



Report on the 2017 Fieldwork in the Farasān Islands (Saudi-French mission in the Farasān Islands)

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REPORT ON THE 2017 FIELDWORK FARASÂN ISLANDS

FRENCH-SAUDI ARCHAEOLOGICAL MISSION



BY DR. S. MARION DE PROCÉ (ARSCAN, UMR 7041)
WITH P.-M. BLANC & B. RIBA, H. MOFAREH AND M. SABIE



INTRODUCTION

2017 marked the resuming of fieldwork activities of the French-Saudi Archaeological Mission. It is the start of a 5-year important programme, as stated in the agreement signed between the project director and the director general of SCTH in November 2017.

The stakes were numerous for this new campaign. On an administrative level, contacts have been reinforced between the project actors and the Saudi partners at SCTH, in Riyâdh, Jizân and Farasân, materialized by the signing of a new agreement.

On a scientific level, the goals were to realize an inventory of the archaeological material collected during previous campaign, to displace it to a adequate place of storage (in the Şabya museum for the time being), to complete the study and the documentation of the artefacts thanks to a database elaborated with FileMakerPro. At last, additional fieldwork was to be carried out in Wâdî Shâmî and Wâdî Maţar.

PRACTICAL ASPECTS

The mission took place between November 21st and December the 8th 2017. After formalities in Riyâdh, the team arrived in Jizân to be met with SCTH member H. Mofareh and M. Sabie. They arrived in Farasân, with M. Sabie, on the 23rd of November 2017, where SCTH official A. Aqîli met them. The team stayed in furnished appartments in the center of Farasân city (Nawras), with all the necessary confort. However, a outside courtyard with natural light, essential to the study of the material would be better for next year. SCTH members were accompanying the team at all times and we used SCTH vehicles throughout the mission.

OFFICIAL VISITS AND MEDIA COVERAGE

Prior to the beginning of the mission, on November 22nd 2017, the director met with SCTH Director of Archaeology, Dr. H. Abu-al-Hassan, and the head of research and excavations department, Dr. A. al-Zahrani, to discuss the scientific programme and to sign a new 5-year agreement for the exploration of the Farasan sites in Wâdî Shâmî and Wâdî Maţar.

The team was visited by SCTH regional director, M. R. Al-Kubaisi on December 5th 2017 on the site (Fig. 1). The latter assured the team of his support to the works of the team in Farasân. He was accompanied by local notables of the Jizân region : the director of the Şabya museum, M. H. al-Modare. The latter offered to welcome the archaeological artefacts from the excavations in the museum's stores.

The team has also had the privilege to meet with HRH the Prince of Jizân, Muḥammad Bin Nasser, thanks to the organisation of M. Rustom al-Kubaisi. It took place on December 6th in the Principate's offices and was the occasion to show the most beautiful objets to the prince and to present our work.

The signature of the new agreement was covered in the media in the Kingdom (<http://www.arabnews.com/node/1197846/saudi-arabia>). The visit to the Prince was also mentioned in several Saudi newspapers (<http://www.spa.gov.sa/1695334> ; okaz.com, alriyadh.com, elwatannews.com).



Fig. 1. Visit of SCTH Jizân regional Director M. R. Al-Kubaisi (© MIFA)

WORK ON THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL COLLECTIONS

In order to prepare the fieldwork, a database was created with Filemaker Pro©. It will allow centralizing all the data from the project in several tables: sites, iconography (pictures, drawings, maps), stratigraphical units, artefacts & ecofacts, pottery. The 2017 mission was the occasion to record all the data (coordinates and sites characteristics, drawings, pictures, objects and bags of material) collected since 2005, when the project started.

The team also proceeded to rebagging some artefacts in new bags and plastics containers. Some of the material was lost due to poor conservation conditions since 2014. The collection was therefore moved from Farasan to the Sabya museum. Some blocks collected from the sites, during the excavations of the temple WM2-C is in the private museum of SCTH consultant I. Miftah. It would be better if they were kept together with the rest of the artefacts from the excavations. The inventory was carried out on the same occasion.

A student from Paris 1 University, L. Fleury, started a pottery study of the Wadi Matar assemblage. Finally, in 2017, the documentation was resumed: photographs were taken of the artefacts by P.-M. Blanc and drawing were produced by B. Riba (figs. 3, 4, 5 & 6).



Fig. 2. Object photography in Şabya Museum, P.-M. Blanc (© MIFA)

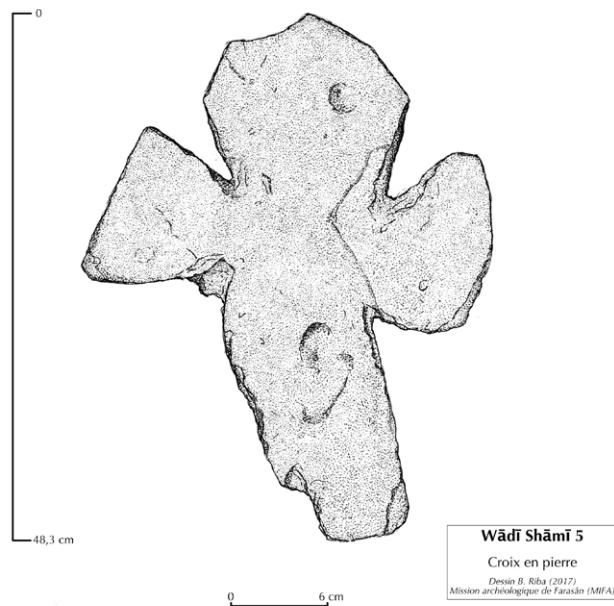


Fig. 3. Drawing of a stela from Wādī Shāmī 5 (B. Riba, © MIFA)

