

Egypt's Sunken Treasures
Art and Exhibition Hall of the Federal Republic of Germany, Bonn
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Egypt's Sunken Treasures presents a spectacular collection of artefacts recovered from the seabed off the coast of Alexandria and in Aboukir Bay. Lost from view for more than a thousand years, they were brought to light as part of an ongoing series of expeditions first launched in 1992 by the European Institute of Underwater Archaeology headed by Franck Goddio in co-operation with Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities. Franck Goddio's expeditions and this exhibition are supported by the Hilti Foundation.

Thanks to Franck Goddio's excavations important parts of a lost world have resurfaced, among them the ancient city of Thonis-Heracleion, the eastern reaches of Canopus as well as the sunken part of the Great Port of Alexandria and the city's legendary royal quarter. The finds shed new light on the history of those cities and on the history of Egypt as a whole over a period of almost 1500 years: from the last pharaonic dynasties in the Canopic region to the rise of the Ptolemies after the death of Alexander the Great, followed by Roman control, the advent of Christianity in Byzantine late antiquity and, finally, the dawn of the Islamic era.

Famous for its temples, especially those of the god-king Osiris, **Canopus** was the site where the goddess Isis was believed to have found the fourteenth and last part of Osiris's savaged body. According to Egyptian mythology Osiris was murdered and his dismembered body scattered all over Egypt by his jealous brother Seth. Isis, so legend has it, assembled the scattered pieces and placed them in a vase at Canopus. Osiris, who also summoned the annual floods, is often represented in the shape of a 'canopic' vase with a stopper in the shape of a crowned head.

In Roman times the port city was notorious for its dissoluteness and debauchery. In the Christian era an important monastery was erected on the site of the ancient temples. Gold jewellery, precious stones, crucifixes, a wedding ring and numerous official seals from the monastery bear testimony to this period. Canopus was claimed by the sea at some point in the 8th century; and indeed there are no finds that can be dated any later than the 8th-century Umayyad coins recovered from the seabed at the site of the vanished city.

Among the most spectacular exhibits is the so-called 'Naos of the Decades' engraved with the earliest known astrological calendar. A fragment of this unique shrine was discovered in the Bay of Aboukir in the 18th century. It was taken to Paris, where it became part of the Louvre's permanent collection. The exhibition in Bonn brings together all known fragments of the 'Naos of the Decades', reuniting the Paris fragment with a loan from the Graeco-Roman Museum of Alexandria and the sections recently discovered by Franck Goddio.

The 'Naos of the Decades'

Of particular importance is the discovery of the 'Naos of the Decades', a black granite shrine engraved with the earliest known astrological calendar. It was smashed and scattered by Christian zealots in the Byzantine era as a work of pagan idolatry and superstition. One of the fragments – the pyramid-shaped roof – was discovered as early as 1777 during excavations on land and has been in the Louvre in Paris since

1817. In 1940, divers working for Prince Omar Toussoun discovered further sizable chunks — the naos' back and the base. But it wasn't until Franck Goddio's underwater excavations, which uncovered several more fragments, that archaeologists finally managed to reassemble the tabernacle. Consecrated in the 4th century BC by Pharaoh Nectanebo I, the black granite shrine was dedicated to the Egyptian god Shu who was worshipped as the personification of the air between sky and earth, as creator of the universe and lord of the stars. The shrine housed a representation of Shu in the shape of a seated lion made of silver covered with pure gold. The naos was engraved with the course of a number of celestial bodies across the night sky and with descriptions of their astrological impact on human and animal life. The hieroglyphic text documents the origin of the ancient Egyptian calendar with its 36 ten-day periods, or decades. Every decade is associated with a prophecy. According to the inscriptions the wandering of the stars brings unspeakable disaster, disease, plague and death upon Egypt's enemies. Sacrificial offerings to the god Shu protected Egypt from her enemies. Unlike modern astrology, which is concerned with the fate of the individual, the 'Naos of the Decades' provided the pharaoh – mediator between the gods and man – with a powerful instrument of divine providence that allowed him to protect the Egyptian people as a whole, to create wealth and ward off the country's enemies. The 'Naos of the Decades' bears witness to the history of ideas because it documents how astrology and mythology developed out of the scientific observation of astronomical phenomena, and not the other way round.

Until its rediscovery in 2000, the city of **Thonis-Heracleion** appeared to have vanished without a trace, its name expunged from human memory – only a few references in ancient texts and a handful of inscriptions testified to its existence. Thonis-Heracleion was a vibrant city with a large Greek community many centuries before Alexander the Great came to Egypt. Before the foundation of Alexandria the city was one of the biggest commercial hubs in the Mediterranean. Its geographical position at the mouth of the Nile allowed it to control the incoming trading ships before they went further upriver to Naukratis.

Archaeological excavations on a large temple – since identified as dedicated to Amun-Gereb or Heracles – and in the sunken city itself have yielded thousands of objects that shed light on the character and topography of Thonis-Heracleion and its environs. The exhibition provides the visitor with a glimpse into the daily life of the ancient city and presents some of the most important finds. Among these are colossal statues of a king, a queen and the god Hapi, god of fertility, abundance and the annual life-giving Nile flood. Hewn from red granite, they bear eloquent testimony to the significance of the temple they once adorned. Beautifully crafted statues of gods and kings, numerous bronze statuettes of deities and ritual items complete the picture. The discovery of a monolithic red granite shrine dedicated to the god Amon-Gereb proved that the remains found on the seabed really were those of the lost city of Thonis-Heracleion. What's more, the discovery of a completely undamaged black granite stele from the time of Pharaoh Nectanebo I put an end to the debate of whether the names Thonis and Heracleion mentioned in ancient texts referred to one and the same city: Thonis was the Egyptian name for the city that the Greeks called Heracleion.

