

22

Main Street, Diospolis Inferior

by A.J. Spencer¹

Excavation in Egypt is a great learning opportunity, as it frequently produces material of periods other than those which might have been expected. This is particularly true on large settlement sites whose continuous occupation over several millennia has left a wide range of archaeological material. The British Museum's excavations in the Valley and Delta of the Nile over more than 20 years have been no exception to this rule and it was particularly fortunate that Donald Bailey was present for many seasons, from the beginning of work at El-Ashmunein in 1980, to bring his expertise to bear on the Roman antiquities discovered. Don was accompanied by Catherine at El-Ashmunein in 1987, and in more recent years they have both put their Egyptian experience to good use in the Fayum.

The most recent work by the British Museum at Tell el-Balamun in March-April 2003 again resulted in the discovery of Roman material, which seemed an appropriate topic for this volume. The most significant find was a Roman paved street which ran through the centre of the ancient city along the former line of the ceremonial avenue leading to the temple of Amun, the principal deity of this Delta centre, which ranked as the northern counterpart to Diospolis Magna (Thebes) in Upper Egypt. The portion of the street found in 2003 was located around the entrance in the temple enclosure wall of the Twenty-sixth dynasty, passing over the earlier gate at a level some 2 m above that of its original Pharaonic pavement. Although the stone jambs of the gate had been quarried out in antiquity, the brickwork of the enclosure wall remained standing to become embedded in the later accumulation of deposits down to the Roman Period. The contouring of the ground by erosion has left the top of the Pharaonic brickwork visible at the present surface, at approximately the same absolute level as the surrounding Roman features, although in places rising slightly higher. Levels on the jambs of the older gate were found to be between 20 and 40 cm higher than the highest level recorded on the pave-

ment of the Roman street where it passed between these jambs. The line of the street developed over the former processional way to the temple, but the presence of the earlier massive brick enclosure wall would still have been evident to builders of the street, and no doubt the remaining elevated portions of this wall were avoided. Although the street ran almost parallel to the older avenue of the temple approach, it was not placed centrally on the earlier axis, but lay slightly to the south east side of it. This placed the centre-line of the street about 2.3 m to the south-east of the previous temple axis. As the width between the jambs of the 26th dynasty gate was almost 13 m, there was ample space to avoid any of the higher brickwork (Figs 1-2).

Work was continued in order to reveal the surviving pavement of the street, which had consisted of thin slabs of limestone laid on a foundation layer of pink plaster over crushed fired brick. The method of construction is exactly similar to that found in the 1991 season above the site of the temple of Amun and it is very likely that the two areas of pavement belong to different ends of the same street (Spencer 1996, 41-2, pls 16-18). This possibility is supported by the presence of the red-brick foundation layer of the street having been detected in the excavation at Location 2 of the 1994 season, which lies between the temple and the excavations of 2003 (*ibid.*, 67).

Some of the original paving slabs remained in place at the northern end of the excavated area, above the location of the 26th dynasty gate in the temple enclosure wall, but only two of them were substantially complete (Fig. 3a). These measured 112 x 73 cm and 95 x 55 cm (slabs in the pavement found in 1991 measured 115 x 85, 80 x 80 and 85 x 65 cm). The width of the street at this point had been reduced through later destruction, but some 7 m further to the south-west the original width of 5 m was found to have survived, if only as the pink plaster bedding-layer, bounded by a kerb of fired brick at either side (Figs 2 and

¹ Department of Ancient Egypt and Sudan, British Museum, London WC1B 3DG.

