Ειδική Ενότητα

Special Section

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

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Religious traditions and syncretism at Alexandria's Western Necropolis

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ABSTRACT

Alexandria's Western Necropolis functioned as a true "city of the dead," intimately connected to the world of the living. From the Ptolemaic to the Roman period, its monumental hypogea –including Anfushi, the Saqiya Tomb, Girghis and Fort Saleh, Kom el-Shoqafa, the Tigrane Pasha Street Tomb, and the Persephone Tombs– developed into key settings in which religious practices, funerary beliefs, ideologies, and cultural identities were negotiated and materially expressed. Within these subterranean funerary structures, Egyptian, Greek, and later Roman elements are not merely combined, but purposefully orchestrated into Alexandrian "gateways" to imagined afterlives of gardens, gazebos, chthonic symposia, and the realm of Osiris. Seen as "multi-coloured knots" in the city's social fabric, these monuments reveal a consistent integration of visual and ritual languages drawn from multiple traditions, where Osiris, Sarapis, Persephone, Hades, Bes, Anubis, "pharaohs," and elite Alexandrians inhabit a shared symbolic landscape. In this context, syncretism appears not as the erosion of identities, but as an Alexandrian strategy for articulating death, afterlife, remembrance, and social presence within a dynamic multicultural environment.

> *"The first remarkable place […] was the suburb of the Necropolis, that is, the City of the Dead. There, with admirable customs, Greeks and Romans took care to bury their dead. But we must not imagine this place as sad and sorrowful, like our cemeteries, whose appearance terrifies us. A thousand magnificent tombs were erected there, accompanied by splendid chapels, adorned everywhere with gold and marble."*
> (Hanna Diab 1707, 122, no. 254.)

Alexandria was renowned not only for its iconic landmarks like the Lighthouse and the Royal Quarters, but also for its vast necropolis –the "city of the dead"– as Geographer Strabo calls it (17.6). Indeed, Strabo could not find a more appropriate term to describe the vast areas to the west and east of the city walls (as well as to the north, on the island of Pharos), occupied by an extensive and highly complex underground network of corridors and structures, hewn into the city's bedrock.

This network is characterized by systematic development and organization to serve the needs of a populous and highly diverse society, accommodating funerary practices of all classes and traditions. A notable feature is the use of cemeteries not only as a final resting place for the deceased, but also as a point of contact with the Alexandria of the living. Many burial complexes include gathering spaces, areas for rituals, water supply facilities, and numerous utilitarian rooms that testify to the presence of life and vibrant activity – at least unusual for

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Fig. 1. View of the West Necropolis remnants (area of Mex), 1906. Paul Fleury Photographic Archive. Paul Getty Foundation.

cemeteries in the Greek mainland. As Strabo notes in the passage quoted above, "there are many gardens and groves and facilities for the embalming of the dead".

The Necropolis of Alexandria emerges as a timeless "tourist" destination of the city, attracting visitors both in antiquity and much later, in medieval and early modern times, even up to the 19th century (Fig. 1). Monumental remains of the necropolis, especially those of the western sector, the primary concern of this article, are frequently the subject of surprise and admiration in the memoirs of various travellers from East and West, who passed through the Alexandria of ruins searching for its ancient grandeur. Local "experts" contributed to this as well, always ready to reveal the great "secrets" hidden in the "underground" Alexandria:

> *"If we believe the Arabs, the catacombs connect underground with the pyramids of Memphis. Such views about their extent are certainly exaggerated. But they are no more so than other giant architectural achievements, and deserve to be investigated."*
>
> (Sonnini de Manoncour 1799, 152–53)

Visible monumental remains of the necropolis are also included in the early and extremely valuable archaeological records beginning at the end of the 18th century, first among them the famous Napoleonic *Description de l'Égypte*. In the two centuries of archaeological research that followed, the cemeteries have (and still do) represent the best-preserved category of archaeological remains from the Ptolemaic and Roman periods – a generous source of data offering a wealth of information on art and architecture, religion, funerary customs, as well as the formation and evolution of Alexandrian cultural identity. A key factor in this was the fact that a significant portion of the cemeteries remained untouched by modern construction until the early decades of the 20th century. Thus, archaeologists were able to carry out both systematic and timely rescue excavations that revealed impressive funerary structures in all wings of the Necropolis.

PTOLEMAIC PERIOD

Ptolemaic Alexandria was a city where religion, politics, and cultural identity were in continuous negotiation. The fusion of Greek and Egyptian traditions was not merely the outcome of royal policy, but also the result of the lived experiences and daily choices of its inhabitants, reflecting broader dynamics of interaction, adaptation, and coexistence across this Cosmopolis.

Developments in the city of the living directly and indirectly influenced the Necropolis. As early as the 3rd century BCE, Egyptian deities such as Isis, Harpokrates (a symbol of rebirth), and Bes (the protective, jovial guardian) sporadically appeared in the funerary sphere of Greek Alexandrians, such as those of Mustapha Kamel necropolis. Their presence suggests that Egyptian beliefs had already begun to shape the funerary practices of non-Egyptians, paving the way for a broader diffusion of Egyptian traditions across cultural and ethnic boundaries in the later Ptolemaic period (Adriani 1936; Venit 2002, 37–67).

Beyond these influences, Alexandrians also drew inspiration from key aspects of the city's religious life, notably the ruler cult. Living in a prosperous metropolis guided by rulers deified through their charisma and achievements, Alexandrians may have responded in kind – elevating their dead to the status of *heroes*. This elevation served both immediate and long-term purposes, whether commemorating personal or family achievements or reflecting the deceased's social standing. As a result, elite *hypogea* were designed with dedicated spaces, furnishings, and an ambience that recalled funerary temples. These spaces celebrated –and materially enacted– the relationship between the city and its ancestors, where the esteemed dead were to be treated as *ἰσόθεοι* ("equal to gods"), as attested by the Alexandrian epigrams of the era (i.e. epigram of Ammonios, *CPI* 69). In return, the deceased reinforced the social prestige of their living descendants and secured ongoing favor.

