



Interpreting Heritage Sites through Name, History, and Cultural Significance: A Case Study of the Catacombs of Kom El-Shoqafa, Alexandria

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ABSTRACT

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Interpretation plays a pivotal role in introducing heritage sites. It transforms a site from mere landmarks, remains, or artifacts into living meanings that impact the visitor. The interpretation process contributes effectively to the visitor's understanding of the site's history and culture. This understanding leads to the visitor's awareness of the site's cultural value and symbolism, which, then, increases the visitor's responsibility to preserve the heritage sites, whose importance and value are realized through the interpretation process. To achieve a comprehensive interpretation process, interpretation must address several points related to the site. This study focuses on three of the most important of these points: the site's name, its history, and its cultural significance. The study concludes that interpreting a site's name is the gateway to understanding the site, an understanding that creates an emotional bond between the visitor and the heritage site. Interpreting the site's history, on the other hand, connects the site's past with its present, transforming it into a living entity that interacts with the visitor. The cultural significance of a heritage site is explained through connecting the site to identity, symbolism, and value. The study also examines the site of the Catacombs of Kom El-Shoqafa in Alexandria, Egypt, as a case study interpreting its name, history and cultural significance as a symbol of the intermingling of thoughts, beliefs, architecture, and art style of both ancient Egyptians and the culture of Greek and Roman in Egypt.

KEYWORDS:

Heritage Interpretation, Toponymy, Cultural Interaction, Funerary Heritage, Heritage Values

1. INTRODUCTION

Interpretation is critical insofar as it serves to convert heritage sites from static witness of the past into spaces for dynamic learning, reflection and engagement. It is the mediator between tangible remains and intangible meanings, which gives visitors access to the historical, cultural and social meanings of places. According to Tilden, heritage interpretation is “an educational activity which aims to help people understand and appreciate the natural and cultural inheritance” (Tilden, 1957). This underlying point asserts interpretation not only as an exercise in didactic expression but also creative and intellectual acts that bind people emotionally and intellectually to the values contained in heritage.

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In nowadays heritage management practices, interpretation has become the linchpin of sustainable site planning and visitor experience design. It supports conservation through public appreciation and stewardship, transforming complex archaeological and historical narratives into comprehensible and meaningful experiences (Uzzell, 1989; Ham, 2013). Additionally, effective interpretation encourages inclusivity and cross-cultural understanding by allowing different audiences to engage with heritage through multiple frameworks and perspectives (Silberman, 2013). Incorporating interpretive strategies—ranging from on-site panels and guided tours to digital and immersive technologies—also plays a role in achieving a balance between learning objectives and the formation of tourism, and makes heritage places significant in a rapidly globalizing and digitalizing world (Poria, Butler and Airey 2003; Moscardo, 2015).

Therefore, interpretation must be recognized not as a lesser duty, but as a core element of managing cultural heritage that bridges conservation efforts, educational initiatives, and collective identity formation. It is through the process of

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interpretation that the importance and meaning found in physical cultural objects are made clear, placed in proper context, and maintained for the advantage of future generations.

The Kom El-Shoqafa Catacombs in Alexandria, Egypt, stand as an extraordinary archaeological treasure from the Greco-Roman era in Egypt. These catacombs were classified as one of the Middle Ages' seven wonders (Latham, 1904). Originally serving as a private family burial site, the main tomb evolved over time into an elaborate underground complex featuring multiple levels with burial chambers, a circular hall, dining areas, and ornately carved decorative elements (Empereur, 1998; Venit, 2002). Access to the tomb begins with a spiral stairway that was traditionally utilized for lowering the deceased into the depths. This stairway descends to burial chambers that were carved directly into the solid rock foundation during the reign of the Antonine emperors in the 2nd century CE (Venit, 2002; Redford, 2001). The main burial chamber remained in active use from the 2nd through 4th centuries CE, until its eventual rediscovery in 1900 CE. These catacombs serve as compelling evidence of Alexandria's diverse cultural landscape during the first two centuries of the Common Era (Venit, 2002).

The site's design and symbolic imagery demonstrate the mixed religious practices of that era, combining classic Egyptian burial symbols with Greek and Roman ornamental styles (Venit, 2002). In contemporary times, Kom El-Shoqafa remains a crucial landmark for archaeological research and cultural understanding, representing Alexandria's lasting importance as a meeting point of different cultures (Venit, 2015).

II. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive case-study approach to examine the role of name, history, and cultural significance in the interpretation of heritage sites. The Catacombs of Kom El-Shoqafa in Alexandria are employed as a single case through which these three interconnected dimensions are investigated and applied.

Data are collected from multiple sources, including archaeological and historical studies, peer-reviewed academic literature, official heritage documentation, historical records and maps where available, guidebooks, and existing interpretive materials. Field observation is also employed to examine the current presentation of the site, including interpretive panels, visitor information, spatial presentation, and the narratives through which its history and significance are communicated.

The collected evidence is analyzed thematically according to the three predetermined categories of name, history, and cultural significance. For each category, the study identifies the available evidence, the meanings derived from that evidence, its representation in existing interpretation, potential interpretive gaps, and opportunities for developing

a more integrated interpretive narrative. Finally, the findings from the three dimensions are synthesized to examine their interrelationships.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1-The name of the site

1-a. Interpreting the name of heritage site

The name of a heritage site is not just a label, it is an entry point into its history, culture, and meaning. So, heritage interpretation begins not only with the presentation of monuments and landscapes but also with their names. Interpreting the name is therefore crucial in heritage tourism and heritage sites. As Timothy and Boyd argue, names are powerful cultural signifiers that anchor heritage within memory and identity (Timothy and Boyd, 2003). Yet, for many visitors, the meaning of a name remains obscure unless properly interpreted.

Interpreting the name of a heritage site bears a historical significance as the etymology of a site's name often encodes historical narratives (Alderman, 2016). For instance, the name of Nabataean site of Petra, from the Greek word for "rock," reflects classical encounters with the city (McKenzie, 1990). Explaining such etymologies situates the site in broader historical processes. Moreover, the transformation of names over time, such as the case of Istanbul, for example, reflects political, cultural, and religious shifts (Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996). Interpreting these changes helps visitors appreciate the layers of meaning embedded in the site's past. Names of heritage sites are not neutral; they often derive from indigenous languages or local traditions. As Smith notes, heritage is a cultural process, and names embody this process by preserving linguistic and symbolic associations (Smith, 2006). Interpreting such meanings not only informs visitors but also safeguards intangible heritage, including oral traditions and indigenous knowledge (UNESCO, 2003 a). By engaging with linguistic roots, interpretation connects visitors with the worldview of past and present communities.

For most tourists, the name is the first interpretive encounter with a heritage site. As Tilden emphasized, interpretation must reveal meanings and relationships rather than merely present facts (Tilden, 1957). Explaining a site's name stimulates curiosity, builds a sense of place, and transforms a label into a story. Educational interpretation of names also enhances memorability, visitors are more likely to recall a site whose name has been contextualized and explained.

There is another important point regarding interpreting the names of heritage sites concerning political and identity dimensions, as the naming of the sites can be politically charged. Many sites bear multiple names that reflect competing cultural or national claims, such as the case of Hagia Sophia/Ayasofya illustrates how a single monument carries Byzantine, Ottoman, and modern Turkish identities (Shaw, 2003). Similarly, disputes over place-names in colonial and postcolonial contexts highlight issues of

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ownership and cultural representation (Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996). Interpreting these contested names allows heritage professionals to present a balanced narrative and promote intercultural dialogue. Moreover, as Nye notes, in his concept of soft power, heritage names can serve as tools of cultural diplomacy and nation-branding in tourism (Nye, 2004).

In order to achieve an effective interpretation of the names of heritage sites, requires deliberate strategies are required such as: Multilingual explanations: Providing translations, etymologies, and phonetic guides on panels, apps, and brochures. Storytelling techniques: Using the name as a narrative entry point, weaving its meaning into broader interpretive themes (Ham, 2013).

1-b. Interpreting the name of the site of Kom El-Shoqafa

Beyond its rich architectural and artistic heritage, even the name of the site of Kom El-Shoqafa is significant and warrants careful interpretation. The interpretation of the name Kom El-Shoqafa demonstrates that heritage significance is embedded not only in architecture and artifacts but also in language and naming practices.

