

Łukaszewicz, Adam

Ostraca and architecture at Kom el-Dikka

The Journal of Juristic Papyrology 39, 121-131

2009

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.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Adam Łukaszewicz

OSTRACA AND ARCHITECTURE AT KOM EL-DIKKA

THE EXCAVATIONS AT KOM EL-DIKKA in Alexandria by the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology (University of Warsaw) in cooperation with the Egyptian archaeological authorities have uncovered since 1960 a complex of Roman baths of late fourth century AD with adjacent cisterns, porticoes and auditoria, a small Late Roman theatre, villas of the second–third century AD and a Byzantine residential area.¹

Many fragments of amphorae were found in the region of the baths and cisterns. Some of them bear red-painted dipinti: intricate and enigmatic signs, words difficult to decipher, or Christian symbols (a monogrammatic cross and the *XMI* symbol). Some inscriptions on the amphorae and stamps on mud stoppers have preserved the number of measures of liquid.

Ostraca are surprisingly rare among so many ancient potsherds. However, a few inscribed sherds have been found in the area. Two small

¹ I wish to express my gratitude to Wojciech KOŁATAJ, the expert of Kom el-Dikka, who kindly provided his documentation and co-operated during the preparation of this paper. For a brief history of the excavations at Kom el-Dikka, see contributions by Zsolt KISS and Grzegorz MAJCHEREK in *Seventy Years of Polish Archaeology in Egypt*, Warsaw 2007, pp. 117–134. Cf. Judith MCKENZIE, *The Architecture of Alexandria and Egypt 300 BC–AD 700*, New Haven – London 2007, pp. 207–220 and *passim*. See also T. DERDA *et alii* (eds.), *Alexandria. Auditoria of Kom el-Dikka* [= *JJP Supplement* 7], Warsaw 2007.



Fig. 1. O. Alex. inv. w2s/352I (photo by J. Kucy).
Archives of the Research Centre for Mediterranean Archeology,
Polish Academy of Sciences

ostraca have been uncovered close to the northern external wall of the cisterns, which were supplying the baths with water. These ostraca bear a few words written in the same, fourth-century hand. The texts contain the name of Diocletian. They read as follows:²

O. Alex. inv. w2s/352I (*SB* XVI 12819)

Δ

Διοκλητιανός

δι(ὰ) Διοσκόρου

4 ὄνος α κε(ράμια) ε

² A. ŁUKASZEWICZ, 'Nouveaux textes documentaires d'Alexandrie', [in:] *Atti del XVII Congresso Internazionale di Papirologia* III, Napoli 1984, pp. 879–884.

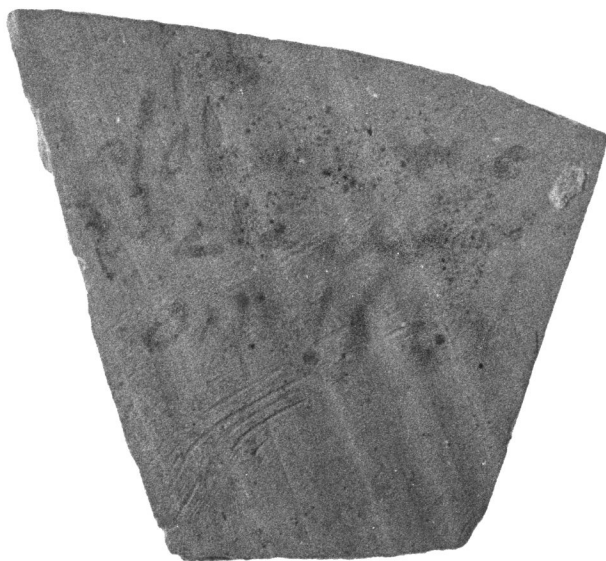


Fig. 2. O. Alex. inv. w2s/3522 (photo by J. Kucy).
Archives of the Research Centre for Mediterranean Archeology,
Polish Academy of Sciences

O. Alex. inv. w2s/3522 (SB XVI 12820)

Δ

Διοκλητιανός

δι(ἀ) Διδύμου

4 ὄν[ο]ι β κε(ράμια) ι

The two texts begin with Δ| Διοκλητιανός. The lack of L for ἔτους and the name standing in nominative exclude a standard explanation of these two lines as the regnal year of the emperor. However, the name Διοκλητιανός has not been attested so far for persons other than the emperor himself. In documents of Alexandrian provenance, the interpretation of *delta* (Δ) as the designation of one of the city's five quarters seems obvious. For that reason also the name Διοκλητιανός should probably be understood as a topographic designation.

