

Alexandria Kom el-Dikka

Season 2017



Abstract: The 2017 season saw the conclusion of the first phase of the Site Preservation Project at the Kom el-Dikka site. The new visitors' route was officially inaugurated by the Minister of Antiquities of Egypt, Dr. Khaled al-Anany. Archaeological excavations continued to be focused on a huge mound of ashes and urban refuse, located to the south of the Imperial Bath complex in the central part of the Kom el-Dikka site. The mound accumulated over the ages from the 4th to the 7th century AD, covering the ruins of early Roman dwelling houses. The report gives an overview of digging in this area, where a substantial part of a house was cleared. It includes also a summary of conservation work performed on mosaics and monuments of ancient architecture.

Keywords: late antique Alexandria, urban dump, mosaics, Roman houses, conservation

The 2017 season of fieldwork was filled as usual with multiple tasks, covering both archaeological and conservation work. The high point of the year came on 1 April with the official inauguration of the tourist itinerary, constituting the first stage of the Kom el-Dikka Site Presentation Project. Officiating at the well-attended opening ceremony were His Excellency Dr. Khaled al-Anany, Minister of Antiquities of Egypt, accompanied by their Excellencies Mohammed Sultan, Governor of Alexandria, Michał Murkociński, Ambassador of Poland and Prof. Marcin Pałys, Rector of the University of Warsaw (see above, page 30 in this volume). The new itinerary swelled the numbers of visitors over the early summer months, even as the team returned late in the season to a regular schedule of digging and conservation, running all the time a training course for a group of junior SCA staff members. The course focused on basic excavation and conservation techniques and methods including stratigraphic analyses, surveying, pottery processing and drawing.

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EXCAVATIONS

Continued excavation of the central part of the site was the main focus of the archaeological part of the season, particular emphasis being placed on studying the early Roman domestic architecture [Fig. 1]. Previous work in this area had exposed substantial sections of at least four Roman houses (FA, FB, FC and FD) (Majcherek 1995: 14–20; 1996: 13–20; 1997: 19–30; 1998:

25–30; 1999: 35–39; 2010: 35–42; 2011: 38–46). The investigation then focused on their layout, decoration and functional arrangement on the assumption—based on a central location within the city and the sumptuous interior architectural decoration, including mosaic floors—that they represented a middle-class, if not elite status of their inhabitants.

