

MAREA SEASON 2014: EXCAVATION IN HOUSE H1

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Abstract: Seven rooms were unearthed completely and another four in part during the second season of excavations in House H1 in Marea. Thanks to a stratigraphic test pit the approximate date of construction of this part of the ancient town was established tentatively as the 6th century AD; it remained in use until at least the 8th century AD. The building techniques and the plan of House H1 follow the Mediterranean tradition of domestic architecture.

Keywords: house, domestic architecture, Marea, Byzantine period, early Islamic period, Egypt

House H1 lies 10 m east of the eastern end of the Byzantine basilica in Marea. Adjoining it from the north is a building of unidentified function. To the east there is a latrine (see Babraj et al. 2013: 56–59; Babraj, Drzymuchowska, and Willburger 2014: 46–52; for an architectural survey of the area, see Kościuk 2012).

The building was first explored by a team from the Archaeological Museum in Kraków headed by Krzysztof Babraj in 2012. The southern half of the structure, which consists of several rooms around a central courtyard, was unearthed during the first season of excavations in 2012. The excavation was continued two years later, in 2014, by an expedition from the Institute of Archaeology of the University of Warsaw. The work focused on cleaning rooms in the northern part of the house. Rooms 14, 15, 16, 20a, 20b, 21, 22, 24a,

24b, and 25 were investigated, either completely or in part; excavations were carried out also in the northeastern quarter of the courtyard (area 17) [Fig. 2].

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION

The report presents a preliminary description of the remains, as well as the archaeological layers and selected finds from the excavation in 2014. The presentation concludes with some general remarks on house form and building techniques within a wider context of Roman and Byzantine residential architecture in Egypt.

ROOM 14

Room 14 in the northeastern part of the house had the shape of a rectangle. Two transversal ashlar walls divided



*Fig. 1. Room 14, view from the south
(All field photos M. Gwiazda)*

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this structure into three parts [Fig. 1]. An erosion deposit of yellow-greenish silt and loam, 0.10 m thick, accumulated over a lime-mortar floor. The walls of the room were poorly preserved, approximately 0.10 m above ground level. There is too little evidence for room function. The material from this area was dated mainly to the period from the 6th through the 7th century AD. It contained fragments of pottery (cooking pots, bowls, and a LRA 5/6 amphora), a fragment of a glass toilet bottle, as well as coins, perhaps from the rule of Justinian I (527–565), struck in the Alexandrian mint, and another one, minted in Carthage and dated to the reign of Maurice Tiberius (582–602).

ROOM 15

In Room 15, adjacent on the western side, the upper layer reflected a complex depositional process; it comprised mostly yellowish silt mixed with stone debris, pottery fragments, and animal bones. The layer immediately below, approximately 0.20 m thick and containing much less rubble and much more ceramics, was comparable with the deposit described above. The room was paved with rectangular limestone slabs [Fig. 3], missing partly in the central part where they had been dismantled in search of building stone. Some later structures were also cleared, including a bench of roughly plastered limestone blocks, located by

