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MAREA REPORT 2009

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Abstract: Two areas of the Byzantine basilica in Marea were investigated as part of the ongoing archaeological project. In the eastern part of the nave and aisles an intriguing water installation was discovered and an entrance in the south wall was investigated. More units identified as shops were found lining the southern side of a courtyard in front of the main western entrance to the church. One of the rooms yielded a coin weight of copper alloy, another a rare glass handle attachment in the shape of a comic actor's mask. A cellar found in this area produced many small jugs used for distributing wine in small quantities.

Keywords: Marea, Byzantine basilica, shops, water well, coin weight, glass mask

The tenth excavation season of the Polish Archaeological Mission at Marea contributed significant data on the functioning of the basilical church. Two areas were investigated: the central part of the *quadratum populi* (nave and aisles) and units adjoining the southwestern corner of the church [Fig. 1].

NAVE

The nave (unit 13) was originally paved with large marble flagstones, the negatives of which can be traced in the extant mortar bedding. One of the slabs, found out of its original context, was almost intact. A *prostoon* or processional way, 1.80 m wide, ran from the pulpit — which was accessible through the central passage in the altar screen and the remains of which were discovered last season — presumably

to the western gate [Fig. 4]. Near the western end of the pulpit, on the northern and southern sides, there were clear traces of narrow passageways, which ended at the colonnades separating the aisles from the nave [see Fig. 4]. Their course was marked by remains of gray cement, which served as bedding for a now-lost pavement in *opus sectile*, which had presumably been laid on a stabilizing layer made of cut amphora fragments, like the pavement in front of the pulpit and in unit 20 (Szymańska, Babraj 2011: 88 and Fig. 8).

The uncovered center section of the northern aisle (2) was also paved with flagstones, impressions of these being preserved in the mortar bedding wherever the pavement was not preserved. The slabs are much narrower than in the nave. The wall separating the aisle from the north side

chapel (discovered in 2004, see Szymańska, Babraj 2005: 47–48, Figs 4, 5) had five evenly spaced projections, which may have also played the role of buttresses [Fig. 2]. Abutting the eastern part of this wall on the south (and east of the presumed buttresses) was a bench built of large, neatly dressed stone blocks covered with a thick layer of plaster.

A rectangular structure, 4.50 x 2.50 m in plan and 1.50 m high, stood in place of the fifth column in the row that separated the north aisle from the nave; the spot matched the position of the entrance to the north side chapel and was near to the northern transept. It was built of masonry blocks similar in size to the stones used for the walls of the basilica. The structure is certainly later than the original church

building, as it was founded on the stylobate of the colonnade, from which the column had been removed. A well was found to the east of this structure. At present, pending thorough study and search for parallels, it can be surmised that the structure was used to draw water. The well itself, built of stone blocks, was 5.60 m deep and had a small squarish opening. Small footholds were cut in the south and north walls, thirteen on each side and located at different heights [Fig. 3]. The channel conducting water, most probably groundwater, ran eastward along the stylobate; it was constructed of skillfully dressed stone blocks. At the bottom of the well there was a small cistern. Its fill contained numerous amphora sherds.

An Attic column base of marble, found in the nave, was most probably once part of

