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MARINA EL-ALAMEIN (EGYPT): A TOPOGRAPHICAL STUDY AND THE FUNCTIONING OF AN ANCIENT PROVINCIAL TOWN ON THE MEDITERRANEAN COAST

ABSTRACT

Marina el-Alamein, a small town situated around 100 km west of Alexandria, is a good example of a middle-sized settlement flourishing during the first three centuries AD. The present paper analyses the urban layout and plan of the settlement. The main hypothesis proposed here is based on the results of excavations conducted on the site since 1986. Thanks to the observations from the field, in addition to analyses of the already excavated structures, it was possible to reconstruct the street

system and divide the urban space into three zones: the coastal zone (port area), the residential quarters, and the necropolis. All of them were situated on three natural terraces. The northern part, located along the seashore, was occupied by the port and warehouses. On the second terrace, wealthy residential quarters with a relatively large bathhouse complex were spread along the coast. Finally, a large necropolis with several types of monumental tombs created a border between the town and the desert.

Keywords: Egypt, Greek-Roman Period, urban planning, dwelling houses, bathhouse

Marina el-Alamein, a small antique town located around 100 km west of Alexandria, without a doubt belongs among the most unique archaeological sites situated in northern Egypt. Archaeological and conservation works have been carried out there regularly for almost three decades. Thanks to these excavations, it is possible to make an attempt to understand how the town was functioning in its prime.

Before the analysis is presented below, some words describing the site and the pertaining history of research are required. The archaeological site was recognised for the first time in 1986, when it was discovered accidentally during construction works, which were a part of a large tourist centre investment. The first rescue excavations were organised the following year. Since then and until his retirement, Wiktor A. Daszewski acted as the head of the archaeological mission investigating the area.¹ The majority, but not all, of Daszewski's activity focused on the examination of the necropolis situated in the southern part of the ancient town (Fig. 1). Thanks to his research, we know relatively much about the funerary

customs practiced in the town during several centuries of its existence.

General remarks

Generally, the southernmost part of the town was likely arranged institutionally or according to public space organisation patterns as well as social and topographical characteristics of the place. Even by looking at the cemetery complex alone, it is possible to identify several phases of its development. Not surprisingly, similarly to the town of the living, the town of the dead went through an evolutionary process of expansion. The oldest part of the Marina el-Alamein's necropolis recognised so far is situated in the central part of the southern section of the town. According to Daszewski's opinion, the oldest burial structures date back to the late 1st century BC or to the beginning of the 1st century AD. Several types of burial structures were concentrated there across a relatively limited area, ranging from simple graves without

¹ Daszewski 2011, 421–423.

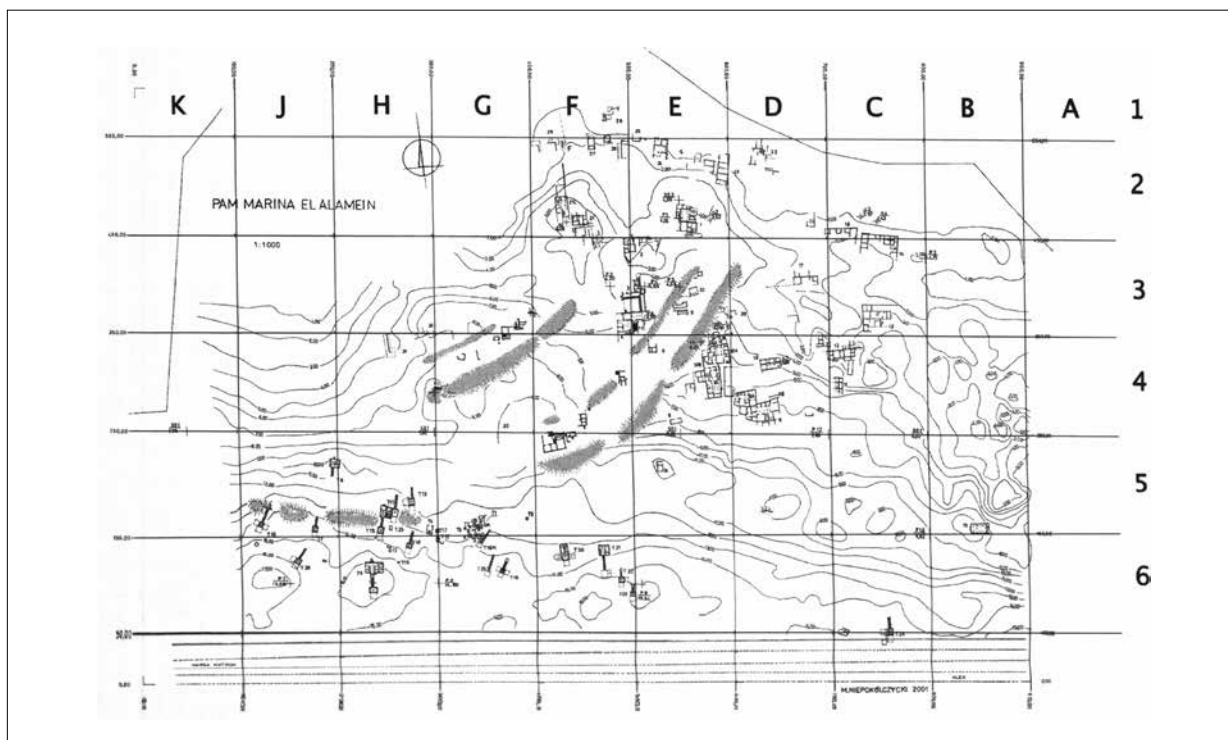


Fig. 1. Plan of the site of Marina el-Alamein (after Zych *et al.* 2008).

