunting or simply crossing the area.

The mountain

Har Karkom is a *mesa* of limestone in the middle of the Negev desert (Israel), with an irregular shape of the surface, about 4x3 Km in size and about 400 m higher, in altitude, than the surrounding valleys. The mountain is a plateau, and a layer of tabular flint of brown color covers the whole surface, by giving to the area a characteristic aspect that the nomads call *hamada* (black flint gravel).
The area, located in the North of Sinai, is characterized by a desertic clima with a very low level of falls (lower than 70 mm/yr).
Due to the particular position, Har Karkom is located along the natural way of connection between Africa and Asia through which the first humans passed, including *Homo sapiens*, during the migrations from one continent to the other.
The flint of the plateau is of high quality for tool making, the best of the entire Sinai, and is available in exhaustive quantities. This fact should have played an important role in resorting to the mountain during the Palaeolithic. In fact, although the climate of the region should have consistently changed many times during prehistory, more humid periods alternated to desertic clima, the Palaeolithic settlements were placed

directly in contact to the flint layer, as discussed below, when the surface was as arid as today.

The Palaeolithic instalments

By exploring the surface of the *hamada* it is still possible to see groups of areas cleared of stones, oval or round in shape, surrounded by flint cores and implements, sometimes with traces of hearths, and paths connecting between them. These appear as sand-yellow spots surrounded by the brown surface. They have been interpreted as basement of huts. Since the wind, for age, removed trace of organic remain or fine soil, there is no stratigraphy and all remains, even Lower Palaeolithic flints, are on the surface in a kind of compact layer.
The cleared areas have regular shapes and are likely to have been cleaned by the prehistoric people, while preparing the ground for the huts. Due to erosion processes, the Palaeolithic ground surface, in many instances, appears to have been higher than the present surface. Unfortunately, the particular composition of the soil did not preserve the pole holes; but the stones used to fix the poles are still recognizable along the perimeters of the huts. In the vicinity, the material culture gives information about the prehistoric period of the settlement. Smaller areas cleared of stones and surrounded by several flint cores and flakes, many of which still connectable, have been interpreted as flint workshops. The paths appear as clean areas and give information about the entrances to the huts. No organic remains were found in the hearths, that appear as circles of stones (mainly flint cores occasionally blackened by fire).
During the survey, over 200 Palaeolithic sites were recorded. Material culture of Lower Palaeolithic was found in 10.3%, of Middle Palaeolithic in 45.9% and of Upper Palaeolithic in 43.8% of cases. In many sites, different stages of occupation were evident.

Lower Palaeolithic (LP) sites: material culture of LP was reported in 29 sites. Most of them were located on the North-Eastern border of the plateau (figure I). In many sites, the findings were flint implements, (Acheulean hand-axes, choppers and chopping tools of the Pebble Culture and *Clactonian* implements). In some of these sites also later tools were found from the Middle or Upper Palaeolithic.
Only three sites, with basements of huts, were associated with LP flints only, namely the sites 120, 120e and 204. They were characterized by large basements of huts (20 m and more in lenght): one single basement (120); two basements (120e) and four (204). A large human group could live inside each hut, and several activities of the group were presumably performed into the hut/s. The sites were considered to have been settled in cold climate, as traces of hearths were found inside the huts.

Middle Palaeolithic (MP) sites: flint implements of MP period were found in 129 sites. Most of the instalments were located on the borders of the plateau, in a dominant position. Only a minority of the sites was placed in the middle of plateau and very few in the surroundings of the mountain, namely in the rock shelters facing the plateau from the West valley (figure II).

