

Hellenic Research Institute of Alexandrian Civilization The Shallalat Excavation Project

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The Hellenic Research Institute of Alexandrian Civilization (HRIAC) obtained the permission from the Supreme Council of Antiquities to start an archaeological survey in Shalalat Gardens of Alexandria in March 2007. The reason for choosing this site for research was its position in the topography of Ptolemaic Alexandria; it was a part of the royal quarter according to the ancient sources and especially Strabo (XVII. 8.). Nowadays, this area seems to be easy to excavate compared to all other parts of Alexandria.

However, we have realized and faced a lot of difficulties due to the tremendous quantities of modern debris and most importantly, the water horizon that exists at a level of 7.5m. This has created a serious impediment for the continuation of the project.

Shalalat Gardens (early 20th century) cover a vast area, replacing the northern bastions created during the years of Mohamed Ali, who "modernized" the medieval city walls of Alexandria. The complex follows the curve NE of the Rosseta Gate.

The project started in 2007 by conducting a geophysical survey in cooperation with the National Institute of Astronomy and Geophysics of Cairo (NIAE). The results showed the existence of anomalies in the underground in 3 different locations of the park. Moreover, a test drilling was made in the points suggested by the previous survey that resulted in the discovery of pieces of limestone at about 7m.

The excavation at the first site (ph.) reached 5.80m and detected part of a canal that was created possibly during the years of Mohamed Ali, East of the medieval walls of Alexandria. The pottery that was collected from the debris was mostly Islamic and post medieval along with a few roman and Hellenistic shreds. The most important finding was a group of 9 Hellenistic stamped amphorae handles.

Unfortunately, the appearance of the water table prevented us from continuing the project.

Next year, in April 2008, the excavation started taking place in site no 2, (ph.) as per the geophysical survey in an area of 6x5m. After removing the modern debris, a part of a wall was revealed at 5.40m depth made of limestone and structure material in second use. This wall was established over the remains of an older wall, possibly dating back to the Byzantine era. Below that structure, at 7.40m, we detected a layer of sandstone. The fact that at the same level we reached the water horizon, forced us to stop the excavation once again.

Among the findings of this trench, was a lot of pottery, fragments of plaster with paint, large fragments of alabaster and architectural parts, 11 stamped amphorae handles and an inscribed part of marble.

In April 2009, the 3rd phase of the excavation began in the NW side of the Gardens next to the Borg El Nahassin Fortress in an area of 5x3m.

Beforehand, we had conducted a drilling with significant results. The samples were concrete pieces of white limestone. Since this specific area did not have any limestone layers, according to the geological surveys performed so far, this was an evidence of the existence of a human construction.

Due to the presence of tons of debris, loose soil and most importantly, the water table that appeared again at a depth of 7.5m, our work was progressing with many difficulties. At the depth of 6.40m towards the west side of the trench, a layer of soft lime mortar was traced, probably the base of a floor. Also, we located a small part of a wall foundation, which was removed after being drawn and photographed.

To continue, at the depth of 7.40m, we reached the level of the water table. After using pumps for the drilling of the water, we continued to excavate at the same depth and revealed part of a construction made of lime mortar and small stones compacted together.

This construction extended through all the area. At the NW part of the trench, the construction was destroyed; in each base, we located part of a wall, constructed mostly of limestone and clay tiles. At that time, we decided to end the excavation due to the problems created by the water level.

It was the 4th of May 2009, while we were about to complete our excavation project for that season, when the soil suddenly collapsed on the west side of the trench and a small white piece of marble appeared at a depth of 8m. That very moment cannot be described by words, but only by feelings. Slowly, we managed to unearth a unique piece of art that appeared to be a marble statue of about 0.80m.

The statue represents a standing naked young man in a form of classical contraposto, with one foot raised, and possibly bent to a support.

The type of the statue, its features and attributes of the head, the "Anastole", the "Dionysus" type of diadem, the proportions, the movement and the pose of the neck are elements which suggest the connection of the statue to the portraiture of Alexander the Great.

The execution of the statue is of fine quality. There is a restrained realism, combined with a post Praxitelean sensuousness. This statue amalgamates the beauty of the sculptures of classical times and the passion of the Hellenistic statues.

Among other significant findings, were many pieces of architectural parts, lamps and parts of a mosaic made of off-white tesserae.

During 2010, the excavation was carried out at the same area. We enlarged it, in order to detect the edges of the lime mortar construction that had been detected. We were also hoping to find more parts of the statue and more evidence regarding its identity.

