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Alexandria: Kom El-Dikka Excavations 1997

Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean 9, 23-36

1998

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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ALEXANDRIA

KOM EL-DIKKA EXCAVATIONS 1997

Grzegorz Majcherek

Archaeological excavations were continued over the entire course of the 1996-1997 season.¹ As in the previous campaigns, limited archaeological research proceeded on an ongoing basis in support of the program for conservation and preservation works in the cistern and baths. The archaeological campaign proper lasted for three months, in April-June 1997, and focused on the continued exploration of some well-preserved Early Roman residential architecture uncovered in Sector F in the past seasons. In December 1996, in consequence of a visit to the site by Polish Prime Minister Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz, who took great interest in our current research program, the Mission received substantial financial support from the Polish Government. We would like to express our deepest gratitude for this assistance.

CISTERN (sector L)

The key objective – to investigate and uncover in full the huge wall that was built along the western edge of Street R4 – has been achieved. The northern end of the wall had been

¹ Excavations were directed by Dr. Grzegorz Majcherek; the members of the Mission were: Dr. Jolanta Młynarczyk, Mrs. Iwona Zych, Mrs. Teresa Witkowska, Mrs. Renata Kucharzyk, archaeologists; Mr. Zbigniew Solarewicz, architect; and Mr. Waldemar Jerke, photographer. The Supreme Council of Antiquities was efficiently represented by Mr. Ahmed Mousa. The Mission would like to acknowledge its deep gratitude to the SCA authorities, especially to Prof. Dr. Ali Hassan, Secretary General of the SCA, and Mr. Ahmed Abdel Fattah, Director General of the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria, for their cooperation and support kindly extended to the Mission throughout the course of its activities.

cleared in the previous two seasons.² Currently, the southern end, a section some 10 m long, has been excavated. The wall had suffered serious damage in the medieval period when it was robbed of almost all the facing stones, in places right down to the foundations, that is 6 m below the presently preserved top of the wall. Based on finds from the robbers' pit, which include Fustat Fatimid Sgraffito and Early Mamluk Sgraff sherds, as well as fragments of medieval lamps, this event can be dated to the 12th-14th centuries AD. The southernmost, relatively well preserved buttress (no. 4) was found to have been erected on a level slightly above the foundations of the wall itself. The joining with the wall indicates that the buttress was not part of the original design, but was added apparently at a later date. Finds from the layers underlying the foundations included Egyptian and imported common wares from the 4th century AD, but a lack of well-dated objects excluded any more exact chronological determinations. Archaeological work along the northern facade of the cistern complex concentrated on clearing a section some 15 m long, leaving only a small section near the northeastern corner of the building where excavations were made impossible by the severity of the damage to the building. Our knowledge of the stratigraphy of the area indicates that a deposit of ashes and building debris from the latest renovation of the baths, some 3-4 m thick, had accumulated gradually in the area to the north of the cistern already in the 6th century.³ The parallel renovation of the cistern resulted in a complex of eight interconnected reservoirs being built on top of the ruined structure. The foundations of these

² See G. Majcherek, Kom el-Dikka excavations 1995-1996, *PAM VIII*, 1996 (1997), pp. 17-31.

³ For the stratigraphy and chronology of the bath complex, see W. Kołataj, *Imperial Baths at Kom el-Dikka*, Warsaw 1992, pp. 50-51.

new reservoirs were set on a much higher level than the previous ones, corresponding with the new elevated level of the surrounding area. In consequence of this renovation, almost the entire northern facade of the cistern found itself underground. This year's investigations indicated that a considerable part of this facade had been destroyed, either as a result of dismantling in antiquity or because of severe caving in of the ground underneath the structure, extending even several meters down. Fortunately, the lower part of the facade, which reaches up to 11 m above sea level, is relatively well preserved. Work on its preservation is planned for the next season. The disturbed stratigraphy, featuring various pits and cavities, does not allow for a precise determination of the chronology of the process of destruction. The fill that is found also underneath the cistern contains a typical spectrum of Late Roman, Egyptian and imported pottery, as well as fragments of later products: glazed Fatimid and Mamluk wares.

