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Two “Horned” Altars from the El Darazya Site at Marina el-Alamein in Egypt

Abstract

Relics of two portable “horned” altars made of limestone were found during the first season of research and conservation work, which began in autumn 2021 at the El Darazya – Marina el-Alamein site. The remains of a Hellenistic-Roman period town preserved here are located on the Mediterranean coast of Egypt 100 km west of Alexandria. The well-known ruins of an ancient town at the Marina el-Alamein archaeological site are 4 km east of the place. Many similarities in architectural solutions and the common construction technique indicate the co-existence of the two settlements in one historical period. Similar material culture relics and archaeological objects can confirm their functioning in the same civilisational setting and within the range of the same influences. One of these is altars, which attest to forms of worship on the one hand and artistic traditions on the other. The latter, while also remaining a reflection, on a smaller scale, of the forms of architectural decoration of the buildings, make it possible to look at them analytically as well. The conclusions presented in this article are the result of the author’s own field research at the El Darazya site.

Key words: “horned” altar, Hellenistic-Roman Egypt, Marina el-Alamein, domestic cult, architectural decoration

Introduction

The large, almost building-sized altars are referred to as “horned” as well as small, portable ones, whose corners are built up with protrusions of various shapes, but most often and most simply in the form of a tetrahedron. So, they look like a pointed merlon. In principle, the term refers to square altars with corners and four horns. However, some altars of a different shape – e.g., round – were also crowned with similar horns. This is shown, for example, by iconographic representations from niches in the chamber of the main tomb of the catacombs of Kom el-Shoqafa in Alexandria [1, Fig. 153], [2, Figs. 2.23, 2.25, 2.26, 2.28], [3, Figs. 57, 60–62].

The actual term “horned”, which has become widely used, is ambiguous or even inappropriate. It is vague and imprecisely describes a form of great variety, while at the same time pretending to interpret this shape with over-precision [4, p. 317]. It would seem to be more ap-

propriate to refer to these altars as “with acroterions”, as this may indeed have been their supposed function [4, pp. 318–326]. This association is all the more justified if the decoration of the altars refers to architecture. This is the case with Hellenistic and Roman altars, including ones of small dimensions, and we will deal with such examples here.

“Horned” altars are noted to have been present over a long period of time. Examples may be found in ancient Egypt, from where their lineage was until recently derived based on the observation that the oldest specimens were discovered there [5, pp. 69–70]. However, current scientific opinion generally sees their origin as Eastern or Syro-Palestinian [6, p. 19], [7, p. 81], [8, p. 40]. Altars of this type were used in various periods throughout a vast geographical area: primarily in the Semitic East, Egypt and finally in the entire Hellenistic-Roman world [4, p. 317]. Therefore, this motif was widespread over a broad area as well as in various and sometimes distant civilisations. We are primarily interested in Hellenistic-Roman times and areas, after the revival of the form from the East, which probably occurred via the Persians and Greeks.

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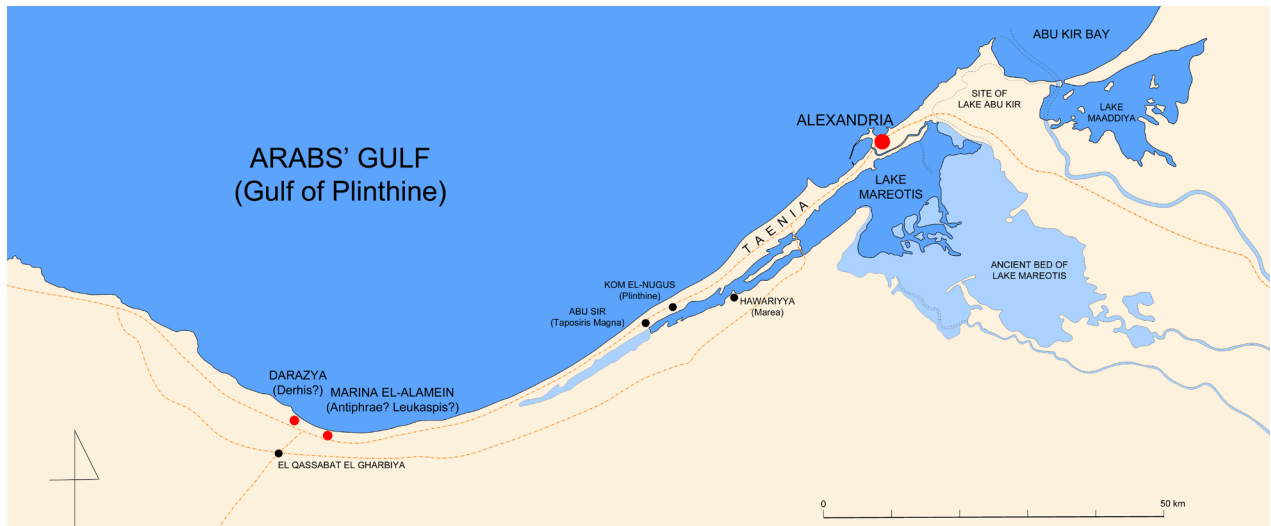


