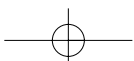
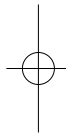
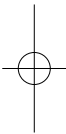


Karol Myśliwiec



TELL ATRIB





Ancient *ḥwt-t3-ḥrj-ibt* (later Athribis), capital of the tenth nome of Lower Egypt and one of the more important administrative and religious centers of the Nile Delta from the early Pharaonic period to Byzantine times, shared the fate of all the great towns of Antiquity situated in the northern reaches of the land. Climate, politics and most recently the rapid industrialization of the Delta region have combined to destroy the centers of ancient culture in Lower Egypt.

Embarking on excavations on the northeastern outskirts of the present-day town of Benha in 1957, the first Polish excavations in Egypt after World War II, Professor Kazimierz Michałowski could not have known that he would be anticipating appeals by the Egyptian Antiquities Organization to prioritize research on Lower Egypt where the progressive degradation of archaeological sites has outstripped that in the southern part of the country. Regular digging on a site in the Nile Delta in the mid 1950s was a pioneer undertaking. In the eastern part of the town one could still observe an extensive field of ruins with inscribed blocks testifying to the greatness of Athribis in Pharaonic and Greco-Roman times. Excavations directed first by Michałowski himself and then by Dr. Barbara Ruszczyc, interrupted for a few years as a result of war in the region, brought out the importance of the town in the last centu-

ries BC and first centuries AD. Remains of temples from the Twenty-fifth and Twenty-sixth Dynasties, as well as a monumental bath complex of Roman date are proof of the heyday of Athribis in an era of Egypt's animated contacts with civilizations in neighboring lands, those of Greece and Rome in particular.

Of particular importance for studies of the material and spiritual culture of Egypt in the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine periods were the salvage excavations carried out in 1985-1999 around the hill of Kom Sidi Yusuf, located on the northeastern outskirts of the modern town of Benha. They were directed by the present author (1985-1995) and later by Dr. Hanna Szymańska (1998-1999). Earlier testing in the area by Barbara Ruszczyc had uncovered the ruins of an early Christian church with gilded columns. It is believed that this may have been the legendary church mentioned in medieval written sources as Egypt's first cathedral, dedicated to the Virgin Mary.

Regular excavation of the area adjacent to Kom Sidi Yusuf on the south revealed a district of the ancient town that was likely founded by settlers drawn from among the troops of Alexander the Great. Considering the uncovered archaeological assemblage as a whole, this group of settlers can be identified with the soldiers mentioned in a biographical inscription recorded on the famous

statue of Djed-Hor (Taho) from the end of the 4th century BC. The varied ethnicity of these early settlers is suggested by a significant share of the Persian element appearing next to the Greek and Egyptian one, observed especially well in coroplastic art and ceramics, both of which are categories amply represented in the site's archaeological record.

The exceptional importance of these excavations lies in the fact that on a large part of the area the stratigraphy of Ptolemaic levels had not been disturbed by later occupation or by modern digging for fertile soil in the ruins of the ancient town. It concerns especially the layers from the 3rd and first half of the 2nd century BC, which escaped the attention of medieval treasure hunters. Rich in dated finds, coins and pottery stamps in particular, these layers could often be dated precisely to the reign of one or at the most two rulers. This is hardly a common occurrence in Egyptian archaeology, especially where the Nile Delta is concerned. Everywhere in the trenches, the deeper-lying layer corresponding to the early Ptolemaic period can be distinguished from the terminal stages, the *caesura* falling in the reign of Ptolemy VI when Athribis clearly enjoyed an architectural boom. A precise dating of layers assists in a better dating of particular artifacts making up an archaeological assemblage, and in the case of Athribis this was a particularly abundant and varied group of objects, ranging from sculpture executed of a variety of materials through ceramic, faience and stone vessels of all kinds. The importance of these discoveries for archaeology is inestimable. Based on the stratigraphy of Ptolemaic Athribis, researchers can now date precisely objects, such as oil lamps, ceramics and Egyptian faience, which

previously had been attributed to the Greco-Roman period in general, mostly on the grounds of less precise stylistic criteria.

