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Tell Atrib: Excavations, 1998

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TELL ATRIB

EXCAVATIONS, 1998

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Polish-Egyptian rescue excavations at Tell Atrib were taken up again after a three-year interval¹ and lasted from September 19 until November 7, 1998.² Work was continued in the southwestern part of the Ptolemaic district abutting on the south the Moslem funerary monument on Kom Sidi Yusuf. The objective was to explore three squares, each 10 x 10 m (HHH, KKK and LLL), closing the area of excavations which was previously explored by a team directed by Prof. Dr. Karol Mysliwiec.³

The present campaign was devoted to the complete exploration of one of the squares in question (HHH). The surface layer of debris was removed from the area of square KKK and the balk between squares BBB, CCC, EEE and FFF, left after the campaign of 1994) was investigated and removed.

¹ Cf. *PAM VII, Reports 1995* (1996), pp. 53-60.

² Expedition members: Dr. Hanna Szymańska, director; Dr. Barbara Ruszczyc; Mrs. Anna Południkiewicz, Mr. Piotr Mieliwodzki, Mmes. Teresa Witkowska, Edyta Knapik, Sabina Grzegorzółka, Nina Willburger, Judith Bender, Mr. Mariusz Jucha, archaeologists; Messrs Marek Puzkarski, draftsman; Hubert Chudzio, photographer. The Supreme Council for Antiquities, Benha, was represented by Mrs. Mouthamed Bakr Abdoul Rahman, Messrs. Ali Shehata Elsayed Gad, Yehia Hasanein Farrag, Emad Abdoul Azeem Emam.

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³ Cf. *PAM I-VII, Reports 1988-1995* (1990-1996).

THE EXCAVATION

The stratigraphy in square HHH, which was explored to a depth of 2.90 m, that is, to the point at which ground water appeared making further work impossible, is no different in principle from what was discovered in the adjacent sectors.⁴ A very thick disturbed layer occurs here, from 1.10 to 1.20 m thick in the center of the square, thinning out to 0.90 m at the sides. It contains mud brick and baked brick rubble mixed with a rich archaeological assemblage from different chronological periods, beginning with pottery pieces typical of the 3rd-2nd century BC, both local and imported, mainly Gnathia ware, Hellenistic terracotta figurines and oil lamps. The chronological horizon of this layer ends in Moslem times. The only coins found here were issues of Ptolemy VI. To judge by the evidence, the disturbed layer is due to the *sebakhin* farmers in search of fertile soil, or else robbers in search of antiquities. Among the objects of high quality from this layer one should mention a terracotta New Comedy theater mask; its presence is confirmation for the thesis about the Greek origins of the population living in this area of the ancient city. Also worthy of attention are the imitation Greek vases, such as alabastrons and oinochoe, etc., elegant relief vessels [Fig. 1] and phallic figurines of faience [Fig. 2], which are typical of the finds from this district.

Underneath, undisturbed archaeological horizons were recorded and dated based on finds of coins and pottery. The square is divided by two mud-brick walls running E-W, found at a depth of 0.60 m below the ground surface; together with three other walls with an N-S orientation, they close off a central room. The architecture is at the level of similar structures in neighboring

squares, which were dated to the Middle Ptolemaic period (2nd century BC). At a depth of about 1.10 m, an undisturbed archaeological layer appeared dated by the coins of Ptolemy IV. The walls, which were in use in the Middle Ptolemaic period, were erected in the end of the 3rd century BC to judge by the archaeological evidence. Traces of a lime floor found at a depth of 1.50 m, by an E-W wall and a N-S wall joining it at right angles, testified to the room having been occupied at about the middle of the century. Two vessels were set in the floor in the corner of this space, next to a small lime kiln. The corresponding layer yielded large quantities of pottery from the late 3rd and early 2nd century BC, early Hellenistic oil lamps and an excel-

