

Adam Łukaszewicz

Caesar in Alexandria : fragmentary Latin dipinti discovered at Kom el-Dikka

The Journal of Juristic Papyrology 41, 79-92

2011

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.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Adam Łukaszewicz

**CAESAR IN ALEXANDRIA.
FRAGMENTARY LATIN DIPINTI DISCOVERED
AT KOM EL-DIKKA**

SINCE 1960 THE SITE OF KOM EL-DIKKA in Alexandria has been excavated by the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of the University of Warsaw. Several buildings were discovered, including a complex of Roman baths of the fourth century AD with adjacent structures.¹

During the decades of excavations, the *kom* has been transformed into a deep hole from which the reconstructed remnants of late antique buildings emerge as the last evidence of the vanished splendour of the ‘Queen of the Mediterranean’.

The Roman baths are undoubtedly the most conspicuous architectural complex at Kom el-Dikka. They were partly restored by the architect Wojciech Kołataj and his team. Kołataj also produced a publication of the baths of Kom el-Dikka.²

Excavations directed by Grzegorz Majcherek continue in the area situated south-east of the baths. Recent work concentrates on the space separating the baths from the theatre. So far, no important remnants of architecture have been found. In late antiquity the area had been filled

¹ Judith MCKENZIE, *The Architecture of Alexandria and Egypt 300 BC – AD 700*, New Haven – London 2007, pp. 207–220.

² W. KOŁATAJ, *Imperial Baths at Kom el-Dikka [= Alexandrie VI]*, Warsaw 1992.

with earth and rubbish. The excavated layers consist chiefly of waste and ashes from the baths. In 2008 two lime kilns were discovered (fig. 1) in the excavated area in a layer of the fourth century, which agrees with the period of construction of the adjacent baths.³

Near these kilns, numerous fragments of marble ready for burning were found. This marble debris constitutes the last prospective load of the kiln which was left unburned for an unknown reason. The abandonment of the kilns probably marks the end of the building works on the baths. An approximate date of the end of the works comes from Late Roman coins of the last quarter of the fourth century found in the baths.⁴

It is common knowledge that in later antiquity precious marbles from earlier buildings were used as raw material for obtaining lime necessary for building purposes.⁵ In Constantinople during the construction of the new capital of the empire numerous lime kilns were in use. In the fourth century the emperors encouraged the production of lime. In 359 Constantius decided that the *coctores calcis* were to be given a single amphora of wine for every three waggonloads of the product (*C.Th.* 14.6.1). In 364 Valentinian and Valens granted to the *coctores* and carters of lime some privileges with respect to the compulsory public services (*C.Th.* 14.6.2). In 365 the rate for a waggonload of lime was set at one *solidus*, while lime-burning became a monopoly of a state-controlled corporation (*C.Th.* 14.6.3). A half of the product was to be used for aqueducts and half for the repair of buildings.

As far as raw material is concerned, the Theodosian Code (*C.Th.* 9.17.2 of 349) forbids burning lime from stones taken from tombs. In 365 Valentinian and Valens inform the governor (*consularis*) of Picenum that for public buildings he should not ask for money but for materials (*non in pecunia sed in ipsis speciebus postulare te par est* [*C.Th.* 15.1.17]). That was obviously an indirect encouragement of obtaining building materials by

³ G. MAJCHEREK, 'Alexandria, Kom el-Dikka: Excavations and preservation work. Preliminary report 2007/8', *PAM* 20 (2011), pp. 35–51, especially pp. 41–44. The *terminus post quem* is provided by Diocletian's tetradrachms.

⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 47–48.

⁵ Cf. A. ŁUKASZEWICZ, 'Some remarks on *P. Lond.* III 755 and the problem of building materials in the fourth century AD', *Archeologia* 30 (1975), pp. 115–118.

