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Kom El-Dikka: Excavations, 1998

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KOM EL-DIKKA

EXCAVATIONS, 1998/99

Grzegorz Majcherek

The excavation strategy in the 1998/99 season (from October 1, 1998, until June 30, 1999) was governed to a degree by the requirements of the Kom el-Dikka Preservation Project.¹⁾ Top priority was given to landscaping and accompanying archaeological work, essential to prepare the ground for completing the first stage of this Project, which entails the opening of the southern part of the site to the public.

Evacuation of soil and debris from various areas of the site was one of the most urgent issues. Some 8000 m³ of modern (mostly 19th century) accumulation were removed from the Theater Portico area. Intensive landscaping was also carried out on the site of the newly built entrance gate from Saphia Zaghloul street, from where some 1400 m³ of soil were removed. An additional 1000 m³ of soil newly excavated from the trenches was again removed from the mound in the central part of the site.

The evacuation of these deposits was made possible thanks to substantial financial support from the Polish Government and assistance from the Governorate of Alexandria.

¹⁾ The team headed by Dr. Grzegorz Majcherek included: Mrs. Renata Kucharczyk, Mrs. Elżbieta Kołosowska, archaeologists; Mrs. Małgorzata Łukowska, architect; Mr. Maciej Warchoń, architect-conservator; Mrs. Małgorzata Redlak, Islamologist; Ms Teresa Witkowska, archaeologist; Ms Anetta Lyżwa and Ms Joanna Szewczyk, students of archaeology; Mr. Waldemar Jerke, photographer of the Polish Center. Mr. Ahmed Mousa participated again as representative of the Supreme Council of Antiquities.

The Mission gratefully acknowledges its debt to Prof. Dr. Gaballa Ali Gaballa, Secretary General of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, and to all the SCA staff in Alexandria for their cooperation and friendly support, which is essential to the successful outcome of our work.

We are also much indebted to the Governor of Alexandria, Mr. Mohammed Abdel Salam Mahgoub, for his invaluable help in accomplishing the evacuation of earth from the site.

ISLAMIC POTTERY RECORDING PROJECT

In addition to the excavations, extensive research has been carried out on the medieval glazed pottery and associate finds from Kom el-Dikka, this in preparation for

a comprehensive publication of the collection. The recording work concentrated on finishing the group of Early Islamic pottery finds (Omayyad through Fatimid).

