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The Three Thousand Year Old Chärchän Man Preserved at Zaghunluq

Abstract Account of a Tomb Excavation in Chärchän County of Uyghuristan

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The Three Thousand Year Old Chärchän Man Preserved at Zaghunluq :
Abstract Account of a Tomb Excavation in Chärchän County of Uyghuristan¹

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Chärchän county is located in the south-east of the big desert of the Tarim Basin, at the northern foot of the Qurum and Altun mountain ranges. It was formerly one of the ancient cities of the Tarim Basin oasis corridor.

Since ancient times, the Chärchänians have lived in this mysterious, attractive, fruitful oasis corridor along the Tarim Basin and the Silk Road. They have enjoyed the pure, sweet spring water and running rivers which originated from the Altun, Kökart (Pamir), Qurum and Qara-Qurum mountains, and have tilled the land on both sides of the Tarim river. Here they created a unique Tarim civilization, which shone like a pearl in the cultural history of Uyghuristan.

At the beginning of this century, numerous archeological teams from various countries carried out many excavations along the Silk Road. Although archeologists had discovered invaluable cultural relics from these regions, a big gap remained in the field of

¹ Uyghuristan ("Uyghur Äli"), found in a medieval Uyghur manuscript, means "The Country of Uyghurs." The name of Uyghuristan is used in this research report as a geographical location rather than a geopolitical term. It is situated in the eastern part of Central Asia and is now the biggest province of China. In different periods it was called "The Western Regions" in Chinese sources, "East Türkistan," "Chinese Türkistan," or "Chinese Central Asia" in Western sources. Different parts of the region were also at various times named as "Qäshqäriyä" (in the south), "Jungghariya" (in the north), and "Tocharistan" (in the middle and the east). Since 1884, the Qing Dynasty government of China started to call it "Xinjiang," which means "new territory." After 1955, the name "Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region" was given to it.

archeological culture studies in the eastern and southern part of the Tarim Basin. Despite scattered archeological achievements in the eastern part of Uyghuristan, scholars were still unable to recover entire cultural treasures which remain deposited under the sands of the Täklimakan.

Since 1950, several Uyghur archeologists have done numerous archeological investigations along the lower valleys of the Tarim river in Lopnur and Charqiliq counties of Uyghuristan. Archeological excavations were also conducted in the eastern part of ancient Kiruran in the lower Könchi river valley in 1979 and 1980. But because of limited staff and funding as well as other reasons, this was only a beginning.

The territory of the ancient Kiruran Kingdom covered approximately 900 square kilometers. Numerous ruins, sites and ancient tombs of the kingdom remain under the sands. Of the artifacts unearthed in the eastern part of the kingdom, in Kiruran and the Könchi river valley, and in the western part of the kingdom, in Niya and Chärchän, many are well preserved, as are a considerable number of the ancient tombs from both regions. The relics excavated consist mostly of woolen fabrics; wood, bone and horn implements; stone arrowheads, wooden arrows, baskets, hampers and the like have also been found. The well-preserved human bodies unearthed from the tombs had deep-set eyes, long pointed noses, thin lips and yellowish brown hair over their shoulders.

Today, Chärchän county is like a lonely island in a sea of sand. Chärchän is one part of Uyghuristan which has suffered greatly from the calamity of desert expansion. The eastern part of the Tarim basin, from Lopnur to Charqiliq, downstream along the Tarim river, was a beautiful oasis corridor. The environment of the region was changed gradually due to natural disaster. But since 1971, the natural environment has deteriorated more rapidly than ever before as a result of deforestation and the construction of dams upriver making reservoirs according to a government plan for new Chinese immigrations into the region. The local Uyghur population has thus been driven into the desert or gone elsewhere, as drought and soil erosion have made plant and animal life scarce. If one

travels from the southern part of the Tarim basin, passes through Charqiliq, then heads toward the west and through the small town Washshähri, one may go on the only passable desert highway to Chärchän. Along the way, travelers would see the facts described above and realize that both sides of the desert highway are an endless sea of sands. The present researcher made two trips on the desert highway in 1985, moving around the Tarim basin for archeological investigation and excavation.

