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Kom El-Dikka: Excavations, 1997

Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean 11, 29-39

2000

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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KOM EL-DIKKA

EXCAVATIONS, 1997/98

Grzegorz Majcherek

In 1997/98, as every year in view of the long-term character of the project, the excavations were spread out all over the area, continuing already advanced research in different sectors of the site.¹ Apart from ongoing archaeological investigations integrally connected with the conservation program in the area of the cisterns (see report on the preservation work by W. Kołtątaj in this volume), the main objectives of this year's campaign were twofold:

- *Excavation of parts of the Medieval cemeteries on the western extremes of the site (sector CV) and in the corner of the Bath gymnasium (sector Q).*
- *Continued exploration of the complex of Early Roman villas discovered in the space between the Late Roman bath and the cisterns (sector F).*

Limited archaeological research was also conducted in the southeastern part of the Residential Quarter, east of street R4 (sector W1). This work was carried out as part of a separate Mosaics Conservation Project funded by an USAID-Egyptian Antiquities Project Grant.

¹ The archaeological excavations continued uninterruptedly over a period from October 1997 to July 30, 1998. The team headed by Dr. Grzegorz Majcherek included: Mmes Iwona Zych, Elżbieta Kołosowska, Renata Kucharczyk, Agnieszka Talar and Mr. Mikołaj Budzanowski, archaeologists; Mrs. Małgorzata Redlak, Islamologist; Misses Ewa Wiewiórka, Katarzyna Wodarska, students of archaeology. Mr. Waldemar Jerke, Polish Center photographer, handled the photographic documentation efficiently as usual.

The mission would like to acknowledge gratefully the friendly support of Prof. Dr. Gaballa Ali Gaballa, Secretary General of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, and the invaluable help of Mr. Ahmed Abdel Fatah, Director General of the Alexandrian Sites and Museums. Our thanks also go to Mr. Abdel Salam Bakr, General Director of the SCA Egyptian Antiquities Sector, for his unfailing efforts in clearing administrative problems. We are also much indebted to the Governorate of Alexandria for extensive help in the evacuation of earth from the site. Last but not least, we owe sincere thanks to Mr. Ahmed Moussa, site inspector, whose assistance and friendly cooperation has made our task possible to complete.

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Last year, the Late Dr. Władysław Kubiak, Professor of Islamic archaeology at Warsaw University, undertook an extensive research project, the goal of which was to prepare a comprehensive publication of all the Medieval pottery finds from the

Kom el-Dikka site. It was not given to him to see this enormous task completed, yet the vast experience and profound knowledge of Islamic ceramics which he shared with us will certainly help us to continue this project.

SECTOR CV

Considerable progress in the evacuation of soil and debris deposits from the western part of the site, particularly from the vicinity of the so-called Theater Portico, prompted our decision to undertake excavations in this area. The work in this sector was made possible thanks to financial support from the Polish Government.

An area measuring some 30 x 13m (c. 400 m²) was marked for exploration. It covers the western end of a passage belonging to the Late Roman bath, including presumably an entrance to the complex.²

Immediately below the present topsoil (c. 11.50 m above sea level) tombs of the Islamic Upper Necropolis were cleared. All the surviving tombs were located in the northern part of the excavated area; the southern part appears to have been destroyed by modern activities during the prolonged occupation of this area by an Egyptian army unit. The tombs were oriented SW-NE, following the traditional Muslim rite of the body being buried facing the *qibla*. Altogether some twenty tombs were recorded within the trench confines. They represent two different types. One group features a stone burial chamber roofed horizontally with slabs; the other group is a more de-

veloped type with the burial chamber also built of small limestone blocks and plastered on the inside, but with the cover constructed as a gabled roof. In one case (CV 103), the eastern part of the tomb was additionally equipped with a sort of vertical shaft, apparently designed to accommodate multiple burials. In the western end of the excavation trench, two large rectangular structures were cleared. They were intended most probably as a means to enclose a number of neighboring graves.

