

## TELL ATRIB 1994

**Karol Myśliwiec**

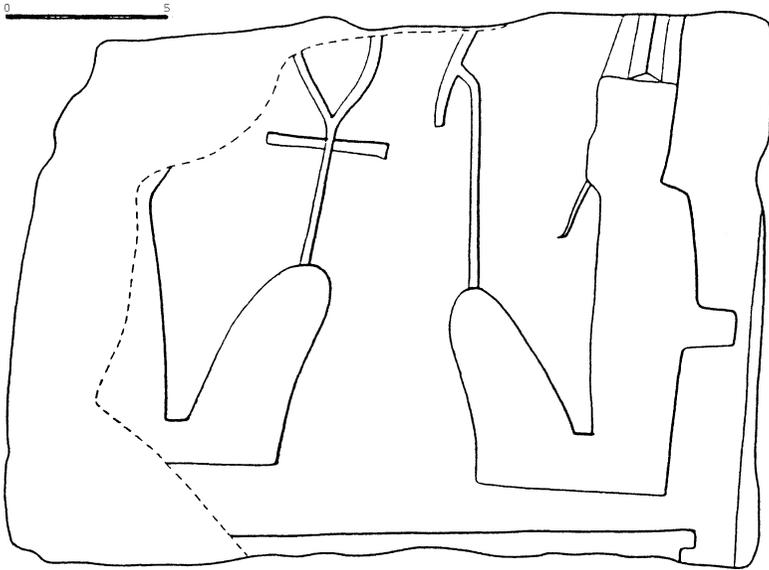
Polish-Egyptian rescue excavations at Tell Atrib (suburban district of Benha in the Nile Delta) were jointly organized by the Polish Center of Archaeology of Warsaw University in Cairo and the Egyptian Antiquities Organization between 2 April and 23 June 1994.<sup>1</sup>

The season was devoted to the exploration of the western part of the area located to the south of Kom Sidi Yusuf where several layers of Ptolemaic period architecture were discovered in preceding seasons. Work focused on excavating a new section of the workshop district and continuing the investigations of a public bath complex from the reign of Ptolemy VI.

In the workshop district, the explored area was extended to the northwest: three squares BBB, CCC and FFF, each 10 x 10 m, were excavated to a depth of 2.50 m below ground level and a fourth, EEE, down to c. 0.70 m below ground level. In terms of stratigraphy, the two northern squares (BBB and CCC) are different from the area directly adjacent to the south (squares FFF and EEE in the investigated sections). In the northern part, the mud-brick Ptolemaic structures are to be found already c. 0.50 m below ground level. To the south there appears a thick mixed layer which reaches 1.50 m below ground level; the layer accumulated in consequence of the destruction of Late Ptolemaic levels and contains a number of artifacts from later epochs,

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<sup>1</sup> The Mission was headed by Prof. Dr. Karol Myśliwiec and included: Dr. Barbara Ruszczyc, Dr. Aleksandra Krzyżanowska, Dr. Hanna Szymańska, Mrs. Anna Południkiewicz, Mr. Piotr Mieliwodzki, Mrs. Nina Willburger, archaeologist, Mr. Mirosław Czarnocki, architect, and Mr. Waldemar Jerke, photographer. Mrs. Somaya Abu Senna represented the Egyptian Antiquities Organization.



*Fig. 1. Fragment of a limestone block with inscription in sunk relief.  
Cartouche of a Ramesside King (Ramesses II ?).  
Drawing P. Mieliwodzki.*

mainly from the Roman period, but also from Byzantine and Arab times.

