

POLISH-EGYPTIAN EXCAVATIONS AT TELL ATRIB IN 1989

Karol Myśliwiec

The Polish-Egyptian archaeological mission at Tell Atrib, sponsored by the Polish Center for Mediterranean Archaeology, the Egyptian Antiquities Organization and Bank Misr, has worked on the site of Kom Sidi Youssef (suburb of Benha) from 10 September until 6 November 1989.¹

Our activities concentrated on the area adjoining the hill of Kom Sidi Youssef from the South. This area has been divided into squares of 10 x 10 m. Some trial pits inside these squares had been made twenty years ago and in 1985, and the south part of this area was excavated in 1987 and 1988. The present campaign had two aims:

a) to enlarge the excavations in the squares in the north and west of the area;

b) to deepen the excavations in some selected places, particularly those in which previously work had to be stopped because of a high water table.

In the north of the area, the excavations included the squares FF-HH and LL-NN (30 by 30 m), while in the western part the squares CC-DD, JJ, PP and QQ have been part of our research. The northern squares have been explored down to the Byzantine level, and their deeper strata should be excavated during the coming season.

A low water table at the beginning of this season enabled us to deepen the excavation in some rooms of the Ptolemaic quarter.

¹ The mission was composed of the following members: Prof. Dr. Karol Myśliwiec (director of the mission), Dr. Barbara Ruszczyc, Dr. Aleksandra Krzyżanowska, Mr. Adam Łajtar, Miss Anna Południkiewicz and Miss Iwona Zych (archaeologists), Eng. Jarosław Dobrowolski (architect) and Mr. Stefan Sadowski (photographer). The Egyptian Antiquities Organization was represented by Messrs Ibrahim Mohammed Soliman, Hamdy El-Ghazar and Mohammed Hasan Heykal.

These are rooms nos 127, 128, 136 and 155, as well as squares FF, JJ and KK. The large rooms 127 and 128 proved to be used as pottery workshops. Several kilns and lot of prefabricated material have been discovered there. The activity of these kilns may have been connected with the material found in room 127, where lots of unbaked pots and sherds were found stuck together alongside the room's east wall in its lower part. This material contained three coins dating from the time of Ptolemy III placing this intensive local pottery production in the second half of the 3rd century BC. A coin of Ptolemy IV has been found in a similar context at a higher level in the same room.

Particularly interesting were the results of our work in room 159 and in squares JJ-KK which are situated in the northwest of the area. Our excavation in square JJ enlarged a trial pit called "X", in which remains of a red-brick construction (water pit and fragments of a column) had been found in 1984. Under a stratum 2 m deep containing debris with Byzantine and Roman pottery, terracotta fragments and coins, remains of a large building made of red bricks were unearthed during this campaign. This construction differs in every respect from the pottery workshops discovered in the south of the area. It proved to be a bath from the time of Ptolemy VI, constructed of red bricks bonded with a thick layer of excellent, plaster-like, waterproof mortar. Two small semi-circular basins and a slightly larger oval basin are preserved in the southern part of the building. The construction is dated by three coins of Ptolemy VI, found between the bricks and immediately under their level. The bath stratum is particularly important for the stratigraphy of our excavations in general, for it clearly separates the earlier levels, belonging to the 3rd and the first half of the 2nd century BC, from the later ones, connected with the second half of the Ptolemaic period.

Subsequent chronological phases could be studied particularly well in building no. 159, which definitely differs from the small

workshop rooms in the southern part of the Ptolemaic quarter. It is much larger than those rooms, and its walls are decorated with painted plaster. This place was excavated down to the ground-water table and five subsequent phases have been distinguished in its stratigraphy. The building with the painted decoration on the walls belongs to the fourth phase and corresponds chronologically to the first half of the 2nd century BC. The inner faces of the walls are divided into squares (each c. 1 m to the side), the surfaces of which appear raised in relation to the sunk frames surrounding them. In the lower register of this decoration, the surface of the squares was painted white and that of the frames had a celadon color. Large fragments of painted plaster belonging to the upper-register squares have been found inside and outside the building. They show that squares in the upper register were purple red and the frames between them white.

