

# Greco-Roman Cities at the Crossroads of Cultures

The 20th Anniversary of  
Polish-Egyptian Conservation Mission  
Marina el-Alamein

edited by

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## Preface

The ancient town, discovered at the site of today's Marina el-Alamein, located on the northern coast of Egypt – which developed from the 2nd century BC to the 6th century AD – has found itself at the crossroads of several civilisations: Hellenic, later replaced by Roman, and eventually Christian – and has always been strongly influenced by Egyptian tradition. A variety of cultures have met and appeared here and grown in strength – then their significance weakened – but they have always co-existed and influenced one another. The syncretism prevailing here is notable in art, architecture, religion and worship.

In 2015, it had been thirty years since the discovery of the remains of the ancient city, which, for many centuries, had been unknown to the world. They were found unexpectedly during the preparatory work for the construction of a modern tourist settlement on the Mediterranean coast, and the significance and extraordinary value of the find was immediately recognised. The discoverer and author of the scientific interpretation, Professor Wiktor A. Daszewski, mentions these pioneering times in the first article of this volume.

The tourist housing complex, designed in 1985, has never been built. The significance of the discovered monument prevailed over the possible benefits that could flow from this construction. The ancient city, and the historic remains of its buildings, are gradually coming to light instead. The archaeological site in Marina el-Alamein, after many years of effort, according to the decision of the Ministry of State for Antiquities, will be soon open to tourists. The organisational work bringing us closer to this important event has already begun.

The Jubilee was twofold, since 2015 marked also the 20th anniversary of the setting up of the Polish-Egyptian Conservation Mission, Marina el-Alamein. During this time, architectural and archaeological research has been carried out at the site, many discoveries have been made, numerous relics of historic building structures have been preserved, and conservation methods have been improved. In the jubilee year, an exhibition was organised at the Alexandria National Museum from 26 May to 8 June, 2015. We also invited researchers – who work on archaeological sites and towns with a similar history and position in the ancient world, art and culture – for a scientific discussion and exchange of experience. A scientific conference was organised in Wrocław on 17-18 September, 2015. The authors of the presented papers are representatives of different disciplines and research methodologies: archaeologists, architects, Egyptologists, specialists in religious studies, historians and conservators. The present volume contains an interdisciplinary review of both the newest and long-term studies and achievements made in various regions of the ancient world.

The research that was conducted in different regions is discussed in articles, ranging from ancient Mauritania, through Africa, Egypt, Cyprus, Palestine, Syria, as well as sites in Crimea and Georgia. The topography of cities, architecture of public buildings, as well as houses and their décor – architectural, sculptured and painted – are presented. Religious syncretism and the importance of ancient texts are discussed. Studies on pottery are also presented. The volume includes studies on the conservation of architecture, sculpture and painting. Several articles are devoted to the study of Marina el-Alamein; others talk about ancient Alexandria, Deir el-Bahari, Hermopolis Magna, Bakchias, Pelusium, Kom Wasit, Berenike, Ptolemais, Apollonia, Palmyra, Nea Paphos, as well as Chersonesus Taurica and Apsarus.

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Thanks to Archaeopress for publishing our book. For the organisational and financial support of the conference and the publication, we would also like to take this opportunity to thank of the Rector of the Wrocław University of Science and Technology, Prof Cezary Madryas, and the Dean of the Faculty of Architecture, Prof. Elżbieta Trocka-Leszczyńska, the Director of the Inter-Academy Institute of Conservation and Restoration of Works of Art, Prof. Andrzej Koss, The Director of the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology at the University of Warsaw, Prof. Tomasz Waliszewski and the Director of the Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations at the Jagiellonian University, Prof. Marta Kudelska. We would like to thank the Director of the Museum of Architecture in Wrocław, Dr Jerzy Ilkosz, for hosting the conference.

Grażyna Bąkowska-Czerner  
Rafał Czerner





Figure 1. In front of the Alexandria National Museum on the opening day of the jubilee exhibition (Photo M. Koczorowska)



Figure 2. Inauguration of the jubilee conference at the Museum of Architecture in Wrocław (Photo P. Zambrzycki)