By the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE, the interaction between Greek and Egyptian traditions had profoundly reshaped Alexandria's landscape, leaving a clear imprint on its World of the Dead. Egyptian beliefs and burial customs had become increasingly appealing to Alexandrians of diverse linguistic and social backgrounds. Yet this diffusion was not a passive process: it unfolded through what may be termed "Alexandrianization" – a deliberate adaptation of contents, forms, practices, and visual styles to align with the city's composite identity and modus vivendi. Within this adaptive environment, the figure of Osiris, the central guarantor of the Egyptian afterlife, entered new configurations of meaning and representation.

The Egyptian concept of life after death was personified by Osiris, the king of the underworld, who retained his traditional iconography and function in Alexandria, as exemplified in tombs such as Anfushi II, Fort Saleh, and Ghirgis. Yet Osiris also appears to have been subtly recalibrated to the city's multi-cultural landscape, as Alexandrian tombs often accommodated stylistic preferences departing from pharaonic funerary settings. Several Alexandrians chose to project a Greek self-image in their tombs—or selected a symposium kline as a final resting place—reflecting elite Greek and Hellenistic practices cultivated during life. At the same time, there are cases in which Osiris shares the tomb's space with Greek deities in a mode of mutual, non-disruptive coexistence, a phenomenon visible in the bilingual architectural and decorative programs of many monuments. Ultimately, Osiris seems to have adjusted to the predominantly Greek-speaking environment of the city, as suggested by the near-total absence of hieroglyphic inscriptions in Alexandrian tombs, apart from a few demotic texts on grave goods such as those found in the Anfushi Necropolis.

The implications of these developments are brought into sharp focus in the necropolis of Anfushi, where Egyptian forms and concepts appear with a clarity and consistency unmatched elsewhere in late Ptolemaic Alexandria.

Fig. 2. Anfushi II. Wall scene of the staircase upper Landing.

THE ANFUSHI NECROPOLIS: ALEXANDRIA'S GATEWAY TO THE REALM OF OSIRIS

Originally located on Pharos Island (present-day peninsula of Anfushi), the Anfushi Necropolis is the setting in which the Egyptian dimension of Alexandria's World of the Dead becomes most clearly articulated (Guimier-Sorbets 2015). The discovery of extensive mummy remains in the Anfushi Necropolis and the nearby cemetery of Ras el-Tin, together with the Egyptian references embedded in the tomb architecture, has led scholars to identify this zone as a funerary context serving the Egyptian population of Alexandria—particularly those residing on Pharos Island and in the western districts of the city (Botti 1902a, 14; Breccia 1914, 9; Adriani 1952a, 54, fig. 27). Yet the evidence from the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE suggests a more intricate reality, one that challenges straightforward ethnic or cultural assignments and calls for a reassessment of who was buried in this part of Alexandria.

Despite the apparent Egyptian influence, none of the tombs in the Anfushi Necropolis can be classified as traditional Egyptian tombs. Several architectural elements incorporated into Anfushi tombs seem to derive from Egyptian temple architecture rather than funerary traditions. For instance, the floors within the burial units gradually elevate from chamber to chamber, a feature common in Egyptian temple architecture across the Egyptian Chora. Yet, many Greek-style decorative elements are also present, especially on the ceilings, creating a bilingual visual program.

The layout of the Anfushi hypogea corresponds to that of the tombs in the eastern necropolis, with chambers organized around courtyards. Of course, unlike the tombs of Shatby and Mustapha Kamel, the decoration of Anfushi tombs is heavily reliant on Egyptian stylistic conventions. Still, in some of them we also find a similar pattern of decoration on the walls, painted imitation of opus isodomum, leaping out under the 2nd–1st century BCE subsequent layers of decoration that were covering the walls upon the discovery, suggesting hypogea of both east and necropolis and Pharos Island may have originally shared common stylistic references.

In Anfushi Tomb II, a noticeably different atmosphere, compared to the tombs of Mustapha Kamel and Shatby, is immediately apparent as one descends the stairs leading from the ground level to the underground courtyard. On the first landing of the stairs, an Egyptian-style wall scene depicts the deceased, dressed as an "Egyptian priest," standing between Horus, the falcon-headed god, and a Pharaonic couple offering a jar to the deceased or performing a purification ritual (though the current state of the painting complicates a definitive interpretation; Fig. 2). Botti (1902a, 13) suggested that the Pharaonic couple may represent a king and queen,

Fig. 3. Anfushi II. Wall scene of the staircase lower Landing.

Fig. 4. Anfushi II. General view of Chambers 1 and 2.

while Adriani (1952b, 64) identified the male figure as Osiris. Botti's assumption seems more plausible, as the male figure lacks the typical attributes of Osiris found in Egyptian funerary art. Additionally, the discovery of several Ptolemaic statues in Pharaonic dress, such as those from the Pharos lighthouse area (Stanwick 2002, C22 and C27) or Hadra (Savvopoulos and Bianchi 2012, no. 29), suggests that it was common in 2nd and 1st century Alexandria for the Ptolemies and their queens to be portrayed in Pharaonic and Isis dress.

Osiris, however, appears in his typical form on the second, lower landing of the stairs, enthroned, wearing his Atef crown and the typical robe, holding his scepters, and receiving the deceased. If the Pharaonic couple on the upper landing truly represents an anonymous Ptolemaic couple in Pharaonic dress, the stairway of the tomb seems to symbolize the passage from the Kingdom of the Ptolemies –the realm of the living– to the Kingdom of Osiris – the realm of the dead (Fig. 3).

