A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO THE KOM EL-SHUQAFA CATACOMBS

A Thesis

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Master of Arts in Archaeology

by

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ABSTRACT

The Catacombs of Kom el-Shuqafa are one of the best-preserved Alexandrian necropolis complexes from the Roman period. A modern tourist can descend into the catacombs much like an ancient visitor would have, allowing today's visitor a shared experience with the past. Because Hypogeum I of the site is known primarily for its mixture of Egyptian, Greek, and Roman decorative elements, scholarship on the site is primarily descriptive, focusing on the visual components of the site that show evidence for cultural mixing or "hybridity". A multi-sensorial approach, however, has yet to be taken. Due to its relatively well-preserved nature, as well as the lack of written evidence at this site, I argue that we can use a phenomenologically-oriented methodology to gain insight on ancient visitor experience, ultimately discovering that ancient visitors would have seen the descent into the catacombs as a descent into the underworld.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Laryssa Shipley is an archaeology master's student in the Cornell Institute of Archaeology and Material Studies (CIAMS), which she joined in the Fall of 2016. Her interests primarily lie in the Roman Near East, with a focus on phenomenology, materiality, and interconnectivity in the eastern Mediterranean. More specifically, her research involves utilizing a multi-sensorial approach at the Catacombs of Kom el-Shuqafa in Alexandria, Egypt. She performed on-site graduate research in Alexandria during the Summer of 2017 in order to further develop this topic. Ms. Shipley has been the recipient of various awards, including but not limited to the Hirsch Travel Grant, the CIAMS Research Grant, and the Sean Dever Fellowship from ASOR. Additionally, Ms. Shipley earned her undergraduate degree as an honor program student in Anthropology with a minor in Classics at Baylor University, where she studied serpentine imagery in the Mediterranean.

To my family, for supporting me every step of the way.

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I. INTRODUCTION

It is dark, except for the faintest hint of light on the horizon. Dawn will be approaching soon. I follow my deceased mother, who is being carried on a bier by my brother and the other men of the household. Like the other women, I pull my hair and loudly mourn for the loss of my mother. I have had very little sleep over the past couple of days, and I can still smell on my hands the faint scent of the oil I used to anoint my mother's body. Soon, rough ground becomes mosaic, and we arrive at the top of the spiral staircase of the catacombs. Torches are lit at the entrance, and Mother is placed on a platform. While she is slowly lowered into the hole of the catacombs, the rest of us descend the spiral staircase in a crowded manner around her. I continue to descend in a continuous loop with the others until we finally meet her one level down. The procession approaches the triclinium on our left, where more torches are lit and oil lamps are placed. My brother and I enter the triclinium to procure wine and honey as offerings and libations for our mother. By now, the smoky air and darkness of the catacombs make it almost impossible to see, and I almost trip down the straight set of stairs leading to my mother's tomb, which is located one level lower than the triclinium.

My mother wanted her sarcophagus to be carved out of the same stone as the tomb, so her body has to be placed in the hollow sarcophagus through an entrance in its backside. The "lid" on the sarcophagus is simply a decoration. While Mother is carried behind the principal tomb, my brother and I take in the site before us. In the dancing light, the snake reliefs appear to slither on the façade of the tomb. As we begin to enter, we notice two figures staring at us in the dark. At first confused and frightened, we are quickly relieved to discover they are only statues. As a matter of fact, our mother paid for these statues to be modelled after us, and their stoic appearance along with the image of my mother on her sarcophagus make me nervous. Flanking our mother's sarcophagus are two other sarcophagi- my brother's and mine for when we eventually leave this world. As the ritual progresses and we listen to a recitation from the Books of Breathing, our eyes stare at a depiction of Anubis and a mummification scene located above our mother's sarcophagus. As soon as my brother and I turn around to leave, Anubis greets us yet again from the backside of the façade in a Roman robe. His twin, sporting a Roman soldier uniform, mirrors him from the other side of the entrance. Anxious to leave, I ascend the few steps up to the more brightly lit triclinium level and take part in a feast to honor my mother. After drinking some wine, I see swirls of light and darkness surround me, and I start having difficulty breathing in the musty air. When the feast is finished, we ascend the spiral staircase back into the realm of the living, where we are greeted by fresh air and the bright early morning sun.

The Catacombs of Kom el-Shuqafa in Alexandria, Egypt have been at the center of Alexandrian necropolis research for over a century.[1] Constructed in the first- or second-century CE, the central catacombs can be divided into two main sections: Hypogeum 1 and Hypogeum 2 (or, the Hall of Caracalla - see **Figure 1**).[2] Explored by German, French, Italian, and British archaeologists alike, the site is known primarily for its incorporation of both Egyptian and Graeco-Roman design and images in the same space. The combination of Greek and Egyptian traditions of architectural form and decoration makes Kom el-Shuqafa an appealing target for research on the "hybrid" nature of Roman Egyptian society.[3] My research, in particular, focuses on Hypogeum 1, or the "principal" hypogeum, which contains depictions of Anubis wearing Roman soldier garb, a male and a female statue in a traditional Egyptian pose (hands at the side, one foot out) sporting individualized heads in Graeco-Roman style, and a general combination of Egyptian and Graeco-Roman apotropaic imagery, all of which have been used as evidence for cultural mixing. However, despite the emphasis on hybridity, relatively little has been said concerning the experiences of the actual individuals who would have visited the catacombs. Since a sensorial approach to Kom el-Shuqafa has yet to be seriously considered in recent scholarship (due to the emphasis on hybridity and visual analysis), it is imperative that we investigate how an ancient visitor would have actually experienced the site. We can do this by

[1] Empereur 1995, 1. The earliest written description of ancient Alexandria is written by Strabo in his *Geography* (Strabo 17.8-10). Theodor Schreiber of the Sieglin Expedition provides us with the earliest accounts of ruins at the site (1908, 18-20). From 1902 to 1908, the Sieglin Expedition excavated a mosaic, which Giuseppe Botti and Annibale Evaristo Breccia thought might have been part of an ancient above-ground structure (Schreiber 1908, Plates Volume: Tafel II; Breccia 1922, 328; Sadarangani et al. 2015, 132). In 1942, Alan Rowe excavated the lowest level of the catacombs after pumping out the ground water in 1941 (Rowe 1941, 14-15; Empereur 1995, 1). For other work on the site, please see: Botti 1900, Adriani 1966, Empereur 1995, and Sadarangani et al. 2015.

[2] Hypogea are chamber areas underground. They are often associated with ancient burials.

[3] Empereur 1995; Seif el-Din and Guimier-Sorbets 1997; Guimier-Sorbets 1999; Venit 2002; McKenzie 2007; Sadarangani et al. 2015; Venit 2015; Guimier-Sorbets et al. 2017.

approaching the physical attributes of the space that remain today from a phenomenological point of view.

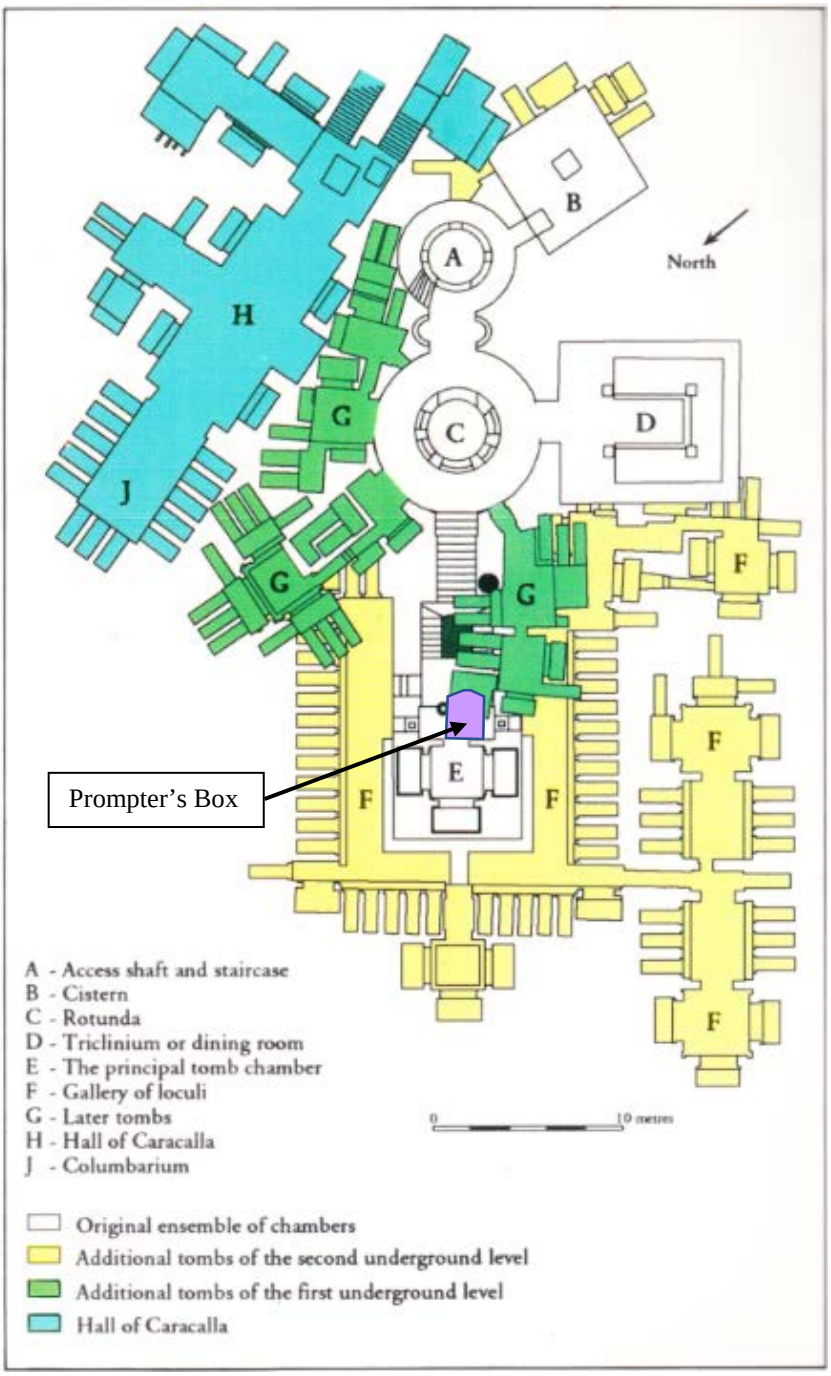


Figure 1. Empereur's Floorplan of the Catacombs (Hypogeum 1), with "Prompter's Box" label added by author (1995, front cover fold-out).

