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Kom El-Dikka: Excavations, 1999

Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean 12, 23-34

2001

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.

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KOM EL-DIKKA

EXCAVATIONS, 1999/2000

Grzegorz Majcherek

Archaeological investigations at Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria, sponsored by the Polish Centre of Archaeology, continued with varied intensity throughout the period from October 1999 until June 2000.¹⁾

All through the season, much effort was spent on essential landscaping, as well as accompanying archaeological work. Evacuation of soil and debris from various areas of the site was again one of the most urgent issues. Some 1000 m³ of soil excavated from the trenches was again removed from the area of the Theater Portico. Again, the evacuation of these deposits was made possible thanks to substantial financial support from the Polish Government and assistance from the Governorate of Alexandria.

Beside ongoing archaeological research wholly integrated with the conservation program (cf. report by W. Kołtąj in this volume), the excavation work concentrated mainly in the area of the Theater Portico located in the southwestern part of the site (Fig. 1).

1) The archaeological research was headed by Dr. Grzegorz Majcherek who worked with a team including: Prof. Barbara Lichočka, numismatist; Ms Renata Kucharczyk, Dr. Barbara Tkaczow, Ms Iwona Zych, Ms Teresa Witkowska, Ms Grażyna Bąkowska, Mr Artur Kaczor, archaeologists; Mr. Władysław Weker, conservator. The photographic documentation was prepared by Mr. Waldemar Jerke.

The multiple tasks of this campaign could not have been successfully accomplished without the indispensable assistance of the authorities of the Supreme Council of Antiquities to whom we wish to express our gratitude. Particular thanks are due Prof. Gaballa Ali Gaballa, Secretary General of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, and all the SCA staff in Alexandria for their help and friendly support. Mr. Ahmed Moussa, chief inspector at the Kom el-Dikka site, devoted as usual much enthusiasm and efficiency to solving everyday problems and facilitating our work.