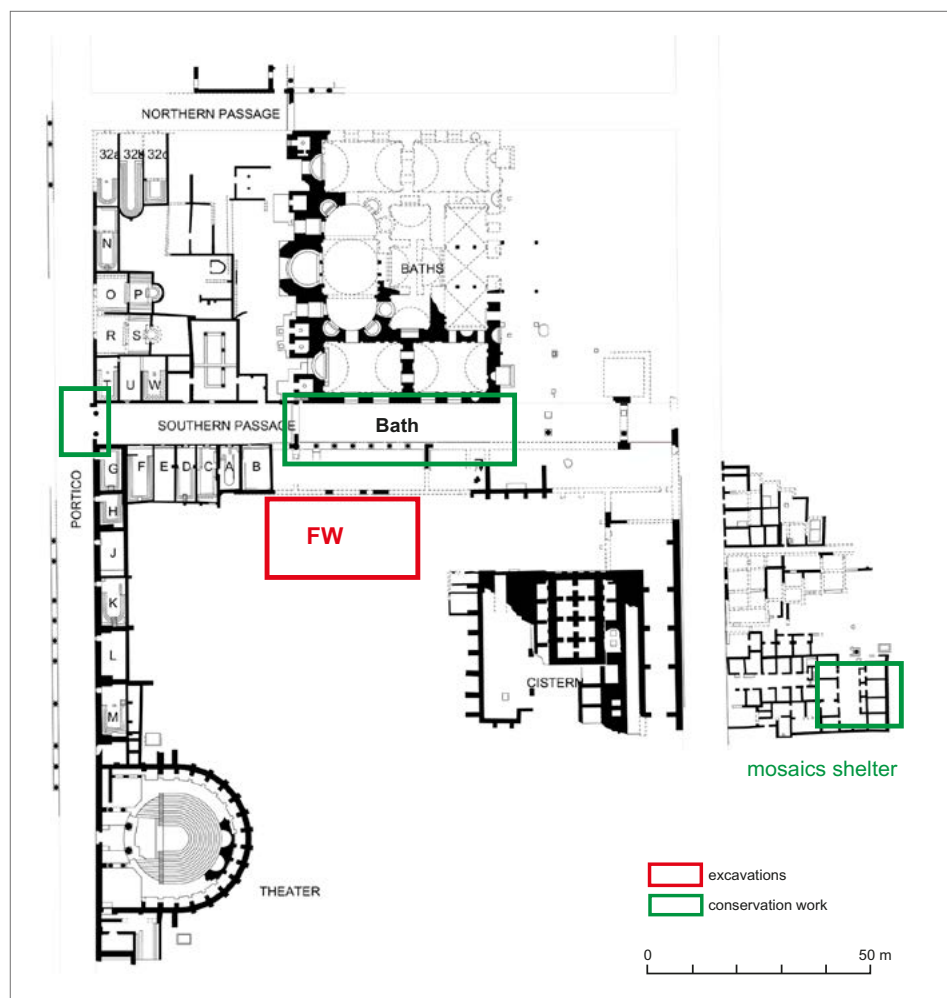


Fig. 1. Kom el-Dikka: areas of excavation and conservation work in the 2017 season (PCMA Alexandria Kom el-Dikka Project/drawing W. Kołataj, update D. Tarara)

This season work was limited to the western part of area F, where the trench, investigated first in 2009, was now extended west (FW). Given the time constraints and logistic obstacles (considerable distance from the current excavation dumps), exploration was limited to an approximately 10 m square trench.

EARLY ROMAN PHASE

The targeted early Roman phase in the trench comprised fairly well preserved structures, which may have formed a western extension of the early Roman house FB, partly uncovered already in 1998, or—more likely—were part of yet another house (Majcherek 1999). The two

long walls (w.760 and w.761) closing the excavated areas from the east have no doors linking this area with the previously excavated structures.

A cluster of contiguous rooms (21–27) of various dimensions was cleared, not all of them explored in their entirety [Figs 2–3]. Given their rather modest dimensions, they should be expected to serve purely domestic rather than official function.

This entire wing appears to have been accessible from a side street that is assumed to have run south of the excavated area. Such a street, approximately 4.80–5.00 m wide, was identified already in two trenches, located next to the north-

