

Hanna Szymańska, Krzysztof Babraj

Marea Excavations 2004

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MAREA

EXCAVATIONS 2004

Hanna Szymańska, Krzysztof Babraj

The fifth season of Polish excavations at Marea lasted from August 14 to September 27, 2004.¹ Excavation in four separate areas of the basilican church, the exploration of which commenced in 2003, led to the clearing of the north wing of the transept together with collateral chapel, the tracing of the main church entrance in the west wall of the complex, and the investigation of lateral rooms beyond the southwestern corner of the church. Further work was also done on the kiln discovered last year under the apse.

Geomorphological studies initiated in the 2000 season, which were aimed at determining environmental conditions at different stages in the settlement of the ancient town at Marea, as well as after its abandonment, were now completed.² Human remains excavated in previous seasons³ in the funerary chapel (thirty individuals) and the two crypts in the basilica (more than one hundred individuals) were subjected to anthropological examination. Adults of both genders and various ages at death, fetuses, newborns, infants, children and youth were identified, but the cause of death could not be established for lack of complete skeletons.

1 The team was directed by Dr. Hanna Szymańska and included Mr. Krzysztof Babraj, deputy director; Dr. Grzegorz Majcherek, Mrs. Renata Kucharczyk, archaeologists; Ms Daria Tarara, Ms Barbara Wrońska-Kucy, architects; Prof. Dr. Elżbieta Mycielska-Dowgiałło, Dr. Barbara Woronko, geomorphologists; Prof. Dr. Maria Kaczmarek, Ms Samia El-Merghani, anthropologists; Mr. Jacek Kucy, photographer (www.jmk.gallery.com); and Ms Dorota Dziedzic, archaeology student from Warsaw University. The Supreme Council of Antiquities was represented by Mr. Amr Ibrahim Ali Noh, inspector. Funds were provided by the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of Warsaw University and Private sponsors contributed to expedition financing, the brunt of which was borne by the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology.

We would like to express our deepest gratitude to Dr. Zahi Hawass, Secretary General of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities, and Mr. Magdy El-Ghandour, General Director of Foreign and Egyptian Mission Affairs and Permanent Committee. Our work would not have been possible without the friendly cooperation of Ms Emily Nessim, General Director of Excavations in Alexandria.

2 The project was conceived and executed by Prof. Dr. E. Mycielska-Dowgiałło and Dr. B. Woronko, both of the Warsaw University Faculty of Geography and Regional Studies, under a grant from the State Committee for Scientific Research (KBN 3P04E01225).