Team

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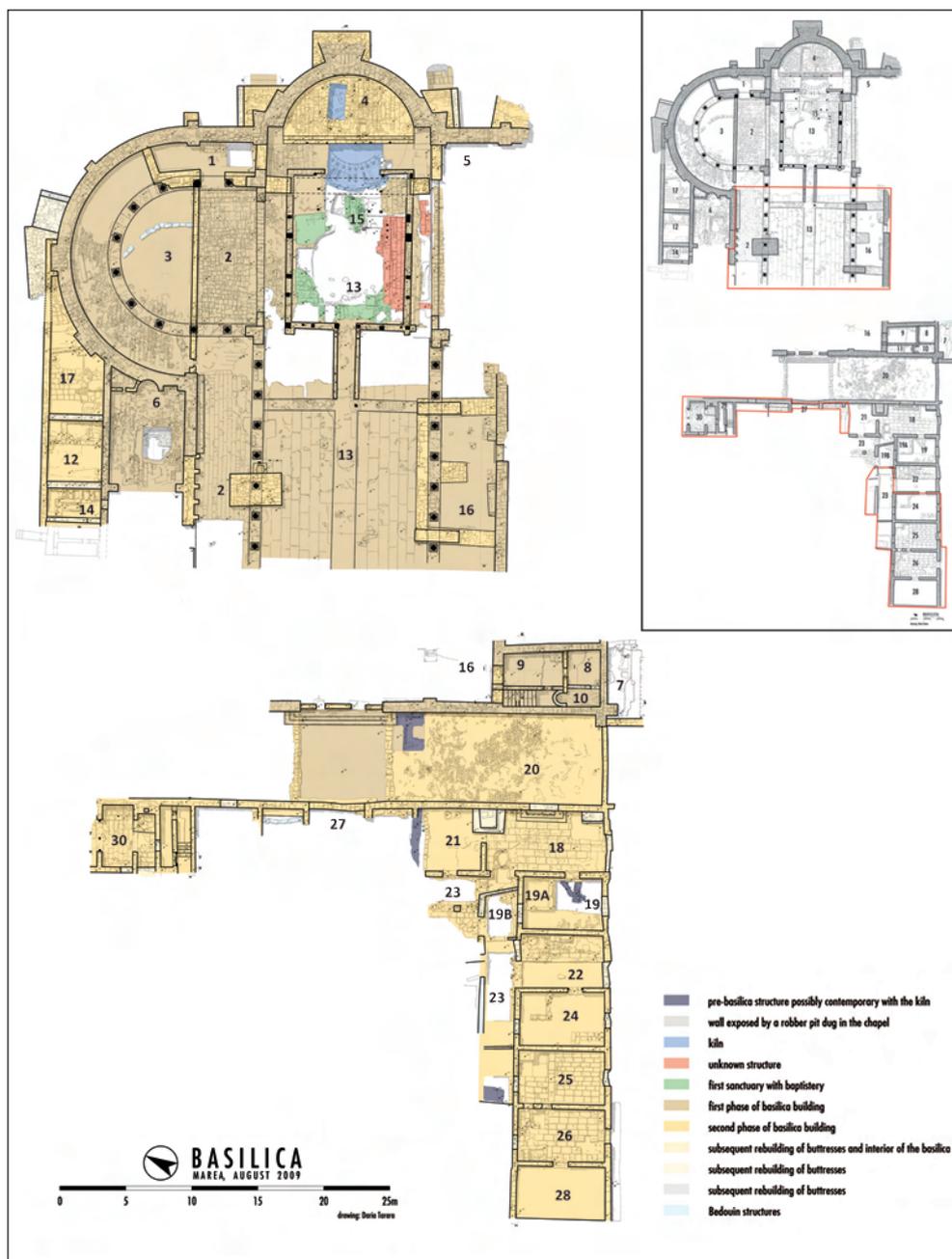


Fig. 1. Plan of the uncovered part of the basilica; inset, trenches excavated in 2009 marked in red (Drawing D. Tarara)



Fig. 2. North wall of the north aisle with presumed buttresses
(Photo P. Suszek)