Fig. 1. The location of the Darazya site in the eastern Mediterranean (drawing by R. Czerner based on [12])

II. 1. Lokalizacja stanowiska Darazya we wschodnim Śródziemnomorzu (rys. R. Czerner na podstawie [12])

The altars could have a libation function [9, pp. 3–5], especially the small portable ones, or were perhaps used in religious ceremonies, be it public, domestic [10, p. 386] or funerary. Altars practically identical in form were found in the burial chambers of the hypogea and in the residential space. They were used to burn sacrificial food or as incense burners. The small portable ones were primarily for the latter purpose. In the domestic sphere, they could also have been used as “lamp-shrines” (models which hold lamps for ritual purposes) [9, p. 10]. It is also believed that the act of burning incense could still have been symbolically associated with the holocaust, as attested to in Egyptian texts and in Syro-Palestinian context [4, pp. 328–329, n. 4], as well as the symbolic annihilation of the enemies of the gods [9, pp. 3–4], [11, pp. 340–341].

The relics of the two portable altars referred to in the title were found during research and conservation work carried out at the El Darazya site in Marina el-Alamein¹, which contains the architectural remains of a city from the Hellenistic-Roman period and is located on the Mediterranean coast of Egypt 100 km west of Alexandria (Fig. 1). Attempts to identify the place with a historical name have indicated a possible connection with Derrhis, mentioned in ancient descriptions of this section of the coast [13]. 4 km east of this place, there are well-described ruins of another ancient city, functioning from the 2nd century BC to the 5th century AD, at a site known today as Marina.

Numerous architectural similarities confirmed by research carried out at both sites, in particular the same construction techniques, as well as building types indicate the contemporary existence of both neighbouring settlements at one time in the past. They are confirmed to have ex-

isted in the same civilisational circle and under the same influences, primarily from Alexandria and related to the location on the sea and land trade routes, by details such as architectural decoration and objects. Sorting out these interdependencies and determining similarities, and thereby detailing what we know about the ancient settlement from the El Darazya site, is the main research goal of this study. Altars, including of the portable “horned” variety, in particular the two described, are among the objects mentioned and may be of exceptional importance. By their nature, as evidenced by other examples, they reflect the forms of architectural decoration on a smaller scale and also enable research into its origin and nature.

State of research

Waldemar Déonna’s work from 1934 [10] constitutes the basis for studies on “horned” altars. The author starts with descriptions of altars from Delos, as this was the site of his research, but he consequently conducted comparative studies, juxtaposed and analysed all the elements of the altars suitable for such a comparison. More or less cross-sectional studies by Jan Quaegebeur from 1993 [11] and Jana Helmbold-Doyé from 2010 on Tuna el-Gebel [14, pp. 133–148] supplement them. Cross-sectional analyses are also included in a study by Georges Soukiassian from 1983 [4]. Renate Rosenthal-Heginbottom wrote about Roman “horned” altars in 2008 [15]. David A. Falk, in his work from 2016, addresses the importance of such altars [5]. He relates the work to Egypt and the East. The following authors wrote about Egyptian altars: Rozalia Tybulewicz on those from Tell Atrib in 2015 [16], Ross Thomas and Aurélia Masson on those from Naukratis in 2018 [8], and Marie-Dominique Nenna on Hellenistic-Roman Alexandrian altars in 2018 [17].

