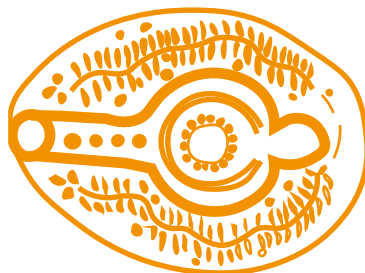


# Late Roman–Early Byzantine occupation at Marea B, Alexandria



**Abstract:** In 2018, the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA) in Alexandria conducted rescue excavations at Marea B (site designation GMR0022), approximately 40 km west of Alexandria, along the Cairo–Borg el-Arab Desert Road. Marea B is the designation used in the registers of the SCA to specifically denote the western part of Marea, distinguishing it from Marea A, which refers to the eastern part. The excavation uncovered a cluster of chambers and structural remains employing a mix of Roman and Byzantine construction techniques. Notable finds –such as coins and oil lamps decorated with Christian symbols– securely date the site’s main occupation to the Late Roman–Early Byzantine period. The pottery assemblage, including Late Roman amphorae (LRA 5/6), tableware, and cooking ware, confirms this chronology and indicates the site’s domestic function. Its strategic location near a key route to the Christian pilgrimage center of Abū Mīnā suggests Marea B likely served as a way station for pilgrims. This paper presents the architectural, ceramic, and small artifactual finds from the site, reconstructing its occupational history and situating it within the broader context of Late Antique religious movement and economic activity in Egypt. The material culture analysis also helps refine ceramic typologies for the Mareotic region.

**Keywords:** Late Roman Egypt, Early Byzantine period, Marea, Hauwâriya, GMR0022, pilgrimage archaeology, Late Roman Amphorae 5/6, domestic architecture

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## INTRODUCTION

Marea is situated in northern Egypt, south of the western part of Lake Mareotis, approximately 45 km southwest of Alexandria. The archaeological site known as Marea B (GMR0022)<sup>1</sup> lies about 40 km west of Alexandria, along the Cairo–Borg el-Arab desert road. It is located approximately 700 m from the modern village of Hauwâriya and about 17 km north of the Early Christian pilgrimage center of Abū Mīnā (Gwiazda and Derda 2021: 1) [Fig. 1].

The earliest detailed account of Lake Mareotis and the Mareotic region is found in Strabo's *Geography* (XVII 1, 7), composed during his visit to Egypt in antiquity. He described the lake as being supplied by canals connected to the Nile and emphasized the region's vibrant commercial activity, which included trade with the Egyptian interior and the wider Mediterranean. Strabo also praised the area's healthy climate, which made it a favored destination for travelers and contributed to its reputation as a center of tourism in antiquity (Abd-el-Ghani 2010: 3–4).

Within this economically and strategically significant region, Marea developed between the 5th and 7th centuries AD into an important center of trade, agriculture, and religious activity (Derda et al. 2020: 551). It flourished as

a key stopover for Christian pilgrims traveling to the shrine of Saint Menas (Abū Mīnā), located in the Western Desert near Alexandria. This pilgrimage site attracted worshippers from across the Mediterranean, and the settlement of Marea played a vital role in the interconnected networks of commerce, religion, and culture in Late Antiquity.

The present study focuses on the site of Marea B, referring to the western part of Marea. The Egyptian Antiquities Authority administers this extensive area, also known among archaeologists as Mit Abu el-Koum.

A rescue excavation was conducted here by the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA) under the supervision of Dr. Khaled Abo Al Hamd (General Director) and Mr. Maged El Sayed (Head of Mission), with Dr. Amany Shabaan serving as field archaeologist and ceramologist.<sup>2</sup>

The excavation yielded significant discoveries, including substantial architectural remains and a rich ceramic assemblage. These finds offer crucial insights into the Late Roman–Early Byzantine occupation of the Mareotic region and enhance our understanding of its role in the broader religious and economic landscape of Byzantine Egypt.

1 This number refers to the site surveyed on 16 and 24 October 2017 by the Centre d'Études Alexandrines (CEAlex), as part of ongoing investigations in the Rond-Point sector. The survey focused on architectural remains and surface ceramics to establish chronological and functional interpretations.

2 The mission took place during the summer season, from 22 April to 13 June 2018 and was funded by the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities.



Fig. 1. Location of the site in west Marea, adjusted from Google Earth (I. Awad)

## OVERVIEW OF THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF MAREA B

### LOCATION, HISTORICAL BACKGROUND, AND PREVIOUS EXCAVATIONS

Marea B is situated approximately 700 m from the Hauwâriya accommodation complex. This large area was previously subjected to test excavations between 1995 and 2001 and was topographically mapped in 2013 by the Centre d'Études Alexandrines (CEAlex).

Several areas were previously excavated, notably two main architectural complexes investigated in detail: the eastern sector, which comprised the baths and associated cisterns, and the western sector, which consisted of domestic structures

and shops separated by a street. The area surrounding the baths was completely leveled in the past by bulldozers.

The 2017 survey at GMR0022, conducted within the framework of the GEOMAR project—an initiative led by the French National Research Agency (ANR) to investigate the archaeological and historical-cultural landscape surrounding Lake Mareotis (Awad 2022: 37)—aimed to carry out a comprehensive assessment of the site and to identify surface ceramics in order to confirm preliminary dating and evaluate the perceived homogeneity of this extensive settlement.<sup>3</sup> This work sought



Fig. 2. The site of Marea B before excavation (Photo A. Shabaan)

- 3 The ceramic material collected during the 2017 survey confirms that the site was occupied during the Late Roman period, specifically from the 5th to 8th centuries AD. The western sector yielded a substantial quantity of sherds indicative of domestic activity. In the northwestern area, finds included beveled-rim cooking pots, banded bowls, LRA.1, numerous LRA.5/6, as well as Cypriot LR D and Aswan ware (Group O) sigillata. A similar assemblage was recorded in the southwestern part of the site, though in smaller quantities, comprising LRA 1 and LRA 5/6 amphorae, LR D, LR C, and African Red Slip Ware (ARSW). In contrast, the bath complex produced fewer finds, although the fragments were notably larger in size. Amphorae of types LRA 1 and LRA 5/6, LR D sigillata, and open forms from Group K were all present. Additionally, a significant number of *sakiah* pots made of calcareous clay were recorded, highlighting their widespread use. These findings contribute to the reconstruction of settlement patterns, economic activities, and the site's integration into the broader Graeco-Roman and Byzantine cultural and economic networks (CEAlex 2017).

to contribute to the reconstruction of settlement patterns, economic activities, and the region’s role within the broader Graeco-Roman and Byzantine contexts.

