The Auditoria on Kom el-Dikka: A Glimpse of Late Antique Education in Alexandria
Grzegorz Majcherek

The flourishing of rhetoric, as well as philosophical and medical studies in Alexandria of the 5th through the 7th century is well evidenced foremost in abundant historical sources. It has recently received unexpected archaeological confirmation. The discovery of a large complex of auditoria on the Kom el-Dikka site, in the very center of the ancient town, calls for a new look at the functioning of educational institutions in Alexandria and perhaps in the entire Late Antique world as well.

The excavation area located in what is broadly understood as the urban center of ancient Alexandria, occupies sections of two adjoining city blocks extending south of street L1, the main town artery, often referred to as Via Canopica. Another street, R4, cuts across the entire site from north to south. In the early Roman period the site was occupied by large urban houses, resplendent with fine mosaic floors. Yet this private architecture was destroyed in the end of the 3rd century and was never rebuilt.

In the 4th century, this vast area in the city center changed beyond recognition. In the effect of major urban renewal, a new set of public buildings appeared in place of the residential architecture of old (Fig. 1). The dominant architectural feature in this part of the town was a grand Imperial bath complex, complete with palaestras, public latrines and a huge masonry cistern. Running west of this monumental establishment was a large portico cutting across the entire width of the city block from north to south. At its southern end, a theatre or odeum was erected in this period.

Lining the monumental portico was a series of auditoria, obviously of special significance considering the location in public space in the very heart of the ancient town. The entire zone of public buildings, including the odeum and the baths, must have thus been considered the civic center of Late Antique

---


2 The site is being excavated since 1960 by the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology (University of Warsaw).


5 W. Kołataj, Alexandrie V. Imperial Baths at Kom el-Dikka (Warsaw 1992).
Alexandria, replacing in this function the Ptolemaic and early Roman *agora* and *gymnasium*, both of which must have been in ruins by this time.⁶

Twenty auditoria have been discovered so far, including some excavated already in the 1980s.⁷ The auditoria appear to be concentrated in two groups (Fig. 2), divided by a passage leading to the bath complex.⁸ There is no reason to think that similar halls had not lined the entire length of the portico from the next street in the south to *Via Canopica* in the north (already outside the excavated area). With the exception of two halls, all the units exhibit a similar orientation along an N-S axis, regardless of their actual location and position of the door. Particular halls, however, differ somewhat in size and internal arrangement.⁹

Builders of the southern group (G-M) had to adjust the length of particular units to the massive buttresses supporting the back wall of the portico at irregular intervals (Fig. 3); thus, the length of individual halls was contained between 9 and 11 m, except for auditorium H, which was just 7 m long.¹⁰ All six halls are bordered on the east by a long casing wall. As a result, all of them are slightly over 5 m wide. Sections of this eastern wall take on the form of a double wall of casemate structure, while the rest is a single thick wall of isonomic blocks, which has tilted and bulged dangerously under the weight of the heaps of rubbish accumulated behind it.¹¹

Rooms forming the eastern extension (halls A-F) (Fig. 3) have slightly different proportions, again taking advantage of already existing walls; as a result they are more spacious, although sometimes accommodating only a single row of benches.¹²

In the northern part of the complex (halls N-W), the conditions were entirely different.¹³ There was evidently a single architectural plan for this area. The auditoria were also generally larger, there being no

---


⁸ Explorations of the auditoria have been intensified thanks to a generous contribution from Prof. Roger Bagnall with funds provided by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

⁹ For a detailed description of the whole complex, see. G. Majcherek, "The Late Roman Auditoria of Alexandria: An Archaeological Overview," in Derda et al., *op. cit.* (above, n. 1) 11–50.


¹¹ The area east of the auditoria was abandoned already in the fifth century, becoming a dumping ground for urban refuse, rubble and ashes originating from the bath, see G. Majcherek, "The City in Transition: Urban Change in Late Roman Alexandria. The Kom el-Dikka Evidence," (forthcoming). On such dumps or *kopriai* throughout the city, see M. Rodziewicz, *op. cit.* (above, n. 3) 25–31, 252–256; cf. also T. Neroutsos, *L’ancienne Alexandrie, étude archéologique et topographique* (Paris 1888) 31–35.


imposed constrictions of space (Fig. 4). Some of them were over 14 m long (auditorium N). The reason for this is the presence of outer rooms – a new feature, not found in the halls to the south of the complex. They were only partly separated from the auditoria proper with wide entrances and no fitted doors. This provided easy access, as well as made everything said inside clearly audible also outside. Interestingly, these outer-rooms or vestibules were evidently furnished with a single row of benches. Their function is not quite clear; they may have been used simply as cloakrooms.

