House H10 from Marina el-Alamein on the northwest coast of Egypt

Abstract: House H10 is a Hellenistic-Roman building that was among the first to be discovered at the site of Marina el-Alamein in Egypt. It is one of the largest and most extensive houses uncovered at the site. The following comprehensive overview is based on the results of regular research since 1997, including initial conservation work. The spatial design is a showcase of building technology typical of houses from Marina. Embedded in both Greco-Hellenic and Roman tradition, it is an *oikos* house with a courtyard and incomplete peristyle consisting of two columned porticoes on opposite sides aligned with the main axis and a third, perpendicular portico imitated by the architectural decoration of the courtyard elevation articulated with engaged columns. The two main rooms were located on opposite sides of the peristyle. The house was rebuilt several times, resulting in a complicated layout. The house has been re-studied, casting new light on domestic religious practices and the distinctiveness of the architectural and artistic interior design, including exceptional examples of figural wall painting. The architecture and interior décor of the house document the changes at the interface of Hellenistic and Roman traditions.

Key words: Marina el-Alamein, Greco-Roman Egypt, domestic architecture, decoration, domestic cult

House H10 is one of the most extensive structures at the archaeological site of Marina el-Alamein (Matrouh Governorate, Egypt). After the discovery in 1985, the relics of the Hellenistic-Roman city and the necropolis

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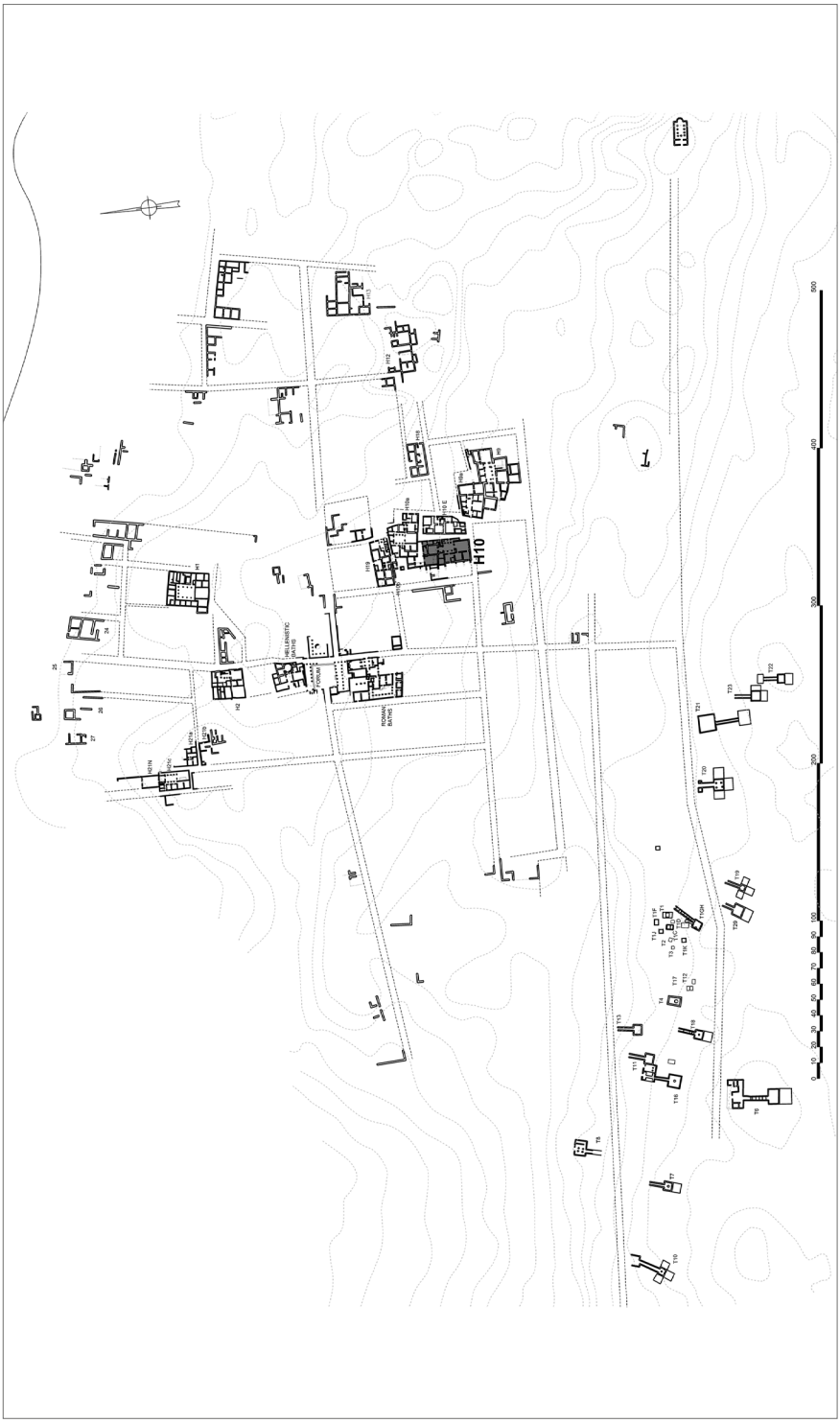

Fig. 1. Plan of the site in Marina el-Alamein showing the excavated structures and the reconstructed network of streets with the location of House H10 (After S. Medeksza)

were studied by the PCMA University of Warsaw archaeological mission led by Wiktor Andrzej Daszewski together with Egyptian archaeologists. Conservation teams undertook work parallel with the archaeological expedition. In 1995, Stanisław Medeksza from the Wrocław University of Science and Technology mounted a separate conservation and research mission.

The structures under investigation include some significant remains of residential buildings. Most of the relics come from the 1st–2nd centuries AD. Opulent tomb monuments from the 2nd century BC–1st century AD are evidence of an already developed urban center (Czerner 2017: 42–46). House H10 lies in the southeastern part of the ancient town [*Fig. 1*]. Research in this area was carried out by Egyptian archaeologists who excavated the relics of the house. A map of excavated structures from 1988 shows the outlines of the first walls (Daszewski et al. 1990: Fig. 2); by 1994 almost the entire house plan had been uncovered (Daszewski 1995: Fig. 1). The conservation team began work once Egyptian archaeologists completed the excavations in 1997. In the seasons until 2001, the preservation of the remains, including anastylosis of various elements, was carried out [*Fig. 2*]. Additional work in later seasons providing further opportunity for research. The results of these studies are collected and presented in this article.

