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THE MARINA EL-ALAMEIN (EGYPT) BATHHOUSE COMPLEXES AND THEIR ROLE FOR THE LOCAL COMMUNITY WELL-BEING

Abstract: The remains of a small town from the Greco-Roman period, located at Marina el-Alamein on the Mediterranean coast around 100 km west of Alexandria in Egypt, indicate an exceptional urban area amongst those unearthed in Egypt. Excavations have brought to light three architectural structures dedicated to the personal hygiene of the citizens. Each of these buildings was constructed in a somewhat different way and style. Therefore, we have at our disposal a unique chance to analyze how the bathhouse structures were developing and changing in Egypt during the first centuries of the Common Era.

Keywords: bathhouse, Alexandria, Marina el-Alamein, Egypt, Greco-Roman period, architecture, urban space, bathing

Introduction

The bathhouses or other structures intended for personal hygiene and sanitation were amongst the most spectacular and important buildings in almost every town and city in the ancient Mediterranean. Such lavish infrastructure dedicated to the public was emblematic for the towns and the cities, which not only wanted to demonstrate their prosperity and unstinting attention to effective town-planning, but also to be recognized by this visual symbol of their status as part of the civilized world.¹ From an anthropological point of view, the city infrastructure, especially those constructions built for hygienic purposes differentiate between the well-organized, civilized urban spaces and those places, or cities, which were still considered as barbarian. The clear association and contrast between cleanliness and squalor, well-organized space versus chaos, and governable versus ungovernable, seem to be reflections of the broad ideology that lies hidden behind mundane constructions such as bathhouses might appear to be at first glance.

The access to bathhouses is a separate issue. The number of people who were able to attend the bath complexes seems to be very important when trying to reconstruct the urban space organization. In the case of the ancient town of Marina el-Alamein, the remains of which can be found around one hundred kilometres west of Egyptian Alexandria, that question appears frequently. The question arises as to whether this small town, burgeoning on the Mediterranean shores of Egypt, reflects the general acceptance of the Greco-Roman period's fascination with personal hygiene as well as the sense of the appreciation of the Greek and Roman way of life.

¹ YEGÜL 1992.

The data from the excavations at Marina el-Alamein

During excavations conducted in Marina since 1986, numerous unique funeral structures and remains of dwelling constructions were discovered.² In addition three bathhouse structures were brought to light. But first, thanks to the excavations focused mainly on the central part of the town it was possible to recognize numerous wealthy, well-designed houses built of stone block [Fig. 1]. All dwellings recognized so far were arranged in the manner similar to *insulae* sections, where clusters of several buildings were interconnected with shared common walls.³ The bathhouse was an integral part of the layout of the urban space. The ancient town was most probably established during the first century BC, as the oldest artefacts, pottery and small finds, discovered in the necropolis confirm.⁴ Most likely, from that time, the town space dedicated to the public buildings sector was developed step by step. Unfortunately, that process is difficult to trace. Because the epigraphic material from the site is very limited, the question is still justified as to the location of the first buildings in the earliest phase of the town's foundation — in other words, whether the public infrastructure was designed and located within the town during the early stages of its

