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Alexandria: Kom El-Dikka Excavations 1995-1996

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ALEXANDRIA

KOM EL-DIKKA EXCAVATIONS 1995-1996

Grzegorz Majcherek

The archaeological excavations carried out at Kom el-Dikka by the Polish Archaeological Mission covered as usual various areas of the site. Work proceeded from October 1995 until June 1996. The archaeological campaign proper was conducted in spring 1996 and lasted two months.¹

The season's principal goal was to continue excavations in sector F, where remains of well preserved Roman house have already been partly uncovered. Ongoing archaeological research, as necessitated by the current restoration program, concentrated mainly in the area of the cisterns complex.

CISTERNS (sector L)

Both the preservation and archaeological work in the eastern part of the cistern building are nearly at an end.² The main

¹ The research team headed by Dr. Grzegorz Majcherek included: Assist. Prof. Barbara Lichocka, numismatist; Assist. Prof. Adam Łukaszewicz, epigraphist; Dr. Barbara Tkaczow, Mrs. Renata Kucharczyk, Mr. Tomasz Witczak, archaeologists; and Mr. Waldemar Jerke, photographer. The Supreme Council for Antiquities was represented by Messrs Ahmed Moussa, Al'a Ed-Din Mahrous, Ashraf Abd El-Raouf Ragab and Mrs. Mona Said, all of whom actively participated in our work. The Mission would like to express its sincere gratitude to all SCA authorities and officials, especially to Prof. Dr. Abd El-Halim Nour Ed-Din, Secretary General of the SCA, and to Mrs. Doreya Said, Director General of the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria, for their friendly interest and support extended toward the Mission during its work.

² For the results of previous work in this area cf. G. Majcherek, Excavations in Alexandria in 1990-91, *PAM III* (1992), pp. 5-7; Excavations in Alexandria *PAM IV* (1993), pp. 11-14; Excavations at Kom el-Dikka 1995, *PAM VII* (1996), pp. 20-21.

objective of our work in this sector was the investigation and thorough clearing of the huge wall bordering the cistern on the east. The said wall had been built in the Late Roman period as a perimeter wall closing the entire complex of public buildings and separating it from the habitation quarter located east of the R4 street.

The eastern face of the wall had been cleared already in the 1970s. This season's work focused on excavating its inner, western face. Two sections of the wall comprised between buttresses nos 2 and 3, and buttresses nos 3 and 4 were cleared. Altogether a stretch of some 20 m of its western face was cleared and prepared for restoration.

It was found that, like the cistern, this structure had been seriously affected in the medieval period. Almost all of the facing had been removed, the damage reaching in some places about 6 m below the present top of the wall, well below the pavement stretching between it and the cistern. It has been suggested before that this space was primarily occupied by stables for animals (donkeys or oxen) which were supposed to drive the water-drawing device positioned on the cistern top. This supposition seems to be further corroborated by new findings. Close to the no. 3 buttress, a huge water tank serving probably as watering trough was found. Originally, it seems to have been a large bathing tank made of a monolithic block of Aswan granite. The rectangular tank was decorated with a pair of finely cut circular handles adorned with leaves. Both the date and the origin of the tank remain unknown; there is, however, a strong possibility, that it was removed from the nearby bath following its last substantial rebuilding in the middle of the 6th century AD.

It appears that the facing of this wall was removed in much the same way and time as the eastern facade of the cistern. The assemblage of finds from the robbers' pit includes sherds of Fustat Fatimid Sgraffito, Early Mamluk Sgraff wares, as well as

