

Failaka Archaeological Research Project Preliminary results after the second and third season of excavation at Kharaib el-Desht in 2015–2016

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Abstract: Excavation at the site of Kharaib el-Desht on Failaka Island, Kuwait, began in 2013 and continued in 2015 and 2016. The second season focused on the northwestern part of the site, namely Areas 1 and 4. In the third season, work also encompassed the southeastern part of the site, Area 3, where the exploration of a stone structure was resumed. A fragment of a residential complex was also unearthed in this area. Test trenches, opened inside the stone structure and below the foundation level of the residential remains, confirmed the existence of an earlier phase, predating the Desht settlement.

Keywords: Gulf archaeology, Failaka, Kuwait, Islamic period

The Islamic-period site of Kharaib el-Desht stretches along the northwestern coast of Failaka Island, Kuwait. The site is known from early 20th century accounts of travelers and the first explorers of the Gulf (Lorimer 1908: 514–515; Dickson 1968: 57; Bibby 1969: 195–212), and was later surveyed in 1974 (Patitucci and Uggeri 1984: 419). Excavation at Kharaib el-Desht begun in 2013, conducted by the Kuwaiti–Polish Archaeological Mission of the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology UW

(PCMA) at the invitation of the National Council for Culture Arts, and Letters (NCCAL) (Pieńkowska 2015). Two subsequent campaigns took place in 2015 and 2016: the second season focused on the northwestern part of the site, namely Areas 1 and 4 (Squares III and XII–XIII), while in the third season work was also continued in Area 3, in Square XXXV, where a fragment of a stone structure was uncovered in the first season, and in the previously unexcavated Square XXXIV.

AREA 1 (SQUARE III)

Investigation of Area 1 (Square III), which covers a small elevation about 40 m by 60 m, was conducted in the 2015 and 2016 seasons in the central part of the area (Square III-C6,C7), as well as in its northeastern part (Square III-D5–D7) [Fig. 1]. The excavation, which began in 2013, continued in a sondage on the western slope in Square III-B7 (Test Trench 1). A new trench was also opened (Test Trench 3), intersecting the slope and some structural remains aligned north–south in Square III-D5 [Fig. 3].

A level with over a dozen small clay stoves, a few refuse pits, and traces of hearths was unearthed in Square III-C6,C7 and in the southern part of Square III-D7. No structural remnants were uncovered, save for a few concentrations of small stones forming short rows. A small sondage (Test Trench 2) dug in 2013 in the southeastern corner of Square III-C7 had shown that the stoves were founded on or dug into the bedrock constituting the core of the elevation.

Almost 60 small clay stoves were recorded on the elevation, located mostly

Team

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in its central and southern parts [Fig. 3]. Typically, the stoves measured 25–30 cm in diameter, though larger examples – approximately 40 cm in diameter – were also found. Their walls, made of unbaked clay, were 2–3 cm thick. The shape of the walls differed depending on the height: the highest examples (25–30 cm) had cylindrical walls, while the lower ones

(5–10 cm) could be, if not straight, then slightly tapered towards the top, surrounding a shallow cavity [Fig. 2:a,b,d]. One of the explored stoves featured a distinct convex bottom, slightly sunk into the ground [Fig. 2:c].

Two structures were unearthed in Square III-D5–D7. House 1 measured 4 m by 8 m and was situated in the northern part

