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Marina El-Alamein: Excavations 1996

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MARINA EL-ALAMEIN

EXCAVATIONS 1996

Wiktor A. Daszewski

In March¹ the exploration of the western necropolis of the town was continued in and around the tombs identified or partly excavated during previous seasons² and on two new sites (Fig. 1).

HYPOGEUM 6 (S6)

Excavations were carried out within the open air court.³ A rectangular well (1.29 x 0.85 m) hewn in bedrock was explored in the northeastern corner. It proved to be very deep with ground water appearing at 8.80-9.00 m below the floor of the court. The shaft, however, is still deeper, probably reaching over 10 m. At a depth of 7.20 m below court level, the top of a side chamber was found. The chamber (the depth of which remains unknown) was cut in the rock in the northeastern side of the shaft, presumably to provide extra space for workers cleaning out the well. Steps cut in the rock in the north and south walls of the shaft were there to facilitate climbing. Counting from the present ground level, water occurs at a depth of about 16 m (court 7 m plus shaft 9 m).

¹ The mission directed by the author included Prof. Dr. Zofia Sztetyłło, archaeologist-epigraphist; Mr. Tomasz Witczak, archaeologist-draughtsman, Dr. Maciej Małachowicz, architect. Dr. Grzegorz Majcherek paid a short visit to identify amphorae sherds. Dr. Rafał Czerner aided in the drawing of one of the tombs and Mr. Waldemar Jerke helped for a few days with the photography. The Supreme Council for Antiquities was represented by the Chief Inspector of Marina, Mr. Mohammed Ali Abd el-Razek, to whom we are very much indebted for his help during the excavations. We also wish to express our deepest gratitude to the respective authorities of the SCA for their help and cooperation extended to our Mission throughout the season.

² See *PAM VI*, 1994 (1995), p. 35.

³ For this tomb, see *PAM III*, 1991(1992), p. 33ff.; *PAM IV*, 1992 (1993), p. 28.

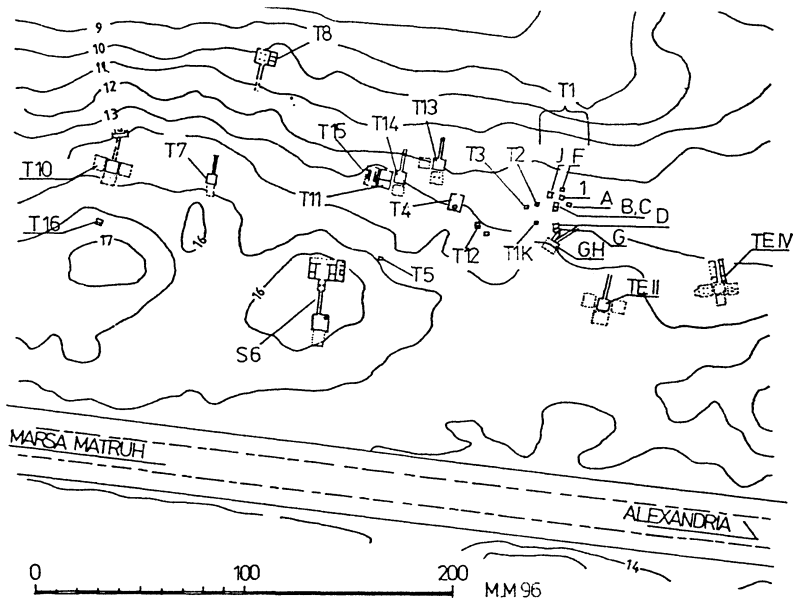


Fig. 1. Marina el-Alamein. Western Necropolis.

