

NOTE ON AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE  
NEAR EL DABĀ  
ON THE NORTHWESTERN COAST OF EGYPT

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*In March 2000, the authors paid a short visit to the area located in the vicinity of el Dabā, actually one kilometer east of the village of el Gamayma and 1.5 km north of the village of Zawiet el Abuan, in order to compare the underground tombs excavated hitherto by a Polish mission in Marina el-Alamein<sup>1</sup> with the rock-hewn sepulchers found in the limestone ridge extending latitudinally a few hundred meters away from the sea, north of the cultivated fields of the two villages. Some of these tombs, used as shelters by the Bedouins during the battles of World War II in the area, had been partly cleared of sand a few years ago by an inspector of the SCA, Mr. Hussein Nouredin.*

1) For a description of these tombs, cf. W.A. Daszewski, "La nécropole de Marina el-Alamein", in: *Nécropoles et Pouvoir. Actes du colloque 'Théorie de la nécropole antique'*, Lyon, 21-25 Janvier 1995, ed. S. Marchegay, M-T. Le Dinahet, J-F. Salles (Lyon 1998), 220-241.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE SITE

In order to reach the cemetery on the site known under the name of Dekheil, we had to cross three low but fairly large mounds (koms) located among the fields at a short distance of about two to five hundred meters to the south of the ridge. The tombs were cut into the rocky outcrops, either N-S on the seaward side of the ridge, or E-W along the ridge parallel to the coast.

Altogether some twenty hypogea could be identified, though not all of them have even begun to be cleaned. None have been excavated completely. In two of them the funerary chambers were accessible. A stepped corridor of comfortable width for one person leads down from ground

level directly into a roughly rectangular funerary chamber, preceded by a small antechamber (vestibule) with narrow benches lining the walls. The vestibule is separated from the main chamber by a low thin wall with a large opening (door) in the middle.

In the funerary chamber itself, the loculi are hewn in the rear and lateral walls, parallel to one another in horizontal rows (*Fig. 1*). Usually, the loculi were cut into the rock, so that their short sides opened onto the chamber. They were rectangular in section, sometimes with a “gabled” roof. A few loculi were cut sideways, opening onto the chamber with the long side. The whole tomb arrangement



*Fig. 1. The chamber of one of the rock-cut tombs at Dekheil*

is axial. There is some evidence of the loculi openings being cut to admit closing slabs.

Generally speaking, these tombs are more modest than in Marina. They show no traces of aboveground structures, and have no open-air courts between the staircase and the chamber, a characteristic feature of the tombs in Alexandria, Plinthine and Marina.<sup>2)</sup> In plan, however, they recall tombs found hewn in the rock in several other places along the ridge, which extends all the way from Alexandria westwards. Their type is suggestive of Late Hellenistic and Early Roman times.

It is the site of the three low mounds, however, that is of much greater interest. Located in the midst of cultivated fields, the area of the mounds is arid and barren, and strewn with countless pottery sherds. Walking around, we spotted vestiges of massive walls barely apparent on the surface. Other indications, such as fragments of architectural decoration, notably a piece of modillion and dentils of good quality are testimonial to fine buildings. The pottery representing all kinds from storage to tableware is proof enough of a settlement that must have been inhabited for quite a time.

## THE POTTERY

The following pottery fragments could be identified on the spot (*Fig. 2*):

### EGYPTIAN WARES

1. Rim fragment of dish, black-gloss ware, Nile silt, Late Ptolemaic (*Fig. 2:1*);
2. Rim fragment of bowl, black-gloss ware, Nile silt, Late Ptolemaic – 1st century BC (*Fig. 2:2*);
3. Rim and neck fragment of two-handled jug, northwestern coastal region, Late Ptolemaic (*Fig. 2:3*);
4. Rim fragment of amphora type AE 2, northwestern coastal region, Ptolemaic – 1st century BC (*Fig. 2:4*);
5. Rim fragment of casserole, Nile silt, Late Ptolemaic – 1st century BC (*Fig. 2:5*);
6. Rim fragments of casseroles, one being a local derivative of the *orlo bifido* type (*Fig. 2:6a*), Nile silt, Late-Ptolemaic-Early Roman (*Fig. 2:6b*);
7. Lid fragments, northwestern coast (*Fig. 2:7a-c*);