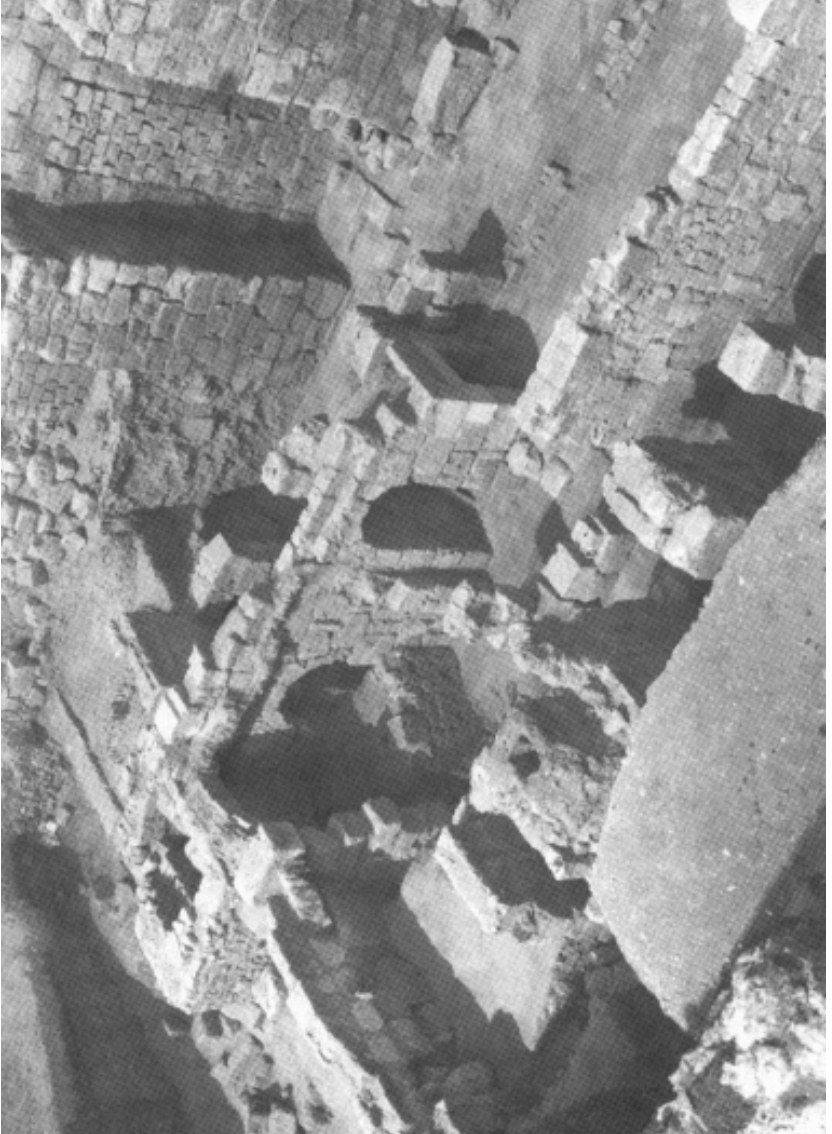
some imported Cypriot Glaze wares, which date this activity to the 12th-14th centuries AD.

Work was continued also in the adjacent corridor of the cistern. In the previous campaign, an entrance with a well preserved monolithic threshold had been uncovered. During this season's work progress was made in clearing the eastern face of the corridor for a distance of some 13 m. Here again, the wall facing was almost entirely removed in the medieval period except for a few separate and limited areas further north. Moreover, a stretch of some 8 m of the corridor's floor was also cleared. It was built as a huge, slightly sloping causeway (inclined c. 15-17°), with wide steps made of dolomite blocks, apparently to facilitate access for animals driving the water-drawing devices. The corridor was filled with a thick, almost homogeneous layer consisting mostly of earth mixed with pottery sherds. Finds from the fill include numerous sherds of amphorae, the Late Roman class 1 amphorae being the most frequent. Some of the better preserved examples bear the red Greek *dipinti* comprising religious formulae like ΧΜΓ, usually dated to the late 6th century AD. A sealed neck of a *spatheion*-type amphora bearing a similar inscription (inv. no. 4392) of roughly parallel date, as well as a fragmentarily preserved zoomorphic vessel (inv. no. 4395) were also found. No fragments of *qawadis* whatsoever were recovered from the fill – clear evidence that the corridor was filled already after the cistern went out of use.

