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Excavations in Alexandria, 1992-93

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EXCAVATIONS IN ALEXANDRIA, 1992-93

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The mission worked generally throughout the period from October 1992 to July 1993, whereas the archaeological campaign proper lasted from 5 May until 20 July 1993.¹

The principal task of this season was to continue excavations in the domestic quarter (sector W₁N), located east of R₄ street. The team also undertook limited archaeological investigations in the Theater area (sector M) as well as in the adjacent portico.²

DOMESTIC QUARTER

Most of the surface of House G has already been unearthed. Work was focused therefore on further exploration of the western and northeastern wings of the building.

¹ The Polish-Egyptian Restoration and Archaeological mission at Kom el-Dikka is directed by Dr. Wojciech Kołataj. The archaeological research team, headed by Dr. Grzegorz Majcherek included: Dr. Jolanta Młynarczyk, Miss Elżbieta Kołosowska, Mr. Krzysztof Domżański, archaeologists, and Mr. Waldemar Jerke, photographer.

The successful outcome of this campaign would not have been possible without the friendly assistance of the EAO authorities, to whom we wish to express our gratitude. We are particularly indebted to Mrs. Doreya Said, General Director of the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria, as well as to inspectors: Mr. Ahmad Mousa and Mr. Ala'a ed-Din Mahrus for their help and cooperation.

² For the plan of the excavation area, see: *PAM* IV, 1992 (1993), p. 12.

House G. The eastern part of the house collapsed sometime in the 7th century AD and, unlike the western wing, it was apparently abandoned and never reoccupied. A partition wall was built across the large room G-9, separating the destroyed part from the rest of the house. This disaster must have occurred in the first half of the 7th century as suggested by material retrieved from fairly homogenous and undisturbed fill. These were examples of locally made Red Slip wares, imported amphorae of the LRA 1 and LRA 2 classes, some well datable forms of Cypriot Red Slip ware, Byzantine lamps and coins. Remains of small industrial installations were cleared in the spacious locus G-9. They consisted of a small, rectangular, stone-cased box, and a water channel of angular section running northward and emptying into a sewage channel located beneath the narrow lane separating houses G and H. Although no remains of a glass kiln were identified and the precise function of this facility remains unclear, there is little doubt that the room served as a glass workshop as evidenced by numerous finds of glass slag, semi-products and moulds. The accompanying finds consisted mostly of pottery indicating that the workshop was used most probably in the 6th century AD.

The underlying layers were composed mostly of leveling material, containing fragments of polychrome plaster and badly damaged elements of architectural decoration. It was apparently deposited as a result of destruction and subsequent dismantling of Early Roman structures predating the kilns.

These layers turned out to be particularly rich in finds: apart from numerous pottery fragments including terra sigillata wares, there were also lamps and coins providing an approximate terminus post quem date in the second half of the 2nd century AD.

Interesting discoveries were made also in locus G-2. It turned out that the room in its initial phase of occupation (4th century AD) was quite sumptuously decorated. Close to its eastern wall two limestone column bases were discovered, forming a sort of monumental frame. This feature suggested the possibility of the main entrance to the house being located here, but more investigations are needed before this question can be answered satisfactorily.

It has been ascertained that the structures of Late Roman age were laid there on entirely new foundations. The huge foundations forming an uniform and integrated structure were built of imposing blocks (some of them measuring 1.20 x 0.70 m), apparently taken from some earlier building located nearby. Although neither the location nor the character of this edifice can be positively identified, it would have been of rather monumental form, considering the size of numerous architectural elements incorporated into the foundations: fluted column shafts, cornices etc. As in the case of House H, here again we witness a long-lasting tradition of both general layout and function of particular loci.

In rooms G-10 and G-2 a series of superimposed doors leading onto Street R4 was cleared. The doors served subsequent occupational layers explored within the rooms. Both loci served primarily as workshops, although their precise function varied over time. A medium-sized oval kiln (c. 0.80 m in diameter) was unearthed in room G-10. The location of the kiln within the room indicated that in this phase the main doors must have been blocked. It was used in the 5th century, as attested by accompanying finds. More developed installations were cleared underneath. They consisted of a small rectangular kiln built in distinct *opus spicatum* technique. The kiln

was accompanied by a rectangular, slightly larger stone-cased bin located further to the east. The bin and the immediate vicinity of the kiln were filled with ashes that yielded a sizeable collection of pottery finds and coins. The overall evidence points to the 4th century AD as the main period of use.

House H. The main effort this year was directed at exploring the Early Roman structures of House H.³ In room H-3, a section of underfloor channel running east-west and connecting the building with a street sewage system was cleared. In the northeastern corner of the room a well preserved doorway was found, giving access to further parts of the house. An adjoining section of wall stands to 1.40 m above the level of a threshold and even retains the original plastering.

