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Tumulus Grave SMQ 30 in As-Sabbiya-Mugheira (Northern Kuwait) : A Report on the 2007-2008 Investigations

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TUMULUS GRAVE SMQ 30 IN AS-SABBIYA – MUGHEIRA (NORTHERN KUWAIT). A REPORT ON THE 2007–2008 INVESTIGATIONS

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Abstract: Tumulus grave SMQ 30 with its 600 beads and other adornments is, so far, one of the richest graves excavated in the As-Sabbiya region. The ornaments were made mainly of shell, mother-of-pearl and soft stones, but two pierced pearls and a few lapis lazuli beads were also present. The burial also evidenced a rare form of burial rites. The dating of the grave to the Bronze Age is based on the presence of a dotted circles motif carved on a mother-of-pearl pendant.

Keywords: Bronze Age, burial mound, cairn / stone tumulus, Gulf, beads, shell ornaments, mother-of-pearl/nacre, pearl, lapis lazuli, dotted-circles motif

Rescue investigations by a joint Kuwaiti–Polish Archaeological Mission (KPAM)¹ in the region of As-Sabbiya in northern Kuwait commenced in 2007. During the first two campaigns a cluster of tumuli graves was excavated in the sub-region of Al-Mugheira (Rutkowski 2011a: 10–17; 2013: 479ff., in this volume). A survey of the As-Sabbiya region carried out by

a joint Kuwaiti–British Mission between 1998 and 2004 had located 31 different stone features, including tumulus grave SMQ 30 (=SB 52.2 in Carter 2010: 215 and 251, Table I.7). In 2004–2009 a number of these tumuli graves were investigated by Kuwaiti and Gulf Countries Council (GCC) archaeological missions (Ad-Duweish, Al-Mutairi 2006).

EXPLORATION OF SMQ 30

Tumulus grave SMQ 30 is located in the middle of a group of tumuli graves, standing in line along the western edge of

a rocky escarpment overlooking the coastal plain [*Fig. 1*]. Approximately 7 m from the grave there is a rock-art site designated as

¹ Joint venture of the Department of Museums and Antiquities of the State of Kuwait, represented by Mr. Shehab A.H. Shehab, and Mr. Sultan Ad-Duweish, acting as co-director on the Kuwaiti side, and the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw, represented by Prof. Piotr Bieleński, who is also co-director of the mission.

SMQ 22 (Ad-Duweish, Al-Mutairi 2006: 110, Fig. 11; Carter 2010: 218, designated as SB 52.3), but there was no evidence of a connection between the two features.

The grave was investigated during the first two campaigns in 2007–2008, by the author in cooperation with Dorota Bielińska (in 2007) and Marta Momot (in 2008).² A trench 8 m by 8 m was cleared, cleaning drifted sand and loose stones from the stone mantle covering the grave in order to be able to record it [Fig. 2]. Upon cleaning, it became clear that, like most of the As-Sabbiya graves, SMQ 30 had been robbed in the past. An outline of a robber's pit penetrating the grave chamber was exposed by the cleaning, and the pit was excavated first. Numerous small fragments of human bones and teeth mixed

with a number of shell beads were found in the sand filling the pit. Thereafter, the tumulus was explored by digging opposite quadrants to achieve a continuous section revealing its structure and the technique of construction. A great number of beads and ornaments was found unexpectedly between the stones of the structure.

GRAVE CONSTRUCTION

The grave was an aboveground stone structure in the shape of a small rounded mound, approximately 6 m in diameter and some 0.70 m high [Fig. 3]. At its center, an oval grave chamber (inner diameter from approximately 1.20 m on the east–west axis to 1.30 m on the north–south one) was constructed over a paving made of flat sandstone slabs. The ring-shaped wall