# Greco-Roman Cities at the Crossroads of Cultures – Marina el-Alamein in Egypt

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## Summary

In late November 1985, while in Alexandria, I was informed by an Egyptian colleague that Chinese workers contracted by the Egyptian Government, had begun work on modern tourist areas south of the lagoon separated from the Mediterranean Sea east of el-Alamein, the famous battleground of the Second World War, some 96 km west of Alexandria. Immediately visiting the area where the workers were destroying small fragments of limestone, perhaps walls, I understood that there must have been ancient fragments including pieces of pottery, especially Cypriot Sigillata of the late Hellenistic and Roman period. Having been granted permission to excavate the area called 'Marina el-Alamein,' from late 1986 onwards I started uncovering all the ruins and documenting them. The mission (of the Centre of Mediterranean Archeology – University of Warsaw) excavates private houses, large bathes, official buildings, including parts of the main square (Forum) of the town, and the necropolis. There were uncovered huge tombs, either hewn deep under the surface (hypogea), sometimes up to forty-four meters long, or built upon surface-pillar-and-column-tombs-in the form of stepped pyramidal tombs reaching a height of 5-7 m. The relatively small, but rich town seemed to have accommodated a plethora of foreigners who wanted to settle there and live together peacefully. They included Egyptians, Greeks from the islands, and especially from Cyprus.

## Keywords

Marina el-Alamein, ancient town, necropolis, Hellenistic and Roman period

During late November of 1985, while studying archaeological issues in Alexandria, I was informed by an Egyptian colleague of mine that Chinese workers, contracted by the Egyptian Government, had started building a modern tourist area, south of the huge lagoon separated from the Mediterranean Sea by sand dunes. On this coast, about 5 to 6 km east of el-Alamein – the famous battleground of the Second World War, and some 96 km west of Alexandria [Figure 1], the workers began to create roads and streets for a new town. This prompted me to visit the area [Figure 2]. Indeed, in preparing the ground for new houses the workers were in fact destroying fragments of limestone walls which seemed to be from ancient times, while young shepherds still hung onto their existence and continued to feed their donkeys with grass [Figure 3]. Among the tiny fragments of walls I found pieces of ancient pottery, including Cypriot sigillata from the late Hellenistic and early Roman period. That is why, I informed the Supreme Council of Egyptian Antiquities in Cairo about the situation and, after some time, was granted permission to begin researching the area, i.e. the place called 'Marina el-Alamein,' while the Egyptian inspectors tried to save the area from modern destruction [Figure 4]. At first, in late 1986 – (look what was found – a huge whale! [Figure 5]) – and during 1987, all the visible ruins were documented. The Polish Mission of the Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology (University of Warsaw), under my direction, began excavating fragments of private houses, of a large bath,

of different official buildings, including part of the main square (Forum) of the town, and the necropolis [Figure 6]. Incredibly, there were huge tombs either partly hewn deep under the surface of the area (hypogea, sometimes up to 44 meters long – see T6!), or built upon the surface – pillar-and column-tombs [Figure 7] – in the form of stepped pyramidal tombs [Figure 8], reaching a height of 5-7 m.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes they were decorated. For instance, the top of the column of one tomb, was decorated with a Horus-falcon statue.<sup>2</sup> Later on, over time, these tombs were partly destroyed or buried under deep sand.<sup>3</sup> On one above-ground tomb with one layer of several *loculi* but without columns or pilasters, on top of one *loculus* a statue was found of a standing women. Such examples of decorations were uncovered during the excavation work. It seems that these reliefs were once made by local people, probably from the same families. The architecture was excellent, indicating that the builders of such constructions were extremely professional, probably Greeks or, more likely, Greco-Egyptians. Of interest is the fact that the Greco-Egyptian geographer Claudios Ptolemaios of the 2nd century AD. when describing this region mentioned Leucaspis, a small town built along

<sup>1</sup> Daszewski 1990: 83-86; 1991: 27-34; 1999: 41-50. Members of the Polish Mission: W.A. Daszewski, Zofia Sztetyło, Iwona Zych, Grzegorz Majcherek, Rafał Koliński, Janusz Wałkuski, Grzegorz Wyrzykowski, Tomasz Szmagier.

<sup>2</sup> Daszewski 1995a: 28-36, esp. 31.

<sup>3</sup> Daszewski 1994: 22-35, esp. 31-35; 2011: 438, fig. 17.



Figure 1. Map of the Mediterranean coast of Egypt (After Fauvel 1982)



Figure 2. Expedition to visit the area (Photo W.A. Daszewski)



Figure 3. Young shepherds feeding their donkeys with grass at the site of Marina el-Alamein in 1985 (Photo W.A. Daszewski)



Figure 4. The site of Marina el-Alamein in 1985 (Photo W.A. Daszewski)



Figure 5. Late 1986. Members of the Polish Mission of the Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology and a huge whale thrown onto the sea shore at Marina el-Alamein (Photo Author's archives)



the lagoon protected from the sea by incredibly white sand forming a narrow band between the sea and the lagoon. Several modern scholars describing the coast between Alexandria and Marsa Matruh thought that in this particular area there must have been either the previously mentioned harbour-town Leucaspis or the harbour-town Antiphrae.<sup>4</sup> Which one of these two is this new place? Until now no inscriptions had been

found during excavations which would attest to the name of this town.

