

Light on the water: ritual deposit of lamps in Lake Nemi

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The context of the discovery (F.D.)

Lake Nemi, in a crater of volcanic origins, lies along the *via Appia* c.30 km south of Rome in the region of the Alban Hills. The basin as a whole has a high density of archeological evidence, most noticeably the sanctuary of Diana on the NE and the imperial villa on the SW sides. Famously, two large ships belonging to Caligula¹ were long preserved in the lake bed. Following repeated attempts beginning in Renaissance times, in 1927 the recovery of the two ships became a matter of national prestige and propaganda for the Fascist government. The decision was taken to lower the level of the lake by c.22 m to the lake floor where the hulls lay, using powerful pumps that sucked and directed the water through the ancient emissary that was re-opened (figs. 2-3). These operations, conducted between 1928 and 1932, concluded in 1936 with the grand opening on the NW shore of the Museo Nazionale delle Navi Romane, where the ships were displayed. But the tragic epilogue came just a few years later in 1944 during the Second World War when the ships, symbols of a régime that was as boastful as it was fragile, were completely destroyed.

During the recovery of the ships, in addition to the structural and decorative materials belonging to the ships themselves, a number of other materials were gathered from the



Fig. 1. Aerial view of Lake Nemi (courtesy of G. Ghini).

1 For the sanctuary of Diana, see most recently *Nemi* 2014; for the imperial villa, Moltesen and Poulsen 2010; for Caligula at Nemi, including the ships, see Ghini 2013. The best description of the ships and their rescue operation remains that of G. Ucelli (1965) who initiated the undertaking.