The well had been cut in view of providing water for funerary rites celebrated in the open air court of the tomb, well in the tradition of rites performed in the Hellenistic and Roman hypogea of Alexandria.⁴ In the uppermost part of the fill in the shaft, a few loose sherds of local amphorae of the 2nd and early 3rd century AD were uncovered. At mid-height, there were sherds of Cypriot Sigillata vessels of the late 1st and early 2nd century AD, as well as small glass bottles. They provide a *terminus ante quem* for the construction of the well and probably for the tomb as well. Apart from this, the well shaft yielded no other finds.

⁴ Cf. W.A. Daszewski, The origins of Hellenistic hypogea in Alexandria, in: *Aspekte Spätagyptischer Kultur, Festschrift E. Winter* (eds M. Minas, J. Zeidler, *Aegyptiaca Treverensia* 7, Mainz 1994), pp. 51-68.

HYPOGEUM T 14

Explorations continued of a tomb that was first localized in the 1994 season.⁵ The staircase was cleared over two thirds of its length. Its upper part and threshold were made of regular limestone blocks bonded in lime mortar; the lower part was hewn in bedrock. In the back part of the staircase, close to the open air court, some flat oblong blocks of limestone forming the roof were found *in situ*. All were fractured in the middle, apparently as a result of mechanical leveling operations (by bulldozers) carried out in the area in preparation for a modern road. Further excavation of the staircase was stopped pending consolidation of the roof. Two thirds of the sand fill in the court was also cleared away. A trench was dug along the central axis to reach the floor level. A square altar (0.90 m to the side), some 0.70 m high, was found hewn in bedrock in the middle of the court. Two successive altars (flat limestone slabs) were set up directly above the original altar but on a higher level, on layers of sand, which had gradually drifted into the tomb over the years. This indicates that the offerings were performed there over a long period of time. Layers of ashes corresponding to each of the altars were clearly visible in the otherwise clean sand fill. The depth of the court with regard to the top of its bracing walls (in their present stage of preservation) reached 8 m.

On the south side of the court, an entrance gave access to a large funerary chamber situated on the main axis of the tomb and containing a total of 18 loculi on all three sides. Upon investigation, the loculi were found to be plundered. None had its closing slab in place, although mortises in the outer corners of some of the loculi testified to where such slabs had originally been fixed with mortar. Tracing lines above the

⁵ See above, note 2.

existing loculi indicated the position of further loculi to be cut according to needs. Along the south wall of the chamber two offering tables were cut in the bedrock. The average dimensions of the loculi were: H. 0.88-0.95 m; W. 0.86-0.90 m; L. 1.80-2.10 m. A few loculi were wide instead of deep and seem to have been closed with some kind of curtain or shroud. The finds, all of them from the upper layers of sand filling the chamber consisted of sherds of local and imported (Cretan) amphorae of the 2nd century AD, as well as of a CS vase (Form 40)⁶ and a terracotta relief bottle in the shape of a cone with high foot and rim.

The loculi contained multiple burials. Some bodies were deposited either in wooden coffins or upon biers, parts of which have been preserved; other bodies were wrapped in shrouds. Below the middle row of loculi faded traces of inscriptions in red paint, presumably giving the names of the deceased, were found. Only one, written in Greek letters, was clear enough to be read: "Apollos". While it is clear that all the other inscriptions were also in Greek, only isolated letters could be deciphered.

The total length of T 14, including staircase, open air court and funerary chamber with loculi was 24.50 m.

HYPOGEUM T 13

A few meters to the east of T 14 there lies yet another large funerary structure, some 23.50 m long (Figs 2 and 3). It consists of a long staircase covered with a flat roof made of oblong blocks, an open air court and two funerary chambers to the south and west of the court. The chamber located on the main N-S axis was rectangular in plan, about 4 m high, and provided in the middle with two pseudo-Doric columns hewn in bedrock. The chamber contained loculi on all three sides and

⁶ Cf. W.A. Daszewski, *Cypriot Sigillata in Marina el-Alamein*, in: *Hellenistic and Roman Pottery in the Eastern Mediterranean, The Second Workshop at Nieborów*, Warsaw 1995, pp. 27-39, esp. 36.

large benches along the east and west walls. Together there were 18 loculi cut in the walls and one trench hewn in the floor in front of an offering table cut out of bedrock in the middle of the south wall. All the burials in the loculi were inhumations except for one case of a faience vase with ashes inside a small loculus in the south wall. The tomb had been plundered in the past. The faience vase was found broken into small pieces and the ashes scattered all around. Clearing of the sand fill inside the chamber has revealed so far only a few sherds of amphorae and two small glass flasks (*lacrymaria*) in the upper layers.

