

University of Reading
Excavations at Amheida
Preliminary Report 2013

The 2013 season started on 28 March and concluded with the registration of finds on 18 April 2013. It was conducted as a part of the New York University-Columbia University Amheida Project, directed by Roger Bagnall.

The Reading team consisted of Anna Lucille Boozer (director, archaeologist); Ashraf Barakat (assistant to the director and site supervisor); Jane Timby (ceramicist); Ashraf Senussi (ceramicist); Elizabeth Mazucci and Elizabeth Warkentin (registrars); Gabor Thomas (topographer, archaeologist); Sarah Lucas (finds illustrator, photographer, archaeologist); Gaber Murad (house manager); Barbora Brederova (archaeology supervisor); Lisa Lodwick (archaeobotanical specialist); Babs Roberts, Roz Hall, Lesley O'Connor, Jenny Murphy, Gareth Williams, Thomas Laurence, Lacy Gillet Jones, and Genevieve Donovan (archaeology assistants). The SCA inspector was Mohammed Salem Ali Mubarak. Giovanni Ruffini (papyrologist, epigrapher) examined the ostraka in New York via photographs.

The 2013 excavations took place in Area 1, an area in the northeast of Amheida, part of which was previously explored (2005-2007, 2012) [Figure 1]. Prior excavations in this area of Amheida focused on a house (Area 1.3) and two test trenches—one in the street (Area 1.2) and one in the courtyard surrounding B2 (Area 1.4). The 2013 excavations continued work in the courtyard begun in 2007 and continued in 2012. The ceramics and finds from the 2013 season were examined during excavation, as much as was possible, by the ceramicists and the registrars.

Area 1.4 Excavations (Anna Lucille Boozer)

The 2007 trench (C2A) in Area 1.4 exposed a bread oven and platform as well as some patchy floors and the beginnings of an informal wall along the westernmost 2 m of the trench [Figure 2]. The 2012 trench (C2B) exposed a 9.5 x 10.2 m area just east of the

2007 trench in order to understand the entire area of the courtyard behind house 1.3 (B2). Additional floors, two of which had associated hearths, and an informal enclosure were uncovered.

Our 2013 trench (C2C) exposed an 11 x 11 meter area east of our 2012 trench. We also excavated approximately 15 cm of an 11 x 11 meter area just east of Area 1.3 (House B2), during which time we exposed B9, which is presumed to be a house at this time. Test excavations took place in one room (room 1) of B9 to determine the viability of future excavations in this structure. Excavations ceased when stratigraphic layers became visible. The below report describes the results of the C2C excavations. We plan to pursue excavation in B9 in 2014.

The C2C excavations revealed many layers of well-stratified depositions. Unlike C2A and C2B most of these depositions consisted of small, defined dumps [Figure 3]. Many of these dumps contained small waster sherds and clinker, which presumably derived from the unexcavated kilns north of house B2. Also found within these dumps were high densities of objects, including numerous ostraka. These dumps appear to have accumulated over a brief time span after the occupational history of the courtyard ceased. Although these above-floor dumps cannot necessarily inform us about the individuals who used C2 during its occupational history, they inform us about the life history of Area 1. We exposed multiple patches of floor and occupational debris. In some areas, formal floors were missing and we discovered sub-floor dumps, which were probably leveling deposits. Some of these dumps require further explorations. Details regarding above-floor and sub-floor dumps, as well as occupational activities, are given by quadrant below.

Northwest Quadrant

The northwest quadrant contained the sole entrance to C2, which was through House B9. The relationship between C2 and B9 was entirely unexpected until this field season since all of the B9 interior walls and its south boundary were buried in sand. The well-preserved doorway between C2 and B9 suggests that C2 belonged to B9 and had no direct relationship with House B2.

The northwest quadrant of C2C contained numerous postholes and preserved wooden stakes, as well as mud bricks with imprints of gireed fencing and ash. It seems likely that an informal enclosure with a light roof was located around the doorway to B9, perhaps to keep out sand and other courtyard disturbances. A complete bronze fibula was found within one of the ash contexts within this area of C2C and can most probably be associated with the C2 occupational usage as it was found in a sealed context at floor level.

Northeast Quadrant

The northeast quadrant contained a high density of postholes positioned in parallel lines to the north boundary wall to the courtyard. Numerous loom weights were found within close proximity to these features as well as throughout courtyard C2 [Figure 4]. The botanical samples taken throughout C2 indicate that flax and cotton were present in C2 (see Archaeobotanicals report below). On the basis of this data, it is possible that the posthole features in this area of C2 relate to weaving. More research on weaving comparanda will be required to justify this conjecture.