ALEXANDRIA
EGYPT

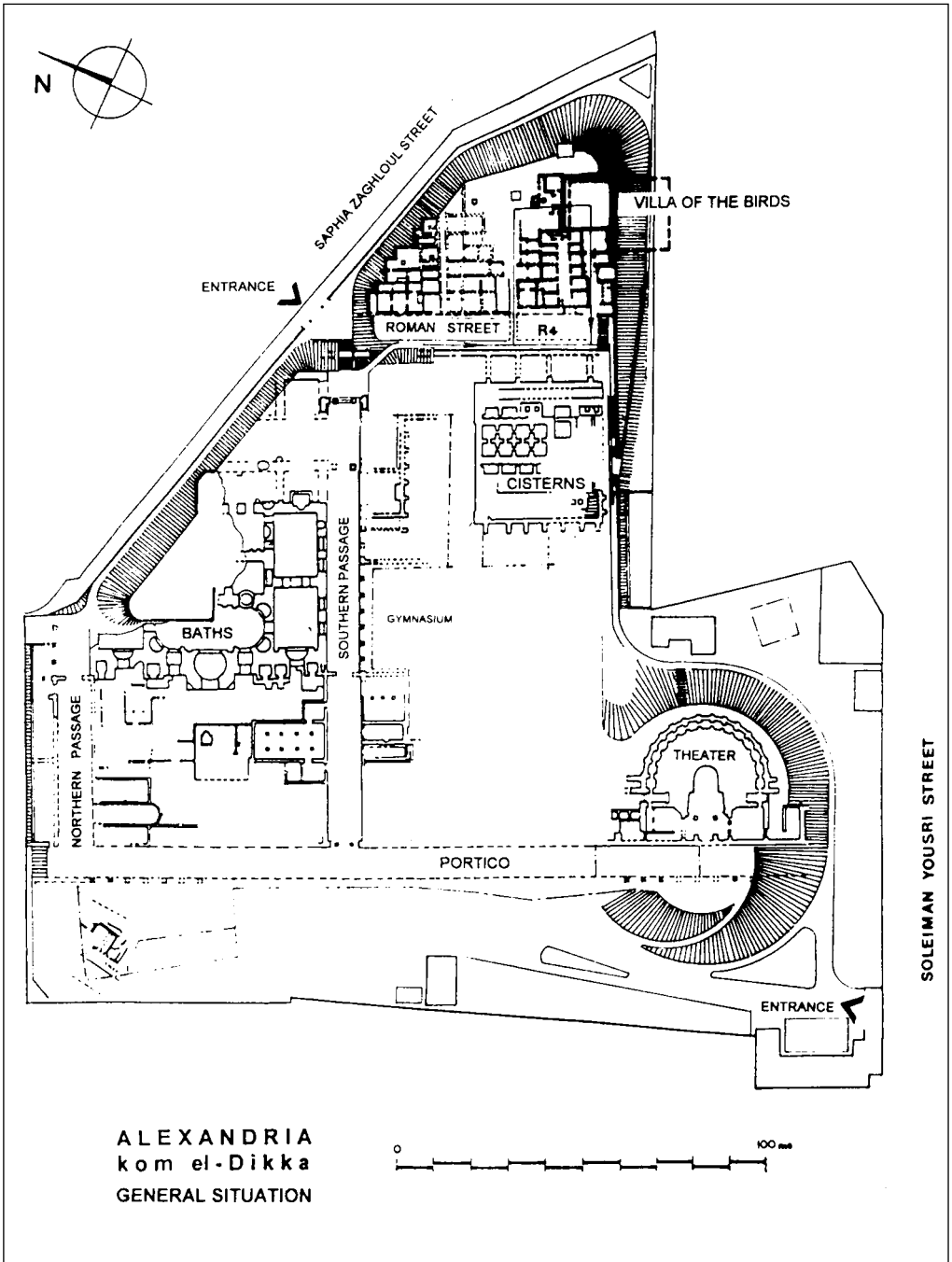


Fig. 1. General plan of the site
(Drawing W. Kolqataj)

SECTOR MX

MOSLEM CEMETERIES

As the previous campaign has shown,²⁾ this area, like almost all of the site, was occupied in the Medieval period by a Moslem cemetery. The overall stratigraphy here is similar to that recognized previously in other sectors of the site.³⁾

This season another 20 x 13 m of the site was explored. Graves of the Upper Necropolis were cleared some 0.80-1.50 m below the present top soil (c. 8.60-9.30 m above sea level) on a westward sloping level (Fig. 2). They were evenly spaced, covering

the whole extent of the excavation trench and revealing some signs of intra-cemetery patterning (Fig. 3). The tombs were oriented SW-NE in keeping with traditional Islamic funerary practice, the head of the deceased being placed in the direction of the *qibla*.

Altogether 22 fairly well preserved tombs were recorded within the trench limits. They fall into two different types, the first being apparently earlier given the stratigraphic position of the tombs. This group, which comprises structures M 291,



Fig. 2. Sector MX. General view of the necropolis looking southwest
(Photo W. Jerke)

2) G. Majcherek, Kom el-Dikka. Excavations, 1998/99, *PAM XI, Reports 1999* (2000), 27-38.

3) Kubiak, "Les fouilles polonaises à Kom el Dick en 1963 et 1964", *BSAA* 42 (1967), 47-80; W. Kołataj and T. Kołataj, "Polish excavations at Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria", *BSAA* 43 (1975), 79-97; G. Majcherek, "Excavations at Kom el-Dikka 1997-98, A Preliminary Report", *ASAE LXXIV* (1999), 39-55.

