

A Re-evaluation of the Kom El-Shoqafa Cemetery: The Imperial Memorial Tomb of Emperor Vespasian

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Abstract

This paper critically re-evaluates the Catacombs of Kom El-Shoqafa in Alexandria, challenging the consensus attributing the monument to a wealthy local family. Instead, it proposes the complex was originally conceived as a Flavian imperial memorial tomb commemorating Emperor Vespasian. Utilizing an interdisciplinary methodology, the study synthesizes archaeological, legal, art-historical, and numismatic evidence to resolve structural and iconographical anomalies. It examines how the monument's urban location violated Roman burial laws within the framework of strict constitutional controls over Aegyptus. Furthermore, the hybrid decorative program, integrating Pharaonic regalia, the Praetorian Guard, and Greek architecture, is correlated with Flavian political iconography, reflecting Alexandria's pivotal role in proclaiming Vespasian emperor in 69 AD. To resolve chronological contradictions, Antonine-period features are reinterpreted as modifications necessitated by *Domitian's damnatio memoriae*. Ultimately, this study redefines Kom El-Shoqafa as an imperial-religious sanctuary engineered for dynastic propaganda, transforming our perspective on Roman Alexandria.

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1. Introduction

In the spring of 30 BC, Octavian advanced through Asia Minor toward Pelusium from Syria, while Cornelius Gallus seized the Paraetionum Fortress, securing the western frontier from Cyrenaica and leaving Alexandria vulnerable to imminent invasion (Grainger, 2013, p. 171). Following the successive suicides of Mark Antony and Cleopatra VII in August 30 BC, Octavian executed Caesarion to eliminate the last Ptolemaic sovereign and neutralize the dynastic threat posed by Caesar's biological son (Rowland, 2014, p. 213). With the concise declaration in the twenty-seventh chapter of his *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, Augustus announced the formal annexation of the realm: "*Aegyptus imperio populi Romani adieci*" (Herklotz, 2012, p. 13). Consequently, Egypt was integrated into the Roman Empire not as a standard senatorial province, but as a unique imperial possession governed directly by an equestrian prefect, establishing a precedent of stringent constitutional and military surveillance to prevent independent political aggrandizement (Brunt, 1975, pp. 124-147).

Over the subsequent centuries, this distinct administrative status influenced the evolution of Romano-Egyptian architecture, temples, and tombs, where indigenous Pharaonic traditions coalesced with deep-seated Hellenistic influences that had permeated the region since the foundation of Alexandria. Within this urban context, the Catacombs of Kom El-Shoqafa, situated in Alexandria's Western Necropolis, stand out as one of the most structurally complex and iconographically perplexing monuments of Roman Egypt (Venit, 2002, p.125). Discovered on September 28, 1900, when Ali Said Jaborah alerted Giuseppe Botti to its architectural remains, the subterranean complex underwent decades of excavation and clearance, prompting various contradictory theories regarding its ownership.

Despite extensive documentation, the existing literature on Kom El-Shoqafa suffers from a significant interpretive limitation. The long-standing scholarly consensus, championed by early excavators and maintained in modern syntheses (e.g., Botti, 1901; Schreiber, 1908; Venit, 1997, 2002), almost exclusively attributes the monument to a wealthy private Alexandrian family or a collective funerary corporation. However, this conventional interpretation fails to establish a coherent scholarly context that can reconcile the profound architectural anomalies and aggressive royal iconography embedded within the tomb's core decorative program. Given the strict Roman administrative and legal prohibitions against independent elite self-aggrandizement in Egypt, where even minor infractions by high-ranking officials like Cornelius Gallus or Germanicus were met with fatal imperial displeasure (Tacitus, *Ann.* 2.59), it is highly improbable that a private provincial individual could safely construct a monument featuring explicit imperial motifs, such as the deceased in Pharaonic regalia flanked by the Praetorian Guard.

To resolve these systemic contradictions, this paper advances a novel alternative hypothesis: that the main complex of Kom El-Shoqafa was originally conceived and constructed as an imperial memorial sanctuary dedicated to the Flavian dynasty, serving as a monumental instrument of imperial propaganda following Vespasian's elevation to the principate in Alexandria in 69 AD. The primary objective of this study is to systematically evaluate this imperial attribution by testing the monument's architectural layout, legal context, and iconographical agenda against explicit criteria of imperial patronage. Ultimately, this investigation aims to bridge a critical gap in Romano-Egyptian scholarship; by redefining Kom El-Shoqafa as a hybrid imperial-religious sanctuary, this paper contributes a transformative perspective to the debate on the monumental and ideological landscape of Roman Alexandria, demonstrating how provincial funerary architecture was harnessed for dynastic legitimization.

2. Early Hellenistic Funerary Contexts in Egypt

To adequately contextualize the monumental evolution of Kom El-Shoqafa within the broader history of Graeco-Egyptian funerary architecture, the chronological baseline of Greek necropolises in Egypt must be accurately established. While traditional scholarship frequently cites the Shatby necropolis as the earliest Greek cemetery in Egypt, this claim is historically inaccurate. Archaeological evidence demonstrates that the earliest Greek funerary presence is firmly rooted in the Memphite region, pre-dating the foundation of Alexandria. Most notably, the archaic Greek cemetery at Abusir yields critical evidence of early Graeco-Egyptian cultural and funerary encounters dating back to the late Saite period and the era of Alexander the Great (Watzinger, 1905; Smoláriková, 2000, 2002). Consequently, the stylistic and structural developments observed at Kom El-Shoqafa must be understood not as a sudden provincial anomaly, but as part of a long-standing evolutionary trajectory of hybrid funerary landscapes that began in Lower Egypt centuries prior to the Roman annexation.

Within this framework, the present study re-evaluates the administrative and legal context of the Catacombs of Kom El-Shoqafa. When analyzing the monument's premium urban placement, traditional Roman burial laws, specifically the prohibition of inhumation *in urbe* derived from the Twelve Tables, must be applied cautiously. This legal restriction primarily regulated the city of Rome and its sacred boundary (*pomerium*), and its direct extension to a provincial capital like Roman Alexandria (*Aegyptus*) requires careful contextual nuance. The prohibition within urban city walls (*urbs*) was not absolute, as regional administrative exceptions were legally granted. Rather than an isolated anomaly, this site was positioned immediately beside the two so-called Tombs of Persephone. Their immediate proximity demonstrates that Kom El-Shoqafa was part of a broader, officially sanctioned elite funerary landscape in this specific sector of Alexandria, rather than an independent and exceptional violation of local provincial urban regulations. Crucially, the complete architectural and decorative program of the monument reveals a deliberate cultural synthesis that balances these imperial claims with deep-seated local traditions. A detailed analysis of the burial-chamber façade is essential here, as it displays prominent Greek architectural and iconographic elements. The façade integrates traditional Hellenistic architectural forms that anchor the monument within Alexandria's dominant cultural identity. However, this Greek framework does not contradict the proposed imperial hypothesis; instead, it complicates and enriches it, serving as a transitional visual device. In a province under strict imperial surveillance, the patron of this tomb exhibited unprecedented political audacity by depicting himself in full Pharaonic royal regalia, presenting the *menat* necklace to Serapis, the official deity of Alexandria during the Roman era, and standing before Ptah to offer the feather of *Ma'at* as a testament to the stability of cosmic justice and order upon the earth. Given these aggressive iconographical assertions of sovereign legitimacy integrated within a sophisticated Hellenistic-Egyptian structural matrix, it remains highly improbable that a private provincial individual could safely construct a monument of such explicit imperial magnitude.

3. The Kom El-Shoqafa Cemetery

3.1 The Construction of the Tomb Within the Urban Perimeter of Alexandria

This monumental tomb was constructed within the Rhakotis district, situated inside the urban perimeter of the city walls of Alexandria. In classical scholarship, it is well-established that according to Greek and Roman religious and civic practices, necropolises were generally required to be situated outside the city limits. Indeed, scholars have long utilized the location of the Shatby tombs, positioned outside the eastern frontier, to deduce the maximum territorial extent of Ptolemaic Alexandria. However, when evaluating the legal implications of Kom El-Shoqafa's urban location under Roman administration, constitutional nuances must be carefully

distinguished. Traditional Roman jurisprudence heavily codified urban burial prohibitions; within *The Law of the Twelve Tables* (Table X, Clause 1), it is explicitly dictated that it is unlawful to bury or cremate any deceased individual *in urbe* (within the city boundaries) (Lassard, 2013, p.7). Yet, these legal concepts should not be conflated or treated as interchangeable; the terms *urbs* (the civic built area), *pomerium* (the sacred, religiously inaugurated boundary strictly unique to the city of Rome), and "within the city walls" possessed distinct legal definitions.

