Exploring Sunken Cities of Egypt

This beautifully illustrated volume brings together years of research and archaeology on one of the most fascinating periods of ancient Egyptian history. Following the conquest of the Persian Empire by Alexander the Great, Egypt fell into the hands of a dynasty of Macedonian rulers. For nearly 300 years (305–30 BCE), these Greek pharaohs ruled over a unified Egypt, yielding one of the most politically stable eras in all of Egypt’s long history. During this period, Greeks and Egyptians lived side-by-side along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Written to coincide with a major exhibition recently on view at the British Museum, Sunken Cities: Egypt’s Lost Worlds highlights excavations which are being carried out by The European Institute for Underwater Archaeology (IEASM), led by Franck Goddio, on two previously lost metropolises: Thonis-Heracleion and Canopus. Following a seismic event in the late 2nd century CE, liquefaction of the ground led to the disappearance of these cities beneath the waters of Abukir Bay. Aided by numerous color photographs, this text brings the sights and sounds of these Graeco-Egyptian cities to life and examines the objects of daily life their inhabitants left behind. As a result, this book holds great interest not only for scholars, but also for museum-goers and armchair adventurers.

Designed essentially as an exhibition catalogue, Sunken Cities goes several steps further with historical essays and digital reconstructions of buildings and landscapes. Its pages are filled with numerous photographs of the objects in the exhibition, shown both during excavation under the waters of the Mediterranean Sea, and following their conservation and cleaning. Juxtaposing these two stages helps to illustrate the archaeological process in a way that most exhibition catalogues do not. Though the work has much in common with richly illustrated coffee-table books, the text is fully referenced with footnotes and bibliographic references, which will be of great use to students and scholars of the Ptolemaic Period for years to come.

The book begins with background essays. The first is a discussion of the cities of Thonis-Heracleion and Canopus, which touches on the difficulties of excavating ancient ruins that now lie meters below the surface of the sea. Chapters 2 and 3 discuss the historical setting of the Ptolemaic Period through a number of different cultural lenses including trade, military, and religion. Augmented by objects and reconstructions, the book draws the reader into the Ptolemaic world.

Chapter 4 highlights the religious life of the inhabitants of the Egyptian sea coast under the Ptolemies. Finally, Chapter 5 rounds out the reader’s journey with a look at the end of the Ptolemaic Period and the resulting culture clash with the burgeoning Roman Empire. Most readers will be familiar with names like Julius Caesar, Mark Antony, and Cleopatra, but what was life like for those of non-royal blood? The objects highlighted in this beautiful text begin to pull back the curtain and give us a glimpse into the world of Graeco-Roman Egypt.

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