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Alexandria 1994: Archaeological Excavations

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ALEXANDRIA 1994 ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS

Grzegorz Majcherek

The Archaeological Mission at Kom el-Dikka, Alexandria, worked from November 1993 till June 1994, the actual season of excavations lasting three months starting April 3.¹ Apart from ongoing archaeological research integrated with the restoration programme,² excavations were concentrated in two areas:

- Theater (sector M);
- area north of the cistern (sector F).

A major task of the season was to continue research on the Early Roman domestic architecture of Alexandria.³

THEATER (SECTOR M)

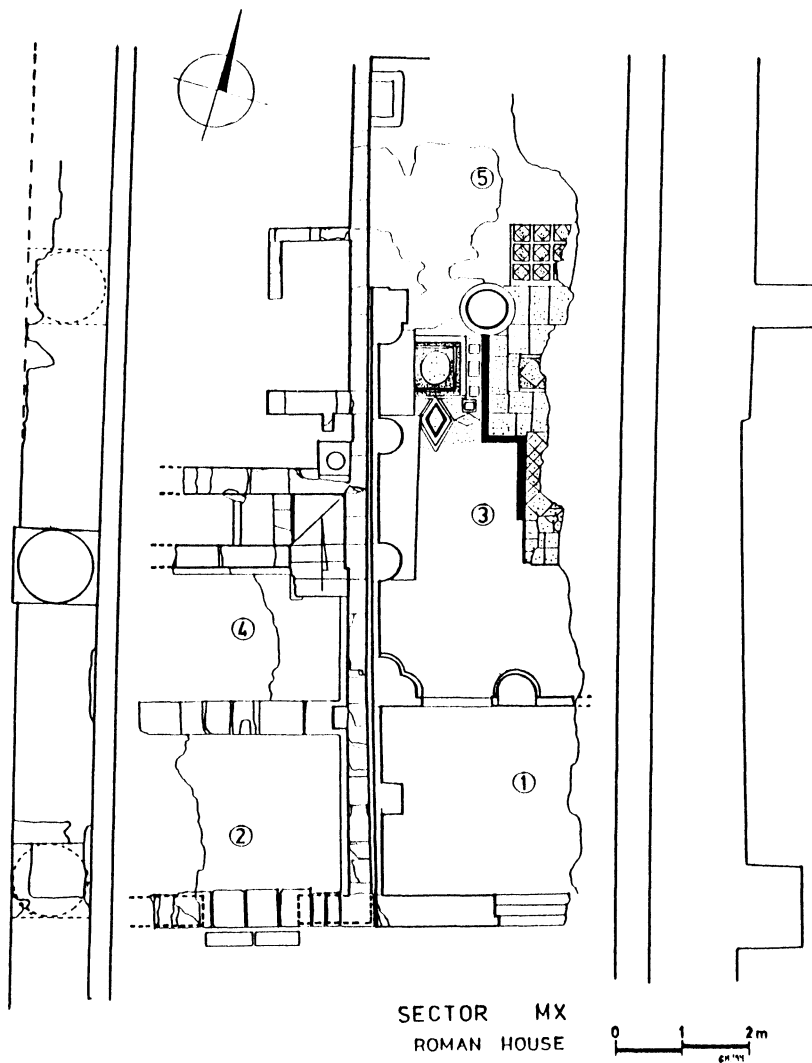
Investigations were concentrated in the area of the large portico in front of the Theater, within the boundaries of former trench MX, explored in 1973.⁴ Present excavations covered some 100 m². Surprisingly well preserved remains of what appears to

¹ The archeological research team headed by Dr. Grzegorz Majcherek included: Dr. Barbara Tkaczow, Miss Elżbieta Kołosowska, Mrs. Renata Kucharczyk, archaeologists, and Mr. Waldemar Jerke, photographer. Dr. Alexandra Krzyżanowska was kind enough to examine and identify coins found during the excavations. The Supreme Council of Antiquities was efficiently represented by Mr. Ahmed Musa and Mr. Ala'a Ed-Din Mahrus. The Mission would like to express its sincere gratitude for the generous assistance it received in the course of its work to all the SCA authorities, and personally to Mrs. Doreya Said, General Director of the Greco-Roman Museum in Alexandria.