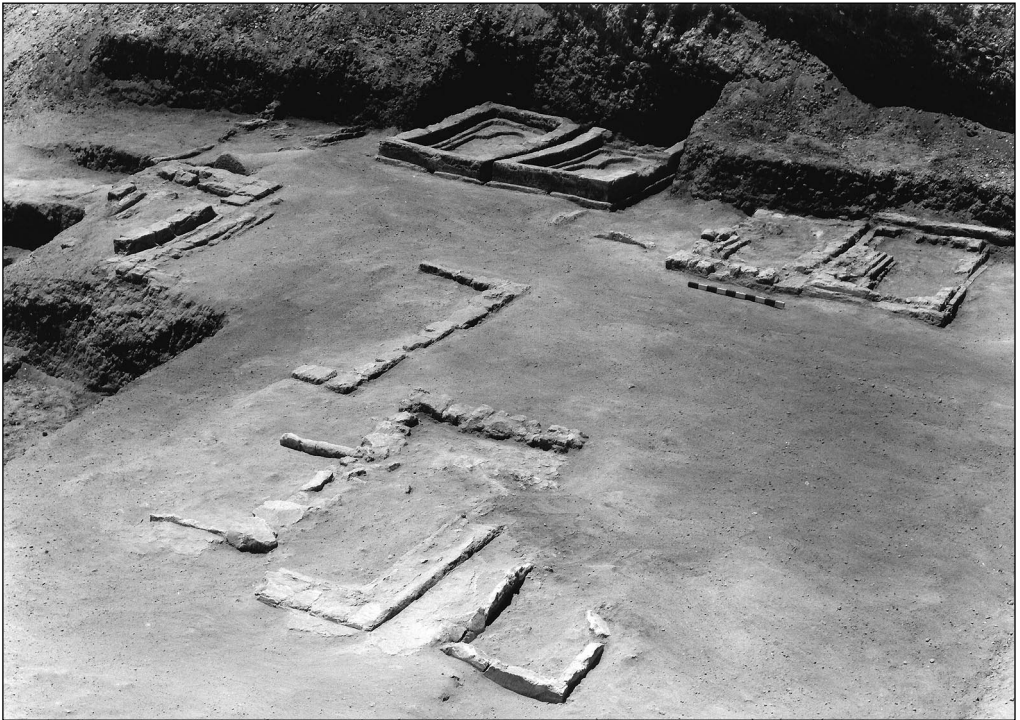
SECTOR MX

MOSLEM CEMETERIES

Further progress in the evacuation of soil and debris deposits from the area of the so-called Theater Portico enabled us to step up excavations in this sector. Last year, the western end of a passage belonging to the Late Roman Bath (sector CV) had been

explored.²⁾ This season our efforts were concentrated in sector MX, in an area measuring some 15 x 20 m and located further to the south, in the immediate vicinity of the Theater.

It has been ascertained already that this area was occupied in the medieval period

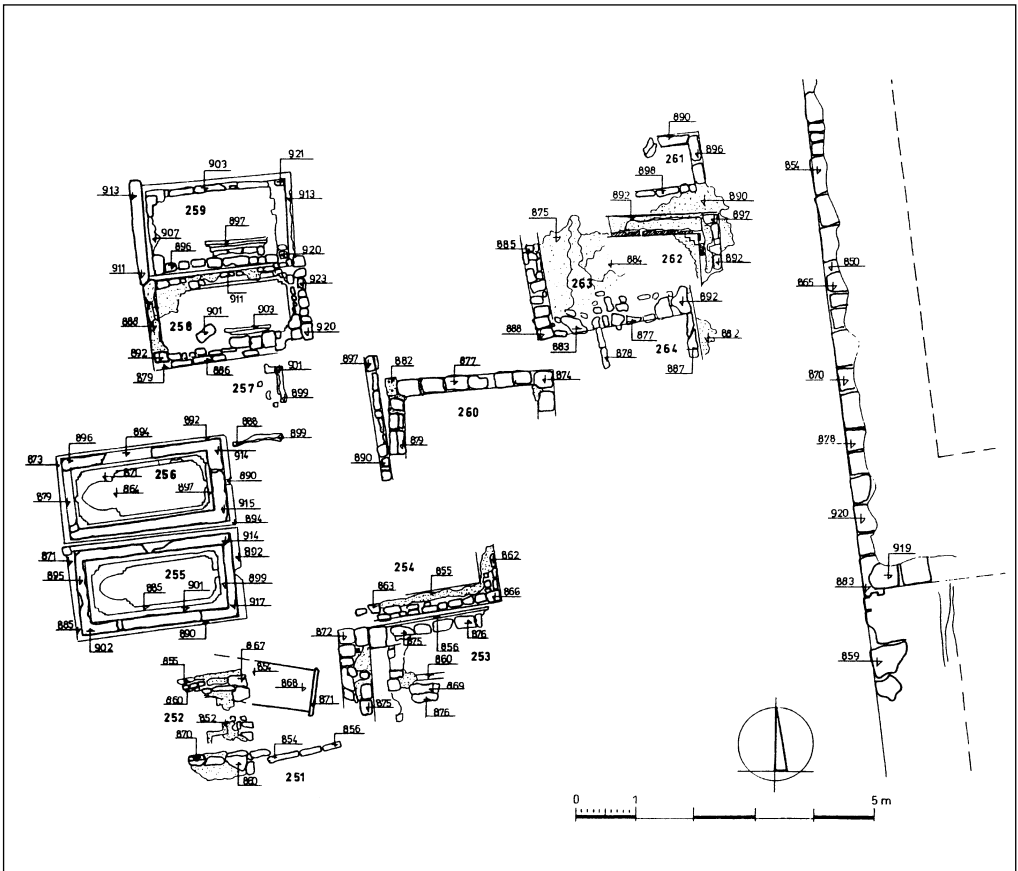


*Fig. 1. Sector MX. General view of the Upper Necropolis looking west
(Photo W. Jerke)*

²⁾ G. Majcherek, *PAM X, Reports 1998 (1999)*, 29-40

by Moslem cemeteries. Graves of the upper Islamic necropolis cleared immediately below the present topsoil (c. 9.20-8.50 m above sea level) were found to be quite well preserved (*Fig. 1*). In keeping with Muslim tradition, the tombs were oriented SW-NE, the bodies laid with heads facing the *qibla*. Altogether some 12 tombs were cleared within the trench limits (*Fig. 2*). Typologically, they fall into two categories that have already been recognized elsewhere on the site.³⁾ One type, undoubtedly-

ly earlier as other structures are found apparently overlying tombs of this kind, consisted of simple open boxes made of slabs mounted on end (nos. M 251, M 259, M 261). Tombs of the second type were built of small limestone blocks and plastered (nos. M 253, M 258, M 260, M 264). In both cases, slabs formed the covering, either flat or gable-roofed, of the stone burial cysts. The latter usually accommodated multiple burials, ranging from two to four bodies in a single grave (*Fig. 3*).