any overground parts, through trench tombs covered with flat slabs, the so-called 'stepped pyramid tombs or box graves', *tempietto* tombs, and 'mass graves', to columbarium tombs (Fig. 2).²

To the east and west of the central part of the necropolis, which doubtlessly is the most peculiar burial area in Marina el-Alamein, numerous tombs were also scattered across the site. Most of them belonged to the final stage of development of the necropolis. The necropolis development peak is manifested in a form of columbarium graves. Sometimes these tombs were finished with burial chapels attached to the front of the *dromoi*, leading to the graves' interiors. This kind of architectural and functional arrangement can be observed in tombs T6³ and T21⁴. Probably, the variety of styles of the tombs and graves reflects different social status of the inhabitants of the town.

It is important to take into consideration the fact that even though numerous tombs and graves have already been excavated, only a fraction of their total number is currently at our disposal, since the majority still remain unpublished or even untouched by archaeologists. Thanks to their location within the town area, however,

it can be estimated that the necropolis covered the southern part of the settlement almost completely. In some cases, the tombs may have been situated outside the town limits. Several columbarium sepulchres were discovered in the westernmost part of the protected area, which is located *c.* 1 km from the settlement's central quarters. The location of the burial places as well as their character and types doubtlessly belong to the most spectacular discoveries. However, even with a relatively good number of tombs and graves available for analysis, the problem of how to understand the necropolis' internal arrangement still remains unresolved. The question arises whether the necropolis developed according to a plan or evolved in a spontaneous way, in response to current needs. Most of the tombs in the central part of the necropolis, however, opened to the north, in the direction of the town and seashore. Such an observation clearly shows that, most probably, the necropolis area was intentionally separated from the town. It cannot be excluded that there was a main road between the tombs and the residential area, running towards Marsa Matruh (ancient *Paraetonium*) to the west and Alexandria to the east. The lay of the land supports this supposition: near the northern edge

² Daszewski, Zych 2007, 149–151.

³ Initially designated as 'S6'; *cf.* Daszewski 1992, 33–36.

⁴ Daszewski 2002, 79.



Fig. 2. A view on the necropolis (photo by K. Jakubiak).

of the necropolis, a subsided area spread along the E-W axis almost at the entire length of the urban zone and left enough space for a road.

Town centre and the streets' distribution

North of the necropolis, there functioned a town situated inside a kind of geological trough. Thanks to the previous and recent works and observations in the field, it was possible to identify several units, if not town quarters. In the case of Marina el-Alamein, it cannot be confirmed whether the town was planned according to a grid plan or not. The streets included in the ground plan are not parallel to one another (Fig. 3). While it is impossible to determine why this kind of urban planning characterised the town, there are enough indications to explain why the grid plan, Hippodamian in style, never did. The first tentative attempt at understanding this urban layout and space arrangement was made by Stanisław Medeksza, but from the present state of knowledge his observations can be updated and re-evaluated.⁵ Recently, Grażyna Bąkowska-Czerner and Rafał Czerner proposed

a general view on the site.⁶ In their study, both scholars were mainly focused on an analysis of the architectural structures. A peculiar layout of Marina was likely to be influenced by such natural factors as the devastating summer winds, bringing heat and sand from the desert, as well as the winter winds bringing humidity and cold from the sea. These climatic conditions most probably did not change much since the times when the town flourished. Consequently, the monitoring of the weather conditions and personal observations during the course of the archaeological research project suggested a hypothesis that climatic observations and knowledge in this part of the Mediterranean coast had implications for or influenced the architectural solutions applied in urban planning. This is why, probably, the model of the street grid was a kind of compromise between the organisation of space based on the tradition (Hippodamian grid plan) and protection of the town citizens against the aforementioned natural factors capable of damaging the architecture of the town as well as making the life there even more difficult. In order to protect themselves, residents of Marina rejected the Hippodamian urban structure and applied a modified version, cleverly adjusted to their needs. Certainly, the process of urban planning in such circumstances was based on the knowledge of the natural conditions characteristic of the Egyptian coastal zone. The question arises as to whether the people who lived there had such knowledge or would pass it down from generation to generation. The last supposition assumes that in Marina el-Alamein the concept of urban structure organisation needed to be modified already during the town's development. Unfortunately, it is still impossible to answer this question, since we do not have enough information at our disposal. The only available observations, albeit very limited, confirm that the architectural structures were built on top of one another using the layout of the previous constructions.⁷ This is certainly not enough to develop a theory concerning the development of the town or any kind of changes in the town's urban planning.