While the absolute prohibition of the *pomerium* was historically confined to the imperial capital, Roman provincial administration in *Aegyptus* maintained a regulatory preference for extramural burials to preserve public order and sanitation. Nonetheless, this provincial prohibition was not absolute, and regional administrative exceptions were legally granted by imperial or prefectural sanction. In a provincial capital like Roman Alexandria, intra-mural burial or high-status tomb construction represented an extraordinary political honor and an official administrative concession, rather than an inherent right.

Historical precedents from the imperial capital illustrate the exceptional nature of such concessions, where intra-mural honors required public or senatorial validation. Among the earliest examples was the burial privilege granted by a civic vote to Publius Valerius Publicola in the Velia region of Rome. Plutarch noted that although this prestigious privilege was extended to his descendants, the family performed a symbolic ritual to respect civic-religious space: the corpse was briefly laid upon the designated spot, and an attendant placed a lighted torch beneath the bier before withdrawing it, symbolically claiming the legal right while voluntarily transferring the actual inhumation outside the city walls (Plut. *Publ.* 23.3). Similarly, the late Republican Tomb of Bibulus (C. Publicius Bibulus) (**Fig. 1**), located at the northern foot of the Arx hill near the *Porta Fontinalis*, represents a rare architectural exception constructed within urban parameters by virtue of an explicit senatorial decree inscribed upon the monument itself (Delbrueck, 1912, pp. 37–41).

Consequently, the location of Kom El-Shoqafa within Alexandria's city walls must be contextualized through its immediate archaeological landscape rather than viewed as an isolated, illegal anomaly. The catacomb was positioned immediately beside the two so-called Tombs of Persephone. This structural proximity indicates that Kom El-Shoqafa was not an independent, rogue violation of urban regulations, but was integrated into a broader, officially sanctioned elite funerary landscape in this specific sector of Alexandria. In a province under strict imperial surveillance, such a prominent urban funerary development strongly implies top-level administrative approval, consistent with an imperial commemorative project rather than a private enterprise.



Figure 1: Remains of the facade of the Tomb of Gaius Publicius Bibulus, one of the rarest surviving funerary monuments from the 1st century BC (Late Republican era).

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Tomb_of_Gaius_Publicius_Bibulus#/media/File:Vittoriano_Graf_van_Bibulus.jpg

Similarly, the Tomb of Emperor Trajan underscores the political magnitude of intra-mural honors. His funerary monument consists of a triumphal column approximately 44 metres high, featuring a square base surmounted by a cylindrical shaft that served as his final repository by virtue of a dedication from the Senate and the Roman People (SPQR) in 113 AD. (Davies, 2000, pp. 27–34). Significantly, the Romans equated Trajan with Romulus, the warrior founder of Rome, justifying this exceptional honor (Eutr. *Brev.* 8.8).

Furthermore, early Roman tradition extended the practice of intramural burial to the Vestal Virgins, whose ashes were traditionally interred within the city boundaries (Smith, 1875, p. 1191). Servius, in his commentary on Virgil's *Aeneid*, noted that while it was customary to bury the dead inside cities during archaic times, the Senate, under Consul Duilius, later imposed a formal statutory ban on the practice. Emperors and Vestal Virgins were progressively exempted from ordinary civil statutes; they retained the unique legal privilege of intra-mural commemoration (Serv. in *Verg. Aen.* 11.206; Thilo & Hagen, 1881).

However, historical evidence demonstrates that even this right to be interred within urban boundaries was strictly conditional upon formal state approval. For instance, the Mausoleum of Augustus, constructed in the first century BC in the Campus Martius as the grandest dynastic monument of its era, had its site meticulously selected by Augustus himself to dominate the tombs of prominent Romans like Sulla and Julius Caesar (Johnson, 1996, p. 218). Yet, despite its imperial and dynastic magnitude, it was notably located outside the contemporary sacred boundaries (*pomerium*) of Rome at the time of its construction.

These legal precedents collectively demonstrate that the construction of high-status tombs within urban limits during the Roman era was tightly regulated and required exceptional political justification. Applied to the provincial context of Aegyptus, these constraints call into question the traditional attribution of Kom El-Shoqafa to private enterprise. Had the catacomb been merely a private venture undertaken by a local elite family, it would have lacked the administrative and legal standing necessary to occupy such premium urban space within Alexandria's city walls. This inference is reinforced by the immediate proximity of the neighboring Tombs of Persephone, which points to an officially sanctioned, elite funerary landscape in this particular quarter of the city. Taken together, the allocation of such prime urban land strongly suggests high-status imperial patronage. This study therefore posits that the primary structural phase of the complex was conceived as a monumental imperial memorial sanctuary, rather than as a private provincial undertaking.

3.2 The Burial Chamber and Its Iconographical Program

The main burial chamber of the complex, by virtue of its extensive inscriptions and reliefs, constitutes another profound enigma of this monument. The identity of the figure depicted in full Pharaonic regalia, and the unique political status that emboldened the patron to adopt such an exalted royal posture, remain central questions. Furthermore, it is critical to address the rationale behind flanking the entrance of the burial chamber with guards wearing the distinct attire of the Roman Praetorian Guard, an elite military unit that, since the reign of Augustus, was exclusively tasked with protecting the emperor and symbolised official imperial presence.

3.2.1 The Architectural Façade of the Burial Chamber

Before evaluating the inner relief cycle, the complete architectural and decorative program of the burial-chamber façade must be analyzed as an integral component of the monument's cultural identity. The façade features prominent Greek architectural and iconographic elements that anchor the complex within the traditional Alexandrian-Hellenistic design. It features two stylized columns with hybrid Egyptianizing and Corinthianizing capitals supporting a classical Greek entablature, surmounted by a prominent Syrian pediment decorated with a central

winged sun-disk flanked by sacred uraei. Far from contradicting the proposed imperial hypothesis, this heavy reliance on Greek architectural forms complicates and enriches the monument's intended function. In the geopolitical context of Roman Alexandria, an official imperial commemorative project would deliberately deploy these familiar Hellenistic visual codes. Rather than representing an unbalanced private eclecticism, the façade serves as a calculated transitional device, engineered to contextualize Roman dynastic claims within the deeply embedded Graeco-Egyptian cultural expectations of the local elite.

3.2.2 The Two Guards of the Burial Chamber

The two guardians of the burial chamber are depicted in the guise of Anubis (**Fig. 2**). A striking stylistic feature of these figures is that their stance departs from that of an ordinary provincial soldier; rather, they adopt a chiastic arrangement, a sophisticated composition derived from the Classical Greek *contrapposto* tradition. Although *contrapposto* originated in Classical Greek sculpture of the fifth century BC and continued to be widely employed in Hellenistic and Roman provincial art, appearing in representations of gods, athletes, and private individuals such as the deceased in the Al-Mazawqa tombs of the Dakhla Oasis, its specific context within Kom El-Shoqafa requires deeper ideological nuance.

While the pose alone does not exclusively demonstrate supreme sovereign authority in every provincial context, its deliberate integration here with explicit military emblems of Roman imperial power alters its interpretive value. In this specific monument, the chiastic posture is directly combined with the insignia of the Praetorian Guard. Consequently, this study argues that the pose transcends a general classical artistic origin. Within the decorative program of Kom El-Shoqafa, this stylistic choice represents a conscious emulation of official Roman state iconography and imperial portraiture, designed to signal supreme sovereign authority and align the monument with Flavian political propaganda. (Venit, 2002, pp. 143- 147).



Figure 2: Two reliefs depicting Anubis in military attire, flanking the entrance to the burial chamber
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:113KOM_EL_SHOQAF_A_CATACOMBS.jpg

Both reliefs face the entrance of the main burial chamber, standing upon pedestals sculpted in the form of an ancient Egyptian temple pylon. The first figure is rendered with a human body and a jackal's head, clad in classical Roman military attire, specifically a muscle cuirass fitted with *pteryges* terminating below the waist and over the shoulders. He is shown sheathing a *parazonium* (a short ceremonial dagger) into its scabbard, while bearing a solar disk upon his head, grasping a spear in his left hand, and carrying a prominent oval shield in his right. On the opposite side, the counterpart guardian is uniquely rendered with a serpent's lower body and the atef-crown of Osiris. He holds a short sword in one hand and a spear in the other; unlike the first guardian, this hybrid figure is further distinguished by a military cloak (*paludamentum*) fastened securely over his right shoulder. The attire worn by Anubis merits closer analysis: the muscle cuirass emerges as the defining iconographical element, having served historically as the official insignia of elite senators, members of the equestrian order (equites), and emperors, and functioning primarily to distinguish high-ranking commanders from ordinary soldiers. Roman commanders frequently sought to emulate the military panoply of the Hellenistic period, in particular the heroic martial bearing of Alexander the Great, a tradition visibly embodied by emperors such as Augustus in the celebrated Prima Porta statue (**Fig. 3**).

