

KPAM PUBLICATIONS
Al-Subiyah 2007–2012

**TUMULI GRAVES
AND OTHER STONE STRUCTURES
ON THE NORTH COAST OF KUWAIT BAY
(AL-SUBIYAH 2007–2012)**

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with contributions by
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and
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PREFACE

The religious beliefs of societies native to the region is well highlighted by the numerous tumuli graves dating from different periods of time. A study of these important archaeological sites brings extended knowledge of the social, economic as well as burial and religious practices of the people that raised them. The tumuli are also a source of information on the architecture, burials and funerary furniture placed with the deceased.

Pre-Islamic tumuli in Bahrain are considered a key to understanding the west coast civilization of the Arabian Gulf, in particular the GCC countries. These mounds had attracted numerous amateur explorers in search of treasure and adventure, similar as in the case of the royal tombs in the area of A'ali, one of the biggest towns in Bahrain, famous for its burial mounds, even before the arrival of Captain Edward Low Durand (1845–1920), the first European writer to comment on the Bronze Age burial-mounds in Bahrain, in the end of the 19th century. Durand was the first to publish the results of his digging in some landfills. He was followed by Thomas Geoffrey Bibby (1917–2001), a pioneer of Arabian archaeology who arrived in Bahrain as an employee of the Petroleum British Company. Due to his friendship with the Danish scientist, Professor Peter Vilhelm Globe (1911–1985), he later became the head of the Prehistoric Museum in Aarhus mission for archeological excavation in the GCC countries. Having investigated some of the mounds, Bibby persuaded Professor Globe to work in Bahrain starting in the early 1950s. That prompted a rapid discovery of ancient civilizations in the Arabian Gulf, especially Dilmun which was mentioned in the Mesopotamian records. The large number of mounds in Bahrain — estimated at 70,000 — led to suggestions that Bahrain was the graveyard of Dilmun civilization, which had spread from northern Kuwait to the south of Bahrain. These ideas have been repeated until quite recently.

Archeological excavations have been carried out in different parts of Kuwait, on the mainland and in the islands. A great deal of evidence has been forthcoming as regards human settlement, especially dating to the pre-Islamic periods. But even with all this work, no burials, tombs or mounds, have been found to accompany this settlement. Archeologists remained baffled by this from 1958 until 1999.

A look at the published books and historical sources on tombs and tumuli in Kuwait shows how limited and repetitive the information given is. The earliest source on the subject is the *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman and Central Arabia* by John Gordon Lorimer (1870–1914), a British diplomat, historian and colonial administrator, where the author states: “The 'Adān district contains the only relics of antiquarian interest which



Fig. 1. Author of the preface on survey

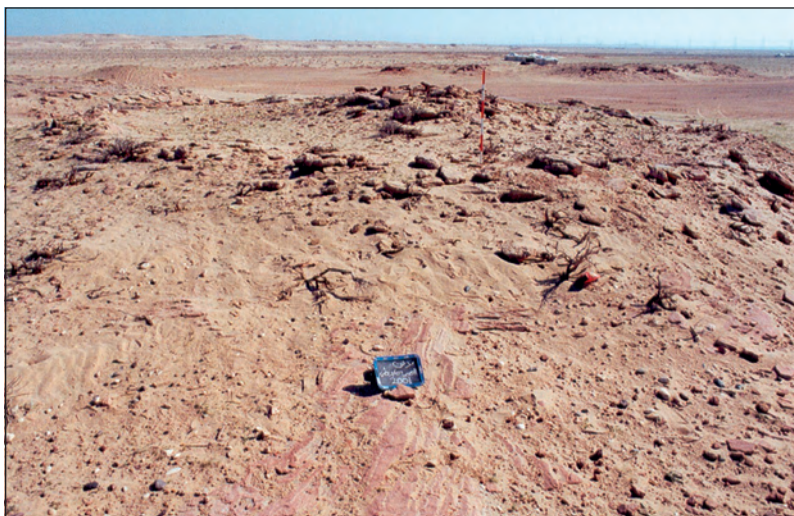


*Fig. 2. Kuwaiti excavations
at Al-Subiyah-Radhha
(site SR D)*

have as yet been discovered in Kuwait Principality; these consist of some sarcophagi at a spot 6 miles from the Warah hill, from which that hill lies at 258° and the western most part of the Burqan hill at 214° . The tombs lie east and west and are therefore not Muhammadan (the direction of Mecca from these tombs is south-west). They occupy a plot of high ground about 100 feet square. The sarcophagi are of gypsum cement, about 5 feet long, 1 foot 8 inches broad and 2 feet deep; the thickness of the sides is about 4 inches; they are buried 3 to 4 feet below ground and a large number of stones of irregular shape, each about 2 cubic feet in content are piled over them. There are no inscriptions." (http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100023486087.0x000001 [accessed 14 September 2015]).