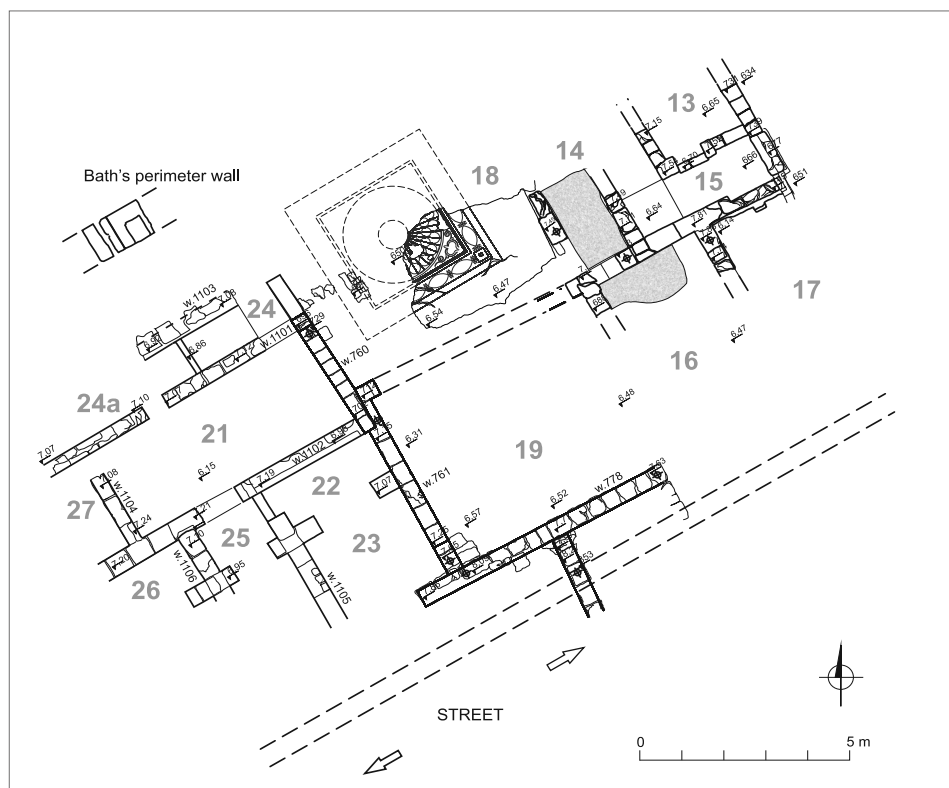


Fig. 2. Early Roman house in Area FW
(PCMA Alexandria Kom el-Dikka Project/drawing M. Sołtys and G. Majcherek)

ern elevation of the late Roman cistern (Majcherek 2011: 46). In one of these trenches dug close to the northeastern corner of the cistern, a typical stepped entrance (*prothyron*) leading from the street to building FD was cleared (Majcherek 1998: 30–34).

The wing was accessed through a narrow corridor/vestibule (25, approximately 1.65 m wide) flanked by two pilasters. A wide doorway opened from it onto the largest transverse unit (21), measuring 6.00 m by 2.50 m. From there additional doors led to a chamber (24a) and to a small side room (27, unexcavated), located further west. An opening in the wall in the northeastern corner of 21 gave access to a staircase (unit 24), indicative of the existence of a second storey or at least a terraced roof. A basin almost square in shape occupied the adjacent

narrow and elongated room 24a, which was barely wide enough to accommodate its width of 0.95 m. A well-preserved *opus signinum* lining still covers the walls. The structure was obviously used as a waste bin; considerable amounts of food remains, fish bones, shells etc. were found in the fill.

Given its key role in organizing communication within the excavated part of the house, it is quite possible that unit 21 served as a small courtyard. This impression is further supported by a large channel cutting diagonally across the unit and emptying into a sewer noted in room 24.

Room 23 and its annex (22) located in the southeastern part of the trench were somehow separated from the rest of the house. The room acted most likely as a shop accessed directly from the street. Similarly located shops were previously



Fig. 3. Remains of the early Roman house in Area FW, looking south (PCMA Alexandria Kom el-Dikka Project/photo G. Majcherek)

identified in nearby house FA (Majcherek 1996: 16). Units 26–27 remained unexplored and their communication with other parts of the house has yet to be recognized.

Wall construction technique identified in sections explored this season was similar to previously excavated structures of Roman age. Walls, preserved sometimes 1.40–1.60 m above the floor level, were chiefly structured in regular isodomic technique and did not exceed 0.40–0.45 m in thickness. Some of them showed clear signs of seismic-related deformations: shattered and displaced masonry, deep vertical cracks etc. However, there is no way to ascribe them to any particular earthquakes known from historical records. Floors varied considerably, from tamped earth surfaces in rooms 21 and 23, to remains of pavement in the *opus barbaricum* technique in room 25, the latter being a bichrome mosaic featuring white rhomboids inscribed within black

rectangles. Stone collapse, cleared in all the rooms, contained numerous pieces of lime/gypsum plaster with reed mat imprints apparently fallen from a ceiling, which is an indication of a flat roof. The fill produced also a large number of fragments of multicolored plastering, found practically all over the trench. Substantial stretches of plastering were found extant on the walls. In room 24a, decoration consisted of a horizontal black band, painted on white plaster. Another, more developed example of adornment was found on the western pillar in room 22; it featured large plain panels, delineated with alternating green, black and red lines [Fig. 4]. Interestingly, several broken fragments of small cups preserving varied dyes (green, yellow, blue and red) were discovered scattered through the debris. It is quite possible that they had found use in decorating the wall plaster.