The Arabic designation "Kom El-Shoqafa" combines two distinct Arabic terms: "Kom" (كوم), which translates to mound, heap, or hill, and "Shoqafa" (الشقافة), stemming from shuqāfa or shaqāfa, referring to pottery fragments or broken ceramic pieces (al-shuqāf). This creates the literal meaning "Mound of Shards" or "Hill of Potsherds" (Venit, 2002; Bibliotheca Alexandrina, 2007). Academic researchers have identified a parallel with the Greek expression *Lofus Kiramaikos*, which carries the identical meaning of "mound of shards," indicating a linguistic continuity that spans different cultural traditions (Abdallah and Abd El-Tawab, 2013). Consequently, this nomenclature provides a direct description of terrain characterized by accumulated piles of fractured pottery vessels.

The shards that gave the site its name are linked to funerary rituals and ancient visitor practices where visitors to the catacombs often brought food, drink, and offerings in pottery vessels. After use, these were broken and discarded, leaving accumulations around the tombs. The act of breaking vessels symbolized the conclusion of the ritual and the separation between the world of the living and the dead. Thus, the name Kom El-Shoqafa is a mnemonic of ritual practice, preserving the memory of funerary traditions in the site's very title (Venit, 2002).

The name of "Kom El-Shoqafa" links ordinary objects, pottery shards, with the sacred sphere of burial and commemoration: While monumental architecture dominates the underground catacombs, the name emphasizes discarded fragments, reflecting how mundane objects become part of the heritage landscape. This duality reinforces the idea that cultural heritage is shaped not only by monumental remains but also by traces of everyday life (Smith, 2006).

Interpreting the name of "Kom El-Shoqafa" shows that the Arabic name preserves and transmits ancient practices into modern cultural memory. It also introduces audiences to the lived experiences of ancient Alexandrians, making the past tangible. For visitors, the name provides an interpretive entry point, sparking curiosity before exploring the catacombs. In heritage branding, the name underscores authenticity, linking material remains to community practices across time.

2-The history of the site

2-a. Interpreting the history of heritage site

Heritage sites are physical remnants of past societies, but without historical interpretation, they risk being perceived merely as ruins or collections of stones. As Tilden emphasized, heritage interpretation aims to reveal meanings and relationships rather than just facts (Tilden, 1957). The historical dimension is particularly important at heritage sites because it transforms material remains into narratives of human experience, enabling visitors to understand the site's role within broader historical and cultural processes.

Archaeological and heritage evidences alone do not speak for itself. Contextual historical interpretation is necessary to reconstruct meaning. For example, the architectural remains at Petra or Hegra gain significance only when interpreted through their Nabataean history, trade networks, and interactions with Rome (McKenzie, 1990; Healey, 2001). Without historical interpretation, visitors may fail to understand why the site was found, who used it, or what role it played in regional or global history (Lowenthal, 1985).

Historical interpretation of the archaeological and heritage site has a very important educational value as archaeological data must be translated into understandable historical narratives for the public (Uzzell, 1992). Such interpretation helps visitors reflect on cultural continuity and change, rather than seeing the past as static (Smith, 2006). Heritage sites interpreted historically contribute to history, anthropology, art history, and environmental studies, making them outdoor classrooms (Moscardo, 1996). Through historical interpretation, heritage and archaeological sites fulfill their role as both research spaces and educational resources.

Another important aspect of Historical interpretation of the heritage site is the matter of identity and cultural belonging as archaeological and heritage sites often serve as symbols of cultural identity. Their historical interpretation reinforces this symbolic role. For example, the site of Machu Picchu, presenting Inca history helps Peruvians connect with indigenous heritage and fosters national pride (Silverman, 2002). Similarly, interpreting the history of Jericho, one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, connects local communities to deep time and reinforces collective memory (Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996). Interpretation thus ensures that archaeological remains are not alien to living communities but integrated into identity and heritage.

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From a tourism perspective, historical interpretation adds depth to the visitor's encounter with archaeological ruins (Uzzell, 1992). As Ham notes, interpretation should provoke, relate, reveal, and address meaning. Without historical explanation, visitors may perceive ruins as empty spaces; with interpretation, they become immersive stories of human creativity, resilience, and transformation (Ham, 2013). For instance, explaining the fall of Pompeii contextualizes its ruins as testimonies of daily life interrupted by disaster, enhancing both educational and emotional impact.