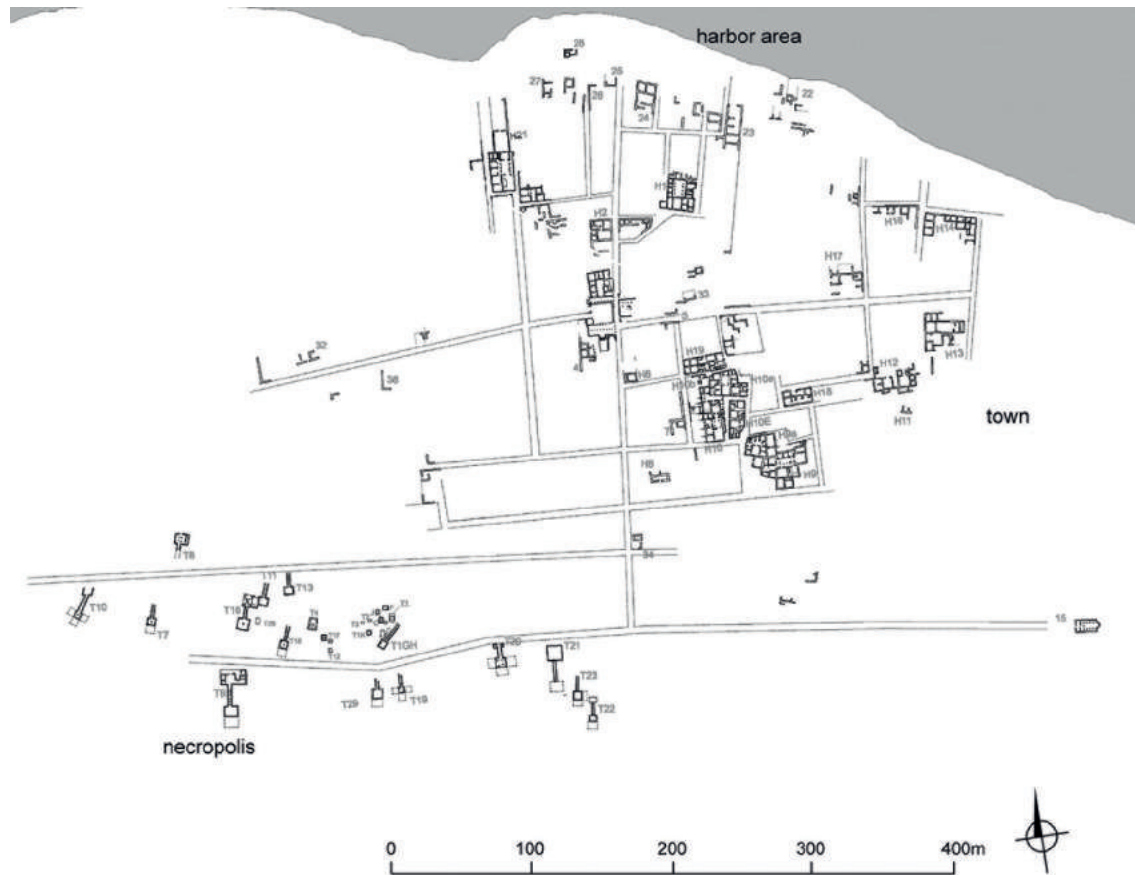


Fig. 1. Marina el-Alamein: the site plan (after Medeksza *et alii* 2010, fig. 1)

² DASZEWSKI, ZYCH 2007.

³ JAKUBIAK 2019.

⁴ DASZEWSKI, ZYCH 2007.

development. Moreover, one might ask whether subsequent settlers would have found the town's infrastructure acceptable and comfortable. If the basic public infrastructure was already *in situ*, then the newcomers would have identified the town as typical of the Greco-Roman standard of the time. Thus, thanks to the public facilities, new arrivals would have rapidly put down their roots here and started to identify themselves with the place where they now lived. It cannot be excluded, however, that the dwelling houses were constructed in parallel with the development of the city infrastructure. Bearing in mind that the central part of the town looks like a precisely designed space, it is not surprising that a bathhouse was added to the project in the ideal location for the convenience of a health conscious and refined citizenry.

According to present knowledge, the bathhouse discovered in the central part of the town was the oldest such structure in Marina.⁵ The building layout, the character of the construction materials and other details lead to the conclusion that the beginning of the complex should be dated to the Late Ptolemaic period (the middle of the first century BC) [Fig. 2]. The most characteristic element that is distinctive of bathhouse construction from that period, is a *tholos* structure, being a part of the building design and the central component of the complex. Analysing the bathhouse plan and its orientation and comparing it to the structures from its neighbourhood, it is possible to easily recognize, that the positioning of the baths is different than the other architectural remains. This Hellenistic type *tholos* bathhouse is around eight, maximum ten degrees deviated northwest in relation to the flagstone paving of the square that marks the central point of the town. That difference can be a confirmation that the urban layout changed slightly during the time of the town's development. Therefore it is not surprising that the older phase buildings, like the bathhouse, in this case, were partly destroyed in the course of the later rearrangement of the town centre. As Bąkowska and Czerner pointed out, and the present author agrees, the structure has two or more architectural phases.⁶ Most probably in the first century AD a fragment of the southern part of the building was dismantled and removed; and the area was possibly levelled in order to construct the other structures. The *tholos* bath building, although seriously damaged, still has some features that make a partial analysis of the architectural structure possible. Since the integrity of the older bathhouse was disturbed during the town centre's rearrangement, the best method of analysing the building is to start from the most spectacular room, the circular *tholos*. This circular chamber, was most probably enclosed within a walled structure that was originally square in layout. However the latter was slightly changed to a create trapezoid shape around the *tholos* in the final phase of the rebuilding of the eastern external façade wall of the building. This also affected the shape of the *tholos*, which now required the remodelling of its internal bath space. The original circular stone wall only partly survived in the northern segment of the circle. The southern part of the circular finishing of the room's interior comprised smaller stone blocks, with red bricks forming the lowermost parts of the submersion or hip-bathtubs. The final stage of the interior redesign converted the chamber into an oval shape. As with the eastern wall, the northern wall of the *tholos* chamber also did not survive in its original shape. The redesign of the northern part of the bathhouse further disrupted the original layout of the *tholos* chamber. It seems that the *tholos* structure had been transformed into a relatively large water reservoir since the entire interior was lined with a waterproof concrete plaster. This rearrangement was limited from the east by a paved street which was running at a very slight angle toward the east in relation to the other street which has been unearthed to the south of the Hellenistic bathhouse. Similar traces of the chaotic rearrangement of the eastern part of the building were also brought to light in the southern part of the complex, which seems to have happened in parallel to the first mentioned redevelopment of the

⁵ MEDEKSZA *et alii* 2010.

⁶ BĄKOWSKA-CZERNER, CZERNER 2019.