3 Cf. report by the present authors in *PAM XV, Reports 2003* (2004), 55-56 and 59.

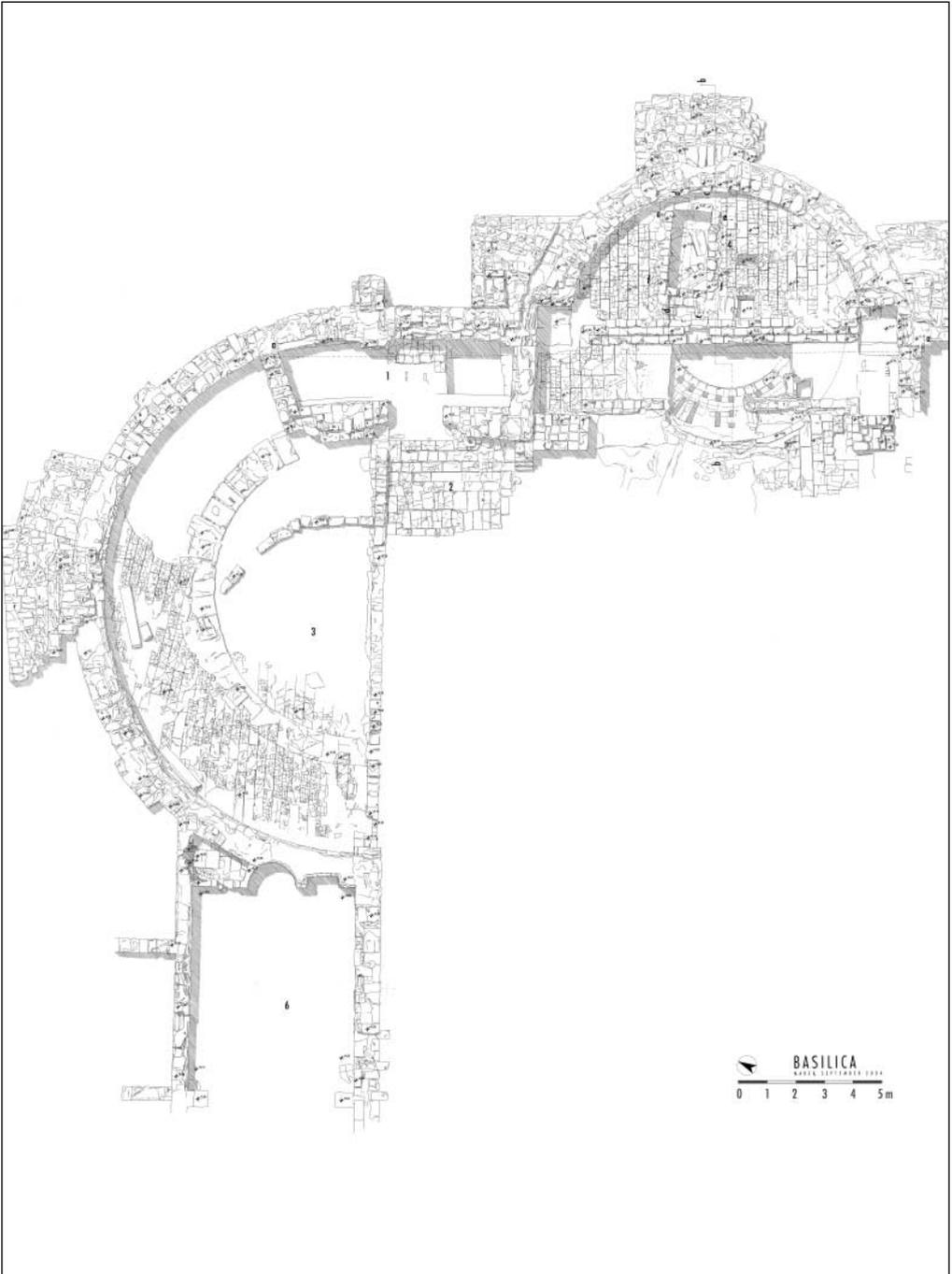


Fig. 1. Plan of the apse, northern wing of the transept and north chapel of the basilica
(Drawing D. Tarara)

BASILICA

Work commenced last year in the north wing of the basilica transept was now continued with more limestone blocks from the collapsed walls being cleared from further sections of the building [Figs. 1,2]. The stylobate, which was revealed in the north transept, was made of blocks of nummulithic limestone averaging 1.00 by 0.75 m. Of the marble columns that had stood on the stylobate, three shafts of 0.35 m diameter were found on the floor of the transept in this area.

One complete shaft was 2.21 m long; the other two were fragmentary. Furthermore, Grossmann's presumed intercolumnar space of c. 2.40 m has now been confirmed.⁴ Consequently, the number of columns in the transept should be reconstructed as twelve. Four of these columns were later incorporated into the wall of the northern pastophorium (prothesis?) during a rebuilding of the church, as indicated by the negative impressions in lime mortar of three of these columns, recorded during



Fig. 2. North wing of the transept with stylobate under the columns, view from the west. Note the circle of stones protecting a late fireplace (Photo J. Kucy)

⁴ P. Grossmann ("Die Querschiffbasilika von Hauwariya und die übrigen Bauten dieses Typus' in Ägypten als Repräsentanten der Verlorenen frühchristlichen Architektur Alexandrias", in: Memoriam Daoud Abdu Daoud, BSAA 45 (1993), 110) takes note of the small diameter of these columns to justify the presumed small distance between them.

last year's work. The fifth column (third counting from the intersection of the transversal colonnade with that of the nave) must have been removed presumably because the wall of the pastophorium and the north wall of the basilica were joined to a narrow (0.30 m thick) stone wall. The width of the ambulatory between the colonnade and the transept wall was 2.80 m. The evidence points to the intentional removing of three column shafts to a place by the outer wall; this was done by people who occupied the building once it had been abandoned as a church. They erected in this part of the transept a circle of blocks taken from the collapsed walls and meant to protect a fire, traces of which are still evident today.

The floor, which was found 1.80-1.90 m below the preserved top of the walls, is composed of a thin layer of lime mortar. Similarly as in the apse, the section here



Fig. 3. *Capital stripped of carved decoration, found in the northern wing of the transept (Photo J.M. Kucy)*

bears numerous traces of damages and repairs. Further proof of refurbishing comes from two stone blocks covered with a thin coating of mortar and blue polychromy, which was stripped in order to repaint the wall a red color. Unfortunately, it is impossible to determine the date of these renovations.

