

CHRISTIAN SETTLEMENT AT FAILAKA, QUSUR SITE (KUWAIT): EXCAVATIONS IN 2011 AND 2013

Magdalena Żurek

Institute of Archaeology, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University

Abstract: Excavations of the Qusur complex in the center of Failaka Island in Kuwait commenced in 2011 and were continued in 2013, carried out by a team from the University of Warsaw. A magnetic prospection preceded the fieldwork. In the course of two seasons three of nine units in the northernmost part of the site were investigated. Stone enclosures and small houses with white mortar floors were discovered and dated provisionally to the late pre-Islamic and early Islamic period. The settlement was cleared of practically all finds save for some refuse pottery in the courtyards.

Keywords: Failaka, Qusur, stone architecture

The remains of the Qusur complex are scattered over a flat and extensive area sloping gently from the northwest to the southeast in the center of Failaka Island in Kuwait [*Fig. 1*]. It is an extremely large site, extending approximately 2 km N–S and 0.80 km E–W and containing over a hundred stone structures barely visible on the surface. At present three concentrations of structures are situated within fenced areas protected by the Kuwaiti Department of Antiquities and Museums.

The Polish team was charged with excavation of nine stone structures designated as Units I–IX in the northernmost part of the site [*Fig. 4*]. Five of these seemed to be rectangular in shape, four subrectangular or oval. The biggest one (marked as Unit IV) was approximately 81 m E–W

and 75 m N–S. It was regular in shape and was composed of apparently four fairly big courtyards. A stone building stood in the northwestern corner. Four of these (Units III, V, VI and IX) were of similar dimensions, ranging from approximately 24 m to 30 m E–W and from 30 m to 40 m N–S. The smallest was Unit VI: approximately 30 m E–W and 30 m N–S, with a small subrectangular building inside it. The northwestern structure (Unit VIII) was in the worst condition; remains of modern wooden constructions were found nearby. The distance between them ranged from about 20 m (Units IV–V) to about 140 m (Units III–VI).

All the structures were made of beachrock, a local building material, which is very soft and easily eroded.

Units III and IV were excavated in the 2011 and 2013 seasons respectively. The former was a subrectangular building

within an enclosure built of beachrock. The latter was the largest structure in the northern part of the site.

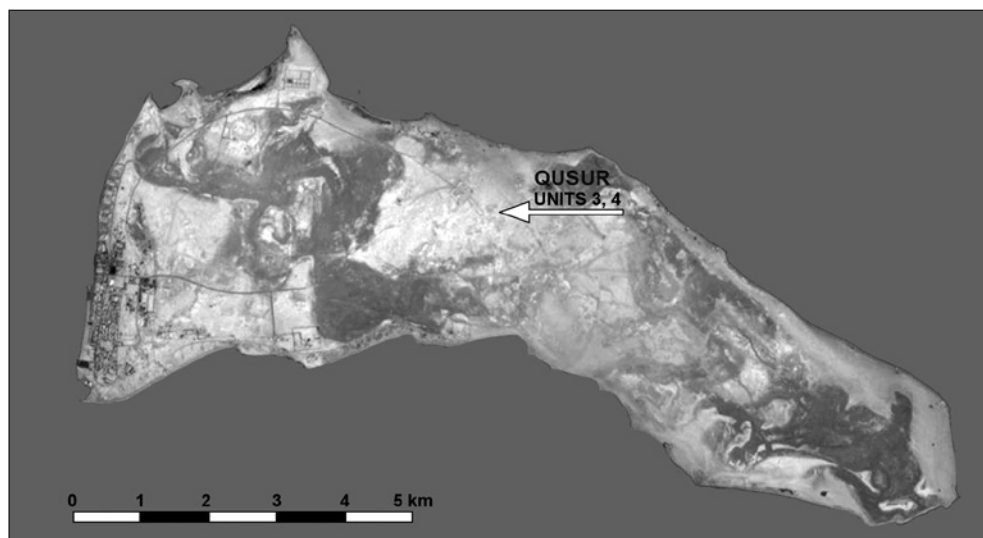


Fig. 1. Map of Failaka Island
(Model R. Łopaciuk, PCMA UW)

Team

Dates of work: 31 October–3 December 2011; 24 February–7 April 2013

General Project Director: Prof. Piotr Bieliński (PCMA UW),

Field directors: Dr. Magdalena Żurek, archaeologist (Institute of Archaeology, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University; 2011, 2013), Dr. Hamed Al-Mutairi (Excavation and Surveying Sector, Kuwaiti National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters)

Archaeologists: Mariusz Gwiazda (Institute of Archaeology, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University; 2013); Joanna K. Rądkowska, Marek Wóźniak, Łukasz Miechowicz (all independent; 2011, 2013), Ewelina Mizak (independent; 2013)

Topographer: Roman Łopaciuk (Geomatic; 2011)

Geophysicists: Prof. Krzysztof Misiewicz, Prof. Przemysław Urbańczyk (both Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology, Polish Academy of Sciences; 2013)

Acknowledgments

The excavations could not have started but for the benevolence and kindly encouragement of Secretary General of the National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters, Mr. Ali Hussain Al-Youha, and of Director of the Antiquities and Museums, Mr. Shehab A.H. Shehab. Words of gratitude are due members of the Kuwaiti staff for their hospitality, patience and friendly advice. We are particularly grateful to Mr. Hamed al-Mutairi, Mr. Talaal al-Saie, Mr. Khaled al-Ali, Mr. Taro Redha and Mr. Mustafa Alansari on whose collaboration and constant help we could always count.

