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Kom El-Dikka: Excavations, 2000

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KOM EL-DIKKA

EXCAVATIONS 2000/2001

Grzegorz Majcherek

The archaeological campaign at the Kom el-Dikka site in Alexandria was conducted between July 2000 and the end of June 2001. The actual fieldwork lasted shorter than usual and was concluded by the end of March, the rest of the season being devoted to documentation and recording, as well as studies on finds from previous excavations.¹⁾ Work was undertaken again on the Islamic pottery documentation project, initiated in 1999.²⁾ The studies and recording work (covering classification, drawing and photographing) continue to focus on the medieval glazed wares discovered in earlier excavations of the site, including Early Lead Glazes, Fayyumi, Lustre Wares, Early Sgraffito, Underglaze Painted etc., all originating from the Early Islamic (Omayyad through Ayyubid) period.

Site landscaping prerequisite to the completion of the first stage of the Kom el-Dikka Preservation Project continued to take up much time and effort. To meet future landscaping requirements and to enable excavations along the line of the stylobate of the Theater Portico, some 3,000 cubic meters of modern (19th century) upper stratum soil had to be removed, pushing back the limits of the excavated area another 5-6 m. This demanding task was effectively accomplished thanks to substantial logistical assistance from the authorities of the Supreme Council of Antiquities and the Governorate of Alexandria.

1) The staff in the 2000/2001 season included: Dr. Grzegorz Majcherek, Director; Prof. Barbara Lichočka, numismatist; Dr. Barbara Tkaczow, Mrs. Renata Kucharczyk, Ms Grażyna Bąkowska, Ms Aleksandra Chabiera, archaeologists; Mr. Aureliusz Pisarzewski, architect; Mr. Waldemar Jerke, photographer; Ms Joanna Lis and Mr. Władysław Weker, conservators. Ms Małgorzata Ujma, conservator, joined the mission for a short period to carry out the provisional conservation of a wall painting discovered in the Early Roman villa.

Mr. Ahmed Moussa was again appointed as the SCA representative, working together with Mr. Mohammed Helmi. Their services to us were indispensable. Our thanks are also due Prof. Gaballa Ali Gaballa, Secretary General of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, and all the SCA staff in Alexandria for their invaluable help and friendly support.

2) The efficient management of this laborious and demanding documentation project is in the hands of Ms Małgorzata Redlak, assisted this year by Ms Teresa Witkowska.

