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Kom El-Dikka: Preservation Work, 1999

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KOM EL-DIKKA

PRESERVATION WORK, 1999/2000

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On the conclusion of a project (sponsored from the US AID/ARCE grant no. 263-G-00 93-00089-00) devoted to the conservation and display of mosaics from an Early Roman villa located in the habitation district east of street R4, some site planning work in the area of the excavations abutting Safia Zaghoul street became essential. In recent years the municipal authorities had assigned considerable resources for a new parking lot and public square along the eastern side of the excavated area, introducing a new pavement, greenery, monument of Khedive Ismail and an attractive fence with entrance gate.

The conservation mission¹⁾ was obliged to carry out landscaping work on 350 m of slope along the eastern and southern border of the concession area, including retaining walls for the deeper archaeological trial pits (Figs. 1, 2). Alexandria Governor Mohammed Abdel Salam el-Mahgub granted the necessary funds to have these slopes covered with grass. A water supply pipe was installed all along the escarpment.

1) Dr. Wojciech Kołataj headed the mission, which comprised: Dr. Grzegorz Majcherek, archaeologist; Mr. Wiesław Kuczewski, Mr. Krzysztof Jurków, conservators; Messrs. Ahmed Mousa and Ehab Mohammed Ghazi, inspectors.



*Fig. 1. Slope along the southern border of the area
(Photo W. Kořtaj)*



*Fig. 2. Slope along the eastern border of the area
(Photo W. Kořtaj)*

"VILLA OF THE BIRDS" MOSAIC PROJECT

The shelter that was erected over the mosaics was fitted with a system of gutters draining rainfall from the roof and surrounding area into the ancient Roman sewage system, which empties into the ground. An extremely rainy season this winter proved the full effectiveness of this system.

The new entrance to the site was designed on the spot of the ancient southeastern entrance to the Roman baths from street R4. It lies on the axis of the above-mentioned street and at the eastern end of the southern bath portico. Newly made steps lead down from the level of the modern street (13.5 m above sea level) to the level of the bath vestibule (9.5 m above sea level). In antiquity this vestibule was reached from street R4 (at 8.00 m above

sea level) also by a staircase leading up. The lower part of the vestibule walls and the columns flanking the entrance were partly rebuilt from ancient material. Part of a Byzantine mosaic floor in this vestibule was protected and displayed. A gravel path was made, leading from the bath vestibule to the mosaics shelter.

The official opening, which took place on January 22, 2000, was attended by the Minister of Culture of the Arab Republic of Egypt, Mr. Faruk Hosni, the Governor of Alexandria, Mr. Mohammed Abdel Salam el-Mahgub, head of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, Prof. Gaballa Ali Gaballa, Polish Ambassador Joanna Wronecka, representatives of the American and Polish embassy staff, as well as of ARCE and the Polish Center of Archaeology (*Fig. 3*).



Fig 3. Official opening of the shelter over the mosaics in the "Villa of the Birds"

The shelter is a glass structure, measuring 15 by 12 m, placed between the walls of existing Byzantine buildings. The gabled roof of beige-colored corrugated sheet metal refers in form to ancient roofs. Four rooms with mosaic floors were subjected to conservation treatment, and a display was prepared. Adjacent to the *triclinium* on the south is a fragmentarily exposed court. The villa walls were rebuilt (in partial anastylosis using ancient stone) to a height of 160 cm, that is, the Byzantine occupation level.

The roof trusses are supported on a steel beam on the north and a concrete beam on

the south. The concrete pillars carrying the beam constitute part of the retaining wall of the slope behind the shelter. Multi-layered insulation was introduced. Visitors pass over a walkway suspended 1 m above the mosaic floors. The thermal insulation of the roof (hard styrofoam sheets 4 cm thick) and the ventilation system permit a stable temperature to be maintained in the shade even on the hottest days.

The mosaic floors, made in different periods and in a variety of techniques, were all subjected to conservation treatment on the spot. A full report from this work is to be published soon by ARCE in Cairo.

BUILDING AND CONSERVATION WORKS

In keeping with the long-term program for opening the excavation area to tourists, building and conservation work was carried out in different parts of the site in addition to the activities on the mosaic shelter.

In the cisterns the partial reconstruction of the north facade was completed, including protection of internal voids, overhangs and cracking caused by earthquakes in antiquity (*Figs. 4, 5*).²⁾ Work on cleaning and completing the causeway, impregnation of wall tops and water draining system is advanced and should be finished in the coming season. A water-drawing mechanism (*saqia*) may also be installed above the double well.

In the baths, work started on protecting the ruined entrance to the underground service area and the outer wall of the complex in its eastern section. Fragments of this wall were reconstructed using ancient building material (a kind of anastylosis), and the eastern part of the slope was done as well.

In the early Roman villa in sector F (between the baths and cisterns) the base of

a damaged engaged column from the pseudo-peristyle of the villa court was prepared, supporting the suspended original parts of this column found higher up on the wall. A ceramic tile roof was introduced above the two surviving domes of the villa, which were protected beforehand.

In preparation for the landscaping of the earth slope on the spot of an early Roman inter-block alley, work was undertaken on completing the external wall of the villa abutting this passage. The condition of this wall is very bad, it having been partly robbed out in antiquity and partly disintegrated and leaning due to frequent earthquakes. Further conservation treatment is required. The socle has been completed on a distance of 5 m, where the wall had been dismantled down to the ground. The socle permits a drain to be installed here to carry off rainfall from the slope above it.

