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THE ACTIVITIES OF THE POLISH-EGYPTIAN PRESERVATION MISSION AT MARINA EL-ALAMEIN IN 1988

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In 1988, under an agreement between the Egyptian Antiquities Organization, the PCMA and the State Ateliers for Conservation of Cultural Heritage (PKZ), a group of restoration specialists from the Zamość Division of PKZ, started conservation and restoration work at an ancient site discovered near el-Alamein in northern Egypt.¹

Already in the summer and autumn of 1987 most of the discovered monuments were catalogued by a group of conservators from the PCMA and PKZ, this last group headed by architect G. Zamoyski.

The site is located on the coast about 6 km east of el-Alamein. It stretches 1200 m east-west along the sea shore and 800 m inward from the coast. About 30 ancient structures were uncovered on the site.

Preliminary investigations have shown that a settlement had existed here between the 2nd century BC and the 6th century AD. Among the structures uncovered so far are residential houses and public buildings, infrastructure and tombs. The condition of the ancient substance varies greatly. In most cases it is possible to trace fragments of walls, floors and fragmentary architectural details. The state of walls varies depending on the material used (dressed or broken stone, dried brick) and binding agents (limestone and clay mortars).

¹ The group included architects Messrs Jan Radzik, Krzysztof Kamiński, constructor Mr. Andrzej Sawecki, conservator Mrs. Urszula Fidecka and the present writer. Working with us were Egyptian archaeologists: Messrs Mohammed Ashmawy, Abdelaziz el-Sayed el-Shennawy and Ezzat el-Hamahmy.

The full report on preservation works in 1988 and the preliminary results of excavations in 1987-1989 will be published in: *Marina el-Alamein, vol. 1, Archaeological Background and Conservation Problems*, Warsaw 1991 (in press).

In practice, we were limited by our means to a study of just three of the several discovered structures. We selected the following monuments: an underground cistern, a residential house and a monumental tomb. The choice was governed by the relatively good state of preservation, the most advanced stage of archaeological research, as well as the different function and architectural form of these structures.

UNDERGROUND CISTERN (Fig. 1)

The cistern, situated in the southeastern part of the ancient site, consists of a reservoir excavated in the rock and a partly vaulted entrance. It is filled with a deep layer of silt sand and the rocky roof is supported by four extant stone pillars has been damaged by seismic activity.

The main problem for conservation in this case was to find a way to consolidate the rock in order to create conditions for completing research and making the site accessible to visitors. A special system of reinforced concrete binding joists was designed to strengthen the cistern roof; damaged sections of the roof should be underslung

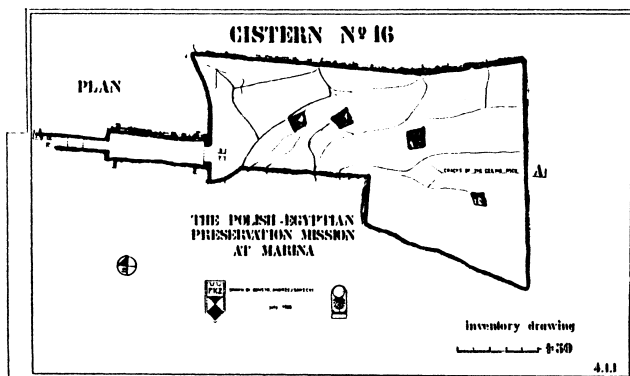


Fig. 1. Plan of the cistern.

to this grid. The whole construction can be hidden under sandy soil such as covers the roof of the cistern already. The conservation program includes reinstallation of several sections of the corridor vaulting, bracing of the pillars and filling gaps with concrete. These measures will stabilize the structure, making future research safe.

HOUSE H 9 (Fig. 2)

House no. 9 is located in the central part of the ancient site. It is rectangular in outline (40 by 24 m), its walls preserved to the height of c. 2 m. The house has been cleared by Egyptian archaeologists, providing a complex of 14 rooms grouped around a central courtyard.

The entrance to the building is on the western side. Four stone steps lead through a door to a vestibule (No. 1). South of it there is a latrine (No. 2) provided with a channel leading to a sedimentation tank located behind the outer wall of the house. On the northern side of the vestibule there is a storage (?) room (No. 3). Next is a kind of corridor (No. 4) leading to the courtyard (No. 5), the central part of which was probably left open.

This court was lined on two sides by a portico and on the third by a vaulted (?) passage flanked by two pilasters. On the northern side, three medium-sized rooms (Nos 6, 7, 8) opened onto the court. In one of them (No. 6) fragments of a ceramic vessel were found forming part of a 'chimney' system.

