

VOTIVE BOATS OF THONIS- HERACLEION



A number of votive boats (most of them lead) were excavated in Thonis-Heracleion. They vary in size from 12–67 cm in length or more. All have a throne. The models are carefully made and the hatching on the lead replicates the papyrus that the vessels and thrones of the cultic fleet were made of. It is the **first time** that these kind of models have been found.

Models linked to the Mysteries of Osiris

The votive boats are clearly attached to the celebration of the **Mysteries of Osiris**, the most important religious event in ancient Egypt that took place in all major temples including that in Thonis-Heracleion. This is firstly because lead is associated with Osiris, and secondly because they reproduce the barques with a throne described in the ritual.

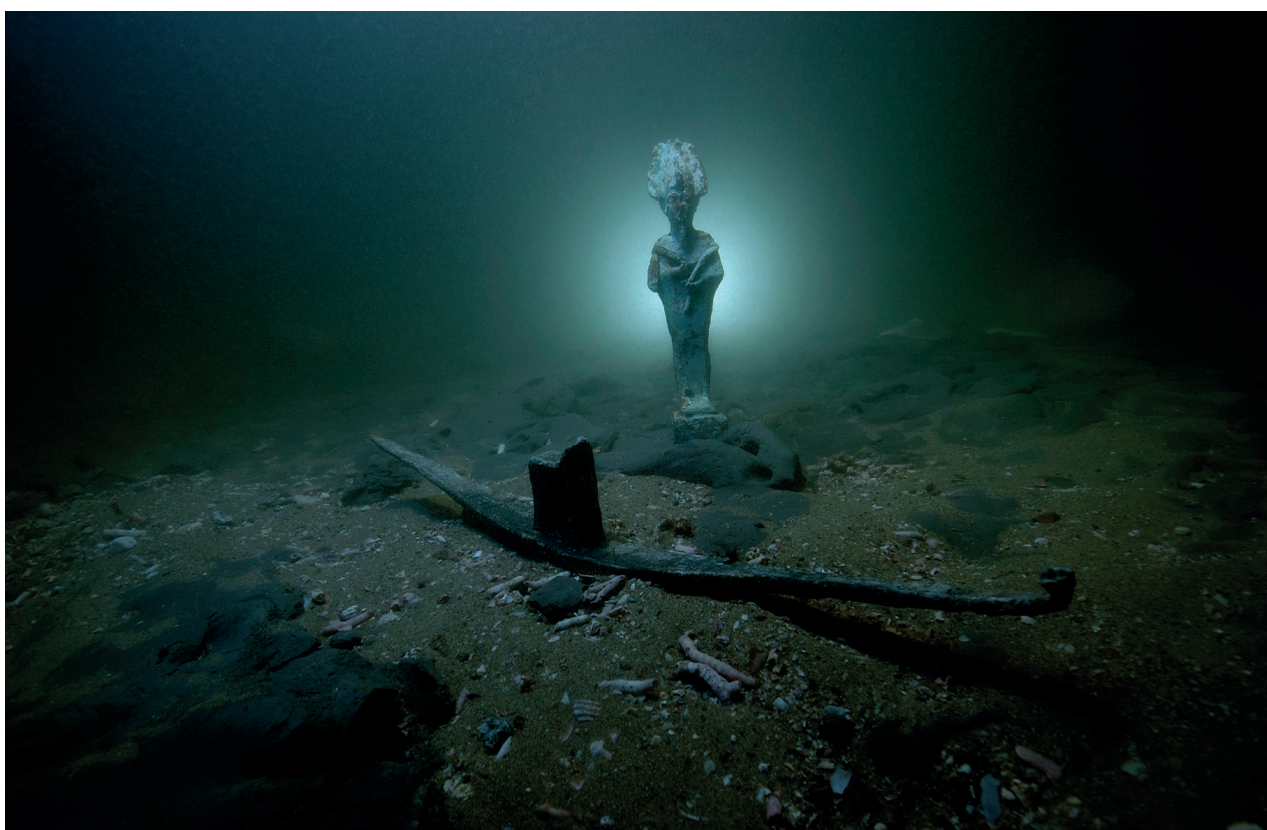
The ritual of the Navigation of Osiris vegetans took place on the 22nd of *Khoiak* (mid-October to mid-November). On that day, at the time of the eighth hour (2 pm), a fleet of 34 boats sailed on the sacred lake of the district of



Osiris. The papyrus-made boats, a cubit and two palms (67.5 cm) long, transported 34 deities who accompanied Osiris and the divine member, and were illuminated by 365 lamps.

Found in the proximity of the temple of Amun-Gereb

Nine of these votive boats were discovered in channels and harbour basins surrounding the great temple of Amun-Gereb in Thonis-Heracleion. Three of them had been deposited along with many lead weights and other objects made of lead under limestone slabs, which may have been a landing place for boats.