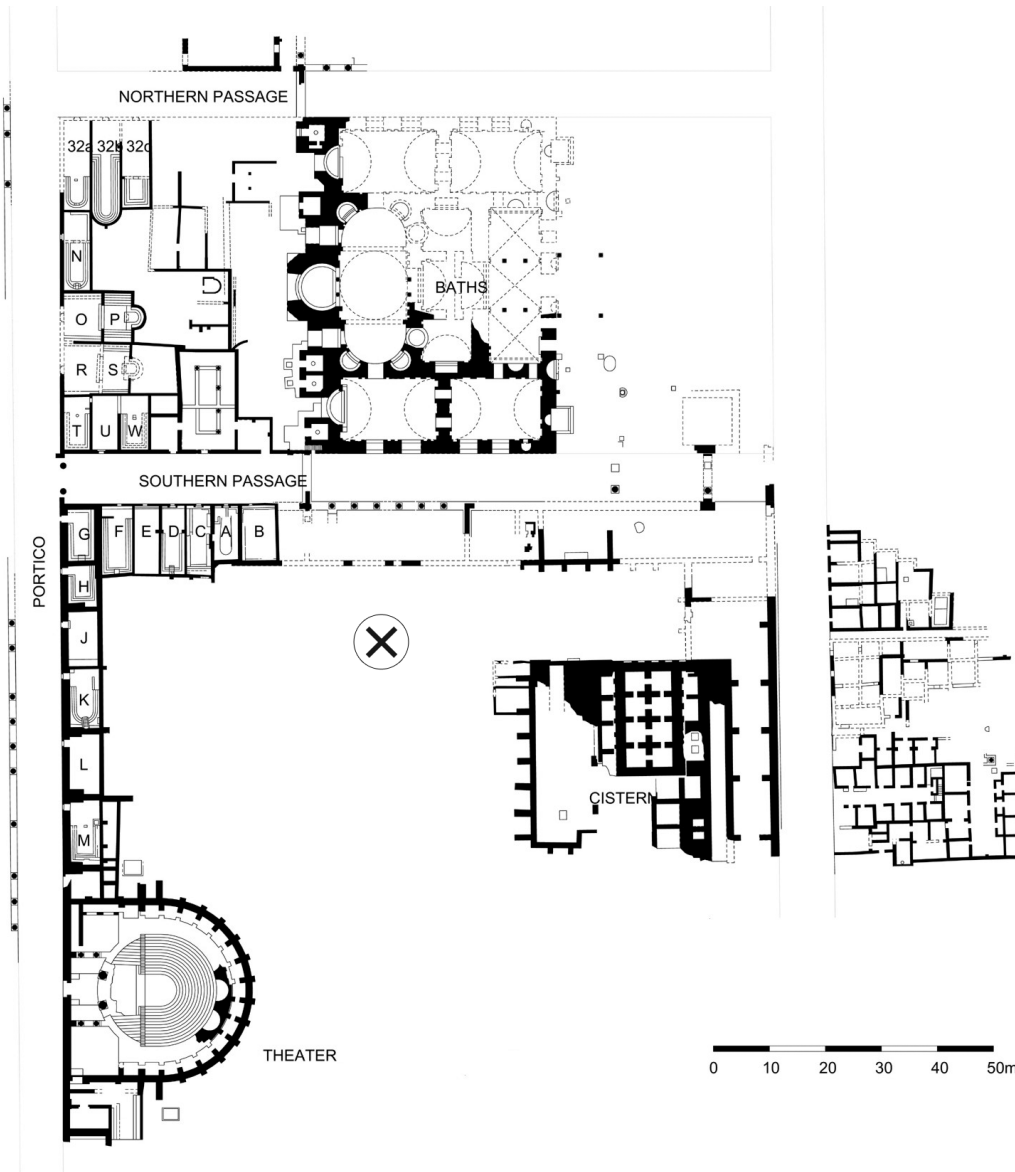


Fig. 1. Polish excavations at Kom el-Dikka; the findspot of the marble fragments marked with X (plan by Wojciech Kołtąj & Daria Tarara)

demolition of old structures. Libanius' oration *Pro templis* of approximately 386–390 is an eloquent testimony to the fate of pagan temples in the fourth century. After a period of apparent protection for places connected with the old religion under Constantius in 340–356 (*C.Th.* 9.17.1–4) and of a more genuine protection of pagan tombs by Julian until 363 (*C.Th.* 9.17.5), Arcadius in 397 assigned the material from pagan temples to the repair of roads, bridges, aqueducts and walls (*C.Th.* 15.1.36). In 399 he ordered the temples in the rural areas to be demolished (*C.Th.* 16.10.16). In 435 Theodosius II completed the work of destruction (*C.Th.* 16.10.25).