SECTOR F

It was the third consecutive season of work in this area. Previous campaigns saw the clearing of a large part of a well-preserved urban house of the 1st century AD embellished with a fine geometric mosaic.³ Following evacuation of earth previously

³ Cf. G. Majcherek, Alexandria 1994, Archaeological excavations, *PAM VI* (1995), pp. 14-20; G. Majcherek, Alexandria, Excavations 1995, *PAM VII* (1996), pp. 13-20.



Phot. 1. General view of House FA. Photo W. Jerke.

removed from the excavation, which had blocked further work, the explored part of area F was extended well to the east. The disturbed upper strata in this area, composed mostly of furnace refuse and debris, produced the usual broad range of assorted pottery, ranging from the Middle Roman to Islamic wares. Immediately below, several structures of Late Roman date were cleared, including two relatively well preserved basins. One of them, located in the southern part of the trench, was built of rough limestone blocks (1.70 x 1.40 m) lined with waterproof mortar. It has been ascertained, however, that the basin was not found in its original position. Below the floor we explored a large robbing pit filled with Mamluk Pottery of the 13th-14th century AD (Sgraff and Slip Painted Wares). It is, therefore, quite possible that the basin, although of earlier date, was moved or brought down during the robbing operation.

The second basin, located further north (next to the outer wall of the bath) was found *in situ*. It was fairly large, measuring 2.90 x 2.50 m, and built in a combined technique using small ashlar stones interspersed with courses of baked bricks. It was again lined with waterproof mortar. The basin was fairly deep (c. 1.20 m) and provided with three steps in the corner. Several marble slabs were found in their original position on the floor. The basin was apparently used for bathing purposes, although its relation to the nearby baths remains unclear. It is quite possible that it served the needs of the workers servicing the bath.

The date of the basin is difficult to specify. The evidence is very scarce and inconclusive. It must have been built somewhere in the 5th century AD, but it definitely went out of use by the mid 6th century, when the whole area was gradually being filled with a thick stratum of refuse and rubbish following the last rebuilding of the baths, the resulting mound reaching as high as the reservoirs of the nearby cisterns (i.e. some

3-4 m above the top of the basin). Hence, the basin could be related to the second phase of the bath complex.⁴

In the central part of the trench a small section of a sewage channel was cleared. It was built of small rough stones and partly covered with amphorae including both Egyptian Nile silt containers (Late Amphorae 7) and foreign vessels (North African spatheia). The channel formed part of the local sewage system that was previously recognized also in the western part of sector F.

The floor of the northern basin reached the level of construction of the baths and cistern. It consisted of an evenly tamped surface with thick local accumulations of mortar deposits and building refuse. A set of rectangular containers resting on this level was cleared previously in the southern part of the trench. This installation was most probably used for mixing and storing mortar during the construction of the cistern.

The Late Roman occupation level was separated from earlier layers by a thick (c. 1.00-1.60 m) leveling stratum containing heavy concentration of architectural debris: mortar chunks, fragments of plastering, and stone rubble. The higher preserved sections of walls of the Early Roman building were found immediately underneath.

This season our efforts focused on the exploration of the eastern wing of House FA, adjoining the pseudo-peristyled courtyard. We were able to excavate three more rooms bringing the total of the uncovered surface of the house to some 250 m². Thus, almost the entire area of the house available for excavations was explored (Phot. 1). Two major phases of occupation were again recognized in this fragment of the house, both reflecting subsequent changes in layout and function of the building.

⁴ Cf. W. Kołataj, *Imperial Baths at Kom el-Dikka*, Warsaw 1992, pp. 50-51.

PHASE I

Some of the loci not yet entirely excavated either for technical or safety reasons were now cleared. A small baulk left in the eastern part of the courtyard was explored and the clearing of the entire courtyard completed. In the debris making up most of the baulk, a finely sculptured marble head of Alexander the Great was found (inv. no. 4397), bringing the total number of statuary recovered from the house to five examples (Phot. 2).

