

# Marina el-Alamein: newly discovered bath after the 2017 season



**Abstract:** Most of the activity during the 2017 season at the archaeological site of Marina el-Alamein was focused on two areas situated in the northern part of the town. Building H.40 was one of the main excavation targets: two rooms were cleared, originally part of a large, multi-roomed and most probably prosperous house. The other target was the structure H.39, already explored in earlier seasons, which was now confirmed as a small but richly decorated bath complex with traces of wall painting and geometric mosaic floors.

**Keywords:** Greek-Roman town, dwelling architecture, bathhouse, immersion tubs, mosaic floor decorations, wall paintings

The PCMA archaeological project in Marina el-Alamein, which restarted in May 2017, continued the excavation of two buildings situated in the northern part of the site: structure H.40 directly south of house H.41 and the H.39 complex (for earlier work, see Jakubiak 2016).

## HOUSE COMPLEXES H.40 AND H.41

Additional clearing work in the H.41 complex [Fig. 1] aimed to clarify the relations between the walls and features of the building. An earlier phase was recorded in a test trench in the eastern part of one of the rooms (H.41.6), dated by the ceramic material to the 1st century AD. Superimposed was a later, second phase from the 2nd century AD. Additional measurements and orthophotographic documentation helped to revise the previously established layout of the structure.

A new trench in the area of small shops or workshops located south of H.41 and examined already to some extent in previous seasons uncovered two new units belonging to a relatively large building (H.40) [Figs 1, 2]. The agglutinative form of building development, common in other housing districts of ancient Marina, was once

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again confirmed in this structure. On the whole the foundations of this building were found to be of good quality with stone ashlars providing a sound base for all the building walls. The surviving upper parts of the walls were built of regular, middle-sized stone blocks. In some places traces of white lime plaster on both the interior and the exterior wall faces have been preserved. The west wall of room 3 has no traces of original bonding with the walls it connects with. In other words, there is no way to determine how the building expanded over time. Unlike the

remaining walls, the north walls of rooms 3 and 4 were constructed of irregular stones of different size. This merits attention as the material could not match the stone blocks used in the other walls for soundness and stability. One could think that these were merely foundation walls were it not for the fact that the north wall faced the street running alongside the building. Despite the apparent incongruity of the building technique in these circumstances, the builders' decision may have been a rational one. The wall here was significantly thicker and wider than