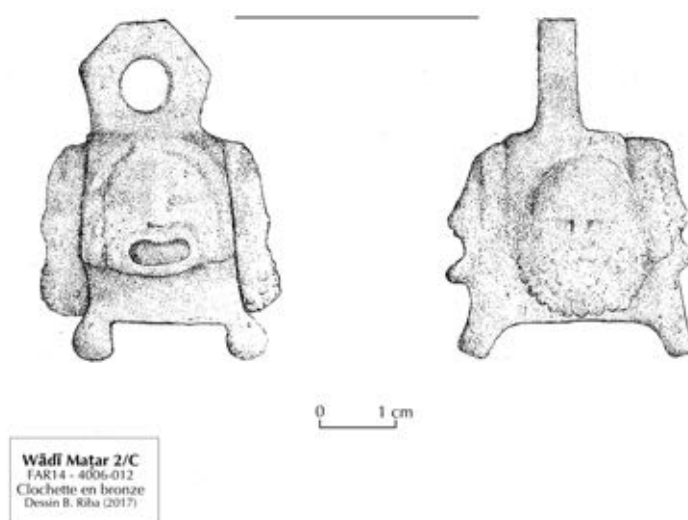


Fig. 4. Drawing of a metal bell from WM-2/C (B. Riba, © MIFA)



Fig. 5. Drawing of a an animal in metal, WM-2/A (B. Riba, © MIFA)

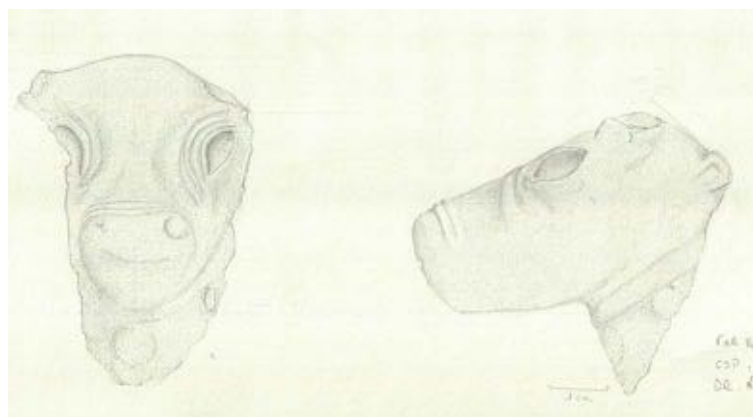


Fig. 6. Drawing of a bull's head in calcite, WM-2/C (B. Riba, © MIFA)

SURVEY IN WĀDĪ SHĀMĪ

The main goal of the survey was to identify a settlement associated with the Late Antique necropolis WS-5 as well as a necropolis associated with the early South Arabic settlement site WS-6.

Thanks to satellites images obtained by G. Davtian from NASA in 2014, a systematic survey was carried out in the region of sites WS-5 and WS-6. An area covering 2 km² was covered by foot from the two sites to the east as far as the coast (fig. 7 & 8). The perimeter represented two kilometers west-east and one kilometer north-south. The results were numerous. Apart from the goals that were set and attained - those being the discovery of two specific sites associated with WS-5 and WS-6, four new sites were recorded. The density of archaeological remains (about one every 200 m) in the surveyed area allows hoping that a lot more remain to be discovered in the Wādī Shāmī.

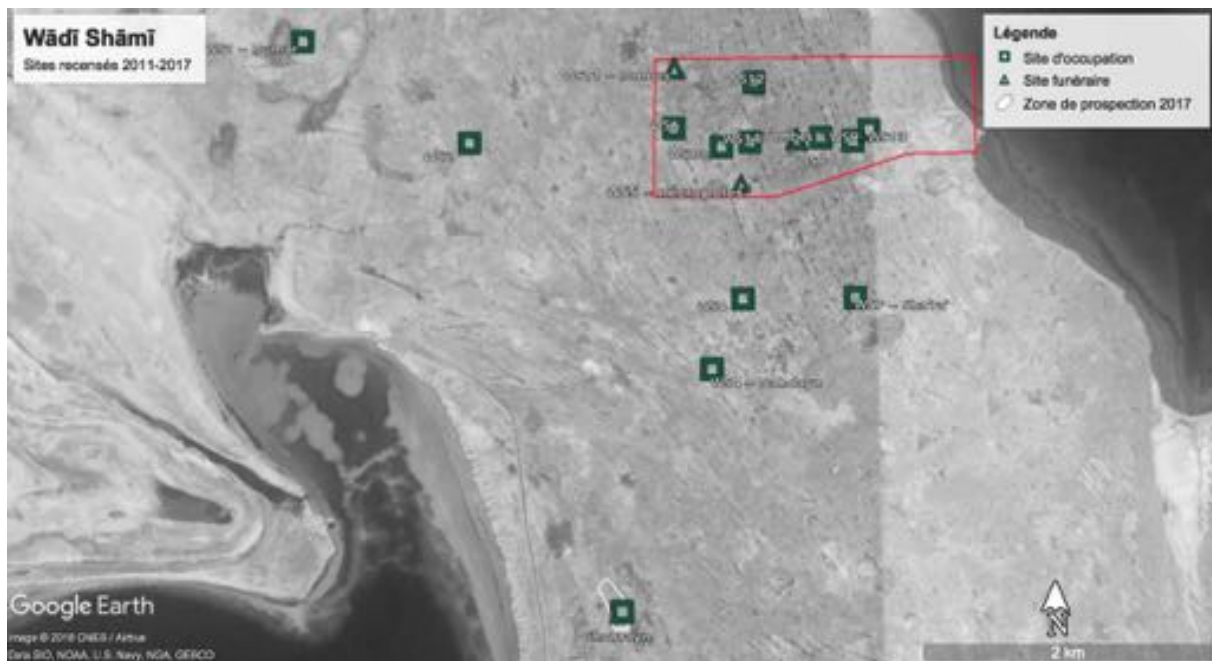


Fig. 7. Wādī Shāmī, sites recorded between 2011 & 2017 (© MIFA)