HOUSE H10

The urban space in which the house is located is a zone of already less regular street layout on the southeastern outskirts of the ancient town [see *Fig. 1*]. The buildings here are also less regular in plan, although H10 is an almost regular rectangle at the core, measuring 16 m by 30 m, oriented to the south with a slight eastward deviation of 5.7° [*Fig. 3*]. Some additional unexplored rooms to the west appear to have belonged to the complex, extending the currently known limits of the house a total of 12.50 m closed by the street parallel to the house main axis.

The house was built entirely of local limestone. The perimeter walls and the walls of the largest rooms are formed of rubble masonry and are of considerable thickness (0.75–0.80 m). They were bonded in clay mortar and covered with lime mortar, which also acted as a structural bond for the stone facade. The walls surrounding the central courtyard—the representative part of the house—were constructed of standard-size regular ashlars of (0.52–0.60 x 0.27 x 0.27 m). Columns were constructed of carefully processed limestone elements and topped with stone cornices. Ashlars were also used for the eastern and northern street facades which is where the main entrances were. All exterior and interior walls were plastered. There are some remains of exterior plaster on the outer east wall and interior plaster in Rooms 2, 3, 3a, 5c, 6 and 7. The courtyard, together with the porticoes and most of the rooms, is paved with rectangular limestone slabs measuring 0.35–0.40 x 0.50–0.65 m. Some rooms lacked a stone floor.

In terms of the layout of the main part, the house is of the *oikos* type (see below) [*Fig. 3*]. This layout is characteristic of houses in Marina, in keeping with the tradition of Hellenistic houses (Pensabene 2010: 208). However, it can also be placed in the tradition of the Roman axial peristyle house (Meyer 1999: 109–110), widespread in the Mediterranean, and present also in Cyrenaica (Pensabene and Gasparini 2019: 183–184), where the *oikos/oeci* was often turned into a triclinium.

Among the Marina houses H10 is the most elaborate, but it has its irregularities. The house was also rebuilt at least twice, clouding the issue of a functional interpretation. However, studies conducted in the course of the restoration work have cast light on the function of the most important rooms and elements of the building even as the function of some of the smaller chambers continues to be speculative.

THE LAYOUT

The core of the house is organised around the main reception room (2) on the southern side [*Figs 3, 4*], opening onto the portico courtyard (1) to the north and a second smaller room (7) on its opposite side. The courtyard had two porticoes, 2.55 m and 2.15 m wide opening on the eastern and western sides respectively, of a central, open space measuring 4.60 m by 7.07–7.25 m. The western portico has two

Fig. 2. House H10 after conservation in 2003, view from the south (Photo R. Czerner)

columns, while the eastern one features three. The facade decoration articulated with three semi-columns, the outer two shared with the porticoes, stood in place of the third portico on the northern side. This gave the impression of an incomplete peristyle with porticoes to the west, north and east. The portico courtyard measured 9.15–9.25 m east–west and 7.15–7.30 m north–south. A cistern situated under the courtyard was fed from a well opening in the middle of this space, which collected water from the roofs through downspouts in the walls next to semi-columns standing in the northwestern and northeasterm corners of the courtyard portico, and then through two channels leading under the floor diagonally towards the well. Relics of both the channels and the western downspout have been preserved.

Fig. 3. Inventory plan of House H10 in Marina el-Alamein (Plan R. Czerner and S. Medeksza)

On the south, the main reception hall (2) ran adjacent to the courtyard (1). It was elongated on the north–south axis, 9.40 long and 6.60 m wide, making it one of the largest halls discovered so far in the ancient town. It had three doors opening onto the courtyard in its southern, architecturally undecorated wall. The largest, central doorway, 2.15 m wide, led directly from the open area of the courtyard, as did the small eastern door, which was 1.12 m wide. The western side door, 1.05 m wide, led from the western portico. Therefore, the main axis of the hall and that of the courtyard were offset in relation to one another. This design was consistently repeated in the other houses in Marina, regardless of whether small or large.

Corresponding to this entrance from the western portico south into Room 2 was a doorway of the same width at the southern end of the eastern portico leading to a very small room (5c). None of the doors described had stone jambs. Nevertheless, above the thresholds from the side of the courtyard, there are recesses for mounting wooden frames. That would have been flush with the south face of the courtyard. The doors (best observable in the eastern doorway from the courtyard into Room 2) also had bolt holes and recesses in the thresholds, fitted with slabs with pivot holes, probably made of harder stone (studies on door thresholds in Marina were carried out by Andrzej B. Biernacki). The doors opened into the hall. The middle one was double-winged.

On the northern side, exactly opposite the central door to Room 2 and on the same axis, stood an equally wide (2.30 m) entrance to a vestibule (6), 3.55 m wide and 2.60 m deep, preceding the second large Room 7, which was 6.00 m long north–south and 5.70 m wide. The entrance to the

Fig. 4. Courtyard and main reception hall of House H10, view from the north (Photo R. Czerner)

vestibule had a threshold raised by about 0.12 m, but there is no evidence for the mounting of the frames, hinges or door leaves. Indications have been preserved only in the entrance to Room 7. It was 1.33 m wide, without stone jambs, with a recess for a frame in the external face of the wall and a pivot hole on the western side. The door opened inwards. The hall with its vestibule is unique in Marina and the only similar example is in House H9 (Daszewski 2011: 431; Bąkowska-Czerner and Czerner 2019: 75). It could be related to the Greek *prostas* layout or a megaron according to Medeksza's interpretation (Medeksza 1999b: 123). One argument in favor of the latter hypothesis is the presence of a rectangular hearth (0.75 m by 1.30 m) in the vestibule, sunk into the floor, found with traces of burning inside it. The fireplace in the vestibule is a unique case in Marina.