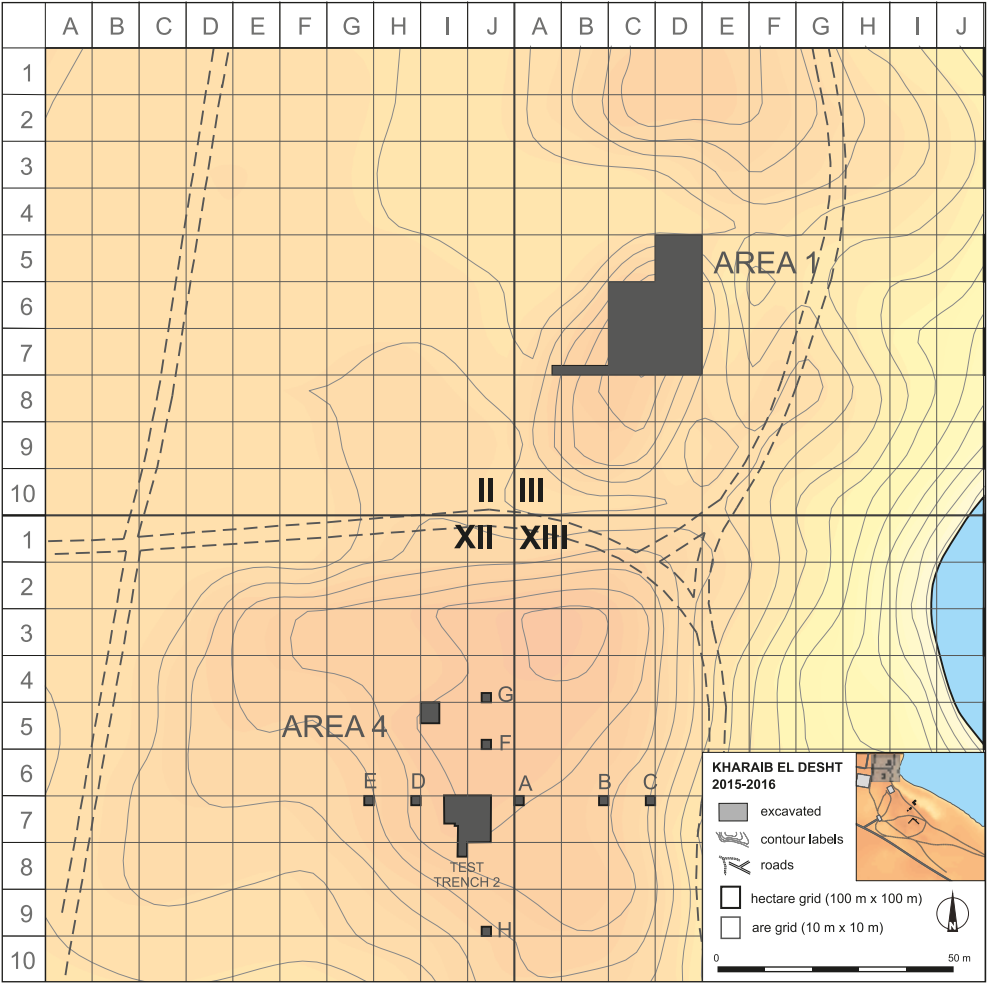


Fig. 1. Northwestern part of the site (Areas 1 and 4)
(Failaka Archaeological Research Project, PCMA/map P. Zakrzewski)

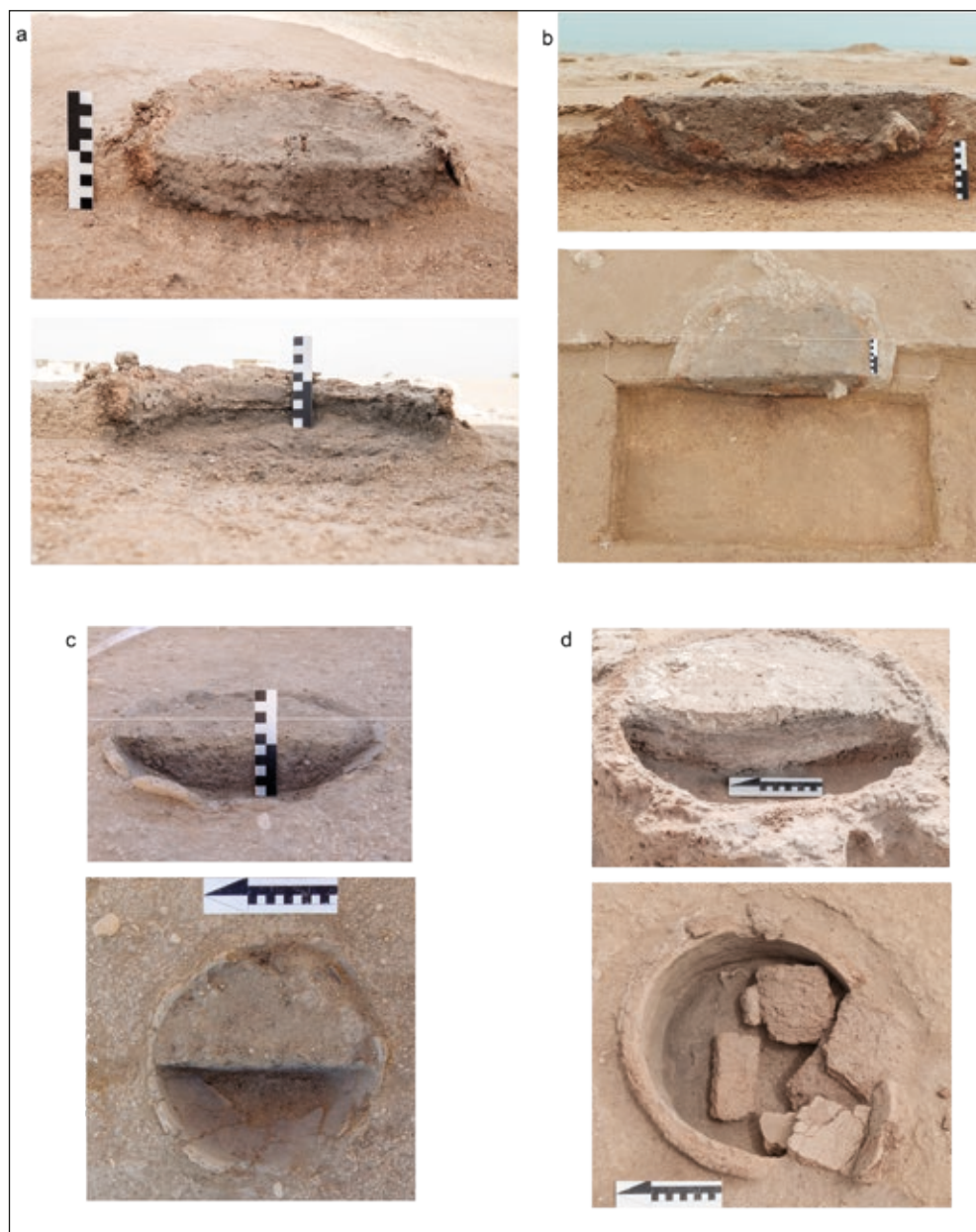


Fig. 2. Various types of ovens attested at the site: a, b, d – ovens with straight walls; c – oven with convex bottom (Failaka Archaeological Research Project, PCMA/photos A. Oleksiak, P. Zakrzewski)

of the elevation. Although its size was not impressive, its walls were apparently very solid. The west and south walls were best visible, but even they were preserved only as single courses of stones. Judging by the best-preserved fragment, the west wall was approximately 0.80 m thick and consisted

of two rows of large flat stone slabs, overlaid on the outside with smaller stones. In the 2016 season, the inside of the structure was excavated, but nothing like a usage level was found. Pits and hearths uncovered in the house, as well as stoves and hearths overlying its east wall most likely belonged

