

Ain el-Gedida 2008 Excavations

SCA Report

The 2008 excavation season at the site of Ain el-Gedida (Dakhleh Oasis Project site no. 31/405-N3-1) was carried out from 8 January to 14 February 2008 by a team sponsored by Columbia University, under the direction of Professor Roger Bagnall.

The DOP conducted a preliminary survey of the site in 1980, and the local Coptic and Islamic Inspectorate carried out three seasons of excavation between 1993 and 1995, under the direction of Ahmed Salem and Kamel Bayumi. The southern part of Mound I was the main object of archaeological investigation. Excavation was resumed in 2006. The documentation of the rooms excavated in the 1990s was begun in that year; five rooms were also excavated in the northern half of Mound I, including room B5 identified as a church (plate 1). In 2007, the excavation of the church was completed and further archaeological investigation was carried out to the north and north-west of room B5 and A46, revealing a church complex consisting of a long E-W corridor (B7), an anteroom/kitchen (room B6), a pantry (room B9), and a staircase (B8), which led to an upper floor or to a roof (now missing). Another room (B10), not connected to the church complex and presumably functioning as a kitchen, was investigated to the west of room B6.

The staff of the 2008 mission consisted of Prof. Roger Bagnall, project director in cooperation with Ahmed Salem; Nicola Aravecchia, archaeological field director; Dorota Dziedzic, archaeologist; Maria Guadalupe Espinosa Rodriguez, assistant archaeologist; Delphine Dixneux, ceramicist; Andrea Myers, assistant ceramicist; Angela Cervi, registrar; Marina Nuovo, assistant registrar and archaeologist; Fabrizio Pavia and Silvia Maggioni, topographers. The inspector was Adli Abdallah Zawal of the local Coptic and Islamic Inspectorate.

The excavation was first carried out in the area immediately to the south and to the east of the church complex, with the goal of ascertaining the topographical relationship of the complex with the surrounding buildings, within the urban fabric of the main mound of Ain el-Gedida (plate 3). A long, E-W oriented passageway (B11) was excavated to the south of the church, along the north edge of area A (excavated by the SCA in the 1990s). It measures approximately 10.76 m E-W by 2.15 m N-S and has walls preserved to a maximum height of 2.09 m. It was originally vaulted, as significant remains of spring vaults are still extant. The passageway, leading from the east to the west half of Mound I, is not perfectly rectilinear; the western sector seems to have been built at a later time, with its two walls (and the vault springs on top of them) having a slightly different orientation from the eastern half of the corridor.

To the east of the church, a long N-S oriented street (B12, measuring 14.75 m N-S by 2.04 m E-W) was investigated and several floor levels were identified. The street has an irregular layout, due to the different constructional phases of the buildings whose walls define its outline (cf. description of room B15 below). It crossed another E-W

passageway (B16) to the north, which formed the northern boundary of B12 and was excavated only in part this season.

To the south, street B12 led to room B13, which was the crossroad where B11 and B12 (and another unexcavated street to the south) met. B13 is a roughly rectangular space, measuring approximately 4.45 m E-W by 3.41 m N-S, with walls preserved to a maximum height of 2.10 m and with evidence of different floor levels. This space opened onto an unexcavated area to the east and on a room along its south side. Two mud-brick basins were found at floor level to the sides of a doorway opening onto B13 along its south side. Their function has not been ascertained beyond doubt, yet.

After the area including streets B11-12 and room B13 was completely excavated and documented, another set of two spaces was investigated further east, i.e., rooms B14-15. B15 is an L-shaped room, measuring approximately 4.81 m E-W by 4.55 m N-S and has walls preserved to a maximum height of 1.97 m. Different floor levels, visible in the south-east part of the room are evidence of different occupational phases. The removal of a large collapse in the western part of B15 revealed significant remains of substructures related to the presence of ovens, whose traces are still visible on the surrounding walls. Other evidence for the identification of the room as a kitchen was the clay stove found against the wall separating room B15 from B14. The west and the south-west walls were poorly constructed and seem to be the result of an enlargement of room B15 protruding into street B12, which possibly happened at the same time or after the apse was added to room B5, to the south-west of B15. A small doorway located at the north-west corner of B15 allowed for the passage from this room onto B12, near the main entrance to the church complex. Two other doorways led onto an unexcavated space to the south.

B14 is a fairly small room (2.69 m E-W by 2.31 m N-S), located to the north-east of room B15 and originally opened onto it through a doorway that was found almost entirely collapsed. The room bears traces of two floors and possibly served as a storage facility for kitchen B15.

Following the excavation of the area to the south and east of the church complex, further archaeological investigation was carried out along the west edge of Mound I, where a large complex of eight rooms is located (plates 2, 4). The complex is 18.50 m N-S by 7.10 m E-W and has walls preserved to a maximum height of 2.19 m to the east, while the north and west parts of the complex were subject to a severe process of erosion and all features are preserved above *gebel* to a low height. The east wall is characterized by the presence of ten regularly spaced niches; it is possible that the west wall was niched as well, but it is currently preserved to a lower level than the one at which the niches would have been placed. Two rectangular rooms are located in the southern part of the complex, B17 to the west and B18 to the east. A mud-brick staircase, built in the south-east corner of B18, led into the room, whose southern wall is missing. A mud-brick rectangular feature was also built against the north-east corner of B18, with a large stone slab placed horizontally on top of this structure and two channels running to both sides. The nature and original function of this feature have not been identified, yet.

