Ειδική Ενότητα

Special Section

FUNERARY ART IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN: THE HELLENISTIC NECROPOLEIS OF ALEXANDRIA

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Commemoration of the dead

Ptolemaic Alexandrian tomb stelae and *loculi* slabs

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ABSTRACT

Tomb stelae and loculi *slabs from Ptolemaic Alexandria offer valuable insights into the funerary practices of the Greeks who lived and died in Egypt. Far from serving merely as tomb markers, these stelae reveal how Greeks adapted to life far from their homeland, embodying the materialization of memory, identity, and values in Alexandria. These commemorative monuments reflect the cultural pluralism of Ptolemaic Alexandria, blending Egyptian, Greek, and broader Hellenistic motifs to forge a distinctive visual and symbolic language that articulated the city's multicultural identity. The rituals associated with their erection, the content of their inscriptions, and their artistic vocabulary offer important perspectives on how individuals and communities engaged with notions of ancestry, the afterlife, and self-representation. The stelae also expose the social dynamics of the period, including class distinctions, religious syncretism, and the use of art and text to negotiate personal and collective memory. This paper explores their iconography, inscriptions, and contextual significance, revealing how these objects functioned as enduring connections between the living and the dead.*

INTRODUCTION

Unlike Egyptian stelae, which primarily aided the deceased in the underworld or supported them in their afterlife (Jequier 1924, 351–53; Wilkinson 1992, 149), Greek tomb stelae were intended to address the living. They served as tools for the living to commemorate the dead and to remind themselves of their virtues. Additionally, they highlighted the deceased's achievements and social status in their adopted homeland (Adam 1966, 108; Woodford 1986, 142). In other words, they provided a profound medium for expressing respect and honor for the deceased within the community of the living. Studying these stelae offers a deeper understanding of how individuals were honored and their contributions recognized beyond death.

Inscribed stelae functioned not only as personal memorials but also as public declarations of the deceased's role within society. They provide valuable insights into the social, political, and cultural contexts of Ptolemaic Alexandria. The use of Greek language and iconography on these stelae attests to the multicultural character of Alexandria during this period, where Greek culture was prominent yet intricately blended with local Egyptian customs.

Ptolemaic tomb stelae present a diverse repertoire of symbolic and artistic elements that both honor the deceased and communicate their social standing, achievements, and belief systems. These elements include inscriptions and iconography featuring wreaths, crowns, papyrus scrolls, divine figures, and scenes of religious

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ritual, such as offerings at altars. Together these components form a vivid visual and textual narrative that preserves the memory of the departed within the cultural and religious framework of Ptolemaic society.

STATISTICAL STUDY

A statistical survey was conducted on Ptolemaic relief and painted stelae and *loculi* slabs from Alexandria, drawing on all available data and visual documentation from scholarly publications and museum collections. The study focused on artifacts securely dated to the Ptolemaic period and identified approximately 88 painted examples and 63 sculpted ones, though some lack precise provenance. The predominance of painted stelae points to a clear preference for polychromy, in line with the Greek tradition of coloring sculpture and architectural elements. Color was not employed to mimic nature but to accentuate specific features and enhance the aesthetic impact of the object (Picard 1935, 208–9; Richter 1950, 150–56).

Similar coloring techniques were applied to sculpted stelae in Alexandria. Chemical analyses augmented by infrared and X-ray imaging undertaken by the National Centre for Research and Restoration in French Museums (C2RMF), have identified the use of a range of pigments, most notably red and yellow ochre, in the painted surfaces. Alexandrian artisans demonstrated remarkable skill in both the original application and the maintenance of polychromy, even accounting for the inevitable degradation over time (Kakoulli 1998, 191–95). The use of Egyptian blue was especially prevalent, extending beyond Egypt into Macedonian funerary contexts and prominently featured on the Vergina stelae in Greece (Romiopoulou and Brecoulaki 2002, 108–15; Brecoulaki 2006, 423–25), as well as on stelae from Alexandria.