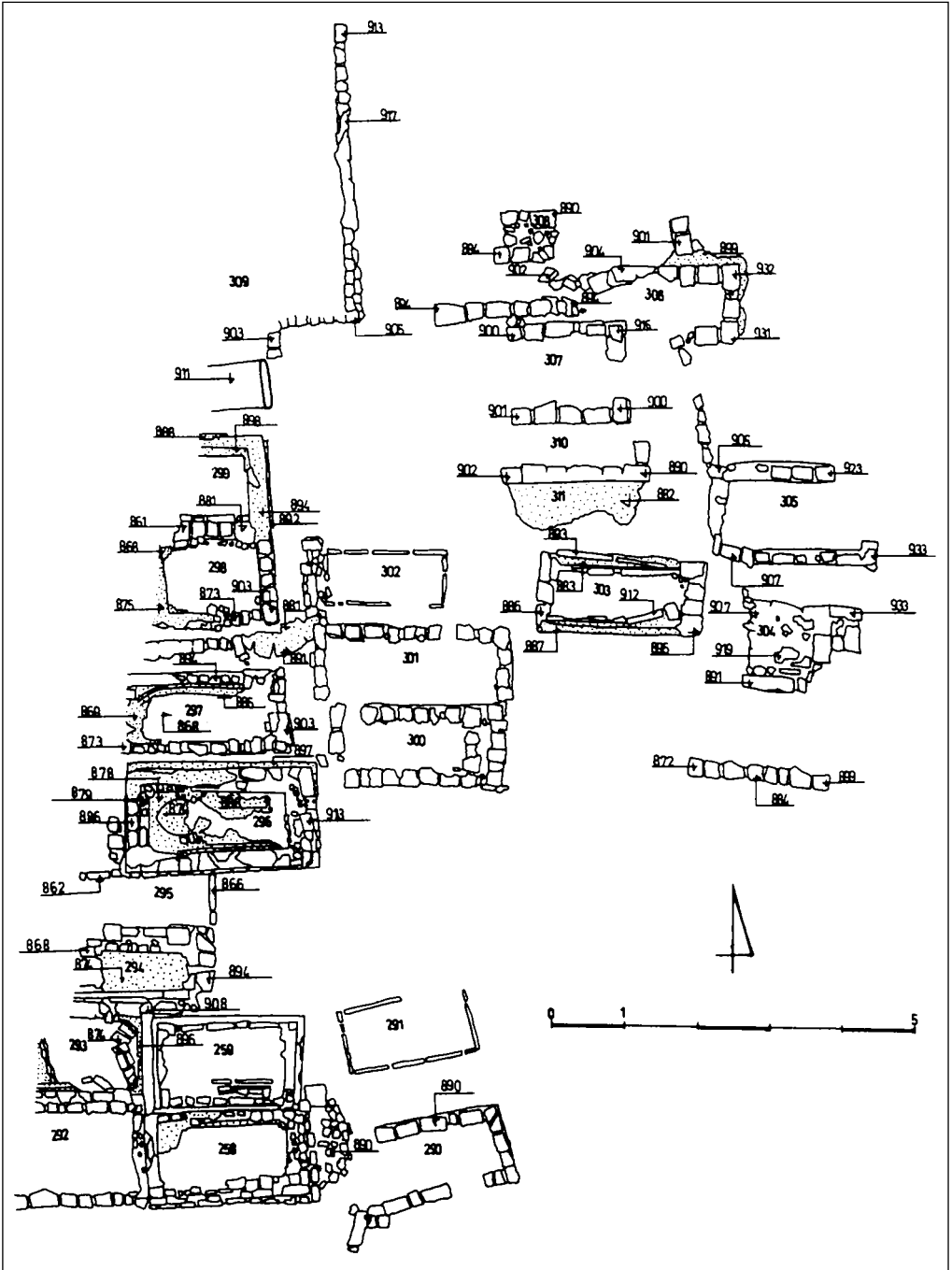


Fig. 3. Sector MX. Upper Necropolis
(Drawing A. Kaczor)

M 295, M 302, features upright limestone slabs set over shallow pits for the bodies. A different and more developed type is represented by graves of the second group (M 258-59, M 292-301, M 303-310). In this case, the aboveground structures were built of small blocks joined with mortar and additionally lined with plaster forming listels on both the outside and inside. The western end of these tombs was very often shaped like a *mibrab* niche (M 258, M 296-7). The floor was covered with lime plaster. The burial chamber was also built with small limestone blocks and again quite often lined with plaster and covered either with slabs or a gabled roof. Contrary to the first group, these graves usually contained several bodies. In one case (M 293), the eastern part of the tomb was additionally equipped with a sort of vertical shaft, apparently designed to accommodate multiple burials. In the northwestern part of the excavation trench, a fragment of a large rectangular structure was uncovered (M 309), of which only the lowermost courses are preserved (cf. Fig. 3). In all probability, it formed an enclosure wall originally, encompassing a number of neighboring graves. Similar enclosures

have been recorded previously in various areas of the cemetery.⁴⁾

The area had patently served as a burial ground before being turned into a dump sometime in the late 12th century. The associated layers yielded a fairly broad range of artifactual data, including fragments of oil lamps, aeolipiles, glass vessels, small bronze items, etc. A vast assemblage of ceramics, representing both Egyptian and foreign production centers from practically all over the Mediterranean area, was also recorded. The rich repertoire of imported ceramics is perhaps the best evidence for Alexandria's lively trade relations in the Medieval period. Unfortunately, most fragments are badly damaged and discolored owing to highly corrosive soil conditions found here: humidity, high concentration of salts and caustic elements. The archaeological evidence supports the previously established chronology for this phase of the cemetery, i.e., 11th-12th cent. AD.