MAGNETIC SURVEY

The magnetic survey in 2013 covered almost 5 ha of the site. A GRAD 602 fluxgate gradiometer with twin sensor configuration which gives a strong response to bodies in subsurface layers as well as deeper-lying anomalies. The resolution is 0.03nT/m when used in a 100nT/m range. Two lines of data are recorded on each traverse. In the parts of the site where structures at greater depth were anticipated, a Geometrics G858 Magmapper cesium magnetometer was used. Simultaneous height measurements giving accurate positioning, combined with track visualisation, allowed fieldwork without other systems supporting the positioning, e.g., setting up orthogonal grids and stretching measurement tapes.

The survey grid was based on the Kuwaiti geodesic grid. The measurement unit was 30 m by 30 m. The magnetic gradient is measured along a series of lines spaced 0.50 m or 1.00 m depending on the resolution required. Measurements were taken at intervals of 0.125 m along each traverse. All traverses were conducted in parallel mode on an E–W line. Procedures were implemented to convert values from the global coordinate system to the local system adopted by the archaeological team. Preliminary results of the survey were presented as color and greyscale map overlying the topographical site plan [Fig. 2], combining information from the survey with the results of excavations and will be used to plan future fieldwork.

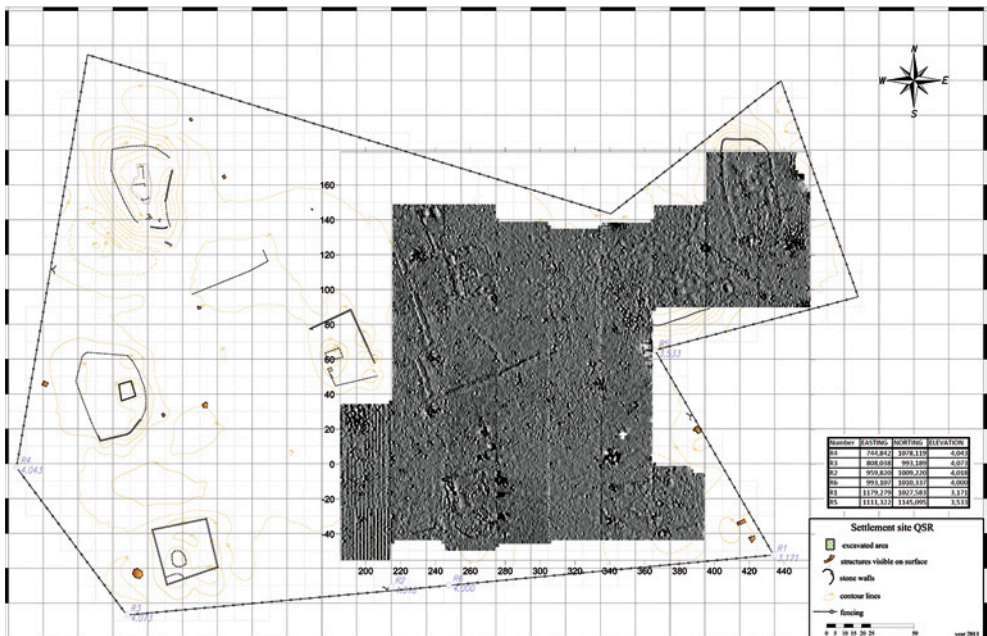


Fig. 2. Magnetic map of the northern part of Qusur settlement (Processing K. Misiewicz)

UNIT III

ENCLOSURE

The enclosure was subrectangular in plan, with two walls straight, one irregular and one semicircular [Fig. 3]. The east wall ran for a total length of 33.50 m, terminating at the southern end with a rather big, well-dressed block of small-grained beachrock.

In the southernmost part of the enclosure, the wall consisted of two faces of well-dressed beachrock with a core of smaller and rougher flat stones bonded presumably in a clay mortar (however, no traces remained) or crushed beachrock. The first section was 3.50 m long, the second 2.50 m; it was 0.63–0.70 m wide, narrowing to 0.40–0.44 m further on.

