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Tell Atrib, 1992

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TELL ATRIB, 1992

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A Polish-Egyptian archaeological mission continued rescue excavations at Tell Atrib (Benha, Lower Egypt) from 12 April until 20 June 1992.¹

Excavations were pursued in the northwestern part of the area adjoining the hill of Kom Sidi Yussuf on the south. This season five new squares (XX, YY, ZZ, AAA, and DDD), 10 x 10 m each, were explored. The trenches were located to the west, north and south of the Ptolemaic habitation quarter which extends west to the bath complex dating from the reign of Ptolemy VI and the second half of the 2nd century BC. The northwestern part of the excavated area includes trial pit I, explored in 1985, in which some remains of a monumental building had come to light.²

¹ Works were sponsored jointly by the Polish Centre of Archaeology in Cairo and the EAO. The mission included: Prof. Karol Myśliwiec (director), Dr. Barbara Ruszczyc, Dr. Aleksandra Krzyżanowska, Ms. Anna Południkiewicz and Mr. Piotr Mieliwodzki, archaeologists, Dr. Wojciech Kołataj, architect, Mr. Waldemar Jerke, photographer, and representatives of the Egyptian Antiquities Organization: Mr. Muhammad Abdel Haq, Mrs. Ola Farid Aba El-Dahab. Mrs. Nagah Abdallah Muhammad, Mr. Yahya Hassanein Farag, and Mr. Hassan Abdallah Ali Nada.

We would like to express our deep gratitude to the President of the Egyptian Antiquities Organization, Prof. Muhammad Ibrahim Bakr, and to the Director of the Zagazig Section of the EAO, Mr. Muhammad Abdel Haq, for their efficient help in organizing and completing our works during this campaign.

² K. Myśliwiec, T. Herbich, Polish archaeological activities at Tell Atrib in 1985, *The Archaeology of the Nile Delta – Problems and Priorities*, Amsterdam 1988, pp. 177-180, Fig. 2, Pl. 1b.

Excavation were also continued in two rooms which had been partly investigated in the previous campaign (room 165, where drilling in 1990 revealed several stone fragments lying together in a spot of a deeper stratum, suggesting the presence of a workshop, and room 163, adjoining the bath complex on the east).

Three phases of utilization and habitation were distinguished in the Ptolemaic Period. The upper stratum, containing a mixed Byzantine-Roman-Ptolemaic material in its surface layer, revealed some remains of Late Ptolemaic structures in its lower layer. The mud-brick walls in the middle stratum, corresponding to the second half of the 2nd century BC, are partly preserved up to a height of c. 1 m. They are built upon a thick layer of ashes and red rubble containing a great amount of pottery, terracotta figurines and oil lamps. The thickness of the layer varies and generally increases toward the west where it reaches 1 m. Its density and structure allowed us to amend a previous hypothesis according to which this layer had witnessed destruction caused by a war, presumably the Sixth Syrian War. In the light of the present discoveries it seems more probable that the layer is an accumulation of material removed from somewhere else in the process of leveling the area, which was previously occupied by pottery workshops and was now supposed to serve a new purpose. Considering the vicinity of the baths dating from this particular period, we are inclined to see in this rubble the displaced remains of the pottery kilns which had existed there previously. This would also explain the predomination of coins from the times of Ptolemy VI and his predecessor in our numismatic material coming from this context. Below the layer of ashes there are remains of