Research and studies of the El Darazya site have only just been undertaken. In addition to several works in preparation by the members of the Mission, one study

¹ The Polish-Egyptian Conservation Mission operating here is organised by Wrocław University of Science and Technology and the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities at the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, in cooperation with the Jagiellonian University and the InterAcademy Institute of Conservation and Restoration of Works of Art.



Fig. 2. Relic of portable altar 1 from the Darazya site
(photos by R. Czerner)

II. 2. Relikt przenośnego ołtarzyka nr 1 ze stanowiska Darazya
(fot. R. Czerner)



Fig. 4. Relic of portable altar 2 from the Darazya site
(photo by R. Czerner)

II. 4. Relikt przenośnego ołtarzyka nr 2 ze stanowiska Darazya
(photo by R. Czerner)

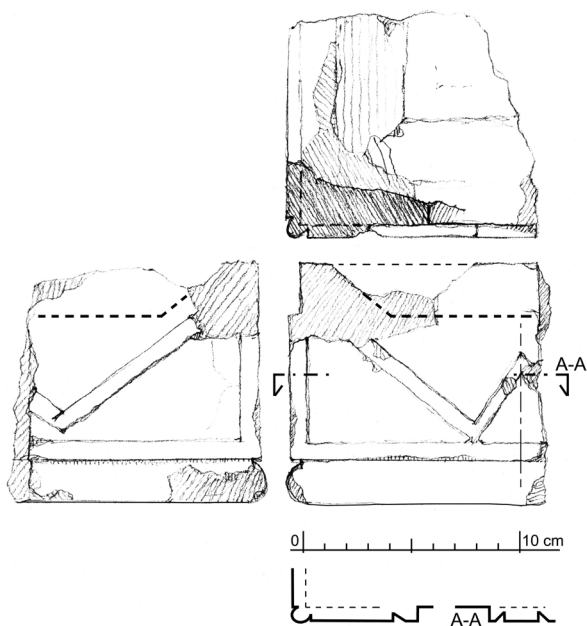


Fig. 3. Relic of portable altar 1 from the Darazya site
(drawing by R. Czerner)

II. 3. Relikt przenośnego ołtarzyka nr 1 ze stanowiska Darazya
(rys. R. Czerner)

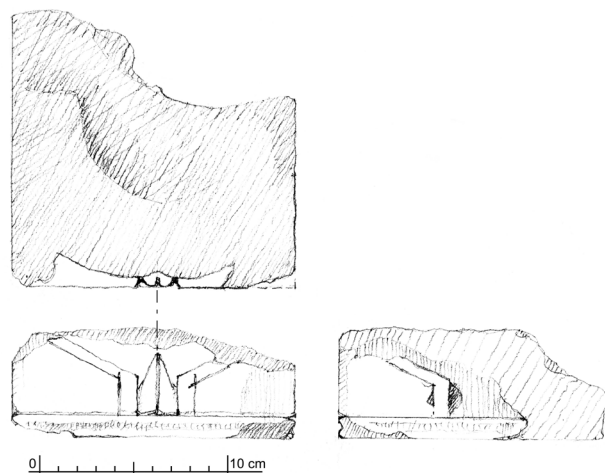


Fig. 5. Relic of portable altar 2 from the Darazya site
(drawing by R. Czerner)

II. 5. Relikt przenośnego ołtarzyka nr 2 ze stanowiska Darazya
(rys. R. Czerner)

on the site and its architecture by Grażyna Bąkowska-Czerner and the current author was published in 2023 [13]. In turn, in the thirty-eight years since the discovery of the relics of the ancient city in Marina el-Alamein, and the twenty-eight years of the conservation mission's work there, the site, its architecture and archaeological objects have been described and studied extensively. Collective and summary studies related to the discovery have been presented by Wiktor A. Daszewski [18], [19], Stanisław Medeksza [20] and the current author together with G. Bąkowska-Czerner [21]. Annual reports on the work of the archaeological and conservation mission in Marina el-Alamein have been published since 1985 in "Polish Archeology in the Mediterranean". The following authors have written about the altars from Marina: W.A. Daszewski [18, p. 25, Fig. 17], [22, p. 55], I. Zych [23, pp. 624–625, Figs 3–5], S. Medeksza [24, p. 75] and G. Bąkowska-Czerner [25, p. 144].