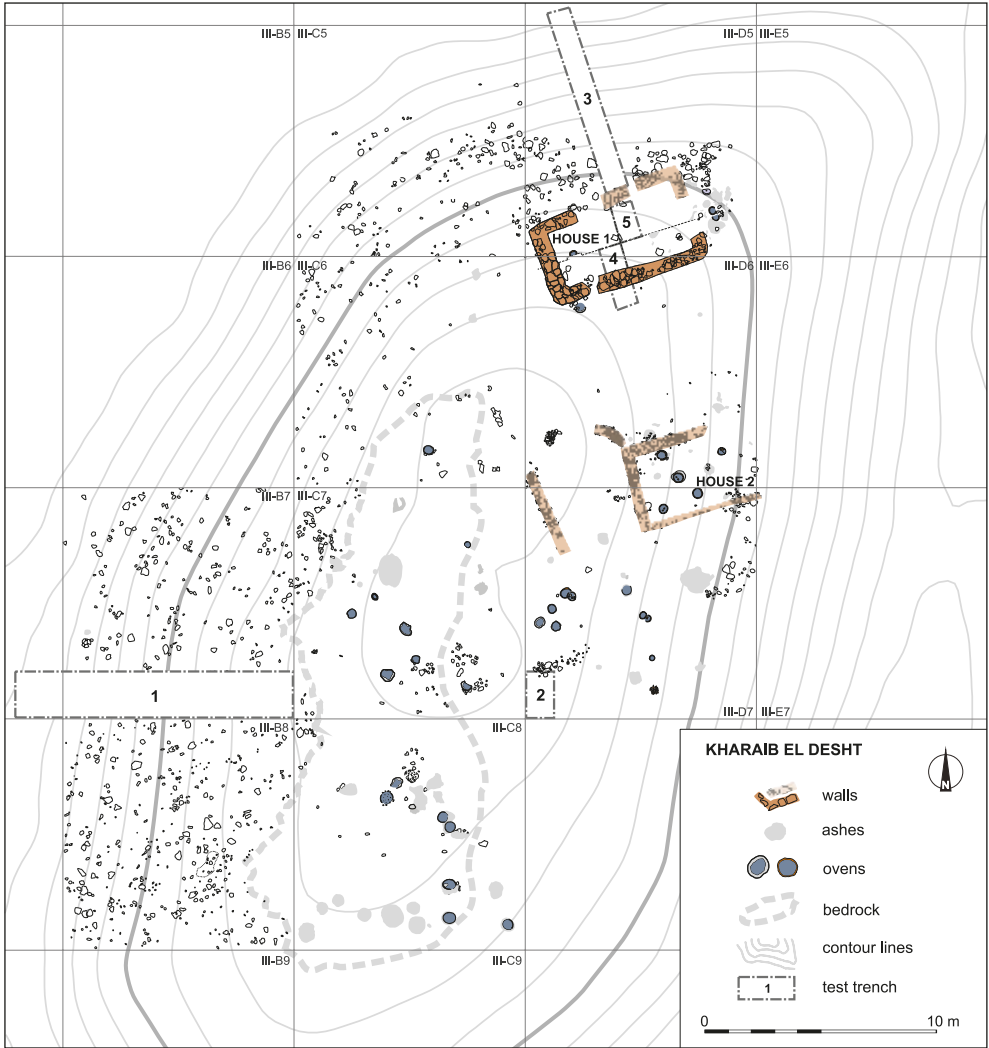


Fig. 3. Square III (Area 1): plan of identified remains
(Failaka Archaeological Research Project, PCMA/map E. Mizak, M. Puskarski, P. Zakrzewski)

to a later occupational phase and were dug in after the structure had been abandoned. Small sondages (Test Trenches 4 and 5) intersecting the north and south walls of House 1 revealed no structural remnants below the wall foundation level. However, they did uncover remnants of hearths and pits, which indicate that, at least in this part of the elevation, there used to be some settlement activity predating the structures.

House 2 was situated about 6 m to the southeast of House 1. Its walls were preserved in the negative, as traces of lime mortar. The north and west walls were best-visible, and both measured about 4 m in preserved length. The south wall was visible as a narrow strip of lime mortar. It is possible that both houses had the same or very similar dimensions. These small structures, composed of one or two rooms, are known as fishing huts, and were also recorded along the coast of the island by the survey in 2012 (Pawlicki 2012: 26–52; 2015).

Bedrock lying below a 10-cm-thick layer of compact clay was revealed in all three sondages. It drops off quite steeply toward the north. The sequence of layers revealed in Test Trench 3 shows that House 1 was built on the very edge of the bedrock rise, explaining the fragmentary preservation of the north wall, which has probably slid down the steep slope.

The central part of the elevation, both in-between the houses and in Square III-D7, was covered with a thick layer of

hard clay, which looked almost like a usage level. However, the hardness of this layer was due to precipitation followed by drying in the sun. The natural character of this layer was evident in the northeastern part of the elevation, where traces of occupational activity were still preserved and a very hard white layer of clay mixed with lime stretched between Houses 1 and 2. This layer was effected most likely by the disintegration of walls made of soft lime and clay bricks which, dissolved in rainwater and drying naturally, enhanced the hardening of the ground surface in this area.