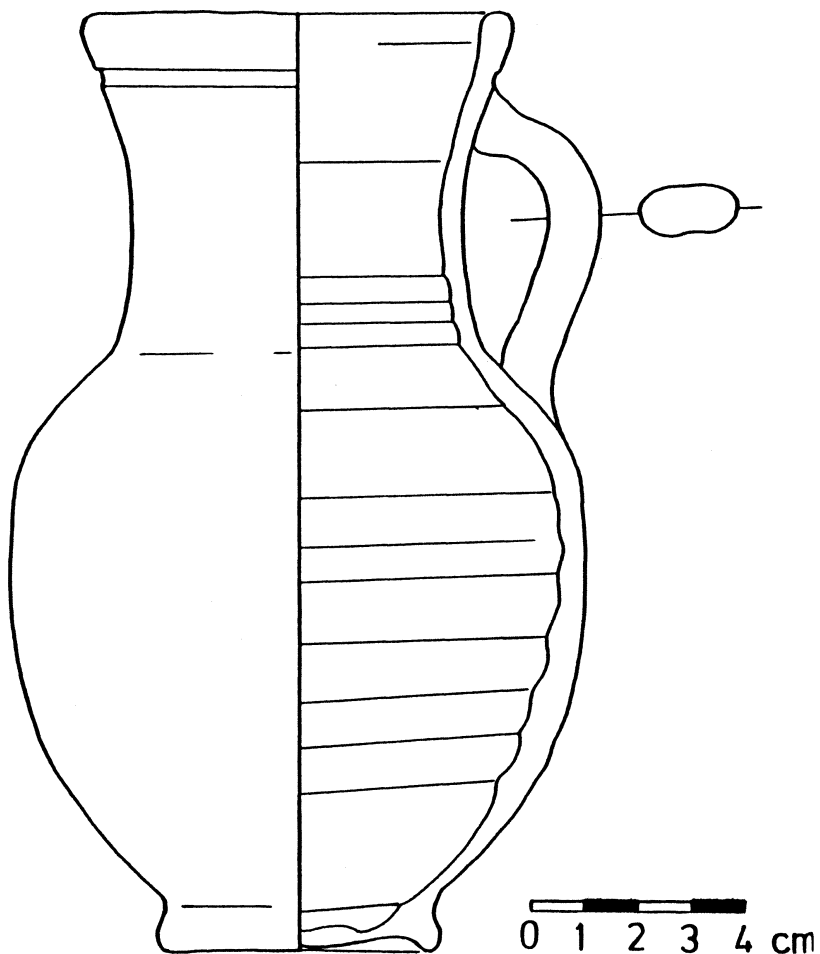


Fig. 1. Flask found beside a mid-Ptolemaic kiln in room 165.
Drawing A. Południkiewicz.

several mud-brick walls dating from the first half of the Ptolemaic Period, most frequently accompanied by the coins of Ptolemy II, III and IV.

Ceramic materials are particularly abundant and diversified in the mid-Ptolemaic stratum. Their greatest part comprises products of Egyptian, mainly local workshops. In the group of imported pottery there are many fragments of amphorae with stamped handles. Several fragments of terra sigillata, most frequently of Oriental origin, occur in the upper stratum,

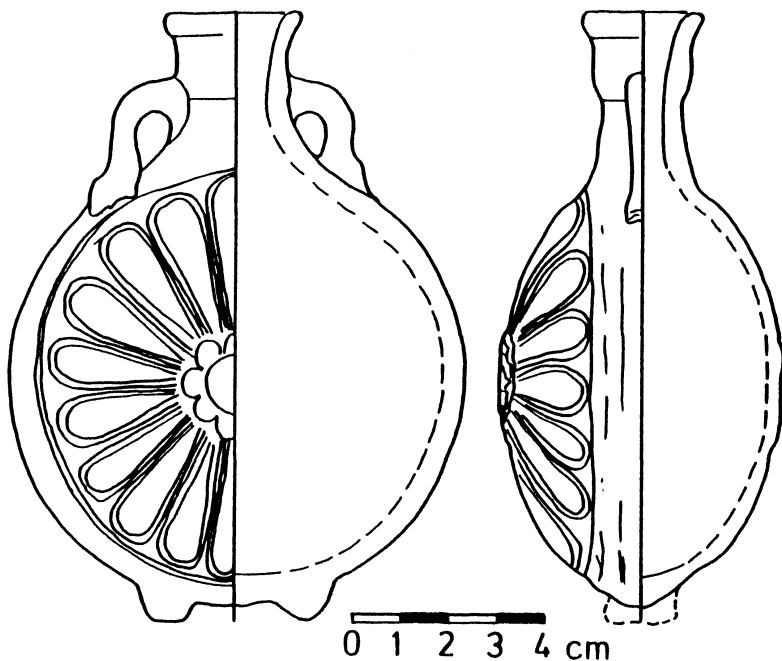


Fig. 2. Mid-Ptolemaic juglet from room 165. Drawing P. Mieliwodzki.

while the middle stratum contains various types of the fine Gnathia or West Slope Ware. The lowest, early Ptolemaic stratum has revealed a fragment of the Cales Ware imported from Italy, the first record of this type of pottery found at Tell Atrib. The fragment has the characteristic black varnish on the relief decoration.

The large group of local pottery also includes new types of vessels decorated with stamped reliefs. Of special interest is a neck fragment of a large jug or amphora with a particularly sophisticated decoration, depicting a frieze of winged Nike figures standing above a scene which represents a juvenile god with a radial crown (Harpocrates ?) seated on a thunderbolt between two eagles and two riders (Dioscuri ?). The shape of the eagles recalls the representations on early Ptolemaic coins.

Even more sophisticated is the decoration of a thin-walled vessel made of particularly fine yellowish-pink marl clay. It consists not only of several friezes and scenes in relief, but also of some figures in the round among which there is a representation of a bearded Heracles with leaves in his curled hair and a figure of a female divinity (Isis ?). The decoration in relief comprises, among other patterns, an erotic scene and a frieze of dolphins with a Cupid on each of them. Together with these fragments some pieces belonging to a similar, but irregularly and quickly formed vase were found. The vase must have served as a model for the final product, and indicates that also this kind of fine pottery was produced in Ptolemaic Athribis.