In the courtyard of Anfushi II, two Egyptian-style gateways with segmental pediments, once flanked by sphinxes, lead to the two burial units of the tomb (respectively, Chambers 1–2, and Chambers 3–4). Upon entering the first burial unit (Chambers 1–2), visitors find themselves in a vestibule with elaborate wall decoration, divided horizontally into two parts (Fig. 4). The lower part of the walls is decorated with a painted imitation of alabaster orthostats. The upper half reveals two different phases. The earliest consists of Greek-style isodomic blocks, which were later covered with Egyptian-style checkerboard-patterned horizontal bands. Egyptian *pschent*, *hemhem*, and feather crowns are depicted on large tiles in the middle checkerboard zone, serving as "heraldic" symbols for the palace of King Osiris and his Queen, Isis.

From the vestibule, a decorative Egyptian-style doorframe with a segmental pediment, papyrus-form columns, and the typical Egyptian "broken" lintel, flanked by two sphinxes, leads to the burial chamber. The use of the broken lintel, a common feature in Egyptian temples, was symbolic and practical, allowing for the statue of the god (sometimes on a sacred bark) to be carried out to the public during annual celebrations (Venit 2002, 94). In this context, the broken lintel in Alexandrian tombs can be interpreted as a funerary version symbolising the "resurrection" of the deceased and their communication with the world of the living.

As in the vestibule, the burial chamber's walls are decorated with the Egyptian checkerboard motif, interrupted by larger tiles featuring painted Egyptian crowns. On the back wall of the chamber, an Egyptian *naiskos* (a small temple structure) is carved, symbolising the deceased's final destination in the realm of Osiris.

However, the ceiling of the burial chamber contains the most prominent Greek decorative element in the tomb. Visitors must look up to see a "Trellis and Tapestry" design, which fills the ceiling's squares with Greek-style multi-figure scenes, possibly inspired by Greek mythology (though these are now illegible). While the

Fig. 5. Anfushi V. Chamber 4. Loculus in the form of Egyptian Naos.

Fig. 6. Anfushi V. Chamber 2.

design's function seems purely decorative, it underscores the multicultural environment the tomb's owners experienced during their lifetime. Despite their Egyptian ethno-cultural background, the tomb's owners sought to incorporate this distinctly Alexandrian Hellenistic atmosphere into their final resting place.

Regarding the identity of the tomb's occupants, the wall scenes and architectural features suggest an Egyptian background for the deceased. However, Greek names are inscribed on the walls and grave goods, which at first glance might seem "incompatible" to such context. But in 2nd and 1st century BCE Alexandria, such apparent "contradictions" were not unusual. As mentioned earlier, Egyptians who sought to rise within the Ptolemaic state bureaucracy would undergo a process of Hellenization, adopting Greek names, education, and public lifestyle. Nevertheless, this process would not preclude them from performing traditional Egyptian roles –such as that of an Egyptian priest– while preserving their Egyptian names, language, and customs in private spheres.

ALEXANDRIAN CONCEPTIONS OF "PARADISE": ANFUSHI TOMB V AND THE SAQYIA TOMBS

Anfushi Tomb V offers another striking example of the distinctive funerary decoration found in the monumental hypogea of Alexandria. Unfortunately, the tomb is currently closed to visitors due to the rising water table, which has already caused significant damage to the wall decorations. Chambers 1, 4, and 5 feature elements similar to those in Anfushi Tomb II, with motifs appearing on both the walls and ceilings. In Chamber 4, one of the loculi is sealed with a slab-shaped like an Egyptian naos, symbolising entry to the realm of the dead (Fig. 5).

Burial Chamber 2 contains a carved funerary kline, adorned with a painted imitation of a shroud. The three interior walls surrounding the kline are painted with trees, separated by painted doorframes (Fig. 6). The back wall and lateral walls above the kline depict trees interspersed with piers. Notably, there is no attempt to show perspective or depth in these images. Between each dock, a date palm or deciduous tree is painted. These trees are rendered in a cursory, decorative style, yet they fit into a larger design that contrasts with their seemingly hasty execution. The ceiling features a painted imitation of a tent, contributing to the room's immersive atmosphere. Together, the painted walls evoke the illusion of a "gazebo" set in a lush garden or grove. This design encapsulates the Alexandrian vision of "paradise," where the deceased reclines on a luxurious kline beneath a canopy, enjoying a serene afterlife (Venit 2002, 87).

Fig. 7. Anfushi V. Chamber 5.

Fig. 8. The Saqyia Tomb, Wardian, wall scenes, today in the Graeco-Roman Museum.

Similarly, Chamber 5 features a monumental loculus of unusually large proportions, with walls decorated with representations of trees and woven tent designs (Fig. 7). When viewed as a three-dimensional space, the chamber resembles another "gazebo" nestled within a botanical garden, creating an idyllic environment for the afterlife.

This decorative scheme has no parallel in the Greek world and can be interpreted as an *Interpretatio Hellenistica* (or "*Alexandrina*") of the nature scenes commonly found in Egyptian elite tombs, where the dead are depicted spending their afterlife in gardens with pools, abundant flora, and fauna (cf. the garden shrine depicted on a wall painting from the tomb of Ipy from the 19th Dynasty: Smith 1958, 218, figs. 369–370).

A similar, but more advanced in articulation, depiction of such (after-)lifetime "paradise" can be found in the wall decorations of another tomb located in the western necropolis, the so-called Saqiya Tomb, now lost but still famous for its wall scene of a watermill (Saqiya), currently displayed in the Graeco-Roman Museum (Fig. 8).

