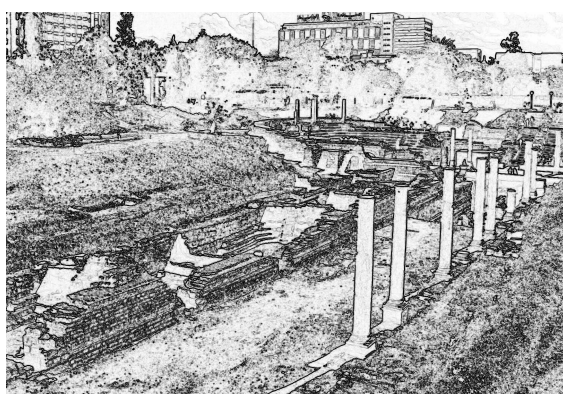
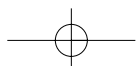
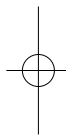
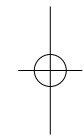
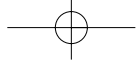
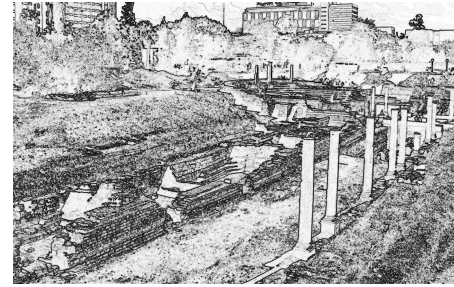


Grzegorz Majcherek



ALEXANDRIA CURRENT RESEARCH





Forty-five years into excavations by a Polish team on Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria hardly anyone expected more findings of historic import for Alexandrian studies. Yet in the past few seasons the site has once again proved its extensive research potential.

For one thing, a project to investigate the domestic architecture of ancient Alexandria was launched finally. Excavators had long been aware of the earlier residential architecture which lay concealed under Late Antique structures regularly excavated and conserved by the team in recent years, but the task of examining these remains proved indeed formidable. Already in the 1970s several excellent Roman mosaic floors had been uncovered at the bottom of deep trenches, and more such vestiges were recorded, but every time reaching these ruins constituted a logistical challenge, not only because of the depths involved, but also because of the frequent need to remove several meters of medieval accumulations. Yet the resulting spectacular discoveries were well worth the effort. The picture emerging from the excavation of an extensive section of downtown ancient Alexandria existing from the 1st century AD through its wartime destruction and abandonment in the late 3rd century is an

entirely new vision of the architectural and urban development of the ancient metropolis.

Domestic architecture in Roman Alexandria was deeply embedded in the Greco-Roman tradition, largely copying models well established in the Mediterranean world of the day. The rectangular courtyard remained at the center of the housing complexes consisting of units of different function, from utilitarian to purely ceremonial, deployed around this focal point. Bedrooms, kitchens and other service areas appeared next to richly decorated *triclinia* or banquet halls. Standard house installations included bathrooms, latrines and well-designed sewaging. Water came from wells and cisterns collecting rainfall. Surviving staircases testify to the existence of upper floors. The courtyards, often with marble pavements, were decorated with engaged columns emerging from the painted walls in an arrangement most closely resembling a pseudoperistyle. The parallels drawing from Alexandria's sepulchral architecture are inescapable. Monumental tombs of Ptolemaic date excavated in the city's cemeteries offer virtually identical architectural designs. How much of the Roman architecture was a conscious reference to tradition and how much the effect of con-

straints placed on true peristyle designs as a result of restricted urban space, are questions not likely to be easily answered.

All the houses uncovered so far had elaborate architectural decoration: impressive colonnades carrying entablatures, columnar portals opening into resplendent reception halls at the center of every house, characteristically “baroque” capitals and cornices of limestone, freely composing canonical elements of the Doric and Ionic orders in a style that has been recognized as typical of Roman Alexandria.

The affluence and aesthetic taste of the residents of these houses is further confirmed by the many fragments of marble statuary found in the rubble, exemplified by a fine head of Alexander the Great, as well as rich mosaic floors decorating all the uncovered houses. The most sumptuous of these floors were found in the *triclinia*. They were of a composite nature, combining pavements of color marble slabs arranged in intricate geometrical patterns (so called *opus sectile*) with regular mosaics made of small colorful stone cubes. One fine example of the latter kind is a floor mosaic with dolphins originating from a house discovered under the Theatre Portico. In another deep trench by the outer theatre wall, at the very bottom, archaeologists hit on a section of well-preserved colorful “carpet” mosaic with a welcoming inscription in Greek rendered in the entrance to the room.

More than just giving a glimpse of everyday life in Alexandria of the Roman age, the research on Kom el-Dikka has contributed new information on urban planning and topography. The uncovered houses filled a block between two latitudinal streets. The structures lay back to back and were accessed from the side streets. A number

of sections of these lateral streets running from east to west have been investigated and found to divide the city districts into smaller *insulae* or blocks, thus providing important additional data for the general plan of the ancient town established by the Egyptian astronomer Mahmud Bey already in the 19th century.