*Fig. 2. Sector MX. Upper Necropolis
(Drawing M. Łukowska)*

³⁾ W. Kubiak, "Les fouilles polonaises à Kom el-Dick en 1963 et 1964", *BSAA* 42 (1967), 47-80; L. Dąbrowski, "Two Arab Necropoles discovered at Kom el-Dikka, Alexandria", *ETI* (1966), 171-180.



*Fig. 3. Sector MX. Tomb M 260, burial chamber
(Photo W. Jerke)*



*Fig. 4. Sector MX. Tombs M 255 and M 256, looking west
(Photo W. Jerke)*

Two tombs (nos. M 255 and M 256) located in the western part of the excavation trench were exceptionally well preserved (Fig. 4). The aboveground structures measured 1.60 x 2.40 m. The smooth mortar lining them was decorated with incised geometrical design. Floors inside the tombs were also plastered with lime mortar. Each had a small run-off opening for rain water pierced through the eastern wall.

Examples of simple internment were also recorded between the built tombs. Bodies were buried in shallow trenches without any additional, protective structures.

Exploration of the overlying layers produced the usual broad spectrum of finds, including several fragments of glazed lamps, coins, and quite a number of sherds of Medieval ceramics representing various production centers, both Egyptian and foreign. Wares originating from the Eastern Mediterranean (Cypriot and Aegean), as well as fragments of vessels produced in Tunisia and Sicily were recorded. The Egyptian ceramic industry was represented mostly by Fatimid and Ayyubid pottery, as well as a variety of Mamluk Slip Painted and Sgraff wares. The layers accompanying the burials yielded a surprisingly small number of finds: a few dozen locally produced plain wares, a small piece of an Arabic funerary inscription, and several fragments of *aeolipiles* dated mostly to the Fatimid period.

A level of the Lower Necropolis was cleared immediately below the layer of debris, ashes and rubble (c. 8.10-6.85 m above sea level). Ten graves dated to the 8th-9th centuries AD were explored (M 270-279). Burials belonging to this phase of the cemetery were largely dug

into the pavement of the portico, destroying much of it in the process.

THEATER PORTICO

A large section (c. 13 m) of the massive Portico backwall was cleared close to the eastern edge of the trench. It is in surprisingly good condition, rising in places to a height of some 2.50 m above the level of the pavement. The bond of this wall comprises small irregular stones interrupted with triple courses of brick tiles at intervals, all set in ashy lime mortar, with an ashlar casing (similarly as in certain parts of the Theater).

Two levels of the portico paving were cleared, both found to be seriously damaged by later Medieval burials. The upper one made of smaller slabs showed signs of prolonged use and frequent patching with the help of smaller irregular slabs or rubble bonded in lime mortar. The lower level of the pavement appeared more regular with better matching slabs measuring some 0.50 x 0.70 m. The presence of two superimposed pavements indicates a major rebuilding of the entire portico, an operation that is also evidenced by some clearly discernible signs of restructuring in the Portico stylobate. In the initial phase, columns had stood on low pedestals lined with marble tiles. In the phase that followed, the intercolumnar spaces were filled with two additional courses of large blocks corresponding to the raised paving. It is tempting to associate this event with a major rebuilding of the Theater that followed the earthquake in AD 535, though this hypothesis should be tested against more reliable dating evidence.

A column of gray Aswan granite was found lying close to its original position in the Portico, extending to the west under

the tombs M 252 and M 255 (*cf. Fig. 1*). There is a distinct possibility that other columns can still be found *sub situ*.