In addition to these weaving implements, we found a large piece of wool tabby weave brown cloth in a good state of preservation, as well as many other organic remains in the northeast quadrant. Figurine fragments, including both mould and hand-made varieties of figurines, were recovered from this area of the courtyard. The most singular object of the 2013 season, a gypsum figurine of the goddess Tauweret, was recovered from this area of the trench [Figure 5]. The figurine was found in at least two fragments (a head and a body) and other pieces are missing. Tauweret was a goddess who protected pregnant women and young children and she is easily recognizable through her distinctive profile and facial features in the preserved fragments.

The northeast quadrant also yielded hints about diachronic change in C2. A blocked doorway was evident in the east wall of this quadrant of C2. Moreover, some collapse

and a possible in situ wall was found on the final day of excavation. These features will be explored in more detail in the 2014 excavation season.

Southeast Quadrant

The southwest quadrant yielded numerous loom weights, ostraka and other debris common to C2. We found few distinctive features, other than two postholes, in this area of C2 until our final day of excavation when several deep, linear mudbrick features became evident. Some of these features appeared to be situated within clean yellow sand. Additional excavation will be required in order to understand the function of these walls and the diachronic history of courtyard C2.

Southwest Quadrant

The southeast quadrant contained a cache of bone in close proximity to the south wall of C2. This bone cache is one of the few areas in which faunal remains were recovered in moderate to high densities in C2 or B2. In addition to the bone, we recovered loom weights and hand-made figurine fragments from this quadrant of C2 [Figure 6].

Registrar's Report (Elizabeth Warkentin)

Small Finds and Bulk Finds

This season finds were recovered from area 1.4 Courtyard C2C from 85 Depositional Stratigraphic Units (DSU's) and from 14 DSU's in B9 Room I. From this area a total of 378 items were given Inventory Numbers. Work was divided between field identification, bagging, and sorting of objects by Liz Mazucci and Lacy Jones. The further sorting, identification, analysis and recording were done at the excavation house by the registrar Elizabeth Warkentin with the assistance of Thomas Lawrence and Jennifer Murphy. Bulk finds were also calculated for each of the DSU's on Stratigraphic Unit Quantitative Data Forms. This information gives valuable quantitative information for what was occurring in the area overall.

Area 1.4 – C2C Courtyard

(DSU's 56-80, 82-103, 105-108, 110-111, 118, 124-136)

From C2C Courtyard the objects found made it clear that this space was being used not only for weaving activity, but also as an area where the family seemed to congregate. Weaving activity can be seen in the 25 loom weights, both complete and fragmented, that were found. In addition, textiles were also found, which included pieces of cloth (INV. #1017, 1151), as well as several pieces of string and thread material (INV. #1184, 1199). Objects like these suggest highly the potential that this area was dedicated to weaving and textile production. In addition, various pieces of wood were collected, which are thought to be part of the looming industry going on in the space.

Other artifacts found in the courtyard indicate that it was used in a multipurpose fashion. These include 29 gaming pieces and disc tokens, which were made of ceramic and stone as well as deliberately shaped bits of unfired clay. There were also several crude figurines found made of ceramic (INV. #746) and unfired clay (INV. #1130), which seem most plausible as children's play items. The less crude and more readily identifiable figures found in C2C include the main portion and head of a gypsum statue of the goddess Tauweret (INV # 1078—DSU84 and 1079—DSU79) [Figure 3], a ceramic head (INV. #1277), possibly female, and a sculpted lower portion (INV. #1180) of a figure. Some jewelry was also found in the courtyard including several singular beads, a fragment of color glass bracelet dating to the 3rd c. C.E., and a fibula (INV. #1201), which is badly corroded and in need conservation. There were many fragments of oil lamps found this year totaling 35 fragments—no complete lamps were found. A total of 20 ostraka were found this year, 19 of them were found in the courtyard C2C. One, INV. #725, was found embedded in a jar stopper.

The bulk assemblages in C2C consisted of pieces of unidentifiable metal, stone (sandstone, limestone, flints), faience, glass, bone, slag, and wood. Total numbers include approximately 3,000 objects.