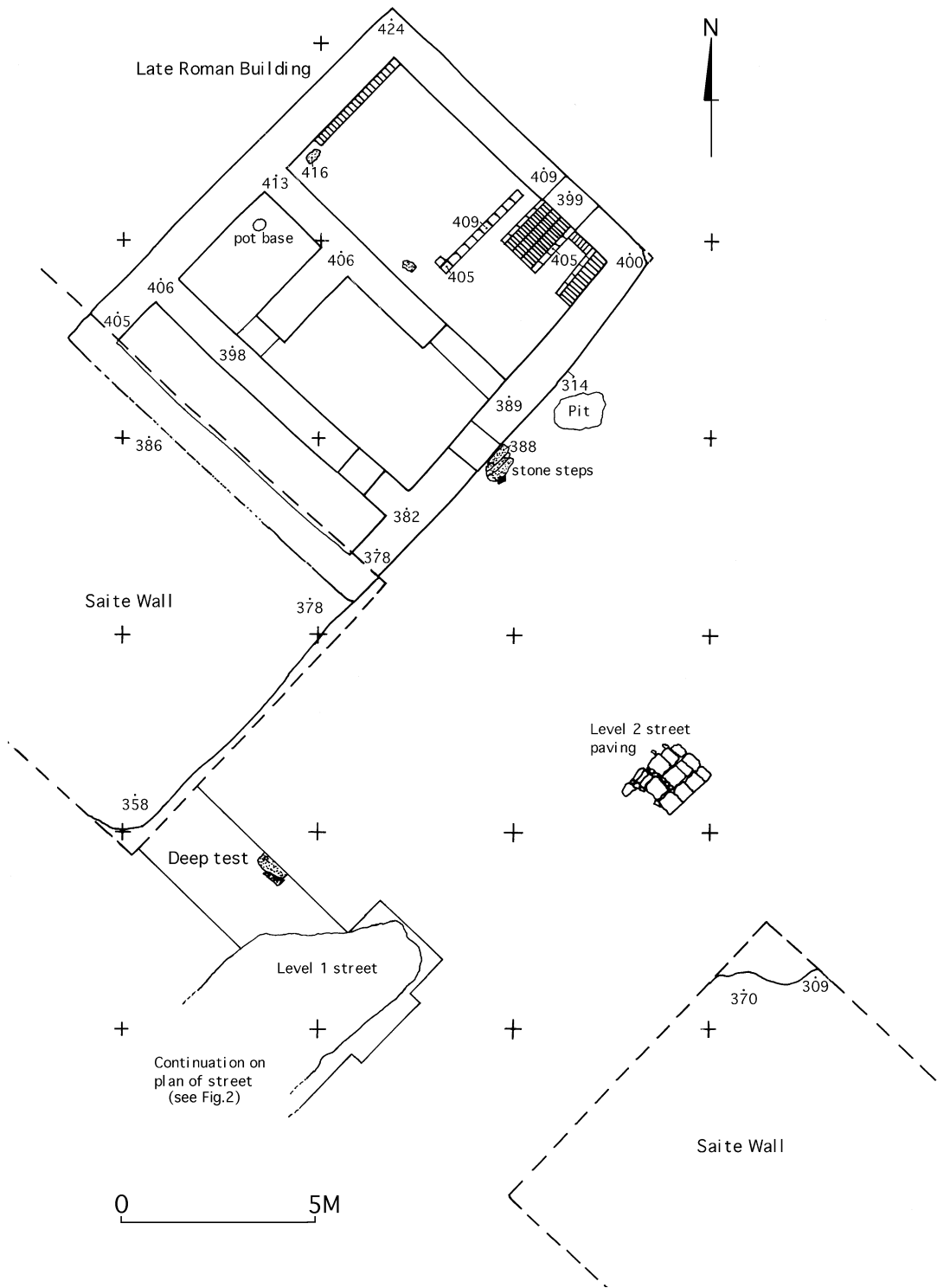


Fig. 1— Plan showing the Roman building beside the remains of the 26th dynasty temple enclosure wall.