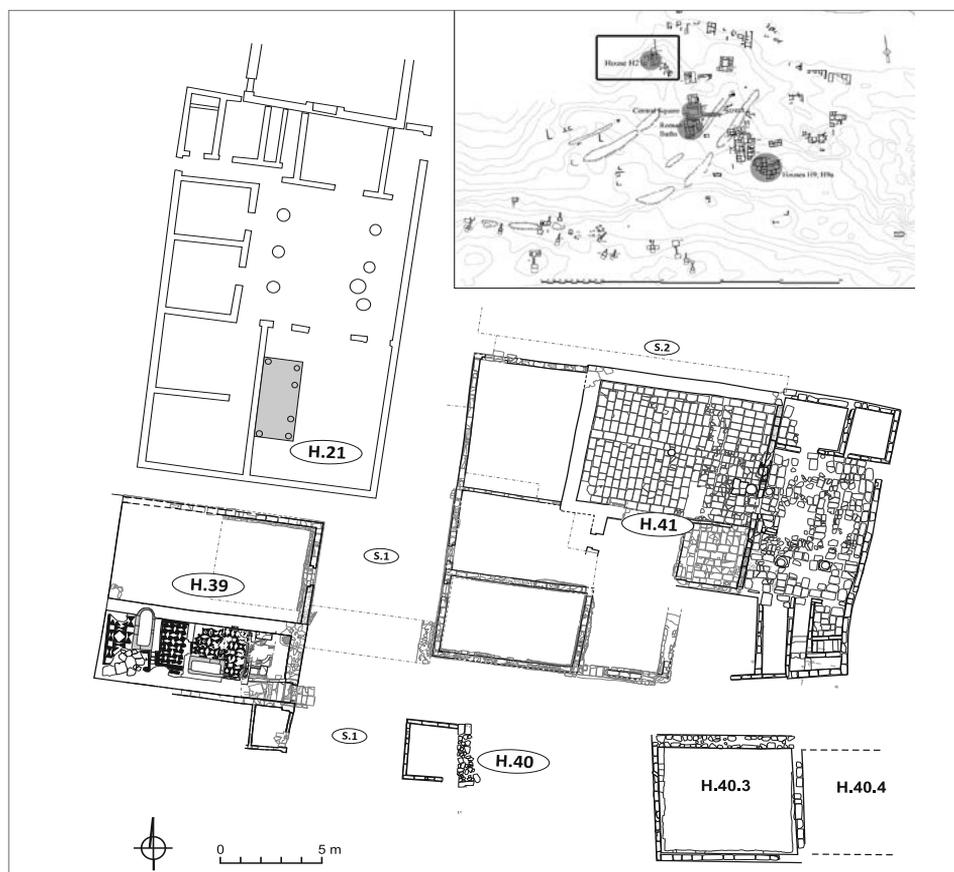


Fig. 1. Excavation area south of house H.21 in Marina el-Alamein (PCMA Marina el-Alamein Archaeological Project/drawing S. Maślak)

the other walls, sustaining structural stability despite the use of materials of lesser quality. No interpretation of this construction design is forthcoming and further excavation may yet contribute

to a better understanding of the reasons behind this architectural choice.

Taking into consideration the house layout, chambers 3 and 4 can be postulated to have been the biggest in the dwelling.



Fig. 2. House H.40: excavated rooms 3 and 4; top, view from the northeast, room 4 in the foreground; bottom, room 3, view from the northwest (PCMA Marina el-Alamein Project/photos K. Jakubiak)

However, the relation of these rooms to a small shop (or workshop) situated in the western part of the building is still not clear. That small structure was most certainly a part of house H.40. The intervening space was most likely a courtyard; these observations, based on ground surface finds, will have to be confirmed in excavation.

The pottery assemblage testifies to the extension or enlargement of house H.40 in the mid 1st century AD. The most characteristic ceramic types were transport amphorae of Benghazi Early Roman type 1.

Sherds of Cypriot sigillata confirm this dating for house H.40, at least for rooms 3 and 4, which were built as an extension of the building. The house appears to have been abandoned in the 3rd century AD. The uppermost layers, just below the surface, yielded a few locally manufactured Mareotic (Dressel 7) amphorae and several fragments of Cilician pinched-handle amphorae. Some local imitations of the latter vessel type from the last phase of house H.40 are dated to the 3rd or beginning of the 4th century AD.

### BATHHOUSE COMPLEX H.39

Work continued also inside structure H.39 [see *Fig. 1*], which was originally a small bathhouse, probably restricted to a limited number of users. The bath consisted of four rooms accessed via steps leading down from the entrance at street level in the southeastern part of the building [*Fig. 3*]. Three of these turned out to be bath chambers, each furnished with a different mosaic floor. Parts of the complex (the easternmost room entered from the street and a furnace and probable water boiler accessed via a door in the north wall), excavated earlier, had been backfilled for protection (see Jakubiak 2016: 129–133).

The bath complex consisted of three rooms entered through the central chamber, which opened onto a southern corridor leading from the steps [*Figs 3–6*]. The room was decorated with a geometric mosaic pavement and was devoid of any hydraulic or bath structures. Doorways in the east and west walls led to the two other chambers containing bathing installations. The chamber on the east was small and squarish, with

a geometric mosaic floor. An immersion bathtub, preserved in relatively good condition, stood at the southern end of the chamber. This bathtub was constructed of red brick, bonded and finished inside and out with hydraulic mortar. The western chamber (2.50 m by 3.00 m), which could be entered via a door in the southeastern corner, also had a mosaic floor. An immersion bathtub stood in the northeastern corner of the room, attached to the north wall and partly embedded in it, where a shallow niche or conch construction was profiled and plastered with hydraulic mortar. Traces of wall painting have survived on the plaster in the conch. The southern end of this chamber was remodeled at a later date when a water cistern was installed in place of the south wall that had separated it from the southern corridor. A water-supply channel ran off from this cistern. The bathhouse seems to have been disused or deserted by this time. Another doorway observed in the northwestern corner of the chamber indicates that the bathhouse clearly

continued to the north (to be explored further in future seasons).

