

# Between closed and opened: the iconography of the semi-closed doors in Alexandrian funerary art



**Abstract:** The iconography of semi-closed doors first appeared on tombstones and loculus slabs from Alexandrian tombs, such as those at el-Shatby and el-Hadara. This motif was often accompanied by other Greco-Egyptian elements, including jackals flanking the door, the griffin of Nemesis, the cobra, and the falcon of Horus. The semi-closed door was typically surmounted by a pediment and a dentil frieze. Alexandrian altars featuring this motif appear as early as the Imperial period. This paper traces the origin and artistic variation of this iconography through a close analysis of the relevant objects. It explores the religious symbolism, thematic context, and artistic conventions of the motif. In doing so, this paper seeks to interpret this iconography and its origin as one of the unique scenes found in the profane art of Alexandria.

**Keywords:** semi-closed door, tomb, Macedonian, Alexandria, tomb slab, altar

In early Alexandrian tombs dating to the 4th–3rd centuries BCE, a distinctive feature is attested: stone slabs carved or painted with various representations of doors, shown either open, closed, or semi-closed (Ville 1969: 273; Empereur 1998: 194–195; Guimier-Sorbets, Nenna, and Seif el-Din 2001: 172–173, Figs 4.5, 4.23; Guimier-Sorbets 2018: 87–88, Figs 1–3) [Fig. 1]. Repetitive door motifs were also painted on the walls of tombs in Al-

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exandria. This practice is attested in the el-Hadara tombs, as published by Breccia (1905b: 51, Fig. 20) and Adriani (1940: Pl. XLIII).<sup>1</sup>

For instance, a funerary slab discovered in Gabbari is painted with the image of a closed door and a stela placed in front of it. On the stela, the husband is depicted bidding farewell to his deceased wife in a *dexiosis* scene (GAB 97.1019.2.3; Ville 1969: 273; Empereur 1998: 194–195; Guimier-Sorbets, Nenna, and Seif el-Din 2001: 172–173, Figs 4.5, 4.23; Guimier-Sorbets 2018: 87–88, Figs 1–3) [Fig. 2].



Fig. 1. Painted funerary slab bearing the shape of a closed door. Alexandria, Gabbari, 4th–3rd centuries BCE, GAB97.1019.2.3, CEAlex Archive (After Guimier-Sorbets 2018: 88, Fig. 1)

Two additional *loculus* slabs preserved in the Louvre Museum also bear the image of a stela before a closed door (Ma 3619, Ma 3620; Rouveret and Walter 2004: 89–92, Nos 25–26; Guimier-Sorbets 2018: 87–88). One example, an early Hellenistic stone slab discovered in Alexandria, depicts a farewell (*dexiosis*) scene between a woman and her young son. According to the accompanying inscription, the woman is identified as Arsinoe and her son as Trebemis. The boy's name, uncommon in Ptolemaic Egypt, is believed to be of Lycian origin — a region under Ptolemaic control. The seated woman is shown wearing a long, pale yellow dress that covers her feet, along with a veil over her hair and a purple headband. She holds the hand of a small, standing boy dressed in a short-



Fig. 2. Painted plaque depicting a man bidding farewell to his deceased wife in front of a closed door. Alexandria, Gabbari, 4th–3rd centuries BCE, GAB97.1019.7.8, CEAlex Archive (After Guimier-Sorbets 2018: 88, Fig. 2)

<sup>1</sup> For other examples of Alexandrian tombstones bearing the closed-door motif, see Breccia 1905a: 130, Figs 46–47. For other examples of open doors, see Guimier-Sorbets 2018: 87–89, Figs 4–5.

sleeved purple tunic covered with a white mantle. The two door leaves behind them are open and painted in a scale pattern interspersed with fillets. The lower part is decorated with bands and fillets interrupted by a triglyph (Louvre MND 2288; Ville 1969: 276–278 [Fig. 3]).

Other Alexandrian stone slabs depict a figure —most likely the deceased— standing at an open door. For instance, one such slab, now preserved in the Louvre Museum, portrays a standing woman wearing a long purple dress covered by an ochre-colored overgarment with a wide blue border. A veil covers her head, giving the appearance of a hood-shaped head-dress. She holds a branch of foliage in her right hand, set against a creamy background (Louvre MND 2287; Ville 1969: 274–275, Fig. 1) [Fig. 4]. The two parts of the door are open and shaped like scales, bordered by a fillet. The lower section is painted as a decorative band consisting of stripes and netting, interrupted by a triglyph. This *loculus* slab was discovered in Alexandria and dates to the Hellenistic period.

The iconography of semi-closed doors emerged as an innovative artistic theme in early Alexandrian tombs. For example, one remarkable Ptolemaic funerary slab bears a painted depiction of a semi-closed door. The right leaf of the door is wider than the left. The door is topped with a Greek pediment and a small rounded acroterion. Each leaf is divided into two parts: upper and lower. The upper sections are decorated with opposing triangles (GRM Inv. No. 10199; Pagenstecher 1919: 85–86, Abb. 58; Ville 1969: 283, Fig. 11; Ahmed 2020: 127). The semi-closed door motif was also attested early on a tombstone excavated in el-Shatby (GRM Inv. No. 10986; Breccia 1912: 22, No. 32, Fig. 21; Schmidt 2003: 113–114, No. 73, Pl. 23; Haggag 2018: 103, Fig. 18). The slab takes the form of a miniature temple façade. The door is flanked by two Doric pilasters that support a pediment, an acroterion, and a dentil frieze. The two door leaves are sculpted to appear partially open inward, leaving an open space in the center (Breccia 1912: 22) [Fig. 5].



