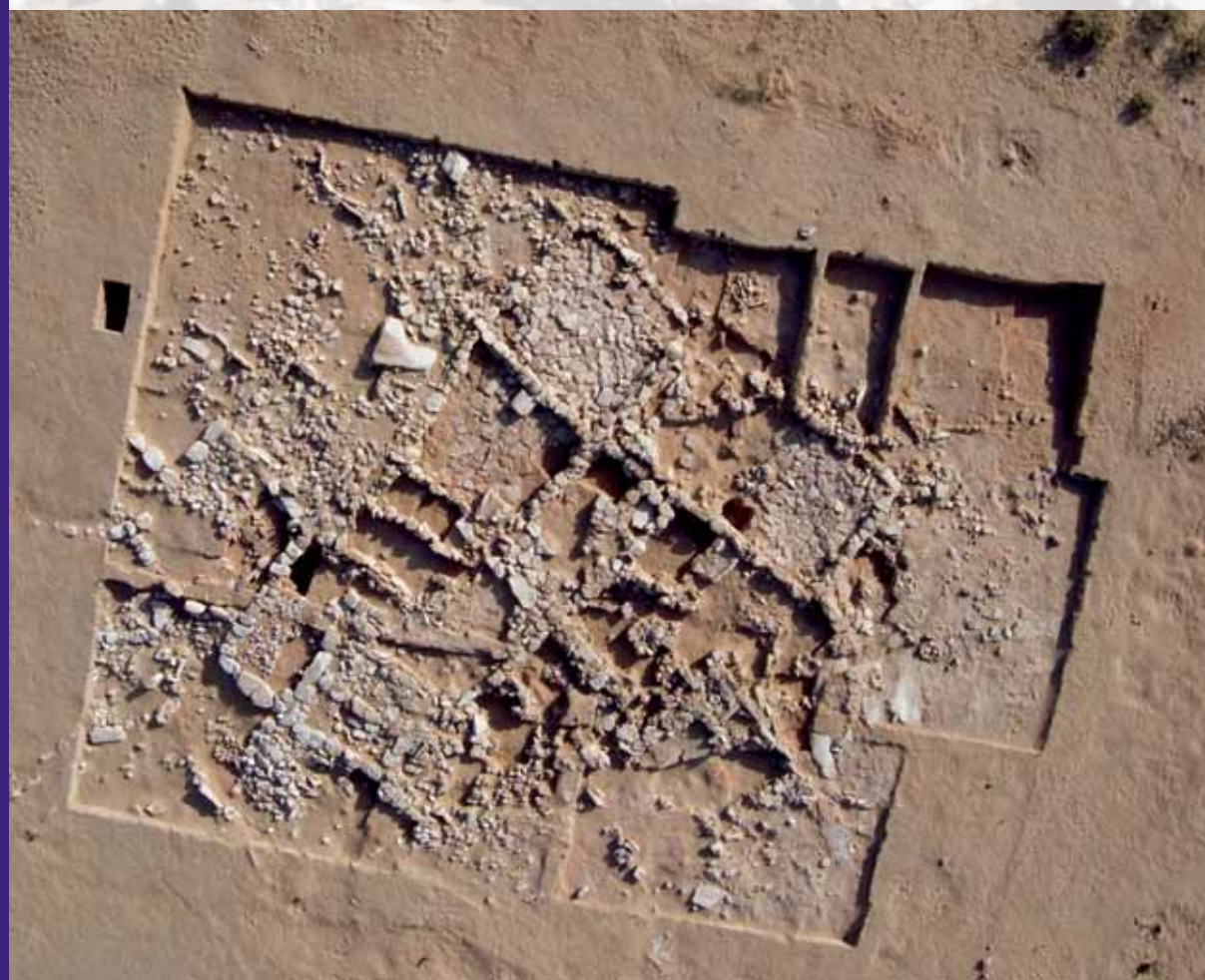


SBH 38 and SBH 35: two Ubaid culture related settlements in As-Sabbiya

In 2009, our mission began regular excavations at a settlement site registered in the inventories of the Kuwaiti Department of Antiquities and Museums as SBH 38. The site is located in the middle of As-Sabbiya, in the sub-region of Bahra, approx. 8 km from the present coastline. It had been discovered by Mr. Sultan Ad-Duwaish during excavations of a nearby grave site conducted by a GCC expedition. At the foot of a low sandstone promontory stretching NW-SE, at a very slight, southerly slope, regular stone alignments could be seen in the sand. Numerous shells and potsherds were found in their vicinity. Some of the pottery fragments had a painted decoration easily recognizable as belonging to the Ubaid culture (6th–5th millennium BC). The stone features, stretching at a distance of c. 120 m, formed straight lines and subrectangular alignments, apparently remnants of orthogonal buildings.

