

RAM OF AMUN

LIMESTONE SLAB

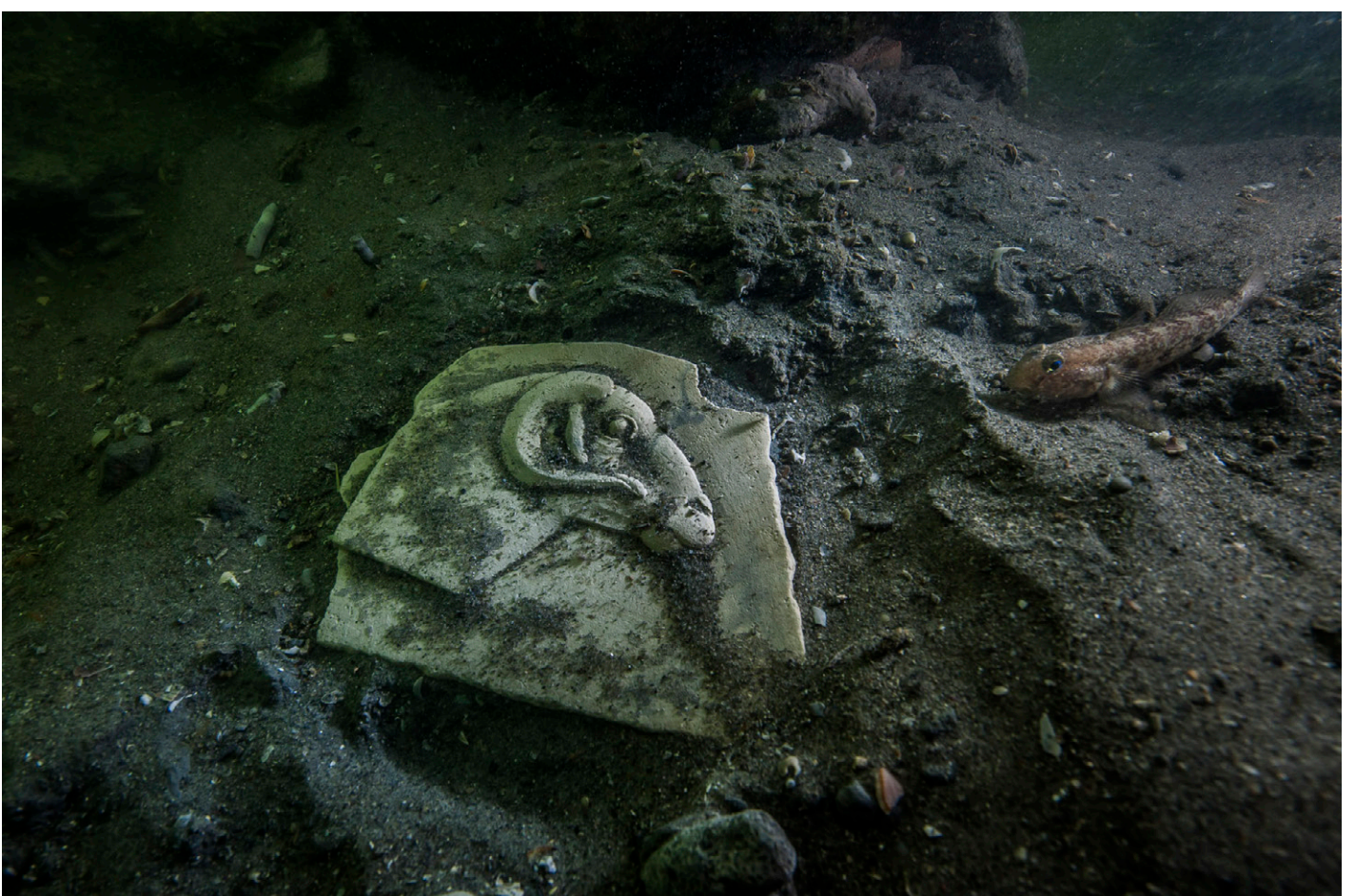


During the IEASM excavations of a small sanctuary in an area north of the temple of Amun-Gereb in Thonis-Heracleion a limestone slab was discovered with **two finely chiselled ram's heads figure on both sides.**

They are no doubt the representation of Amun.

Cult of Nubian origins

Horns and ears identify him as *ovis aries palaeoatlanticus*, a species which appeared in Egypt around 2000 BC, perhaps coming from Nubia, which was conquered during the New Kingdom, and where the population was intensely engaged in the rearing of livestock. The Nubian origins of this cult could explain the association of the ram with Amun, and thus the addition of curved horns to the crowns of the reigning or the deceased king on the occasion of specific rituals represented in the Osiris temple at Abydos.



Continuous use of ram motif

The use of this motif of the ram's head with curved horns was continued into the Ptolemaic and Roman periods. On coins, these curved ram's horns of the king of the gods flanked the head of Alexander the Great, who was recognised by the oracle at the temple of Siwa ("the oasis of Amun") as the son of Zeus (Amun).

According to Callisthenos, the divine decision was rendered by a sign of the "face of Amun" set at the bow of the sacred barge. Was it a ram's head like that which decorated the boat of the god at Thebes?

Whatever it was, this affiliation appeared differently several centuries later. In the Novel of Alexander (third century AD), it is written that the future conqueror's mother was visited by Amun – or rather by Nectanebo, the last native pharaoh – who slipped into the skin of the god and dressed "in a delicate fleece of a ram, with its horns on his temples".

Stamp by priestly graphic designers

The first time that the “living image of the cult” appeared at Thonis-Heracleion was on a coin weight of the fourth century BC, bearing on one side a protome of an essentially identical ram, and on the other the reverse side of an Athenian tetradrachm; it **confirmed the importance of the temple of Amun** in the economic management of the town. According to Jean Yoyotte, whether punched into lead or chiselled into limestone, “the ram of Amun had truly lent its head to the priestly graphic designers as a stamp to personalise the affairs of the god”.



Parallel to Naukratis decree

A decree at Naukratis, dating from the year 282 BC in the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus, which was issued in honour of Khemamenope son of Harpakebis and Esnebtekh, allows an interesting parallel to the objects from the excavations at Thonis-Heracleion to be drawn, because the protagonists are identical: Khonsu-Thoth and Amun and his ram. In the upper part of the stela, Khemamenope adores the “ram of Amun-Re”, in front of which is erected an altar loaded with loaves of bread and plants.



Below, the demotic text gives thanks to Khemamenope for the administration of the sacred goods and the care administered to the divine animal which “he had in his protection”, on the part of a “group of sheep breeders connected with the temple, some of whom being priests of inferior rank and linked to the service of the Divine Offering to Amun”.

The stele provides information about the life (and death?) of Amun’s holy animal. A place was built to house it, and then salt was brought, which sheep particularly relish. This could also have been natron so the animal could benefit at its death from funerary rites of mummification, in the same way as the sacred bulls Apis, Bukhis or Mnevis.

Object: Limestone. L. 11.5 cm. Sixth century BC. Maritime Museum, Alexandria (SCA 1579)

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, Minneapolis

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