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Marea: Fourth Season of Excavations

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MAREA

FOURTH SEASON OF EXCAVATIONS

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The fourth field campaign of the Polish Mission at Marea lasted from August 9 to October 1, 2003. The work was sponsored by the State Committee for Scientific Research of the Republic of Poland (grant 5 H01H 042 21), the Polish Center of Archaeology of Warsaw University and private sponsors.¹⁾

The season's objectives were twofold: to explore a funerary chapel recorded during the previous field campaign²⁾ and to open excavations in the basilical church. Preservation work was carried out wherever required throughout the season. Especially in the apse of the basilica it was necessary to introduce beams to support the collapsing structure of the steps and to safeguard the stone vault of one of the crypts.

1) The team was directed by Dr. Hanna Szymańska and comprised: Mr. Krzysztof Babraj, deputy director; Mrs. Renata Kucharczyk, archaeologist; Prof. Dr. Ewa Wipszycka-Bravo, historian; Dr. Tomasz Derda, epigraphist; Ms Daria Tarara, architect; Mr. Grzegorz Kieferling, conservator and archaeologist; Ms Joanna Babraj, draftsman; and Mr. Tomasz Kalarus, photographer. The Supreme Council of Antiquities was represented by Mrs. Raheb Mohammed, inspector.

We would like to express our deepest gratitude to Dr. Zahi Hawass, Secretary General of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities, and Dr. Mohammed Maqsud, General Director of the SCA Egyptian Antiquities Sector, for their contribution to the success of the expedition. We could not have accomplished our objectives this season were it not for the friendly cooperation of Dr. Ahmed Abdel Fattah, General Director of Alexandrian Antiquities.

2) See PAM XIV, *Reports 2002* (2003), 48, fig. 11.

EXCAVATIONS IN THE FUNERARY CHAPEL

The stone-built funerary chapel lying 110 m to the southeast of the baths measures 9 by 7.70 m. It is furnished with a small apse (1) oriented eastward according to Christian custom; in this case the building axis deviates somewhat to the northeast (total length with apse: 10 m). Two cross walls divided the interior of the chapel into three parts (*Fig. 1*). Rooms 2-6 and a narrow passageway running around them were located immediately next to the apse. Next were three tombs (11, 12 and 7) and, at the western end, a kind of vestibule (9-8) with a stone "trough" (10) set up against the middle of the wall of the grave chambers.

All three of the tombs, featuring the same standard dimensions of 2.5 by 1.75 m and a surviving depth of 2 m, contained multiple burials. Not much can be said of

the original burials, as all of the skeletons appeared disturbed, but it is clear that the heads all pointed west. The surviving grave furnishings were restricted to a few simple bronze rings, a small bell of bronze, a few glass beads (and one of amethyst) lying loose and a few coins that are difficult to date. Some of the bodies must have been either dressed or wrapped in textiles to judge by the brown hue of the accumulations around the bones.

Sets of three steps each, discovered respectively in rooms 2, 4 and 6, led to the tombs (*Fig. 2*). For reasons that remain unclear, these rooms were further partitioned – cross walls were discovered separating room 3 from 2 and 5 from 6. In the wall opposite the steps, there were three openings through which bodies of the newly dead



Fig. 2. Funerary chapel. View from the west (Photo T. Kalarus)

were introduced into the grave chamber. Following every funeral, this aperture was blocked with stones in mortar or just mortar. Inside the burial chamber, there were stone blocks set up against the walls under the opening; the pall-bearers used them as steps to descend into the tomb.

Rooms 9 and 8 apparently constituted a kind of vestibule and the entrance to the chapel was in the western wall. The mysterious structure (10) could have been meant as protection against reptiles and frogs creeping into the tomb.³⁾

The chapel may have had a kind of mezzanine (first occupational floor) through which the western part of the building could have been accessed for the purposes of

worship or successive burial. From here one could reach the apse, which constituted the second occupational level together with the vestibule (8, 9). Once in the apse end of the chapel, one could follow steps down to the burial crypts (third occupational level). These steps must have also had a flight going up.

The erection of the chapel is dated to the 6th century on the grounds of coins found in the graves, as well as of a Gazan bag-shaped amphora found immediately under the apse floor. The building remained in use presumably until the beginning of the 8th century, like the nearby bath establishment that has been explored over the past three seasons.