**THE NATURE OF THE SITE**

Marea B represents one of the ancient cities where most of the architectural remains have been damaged or destroyed over time, leaving only partial structural elements. These include remains of stone

walls visible on the surface and structural fragments exposed through archaeological excavations. Such architectural remnants are crucial for identifying the stratigraphic sequence of the site and for reconstructing its occupational history. The surface of the site is covered with pottery sherds and scattered stone fragments, which provide significant evidence for determining the chronology, function, and use of the area [Fig. 2].

**EXCAVATION**

**METHODOLOGY OF THE EXCAVATION**

The excavation followed a systematic stratigraphic approach, combining both exploratory and extensive techniques to ensure accurate documentation of the architectural and material remains. Ex-

cavations were carried out within a large residential area of the site, selected for investigation based on its topography and visible surface features. This area was divided into two main sectors: Area I and Area II [Fig. 3].

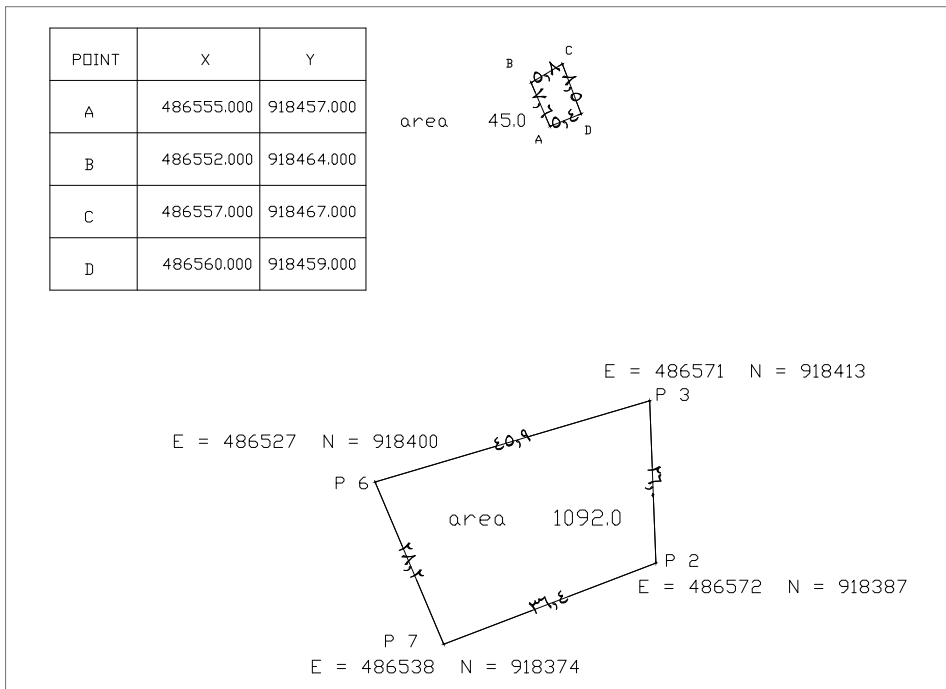


Fig. 3. General plan of the excavation site (H. Saad)

All architectural elements and artifacts were systematically measured, photographed, and drawn. The ceramic assemblage was collected for typological and chronological analysis, providing essential data for reconstructing the occupational phases of the site.

#### **AREA I: SQUARES A, B, F, AND G**

Excavations began in Area I, the larger of the two investigated sectors, with the opening of two initial exploratory trenches aimed at determining the nature

and depth of the archaeological deposits. Once the stratigraphic sequence had been established, these trenches were gradually expanded to reveal architectural features, including stone walls, foundations of varying dimensions, and evidence of diverse construction techniques.

These structures were built using locally quarried limestone blocks bonded with a substantial amount of mortar. The walls exhibit a traditional pseudo-ashlar masonry style executed in the *opus isodomum* technique, char-



Fig. 4. Area I: a – view from the north; b – view from the south (Photos A. Shabaan)

acterized by the use of exceptionally large stone blocks. This construction method provides important evidence for the continuity of Ptolemaic architectural traditions into later periods, as seen in the Roman House H at Kom el-Dikka (Majcherek 1995: 137). The term “pseudo-ashlars” —first introduced by German architects during excavations at Abū Mīnā<sup>4</sup>— refers to roughly cuboid limestone blocks. Due to the friable nature of the local stone, these blocks often lack sharply defined edges and corners.<sup>5</sup>

The excavation area was subsequently extended to include four adjoining squares arranged in a row: Square A (SQ#A), later expanded to Squares B, E, and G (SQ#B, SQ#E, and SQ#G). The primary objective in this area was to in-

vestigate the architectural remains and to understand their relationship to the overall urban layout of the settlement [Fig. 4].

#### **AREA II: SQUARE C**

Square C (SQ#C), designated as Area II, was located in the upper part of the site. Stratigraphic observations indicate that this area likely served as a refuse disposal zone rather than a formal habitation space. The stratigraphy within the square was irregular and lacked a consistent, homogeneous sequence. The excavated material included numerous pottery sherds, a limited number of small finds, and traces of burning, fish bones, and food remains — all characteristic of waste disposal activities.

### **DESCRIPTION OF THE OCCUPATIONAL FEATURES: ROOMS, COURTYARDS, AND THEIR FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS**

The excavated structures, consisting of a series of rooms and courtyards, follow the Mediterranean tradition of domestic architecture. They also provide valuable insights into building techniques within the broader context of Roman and Byzantine residential architecture in Egypt. Reflecting domestic and utilitarian functions characteristic of Late Roman–Early Byzantine housing complexes, these structures are comparable to others, such as House H<sub>1</sub> at Marea. Before these investigations, little was known about the layout and character of Marea’s residential quarters.<sup>6</sup>

The architectural features and material culture uncovered suggest a hybrid building tradition that integrates both Roman and Byzantine elements, shedding light on domestic life and local economic practices. The walls of the rooms were constructed entirely from blocks of locally quarried limestone.