Area 1.4 – B9 Room I

(DSU's 81, 104—C2D, B9 Room I DSU's 109, 112-117, and 119-123)

Excavation began (DSU81) in area 1.4 B9 believing that it was a continuation of the C2C Courtyard, but after the excavation of DSU104 it was believed that the space was actually a house—B9. It was at this point that the excavation concentrated on one portion of the square (southeastern quadrant) called Room I with DSU109. In DSU81 some notable finds include 1 ostraka (INV. #795), a partial metal buckle (INV. #1068), 4 tokens, and 12 of the total 16 lamp fragments found in B9 were found in DSU81 the remainder coming from DSU104—no complete lamps were found.

Many of the objects found within B9 Room I are similar to those that were found in C2C, although, as of yet, not in the same quantity. For example, loom weight fragments (4) were found in this space as well as a lamp fragment. Room I was not fully excavated this season so for this reason most of the artifacts coming from this space are ceramics and bulk items. The bulk assemblage consists of pieces of unidentifiable metal, stone (sandstone, limestone, flints), faience, glass, bone, slag, and wood. Total numbers include approximately 370 finds.

Ceramicist's Report (Jane Timby)

Introduction and methodology

The ceramic work started in 2012 for Area 1.4 continued in 2013 using the same methodology as that employed previously with bulk processing and discard on site and recovery of diagnostic sherds for further work. This year a larger area was cleared on site resulting in a commensurately larger assemblage of pottery. The sorting was kept fairly basic as it also acted as a training exercise for participants who were unfamiliar with pottery. As the greater part of the processed assemblage came from unreliable contexts and comprised a limited range of fabrics it provides a useful teaching tool. Pottery from all levels was rapidly sorted, counted and weighed by main fabric groups to explore its potential in terms of site formation processes and the distribution of material across the houses.

Given the quantities recovered it was impractical to process all the diagnostic material. A sample of the uppermost levels and other contexts identified by the excavator as

potentially useful were recorded in detail by fabric and form. Rims were classified using the typology developed by Dixneuf and measured for diameter and percentage present (estimated vessel equivalence). The non-analysed diagnostic material was scanned for any usual fabrics and forms which, if present, were extracted for illustration by Ashraf Senussi. Approximately 120 vessels have been illustrated which largely represent new forms or variants of forms already defined in the typology prepared by Dixneuf. The diagnostic material has been bagged by context and stored at the Excavation House. Drawn sherds have been bagged separately. The opportunity was also taken at the beginning of the season to complete inputting the pottery database from 2012.

Preliminary results

In total pottery from some 61 excavated contexts was processed amounting to some 157, 242 sherds weighing just over 2.5 metric tonnes. A significant percentage (c-80-90%) of the material came from surface levels or unreliable contexts with the remainder largely from a series of small trash deposits dug into the overburden after the abandonment of the houses. A marked increase in the density of material across the area uncovered is likely to be due to the proximity of the kilns suggesting much of the pottery may be derived from dispersed middens of kiln waster material, or that the house area was used for dumping industrial waste material after it had been abandoned.

As might be expected the assemblage is dominated by local coarse wares made in the hard fired, iron-rich fabric fired to a range of grey, brown or orange colours and designated fabric A1a and A1b respectively in the Amheida fabric reference series. The fabric contains quartz sand, ferruginous pellets and variable amounts of visible limestone and was used throughout the Roman period at Amheida. Other fabrics present from the stratified layers include black-surfaced thin-walled cooking wares (fabric B3), buff marl fabrics (B10), Christian brittle ware (A11), dense limestone-tempered ware (A5) and low-fired organic-tempered ware (A4). A few imports were noted, including one amphora sherd possibly from the Levant (Senussi pers comm.); an amphora handle of unknown provenance with limestone and shale in the fabric and a single sherd probably from the Late Roman Amphora 2 (LRA2) imported from Chios (eastern Aegean off the

coast of Turkey) and likely to date to the 4th-6th century. A single Egyptian amphora sherd was recovered and one lid in fabric B13.

The pottery recovered from the courtyard area includes quite a wide variety of types mainly of a domestic nature with vessels for the preparation and serving of food such as casseroles, dishes and bread moulds; storage vessels, lids, water containers (kegs) and vessels for the dispensing of liquids. The assemblage is almost exclusively composed of coarse wares with negligible fine wares, other than a small number of lamps. A single possible incense burner and three fragments of brazier were also noted.

Much of the pottery was in a very fragmented state. A few vessels with complete profiles were recovered, but these were largely lids and small straight-sided bowls. Most of the vessels are plain, but a small number of decorated pieces were noted with painted or incised decoration in the form of plant motifs or as dabs of paint on the rim tops. The assemblage has yet to be studied in conjunction with the stratigraphic data to determine whether there are any significant differences between contexts, but the preliminary assessment suggests that these are not likely to be very marked or not detectable.

