

The sacred topography of Thonis-Heracleion

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The city of Thonis-Heracleion was discovered by the European Institute for Underwater Archaeology in 2000, in the Bay of Aboukir, after four years of a geophysical survey. The etymology of the name 'Thonis' refers to a topographical reality. This toponym derives from the word *hōne*, which describes a specific configuration of land and hydraulic networks as existed in the delta of a main branch of the Nile around its secondary branches. It was thus expected, from the very beginning of archaeological work, that all attempts to delineate the topography of this city have to confront the complexity of a landscape in which land and water is intermixed.

Twelve years of underwater archaeological excavation in Thonis-Heracleion have brought to light important information about the topography of this site, located at the Canopic mouth of the Nile. The organisation of the city and its port, with its various basins and navigation channels around the main temple, has become clear: the best possible use was made of the natural topographic features of the *hone* to achieve the most efficient connectivity. However, there is also a direct relationship between the work done to map the general layout of the site and the unveiling of the sacred topography of the city. The archaeological excavations directed towards outlining the submerged contours of the land and port structures, resulted in the discovery of several sanctuaries. Some of them can be precisely identified; others are assumed to be associated with specific gods, but still need further study for confirmation.

Epigraphic studies of some of the artefacts brought to light during excavation give additional substantial information on the religious life and places of worship. The discoveries enhance the importance of the specific location of the city standing at the 'Mouth of the Sea of the Greek' in relation to the cults rendered there. The gods worshiped in this place start to emerge from the past.

It also appears that there is a strong correlation between the presence of some ritual instruments, probably used for the processions performed during the ceremony of the 'Mysteries of Osiris' during the Khoiak festival, and the existence of channels and port basins on the sites where they have been found. The presence and location of specific ritual objects is often used to characterise the nature of the area where they have been discovered.