#### **ROOM A**

Room A was primarily filled with calcareous clay soil and exhibited an irregular shape, with sides measuring approximately 8.50 m and 7.50 m in width, and 9.90 m and

4 For the use of pseudo-ashlar masonry at Abū Mīnā and the terminology adopted by German architects, see Grossmann and Kościuk 2006: 32.

5 For a comparable Early Byzantine pilgrimage site, see Gwiazda 2023: 200.

6 For further details, see: Wielgosz-Rondolino and Gwiazda 2014; 2016.

11.80 m in length. The stratigraphic layers ranged from compact to friable, and certain loci indicated the presence of a fireplace.

As the excavation expanded, a side-wall was uncovered on the northeast side of the room. Representing a style characteristic of Byzantine architecture, the wall was built using irregularly shaped and unevenly sized stone blocks bonded with mortar. It measured approximately 10.20 m in length and 2.50 m in width. Notably, a fragment of a cylindrical stone column, measuring 3.30 m in height and

0.60 m in diameter, was inserted into the wall. Near its southwest end, the wall was interrupted by three large, regularly shaped stone blocks that were possibly identified as part of a collapse. These blocks measured approximately 1.65 m × 2.60 m and 0.67 m × 2.45 m [Fig. 5].

The ceramic assemblage from Room A includes fragments of Late Roman Amphora types LRA 1 and LRA 7, in addition to cooking and tableware sherds such as Late Roman D (LRD) or Cypriot Red Slip Ware (CRS), African Red Slip Ware



Fig. 5. Area I: Room A: a – view from the northeast; b – view from the south (Photos A. Shabaan)

(ARSW), and Kitchenware for baking. These findings indicate that the space was likely used for domestic activities, particularly food preparation and storage [Fig. 6]. The pottery assemblage recovered from this room offers valuable insights into domestic life during this period.

**ROOM B**

Room B is a rectangular space measuring approximately 5.35 m and 4.70 m in width and 6.00–6.15 m in length, enclosed by substantial walls approximately 0.80 m thick. These were constructed using a combination of Roman and Byzantine building techniques. The room’s fill consisted primarily of sandy silt [Fig. 7:a].

The main entrance is located on the northeast side, featuring a threshold meas-

uring 0.90 m in width and 1.80 m in length — possibly the base of a staircase. Another entrance was identified but left unexcavated, as a large limestone block (measuring 0.75 m × 0.76 m) was situated in front of it, at the southwest corner. Behind the wall on the northwest side, a parallel room, measuring 5.35 m in length and 1.25 m in thickness, was uncovered, though no visible entrance was found. This adjoining space, measuring approximately 2.25 m in width and 6 m in length, was built using typical Byzantine construction methods.

A bench made from ten limestone slabs, each measuring approximately 0.60 m × 0.25 m, was attached to the interior face of the wall; this feature suggests a functional purpose — possibly for seating, storage, or as a working surface [Fig. 7:b].

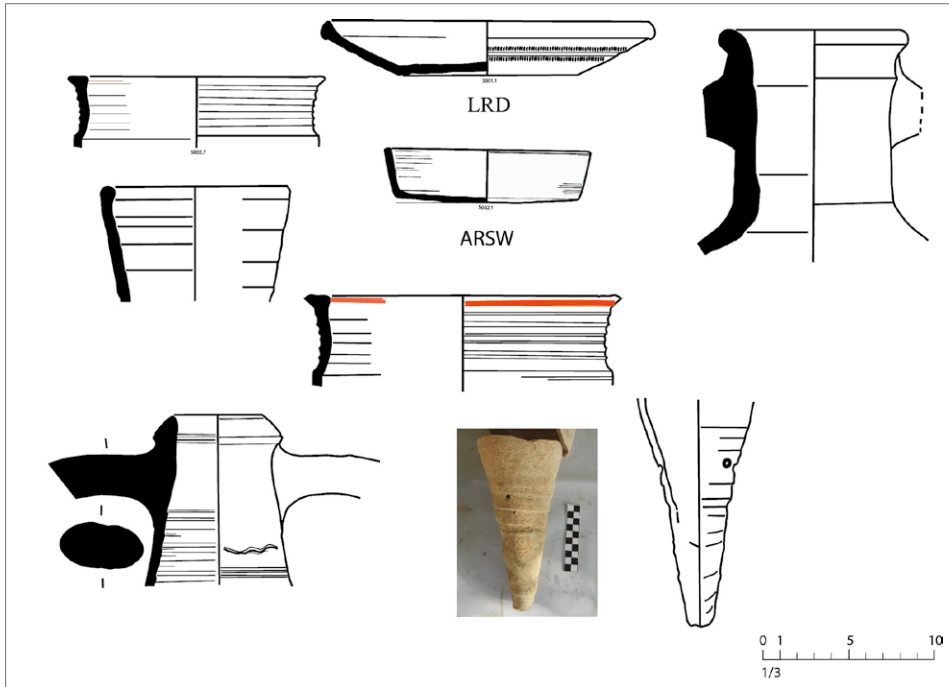


Fig. 6. Selection of Late Roman ceramics (LRA 1, LRA 7, LRD, and ARSW) from Room A (Photos and drawings A. Shabaan)

The presence of the bench, along with the enclosed nature of the space, supports the interpretation of the room as primarily utilitarian, likely associated with domestic storage or light industrial activity. This reflects the adaptation of residential architecture to meet both domestic and economic needs during the Late Roman–Early Byzantine period.

Beyond Room B, a corridor measuring approximately 8 m in length was also identified. The fill in this area contained a concentration of animal bones, suggesting possible food-related or waste disposal activities.

From the upper layers of Room B, a marble column was recovered. It features a smooth shaft, an astragal at its base, and a simple capital that may belong to the Roman Doric order — although it was likely reused (*spolia*).<sup>7</sup> This

find highlights the reuse of architectural elements in later constructions [Fig. 7:c].

On the wall parallel to the Byzantine wall of Room A, an *in situ* storage jar made of fragile, brown-colored fabric was discovered (Shabaan 2024: 221, Fig. 7). While its exact function remains uncertain, it may have served as a major storage vessel or a silo for grain.

The ceramic assemblage from Room B includes a broad range of utilitarian ware likely used for food preparation and storage [Table 1]. These consist of large and medium-sized jars — some decorated with paint, incisions, or relief— medium-sized pitchers, and a few plates. This variety, including subtypes belonging to Late Roman Amphora 5/6 (LRA 5/6), is consistent with domestic provisioning and storage activities [Fig. 8].