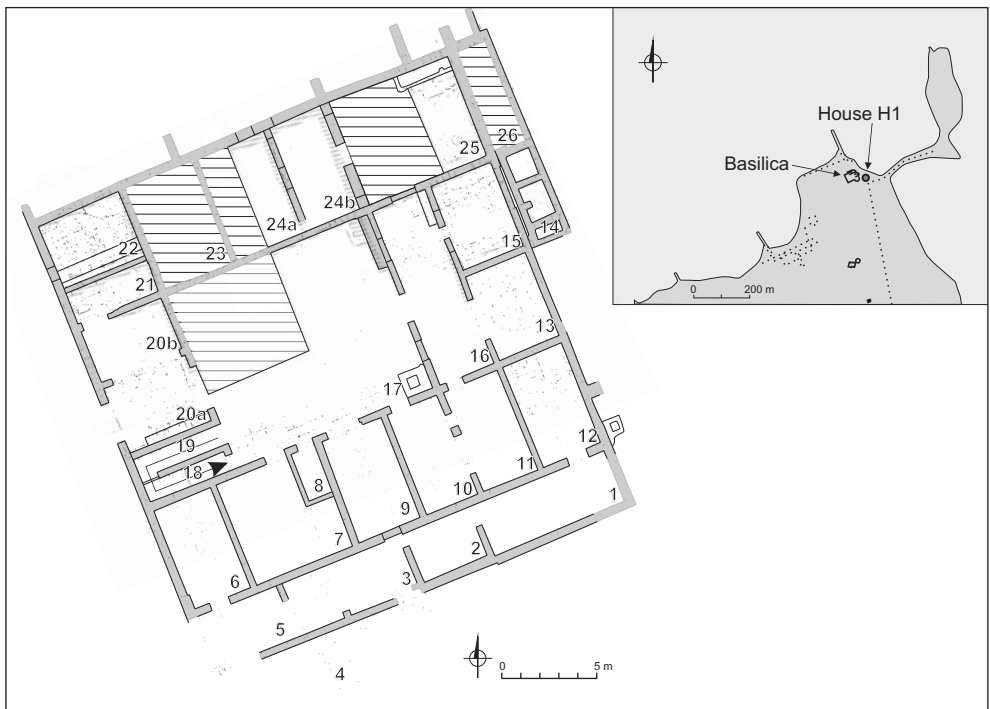


Fig. 2. Preliminary plan of the last phase of House H1 (cross-hatching marks areas that were not explored); inset, location of House H1 on the site (Drawing D. Tarara, A.B. Kutiak)

the south wall of Room 15. Apparently it did not belong to the last construction phase, and was transformed at some point into a structure resembling a narrow basin [see *Fig. 3*]. The datable material was found mostly in the upper layers. It comprised a few coins struck at the Alexandrian mint in the 6th through 7th centuries AD, as well as Arabic coins from the 7th through 8th centuries AD. The glass collection comprised fragments of lamps, bowls, and bottles. Pottery included various forms of bowls, plates, cooking pots, lids, and an amphora (LRA 5/6). A fragment of a stone mortar was unearthed as well [*Fig. 4 left*].

CORRIDOR 16

Corridor 16 to the west of Room 15 adjoins the courtyard (area 17) and connects with Rooms 15 and 13 by means

of two entrances. Investigation of this area in 2012 covered the southern part; in 2014, the excavation area was extended to the north. The upper layer (0.60–1.00 m thick) was composed mostly of yellowish silt and architectural debris covering a lower layer of yellowish loose sediment related to the abandonment of House H1. Three occupation levels were cleared below these deposits [*Fig. 5*]. The earliest floor was made of mortar; on it lay a tamped earth surface, covered in turn by the third, upper level constructed of rectangular limestone slabs. A stone bench, measuring 1.86 m by 0.42 m was unearthed by the northeast wall. The archaeological assemblage was roughly similar to the finds from Room 15. It contained pottery vessels, dated mostly to the 6th through 8th centuries AD.



Fig. 3. Room 15, view from the north

In the southeastern corner of Corridor 16, a test trench (1.50 m by 2.00 m) was opened to determine the age of the house foundation. The mortar floor, which was about 0.20 m thick, was bedded on

a leveling layer of brownish silt mixed with greenish loam, 0.40 m thick. The collection of finds from this layer included fragments of both local and imported pottery, as well as one coin; they point to a *terminus a quo*



Fig. 4. Finds from House H1: left, stone mortar; right, pottery jug (7th century)
(Drawing H. Kosińska-Sowa; photos A. Pawlikowska)



Fig. 5. Northern part of Corridor 16, view from the northeast

in the 6th century AD for the construction of House H1. The date should be confirmed by further investigation.