A typical design feature in Marina are two rooms adjacent to the main hall that, together, form a complex, here 3 and 3a located on the western side. Both are almost square and measure 4.80 m by 4.43 m (east–west). They are accessed from Room 2 via 1.10 m-wide doorways fitted with wooden frames in the eastern face of the wall and doors opening inward. The northern room (3) has four recesses in the middle of the floor for wooden poles that probably supported the structure of the skylight frame. The southern room (3a) was never fully explored and awaits restoration of the preserved remains of polychrome plaster on the walls (Medeksza 1999b: 130). Hence, nothing can be said of the floor and roof arrangements, whether they repeated those from the twin room.

Room 4 located to the north of Room 3 (with a smaller one, 4a) had no floor. All the doors that opened into it featured stone jambs in a direction indicating that they had led from inside. Therefore, Room 4 was perhaps an open, working courtyard.

Room 10a, accessible from the north-western corner, provided with a cellar or a cistern (a hole in the floor remains), could have been a kitchen. Room 10 to the east, of identical size as Room 10a, was accessible from the portico and must have served a residential purpose. Rooms 11–13 on the eastern side of the house probably constituted a series of shops with storerooms, accessible from the street from the east and north.

REBUILDING PHASE

The preserved entrance to the house, which led directly into the courtyard down from the street running along the eastern façade, is not the original one. It was probably created after the street level had been raised, exceeding the level of the peristyle courtyard by about 0.50 m. It became necessary to build four steps inside the eastern portico leading down to its level and to make a new entrance. Therefore, the portico was rebuilt in order to adapt the number and spacing of the columns to the new functional layout (Medeksza 1999b: 122–123). The southern column set on a base, which is an inverted pseudo-Corinthian head, stems from this time. The old entrance was located north of the present one and led from the street into Room 8, which also contained steps, and through it into the courtyard.

Research in the street revealed that the east wall of the house was rebuilt, probably after some kind of cataclysm. The

confirmation of a 0.08 m thick layer of combustion in all of the excavated rooms as well as in the area indicates that this event could have been accompanied by a fire. This was connected with the said raising of the usable street level. Some remains of the original wall, built of stone blocks 0.27 m, i.e., half a royal cubit, thick, have been preserved at the bottom and a foundation course was laid on top of them corresponding to the new usable street level. These blocks were already equal to the length of the block used in Marina, i.e., 0.52 m, and a wall one-block thick was built on top of this foundation (Medeksza 2001a: 69; 2001b: 9).

Houses in Marina usually featured a latrine adjacent to the entrance and the staircase (Medeksza 1999b: 123). In House H10, it is also located next to the entrance, at the northern end of the eastern portico and adjacent to the wall of Room 8. However, it was rebuilt in this place, probably during the same reconstruction that formed the new east wall and entrance. The preserved latrine could be flushed from the same downspout, which supplied water to the cistern from the east. No relics of any other, more regularly arranged, latrine have survived.

The functional transformation that the building underwent at the time of the rebuilding also called for bricking up the door leading from the western courtyard portico into the reception hall (2). Next to the bricked-up door, already inside Room 2, in its northeastern corner, a plinth enclosed with vertical slabs or a *kline* couch, measuring 2.15 m by 1.05 m, was installed. The western portico was partly fenced off with a wooden balustrade, traces of the installation of which could be seen in the floor, and a column base still preserved in the southern bay.

The other entrance, from the east–west street running north of House H10, must have been then the second, representative entrance to House H10.It led down some steps into Room 14 and then, through an original door, into Room 7. The rebuilding cut Room 14 and the neighboring Room 15 off from the house, and made them part of the adjoining house H10b, which was created by fencing off part of the street and connecting it with these rooms. A cistern lay under Room 14, the opening into it preserved in the southeastern corner. In the opposing, southwestern corner, three steps led up to a passage running west to Area 15, where the floor level was higher than in the interior of Rooms 7 and 14. Under the floor ran a cistern channel that could collect water from the roof through a downspout carved inside a nearby pseudo-Ionic column. This could be in fact associated with the construction of House H10b. Room 15, accessible only from the northern street, may have originally been a shop or a tavern. Indeed, the spot could have been empty of any kind of building at first as suggested by the regular limestone-slab facade of this side of the west wall of Room 7. Were this the case, it would mean that all the important facades of the original house were constructed of well-dressed ashlars or stone slabs. It is possible therefore that House H10 was initially smaller, and that the area later occupied by Room 15 (with 15a and 15b separated off) was left empty at first, becoming the main reception hall of House H10b when it was constructed. The floor could be related to those times as well.

FUNCTIONAL INTERPRETATION OF THE MAIN ROOMS

The main axial complex of the courtyard with the two spacious rooms functioned in the same way before and after the rebuilding. Medeksza interpreted the two rooms (7 and 6) as an *oikos* with a vestibule from the north and the main, largest room (2) on the south as an *andron* turned triclinium (Medeksza 1999b: 123). In other Marina houses, the largest hall is usually considered to be the *oikos*. It was often designed with a niche that performed a religious function. This was the case with Houses H9 and H21c. Usually, such a room was accompanied by one or more often two auxiliary rooms.

In House H10 likewise there was an aedicule with a rich architectural design and figural painting, undoubtedly of a religious nature, situated in the middle of the south wall of the main hall. The hall was accompanied by two rooms (3 and 3a). However, unlike the other houses, H10 also had an exceptionally spacious and representativ room (7) on the opposite side of the courtyard, additionally preceded with a vestibule (6). The special layout of the floor in the main hall (2), distinguished by the orientation of the slabs in the central part surrounded by three narrower panels by the walls, corresponds to the layout of a triclinium. However, it could have been the same as in the other houses, where the main reception room with a niche for religious purposes and auxiliary rooms at the side would have been in fact an *oikos*.

In this context, one should note that Room 7 had a relatively narrow door and its floor slab arrangement corresponds to the arrangement of dining couches in a triclinium.

THE FORM OF THE ROOFS AND UPPER FLOOR

Medeksza (1999b: 124) considered two different forms of roofing in ancient Marina: sloping tile roof and flat roof/terrace covered with clay or lime mortar. This issue is also relevant to the house in question. The tradition of Greek and Roman houses in this area incorporates both types of roofs as well as combined systems with gable roofs over high halls only (see Hoepfner and Schwander 1994: 40, 150, 185, 211, 278). With the exception of one example, no relics of tegula roof tiles have been found in Marina. This argues in favor of a prevailing flat roof form. It is also connected with the Egyptian tradition of utility terraces. Flat roof technology is also known to have been used at the site: remains of a clay covering of a flat ceiling structure made of palm beams was discovered in the Hellenistic baths in the town centre (Bąkowska-Czerner in Czerner et al. 2016: 173).