At this stage of research the function of particular rooms cannot be identified properly. It is apparent nonetheless that the building was used for a prolonged period and witnessed subsequent transformations and reshaping. In a later period, it served industrial purposes with some rooms apparently turned into workshops. Stone moulds for glass beads were discovered in the fill; some additional furnishings of an industrial nature (stone anvils, benches, supports etc.) were also found in the presumed courtyard (21). In the final phase, the courtyard may have also been used as a kitchen, as evidenced by a thick deposit of soot and ashes, as well as a fair number of kitchen ware fragments, found in associated layers. Noted along a number of Egyptian and imported cooking pots and mortaria was a fine example of



Fig. 4. Painted plastering in the early Roman house (PCMA Alexandria Kom el-Dikka Project/ photo G. Majcherek)

an African large shallow bowl or lid with grey-fired rim (Hayes Form 196), dated to the mid 2nd–mid 3rd century AD [Fig. 6:8].

The most surprising and advanced transformation took place in room 23. A brick-made dome was obviously introduced there. A great number of flat Roman bricks (24 cm by 24 cm) and the keystone were found collapsed on the floor [Fig. 5]. The dome must have been part of the same modification that was previously witnessed in house FA, where two rooms were also found to be covered with well-preserved domes (Majcherek 1996: 19). The purpose of this alteration and of the effectively domed rooms continues to be subject to speculation.

Layers associated with the latest phase of settlement or the final abandonment of the house produced substantial quantities of pottery, some glass as well as lamp fragments, belonging mostly to the 2nd–4th century AD horizon. The repertoire included both Egyptian and imported pottery, and consisted mostly of amphorae and coarse wares, with only a small quantity of fine wares present. Early variants of LRA 4 (Gaza–Ashkelon) amphorae made up the overwhelming majority of the finds [Fig. 6:1]. Among other imported wares one should mention Cilician amphorae (early version of LRA 1 and “pinched-handle” amphorae; Fig. 6:2). Some oil and wine containers, originating from Byzacene (Africana I) and Tripolitania (Tripolitanian III) and Tunisia, were also recorded [Fig. 6:3,4] (Majcherek 2017). Aegean vessels make another distinct group, including among others examples of Cretan amphorae (mostly AC1) and quite a number of cooking pots. The latter, albeit widely traded throughout

the Mediterranean, were until now hardly ever reported from Alexandria and from other Egyptian sites. Globular *kakkabe* were the most common among the several noted shapes [Fig. 6:5,6]. Most vessels were made in standard “Lycian kaolinitic” fabric, although a few sherds of red “ferromagnetic” fabric were also identified (Lemaître et al. 2013). All in all, this is the first indication of large scale importation of Aegean kitchen ware to Egypt, in stark contrast to their extremely low frequency in the late antique period. Regional Egyptian pottery is represented mostly by early-mid Roman amphorae produced in the Nile Valley (Egloff 172 and Egloff 176–179, respectively) and various examples of common wares. There was a marked presence of two-handled water jugs on highly moulded foot as in previous seasons [Fig. 6:7]. The macroscopic characteristics of their Nile silt fabric point to production centers located most probably in the Delta.

Fine wares were definitely less numerous. A few examples of Egyptian imitations of ubiquitous Cypriot Sigil-

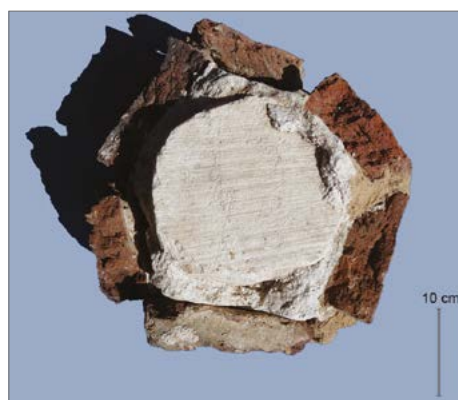


Fig. 5. Keystone from the collapsed brick dome (PCMA Alexandria Kom el-Dikka Project/photo G. Majcherek)