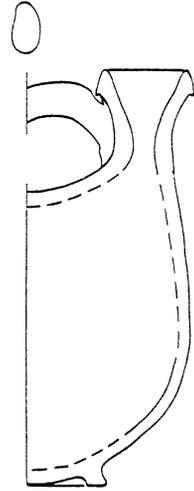
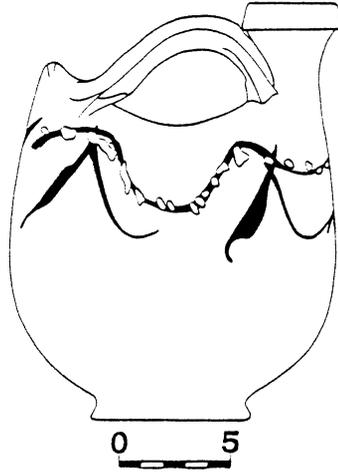
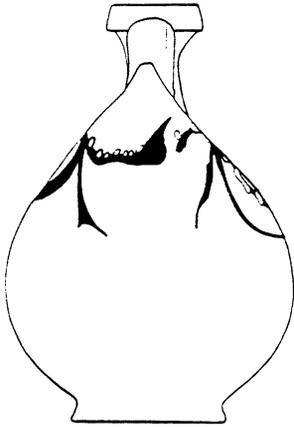
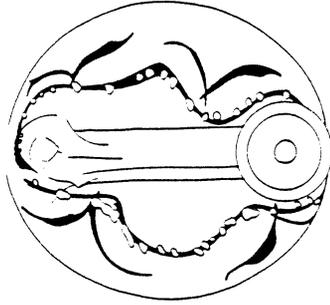
This mixed layer also yields limestone blocks of monumental structures of the Pharaonic period, including a block decorated with a hieroglyphic inscription in sunk relief; the middle part of a cartouche of one of the Ramessides, perhaps Ramesses II, has been preserved on it (Fig. 1). This block, like other undecorated limestone blocks found in this layer which presumably originated from a nearby temple, turned up in the workshop district presumably as material either to be reworked into stone vessels or to be transformed into lime in the nearby kilns.

In squares BBB and CCC, thick Late Ptolemaic walls have been preserved to a level several centimeters above the layer in which the coins of Ptolemy VI predominate. This layer also includes painted plaster fragments, which doubtless came from a bathing establishment erected nearby during the reign of this particular Ptolemy. Two coins deserve particular attention; both were found near the northeastern corner of square CCC. On the obverse of one of them (TA 94/34) there is an image of Isis identified as Cleopatra I; it refers to the short regency of this queen (181-174 BC) after the death of Ptolemy V. The other (TA 94/264) bears a representation of Heracles in a lion's skin on the obverse and was struck in the reign of Ptolemy VI. Close to these two coins (square UU) a terracotta figurine was discovered in 1991, representing a woman with a pair of children; the figurine was interpreted as a representation of Cleopatra I dressed as Isis, shown with her two sons, the future rulers of Egypt: Ptolemy VI and Ptolemy VIII.

In layers dated to the 2nd century BC ceramic deposits were discovered containing primarily small wine and oil containers, vessels for ointments and unguents, the latter including a few *askoi* of different shapes, produced in local workshops. *Askoi* were discovered in excavations at Athribis for the first time. Their concentration in this particular spot is conditioned by the character of the nearby structures, the baths in particular. Two of the *askoi* have been preserved whole. The one which is decorated with a painted floral ornament has a small ball inside. Vessels which are usually to be found together with these rare objects include *aryballoi*, *oinochoe*, *lagynoi*, *unguentaria* and all kinds of jugs and bottles of different shape and size.

A much smaller though unique group is constituted by sherds of thin-walled vessels with relief decoration, made usually of marl clay fired to a yellowish-light pink color, often covered with a yellow slip decorated with bands of red occasionally.