Main Street, Diospolis Inferior

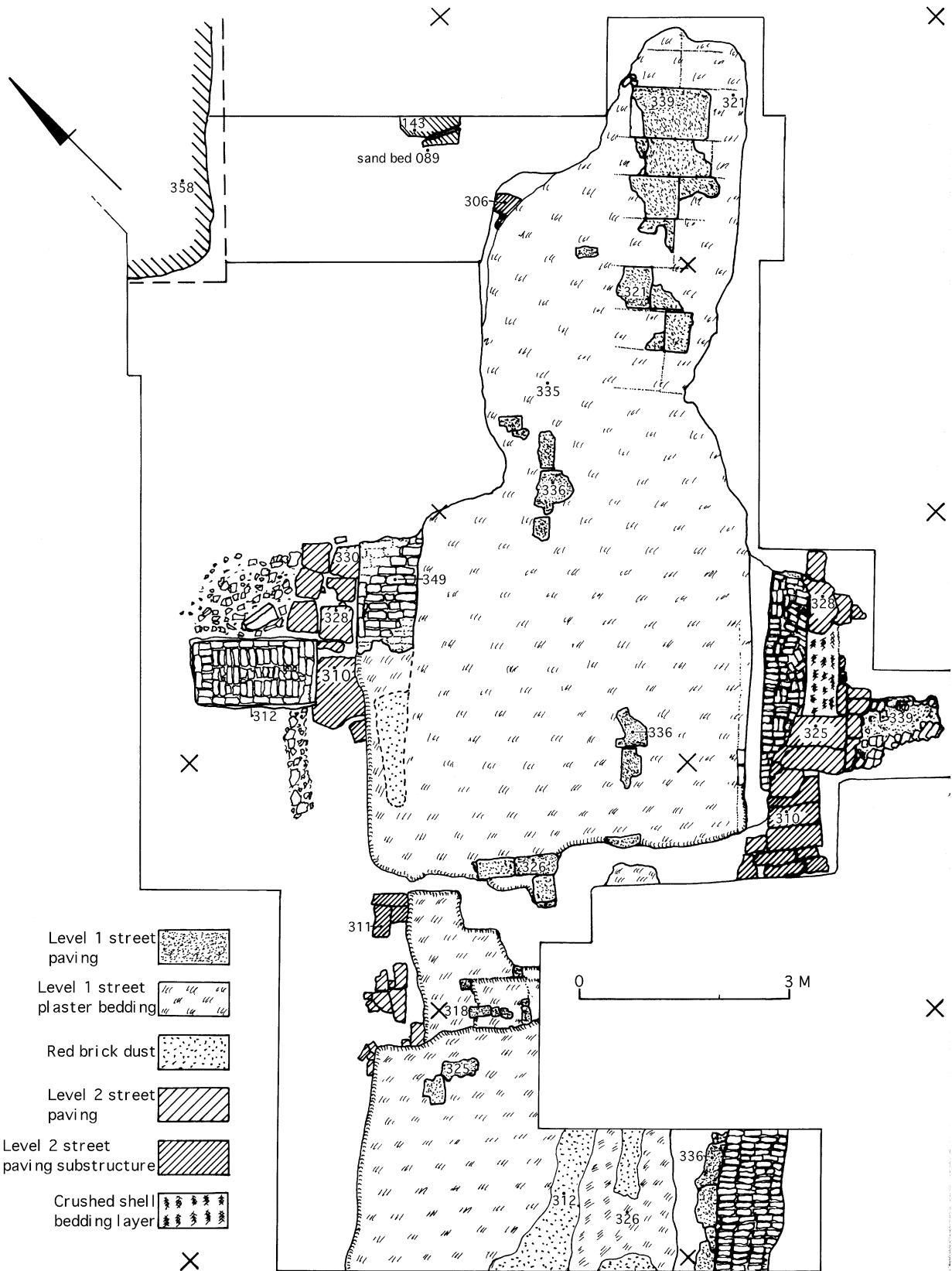


Fig. 2 — Plan of the Roman street showing the remains of the two levels of pavement.