Fig. 6. Selection of early Roman pottery: 1 – Gazan amphora (LRA4); 2 – Cilician LRA 1 amphora (early version); 3 – Africana I amphora; 4 – Tripolitanian III amphora; 5, 6 – Aegean cooking pots; 7 – Egyptian (Nile silt fabric) water jug; 8 – African Red Slip bowl/lid, form 196; 9 – Egyptian imitation (Nile silt fabric) of Cypriot Sigillata form P40 (PCMA Alexandria Kom el-Dikka Project/drawing K. Pawłowska)

lata form P40 were recorded [Fig. 6:9].¹ Of note is a thin-walled cup imported from the Aegean, bearing a partly preserved painted inscription in Greek: *πεί[ν]ε εὐφραίν[ων]*, i.e., “drink with joy” (reading by A. Łukaszewicz) [Fig. 8]. Similar exhortations proliferated particularly in later antiquity, being found on glass vessels (Auth 1996), although never before attested in Alexandria. Several examples of 2nd century AD Egyptian-made lamps complete the repertory of ceramic objects, among them a couple of handles of the *Isis lactans* figurine type [Fig. 7].

The excavations produced also some glass fragments representing mostly tableware characteristic of the 1st to the 3rd century AD. Vessel shape and glass color and quality are paralleled by contemporary glass from earlier excavations in the area and also by material from Marina

el-Alamein (Kucharczyk 2005; 2010b: 125–127; 2016a: 88). The assemblage comprises bottles and flagons of various shape, often equipped with solid ring bases, shallow



Fig. 7. Egyptian oil-lamp handle (Inv. No. 1084.1.17) (PCMA Alexandria Kom el-Dikka Project/photo K. Pawłowska)

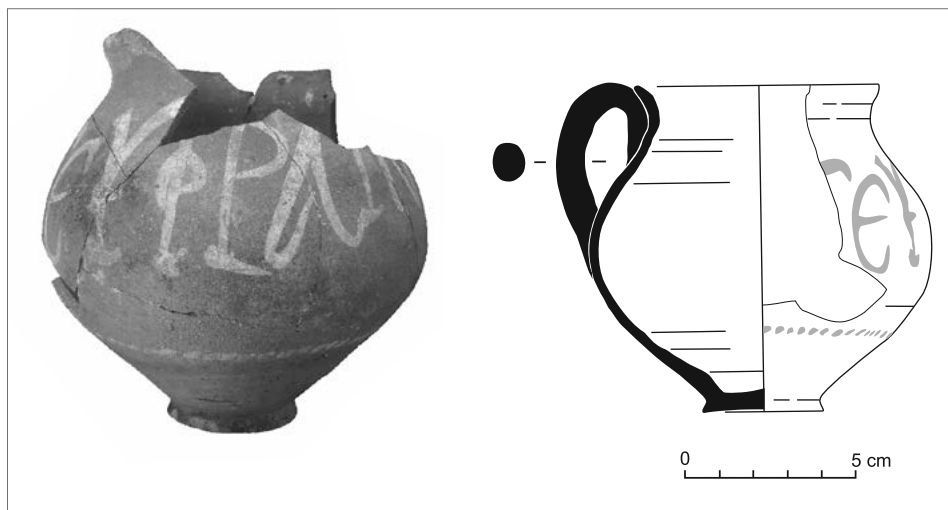


Fig. 8. Thin-walled cup, an Aegean import, with a painted Greek inscription “drink with joy” (PCMA Alexandria Kom el-Dikka Project/photo and drawing K. Pawłowska)

¹ Egyptian imitations of this form were first identified in Alexandria in 1991 (Majcherek 1991: 2). They have been reported frequently from other Egyptian sites ever since (Ballet and von der Way 1993: 19–20).

plates, deep bowls, cups and beakers, including cylindrical specimens with thick bases decorated with thin, horizontally applied threads, as well as with irregularly spaced deep elongated indents, all made

of colorless free-blown glass [Fig. 9:1–7]. A limited number of vessels, including an unguentarium, was made of green glass. A small hemispherical cast mosaic bowl with a very fragmentary polychrome or-