A marble slab bearing a raised Arabic inscription in Kufic script was found reused in the structure of tomb M 258 (Fig. 4). The inscription, containing the text of the *shabada*, can be dated safely on

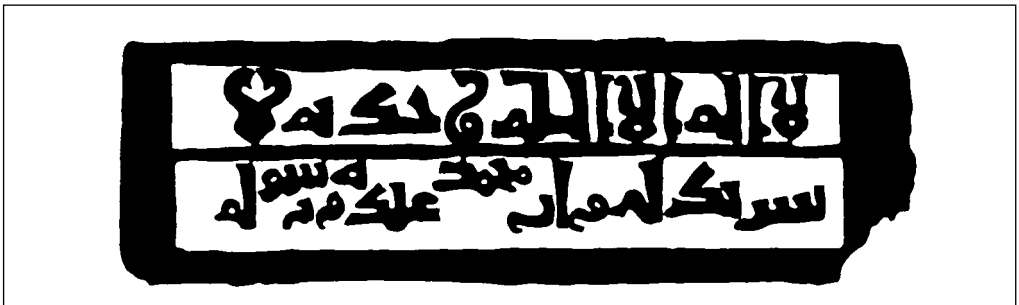


Fig. 4. Kufic inscription
(Drawing M. Redlak)

4) Cf. Sectors U and AW: M. Rodziewicz, "Excavations at Kom el-Dikka in 1980-1981", in: *BSAA* 44 (1991), 71-83, fig. 4.

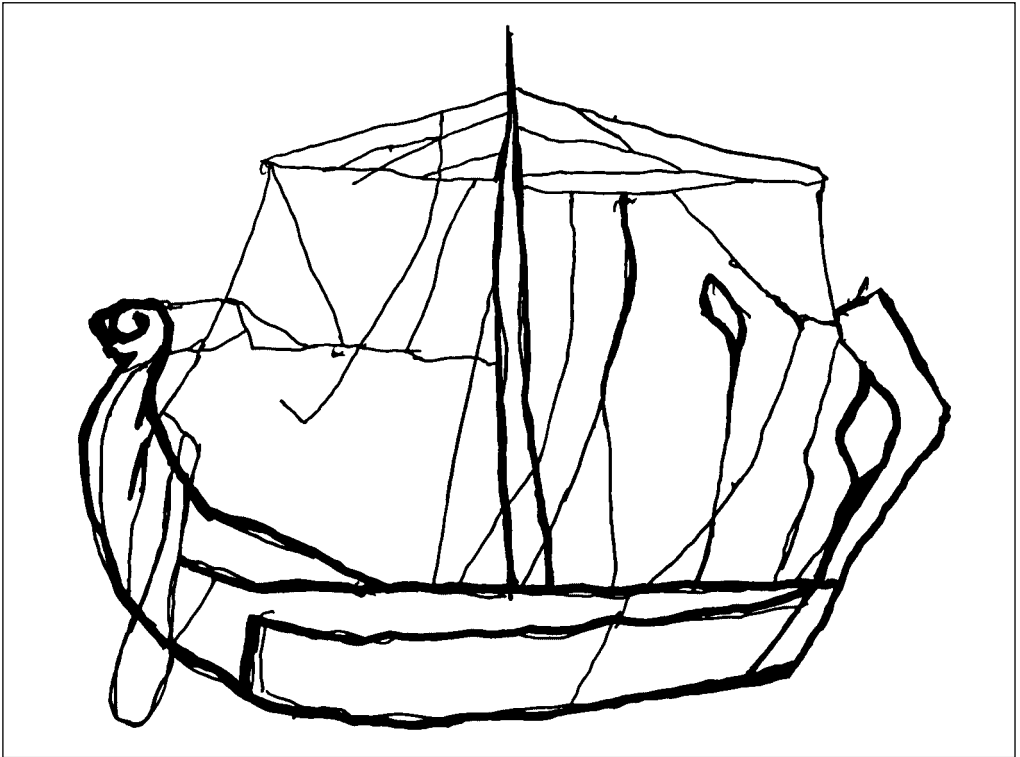
epigraphic grounds to the 4th cent. AH (11th cent. AD). It may have been attached originally to the wall of either some unknown building or the cemetery gate.

Often the graves of the Upper Necropolis were located practically upon the pavement of the Portico; in some cases even the burial chambers had been dug into the stylobate, damaging much of it in the process. A column of red Aswan granite, found last year lying under tombs M 252 and M 255, was now cleared completely. Fragments of a marble capital and yet another column were now

unearthed in the northwestern part of the trench, close to grave M 299.