ROOM 25

A test trench (2.60 m by 5.60 m) was opened north of Room 15. From a stratigraphic point of view, it was the most complex part of the house explored in 2014. There were at least two late floor levels from the 7th through 8th centuries AD, dated by the assemblage of complete and fragmentary pottery vessels, including a jug, probably from the 7th century AD [Fig. 4 right]. A large ceramic pot (Diam. 57 cm) was planted in the thick ash deposit and tamped earth [Fig. 6]. Additional structures, added when the house was already standing, included a narrow enclosure built of loose rectangular limestone blocks next to the south wall, and a carelessly executed stone platform on the opposite side of the room [see Fig. 6].

ROOM 24B

Work in adjacent Room 24b, entered through a wide doorway from Room 25, did not reach the level of the threshold in the entrance, suggesting that the floor level has yet to be reached. Room 24b was filled with a 0.60 m thick layer of sediment mixed with stone rubble and mortar resulting from the collapse of the walls. A yellowish silt and greenish loam containing bones of middle-sized mammals and fish separated this layer from the tamped earth floor. Two floor levels were recorded, the earlier one with two fireplaces. One of these hearths, in the southeastern corner, was surrounded with a pavement [Fig. 8]. The other one in the northeastern corner yielded bones of middle-sized mammals. Layers associated with these installations yielded mostly material from the 7th–8th century AD, composed of potsherds, oil lamps, and Arabic coins. The glass material included mostly fragments of bottles.



Fig. 6. Test trench in the eastern part of Room 25, view from the south

ROOM 24A

A trench measuring 5.68 m by 2.00 m was opened in area 24a, which is situated further to the west and adjoins room 24b along the west wall [Fig. 7]. Layers explored there resembled those in Room 24b, including a fill layer of sediments mixed with architectural debris, and two consecutive floor levels. An entrance in the east wall, walled up probably during the latest phase of use, joined Room 24a to 24b. The oldest floor level cleared in 2014 had a stone pavement in the southern part and a tamped earth floor in the northern part. Datable material included fragments of glass bottles covering a period from the 5th century to the first half of the 8th century AD, Arabic coins, and fragments of ceramic vessels such as cups, carinated bowls, and cooking pots.



Fig. 7. Room 24a, view from the northwest



Fig. 8. Room 24b, view from the south

ROOM 22

Room 22 in the northwestern corner of House H1 was also explored in 2014. The uppermost layer included sediment mixed with stone rubble from the collapsed wall. The rubbish layer below it was almost homogeneous. It may reflect abandonment of the room, perhaps in the 7th through 8th century AD. The layer consisted of light-brown silt and sand mixed with a large amount of pottery fragments from vessels both locally produced and imported around the 6th and 7th century AD. The refuse layer also yielded fragments of blocks and pieces of *opus sectile* made of *marmor Thessalicum*, *marmor Taenarium*, *marmor Carium*, etc. [Fig. 10], as well as glass vessels, and Arabic coins. This layer covered the original floor level paved with rectangular limestone slabs [Fig. 9].

Two structures were cleared in the course of excavation work in Room 22.

A platform, measuring 2.16 m by 1.12 m and reaching 0.42 m in the highest point, was uncovered above the pavement in the northeastern corner. It was constructed of roughly worked limestone blocks and mortar. Another structure, resembling in shape a narrow basin (0.36 m wide) was discovered along the south wall. It was built of rectangular limestone blocks; a kind of step or bench was found in front of it on its side. The blocks were set directly on the pavement. This structure is similar to constructions uncovered in Rooms 15 and 25.

ROOM 21

Room 21, located south of the previous one, occupied a narrow space measuring only 4.68 m by 1.78 m. It was completely filled with homogeneous architectural rubble from the collapsed walls, mixed with yellowish silt. This layer covered the original



Fig. 9. Room 22, view from the east

floor made of rectangular limestone slabs. Some coins from the 6th–8th century AD were found there, as well as fragments of glass bottles and pottery fragments.