In Egypt the name of Diocletian was given to various buildings and places. Hence, several hypotheses are possible. According to Theophanes,³ one of the Alexandrian baths bore the name of the emperor; they were reconstructed under Marcian, probably after an earthquake. Although the huge thermal complex at Kom el-Dikka remains anonymous, it cannot be interpreted as the baths of Diocletian, owing to two major objections:

- 1) They were built much later than the reign of Diocletian;
- 2) Kom el-Dikka is not in the 'Delta'. The Alexandrian quarter of Delta was situated much farther to the north-east, probably near the seashore.

Dioscorus and Didymus are donkey-drivers, *ὄνηλάται*. According to the first text one donkey carries five *κεράμια*, in the other one two donkeys carry ten *κεράμια*. *Κεράμια* appear in Greek texts from Egypt as a standard measure of wine equal to about eighteen litres. Thus, five *κεράμια* are equal to some ninety litres, which is an exact equivalent of a normal load of a donkey.

Such texts⁴ most probably served as receipts which a donkey-driver was supposed to show the wine-storekeeper as a proof of the correctness of the delivery. Due to the temporary significance of such receipts, it is likely that they were discarded in an immediate vicinity of the repository.

Therefore, it can be concluded that in the fourth century (the name of Diocletian provides only a *terminus post quem*) a wine depot must have been located in the area of the baths at Kom el-Dikka. The first idea of the present author was that this storehouse was directly connected with the baths (built *c.* AD 370), where such shops must have existed. However, a wine-cellar certainly could have functioned independently even before the erection of the baths, that is between *c.* AD 300 and 370. It seems that this was a big cellar which had a branch (or a customer) in the Alexandrian Delta, probably in the baths of Diocletian.

³ Theophanes, *Chronograph*. 1, ed. C. DE BOOR, Lipsiae 1883, 107.4.

⁴ See numerous examples in *O. Mich.* 1.

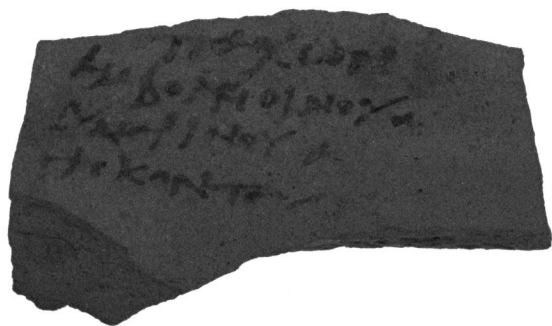


Fig. 3. O. Alex. inv. w1/2204 (photo by J. Kucy).
Archives of the Research Centre for Mediterranean Archeology,
Polish Academy of Sciences

Another small ostrakon concerning wine has been found in the area of the baths. It is dated to the fourth century:⁵

Παχών
ἐμβολή οἴνου α
δ(ιὰ) Μαρίνου α
4 [πεν]τήκοντα /

Pachon. Load of wine 1. Through Marinos 1. Fifty.

This ostrakon concerns two deliveries: one load of wine and an unspecified delivery. The total of fifty could perhaps refer to the amount paid in drachmas (with the sign for drachmas omitted); in this case the almost horizontal stroke would mean an obol. Otherwise, we may have here a re-

⁵ A. ŁUKASZEWICZ, 'An ostrakon from Alexandria', [in:] *50 Years of Polish Excavations in Egypt and the Near East. Acts of the Symposium at the Warsaw University 1986*, Varsovie 1992, pp. 215–216.

ference to a total of amphoras, and the stroke was intended to close the note (a stroke for *γίνεται* or *γίνονται* would be out of place since it usually precedes a numeral).

In the earlier Roman period the excavated area in the heart of Alexandria was a residential quarter of opulent villas. Those residences were partly destroyed and abandoned at the end of the third century AD (in the times of Aurelian or Diocletian – the emperors who stormed the city). Only as late as the second half of the fourth century was the area re-arranged and then it received a set of public buildings: the theatre and the baths.

