

THE NAOS OF THE DECADES



The small chapels known as naos are shrines housing statues of the divinities. They were located in the most sacred place at the core of the temple. They were furnished with doors which the officiating priest opened in order to carry out the daily rites of the cult, as well as the rites specific to that divinity. Originally of wood, these chapels were later made of stone, hollowed from a single block, in the Late Egyptian Period.

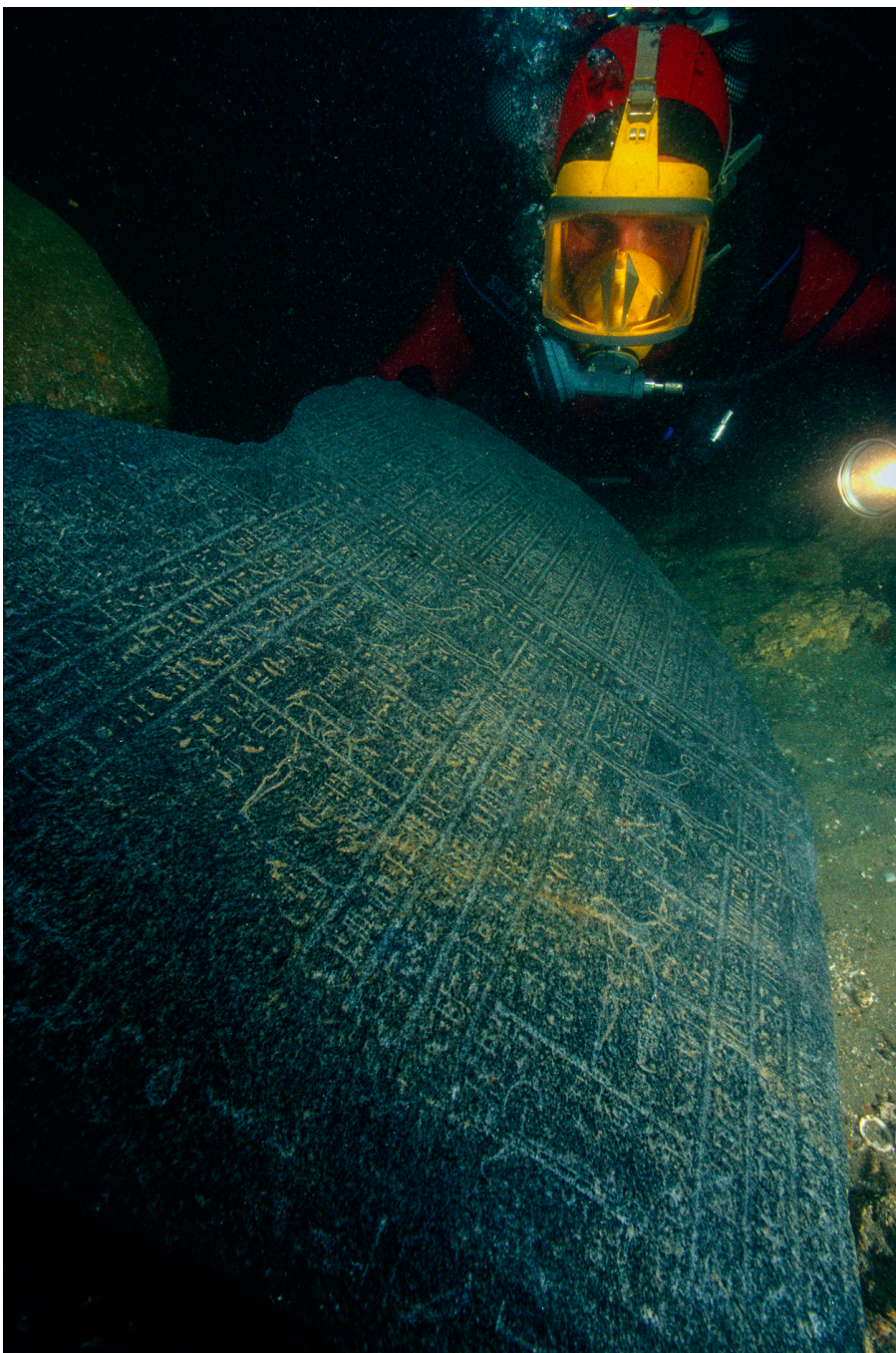
Pieces brought together after thousands of years

The underwater archaeological excavations led by Franck Goddio in the Bay of Aboukir brought to light a sizable section of the lateral walls of an exceptional naos, known as the Naos of the Decades, parts of which were already held in the Greco-Roman Museum in Alexandria and in the Louvre in Paris.



The upper section, in the form of a pyramid-shaped roof, was found on dry land in the Canopus region to the west of the Delta, and entered the Louvre as early as 1817.

A large fragment comprising the base and the back section, also found in the Bay of Aboukir by Prince Omar Toussoun in 1940, was given by its discoverer to the Greco-Roman Museum in Alexandria.