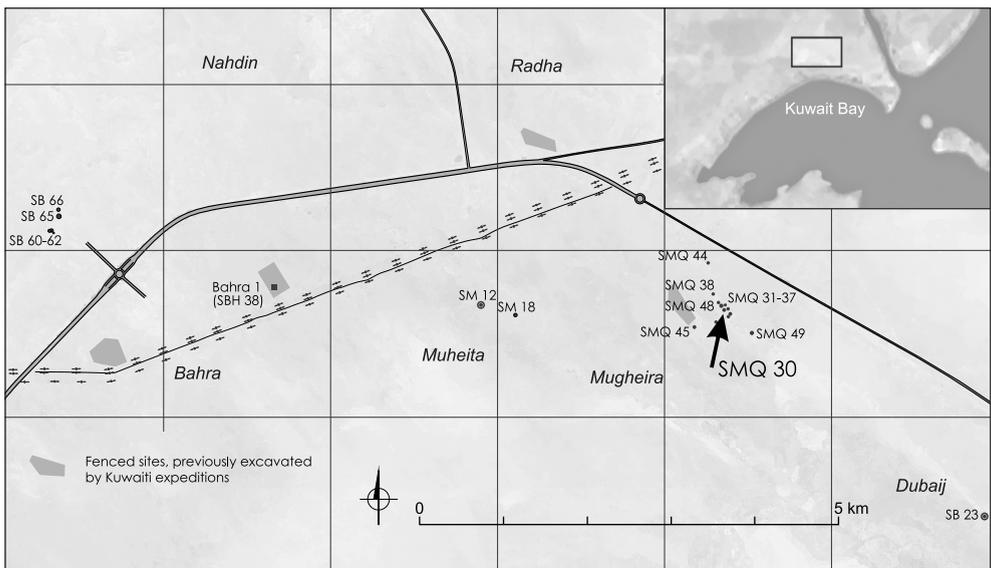


Fig. 1. General location of tumulus grave SMQ 30 in the Al-Mugheira area of As-Sabbiya (Mapping Ł. Rutkowski based on Google Earth and GPD coordinates)

² For preliminary reports, see Reiche 2008; 2009; Rutkowski 2011b.

of the chamber (from 0.30 m to 0.40 m wide and similarly high) consisted of four to five layers of thin (7 to 10 cm) stone slabs, closely fitted without using mortar. The slabs, made of local sandstone, were of different size and shape, mainly rectangular or triangular; they were set with their longer sides facing the inside of the chamber.

A ring of larger slabs (some up to 1 m long, and approximately 0.30–0.50 m wide) encircled the chamber at a distance of about 0.30 m to 0.40 m from its wall [Figs 4, 5], the intervening space being densely packed with smaller sandstone chunks. Finally, the structure was covered with a mantle of loosely laid sandstone chunks and flattish slabs of different sizes, forming a small rounded mound.

Similar grave mounds, repeating the main structural elements, that is, an oval grave chamber encircled by a ring of large stones or a stone wall, all covered by a mantle of stones, are numerous in the As-Sabbiya region, e.g., SMQ 5 (Ad-Duweish, Al-Mutairi 2006: 23, 91, Fig. 12), S.R.F. (Ad-Duweish, Al-Mutairi 2006: 99, Fig. 20); for more examples see also Rutkowski 2013: 493ff., in this volume.

FILL OF THE GRAVE CHAMBER

An approximately 0.30 to 0.40 m wide strip of sandy fill along the western and northern chamber walls was not touched by the robber's pit. At its bottom, fragments of a human skeleton (almost complete long bones of the arms and legs)



Fig. 2. Grave mound SMQ 30 after cleaning of the stone mantle
(All photos A. Reiche)