Generally, it is difficult to find any remains of straight streets going through the town that would give the slightest impression that a grid plan of urban internal arrangement was used there. In some places, however, straight or almost straight streets were recognised. It is noteworthy that these straight segments of the street grid were relatively short, giving little room for blowing wind and thus increasing comfort for the residents. What deserves special attention is one of the broader streets discovered so far in Marina el-Alamein. The street, situated in the central part of the town, taking into account its

⁵ Medeksza 1999.

⁶ Bąkowska-Czerner, Czerner 2019.

⁷ Jakubiak 2016.

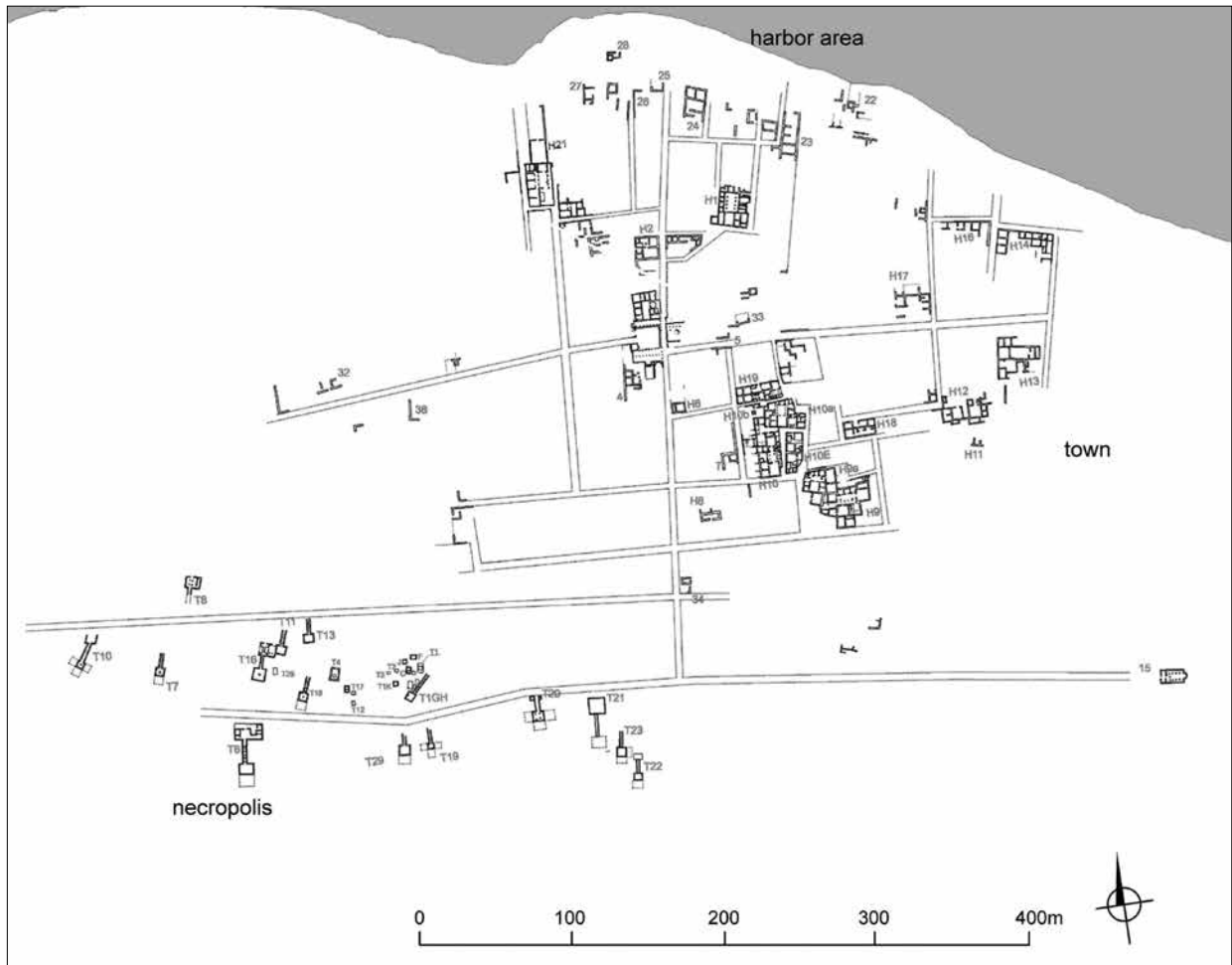


Fig. 3. Plan of the site of Marina el-Alamein (after Medeksza *et al.* 2010, fig. 1).

location in the town plan, must have been thought of as one of the most important arteries, making communication between the port area and the residential quarters easy and efficient. Next to this street, so-called House H21c was discovered, a very rich edifice with a commemorative monument dedicated to Commodus situated in its courtyard. It is hard to tell whether the residence was originally constructed there because of the vicinity of the broad street or for other reasons (Fig. 4).⁸ Leaving speculations aside, it seems most important that the street functioned for several hundred years. During the excavations undertaken in 2012, a trench adjoining the street was partly explored.⁹ The results of these works and stratigraphic observations confirmed that the street was in permanent use since the beginning of the 1st century AD. What is crucial is that this route, which played a vital

role in the town's communication network, had never been paved. Each exploitation level of the street was marked by a layer of ashes mixed with pottery fragments and shells of freshwater snails. The street is also the longest straight artery so far discovered among the ruins of the town. It should be mentioned that the route was built to the west from the bathhouse complex originally situated in the central part of the town.¹⁰ It cannot be excluded that several public buildings might have been erected to the west of the baths. Certainly, without trial excavations in that part of the ancient town this supposition will remain a mere conjecture. Yet, the presence of the broad or main street allows suspecting that some other important buildings were located nearby. Only further excavations may reveal what kind of architectural structures were functioning along the western side of the street.

