Wojciech Kołątaj

Kom El-Dikka: Preservation Work, 1998

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On account of the ARCE/EAP Conservation Project (USAID Grant no. 263-G-00-00089-00) aimed at the conservation and display of Roman mosaics on Kom el-Dikka, partly uncovered in previous years by the Polish Archaeological Mission, restoration works were carried out continuously from July 1, 1998, through June 30, 1999.[1)]

1) The staff included: Dr. Wojciech Kołątaj, Eng. Arch., Director; Dr. Grzegorz Majcherek, archaeologist; Mrs. Ewa Parandowska, conservator; Dr. Edwin Brock, photographer; Mr. Asam Mradny, civil engineer; Mr. Wiesław Kuczewski, conservator.

The Supreme Council of Antiquities was represented by Messrs. Ahmed Moussa and Abdel A'l Saad Abdel A'la.

Fig. 1. Roman residential quarter. Site of the mosaics before the construction of the shelter (Photo W. Kołątaj)

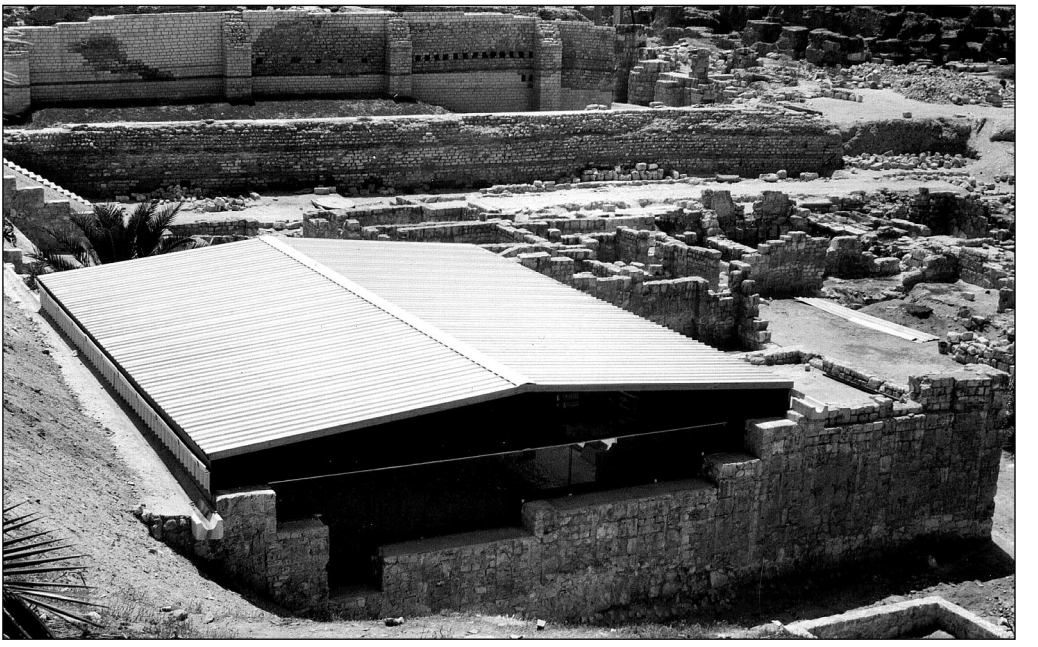

Fig. 2. Roman residential quarter. Site of the mosaics after the construction of the shelter (Photo W. Kołątaj)

THE ROMAN MOSAICS PROJECT

The four mosaics (panels with representations of birds, a rosette, a panther and the *opus sectile* pavement) selected for this project belonged to an Early Roman villa (1st-2nd cent. AD) situated in the Roman residential quarter, in the southeastern corner of the site (close to Saphia Zaghloul street) (*Fig. 1, 2*). The mosaics, which display different subjects and techniques of execution, and which testify to subsequent phases of occupation, are located c. 4.5 m above sea level. They were first excavated in the 1970s, protected provisionally and covered.[2] The present project entailed the conservation of the mosaics, partial rebuilding of enclosing walls, and erection of a specially designed shelter over the mosaics (15 x 12 m) complete with an access path to the building and information displays for the public.