In reality, the rules known from the Theodosian Code do not concern protection of ancient monuments in our sense of the term but rather prohibit the illegal demolition of those structures. Some imperial constitutions could seem to provide a kind of protection of the environment. However, these measures really concern the comfort of the ruler. Such is the actual purpose of the law of Honorius and Theodosius of 419 (*C.Th.* 14.6.5) which forbids the usage of lime kilns polluting air in the heart of Constantinople. The right to decide in matters of public buildings was always a prerogative of the emperor (*D.* 50.10.3.1; 43.8.10).

Wojciech Kołataj is undoubtedly right when he calls the baths of Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria 'imperial *thermae*'. The decision to build that complex must have been taken by an emperor, probably by Constantine.⁶ Constantine, while building his new capital on the Bosphorus, did not hesitate to plunder other cities. The Chronicle of Hieronymus states: *Constantinopolis dedicatur omnium paene urbium nuditate*.⁷ That plague of demolition and plundering probably did not spare Egypt. A papyrus document (*P. Lond.* III 755, pp. 221–223) shows that in the first quarter of the fourth century in an Egyptian city, an inventory of columns with their bases and capitals was made, obviously for the purpose of an eventual reuse of those materials.⁸ The quality of the material (imported stone, i.e. marble, or a local stone) was registered. The papyrus came from Oxyrhynchus and the city concerned could certainly be Oxyrhynchus.

⁶ A. ŁUKASZEWICZ, 'Fragmenta Alexandrina I', *ZPE* 82 (1990), pp. 133–136.

⁷ Hieronymus, *Chron.*, [in:] *Eusebius Werke* VII, ed. R. HELM, Berlin 1956, p. 232.

⁸ ŁUKASZEWICZ, 'Some remarks on *P. Lond.* III 775' (cit. n. 5), pp. 115–118.

However, the document could also have originated from Alexandria, since papyri were often sold and transported from Alexandria to other places as a reusable material. The papyri of Abusir el-Meleq are a notorious example of such a practice.⁹ The *recto* of *P. Lond.* 111 755 contains three petitions to the prefect of Egypt, the first one dating to 303 (*P. Oxy.* 1 71). The list of building materials can be found on the *verso*.

In the fourth century the priority given to Constantinople could cause a delay of building projects in other cities, even if those projects were approved by the emperor. Maybe that was the reason why the baths of Kom el-Dikka were finally built only as late as *c.* 370, while the initial project was probably already conceived under Constantine. Maybe the monumental entrance and the dedicatory inscription were already set up under Constantine. It seems, however, that the vaulted structures which in the first half of the fourth century occupied the place were rebuilt only in the second half of that century, contemporaneously with the construction of the baths into which they were integrated as cellars containing furnaces and as storerooms of fuel (reed and straw).¹⁰

When the real work began, building materials were necessary, including enormous quantities of lime. Those materials were subject to imperial monopoly. Alexandria at that time had plenty of ruins. Their number even increased after the earthquake of 365. The suitable raw material, probably taken from the ruins of royal palaces, public buildings and pagan temples, was burnt in lime kilns. We are now fortunate enough to have a sample of the contents of an Alexandrian lime kiln, producing lime for the construction of the baths of Kom el-Dikka.

The marble fragments found near the kilns of Kom el-Dikka came from slabs of high quality. On these fragmentary marble panels there are some dipinti in red paint. The traces are sometimes too fragmentary to be read. Some fragments show only single letters. On other items, groups

⁹ *BGU* IV. For a general information, see A. ŁUKASZEWICZ, *Świat papirusów* [The world of papyrus], Warsaw 2001, p. 133; H.-A. RUPPRECHT, *Kleine Einführung in die Papyruskunde*, Darmstadt 1994, p. 16.

¹⁰ A. ŁUKASZEWICZ, 'Ostraca and architecture at Kom el-Dikka', *JfJrP* 39 (2009), pp. 121–131.

of letters can be recognized. The word 'Caesar' is repeated several times, apparently without a context.