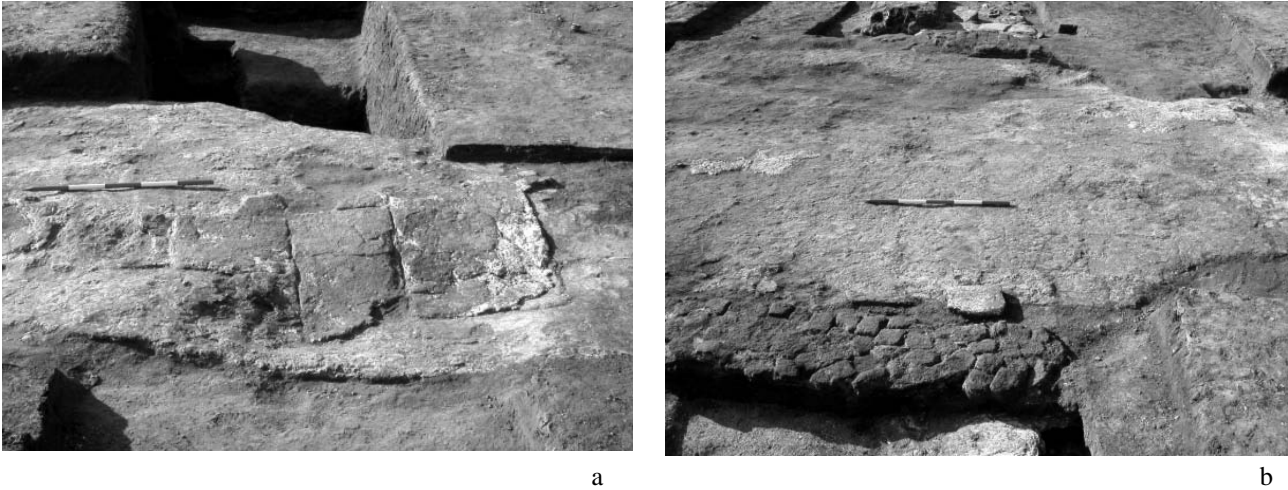


Fig. 3 — a...Paving-slabs of the Roman street at Level 1; b...View of the Roman street at Level 1 showing the fired-brick kerbs at the sides.

3b). Two courses of these bricks survived, laid on the same stratum of soil fill on which the street itself had been constructed. The original height of the kerbs may not have been any greater than as discovered. The width of that on the west was 85 cm, whilst of the opposite kerb on the east a width of 65 cm remained owing to the robbing of the bricks from the outer edge. Only a few isolated fragments of the limestone pavement remained in this area above the plaster layer. The plaster had been spread against the inner faces of the brick kerbs, indicating that this phase of the street and the kerbs belonged together. Beside the inner edge of the kerb on the east side was an imprint in the plaster of a narrow channel, possibly the remains of a drain along the side of the pavement, visible in Fig. 4a. This channel had a width of approximately 15 cm. The bricks of both kerbs had been laid in a rather irregular fashion as a mixture of headers across the thickness of the kerb and bricks laid at an oblique angle, possibly a poor imitation of the Roman ‘herringbone’-pattern. Broken bricks had been used extensively to fill odd spaces (Fig. 4a). From above the street in this area came some fragments of pottery, three of which were fine red-slipped products. One of these would appear to be an example of the African Red Slip Ware vessel Hayes Form 91 (Fig. 5, 1; Hayes 1972, 140, fig. 26, A2), the others probably examples of Cypriote Red Slip Ware (Fig. 5, 3-4; *ibid.*, 377-82, figs 81-2, Forms 7 and 9)². The date of these would probably lie in the 6th to 7th century AD. A locally-made siltware bowl with a thin red slip was also found (Fig. 5, 2). Since the only stratum above the latest pavement of the street consisted of surface dust and mud, there is no evidence as to when this pottery arrived at this location.

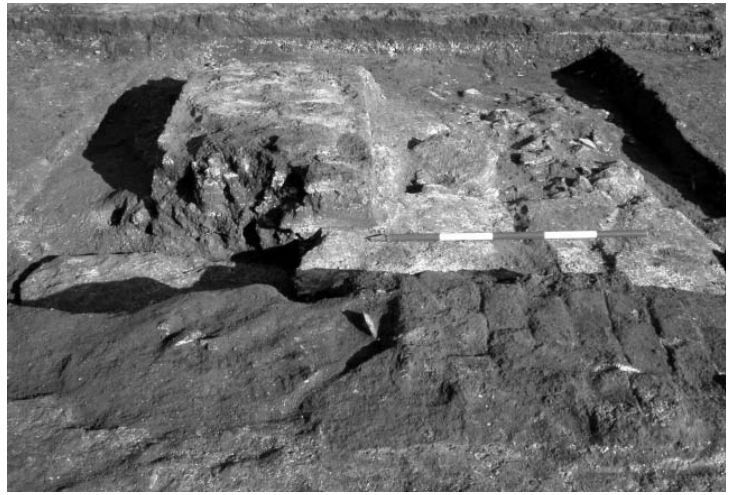
As work progressed, a second level of the street was discovered, located between 30 and 35 cm below the first and constructed of thicker blocks of limestone. Unlike

