

Archaeology

Kuwait-Georgian Archaeological Mission - Archaeological Investigations on the Island of Failaka in 2011-2017

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ABSTRACT. According to the agreement between the National Council for Culture, Arts, and Letters of the State of Kuwait and the Georgian National Museum, archaeological investigations began on Failaka Island in March of 2011, and on the continental part of Kuwait in the As Sabbiya region. Failaka is situated 17 km off mainland Kuwait in the north of the Arabian Gulf at the entrance to Kuwait Bay. The discovery of dozens of sites on the north-east coast of Failaka dating from the Early Bronze Age to the Late Islamic Period resulted from the work of Kuwaiti-Georgian Archaeological Mission, where investigations focused on monuments from the various periods. From the Early Bronze Age, this study examines two completely looted burial mounds reinforced with stone slabs as well as a stone “box” with an adjoining thin layer containing pearl shells and fragments of Dilmun vessels dating to the 2200-1750 BC from the site of Al-Awazim, located some 100-150 m from the coast. Nearby, along the shore of the bay we also investigate seven stone structures of similar construction: each rectangular, built in specially dug pits, and separated into two parts by a wall along the longitudinal axis. The inner surface of the walls was plastered using clay. The closest context for the materials found within the structures aligns with early Islamic ceramic complexes from Al-Qusur and Al-Quranyah of the second half of the 7th to the mid-9th century AD, but the fragmentary nature of the material is not sufficient enough to enable us to determine their function. Large groups of clustered sites, located within 150-160 m of the shore, extend along the coastline of the Arabian Gulf. These sites are characterized by long buildings consisting of three rooms arranged in a row. It is possible that these constructions were connected with fishermen’s activity in the late Islamic period and archaeological artifacts found at the sites are similar to 17th-18th century material found in the Arabian Gulf. © 2017 Bull. Georg. Natl. Acad. Sci.

Key words: Failaka, Awazim, Al Qusur, Dilmun, burial mound, stone box, stone construction, Early Islam, Late Islam



Fig. 1. Map of the Kuwait Bay and research zones of KGAM.

On 24 December 2010, the former Secretary General of the National Council for Culture, Arts & Letters (NCCAL), State of Kuwait, Mr. Bader Al-Rifai, and the General Director of Georgian National Museum, David Lordkipanidze, signed an agreement founding the Kuwaiti-Georgian Archaeological Mission (KGAM), which would carry out long-term archaeological investigation at Failaka Island starting in 2011 and in the continental part of the country in the region of As Sabbiya on the northern shore of the Arabian Gulf starting in 2015 (Fig. 1).

Emergence of the idea of this project was proposed by the Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassadors Mrs. Ekaterine Meiering-Mikadze, Mr. Archil Dzuliashvili, and NC AL's Department of Antiquities and Museums former director Mr. Shehab A.H. Shehab.

From the very beginning the Kuwaiti-Georgian Archaeological Mission focused on the island of Failaka, which is situated to the south of the delta of the Shatt al-Arab at the gateway to the northern part of the Arabian Gulf, some 17 km from the capital

of Kuwait. The island stretches from northwest to southeast and is approximately 13.8 km long and between 1.8 and 6.5 km wide. The convenient location of this small island made it a highly important place over the centuries as the archaeological finds demonstrate.

Failaka is the cradle of archaeology in Kuwait. Archaeological work conducted by Danish archaeologists under the supervision of G. Bibby began here in the 1950s. Since, in the studies have involved archaeologists from France, USA, Slovakia, Italy, Greece, and, more recently, a Polish Archaeological Mission.

According to the archaeological research to date, the ancient history of Failaka goes back to the beginning of the second millennium BC. During this time were Bronze Age settlements with palaces and temples, indicating a very active economic lifeway were discovered. The importance of the island is likely a result of its strategic position on the trade route between early civilizations of Mesopotamia and Dilmun, which flourished on the Island of Bahrain.

