

MARINA EL-ALAMEIN 1991

Wiktor A. Daszewski

The fourth season of Polish excavations at the site of an ancient settlement, discovered during the construction of a new tourist centre Marina el-Alamein on the Mediterranean coast of Egypt, started on February 20 and ended a month later, on March 20, 1991.¹

Excavations concentrated on the Late Hellenistic and Early Roman necropolis (Fig. 1) in the western part of the ancient settlement. To the extent that circumstances allowed, the mission also proceeded with a survey of the remaining area. Limited architectural recording of monuments uncovered by the EAO team in the area of the settlement itself was undertaken in response to a request by Egyptian colleagues.²

The exploration of the necropolis proceeded in four sectors. The first covered the area occupied by tombs T 1B, T 1C and T 1D, which were discovered in earlier seasons, but were not cleared completely.³ The loculi of tombs 1B and 1C were

¹ The Mission directed by Prof. Wiktor A. Daszewski included: archaeologists Mr. Grzegorz Majcherek and Miss Joanna Sawicka, architect Mr. Jarosław Dobrowolski and photographer Mr. Bogdan Okupny. The Egyptian Antiquities Organization was represented by the General Inspector from el-Hammam, Mr. Ezzat El-Hamahmy. The Mission would like to express its gratitude to him and to Dr. Ali el-Kholy, General Director for the Western Delta, for their ready help and cooperation in the course of fieldwork,

² Beside Polish explorations, Marina el-Alamein was also the site of rescue excavations carried out by an Egyptian team from the EAO. The main goal of these activities was to document as many as possible existing ancient structures in the area presently intended under modern housing development in the hope of protecting them from destruction in the future.

³ Cf. W.A. Daszewski *et alii*, *MDAIK* 46, 1990, pp. 15ff.; also *id.*, *PAM* I, 1989-1990 (1991), pp. 31ff.

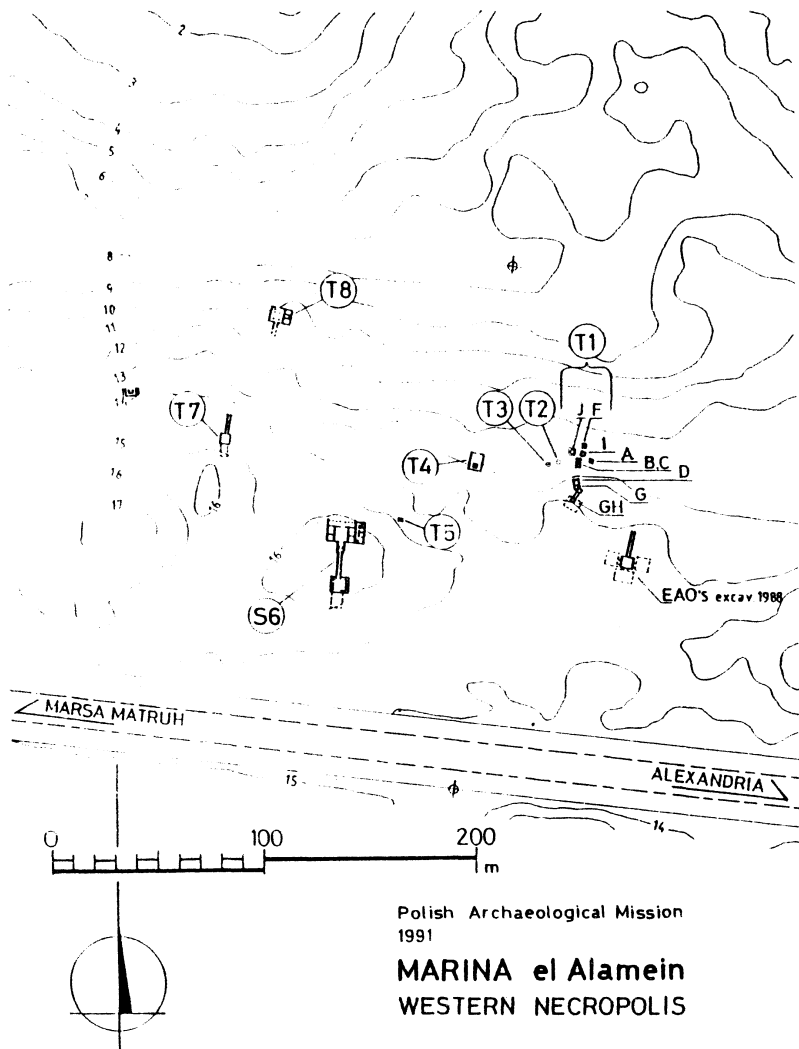


Fig. 1. Identified graves on the western necropolis of Marina el-Alamein.

