The plateau of As-Sabbiya has yielded numerous stone structures, mainly circular tumuli graves made of rough stones. They are scattered throughout the plateau, stretching out between the ridge of Jal Az-Zor and the coastal plain. Some of them have already been investigated by Kuwaiti and GCC archeological expeditions, conducted by Sultan Ad-Duweish. Since 2007, they have also been explored by the KPAM. Up till now, 19 stone structures, including 17 burial mounds, have been excavated in three areas of As-Sabbiya: Mugheira, Muheita, and Bahra. Fieldworks of the mission started in the Mugheira region. 12 burial mounds have been excavated in this area. Most were situated near the edge of a cliff overlooking what is now the coastal plain, but what in antiquity was probably the sea. The agreeable view offered by the cliff may have played a role in the choice of the burials' localization by their builders.

A tumulus is an artificial mound of earth and stones raised over the remains of the dead. Tumuli are also known as barrows, burial mounds or kurgans, and can be found throughout much of the world as a popular type of ancient burial place. Tumuli known from Northern Kuwait are largely made of locally available stones, boulders and slabs arranged in conical mounds. Such a form of the graves is in itself a marker of the burial place, thus tumuli tombs are easily recognisable in the terrain.

The aim of archaeological research in the As-Sabbiya region is to explore and record these important remains before they are destroyed forever. Some of them have already suffered damages in recent times. For instance, traces of destruction and caterpillar tracks were detected on the surface of tumulus SM 18. The damage was probably caused by a tank that ran over the grave, which shows how modern history can leave its stamp (literally!) on ancient vestiges.

View from the edge of the Mugheira cliff with tumulus SMQ 33 in the foreground

General view of grave mound SM 18 in the Muheita area

Side view of tumulus SB 65 after removing sand cover, plants and loose stones. This is the largest tomb excavated so far by KPAM (8.20 m in diameter and approx. 0.90 m in height). It is situated on a rocky prominence vis-à-vis a newly constructed interchange road in the Bahra region.

MANNER OF CONSTRUCTION

The tumuli are erected on a circular or sub-circular plan. They consist of a grave chamber situated in the middle of the mound and a stone mantle around it. Though all mounds are similar at first sight, their manner of construction often differs in details, such as the shape and depth of the chamber and the alignment of stones in their mantle. Most often, one can distinguish an inner ring of stones, which forms the chamber's wall and the tumulus' core at the same time. Sometimes, an outer ring of stones can be encountered on the perimeter of the mantle. It is usually composed of large slabs arranged vertically or obliquely.

Tumulus SB 61 after half the stone coating had been dismantled; two rings of stones are easily perceptible

One can distinguish at least two size rates of the tumuli – smaller structures, up to 6 m in diameter, and larger ones, measuring over 6 m, but only occasionally exceeding 10 m in diameter. Their present height varies from 0.50 m to slightly over 1 m above the ground (the biggest– registered in survey – PSRD 10 – is 14 m in diameter and over 2 m high).

Tumulus SMQ 33, view after unearthing the bottom of the grave chamber. All the graves either have a paved floor made of thin slabs inside the chamber or natural, solid bedrock constitutes their bottom. An irregular ring of upright slabs is visible on the, partly dismantled, western half of the mantle. Its function is apparently to prevent stones from slipping down from the mantle.

Tumulus SMQ 49 during exploration of the grave chamber. This tomb turned out to be an exceptional multiple burial containing a dozen skeletons.

Grave chambers most often are rounded in shape. There are two main types– deep chambers, partly hewn in solid bedrock, and shallow ones with bottoms on or slightly over the ground level. Usually the chamber's sides gradually taper upward to form a covering from the top. Unfortunately, none of such coverings was preserved intact, yet the scanty remains suggest that they were originally constructed of large slabs arranged horizontally, partly overhanging the chamber and partly resting on the chamber wall.

During exploration of tumuli, their halves or quarters are dismantled in order to investigate their internal structure. The stone alignments visible in the sections show that the mantles are constructed of well-fitted slabs. Most of them overlap, like roof tiles, descending towards the mantle's fringe.

Section through tumulus SB 65 after dismantling the grave's northern half

EXPLORATION AND DOCUMENTATION

Flashbacks on a four year field experience with tumuli graves' exploration.

Special "visitors"