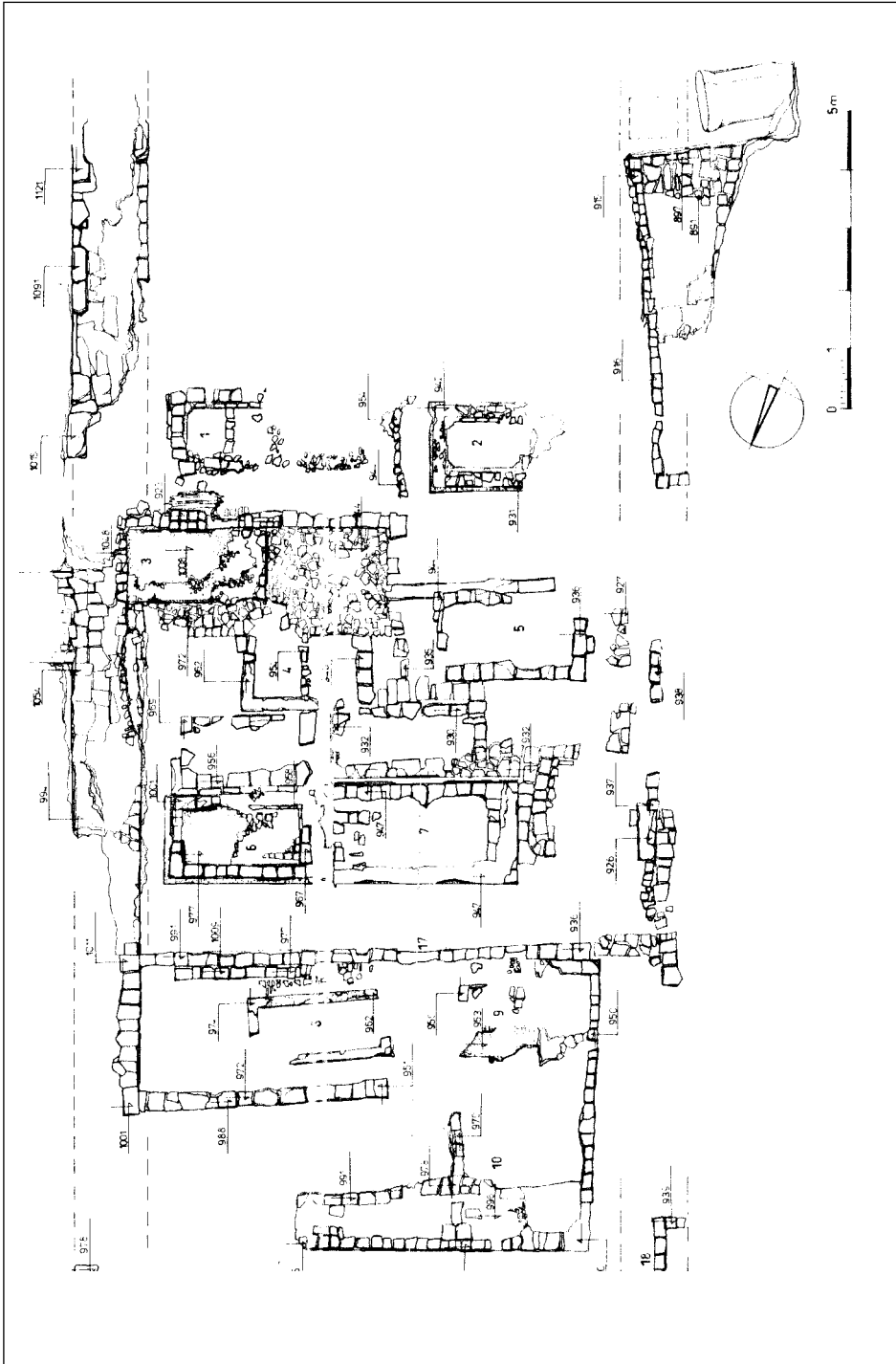


Fig. 1. Sector E. Moslem Upper Necropolis
(Drawing A. Piszewski)

EXCAVATIONS

A substantial part of our work on the site is geared to the requirements of the concurrently implemented preservation program, of which the overall objectives are best outlined in Dr. W. Kołataj's report (cf. *supra*). Consequently, while some limited investigations were carried out in the areas of the bath and cisterns, wherever

advanced research projects demanded it, the main thrust of fieldwork was directed at excavating the Theater Portico in the southwestern quarter of the site. The key objective is to clear the length of this portico (within the confines of the site), progress being conditioned by the advancement in restoration work.

SECTOR E – MOSLEM CEMETERIES

Having completed the investigation of the Islamic cemetery in sector M,³⁾ we opened a new area in the adjacent sector E to the north. Some 525 sq. m (c. 15 x 35 m) were effectively explored this year.

After mechanically removing the upper, modern (19th century) layers, which are some 3-4 m thick, we could begin the excavations proper. As expected, the tightly packed graves of the so-called Upper Necropolis were found to overlie the entire width of the portico at a level of 10.10-8.90 m above the sea (*Fig. 1*). The ground of the graveyard falls somewhat to the west, in the direction of a large open square that had fronted the portico. This reflects land configuration existing in the Medieval period – a large and fairly steep mound (*kopron*) that accumulated in the area fenced in by the theatre, portico and bath complex, which beginning in Late Antiquity (6th-7th centuries AD) had been turned into a heavily-used dump for urban refuse and rubble. The rise in ground was

substantial and with time the mound stood well above the still visible ruins.