⁸ Medeksza 2001, 72–74; 2002, 92–103; Medeksza *et al.* 2003, 89–96.

⁹ Jakubiak 2016.

¹⁰ Daszewski 2011, 424–29; Medeksza *et al.* 2011, 109–118.



Fig. 4. Courtyard of House H21, a view from the north (photo by K. Jakubiak).

The second, partly-paved street, running almost in parallel to the above-mentioned artery, was functioning along the eastern elevation of the bathhouse complex (Fig. 5). It cannot be excluded that both streets were planned to frame the central part of the town. Based on the data recently made available, it is likely that the central part of the town was limited to the area north of the bathhouse complex and its vicinity and spread as far north as the port area. A significant role in this argumentation is doubtlessly played by the remains of flagstones which paved the street running northward from the bath complex. Additionally, the other paved street running perpendicularly along the E-W axis, beginning near the bathhouses and the central square between them, seems to be crucial in the aforementioned interpretation of the functioning of this part of the town. The traces of the paved street are still visible at a distance of *c.* 100 m to the east of the bath complex. This part of the street grid is a very promising area for further investigation. There, in the preserved part, not only the pavement and flagstones but also kerbstones survived in their original places. Unfortunately, the road is only partly visible and has never been fully examined, which makes it impossible

to estimate the length of the paved section. The road was probably running as far east as the eastern town limits and further to the eastern suburbia of the town. It can be tracked all the way to the vicinity of House H13 situated in the eastern part of the town.¹¹ There, supposedly, it formed a junction with another, smaller street which was running along the N-S axis. The question remains whether the above-mentioned paved street had its continuation farther to the east or terminated as a dead end in this area. Unfortunately, our present knowledge does not allow determining exactly what kinds of dwellings were built there. The remains of partly-excavated architectural structures indicate that it might have been a relatively wealthy quarter. Naturally, without excavations in that part of the town that supposition cannot be verified.

Residential district

Generally, the remains of residential architecture are situated in the southern and western parts of the ancient town. Major knowledge on the residential structures definitely comes from the excavations conducted in

¹¹ Zych *et al.* 2006.

