



Treasures of Ancient Egypt

SUNKEN CITIES

More than 1,200 years ago, the cities of Thonis-Heracleion and Canopus on Egypt's north coast disappeared beneath rising waters and natural disasters. Although ancient accounts told of their splendor, these cities were largely forgotten, lost in the Mediterranean Sea.

In 1996, marine archaeologists began searching Aboukir Bay for traces of the lost cities. Under the direction of maritime archaeologist Franck Goddio, the team rediscovered the two cities, uncovering important artifacts and deepening our understanding of life in ancient Egypt at a time of intense contact between Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans. These cities were also important religious centers and linked by an annual religious ceremony, the Mysteries of Osiris.



Photography Encouraged

Post your selfies and photos from the exhibition using **#VMFASunkenCities**, and VMFA will share select examples.

Non-flash photography only, please.

How to use this guide

Many of the objects in this exhibition lay submerged for more than 1,200 years in the depths of the Mediterranean Sea.

This symbol on the labels indicates objects recovered from the seafloor.



This brochure follows the layout of the exhibition and is organized around the themes of Continuity and Change. The guide highlights key works in each gallery and identifies these additional themes: **Time, Place, Belief, and Practice.**

Continuity and Change

This exhibition covers the period from roughly the seventh century BC to the fourth century AD, a time of tremendous change in ancient Egypt. Egyptian civilization transformed as it came into increasing contact with the peoples of the Near East, Mesopotamia, Greece, and, eventually, Rome. Old traditions were adapted to new circumstances, and new forms of artistic and religious practice emerged.

The Time

Late Period Egypt (seventh–fourth century BC) was a time of great social and political change. Both native Egyptian pharaohs and Persians ruled over the land during this era. Alexander the Great's conquest of Egypt in 332 initiated a new phase of its long history—three centuries of intense contact between the civilizations of Egypt and Greece under the Ptolemaic Dynasty. These ongoing interactions produced new forms of artistic, literary, and religious expression, trends that continued after Egypt became part of the Roman Empire in 30 BC.

The coins in this case represent Ptolemy I, founder of the Ptolemaic Dynasty (305–31 BC). When Alexander the Great died in 323 BC, his generals divided his empire and Ptolemy I took control of Egypt.



Coin with Head of Ptolemy I, 305–287 BC
Thonis-Heracleion | Gold | Greco-Roman Museum,
Alexandria. IEASM excavations (SCA 304)

The evolving relationship between Egyptian and Greek civilizations during the Ptolemaic Period can be traced in the coinage. Before the Greek conquest, coins had rarely been used in Egypt, but they became the foundation of the Ptolemaic economy. The Ptolemies embellished coins with images of living rulers, which communicated important messages about their power.

While the designs of Ptolemaic coins followed Greek artistic styles, Ptolemaic statues were often created in an Egyptian or hybrid Egyptian-Greek style. This statue of a Ptolemaic queen dressed as Isis embodies the Egyptian fusion of kings and queens with gods and goddesses. The rigid pose and pillar in the back is typical of traditional Egyptian statues, but her corkscrew hair is a typical Greek hairstyle. The combination of both Greek and Egyptian characteristics appealed to both communities.



Queen Dressed as Isis
2nd century BC | Thonis-Heracleion
Granodiorite
Alexandria National Museum
IEASM excavations (SCA 283)

Place

Canopus and Thonis-Heracleion were located in the western part of the Nile Delta, where the Canopic branch of the Nile once flowed. Both cities were important and together played a key role in the Mysteries of Osiris, one of the most significant religious festivals of the Egyptian calendar.

For centuries, until Alexandria replaced it in 331 BC, Thonis-Heracleion was Egypt's major Mediterranean port. Like today, trade was tightly controlled and taxes were levied.

This stele was found underwater in Thonis-Heracleion's most important sanctuary, the Temple of Amun-Gereb. The stele records a decree from Pharaoh Nectanebo I (reigned ca. 379–361 BC) that granted one-tenth of import taxes levied at Thonis-Heracleion to a temple of Neith, goddess of creation.



Stele of Thonis-Heracleion, 380 BC
Thonis-Heracleion | Late Period, Dynasty 30,
reign of Nectanebo I | Black granodiorite
Alexandria National Museum. IEASM excavations (SCA 277)

Information from this stele as well as other inscriptions and literary sources have allowed scholars to confirm that Thonis and Heracleion referred to the same city. Egyptians knew it as Thonis and Greeks called it Heracleion. The compound name reflects the blending of cultures that occurred during the Late Period.

A variety of goods passed through the port of Thonis-Heracleion, including metal, wine, wool, oil, and wood. The most important export from Egypt to Greece was grain, but others included gold, alum, and natron (used in dyeing fabrics) as well as finished products like perfume, papyrus, and amulets.