Although the term "phenomenology" has been in existence in academic writing for over a century, the concept of phenomenology has been around even longer, with roots in the eighteenth century. In its simplest form, Edmund Husserl would argue that phenomenology examines the processes of consciousness and reflection.[4] More specifically, phenomenology can be defined, using Christopher Tilley's terminology, as the relationship between "Being and Being in the world".[5] Tilley's definition involves taking both an introspective approach and a contextual approach: in essence, phenomenology is the examination of the ways in which we are simultaneously distinct from and a part of the world in which we live. Here, Tilley is drawing on Heidegger's notion of "being" and his concept of *Dasein* or "being there" in the world. We are aware and concerned of our "being in the world" and defined and distinguished by this awareness. We understand the world through our senses and perceptions.[6] With such a broad definition, phenomenology can be applied to a wide range of disciplines, including archaeology, where we look at this relationship in ancient contexts.

In the recent past, phenomenology has been criticized for its subjectivity and lack of structured methodology.[7] One of the bigger critiques of phenomenology is the assumption that human bodies, throughout time and space, inherently and universally experience the same things in the same ways.[8] In other words, we must not assume that a modern participant experiences space in the same fashion as an ancient participant would have experienced it. I use the word "participant" because the visitor automatically participates with the space upon entry, perhaps even subconsciously. One way to combat such criticism is to explicitly acknowledge the

[4] Husserl 1931. Edmund Husserl is often described as the founder of modern phenomenology.
[5] Tilley 1994, 12.
[6] Heidegger 2010, 11-12. We understand the world through our senses and perceptions.
[7] Hall 2000, 48-52; Smith 2003, 62-63; Brück 2005, 57; Weismantel 2013, 22.
[8] Brück 2005, 56.

limitations of phenomenology, using it to get as close to an answer as possible without necessarily equating ancient experience with our modern-day experiences.[9] As Joanna Brück says, phenomenology allows us to analyze the past in a way that is beyond the two-dimensional, allowing us to get to actual experience by looking at one's relationship with space.[10]

Phenomenology has mostly been utilized in research on European prehistory.[11] However, other authors have been able to apply phenomenological research at sites outside of this time period and region. For example, Ruth Van Dyke utilized phenomenological approaches to study Chaco Canyon in New Mexico; Mary Weismantel analyzed the intentionally eerie feeling of venturing underground at the site of Chavín de Huantar in Peru.[12] In a similar vein, I claim that phenomenology represents a fruitful theoretical approach within a Roman Egyptian context, particularly at the mortuary site of Kom el-Shuqafa.

By using a phenomenological approach, we learn how visitors to the catacombs may have experienced the site on a sensorial level. Specifically, I will employ this method to argue that the ominous and darkening descent into the catacombs paralleled Egyptian, Greek, and Roman notions of descent into the underworld. The descent is truly a multi-sensory experience: besides visually observing the darkening of the space, the visitor feels constricted, warm, uncomfortable, while going deeper and deeper underground (see **Figure 2**). The dusty smell becomes stronger the further one goes down, and the air is still.[13] As we shall see, the catacombs play on the

[9] Brück 2005, 45. Joanna Brück has argued that, despite its setbacks, phenomenology is a new way to consider the "social and political implications of spatial layout" (2005, 65).
[10] Brück 2005, 64.
[11] Brück 2005, 58; Johnson 2012, 270. Other sources analyzing and criticizing phenomenology in a British prehistorical context: Tilley 1994; Cummings & Whittle 2004; Bender et al. 2007.
[12] Van Dyke 2009; Weismantel 2013.
[13] For more on smell in the ancient world, see Bradley 2015.

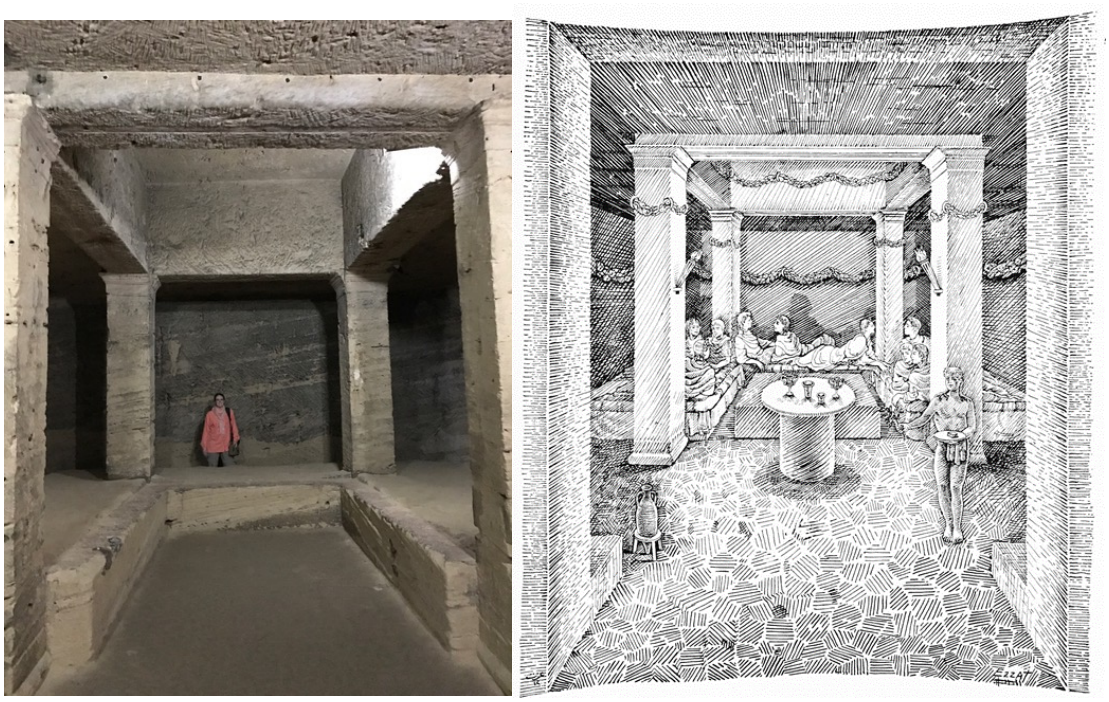
similar notions of the underworld as evidenced in both Graeco-Roman and Egyptian cosmologies, providing a common experience that bridges the space between culture and time.

Figure 2. The staircase leading to the façade of the principal tomb. (Photograph taken by author.)

Inevitably, there are limitations on the available evidence for ancient experiences of space at this site. For instance, a wealth of iconography (both sculpted and painted) at Kom el-Shuqafa is at our disposal, but the site itself lacks extensive physical written evidence.[14] On the other hand, the physical layout of the space (and its relatively excellent preservation for an Alexandrian site) allows us to analyze things like ease of access and room capacity. Accordingly, I consider the layout and floor morphology of the space in order to determine what type of body

[14] Unfortunately, the "hieroglyphs" located in the principal tomb have no meaning. Indeed, knowledge of hieroglyphs would have been limited by the Roman period (Houston et al. 2003, 443-444). Perhaps these "hieroglyphs" simply were an attempt to authenticate the space, calling back to older Egyptian traditions. However, there exists some evidence of names being written in Greek on *loculi* slab seals (Botti 1908, 358-359; Schreiber 1908, 110). Other content on the slabs includes the age of the deceased when he or she died and the word *eupsuchei* (farewell). A couple of these slabs remain today, and visitors can see them in **NEL2**.

this space can accommodate. In addition, I have conducted in-person research at the catacombs that has produced data on a range of environmental conditions inside the tomb, including altitude, humidity, temperature, and wind speed, sound, room capacity, lighting, and floor morphology. As I noted above, this analysis is specifically limited to the space of Hypogeum 1, which features the triclinium (**Figure 3** and **Figure 4**), principal tomb (**Figure 2**), and the tomb's many *loculi* (**Figure 5**) - all of which can be seen in **Figure 1**.[15]



The Triclinium.

Figure 3 (Left): a photo of the triclinium. I am included for scale.
(Photograph taken by Lucia Lary.)
Figure 4 (Right): a sketch depicting a festive scene at the same triclinium
(Rowe 1942, PL. I.).

[15] The principal hypogeum's partner site, the Hall of Caracalla (Hypogeum 2), tends to be the center of attention in most scholarly discourse because of its captivating paintings. When the principal hypogeum is mentioned in descriptions of the site, it is often mentioned within the context of the arguably more famous Hall of Caracalla, which possesses the depiction of Persephone's kidnapping in the central wall of tomb 2 (Guimier-Sorbets et al. 2017, 86-87).

In other words, this work explores Hypogeum 1 within its own context, originally entirely separated from the Hall of Caracalla before tomb raiders created their own entrance connecting the two once separate hypogea together.[16]

Figure 5. Flooded *loculi* surrounding principal tomb and modern plank bridges; photo taken by Jean-François Gout
(Empereur 1995, 16).

To advance my argument, let us look at the descent into the catacombs from a modern-day perspective as opposed to the ancient perspective I offered at the beginning. The surface-level entrance into the catacombs can be found on the more general Kom el-Shuqafa park grounds.[17] It is not immediately noticeable, for it is also placed among the relocated Tigrane, Silvago, and Wardian tombs as well as a large limestone outcrop (**Figure 6**).

[16] Empereur 1995, 18.
[17] Parts of a mosaic were found on the surface level surrounding the access shaft in the Sieglin excavations (Schreiber 1908).