The characteristics of the MP instalments were investigated in 23 sites, where only MP material culture was found.
About half of the settlements was characterized by the presence of three, sometimes four, small, round basements of huts similar in size (mainly < 4 m in diameter), placed in a row and connected by a path crossing the central hut. In a few sites, the huts were placed in a triangle-shaped figure (like in site 15b, figure III). Sometimes, one hut was oval and larger than the others. No traces of hearths were found (summer instalments?). In each one of these sites (of a size of a nuclear family?), only a few people could live, with the hut for the man, and one or more huts for the women, together with their children (1-2 each?)
The other settlements were more complex, with 4-6 round or oval-shaped huts, flint workshop/s and often, traces of hearths, indicated by flint core circles. In the sites of this group, the hearth, when present, was mandatorily one per instalment, located between two huts connected by the hearth, (that was outside), to form an *8* figure.
The material culture of the MP sites was characterized by the presence of abundant Mousterian implements, including bifaces of Acheulean tradition, cores and flakes of the Levallois technique, and, in some cases, Aterian-like notched and peduncolated implements.

Upper Palaeolithic (UP) sites: flint implements of the UP periods were found in 123 sites. The UP settlements were placed mainly on the top of the mountain, rather than on the surroundings, but the sites were placed on the plateau independently of the position, either near the border or in the middle (figure IV).
No evidence of different stages of occupation was found in 24 UP sites. The instalments were rather complex, with the presence of many huts, (up to 13 in a site), with various disposition (in a circle, in a row, irregularly), round, oval, small or large. Dozens of people could live inside and different models could be proposed for those settlements. One, several or no hearths were present. Several flint workshops were associated to the UP sites, either inside the site or at its edge. Most of the material culture was early and late Aurignacian. Some later UP implements are present in a few sites.
Evidence of stone cult was found at Har Karkom and the group of anthropomorphic orthostats of site 86b was interpreted as the earliest *sanctuary* of the prehistory.

The concentration of over 200 Palaeolithic sites in about 8 sq.Km. is a rather unique case in the area of Negev and Sinai. Why? What was the meaning of this mountain?
Collecting and working flint, rather than hunting, is likely to have been the first and most important purpose for visiting the mountain, that was settled when the climate was arid. With age, the mountain was identified with the stone as source of life and this fact most probably originated the first cult.
During Palaeolithic, the cult of the mountain was the cult of stone: when, during more recent prehistory, the stone ceased to be the only primary source of life, the memory of the ancient cult remained, linked to the mountain as an abstract life-generating force.

THE PLATES CONCERNING THE MATERIAL CULTURE

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Lower Palaeolithic: two small, oval Acheulean hand-axes found in the site 120 are reported in figure V. The two implements show a heavily oxidated *patina* on the whole surface.

Middle Palaeolithic: an example of the flints of the MP period is reported in the figures VI-VII. Site 102b 1-2: retouched *Levallois* cores. Flints made by *Levallois* technique are present in several MP sites and their shapes are characteristic of Har Karkom. 3: heavily retouched blade with *cortex*. Percussion bulb made by an archaic technique. 4: scraper on the *cortex* side of a *tortoise* core. Site 93a 1: *Levallois* core. 2-3: retouched flakes with double *encoche* of Aterian type. Although Aterian implements are not frequent at Har Karkom, they may show an influence of African cultures in the area. 4: large scraper on blade.

Upper Palaeolithic: UP at Har Karkom is primarily characterized by different recognizable phases of the Near Eastern Aurignacian cultures (figures VIII and IX, respectively). Site 203 1-2,5: scrapers. 3: blade. 4,6: pierces. Site 202 1-5,7: scrapers on blades. 6: piercer. 8-9: burins. 10-11: blades with *encoches*.

REFERENCES

1) E. Anati: *The Mountain of God*. New York (Rizzoli): 1986. 358 pp.

