

Dagmara Wielgosz-Rondolino, Mariusz Gwiazda

A Late Antique House in Marea, Egypt : Excavation Season 2014

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DAGMARA WIELGOSZ-RONDOLINO, MARIUSZ GWIAZDA

A LATE ANTIQUE HOUSE IN MAREA, EGYPT. EXCAVATION SEASON 2014

Keywords: Byzantine Period, domestic architecture, Egypt, Early Islamic Period, Marea

Site: Qaryat Shakush – Marea, Egypt

Excavation director: Dagmara Wielgosz-Rondolino

Research team: Tomasz Derda, Piotr Jaworski, Mariusz Gwiazda, Renata Kucharczyk, Tomasz Górecki, Andrzej Bruno Kutiak, Hanna Kozińska-Sowa, Julia Górecka, Aleksandra Pawlikowska

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Excavation timeline: 31 August – 2 October 2014

The Institute of Archaeology of the University of Warsaw in collaboration with the Archaeological Museum in Cracow and the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of the University of Warsaw has recently launched archaeological works at Marea, a site located 40 km west of Alexandria, Egypt, on the southern shore of Lake Mareotis (Maryut) (Fig. 1).¹ Excavations were

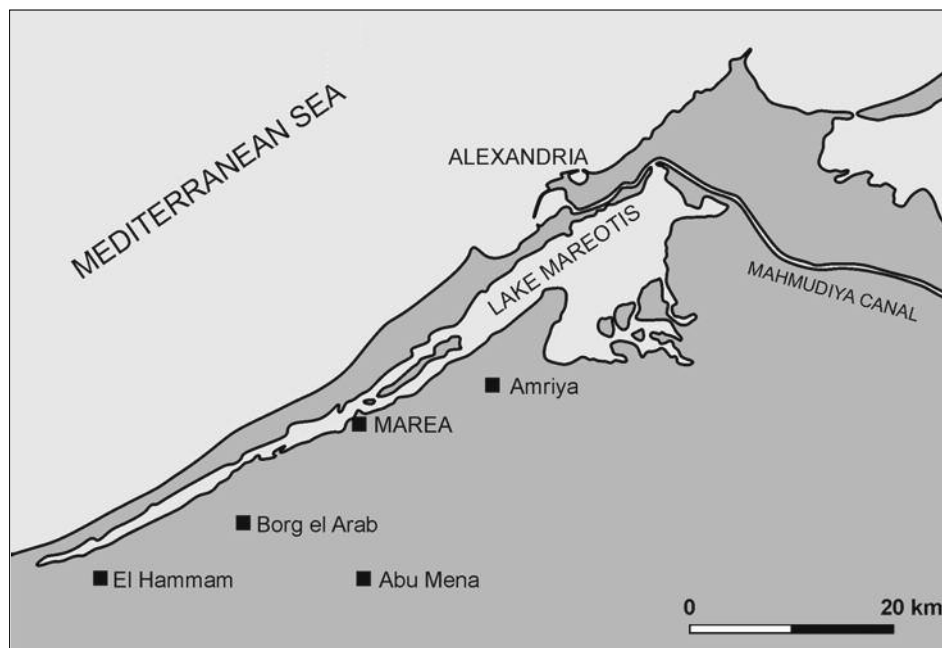
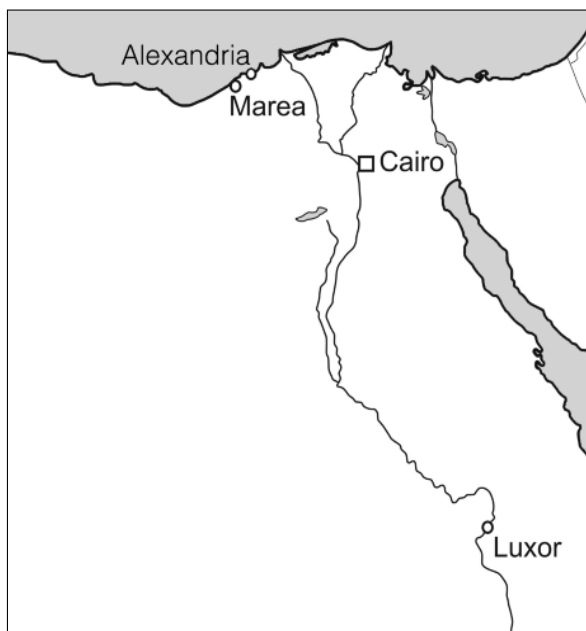