² For the restoration work at Kom el-Dikka, cf. *supra*, report by Dr. W. Kołataj, Director of the Mission.

³ For the results of previous research, cf. *PAM V*, 1993 (1994), pp. 11-20.

⁴ For previous excavations in this area, cf. E. and M. Rodziewicz, *Alexandrie 1972-73, EtTrav IX* (1976), pp. 261-264.



*Fig. 1. Plan of the Early Roman house unearthed in sector MX.
Drawing by the author.*

be two separate houses were cleared (loci 1 and 2 were excavated already in 1973). Of particular interest is house A, occupying the eastern part of the trench (Fig. 1). The entire available surface of a large loc. 3 was cleared, the rest having been destroyed by the wall of the theater. The room measuring originally some 6 by 6 m, seemed to be the principal, sumptuously decorated chamber of the house. It was accessible from the north through a tripartite entrance formed by two columns and framed with large pilasters. The interior decoration comprised pairs of engaged columns placed along the walls and similar double engaged columns (*Härzsaulen*) posted in the corners opposite the entrance, giving an overall impression of a pseudo-peristyle arrangement. Several, fragmentarily preserved capitals, cornices and architraves permitted a reliable theoretical reconstruction of the hall. The style of decoration indicates that the hall and supposedly the whole edifice was built at the end of the 1st century BC or the beginning of the 1st century AD at the latest.

The floor of the hall was decorated with a mosaic-like pavement. The central part was made of multicolored marble tiles arranged in a geometrical design: combination of squares, triangles and lozenges. Ample space along the walls was paved with smaller irregular pieces of stones in typical *opus signinum*. This gave the general effect of a T-shaped floor design, suggesting a *triclinium* rather than *oecus* or perhaps a combination of both. The *oecus-triclinium* opened on a courtyard which has not been fully excavated yet. Again, it was paved in the *opus signinum* technique save for a small area in front of the entrance, which was made of larger marble tiles set in a geometrical pattern. Next to the western wall of the courtyard a small rectangular pedestal of reused blocks was unearthed. It apparently served religious purposes as evidenced by several *ex-vota* found nearby: finely sculptured marble hand, foot imprint carved in a limestone slab, and a small but accurate model of a shrine or temple. Below the courtyard pavement remains of a

small brick-made and vaulted cistern were excavated. A partly preserved water conduit running to it from the corner of the courtyard indicated that it had been supplied with rainwater from the roof.

Of house B, only the eastern wing was uncovered: the rest was either destroyed by the portico stylobate or had been located further west, well beyond the extent of the present excavations. The unearthed part of the building served essentially household purposes. All the rooms were rather small: the biggest one (no. 4) not exceeding 3.50 by 2.60 m. In the northeastern corner of this room, a well preserved staircase was cleared. This indicated the existence of an upper storey or a roof terrace at least. Immediately to the north a large vertical gully made of monolithic blocks pierced with holes was installed. No outlet has been found so far, but it can be expected that it served to carry sewage water from some sanitary installations located on the upper storey. Taking into consideration that both house A and house B had been similarly designed, one can expect to find an official part of the building further to the west. Both houses were most probably destroyed by an earthquake as evidenced by wide vertical cracks in the walls. However, following seismic disaster, house A was at least partly cleared and re-occupied. Finds from this stage of occupation point to it being transformed into a kind of workshop. Ceramic material from corresponding layers consisted mostly of Gazan and local Mareotic amphorae, as well as several lamps and Egyptian tableware, indicating the end of the 3rd century or beginning of the 4th century AD as the most plausible date for this phase. The building was finally abandoned in the mid 4th century AD, partly leveled and filled with debris.

AREA NORTH OF THE CISTERN (SECTOR F)

The area of excavations is located between the bath and the cistern, close to the northwestern corner of the latter. Initial

investigations were conducted in 1963 when a large portion of the bath's outer wall was unearthed as well as other fragmentarily preserved constructions of then unknown date and function.⁵ Additional research was also conducted in the 1970s. As a result of these activities, remains of installations of Late Roman date were cleared and a stratigraphical sequence outlined for the whole area.⁶ Most of the Medieval and Late Roman layers deposited there have already been explored. The area was found to be heavily disturbed by robbing pits and extensive depressions most probably reflecting the sinking or collapse of some structures buried underneath.