A large break in the enclosure measured 4.50 m. Judging by the rather

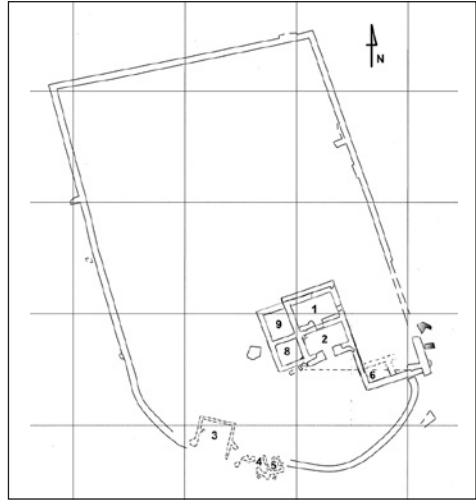


Fig. 3. Plan of Unit III
(Drawing M. Żurek)

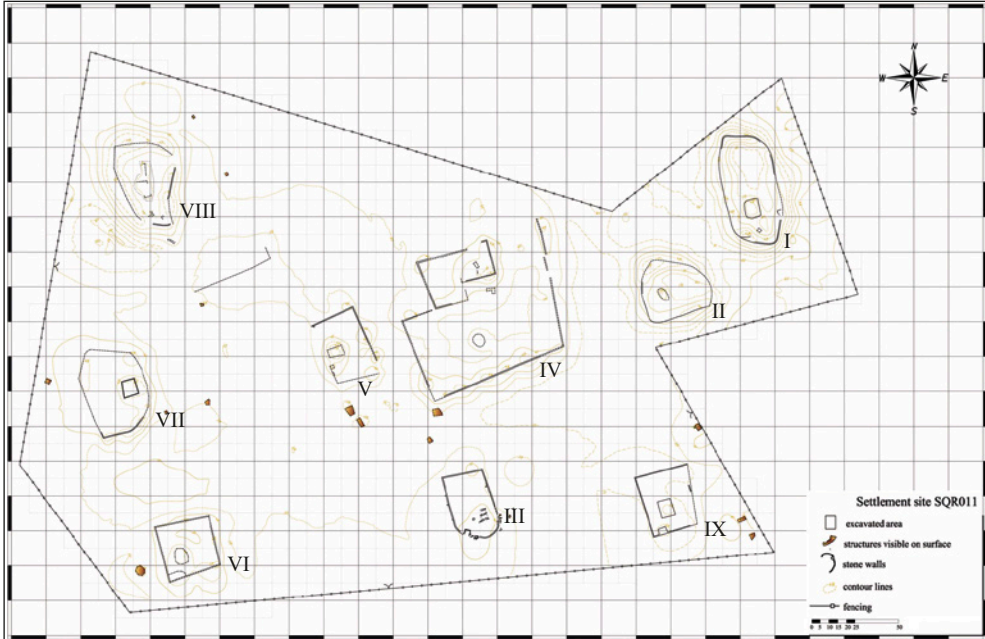


Fig. 4. Plan of the northern part of Qusur settlement
(Drawing R. Łopaciuk)

well-constructed ends, it may have been a gateway.

Further to the north the enclosure wall was 0.45–0.47 m wide [Fig. 6]. It was built of fairly regular pieces of beachrock with a core of smaller and rougher flat stones or crushed beachrock. Some potsherds were found collected against the wall. A narrow (W. 0.62 m) gap appeared in the wall, finished on the northern side with a rather big and well-dressed block of beachrock. A layer of mud with limestone inclusions, evidence of standing water, could suggest a drain. This feature needs to be explored further.

The north wall of the enclosure was 24.10 m long and 0.49–0.53 m wide. Two or even three layers of stones were observed in places, making it the highest preserved part of the structure. Both faces were built

of dressed beachrock, whereas the core was of smaller and rougher flat stones and no crushed rock. The northwestern corner consisted of soft beachrock that has largely been eroded. From it ran the west wall, 0.52–0.59 m wide and 33.85 m long. The northernmost section was again of dressed beachrock in the face and a core of crushed beachrock.

Testing the enclosure foundation revealed a thick layer of earth and clay with limestone inclusions of different size, over it a thick layer of crushed limestone under the first wall course. The foundation cut was shallow. Some non-diagnostic pottery was found in deeper layers. A badly preserved stone wall was found to double alongside the enclosure wall, turning into a dark trace along the northernmost part of the west wall and westernmost part of the north



Fig. 5. Potsherds by the west wall of the enclosure, view from the north
(Photo Ł. Miechowicz)



Fig. 6. East enclosure wall, view from the north
(Photo Ł. Miechowicz)

wall. Further exploration revealed a mud-brick wall that appears to have been one of the latest building phases in Unit III.

Two layers, presumably from a destroyed stone structure, were found below it. The mud-brick wall was built on top of a low and narrow embankment [Fig. 7], which could represent an earlier phase of construction.

A deeper foundation for the enclosure wall in a section where the ground dips could have been connected with the need to reinforce the wall on the outside. The wall here was destroyed, leaving nothing but a foundation of crushed beachrock.

