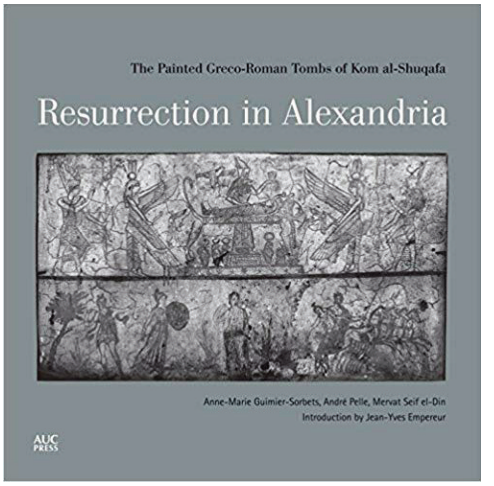
Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections

REVIEW

Resurrection in Alexandria: The Painted Greco-Roman Tombs of Kom al-Shuqafa

by Anne-Marie Guimier-Sorbets, André Pelle, and Mervat Seif el-Din
Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2017

Reviewed by Patricia A. Butz,
Savannah College of Art and Design



This book provides visual and written documentation of a remarkable pair of painted tombs located in the Hall of Caracalla in the Kom al-Shuqafa complex of Alexandria, Egypt. They are referred to as Tomb 1 and Tomb 2, as there are no specific names of tomb owners associated with either. Later in the publication they come to be called the "Persephone tombs" because of the rare visual treatment of the mythology for the rape of Persephone carried by both. After the book presents the full descriptive and interpretive study, the tombs are dated to the Roman period: specifically the end of the 1st century CE to the middle of the 2nd century CE (p. 153).

The story of the rediscovery of the Tomb 1 paintings and recognition of the enormous importance of this decoration, both of each individual scene and of the complete program, is recounted by Jean-Yves Empereur in the introduction entitled, "A Revelation in Four Acts." Starting with the year 1993, when he discerned the paintings for the first time, he gives a timetable of the four significant time spans constituting the photographic and technological methodology employed to implement the scanty information recorded when Tomb 1 was officially entered and some paintings noticed in 1901. Indeed, there is a sense of the revelation of something precious that builds up in the reading of the book, reinforced by the careful wording of the text, the quality and quantity of the images, and the "elegant layout," as Empereur phrases it (in the Introduction, p. 9).

The book is divided into three sections instead of numbered chapters, each section attributed to its individual authors. Following the introduction, André Pelle, photographer with the Centre national de la recherche scientifique and called upon by Empereur in 1996 to help with the project, is responsible for the section entitled "Photographing the Invisible." It is because of Pelle's placement of equipment for the study of Tomb 1 that attention was first drawn to Tomb 2 and ultimately its similar decoration exposed by the same fluorescent lighting procedures he used on Tomb 1. Pelle's section presents the scientific methodology used to go further, making visible even those walls that had no evidence of painted images

whatsoever to the naked eye. Precise explanation is given for the equipment used and all steps of the photographic procedures that finally achieve legibility of the visual narratives, moving from white light to ultraviolet fluorescence to digital modification of the ultraviolet fluorescence (p. 17). Pelle's text is extremely clear and even poetic, as in the description of the unsuspected ceiling paintings that would have sheltered the deceased in the sarcophagus below, literally coming to light by means of the fluorescence. "Lab color space," developed in the 1970s, is explained and how adjustments made in the layering techniques, related to earlier color separation methods, rendered the best images for reproduction (p. 20). Over a three-and-a-half-page double spread, there is a useful compendium of close-ups compiled by this method taken mainly from Tomb 2, which is the better preserved of the tombs and heretofore undocumented. The thumbnails include details of the Greek divinities and details of the Egyptian divinities, followed by details of the ceilings of both tombs (pp. 22–28). The reader is referred back to these images frequently throughout the book. Another, albeit brief, section of particular interest relates to Egyptian blue and the recognition of this pigment for these studies as recently as 2012, thanks to application of LED light. Assessing the pigment can also be done through the "saturation method" of the digital software program, and Pelle's section closes with a series of six images showing the effects of saturation for Egyptian blue and other colors (pp. 31–33). It may be noted that detection of Egyptian blue and other pigments is at the cutting edge of color analysis for the sculptures of the Parthenon in Athens as well.[1]