Depiction of Shu, god of the air

The Naos of the Decades is a monolith of very dark granodiorite, 178 centimetres tall. It was set up by King Nectanebo I, the first king of the 30th Dynasty (380–362 B. C. E.), for the benefit of Shu-Sopdu, a god worshipped in a town to the east of the Delta: the ancient House of Sopdu, present-day Saft el-Hinna.



Shu is the personification of the gaseous atmosphere, which Egyptians believed was situated between the Sky and the Earth; he is often depicted in the form of a man standing, with his feet resting on the earth (personified by his son Geb) and his arms raised to support the sky (personified by his daughter Nut). The statue which the naos contained depicted Shu in the form of a seated lion. Although this statue is unfortunately lost, we know exactly what it looked like, as it is reproduced on the inner back wall of the shrine.

Existence of sister naos

This naos is unique in its decoration. Thanks to Pr. J. Yoyotte, however, we know that there was a second naos dedicated to Shu's sister, the goddess Tefnut, made in the same way and certainly created by the same workshop, because a fragment of the naos of Tefnut, very similar to that of Shu, was seen in Alexandria in the 19th century.

Engraved astrological calendar

A calendar is engraved on the external surfaces of the naos, dividing the Egyptian year into sections of ten days or decades, inaugurated by the successive rising of particular stars called decans. Thirty-six large squares are each devoted to the thirty-six decades of the year, i.e. 360 days, to which a thirty-seventh square is added for the five days which the Egyptians added to complete the year.



Each of these thirty-seven squares contains the same five images, depicting, from top to bottom: a human-headed bird, a falcon-headed sphinx brandishing a bow, a ram in motion, a standing mummy and a recumbent mummy.

Cruel prophecy for enemies of Egypt

As Pr. C. Leitz showed, the five figures relate to the different moments of the annual cycle of the decan stars from their appearance (the human-headed bird) to their disappearance (the mummy lying on a funerary bed).

Before the bird, three columns of text stipulate which ten days of the year are concerned. Three other columns, before the other four figures, contain a text of an astrological nature giving details of the effects which the decan stars and Shu are supposed to induce on earthly life during the ten days indicated before the bird: wars, massacres and epidemics affecting foreign or rebellious populations, animals or plants.

The sicknesses described are often accompanied by fever, for these were infectious diseases caused by air-borne germs. These calamities are unleashed by the decan stars under the direction of the god Shu, the personification of the atmosphere.

Text of the 9th decade:

“The great god in the beginning: it is he who causes bloodbaths, who provokes war, massacres, unrest and violence. It is he who sends miasmas to all foreign lands after savagely conquering them. It is he who creates the rain in the sky and who kills the small animals in the desert.”

Ancestor of our modern astrology

This monument appears to be the precursor of the late Egyptian astrological texts and the ancestor of our astrology, which subdivides the twelve signs of the zodiac into periods of ten days, the decans. While the zodiac is not of Egyptian origin – it is not found in Egypt before the Ptolemaic Period (323–30 B. C. E.) – the first indisputable attestation to the concept of decans is Egyptian, and it probably constitutes the origin of the subdivisions of time and of the Egyptian calendar. When the zodiac appears in Egypt, we see the former decans swallowed up three by three in each of the twelve signs of the zodiac.



Description of the creation of the world

The Naos of the Decades, which predates the Ptolemaic Period by more than half a century, is of infinite interest for the study of the evolution of ideas, particularly since one of the large pieces found in the sea by the IEASM gives an account of the creation to which we possess no parallel. It tells of the creation of the sky and the stars by the god Shu who separates the sky and the earth by placing himself between them, thus personifying the atmosphere.

Once the sky has been created, Shu sets in motion the decan stars and becomes their leader. Thus, he becomes the great god of the astrological commentaries which accompany each decade, and – along with the decans he directs – the power responsible for the sickness and death that strike above all the enemies of Egypt.

Egypt threatened by the Persians

Since the Old Kingdom, the god Shu-Sopdu had been invested with the role of protecting Egypt against invaders from the East. The new threat represented by the Persians, from whose control Egypt had recently been liberated, could be one of the reasons why Pharaoh Nectanebo I set up this monument to the god of Saft el-Hinna.

Object: Granodiorite. Nectanebo (380-362 BC). IEASM excavations. Canopus. Greco-Roman Museum Alexandria (JE25774, SCA 161-164), Louvre Museum (Louvre D37)

Source: Original description by Sophie von Bomhard in exhibition catalogue Egypt's Sunken Treasures, Berlin 2006, p. 86-89, exh. Egypt's Sunken Treasures, Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, May - September 2006

Further reading: The Naos of the Decades: Underwater Archaeology in the Canopic region in Egypt, A-S von Bomhard (Author), Oxford Centre for Maritime Archaeology, University of Oxford, 2008

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