Exploration of the corresponding and superimposed layers yielded a large number of finds. Apparently, what had been a burial ground, was turned into a dump in the late 12th century. Small finds include fragments of inscribed glass weights, lamps, glass vessels, small bronze items etc. Of particular interest is an animal bone inscribed with magic incantations (Reg. 4420). An extensive collection of ceramics representing production centers from practically all over the Mediterranean area was also recorded during the excavations. Beside examples from the Eastern Mediterranean (Cypriot and Zeuxippus wares), sherds of Italian and Siculo-Maghrebi proto-majolicas were also discovered. Wares originating from

² For previous excavations nearby, cf. W. Kubiak, *Les fouilles polonaises à Kom el-Dick en 1963 et 1964*, *Bulletin de la Société Archéologique d'Alexandrie*, 42 (1967), pp. 47-80; G. Majcherek, *PAM V, Reports 1993* (1994), pp. 11-21.

Tunisia and Spain were also quite frequent. Egyptian-made pottery is represented by practically all the known types and decoration techniques. Noteworthy are the numerous examples of conspicuous, color, Fayyumi-type pottery. Apart from quite frequent monochromatic vessels, fragments of Fatimid Lustre Ware, and a variety of Mamluk Sgraff and Slip Painted wares were also recorded. One should mention numerous examples of semi-artistic pottery, presumably locally made, although tangible proof is lacking. The rich repertoire of imported ceramics provides direct evidence for Alexandria's overseas trade and the prominent part played by the city in the commercial exchange of the Middle Ages. The finds from the Islamic strata have never been thoroughly studied; it is only now that the research has been undertaken in a broader archaeological context.³

Immediately below the layer of debris, ashes and kiln refuse (c. 0.80-1.20 m thick) a level of the Middle Necropolis appeared (c. 10.50 m above sea level). Graves belonging to this phase of the cemetery were located mostly along the northern and southern border of the trench. The central area, following an E-W axis was left free, apparently serving as a small internal passage. A fragment of the passage (c. 1.20 m wide), its surface reinforced with crushed bricks and gravel, was cleared at the eastern edge of the excavation area.

Middle Necropolis graves are of a different kind entirely. Usually, they are built as relatively large, rectangular structures made of bigger, tightly fitting limestone blocks.

Floors inside the structures were paved with gravel or small pebbles set in lime mortar. Bodies were buried in shallow trenches with no additional, protective structures. In two cases, inscribed stele giving the names of the deceased along with the usual Quranic verses were found. Neighboring graves seem to belong to one family as suggested by the names: Isma'il Ibn Ahmed (Fig. 1) and Musahir(d) Ibn Ahmed. Both steles can be safely dated to the first half of the 3rd century AH (9th century AD).



Fig. 1. Inscribed Arabic stele
(Photo W. Jerke)

³ See preliminary study of imported wares, W. Kubiak, Overseas pottery trade of Medieval Alexandria, *Folia Orientalia*, X (1969), pp. 5-30.

Finds from corresponding layers represented a wide range of artifacts of both Byzantine and Early Islamic date. Apart from sherds of Fayyumi-type pottery and Tulunid Luster wares, some fragments of the Early Islamic lead-glazed splashed ware usually designated as "Coptic" (8th-9th century AD) were found. Late Ro-

man, apparently residual pottery was also abundant. The archaeological evidence as a whole supports the previously established chronology of this phase of the cemetery.

Graves of the Middle Necropolis were placed directly on top of the relics of the Late Roman structures bordering



Fig. 2. General view of the paved passage. Sector CV
(Photo W. Jerke)

the passage. Apparently, these buildings were already in ruin at this time. The observation was further corroborated during the exploration of the Lower Necropolis. Burials belonging to this phase of the cemetery were largely dug into the pavement or latest surface of the passage, destroying much of it in the process. Altogether some 30 burials were recorded. Graves of the Lower Necropolis were more evenly spaced, covering the whole extent of the excavation trench. Again, they fall into two distinct groups: stone-cased burials and simple interments. Skeletal remains were rather poorly preserved, owing to the detrimental soil conditions: humidity, high concentration of salts and biological degradation.

