

Archaeological Investigations in the As-Sabbiya, Kuwait, in 2015-2017

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ABSTRACT. From 2015 the Kuwait-Georgian Archaeological Mission carried out archaeological research in the continental part of Kuwait, at Bahra, As-Sabbiyah region. Three years of investigation have revealed very interesting cult complexes, the first of their kind in the region. One of them consists of two parts: a so-called "long structure" and a burial adjacent to its north-west side. The long structure is in the form of a "corridor" composed of walls of upright stone slabs that delimit the edges. In the west, the wide part of the corridor was partitioned by an altar erected using flat stone slabs arranged in three rows. Incorporated into the altar wall were several vertical stone slabs decorated with curved geometrical patterns, as well as two narrow vertical column-like slabs. One of the latter is decorated with a vertical row of convex spherical parts, separated from each other by grooves. The upper part of this column ends with a forward-projecting element, representing a schematic image of an animal, probably a lion or a dragon. In front of the altar, as well as in the sandy mound originally covering the burial and western part of the corridor a large quantity of ostrich egg-shells, shell ornaments, fragments of pottery, pieces of bronze plates and wire, stone beads, sprigs of corals, ocher, various multicolored stones, a limestone seal of conical shape, and a rim fragment of a steatite bowl were discovered. Behind the altar was found a goblet of the Kassite period. The radiocarbon date measured at Oxford is 3405 ± 32 BP, corresponding to a calibrated date range of 1770-1620 BC. In 850 m to the east a very interesting complex of rounded stone structures was excavated, apparently also of a religious nature. The four discovered structures stretch in a line from north to south and all share the same basic characteristics: round in plan, flat, and of horseshoe shape. At the eastern edge of each structure was arranged a row of three stone boxes, enclosed from the outside by one large stone. All of these structures were destroyed and plundered in antiquity. A very interesting object was found directly at the outer wall of one of the structures. This is a cylinder seal of black soft stone with a multi-figure composition carved on its surface and a three-line inscription. According to its iconographic features this seal can be dated to the 23rd century BC. Other very interesting objects found here were two bronze styluses. To our knowledge, these are the only items of this kind found in Kuwait. © 2018 Bull. Georg. Natl. Acad. Sci.

Key words: As-Sabbiyah, burial mound, stone structure, shrine, long structure, altar, Kassite, Old Akkadian, cylinder seal

From 2015 the Kuwaiti-Georgian Archaeological Mission carried out archaeological research at Bahra in the As-Sabbiya region, which stretches for about 60 km along the shores of Kuwait Bay (fig. 1). In previous years this region was investigated by Kuwait [1; 2; 3], British [4], and Polish teams [5: 479-492; 6: 493 493-517; 7:

was lined with flat stone slabs. The size of this embankment was 16 m from the north-west to south-east and 17m from the north-east to south-west.

The long structure in the form of a "corridor" starts from squares D₁₆-E₁₆, stretches initially to the west, then turns to the north-west, and ends at the

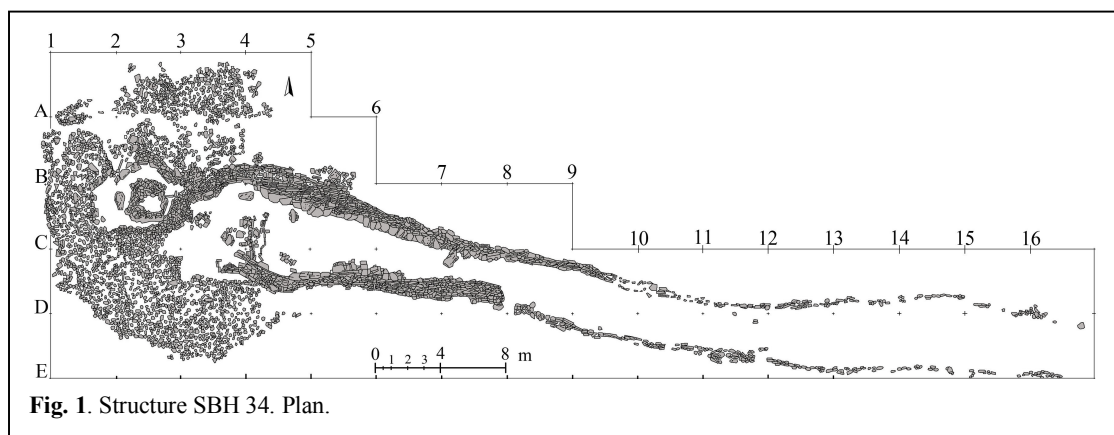


Fig. 1. Structure SBH 34. Plan.