Named after its founder, Alexander the Great, and seat of the Ptolemaic rulers of Egypt, the city of **Alexandria** was one of the greatest cities of the Hellenistic world. Second only to Rome in size and wealth, the city's streets were lined with large temples, palaces, colonnades and statues. The fabled 130-meter high lighthouse on the island of Pharos, then the tallest building on earth, was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. World-famous too was the library with its priceless collection of almost half a million papyrus scrolls. The city's magnificent royal quarter with its temples, palaces and parks, which had formed the backdrop to Cleopatra's dalliance with Julius Caesar and Marc Anthony, lay in the immediate vicinity of the harbour.

Historians and archaeologists have long sought to locate the site of the historical Portus Magnus (Great Port or Eastern Harbour) and the splendid buildings surrounding it.

It took Franck Goddio and his team twelve years of painstaking research and excavation to piece together a viable map of the legendary Great Port. His underwater explorations brought to light important archaeological material that testified to the overwhelming splendour of the sunken royal quarter. Among the finds are sculptural masterpieces such as the black granite statue of a priest of Isis holding Osiris-Canopus and a sphinx believed to represent Cleopatra's father, Ptolemy XII. Numerous architectural fragments with inscriptions as well as pottery, jewellery and coins testify to the luxury that once characterised the famous city.

All three cities were important religious, scientific and economic centres of the ancient world. They flourished in a period of Egyptian history that bore the imprint of conquests by foreign cultures. Egypt's adoption and adaptation of religious and cultural ideas from Greece and Rome had direct impact on many areas of daily life. The cult of the god Serapis is one example for the fusion of Greek and Egyptian deities and the rapprochement of different cultures. The exhibition presents an almost 60 cm tall marble head of the god found during excavations in Canopus; and ancient texts do indeed testify to the existence of an important Serapis temple in Canopus. Also on show are a number of statues of Ptolemaic queens in the guise of the goddess Isis wearing Egyptian clothes and Greek hairstyles.

Statue of a Queen, Black Granite, 3rd Century BC

Carved from dark stone, this female figure has a startlingly sculptural quality. Complete, it would have been just a little over life-size. The figure does not represent the goddess Isis. This identification is based on the knot holding together the ends of the woman's shawl. Found on numerous sculptures representing Lagid (Macedonian) rulers, this knot can be placed, as it is here, above the left breast or between the breasts. Because the sister-consorts and mothers of the heir to the throne tended to be identified with Isis, sister and wife of King Osiris and mother of Horus, scholars often refer to this knot as an 'Isis knot'. This feature – not to be confused with the amulet known as *tyet* and also often described as 'Isis knot' – clearly identifies the figure as a Ptolemaic queen.

The handling of the drapery is reminiscent of Hellenistic representations of Aphrodite Anadyomene (Aphrodite rising from the foam). Head-on, the folds of the diaphanous robe reveal the body more than they conceal it, while at the back the mass of fabric falls heavily as though saturated with water, the seam clinging obliquely to the left leg.

Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love and fertility was born from the foamy froth of the sea near Palaipaphos, the ancient Paphos, in southern Cyprus. One is immediately put in mind of the queen that more than any other was seen as an incarnation of Aphrodite: Arsinoë II Philadelphos, wife and sister of Ptolemy II, a woman whose fate, both in life and after her death, was fraught with adventure.

Ptolemy II did much to promote literature, the arts and science. By force of arms he was able to hold on to the territories his father had conquered for Egypt, such as Cyprus and the Syrian coast, and even to intervene in Greece. He instigated the construction of the military harbour of Alexandria and the famous lighthouse. Arsinoë, widely travelled and never afraid of confrontation, took an active interest in the navy and sea routes. In Alexandria, in the Great Harbour, an enormous obelisk was erected in her honour in the vicinity of the arsenal. The installation of an iron statue, which was meant to hover in midair by virtue of a powerful magnet, was envisaged for her shrine, the 'Arsinoëion'. Most extraordinary of all, as mistress of the seas, Queen Arsinoë enjoyed a special form of apotheosis: she was Aphrodite personified. The great Cypriot goddess, responsible for the fertility of fields, gardens

and humans alike was also the mistress of the sea, from which she had come, and thus the protectress of navigators and sailors.

Judging by the quality of the sculpture, it is safe to assume that it was intended for a very important temple and quite possibly carved on the express wish of Ptolemy Philadelphos, who may have commissioned an Egyptian master sculptor to create an expressive likeness of his beloved sister and wife Aphrodite Arsinoë. Later this sculpture may have served as a model for numerous cult statues.

The cities of Canopus and Thonis-Heracleion and the harbour quarter of Alexandria shared the same tragic fate: following a devastating natural disaster all three sank to the bottom of the sea where they lay for more than a thousand years untouched and unrecognised. The exhibition *Egypt's Sunken Treasures* restores them to the light of day without, however, stripping them of their mystique.

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