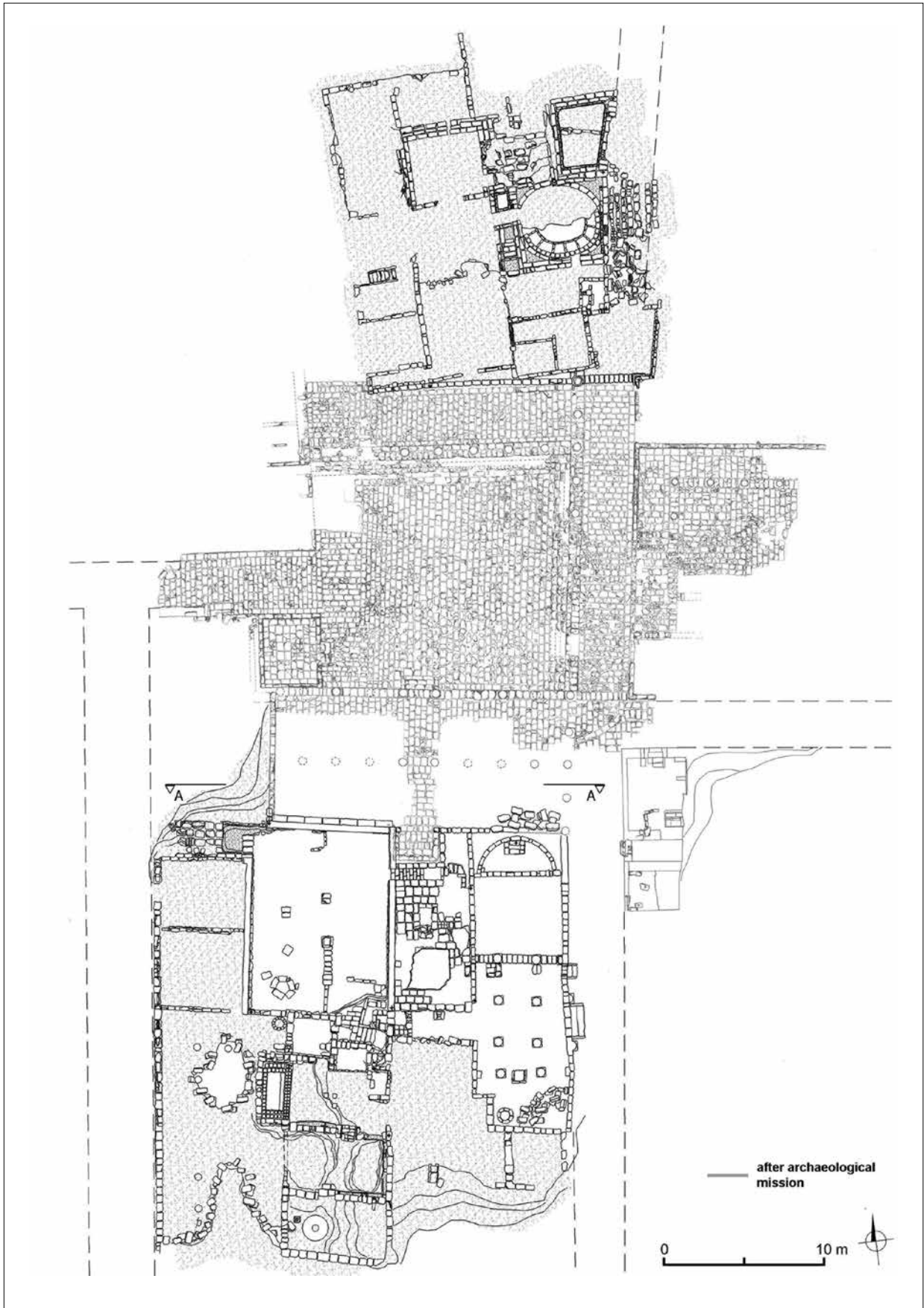


Fig. 5. Plan of the baths from the central part of the town (after Medeksza *et al.* 2010, fig. 6).

the southern part of the settlement. Most of the already excavated houses were rather rich, well-built, and well-finished. Taking into account the urban space arrangement, it seems at the first glance that the southern part of the town was arranged chaotically. A closer and more careful analysis of the space provides some further impressions concerning the internal spatial organisation of this district. Based on the present understanding, however, it is possible to assume that the layout of each house depended on the shape of the plot. The wealthiest of the investors also could have played a significant role. In consequence, the investors became the owners of a piece of land within the town. The only puzzling matter is why the shapes of the plots are sometimes not even remotely regular. It cannot be excluded that the shape of each plot, visible after the excavations, is a result of the earlier phase of the town's internal organisation. It cannot be assumed, however, that the town planning had never been changed over the lifespan of the settlement. As already mentioned, at least two building phases were confirmed by a single deep trial trench. The excavations showed that the structures were built on one another according to the same ground plan.

The best-known parts of the residential structures are currently the complexes of House 9¹² and House 10 (Figs 6, 7). Also, the northern part of the residential district was limited by House H19, which is situated north of the narrow street behind House 10a.¹³ Only one house there had a rectangular layout and was constructed perpendicularly to the residential complex no. 10. Even there, the narrow street did not keep the same breadth at its whole length and was getting narrower near the entrance to House H19. The layouts of both compounds nos. 9 and 10 are irregular in shape and were located against each other. Both of them formed a cluster of several houses. This kind of residential structures' distribution seems to reflect the oriental or local style of dwelling organisation. In the complex no. 10, three large and well-built houses would form a residential quarter. Between the structures nos. 10 and 10a, a partly-excavated dwelling was cleaned up in the western part of the complex. Two out of three of the fully-excavated dwellings had internal courtyards with peristyle finishing. Inside the third one, a simple courtyard was situated in its western part. House 10e was constructed in an open space between the complexes nos. 10 and 9. This way, supposedly, the original court was taken up by the house, which arranged and finished this part of the residential quarter. In this manner, a small, roughly L-shaped street was designed to provide access to the structures in the complex no. 10.

The other residential complex (no. 9) consists of two houses only. The layouts of both of them were also irregular in shape. From the urban planning point of view, the most important is how difficult it is to observe one straight street along these complex architectonic constructions. Here, the street also turns several times to facilitate access to the dwellings' entrances.

The neighbourhood of the H9 and H10 districts has a very specific internal organisation which is, apparently, characteristic of the whole spatial arrangement of the town. Eastward of these residential complexes, several partly-recognised houses could be identified. Thanks to a field survey and rescue excavations, it was possible to confirm that houses H18 and H12, as well as House H13, were situated in the eastern part of the already known district. In that part of the town, remains of a possible street communication network are also clearly visible. There, at least two streets could be reconstructed. Both of them were running directly toward the east. Another street reconstructed there was running more or less along the N-S axis. This street had its beginning at the corner near House H12. In the northern part, the street was slightly bent to the east, toward the harbour. This relatively narrow route crossed another one, running E-W, which started near the bathhouse complex. In the north-eastern part of the already recognised settlement limits, some traces of three other streets and three more partly-recognised houses were detected. At this point, similarly to the other parts of the town, the streets were running not in parallel to one another. They ran straight only in small sections, and each of the fragments did so at a different angle.

The area located westward from the ruins of House H17 remains almost completely untouched, so it is difficult to tell what kind of architectural structures could be found there. A relatively vast area in the central part of the town is still awaiting future excavations. In the centrally-located northern part of the town, several residential structures were brought to light. Architectural structures H2 and H1 doubtlessly deserve attention (Fig. 8).¹⁴ Especially House H1 seems to be crucial for a proper interpretation of that part of the town. This building is one of the largest dwellings ever excavated in Marina el-Alamein. Thanks to an architectonic analysis, it was possible to confirm that the building should be reconstructed as a two-storey construction. It was not only a wealthy dwelling, but was also used partly as an industrial structure. Several large tubes finished with water-resistant concrete were discovered in the eastern part of the house. The fact that considerable amounts of

¹² Medeksza 1996, 45–52; 2002, 89–102; Daszewski 2011, 429–431.