431-461; 8: 505-528]. As a result of extensive archaeological investigations and surveys, the remains more than two hundred archaeological monuments of various kinds, from the Neolithic to the Late Islamic period, have been recorded. Nearly 200 stone features, mostly circular burial mounds (tumuli graves) of the Bronze Age, were identified as well.

Our excavations focused on the stone structure SBH 34, located to the south-east of the Saad Al Abdulla Al Sabah road leading to Bubian Island. It is located not on a rocky ledge, as most of the stone structures in the region are, but on the lowlands gently rolling toward the coastal *sabkha* plain.

As a result of two years of investigation of SBH 34, a very interesting complex has been discovered and documented. It is the first of its kind in the region. It consists of two parts: a so-called "long structure" and a burial adjacent to its north-west side (Fig. 1). The length of the entire complex from the north-west to south-east is 63 meters. The western part of the complex was surrounded by a rounded sandy embankment, the surface of which

eastern edge of squares B₂-D₂. For the first 26 m (up to squares D₉-E₉) the walls are rather fragmentary, preserved in separate sections, and represented by small stone slabs placed along the edge. In this section, the width of the corridor varies between 3.5-4.20 m. Starting from squares D₁₁-E₁₁, the walls turn to the north-west and retain this orientation to the end. From squares D₉-E₉, the walls of the corridor begin to thicken to 0.45 m and rise to a height of 0.4 m. The nature of the masonry begins to change as well, consisting of obliquely placed medium-sized stone slabs, the space between filled with vertical slabs of a more modest size. The width of the corridor here is 3 m. In fact, this is the beginning of the monumental part of the structure. At squares D₇-E₇, the height of the walls is 0.7 m with a width of 1.0 m (south-western wall) and 1.5 m (north-eastern wall). The outer and inner facades of the walls consist of large, inwardly inclined stone slabs, with an inner filling of smaller stones. The walls become increasingly enlarged further to the north-west. In squares C₆-D₆, the outer shell is constructed of three plates; just to the



Fig. 2. Transverse wall and the fence in front of it.

north-west, there are three plates on the inside and four on the outside. The width of the walls increases to 2.10 m at the base, and the width of the corridor increases to 4.30 m. In squares C₄-D₄, the walls begin to round off. Here they appear the most monumental, especially the north-eastern wall, with a width at the base of 2.30 m and a height of 0.95 m. The outer facade of this wall is built up of five large slabs, while the inner is composed of four. The south-western wall here is more modest – only 1.0 m wide and 0.5 m high – and built in a completely different manner, using five rows of regular horizontal masonry enclosed on both sides by large vertical stone slabs. Further to the west, within squares B₃-D₃, this wall breaks off abruptly. The north-eastern wall continues to be rounded to the south, but near the eastern edge of square C₃ it also breaks off. The whole north-western extremity of the corridor is badly damaged, and the masonry from the building is dismantled. It is here that the corridor reaches a maximum width of 7 m.

In square D₅ one of the stone plates at the inner face of the south-western wall is decorated with carved ornament of unknown iconography: a long vertical figure, divided by horizontal incisions into segments of varying heights. The dimensions of the stone plate are 0.75 x 0.70 m.

