

PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF THE JOINT KUWAITI–POLISH MISSION, FAILAKA ISLAND, 2012

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Abstract: An extensive archaeological prospection along the coasts of Failaka recorded over 180 sites, different stone structures, surface pottery assemblages, farms and enclosures. These were registered, documented and mapped. Stone by stone plans were drawn up of a number of substantial structures that were cleaned and some general observations were made. All prospected and cleaned structures proved to be built of local ashlar sandstone straight on solid ground or bedrock. All kinds of mortar and plaster was used for building construction. Flat stones of similar dimensions were carefully selected. Buildings were neatly designed with entrances always in the middle of the front wall. Archaeological sites of Al-Sabbahiya, Um al-Dakhan, Matitah, Kharaib el-Desht with a density of different historical structures dating from the mid- and late Islamic period are found in the southern regions of Failaka Island.

Keywords: Failaka Island, survey, stone structure, cairn, Islamic settlement, surface pottery assemblage

The Kuwaiti–Polish Archaeological Mission (KPAM) was established in 2012 on the grounds of an agreement between the National Council of Culture, Arts and Letters of the State of Kuwait and the Polish Centre of the Mediterranean Archaeology of the University of Warsaw. The main aim of the project initiated by Shehab Ahmed Shehab, Director of the NCCAL Department of Antiquities and Museums, was to register and record substantial structures and other archaeological evidence situated in areas extending along the island coast not covered earlier by the archaeological surveys which had started

on Failaka in the late 1950s (followed by exploration of several sites: Tell Khaznah, Tell Saad, Al Zoor, Al Qusour, Al-Khidr, Al-Awazim, Al-Quraniyah) (Bibby 1996; Callot and Calvet 1999).

Fieldwork entailed an extensive survey of approximately 10.7 km², the walking distance covered being over 19 km [*Fig. 1*]. Once topographic data was acquired, the island was divided into sectors (SQ), which were subsequently surveyed in search of archaeological field evidence recognizable on the surface and artifacts. Newly identified sites, structures, middens and pottery scatters were registered. GPS

coordinates were recorded for all located finds (stone structures, installations, pottery scatters) using a Garmin Oregon handheld GPS apparatus. Sites were then assessed in terms of potential for further evaluation.

Very little evidence has come to light from the coastal plain area, even upon revisiting. Needless to say, low-visible archaeological features may have remained unrecognized due to human error or by being mistakenly discounted as modern

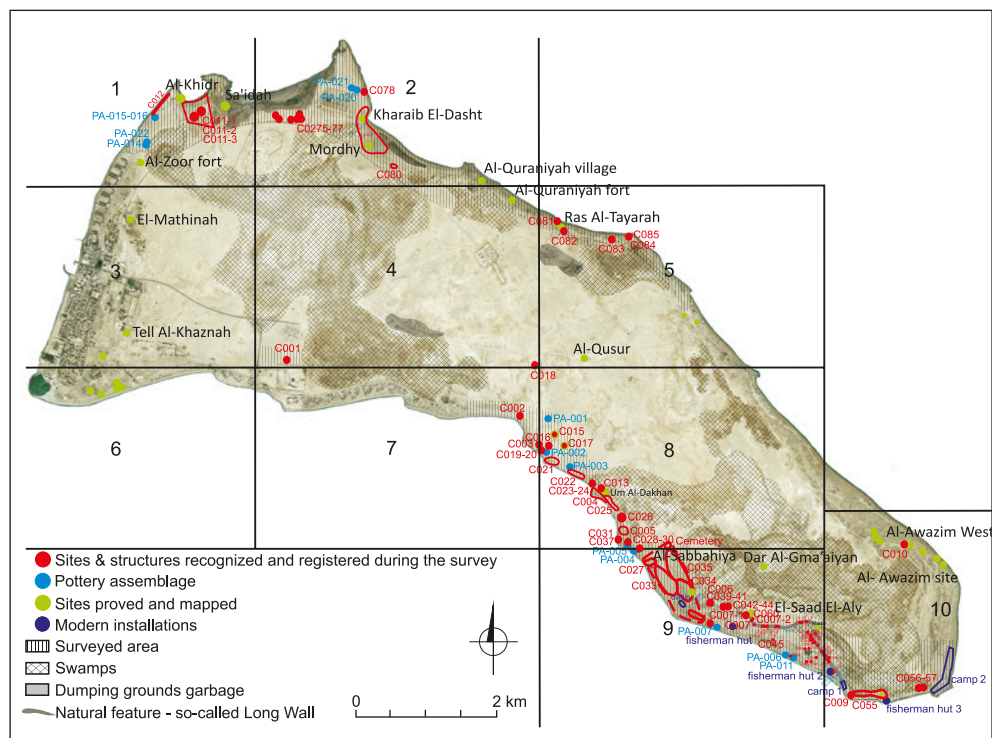


Fig. 1. Failaka survey map for the season 2012
(Topography I. Nazaruk, P. Zakrzewski)