¹³ Medeksza 2001, 65–72; 2002, 89–102; Daszewski 2011, 429–431.

¹⁴ Medeksza *et al.* 2007, 10–15.

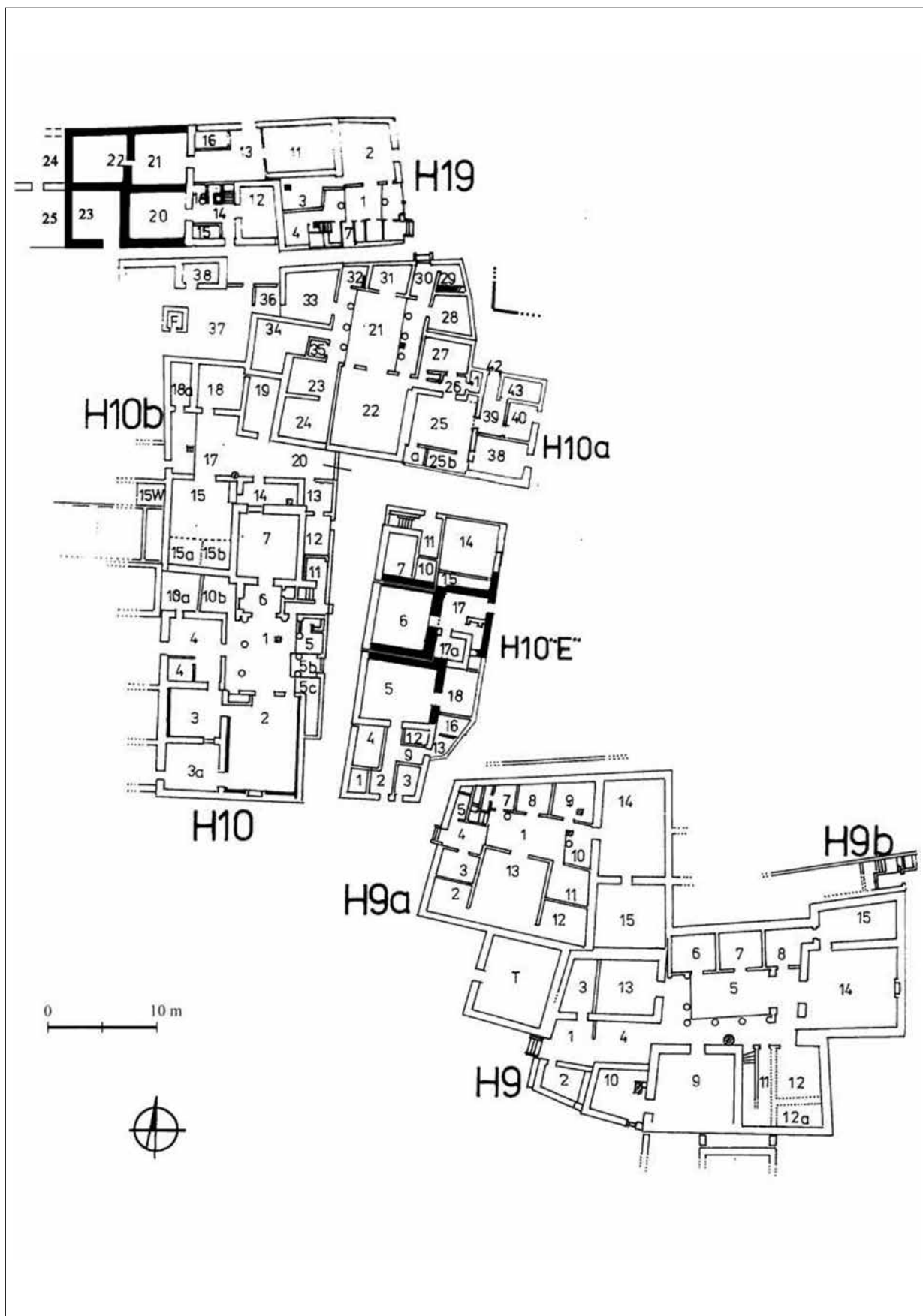


Fig. 6. Plan of the southern residential complex (after Medeksza *et al.* 2005, fig. 2).



Fig. 7. House H10a, a view from the south-east (photo by K. Jakubiak).



Fig. 8. House H1, a view from the north-west (photo by K. Jakubiak).

murex shells were found on a refuse-heap can indicate that a dye-house used to operate on the ground floor.