Several houses were partly rescued in 1986/7 and later excavated entirely. Salvage works allowed us to uncover a number of such houses in a residential quarter. Later on they were fully explored and restored. All these buildings represented the Greek type of Hellenistic and Early Roman private houses. As an example, one may present [Figure 9] House no. 9.<sup>5</sup> It stood about 150 m southeast of the main square and was of average

<sup>4</sup> Ptol. *Geog.* 4.5.7; Strabo. *Geog.* 17.1.14; Diod. Sic. *Bibl.* 1.31.68; Plin. *HN* 5.5.32; 6.39; Hierocles, *Synecdemus* 734.2. All these things are of importance for the areas called 'Gulf of Arabs' (Gulf of Plinthine) and possibly the town of Leucaspis or Antiphrae – cf. Fourtau 1914: 100-126; de Cosson 1935; 1940: 48-61; Ball 1942.

<sup>5</sup> Daszewski 1995b: 11-29, esp. 20-21; Medeksza 1996: 42-52, esp. 48.





Figure 6. Marina el-Alamein. The excavations in the area of the necropolis (Photo W.A. Daszewski)



Figure 7. Marina el-Alamein. Pillar-and column-tombs (Photo Author's archives)

size, approximately 38 m E-W by 24 m S-N. An earlier building stage from the late 1st century BC used broken limestone bonded in clay and lime mortar. A later stage, from the late 1st century AD, showed repairs to the stone walls and additions made of mud-brick in clay mortar. Several houses in the neighbourhood demonstrated similar process of development by agglutination, in the 1st and 2nd centuries AD.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Plan of private houses to the southeast of the main square – see especially H9. Cf. Medeksza 1999: 52, fig. 2 and Daszewski 2011: fig. 9. Plan of private houses, including H9a, H10, H10a, H10b, H10E.

House 9 was entered from a winding ally to its west. The wooden doorway nestled in a corner of walls, next to a large stable (T), probably for donkeys. It was provided with a separate entrance from the street. Four stone steps led up to the threshold of the house, passing a bench by the side of the entrance. From the vestibule (1) one could pass into a latrine (2) with seats for several users. The installation was flushed by water brought from the main house cistern and discharged into a circular settling tank outside the house wall. On the opposite side of the vestibule there was a storeroom (3) still full of completely preserved amphorae. A long

Figure 8. Marina el-Alamein. The author of this work at a stepped pyramidal tomb (Photo Author's archives)