Roman military practice recognized two distinct typologies of the muscle cuirass, differentiated by tactical function: the infantry variant extended downward to cover the lower abdomen, ensuring maximum protection in close-quarters combat, while the cavalry variant featured raised, curved lower edges for greater comfort and flexibility while riding. Within the iconographical program of Kom El-Shoqafa, the infantry variant is clearly identifiable by its extended abdominal coverage, reinforcing the guardians' role as localized representations of the elite imperial bodyguard. This elaborate martial attire, however, does not merely signal Roman influence; rather, its deliberate juxtaposition with Pharaonic crowns and Hellenistic stylistic traits produces a unified, high-status artistic program tailored to official dynastic representation. (Thomas, 2019, p. 80).



Figure 3: The statue of Emperor Augustus in military attire, wearing the cuirass (muscular breastplate), from Prima Porta.

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Statue-Augustus.jpg>

Conversely, the cavalry cuirass was engineered with horizontally cropped lower edges designed specifically to facilitate fluid movement during riding. Roman emperors exclusively favored the muscle cuirass in official portraiture to reinforce their affiliation with the elite commander and officer class, deliberately avoiding the equipment of ordinary legionaries, such as segmented armor (*lorica segmentata*) or mail armor (*Lorica Hamata*). Moreover, an officer or equestrian did not wear the cuirass in isolation; a military sash (*cingulum*) was fastened around the waist to secure the overall ensemble, supplemented by dangling leather strips (*pteryges*) projecting at the shoulders and waist. Recent scholarship has demonstrated that these leather strips were in fact integral components of a padded undergarment worn beneath the cuirass, known as a *thoracomachus*, rather than extensions of the metallic plate itself. Arguably, a primary factor behind the archaeological rarity of the muscle cuirass is its strict restriction to high-ranking commanders and equestrians, which kept the total volume of historically manufactured pieces exceptionally low compared to the mass-produced armor of common soldiers. This elite cuirass was worn by only the top tier of officers, an estimated nine individuals within an entire legion comprising thousands of troops (Bishop, 2022, pp. 40–42).

A comparison of the weaponry carried by the Kom El-Shoqafa Anubis with that borne by the Praetorian Guard on the relief of the Puteoli Marble, one of the most significant Roman archaeological artifacts discovered in the city of Puteoli (modern Pozzuoli, Italy), reveals striking iconographical parallels. The inscribed face of this stone block originally formed the facade of a monument bearing a statue of Emperor Domitian (son of Vespasian and brother of Titus), who ruled from 81 to 96 AD. The citizens of Puteoli had erected the monument in the final year of his reign to express gratitude for his completion of the Via Domitiana, a major road linking their city to the Via Appia and, by extension, to Rome.

Following Domitian's assassination, the Senate promptly decreed that all settlements and municipalities destroy his images and erase his name wherever found, a penal practice known as *damnatio memoriae*. This decree likely reached Puteoli within about a week of senatorial ratification, prompting local authorities to chisel out the inscription and dismantle the statue that had surmounted it. Fortunately, those carrying out the erasure occasionally left incomplete marks, allowing modern scholars to reconstruct the full text. The defaced monument probably remained on display for several months as visible evidence of Puteoli's compliance with the senatorial decree. The city later chose to reuse the stone block to honor one of Domitian's successors, either Nerva (96–98 AD) or Trajan (98–117 AD). During this re-carving, the block was rotated 180 degrees, inadvertently preserving the original imperial inscription, while what had formerly been its reverse side was carved with reliefs depicting the emperor's personal bodyguard, the Praetorian Guard (**Fig. 4**), an exceptionally rare choice of subject matter for a provincial imperial monument (Rose, 2025, p. 17). This episode of epigraphic and sculptural recycling offers a compelling imperial parallel for the architectural and portrait anomalies observed at Kom El-Shoqafa, where subsequent dynastic shifts appear to have triggered similar structural reinterpretations.



Figure 4: A reconstruction of the Praetorian Guard scene on the Puteoli marble remains. (Rollinger, 2025, fig. 6).

Striking similarities are observed in the rendering of the long spear, the short sword, and the prominent oval shield; all of these offensive and defensive weapons are clearly identifiable on the reliefs of Anubis, alongside the military cloak (*paludamentum*) draped over the deity's shoulder. Within this iconographical context, this study posits that Anubis was deliberately depicted in the guise of a Praetorian guardsman protecting the divine owner of the tomb. This attire did not merely represent the panoply of an ordinary Roman legionary; rather, the specific insignia worn by Anubis mirrored the exclusive uniform of the Praetorian Guard. It is well established that this elite unit was structurally reconstituted early in the reign of Augustus. Whereas its primary mission during the Republican era had been to protect individual military commanders and prominent magistrates, from the Augustan principate onward its duty became strictly confined to the personal protection of the emperor and the imperial family, transforming the Guard's presence into a visual synonym for sovereign imperial authority (Rollinger, 2025, pp. 30-32).

3.2.3 The Reliefs Surmounting the Sarcophagi of the Main Burial Chamber

The Catacombs of Kom El-Shoqafa constitute a unique paradigm of funerary art in Roman Alexandria, with the pinnacle of this artistic distinction manifesting in the main burial chamber. The profound significance of the reliefs in this chamber lies not only in their aesthetic value but also in their function as a living embodiment of ideological and artistic syncretism, in which ancient Pharaonic religious symbols converge with incoming Graeco-Roman stylistic conventions. An analysis of the scenes and iconographical programs adorning the chamber's walls reveals that the Alexandrian artist succeeded in projecting a hybrid vision of the underworld. While the underlying themes remain purely Egyptian—concerned with the metaphysical journey of the deceased, divine protection, and the ritual offerings presented to Serapis—their stylistic execution reflects a complex cultural synthesis. This deliberate iconographic interplay balances local provincial sensibilities with official imperial motifs, reinforcing the monument's dual political and religious program (Veint, 2002, pp. 136–142).

3.3 The Central Sarcophagus

The analysis commences with the central sarcophagus, which occupies the absolute architectural and ritual center of the burial chamber (Fig.5). Decorating the front facade of this sarcophagus is a lush botanical garland, from which the apotropaic head of Medusa and the mask of *Silenus*, the elderly, satyr-like follower of *Dionysus*, are suspended from the clusters

in place of standard fruits. Above the organic branch, a female figure reclines gracefully upon a cushion draped over a structural panel spanning the garland. She is rendered wearing a long, off-the-shoulder Roman tunic and holds a portion of her drapery, which likely represents her mantle or cloak. Alan Rowe suggests that this reclining lady represents the definitive patron and owner of the tomb, a hypothesis heavily supported by her distinctive Roman attire and her strategic spatial positioning directly beneath the traditional Egyptian mummification scene (Venit, 2002, p. 134).



Figure 5: A scene depicting the mummification process according to Egyptian belief, decorating the middle coffin <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:CatacombsKomElShoqafa4.jpg>

The scene surmounting the central sarcophagus depicts the resurrection and mummification process of the deceased, who is portrayed in the guise of the Egyptian deity Osiris and adorned with a *uraeus*, the supreme symbol of Pharaonic royalty. The deceased is extended upon a lion-shaped funerary bed, which is further embellished with the *atef*-crown of Osiris, and grasps a feather of justice (*Ma'at*) with its sculpted claws. Anubis, the deity responsible for the mummification of the Pharaoh, or perhaps a *sem*-priest acting in his stead wearing the sacred jackal mask, stands over the corpse. Anubis places his right hand upon the body while holding in his left hand an ointment jar decorated with two *uraei*. To the left of the funerary bed stands Horus, represented with a falcon's head and wearing the double crown (*pschent*); he holds a *Was*-scepter in his right hand and, in his left, an urn containing a lotus flower, a profound metaphor for rebirth, echoing the legendary rejuvenation of Osiris.

On the right flank of the scene, Thoth, the lord of wisdom, is depicted standing in his specific ibis-masked and crowned form, holding a vessel in one hand and a *Was*-scepter in the other, while an *Ankh* sign rests prominently near the lion's nose. Beneath the funerary bed, three canopic jars are explicitly rendered: *Imsety* with a human head, who guarded the liver; *Qebehsenuef* with a falcon head, who guarded the intestines; and *Duamutef* with a jackal head, who guarded the stomach (Venit, 2002, pp. 134–137).

Additionally, two facing reliefs appear on the sides of the central sarcophagus:

3.3.1 The Right Side

The right wall of the central niche depicts a confrontational scene featuring a priest and a lady, separated by an offering altar adorned with papyrus and lotus bud motifs (**Fig.6**). The two feathers secured to the priest's headband determine his functional identity within the hierarchy of the Isiac cult. In a manner consistent with the priest rendered on the left wall, this official wears a long robe and dons a ritual leopard skin. The priest holds a lotus flower in his right hand, while carrying in his elevated left hand a shallow platter supporting a purification vessel.

