

# A COSMOPOLITAN CITY

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In the 700s BCE, Thonis-Heracleion, situated on the westernmost branch of the Nile, became an important hub for trade between Egypt and other civilizations with access to the Mediterranean Sea. The city developed a huge port complex. Underwater excavations around the city have revealed a vast harbor with quays and basins protected by bands of sandbars. A systematic archaeological survey of the basins identified more than 75 shipwrecks, dating from the 500s to 100s BCE, which speak to the volume of sea traffic in the city.



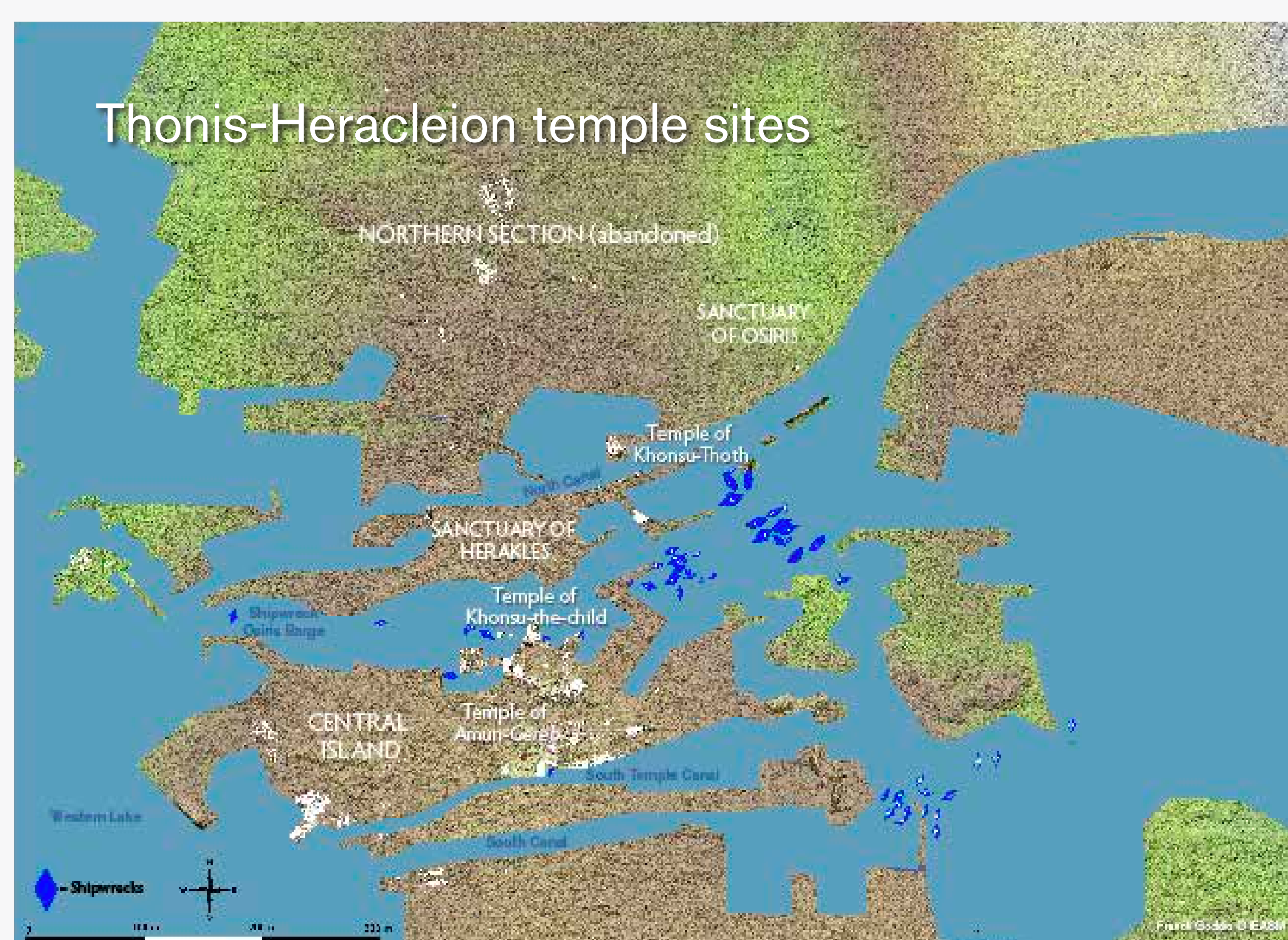
Imported objects excavated from the sea floor at Thonis-Heracleion reveal the extent of contact between the city and the wider Mediterranean region. Ceramics from southern Italy and Athens reflect trade with Greek colonies. Coinage from Cyprus attests to exchange with the Phoenicians of the Levantine coast, who used Cyprus as an important trading depot. Metal objects from the Persian Empire in the heart of Mesopotamia indicate that goods traveled vast distances over land before embarking upon their nautical journey to Egypt.

