

POLISH-EGYPTIAN EXCAVATIONS AT TELL ATRIB IN 1990

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The Polish Egyptian archaeological mission sponsored jointly by the EAO and the PCMA pursued its work on Kom Sidi Youssuf at Tell Atrib (suburb of Benha) from 1 August until 6 October 1990.¹ This campaign was possible thanks to the efficiency and friendly help of Dr. Ali El-Khouly (EAO, Cairo) and Mr. Muhammad Abdelhaq (EAO, Zagazig), to whom we wish to express our deep gratitude.

The program of this campaign comprised:

- 1) archaeological exploration of the northeastern part of the area, untouched by excavations so far;
- 2) reaching the present level of the water table in the parts of the Ptolemaic town unearthed during previous campaigns (north-west of the excavated area);
- 3) further exploration of the area's northern zone, where our excavations in the preceding year did not reach deeper than the upper Byzantine level;
- 4) survey of deep-lying strata below the present water table level, using mechanical drilling to probe various parts of the excavated area.

The northeastern part of the concession, comprising 4 squares 10 x 10 m, was excavated about 1.50 m below the present surface.

¹ The mission included the following: Prof. Karol Myśliwiec, Dr. Barbara Ruszczyk, Dr. Aleksandra Krzyżanowska, Miss Anna Południkiewicz, Prof. Waldemar Chmielewski, Mr. Adam Łajtar, Mr. Włodzimierz Bogusz and Miss Iwona Zych, archaeologists, Mr. Janusz Wąkuski, architect, and Mr. Waldemar Jerke, photographer. The EAO was represented by two inspectors: Mrs. Somaya Abu Senna and Mr. Fawzi Abdinain El-Barbari.

Beneath a thick layer of black ashes followed by a stratum containing much pottery and brick rubble there were remains of Late Roman and Byzantine structures. The southern end of the quarter proved to be a center of lime production. Several large lime kilns were found on two different levels. Many fragments of painted plaster as well as fragmentary limestone blocks and terracotta tiles originating from the neighboring baths were found inside the kilns. A thick layer of lime rubble surrounded the kilns and extended up to the southern limit of a large mud-brick construction which occupies the northern end of the quarter. The structure embraces several small rooms, some of which may have served as storerooms, while others were probably inhabited. In one of these rooms a pottery deposit was found together with Late Roman coins and lamps of similar date. The deposit contained many globular pots and a portable cooking-stove. A second deposit came to light in another room on a slightly higher level. This was a set of large Egyptian amphorae and barrels dating to the Byzantine period.

The extremely rich ceramic material belonging to the archaeological context of this stratum comprises several oil lamps made of marl clay and decorated on the discus with a stamped pattern of a frog with spread legs in various stylized versions. The most sophisticated of these reliefs shows two newborn children attached to a small circle which most probably should be identified as a picture of the vagina. At the western extremity of the Byzantine quarter there is a deep well built of red bricks. It is incorporated into a long and wide mud-brick wall constituting the east border of the Ptolemaic quarter. The well was explored down to a depth of c. 4 m below its top, water being pumped out while excavations proceeded. This exploration revealed a long period of use and multiple repairs made to the well in the Byzantine period.

Owing to the particularly low water table during our excavation season (September-October), we could continue explorations in the previously unearthed Ptolemaic structures, reaching strata

corresponding to the second half of the 4th and the beginning of the 3rd century BC. This early date is confirmed by the pottery and some small finds, among which two objects, so far unique, deserve particular attention. These are a terracotta lamp in the form of a small bowl with a partly contracted rim and an amphora handle with a round stamp containing just two large Greek letters: ΦΙ

Several pottery wasters found in this stratum prove that the excavated quarter of Athribis was a center of ceramic production as early as the end of the Dynastic period and the very beginning of the Ptolemaic period.

A large deposit of Early Ptolemaic (Ptolemy II and Ptolemy III) unfired ceramic vessels (Fig. 1) was unearthed below the walls of room 127, which were dismantled in the course of our work in order to study the pottery. The discovery of the deposit allowed us to establish a repertory of ceramic pots which were produced in the local workshops during the 3rd and in the first half of the 2nd century BC. Beside the most frequent forms, such as curved rim