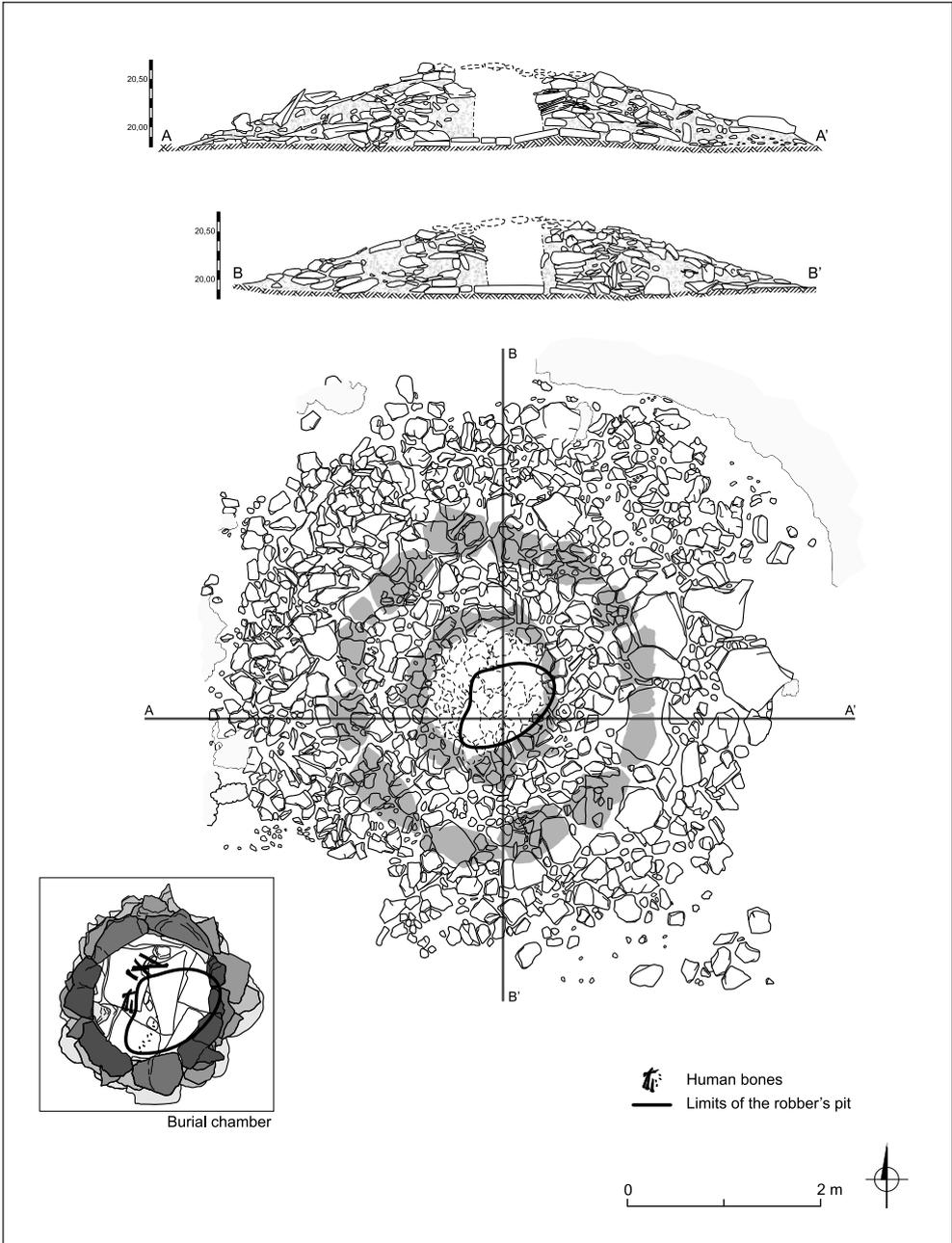


Fig. 3. Tumulus SMQ 30: general plan and E–W and N–S sections; bottom left, plan of burial chamber (Drawing D. Bielińska, M. Momot; digitizing M. Momot, E. Rutkowski)

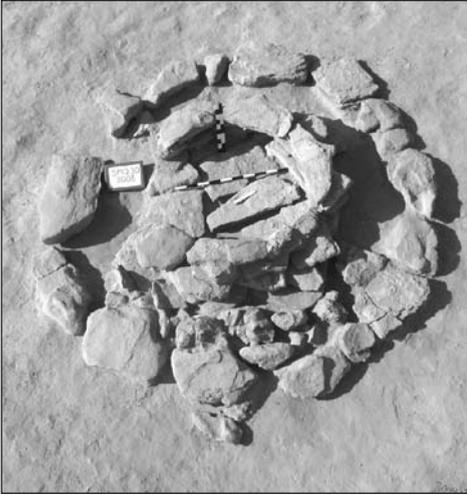


Fig. 4. Ring-shaped wall of the grave chamber encircled by another ring of large stones, after removal of the stone covering

were found *in situ*, lying on the slabs of the pavement. The position of the skeleton was most probably aligned NE–SW, the body having been laid on the left side with bent legs, the head pointing south and the face turned to the west. The arms were bent at the elbows and the hands held to the face. Anthropological analysis of all skeletal remains found in the grave chamber determined the presence of burials of at least two adult individuals, one of them a female (Sołtysiak 2009: 104). Beads and adornments found in the undisturbed part of the fill were scattered randomly in the sand over the skeletal remains and beyond. Scatters of different beads were found in “pockets” between stones of the walls of the chamber. A large mother-of-pearl pendant with engraved decoration



Fig. 5. Partly uncovered southwestern quarter of grave SMQ 30

was found away from the skeleton (to the west of the supposed position of the head), resting against a stone of the wall [Fig. 6].

