

TELL ATRIB 1993

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The Polish-Egyptian mission continued rescue excavations at Tell Atrib (suburb of Benha, lower Egypt) between 4 April and 17 June 1993.¹ The work was sponsored jointly by the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of Warsaw University in Cairo and by the Egyptian Antiquities Organization.

Excavations focused on uncovering the western part of the area south of Kom Sidi Yusuf. Consecutive strata in four squares (10 x 10 m), located along the western edge of the previously explored quarter of artisan and artistic workshops and excavated down to a depth of c. 3 m under the present surface, contained remains of the Ptolemaic period. In terms of stratigraphy, the newly excavated area can be divided into an undisturbed eastern part where Ptolemaic strata occurred at c. 40 cm below the present surface, under a relatively shallow layer of mixed material, and a western part where a deep layer of mixed materials, including sherds of glazed medieval pottery, bears witness to intense digging in search of treasures (hypothesis justified in the light of our present discoveries) or sebbakh for cultivation.

¹ The mission included: Prof. Karol Myśliwiec, Dr. Barbara Ruszczyc, Dr. Aleksandra Krzyżanowska, Dr. Hanna Szymańska, Dr. Tomasz Scholl, Ms. Anna Południkiewicz, Ms. Kamila Baturo, Mr. Piotr Mieliodzki, Mr. Krzysztof Domżański, Mr. Andrzej Ćwiek, archaeologists, Dr. Wojciech Kołataj and Mrs. Agnieszka Dobrowolska, architects and Mr. Waldemar Jerke, photographer. The Egyptian Antiquities Organization was represented by Mr. Muhammad Abdel Haq Rageb and Ms. Somaya Abu Senna.

We should like to express herewith our gratitude to the authorities of the EAO in Cairo, Zagazig and Benha for their friendly and efficient help in the completion of our tasks.

The pit contained brick, stone and pottery debris. In the lower layers there were many fragmentary limestone blocks from a building, temple or tomb located in the vicinity of the workshops. Some are decorated with hieroglyphic inscriptions and scenes carved in sunk relief, with traces of polychromy including red, blue and yellow. A well preserved rectangular slab with a relief representation of a shrine (possibly a model of a Ptolemaic door-stela) has been found in the same context. The group of limestone objects also comprises a model of a shrine with an incised proportion grid on its back side as well as a series of votive figurines and stelae. Particularly frequent are small stelae of a type occurring all over the site in Ptolemaic strata, decorated with a representation of a naked goddess standing inside a simple shrine. It seems likely that one of the local workshops grouped sculptors working primarily in limestone.

Numerous fragments of unfinished large vessels (e.g. basins, querns) made of hard stone (granite, quartzite etc.) testify to the presence of workshops which presumably made use of elements of monumental architecture from neighboring temples and tombs as raw material for this production. Fragments of columns and a huge stone sarcophagus were discovered in the lower layers of the fill and everything would suggest they are lying close to their original positions.

The stratum lying directly under the thick layer of rubble is dated by several coins of Ptolemy IV (second half of 3rd century BC). The rectangular rooms of a mud-brick structure in the northern part of the area yielded many objects of exceptional artistic quality, as well as human skeletons. One of these, completely crushed, was found lying under long limestone blocks from

a door jamb. Another one lay next to sherds of a huge amphora which he must have been carrying at the fatal moment. Other human bones found at the same level in various parts of the excavated area testify to a catastrophe, possibly an earthquake that surprised the inhabitants of Athribis towards the close of the 3rd century B.C.

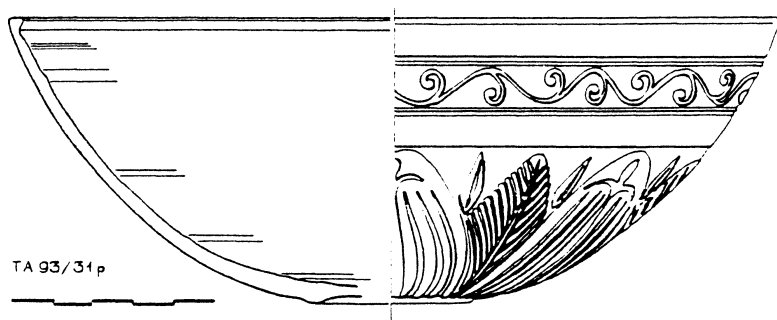


Fig. 1. Faience bowl made in Athribis, second half of 3rd century BC (TA 93/31p). Drawing K. Baturo.

Among the objects from the period a group of faience vessels found in Room 216 deserves particular attention. There are several bowls with rich relief decoration comprising concentric figural friezes (e.g. scenes of hunting fabulous animals) on the inner side and floral patterns on the outer side (Figs 1, 2), as well as phials and other small luxury vessels. A particularly striking feature of the bowls is the presence of conical supports made of unglazed quartz-like paste and attached to their bottom for the

purpose of stabilizing the vessels during the process of firing. This technical feature, as well as cracks and deformations of the body, prove that faience objects were also produced by the local potters as were probably votive figurines and amulets found in fragmentary condition in great quantities all over the excavated area.