Although the Silk Road through Uyghuristan witnessed many dynasties and khanates throughout history, gradually shifting southward in the course of time, it remained until quite recently a discernible course through the barren desert. But today the road lies buried under sand at the foot of the Qurum Mountains. In September 1985, our group arrived in Chärchän county on the contemporary desert highway. We conducted archeological excavations in the Zaghunluq village of Chärchän, based on preliminary investigations begun in the spring of the same year. During the excavations we unearthed a number of cultural relics from the tombs, which constitute a great archeological discovery.

The village of Zaghunluq is situated approximately six kilometers south of the Chärchän county seat. There is rich salt within the tomb area, hence the local people often dig salt from the place and the place was also named by them as "Tuzluqqash" which means salt rock. The excavation was carried out in a geological formation of combined salt and sandy soil, some thirty meters above the level of the village itself, at thirty-eight degrees twenty-six minutes nine seconds north latitude and eighty-five degrees thirty-one minutes eight seconds east longitude. The tomb site is located within a large cluster of tombs measuring some 1.1 kilometer from north to south and 750 meters from east to west (see figure 1). This cluster contains several hundred ancient tombs, some of which show signs of having been looted, while others apparently remain untouched. Our team excavated a total of five tombs, three of which had already been broken into and two of which were still complete.

In this brief report, I would like to discuss the latter two complete tombs, which have been assigned the numbers 85QZM 1 and 2 (see figure 2). With the exception of tomb 85QZM 1, the four other tombs were rectangular in shape, with straight vertical walls and single-stepped rims.

Traces of an ancient bed of the Chärchän River have been found approximately one kilometer south of the tomb site. Today's Chärchän River is some ten kilometers east of the tomb site. After 1971, it has evidently changed course frequently due to the expansion of the Täklimakan Desert. The highway from Lopnur to Chärchän has also had to be displaced three times, shifting thirty kilometers to the south over the past forty years for the same reason.

Excavation of Tomb 85QZM 1

As noted above, this tomb differed from the other four in that it was oval and relatively shallow. After excavating to a depth of 50 cm., a 20 cm. layer of reeds was encountered. Underneath was found a 1.3 m. long cover-slab of Huyang (*Poplar diversifolia*) wood. The tomb itself was 1.75 m. long by 0.8 m. wide and 0.3 m. deep (see figure 2, M1). The tomb contained only the corpse of an infant, apparently not yet three months old at the time of death. This corpse was tightly wrapped in purple wool, and its head was covered with a hat of blue wool. The eyes were covered with two small flat uncarved stones measuring 2 x 3 x 0.3 cm. The corpse had been placed on a white felt blanket measuring 0.4 x 0.15 m. and its head was resting on a pillow of raw wool wrapped in woolen fabric. The corpse wrappings were bound tightly with woolen string and were in a state of excellent preservation. Next to the head was a small bovine-horn drinking cup in which trace of an unidentifiable substance remained. Next to the cup was an ancient "baby bottle" made of a sheep's teat which had been cut and sewn up in such a way as to allow it to contain milk.

Furthermore, a sheep's head had been buried in an associated hole approximately 0.8 meters to the northwest of the tomb itself.

Excavation of Tomb 85QZM 2

At the surface, the mouth of tomb 85QZM 2 was 5.35 m. in length and 3 m. in breadth. Below the surface it was 3.1 m. long and 1.55 m. wide. Its maximum depth was 2.4 m. The tomb was covered with a 50 cm. layer of sandy soil, beneath which was a 30 cm. layer of scattered reeds containing a sheep's head and two bovine-horn drinking vessels. About 1.75 m. southwest of the tomb at this level we uncovered the skull and foreleg of a horse; the leg bones had been removed, leaving the skin and hoof, which had been stuffed with reeds (see figure 2, M2-1). In the middle of the tomb at this level was a 0.3 x 0.6 m. opening into the lower level of the tomb, which was blocked with a large brown woolen *chapan* (robe). The *chapan* was in turn covered by a white felt blanket, on top of which was a leather saddle and a single round-bottomed black-pottery jar (see figure 3, M2-2).