Team

Dates of work: 7 February–3 April 2012

General Project Director: Prof. Piotr Bieliński (PCMA UW)

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Surveyors and topographers: Piotr Zakrzewski, Sebastian Skubisz, Ireneusz Nazaruk (all freelance)

KUWAIT

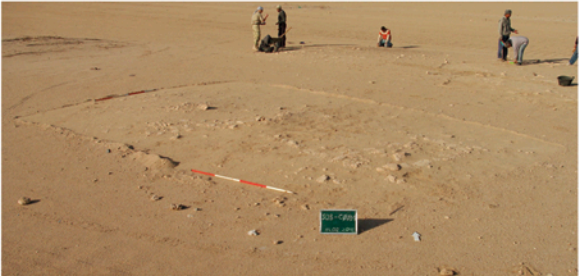
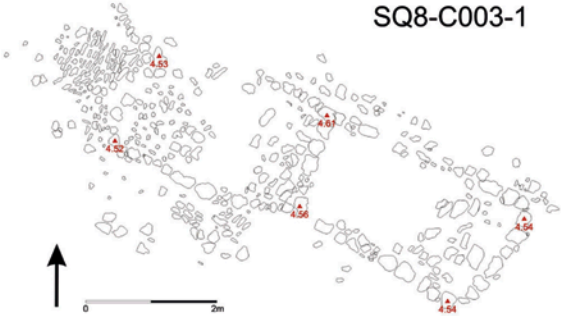
Site: C003-1	Date: 15.02.12	GPS Coordinates: N: 29.423720 E: 48.341539	Surveyed by: KJ
Type: HUT FOUNDATION	Description: Remnants of hut with two rooms (possibly two huts clustered together). On the western side of the structure remnants of fallen wall (blocked window?) are visible.	Finds: <u>Y</u> / N	
		Ceramics	Yes
		Lithics	Yes
		Bone	
		Shell	Yes
Condition: poor		Glass	
Projection: medium		Metal	
Dating: unknown		Rock Art	
		Other	
Dimensions (m):	Sketch/Photo:		
Diameter –			
Length – 3 m			
Width – 8 m			
Height –			
Photos:	 <p style="text-align: right;">SQ8-C003-1</p>		
Drawings:	<p style="text-align: center;">Yes</p>		

Fig. 2. Example of a Survey Card opened for a stone feature (Processing K. Juchniewicz)

or natural. During the second stage of the survey, chosen sites were inspected again, being given a unique ID code preceded by SQ (Square) and "C" for the coast. Each site was photographed and some of the stone structures were sketched. Structures were brushed of sand and surface layers of compact earth were removed on occasion in order to recognize site extent and dimensions, and to test preliminary interpretations. A Survey Card was filled out for each structure, then digitized and included in the mission records [Fig. 2].

The research program also included digging of probes. The main goal this season was to test a "long-wall", a rock feature already marked on the map (Dickson 1949), running across the desert for a distance of about 2 km not far from the southern Failaka Island coast [Fig. 3]. The said wall was speculated to be a sort of rampart raised as an embankment for unclear reason. Probes in two different sections of "the wall" showed clearly that it was apparently a natural feature, an elevated ridge that was presumably the line of the seashore once. The ridge appears