The part of the cemetery now uncovered turned out to be no less well preserved than previously excavated sections.⁴⁾ Once abandoned, the burial site returned to its earlier function as a vast dumping ground and the graves were sealed by quickly accumulating layers of urban refuse. All the uncovered tombs were oriented following traditional Moslem funerary practices: the corpses were buried in fairly uniform manner with the head in the direction of the *qibla*. Altogether, some 18 above-ground structures were cleared within the confines of the trench. They represent the same two types that have already been observed. One of these types is an open frame constructed of thin slabs standing upright (e.g. no. E 6A). Very often such graves were found covered or disturbed by superimposed later structures of the second type – a clear indication of development trends inside the cemetery. This second,

3) For the work, which took up the better part of seasons 1998 through 2000, cf. G. Majcherek, *PAM X, Reports 1998* (1999), 29-40; id., *PAM XI, Reports 1999* (2000), 27-38; id., *PAM XII, Reports 2000* (2001), 23-34.

4) For previous excavations of the Islamic necropolis in various areas of the site, cf. W. Kubiak, "Les fouilles polonaises à Kom el Dick en 1963 et 1964", *BSAA* 42 (1967), 47-80; E. Promińska, *Investigations on the Population of Muslim Alexandria* (Warsaw 1972); 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; Z. Kiss et al., *Fouilles polonaises à Kom el-Dikka 1986-1987, Alexandrie VII* (Warsaw 2000), 35-98.

definitely more numerous group (nos. E 1-10) paralleled graves encountered previously in sector M. The superstructures were rectangular, built of small limestone blocks faced with plaster. In a few cases, the tombs were additionally decorated with incised geometrical patterns. Unfortunately, most of the graves in the northern part of the area had lost their superstructure, which may have simply deteriorated and been removed during a later phase of the graveyard or was damaged by stone robbing. Some simple interments in shallow pits packed between more developed structures were also observed.

What sets apart this fragment of the cemetery is that it (graves nos. E 8-10) shows some signs of internal patterning. Several graves were grouped together and

enclosed by a wall, which when found had largely been reduced to the lowermost courses. Such enclosures were excavated in the central and western portions of the trench (nos. 17 and 18) (*Fig. 2*). They are likely familial groups. Anthropological research planned for the next season should shed more light on this question.

Not surprisingly, this phase of the graveyard was introduced well after the portico had been demolished, most of the columns fallen and the massive back-wall largely dismantled. Some of the graves were found straddling the back-wall (no. E 3), others had been cut either into the portico stylobate (nos. M 253-254) or into the original pavement.

The associated layers yielded the usual range of assorted finds, largely similar to that recorded previously in other medieval



Fig. 2. Sector E, Moslem Upper Necropolis, enclosure E 17. View from the west (Photo W. Jerke)

strata overlying the cemetery. Two fragmentary stelae bearing Quranic verses in Kufic script were found in different locations (nos. 5063-5064) (Fig. 3); unfortunately, they cannot be ascribed to specific graves. Several examples of lead-glazed lamps dated to the 11th-12th century AD were also recovered (e.g. no. 5057).⁵⁾ Apart from minute fragments of glass vessels and an assortment of commonwares, such as cooking pots, frying pans, bowls and dishes, there was quite a variety of tableware. The types are a representative cross-section of the glazed ware repertoire. As before, Egyptian wares,

both Mamluk Sgraff and Slip Painted, form a group that is numerically the largest. They were accompanied by a few finds of wares imported from production centers in the Byzantine realm, notably Cyprus, as well as Tunisia. Some fragments of Yemeni pottery were also recorded. The evidence taken as a whole is fully in accord with the results obtained previously, confirming the 12th-13th century AD dating of the cemetery.

This year's large-scale clearing of the topmost cemetery layer in Sector E prepares the ground for comprehensive exploration to follow in the next campaign.



Fig. 3. Sector E. Funerary stela fragment, no. 5064
(Photo W. Jerke)

5) W. Kubiak, "Medieval Ceramic Oil Lamps from Fustat", *Ars Orientalis* VIII (1970), 1-18, type H.