Fig. 2. *Askos with painted decoration,  
2nd century BC.  
Product of local workshops.  
Drawing P. Mieliwodzki*



Spherical cups with a high vertical rim are the most numerous in this group. The relief decoration consists of floral elements framing a series of figural scenes running around the body. Frontal representations of divinities sometimes appear among these figural scenes. On the best preserved vessel Serapis, Harpokrates and Isis are depicted among the divinities. Some of the fragments indicate that vessels of larger size and more elaborate shape also occurred. One of the fragments with a fine bust of Sarapis in high relief is characterized by a concave surface on the back of the relief indicating a larger vessel of untypical shape. It may have been a fragment of a richly decorated rhyton, similar to vessels evidenced in earlier seasons of the excavations. This suggestion is supported by a striking similarity in style and texture between the head of Sarapis and that of a bearded Dionysos from the protome of a rhyton discovered earlier in adjacent square DDD. A small fragment of a different vessel from this group, characterized by considerably thicker walls, bears a relief representation of a female head with a hairdo *en melon*, presumably a depiction of one of the Alexandrian queens.

It is noteworthy that in the layer dated to the first half of the Ptolemaic period several chips, sometimes of considerable size, of a soft greenish-yellow rock were found. This marl stone was definitely imported to Athribis from another region. Its presence confirms the production of elegant "marl clay" vessels in local workshops.

In the next layers which are dated to Middle Kingdom and Early Ptolemaic times, particularly in the southeastern part of square CCC, the remains of small round kilns were uncovered. Their construction as well as the nature of the finds from their vicinity indicate that the kilns were used to bake bead. The finds included two miniature clay models of bread loaves decorated with a stamp in the form of a rosette. One of these models was fired, the other was not. A few fragments of terracotta forms for

stamping bread come from the same context. One of these was distinguished by an original iconographic motif modeled in sunk relief on the flat round surface of the stamp. The representation depicts Dionysos-Sabasion with naked torso and long loose hair, shown among leaves and holding two animals in his outstretched hands.

Dionysiac themes present in reliefs decorating vessels and bread stamps, and particularly the terracotta votive figurines produced in local workshops, suggest that the currently explored Ptolemaic district of Athribis was connected with the local Dionysiac *thiasos*, one of the *thiasoi* the Greek papyri are so full of, especially in reference to the reign of Ptolemy IV. The exceptional popularity of wine, oil and scent containers and the presence of refined vessels of a ritual character in the same contexts would suggest that Dionysiac feasts took place in the area. Numerous lagynoi may be evidence of the lagynaia, another feast which accompanied festivities in honor of Dionysios.

This season's discoveries of terracottas include naturalistic portraits which are almost caricatures. Perhaps they are images of human types known from the comedies which unfailingly accompanied the cult of the Greek deity. An original terracotta showing a bird sitting on a bunch of grapes also finds a logical explanation in this context. Some of the figurines of Harpokrates take on Dionysiac expression because of a telling iconographic detail: foliage which encircles the head just below the Old Egyptian crown. The discoveries seem to indicate that in the provinces the cult of the dynastic god of the Ptolemies (celebrated in purely Greek form in Alexandria) was considerably permeated with Egyptian elements, revealing a much more syncretic approach than in the metropolis. In the case of Athribis, the symbiosis concerned deities worshipped there for centuries: Osiris, Isis and the child Horus, whose assimilation with Greek divinities in the mythological sense was particularly simple. Countless figurines of Isis-Aphrodite with bared pubic regions as well as images of Harpokrates occurring

in great abundance and iconographic variety, and almost always combining Greek and Egyptian elements, finally the phallic character of male figurines whether dressed in Greek robes or in typically Old Egyptian ones (e.g. Bes), testify to an assimilation of Hellenic and Pharaonic fertility cults for the purpose of the common people who must have differed ethnically from the population of Alexandria. There were apparently more Hellenized Egyptians in this region living alongside the Greeks to whom Egyptian tradition was not totally foreign.

It cannot be excluded that the local workshops also produced elaborate faience vessels for the needs of the Dionysiac cult. Numerous pieces including workshop discards with supports under the base were uncovered during the present campaign, particularly in layers from the turn of the 3rd century BC. The same layers contained fragments of monumental stone architecture, e.g. a large fragment of a granite column lying in the southeastern corner of square FFF. These fragments presumably found themselves in the workshop district as material for the production of vessels and small basins used primarily in the nearby baths.