EARLY ROMAN HOUSE

Continued excavations of a large Early Roman house located in the southern part of the trench succeeded in clearing most of the area of the building.⁵⁾ The previously excavated part consisted of seven rooms serving various purposes. The most imposing of them was a large hall decorated with pairs of engaged columns placed along the walls and in the corners, giving an overall impression of a pseudo-



*Fig. 5. Ship drawing found on the wall of the southern triclinium
(Drawing G. Majcherek)*

5) For the results of explorations in recent years, cf. G. Majcherek, *PAM VI, Reports 1994* (1995), 11-20; *PAM XI, Reports 1999* (2000), 27-38, fig. 5.

peristyle arrangement. The floor of the hall was paved with multicolored marble tiles arranged in a geometrical pattern, suggesting a *triclinium*. Only this year, behind one of the now dismantled later walls, some indecipherable Greek graffiti and sketchy drawings were found. Among the best preserved is a fairly accurate rendering of a ship (*Fig. 5*).

This season excavations were continued north of the courtyard. Another, fairly well preserved column was found some 1.20 m away from the previously uncovered and much weathered limestone column. It was of a smaller diameter (c. 0.45 m, as compared to 0.65 m of the one excavated before) and stood some 1.10 m off the wall. From the start it was obvious that it marked the entrance to another large room. This room was cleared to the extent made possible by its preservation, its eastern part having been destroyed by the wall of the theater. This large, almost square room, originally measuring some 6 x 5.50 m, seems to have been the principal, richly decorated hall of the house. It has been interpreted as yet another *triclinium*, judging by the typical design of the mosaic decorating its floor: U-shaped border, intended to accommodate the banquet couches, running around a T-shaped center field.

Excavation of the room revealed a large accumulation of architectural debris: limestone cornices, engaged columns, capitals, stuccowork and other decorative elements – clear indication of sumptuous architectural decoration of the building (*Fig. 6*). The cornices are usually decorated with dentils or with alternately flat-grooved and hollow square modillions in

typical Alexandrian tradition.⁶⁾ The decoration style indicates that the edifice was erected in the late 1st cent. BC or early 1st cent. AD at the latest. To judge by the stratigraphical position of these elements, they had, however, originally adorned an upper story. The *triclinium* in turn was decorated merely with niches that were evenly spaced along the walls. They were found very damaged by later use and their original form is unknown. The walls of the *triclinium* were made of regular masonry, with some blocks measuring 0.60 x 0.50 m.

The tessellated floor has survived in relatively good condition, including the decorative panel, almost entirely preserved, although the emblema itself is much damaged (*Fig. 7*). The ample space along the walls (1.45 m wide) was paved with small irregular stones with no pattern to them. The mosaic floor proper combines a main field and lateral extensions. The central square field (1.90 x 1.90 m) framed by a black band, contains a shield of bichrome, coloristically interchanging scales edged by a triple black fillet. In the corners, there are dolphins placed symmetrically on either side of a trident. The small-sized (c. 0.35 m in diameter) multi-coloured *opus vermiculatum* emblema shows three birds.

The forepart of the floor followed a different design. Its simple orthogonal pattern consists of tangent octagons outlined in black on a white background. Large lozenges appear in both lateral extensions.

The subject of the emblema makes it one of only a few figural mosaics known from Roman Alexandria.⁷⁾ Our panel brings to mind associations with

6) P. Pensabene, *Elementi architettonici di Alessandria e di altri siti egiziani* (Rome 1993).

7) Cf. forthcoming: G. Majcherek, "Mosaic Floors of Roman Triclinia in Alexandria: Evolution of the Techniques and Design", in: *Acts of the Eight International Congress of Egyptology* (Cairo 2000).