Two vessels from this deposit were almost of the same size as the life-size papyrus boats which sailed during the mysteries. Fifteen lead oil lamps have also been recovered from the harbour basins and canals. They were also often found near to the lead votive boats, and could recall the 365 lamps described in the ritual.

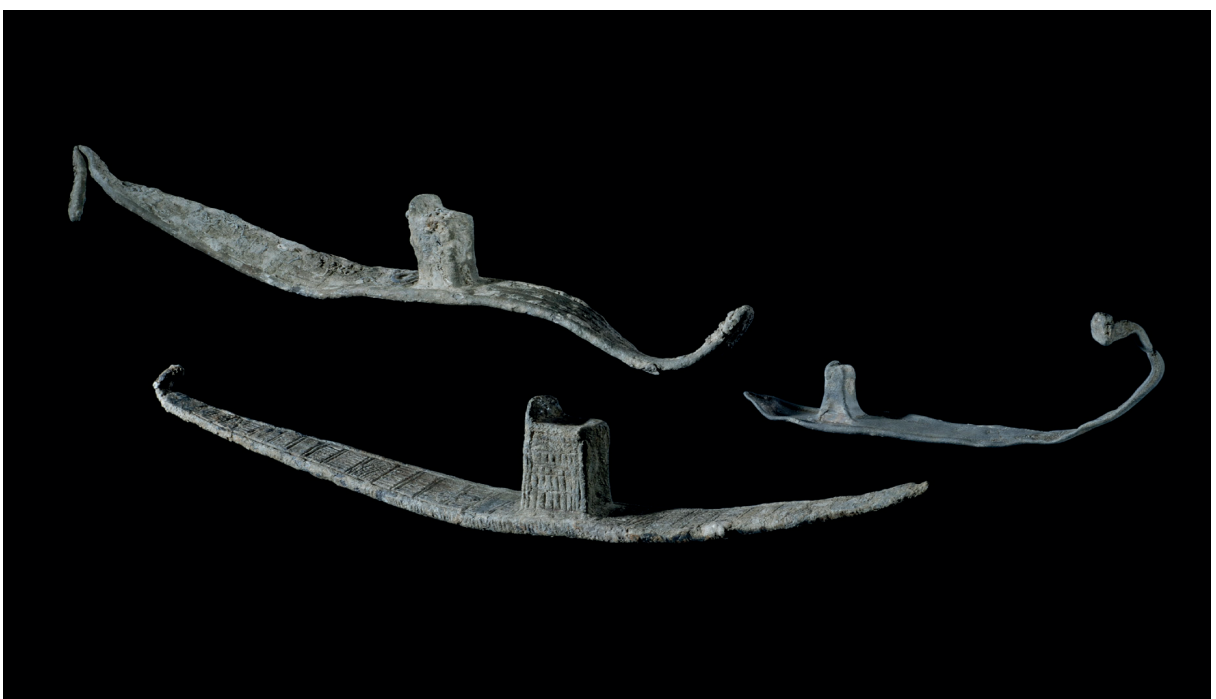
Re-use of model boats

The hull of one boat, its throne and its steering oars were found close to one another, but each under separate slabs of a mole. The fact that these elements were found underneath slabs proves that they were older than the time when the pavement was placed. Perhaps once used in Osirian rites, the models could not be melted down to be re-used. We do not know whether these boats were used once during the mysteries, or for several successive years, but they were certainly not destroyed after they went out of use. Rather, they were either deposited in the canals around the temple

of Amun-Gereb along the route that the papyrus barques were navigating on the 22nd of *Khoiak*, or carefully preserved with a view to being consecrated in votive deposits in foundations on the occasion of a new construction or rearrangement of the site. It may also suggest that the mole, made sacred by those deposits, was utilized during the Osirian ceremony.

Importance of Thonis-Heralceion for the celebration of the mysteries

The unusual number of deposits connected to the ritual of *Khoiak* show the important role of the Grand Canal and the waters surrounding the temple of Amun- Gereb in the context of the celebration of the mysteries.



The archaeological excavations show quite clearly that they replaced the sacred lake of the Osirian districts. One might recall in this context a detail from the Book of the Temple about Osirian complexes, that the offerings made in this area were not intended for human consumption, but were returned to nature and probably thrown into the water. This was similarly the case for votive offerings in small lead containers, which were found throughout the entire network of water channels in Thonis-Heracleion.

The temple of Amun-Gereb, like all sanctuaries of the *hone* was surrounded by water and its cultural practices were adapted to the local topography. The channels surrounding the temples were the privileged area for the navigation of Osiris.

Object: Votive barques. Lead. Seventh to second century BC. Thonis-Heracleion. Maritime Museum. Alexandria (SCA 1039, SCA 405, SCA 1017, SCA 1039, SCA 1072, SCA 1606-1617, 1607, 1591)

Source: Original description by Franck Goddio, “The sacred topography of Thonis-Heracleion” in “Thonis-Heracleion in Context“, Oxford Centre for Maritime Archaeology Monographs, 2015.

Photos: Christoph Gerigk © Franck Goddio/Hilti Foundation