8. Ring-base of bowl, Nile silt, Cypriot Sigillata derivative, 1st-2nd century AD (*Fig. 2:8*);
9. Handles of amphora type AE 3, produced either in the Mareotis or the northwestern coastal region, 2nd-3rd century AD.

### IMPORTED WARES

10. Four fragments of Megarian bowl, black-gloss, probably 2nd century BC;
11. Fragment of Red Slip plate, probably 2nd century BC;
12. Four fragments of ESA plates, Augustan – late 1st century BC;
13. Fragment of black-gloss bowl, Hellenistic imitation of Attic ware, probably late 3rd century BC and four small sherds of same ware, Aegean, Late Hellenistic;
14. Fragment of fusiform unguentarium, Late Hellenistic – 1st century BC-1st century AD;

2) Cf. id., "The Origins of Hellenistic Hypogea in Alexandria", in: *Aspekte Spätagyptische Kultur. Festschrift für Erich Winter*, ed. M. Minas and J. Zeidler (Mainz am Rhein 1994), 51-68.

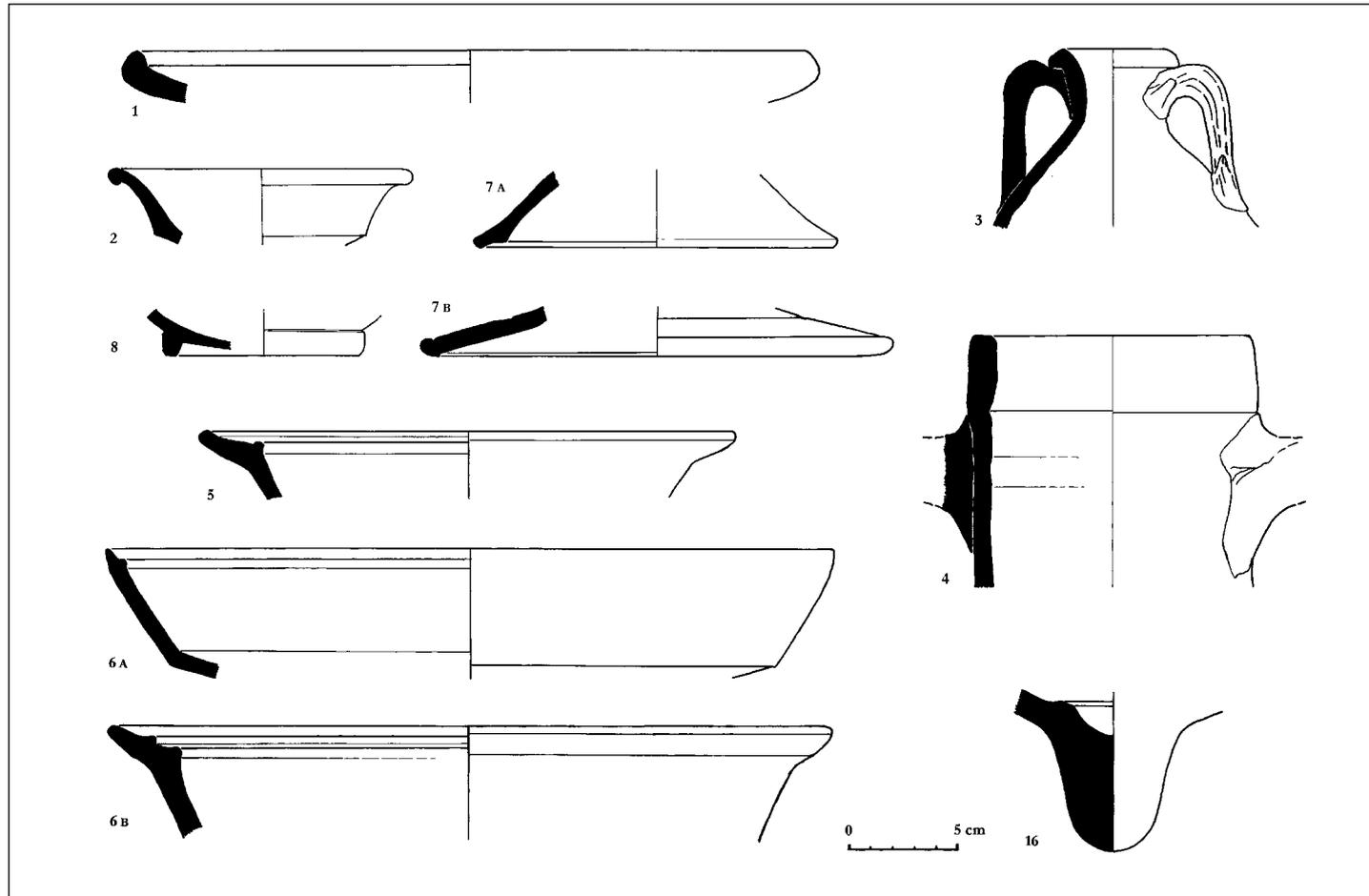


Fig. 2. Selection of pottery from the settlement site near the Dekheil necropolis  
(Drawing I. Zych)

15. Stamped Rhodian amphora handle, probably 2nd century BC;
16. Bottom of amphora of Tripolitana II type, 1st-2nd century AD (*Fig. 2:16*).

Taking into account all the reservations, which draw from the limited nature of the visit and the modest size of the pottery sample, it should be noted that the potsherds found all over the koms are remarkably homogeneous. They consistently refer to a chronological horizon of the Late Hellenistic period and the 1st and 2nd century AD. Many of the sherds investigated *in situ* appear to represent

local production, originating from the Mareotis and the northwestern coastal region, including the neighboring El Dab<sup>CA</sup> area where, in antiquity, there had existed important pottery workshops.<sup>3)</sup> Except for the Rhodian piece, the amphorae appear to be slightly later, which may of course be due to the unrepresentative character of the sample.