The distribution of beads and adornments inside the burial chamber did

not demonstrate any sets that could be interpreted tentatively as strings of ornaments or clusters of embroidery on clothing. It suggests that loose beads were scattered over an open chamber.

THE FINDS AND THEIR CONTEXT

Personal adornments constituted the sole category of finds from the grave. Most were made of seashells or nacre, but there were also two pierced pearls and beads cut from different stones, including the highly prized lapis lazuli. Sieving of the

fill recovered even the smallest pieces, and altogether 600 different beads and ornaments have been found [Fig. 7].

The adornments were found scattered both in the sandy fill of the grave chamber (247 items) and outside it, in the sand-

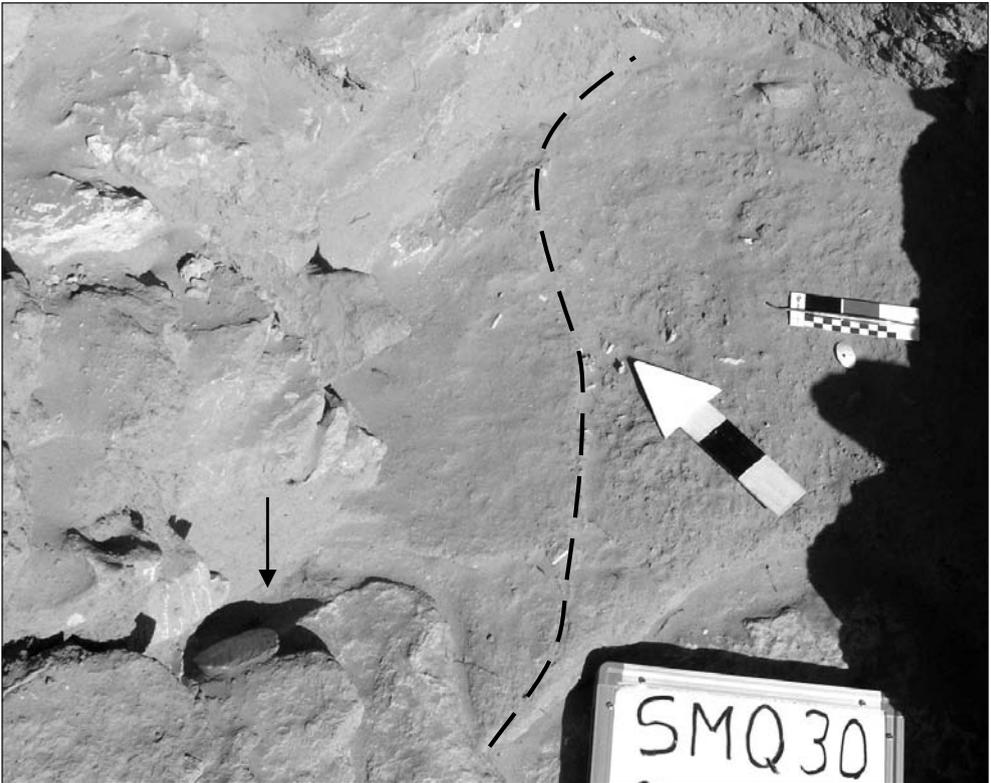


Fig. 6. Top view of the burial chamber close to the bottom: to the right of the dashed line, fill of the robber's pit; on the left, undisturbed fill covering skeletal remains; arrow points to findspot of nacre pendant

blown fill between the stones of the mantle, right down to the bottom of the structure (353 items). Some concentrations of different beads were found in “pockets” between the stones of the outer, northwestern face of the grave chamber wall. The distribution of the ornaments over the whole structure was remarkably uneven: the greatest concentration (184) was found in the northwestern quadrant, another 51 in the northeastern one and 87 more in the southwestern one; only 29 beads were found in the southeastern quadrant. This quantitative disproportion between the quadrants may be the result of a ritual being performed at the burial ceremony, during which beads were strewn over the grave by mourners standing in front of the grave on its western side. The grave chamber was apparently still open at the time, explaining the position of the large pendant found lying away from the body. Also the small clusters of different beads found in “pockets” between the stones in the western face of the burial chamber wall would support this interpretation.