The Late Roman occupation level was separated from earlier layers by a thick levelling stratum, containing a heavy concentration of architectural debris: mortar chunks, fragments of plastering, remnants of decorative details and stone rubble. It was followed in turn by a layer consisting of slag and lime kiln refuse most probably related to the construction of the nearby bath complex. Buried immediately underneath, there were remains of an Early Roman domestic building, its walls surprisingly well preserved, occasionally to the height of c. 3 m above floor level. However, later alterations and dismantling have destroyed much of the original structure, thus hindering the reconstruction of the original plan of the building. Two principal phases were recognized, both reflecting subsequent changes in the layout and function of the building.

⁵ J. Lipińska, Polish excavations at Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria, *EtTrav* I (1966), pp. 181-199.

⁶ J. Meuszyński, Report 1971, typescript in the archives of the Mission. For a summary of results, cf. W. Kołataj, *Imperial Baths at Kom el-Dikka, Alexandrie* VI, Varsovie 1992, pp. 46-47.

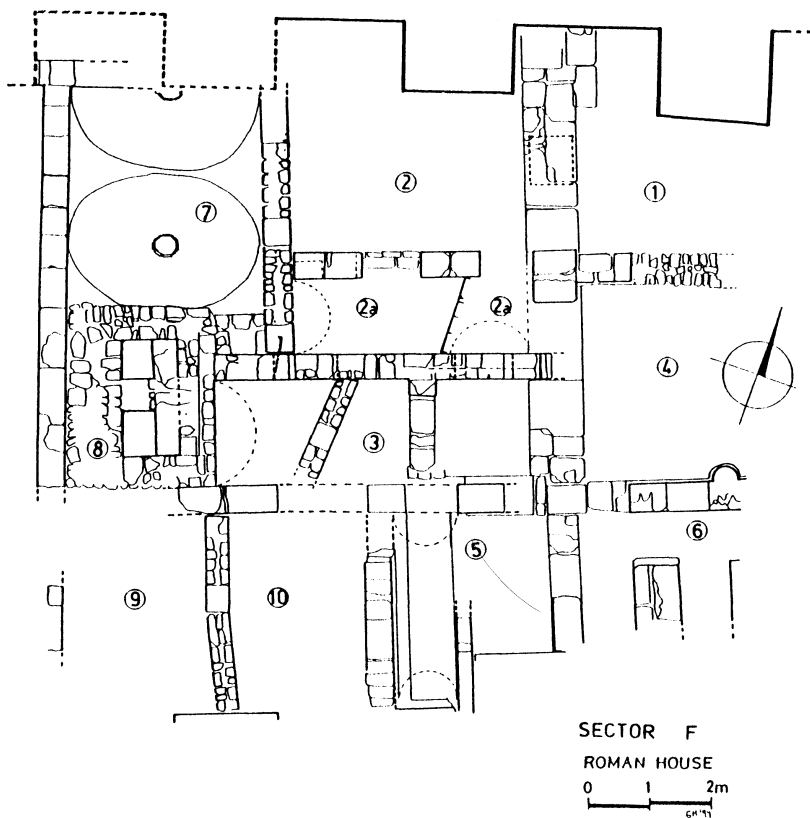


Fig. 2. Plan of the Early Roman structures excavated in sector F.
 Drawing by the author.

Phase I:

The building was originally constructed as a large urban house (Fig. 2). All the existing walls were uniformly built of regular dressed stone in *pseudo-isodomum* technique. The main entrance of the house has not been excavated yet, there-

fore the orientation of the building and its topographical relation to the street network remain unknown. It appears that the building represented a rather typical urban house plan, featuring a central courtyard and a series of rooms grouped around it. It should be made clear, however, that at this initial stage of research it is still premature to embark upon a hypothetical reconstruction of the house as a whole. The courtyard has not been completely cleared, but the explored part (3 by 7 m) has led us to assume, that it was designed as a pseudo-peristyle structure, decorated with engaged columns along the walls. One such column, adorning the southern wall of the courtyard has actually been excavated. It was a plain-shafted column resting on a low angular torus and topped with a regular Doric capital. The courtyard was paved with small chips of marble set in pinkish mortar.

