

# GARDEN VAT FROM THE GREAT TEMPLE



This garden vat made of pink granite was excavated on the site of the temple of Amun-Gereb in Thonis-Heracleion. It measures 205 cm and is dated to the Ptolemaic Period, between the fourth and second century BC. It is a **very rare object** that played an important role in the preparations for the celebrations of the **Mysteries of Osiris**.



The form of these Mysteries is known from texts and bas-reliefs engraved in the chapels of Dendera, which Cleopatra VII (ca. 50 BC) had compiled from sources dating back to the Middle Kingdom:

*”The Osiris presiding at the Temple-of-the-Prince, the great in the Divine, is made in garden-vat work of Khentia-mentiu with barley and sand from the mouth of the canal.”*



# The celebrations of the Mysteries of Osiris

From 1850 BC, the religious ceremonies of Abydos in Upper Egypt commemorated the death of Osiris – killed and then cut into pieces by his brother Seth – and glorified his return to life.

During the fourth month of the Nile flood – the **month of Khoiak** between October and November – a figurine of Osiris was manufactured, preserved during the year, and finally sent on the nechemet barque to the tomb of the god – the sacred mound – to be buried there.

At the same time, a comparable cult around Sokaris, the mummified falcon god who was seen as a manifestation of the resurrected Osiris, took place at Memphis. With time, these Osirian liturgies spread out and entered into all of the temples in Egypt.



# Adaptation of the cult in Thonis-Heracleion

It is likely that as the cult spread it was adapted to fit with local circumstances, which was certainly the case at Canopus and Thonis-Heracleion. Nevertheless, despite these modifications of mythology and ritual in the light of local beliefs and traditions, we can still refer to the Osirian oratories of the temple of Hathor at Dendera to help understand the religious ceremonies observed in the sanctuaries of the two sites in the Canopic region.





These Osiris Mysteries unfolded like a sacred drama, “played” in the chapels where Osiris, protected from his brother Seth and helped by his sister-wife Isis, continued to return to life. Hieroglyphic texts explain how a figure in the shape of a mummy, made of barley and black silt doused with the water of the Nile flood, was placed in the “garden vat”.

Sprayed with water until it germinated, the now green figure – the colour of life, renewal and prosperity – symbolised the rebirth of the god. Another Osiris figure made from precious and semi-precious stones was also made each year.



The effigy of Osiris made of earth mixed with barley grains was set to germinate in the garden vat and the two divine silhouettes were then “each day with a golden situla” sprayed with water from the sacred lake or canal up to the 21st Khoiak.

The liquids – “the humours of Osiris” – flowing out of the garden vat, like the one that was discovered in the holy of holies of the great temple of Thonis-Heracleion, were devotedly collected in a lower basin of pink granite.

**Object:** Pink granite, Maritime Museum, Alexandria, (SCA 459)

**Source:** Exhibition catalogue „Osiris. Egypt’s Sunken Mysteries“, Paris, 2015, re-ed 2018, exh. Egypt’s Sunken Cities, Minneapolis Institute of Art, 4 November 2018 - 14 April 2019

**Photos:** Christoph Gerigk © Franck Goddio/Hilti Foundation