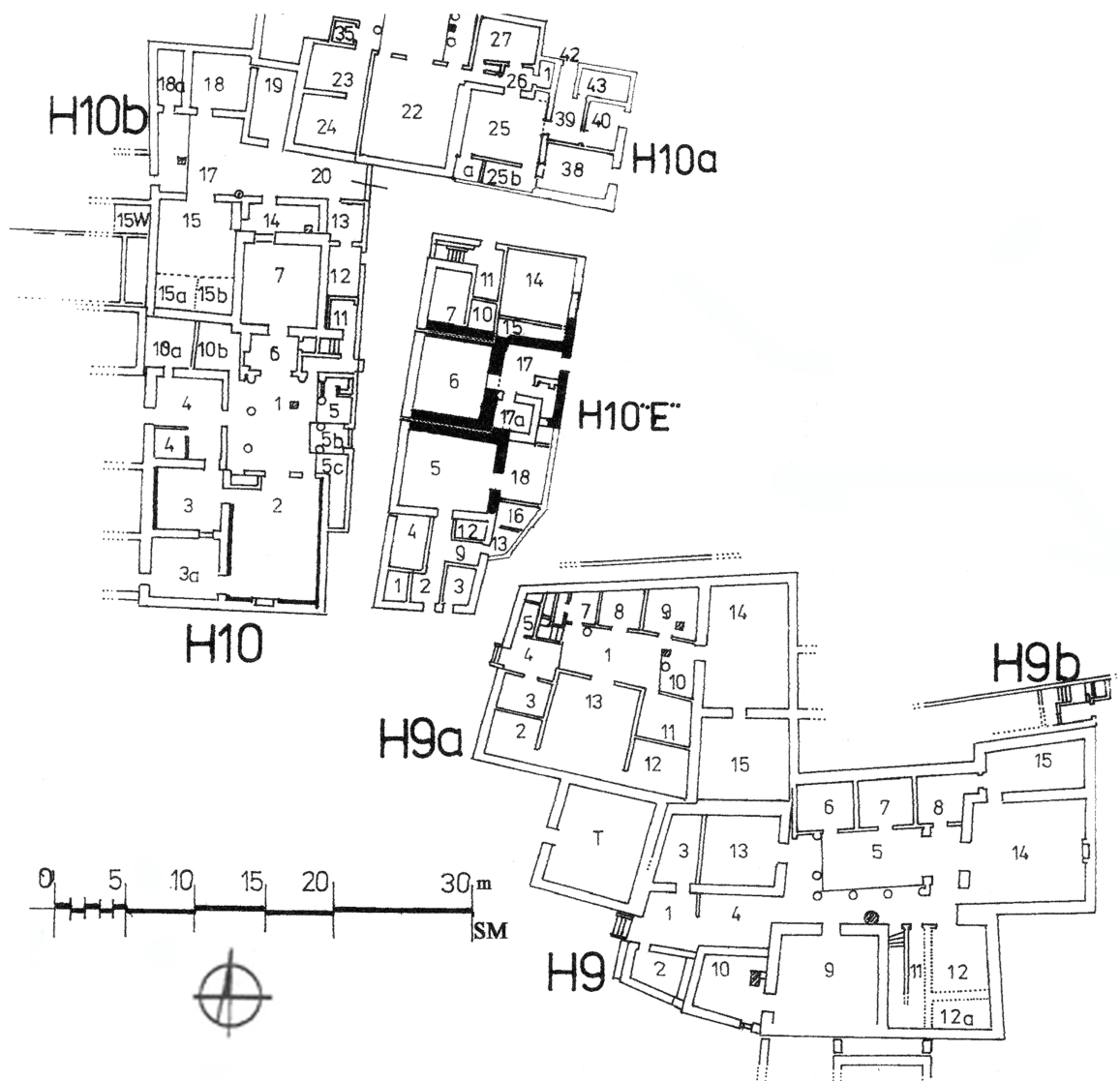


Figure 9. Marina el-Alamein. Plan of a group of private houses in the south-eastern area of the site (Drawing S. Medeksza)



corridor (4) led to the porticoed courtyard (5) at the heart of the house. The diurnal life of the inhabitants ran its course in room (13), west of the portico. The kitchen (6) and living rooms (7, 8, 15) in the north wing of the house, as well as room (12) to the south of the courtyard were all for daily activities. A well-shaft leading to an underground water cistern was located in the middle of the southern portico. A large room – an ‘andron’ (9), southwest of the courtyard, was a place for men. Room (14) was an ‘oikos’ preceded by a ‘prostas.’ The columns and pilasters of the porticoes were decorated in the pseudo-Ionic style, while those in the entrance to the ‘prostas’ and ‘oikos’ were of the pseudo-Corinthian type. A staircase leading up to the rooms of the upper floor and the roof of the House were situated between rooms (9) and (12). Painted panels with geometric patterns in blue, red, yellow, white and purple were also recorded everywhere, sometimes including figural representations. For instance, in House 10, the heads of Harpocrates, Serapis and Helios were uncovered, while in other parts, near the main square, marble statues were found, a nymph and a marble head of a young woman, perhaps a goddess.<sup>7</sup> Many other finds – pottery, lamps, fragments of amphorae and coins were found during the restoration and conservation of the buildings carried out by ourselves and our colleagues from the PCMA Polish-Egyptian Restoration Mission.<sup>8</sup>

Who were those people of the harbour town? Most of the tombs were plundered, and the corpses almost completely destroyed. Were they Greeks (see the Greco-Roman architecture!) or were there other groups of people, from Cyrenaica or from Egypt. This small, but rich town seemed to have accommodated all foreigners who wanted to settle and live together peacefully. It seems to me that, just as in Hellenistic and Roman Alexandria, there were different groups of Greeks from the islands, particularly from Cyprus (closely connected with the famous goddess Aphrodite/Venus) and Crete, as well as from the mainland and, of course, the Egyptians. That is why in some tombs some splendid mummies were found – the Greco-Egyptians, most probably bilingual.<sup>9</sup> See, for example, the fully preserved portrait painted on a wooden panel from this burial in T6. That is why, indeed, they were the truly ‘Greco-Egyptian people’ whom we are now attempting to uncover once again.

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<sup>7</sup> Daszewski 2013: 167, fig. 4, 169, fig. 5.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, cf. Medeksza *et al.* 2011: 119-127; also Bąkowska 2005: 100-105; Kucharczyk 2005: 93-99.

<sup>9</sup> Mummies from a cache burial in T6 in Marina el-Alamein, cf. Daszewski 2011: 451-452, fig. 30.