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TUMULUS GRAVE SMQ 49 (AS-SABBIYA, KUWAIT) PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE INVESTIGATIONS IN 2009–2010

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Abstract: Tumulus grave SMQ 49 in the As-Sabbiya area, excavated by a Kuwaiti–Polish archaeological expedition (PCMA UW), was most probably a family tomb of some kind, containing a large number of burials, both primary and secondary, single and double. Finds, including lithic and bone tools, as well as an equid burial, are unparalleled in funerary structures in the region. Moreover, SMQ 49 was one of just a few stone mounds from the As-Sabbiya area which could be dated, thus contributing data for a chronology of tumuli that are widespread in this part of Kuwait. The conclusion is that the oldest mound burials can be dated to the late Neolithic.

Keywords: Kuwait, Gulf, cairn / stone tumulus, burial

Tumulus SMQ 49 was investigated in the 2009 and 2010 seasons by a Kuwaiti–Polish Archaeological Mission (PCMA UW), headed by Prof. Piotr Bieliński. It is situated in the area of Mugheira (a sub-region of As-Sabbiya), near the southeastern edge of a vast plateau, over

300 m southeast of a concentration of tumuli excavated previously by the team (SMQ 30–33) [*Fig. 1*].¹ It was first located in 2004, during a survey conducted by a Kuwaiti–British archaeological expedition (SB 54, Carter, Crawford [eds] 2010: 253 and Pl. 41).

GRAVE CONSTRUCTION

The tumulus was built of local sandstone slabs, fitted closely without mortar. The structure was erected directly on bedrock, on the plan of a regular circle with a diameter of approximately 7.60 m [*Figs 2, 4*].

In the highest preserved point, it stands approximately 0.80 m above bedrock. Close to its outer limit there was a ring formed of several rows of large slabs, either arranged vertically or obliquely inclined towards

¹ For a general presentation of tumuli graves from Kuwaiti–Polish excavations, see Bieliński 2007; Rutkowski 2011a; 2011b; 2011c; and 2013 in this volume; Reiche 2013, in this volume.

the center of the structure [Figs 2, 4]. This outer ring was leaning against the inner part of the tumulus, which had been built of horizontally arranged slabs and stones of different sizes. In some places, the ring was supported on the outside by one or two rows of boulders and horizontally stacked plates. A multitude of stones skirted the outside of the tomb. Many of them rested on a layer of earth rather than directly on bedrock. They are presumed to have slipped down the tumulus coating or may have been discarded when the chamber was penetrated in the past (see below).

GRAVE CHAMBER

In the center of the tumulus there was a sub-elliptical chamber that broadened toward the bottom [see Figs 2, 4]; it measured approximately 1.30 m and 1.70 m at the top and at bedrock level respectively on the NW–SE axis and approximately 0.90–

1.00 m on the SW–NE axis. The depth from the highest preserved point of the tumulus coating measured to the bottom of the chamber approximated 1.30 m. The chamber was cut up to 0.40 m into bedrock and its bottom was irregular but solid. The walls tapered in toward the top, the stones from each successive course moving inward to form the covering over the chamber [see Figs 2, 4]. Damage by grave robbers left little of this covering intact, disturbing the burials as well. The bell-shaped form of the chamber and its depth protected the fill of the chamber along the wall and near the bottom from penetration by the plunderers.

THE FILL AND SKELETAL REMAINS

Exploration of the grave chamber brought to light a number of artifacts and a large quantity of human and

