

PREFACE

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The production of Athribian workshops of the Ptolemaic Period (Myśliwiec 1996b; 1996; 1997a) included, apart from pottery (Myśliwiec, Południkiewicz 2003; Myśliwiec 2000; Południkiewicz 2000), oil lamps (Młynarczyk 2012) and terracotta figurines (Szymańska 2005) crafted of Nile silt or marl clay, a variety of products that belong to a category usually described as “Egyptian faience”. These included vessels, figurines, amulets, ushebtis and applied ornaments, doubtless the most numerous artifacts produced in these workshops. The ateliers were discovered by the Polish–Egyptian archaeological mission in the vicinity of Kom Sidi Yousuf at Tell Atrib, a suburb of Benha, in the years 1985–1999 (Myśliwiec 2000: 11–13 and 28–33).

The conditions of deposition in Tell Atrib are not conducive to the preservation of artifacts made of faience. Depending on the context and foremost on the hydrological conditions in which these objects, more fragile than ceramics made of clay, have lain for more than two millennia, many of them have disintegrated completely or have been preserved as lumps or powder. Nevertheless, the number and quality of the fragments that have been preserved and recorded by the mission make them a representative assemblage.

The specificity of the site and the diagnostic features of the finds in question have contributed to a number of important conclusions.

Firstly, a clear site stratigraphy revealed three principal layers corresponding to three phases of the Ptolemaic period: early (from the beginning to the reign of Ptolemy V), middle (reign of Ptolemy VI, the apogee of artistic and artisanal development, and the years immediately after it) and late (1st century BC, possibly until the beginning of the Roman period). The strata have been dated securely by a rich collection of numismatic and epigraphic evidence, the latter in the form of inscribed handles of imported amphorae (Sztetyło 2000; Krzyżanowska 2009; see also Myśliwiec 2000; 2009). Some contexts could be dated with even greater precision, especially the deepest strata from the first half of the Ptolemaic period, which were hardly disturbed by later robbing (Myśliwiec 2000: 28, notes 24 and 25). Consequently, many objects, including faience artifacts from the time of the first two Ptolemies could be distinguished from objects crafted in the reigns of Ptolemy III and Ptolemy IV. This circumstance is of particular importance for the history of local faience production.

Secondly, a number of the faience objects found in these contexts proved to be wasters, which is an obvious indication of local production. The topographic distribution of these fragments and specifically their accumulation in one area could be considered an indication of where the production center was located.

Thirdly, once a chronological sequence of the faience vessels, especially those with relief decoration, was established, it became possible to deduce some characteristics of their prototypes and, subsequently, to suggest possible sources of inspiration.

Fourthly, the form of some of the faience artifacts is not only proof of high artistry and a great deal of originality, but also suggests a ritual role associated with the adjacent early and mid-Ptolemaic public baths in the area (Myśliwiec forthcoming). These were probably connected with a sanctuary from the 4th century BC, located most probably on a nearby site of a later church and the present Islamic cult place called Kom Sidi Yusuf. Scarce remains of later structures have also been unearthed near the Kom and one of the Ptolemaic baths seems to have been superimposed on an earlier faience production center.

Last but not least, the author's typology of faience artifacts from Athribis demonstrates a range of products that evince the integrality of this branch of artisanal production in Ptolemaic Egypt with the period's artistic *koine*. Abundant stylistic parallels provided by artifacts crafted of various materials, such as clay, glass, metal, stone and faience, are the best proof of this.