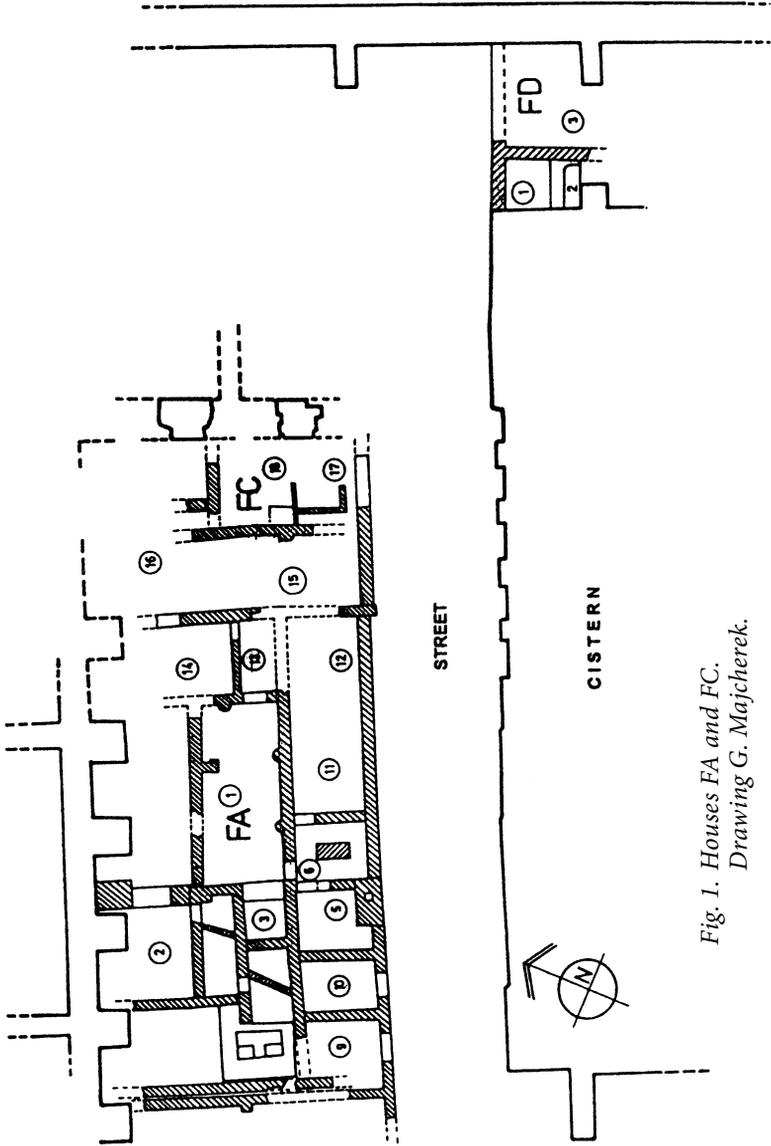
RESIDENTIAL DISTRICT (sector F)

This year's campaign was the fourth successive season of excavations in this sector.⁴ The objective was to uncover the ruins of Early Roman residential architecture. In the course of previous work, House FA was investigated practically in its full extent and House FB in a small fragment (fig. 1). The excavations were extended to the east this year, to the line marked by the Late Roman wall linking the baths and cisterns. As in the sector as a whole, the upper layers in the newly excavated area consisted of a thick homogeneous leveling layer made up of mostly ashes and debris from the last rebuilding of the baths.

⁴ For the results of earlier campaigns, see G. Majcherek, Alexandria 1994, archaeological excavations, *PAM VI*, 1994 (1995), pp. 11-20; id., Alexandria, excavations 1995, *PAM VII*, 1995 (1996), pp.13-22; id., Kom el-Dikka, excavations 1996, *PAM VIII*, 1996 (1997), pp. 17-31.

STREET R4

BATHS



FD

STREET

CISTERN

Fig. 1. Houses FA and FC.
Drawing G. Majcherek.

