Nile shipwreck discovery proves Herodotus right—after 2,469 years

Greek historian’s description of ‘twin boats’ indicated by archaeologists at mouth of Nile

By Ben Woods

In the fifth century BC, the Greek historian Herodotus visited Egypt and wrote of ancient Nubian ships that may have been used in the construction of the Great Pyramid of Giza. For centuries, the ancient world’s first great narrative historian, he was revered for his intricate descriptions of events and cultures.

But in recent years, scholars have argued over his account because there was no archaeological evidence that such ships ever existed. Now, to see a “twin ship preserved” would be the ultimate achievement for a ship that has been under the Nile for more than 1,500 years. But it seems Herodotus was right.

“It wasn’t until we discovered the shipwreck that we realized Herodotus was right,” said Dr Daniel Robinson, director of Oxford University’s Centre for Maritime Archaeology, and publishing the excavation’s findings. “What Herodotus described was what we were looking at.”

Robinson said previous scholars had dismissed Herodotus’ description as ‘twin boats’—two ships of similar size—because there has been no archaeological evidence that such ships existed.

“Robinson added: “Herodotus described the twin ships as long-hulled, shallow, and more than two meters high. We have identified these characteristics in the ship that we have excavated. In essence, we have a perfectly modern ship of similar size and shape, which is why we are so excited.”

After more than a century of exploration, they are now ready to conclude that the twin ships described by Herodotus were real. It is a significant discovery that has implications for our understanding of ancient shipping and trade routes.

The excavations were carried out in the Nile Delta, a region that is rich in historical remains, and the site of many ancient shipwrecks. The twin ships were found on the western bank of the Nile, near the town of Aswan. They were discovered using a combination of archaeological techniques, including ground-penetrating radar and sonar imaging.

The twin ships were found to be made of wood, with a hull thickness of around 0.1 meters, and were approximately 20 meters long. They were also equipped with a steering mechanism, which suggests they were designed for long-distance navigation.

“We were completely amazed to find such a well-preserved shipwreck with such a rich history,” said Robinson. “This discovery will help us to better understand the ancient world and its connections to the rest of the world.”

The twin ships were once part of a larger fleet, which was probably involved in trading goods between Egypt and other parts of the Mediterranean world. This fleet may have included other ships that were not excavated during the current project.

The twin ships will be carefully removed and transported to a museum for further study. The project will continue to explore the site, with the hope of finding more evidence of ancient shipping and trade.

“This discovery is a major step forward in our understanding of ancient shipping and trade,” said Robinson. “It is a testament to the importance of archaeological research and the value of exploring our cultural heritage.”