

Two Terracotta Incense Burners with ‘Horns’ and Vine Scroll Decoration from Tell Atrib (Egypt)

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Abstract: Among terracottas found in Tell Atrib in the Nile Delta by the Polish-Egyptian archaeological mission, there are two incense burners with ‘horns’ and vine scroll decoration. Both objects were made from a double mould. The first one, found in 1989 (TA 89/166), is almost fully preserved; the second one, discovered in 1978 (TA 87/41), is just a small fragment of a similar object. Archaeological context allows to date the artifacts to the Ptolemaic or Roman period. The closest analogies are known from necropoleis in Alexandria, but similar objects are also attested outside Egypt.

The soot traces visible on the better preserved specimen (TA 89/166) confirm that it was used for incense burning. The find context suggests that both objects could have been rather intended for domestic cult than for official religious practice or funerary rituals. The form of the burners, and the horn-shaped projections in particular, suggest their connection to the cult of Egyptian gods.

Keywords: Tell Atrib, Greco-Roman Egypt, incense burner, domestic cult, vine scroll motif

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In the years 1957–1995 Polish-Egyptian missions (PCMA and SCA) carried out rescue excavations in the area of north-east suburbs of the modern city Benha (Nile Delta), between Kôm Sidi Yusuf and the ancient Cairo – Alexandria road.¹ The project aimed at protecting the site from destruction by development of modern city. The site revealed remains of the ancient city of Athribis (gr. *Ἀθρίβις*) – capital of the 10th nome of Lower Egypt.² In the Arabic period, the name of the site was changed to Tell Atrib.³ During the excavation, the district of the artisanal workshops from the Ptolemaic period, densely inhabited and rebuilt during the Roman and Byzantine period, was found.

¹ Myśliwiec 1992: 383–391; Myśliwiec, Haq Rageb 1992: 393–416.

² Myśliwiec 1990b: 286.

³ Szymańska 2005: 13.

The present article aims at analyzing two terracotta incense burners – *thymiateria* – gr. *Θυμιατήριον*,⁴ lat. *Turibulum*,⁵ discovered during the 1987 and 1989 campaigns.⁶ The author did not have the opportunity to examine the original finds.⁷ The present study is therefore based on the field documentation (field journals, excavations reports, inventory cards, drawings and photos), kept at the Institute of Mediterranean and Oriental Cultures of the Polish Academy of Sciences (IKŚiO PAN) in Warsaw and, at the same time, on publications of results of Tell Atrib excavations.

INCENSE BURNER INV. NO. TA 89/166

The terracotta *thymiaterion* (**Fig. 1**) inv. no. TA 89/166, was found on October 18th, 1989,⁸ within the thickness of the southern wall of room no. 171, at a depth of 1m from its crown.⁹

The object was documented in drawing and photo.¹⁰ It measures 13.2cm in height and 9.9cm in width.¹¹ The fabric is red and porous, with the admixture of mica.

The *thymiaterion* was found broken and was mended afterwards. A third of the base is missing. The decoration of the trunk and the base was heavily damaged.

In general, as seen from the top, the incense burner is square. In each upper corner there is a large triangular horn-shaped projection. Between each two ‘horns’, a single intermediate smaller triangular dent-shaped projection is placed. The exterior of all projections is decorated with a palmette motif moulded in sunken relief. The horns surround a deep, square burning container.

The upper and lower parts of the cylindrical trunk are decorated with wide double-profiled toruses. In the mid-height the trunk is encircled with a horizontally placed vine scroll, with alternately up and down shooting bunches of alternating heart-shaped leaves and grapes, all heading to the right.

The base, on four rectangular legs, is square and decorated with two horizontal grooves on each side.

The incense burner was made from a double mould. The vertical ridges, clearly visible on two opposite sides of the object, mark a crevice between two parts of the mould. Moreover, prints of a finger, as well as traces of a flat tool (wooden stick?) are found on the surface. The contrast between fine decoration of the top and low quality of the trunk may result from either heavy wearing of the surface or from the quality of the mould and workmanship.

⁴ Morstadt 2007: 15; Horschmann 2002: 522–523; Zaccagnino 1998: 12.

⁵ Zaccagnino 1998: 43; Besnier 1963.

⁶ Myśliwiec, Haq Rageb 1992: 406–407, Fig. 8d. Find from 1987, unpublished (TA 87/41).

⁷ Both artifacts are probably held in the archaeological storehouse in Zagazig (East Delta, al-Sharkiyya Governorate).

⁸ Myśliwiec, Haq Rageb 1992: 407; Myśliwiec 1990a. Information from the inventory card of small finds (TA 89/166) and from the manuscript of the Tell Atrib Field Journal 1989 MSS, 46.