West of the court there was a small portico provided with two pillars cut in the bedrock. Beyond the portico, a large door led to a rectangular funerary chamber. It was provided with large (1.34 and 1.38 m) benches about 0.70 m high along the south and north walls and a narrower one along the rear wall. In the central part of the chamber, in the cavity between the benches there was a square (0.34 m) horned altar of limestone (0.56 m high). The room contained four loculi: one deep loculus in each of the side walls, in the NE and the SW upper corners respectively, and two wide ones in the rear (west) wall. The upper of the transversal loculi (2.05 x 0.90 m; 1.08 m deep) was provided with a low (0.06 m) rock-cut podium in the middle. Two bodies were deposited there, the heads facing north. The loculus was once crowned with a triangular pediment and closed with a slab. Only mortises in the side walls testify to the position of the long-plundered slab.

It seems that the tomb was constructed in the course of the 1st century AD, but continued in use into the 3rd century. Outside the south bracing wall of the court there was a large deposit of broken amphorae of the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD, containing vessels of both local origin (region of El Daba and Mareotis) and imported. Also sherds of CS and of cooking pots were uncovered.

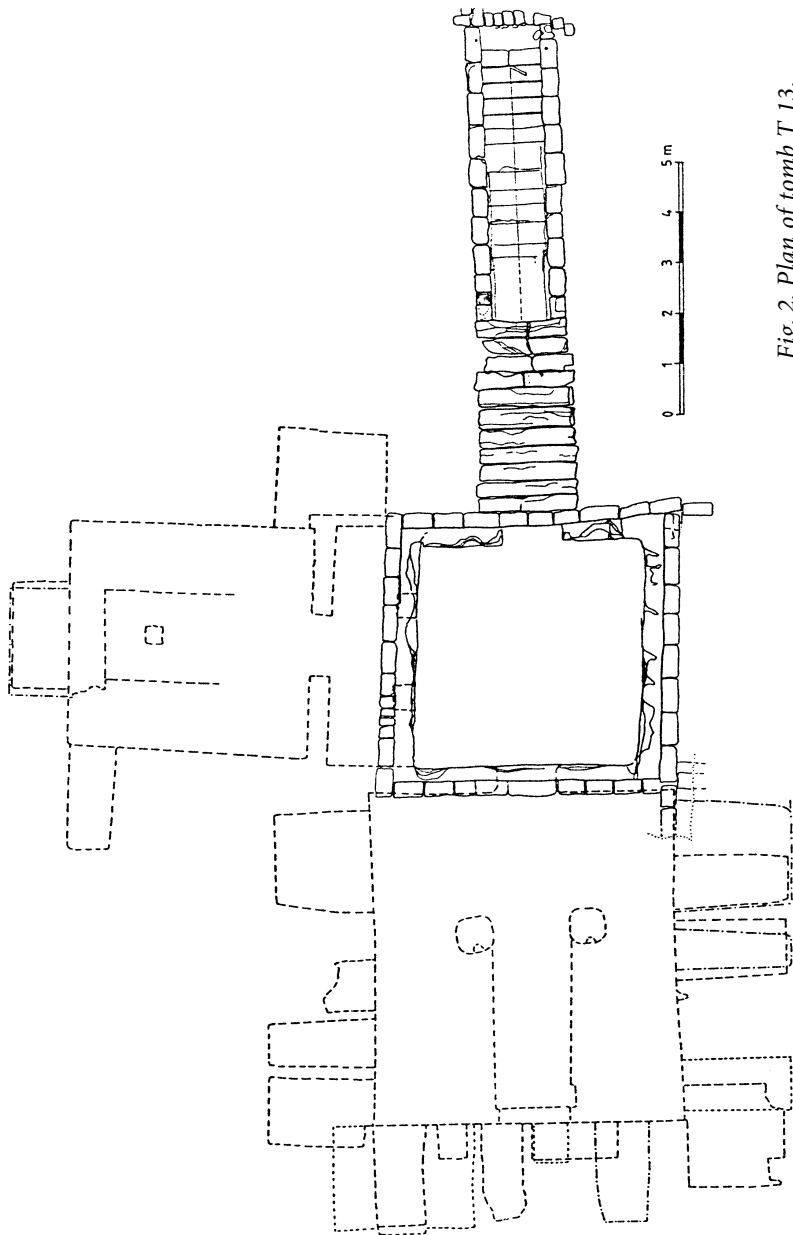


Fig. 2. Plan of tomb T 13.

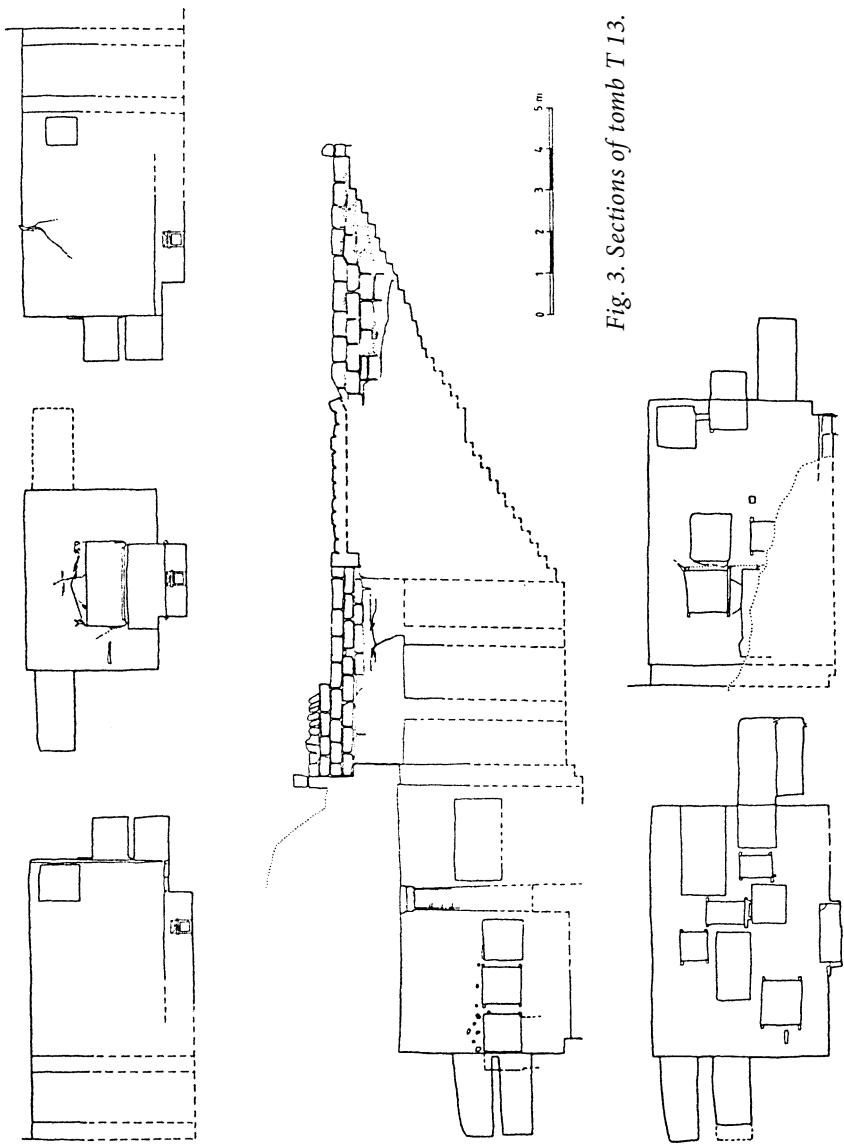


Fig. 3. Sections of tomb T 13.

