

Egypt's submerged cities

New discoveries from the lost cities of the Nile delta



Underwater archaeologists have taken to the waters of Egypt's Aboukir Bay once more, revealing remarkable new finds from a temple at Thonis-Heracleion. **Franck Goddio** told Lucia Marchini about the latest results from this year's excavation at the sunken city.

In the 2nd century BC, disaster struck the Egyptian city of Thonis-Heracleion. A tidal wave and devastating landslides, caused by the liquefaction of soil after an earthquake, brought down entire buildings, burying them beneath the waters of Aboukir Bay and preserving their contents in the dense Nile clay. To date, the spectacular underwater discoveries at the mouth of the Nile include more than 70 ships, which offer insights into ancient shipbuilding, colossal statues and a vast temple dedicated to Amun-Gereb (see *CWA* 60 and 95). It was to this special, sacred spot that new pharaohs went in order to receive their power from the god Amun. The 150m-long temple at Thonis-Heracleion fell into an ancient canal, filling it. Now, new finds are adding more details to the picture of religious activity at the important sunken city, as underwater archaeologists have uncovered another sacred structure beneath 3m of debris.

'We already knew about the big temple of Amun-Gereb,' Franck Goddio, who leads a team from the European Institute for Underwater Archaeology (IEASM) at Aboukir Bay, told *CWA*. 'We discovered a large canal south of the temple, with part of the temple in it. There were bits of architectural debris, ritual instruments, and statuettes in pristine condition. Inside the

canal, we also found a small round temple. It is a tholos, a Greek early Doric temple. Years ago, we'd found a round base, so now we understand what it is.'

Greek goddesses

With a diameter of 5.5m, the tholos is much smaller than its next-door neighbour, the grand temple of Amun-Gereb. While the identification of the deity worshipped at this diminutive Greek temple is far from certain, there are intriguing clues that it may have been Athena, who, thanks to her ties with navigation, would have been a pertinent presence at a port city that served as the gateway to Egypt for sailors from the Greek world. The Greek goddess is associated with her Egyptian counterpart, Neith, the protector of Lower Egypt, who is honoured in the inscription on the Stele of Thonis-Heracleion, found in the *temenos* (sacred precinct) of the temple of Amun-Gereb.

Moreover, the underwater excavations at Thonis-Heracleion have previously uncovered a number of coins struck with the image of Athena. Along with the early 4th-century silver coins, Franck's team found a weight with the impression of the coin, a bronze die, and silver ingots, indicating that there was most

ABOVE Beneath the waters of Egypt's Aboukir Bay, archaeologists found the remains of a small tholos, a Greek round temple. Among the fallen Doric columns were ritual artefacts and statuettes, including this 3rd- to 2nd-century BC Isis-Aphrodite *anasyromene*.

RIGHT The Greek tholos of Thonis-Heracleion may have been devoted to the worship of Athena.

probably a financing agreement between Athens and Thonis-Heracleion, allowing the Egyptian city to mint these coins.

Among the architectural remains of the tholos, the team found a number of pristine ritual artefacts, among them vessels (*situlae*) and ladles (*simpula*), and fine engraved silver cups. Bronze and silver coins were recovered too, as were statuettes including a 3rd- to 2nd-century BC ceramic Isis-Aphrodite *anasyromene* ('revealing the womb'), who is depicted lifting up the hem of her clothing. Just as Athena and Neith were linked, Aphrodite became fused with the Egyptian goddesses of fertility, Isis, Hathor, and Bastet in the Hellenistic and Roman periods.

Like the temple of Amun-Gereb, the tholos dates from the early 4th century BC. It was still active when it sank into the canal in the 2nd century BC. Interestingly, among the ceramics (many of which are very well preserved), the team found (Greek) Attic pottery from the late 5th century BC. These too were in excellent condition and already centuries old by the time the tholos collapsed.



Charting Canopus

Work has also continued at Canopus, about 3.5km west of Thonis-Heracleion. This city was also destroyed in a natural disaster, but later than Thonis-Heracleion, in the 8th century AD.

Franck and his team first identified the remains of the city beneath the waters two decades ago, but now new methods are leading to further discoveries. He explained, 'We're always trying to develop new processes. Between 1997 and 2000, we'd already done a complete survey, but we still carry out new surveys with new prototypes to assess more and more.'

'We used a new sub-bottom profiler, which gives a 3D rendering of what is beneath the surface, and we found that the city extended much further south than we thought before. It's an extension of between 750m and 800m, depending on where you're measuring from in the city.'

Lying to the south of the previously explored area with its temples, monuments, and the Christian monastery (which was built in AD 391 using material from an earlier temple of Serapis that was destroyed by Christians), test excavations in this new section of the city have revealed Roman structures dating to the 2nd century AD. There is a brick-built water-supply system, a bathhouse, and other buildings yet to be identified.

Building debris and finds including Byzantine gold coins and jewellery mingled with Islamic gold coins bear witness to the later life of the site. Franck said, 'We knew the city was occupied in the Byzantine period from previous finds, but now we have firm evidence for continued occupation from the early 6th century BC to the middle of the 8th century AD.' ■



Finds at Canopus include Byzantine jewellery (LEFT) and gold coins (ABOVE) that bear witness to activity at the city until it was swallowed by the sea in the 8th century AD.