A large doorway opened from room B18 into room B19, the largest space of the complex, which measures about 9.10 m N-S by 4.74 m E-W and has walls preserved to a maximum height of 1.91 m (E wall). The clay floor, quite well preserved above an earlier floor level (identified in the north-west corner of the room), slopes down from north to south. In the north-west corner of the room a clay and mud-brick hearth is preserved to the south of an earlier hearth partly visible within the floor. In the north-east corner of B19 traces of a roughly rectangular clay basin are visible, embedded in the latest floor. To the south, a large rectangular basin is placed against the east wall of the room, at a lower level than the late floor in its northern half. Another, smaller but deeper stone and clay basin was found in the south-east corner of the room. The presence of such features, seemingly pertaining to a small-scale industrial establishment, and the discovery of a significant number of sherds of unbaked vessels, has led to the preliminary identification of the complex, at least in its late occupational phase, as a center for the production of ceramic vessels.

Room 19 opened onto a set of four rooms to the north through three smaller openings. A very small rectangular room (B20, measuring 1.83 m E-W by 1.73 m N-S) could be accessed through a central doorway, which was on an axis with the main entrance from room B18 into room B19. Room B20 opened onto room B21, measuring 1.83 m E-W by 1.55 m N-S, to the north. Rooms B20-21 were flanked by two symmetrically placed rooms, B22 to the west (preserved to an extremely limited degree due to erosion) and B23 to the east (measuring 3.54 m N-S by 1.57 m E-W and with walls preserved to a maximum height of 1.06 m). Another very small space (B24) was built against the south-west corner of room B19. It measures 1.40 m E-W by 1.07 m N-S and a doorway built in the east side gave access to it from room B19.

The discovery of collapses, consisting for the most part of vault bricks, throughout room 19 is evidence to the fact that such a large space was, at least in its late phase of occupation, covered with a barrel-vaulted roof.

A preliminary examination of the walls and their relative chronology points to different constructional phases for the complex. It is possible to argue that at a first stage rooms B17, 18, 19, and 24 were one large, rectangular space, which was later partitioned into several rooms. Two long walls were built along the inner face of the west and east original walls, possibly to support them, as evidence was found of structural problems and of attempts to restore the complex already in ancient times. Surely, the central doorway between rooms 18 and 19 does not seem to have been the earliest entrance to the complex, whose original function has not been ascertained beyond doubt and awaits further comparative study.

On the last few days of the 2008 excavation season, the rooms that were the object of archaeological investigation were partially backfilled, paying particular attention to the features more in danger of collapse or damage, which might arise from a prolonged exposure to the elements. Rooms B9 and B10, excavated in 2007, were completely backfilled and rooms B5 and A46 were filled in with additional clean sand.

The topographers surveyed the excavated rooms and updated the two plans of the archaeological site, the first showing the plan of the walls at ground level and the second depicting the overall architecture of each room. The methodological standards and

graphic conventions that were set in 2007 were followed. Scalable photographs of the outer face of the eastern and southern walls of the church complex were taken and then elaborated for photogrammetric analysis. Furthermore, the planimetric and photogrammetric data of the church complex, collected in 2007 and 2008, were processed and plates for most rooms of the complex were created. Each of them includes a CAD plan of Mound I, a simplified plan of the church complex, and the photogrammetric images pertaining to each room.

Several small finds were found and collected in all the rooms that were the object of archaeological investigation. The most considerable of all is a large number of coins (over one hundred) coming from different stratigraphic contexts and in various states of preservation. Their cleaning, recording, and analysis has already begun, as they may provide significant data on the chronology of the site. Other finds include three Greek ostraka, one of which bears what might be the ancient name of the site (matching the modern Arabic toponym), fragments of dull glass bracelets, several beads, two pieces of chloroplastic, i.e., a woman (plate 5) and an animal, and seven complete or fragmentary lamps (plate 6). Furthermore, numerous small fragments of a cartonnage funerary mask, possibly Roman in Egyptian style, were collected in rooms B20-21 and were the object of preliminary conservation. All small finds were cleaned, numbered, and photographed; written records were created for each of them and then entered into the general database.