The chronology of the tomb has long been debated, with suggested dates ranging from the late Ptolemaic to the early Roman or even early Christian period. However, based on stylistic and iconographic considerations, a rather convincing interpretation is that of Venit, who places the monument between the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE. Venit emphasizes that motifs such as the shepherd figure, although later common in Christian iconography, derive from Hellenic artistic tradition and in this context do not indicate a Christian attribution (Venit 2002, 109–115).

The scene is a masterpiece of Alexandrian painting, showing a waterwheel turned by two oxen, urged on by a piping boy. A pond filled with plants and waterfowl occupies almost a third of the preserved image. The oxen move counter-clockwise around the Saqiya, which is set under an arbor with a vine trained over it. On the left side of the image, a boy, now heavily damaged, is depicted holding panpipes to his mouth and carrying a switch or stick across his left shoulder, walking toward the viewer.

On the north side of the projection of the east wall, at a right angle to the Saqiya scene, a Herm of Pan stands within an enclosure. Adjacent to this, a herdsman and his flock decorate the projection between the room with the zone-style wall and the one with the Saqiya and the herm. Only the herdsman's raised arms and the upturned hoof of an animal he carries on his shoulders are preserved. To his right, two dogs sit –one facing outward, the other looking back at the shepherd– while trees and rocks form the backdrop. Below the green

Fig. 9. *Ba* bird, once painted on the sarcophagus of Saqyia Tomb, Wardian.

Fig. 10. Girghis Tomb, Gabbari.

line upon which the shepherd stands, clumps of grass suggest fields, where a small flock of sheep, including a lamb gambolling next to its mother, are depicted. Additionally, a ship is shown drinking from a pool, with two grazing sheep beneath it. At the bottom of the image, along a green ground line, a bony jackal sits, lurking in the shadows.

Indeed, such an idyllic environment of relaxation and joy, seemingly inspired by Alexandria's countryside, would have represented the ideal final destination for the elite Alexandrians. However, like many of his Egyptian counterparts from the Pharaonic period, the Alexandrian deceased appears to have been concerned not only with the composition of the natural environment, but also with the provision of essential resources for the afterlife. These included water and agricultural products, believed to sustain the *Ba* (the soul), which is depicted as a bird on the surface of his/her sarcophagus (Fig. 9; see Smith 1958, 220, fig. 373 for a similar example).

CHTHONIC SYMPOSIA WITH OSIRIS

We may conclude our tour of the Ptolemaic West Necropolis with two remarkable examples –the Girghis and Fort Saleh tombs– both discovered in the present-day area of Gabbari. These tombs provide striking evidence of Alexandria's cultural interplay, where Greek and Egyptian elements coexist in a single funerary space.

In the Girghis tomb, the back wall of the burial chamber presents a composite setting (Fig. 10). A rock-cut sarcophagus in the form of an *amphikephalos kline* reflects an elite Greek lifestyle, reinforced by carved military armature on the back wall, indicating the deceased's high-ranking status. However, at the center of the same wall, an Egyptian-style *naos*, similar to those in the Anfushi tombs, is also carved, demonstrating adherence to Egyptian funerary traditions.

A similar synthesis of traditions is evident in the northernmost chamber of the Fort Saleh tomb. this chamber was designed as a deep niche, framed by columns inscribed with lotus motifs at the base and crowned with composite floral capitals supporting a straight lintel – an unmistakable Greek architectural feature. Yet, an Egyptian broken lintel is attached to the inner faces of the columns. Within this space, a rock-cut *amphikephalos kline*-sarcophagus occupies the lower portion, while the back wall is adorned with Egyptian religious imagery. A *pseudo-naos* crowned with *uraei* at the center once contained a painted depiction of Osiris, standing frontally with a crook and flail. Below, rearing serpents and traces of additional painted figures –Isis, Thoth, and Horus– suggest a broader Egyptian divine presence. Flanking the tomb niche, two mummiform figures of Osiris remain faintly visible (Fig. 11).

It does not take much effort to recognize that the individuals buried in the Girghis and Fort Saleh tombs – like those in Anfushi, Mustapha Kamel, and Shatby– represent only some of the countless "multi-colored knots"

Fig. 11. *Fort Saleh Tomb, Gabbari.*

in Alexandria's diverse social fabric. Over time, this complex cultural tapestry took on its own distinct identity, one that no longer needed to be explicitly categorized by its constituent parts. While we can still distinguish what is "Greek" and what is "Egyptian" in these material compositions, such expressions of identity should be primarily understood as *Alexandrian* – a concept shaped by each individual's perspective and needs. Here, Greek and Egyptian elements do not stand in opposition, but instead complement one another, serving multiple purposes – from the articulation of composite cultural identities to the ultimate preparation for the afterlife.

The Girghis and Fort Saleh tombs demonstrate how Egyptian funerary beliefs became integral to Alexandrian self-understanding, embedding ideas of the afterlife within the city's evolving cultural landscape. Through their architecture and decoration, these monuments communicate the social position and personal background of the deceased while also emphasizing the transition into the afterlife as a meaningful continuation of one's existence.

ROMAN PERIOD

The necropolis of the Roman period has developed in the same pattern as in the Ptolemaic period, with considerable extensions on all sides and systematic reuse of preexisting structures. No hypogea have survived from the Roman phase of the East Necropolis, except the impressive painted decoration of the so-called Tigrane Pasha (street) Tomb, which was extracted from its structure and now is hosted in the site of Kom El Shoqafa. The Western Necropolis hosts the impressive four-storey underground complex of Kom El Shoqafa, including the tomb with the most elaborate architecture and decoration found so far in Alexandria. Yet, extensive cemeteries have been excavated in the present area of Gabbari, from which only the so-called Great Catacomb survives, today closed to the public due to its poor state of preservation.