Acknowledgements

A significant part of the bulk sorting in the field, particularly in the latter part of the season, was carried out by Gareth Dennis, Babs Roberts and Leslie O'Connor. Data entry was carried out by Tom Lawrence, Jenny Murphy and Liz Warkentin and illustrative work by Ashraf Senussi.

Archaeobotany (Lisa Lodwick)

Archaeobotanical work during the 2013 season focused on the processing and analysis of samples and hand picked samples from the 2012 and 2013 seasons. Loose sandy/silty samples were dry sieved to 0.5mm whilst more solid samples were soaked in water and bucket floated onto a 0.5mm sieve. Plant remains were preserved by both charring and desiccation. Samples from the 2012 season derived from burnt and unburnt camel dung, a hearth and occupation deposits. All of these samples were abundant in plant remains.

Samples from the first week of the 2013 season were from mudbricks and secondary trash dumps. These samples were not as abundant as the 2012 samples, but provided a useful assemblage to evaluate the background archaeobotanical signature.

Two fibre plants were recorded, *Linum usitatissimum* - flax (seeds and capsules) and *Gossypium* – cotton (seeds) and one oil crop *Carthamus tinctorius* - safflower (seeds). The main cereal crops present are *Hordeum vulgare* - barley (grain and chaff), *Triticum durum* – hard wheat (grain and chaff) and *Triticum aestivum* – bread wheat (chaff). The only pulse identified so far is *Lens culinaris* - lentil. A range of cultivated fruits and nuts are present, including *Olea europaea* - olive, *Phoenix dactylifera* – date, *Vitis vinifera* – grape, *Prunus persicaria* – peach, *Cordia myxa* – sebesten and a single pine cone scale of *Pinus pinea* – stone pine. A reasonable range of wild plants was also present including *Acacia* and *Tamarisk*. The results from the courtyard of B2 will provide an excellent comparison for the activities taking place inside and outside the house, including the stabling of animals, use of crop processing by-products and dung as fuel as well as fibre and cereal plant processing.

Ostraka (Giovanni Ruffini)

The text finds from the 2013 season are in keeping with those found from this area in previous years. We see several more examples of one of the most common text genres from Trimithis, well tags or labels indicating which property or well produced specific commodity shipments. Some of these well tags give dates which reinforce the general impression of a late third or early fourth century CE context for this area. Other texts are in a poor state of preservation and may defy analysis. Some of these clearly provide proper names of some of the residents of the region, including a possible reference to a former high-ranking regional official whose estate may have produced goods consumed in this part of Trimithis.