First stage in grave exploration – sand cover removal

Drawing documentation of SMQ 30 using a grid

Sultan Ad-Duweish taking photos of skeletons in SMQ 49

After unloading the archaeological equipment

Taking measurements with total station

During a sandstorm

"Crane" photography

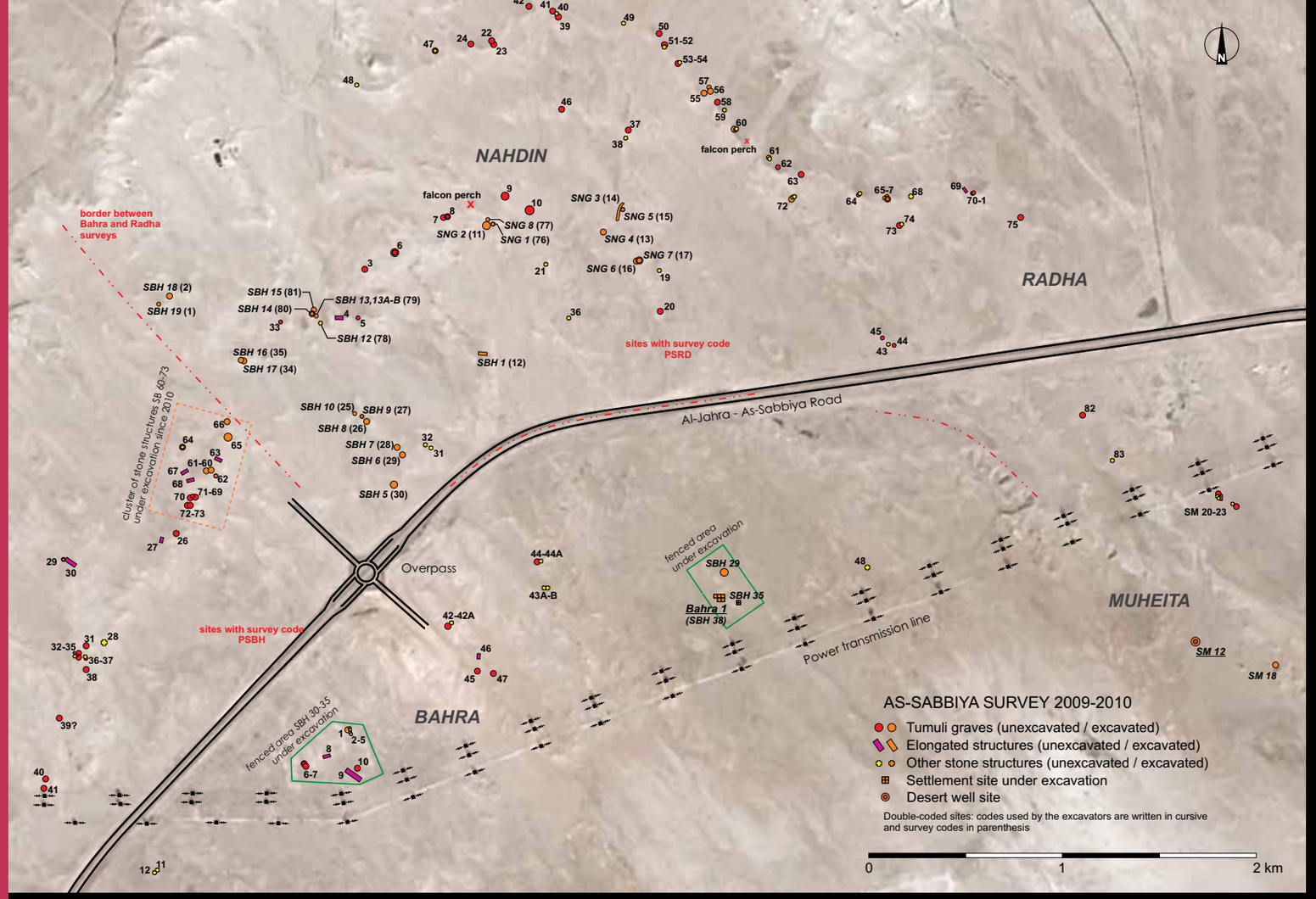
Cleaning the grave surface

Grave chamber's exploration

Grave chamber after heavy rainfall

Last stage of fieldwork – sieving the spoil tips to look for finds

Łukasz Rutkowski



Elongated structures are usually 2-3 m wide and 7-12 m long (the longest, PSBH 30, being 21.50 m long). Their shorter sides are rounded. The structures' edges are delimited by thin slabs set vertically, whilst the core is packed with horizontal stones. Above, structure PSRD 4.

Tumulus SM 20 and its additional structure in the foreground

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY

Apart from excavations, a detailed territorial survey is another project conducted in the plateau of As-Sabbiya. It aims at recording all archaeological features and creating an archaeological map of the region. Up till now, the total inspected area covers approx. 18 square kilometres and the total number of recorded sites was brought up to 142, including 86 tumuli graves, 12 elongated structures, and 44 other features.

Elongated structure SB 67

Most of the recorded structures turned out to be pretty evenly spread along two main, crescent-shaped terraces running parallel to the Jal Az-Zor hills and outlining the descent of the land towards the south. It is obvious that an edge of a cliff, where stone building material was easily accessible, was regarded as the best spot for the erection of stone structures.

Elongated stone structures are the second most conspicuous feature in As-Sabbiya. They are pretty low and of an oblong outline, which gives an impression of long and flat platforms. They are quite often situated in the vicinity of tumuli graves, which suggests there may be an association of some kind between the graves and these mysterious structures. A noteworthy peculiarity is their orientation: although it varies from E-W to N-S (NW-SE being the most popular), none of a NE-SW orientation has been identified so far.

The category of "others" encompasses a wide spectrum of stone features that are difficult to classify. The most intriguing among them are small stone features accompanying tumuli graves. Some contain a kind of a rectangular bin made of stone slabs set vertically.