Opposite him, the lady wears an elaborate wig surmounted by a solar disk and a long, form-fitting robe adorned with fringes—strikingly replicating the traditional fringed mantle of the goddess Isis and the initiates into her sacred mysteries, despite the conspicuous absence of the inner tunic characteristic of such vestments. The sacrificial altar stands between the two figures, where two items of bread (or fruit) are depicted flanking a spherical vessel containing floral offerings (Venit, 2016, p. 74). This meticulous replication of traditional Pharaonic ritual iconography is not decoupled from the overall complex; rather, it functions as the ideological anchor of the tomb, deliberately contrasted against the Hellenistic architectural façade and the Roman martial attire of the guardians to deliver a unified, hybrid statement of sovereign and cosmological legitimacy under Flavian propaganda.



Figure 6: A view of the right niche of the middle coffin, showing a confrontational scene that brings together a priest and a woman, separated by an altar of offerings (Venit, 2002, fig. 117).

3.3.2 The Left Niche

The scene executed on the left wall of the central sarcophagus highlights a human figure whose gender identity has generated significant scholarly debate (**Fig.7**). While Venit (2002, p. 139) argues that the figure represents a male, relying on the presence of the half-mantle worn by the individual, Jean-Yves Empereur and Abdel-Hamid Masoud (2020, p. 237) reinterpret the figure as a lady. Their counter-argument relies on anatomical details and the context that the central sarcophagus itself belongs to a woman. This study endorses the latter hypothesis, asserting that the figure is indeed a female patron, given the established female ownership of the immediate sarcophagus matrix.

A priest stands before her, separated by an altar surmounted by a botanical arrangement of papyrus and lotus. Upon the altar rests a cylindrical vessel emitting tongues of fire or smoke, indicating the active burning of incense. Facing the female figure stands a barefoot lector priest wearing a transparent, dotted robe topped with a ritual leopard skin; he holds an unrolled papyrus scroll from which he recites the sacred funerary formulae (Venit, 2002, p. 138). Reinterpreting this figure as an exalted female patron provides a crucial structural link to the subsequent dynastic phase of the monument, specifically aligning with the presence of imperial female portraiture within the Flavian propaganda program prior to its systematic defacement.



Figure 7: A view of the left niche of the middle coffin, showing a confrontational scene of a woman and a lector priest, separated by an altar (Venit, 2002, fig. 116).

3.4 The Left Sarcophagus

The reliefs executed on the rear walls of both the right and left sarcophagi bear a close iconographical resemblance to one another. Each scene displays the sacred bull Apis standing atop a pedestal executed in a distinctive Alexandrian hybrid style, which consists of an Egyptian temple pylon decorated with a classical Greek *denticul frieze* (Fig.8). In front of this platform stands a small sacrificial altar, identical in its architectural typology to the altars visible in the adjacent compositions. The flank of the bull is adorned with a crescent monogram, and a solar disk is centered between his horns, while a small shrine (*naos*) hangs from his neck, secured by a cord, supplemented by numerous amulets suspended in the upper register of the scene.

Beyond the altar stands a figure adopting an exalted regal posture, wearing a pleated kilt resembling the traditional attire of Horus, which is further embellished with feathers that characteristically define the raiment of the deity Thoth. The sovereign wears a prominent *usekh*-collar around his neck and the double crown (*pschent*) atop his head, presenting a decorated *menat*-necklace to Apis. Behind the sacred bull appears the syncretic form of the

goddess Isis-*Ma'at* with two extended wings, holding the feather of truth (*Ma'at*) in her left hand, while her head is adorned with a solar disk preceded by the *uraeus* cobra (Venit, 2016, p. 74). This precise structural integration of a Greek dentil frieze onto a traditional Pharaonic pylon provides further empirical support for the balanced, non-selective nature of the monument's design. This Hellenistic-Egyptian architectural synthesis serves as the spatial matrix for an aggressive imperial ritual, directly mirroring the historical Flavian religious interventions in Egypt, such as Titus's official consecration of the Apis bull in 70 AD.



Figure 8: A scene illustrating the relief of the left coffin, where the emperor makes an offering to the deity Serapis, distinguished by his feather-decorated garment.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Kom_el-Shoqafa?uselang=it#/media/File:Catacombs_of_Kom_el-Shoqafa.jpg

3.4.1 The Right Niche

On the right wall of this architectural compartment, Osiris appears facing a pharaoh who wears a pleated *shendyt* kilt, a ceremonial collar, and a *nemes* headdress surmounted by a magnificent *hemhem* crown (Fig. 9). The ruler's left hand dangles by his side, while he extends the feather of truth (*Ma'at*) with his right hand toward Osiris.

Osiris is depicted with a divine false beard and a solar disk atop his head, adopting a traditional Egyptian posture. However, a distinctive stylistic modification occurs as his arms and joined hands project clearly from beneath a garment decorated in a reticulated pattern. This net-like design closely resembles the elaborate mummy wrappings of the Roman era, with each constituent square containing intricate celestial and astronomical symbols (Venit, 2002, p. 140).



Figure 9: A relief decorating the right niche, showing Osiris facing a pharaoh who wears a shendyt kilt, a necklace, and the nemes headdress surmounted by the hemhem crown, extending his right hand with the 'Maat' feather towards Osiris (Venit, 2002, fig. 120).

3.4.2 The Left Niche

On the left wall of the left sarcophagus, a relief depicts a female figure enveloped in a tight garment, facing Qebhsenuf (the falcon-headed son of Horus), who is rendered wearing the double crown (*pschent*) (**Fig. 10**). Each figure holds a scepter with hands that project from beneath a tightly wrapped cloak, and across the shoulders of each extends an adorned textile sash, tautly stretched and dangling vertically in front of the body so that its intricate decorations are clearly visible. Crucially, Venit (2002, p. 140) points out that the sons of Horus do not customarily wear royal crowns or hold such ritual scepters in traditional Pharaonic iconography. Furthermore, the female figure wears a layered wig and a headband across her forehead surmounted by the *uraeus* cobra, and she is further crowned with a prominent solar disk.

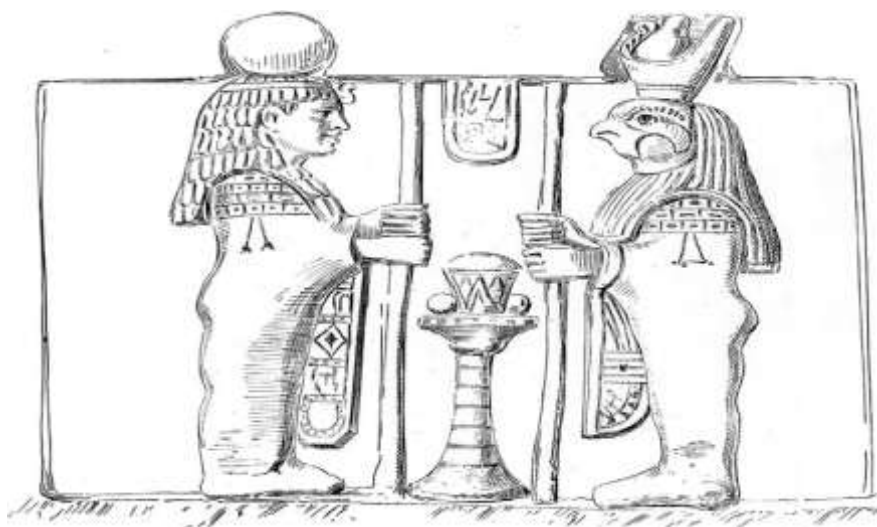


Figure 10: A relief decorating the left niche, showing a female figure wrapped in a tight garment facing 'Qebhsenuf' (the falcon-headed son of Horus), who wears the double crown; both are holding a scepter with hands emerging from a tightly wrapped cloak (Venit, 2002, fig. 119).

3.5 The Right Sarcophagus

The scene centered on the right sarcophagus does not differ extensively from its counterpart on the left sarcophagus, except in a few subtle aspects that this study posits were never secondary or inadvertent variations (**Fig.11**). Conspicuously, the attire worn by the male figure diverges between the two reliefs; on the left sarcophagus, the sovereign is rendered wearing the feather garments characteristically associated with Thoth, whereas here he does not wear them.

Furthermore, the morphology of the sacrificial altar varies between the two compositions, alongside the complete absence of the amulets that surmount the sacred Apis bull in the opposite niche. Finally, the specific form of the ritual *menat*-necklace offered by the ruler exhibits distinct formal variations between the two scenes, reinforcing the intentional nature of these deliberate iconographical updates.



Figure 11: A scene illustrating the relief of the right coffin, where the emperor also makes an offering to the deity Serapis, yet it differs from the relief found on the left coffin.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Kom_el-Shoqafa?uselang=it#/media/File:Catacombs_of_Kom_elShoqafa.jpg

3.5.1 The Right Niche

On the right wall of this compartment, the male figure appears rendered in full Pharaonic attire, crowned with a solar disk adorned with the royal *uraeus* cobra (**Fig.12**). Significantly, the deity Ptah appears here as an alternative to Osiris, with the sovereign shown offering him the feather of truth (*Ma'at*).

