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New French-Kuwaiti research in the Hellenistic fortress of Failaka-Ikaros

Mathilde Gelin

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of the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East

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NEW FRENCH-KUWAITI RESEARCH IN THE HELLENISTIC FORTRESS OF FAÏLAKA-IKAROS

MATHILDE GELIN¹

ABSTRACT

The Hellenistic fortress of Ikaros faces the Arabian Gulf, standing on the south beach of Faïlaka Island (Kuwait). It was built by Antiochos the First at the beginning of the 3rd century BC. The fortress has known several occupation periods, the most important for 150 years in Hellenistic times. Special care was devoted to the fortifications, with many reinforcements, additions and extension. The work of the new French-Kuwaiti expedition (French Institute for the Near East – Department of Antiquities and Museums of Kuwait) is concentrated first on study of the fortifications, in order to understand the chronology of the fortress. Next, this work is linked with the study of the internal circulation, to understand if both are interrelated. Finally, a program of preservation and presentation of the heritage should be put in place. The new research reveals that the chronology of the fortifications is much more complicated than what it first seemed: the discovery of occupations located outside the fortress and linked with the first period poses new questions, similarly as does the chronology between the different constructions of the defense system.

Facing the Arabian-Persian Gulf between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, located just south of Shatt el Arab (Fig. 1), Faïlaka Island² was situated on the axis of trade routes which, combined with its reserve of fresh water, made it an attractive point for human occupation. The island was occupied for a long time, since the Dilmun period (Bronze Age) until medieval times, as shown by the thirteen archaeological sites discovered (Fig. 2).

The previous archaeological expeditions of the fortress

Since 1958, international expeditions have excavated Faïlaka Island, in collaboration with the Kuwaiti government. At present, archaeological research is being performed under the authority of the National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters from Kuwait (NCCAL), in collaboration with the Department of Antiquities and Museums (DAM), who invest greatly in gathering knowledge about the history of the country.

1 French National Centre for the Scientific Research – CNRS, French Institute for the Near East – IFPO, Damascus-Beirut.

2 The island is located 20 km to the north-east of Kuwait City and covers an area of 12 x 7 km, with a maximal altitude of 7-8 m above the medium high sea level.

The Hellenistic fortress was discovered and excavated mainly by a Danish expedition from Aarhus University, who worked there from 1958 until 1963, and by a French expedition from CNRS in Lyon from 1985 to 2009 (with several years of interruption due to the Iraqi war).³ These expeditions mostly worked on the east half of the fortress and revealed the published results.

*The French-Kuwaiti expedition*⁴

In 2011, a French-Kuwaiti expedition was created⁵ by the Kuwaiti NCCAL, the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) and the French Institute for the Near-East (Damascus-Beirut) (IFPO). The scientific work is directed by Sh. A. H. Shehab, director of DAM, and M. Gelin, researcher at CNRS-IFPO.

Our new expedition focuses on the study of the sites of Al Qusur, in the centre of the island, and the Hellenistic fortress, on the south-west beach.

*Al Qusur*⁶

The site of Al Qusur, attributed to the 7th-9th centuries,⁷ is composed of two churches and many widespread habitations. Our first objective is to make a precise map of the remains that will be used as a basis for our future research. The central area of the settlement, where our work is carried out, has already been noted down and drawn (by J. Humbert); it represents the most concentrated occupation, probably a monastery (Fig. 3). This mapping is going to be continued until we cover the entire surface of the site, which extends about 2 km in length.

THE HISTORY OF THE HELLENISTIC FORTRESS

The Hellenistic fortress of Faïlaka-Ikaros⁸ was built on the beach, in the south-west part of the island. An ancient well, situated in the south part of the establishment, and the difficulties of directly accessing this area from the sea, thus acting as natural protection, had probably indicated the position for the construction of the fortress.

Following the previous Danish and French expeditions, the main historical phases were established:⁹

1st phase: the foundation of the fortress, around 300 BC, is attributed to Antiochos the First. He is said to have been sent by his father Seleucos to establish a control point

3 Some other missions (American in 1974-1975, and Greek in 2007 and 2009) also excavated the area, very occasionally and did not publish the results.

4 We sincerely thank all our supervision authorities, Kuwaiti and French, who made this new expedition possible. Our mission is also supported by the French Embassy in Kuwait and receives a great help from the Total Foundation and Total Kuwait.