Stone benches were the most important interior furnishing, present in all the units (Fig. 5). The most common design was to have two or three rows lining three of the walls (auditoria G-M, N), although single benches have also been recorded (auditorium C). The bench arrangement did not always follow the rectangular shape of the halls, as was the case in most of the auditoria. A horseshoe plan is encountered equally often, with a kind of circular exedra at the southern end of the room. Capacity differed significantly from unit to unit. Apparently, the seats could hold from 20 to 30 people sitting on alternate steps.

A distinctive feature in all of the halls is the central dais on the short side opposite the entrance. Steps leading up to the dais even if not to the seat itself, were documented in virtually all of the units. Where preserved, this dais takes on various forms. Sometimes it is merely a block raised above the level of the topmost seat. The most monumental of these seats – a real cathedra, was unearthed in auditorium K. It featured six steps flanked by low sidewalls, which also gave access to the seating placed high above the floor level (Fig. 6).

A rather puzzling feature is a stone block or low pedestal found on the floor of most of the auditoria. These pedestals were situated invariably on the long axis of the rooms, opposite the main seat of honor (Fig. 5). They could take on the form of a large singular block of stone, but a marble capital was also used for the purpose in one case. The upper surfaces of these platforms are usually smooth and their original height difficult to ascertain. Only one block (found in auditorium W) bears a small rectangular depression, evidently serving to mount some additional furniture.

Two halls, P and S, turned out to be completely different from the above described plan. Their size, orientation and certain features of the plan were out of the ordinary. Both were aligned E-W and had apses projecting beyond the rectangular building outline at their eastern ends (Fig. 4) Instead of continuous benches lining three walls of the room, these two units were furnished with two pairs of stands on opposite sides. In auditorium P (Fig. 7), these consisted of five rows of benches each, rising high above the floor. In both auditoria, the apse contained a platform, supporting a semicircular set of benches, clearly in imitation of a synthronon.

A low partition wall separated the main part of the building from a much bigger room (O and R respectively) adjoining the back wall of the portico (Fig. 4). Lateral sections of the wall could have concealed the sides of the benches, while leaving a clear view of the apse. Both outer-rooms were again furnished with a single row of benches lining the opposite walls.

The uncommon interior arrangement of these two halls points to a function differing somewhat from that of the other lecture rooms. The resemblance to church architecture is striking – apse, synthronon, clear division into two parts corresponding to the presbytery and part of the building intended for the
congregation. Nonetheless, the absence of any trace whatsoever of the altar questions identification with a church.

Overall, the available material points to the late 5th – first half of the 6th century AD as the most plausible time for the construction of the whole complex. More importantly, the rebuilding of the theatre and the bath complex falls in the same period. Their construction could be seen therefore as part of a redesigning of civic space in the city. While the detailed chronology of particular halls is yet to be established, it is becoming increasingly clear that the whole complex was enlarged and expanded over time.

Auditoria forming the southern run that adjoined the theatre (halls H-M) are certainly the earliest. Those located further north (N-W) were apparently added later. This is best illustrated by the existence of earlier structures found under their floors. The lecture halls, or at least some of them, appear to have survived all the political tribulations of the first half of the 7th century (first the Persian and later the Arab invasion) and continued in use for quite some time, possibly even till the end of the century.

The internal arrangement of the halls, so characteristic and universal, especially with regard to the benches and the magisterial seats, is the most important, if not the decisive indication of their function. The structures discovered in Alexandria should be interpreted apparently as lecture halls. In the light of this idea, the benches would have been used by students and the seat on the dais would have served as a teacher’s chair.

This interpretation finds sound iconographical confirmation. The high chair, thronos, is an inseparable element of representations of teachers and philosophers, found on pottery, reliefs, sarcophagi and sculpture. Representations of this kind, undoubtedly grounded in the realities of life, were also freely adopted into Christian art. The firm rooting of all these iconographic depictions in the realities of the period is also well attested by literary sources. An exceptionally suggestive image of a lecturer was provided by Libanius in one of his chriae. This short passage seems to be a surprisingly good illustration of

---

14 The synthronon-like dais and the cathedra present in many of the auditoria were surely inspired by church architecture. See also a stone ambo, closely resembling a seat of this kind, from Saqqara, J.E. Quibell, Excavations at Saqqara (1908–9, 1909–10). The Monastery of Apa Jeremias (Cairo 1912) pl. XIV.

15 Some of them may have even been dated as early as the mid 4th century AD, as suggested by finds retrieved in a test pit sunk below auditorium I. This conclusion needs to be reassessed however.