Research

Studies on two portable altars were carried out after their discovery during the first season of field work run by the Polish-Egyptian Conservation Mission El Darazya – Marina el-Alamein in September 2021. The presented studies are therefore basic. Relic analysis and comparative studies were chosen as research methods. The comparisons mainly involved artefacts from the neighbouring site of Marina and other sites pertaining to Hellenistic-Roman Egypt. The presented conclusions are the result of the author's own field research. He participated in it between 1996–2018, co-led the Marina el-Alamein Conservation Mission and leads the mission in El Darazya.

The portable altars from El Darazya are a surface find. Their context is then limited to the probability that they come from a residential area. They are therefore associat-

ed with a private, domestic cult. Both were carved from local oolite limestone, the same from which the buildings were made [26, p. 1179]. The altars have not survived in their entirety, but the relics are so extensive that it is possible to reconstruct the form and dimensions.

The bulkier of the altars is carved from a prismatic cube, square in plan, with a side length of 21.2 cm and 11 cm in height (Figs. 2, 3). The upper surface contains a square recess for burning incenses, with a trapezoidal cross-section; the side length at the top is 17.6 cm, 12 cm at the bottom and 2.5 cm deep. The lower surface of the cuboid altar is flat and carefully levelled, while the side ones are sculpted in the form of horns – larger and higher corner merlons or acroterions and smaller ones in the middle of each wall. The corner (edge) horns are 8.5 cm long, while the small middle ones are 4.2 cm. These were also about 3.5 cm lower than the corner ones, which reached almost the upper edge of the altar and were about 8.5 cm high. The angle of inclination of the upper edges of the large and small horns is the same. They are not separated in any way, but their upper, lower and side edges are jointly outlined by a slightly rounded band 0.8 cm wide marked with a thin scratch. The lower part of the wall decoration is like a base distinguished by an architectural half-round profile 2 cm in height. It is the only one that is more artistically carved, while the rest of the decoration is delicate, flat and schematic. A full height corner relic and more than $\frac{1}{4}$ of the original mass has been preserved. Thanks to this, the middle of the wall decoration is known, as well as its height, and it is possible to reconstruct the dimensions.

The second altar featured slightly more developed and complex decoration, albeit generally representing the same type of form (Figs 4, 5). It is poorly preserved, which makes it difficult to determine the height, but it was also forged from a square, but slightly smaller cube. The relic in the plan is more than $\frac{3}{4}$ preserved. Its side length was 15 cm, with a height of 6.5–7 cm, preserved to a height of 6 cm. The decoration of the walls, similar in character, also began with an architectural profile at the bottom. It is similar to a *syma* and is 1.2 cm high. The corner horns did not reach the full height of the altar, but only reached up to about 5.3 cm above the profiled base, so they were lower and flattened. A slightly rounded band, 0.8–0.9 cm wide, framed their upper and vertical side edges from the centre of the wall. Between two such horns there was a small central one, 2.2 cm wide and 3.5 cm high, without a band and only with a vertical line accentuating the centre. The inclination of the upper edges of the horns was different; the corner ones were gentle, while the central ones were steep. Also this altar had a flat bottom directly below the lower profile. The form of the upper part and surface differed the most. The depression of a fire pit was round in shape here, with a diameter almost equal to the width of the block, and it sank spherically. Externally, it was described in the form of a cylinder, spatially intertwined with horns-acroterions. Indeed, this solution is known to have also been applied to stone "horned" altars in other regions and is typical.