The deity Ptah adheres to the traditional Egyptian composite posture; however, his artistic treatment exhibits a notable modification in the clear projection of his hands from beneath the mummy garment to firmly grasp his scepter. As for the funerary garment itself, it reveals a distinct evolution in decorative schemes, as the previously observed rhombic reticulated pattern is replaced by an updated, specialized decorative design (Venit, 2016, p. 74).



Figure 12: A relief in the right niche showing the male figure in 'pharaonic' attire, crowned with a sun disk adorned with a uraeus, where the god Ptah appears as an alternative to the god Osiris (Venit, 2002, fig. 121).

3.5.2 The Left Niche

On the left wall of this architectural compartment, a male figure enveloped in a cloak appears on the left, facing Hapi, the fourth son of Horus represented with a baboon's head, who is likewise depicted enveloped in a cloak (**Fig. 13**). Both figures are surmounted by a solar disk, and an adorned textile band dangles vertically in front of their bodies, indicating that the Alexandrian artist intended to project a rigorous sense of iconographical symmetry between the mortal individual and the deity Hapi. Meanwhile, the dynamic figure on the left is uniquely characterized by the presence of two intricate strings of amulets tightly wrapped around the lower portion of his body (Venit, 2002, p. 142).

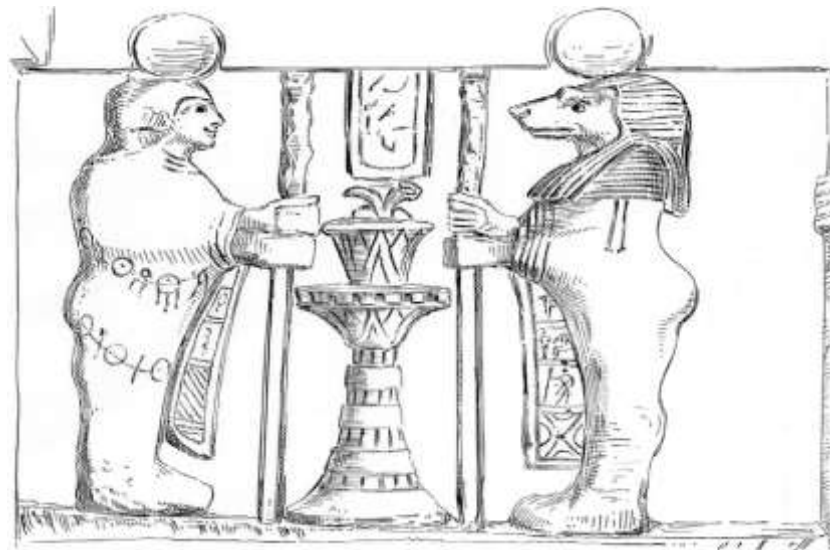


Figure 13, A relief showing a male figure wrapped in a cloak on the left, facing 'Hapi' (the fourth son of Horus with a baboon head), who is also depicted wrapped in a cloak; both are wearing a sun disk (Venit, 2002, fig. 122).

4. The Geopolitical, Legal, and Constitutional Environment of Roman Egypt

The veneration of bovines, both cows and bulls, spread extensively across Egypt from the Early Dynastic Period onward and grew increasingly prevalent in subsequent eras. The cult of the sacred bull Apis emerged during the First Dynasty, later supplemented by a dedicated priesthood established under the Fourth Dynasty. The Apis cult was closely and inextricably linked to the persona and political legitimacy of the Pharaoh. Memphis served as the administrative and ritual center of his worship, associated primarily with the great Temple of Ptah, while the city's subterranean necropolis, the Serapeum, was reserved for the interment of the deceased Apis bulls. Furthermore, according to classical Roman historians, the elaborate coronation ceremonies of the Apis bull were conducted inside the Temple of Ptah in the presence of approximately one hundred priests gathered from all parts of Egypt (Omran & Zouair, 2014, p. 44).

The oracular role of Apis, closely associated with Thoth, enjoyed wide popular acclaim, as these deities were subsequently linked to the interpretation of dreams, in addition to being connected to the ancient sciences of astronomy and astrology. Furthermore, the sacred bull was associated with potent magical attributes, and the influx of pilgrims increased exponentially alongside the burgeoning fame of the sanctuary, with worshippers arriving to petition the deity for the fulfillment of their wishes (Omran & Zouair, 2014, p. 45).

Serapis, frequently manifested in his zoomorphic form, appeared consistently in funerary contexts during the Graeco-Roman period throughout most parts of Egypt, and was by no means restricted solely to Alexandria. Key archaeological examples of this widespread zoomorphic iconography include the Tigrane tomb, the Gabbari tomb, the Sieglin-Gabbari complex, Minet El-Basal (El-Wardian), El-Mafrouza, the tomb of Petosiris, the tomb of Petubastis at Al-Mazawqa in the Dakhla Oasis, alongside Tomb IV and Tomb C3 in Akhmim within the Sohag Governorate.

However, the perplexing anomaly resides in the fact that within all these regional provincial contexts, no deceased individual was ever depicted in the guise of a pharaoh or a sovereign presenting sacrifice. This remains true despite Olaf Kaper's hypothesis (Kaper, 2012, p. 965-680), which posits that the deceased could be portrayed as a king offering sacrifices before Apis on the premise that during the Roman era, the deceased systematically aspired to assimilate with Osiris, thereby adopting his inherent regal function. Yet, if we were to accept the validity of Kaper's theory, we should logically expect to find at least a few instances within these numerous Apis-bearing tombs where the deceased is rendered wearing the official royal crowns.

While every deceased individual indeed desired to attain Osiris-hood, the absolute and total absence of any provincial portraiture featuring a private individual in full Pharaonic royal regalia exposes a profound constitutional boundary. This unprecedented iconographical exclusivity leaves us facing a compelling and unavoidable academic question: if the patron depicted so explicitly upon the walls of Kom El-Shoqafa was not truly a sovereign or an emperor, then who could he possibly be? Who, then, was the figure that systematically shattered the established iconographical convention of depicting the deceased before Apis in ordinary attire, traditionally rendered as a deceased soul entirely devoid of crowns, and dared to portray himself in full Pharaonic royal vestments during an era when such aggrandizement was strictly prohibited even for the Roman governor himself?

Within this historical context, this study encounters a profound constitutional paradox in determining the identity of this tomb owner, the one who ventured to defy all prevalent legal and political norms. For this reason, it is imperative to first scrutinize the administrative and

legislative measures adopted by Augustus following his conquest of Egypt offer the reader a foundational perspective on the status of Egypt as a pivotal, highly restricted province.

Paradoxically, little is documented regarding Octavian's actual stay in Egypt; in his official record of achievements, Augustus referred to the conquest in a single, succinct sentence despite its immense geopolitical consequences: "*Aegyptus imperio populi Romani adieci*" (Riggs, 2012, p. 11). Furthermore, the classical accounts provided by Suetonius and Cassius Dio remain brief and non-contemporary with the events themselves. The primary difficulty in reconstructing these chronicles stems from the fact that both authors wrote retrospectively, from the ideological perspective of the victor. The geographer Strabo, by contrast, lived during the reign of Augustus, accompanied the prefect Aelius Gallus on his military expedition through Egypt in 25/24 BC, and resided in Alexandria for a substantial period. His work therefore provides not only invaluable ethnographic information on Egyptian culture but also contemporary, firsthand evidence of the province's unique administrative structure (Riggs, 2012, p. 13).

Octavian's initial actions as conqueror of Egypt were carefully orchestrated. Upon entering Alexandria on the first of August, 30 BC, he visited first the Serapeum and then the hippodrome, where he formally pardoned the city in recognition of its aesthetic grandeur and its legendary founder. Shortly after the conquest, Augustus established an imperial ruler cult for himself at the Caesareum in Alexandria—the monumental temple originally begun by Cleopatra in honor of Julius Caesar—transforming it into the Sebasteion. From that point onward, all sanctuaries in Egypt, whether Hellenistic or traditional Egyptian, were statutorily required to present daily offerings to the Roman emperor. Portrait statues of Augustus, executed in the traditional Hellenistic royal style, were likewise erected systematically throughout the province (Maja, 2020, p. 15).

In emulation of Alexander the Great, Octavian subsequently journeyed to Memphis, the ancient seat of Pharaonic royalty, where the god Ptah and the Apis bull had been venerated since the First Dynasty. Throughout the Ptolemaic era, the Memphite priesthood had maintained an exceptionally close relationship with the ruling dynasty. The High Priest of Ptah alone presided over the sacral coronation ceremonies of the sovereign—a ritual validation that took place sometime after the king's actual political accession, symbolizing the gods' mythological protection of the crown, during which the pharaoh received his formal titulary. Augustus, however, pointedly refused to venerate Apis, famously declaring that his custom was to offer sacrifices to gods, not to beasts (Riggs, 2012, p. 15).