ROOM 20

Room 20, divided into two sections, a and b, by pillars built against the east and west walls, lay in the western wing of House H1. The stratigraphic sequence resembled that from Room 21, i.e., homogeneous rubble directly on a pavement of limestone slabs in Room 20a [Fig. 12] and a mortar floor in 20b. Some additional structures were found in this area, including a long bench by the south wall of Room 20a. It measured 3.61 m by 0.52 m, rising 0.30 m above

the pavement. This construction was plastered with four layers of mortar. The main entrance to House H1 was cleared in the west wall of room 20a; it was 2.15 m wide. Another passage, 2.41 m wide, giving access to the courtyard (area 17), was explored in the opposite, east wall of Room 20a. Datable material from the two rooms comprised glass bottles and lamps, of tumbler and conical type, as well as a few coins, some struck in the Alexandrian mint in the 6th–7th centuries AD, and also Arabic ones.

COURTYARD 17

The central part of House H1 contained a large courtyard measuring 11.24 m by

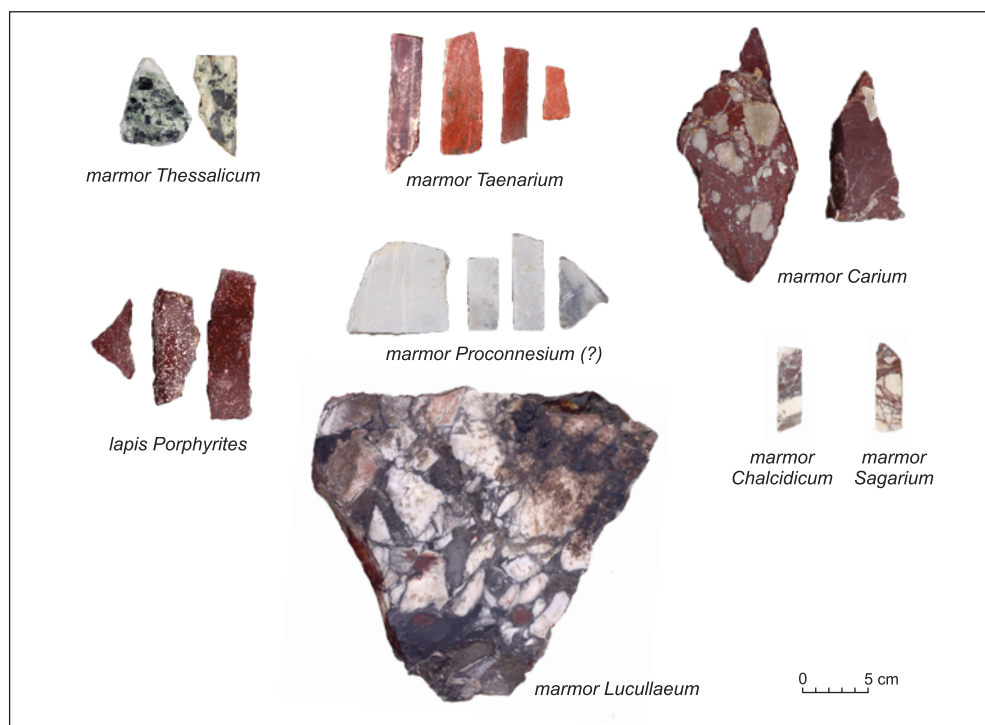


Fig. 10. Fragments of opus sectile from Room 22
(Photo A. Pawlikowska)

9.84 m (labeled on the plan as area 17). This courtyard was previously explored in 2012. In 2014, the northeastern quarter was cleared. An E–W cross-section revealed collapsed walls and a sequence of sediment accumulation. Three late walking levels were distinguished, approximately 0.27 m above the original pavement made of regular limestone slabs, which was preserved only in the south part of area 17.

Several structures belonging to the late phases were cleared, including an oven built of fired bricks, measuring 0.61 m in diameter. Ash deposits accumulated around it. Excavations in the northeastern corner recorded a rectangular basin or cistern opening, measuring 1.10 m by 1.08 m, made of limestone ashlars [Fig. 11].

