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## Marea 2007 : Eight Season of Excavations

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# MAREA 2007

## EIGHTH SEASON OF EXCAVATIONS

Hanna Szymańska, Krzysztof Babraj

*The eighth season of Polish excavations at Marea lasted from August 15 to September 20, 2007, and covered preservation and excavation works.<sup>1</sup> The digging season was cut short by unforeseen external circumstances (required official permits were not ready until September 7) which resulted in a limited execution of the originally planned program. Two trenches were excavated, exploring the western gate to the basilica and the westernmost features in the uncovered part of the architecture lining the north wall of the basilica (latrine and newly excavated subterranean unit).*

*The restoration project, sponsored by Bone Levine Architects, New York, concentrated on the protection of the most endangered masonry structures from phases preceding the building of the basilica, namely the pottery kiln and baptismal font located within the presbytery area (see below in this volume, contribution by Barbara Wrońska-Kucy).*

1 The team was directed by Dr. Hanna Szymańska and comprised: Krzysztof Babraj (Deputy Director), Joanna Michalska, Dawid Wieczorek and Renata Kucharczyk, archaeologists; Daria Tarara, architect; Joanna Babraj, conservator; Piotr Suszek, photographer; Barbara Wrońska-Kucy, architect, representing Bone/Levine Architects, New York, the sponsor of the conservation work and Jack Kucy (JMK-Gallery.com, New York, technical and photographic services for the conservation work). The Supreme Council of Antiquities was represented by Inspector Hala El-Fawal.

We would like to express our deepest gratitude to Dr. Zahi Hawass, Secretary General of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities, and Magdy El-Ghandour, General Director of Foreign and Egyptian Mission Affairs and Permanent Committee. Our work could not have been completed without the cooperation of Fawzy Al-Khawlany, General Director of the Alexandrian Antiquities Department, and the generous assistance of Emily Nessim, General Director of Excavations in Alexandria.

## COIN CONSERVATION PROGRAM

The conservation program planned on the Marea archaeological material kept in the SCA storehouse in Mustapha Kamel could be undertaken at once (from August 15 to September 5). The project concerned a set of bronze coins discovered at Marea in 2005. The objects had started to be cleaned at the time, but the work was brought to a standstill by the untimely death of conservator Grzegorz Kieferling. Of 314 coins, 60 were now cleaned, the remaining 254 being in such poor condition due to corrosion that they were left untreated as study material. The team also examined all the bronze finds from Marea kept in the stores.

A cursory examination of the cleaned and conserved coins identified most of them as a type most frequently found at Marea, in the baths as well as in the basilica. These were *dodecanummia* struck in the Alexandria mint before and after the Persian invasion. The later coins, from after the Persian invasion, bear the bust of Persian king Chosroes II, who ruled Egypt in 619-629. A few *folles*, from the mints in Constantinople and Nikomedia, must have been brought to Egypt by pilgrims.

Two of the coins have nothing to do with the contexts in which they were found. One is obviously Ptolemaic with the image of an eagle on the reverse and Zeus Ammon on the obverse. The other is an Athenian coin with an owl on the reverse (obverse illegible).

Most of this coin assemblage had been recovered from a small room which had also yielded coin weights (Szymańska, Babraj 2005: 54, Fig. 12). It was hoped that the coins from the basilica, once identified, would shed light on the origins of the

pilgrims on their way to the sacred pilgrimage center at Abu Mena. Current fieldwork provided more evidence in the form of an unguentarium with a Greek-letter stamp impressed on the lower body. The letters of the stamp read:  $\kappa\alpha\beta$  [Fig. 1]. In Byzantine times, bottles of this type served as ampullae for collecting sacred oil from holy places where Christian saints were worshipped. An identical stamp was found on the same kind of bottle during excavations in Saraçhane in Turkey (Hayes 1992: 9, Pl. 17). The letters are presumed to represent the initials of a local bishop. Thus, the bottle attests to the presence in Marea of pilgrims from Asia Minor.



