

The Day I found A Seal!

By Danielle Simpson



Danielle and colleagues on the dig

After the initial excitement of settling in Bahrain, I decided I needed to find some work. After weighing up my options, I approached the Museum to see if I could learn to curate exhibitions. I think something may have got lost in translation as I was actually put in the conservation laboratories.

After a month of restoring a 5,000 year old pot, (there wasn't a day that I didn't visualise the pot rolling off the table and smashing to the ground), I was

the Bahrain National Museum to excavate some more of the burial site at Saar. It is January, the wind is blowing and it is cold outside.

With no experience of archaeology, Dilmun history, or even Middle Eastern history of any kind, I listen with interest as it is explained that this burial site is 5000 years old. The team has been working on the site for a month and is making daily finds. Aktham, one of the archaeologists, is appointed to be my mentor and walks

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asked if I would like to go and work on an archaeological dig. I was delighted at the prospect, and so I found myself an entirely new work experience.

On arriving at the site a group of men are seated around a dilapidated table talking and laughing. In one corner a man kneels on the floor in front of a pot, cooking a meat dish over a flame from the small stove on the floor. I introduce myself and explain that the museum has sent me.

They are a group of archaeologists from Jordan working in collaboration with

me onto the site. He takes me to one of the larger graves, jumps in, and shows me how to scrape the top layer of sand very gently with the side of the trowel. He gets out and I get in. The space I am working in is about one metre wide, by about one and half long, and is as deep as I am tall. At least I am slightly sheltered from the wind.

Scraping is a painstaking process and must be done in small stages so that if and when bones are unearthed, they are not damaged or dislodged. I am allocated

a helper - a young lad of about 19 or 20, called Hassan, who is shy. I scrape the sand, put it in a bucket and as it fills pass it up him. Suddenly Aktham, who is observing my technique, kneels over the edge of the grave and points out what looks like darker brown sand. "That is the remains of bones. You need to work very carefully now, come out and I will show you".

We exchange places and with the point of the trowel he delicately scrapes the sand away from the darker places. As he works I see the shape of a leg bone materialize. What looked like darker sand is in fact pieces of bone. It occurs to me that this is the first time in 5000 years that anyone has discovered this body. Quite an overwhelming thought. Aktham works incredibly carefully and gradually the legs and torso appear. There is a sense of excitement as what appears to be the skeleton of a person materialises. It is lying on its side, in the foetus position. Apparently all the bodies were buried in this position - facing the same way.

When the skeleton is completely unearthed, photos are taken, the position is logged, and then with great care, the bones are removed as gently as possible in order not to break them too much. These bones are very soft and dark ochre in colour and most crumble upon contact. However they will be bagged and sent to the anthropologists' laboratory for analysis. Aktham reckons that this was the skeleton of a man, because of its size. He allows me back in the grave to continue scraping the sand.

As I scrape, my trowel hits something hard. "Pot, pot" says Hassan. I cautiously use the trowel to scrape the sand away from the surfaces of the pot, and to discover its shape. I feel really excited - it's like finding a prize in the lucky dip at the fair. The pot emerges slowly, wedged into

the impacted sand. It is the size of a mug, is terracotta in colour, and is perfect. It is not damaged and everyone congratulates me on finding it.

I feel so pleased with myself. The boys working around me offer to lift my bucket and can't believe that I will do this myself. I have however decided from the start that if they are to respect me, especially in a culture where perhaps it is unusual for a woman to be doing the physical labour in this way, and where women certainly do not usually work together with the men, I must work as hard as them, and be as unobtrusive as possible. Perhaps a ridiculous thought as I am the only woman on a site of nearly 50 men, most of them in their 20's. Only the archaeologists are older. Much older I assume.

I am astonished, as the days go by to learn that they are my age, and see that a lesson in skin care could be useful. I coat myself with high factor sunscreen on every exposed part from then on.