The archaeological context of this stratum was particularly rich in finds. Large quantities of pottery included several intact vessels and many sherds of broken pots which could be reconstructed. Most of them represent a local production comprising the same shapes and fabric that are known from the unbaked pieces found in the industrial quarter. The most popular types are bowls with incurved rim and globular pots without handles, having a ring foot and a vertical rim. Many of them bear painted decoration, some particularly fine samples preserving parts of stamped patterns in relief. The painted vessels usually have a white slip band in the upper part of their body, on which brownish-lilac and red stripes are painted horizontally. Larger vessels usually bear some floral patterns, most frequently sequences of garlands with pending endings. Many fragments of imported amphorae, some of which with stamped handles, as well as characteristic types of early- and middle-Hellenistic oil lamps have been found in this context as well.

The northeast sectors (EE-FF-GG and LL-HH-HN) of the area besides Kom Sidi Youssouf were excavated down to a level

corresponding to the Byzantine period. The upper stratum in these sectors contains pottery, red bricks and other objects dating from the three periods represented in our excavations: the Byzantine, Roman and Ptolemaic ones. Among the objects found in this stratum there are many coins dating from the late 3rd/early 4th century AD and terracottas, e.g. the upper part of a statuette representing an early Ptolemaic ruler wearing the ancient Egyptian nemes-headcloth and the "double crown".

A purely Byzantine level begins at a depth of c. 0.80 m below the present surface. This stratum could be reached in two rooms during this campaign (nos 169 and 171). Several large-size amphorae and other vessels that are typical of the period came to light in association with architectural fragments. Some of them are decorated limestone blocks which must have belonged to a monumental building, perhaps an early Byzantine church (Fig. 1). These blocks occur in a secondary position, while the amphorae and jars are sometimes still standing vertically in their original positions.

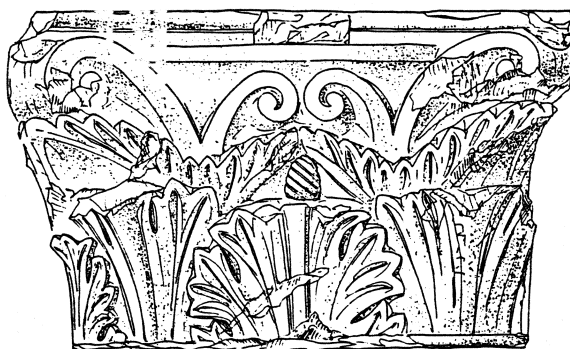
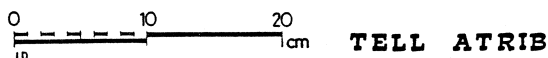


Fig. 1. Limestone capital found in the Byzantine stratum
Drawing J. Dobrowolski

Our investigations during this campaign concentrated on Ptolemaic Athribis, and comprised also an extensive exploration of surface layers where excavations will be continued during the next season. The Ptolemaic strata, not disturbed by later inclusions, preserve a clear stratigraphy which displays several phases of industrial and architectural activities during the three last centuries BC. Particularly important is the stratum dating from the time of Ptolemy VI. It divides our stratigraphy into two principal phases (first and second part of the Ptolemaic Period). The first phase is characterized by an intense production of pottery in the local workshops. Comparing the vessels that were found unbaked and the final products, one can state what kind of pottery was produced in this part of Athribis during the first 150 years of the Ptolemaic Period. These conclusions may help other excavators to date precisely the archaeological material, and subsequently strata found on other sites in the Delta.

This campaign could be organized and the work accomplished thanks to the support and help of Dr. Ali Hassan in Cairo, Mr. Mohammed Abdelhaq and Mr. Mahmoud Yassin in Zagazig, to whom we wish to express our thanks.