The Afterlife of Ships in Thonis-Heracleion: Recycling, Abandonment, and Ritual Sacrifice at an Egyptian Port

By Damian Robinson

What do you do with a ship at the end of its life? Today, many of the ships that are at the heart of our interconnected maritime world end theirs driven onto a beach and cut up by hand to be recycled. In a few short weeks a giant vessel can be reduced to nothing as its owners gain one last pay day and rid themselves of something that was unwanted, no longer economically viable, or perhaps not even safe.

Ancient seafarers would have had exactly the same choice about what to do with their old ships, recycling timbers for use in new vessels, in buildings, or just for firewood. Some ancient ships, however, survived this ‘cull’ and entered the archaeological record through a variety of different formation processes. In the Egyptian port of Thonis-Heracleion, for example, old ships and boats have been found abandoned, reused in infrastructure, and even sacrificed to the gods.

Thonis-Heracleion was located at the end of the western most navigable branch of the river Nile, where its waters met the Mediterranean.

Initially a frontier post guarding this maritime gateway into Egypt, the port rose to become its most significant emporium in the Late Period where traders from the cities of the Greek world mingled with those from the Achaemenid Empire. Following the foundation of Alexandria and the transferral of trade there, life in Thonis-Heracleion continued, centred around its temples and their cycles of festivals. This came to an abrupt halt sometime around the end of the 2nd century BCE in a natural disaster that destroyed large parts of its main temple, a catastrophe from which the city never recovered as it slipped beneath the rising waters of the Mediterranean. Since its rediscovery in the late 1990s by the underwater archaeologist Franck Goddio and his team from the European Institute for Underwater Archaeology, the site has been systematically examined with some truly amazing results.

Amongst these are the discovery of over 70 ancient ships during survey work in the port and its basins, with examples dating from the 8th to the 2nd century BCE.
It is the largest group of vessels to be found in the ancient world and a fantastic resource to examine aspects of Egypt’s nautical past. Originally, we thought that these ships were simply wrecked, coming to a variety of catastrophic ends. This certainly seems to have been the case with ship 61, for instance, which was tied up at a quayside at the moment when the main temple of the city collapsed, swamping the ship beneath the debris.

From the detailed excavation of other vessels, however, it became clear that the majority of them entered into the archaeological record through a variety of different processes.
Simply, when a ship is wrecked it sinks along with its contents, or at least those elements of it that don’t float away. The things that go down with the ship usually entail both the objects that the crew would have used onboard, as well as any cargo it might have been carrying. Ships that are abandoned or reused, however, present very different archaeological signatures from a wreck. Their last cargoes would have been removed and their crew would have taken with them their personal belongings or anything else that would be useful (or saleable).

This process can clearly be seen in the excavated remains of ships 17 and 43, which when excavated were found to be without any *in situ* material culture that could be directly associated with them. Indeed, all that we found was the sort of general trash that washes around on the bottom of this busy harbour. As excavations continued, it became apparent that ship 17 was also surrounded by 14 long wooden piles that were driven up to 3 m into the harbour bottom. Clearly someone did not want this ship to move.

The reason was that the vessel was tethered into place at the end of a jetty in order to extend its length, perhaps out into deeper water. It would seem that the structural integrity of the hull was not breached and that it would still have floated, allowing the new jetty to rise and fall with the Nile flood and so to be used throughout the year.

A similar reuse of an old hull can be seen in the case of ship 43. Again, the hull appears to have been left watertight and it was then ballasted with local stone and tethered into place alongside another identically sized hull. Other pairs of ships, of the same size, type and dating to the same period, were found close by ship 43 leading to the suggestion that it formed part of a pontoon bridge that would have been used to link up some of the different islands that formed the settlement of Thonis-Heracleion. Again, the beauty of building a pontoon bridge is that it too could rise and fall with the yearly cycle of the river.

A very different process of deposition can be seen with ship 11. This small vessel was found lying across the western end of a waterway where it was deliberately scuttled through the removal of a piece of the keel.
While boats can be deliberately sunk to get rid of them – as certainly happened in Thonis-Heracleion’s nearby ship graveyard – this most commonly occurs in a quiet part of the port rather than directly across a busy waterway. Furthermore, excavations surrounding ship 11 revealed a range of objects with a clear ritual character. Stone offering plates complete with pieces of crushed lead and animal bones seem to have been placed into the waters close to the boat from small offering chapels on the banks, along with numerous *simpula*, long-handled ladles that were probably used in the rituals linked to the celebrations of the resurrection of Osiris during the Egyptian month of *Khoiak*.

Clearly very different in character from the everyday trash thrown into the waters, these artefacts suggest a more sacred character for this small boat, an interpretation strengthened by its graceful crescentic hull, carefully constructed from the wood of the sycamore fig tree sacred to Osiris. It could be a *neshmet* barque used in waterborne temple processions and also perhaps in ferrying the dead to their eternal rest. When the time came to replace this vessel, it was likely thought to be too sacred to be recycled or discarded and instead it was reused in a ceremony to mark an important location within the city’s ritual landscape.

The discovery of ships and boats from ancient Egypt is rare and to find them away from burial contexts in the desert is doubly so. Consequently, the ships and boats from Thonis-Heracleion have much to say about how Egyptian shipwrights of the Late and early Ptolemaic periods built their vessels, as well as the range of decisions that were made when they reached the end of their working lives on the waters of the Nile.
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