THE DOMINANT section of the book is "Architecture and Iconography," co-authored by Anne-Marie Guimier-Sorbets and Mervat Seif el-Din. It begins by contextualizing the tombs in the necropolis of Kom al-Shuqafa, which consists of two hypogea, the more famous containing the so-called Principal Tomb with its temple format and triple sarcophagi. The authors frequently reference the Principal Tomb for comparative purposes. The second hypogeum, named the Hall of Caracalla, had independent access but is now connected to the first by a robber's passageway cut through the back and right side wall of Tomb 1 itself. A full-page plan details these locations, but greater exactitude between plan and text would be helpful. It is stated, for example, "The paintings examined here are located in the Hall of Caracalla and decorate two tombs of the first chamber to the north of the central hall" (p. 37). "First chamber," howver, is not obvious in meaning and is not labeled on the plan; in fact, the plan shows only Tomb 2 to be north of what constitutes a transept hall running east-west across the main Hall of Caracalla. Tomb 1 is south of the intersection, on the opposite wall, putting Tombs 1 and 2 on the diagonal from each other. These precise locations become important when considering the challenges of Pelle's photography. It is not specified whether the other two tombs that make up a total of four identical units around the transept crossing were also examined for paintings.

Nevertheless, the reader is made aware throughout the strong descriptive analysis of Tombs 1 and 2 just how remarkable a comparison they make. This starts with the architecture. Both are called "sarcophagus niche" in type (p. 45), also resembling "a built *naiskos* in Ionic style" (p. 46) and are shown side-by-side (figs. 80 and 81). Their dimensions are not stated, but the elevations and sections depicted in fig. 82 are identical in this respect and include a meter scale. It is worth mentioning that the niches also appear perfectly proportional: c. 3 m high, 2 m wide, 1.5 m deep using the scale. Aside from fasciae and moldings in the Ionic entablature and the fact that Tomb 1 carries a painted pediment, the greatest architectural difference between them lies in the ceilings. Tomb 1 has a shallow barrel vault with consequent lunettes on the side walls, whereas the ceiling of Tomb 2 is flat. An important detail discussed is the color of plaster: for both sarcophagi, a grainy red plaster simulating red granite was used, whereas the two registers where the major paintings occur and other parts of the upper architecture are plastered in white, the fine grain of which suggests marble powder was included (p. 46). It should be stated that marble is not only a rare luxury import for Egypt but also evocative of Greece per se in a context of cultural dualities, whereas red granite would be regarded as an elite Egyptian commodity.[2]

THE NOMENCLATURE of "the tombs of Persephone" in place of "Tombs 1 and 2" occurs suddenly and for the first time in this discussion of the architecture: "The sarcophagus niche layout can also include a façade with pediment, as is the case for the tombs of Persephone" (p. 47). A word of explanation for the substitution should be offered, although reference to

the scene itself showing the rape of Persephone has been introduced by Empereur and Pelle. As the description of the painted architectural components of the niches, especially the two registers of visual narrative, unfolds over the next 100 pages, it becomes evident that the truly unique contribution that these tombs make in terms of their iconography, Egyptian or Greek, is to the myth of Persephone occupying the second or Greek register: the manner in which the rape is depicted with Aphrodite, Eros armed on her shoulder,[3] being the fulcrum in both the flower-gathering scene on the left-hand wall and the central scene depicting the rape, followed by the positive outcome of the event seen on the right-hand wall in the crowning of Persephone as Queen of the Underworld with Hermes and Cerberus in attendance. The sequence runs linearly over the walls, much like a continuous Ionic frieze with the final scene preserved only on Tomb 2 but presumed to have been similar in Tomb 1. The name "the tombs of Persephone" thus is justified. Ample primary sources mainly from the Roman period are cited that support this unique visual interpretation, reinforcing the hope of the deceased to join with her in eternity.

By contrast, the Egyptian sequence of scenes occupying the first register on the niche walls is to be read with the central panel first followed by the left and right side panels in non-successive order (p. 108). In other words, the two side panels for the Egyptian register that reinforce the central Osirian theology occur simultaneously, which recalls Jan Assman's interpretation of *nḥḥ* and *ḏt*, cyclical and suspended time, even as his understanding of Greek linear time matches the layout of the second register.[4] The Osirian imagery is considered by Guimier-Sorbets and Seif el-Din as standard and equivalent between Tomb 1 and Tomb 2, but they stress that it derives from the tradition of temple decoration, specifically the Osiris chapel, more than a tomb: "Within the limits of the three walls of the niche, the essential scenes for the survival of the deceased–embalming and two forms of resurrection–have been selected and laid out in such a way as to create a small Osiris chapel" (pp. 113; see also p. 154).

However, there is a set of panels that can be argued significant enough in their differences that they join the Persephone sequence in achieving a higher eschatological level for these tombs. On the left-hand wall of register one, Tomb 2 shows a tripartite composition with the standing figure of the mummified Osiris in the center turned to the left, flanked by Isis seated on the left and Thoth, proffering the Horus falcon statuette, seated on the right. The equivalent panel for Tomb 1 shows the same deities seated in the same positions but with the reliquary of Osiris, famously associated with Abydos, in the center. The reliquary is smaller than the deities and the result created is much more of a dyad composition. Contrary to the authors' interpretation that the scenes are perfect equivalents, their force is very different visually and even theologically.