The Roman-period hypogea vividly illustrate the advanced stage of cross-cultural dialogue unfolding within the funerary sphere. What emerges most profoundly across these examples is the deceased's aspiration to secure a favorable destiny beyond death. Egyptian funerary beliefs, with their detailed vision of the afterlife, appear to dominate this "World of the Dead" as the most efficacious and enduring model.

Mummification practices became more widespread than ever, with the architectural and decorative programmes of the tombs often reflecting this preference. Yet the engagement with Egyptian tradition remained distinctly Alexandrian – defined by negotiation and interplay with the Greek tradition. Persephone, Hades, and other Greek deities continued to offer their presence and protection, frequently sharing tomb space with

Fig. 12. *Kom El Shoqafa. General view of the Main Tomb.*

their Egyptian counterparts. Greek and Egyptian forms and contents were brought together in various ways – through juxtaposition, fusion, and hybridity. In line with the same Alexandrian principles of adaptation, the Roman dimension also emerges, lending a socio-political inflection to the funerary repertoire and further enriching Alexandria's cultural palette.

THE GREAT CATACOMB OF KOM EL SHOQAFA: GODS, PHARAOHS AND SACRED LEGIONARIES IN SERVICE OF THE PROMINENT DEAD

Things get quite complicated in the elite hypogea of the highest ranks of Alexandrian society of the period. There could be no better representative of such a cast of people than the Main Tomb at Kom el-Shoqafa, which represents the most well-preserved, monumental and lavishly decorated tomb of ancient Alexandria. The Main Tomb is shaped like an Egyptian temple, with the façade composed of a segmental pediment and papyri-form pilasters and columns. Still, it could be identified as Egyptian only within an Alexandrian context, meaning several Greek and Roman elements have been inserted in various areas of the inner structure (Fig. 12).

Moving into the *pronaos*, the visitor stands between two statues placed in niches in Egyptian style on the two lateral walls (Figs. 13 and 14). These statues represent two tomb owners, combining an Egyptian-style body with individual portrait characteristics, dated to the Flavian Period, probably Vespasian's reign (69–79 CE; Venit 2002, 129). While the portrait represents the image and status of the dead during their lifetime, the Egyptian body seems particularly critical in a funerary context. In Egyptian tradition, statuary in a tomb environment – usually in royal and courtier burials– serves ceremonial purposes such as the Opening of the Mouth ceremony. After this ceremony, the mummy or statue of the dead would have been "able" to eat, breathe, see, hear and enjoy the offerings and provisions the priests and visitors brought to them, thus sustaining the Ka (living spirit; David 1999, 154).

In the case of the Main Tomb, the so-called "opening-of-the-mouth" ritual may have assumed a distinctly Alexandrian form, though no conclusive evidence currently allows us to reconstruct how it was performed

Fig. 13. Kom El Shoqafa. The male statue in the pronaos.

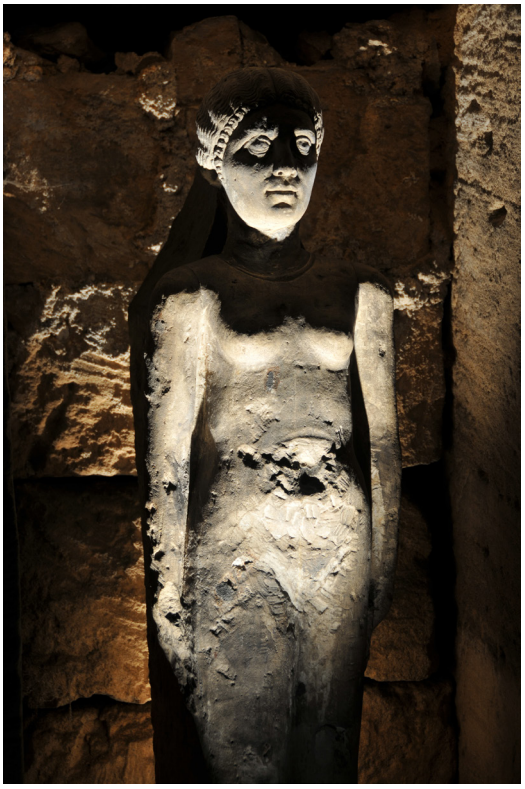

Fig. 14. Kom El Shoqafa. The female statue in the pronaos.

in this context. Even if such a rite was adapted locally, the statues themselves still convey a clear intention: emerging from their niches or false doors, they appear to greet and receive the living into their new abode, much like the young Alexandrian figure in the Gabbari Stele. In this way, the pronaos becomes a liminal space – a threshold where the worlds of the living and the dead intersect.

The back wall of the anteroom forms the façade of the main burial chamber, where Egyptian, Greek, and Roman elements are combined. The doorframe is bound by a torus moulding and supports a cavetto cornice decorated with a winged sun disc and crowned with a frieze of rampant *uraei*-cobra. Yet, the doorway is flanked at each side by an Agathos Daimon, standing on an Egyptian-style trapezoid base, as the guardian of the burial chamber's entrance. Each Agathos Daimon wears the *pschent* crown, but it also supports a Thyrsus and Kerykeion in its coils, which are attributes of Dionysus and Hermes respectively. There are typical Roman shields above each Agathos Daimon figure, with an image of Medusa.

The burial chamber hosts three niches in a cruciform ("triclinium") arrangement, which contain Roman stone sarcophagi with garlands and masks. In contrast, the upper part of the niches is decorated with an Egyptian-style scene. The back wall of the central niche presents the funeral of Osiris, who is laid on his royal lion-shaped bed, surmounted by Thoth, Horus and Anubis in the role of the priest, a typical theme throughout Egyptian funerary tradition (Fig. 15).