As for the local historian Abdulaziz Al Rushaid, he states: "In Failaka Island there are ruins of old buildings and tombs, rundown throughout the centuries." He also states: "In the south of Kuwait, near Shuaiba, there are old tombs that do not look like the typical tombs, they do not belong to either the Muslims or the Bedouins, or (Hadhar)." He also says that "in Al Jiheri vertical tombs were found and the deceased were buried standing." The historian Al Nabhani agreed with Abdulaziz on this.

In his book on the search for Dilmun, Bibby told the story of the discovery of a civilization and the excavations of the Danish mission in the Arabian Gulf. He described his first visit to Failaka Island as follows: "We soon started running along the east coast of the Arabian Gulf, the sea had started to surround us from both sides. Towards the end there were small hills that didn't look from nature's work, and the closer we got the more we realized there were tomb prosecutions, nearly 5 or 6 of them in total. With our previous experience in Bahrain we didn't want to take the risk by estimating their age without proper excavation, all we knew was they dated far back to the Roman and Islamic periods. We marked them as a sign of worthy sites to excavate."



*Fig. 3. Tumulus SNG 6 in the
Nahdain area before
exploration*

Field research did not bring to light these tombs mentioned in the historical sources. But archeological investigations in Kuwait uncovered tombs as well as human skeletons at the F6 site in Failaka Island, known as the “Tower Temple”. Some of these skeletons were buried in jars that could be dated to the 8th century BC, other burials dated from the Hellenistic period. These studies were published by Yves Calvet and Jean-François Salles in the volume *Failaka. Fouilles françaises 1984–1985* (Lyon 1986).

A tomb discovered by the Slovak mission in the Al Khidr area (2004–2009), was found to contain a squatting skeleton; it was believed to date from the Kassite period, based on the burial form and the funerary furniture found within the grave, such as the historic cup of the Kassite period. To the east of the church in Failaka Island, in the Al-Qusur area to be exact, an undisturbed tomb sealed with plaster and a Christian cross stamped on it was located. Another intact grave occurred by the western entrance to a church on Akkaz Island (or Shuwaikh); the skeleton buried in it proved to belong to an old man. This was published by J. Gachet in 1998 (*Akkaz (Kuwait), a site of the Partho-Sasanian period. A preliminary report on three campaigns of excavation (1993–1996)*). On the northern coast of Umm Al Namel Island located west of Akaaz Island, there was a ruined tomb with a floor of stones dating to the Hellenistic period. It was explored by Dr. Fahad Al Wuhaibi, but never published.

The discovery of the Al-Subiyah tumuli was a mere coincidence. In 1999, I was working on the Qasr al-Subiyah site located near a power station on the south coast of the lagoon across from Warba Island. One evening in camp, I was visited by Dr. Najeeb Al Salem from the Kuwait University geology department and he mentioned in passing that he had seen piles of stones scattered along the road to the camp and asked me the reason for this. I told him that these were landmarks to guide travelers following in the dessert road. He, however, knowing of my interest in the tumuli excavations, suggested that I excavate beneath them. Especially given the fact that I had worked in Bahrain in 1984–1985 and in Tunisia in 1986. So, after completing the work in Qasr al-Subiyah, I surveyed the area and observed that the mounds were all located on elevated ground, immune to rainfall. The exterior shape and the diameter suggested an almost circular shape, which is the most common.

Consequently, experimental archaeological excavations were carried out in the Radha area and the results encouraged us to organize a joint mission with Poland to study this phenomenon in six successive field seasons, from 2007 to 2012. A partial solution to the dilemma was provided by the extended excavations, but a great deal of questions were also raised, such as the date of the burials, the reason behind their existence in Al-Subiyah, which settlements they represented, their relationship to the island of Failaka and islands in Kuwait Bay. Work on these mounds will continue for many seasons, the Polish team hoping to shed light on the matter and answer all these various questions.

This scientific publication is the first of many to come from our joint effort. It is also considered the first joint publication on tumuli in Kuwait and will be an important resource for researchers. We hope to continue collaborating with the Polish team for the sake of writing the history of mankind through archeological evidence as part of the journey of human civilization and the evolution of society.

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(NCCAL) of the State of Kuwait