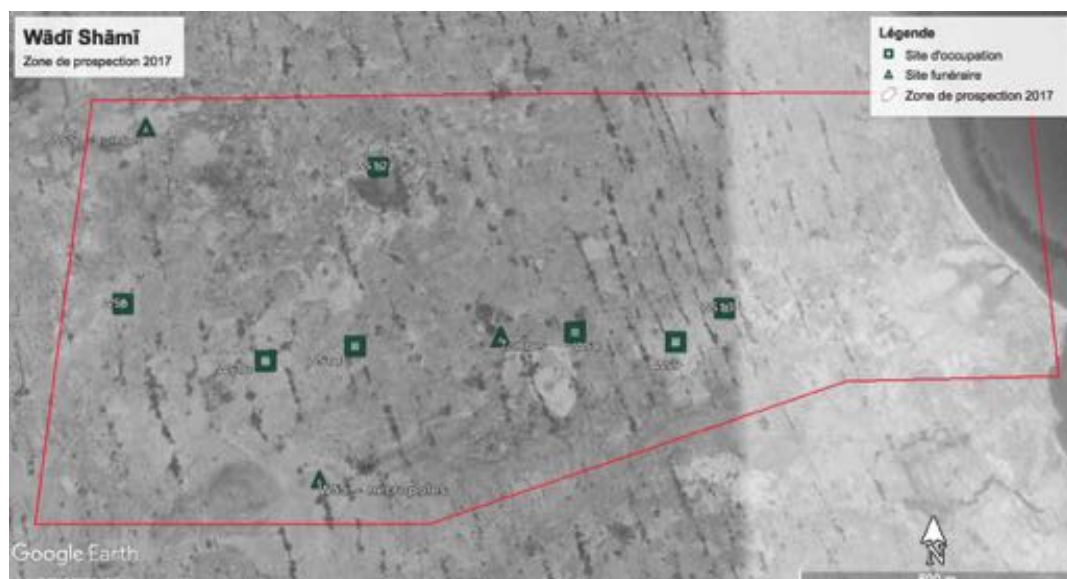


Fig. 8. Wādī Shāmī, survey area 2017 (© MIFA)

NEW VISIT OF WS-6 AND DISCOVERY OF NEW TOMBS (WS-1 1)

During a new visit on WS-6, ascribable to the ancient South Arabic phase (8th-6th c. BCE), additional observations were made, particularly on the large central building of the site. Inside this structure, two large thresholds allow entering the same narrow room (fig. 9). These have suffered from plundering, probably helped by metal detectors. The thresholds are often the target of plundering due to the fact that they can hide foundation deposits.



Fig. 9. WS-6, western threshold of the large building, to the south (© MIFA)

The survey was extended to the norther part of the site, where the landscape consists of large areas of coralline rocks, cracks in the floor create small ravine that are several meters deep (fig. 10). It yielded scattered tombs possibly associated to WS-6. They are small isolated tumuli, that seem unviolated at first glance (fig. 11). A specificity was noted on three of these: it bore a pottery vase neck on top of it (two of them being ancient South Arabic storage jars). The tombs measure 3 to 4 m in diameter. As we moved to the east, the team recorded additional examples. These are in less good condition and don't seem to have been bearing a pottery vase neck. Moreover, they are located close to shell middens. Hence, they could largely predate the other examples.

Immediately to the east of this concentration of prehistorical remains, a 4 meters large rectangular building had monolithic thresholds still visible. Architectural remodeling was observed: doors have been blocked and walls added. The pottery seen on the surface is reminiscent of the one of WS-6 and could therefore indicate a South Arabic date for this site. However, one cannot exclude that these are earlier structures reoccupied during the Ancient South Arabic period. Around this building, several small uncarved stones structures of 1 m meter



Fig. 10. Zone de roche corallienne affleurante (© MIFA)



Fig. 11. Isolated tombe (WS-11) north of WS-6 (© MIFA)

in diameter could be funerary monuments. To the south of the rectangular building, a little circular ensemble might also represent a finer funerary structure. It is a circle of standing stones planted in the floor, accessible through a door marked by two monolithic doorjambs and a stone ashlar threshold. In the centre of this circle, a dense group of uncarved rocks seems untouched (fig. 12).



Fig. 12. View from the south of the circular structure with a central tumulus (© MIFA)

WS-5 AND ITS ASSOCIATED SETTLEMENT (WS-10)

One of the objectives of the operations in the Wādī Shāmī was to locate the settlement associated with the necropolis WS-5, as WS-6 could not be contemporary judging from the surface material.

Thanks to the systematic surveys led in 2017, it has been located. It is one of the most important discoveries of this year.

The site is 200 m to the north-west of the necropolises (fig. 13). It covers an area of 0,76 ha, in the shape of a rounded rectangle measuring 90 m north-south and 75 m east-west. The visit allowed the



Fig. 13. Location of WS-10 (QuickBird, NASA, © MIFA).

observation of a densely built area. The constructions are mostly rectangular measuring 3 x 4 m and of which only one course remains. In some of them, a large storage jars neck show on the surface in the corner of a room. On the southern and western limits of the site, very ashy areas (fig. 14) have been noted, one can see charcoal and charred seeds and a large quantity of material such as a metal plaque (mirror?) (fig. 15). The surface material was collected. Other than the numerous pottery sherds, we also noted an important quantity of glass fragments, a pottery weight, metal fragments, decorated sherds and fragments of decorated incense-burners. The pottery contains local assemblages as well as imported glazed sherds. The type of material corroborates the hypothesis that this is a domestic settlement, and the comparison of this material with the one from WS-5 allows associated the two sites.



Fig. 14. WS-10, ashy areas in the southwestern limit of the site (© MIFA)



Fig. 15. WS-10, metal plaque found on the surface (© MIFA)

In a glade, close to a modern enclosure wall, a rectangular building in small blocks was recorded (fig. 17). The elevation is preserved up to a several courses. One of its angles has collapse. The date of the structure is most likely quite recent and doesn't seem to overlay an more ancient building. The inside space of this structures and of similar units is never composed of internal walls, backing the hypothesis that these are ephemeral or seasonal buildings for farmers or hunters. Not far from it, an undated dolmen is recorded (fig. 16).