On the south the court is flanked by a large hall accessible through an opening with traces of a door (No. 9). In the next room (No. 10), which probably had a storage function, the floor was made of horizontally placed amphorae covered with sand. An opening closed by a stone slab gave access to two small storage cellars. Next to hall No. 9 there is a double-track stairway (No. 11) with its lowest two steps preserved. Next to it is a room (No. 12) situated in the

southeastern corner of the house. Facing west, one can enter room No. 13 from the courtyard, while turning east through two openings one can enter the largest room of the house (No. 14). In one of these openings traces of a wooden doorframe were preserved. In the other there were remnants of wooden partitioning. The last space is a longitudinal room accessible from the previous one.

The house was provided with a cistern under the court. Rain-water ran directly from the roof to the cistern. Water from the courtyard served to flush the latrine or was directed to a container disguised as a bench near the entrance.

In the course of exploration many architectural details were found, including column drums, capitals, fragments of a tympanon, cornices and a frieze with triglyphs and metopes. Of the greatest interest were remnants of an *aedicula* – a shallow niche crowned with a conch and a tympanum supported on either side by two small columns (Fig. 3).

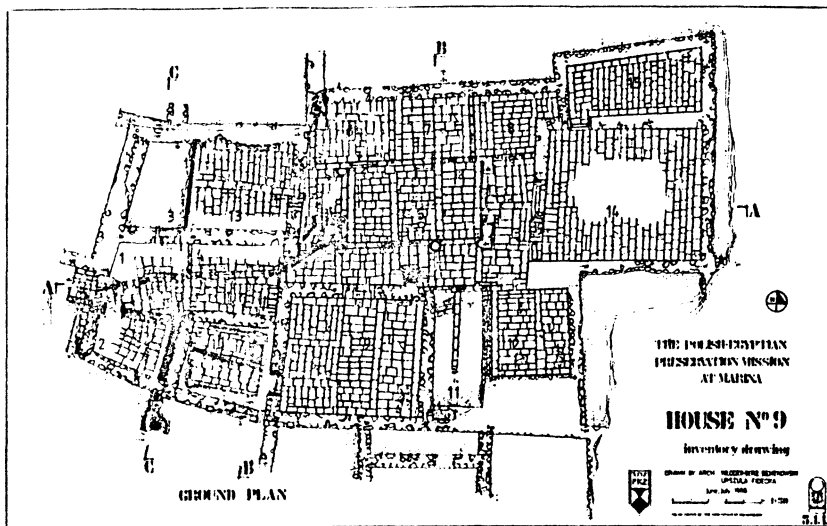


Fig. 2. House H 9, ground plan.

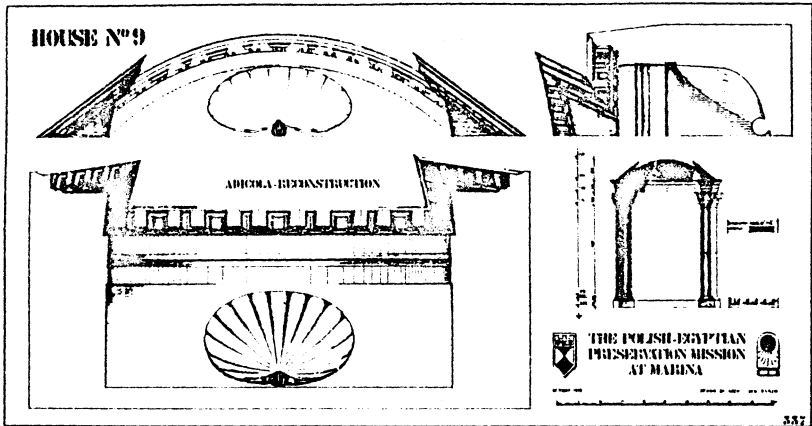


Fig. 3. Reconstruction of the aedicula found in House H 9.

The walls of the building were covered with plaster. Some of the plasterwork was decorated with polychrome panels. Similar colors (blue, yellow, dark red and black) were found on the gypsum stucco of the courtyard columns, as well as on the stuccowork present on the remnants of the aedicula. Waterproof plaster lined the cistern, the latrine channel and the gutter.

Beside preparing a full architectural record of the monument, our aim was to specify the required reconstruction work. In the case of House H 9 we decided to limit such work as much as possible. The structure we were dealing with here was only partly uncovered and its plan could not be traced in its entirety. However, some of the discovered elements needed to be protected and enhanced. Thus, we suggested such conservation work as was necessary to enable a clear and proper exposition of the structure in the future. Beside reinforcing and building up the walls in several places and making the openings more visible, we proposed a full reconstruction of a column from the portico and of the aedicula which could be placed in the wall of room No. 14.

TOMB MONUMENT T 1

The monument discovered in 1987 (see W.A. Daszewski, p. 33ff. in this volume) is situated in the southwestern corner of the site. It consists of a pedestal (containing two loculi) and a column with base and capital. Some 80% of the structure is preserved undamaged. The monument was restored in 1990 (see J. Dobrowolski, p. 44ff. below).

The three monuments discussed above are only a small part of those already discovered. All of them require urgent reconstruction work. Leaving them unprotected will lead to their complete disintegration in the course of just a few years.