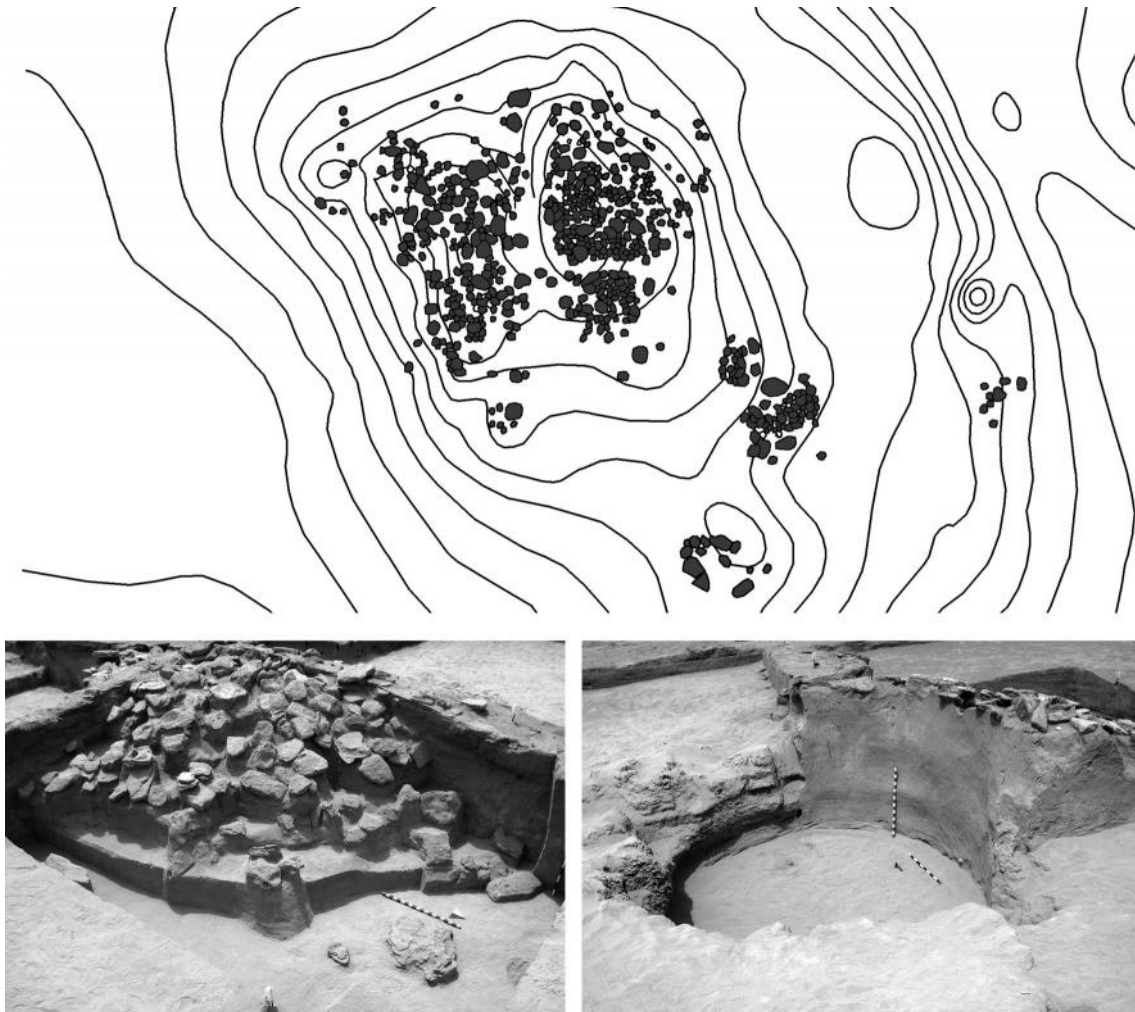


Fig. 2. Al Awazim, structure 1. plan; photos of revetment of the burial mound, and of burial pit beneath the sandy mound.

In the Hellenistic period, Greeks established an important military port that helped the Seleucid rulers of Antioch control southern trade routes. Per written sources, the Greeks referred to the island as Ikaros. Archaeologists have found the remains of fortifications, temples, and other public buildings, as well as epigraphic material, belonging to this period.