5 Convention signed between Mr Ali Al Youha, Secretary General of the NCCAL, and Mr François Burgat, director of IFPO.

6 Study conducted under the responsibility of J. Bonnéric.

7 For the dating, see Bonnéric *in press*.

8 Square of 60 meters side.

of the trading maritime routes in the Gulf and to defend the borders of the Seleucid Empire. A fortress was built for the garrison, with angle towers and a south gate (through a tower); on the northern rampart, only a small gate, interpreted as a postern, was opened. Inside the walls, two temples coexisted. Temple A has a typical Greek plan (*pronaos-naos* and two columns *in antis*), Greek decoration (*acroteria* with vegetal sculptures, ionic capitals), and a rectangular altar located several meters to the east (Fig. 4). However, the bases of the columns are in Achaemenian style. Temple B stood 3.50 m south of temple A, with a square plan interpreted as an oriental one; here also the Danish excavators found *acroteria*, without decoration. A circular altar was used for cult purposes. Several masonries are interpreted as belonging to this 1st phase. The material found consisted mainly of ceramics and coins, all Greek models, and some inscriptions in the Greek language.¹⁰

2nd phase: it seems that the Greeks and the 'local' people encountered difficulties¹¹ which led to the fortress being taken over by the local inhabitants, for a period estimated by the excavators to have lasted about forty years. This could correspond with the decline inside the Seleucid Empire, especially on its oriental borders. Inside the fortress, some more constructions appeared; the temples seemed to have remained in use. The fortifications were reinforced as supplementary towers were built to the west and east sides, and walls along the curtains; the north gate was reinforced. The discovered material shows some imitations of Greek material, such as 'Arab' coins and ceramics.

3rd phase: Antiochos the Third is known to have restored Seleucid order in the empire, reinvesting in the fortress and awarding it the status of colony. The establishment was then full of habitations and extended to the north, outside the walls, moving outward the previous northern line of the ramparts. The fortifications were again reinforced, including the northern part, and a big moat was dug around the area. Temple A was still functioning, and two new buildings were constructed on the south beach; the south gate was closed and it seems that the well was not in use anymore. During this period, which lasted about fifty years until *c.* 150 BC, a great Greek inscription was erected on the front wall of temple A.

After the abandonment of this area, limited occupation occurred in the fortress until the 1st century AD.

9 Two later phases have been described; however, we concentrate here on the main phases which directly concern the building of the fortress. The phases are summarized in Galliano 2005: 66-71, which is the most recent synthesis of the results of the excavations by the previous French expedition. See also: Callot 1987, Hannestad 1984 and Jeppensen 1989.

10 Part of this typical Greek material (coins and inscriptions) was found not in the fortress, but in Tell Khazneh. See: Salles 1986.

11 Problems mentioned in a later inscription found on the front wall of temple A.

THE WORK OF THE FRENCH-KUWAITI EXPEDITION¹²

The work environment and objectives

Working on a site already partly excavated presents several problems, related to the previous excavations, but also to the remains themselves. Therefore, our research faces various difficulties:

- Lack of information: some of the archives of the previous expeditions are missing, having disappeared during the war in the 1990s, and the previous excavations have only been partly published;
- The previous soundings opened along the walls destroyed the stratigraphical links between the occupation layers and architectural remains in the most important locations that allow us to understand the different phases, making it very often impossible to link the constructions themselves, which is a great handicap in establishing a precise chronology (see Fig. 5);
- The site has been subjected to destruction on a number of occasions, mainly due to the fragility of the building materials (beach stone, mud bricks), to the weather (heavy rains during the winter season) and to previous excavations conducted deeper than the bases of the walls left without protection; it was also partly due to the previous excavators' low knowledge of the building materials, which sometimes led to removing mud brick courses above the stone foundations, as on the first rampart;¹³
- 'Restoration' works were conducted with white cement on all the uncovered masonries in the 1980s, which, in some cases, led to more intense destruction, or created new walls and, most of the time, hid the links between the masonries.

In spite or as a result of these difficulties, our expedition fixed its objectives on conducting scientific research, and preserving and presenting the heritage, as follows:

- The study of the fortifications, providing a lot of information for the dating and for gathering knowledge about the life of the fortress. In the first step, we excavate large surfaces, in order to reach intact stratigraphy (out of the previous soundings);
- The study of the internal circulation and its links with the ramparts (gates);
- The implementation of a program to preserve and to present the site to the general public;
- The creation of an on-line site, booklet, etc.