A narrow vertical slot clearly visible in the wall gave every reason to believe that the eastern part of room H-1 was separated by a sort of wooden screen, making thus a small anteroom screening a more private section of the house. Corresponding layers gave evidence of long-lasting occupation from the 1st to the 3rd century AD. Beside a substantial number of Early Roman coins, excavations yielded also a large collection of pottery finds, among them stamped fragments of imported terra sigillata wares, complete plate of Eastern Sigillata B, small juglets and locally manufactured painted jug dated to the 1st century BC - 1st century AD.

Excavations continued also in the adjoining locus H-3a. The whole inner face of the western (facade) wall was cleared. It was ascertained that the room did not have any doorway from this

³ For the results of previous campaigns, see: *PAM I*, 1988-89 (1990), pp. 75-83, *PAM II*, 1989-90 (1991), pp. 19-24, *PAM III*, 1991 (1992), pp. 7-14 and *PAM IV*, 1992 (1993), pp. 11-22.

side, thus the only possible access was through the entrance vestibule (H-1). The uncovered fragment of the wall was covered with plastering identical with the one previously observed on the other walls featuring large rectangular panels. The function of this room remains unclear. However, its considerable size (almost 5 by 5 m), the character of the decoration, as well as its location in relation to the entrance lead us to conclude that it might have been a reception hall for visitors. In the adjoining locus H-3b, a very well preserved pavement was cleared. Its surface is markedly worn with certain traces giving the impression that the room must have been originally unroofed. Upon further examination it has been revealed that the west wall of the room was originally built as a row of evenly spaced square pillars. Several thresholds were still preserved in situ, although the whole structure was later re-structured as a continuous wall. This quite unexpected architectural feature indicated that the space in front of the pillars, later taken by rooms H-3b and H-2, served originally as an open courtyard (3 by 5 m) paved with flagstones. The exact chronology of this occupational phase is yet to be determined, but based on stratigraphical evidence, it could have been of transitional Late Hellenistic/Early Roman date.

Room H-7, located further to the east, was also found to be furnished with a very well preserved pavement. Tightly fitted large limestone slabs covered the whole excavated surface of the room.

THEATER PORTICO

A small-sized test trench (6 by 6 m) was opened in the area of the hypothetical intersection of the Theater Portico and the southern passage of the Bath complex.

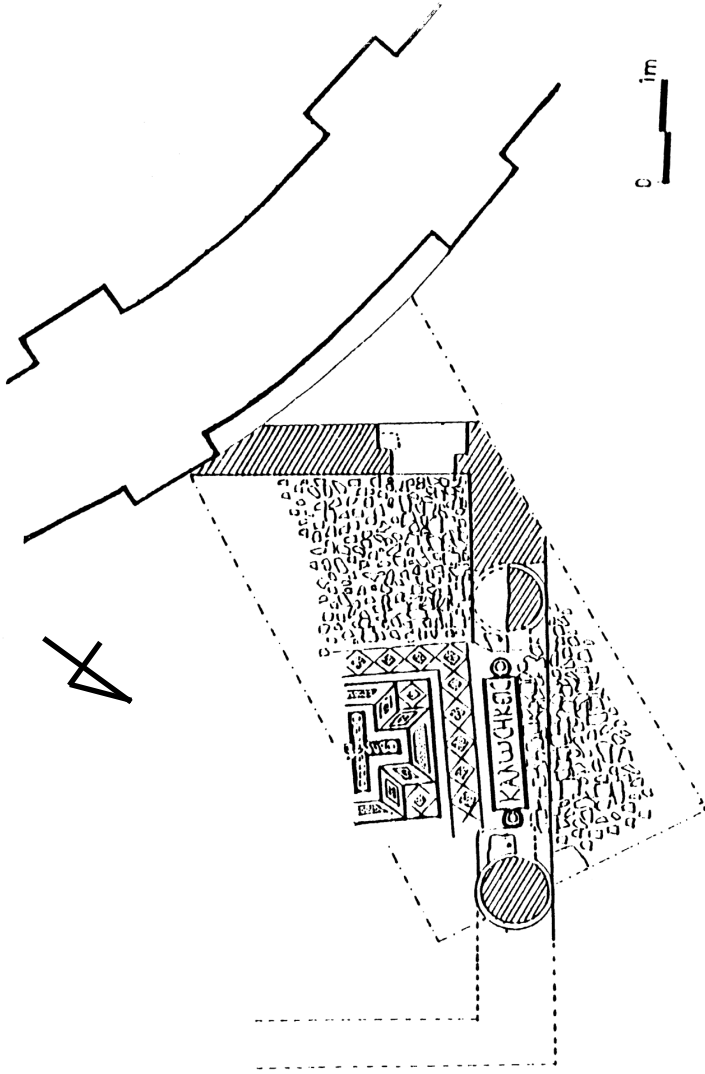


Fig. 1. Fragment of Early Roman villa found under the Theater.
Drawing by the author.