The presence of these varied objects, along with the shipwrecks and the port infrastructure, confirm that Thonis-Heracleion was a crossroads. Travelers, merchants, and commercial entrepreneurs from around the Mediterranean met, conducted business, and socialized at this cosmopolitan port.

# FAITH, PHARAOHS, AND FOREIGNERS: RELIGION IN THONIS-HERACLEION

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Foreign influence on the city of Thonis-Heracleion extended beyond trade to the most personal of activities: religious faith and observance. When Greek traders arrived on Egyptian shores, they were permitted to erect chapels to their own gods. Over time, the beliefs of Greek and other Mediterranean travelers began to shape, and be shaped by, the Egyptians they encountered.



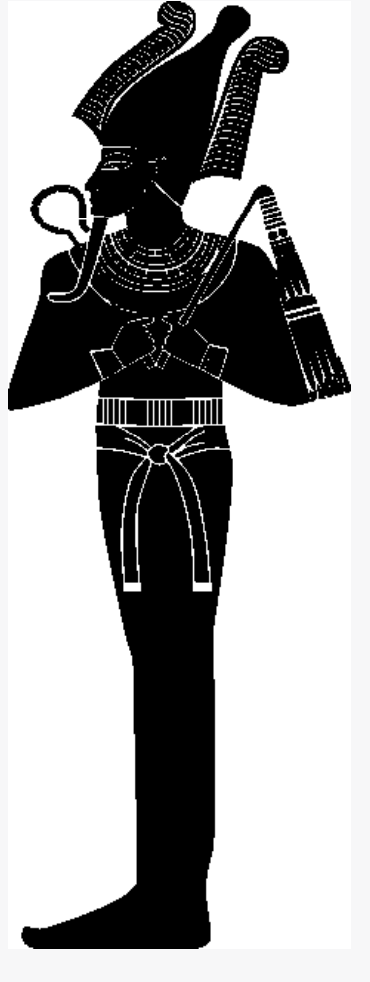
Thonis-Heracleion was a particularly fertile place for cross-cultural religious devotion, as historically it was an important site for the local religion. Throughout much of Egyptian history, new pharaohs (kings) came to the city to be granted royal legitimacy by the creator

god, Amun-Gereb. Guarded by three colossal statues, the massive temple complex dedicated to Amun-Gereb covered nearly four-and-a-half acres on the central island, towering over the bustling metropolis. Only priests were granted access to the holiest sites within the temple, but ordinary people regularly entered the complex to perform their devotions.

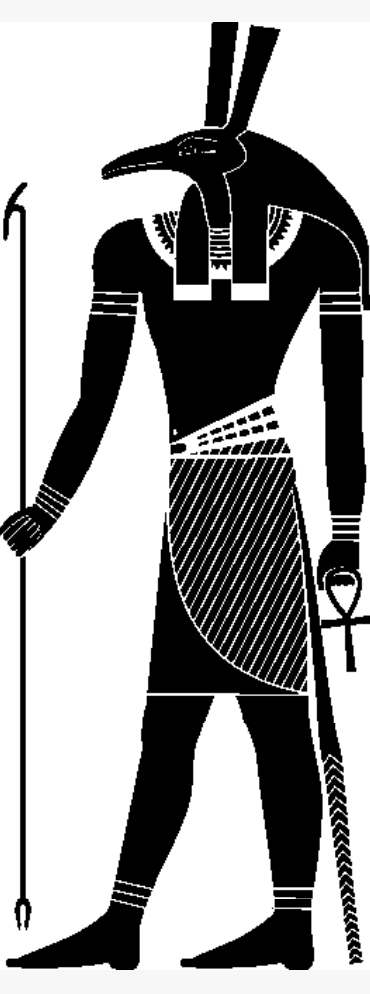
Close to the temple of Amun-Gereb stood another temple dedicated to his son, Khonsu. The Greeks assimilated Khonsu to their demigod Herakles. As a result, the city was known to them as Heracleion. Spread across the harbor were numerous other sanctuaries, each devoted to a specific deity, including Khonsu-the-child, Khonsu-Thoth, and Bes. Chapels dedicated to gods from Greece, Cyprus, and other foreign lands were scattered across the city, as well as a number of sites dedicated specifically to Osiris, god of the underworld.