Figures

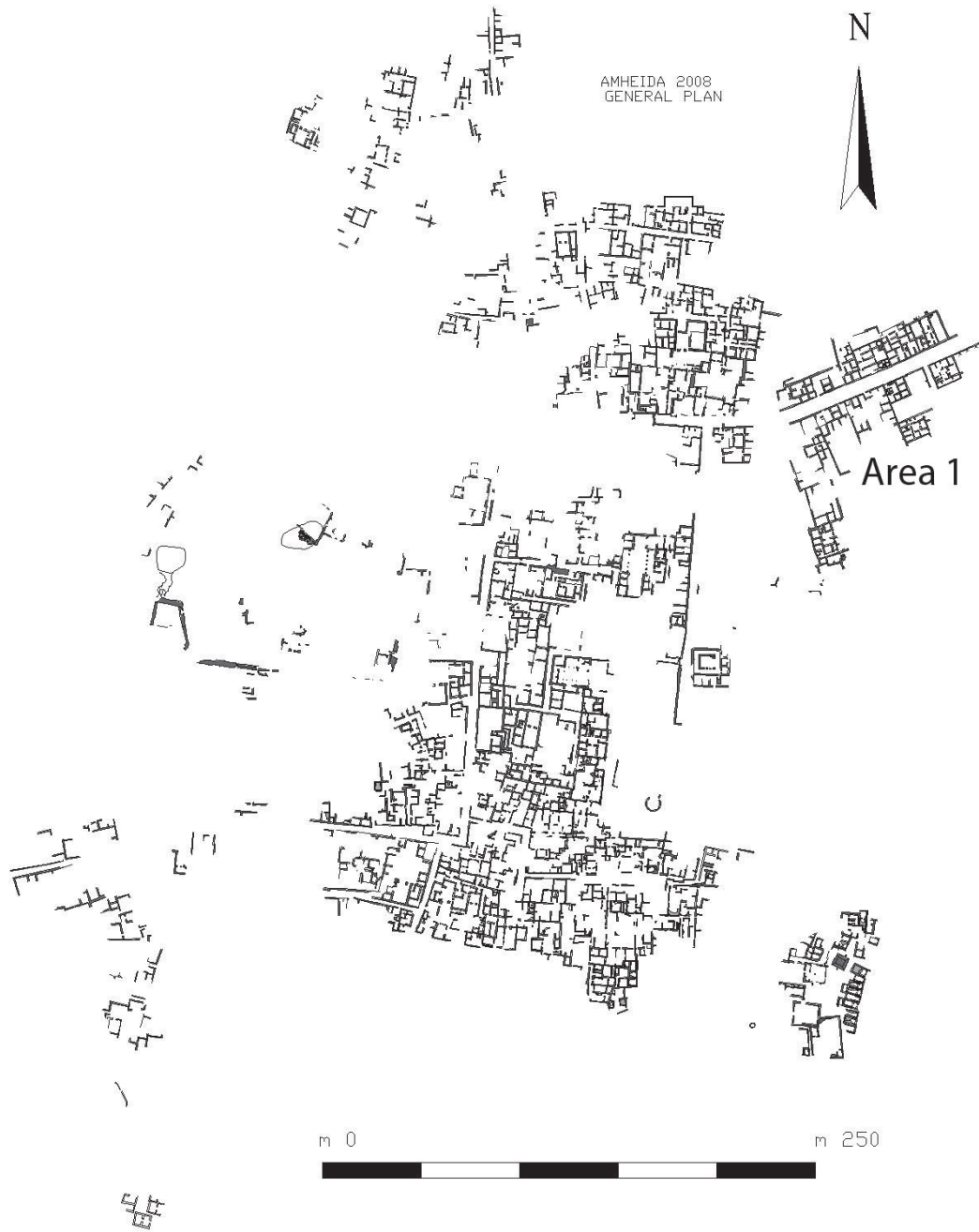


Figure 1: Location of Area 1

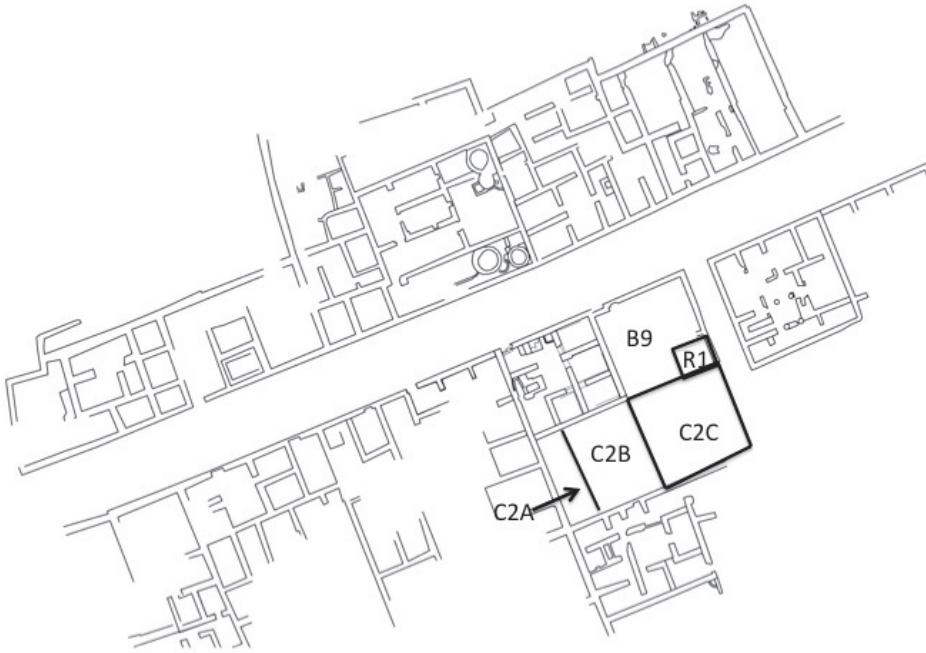


Figure 2: Area 1 Trenches in C2 and B9



Figure 3: C2C Post-Excavation Photo April 2013



Figure 4: Loom weights found in excavation



Figure 5: Tauweret during excavation



Figure 6: Unfired clay figurine with arm bracelet