⁹ Information from the inventory card of small finds (TA 89/166).

¹⁰ Photo negatives nos 930–933 from the 1989 campaign.

¹¹ Measurements given according to the field documentation; the width was measured at the level of the base.



1. Terracotta incense burner inv. no. TA 89/166, Tell Atrib (Phot. S. Sadowski © IKŚiO PAN).

INCENSE BURNER INV. NO. TA 87/41

The fragment of *thymiaterion* inv. no. TA 87/41 was found on the 23rd of March 1987 in room no. 82, in its north-east corner, nearby the wall, at a depth of 50cm from the surface level (**Fig. 2**).¹² The artifact was documented in sketch and photo.¹³

This *thymiaterion* is heavily damaged. Only the lower part of the trunk and one corner of the base are preserved. The preserved fragment measures 6.5cm in height by 4.8cm in width. It is made of a double-mould.

The cylindrical trunk is set on a squarish base, with rounded corners. The preserved part of the trunk has decoration similar to that of the *thymiaterion* TA 89/166 – with a motif of a vine scroll and wide double-profiled torus in the lower part. The bottom of the base is entirely flat, without legs.

¹² Information from the inventory card of small finds (TA 87/41).

¹³ Photo negatives nos 239–240 from excavations at Tell Atrib in 1987.



2. Terracotta incense burner inv. no. TA 87/41, Tell Atrib
(Phot. G. Wyrzykowski © IKŚiO PAN).

COMMENTARY

The most important difference between these two finds is the shape of the base: with four rectangular legs (TA 89/166) or low and flat (TA 87/41), respectively. Otherwise the decoration is very similar. Minor differences result clearly from the quality of moulds, used in the process of crafting these objects. The shape and decoration of the upper parts of both artifacts cannot be compared, due to the heavy damage of TA 87/41.

It is difficult to precise the date of the objects. They have been discovered in secondary contexts. *Thymiaterion* TA 87/41 was found in the room no. 82, which very likely belonged to the so-called Roman Villa (second–third century AD). The northern part of the Villa was apparently rebuilt in both Roman and Byzantine periods.

The *thymiaterion* TA 89/166 was found re-used in the construction of the wall of the room no. 171, probably built during the Ptolemaic period,¹⁴ at a depth of 0.8–0.9m below the ground level.¹⁵

TYOLOGICAL ANALYSIS AND ANALOGIES

According to the typology of W. Deonna, both objects should be attributed to the group of incense altars surmounted with big horn-shaped projections, separated by a smaller intermediate dents.¹⁶ Small square (as seen from the top) incense burners with horns emulate regular-size altars. According to the pioneer research of K. Galling, the altars with horns appeared in Egypt as a result of influences from Syria. He classified them as type G – germ. *Hörneraltar*.¹⁷ Already W. Deonna stated that they were not attested in Egypt before the third century BC; however they were in common use until the third–fourth century AD.¹⁸

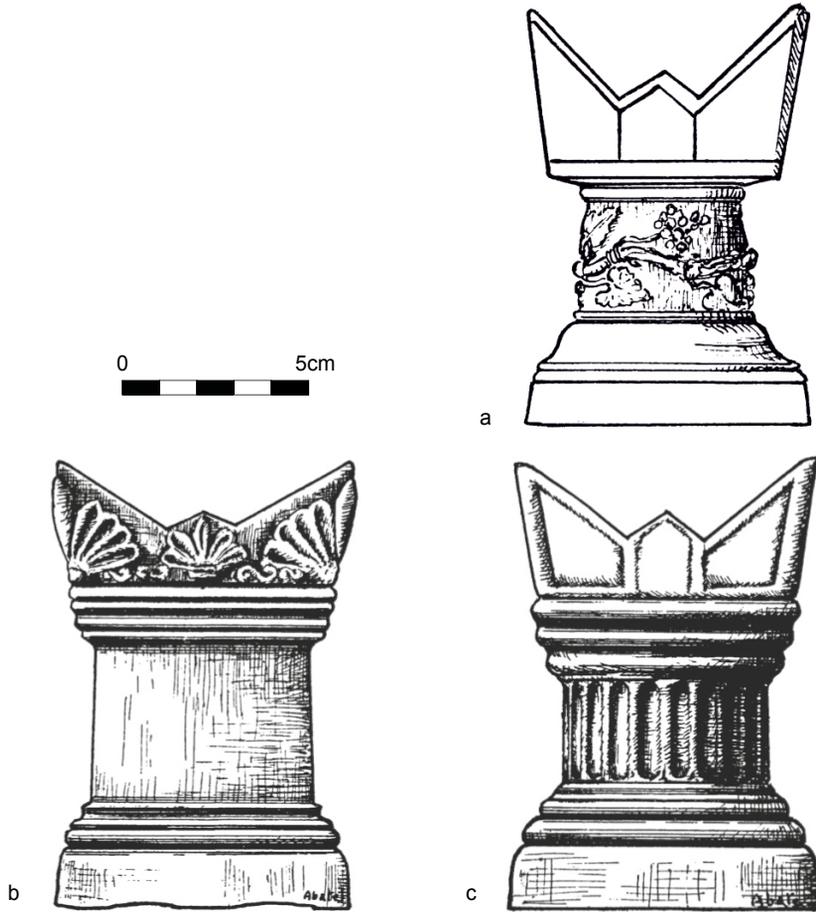
¹⁴ Myśliwiec, Haq Rageb 1992: 407.