# OSIRIS: LIFE, DEATH, AFTERLIFE

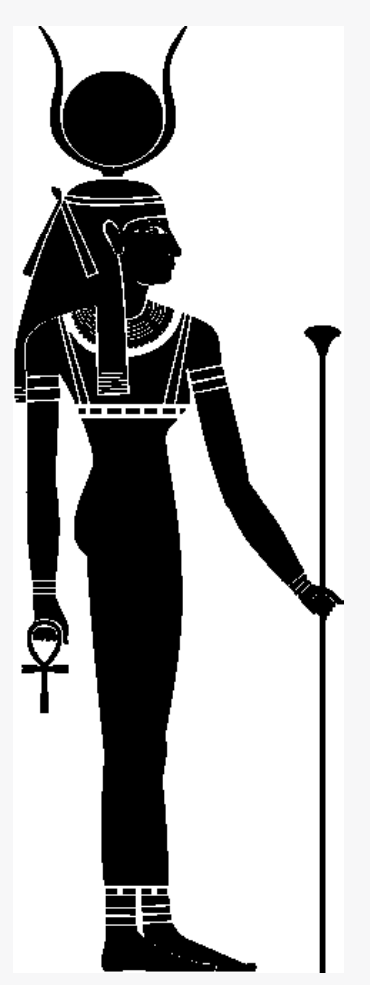
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**Osiris** was born of Earth (Geb) and Sky (Nut). As their eldest child, Osiris was destined to be a king. He brought order and peace to ancient Egyptians and introduced agriculture to the land, ensuring its success with the annual flooding of the Nile River. He is often portrayed holding a crook, a shepherd's tool, and a flail, used for threshing grain.



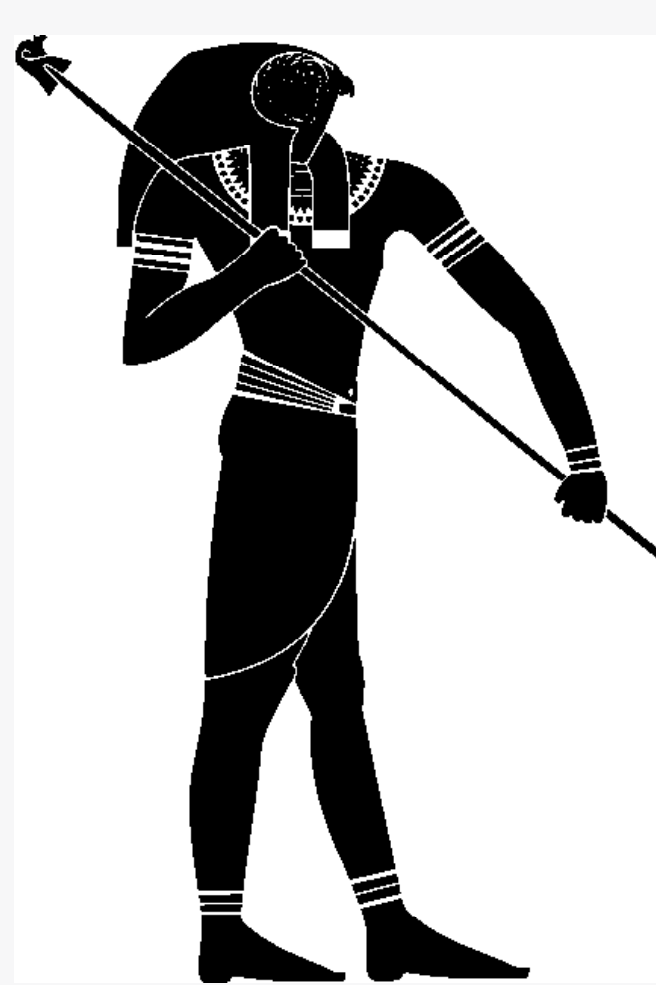
**Seth** was the god of chaos. He is depicted with a composite animal head. Out of jealousy, he sought the destruction of his brother, Osiris. Seth murdered Osiris and tore him apart, scattering the pieces of his body throughout the land. So began a bitter contest between Seth and the forces of Osiris.



