

The sunken temple of Thonis-Heracleion reveals its treasures and secrets

The underwater archaeological team, led by Franck Goddio, makes new discoveries off the coast of Egypt

Alexandria/Paris, September 2023 – The European Institute for Underwater Archaeology (IEASM), led by Franck Goddio in a joint mission with the Department of Underwater Archaeology of the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities of Egypt made further discoveries at the sunken site of Thonis-Heracleion in the Bay of Aboukir.

The team investigated the city's South canal, in to which huge blocks of stone from a great temple collapsed during a cataclysmic event dated to the mid-second century BC. This was the temple to the god Amun, where Pharaohs came to receive from the supreme god of the ancient Egyptian pantheon the titles of their power as universal kings. Precious objects belonging to the temple treasury have been unearthed, such as silver ritual instruments, gold jewellery and fragile alabaster containers for perfumes or unguents. They bear witness to the wealth of this sanctuary and the piety of the former inhabitants of the port city.

The archaeological excavations also revealed, metres deep under the area of the temple, under-ground structures supported by very well-preserved wooden posts and beams dating from the 5th century BC.

The development and use of new geophysical prospecting technologies has made it possible to detect cavities and objects buried under layers of clay several metres thick.

"It is extremely moving to discover such delicate objects, which survived intact despite the violence and magnitude of the cataclysm" says Franck Goddio, President of IEASM and director of excavations.

East of the Amun temple, a Greek sanctuary devoted to Aphrodite was discovered, which yielded imported bronze and ceramic objects. This illustrates that Greeks who were allowed to trade and settle in the city during the time of the Pharaohs of the Saïte

dynasty (664 - 525 BC) had their sanctuaries to their own gods. The presence of Greek mercenaries is also seen by numerous finds of Greek weapons. They were defending the access to the Kingdom at the mouth of the Canopic Branch of the Nile. This branch was the largest and the best navigable one in antiquity.

The remains of the port city of Thonis-Heracleion are now located under the sea, 7 kilometres from the present coast of Egypt. It was for centuries Egypt's largest port on the Mediterranean before the foundation of Alexandria by Alexander the Great in 331 BC. Rising sea levels and earthquakes followed by tidal waves triggering land liquefaction events, caused a 110 square kilometre portion of the Nile delta to totally disappear under the sea, taking with it the city of Thonis-Heracleion. It was discovered in 2000 by the IEASM.

Franck Goddio's archaeological research is supported by the Hilti Foundation.

Links:

IEASM: www.ieasm.org

Franck Goddio: www.franckgoddio.org

Franck Goddio's YouTube Channel: www.youtube.com/@Franck_Goddio

Hilti Foundation: www.hiltifoundation.org

Press images/Captions:

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Gold objects, jewelry and a *Djed* pilar, symbol of stability, made of lapis lazuli were retrieved. Thonis-Heracleion, 5th century BC.

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Two silver ritual dishes for libations for the gods from the temple treasure. Silver was considered extremely precious in ancient Egypt. An alabaster container for unguents and perfumes was found amongst them. Thonis-Heracleion, 5th century BC.

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A delicate bronze duck-shaped pourer is discovered amongst ceramics of the 4th century BC on the site of a newly discovered Greek sanctuary to Aphrodite in Thonis-Heracleion.

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A votive hand is emerging from the sediment during an archaeological excavation in Thonis-Heracleion. End of 5th century BC-early 4th century BC, probably from Cyprus.

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After excavation, an archaeological diver gazes at the huge blocks of the Amun temple, which fell in the mid-second century BC in the South canal of Thonis-Heracleion. They were discovered under 3 m of hard clay.

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Under the floor level of the Amun temple, very well-preserved under-ground wooden structures were discovered. 5th century BC.

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Press Contact:

Institut Européen d'Archéologie Sous-Marine/
European Institute for Underwater Archaeology (IEASM)
Sophie Lalbat / Katrin Wollgast
presse@ieasm.org
Phone: +33 607867508 / +49 160 9861 6353