The few complete vessels and the large amount of pottery fragments that were found and collected during the 2008 excavation season were recorded and drawn by the ceramicist. Furthermore, the recording of the diagnostics from the 2007 season was completed. The corpus of material found in 2008 includes jars, flasks, plates, cooking-pots, craters, and several bowls with white slip and red dots on the rim. A few fragments of Oasis Red Slip Wares and of ceramics from the Nile Valley were also identified, i.e., Egyptian amphoras made of Nile brown silt and a fragment of a marl clay juglet. The Late Roman dating of the ceramics found in 2008 is consistent with those from the two previous excavation seasons. The chronological range spans from the fourth to the beginning of the fifth century C.E., with the exception of a few pottery sherds, found in room B10 at the end of the 2007 season and analyzed this year, which possibly belong to Early Roman forms. Furthermore, the list of the main iron-rich (A1-A2) and calcium-rich fabrics and the general catalogue of forms and fabrics from Ain el-Gedida were reorganized, including the evidence collected in 2006-2008 excavation seasons.

The systematic study of all documentation from the 2006-2008 excavation seasons, including ceramics and small finds, has already begun. Its results will be published in collaboration with the SCA.

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PLATES



Plate 1: church complex and new rooms excavated in 2008.

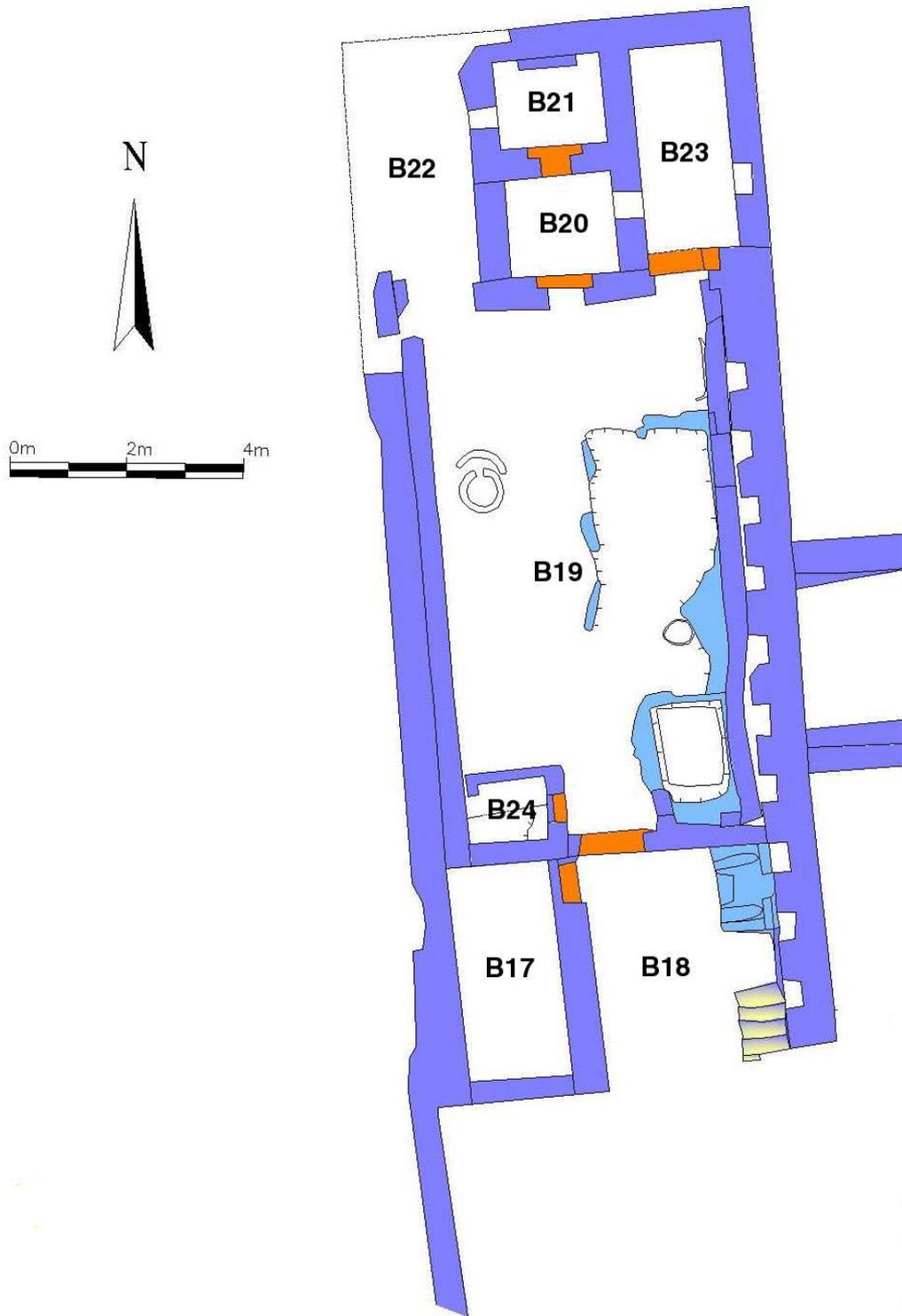


Plate 2: excavated complex of rooms along the west edge of Mound I.



Plate 3: Excavated area to the E of the church complex (aerial view to the SE).



Plate 4: Excavated area along the W edge of Mound I (aerial view to the N).



Plate 5: choroplastic statuette from room B19.



Plate 6: lamp from room B21.