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Alexandria: Excavations at Kom El-Dikka 1995

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ALEXANDRIA

EXCAVATIONS AT KOM EL-DIKKA 1995

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As in previous years, the archaeological investigations conducted by the Polish Archaeological Mission in different sectors of the Kom el-Dikka site were integrally connected with the program of the conservation project carried out by a joint Polish-Egyptian Mission. Work proceeded from October 1994 until June 1995 inclusively. The actual excavation season lasted from April 3 until June 25, 1995.¹

The season's work focused on the area between the Cisterns and the Baths (Sector F, Fig. 1).² The previous campaign resulted in the discovery of a well-preserved urban house of the 1st century AD (House FA) including a geometric mosaic of fine quality.³ This year, the explored part was extended considerably to the east and west, totaling some 400 m², which is about four fifths of the area presumed to be occupied by the house. Moreover, a small section of House FB, adjacent to the former on the west, was also cleared. The uncovered part of House FA comprises a large fragment of the western wing and almost all of the southern one, providing reasonably sound grounds for estimating the size of the house and its plan.

¹ The research team was headed by Dr. Grzegorz Majcherek and comprised: Mrs. Renata Kucharczyk, Miss Maria Mossakowska and Miss Iwona Zych, archaeologists; and Mr. Waldemar Jerke, photographer. SCA inspectors of antiquities: Mr. Ahmed Moussa, Mr. Al'a ed-Din Mahrous, Mr. Ashraf Abd el-Rauf Ragab, Mr. Mohammed Abd el-Hamid Ismail and Mrs. Mona Said actively participated in the work.

The Mission would like to acknowledge its deep gratitude to the SCA authorities and especially to Mrs. Doreya Said, Director General of the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria, for their cooperation and support extended toward the Mission during its work.

² Cf. *supra*, report by W. Kołataj.

³ Cf. *PAM* VI, 1994 (1995), pp. 11-20.