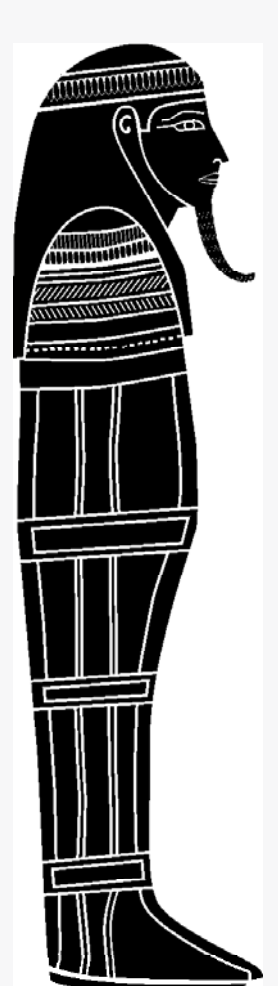
**Isis**, Osiris' devoted wife, reassembled her husband's body after the terrible fight between Osiris and his brother, Seth. In the process, she invented the rites of mummification. With help from her sister, Nephthys, and the god of mummification, Anubis, Isis brought her beloved husband back to life.



**Horus-the-child/Harpokrates**, the child of Isis and Osiris, was born into a dangerous situation. Fearing Seth, pregnant Isis went into hiding to give birth to the child who would become heir to Osiris. The child, Horus, known as Harpokrates to the Greeks, was raised in secret among the papyrus marshes along the banks of the Nile River.



**Horus**, adult son of Osiris and Isis, was heir to his father's throne. He has the head of a falcon. As he matured, Horus sought to avenge his father's murder. After a lengthy battle, he defeated Seth, but Horus did not emerge unscathed, losing one eye in the fight. Restoring order, Horus took his rightful place as pharaoh, uniting and ruling over all Egypt.



**The Mysteries of Osiris** were celebrated every year after the waters of the Nile flood receded. The multiday ceremony commemorated Osiris' rebirth, which brought enduring prosperity and stability to Egypt. After Horus defeated Seth and took his rightful place as pharaoh, Osiris became king of the dead and the god of death, resurrection, and fertility.

# THE MYSTERIES OF OSIRIS

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Living in a desert land with little rainfall, ancient Egyptians depended on the annual flooding of the Nile for their livelihoods. Each year after the floodwaters receded, leaving fields covered in rich soil ready for planting, a ceremony would take place to celebrate this essential renewal. Called *ka-her-ka*, meaning “soul upon soul,” this ceremony gave its name to the month in which it happened, a name still used today in the Egyptian and Coptic calendars: Khoiak.

In the last two weeks of Khoiak, the major temples of Egypt would celebrate the Mysteries of Osiris, the most significant event of the holy calendar. The Mysteries were conducted in secret by specially consecrated priests, and we know of the rituals now only through temple carvings and archaeological discoveries. Though precise details could vary across the land, the essential elements of the Mysteries remained the same. Figures of Osiris, god of the afterlife, were made out of highly symbolic ingredients, such as soil from the Nile River. These figures were then used during rituals that re-created and celebrated the god’s death, dismemberment, reassembly, and rebirth.

The Mysteries of Osiris were believed essential to ensure the balance of the cosmos, to safeguard dynastic continuity of the pharaohs, and to guarantee the annual floodwaters that regenerated Egyptian daily life.

# CANOPUS

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The city of Canopus lay two miles west of Thonis-Heracleion. In antiquity the two cities were connected by a sacred waterway, which allowed Canopus to serve as the festive climax to the Mysteries of Osiris. After the figures of Osiris *vegetans* and Osiris-Sokar had been installed in the temple at Thonis-Heracleion, the previous year's figures were taken by boat to Canopus, where they received their final burial.

In addition to its role in the Mysteries, Canopus was an important city in its own right. Called Canopus by the Greeks and Pe-Guti by the Egyptians, the city was home to a monumental temple for Serapis, a new hybrid Greco-Egyptian god popularized by the Ptolemaic rulers. The city became one of the most significant religious centers during the Ptolemaic period (332–30 BCE). Pilgrims from all over the Mediterranean world came to visit the temple dedicated to Serapis—also called a Serapeum—in search of miraculous healing.