An overall date to the Middle-Late Hellenistic and Early Imperial period is also borne out by two bronze coins, surface finds, both very corroded, but recognizable as (Late) Ptolemaic issues.

## REMARKS ON THE IDENTIFICATION OF THE SITE

It is a matter of course that any reliable identification of the settlement is pending further investigation and successful excavation of the site. At present, however, it is possible to make the following remarks on the ground of the observations and suggestions proposed by modern travelers and the descriptions referring to this part of the coast found in the ancient sources.

The settlement in question is located some six to seven kilometers to the northwest of the modern town of el Dab<sup>CA</sup>, but a bit closer to the promontory of the same name. Ancient sources mention towns, villages and characteristic topographic features off and along the coast. They usually favor the most important places, such as, for example, the towns of Catabathmus (=Sollum) or Paraetionium

(=Marsa Matruh). Some sources, however, are more detailed, notably, Strabo (late 1st century BC); Claudius Ptolemy (=Ptolemy, mid 2nd century AD); *Stadiasmus* (handbook for sailors navigating along the coast, probably late 3rd century AD); Antonine Itinerary (Diocletianic period, but probably going back to the time of Caracalla); and *Tabula Peutingeriana* (medieval copy of a 2nd-3rd century map, probably altered in the 4th century AD).<sup>4)</sup> They all enumerate smaller settlements, harbors and villages, road posts and promontories, and often give distances from harbor to harbor or anchorage, or promontory.