Directly underneath the leveling layer, a number of Late Roman domestic installations were discovered. In the southern end of the trench, there was a fragmentarily preserved circular basin (dia. c. 1.70 m), built of big limestone blocks faced with waterproof mortar on the inside. Yet another section of a sewage channel running approximately E-W was uncovered; previously, the same channel had been identified and investigated in the western and central part of the sector. In the northern end of the trench, the remains of a local water conduit were uncovered, made of African *spatheion*-type amphorae with cut-off ends to serve as a pipe. The corresponding layers yielded a rich assemblage of finds, mainly pottery. The majority of the vessels represents Egyptian wares: Nile silt amphorae of Egloff Forms 172, 177-179, and domestic and kitchen wares. Of interest among the imported wares are early forms of Gazan amphorae (LRA 4)⁵ and oil-containers produced in Cilicia and North Syria (LRA 1). A few accompanying sherds of African Red Slip and Cypriot Red Slip wares date the use of these installation to the 5th century AD. It seems that this entire sector was used at the time as a service area for the baths, although missing the architectural context it is difficult to be certain about the exact function. The area is criss-crossed with all kinds of cavities and robbers' pits from late Antiquity to Medieval times. In consequence of this activity, the underlying structures have been largely destroyed. The top of the best preserved sections of walls was found at a level some 7 m above sea level. We succeeded in clearing another four rooms of the east wing of the Early Roman House FA. In loc. 14, which abuts on the courtyard, the marble floor was finally uncovered in its

⁵ For the new chronology of Gazan amphorae, see G. Majcherek, Gazan amphorae: typology reconsidered, in: H. Meyza, J. Młynarczyk (eds.), *Hellenistic and Roman Pottery in the Eastern Mediterranean*, Warsaw 1995, pp. 163-178.



Fig. 2. Marble floor in House FA.

entirety. The central geometric panel was found to be made of marble and porphyry, and surrounded by slabs of grey marble (fig. 2). While the northern wall of the room is destroyed, the eastern one was found to have a doorway with a marble threshold slab, leading to the next room (loc. 16). The walls of this small room were largely plundered in antiquity and destroyed by the construction of the outer southern wall of the bath.

The entire eastern wing is destroyed to a similar degree. Walls from the original occupation phase have been preserved only in the bottom parts. The remaining existing sections, mostly from the 3rd/4th century AD, belong to the second occupation phase. In consequence of a major rebuilding at this time, the original plan was largely obliterated and cannot be reconstructed as yet. It appears that in the late phase of occupation, house FA and the neighboring House FC were func-

tionally interconnected. In all the explored rooms, there was an occupational layer higher up, consisting mostly of a clay and lime floors. The deposits underneath these floors contained color plaster fragments, small stucco and limestone elements of architectural decoration (cornices, column facing, etc.). The finds from this accumulation date the destruction of the original building to the late 3rd century AD.

Egyptian-made products are represented mainly by amphorae from the Mareotic region (imitations of Dressel 2-4 and biconical amphorae) and a local Red Slipped tableware. The presence of Egyptian imitations of Cypriot Sigillata products is noteworthy, particularly form 40. Imported pottery is represented by amphorae primarily: Cretan (forms CA 1-3), Tripolitanian (I and II) and from Asia Minor.

The structures from the original phase of the building are only fragmentarily preserved. A section of the southern facade of adjoining house FC was excavated; unfortunately, it is preserved only as a foundation course. This wall, some 0.50 m thick, was built of very big blocks exceeding 1.00 m in length. The remains of plaster on the sides suggests that it was part of an earlier structure, possibly of Ptolemaic age. Remains of an entrance from the street, a threshold and traces of jambs, were discovered in the eastern part of the trench. Apparently, the entrance had been flanked by two pilasters; remains of the western one have been discovered. The street surface in front of the entrance was partially covered with limestone slabs. The street level at this point corresponds to that discovered in trench F IV. In the abutting room 17, there are the remains of a staircase leading to the upper floors. In the neighboring room 18, remains of domestic installations were discovered: a domestic pit with the top part of an amphora serving as a funnel. In room 19, adjoining on the north, two floor levels were cleared. The upper one was paved with assorted marble tiles,

while the lower one was made of lime mortar painted red, pointing to a rather prolonged period of use. Excavations in this area had to be temporarily suspended in order to take appropriate preservation measures in view of the disintegrated condition of surrounding walls. It appears that house FC reached all the way to street R4. A detailed study of its plan and architectural stratigraphy will be made following excavations in the coming season.