The southern part of the explored area (square FFF) provided the most surprising finds. Under an exceptionally thick mixed layer, reaching over 1.50 m below ground level, mud-brick walls were discovered, preserved in the lowermost courses. At this level the coins were all of Ptolemy II to IV. In the bottom part of the layer two large pottery deposits were discovered. One contained an assemblage which unquestionably served bathing purposes: small vessels used to draw water, bottles for olive oil, ointments or unguents, a container with a strainer included. Miniature amphoras repeating shapes known from Tell Atrib in much larger size were found in the deposit; obviously they must have served as models for the amphoras produced in local workshops. Next to the deposit there was a two-handled pot found standing, characterized by a globular body, rounded bottom and surface

finish (oblique parallel grooves left by a sharp instrument); these features betray a pottery workshop from the Late Dynastic or very early Ptolemaic period.

Beneath the deposit of bath-related vessels there was another deposit made up of the bottom part of a number of large pots with rounded bottoms. Inside the largest of the pots there were fragments of four terracottas representing a naked female of standing "concubine" type with arms hanging loosely along the body. An analysis of these figurines throws light on the production technique employed in the local workshops. One of the figurines lacking the bottom part of the legs consists of several fragments which were modeled and fired separately. Another figurine has a compact mass of clay forming its bottom unlike the usual empty forms so characteristic of the majority of Egyptian terracottas. The proportions and shape of the third figurine recall the Greek *kuros* statues from a few hundred years back, indicating that the local potters had the opportunity to draw upon Archaic sources of inspiration.

The pot with terracottas lay directly upon a thick layer of plaster which turned out to be the floor of a private bath. The bottom parts of this installation were excellently preserved. The floor filled a small rectangular room with three different adjoining pools (Fig. 3). The middle pool, which was semi-oval in shape, was located between two oval pools of different size. The semi-oval pool is known from baths dated to the times of Ptolemy VI. The walls of the pools were of mud brick faced with a thick layer of plaster. Adjacent to the pools on the north there was a small furnace. Next to the eastern wall of the room an exit was left leading to a channel made of pipes of oval section set one into the other. The channel led straight to a large cylindrical vessel sunk into the ground a few meters further on, at the eastern end of the channel. The fall of the floor and pipe channel toward the east determines the function of this installation as a water

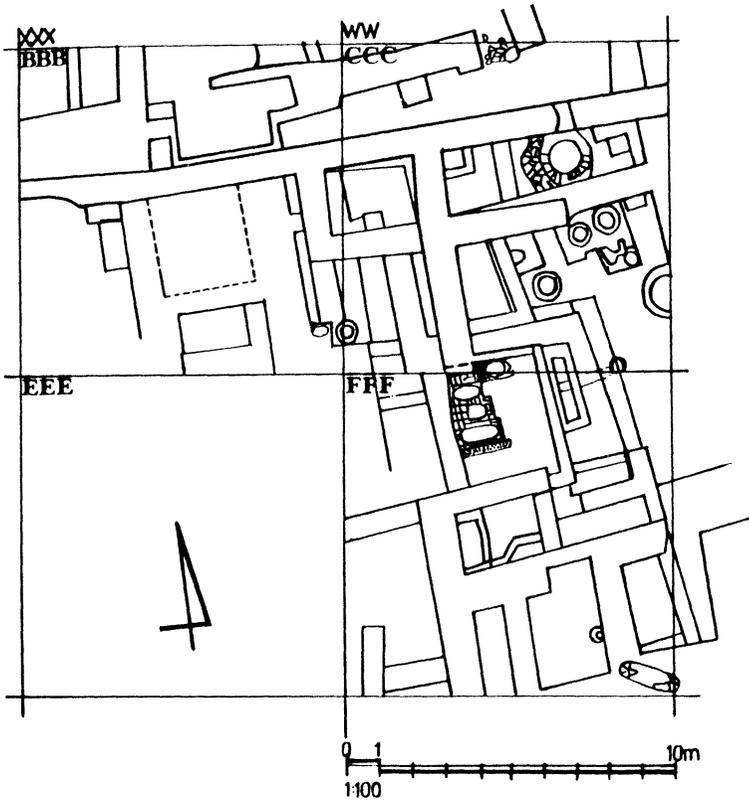


Fig. 3. Private bath in the western sector of the Ptolemaic quarter.  
 Beginning of the 3rd century BC.  
 Drawing M. Czarnocki.

