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Tell Atrib: Excavations 1995

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TELL ATRIB

EXCAVATIONS 1995

Karol Myśliwiec

The Polish-Egyptian rescue excavations at Tell Atrib were carried out between 19 September and 19 November 1995.¹ The work was concentrated in the southwestern part of the area which is adjacent to the Kom Sidi Yusuf necropolis on the south; the remains of a town from the Ptolemaic period were discovered here in previous years. During the current season two squares (EEE and III), each 10 x 10 m, were explored from ground surface down to a depth of almost 3 m. Also the trench with remains of public baths from the times of Ptolemy VI (squares GG and MM) was extended toward the east and test trenches in the northwestern part of the previously explored area were excavated a further 1 m down (squares XX, WW, ZZ and AAA) in order to continue investigations of the layer underlying the mud-brick walls from the mid 2nd century BC and containing a rich deposit of ceramic material from the leveled furnaces of earlier date. The unusually low water table during the present season made the described work possible.

¹ Members of the Mission: Prof. Karol Myśliwiec (director), Dr. Barbara Ruszczyc, Dr. Aleksandra Krzyżanowska, Dr. Hanna Szymańska, Mrs. Anna Południkiewicz, Mr. Piotr Mieliodzki, Mr. Marek Puzkarski, archaeologists; Mr. Fabian Welc, student of archaeology; Dr. Wojciech Kołataj, architect, Mr. Andrzej Ring, photographer, and the following inspectors and conservators representing the Supreme Council for Egyptian Antiquities, Benha branch: Mrs. Moattammeda Bakr Said, Mr. Gamal Mohammed Musallem, Mr. Fawzi El Barbari, Mrs. Hamdiya Zaki Shaaban, Miss Entasar Hassanein, Mr. Ayman Ibrahim Abdel Fakil and Mohammed Rageb. We wish to extend our deepest gratitude to the Supreme Council for Egyptian Antiquities for the help and cooperation in bringing the work of the Mission to a successful end. The Mission is sponsored by the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of Warsaw University and the Egyptian Supreme Council for Antiquities

