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EXCAVATIONS AT KOM EL-DIKKA IN ALEXANDRIA IN THE 1989 SEASON

Grzegorz Majcherek

Archaeological excavations in the 1989 season concentrated in the W1N sector located east of the street R4 and north of an area already investigated in the 1970s.¹ The work was a continuation of research begun in the preceding season which was spurred by a plan to prepare a permanent architectural exhibition of the relics in this quarter. The excavations confirmed beyond doubt that the area east of street R4 was completely occupied by private and domestic architecture. As for the chronology, stratigraphic analyses demonstrated a continued habitation from the Late Ptolemaic period (around the 1st century BC) to the end of the Byzantine period, that is, the end of the 7th century AD² with the following three basic periods to be discerned:

- Late Ptolemaic (1st century BC),
- Early to Mid Roman (1st to 3rd century AD),
- Late Roman and Byzantine (4th to 7th century AD).

A number of chronologically distinct stages of architectural development were distinguished, each featuring changes in plan and function.

In the preceding season excavation work led to the discovery of several, rooms belonging to a late occupational phase of House H. Presently the exploration of earlier layers was continued and the

¹ The Mission is directed by Dr. W. Kołątaj. The excavations were conducted, similarly as in the preceding season by Mr. G. Majcherek, who worked with a team including: Assist. Prof. P.M. Gartkiewicz, architect, Dr. H. Szymańska, Miss R. Kucharczyk, Miss I. Zych, archaeologists, and Mr. T. Szmagier, photographer. Participating on a volunteer basis was Miss M. Złotogórska.

² A few existing relics of the medieval period found in this sector were investigated in the 1980/1981 season, see M. Rodziewicz, *Excavations at Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria 1980-81, ASAE 70 (1984-85), 233-236.*

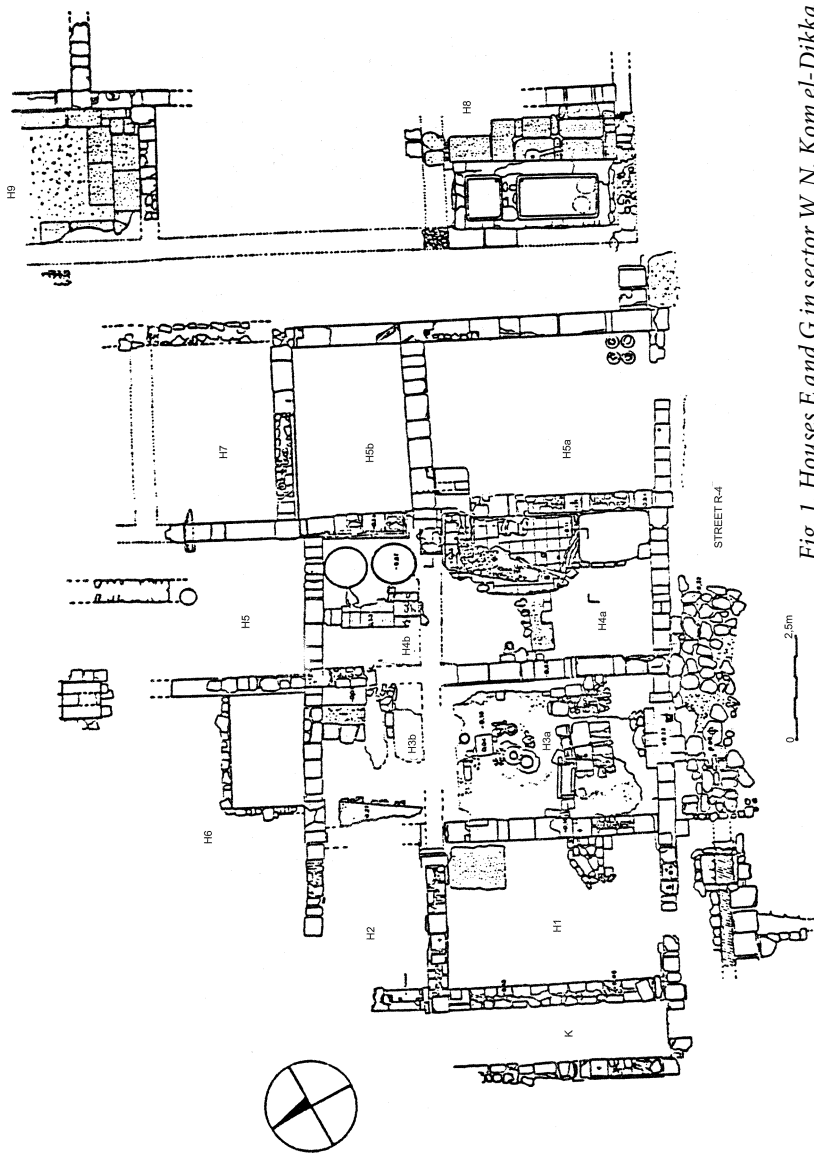


Fig. 1. Houses E and G in sector W.N, Kom el-Dikka.

area covered by excavations was greatly extended to the south and east (cf. Fig. 1).

