

BRONZE WATERFOWL FIGUREHEADS



In the ancient Egyptian port–city of Thonis-Heracleion **two decorative pieces** from small boats, found separately from the ships' hulls, were excavated by the Institut Européen d'Archéologie Sous–Marine (IEASM) directed by Franck Goddio. They are important finds complementing this rare type of material from Egypt.

Description

Figurehead SCA1592 was found near the bank of the city's South Temple Channel. The piece was only covered by 0.1 m of sediment and its context indicates that it dates from the 4th century BC. Made of solid bronze, the piece measures 0.17 m high and 0.086 m wide.

Its upper half renders, in a sufficiently realistic manner, the head, neck, and upper breast of a waterfowl, ending in a flat surface that forms a kind of base.

Item SCA156 is not complete and its function long remained unclear. The piece represents a head of a waterfowl.



Today the similarity in material, size, and shape of the two pieces makes it possible to identify SCA1561 as a fragment of a figurehead. Made of bronze, it measures 0.12 m long 0.024 m wide. It was found under 30 cm of sediment in a similar context as SCA1592 and is equally dated to the 4th century BC.

Egyptian tradition of decorating posts with animal effigies

In ancient Egypt the tradition of decorating the posts with animal effigies may be traced back to the Predynastic Period. The list of animal images includes hedgehogs, bovinæ, horses, rams, antelopes, lions, snakes, falcons, vultures, owls and numerous species of waterfowl.

Most of these effigies had a sometimes quite complex set of religious connotations. Seventy species of birds can be confidently identified in Egyptian iconography and 94 from the bone

remains found in tombs, temples, and middens. Of these, 22 were geese and ducks.

Position of the boat's figureheads: Stem or stern?

Item SCA1592 is intact which considerably facilitates understanding its purpose. The identification of it as an item of stem or stern post decoration is supported by the angle between the base of the piece and the plate which corresponds to the position of a stem or stern post.

But was the piece a stem or stern decoration? Iconographic material suggests that it had been positioned upon the stem. The sculptures of all known waterfowl decorations from Egypt invariably look forward except for several ships belonging to an established foreign type.

An identification as stem decoration is also a good fit for the estimated angle of the post (23 degrees from vertical): this figure is high and corresponds better to a stem than to a sternpost.

Real boat's items or models?

It may be questioned whether the pieces come from a real boat or from a model? Could it, for example, have come from one of the ritual barks carried in procession by the priests that are evidenced by many reliefs?

There are two objections to this hypothesis. Firstly, the available iconography does not show watercraft of this kind decorated with waterfowl. Most often they show figureheads representing a falcon, ram, antelope, or an anthropomorphic god. Secondly, the discovery sites of both finds correspond to the shore of a major waterway of Thonis-Heracleion thus indicating that the items most probably came from real crafts.

Purpose of the waterfowl items

The finds SCA1592 and 1561 were discovered in the very centre of Thonis-Heracleion near the major temple of Amun-Gereb.