Fig. 16. WS-12, rectangular building in the center and a dolmen close-by (© MIFA)

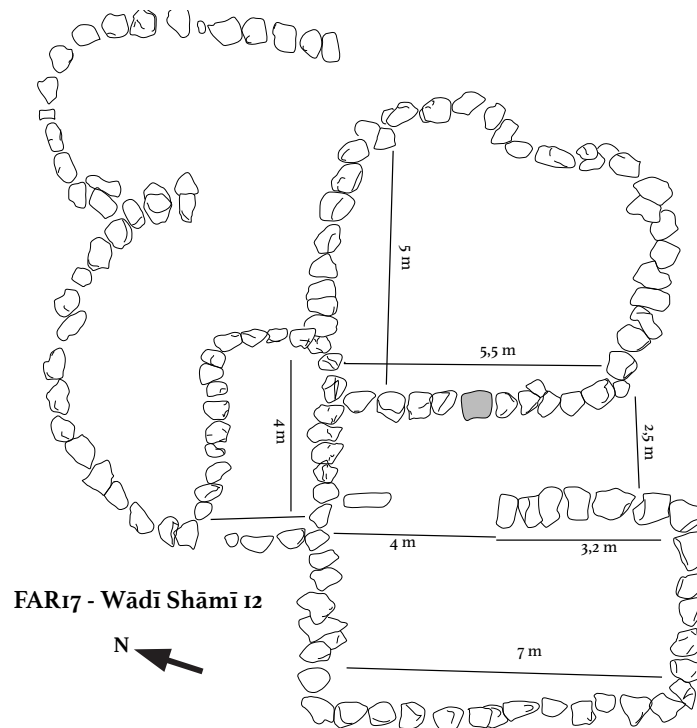


Fig. 17. Schematic plan of the structures, WS-12 (B. Riba, © MIFA)

To the south of the glade where WS-9 lays, another site was recorded. The architecture is similar to the one observed at WS-11 and WS-15, and therefore allows to propose a dating during recent prehistory. One can see circular units (5 to 6 m in diameter) isolated from one another, very little ceramic is visible on the surface: the rare sherds are very eroded, of a dark red to black colour (fig. 22). Large areas present dense shells concentrations (fig. 23).

Three types of buildings were observed:

type I

a main circular building on which rests one or several additional units of smaller size (fig. 18).

type II

a circular construction with an small area (20 to 30 cm in diameter) delimited by small blocks and resting on the internal facing of the outer wall (fig. 19). This area is slightly higher and is characterized by the presence of shells (fig. 21).

type III

a construction composed of three successive rectangular units, whose sizes diminishes and whose level rises one after the other. The preserved height is 1,50 m (fig. 20). The access between these units is marked by a threshold and two monolithic doorjambs placed in the middle of the wall.



Fig. 18. Type I : circular structure, a second unit (non-visible) is on the left side (© MIFA)



Fig. 19. Type II : simple circular unitunité, to the right, small area delimited by blocks (© MIFA)



Fig. 20. Type III : successive rectangular units (© MIFA)



Fig. 21. Close-up view of the small mounds of shells in the WS-13 structures (© MIFA)



Fig. 22. Pottery sherds observed on the surface of WS-13 (© MIFA)



Fig. 23. Concentration of shells, WS-13 (© MIFA)

WS-15, A NEW SITE FROM RECENT PREHISTORY

This site, discovered during the last campaign, is composed of a few circular structures built with dry masonry of uncarved blocks. They are isolated from one another. Quite dense scatters of pottery (ring bases, vertical lug handles) and of grey-blue gravel may indicate a perishable architecture, especially in the little depression marking the western limit of the site (fig. 24).



Fig. 24. WS-15, western limit of the site: scatter of grey-blue gravel (close up view on the right), fauna and pottery (© MIFA)



Fig. 25. WS-15, circular unit with a threshold and door socket (© MIFA)

A first unit (3,5 m in diameter) shows a threshold with a door socket (fig. 25). The two doorjambes are monolithic blocks. To the north, a circular structure has been recorded. The surface material consists of fine soil covered in dark red sand tempered pottery sherds, one can also observe shells, fragments of basalt grinders and obsidian flakes. This enclosure was called a *ḥawṭa* by the SCTH representative (fig. 26).

To the east, two standing stones mark the entrance of a small circular structure. In its centre, a small cluster of rocks is still visible. This could possibly be a tomb (fig. 27). A little more to the east, on the

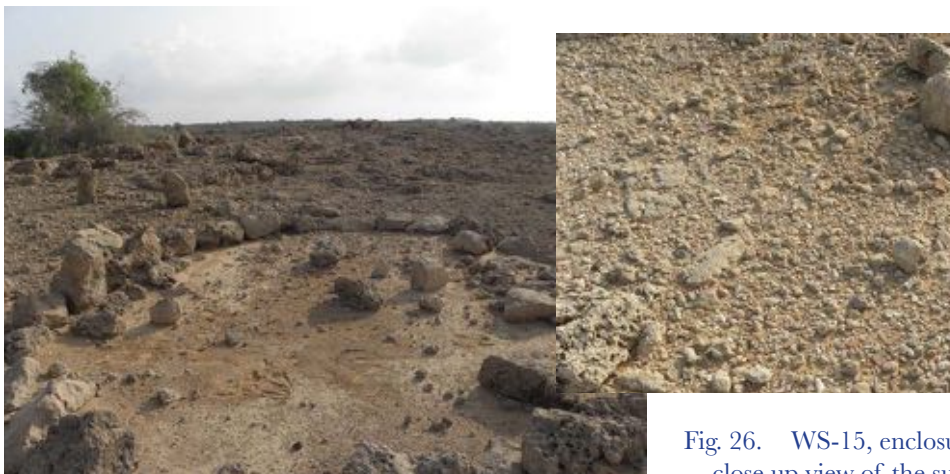


Fig. 26. WS-15, enclosure ('ḥawṭa') and close up view of the surface material (© MIFA)

site limits, a circle of standing stones has a diameter of 4 m. No threshold is visible there. In the center, a rocks cluster evokes the unit described above as well as the tombs recorded at WS-11.

To the west of the site, a building is erected on a slight relief. The main unit is built with uncarved blocks and rests on the natural rock, showing on the surface in some places. Neighbouring little units are built against the outer masonry to the south and to the east. In its immediate vicinity, small clusters of smaller blocks are reminiscent of little dolmens (fig. 28). This type of dolmen was also observed in WS-11. This area also yielded a little blade in copper alloy on the surface (fig. 29).