The grand complex of public buildings uncovered on Kom el-Dikka is undoubtedly the most important part of the ancient Alexandrian downtown of Late Antiquity excavated to date. Indeed, the ancient theatre building, imperial baths and adjacent porticoes, not to mention the cistern complex, have already become part of the modern cityscape and are a thriving tourist attraction. In the past few seasons the team from the Polish Centre has explored the monumental portico in front of the theatre, reconstructing several of the monolithic red granite columns of this structure which measured at least a few hundred meters in length. The portico reached all the way to the *Via Canopica* as the main town artery is traditionally called, and it was the urban backbone of a district which unexpectedly became the stage of a truly sensational discovery in the past few years. That is to say, archaeologists have brought to light vestiges of a well preserved complex of lecture halls, dated to the 5th through 7th centuries AD, the first ever to be discovered anywhere in the ancient world. It is a matter of chance, but still gratifying, that the discovery was made by a team of Polish researchers.

A number of these halls had been uncovered in the 1980s at the northern edge of the site and near the baths, but the scale of the establishment and its true purpose were recognized only after several more halls were cleared in the course of re-

cent work. At the core of the complex was a row of separate rooms alongside the Theatre Portico with a few more grouped in lateral wings lining the passages leading to the baths.

Altogether there were 20 halls in this complex, of different size, but aligned the same way and featuring a similar layout of the interior. Not really big, they are 10-12 m long as a rule and no more than 5-6 m wide. Most were rectangular, although in a few cases one long end took on the form of an apse or elongated exedra. All had stone benches on three walls, most commonly two or three rows of this seating. Seats of honor, raised and specially distinguished, are present in all of the halls. The grandest of these took on the form of a high "chair" approached by a set of steps. The seating arrangement and the seats of honor, markedly present at the apex of each hall, fully confirm the interpretation of these units as lecture halls. This raised seat was probably intended for the teacher, while students occupied the benches, an arrangement borne out by written sources describing classrooms and lectures, and by iconographic representations. In ancient art, the high chair, also called *thronos*, was an inseparable attribute of images of philosophers and their students, often encountered in wall paintings, reliefs and even in applied art.

The recent discoveries have also thrown new light on the function of the nearby theater building, which Professor Kazimierz Michałowski had explored with his team in the 1960s. It now seems very likely that in the 6th century, following a thorough remodeling that imparted upon the structure its horseshoe-like shape, it was incorporated into the academic com-

plex, not so much as a place for regular lectures as a hall intended for public displays of oratorical skills by known speakers and professors, attended as might well be expected by large audiences.

The uniqueness of this municipal establishment is borne out not just by the mere number of halls, but foremost by their localization in the city center, immediately next door to an imperial bath complex and theatre building. It is very likely that we are dealing here with a public educational institution, that "temenos of the Muses" or "academies" mentioned in written sources of late Antiquity as being located allegedly in the very center of the town.

Significantly, this complex was discovered in a city that was a leading center of science and academia throughout Antiquity, where the traditions of learning remained exceedingly strong for ages. Despite having the glorious years of the Museum and Library established by the Ptolemies long past it, Alexandria continued to draw students of rhetoric, philosophy, law and foremost the medical sciences. It was proud of its status as a center of learning and it cultivated traditions of past excellence. The ruined complex now being excavated on Kom el-Dikka is a few hundred years younger, but it remains palpable proof of the vitality of these traditions.

Salvaging even a fraction of its splendid past for the "most glorious of cities" as Alexandria was called in Antiquity has been the main objective of a conservation project implemented in cooperation with Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities, prepared by the project's longtime director Dr. Wojciech Kołataj. Even though Dr. Kołataj is now retired, he occasionally joins the ranks of the Polish-Egyptian

team of specialists from various fields, primarily archaeologists, conservators and architects, charged with year-round work on the clearance, conservation and display of monuments of architecture. Priorities include turning the site into an archaeological park, hence the extensive program of architectural restoration balanced with lesser but equally important tasks like conservation of mosaic floors. Most of the work is accomplished by successfully implementing ancient building techniques to raise walls and mount vaults, reinforce foundations and even lift tumbled columns. The conservation of the theatre was completed in the 1960s. Next, work was focused on

the domestic district in the eastern end of the site and the cisterns, and recently the restoration of the baths has entered the final stages. A specially designed glassed-in shelter constructed above the so-called "Villa of the Birds" has created conditions for admiring the fine Early Roman mosaic floors in their original architectural setting. Complementary landscaping of the site surroundings, including greenery and tourist paths, are carried out simultaneously in an effort to bring life back to the ruins. Soon the entire site will be welcoming modern Alexandrians and foreign visitors alike, telling a tale of a once glorious past to future generations.

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Kom el-Dikka. Plan of the site
(Drawing W. Kołataj, D. Tarara)





Kom el-Dikka. General view from the northwest; complex of lecture halls (auditoria) in the foreground (Photo G. Majcherek)

Excavating the Early Roman houses in the central part of the site (Photo G. Majcherek)





*Mosaic floor with dolphins from a house
near the theater building
(Photo G. Majcherek)*

*Mosaic floor with a welcoming inscription from a Roman
house discovered under the walls of the theater
(Photo J. Lis)*





*Finds recovered from excavations in the habitation quarter
(Photo G. Majcherek)*

*Late Roman auditoria, view from the northwest
with the theater in the background
(Photo M. Krawczyk)*