Of the 63 sculpted stelae and *loculi* slabs attributed to Alexandria, only 32 have well-documented provenance linking them to specific tombs within the city. Their distribution is as follows:

SHATBY	HADRA	GABBARI	CANOPUS
13	16	1	2

Of the 88 painted pieces, only 71 have well-documented provenance, as follows:

SHATBY	HADRA	IBRAHIMIA	WARDIAN	MEX GABBARI	ANFOUSHY
15	26	19	1	9	1

The ancient cemeteries of Alexandria are broadly divided into two main zones. The eastern necropolis was predominantly used during the early Ptolemaic period for the burial of Greeks and other foreign residents. In contrast, the indigenous Egyptian population was primarily interred in the western cemetery, traditionally referred to as the *Necropolis* or "City of the Dead" (Noshy 1937, 40–1).

As the preceding data indicate, Ptolemaic stelae are more frequently attested in tombs of the eastern necropolis than in the western sectors. This distribution reflects the demographic patterns of the time, with Greek immigrants and other non-native populations largely concentrated in the eastern districts of the city. The thematic content of the stelae and *loculi* varies considerably and may be classified into several principal categories, as outlined below:

Children	Dexiosis	Everyday life	Militaries	Symposium & reclining	Religious & Funerary
25	34	14	37	13	9

Children (25 occurrences): Representations of children, often shown playing with pets such as dogs and birds, frequently draw inspiration from Attic funerary art (Vermeule and Brauer 1990, 24). While stylistic and iconographic differences are evident, particularly in the incorporation of local elements, Alexandrian stelae are distinctive for associating children with divine imagery. Notably, figures resembling Harpocrates and other

Fig. 1. Alexandria, Egypt. Limestone stela; woman dying during childbirth. Late 4th century BCE Graeco-Roman Museum inv. no. 83.

religious symbols appear, reflecting both Hellenistic and Egyptian influences in the construction of childhood identity and commemoration.

Dexiosis scenes **(34 occurrences):** The motif of *dexiosis*, depicting a farewell handshake, originated in Attic funerary stelae of the 5th and 4th centuries BCE and also appears in earlier Egyptian art, as evidenced by an example from North Saqqara (Soleiman 1999, cat. no. 1). In Alexandrian contexts, *dexiosis* scenes manifest in several variants, most commonly showing two standing figures clasping hands an image widely associated with familial bonds and funerary parting in Greek visual culture. This motif also appears on vases associated with death rituals.

In contrast to Attic stelae, where compositions may include four or more individuals, Alexandrian examples tend to be more restrained, usually portraying only two or three figures. Furthermore, while the deceased on Attic monuments is not always shown engaging in the handshake, they are often depicted in conversation. This selective adaptation highlights both continuity with and divergence from Athenian commemorative conventions (Conze 1893, 359).

Everyday Life Scenes **(14 occurrences)**: common in Attic stelae, particularly during the classical period. They are also frequently found in Alexandrian stelae, which often portray the wealthy deceased accompanied by a servant holding a jewelry box, or the deceased engaged with his or her children. Among the everyday life scenes that appeared on Alexandrian stelae is the depiction of a woman in childbirth. In this scene, the woman, who may have died during childbirth, is represented sitting on a delivery bed, typically with a bare torso, while two women support her, as seen in a stela (Fig. 1) dated to the end of the 4th century BCE at the Graeco-Roman Museum of Alexandria (inv. no. 83; Schmidt 2003, Pl. 2. no. 3).

Militaries (37 occurrences): the largest category; indicates a significant focus on military themes, likely due to the strategic and historical importance of the Ptolemaic Army. The depictions varied, showing either the soldier alone with his weapons or in scenes with family members, servants making offerings at altars, or portrayed as knights.

Symposium and Reclining (13 occurrences): these scenes serve as illustrations or references to family and social gatherings, highlighting the city's cultural vitality.

Fig. 2. Alexandria, Egypt. Fragmentary limestone stela from Hadra. 3rd century BCE. Graeco-Roman Museum inv. no. 24148.

Fig. 3. Alexandria, Egypt. Limestone stela from Shatby; child with pet. 3rd–2nd century BCE. Graeco-Roman Museum inv. no. 19044.

Religious and Funerary (9 occurrences): the smallest category, though still significant, reflects the intersection of ritual, belief, and death practices by depicting the deceased in acts of adoration to the gods, making offerings at altars, or imitating a god.