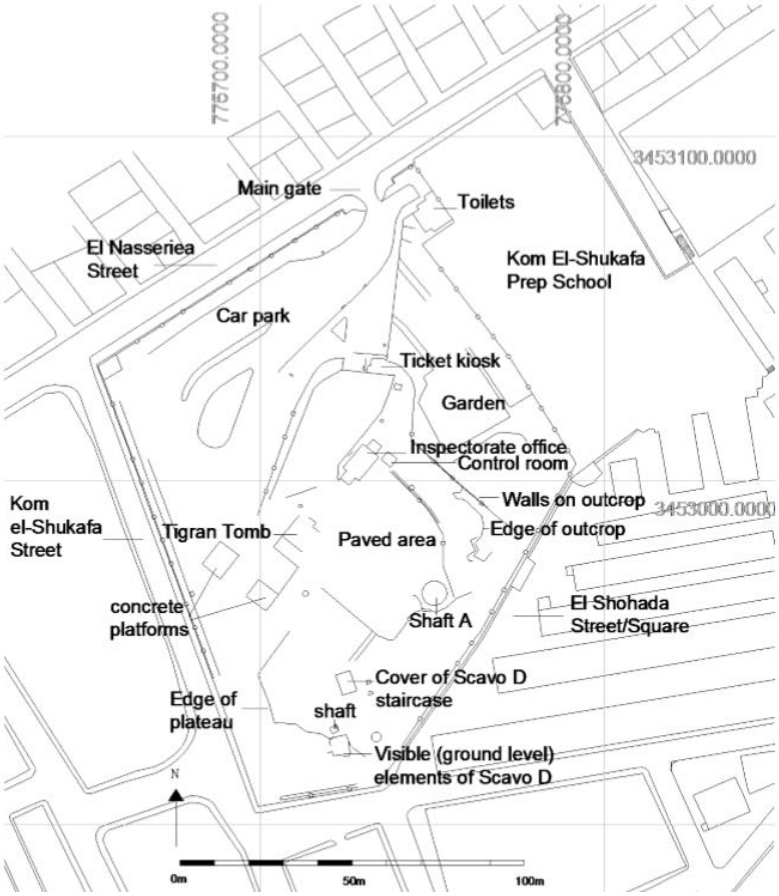


Figure 6. The layout of the Kom el-Shuqafa grounds (Sadarangani 2015, 29).

The entrance is covered by a shelter, and the staircase is accessible on the southwestern side. A visitor then descends a spiral staircase, careful not to trip down the surprisingly shallow steps to the first lower level. During the descent, light from the surface enters the stairwell through openings carved out of the inner wall, allowing the visitor to see into Shaft A around which the staircase winds. A musty smell greets the visitor about halfway down the steps as the humidity rises, and he or she can faintly taste dust. Eventually, a break in the steps indicates the first underground level has been reached. Continued access into the lowest level is blocked. The visitor looks into the open space, and is met with a rotunda, which prevents someone from looking deeper into the catacombs. The warm, natural light that had entered the shaft is now dim,

artificial. The modern visitor enters further into the space knowing that, if the artificial lights were to go out, he or she would be enveloped in complete darkness. This is how the catacombs welcome their guest.

Certainly, spaces *change* over time. Hypogeum 1 of Kom el-Shuqafa has undergone a number of phases since its construction in the first- or second-century CE. The modern viewer simply sees the "final product," an amalgamation of these phases. Most assuredly, the newly-constructed (and oldest version of the) catacombs would have appeared smaller and more claustrophobic than the more expansive, *loculi*-filled catacombs we see today. At their start, the catacombs consisted of little other than the triclinium and the principal tomb (see "Original ensemble of chambers" in **Figure 1**). However, certain components of modern visitor experience are reminiscent of those experienced by the second-century CE visitor when entering the catacombs. Such elements of commonality include the general contrast between light and darkness and the original spiral descent to the first underground level. These physical elements are key to our understanding of past visitor experience. Therefore, I first discuss a phenomenological approach to space, then I analyze what it means to descend into the underworld, and lastly I consider possible ritual and utilization of space within an underworld context.

II. PARTICIPATING IN SPACE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

As mentioned above, past publications on this site have largely been either purely descriptive or focused on the identification of "hybrid" imagery.[18] The catacombs have been primarily studied for their capacity to showcase the mixing of cultures. No previous study has sought to understand this site as lived by individual humans and experienced by their bodies. We understand the world in a multi-sensory way. Only by using a multi-sensory approach can we truly begin to understand how an ancient visitor would have experienced Kom el-Shuqafa. What kind of body do the catacombs accommodate? To answer this question, we will explore the space on a corporal level, analyzing how considerations such as the steepness of the stairs, the catacomb's environmental conditions and weathering, room capacity, and light and sound can affect visitors' perception of bodily interaction with the space.

Using an anemometer, I took measurements of altitude, humidity, temperature, and air speed in order to give a more objective description of air quality. Due to the well-preserved nature of the site, we can assume the *relative* differences between surface air conditions and those within the catacombs are comparable to similar conditions in the past. Additionally, the differences in the environment of the surface and that of the subterranean space show that the visitor truly enters another "world" on a physical level when descending into the catacombs. Light and sound also play into this idea of entering a new "world" when analyzing how each are distributed throughout the catacombs. Natural light was measured simply by how far it reached into the catacombs from its origin in the spiral staircase. The areas that would have been darker (that are now lit thanks to modern electricity) would have needed some sort of artificial lighting

[18] See n. 3.

like torches or oil lamp lighting.[19] The amount of available light (or lack-of) tells us that the catacombs are a naturally dark place, which adds to its netherworld atmosphere. Sound was measured by analyzing how well voices and instruments could carry within the catacombs environment. To do this, I performed vocal tests by shouting from one part of the catacombs to see if I could be heard from another area. From the top of the spiral staircase, a shout could be heard in the principal tomb. For the musical instrument component, I utilized a model for an instrument called a *sistrum*, which would make a clear cling noise (in a similar manner as a tambourine). This noise, from the top of the spiral staircase, could be heard much further than a shout, extending beyond the principal tomb into the *loculi* surrounding it. This means that music could be heard in most (if not, all) areas of the catacombs. However, it would not always be clear as to where a certain sound originated, so the experience might be a little disorienting, adding to the already unpleasant environment of this other "world".

Data concerning air conditions pertain to the sense of touch, particularly to the feeling of being within the catacomb environment. Lack of air flow contributes to dust particles hanging in the air, which, in addition to the still water in the lowest level of the catacombs, affects smell and taste. Light analysis pertains mostly to the sense of sight, but smoke from older light sources would affect the smell and taste of the air as well. Again, the sense of sound is analyzed via *sistrum* and vocal testing. Touch and the tactile experience of balance are both considered in my description of floor morphology, particularly in how easy or difficult it is to traverse the catacombs and how flat or rough the floor is in certain places.

[19] Part of a lamp was discovered by Rowe bearing the Chi-Rho monogram and oil lamps would have been utilized at the site during the Roman period (Rowe 1942, 5). Additionally, a lamp handle was found at the site with an Isis depiction (Hassan 2002, 112). See section on "Light".

A General Description of the Kom el-Shuqafa Catacombs

The *loculi* on the first and second underground levels were created after the principal tomb was completed, but at an uncertain date.[20] Many *loculi* have depressions in the ground that loosely mimic the shape of the human body with a space for the head (see **Figure 7**). This suggests inhumation burial rather than cremation. More than 300 people were buried in the *loculi* of the second underground level.[21] Additionally, multiple people were often stacked in each *loculus*, as Alan Rowe has argued.[22]

Figure 7. An example of a lower loculus silhouette, which is visible due to lower water levels. (Photograph taken by author.)

The principal tomb of the catacombs contains both Graeco-Roman and Egyptians reliefs and visual elements. At the front of the tomb, there are two columns topped with Egyptian

[20] Empereur 1995, 15; Rowe 1942, 27. According to Alan Rowe and Empereur, they were created over several decades for the purpose of common burial. We can only utilize relative dating in these circumstances.
[21] Empereur 1995, 17. Rowe believed one of these bodies was the mummified remains of priestesses of Nemesis due to the way her hands were positioned on their chest and the fact she was wearing a necklace with what he referred to as the "eight-spoked wheel of Nemesis" (Rowe 1942, 28-29). Rowe seems to focus on one body; Empereur, on the other hand, mentions two. Rowe does not mention whether these bodies still had flesh - only that at least one of them was encased in cartonnage (Rowe 1942, 29).
[22] Rowe 1942, 37.

composite anta capitals (see **Figure 8**). These columns support an architrave, above which the viewer will find a relief of a central winged sun disc flanked by Horus falcons. Above the central winged sun disc is a simple circle (also presumably a sun disc). The area behind the columns functions much like an antechamber, where the outer façade of the principal tomb can be found. The antechamber forms a rectangle: the Egyptian columns are parallel with the outer façade, with female and male statue niches on each side. The façade simultaneously functions as the entrance into the inner tomb. Above this entrance is another relief of a central winged sun disc. An *agathodaemon* (a benevolent spirit) in the form of a snake is carved on the left and right side of the entrance façade. Each snake wears the Double Crown of Egypt and is wrapped around a *thyrsus* and *caduceus* staff. A *gorgoneion* on a shield (reminiscent of Athena's shield or *aegis*) can be found above each snake carving.

Figure 8. Façade of the principal tomb.
(Photograph taken by author.)

The interior side of the entrance façade is flanked by two Anubis reliefs dressed in soldier uniform, one of which is part snake (**Figure 9**). The inner chamber's three sides are composed of three sarcophagi and their associated relief panels (**Figure 10**). Each sarcophagus is carved in the limestone rock. In other words, these sarcophagi were not brought in from another location. They are Roman in style, decorated with garlands and the heads of gorgons and an ox skull. The primary difference among the three sarcophagi is that the central sarcophagus is also adorned with a woman reclining on a couch. Above each sarcophagus is a relief panel. The central panel shows Anubis mummifying a body that is lying on a lion bed. The head of the lion sports the *Atef* crown (or the crown of Osiris). Below the bed are three canopic jars, and at the head and foot of the bed are the gods Thoth and Horus, respectively. The side panels of the mummification scene show divinities and a priest reading a document. The main panels of the other sarcophagi show the Apis bull receiving a gift, with their respective side panels showing gods in mummified forms.[23]

Figure 9. Two images (side by side) showing the Anubis reliefs. (Photographs taken by author.)

[23] Empereur 1995, 11-13.

Figure 10. Central panel of the principal tomb.
(Photograph taken by author.)

The principal tomb would have been restricted to the patron and the patron's family because of their funding of the principal tomb's construction. One theory suggests that the woman on the principal sarcophagus was the patron.[24] Due to their proximity to the family tomb, the two other sarcophagi might have belonged to her children, who would have been represented in the two statues flanking the tomb.[25] However, we cannot be certain that this was the case.

The third underground level can be accessed via the "prompter's box" (the doorway into the lower portion of the tomb, so named for its box-like appearance), the stairway, or the rotunda and the access shaft (for dead bodies being lowered on a platform into the third underground level). Because the catacombs are three-storied, the fastest and easiest way to move the dead bodies would be through the center of the access shaft, as opposed to the spiraling staircase that

[24] Rowe 1942, 20; Empereur 1995, 9.
[25] Empereur 1995, 7.

goes around it. It has been theorized that this lowest level was once home to a Serapeum, which preceded the private utilization of the space by the patron family.[26] However, there is no solid evidence to support this theory.

