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Tell Atrib: Excavations, 1999

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TELL ATRIB

EXCAVATIONS, 1999

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The Polish-Egyptian Mission at Tell Atrib (Benha) carried out a two-month long campaign, from September 4 to October 26, of rescue excavations. The work was sponsored by the Polish Center of Archaeology of Warsaw University.¹⁾

The fieldwork proceeded in the southwestern part of the Ptolemaic district that abuts on the south side of the Moslem funerary monument erected on Kom Sidi Yusuf. The objective was to explore two squares, each 10 x 10 m (KKK and LLL), continuing the previous research (squares HHH and MMM) in an effort to close the rectangular plan of the area of excavations begun by the Polish-Egyptian mission in 1986.

¹⁾ The team, directed by Dr. Hanna Szymańska, comprised Mr. Krzysztof Babraj, Ms Anna Południkiewicz, Ms Teresa Witkowska, Mrs. Joanna Szczepkowska, archaeologists; Mrs. Katarzyna Dańska-Białostocka and Ms Aleksandra Czarnocka, students of archaeology from Warsaw University; Mr. Maciej Jawornicki, photographer; and Mr. Marek Puzkarski, documentalist. The Supreme Council of Antiquities was represented by the following inspectors from the Benha district: Mrs. Mouthameda Bakr Abdoul Rahman, Mr. Ali Shehata Elsayed Gad, Mr. Awny Mokhtar Hasan and Mr. Emad Abdoul Azeem Emam.

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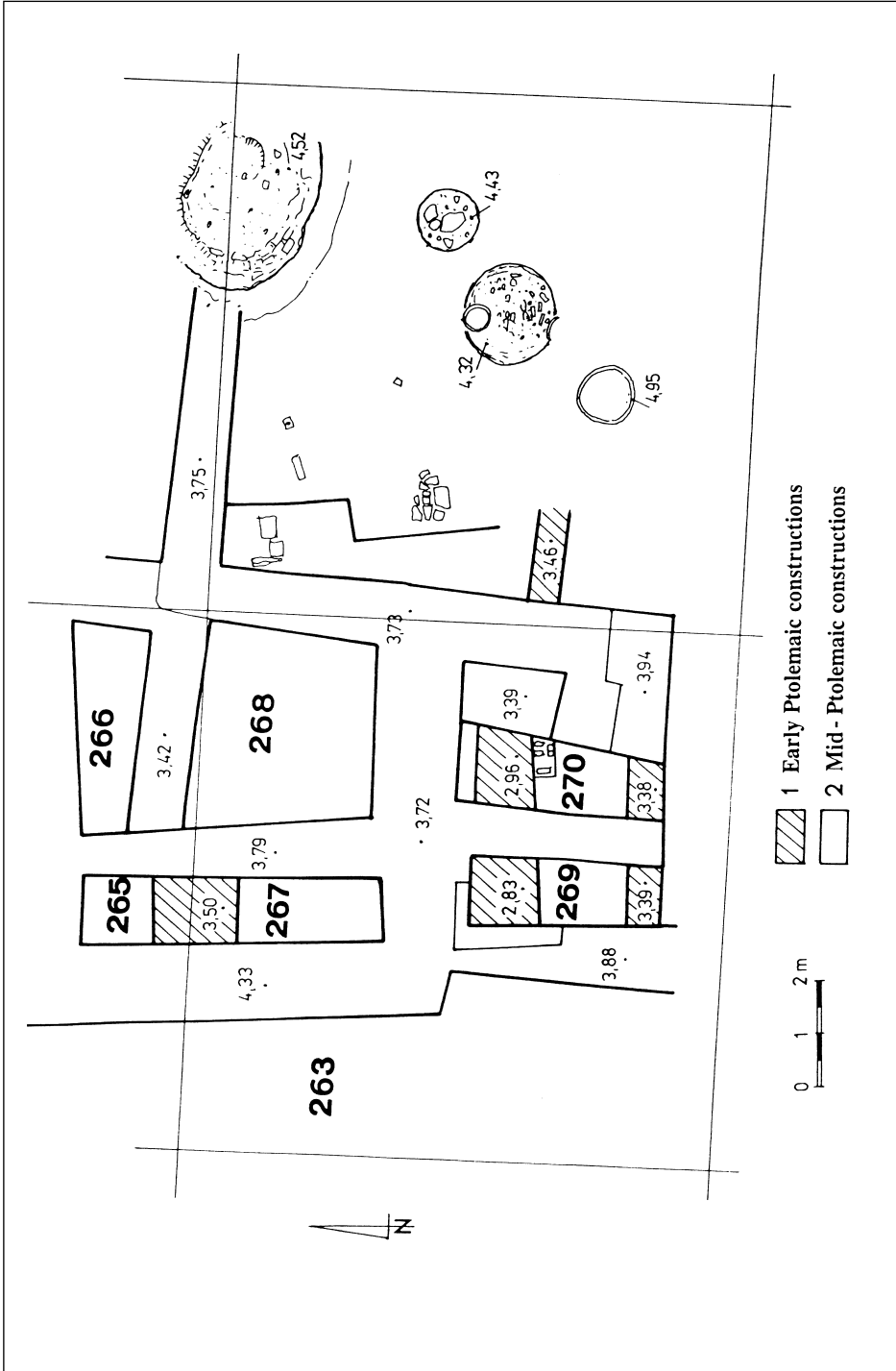