Fig. 1. Map of Mareotis region (Drawing M. Gwiazda, after M. RODZIEWICZ, *From Alexandria to the West*, (in:) J.-Y. Empereur (ed.), *Commerce et artisanat dans l'Alexandrie hellénistique et romaine: actes du colloque d'Athènes organisé par le CNRS, le Laboratoire de céramologie de Lyon et l'École Française d'Athènes, 11–12 décembre 1988*, Athènes 1998, fig. 1).

Ryc. 1. Mapa regionu Mareotis.

¹ The mission acknowledges a debt of gratitude to the authorities of the Supreme Council of Antiquities in Cairo and in Alexandria, and particularly to Eslam Tailon, the Inspector of the SCA, for continuous support of the mission and its work. Special

thanks also go to Krzysztof Babraj, the director of the Marea Mission, who invited our team to collaboration and helped us on different stages of archaeological works.

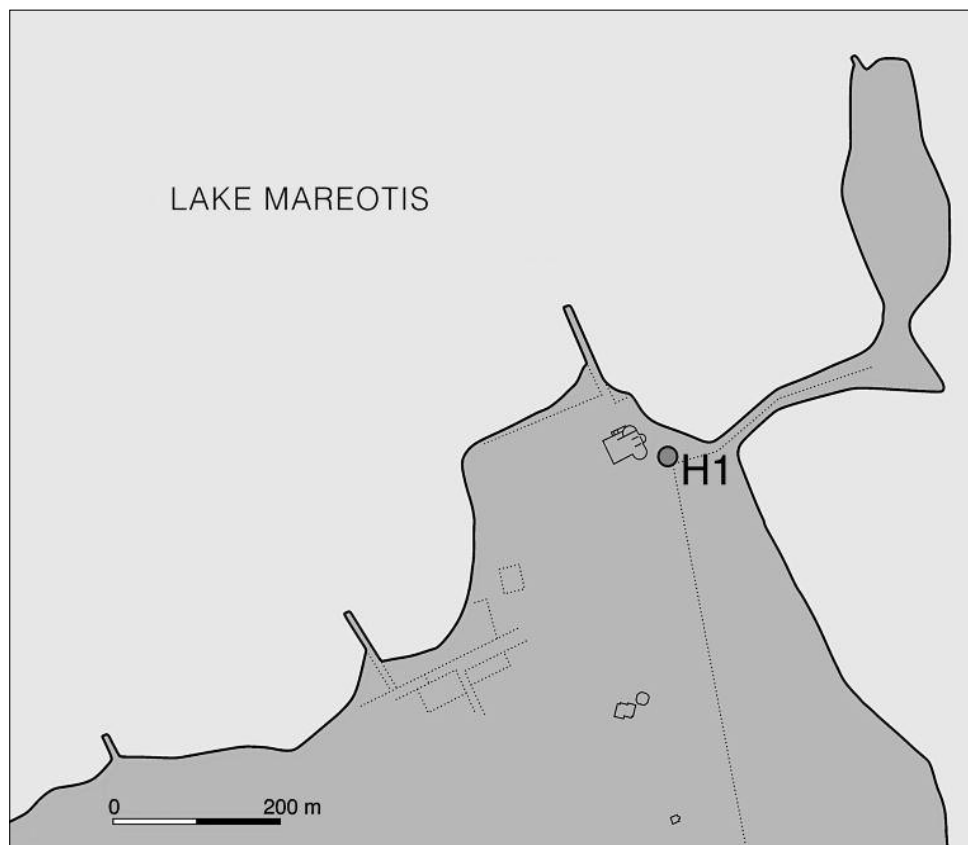


Fig. 2. Plan of Marea, with the location of the Late Antique house (H1) (Drawing M. Gwiazda, after H. SZYMAŃSKA, K. BABRAJ, *Marea Vol. 1. Byzantine Marea. Excavations in 2000–2004 and 2006*, Biblioteka Muzeum Archeologicznego w Krakowie IV, Kraków 2008, fig. 1).