Interpreting the history of heritage and archaeological sites also supports sustainability. By explaining the fragility and historical importance of remains, interpretation fosters respect and responsible visitor behavior (Moscardo, 1996). UNESCO stresses that historical interpretation is central to World Heritage Site management, since it builds public support for conservation (UNESCO, 1972). Moreover, integrating site history into interpretation helps manage visitor flows by directing attention to less fragile areas while still providing meaningful engagement.

2-b. Interpreting the history of the site of Kom El-Shoqafa

As for the Catacombs of Kom El-Shoqafa, any historical interpretation must situate the site within Alexandrian society of the 2nd–3rd centuries CE when Alexandria was the blending of Egyptian, Greek, and Roman forms in art, ritual, and architecture. The historical interpretation of the site should explain how its plan, décor, and mortuary choreography made hybrid identities visible. UNESCO's description of Kom El-Shuqâfa as a “magnificent testimony of religious syncretism in the Roman Empire” captures the core of this significance and provides a public-facing starting point for interpretation (UNESCO, 2003 b).

Chronologically, the catacombs were built in the Roman imperial period, commonly assigned to the Antonine era, with use into the 3rd–4th centuries CE (Venit, 2002). The catacombs belong to a broader network of Alexandrian rock-cut tombs distributed across the city's western and eastern necropolises (Empereur, 1998). Reading Kom El-Shoqafa historically therefore means reading it as part of an urban mortuary ecology in which social distinction, civic cults, and cosmopolitan identities were negotiated through funerary art. One of the most important and interesting stories related to the history of the site is the story of discovery. The modern discovery narrative is itself historically significant. The popular story dates the discovery to 1900 CE. The story is known as “the donkey tale”, it mentions that a donkey belonging to a local Alexandrian man fell into a hole in the ground while walking through the area. When locals attempted to rescue the animal, they noticed that the pit opened into a man-made shaft leading downward (Empereur, 1998; Venit, 2002). This chance event prompted curiosity among local residents, who reported the find to authorities. The incident reached the attention of Evaristo Breccia, the Italian archaeologist and director of the Greco-Roman

Museum in Alexandria, who quickly organized an excavation to explore the newly uncovered shaft (Breccia, 1902). Another scholarly account point to a longer history of investigation in the area carried out by Botti from 1892 CE, and identify an Alexandrian, Sayed Aly Gibrah, as opening a vault during quarrying; decades later Achille Adriani, Keeper of the Graeco-Roman Museum, undertook major documentation in 1952, which has underpinned subsequent scholarship and reconstructions (Adriani et al. 1961). For interpreters, treating the discovery story critically helps audiences understand how modern archaeology, local labor, and museum leadership shaped what and how we know.

The historical importance, that should be interpreted, concerning the Catacombs of Kom El-Shoqafa is that its role as a key to Alexandrian funerary art evidence of theological translation in a port city of the Roman East. This is why the site is repeatedly singled out in global and public-heritage narratives (UNESCO, 2003 b). Interpreting historical importance of the Catacombs of Kom El-Shoqafa helps audiences see heritage as a dialogue between ancient past and modern discovery (Lowenthal, 1985).

3-The cultural significance of the site

3-a. Interpreting the cultural significance of heritage site

Heritage and archaeological sites are not just physical remains of the past; they are cultural symbols that personify meaning, identity, and values. Their significance lies not only in their historical or physical aspects but also in their cultural relevance to societies across time. As Smith assumes, heritage is less about the physical site itself and more about the cultural processes of meaning-making and identity formation around it (Smith, 2006). Effective interpretation of cultural significance is therefore essential to ensure that heritage is not reduced to ruins, artifacts, or tourist attractions but is appreciated as a living cultural resource.

Interpreting the significance of the heritage site helps in true understanding of its cultural significance. The Burra Charter defines cultural significance as “the aesthetic, historic, scientific, social, or spiritual value for past, present, or future generations” (ICOMOS, 2013). Such Cultural significance goes behind materiality as it includes intangible heritage such as traditions, beliefs, and social practices associated with sites (UNESCO, 2003 a). The cultural significance evolves as societies reinterpret the meanings of heritage, making interpretation a continuous process (Lowenthal, 1985). Thus, interpreting cultural significance means uncovering why a site matters, not only what it is or when it was built.