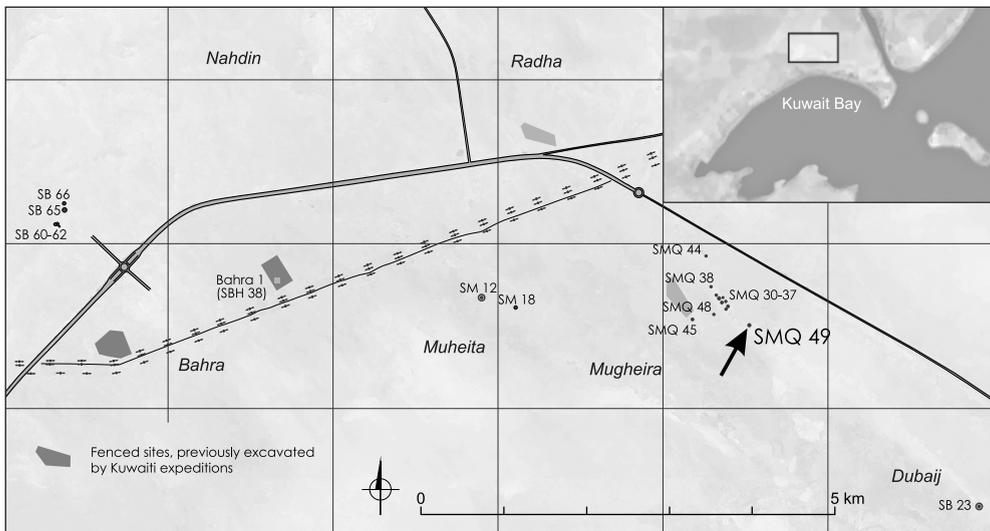


Fig. 1. General plan of all sites under investigation by the Kuwaiti–Polish Archaeological Mission in the As-Sabbiya region up till 2010; localization of SMQ 49 marked by an arrow (Mapping based on Google Earth and GPS coordinates, drawing Ł. Rutkowski; editing M. Makowski)

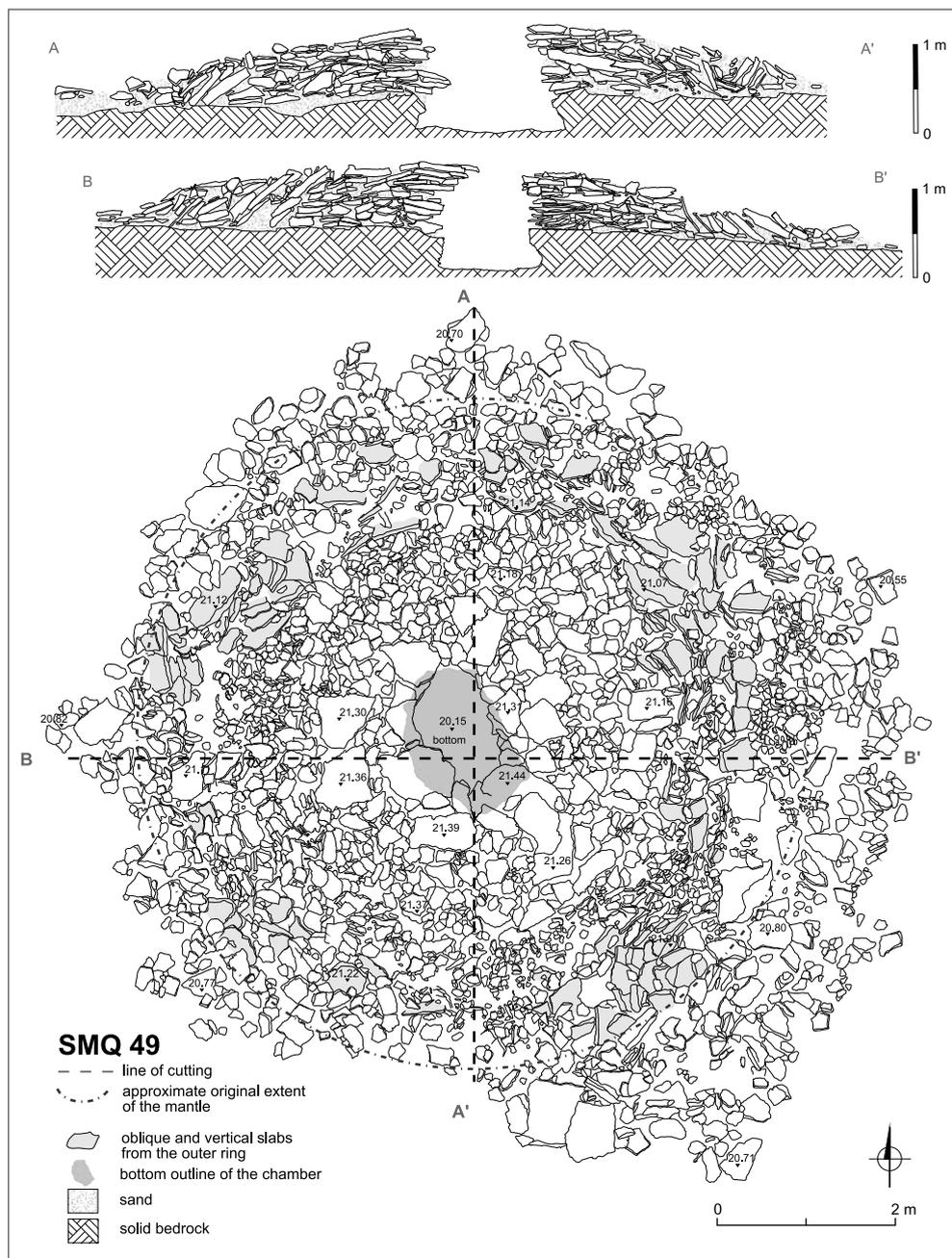


Fig. 2. Tumulus SMQ 49: plan and sections through the tumulus (Drawing and digitizing U. Wicenciak, M. Makowski)