I. Late Ptolemaic period

It was only in room H-1 that it was possible to investigate the architectural relics of this period. A corner of the house was uncovered here with deeply entrenched foundations reaching the present water level. The foundations were constructed of small irregular blocks, while the wall itself, of which only the lowest courses have been preserved, was made of large blocks 1.10 m long. In the western wall there were traces of a large doorway leading into the street.

The corresponding layers yielded much pottery (black table ware both imported and Egyptian, Late Hellenistic lamps and numerous sherds of imported Graeco-Italic amphorae), which dated the construction of the walls to the 1st century BC. Of particular interest were scattered finds of roof tiles, as yet unreported at our site.

II. Early Roman period

In many places of House H the remains of well-preserved walls belonging to a large villa urbana were uncovered. In room H-1, which is at present the most fully investigated part of the structure, the said walls were constructed in typical opus quadratum directly on top of the relics of Late Hellenistic houses. This season's work led to the discovery of the main entrance to the house leading from street R4. The monumental frame of this doorway has been preserved on the street side of the wall. Leading up to the door (which is some 1.20 m wide) is a three-step porch flanked by pilasters. The southern side of the door was destroyed by later building activity. Inside the room, which served at this time as an entrance vestibule, remains of a stone pavement were uncovered together with large sections of plaster still on the walls, indicating the rather high quality of the interior decoration. In the upper parts

of the walls (uncovered partially in the preceding season) a red-painted plaster band of decoration imitating *opus isodomum* is well preserved. Similar wall decoration is encountered in the architecture of earlier periods.³

The debris filling this room contained numerous potsherds and lamps from the 1st-2nd century AD. An Italian Early Roman amphora was set up in the corner of the room; its bottom was sawed off, so it could serve as a drain draining waste to the street channel in Street R4.

Remains of Early Roman architecture were uncovered also in rooms H-5 and H-6. Fragments of walls built in *opus quadratum* and plastered in imitation of the wall bond were cleared here. The fill of the interiors consisted of debris from the dismantling of houses in the neighborhood. It yielded numerous fragments of architectural decoration, including a small fluted column covered with stucco and a painted limestone capital.

H-8 is a large room which adjoins the street and measures roughly 2.80 by 4.80 m. It is, therefore, similar in size to room H-3a cleared in the preceding season. It most certainly was one of the main rooms of the villa. Several layers of lime plaster-work upon the walls is evidence of long-lasting habitation. However, the floor level corresponding to this period has not been reached as yet. Running along the east wall of the room there was a small channel oriented N-S, built of small rectangular blocks covered with slabs. Together with the channel uncovered in room H-1 in the preceding season, it forms part of the drainage system inside the building.

The entire room was filled with a thick deposit of debris and ashes which yielded numerous objects including some well preserved lamps dated to the 2nd-3rd century AD and large quantities of potsherds

³ See, for example, the tombs at Anfushy: A. Adriani, *Annuaire du Musée Gréco-Romain* III, 1940-50, figs 35, 36.

among which there is a rich set of wine amphorae of Meroitic production.⁴

STREET R4

A deep trial pit was sunk on Street R4 in the vicinity of the main entrance to House H. A large fragment of the street paving made of large irregular dolomite slabs was cleared along the facade of House H. The pavement showed much wear over a long period of time. A section of identical paving had been discovered in another part of the same street in the 1950s when a sounding was made under the present cinema "Amir".⁵ According to the pottery evidence, the paving must have been laid somewhere in the 6th century AD. It also became clear from the evidence that the original street width in this period was much greater than had been supposed so far and equaled about 9.50 m.

About 0.30 m below this surface the remnants of an earlier street surface were discovered. The earlier paving was made in the same way.

Further excavations in the trial pit led to the clearing of and extensive part of the city sewage system. The relics consisted of several channel sections, rebuilt multiple times, once again testifying to a long history of use covering a period from 1st to the 6th century AD. Just under the paving there was a small N-S channel about 0.40 m wide. It was constructed of disproportionately large regular blocks which must have come from the dismantling of some earlier structures. The channel, running off to the south, led to a rectangular pit connected to a street collector located along the facades of the houses. This main drain, 0.60 m wide, was constructed in the Early Roman period and continued in use in much

⁴ For these amphorae, see J.-Y. Empereur, *Un atelier de Dressel 2-4 en Égypte au IIIe siècle de notre ère*, *BCH suppl.* XIII (1986), 599-608.

⁵ See A. Adriani, *Scavi e scoperte allesandrine (1949-1952)*, *BSAA* 41, 1956, Fig. 6.

later times as well. Its bottom was reached at about 3.70 m below the latest street paving. It was built of small blocks set in a mortar mixed with ashes. The original gabled roof has been preserved in several places. The drain was repaired on multiple occasions and in some cases the gaps left in the vault were filled in with large amphorae. A similar technique is to be observed in another part of the channel neighboring directly with the entrance to House H.

In the northwestern corner of the trial pit yet another sewage pit was discovered. It quite possibly served a channel running transversely across the street from houses bordering the western front of R4.