Among about forty more or less significant fragments, there are a few worth reproducing. Below are listed the fragments with certain or probable mentions of a Caesar:

Inv. no. 61.05.08
18.4 x 10.8 x *ca.* 3.3 cm

CAESAR

Inv. no. 41.04.08
7.7 x 5.6 x *ca.* 1.25 cm

[CAES]AR

Inv. no. 51.16.08
width of the inscribed field 18 cm,
height of the inscribed field *ca.* 11.5
cm, thickness of the stone *ca.* 6 cm

CAESA[R]

Inv. no. 61.06.08
8.8 x 7.8 x 4.3 cm

[CAE]SAR

Inv. no. 41.05.08
5.4 x *ca.* 3 x *ca.* 1.35 cm

[CA]ES[AR]

Inv. no. 68.04.08
13.65 x *ca.* 4.5 x *ca.* 2.25 cm

CAES[AR]

The height of the letters varies from *ca.* 4 to *ca.* 6 cm.

Latin inscriptions are rare in Alexandria and graffiti in that language are an unusual occurrence in the former capital of Roman Egypt. The hand is not easy to date. The comparison of letters in the graffiti from Kom el-Dikka with known Latin hands does not point to the fourth or even third century, but rather to a much earlier period: the late first century BC or early first century AD. Letters in the graffiti under discussion do not fit the pattern of the standard cursive texts scratched or painted on walls. They are rather a version of an official or literary hand of the Augustan period. The shape of the letters can be compared with the famous papyrus from Qasr Ibrim containing the elegiacs by Cornelius



Fig. 2. Inv. no. 61.05.08 (photo by the Author)



Fig. 3. Inv. no. 61.06.08 (photo by the Author)

Gallus.¹¹ We read there CAESAR (col. i 2)¹² in a hand which offers a remarkable parallel to the same word in the graffiti from Kom el-Dikka.

A table of letter-forms on the Latin papyrus from Qasr Ibrim drawn by Mary Baines shows shapes of C, A, E, S, and R obviously reminiscent of the letters of the newly discovered graffiti.¹³ The description of the hand of the Gallus papyrus in the *editio princeps* lists the comparative material.

An examination of other papyrus fragments from Qasr Ibrim is also very instructive.¹⁴ C and E in the cursive texts have a shape similar to the letters of the Alexandrian dipinti. Some non-cursive items have also a similar A and S. More parallel letters can be found in inscriptions of Augustan age. Among numerous examples in Arthur E. Gordon's *Album of Dated Latin Inscriptions. Rome and the Neighbourhood, Augustus to Nerva*, nos. 1 and 3 may be quoted as useful analogies.¹⁵ There are also provincial and unofficial examples of a similar hand, like a graffito from the *fanum* of Châteauneuf mentioning a sacrifice to Mercury and Maia (now in the Musée Savoisien de Chambéry), which combines a similar S, C, and R with a cursive shape of E and A.¹⁶ The similarity of the lettering described by Leszek Mrozewicz as B8 is only approximate. It is a style of the first and beginning of the second century AD.¹⁷

The mere criteria of palaeography are not sufficient to provide a date of our text with a fair degree of certainty. Unfortunately, the script of

¹¹ R. D. ANDERSON, P. J. PARSONS, & G. M. NISBET, 'Elegiacs by Gallus from Qasr Ibrim', *JRS* 69 (1979), pp. 125–155.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 140, pl. V.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 137.

¹⁴ I owe the possibility of viewing the photographs of the unedited Latin fragments from Qasr Ibrim to the courtesy of Tomasz PŁÓCIENNIK. I wish also to express my thanks to Tomasz DERDA and Adam ŁAJTAR, who are studying the unedited papyrus material from Qasr Ibrim.

¹⁵ A. E. GORDON & J. S. GORDON, *Album of Dated Latin Inscriptions. Rome and the Neighbourhood, Augustus to Nerva*, Berkeley – Los Angeles 1958, pp. 15–17.

¹⁶ A. BARBET & M. FUCHS, *Les murs murmurent. Graffitis gallo-romains*, Lausanne – Vidy 2008, p. 156, fig. 135, cat. 69.