The city district discovered south of Kom Sidi Yusuf was occupied by craftsmen and artists of different specialties. In small rooms with walls of mud brick there were furnaces and kilns of different size, intended for use in the manufacture of pottery, terracotta figurines and various faience objects. There were also bread ovens in which local bakers must have baked ritual breadstuffs on an industrial basis, pressing appropriate decoration into their surfaces with stamps, many of which were also found nearby. Produced for ritual use were the numerous terracotta figurines, representing mostly Greek and Egyptian deities, as well as pottery vessels stamped with relief ornaments. Prevalent among the images of Egyptian deities were representations of Isis and Bes, while the world of Greek mythology was dominated by Aphrodite and divinities connected with the Dionysiac sphere. Meriting particular attention are figurines which constitute coroplastic testimony of Hellenistic religious syncretism, combining in one the characteristics of Greek and Egyptian deities. The most numerous are representations of Isis-Aphrodite *anasyromene* (unveiling the womb); also abundantly represented are figures of naked women with prominent belly. Since they are found in the same context with male figures (Greek and Egyptian gods included) equipped with phalluses of exaggerated size, they can be deemed evidence of a developed fertility cult, descended in Ptolemaic Athribis from local Osiriac worship. According to ancient belief, the heart of Osiris was a holy relic connected in a special way with Athribis. Dominating among the images of syncretic deities are representations of Harpocrates,

emphasizing different aspects of the youthful son of Osiris, a resurrection symbol with evident political connotations, recalling Horus' identification with the ruling king. Not surprisingly some of the male terracotta figures reveal a physiognomy recalling portraits of the Ptolemies, while images of female deities feature typical elements from the iconography of queens from the court in Alexandria.

Among the ample finds of terracotta figurines there are some that merit particular attention, finding no parallels as yet in the iconographic material from the territory of Egypt. One Harpocrates figurine demonstrates Asiatic facial features and Persian dress; a whole hand inserted in the mouth alludes to the motif of a finger touching the mouth, which was a typical element of the iconography of the youthful god. Another terracotta depicts him as an effeminate youth lying in a provocative pose, which can be considered a distant echo of the legend about Seth raping Horus, present in Egyptian literature from the Pyramid Texts on. Some of the figurines are veritable masterpieces in miniature, copies or imitations of the great artworks of Hellenistic stone statuary. One example is a tiny head, modeled in clay but left unfired, depicting a drunken old woman with dramatically contorted features. Many of the male faces present portrait characteristics; some are figures known from New Attic comedy, some representations of foreigners, Persians for example, dressed in their characteristic caps.

One of the local workshops from the end of the 3rd century BC belonged to an artist of Greek origin, specializing in sculpting statues of Aphrodite in imported marble. Some fragments of such statues were found in a cache, the most exceptio-

nal piece being a figure with preserved polychromy: red on the goddess' hair and blue on the robe. Further testimony of the work of a sculptor's workshop from the early Ptolemaic period is a small portrait head of Ptolemy II Philadelphos, made of Egyptian limestone, doubtless a model for a statue of larger size.

The workshop district extended to the south of a sizable building of red brick that was erected most likely in the times of Ptolemy VI. It was a public bath, furnished with small pools of different shapes. Between two wings of bath halls following an L-shaped plan there was a separate room with exceptionally thick walls. These were thickly plastered on the inside and outside, shaped and painted as polychrome panels. The interior of this room, as well as the immediate vicinity, contained the biggest concentration of vessels of a ritual character, used for holding either wine for drinking or oils for anointing the body. Many of these were richly painted or featured appliqué and stamped decoration; among the most frequent motifs were erotic scenes of couples engaging in sexual intercourse. Globular bowls with relief decoration stamped on the surface constituted a separate and special category of these ritual vessels. Some show a Greek-Egyptian divine triad (Isis, Sarapis, Harpocrates), others carry ritual representations, like, for example, cattle being led toward an altar on which a fire is burning and a cart transporting a bark with shrine for the god's statue. Nor is there a lack of ceramics imported from different regions of the Hellenistic world and their local imitations.