SECTOR E – THEATER PORTICO

Small areas of the portico paving were cleared. Both of the two superimposed levels of flagstones have been damaged seriously by medieval burials. Each of these levels corresponds to subsequent building phases of the portico. Portico rebuilding is also evidenced by signs of restructuring that are clearly discernible in the stylobate. In the initial phase, the columns were standing on low pedestals lined with marble tiles. In the next phase, the intercolumnar spaces were filled with two additional courses of large blocks corresponding to the raised paving. One broken column shaft was excavated last year near tomb M 299. Hopefully, more columns will be found *sub situ*.



Fig. 4. Sector H. Fragment of a Late Roman auditorium. View from the north (Photo W. Jerke)

The massive back wall of the portico, c. 1.55 m wide, was exposed along the eastern face of the excavation trench. Its core was structured of irregular stones set in a thick layer of ashy-lime mortar, while the facing was made of regular courses of smaller dressed stones and conspicuous brick lacing laid every seventh course. Contrary to the southern section excavated last year and still rising in places to a height of some 2.50–3.00 m above the pavement, the section further to the north is much lower. The wall was found to be deteriorated and severely damaged by stone robbing. The damages apparently predate the Upper Necropolis, and might be related to the initial phase of the cemetery (Lower and Middle graveyards).

At the northern end of the trench (western edge of the sector G), close to the monumental gateway of the bath complex, the portico back wall is better preserved and rises considerably, meeting another huge and similarly structured wall (c. 1.25 m wide) that runs to the east, forming the corner of a large structure. Surprisingly enough, the eastern faces of both wall sections still retained their ancient facing and plastering. This fragment of the wall must have been substantially rebuilt as evidenced by the employment of two different structural techniques: isodomic courses of large blocks in the lower section and much smaller stones in the upper parts. It is still unclear whether this should be construed as proof of substantial rebuilding following major destruction or simply local repairs. The available dating evidence is inconclusive, and it remains to be seen whether it coincides with the re-designing of the colonnade.

A small test pit (3 x 5 m) sunk behind the back wall brought to light three partly preserved rows of seats resting on a clay floor. These remains were discovered immediately below graves of the Upper Necropolis (G 200-202). The seats were built of large blocks set along both of the corner walls, at a distance of 0.40-0.60 m away from them, the empty space next to the walls being packed most probably with earth and rubble to form the substructure for the higher row (*Fig. 4*).

It is apparent, even following this very limited investigation, that we have come across yet another auditorium, for which

parallels have been found in other locations on the site. A set of three similar auditoria was excavated in the 1980s, some 25 m further to the east.⁶⁾ Although the precise function of these halls remains unknown, it is almost certain now that such auditoria were constructed along the entire length of the southern passage of the bath. The newly discovered auditorium apparently was not entered from the passage, as the other halls, but more likely from the portico. It is considerably larger than the ones excavated previously, its length reaching some 17 m along its north-south axis.

SECTOR M – MOSLEM CEMETERIES

In the southern end of the trench, overlying the fragmentarily excavated Roman villa, the exploration of graves of the Lower Necropolis (8th-9th century AD) was completed. Five remaining graves (nos. M 326-330) located in this area were duly explored. They were structured

similarly to the other graves of the same date: burial chambers made of large blocks (most probably originating from the portico backwall) covered with horizontal slabs. No regular aboveground structures were recognized. The graves may have simply been left unmarked.

SECTOR M – EARLY ROMAN HOUSE

Excavations in this area, initiated in 1993, have continued over the past few seasons and have brought to light a well-preserved example of an Early Roman house inhabited in the 1st-3rd centuries AD.⁷⁾ The layout of the villa is fairly typical, consisting of a centrally located courtyard giving access to two large *triclinia* situated on the opposite sides. The southern one was adorned with a pavement made of multicolored marble tiles arranged in a geometrical pattern, while the northern one revealed a fine *tesselatum* mosaic sur-

rounding a multicolored *emblema*.⁸⁾ In the remaining rooms, a staircase, small lavatory and most probably a kitchen were cleared. The sumptuous decoration of the villa is perhaps best evidenced not only by the mosaics, but also by numerous fragments of interior architectural decoration found in the course of the excavations.