The fortifications (Figs. 5, 6)

A trench has been opened between the first and the last rampart, north-west of the first gate (A1 sector), and has been prolonged inside the first fortress limits: this should provide us with information about all the occupations. Against the south face of the first

¹² As our expedition is currently (30/10/2012) on site for its second fieldwork campaign, some very recent results are given here; however, everything mentioned here is to be confirmed by forthcoming research.

¹³ Even very recently, mud bricks and accumulated earth were once again confused.

gate and rampart, previous excavations were cleaned and the soundings extended (A2 sector), including the main north-south street. Verification has also been conducted all over the fortifications around the fortress (C sectors).

North-west fortifications: so far, meaning during the second campaign of our expedition, we have removed a later and limited occupation, represented by the remains of two mud brick walls preserved to only half the thickness of a course, and reached the level of abandonment of the fortress.¹⁴ Underneath, some accumulation attests an occupation of the sector and, immediately below is a mass of pieces of mud bricks and hard earth, filling a huge antique excavation that was dug throughout the north-west corner of the fortress (as already established in 2007).¹⁵ The aim of this excavation was probably to remove the civil buildings which had been installed near the first rampart, as shown by vestiges of previous walls and by the same occupation that is still visible in the north-east corner of the fortress. It seems that the occupants wanted to establish a clear level of circulation in this north-west part of the fortress; the function of this platform will be, we hope, clarified with our future work.

Underneath this thick layer, there are others associated to the occupation of the space located between the two ramparts from the first and the last period of the construction of the fortress and, in the lower part, the defense system established to protect the first north gate.

Bent-axis walls and towers protecting the first north gate: the small northern first gate has been reinforced with the adjunction of two towers (one on each side) and by a bent-axis wall (chicane). After the previous excavations, it seemed that the towers predated the chicane. Our research north-east of the gate (C3 sector) (J.-M. Gelin 2012) showed that the chronology is more complicated, as the soil on which the east tower stands abuts against the chicane. However, it seems possible that the chicane itself has known at least two different phases, and our work conducted in the large A1 sector, upon reaching the lower levels, should give us the key to understanding this complex chronology.

Outside constructions: for the first time, outside constructions linked with the ancient phases of the fortress have been discovered. Already in 2009, we discovered an occupation outside the east rampart, linked with the north-east tower, represented by a large mud brick wall. Outside the first north rampart, a small square building made of mud bricks was uncovered, the function of which remains unknown. However, it seems to be linked with the remains of occupations; so far, we have been unable to establish if they are linked with the first rampart itself or even with a previous phase of occupation, maybe associated to the use of the well probably predating the Hellenistic fortress (J.-M. Gelin 2012; *in press*).

Inside constructions: at the southern extremity of the A1 trench, a sounding conducted against the first rampart inside the fortress shows that the first rampart was colonized as soon as its mud brick elevation was partly ruined and the levels inside the

14 By M. Gelin in 2011 and by Couturaud in 2012.

15 I was in charge of the study of the north fortifications during the previous French expedition, from 2007 until 2009.

fortress increased, as visible thanks to a wall running until the top of its worn elevation. The building to which it belongs can be linked with the civil occupation that occurred between the two northern ramparts, meaning at the time of the construction of the last north rampart supposedly dated to the third phase of the fortress. However, before the ruining of this elevation, the south face of the wall was already affected by walls laying against it: a storage room was discovered in 2011, containing many jars and potteries, destroyed by the collapse of its walls. This room took place after at least two reinforcements that were early built inside the fortress, along the rampart, and an occupation of the sector which saw an increase in the occupation layers against the fortress walls.

Dating: a ceramological study has revealed that the lower levels we excavated, associated to the first rampart, are dated from the 3rd century BC, and that the levels corresponding to the occupation occurred after the abandonment of the first north rampart, between the first and the last ramparts, belonging to the 2nd BC.¹⁶

After beginning our work, we follow the previous phasing established by the precedent expeditions for at least the first two periods, but only in its main outlines: the details of our work reveal that the chronology is much more complicated, as many 'sub-phases' have been established, which we must now specify. So far, the areas we have worked on belong to the later phase – only up to the 2nd century BC.

The reconstruction we propose, to be refined by forthcoming work, draws a fortress that knew different episodes all linked with the history of its fortifications.