studied. In the first case, the northern loculus (length 1.85 m, width 0.38 m, height 1.10 m) was found to contain a single male burial. The excellently preserved skeleton appeared to be lying almost directly upon bedrock and had once been covered by a wooden vault supported against the walls of limestone blocks; the vaulting itself was not preserved, but imprints of particular wooden planks have survived in the plaster covering the walls. There were no furnishings accompanying this burial. Another burial trench excavated in bedrock was found under tomb 1B, a part of which had to be dismantled in order to prepare it for future reconstruction. The trench which was oriented from east to west and lay under the middle part of the box-like structure, was also found to contain a single burial without any tomb furnishings. This was presumably the earliest burial on this spot, later marked by the construction of a monumental tomb taking on the form of a box-like base and rectangular pillar on top, the latter adorned with pilasters in the corners and a moulded cornice.

A careful examination of tumbled blocks from tomb 1C, which adjoined tomb 1B on the south, demonstrated that on top of the box-like construction there had been a single-step stylobate and a gable-roof sarcophagus built of stone. This form brings to mind the so-called "sarcophagus tombs" known from Cyrene, where, however, they are of much larger dimensions and are usually dated to the Hellenistic period. The southern loculus of T 1C contained three burials, two adults and a child; there were no furnishings. In a narrow crack between blocks of the upper layer of both tombs, T 1B and T 1C, an excellently preserved terracotta oil lamp of the 1st century AD was found (Fig. 2). The scene on the discus, depicting a winged Eros riding on a panther, presumably with Dionysiac overtones, is rare in lamp decoration, but is known in the iconography of Late Hellenistic mosaics both on Delos and in Pompeii.

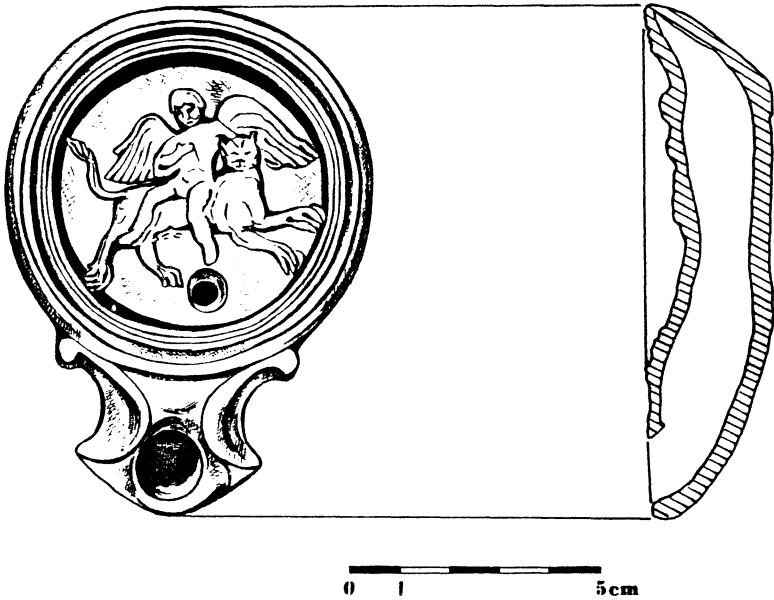


Fig. 2. Terracotta lamp found between tombs T 1B and T 1C.

About 1.50-2 m to the west and north of tomb T 1, two other tombs were discovered. The tomb on the north, T 1F, was preserved only as the bottom box-like structure with loculi; the monument once adorning it has long since disappeared. In the case of tomb T 1I, the superstructure has been preserved, although in ruins. It proved exceptionally interesting. A pillar about 4 m high stood on a three-step stylobate on top of the box-like structure containing loculi. Crowning the pillar were two capitals, one on top of the other, the bottom one of huge proportions, the upper one smaller in size. In style both capitals recalled so-called "Nabatean" examples.

