

KOM EL-DIKKA

EXCAVATION AND PRESERVATION WORK, 2005/2006

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Following the summer break the PCMA's Polish-Egyptian Archaeological and Preservation Mission resumed work on 15 September 2005 and continued through the end of June 2006.¹

Last season saw considerable progress in the site presentation project with a thorough facelift of the immediate surroundings of the theater, initiated by the Supreme Council of Antiquities (see below).²

Accruing excavation dumps in the central and western parts of the site (altogether some 3000 cubic meters of soil and debris) were removed in an operation opening for further exploration the area believed to contain more of the Late Antique auditoria. The operation was made possible thanks to a generous contribution from Dr. Roger Bagnall (Columbia University) with funds provided by the Andrew H. Mellon Foundation.

1 The team headed by Grzegorz Majcherek included: Renata Kucharczyk (archaeologist, Deputy Director); Barbara Lichocka, numismatist; Emanuela Kulicka, Urszula Wicenciak, Marek Woźniak, archaeologists; Daria Tarara and Aureliusz Piszczewski, architects; Wiesław Kuczewski, restorer; and Waldemar Jerke, photographer. The Supreme Council for Antiquities was represented throughout the season by Mohammed Senussi, Mohsen el-Sayeh, Khulud Shawky and Hossam el-Misiri, all of whom participated actively in our work. The Mission also offered field training for SCA junior personnel: Amal Hassan, Bahgat Ibrahim and Hossam el-Misiri.

The Mission would like to express its sincere gratitude to the Supreme Council of Antiquities of Egypt, especially to its Secretary General Dr. Zahi Hawass, and to Dr. Mohammed Abdel Maqsood and Dr. Atiya Radwan, respectively former and present Director of the Lower Egypt Antiquities, for their generous help and friendly support extended toward the Mission during its work. Last but not least, we would like to thank Mr. Ahmed Musa, Kom el-Dikka Site Director, for his valuable assistance in solving everyday problems and facilitating our work.

2 Site upgrading operations were supervised by Dr. Mohammed Abdel Maqsood of the SCA.



*Fig. 1. Path leading to the Villa of the Birds, current view
(Photo G. Majcherek)*



*Fig. 2. Restored portico, looking south
(Photo G. Majcherek)*

SITE PRESENTATION PROGRESS REPORT

Visitors paths around the theatre were remodeled and given a modern surfacing of prefabricated concrete pavers. New concrete surfacing was also introduced around the main entrance where heavy transport can be expected. Grass carpets were extended along the footpaths and integrated with existing structures. The stone-made auditorium built in 2000 in front of the Roman theatre and used for modern theatrical performances was also refurbished in order to make it more aesthetically compatible with the ancient monuments (for this auditorium, see Kołataj 2001: 24). A new perimeter fence of forged iron panels (each c. 11 m long), mounted on a reinforced concrete base and fixed to posts, replaced the old wall along the southern boundary of the site, opening the site visually and integrating it better with the modern city fabric.

The temporary display of objects retrieved during Franco-Egyptian underwater excavations near the Qait Bey fort

was thoroughly rearranged and a similar display of architectural pieces (columns, bases, capitals and fragments of statuary), coming from various sites in Alexandria and in temporary storage at Kom el-Dikka, was mounted along the footpath leading to the Villa of the Birds. The path itself, made in this stretch of salvaged basalt setts, was widened here to c. 3 m [*Fig. 1*]. The steps leading down to the Villa from the level of the cistern (Kołataj 1997: 22 and *Fig. 3*) were also similarly upgraded.

The most challenging operation of the season was the landscaping of the western part of the site. The entire excavated and restored section of the portico (some 70 m long) was leveled and scattered with gravel [*Fig. 2*]. A stone ramp was introduced to facilitate communication between the modern auditorium and the portico. The western edge of the excavation area was formed into a sloping escarpment and grassed. A new access road to the excavated part of the site was arranged.

EXCAVATIONS

AREA CW

Excavations started with the exploration of medieval Moslem graves CW 1 – CW 39, identified in this area during the previous season [*Fig. 4*] (Majcherek 2006: 25; for excavations in the adjacent area AS, cf. Majcherek 2004: 32-34; see also contribution by E. Kulicka, below in this volume). On-site anthropological examination was carried out by Robert Mahler from the PCMA.

In this part of the burial ground, the graves were packed in tightly. At least two separate clusters, each enclosed within a perimeter wall, were identified: graves CW 17-19 in the southern part of the area

and graves CW 24-26 lying further to the north. In both cases, the perimeter walls were structured of rather small stones set in lime mortar and preserved generally to a height of 0.20-0.40 m, although one section was even 0.90 m high. Of special interest was the southern perimeter wall (nos 20-21) preserving a small *mibrab* niche lined with plaster. Similar architectural features had been recorded previously in other areas of the cemetery as well (Promińska 1972: Plan II; cf. also Majcherek 1999: 34).