KEY SIGNS OF COMMEMORATION

Architectural façades

Most sculpted and painted Alexandrian stelae feature architectural frames surrounding the main panel. These often take the form of traditional architectural elements, consisting of two pillars or columns with entablatures. However, some stelae include an architrave, frieze, and triangular or curved pediment. Many Greek architectural influences are evident in these frames, utilizing pillars with a Doric frieze composed of triglyphs and metopes that are devoid of any decorations, as seen in the stela from Hadra dating back to the 3rd century BCE (Fig. 2) at the Graeco-Roman Museum (inv. no. 24148; Schmidt 2003, pl. 6 no. 20). The Ionic columns also appeared on a unique stela from Shatby (Fig. 3) dating back to the 3rd – 2nd century BCE at the Graeco-Roman Museum (inv. no. 19044; Dinsmoor 1975, 51–65; Schmidt 2003, pl. 12 no. 42). Those pediments were typically adorned with an egg-and-dart frieze (Robertson 1971, 69–147). The Corinthian order on the Alexandrian stelae exhibited variations and was distinguished by the unique design of the Alexandrian Corinthian capital (McKenzie 2007, 86–90).

Fig. 4. Alexandria, Egypt. Limestone stela from Hadra; child. 2nd century BCE. Graeco-Roman Museum inv. no. 3714.

Fig. 5. Alexandria, Egypt. Limestone stela from Shatby; man facing snake. 4th–3rd century BCE. Graeco-Roman Museum inv. no. 153.

Divine figures and deities, adoration, offerings and sacrificial imagery

Some stelae and slabs depict the presence of gods and goddesses, such as Harpocrates, Agathodaemon, Osiris, Anubis, and Hermes. Additionally, some of the children illustrated on these sculpted stelae are associated with various gods or other religious symbols. For instance, a child in a stela from Hadra, dating back to the 2nd century BCE at the Graeco-Roman Museum (inv. no. 3714; Fig. 4), is shown sitting inside a primitive form of an open lotus, similar to Harpocrates, who was regarded as the shining sun (El-Khachab 1971, 132–45; Schmidt 2003, pl. 30 no. 92). The seated figure of the deceased on the lotus flower may symbolize his renewed life as the god Harpocrates. Another example depicts a soldier accompanied by his servant, who is holding the soldier's military equipment. The soldier is shown shaking hands with the god Hermes. This same motif of Hermes shaking hands with a soldier also appears on a stela from Naucratis, where the inscription notes that the deceased was a soldier (Wace 1946, 24–32 pl. I fig. 1). Some of the children depicted on the Alexandrian stelae are associated with the god Anubis, as they are shown alongside two jackal statues positioned on pillars flanking the child.

Some stelae show the deceased seated on the left, receiving offerings and adoration, raising his hand toward a snake positioned in front of him, similar to a stela from Shatby dating back to the 4th –3rd century BCE at the Graeco-Roman Museum (inv. no. 153; Fig. 5). In some instances, three snakes are shown in front of the deceased in the same position (Schmidt 2003, pl. 15 no. 56), possibly alluding to the Alexandrian Trinity of Isis, Serapis, and Harpocrates.

Another stela from Hadra, dating back to the 2nd century BCE at Ismailia Museum (inv. no. 1406; Fig. 6), depicts a standing, bearded figure on the right, holding a stick in his hand and accompanied by a dog. He is offering a circular plate to a snake (Schmidt 2003, pl. 17 no. 58), suggesting that he may have been a shepherd or a priest. The act of making an offering to a snake has had funerary significance since the time of ancient Egyptian civilization and continued in Egypt during the Hellenistic and Roman eras. The snake was regarded as the messenger of the god Osiris, necessitating worship and sacrifices to appease it (Lewis 1973, 27–63; 34 fn. 27).

Fig. 6. Alexandria, Egypt. Limestone stela from Hadra; man with dog performing libation opposite a snake. 2nd century BCE. Ismailia Museum inv. no. 1406.

Fig. 7. Alexandria, Egypt. Limestone stela from Shatby; painted knot. 3rd century BCE. Graeco-Roman Museum inv. no. 10688.

Alexandrian-painted stelae and slabs depicting religious themes are rare. However, there are two stelae from Shatby dating back to the 3rd century BCE, one of them at the Graeco-Roman Museum (inv. no. 10688; Fig. 7) illustrates symbolic subjects through the representation of colorful pinned ribbons, featuring a large knot in the center, with two bands tapering to pointed ends that hang from the knot. This imagery may symbolize elements used in funerary processions for the deceased (Breccia 1912, pl. xxxiii no. 38). The composition appears similar to that of a painted cinerary Hadra urn. It is possible that both the stela and the urn were created by the same artist or belonged to the same deceased individual, likely a soldier, as suggested by the shield and body armor depicted around the Hadra vase (Breccia 1912, 33–4 no. 51). It is also noteworthy that this symbolic form appears similarly on the Vergina stelae in Greece (Brecoulaki 2006, 150–51).