The baths comprise two different superimposed structures: the superstructure in red brick and the vaulted cellars. When the baths were functioning, between the late fourth and seventh centuries, the vaulted substructures were containing furnaces and served as a storeroom for the fuel (reed and straw).

Wojciech Kołataj has demonstrated in his publication on the baths of Kom el-Dikka that a large part of the extant vaulted structures had existed before baths were constructed. In this monograph he has written:⁶

(...) the substructure was larger than the heated part of the baths built above it. The complex of underground cellars and corridors joined the course of the footings of other parts of the baths, but clearly differed in the material used, the wall bonds and structure (Plan v). In the time intervening between the construction of the substructure and the beginning of the construction of the superstructure (...) earlier structure had been in use, which after some adaptations became the subterranean part of the later bath.

The vaulted structure originally stood (perhaps only in part) above the ground level as a low stone building with thick walls and vaults. At that time there were no furnaces and the whole design of the building had little to do with typical service areas of the baths. The function of this primitive vaulted building remains unknown. Later, at the beginning of the second half of the fourth century, the original solid stone vaulted

⁶ W. KOŁATAJ, *Imperial Baths at Kom el-Dikka* [= *Alexandrie VI*], Varsovie 1992, p. 82; see phot. 49 and 50, plan XIII.

ALEXANDRIA
KOM EL-DIKKA

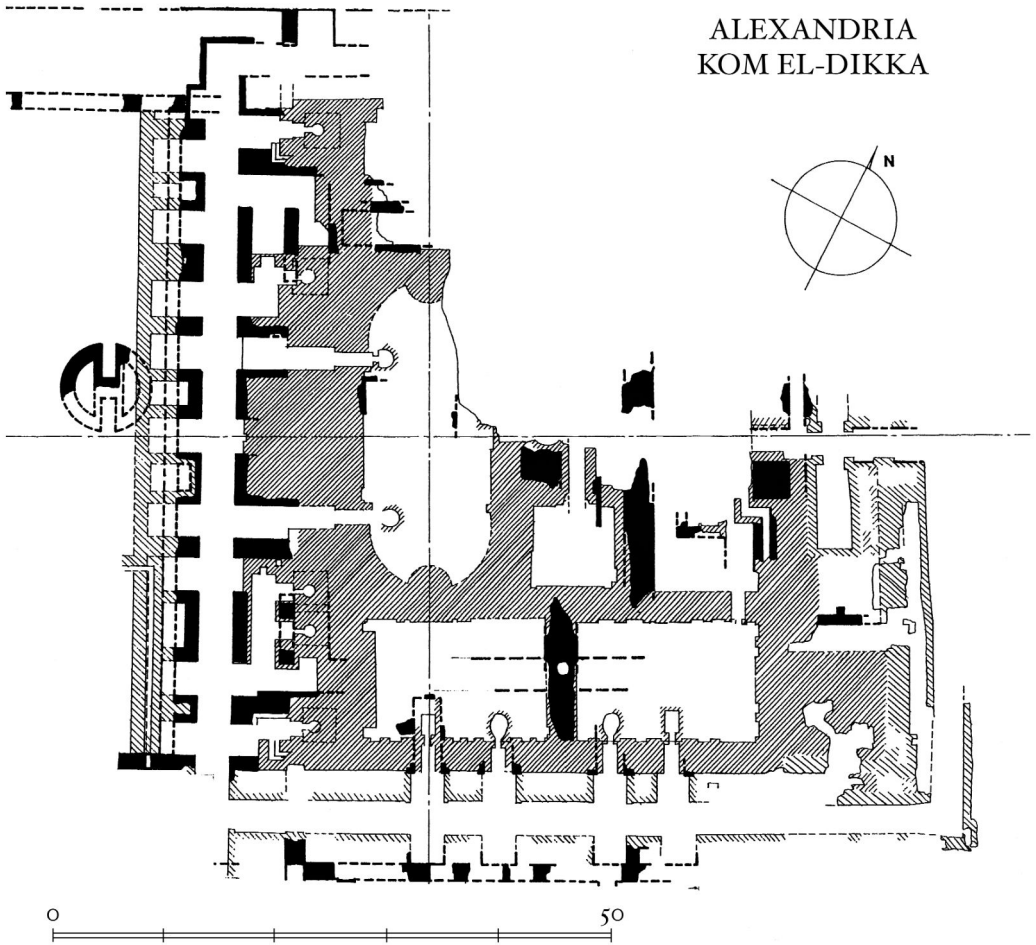


Fig. 4. Plan of the baths at Kom el-Dikka (drawing by W. Kołataj)

structure with thick walls was re-shaped: it was partly destroyed and partly integrated with the subterranean part of the new baths.

