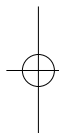
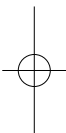


Zsolt Kiss



ALEXANDRIA

PAST RESEARCH





A Napoleonic fort once overlooked the center of the town from the top of an artificial hill that stood majestically between the Main Railway Station and the Governor's seat. In 1894-1895, British archaeologist D.G. Hogarth tunneled into the hillside, excavating rubbish from Mamluk times and massive brick remnants that aroused no special interest. In the late 1950s, local authorities decided to develop the area, building in place of the ruined fort a new building for the municipal administration. This required archaeological testing of the area before construction work could proceed and the Egyptians approached Professor Kazimierz Michałowski, then lecturing as a visiting professor at the University of Alexandria, to investigate the site.

Thus started the Polish archaeological adventure on Kom el-Dikka. In the fall of 1960, Michałowski and his team of archaeologists began a project that has now continued for close to half a century. The first task of the archaeologists and later architects in conjunction with architectural restorers was to save this part of ancient Alexandria

from modern building development. The challenge was to work quickly and intensively, as demanded by the pace at which the city was growing, without sacrificing scientific reliability and these requirements Michałowski met. There is no better proof of his success than the continued Polish presence on Kom el-Dikka.

Even before monumental brick walls, identified as of Roman date, started appearing in the deep trenches, the requirements of scientific reliability demanded of the Polish team to deal with the abundant relics originating from the artificial mound of Mamluk times. Based on the finds, the pottery in particular, Władysław Kubiak published an important study of the life and trade of medieval Alexandria. The underlying brick ruins proved even more significant – in a city so lacking in vestiges of its glorious past, they were a foretoken of an important archaeological discovery (and a tourist attraction to come). Kom el-Dikka was saved!

First, however, the archaeologists had to explore the Arab burial ground that had overrun the artificial mound of ruins. Based on the pottery, the cemetery was dated to

the 12th-13th centuries. Masonry tomb superstructures were often grouped in larger quarters and furnished with *mihlabs*. This first level of tombs (which is referred to as the Upper Necropolis) turned out to be the latest; the earlier burial ground, which had developed in and on top of the ancient ruins, was dated to the 9th and 10th centuries. The tombs in this "Lower Necropolis" were often graced with funerary stelae inscribed in Kufic characters. Anthropologist Elżbieta Promińska studied the skeletal material, producing an in-depth analysis of the composition of the population of medieval Alexandria, the longevity of the inhabitants and the diseases they suffered from. The historical conclusions were of no less importance: the cemeteries were proof that the mound must have been outside the limits of the early Arabic town. The only non-funerary vestiges of medieval times were the few poor huts with animal pens of the Fatimid period (11th century) discovered in 1975-1977 to the east of the Roman street R4 (the cemetery started beyond this road to the west).

Through the 1960s and 1970s the Polish team doggedly worked on uncovering the massive brick remains which were soon identified as a monumental bath complex of Imperial foundation. The thick brick walls were part of the heated building with numerous pools. Pillars in the hypocaust cellars under room floors showed how the building had been heated by combustion gasses circulating among them. The hot air came from furnaces that were installed in the complex of subterranean corridors which also held stores of fuels and other supplies necessary in a bath. The corridors are the best preserved part of the bath. Half of the main hall, the *caldarium* where hot bathing

took place, was ripped out by an explosion of gunpowder in the Napoleonic fort, while the cold-bathing section of the bath, built of stone blocks, suffered at the hands of medieval masons searching for building material to be used elsewhere in the town. This part with the entrance facade from street R4 was dismantled practically down to the ground. Surprisingly, the next-door masonry cistern, which acted not only as a water reservoir but also as a pressure tower for the baths, survived with much less damage and still dominates the ruins on the south.

The excavations were paralleled by immediate preservation and conservation of the complex, carried out by the mission's architect and conservator, Wojciech Kołataj, who directed the mission in 1966-1972 and from 1985 until his retirement in 2004. Kołataj's work on the Kom el-Dikka baths was crowned with his monograph study of this architectural complex from its founding in the middle of the 4th century AD through its development and decline by the mid 7th century.

The Roman bath occupied only part of the site of the old fort. In 1964, the municipal authorities decided to build a new theater on empty ground just south of the trenches. When foundation pillars started being driven in by heavy construction equipment, part of a great arch was uncovered. Again Michałowski was around to provide an expertise and there was no mistaking the ruins – it was an ancient Roman theater! The authorities immediately stopped the building project and Polish archaeologists and architects were moved to the new sector.