The present work provided an opportunity for a thorough study of the full archaeological context of the mosaics and a clarification of the villa plan and of the relations between neighboring structures (*Fig. 3*). Moreover, the *triclinium* (main hall, 7.5 x 6 m) was cleared in its full extent. It was sumptuously decorated with a multicolored *opus sectile* pavement that, although fragmentarily preserved, could be reconstructed theoretically. The design was purely geometrical and the imprints of marble tiles left in the bedding gave an idea of the pattern.

In room α-6, immediately below the black-and-white geometrical mosaic (this mosaic was lifted and transferred to the stores), yet another panel was found. This well preserved mosaic is composed of a central element surrounded by a wide border that features a geometric design made of overlapping black and white squares and circles. The central element (1.5 x 1.5 m) is decorated with an acanthus scroll framing a small panel (0.5 x 0.5 m) with a panther represented. The panel is made of extremely fine tesserae (2-3 mm).

The new discoveries imposed substantial changes of the original shelter design. The shelter, which had to be extended to the west and south, was designed as a kind of glass case inserted among existing walls of the Byzantine buildings B and F. The gable roof of the shelter was covered with beige-colored corrugated iron sheets, thermally insulated with styrofoam. On the south, the trusses of the gabled roof rest on a reinforced concrete beam supported by four reinforced concrete pillars (measuring 0.50 x 0.25 x 5.1 m) and on the north on pillars and a steel beam. The supporting structure is entirely hidden behind the Byzantine walls.

A walkway, suspended a meter above the mosaic floors, permits viewing of the exposition. The area around the shelter was re-arranged. New slopes were landscaped and a modern water supply system was installed permitting proper care of the greenery that will be introduced in the next season. The ancient sewage system running along street R 4 and two ancient wells located to the east were cleared and successfully adapted for drainage purposes. Along the southern limits of the site (close to the Fire Brigade station) a screening wall has been built. This wall, some 42 m long and 3 m high, protects the access path leading from the Theater to the shelter from constant littering.

[2] Cf. M. Rodziewicz, "Un quartier d'habitation gréco-romain à Kôm el-Dikka", *ET* IX (1976), 169-210.