Stairs leading to the roof terraces or to the upper floor rooms were found in most of the houses in Marina (Medeksza 1999b: 124). The existence of rooms on the first floor would have facilitated the functional separation of the part of the house intended for women. Room 8, located on the eastern side immediately to the north of the peristyle courtyard, had a corridor on the southern side,

leading to the street entrance to the house and the first flight of stairs on the northern side. Before the entrance from the courtyard there was one step up, another in the corridor, four more already in the northern flight. As far as the landing, which would have restricted the flight of the stairs to the west, and slightly beyond the wall that separated the room below, there was room for another six steps, of which at least the last two must have been wooden. Therefore, the flight of the stairs was short. With an average step height of up to 0.20 m, a total

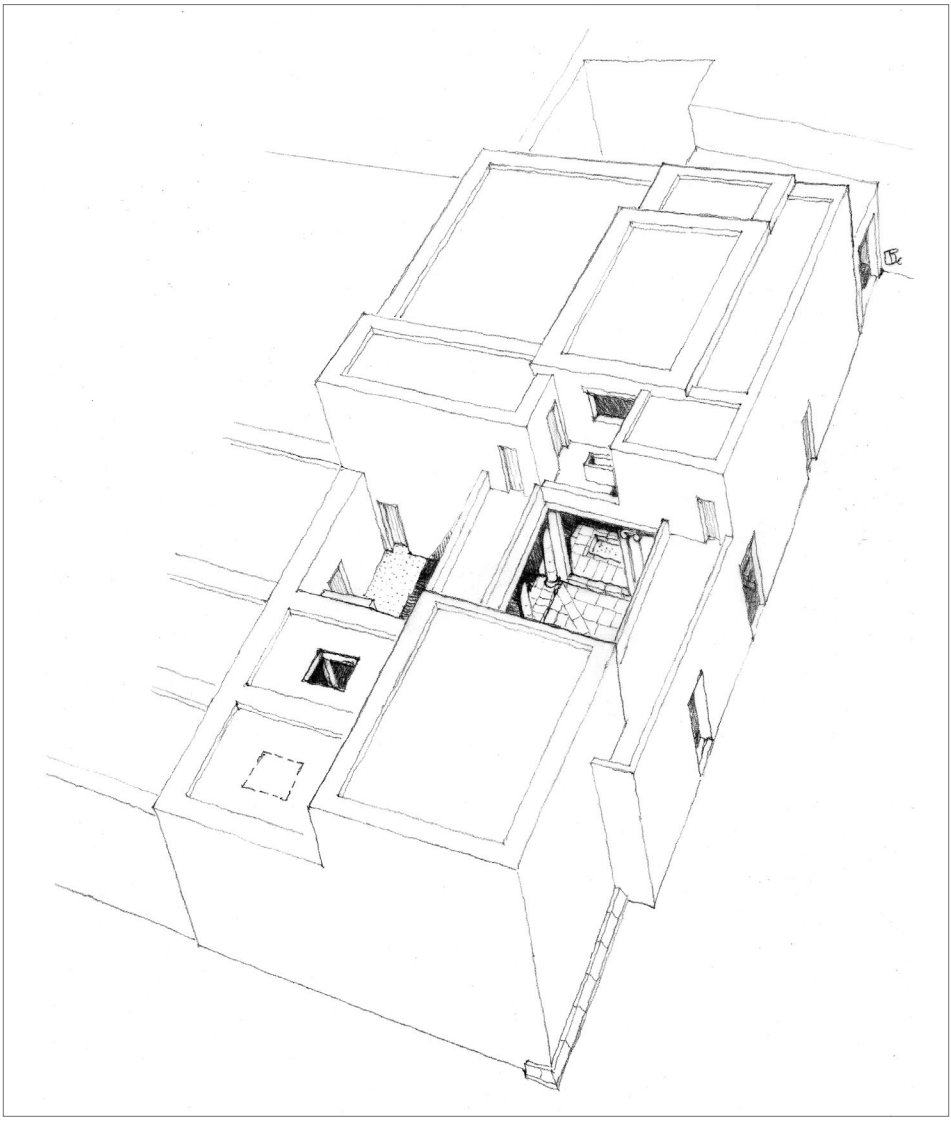

Fig. 5. Reconstruction of the form of the roofs and upper floor of House H10 (Reconstruction drawing R. Czerner)

of 12 steps ensured a rise of about 2.40 m. This was not much, but enough for the landing to rise to the level of the lintel above the entrance to the corridor, which was only 1.00 m wide, and the staircase from the courtyard. However, the upper floor level could not have been as low as this. Therefore, the staircase must have had two more flights, which could have reached a height of 4.40 m. At this level or slightly lower than that, one could expect the floor of the rooms or terraces on the upper storey. This is also the level of the roofing of the courtyard porticos, which, with a maximum height of the columns equal to nine times the diameter of the shaft above the base, measured at 0.425 m, would be more than 3.825 m.

An issue to be clarified is the range of rooms and/or terraces on the upper floor [*Fig. 5*]. Undoubtedly, the largest reception room (2), 6.60 m wide and 9.40 m long, required a proportionate height. The south wall of the room featured an aedicule 2.44 m high, its bottom ledge at 1.53 m above the floor (Czerner 2000: 4). Counting the space essential above the finial of the niche, the hall should therefore have been about 4.50–5.50 m high. Finally, the flat ceiling covering it, assuming it was the case, would have probably been made of palm beams, which at a span of 6.60 m would have been insufficient in terms of load-bearing capacity to carry a floor usable for people. Consequently, there could not have been a used level above the main reception room which would have been covered directly with a probaby flat roof. The skylight lighting Room 3 to the west (and possibly Room 3a) would have precluded an upper floor of rooms in this part of the house as well. Room 4 farther north, interpreted as an open courtyard, also would not have had any need for utility galleries above the porticoes, although the height of the porticoes (equal to about 4 m) allowed for their existence. There were no rooms on the upper floor to the south and west of the courtyard.

