

EXCAVATIONS IN ALEXANDRIA IN 1991-1992

Grzegorz Majcherek

Archaeological research at Kom el-Dikka continued throughout the period from November 1991 until the end of June 1992.¹ Excavations were concentrated mainly in the eastern part of the site, in two separate areas: sector L (cisterns) and sector W₁N (habitation quarter) (Fig. 1).

CISTERNS

Excavations were continued along the eastern facade of the building, as required by the current restoration program. A large part of the cistern wall comprised between buttresses 1 and 2 was unearthed. The stratigraphic sequence recognized here is largely parallel to the one previously established in test pits located close to the buttresses. A very thick Late Roman stratum composed almost entirely of discarded amphorae sherds was found to be interlaced with layers of debris, ashes and bath refuse (fragments of bricks, *tubulatio*, etc.). At the level of 9.50-9.60 m, a portion of a stone pavement was cleared,

¹ The Polish-Egyptian Restoration and Archaeological Mission at Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria is directed by Dr. Wojciech Kołataj. The archaeological research team headed by Mr. Grzegorz Majcherek included: Dr. Barbara Tkaczow, Ms. Elżbieta Kołosowska, archaeologists, Dr. Barbara Lichocka, archaeologist-numismatics expert, and Mr. Waldemar Jerke, photographer. As in previous campaigns, the Egyptian Antiquities Organization was represented by Mr. Ala' ed-Din Mahrous.

We wish to express our sincere thanks to the Authorities of the EAO, and particularly to Mrs. Doreya Said, Director General of the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria, for their support and assistance.

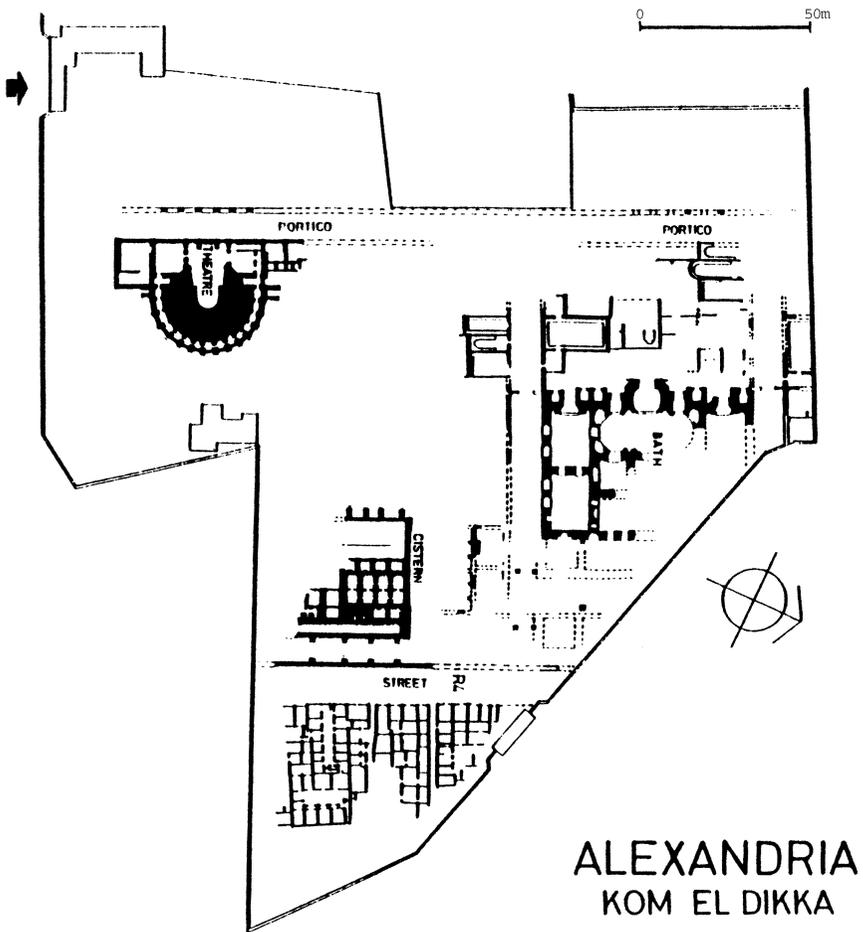


Fig. 1. Kom el-Dikka site in Alexandria. Plan of Polish excavations.
Plan W. Kołtąj.

similar in appearance to the sections previously discovered in other areas along the facade and belonging to a very large hall once located there.