Fig. 7. a – Room B; b – room behind Room B; c – Doric column in situ (Photos A. Shabaan)

7 On the reuse of architectural elements (*spolia*) in Late Antique domestic and ecclesiastical contexts, see Kinney 1997.

Table 1. Ceramics from Room B

Type/form	Rim	Base	Handle	Body sherds	Total NMI
Egyptian amphorae		1			1
African amphorae	1				1
Table ware (plates)	1				1
Big <i>māḡūr</i>	1				1
Late Roman Amphorae 5/6 (LRA 5/6)	8				6
Painted incense burners		1			1
Jugs (pitchers)	1				1
Painted jars	1				1

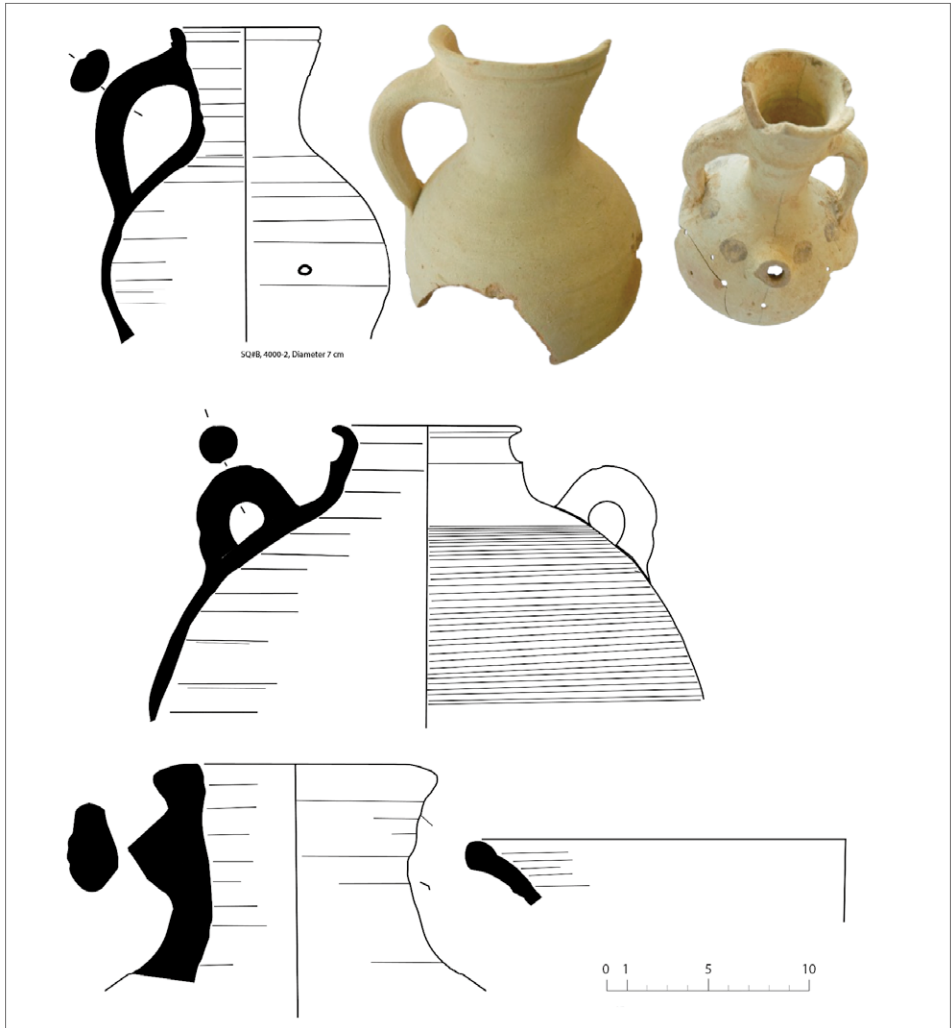


Fig. 8. Examples of ceramic finds from Room B (Photos and drawings A. Shabaan)

**ROOM F (COURTYARD)**

Room F functioned as an open courtyard, measuring approximately 6.20 m in width and 10.60 m in length. Its construction reflects typical Byzantine building practices, characterized by the use of irregularly shaped bricks set between large, rectangular stone blocks. A wall to the southwest was composed of six regular courses. Comparable construction techniques have been documented

by the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw, at the Kom el-Dikka archaeological site, where excavations have revealed a large part of a Late Roman habitation quarter (see Majcherek 1995).

Within the courtyard, a row of 12 rectangular stone blocks —each measuring approximately 0.20 m × 0.65 m— was uncovered, arranged in a style similar to that of Roman architectural tradition. An



Fig. 9. Courtyard F: a – general view; b – limestone column capital; c – circular ash deposit; d – coin; e – bronze pin with a pointed tip; f – Late Roman Amphora 5/6 in situ (Photos A. Shabaan)

entrance to Room G, measuring 0.68 m in width, was identified. Another threshold was noted, measuring 0.32 m in width and 1.18 m in length [Fig. 9:a].

A circular installation of stone blocks, showing clear evidence of burning, was also revealed within the courtyard. The installation measured approximately 1.80 m in external diameter and 1.70 m internally. A small number of undiagnostic ceramic sherds were recovered nearby, but their typological identification could not be established. The circular installation may be interpreted as a lime-processing kiln dating to the Byzantine period, suggesting that the courtyard was used for industrial purposes, possibly functioning as a workshop or shop.

A notable find from this space is a worked stone, originally part of a column capital, decorated with a red-painted motif of a six-petaled flower enclosed within an irregularly shaped circular frame measuring 22.4 m in diameter. This decorative motif, widespread in Greek and Hellenistic art, was later adopted into Coptic artistic traditions, where it came to symbolize the six-armed cross. In this example, however, the outline of the enclosing circle appears somewhat irregular [Fig. 9:b].

Additional features within the courtyard include scattered finds such as metal objects and approximately 20 bronze

coins. These were discovered within a circular ash deposit measuring approximately 0.30 m in diameter. This ash deposit is comparable to similar features observed at Marea (Gwiazda and Wielgosz-Rondolino 2019: 266, Fig. 5) [Fig. 9:c].