Interestingly, scholars have observed "mistakes" in the scene, such as the depiction of three Canopic jars instead of four. Yet, by the time the Main Tomb was designed, Canopic jars had long disappeared from the canonical panoply of funerary equipment for almost 1000 years, if not longer. What is represented here is not a detailed rendering of a traditional Egyptian burial, but an evocation created by arranging vignettes that recall the Pharaonic funerary ambience. The emphasis, therefore, falls on the narrative's broader meaning rather than on precise pictorial detail, while the essential theme remains unchanged. Above all, such scenes suggest a more deliberate engagement with, and a deeper familiarity with, the long history of Egyptian funerary tradition within Alexandrian society.

Fig. 15. Kom El Shoqafa. The wall scene above the central niche: Funeral of Osiris.

Fig. 16. Kom El Shoqafa. The wall scene above the two later niches: act of worship to Apis-bull (Sarapis) by a Pharaoh.

A scene of a Pharaoh venerating the Apis-bull is presented on the back walls of each of the two lateral niches (Fig. 16). Apis stands on a podium, while Isis, on the right, embraces the god with her open-winged arms. The bull figure seems to represent a statue on a base, like this discovered in the Alexandrian Serapeion, rather than an actual bull. Considering the tomb's exceptional monumentality and precise dating, the participation of "Pharaohs" in the scenes can lead us to a series of questions. Would it be possible for the wall scenes on the back walls of the two lateral niches to represent the Roman Period Alexandrian cult of Apis? Is there a political-ideological symbolism behind these scenes? Who were the owners of the most monumental tomb preserved in Alexandria? What could their role have been in the public life of Alexandria?

Beginning with the latter point, the overall structure of the tomb strongly suggests that its occupants belonged to the highest social strata. Moreover, the depiction of pharaohs standing before the statue of the Apis bull may evoke acts of reverence to Apis performed by Roman emperors during this period. This could plausibly include Emperor Vespasian, whose reign coincides with the proposed date of the tomb. Notably, Vespasian is known to have participated in rituals at the Alexandrian Sarapeion, located only a few hundred meters from the Kom el-Shoqafa necropolis (according to Venit (2002, 143), the Pharaoh of the Main Tomb represents Vespasian). If the tomb's residents were indeed of the highest social rank, such scenes may imply their role in the relationship between the Emperor and Sarapis (and the city).

Through these scenes (as well as their Flavian style portraits), the Main Tomb's owners might have desired to forge a relationship with the Roman "pharaohs" of Egypt as a reflection of their high status in Alexandrian society and possible involvement in the Roman state machinery. Probably for this reason, the two guards of the burial chamber flanking the exit are dressed in typical Roman military costume, as the exceptional case of a high-ranking Roman-Alexandrian demands. Still, the guards were not just ordinary Roman legionaries, but two different versions of the Egyptian god Anubis –one with a snake tail– in his eternal role as a guard of the necropolis, who adopted the characteristic military fashion of the era. Still, this can't be considered a purely Roman-period innovation. The soldier-dressed Bes used to do a similar job on behalf of the Alexandrian dead since the 3rd century BCE (Fig. 17).

THE TIGRANE PASHA STREET TOMB: INITIATION TO THE MYSTERIES OF THE DEAD

The Tigrane Pasha Street Tomb represents the only example in this study from the Roman phase of the East Necropolis. Although the tomb is lost, archaeologists managed to safely remove most of the exceptional wall

Fig. 17. Kom El Shoqafa. The Main Tomb burial chamber, towards the entrance. Two relief figures of Anubis-legionaries flank the exit.

Fig. 18. Tigrane Pasha Street Tomb. Back wall of the central niche: mummy-funeral scene.

decoration of the main burial chamber, once hosting three sarcophagi in triclinium arrangements. Today, the tomb decoration is displayed at the site of Kom el Shoqafa in a little museum, recalling the original shape of the triclinium chamber. The tomb dates probably to the Hadrianic era (Venit 2002, 147).

On each of the lateral walls of the entrance corridor, a male figure (upper part) and an Apis bull (lower part) are depicted on each side of the corridor. The males wear a Nemes headdress and a short garment. Each figure is carrying a round vessel. They have been interpreted as Isis' servants (Venit 2002, 147). On the short walls of the burial chambers, two crowned Agathoi Daimones are depicted, with false bears and crowns on their heads.

Inside the burial chamber, the back walls of the three niches bear painted scenes, which seem to compose one program. The back wall of the central niche shows a mummy lying on a bed and flanked by two female figures. Behind each woman is a pedestal, on which a crowned falcon stands (manifestation of Horus) (Fig. 18). The funerary couch has been identified as being a late Greek or Roman type, like the characteristic rhomboid pattern of the mummy binding. The two female figures seem to imitate Isis' and Nephthys' appearance, typical participants in such scenes in favor of the dead. Above the mummy, a winged solar disc holds out a garland. The upper parts of the pilasters that flank the central niche are each decorated with a seated figure of Anubis.

The central painting in the left niche depicts a male figure standing frontally; he has been thought to be the deceased (Venit 2002, 153), or even Osiris himself (Empereur 1995, 23–4). He is flanked by two seated jackals (animal manifestation of Anubis) looking upwards and two winged figures in tunics and leggings (Fig. 19). At the corner of the scene, there are two huge eggs tied with fillets set on high stands, which are symbols of rebirth. On top of the scene, there is a winged solar disc. The male figure clasps his hand before his torso, holding green palms between them. His head could be shaved or covered with a cup, slightly turned away from the frontal position. Most of the body is naked, apart from his middle part, which looks to remain wrapped in mummy bands.

