



Qumayrah Valley in Oman: new discoveries of ancient towers, copper trade and games

At the end of December, another season of archaeological fieldwork in Qumayrah Valley in Northern Oman came to a close. Archaeologists identified there another tower in a Bronze Age settlement, unearthed evidence of copper smelting and discovered a 4 thousand-year-old... game board!



The work is carried out by an Omani-Polish project "The development of settlement in the mountains of northern Oman in the Bronze and Iron Ages" headed jointly by Prof. Piotr Bieliński from the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw (PCMA UW) and Dr. Sultan al-Bakri, Director General of Antiquities at the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MHT) of the Sultanate of Oman. It investigates the development and forms of settlement in one of the least studied corners of Oman: the mountain valleys of the Northern Hajar range.

In the current season, settlements from the Umm an-Nar phase of the Bronze Age and Iron Age II situated near the village of Ayn Bani Saidah were the main focus of the team's work. – *Ayn Bani Saidah is strategically located at a junction of routes connecting Bat in the south, Buraimi and Al-Ayn in the north, and the sea coast near Sohar in the east. Along this route there are some major sites from the Umm an-Nar period. So we hoped that also our site will be in the same league,* – explains Prof. Bieliński.

Latest discoveries prove the archaeologists right. – *The settlement is exceptional for including at least four towers: three round ones and an angular one. One of the round towers had not been visible on the surface despite its large size of up to 20 m in diameter. It was only discovered during excavations,* – says Dr. Agnieszka Pieńkowska of the PCMA UW who is analyzing the Bronze Age remains within the project. – *The function of these prominent structures present at many Umm an-Nar sites still needs to be explained,* – she adds.

But new discoveries have also been made in other Bronze Age buildings. – *We finally found proof of copper working at the site, as well as some copper objects. This shows that our settlement participated in the lucrative copper trade for which Oman was famous at that time, with mentions of Omani copper present in the cuneiform texts from Mesopotamia,* – says Prof. Bieliński.

But the most unexpected discovery is not related directly to economy or subsistence. – *In one of the rooms we've found... a game-board!* – beams the project director. The board is made of stone and has marked fields and cup-holes. Games based on similar principles were played during the Bronze Age in many economic and cultural centers of that age. – *Such finds are rare, but examples are known from an area stretching from India, through Mesopotamia even to the Eastern Mediterranean. The most famous example of a game-board based on a similar principle is the one from the graves from Ur,* – explains the archaeologist.



Next year, the Omani-Polish team will continue work in the Qumayrah Valley, both in Ayn Bani Saidah and in Bilt, on the other end of the valley where further Umm an-Nar remains are located.

The research area, the Qumayrah micro-region, is a mountain valley stretching from Bilt in the north-east to Ayn Bani Saidah in the south-west. During initial investigations, conducted since 2015, the valley proved to be very rich in archaeological remains from at least five different archaeological periods. Archaeologists discovered that human settlement was present in Ayn Bani Saidah since the late Neolithic period (site QA2; about 4300–4000 BCE). And both in Ayn Bani Saidah and in Bilt, tombs and settlements from the Umm an-Nar period (sites QA 1, QA 3, and Bilt; approx. 2600–2000 BCE) can be admired. Moreover, the remains of an Iron Age II settlement (QA 21; c. 1100–600 BCE) sprawling around the stony hills near Ayn Bani Saidah have been found to be several times larger than initially thought. Archaeologists also documented the ruins of a Late Islamic-period village standing on top of earlier remains. – *This abundance of settlement traces proves that this valley was an important spot in Oman's prehistory*, – says Prof. Bieliński.

- The project “*The development of settlement in the mountains of northern Oman in the Bronze and Iron Ages*” is financed with a grant from the Polish National Science Centre (2018/30/M/H3/00635).
- Read about the Omani-Polish Archaeological Mission:
<https://pcma.uw.edu.pl/en/2019/02/07/qumayrah-ayn-2/>

Prof. Piotr Bieliński is an archaeologist specializing in the ancient Middle East. His research interests include the art and architecture of Mesopotamia, Syro-Palestine, and the Arabian Peninsula from the Chalcolithic period to the Iron Age. Since the 1980s, he has directed over a dozen Polish archaeological expeditions to the Middle East: in Iraq, Syria, Kuwait, the UAE, and Oman. Bieliński was the dean of the Faculty of History at the University of Warsaw (1999 to 2005) and the director of the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of the University of Warsaw (2005–2013). Since 2014 he has been the President of the Research Council of the PCMA UW.



Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw coordinates Polish archaeological research in the Eastern Mediterranean since 1959 (since 1990 under the present name). In recent years it broadened its scope of interest into the Arabian Peninsula and the Caucasus. Currently about 20 projects are ongoing in Egypt, Sudan, Cyprus, Lebanon, Kuwait, Oman, Armenia and Tunisia. The PCMA UW also runs Research Centres in Egypt, Sudan and Cyprus.

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Contact: Agnieszka Szymczak agnieszka.szymczak@uw.edu.pl, T (+48) 502 14 00 36