Most of the coins were heavily oxidized, likely due to post-depositional processes due to soil humidity and salinity. One notable specimen prominently features on the reverse a large Greek letter “K” enclosed within a circular frame, symbolizing a 20-*nummi* piece dating to the reign of Emperor Anastasius I (AD 491–518). Although the obverse side of the coin is unclear, this example is among the earliest bronze issues minted following the monetary reform introduced by Anastasius I and can therefore be attributed to the early 6th century AD<sup>8</sup> [Fig. 9:d].

Further finds included a bronze pin with a pointed tip measuring 0.5 m in length [Fig. 9:e]. Several complete Late Roman Amphora type LRA 5/6 [Fig. 9:f], and numerous fragments of the same type, along with a fragment of LRA 1 dating from the 5th to 7th centuries AD, as well as fragments of cooking pots, casseroles, dishes, and bowls [Table 2]. Of particular note is a small plate distinguished by a unique design: a cross-impressed in dots at the four corners of the interior surface of the dish (Shabaan 2024: Fig. 9/6A).

8 Byzantine coinage is generally considered to have begun with the reign of Anastasius I (AD 491–518), who introduced a significant monetary reform in AD 498. This reform marked a clear departure from the Late Roman bronze issues, establishing a distinctively Byzantine system characterized by standardized bronze denominations with clear numeric markings. The new denominations included five nummi (pentanummium), marked with the Greek letter E (5); ten nummi (decanummium), marked with I (10); twenty nummi (semifollis or half-follis), marked with K (20); and forty nummi (follis), marked with M (40). The system continued to evolve until the end of the empire under Constantine XI (AD 1448–1453). See Hendy 1985: 396–402.

Table 2. Ceramics from the courtyard (Room F)

Type/form	Rims	Bases	Handles	Body sherds	Total NMI
Late Roman Amphorae 1 (LRA 1)	1				1
Late Roman Amphorae 5/6 (LRA 5/6)	2				2
Pans/casseroles	1				1
Cooking pots ( <i>marmite</i> )	2				2
Jugs	2	1			2
Cups		1			1
Egyptian fine wares (group O – orange)	2				2
A unique stamped plate displaying a cross motif	1				1
Deep dishes	3				3
Imitations of African Red Slip Ware	1				1

The interpretation of this courtyard as an industrial area is reinforced by the presence of the kiln and associated working features, reflecting the multifunctional nature of Byzantine domestic architecture.

### ROOM G

Room G consists of a paved courtyard measuring approximately 8.30 m in length and 7.50 m in width, with a floor constructed of rectangular limestone slabs<sup>9</sup> arranged in a five-by-five pattern. Each slab measures approximately 0.76 m × 0.40 m. Parts of the pavement are missing in the area oriented toward the adjoining space [Fig. 10:a].

An entrance located on the northwest side connected this courtyard with Room F, facilitating circulation between the two spaces and providing access to an adjacent room that may have formed part of the same activity area. This adjoining space, which opens onto another room measuring

approximately 3.55 m in width, also featured an entrance coated with lime plaster [Fig. 10:b].

No pottery was recovered from this area, which may suggest that the courtyard was either intentionally kept clean for specific activities or was abandoned before significant occupational debris could accumulate. The regular and carefully planned layout of the paving further supports the interpretation of Room G as a deliberately designed functional space, possibly serving domestic or light-industrial purposes.

### AREA II: SQUARE C

Square C (SQ# C) is located at the highest point of the site, on an elevated section of the *kom* that rises above the surrounding terrain. The square, measuring approximately 5 m × 5 m, was excavated to a depth of 2 m. Although no architectural remains were uncovered, several stratigraphic layers were identified, each yielding

9 Similar rooms can be found in House H1 at Marea, such as Rooms 15 and 20, although they are smaller in size compared than the one at Marea B. See Wielgosz-Rondolino and Gwiazda 2016: 118, Fig. 3.

archaeological materials that contributed to the chronological framework of the site.

A particularly significant feature was a pottery dump containing com-

plete artifacts, including oil lamps, along with numerous fragments of Late Roman Amphora type 5/6 (LRA 5/6), tableware, cooking ware, and a few pieces of Roman glass [Table 3].



Fig. 10. Room G (Photos A. Shabaan)

Table 3. Ceramics from Square C

Type/form	Rims	Bases	Handles	Body sherds	Total NMI
Late Roman Amphorae 1 (LRA 1)	1				1
Late Roman Amphorae 5/6 (LRA 5/6)	30			70	13
Hemispherical cooking pots ( <i>marmite</i> )	2		7		2
Pans/casseroles	2				2
<i>Marmite</i> lids	2				1
Late Roman C wares (LRCW)	2				2
Cypriot red slip wares	2				1
Egyptian fine wares (orange)	2	1			3
Bowls	2				2
Deep dishes/carinated bowls	4			7	4
Small plate reused as a lamp	1				1
Late Roman B (LRB)	1				1
Jugs with spouts	1	1			1
Lamps	1				7

## OBJECTS AND MATERIALS: LAMPS

The lamp assemblage includes several common Byzantine examples decorated with Christian symbols. Two complete lamps were found in the dump context of Square C (SQ C) in Area II, while a third complete example was found *in situ* in Area I, along with three additional fragments. All were mold-made.

The fabric is either Nile silt or marl clay, following the same pattern observed in lamps from Abū Mīnā workshops. They share similar stylistic and technological features, characteristic of the 6th–7th centuries AD (Szymańska 2008: 161). Each lamp features a narrow filling hole for oil and a distinct nozzle for ignition, with visible traces of use, including soot and burning marks. The surfaces exhibit a yellowish-brown color, while the fabric ranges from beige to light brown, containing numerous small sand grains, gray and white inclusions, and occasional limestone particles. Evidence of

surface treatment is present, including relief dots used for decoration.

### LAMP 1

This complete lamp [Fig. 11] was produced using two molds — one for the upper part and one for the lower (Engemann 2016: 138). The lamp is oval and exhibits clear traces of use, including soot deposits on the surface. It features a narrow filling hole for oil and a well-defined ignition nozzle.

The clay has a yellowish-brown surface, while the fabric is beige to light brown in color, containing numerous fine gray sand inclusions and white limestone particles.