EXCAVATIONS IN THE BASILICA

The other objective of the 2003 season was to explore the ruins of a Christian basilica situated on an eminence of the cape between the eastern and middle harbors of the town on the south shore of Lake Maryut, on a spot next to the longest of the piers. The structure had been discovered by W. Müller-Wiener, who was then excavating the nearby monastery of Abu Mena.⁴⁾

The stone building measures 49 m in length and 47 m in width (including the transept). It is one of just four churches furnished with a transept that are known from Christian Egypt; the other three structures are situated in Abu Mena, Ashmunein (Hermopolis Magna) and possibly Dakhayla.⁵⁾ Interestingly, there is

no mention in the written sources of the basilica in Marea, despite it being the second biggest complex of the kind after Abu Mena.

The ruins traced in the field prior to the excavations provided an idea of its plan. The architectural proportions were fairly squat: a short main body with two rows of columns separating the three aisles, a wide transept with rounded wings and a very small apse. There does not seem to be any sign of a narthex and atrium, both deemed to be characteristic features of buildings of this kind.

Work began with the clearing of the northeastern wing of the transept (*Figs. 3, 4*), which had been provisionally investi-

3) Suggested by P. Grossmann, based on parallels found in modern Coptic monasteries.

4) W. Müller-Wiener, "Siedlungsformen in der Mareotis", *AA* 82, 1967, 106, note 16. The plan of the church was given by P. Grossmann (*The Coptic Encyclopedia* 4, 1211-1212; id., "Die Querschiffbasilika von Hawariya und die übrigen Bauten Frühchristlichen Architektur Alexandrias", *BSAA* 45 (1993), 107-121, pl. XVII), who spent a couple of days measuring and investigating the structure.

5) The church complex at Dakhayla was identified mistakenly as the Enaton monastery, despite written sources describing the latter's location as being by the seaside.



Fig. 3. *Basilica. Plan of the apse and the northern aisle of the transept*
(Drawing D. Tarara)



Fig. 4. *Basilica. View of the apse and the crypts after clearing*
(Photo T. Kalarus)



*Fig. 5. Basilica. The inner pastophorium. View from the west
(Photo T. Kalarus)*



*Fig. 6. Marble tile bearing a Greek inscription
(Photo T. Kalarus)*

gated by P. Grossmann in 1980. The fill, measuring a mere 1.5 m in depth, yielded few potsherds, but sizeable quantities of stone blocks fallen from the upper parts of the walls. Two thinner walls attached to the inside of the wide transept wall created room 1, presumed to be an inner pastophorium (Fig. 5). The floor here was of marble slabs, this conclusion evinced by several pieces of marble tiles, as well as imprints in the lime substructure of the floor. One of the marble tiles discovered in the debris was found to bear an inscription in Greek: Ἀναστασία Εὐλογίου (πρεσβυτέρου) θυγατέρα (To the memory of Anastasia, daughter of Eulogios, presbyter). It was presumably a wall plaque erected in commemoration of the daughter of the chief priest of this church (Fig. 6).

Another two crosswalls flanked a wide passage leading to room 2, closed off from the north and south by provisionally constructed partitions. The building material used here included pieces of shattered marble columns, which had been taken either from other structures or from the partly damaged church. The evidence indicates that the pastophoria (remains of walls of analogous construction can be seen on the other side of the apse) were of later date and did not belong to the original foundation. Littering the floor of room 2 were considerable quantities of black and red stone tesserae originating from wall mosaics, some still embedded in plaster. The size of the tesserae ranged from 10 to 12 mm². Also found were two cubes of gilded glass, undoubtedly from the dome of the apse, as well as large pieces of *opus sectile* cut from pink and green marble and from porphyry.

The most interesting results were achieved in the apse itself, which was completely explored in the course of the present season. Two steps led up to a plat-

form made of lime mortar, now cracked. A crypt was found on either side of the axis of the apse. In both cases, the depth of the crypt reached 1.80 m. One of these crypts (no. 1; marked as *a* in Fig. 4) preserved a stone vault and a slab closing the entrance from the west (Fig. 7). The other (*b* in Fig. 4) contained the collapsed stones of a similar vault. There were multiple burials in both of the crypts. Pieces of rotten wood found with the bones indicated the presence of some kind of wooden coffins. Since the tombs had been



Fig. 7. Crypt no. 1 in the apse with a slab closing the entrance. View from the west (Photo T. Kalarus)

violated, little could be said of the original position of the burials. Numerous poorly preserved coins were discovered with the burials, as well as a single ring of bronze, sherds of a big Early-Roman amphora and a considerable quantity of clay loom-weights that constituted an unusual addition to the regular repertory of grave furnishings.