At a distance of about 6 km to the east of the settlement of our interest, there is the promontory of Râs ad Dab<sup>CA</sup>. Following

3) Cf. G. Majcherek, "Tell el-Haraby. A newly discovered kiln-site", *BCE* XV (1991), 5-7; also, id., and A. el Shennawy, "Research on Amphorae Production on the North-Western Coast of Egypt", *CCE* 3 (1992), 129-136.

4) Strabo 17.1.14; Claudii Ptolemaei, *Geographia* IV, 5- 9, ed. A. Noble (Leipzig 1843-1845; repr. G. Olms, Hildesheim 1966); *Stadiasmus (sive Periplus Maris Magni)*, cf. C. Müller, *Geographi greci minores* I, 429-438; *Itinerarium Provinciarum Antonini Augusti*, cf. O. Parthey, M. Pinder, *Itinerarium Antonini Augusti* (Berlin 1848); *Tabula Peutingeriana*, cf. K. Miller, *Die Peutingerische Tafel* (1887; repr. 1961); also id., *Itineraria Romana: römische Reisewege an der Hand der Tabula Peutingeriana* (Stuttgart 1916; repr. 1963). For a discussion of ancient sources and observations by modern travelers, cf. W.A. Daszewski et al., "Excavations at Marina el-Alamein 1987-1988", *MDAIK* 46 (1990), 16-17.

the distances given by the *Stadiasmus*, Fourtau<sup>5)</sup> placed Zephyrios, which he understood as “*un port abrité du Zéphyre ou vent du N-O*”, just one kilometer further east of this promontory. As a matter of fact, there is a small creek there, in reality “*fort mal abrité*”, still used in Fourtau's time (1904) as an anchorage in fine weather for small sailing boats from Alexandria which “*viennent charger le peu d’orge que l’on récolte dans la région*”. El Dab<sup>ca</sup> is also associated with Zephyrium by J. Ball.<sup>6)</sup> On survey maps of Egypt, Zephyrium is identified with a “*harbor*” 3 km southeast of Râs ed Dab<sup>ca</sup>.<sup>7)</sup> Indeed, there is yet another natural anchorage there. Therefore, it cannot be the same “*port abrité*” mentioned by the French scholar, unless his one kilometer should be understood as an approximation, since he did not take exact measurements. In a more recent atlas of 1989, the authors place Zephyrion also at Râs ed Dab<sup>ca</sup>.<sup>8)</sup> The small harbor mentioned by Fourtau must thus be considered as located in the relatively near vicinity of our settlement. It should be added, however, that Strabo places Zephyrion much further to the east, behind the harbor of Derris, usually identified with modern Râs Gibeissa.<sup>9)</sup> Since Strabo did not have immediate knowledge of the coast except that he once sailed along it from west to

east, and received secondhand information, some of the distances given by him are far from correct and it may well be that he also mispositioned some places of minor importance. In this respect the *Stadiasmus* seems to be more reliable. It was written by experienced sailors, most likely themselves sailing regularly in the area, thus having practical knowledge of the coast and especially of the harbors and small anchorage places.

West of our settlement, the nearest ancient locality, several kilometers away, (according to the *Stadiasmus* 110 stades to the west of Zephyrion) and repeatedly mentioned by ancient sources, is Pedonia, considered either as an island with a harbor (Strabo), a village (Ptolemy) or settlement, apparently with a harbor (*Stadiasmus*), or a town (Pidonia in the *Synecdemus* of Hierokles).<sup>10)</sup> Nowadays, Pedonia village is usually identified with Marsa (=Arabic for “harbor”) Abu Samra,<sup>11)</sup> (Fourtau: Bir [Arabic for “well, source”] Abu Samra),<sup>12)</sup> while Pedonia island (Myrmix rock of the *Stadiasmus*?) is associated with the neighboring Samra Reef.<sup>13)</sup>

Our settlement should thus be located somewhere between Zephyrion and Pedonia, but much closer to the former, since it is found, as mentioned above, about 6-7 km northwest of the town of el Dab<sup>ca</sup>.