Ryc. 2. Plan Marei, ze wskazaniem położenia późnoantycznego domu (H1).

conducted within a large residential building (Sector H1) situated in the north-eastern part of the site (Figs. 2, 3). Previous archaeological explorations demonstrated that this city was an important harbour in the region and a vital link between the Mediterranean Sea and the Nile River, from the Hellenistic Period onwards.² However, the identification of the ancient name of this site is still under discussion: Marea, as it is today called after Mahmoud Bey el-Falaki by most of the scholars, or Philoxenite, as suggested by Mieczysław Rodziewicz.³

Almost nothing has been known about Marea's residential quarters and dwellings. The building excavated by our mission is the only one investigated so far. It was the second season of work in this sector; during the first ar-

chaeological campaign in 2012, part of the courtyard and 16 rooms serving residential as well as production and commercial purposes were uncovered.⁴ In 2014, we extended our work to the northern part of Sector H1. The fieldwork started with cleaning of previously excavated rooms. The main objective in the following weeks was to remove layers formed after the building had been definitely abandoned. The works proceeded in three parts of Sector H1 simultaneously uncovering Rooms 14, 15, 16, 20a, 20b, 21, 22, and 24b (Fig. 4). In order to obtain material which would allow to date the foundation of the structure, a test trench was opened in the south-eastern corner of Room 16. The courtyard labelled in plan as 17, as well as Rooms 24a and 25 were partially unearthed.

² L. BLUE, E. KHALIL, *A Multidisciplinary Approach to Alexandria's Economic Past: The Lake Mareotis Research Project*, University of Southampton Series in Archaeology 5, BAR International Series 2285, Oxford 2011, 299, 300, 302.

³ M. BEY EL-FALAKI, *Mémoire sur l'antique Alexandria, ses faubourgs et environs découverts par les fouilles, sondages, nivellement et autres recherches*, Copenhagen 1872, 96; M. RODZIEWICZ, *Alexandria and the District of Mareotis*, "Graeco-Arabica" 2, 1983, 199–216;

cf. E. WIPSYCYKA, *Marea and Philoxenite. Where to Locate Them?*, "Études et Travaux" XXV, 2012, 418–432.

⁴ The excavation of the southern part of Sector H1 was initiated by the archaeological mission of the Archaeological Museum in Cracow under direction of Krzysztof Babraj, cf. K. BABRAJ, A. DRZYMUCHOWSKA, N. WILLBURGER, *Marea 2011*, "Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean" XXIII/1 (Research 2011), 2015, 48.