Given the fragmentariness of the remains, it is difficult to establish the chronological relation between the houses and stoves. Stoves dug into the walls of House 1 must have been in use after the structure was abandoned, stoves located inside House 2 probably also belonged to the later occupational phase. It is possible that the house walls were still standing when the stoves were in use, providing shelter against the wind. It could account for the placement of the stoves.

In sum, at least three occupational phases can be distinguished in Area 1. The earliest one, revealed on the northern slope below House 1, is represented by remnants of hearths and pits. The second phase corresponds to the use of Houses 1 and 2, possibly along with some of the stoves. The third phase followed the abandonment of the houses and seems to have been connected with intensive stove-related activities.

AREA 4 (SQUARES XII–XIII)

Area 4 is located in the northern part of the site, some 60 m to the southwest of Area 1, and features a natural elevation,

along with over a dozen stone mounds (Squares XII and XIII) [see *Fig. 1*]. In the 2013 season, one of the mounds

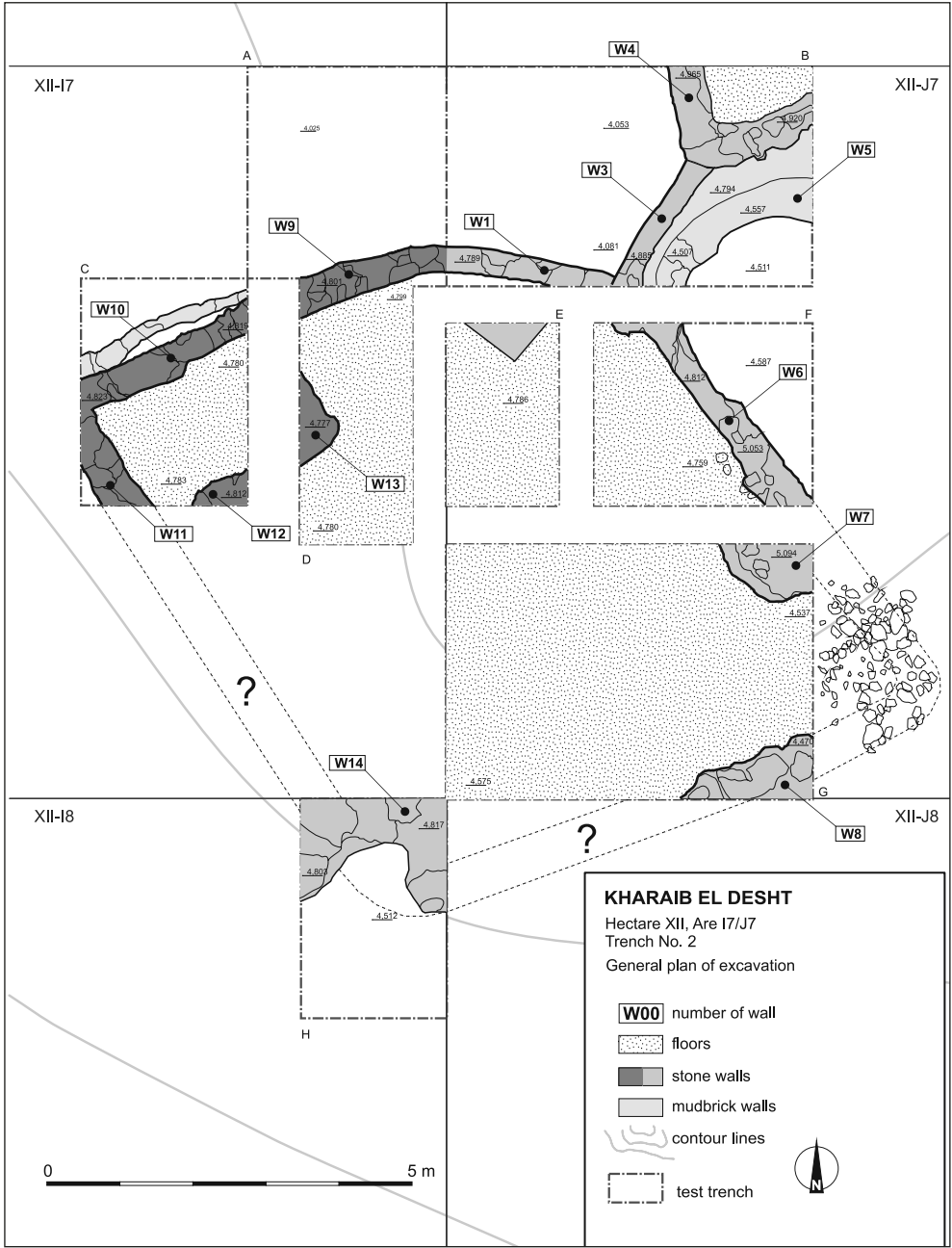


Fig. 4. Square XII (Area 4), plan of Trench 2 (sondages A to G)
(Failaka Archaeological Research Project, PCMA/plan Ł. Miechowicz, M. Puskarski)

was explored. It revealed a fragment of a wall, but not much could be said about the character of the settlement in this area on these grounds. Further investigation of Area 4 was aimed at determining the stratigraphic and chronological sequences, as well as the function of the settlement. Another mound was excavated (Mound 6 in Square XII-I7,J7), and eight small sondages (2 m by 2 m) were opened: three aligned north-south and five east-west (Squares XII-J-4,5,9 and XIII-7-H, I, A-C) [see *Fig. 1*].