Fig. 1. Squares KKK and LLL
(Drawing M. Puzkarski)

EXCAVATIONS IN SQUARE KKK

The stratigraphy in square KKK is basically the same as that in adjacent sectors HHH and III, excavated in the previous seasons. A very thick, disturbed layer occurs, starting from 1.50 m in the center of the square, thinning out to 0.90 m at the sides. The layer contains mudbrick and baked brick rubble mixed with extensive archaeological material coming from different chronological periods, beginning with pottery sherds dated to the 3rd-2nd century BC, both local and imported (e.g. lid of a Greek red-figured pyxis, examples of Eastern Sigillata A and many fragments of faience). Terracotta figurines and Hellenistic oil lamps, characterized by small lugs, short nozzles and round bodies (sometimes striped) appear frequently in this group. As was to be expected, small bowls with in- and outcurved rim, dated to Ptolemaic and Roman times, were found in this agglomeration. The chronological horizon of this layer ends in Moslem times. Also originating from this stratum are stone blocks inscribed with now fragmentary lines of hieroglyphs in sunken relief, as well as blocks with circular mortises, which must have served as door sockets. All of the blocks were assembled presumably for burning lime in the nearby kilns. Some stamped amphora handles inscribed in Greek and Latin were also found in this stratum. All the coins discovered here were issues of Ptolemy VI, except for one of Ptolemy VIII. To judge by the evidence, the layer was disturbed by the *sebakhin*, farmers in search of fertile soil, or else by robbers in search of antiquities. Among the objects found in this layer one should mention the upper part of an ampulla in the shape of Eros with spread wings; an incense altar of limestone; faience amulets decorated with the

head of the god Bes on one side and the eye of Horus on the other. Also present were the heads of men and women crowned with wreaths of flowers and several terracotta heads of Harpokrates bearing a floral wreath and two lotus buds. There was also a standing figure of this god with an attribute – a small loaf of bread with floral decoration. Equally noteworthy are the small elegant jugs with relief decoration consisting of a variety of leaves. The pottery found in this stratum includes various types of pots characterized by thick, coarse walls and blackened bottoms, as well as flat plates made of pure, very fine and well fired clay. From the same assemblage come pieces of stone plates worked in granite or basalt.

Undisturbed archaeological layers were recorded underneath and dated on the grounds of evidence provided by coins, stamped amphora handles and pottery. Excavations revealed three mudbrick walls running N-S through square KKK (*Fig. 1*). Together with three other walls of an E-W orientation, they close off four rooms. The level of this architecture corresponds to that of similar structures in neighboring squares, dated there to the Middle Ptolemaic period (2nd century BC). In the large room 268, situated in the N-E part of the square, a threshing floor was found at 0.85 cm below the preserved top of Middle Ptolemaic walls. Three other very small units seem to have been cellars. One of them (room 267) yielded a terracotta figure, 41 cm high, of the god Bes. Of very fine execution, the red-painted statuette shows the god standing, strangling a snake with his left hand and holding a sword in his right. This type of flat-backed statuette made in a single mold belongs to an Early Ptolemaic group of Bes

representations. Dated by two coins of Ptolemy II, this terracotta resembles a figurine that was found attached face-down to a mudbrick that had been laid in an early 3rd century BC wall, next to a private bath discovered last year in the abutting square HHH.²⁾

A narrow passage, oriented E-W, cuts through this cellar. It is visible in the two walls closing the cellar, where the mudbrick courses had been broken to form a free space that was later blocked with soil.

A big, well-preserved jar was set in one of the Middle Ptolemaic walls. It is painted with a typical 2nd century BC floral ornament. Coming from this layer are two beautifully executed terracotta heads of dwarfs that were issued from the

same mold, as well as a figurine of a naked man holding a Dionysiac lagynos, the figurine entirely Greek in style. Another object of high quality is a terracotta head of another dwarf – a good example of Alexandrian grotesque (*Fig. 2*).