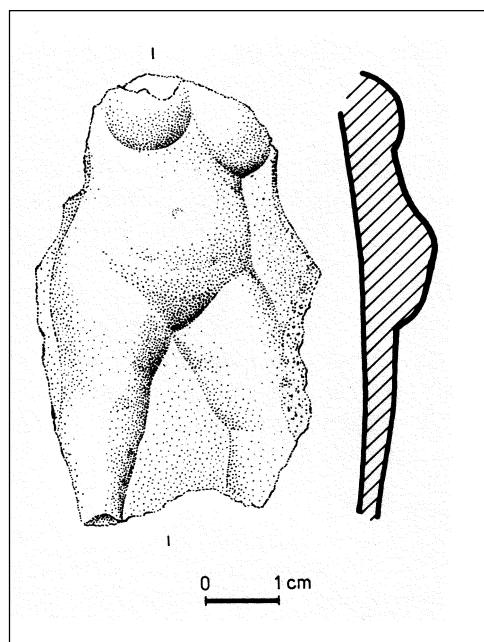


Fig. 1. Nude female figurine. Relief vessel fragment. From disturbed layer (Drawing M. Puzskarski)

⁴ Cf. PAM VII, Reports 1995 (1996), p. 55.

lently preserved Rhodian stamp with inscription, as well as numerous terracottas. Three figurines deserve special attention: a female head with the "melon" hairdo typical of the 3rd century BC, and two examples of the so-called Alexandrian grotesque, both of which belong to the Harpocrates circle. One of these shows a dwarf with the lock of youth, the other a priest with a mature face and a wreath decorated with lotus buds. Originating from this context are also pieces of a luxurious vessel made of marl clay, thin-walled and taking on the form of a figure of Bes. On the level of the floor, a figure of a sitting Harpocrates was discovered holding a nou vessel under his arm; another find was a head of Tyche in a *corona muralis*. The rich archaeological assemblage from immediately under this floor consisted of vessels with plastic decoration, numerous faience beads with geometric ornament and a Baubo figurine-rattle.

The next layer, which is well-dated by coins of Ptolemy II to the first half of the 3rd century BC, was recorded at a depth of about 0.30 m under the described floor. Contemporary with it are two rows of superimposed Early Ptolemaic walls (the difference in depth is 0.25 m), preserved in the central part of the square and extending to the west and north [Fig. 3].

Coming from this layer are two objects which are of importance for the reconstruction of what this district was like. Between two walls with an E-W orientation, in the west end of the square, the ruins of a private bath were uncovered: a thin lime floor and part of a rectangular pool encased in a two-course baked brick wall on one side and stone blocks on two other sides. Debris of plastered baked bricks and stone blocks coming from the ruined building is gathered to the south of the pool. Opposite it there were two vessels set in the floor, presumably corresponding to the time in which the bath

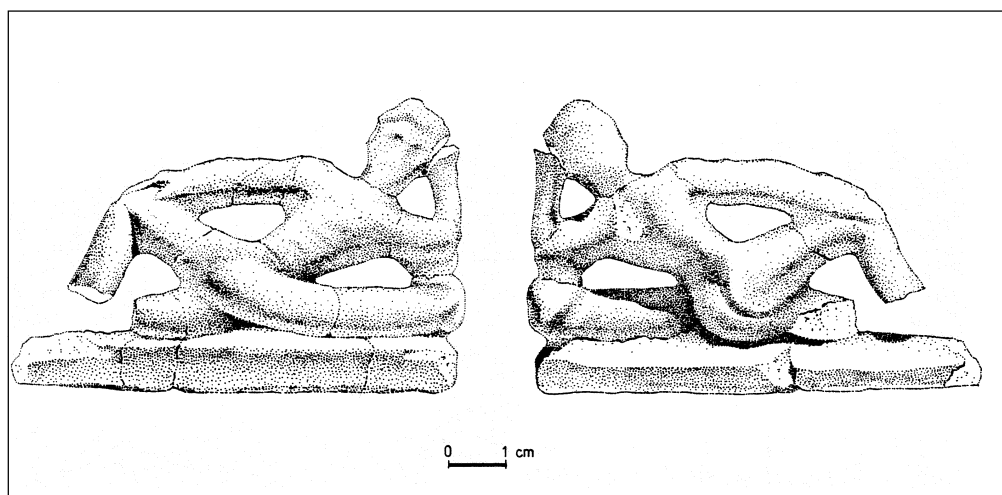


Fig. 2. Nude male phallic figurine in banqueting pose. 3rd century BC
(Drawing M. Puzkarski)