Below the 30 cm. layer of scattered reeds were two layers of reed mats measuring 3.8 x 2.4 m (see figure 3, M2-3). Immediately below these were three animal skins (one of a horse and two of wild buffalo (see figure 3, M2-4.)), underneath which were two layers of willow mats (see figure 3, M2-5), which in turn covered 25 tree limbs laid across the step-rim of the tomb (see figure 4, M2-6; the step-rim was 0.75 m. in both width and height).

The floor of the tomb was partially covered with willow mats (see figure 4, M2-7), beneath which a 2.6 m. x 0.6 m. x 0.3 m. gutter (see figure 4, M2-9) had been dug to protect the tomb's contents against excess moisture. Fourteen small tree limbs had been laid across the top of this gutter (see figure 4, M2-8), after which the matting had been placed atop the branches. Four corpses were found in the tomb (see figure 4, M2-7): three

adult females and one adult male. Two of the female corpses were partially decayed; they were found lying on their backs on exposed earth with arms and legs crossed. The other female and the male corpse were very well preserved. The images of a human hand and an animal of some type were carved into one of the tomb walls (see figure 5).

The male would have been two meters tall when living (see color plates I and IIa); the corpse was lying on its right side with legs bent and propped up by a small piece of wood (perhaps to promote preservation by means of circulation of air around the corpse). The hair, eyelashes, beard and chest hair were intact and traces of makeup (ocher spiral sun-symbols) could be seen on the face. The presence in the tomb of two small bone spoons with dried ocher pigment in them may indicate that the makeup was applied after death. The male's head hair was yellowish brown half gone to white; the hair was dressed in two 30 cm. braids each 5 cm. thick. The final 15 cm. of each braid had red wool yarn braided into it. The corpse was dressed in a short jacket and long trousers, all made of dark purple wool. There were multicolored felt socks and knee-high white deerskin boots on the feet.

The female would have stood 1.9 m. tall when living (see color plates IIb and III); the corpse was placed with the feet propped on the step-rim of the tomb so that only the upper back and head were resting on the tomb floor. Traces of make-up similar to the male's were found on the face. The yellowish-brown hair was dressed in four braids, two of which were her own hair and the other two of which were artificial. The genuine braids were 20 cm. in length and showed traces of white; the two artificial braids were also yellowish-brown and were 45 cm. in length. The socks and boots were identical with those of the male; the corpse wore a dark reddish-brown one-piece open-necked dress that was cut to below knee length.

Other items of interest found in this tomb include several pieces of black pottery, all of the same shape; some wooden objects such as combs, a milking-pail, some knitting needles, several wooden arrows and some ritual yarn, which may have been used as fire

symbols, and also some reed bundles bound in red wool yarn and suspended from forked branches stuck into the floor of the tomb; some bone objects like combs and drinking-cups; one horn hook that may have been used to hang up clothing; animal skins, a felt blanket, as many as ten different kinds of caps, some of which were felt and others were woven of wool, and a wide variety of woolen fabrics.