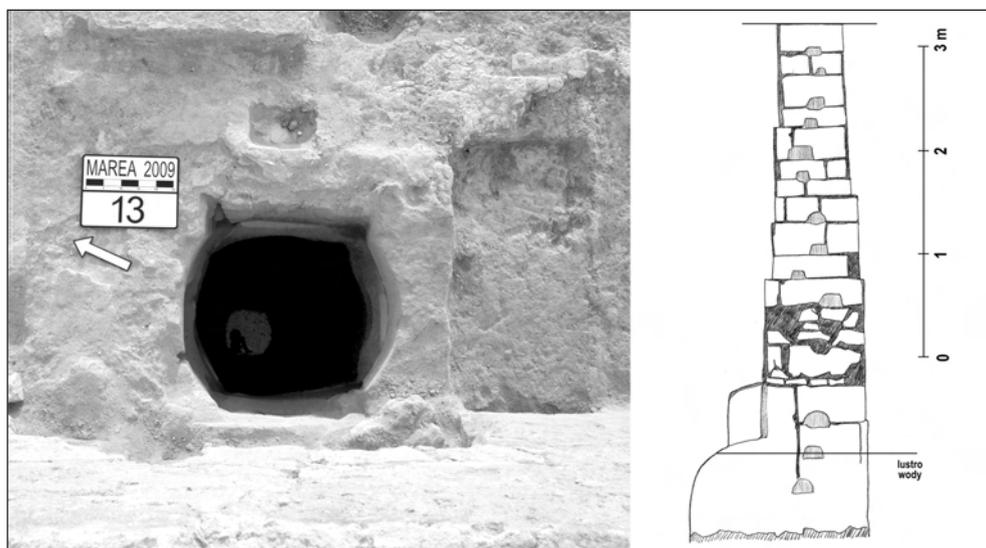


Fig. 3. Top view of well head close to the water installation and section through the well and cistern below it (Photo K. Babraj; drawing T. Skrzypiec)

the colonnade separating the nave from the north aisle. The base, which had originally been part of a different structure, was placed on one of the impostes laid on the stylobate.

In the eastern part of the uncovered section of the north aisle there was a vessel (*quadus*) anchored in the pavement with fragments of reused limestone slabs. A similar artifact was found last season in the sanctuary.

Excavations in the south aisle of the basilica uncovered two structures set 8.50 m apart. Both were free-standing, built of stone blocks, measuring 3.00 m by 1.00 m and 1.00 m high [Fig. 5]. They

presumably separated the nave from the south aisle and set off a space facing a side entrance opening to the south. They were erected, as was the pedestal in the other aisle, between columns of the southern colonnade, which indicates that they were constructed at a later date. The space between these structures (2.00 m by 2.80 m) was paved with very large limestone flagstones. Another well-made pavement of limestone slabs was recorded in a test under this floor at a depth of 1.20 m. It suggests that there was either earlier occupation of the basilica or a different building underlying the church in this location.



Fig. 4. Sanctuary of the basilica with ambo and proston, looking east; note apparent water installation in the north aisle (Photo T. Skrzypiec)

A well-preserved side entrance with two doorjambs was found in the south wall of the basilica [Fig. 6]. It appears



to have remained in use until the end of the occupation of the church. A bench abutted this entrance on the west side; its side was painted with two successive coats of vivid red. To the west of the entrance, about 3 m away from it, there was a small recess in the wall, presumably for a stoup in the form of a marble basin, a fragment of which was found nearby.

Various elements of marble architectural decor were found in the part of the *quadratum populi* (nave and aisles) uncovered this season. These elements included column fragments (pieces of capitals, shafts, bases), painted moldings that once constituted wall decoration, as well as limestone structural elements, such as thresholds, a statue console, etc.

Fig. 5. Two stone structures flanking entrance through south doorway, seen to the east (Photo T. Skrzypiec)



Fig. 6. Southern entrance to the basilica, looking south (Photo K. Babraj)

(on the architectural decoration from the basilica in Marea, see Szymańska, Babraj 2010), as well as small fragments of a mosaic made of glass cubes from the cupola. A trial reconstruction of at least some elements of the church interior will be attempted on these grounds.