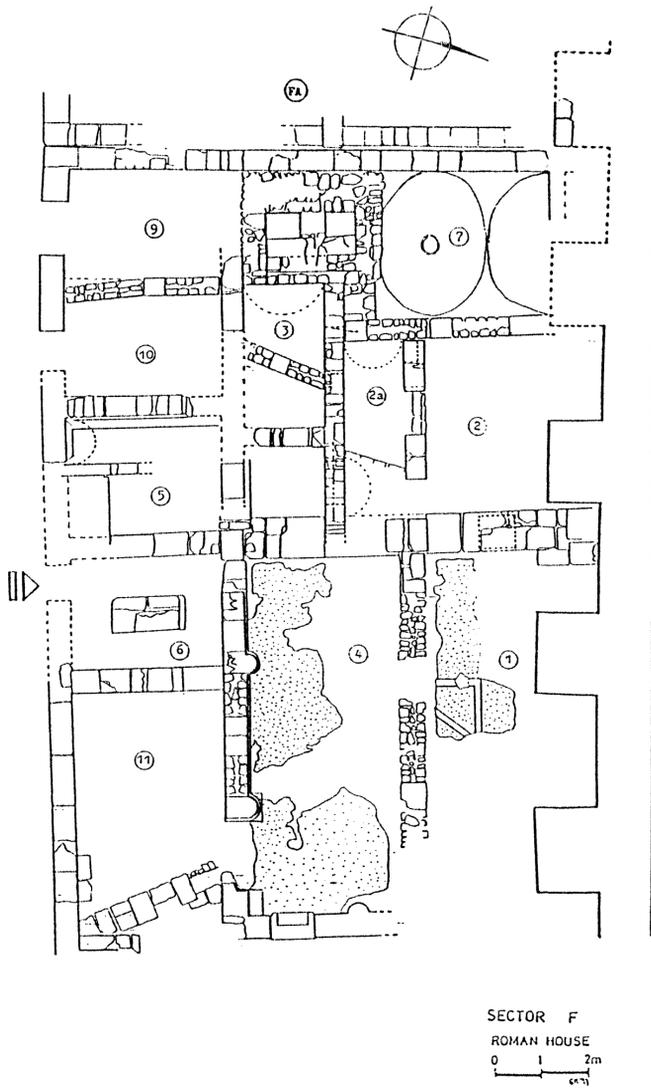


Fig. 1. Plan of the unearthed part of House FA.
Drawing G. Majcherek

The house was apparently built along a narrow side street c. 5 m wide, running east-west and constituting one of the transversal passages dividing the large insula delimited by streets R4 and R5 and leading to conclusions about its plan and functional design (Fig. 1). Limestone slabs belonging to the original pavement were discovered along the southern edge of the passage, in a trench dug across the street level with room 9. Another section of street with a similar orientation and width was recorded earlier inside the Habitation Quarter lying east of street R4.⁴ The existence of this hitherto unknown street throws new light onto the much discussed question of the street network of ancient Alexandria. The large insulae (c. 278 x 330 m), recognized in the 19th century by Mahmoud Bey el-Falaki, were apparently divided into smaller units by regularly traced secondary streets which permitted internal communication and provided access to lots located farther back.

PHASE I

It would seem that the main entrance to the house (not cleared as yet for technical reasons) led from the side street, straight into locus 6 which also contained the staircase to the upper floors of the house. The actual staircase has not survived, but the holes which held the beams supporting the steps are clearly preserved in the walls. Room 6 also provided direct access to the court, which was the main element of the house, ordering its plan and functional arrangement. The court was designed as a pseudo-peristyle complex with pairs of engaged columns at regular intervals along the walls. The middle intercolumnium with a span of c. 2.60 m was slightly larger than the lateral ones. The engaged columns had plain plastered shafts set upon simplified bases consisting of a plinth and a single somewhat angular torus. The capitals were most probably of the Doric order to judge by a fragmentary piece uncovered in the court during the previous season. The floor was made of chips of granite, marble, porphyry

⁴ Cf. *PAM* II, 1989-90 (1991), pp. 19-24, fig. 1.

and alabaster in many different colors; large sections of this floor have been preserved along the southern wall of the court. In the centre the floor was decorated with a simple geometrical composition, now fragmentarily preserved, made of pieces of basalt. The preserved diamond-shaped tiles of basalt appear to indicate the main axis, which also runs through the middle of the entrance to the oecus (loc. 2), uncovered in part during the last season.

Assuming that the axis indicated by the tiles marks its centre, the court should be reconstructed as a rectangle with the shorter sides measuring 7.80 m (the southern wall cleared along its entire length) and the longer ones hypothetically approaching 9 m.

The plan of the house reveals two separate sets of rooms apparently of different function. Units nos 9 and 10 in the southwestern part of the house are identical in size (c. 2.30 x 3.35 m) and are planned as completely isolated rooms with separate entrances from the side street; they should presumably be identified as shops. Similarly located shops are a typical feature of the plan of urban houses which usually combine residential and commercial purposes.

The remaining part of the house served a variety of residential and domestic purposes, although it is difficult to be specific about function in the case of particular units. Loc. 5, which is divided down the middle by a narrow wall, was presumably of domestic use. It contains a vaulted double-chambered cellar, which will be explored in the next season, once the surrounding walls are protected.

Locus 11 (3.30 x 6 m) probably served a similar role and was accessible from the staircase. It would appear that the entire southern wing of the house was devoted to household use. Thus, it should be expected that the living quarters were located in either the northern or eastern wing. This is also suggested by a decorative pilaster embellished with painted stucco modeled in relief, marking the entrance to this part of the house.

Contrary to the previously explored parts of similar houses located in the area of the Theater, no traces of a cistern were

discovered under the court.⁵ Rainwater appears to have been drained from the court through a hole made in the southern wall, emptying into a channel leading outside and into a street sewer. A well preserved section of this channel was uncovered in the eastern part of loc. 11.

A variety of building techniques have been recorded in this house. Most of the walls, especially the outer walls which exceed 0.50 m in thickness, were constructed of large regular blocks in the opus isodomum technique. The pillar technique was used in the walls of the court; pillars of large blocks were erected at intervals in the intercolumnar spaces and the sections in between were filled with small stones.