Flooding

Currently, the lowest level is flooded and inaccessible to the public. Much remains uncertain concerning the earliest date of this flooding. We only know that 1) flooding could not have occurred until after the lowest level of the catacombs was constructed, 2) the site might have started flooding after a rather large tsunami hit Alexandria in 365 CE,[27] and 3) the sea level has been steadily rising for the past 2,000 years.[28] Perhaps when the lowest level is completely pumped out again, we might be able to find evidence of later alterations − changes that could not have occurred unless the flooding receded for a period of time.[29]

In the **NEL2 and SWL2** areas themselves, the ground has very noticeable evidence for water damage and, consequently, a somewhat uneven surface. One particular feature is a trench that runs around the outer edges of the principal tomb. Fortunately, this area was not flooded during my time there. Nevertheless, it has consistently flooded at various points in the past (compare **Figure 5** and **Figure 7**). In 2015, an attempt to remove the water in the lowest level of

[26] Rowe proposes that there once stood a statue of the bull Apis in the rotunda area, much like the one that was found underground in the area of Pompey's Pillar (Rowe 1942, 17). However, this statue has not been found. Rowe argues that this supposed Serapeum, which contains two tombs and includes a portion of the second underground level, also resembles the Graeco-Roman temple of Dendera in its layout, "where the front room is the 'Sanctuary of Festivals' and the back room the real sanctuary which contained the principal statue of the divinity" (Rowe 1942, 17). Although we cannot definitively state that the Serapeum indeed existed, depictions of Serapis via the Apis bull can be seen in the panels above the two side sarcophagi in the principal tomb.
[27] Goddio and Fabre 2014, 6020.
[28] According to Goddio and Fabre, it is "generally acknowledged that the sea level in Alexandria has risen by 1–1.5 m, and the land level has dropped by 5–6 m over the last 2,000 years" (2014, 6020).
[29] Goddio and Fabre 2014, 6020.

the catacombs was made, but it was not entirely successful. In 1992, the water levels were very high due to a high amount of winter rain.[30] Before that, in 1941, Alan Rowe also attempted to pump the flooded areas of the lowest level.[31] We can assume that little flooding occurred at the beginning of the construction of the catacombs, or it would not have been possible to carve out the tombs and pathway of the lowest underground level. However, this third underground level was abandoned at a later point due to flooding, as evidenced by the rising water levels in the second underground level. We know this second underground level experienced flooding issues in antiquity because a drainage ditch was cut around the principal tomb to keep it relatively dry.[32] Water and its relationship with this mortuary environment is discussed later on.

Entering the Catacombs

In order to enter Hypogeum I, the modern-day visitor (much like the ancient one) must descend a series of rather shallow steps. Although access to the lowest level of the catacombs is prohibited today, the visitor descends a total of 99 steps to reach the first underground level. The height of each step centers around 8 cm, with greater depressions in the middle of each step from greater wear and tear. There is no evidence for a decrease in rise[33] from the first underground level to the surface level to facilitate easier ascension up the staircase. In any case, elderly people as well as children are able to go down into the catacombs with relative ease, as evidenced by direct observation and my own experience. However, descending and ascending the spiral staircase multiple times every day proves rather taxing. Descending can prove tiring on the knees and

[30] Sadarangani 2015, 46; Empereur 1995, 1.
[31] Rowe 1942, 15.
[32] Rowe 1942, 17.
[33] "Rise" in this context refers to the changes in height of each individual step in the staircase.

legs. Two people can fit somewhat comfortably on each step, standing abreast; however, it is much easier and less claustrophobic for groups of people to walk in a line, as evidenced by rather large tourist groups (numbering about 30 people) that would visit before noon. To counter what might otherwise be considered an enclosed space, windows of light enter from the shaft which the staircase encircles. When the first underground level is reached, a niche area presents itself (the vestibule or **S**), and then the space opens up to a rotunda and entrances into various chambers.

Spatial Navigability and Floor Morphology

I examined the floors of the vestibule, the rotunda (see "C" in **Figure 1**), the triclinium ("D"), the principal tomb ("E"), and the additional *loculi* surrounding the principal tomb. The vestibule is flanked on the NE and SW sides by carved stone benches and, above them, cockle-shell semi-dome decorations.[34] This small area contains evidence of white stone flooring, identified by Empereur as alabaster. Because the alabaster appears to have been cut into small paving segments before it was set into the ground, the flooring would have been relatively easy to walk on (see **Figure 11** and **Figure 12**).[35] The change in floor texture from limestone to alabaster and vice versa most likely would have been noticed and could have likewise encouraged a change in pace. Alabaster provides a smooth surface to walk on, so traffic might have moved faster through

[34] There has not been a lot of discussion as to the actual purpose of the vestibule. Perhaps it was an area for visitors to wait before going into the rest of the tomb – a simple resting place. The vestibule is often described within the context of Roman decorative elements; the shell ceiling is a particular Roman feature (Rowe 1942, 12; Fakharani 1965, 57; Empereur 1995, 3). For more on conch shell semi-dome decoration in Egypt, including similar decoration in the Wardian tomb and Tuna el-Gebel, as well as in Rome, see El Fakharani 1965.

[35] Empereur 1995, 3. The surface-level mosaic is geometric, black and white. However, the patterning of the alabaster flooring here looks like it was set randomly. Alabaster flooring can be found at higher-status locations like Hadrian's Villa in Tivoli, but set in a more structured manner like opus sectile (Dunbabin 1999, 260-261).

the vestibule area. At the same time, the two benches face each other, welcoming the guest to slow down, relax, and perhaps start a conversation.

Figure 11. NE niche in the vestibule. (Photograph taken by author.)

Figure 12. Closeup of remaining alabaster flooring in front of niche area. (Photograph taken by author.)

The floor surface of the rotunda proves to be the most uneven. Over a 9-day period, I observed several other people (including 2 adults and 1 child) beside myself who tripped in this area because of its irregular surface. The pattern of wear and a dimpled appearance on the stone floor indicate an uneven pattern of water damage here. The rotunda is centrally located in the first underground level, so it is impossible for a visitor to enter any other part of the catacombs without entering the rotunda area first. As a result, some of the weathering might have been caused by the paths people have taken to walk around the rotunda. Support for this theory comes from the floor's sloping around the rotunda itself, indicating that the most walking occurred at a distance from the edge of it. However, water damage might have been a factor as well: a pathway worn down from walking would have a more flattened appearance. The areas affected by water damage could have a wave-like appearance, with slight "slopes" visible in the ground.

Similarly, the floor of the triclinium, particularly outside its three *klinai* and four limestone columns, is rather uneven. It presents a dimpled appearance, most likely from water damage as well. This portion of the floor surrounding the *klinai* was actually filled in with sand during modern times for an unknown reason (perhaps to prevent people from slipping). However, while standing in the middle of the three *klinai*, one will notice that the stone floor is very smooth and flat, only downgrading by ½ cm from the SW *klinē* to the triclinium entrance on the NE side. The space around the triclinium is not necessarily cleared out. In its NE corner, one can find a large, red granite column along with several objects and some modern-day trash (see **Figure 13**).[36]

[36] Rowe does mention that a "short stone column with a cup-shaped hole in the top" might have stood along with a wooden table in the center of the triclinium (1942, 13). Perhaps he is referring to this red granite column, but it would have been too tall to be a short table, and the impression visible in **Figure 6** is not necessarily cup-shaped. Two other red granite columns are located on modern-day buildings outside of the Kom el-Shuqafa complex, so it is

Figure 13. Red granite cylinder in triclinium. (Photograph taken by author.)

The principal tomb and its surrounding area are relatively flat, with a 3 cm slope from the front of the principal tomb to the NW opening of the so-called "prompter's box," which in reality served as an entrance point to the lowest level of the catacombs. The entrance into the principal tomb could fit three people, standing side by side, comfortably. Inside the principal tomb itself, the floor is slightly dimpled, but mostly covered by wooden planks resting on stone blocks. This modern addition places the visitor in a much higher spot, therefore closer to the ceiling of the principal tomb. At its entrance, the vertical height from the plank to the ceiling is ca. 187.2 cm. The original height of the entrance is ca. 212.2 cm. The difference in height between the planks and the original floor becomes even more apparent when entering the additional *loculus* area surrounding the principal tomb.

reasonable to suggest that this red granite column actually once had a limestone capital on its top, which explains the round impression on one of its bases (Sadarangani et al. 2015, 67 and 71).

To access these areas (which I have labelled **NEL2** and **SWL2** on **Figure 14**), one must proceed through one of two entrances flanking the "prompter's box" (labelled **H** and **β** on **Figure 14**). The plank bridge continues into these entrance points, and the bridge makes the change in height even more drastic. A couple of unfortunate tourists hit their heads on these "low" entrance ceilings, which, again, would not have been low in antiquity if plank boardwalks were not being used. (Many of the ceilings in the catacombs, particularly those in the triclinium and in the *loculi* surrounding the principal tomb, are rather high. The principal tomb, on the other hand, has a relatively lower ceiling, but not as low as **H** and **β**.) Because flooding has been a problem at least since late antiquity, perhaps some version of a boardwalk was already utilized at that time.[37] I personally hit my head at these entrances a total of three times. If the original floor was being used, height would have been less of a problem. According to one study on skeletons found in El Hesa and Kharga, the height for an average non-elite female in the Roman period in Egypt was 150 cm (or about 4 ft 11 in). The average height for a male was 161 cm (or about 5 ft 3 in).[38] The difference in both body and floor depth creates a stark contrast in the experience of the modern-day visitor and the ancient visitor; the plank walks obstruct the original flow of the physical space. The original height of these entrances is ca. 187.2 cm. With the planks, the new height is reduced to ca. 162.2 cm, which is significantly shorter for someone like me who is 5 ft 7 in (or 177.18 cm) tall.

[37] See n. 27.

[38] Raxter 2011, 131. Unfortunately, information concerning elite populations during the period was not available in this study. Very little information on the bones found at Kom el-Shuqafa exist, besides the description of two females by Rowe (see n. 21) and a study about a tumor in the pelvis of another deceased person discovered in the catacombs (Ruffer and Willmore 1913; Rowe 1942, 28-29; Empereur 1995, 16). The pelvis was discovered among a pile of bones at a grave at Kom el-Shuqafa, but the exact location is not specified. In both sources, dampness plays a large role in damaging the bones and making them very fragile (Ruffer and Willmore 1913, 1; Rowe 1942, 29). The current whereabouts of the remainder of the human bones that were previously at Kom el-Shuqafa are unknown.