There is an intriguing *loculus* slab (Fig. 8), which was discovered by M. Rodziewicz in 1981 near Shatby. Based on its overall design, some scholars have interpreted it as a panel representing Nilotic scene~~s~~, dating back to the 2nd century BCE (Venit 1988, 71–91; 2002, 112–13). This view was refuted by its excavator (Rodziewicz 1992, 329–37). I agree with the latter, as he observes that this *loculus* has no connection to the nature of the Nile – an observation clearly illustrated in the mosaic of Palestrina. Instead, it depicts a religious and mythological theme. The figures are portrayed on two levels: the lower level features individuals inside a temple, complete with a roof rendered in perspective. To the right, a woman sits on a throne, possibly Persephone, the wife of Hades. To the left, another woman holds a man next to the stairs. Additionally, there is a representation of the ferryman, Charon, in his boat on the river Styx, ready to transport souls to the underworld. All these elements suggest a scene from the underworld or may refer to the journey of the deceased as they approach the gates of Hades.

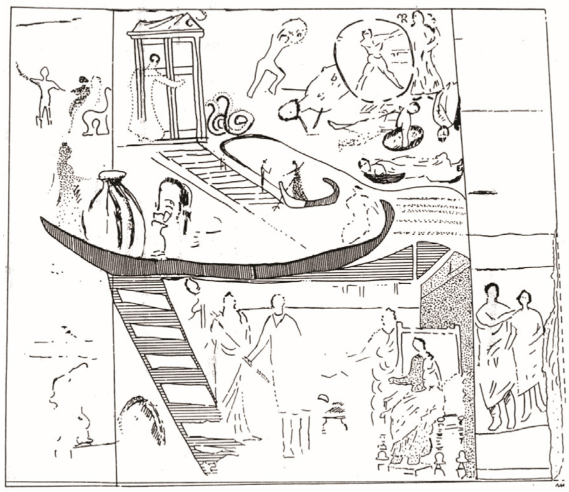

Fig. 8. Alexandria, Egypt. Limestone loculus slab allegedly discovered near Shatby; Nilotic scenes? 2nd century BCE. Drawing by M. Rodziewicz.

Fig. 9. Alexandria, Egypt. Limestone stela; woman with maid. Early Hellenistic. Graeco-Roman Museum inv. 3893.

Iconography and other symbols

The deceased were often depicted in an idealized form, portraying them as youthful and healthy, akin to a hero. Various symbols and motifs served as visual representations, including wreaths, crowns, laurel leaves, and symbols of wealth and status, such as jewelry. In one example, the deceased woman is shown sitting to the right of a sculpted stela at the Graeco-Roman Museum (inv. 3893; Fig. 9), with a maid standing in front of her, presenting a jewelry box (Schmidt 2003, Pl. 1 no. 1). This depiction resembles an Attic stela housed in the National Museum of Athens (inv. no. 726; Ghisellini 2000, fig. 3). In the Alexandrian-painted stelae, the deceased similarly sits to the right of the stela, with a maid in front of her, potentially presenting a jewelry box as well (Breccia 1907, 35–86; Fig. 14). This topic is prevalent in Attic stelae, with the most famous example being the stela of Hegeso (Charbonneaux 1943, 80–1). The depiction of servants accompanying the deceased, along with the jewelry box on the Alexandrian stelae, may indicate the high social status of the deceased (Leader 1997, 683–99).

Inscriptions and epitaphs

Short Greek inscriptions and epitaphs often include names, titles, and ethnic affiliations, as well as notable deeds. These inscriptions appeared in large numbers on many of the painted and sculpted stelae of Ptolemaic Alexandria.

The inscription on a sculptured stela from Hadra, dated to the 3rd century BCE, based on the characters of the inscription (Breccia 1911, 152 no. 292), or the end of the 4th century BCE (Schmidt 2003, 82). The remains of a stela featuring a temple façade include a recessed panel that displays the head of a child. The inscription contains the child's name, the father's name, and the child's ethnic or geographical origin, Kleon Antipatrou Salaminios, that is: Kleon, son of Antipatros from Salamis (Botti 1900, 576 no. 425; 1902, 85–107 no. 111; Schmidt 2003, 82).