¹⁵ Tell Atrib Field Journal 1989, MSS, 41.

¹⁶ Deonna 1934: 392–396.

¹⁷ Galling 1925: 65–66.

¹⁸ Deonna 1934: 402.



3. Incense burners: a. the Mustapha Pasha Necropolis, Alexandria; b-c. the Roman Hypogaeum, Alexandria (a-c. Adriani 1940: 122, 123, Figs 56, 57a, c).

A large group of incense burners with horns, representing both direct and indirect parallels to the objects of Tell Atrib, comes from Alexandria.¹⁹ These were, however, found in funeral contexts – at the necropoleis, while specimens from Tell Atrib originate from domestic context, although secondary in character.

The most important parallel for the objects in question is a terracotta *thymiaterion* discovered in Alexandria, the Mustapha Pasha necropolis²⁰ (second half of the third–second century BC) (**Fig. 3a**).²¹ It is a direct analogy to the object TA 87/41. It has an identical shape and the decoration of the trunk, and the base differs in details only. The upper part of the object is decorated with a triangular pattern in the center, so it differs significantly

¹⁹ Deonna 1934: 397–398, nos 60, 62–63, 67.

²⁰ Adriani 1940: 120–122, Fig. 56. Height: 11cm.

²¹ Tkaczow 1993: 174.

from the better preserved Tell Atrib specimen (TA 89/166). As to the palmette motif decorating the upper part of TA 89/166, a terracotta *thymiaterion* (**Fig. 3b**), from the Roman Hypogeum in Alexandria, unearthed in the area of Sidi Gaber Avenue no. 47, is the closest analogy.²² The object is dated to the first–second century AD. In contrast to Tell Atrib finds, its trunk is undecorated and square; it also differs with the object under discussion in the moulding of its upper and lower part.

Another terracotta incense burner coming from the same Hypogeum (**Fig. 3c**),²³ similar to the Tell Atrib examples, is distinguished by the trunk decoration, emulating the shape of a Greek column. The base is flat without legs and undecorated.

One should also recall a terracotta incense burner of unknown provenance (**Fig. 4a**) from the Guimet Museum (Paris), now in the Egyptian Antiquities Department of the Louvre Museum (inv. no. E 30299).²⁴ In terms of shape, size, design and decoration it is identical with the above mentioned *thymiaterion* from the Mustapha Pasha necropolis in Alexandria. It was also pressed from a double-mould. The find is dated to the Roman period.

An indirect analogy to the find TA 87/41 comes from the Gabbari Necropolis in Alexandria.²⁵ The upper part of the object is decorated with geometric pattern, referring in style to the artifacts from the Mustapha Pasha necropolis and from the Louvre. The central part of the trunk is decorated with a pleat motif. The object is provided with a flat square base. A precise date of the object is not known, although the necropolis itself was in use during Ptolemaic, Roman and Early Christian times.²⁶

The exact provenance of another terracotta *thymiaterion* (**Fig. 4b**), currently in the Akademisches Kunstmuseum in Bonn (inv. no. D 691), remains unknown, although most probably it also originates from Egypt.²⁷ Its shape is very similar to TA 89/166. The horns are almost completely missing. The trunk is profiled in the upper and lower parts, but otherwise it remains undecorated. On the outer surface of the top and the trunk, traces of orange paint are visible. This incense burner is dated to the second–third century AD.

The Tell Atrib artifacts could also be compared with bronze *thymiateria*. One of them, undecorated, is in the Palestine Archaeological Museum in Jerusalem.²⁸ The provenance of the object is unknown. It is distinguished by a short and narrow undecorated trunk. The shape of the top and the base, provided with four rectangular legs, reminds one of the artifacts from Tell Atrib. The incense burner is dated to the Roman period.