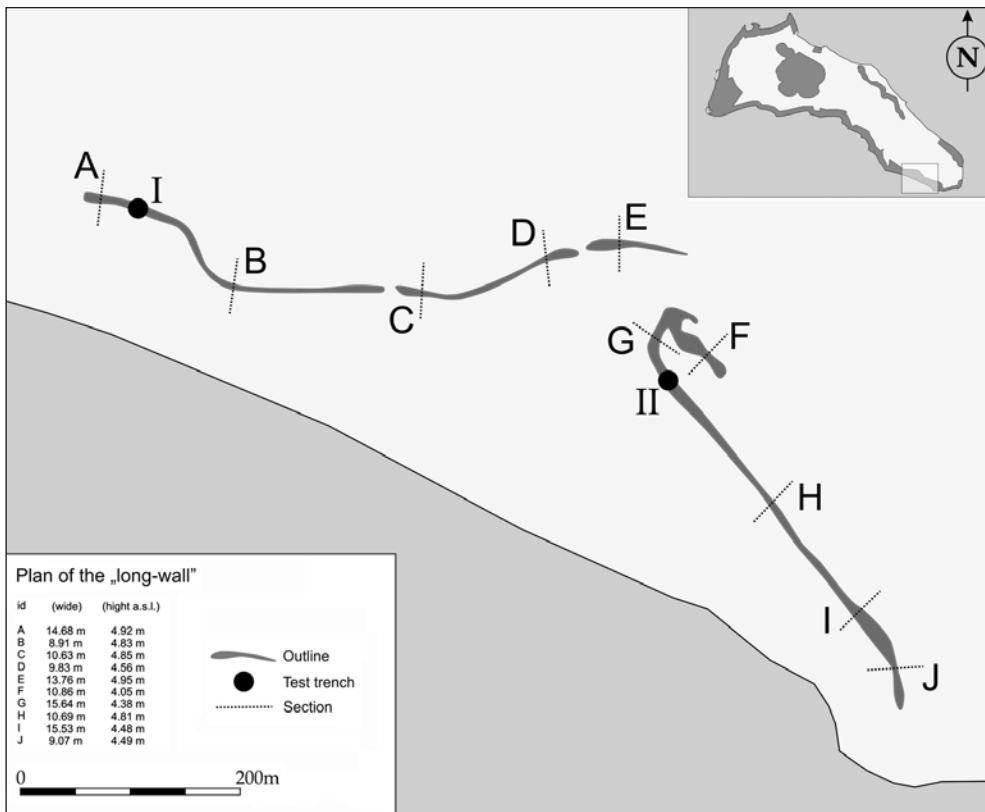


Fig. 3. Plan of the natural feature in the southern part of the island (Drawing S. Skubisz, P. Zakrzewski)

to have a solid core of sandstone bedrock situated a few centimeters below the coating composed of eroded stone material and compact top layer of sand. The slabs of bedrock are approximately 6–9 cm thick and those situated at the top of the ridge are broken into many fragments and badly eroded, disintegrated into sand and pebbles. The largest slab of bedrock discovered in probe II (near Matitah) was still of significant size (approximately 100 cm by 80 cm). The formation and its evolution requires geological research. Tumuli-like heaps of stones (cairns) in the elevated area on the rocky ridge are currently believed to be of Bronze Age date, to be confirmed by further exploration.

BUILDINGS/FOUNDATIONS/ DESERT WELLS

Most structures identified by the survey could not be easily classified by surface examination alone and needed brushing and partial cleaning. Buildings thus investigated demonstrated a clear variety in terms of shape, size and form.

Walls built of the same flat slabs can be either thin, made up of one row of stones, approximately 0.32–0.35 m wide, or double that, measuring 0.60–0.65 m. This is the case of building foundations clustered on the southern coast and labeled as SQ 8 C003-1, C003-2, C003-3 and C003-46. Presumably the walls themselves were built of mud brick and possibly wood to render the whole construction relatively light.

Only one abandoned and sand-filled desert well was found on the southern outskirts of Al-Sabbahiya. More wells and a cistern, all abandoned and badly devastated, were seen in the town of Al Zoor. Their investigation was not

included within the scope of the present program.

Stone-by-stone plans were drawn up of a number of substantial structures; the outlines of many others were drawn and mapped. The interpretation of different kinds of stone structures and their attributes as observed in the survey is still provisional at this time, but even so there are forms worth brief mention below. Time constrictions allowed only chosen structures to be prospected in detail, searching for data on the manner of construction, kind of material, exact plan and dimensions, or at least outline of the structure. Some datable material was made available as a result of cleaning or more intensive exploration.

After examination of the 17 different kinds of stone structures deriving from different sites, both on the northern and southern coast of the island: Al Qaseer, Um al-Dakhan, Al Bult, Al-Sabbahiya and Matitah, the following general observations can be concluded:

- All examined structures (oval shaped, rounded, rectilinear or rectangular) were built of local ashlar sandstone.
- Most, if not all, structures were raised on solid ground or directly on bedrock.
- All kinds of mortar or plaster (save for modern cement plaster) had been used in construction.
- Stone was not dressed, but sometimes was selected with utmost care; most stones were flat and of similar dimensions.
- Foundations or bottommost courses of walls were composed of single or double rows of well-fitted stones.
- Building foundations and bottommost courses were built of stone, whilst