As ascertained already, this area was occupied in the medieval period by Islamic necropolises. Several tombs belonging to successive cemetery strata were unearthed inside the trench. The lowermost tombs, from the so called Lower Necropolis (dated to the 8th-9th century AD), were found immediately on top of the remains of earlier structures of Late Roman age. Two of them were even partly cut into the structure itself. The section of large portico backwall running north-south was cleared close to the western face of the trench. The structure, some 6 m long and 1.35 m wide, was built of large blocks in a manner similar to that already encountered in front of the Theater. In the midsection of the wall, a single reused drum of a Doric column was found. Its position with regard to the rest of the structure suggests that it was destined to serve as a solid substructure for the base of another column. A small section of yet another wall running east-west (i.e., perpendicularly to the former one) was also unearthed. The wall was found to be partially dismantled, but existing remains prove that it was constructed in small, regular masonry. The course and parameters of this structure are identical with the southern wall of the latrine, and it is quite clear that it originally formed a wall bordering the passage leading to the Bath complex.

Both excavated structures seem to belong to a monumental gateway flanked by columns and opening onto the passage. This impression is confirmed by already recognized traces of a large threshold positioned behind the column. Although only the northern wing of the alleged gate has been unearthed so far, one can reasonably assume that the other part would be similarly arranged. The overall span of the gate (measured between columns) could thus be calculated as c. 4.50 m.

The pavement of the passage in front of the nearby latrine was set on a markedly higher level than the threshold of the gate (c. 0.80 m. higher). It is obvious that difficulties arising from such a difference of levels must have been overcome either by a sloped surface or by the introduction of steps. The latter solution seems to be at least partly evidenced by poorly preserved remains of what appears to be staircase substructure. Unfortunately, it was almost entirely dismantled or damaged by the later burials.

Considering both the dimensions and the architectural features, it appears that the excavated structure was the principal, monumental gate leading to the Bath complex; while the entrance previously recognized near street R⁴ was of secondary importance.

THEATER (SECTORM)

Another trench (marked MXV) was opened in the nearest vicinity of the Theater, near its outer wall. It measured only 5.5 by 5 m at topsoil level, nevertheless due to the technical difficulties we were forced to reduce it even further at the bottom, to a mere 5 by 3 m.

The main task of this undertaking was to verify the stratigraphy and chronology of the Theater. Undisturbed strata allowed us to follow the architectural development of the building and to establish useful phasing. The digging was continued down to the foundation layer, where the most interesting discovery was made. At a level of some 7 m below topsoil a large accumulation of architectural debris was cleared, covering the entire surface of the trench. Upon closer examination it became apparent that we had come across the ruins of a large edifice predating the Theater. Careful exploration of the uncovered remains brought

to light numerous fragments of polychrome cornices, capitals, stuccowork and other decorative fragments. Some of the fallen blocks retained their original plastering painted in red, green and yellow. Both the position of these elements and overall character of the debris suggest that the construction of the nearby Theater had left them largely undisturbed. A well preserved structure was found immediately underneath (Fig. 1). It consisted of a wall (c. 0.45 m wide), built in *opus quadratum* technique, and two partially preserved limestone columns erected on Attic-type bases. The columns, standing c. 2.25 m apart, flanked the entrance to a room as indicated by well preserved door-sockets and traces of doorposts. The centre of the room was covered with a finely preserved multicolored mosaic in *opus tessellatum* (excavated fragment measured c. 2 by 1.70 m). The decoration is strictly geometrical and consists of squares, lozenges and trapezes. The central element, cruciform in shape, is filled with a band of double guilloche. The mosaic is framed with a band composed of diagonally arranged squares. The threshold is paved with another mosaic panel forming a framed Greek inscription greeting visitors: **καλῶς ἦκει.**

The rest of the room as well as the area in front of it is paved with multicolored pieces of marble, alabaster and porphyry. The excavated relics obviously belong to a sumptuous room, most probably the *oikos* of a large villa, as suggested by the mosaic inscription.

While it is too early to speculate on the possible layout and dimensions of the villa, some cautious suggestions can be made. Since the *oikos* is usually located at the rear of the house, one can expect a peristyle or courtyard in front of it; the whole of

the house would therefore extend well to the north where the main entrance may be anticipated.

The villa was apparently ruined by a sudden catastrophe, most probably an earthquake and fire, the conflagration evidenced by burnt timberwork and a layer of ashes resting immediately upon the mosaic. Finds trapped under the debris contain lamp and pottery vessels, all of late 3rd – early 4th century AD date. The date of the mosaic is more problematic, but similar examples from Cyprus and Palestine are usually dated to the 3rd century AD. Further investigation should certainly bring more conclusive evidence.