As for the administrative framework, Augustus refrained from appointing any member of the Senate to govern Egypt—a decision most specialists attribute to the province's high population density in both urban and rural areas, the volatile temperament of its populace, and the massive scale of its grain supplies and wealth. He in fact strictly prohibited senators from even visiting or residing in Egypt unless they held an explicit, individual permit issued by the emperor himself, by name (Riggs, 2012, p. 16).

Among the major provinces of the Roman Empire, Aegyptus was uniquely governed by a prefect drawn from the equestrian order and appointed directly by the emperor. In terms of jurisdiction, the prefect wielded powers fundamentally equivalent to those held by senatorial provincial governors; jurisprudence granted him authority resembling that of a proconsul (*imperium ad similitudinem proconsulis*), which terminated immediately upon his successor's formal entry into Alexandria (see: Digest 1.17.1).

His prerogatives were not restricted to civic governance but initially included the command of three military legions, which were subsequently reduced to two legions from the reign of

Tiberius onward, a military privilege that was customarily a structural monopoly exclusive to senators alone. Furthermore, the governor enjoyed unlimited authority within the civil sector; in his capacity as the supreme Roman magistrate in the province, he possessed the "right to issue edicts" (*ius edicendi*), a historical fact substantiated by more than sixty surviving epigraphic and papyrological edicts. Similarly, he possessed the supreme judicial powers in the country, including the absolute right to pass capital punishment decrees by virtue of the "right of the sword" (*ius gladii*) (Riggs, 2012, p. 61).

All state officials in Egypt were strictly subordinate to the prefect; nevertheless, it was the emperor who personally appointed the high-ranking administrators. The country was structurally divided into three (and later four) major administrative districts (*epistrategeiai*), which were also governed by Roman officials appointed directly by the emperor. As for the Greek cities, of which only three existed during the reign of Augustus: Alexandria, Naucratis, and Ptolemais Hermiou, they enjoyed a greater degree of civic autonomy and remained more independent of the provincial government, possessing their own unique municipal administration. Crucially, however, Octavian prohibited the *boule* (the Alexandrian municipal council), suppressing its political influence within the capital (Riggs, 2012, p. 18).

From the arguments presented above, the exceptional geopolitical and constitutional status of Egypt within the Roman Empire becomes distinctly clear to every specialist, demonstrating that it was entirely unlike any other imperial province, whether in its unique method of governance or even in the mere restriction of entry and visitation. Furthermore, from the historical evidence that will be discussed subsequently, the reader will observe the utmost severity and firmness with which the imperial administration suppressed any individual infraction or independent political aggrandizement.



Figure 14: A reconstruction of a part of the Gallus stele, showing the traditional Egyptian winged sun disk, below which a horseman attacks an enemy who has fallen to his knees and is trying to protect himself with his shield (Martina Minas-Nerpel, 2010, fig. 7).

This iconographical depiction is accompanied by a single line of hieroglyphics containing a royal cartouche, which represents one of the most significant and controversial epigraphic points on the entire stele. This line has been translated quite differently by various scholars, prompting many to deduce Gallus's excessive arrogance. Adolf Erman read the cartouche as *Kjsrs* (Caesar) and argued that it referred directly to Octavian (Erman, 1896, p. 3).

Although Ulrich Wilcken adopted Erman's epigraphic interpretation of the cartouche in 1897, he completed the *lacuna* (the damaged missing portion) with the Pharaonic epithet: *stp.n nswt-bjt*, which signifies "the one chosen by the King of Upper and Lower Egypt." Being the first to identify the victorious horseman as Gallus himself, Wilcken translated the hieroglyphic text as follows: *dd mdw jn wr n tjl-mry šm .w mh.w [rn=f nfr] Krrnwys*, rendering it as: 'The governor of Alexandria and Egypt, [appointed by the King] Caesar'. This specific administrative title has not been attested in hieroglyphic sources except exclusively on this stele of Gallus. Wilcken assumed in 1897 that it might constitute the hieroglyphic equivalent of the official Latin title *praefectus Alexandriae et Aegypti*, but there is no additional epigraphic evidence to substantiate this hypothesis (Wilcken, 1897, p. 76).

Furthermore, Edda Bresciani subsequently suggested an alternative translation and interpretation of the hieroglyphic inscription accompanying the horseman's scene: *dd mdw jn wr n t3-mry šm .w mh.w [rn=f nfr] Krrnwys*, which translates as: 'Words spoken by the great one of the land of (Ta-Mery) [Egypt], Upper and Lower Egypt, [whose beautiful name is] Cornelius'. Bresciani read the cartouche as 'Cornelius' and linked it directly to the first prefect of Egypt (Bresciani, 1989, pp. 93–98). The text commences with praise for Gallus's military capabilities and his patronage over Egypt in a traditional Egyptian panegyric style usually reserved exclusively for the reigning monarch. In contrast to the companion Greek and Latin texts, the Egyptian version explicitly refers to Gallus's activities in constructing and expanding indigenous shrines or temples, and to the ritual offerings presented to Egyptian deities, particularly to Khnum at Elephantine; this pious devotion is cited as the reason for the bountiful influx of Hapi (the crucially important Nile flood). The final point in the hieroglyphic version confirms that Gallus also paid special attention to Isis and Osiris, the primary deities of Philae Island where the stele was originally erected (Minas-Nerpel & Pfeiffer, 2010, p. 269).

The deeds and achievements of Gallus were immortalized through the erection of this trilingual stele within the Philae temple complex. He selected for himself the iconographical appearance of a Hellenistic horseman conquering a barbarian enemy. Although Gallus did not overtly attempt to usurp absolute royal privileges by explicitly naming himself a pharaoh, as assumed by Bresciani, the prefect was nevertheless praised in the hieroglyphic inscription with complex royal titles and attributes customarily reserved solely for the pharaoh in historical Egyptian stelae (Minas-Nerpel & Pfeiffer, 2010, p. 293).

This specific act, which occurred not within the provincial capital or anywhere near its vicinity, but rather at the absolute frontier reached by the Roman legions, prompted Augustus to enforce the severe decision to penalize Gallus, his trusted friend who had pioneered the Roman advance into Egypt from the western borders. At this crucial juncture, the foundational and overarching question of this research is forcefully raised: if the very first prefect and a close personal companion of Augustus was stripped of his high office, dispossessed of his entire wealth, and driven to suicide for such peripheral hubristic aggrandizement, who then was the individual that possessed the supreme political audacity to portray himself as a sovereign within the capital itself? Furthermore, who could this patron be, who acted in open defiance of fundamental Roman constitutional regulations that strictly and categorically prohibited the establishment of tombs inside city walls, an exceptional legal privilege structurally reserved exclusively for the emperors and the Vestal Virgins?

Furthermore, Gallus was by no means the sole prominent figure penalized for such constitutional transgressions; rather, this absolute imperial intolerance escalated to the point where the heir apparent himself, Germanicus, faced severe political downfalls merely for visiting Egypt without authorization, culminating in his mysterious and fatal illness in Syria as an indirect consequence. Specifically, in 19 AD, Germanicus, a high-ranking member of the

Julio-Claudian imperial family—traveled to Egypt despite failing to obtain explicit permission from Emperor Tiberius. In sharp contrast to Octavian Augustus, Germanicus presented ritual offerings to the Apis bull. However, because Germanicus did not hold sovereign power, these ritual acts were interpreted as an intolerable form of political insolence and royal usurpation. According to Pliny the Elder and Ammianus Marcellinus, the sacred animal refused to consume the offerings; this rejection by Apis was interpreted as a dire omen portending Germanicus's impending death, which tragically occurred within that very same year (Riggs, 2012, p. 625).

Within the second book of Tacitus's *Annals*, Germanicus's itinerary includes a visit to the city of Alexandria followed by an extensive tour through the Egyptian countryside (*chora*). Upon departing Alexandria, he journeyed first to Canopus and a nearby distributary mouth of the Nile, before advancing to the ruins of ancient Thebes. Other monumental sites captured his attention, including the Colossi of Memnon, the pyramids situated west of Memphis, Lake Moeris, and finally the frontier depths of the Nile near Aswan and Philae (Kelly, 2010, p. 1).

The historian Tacitus evaluated Germanicus's 19 AD expedition, noting that while its ostensible purpose was to mitigate a local economic crisis, its underlying motivation was the exploration of ancient antiquities. Herein lies the core constitutional dilemma: Tacitus explicitly records that Emperor Tiberius felt profoundly insulted and threatened because Germanicus had failed to request formal imperial permission to enter Egypt, a strict administrative requirement that had been rigidly maintained since the principate of Augustus (Riggs, 2012, p. 949).