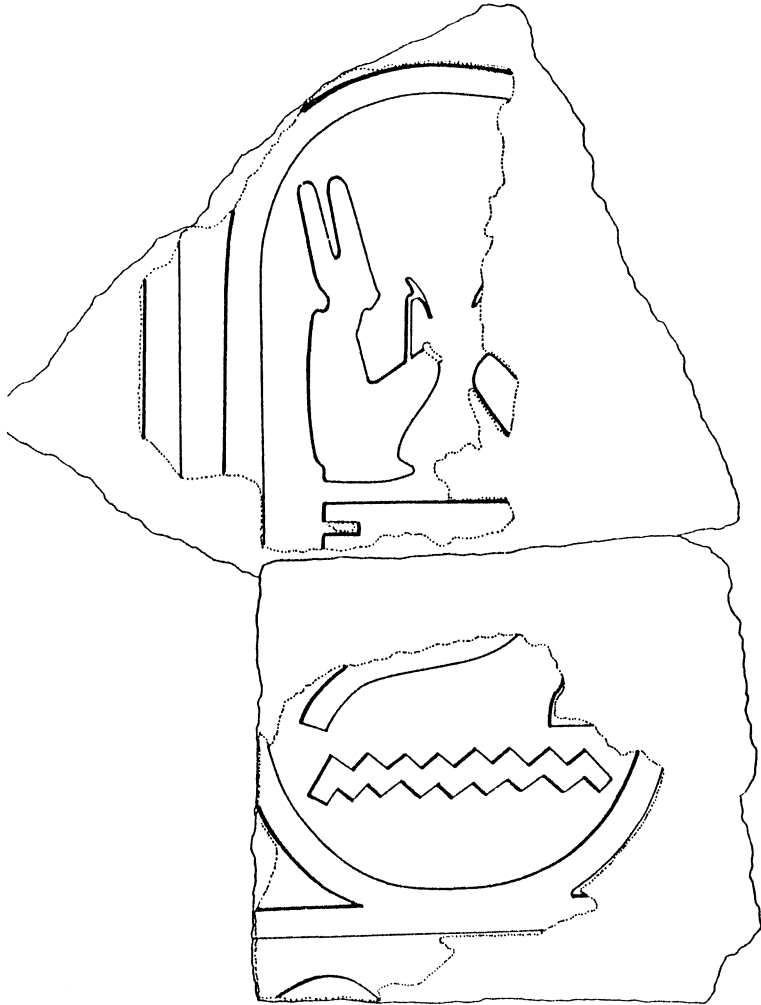


Fig. 1. Cartouche with the throne name of Alexander the Great,
Philip Arrhidaeus or Ptolemy I Soter. Limestone.
Drawing M. Puszkarski.

Several layers of mud-brick walls were explored in squares EEE and III, under a mixed layer containing artifacts of different date, from Ptolemaic times to the Moslem Middle Ages (glazed Arab wares). The walls were found to correspond to the period from the second half of the 4th to the mid 2nd century BC; the dating was provided by coins of Ptolemy I to VI, imported amphora stamps and abundant locally produced pottery wares. The presence of a large pottery furnace with about 140 identical cylindrical cups inside it, as well as traces of smaller furnaces and layers of ash containing numerous storage vessels and amphoras of large size indicate that the rooms are a continuation of the workshop district discovered in previous excavation campaigns.

The layer corresponding to the 2nd century BC is the richest in finds; it corresponds to the period in which the public baths, located somewhat to the east, were in operation. The rich pottery assemblage representing a local production is distinguished by a deposit of flasks decorated with impressed rosettes on either side. Fired either red or black, the bottles differ in the size and shape of the relief ornament. Of the lamps from this layer, the most interesting pieces have two solid handles with one shaped like a dolphin.

The terracotta production of the period is represented by especially frequent and iconographically differentiated images of Harpocrates, as well as fragments of juglets in the shape of Isis-Aphrodite with a cylindrical neck set atop the goddess' head. The coins found in this layer are almost exclusively those of Ptolemy VI, but they continued in use after the end of the reign of this ruler.

The next layer is dated by large well-preserved coins of Ptolemy IV. It also yielded several fragments of richly decorated faience vessels, as well as faience amulets. These finds confirm the hypothesis that faience objects were produced locally in the late 3rd