The stratigraphy revealed in the two other cellars turned out to be very strange indeed. Room 269, recorded at the depth of 1.35 m below the top of a Middle Ptolemaic wall, was well dated by coins of Ptolemy II and corresponded to an early 3rd century BC level. The other cellar, room 270, found at the same depth (1.40 m), yielded a large deposit of fragmentary terracotta figurines, which were dated by a coin of Ptolemy V to the beginning of the 2nd century BC.



*Fig. 2. Head of a dwarf (front and side view), TA 99/57
(Photo M. Jawornicki)*

²⁾ Cf. H. Szymańska, *PAM X, Reports 1998* (1999), 75.

This deposit included statuettes of Isis-Aphrodite, broken and discarded in antiquity. Five of these figurines were reconstructed. Two are interpreted as "concubines", that is, frontal representations of a standing naked goddess with straight legs and arms, and head crowned with two wreaths of flowers decorated with long ribbons and ivy leaves. A long filament across the breast of one of these two figurines protects her nudity against the evil eye. The other one carries a tall kalathos on her head. Two other terracottas of the Isis-Aphrodite *anasyromenai* type (Fig. 3) lift chitons to expose their genitalia in front of a newborn Apis bull, to believe the testimony of Diodorus Siculus (I, 85). All of them are thought to be connected with a fertility cult. Traces of polychromy are still preserved on the surface of several fragments. A terracotta head of Dionysos found among the broken pieces is noteworthy. The god is depicted as an old man with thick beard and mustache, crowned with vine leaves. It recalls some of the best Tell Atrib findings connected with the Dionysiac thiasos.

Between rooms 265 and 267, as well as on the two edges of the cellars 269 and 270, walls with an E-W orientation were discovered, running under the Middle Ptolemaic walls. The date of the first one, based on finds of coins and pottery, could be fixed in the end of the 3rd and the beginning of the 2nd century BC. The other walls, lying 70 cm below, are dated by two coins of Ptolemy II to the first half of the 3rd century BC. In some of the walls the bond is quite distinct. The size of the mudbricks used in their construction, varying between 31 x 12 x 16 and 31 x 16 x 9 cm, is characteristic of Early Ptolemaic domestic architecture. In the lowest stratum in room 270 a fine faience jar was brought to light.



Fig. 3. Terracotta statuette of Isis-Aphrodite *anasyromene*. H. 24 cm
(Drawing M. Puzzkarski)

EXCAVATIONS IN SQUARE LLL

The layer of debris in square LLL reached the same depth as that in the abutting sector KKK, except for the eastern part, where the disturbed stratum thinned out toward the east. As in square KKK, the pottery assemblage in LLL includes many sherds from different periods starting with the 3rd century BC and ending in Islamic times. Deserving mention is a complete ampulla decorated with palmettes.

Remains of three kilns occupied this part of the sector (cf. *Fig. 1*). The largest one, 1.80 m in diameter, had its floor made of red-fired bricks and stones. To judge by the evidence of two coins of Ptolemy VI, found directly under its floor, it could be dated to the 2nd-1st century BC.³⁾ The layers explored under the kiln, stratum by stratum, revealed all the periods of settlement in this sector in chronological order. Coming from here is an amphora of local production, as well as big and small jars, some of them painted with a simple decoration of red stripes. Hellenistic lamps, both local and imported, were also found in this assemblage. Next to the kiln, on its southern side, a large basin for kneading clay was discovered. Made of very coarse

clay, it is round in shape and has very thick walls. Remains of two other kilns were uncovered side by side toward the north of the square. A thin layer of ashes is visible under one of the kilns and additionally in the abutting eastern wall of the trench. The basin and three kilns, as well as the finds from other kilns in the abutting square III prove that this area was a southern extension of the workshop district producing pottery in Late Ptolemaic times.

In its western end, square LLL reveals a stratigraphy that is completely different from both its eastern part and the neighboring sectors. At a depth of 1.20 m below the above-described kilns, an undisturbed archaeological layer appeared. The dating to the 3rd century BC, provided by a coin of Ptolemy IV, was confirmed by amphora sherds characteristic of this period. Immediately below this stratum two Palestinian amphorae were found; one of these, covered with a stone, was used presumably as a storage vessel. Amphorae of this kind are rare from Tell Atrib, but the few that have been discovered all come from layers dated to the end of the 4th and the beginning of the 3rd century BC.

³⁾ Coins of Ptolemy VI remained exceptionally long in circulation, cf. A. Krzyżanowska, "Remarks on the coins of Ptolemy VI found in Egypt", *Notae Numismaticae* III/IV (Cracow 1999), 45-49.