During the present campaign four other rooms, located behind the western wall of the courtyard and *triclinium*, were cleared. These units served essentially household purposes. All the explored rooms were

6) Z. Kiss, op. cit., 9-33.

7) G. Majcherek, *PAM VI, Reports 1994* (1995), 11-20; G. Majcherek, *PAM XI*, op. cit., 27-38, fig. 5.

8) See G. Majcherek, *Mosaic Floors of Roman triclinia in Alexandria: Evolution of techniques and design*, Proceedings of the Eighth International Congress of Egyptology, Cairo 2000 (forthcoming).



*Fig. 5. Sector M. Remains of an Early Roman house. View from the north
(Photo W. Jerke)*

rather small in size. Their western ends had either been destroyed by the portico stylobate or were extended further west, well beyond the confines of the present archaeological trench. The function and internal arrangement of the rooms is fairly difficult to determine and the position of potential doorways is hardly clear.

Much to our surprise, rooms 8-14, which we had previously taken for the western wing of the villa, are in fact separated from the rest of the house by a double wall standing some 2-2.40 m high in places (*Fig. 5*). Although the upper parts of the structure show clear evidence of reworking and rebuilding, both walls were initially constructed in a similar isodomic technique, using large limestone blocks some 50-53 cm wide and 40-50 cm high. The course of the other wall, although not preserved along the entire length of the wing, leaves no doubt that it had belonged to a separate, architecturally independent structure extending to the west, apparently yet another house.

Room no. 10 (4.10 m long), adjacent to a small lavatory (no. 8), had a floor made of assorted broken marble tiles. In the next, small room no. 12 (c. 2.35 m wide), separated only by a very thin screen wall (c. 23 cm thick), the floor was made of tamped earth and clay. In the western part of the room, below the floor, a small section of a sewage channel was cleared; it was constructed of small stone blocks, and ran towards a street located further to the south. Floor subsidence in room no. 10 permits its course to be traced. A similar tamped-earth floor was also encountered in the neighboring room no. 13. In its southeastern corner we came across a large

well. Its rectangular casing was made of regular, vertically mounted slabs. The bottom of the well was not reached, explorations having to be halted until necessary safety precautions could be taken. The eastern part of the room comprising the well was closed off with a thin screen wall (c. 25 cm thick) built of dressed stone (cf. *Fig. 5*). This is where a large accumulation of broken vessels comprising mostly Palestinian (early form of Gazan LR4) and Egyptian (Mareotic AE 3) amphorae accompanied by some cooking pots was found. All the datable sherds were from the 3rd century. The finds were carefully processed: as a result, several complete forms could be restored. The largest room, no. 14 (c. 3.35 m wide), located further north, revealed the same type of floor.

The fill featuring the western run of rooms yielded large quantities of architectural decoration fragments featuring very good workmanship. These pieces, which included limestone capitals (*Fig. 6*), cornices, fluted colonnettes, etc., were found loose in the fill among scattered demolition debris. Such evidence of sumptuous interior decoration had been recorded previously, during investigations of the eastern wing.⁹⁾ Large fragments of tessellated mosaics were found wedged among the broken ashlar and decorative elements. Their stratigraphical position indicated that they may have fallen from rooms located on the second floor.

In all of the newly explored area, a destruction layer varying in thickness from 0.60 to 1.20 m was discovered directly superimposed on the Early Roman ruins. It consists mostly of large stone

9) G. Majcherek, *PAM XI*, op. cit., 7-38, fig. 6; for architectural decoration in general, cf. P. Pensabene, *Elementi architettonici di Alessandria e di altri siti egiziani* (Rome 1993).

tumble, painted plaster fragments and occasionally ashes. The nature of this layer, when considered together with the evidence provided by numerous elongated vertical cracks in the walls, leaves no doubt that the destruction of the building had been cataclysmic. Evidence of this catastrophe is also to be observed in the countless bulges caused by thermal expansion of limestone subjected to high temperatures.