2) E. Anati: *Har Karkom in the light of new discoveries*. Studi Camuni. Volume XI. Eng. Ed. 1993

Figure I: Distribution of Lower Palaeolithic sites (•) at Har Karkom

Figure II: Distribution of Middle Palaeolithic sites (•) at Har Karkom

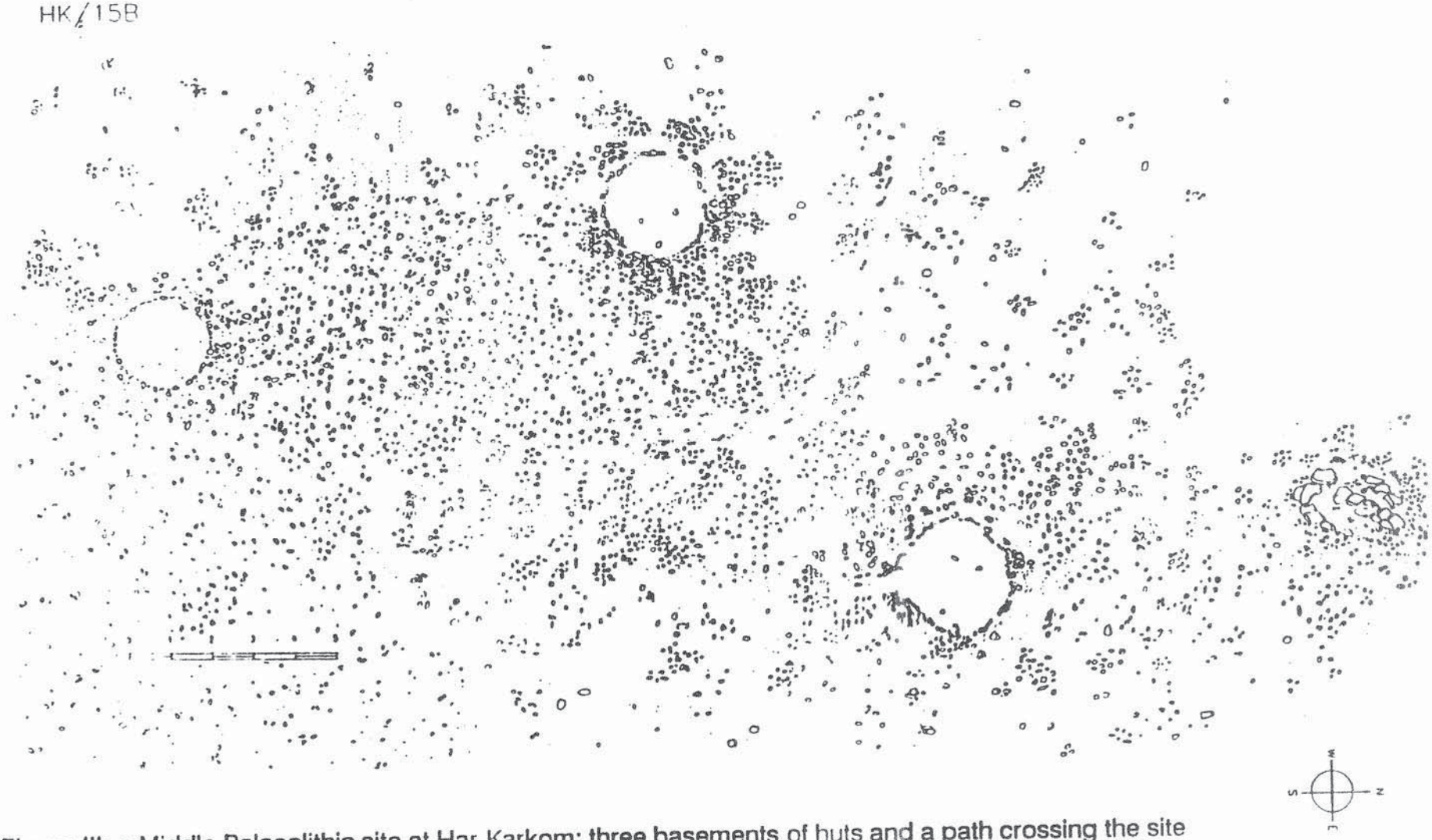

Figure III: a Middle Palaeolithic site at Har Karkom: three basements of huts and a path crossing the site
(drawing of Candida Zani)

