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MARINA EL-ALAMEIN

RESTORATION WORK 1997

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The Polish-Egyptian Mission worked from April 3 until the end of May 1997.¹ The conservation effort was directed at houses in the habitation district in the southern part of the ancient town.

The main objective was to complete the restoration work in the H9 house complex, and the conservation of house H9a and of one of the tombs in the western necropolis. The architecture of the H7 and H7a house complex was also largely recorded, with conservation intended to be carried out in the coming seasons.

HOUSES H9 AND H9A

The natural elements, especially water penetrating the walls, have an exceptionally detrimental effect on the condition of the architecture preserved in Marina. Walls tend to disintegrate and need to be rebuilt with new stone-and-lime filling of the core. Obviously, the tops of stone walls suffer the biggest damage, but it is the partly mud-brick superstructure, which comes from the latest stage of rebuilding, that suffers the most, disintegrating completely within a very short period of time.

¹ The Mission headed by Prof. Dr. Stanisław Medeksza included: Dr. Rafał Czerner, Dr. Ewa Łużyniecka, Mr. Zbigniew Solarewicz, architects; Dr. Andrzej Biernacki, archeologist; Dr. Józef Adamowski, constructor. The SCA was represented by Mr. Mohammed Ali Abd el-Razek, Chief Inspector, and inspectors: Messrs Mahmoud Roshdy Embaby, Mamdouh Mahmoud, Rabia Ibrahim and Abd el-Hay Shehata. The Mission is greatly indebted to the SCA authorities in Cairo and Alexandria, and especially to Prof. Dr. Ali Hassan, Secretary General of the SCA, Dr. Abd el-Salem Bakr, Western Delta General Director, and Messrs Ahmed el-Fatah, Hassan Shehata and Mohammed Ali Abd el-Razek from the SCA in Alexandria, for their unfailing help and support.

In consequence, the work in Marina is mostly structural, consisting of treatment of the joints, laying the tops of walls and restoring the colonnades of the house courtyards. It was also necessary to clean the floors, clear the course of ghost walls, study the thresholds and even uncover some of the walls closing off particular rooms. All the walls are cleaned of crumbling mortar, dirt and vegetation in the joints. A new lime mortar with some white cement added is introduced into the cleaned joints, the degree of hardness depending on the condition of the stone. The original binder, a clay-and-lime mortar with fine-grained local sand in it, is easily washed out and it is common for the walls to have to be dismantled down to the first strong mortar, sometimes right down to the bottom, and reconstructed replacing all the eroded blocks with new ones along the way.

The outside walls of houses H9 and H9a (fig. 1) were treated during the season. They were made of broken stone in a clay-and-lime mortar. Also treated were the partition walls made of stone slabs set vertically in one course, using a lime mortar, especially in rooms 2, 3, 9, 10, 12, as well as the walls of the room situated between houses H9 and H9a. Many of these walls required only that the joints be restored and the wall tops laid. But the outer walls necessitated some dismantling. For example, the eastern wall of House H9a was dangerously inclined. It was impossible, however, to take it apart and restore it because of the heavily eroded stones and the big difference of levels between the room spaces that abutted it. Hence, this wall was reinforced with a new facing erected immediately in front of the original one, and joined to it taking advantage of the missing parts in the old structure. The eastern, southern and western walls originally had niches, now mostly destroyed, especially in the upper parts; these niches required restoration of their original layout.

Another objective was the reconstruction and re-erection of columns and door jambs. The condition of the column drums and capitals dispersed in the immediate neighborhood of houses H9 and H9a varied considerably, so it was necessary to cut some of the elements out of new stone, particularly the drums of the full and engaged columns. Only one column, reaching a height of 3 m, could be wholly restored from original fragments. The raising of columns in the portico courtyard of house H9a is intended in the coming season.

The reconstruction of the door jambs presented a similar case. Many new elements had to be prepared. Up till now the door jambs have been restored to a height exceeding the height of walls by one or two courses of stones. In house H9, the main entrance was reconstructed, as well as doors to rooms 2, 9, 10, 13, and to the room connecting house H9 to H9a.

All the walls and architectural elements of the houses were plastered, presumably because of the porosity of the stone which makes it hardly durable in the local climate. Therefore, it was decided to apply a thin layer of plaster on the reconstructed elements, such as the columns, engaged columns, pilasters and capitals, as well as the adjoining walls.

Taking into consideration the exhibition valor of the houses under conservation, it has been assumed as a matter of principle that walls would not exceed a height of more than 1 m, while keeping reconstruction to a minimum and distinguishing new parts by the bond and joints. For the same reason, the surroundings of houses H9 and H9a were landscaped in the form of 4-5 m wide escarpments which are inclined toward the building, creating better visibility for the structure when viewed from the outside. Also, the occupational level outside the entrance to house H9 was restored, giving an idea of the urban space in which the building had functioned.

Architectural analyses provided grounds for dating the origins of building H9 to an earlier period than in the case of house H9a, as well as the room connecting the two houses. Objects found during the season, i.e. 7 well dated coins² and many bronze objects like a round key and a fishing hook, as well as fragments of oil lamps and an amphora sherd with *dipinti*,³ will help in providing a more precise date for the occupation of the houses, a task which is expected to be completed in the next season.

HOUSES 7 AND 7 A

Detailed architectural studies of this complex were carried out over the course of the season. The resulting documentation in 1:50 scale is prerequisite to preparing the conservation project. Many elements of the architectural decoration and functional design, such as the types of thresholds and the roof-support design in one of the rooms (preserved wooden pole settings), were also studied and recorded. In the course of the work, fragments of wall paintings from the first stage of house H7 were discovered, moving the provisional dating of the construction of this complex from the 1st-2nd century AD to the turn of the 1st century BC. Based on the investigations carried out in the necropolis, the discovery of even earlier architectural remains, from the 2nd century BC, should be expected at the site of Marina.⁴

² The coins belonged to Vespasian, Hadrian, divus Constantinus, the sons of Constantine, Theodosius I, and Theodosius II (as kindly identified by Dr. H. Ch. Noeske from the J.W. Goethe Universität, Frankfurt am Main).

³ All the objects were recorded archaeologically by Dr. A.B. Biernacki.

⁴ W.A. Daszewski, Marina el-Alamein. The site of an unknown Graeco-Roman settlement on the Mediterranean coast of Egypt, in: *Marina el-Alamein. Archaeological Background and Conservation Problems. The Polish-Egyptian Preservation Mission at Marina 1988. The Polish Excavation Mission at Marina 1987-1989*, vol. 1, Warsaw 1991, p. 12.