At the moment of the discovery the filling of the vaulted basement of the baths consisted of two layers: the lower one was composed of the ashes from the furnaces; the upper one, dating to the final period in the use of the baths in the seventh century, contained large quantities of crushed brick and limestone, with a relatively small amount of potsherds of coarse tableware of the seventh and eighth centuries. Earlier ashes and potsherds from the area of the baths were disposed of elsewhere.



Fig. 5. View of the vaults at Kom el-Dikka (photo by the Author)

The perfect construction and the enormous durability of the vaulted structure are confirmed by the fact that, at the moment of the discovery, most vaults were found intact. They have endured the enormous pressure of not only the walls of the baths but also the huge *kom* seventeen metres high, under which they were buried during many centuries. Moreover, a citadel with additional ten metres of walls must be added to the burden. According to Kořątaj the pressure on the vaults reached almost one ton per square centimetre.

The building had neither doors nor windows. However, the openings in the vault, which brought in some air and light, were big enough to allow also the delivery of goods. An intriguing element of the pre-thermal stage of the vaulted building is an adjacent round structure (the so-called 'tower'). An attempt to explain its function has been made by Kořątaj in connection with the openings in the vaulted roof – possibly the goods were craned from the street level into the storage building.

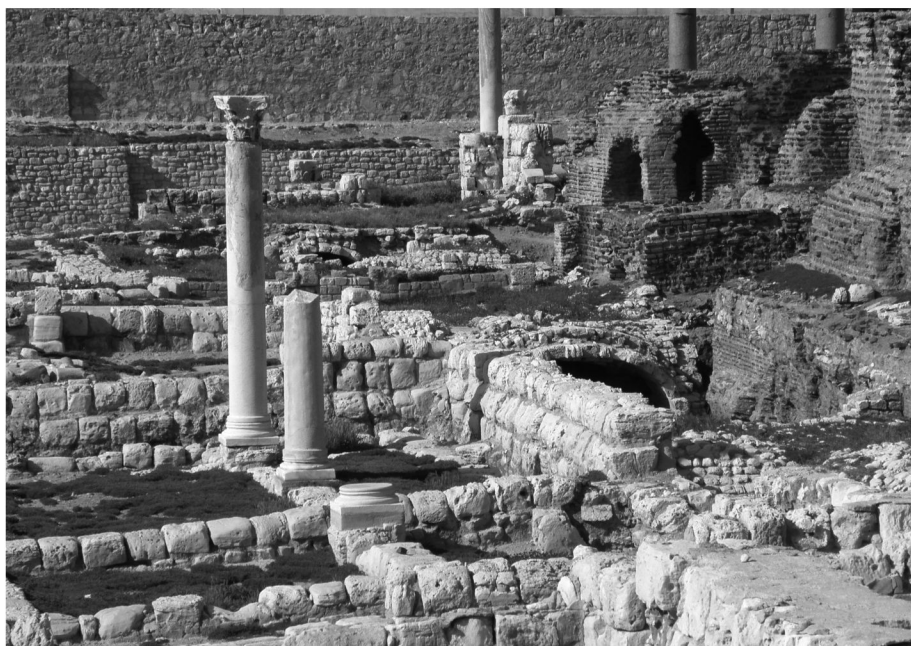


Fig. 6. Vaulted structures at Kom el-Dikka and the adjacent area (photo by the Author)

The word *ἐμβολή*, which occurs in the above-quoted ostrakon, has several meanings, including a tribute sent from Egypt to Constantinople. However, the basic meaning related to the verb *ἐμβάλλειν* indicates ‘throwing in’. This agrees with the idea of the loads of goods being brought into a storeroom through a hole in the vault.