Test Trench 2 in Square XII-I7,J7 revealed three functional phases. The latest one, phase 1, yielded fragmentarily preserved structures, refuse pits and a square stove with a stone outer cover. Both the fill of the stove and the refuse around it left no room for doubt as to the date of these remains between the end of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century AD.

Below this level, in the northern part of the trench, remains of at least two structures representing phase 2 were uncovered. One structure, located in the northeastern part of the trench, was visible only as a corner. The other was a much larger structure, as it covered most of the trench and had an atypical rhomboid outline [*Fig. 4*]. Although the north wall (W10) of the

structure was uncovered to 5 m of preserved length, the overall state of preservation of the walls was too poor to determine whether they indeed formed a single building or belonged to different structures. Hindering the interpretation were many later pits and modern refuse. Moreover, the use of diverse building materials for the walls, that is, stone, mudbrick, and tamped clay, resulted in a different pace and manner of disintegration, which made the task of retracing the walls even harder.

Nonetheless, it was possible to distinguish a small room, 2 m by 3 m, with a floor level of hard tamped clay. The same floor level was also traced along the north wall and in the space between W1, W6 and W8.

Remnants of the earliest phase, that is phase 3, were uncovered directly below phase 2. They were represented by a usage level with an abundance of ashes, hearths and stoves.

Of the eight sondages in Area 4 only Test Trench A yielded structural remains, namely the corner of a house. Moreover, Test Trenches A (XIII-A7), C (XIII-C7) and F (XII-H7) revealed hearths and fragmentarily preserved clay stoves. The uncovered remains can be dated to a period contemporary with phases 2 and 3 in the trench in Square XII-I7,J7.

AREA 3 (SQUARES XXXIV-XXXV)

In the 2016 season, the team tested the previously unexcavated southeastern part of Area 3, where the survey in 2012 had recorded settlement remains in the form of small stone mounds together with an abundance of pottery sherds. This area is well-visible in the 1960s aerial photographs which show the outlines of

over a dozen structures forming a fairly dense and regular residential complex. The houses were arranged in a U-shape around a courtyard (Pieńkowska 2015: *Fig. 2*, 563). A test trench in Square XXXIV-H9-10,I9-10, measuring 14 m by 2 m, was opened at the western end of the village [*Fig. 5*].

The trench revealed corners of at least three structures or rooms [Fig. 6]. Two walls (W22 and W4) were discovered along the southern trench wall. Both were made of stones joined with lime mortar and clay. Wall W22 was 2.50 m long and preserved to a height of 0.30–0.40 m, while W4 measured 6.50 m in uncovered length, and was approximately 0.70–0.80 m high.

Judging by the fact that the foundation level of W4 was some 0.35 m lower than that of W22, it must have been built at an earlier date. An eastward extension of the trench revealed yet another wall, W17, which formed the southwestern corner of a structure. The unearthed part of the interior revealed a usage level with a large shell and a 2-cm-thick patch of unbaked

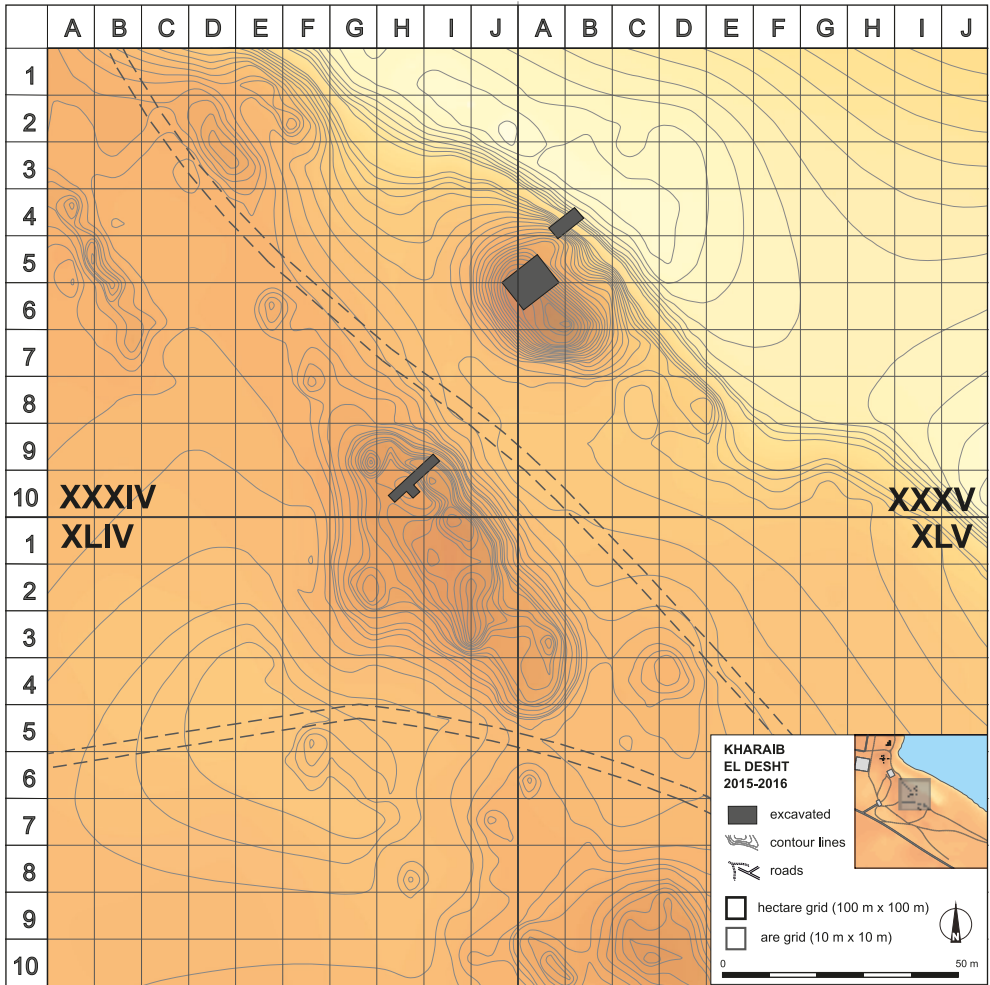


Fig. 5. Southeastern part of the site (Area 3)
(Failaka Archaeological Research Project, PCMA/plan P. Zakrzewski)

clay, round in shape, measuring 0.50 m in diameter, which was perhaps used as a stand.