Doors situated in the southwestern corner of the courtyard gave access to the staircase (loc. 6), pointing to the existence of a roof terrace or upper floor. No actual steps have survived, having been made presumably of wood as evidenced by the traces of supporting beams left on adjacent walls. West of the staircase, room no. 5 accommodated a two-chambered vaulted cellar, of which only the northern part measuring 0.80 by 3 m has been explored. The originally brick vaults were found to be almost entirely destroyed, save for an interconnecting stone arch which was preserved intact. Further to the west, there were two additional rooms (loci 9 and 10). They were only partly excavated, the seriously damaged walls preventing a thorough exploration. Both rooms were of roughly the same size (2.30 by 3.25 m), and both had separate entrances from the south, while at the same time they had no direct communication with the northern part of the edifice. This section of the building was somehow set apart from the main body of the house and must have served household functions.

The main reception hall of the house (*oecus*) was situated immediately west of the courtyard. It was accessible through a

wide entrance flanked by two imposing pillars; only the southern one has been preserved, the other one having been destroyed by the huge buttressed wall of the bath complex. The hall had been altered significantly by later constructions of the second phase of occupation, therefore its original extent remains unclear. It would appear, however, that it initially occupied almost the whole width of the courtyard, except for a narrow, elongated annex or corridor (loc. 3) adjoining it on the south. The annex, some 1.75 m wide, communicated with the *oecus* through two arched doorways. The size of the *oecus* is again unspecified. Originally, it must have been much larger, as indicated by a careful analysis of wall bonds. This assumption is further corroborated by evidence provided by the mosaic preserved in the eastern part of the *oecus* (loc.2). The preserved part (2.20 by 3.80 m) of this multi-coloured *opus tessellatum* mosaic was divided into rectangular segments, each featuring a different geometric design. The two front panels were subdivided into six squares, each filled with rosettes inscribed into circles. Of the two remaining segments one is filled with four-pointed stars and the other is bordered with a double-guilloche pattern, apparently running around a central circular panel. The free corners of the panel were decorated with a floral design. Later partitions destroyed almost entirely the panel itself. The style of the mosaic suggests that it was laid most probably in the 2nd century AD.

The dating of the building is still far from precise. Finds retrieved from the fill provided little, if any, evidence. Although ample, they are mostly residual and pertaining to the final stage of occupation. Therefore the preliminary dating is based mostly on an analysis of architectural elements. The style of the architectural decoration indicates that the house was most probably built in the late 1st century BC or early 1st century AD. Needless to say, a verification of this conclusion will be possible only after a larger part of the building has been excavated and more evidence provided.

Earlier investigations in the area have proved that the huge foundation wall between the courtyard and *oecus* was erected upon remains of earlier structures, most probably of Ptolemaic date. It is still unclear, however, to what extent our house followed the layout of the earlier one, but one can expect it not to have been much different.

Phase II:

This phase is marked by the introduction of new building techniques, the pillar method of structuring walls and brick bonding being widely applied. A new system of roofing was also introduced. The original flat roofing was replaced by barrel vaults and domes. The initial layout of the house was significantly altered by new partition walls. The *oecus* was subdivided by transversal walls into three smaller chambers. The neighboring room (loc. 2a) was transformed into a sort of passing chamber accessible through arched doorways. The new room no. 7 was covered with a finely preserved brick dome. In almost all the other rooms more or less well preserved fragments of vaults have survived. The function of this reshaped building is still obscure. It would appear though, that in the second phase of occupation the building lost its original domestic function and begun to serve commercial or storage purposes. The house was apparently rebuilt following heavy destruction in the late 3rd century AD. The final abandonment of the building might be dated tentatively to the mid 4th century AD. and was probably associated with the construction of the nearby bath complex.

So far the peristyle house has been widely believed to be the most common feature of domestic architecture in Alexandria, although this view was based mainly on analyses of occa-

sional ancient written sources and tomb architecture.⁷ With our recent discoveries we can now conclude that at least some of the houses were patterned after the so-called *oecus* type, the more popular arrangement by far in Egypt of the Graeco-Roman period.

⁷ A. Adriani, *Annuaire du Musée Greco-Romain 1933-1935*, Alexandrie 1936, p. 67.