The loculus tombs (aboveground structures) of this part of the necropolis exhibit a surprising variety of forms, admirable not only for their architectural quality, but also for their size.

All of the tombs described above come from the first half of the 1st century AD. The underground part of tomb T 1GH is somewhat earlier, being dated to the end of the 1st century BC, while the modest burials lying on a higher level between tombs T 1C and T 1D are later and take on the form of roughly rectangular box-like structures constructed of narrow undressed limestone slabs. Some isolated slabs set horizontally, bearing traces of burning on their surface were found in the vicinity of these tombs. The burning as well as a rather regular arrangement of these slabs in respect to particular tombs, would indicate their role as artificial altars of a kind, intended for offerings to the dead. The largest of the slabs, which measured 0.70 x 0.77 x 0.11 m, was found next to the loculus tomb T 1D, although in all probability it was connected not with this tomb, but with burials located further west and not yet uncovered.

The second sector of excavations comprised a monumental tomb complex S 6 (see Fig. 1), which consists of an above-ground mausoleum and an underground complex, the two linked by a 15 m long staircase, once roofed, cut in the rock. The staircase led to an open courtyard 7 m deep, from which one entered a funerary chamber furnished with rockcut benches, an altar and a side loculus. Excavations in the courtyard uncovered yet another altar (1.30 m high, 1.05 m long and 1 m wide) located in its centre. On top of it there were remains of a burnt sacrifice. The clearing of the staircase brought unexpected results in the form of two additional burial chambers located about halfway down; the entrances to these chambers were found sealed. The eastern one (2.20 m long, 1.65 m wide, 0.85 m high) contained 11 burials, preserved rather badly owing to a humid environment. The skeletons were found lying from east to west, with heads alternately to the east and west. Two of the burials were mummies swathed in bandages and provided with portraits of the dead which were unfortunately completely

destroyed. The western chamber, very similar in size, contained four burials, somewhat better preserved. Three of the mummies belonged to adults, one was that of a child. Gilding was preserved on the outer surface of the bandages. The one preserved portrait represented a young male in a golden wreath on his head (Fig. 3); it was painted in encaustic technique on a thin wooden panel and betrayed the hand of a practiced artist who still embodied the spirit of Hellenistic art in his work. Excellent lines and expert use of colors have given in effect a masterpiece of painting. On stylistic grounds, the portrait should be dated to the beginning of the 2nd century AD.

There can be no doubt as to the importance of the discovery of mummies with painted portraits of the dead in the necropolis of Marina. Portraits of this kind have so far been associated with the Fayum oasis and certain sites in Upper Egypt; this is the first time that they have been recorded this far to the north, on the Mediterranean coast. The discovery poses several questions, answers to which will have to wait for the results of further explorations. Questions concern the localization of painting workshops as well as mummification centers. The presence of mummies in Marina testifies again to the wealth of the inhabitants of this seaside city, for the costs of preparing gilded mummies with painted portraits were considerable.

In the third excavated sector located about 80 m northwest of the S 6 complex (Fig. 1), another large hypogeum measuring a total length of more than 22 m was found (T 7). Its structure differed somewhat in that it did not possess an above-ground mausoleum. The rockcut staircase covered with a flat roof was entered by a wide door leading to a short corridor on the surface and a flight of steps descending about 5 m to a courtyard which opened in turn on a large chamber with a number of loculi. The tomb had been plundered, presumably a long time ago, although not in antiquity.



S6 · LW 3

MARINA el Alamein 1991

Fig. 3. Painted funeral portrait found in the side chamber LW in tomb S 6.

The skeletons were found in disarray outside the loculi, in the sand filling the burial chamber. Of the slabs closing the loculi was found in place. An interesting matter was observed in the opening of one of the loculi: instead of a slab closing it, there were traces of wooden pegs in the upper corners and above the upper edge, presumably evidence of some kind of curtain once screening the opening.

A trench excavated along the wall protecting the court of tomb T 7 from windblown sand, yielded pottery, mainly Cypriot sigillata and lamps of the 1st century AD.