Burials of the Lower Necropolis were dug into what appears to have been the latest surface of the passage, a layer of earth reinforced with crushed potsherds and gravel. The said level corresponds with the thresholds of Building No. 12, excavated in 1986/87 along the southern edge of the passage.

The entire western end of the south passage of the Bath was cleared, revealing a partly preserved pavement and dismantled front wall of adjacent buildings (Fig. 2).

The pavement was found to be seriously damaged by later burials. Only its southern part, made of large limestone flagstones, has survived. At the western extreme of the trench, remains of a monumental gate leading to the Late Roman Bath complex were discovered. The entrance was flanked by two Doric columns (c. 0.85 m in diameter) standing 3.5 m apart (Fig. 3). The southern one was preserved to a level of approximately

1.00 m above the foundation wall, while of the northern one only a single drum has survived. Both columns stood on a massive foundation wall c. 1.35 m thick, built of large blocks in a manner similar to that previously investigated in front of the Theater. The preserved passage pavement, however, was laid on a markedly higher level.

At a later period the Doric columns may have been used as a substructure for other columns; but this assumption needs further evidence. The said gateway, built along the passage axis, was apparently one of the monumental entrances to the bath complex. Therefore, it is expected that a similarly located gate will be found at the beginning of the northern passage.



Fig. 3. Remains of the east gate of the Bath. Sector CV (Photo W. Jerke)

SECTOR Q

Excavation in this area, which adjoins sector F on the west, covered some 120 m² (c. 17 x 7 m). Graves of the Islamic Upper Necropolis, cleared some 0.60-0.80 m below the topsoil, were found to be in relatively good condition. Altogether some 13 tombs were explored, falling into two typologically different groups, similar to those previously recognized in sector CV.

Some of the graves cleared in the central part of the trench were apparently surrounded by enclosure walls, of which only the lowermost courses have been preserved. In the southern part of the excavation area, scanty remains of a small mosque were found. Actually, only the lime floor of a mihrab niche pointing southeast has survived, together with a small section of abutting wall. There is nothing to suggest the extent of the mosque. The *mihrab* was built over an earlier tomb, Q 40, a clear indication of the stratigraphical and typological development of the cemetery.

The corresponding layers yielded the usual broad range of assorted finds, similar to that recorded in sector CV. Apart from numerous fragments of common wares: cooking pots, frying pans, bowls and dishes, quite a number of various table wares and lead-glazed oil lamps was also found. Quantitatively speaking, Mamluk Sgraff and Slip Painted wares form the largest group. They were accompanied by less frequent finds of North African (Hafsid) pottery and examples of Siculo-Maghrebi proto-majolica. The evidence as a whole points to the 12th-13th century AD as the most probable date for the cemetery.

Exploration reached down to the Early Islamic and Byzantine levels. Immediately below the northernmost graves, a marble column was found. It had apparently toppled from a nearby portico. Given the relatively high level, on which the fallen column lies, as well as archaeological evidence from the layers trapped underneath, it should be assumed that the catastrophe occurred sometime in the end of the 8th century AD. It is tempting to connect it with an earthquake recorded in AD 792. The column (broken into two) was approximately 4.65 m high, i.e., considerably smaller than the Aswan granite columns forming the northern wing of the gymnasium. Obviously, the architectural arrangement of the eastern wing must have followed a different plan. Columns were apparently placed on top of an elevated stylobate (c. 1.55 m high) to make up for the difference in levels. A small section of the foundation wall structured of large blocks (c. 1.30 m wide) was uncovered nearby. The large trench of a ghost wall continued in a southerly direction for another 6 m. The fill was explored down to a level of some 2.50 m without finding any traces of the original structure. It appears that the wall was completely dismantled, save for another small section at the southern end of the excavation trench.

The results of excavation in this area have confirmed our earlier surmises, based mostly on calculations and a study of the overall design. The southern gymnasium of the Late Roman bath was certainly surrounded with porticoes on three sides at least.⁴

⁴ For the initial hypothesis, cf. W. Kołataj, *Imperial Baths at Kom el-Dikka, Alexandrie VI* (Warsaw 1992), pp. 169-170.