In subsequent Islamic periods, the densely populated centre of Failaka was called Al-Qusur, and a Christian church was also excavated here. Later, the population moved from the centre of the island towards the coastal areas to the north (Al-Quraniya), the west (Al-Zor), and the south (Umn Al-Dakhan, Al-Subahiya).

KGAM began work on March 7, 2011 on the north-

east coast of Failaka that had not hitherto been extensively investigated by archaeologists. The place selected first was situated in Al-Awazim, and in following years the activities were extended nearby areas. From these investigations, KGAM discovered dozens of scattered sites dating from Early Bronze Age to Late Islamic Period.

1. Al-Awazim, situated ~100-150 m from the north-east coast, is an extended area measuring 25 x 20 m and features a 1.6 m high sandy mound stretched from north to south. A shell-stone (“coquina”) mound was visible at its northern part. Slovak archaeologists made a cartographic and geophysical survey of the site that revealed some anomalies in the north-east part of the hillock [1: 58].

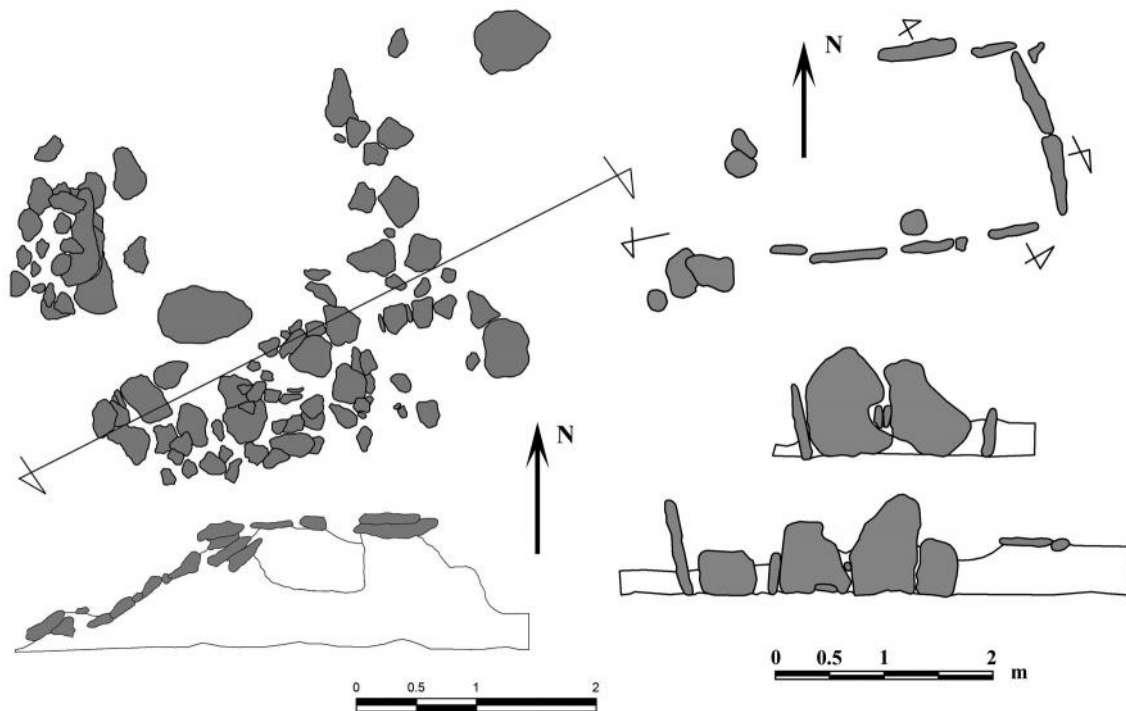


Fig. 3. Smaller burial mound (structure 2), and stone box (structure 3). Plans and sections.

