

CYPRIOT STATUETTE



Archaeological discoveries in Thonis-Heracleion bear witness to extended contacts between **Egypt and Cyprus**. Close connections existed between the Nile valley and the Phoenician-Cypriot towns of Kition or Amathus. This is confirmed by the discovery of a Cypriot limestone statuette from the fifth century BC, whose headgear identifies it as being a deity of Semitic origin.

Important role of Phoenicians

This figurine of a foreign god, without any Egyptian attributes, perhaps constitutes a religious marker of Cypriot traders trying to sell their ware on the Egyptian market passing through the Canopic mouth of the Nile, or even of pilgrims or mercenaries.

We know of some who left their signature at Buhen or on the walls of Giza, and on the temples of Abydos, Thebes or Karnak . . . We also know of the important role that the Phoenicians played, particularly on Cyprus during the first half of the first millennium BC, in the trade and redistribution of products from Cyprus, the Aegean and the western Mediterranean.

At Memphis, the Phoenicians occupied the quarter called the “camp of the Tyrians” and had religious sanctuaries there.

Dedications to local gods by foreigners

It was common for foreigners to make dedications to local gods and it is possible that the figurine was deposited at a sanctuary in Thonis-Heracleion through a ritual act of devotion. For example, Herostratos, a Naukratite merchant on a voyage from Cyprus to Egypt, when surprised by a storm promised to offer the sanctuary of Aphrodite a statuette of that god which he had acquired before his departure.



Egypt's religious tolerance towards foreigners

We also know that foreigners could obtain permission to build sanctuaries for their own gods. In all periods, the Egyptians displayed religious tolerance towards foreigners. A sanctuary was also a guarantee of safety for the stranger; one of the best examples of such sanctuaries was at Thonis- Heracleion.

According to Herodotus, the temple of Herakles possessed the privilege of **granting asylum**. In practice, foreign sanctuaries were certainly also places to encounter other foreigners, whether they were mercenaries, merchants, traders and so on.



Which god is represented?

Who was the Semitic deity represented by the statuette? It could perhaps be **Baal**, a Phoenician-Cypriot god who found his equivalent in the Egyptian god Amun, the tutelary deity of Thonis-Heracleion. It could also be the Phoenician god **Melquart**, who shared various iconographic traits with Herakles, as seen on the obverse of a [Phoenician hemistater](#) of Pumyaton, King of Kition, that was discovered in Thonis-Heracleion, where there was also a temple to Herakles.





Object: Head of a Cyriot statuette. Limestone. H. 12.9 cm.

Fifth century BC. Maritime Museum, Alexandria (SCA 1394)

Source: Original description in exhibition catalogue „Osiris. Egypt’s Sunken Mysteries“, Paris, 2015, re-ed 2018, exh. Egypt’s Sunken Cities, Minneapolis Institute of Art, 4 November 2018 - 14 April 2019

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