SHELL BEADS

Most of the beads and ornaments found in the grave were made of seashells originating from different species of univalve and bivalve mollusks (464 objects). Almost a half of the shell ornaments were made of small gastropod shells adapted for stringing by making a suspension hole in the body of the shell, or at the apex, mainly by trimming, chipping or picking, grinding, and drilling. The following shell beads were identified:

- *Dentalium* sp. (commonly known as tusk shell) beads: trimmed sections of a whitish, tube-like marine mollusk shell, open at both ends, conical and curved

[*Fig. 7:a*]; they constituted the largest group in the assemblage (134 pieces). Their length ranged from 7 mm to 27 mm, but most were middle-sized, from 14 mm to 21 mm in length.

- immature *Conus* sp. beads: small shells turned into beads by careful abrasion of the apex to obtain a hole for stringing [*Fig. 7:s*]. They constituted the second largest group of beads (80 pieces).
- *Engina mendicaria* beads: a group of attractive brown-striped whelk shells (13 pieces), which were deliberately holed in the middle of the body opposite the mouth [*Fig. 7:e*]. The hole was made by grinding down the shell body or by making in it a rough hole with a pointed tool; there are examples holed also at the apex.
- *Olividae* sp. bead: probably an *Ancilla farsiana* shell holed at the apex by abrasion (one example) [*Fig. 7:u*].

WORKED SHELL AND ORNAMENTS

A separate category of shell is made up of items shaped deliberately from a solid piece of shell or mother-of-pearl (nacre), using the techniques of trimming or filing, grinding, polishing and drilling.

The following types have been classified:

- **Disc-beads**: the largest group of worked shell beads (78 pieces) was formed by round and oval disc-beads [*Fig. 7:b1–3*] pierced in the center with a single hole, trimmed either from bi-colored (orange to red on one side, and white on the other) *Spondylus* sp. shell, white shell or mother-of-pearl.
- **Double-holed spacer beads(?)**: oblong oval plaques pierced with a hole at each short end (13 items) [*Fig. 7:c*]. Most were worked in bi-colored *Spondylus* sp.



Fig. 7. Assemblage of beads from grave SMQ 30 (arranged by category): a – *Dentalium* sp. beads, b – disc beads (1 – mother-of-pearl, 2 – white shell, 3 – bi-colored *Spondylus marisrubri* shell), c – double holed spacer beads, d – single-holed shell pendants, e – *Engina mendicaria* beads, f – double holed mother-of-pearl pendant, g – natural pearls (magnified at top right), h – shark tooth, i – elliptical shell bead, j – black stone bead, k – lapis lazuli beads (magnified at right), l – copper wire earring(?), m – stone bead, n – talcose steatite(?) and chlorite(?) micro-beads, o – tubular shell beads, p – limestone spacer beads, q – marble(?) tubular beads, r – ring beads (1 – small, 2 – medium and large), s – immature *Conus* sp. beads, t – *Strombus* (*Conomurex*) *persicus* shell beads, u – *Olividae* sp. bead

shell, but a few white-shell and mother-of-pearl examples were also present in the assemblage.

- Single-holed **pendants**: trimmed from pieces of the body of *Strombus* sp. or *Conus* sp. or the valve of the Veneridae and Cardiidae family species (10 items) [Fig. 7:d]. They were shaped as plain, irregular ovals with a suspension hole often pierced off-center. Their dimensions are quite standardized: 28–32 mm long and 17–22 mm wide.
- Round double-holed **pendant**: a unique piece, worked in mother-of-pearl, probably of a *Pinctada margaritifera* (approx. 75–80 mm in diameter), decorated with 17 carved dotted-circles motifs placed randomly on its surface [Fig. 7:f]. There are a dozen dotted single circles with different diameters (six have a diameter of 10–12 mm and the other six a diameter of 1.35–1.45 mm) and five with dotted double circles (dia. 14–15 mm). The dot in the center is a conical concavity drilled by the foot of a compass used for carving the ornament.³ Two suspension holes were pierced in the upper part of the pendant. The fact that some of the carved circles are cut off by the edge of the pendant permits the assumption that the pendant was reshaped from a larger one. It should be noted that the pendant was so worn in the lower part of the back side that, the dots had become holes in some cases. The pendant was obviously in long use before being placed in the grave.
- **Ring beads**: made of whorls cut off from

the apex of *Conus* sp. or *Strombus* sp. and ground down on both sides (64 pieces) [Fig. 7:r]. This numerous group of beads can be divided into three subgroups according to their external diameter: small (9–10 mm), medium (19–26 mm) and large (27–31 mm). Although the opening in some of the largest ring beads would allow the beads to be worn as finger-rings, such use has not been proved.