18 Libanius, Chriae III, 7: "The teacher is established in an imposing chair, like judges are. He seems terrifying; he frowns in anger and shows no signs of calming down. The pupil must go forward in fear and trembling to give an artistically conducted demonstration, which he has composed and learnt by heart." Trans. by S.N.C. Lieu, "Scholars and Students in the Roman East," in R. MacLeod (ed.), The Library of Alexandria (Cairo 2002) 131. Cf. also similar but somewhat ironic portrayal of Ammonius in Zach. Schol., Ammonius 92–99.
the layout of the Alexandrian auditoria. It may even suggest the correct interpretation for the stone blocks situated in the center of each of the rooms. They could well have acted as bases for wooden lecterns (analogeion) from which students read texts or delivered their epideictic speeches.  

Discovering the academic complex has prompted a review of the interpretation of the nearby odeon/theater. In his publication of a series of graffiti of circus factions preserved on the marble seats of the theatre, Zbigniew Borkowski argued convincingly that the last function of the theatre was as an assembly place for the faction of the Greens. It now seems, however, that the building's function following a major transformation in the 6th century, should be viewed in a broader context than before. It may have been part of the newly discovered academic complex, being the auditorium par excellence, destined presumably for public orations or rhetorical declamations presented before larger audiences.

Could the remodeled odeon be considered a blueprint for the auditoria constructed nearby? A short note by Elias provides an important premise. Using the word diatribai to refer to school buildings, he wrote that the classrooms often had "not unlike theatres, a rounded plan in order for the students to be able to see one another, as well as the teacher." This marginal note is all the more valuable, as it presumably reflects realities known to the author, a renowned Alexandrian academic himself.

Education in antiquity availed itself of a variety of places. Foremost in this were existing public buildings: temples, baths, gymnasia, and private houses. Raffaella Cribiore in her magisterial Gymnastics of the Mind has demonstrated that elementary classes could have even taken place out in the open, in the city streets, and even under the trees. Higher education, however, needed more permanent structures, ensuring appropriate standards, but also relative isolation from the outside world. The existence and activity of Late Antique institutions of higher education is recorded well enough in the historical sources, but looking for direct comparanda with Alexandrian auditoria will almost certainly draw a blank. The

---

19 This idea has been suggested by R.S. Bagnall, quoted by R. Cribiore, "Spaces for Teaching in Late Antiquity," in Derda et al., op.cit. (above, n. 1) 150. For the need to use a lectern both by teacher and students, cf. H.G. Snyder, Teachers and Texts in the Ancient World (London 2005) 25-27. For the images of antique lecterns cf. E.R. Knauer, "Roman Wall Paintings from Boscotrecase: Three Studies in the Relationship between Writing and Painting," MMJ 28 (1993) 18–28; see also W. Binsfield, "Lesepulte auf Neumagener Reliefs," BJ 173 (1973) 201, Fig.2.


24 R. Cribiore, Gymnastics of the Mind: Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt (Princeton 2001) 21–34; ead., op.cit. (above, n. 19) 143–150.

25 Expositio Totius Mundi XXV, mentioned “auditoria legum” in Berytos, but bypassed in silence any details of the architecture that is of interest to us here, see also L. Jones Hall, Roman Berytos: Beirut in Late Antiquity (London 2004) 66–67. The so-called "House of Proclus" in Athens is perhaps the only surviving example of a building used for educational purposes, cf. A. Kariveri, "The "House of Proclus" on the Southern Slope of Acropolis: A Contribution," in P. Castrén (ed.), Post-Herulian
identification of school buildings or lecture halls in archaeological context is further hindered by their functional resemblance to other buildings used for varied assemblies and congregations, as much as by the variety of terms used to designate them.\textsuperscript{26} The most common terms are \textit{didaskaleion} and \textit{akroaterion}, but \textit{akademia}, \textit{mouseion} as well as \textit{phrontisterion} occur with equal frequency.\textsuperscript{27} The terminology is not always explicit and there are no set criteria for identifying a structure as a school building.

Of particular significance for the interpretation of the Alexandrian complex seems to be Theodosius' constitution of AD 425, establishing the co-called "university" in Constantinople.\textsuperscript{28} The text of the edict concerning that "\textit{auditorium in Capitolo}" lists a total of 32 chairs established for grammarians, orators, philosophers and teachers of law. Their number apparently corresponded to the number of lecture rooms, as directly implied by the edict: "... to each of these teachers a designated place shall be specifically assigned." Thirty-two auditoria is a huge architectural complex comparable with that found in Alexandria.