those of the upper level pavement, these blocks were not of rectilinear shapes and had been fitted together in the manner of crazy-paving. Although the majority of the stones had been laid directly on the ground, in one or two cases powdered shell had been used as a bedding layer, a common practice in Roman architecture. In the area around the 26th dynasty gate, the pavement was mostly hidden by the later one above it, and only small areas could be observed through breaks in the higher-level street. Additional excavation at the sides of the upper level remains revealed more blocks of the lower pavement, since the older street had been of greater width than the one which replaced it (see Fig. 4a). The presence of both levels in the same area provided good information on the stratigraphy, because the layer of fill between the two levels could be observed. At some points the level of the latest pavement had been adjusted by the deliberate dumping of broken pottery to level the ground across hollows created by subsidence.

About 8 m south-west of the 26th dynasty gate the remains of two small plinths of fired brick were found, one on either side of the street. The western plinth was the better preserved of the two, with plaster on all its sides (Fig. 4b). This plaster connected with the pavement of the second level of the street, showing that the plinths belonged with that phase of construction. The western plinth measured 1.80 x 0.95 m, with a preserved height of 40 cm. The plinth on the eastern side was found to be badly damaged and many of the bricks had collapsed. The two plinths were not quite directly opposite each other, but offset by about half a metre. Their full original height and purpose remains unknown. The width of the street in the area close to these plinths seems, from the position of the surviving blocks in the pavement, to have been up to two metres greater than its width further north (see below). This suggests that there may have been some

² Cypriote Red Slip Ware has been found previously at Tell el-Balamun, see Spencer 1996, 43, pl 56, 13-16 and pl. 57, 1-2.

Main Street, Diospolis Inferior



b

Fig. 4 — a...Detail of the kerb at the east, with the Level 2 pavement at greater depth on the left and the drain channel against the right edge (between the ranging-pole and the kerb); b...The fired brick plinth at the north-west side of the street, view from the east.

