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## Excavations in Alexandria in 1989-90

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Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean 2, 19-24

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1991

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## EXCAVATIONS IN ALEXANDRIA IN 1989-90

### Grzegorz Majcherek

The Polish-Egyptian Conservation and Archaeological Mission at Kom el-Dikka, sponsored jointly by the EAO and the PCMA, and directed by Dr. Wojciech Kołataj, worked from October 1989 till the end of July 1990.<sup>1</sup> The multiple tasks of this campaign could not have been accomplished without the indispensable assistance of the authorities of the Egyptian Antiquities Organization to whom we wish to express our thanks. Particular gratitude is due Mrs. Doreya Said, the Director of the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria, for her constant help and support.

Beside ongoing archaeological research integrated with the mission's restoration program, excavations were concentrated in the habitation quarter adjoining street R4 on the east (Sector W<sub>1</sub>N). The objectives of this campaign, which was a continuation of previous seasons, were twofold: to continue the investigation of Houses G and H, and to study and verify the stratigraphy and chronology of the area as worked out on the basis of excavations conducted so far.

The continued occupation of the quarter from the Late Ptolemaic (c. 2nd-1st centuries BC) to the end of the Byzantine period (end of the 7th century AD) was fully confirmed. As a result of the present excavations, substantial remains of Late Roman building G were cleared and its plan and functions thoroughly studied. Several subsequent chronological phases covering the period from the 4th to 7th century AD were distinguished; their detailed description will be published in the final report. Fragments of the Early Roman structure fragmentarily

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<sup>1</sup> The archaeological research was headed by Grzegorz Majcherek who worked with a team including: Assist. Prof. Przemysław Gartkiewicz (architect), Assist. Prof. Barbara Lichočka, Dr. Barbara Tkaczow, Miss Jolanta Jabłonowska, Miss Iwona Zych (archaeologists) and Mr. Stefan Sadowski (photographer). The Egyptian Antiquities Organization was represented by Messrs Ala'a ad-Din Mahrous and Ahmad Mousa.

preserved underneath were also unearthed. Further research here is planned for the coming season.

Building G bears a general resemblance to the previously excavated House H, its plan however appears to be less regular. It was found that the walls of the building had been largely dismantled in the 8th-10th centuries AD, when they served as a ready source of material for the medieval structures built on a higher level. Owing to this, most of the plan could be traced only approximately in ghost walls. The walls that have survived are in their majority founded upon entirely new

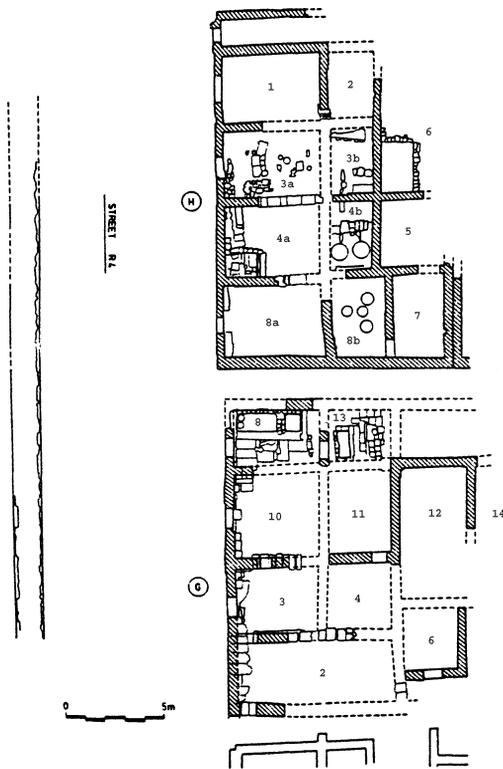


Fig. 1. Plan of the Late Roman houses G and H in sector  $W_1N$

foundations, which often have nothing to do with the earlier structures. The reason for the alteration of the old building plan, dated by coins and pottery to the turn of the 3rd and 4th century AD, must lie in the degree of destruction sustained by the Early Roman structures.<sup>2</sup> The Late Roman occupation layer is separated from the earlier layers by a thick stratum containing ashes, fragments of polychrome plastering and architectural elements. Reused fragments of architectural decoration were also found in the foundations (rooms nos 2, 3, 10) and include such items as drums of engaged Doric columns covered with stucco.<sup>3</sup> At the close of our work, the entire street facade of House G had been cleared, but its extent into the insula remained undetermined. On the remaining sides, both on the north and south, the building was separated from neighboring edifices by narrow alleys (some 1.50-1.70 m wide) perpendicular to street R4.

The main walls of the house were built in a technique typical of the period and apparently derived from *opus africanum*; pillars constructed of large blocks, with spaces in between filled with small irregular stones in an ashy mortar. The western part of House G comprised four rooms, each provided with a separate entrance, the northernmost of which (G-8) had been explored already in 1989. The adjacent room (G-10) is the largest so far uncovered. Only the front wall with its thick lime plaster coating has been preserved. The debris overlying the latest clay floor contained numerous colored marble pieces of *opus sectile* pavement, which doubtless must have come from the destroyed upper storey. The finds from the occupation level: sherds of Egyptian Red Slip ware (A and B), Cypriot Red Slip and amphorae of Egyptian origin as well as several coins dated to the reign of Heraclius indicate that

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<sup>2</sup> The destruction of the eastern quarters of Alexandria is usually connected with the ransacking of the city by the Palmyrenians. Cf. A. Adriani, *Repertorio d'Arte dell'Egitto Greco-Romano, Serie C, I-III*, Palermo 1963-66, pp. 209, 211.