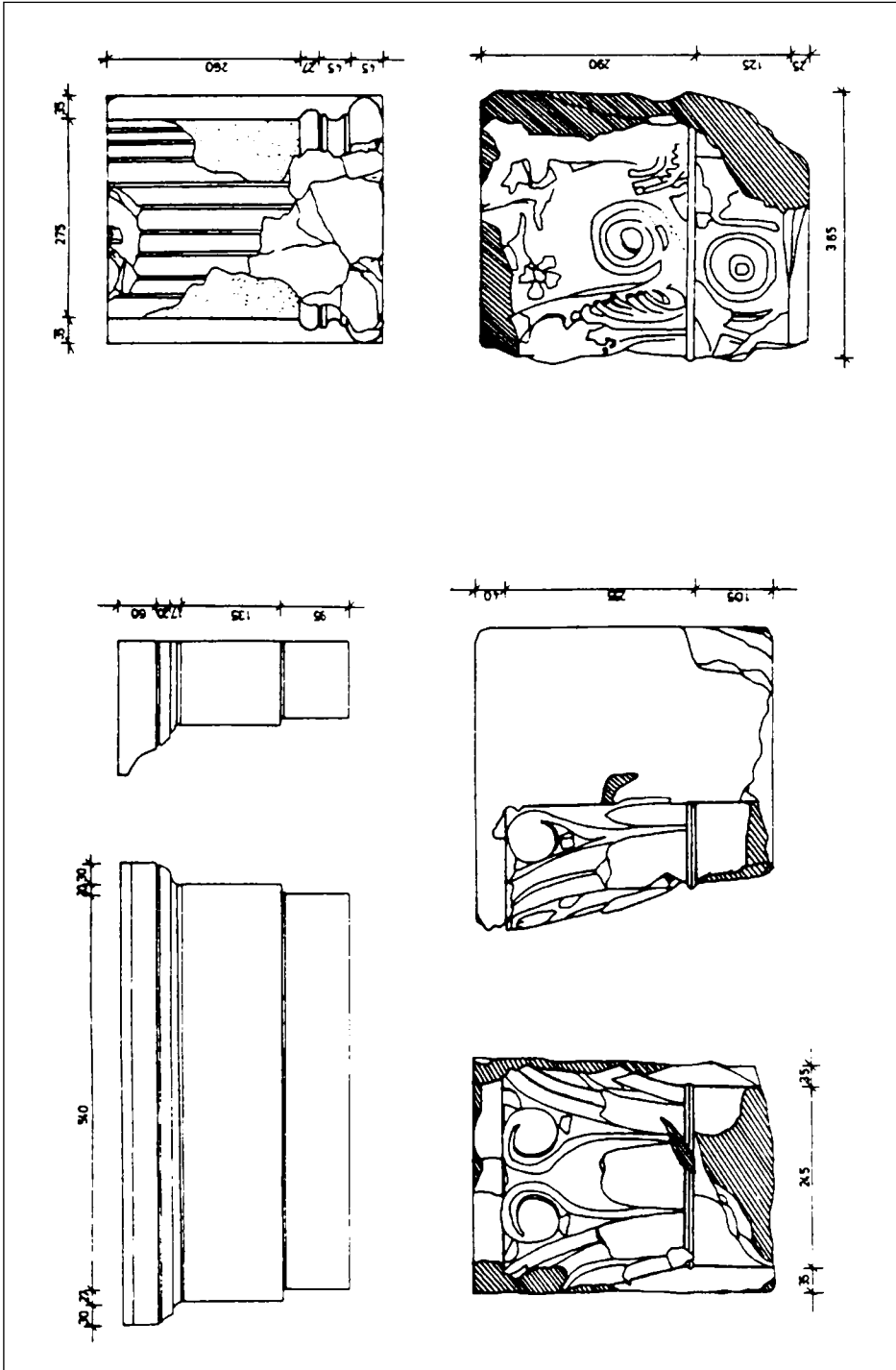


Fig. 6. Architectural elements found in the Early Roman bouse
(Drawing G. Majcherek)

representations of various species of birds depicted on separate panels of yet another mosaic discovered at the site of the so called Villa of the Birds.⁸⁾ Bird depictions in themselves are among the most popular themes on Egyptian mosaics. They can be seen represented also on the mosaic floors from Canopus and Thmuis, where they usually constitute part of a Nilotic landscape decoration. Our emblema, however, reveals a striking similarity with another emblema from Kom Trouga, representing three birds in an almost identical composition.⁹⁾ This piece, dated to the 1st cent. BC, was found inserted in a much later tessellated floor of the 2nd century. Perhaps in our case we are also dealing with a similar phenomenon. As

there is another, earlier mosaic floor below our mosaic, it appears that our emblema may have been transferred originally from this earlier floor.

Shield-of-scales panels are exceptionally popular in Egypt and are evidenced in number. The best parallels are offered by the well known mosaic from Thmuis with a representation of Berenike II and other examples found in Alexandria (at Gabbari and the mosaic recently discovered at the Cinema Diana site).¹⁰⁾ All these shields, however, are usually multicolored. Our piece fits very well into the bichrome, black-and-white style that became predominant in Alexandria from the 1st cent. AD. The design itself of a circle inscribed into a square, so exceptionally



Fig. 7. *Early Roman house. Mosaic in the triclinium*
(Photo W. Jerke)

8) M. Rodziewicz, "Un quartier d'habitation gréco-romain à Kom el-Dikka", *ET IX* (1976), 169-210, figs. 11-14.