Provisional protection work has been started in the early Roman villa uncovered under the pavement of the theater portico.

2) Cf. W. Kołataj, *PAM X, Reports 1999* (2000), figs. 6-9.

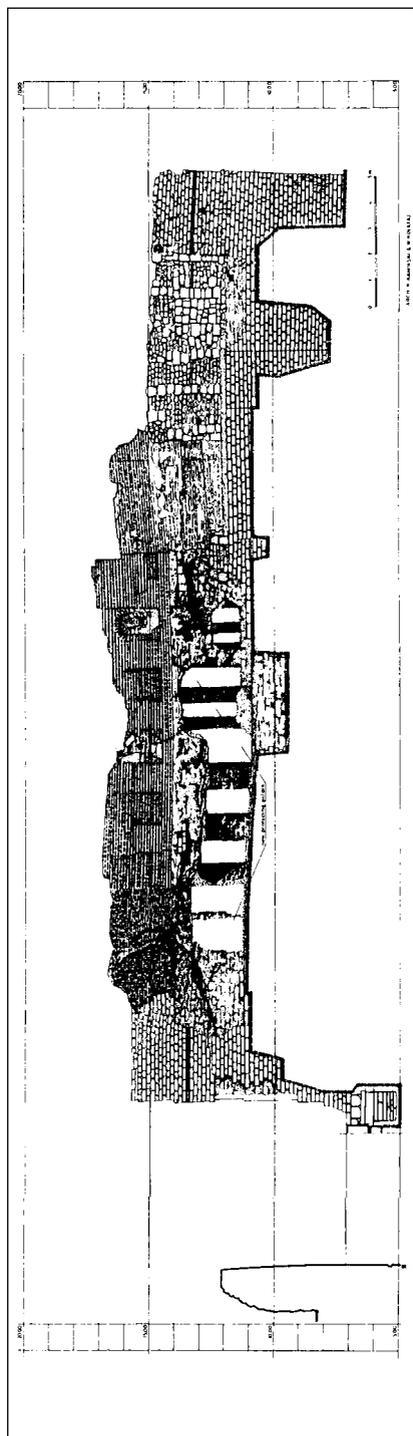


Fig. 4. Cistern. North elevation before reconstruction
(Drawing K. Kamiński & W. Kotłataj)

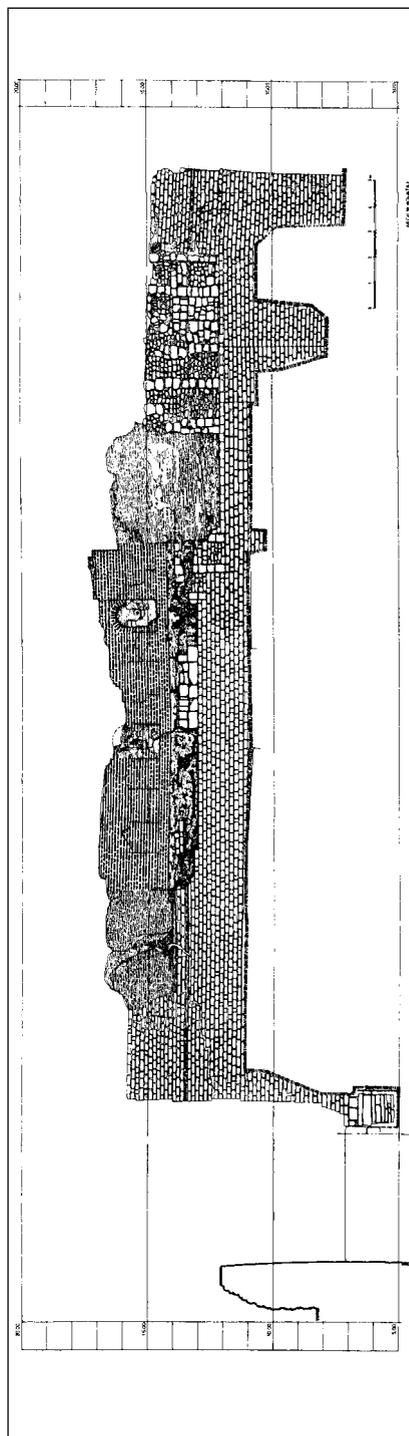


Fig. 5. Cistern. North elevation after reconstruction
(Drawing W. Kotłataj)

The surviving edges of the mosaic with dolphins discovered here have been protected and a column from the *triclinium* of this villa was subjected to treatment and raised.

Annual conservation activities in the theater included replacement of two eroded stones of the audience wall;

a fragment of the brick gutter above the corridor arcades (*ambulacrum*), which had been destroyed by trespassers, was reconstructed. The planned anastylosis of two newly uncovered columns in the theater portico was delayed until the coming season as a result of changed priorities.

THE "ZONA MONUMENTALE" PROJECT

Designing work for the second stage of the "Zona Monumentale" project, an archaeological park on Kom el-Dikka, has started. Far-going help from SCA Secretary General, as well as the Governor of Alexandria, may help in bringing the project to a quick finish. The design concerns not only landscaping around the baths on the western and northern sides, but also the erection along the south-

western theater facade of a new staircase. Also a new audience will be designed on the west slope opposite the structure. A causeway alongside the western facade of the cisterns permitting visitors to enter and see some of the underground cellars of the service area of the baths is also on the boards. It is intended that this program be completed in the years 2000-2005.