A transverse wall extends out from the south-west wall at the western edge of squares C₄-D₄. It is 0.40 m high and 0.40 wide and is made of flat horizontal stones arranged in three rows (Fig. 2). It

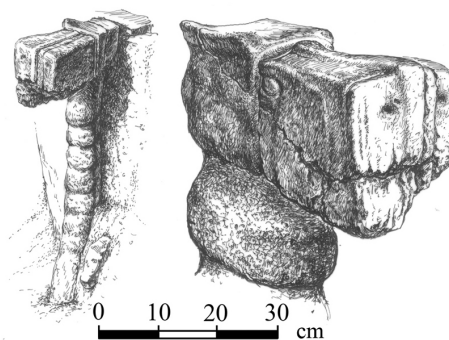


Fig. 3. Column with lion or dragon head, reconstruction.

stretches out from the south-west wall for a distance of 2.80 m and ends abruptly before reaching the north-east wall, leaving a passageway 0.90 wide that provides access into the rounded western part of the long structure.

The south-eastern facade of the transverse wall is lined with vertical stone slabs. In the corner stands a relatively low and narrow stone plate of reddish color, the surface of which is decorated with carved rectangles (Fig. 3). To the north of it are placed two narrow vertical column-like stones. The southern column-like stone is quite remarkable. Its main trunk is decorated with a vertical column of stacked convex spherical parts, separated from each other by grooves. The upper part of this column ended with a forward-projecting element, rectangular in cross-section, representing a schematic image of an animal, probably a lion or a dragon (Fig. 3). The nostrils are clearly visible in front, as are circular eyes on the sides. The frontal lobe is smoothly carved, as well as the upper edge of the stone plate standing behind it. This part of the column was broken off from the rod and lay at its foot (length: 0.12 m; preserved height of the column: 0.57 m).

In the northern part of the transverse wall, two separate vertical slabs stand upright, to a height of 0.50 m. The back of one stone slab is much eroded but on the underside a pattern is visible, consisting of a rectangle formed on all sides by double grooves. The back of the other stone slab is also

ornamented with a pattern of rectangles outlined by double rows of grooves and separated from each other by the same grooves.

Parallel to the transverse wall, at a distance of 0.65 m to the east of it, stretches a line of small stone slabs set on edge, which fenced off this part from the rest of the described corridor (Fig. 2). The upper edge of the stone that forms the southern end of the fence is decorated with jagged carving. At a distance of 1.25 m from the southern end of the fence, a stone rectangular "box" is attached, also composed of small vertical stone slabs. Its dimensions are 0.25 x 0.18 m. This "box" was filled with loose sand. The fence ends with another "box", this one triangular in shape. It is noteworthy that the thin stone tile of the same triangular shape and appropriately sized is placed within this space. The total length of the entire fence is 2.40 m.

Inside the fenced area was found a horizontal stone plate with ornament engraved on it, consisting of an elongated triangular shape, filled with horizontal strokes, with four lines radiating from its base.

Described features allow to conclude that the area around and including the transverse wall is an altar, and therefore the entire long structure should be interpreted as a shrine.

In the immediate vicinity of the front of the altar, as well as in the sandy mound surrounding it, were discovered numerous ostrich egg-shells. It was possible to restore one of the eggs. It had a round hole at the top, which indicates its use as a container for liquid. The use of ostrich eggs as containers, though rare, is noted in the territory of ancient Mesopotamia from the 3rd millennium BC. [9: 128; 10: 283, 543, pl. 156; 11: 19; 12: 73; 13: 193-198]. The radiocarbon date measured at Oxford University is 3405 ± 32 BP, corresponding to a calibrated date range of 1770-1620 BC (the authors express their great gratitude to Thomas Higham for invaluable help in obtaining this date).

In the shrine were also found almost 2300 objects made of sea shells, pieces of bronze plates

and wire, stone beads, as well as fragments of pottery, a fragment of the rim of a steatite bowl, sprigs of corals, ocher, and various multicolored stones.

Directly behind the altar is situated a large empty area, delimited by the vertical stone slabs of the internal face of the north-east wall of the ritual corridor (Fig. 1). In the western part of the area, immediately in front of the small stone slabs, a recess was found filled with stones and ceramic fragments, among them fragments of a goblet of the Kassite period.