Figure IV: Distribution of Upper Palaeolithic sites (•) at Har Karkom

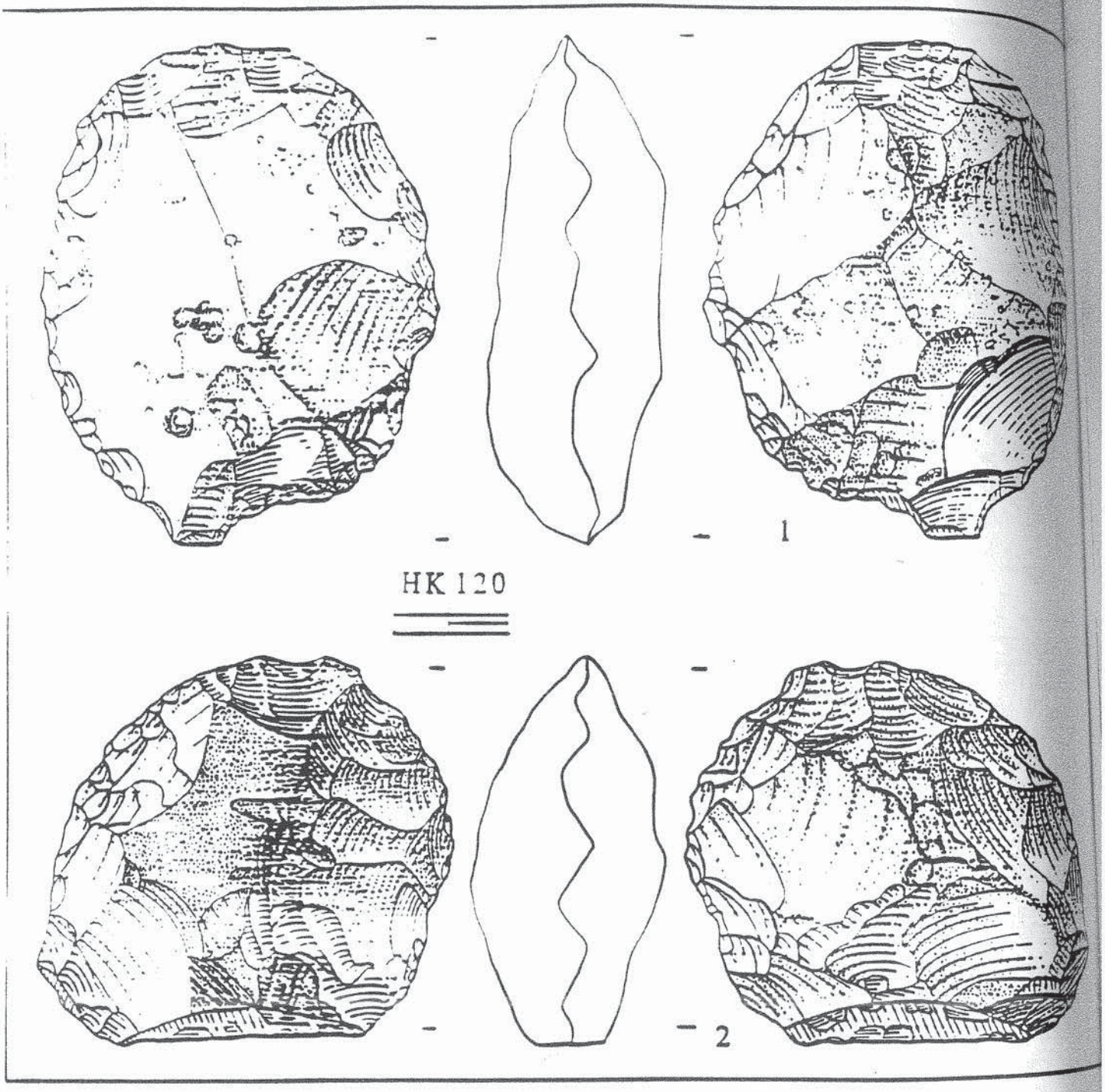