The upper surface is decorated with relief dots arranged in a zigzag pattern. A large cross within a circle decorates the base, and an additional cross appears beneath the handle. The lamp is attributed to the Byzantine period and is generally



Fig. 11. Lamp 1 (Photos A. Shabaan)

dated to the 7th century AD. However, the form and style of the cross suggest a slightly later date —likely the second half of the 8th to early 9th century AD— based on parallels with similar examples recovered from Abū Mīnā (Engemann 2016: Taf. 267, L.44).

**LAMP 2**

This ovoid-shaped lamp [Fig. 12], features a single filling hole and a well-defined nozzle. Its clay fabric closely resembles that of Lamp 1, exhibiting a yellowish-brown surface and a beige to light brown core. The upper surface preserves traces of use and is decorated in relief. The decorative motifs include a geometric dart pattern and pellet designs.

Workshop signature on the base includes a cross enclosed within a circle,

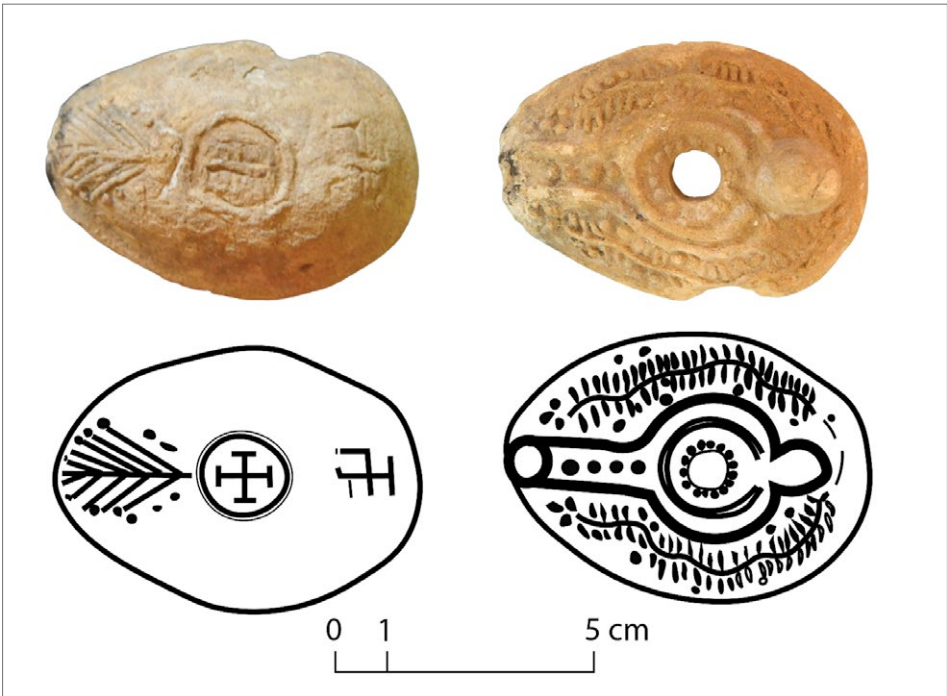


Fig. 12. Lamp 2 (Photos and drawing A. Shabaan)

flanked by palm-branch motifs, with an additional cross positioned beneath the handle, similar to a base of lamp from baths of Marea explored by the Polish mission (Szymańska 2008: 168, Fig. 56, Cat. No. 47). Identical signature marks from comparable examples have been documented in excavations at Abū Mīnā (Engemann 2016: Taf. 29, L.53 A). This lamp is attributed to the Byzantine period and can be dated to the late 8th to early 9th century AD (Engemann 2016: 140, L.53).

### LAMP 3

This oval, mold-made lamp [Fig. 13] — missing its ring handle— was discovered in the area between Rooms G and F. It is made of Nile silt clay with a buff-pink surface. The discus is decorated with a monogrammed cross (XP) surrounding two filling holes, representing the first two letters of *Christos* (Χριστός) in Greek — a symbol commonly associated with early Christian iconography. Traces of burning are visible around the wick hole, indicating use.

The lamp is dated to the mid-5th to mid-6th century AD and was likely produced in Alexandria. Comparable examples have been recovered from the site of Abū Mīnā (Engemann 2016: Taf. 263, L.29), further supporting this attribution. A similar XP (Chi-Rho) monogram has also been identified on lamps from Abū Mīnā (Engemann 2016: Taf. 266, L.38). Based on typological and fabric analysis, this lamp fragment is dated to the 6th–7th centuries AD (Engemann 2016: 140).

### OVOID LAMP FRAGMENT

This fragment [Fig. 14], represents the upper part of a common ovoid-shaped lamp, similar to examples known from Abū Mīnā, Marea, and Alexandria. The fragment is made of compact fabric with a beige to light brown surface, containing a few very small gray and white inclusions. The discus is partially preserved, with a slight defect near the filling oil hole.

The disc is decorated with radiating patterns surrounding a Maltese cross, accompanied by simple geometric motifs,



Fig. 13. Lamp 3 *in situ* (Photos A. Shabaan)

this type was common in the Christian East (Szymańska 2008: 162), the decoration and clay composition suggest a local production tradition. A comparable example was recovered from the baths at Marea (Szymańska 2008: 168, Fig. 58, Cat. No. 61).



Fig. 14. Fragment of an ovoid lamp (Photo A. Shabaan)



Fig. 15. Upper part of an ovoid lamp (Photo A. Shabaan)

**UPPER PART OF AN OVOID LAMP**

This fragment, preserving the upper part of an ovoid lamp, features a beige surface and light-brown fabric [Fig. 15]. It is dated to the 6th–7th centuries AD. Minor traces of use are visible around the nozzle. A double relief ring surrounds the filling hole, accompanied by relief dots and dart motifs, combining functional design with decorative elements.

The stylistic features correspond to artistic trends of the period and are comparable to examples recovered from the funerary chapel at Marea (Szymańska 2008: 168, Fig. 58, Cat. No. 65). Similar examples have also been found at Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria.