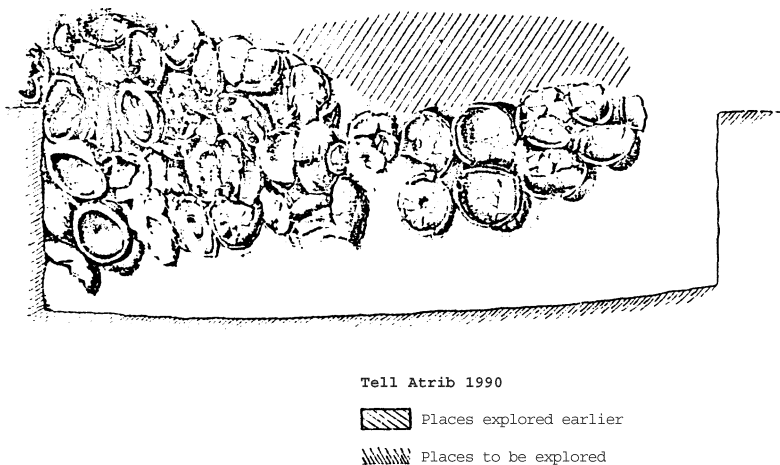


Fig. 1. Early Ptolemaic deposit of unfired pottery, found in Room 127.

bowls and plates with flattened edge, there were also some closed forms, e.g. painted jugs and globular pots without handles, decorated with patches suspended from a white band, garlands and geometrical patterns, as well as large-size amphorae.

As far as the identification of local ceramic production is concerned, one of our finds may be considered a genuine sensation, for it demonstrated that terracotta figurines were fabricated in these workshops as well. This unique object is a head belonging to an unfired figurine representing an elderly woman wearing a floral wreath on her head. Its realistic features and dramatic expression betray the activity of a local workshop with high artistic aspirations. This head was found beside a fragmentarily preserved kiln in the Early Ptolemaic stratum.

Another original figurine of slightly later date (possibly late 3rd-early 2nd century BC) came to light in the vicinity of another kiln. It represented a seated dwarf with an animal tail and a disproportionately large phallus. Two lotus buds decorate his bald head. Several heads belonging to this type have already been found in our Early Ptolemaic strata but this is the first complete specimen of what was doubtless a fertility divinity of some kind, perhaps a magical symbol. This terracotta type must also have been produced in the local workshops at Athribis.

A series of red-brick structures covered with a layer of plain white or polychrome plaster came to light below the Byzantine strata in rooms 160-162 (numbers corresponding to the Byzantine level). The evidence provided by the numismatic material points to the reign of Ptolemy VI as the date for these constructions. They comprise a long corridor leading to a square basin, which has a wide inner step and a miniature basin near its northwestern corner. Smaller basins of various shape occur in two groups east of the corridor. One of these groups is constituted by a pair of oval lavatories, which recall in shape those found previously a few meters from this place, close to the northwestern corner of the excavated area. It seems that

all these structures belonged to a complex of baths built in the mid 2nd century BC. Some erotic figurines and relief fragments were found inside and beside these structures. Their iconography would suggest rather a frivolous function for the structure, maybe a "house of joy". This "recreation center" probably embraced the adjacent room 159, which was uncovered during previous campaigns and which is much larger than the workshops found in the southern part of the Ptolemaic quarter. The walls of this room were decorated with painted plaster. The archaeological context includes ceramic drinking cups with saucers and a few finely painted vessels.

The relatively elevated stratigraphic position of the mid-Ptolemaic structures in this part of the excavated area, as well as the gradual sloping of Ptolemaic and Roman layers eastward and south-

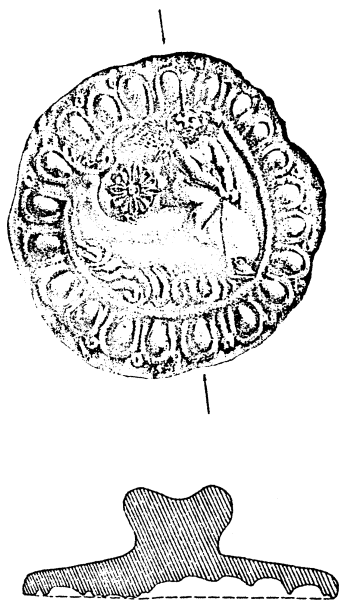


Fig. 2. Terracotta seal with relief decoration. Second half of the Ptolemaic Period.

ward imply that at one time there was a natural hill here, occupied by buildings of a public or official nature. The workshop quarter was situated further to the south.

Among the important finds of Roman date there is a headless statue representing a man standing beside a herm, which is crowned with the head of a bearded man wearing a headband. The composition and the modelling of the sculpture betray the rather clumsy hand of a local copyist.

Objects of Ptolemaic and Roman date were found inside some of the walls, which had to be removed or cleared in order to facilitate further exploration. Among these there is a round terracotta seal which may be dated to the second half of the Ptolemaic Period (Fig. 2). Its flat surface bears a sunken relief representing a cupid riding a dolphin.

The drilling carried out with a hand drill reached a depth of c 4 m below the lowermost of the excavated strata. An examination of the core samples demonstrated that this area was in use in the Late Dynastic Period (probably from the Thirtieth Dynasty on). There seem to be no artifacts of earlier date in this material. These early strata contain lots of pottery sherds, and in one of the examined spots there were also fragments of various stone objects (a stonecutting atelier?).