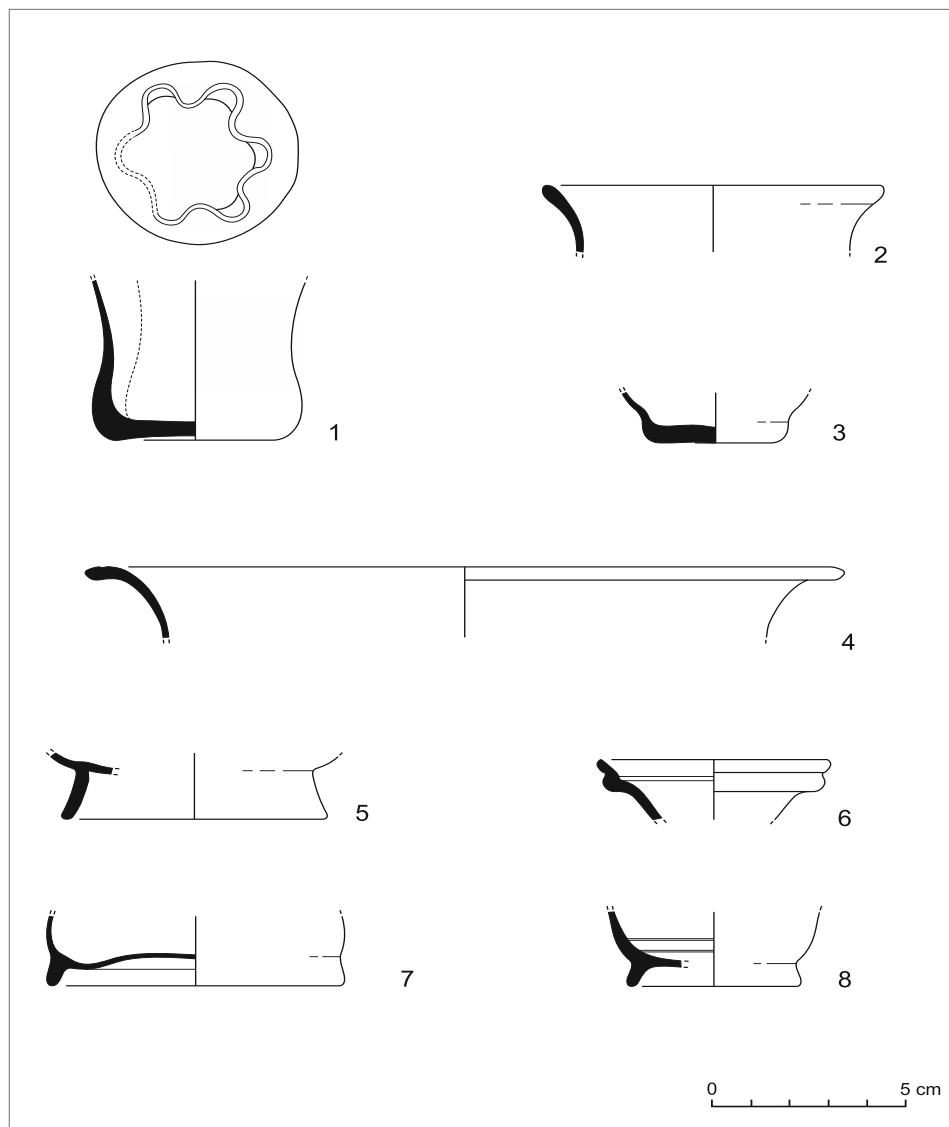


Fig. 9. Selection of early Roman glass: 1 – indented beaker; 2, 3 – beaker on solid base; 4 – deep bowl; 5 – high ring base of bottle or bowl; 6 – bottle neck with internal fold; 7 – base of cylindrical bottle; 8 – cast mosaic bowl base (PCMA Alexandria Kom el-Dikka Project/drawing E. Kulicka, M. Momot, K. Pawłowska)