Fig. 11. Hydraulic installation in the corner of the courtyard, view from the south

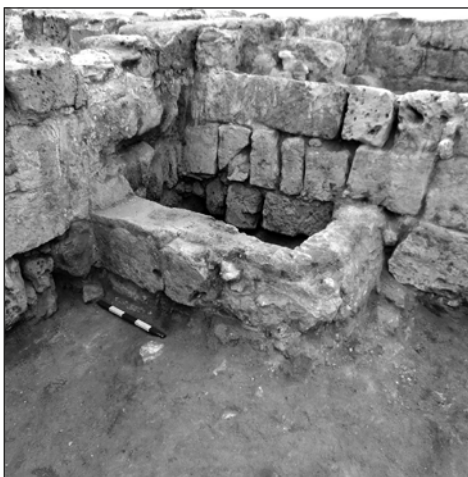


Fig. 12. Room 20a, view from the north

However, it may have gone out of use by the 7th–8th century AD, when it was filled with rubbish, including glass and potsherds mostly from the first half of the

7th century AD. A channel covered with irregular limestone slabs was discovered in the center of the courtyard; it continued in Room 20a.

GENERAL REMARKS ON THE ARCHITECTURE

Data on the chronology of the building recorded in the 2014 season broadened knowledge of House H1. It was built most probably in the 6th century AD. Finds of ceramic vessels and coins indicate that it remained in use until at least the 8th century AD.

The building was constructed mainly of limestone ashlar and pseudo-ashlar bonded in mortar. Wooden boards inserted between particular rows of stone blocks might have been used in wall construction; a negative impression in the lime mortar suggests this was the case with regard to the wall between Rooms 9 and 10. This kind of building technique is attested, for example, in some of the Byzantine buildings in the pilgrimage center in Abu Mena, located approximately 17 km from Marea (see Grossmann 1991). The use of limestone blocks as the principal building material in House H1 distinguishes it clearly from examples of domestic architecture in the Nile Valley and Delta, where sun-dried and fired bricks were in common use (on the use of bricks in Egypt, see Spencer 1979; Emery 2011). Building techniques in Marea more closely resemble those known from Marina el-Alamein or Alexandria (see Rodziewicz 1984: 62–65; Majcherek 1995: 137; Daszewski 2011: 429–435). From this point of view, these settlements, located on the Mediterranean coast, constitute a distinct group connected more closely with the Graeco-Roman building tradition.

House H1 has a regular plan. A large courtyard was at its center, more typical of the Graeco-Roman domestic architecture than of the Egyptian tradition (Majcherek 1995: 136, with further references). In the Roman and Byzantine periods in northern Egypt, such spaces were usually provided with peristyles, pseudoperistyles, or porticoes (Grossmann and Kościuk 1993: 78–80; Majcherek 1995: 138, with further references; 2007: 204–205, 207, 210–211). Nothing points to the existence of columns in the House H1 courtyard. Such a form is characteristic of domestic buildings constructed at the end of antiquity (Ellis 1988).

In the course of earlier excavations, the remains of basins were unearthed in some of the rooms of the southern wing (Rooms 6 and 9), which may indicate that production of some kind took place in this part of the house. The fact that Rooms 6 and 12 had entrances only from the outside also might suggest that they were *ergasteria*. Rooms of this kind are well attested in nearby Alexandria (Rodziewicz 1984: 246–257; Majcherek 1995: 142; 2007: 206).

In the first phase of use, the northern part of House H1 was certainly intended for residential purposes, as indicated by the absence of installations connected with production. Nevertheless, no evidence attesting to the presence of decoration in the form of wall paintings or floor mosaics has been found. Elements of architectural

decoration are scarce and its use within House H1 is questionable. Thus, taking into consideration the large living space of the house (over 500 m²), the building appears very modest from the point of view of its decoration.

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