The exploration of room no. 6 accommodating the staircase was also completed (Fig. 1). In its southern part adjoining the façade, remnants of steps were uncovered. Contrary to the previous suggestion, the position of the steps excludes the possibility of the main entrance being located here. The entrance, therefore, must have been in the neighboring locus no. 5, serving at the same time as a vestibule giving access to the courtyard.

The eastern wing of the house was found to be rather poorly preserved. Several sections of walls were almost entirely demolished, while others were seriously damaged, most probably due to earthquakes as indicated by numerous vertical cracks.

Chamber no. 12, located in the very corner of the house, was rather part of the southern wing in terms of function; it neighbored with the side street and served varied purposes. At its western end two separate shops were located, while the middle part accommodated the entrance vestibule and staircase leading to the upper storey. Room no. 12 measuring 3.25 x 2.35 m was not connected with the eastern wing proper. It opened into a large room no. 11 (excavated in 1995), where a kitchen was probably located (an assumption based on the presence of thick ash deposits). The floor of room no. 12 was paved with much-worn limestone slabs; no additional installations were found in this chamber and its exact function remains unknown. The adjacent small room no. 13, measuring only 2.90 x 1.50 m, was accessible through a wide entrance directly from the courtyard. The doorway was ren-

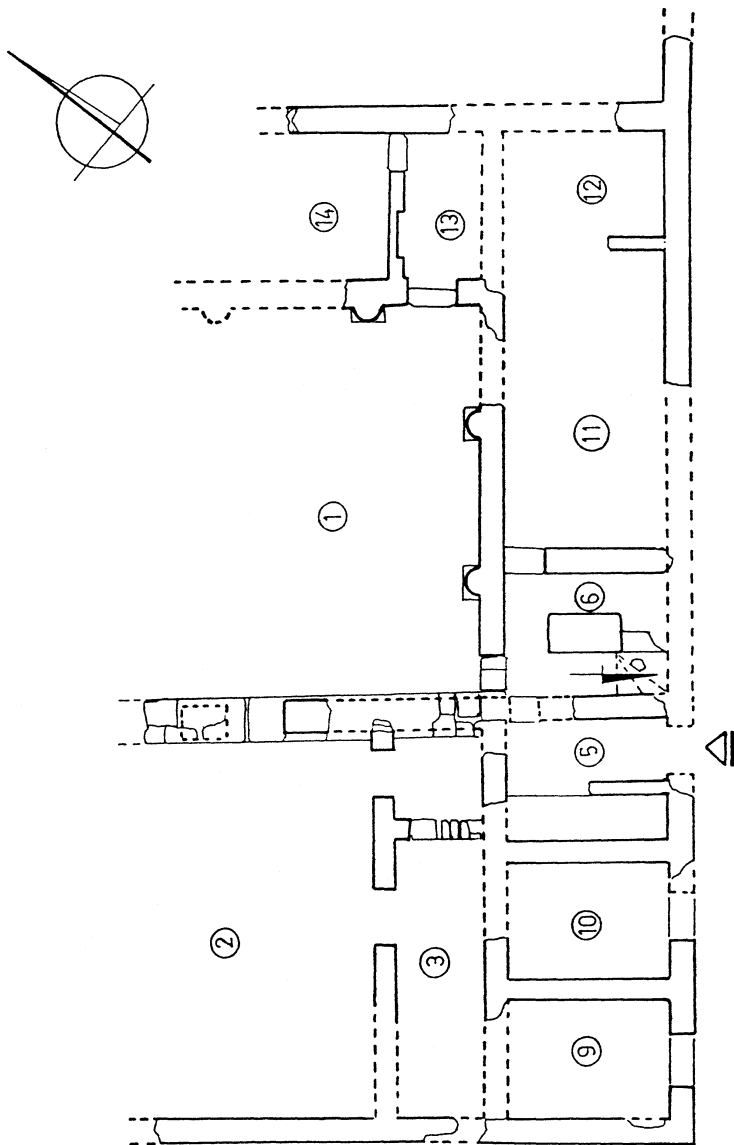


Fig. 1. House FA, original stage. Drawing G. Majcherek.