EARLY ROMAN HOUSE

Following the removal of the Medieval strata, the team focused on exploring the Early Roman layers sealed below the paving. A small section in the southern part of this sector had been excavated in 1994 with encouraging results.⁴⁾ Surprisingly well preserved remains of what appears to be a large Early Roman house were cleared at the time. The existing ruins comprised a large sumptuously decorated hall (*Fig. 5:3*). The interior decoration comprised pairs of engaged columns placed along the walls and similar twin engaged-columns posted in the corners opposite the entrance, giving the overall impression of a pseudo-peristyle arrangement. The floor of the hall was decorated with a mosaic-like pavement made of multicolored marble tiles arranged in a geometrical pattern giving the general effect of an U+T design, suggestive of a *tricladium*. The adjacent courtyard apparently served some religious purposes, as evidenced by several *ex-vota* found there.

Present investigations led to the complete clearing of four rooms and a courtyard. The western fragment of the building unearthed this season served essentially household purposes. All the explored rooms were rather small in size. Their western ends had been either destroyed by the portico stylobate or extend further west, well beyond the extent of the present excavations.

Immediately to the north of a well preserved staircase (*cf. Fig. 5:4*), a small latrine

was excavated (*cf. Fig. 5:7*). Its northern wall, where the entrance was located, is almost entirely destroyed save for a clearly visible threshold and door-sockets. The settling tank could not be excavated in its entirety for safety reasons, but it obviously extends well under the staircase. A big vertical pipe of pierced monolithic blocks was installed in the corner of the latrine. It was obviously used to drain sewage water from the upper floor sanitary installations.

The adjoining room no. 8 (2.35 x 3.00 m) apparently served as a lavatory. A small water tank (1.75 x 1.1 m) was cleared next to its northern wall. The walls of the tank were lined with bricks on the inside and coated with waterproof mortar. The bottom of the tank was raised some 0.90 m above the floor level to allow for unimpeded water flow. In the northeastern corner of the room, there was a small outlet with terracotta pipes that drained waste water to the underground settling tank of the latrine located under room no. 7.

The layer found directly on the floor surface produced very little datable finds. The limited ceramic material from this layer represents mainly local vessels, usually dated to the 3rd-4th century AD. The entire floor of the room was originally paved with small multicolored marble tiles, of which some fragments were still preserved close to the latrine entrance. A similar pavement was also discovered in the bigger next-door room no. 10 (*Fig. 5:10*). This room has not been fully excavated as yet, hence neither its dimensions nor function may be determined.

The entire western wing was separated from the rest of the building by a wall preserved to a considerable height of about

⁴⁾ G. Majcherek, *PAM VI, Reports 1994* (1995), 11-20

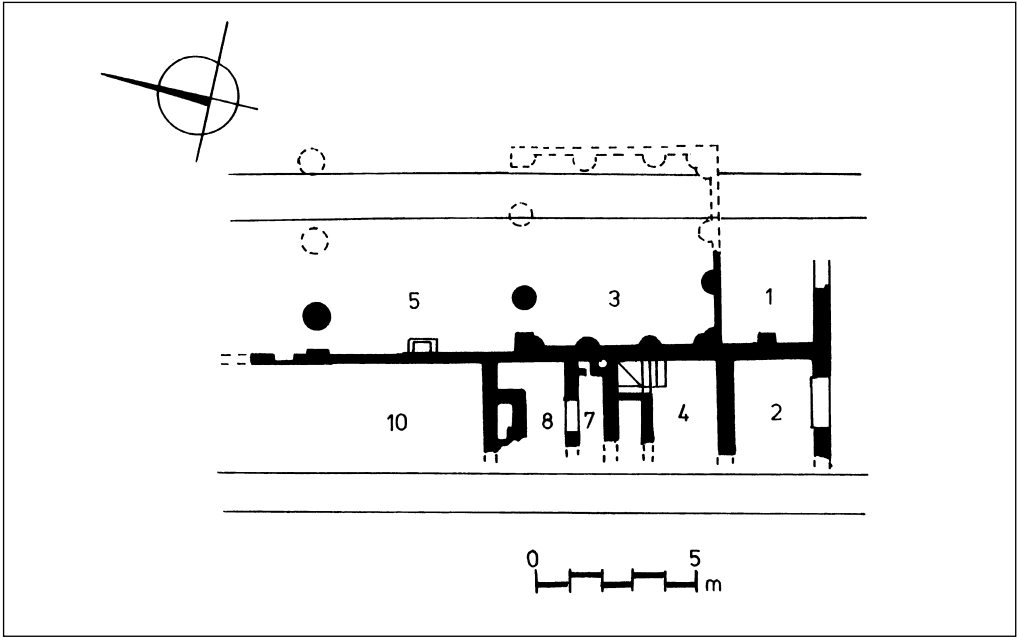


Fig. 5. Sector MX. Early Roman house
(Drawing G. Majcherek)