RESIDENTIAL QUARTER (SECTOR F)

Excavations in this sector, initiated in 1994, have been continuing over the past few seasons and have brought to light examples of residential architecture of the 1st-3rd century AD. The relatively well-preserved structures constitute a valuable source for studies on the development of domestic architecture in Early Roman Alexandria. The houses represent a rather typical layout consisting of a pseudo-peristyle courtyard surrounded by a series of rooms of different function.

A partly preserved oikos excavated in 1995 revealed a fine, colored geometric mosaic, while an opus sectile floor of different color marble tiles decorated yet another room opening off the courtyard. The series of rooms siding the street served domestic purposes. Shops were also located in this wing. How sumptuous the decoration of the villa had been is proven by the collection of statuary pieces found over the course of the work.⁵

HOUSE FA

Work was concentrated on the exploration of some 3rd century AD accumulations left in the eastern wing of the house (Fig. 4).

In Room 15, the said stratum was cleared down to the original floor level. A solid structure, measuring 1.30 x 0.90 m, made of extremely large blocks

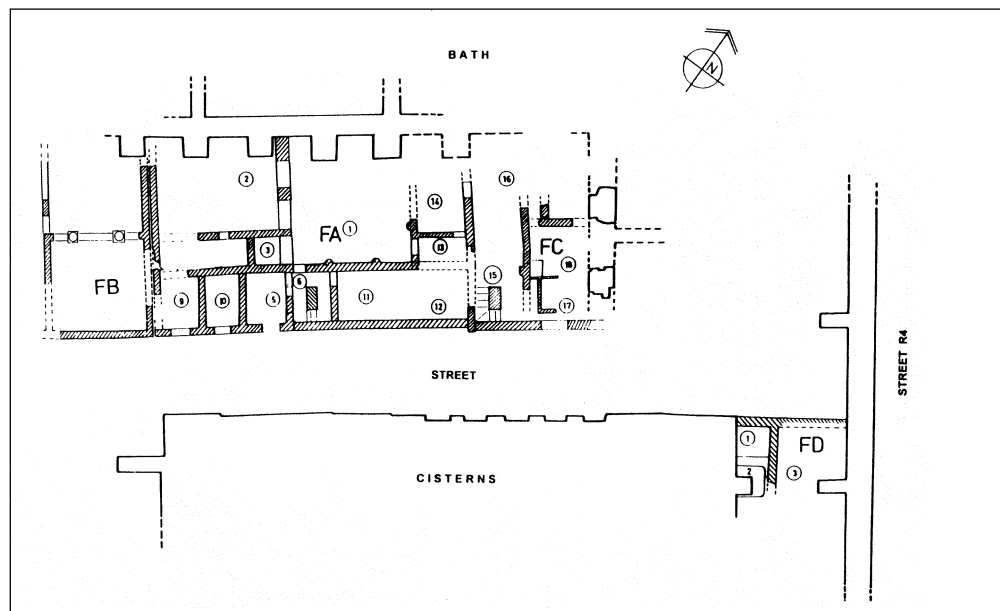


Fig. 4. Early Roman houses. Residential quarter
(Drawing Z. Solarewicz and G. Majcherek)

⁵ For the results of earlier campaigns, see G. Majcherek, *PAM VI, Reports 1994 (1995)*, pp. 11-20; *PAM VII, Reports 1995 (1996)*, pp.13-22; *PAM VIII, Reports 1996 (1997)*, pp. 17-31; *PAM IX, Reports 1997 (1998)*, pp. 23-37.

in the center of the room, apparently served as a central pier supporting a staircase. A similar structure was previously excavated in Room 6.

In the subsequent phase of occupation, the staircase was dismantled and its relics covered with a new floor laid on a much higher level. Another floor from the same period was found on a similar level in Room 19. This floor, however, was paved with fragments of different color marble slabs. Along the wall dividing rooms 18 and 15, a sewage channel, running south and opening into a side-street, was excavated.