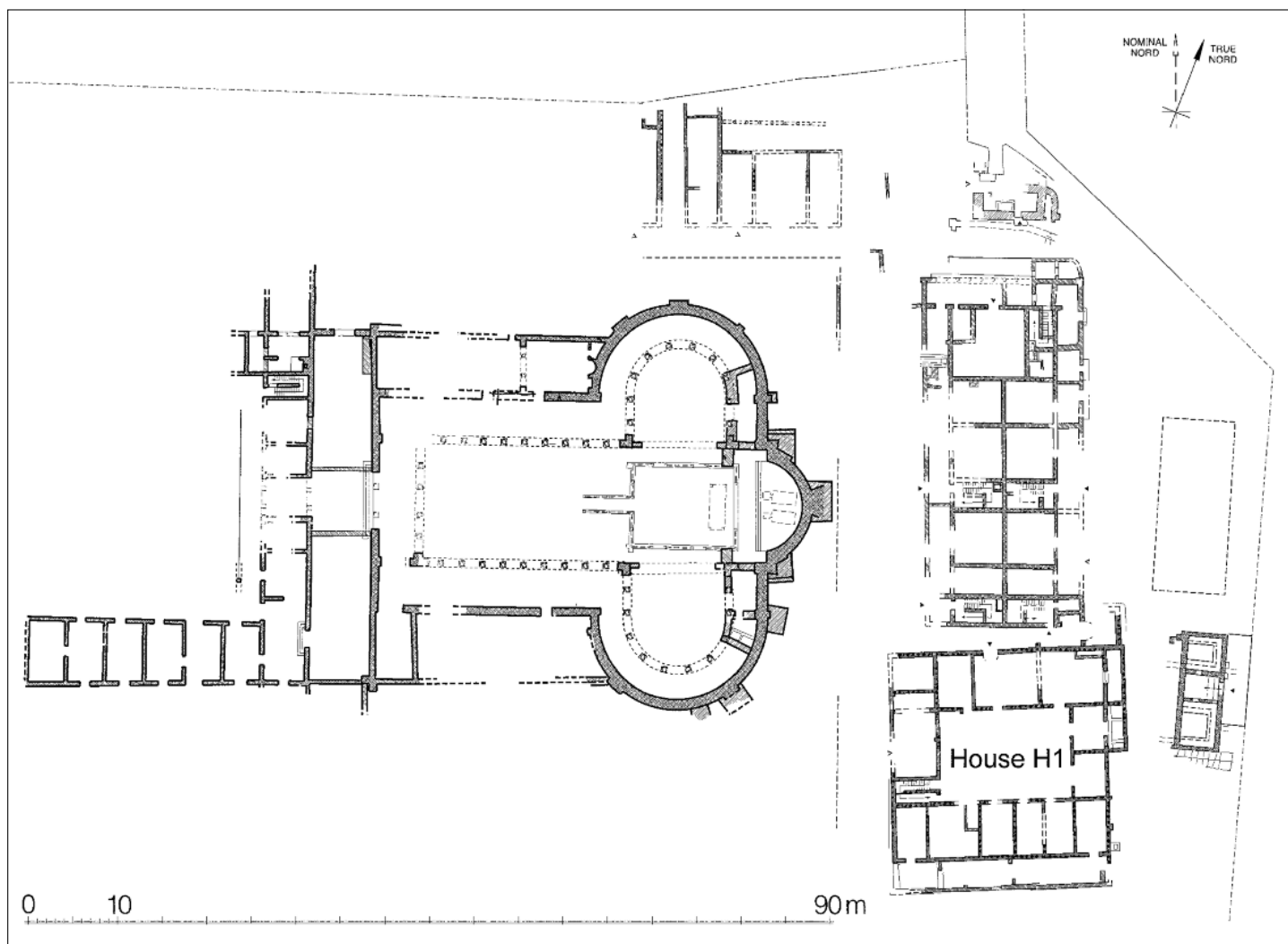


Fig. 3. Plan of the north-eastern part of Marea (K. BABRAJ, A. DRZYMUCHOWSKA, N. WILLBURGER, *Marea 2011...*, fig. 1).

Ryc. 3. Plan północno-wschodniej części Marei.

The original plan of the house was a regular rectangle measuring 22.9×24.2 m. A large courtyard constituted its central part. It is surrounded by a succession of halls and rooms used for residential and commercial purposes. The main entrance was situated in the west side of the building and was connected with the courtyard via a vestibule (Room 20a). At some time after its construction, the house was enlarged by adjoining rooms to its southern (Nos. 1–5) and eastern (Nos. 14 and 26) sides. The internal part of the original structure also underwent later redevelopment which consisted in adding new walls and other constructions. These activities were certainly meant to adapt the building to the needs of its successive inhabitants. The process continued for about 200 years, from about the 6th to the beginning of the 8th c. AD. The abandonment of this building was most probably connected with the end of settlement at the site.

All the walls of the house, erected both during the original construction phase and the subsequent rebuilding,

were made of blocks of local limestone. The same material was used for flagstones in some of the rooms and in the courtyard.

