

For a long time, Kuwait and the whole Gulf region remained outside the scope of interest of Polish archaeologists from the University of Warsaw, even though they have been working in countless places throughout the Near East for over six decades. Of course, we were familiar with the discoveries at Failaka Island but archaeology of the rest of Kuwait was largely unknown to us, as none of our Polish colleagues specialized in this field. It could have remained so, but for an initiative of Mr. Shehab A.H. Shehab, the Director of the Department of Antiquities and Museums of the State of Kuwait, who initiated a contact with the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of the University of Warsaw (PCMA). Consequently, in November 2006 professor Michał Gawlikowski, the President of PCMA's Scientific Council, visited Kuwait and in the spring of 2007 Mr. Shehab A.H. Shehab traveled to Warsaw. The two visits not only established a direct cooperation between our organizations but also introduced us to the subject of archaeology of northern Kuwait, in particular of As-Sabbiya – the field of our future research. At that time, we became acquainted with the results of research conducted there by Mr. Sultan Ad-Duweish, Superintendent at the Department of Antiquities and Museums.

The picture that emerged was very exciting, and research in northern Kuwait, with hundreds of previously uninvestigated grave sites was a great challenge that would involve a study of the archaeology of nomadic populations' relationships with their settled neighbours. New research goals and cooperation with new colleagues were a welcome perspective and during Mr. Shehab's visit in Warsaw a decision was taken to organize a joint Kuwaiti-Polish Archaeological Mission (KPAM). An agreement was signed between the Kuwaiti Department of Antiquities and Museums and the PCMA, concerning the participation of Polish archaeologists in exploration of the As-Sabbiya region. According to this agreement, the first reconnaissance campaign was scheduled for November 2007. The

group was headed by the present author, who has been a co-director of the KPAM ever since.

During the first days in As-Sabbiya, under the guidance of Mr. Shehab and Mr. Ad-Duweish, we were learning the ropes of exploration of desert grave sites. Our hosts showed us numerous concentrations of graves and pointed out their various typological distinctions, advising us on the choice of our first excavation sites in the Kuwaiti desert. That was the beginning of our first – short, but important – excavation season.

*Mr. Shehab A.H. Shehab, Mr. Sultan Ad-Duweish and Prof. Piotr Bieliński visiting archaeological sites As-Sabbiya (2007)*

*Adornments obtained from graves excavated by our mission in 2007–2008, exhibited at the Kuwait National Museum*



Our research concentrated around the so-called Mugheira Well Field. As if in a gesture of welcome, one of the graves excavated in the first season – SMQ 30 – yielded an exceptionally rich set of grave goods, with “our” first Kuwaiti pearl, which further strengthened our enthusiasm for future research.

From the beginning, we have felt that our research is interesting not only for Kuwaiti archaeologists, but also for the heads of the National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters (NCCAL) of the State of Kuwait. We could feel it during the meetings and discussions we held in their offices in the capital, but also in the numerous visits at the investigated sites by Mr. Eng. Ali Hussein Al-Youha, Assistant Secretary General for Antiquities and Museums of the NCCAL. This kindly interest and support from the National Council and its President, Mr. Bader Al-Refai, Secretary General of NCCAL, bore witness to the concern and care with which national cultural heritage is treated in Kuwait.

*The team at a meeting with the heads of NCCAL (2009)*







*Mr. Eng. Ali Hussein Al-Youha with the KPAM team at Bahra 1 (2009)*

In the second season of our research in Kuwait, in October 2008, we continued explorations of archaeological stone features in Mugheira, including tumuli graves but also features that may have been some kind of supplementary constructions to the graves. We also started investigations of a large desert well, or cistern, labelled SM 12 in Muheita, another sub-region of As-Sabbiya.

In the third season in the autumn of 2009, apart from excavating graves in Mugheira and the well-cistern and a single burial mound in Muheita, we began work at an Ubaid-period settlement site, code-named SBH 38, in Bahra (yet another As-Sabbiya sub-region); we also managed to resume an extensive survey of As-Sabbiya in order to map all grave sites, including those that had been found by Mr. Sultan Ad-Duweish, whose extensive knowledge of the region and constant help were essential for the project. The results of the survey, with approx. 130 archaeological sites described and localized, were especially satisfying, as was the exploration of the prehistoric settlement, which proved to be surprisingly large and well preserved. Throughout this busy but rewarding season, discussions were held with Mr. Shehab and Mr. Ad-Duweish, which resulted in the formulation of four research projects of the KPAM: 1. surveying and cataloguing grave sites and other stone structures, 2. exploration of chosen grave sites, especially those endangered by construction work, 3. investigating old desert well network 4. exploration of two prehistoric settlements from the period of the Chalcolithic Ubaid culture (6–5th millennium BC), located in As-Sabbiya – Bahra.

The experiences and discoveries of the third excavation campaign, along with the newly-approved research projects of the KPAM, resulted in a decision to divide our team into two, almost autonomous, teams. The sheer number of research goals and the spatial distribution of sites to be excavated prompted us, upon advice from our Kuwaiti hosts, to form a separate unit for the excavation of burial sites, with a branch investigating desert wells, and another unit that would concentrate solely on the excavations of the settlement sites. The first unit was to work in springtime under the supervision of Dr Łukasz Rutkowski, while the other was to continue working in autumn under the direction of the present author.

These arrangements were brought into action the following year. In 2010 the spring group began excavations of a concentration of graves in Bahra and of a desert well site in the region of the Dubaij Bay (labelled SB 23). The autumn season was devoted mainly to a continuation of the exploration of two neighbouring prehistoric sites code-named SBH 38 and SBH 35. Based on preliminary results of these investigations it seems possible that we are dealing with one vast settlement, rather than with two separate sites. Upon careful consideration, our Kuwaiti colleagues decided to replace the survey code with a more ear-catching and “user-friendly” name of Bahra 1. We hope that this name will soon become well known not only among scholars studying the prehistory of the Gulf region but also to ordinary Kuwaitis.

A specific side effect of archaeological work is the unique opportunity it creates for getting to know the country where it takes place, admiring its nature and befriending its people. We have made friends with the Kuwaiti desert with its captivating landscapes and inhabitants, including camels grazing around – and sometimes on – the sites we excavated. But it goes without saying, that most important are the friendships with the Kuwaitis, both those involved in archaeology and those met in the desert, who showed us their traditional hospitality and genuine interest in our work. We are grateful to them and we hope that we can, at least partly, repay them by our involvement in discovering the treasures of Kuwait’s past.



*Mr. Shehab visiting Kuwaiti-Polish and GCC archaeological expeditions at Bahra 1 (2009)*