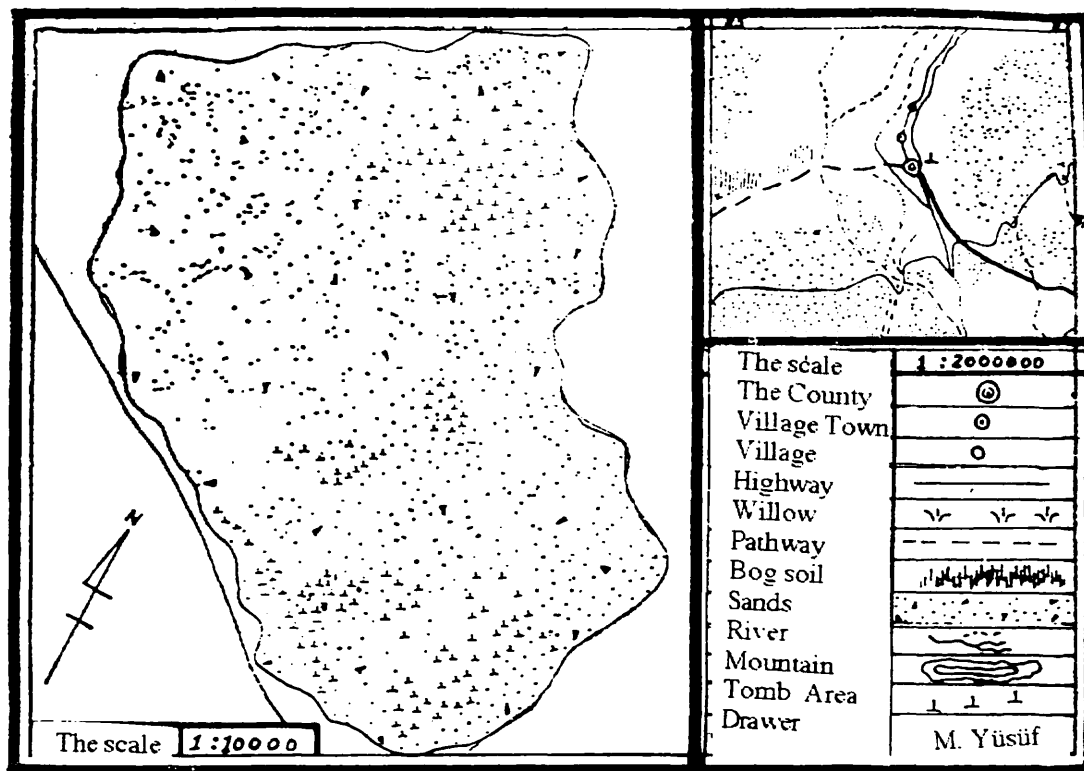
Radiocarbon dating of five samples from this tomb, performed by the Bureau of Cultural Relics in Beijing, indicates that it dates from approximately 1000 B. C. E. The three-thousand-year-old corpses found inside it may thus be related to the Saka people of that time, or may indeed be early forerunners of the Uyghur people. Many of the artifacts found in the tomb, such as the clothing and food items, are certainly very similar to those used by modern Uyghurs every day. The fabrics especially indicate a surprisingly advanced level of textile technology not often seen in other finds either in Uyghuristan or in the rest of China. In any case, the wide variety of objects found and their excellent state of preservation make this a very important discovery, which will provide a great deal of information regarding the early history, religion, ethnology, culture, and technology of the Tarim Basin.