Taking into consideration the scale of our complex as a whole and its location in urban space, we are entitled to assume that it was a municipal establishment that ensured in principle education in all the fundamental fields of ancient \textit{paideia}, that is, rhetoric, law, philosophy and above all medicine. In the last one especially, Alexandria's position remained ever unchallenged.\textsuperscript{29}

An academic institution, a real "campus" of this size in Alexandria, comes as no surprise. The city was, next to Athens and Berytos, one of the most important educational centers of Late Antiquity with traditions reaching back many centuries and commensurate ambitions. The number of students studying here must have been considerable, much more that in other, provincial centers. The twenty plus auditoria on Kom el-Dikka would have provided comfortable facilities for 500–600 students.

That specially designed auditoria, combining different functions such as classrooms, lecture halls or rooms for public reading, existed in Alexandria is evidenced by several historical sources. The brief remark by Elias has already been mentioned.\textsuperscript{30} The terms \textit{mouseia} and \textit{akademai} (quite interestingly in the plural) appear in \textit{P.Cair.Masp. III 67295}, denoting the place where Flavius Horapollon lectured and also his father before him.\textsuperscript{31} Of special significance seems to be yet another textual evidence: it is not to be excluded that the 6\textsuperscript{th} century description left by Zacharias reporting "a \textit{temenos} of the Muses, where poets

\textit{Athens. Aspects of Life and Culture in Athens, A.D. 267–529. Papers and Monographs of the Finnish Institute at Athens, 1} (Helsinki 1994) 115–139. See also K.E. Welch, "Some Architectural Prototypes for the Auditoria at Kom el-Dikka and Three Late Antique (Fifth Century AD) Comparanda from Aphrodisias in Caria," in Derda et al., \textit{op.cit.} (above, n. 1) 115–133.


\textsuperscript{27} On use of different terms, see Lib. \textit{Or}. I, 102; Lib. \textit{Or}. 4, 161; Ioan.Chrys. \textit{Ep. ad Theod. 4.28}; \textit{Anth. Pal}. IX 299, 800, 801; Aen. Theophr. PG 85, col. 876; Suda A 775:2.

\textsuperscript{28} \textit{CTh}. XIV 9,3.


\textsuperscript{30} See Coptic text of the 6\textsuperscript{th} century, preserved on a fragment of stone block and containing an account of a philosophical dispute between the future bishop Cyril and his pagan colleague, the debate taking place in a school auditorium (\textit{akroaterion}), cf. F. Hintze and S. Morenz, "Ein Streitgespräch Kyrills," \textit{ZAS} 79 (1954) 125–140.

and rhetors and young students walk about and make their speeches" in the very center of the town, could have referred to the Kom el-Dikka auditoria.32

But, like any new, unexpected discovery, also this one raises more questions than the answers it provides. Is the complex of lecture halls evidence of organized education? What was the reason for this sudden development of academic life in Alexandria in this period? Could the successive expansion of school buildings recognized in the archaeological record on Kom el-Dikka in the second half of the 6th century be somehow related to the closing of the Athenian Academy in AD 529?33

The sheer size of the complex discovered in the heart of the city and its localization in public space leaves no doubt that it was an architectural design of municipal significance. We will never know whether all the teachers known to us from historical sources had their lectures in this complex and indeed this seems unlikely.34 But even assuming it was not connected directly with a formal educational institution, the complex as a whole continues to be ample proof of the prominent position occupied by Alexandria on the "map" of intellectual and academic life in Late Antiquity.

32 Zach. Ammonius, PG 85, coll. 1064. It might be tempting to associate Libanius' reference to a "temenos of the Muses" located next door to the Tychaion with the oldest of the Kom el-Dikka auditoria, cf. Lib. Progymnasmata, VII; cf. also supra note 15.


34 On members of the Alexandrian intellectual community, cf. E. Szabat, "Teachers in the Eastern Roman Empire (Fifth-Seventh Centuries). A Historical Study and Prosopography," in Derda et al., op.cit. (above, n. 1) 177–345.
Fig. 1:
Kom el-Dikka. General plan of the site. (Drawing W. Kołtaj, D. Tarara)
Fig. 2:
General view of the auditoria at Kom el-Dikka. (photo G. Majcherek)
Fig. 3:
Auditoria complex, southern part. (Drawing A. Pisarzewski)
Fig. 4:
Auditoria complex, northern part. (Drawing A. Pisarzewski)

Fig. 5:
Auditorium M. (Photo G. Majcherek)
Fig. 6:
Auditorium K. (Photo M. Krawczyk)
**Fig. 7:**
Auditorium P. (Photo G. Majcherek)