¹⁷ L. MROZEWICZ, *Palaeography of Latin Inscriptions from Novae (Lower Moesia)*, Poznań 2010, p. 92.



Fig. 4. Inv. no. 51.16.08 (photo by the Author)

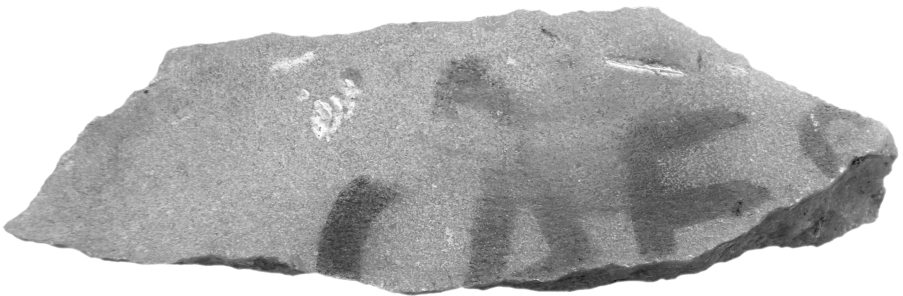


Fig. 5. Inv. no. 68.04.08 (photo by the Author)

these dipinti tends to imitate the lettering of monumental inscriptions and for that reason, there can be no certainty whether we can exclude a later date of the writing. We are inclined to propose the later first century BC as a probable date of the red dipinti from Kom el-Dikka. However, an important factor which must also be considered is the material upon which the texts were inscribed. The chronology of the usage of various kinds of marble in Alexandria could perhaps contribute to establishing an approximate date. A detailed analysis of the material remains to be done. The marble fragments on which the dipinti under discussion were inscribed can be positively identified as coming from Proconnesus, an island of the Propontis. That marble was renowned in later antiquity, since it was used in Constantinople.¹⁸ However, the material from the quarries of Proconnesus was used in remote places as early as the fourth century BC. Its use in the buildings of Mausolus (377–353 BC), son of Hecatomnus, at Halicarnassus is confirmed by Vitruvius and Pliny the Elder.¹⁹ The contacts between Caria and Ptolemaic Egypt were rather close. It may be taken for granted that marble from Proconnesus, already known in Caria, could also be used in Ptolemaic Alexandria.

The identity of the Caesar mentioned in the items under discussion is an essential matter. The name of Caesar was most probably written as an isolated single word. Therefore it is not likely to be a part of full imperial titulature. Any ruler of the Julio-Claudians could possibly be meant. Also later successors of Augustus cannot be excluded, since in a text ‘Caesar’ could be used as a reference to any emperor. However, it would be somewhat unusual to call one of them repeatedly only by the appellation of Caesar. At that time ‘Caesar’ was just a title, being a part of the wording accompanying the ruler’s complete name. In a period posterior to the early Julio-Claudians, the appearance in an inscription of the name of Caesar alone would be atypical and enigmatic. Much more probable would be therefore the identification of the ‘Caesar’ from Kom el-Dikka as Augustus. For palaeographical reasons even the Caesar *par excellence*, that is Julius Caesar, cannot *a priori* be excluded.

¹⁸ Zos. II 30.4.

¹⁹ Vitr. II 8.10; Plin. *Nat. hist.* 36.47.

What was the original location of the marble slabs upon which the dipinti were written? The moderate dimensions of the letters do not point to street inscriptions. It seems more likely to interpret these fragments as remnants of writing upon the wall of a room, or perhaps in an interior of a portico. That might explain the preservation of those graffiti during four centuries until they were dispatched to feed a lime kiln. The destruction of their original architectural context could result from the ravages caused by Diocletian to the urban structure of Alexandria at the end of the third century or could perhaps be a consequence of the disastrous earthquake of 365.

Who was the author of these unusual writings and what could be the purpose of writing the name of Caesar alone, without the usual context? Latin wall inscriptions in Alexandria at any time must almost certainly originate from Roman soldiers. The author of Caesar's name was apparently a frequent and experienced writer. It is unnecessary to insist that these repeated records of a Caesar are unlikely to be Caesar's personal signature. Unless we have here traces of a simple writing exercise, a probable reason for the appearance of such dipinti might be the commemoration of an arrival of a Caesar by the accompanying soldiers. The writer was probably a Roman army officer. Otherwise, it is difficult to imagine circumstances which could induce a Roman or Romans to cover a wall with such an invocation of a Caesar.