AREA IN FRONT OF THE BASILICA

A test trench, 2.20 m square, was excavated in the northeastern corner of unit 20, immediately west of the steps leading to the main basilica entrance from the west. The unit, which seems to have been a roofed courtyard in front of the church, was discovered last season. A row of amphorae, twelve of which were unearthed, ran west

from the wall of the building, presumably continuing under the floor of unit 20 [Fig. 7]. The vessels were buried mouth down, their bodies cut off to an even level. Amphorae of this type were common from the 1st to the 4th century (see Caravale, Toffoletti 1997: 156; Gempeler 1992: Pl. 120, Form K 700, 188). Further studies are needed to interpret this structure. Significantly, the date of these vessels matches finds from the amphora kiln, on which the apse and presbytery of the basilica were founded (for the date of the vessels, G. Majcherek, personal communication; see also Szymańska, Babraj 2004: 62). Altitude measurements have confirmed that the lined-up amphorae and the kilns were on the same level.



Fig. 7. Space sectioned off by amphorae of 2nd–3rd century date with cut necks, found in the layer under the floor of the roofed courtyard (no. 20), looking south (Photo J. Babraj)

SHOPS NORTHWEST
OF THE BASILICA

Another five units were excavated by the southwestern corner of the basilica (loci 23, 24, 25, 26 and 28) [Fig. 8], extending the row of rooms explored already in previous seasons (2005, 2007 and 2008) and contributing data to the ongoing research on the economy of Byzantine churches. Units 25 and 26 may have served as a kind of exchange office, where pilgrims on their way to Abu Mina could change their money (see Szymańska, Babraj 2005: 52). Excavation of these rooms yielded over 300 coins, most of which were too corroded for conservation, but their presence alone

pointed to the economic function of these rooms. A coin weight was also discovered in unit 26 (for a similar specimen [six *nomismata*] dated to the 4th–6th century, see Wamser, Zahlhaas [eds] 1998: 161, 163, Cat. 197; see also Wamser [ed.] 2004: 360–367) [Fig. 9, top right]. Both rooms were neatly paved with limestone slabs of roughly equal size.

These five rooms, which were most probably shops, yielded the largest number of small finds, including a plethora of objects of daily use. These included bone plaques for adornment of wooden boxes, some of them skillfully carved, like a fragment of a plaque depicting



Fig. 8. Shops explored behind the southwestern corner of the basilica, looking southwest (Photo T. Skrzypiec)

a dancing Maenad [Fig. 9, top left]. Other finds included bone and bronze hair pins, two linked bronze plates that were once part of a decorated bracelet, hanger hooks, fishing hooks, game pieces, half of a stone mold with a depiction of a gazelle, etc. Above all, however, the exploration of these rooms brought to light large amounts of earthenware vessels, some of

which were preserved intact. They were mostly amphorae, tableware, bowls, jugs, etc., as well as two amphora stoppers. Some of the sherds bore Greek inscriptions, most probably indicating measures.

Coptic pottery with painted decoration constituted a noteworthy group of finds. Vessels were adorned with floral and faunal motifs, as well as human



Fig. 9. Finds from units identified as shops in front of the western basilica entrance: (clockwise from top right) coin weight; glass jug handle attachment in the shape of a comic actor's mask, fragmentary bone plaque with image of a dancing Maenad (Photo K. Babraj [top right], P. Suszek)

figures, usually male busts typical of this repertoire. Other finds included several fragments of terracotta figurines with partly preserved polychromy, as well as a whistle in the shape of a rooster. There were also numerous oil lamps, all of them products of the workshops in Abu Mina (Szymańska 2008). An ampulla of St Menas was found in unit 23. Fragments of glass perfume bottles, some of them gilded, and *polycandelon* lamps were just as numerous as in previous seasons (Kucharczyk 2008; Szymańska, Babraj 2005: 53).

The finds and interior furnishings from unit 24 suggested that it was a kind of tavern(?). A small closed-off space in the northeastern corner may have been used for meal preparation. Finds included 145 shells of edible clams and snails, and a considerable amount of pottery, tableware and kitchenware. The most interesting find was a glass theatre mask applied as a decorative element to the handle of a glass vessel [Fig. 9, bottom right].¹

UNITS NORTHWEST

OF THE BASILICA ENTRANCE

Exploration to the northwest of the main entrance to the basilica concentrated foremost on an air vent, which could be seen in the top of a wall that extended the partition wall between the courtyard (unit 18) and reception hall (unit 20) located to the south of the church entrance. A bread oven built of two stones was discovered in the upper layers

(on the spot of unit 30), 0.67 m below the top of the wall; the air vent was located immediately above this oven. Sherds of 7th–8th century amphorae were found inside this oven.