In the central painting of the right niche, a male is depicted wearing a tunic, leggings and a nemes-style headdress, kneeling in front of a female (Fig. 20). Both figures hold palm trees, while extending their arms. The female figure wears a diadem with an uraeus on it. Her garment is similar to the female figures in the central niche. Behind the central figure, another male figure stands in profile to the right. He has his left foot advanced, standing in a traditional Egyptian pose. He holds out a large green censer in his left hand. He holds a snake-shaped crook in his right hand. Again, a winged disc flanks the scene from above.

Death, "resurrection," and an afterlife sustained by the presence of deities, such as Isis and Nephthys, appear to form the central thematic thread of these wall scenes. However, in terms of style and composition, although the imagery aspires to an Egyptian appearance, it fails to meet the formal criteria of Egyptian art. The painter was evidently unfamiliar with the conventions of traditional Egyptian visual language. Instead, the scenes reflect a Greco-Roman idiom: real-life model figures are depicted in Egyptian-style dress, yet the iconographic details and material culture are characteristic of the Roman period. The funerary *kline* in the central niche, for example,

Fig. 19. Tigrane Pasha Street Tomb. Back wall of the left niche: "resurrection" scene.

Fig. 20. Tigrane Pasha Street Tomb. Back wall of the left niche: kneeling figure in front a winged figure (Isis?).

is rendered in three-quarter perspective –a distinctly non-Egyptian convention– while shadows are used beside the figures, and the mummy is wrapped in the rhomboid banding typical of Roman-era burial practices.

Based on such a general idea of Egyptian art (if at all), the painter of the tomb seems to compose his scenes, dragging inspiration from Alexandria's religious life (and funerary rites). Indeed, there could have been no better source of inspiration than the Isiac mysteries performed by their followers. Perhaps he even used some of them and their sacred equipment as models. The *situlae*, for example, held by the servants of Isis at the entrance corridor represent actual aspects of the Isiac cults. Also, the funeral scene might have copied aspects of a proper funeral in Roman Alexandria. Therefore, regardless of the result in strictly artistic terms, we shall still be thankful to the Trigrane tomb painter for offering an insight into such rites.

Having penetrated the Alexandrian world of the dead, Egyptian eschatological beliefs and the fundamental concept of life after death became integral to Alexandria's cultural life and identity. For Alexandrians, existence may extend beyond death in the afterlife. This notion would bring some of the otherworld's protagonists to the front in a civic context. This is what Osiris Hydreios represents in the context of Isiac cults, for instance, as part of the divine environment of the co-dated so-called Ras el Soda Temple: the need of every individual to be prepared for what comes after death, the afterlife. For such an objective, people must follow a consistent and pious religious life in the company of the appropriate Gods. The owners of the Tigrane Tomb assert exactly this: as faithful adherents of Isis during life, they now place their hope for a favourable destiny beyond death in her care.

THE PERSEPHONE TOMBS: THE DUAL GAZE OF THE AFTERLIFE

The last examples come from the so-called *Nebengrab*, also called the Hall of Caracalla, a section of underground galleries adjacent to the Great Catacomb of Kom el Shoqafa. These are the so-called Persephone Tombs, two Naiskos-form burial niches, each hosting a sarcophagus, named after the central theme of their decorative program. In both Persephone tombs, the niche walls are covered with a double-narrative decoration program, creating a "triptych" around the sarcophagus composed of two mythological scenes. In each case, one Greek and one Egyptian are horizontally arranged in two registers. Each register represents a myth of death and resurrection, specific to its own culture, respectively Greek and Egyptian, the Abduction of Persephone and the Death and Resurrection of Osiris (Fig. 21).

Being almost identical to each other, the wall decoration of the two Persephone Tombs will be examined in parallel, based on their recent re-publication after an advanced digital documentation process with admirable results (Guimier-Sorbets et al. 2017). The Egyptian decorative program is arranged in the same manner

Fig. 21. Persephone Tombs central wall scene (identical in both tombs). Upper register: Funeral of Osiris. Lower register: Abduction of Persephone.

as in the Kom el Shoqafa and Tigrane Pasha street Tombs. The upper register on the central back wall depicts Osiris's typical funeral. Osiris' mummy lies on a royal lion-shaped bed. Anubis, who stands above him, attends the appropriate rituals. Isis, from the right side, and Nephthys, from the left, flank the funerary couch. Finally, Horus is depicted at the two corners of the scene, on the left side as a Pharaoh with a human head, while on the right side, with a falcon head.

On the lower register, the abduction of Persephone by Hades is depicted. On the right side, the scene presents Persephone, held by Hades, on Hades' *Tethrippon* chariot (which four horses draw). In the middle of the scene, Aphrodite is depicted with Eros above her left shoulder, with next to her on the left, Athena, and finally, at the end of the left side, Artemis.

The niches' two lateral walls complete the narrative of each register. The scenes of the Egyptian register present aspects of the process from the funeral to the afterlife, with the contribution of a series of gods. These scenes are traditionally placed on the lateral walls rather than in frontal view towards the visitor. They are considered themes regarding exclusively the dead and the involved gods – unlike the prosthesis of the mummy on the funerary bed, which is also a social event.

On the left wall of the upper register of Tomb 1 are two enthroned images of Isis and Thoth. The latter projects a falcon image of Horus, a symbol of rebirth, wearing the crown of Upper Egypt. Between the gods is the Osirian symbol from Abydos, also known as the Reliquary of Osiris, who had been dismembered by his brother Seth. The upper register of the right wall in Persephone Tomb 1 presents an Osirian resurrection scene. The 'Osiris' figure –the portrait takes more discussion– is presented in the typical Osiris robe, decorated with the characteristic rhomboid pattern, in the typical resurrection stance, between two altars and two seated figures, Ptah-Sokar-Osiris, the Memphite "God Creator" in the funerary role, and his counterpart Sekhmet, the Egyptian goddess of war and healing (Bianchi 1995, 125, 140; Shaw and Nicholson 2002, 230, 273–74).

