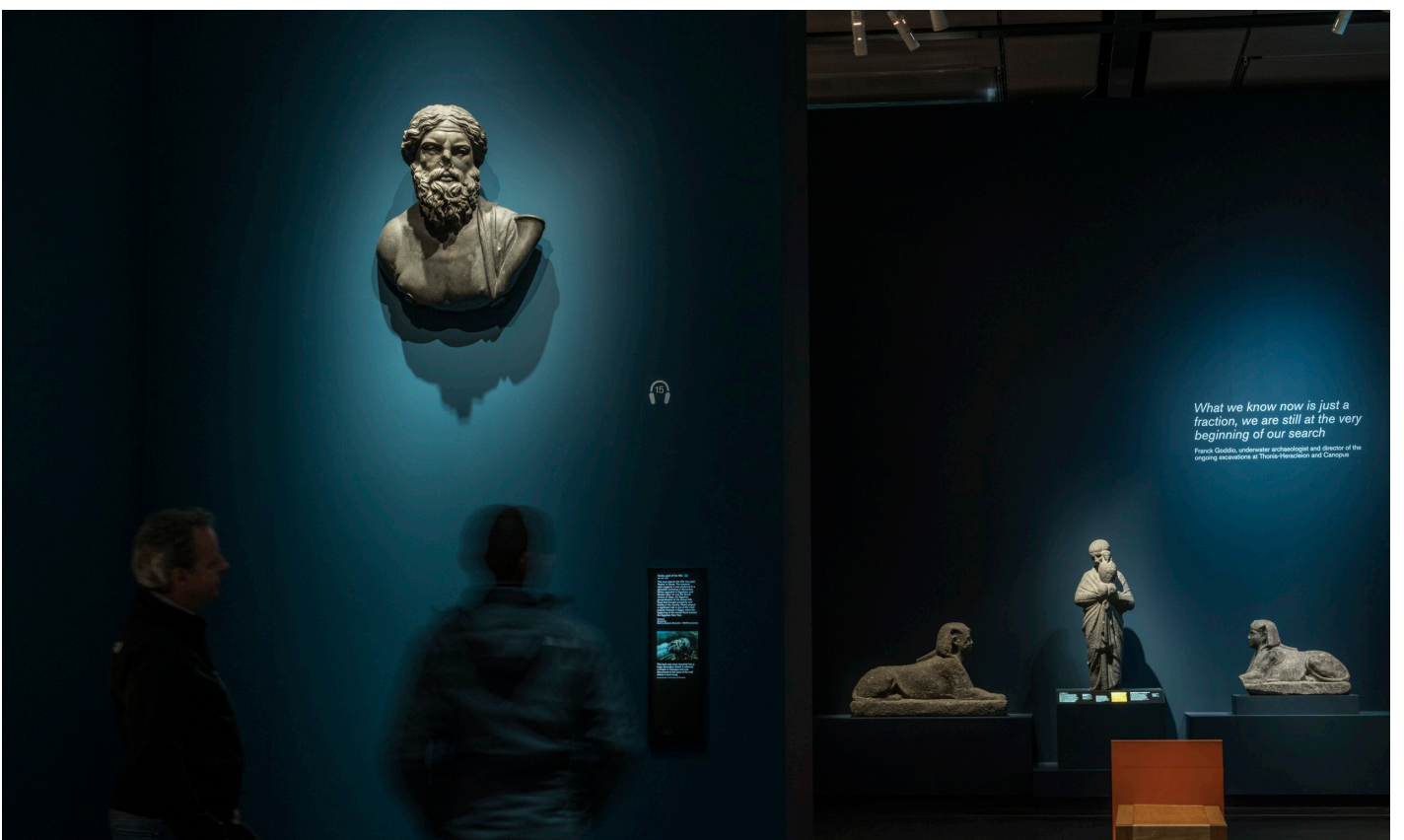


GOD OF THE NILE



This bust of greywacke was found at the temple site at Canopus. It is astonishingly well preserved and of the highest quality. From the head, only the end of the nose and the lowest part of two of the long strands of beard, where it joins the chest, are missing.

It belongs in a broad and well-known context, that of fine dark-stone statuary

in classical style produced in Egypt for buyers in the Delta and central Italy. It represents a long-bearded divinity, with vigorous ideal features, carrying a cornucopia at its proper left shoulder. This attribute and the divine 'portrait' best suit a river god; the material and context best suit a representation of the **god of the Nile, Neilos**.

The semicircular lower edge, the flat back with a wide-gauge dowel hole and the forward lean of the head all show that the bust was mounted inside a shield frame.