TRENCH FIV

The trench opened in the previous campaign was now extended to the east, covering the area between the cisterns and the great perimeter wall on street R4.⁶ Upon removing the upper Late Roman leveling stratum (some 2 m thick), a layer of debris was discovered, consisting of regular limestone blocks coming from an earlier structure. Beside the typical debris resulting



Fig. 3. Stucco plaster head.

from either the dismantling or destruction of a building, the layer yielded numerous fragments of architectural elements, colored plaster, cornices, stucco. Interesting finds include a broken Tripolitanian III amphora, dated to the 3 century, a stucco plaster head (fig. 3), and an excellently preserved game counter with an inscription on one side and a representation

⁶ For the initial results, see G. Majcherek, *Kom el-Dikka, Excavations 1996, PAM VIII, 1996 (1997)*, pp. 30-31.

of a city gate on the other (fig. 4). Directly underneath this debris, a large E-W wall was uncovered, 1.25 m wide, structurally joined with the great wall on the east and similarly constructed: a core of irregular stones set in mortar tempered with considerable quantities of ash, faced with small rectangular blocks. The wall, which is preserved down to c. 7.30 m above sea level

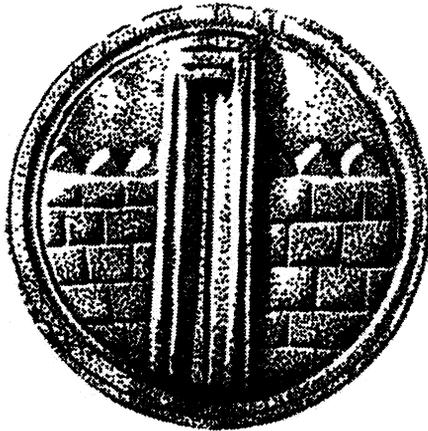


Fig. 4. Game counter

(that is, about 4.95 m below the extant top of the eastern wall), was presumably never finished. It served as a kind of additional, buttress for the eastern wall, safeguarding it against settling.

In the space located to the south (loc. 3), the remains of a large kiln were uncovered. The oval brick structure was approached from the north. Its eastern part had been destroyed when the great wall was built. On the north, the kiln abutted a large container built in a technique combining stones and brick. The finds from this phase, mainly Egyptian and imported pottery, indicate that the kiln remained in use in the late 3rd century AD. The nearby basins, discovered in the previous year, were investigated, too. The floor of the northern basin (loc. 2) was cleared and found to be made of tightly fitted limestone slabs. The characteristic arrangement of drains from the upper southern basin (loc. 1) and the hollow in the floor for fusels to settle (organic remains were found inside it) appear to indicate that the basins had been used to hold wine or oil. At this point in the research, it is difficult to be certain about the exact function of these installations.

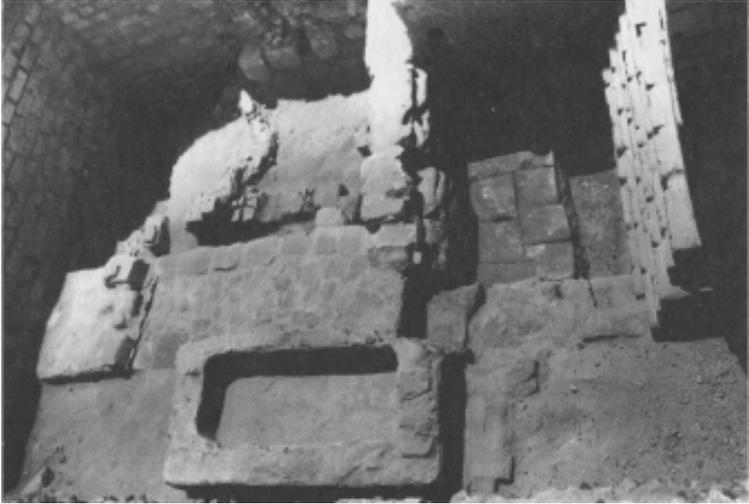


Fig. 5. Part of Roman House FD.

They were definitely in use at the turn of the 3rd century, just before the cistern was erected.