The south wall of the enclosure was curved, being built from two sides to meet somewhere in the center. The western section was 0.58–0.62 m wide, the eastern one 0.48–0.54 m wide. The building technique did not differ, consisting of wall faces of dressed beachrock (the

stones slightly bigger in the eastern part) and a core of crushed rock. About 6 m of wall was traced from the west; the rest was decomposed down to a level of crushed beachrock in the foundation. Irregular cubicles, a late phase of occupation (see below), were excavated here.

A collection of potsherds was found dumped against the west wall [Fig. 5] and by the south wall, as well as scattered throughout the courtyard area, similarly as the pottery by the east enclosure wall. The pottery had evidently been discarded there after use.

SOUTHERN COURTYARD

The southern courtyard was investigated more thoroughly in an effort to establish the economic organization of the complex.

A circular trace of bitumen with impressed rope was recorded in the



Fig. 7. Earlier phase of the Unit III enclosure
(Photo Ł. Miechowicz)

southeastern part of the courtyard, together with several potsherds from a single bottle with stamped decoration. Three stones formed a structure that may have been a kind of roofing over the southernmost part of the courtyard. A concentration of shells and crab fragments near smears of ashes on the ground indicate everyday activities of the inhabitants in this part of the enclosure.

A stone structure adjoining the southern enclosure wall was excavated. It consisted of small and irregular units. The westernmost one, S.1, was rather rectangular, the walls being added to the standing semicircular enclosure. They were well made, one-stone wide, from 0.14 m to 0.18 m. The east wall was 3.30 m long, the north wall 3.16 m, the west one 2.50 m. Their foundation level was not reached; it is deeper than that of any other unit here. Pottery came from the latest occupational level in this room. The other two cubicles were formed by poorly constructed walls, built of small and irregular pieces of beachrock. S.2 was triangular and S.3 subrectangular. The dimensions of the former could not be established, whereas the latter had walls 1.80 m (west) by 1.45 m (south) and 2.11 m (east) and 0.74 m (north). A doorway in the north wall was 0.46 m wide. Both loci yielded pottery evidence.

Three phases of occupation were distinguished for this structure. The first phase consisted of unit S.1 added to the standing enclosure wall. The southernmost part of the curved wall disappeared in the second phase and unit S.3 was constructed about 3 m east of S.1, close to the standing eastern part of the curved wall. In the third phase a wall joined the east wall of S.1 to the southwestern corner of S.3, forming

the triangular space of S.2 in between. It could have been a small open space.

NORTHERN COURTYARD

The northern courtyard is a large open space approximately 21 m N–S and 23 m E–W. Trenches were dug on the central sections of the east and west enclosure walls. The upper layer in both trenches yielded pottery collected against the walls inside the enclosure (see above). It was not a rubbish dump (there was no other trash there), perhaps rather a place for storing recyclable material.

Trench III.N dug in the northeastern corner of the northern courtyard revealed darker and softer traces interpreted as mud-brick structures of the same kind as noted in the northwestern part of the complex (see above). There is insufficient evidence for now to determine whether the two walls were constructed in the same period or not.

A concentration of stones against the north wall of House A (see below) could suggest that the house had been bigger once.

HOUSE A IN UNIT III

Excavations concentrated on the stone building inside the enclosure. The north, west and south walls were preserved at the foundation level (maximum height approximately 0.20–0.23 m). The east one was dismantled completely and is marked only by the floor extension cleared about 8 cm under the surface. The standing walls were from 0.35 m to 0.43 m thick. They were constructed of flat slabs of beachrock and mud bricks. The partition wall between rooms was of beachrock, too.

Room III.A.1 measured 3.74 m E–W by 1.91 m N–S [*Figs 8, 9*]. The walls were

of big mud bricks, nearly square in shape (0.43–0.46 m to the side). Traces of white plaster were observed. A beachrock wall was added to the mud-brick wall on the northern side of the north wall and the partition wall, as well as on the southern side of the south wall. The entrance, 0.89 m wide, was in the south wall. The floor was made of white mortar and the walls were built on top of this base. Rainwater damage was noted in the central part of the room, close to the entrance. Another white mortar floor was observed underneath.

Room III.A.2 was entered from the previous room through a doorway,

0.70 m wide, in the middle of the south wall [Figs 8, 9]. The dimensions of this room were 3.79 m E–W by 2.05 m N–S. The walls were of mud brick and covered with fine white plaster. They were 0.46–0.47 m thick. The floor was made of white mortar. The only installation associated with this first phase was a threshold between the rooms, made of plastered beachrock and mud brick.

The stratigraphy indicated that the stone walls were later than the mud-brick walls. The latter could be distinguished only if they had been limewashed (leaving a white trace) or in specific conditions, in the early morning on sunny days when



Fig. 8. Units III.A.1 (in the background) and III.A.2, early stages of exploration; view from the north (Photo E. Miechowicz)

the light permitted their distinction from the surrounding fill.