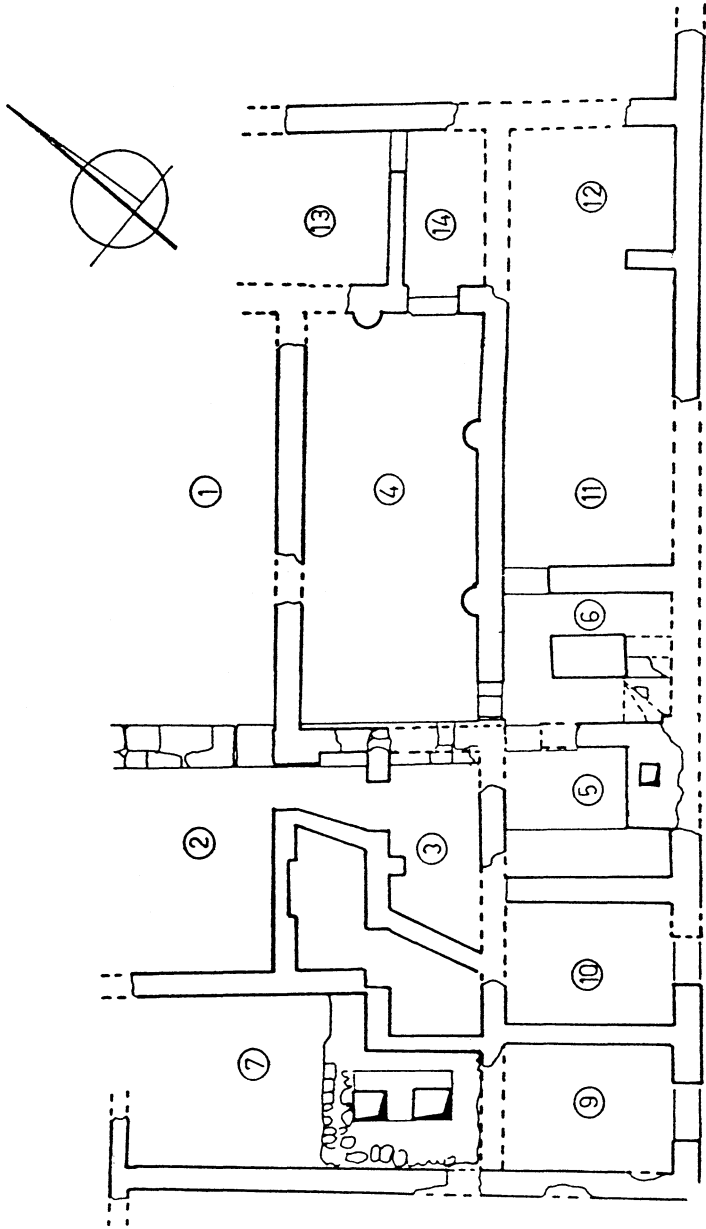


Fig. 2. House FA, second stage. Drawing G. Majcherek.

dered on either side by narrow, vertical recesses shaped in plaster. The holes for fixing a wooden door frame are still clearly seen. Since there were no traces of direct communication with the previously described chamber, this small room must have served as a narrow antechamber leading to the next room no. 14. The room was embellished with marble wall veneering, of which some remains were still preserved on the walls.

Adjacent room no. 14 was found to be quite sumptuously decorated. The floor was paved with large marble slabs (1.20 x 1.10 m), while the centre was additionally decorated with a two-colored *opus sectile* panel featuring a rectangle framed by a narrow band of porphyry tiles. The frame, comprising four inverted triangles, surrounded a central square with a round tile of porphyry inside it. The whole design made for a conspicuous decorative composition based on vividly contrasting colors: red porphyry and white marble. The lower fragments of the surrounding walls were covered with marble tiles.