Figure V: Acheulean hand-axes from Har Karkom

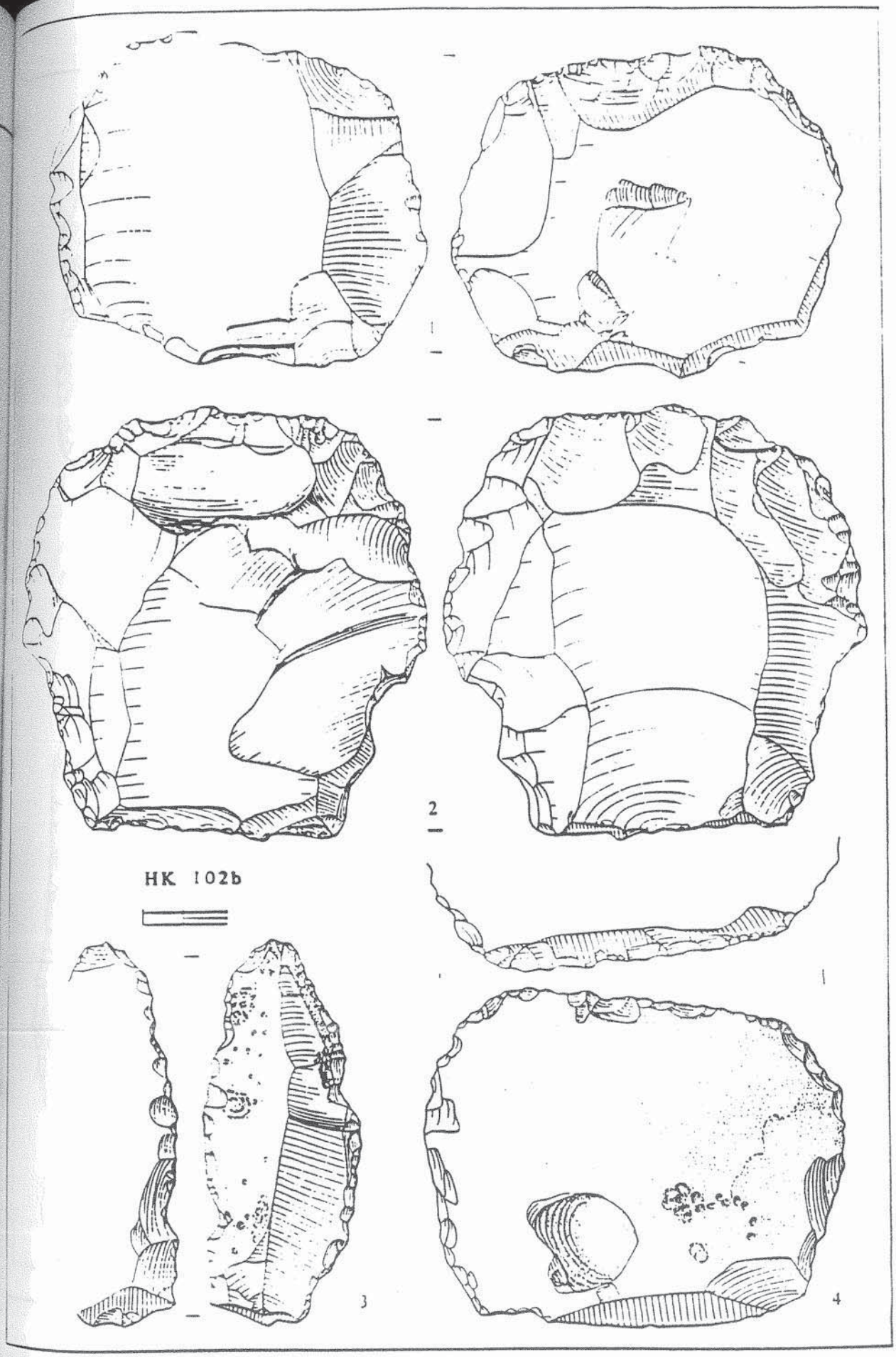

Figure VI: Middle Palaeolithic