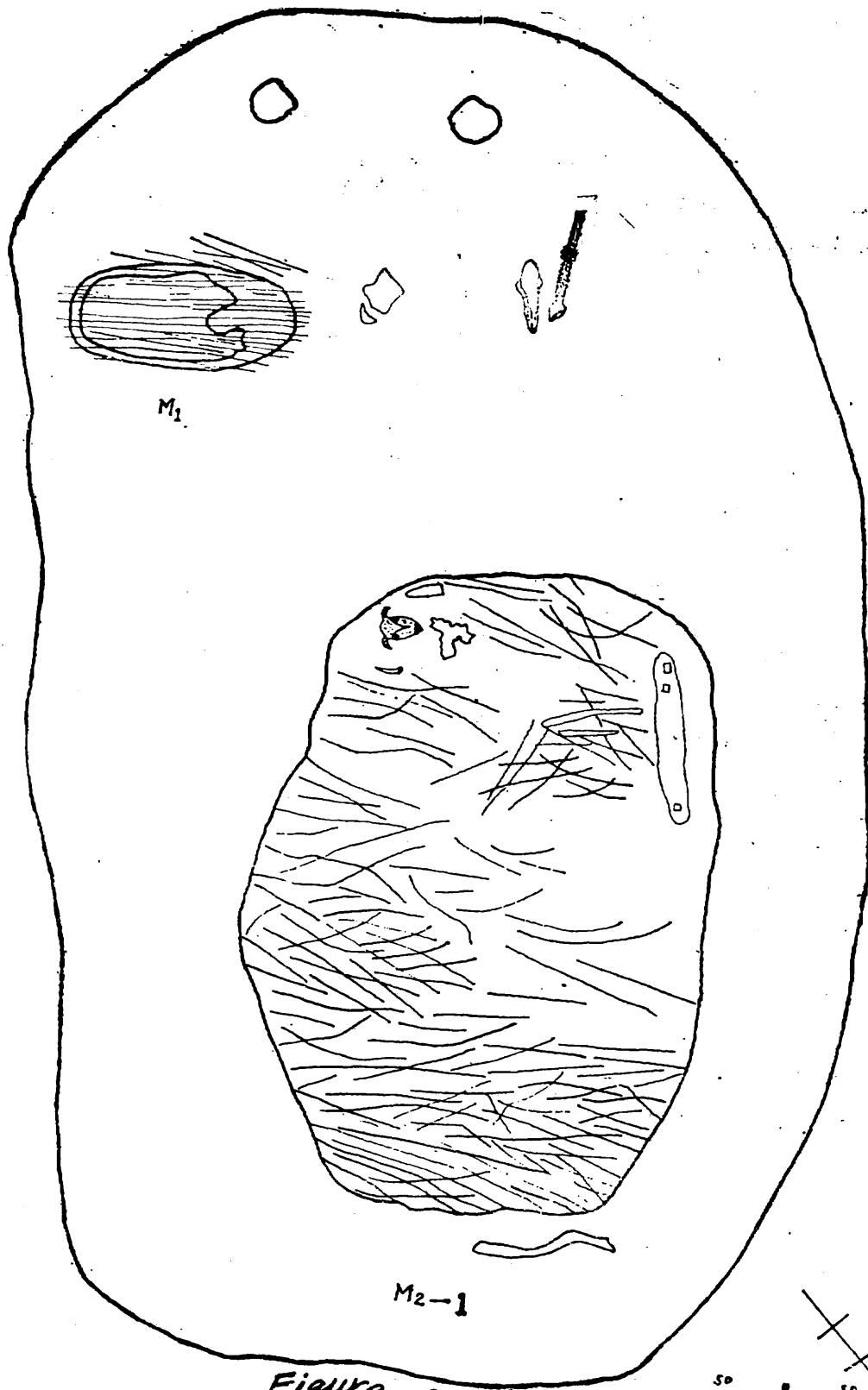
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Figures