Thirteen rows of marble benches were cleared, revealing the elongated horseshoe-shaped audience which was

two-thirds preserved. The marble and granite columns of the portico along the top of the audience lay collapsed on the seats. At the open end of the hall were two huge pedestals. Very soon people started talking of the "Roman theater" in Alexandria, even though by rights it was no more than an odeon, meaning a hall for musical and poetic performances and recitations.

In 1966 Wojciech Kołataj embarked on a restoration of the theater building. He replaced the missing elements of the seating and raised the columns on top of the audience. Archaeological and theoretical studies allowed him to reconstruct the appearance of this monumental structure with its dome resting on arcaded niches crowning the top of the audience and two enormous columns at the open end.

This "concert hall" was founded most likely in the 4th century, at the same time as the neighboring Baths, but in the 6th century was completely rebuilt, given a dome and turned into an auditorium. Zbigniew Borkowski's research on the graffiti and inscriptions found inside the building confirmed that it was used in the times of Heraclius and was abandoned with the coming of the Arabs.

The Polish team also explored a paved portico lining the western facade of the theater building and bath. Under this pavement (as well as under the audience hall) archaeologists have uncovered vestiges of luxurious houses of the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, obvious proof that the district served a different function in earlier times.

The reconstruction was a spectacular achievement. The theater was opened to tourists (it was even used for performances) and it germinated the idea for a *zona*

monumentale, a zone of antiquities in the center of modern Alexandria. But there was still some unexplored ground on Kom el-Dikka, on the other side of street R4. In 1972, the army started building a large air-raid shelter and it hardly came as a surprise to the archaeologists when they found antique ruins. Once again the scholars' arguments were sufficient to save yet another fragment of the ancient metropolis.

Between 1972 and 1980 Mieczysław Rodziewicz directed a concerted effort to clear this residential quarter (he later published it in exemplary fashion). The discovery of houses and workshops from the 4th-7th centuries clarified the urban situation of late antique Alexandria in this region: a complex of public buildings to the west of street R4 and to the east of it a crowded quarter of modest houses with small ateliers and shops. In underlying layers, corresponding to the city of the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, the houses were just as spacious and resplendent as the structures discovered west of the street. They were furnished with fine mosaic floors (including one with representations of birds, restored and on display now).

In 1981-1983, the Polish mission uncovered three small lecture halls, to the west of the baths; another three were brought to light further south by Zsolt Kiss' team in 1986-1987. The next four years, after Grzegorz Majcherek took over as head of the archaeological mission, were devoted to the investigation of another fragment of the residential quarter from the Late Ptolemaic and Early Roman periods, east of street R4, as well as in the area south of the baths and under the pavement in front of the theater building. The team recorded numerous pieces of archi-

tectural decoration, wall paintings, mosaics and statuary. In 2003, Majcherek returned to exploring the area west of the public baths and between the southern portico of the bath and the theater building, discovering further lecture halls belonging to a presumed “university” complex.

The combined effort of Polish archaeologists, architects and restorers has salvaged a whole quarter of the ancient town. Work is being continued even while specialists research the discoveries made so far, preparing successive volumes of the Alexandria publication series.