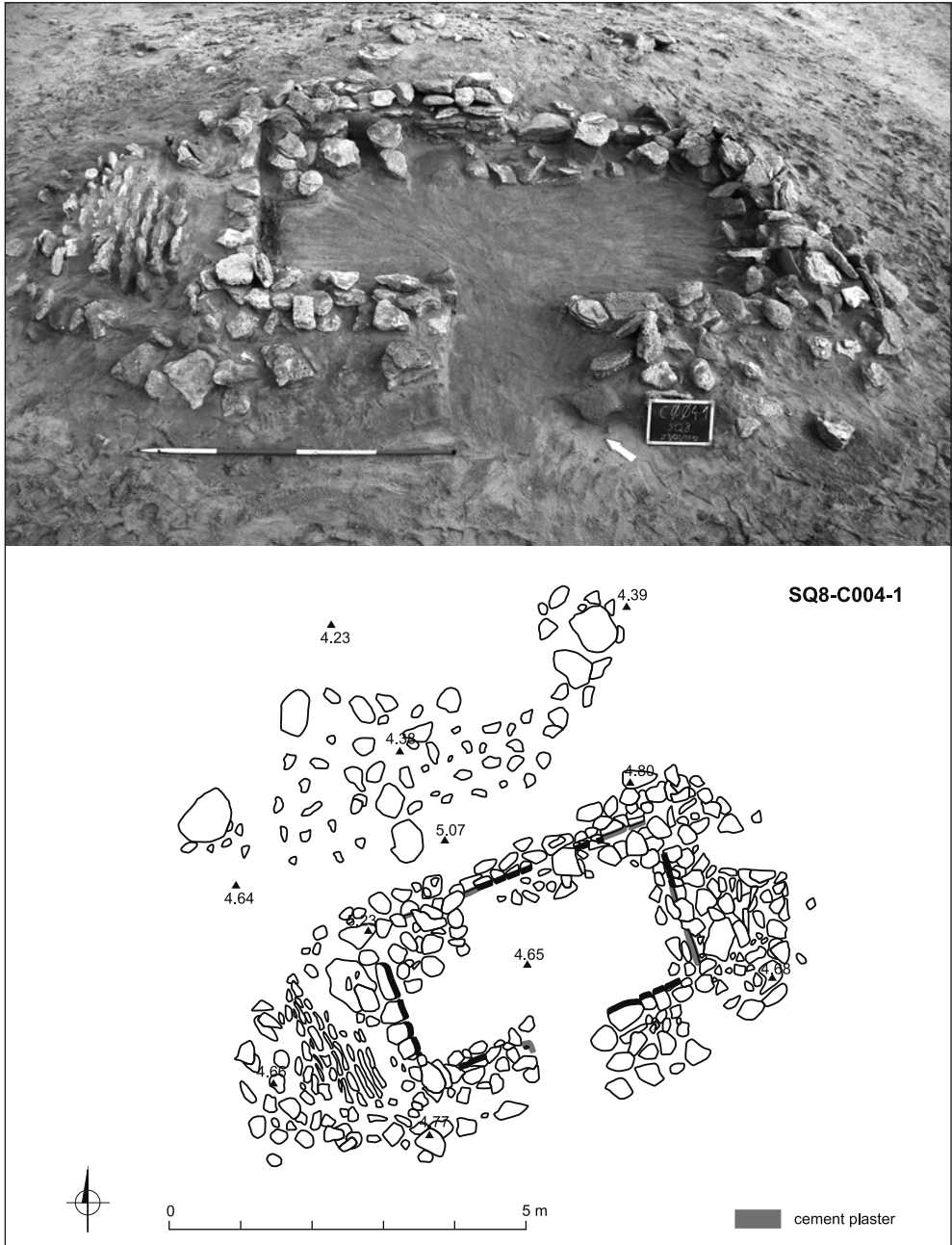


Fig. 4. Rectangular stone structure (C004-1) at Um al-Dakhan: top, general view, and bottom, plan (Drawing and digitizing S. Skubisz, P. Zakrzewski; photo I. Nazaruk)

the upper parts of structures were presumably of mud brick.

- Buildings were neatly designed with entrances located always in the middle of the front wall.

UM AL-DAKHAN

The structure at the site of Um al-Dakhan is relatively well preserved [Fig. 4]. Built of ashlar stones, it consists of one chamber (4.95 m by 2.90 m). Five courses of stones are still in place, rising in the west wall to a height of approximately 0.65 m. The remaining upper part of the wall had collapsed and at least seven more courses were lying beside the structure in regular order, supplying grounds for a calculation of the height. Stones from the opposite east wall were seen lying nearby and, should it be needed for restoration, one can expect more of the original building material behind the north wall. The entrance (0.70–0.75 m wide) was practically in the middle of the south wall.