From a technical point of view, the layout and internal arrangement of this bath complex is typical of Ptolemaic Egypt. Comparable buildings were re-

corded on archaeological sites in Karnak (Boraik 2009; Myśliwiec 2017), Schedia (Bergmann and Heinzelmann 2009), Krokodilopolis and Athribis (Trümper 2009), among others. Characteristic features recognized at all the sites men-

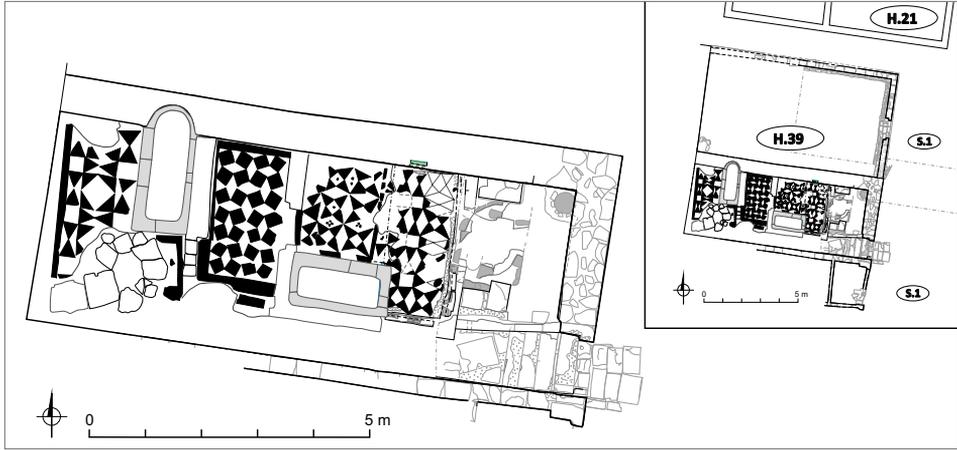


Fig. 3. Plan of the bath complex in building H.39; inset, location of the chamber within the bigger plan of the bathhouse (PCMA Marina el-Alamein Archaeological Project/drawing S. Maślak)

Fig. 4 (below and opposite page). Bath complex in building H.39: orthogonal view of the north wall, western and eastern sections (PCMA Marina el-Alamein Archaeological Project/orthophoto and processing M. Iskra)

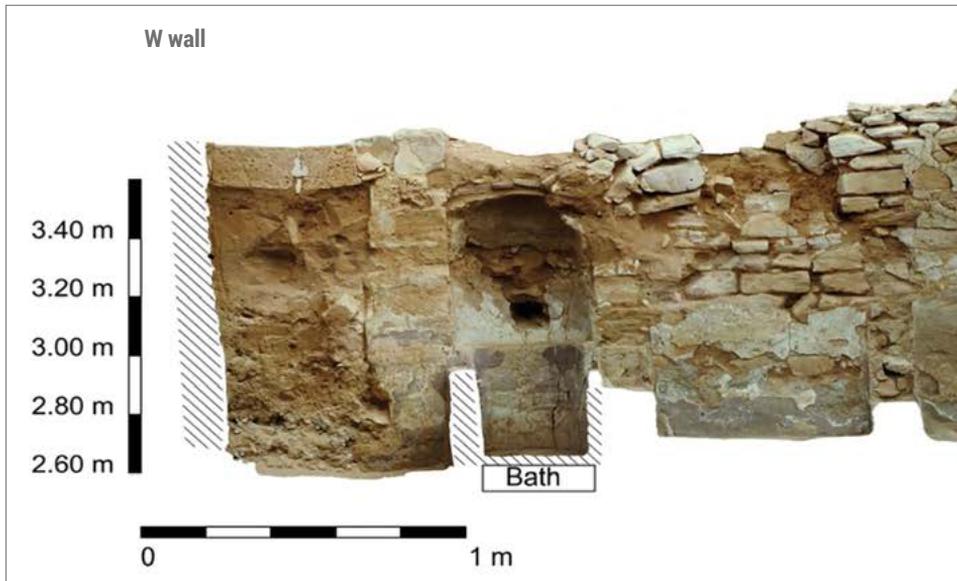




Fig. 5. Bath complex in building H.39, view looking east, from the direction of the entrance (PCMA Marina el-Alamein Archaeological Project/photo K. Jakubiak)