In 2013, three trenches were explored: south of House A, to the southeast and to the west. A narrow, triangular space to the south of the House A revealed a threshold and a small part of a mortar-

hardened courtyard [Fig. 9]. Its level corresponded with the bottom layer of the mortar floor in room III.A.1, and was situated 12 cm deeper than the newest mortar floor layer in room III.A.1. It may have been a hardened courtyard level and it may have been partly roofed, consi-

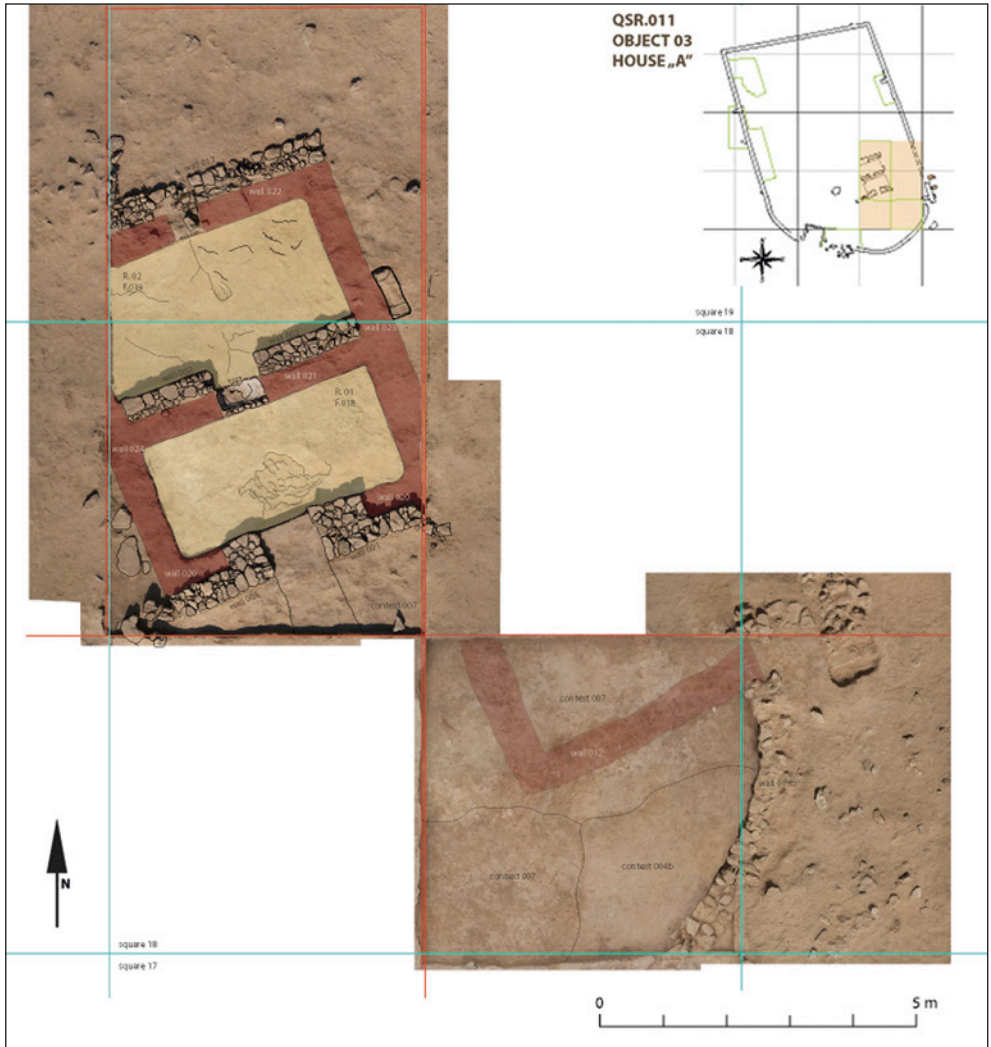


Fig. 9. Rooms III.A.1 and III.A.2
(Drawing J. Rądkowska)

dering that it was more eroded the farther away it was from the house.

A mud-brick wall oriented E–W including a wall corner and two perpendicular walls were identified in the trench to the southwest of the house. All were about 0.50 m wide. The structure was either a separate house or, more likely, the southernmost part of House A. The space between these walls, designated as **Room III.A.6**, was a small square chamber, nearly 1.70 m by 1.70 m [Fig. 10; see Fig. 3]. The walls were not plastered and instead of a mortar floor there was a layer of gravel with marine deposits, small pebbles and sand, most probably the latest occupational level in this room, yielding also some potsherds. The level of marine accumulation was observed to extend also to the west of the room and might correspond with the badly

preserved mortar level south of the entrance to House A.

Another room to the east, **III.A.7**, was distinguished based only on a color difference of the soil indicating the presence of a partition wall. It would have been a small, rectangular room, possibly 1.30 m E–W by 1.70 m N–S. A few slabs found here may have constituted a kind of occupational level here.