What primarily prompted the emperor's deep suspicions regarding Germanicus was that the prince ventured to open the state grain granaries, an executive act that led to a significant reduction in local grain prices. Furthermore, he was observed walking through the streets of Alexandria entirely unaccompanied by a military guard. Tacitus remarkably notes that Germanicus's populist style of interacting with the Alexandrians closely resembled Scipio Africanus's interaction with the populace of Syracuse during the Second Punic War. Naturally, Tiberius's reaction was intensely hostile when he discovered that Germanicus was acting in the manner of a traditional "Republican hero". Consequently, while the emperor rebuked him gently for his Greek attire and his civic behavior toward the Alexandrians, he vehemently criticized Germanicus's unauthorized entry into Egypt, which stood in direct violation of Augustus's strict decree prohibiting senators and prominent equestrians from visiting the province without explicit imperial permission. In fact, Tacitus explicitly cited the historical precedent of Cornelius Gallus to justify that Emperor Tiberius's anxiety and political rage were entirely warranted (Kelly, 2010, p. 18).

From the arguments presented above, it becomes apparent to both the reader and the researcher that Egypt was entirely unlike any other imperial province, primarily due to its status as the chief granary of Rome. As previously underscored, *Aegyptus* was characterized by a dense population in both its urban centers and rural districts, a volatile and impulsive temperament among its populace, and a massive concentration of dynastic wealth that required absolute, centralized imperial surveillance.



Figure 15: A ring discovered in the tomb of the priestesses of Nemesis at Kom El-Shoqafa, illustrating the myth of Zeus and Leda (Maja, 2020, fig. 48).

5. The Role of Nemesis and Flavian Political Ideology

The institutional presence of high-status features associated with the priestesses of Nemesis was by no means an ordinary provincial occurrence; rather, it fundamentally reinforces the probability of the complex functioning as an official imperial monument. Within Roman political theology, Nemesis evolved into a potent political symbol closely intertwined with the programmatic concept of imperial peace (*Pax Augusta / Pax Imperatoris*), embodying divine retribution, cosmic justice, and the ultimate stability of sovereign governance.

Consequently, her iconographical image appeared frequently on official imperial coinage, explicitly accompanied by the programmatic legend of "Imperial Peace." Prominent among these numismatic issues are the coins minted during the crucial consolidation era of the early Flavian principate under Vespasian. Specifically, a distinct *aureus* coin recovered from the mint of Lugdunum, dating precisely to 71 AD, provides a compelling contemporary parallel (Fig.16). On its reverse, Nemesis is clearly depicted walking and holding a caduceus, surmounted by the definitive imperial inscription of *PACI AVGUSTAE* (Mattingly & Sydenham, 1926, No. 297).



Figure 16: An aureus coin from Lugdunum, dating to the reign of Vespasian, 71 AD.
(Mattingly & Sydenham, 1926, no. 297).

6. Dating

As is widely acknowledged, this tomb dates back to the Roman period. However, scholars have diverged regarding the precise era of its construction. The majority of researchers attribute the initial phase of the monument to the Flavian period (69–98 AD), corresponding to the late first century AD, with its continuous utilisation extending until the fourth century AD (Venit, 2002, p. 129). Furthermore, a fragment of a lamp was discovered bearing the sacred *Chi-Rho* monogram (XP), which represents the first two letters of Christ's name in Greek. This artefact was recovered from the Byzantine section of the proposed funerary pathway identified by Alan Rowe, who noted that this specific monogram was not utilised prior to 355 AD. Within the same architectural sector, skeletal remains of horses equipped with iron horseshoes were uncovered. This practice was entirely absent among the Greeks but is well-documented in Roman literature, thereby substantiating its Roman origin (Rowe, 1942, p. 5).

Numismatic evidence recovered from the tomb includes coins dating from the reign of Trajan (98–117 AD) through to the reign of Licinius (317–326 AD), further confirming the continuous utilisation of the funerary complex until the fourth century AD (Rowe, 1942, p. 10). Conversely, some specialists tend to date the monument to the Antonine period due to the stylistic attributes exhibited by the statues of the man and the woman, which align with Roman sculpting techniques of the Antonine era. The man's hair is rendered in voluminous, curly locks, showcasing the extensive use of the running drill to manipulate light and shadow (*chiaroscuro* effects). This contrasts sharply with the cropped hairstyles customary during the Flavian dynasty, as observed in the portraits of Vespasian, Titus, and even Domitian. Furthermore, the physiognomy of the male statue exhibits a stylistic feature that deviates fundamentally from Flavian artistic conventions: the incised pupil and iris, defined by a circular line with a central drilled hole. In the history of Roman portraiture, this distinct sculptural technique was introduced for the first time during the reign of Hadrian and persisted through subsequent imperial eras.



Figure 17: A close-up image displaying the detailed features of the head and the inlaid pupil of the male statue positioned in front of the burial chamber.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Kom_el-Shoqafa?uselang=it#/media/File:Catacombs_of_Kom_al-Shoqafa.jpg

Prior to the Hadrianic era, Roman portrait eyes were typically left blank without sculptural features for the pupil and iris, lacking incised depth or carved shading. This chronological indicator is further substantiated by the artistic treatment of the female statue's coiffure, a classicizing style that persisted from the Classical period through the Imperial era into the Late Roman period, and was by no means exclusively confined to the Flavian era (Masoud, 2020, p. 216). Furthermore, the underlying sculptural posture of these figures incorporates a developed chiastic or *contrapposto* pose. While earlier interpretations often associated this posture strictly with sovereign or imperial authority, art-historical parallels demonstrate that its

lineage traces back to fifth-century BC Classical Greek sculpture rather than the Hellenistic period alone. Throughout the Roman Empire, this pose was democratized and utilized not only for emperors, but also for deities, heroes, athletes, and private individuals, as evidenced locally by the representation of the deceased in the two provincial Roman tombs of al-Mazawqa.

6.1 Vespasian's choice and the Flavian Imperial Attribution

Identifying the specific Roman emperor commemorated at Kom El-Shoqafa has generated intense academic debate. While Thompson suggested that a milestone historical event was recorded for posterity within the main burial chamber, Marjorie Susan Venit (2002) argued that Vespasian represents the most plausible candidate depicted performing the ritual of supreme reverence before the Apis bull. Following the suicide of Nero and the ensuing civil war of 69 AD, Vespasian left his son Titus in Judaea to conclude the military campaign and traveled personally to Alexandria. Upon his arrival, he visited the Serapeum to consult the oracle regarding the legitimacy and permanence of his imperial office. Furthermore, he performed celebrated miracles in Alexandria under the divine patronage of Serapis, healing a man with a paralyzed hand and restoring sight to a blind citizen. Vespasian resided in Alexandria during the winter of 69–70 AD, departing Egypt in August of 70 AD. Subsequently, Titus visited Alexandria while en route to Memphis in late 70 AD, where he formally consecrated and dedicated a new Apis bull.

Conversely, Kater-Sibbes and Vermaseren suggested that the sovereign at Kom El-Shoqafa might be Titus. Similarly, Minas-Nerpel, Pfeiffer, and Thompson posited that the portrayal of a king before Apis might directly commemorate this specific religious intervention by Titus. However, Suetonius explicitly documented that Titus had not yet attained the supreme rank of emperor (*Augustus*) at that time, whereas the Kom El-Shoqafa relief distinctly portrays a reigning sovereign wearing the Pharaonic double crown (*pschent*).

That the iconographical program refers directly to the emperors of the Flavian dynasty is further substantiated by two critical historical factors:

A. The Persecution and Integration of Egyptian Deities

The intense persecution faced by indigenous Egyptian deities, such as the goddess Isis, within Rome serves as a vital historical indicator. Throughout the first century BC, her veneration was strictly prohibited; the Roman Senate and early Julio-Claudian emperors systematically dismantled her altars and demolished her sanctuaries, a ban rigidly enforced by Augustus and Tiberius. Although Caligula later revived the cult by rebuilding the monumental *Iseum Campense* in the Campus Martius, the Isiac religion did not become formally integrated into the official Roman state religion until the ultimate collapse of the Julio-Claudian dynasty and the rise of the Flavians.

B. The Zoomorphic Form of Apis and Flavian Imperial Propaganda

The zoomorphic form of Apis serves as another crucial indicator; the veneration of live animals was still considered deeply bizarre and unacceptable to traditional Roman sensibilities. Therefore, early Roman emperors preferred to associate themselves with Isis primarily through her anthropomorphic Hellenistic consort Serapis, rather than his animal attendant, the Apis bull. In fact, as previously underscored, Augustus pointedly refused to visit Apis during his stay in Memphis, famously declaring that his custom was to offer sacrifices to gods and not to cattle. Conversely, Vespasian paid immense reverence to Serapis in Alexandria and prayed devoutly before his image within the Serapeum, where Serapis functioned as the primary divine protector of Vespasian's emerging imperial cult. Furthermore, Vespasian directly attributed his ultimate victory over the Jewish rebellion to the patronage of Serapis. He entered the *adyton*

(the holy of holies) of the Serapeum entirely alone, consulting the oracle regarding the legitimacy and permanence of his imperial office (Omran & Zouair, 2014, p. 48).