The building was situated on elevated ground parallel to the nearby seashore and there is every reason to think that the structure dominated over the surrounding area. It is still not clear when it was built and when it collapsed. Pottery collected from the surface is overwhelmingly late Islamic, if not modern. Cement plaster preserved on the inner face of the walls and on the jambs of the doorway testifies to the use or rebuilding of the structure within the past century. Nevertheless, the structure should be explored and excavated.

At least two other stone structures of similar size and character were found in the vicinity of the building. Both stood parallel to the seashore.

MATITAH

The Matitah site, which lies in the neighborhood, is believed to be the location of Bronze Age occupation. Several stone structures discovered during the survey testified to intensive human activity through the centuries. The cluster of features discovered on the outskirts of the region [Fig. 5] was composed of buildings highly similar to the structures described above. They were rectangular in shape and had entrances located in the middle of the longer wall. All were oriented parallel to the line of the seashore and were of similar size; however, the dimensions of C053 (10 m by 5 m) are impressive. The door openings were approximately 0.70 m wide, as in the building at Um al-Dakhan. Inside were two semi-square rooms, each 3.50 m by 2.30 m. The building technique was very regular. Flat undressed stones were of similar size and well-fitted; the foundation remains were strikingly straight. The significant quantity of stones lying beside the foundation (both inside and outside the walls) seems to be sufficient testimony of a solid structure built with local ashlar stones. Three courses of stones preserved in the northwestern corner of the western chamber can be considered as satisfactory confirmation of this supposition.

Three other structures of similar shape but smaller and not so well preserved were recorded both east and west of the described building. C054 was located almost at the foot of the rampart at a distance of 3 m to the south. As far as can be recognized at this time, the structure was composed of a semi-rectangular chamber or chambers with doorway presumably located in the middle of the south wall of the building. The total

length of the structure, including a wide heap of stones accumulated in its western part, reached over 7 m; its width in total was almost 5 m. Originally, the chamber was not so wide. Its width was about 3.00–3.20 m, as calculated according to the partly preserved foundation walls. The building likely had two rooms, presumably of the same shape and similar dimensions. The corners seem to be rounded, but the precise plan of the structure can be reconstituted only after excavation.

A significant amount of stones gathered in the western part of the structure

suggested that there was a large building set against the embankment. The location at the foot of the ridge avoided the northern wind. The house was built directly on bedrock; a few broken slabs of rock are visible on the foundation level and on the western outskirts of the site.

Another building foundation (SQ 10 C065) was noted in the vicinity of the above-described structure. The state of preservation of the remains was poor, but the plan of the installation fairly evident, which surface brushing only helped to define. It appeared to be rectangular in shape with an entrance located practically

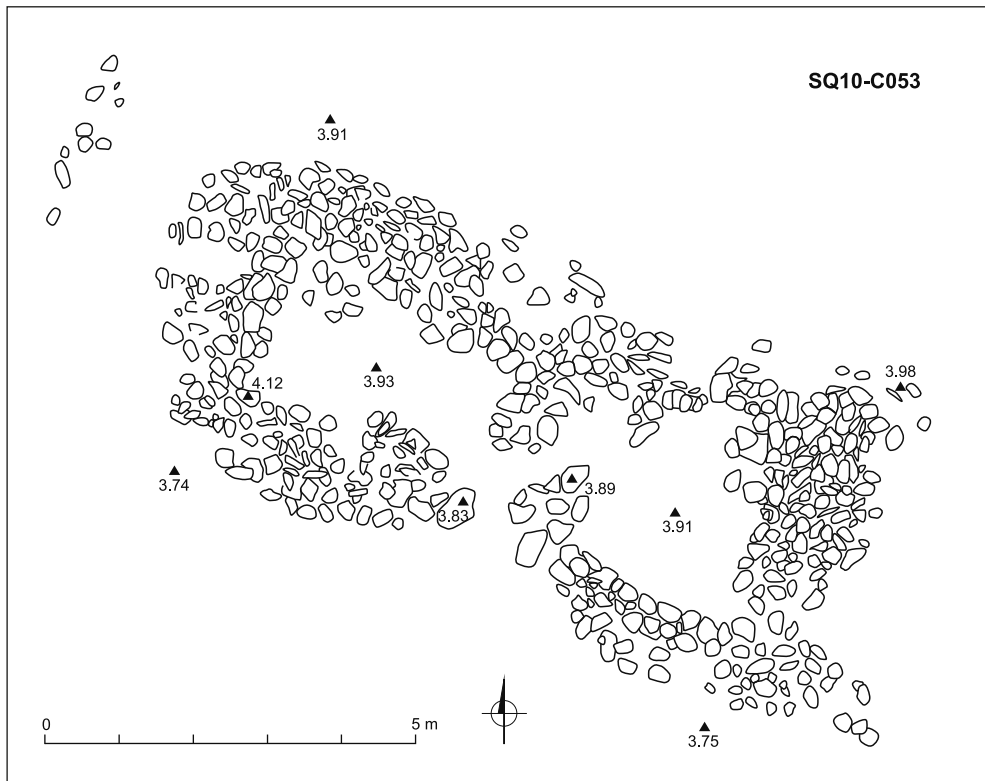


Fig. 5. Rectangular structure on the southern outskirts of the Matitah site
(Drawing and digitizing S. Skubisz, P. Zakrzewski)