A similar concentration of painted Ubaid potsherds had been also spotted nearby at the southern end of the same promontory, where we later discovered stone alignments similar to those at SBH 38. This other concentration of archaeological material – undoubtedly also a settlement site – was codenamed SBH 35. However, the distance between SBH 38 and 35 being so small (just about 120 m), it seems very probable that in we are dealing here fact with two parts of one site.

Kite view of House 1 remains



We began our research (still at SBH 38) with the seemingly somewhat unscientific activity of intensive sweeping the stone structures and their vicinity with hand brushes. This effort allowed us to get a better picture of the situation at a considerable area and to choose a spot for regular excavations. Our choice fell on the southern part of the site, where complete outlines of rooms were revealed under the sand cover. By carefully discerning between *in situ* stones belonging to walls and floors and those of stone tumble, we soon roughly established the boundaries of the building, which was designated as House 1.

This rectangular building, which still remains the object of our research, was inhabited for a long period of time; in the last stage of its usage it was approx. 11.50 m long and 8.50 m wide. Interestingly, its corners were quite accurately oriented according to the cardinal points. The south-eastern corner of the building has not been uncovered as yet, but the wall alignment clearly points to the place where it should be, if it had not been destroyed at some point in the past. House 1 consists of at least 13 rooms distributed in three, more or less regular, rows. South of House 1, visible fragments of walls suggest that at least two rooms had been build against the house's outer wall, most probably to enlarge it. The situation on the northern side of House 1 is more complicated: remains of four rooms and fragments of three others, arranged in two rows parallel to the main axis of House 1, point to the existence of another architectural unit similar in plan to House 1.

Isometric drawing of Bahra 1 remains



The two seasons of research that have taken place so far allow for a preliminary reconstruction of the history of House 1. We are sure now that the house was rebuilt several times and we can distinguish four stages in its history. The house reached its largest dimensions in the last stage, when rooms were added to it on the south-west. Although it is clear now that the interior of the house was subdivided into more and more small rooms with each rebuilding, the oldest stage is, for the time being, barely known.

The walls of House 1, or at least their lowest courses, were built of local sandstone, which naturally breaks into thin slabs that do not bear traces of intentional dressing. In many parts of the building the walls consisted of stones set vertically in two parallel rows, with smaller stones packed between the two stone faces. They may have been bonded with a mortar made of local, sandy clay. What the upper parts of the walls were made of, remains unknown. For the time being we assume they were made of smaller stones and clay. Some of the rooms had pavements made of irregular, flat stones. In one room the floor was made of cobbles, most probably originally covered by a layer of earth. The remaining rooms must have had earthen floors or their floors have not been preserved.

The rooms with the stone pavements are among the largest in House 1. Two of them measured approx. 3.50 x 3.25 m and were located symmetrically, in the eastern part of a younger stage of the building. A much larger room (6 x 3.25 m) was discovered in an older building stage of House 1, under one of the paved rooms. It was the largest room discovered so far in House 1. A small, rectangular podium of stone stood in the middle of the room. Its function has not been ascertained. Among other facilities of the house discovered in some of its rooms, there are round, stone hearths, shallow depressions in floors edged with stones and low platforms, also bordered with stones. On the floor of a room in the middle

House 1: the rooms with the stone pavements



Prof. Piotr Bieliński and Ms. Dorota Bielińska working on the Bahra 1 site (2009)

of the house, four large Ubaid vessels were found. They can be associated with the highest preserved floor level and are the best archaeological material for dating the last stage of House 1 history. Lack of preserved doorways between rooms in House 1 presents some difficulty for the reconstruction of internal communication inside the building. As for the entrance to the whole building, it seems to have been located in its south-western wall.