Another example of an inscription on a painted stela from Mex or Gabbari, now in the Louvre, dates to the 4th – 3rd century BCE. The stela depicts a *dexiosis* scene painted against a light red background. On the left, a seated woman extends her right arm toward another woman standing in front of her. The inscription on the architrave reads "Gorgis, daughter of Heraclitus from Samos" (Rouveret 2004, 83–4). Many other examples of sculpted and painted Alexandrian stelae feature short inscriptions that mention names and indicate ethnic origins from various regions in Greece, North Africa, and among the Gauls, particularly the soldiers who are prominently represented in numerous painted examples. This representation reflects the privileges they gained in the city.

The epitaphs on the Alexandrian stelae are relatively few. One of these lengthy epitaphs, is a rare example of an inscription on the back of the stela rather than the front, as is typical for Alexandrian stelae. This stela is dated to the 2nd – 1st century BCE (Breccia 1911, 162 no. 315; Schmidt 2003, 105). The stela features the customary temple façade, and within the recessed panel, there is a depiction of a man reclining on a couch. The inscription consists of seven lines:

Πατρίδος ἐγ Μιλήτου ἐσθλόν

γόνον ὧδε τὸ Σώσου γῆ ῷερὰ

Λιβύης τόνδε Νικόλαον ἔχει,

ὅς πᾶσιν θνητοῖς ἐεν φίλος

ἐδὲ θεοῖσιν. Ἀλλὰ τὸ τῆς

κοινῆς ἦλδε τύχης μόριμον.

Νικόλαε χρηστέ, χαῖρε.

(Breccia 1911, 162 no. 315; Schmidt 2003, 104-5, no. 55.)

"*This is the holy land of Libya (Egypt), containing the remains of Nicolaos, son of Susus, a nobleman of long descent from the citizens of the city of Miletus. He was well-regarded and close to both humans and gods. However, it is the hand of fate that affects everyone. Farewell, my beloved Nicolaos, the revered*". I believe this stela was crafted in a workshop before its inscription. When the user sought to write this epitaph, they could not find sufficient space on the front, as is customary; therefore, they inscribed the epitaph on the back. The inscription commemorates the deceased Nicolaos, a nobleman from Miletus. He was buried in the sacred land of Libya, which in antiquity referred to all regions of North Africa, including Egypt, particularly the western desert.

Daily life and achievements

On Alexandrian stelae and slabs, depictions of the deceased's achievements often include scenes of significant events and moments from their life, farewell scenes, and representations of their profession. *Dexiosis* scenes appeared on Attic stelae in the 5th and 4th century BCE. In any case, farewell scenes on Alexandrian stelae come in various forms. One common type features two standing figures shaking hands, a motif frequently found in Greek funerary reliefs. These scenes symbolize the concept of family. It is believed that one of the seated figures in a farewell scene represents the deceased, while the standing figure is still alive (Davies 1985, 627–40) or may have died before the sitting person, so he is welcoming him to the other world.

In Alexandrian farewell scenes, it was customary to depict only two individuals on the surface of the stela. However, some stelae feature three figures. Typically, the third figure is a child, a servant, or a maid, or the deceased woman is accompanied by two of her children (Schmidt 2003, pl. 5 no. 15). Sometimes the number of depicted figures on Attic stelae can reach as many as seven (Conze 1893, no. 359), a phenomenon not observed in Alexandrian stelae.

Fig. 10. Alexandria, Egypt. Limestone slab; woman dying during childbirth. Late 4th–early 3rd century BCE. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art inv. no. 04.17.1.

Fig. 11. Alexandria, Egypt. Limestone stela; woman with child. Hellenistic period. Graeco-Roman Museum inv. no. 85.

In the previous scene of childbirth (Fig. 1), women in labor are depicted. The issue of women dying during childbirth has been a topic of discussion in Greece since the 4th century BCE. However, this scene is notable for the presence of a bearded man supporting the woman, which contrasts with the traditional image of a nurse or doctor (Vermeule and Brauer 1990, 25). In the childbirth scene depicted on the painted stela at the Metropolitan Museum New York (inv. no. 04.17.1), the woman is shown sitting on a delivery bed with her torso exposed (Fig. 10), while draping a himation over her lower body. Her stomach appears swollen, and a young girl supports her, while another woman holds her right arm (Merriam 1887, 261–68 pl. II).