To the north of the two circles of stones, a rectangular construction (2 x 4 m)



Fig. 27. WS-15, circular construction with a threshold, cluster of rocks in the center, eastern limit of the site (© MIFA)



Fig. 28. WS-15, two examples of little structures built close to the circular structure on a small relief (© MIFA)

breaks with the recorded architecture, it could date from a later period, rather modern and probably associated with the modern crop enclosure found in the depression west of the site (visible in the background on figure 24, left). The elevation is preserved up to 1,50 m. An object in basalt was collected on the surface (fig. 30). Finally, to the north of the modern enclosure, a pottery scatter measuring 2,5 m in diameter was observed.



Fig. 29. Copper alloy blade on the surface (© MIFA)



Fig. 30. Basalt object (© MIFA)

NEW VISIT OF WS-8, FIRST SEEN IN 2011

This site had been surveyed briefly in 2011 by F. Villeneuve and S. Marion de Procé. A second visit allowed completing the surface material collection, description and sketching the site by B. Riba (fig. 31). The masonry is made of small rocks and appears to recover a more ancient structure. The place may have been reoccupied at a recent date, maybe by poachers or farmers according to our guides. The surface observation allowed discovering a coin, that is yet to be identified (fig. 32). Pottery and pozzolano is also observed.

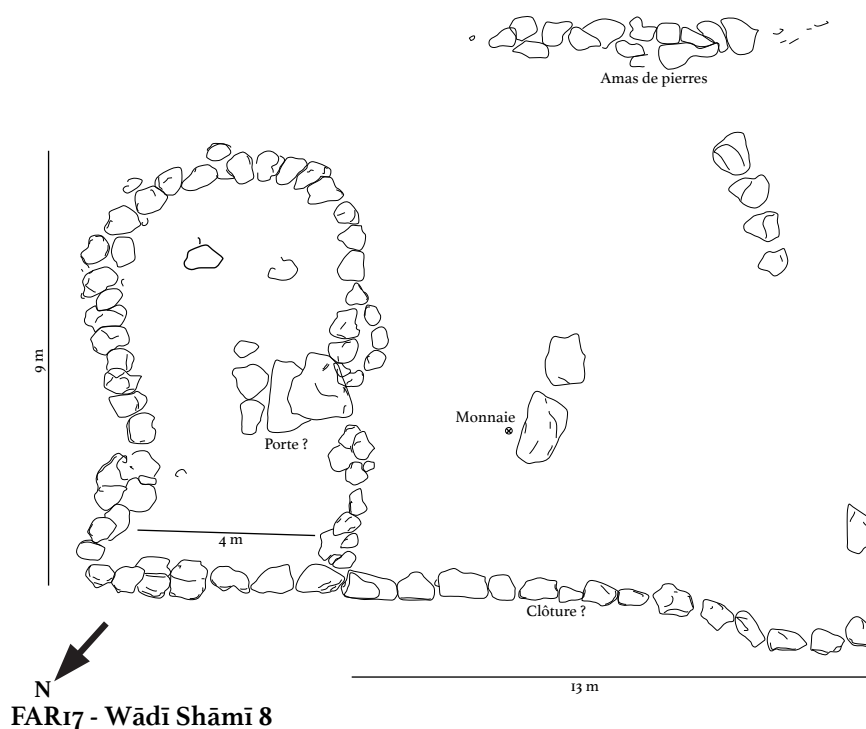


Fig. 31. Sketch of WS-8, 2017 by B. Riba (© MIFA)



Fig. 32. WS-8, coin found on the surface (© MIFA)

The systematic survey carried out in 2017 in the Wadi Shami revealed an unexpected density of sites dating from prehistory to the islamic period. In the coming campaigns, this surveys must be continued in order to realize the archaeological inventory of this largely unknown area. The systematic recording will be carried out by a geomatician, and completed, when deemed necessary, by kite photographs.

Apart from the surveys, the Saudi-French team also considers to excavate some tombs of the late antique necropolis WS-5, in the tumular area of the site (very disturbed by plunderers) as well as in the wider area where untouched tombs still remain. The coming campaigns will focus on establishing a top plan of WS-10, in order to confirm its association with the necropolis and its chronology.

SONDAGES IN THE WĀDĪ MATAR

The team members' time was mainly devoted to the study of the Wadi Matar, started in 2013. The objectives for 2017 were to clarify the plan of the temple and to carry out a test excavation on WM-2/B in order to assess the potential of a larger dig.

SONDAGE IN THE TEMPLE CELLA - WM-2/C

(S. MARION DE PROCÉ)

A little sondage 1,20 m x 0,90 m was opened in the cella of the temple, at the highest point of the artificial mound in which the building rests. It was located between the north-south walls (M02 and M05), in the narrow room at the eastern extremity of the temple (fig. 33).

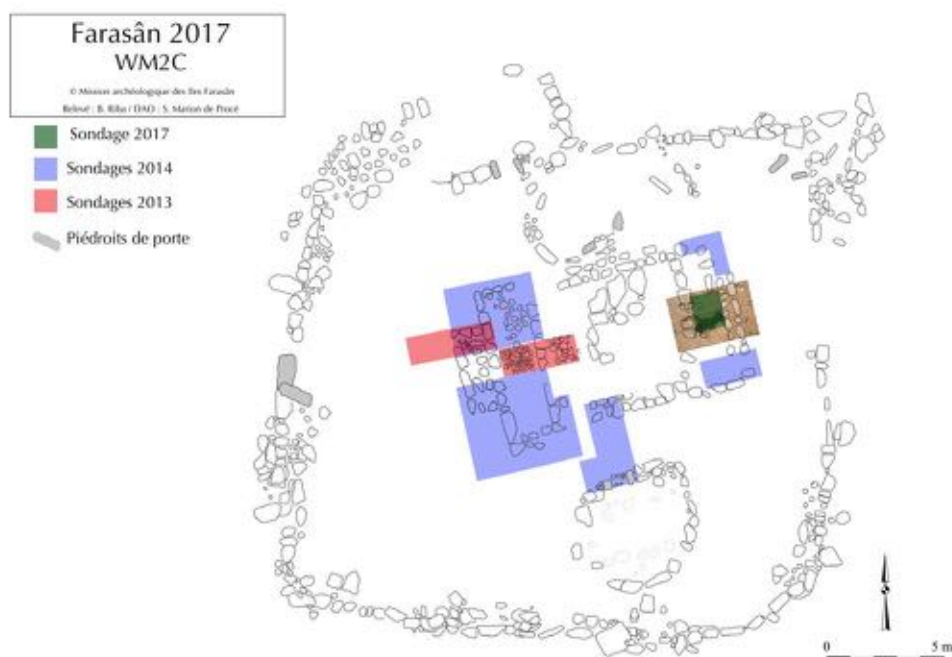


Fig. 33. WM-2/C, location of the sondages (© MIFA)

