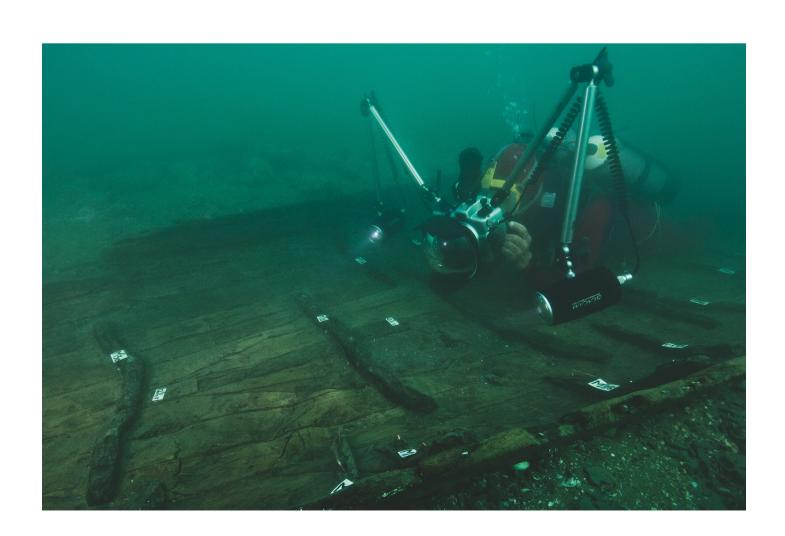
RITUAL BOAT FROM THONIS-HERACLEION



At the western end of a major waterway in Thonis-Heracleion the IEASM discovered a small boat around 10m long by 2m wide. The vessel has a crescentic shape with a flat-bottomed hull. It was assembled using mortise-and-tenon joinery with frames secured to the planking using double-clenched copper alloy nails. **Ship 11** is unusual in the assemblage from the sunken city

as it is the only one constructed from **sycamore fig**, although this wood is used for shipbuilding timber elsewhere in Egypt.

The waterway in which ship 11 was found passes on the northern side of the Central Island on which the **temple of Amun-Gereb** stood. The island was the focus of life in the port-city from the foundation of the temple between 450–380 BC until its destruction in the natural disaster at the end of the 2nd century BC. The deposition of ship 11 dates to around 400–325 BC, shortly after the foundation of the temple.



Sacred barque associated with Osiris

Preliminary analyses of the vessel form, context of its deposition, and the objects discovered around it, suggest that ship 11 may be the remains of a sacred barque associated with the god Osiris. The wood that it was constructed from, *Ficus sycomorus*, comes from the Egyptian 'Tree of Life' that was sacred to the god Osiris and would have been a particularly apt choice for the construction of a temple barque made to participate in the rituals associated with this god.



Such a barque, for example, may have been used in the navigation of Osiris on the 29th of Khoiak, when the god travelled to the west in his sacred boat from his temple in Thonis-Heracleion to that in Canopus.

The vessel had seen a lifetime of work in and around the waterways of the port-city, as can be seen from the scratches on the underside of the hull where the vessel had been repeatedly beached or hauled out of the water. The barque was at the functional heart of religious festivals and activities that were adapted to the local environment.

Ship carefully abandoned

Ship 11 did not sink as the result of an accident. This can be seen in the careful and deliberate removal of a plank of the keel to let water in. Given that it was found amidst other deposits that have been interpreted as being ritual in character, it is unlikely

that it was simply discarded in this location when the ship graveyard of the port was only a few hundred metres away to the east. Instead, ship 11 was carefully abandoned at a propitious liminal location within the sacred geography of the city, articulated with the temples, shrines and waterways, and surrounded by a range of objects clearly placed into the water as part of acts of temple and everyday ritual.

Foremost among these are a group of simpula, long-handled ladles that were most probably linked to the Osirian celebrations during the month of Khoiak, which were repetitively deposited along the banks of the waterway with their long axis in an eastwest direction.



Largest assemblage of vessels ever to be discovered

More than 70 ancient ships have been discovered in the waters around the port-city of Thonis-Heracleion by the IEASM. These were deposited both individually and in groups from the 8th to the 2nd century BC. A variety of explanations account for their deposition: shipwrecking, abandonment and structural reuse, as well as ritual deposition. It is the largest assemblage of vessels ever to be discovered in one location in the ancient world and is an incomparable resource for understanding aspects of the nautical archaeology of Egypt's Late and Ptolemaic Periods.

Object: Sycamore fig, fourth century BC, location: canal alongside the temple of Amun-Gereb of Heracleion.

Sources: Original text by Damian Robinson, 2018 'The depositional contexts of the ships from Thonis-Heracleion, Egypt' International Journal of Nautical Archaeology 47(2): 325–36.

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