Excavations revealed a destroyed structure (1), consisting of large and medium size slabs of shell-rock (0.60 x 0.40 m) that were used as a protective surface, as a revetment for the sandy mound. These slabs were arranged in single layers on top of the sandy mound, but were reinforced with two or three layers in the middle. Despite the damage, it was clear that the slabs were arranged in clearly-defined, regular circles. The revetment was best preserved on the NE slope. Its footing was located one metre below modern ground level (Fig. 2). The sandy mound itself was 8 m in diameter and 2 m in height. Beneath the centre of the sandy mound, an oblong pit (oriented NS, and measuring 4.5 x 3.6 m) was unearthed. It was sunk to a depth of one metre beneath the base of the sandy mound. The pit was cut into sand that was almost white in colour, and was filled with yellowish-grey sand; it did not contain any artefacts.

A few meters southeast of these excavations revealed smaller sandy mound, 3-4 m in diameter and 1 m high, which at the north-eastern part had the same stone revetment of large shell-rock slabs similar to

the above described structure. This structure (2) was badly damaged in the centre (Fig. 3). Both of these structures began at the same depth, which suggests that they had been constructed simultaneously. This one also did not contain any artefacts.

Next structure (3) represents a stone “box” consisting of vertical stone slabs. The west part of the structure was damaged, but its size could be reconstructed with the help of the surviving remains; it was 2.5 m long, 1.8 m wide and 0.9 m high. The eastern and the southern wall were well preserved, but only two slabs survived from the northern wall and the western wall was completely destroyed. The structure yielded red pottery fragments and remains of bitumen at the floor level.

In the immediate vicinity the excavation of an area 3 m in diameter revealed a few pearl shells scattered at a depth of 0.15-0.29 m. Another area of the same kind was detected in a layer of yellowish sand; it also contained pearl shells, scattered close to the surface, but this time they were accompanied by fragments of vessels dating to the Early Bronze Age (Fig. 4). The

pottery fragments belonged to about 20 clay vessels. Basically, these were the walls of red clay vessels, but several fragments of rims were also preserved. More distinctive vessels had horizontal decorations in relief. Most of these vessels have parallels in the Barbar pottery of the Dilmun Culture dating to 2200-1750 BC [2].

The excavations at Al-Awazim revealed structures as yet unknown on the island. Structure 1 with its characteristic construction was a tumulus type burial; so too was structure 2. Although no grave goods or human remains were found, it is reasonable to assume that these structures are associated with a burial complex of the Early Bronze Age. It seems that Structure No.3 was also built in the early period. Its stone "box" was destroyed, but fragments of red pottery dating to the Early Bronze Age were unearthed from the base of the "chamber".

2.0. During the several years of the project, the Kuwaiti-Georgian Archaeological Mission also conducted archaeological surveys of the surrounding area. KGAM identified 84 sites, some of which stood out distinctly while others consisted of a row of clustered finds. The results of this survey provided the main framework for further archaeological activity.

In 2012-2013, KGAM investigated seven similarly sized (on average, the approximate size are 3.5 x 2.5 m) rectangular stone structures located in specially

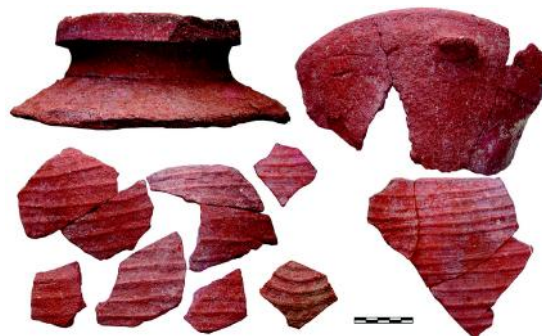


Fig. 4. Dilmun type pottery from Al Awazim.

dug pits. Their walls were built with regular masonry or using upright stones. In many cases the walls were reinforced with stone revetments. At the centre of the structures there were walls that divided them into two equal parts. As a rule, the walls were plastered internally and badly burned by the impact of a strong fire. In most cases, the structures had pits for accumulating burnt sand. The structures had roughly the same EW alignment, with only slight variations. The floor level was covered with a black layer of sand mixed with particles of bitumen and rare fragments of pottery (Fig. 5). The fragmentary nature of the material prevents us from determining their exact function, but there is no doubt that bitumen played a large role in the process of functioning. It is likely that these buildings were of economic importance.