In the course of Season 2014, some structures of types as yet unattested in the already investigated southern rooms were discovered in the northern part of the house. These structures included benches made of evenly-cut stone blocks adjacent to the walls. They were recorded in the southern part of Room 15, the north-eastern corner of Room 16 and by the southern wall of Room 20a. They are most probably contemporary with the building's foundation, as indicated by their close connection with the earliest occupation levels. Another type of yet unattested structure are long rows of limestone blocks set up ca. 30 cm from the southern walls of Rooms 14, 22, and 25. Their height ranges from ca. 20 to 60 cm. They are certainly connected with more recent occupation levels dated to the period when the house started to lose its original form. Another example of later rebuilding are Rooms 21 and 22; originally,

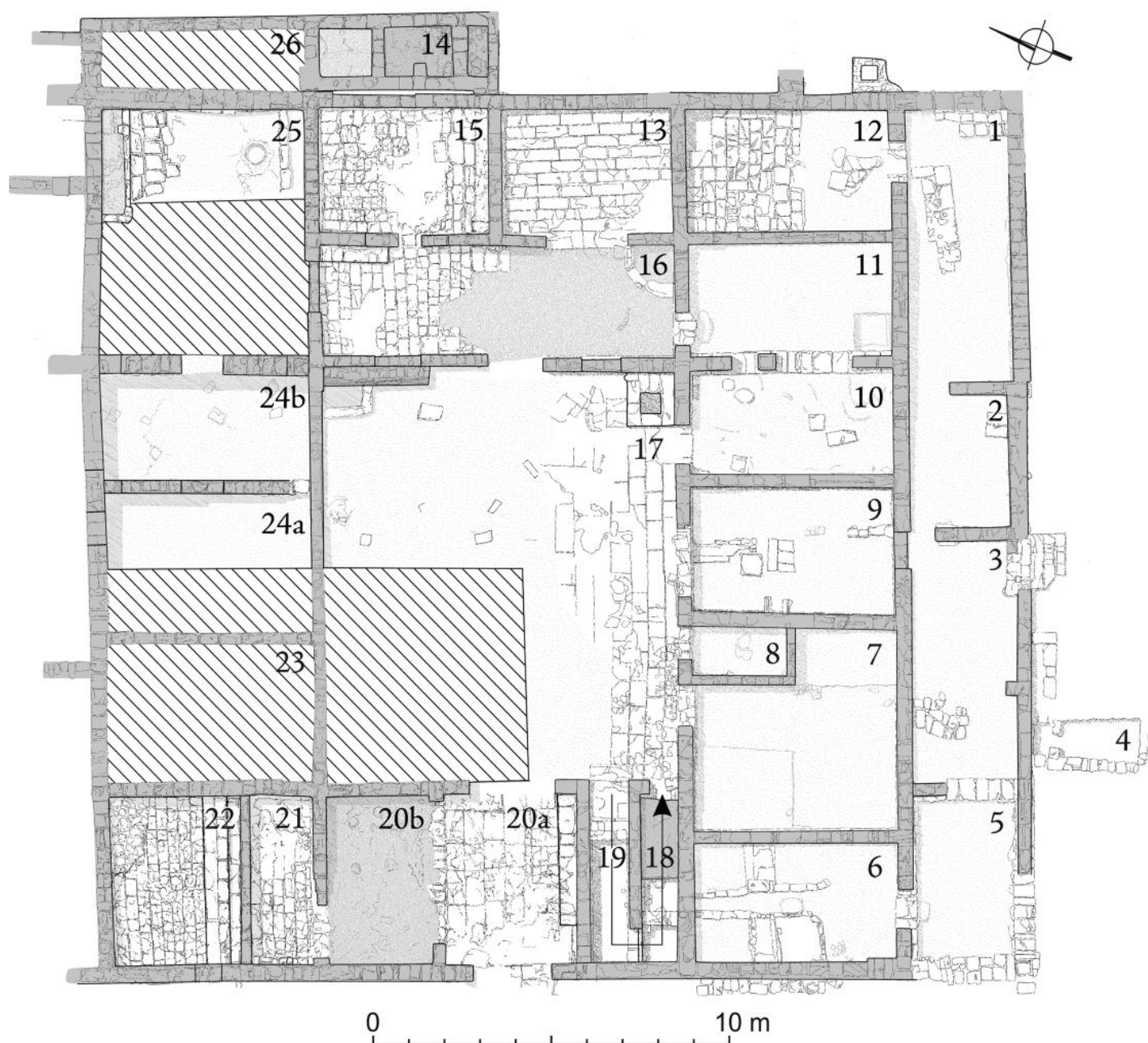


Fig. 4. House H1, overall plan. Hatching marks not explored areas (Drawing D. Tarara, A.B. Kutiak).

Ryc. 4. Plan domu H1. Kreskowaniem zaznaczono obszar nie eksplorowany.

they constituted a single space, which was later divided with a wall oriented along the east-west axis, founded directly on the limestone floor (Fig. 5). The abovementioned elongated structure of unclear function was subsequently added by the north side of this wall.

