

# SERAPIS AND CALATHOS



This high-quality object was found in Canopus, in an area which seems to have been used for storing or depositing broken statues. It is a **colossal masculine head** in white marble. It is broken at the base of the neck. The tip of the nose is missing, as well as the hair at the apex of the forehead. The top of the head is



surmounted by a circular horizontal surface, slightly in relief.

## Proof of divine image

In the middle of this disc, a square hole has been made, designed for the tenon attaching an additional element to the top of the head. This detail and the impressive size of the head prove that we are dealing with a divine image. The powerful face, endowed with a luxuriant beard and hair, is characteristic of effigies of **Serapis**.





The shape of the disc, at the top of the head, is exactly the same as the base of a grain measure, known as the calathos, which the god routinely wore in representations.





## Sculpture pieces brought together

Further away on the sea bed of ancient East Canopus, the **calathos** belonging to this sculpture has been found.

This is made of white marble and is cylindrical in form, flaring out slightly towards the top. The upper surface is damaged and the back erased. In the middle of the base a hole has been made, designed to receive the attaching tenon.



The surface of the calathos is decorated with two similar plants. Certainly, this is a stylized depiction of olive trees – the most common decoration on the headgear of Serapis. It may date from the Roman Period, unlike the head. So one may assume that the calathos in question was an addition or a replacement to the earlier statue.

## **Second largest sculpture head found in Egypt**

The size of the sculpture is an aspect which is vital to its interpretation.

In its current state, with the calathos, it measures eighty-three centimetres high. Among the heads found in Egypt of comparable dimensions, we know of only the marble example exhibited at the Greco-Roman Museum in Alexandria (fifty-three centimetres) or the plaster head in the same museum (fifty-five centimetres). Only the Crocodilopolis head at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo is larger, reaching ninety centimetres in height.





## Cult statue of a temple

We should note that all are of the 'anastole' type. The mode of attachment at the back of the sculpture indicates that it belonged to a statue of a god, to all appearances of the canonical type, i.e. enthroned.

We must therefore imagine a statue measuring between four and four-and-a-half metres in height. In a temple, there could be only one statue of the god on this scale: the cult statue.

Naturally, it was not found in its original location but very close on the foundation of a huge temple, most probably a sanctuary to Serapis: The Serapeum of Canopus.

## Hellenistic original

Taking account of its artistic quality and the stylistic traits corresponding closely to Hellenistic art in the second half of the 2nd century BC, we would be inclined to regard this head of Serapis as a Hellenistic original from that period, a fragment of a cult statue whose role was important in the religious centre of Canopus.

**Object:** Serapis. Marble. H. 83 cm. 2nd century BC to Roman Period. Canopus. Bibliotheca Alexandrina, Museum of Antiquities (SCA 169, 206)

**Source:** Original description by Zsolt Kiss 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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