a

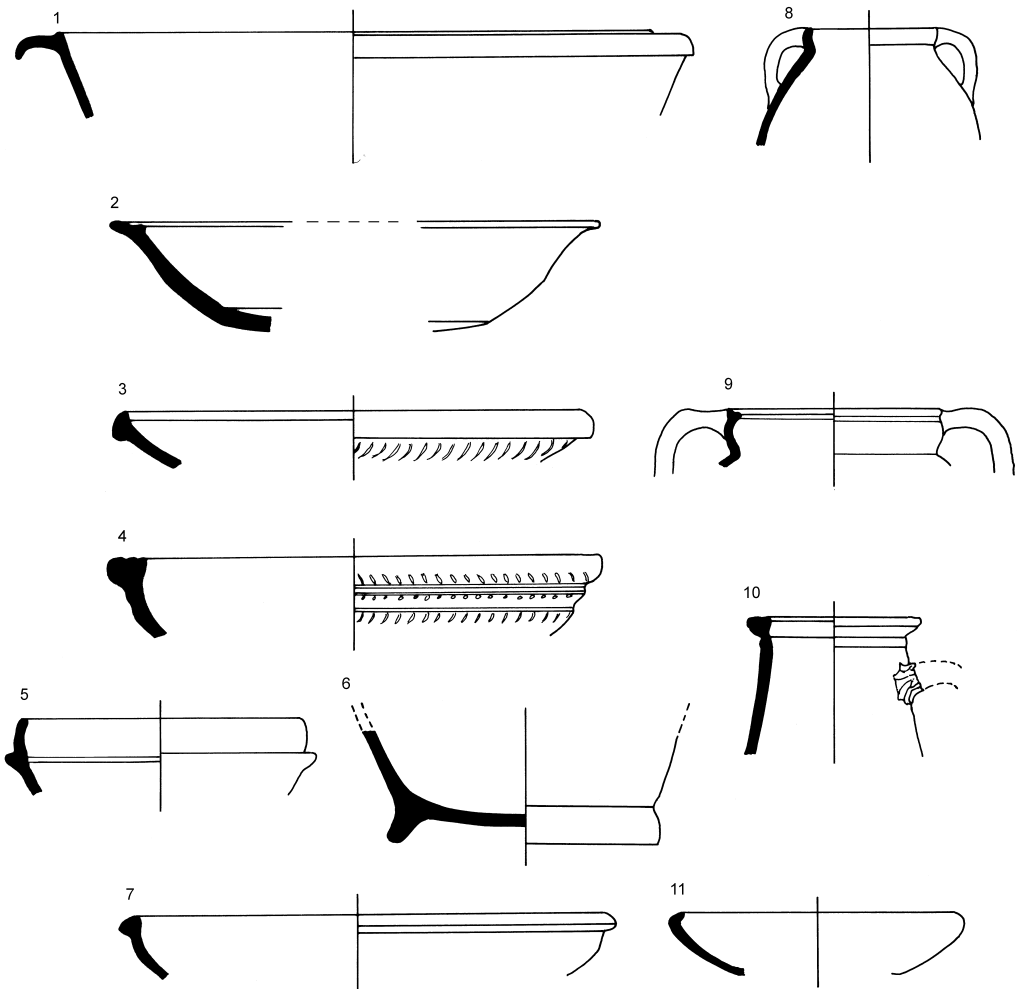


Fig. 5 — Pottery from various contexts.



b

Fig. 6 — a...The Level 2 pavement of the Roman street; b...The drain in the pavement of the Roman street at Level 2, made from a pottery amphora-neck.

a

features on the plinths which prompted the construction of a slightly more elaborate area of pavement at this point than was usual along the majority of the length of the street. Unfortunately, the loss of much of the pavement through ancient stone-robbing and the fact that part of the second level was hidden below the upper one made it impossible to establish the precise original dimensions.

The two levels of the street could be seen in the section of a deep trench dug down to the 26th dynasty level, in addition to the remains of the earlier avenues of the temple approach. Below the two successive pavements of Roman date was another thin limestone pavement, about

30 cm below the second Roman level, perhaps dating from the Ptolemaic Period. Between this and the 26th dynasty level were remains from yet another pavement, laid on a black mud foundation layer, which belongs to the 30th dynasty sacred way leading to the temple. Other parts of this feature had been encountered further along the temple axis in earlier seasons of excavation, but its presence here confirms that it was indeed a continuous processional way to the temple of Amun.

Test trenches were cut along the projected line of the Roman street beyond the immediate area of excavation, to see whether any continuation of the paving could be



a



b

Fig. 7 — a...Amphora-neck used as a drain in the Level 2 pavement of the street; b...Pit to the east of the Roman building, containing broken pottery of the Late Roman period.