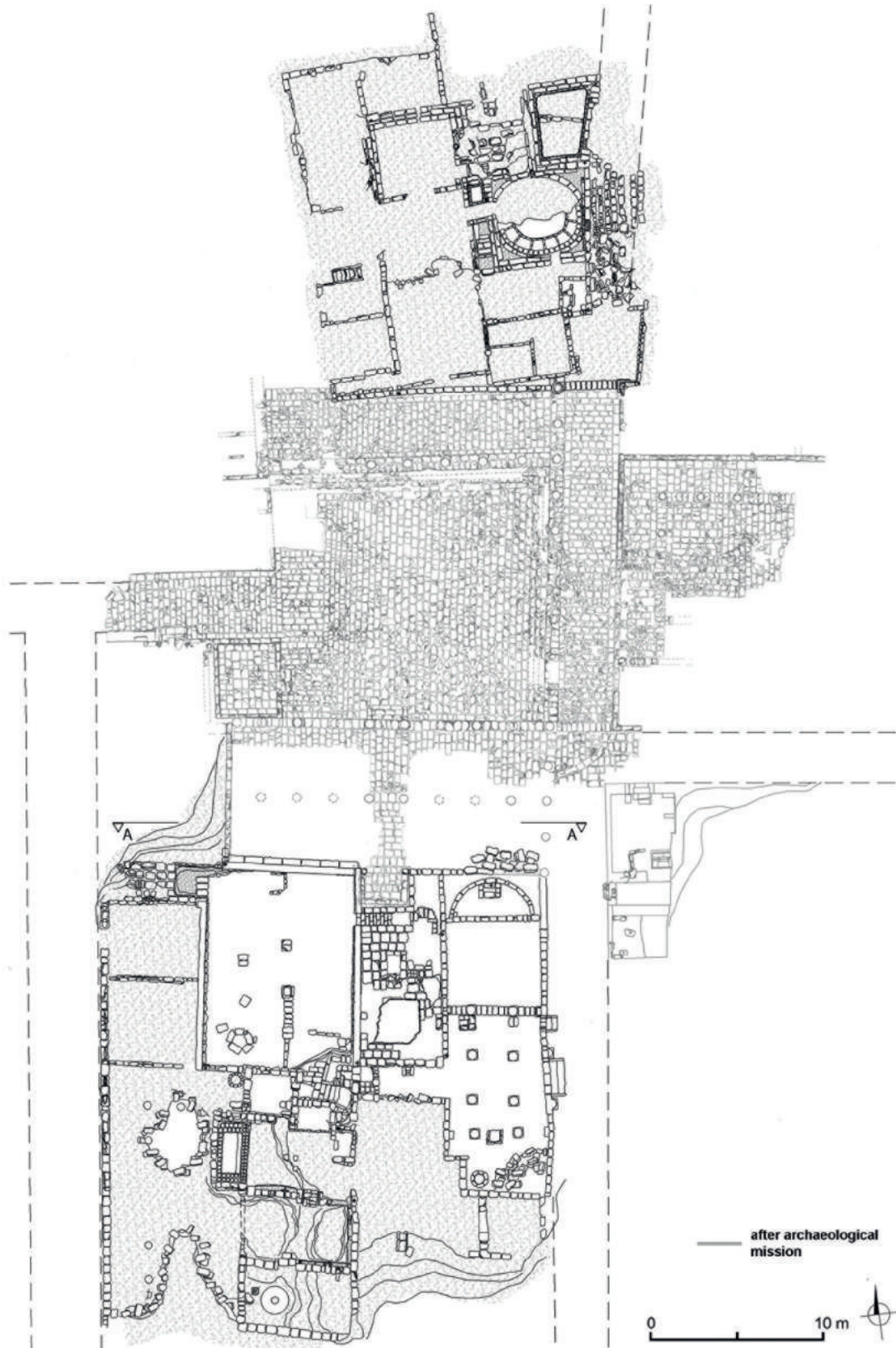


Fig. 2. Bathhouses discovered in the central part of the town (after Medeksza *et alii* 2010, fig. 6)

town centre. Several rooms, the functions and intention of which remain obscure, were attached to the *tholos* southern wall. All of the changes in the building's shape, especially in the eastern part, most probably happened in the early Roman period. Those changes were likely forced by the poor condition of the old baths infrastructure. However, the rearrangements had to respect the course of the old street, which has been interpreted as one of the most important arteries linking the town with the harbour area.

The western part of the older bathhouse building, especially in the northern section of the construction, was most probably dedicated to the technical aspects of the functioning of the complex. Badly damaged remnants of the heating infrastructure were recorded there during the fieldworks. The westernmost part of the bathhouse building was most probably originally arranged as a recreation zone. Moreover, the main entrance to the building was positioned here, which indicates that the cloakrooms (*apodyteria*) should also be located in this part.

South of the *tholos* bathhouse one can find a portico decorated square, this being one of the most spectacular architectural structures of the town. The function of that square is a separate issue, and it will be discussed later in a broader context as a part of the baths service organization. To the south of the square, were the remains of another baths structure, which was originally a much more elaborate and better designed building. This second bathhouse complex standing along the southern edge of the town square was visibly better constructed and more finely finished than the older bathhouse previously described. Certainly, present knowledge confirms the above statement, since the *tholos* bathhouse was not preserved in such good condition as the building south of the square. It would be reasonable to suppose that the decision concerning a further investment in a new bathhouse complex in Marina el-Alamein was instigated by the deteriorating condition of the old *tholos* bathhouse. Analysing the *tholos* bathhouse it is possible to recognize numerous cracks in the wall constructions as well as traces of the partial demolition process. In other words, at the beginning of the second century AD, this Hellenistic type building was “worn out” and in consequence partly disused. Most probably the new bathhouse construction was a part of a much bigger space rearrangement program when the town square was established, further damaging the already dilapidated *tholos* baths.