Chambers could have existed above Rooms 10 and 10a, above the row of shops 11–13, Room 14 perhaps and possibly Room 15. However, as we recall, the latter might not have existed in the original phase, while in the second it was the main reception hall of House H10b, probably also double height. In turn, the column with a hollow downspout between Rooms 14 and 15, by their north wall, was reconstructed from its preserved set of elements to a height of 3.51 m (Medeksza 2001a: 69; 2001b: 11). This suggests that either the original street, which later became part of Courtyard 17 of House H10b, had a roof or this particular area of the house above Unit 1 did not actually have an upper-floor room.

Theoretically, a chamber could have existed above Hall 7, this despite the hall's large dimensions and representative character. But the need to illuminate it would make it expectedly higher than some of the neighboring interiors in order to have a window or windows in the upper part of its walls. In fact, Vestibule 6 could have been covered with a terrace roof with an opening for the smoke from the hearth to escape outside.

Consequently, it should not be expected that the upper floor lay above the utilitarian rooms further to the west of the examined part of House H10, unless they were accessed via a different staircase or staircases.

INTERIOR DÉCOR

Some relics of sculptural and painted interior decoration have been preserved. Pseudo-Ionic columns of the Marina type (named so according to Daszewski's suggestion, similarly to the pseudo-Corinthian ones. See Czerner 2009: 2, 22–24; Daszewski 2011: 440) stood in the porticoes, the shafts without fluting and with simplified forms of bases and capitals. In the absence of any relics of stone architraves, it should be assumed that wooden beams rested upon them. Stone cornices with dentils were featured at ceiling level, i.e. Ionic as well as simplified versions. Several elements of this kind of a cornice have

Fig. 6. Reconstruction of the body of House H10 with location of polychrome decoration (Reconstruction drawing R. Czerner)

been preserved (Czerner 2009: 103–104). Some remains of cornices with obliquely positioned flat hollow modillions were also found (Czerner 2009: 106). Such modillions, often alternating with flat grooved modillions, also referred to as *a travicello* (Pensabene 1993: 99–100 and 131; McKenzie 2007: 87–89; Pensabene 2010: 206) are typical forms of Hellenistic architectural decoration and were commonly used in Marina. The cornices, in which they took an oblique form, probably came from the corner triangular jerkin heads of the pediment placed above a door.

The aedicule was located in the main Room 2, in the middle of the wall opposite the entrance (Czerner 2000: 3–4) [*Figs 4, 6*]. This location of a niche in a house is typical and is also repeated in the reception halls of other Marina Houses: H9, H21c and in Hall H21 "N" (Bąkowska-Czerner and Czerner 2017: 142; Czerner 2017: 52). Stone elements of the fallen niche, almost completely preserved, were discovered in 1998 (Czerner 2005: 120) [*Fig. 7*]. The remains of the bottom ledge were still *in situ* in the wall. This allowed for anastylosis of the niche during conservation work in 1999–2001 (Medeksza 2000: 50–51; 2001a: 69; 2002: 93). Four slabs from the back wall of the niche were also found, still preserving relics of figural painting on the plaster. The architectural form of the niche was peculiar, at the same time typical of

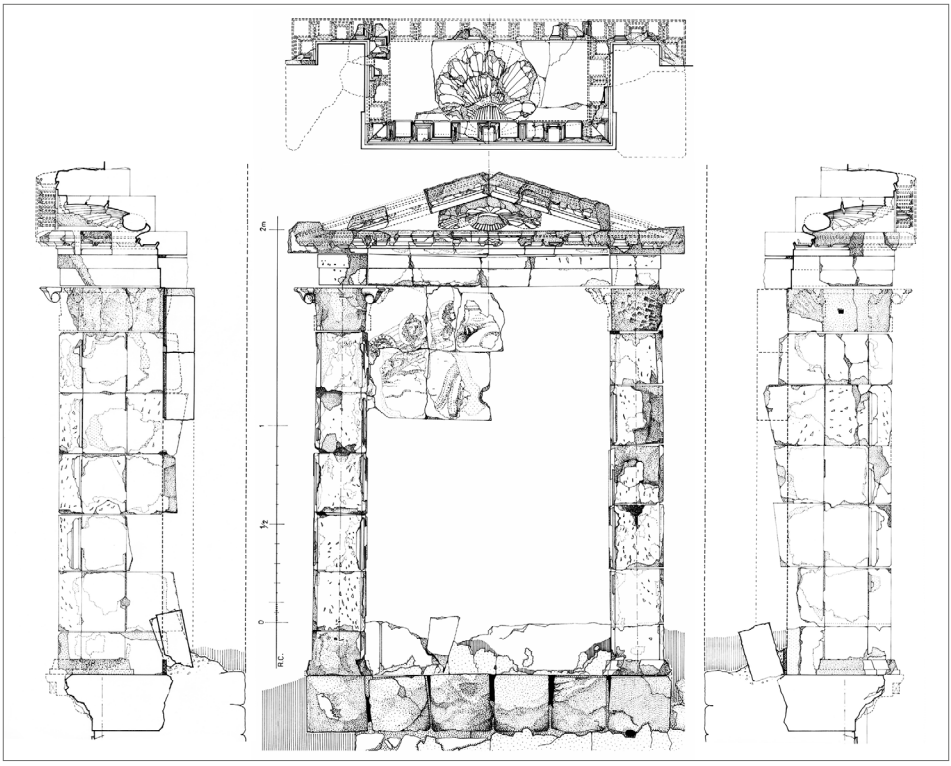

Fig. 7. The aedicula from Room 2 of House H10 (Inventory drawing R. Czerner and A.B. Biernacki)

Marina, with half-columns and pilasters on the sides and a pediment, in this case triangular, which did not form a closed tympanum, but whose lower cornice was retracted and ran around the side and rear wall of the niche (Pensabene 2010: 206; Czerner 2017: 52). The half-columns and pilasters were pseudo-Corinthian, of the Marina type, the former with convex fluting modeled in mortar (Czerner 2009: 111, Pl. XV-E.001). The lower cornice of the pediment was decorated from the base with geometrized flat groove modillions alternating with square hollow modillions, the upper one featuring the flat grooved type only. In the centre of the pediment, from the bottom, was a shell modeled in mortar.