It was ascertained, however, that marble wall veneering was applied only in the second phase of decoration. Remnants of the earlier decorative system survived on some sections of the wall. The bottom black-painted dado was surmounted with plain rectangular painted panels of varied colors; yellow, red and black. The panels were separated by narrow, light-green stripes. This arrangement closely recalls the so called Masonry Style (First Pompeian style) of wall decoration, examples of which have been previously discovered in the Early Roman House H (habitation quarter east of R4 street).⁵

The precise chronology of both decorative styles recognized in room no. 14 is not available at this stage of research; small underfloor test pits scheduled for the next season will certainly

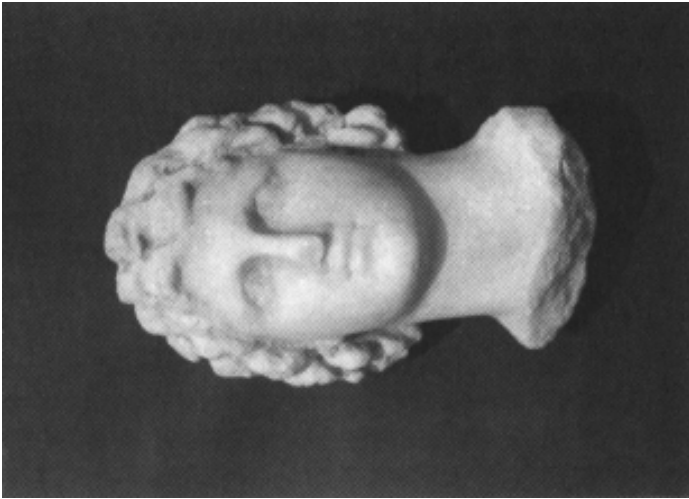
⁵ G. Majcherek, Notes on Alexandrian habitat, Roman and Byzantine houses from Kom el-Dikka, *TOIIOI* vol. 5/1 (1995), pp.137; for other examples of similar decoration from Alexandria, cf. A. Adriani, *Annuaire du Musée Greco-Romain* III, (1940-50), pp. 107-115, figs 35-36.

provide more evidence. Due to technical reasons we were not able to clear the whole room. Assuming the central position of the decorative panel it could be tentatively described as almost square (2.90 x 3.00 m). The room formed one of the main halls of the house, although in contrast to the previously uncovered *oecus* (room no. 2) located opposite, it was not accessible directly from the courtyard: One can assume, therefore, that it served more private, domestic functions.

The back wall of rooms nos 12, 13 and 14 did not survive in its entirety. However, the continuous ghost wall, clearly preserved up to 0.80 m above the floor layers, seems to provide substantial evidence that there were no doors in it. It could thus be regarded as a back-wall for the whole house. It is surprising that the said wall was not structurally bonded with the other walls of building FA, but seemed to belong to a separate structure excavated further east, most probably another house (FC).

We were able to clear in part only one room of this building. The excavated fragment measured roughly 3 x 4 m. The room was definitely larger and divided functionally into two parts by small pilasters; only the eastern one is still preserved. The surrounding walls were seriously destroyed, due to either earthquakes or demolition. The fill of the room produced numerous decorative elements: fragments of painted wall plaster, a large limestone column base and small fragmentarily preserved capital. The exploration of this newly discovered building will be continued in the next season.

In order to ascertain the date of construction and to determine the phasing of the edifice, a small test trench was opened in the corner of room no. 11. This sounding produced substantial chronological evidence. The datable material recovered from below the floor level, consisting mostly of ceramics both imported and local, proved that the house was built somewhere at the close of the 1st century AD. It has been found also that the Early Roman walls were built directly upon earlier structures which served as ready found-



*Phot. 2. Marble head of Alexander the Great.
Photo W. Jerke.*



*Phot. 3. Male head. No. 4393.
Photo W. Jerke.*

dations. A fragment of such wall built of extremely huge blocks (c. 1.10 m long) in *opus isodomum* technique was cleared within the trench. The upper course of the said wall was found to bear still its original plastering. The accompanying floor level was rather poor, made of tamped earth mixed with clay and lime. Underfloor layers produced exclusively Late Hellenistic material, composed mostly of ceramics.