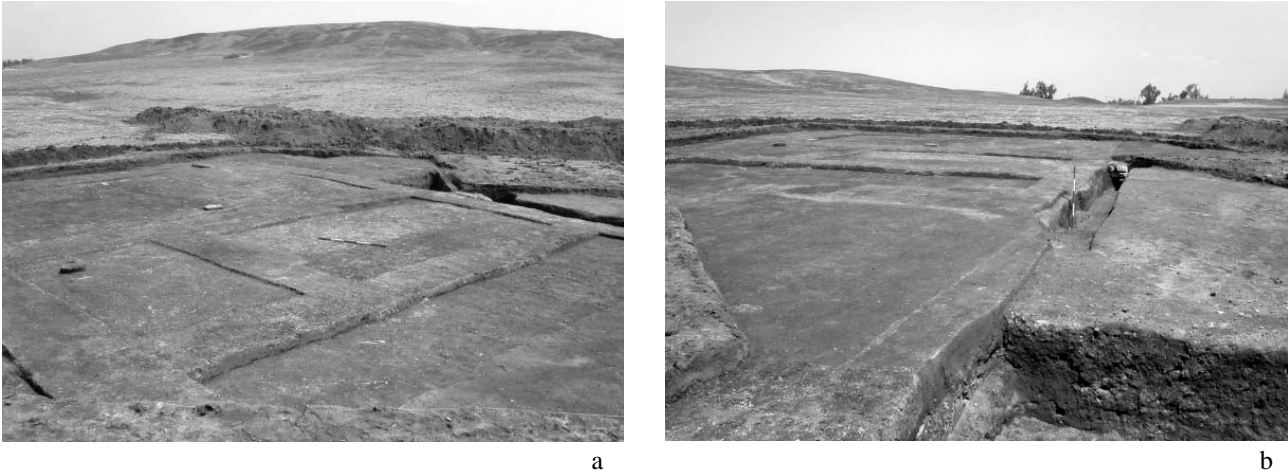


Fig. 8 — a...View over the Roman building, looking to the north-east; b...View over the Roman building, looking to the north-west, with the 26th dynasty enclosure wall in the foreground.

found. Fragmentary remains of both levels were detected to the south-west, some 13 m from the limit of the main excavation. A small area of the Level 2 pavement was found above the site of the 26th dynasty gate, consisting of a few blocks of limestone. The position of these blocks is shown on Fig. 1. Much more impressive remains were found further to the north-east. An initial test made about 38 m north-east of the 26th dynasty gate exposed a well-preserved area of pavement belonging to Level 2. As work continued it became clear that the full width of the street had survived here, measuring 6.2 m across (Fig. 6a). A narrow exploration-trench was then cut from this point back in the direction of the main excavation, following the north-west edge of the pavement. This was found to continue unbroken for a distance of 16 m, but as it approached the area of the temple gate much of the paving was found to have been robbed out. Part way along this long stretch of pavement was a simple drain, formed from the neck of a pottery amphora set upright into the ground below a small gap between the slabs. This was intended to act as a soak-away to remove rainwater from the street, although its effectiveness would have been limited if the climate at Tell el-Balamun in antiquity was anything like that of the present day (Fig. 6b). The type of amphora used in this drain, with the handles positioned at the top of a tall, ribbed neck, is widespread in Egypt but difficult to date precisely (Fig. 7a). They have been discussed at length by Donald Bailey, who labelled examples from the British Museum's excavations at El-Ashmunein as Hermopolite Type A (Bailey 1998, 125-9). The example used in the drain resembles the amphora EA 27429 in the British Museum, particularly in the details of the rim. This parallel came from Tanis and dates from the 2nd century AD. Later forms of Type A amphorae were found in a pit

associated with a building to the west of the street (see below).

No trace of the higher Level 1 street was found in this area, either because it had been completely destroyed or perhaps because a new pavement was not considered necessary where the older one remained in good condition. Preliminary conclusions are that the Level 2 street was constructed in the 2nd century AD and the Level 1 replacement dates from the 4th century AD. A coin found just above the Level 2 pavement close to the above-mentioned drain proved to be a small bronze of Arsinoites, dating from Year 11 of Hadrian. A second coin from the high level surface fill above the street was a silvered bronze nummus minted between AD 348-60³.

On the west of the street, just under the surface dust, lay a square building occupying an area of 12 x 10 m, with mud brick walls between 80 and 100 cm in thickness (Figs 1, 8a). Fragments of pottery and the small size of the bricks indicated that the building belonged to the Late Roman Period. The south-west wall of the structure had been built over the eroded exterior face of the 26th dynasty enclosure wall of the temple, just to the north-west of the entrance gate (Fig. 8b). The depth of brickwork remaining above the foundation-level of the walls was around 75 cm, and some traces of brick-paving inside the building showed that highest preserved parts were just at the level of the original floor. The building contained four rooms, the largest of which, measuring 7.5 x 4 m, was located at the north-east and entered through a door in the north-east wall. The door was 110 cm wide, and immediately inside it was an area paved with small bricks, extending 1.42 m into the room (Fig. 1). The bricks of this pavement measured 23 x 11.5 x 6 cm. Bricks of similar size had been used at floor-level around the edges of the

³ I am grateful to Richard Abdy for his identifications from photographs of all the poorly-preserved coins mentioned in this article.