In the area west of House A (rooms III.A.1 and III.A.2) two long dark traces observed on the surface were deemed to be the vestiges of mud-brick walls enclosing two more rooms of the house. **Room III.A.8**, to the south, was a small, rectangular room with a white mortar floor [Fig. 11]. The east and west walls were nearly completely destroyed. None of the walls bore traces of plaster. A thick layer of silt in the eastern and central



Fig. 10. Room III.A.6, view from the west
(Photo Ł. Miechowicz)

part of the room attested to standing water; embedded in this layer were some beachrock slabs and animal bones in the northeastern corner, mixed with the rubble of the destroyed east wall. The slabs formed two semicircular structures, poorly constructed, in the western part of the room. There was evidence of ashes inside them, suggesting their function as fireplaces or ovens. The fill over them was burnt. The structures were in use after the west wall of the room had collapsed. The assemblage collected from the layer on the mortar floor, around and under the

slabs included shells, fragments of two corroded iron nails, some potsherds and many fragments of a glass flask, completely crushed under one of the slabs.

Situated to the north of this room was unit III.A.9 [Fig. 11; see Fig. 3]. It was small and rectangular, 2.40 m N-S by 1.88 m E-W, furnished with a white mortar floor that was badly preserved, presumably due to water action. Water had also destroyed almost completely the easternmost part of the south wall. Traces of thin white plaster were recorded on the east wall, behind a stone structure S.035



Fig. 11. Rooms III.A.8 and III.A.9 in the foreground, III.A.1 and III.A.2 in the background, view from the west (Photo E. Miechowicz)

situated in the southeastern corner. This was a later addition.

The fill consisted of a thick layer of hard, compact, yellowish brown mud mixed with sand, probably from a fallen wall, mixed with wind-blown sand, washed by rainwater. The layer below, intensive brown in color, thicker in the southeastern corner, constituted the relics of a fallen wall. Under it there was a thin layer of grey ashes mixed with earth, spread on the mortar floor. Finds from this layer included a fragment of copper pin just under the structure in the corner, a roundcut and a potsherd.

Two phases of House A were distinguished. Initially, it was a spacious, multi-room house (at least eight rooms), built with mud brick. The main entrance,

at least 0.89 m wide, was situated in the south wall and led from a courtyard with a hardened surface. Stone pilasters flanked the doorway inside room III.A.1, perhaps buttressing the wall or for the purpose of narrowing the passage. The outer south wall of the building was about 0.43 m wide.

The main axis of the house consisted of the two rooms, III.A.1 and III.A.2, with whitewashed walls and floors of white mortar. The entrance in the south wall was closed with a mat or a piece of textile. The only installation associated with this first phase was the threshold of plastered beachrock and mud brick between the rooms. Two rooms were found to the west of this complex, III.A.8 and III.A.9, both small and rectangular, with plastered walls



Fig. 12. Room III.A.8, later phase, view from the west
(Photo Ł. Miechowicz)

and white mortar floors. At least four more rooms existed in this part of the house (unexcavated). On the other side was a room, III.A.6, small and square, without plaster on the walls and without a mortar floor. Two more rooms could have existed to the north of this room (unexcavated). The entrances to these rooms could not be located.

The only part of the house that survived in the later phase was the complex of rooms, III.A.1–III.A.2. Rooms on the eastern side (III.A.6–III.A.7) disappeared, whereas those on the western side were ruined and served as a dump (III.A.9) and maybe as a kind of kitchen. The mud-brick walls of the standing rooms were reinforced with parallel walls of stone. These walls were 0.35 m to 0.43 m wide and built up of flat slabs of beachrock to a uniform height of approximately 0.20–0.23 m. It is possible that these lower parts of walls were not much higher and their upper parts

were constructed of mud brick. Also the inner wall between III.A.1 and III.A.2 was doubled by a beachrock wall, constructed on the northern side of the mud-brick one, which made room III.A.2 much narrower. The east wall remained of mud brick and it is so eroded that no evidence of its reinforcement could be traced. The walls were whitewashed and the floors were made of white mortar. Pillars of beachrock were introduced in the entrance to narrow the passage.

The main entrance to House A was still situated in the south wall. This phase did not last for long as there is no evidence of floor repair in this period and the quality of lime mortar floor was excellent, especially in the northern room. Only a layer of earth mixed with lime inclusions was found inside the house and no small finds. The house was evidently cleaned of everything before being abandoned.

UNIT IV

Unit IV is a big complex of courtyards and a house [*Fig. 13*; see *Fig. 3*]. The courtyards were rectangular in shape and their function is still unclear. The enclosure walls were of different width and were constructed in different ways. The course of the walls was not traced in full.

Courtyard α is the smallest one, approximately 17 m E–W by 20.10 m N–S. It extended to the north and east of House A, enclosed by walls on these two sides. On the south there were the house walls. On the west it was open and connected with another courtyard (β), which was much bigger, subrectangular, approximately 30 m N–S to about 20 m E–W. It was situated west of House A, with

a gateway in the west enclosure wall leading from the outside. Another gate in the south wall may have led to the biggest courtyard γ .