The niche was refashioned. Surviving remains of the new decoration imclude Corinthian forms of the half-columns and pilasters closer to the classical versions. Both received concave fluting, with semicircular ends at the top and bottom, and Attic bases (Czerner 2009: 110, Pl. XIV-D.006). The capitals were probably also changed. The grooves of the cornice modillions were closed. The new decoration was made of mortar.

POLYCHROME DECORATION

House interiors were richly decorated with wall painting. House H10 yielded the most examples of figural as well as geometric decoration, preserved on successive coats of plaster. Relics of polychrome decoration were discovered *in situ* same as in House H9 (Bąkowska-Czerner and Czerner 2019: 81–84). Not all of the fragments were revealed.

Fig. 8. Remains of polychrome decoration on the west wall of Room 3 of House H10 (Photo S. Medeksza)

Polychrome decoration was observed on the walls of Rooms 3 and 3a. In Room 3, it was best visible on the west wall, reaching a height of 0.87 m (Medeksza 1999a: 130) [*Fig. 8*]. Traces of decoration were also found in the southwestern corner and near the floor by the south wall and in the southern doorway. The bottom of the west wall was decorated with a black plinth 0.21 m high, separated by an engraved line from red and black pilasters surrounded by a vertical, red frame. There were panels between the pilasters, alternating brown and black, with traces of marbling. Such colors, although practical, made the room dark. Light penetrated here through an opening in the roof; the upper parts of the walls may have been painted in light colors to brighten up the interior. Similarly decorated walls can be found, among others, in Pompeii (Strocka 1984: 26, Figs 13, 14). Room 3a was not cleared of the fill before a conservation project could be mounted. Securing of the plaster edges demonstrated that the walls had been painted with a structural geometric decoration.

Remains of polychrome painting are discernible on the cornices and one of the capitals from the courtyard porticos. The colors have been reconstructed referring additionally to parallels from other houses. The shafts of the columns and half-columns were plastered and probably painted white. However, their bases and wall plinths were black (Medeksza, Czerner, and Bąkowska 2015: 1753–1754). A preserved fragment of a pseudo-Ionian capital was painted in Pompeian red with a black margin under the abacus (Czerner 2009: 38, 97, Fig. 71). A fragment of a pseudo-Ionic volute found in House H10e had the same color and a black margin (Czerner 2009: 38, 98, Fig. 70). The Ionian cornices reveal remains of Pompeian red between the dentils (Czerner 2009: 38, 103–104, Fig. 67).

The decoration of the aedicule was also polychrome. Remains of blue paint was preserved on the pediment, along with the shell and the modillions of the upper cornice. On the lower cornice, the modillions were Pompeian red, and the interior of the square modillions was painted black. The shafts of the pilasters and half-columns were ash-grey. In the second phase, they were white and the inside of the fluting was painted black.

Of greatest importance is the fine figural decoration of the niche, which is linked to the first phase of the structure (Medeksza 1999a: 57–58) [*Fig. 9*]. It was later either repaired or completely replastered, as indicated by the fragments of white plaster visible in two places. The interior of the niche in which the painting was located is 1.98 m high and about 1.26/1.23 m wide. The preserved images of three busts are on the left side in the upper part of the niche [see *Fig. 7*] and have been interpreted as well as described in detail by Zsolt Kiss (2006: 163–166). They are arranged on an arch, with Serapis at the top and Harpocrates and Helios below. Their female counterparts, such as Isis and Selene/Luna, could have appeared on the other side. If so, then one side would have been dedicated symbolically to the Sun, and the other to the Moon. These elements resemble compositions depicting scenes of Mithra killing a bull. The arch over which the busts of the gods are located could refer to the image of a grotto in

which the action took place. Considering the location of this painting in the *lararium* of the main hall of the house, it could testify to the cult of Mithra in Marina. Mithraism was a mystery religion followed mostly by Roman soldiers and officials. According to some scholars, the cult of this god could have been introduced into Egypt in the time of the Achaemenids (Mikołajczak 2008: 132–133, Note 23). There is evidence of its existence at a later date (Harris 1996). Representations of Mithra in homes, or in private Mithraea, are found in ancient Ostia and elsewhere (Rubio Rivera 2003–2005). However, as Kiss emphasizes, the kinship with Mithra's iconography here is purely formal (Kiss 2006: 169).

Medeksza suggested that the the lower part of the scene represented a man or a god, the figure of which could have been about 1.60 m high (1999a: 57). This figure was not identified. The busts of deities described above were shown against a distinctly blue background and were given blue nimbuses, the color of which could have had some significance. In the case of the images of Jupiter or Dionysus,

Fig. 9. Painting depicting three gods: Helios, Harpocrates and Serapis, inthe aedicula in Room 2 of House H10 (Photo S. Medeksza)

a bluish nimbus highlighted the cosmic nature of the deity, the universal divinity (Cecconi 2016: 17–19). In the upper part of the painting, the action undoubtedly takes place in the sky. The remains of the main scene have been preserved in the form of two small fragments. Delicate waves are marked in various shades of grey on a bluish-greenish background. A yellow, vertical element can be interpreted as a raised forearm of the arm bent at the elbow. Long strands of straight, black-brown-burgundy hair on either side of the forearm, slightly curled at the ends, arranged as if a hand—missing unfortunately—was holding them up. One could imagine the head with black thick hair, parted in the middle of the forehead, positioned directly on the vertical axis of the niche, already on the fragment with the head of Serapis. It would have been turned to the right and inclined, probaby crowned with a white diadem with a red tip at the very top. Described in this way, the figure immediately lends itself to an association with images of Aphrodite Anadyomene emerging from the sea foam. Based on the length of the forearm and taking into account the proportions of the figure, it could have been about 1.26 m tall, fitting perfectly the imaginary scene. The painting is very poorly preserved in this part and difficult to interpret; other interpretations may yet be put forward following further research and analysis. However, one should bear in mind that Aphrodite was undoubtedly venerated there considering the many representations that have been discovered in various form in the ancient town (Bąkowska-Czerner 2011). Images of the goddess of love have been found in the *lararia* of houses in Pompeii (Fröhlich 1991: 147–150). A representation of the nude Aphrodite Anadyomene in a similar arrangement is found in the triclinium of Casa del Principe di Napoli in Pompeii (Strocka 1984: 106–107, Figs 106, 107). A terracotta niche with a naked Aphrodite under a shell may also be considered as a parallel. The upper part of the Marina niche was decorated with a scallop shell, an attribute of Aphrodite. It is not known why the goddess emerging from the sea was accompanied by Serapis, Harpokrates and Helios. The presence of these gods could mean that they were her patrons in this scene, emphasizing in a way Aphrodite's command of the sea.