East of the staircase, in what appears to have been originally a small compartment under the stairs, later used

as a dumping place, a large pottery deposit was uncovered. It proved to be particularly significant for the chronology, as it was found sealed by a later floor. A careful exploration of this deposit produced an extensive and diverse assemblage of pottery of Early Roman date, many of the items being whole or easy to mend.

Amphorae were chiefly represented by examples of Mareotic vessels. Nile silt amphorae of the Egloff 172 class with the typical ringed-toe were also present. Imported containers included examples of Cretan Amphora 2 (Fig. 6). Tripolitanian I and early examples of Palestinian bag-shaped vessels. Several pieces of North African origin were also identified. Common wares came in almost every shape and size: cooking pots, frying pans, jugs, etc., all of Egyptian manufacture. Tableware, although definitely less frequent, included some ESA cups (EAA f. 45, 50), and Aegean-made bowls with roulette and barbotine decoration. Of greatest interest, however, is a large group of Egyptian-made bowls (Fig. 5), closely imitating some Cypriot Sigillata shapes,

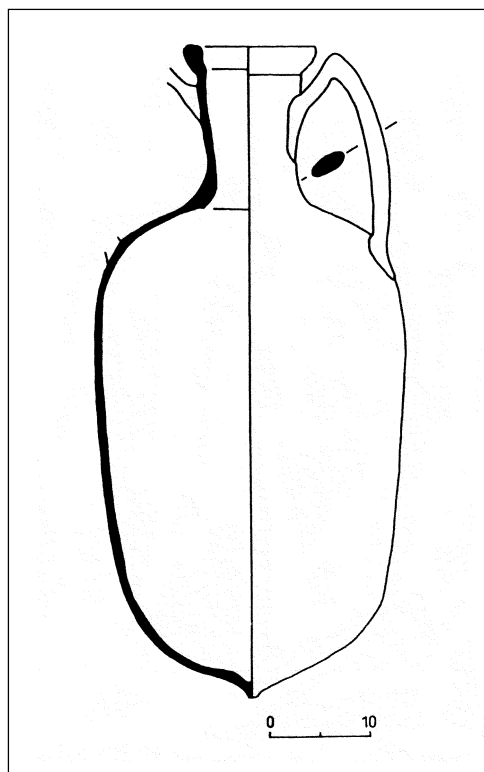


Fig. 5. Cretan amphora – AC 2
(Drawing G. Majcherek)

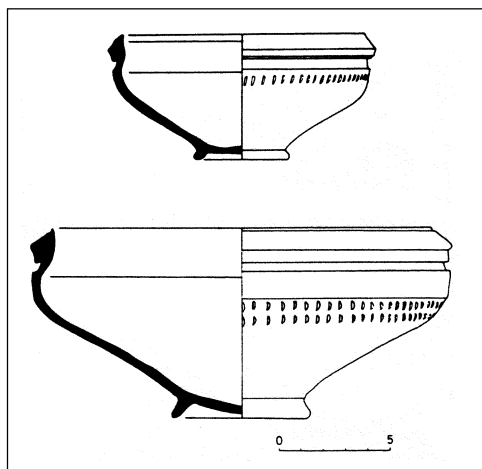


Fig. 6. Egyptian imitations of Cypriot Sigillata ware
(Drawing G. Majcherek)

particularly form P 40.⁶ A dozen or so complete and fragmentary lamps were also collected, including an intact example of the *Firmalampen* class bearing the inscription: TANAIΣ. A few pottery sherds at the very top of the deposit may be of a later date, but all the recorded items can be dated safely to the late 1st-

early 2nd century AD. This well-dated deposit provides a *terminus post quem* for the second phase of the occupation of House FA. Naturally, it remains to be decided whether the destruction of the staircase should be interpreted as evidence of major destruction or simply remodeling.

BUILDING FB

The excavations in this area were resumed at the point where they had been halted in 1994. Double walls running N-S, discovered at that time, led us then to believe that another building (designated as FB) would probably be found extending further to the west.