An imperial visit was not a very frequent occurrence in Alexandria.²⁰ After Augustus, the next possibility was Vespasian, and then Titus in 71. A famous imperial visit was Hadrian's long stay in Alexandria and Egypt. Marcus Aurelius, Septimius Severus, Caracalla and some later rulers of the third century, including Aurelian and Diocletian, are the last possible ones. Would any of these emperors, under certain circumstances, be designated in a wall inscription as Caesar *tout court*?

An important non-palaeographical argument in favour of an early date of the dipinti is a fragment with the following text, also in red paint:

²⁰ For journeys of the emperors, see H. HALFMANN, *Itinera principum. Geschichte und Typologie der Kaiserreisen im Römischen Reich*, Stuttgart 1986.

Inv. no. 51.17.08

ca. 19.3 x ca. 12.3 x ca. 3.5 cm; height of letters ca. 5 cm

[---]ARIAN

A possible interpretation is CAES]ARIAN<I>. The hand looks slightly different from that of the dipinti containing the word CAESAR.

Other similar instances are:

Inv. no. 51.19.08

ca. 18.6 x ca. 14.5 x 3.3 cm; height of letters ca. 4 cm

[CA]EŞARİ[---]

Inv. no. 41.06.08

11.6 x 9.1 x 3.8 cm

CAES]RİA[---]

In all of these items a reference to Caesar's (probably Augustus') soldiers, the *Caesariani*, would be the most convincing solution.

In the case of the two earliest Caesars, their presence in Alexandria was extremely warlike. Should we see in our dipinti traces of the *bellum Alexandrinum* of 48–47 BC or of the conquest of Alexandria in the summer of 30 BC? It seems almost too beautiful to be true. Nevertheless, we may indeed have here a testimony of the Roman conquest of Egypt in the first century BC. Soldiers of Caesar – probably Octavian – amidst the havoc of war, were certainly not unlikely to write on the walls their inscriptions in honour of their commander-in-chief. It seems that they did so in an interior rather than on an exterior part of a building.

Wall inscriptions in modern cities usually do not have a long life. Some forty years after World War II the last scribbles of 'no mines' disappeared from the walls of Warsaw houses. However, in a southern Italian town, graffiti dated 1945 could still be seen quite recently. In Egypt, however, the situation was much more favourable for the preservation of ancient wall



Fig. 6. Inv. no. 51.17.08 (photo by the Author)

inscriptions. In the ruins of ancient temples Greek, Latin, and Coptic graffiti and dipinti are often well preserved until the present day. The dipinti in interiors, for instance on walls of tombs, are in an even better state.

The Alexandrian dipinti in honour of a Caesar remained intact until the fourth century, when the marbles were reused. At that time, as stated before, ancient monuments in the Roman Empire were often demolished in order to be reused or transformed into lime which was subsequently used for building purposes.

It would be too hazardous to speculate on the possible original location of the dipinti. No possibility for the provenance of the marbles can be rejected, including an interior in the Ptolemaic palace quarter of Alexandria occupied by soldiers. The fact that after his landing in Alexandria Julius Caesar moved into a complex of buildings being a part of the royal palaces, adjacent to a theatre and to the harbour,²¹ is perhaps unrelated.

²¹ Caesar, *De bello civi.* III 112.

Another possibility, already mentioned above, would be a public interior, like a portico. It seems thinkable that the soldiers who left such traces of their passage belonged to a unit which was housed in the interior which they inscribed in that way.

That enigmatic but significant discovery was made in March 2008 and 2009 at Kom el-Dikka during excavations of the Polish-Egyptian Archaeological Mission of the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology. The excavations are in progress and may bring further interesting results.

Adam Łukasiewicz

Department of Papyrology
Institute of Archaeology
University of Warsaw
ul. Krakowskie Przedmieście 26/28
00-927 Warszawa
POLAND
e-mail: adlukasz@adm.uw.edu.pl