These pilgrimages came to an end in 391 CE, when the Christian emperor Theodosius I outlawed pagan cults. Christians smashed statues, toppled shrines, and razed the temple of Serapis to the ground, leaving only its foundations intact to be discovered by archaeologists 2,000 years later. In place of these earlier structures, the Christians built their own buildings, including a monastery, and the site continued until the 700s.

# SERAPIS = ZEUS + OSIRIS

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The creation of the god Serapis is certainly more complicated than the equation above suggests. Serapis was a Greco-Egyptian god whose cult was popularized by Ptolemy I (r. 305–285 BCE) as a means of unifying Greeks and Egyptians in his kingdom. While Ptolemy I is often credited with “inventing” Serapis as a unique god of the period, linguistically, the god’s name is a fusion of Osiris and Apis, the sacred bull worshipped in Memphis, the ancient capital of Egypt.

Building upon this Egyptian foundation, a number of Greek deities also influenced the god’s final identity: Zeus, Helios, Dionysus, Hades, and Asklepius. This blend created a thoroughly Greco-Egyptian divinity who personified aspects of kingship (Zeus), the sun (Helios), fertility (Dionysus), the underworld and afterlife (Hades), and healing (Asklepius).

Serapis was worshipped in various Egyptian towns where there were large Greek communities, such as Canopus. He became particularly popular in the Ptolemaic capital city, Alexandria, where Serapis acted as patron deity. The city was home to one of the major temples dedicated to the god, called the Serapeum. The cult of Serapis continued to grow, enjoying enormous popularity during the Roman period (30 BCE–395 CE), rapidly spreading beyond Egypt throughout the Roman Empire.

# ALEXANDRIA: A NEW CAPITAL

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Founded by the ancient Greek ruler Alexander the Great in 332 BCE, Alexandria later became the capital of Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt and its location near an abundant supply of fresh water as well as its natural harbors ensured its future success. Upon the death of Alexander, the rule of Egypt passed to one of his senior generals, Ptolemy, who founded the Ptolemaic dynasty. The Ptolemies made Alexandria their home and invested heavily in the city's development. They not only established one of the largest and most significant libraries in the ancient world, but also built a magnificent temple to the Greco-Egyptian god, Serapis.

Within a century, Alexandria became one of the Mediterranean's largest cities and a center of Greek art, culture, intellectualism, and religion. Neighboring Canopus leveraged the healing reputation of its own temple of Serapis and became a suburb of Alexandria. However, all this development came at a cost to Thonis-Heracleion, and the city lost its status as the premier port and customs depot of Egypt. Nevertheless, Thonis-Heracleion continued to serve an important religious role within Egypt as the site of the temple of Amun-Gereb, where each new pharaoh paid an obligatory visit upon ascending the throne.

With the death of Cleopatra VII, the last Ptolemaic pharaoh, in 30 BCE, Egypt was soon absorbed into the Roman Empire. Alexandria had functioned as a hub of Mediterranean trade for 300 years. Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, and others continued to mingle with each other, learning one another's religions, which allowed Egyptian gods and religious practices to spread throughout the Mediterranean.

# OSIRIS RESURRECTED

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Osiris, lying on a bier, impregnates Isis, flying over him in the form of a kite. Anubis attends the scene.  
Osiris Chapel, Temple of Hathor, Dendera temple complex, Qena, Egypt  
© A. Parrot, created Dec 29, 2015; Source: Wikimedia Commons

The well-preserved temple complex of Dendera in central Egypt depicts scenes of ancient Egyptian religion, including the creation of the cosmos, the birth of Isis, and the death and resurrection of Osiris. The scenes on the temples' walls are painted low reliefs made during the

late Ptolemaic period (c. 54–30 BCE). The storyboard-like drawings on the walls in this gallery are simplified versions of carved scenes in the Osiris Chapel at Dendera. They show events in the life, death, and resurrection of Osiris, which became the basis of ceremonies performed during the Mysteries of Osiris.

Look for the line drawings that closely match artworks on view in this gallery, including the large statue of Osiris on his funeral bed, revived by Isis in the form of a bird. You can also see a representation of the awakening of Osiris, who lies stretched out on his stomach. A smiling stone version greets you in the center of the gallery.