In the course of the investigations, it was found that the wall of the unfinished buttress had been constructed on top of an Early Roman facade wall belonging to house FD (fig. 5). Decorating the outer facade was plaster painted with two horizontal bands, 6 cm thick, set about 45 cm apart. On the southern side of the wall (in loc. 3), a layer of architectural debris was cleared. Among the finds of interest, a fluted "papyrus"-column stucco facing should be mentioned, originating most probably from the building's earliest decoration. Close to the western extreme of the trench a single limestone block retaining its original plastering was found. The decoration consisted of a white-painted dado surmounted with rectangular panels of yellow and red, framed by green stripes. The panels

were separated by narrow black-painted bands. Examples of similar decoration, closely recalling the first Pompeian style, were previously recorded in house FA.

In the western part of the trench, just below the corner of the cistern, the entrance to this building was discovered. It was a kind of porch (*prothyron*) with steps leading up from the street level between flanking projections. The steps of the porch were largely destroyed, but the extant remains indicate that the surface of the side street at this time was located 6 m above sea level. The level corresponds to the Early Roman level of street R4, identified in 1989 near the currently explored house. The entrance was only the latest in a series that had led inside the building. The lowermost threshold was found at c. 5.20 m above sea level. In a small test trench dug next to the great wall, a Ptolemaic wall was found to run immediately under the Early Roman one. Built as an *opus isodomum* wall, it used exceptionally large blocks in its construction; some are more than a meter long. Both walls were partly destroyed when the great perimeter wall enclosing the cisterns was constructed (the foundations of the great wall were reached at a depth of 4.90 m above sea level). In the section of the side street that was excavated this year, the surface was made of successive tamped layers of lime. The intervening layers contained large quantities of pottery, representing a wide spectrum of type-forms: Egyptian and imported amphorae, stamped amphora handles and primarily a numerous assemblage of tableware forms. Beside the thin-walled Coan vessels, there is considerable number of Eastern Sigillata A (Hayes *EAA* Forms: 4, 28), fragments and several examples of stamped Italian Terra Sigillata. Several lamps, both local and imported, of late Ptolemaic date were also found (e.g. inv. no. 4408). A chronological analysis of the dated pottery forms and the lamps indicate that the building and corresponding street levels date to the end of the 1st cen-

tury BC - beginning of the 1st century AD. Erecting Early Roman structures on the remains of Ptolemaic walls, and largely repeating the plan of earlier structures in consequence, is a phenomenon observed already in the past in the habitation district in sector W1N of the site.⁸ This is proof of architectural and urban-planning continuity in this part of the ancient city. The street is indeed a continuation of a side street of the same width (c. 5 m) discovered in previous campaigns in the habitation district east of street R4. Both the course and the localization on Mahmud Bey's grid of city streets suggest that it might be a continuation of a small latitudinal street L' (traced by E. Breccia in the eastern part of Alexandria, near street R3).⁹ The identification of its course on the Kom el-Dikka site constitutes an important breakthrough in studies on the urban planning of Alexandria, permitting for the first time an archaeologically well-documented reconstruction of the inner divisions of major insulae and providing data for determining the basic dimensions of a building lot in the town of Ptolemaic and Early Roman times.

SECTOR H

A series of trenches was planned to be dug in this sector, primarily in order to establish the stratigraphical sequence and to evaluate prospects for future regular excavations in the area comprised between the theater and the baths.¹⁰ A small trench (c. 5 x 5 m) designated H-II was sunk in the area south of the

⁸ G. Majcherek, Excavations at Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria in the 1989 season, *PAM I*, 1988-1989 (1990), pp. 75-83.

⁹ See E. Breccia in: *Enciclopedia Italiana I*, 1929, s.v. Alessandria; A. Adriani, *Reperitorio C*, p. 63, no. 11.

¹⁰ This sector has not been investigated so far, save for a trial trench (H) explored at its eastern end, see J. Lipińska, H. Riad, Trial pits at Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria, *ASAE LIX*, 1966, pp. 99-108. The work in this area was financed from a special government grant provided by the Prime Minister of the Polish Republic Włodzimirz Cimoszewicz.