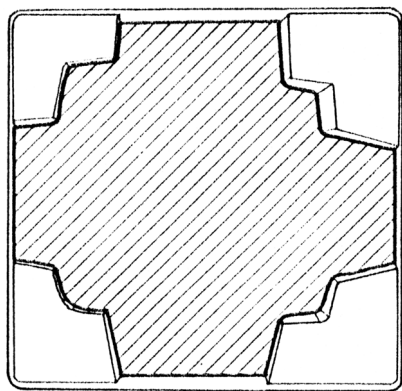
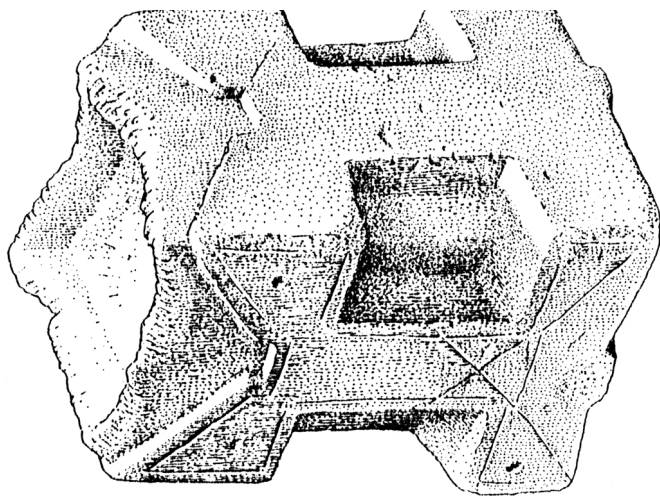
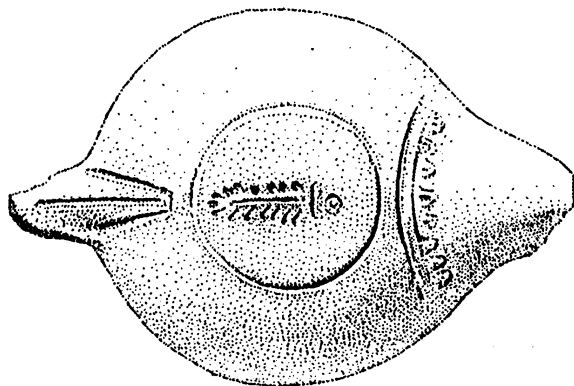
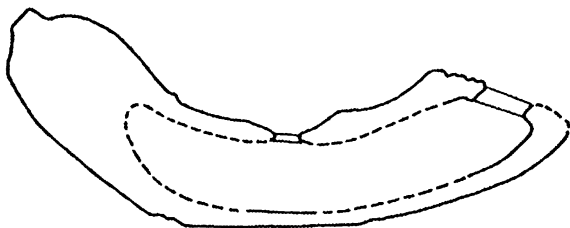
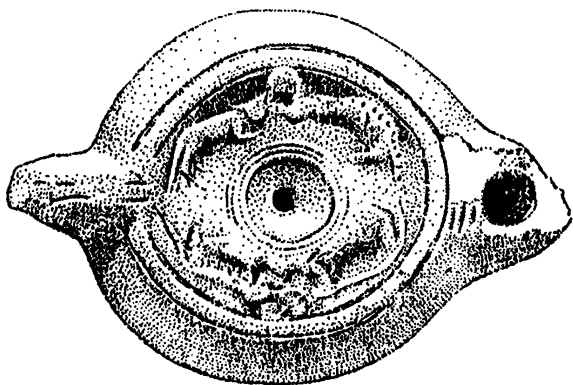


Fig. 2. Limestone votive altar found in the public baths from the reign of Ptolemy VI.
Drawing M. Puzskarski.

century BC. Among the amulets there is an ithyphallic figure of Amun-Min and a number of tesserae with relief representations of Bes on one side and the udjad eye on the other. The most original fragment of faience vessel is an appliqué showing an erotic scene in relief. Figures of a similar function made of materials other than faience also occur, e.g. a bronze figurine of Osiris. The significant Egyptian presence in the beliefs of the local population at the turn of the 3rd century BC is confirmed by the presence of a miniature stele of the "Horus-on-crocodile" type, made of schist. Terracotta figurines from the earlier Ptolemaic layers include numerous Bes representations, characterized by a flat rendering of the back. The layer corresponding to the first half of the 3rd century BC contained a number of bronze coins of Ptolemy II and silver coins found for the first time in Tell Atrib. The two silver coins turned out to be tetradrachmae bearing the image of Ptolemy I; one comes from Soter's times, the other from the reign of Philadelphos. The coins were found not far from the spot where a limestone head of one of the first Ptolemies was discovered during the last season. Its attribution to Philadelphos, based on style and stratigraphy, now finds confirmation in the coin evidence. The deepest layer uncovered, which is 0.50 m thick in places, lacks coins, but contains instead pottery sherds typical of the Late Dynastic and Early Ptolemaic periods: Amphoras with cylindrical bodies spreading slightly toward the bottom and two arched handles set just under the angular edge of the flat upper part. The amphoras are made of a light (pinkish, yellowish or greenish) marl clay and are usually found in context with thick-walled vessels of Nile silt covered frequently with a polished dark-red slip on the outside. The remains of a (pottery?) furnace discovered in this layer yielded two terracottas representing Macedonian horse riders in causia headdresses and wind-blown *chlamidae* on the shoulders. The discoveries confirm the assumption that the suburbs of ancient Athribis, which have been uncovered in the Polish-Egyptian excavations, were settled by soldiers of Alexander the Great who first took over the area of a temple,