In the northern part of the trench, a wall, W5, was found to be perpendicular to W22 and founded on the same level, but not bonded [Fig. 7] Another wall fragment, emerging from the trench profile, formed a corner with W5. The features unearthed in the gap between W5 and W22, namely remnants of a stove, some traces of hearths,

and a refuse pit filled with bones and pottery, suggest this was an outside space and not a room interior.

A corner of yet another structure was unearthed in the southeastern part of the trench. Its longer wall (W11) was 2.50 m long and was oriented almost the same as W5 and W22. It was preserved up to two courses of stones, that is about 0.35–0.40 m. To the east of W11 a row of stones and mud bricks was unearthed, running

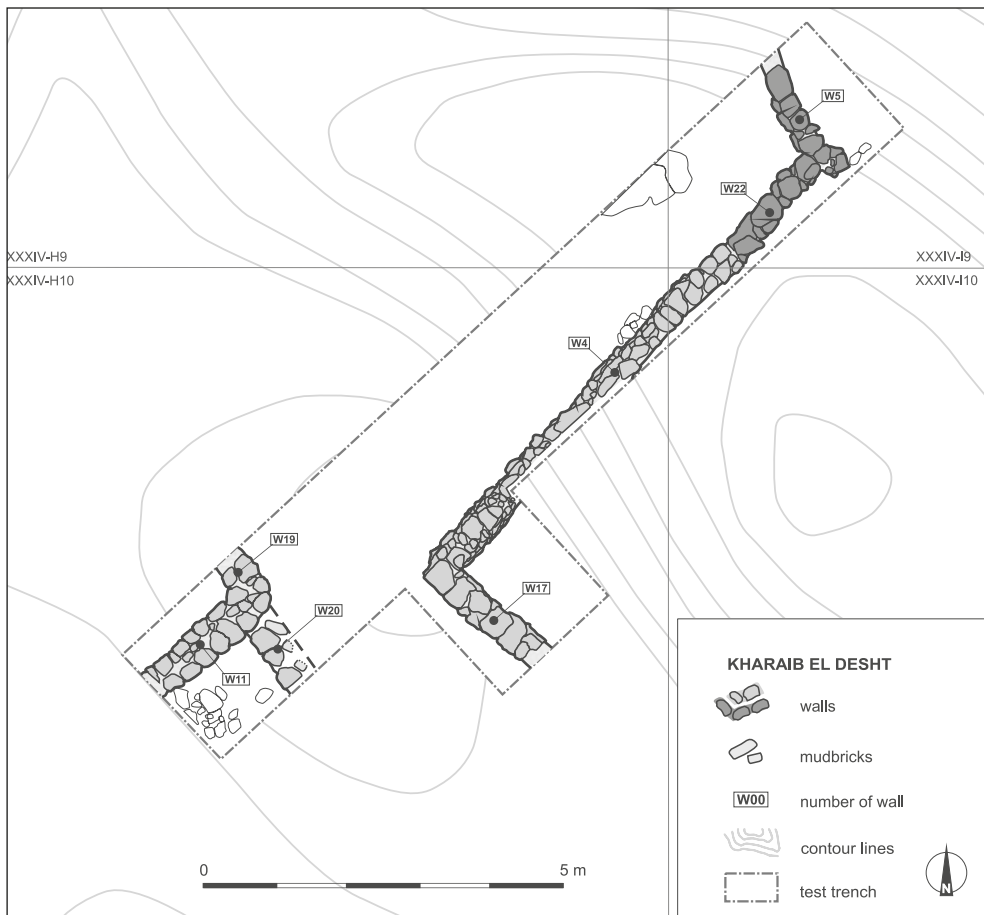


Fig. 6. Test trench in Square XXXIV (Area 3) with architectural remains
(Failaka Archaeological Research Project, PCMA/plan M. Iskra, M. Puzkarski)



Fig. 7. Building walls in Square XXXIV (Area 3), view looking west
(Failaka Archaeological Research Project, PCMA/photo A. Oleksiak)



Fig. 8. Test trench between walls W5 and W22
(Failaka Archaeological Research Project, PCMA/photo A. Oleksiak)

perpendicularly to the wall, but it cannot be interpreted without further excavation in this part of the settlement.

In the corner formed by walls W5 and W22, a test trench (Square XXXIV-I9) revealed a stove of the same type as those frequently uncovered in Areas 1 and 4. The stove was dug into culturally sterile soil, which was separated from the foundation level of W5 by at least two layers of aeolian sand of a joint thickness of 0.90 m [Fig. 8]. The time gap between the building of the houses and of the stove could not be established for lack of dated finds. However, the presence of a stove on this level proves that there was a phase preceding the occupation connected with the structural remnants still visible on the surface.