"Horned" altars with more or less similar forms have been found at the Hellenistic-Roman site of Marina el-Alamein. One of the first such surface finds, described in



Fig. 6. Two portable altars found in the area of House H10"E" in the Marina site (photos by R. Czerner)

II. 6. Dwa przenośne ołtarze znalezione w przestrzeni Domu H10"E" na stanowisku Marina (fot. R. Czerner)



Fig. 7. Two portable altars found in hypogea T16 and T19 in the necropolis of the Marina site (photos courtesy of W.A. Daszewski)

II. 7. Dwa przenośne ołtarze znalezione w hypogeach T16 i T19 na nekropoli stanowiska Marina (fot.: dzięki uprzejmości W.A. Daszewskiego)

1995 by W.A. Daszewski [18, p. 25, Fig. 17], with a Greek inscription, has more elaborate architectural decoration. Subsequent items present significant similarities in the form of the horns themselves, which are even more schematic, or also in the characteristic thin straight band. Two altars were discovered in 2000 by the conservation mission in the area of residential house H10"E" [24, p. 75] (Fig. 6) and three of the hypogea T16, T19 (Fig. 7) and T29 described by I. Zych [23, p. 624, Fig. 3] and W.A. Daszewski [22, p. 55]. A portable altar found in the hypogea T29 chamber is identical in terms of horn shape. It can be seen in a photograph taken in 2001 by A.B. Biernacki through the hole in the ceiling of the chamber before starting its exploration a year later (Fig. 8).

Two things distinguish the decoration of both altars from El Darazya and similar ones from Marina el-Alamein against a background of counterparts found elsewhere – e.g., at Kom el-Shoukafa in Alexandria. Firstly, there are no elements referring to the forms of decoration and architecture of ancient Egypt [1, Abb. 181], [17, pp. 88, 89,



Fig. 8. The chamber of Hypogeum T29 from the necropolis of the Marina site, as seen through a hole in the ceiling in 2001 before exploration began (photo by A.B. Biernacki)

Il. 8. Komora Hypogeum T29 z nekropoli stanowiska Marina, widziana przez otwór w stropie w 2001 r. przed rozpoczęciem eksploracji (fot. A.B. Biernacki)



Fig. 9. Relic of portable altar 1 from the Darazya site. Photo showing the lower surface (photo by P. Zambrzycki)

Il. 9. Relikt przenośnego ołtarzyka nr 1 ze stanowiska Darazya. Zdjęcie ukazujące dolną powierzchnię (fot. P. Zambrzycki)

Fig. 27], with the only exception being a sometimes strongly simplified cavetto cornice. This may be related to the ethnic origin of the city's inhabitants from Marina and similarly from the area of Darazya. Such reflections on how the nature of architecture, especially sepulchral architecture, depended on the origin of groups of the Hellenistic population of Alexandria were recently conducted by Kyriakos Savvopoulos [27, pp. 107–111]. Following his line of thought, the lack of elements relating to Egyptian architectural forms would, of course, point to ethnic Greeks rather than Hellenised Egyptians.

The second characteristic feature is the overarching simplification and geometrisation, especially of the horns-acroterions. It should be noted that specific architectural decoration from the Hellenistic and Roman times is of a similar nature [28], [29], the most distinctive element being a simplified, geometrically stylised capital, recently referred to as blocked-out. However, the geometric simplification also applies to other elements of the decoration. These forms, known in connection with the first discoveries as Nabataean, have recently been commonly associated with Alexandria and its sphere of influence. They are particularly prevalent at the Marina site. These forms were so widely used there that their discoverer, W.A. Daszewski, named the local variant a “Marina-type” capital [19, p. 434]. Elements of the same stylised decoration are also beginning to be found in El Darazya. It seems to be a logical conclusion that the uniquely geometrised “horned” altars from Marina and El Darazya should be associated with the same artistic tendency.