The bulk of the recovered pottery sherds refers mostly to Black Glazed wares, either Egyptian or foreign, and several amphorae stamps originating in the Aegean. It is quite obvious that House FA replaced a yet unknown Ptolemaic building previously occupying this area, most probably also a house. However, neither the dimensions nor original layout of this earlier structure can be determined at this stage of research. It is quite possible though that the Early Roman house largely repeated the plan of this building.

PHASE II

Following rather extensive damage, the building was rebuilt and its plan substantially altered (Fig. 2). Large sections of the walls, especially in the facade, were either re-structured or entirely rebuilt in new material. In some cases, partition walls were introduced; one such wall was built across the courtyard, dividing the building into two separate units. The exact purpose of this important modification is unknown. It would seem that the building lost its residential character at this time and began serving storage purposes. The later phase is well attested by occupation levels cleared in all three rooms, set usually some 0.70-0.80 m above the original floors. Finds trapped between these two floor layers should be ascribed to the later part of the 3rd century AD. Among the objects of special interest found on the floor was a fragmentarily preserved marble slab bearing a Greek inscription referring to the cult of Tyche, dated to the 2nd-3rd century AD (inv. no. 4399).

The building was most probably abandoned in the first half of the 4th century AD, as evidenced by finds from the destruction layer, most probably in connection with the building of the baths and the cistern complex.

At present, the archaeological evidence for domestic architecture of the Early Roman Period in Alexandria remains very limited; only minor fragments of houses have been excavated east of the R4 street and in the Theater area.⁶ The design of house FA is undoubtedly deeply rooted in the Graeco-Roman architectural tradition. The arrangement of a pseudo-peristyle courtyard and main reception hall (oecus) formed the principal feature of the building's layout. The whole house consists of two clearly distinguished functional units: two corner rooms facing the street (loci 9 and 10), separated from the main body of the house and used as shops, and the rest of the building serving purely domestic purposes. Such an arrangement, combining both commercial and residential functions can be observed in numerous urban houses from all over the Mediterranean area.

An additional trench (FIV) was sunk close to the northeastern corner of the cistern. The trench measuring some 6.50 x 6.00 m was planned as an extension of a smaller trench excavated there back in 1991. It was established then that the cistern foundations in this area were built directly upon the remains of some earlier structures. The said structures consisted of at least two basins built of flat bricks with their inner surfaces lined with waterproof mortar. Destroyed, they were filled tightly with stone debris, to form a ready substructure for buttress no. 1. The largest, central basin was provided with three outlets leading to the northernmost one. In one of the outlets a lead pipe was found still *in situ*. The stra-

⁶ G. Majcherek, Alexandria 1994, Archaeological Excavations, PAM VI (1995), pp. 11-14.

tum overlying the basins produced a rather meager collection of finds, mostly mixed pottery sherds of various date.

Particular attention is due to a very fine male portrait head, sculptured in black granite (inv. no. 4393), found in the fill close to the huge perimeter wall, bordering the area on the east. It originally belonged to a full-size, free-standing statue, as evidenced by a fragment of dorsal pillar preserved at the back. The portrait shows a certain resemblance to a known representation of Julius Caesar: oblong face with almost rectangular chin, prominent cheekbones, small minute lips, wrinkled forehead, and short hair (Phot. 3).

Both the kind of stone employed and particularly the presence of a dorsal pillar, as well as the style of the sculpture point undoubtedly to an Egyptian or perhaps even Alexandrian origin of the portrait.

In the western part of the trench, the exploration was continued down to the level of some 6.50 m above sea level, where some additional structures were cleared. They consisted of two sections of large walls (c. 0.50 m wide) meeting at right angles, and a small basin. Both walls show traces of prolonged use and rebuilding, although their exact nature is hard to determine. It would appear that the excavated structures together with basins belonged to a bathing establishment or cistern of an Early Roman house.

It has already been ascertained that House FA adjoined a small side street dividing the whole quarter into smaller insulae. The street runs east-west along the northern facade of the cisterns. Our conclusions concerning the new side-street have proved correct: The structures excavated in trench FIV should be assigned to a house built in another insula located further south.