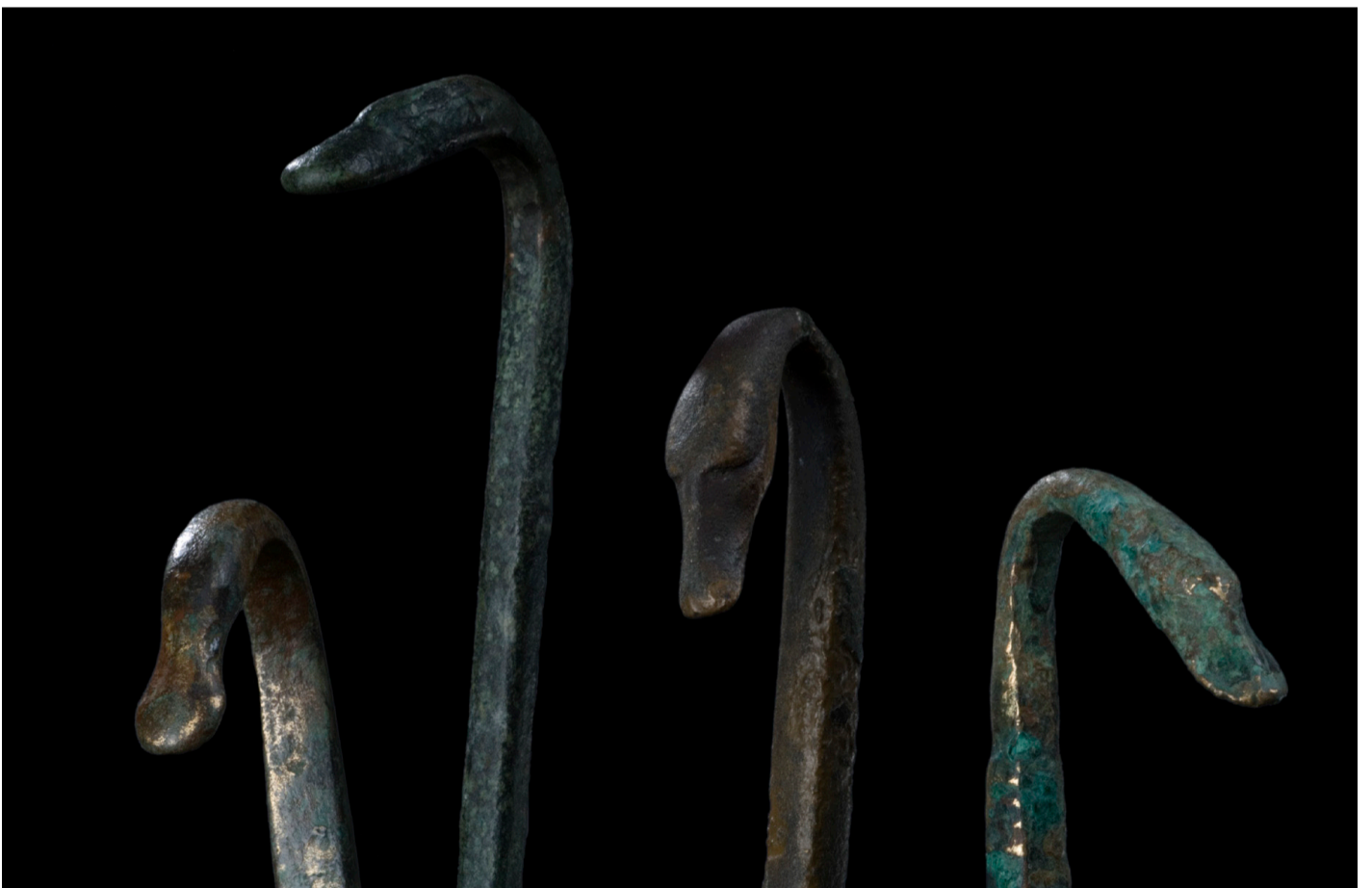
Thus, it is very tempting to suggest that they had a religious connection. The **Mysteries of Osiris** included a navigation of the god's effigy on the 29th of the month of Khoiak from his temple in Thonis-Heracleion to that in Canopus.

A **ritual ship** some 10 m long and dating to 400–325 BC was found scuttled at the entrance of the Grand Canal and also in the vicinity of the main temple of Amun-Gereb.



This ship was built of sycamore, a timber sacred in ancient Egypt, and many ritual objects, including numerous **simpula decorated with duck heads**, were found around it.

It may be suggested that figureheads SCA1592 and 1561 were installed on similar boats but of smaller dimensions. They could have been used by priests during the Osirian celebrations of the month of Khoiak or in other rituals.





Objects: Bronze, Maritime Museum Alexandria (SCA 1592, SCA 1561)

Sources:

Alexander Belov (2023) Two Bronze Waterfowl Figureheads from Thonis-Heracleion, *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology*, 52:2, 255-270

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