The fourth and last sector of excavations was located north of tomb T 7 (Fig. 1). Further data was provided concerning the nature and extent of the western necropolis. A rectangular above-ground mausoleum (10.20 x 7.60 m) was discovered here, together with a flight of rockcut stairs leading down to unexcavated courtyard and burial chamber(s). In the western end there was a reception hall with two wide banquet benches. The presumably flat ceiling was supported on four columns in the corners of the benches. The eastern part of the structure was composed of three small units serving as sleeping and storage areas. The main entrance in the northern wall had the appearance of a wide gate framed by pilasters and crowned with a dentil cornice.

In summary, the results of this season's excavations have fully confirmed earlier observations concerning the monumental character of the necropolis complex, the high quality of the architecture and the wealth of the inhabitants of the ancient city. Imported pottery as well as lamps once again attested to developed trade with foreign territories. The discovery of mummies in tomb S 6 raises hopes of further interesting finds in tombs yet to be uncovered, assuming of course that climate and human vices personified by grave robbers have not destroyed everything of value.

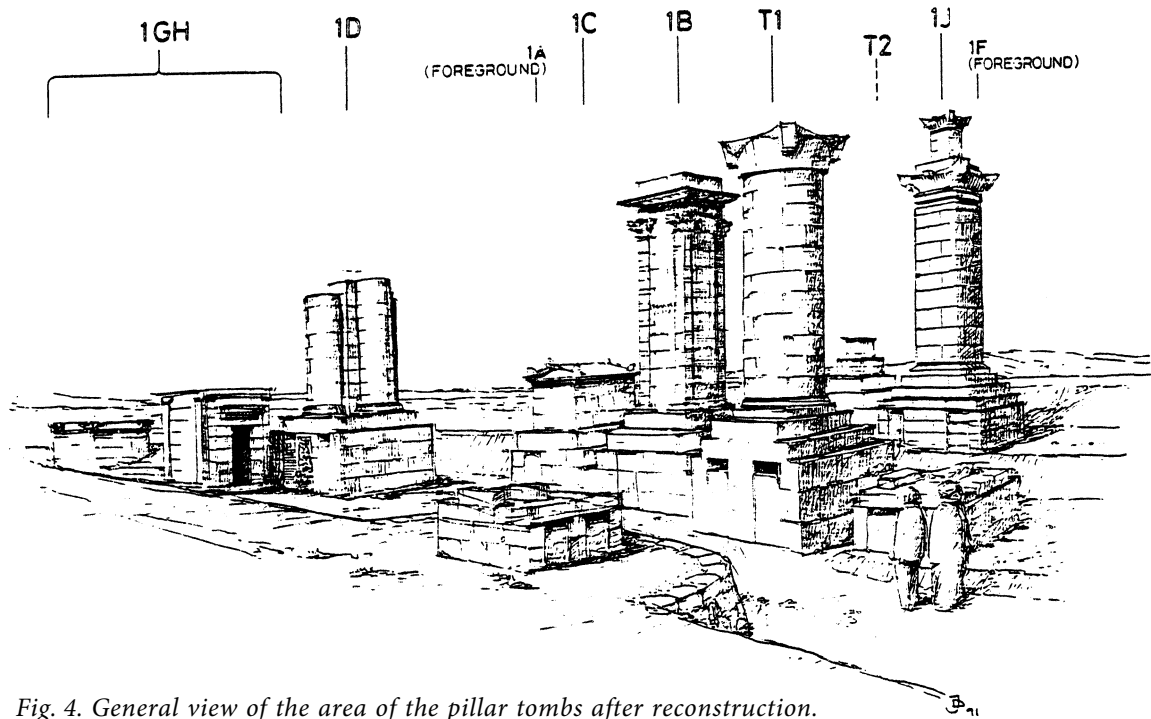


Fig. 4. General view of the area of the pillar tombs after reconstruction.
Drawing J. Dobrowolski.

Following the close of the excavation season, a mission directed by architect Mr. Jarosław Dobrowolski and sponsored by the EAO and the Polish Centre carried out in the period from April until end June⁴ a reconstruction and conservation campaign at the site. The mission's program called for completing the reconstruction of tombs T 1B and T 1C and safeguarding hypogeum T 1GH. Concurrently, the mission prepared the architectural documentation necessary for continuing reconstruction activities in the future (Fig. 4).

⁴ Cf. below, J. Dobrowolski, p. 39ff.