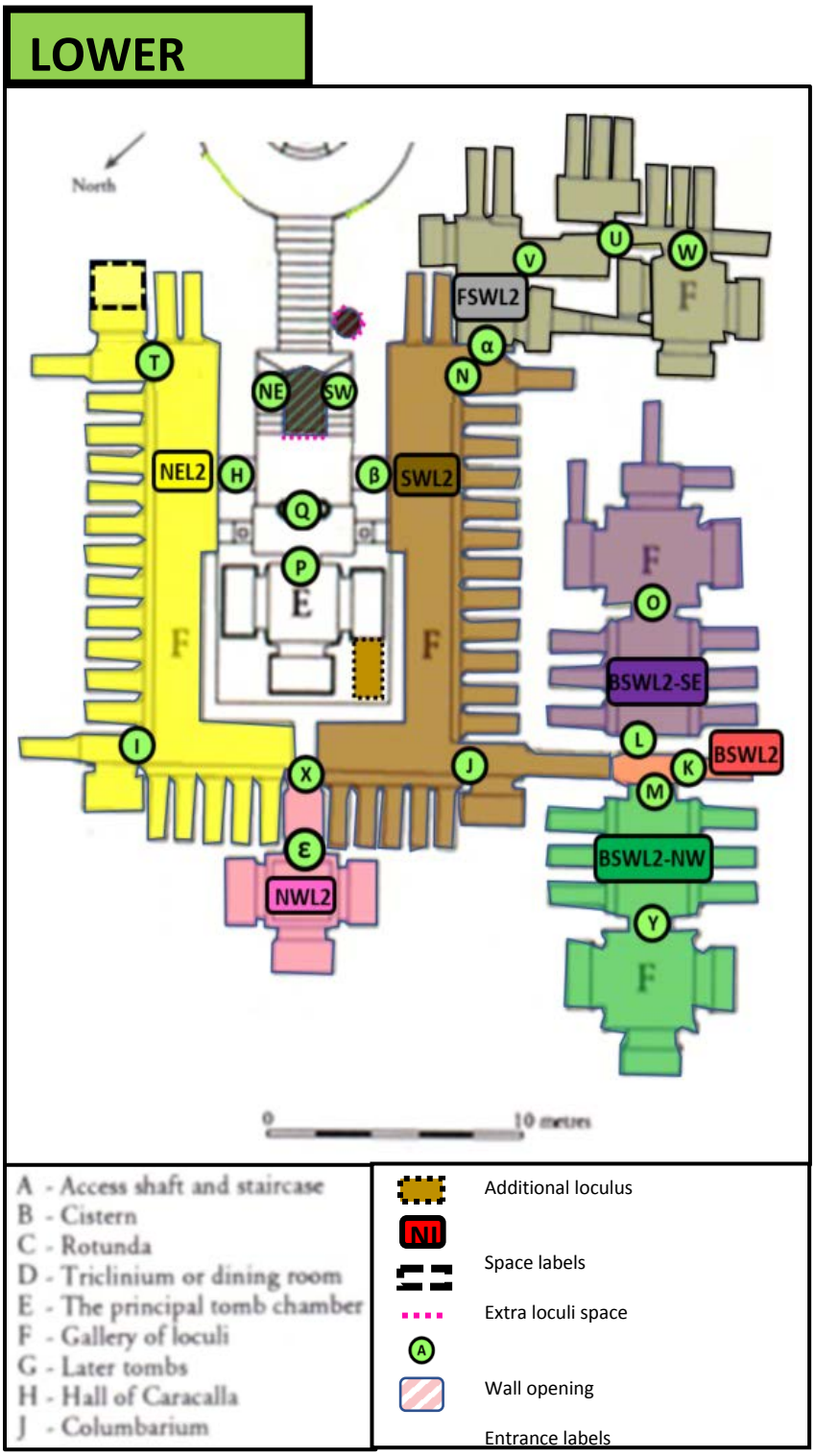


Figure 14. Lower-level map (created by author), overlaid with Empereur map (1995, front cover fold-out).

The visitor's relationship with the *loculi* and the dead bodies they contained are critical to their interpretation of the catacombs as an underworld space. Our separation from the *loculi* today did not exist in antiquity. The plank bridges isolate modern visitors from the physical space, separating them from, even elevating them in respect to the lower *loculi – loculi* that would have been comfortably accessible by relatives of the deceased. When standing in front of these *loculi*, I could easily see inside and rest my arms on the upper *loculi*. Someone on the shorter side, around 5 feet, would still be able to see the upper *loculi*, especially if he or she stood at a distance from the wall of *loculi* itself. A shorter person would still be able to reach the upper ledge. In antiquity, however, it would not have been possible to look inside the *loculi*. The openings of many of these *loculi*, if not all, were originally covered by a limestone slab on which the name of the deceased would be written with red paint.[39] The walkway among these *loculi* also forces the visitors on a designated path, and their flow of movement is decided for them. The wider rock floor pathways encourage a group movement that the narrow plank bridge cannot provide. Ancient visitors would have had the flexibility to walk directly up to the bodies in the wall, enforcing their connection with those who have passed and solidifying the notion that they are truly in the realm of the dead.

Air Quality

Using an anemometer, I measured the altitude, humidity, temperature, and air flow of five different spaces: the outside garden on the surface (right outside the access shaft entrance), the rotunda, the triclinium, the principal tomb, the triclinium-oriented area behind the principal tomb (see **NWL2**, **Table 1**). All data were acquired around noon on June 17, 4 days before the

[39] Botti 1908, 358-359; Schreiber 1908, 110. See n. 15.

Summer Solstice, an extraordinarily warm time during the summer and one of the hottest parts of the year for Alexandria (see **Figure 15**). During the winter, the temperatures would most likely not be as extreme. It is also important to consider that these temperatures could vary day-to-day; nevertheless, the relative differences between the temperatures in these different locations mentioned above would remain the same.

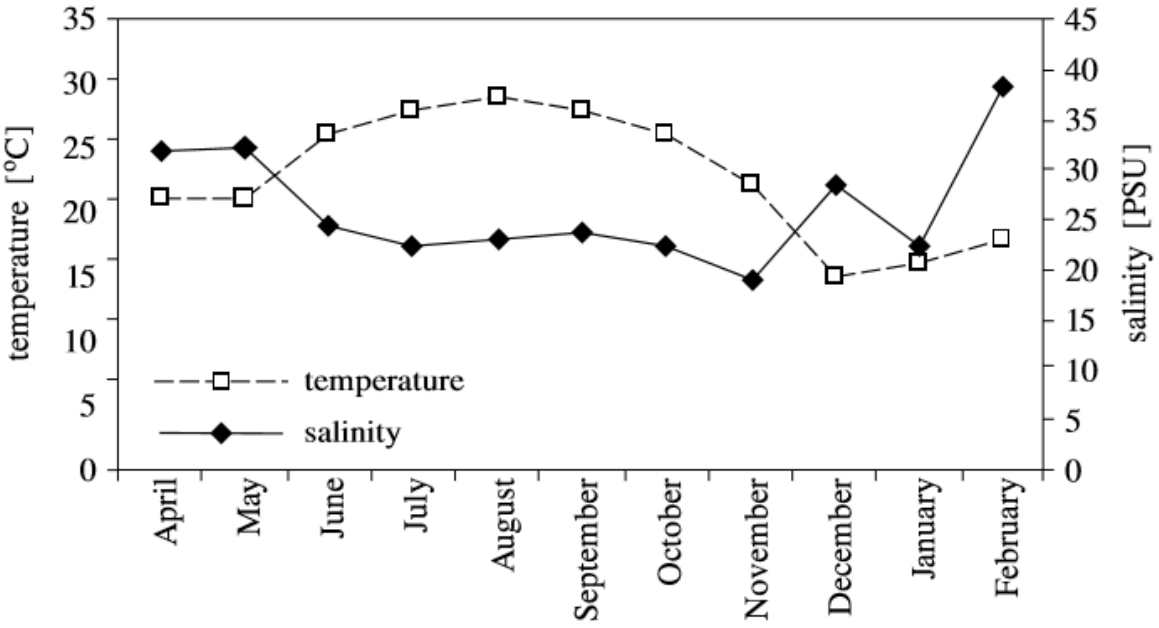


Figure 15. Monthly variations of temperature [◦C] and salinity [PSU] in El-Dekhaila Harbor during 1998–1999. Taken from Ismael and Dorgham 2003, 126.

TABLE 1

	Outside Garden	Rotunda	Triclinuim	Principal Tomb	NWL2
Altitude (m)*	8	-2	-3	-6	-5
Humidity (% RH)	49.5	49.4	51	64.3	70.8
Temperature (°C)	32.5	37.2	31.7	30.5	35.2
Wind (m/s)	1	0	0	0	0

*Negative numbers represent below sea level

In this exercise, the "Outside Garden" or the above-ground area of the Kom el-Shuqafa complex as a comparison for the environmental conditions inside the tomb (since it provides data on environmental conditions outside of the tomb).[40] An obvious insight derived from looking at this table is the lack of air circulation in the catacombs. The very little air flow present on the surface is practically non-existent in the lower levels. Besides the air entering the catacombs from the access shaft, the only other air flow comes from the Hall of Caracalla. In the tomb robber entrance (labelled **Z** on **Figure 16**), one can feel a slight breeze entering **EL1**.[41] However, the air is very still in all other places in Hypogeum 1. At first, the still and dust-filled air is not very noticeable. Over a period of 30 minutes, breathing is not really affected. However, after several days, my lungs started filling with dust, and I started coughing more the longer I stayed there. At one point, I had to take breaks every couple of hours. The tomb also contains stagnant water in the lower *loculi* of the second underground level (not to mention the bottom of the access shaft, the rotunda, and the last third level as a whole). If long rituals took place in the catacombs on a consistent basis, there were almost certainly health implications, particularly respiratory issues.

[40] This "Garden" is a modern construction, containing artifacts which were not originally in association in antiquity. The Kom el-Shuqafa area is protected and fenced, providing a rather secure location for leftover archaeological finds.

[41] Because the opening into the Hall of Caracalla was created in modern times, ancient visitors would not have had the luxury to experience this extra breeze.