What goods were stored in such a solid building? Certainly it was not grain or flour because the structure does not seem to be a standard *horreum* or *θησαυρός*. In the attempt of explanation we must also consider the unusual construction of the vaults. The vaulting of the older part of the basement consisted of two layers:⁷

the structural layer was built of voussoir stones ... set in a lime mortar. The outer layer 0.2–0.3 m thick (possibly an insulation layer) was made in opus

⁷ ΚΟΛΑΤΑΪ, *Imperial Baths* (cit. n. 6), p. 85 (phot. 51).

incertum set in a lime mortar with a large admixture of ash (mortar-to-stone ratio 1:1).

Such a complex structure of the vault, which certainly served as a kind of thermal insulation, was intended to keep the interior cool. Such an insulation is absent from the newer vaulting of the more recent part of the structure.

The ostrakon under discussion explicitly mentions wine and thus wine cellar should be considered the most probable explanation of the vaulted structure at Kom el-Dikka, all the more so as a wine cellar requires keeping a low temperature. The location of a wine cellar in the heart of Alexandria and in a relative proximity of the port is easy to understand. After the cessation of the previous residential function of the area at the time of Aurelian's or Diocletian's destruction of the city, the empty space stood open to possible investors, if only they fulfilled the conditions of property. The last traces of habitation date to the period after Aurelian and before Diocletian. Under Constantine some building activities began in Alexandria, but only later in the fourth century was a big imperial project realised in the area, resulting in the re-adaptation of earlier structures.

The vaulted substructure of the baths is now dated to *c.* AD 325, but it may be even slightly earlier; the second phase, including the superstructure, is from *c.* AD 370. Thus, the vaulted stone structure seems to fill the gap in the occupation of the site between the period of the villas and the phase of the baths. When the stone structure was being built, only the ruins of the abandoned villas were standing in the neighbourhood.

The quantities of amphoras found in the vicinity and the evidence of the texts seem to confirm the present interpretation of the mysterious building at Kom el-Dikka. Further research, however, must be done. The role of an epigraphist is limited in this case to providing textual evidence.

One thing must be added: on the stone walls of the vaulted structures some graffiti have been recorded, which are not only stonemasons' marks. One of them contains the name of Athanasius. The context makes a reference to the famous fourth-century bishop of Alexandria very probable.⁸

⁸ A. ŁUKASZEWICZ, 'Fragmenta Alexandrina 1', *ZPE* 82 (1990), p. 136, pl. IIIIC; IDEM,

Eϑ̣τ[υ]χ̣ω̣ς̣
 Ἀθ̣α̣ν̣[α̣σ̣ί̣ω̣
 τ̣ϕ̣̣ . [
 4 .. [

Good fortune to Athanasius...

The public activity of the famous bishop and religious leader of Alexandria covers almost a half of a century and has its peak between the 330s and c. 370s. This evidence agrees with the supposed date of the vaulted structure. It also confirms the accessibility of the cellars – it can be seen that the corridors were large enough to allow a donkey to pass. These storerooms in the centre of Alexandria must have indeed been teeming with life. Otherwise, political graffiti would have been purposeless in such a place.

Adam Łukaszewicz

Department of Papyrology
 Institute of Archaeology
 University of Warsaw
 00-927 Warsaw 64
 POLAND

adlukasz@adm.uw.edu.pl

‘Ostatni ślad Atanazego’ [Athanasius’ last trace], [in:] *Symposium Kazimierskie poświęcone kulturze świata późnego antyku i wczesnego chrześcijaństwa*, 111: *Biskup i jego rola w kształtowaniu miasta późnoantycznego*, Lublin 2002 [Symposium in Kazimierz dedicated to the culture of the Late Antique and Early Christian world, 111: *Bishop and his role in the shaping of Late Antique city*], pp. 209–213; IDEM, ‘Violence in Alexandria’, [in:] *Proceedings of the International Conference on Violence and Aggression in the Ancient World 15–17. IX 2005* [= *Classica Cracoviensia* x], Kraków 2006, pp. 127–134. For Athanasius, see Annick MARTIN, *Athanase d’Alexandrie et l’église d’Égypte au IV^e siècle (328–373)*, Rome 1996.