Fig. 3. Tumulus SMQ 49: southern section of the northwestern quarter, view from the north (Photo M. Makowski)



Fig. 4. Tumulus SMQ 49 after removing the sand cover, during exploration of the grave chamber, view from the northwest (Photo M. Makowski)

animal bones, which were examined by Dr. Arkadiusz Sołtysiak (2012: 57–59) and Katarzyna Hryniewicka respectively. Three major phases of funeral activity were distinguished, corresponding to the sequence of layers in the grave chamber and the archaeological and anthropological evidence. More interestingly, however, each one of these phases is characterized by somewhat different funeral customs.

PHASE 1

In the earliest phase, articulated skeletons of at least six individuals (primary burials) could be identified: four adults, male and female, and two children. The dead were buried in flexed position on the right or left side, aligned with the long axis of the chamber, the head toward the northwest or southeast [Fig. 5]. Two double burials were deposited in the chamber; in both instances it was a burial of a woman and

a child, one 4–5 years old and the other 8–9 years old. The other two deceased individuals — an adult male and an adult of undetermined sex — were buried successively, one directly above the other.

A large quantity of equid bones was uncovered in the southeastern part of the chamber. They represented practically all parts of the skeleton of one animal, broken and mingled already in antiquity. A layer of stones covering them clearly separated these animal bones from burials of the second phase.

PHASE 2

Skeletal remains from the second phase represented also at least six individuals: five adults, both male and female, and one child. No anatomical relations between the bones were recorded; they had been intermingled and broken already in antiquity. Some of the long bones were stacked up over the skulls [Fig. 6], indicating that at least some



Fig. 5. Bottommost burials in the grave chamber, view from the northwest (Photo M. Makowski)



Fig. 6. Tumulus SMQ 49: Secondary burials from phase 2 in the grave chamber; robber's pit is in the central part of the chamber where some equid bones can be seen, view from the northwest (Photo M. Makowski)

of the burials were secondary. The character of the burials is further confirmed by the presence of only selected bones, which must have been transferred from primary burials. It could not be ascertained whether the burials took place simultaneously or were deposited in succession.

The burials from phases 2 and 3 were clearly separated by an approximately 0.15 m thick layer of stones arranged horizontally and obliquely.

PHASE 3

The last phase consisted of the remains of at least four individuals, both male and female. There is also some evidence of the presence of a child burial. Layers assigned to this phase were damaged severely by the robbers' pit and hardly anything but small fragments of bones were retrieved from the topmost ones. However, skeletal remains found just above the layer of

stones separating burials from phases 2 and 3 were in a slightly better state of preservation, some even still articulated. Thus, in phase 3, there was a return to the tradition of primary burials. Unlike phase 1, however, there is evidence, both anthropological and archaeological, for pushing aside the remains of earlier burials when new bodies were introduced. No secondary burials were identified.

In each of the three phases some animal bones were found. Most of them belonged to an almost complete equid skeleton, possibly an onager (an undomesticated species of the Equidae family), probably the remains of the burial of an entire animal. Sheep/goat bones, belonging to several individuals, and some bird bones collected in different parts of the chamber may have come from sacrifices left next to the deceased or they may be the remnants of funerary banquets.

FINDS FROM THE GRAVE CHAMBER AND CHRONOLOGY OF THE TUMULUS

The grave goods from tumulus SMQ 49 represented a number of different categories. First came the personal ornaments [*Fig. 7*, top]: three Veneridae shells, the tips ground down to create a perforation; one bead made of bone, two of stone and another two made of trimmed tusk shells; finally, a thin, triangular bone plaque [*Fig. 7*, top left] perforated near one end, most probably a pendant. The ornaments were not found together.

The second category comprised five bone tools [see *Fig. 7*, top left]. There were also some animal bone fragments showing anthropogenic marks.