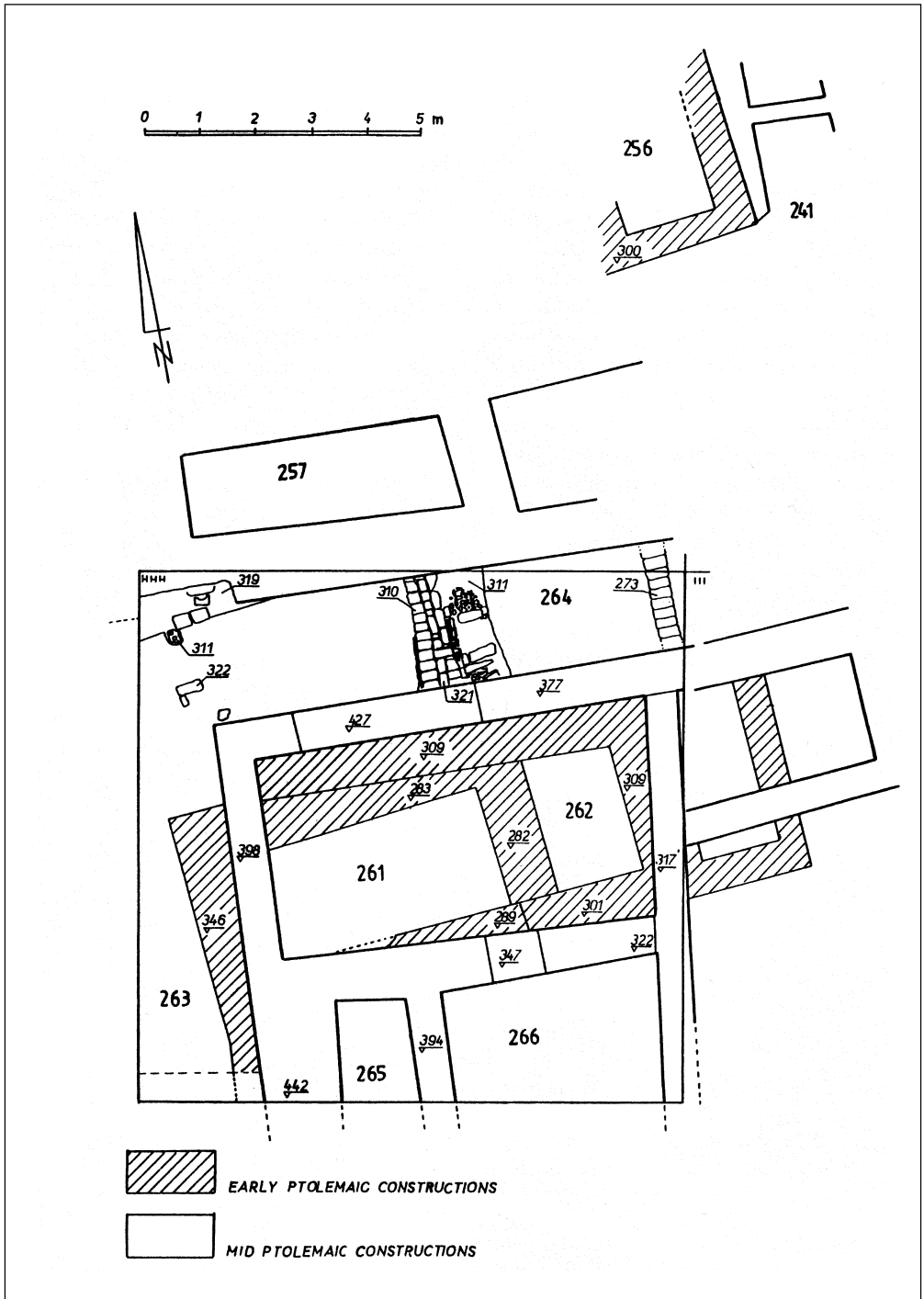


Fig. 3. Bathroom and entrance with preserved threshold in the northern part. Square HHH (Drawing M. Puzkarski, M. Jucha)

was in operation. Traces of the floor were visible also in a wall running perpendicular to this structure and extending to the northeast, that is, in the direction of the abutting square FFF where a similar bathing structure was discovered in a much better condition.⁵ Since the two floors occur at the same depth, it is possible that the newly discovered architecture in square HHH is part of a big bathing complex from the Early Ptolemaic period, which was destroyed by later building.