HYPOGEUM (?) T 16

On the same line as T 13, T 14 and T 11, adjacent to the west wall of the temenos of the last tomb, excavations revealed a spacious banquet chamber (E/W 5.72 x N/S 8.45 m) apparently belonging to yet another huge hypogeum. Approximately two thirds of the room were cleared of sand and debris during the final days of this year's campaign.

The room is rectangular in plan, oriented N-S. A two-step entrance (1.08 m) in the north wall gave access to a room with two 5.12 m long and 1.45 m wide *klinai* set along the side (= east and west) walls at a distance of 0.36 and 0.41 m from them respectively. The bed fronts reveal corner moldings imitating a simple wooden construction. In the rear (= south) wall of the chamber a door 1.10 m wide opened onto what was probably a corridor leading to a staircase and the underground part of the tomb, to be explored in the future.

Tomb 16 appears to have been built prior to T 11 and was destroyed earlier than this adjacent structure. Since the origins of T 11 can be traced back to the 1st century AD,⁷ T 16 must be somewhat earlier. Future excavations may perhaps provide additional evidence. In any case, T 16 fell out of use much before offerings ceased to be performed in T 11, i.e., before well in the 3rd century. The location of T 16, if considered together with Tombs 13, 14, 11, 7 and 10, points to the existence of a long row of monumental funerary structures set along the slope parallel to the coast and oriented N-S. One may well expect more of the same type of tombs still waiting to be uncovered along the same line. This particular positioning of the tombs in the area may have been partly dictated by the slope, but there is seemingly a desire on the part of the builders to create stage effects by placing the structures close together. There was no lack of space in Marina

⁷ Cf. PAM VI, p. 33ff. and fig. 4

and no real need for such an arrangement. With their large staircases projecting well above ground, provided either with small entrance vestibules with doors or with large banquet halls, and accompanied in the eastern part of the area by a series of tall pillar tombs, this part of the necropolis must have cut a very impressive and spectacular picture indeed.

Some excavations were also carried out at a short distance south of hypogeum Tomb 10 in the westernmost part of the necropolis. A small tomb (T 15) oriented E-W, probably of cubic shape, containing three loculi, was cleared. Originally the tomb was smaller and had only two loculi. The third one, to the south, was added later. Its walls were made of reused blocks apparently taken from the uppermost layer of the bracing wall of one of the hypogea. These blocks had gabled tops. The whole structure (approximately 3.16 x 3.07 m) had been badly damaged in the course of time. Only the lowest layer of oblong blocks forming the walls of the loculi remained in situ. The north loculus was empty, while the central one contained two skeletons of adults and one of a child; an adult was buried in the south loculus. All of them had their heads to the west. A square altar made of a limestone slab, 0.74 (L.) x 0.69 (W.) m and H. 0.16 m, was placed in front of the tomb on the east side. Traces of burning, as well as a layer of ashes testified to offerings being made there for the dead. Pottery sherds found near the tomb belonged to local amphorae of the 2nd century AD, a small drinking bowl and a CS vase Form 40. A 2nd century AD date for the tomb appears to be acceptable.

This year's excavations confirmed earlier observations that the greatest prosperity of the town and the resultant construction of the most impressive funerary structures should be linked with the first two centuries of Roman domination in Egypt. It may well have been the richness of inhabitants that prompted the robbers to plunder the tombs in search of easy booty.