STONE STRUCTURE

A corner of a stone structure together with a massive buttress was uncovered in this part of the site in 2013. In 2016, Trench 1

was extended to 7.50 m by 9.50 m, revealing a room (Locus 1) which measured 2.50 m in width and 4 m in uncovered length, and was delimited by W23, W15 and the

buttress from the south, by W11 from the west and by W24 from the north. The east wall of the room has yet to be found [Figs 9, 11].

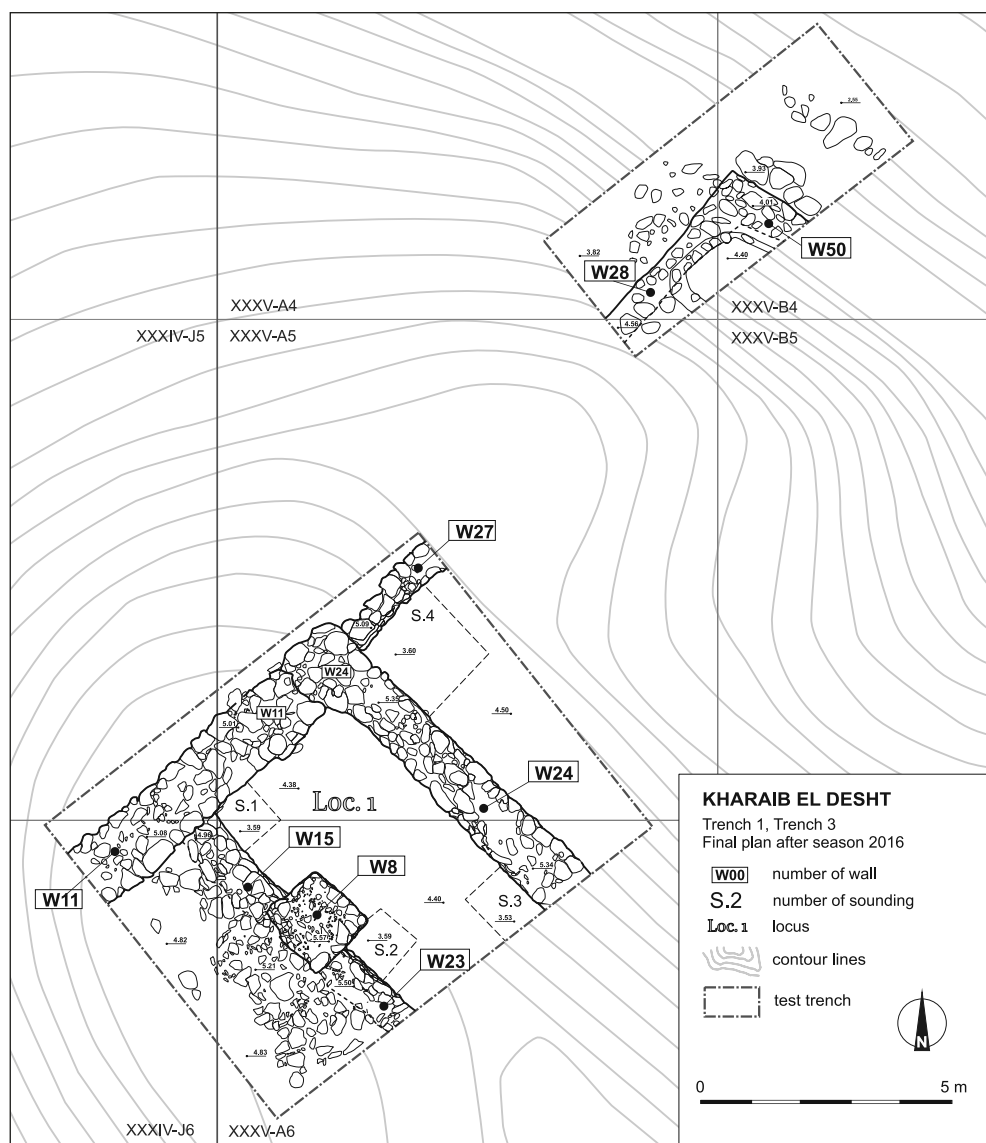


Fig. 9. Plan of the stone structure in Squares XXXIV-XXX3 (Area 3)
(Failaka Archaeological Research Project, PCMA/plan M. Truszkowski, M. Puszkarski)

The walls of the structure were made of some kind of conglomerate with an abundance of shells bonded in lime mortar mixed with clay. The peripheral wall (W11), which was 1.40–1.50 m wide and preserved up to 1.40 m in height, was the sturdiest. At the present stage of research, as the southwestern part of the structure has not been excavated yet, it is difficult to determine the width of the walls. However, it seems that W15 and W23, which abutted the buttress and were founded some 0.40 m higher than W11 and W24, were in fact much narrower than the remaining walls.