A more recent occupation level made up of reused flagstones was discovered in Room 16. The slabs were placed on a beaten earthen occupation level, which in turn was laid on the original floor made of lime mortar. In Room 15, above the original occupation level composed of limestone slabs, there was only a layer of beaten earth which certainly constituted the most recent occupation level. In the north-

-eastern part of Courtyard 17, all slabs were removed and substituted with a layer of beaten earth during the later phase of occupation. No layers connected with more recent occupation levels have been found in the succession of Rooms 20a–22 located in the north-western part of the house. Here the original floors remained in use until the abandonment of this part of the building, as indicated by the presence of rubble from the collapsed walls directly on these occupation levels. The above examples demonstrate that the history and the manner of utilisation of different rooms of the house in the later phase of its functioning were most probably not uniform.



Fig. 5. View on Room 22 from the north (Photo A. Pawlikowska).
Ryc. 5. Widok na pomieszczenie 22 od strony północnej.

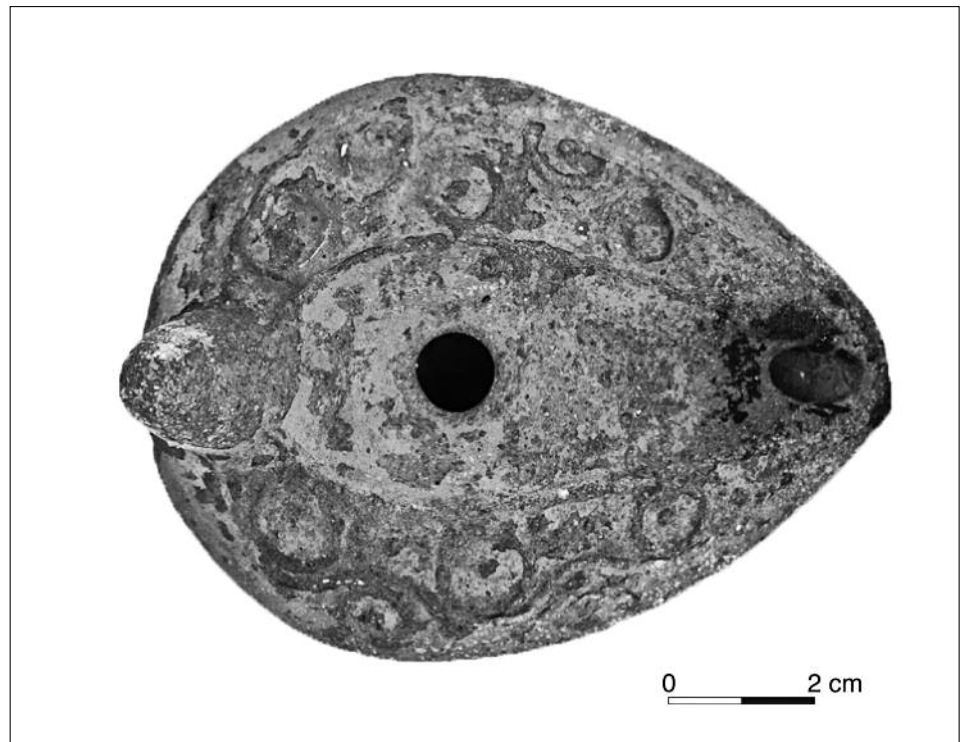


Fig. 6. Oil lamp of Byzantine/
Early Islamic type (Photo
A. Pawlikowska).
Ryc. 6. Lampka oliwna w ty-
pie bizantyjskim/wczesno-
islamskim.