Another interesting find must be noted as well: in square D₅ at a depth of 0.5 meters above the floor level of the corridor, we found a white, cone-shaped signet of limestone with a loop at the top. The round-shaped seal is divided into four sectors, each including one leaf-shaped image. There is a net-shaped impression on the upper surface of the loop. Traces of pigment – reddish, bluish and green – survive in the incised grooves of the seal. This find is quite remarkable. The closest parallels to the image on the seal (stylized flower) are found among artifacts of the Early Iron Age in Oman [14: 93], and this may indicate that the sanctuary was visited in a later period as well.

Even before excavation, a section of a compact stone mound was visible in the central part of the round, sand-covered area that formed the western part of the investigated complex. The stone mound stood out because it towered above the surrounding stone slabs, and because in this area on the surface was a concentrated scatter of black and white stones. To the west and to the north of this mound there was a semicircular band of stones with no lining of upright slabs. In the process of excavating this mound, it was possible to identify individual stones that were once arranged as though flowing down from the edges into the interior of this space, which must have originally been empty. The western edge of the stone structure was composed of masonry roughly built with stone slabs. The dimensions of the stone structure in the upper part

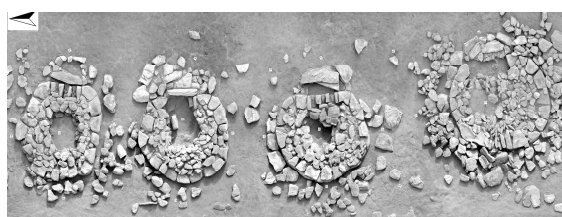


Fig. 4. Rounded structures.

were 2.0×2.5 m with a height of 2.5 m. Fragments of ostrich eggs and necklaces and rings made of shell were found between the stones on the exterior surfaces of the masonry.

After removing the stones in the central part of the stone mound, flat stone slabs of relatively large size were found at a depth of 0.60 m below the upper level of the structure. The slabs were inclined toward the center of the structure. In the eastern part at depth of 0.80 m, we reached a layer of sand with small inclusions of gravel – essentially bedrock, with no additional stone slabs. The bottom level of the flat slabs was cleaned, with no finds, not even a single conch. At the bottom of the stones comprising the outer wall a few barely detectable bones were found scattered in small pieces during removal, as well as two shell beads. The upper layer of gravelly sand was completely sterile. The investigated stone structure was surrounded by a circular wall, adjacent to the western end of the corridor of the sanctuary.

Thus, we have discovered an interesting complex consisting of a so-called "long structure" and an adjacent burial mound with an outer ring. At some point the entire western part of the complex was incorporated into a large sandy mound of round-oval shape, undoubtedly constituted as a single entity. It seems most likely that the corridor-like structure was built first, and only later was the burial mound added to the west.

At a point 850 m to the east of the long structure, a very interesting complex of rounded stone structures was excavated. The four discovered structures stretch in a line from north

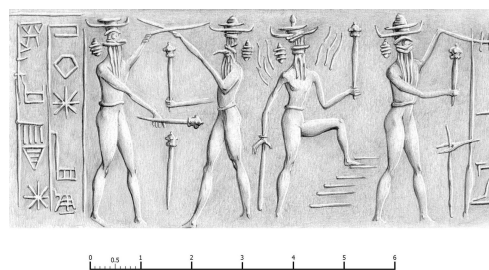


Fig 5. As-Sabbiya. Cylinder seal, imprint, drawing of G. Tatishvili.

to south for 23 meters. They all represent the same type of structure: round in plan, flat, and of horseshoe shape. Their diameter varies between 3.40-3.60 m. The outer face of the walls consists of finely cut large stone slabs with rounded edges (Fig. 4).

The eastern part of each rounded structure contains a unique feature. The rounded walls here are replaced by a straight line of three stone "boxes" made up of medium-sized stone plates placed on edge. The length of these features ranges from 1.10-1.20 m. The bottom of each feature is also formed by stone slabs (Fig. 4). In front of three of the features to the east lies a flat stone slab. The slab next to the feature in one of the rounded structures is 1.20 m long and 0.35 m wide. Perhaps initially this slab stood on its edge and enclosed all three boxes from the east. Probably a slab of the same size covered these "boxes" from above as well. On the outside, a semicircular platform paved with stone slabs adjoined the stone boxes (in one case this semicircle was marked with stones only along the outer contour).