Reconciling these architectural layouts, Venit reaffirmed that Vespasian is most likely the Roman emperor depicted performing the ritual of supreme reverence before the Apis bull. Regarding the left sarcophagus, the pharaoh appears to be presenting an offering to Serapis, mirroring the scene executed atop the opposite monument. However, a critical iconographical divergence from the right sarcophagus occurs: the pharaoh here wears the feather vestments that traditionally characterize the raiment of the deity Thoth. It is well noted in Egyptian theology that the oracular role of Apis was closely associated with Thoth, and both were subsequently linked to the metaphysical interpretation of dreams, directly aligning the monument's design with the political and prophetic context of Vespasian's elevation in Alexandria (Omran & Zouair, 2014, p. 45).

7. The Oracular Charisma of Vespasian and the Flavian Memorial Function

This study strongly supports Venit's (2002) hypothesis, as the oracular aspect of Serapis was closely intertwined with Vespasian's political charisma during his crucial residency in Alexandria. Perhaps the most celebrated historical incident that occurred to him while presenting offerings within the *adyton*, and what fundamentally cemented his association with this oracular dimension, is recorded extensively by classical historians. When Vespasian entered the inner sanctuary of Serapis to inquire about the future stability of his empire, he experienced a mystical vision of an Egyptian elite named Basilides, whom the emperor knew to be physically located in a completely different province. In this prophetic vision, Basilides presented him with sacred palm branches, garlands, and ritual cakes, symbols explicitly signifying divine selection, legitimacy, and victory (Levick, 1999, p. 68).

Consequently, this study posits that the relief of the right sarcophagus specifically elucidates the historical consecration and dedication process of Apis performed by Titus in 70 AD at Memphis. The Alexandrian artist deliberately altered the formal morphology of the *menat*-necklace and omitted both the crescent monogram and the cord of amulets that surmount Serapis on the left sarcophagus. This intentional omission serves as a calculated visual strategy to establish a clear iconographical distinction between two distinct manifestations of the bovine deity: one representing Serapis in his zoomorphic form within the Serapeum of Alexandria, and the other commemorating the live Apis bull residing in the ancient sanctuary of Memphis.

Furthermore, this investigation argues that this monumental complex was erected specifically to commemorate Vespasian following his historical visit to the Serapeum and his public manifestation of numerous miracles that a private provincial individual could never have performed. Chronologically, who could heal a blind citizen or cure a paralyzed hand other than a reigning sovereign explicitly supported by the divine patronage of Serapis? Therefore, it is highly probable that this complex, given its illegal location within the city walls, its strategic spatial proximity to the Serapeum, from which it is situated no more than 300 meters away, and its gigantic architecture that originally spanned four subterranean storeys, constitutes an official imperial monument befitting an emperor whom the populace of Alexandria embraced and venerated through the miracles of their chief deity. Consequently, the Alexandrian administrative authorities and priesthood did nothing less than construct this monumental memorial sanctuary in his honor.

Within this ideological context, this study further suggests that an official imperial cult for Vespasian and his dynasty may have been formally established within this tomb during the reign of Domitian (81–96 AD) at the very latest. Subsequently, the penal measures of *damnatio memoriae*, enforced strictly upon Domitian's monuments throughout the entire Roman Empire by absolute order of the Senate, were systematically applied to this imperial sanctuary. This

groundbreaking hypothesis is materially supported by the local archaeological discovery of a stone portrait head belonging to Empress Domitia Longina (**Fig.18**), the wife of Emperor Domitian, which was deliberately defaced and discarded at the bottom of the deep shaft located within the complex's rotunda.



Figure 18: The head of Empress Julia Longina, wife of Emperor Domitian, discovered at the bottom of the well located in the Rotunda (Kyriakos, 2012, fig. 14).

along with another stone portrait head belonging to a high-ranking priest of the Serapis cult (**Fig.19**). This diagnostic portrait was securely identified by means of the distinctive crown bearing an official ritual emblem engraved with seven parallel lines (Maja, 2020, p. 119).



Figure 19: A head belonging to a priest of the Serapis cult, identified by the distinctive crown bearing an emblem engraved with seven lines (Schreiber, 1908, Tafel XLV).

What significantly reinforces this probability is the strategic archaeological discovery of the empress's portrait head within this specific tomb. This study strongly refutes the conventional hypothesis stating that these portraits merely found their way into the complex during a transient period of civic unrest to be preserved at the bottom of the shaft. Critically, how many heads belonging to imperial consorts or high priests have ever been recovered from common, private provincial tombs? Furthermore, why did this discovery yield specifically a portrait belonging to a prominent member of Vespasian's immediate family (Domitia Longina),

alongside the head of a priest directly associated with the Serapis cult, a sanctuary situated adjacent to the tomb which functioned as the divine patron of the Flavian dynasty?

Within this context, this investigation argues that these heads were by no means deposited here in vain or without a clear ideological rationale; rather, they were originally erected as a formal imperial dedication to the divine owner of the tomb before being ritually defaced and discarded. Furthermore, this study does not overlook the presence of the two statues flanking the entrance to the main burial chamber. However, it posits that these two specific statues played no role whatsoever at the time of the tomb's initial establishment and were entirely absent from the original Flavian architectural phase. Instead, there may have been two different portraits in their place, likely depicting Vespasian or his sons, and most plausibly Domitian and his consort.

What fundamentally reinforces the argument that the surviving two statues were never part of the original monument is the specific sculptural technique utilized to define the pupil and iris of the male figure. In the history of Roman portraiture, this distinct anatomical incising did not appear in the art of sculpture until the reign of Emperor Hadrian, persisting through subsequent eras. Prior to the Hadrianic period, eyes were systematically left blank without sculptural features or shaded depth, a chronological reality further compounded by the extensive drill-work that distinctively characterizes the later Antonine period (Masoud, 2020, p. 216).

8. Conclusion

From the evidence previously elucidated regarding the exceptional geopolitical status of Egypt since Augustus's annexation—including his strict prohibition of the senatorial order from entering the province without authorization and his unprecedented appointment of an equestrian prefect to govern it—it becomes structurally clear that the Catacombs of Kom El-Shoqafa were never intended as a final resting place for an ordinary private individual, even one from the wealthy elite of Alexandria. In Roman administrative practice, common provincial citizens never constructed tombs within civic walls; rather, such intramural burials represented exceptional legal privileges granted strictly by senatorial decree to supreme political figures who fundamentally influenced the state. This constitutional reality is further compounded by the severe downfalls that befell high-ranking individuals who attempted unauthorized aggrandizement on Egyptian soil, as demonstrated by the forced suicide of the first prefect, Cornelius Gallus, and the fatal political disgrace of the heir apparent, Germanicus, following his unsanctioned visit to the province.

Furthermore, Egypt's immense economic and political significance relative to Rome functioned as the definitive mechanism that propelled Vespasian to the imperial throne in 69 AD, an ascension intrinsically linked to his residency and celebrated miracles in Alexandria. This historical convergence prompts the core conclusion regarding the exalted rank of the tomb's patron, who possessed the unique audacity to violate Roman urban statutes and portray himself in full Pharaonic regalia. The iconographical choice of presenting the *menat*-necklace to Serapis and the feather of truth (*Ma'at*) to Ptah was by no means arbitrary; the Alexandrian artist was acutely aware that the Memphite priesthood of Ptah was traditionally entrusted with bestowing royal coronation titles and legitimizing Pharaonic sovereignty since the era of Alexander the Great. This sacral programmatic layout is heavily reinforced by the adjacent presence of the tombs of the priestesses of Nemesis, a deity who, during the Flavian principate, served as the primary ideological patron of divine justice and imperial peace (*Pax Augusta*), as consistently substantiated on contemporary numismatic issues.

Consequently, this study demonstrates that the Kom El-Shoqafa complex, by virtue of its highly restricted urban location, monumental scale, and specialized iconographical programs, was initiated as a monumental imperial memorial tomb. The most plausible historical candidate

for this monument is Emperor Vespasian, the first sovereign to visit Egypt during the principate, whose legitimacy was validated by the local prefect, celebrated through dynastic miracles at the Serapeum, and sustained by offerings to the Alexandrian deities. The pharaoh's feather garment characteristic of Thoth visually encapsulates the oracular role of Serapis in confirming Vespasian's imperial destiny. Similarly, the subtle variations between the bovine deities on the opposite sarcophagi serve as a deliberate visual strategy to distinguish between Serapis in his zoomorphic form within the Alexandria Serapeum and the live Apis bull of Memphis, whose formal consecration was celebrated by Titus in 70 AD.

Finally, the diagnostic archaeological discovery of the defaced stone portrait head of Empress Domitia Longina within the deep shaft of the rotunda, alongside the head of a high-ranking priest of Serapis, strongly confirms that this complex functioned as an official imperial-religious sanctuary dedicated to the Flavian family. This monument was subsequently subjected to the severe penal measures of *damnatio memoriae* following the assassination of Domitian, which necessitated later Antonine-period artistic remodeling to reconcile the damaged architectural matrix.

9. References

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