As for the few finds associated with this struc-

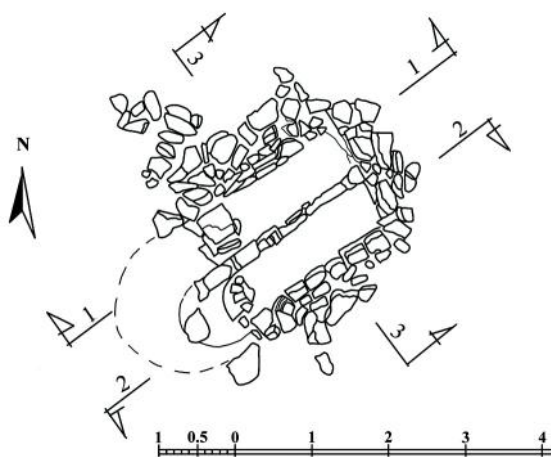


Fig. 5. Structure KG 1.4.



ture, the closest similarity to the fragments of pottery are found in the early Islamic ceramic complexes from Al-Qusur and Al-Quranyah from the second half of the 7th- to the mid-9th century AD [3: 12; 4: 50-69]. Residents of both of these settlements likely used these structures while engaging in economic activity based on the several recovered fragments of the so-called torpedo jars, which are large cylindrical vessels used for transporting bitumen [5: 85]. The recovery of similar vessels and the similar interpretation at the settlement of Al-Qusur strengthens this assertion [6: 148, 178]. It is possible that as a result of further research this date can be moved into the late Sasanian period.

3.0. A large group of clustered sites within 150-160 m of the shore extends along the coastline of the Arabian Gulf.

Cluster KG 18 starts near Al Awazim and spreads in a 300 m strip in north-west. The same strip also contains a circularly shaped structure constructed by stones: the KG 9 site. Another cluster, KG 12, consisting of thirteen sites, and possibly wells, is located just to the west of the KG 18 cluster. KG 10 is a lone site located NW of the KG 12 cluster. It seems that here we are dealing with 750-800 m long late Islamic settlement.

The “Long Building” (KG 10) is 17 m long and 2.5 m wide and extends from south-east to north-west. Initially, it had been a three-room building, but, during one of the renovations of the building, a semicircular structure had been built onto one of the ends. To the south-west of the “Long Building” an additional storage room was added. Vertically arranged flat stone bricks encircled the internal yard of the dwelling at the south-east end (Fig. 6).

A building revealed in KG 18 cluster (site 22, excavated in 2016) has similar orientation as KG 10. Initially it had been a three-room building (2.20 x 11.40 m). Later, a 2.40 x 1.60 m semicircular storage room had been built onto it at the south-east end. Whereas, to the south-west an arch-shaped wall was added. This wall surrounds the entrance to the dwelling.

The stone entryway was identified in its north-west wall indicating an additional entrance (Fig. 6).

The height of the remaining walls in both buildings varies between 0.20-0.50 m. They are built with flat shell-stones. The remains of walls seem to be only the foundation of the buildings. For shaping up the walls, different types of material were probably used, such as 16 wooden pillars, palm wickers, clay, and a tent. The remnants of those materials have not been preserved, but pillar pits within the walls of the building as well as in the central strip of the rooms have been identified. These pillar pits must have been used as a support for walls and for the roof. Similar elongated structures were discovered by the Polish-Kuwait archaeological mission on the southern coast of the island (the southeastern part of Failaka) during an archaeological survey [7: 547-559].

The artifacts related to fishing, such as fishing-net stone weights, fishing-rods, etc, indicates the main occupation of the inhabitants – seasonal fishing and accompanying activities. The archaeology has revealed several living surfaces and periodic renovations within the structures in the settlements, which points to a seasonal occupation of these sites.