Finally, one has to mention an undecorated bronze *thymiaterion* of Egyptian provenance, currently in the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg (inv. no. N 10625).²⁹ Its form is generally similar to the Tell Atrib finds. The trunk is cylindrical, the top surmounted with alternating big and small horns (dent-shaped projections) crowned with small balls and

²² Adriani 1940: 123, Fig. 57c. Height: 12cm, base: 7.9 x 7.9cm.

²³ Adriani 1940: 123, Fig. 57a. Height: 12cm, base: 8.3 x 8.3cm.

²⁴ Dunand 1990: 310–311, Fig. 937. Height: 11cm, base: 7.3 x 7.4cm.

²⁵ Empereur 1998: 199.

²⁶ Tkaczow 1993: 56.

²⁷ Schmidt 1997: 123, Pl. 57, cat. no. 183. Height: 10.1cm.

²⁸ Iliffe 1945: 18, no. 98a, Pl. 6:98a.

²⁹ Kakovkine 1994: 55–56, Fig. 1.



4. Incense burners: a. the Louvre Museum, Paris – inv. no. E 30299; b. Akademisches Kunstmuseum, Bonn – inv. no. D 691 (a. Dunand 1990: 311, Fig. 937; b. Schmidt 1997: Pl. 57, cat. no. 183).

the base is provided with rectangular legs. However, the top and the base are hexagonal in shape. The object is dated to second-third century AD.

The vine scroll motif, characteristic of both finds from Tell Atrib, is attested not only on incense burners but also on vases from the Hadra Necropolis in Alexandria (southern side of the Abukir Street).³⁰ These were crafted from 259/258 BC³¹ until 220–200 BC.³² They have functioned mainly as ash-urns of foreign dignitaries who died while visiting the Egyptian court. The necropolis itself was in use in the Ptolemaic period (third–second century BC) and, after an interval, in the third century AD. Nevertheless, the motif has also been observed on other objects dated to the Roman period, both in and outside Egypt.³³

Summing up, both incense burners from Athribis can roughly be dated to the Ptolemaic or Roman period, based on find context, shape and decoration, as well as analogies from the Alexandria necropolises.

FUNCTION

In Egypt and in the Greco-Roman world the incense burners, including those surmounted with horn-shaped projections and dents, were commonly used in domestic cult, funeral and religious contexts.³⁴ We can assume, that the finds from Tell Atrib probably originally have functioned within domestic space.

³⁰ Tkaczow 1993: 176–177; Adriani 1940: 111, Fig. 48:2; 112, Fig. 49, Pl. XLVIII:5.

³¹ Cook 1966: 8.

³² Guerrini 1964: 19.

³³ Török 2011: 260.

³⁴ Chavane 1975: 120; Wigand 1912: 7–9.

The incense burners, made of various materials, were placed in niches arranged especially for them, and used in domestic cult.³⁵ During the Roman period, they were offered to the Lares and deposited in shrines – Lararia.³⁶ Mette Fjeldhagen places them among the utensils connected with domestic cult in the Pharaonic and Roman Egypt: *At the altar of the house the family honored the household gods. This would be also where figure-lamps and lanterns would come into their own, as would the various small bottles and vases, models of altars, knives and other things which presumably served as varieties of reliquaries during the performance of the cult rite (...)*.³⁷

During the Hellenistic and Roman period both the horned altars and *thymiateria* were probably related to the cult of Egyptian gods, especially Isis, Osiris and Serapis.³⁸ *Thymiateria* and altars with horns found in the sanctuaries of Egyptian gods in private houses on the island of Delos (second–first century BC)³⁹ as well as wall paintings from some houses in Pompeii and Herculaneum (first century AD)⁴⁰ seem to corroborate this thesis.

In case of the incense burners from Tell Atrib, their possible relation to the cult of Isis is very tempting, since Athribis was an important cultic centre of the goddess already in the Pharaonic times, continuing well into the Greco-Roman period.⁴¹

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³⁵ For stone and metal incense burners, see: Kakovkine 1994: 56, Fig. 1; Iliffe 1945: Pl. 6:98–98a; Weber 1914: 258, nos 470–471, Pls 41:470, 42:471; Edgar 1904: 46, Pl. XV:27.810; 47–48, Pl. XV:27.813–27.814; Tybulewicz forthcoming: Pl. 4:23–25, 27–29.

³⁶ Deonna 1938: 417; Krzyszowska 2002: Fig. 26.

³⁷ Fjeldhagen 1995: 22–23.

³⁸ Burr Thomson 1973: 35.

³⁹ Deonna 1938: Pl. XVIII, nos 976, 979–980; 1934: 386.

⁴⁰ Walker, Higgs (Eds) 2001: 323, Fig. 341; Soukiassian 1983: 56.

⁴¹ Myśliwiec 1990b.

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