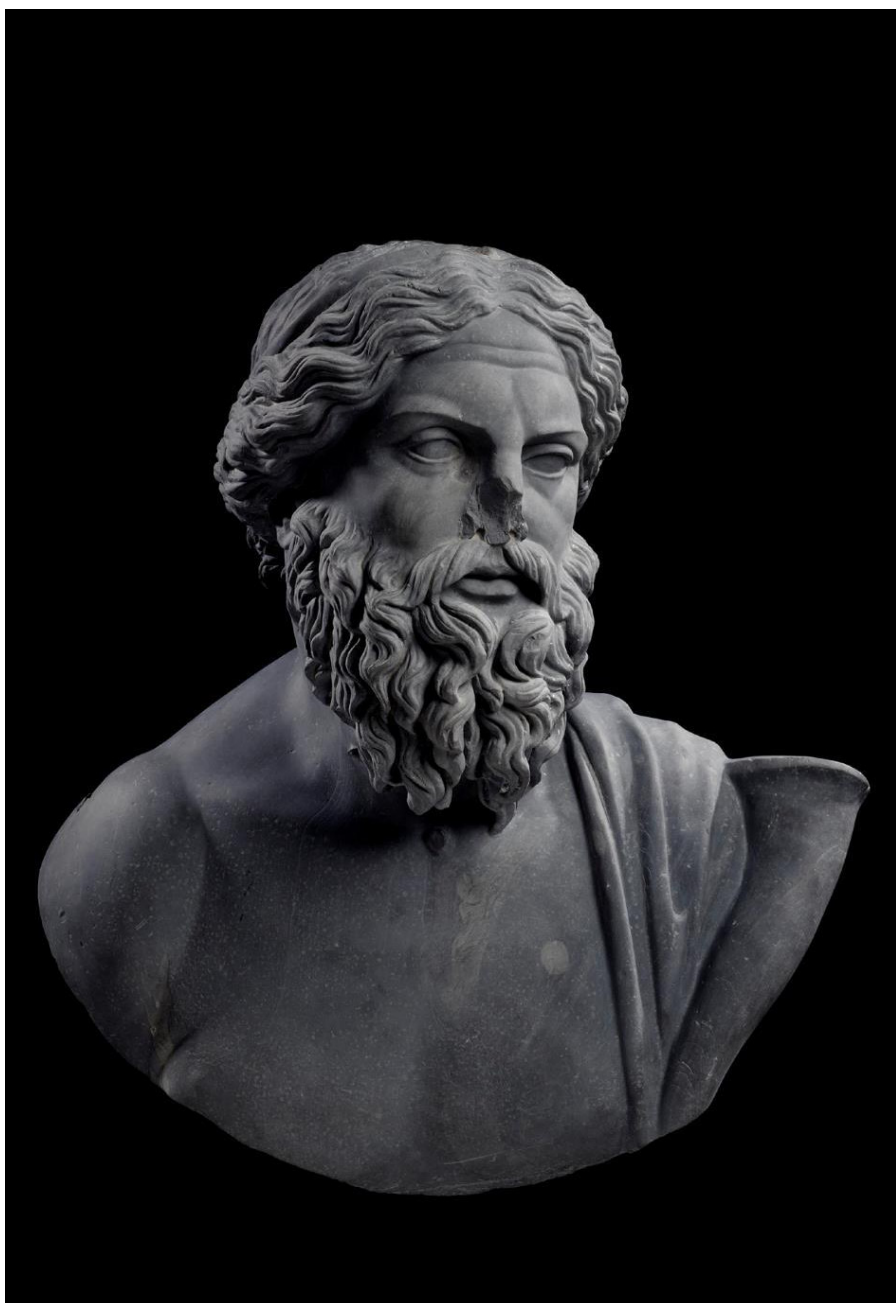


Cornucopia as attribute for Neilos busts

The character of the river god as an old but vigorous figure is represented by the thick long beard, by the muscled brow, and by light aging lines beneath the eyes. His ancient divinity is represented by the classically-formed features.



The identification as Neilos is confirmed by the cornucopia as well as by details of the hair and beard arrangement, which are closely paralleled in other representations of the god – for example, a reclining basalt figure in the Palazzo Doria, Rome. The drill hole in the fillet over the centre of the brow was almost certainly for the attachment of a lotus flower, an attribute worn by busts of Neilos on Roman-Period coins of Alexandria.



Specialist workshops in Alexandria

Such virtuoso sculptures of Greek divinities in dark Egyptian stones were products of specialist workshops, located probably in Alexandria, that catered to a sophisticated clientele in Delta communities as well as in Rome and central Italy.

These workshops made purely Pharaonic-looking statuary, figures in 'mixed' Greek-Egyptian style and figures in purely classical style but in dark stone. The last category includes such extraordinary figures as the colossal basalt statues of Bacchus and Hercules from the imperial palace on the Palatine in Rome (now in Parma). Such sculptures could have a local Egyptian aspect that made the material appropriate – for figures such as Isis, Serapis and Neilos. Several such dark-stone busts of Serapis and at least two figures of the Nile survived. The new bust is a particularly high-quality and effective example of this category of sculptured product.

Shield images in use into the late Roman Period

Shield images had been devised in the Hellenistic Period as an honorific portrait form. Their use had been extended to images of gods and heroes in the later Hellenistic Period, and they remained in use for sculptured images of both men and gods into the late Roman Period.

The shield-portrait format, the sharp classical style of the eyes, lips and hair, and the deeply drilled, mannered symmetry of the beard with its stone 'bridges' onto the chest indicate a date probably in the 2nd century C. E.

Object: Greywacke, Roman Period, 2nd c. CE, Maritime Museum Alexandria (SCA 842)

Source: Original description by R.R.R.Smith 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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