Taken as a whole, the available evidence indicates that the building must have been destroyed in the late 3rd century AD. Whether this had been a natural catastrophe, perhaps an earthquake, or whether it was linked to the destruction inflicted on large sections of the town following Palmyrean occupation in AD 270 or the siege laid to the town by Roman imperial forces in the reign of Diocletian (AD 297), will have to remain



*Fig. 6. Sector M. Limestone capital originating from the Early Roman house
(Photo W. Jerke)*

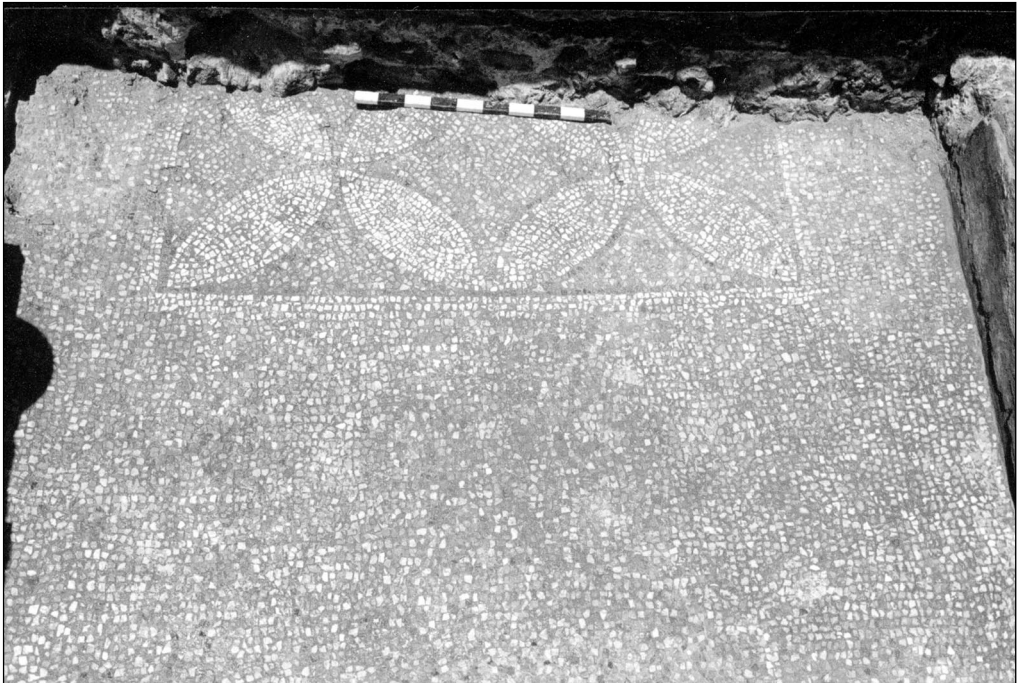
an open question for now. It is certain, however, that the derelict buildings were leveled ultimately in the following century and the portico was constructed, its massive foundations cutting through the already buried ruins.

While the end of occupation of the house can be determined on the grounds of ample evidence, the beginnings of its construction are much vaguer. The available evidence suggests that the building was occupied for a protracted period of time (most probably beginning in the late 1st century BC) and underwent a variety of modifications, which were mostly limited to raising the floors and some redesigning. This conclusion was corroborated even further by the existence of large patches of original plastering,

going down well below the cleared floor levels.

In three rooms (nos. 12-14), the earth floors were removed and excavations carried down to the original level, which was reached eventually some 0.80 m below. Apparently in all three rooms, the original floors had first been made as mosaic pavements. In rooms 12 and 13, the surfaces were plain (the latter floor, however, was found substantially damaged due to the collapsed underlying sewage channel). A larger fragment of the mosaic preserved in room 14 was made of fairly large, irregular tesserae and decorated with a black-and-white geometrical pattern of intersecting circles (*Fig. 7*).

The most unusual find, however, is the surprisingly well preserved painted plaster



*Fig. 7. Sector M. Mosaic floors from the Early Roman house
(Photo G. Majcherek)*