Fig. 9 — a...Glazed composition figure of Harpocrates; b...Limestone pilaster capital fragment.

room at the east corner and along the inner face of the north-west wall. Those parts of the floor without any surviving brick pavement consisted of hard mud. Inside the room, just to the right of the entrance, was a screen-wall of a single row of bricks. A door in the south-west wall led into the second room, which could also be accessed by a second door from the exterior, through the south-east wall of the building. Just outside this outer door was a step formed of three rough blocks of limestone, descending about 35 cm. This would have provided access to and from the highest level of the street, which passed within 3 m of this side of the building. In the north-west part of the structure was a third room entered from Room 2. It contained the base of a pottery vessel set into the ground. The final room, at the south-west, was a long narrow space of 8 x 1.5 m, entered from Room 2 by a door 85 cm in width. On the east of the building was a rubbish-pit containing some broken pottery (Fig. 7b), including parts of three Roman transport amphorae, a ring-base from a coarse siltware vessel (Fig. 5, 6), and part of an Egyptian Red Slip Ware bowl (Fig. 5, 5). This bowl probably dates from the late 4th to 5th century AD⁴.

The amphorae belonged to Hermopolite Type A, like the one used for the drain in the Level 2 pavement of the street. The upper parts of two examples in the pit which were sufficiently well-preserved to show some diagnostic

features belonged to two separate varieties. One had a narrow, closely ribbed neck⁵ and the other considerably shorter neck, with wider-spaced ribbing. The latter neck was attached to part of the upper body, which was of a wide type suggesting a shape somewhere in between that of two vessels in the British Museum from Tanis⁶.

Since the building was preserved only just to the level of its floor and buried only by surface dust, very little material was found within it. The surface layer being an open context, there is no way to be sure if the items recovered had any connection with the building. A fragmentary glazed composition figure of Harpocrates in Hellenistic style, 6.6 cm high, was found in Room 1 (Fig. 9a), and part of a limestone pilaster capital was recovered from Room 4 (Fig. 9b). A bronze coin from the fill above the outer east wall proved to be a bronze diobol from the mint of Alexandria, dated to Year 4 of Vespasian (71/2 AD). A second coin in bad condition, found in Room 1, is probably also a diobol of Vespasian. The sherds in the surface dust above the building came mostly from siltware vessels (Fig. 5, 8-11), but one piece from a Cypriote Red Slip Ware bowl, probably of Hayes Type 5.2 was also found (Fig. 5, 7; Hayes 1972, 377, fig. 81, Form 5.2).

The finding of the paved street in the centre of Lower Egyptian Diospolis suggests that the city was redeveloped on standard Roman lines, by the creation of major routes

⁴ See the similar styles of bowls in Bailey 1998, pl. 25, D314, D315, D328.

⁵ Probably from a vessel similar to those in Bailey 1998, 129, pls 112-3, U7, U8, U9.

⁶ British Museum EA 22366 and 22358; see Bailey 1998, 126, pl. 134, lower right.

through the heart of the town. This was a civil street, and as such continued beyond the limits of the Pharaonic temple enclosure, unlike the older sacred avenues which had run only between the gate of the enclosure and the temple. Very probably the street would have intersected with another running a right-angles, so as to divide the town into four quarters, as at Hermopolis Magna and Antinoopolis. The location of the east-west street at Tell el-Balamun remains unknown, but there is a strong possibility that it could have run along the old axis of the subsidiary temple of Nectanebo I, passing over the ruins of that monument just as the north-south street passed across the site of the temple of Amun.

Bibliography

- Bailey, D.M. 1998. *Excavations at El-Ashmunein V, pottery, lamps and glass of the late Roman and early Arab periods* (London).
- Hayes, J. 1972. *Late Roman pottery* (London).
- Spencer, A.J. 1996. *Excavations at Tell el-Balamun 1991-1994* (London).