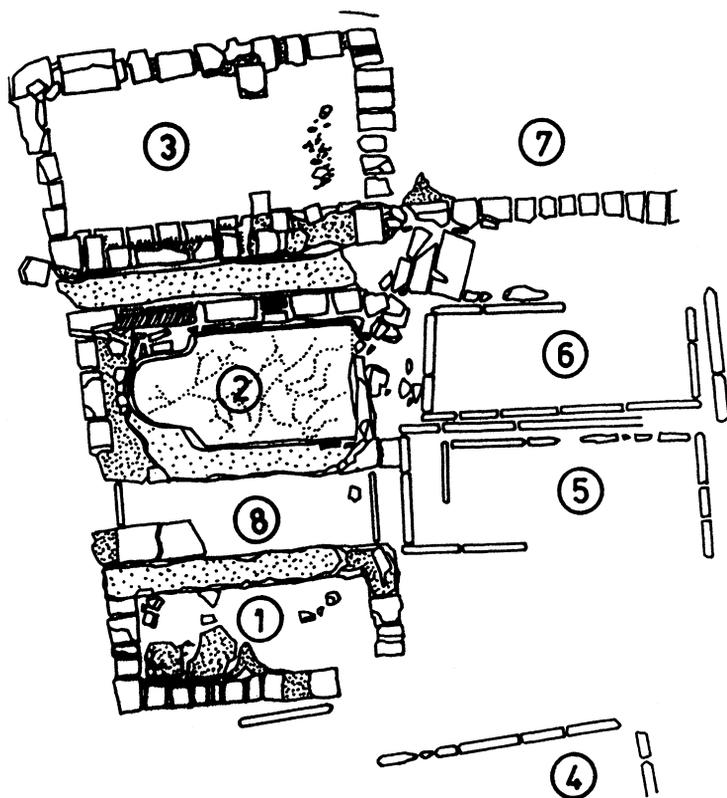


Fig. 6. Tombs of the Upper Islamic Necropolis.

Late Roman structure accommodating an auditorium (Building no. 1). Immediately below the present topsoil (c. 14.25 m above sea level), tombs of the Upper Islamic Necropolis were cleared (fig. 6). Graves were traditionally oriented SW-NE, the dead buried facing the *qibla*. The eight tombs recorded in the trench belonged to two typologically different groups. One group – undoubtedly earlier since some of its examples were overlaid by other structures – consisted of tombs shaped as open cases with walls made of vertically set slabs (nos 4-5, 8).

Another group (nos 1-3, 6-7) represented a more developed type. Tombs were built of small limestone blocks lined with plaster. In one case (no. 2), the western part of the grave was apse-shaped and the floor was plastered with lime mortar. Some 0.70 to 1.10 m below these superstructures, stone-made burial cists were found, falling also into two different groups: flat-roofed and gable-roofed. Both were constructed of small, rather regular stones covered with slabs. Of special interest was tomb no. 3, additionally equipped with a vertical shaft built over the eastern part of the cist, apparently designed to accommodate multiple burials. The accompanying layers yielded few finds, mostly potsherds and some glass shards. Apart from residual Late Roman pottery, a number of sherds of Ayyubid Overglaze Painted and Early Mamluk Sgraff and Slip Painted wares, as well as some Chinese celadon imitations were recorded. The finds point to the 12th-13th centuries AD as the most plausible date for the Upper Necropolis. Below the burials, a thick (1.50-2.00 m) stratum of rubble sloping to the north and west was explored. It consisted mostly of ashes and hardened slag. Typical Late Roman series, including fragments of LRA 1, LRA 4, and Egyptian LRA 5/6, were accompanied by examples of Egyptian Red Slip Ware A and early lead glazed "Coptic" ware, as well as related molded glazed pottery. Immediately underneath, a demolition layer over 1 m thick was cleared and found to consist of stone rubble, mortar and sand. This stratum covered the top of a huge N-S wall, c. 0.60 m wide. The wall of Late Roman date was apparently demolished at the end of antiquity; however, its exact date and function is yet to be established. It is surprising that no tomb whatsoever of the Lower Necropolis (dated to the 7th-8th centuries AD) was found in the trench. It seems that the entire area south of the baths had already started to serve as a dumping ground in this period.