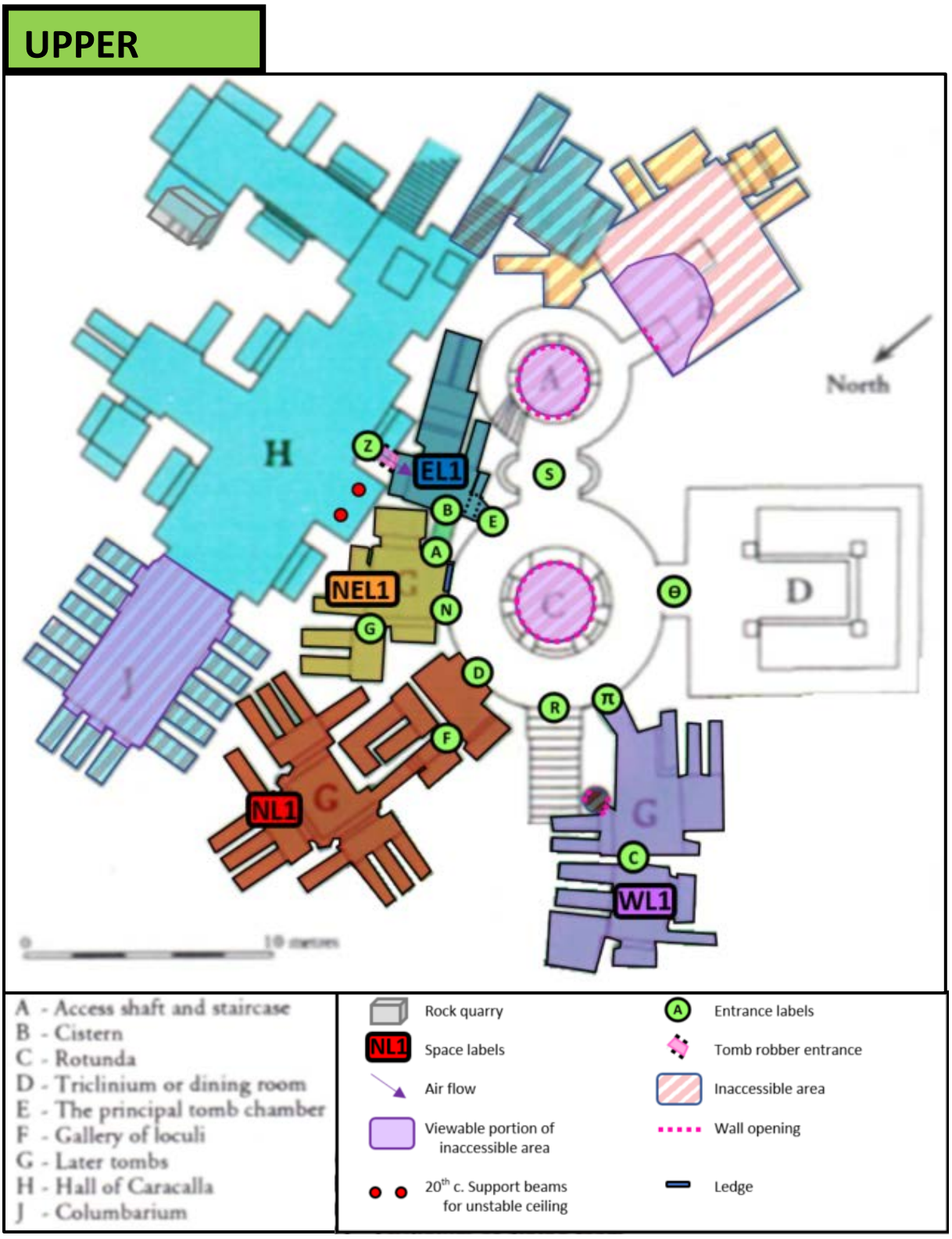


Figure 16. Upper-level map, overlaid with Empereur map.

Altitude reveals the reason why the catacombs experience flooding issues in the first place: the entirety of the underground portion of the catacombs is below (modern) sea level.[42] This water contributes to overall humidity as well, particularly in **NWL2**, which, out of all of the locations in **Table 1**, is the furthest location away from the access shaft entrance. Surprisingly, however, the hottest location out of the five is not the outside garden, but the rotunda. A reason for this could be that the rotunda has access to more sunlight than other rooms in the catacomb. The sun and still air make the air warm and uncomfortable, negating any air flow that might enter the rotunda from either the access shaft or the tomb robber entrance of the Hall of Caracalla.

With these conditions, it is difficult to imagine the commissioner family lounging in the triclinium for more than maybe a few hours, while contemplating the mortuary atmosphere in which they sat. (For evidence concerning these funerary rituals, see below, *Ritual and Utilization of Space*.) Although air quality is an important consideration, it is also important to consider two other aspects of visitor experience: light and sound. In fact, these other aspects of visitor experience are sometimes inseparable from air quality. As discussed below, the types of light sources used in antiquity would have produced smoke, which could have further worsened air quality in the confined space of the catacombs.

Light

Examining light within this environment proved to be a bit tricky – modern, artificial lighting makes darker areas brighter than they probably ever were in antiquity. To get around this problem, I decided to focus on identifying those areas where sunlight either could or could not

[42] This is what the negative numbers in **Table 1** mean.

reach. Additionally, since visitors would have most likely carried a torch or oil lamp, I wanted to look at luster properties of limestone to see how well it reflected light in the darker areas of the catacombs that natural light could not reach.

Limestone does not reflect light well at all, despite the fact that its relatively light color somewhat acts as a foil to the pitch black of darkness. The luster property of limestone is normally dull.[43] Any light coming from oil lamps and torches would not have brightly bounced off the walls and reflected into other parts of the hypogeum. Roman-period oil lamps were discovered there and put into the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria (see **Figure 17** for an example of a lamp handle found at Kom el-Shuqafa and **Figure 18** for other lamps similar to those from Kom el-Shuqafa).[44] There are not many places for the smoke of the oil lamps to escape. Today, we have the convenience of modern light sources: electricity has replaced torches and lamps, which had been the only sources of artificial lighting in the catacombs.

Figure 17. Terracotta lamp handle with a depiction of Isis suckling Horus, found on the Kom el-Shuqafa site (Hassan 2002, 112).

[43] Vanders and Kerr 1967, 213.
[44] Botti 1900.

Figure 18. An assortment of Roman oil lamps at the Alexandria National Museum. These lamps do not come from Kom el-Shuqafa, but they are representative of the kinds that would have been found there.
(Photograph taken by author.)

The darkest part of the catacombs is located in the additional *loculi* surrounding the principal tomb, most notably **BSWL2-SE** and **BSWL2-NW**. The modern lighting in these areas had gone out, giving me an opportunity to experience a portion of the catacombs in complete darkness. In order to enter these two back chambers, one must follow a narrow pathway (labelled **K** in **Figure 14**). Additionally, this part of the catacombs receives no amount of natural light whatsoever. The furthest a visitor can go and still see natural light is the principal tomb, or the primary chambers branching off from the rotunda area in the first underground level.

Sound

Sound travels much better than light in these catacombs. Because the catacombs are relatively empty and hollow, and contain a greater amount of *loculi* than when they were first constructed, sound probably travels somewhat differently. I included areas like the principal tomb and the triclinium particularly because they had been through the least amount of physical changes.

A shake from a *sistrum*[45] played at the top of the access shaft can be heard by an individual standing in the principal tomb. This is remarkable considering the principal tomb's location two levels below the origin of the sound. Additionally, shouts can be heard over the same long distance; however, the *sistrum* cuts through the air in a sharper, cleaner way. Voices, on the other hand, are much more muffled. Unsurprisingly given its size, the room most conducive for vocal use proved to be the triclinium. Even in opposite corners, whispering and facing away from each other, two people can still hear each other's voices. Those lounging on the massive *klinai* would have had no problem hearing each other, or others wandering the lower portions of the catacombs.

Besides recording and listening to sound from various rooms, I also measured the reverberation time (RT) in the principal tomb and the triclinium. From the center of each room, a sound would be emitted from a device (like from a cell phone), and by using the application "Impulso," which measures RT by inputting measurements for the room, I could calculate how fast sound died away in a room. In the triclinium, the reverberation time was .1 second. The RT for the principal tomb was .01 second. In other words, sound died away much faster in the

[45] The *sistrum* I used for the instrumental tests is simply a stand-in for the real thing (one can find "*sistra*" on the internet quite easily these days). Its shape is modelled after an arched *sistrum* or *sḫm* (Reynders 1998, 1015). However, it is rather wide, not slim, and it is made using modern tools. It is mostly made of copper. It is meant to provide an acoustic alternative to the voice in my analysis.

principal tomb than in the triclinium, a fact that remains consistent with the vocal tests previously mentioned.

However, the principal tomb possessed its own interesting aural phenomenon. While facing the northeastern sarcophagus, a human voice reverberates along the northeastern wall much better than facing the entrance of the principal tomb. This acoustic phenomenon does not occur when facing the northwestern and western sarcophagi. It is unknown why a voice reverberates relatively better facing toward the northeastern wall: perhaps the curvature of the ceiling of the inset sarcophagus niche is more perfectly rounded, providing an ideal surface for sound to bounce off from.[46] It is unclear whether this acoustic effect was produced on purpose.

Modern Perceptions of the Site

During my time at the site, I was able to talk to some of the modern-day visitors to the catacombs and ask for their first-impressions of the site. After describing a little bit of my research to a visitor, I would ask them how being in the catacombs made them *feel*. The responses were varied, but centered mainly on the site's ancientness and eerie environment. For my one-on-one interviews, I chose visitors who were not a part of a tour group and were therefore not short on time. Some of the tour groups were from Brazil, Germany, and China. Although I did not interview these tour groups, they allowed me to measure room capacity relatively easily, particularly in smaller places like the principal tomb. Additionally, although I could not necessarily speak their languages, I could see in their reactions that they were immediately curious about the space. The most common response was to take a phone out and take photos – particularly of the principal tomb. Concerning the interviews, the Corliss couple (late 50s to early

[46] A similar acoustic effect is present in domed buildings or churches.

60s) whose daughter lived in Kenya[47] described the place as "spooky," "scary," and "somber," and they were constantly reminded of the "spirits" that made the catacombs their final resting place. A young French man in his 20s or 30s named Yuann described Kom el-Shuqafa as antique, and filled with many tombs, making quite the impression on the visitor. Sonia Ricol, in her 30s or 40s from Bedford, Texas, described the atmosphere as "sacred" and "creepy". Jamie Irwin, a woman in her mid-30s from Tennessee, described herself as "a little creeped out". Several others, including an expatriate, Western family that had just made their way back from Petra, Jordan, expressed their fear of the lights going out, and having to navigate out of the catacombs in complete darkness. This family included a couple in their 30s and their young boys (around 12 and younger).