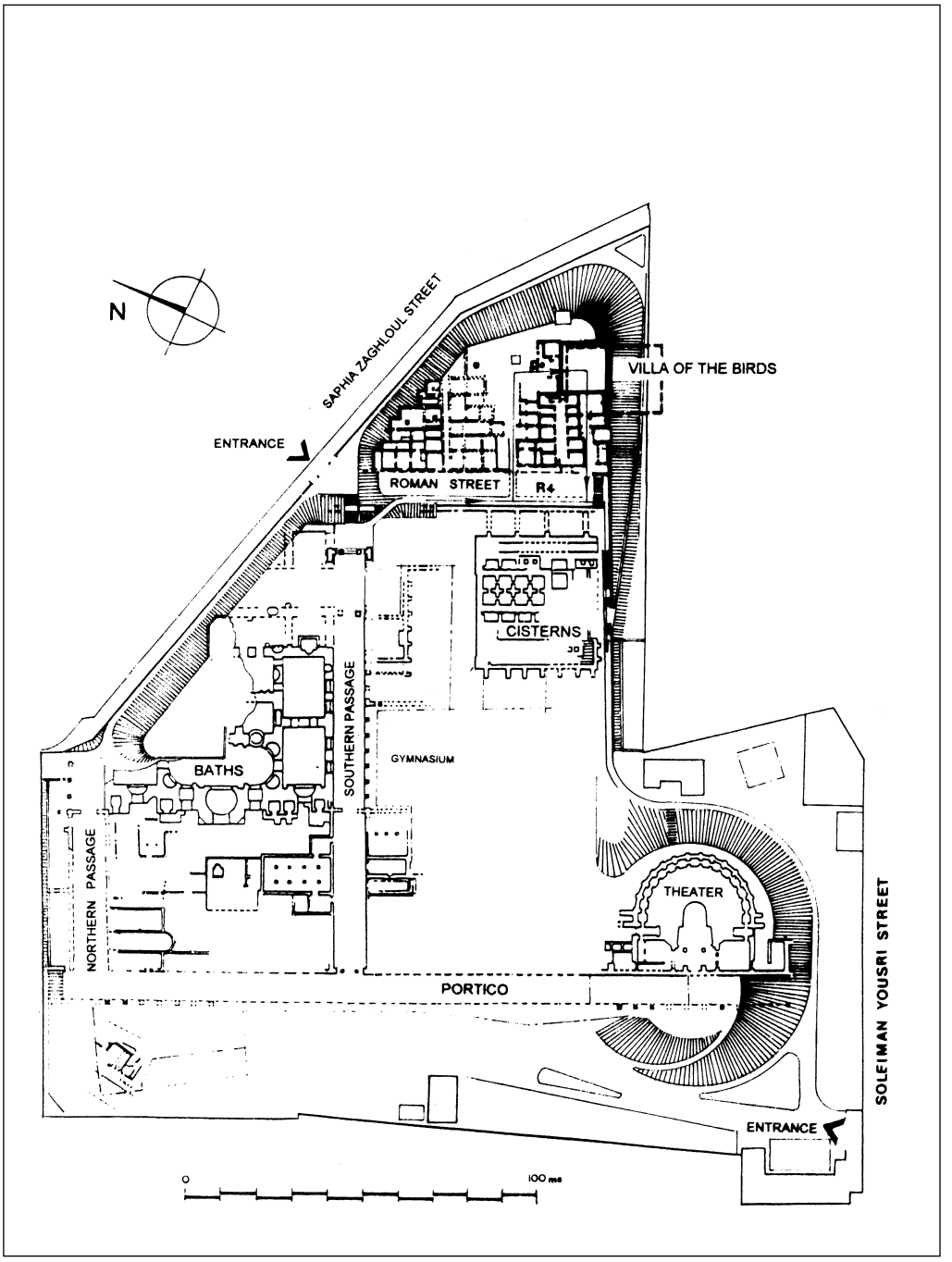

Fig. 3. General plan of the site with areas of preservation work in 1998-1999 (Drawing W. Kołątaj)

OTHER CONSERVATION ACTIVITIES

Landscaping operations along Saphia Zaghloul Street required new steps to be constructed from the main gate on this side to the southern passage of the baths, which will constitute the main tourist path of the Archaeological Park to be created soon at the site (*Fig. 4*). A section of the foundation wall of the main bath entrance

Fig. 4. Southern passage of the baths (Photo W. Kołątaj)

Fig. 5. Eastern edge (entrance) to the southern passage of the baths (Photo W. Kołątaj)

Fig. 6. Anastylosis of a marble column from the southern gymnasium (Photo W. Kołątaj)

from street R 4 was reconstructed (*Fig. 5*). The anastylosis of a marble column at the corner of the southern gymnasium was completed (*Fig. 6*). Conservation work in the cisterns has nearly been completed. The northern facade was accorded top priority. A badly damaged and eroded fragment of the original wall (c. 15 m^2) was carefully dismantled and reassembled following conservation treatment of particular blocks. The reconstruction of missing parts of the facade was also initiated. A new foundation wall was prepared along the entire facade (c. 23 m long), and several courses in the wall were restored (c. 18 m^2). Serious delays in the supply of building materials precluded the completion of some of these operations (*Fig. 7*). A long-term operation for removing c. 15,000 m^3 of earth and debris overlying the Theater Portico has left the area open to archaeological excavations, which have begun in the southern end. The discovery of yet another fallen column of the portico prompted the decision to execute new bases for the columns with a view to completing the planned reconstruction. In preparation for the anastylosis of the Portico in the next season, two bases were cut of Helwan limestone.

Fig. 7. Cistern. The northern facade during reconstruction works (Photo W. Kołątaj)