It was rapidly confirmed that the circulation levels had all disappeared, as thought since 2013. The sondage in 2017 revealed the presence of a little block apron abutting against the two walls. This apron was showing on the surface (fig. 34). The excavation allowed revealing the eastern facing of the partition wall M02 (fig. 35) as well as the western facing of wall M05 (fig. 36). A coarsed partition wall, M06, appeared on the southern side of the sondage (figs. 37 et 38). The apron also rested against

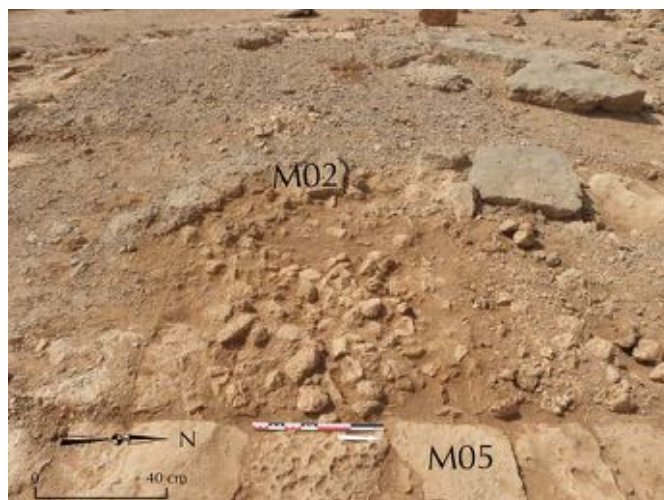


Fig. 34. WM-2/C, beginning of the excavation (© MIFA)



Fig. 35. WM-2/C, sondage 2017. Section A.
Eastern facing of wall M02 (© MIFA)



Fig. 36. WM-2/C, sondage 2017. Section C.
Western facing of wall M05 (© MIFA)



Fig. 37. WM-2/C, sondage 2017. Section D.
Northern facing of wall M06 (© MIFA)

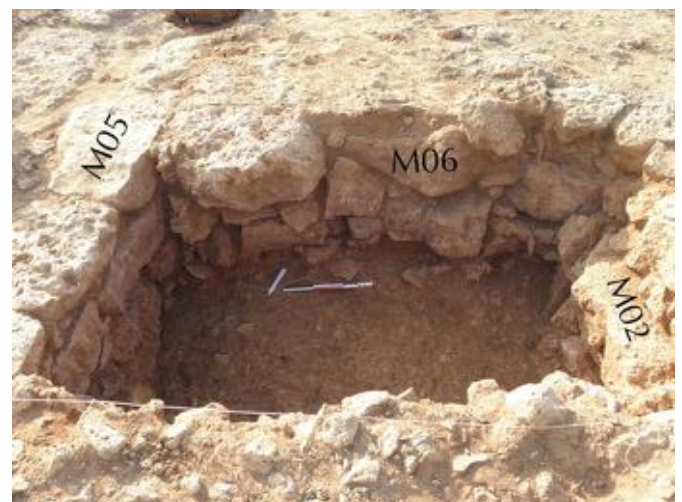


Fig. 38. WM-2/C, sondage 2017.
Section D at the end of the excavation (© MIFA)

it.. A surface cleaning to the north of the sondage allows thinking that the apron is contained by another partition wall to the north: one can see on figure 41 that it stops clearly. Two hypothesis can be proposed: the temple cella consists of three rooms (see fig. 43), or this apron materializes a central podium resting on the back wall of the temple. One can also imagine that, if the cella is triple, the central room would be slightly higher. The absence of blocks showing on the surface in line with M02 argues in favor of a podium as well as the very well marked location of the apron (in the middle of M05), but the alignment of blocks on the northern side on the other hand, argues in favor of a triple cella. Given the type of religious buildings known in the region, a dissymmetric cella is very unlikely, future excavation will hopefully confirm one hypothesis or the other.

Few material came out of this sounding and there is an important need for the study of the exhumed sherds in order to determine the original date of the apron and of the building. It seems that



Fig. 39. WM-2/C, sondage 2017. Coupe B. Radier comblant l'espace entre M05 et M02 (© MIFA)



Fig. 40. WM-2/C, sondage 2017. Coupe B, couche de terre que recouvre le radier (© MIFA)

the apron date from the same construction phase than walls M06 and M02. These two walls are chained whereas wall M05 was built prior to them both. M05 could date from the original building phase but could also be from the same construction phase. It appears logic to first build the outer walls before erecting the internal partition walls and structures such as the apron for a podium. Finally, the slope of the apron and the earth layer beneath it (see the sections fig. 42) probably results from a construction phase destined to erect walls M02 and M05. Once these walls were built, the workmen could fill the space with small blocks as the apron without having to level the earth.