The new baths building, generally rectangular in layout, was around 25 meters wide and almost 40 meters long.⁷ Thus, the newly established complex was approximately 30% bigger than the old baths. Not only is the scale of the object and its layout different, but also the internal space arrangement has survived in much better condition. It is today possible to decode the functions of almost all of the baths architectural components. Evidently, the new bathhouse was more splendid, which shows that the town was flourishing during the Roman domination over Egypt. The newly established bathhouse was based on a completely novel concept and according to a different architectural philosophy implemented by the Romans. The innovative design allowed much more space inside the building. This is manifested by a basilica structure incorporated into the north-eastern part of the baths complex. The three-aisle basilica was additionally divided into two sections: northern and southern. In the northern part, the most striking characteristic of the whole construction is an apse with a podium built against the centre of its arced wall. The connection between the semi-circular apse and the rest of the basilica, was demarcated by a low structure built of regular stone blocks. To the south of the apse, the northern part of the basilica consists of a square space without any trace remaining of the necessary rooftop support elements. The only element separating that part of the building from the three-aisle basilica section is a low

⁷ MEDEKSZA *et alii* 2010; BĄKOWSKA-CZERNER, CZERNER 2017; BĄKOWSKA-CZERNER, CZERNER 2019.

stone block marker raised a few centimetres above the flagstone pavement that possibly covered the whole basilica interior [Fig. 3]. What is more, this element is also a stylobate for the two of the columns that demarcate the three aisles — running north to south — the remains of which are still visible in the southern part of the basilica.

In the southern part of the basilica, the doorway to the baths complex was located in its eastern wall. The entrance was lifted several dozen centimetres above a paved street running along the building façade. To make entry possible, two stone steps attached to the façade were needed. Moreover, the entrance was additionally decorated with two half-columns that flanked the doorway. That kind of embellishment made the entrance relatively monumental and, without a doubt, it was the main access into the building. Another much smaller doorway, but also raised above the street level, was located approximately two or three meters north of the main entrance. The small doorway could have been dedicated to people who wanted to get into the northern part of the basilica [Fig. 4]. The second doorway might also have been the entrance for women who certainly needed to have another cloakroom (*apodyterium*) but this is still debatable. Alternatively, the basilica structure being a part of the bath complex design as one of its sections could have served as a vestibule and the cloakroom. It is also possible that it was used as a meeting hall. Perhaps — though yet to be examined carefully — the large space of the basilica was a site for court hearings and a place where sentences were announced. That could explain the elevated sitting space located in the central part of the apse.



Fig. 3. The eastern part of the Roman period baths (photo by K. Jakubiak)

West of the basilica two chambers formed the next section of the complex. The northern room is difficult to recognize but certainly belonged to several other chambers forming the technical part of the building. The northernmost fragment of the chamber is attached to a staircase giving access to the upper floor section or the bath complex roof. That part of the bathhouse's northern elevation was finished with a rectangular exedra. On the other side of the complex, a large, L-shaped hall formed one of the largest chambers in the building. Two columns were erected along the wall which closed the basilica section from the south to support the roof over the large hall. It cannot be also excluded that these technical architectural elements were not only used for the structural support but also, somehow, at the same time the columns divided the hall space (even if only symbolically) into two sections. As Bąkowska and Czerner pointed out, this part of the building should be interpreted as a *frigidarium*.⁸ In other words, one of the largest halls was dedicated for cooling off after a hot bath, and to relax.

The southern part of the bathhouse was divided into three sections. The eastern part formed the basilica and *frigidarium* chamber. The central part of the bathhouse was dedicated to a *caldarium*, *laconicum* and *tepidarium* looking from north to south. The attribution of those three chambers was postulated by Bąkowska and Czerner, which seems to be confirmed by the characteristic infrastructure of these rooms. The *caldarium* was recognized by the presence of two rectangular containers covered with waterproof concrete. The southernmost chamber, interpreted as *tepidarium*, had the internal pavement decorated with *opus sectile*. A large stone *labrum* discovered in the room makes its above interpretation acceptable. Still, the most convincing is elimination of



Fig. 4. The apse in the Roman period baths (photo by K. Jakubiak)

⁸ BĄKOWSKA-CZERNER, CZERNER 2019, pp. 32–35.

the other possible attributions of that chamber. The same solution can be applied for the chamber situated between (postulated) the *caldarium* and *tepidarium*. The chamber has been recognized as the *laconicum/destrictarium* and that interpretation is based on general knowledge of the patterns of the Roman bath architecture. Inside this room, no traces of any installation were found.

West of those three chambers, a peristyle courtyard enclosed the whole architectural structure. The columns formed a portico from three sides: north, west and south. The three-chamber elevation on the east side of the court was irregular in shape so there was no place there for a portico. A long stone bench situated along the western wall — opposite to the bath chambers — enhanced the court and gave the clientele space for rest in the shade after bathing. Along the southern portico and the *tepidarium* southern wall run a corridor with a fine *opus sectile* style decoration. South of the corridor three extra chambers completed the whole bathhouse complex. Two of them, situated in the western part, and separated by a narrow corridor, served as latrines, which is confirmed by typical installations discovered in there. The third small chamber located on the opposite side of the corridor of the *tepidarium* is difficult to interpret since no installations survived inside. Based on present knowledge we can interpret that, according to the localization of the room, it could have been used as an extra safely located *apodyterium*. This interpretation is only speculative since usually, cloakrooms were located near the entrance to the baths. It cannot be excluded, however, that there was an additional entrance in the southern wall of the baths complex.

The third baths building recognized so far, was brought to light in the northern part of the town. More precisely, the bathhouse was situated directly south of the dwelling H21 which was excavated and then partly restored a few years before the current excavations.⁹ Both buildings, H21 and the bathhouse, were located at a short distance from the original seashore where a broad harbour was used as a port. The baths building, which was uncovered during the excavations of the architectural structure known as H39, doubtlessly belongs to the small bathhouse structures category¹⁰ [Fig. 5]. Among the baths structures already recognized in Marina el-Alamein, this building appears to be a boutique-like establishment. Considering its small size and the limited scale of its site, it seems that at the beginning of the first century AD, a compact bath building had been designed and constructed among the relatively wealthy houses concentrated in that part of the town. The development of the building in the first century AD can be confirmed by pottery material. Most likely, this bathhouse has been restored at least two times. Smaller damages that occurred during the building's use were also repaired until the second century AD when the building was abandoned.