Another feature distinguishes the portable “horned” altars from El Darazya from both known examples from Marina el-Alamein as well as others, in particular from Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt. The difference involves the proportions, the height of the altar and the shape of its base. Altars, either those in existence or known from iconographic representations [1, Abb. 153], [2, Figs. 2.23–2.28], [3, Figs. 56–62], [9, Fig. 1] are usually proportionally high. Below the part with the fire pit surrounded by horns, separated by a cornice that supports them, there is a high base in the form of a pedestal, a column, less often four corner columns or a miniature of a kiosk. The altars from El Darazya, on the other hand, do not have any higher base, and below the area with the horns there is only a 0.012–0.02 m high cornice-profile and below it the block ends, flat and levelled from the bottom (Fig. 9). The entire altar is therefore shaped proportionally like a flattened cube. This design, regardless of its exceptional simplicity and dominance of functionality, is unique and almost unknown from other sites. In any case, there are hardly any known publications describing portable “horned” stone, ceramic or miniature bronze altars. Neither do studies, to some extent resembling catalogues, by G. Soukiassian and W. Déonna [4], [10] mention cases of such an arrangement. Only Seymour Gitin's publication from 2002, concerning the area of modern-day Israel, managed to find two altars with similarly flattened proportions from Tel Migne-Ekrom, but much earlier – from the 7th century BC [30, p. 103, Figs. 4.2, 4.7].

Summary

The results of the comparative methods applied have confirmed what was initially known from analyses of architectural relics and other archaeological objects, namely that an ancient settlement from the El Darazya site in today's Marina el-Alamein functioned in the Hellenistic-Roman period and in the same sphere of influence as the neighbouring town from the Marina site.

These cultural, artistic and everyday influences obviously came from Alexandria. The artistic forms have been confirmed to be significantly similar to objects from Marina.

At the same time, the type of functional solution and the shape of the portable altar from El Darazya – low and without any base or pedestal – is acknowledged as unique, and perhaps characteristic of this place. The reason for using such a simplified and therefore inexpensive form could have been provinciality, though not necessarily. It is possible that here we have some unpreserved elsewhere, yet widespread, simple household items. Finally, it is worth noting that these altars, while rather small, were handy and entirely portable. Would this have some connection with the presence of a harbour and boat transport?

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the authorities of the Wrocław University of Science and Technology and the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities at the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities for establishing the Polish-Egyptian Conservation Mission El Darazya – Marina el-Alamein, where the studies presented here were conducted. I would like to thank the institutions participating in the work: the Jagiellonian University and the InterAcademy Institute for the Conservation and Restoration of Works of Art. I would like to thank my colleagues from the El Darazya mission and earlier from the Marina mission for their help, advice and cooperation. I wish to express my special thanks to jubilarian Professor Jacek Kościuk, who was the first to introduce me to the world of ancient and modern Egypt with his colourful stories.

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Streszczenie

Dwa ołtarze z „rogami” ze stanowiska El Darazya w Marina el-Alamein w Egipcie

Relikty dwóch wykonanych z wapienia przenośnych ołtarzyków z „rogami” odnaleziono podczas pierwszego sezonu prac badawczych i konserwatorskich, które rozpoczęto jesienią 2021 roku na stanowisku El Darazya – Marina el-Alamein. Zachowane tu pozostałości miasta z okresu hellenistyczno-rzymskiego położone są na śródziemnomorskim wybrzeżu Egiptu 100 km na zachód od Aleksandrii. Oddalone o 4 km na wschód od tego miejsca znajdują się dobrze znane ruiny starożytnego miasta na stanowisku archeologicznym Marina el-Alamein. Wiele podobieństw rozwiązań architektonicznych oraz taka sama technika budowlana wskazują współistnienie obu osad w jednym okresie historycznym. Ich funkcjonowanie w tym samym kręgu cywilizacyjnym i zasięgu tych samych wpływów może być potwierdzone przez podobne relikty kultury materialnej i ruchome obiekty archeologiczne. Jednymi z nich są ołtarze, które z jednej strony poświadczają formy kultu, z drugiej zaś tradycje artystyczne. Te drugie, pozostając też odbiciem w mniejszej skali form dekoracji architektonicznej budynków, umożliwiają analityczne spojrzenie również na nie. Przedstawione w artykule konkluzje są wynikiem własnych badań terenowych autora na stanowisku El Darazya.

Słowa kluczowe: ołtarz z „rogami”, hellenistyczno-rzymski Egipt, Marina el-Alamein, kult domowy, architektoniczna dekoracja