A further essential factor of interpreting the cultural significance of heritage site is that it anchors sites to individual and collective identity. For example, Jerusalem's Old City multiple interpretations, Jewish, Christian, and Islamic, highlight the city's layered cultural significance (Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996). By interpreting identity-

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linked meanings, sites become spaces of belonging and pride, not just tourist destinations.

Interpreting the significance of the heritage and archaeological site helps in enhancing visitor experience through cultural context as visitors often connect more deeply when cultural significance is explained. such interpretation leads to emotional engagement as stories of rituals, festivals, or sacred traditions foster empathy and fascination (Moscardo, 1996). Moreover, good interpretation fulfils more multicultural understanding as interpretation of cultural meanings challenges stereotypes and promotes tolerance (Tilden, 1957). In such case, the heritage sites turn not only into attractions but also into catalysts for reflection on humanity's shared values. Thus, cultural significance enriches visitor experiences by moving beyond factual explanations to value-centered interpretation.

One more important result of interpreting the cultural significance of the heritage site is the community engagement and participation as local communities are the custodians of cultural significance. When the interpretation includes their perspectives, this increases their awareness of the values of their heritage and encourage them to participate in safeguarding that heritage (UNESCO, 2003 a; Crooke, 2007). Another important result of interpreting the cultural significance of the heritage site is its role in sustainable heritage management. The good interpretation increases the conservation awareness as visitors respect sites more when they understand their cultural meanings (Ham, 2013). In addition, it leads to conflict resolution as inclusive interpretation of contested sites reduces tension by acknowledging multiple cultural perspectives (Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996). This ensures that cultural significance is not only preserved but also transmitted to future generations.

3-b. Interpreting the cultural significance of the site of Kom El-Shoqafa

The Catacombs of Kom El-Shoqafa represents the best-known example of funerary complex from the Greco-Roman period in Alexandria, renowned for the dense fusion of Egyptian, Greek, and Roman visual languages within a single mortuary landscape. the site is not just a major attraction in Alexandria heritage tourism, it crystallizes Alexandria's cosmopolitan identity and the city's long history of cultural brokerage. Scholarly and heritage bodies alike underline its importance as a paradigmatic case of religious and artistic syncretism in Roman Egypt, where Pharaonic motifs were re-signified alongside Hellenistic and Roman idioms (Venit, 2002; Bibliotheca Alexandrina, 2007).

Kom El-Shoqafa's architectural program and iconography is an excellent example of blending the Egyptian and Greco-Roman traditions. The tomb articulates a conscious blending of: Egyptian papyrus-lotus capitals and winged sun-disks cohabit with Greco-Roman acanthus friezes and portraiture; Egyptian deities appear with Greek and Roman attributes.

This is not stylistic eclecticism but a social practice that negotiated identities within a multiethnic port city. UNESCO highlights Kom El-Shoqafa as a magnificent testimony of religious syncretism in the Roman Empire (UNESCO, 2003 b).

The façade of the main tomb burial chamber contains Egyptian columns and a central winged sun, flanked by serpent Agathodaemons bearing Roman caducei and Greek thyrsos, an Alexandria-specific visual grammar that fuses protective serpent symbolism with classical emblems. Reliefs, on the walls of the burial chamber, also include Anubis performing mummification dressed in Roman military clothes (Habib, Abelwahed and Abdallah, 2024).

Recent iconographic work further nuances this syncretism, analyzing Alexandrian variants such as snake-footed Anubis (anguipede): a hybrid drawing simultaneously on Egyptian protective serpent lore and the Greek Agathos Daimon tradition, underscoring how local workshops recombined repertoires to address new ritual and social needs (Venit, 2015; Habib, Abelwahed and Abdallah, 2024).

The architectural layout and elements of the Catacombs of Kom El-Shoqafa, such as the rotunda, spiral descent, banquet hall (triclinium), and multilevel burial galleries, materializes Alexandrian funerary customs where commemorative meals enacted ties between living and dead. This architectural plan and design trace how circulation and staging served ritual movement, with dining spaces designed for repeated visits and remembrance; engineering features, for example, the spiral staircase around the well, also facilitated the vertical logistics of burial (Venit, 2002; McKenzie, 2007).