An interesting find of a capital was made in a corner between the wall of the northern aisle and the wing of the transept. The top surface of the capital measured 0.47 by 0.45 m, the bottom diameter 0.26 m [Fig. 3]. It was not ornamented. Perhaps the decoration was never executed or else the decoration was hammered away at one point in order for the element to be painted.⁵

The fill in this part of the basilica yielded only two coins;⁶ a few marble elements of architectural decoration, including two fragments of screens of different thickness from a chancel barrier, decorated with a cross, wreath and palmette; an acanthus leaf from the decoration of a capital; a column base (dia. 0.19-0.21 m); part of the shaft of a colonette (dia. 0.095 m); tiles of various kinds of marble, not to mention a piece made of green porphyry from Sparta.

Excavation of the northern buttress of the transept revealed traces of successive measures taken to counter the slow dilapidation of the building. The process of ruination was apparently due to a constructional deficiency (dome too heavy for the transept walls) or else was the outcome of earthquake-related damage.

- 5 Especially if we take under consideration the fact that in the 5th and 6th century all the marble architectural elements were brought from other buildings, in our case most likely from Alexandria. It is also possible that it is the impost under a capital made to imitate its shape, an idiosyncrasy prevalent in Byzantine architecture.
- 6 This and other numismatic material has been deposited in SCA stores and will be cleaned and identified in the coming season.

CHAPEL

The room adjoining the basilica on the north proved 6 m wide [cf. *Fig. 1*; *Fig. 4*]. A third of it was cleared in the course of this campaign. Meriting attention is the difference in the thickness of the walls between the apse, the outer wall of the basilica and the side room: 1.20 m, 0.80 m and 0.50 m respectively.

Much would suggest that this room was used as a chapel. Two niches were cut into the western part of the transept wall: one semicircular (0.80 m deep and 1.80 m wide), the other rectangular (0.40 m deep, 1.20 m wide). The space between them and the north wall of the chapel was occupied by

a small chamber paved with limestone slabs, entered from a narrow passage leading from the west. This passage was later blocked with a piece of destroyed wall and a granite column (diameter at the base 0.22 m; height 0.85 m) incorporating a base and shaft which narrowed toward the top [*Fig. 5*]. Its shape and the depression for a bowl in the top of the shaft indicate that it had served as the foot of a washbasin. Nearby, by the north wall of the chamber, a small channel was discovered, presumably intended as a means for discharging water from a washbasin that had once stood there and which served liturgical purposes in the chapel.



Fig. 4. Chapel adjoining northern aisle. View from the west (Photo J.M. Kucy)

The entrance to the chapel, preserving the two lateral projections, lies 7 m away from the west wall of the transept. All that survives of the interior decoration of this chamber is a small Corinthian capital (H. 0.15 m).

Joining the north wall of the chapel on the outside were two thin perpendicular walls, partly uncovered in the present campaign, one in line with the entrance

and the other a little further away [cf. *Fig. 1*]. They are suggestive of yet another chamber being located behind the wall here. Ledges for steps, possibly leading to the emporas in the aisle, were noted in the wall between the two walls [*Fig. 6*]. The fill behind the wall yielded a sherd from a Coptic plate featuring a wavy edge and painted scene from the Dionysiac repertoire [*Fig. 7*].

KILN

Continued exploration of the kiln found under the apse of the basilica involved extending the trench about 2 m to the west (toward the nave). The fill on the northern and southern side of the trench contained

numerous blocks of limestone fallen from the walls of the basilica. Three coins were found with the disturbed building material, as well as iron nails of considerable size, a piece of terracotta oil lamp and fragments



Fig. 5. Blocked passage between alleged chapel and small next-door room. Note opening of a channel in the wall of the room on the right (Photo J.M. Kucy)



Fig. 6. Evidence of a staircase leading to the gallery in the northern aisle. View from the north (Photo J.M. Kucy)