The facade itself was found to be almost entirely lacking its original wall facing. Finds from a deep robbers' pit largely confirm our previous conclusion in regard to the possible date of this operation. Numerous fragments of Egyptian-made Splashed Ware (Fayyumi) and several imported vessels seem to point to the period of the 10th and 11th century AD as the most probable date.

The foundations of the cisterns were reached at the level of 8.00 m. The robbing, however, extended even deeper. In the northern part of the trench, close to buttress 1 damages continued down to a depth of 5.80 m above sea level. It was once again confirmed, that the buttress itself was built on the earlier structure serving as a ready foundation. This structure turned out to be a large basin built of fired bricks and lined with waterproof mortar. It was possible to clear its wall down to the level of 5.60 m (i.e. 2.40 m below the preserved top of its walls) without reaching the bottom. Originally it formed part of a large water tank or cistern apparently predating the Late Roman structure.²

Another deep sounding was made in the area close to the southeastern corner of the cisterns, encompassing also the adjacent section of its corridor. The accumulation within the corridor proved to be substantially different from the strata deposited along the eastern facade. It did not contain either the

² G. Majcherek, *Excavations in Alexandria in 1990-91*, *PAM III*, 1991, (1992), pp. 5-7.

conspicuous layers of amphorae sherds or the bath refuse, and judging by the accompanying pottery finds was apparently accumulated at a later time. At the level of 9.90 m, a floor was cleared in the corridor. It appears that one of the two principal entrances to the cisterns was located here. A fragment of large threshold made of a single numulithic limestone slab was cleared (1.00 by 0.75 m). The door posts were not preserved, but traces of their original position are clearly recognizable.

The floor of the corridor paved with small stones or pebbles was raised towards the north forming a sort of sloping platform. This platform seems to have been designed to facilitate access for animals which were supposed to drive the waterlifting machine (*saqiya*) originally positioned at the top of the cistern.

HABITATION QUARTER (SECTOR W₁N)

The archaeological research in this sector was a continuation of excavations initiated in 1988.³ The objectives of this campaign were twofold: exploration of the remaining part of the Late Roman building G, and a further investigation of the Early Roman structures within the limits of house H.

House G

In the present season of work the excavated area was extended to the east. A series of contiguous rooms forming the eastern wing of the building (Fig. 2, rooms G 14-19), and occupying a surface of some 250 m², was explored.

³ For the results of previous campaigns, see G. Majcherek, *Excavations in Alexandria, PAM I, 1988-89 (1990)*, pp. 75-83; *PAM II, 1989-90 (1991)*, pp. 19-24 and *PAM III 1991 (1992)*, pp. 7-14.

This part of the edifice has been rather poorly preserved owing to the systematic dismantling of the original walls which begun already in the 8th century AD. Most of the walls could be traced only as ghost walls, hence the detailed plan and internal communication system is not to be established.

The building is separated from the neighboring House H by a narrow lane, perpendicular to street R4. The eastern limit of House G has not been reached yet, there is however a strong possibility that the building extends well beyond the area of the site.

The excavated part of House G was built in the beginning of the 5th century AD, according to the evidence supplied by the pottery found in the underfloor layers. The plan is fairly regular: the whole structure was divided into units of roughly similar dimensions not exceeding 4 x 4 m; the only exception is a large room G-9 (but at this stage of research it cannot be excluded that originally it had been composed of two smaller units, too).

All the preserved walls were built in a uniform technique typical of the period, which was a local version of the so called *opus africanum*. Contrary to building H, most of the walls of Late Roman age unearthed here were not built on top of the earlier structures. This phenomenon may be explained by a high degree of destruction sustained by the Early Roman building in this area. It is further corroborated by the results of previous research carried out in the nearby houses B and D where most of the constructions of this age were found to be almost completely obliterated.

The excavated part of the house served principally domestic purposes. However, the exact function of particular rooms