The construction of particular graves evinced some variability. As a rule, most of

the superstructures were constructed of small regular stones, very often lined with lime plaster and featuring some rudimentary decoration consisting of diagonal hatchings. The burial chambers were closed either with flat slabs or a pitched covering. Much smaller graves made of slabs set up vertically (CW 7-9, 34, 38-39), apparently belonging to the earlier phase of the cemetery, were found packed in tightly among the later graves. Cases of simple internment were also recorded between the built tombs with the bodies being buried in shallow trenches without any protective structure whatsoever.

Finds from associated layers demonstrated the usual breadth of category, from glazed pottery to lamps and glass weights. Most of the collected pottery fragments, both imported and local, belong to the 10th-12th century horizon. The Egyptian



Fig. 3. Middle Necropolis Grave in Area CW (Photo G. Majcherek)

ceramic industry was represented by a variety of Fatimid and Ayyubid glazed pottery, including Fatimid Luster Ware bearing potter's marks on the base.

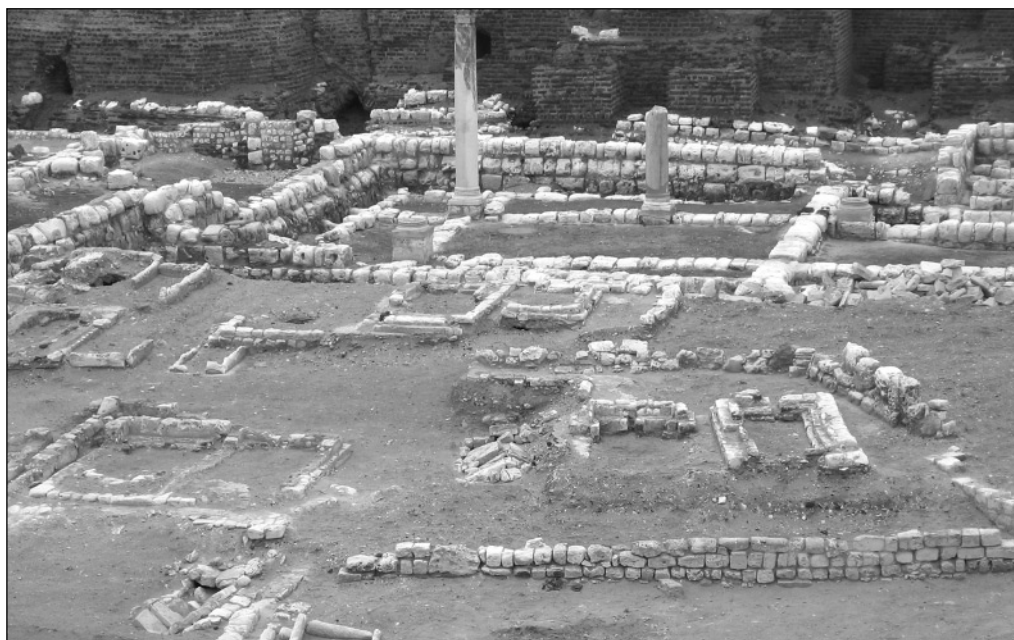


Fig. 4. Area CW. Moslem burial ground, seen at the beginning of the season (Photo G. Majcherek)

Graves of the so-called Middle Necropolis phase were cleared directly below the Upper Necropolis level. Despite serious damages caused by the digging of later internments, a few of the graves turned out to be in surprisingly good condition. The aboveground superstructures of these earlier tombs were usually built of larger blocks, forming rectangular structures [Fig. 3]. Floors were covered with a thin layer of pebbles as a rule. Interestingly enough, in several cases funerary stelae were found where they had been immured.

Some graves of the Lower Necropolis, scattered among the higher preserved walls of Late Roman structures, were also explored.

LATE ROMAN AUDITORIA IN AREA CW

Fieldwork in recent seasons had brought the discovery of a large and well-preserved complex of lecture halls (auditoria) of Late Roman date. So far, 17 auditoria situated along the Theater Portico have been identified and explored (Majcherek 2004: 27-32; 2005: 19-22; 2007: 25-28). Since there was every reason to believe that similar halls lined the entire length of the portico, further structures of the kind were anticipated in the yet unexplored Area CW. This was indeed the case with three more halls (RS, T and W) being cleared here this year [Fig. 5].

