

# A SCENT OF GODS: INCENSE BURNER FROM HERACLEION



This incense burner (H. 24.2 cm) takes the form of a seated sphinx (also sphinge for female version) carrying a bowl on its head. The teats on the belly show that it is female. It is carved in a style that combines Greek and Cypriot elements. The plinth and the creature's forefeet are broken and the piece is worn from exposure to seawater.

## The mythical sphinx

The mythical sphinx was a mixed being, part-human and part-lion. In ancient Egypt it had a long history as the male incarnation of the pharaoh and a powerful guardian figure. Greek and Cypriot culture transformed it into a winged, female monster associated especially with the border between life and death.



# Importance for Egyptian and Cypriot cult

Burning fragrances was important in both Egyptian and Cypriot cult.

Incense burners carried by sphinxes and, less frequently, other figures are well known from Cypriot sanctuaries and palaces from the early fifth century BC onwards; close parallels are found especially at Amathus (Cyprus).



# Thonis-Heracleion: Religious and economic centre

Thonis-Heracleion was a city in ancient Egypt in the Nile delta. It sank into what is now the Bay of Abukir, 35 km east of Alexandria, probably during the course of the 2nd c. BC. Thonis was its Egyptian name and Heracleion its Greek name. The city knew glorious times as the obligatory port of entry to Egypt for all ships coming from the Greek world. It had also a religious importance because of the temple of Amun, which played an important role in rites associated with dynasty continuity.

**Object:** Limestone, 6th c. BC, National Museum Alexandria (SCA 270)

**Source:** Original description by Damian Robinson from Zsolt Kiss in *Sunken Cities, Egypt's lost worlds*, British Museum editions, London, 2015, exh. *Sunken Cities, Egypt's lost worlds*, British Museum, 19 May 2016 - 27 November 2016

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