The quality of the workmanship and mastery of *chiaroscuro* in the painting under consideration is evident. Only one head—that of Harpocrates—survives in its entirety. The god appears surprised or agitated. The hair is long, curly, blowing in the wind. At the same time, the raised eyes emphasise his spirituality, divinity and inaccessibility. The composition of the scene as a whole is well thought out and shows good technique and the influence of Hellenistic art. The painting has been dated to the 2nd century AD, but it could have been made earlier, even in the 1st century AD, arguably because the house with the niche were built in the 1st century AD. The characteristic architectural decoration of the niche itself (Czerner 2005: 122–123) and the influence of the Hellenistic tradition visible in the painting are also noteworthy.

The preserved fragment of painting from the *lararium* is further testimony of religious syncretism and the popularity in

Marina, above all, of the private cult of Serapis and Harpokrates. These are not the only figural representations found in House H10. In its eastern part, by the main entrance, next to the courtyard and the *oikos*, lies a small rectangular room (5c), 2.65 m long and 1.05 m wide. As indicated by preserved traces in the stone floor, as well as holes for the horizontal beam of the wooden frame, a wooden door closed it off from the courtyard. A plinth or table (Medeksza 1999a: 61), perhaps an altar, stood in the southern end of the room. One should note that small stone altars attesting domestic worship are ubiquitous in the houses in Marina. Restoration work in 1998 uncovered fragments of a wall painting which were subsequently studied by Kiss (2006: 166–169). The painting shows Heron, a god of Thracian origin, standing next to an altar [*Fig. 10*]. It is badly damaged, but a thorough conservation over the years (by painting restorer Małgorzata Ujma) have revealed several previously unseen elements.

Fig. 10. Painting depicting Heron from Room 5c of House H10 (Photo S. Medeksza)

The scene is presented inside a brown, rectangular frame that Kiss interpreted as a picture frame (Kiss 2006: 168). Vestiges of the frame remain in the upper part of the painting and are also faintly visible in the lower part as well as on the right side, where one can also see the plaster from the adjacent west wall. Fragments of the figure of the god survive. Heron is depicted standing, a large, curving cornucopia to his left, supported probably by his left arm. In his right he could have held a patera (lost) for pouring a libation on a high altar. The god has thick hair and beard. A brownish-maroon *kalathos*, a symbol of abundance, rests on top of the head, shown surrounded by a nimbus of turquoise color that became clear after conservation. The god's face is completely destroyed. Behind his back, on the right side, one can see a large spearhead. The dress is barely visible: a turquoise chiton traces of which can be discerned on the right arm. However, the left is covered with a reddish-brownish chlamys or *plaudamentum*, a type of military cloak possibly fastened with a fibula or brooch on the right shoulder. By painting the folds, the artist highlighted the arrangement of the garment, which is barely discernible today. The second attribute ensuring abundance is the cornucopia. A snake with its head turned towards the god hovers above him. The

long, thin and tightly twisted body of the serpent is partly hidden around the cornucopia and its sinuous tail appears in the middle of its height. In Greco-Roman Egypt, the image of a snake is associated primarily with the guardian deity Agathos Daimon.

Half of a horizontally hanging garland (Latin *serta*) has been preserved in the upper part of the painting. Made of red flowers, it is tied with a double, thin, green ribbon, the ends of which are tightly twisted. Garlands were usually secured by nails driven into the wall. Some of the paintings bear traces in these places, because sometimes real garlands were hung in the painted areas (Rogers 2020: 1). Often depicted in *lararia*, they were an important element of Roman cult as reported in the ancient written sources, being offered to the Lares in addition to incense, wine and cakes (Rogers 2020: 9). Long, thin grasses along with plants with thicker or thinner stems and oblong leaves appear to grow from the groundline formed by the brown frame. This indicates that the scene is set in a landscape.

The painting was well composed and executed, and the precision in rendering the details is clearly visible. Strong colors contrast with the white background. The painter used a narrow range of colors. Shades of brown and burgundy dominate, but turquoise, red, delicate pink and light green are also included. Looking at the contorted body of the snake, the twisted strings of the garland that seem to dance in the wind, and the plants shown at different angles, it seems that the artist was trying to convey the impression of movement. It is also observable that some details are painted delicately, with brisk strikes of the brush. They contrast with the dignified, static figure of the god. The preserved fragment of the scene reflects the atmosphere of a religious ceremony.

The size and location of this painting are puzzling. On the basis of the preserved fragment of garland, Daszewski suggested (Medeksza 1999a: 59, Note 9) that this scene was part of a larger whole and that there could have been at least one more character, perhaps Lycurgus. Considering the composition and dimensions of this painting, and taking into account the size of the room, the best place for it would have been the shorter, southern wall, opposite the entrance. All the more so because of the remains of a structure found in front of this wall, which is 1.05 m wide against the 0.47 m of the image. An edge fragment of the plaster belonging to the side wall indicates that the painting had started from the edge, leaving enough room for a larger composition perfectly fitted to th dimensions of the south wall. Regarding a reconstruction of the full composition, parallels need to be considered in this case.

This religious painting featuring the image of a god and the remains of a structure preserved on the floor in front of it suggest that some ceremonies and rituals were performed in this room, and that sacrifices were certainly made to the god. There are many indications that it was a *sacrarium*, a place of worship, sacrifice, prayer or storage of sacred paraphernalia (on the *sacrarium*, see Sfameni 2014: 19–22). These were usually small rooms, located near the courtyard, and were treated as private religious spaces.