As is common in the sector, the upper layers in the newly excavated area consisted of a thick, homogenous leveling layer made up mostly of ashes and debris from the last rebuilding of the Bath. Directly underneath, some Late Roman structures were discovered. In the northern part of the trench there was a section of sewage channel running north. It had certainly belonged to the same series of installations previously discovered in other parts of the sector.

In the southern part of the trench, close to the Cisterns, a large lime kiln was uncovered. Part of the kiln had been visible on the surface cleared already in the previous campaigns. The relatively well preserved structure was built of red-bricks encased in small stones. It appears to have been constructed directly on top of the front wall of Building FB. The reducing chamber is roughly circular, measuring some 1.20 m in diameter. The walls survive to a height of 1.90-2.00 m.

The interior surface of the reducing chamber is coated with a black vitreous formation testifying to high temperatures inside it. The chamber was filled with deposition strata consisting mostly of brick detritus, broken marble pieces, stones and kiln waste. A roughly sketched portrait was found on one of the broken marble slabs. The floor of the chamber was covered with a thick deposit of lime. The top of the kiln has not been preserved, but it was built presumably in the shape of a dome or beehive. A transitional tunnel opening to the west, and covered by a radial brick vault, is approximately 1.10 m in length. Kiln waste was found in the stoking area in front of the structure and also littering the entire surrounding surface. This area was apparently used for lime slaking in the 4th-5th century AD as evidenced by the pottery finds. The structure thus can be associated with extensive building activity nearby, most probably connected with the building of the cisterns.

Another structure was cleared in the northern part of the excavation trench: a diagonal wall made of large blocks and reused elements of architectural decoration, including marble column drums, consoles and cornices. The

⁶ J.W. Hayes, *Sigillata Cipriota*, [in:] *Enciclopedia dell'Arte Antica, Atlante delle forme ceramiche*, vol. II (Roma 1986), pp. 80-91, pls XVIII-XXII.