One response was slightly different from the others. It came from an older couple in their 50s or 60s, from Maryland, who wanted to remain anonymous. They had just been to Saqqara, particularly the Teti Pyramid and associated tombs. From this perspective, they saw the catacombs as "primitive" (despite the fact that they were actually constructed millennia later than the tombs at Saqqara), lacking the color and sophistication of the carvings they had seen at Saqqara. They felt the tombs compared negatively to older Egyptian sites. In a sense, they are right. The artistic technique used in the catacombs seemed to lack the finesse of Old Kingdom tombs.[48] One example of this can be seen on the central panel of the principal tomb. Here, we see the carver neglected to leave enough room for Anubis' and Horus' headdress while carving the figures (**Figure 10**). The headdresses are awkwardly carved above the top border line, almost as an after-thought. Also, many of the figures are rather stout, and lack the height of those depicted

[47] They were visiting Egypt because they were already in Africa. They never stated where they were from, but they sounded American.
[48] Riggs 2006, 5.

at Ptolemaic sites like the Temple of Isis at Philae and the Tomb of Petosiris at Tuna el-Gebel. Some modern visitors might find taller, proportionate figures more appealing to gaze upon. For today's visitors, another important element that is missing from this funerary context are proper hieroglyphs.[49] In several ways, therefore, the craftsmanship in these catacombs falls short of older Pharaonic standards.

However, what we see today is not necessarily the same Kom el-Shuqafa a second-century visitor would have experienced. The catacombs would have been quite colorful, as evidenced by the red paint visible throughout the rooms (particularly the triclinium, **NL1**, and the room adjoining **W**), particularly the remnants framing the panels and decorating the ceiling of the principal tomb (please see **Figure 10**).

III. THE DESCENT INTO THE UNDERWORLD

Considering the data I collected on the environmental conditions of the catacombs, I believe that the sensory experience of the space creates an atmosphere in which visitors feel they are descending into the underworld. In order to develop this argument, it is necessary to examine Egyptian and Graeco-Roman underworld mythologies in greater detail while simultaneously considering alterations made to the physical space.

Egyptian and Graeco-Roman Mythologies and their Association with the Catacombs

Two common themes among Egyptian, Greek, and Roman concepts of the underworld are darkness and subterranean location. For instance, in the New Kingdom Books of the

[49] Empereur 1995, 11.

Netherworld, the sun god's nocturnal journey as *ba* through the cosmos is equated to a journey through darkness, water, and the "netherworld and the depths of the earth".[50] Night represents chaos. According to the *Amduat*, the sun god enters the night in an old and weak state, but he returns rejuvenated with the sunrise.[51] According to the Book of Gates, the sun god is essentially raised from Nun each morning.[52] These Underworld Books were still in use during the Roman period and, therefore, remain relevant at this time.[53] The catacombs could almost be described as cave-like, and Greeks and Romans associated cave imagery with an entrance into the underworld, or the underworld itself.[54] Additionally, the darkness associated with caves would have paralleled that of the underworld.[55]

Regarding Egyptian mythology in particular, one of the most consistent underlying themes is the war between order and chaos. The swampy, primordial waters of chaos existed before the order that came with creation in Egyptian creation myths. Evidence suggests that ancient Egyptian temples were even modelled after these myths, with part of the sanctuary representing a swamp and bundles of papyri represented on the columns surrounding the naos or inner sanctuaries.[56] Another important motif associated with the inner sanctuary is the "mound of creation" seen as the birthplace of a god.[57] In this manner, sites like the Temple of Edfu are often seen as representations of the cosmos.[58] Although the principal tomb in Kom el-Shuqafa is just that – a tomb – its façade resembles that of a temple, with its columns topped with Egyptian

[50] Hornung 1999, 27.
[51] Hornung 1999, 160-161.
[52] See n. 51.
[53] Manassa 2007: 55, 58; Roberson 2007: 20-22; Barrett 2011, 205.
[54] Ustinova 2009, 2.
[55] Ustinova 2009, 231.
[56] Finnestad 1985, 3 and 94; Bell 1997, 133; Finnestad 1997, 185-237; Shafer 1997, 6.
[57] Shafer 1997, 6.
[58] Finnestad 1985, 5 and 64.

composite capitals that might remind visitors of the façades of many Egyptian temples (see, for example, **Figure 8** and **Figure 19**). Also, notice the similar central winged sun disc above the columns. The principal tomb's similarity to a temple recalls the role of Egyptian temples as representations of the cosmos. The ditch that surrounds the outer walls of the principal tomb resembles that of a shallow moat and would have been used to help with flooding on the second underground level. Besides the previously mentioned practical purpose of the ditch (to keep the elevated area dry), one could also argue the apparent elevation of the principal tomb might call to mind notions of the "mound of creation". This space would conjure up cosmological images in the minds of later visitors, even if elements (like the mound) were not purposely designed by the tomb's original creator.

Figure 19. The front entrance of the Temple of Dendur at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. (Photograph taken by author.)

In addition to the tomb's cosmological significance, elements like the Anubis reliefs and *gorgoneia* recall apotropaic motifs. Anubis' role as a guardian and underworld deity is evident in

other Egyptian tombs as well.[59] The *gorgoneia* on the principal tomb façade serve a protective function as well. Because they are placed on shields, we can make the assumption that they are related to the *aegis* shield and are therefore meant to thwart evil.[60] The simultaneous depictions of an Egyptian protector and a Graeco-Roman protector combine to form the best line of defense against the perils that await during the journey to the underworld. Additionally, during this time, apotropaic power was sought out for both the living and the dead, particularly against demons.[61] The deceased inside the sarcophagi of the principal tomb would have been safeguarded by these images. The principal tomb's depiction of the mummification scene, as well as depictions of Persephone's abduction in the Hall of Caracalla, evoke images of the netherworld in both Egyptian and Graeco-Roman visual languages, respectively.

Certainly, the importance of *katabasis* (a descent into the underworld) cannot be underestimated in ancient Egyptian religion. Jan Assmann argues that this descent is emphasized in other tombs as well, "visually and architectonically actualized by a descent into a crypt decorated with cosmographic representations"[62]. Here, Assmann is discussing this movement in the context of New Kingdom tombs, which often depicted scenes from the underworld. I argue that Kom el-Shuqafa draws from these more ancient Egyptian elements for a new and more culturally "hybridized" era.

[59] Smith 2017, 366-367.Consider, for example, the Shrine of Anubis found in association with King Tutankhamun's tomb (Hawass 2008, 202).
[60] Stehle 2012. For more on the depiction of the *gorgoneion* and Athena on coins and clothing, see Hartswick 1993. Belson 1981 also provides extensive examples of *gorgoneia* in the Hellenistic and Classical periods over a wide range of geographical areas.
[61] Frankfurter 1998, 119-120. For more on militant Anubis, see Grenier 1978, 408 and Boardman et al. 1981, 688-696.
[62] Assmann 1989, 153.

IV. RITUAL AND UTILIZATION OF SPACE

The underworld atmosphere that the catacombs provide creates the perfect backdrop for funerary festivals and monthly or annual rituals. The physical descent into space, the poor quality of air, sound, and light, as well as the images of the underworld, all contribute to a mortuary environment completely distinct from rituals of the surface world. Consequently, the types of rituals and activities that are performed here are different from those that occur in the realm of the living. In this section, I will primarily focus on feasting rituals and other events that would cause the living to interact with the dead. However, not all activities within the catacombs were ritualistic in nature.

Even though Kom el-Shuqafa is a mortuary space, there might have been other reasons people would visit this site. They could have gone down to fix maintenance and repairs. Additionally, future residents might hire a renovator to fix the space up to their liking. Empereur suggests that the demand for *loculi* even attracted businesspeople, who were looking to turn a profit by selling available spots (or moving old bones aside to create availability).[63] Another possibility was that these *loculi* were used by members of a *collegium*. Those in *collegia* often shared the same occupation and lived in the same region, and they offered burials for members lacking family or money.[64] A rather unfortunate activity that occurred at the catacombs and at various tombs in Egypt's history was robbing.[65] Compared to the visitor, businessman, or

[63] Empereur 1995, 15-16.
[64] Rebillard 2009, 37-39.
[65] Ikram 2003, 196-199. We cannot be sure at what points the catacombs were looted. However, a skeleton, most likely that of a grave robber, was discovered in the Hall of Caracalla. The grave robber apparently got stuck in a rock fall (Empereur 1995, 19).

maintenance person, the tomb robber's intentions are malicious. His interest lies not in the tomb, but in what the tomb contains.

Although we cannot be certain as to what types of rituals occurred in the Kom el-Shuqafa catacombs, we can make educated guesses as to what possibly occurred there by drawing on Greek, Roman, and Egyptian textual and iconographical evidence. Another source of evidence are the finds from the tomb itself, although these assemblages are likely disturbed and incomplete. For example, funerary objects like *shabtis* and canopic jars have not been found.[66] They could have been looted, taken away to the Graeco-Roman Museum, or simply not there to begin with. We do not really know for sure. Whether or not the physical objects were still considered necessary, the architects of Kom el-Shuqafa (or possibly the patron family) still felt it necessary to include canopic jars in the principal tomb's mummification scene, where Anubis is shown embalming the deceased. The inclusion of Anubis is appropriate in this scene, because he was the patron deity of burial and embalming.[67]

The representation of the three (as opposed to the usual four) canopic jars may have been enough to connote older traditions without actually performing these practices. It may no longer have been necessary to mummify the body (in full, at least) because the simple depiction of the mummification scene was enough to satisfy the sacredness of the ritual. Certainly, mummification remained widespread throughout much of Roman Egypt;[68] however, many Alexandrian burials followed more of a Graeco-Roman program for burial and ritual (including inhumation or cremation) than other sites in Egypt.[69] Inhumation had replaced cremation in

[66] Maitland 2017, 78.
[67] Helck et al. 1975, 327-334.
[68] Riggs 2005, 34; Dunand and Lichtenberg 2006, 74.
[69] Venit 1999, 666.