Courtyard γ was subrectangular, approximately 80 m E–W by 50 m N–S. It was situated south of House A, with a gateway in the west enclosure wall leading from the outside. Two stone structures were situated in this courtyard: an unidentified structure close to House A and a circular structure in the center. There are no traces of other structures visible on the surface.

Courtyard δ lies east of courtyard α . It was approximately 30 m E–W in width, but the length was uncertain.

HOUSE A IN UNIT IV

Four chambers of the house in the central part of Unit IV were cleared. Other rooms probably extended to the north and west [Fig. 13]. The inner walls, and the west and east walls were approximately 0.50 m wide, built chiefly of mud brick and thickly plastered. The west wall was reinforced with a line of stones. The floors were of white mortar of good quality.

Room IV.A.1 in the northeastern corner [Figs 13, 14] measured 3.50 m E–W by 2.00 m N–S. Doorways in the north, south and west walls led to other rooms or outdoors (north of this room the area still remains unexcavated). Doorways were well-done, with plastered thresholds of stone. The floor was smoothly plastered and white in color. To the south was **Room IV.A.2**, also rectangular in shape,

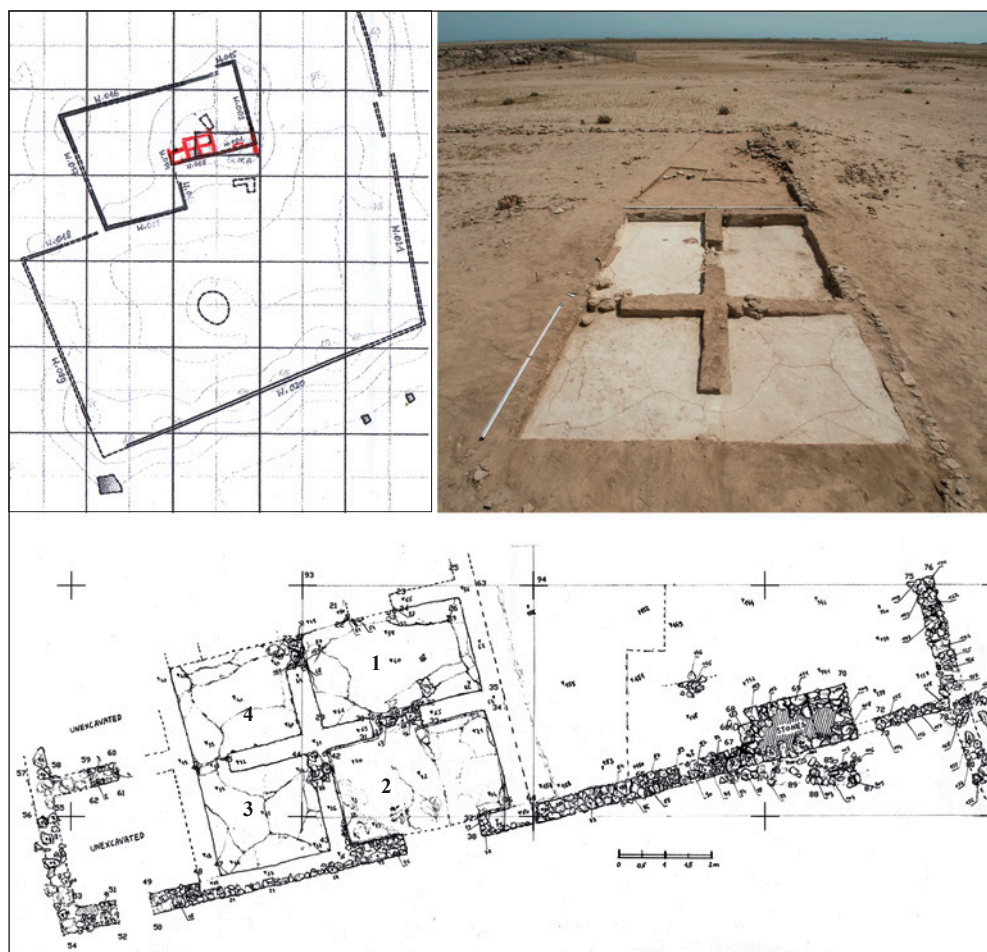


Fig. 13. Unit IV: top left, plan of the unit; top right, general view of the house from the west; bottom, plan of House A (Drawing M. Woźniak; plan R. Łopaciuk; photo Ł. Miechowicz)

3.50 m E–W by 2.50 m N–S. The east wall was thickly coated with white plaster in places. The floor was of white mortar as well. A large doorway (1.66 m wide) in the south wall led directly into courtyard γ . A thicker layer of mortar was observed on the walls, about 0.46 m long with nearly perpendicular ends; this recalled mud bricks of this length [Fig. 15], corresponding with similar traces observed on a wall in House A of Unit III.