The architecture of the baths at Athribis and the objects found in the ruins indicate beyond all doubt that the facility was

used not merely for the purpose of keeping the body clean, but also as a place for gatherings during which eroticism and fertility worship played an important role. One of the terracottas found inside the baths represents a nude woman with prominent belly, sitting in an oval basin and pouring water over herself from a bowl with incurved rim. Pools of this type are characteristic of the Athribis bath, while extensive deposits of similar bowls were discovered next to pottery kilns identified near the bath. The entire archaeological context leads researchers to the conclusion that the baths were attended either by those expecting or wishing to have a baby or by members of an association of worshippers of Greek gods identified with ancient Egyptian deities, most likely Dionysus and Aphrodite, who were associated with Osiris and Isis. Papyrus texts speak of Dionysiac associations in the Egyptian *chora* of the period. It thus appears that much of the production of the nearby crafts workshops was intended for the purposes of the cult that was practiced in this establishment.

The archaeological context also indicates that the baths stood near a sacral building, and indeed, they may have even been an annex of this unpreserved structure.

Numerous limestone blocks with fragmentary hieroglyphic texts, found with considerable frequency near limekilns of Roman and Byzantine date in the upper layers of the area under investigation, would seem to point to this. Some of these blocks bore traces of the original polychromy and one even had a cartouche with the throne name of Alexander the Great. It seems likely that a district established by Alexander's veterans on the northeastern outskirts of the ancient town would have had as its central point a temple combined with public bath serving ritual purposes, used for ablutions of a magic character and hence acting in similarity to the "healing" statue of Djed-Hor (Taho) from the early Ptolemaic period. The temple could have stood just north of the bath, meaning it would be concealed today under the hill of Sidi Yusuf. Were that so, we would again be dealing with a religious cult tradition surviving down the ages in the same spot, serving the successive religions present in Egypt from the close of the Dynastic era to the modern age: an Egyptian sanctuary from the early Ptolemaic period, Early Christian church of the Virgin Mary in Byzantine times and the tomb of Sidi Yusuf, still worshipped here by Muslims today.

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*Discovering a street of Ptolemaic Athribis in the midst of the modern town of Benha
(Photo K. Myśliwiec)*



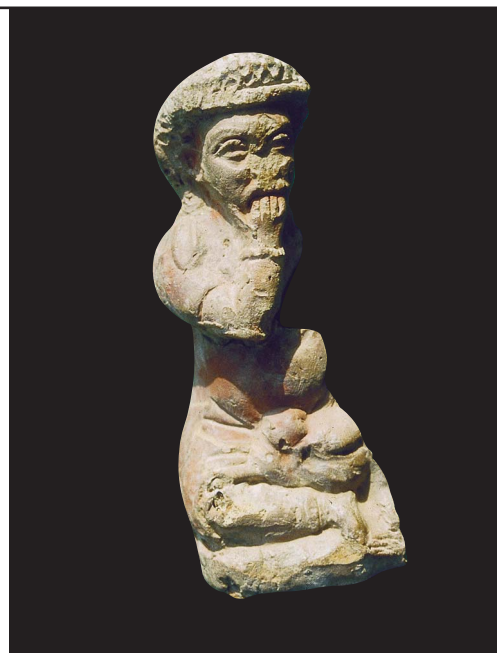
*Exploring a pottery kiln of the end of the 3rd and early 2nd century BC
(Photo K. Myśliwiec)*



*Marble Aphrodite. Statuette from
a sculptor's workshop
End of 3rd/early 2nd century BC
(Photo K. Myśliwiec)*



Head of a marble statue of Aphrodite, from a sculptor's workshop. End of 3rd/early 2nd century BC (left)
Unique representation of Harpokrates depicted with Asiatic features and Persian robe, the hand thrust in the mouth (top right). 3rd century BC
(Photos K. Myśliwiec)



Terracotta figurine of a naked woman unveiling her womb (bottom left), found in the public baths, mid 2nd century BC,
Portrait of a Greek warrior
End of 3rd/early 2nd century BC
(Photos K. Myśliwiec)





Ritual vessel with relief decoration
Mid 2nd century BC
(Photo K. Myśliwiec)

Earring of gold in the shape of Amor (left)
3rd century BC

Seal with inscription dedicated to the fertility goddess
Renenutet, used presumably to stamp bricks
Limestone. 4th century BC
(Photo K. Myśliwiec, drawing K. Baturo)

