

BEAUTIFUL AS APHRODITE: STATUE OF A QUEEN

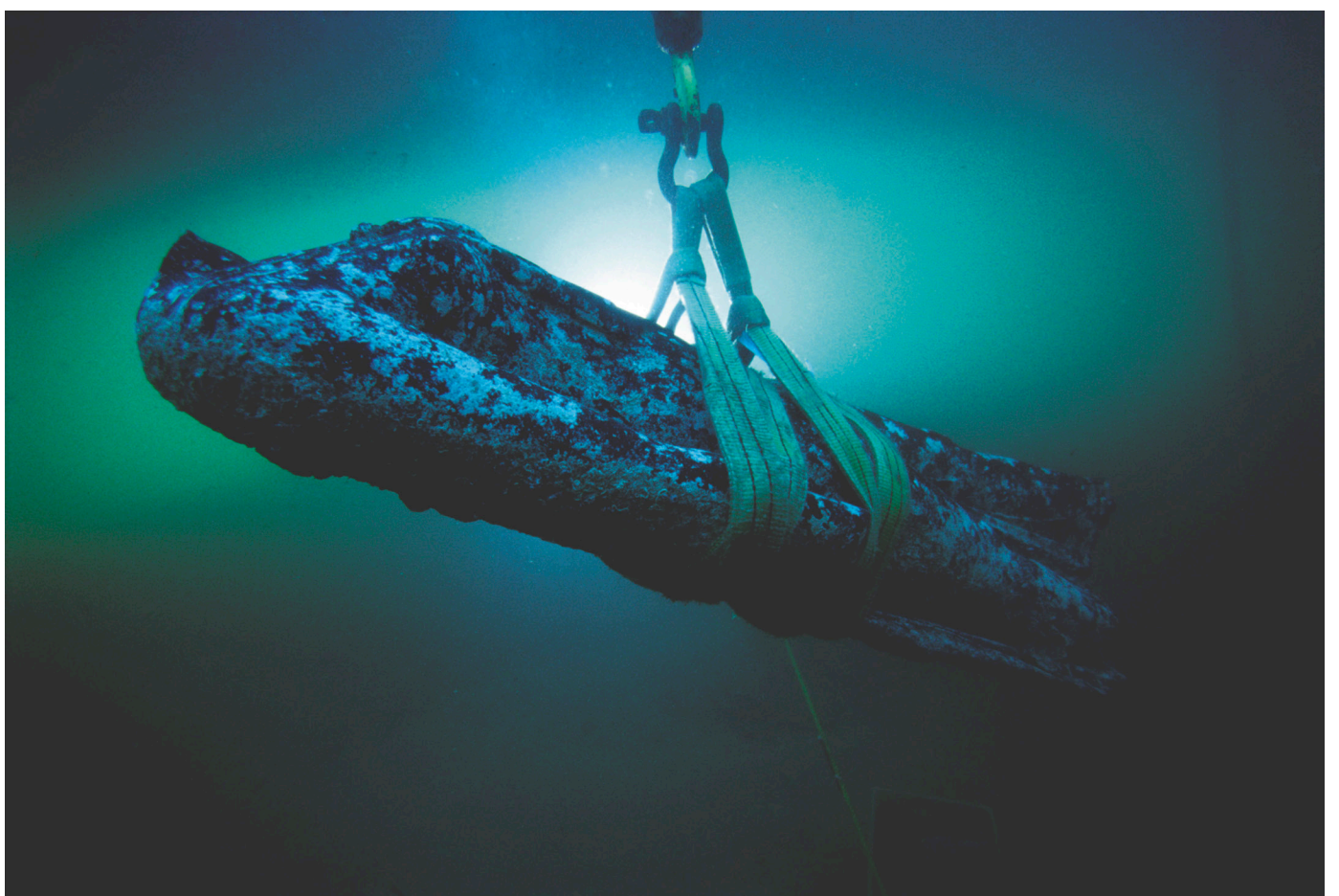


Her posture is straight, her arms held against her body, her left foot placed forward: this striding queen found by the IEASM in Canopus presents the same calm dignity shared by all **Pharaonic statuary**. The head has not been found, nor the feet, which are broken off at the ankles.

Who is that woman?

The sculpture surely depicts one of the queens of the **Ptolemaic dynasty**, whom a master sculptor has shaped in stone from an Egyptian quarry. But which queen? With the face missing, this is a difficult question, which one can try to answer through laborious typological comparisons with images of other family members.

The work belongs to a particular group of female statues representing queens with bare shoulders and their hair pulled back.



Prototype of a statue group of queens?

The statue is unusual: it has no back pillar. There seems to be something almost Greek in this absence, since the back pillar is a hallmark of Egyptian sculpture.

Could this masterpiece, which had been worshipped in the Canopic region, be the prototype of the statue group of queens with bare shoulders and hair pulled back, a group the Alexandrian king commissioned from a great master to confer sacred status upon a great queen?



The appearance of Aphrodite

The treatment of the garments on this statue recalls Hellenistic marble statues representing **Aphrodite** in ‘wet’ drapery. Aphrodite, in her role as a great goddess of vegetal fertility, was born from the foamy sea off Palaepaphos (old Paphos), on the southern coast of Cyprus.

This immediately brings to mind the queen who was especially considered to be a manifestation of Aphrodite: **Arsinoe II Philadelphia**, a woman whose destiny, both during her life and after her death, included extravagant adventures.



Arsinoe II becomes Aphrodite incarnate

Arsinoe II ended up marrying her brother, Ptolemy II (285–246 BC), her junior by eight years who reigned in Egypt. He proclaimed himself Philadelphus, ‘he who loves his sister’, and she became Philadelphia, ‘she who loves her brother’. Both were to become **‘the Philadelphic gods’**.

Arsinoe became actively involved with the naval forces and maritime routes, with the result that, according to her eulogists, she was respected by admirals and loved by sailors, the majority of whom were native rowers.

At her death near the age of fifty (a remarkable longevity for the time), she became a **deity**. The glorious apotheosis of the dead queen was immediately announced throughout the empire. Many cities were named or renamed ‘Arsinoe’. As the **mistress of the seas**, Arsinoe II enjoyed a specific type of apotheosis: she was Aphrodite incarnate.

It happened, in fact, that the great Cypriot goddess, creator of the fertility of fields, gardens and human couples, had acquired the role of the protectress of navigators, the mistress of the sea.

Where did the statue once stand?

Judging by its quality, it must have been intended for a very **important temple** and perhaps sculpted according to the express desire of Ptolemy II Philadelphus.



He may have asked an Egyptian master to create an expressive image of Arsinoe-Aphrodite, revealing her as at her birth, in order to serve as a model for anticipated cultic statues.

The king could have put the artist in contact with Alexandrian workshops or at least shown him the types of marble statues of the goddess made by Greeks. This statue from Canopus could be the prototype of the dress which, in renderings of varying quality, was to be worn by all the Ptolemaic queens and then Isis herself.

Object: Statue of Arsinoe. Granodiolite, H. 150 cm. Third century BC.
Canopus. Bibliotheca Alexandrina, Museum of Antiquities (SCA 208)

Source: Original description by Jean Yoyotte in exhibition catalogue „Egypt’s Sunken Treasures“, Berlin 2006, exh. Egypt’s Sunken Treasures, Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, May - September 2006

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