5) R. Fourtau. “La côte de la Marmarique d’après les anciens géographes grec”, *BIE* VIII (1914), 107-108.

6) J. Ball, *Egypt in the Classical Geographers* (Survey of Egypt) (Cairo 1942), 66.

7) Cf. *ibid.*, 136.

8) H. Heinen, W. Verbeeck et al., *Tübinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients* (TAVO), BV 21, Ägypten in hellenistisch-römische Zeit (Wiesbaden 1989). As a matter of fact, Zephyrion cannot be at Râs ed Dab<sup>ca</sup>, but in its vicinity!

9) Strabo, 17.1.14; for modern identification, cf. Fourtau, *op. cit.*, 106-107; also Ball, *op. cit.*, 67, 104.

10) Hierokles, *Synecdemus et Notitiae Graecae Episcopatum* (ed. G. Parthey, repr. Amsterdam 1967); also *Le Synekdemus d’Hierokles et l’opuscule géographique de George de Chypre* (introduction, commentaire et cartes de E. Honigmann) (Bruxelles 1939).

11) Ball, *op. cit.*, 136, 140, 166.

12) Fourtau, *op. cit.*, 108-109.

13) Ball, *op. cit.*, 67, 104.

The Antonine Itinerary mentions the road station of Caportis, which is usually placed at el Dab'ā.<sup>14)</sup> Bayle St. John, who traveled in this region in the 1840s, describes in the area of el Gamayma (!) a “massive quadrangular stone tower with two lower rooms, one probably serving as an entrance hall. It was built of large hewn stones, most of which are now weather-worn and shattered. From its position on the crest of a steep hill overlooking the road we came by, I should think it was erected for protection of the caravan road to the Oasis, as well as that to Cyrene. Outside on the west is a vast cistern cut in the solid rock.”<sup>15)</sup> We saw no trace of this tower in the visited area. Either the ruin should be located elsewhere or it has disappeared completely, the blocks being taken away by stone robbers, as it happened with many other monuments in the region in the

course of the last 150 years. Comparing the Itinerary (as suggested by Ball) and the site of Comarum mentioned on the *Tabula Peutingeriana*,<sup>16)</sup> Anthony de Cosson writes that the former overlaps the latter and comes to the conclusion that the remains found 6-8 km west of el Dab'ā (el Gamayma and further Ilwet el Quseir) may be the site of the station called Comarum.<sup>17)</sup>

Is this our settlement? It is difficult to say without jumping to premature conclusions. In view of the pottery finds mentioned above, the site appears to have been occupied from Late (perhaps even Middle) Ptolemaic until Roman Imperial times. The road post of Comarum is quoted only once in a later source (*Tabula Peutingeriana*). Perhaps future excavations of the site will provide a more satisfactory answer.

14) Ibid., 140, 154. However, K. Miller, *Itineraria*, op. cit., places it further to the east, cf. 873-874, map 276.

15) Bayle St. John, *Adventures in the Libyan Desert* (London 1849), quoted after A. de Cosson, *Mareotis* (London 1935), 55.

16) Ball, op. cit., 154. This site, however, has been located on a modern survey map at Sidi 'Abd el-Rahman, as quoted by Ball (i.e., much more to the east).

17) A. de Cosson, op. cit., 54-55. It should be noted that Miller, *Itineraria*, op. cit., on his map 276 (see above note 14), commenting on the *Tabula Peutingeriana*, places Comarum in the close vicinity of Pedone (=Pedonia). He writes, (873) “near the ruins of *Gammernel*”(?), and states further on that in the area west of Caportis “*es fahlt eine Station, vielleicht Pedone*”. Is the settlement described in this note the missing post mentioned by Miller?