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EXCAVATIONS AT THE BASILICA SITE AT EL-ASHMUNEIN/HERMOPOLIS MAGNA IN 1987-1990

Marek Barański

The Polish-Egyptian Archaeological and Preservation Mission at el-Ashmunein was established by the Egyptian Antiquities Organization and the Ateliers for Conservation of Cultural Property (PKZ) for the purpose of protecting and restoring one of the most spectacular Coptic monuments – the Ashmunein Basilica. The aim of the mission was to carry out archaeological work, prepare architectural documentation and supervise the implementation of preservation and restoration works on the endangered monument.¹

The basilica's remains were discovered in 1942 by M. Kamal. In the following years an expedition of the University in Alexandria cleared the whole monument.² The great cathedral is a big basilical building with side galleries. It has a colonnaded transept with exedrae at both ends. The church building with *atrium* and adjacent rooms formed an independent complex set in the very centre of the ancient town. The building of the

¹ Mission members: Marek Barański, architect, archaeologist and director of the mission, Mr. Artur Zbiegieni, architect, Messrs Zbigniew Polak, Jan Gromnicki, archaeologists, Dr. Tadeusz Kowalski, civil engineer, Dr. Ryszard Jurkiewicz, civil engineer, chemist and Mr. Leszek Niespodziewański, chemist. EAO assistance: Messrs Atta Makramallah, Faig Abd Rabokab, Ahmad Mousa, Samy Farid, egyptologists and Mr. Mamdough Jamal, civil engineer. We want to express our sincere thanks to Dr. Ali Hassan and Mr. Karnal Fahmi for their help and personal involvement in mission problems.

² A.J.B. Wace, A.H.S. Megaw, T.C. Skeat, *Hermopolis Magna/Ashmunein. The Ptolemaic Sanctuary and the Basilica*, Alexandria 1959; A.S. Atiya (ed.), Ashmunein, [in:] *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, New York 1991, pp. 285-287.

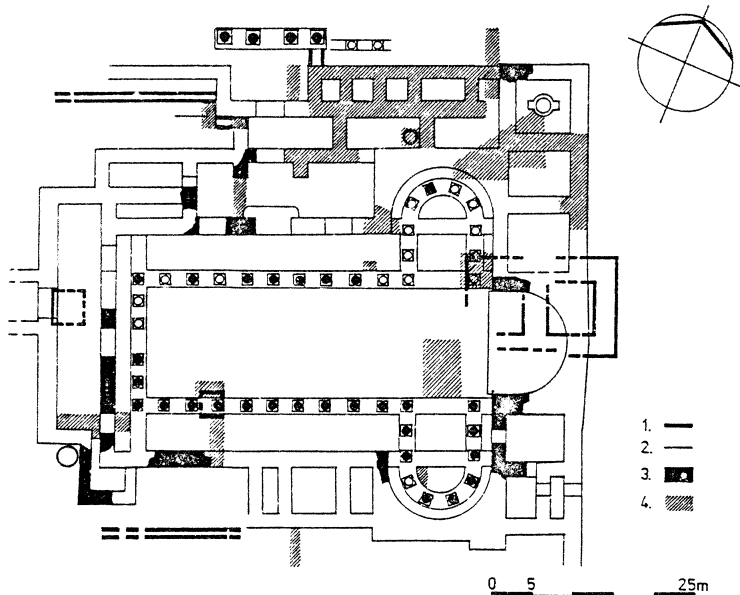


Fig. 1. The Basilica of Ashmunein.

1 – outline of the Hellenistic remains, 2 – outline of the Basilica's foundations, 3 – remains of the basilica walls and columns, 4 – trial pits and newly excavated areas.

basilica destroyed structures previously existing on the spot. Unfortunately, after the collapse of the basilica, its remnants were partly dismantled in quest for limestone blocks. The excavations carried out in the forties discovered that the basilica foundations were constructed of blocks and elements of decoration taken from Hellenistic buildings. The high artistic quality of the Corinthian capitals, inscribed blocks of Doric architraves and other architectural elements found there prompted the decision to dismantle part of the still preserved church foundations. Unfortunately, neither were these early excavations recorded properly nor was there an analysis of the archaeological context made.