At a depth of 3.6m, we revealed strata consisting of a destroyed structure made of mortar and clay plinths and plentiful pottery. Among these, we discovered two large pithoi, still in situ. All over the area, we detected traces of fire.

The strata were traced at an area 7.5x8.0m and probably constitute a part of a workshop or storage area. Based on the pottery found, though not thoroughly studied yet, the chronology dates back to the late roman period.

At the depth of 7.6m (S) and 8.30m (N), we traced the extension of the lime mortar construction to the west. Towards the north-west part of the trench, at 8.30m, we revealed two large crafted stone blocks of psammite, covered at

some parts by bricks. The stone blocks are based on the lime mortar construction.

Among the small parts of the crafted stones and the bricks that we removed, we revealed a large limestone block with anathyrocis at one side that was dropped there, used as a filling of the lime mortar construction.

As far as the pottery is concerned, many sigillatas, fine red ware printed-base amphorae and plenty of coarse ware were found. Furthermore, we were able to recover a miniature nude male torso, two parts of a female statue, a finger, a breast, as well as a part of another marble statue, two small parts of capital lamps and stamped amphorae handles.

Furthermore, we enlarged the excavation area to the north for about 4.5 m., by removing modern debris until the depth of -3 m. Our target was to detect the continuation of the destruction strata we had revealed. We started locating the same strata on the same depth (-3.60 m.) by finding again destroyed structures, traces of fire and big quantities of pottery, especially shreds of pointed – base amphorae, stamped handles and small pieces of decorated (possibly Coptic) pottery. It is important to mention that among the findings, there was a significant amount of burnt glass as well as broken pieces of glass vessels, fact, that leads us thinking the possibility of having a glass workshop there. A large number of coins (Byzantine) were also collected from the excavated area.

We could not continue our excavation further in bigger depths because we would like to organize, the installation of 3phase electric power at the site, in order to use a pump 24 hours per day for drying the trench from the water appearing every time. Due to this technical problem we could not verify once again the limits of the lime mortar construction we have started revealing the previous years at the depth of -10 m. We intend to excavate in that location in the near future, if of course, the circumstances will allow us...

After finishing this excavation period, the overall appearance of the site drives us to the hypothesis that the settlement we have uncovered used to serve as a workshop of late roman or early Christian period.

The surveying plans of the HRIAC are to undertake a systematic research of the whole area of Shallalat Gardens in the near future. The site is very

promising and important as far as the topography of ancient Alexandria is concerned and thus should be studied thoroughly.

To conclude, the most crucial matter now is to find a suitable way of draining the water from the trenches due to the belief that the Ptolemaic layer of Alexandria is below the level of the water horizon.

We wish to thank the S.C.A. for permitting the Institute to work in Alexandria, the authorities of the Ministry of Antiquities, as well as our Egyptian friends and colleagues that have supported our work.



Fig. 1

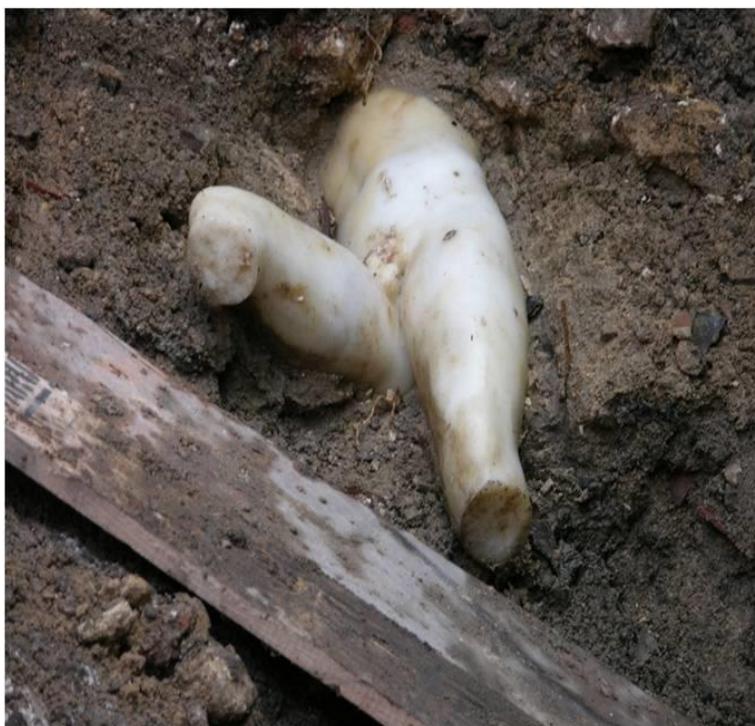


Fig. 2



Fig. 3