- A well, located in the south part, predated the fortress; some occupations found outside the walls, immediately north of the establishment, are maybe linked to this previous period, or associated to the very first fortress.
- Soon after its construction, the first north rampart was reinforced on its inner face and, maybe, a wall was erected in front of the north gate as the first outside protection. A short time later, as the occupation increased, civil buildings leaned against its internal face. Two towers and a bent-axis wall reinforced the protection of the north gate, but the chronology between these two elements is still to be specified.
- After a while, occupation occurred also outside the north part of the fortress and against the north rampart. Then, a new rampart was built to protect these constructions.
- The storage room inside the fortress seems to have undergone destruction, maybe due to a violent episode, as the jars and other ceramics were abandoned just before the destruction of the room's walls. Next, walls belonging to another occupation were constructed above, including above the destructed elevation of the first rampart.
- After some time (not yet determined), in the west half of the north extension all the constructions located between the first and the last rampart were removed to install a strong platform, while the constructions added in the east part of the northern extension still continued to be in use. This platform is partly and occasionally

16 Forthcoming study.

destroyed, some occupation levels accumulated during a very short time before the abandonment of the fortress.

- Limited occupation occurred, then the place was completely abandoned.

The main street

The main street of the fortress is orientated north-south and runs from the first north gate. In its later state,¹⁷ it is straight, then about 17 m from the south rampart it turns and reaches the south gate by another route, not clearly visible. Our purpose is to understand what the street looked like in its first state, as well as how the internal circulation and access to the main buildings, such as the temples, the well and the ramparts, were organized.

We began to work on the north extremity of the street, but its links with the gate have been destroyed by previous excavations. However, it is noticeable that the street lost part of its width from the first to the last period (at least 1 m), the civil buildings taking up more space. To the north, at the last visible state, the axis was left without maintenance, and accumulations alternate sand and maybe sewer levels. To the south, the street is not visible today, but we began a study of the deeper visible constructions near the gate, which needs to be completed.

In the case of the secondary routes, it is impossible at this time to establish any more precise details, except for the last period where narrow alleys were leading to the different buildings.

This research is, as in the case of our entire expedition, linked to our forthcoming work.

The preservation and presentation program

In 2011, several preservation operations were implemented on walls threatened by destruction. We used the same materials as those from Antiquity (beach stone and earth), and intervened only to maintain these masonries in order to avoid their collapse.

In 2012, a preservation program for the site will be put in place, as an architect specializing in site preservation and a PhD student will work on this issue.¹⁸ This preservation should be followed by a presentation to the public, by restoring chosen parts of the fortress and installing circulation routes, with explanation inside the site itself. We are also discussing other possibilities with DAM.

In 2013, we hope to create an on-line site to present our research and results, and to publish a booklet on the subject.

CONCLUSION

The French-Kuwaiti archaeological expedition is in the phase of being set up; however, for the Hellenistic fortress we can base our research on strong foundations, related to the results of the previous expeditions and, most of all, to our two first campaigns,

¹⁷ The street has been partly cleared by the Danish expedition.

¹⁸ Dr M. Bendakir and M. Imbert, respectively.

which have already brought precise information on the chronology, the life and the functioning of the fortress. Of course, our research needs more time to bring proven results, but we hope that, after the first phase of five years (in 2015), we will be able to prepare a synthesis of these results.

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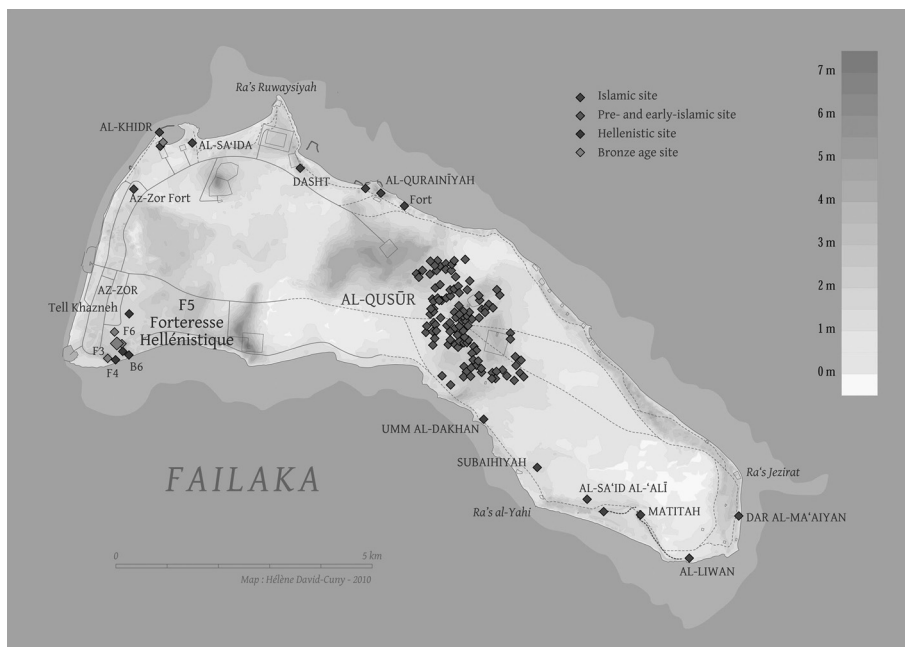