During three seasons of work the Polish-Egyptian Mission prepared the architectural documentation and started on the preservation of the monument.³ In the course of work some trial pits and trenches, as well as the exploration of the area north of the basilica complex were carried out. The excavations enabled us to establish an archaeological context for the monument (Fig. 1). The building of the church caused the area beneath the basilica to be artificially raised c. 1 m above the Hellenistic and Roman strata. Exploration of the northern area, between the church and Antinoe street, exposed foundations of rooms and shops, presumably opening onto the street. Part of the foundations remained intact, other fragments were dismantled in search of building stone (mainly limestone) and only a few sandstone blocks were left. These blocks bearing hammered cartouches of Akhenaton were presumably brought from Tell Amarna and later reused in the basilica complex. Our research indicated that this part of the complex was founded in much shallower trenches than the church itself. Presumably this part of the complex was added to an already existing building. We consider this to be the second phase of development of the basilica complex, slightly later than the construction of the church. Close to the foundations of the northern transept, the remains of a well of an earlier date were found. The well had been partly destroyed and its shaft filled in and closed up at the time of the construction of the basilica. Exploration of the upper part of the fill brought very interesting evidence of pottery sherds and coins from the end of the 5th century AD and this date could be connected with the construction of the church. Another trench located close to the north-

³ *Reports from Ashmunein*, vol. 1, Warsaw 1989, vol. 2, Warsaw 1992; M. Barański, Preserving the Christian Basilica of El-Ashmunein, *BIFAO* 90, 1990, pp. 41-49.

eastern corner of the basilica complex confirmed that this part of the street portico, lying east of the Tetrastyle, was never completed. A section through the street clearly showed a foundation trench filled with debris and pottery sherds and deposits connected with the construction of a water channel which ran along the street and was built after the completion of the Tetrastyle.

The excavations also brought to light evidence concerning Hellenistic strata. The Alexandria University excavations exposed a fragment of the foundations of a big building and remains of two stoas constructed on either end. During the present research, in a trench dug at the crossing of the basilica's nave and transept, the third corner of this big building was found. This discovery enabled us to prepare a theoretical reconstruction of the original plan of this Hellenistic building. Further research under the northern part of the church revealed remnants of two small altars which formed, together with two Doric stoas and a gate, part of an architectural complex of Hellenistic date. Excavations also revealed the remains of mud-brick structures of unknown purpose.

The survey of basilica remains brought to light an inscription of Nectanebo II, presumably from a granite naos from the Thoth temple,⁴ and evidence of two other Ptolemaic buildings: a temple devoted to the royal cult of Ptolemy III and a building constructed by Ptolemy VII and later adapted by Claudius. Both structures were dismantled in the Christian era. The lower part of a Hathoric capital found during present excavations presumably came from one of these buildings. These discoveries enlarged the list of Hellenistic structures known from Hermopolis Magna. It is difficult to say whether these remains belonged

⁴ Z. Szafranski, A. Makramallah, A new inscription of Nectanebo II from Ashmunein, *CM* 112, 1989, pp. 65-66.

to structures erected on the site or were they transported from other places, but the first possibility seems more likely, since earlier structures on the site had to be demolished before the basilica could be built here.

A large number of minor objects, including terracotta figurines, coins, oil lamps and a fragmentary nude male statue of marble were discovered. An important find is a 2nd century BC inscription mentioning Thenon son of Thenon, a gymnasiarch of Hermopolis, as yet unrecorded.

Archaeological investigations supported the results of architectural research on the basilica remains, enabling us to prepare an inventory of the structures, as well as a conservation plan. We were also able to gather more information on earlier strata found on the site. The Basilica restoration programme is planned for a period of six years at least.