Fig. 10. Buttress inside the stone structure (Failaka Archaeological Research Project, PCMA/photo A. Oleksiak)

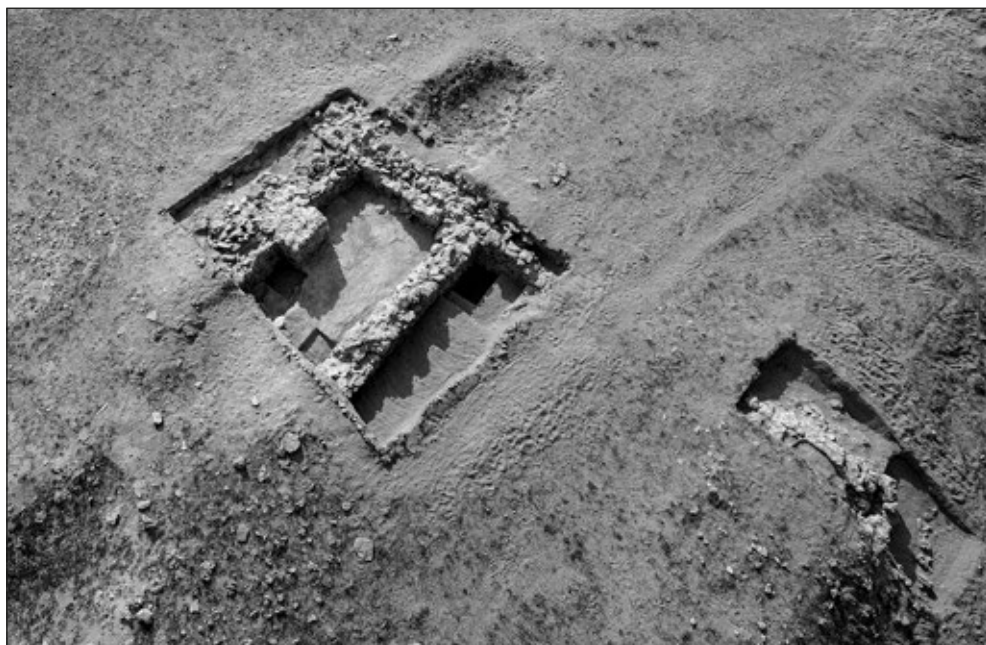


Fig. 11. Top view of the stone structure (Failaka Archaeological Research Project, PCMA/photo A. Oleksiak)

The most characteristic feature of the structure was the said buttress which supported but was not bonded with W15 and W23. In addition, the material from which it was built, namely large stone slabs fitted closely together, further differentiated it from the abutting walls. The buttress was also the most solid element of the structure, preserved to 1.96 m in height, dug some 0.15 m deep into culturally sterile soil and founded 0.65 m lower than the remaining walls [Fig. 10].

A fragment of a courtyard (or another room), closed from the west by W27,



Fig. 12. *Vessel found on the floor level in Locus 1 of the stone structure (Failaka Archaeological Research Project, PCMA/photo A. Oleksiak)*

was unearthed to the north of Locus 1. Its probable western and northern limits (W28 and W50, respectively) were uncovered in Test Trench 3 which was opened in 2016 on the northwestern part of the elevation. It also seems that W28 was a continuation of W27. The courtyard's dimensions were tentatively estimated at 12 m by 20 m. In the space between walls W28 and W50, an interesting feature was found, namely bricks and stones forming a semicircle measuring 2 m in the widest part. They limited a space filled with hard tamped clay. It seems plausible that these are remnants of a tower, perhaps a fortified one, located at the corner of the structure.

Three sondages were opened in Locus 1, each measuring 1 m by 1 m. The first one was placed in the corner formed by W11 and W15, the second one in the corner between the buttress and W23, and the third one adjoined W24 and the southeastern border of the trench. In all three sondages, a usage/floor level was revealed, made of hard yellowish clay mixed with sand. The clay also covered the lower parts of the walls. In Test Trench 2, this level yielded a complete handmade (brittle) open bowl [Fig. 12]. The wall foundations were found directly beneath the usage level in all three sondages.

Interestingly, below the wall foundations in Test Trenches 1 and 2, a layer of dark grey ashes was uncovered, including the remains of small round stoves with diameters of 0.20–0.30 m and walls about 1–2 cm thick. The stoves were of the same type as those uncovered in Area 1. Underlying them in Test Trench 1 was another layer lying directly on culturally sterile soil. The layer yielded a few undiagnostic, late Islamic sherds.

Test Trench 4 (2 m by 2 m) was opened in the courtyard next to Locus 1, in the corner formed by W24 and W27. As was the case in Test Trenches 1

and 2, a layer with ashes and two clay stoves, set directly on culturally sterile soil, was unearthed below a sand layer.

CONCLUSIONS

Results of the excavation in the northwestern part of the settlement, namely in Areas 1 and 4 (Squares III, XII, XIII) indicate that there were at least three occupational phases at the site. Pottery analysis has demonstrated it to be probably the youngest part of a village established between the 18th and early 20th century. Remnants of the residential structure uncovered in Area 3 (Square XXXIV) can surely be dated to an earlier period, that is between the 18th and 19th centuries AD.

Part of the stone structure uncovered in 2016 (Square XXXV–Area 3) clearly shows that it was not a typical residential structure. At the present stage of research it is difficult to establish whether it was a type of fort or a watchtower. The interpretation of its function is further hindered by the scarceness of finds. Nonetheless, there are reasons to suppose that this structure

predated the remaining part of the settlement. It is possible that it was built in the 17th or 18th century, or perhaps even in the early Islamic period (Pieńkowska and Mierzejewska in press). However, it must be emphasized that the above dating is based on but a few sherds and therefore is of a very preliminary and tentative character.

Another important discovery was made in Area 3 where yet another layer was unearthed below the foundations of house walls and an accumulation of aeolian sand. A clay stove was dug into this layer. A layer with stoves, situated on the same level, was also uncovered below the floor of the stone structure. Apparently, this is the oldest occupational phase discovered so far at the site, undoubtedly related to the use of stoves, and it preceded, but was not necessarily connected with the period of occupation of the Desht village.

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