disposal system. It can be assumed that clean water was supplied in large containers and small bowls were used to pour water on the bodies of the bathers. Thousands of these small bowls were found in the Ptolemaic layers at Athribis. The function of these bowls is indicated by a terracotta discovered earlier, depicting a naked woman sitting in a semi-oval tub and holding such a bowl in her hands.

The floor of this bath is completely different from the footing of the baths from the times of Ptolemy VI located a little further to the east. In the later baths the plaster is laid on two courses of fired brick set on a layer of clean sand. The earlier bath has the plaster laid directly on the ground which was not even leveled for the purpose. The thickness of the floor is thus uneven, but on the whole it is thicker than the plaster covering the bricks in the later baths. Another technical difference is that in the Early Ptolemaic bath the plaster was reinforced with a considerable number of small stones mixed into the mass, recalling a kind of cement where the stones are joined by a lime mortar.

Taking into account the stratigraphy – the early bath is located in the lowermost of the explored layers – and the complete absence of coins on the floor of the baths, the structure should be dated to the very beginning of the Ptolemaic period.

It would appear that even though the bath formed a closed complex, it could have belonged to a larger bathing establishment built at the beginning of the reign of the Ptolemies. The suggestion draws from the presence of a large number of broken ceramic tubs of an oval shape found on the same level in adjacent squares. In the northern end of square CCC a round ceramic pool was discovered faced with thick-walled fragments of such tubs. Identical sherds were used to face the walls of an Early Ptolemaic well discovered a few meters south of the pool. A little farther to the northeast of the pool an occupational level paved with hundreds of pieces belonging to identical tubs was discovered in 1991 (square UU). Considering the number of finds of this sort and the presence of terracotta figurines of a votive character on the Early Ptolemaic bath, it is possible to assume that the bathing complex of the early 3rd century BC was an establishment intended more for cult purposes than for maintaining hygiene.

Continued explorations of the baths from the times of Ptolemy VI in squares LL and MM and to the south of them brought

interesting new results. A well preserved sewage system was discovered removing waste water from under the central north-south corridor of the baths. The channel, which ran to the northeast, was uncovered all the way to the northern edge of the excavations, that is to Kom Sidi Yussuf, and to judge by available evidence, it continued to run under the kom in a northerly direction. It is constructed of fired brick covered with a thick layer of mortar and has a barrel vaulting of bricks in mud mortar. The baths were apparently rebuilt in the Ptolemaic period, presumably following earthquake damage. The original sewage system was replaced with a provisional channel, the walls of which were made of irregular brick fragments, presumably reused elements of the original structure. The fragments were set in two uneven lines on the original floors of the baths which were thus reused as the floor of the secondary sewage system.

The preserved part of the floor in the northern part of the baths was uncovered completely; it had cracked and tilted considerably to the south as a result of seismic disturbances. South of the channel system the floor was completely destroyed; what was preserved were two furnaces which were used after the destruction of the baths rather than before their construction. Were the latter case true, the furnaces should be dated to the first half of the Ptolemaic period and it should be assumed that the floor of the newly constructed baths covered them.

The largest furnace below the level of the floors of this early bath was discovered between the eastern part of the bath (squares LL-MM and FF-GG) and its western part (squares JJ-KK) explored in 1989. Since sherds of unfired pottery were uncovered at the bottom of this furnace, it should be assumed that in the first half of the Ptolemaic period it was used for pottery production and when the baths were built in the mid 2nd century BC, it was either covered by the floor of the new structure or reused to heat the establishment.