On the left-wall upper register of Tomb 2, we find a typical figure of Osiris, bearing all his typical characteristics: (1) the atef crown, (2) the stance, with his forearms, turned towards his chest, (3) the typical robe with the rhomboid pattern. The god stands in the middle of the scene between two enthroned figures of Thoth (right) and Isis (Isis). As in the left wall, Thoth projects a falcon image of Horus with his left hand. On the left-wall upper register of Tomb 2, a figure in Osirian dress and stance –portrait is unclear– with the head surrounded by a star-disc- between Ptah (right) and a Baboon-headed god, Babi or Thoth, according to the 2021 publication (69-70), although Ptah would certainly couple well with the Lion goddess Sekhmet.

In the left-wall Greek (lower) register of both tombs, Persephone collects flowers with her companions, Athena, Artemis, and Aphrodite, while Hades has just appeared at the scene. The right-wall lower register provides a view of the Underworld, with the notorious three-headed dog Cerberus standing at its gate. To the left, Hermes, the soul leader god, would guide the dead to their final destination.

The figured-painted decoration is also found on naiskos' architectural frame. The pilasters of the naiskos bear images of Bes, while at the pediment is a solar disc flanked by figures of the Apis-bull and Thoth.

The role of the Egyptian scenes seems straightforward towards the desire of the dead to achieve eternal life, a destiny similar to that of Osiris, king of the Underworld, from funeral to resurrection. Accordingly, the Greek register follows a narrative form from left to right, before, during, and after the Abduction of Persephone. Still, to the eyes of the viewer, it is the abduction scene juxtaposed with Osiris' funeral that dominates the tomb's environment.

In the case of the Greek register, it is worth having a more thorough look at what else is promoted, along with the apparent concept of death and rebirth. We may start by carefully considering each figure's position in the central scene composition. While the abduction comprises the key theme, the Hades chariot is not presented in the middle of the scene but in the right corner, almost escaping from the frame, already on its way to the underworld. Left of Hades' chariot, Aphrodite stands in the middle of the scene in a relatively relaxed frontal pose along Eros, appearing as almost "ignoring" the main act to the right, where Persephone has turned her head and body towards her companions, desperately extending her arm. In contrast, in the left corner, Artemis and Athena seem to have the expected reaction, turning to the side of Persephone. In any case, figures in both corners point to the position of the central figure of Aphrodite, with the postures of their bodies, and by staring at the center, creating a symmetric arrangement to the scene, with Aphrodite in its center.

Yet, in relation to the Egyptian register, Aphrodite is located just under the central figure of Osiris. Her ever-desirable image and everything it represents (beauty, pleasures, desires, and happiness) would undoubtedly contradict the mummy figure of Osiris, who, in this specific scene, is more related to the sadness of death. Yet, Aphrodite may further represent the happiness and joy of the eternal life that the tomb owner desires to achieve after following the practices indicated in the Egyptian register.

Aphrodite got intensively involved in the funerary matters of the Roman period through her association with Isis and Hathor. Her image is frequently found in tombs of Roman Egypt, either as a figurine or as a coffin and shroud decoration. In the latter case, Hathor-Aphrodite may bear the portrait of a female dead as an expression of her desire to obtain rebirth and the afterlife, synchronising her desires with the capacities of the goddess (Riggs 2005, 41- 83).

This may also create second thoughts on this so-called "Osirian figure" of the Egyptian register of the left lateral wall, as, at least from what is visible in the published photo, there seems to be an attempt to create a portrait in frontal view, unlike the typical depictions of Osiris, and all other figures of the Egyptian registers that present their heads in profile. Perhaps it is also not a coincidence that the figure bears a star-like crown, similar to the female figure in Stagni Tomb, which most probably represents a dead female with Isis-Aphrodite characteristics (Venit 1999, 641–49; 2002, 159–64). Suppose this is true for the case of Persephone Tomb, there are still unpassable obstacles in recognising the figure's gender, as both females and males may be presented in Osirian resurrection robes and poses. Considering the prominent position of Aphrodite in the lower register as the de facto protagonist, at least in scene-arrangement terms, we cannot exclude the possibility of this tomb representing a female Alexandrian.

After more than three centuries of Greco-Egyptian interaction, such scenes can no longer be described as simple juxtapositions of two distinct religious or artistic systems. The divine figures represented in each register could typically find counterparts in the other, much like the overlapping dynamics observable in the life of the city itself – through fusion, synnaos associations, or the exchange of names and iconographic features. Within this context, Greek and Egyptian deities ceased to function as symbols of separate worlds; instead, they coexisted along a shared divine spectrum that reflected the hybrid character of the Alexandrian society. In a

city that had long internalized syncretism, drawing upon all available symbolic resources was both a pragmatic adaptation and a meaningful spiritual strategy.

These cross-cultural interactions gave rise to complex systems of meaning—multivalent, adaptive, and no longer confined to the interpretive frameworks of a single tradition. Rather than signalling the "erosion" of distinct identities, as an uninitiated observer like the Greek historian Polybius might have assumed, they mark the emergence of a shared symbolic repertoire forged through coexistence, negotiation, and the lived experience of an intricately entangled society. What emerged was not a superficial fusion born of expedience, but a composite language of symbols and practices capable of articulating the complexity of a world in which cultural boundaries were fluid and continually traversed. In this context, expressive patterns and practices were shaped less by doctrine than by the choices, affiliations, and aspirations of individuals navigating the porous contours of multicultural life.

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