At 1pm everyone stops work. They call to me, "Break, break," and I explain that I must now go to collect my daughter from school. "You come back tomorrow?" some of the boys ask and I promise I will.

The following day it's still cold, very windy and threatening to rain. I wear old jeans, t-shirt, jumper, hoodie, fleece, scarf, fleecy beanie hat, gloves and walking

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boots. Everyone is in similar attire.

People smile and greet me as if I'm an old friend and Aktham shows me where I will be working. There is a real buzz on the dig today. Banter, chat, laughing, and the occasional shout mingle with the wind. The grave I am to work on is again nearly completed. I make my way into it and start to scrape away at the sand. The excavation site is large and only a small section has been completed by this team so far. About 15 graves are fully excavated, some are being worked on, and the rest of the site just looks like desert. It is criss-crossed with string dividing it up into a series of grids. This gives the team a way of working out where the parameters of the site they want to work on are and how much needs to be completed on a daily basis in order to finish in the time they are here.

This is a four month project and the Jordanian team needs to fly home on the 1st April. That seems a long time away. I am introduced to a different person today, Ali, who is going to help me. I am handed a trowel, a bucket, and a brush. I start to



work like yesterday on the ground of the grave. I am almost at the ground rock level. The sand becomes more stony. Almost at once I hear, "Break, break, come." I tell them I will be there in a minute and everyone makes their way to the tents. I want to finish the bit I'm working on. As I remove a layer of sand, a small stone object appears. I have no idea what it is. It looks like the top of a pepper pot - it's slightly oval on one side and flat on the other. It has a diameter of about 100 fils coin. It seems to have some markings on it. I'm not sure what I should do with it - no-one has explained to me what I am

they all say to me as I approach. I am confused. They shake hands with me and pat me on the back. "What have I done?" I am completely bemused. "You have found a seal," someone elaborates. I have no idea what this is. "Where did you find this?" Aktham asks me. And points to the stone object I had found earlier. "In the grave," I reply. "But where exactly?" "Um, here I think." And I get in the grave and point to where this object was lying. "This is a Dilmun Seal," he explains "You are the first person on the dig to have found one. It is so important to us as we are able to date the site from this. It is what every person working here hopes to find."

I am thrilled, though I feel like a charlatan as I had thought it was a pepper pot lid, and am still no wiser as to what a Dilmun Seal is. I do not share my embarrassing ignorance with the rest of the team as I wish to retain their respect, and don't want them to think that I'm a total idiot! I am aware of a palpable shift in feeling towards me - even this early on. The bewilderment that I, a woman, would be doing physical labour like the men, has shifted to respect for having successfully discovered something so important so early on.

I continued to work with the team for 3 more months, learnt a fair amount of Arabic, improved my knowledge of Dilmun history considerably and enjoyed one of the most interesting experiences I've had to date while living in Bahrain. It was all made possible through contacting the Bahrain Museum ■

To find out about working as a volunteer with the museum, contact: Bahrain National Museum tel. 17298701, and ask for Yousif Bumtaia, or go in and ask if you can work on an archaeological dig. Best months are November - March, when it is not too hot. You will need to persevere if you don't get a reply straight away - don't wait for someone to call you back.

looking for. I am wondering if I should just throw it in the bucket, but decide to be cautious, and I place it on the side of the grave above my head.

I climb out of the grave and walk back to the tent.

I am offered food - another delicious breakfast has been prepared in the tent. As we eat, the men ask me if I can speak Arabic. I say no and Aktham promises to teach me everyday. He starts by writing down in English "Salam alaykem, keif harlech, zaina, choukran, and ismi Danielle." The man who makes the tea teaches me "Shai". These are the useful words I am told I will need to begin with. Aktham tells me I have to learn these tonight and he will test me tomorrow. The pressure is on! Everyone on the dig makes me practise. I feel shy, and most of them speak only the smallest amount of English. But overall I am completely overwhelmed by how kind and generous the team is with me.

We finish our break and walk back to our graves. There is a group of men around mine. "Well done, well done,"