- **Tubular beads**: slightly bent, 12–23 mm long tubes with oval sections (4.6–8.8 mm by 4.9–8.0 mm), and a longitudinal drilled hole, worked into beads from trimmed sections of *Strombus* sp. or *Conus* sp. whorls cut off from the shell apex (seven pieces) [Fig. 7:o].⁴ The beads were found outside the grave chamber as a cluster in a “pocket” between the stones of the northwestern part of the chamber wall.
- Elliptical bead with lenticular transverse section and lateral hole (17 by 14 mm). It was probably worked from a whorl of a *Conus* sp. or *Strombus* sp. [Fig. 7:i].

PEARL AND STONE BEADS

- **Pearls**: two examples, probably *Pinctada radiata*, both well-preserved and pierced, found inside the grave chamber [Fig. 7:g]. One measured 6 by 4 mm and the other 4.4 by 2.2 mm.
- **Micro-beads**: made of soft stones, they constituted a large group of 64 beads (2 to 3 mm in diameter and 1 to 1.5 mm high) [Fig. 7:n]. They could be divided into two sub-groups:

³ The tool used for carving the dotted circles on soft stone vessels could have been either “a tube drill with a mounted bronze or flint point in the center” (Potts 2000: 74) or “a compass turning around one of its points” (David 2002: 184: note 2 with discussion).

⁴ This type of tubular bead should not be mistaken for “Akab-type” tubular beads, which are dated to the 5th millennium BC and which were fashioned from the *columella* of Muricidae shells (Charpentier, Méry 2008: 130).

- 1) small, ring-shaped discs, whitish-cream with yellowish coating, very fragile and made (probably) of talcose steatite or enstatite/hypersthene.⁵ There are also three ring-shaped micro-beads made of shell, and one of red stone.
- 2) cylinder-shaped beads (some with square section) made of two kinds of stone: the one described above and a semitransparent grayish stone, sometimes with greenish shade, probable chlorite (or steatite).
- **Lapis lazuli beads:** four cylinder-shaped micro-beads (2–4 mm by 2–2.5 mm) and one barrel-shaped bead (6 mm by 3 mm) found outside the grave chamber [Fig. 7:k].
 - **Tubular beads:** some oval and some almost square in section, made of a fine crystalline, white stone, possibly marble(?) (eight examples) [Fig. 7:q]. They are very similar in shape to the above described tubular shell beads made from the whorl sections of *Strombus* sp. or *Conus* sp.
 - **Spacer beads:** made of limestone; rectangular, flat on one side and concave on the other, pierced with two parallel lateral holes. Three [Fig. 7:p] were found randomly distributed, two separately on the bottom of the chamber and one outside the chamber. Their height was standardized, equal to 7 mm, and their size was only slightly differentiated, measuring 22.4–25 mm by 13–16 mm.
 - **Small ring-shaped bead:** made of glossy black stone (6.5 by 3.7 mm) [Fig. 7:j].
 - **Cylindrical bead:** made of grayish stone (11 by 8 mm) [Fig. 7:m].

MISCELLANEA

- **Earring(?):** two elliptical coils made of copper-alloy wire [Fig. 7:l]. Found at the bottom of the outer edge of the stone mantle, prompting doubts as to whether it had actually belonged to the grave assemblage or made its way in between the stones accidentally at a later time.
- Unworked mature *Strombus* (*Conomurex*) *persicus* shell [Fig. 7:i]. Its presence below the grave structure was most probably accidental. Single examples or even small concentrations of not worked, complete shell of this species can still be found on the top of the ridge over the coastal plateau.
- Shark tooth: small (11 by 5 mm), not perforated [Fig. 7:h].

The assemblage of ornaments from the SMQ 30 grave contains beads made of materials of local origin (e.g., *Dentalium* sp., *Spondylus* sp., *Conus* sp. or *Strombus* sp., natural pearls and nacre),⁶ as well as beads made of materials which were not available locally and must have been traded from beyond the As-Sabbiya region. Beads acquired in this manner were those made of lapis lazuli,⁷ *Engina mendicaria*,⁸ and soft stones, like chlorite and steatite.⁹

⁵ For a discussion concerning these raw materials, see Frifelt 1991: 114.

⁶ For a catalogue of molluscs available on the Ubaid-related site H-3 at As-Sabbiya, and the use of shells (but not *Dentalium* sp., which was found at nearby Bahra 1) as raw material for beads, see: Glover 2010.