The excavations revealed a circular building built of flat stone, erected on a platform measuring 4.2 x 3m that consisted of stone, clay, and sand. The walls were made from three or four courses of masonry up to a height of 0.7m. The interior of the chamber measured 2.3x2m; the floor had been levelled and compressed. The entrance inside the structure was from the north-west and here we can see a stone doorstep. It should be noted that most investigated structures of this period have an entrance from the south or south-eastern side, and because of this feature, KG 9 differs from all the others. The south-east is the direction to Mecca, and this orientation of a building possibly indicates that in this case we are dealing with a Musallah, an outdoor prayer area. As we know, similar Musallah are encountered widely in the Arab world, and they can have various shapes [8: 152-153; 9: 88-89].

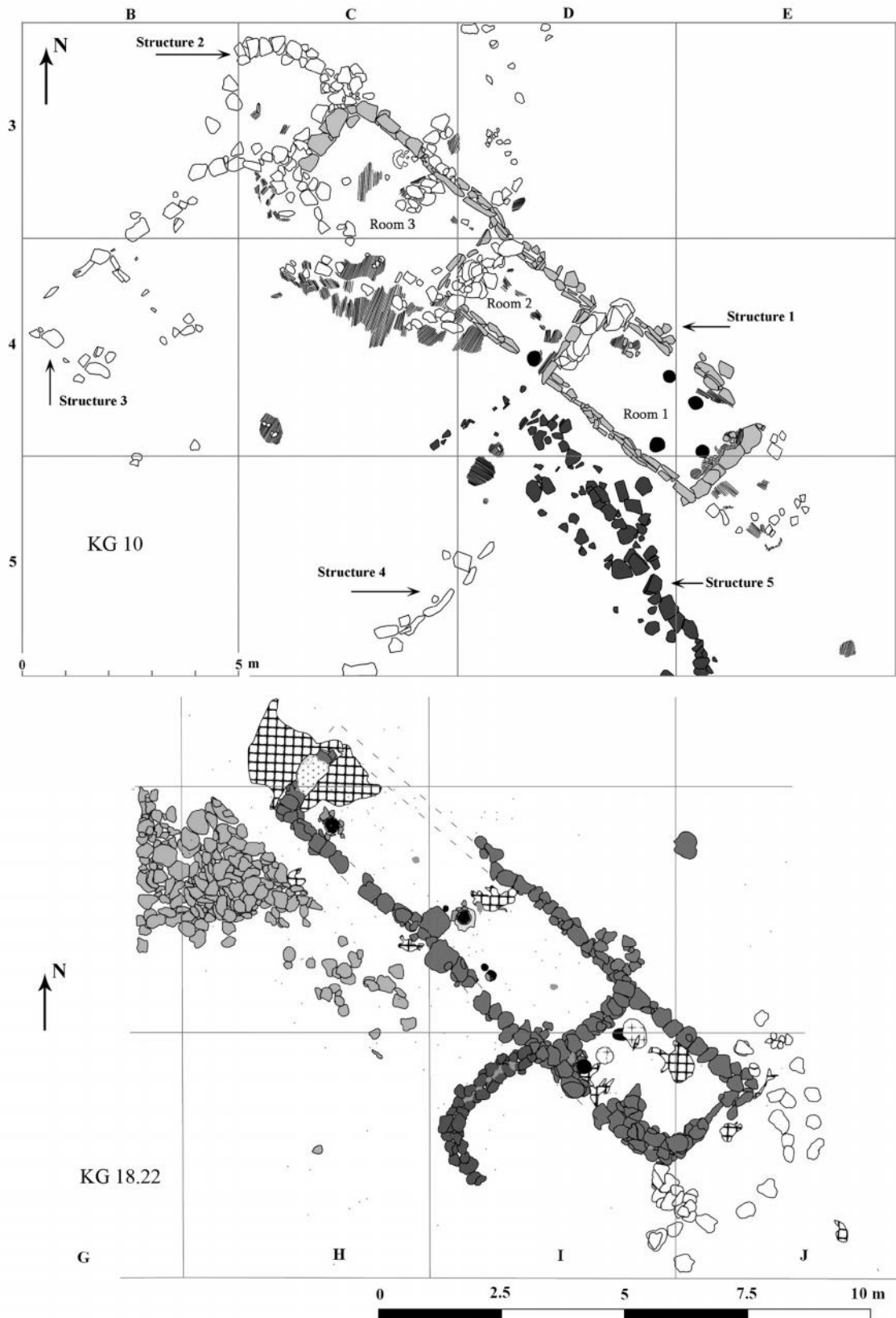


Fig. 6. Buildings KG 10, and KG 18.22; plans and sections.



Fig. 7. Archaeological artefacts from site KG 9, KG 10 and KG.18.22

Archaeological artifacts found on the sites are similar to 17th-18th century material found in the Arabian Gulf. Specifically, types of ceramic such as Bahl (Kunj) ware, MGPAINT.2 (Manganese Painted Ware), GMONO.2 (Green Monochrome Ware) and Julfar ware were found (Fig. 9). Additionally, the glass bracelets and metal objects found on the site are similar to those

found in the Arabian Gulf during the late Islamic period [5; 10: 5-7]. These findings also have parallels with materials from the Island of Failaka from sites such as Al-Sabbahiya and Kharab El-Desht [11: 23-24]. Polychrome glass bracelets with red, yellow, and green colors found at site KG 10 find their parallels at Al-Qurainyah, which also belongs to the Islamic period