The terracotta figurines found during this campaign reveal a great variety concerning both subject and style. A type of Bes with a flat back and an elaborate relief on the front occurs frequently in the Early Ptolemaic strata. These figurines, made of a particularly coarse clay, are poorly fired. Representations

of Greek divinities in a purely Hellenistic style (e.g. Hermes), as well as various types of non-divine subjects (e.g. a youth with *causia* on the head) predominate in the upper level of these strata.

Two figurines from a mid-Ptolemaic context are particularly interesting from the iconographic point of view. One is a statuette of a naked female with a bowl in her hand, seated in a small basin which has the same shape as some of the basins unearthed in our bath complex. The other one is a group of two phallic animals, one of which appears to be a personification of a frog wearing a cuirass and holding a shield (a grotesque representation of the *batrachomiomachia* ?). The protruding belly of the first figurine brings to mind another type of terracotta found in a similar stratigraphic context. This is a representation of a naked woman seated with spread legs and pointing with her hand to her vagina. She wears a sophisticated hairdo, two chains crossing between her breasts and boots. The accentuation of the fertility aspects in the representations of women and of the phallic male figurines, as well as their association with the baths, also on the iconographic level, are an important suggestion for the interpretation of the mid-Ptolemaic red brick structures in Athribis. They could have served for the (ritual ?) baths of pregnant women or those who wished to become pregnant, and may have been connected with the cult of Isis as the goddess of fertility.

Among the numerous oil lamps there are two new types, one of which has a round discus without a burner, with two little handles attached on opposite sides and a decoration consisting of a multiple rosette pattern.

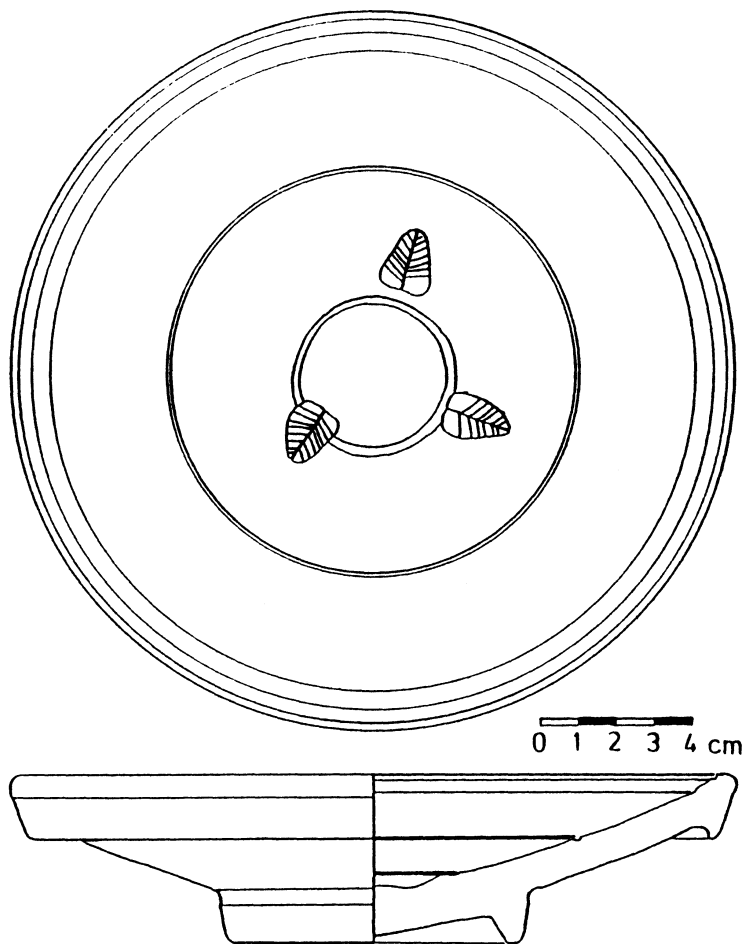


Fig. 3. Hellenistic plate with stamped decoration made in the local pottery workshops of Athribis (mid-Ptolemaic date, room 165). Drawing P. Mieliodzki.

Early Ptolemaic strata have been explored in room 165 where remains of pottery kilns and the lower part of a huge jar standing beside the kilns were unearthed. However, no traces of the alleged workshop connected with the previously discovered stone fragments have been found. The mid-Ptolemaic stratum in this room contained remains of a later pottery kiln in the vicinity of which a black-fired circular flask with a rosette pattern stamped on both sides was found. Its surface bears several irregular impressions resulting from contact with other objects during the process of firing. The flask enriches our knowledge of the local workshops¹ ceramic production.

The exploration of the mid-Ptolemaic strata in room 163 brought to light further fragments of red-brick structures constituting an extension of the bath complex to the east. Work will be continued in the next season.