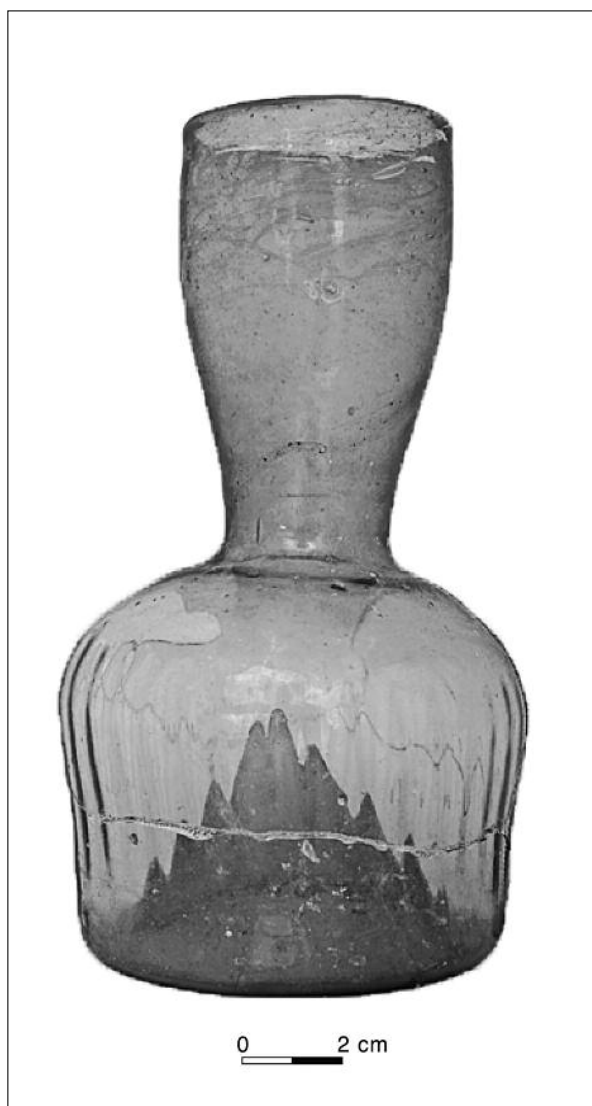


Fig. 7. Byzantine glass bottle (Photo A. Pawlikowska).

Ryc. 7. Bizantyjska szklana butelka.

Pottery vessels – tableware, kitchenware, and amphorae – prevail in the assemblage of portable finds. The majority of them are regional or local products; a very small number of vessels were imported from Palestine, Cyprus, and Asia Minor. Finds of clay oil lamps were not numerous, but some of them were entirely preserved (Fig. 6). Bottles (Fig. 7) constitute the most numerous group of glass objects; apart from them, also bowls, jugs, lamps, and window panes were recorded. Also unearthed were 115 Byzantine and Arab bronze coins.⁵ The majority of them, however, are badly corroded as a result of post-deposition conditions (humidity and salinity of the soil). The abovementioned material is dated from the 5th/6th to the 8th c. AD and allows for dating the respective occupation levels.

The archaeological works conducted in Sector H1 in 2014 brought to light a portion of the house amounting its total cleared surface to 174 m². The construction of the building falls in the 6th c. AD, but this date must be confirmed by additional test trenches. It possibly went out of use gradually, changing its character. Thus Sector H1's original layout was altered and function of some rooms changed perhaps during the last occupation phases. Most of the datable material is related to the last phase of building's occupation and its abandonment. It may have occurred probably in the 8th c. AD and is perceptible in almost all cleared rooms.