tioned here include the immersion bathtubs; these were significant elements of the interior organization of the baths. Bathtubs of similar construction were found in the so-called Southern Baths situated in the neighborhood of the Soknebtynis temple in Tebtynis in the Fayum Oasis (Hadj-Minaglou 2009). One of the tubs there was situated in a shallow niche, which technically required a kind of *arcosolium* to be constructed above the tub. This is similar in a way to the conch or niche recognized in the western chamber of H.39.

There are several secondary technical issues, which arise upon examination of the bath construction. One is how the tubs were emptied, this in the face of absolutely no evidence of any draining installations. It should be assumed that used water was removed manually with

buckets or other pots dedicated for the purpose. Another issue is the location of the tentative tholos bath or circular chamber with hip tubs around the walls. From an architectural point of view, one could expect its existence in the northwestern part of the building. The doorway leading north from the western chamber of the bathhouse could make this supposition feasible.

There was other painted decoration preserved on the wall plastering apart from the conch above the tub in the western chamber. It was executed in the *al secco* technique and was renovated and repainted at least three times. Most of the decoration formed multi-colored geometric patterns consisting of rectangular panels painted in dark colors within lighter-colored frames (in the western chamber). Several fragments from the



Fig. 6. Western section of the interior of the bathhouse complex, looking north (PCMA Marina el-Alamein Archaeological Project/photo K. Jakubiak)

debris, too small for reconstruction, bore traces of a floral or even anthropomorphic decoration. The original decoration program cannot be determined from these pieces.

The floors of the bathhouse were decorated with mosaic floors sporting geometric patterns. The floor of white and black stone pebbles bears a resemblance to the mosaic discovered in the tholos of the Ptolemaic baths located in front of the temple in Karnak (Boraik 2009). The pebble mosaic technique is in itself suggestive of a date in the Ptolemaic period, but the pottery assemblage from the excavation indicated a later date for the bathhouse, a suggestion further confirmed by a study of the stratigraphy, which revealed that the tub in the eastern room and the

floor it stood on had been constructed over a hypocaust built in the Roman tradition of bathroom heating. The room would have been either a tepidarium or a caldarium, with the central chamber to the west of it acting as an apodyterium. The archaeological evidence thus points to mixed Hellenistic and Roman bathing tradition being manifested in this structure.

The pottery assemblage from the excavated structure assigns a tentative date to its construction in the beginning of the 1st century AD; the building was deserted sometime in the 3rd century AD. Fragments of Dressel 43 (Cretoise 4) amphora handles (Crete, first half of the 3rd century AD) were among the most characteristic pottery found in the deposits accumulated above the ruined bathhouse.

## CONCLUSIONS

Taking into consideration the new discoveries of the 2017 season, complementary to the results of archaeological work in past years, it can be said that the residents of the northern part of the town near the harbor were a relatively wealthy community. This is strongly supported by the presence of a bathhouse in structure H.39, including the now uncovered internal decoration of the complex. The baths evidently emphasized the significant position and prestige of the town as a whole. The main rooms of the bath complex were decorated with pebble mosaic floors, which is very rare among buildings of this kind from Egypt. The location of the baths in the neighborhood of house H.21, where evidence of cult practices devoted to Commodus was identified, is interesting from an urban-

planning point of view. The buildings were certainly not contemporaneous, the bathhouse being dated provisionally to the 1st century AD and the H.21 complex to the reign of Commodus (AD 177–192). The latter building was on a level almost 2 m higher than the bath complex and was probably constructed on top of an older structure possibly associated with the same chronological horizon as the bathhouse. Nevertheless, the location of these structures near the sea shore and next to the harbor seems to have been of prominence within the town. This observation is supported by the character of house H.41, which is also apparently a substantial building in the ancient harbor. Moreover, structure H.40, which has just started to be investigated, looks like a large and wealthy house as well.

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