Fig. 2: Map of Failaka Island, with localization of the archaeological sites. Al Qusur in the center, the Hellenistic fortress on the south-west beach.

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Fig. 3: Map of the central part of Al Qusur in 2011.
(By J. Humbert © French-Kuwaiti archaeological expedition in Failaka)

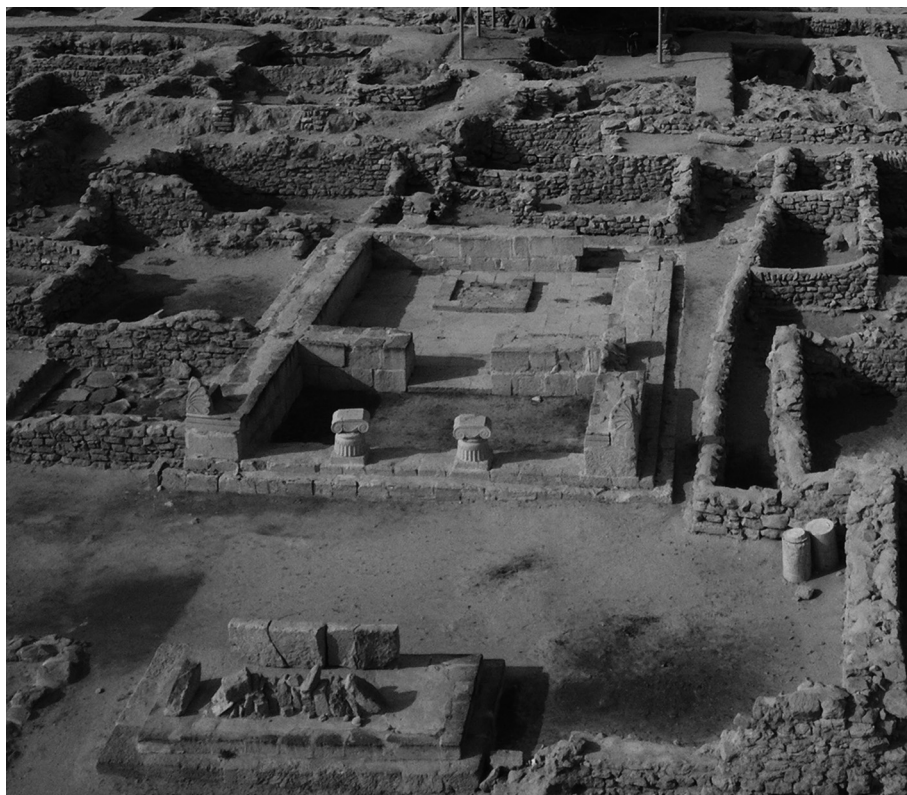


Fig. 4: Temple A, from the first phase. View to the west.
(Picture Y. Guichard © DAM Kuwait)



Fig. 5: The sector north of the gate of the first rampart. On the left of the corridor, A1 sector (stratigraphical trench between the first and the late ramparts); on the right of the corridor, C3 sector, inside the bent-axis walls. Note the deep soundings from the previous expeditions inside the corridor, all around the first north gate, inside the tower, and in all the C3 sector. Note also the recently cemented parts: the corridor and tower walls. View to the north.

(Picture Y. Guichard © DAM Kuwait)



Fig. 6: A2 sector, view to the east. On the left, the first rampart and its gate. The deep soundings are from the previous expeditions.

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