Roman burial practices by the end of the second century CE.[70] Unfortunately, descriptions of the bodies that once rested here are limited. Very little is known about their current whereabouts and condition.[71] Isotopic analyses (or even basic investigations) of the bodies have not been performed. If mummies were present in the catacombs, traditional Egyptian rituals like the "Opening of the Mouth" ceremony could be performed, allowing the deceased to be able to drink and eat again in the afterlife.[72] However, the Books of Breathing would have performed a similar role without necessarily interacting with the body, allowing the deceased a continued existence after death. More specifically, the books allowed the *ba* of the deceased to live forever.[73] These books replaced the Book of the Dead in Roman times.[74]

From the original construction of the catacombs (which originally consisted of the triclinium and the principal tomb) to their later, *loculi*-ridden state, we can come up with an idea of how the space was utilized in the context of burial and ritual. If the deceased were to be buried according to Greek practice, then before the *ekphora* (or the funerary procession),[75] the body must first go through a cleaning and oil-anointing process called *prothesis*. After the *ekphora*, the body was interred or cremated.[76] If the deceased were to be buried according to Roman practice, two large components of a Roman funerary ritual involved a procession and a feast.[77] If the deceased were to be buried according to Egyptian practice, the body would be mummified, then

[70] Hope and Huskinson 2011, 17.
[71] See supra, n. 21, n. 38.
[72] Ikram 2003, 99.
[73] Stadler 2012, 387-388.
[74] Dunand and Lichtenburg 2006, 92; Drummond 2013, 67. For more on the Books for Breathing, Books of Transformation, and Book for Traversing Eternity, see Stadler 2012, 387.
[75] For more on the *ekphora*, see Moore 2007, 10.
[76] Garland 2001, 21-23.
[77] Toynbee 1996, 46 and 50. Drummond 2013, 69.

there would be a recitation of spells (like the Books of Breathing), and then a burial with specific grave goods.[78]

As previously mentioned, the triclinium provided the ideal locale for feasting in a funerary context. However, in addition to the feast that occurred at the end of an individual's funeral, family would come back during the year to feast again in honor of their dead relatives.[79] In Roman tradition, lamps would be lit in tombs at certain points in the year.[80] The tradition of "picnicking" at a cemetery goes back to Pharaonic times.[81] During the older Egyptian tradition of the Beautiful Feast of the Valley, it was customary to become drunk at the tombs and participate in an event that blurred the line between the living and the dead.[82] Images in New Kingdom Theban tombs also depict similar drunken festivities in the context of New Year festivals.[83] Turning more specifically to Kom el-Shuqafa, amphorae and drinking vessels were discovered in the triclinium, showing evidence for both eating and drinking.[84] These ritual traditions were a way to retain a connection with ancestors and ancestral memory.[85]

Additionally, the "triclinium" arrangement in the principal tomb is emblematic of the symbolic nature of the *klinē* to which Venit alludes in her discussion of the first century BCE Antoniadis Garden Tomb in Alexandria.[86] Venit specifically uses the term "emblematic," referring to the fact that the Antoniadis Garden Tomb triclinium did not serve a functional

[78] Taylor 1997, 9-10.
[79] Venit 1997, 703. It is not uncommon at this time for sacrifices to be offered at the tomb of loved ones (Borg 1997, 28).
[80] Lamps utilized for funeral anniversaries would be lit on the *calends, ides,* and *nones* of each month (Şöföroğlu and Summerer 2016, 264).
[81] Ikram 2003, 199-200.
[82] Manniche 2003, 44.
[83] Bryan 2014, 107.
[84] Rowe 1942, 1; Empereur 1995, 5.
[85] Frankfurter 2012, 322.
[86] Venit 2009, 46-47.

purpose. Instead, the triclinium would have provided the setting for a "fictive" funerary banquet. The Antoniadis *klinai* are reduced to a façade, which means they could neither support a dead person's body or be utilized in ritual feasting. Similarly, Kom el-Shuqafa also possesses a symbolic triclinium within the principal tomb in addition to its genuine triclinium on the first underground level. The sarcophagi in Kom el-Shuqafa's principal tomb are arranged in a triclinium fashion, with each sarcophagus metaphorically representing a *klinē.* Additionally, these "*klinai*" function as resting places for those who have passed, differing from the *klinai* Venit describes. In this scenario, the dead are symbolically joining the living in the ritual act of feasting.

In any case, Egyptian mortuary religion was appealing to the Greeks and Romans,[87] and would have impacted visitor experience in a way that goes beyond ethnic boundaries. Egyptian and Graeco-Roman respective mythologies certainly overlapped in a few categories. The netherworld often had negative associations, often being described as "a dark and chilly place or a very dry region where people suffer from thirst".[88] However, Kom el-Shuqafa does not really fit into the "dry" category. With its constant flooding and overall wet atmosphere, the mood plays more on Egyptian primordial water themes than it does on a "dry" motif.[89] The catacombs would have started flooding at some point after all three levels were constructed. However, there is also a place for water within Graeco-Roman conceptions of the underworld. The river Styx provides one of the best-known examples.

The concept of a rewarding afterlife (as opposed to the dreadful Hades-like afterlife that Graeco-Romans were accustomed to learning about) was promising to outsiders of the Egyptian

[87] Stadler 2016, 151; Empereur 1995, 15.
[88] Stadler 2016, 151.
[89] Shafer 1997, 5-8, and the association between water and the underworld.

religion.[90] The appeal of a rewarding afterlife in Egyptian notions of death might explain the attention paid to Egyptian elements within the principal tomb. The mummification panels above the sarcophagi are at eye-level and clearly prominent, while the Graeco-Roman elements highlighted either the individual (i.e., the statues, the figure of a woman on the principal sarcophagus, and the sarcophagi themselves) or serve in a guarding role (the *gorgoneia* on the tomb's façade, or the images of Anubis as a Roman soldier, which draw on both Graeco-Roman and Egyptian iconographic precedents).[91] Perhaps the craftsmen who constructed the tomb wanted the principal tomb to reflect multiple belief systems in order to appeal to a broader audience.

Some archaeologists have argued that at a later point in time, possibly the fourth century, the catacombs were utilized by Jews or Christians.[92] Although it is assumed that Christians might have hid in catacombs along the Nile during Diocletian's scourge,[93] there is no direct evidence of their staying at the Kom el-Shuqafa catacombs specifically. Rowe and Empereur believe that flower-like symbols on the ceilings of some of the rooms represents the Greek letters Iota Chi, an early symbol of Christianity.[94] However, we cannot say for certain if Christians actually worshipped at the site.

Between late antiquity and the site's rediscovery in 1901, the catacombs were robbed for valuables. Robbing, as I mentioned above, is one of the more unfortunate uses of the site. Archaeologist Giuseppe Botti had excavated other portions of the site starting in 1892, and grave

[90] This is not to say Greeks and Romans did not have positive images of the afterlife. Consider, for example, mystery cults such as the Eleusinian mysteries, whose initiates believed they would be rewarded in the afterlife (Burkert 1985, 81 and 301).
[91] As previously mentioned, Anubis already fills this protective role in Egyptian mythology because of his association with mummification. See n. 68.
[92] Rowe 1942, 5; Empereur 1995, 18.
[93] Bagnall and Rathbone 2004, 18.
[94] Rowe 1942, 31; Empereur 1995, 17-18.

robbers had known about Kom el-Shuqafa prior to Botti's research.[95] Additionally, Alan Rowe noted that the stones placed behind the female and male statues were not originally there, and, at some point, were placed in that location to form niches that looked like pharaonic doorways.[96]

Today, the catacombs no longer serve a ritualistic, funerary purpose, and we can only see the remnants of the rituals that may have taken place here. Kom el-Shuqafa is not only a site visited by tourists; it is also a site of continued excavation research. Excavation is simply another activity, albeit modern, that is occurring here. Currently, a small team of archaeologists is working on an area at the site designated as the "Keep Out" section, located on the southwestern tip of the plateau the complex sits on (see **Figure 6**). One of the archaeologists, Mikaël Pesenti, was kind enough to give me a tour. In the current excavated area exists evidence of plaster, a large space with stacked *loculi* (the likes of which can also be found in the Hall of Caracalla), a niche in the far side of the *loculi*-filled room, and a large collection of ceramics. These ceramics are currently being catalogued.

In addition to excavation and the touristic use of the catacombs, contemporary activities at the site include ongoing restoration and stabilization efforts. Concerning the flooding problems of the site, there have been reports concerning possible installation of additional groundwater lowering systems at Kom el-Shuqafa, with help from the Ministry of Antiquities, USAID, and ARCE.[97] Although the catacombs are no longer utilized for their original purpose, they will nevertheless continue to perpetuate the interaction between the living (whether that be the tourist, the archaeologist, or the water utility engineer), and the (now empty tombs of) the dead.

[95] Empereur 1995, 1.
[96] Rowe 1945, 18.
[97] Sadarangani et al. 2015, 4.

V. CONCLUSION

Kom el-Shuqafa allows both the living and the deceased to make the descent into the underworld. This shared experience of living and dead blurs the division between the earthly realm and the netherworld. The Kom el-Shuqafa catacombs render the physical space into something metaphysical (beyond the physical), allowing for a relationship to exist between the visitor and the deceased. The very nature of the catacombs as an open-tomb complex (as opposed to a closed tomb, which is never meant to be opened again) allows them to cater to the living and the dead simultaneously. In turn, this "accommodating" environment of the catacombs enables the connection between the living and the dead to be sustained and renewed over the course of years. In other words, the relationship between the living and the dead does not end with the burial of the deceased.

Kom el-Shuqafa offers a wonderful opportunity to connect the past and present visitor through a common experience. A phenomenological approach provides a sense of how ancient visitors would have moved through the space, utilized the space, and *felt* while simply being in the space. A multi-sensory approach allows us to look beyond the visual. Taking this method one step further, we are able to connect space with cosmology, by showing that the descent into the dark, musty catacombs parallels that of a descent into the underworld. In this way, we get an impression not only of what the living visitors themselves experienced, but also what they expected that the dead were experiencing. The relatively well-preserved nature of the site provides past and future visitors the potential for a common experience through the physical nature of a common space. Furthermore, phenomenological research suggests a new conclusion about ancient visitors' experience of the space: they would have understood their descent into the catacombs as a descent into the underworld. Ancient visitors would have most likely felt a mix

of emotions in their experiences: sadness for having to bury a loved one, initial anxiety (but then perhaps a feeling of reassurance) when night approaches and the eyes of Anubis, *gorgoneia*, and human statues are looking in their direction, and perhaps a feeling of relief when returning to the surface world.

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