The other house, H2, a smaller but also well-built structure, is situated to the west from a slightly bent street running along the N-S axis. This street was most probably one of the main town arteries which passed by the bathhouse complex situated in the town centre. Several other architectural structures are still visible on the surface there, but their ground plans still await mapping and recording. It needs to be mentioned, however, that to the north from House H2 three other streets could be identified and recorded. Two of them were aligned along the E-W axis, while the third one ran northwards. Between these three streets – two parallel and one perpendicular to them going toward the harbour – House H41 has recently been excavated (Figs 9, 10).¹⁵ This large house with two internal courtyards also belongs to the most spectacular architectural structures unearthed in Marina el-Alamein. There, inside a large stone-paved courtyard, remains of a private shrine used only by the residents were detected. The structure, similarly to the already

mentioned House H1, was also a two-storey building. Most importantly, House H41 covered the area of the whole insula and was one of the largest residential structures ever functioning in this ancient town. The neighbourhood of House H41 without a doubt belonged to the most important spaces in the town. This supposition was confirmed thanks to the excavations in House H21, with an attached banquet hall situated directly to the north from the house (Fig. 11). Both unearthed structures and especially the remains of the Commodus commemorative monument located inside House H21 seem to support the hypothesis about the importance of this part of the town.¹⁶

Harbour area

All of the structures situated in the northern part of the town were most probably connected with the harbour and, in consequence, to the port, which played a crucial role in the town's economy. It can be assumed that the port area started north of the line of houses H21 and H1,



Fig. 9. Courtyard of House H41, a view from the east (photo by K. Jakubiak).

¹⁵ Jakubiak 2016.

¹⁶ Czerner 2005, 126–130; Czerner, Medeksza 2010.

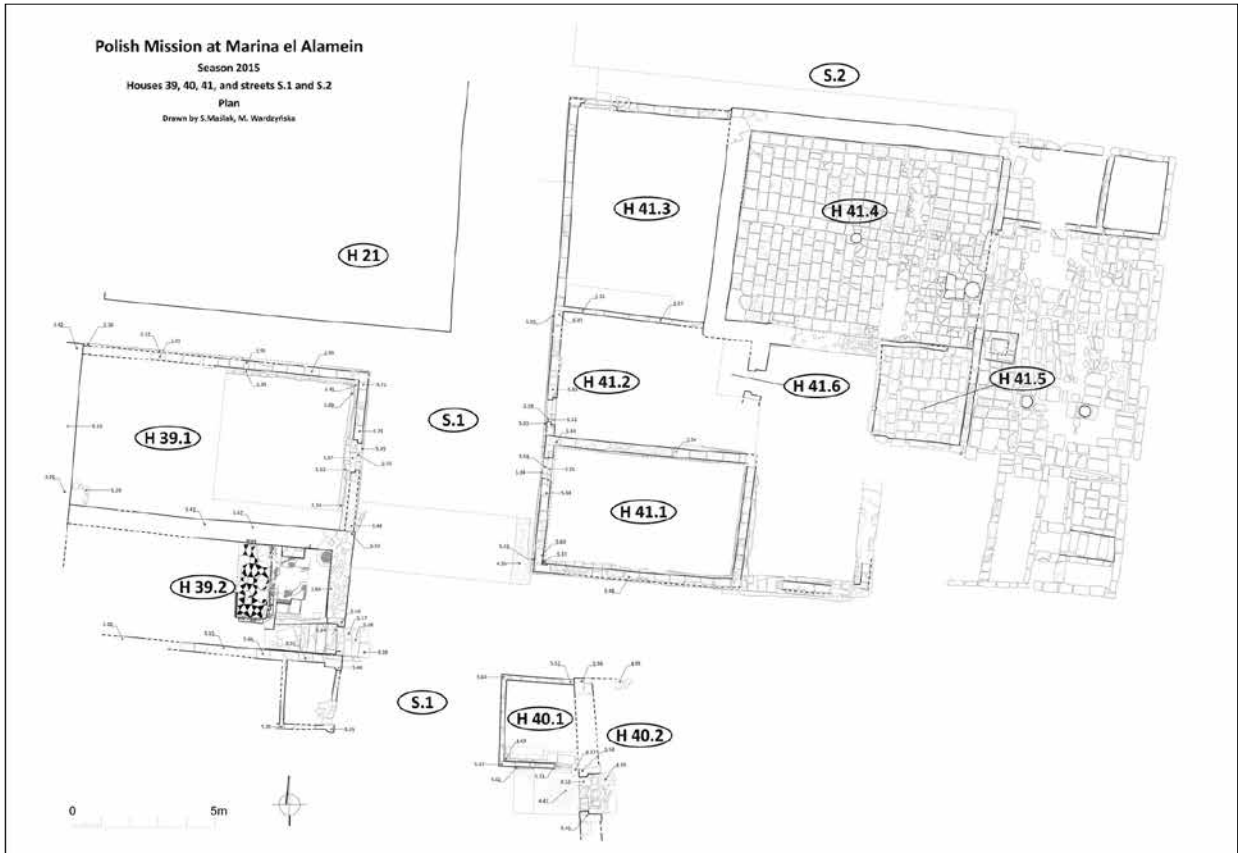


Fig. 10. Plan of House H41 (drawing by S. Maślak and M. Wardzyńska).



Fig. 11. Banquet hall attached to House H21, a view from the north (photo by K. Jakubiak).

with a street running along the E-W axis. To the north of this street, a small depression is clearly traceable. Most probably, it was an original landform, which provided free access to the seashore. Today, not many of the stone block and rock structures survive *in situ*. The structures as well as their layouts seem to be the remains of storage buildings spread all over the sunken area. The best-preserved ones are the two buildings known as structures 23 and 24. Several other buildings partly-visible on the surface (22, 25, 26, and 27) also belonged to the infrastructure of the port. Unfortunately, not all of the structures have survived in good condition, and this influenced the extent of our present knowledge on how the port in Marina el-Alamein might have been organised. It cannot be excluded that numerous port structures, such as storehouses, docking piers, and breakwaters, were most probably ultimately destroyed during the Porto Marina Resort construction process.