This bottle decorated with a panther figure contained perfume, one of the trade goods that was taxed upon entry into Egypt. The shape and decoration are typical of ceramics from Athens, Greece, which had a thriving pottery industry. Imported Greek perfume was a precious commodity in Egypt, used in both daily life and religious ceremonies.

Found at Thonis-Heracleion, this bottle was probably a votive offering to give thanks to a god or appeal for favor. Many ancient peoples made offerings for divine protection during sea journeys and success in business.



Lekythos (Perfume Bottle), ca. 400 BC
Thonis-Heracleion | Late Period
Terra-cotta | Alexandria National
Museum. IEASM excavations (SCA 247)

As material goods were traded between Greeks and Egyptians, cultural ideas and practices were also exchanged.

Belief and Practice

The Egyptians (like the Greeks and Romans) were polytheists, who believed in many gods and goddesses. Polytheists honored their gods by building temples, making offerings and sacrifices, and holding religious festivals. Beginning in the Middle Kingdom Period (ca. 2055–1650 BC), the Mysteries of Osiris were celebrated as one of Egypt's most important religious festivals. The Mysteries associated Osiris, lord of the netherworld and rebirth, with the annual flooding of the Nile that ensured the fertility of the Nile valley.

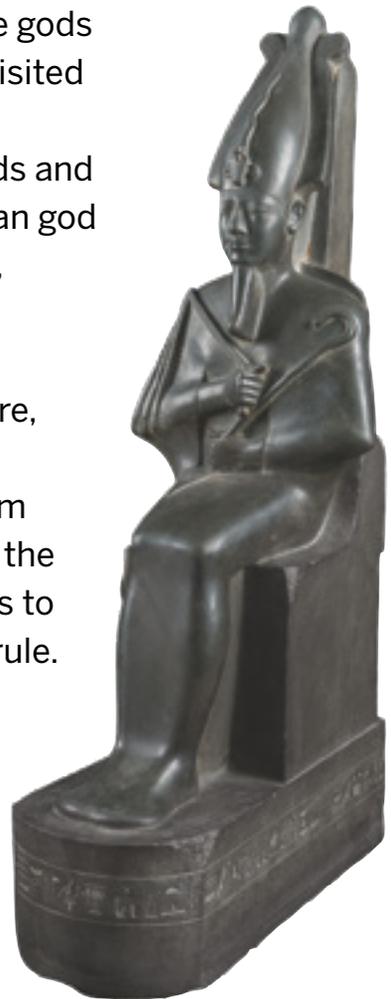


Statue of Isis, 570–526 BC
Saqqara | Late Period, Dynasty 26, reign of Amasis | Graywacke
Egyptian Museum, Cairo (CG 38884 and CG38358)

The rituals echoed the myth of Osiris, whose death at the hands of his jealous brother Seth represented the lifeless land before the flood. His restoration by his sister-wife, Isis, symbolized the replenished land after the flood.

As the first mummy, Osiris is almost always shown in mummified form, with arms and feet wrapped in a shroud.

Ancient travelers often honored the gods and goddesses of the places they visited or settled in. Over time, they made connections between their own gods and those of other cultures. The Egyptian god Osiris was identified with Dionysos, the Greek god of wine, vegetation, and plenty, while Isis was merged with Demeter, goddess of agriculture, and Aphrodite, goddess of beauty. The Ptolemies claimed descent from Dionysos and, therefore, promoted the worship of both Osiris and Dionysos to underscore the legitimacy of their rule.



Statue of Osiris, 570–526 BC
Saqqara | Late Period, Dynasty 26, reign of Amasis | Graywacke
Egyptian Museum, Cairo (CG 38884 and CG38358)

The resurrected Osiris together with Isis and their son, Horus, comprise one of the triads (groups of three gods) in the Egyptian pantheon. In life, the pharaoh was the incarnation of Horus, but after his death, the pharaoh, like Osiris, became a ruler in the netherworld.

Horus, the Egyptian god most closely identified with the pharaoh, is shown here as a falcon, standing guard over a pharaoh in the position of prayer. Egyptians often depicted gods with animal features to indicate shared characteristics.



Statue of Horus Protecting Pharaoh,
ca. 350 BC | Unknown origin | Late Period,
Dynasty 30, reign of Nectanebo II | Quartzite
Egyptian Museum, Cairo (JE 33262)

Belief and Practice: Festivals

Egyptians honored their gods with great festivals. During the month of Khoiak, at the end of the inundation or flooding season, they celebrated the Mysteries of Osiris, an annual festival that ensured the fertility of the land as well as the power of the pharaoh to protect and provide for his people with the help of the gods.

