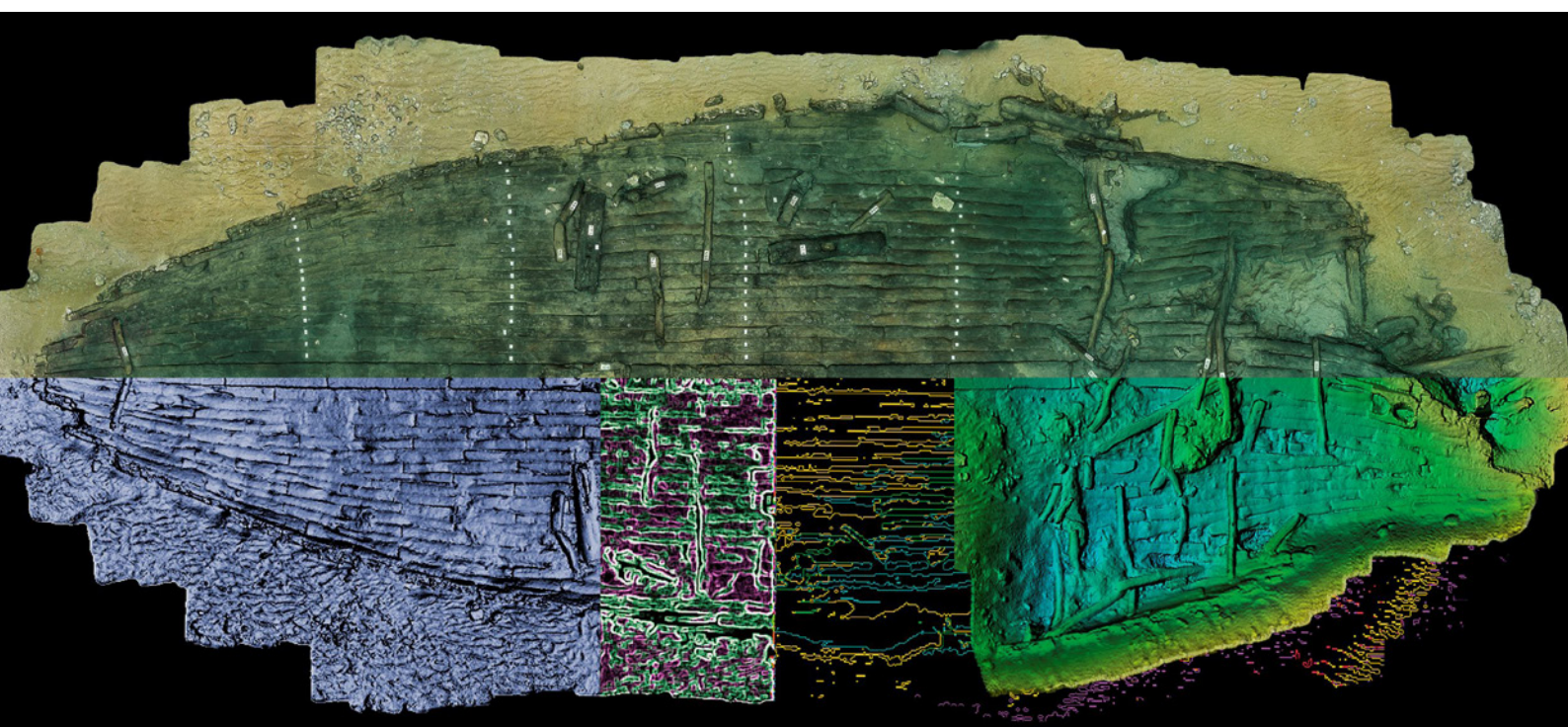
FRANCK GODDIO
UNDERWATER ARCHAEOLOGIST

BARIS
AN EGYPTIAN RIVER BOAT



Although archaeological finds of Egyptian ships and boats and their fragments are not numerous, our knowledge of **Egyptian ship building** is not as poor as it could be thanks to a great number of detailed models and representations of ancient sea and river craft found in tombs and on the walls of the temples. In the **Late Period** (664– 332 BC), however,

iconographic data becomes scarce, and only a single archaeological example of a boat from Mataria has so far been briefly published.