Thanks to an analysis of satellite photographs, it can be postulated that the seashore in the port area is badly damaged. The process of the seashore remodelling is already finished, and now the area of the ancient port is a part of a much larger modern tourist resort. Looking westward from the remains of the ancient port, the seashore looks very interesting. The area where the museum building and the dig house are presently located was probably free of any traces of human activity in the past. In the ancient times, supposedly, there was a sea bottom there. Here, a relatively flat harbour must have been originally formed. The original shape of the coast was probably changed by the ocean currents, which brought the material that was gradually silting up the area westward from the supposed headland. If the supposition is correct, it indicates that the location of the port was chosen perfectly, as the waters in the port basin were relatively calm, and only one small breakwater was enough to protect boats and ships anchored there.

Final remarks

Generally, the town can be divided into several parts according to the specific role of the distribution of architectural structures within the settlement. Certainly, the character of architecture determined the specific organisation of each district. On the basis of our present knowledge and the results of the already conducted excavations and observations from the field, it is possible to identify quite a lot of units within the settlement. In the north, along the seashore, traces of port infrastructure can be found. The second unit, located between houses

H1, H21, and H41 and their vicinity, was the district of wealthy houses with a private bathhouse, decorated with a pebble mosaic floor and attached to House H41.¹⁷ This is, probably, where the most spectacular and representative group of private buildings was situated. The third unit, that is the town centre, was located in the vicinity of the bathhouse, with a basilica attached to the complex and a *palestra* structure as the central part of the compound. Supposedly, to the north-east of the northern part of the baths and directly to the south of House H1, an *agora* or the main city square can be inferred. The supposition can be supported by the fact that a subsided area, more or less rectangular in shape, is still clearly visible. In other words, the most important public buildings could have been situated in the discussed part of the archaeological site.

To the east and west of the centrally-located bathhouse complex, two large districts of wealthy houses must have been situated. The only well-examined features of the area are the two clusters of houses known as housing complexes 9 and 10. Taking into consideration the lay of the land and the surface of the area, it is likely that the whole central part of the town was occupied by wealthy and well-built residential structures. Eastward of the H9 and H10 town quarters, another district of dwellings developed in the vicinity of houses H14 and H16 and other buildings. A slightly more modest architecture can be observed there. These structures, partly excavated and recorded only on the surface, represent the average residential architecture. Most probably, the middle class inhabited this district of the town. However, this automatically provokes the question about the whereabouts of the poorer dwellings. It is likely that non-wealthy, ordinary people of Marina el-Alamein lived in the eastern part of the town. Unfortunately, this fragment of the ancient settlement is severely damaged by modern activity. The character of this part of the site, however, indicates that mud brick architecture may have dominated there. In many places, traces of eroded mud brick structures are still visible on the surface. In this part of the town, an early Christian basilica was constructed, most probably at the beginning of the 5th century AD.¹⁸ This religious facility clearly confirms that the town survived the earthquake in the 4th century AD.

The last element that was an integral part of the town is a large necropolis attached to the settlement from the south. It cannot be excluded that the aforementioned basilica was erected over a burial of a local saint. Along a modern highway running toward Marsa Matruh, at the distance of at least 1,5 km, several types of tombs indicated the scale of Marina el-Alamein's cemetery. Most

¹⁷ Jakubiak 2016.

¹⁸ Daszewski 2011, 435.

probably, the tract of land between the cemetery and the town quarters used by the citizens was taken up by a main road connecting Alexandria to the east and *Paraetonium* to the west. In such a natural way, the two parts of the town were separated from each other. A clear and natural barrier divided the two worlds: the town of the living in the north and the town of the dead in the south.

Considering all the above-mentioned elements which together formed the town, it can be postulated that in the 1st century AD Marina el-Alamein was a peculiar settlement situated on the Egyptian Mediterranean coast. Especially the wealthiest members of the urban community once living there deserve our closer attention. Reflection of their social status is clearly visible in the different types of tombs, which can also provide information about the origin of the populace living in this part of Egypt. The street grid and the omission of

the Hippodamian urban plan can be interpreted as an attempt to protect against the local weather and harsh climatic conditions. The coastal area with the port, the first natural platform used for dwelling and public space organisation (cultic or sacral structures were possibly located there), and the uppermost ridge, where the necropolis was located, paint a picture of a town divided in a very natural way into three zones of human activity. The towns from the shoreline are not as well-known as those from the Egyptian interior, such as the Faiyum Oasis and others.¹⁹ This is what makes it still worthwhile to analyse the town of Marina el-Alamein as a specific and exceptional settlement functioning on the Mediterranean coast of Egypt. Therefore, Marina el-Alamein doubtlessly belongs to the most intriguing and important, as well as small yet wealthy, towns in the eastern part of the Mediterranean basin.

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¹⁹ Davoli 2011.

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