Many fragments of a rich interior decoration were recovered from the fill inside the apse of the church and between the walls of the pastophories. Foremost, there are the numerous column shafts (Fig. 8) with diameters of 60, 30 and

22 cm. The biggest shafts, carved from a gray, striped marble, must have originally stood in the nave; the lesser ones presumably supported the *ciborium* above the altar or else constituted some architectural elements difficult to reconstruct today. The two Corinthian capitals that were discovered once topped columns of average size. The interior decoration of the basilica also included engaged columns of stone with Corinthian capitals of unpainted stucco. Numerous pieces of stucco were brought to light while removing the debris from the southern end of the apse.



Fig. 8. Marble column shaft with sgraffito of an orant
(Photo T. Kalarus)



Fig. 9. Fragment of screen with a cross from the cancelli of the church
(Photo T. Kalarus)

A section 2 m wide in front of the apse belonged to the part intended for liturgical function. The altar had presumably stood here, separated by a wall from the rest of the church. Remains of this wall can still be seen adjoining the pastophorium walls. Uncovered walls with traces of small columns, each of a diameter equal to 22 cm, must have been the foundation of the altar situated in front of the steps to the apse. Elements of the marble chancel surrounding the altar were identified in the fill: these included two posts and fragments of a screen decorated with a cross in a bejeweled wreath and with palmettes on either side (*Fig. 9*).

The northern wing of the transept was also cleared in the course of this season (*Fig. 10*, cf. also *Fig. 3*). At a depth of 1.50 m below the surviving top of the wall, a stone support for a column the excavator found as well as a column shaft, which was complete and which measured 2.21 m in length and 35 cm in diameter.

Three massive buttresses that had been recorded on Grossmann's plan on the outside of the apse wall were now cleared. Yet another buttress supported the wall of the northern aisle of the basilica (see *Fig. 3*).



Fig. 10. Basilica. The northern wing of the transept after exploration. View from the west (Photo T. Kalarus)

POTTERY KILN

Surprising results came from the excavation of a test pit dug under the level of the basilica in a section west of the steps to the apse, the presumed place of the altar and *cancelli*. At a depth of 1.80 m below the surviving top of the walls, the grate of a huge kiln for firing amphorae came to light (Fig. 11). The part of the church where liturgical functions were celebrated was founded on top of this structure. Further sections of the grid were observed under the floor of the crypts. The kiln is one of just a few such constructions known from the Nile Delta.⁶⁾ It is 8 m in diameter and the firing grid is c. 50 cm thick. Inside the kiln, there were still fired examples of amphorae dated from the 2nd-3rd century AD.⁷⁾ The fire chamber and the debris above it also yielded numerous examples of clay separators used to pile up the amphorae for firing inside the kiln. The preserved wall of the kiln revealed traces of mud plastering, recorded to a height of 93 cm especially in the western part of the circumference. The middle part of the grid had to be removed in order to adapt the structure for use as a foundation for the church. The construction of the kiln did not differ substantially from the known pottery kiln architecture of the period: pillars running from the firing chamber, supporting the floor of the pottery chamber, pierced with holes to ensure heat flow.

The building of the basilica has been dated provisionally to the 5th or 6th century. Thus, there is a stretch of over one hundred years between the last operation

of the kiln and the time when the basilica started being constructed. The kiln is thus proof of a flourishing wine-manufacturing center existing on the site before the foundation of the Byzantine town. The wine was packed in locally-made amphorae and sent to other cities of the Graeco-Roman world. One of the sherds from the debris filling the kiln featured a stamp with the name of the owner of the vineyard - Dionisiou.



Fig. 11. Basilica. In the foreground, the amphora kiln discovered under the apse (Photo T. Kalarus)

6) Cf. Feisal El-Ashmawi, "Pottery kiln and wine factory at Burg el-Arab", in: Commerce et artisanat dans l'Alexandrie hellénistique et romaine, Actes du Colloque d'Athènes 11-12 décembre, BCH, Suppl. 33 (1998), 55-64; Ahmed Abd El-Fattah, "Recent discoveries in Alexandria and the chora", in: *ibid.*, 43, figs. 9-10.

7) The pottery was kindly dated by Dr. G. Majcherek.