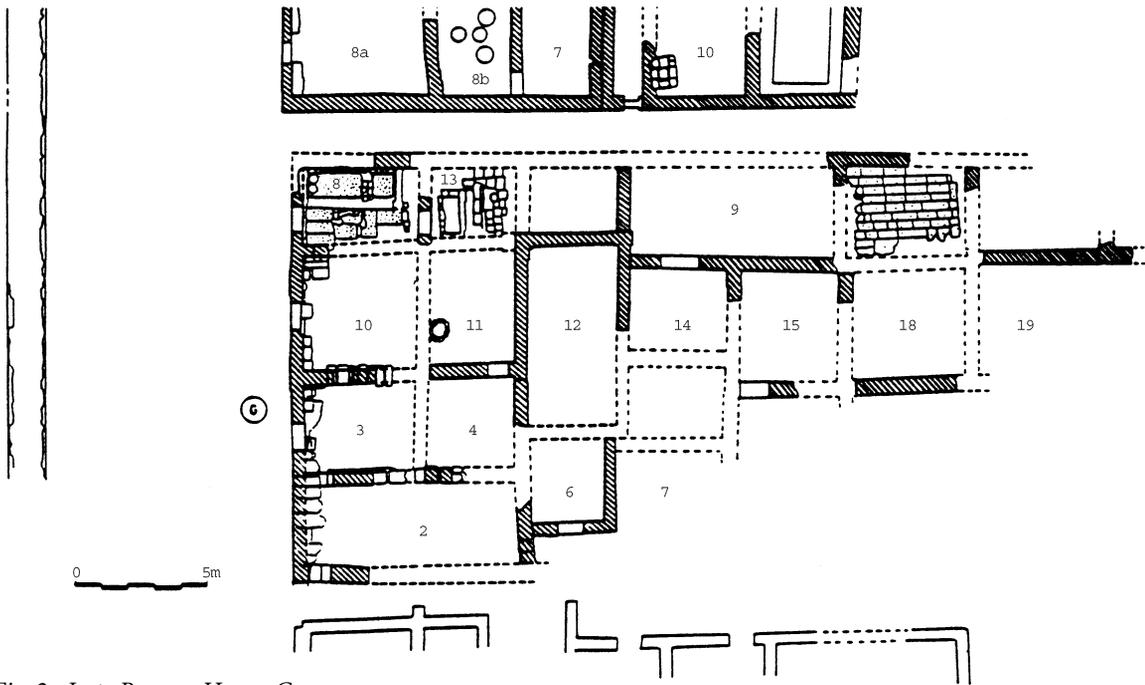


Fig. 2. Late Roman House G.
Plan G. Majcherek.

cannot be ascertained since no specific installations have been found.

In room G-17 a finely made pavement was cleared. It was made of fairly large and closely fitting limestone slabs. Large portions of the plastering was found preserved on adjacent sections of the wall. A similar, although more poorly made pavement was found in room G-19. It was made of reused blocks instead of slabs. Smaller sections of well preserved flagging were also unearthed in room G-15. In room G-14 a floor of stamped clay was additionally adorned and reinforced with small pieces of multicolored marbles.

Room G-18 was the only locus where exploration was continued well into the earlier layers. A well preserved water well was uncovered there. The shaft of the well was constructed of fitted dressed stones. On the opposite sides small openings were recognized, apparently to facilitate descent into the shaft. The upper part of the well was formed of two large semicircular blocks. The shaft was cleared down to the depth of about 4 m without reaching the bottom. The well was most probably constructed in the 4th century AD at the earliest, and served till the middle of the 6th century AD, when it was abandoned and filled with debris. Apart from pottery sherds and coins, the fill yielded one complete lamp dated to the 4th century AD and fragments of painted plaster adorned with a representation of a male torso.

About the middle of the 6th century AD the building was thoroughly rebuilt. New mostly stamped earth floors were laid some 0.50-0.60 m higher than the earlier ones. They are a clear sign of the gradual pauperization of the inhabitants. New partition walls were introduced and the general layout of the

house substantially changed. The large room G-9 was further extended to the east at the expense of the adjacent room G-16. The floor of this new room was paved with large limestone slabs fitted with smaller pieces of marble. Little can be said about its function but the considerable dimensions and the finely executed pavement point to it being the most important chamber of the house at this stage.

The corresponding layers were particularly rich in finds. Beside the ample collection of pottery comprising mostly examples of Egyptian Red Slip Wares A and B, as well as Cypriote Red Slip Ware and abundant sherds of both Egyptian and imported amphorae, a number of other artifacts was also found: several complete lamps of Late Roman date and fragments of Coptic statuary are the best examples.

In the final stage of occupation, tentatively ascribed to the second half of the 7th century AD, further alterations of the plan were introduced. Some of existing walls had collapsed and no effort was made to clear up the area. Instead, the ruined portion of House G was walled off with a rough, hastily made partition which certainly could not have carried any roof. It was found to separate room G-9 from the already ruined and abandoned rooms G-17 and G-19.

House H

Exploration of the Early Roman structures was continued within the limits of House H, already largely unearthed in the campaigns of 1988-1989.

The large room H-3a, measuring originally 5 x 5 m was almost entirely explored, save for a small portion of deposits left in the northwestern corner for technical reasons.

The walls of the room are surprisingly well preserved, attaining in places about 1.70 m above the level. The architectural sequence observed on the walls of this room was corroborated by stratigraphical evidence.