Interpretively, the triclinium and banquet imagery situate Kom El-Shoqafa within broader Mediterranean commemorative dining traditions while retaining Egyptian afterlife semantics such as mummification scenes and canopic references. Such hybrid programming reveals how Alexandrian families inscribed status, piety, and cultural belonging in stone, using a repertoire legible to multiple communities (Venit, 2002; McKenzie, 2007).

One of the most important significances of the catacombs of Kom El-Shoqafa is it shows Alexandria's role as a contact zone where imported classicisms conversed with enduring Pharaonic cults, for example, Serapis' priest portraits, Alexandrian Agathodaimon. Syntheses like these are precisely what heritage authorities cite when framing the site's Outstanding cultural value within Alexandria's ensemble of ancient remains (UNESCO, 2003 b). Interpreting the site thus tells a city-story: the politics of identity after Rome's annexation, changing funerary economies, and the interplay of local elites with imperial aesthetics. Such significance makes Kom El-Shoqafa as the most visited and emblematic complex, central to how modern publics learn Alexandria's ancient pluralism (Empereur, 1998; Venit, 2015).

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IV. CONCLUSION

Interpreting the name of heritage site is a fundamental dimension of heritage communication. Names are doorways to history, carriers of cultural memory, and markers of identity. By explaining names, interpreters enable visitors to more understanding of the heritage sites. Furthermore, engaging with names enhances education, fosters intercultural understanding, and strengthens the emotional connection between visitors and place. Interpreting the site's names is not a minor supplement but a core component of meaningful and sustainable heritage interpretation.

Interpreting the name of the site of Kom El-Shoqafa illustrates that the importance of heritage site significance is embedded not only in its architecture and artifacts but also in language and naming practices. The "Mound of Shards" is both a literal description of broken pottery and a metaphor for cultural layering, ritual memory, and cosmopolitan identity. As such, interpreting the name provides a vital tool for understanding the actual role of the site, enhancing visitor engagement, safeguarding intangible heritage, and deepening academic understanding of Alexandria's Greco-Roman past. The interpretation of the history of heritage and archaeological sites is essential to transforming ruins into meaningful cultural heritage. It resituates remains within human narratives, enhances education, strengthens identity, enriches tourism experiences, and promotes sustainable conservation. Without historical interpretation, archaeological and heritage sites risk being misunderstood or undervalued; with it, they become living narratives that connect past and present, local and global, researchers and visitors, material and intangible heritage, communities and humanity at large.

Interpreting the historical importance of the site of Kom El-Shoqafa clarifies how Alexandria, during its golden era, was a cosmopolitan city, and how a Roman-period Alexandrian elite made themselves legible to multiple audiences—Egyptian, Greek, and Roman—at once. The history of Kom El-Shoqafa, together with its modern discovery and documentation illustrate the entanglement of local actors and museum scholarship in constructing Alexandria's past for the present. That double vantage—ancient practice and modern recovery—is why Kom El-Shoqafa continues to matter historically.

The cultural significance of heritage and archaeological sites should be interpreted, such interpretation is essential for transforming material remains into meaningful cultural landscapes. the interpretation of cultural significance of the sites connects sites to identity, symbolism, and values, enriches visitor experiences, engages communities, and promotes sustainable management. As heritage is ultimately about what one values and why, cultural significance must stand at the heart of interpretation. Without interpretation, heritage risks being reduced to mere ruins or visitor

spectacles; with it, sites become living cultural narratives that bridge the past, present, and future.

The cultural significance of Kom El-Shoqafa lies in how it makes identity-making visible: it is a mortuary archive in which Alexandrians curated who they were—Egyptian and Greek and Roman—through architecture, ritual choreography, and iconographic invention. Interpreting this significance means reading the catacombs as a social text: a place where protective serpents, Romanized Anubis, and Egyptian façades together perform a cosmopolitan theology of the dead. Sustained research, careful conservation, and visitor-centered interpretation are essential to ensure that Kom El-Shoqafa remains not just an extraordinary site, but a living narrative of cultural encounter and creative syncretism.

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