Exploration of the fill inside the house yielded many finds to illustrate the rich repertory of interior decoration. Limestone and stucco cornices, lintels, fluted columns, etc., were accompanied by a variety of colored plaster fragments. Examination of the preserved plaster permitted two basic phases to be distinguished in the painted decoration, both of them operating with similar sets of colors and compositions. The dominant designs are vertical and horizontal bands of color, mostly using blue, but also employing yellow and dark grey. The more complicated elements of the compositions include a peacock eye and running-dog designs.

Of particular interest are finds of fine marble statuary fragments originating from loc. 11 and the southeastern corner of the court. Their original location inside the house cannot be determined at present; some of the fragments should be considered clearly as *spolia* used as fill in a small platform erected in this part of the building. The finds include: portrait head of a child (inv. 4384); female head (inv. 4386); male torso (inv. 4385), most probably a miniature replica of Hermes by Praxite-

⁵ Cf. *PAM VI*, 1994 (1995), pp.11-20, fig. 1.

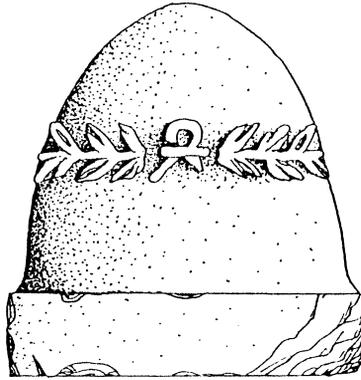


Fig. 2. Limestone omphalos found in House FA.
Drawing G. Majcherek

les; and a female figure resembling the Aphrodite Anadyomene type (inv. 4387). The sculptures are most probably of 2nd century date, except for the portrait head of a child which seems to date to the late Ptolemaic period. An excellently preserved limestone *omphalos* decorated with a wreath in relief was discovered close to the center of the court (Fig. 2).

Outside the *oecus* and court (loci 2 and 4) the original floor level was not preserved anywhere, having presumably been destroyed by the later transformations and rebuilding of the house.

The house in its primary shape suffered extensive destruction in the late 3rd century AD, although it is difficult to be sure about the actual cause of the damages. A tremor of considerable force is a distinct possibility.

The exploration of House FA has provided new evidence for an earlier hypothesis concerning the origins and development of Alexandrian domestic architecture. It is only natural to assume that in a city like Alexandria the housing pattern would be strongly rooted in Hellenistic tradition and would reflect the civilizational and cultural heritage of the Graeco-Roman period. It has been argued in the past that a great many hypogea discovered in the city's cemeteries imi-

tated house-types current in Ptolemaic Alexandria; the tombs of Mustapha Pasha, which feature the pseudo-peristyle arrangement, are the most commonly cited examples.⁶ It is almost certain now that both the overall design and the architectural decoration of the tombs and of the early Roman House FA are derived from a common source, constituted most probably by Hellenistic domestic architecture.

PHASE II

In the second phase, both the construction and plan of the house underwent considerable changes. Parts of the original walls were rebuilt and new structures were introduced. Changes usually consisted of partition walls being erected in the hitherto large units. The *oecus* (loc. 2) was divided into three separate units (loci 2a, 2b and 7). The same goes for the court, divided by a transversal wall which destroyed part of the mosaic floor. In other cases, the rebuilding was limited to blocking the entrances or introducing new ones where required. Loc. 9, used previously as a shop, was now blocked off from the side street and connected with the rest of the house. Loc. 11 was connected directly with the court, destroying a large section of the wall in the process. In some of the units new installations were built, e.g. a well in loc. 8 and a settling tank in loc. 11.

New building techniques were introduced as well, i.e. pitched brick vaulting on a wide scale and even domes. The newly established room 7 was found to be covered with almost intact domes. Its function will remain unknown, however, until it is cleared.