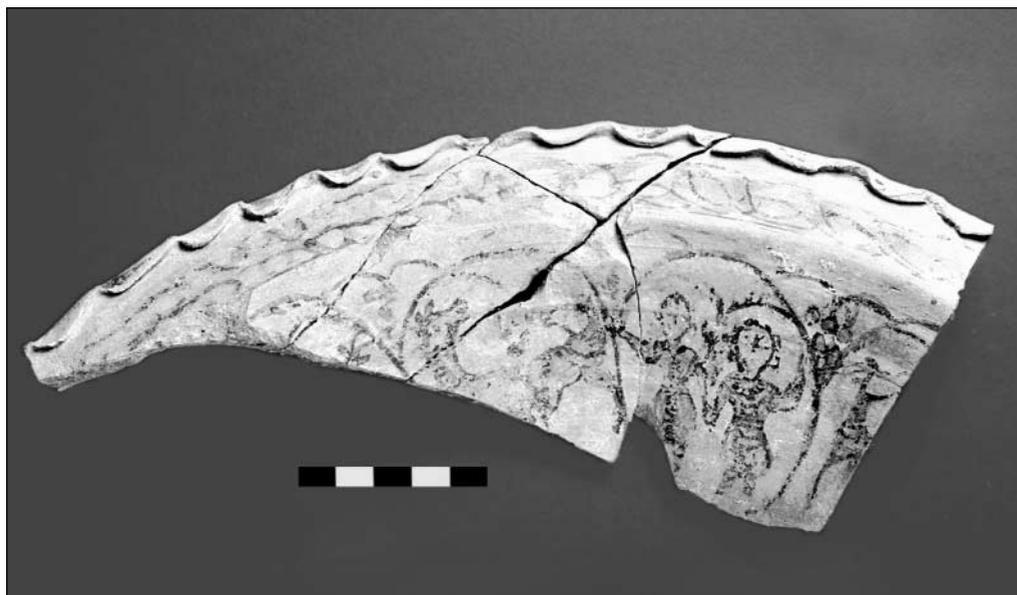


Fig. 7. Fragment of a plate decorated with a Dionysiac scene (Photo J.M. Kucy)

of marble architectural decoration in the form of shattered column shafts. Two of these shaft fragments bear evidence of mounting techniques. One found in the fill on the southern side of the trench (dia. 0.235 m) had a metal (lead ?) peg; the other, 0.20 m in diameter, had a groove c. 3 cm



Fig. 8. *Chancel post from the altar, recovered from underlying rubble*
(Photo J.M. Kucy)

deep down one side, still filled with remnants of lime mortar, which had served to fix the column to a wall. It may have been used in the secondary walls, aligned N-S, that were found standing in front of the apse (to support the ciborium above the altar ?). Of the same diameter is a column base discovered 0.10 m above the floor, at a distance of 3.50 m from the said wall. The fill yielded more column shaft fragments, one of nummulithic limestone, the other of marble with a diameter of 0.66 cm.

The bottom of the kiln was explored further down in order to remove another chancel post standing inside it. This element (H. 1.30 m; W. 0.21 m) differs in size from the pillar found last year; it also bears evidence of reuse [Fig. 8]. Originally, it may have flanked the entrance to the bema, but was later moved to the corner of the balustrade, as indicated by modified profiling with secondarily cut grooves for mounting screens. It adds to the list of finds testifying to alterations introduced in the interior decoration of the church.

Similarly as in the previous campaign, fragments of red-painted plaster were recovered from above the kiln, near its clay wall. Some of these pieces of plaster were evidently from the joining of wall and ceiling. Behind this wall, lying on the dislodged pavement is a collapsed block of bricks held together with coarse mortar. Similar blocks of bricks were found last year on either side of the alleged altar. They appear to be part of the ruined barrel vault of the apse.

Trial pits dug under the steps of the apse in the north and south confirmed yet again that the lower floor of the apse was laid directly on top of the kiln's firing grid. Pottery from under this floor has been dated to the 2nd century at the latest.

ENTRANCE TO THE BASILICA

Another objective of this year's investigations was to locate the main entrance to the basilica, believed to be in the west wall of the building. Excavations in this part of the church revealed at a depth of about 1.20 m below the preserved top of the walls, an entrance 6.40 m wide, clearly divided by two pillars (evidence of one of these pillars was preserved on the threshold). Later the space between the two pillars was blocked, thus forming two doorways of a width of c. 1.10 m each [Fig. 9]. Under the threshold, used as a support under a slab, was a small, undamaged marble Corinthian capital. The pavement

was laid 0.60 m below the threshold. Leading to the entrance from both north and south were three steps. Above the steps on the north side traces of burned ground were found – evidence of a Bedouin fire. The layer of burning yielded over 50 marble tiles coming from the decoration of the basilica, mostly square, hexagonal and triangular pieces. The fill further yielded two fragments of plaster giving an idea of what the ceiling could have been like: one with impressed bunches of reeds on the reverse and the other from a corner with impressed images in the negative of the construction supporting the roof.