West of IV.A.2 was **Room IV.A.3** [Fig. 13]. It was a small, rectangular room, 2.15 m N–S by 2.40 m E–W, with a white mortar floor, relatively smooth with only some cracking. The walls were of mud brick, the south outer wall being reinforced externally with beachrock. There

are no traces of plaster on the walls. A narrow doorway leading to the north pierced the western part of the inner E–W wall. **Room IV.A.4** was explored north of unit IV.A.3 [see Fig. 13]. It was a small room, 2.12 m N–S by 2.40 m E–W, with a smooth white mortar floor, showing some cracking. A doorway with stone threshold leading to room IV.A.1 was located in the east wall, close to the northeastern corner.

Excavations in courtyard α were concentrated on the corner area north of the east wall, delimited by walls on the east and south. A deposit of compact, brown, silty earth was traced here surrounded by some blocks of beachrock, which had once formed a massive



Fig. 14. Rooms IV.A.1–2
(Photo E. Miechowicz)



*Fig. 15. Room IV.A.2, traces of earthbrick on walls
(Photo Ł. Miechowicz)*



*Fig. 16. Beachrock structure ("mastaba")
(Photo Ł. Miechowicz)*

engaged pillar against the enclosure wall, between courtyards α and γ , situated close to the corner [Fig. 16]. It may have been

a kind of mastaba; more can be said about it when excavations of this feature are completed.

TRIAL PITS

Three trial pits (2 m by 1 m) were excavated down to bedrock between Units III and IV to observe the stratigraphy between farms and to check for the existence of a passage. No occupational

levels were observed, even near the Unit III enclosure, except for a thin layer of compact earth, maybe associated with an occupational level in the space between farms.

CONCLUSIONS

Excavation of Units III and IV as well as the geophysical survey have brought interesting results regarding a late pre-Islamic and early Islamic period settlement with well-built architecture from Kuwait and more generally from the Arabic Gulf. It was not the first discovery of the type in Failaka, but the subject still needs to be studied. Firstly, the houses were bigger and their plans were more complicated than expected to date.

The following observations concerning social life in the settlement can be made following two seasons of work:

1. Qusur was the only settlement situated in the center of Failaka Island. Ancient and Islamic settlements have been located along the seashore.
2. It seems that sheltering from the sun and wind was a priority for the inhabitants. Winds from the south were grievous, and so were winds from the north. Gateways, where present, were always

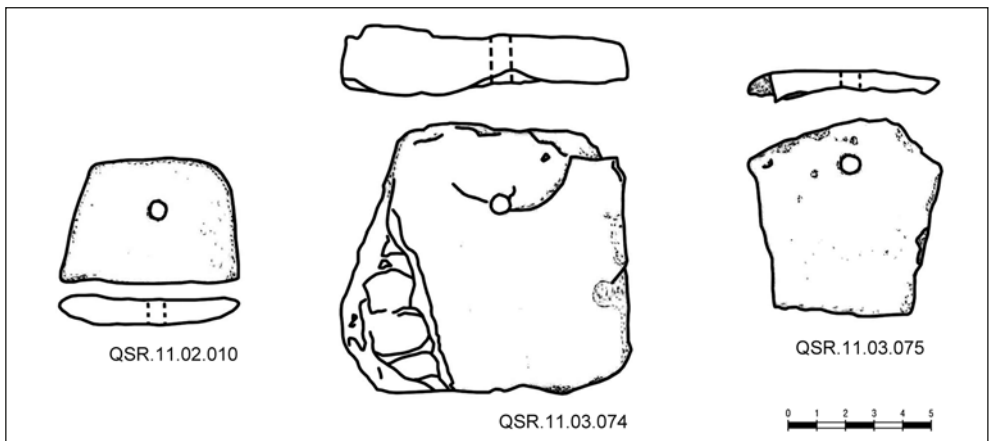


Fig. 17. Net sinkers found in Unit III
(Drawing M. Žurek)

in the east (Units I–III) or west walls (Unit IV).

3. Little pottery was found in the courtyards and very few in House A, Unit III. No tools or pottery were found inside the excavated houses. These seem to have been cleaned of everything before being abandoned.
4. Almost no cooking pottery (only two sherds) was discovered in Unit III. A kitchen may have been situated somewhere at a distance from the main house in the unit.
5. Pottery was often repaired; fragments of vessels with small holes close to old breaks were recorded. There may have been a problem with the supply of new vessels. The presence of reused fragments of pottery (roundcuts and net sinkers) shows that the inhabitants of Qusur recycled whatever they could [Fig. 17]. Potsherds unearthed along the enclosure in the northern courtyard of Unit III could have been collected for recycling.
6. No lamps or plates were found; the repertoire consisted of amphoras, bottles and bowls.
7. Houses were built in different ways and the mortar and plaster were different as well. Families may have constructed their houses by themselves.

Dr. Magdalena Żurek

Institute of Archaeology, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University

01-938 Warsaw, Poland, ul. Wóycickiego 1/3

m.zurek@uksw.edu.pl