Originally this bathhouse was designed as a structure on a rectangular layout divided into several sections within. In the south-eastern corner of the architectural structure, a stairway of a few steps led downstairs onto a shallow corridor level running along the southern wall of the baths [Fig. 6]. The stairway clearly shows that, at the beginning of the first century AD or slightly later, the level of the street running along the eastern building façade was roughly a half a meter higher than the paved floors noted inside the bathhouse.

To the north of the corridor were located five small chambers, each of them dedicated to different bathhouse purposes. Near the entrance, just behind the narrow stone block wall was a *praefurnium* chamber with badly damaged remains of the furnace. Most likely there had been a water boiler on top of the furnace. This chamber was separated from the other rooms and *thermae* components so the entrance for the furnace operators was through an opening in the northern wall. Behind the doorway, a small courtyard was located where the fuel for the furnace was kept; and, most probably, where the ashes were deposited.

⁹ MEDEKSZA 2001; MEDEKSZA 2002; MEDEKSZA *et alii* 2003.

¹⁰ JAKUBIAK 2018; JAKUBIAK 2019.



Fig. 5. Small baths, a view from the west (photo by K. Jakubiak)

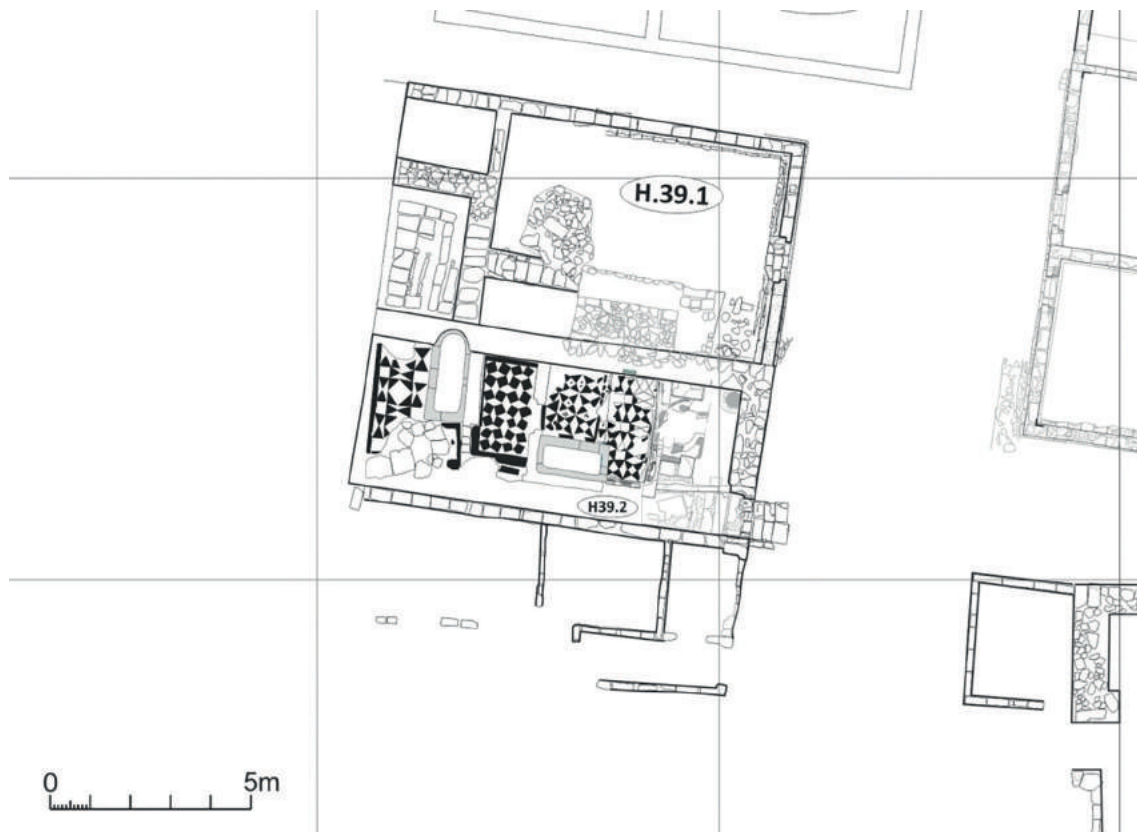


Fig. 6. Marina, plan 2021, structure H39 with small baths (drawn by Sz. Maślak)

To the west of the furnace chamber, just behind the thin wall made of well-finished stone blocks, another chamber was brought to light. Unfortunately, the wall separating both rooms was recorded *in situ* on its lowermost level only. That room certainly was used as *laconicum* or *sudatorium*. This attribution was possible thanks to the remains of the hypocaust heating system found below a badly damaged stone chips mosaic floor. The interpretation is also supported by the lack of other traces of bath installations. The only characteristic element of this chamber was the mosaic floor finished with a geometric pattern, and the vertical heating channels or flues placed within the chamber walls to keep them warm. Moving toward the west another, likewise small, chamber can be found. This chamber also has a mosaic floor made of stone chips forming a geometric decoration. There, along the southern chamber's wall an immersion tub was discovered, as the only installation surviving in the room. It was built of red bricks and lined with a waterproof cement inside. The characteristic is that this immersion tub has no outlet or drain. Since this chamber was situated side by side of the *laconicum* chamber it seems valid to postulate its interpretation as a *tepidarium*. The entrance to both chambers described above was designed as an enfilade in the western walls of each room.