<sup>3</sup> In general appearance these elements resemble the relics of a Doric style structure discovered beneath the nearby building of the National Insurance Company, cf. H. Riad, *Vestiges d'un edifice ptolémaïque, BSAA 1, 42* (1967).

the building was destroyed probably around the middle of the 7th century AD.<sup>4</sup> The two rooms located further to the south (G-2 and G-3) were also substantially damaged. The front wall was dismantled to the foundations, while the eastern walls have all but completely disappeared. Exploration in room G-13, which is side by side directly with G-8, uncovered a deep rectangular well. The shaft was cleared down to a depth of about 6 m, not reaching the bottom, and was found to have walls constructed of well-fitted dressed stone. Pairs of large blocks protruded from the middle of opposing walls at a point just below the preserved top and about 2 m down, directly below the first. These blocks may have served to mount some kind of water-wheel, equipped with ceramic pots (*qawadis*) attached with ropes. The proximity of this wall and a pair of pools discovered in room G-8 obviously indicates a relation between the two water facilities. The finds on the paved floor preserved around the well include coins of Tiberius II and Phocas and point to the turn of the 6th and 7th century AD as the period of use. A similar but fragmentarily preserved pavement was cleared in room G-11. The dating material from the fill contained two well preserved St Menas ampullae. The remains of a large lavatory were discovered in the spacious room G-12. An angled section of a conduit ran through the room and served presumably as a sewage tank, since no outlets were found. In the southern part of the room the conduit increased slightly in width and was covered with some large slabs. Two large blocks pierced with a rounded aperture c. 0.30 m in diameter were found *sub situ*. Several coins and a considerable amount of pottery sherds from the fill point to a surprisingly long period of use, from the 4th to 6th century AD. A small room located in the southeastern corner of the excavated area initially opened out onto the alley between houses G and C. In the 5th century some of the walls were replaced and the room enlarged.

In summary, it appears that in the Late Roman period House G served needs as complex as the previously investigated House H. The

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<sup>4</sup> See the review of ceramic material in: G. Majcherek, Polish excavations at Kom el-Dikka, 1989-1990, *Bulletin de Liaison du GIECE*, 1991, in press.

large rooms opening onto the street may have been used as shops, while the rooms in the back served both as workshops and domestic areas. Both houses were continuously occupied at least till the middle of the 7th century AD.

In the southern wing of House H some remaining layers of Late Roman date were also explored. Room H-8b turned out to contain some well-preserved domestic facilities consisting of four containers set into the floor. Two of these were reused Baetican amphorae, while the others were bodies of Palestinian amphorae, which were an early 4th century AD version of the widely traded Gaza-type vessels. Some of the containers had their covers still *in situ* – limestone slabs with a funnel hole in the centre closed with stone stoppers. The fill in which the amphorae were embedded contained a great deal of pottery typical of the 2nd-3rd centuries AD, including two lamps: one with a relief representation of a sandaled foot, the other with an erotic scene on the discus.

In compliance with the study program concerning Early Roman structures in the quarter, it was decided to explore the lower layers in room H-2. A small basin was discovered there, alongside the western wall. The rest of the room was taken up by a small staircase descending below the level of the basin and a small-sized well. It would appear that these facilities belonged to a private bath of the Early Roman villa.

Another deep sounding was dug in the partly explored room H-8a. About 1.50 m below the 6th century street level, the remains of a clay floor covering the entire room space was noted. Close to the blocked entrance a small storage bin constructed of stone was discovered. Further exploration beneath it revealed the presence of a rectangular shaft 6 m deep. Although it was originally built as a well, the composition of the fill proved that in this period it must have served as a sewage tank. The clay flooring was laid upon an even layer of burning and ashes. It probably coincided with the destruction and final abandonment of the Early Roman house, tentatively dated to the late 3rd century AD. Apparently the structure was once more inhabited while still in ruins, with the aforementioned facilities being the first signs of renewed occupation. The Early Roman occupation level, comprising

several lime floors was reached immediately below. The archaeological context of these layers included a considerable amount of ceramic material, bearing evidence to a long-lasting habitation in the period from the 1st to the 3rd century AD. Further exploration revealed a clear architectural sequence, visible in the walls of the house. Roman structures were built directly on top of the remains of Ptolemaic ones. The foundations of the Ptolemaic building were reached at a depth of 4.50 m below the street level, on top of a clay layer some 0.70 m thick. Much to our surprise the remains of yet another structure came to light under the deposit of clay. Although it is tempting to see it as the remainder of the first structure built in the area, its nature as well as precise dating is yet to be determined.

Particularly important discoveries were made while studying the urbanistic development of the quarter. The sewage system uncovered in the alley separating houses H and G, proved the existence of the side street as early as the Early Roman period. It was presumably much wider at that time, reaching some 5 m, that is about half the width of the R4 street.<sup>5</sup> Its presence throws new light on the previous findings and hypotheses concerning additional subdivisions of the great *insulae* defined by the basic urban street network.<sup>6</sup> Another channel was discovered on street R4 at a depth of 4.80 m. No precise dating material was available here: however, the level of the channel relative to the uncovered architectural structures indicates that it must have formed part of the urban sewage system of the Ptolemaic period. Its course along the facades of the houses presents evidence for the permanence of the street network of Ptolemaic date, existing in this area in basically unchanged form till the end of Antiquity.

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<sup>5</sup> An Early Roman street of similar course and dimensions was uncovered during the 1973 excavations below the Theatre Portico.

<sup>6</sup> M. Rodziewicz, *Alexandrie III. Les habitations romaines tardives d'Alexandrie*, Varsovie 1984, pp. 17-33.