Thus, the **discovery of 36 vessels** dated to the Late Period in the port regions and canals of the submerged city of Thonis-Heracleion provides a rare opportunity to study the construction principles and methods that are characteristic of Egyptian ship building at this time. One of them is **Ship 17**.

Preserved under layer of sand and clay

Ship 17 is dated to the beginning of the fifth to the middle of the fourth century BC. About 70 per cent of the hull has been excavated, the remainder, held in place by clay deposits, was left in situ in order to protect the vessel. The hull of the ship was well-preserved under a 50 cm thick layer of sand and clay. It contained no cargo. Its construction shows numerous parallels with **Herodotus' description** of the local Egyptian river boat called a **baris**.

Herodotus' description in Historiae 2.96 around 450 BC:

"Their boats with which they carry cargoes are made of the acacia, of which the form is very like that of the Cyrenaican lotus, and its sap is gum. From this acacia, then, they cut planks two cubits long and arrange them like bricks, building their ships in the following way: on the strong and long tenons they insert two-cubit planks.

When they have built their ship in this way, they stretch beams over them. They use no ribs. They obturate the seams from within with papyrus. There is one rudder, passing through a hole in the boat's keel. The mast is of acacia-wood and the sails of papyrus. These boats cannot sail upstream unless a fresh breeze continues; so they are hauled from the bank; but downstream they are thus managed: they have a raft made of tamarisk wood, fastened together with matting of reeds, and a pierced stone of about two talents' weight; the raft, made

fast by a rope, floats ahead of the boat, and the stone is made fast by another rope behind. So, driven by the current, the raft floats swiftly and tows the 'baris' (which is the name of these boats), and the stone dragging behind on the bottom keeps the boat's course straight. They have many of these boats; some transport many thousands of talents."

Herodotus' statements correspond to evidence of the ship

The wordby-word analysis of this text demonstrates that all the statements of Herodotus, except for the smaller length of the planks and the absence of frames in the construction of the baris, correspond exactly to the evidence of ship 17. These two mismatches can be explained by the larger size of ship 17 in comparison with the boat described by Herodotus.

The resemblance between the baris and ship 17 starts with the construction material (acacia) and the type of vessel (Nilotic freighter) and then continues with both the longitudinal (keel,

planking) and transversal (through-beams) structure of the ship.
The methods of assembling the planking and making the hull watertight are exactly the same as in Herodotus' description. Finally, the steering system of ship 17 and the presence of the mast are also corroborated by the ancient text.

The arguments cited above allow us to state that ship 17 from Thonis-Heracleion most probably belongs to a type of vessel that Herodotus described as a baris, or at least to a type that was closely related to it.

Use of baris in the Nile Delta

This type of vessel with a shallow draft and a flat keel was perfectly suited for the navigational conditions of the Delta that included shallow waters and numerous sandbanks. Alternatively, these ships could have been used for the lightening of cargo on to or off of large sea-going freighters that may have anchored in the deeper waters of the port of Thonis-Heracleion.

Advantage of the Thonis-Heracleion site

The advantage of the site of Thonis-Heracleion is that the information provided by ship 17 can be supplemented and extended by the excavations of other ships dated to the Late Period in the harbour. This will allow a more precise definition of the constructional principles and methods used during this time, many of which remain unique to the ancient Egyptian ship-building tradition.

Object: Acacia wood, reconstructed length of about 28 m, beam of 8 m, Late Period, location: port region of Thonis-Heracleion

Source: Original description by Alexander Belov, Archaeological evidence for the Egyptian baris (Herodotus Historiae 2.96) in Thonis Heracleion in Context, Oxford Centre for Maritime Archaeology, 2015

Further reading: Ship 17 a baris from Thonis-Heracleion by Alexander Belov, Oxford Centre for Maritime Archaeology, University of Oxford 2019. L'epave d'Heraceion et la baris d'Hérodote, Les Dossiers d'Archéologie vol. 364: 48-51, 2014

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