Fig. 1. Stamp on a fragment of unguentarium (Photo D. Wiczorek)

## EXCAVATIONS

During the two-week long digging season the west gate of the basilica was cleared (cf. Szymańska, Babraj 2005: 51 and Fig. 9). Two big steps leading to the church were uncovered in front of it [Fig. 2]. A trial pit traced 5 m away from the steps indicated the presence of a paved courtyard; the size of this was not determined this year. This courtyard has a second, later phase, when it measured 6 by 7 m and was surrounded on three sides with stones laid without bonding [Fig. 3].

The rubble in front of the basilica gate yielded two marble Corinthian capitals and a considerable quantity of floor slabs of the same material. It is very likely that these finds came from the courtyard (atrium ?) of the church.

Fig. 2. *Two steps leading to the church, view from the north (Photo P. Suszek) ▶*



Fig. 3. *Courtyard in front of the basilica gate, view from the west (Photo P. Suszek)*

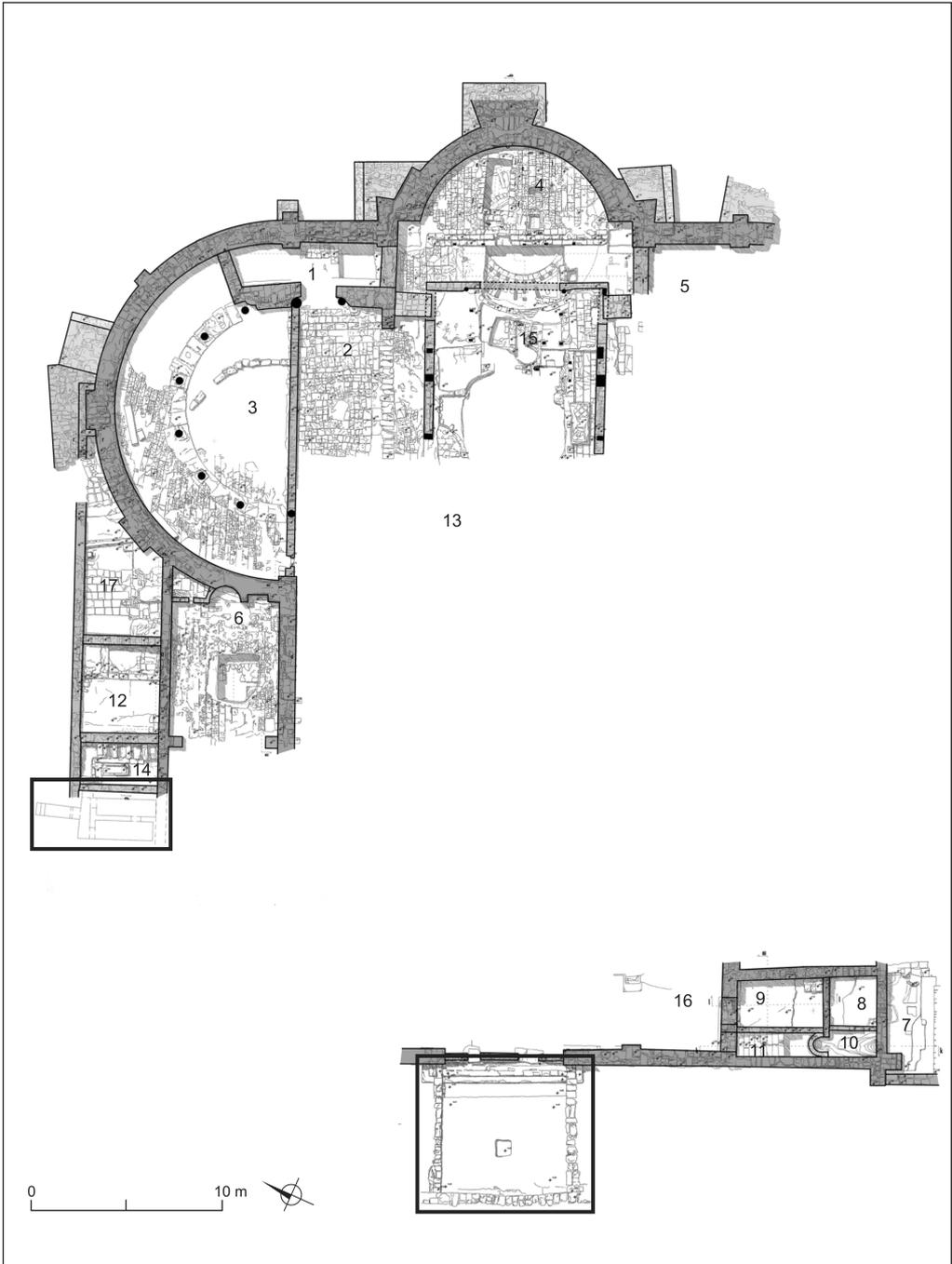


Fig. 4. Plan of the basilica in Marea; boxes mark the trenches excavated in 2007  
(Plan D. Tarara)