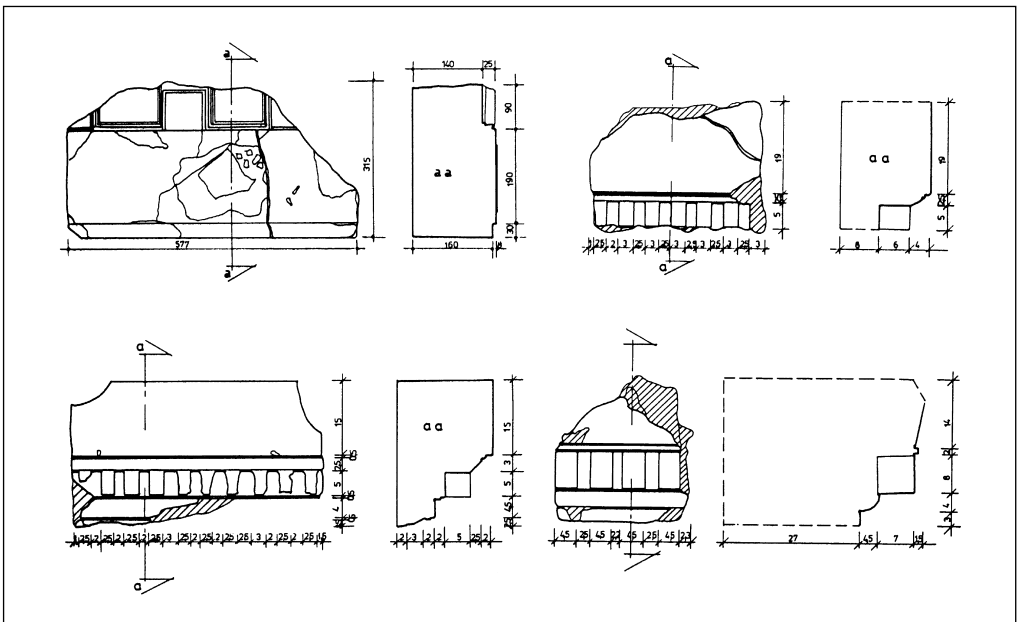


Fig. 6. Sector MX. Architectural elements found in the Early Roman house
(Drawing M. Łukowska)

2 m. Much to our surprise, no doorways whatsoever were found, thus excluding any direct communication between these two wings.

The excavation was continued north of the *triclinium*, in the area of the supposed courtyard. At a distance of some 5.80 m from the entrance to the former, a much weathered limestone column (Dia. 0.70 m) was found, standing some 0.80 m away from the wall. The upper part of the column, which rises almost 2 m above the floor level, was damaged by a later burial of the Lower Necropolis. At this stage of the research, it is difficult to be certain whether it marked the entrance to another large room (no. 11) or was the corner of a peristyled courtyard. The floor in the room was paved with multicolored pieces of marble tiles. A fragmentary stucco statue was found in the courtyard next to the western wall and close to a small pedestal unearthed in 1994.

Almost all of the loci excavated this season were filled with a large accumulation of architectural debris. Careful exploration of the uncovered remains brought to light numerous fragments of limestone cornices and capitals, stuccowork and other elements that hint at the architectural decoration of the building (*Fig. 6*). Some of the fallen blocks retained their original painted plastering. The cornices are decorated with dentils or with alternately flat-grooved and hollow square modillions.

Such cornice types of distinct Alexandrian tradition continue from Ptolemaic to Roman times and are usually dated to the 1st century BC-1st century AD.⁵⁾

The building chronology is still far from being precise. Finds trapped under the debris provided little, if any evidence; only a dozen or so stray sherds were recorded, usually belonging to the 3rd-century horizon. The final abandonment of the building may be dated tentatively to the end of the 3rd century AD. In the next century, the ruins were leveled and the Theater and Portico constructed in their place.