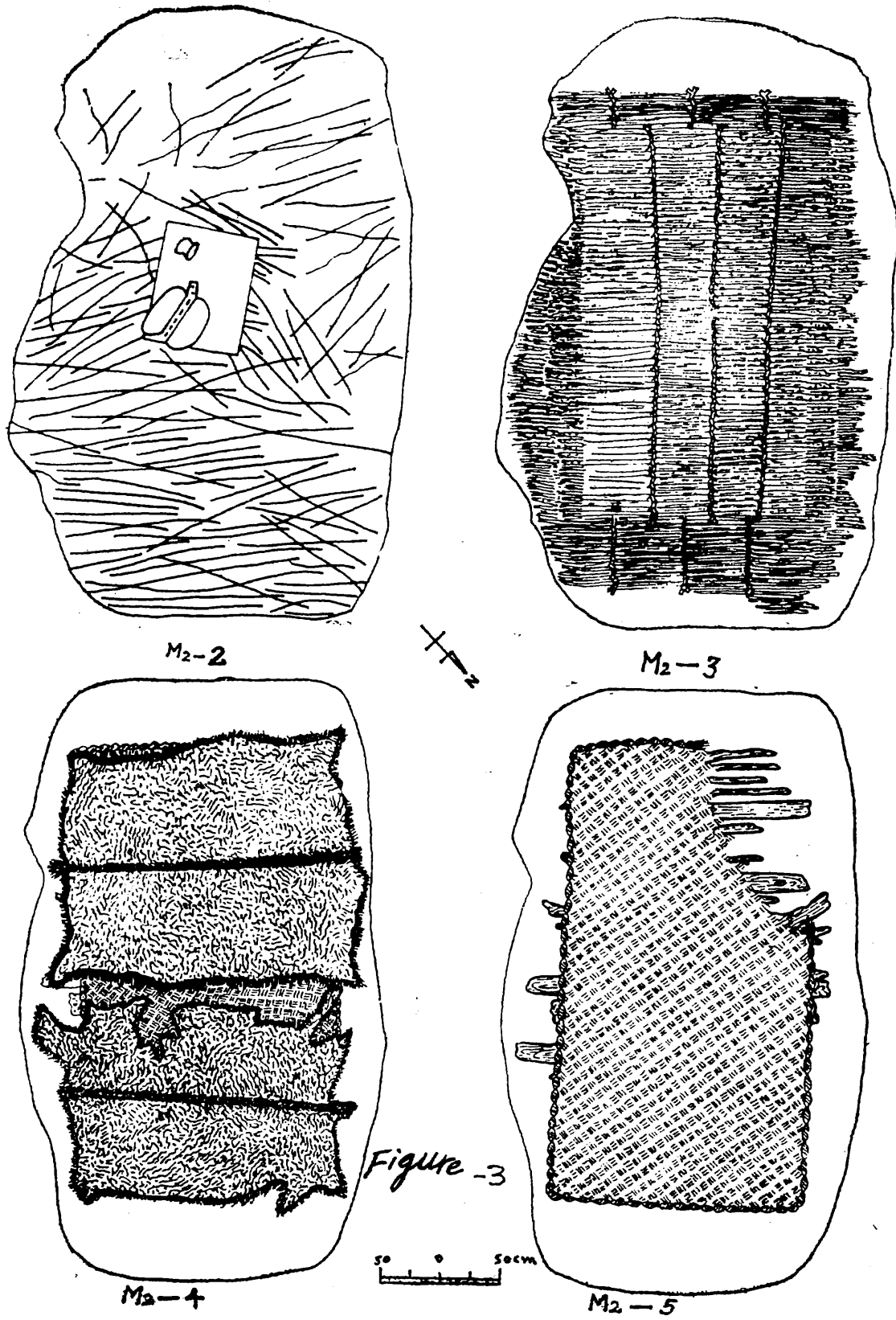
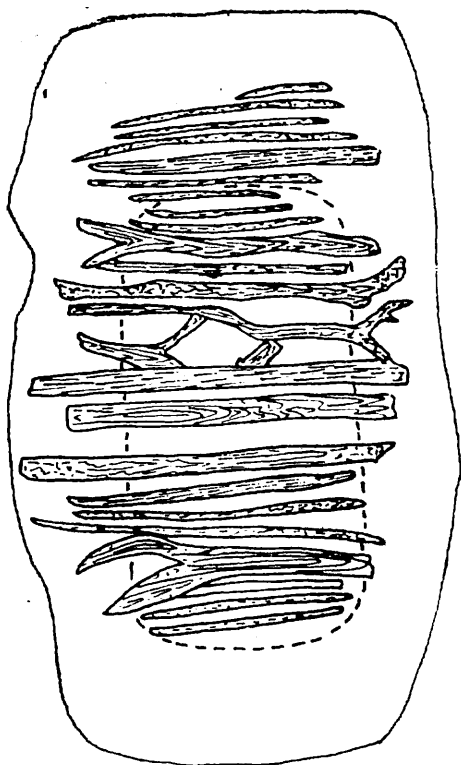