In everyday life, common scenes depict the deceased interacting with their children. The deceased woman is illustrated sitting to the right in a highchair at the Graeco-Roman Museum (inv. no. 85; Fig. 11), extending her hand with a bird or doll to her baby, who sits on the floor (Schmidt 2003, 88), also the man is shown standing and presenting a doll to one of the two children accompanying him on the stela (Fig. 12) at the Graeco-Roman Museum (inv. no. 23354; Schmidt 2003, 101). This theme is prevalent in several Attic stelae, whether portraying servants offering a baby to the deceased or a child standing between the arms of his mother (Conze 1893, 19 no. 58, pl. xxvi). But I believe that the Alexandrian stelae are distinguished by their portrayal of the intimate relationship between the deceased and their children, particularly through the presence of dolls that the deceased offers to them, more so than in their Attic counterparts.

On some stelae, the deceased is depicted sitting alone on a chair, as in a stela at the Graeco-Roman Museum (inv. no. 97; Fig. 13) and one at Brussels (inv. no. 5289; Fig. 14), both from Alexandria, with the deceased depicted sitting, holding a thin stick in his right hand. These examples are reminiscent of a stela from Athens, which shows a man in a similar position on the left, also holding a thin stick diagonally. However, in the Alexandrian example, remnants of a bird, likely an ibis, appear in front of the man. The bird's beak is positioned in front of the man's head, as suggested by Schmidt (2003, 26). He also posits that this individual is a philosopher. The Egyptian bird may indeed be the ibis, which symbolizes Thoth, the god of science and knowledge in ancient

Fig. 12. Alexandria, Egypt. Limestone stela; man with children. Hellenistic period. Graeco-Roman Museum inv. no. 23354.

Fig. 13. Alexandria, Egypt. Limestone stela; man in chair. Hellenistic period. Graeco-Roman Museum inv. no. 97.

Egypt (Botti 1900, 181 no. 15; Schmidt 2003, 26; 94–5; Ashour 2007, 599). Therefore, I believe that these figures could represent teachers, given the renowned status of Alexandria as the city of the *Mouseion* and the Library, which were centers of learning and education.

Military life and emblems

Soldiers are depicted in Alexandrian stelae in various positions, often standing alone. In these sculpted stelae, they are shown wearing military attire and accompanied by weapons such as the round shield and the lance. The round shield is associated with the Greek army, where soldiers known as *hypaspists* ("adjutants") served in the Macedonian army since 360 BCE. Their primary role was to protect the battalion wing of the phalanx, the heavy infantry, whose essential weapon was the long lance, or *sarissa* (Bull 1991, 19–21; Schmidt 2003, 99). The oval shield, which has been associated with Gallic soldiers since the third century BCE, is also depicted on painted stelae from Alexandria featuring Gauls. This large shield extends up to the neck of the soldier (Brown 1957, 18–9; Rouveret 2004, 55–6).

Soldiers are occasionally depicted alongside others, as seen in a painted stela at the Louvre (inv. no. MNC 825; MA 3632; Fig. 15). In this depiction, the soldier wears the Macedonian *kausia* and holds a sword in his right hand. Next to him stands a young man in profile, holding two spears on his left shoulder, possibly a servant, one of his sons, or a relative (Rouveret 1998, 175–90; 2004, 45–6). The stela in Fig. 16, also at the Louvre (inv. no. MNC 830, MA 3637), depicts a soldier standing and holding a spear in his left hand, while a large shield rests beside him. Next to the soldier, a young man extends his hand, holding an unidentified object (Rouveret 2004, 55–6). On another *loculus* slab at the Metropolitan Museum in New York (inv. no. 04.17.4; Fig. 17), a standing soldier shakes hands with one of the two young girls in front of him, while the other girl raises her arm to say goodbye (Merriam 1887, 261–68 pl. ii).

Fig. 14. Alexandria, Egypt. Limestone stela; man in chair. Hellenistic period. Brussels, Art and History Museum inv. no. 5289.