Despite neither overall dimensions nor detailed plan being available, some cautious suggestions can be made regarding the building. Until now the peristyle house has been widely believed to be the most common feature of the domestic architecture in Alexandria, although this view was based mainly on the analyses of scarce ancient sources and funerary architecture. On the other hand, a typical peristyle arrangement of the courtyard is rather rare in Egyptian domestic architecture of this period. The few known buildings erected on such a plan come from Tell Atrib and Marina el-Alamein⁶⁾. The much more widespread and common *oikos* or pseudo-peristyle layouts have many parallels, also in Alexandria, e.g. the tombs of Mustapha Pasha and other Early Roman houses uncovered at Kom el-Dikka.⁷⁾

⁵⁾ P. Pensabene, *Elementi architettonici di Alessandria e di altri siti egiziani* (Rome 1993).

⁶⁾ K. Michałowski, "Les fouilles polonaises à Tell Atrib", *ASAE* LVIII (1958), 235-240; W. A. Daszewski, "Témoignage de l'urbanisme de la côté méditerranéenne de l'Égypte hellénistique et romaine à la lumière des fouilles de Marina el-Alamein", *BSFE* 132 (1995), 11-29, figs. 8-9; S. Medeksza, *PAM X, Reports 1998* (1999), 51-62.

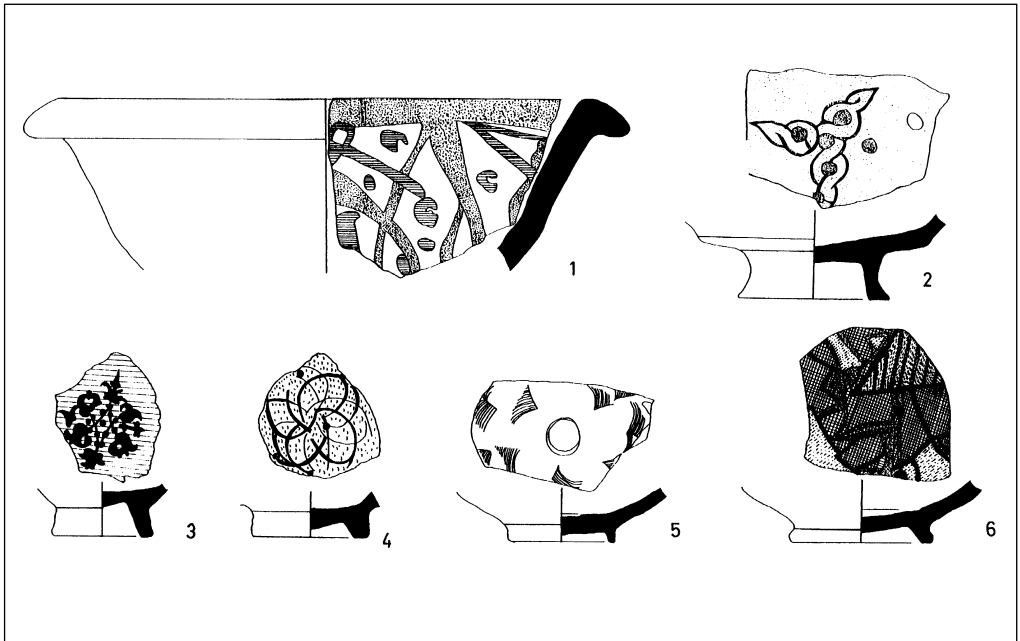
⁷⁾ G. Majcherek, *PAM VII, Reports 1995* (1996), 13-22; G. Majcherek, "Notes on Alexandrian habitat: Roman and Byzantine houses from Kom el-Dikka", *TOIIOI*, vol. 5/1 (1995), 133-150

SECTOR G

Excavation in this area adjoining the Late Roman bath complex covered some 120 m² (c. 17 x 7 m). The area appeared to be seriously disturbed by later trenching. Five rather poorly preserved graves of the Upper Arab necropolis were found some 13.00-12.60 m above sea level. The tombs represented two different types of structures, similar to those previously uncovered in other areas of the site: the earlier one comprised tombs shaped as open cases made of slabs mounted on end (G 81-G 83), while the more developed one was built of small blocks lined with plaster (G 80, G 84).