One is left with the question why a god of Thracian origin would have been depicted in a house in Marina, right in the entrance. In Egypt, the origins of the Heron cult stem from the Thracian military settlers who arrived in the 3rd century BC. They were mercenaries and soldiers recruited from the southern part of Thrace enlisted in the Ptolemaic army (Velkov and Fol 1977: 97). They settled in Fayum, and many testimonies of Heron's cult were also found in Upper Egypt in Deir el-Medina and Deir el-Hagar in Dakhla (Kaper and Worp 1999: 246–248, Figs 15, 16; Omran 2015: 206). The Thracians also certainly lived in Alexandria, all the more so because in Roman times a Roman army, in which the Thracian riders served, was stationed in Nicopolis (Dimitrova 2002: 210, Note 4). Art, papyri and inscriptions indicate the survival of the cultural and religious traditions of the Thracians in the country on the Nile (for more about Thracians in Egypt, see Bingen 2007).

Reliefs depicting a "Thracian rider" found in ancient Thrace (Dimitrova 2002) are very similar to the depictions of Heron in Egypt. In the reliefs from Thrace, he is shown in various scenes, sometimes appearing in a chiton and chlamys, holding a patera or sometimes a spear, at times standing in front of a tree with a snake entwined around the trunk interpreted as a "tree of life", symbolizing the birth of nature (Dimitrova 2002: 211–216). Due to the scarcity of written sources, little is known about his cult in Thrace itself. He is depicted as a god and a hero, referred to by scholars in various ways, sometimes as the Lord of the Universe or the protector of fertility (for more on this topic, see Boteva 2011: 12–14). The iconography is believed to have been borrowed from Greek art (Dimitrova 2002: 223). In Egypt, Heron is usually depicted on horseback or standing in front of an altar, holding a patera intended for libation (Omran 2015: 207). As a military deity, he was depicted in a soldier's outfit with the appropriate attributes, usually a spear. He is often accompanied by a snake sometimes coiled around a tree (Omran 2015: 206, 210, 211, Pl. 2). Iconographic details changed with the passage of time. This is also seen in the Marina representation, which is dated to the 2nd century. Only a fragment of the Heron scene has survived here, and it is very damaged. The presence of a tree cannot be confirmed. The serpent appears apparently entwined around the cornucopia. A nimbus is visible around Heron's head. As already mentioned, many illustrations of him have been found at the Fayum oasis. He was worshiped in temples and in homes (Omran 2015: 208, Pl. 10). It has been noted that the image of Heron sometimes appears at entrances, for example, in the temple in Magdola or the sanctuary of the temple dedicated to the crocodile god Pnepheros and Petesouchos at Theadelphia in Fayum (Omran 2015: 209). One of Callimachus' epigrams could also be mentioned here; it contains a reference to a small statue of a Hero with a coiled snake and a sword, which stood guard at the door in front of a house in Amphipolis (*Call. Epigr.* 24; Cameron 1995: 211, VIII.5). In all likelihood, this concerns an image of the Thracian horseman who was known in Thrace as a door keeper (Bingen 2007). He could have played this role, in addition to that of protective spirit, in Egypt, also

protecting the inhabitants of House H10. Heron of Marina is also very similar to the image of Genius, the guardian spirit of the *paterfamilias*, who approaches the altar holding a cornucopia in one hand to offer libations (Rogers 2020: 3, Fig. 1). Such a representation was featured in a niche in a *sacrarium* at Casa di Popido Prisco in Pompeii (Bassani 2013: 412, Figs 149, 150). The protective god of the house, the guardian of the door, watches over the safety and well-being of the inhabitants, who complete their daily worship by making offerings and pouring a libation on the altar.

The painting in Room 5c is a testimony to the cult of Heron in Marina. Various assumptions can be made: perhaps the residents of the house were descended from Thracian soldiers from Ptolemaic times, possibly originating from nearby Alexandria or the Fayum, or appearing later with the Roman army. The military in Egypt played an important role beyond economy or religion—they also united different social groups (Fischer-Bovet 2014: 140). Given the apparent religious syncretism in Marina, it seems that the owners of the house did not necessarily have anything to do with the military. The described house is relatively large, representative, close to the city centre, and has rich architectural and painting décor. It must have belonged to a wealthy, influential family engaged in commerce and worshipping syncretic deities popular in the Greco-Roman period in Egypt. The ancient city on the site of Marina el-Alamein may have been inhabited to some extent by a multi-ethnic and multicultural society. There are traces of Egyptian, Greek, Roman and later Christian culture. The proximity of cosmopolitan Alexandria, as well as its location on trade routes, had a great influence on the developing cultural and religious syncretism.

The paintings from House H10 help to interpret the purpose of the rooms, and stand as testimony to domestic religious worship that existed in Marina, as well as the painting skills of the artists working in the area, which also emphasizes the status of the people living there.

THE ARTIFACTUAL ASSEMBLAGE FROM THE HOUSE

House H10 had been partly cleared in the early stages of archaeological work at the site, hence the conservation mission focused on archaeological supervision in places where conservation work was underway instead of regular excavations (Medeksza 2001b: 7–12). The few artifacts found include ceramics, a fragment of a lamp, as well as some coins (Medeksza 1997: 8, Pl. XV). There were also a few small nails, including tacks, which were probably used to nail together or decorate furniture. A bronze key-ring had practical uses—such keys were used to lock small wooden boxes. A bronze fish-hook from the ruins is of a type often found in Marina and other coastal settlements. However, the most important finds in terms of dating evidence are the coins, dated from Vespasian to Theodosius II, i.e., from the end of the 1st century AD to the middle of the 5th century AD (Medeksza 1998: 76, Note 2).

The house was rebuilt several times.

Surveys made in the street and in neighboring houses indicate at least three phases of use. The house was probably built in the 1st century AD. It was rebuilt at the beginning of the 2nd century AD. There is evidence for a general building movement throughout Marina in this period. It could have been influenced by historical events in Egypt, although it is impossible for now to say whether and to what extent the town was affected by events related to the Jewish uprising. Marina was expanded during the rule of Emperor Hadrian. The damage seen in many places in Marina dates to around the middle of the 3rd century. One may wonder if the cause was not an earthquake, perhaps the one that hit Libya and Western Anatolia in AD 262. A layer of burning 8 cm thick, found in several places around the House H10 complex, appears to be related to this event. The city was certainly impacted by the crisis of the 3rd century, which halted its development. The rebuilt House H10 was still in operation in the 4th century, when Christianity reached Marina, and probably even after AD 365, which is the date of the next great earthquake.

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