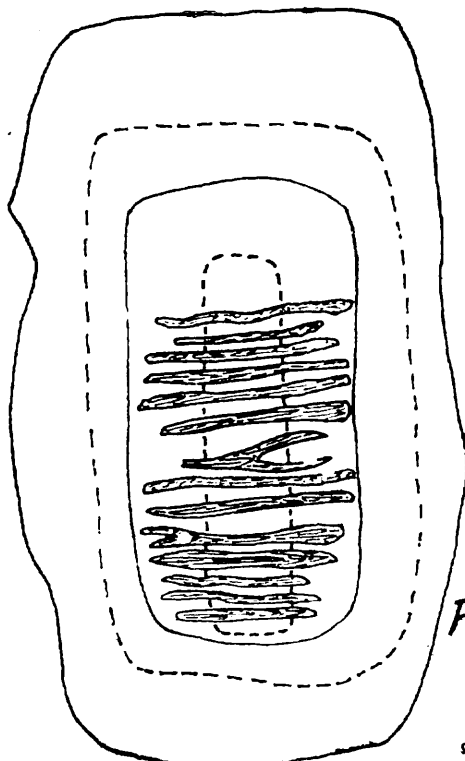
Figure -3



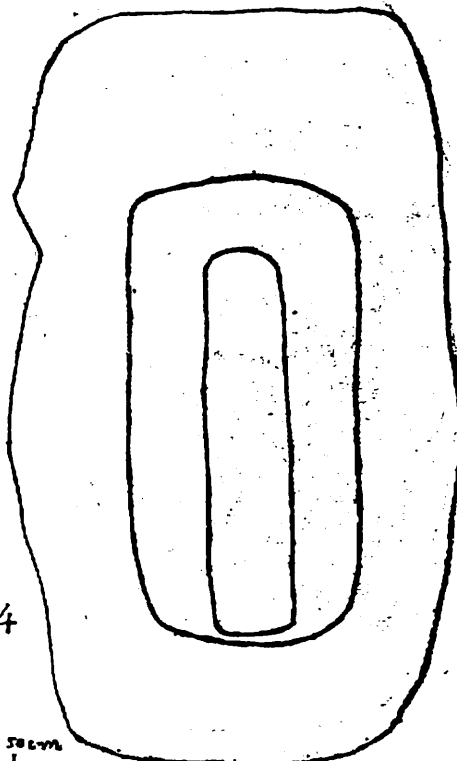
M2-6



M2-7

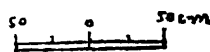