**LOWER PART OF AN OVAL LAMP**

This fragment, preserving the lower part of an oval lamp [Fig. 16], is dated to the 6th–7th centuries AD. It is distinguished by a relief cross design accompanied by a “P” symbol, both executed in raised relief. The interior bears a pinkish finish, a characteristic shared with similar lamps from Abū Mīnā (Engemann 2016: Taf. 270, L.58). The presence of the cross motif reflects the religious and cultural symbolism of the Byzantine period and supports the

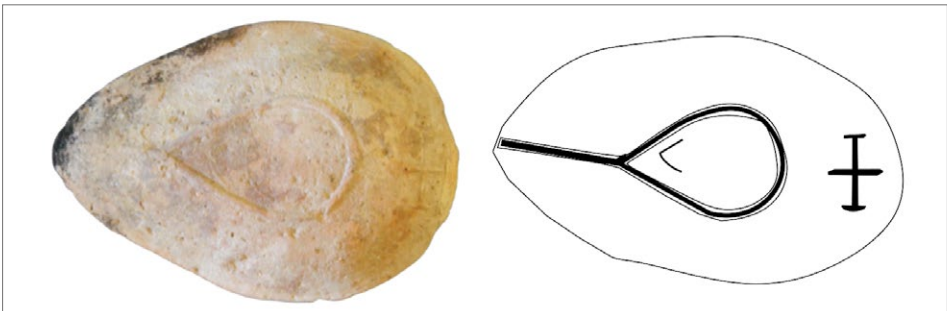


Fig. 16. Lower part of an oval lamp (Photo and drawing A. Shabaan)

attribution of this piece to a regional stylistic tradition.

A comparable example features a similar relief cross with a pinkish interior, consistent with lamps from Abū Mīnā and Alexandria. Additionally, another fragment made of marl clay and bearing the same pattern and oval shape closely resembles lamps discovered in the funerary chapel at Marea (Szymańska 2008: 168, Fig. 58, Cat. No. 65). These parallels reinforce the typological and chronological attribution of the piece to the Byzantine period, specifically the 6th–7th centuries AD.

### JUG LAMPS

One of the distinctive lamp types identified at the site is the jug-shaped lamp, resembling a small pitcher and produced on the pottery wheel [Fig. 17]. Although

originally designed as a vessel for pouring liquids, this type was later repurposed as a lighting device, as evidenced by traces of burning around the mouth. Wheel-made jug lamps are less common than mold-made examples but are attested in Egypt, particularly in the necropolis and residential zones of Ichnasya, Faiyum, Tell el-Fara'in, Tell Atrib, Naukratis, and Alexandria. Similar types have also been found in other regions of the eastern Mediterranean, including Turkey and Palestine. These lamps were especially widespread in Alexandria and its hinterland, with comparable examples recovered from Abū Mīnā. Based on typological parallels, jug lamps of this type are generally dated to the mid-7th century AD (Engemann 2016: Taf. 283, L.117, Phototaf. 32, L.117A, B).

## CERAMICS

### LATE ROMAN AMPHORA 1 (LRA 1)

Several locally produced examples of Late Roman Amphora 1 (LRA 1) were recovered from Rooms A and F, all dated to

the 6th to early 7th centuries AD. The fabric of these amphorae is characterized by numerous fine white and gray inclusions combined with fine to coarse sand



Fig. 17. Jug lamp (Photo A. Shabaan)

grains — a typical feature of regional production techniques in the western Nile Delta.

LRA 1 is the most common amphora type across the eastern Mediterranean in Early Christian contexts, widely used for transporting goods such as wine and olive oil. The examples from Rooms A and F correspond chronologically with the phase during which this type reached its widest distribution across the Mediterranean basin, particularly between the 6th and early 7th centuries AD. Parallels can be drawn with LRA 1 amphorae recovered from House H<sub>1</sub> at Marea (Gwiazda and Derda 2021: 4, Fig. 3:7–8), the Monastery of Baramus in Wadi el-Natrun (Konstantinidou 2013: 71, Figs 5–19; 2010: 956, Figs 4–3), and Deir el-Roumi in the Valley of the Queens (Lecuyot 2007: 380, Fig. 3/12). These comparisons highlight shared trade and distribution networks across Egypt and the broader eastern Mediterranean during Late Antiquity. The local variants found at the site likely originated from Mareotic ceramic workshops, in line with previously documented production centers in the region (see Empereur and Picon 1992).

### LATE ROMAN AMPHORA 5/6 (LRA 5/6)

The majority of amphorae recovered from the excavated rooms belong to the Late Roman Amphora 5/6 (LRA 5/6) type, which was widely distributed across the eastern Mediterranean from the 1st to the early 8th centuries AD (Shabaan 2024: 219).

This type is particularly associated with Palestine and Egypt and closely linked to Christian religious communities such as Abū Mīnā near Lake Mareotis and

Kellia in the Western Desert. LRA 5/6 amphorae are strongly connected with the transport of fine wines (Kingsley 2001: 57), reflecting the commercial success of Palestinian wine in the Egyptian market before local workshops began producing imitations.

According to Empereur and Picon, these amphorae were manufactured in workshops located around Lake Mareotis — particularly in Abū Mīnā and the hinterland of Alexandria— as well as in Middle Egypt. They are typically made of calcareous or marl clay, and their distinctive globular, bag-shaped forms were produced from the 6th to the mid-8th centuries AD in both Palestine and Egypt. Their widespread distribution across the eastern Mediterranean underscores the existence of an extensive trade network dedicated to wine distribution. Numerous LRA 5/6 fragments have been documented at Marea, consistent with the type's broad presence at Egyptian and eastern Mediterranean sites (Empereur and Picon 1989: 239, Fig. 18, Workshop No. 11; 1992: 149).

Ballet and Picon (1987: 34) note that several workshops producing this amphora type were established along the shores of Lake Mareotis and at Abū Mīnā from the 5th century onward. Furthermore, Egloff (1977: 117–118) reports the discovery of a kiln at Abū Mīnā, active between the mid-7th and early 8th centuries AD, specifically dedicated to the production of LRA 5/6 amphorae.

The predominance of this amphora type in the ceramic assemblage from the excavated rooms highlights the economic significance of the wine trade during the Late Roman–Byzantine period and em-

phasizes the important roles played by Mareotic and Palestinian workshops in supplying both regional and interregional markets.