The second important element for the reconstruction of the housing plan of the district is a stone threshold situated next to the northwestern corner of the Early Ptolemaic mud-brick walls. The structure consists of three stone blocks laid side by side. One reveals a circular hole which must have been used to install a door. Overlying the threshold was a layer of pure soil, which blocked the entrance; it contained no archaeological evidence at all. Running above it was a later wall dated to Middle Ptolemaic times. The layer corresponding to the baths and threshold, some 0.40 m thick, has been dated by coins of Ptolemy II.

The terracottas from this archaeological context are also characteristic. Two figures depicting Macedonian soldiers dressed in short tunics, a *chlamys* and a *kausia* cap belong to the earliest terracottas produced in the Athribis ateliers. The first shows a standing elderly man; it was found together with a coin of Philadelphos in excellent condition. The other depicts a rider and was found 0.40 m below the first one. Statuettes of the same kind were discovered in the

abutting square III, in a layer dated to the early 3rd century BC.⁶

An interesting find is a figurine of Bes which constitutes an integral part of a mud brick in the northern face of an early 3rd-century wall running from the bath in an easterly direction. Of very fine execution, the red-painted figurine has a flat back; it was made from one mold and belongs to an Early Ptolemaic group of Bes representations.

An exceptionally low water table this year permitted the excavations to reach a depth of 2.90 m in the central part of the square, that is, 0.60 m below the level dated by coins of Ptolemy II. In this layer, inside room 261, there was a considerable concentration of potsherds: thick-walled vessels made of poorly levigated and poorly fired clay characterized by numerous organic and mineral inclusions, and a thick gray core. The terracottas found in this context are of much lesser quality, both in the artistic and technical sense, than the coroplastic products usually found in this district. Handmade and primitive, they represent animals as a rule, a pig or bird. The single human figurine that was found depicts a schematically represented horse rider. Similar terracottas and pottery and no coins, came from the nearby square III, explored in the previous season.⁷ Based on the form and morphological features, this assemblage can be dated to the end of the Dynastic period and the beginning of the rule of the Ptolemies.

The lowest-lying mud-brick wall was uncovered at a depth of 2.30 m below ground level; it was situated in the northeastern part of square HHH, in room 264.

⁵ Cf. *PAM VI, Reports 1994* (1995), pp. 44-46.

⁶ Cf. *PAM VII, Reports 1995* (1996), pp. 57-58.

⁷ Cf. *PAM VII, Reports 1995* (1996), pp. 57-58.

The considerable size of the bricks (40 x 20 x 15 cm) used in the construction of this wall is characteristic of Early Ptolemaic domestic architecture.

The investigation of the balk between squares BBB, CCC, EEE, and FFF, brought to light two mud-brick walls. One of these walls, which stands on a substructure of potsherds and baked bricks from the neighboring bath (in square EEE), corresponds to the Middle Ptolemaic period. In the debris of these bricks there was a coin issued during the regency of Cleopatra I (181-174 BC) with a representation of Isis on the obverse and an eagle on the reverse. The lower wall constitutes an extension of the structure from square EEE, dated to the early 3rd century BC.

The layer of debris removed from square KKK over the course of the campaign reached a depth of 1.10 m in the western end and 1.60 m in the eastern end. Similarly as in the abutting sector HHH, the pottery assemblage includes many sherds from different periods starting with the 3rd century BC and ending in Islamic times. Among the most important objects discovered here are stamped amphora handles from imported vessels, Hellenistic oil lamps, terracottas and two coins of Ptolemy VI. Two Middle Ptolemaic walls can be observed below the disturbed layer; they are an extension of the structures uncovered in the square explored this year. Square KKK and the abutting LLL will be investigated next year.