Construction in this area appears to have been determined by a single architectural plan. Structures predating the building of auditoria in the late 5th-early 6th century were found to be mostly dismantled down to the ground. The prevailing technology for raising new walls, from scratch as a rule, was the pillar technique. The auditoria were also

generally larger, there being no imposed constrictions of space.

Hall T (c. 9.00 by 4.70 m) featured a standard arrangement with two rows of benches running around three of the walls [Fig. 6]. The southern section with the dais has been preserved only as an imprint on the ground. An upturned marble base found close to the northern end of the benches may have served as a small pedestal, set in the middle of the room in a manner similar to the pedestals

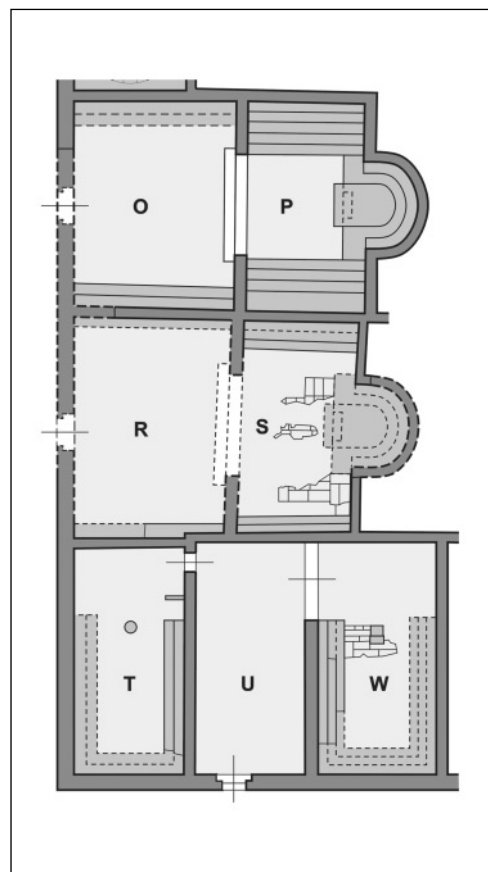


Fig. 5. *Late Roman auditoria*
(Plan A. Pisarzewski)

uncovered in halls M, K and J. The auditorium was most probably originally accessed from the portico, although the poor state of preservation of the portico back wall makes a positive identification of this entrance practically impossible.

Auditorium W followed the same design. Likewise oriented N-S, it had three rows of benches along the walls (only the western run has been preserved) [cf. *Fig. 7*]. In its northern part, a low pedestal made of a large block of nummulithic limestone was found *in situ*. It has a small rectangular hollow evidently serving to mount some additional furnishing. The only viable entrance to this hall, which had its back to the bath passage, was from the vestibule in unit U which had a doorway opening onto the passage. In a later phase, auditorium T was also entered from this vestibule.

Hall S, uncovered further to the north, turned out to be completely different in plan and orientation [*Figs 5, 7*]. It was much larger, forming together with its vestibule (R) a rectangle 12 by 19 m. Aligned E-W, it had an apse projecting eastward, beyond the rectangular outline of the room. The walls of the apse have not survived above the foundations, but sufficiently however for a full graphic reconstruction including semicircular benches (preserved in the northern part), clearly in imitation of a *synthronos*. The regular benches along the walls were replaced in this case with an asymmetrical pair of stands on opposite walls, three rows on the north wall, but only two on the south one.

A partition wall of little substance, evidently not meant to carry any substantial weight, separated the hall from

a much bigger unit (R) to the west of it and directly adjacent to the back wall of the portico. Indeed, it seems that instead of a solid wall with a doorway leading through it into Hall S, we should rather envision low lateral walls screening the sides of the benches but not hampering a view of the apse. This vestibule was furnished with a single-step bench of stone blocks lining the opposite walls on the north and south (where some remnants were recorded). It appears to have been entered from the portico.

The uncommon arrangement of the interior and the furnishings in this hall with its vestibule and the previously discovered units O+P (cf. *Fig. 6*) points to a more complex function for these auditoria, one that must have differed to some extent from that of the other lecture rooms (Majcherek 2004: 33-36 and *Fig. 6*).³