implements from Har Karkom

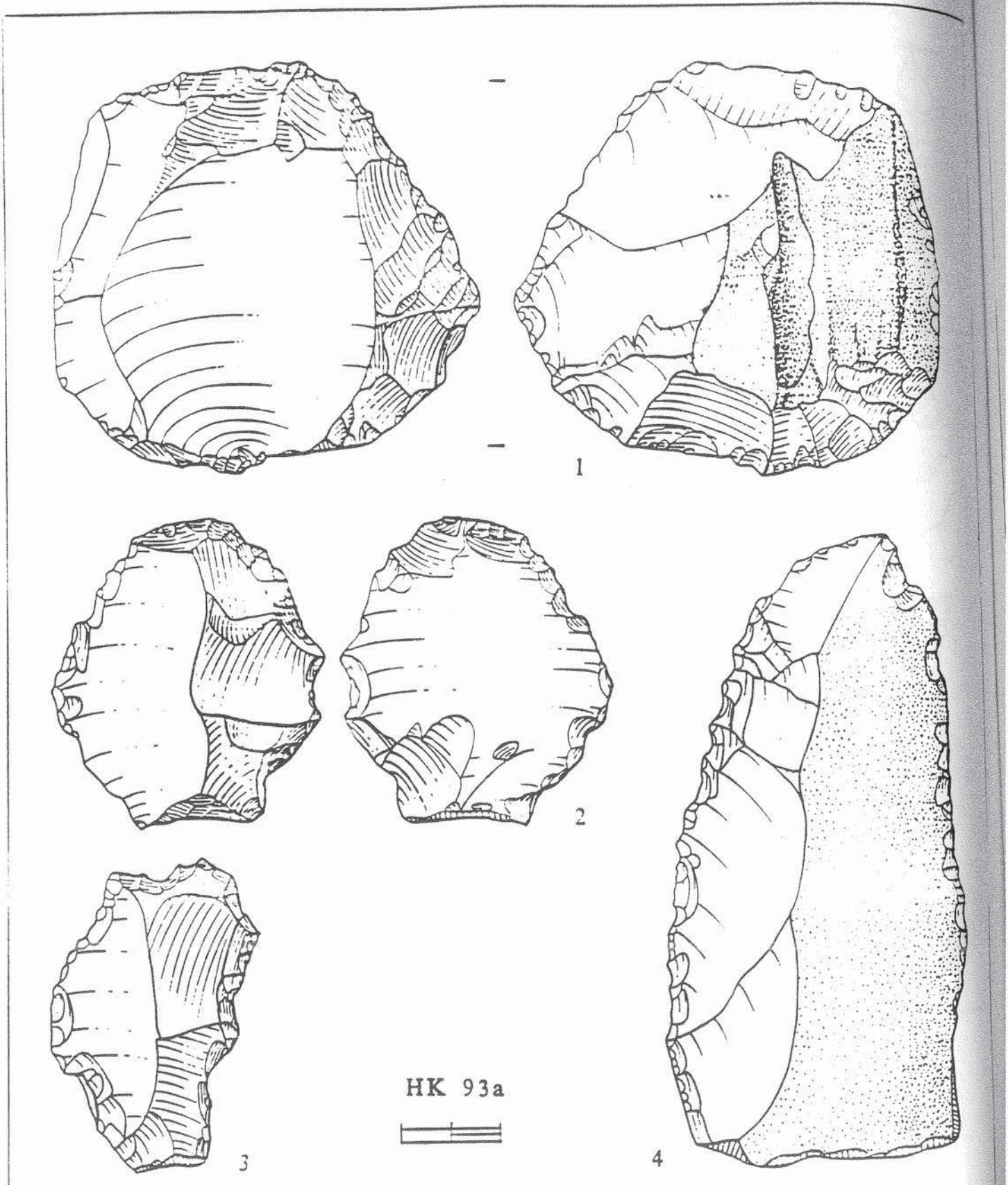

Figure VII: Middle Palaeolithic