The shape of the reliquary is reminiscent of a cartouche crowned with the plumed solar disc (fig. 115), and it leads directly to the subject of the pseudo-hieroglyphs, which are present in every panel of the first register for both tombs, but far more numerous and prominent in Tomb 1 than 2. One such group is located directly above the reliquary (fig. 114), and it also recalls a cartouche because of its curved framework at the bottom: not, in other words, strictly columnar. The authors state emphatically, "The columns of roughly sketched pseudo-hieroglyphs show that the texts, so essential for all Egyptian religious representations, were unknown, whereas numerous modest funerary monuments of the same era are inscribed with legible hieroglyphs" (p. 112). Indeed, the treatment of the pseudo-hieroglyphs over the whole of the first register of each tomb needs further examination. The word "column" is used to describe the bank of pseudo-hieroglyphs in all of the compositions, yet does not take into account the hung quality of the single, ribbon-like framework and the curvature already mentioned, as seen in most examples from both tombs. Never is there more than one bank at a time, in contrast to three examples of reliefs, including an Osiris chapel, from Dendera, showing multiple banks and columns of hieroglyphs (pp. 114–115, figs. 161–163). The allusion to a cartouche is believable. The pseudo-hieroglyphs may therefore be functioning entirely differently. The reference to the "clumsy columns of signs" (p. 154) also needs reevaluation when the ornamental signs clearly seen in fig. 110 and fig. 113 (four in number inside the curved framework positioned between the mummified Osiris and the seated Isis) are in fact extremely well formed calligraphic flourishes.

The subject matter of *Resurrection in Alexandria* will be of great interest to many, including students and scholars of funerary practices in Egypt during the Graeco-Roman period; art historians and

archaeologists working in this unique, hybrid time frame; and conservators and specialists in ancient painting technologies. The aesthetic properties of the book are strong and will also attract an audience, especially one that appreciates the juxtaposition of ancient literary sources alongside such a rich visual display. The boxed background for a few of these quotations (from page 87 through page 91) is dark grey as opposed to the signature coral terracotta, clearly a misprint. The organization of the whole might have been better served with numbered chapters (the subdivisions are numerous and complex), and the choice to address the paintings of Tomb 2 before Tomb 1 on account of better condition of the former (p. 50) can feel out-of-order at times, especially since the point is strongly made that Tomb 1 was rediscovered first. The lack of an index is likewise felt, although the number of illustrations may be accountable for that decision. An important iconographic connection between the Egyptian and Greek registers only touched upon and worth exploring more fully is the equivalency of Thoth and Hermes.[5] But the lavish photography, finely written descriptions, extensive comparanda, and contribution this material makes to our knowledge of the "bilingual" iconography of the period all take precedence: the subject and its presentation inspire.

References

Assmann, Jan. 2002. *The Mind of Egypt: History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs*, trans. Andrew Jenkins. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press.

Butz, Patricia A. In press. "The Marble Dedication of Komon, son of Asklepiades, from Egypt: Material, Provenance, and Reinforcement of Meaning." Proceedings of ASMOSIA XI, May 2015. Split: University of Split, Academy of Art & Faculty of Civil Engineering, Architecture and Geodesy.

Notes

1 For example, in the international symposium "Rethinking the Parthenon: Color, Materiality, and Aesthetics," offered by the University of Georgia's Lamar Dodd School of Art, October 17–18, 2014.

2 Butz in press. The article argues that, while marble quarries do exist in Egypt, the dedication of Komon with its fine inscription is an example of imported marble used as a statement of cultural identity.

3 Eros over the shoulder of Aphrodite evokes the statue of Aphrodite, Eros, and Pan from the Establishment at the Poseidoniastai of Berytos at Delos, the iconography of which is relevant to the Alexandrine subject matter, as my research will show.

4 Assmann 2002, 18–19.

5 A painting from a funerary chapel at Touna el-Gebel that compares well with Tomb 2 includes the presence of Eros and Hermes in the rape scene (fig. 175). Hermes is reversed in stance and actively leads the way into the Underworld, as opposed to his more static counterpart in Tomb 2, standing in contrapposto looking toward Hades and Persephone across the dark opening into the Underworld guarded by Cerberus. In both paintings Hermes wears the *apex* lotus petal associated with Thoth (p. 159, n. 102, citing Sami Gabra). The interconnection between Thoth and Hermes at Hermopolis Magna is legendary.