in the middle of the south wall. It may be indicative of a certain type of dwelling. The structure was situated on the southern slope of the rampart. Taking into consideration the frequent north winds of winter time, the location seems to be much more comfortable than any other in this area. The building was large enough for different domestic purposes. Ashes discovered in the eastern part of the chamber are an important indication.

The surveyed structures in the region of Matitah are concentrated over a distance of some 250 m. The reason for the density

of structures is unclear, considering that there is absolutely nothing special in the region itself. Water availability may be a potential factor. However, until now there is no trace of a well in the neighborhood.

AL-SABBAHIYA

Al-Sabbahiya may be one of the largest Islamic settlements in the desert plain on Failaka Island. The site occupies an almost completely flat area and was covered with wind-blown sand deposits of up to 0.20–0.50 m upwards upon abandonment.

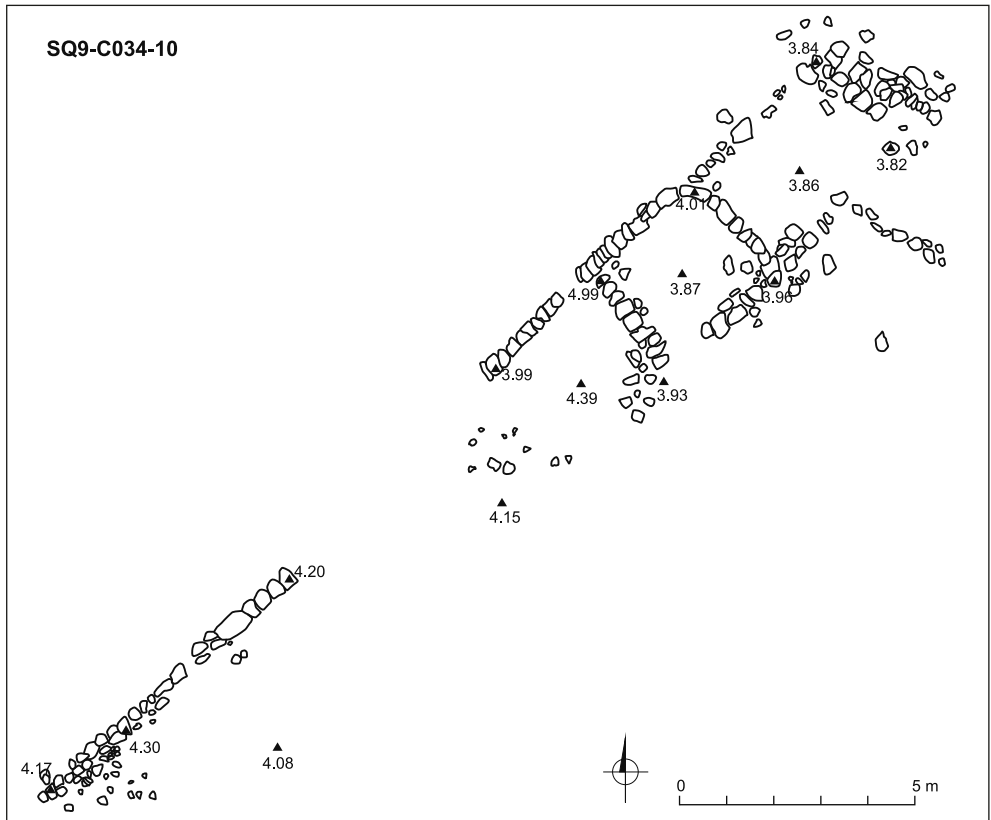


Fig. 6. Building foundation units cleaned at Al-Sabbahiya
(Drawing and digitizing S. Skubisz, P. Zakrzewski)

It is located near the southern coast of the island, at a distance of approximately 100–130 m from the seashore. The settlement appears to have extended at least 750 m in a NNW–SSE direction and approximately 300 m NEE–SWW. Pottery sherds scattered on the surface are similar to those from the ruins of the Desht village (see below and Mierzejewska 2015, in this volume). It is likely then that this settlement belongs to the same historical period, that is, the mid- and late Islamic. The cemetery found on the northwestern outskirts of the village probably dates to the same historical period. The survey identified, registered, and mapped dozens of stone structures, which evidently represented the remains of a city or large settlement existing in the southern part of Failaka Island. Some of the structures were situated on flattened mounds; others were positioned much lower on the desert outskirts. The interpretation of the different attributes recognized in the stone structures, alignments and enclosures across the Al-Sabbahiya survey area is preliminary at this time, but the date in the mid-Islamic period is certain.