⁷ This highly valued semiprecious stone, mined in the Badakshan (Afghanistan), was traded through Iran and along the Indus Valley (Hermann 1968; Frifelt 1991: 116). A workshop of lapis lazuli beads dated to the 3rd millennium BC was found at, e.g., Sahr-i Sokhta, Iran (Tosi, Piperno 1973: 15ff.).

⁸ The source of this species was restricted to the eastern Arab/Persian Gulf, the Makran coast and the Gulf of Oman (Charpentier *et alii* 1997; Gensheimer 1984: 65, 69).

⁹ Workshops manufacturing beads of different soft stones have been found on 3rd millennium BC sites in the Indus Valley as well as in Iran (Frifelt 1991: 116).

PERSONAL ADORNMENTS AND GRAVE CHRONOLOGY

Dating of the bead collection from SMQ 30 presents difficulties. The chronological significance of different groups of beads and adornments is not the same. Beads made of *Dentalium* sp., *Engina mendicaria* and immature *Conus* sp. shells were found in grave contexts from the Neolithic period (Charpentier *et alii* 1997, de Beauclair *et alii* 2006) on to the Iron Age (Reese 1989), and therefore their presence is of no chronological consequence. The presence of lapis lazuli beads gives only a *terminus post quem* for the burial, in the late 4th millennium BC (Hermann 1968: 21). A more precise dating can be based on the presence of dotted, single and double-circle decoration carved on the mother-of-pearl pendant. This decorative motif appears in the Gulf region, Iran and southern Mesopotamia on soft stone vessels and some ivory artifacts in the late 3rd and early 2nd millennium BC (David 1996; 2002;

Potts 1991: 34–35, Figs 23–24; 2000: 100, 103). This dating can be considered as a chronological frame for the grave.

However, there remains the question of the cluster of ornaments worked in shell and mother-of-pearl found in SMQ 30. There is an abundance of *comparanda* for these ornaments in late Neolithic material (Charpentier, Méry 2013: 76, 77). In late 3rd/early 2nd millennium BC bead assemblages from Mesopotamia, these kinds of shell ornaments appear sporadically, except for the single-holed disc beads and medium-to-large rings (Szelaġ 2013, in this volume). One can assume, therefore, that at least a part of the ornaments found in grave SMQ 30 could have come from robbed Neolithic graves. The same can be said about the two perforated pearls. In southeastern Arabia pearls are found in abundance in Neolithic graves (de Bauclair *et alii* 2006: 176).

CONCLUSIONS

Almost all the graves in the As-Sabbiya region were robbed at some point in the past. The extent of the damage varies, with some graves being completely empty of everything, including the smallest bones, as was the case with SMQ 31 in the near vicinity of SMQ 30. Therefore, fixing a date for the As-Sabbiya tumuli graves is a difficult matter and in many cases impossible (Rutkowski 2011b: 23).

The few exceptions only partly robbed afford some insight into burial customs, as well as aspects of material culture of the local population.

Two graves dug by the Kuwaiti–Polish team, SMQ 30 and SMQ 49 (see Makowski 2013: 518ff., in this volume), fall into this category. Although both produced interesting results, it must be kept in mind that the information is incomplete because the assemblages in both cases were disturbed and depleted by the robbing.

In general, it seems that the As-Sabbiya tumuli graves belonged mainly in the Early to Middle Bronze Age (3000–1500 BC); one cannot exclude, however, that some of them could have been even later (see Rutkowski 2013: 493ff., in this volume).

Therefore, dating the SMQ 30 grave to the end of the 3rd and beginning of the 2nd millennium BC, supported by the presence of the dotted-circles motif decorating the mother-of-pearl pendant, would be acceptable.

In northern Kuwait, occupation from the 3rd and 2nd millennia BC is attested only on Failaka island, but no graves of this period have been found there. This fact raises the question whether the Bronze Age graves in As-Sabbiya belonged to the dwellers of Failaka or to some nomadic tribes which may have lived in the region.

SMQ 30 also offered information on a rare burial custom, in which beads were apparently strewn over the grave during the burial, presumably when the grave chamber was still uncovered. This supposition is supported by the way in which the beads are dispersed throughout

the structure, as well as by the location of the nacre pendant. Among the dozens of graves excavated in the region so far, only two, SMQ 30 and SB 100, have yielded such evidence (Ł. Rutkowski, personal communication).

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