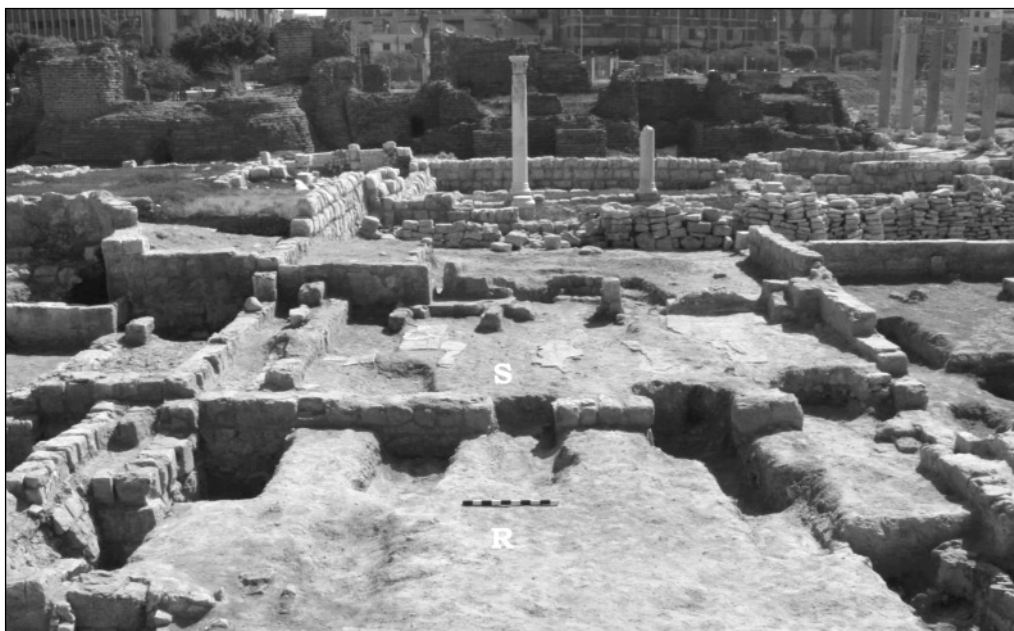
AREA L

A fragment of the medieval Moslem cemetery overlying the southwestern part of the cistern (for explorations of this part of the site, cf. Kubiak 1967: 75-77, Pl. II) was explored, uncovering graves of the Upper Necropolis immediately below the present topsoil (c. 16.90-17.00 m a.s.l.). Graves were clustered in the middle of the excavated area [*Fig. 8*], the ones at the south and west edges apparently destroyed by modern construction works in the 1960s. The tombs were oriented SW-NE, in keeping with traditional Islamic funerary practice, the head of the deceased placed in the direction of the *qibla*. Altogether 12 graves (L 1-L 12) were excavated, representing two basic types of construction already identified in other areas of the cemetery.

3 The affinity with church architecture is striking: apse, *synthronos*, clear division into two parts corresponding to the presbytery and the part of the building intended for the congregation. Nonetheless, units R+S were apparently an integral part of the academic complex and were used as an auditorium.



*Fig. 6. Late Roman auditoria T and W, looking south
(Photo W. Jerke)*



*Fig. 7. Auditorium S with vestibule R in front, looking east
(Photo W. Jerke)*

Upon exploring the graves, a stretch of Late Roman water-channel was cleared. The channel, which runs northward, appears to have supplied water from a nearby drawing well to the tanks of the cistern. Trapezoidal in section, it was built of red bricks, heavily lined with waterproof plaster and covered with horizontal slabs. Some sections of the channel were heavily damaged by medieval interments.

The outer wall of the cistern complex was cleared at the western edge of the



*Fig. 8. Upper Necropolis graves in Area L
(Photo W. Jerke)*

trench. The wall with its buttresses proves to have been largely dismantled sometime in the 9th-10th century, but before the area started being used for graves belonging to the Upper Necropolis.

AREA F

Landscaping of a small stretch of ground sandwiched between the baths and Street R4 quite unexpectedly revealed remnants of a large public latrine. The structure built next to the huge outer wall of the baths was excavated c. 0.80 m below the present surface. The rectangular building featured a typical arrangement with a channel running along its four sides (see appendix by M. Woźniak, below in this volume). It is presumed to have measured 10 by 5 m, ending most probably on the wall bordering street R4, the latter unfortunately not preserved, having been dismantled sometime in the Middle Ages. The discovery of a latrine apparently on the bath premises goes a long way to solving the functional issue connected with the other two latrines discovered west of the bath (Kołątaj 1992: Fig. 35 – general layout of the baths; Rodziewicz 1984: 287-292; 1991: 103-106). These western latrines lie already outside the bath complex proper and it now seems that they would have easily served the needs of the public frequenting the portico and adjacent auditoria rather than the bathers.

CONSERVATION WORK

Active participation of PCMA mission staff and manpower in the site-upgrading operation compelled substantial readjustment of the annual restoration program. Regular conservation work was therefore delayed and did not start until January 2006. As in previous campaigns, it was

focused on the architectural monuments making up the core of the future Archaeological Park.