9) M. Abd er-Rahman, "Les premières fouilles du Kom Trougah", *ASAE LV* (1958), 356, pl. VIb; W.A. Daszewski, *Corpus of Mosaics from Egypt* (Mainz 1985), 172-173, cat. no. 47, pl. D1; fig. 12.

10) Daszewski, *op.cit.*, 120-128, cat. no. 20, pls. 22-23, fig. 6; A.-M. Guimier-Sorbets, *Le pavement à la Méduse dans une maison d'époque impériale à Alexandrie*, *Alexandria I* (1998), 115-140, fig. 1.

popular in Egypt, is also considered as distinctive of the Alexandrian style.

Traces of ancient repairs are to be observed in both parts of the floors. In the northern part of the *tessellatum* mosaic there was quite a big lacuna (c. 0.90 x 0.60 m), repaired with tesserae of slightly different color and size. A destroyed fragment of one of the dolphins (SW corner) was mended in similar manner, as were some of the octagons decorating the forefront of the mosaic. Comparable interventions are discernible also in the section of the U-shaped floor.

The dating of the building is still far from precise. Associated finds included relatively few pottery fragments, mostly belonging to the 2nd-3rd century horizon, as well as several lamps of similar date. Among the more interesting finds one should mention a small terracotta figurine (Reg. no. 5049) and a lamp decorated with a representation of winged Eros (Reg. no. 5050).

Once destroyed, the room, as well as the whole derelict building, was at least partly cleared and re-occupied. It must have been turned into a kind of workshop to judge by the installations uncovered on floor level: a series of stone-made rectangular cysts accompanied by some large vessels (mostly reused amphorae) dug into the corresponding layer. The impression is that of a small foundry, although no actual evidence of slag was found with the thick layer of ashes. The precise function of the installations, however, remains obscure owing to their poor state of preservation.

The building was abandoned in the early 4th cent. AD and partly leveled during the construction of the Theater and the Portico.

The results of our work seem to call for a thorough re-examination of an old debate

concerning the typical layout of Alexandrian domestic architecture of the Roman period. The house uncovered in sector M can be identified as a rectangular building (c. 25 m long), accessible from the north, from a small secondary street running east-west. The governing element of the plan is an open courtyard. The western wing (partially excavated last season) accommodated a number of rooms serving typically domestic purposes. This part of the house communicated with a courtyard through a single doorway. Upper-floor rooms were accessed by a staircase. Opening into the courtyard were two *triclinia*, facing north and south respectively. This disposition suggests seasonal use, appropriately in winter or summer. The arrangement of the courtyard is fairly interesting. Its main distinctive element is the monumental porch (*prostas*) preceding the northern *triclinium*.

The occurrence of this type of architectural feature comes as a surprise, since until recently the full peristyle house had been widely believed to be the most common type of domestic architecture in Alexandria. Our work at Kom el-Dikka has provided a somewhat different picture. It seems that the *prostas-oikos* layouts, occasionally combined with a pseudo-peristyle courtyard, were much more widespread than previously thought, and had many parallels detectable also in the plans of the underground tombs, e.g. Tomb no. 2 at the Mustapha Pasha necropolis.¹¹⁾ The absence of a full peristyled court in Alexandrian houses could be explained by the fact that owing to urban limitations on space, it was not practical to expand the courtyard to the dimensions that would allow porticoes to be accommodated on all four sides.

11) A. Adriani, Repertorio d'arte dell'Egitto Greco-Romano, Serie C, vols. I-II (Palermo 1966), 201-209.