The associated layers yielded a typical assortment of finds: fragments of cooking pots, frying pans, bowls and dishes,

quite a variety of tableware and lead-glazed oil lamps. Mamluk wares of different types form the largest group (*Fig. 7:4*). Some associated sherds of rather rare Syro-Egyptian Underglaze Black Painted Ware were also observed (*Fig. 7:3*). They were accompanied by less numerous finds of North African (Hafsid) pottery (*Fig. 7:1*) and examples of Cypriot Wares (*Fig. 7:2*). A very fine example of Siculo-Maghrebi protomajolica decorated with a representation of a horseman was also found (*Fig. 7:6*). Moreover, a few sherds of Chinese celadon were also recorded (*Fig. 7:5*). The evidence as a whole points to the 12th-13th centuries AD as the most probable date for the cemetery.



*Fig. 7. Sector G. Selection of Medieval pottery
(Drawing J. Szewczyk)*

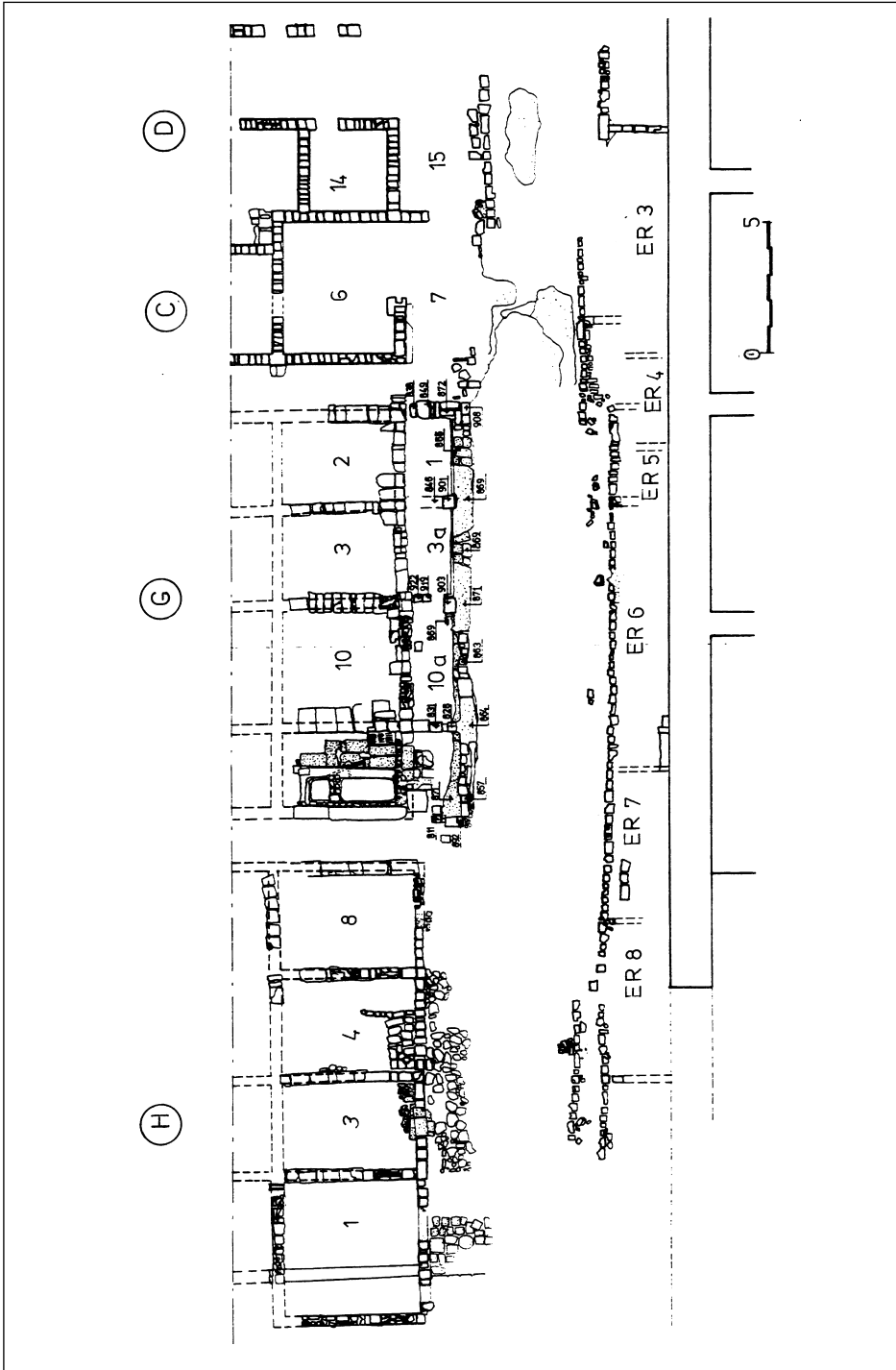


Fig. 8. Street R 4. Late Roman annexes
(Drawing M. Lukowska)