არქეოლოგია

კუვეიტ-საქართველოს არქეოლოგიური მისიის კვლევა-ძიება კუნძულ ფაილაკაზე 2011-2017 წლებში

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2011 წლის მარტიდან კუვეიტის კულტურის, ხელოვნების და ლიტერატურის ეროვნულ საბჭოსა და საქართველოს ეროვნულ მუზეუმს შორის დადებული ხელშეკრულების საფუძველზე კუვეიტ-საქართველოს არქეოლოგიური მისია შეუდგა არქეოლოგიურ გათხრებს კუნძულ ფაილაკაზე და კუვეიტის კონტინენტალურ ნაწილში ას საბიას რეგიონში. კუნძული ფაილაკა მდებარეობს კუვეიტის უბის შესასვლელში, სანაპიროდან 17კმ დაცილებით. სხვადასხვა ექსპედიციების მუშაობის შედეგად აქ გამოვლინდა რამდენიმე ათეული არქეოლოგიური ძეგლი ადრეპრინჯაოს ხანიდან გვიანისლამური ხანის ჩათვლით. კუნძულის ჩრდილო-აღმოსავლეთ სანაპიროზე განხორციელებული ექვსწლიანი კვლევების შედეგად გამოვლინდა სხვადასხვა დროის რამდენიმე ათეული არქეოლოგიური ძეგლი. ადგილ ალ ავზიმში შევისწავლეთ განსხვავებული ზომის ორი სრულებით გაპარცეული ყორღანი და ნახევრად დანგრეული ქვაყუთი მიმდებარე თხელი ფენით, რომელიც შეიცავდა ძვ.წ. 2200-1750 წწ. დილმუნურ კერამიკას. 2012-2013 წლებში შესწავლილი იყო ერთმანეთის მსგავსი, შუაში გრძელ დერძზე კედლით ორ ნაწილად გაყოფილი წაგრძელებული ქვის შვიდი კონსტრუქცია თიხით შელესილი შიდა ზედაპირით. ამ კონსტრუქციების დანიშნულების გარკვევა დამატებით კვლევას მოითხოვს, ხოლო რაც შეეხება ასაკს, ფაილაკადაწვე მომდინარე არქეოლოგიური მასალის საფუძველზე ის შეიძლება განისაზღვროს ახ.წ. VII-IX სს-ით. გაითხარა ასევე გვიანისლამური ხანის მეთევზეთა სადგომები, რომლებიც XVII-XVIII სს-ის მასალებს შეიცავდა.

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Received July, 2017