It would seem that the building lost its residential character at this time and began serving storage purposes. The upper floor above loc. 11 was turned into a storeroom for amphoras, most of them representing an early form of the well known amphorae from Gaza (LRA 4), dated to the 4th century AD. What is more interest-

⁶ Cf. A. Adriani, *Annuaire du Musée Gréco-Romain* (1933-35), pp. 67-79.

ing is the fact that almost all of the vessels bear red dipinti marks on the body, a phenomenon very rarely recorded at other sites.

In the corner of loc. 5 a relatively well-preserved shaft was uncovered (0.30 x 0.40 m) reaching from the upper floor down to the cellar. Its purpose remains unknown; it may have been used to pour loose dry goods like grain etc.

The stratigraphic analysis of accompanying layers indicates that at this point the building may have been connected functionally with the nearby vaulted underground structure which was later to be incorporated into the Baths.

The house appears to have been abandoned in the middle of the 4th century AD, as indicated by finds from the destruction layer, presumably in connection with a major construction project begun in the vicinity, i.e., the building of the Bath and Cisterns complex.⁷ The huge buttressed outer wall of the Bath runs across the house, destroying almost completely its northern wing.

CISTERNS

Archaeological explorations in the sector of the cisterns were necessitated by the current restoration program.⁸ Work focused on the southeastern part of the structure with the principal goal being the investigation and complete clearing of the corner of the building.

It was found that like the rest of the eastern facade, this part of the structure was also robbed of the facing stone in the Middle Ages. The assemblage of finds from robbers' pits includes sherds of Fustat Fatimid Sgraffito and Early Mamluk Sgraffito Wares, dating this activity to the 12th-13th century AD. The entire facade was removed down to the foundations at 5.20 m above sea level.

Immediately to the west, explorations started on two reservoirs dating back to the first stage of the cisterns. Like other reservoirs

⁷ For stratigraphy and chronology of the Baths, cf. W. Kołataj, *Imperial Baths at Kom el-Dikka, Alexandrie VI*, Warsaw 1992, pp. 43-56.

⁸ For the restoration work at Kom el-Dikka, cf. *supra*, report by W. Kołataj.

from this phase, they measure c. 4.30 m x 3.80 m and were constructed of large flat bricks typical of structures antedating the 5th century AD.

The upper parts of the walls bear traces of systematic dismantling. Deep cuts were intended to procure large segments of brick wall to be used as building elements in other structures. Building no. 15 located in sector F contained such brick elements, dated to the 6th-7th century AD.

The reservoirs were found to be filled with a thick, almost homogeneous layer of building debris: stone detritus, bricks, tubulature and ashes. Finds from the upper part of this layer include numerous sherds of amphorae of local and imported origin, tableware and fragments of typical Coptic figurines and zoomorphic vessels (inv. nos 4377, 4378), thus providing a date for the filling of the reservoirs in the middle of the 6th century. This part of the cisterns was presumably abandoned following extensive destruction caused by the earthquake in AD 535, the same tremor which preceded the last rebuilding of the Baths.

Excavations were also continued in the area of the southern portico of the Baths. New evidence appeared for the study of successive stages in the architectural development of the Baths, particularly the underground vaulted structure which constitutes an integral part of the building (cf. *supra*, report by W. Kołataj, Fig. 2). The extension of the stylobate to the east (c. 7 m were explored) turned out to be completely dismantled. The finds from the fill included sherds of Early Mamluk Sgraffito and Early Cypriot Medieval Glazed wares, indicating that the structure was destroyed in the late 13th century when a general dismantling program was instigated in the area.

Both the imprint of the foundations in this section and the adjacent stratigraphy indicate that the foundations were by no means a homogeneous structure at this point. An arch was employed to carry the wall above the vault of one of the chambers of the underground service area of the Baths. The presence of this elongated

chamber, which extends beyond the line of the stylobate, is additionally corroborated by the transversal walls of the chamber, visible in the southern baulk, preserving the springs of the vaults. The chamber's unique form provides strong proof in favor of the localization of the southern entrance to the underground structure in this spot.

Overlying the area was a thick layer of ashes removed from the baths; the accompanying pottery finds, including a late 4th century lamp (inv. 4366), indicate that the entrance remained in use all through the first and second stages of the operation of the Baths.