Fig. 9. Main entrance in the west wall of the basilica. View from the west (Photo J.M. Kucy)

"SHOPS"

Explorations this year also covered the area beyond the southwestern corner of the basilica. A series of rooms adjoining the south wall of the church was cleared. On the south, they were closed off with an interlocking wall [Fig. 10].

Directly behind the aisle of the church there was a set of six steps leading to an upper level (room 11). Under the steps on the south side, at a depth of 1.50-1.60 m, a rubbish dump was discovered. It has not been fully explored yet, but already it has yielded a huge quantity of *opus sectile* tiles [Fig. 11], of differently colored marbles, as well as tiles ready to use for floor inlays. Other finds from the dump included discarded fragments of bone inlays used in

the decoration of boxes (furniture?), oil lamps and a considerable quantity of loom weights. Indeed, the latter category of finds can be found scattered all over the basilica, even in the crypts of the apse excavated last year. The pottery found in the dump is dated to the 6th-7th century. Ledges recorded in the west wall of room 11 corresponded to another set of steps, parallel to the first one described above.

At a distance 1.25 m to the west, a semi-circular brick structure was uncovered (room 10) [cf. Fig. 1]; it appears to have protected a latrine (?) found 2.21 m below it. Further explorations should provide an explanation of the function of this feature. Investigations in room 8 brought the most

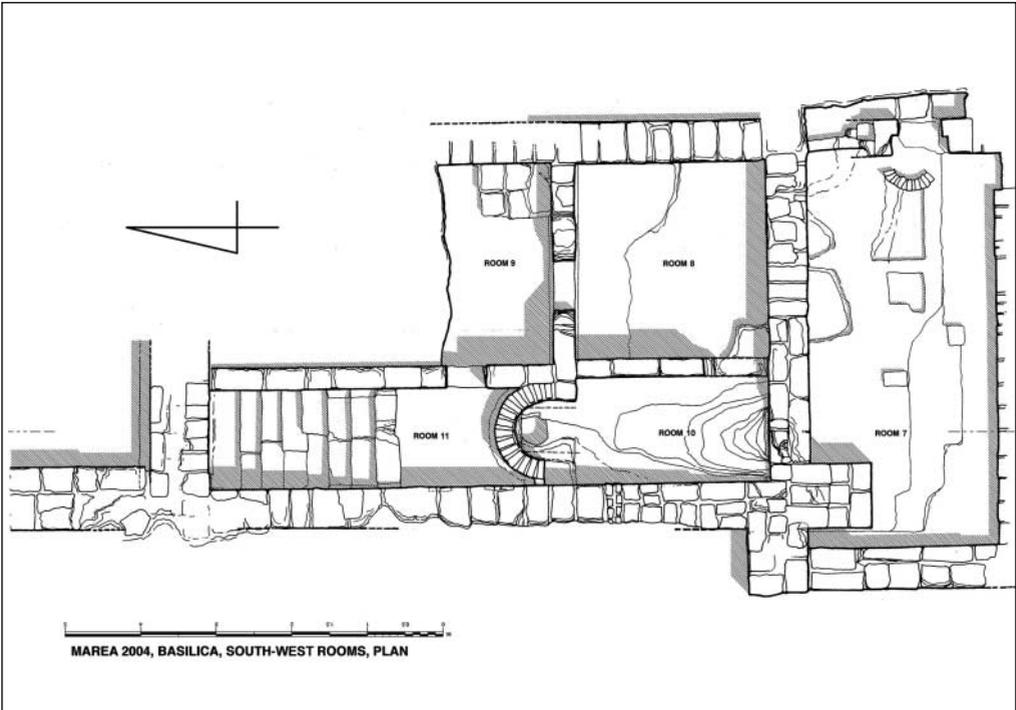


Fig. 10. Rooms beyond the southwestern corner of the basilica
(Drawing B. Wrońska-Kucy)

interesting finds of the season. The chamber is 2.70 by 2.50 m and had two floors: a paved floor of limestone blocks c. 1 m below the preserved top of the walls and another floor, this time of lime mortar, underneath it. On the partly preserved upper pavement, more than a hundred bronze coins were found,⁷ as well as more than 30 handles of lamps from a *polycandelon*.⁸ This last pavement may have been stabi-

lized on a stone sub-structure: the surviving fragment was found to have an underlying slab of marble (which turned out to be decorated with a wreath in relief). Directly adjoining the chamber on the north is a backroom (room 9), still to be explored, apparently connected with the first room via a passage that was later blocked. Finds from this backroom: two bronze pieces, used for weighing coins



