

Dr. Julia Burdajewicz

Wall painting and stucco decoration of the Lower Basilica at ‘Marea’/Philoxenite as a testimony of the decoration of Alexandrian churches
An iconographic, stylistic, and technical study

‘Marea’/Philoxenite is a Late Antique town located on the pilgrimage route between Alexandria and the sanctuary of St. Menas in Abu Mina. It grew in the shadow of Abu Mina and served rather as a convenient stop for pilgrims than their destination, but – as demonstrated in recent years by the archaeological works of the Polish expedition – its inhabitants could take pride in its monumental architecture, a well-thought-out urban layout, functional infrastructure, and sound economy owed to local agricultural production. The most monumental building discovered so far is the ‘Great Basilica’. Unfortunately, after more than a thousand years of deterioration caused by environmental factors, nothing remained of its once-opulent wall decorations, which most likely consisted of paintings, mosaics, and revetments made of various colored stones.

However, the Great Basilica still held a surprise for its explorers: when the stone slabs of its flooring were lifted to check for remains of earlier buildings, thousands of colorful wall painting and stucco fragments came to light. Further excavations revealed outlines of the walls of an earlier church – a small three-aisled basilica. It appears to have been in use for only a few decades – from the last quarter of the 5th century, when it was built, to the first half of the 6th century, when it was deliberately dismantled to make room for the edification of the Great Basilica. As the ‘Lower Basilica’ was torn down, painting and stucco decorations that covered its walls were broken into countless fragments and used as ‘rubble’ to level the terrain for the new construction.

The research project aims to characterize the wall decorations of the Lower Basilica and its overall appearance through an iconographic, stylistic, and technical study. The iconographic analysis allows us to define the repertoire of employed iconographic motifs, the stylistic study aims to appraise the artistic treatment of represented subjects, and the technical study focuses on the materiality of decorations: the materials used and the manner of their application. These three intertwining lines of research lead to an attempt at reconstructing the appearance of wall decorations of the Lower Basilica: their composition, spatial distribution, overall aesthetics, and the correlations between painted and stucco decoration. However, to make this possible, it is necessary to undertake the painstaking task of matching and reassembling as many painting and stucco fragments as possible in order to restore – at least partially – the physical and aesthetic integrity of these decorations.

This effort is undoubtedly worth undertaking due to the remarkable scientific value of these finds. The founder of the Lower Basilica is anonymous, but considering that no bishoprics independent of Alexandria were ever established in the Mareotis region, it is very likely that it was built on the initiative or under the patronage of its patriarch. Next, the high artistic and technical level of execution of these decorations suggests that the task of embellishing the Lower Basilica was entrusted to a workshop of painters and stucco workers from Alexandria. In view of the above, it seems almost certain the wall decorations of the Lower Basilica reflect the appearance of the interiors of Alexandrian churches. This makes them a discovery of unparalleled significance: despite the fact that – as we learn from written sources – around 50 churches were built in Alexandria between the 4th and 7th centuries, no material or written record of their appearance survives.

Thus, the research project on wall decorations from the Lower Basilica in ‘Marea’/Philoxenite is not just a detailed study of a single assemblage of finds. It is a pioneering contribution to the scanty state of knowledge on the Late Antique church decoration in Alexandria, one of the most important points on the map of the early Christian world. It also aims to place the wall decoration of the Lower Basilica in a broader context of Late Antique monumental art in Egypt through comparative studies with other extant examples of such decorations.

The results of the research project will be published as a series of scientific articles and a final monograph book; they will also be disseminated at scientific conferences and other public presentations.