Earlier excavations have shown these workshops to have specialized in producing a great variety of clay vessels, terracotta figurines, oil lamps and moulds for stamping bread. The local sculptors worked not only in various kinds of Egyptian stone, as mentioned above, but also in imported marble, which was used to make the statues of Aphrodite found in 1985.

A set of miniature pots of clay, doubtless models of similar large-size vessels occurring in our ceramic assemblage, was found together with faience objects in a stratum dating to the second half of the 3rd century BC. A mould of a grape-shaped conical juglet from a neighboring room adds to the series of technical devices used by the early Ptolemaic potters in Athribis.

Found in context with the faience wasters was a fine golden earring in the form of Eros attached to a capsular rosette adorned with filigree. Occurring as it did in the ruins of a workshop, directly underneath a deep stratum of rubble, this masterpiece of Ptolemaic jewelry suggests that other precious, perhaps golden, objects could have already been plundered from the area in past centuries.

Surprising artistic originality is presented by the terracotta figurines found together with this group of artifacts. There are heads of individuals with naturalistic facial features depicting, for example, a bearded Macedonian soldier, as well as caricatures and grotesque types, perhaps characters of Greek comedy.



Fig. 2. Decoration of the inner face of a faience bowl from Athribis (TA 93/31p).
Drawing K. Baturo.

A particularly important discovery for studies of Athribian pottery workshops is a large, well preserved pottery kiln. It is built of red bricks and has a circular shape. It is divided into eight lateral chambers around a central orifice in the top of the vault, which in turn is made of four courses of bricks with a diameter progressively larger toward the bottom. An air hole has been identified on the northern side of the kiln. Inside there were many sherds of large brown amphorae. The bottom parts of some amphorae were found standing in the lateral chambers, the size of which fitted precisely the dimensions of the vessels. Although fragments of other pots, as well as complete jugs and plates were also found inside the kiln, it seems likely that amphorae constituted the most important product fired in it. Both the stratigraphy of the kiln and the presence of a well preserved coin of Ptolemy V in the fill above the amphorae (*terminus ante quem*) indicate that the kiln was used in the second half of the 3rd century BC.

Several deposits of pottery were found in various parts of the Ptolemaic quarter. Of particular interest is the deposit discovered in the early Ptolemaic stratum in the eastern part of square JJJ where about 30 intentionally bottomless bowls were set one inside the other, beside a large cylindrical vessel stand. The function of these vessels remains an open question. They seem to have been intended as a not very tight ventilation shaft or each separately constituted air or light apertures for some interior. Beside prolific ceramic material of local origin, many fragments of imported pottery came to light. There are parts of large amphorae, often with stamped handles, as well as late Ptolemaic/early Roman terrasigillata (with some stamped patterns never recorded before) and black glazed pottery with painted or stamped decoration.

Supplementary excavations in the northern part of the Ptolemaic baths, which had partly been investigated during previous seasons, brought to light a floor consisting of two courses of red bricks set on a bed of pure sand and covered with thick plaster painted red. Several basins of various shape were sunk into this floor. The lower part of a rectangular basin came to light at the northern edge of the excavated sector. Further to the east parts of large, thick-walled basins made of black-fired local clay were found standing inside a room with mud-brick walls. Their relief decoration shows that their prototypes were made of metal. One of them is a hemispherical basin on a ring base and with horizontal handles modeled in high relief at the vessel's rim.

A striking feature of the baths is the absence of a system of canals in their foundations. This would indicate that rather than operating as a real *thermae*, it was a place for ritual purification consisting of pouring water on persons seated in small basins, as illustrated perhaps by one of the terracotta figurines found previously in the vicinity of the baths. An object probably connected with the baths is a small bottle in the shape of a naked youth represented squatting with a long towel across his left arm and a scraper at his right leg. There are some noticeably archaic elements in the iconography of the facial features and in the style of the long curled hairdo. The perfectly preserved bottle is made of a local clay fired black.

Continuing last year's explorations in the northwestern part of the excavated area, we focused on a thick layer of ashes dating from the mid 2nd century BC, which contained a dense conglomerate of ceramic objects. Some sherds of large vessels decorated with scenes in relief proved to be fragments of one or more *rythons*. Parts of other *rythons* were found in similarly dated

strata of Room 216 (mentioned above in connection with faience objects). Of particular interest is a thin-walled rython made of a fine white-fired clay. Its body is decorated with relief impressions and a group of figurines fixed onto its front. Sherds belonging to a model of similar form but less careful execution, found in this context, permit this particular ware to be attributed to the local Athribian workshops of the Ptolemaic period. Some of these rythons may have been models of sophisticated vessels to be cast in metal.