Another room which was situated further west was certainly recognized as an *apodyterium* — a cloakroom. This chamber was also finished with a geometric pattern mosaic floor constructed in the same way as the other floors that decorated the bathhouse. The entrance to the cloakroom was situated in the southern wall and linked with the long corridor running along the southern bathhouse wall.

The last baths chamber, completing this small complex, was situated west of the cloakroom. The room was used as a *frigidarium*. The entrance was situated on the eastern wall. The most decorative element of its interior was an immersion tub partly recessed into the northern wall of the chamber. Above the tub, a shallow but high conch was placed. Here also, a geometric pattern mosaic floor embellished the chamber. Unfortunately, the floor was badly damaged after the baths complex was abandoned. The whole *thermae* building was not only decorated with the geometric mosaic floor, but in addition, the walls were painted, which gave a splendid character to the interior. Regrettably, the white limestone plaster and the coloured murals did not survive on the walls, most of the decorations having vanished as the *thermae* succumbed to the destructive forces of the elements. Yet, sufficient fragments of paint remained to prove that the baths building interior was multi-coloured. Most of the pigments were red, yellow, and green. From the surviving fragments we can conclude that there were big coloured panels, some with geometric patterns, painted on the walls.

To the north of the bathing section of the small bath complex in another part of the building, at least one additional chamber, a *tholos*, should have been found. However, the sealed up doorways located in the north western corner of the bath lead to a different kind of chamber. Instead of a possible *tholos*, a small and well-arranged latrine was brought to light. The interior was relatively well finished. The facility was constructed to a high standard, and the walls were covered with a with plaster. It is possible that this white plaster can be paralleled with an early phase of the bathing part of the *thermae* development, when white finishing was also recorded. During the excavations inside the latrine, numerous multi-coloured plaster decorative fragments were also brought to light. These decorations, however, cannot be associated with similar examples from the southern part of the complex. Here, the discarded fragments of painted plaster were originally part of the bath chambers decoration, and were thrown into the disused and blockaded latrine.

To the east of the latrine an open space was noted instead of the anticipated courtyard. In other words the layout of the bathhouse was not rectangular or square but rather more L-shaped.

A smart architectural solution applied in order to keep the hot temperature inside the *laconicum* is worth to mentioning here. Outside the bathhouse, adjacent to the *laconicum* chamber,

a large stone-built mastaba had been added. It is possible that this structure also fulfilled other functions, since traces of a stairway were detected in its eastern part. Possibly the stairs gave access to the bathhouse roof, yet its poor state of preservation makes this idea only theoretical.

Considering the above presented facts it appears quite fascinating that, in the small town area, three different bathhouse structures were noted. The question is, whether there could have been even more buildings of this kind functioning in the town. Either way, considering the size of Marina el-Alamein, the presence of three baths complexes is really impressive, and speaks volumes about the conception of personal hygiene among the citizens. The characteristics of bathhouse complexes from other parts of Egypt were carefully analysed by Monika Trümper.¹¹ The buildings from Marina el-Alamein were constructed according to the Hellenistic type of the structural principals, the Roman type and the recently recorded hybrid style building where Hellenistic and Roman technical elements were functioning under one roof. Certainly, at least for some time all three bath structures were available simultaneously. Unfortunately, the problems with the precise chronology of the oldest Hellenistic type bath, make the accurate calculation of their correlation and coexistence impossible.

It is worth, however, to analyse how many people could use the whole hygienic infrastructure at the same time. Surely, the modern saunas do not meet every criteria of their ancient counterparts, but they can be quite helpful with this calculation.¹² The estimates and calculation below are based on modern day standards, but it seems justifiable to apply these same standards to the Marina el-Alamein bath structures. Considering that each chamber was dedicated for different purposes it is possible to postulate that the Hellenistic type baths complex could be occupied by up to twenty persons simultaneously. Similar calculations applied to the next structure (the hybrid style bathhouse) indicates that this building was could accommodate a maximum of five persons at the same time.

The most monumental bathhouse recoded in Marina el-Alamein dates to Roman times. The concept behind the baths as constructed according to the Roman principles was completely different from that of both the other buildings constructed in the town. Roman bathhouses were dedicated to the maximum comfort of the customers who were looking for relaxation and an enjoyable time while bathing. In consequence, more space for the people was required. The Roman bathhouse in Marina was designed to be comfortably used by even fifty or sixty persons at the same time. Since the baths was probably operating all day long, the individual costumers would have been replacing each other during the “open hours”.

Discussion

The baths buildings from Marina el-Alamein, represents different styles, sizes and concepts. Apparently the Hellenistic baths complex was introduced to the urban space as the first and was a part of the urban space from the beginning of the town existence. The baths structures and other characteristic public buildings were essential for every town and city where the Greeks were settled and the “Greek lifestyle” dominated. This is visible in the Hellenistic baths building’s vicinity where a very well-designed square, embellished with a portico, was attached to the bathhouse structure. The baths complex, with the *tholos* chamber as the most spectacular part of the building, adhered to the high standards of the Hellenistic period of architectural design. Certainly, the size of the complex was relatively modest but surely big enough for the local population. Structures

¹¹ TRÜMPER 2009.