STREET R 4

The primary goal of excavations on Street R4 was to explore the remnants of original accumulations still left on the street and to ascertain its structural and chronological development. The whole area adjoining the street was originally occupied by buildings serving both domestic and commercial purposes. The earlier excavation of this area has provided evidence for continuous occupation within the boundaries of buildings planned in the Early Roman period, although with numerous alter-

ations.⁸⁾ It was only towards the end of Antiquity that substantial changes in layout occurred. All the excavated buildings (C, D, E, G, and H) began serving workshop needs as well. This transformation was caused not only by a continuous evolution of functional needs, but also because of the ruination that left structures further back in the quarter uninhabitable. A reaction to the gradual shrinking of living space is the expansion of buildings onto the only available free space – the street. Beginning with the early 6th century AD, a row of single units takes up the western side of Street R 4 along the cistern wall, causing the street to be narrowed to about 6.50-6.70 m. In the 6th-7th century AD this street width was reduced even further, as a result of more structures being erected in front of houses H and G. Street R4 was turned into a narrow alley (c. 3.50 m wide) lined with a row of shops and workshops on both sides – the forerunner of the medieval *suq*.

Clearing some 40 m of the street surface we were able to recognize several consecutive Late Roman street surfaces. The lowermost, dated to the 6th century AD was paved with dolomite slabs, the flagging being identical with that discovered by Adriani further to the north, under the present-day cinema Amir, and the section already identified along the facade of House H.⁹⁾ The paved surface, however, did not cover the entire original width of the street (some 9 m); in several areas it stopped at the edge of the later structures built on both sides of the road. A few such structures, identified as *ergasteria*, were



Fig. 9. Street R4. The Late Roman annexes along House G looking north (Photo W. Jerke)

⁸⁾ G. Majcherek, *PAM I, Reports 1988-1989* (1990), 75-83; id., *PAM II, Reports 1990* (1991), 19-24; id., *PAM III, Reports 1991* (1992), 5-14; id., *PAM IV, Reports 1992* (1993), 11-22.

⁹⁾ G. Majcherek, *PAM IV, Reports 1992* (1993), 11-22.

previously discovered at the southern end of the street along the huge Late Roman wall separating the cisterns from the residential quarter.¹⁰ This season, a whole row of similar structures was cleared at a distance of some 40 m (*Fig. 8*). The structures are preserved at the foundation level, the foundations being as a rule single rows of assorted, irregular stones. Most of the units (ER 4-ER 8) share the same depth of about 2.00-2.50 m, while their length varies from 3.50 to 6.00 m. The floors were invariably made of tamped earth. No additional installations of any kind were uncovered in these rooms, hence their precise function remains unclear. The structures seem to have been built as a single complex, although, the southern units show clear signs of rebuilding.

Another row of small annexes lining the street was uncovered along the facade of House G. They, too, were in fairly poor condition. In almost every case the lowermost blocks of the foundations are all that has survived (*Fig. 9*). The foundation wall along the street is made of exceptionally big blocks, some of them 0.60-0.70 m wide and 1.1 m long. The whole complex

is made up of four units of roughly similar size (c. 3.50 x 2.00 m). Room G 10a is larger, its length reaching 4.50 m and corresponding in size with the adjacent room G 10. The annexes are equipped with separate entrances (only thresholds survive) corresponding to the doorways of respective rooms in building G.

A limited sequence of floors of the later 6th and early 7th century AD was accumulated on top of an uniform soil deposit. In unit G 10a, a fairly obscure installation was cleared, comprising a brick-made substructure used presumably for some sort of water installation.

Excavations have to be completed for more detailed phasing of the excavated structures to be carried out.

A gradual encroachment of private architecture onto the streets is a process that is fairly typical of Late Antiquity. This phenomenon was apparently connected with the decline of the classic urban substance, prompted by a slow and constant evolution of architectural planning frequently effected by the destruction and abandoning of whole city quarters.¹¹

¹⁰ M. Rodziewicz, *Les habitations romaines tardives d'Alexandrie*, Alexandrie III (Warsaw 1984), 246-251.

¹¹ P.M. Fraser, "Byzantine Alexandria, decline and fall", *BSAA* 45 (1993), 91-105.