implements from Har Karkom

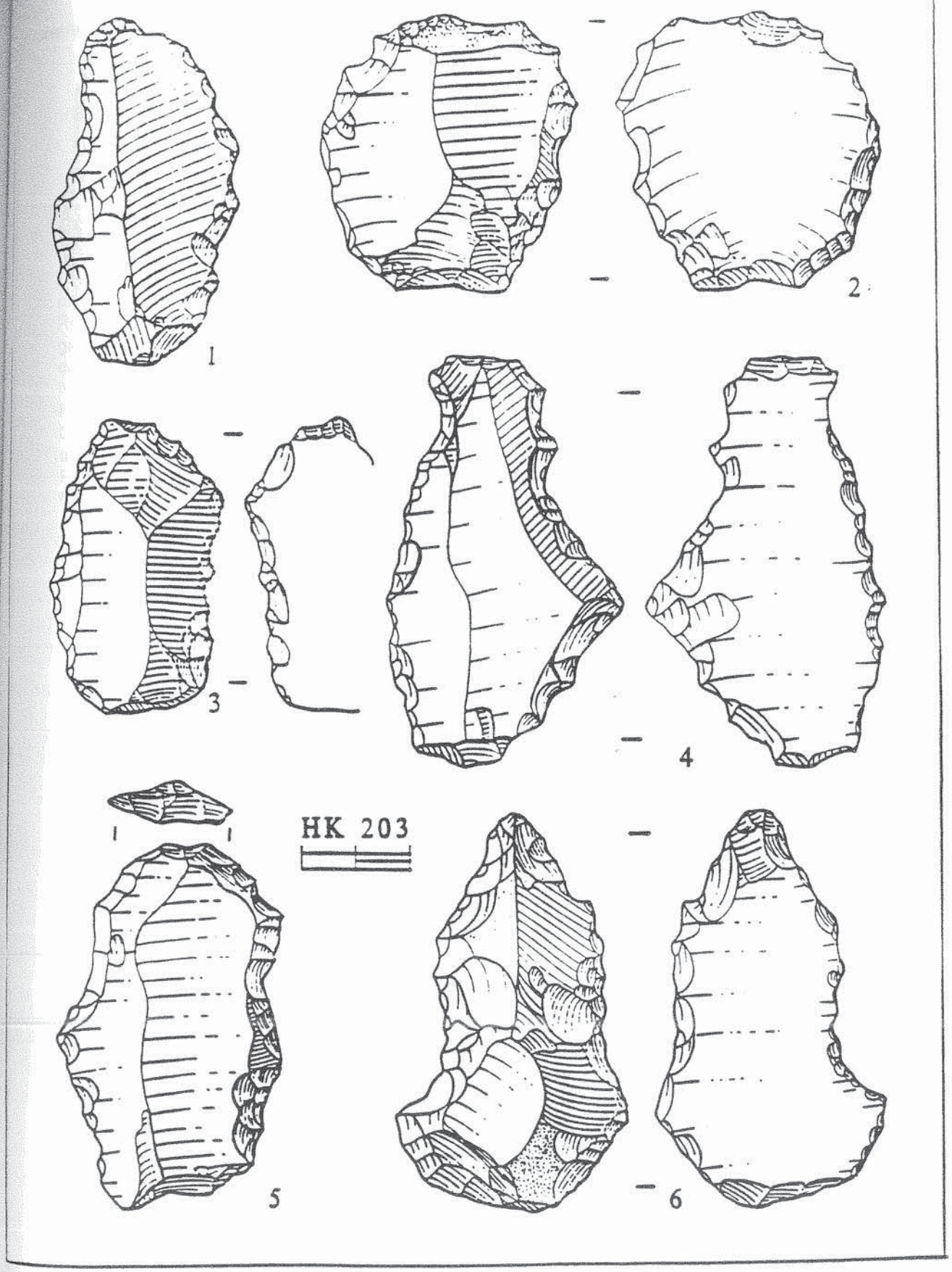

Figure VIII: Upper Palaeolithic implements from Har Karkom