Dr Dagmara Wielgosz-Rondolino
Institute of Archaeology
University of Warsaw
dagmara.wielgosz@uw.edu.pl

Mgr Mariusz Gwiazda
Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology
of the University of Warsaw
mariusz.gwiazda@gmail.com

⁵ The publication of pottery vessels, glass vessels, and coins is prepared by T. Górecki, R. Kucharczyk, and P. Jaworski respectively.

DAGMARA WIELGOSZ-RONDOLINO, MARIUSZ GWIAZDA

PÓŻNOANTYCZNY DOM W MAREI, EGIPT. WYKOPALISKA 2014 R.

W sezonie 2014 prace wykopaliskowe w obrębie późnoantycznego domu, podjęte w 2012 r.⁶, kontynuowała misja Instytutu Archeologii UW, we współpracy z Centrum Archeologii Śródziemnomorskiej UW i inicjatorami badań (Ryc. 1–3). Dokończono eksplorację pomieszczeń mieszkalnych południowej części budynku, a także rozpoczęto badania w kolejnych, znajdujących się od strony północnej. Głównym zamierzeniem było odsłonięcie możliwie największej liczby z nich, w celu rozpoznania pierwotnego rozplanowania domu oraz jego późniejszych przebudów (Ryc. 4).

W całości odkopano pomieszczenia 14, 15, 16, 20a, 20b, 21, 22, 24b, a częściowo dziedziniec 17 oraz pomieszczenia 24a i 25. Usunięte warstwy zasypiskowe wskazują w większości przypadków na powolny proces niszczenia murów budynku. Praktycznie we wszystkich pomieszczeniach w warstwach związanych z opuszczeniem budynku znaleziono niewielkie ilości śmieci w postaci naczyń ceramicznych i szklanych.

Poniżej warstw zasypiskowych natrafiono na warstwy użytkowe związane z ostatnią fazą wykorzystania domu. Większość z nich nie posiadała kamiennych lub wapiennych posadzek, tylko ubite klepiska, zawierające drobno potłuczone naczynia ceramiczne, które nie zostały wyrzucone na śmietnik przez ostatnich mieszkańców budynku w trakcie użytkowania poszczególnych pomieszczeń. Poniżej tych późnych poziomów użytkowych, w czę-

ści pomieszczeń udało się odsłonić posadzki związane z fundacją całego założenia. Część z nich została uszkodzona lub rozkradziona już w starożytności; zachowane niekiedy w całości podłogi nosiły ślady długiego lub intensywnego ich wykorzystywania, w postaci wytarć oraz spękań.

W trakcie badań sezonu 2014 podjęto także próbę określenia przybliżonego czasu powstania domu. W tym celu w południowo-wschodniej części pomieszczenia 16 otworzono sondaż stratygraficzny. Po usunięciu wierzchniej warstwy, dwóch warstw poziomujących oraz kamiennego podkładu, natrafiono na depozyty będące warstwami niwelacyjnymi związanymi z konstrukcją domu. Znaleziono w nich fragment importowanej ceramiki datowanej na V/VI w. n.e. oraz brązową monetę datowaną na VI w. n.e. Ceramika znajdowana w najmłodszych warstwach wskazuje natomiast, że dom został opuszczony najprawdopodobniej w VIII w. n.e., co wiązać należy z końcem osadnictwa na terenie miasta. Zanim to nastąpiło, dom ulegał wielu przebudowom, związanym ze wznoszeniem nowych murów i instalacji.

Spośród drobnych znalezisk, z terenu całej budowli, wymienić należy jeszcze liczne fragmenty ceramiki (stołowej, kuchennej oraz amfor, w większości lokalnej produkcji), lampki (Ryc. 6) i naczynia szklane (Ryc. 7), jak również 115 brązowych monet, bizantyjskich i arabskich, niestety – w większości silnie skorodowanych.

⁶ Prace rozpoczęła misja Muzeum Archeologicznego w Krakowie, pod kierunkiem Krzysztofa Babraja. Dom H1 jest jedyną

budowlą mieszkalną uchwyconą i badaną na tym stanowisku.