The other sector explored this season included the feature to the west of the latrine (cf. Szymańska, Babraj 2006: 62–63 and Fig. 8) adjoining the basilica wall on the north [cf. Fig. 4, no. 14]. This was a subterranean structure built of limestone blocks, entered from the east via a passage (C) [Fig. 5]. Two interconnected chambers (A and B) led off this passage to the south. Another one (D) opened in the opposite direction to the north [Fig. 6]. Steps led down to the cellar from the lake side.

The deposits in the channel and the cellar yielded a few typical Byzantine jugs, numerous sherds of Coptic painted ware decorated with floral ornaments and female busts. Two coins, one of which was an Arabic one from the end of the 7th–8th century, were also discovered. One of the sherds bears a fragmentary charcoal

inscription in Arabic, presumably a *sura* from the Quran. Two lamps coming from the channel and a fragment of St. Menas ampulla, both typical products of the Abu Mena workshops, are numerous represented among the finds from the baths and basilica at Marea.

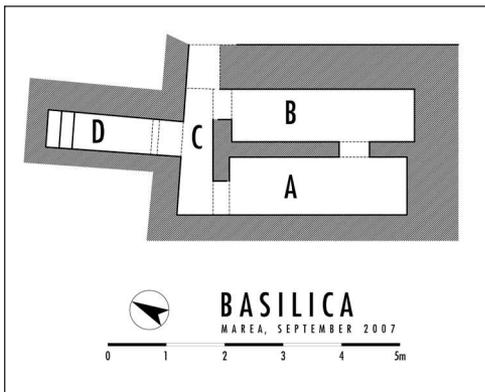


Fig. 5. Plan of subterranean structure situated west of the latrine and north of the basilica wall (Plan D. Tarara)

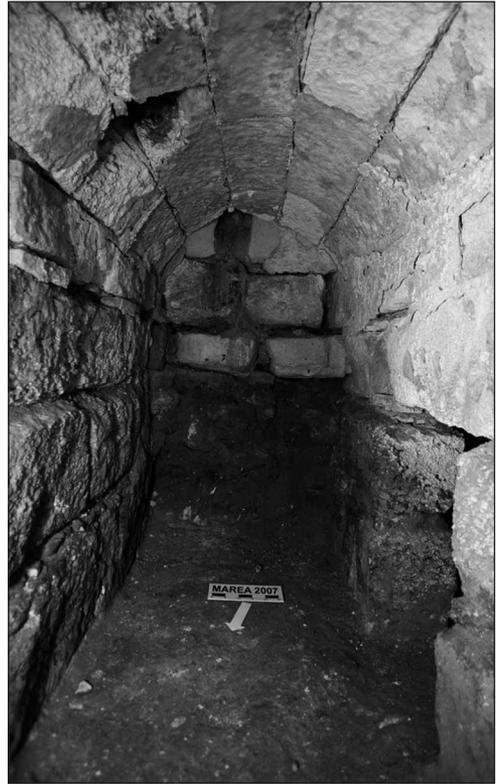


Fig. 6. Interior of unit B of the subterranean structure, view from the north; note connecting passage to unit A in the right wall (Photo P. Suszek)

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