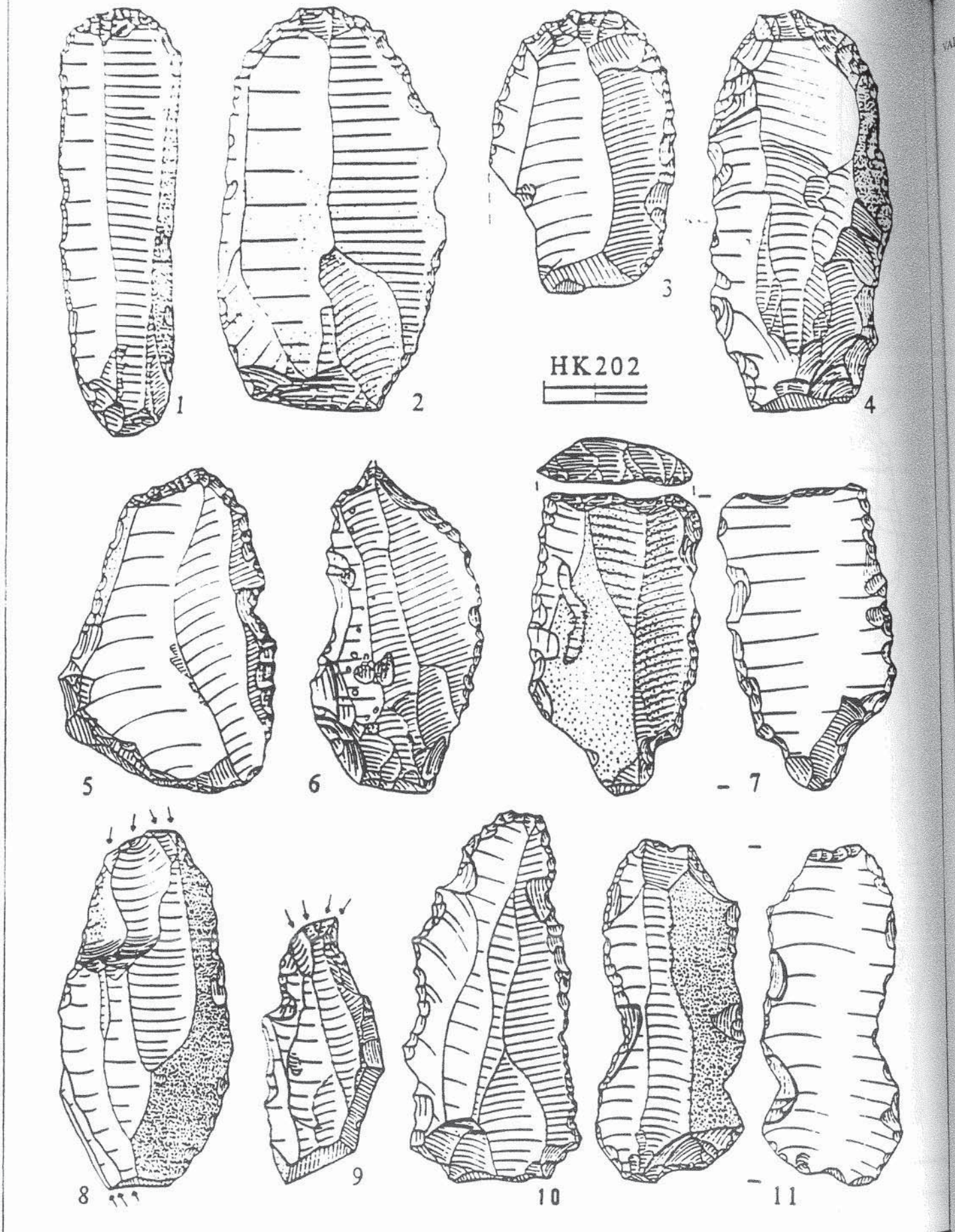

Figure IX: implements of Aurignacian culture from Har Karkom