¹² NEUFERT 1992, pp. 443–445.

of similar size or even slightly smaller were brought to light in Megara Hyblaea.¹³ As for larger baths structures, which without any doubt must have existed in the bigger Egyptian towns and cities of the Hellenistic period, our knowledge is very limited. Perhaps the concept of one big bath complex was not very popular; and, even in the big cities, it was more reasonable to provide a few smaller complexes of the kind, which were easier to fit between dense urban development. In a somewhat similar way, access for the public baths was arranged in the cities in the Ottoman Empire.¹⁴ The analogy is coming from a long chronological distance, but the philosophy of public hygiene seems to be similar. One way or another, the Hellenistic baths structure from Marina el-Alamein shows that the local community was Greek from its origins or had been attracted to the Greek tradition and Greek identity. The pottery material recorded during the excavations clearly shows broad scale contacts with the Hellenistic world spread along the eastern Mediterranean zone. Pottery products were imported from Cyprus, Greece, Crete, or even the Mediterranean coast of Anatolia. It cannot be excluded that not only the goods but also the people associated with them (merchants, craftsmen) could have travelled here with their wares and skills; and possibly some of them settled in Marina el-Alamein. It looks, in consequence, as if the culture bearers successfully implemented some of their motherlands' traditions into Marina.

Most probably the second, later bathhouse constructed on the other side of the paved courtyard, had been the visual symbol of the town's development, as the size of the building as well as the high quality materials used for the interior finishing seem to prove. According to a Greek inscription discovered inside the basilica, it is possible to confirm that the baths was operating a few years before the year AD 129. Łajtar pointed out that the inscription was a part of a statue podium, which was engraved a year before Hadrian's visit to Egypt.¹⁵ This interpretation, allows a more precise dating of the Roman period's baths building. The archaeological evidence confirms that the Roman baths in Marina el-Alamein was established in order to replace the Hellenistic baths. According to present knowledge, the Hellenistic (or *tholos* type) bathhouses were operating in Egypt until the end of the first century AD.¹⁶ Theoretically then, the Hellenistic baths could have been replaced by the new, Roman type building. Analysing the findings from Marina el-Alamein, however, it seems highly plausible that both baths buildings were functioning in parallel for several decades. In consequence, the portico square designed to the south of the Hellenistic baths was a kind of common space for both Greek and Roman baths. Eventually, that part of the town became the main public space, with places and structures designed for municipal purposes with the baths buildings in the centre.

Beyond the town centre, however, the smallest baths structure was also in use. This boutique-like bathhouse, dating to the first century AD, represents a completely different philosophy of the spatial arrangement and relaxation activities. The size and the limited number of the chambers indicate that this baths had been dedicated to a small group of people. Based on present knowledge, it is difficult to judge how exclusive this bathhouse was, and how the visitors utilizing the bathing facilities were selected. It cannot be excluded that the small building was simply dedicated only for the people living in the surrounding houses. It looks possible that the small baths was a quasi-private investment paid by several families, or a group of the local people, or guild members who were the owners of that piece of land.

The *opus sectile* floor decorations from the Roman large *thermae* located in the central part of the town, indicate that the building was rearranged or refurbished. These kind of luxury decorations were most popular during the third and especially fourth century AD; and, most probably, the Roman baths in Marina were successfully operating in that period of time. The town population

¹³ TRÜMPER 2009.

¹⁴ GOODWIN 1971; KUBAN 2010, pp. 149–162.

¹⁵ ŁAJTAR 2005.

¹⁶ TRÜMPER 2009.

stabilized during the second century AD and maintained its residential density at least to the third or even fourth century AD when the town's depopulation may have dropped dramatically after the earthquakes that devastated the Mediterranean shores of Egypt in AD 365.¹⁷ Consequently, the Roman bathhouse was probably still in use at the time when the town collapsed.

Another important factor linked with the Roman bathhouse is the lavatory system of the complex. Two independent lavatories situated side by side in the southern part of the baths seem to be dedicated to two different groups of the people: one for women and another for men. That solution made an access to the baths available for both genders independently. It also indicates that different parts of the baths complex most probably allowed privacy to be maintained between ladies and gentlemen. Taking everything into account, the possible access to the infrastructure dedicated to the town community was most probably one of the significant aims for the town "council". For sure, such an institution, even if was acting in a non-formal way, would have been part of the local community's representation. This institution must have been very effective and must have had at its disposal a relatively big budget for public investments. The best evidence, discovered so far, are monumental structures such as the bathhouses that functioned in Marina el-Alamein. Certainly, the possible funds which the local authority had for public works would have come from the local community's economic activities. Unfortunately, an understanding of the sources of the Marina el-Alamein citizenry's affluent economic status is still beyond our reach. However, the town's prosperity is recognizable not only in the public sector bathhouses but also the private baths, which would have been dedicated to the exclusive clients or only several families who dwelt in the boutique baths neighbourhood. From the psychological point of view, the presence of public buildings and public infrastructure within every ancient city plays a significant symbolic role. Taking care of the social needs and making life within the city comfortable were also significant factors for the town dwellers almost as much as to the town council or governorate. Both those factors need to meet each other and became complementary elements making the idea of a town or city complete. Looking on the public buildings and space arrangements from this perspective, it seems valid and confirmed that all the above factors were applied, somehow, through the town's facilities and the whole urban plan. The investments in public infrastructure, as can be recognized in the already excavated structures in Marina el-Alamein, show that here the local community or citizens were no different from those who lived in much bigger urban zones. Certainly, the scale of public architecture is different, and was more local. Here an equilibrium between the public sector investment providing life's comforts was successfully attained, and was certainly correlated to the size of the town's population. These human-scale architectural structures being not so small as to be overly modest and not so big as to be a manifestation of the megalomaniac scale, show the pragmatism of the Marina el-Alamein community who used to live there. This was in contrast to other big ancient cities, where the ideology and manifestation of power was crystalized in monumental architecture. The old site at Marina el-Alamein was never destined to be a large scale city, so the arrangement of its internal urban space was much more modest and focused on providing a relatively comfortable lifestyle for the local community in that part of the coastal region.