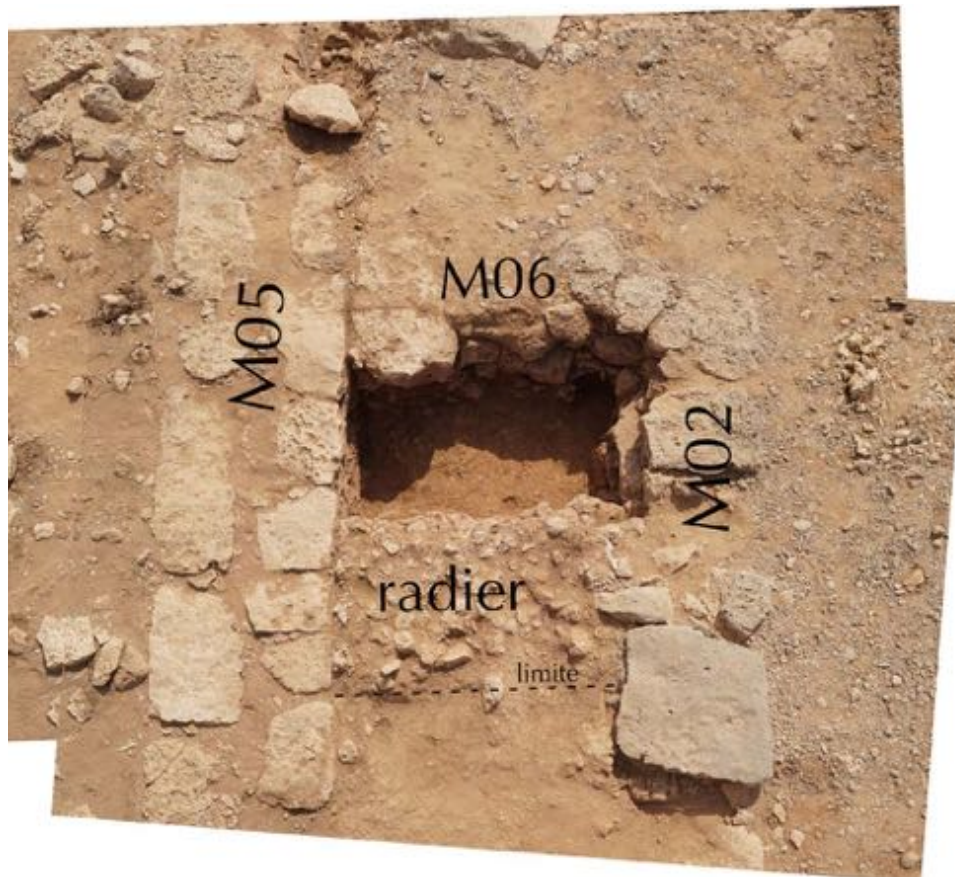


Fig. 41. WM-2/C, sondage 2017. Wall M06 and the apron abutt the back wall of the temple (M05). One can see the northern limit of the apron after a surface cleaning. (© MIFA)

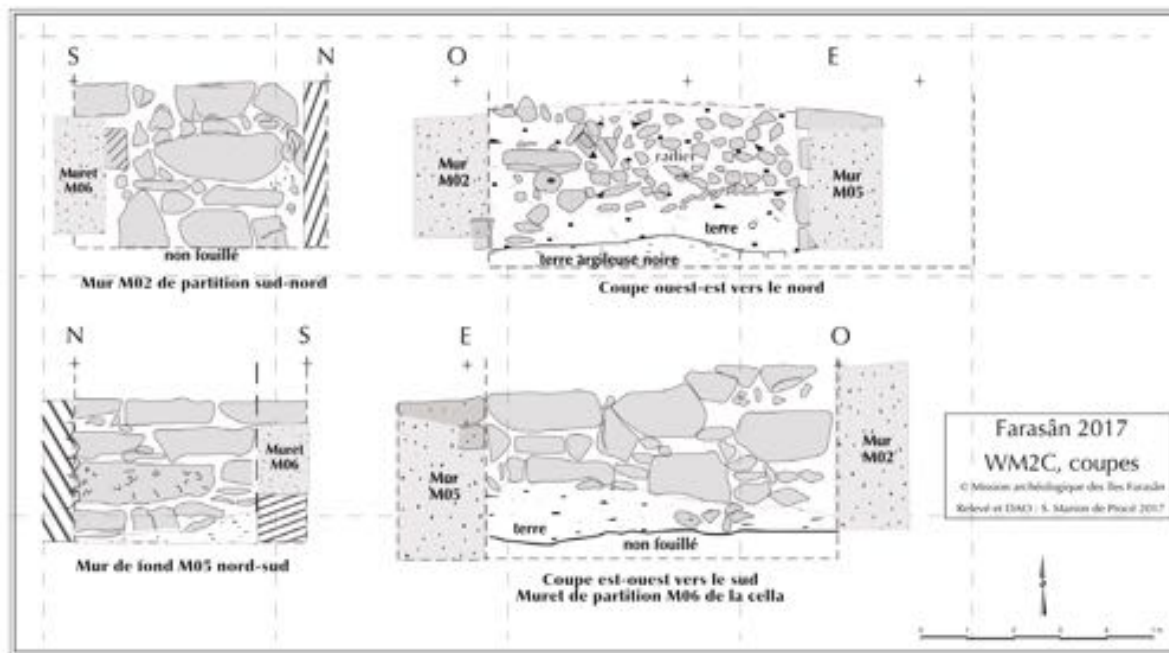


Fig. 42. WM-2/C, sondage 2017 (© MIFA)

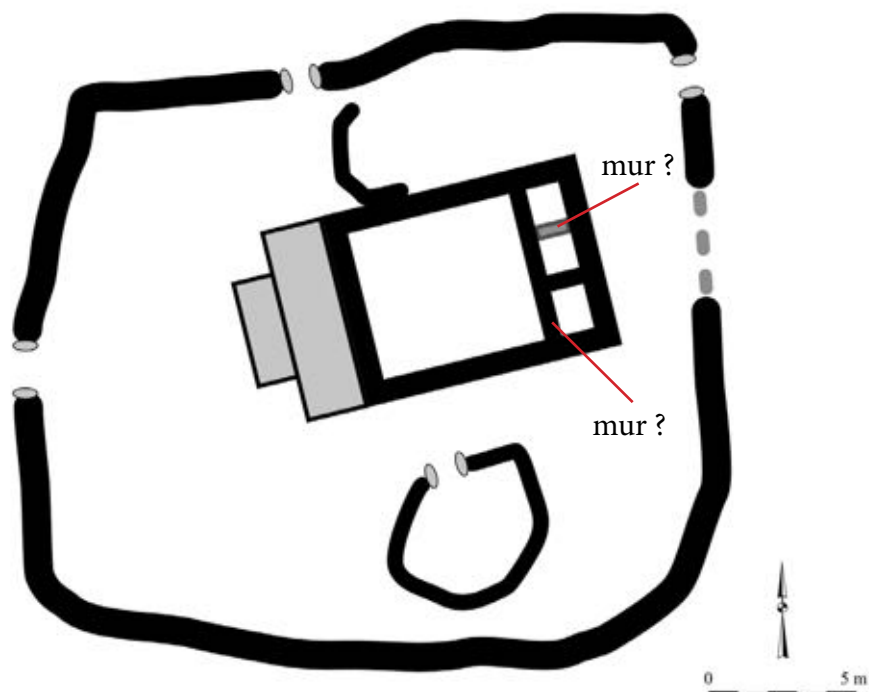


Fig. 43. WM-2/C. Schematic plan with hypothetic restitutions (© MIFA)

TEST EXCAVATION IN WADI MATAR-2/B (RESP. P-M. BLANC)

In the area of WM-2/B, a central location was selected for a test excavation. It was carried out under the responsibility of P-M. Blanc. M. Sabie (from SCTH - Şabya) participated in the excavation and was trained for archaeological activities (fig. 45).