More confirmation of the economic functioning of the basilica came from the exploration of two adjoining rooms and cellar below them [Fig. 11]. The southern of the two units, 29, contained a staircase, entered from the west. The space under the stairs was open and was reached from unit 30 through a doorway with preserved hinges. There was a dirt floor in this unit.

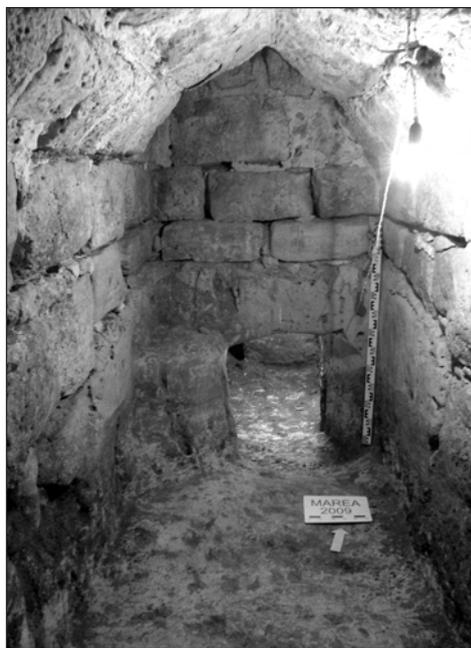


Fig. 10. Cellar under unit 30, looking south
(Photo T. Skrzypiec)

¹ Similar decoration of glass vessel handles is dated to the 1st–2nd century, see, e.g., von Saldern *et alii* 1974: 194, Cat. 231. Theatre masks adorning vessels from Egypt have also been dated to the 4th century, see Israeli 2003: 190, Cat. 224. A different-style mask found in Thessaloniki, out of archaeological context, has been dated to the 4th–5th century, see Antonaras 2009: 332–335, Pl. 45, XXIV 753.

Four stone steps have been preserved and there are traces of the mounting of more on the walls of the unit.

Unit 30, located immediately to the north of unit 29 [see *Fig. 11*], was paved with limestone slabs. It was paved throughout and had a large recess in the southern part, communicating with the space under the staircase. The entrance, a double gate in the broad side of the unit, opened to the north, onto the courtyard facing the lake. Three square openings cut in the threshold held the hinges and the bolt of the lock. Installations for tying down donkeys, familiar from the practices

of modern day local Bedouin, were cut in two stone blocks.

A hole in the pavement of the back part of unit 30, immediately beneath the air vent mentioned above, led to a cellar. It appears to have been a robber's hole. The cellar consisted of two vaulted units, which had been hewn in bedrock in the lower part and raised of large stone blocks in the upper part [*Fig. 10*], interconnected by a small passageway, 0.50 m in height, hewn in the rock. Inside there were over one hundred small wine jugs (see Drzymuchowska 2012, in this volume) [*Fig. 12*]² and some oil lamps, as well as, significantly, a large



Fig. 11. Units 29 and 30, looking east
(Photo T. Skrzypiec)

² Similar jugs have been interpreted as water containers (Kaminski-Menssen 1996: 263–265, Pls 112–118), but their number and storage in a cool cellar points to wine as a product requiring specific storage conditions.

number of coins concentrated in one place (a hoard?). The implication is that the goods stored in the cellar were sold and in that case it would be wine rather than water.

The cellar was accessed from the lakeside by a flight of rock-cut steps and

a now blocked doorway. It can be said therefore to be yet another room for commercial purposes adjacent to the basilica, which, along with shops, exchange offices and taverns (?) catered to the needs of pilgrims who stopped there on the way to Abu Mina.



*Fig. 12. Jugs found in the cellar under unit 30
(Photo J. Babraj)*

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