*Fig. 3a-c. Terracotta lamp from the 4th century AD with representation of animal combat.
Drawing M. Puzkarski.*

presumably that of Horus Chenti Cheti, and who were later removed from there by Djet-Hor as recorded in the inscription on the statue of this dignitary.

Together with the figurines of Macedonian soldiers, there was a terracotta representation of a female with prominent pubes and spread legs (pseudo-Baubo). It is one of the figures of an erotic nature found in the layer from the turn of the Dynastic period. Another figurine, primitive in style and made of coarse-grained, badly fired clay, shows a reclining man with a gigantic phallus and female(?) breasts (hermaphrodite?). Similar clay was used for a figurine of a woman presumably shown giving birth in a sitting position. The series of ex-vota connected with a fertility cult, featuring clearly emphasized erotic aspects, is supplemented by two objects of limestone: A stele with a typical relief representation of a standing naked woman and a figurine showing a crouching man with large phallus. The style and iconography of these representations reveal influences that are both Old Egyptian and Greek. The figurines are proof that already at the beginning of the Ptolemaic period there was a developed local fertility cult which could have served as grounds for a cult of Dionysos with its specific character emphasizing the erotic aspects of this mythical progenitor of the Ptolemaic dynasty. Evidence of this is to be observed in the local terracotta production and relief vessel decorations from the 2nd century B.C.

An interesting object with hieroglyphic inscription was discovered in the deepest layer that was excavated this year and found to correspond to the second half of the 4th century BC. It is a seal of limestone with the flat side in the form of a simplified cartouche crowned with two feathers from the crown of Osiris. The cartouche contains a number of hieroglyphic signs carved in sunk relief; the signs can be read as the name of a dead person who was presumably a member of the royal family. A seal of this shape could have served to stamp bricks used to build the tomb or sanctu-

ary of a personage from the highest echelons of the social hierarchy.

Other fragments of hieroglyphic inscriptions in sunk relief have been preserved on pieces of limestone blocks found in the bottom part of the mixed layer in squares EEE and III. Some of these fragments contain royal titles as well as a cartouche with the throne name of Alexander the Great (*stp n R^c mrj Jmn*, Fig. 1). Both Philip Arrhidaeus and Ptolemy I Soter bore a similar throne name, but in the light of our newest discoveries it seems more probable that the blocks originated from a sanctuary erected here in the times of Alexander the Great. The building's localization remains unknown. Should this Early Ptolemaic temple have been situated on the spot occupied today by the tomb of Sidi Yusuf, then the public baths from the reign of Ptolemy VI, which obviously served a cultic role (*stibadion* for meetings of Dionysiac symposiasts?) would have constituted merely an extension.

This year's excavations in the eastern part of the baths, which lies under a wall of the Byzantine period and ceramic deposit of Roman times, have uncovered disturbed fragments of walls of fired brick covered with a thick layer of plaster. Two small limestone altars were found in relation to this wall. One of the altars, a typical "horned" type, is completely preserved (Fig. 2), the other apparently represents a piece of monumental architecture in miniature. The presence of these altars in the area of the baths confirms the cultic aspect of the entire bath complex.

The deep surface layer explored in squares EEE and III during the present season also contained a number of objects from the Roman period, including a lamp of the 2nd century AD featuring a discus decorated with an original scene of animal combat (Fig. 3). The presence of these objects is all the more valuable, because the Roman layer in this part of the ancient Athribis was destroyed completely, presumably by medieval diggers in search of gold.