Structures C034-10 and C034-11 were cleaned for the purposes of the project. They proved to be an elongated complex of square or rectangular units of similar shape and dimensions, aligned in a row [Fig. 6]. Three of these units were prospected in detail with the main goal being to obtain datable material. Islamic pottery sherds, bones and shells were collected from the surface. Blocks of local stone of fairly regular size were used for the construction. Today separated, the two structures that were cleaned originally composed one very long (almost 22 m)

habitation complex with several isolated cells, including one of fairly square shape (2.40 m by 2.50 m) and the other bigger and rectangular (3.30 m by 2.50 m). Presumably the entrances were located on the same side of the complex. It seems likely for the courtyard built up against this complex to extend to the east. A potential hearth feature was identified to the east of structure C034-10.

AL BULT

This site is a coastal area located immediately to the south of the well-known Al Khidr site on the west seashore of the island (Benediková 2010) [Fig. 7]. Differences in levels of geological formation of the site are clearly visible on the contour map prepared by the mission topographers. Natural rocky terraces descending to the seashore were used by fishermen and villagers from neighboring Al Zoor as a comfortable place to dry fishing nets and store fishing gear. Tools and fishing equipment were stored in rather modest buildings or huts built of local ashlar stones forming the lower parts of walls and presumably mud bricks in the upper part of the structure. Pottery found at the site is dated to the past century.

KHARAIB EL-DESHT AND MOURGHY

The settlement was situated on the northern coast of the island east of the Saieda site and is isolated now by a modern waste landfill. Flat ground extends from the area named Ras al-Ruwasyah in the east all the way to Al-Quraniyah cemetery. Several stone structures and installations were identified and registered during the field walking survey. Pottery scattered on the surface seems to be of late Islamic date.