### LATE ROMAN AMPHORA 7 (LRA 7)

Fragments of a single LRA 7 amphora were recovered from Room A, mainly consisting of body sherds with distinctive morphological features. This amphora type was widely distributed across Egypt during Late Antiquity and produced in several workshops, especially in central Egypt and the Nile Delta. It was typically made of alluvial clay with a dark brown fabric containing abundant mica inclusions. The sherds are characterized by deep grooves on the exterior surface and a pointed base with a post-firing perforation — an intentional modification that strongly suggests secondary use of the lower part of the vessel, likely as a suspended container for storing liquids or for other domestic purposes. The Polish mission at Deir el-Naqlun documented a comparable example featuring a post-firing hole (Danyś-Lasek 2014: 546). Parallels have also been reported from sites in the Kharga Oasis and from Kellia (Ballet and Picon 1987: 39), underscoring shared patterns of reuse and functional adaptation in monastic and domestic contexts within Egypt during the 6th–7th centuries AD.

The identification of Late Roman Amphora types — namely LRA 1, LRA 5/6, and LRA 7 — is particularly significant for reconstructing regional and interregional trade and economic dynamics.

In contrast, the abundance of LRA 5/6 — a type often produced locally in Egypt — points to the regional redistri-

bution of wine or oil, particularly within the Nile Delta and the Mareotic region.

This ceramic evidence reinforces interpretations of a mixed economy that combined local production with sustained integration into broader Mediterranean trade networks.

Complete Late Roman amphorae such as type LRA 5/6, along with numerous amphora fragments, represent storage vessels. Additional amphora types, including LRA 1 and LRA 7 were also identified. These amphorae underscore the role of the site in regional trade networks and its participation in local exchange, particularly along pilgrimage routes.

In addition to amphorae, a *māḡūr* (traditional kneading basin) was recovered, measuring 0.36 m in diameter. This type of basin, used for preparing dough, is still in use today in traditional Egyptian villages, providing a valuable ethnographic parallel that reinforces its domestic function in the archaeological context.

### Cooking and tableware ceramics

The ceramic assemblage recovered from the site represents a wide range of domestic and utilitarian wares, reflecting the daily life and economic practices of its inhabitants during the Late Roman and Early Byzantine periods. Notably, several painted Byzantine jugs and pitchers — comparable to examples recovered from Marea (for similar ones, see Majcherek 2002) and Abū Mīnā (Egloff 1977: types 227–228) — were present in the assemblage. The majority of these vessels appear to be of regional or local production, highlighting the vitality of local ceramic industries and their integration within broader cultural and economic networks.

The assemblage includes diverse categories of domestic pottery, such as kitchenware (including pots, casseroles, and marmites), tableware, and storage vessels. Tableware is represented by dishes, plates, and small bowls, among which Egyptian Red Slip Ware A and Late Roman D (LRD) are particularly common. Carinated Mareotic bowls, often locally produced (Majcherek 1995), also attest to a well-developed fine-ware tradition in the region. These forms reflect widespread consumption patterns and regional ceramic styles consistent with assemblages from other major sites in the western Delta.

The ceramic evidence offers valuable insights into the site's economic, domestic, and possibly monastic functions. The presence of imported and locally produced fine wares corresponds to established ceramic sequences from sites such as Marea and Abū Mīnā, situating the assemblage securely within the 5th–7th centuries AD. Many of the vessel types

are commonly associated with monastic settlements and pilgrimage contexts, supporting the interpretation that the site functioned as a monastic center or a way station for pilgrims en route to the shrine of Saint Menas.

The abundance of cooking vessels, largely of local manufacture, suggests a predominantly domestic context in which daily subsistence activities relied heavily on regionally available products. This corresponds with previous research indicating a strong dependence on nearby ceramic workshops for household supplies.

In conclusion, the ceramic repertoire reflects both the local character of pottery production and broader cultural connections. The presence of painted Byzantine jugs and pitchers, similar to those found at Marea and Abū Mīnā, reinforces the chronological framework and emphasizes the site's role within a wider religious and economic landscape during Late Antiquity.

## CONCLUSION

While much remains to be excavated, the results of the 2018 campaign at Marea B (GMR0022) offer significant insights into the role of the Mareotic hinterland in shaping the religious infrastructure, regional economy, and settlement patterns of Late Antique Egypt. The rescue excavations yielded substantial architectural and ceramic evidence dating from the 5th to 7th centuries AD, firmly situating the occupation within the Late Roman to Early Byzantine period. These findings contribute significantly to our understanding of the

broader socio-economic and religious landscape of the Marea region during this transformative era.

The exposed architectural features—including substantial masonry walls, column fragments, and a kiln installed within a courtyard—indicate a multifunctional complex integrating domestic, industrial, and possibly ritual functions. The spatial distribution of material culture across the site reveals a well-structured internal organization: Room A likely served as a storage space; Room B, as a kitchen or food prepara-

ration area; Room F, for communal or artisanal activities; and Room G, potentially for ritual or symbolic use. In contrast, Square C appears to have functioned as a refuse dump, offering valuable insights into the daily life and waste practices of the inhabitants.

The ceramic assemblage is particularly informative. It comprises both locally produced utilitarian wares — including cooking pots, casseroles, marmites, and Egyptian Red Slip Ware— and imported transport amphorae, such as Cilician and Cypriot LRA 1 types, along with regional variants of LRA 5/6 and LRA 7 from Mareotis and the Nile Delta. These forms attest to the site's active participation in regional and interregional trade networks. The presence of painted jugs and Christian-decorated oil lamps further emphasizes the site's religious character and suggests a strong connection to pilgrimage activity, particularly which associated with the shrine of Saint Menas at Abu Mīnā.

In relation to the broader urban layout of ancient Marea, the Marea B complex appears to have functioned as an auxiliary, peripheral installation or way station, possibly operating under the administrative or logistical authority of Philoxenite.

Its strategic position along a likely pilgrimage route supports this interpretation, highlighting its role in sustaining the flow of goods, people, and ritual engagement in the Mareotic region.

These results provide a solid foundation for future fieldwork. Upcoming excavation seasons should aim to fully expose the architectural layout, refine the site's stratigraphic and chronological framework, and investigate further its connections to neighboring urban and ecclesiastical centers. Such work will deepen our understanding not only of Marea B itself but also of broader themes related to infrastructure, sacred landscapes, and the organization of peripheral settlements during Late Antiquity.

In conclusion, the findings from Marea B demonstrate that the investigative focus at Marea is advancing into an interpretative phase — moving beyond the establishment of chronology and typology to examine the socio-economic functions and religious significance of secondary sites within the Mareotic hinterland. The Marea B complex emerges as a strategic locus within this expanding narrative, offering a tangible link between local settlement activity and the wider spiritual and economic networks of the Late Antique world.

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