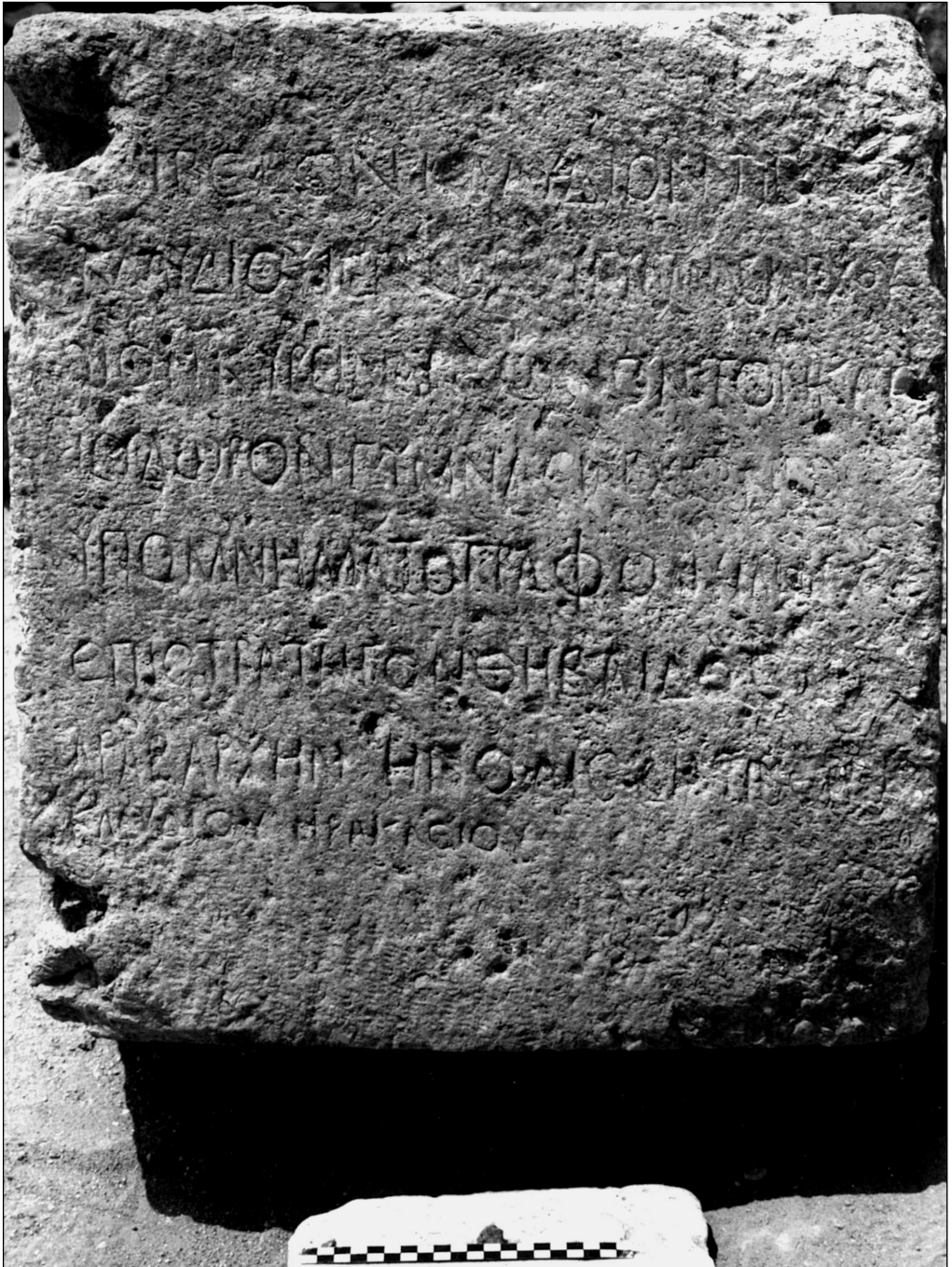


Fig. 8. Greek inscription found in the bath complex
(Photo W. Jerke)

SECTOR F

Limited archaeological work was undertaken in the area of the southern outer wall of the bath complex. At the eastern end of the wall a deep robbers' pit was explored down to the level of the foundations. This section of the wall was most probably dismantled in the 13th century, as evidenced by some ceramic finds, consisting mostly of Mamluk glazed pottery fragments. A single inscribed block (*Fig. 8*), found among the scattered debris and collapsed wall blocks appears to have been reused in the wall structure; as such, it has no direct chronological bearing on the structure. Nevertheless, this Greek

inscription appears to be of considerable historical and prosopographic significance, since it reports the career of Tiberius Claudius Isidorus, epistrategus of the Thebaid, gymnasiarch, hypomnemo-graphus and arabarch.¹²⁾

Work was also continued on the western section of the said wall, efforts being concentrated on excavating the entrance to the underground service area of the bath. The barrel vault over the entrance chamber was found to be seriously damaged as a result of systematic plundering of building material in the 12th-13th cent. AD.

12) A. Łukaszewicz, "Some remarks on the trial of Isidorus and on Isidorus Junior", *JJP* 30 (2000), 59-65.