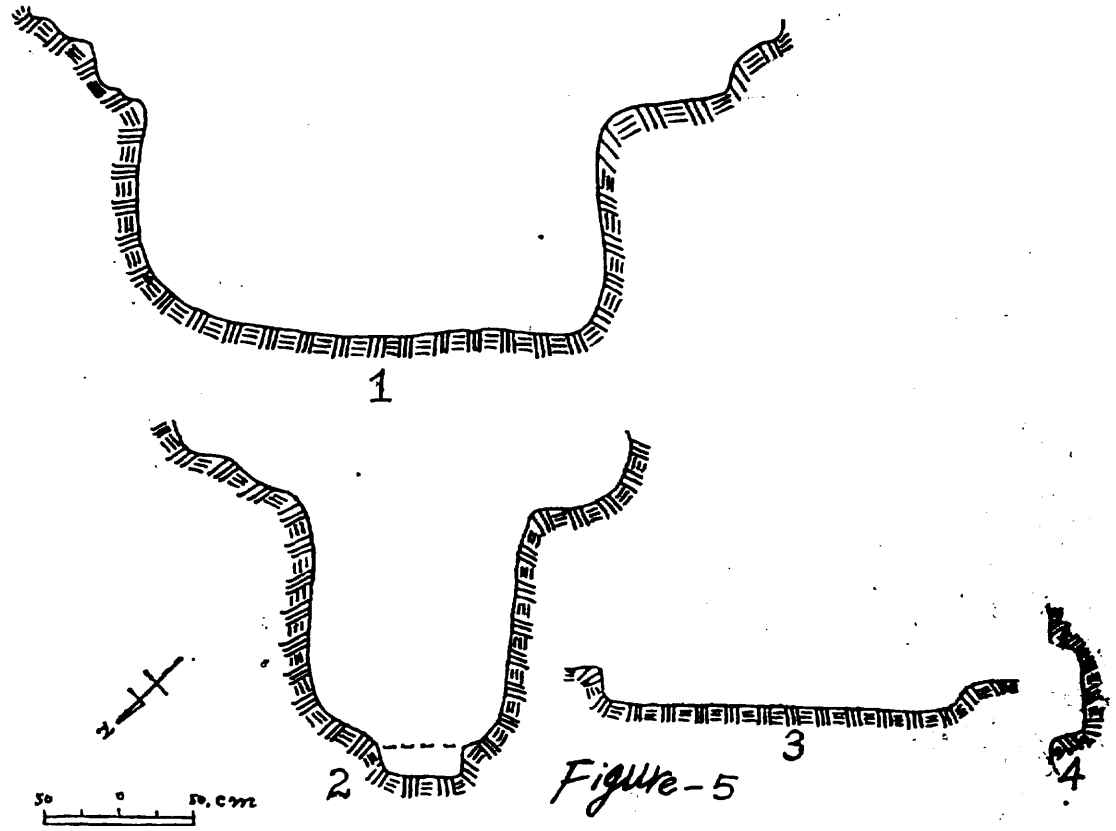
M2-8

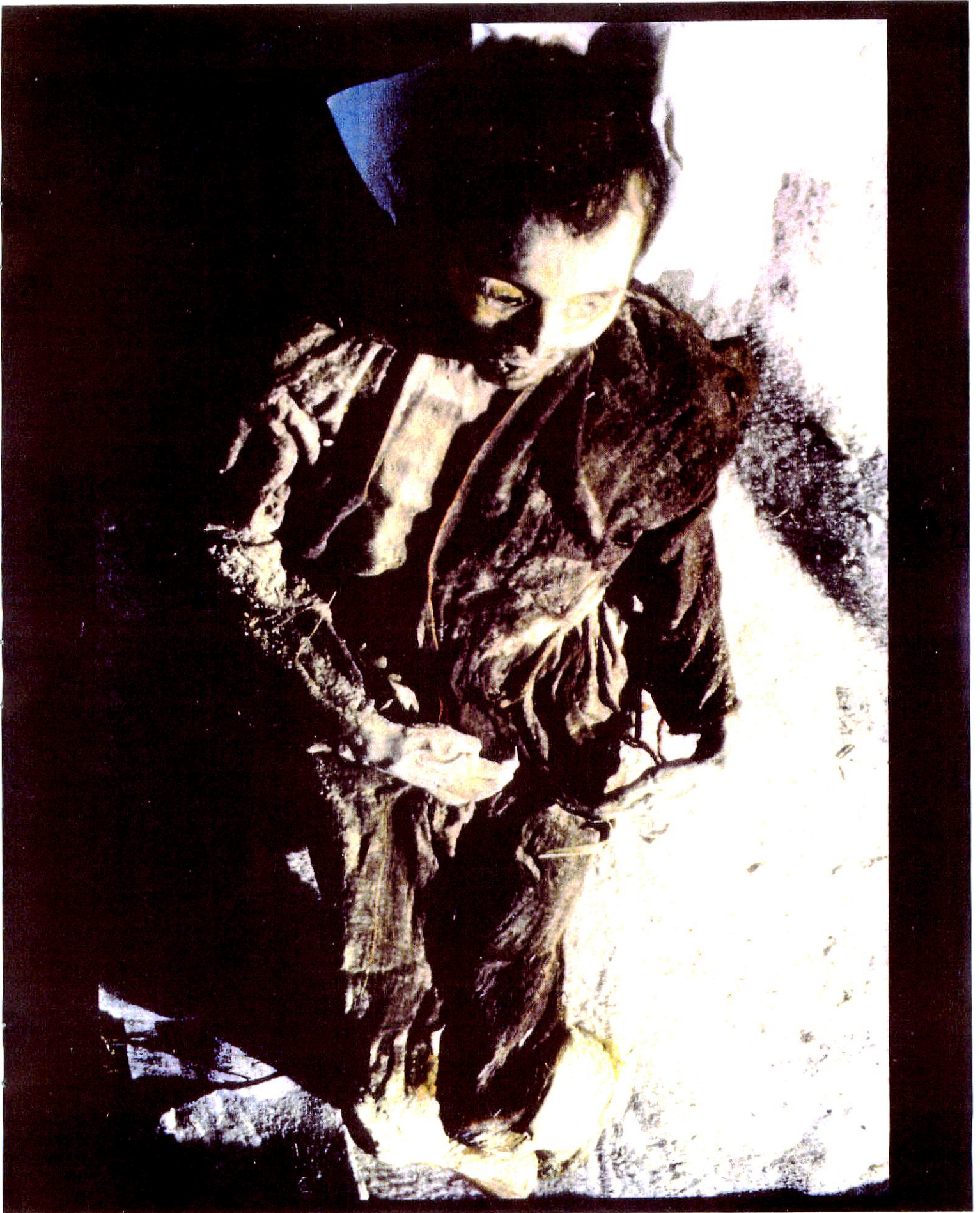


M2-9

Figure-4









2

II



9



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