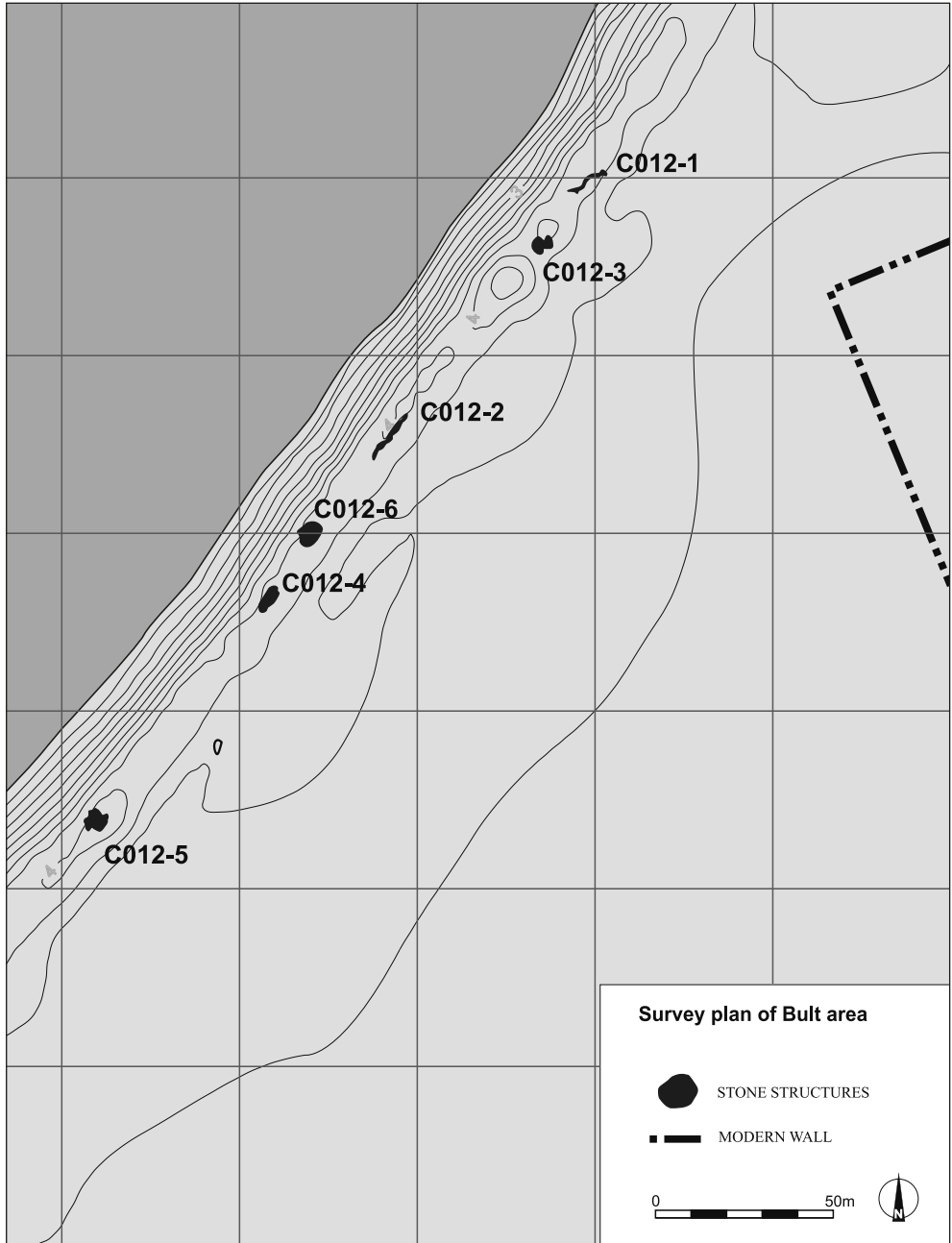


Fig. 7. Survey plan of Al Bult area
(Drawing and digitizing P. Zakrzewski)

According to historical sources, the village of Desht was inhabited until the beginning of the 19th century. Habitation density must have been considerable considering the wide area over which ceramics can be found. Remnants of stone structures (most probably building foundations) are numerous as well.

Pottery sherds collected during the survey (more than 900) were brought back to the Museum laboratory for initial processing and were catalogued according to fabric, decoration, technique of manufacture, type or form, and other variables recorded. Individual scatters were interpreted as potential traces of human activity and were registered and mapped as PA (pottery assemblage). Sherds that were obviously modern were not recorded or studied. The material was mostly fragmentary, consisting of body sherds, but also diagnostic rims, bases and handles which were given unique numbers and registered.

Needless to say, the archaeological material collected during the survey was not decisive in terms of dating the remains. A thorough study was beyond the scope of this project (investigations of the site were supervised in the following season by Agnieszka Pieńkowska; for a report, see Pieńkowska 2015, in this volume), but a preliminary review indicated the presence of a few characteristic wares that may be distinguished as typical of sites in Failaka as well as on other sites in the Gulf region. Of greatest interest among these are Black Ware sherds decorated with flat, horizontal raised panels with imprinted fingers (Kennet 2004), Red/Orange Ware typical of Bronze Age pottery, Pale Gritty Ware, one of the most common wares in the late 19th/early 20th century

assemblage of the Central Gulf (Carter 2011). Glazed pottery made up about 6% of the collected pottery assemblages.

RECAPITULATION

Summing up the results of the Kuwaiti–Polish survey of the island coast, it is essential to emphasize the comprehensive and intensive character of this survey. Apart from dumps and areas occupied by campers, as well as already explored archaeologically areas at Al-Awazim and Al-Quraniyah, the survey team walked through every region situated along the coast. The outcome of two months of prospection was the identification, registration, documentation and mapping of over 180 sites, different stone structures, pottery assemblages, farms, enclosures and, last but not least, desert wells and cisterns [see *Fig. 1*].

Regarding the importance of the cultural heritage already known and still to be discovered on Failaka Island, a salvage program should be implemented for the archaeological sites. The regions of Al-Sabbahiya, Um al-Dakhan, Matitah, Kharaib el-Desht and Mourghy offer a density of different historical structures from the mid- and late Islamic period. These sites and the areas around them should be excluded from any modernization program of the island, at least until the completion of relevant research. In the meantime, a comprehensive historical study of the development of Islamic settlements located on the southern and northern coasts should be undertaken to understand the relationship between villages. No settlement existed in isolation and the availability of water might be a potential factor related to the phenomenon of their clustering,

as at Um al-Dakhan – Al-Sabbahiya, Kharab el-Desht – Mourghy and El Saad el-Aliy – Matitah, leaving large gaps in between. Further archaeological exploration could result in more

information on the settlement practices of the inhabitants of Failaka and generally in a better understanding of the history of the island and the nature of Failaka settlements.

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