The Early Roman stratum explored within this room consists of a series of floors made of tamped clay or lime mortar. Their exact dating will be possible after the research on coins found in the accompanying accumulation is completed. The earliest floor corresponding with finely preserved plasterwork covering most of the existing walls was laid approximately on a level 5.90 m above sea level. Shallow incisions with dark blue paint mark out panels (106 x 90 cm) in polished quality plaster. Close to the eastern wall an unusual limestone column was found preserved *in situ*. Its shaft was oval in section and was also plastered. Against the southern wall, flush with the column, a shallow pilaster was formed. It was covered with plasterwork painted in red, black and yellow patches in an apparent attempt to imitate marble or granite inlay. The upper unpreserved sections of the wall were also decorated with a painted plaster, numerous fragments of which were found in subsequent layers sealed by the later floors. Most of the recorded fragments were adorned with black, yellow and red stripes. Several characteristically shaped pieces of plastering evidently fallen from the ceiling, with clear impressions of rounded wooden beams and reed matting, suggest a rather poor form of roofing. The accompanying finds, consisting mostly of sherds of wine amphorae produced in the nearby Mareotic region, fragments of Eastern Sigillata A and B as well as typical forms of unguentaria, suggest the first half of the 1st century AD as the date for this occupational phase.

The room and most probably the whole house was inhabited without any substantial alteration of plan until the end of the 3rd century AD, when destruction on a large scale occurred. The walls were then deliberately dismantled; the corresponding layers were found to be filled with building debris including large fragments of plastering and pieces of architectural decoration.

A very similar stratigraphical sequence was also recognized in room H-5. The lowermost levels contained numerous finds dated to the 1st-2nd century AD. Here again a thick destruction layer composed of plaster remains, fragments of architectural decoration and other debris, was explored. This layer precedes the Late Roman occupation stratum which featured an entirely new disposition of the house,

An Early Roman occupation stratum was also investigated in the neighboring room H-6. A series of floor levels was found, revealing a similar chronological range. The fill was particularly rich in finds. In addition to a series of well preserved lamps, a small finely shaped faience head was found.

A trench was dug across street R4 in front of House H in order to ascertain the street's structural and chronological development. The adjacent section of a huge Late Roman wall (most probably serving as an aqueduct) which bordered the street on the west was found to have been removed almost entirely. It was possible to trace the original course of the wall in a clearly defined robbing pit. The wall was apparently dismantled in the early Mamluk period as evidenced by several sherds of Mamluk Sgraff and Slip Painted Wares found in the fill.

Three consecutive Late Roman surfaces of street R4 were recognized within the trench. The lowermost dated to the 6th

century AD was paved with large blocks of dolomite. This type of flagging was identical to the one discovered by Adriani further to the north, beneath the present-day Cinema Amir, and has already been identified along the facade of House H.⁴ The paved surface however did not cover the whole width of the street: a two-meter wide strip along its western edge was left unpaved. It is as yet unclear whether the uncovered pavement marks the original width of the street at this period, or the missing portion of the flagging was removed to make room for later structures built in this location. Similar structures identified as *ergasteria* were previously discovered further to the south.⁵

The street was subsequently narrowed again as a result of more structures being erected in front of Houses H and G. The extent of these structures is marked by a new, higher street surface made of stamped lime mortar reinforced with crushed pottery sherds and pebbles. The overall width of the street was thus considerably reduced to a mere 3.40-2.60 m.

The phenomenon observed here of a progressive encroachment of architecture onto the street provides evidence of a gradual transformation of the Late Roman street into a Medieval *suq*, featuring regular lines of shops and workshops on both sides of the roadway.

Archaeological excavations were also carried out in the theatre. A large trial pit (marked M-XV) was dug in the north-eastern part of the area, close to the huge outer wall surround-

⁴ A. Adriani, *Scavi e scoperte allessandrine (1949-1952)*, BSAA 41, 1956, fig. 6.

⁵ M. Rodziewicz, *Alexandrie III. Les habitations romaines tardives d'Alexandrie*, Varsovie 1984, pp. 246-251.

ing the edifice. The stratigraphic sequence in the trench was found to be fairly undisturbed fortunately, permitting conclusions concerning the phasing and chronology of the monument. The work in this area is still in progress, and a summary of results will be presented upon completion of research. It is worth mentioning, however, that some remains of an Early Roman structure apparently predating the foundations of the theatre were uncovered there. The function as well as the precise dating of the unearthed structure is yet to be determined. The considerable dimensions and overall character of the preserved architectural decoration suggest a building of a public nature rather than a domestic one.