The best manifestation of this development strategy, doubtlessly, can be recognized when analysing the bath structures form the town area. On the basis of all the baths structures, it is possible to reconstruct two variants of the public, and semi-public space dedicated for the hygienic purposes. The small, dwelling district baths can be interpreted as a private local investment. It also seems possible, however, that these kind of structures were a manifestation of the town development strategy, where the comfort of the local community was important for the social status of the people who dwelt in the town.

¹⁷ STIROS 2020.

The evidently public investments located in the town centre reveal another aspect of the space managing strategy. The two relatively large baths complexes, were indicators of the social and economic status of the community. The paved portico square as an additional element was definitely essential to the spatial arrangement. It was not only a link between both monumental buildings but also an axis and important element of the central part of the town. The square was a focal point of the social life of the local community. According to Daszewski, who discovered that significant construction, it was simply the town agora.¹⁸ However, from the formal point of view, an agora would only be found in a polis. Marina el-Alamein was never a polis, consequently, this structure cannot be interpreted as an agora. The ancient name of this town remains unknown. However, there are two equivalent ancient towns, namely, Leucaspis and Antiphrae, which should be taken into consideration, as Daszewski pointed out.¹⁹ But neither of them ever had the status of a polis and if so, there could likewise have been no agora in Marina el-Alamein.

Alternatively, taking into consideration the shape, size and decor of the town square, especially with its stone benches situated along the south and north sides, the whole structure should rather be recognized as *palaestra*. This interpretation seems to be logical and explains the general idea of the public space arrangement. With athletic activities being performed in this open space, its location between two bathhouses gave the athletes an opportunity to refresh themselves when their exercises were finished. Similar collocation of the bathhouse complexes can be recognized in many Greek and Roman cities, as for instance in Pergamon (in the Middle City),²⁰ Sardis,²¹ Verdis *gymnasion* from Ephesus,²² or even in Pompeii.²³ However, there is no example of two independent bathhouses situated on either side of a *palaestra*. The construction of the Roman period bathhouse in Marina was an original design apparently respecting the needs of the town community. As in the case of other public buildings, the bathhouses were carefully planned to fit in the town space in an optimal way to enhance the lifestyle and comfort of the citizens. Thus, Marina el-Alamein developed from a well-planned settlement into a flourishing town in which Greco-Roman standards were maintained. The baths buildings were first a manifestation of the Greek and then of the Roman way of life, being exemplars of the contemporary urban planning of those times. Analysing the proportion between the dwelling structure district to the public architecture, a good relation between the urban infrastructure to the comfort of the people who had settled the town can be observed. The infrastructure, in this case dedicated for hygienic purposes, and its location within the central part of the town, gave relatively easy access for all its likely customers. As was usual in ancient towns, the town centres, were places where the social and economic activities were focused, so the bathhouses were not only part of the public infrastructure but also stimulated the activities of the local community. The baths, equipped as they were with lavatories would have been a good place for relaxation and for meetings of all the people who were active in the Marina el-Alamein public space. The space dedicated for hygienic purposes and their distribution within the town space, seems to have been adequate for the needs of the local population. Based on the dwelling architecture analysis, it can be confirmed that each house was equipped with a cistern for collecting rainwater during autumn and winter. Very often inside the houses there were also private lavatories, but not private baths. This means that the infrastructure designated for the personal hygiene of the citizens, and the investments realized by local community were a reasonable expression of their needs, as well as the manifestation of their way of life and social status. Limited access to freshwater ensured that the local people

¹⁸ DASZEWSKI, ZYCH 2007.

¹⁹ DASZEWSKI *et alii* 1990, pp. 15–16.

²⁰ AKURGAL 2001, pp. 91–95; MATTHEWS 2014, pp. 99–100.

²¹ YEGÜL 1986.

²² AKURGAL 2001, pp. 154–155; MATTHEWS 2014, pp. 249–250.

²³ YEGÜL 2013, p. 23.

utilized the rainwater collection systems with restraint. But, regardless of the scarcity of this precious commodity, the town dwellers did not neglect their social status, as expressed in a high standard of bodily cleanliness. One of this style manifestation doubtlessly was their participation in the relaxation time offered by baths and bathing. Therefore water management in the bathhouses must have played a very important role in the town's infrastructure functioning. Till now, in all the Egyptian territories of the Greco-Roman period such a density of the bathhouses has not been brought to light. It seems, somehow, to suggest, that the local community living there in Marina, were strongly rooted or steeped in the Greek and Roman lifestyle and social status. Thus, based on this recent research, Marina el-Alamein seems to be unique among the other small towns and cities of Greco-Roman Egypt. All of the above factors lead to the conclusion that the town, nowadays known as Marina el-Alamein, was a combination of Greek and Roman concepts, with Egyptian determination which resulted in a unique effect. The question remains: how many similar settlements once existed on the Egyptian shores? Is Marina el-Alamein really so exceptional or are there, perhaps, comparable towns still awaiting discovery? Only further research can solve that problem before modern industrial activity along the Mediterranean coast destroys the possible traces of other ancient settlements.

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