Fig. 11. Collection of marble *opus sectile* tiles from the basilica area
(Photo J.M. Kucy)

7 See note 7.

8 Of the same type as glass lamps reported on by R. Kucharczyk, "The glass finds from the Basilica in Marea, 2003", *PAM* XV, op. cit., 63-64 and Fig. 1.

[Fig. 12], found on the floor, suggest the potential function of this complex as a sort of exchange office for various foreign monies brought by the pilgrims arriving through the port here from all over the Mediterranean. This would also explain why so far no coins of other than Alexandrian issue have been found in our excavations.⁹

In front of the presumed exchange office on the south, a paved street (no. 7) was dis-

covered. Traces of three separate fires were observed on it, one of these with a small brick structure arranged in a semicircle around it for protection.

The pottery repertoire from this year's excavations did not differ from the already known assemblage originating from the ruins of the basilica. Most of the amphorae were dated to the 6th and 7th century and represented vessels of LRA 2 and LRA 4 type, as well as Egyptian LRA 7.¹⁰

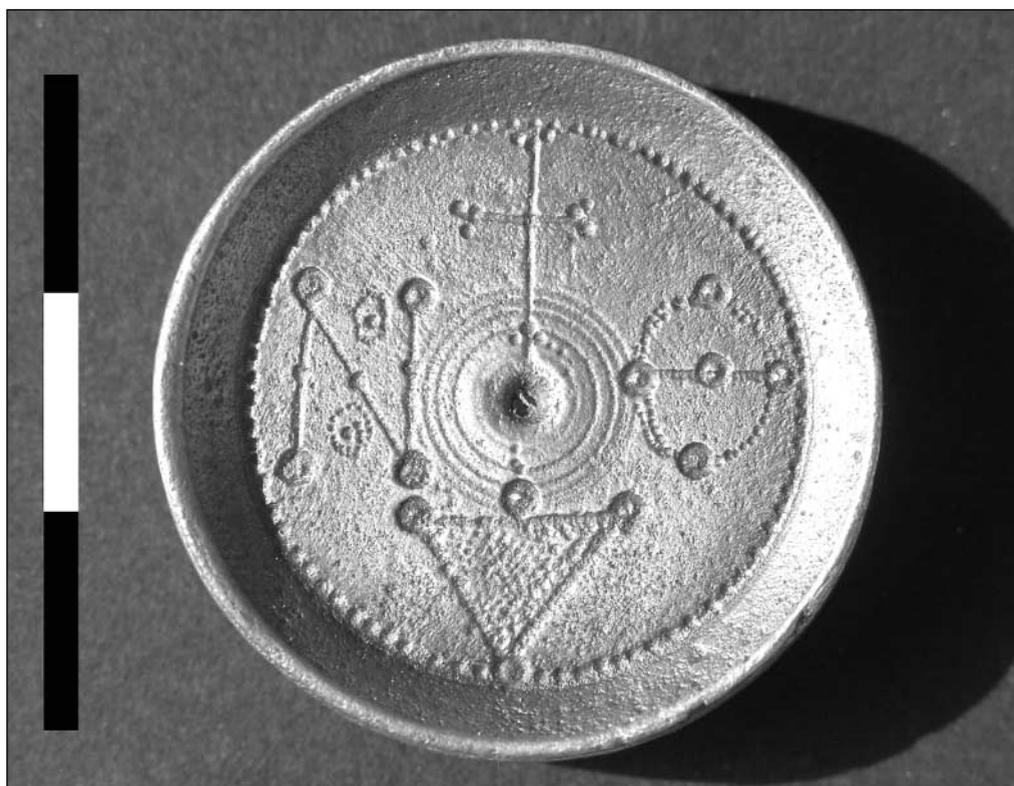


Fig. 12. Coin weight
(Photo J.M. Kucy)

9 With the exception of the *sakiyah* where two bronze *folles* from Constantinople were found. Cleaning and identification of the coins will surely contribute to the interpretation of this room.

10 All pottery identification provided by Dr. Grzegorz Majcherek.