Fig. 15. Alexandria, Egypt. Limestone stela; soldier with attendant. Late 4th–early 3rd century BCE. Paris, the Louvre inv. no. MNC 825; MA 3632.

Fig. 16. Alexandria, Egypt. Limestone stela; soldier. Late 4th–early 3rd century BCE. Paris, the Louvre inv. no. MNC 830; MA 3637.

Fig. 17. Alexandria, Egypt. Limestone slab. Soldier with his daughters. Late 4th–early 3rd century BCE. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art inv. no. 04.17.4.

Fig. 18. Alexandria, Egypt. Limestone stela from Shatby. Horseman. Late 4th – 3rd century BCE. Graeco-Roman Museum inv. no. 10228.

In the Ptolemaic tomb stelae of Alexandria, there is a notable depiction of soldiers on horseback or as knights. This imagery alludes to the heroic hunter or warrior, a theme commonly found in tombs from northern Greece (Cole 2019). These painted funerary monuments from Alexandria typically date back to the late 4th to 3rd century BCE, and commemorate members of the Ptolemaic cavalry, including Macedonian and Thessalian soldiers, as indicated by the accompanying inscriptions.

In Ptolemaic Alexandria, the diverse population facilitated a cross-cultural exchange of funerary practices. Immigrant residents, including mercenaries who served in the Ptolemaic army, brought their cultural and artistic traditions from their homelands. These traditions were incorporated into their burials, as exemplified by the depiction of a soldier on horseback. This imagery not only highlighted the deceased's military status but also established a connection with Macedonian and Ptolemaic royal iconography. On the painted stelae, the soldier is depicted riding a galloping horse, as seen in an example from Shatby dating back to the 4th – 3rd century BCE at the Graeco-Roman Museum (inv. no. 10228; Fig. 18). In some instances, he is followed by his servant. The soldier typically wears a shield and a cuirass for chest protection, carries a sword in his belt, and his chlamys billows behind him, reminiscent of the movement of Alexander the Great in the Pompey mosaic (Stewart 1993, fig. 21; Laisné 1995, 190–93). The knights in the previous examples resemble the knight's frieze in Tomb I at Mustafa Kamel, where they are depicted in a similar style, riding horses with two priests beside them making offerings at the small altars (Adriani 1933–35, 15–176 pl. xxvii).

CONCLUSIONS

The incorporation of architectural temple façades suggests the tomb's grandeur and reflects the esteemed status of the deceased, emphasizing the sacred nature of the burial site and the honored position of those interred within it. Stelae and slabs featuring depictions of gods or their symbols –particularly those associated with the afterlife, such as Osiris and Anubis– symbolize divine protection and the promise of an afterlife, conferring blessings and safeguarding the deceased. Imagery of offerings signifies the provision for the deceased in the afterlife and represents the ongoing care of their living relatives.

Scenes often portray the journey to the afterlife and the deceased's acceptance into the divine realm. The idealized depiction of the deceased –shown as youthful or heroic, regardless of their actual age at death– serves to honor their eternal beauty and vigor. Symbols and motifs such as wreaths, crowns, and laurel leaves visually convey honor, victory, and immortality, while also signifying divine protection. Depictions of jewelry, fine clothing, and other indicators of wealth underscore the deceased's high social standing.

Short Greek inscriptions or lengthy epitaphs on these stelae and slabs frequently praise the virtues and accomplishments of the deceased. Common names, such as Isadora ("gift of Isis") and Herakleitos ("glory of Hera"), often suggest divine favor. Greek inscriptions also reveal the diverse ethnicities of the deceased, including individuals from Kos, Miletus, Pisidia, Salamis, Troy, Thessaly, Libya, and Cyrene. The concentration of deceased individuals from a particular ethnicity within the same cemetery, such as the Gallic soldiers commemorated in the Ibrahimia cemetery, points to the presence of distinct communities, such as the Ptolemaic garrison in this region.

The depiction of the deceased's achievements, including scenes of significant events or even their professions, served to celebrate their contributions and legacy. For instance, the portrayal of a deceased individual as a courageous soldier may symbolize their triumph over death.

Collectively, these elements create a rich and powerful visual and textual narrative that honors the deceased, highlights their status, and preserves their memory. These commemorations serve both as personal tributes and public affirmations of the individual's importance, firmly embedded within the cultural and religious framework of Ptolemaic society, ensuring their eternal remembrance and honor.

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