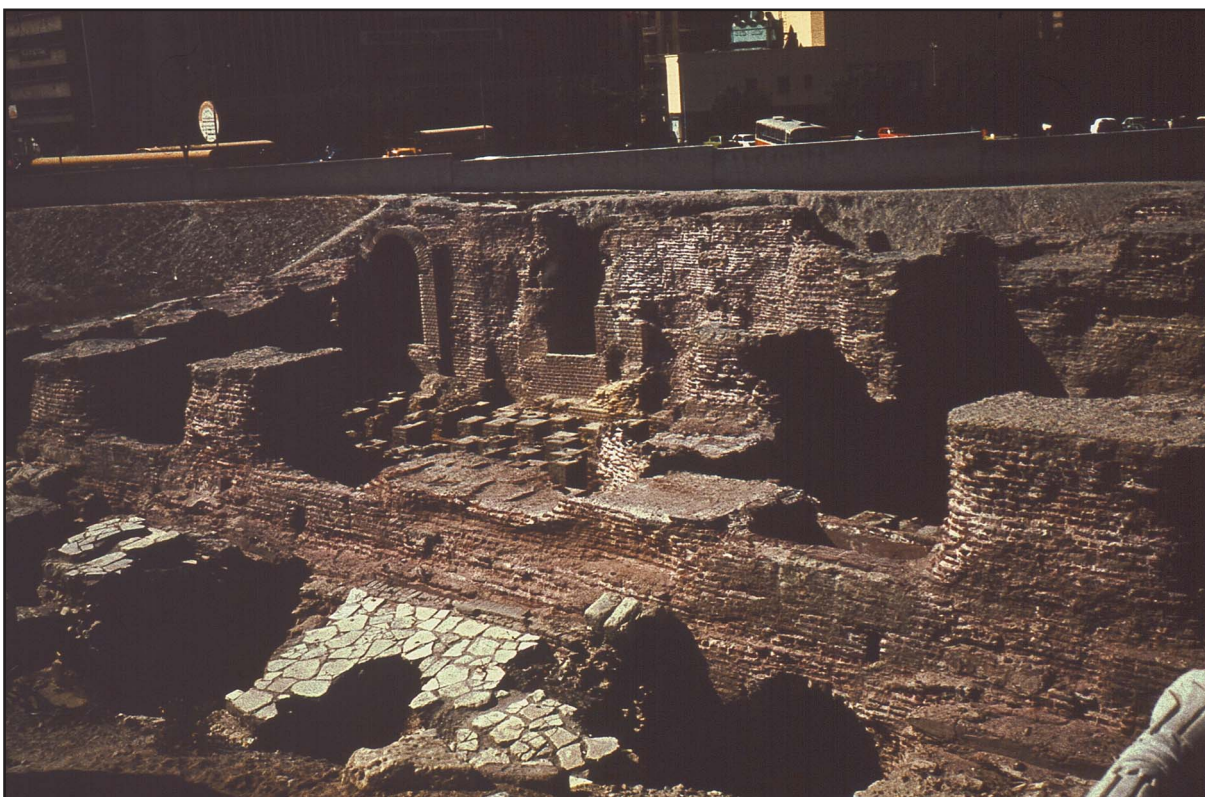
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Plan of Polish excavations on Kom el-Dikka
(Drawing W. Kołtąj, D. Tarara)



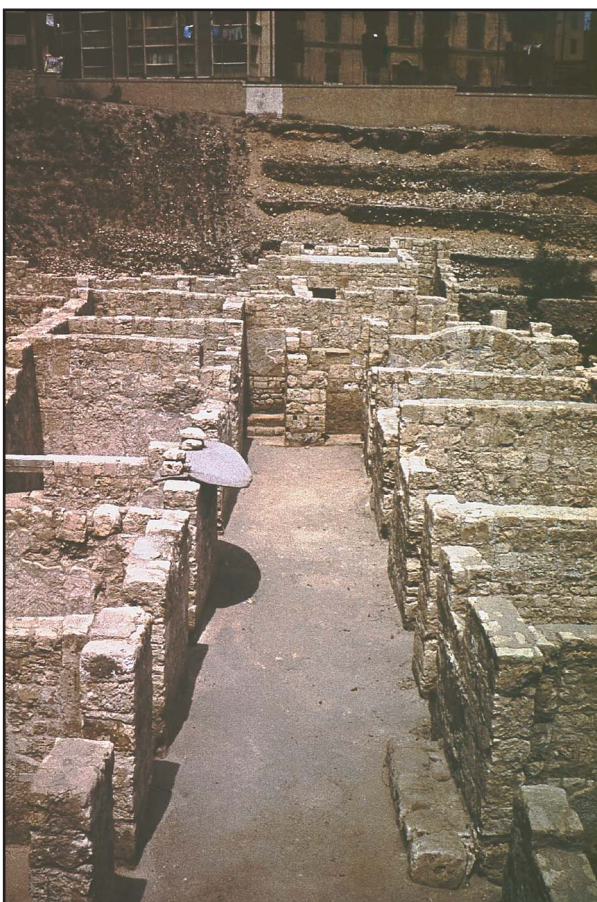
ALEXANDRIA
Kom el-Dikka



Kom el-Dikka. The heated part of the public baths and the southern portico viewed from the south (Photo Z. Kiss)

Kom el-Dikka. Wojciech Kołataj supervising the anastylosis of a granite column in the southern vestibule of the theater building (Photo W. Jerke)





Kom el-Dikka. Late Roman House D east of street R4, with central courtyard, workshops and living quarters (Photo Z. Kiss)



Kom el-Dikka. Mosaic floor with peltae from a luxurious residence of the 1st-2nd century AD east of street R4 (Photo Z. Kiss)



*Kom el-Dikka. Late Roman lecture
halls discovered in 1981-1983
west of the public baths
(Photo Z. Kiss)*

*Kom el-Dikka. Marble head of Alexander the Great
discovered in the Roman house south of the public baths
(Photo W. Jerke)*