Apart from House 1 at SBH 38, we have also investigated the nearby SBH 35 site. Intensive cleaning of the surface of a rocky outcrop slightly above SBH 38, revealed outlines of roughly rectangular and circular stone structures. Their builders made an obvious effort to fit them to the undulating rock surface, in places actually using natural rock formations as part of their constructions. The rectangular rooms seem to have belonged to a residential compound (comprising at least four chambers) but the curved stone alignments may have been walls protecting the other structures from rainwater flowing downhill.

For the time being, the vital question of the chronology of the sites remains unresolved. They may have been either contemporary with each other, or belonged to successive settlement phases. In my opinion, the latter possibility is much less probable and we are therefore treating SBH 38 and 35 as parts of one settlement complex, which has been called Bahra 1.

In the subsurface layers and fill of House 1 and in the northern part of SBH 35, numerous artifacts were discovered, among which there were many pottery sherds, very few chipped stone tools and some flint or chert waste products, as well as a few examples of ground stone industry and a considerable number of shell objects. As for palaeoecological remains, shells of different mollusk species are by far the most numerous group, while animal bones are rather few and in a poor state of preservation. Pottery material remains the most important category of finds from an archaeological perspective. Although pottery from





Our team at work on the Bahra 1 site (2010)

Bahra 1 is discussed below in a separate chapter I must mention it also here to explain the importance of discoveries at this site.

The potsherds represent wares of two separate pottery traditions from the 6th millennium BC. One is a local Coarse Red Ware, known also from other Chalcolithic sites in the Gulf region. The other – a creamy and often painted ware – is typical of the Ubaid culture which formed in southern Mesopotamia in the 6th millennium BC. Afterwards it spread into the north of Mesopotamia, northern Syria and eastern Anatolia and to the south, including the coast of Kuwait.

Ubaid vessels from House 1 are not local copies, but genuine Mesopotamian products, brought to the As-Sabbiya desert as a luxury ware. They can be dated to Ubaid 2 and/or Ubaid 2/3 (phases of the Ubaid period). Examples of the same pottery types have been found at H3, another Kuwaiti site, located approx. 10 km to the south-east of Bahra 1. This coastal settlement was studied by a Kuwaiti-British expedition a few years ago; it to have been roughly contemporary with Bahra 1. However, the two sites differ in several vital aspects. Firstly, there is the size difference. SBH 38 alone is considerably larger than H3; upon extending the settlement's size to encompass also SBH 35, the difference becomes striking. Secondly, there are the subsistence strategies of the sites' populations. At H3, it was firmly sea-oriented, yet in the case of Bahra 1 the issue is less clear. Although the distance from Bahra 1 to the coast was much shorter than today, the natural conditions in As-Sabbiya cannot have changed much and must have been semiarid at best. Such a climate does not generate a particularly inviting environment for a permanently settled lifestyle even

if the problem of access to fresh water is not a problem. So what could have tempted the inhabitants of As-Sabbiya into settling in such a, less than welcoming, place? Thirdly, there is yet another difference between H3 and Bahra 1: the type of architecture. Most of the buildings at H3 were huts of irregular, subcircular shapes. At Bahra 1, the structures have roughly orthogonal plans. In the case of House 1, the layout is clearly reminiscent of typical tripartite plans of Ubaid-culture houses known from Mesopotamia and Syria. The presence of Ubaid pottery strengthens this connection. It seems we are dealing here with an attempt to adapt an architectonic concept created by a settled, agricultural population, using mud bricks as its main building material, to completely new conditions and technologies.

Bahra 1 is an extremely interesting object of research for an archaeologist, as it poses many difficult questions: who were the inhabitants of this settlement, what were their subsistence strategies, what was their relationship with the residents of H3 and other inhabitants of As-Sabbiya? Before further work allows us to answer any of them, we can already say that Bahra 1 is the largest prehistoric settlement discovered so far in Kuwait and the largest Ubaid-related settlement in the whole Gulf region. It is also the first site in the region where Ubaid-style architecture has been encountered. This discovery sheds new light on the character of intercultural relations between Mesopotamia and the Gulf region in the Chalcolithic period. With the site's importance in mind, KPAM's objectives at Bahra 1 include not only excavations but also conservation, partial restoration and preservation of the prehistoric relics as a vital monument of Kuwaiti cultural heritage.