During the Khoiak festival, priests made Osiris *vegetans* figures, or corn mummies, by mixing Nile silt with seeds. The sacred waters of the Nile were poured over the corn mummy, and the seeds germinated, promising the renewal of life in this world and in the world to come. While much about the ceremonies and rituals remains unknown to us today, reliefs from Osirian chapels in Dendera, located far south of Thonis-Heracleion, reveal a great deal about the Mysteries of Osiris. Before the underwater excavations of Thonis-Heracleion, these



Osiris *Vegetans* Figure in a Falcon-Headed Coffin,
ca. 800–600 BC | Tihna el-Gebel | Third Intermediate Period
Sycamore (sarcophagus); earth, grain (figurine)
Egyptian Museum, Cairo (JE 36539 A, B, and C)

reliefs were one of the only sources of information about the Mysteries of Osiris.

The reliefs record that on the 22nd day of Khoiak, the corn mummy was carried in a nighttime maritime procession accompanied by thirty-three other gods in boats lit up by 365 lamps, one for each day of the Egyptian year.

Belief and Practice: Processions

The gods of ancient Egypt traversed the starry heavens in boats. Many Egyptian festivals included processions of boats carrying divine images to evoke this journey.

Dozens of boat models and actual boats have been discovered in the excavations of Thonis-Heracleion and Canopus. These findings provide extraordinary archaeological evidence of ritual practices that are otherwise known only through texts and images.

The boat models were found mostly along the Grand Canal near the temple to Amun-Gereb. They were probably left as votive offerings along the route that the boat procession followed on the 22nd day of Khoiak.

Ancient writings disclose that offerings to Osiris were to be symbolically removed from the human realm by deliberately damaging them, burning them, or throwing them into sacred water.

Votive boats, ca. 664–140 BC
Thonis-Heracleion | Lead
Alexandria Maritime Museum
(SCA 1607-1617, 1591)



Belief: Cults of Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt

One of the most enduring cults in Egyptian religion was the cult of the Apis Bull. It was originally established in Memphis, the first capital of a united Egypt in the Old Kingdom (ca. 2649–2130 BC). Apis took the form of an actual living bull, identified by his special markings. After each incarnation of Apis died, the bull transformed into Osirapis (Osiris-Apis) and was mummified, after which a new living Apis was identified. The Apis bull is the only Egyptian deity represented solely as an animal and never as a human with animal features. Beginning in the late seventh century, the Greeks showed a particular interest in the cult.



Apis Bull, AD 117–138
Alexandria | Roman Period,
reign of Hadrian | Black Diorite
Greco-Roman Museum, Alexandria (GRM 351)



Head of Serapis with Kalathos, 2nd century AD
Canopus | Roman Period | Marble
Bibliotheca Alexandrina Antiquities Museum
(SCA 169, 206)

The god Serapis was introduced into Egypt by Ptolemy I, the Macedonian founder of the Ptolemaic Dynasty. The name Serapis is probably related to Osiris-Apis, the version of the Apis bull in the netherworld. Serapis is typically depicted with a full head of curly hair and a beard, like the Greek gods Zeus (king of the gods), Hades (ruler of the underworld), and Asklepios (a god of healing). By combining gods traditionally worshipped by Egyptians and Greeks, Ptolemy I sought to unify his new kingdom. The worship of Serapis became one of the most

popular cults of the Roman Empire, spread by merchants, soldiers, and government officials.

Both the statue of the Apis Bull and this sculpture of Serapis date to the reign of the Roman Emperor Hadrian (AD 117–138), whose visit to Egypt had a profound impact on him. He promoted the cult of the Apis bull and Serapis throughout the Roman world.

Egyptian cults continued to adapt and transform during the Roman Period. Osiris-Canopus sculptures represent a distinct form of art that existed only in Egypt after the reign of Roman Emperor Augustus (27 BC–AD 14). Portraying Osiris in the form of a water jar, these sculptures are a specifically Roman interpretation of the god called Osiris *hydreios*, or more commonly Osiris-Canopus. The decoration on this jar reflects the Osiris *hydreios* cult's worship and glorification of water as the source of life, in particular the water that Osiris gives to the dead for regeneration.



Osiris-Canopus, ca. AD 100–200
Temple of Ras el-Soda, Alexandria |
Roman Period | Marble
Greco-Roman Museum, Alexandria
(GRM 25787)

We hope you enjoyed your visit to ***Sunken Cities: Treasures of Ancient Egypt***. We encourage you to visit VMFA's collection of Ancient Egyptian art on Level 2 and our Interactive Exhibition ***It's Egypt!*** in the Art Education Center.



Treasures of Ancient Egypt: Sunken Cities is organized by the European Institute for Underwater Archaeology with the generous support of the Hilti Foundation and in collaboration with the Ministry of Antiquities of the Arab Republic of Egypt. The exhibition program at VMFA is supported by the Julia Louise Reynolds Fund.

All photos: Christoph Gerigk © Franck Goddio/Hilti Foundation.

Franck Goddio holding an Osiris-Canopus,

ca. AD 1–20,

Canopus | Roman Period | Marble

Maritime Museum, Alexandria (SCA 205)

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