THEATRE AREA

Limited conservation undertaken in the theatre comprised the outer wall, which

had suffered extensively from damp and moisture, especially in the areas untreated during recent conservation work in the 1980s (Kołątaj 1994: 5-8). In accordance with previously developed principles and methods, the intervention was limited to conservation in the most critical areas. In several places erosion of limestone masonry or brick lacing was visually dramatic. Conservation treatment entailed the replacing of badly deteriorated stones or bricks with new ones and repair of missing jointing. In some cases, a masonry infill was also applied. To arrest ongoing decay, the protective anti-damp layer on the wall coping was repaired and expand-

ed. As a rule, all interventions were done in traditional materials: lime-sand mortar and seasoned limestone blocks.

Some damages to the modern drainage system especially, resulting from unchecked vandalism, were also repaired. New gravel surfacing was introduced along the entire semicircular wall of the theatre.

Limited restoration work was also performed in front of the theatre, where a 6 m-long stretch of the portico back wall was restored. The wall was restructured in original blocks salvaged from nearby excavations and apparently originating from the structure itself.



*Fig. 9. Outer wall of the bath complex, after partial restoration
(Photo G. Majcherek)*

BATHS

The conservation effort this season was focused on the baths. Two vaults already successfully restored in the underground service area (Majcherek 2004: 35, 37, Fig. 10; 2005: 27-29) were given an additional 2-3 rows of blocks, necessitating the consolidation of extant vault springs. This was done using new blocks in order to secure structural stability.

Newly restored parts of the vaulting were covered with additional protective layers structured in small assorted stones. Exposed faces of adjacent additional bedding of the passage pavement were screened with protective walls. In the southeastern corner of the baths, one additional chamber was cleared of modern

backfill in order to introduce a modern access staircase which will permit the underground structure of the bath to be visited as part of the tourist itinerary.

A major restoration operation was conducted in Area F, where a large section of the huge outer wall of the bath was rebuilt [Fig. 9]. Prior to that, the wall was tested archaeologically down to the original footing at c. 1.40 m below the floor level of nearby Early Roman house F. The wall disappeared apparently in the Middle Ages, dismantled in a large-scale robbing operation. The original pillar structure composed of pillars made of large masonry blocks and intervening sections built in *opus caementicium* with limestone facing enclosing a rubble core (c. 1.60 m



Fig. 10. Street R4 after conservation in 2006
(Photo G. Majcherek)

wide) was robbed out in a characteristic manner, already evidenced at the site: little if anything remained of the pillars, while the extant screening walls were in very poor condition. These were treated first, consolidating the core of the wall and restoring the masonry facing wherever necessary. The rebuilding operation entailed also some protective dismantling of adjacent extant parts in order to deal with dangerously overhanging blocks. The dismantled wall sections were duly marked and stored for reassembly once the rebuilding has been completed.

The new wall footing was made structurally sound and the whole wall was rebuilt to about 1.60 m above the floor level of the adjacent Early Roman villa. The operation will be continued next season when the wall is planned to be restored to a final height of close to 5 m.

STREET R4

Street R4 and the adjoining domestic quarter is planned as an essential part of the future Archaeological Park. The idea is to present the multiphase character of the area with its various structures covering a wide span from the Early Roman to the Byzantine age. The street itself, giving also access to the Villa of the Birds housing Roman mosaics, will constitute a major part of the visitors itinerary. The 2006 operation entailed not only landscaping, but also substantial conservation work [Fig. 10].

The street elevation for a stretch of some 40 m was treated. Badly eroded stones were replaced with new ones, missing joints restored and the whole structure thoroughly consolidated. A considerable section of the wall enclosing rooms G 2-3, originally structured in the pillar technique like many other features of the period, was restored to a height of some 1.10 m in order to comply visually with other extant walls. Next, the row of antique shops uncovered in front of House G was partially restored. The shops had been found almost entirely dismantled, save for small sections of the walls in the southern part (Majcherek 2000: 37-38). Only one course of the original masonry was restored, however, in an effort to retain the balance between restored and original fabric.

The whole run of the street was cleared and the Late Roman surface exposed. A deep manhole used to service the ancient sewage system in the street was consolidated and partly restored. The head was built in new stone masonry, protruding c. 0.30 m above the ground level and secured with a wooden cover to avoid any hazards. The whole run of the street was then covered with a gravel layer c. 0.10 m thick. In order to cope with the increasing number of visitors, a modern staircase previously built at the southern end of the street (Kołataj 1999: 24 and Fig. 11), was substantially expanded. Two more runs of steps were added and the whole width enlarged to about 6 m.

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