All these structures were destroyed and plundered in ancient times. A very interesting object was found directly at the outer wall of one of the structures. This is a cylinder seal of black soft stone with a multi-figure composition carved on its surface and a three-line inscription (Fig. 5). The composition represents a scene of a battle of the gods with the figure of Utu-Shamash at the centre. The seal belongs to the Old Akkadian period, and moreover, according to aspects of the iconography, in particular the nudity of figures,

it can be dated to the 23rd century BC [15: Fig. 329; 16: 15, 130, Fig. 80]. The legend on the seal could be read as follows (our sincere gratitude to Professor Olga Drewnowska-Rymarz of Warsaw University who read and commented on the inscription):

A-mur-^dEN.ZU Amur-Suen,
dumu [Kal]a-ga-DINGIR son of Kalaga-dingir,

ugulageš₂-da overseer of 60.

Other very interesting objects found here are two bronze styluses. To our knowledge, these are the only items of this kind found in Kuwait.

In summary, three years of investigation in As-Sabbiya allowed us to identify a number of very interesting ancient complexes, which shed new light on the Bronze Age archaeology of this region.

არქეოლოგია

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** კულტურის, ხელოვნების და ლიტერატურის ეროვნული საბჭო, სიძველეთა და მუზეუმების დეპარტამენტი, კუვეიტი

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2015 წლიდან კუვეიტ-საქართველოს არქეოლოგიური მისიის ცალკე ჩამოყალიბებულმა რაზმმა დაიწყო სამუშაოები ქვეყნის კონტინენტალურ ნაწილში, ას საბიას რეგიონში. სამი წლის მუშაობის შედეგად აქ პირველად კუვეიტის გათხრების ისტორიაში აღმოჩნდა საკულტო ნაგებობების მთელი წყება, მათ შორის, დიდი სამლოცველო, შემდგარი გრძელი „დერეფნისაგან“ და მასთან დაკავშირებული ყორღანული სამარხისაგან. დერეფნის განიერ ნაწილში, მთელ მის სიგანეზე გამართული ქვით ნაგები საკურთხეველი აღმოჩნდა, მორთული სხვადასხვა ამოღარული გეომეტრიული სახეებით, ლომისა თუ გველეშაპის თავით შემკული დაბალი სვეტით. საკურთხევლის წინ აღმოჩნდა მრავალრიცხოვანი შეწირულობა, წარმოდგენილი ძირითადად ზღვის ნიჟარებით და მათგან დამზადებული მძივ-სამკაულით, სირაქლემას კვერცხის ნაჭუჭებით, სარდიონის მძივებით, თიხის ჭურჭლის ფრაგმენტებით, ბრინჯაოს წვრილი ნატეხებით. ცალკე აღსანიშნავია კარგად შემონახული კასიტური ტიპის სასმისი. ოქსფორდის ლაბორატორიაში სირაქლემას კვერცხის ნაჭუჭზე ჩატარებული რადიოკარბონული ანალიზის შედეგად გაირკვა მისი თარიღი – ძვ.წ. 1770-1620 წწ. გარდა ამისა, ექსპედიციამ შეისწავლა რამდენიმე ამ რეგიონისათვის მეტად უჩვეულო საკულტო ნაგებობა, რომელთანაც დაკავშირებული აღმოჩნდა მეტად საინტერესო ნივთები - ორი ბრინჯაოს სტილუსი და ადრეაქადური ხანის ცილინდრული საბეჭდავი ღმერთების ბრძოლის გამოსახულებით და სამსტრიქონიანი წარწერით, რომელმაც მისი მფლობელის ვინაობა გაგვიმხილა - „ამურ სინი, კალაგა დინგირის ძე, ზედამხედველი სამოცზე“.

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