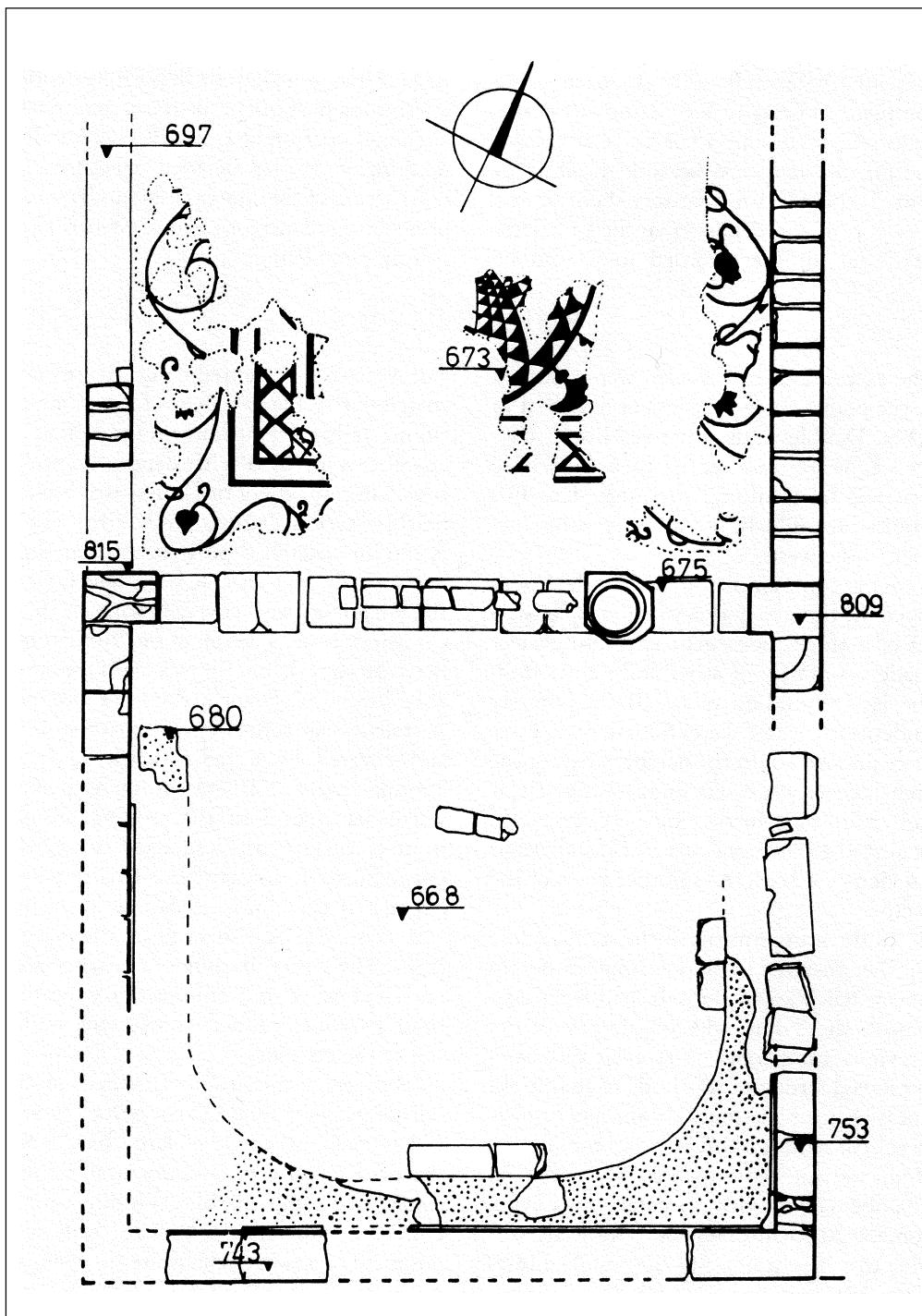


Fig. 7. General plan of Building FB
(Drawing M. Budzanowski and G. Majcherek)

wall was designed as a sort of enclosure in an apparent attempt to contain large deposits of ashes originating from the bath *praefurnium*. This attempt, however, proved futile, as indicated by a thick layer of ashes and kiln refuse superimposed on the wall. It seems obvious that in the last phase of the operation of the bath, this area served as a dumping ground for ashes evacuated from the subterranean service area.

Immediately below the said structure, blocks of a fallen wall were cleared. The undisturbed position of the blocks indicated that this area somehow escaped the stone robbers' attention in Late Antiquity and Medieval times. After careful exploration of the whole area, the Roman occupation level was cleared, revealing a rather unusual building consisting of two large rooms (Fig. 7). The southern one, almost square (c. 5.50 x 5.80 m), had served most probably as a courtyard. The room was not accessible from the street as proved by a continuous wall preserved c. 0.60 m above the floor level. The floor of the courtyard was unusual: a pebble pavement laid along the walls, slightly curving at the corners, and an earth floor in the central part. The northern room, which was entered from the courtyard through an entrance flanked by two granite columns between pilasters, closely recalls the typical *prosta* layout. Both columns (c. 3.80 m high) were found broken nearby. The lower fragment of the eastern one was found *sub situ*, still partly

resting on its base. The flanking pilasters were topped with Corinthian capitals worked in plaster. The room was accessible not only from the courtyard, but also from the west, through a series of doors leading from another as yet unexcavated room.

The floor of this room was covered with a fragmentarily preserved *opus tessellatum* mosaic featuring black-and-white floral and geometric patterns. In the center, there is a large circular emblema inserted in a rectangle decorated with *peltae* motifs in the corners. The finds from the destruction layer included the head of a marble lion statue, several fragments of lamps, as well as sherds of tableware and commercial amphorae. The bulk of the pottery indicates a date in the late 3rd-early 4th century as the most plausible date for the ruining of this building.

It is possible that the discovered structures were designed as a kind of monumental entrance to the nearby Subterranean Building, which was an extensive underground complex of chambers and corridors, adapted at a later date to be used as the cellars of the Late Roman Imperial bath erected on the site. The presence of such a monumental entrance throws completely new light on the function of the Subterranean Building. The layout excludes the structure having served as a kind of enormous stores, although what exactly it did serve remains unclear.