III. Late Roman Period

HOUSE H

Throughout the Late Roman period the building retained a generally similar layout. It was ascertained in the course of research that most of the walls dated to this period were constructed on top of earlier structures serving as foundations. Subsequent rebuildings occurring after periods of ruin were connected as a rule with functional changes. Originally, the building was a typical dwelling. Starting with the 5th century AD it began serving workshop needs as well. Further rooms belonging to this house were excavated during this season. Rooms H-5 and H-6 located to the east served presumably as open courtyards in this period. Remains of domestic installations were uncovered here. In room H-5 there were two oval pits surrounded by stone parapets. In one of these, filled with clay, a well-preserved late amphora of Egyptian production was found. In room H-6, a large storage bin measuring 2.60 x 1.70 m was discovered in the southwestern corner; it had been constructed using parts of earlier, fragmentarily preserved walls. Inside it there was a sizeable collection of broken imported Late Roman amphorae.⁶ East of the storage bin there was a well-preserved

⁶ Most of them belong to a well-known Levantine type widespread in Egypt, see M. Egloff, *Kellia, la poterie Copte*, Genève 1977 (types 169, 182).

kitchen oven. Rectangular in plan, it was constructed of flat bricks set in clay mortar. The chamber which measures 1.00 x 0.90 m is divided by a small wall supporting the upper parts of the oven.

In the final occupational phase both the oven and the storage bin were filled in and the entire room covered with a lime floor; reused pieces of marble were set into it in places (preserved fragment in the northwestern part of the room). A very fine bone plaque decorated with a representation of Pan (inv. no. 1428) was found immediately under this layer.

In room H-7, which adjoins room H-5 on the south, there were no installations to determine specifically its purpose. Under the threshold of the door leading from it to room H-5 a water channel was discovered. This channel was constructed of reused imported Coan-type amphorae lacking bottoms and set one into the next.⁷

In the small room H-8b (2.60 x 3.80 m), which is separated from the preceding room by a well-preserved wall retaining a pillar structure, a lime floor was cleared. This last phase of habitation corroborated by finds should be dated to the second half of the 6th-early 7th century AD.

The large room H-8a (3.80 x 4.80 m) extends right up to street R4. Of the walls only the western one and the one to the north have been preserved retaining traces of plasterwork. The remaining walls were to a large degree dismantled in the 9th-10th century AD. Originally, this room communicated with the neighboring room H-4a as evidenced by a set of some steps preserved in staircase form in a place where there had once been a door. The door was later blocked by the construction of a large basin in the room next door.

It would appear that in this period the building as a whole served as a habitation. According to pottery evidence this phase

⁷ For the development of this class, see V. Grace, *Amphoras and Ancient Wine Trade*, Princeton 1961, figs 56, 57.

should be dated as early as the 4th century AD. At a later time the room was transformed into an independent unit separated from the rest of the house and equipped with an entrance leading directly from the street.

The complex of rooms H-8a and H-8b formed the southern wing of House H beyond which there was a narrow unpaved passage about 1.70 m wide and the next house, House G.

Room H-2 of House H was also explored to the extent of removing a rich pottery deposit dating to the end of the 4th century AD. A variety of finds was recovered, including a set of bone hairpins, bone plaques with figural representations, lamps and, last but not least, pottery.⁸

HOUSE G

Only a few rooms forming the northern wing of this building were uncovered.⁹ Walls of room G-9, which is located in the eastern end of the structure, did not exceed 0.50 m in preserved height. The floor is a regular pavement consisting of large limestone slabs reaching 1.00 x 0.80 m in size. Although so far it has not been possible to clear this room entirely, its size and the high quality of the interior finishing clearly suggests that it was one of the main halls of the house.

Room G-6 located in the northwestern corner of the house contains an interesting structure. It consists of two basins of unequal size, the larger one measuring 1.00 x 1.85 m, the smaller one 1.00 x 0.85 m. Both were constructed of small stones and bricks set in mortar with a large admixture of ashes. On the inside of the basins the

⁸ The finds there included a well-preserved example of an amphora imported probably from the Aegean region, as yet unreported in Egypt. For this type of amphora, see H.S. Robinson, *The Athenian Agora*, vol. V: *Pottery of the Roman Period*, Princeton 1959, his type H-273.

⁹ The southern wing of House G was explored already in the 1970s, see M. Rodziewicz, *Les habitations romaines tardives d'Alexandrie*, Varsovie 1984, 173-177.

walls were covered with a waterproof plaster. Each of the pools had an outlet for discharging the fluid contents, whatever it may have been. The floor around the basins is paved with thick slabs of nummulithic limestone. The purpose of this unique installation escapes explanation so far.

In the closing period of habitation in the area (6th-7th century AD), the basins were filled and a new floor laid; in the latest phase reused marble slabs were used to pave it.

Both houses went out of use in the form described here at the turn of the 7th and 8th century AD. Existing still in ruins later on, they served as a ready source of building material for the new Arab structures which were built on a much higher level.