Lithics constituted the third category (examined provisionally by Marcin Białowarczuk), among them, a triangular barbed and tanged flint arrowhead [see *Fig. 7*, top right]. Fragments of two more lithic tools were found inside the grave chamber, along with some semi-products and debitage. The ground stone tools included a pestle and a stone that could have served as a pestle. Moreover, two mortars (one complete and one fragmentarily preserved) and two grinding slabs [*Fig. 7*, bottom] were found among stones scattered at the base of the tomb. They could have been removed from the chamber and discarded by the grave



Fig. 7. Collection of artifacts made of animal bones (top left); personal ornaments and flint arrowhead (top right); ground stone tools from around the perimeter of the mound (bottom) (Photos A. Niemirka, A. Reiche)

robbers who saw no intrinsic value in them.

Finally, at least some of the unworked stones and shells (of the *Veneridae* family) found in the grave chamber should also be interpreted as grave goods, although it is also possible that some found their way into the chamber by accident.

The disposition of grave goods in the chamber seems to be accidental, even in the case of finds originating from parts of the chamber not reached by the robbers. In most instances it was impossible to reconstruct any relation between the objects and specific skeletons. Some of these objects could have been moved from their original location when new burials were made or they can have even been transported from elsewhere, together with the secondary burials. On the other hand, it is also possible that objects were thrown into the chamber at some point during the funeral ceremony as a “votive” deposit of some kind.

Most of the burials, even the burials undisturbed by the robbers’ pit and the intact or almost intact primary burials from phase 1, were not accompanied by any grave goods. Therefore, the lack of mortuary gifts beside some of the deceased

may have been a norm, as (at least in the case of the intact burials) it cannot be explained by the practice of removing grave goods accompanying older burials at the time of the burial of another person in the same grave. For the same reason, the small number of grave goods (at least such that would have left traces in the archaeological material) cannot be explained solely by the fact that the tumulus was robbed.

The finds from SMQ 49 are for the most part chronologically non-diagnostic. The only exception is a flint arrowhead, which was found moreover in a secure and sealed context. It seems to represent the Arabian Bifacial Tradition, which was widespread in Arabia in the late Neolithic (Carter, Crawford [eds] 2010: 123; Crawford 1998: 19–21, Fig. 2.1). Similar arrowheads occurred in the same period in southern Mesopotamia (Carter, Crawford [eds] 2010: 124–127, Fig. 6.13) and they have also been found in neighboring settlement sites from the Ubaid period (Reiche 2011: 49; Carter, Crawford [eds] 2010: 105, 114, 123). Parallels from the late Neolithic/Ubaid period from Kuwait can be cited also for some other less diagnostic finds from SMQ 49.³

RECAPITULATION

The number of individuals, and the sex and age differences between them, suggest that SMQ 49 was most probably a family tomb of some kind. Considering the size of the chamber, which was cut deep into bedrock,

it must have been intended for multiple burials from the start.

In many respects SMQ 49 is unique among the stone mounds investigated so far in As-Sabbiya, even if its construction

³ For example, simple tubular beads made of trimmed tusk shells were collected at Bahra 1, an Ubaid-period site in the vicinity (unpublished). Parallels for the tubular bead of bone and the long bone point from SMQ 49 are known from H3, another Ubaid period settlement (Carter, Crawford [eds] 2010: 74, 80, 82, Fig. 4.8:11, 13). This site produced also several ornaments made of bivalve shells (Carter, Crawford [eds] 2010: 75, Pl. 36k), comparable to those from SMQ 49 that were made of *Veneridae* shells.

may resemble some of the tumuli situated in the region (see tomb SB 65, Rutkowski 2013: 507–511, in this volume). First of all, this tomb contained no less than 17 burials. No other tumulus grave has yielded nearly as large or even comparable number of individuals. SMQ 49 is exceptional for the finds it produced. Many of them, like lithic and bone tools, animal bone fragments with manmade marks, ornaments made of bone and burial of a whole animal, are not known from other tumuli. The lack of parallels for SMQ 49 in these respects could be due, at least in part, to a very poor state of preservation of most of the other tumuli. Moreover, none of the funeral structures investigated so far in Kuwait could be dated unquestionably to the late Neolithic or Ubaid period. More research is necessary to clarify how the tumulus

fitted into the general picture of late Neolithic burial customs in the Arabian Peninsula.

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