The selected area extended in room (p), on both sides of a monumental threshold located at the southern end of the area (fig. 44). The doorjambs are still in place but they are slightly leaning out of place: the east doorjamb is leaning to the south and the west doorjamb is leaning to the north (fig. 46). This could be resulting from the fall of a lintel that would have crowned the doorjambs. The threshold, once cleared from fallen blocks (fig. 48 et 49), presented a width of almost two meters, like the one found in room (a), which has inscribed doorjambs. The sounding revealed preserved occupation levels (fig. 47) as well as pockets of ash of about 50 cm (fig. 50 and 51).



Fig. 44. Location of sounding 2017, room p/ (© MIFA)



Fig. 45. P-M. Blanc and M. Sabie during the excavation of WM-2/B (© MIFA)



Fig. 46. WM-2/B, view of the 2017 sounding at the beginning of the season (© MIFA)



Fig. 47. WM-2/B, sounding 2017, view of an occupation layer by the threshold (© MIFA)

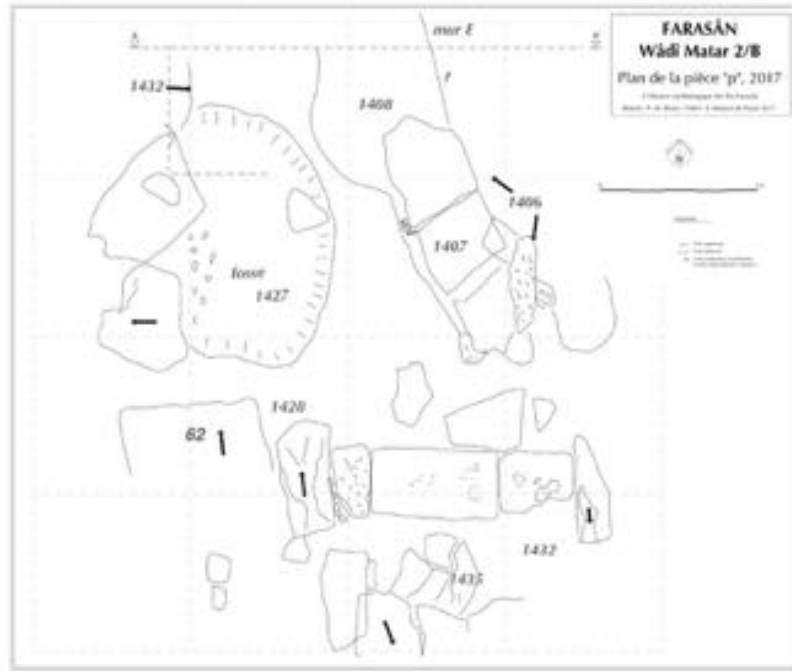


Fig. 51. WM-2/B, plan of sounding 2017

The remains of the structures and of the layers discovered after the surface cleaning leads to think that the area located north of the threshold must have been an open area, like a courtyard. Small blocks in the ground evoke the blocking of wooden posts (fig. 52), in order to cover the area with that we can imagine being pieces of cloth, leaves and branches or hay. This space is delimited to the east by a crude construction made of blocks laid on a collapse layer characterized by block 1407 (fig. 53), fallen and broken, which may be the door lintel.

Among this year's discoveries, we can mention a small object carved in bone (fig. 54), fines elements made of copper alloy as well as fragments of obsidian tools. The pottery has yet to be studied, it didn't seem to include diagnostic sherds or complete vessels. We can still note that the pottery paste was homogeneous, pink to orange coloured.



Fig. 52. WM-2/B, blocking stones on the surface of room (p) (© MIFA)

These discoveries (preservation of occupation layers and a 50-cm stratigraphy to the least) allows planing for more important excavations in the coming seasons as well as one can hope to exhume datable material like charcoal. The 2017 sounding (fig. 55) revealed the archaeological richness of the area and the attention that we shall pay to WM-2/B in the future, in order to clarify its chronology and function.



Fig. 53. WM-2/B, fallen block 1407, on which crude wall 1406 was built (© MIFA)



Fig. 54. WM-2/B, small bone carved object (© MIFA)



Fig. 55. WM-2/B, sounding 2017, aerial view at the end of the season(© MIFA)

PERSPECTIVES AND GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

The 2017 season has fully answered this year's questions. The Saudi-French team will therefore continue working in the Wâdî Maṭar 2 area for the excavation of WM-2/B, WM-2/B and WM-2/C. These areas will shed light on the type of site we are studying. There is a need to confirm or not the function of WM-2/A ("crafts area") and define that of WM-2/B as well as its chronology. The temple area is a lot more eroded and future soundings will try to determine the original building period.

The resuming of the works of the Saudi-French archaeological team in Farasan was productive on many levels. In terms of cooperation, this year marked a great enhancement thanks to the help and interest of members of the SCTH in Riyâdh, Ṣabya, Jazân and Farasân. On a scientific level, the archaeological wealth of the islands was confirmed by the surveys and excavations. The test excavations allow a quick assessment of the potential for future digs. This year's results are important and pave the way to more in-depth studies in the coming years, in order to address the three following regional historical problematics : 1/ Recent prehistory, transition into the South Arabic period; 2/ Antiquity, around the change of era and during the Roman presence; 3/ Late Antique periode. The selection of three areas from three different time periods is explained by the will to shed light on those key-questions and promise encouraging new results for the southern Red Sea.

TEAM

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