Fig. 3. Loculus slab depicting a small boy bidding farewell to a seated woman named Arsinoe in front of an open door. Discovered in Alexandria, 200–100 BCE, Louvre Museum <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010277278> (accessed: 09.06.2025)



Fig. 4. Loculus slab depicting a standing woman between two leaves of open door. Discovered in Alexandria, 200–100 BCE, Louvre Museum <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010277276> (accessed: 09.06.2025)

A remarkable early Ptolemaic funerary slab features the depiction of a semi-closed door. Unlike the previously discussed example [see Fig. 5], the shape of the door is rendered here in red paint. The right leaf of the door is wider than the left. The door is surmounted by a Greek pediment and a small rounded acroterion. Each door leaf is divided into two sections: an upper and a lower part. The upper sections of both leaves are decorated with interfacing triangles (Pagenstecher 1919: 85–86, Abb. 58; Ville 1969: 283, Fig. 11). A door knocker is painted in red on the right leaf [Fig. 6].

By the Roman period, the theme of the semi-closed door was retained in Alexandrian art, though with a clear Egyptian influence. A limestone slab

discovered in Marsa Matrouh in 1936 depicts a semi-closed door framed by two Doric semi-columns. The door is topped with a dentil frieze and an architrave bearing a winged sun disc (GRM Inv. No. 24864; Schmidt 2003: 115, Taf. 25, No. 75) [Fig. 7].<sup>2</sup> The remaining part of a crouching sphinx is visible at the bottom right of the slab. The concavity on the opposite left side suggests the probable presence of a now missing counterpart.

Another Roman example is a stone slab excavated in Marina el-Alamein. This piece once formed the upper part of a multi-stone *loculus* closure. Egyptian influence is clearly evident: the architrave features a solar disc flanked by two *uraei*, a dentil frieze, and a cobra frieze



Fig. 5. Alexandrian Ptolemaic slab carved with a semi-closed door. Early 3rd century BCE (Photo S. Kitat)



Fig. 6. Alexandrian Ptolemaic slab painted with a semi-closed door. Early 3rd century BCE (Photo S. Kitat)

2 For further similar examples see Schmidt 2003: 117–118, Taf. 26, No. 85; Inv. W.D.7.

above the door. As in the previous example [see Fig. 7], two Doric pilasters flank the door and support the architrave. The right leaf of the door is sculpted to open inward, while the left leaf remains closed (GRM Inv. No. W.D. 6; Schmidt 2003: 117, Taf. 26, No. 84) [Fig. 8].

The iconography of the semi-closed doors is also attested on altars. For instance, a limestone altar from el-Hadara, dating to the late Ptolemaic or early Imperial period, features this motif. Its four corners are decorated with Egyptian columns topped by floral capitals. The door, sculpted to appear opened inward, is framed by a dentil frieze and an architrave. The door is guarded by two perching falcons positioned in front of it, one of which is partially destroyed. The upper part of the façade is adorned with a frieze of uraei. The door motif is repeated in simplified form on the back of the altar. On the lateral sides, two falcons are shown standing on hills (GRM Inv. No. 3594T 21; Schreiber 1908: 175, Abb.

109; Adriani 1966: 118, Taf. 39, Abb. 114; Pensabene 1993: 6, Taf. 117; Onians 1996: 133, Abb. 8; Schmidt 2003: 112, Taf. 21, No. 70b) [Fig. 9]. Onians (1996: 133, Abb. 8) noted the similarity between this iconography and the gateway between Rooms 1 and 2 in Anfushy Tomb II, which dates to the same period and is decorated in an Egyptianizing style (Venit 2002: 84–85, Fig. 67).

An early Imperial limestone altar similarly features the same semi-closed door motif within an elaborate decorative context. One of the four upper corners is damaged. Each corner is sculpted with two interfacing triangles, centered around a pinecone shape. Each triangle bears the image of an Egyptian crown, apparently the *hemhem* crown. The back of the altar is decorated with an Egyptian-style architrave with a centrally located solar disc and includes a high-relief representation of a female griffin resting her right forepaw on a wheel — a symbol of the Alexandrian Nemesis<sup>3</sup> (GRM Inv. No. 25543; Geissen 1974: No.



Fig. 7. Alexandrian Roman slab carved with a semi-closed door. 1st–2nd centuries CE (Photo S. Kitat)



Fig. 8. Roman slab bearing the shape of a semi-closed door. 1st–2nd centuries CE (Photo S. Kitat)

3 The cult of Nemesis occupied a prominent role in Alexandria. Inscriptions dating from the late 2nd to the 1st century BCE refer to the existence of a temple dedicated to the goddess within the city; see Venit 1999: 649.



210; Flagge 1975: 106–121; Schmidt 2003: 118, Taf. 29, No. 87). The central section of the altar displays a semi-closed door with only the left leaf shown open. Positioned behind it is a high-relief representation of a cobra. Flanking the door on both sides are depictions of the falcon-headed god Horus, shown wearing the double crown (Adriani 1961: 64, No. 214, Taf. 100, Abb. 330, 332, 333b; Haarlov 1977: 117, No. 3; Schmidt 2003: 118, Taf. 29, No. 87) [Fig. 10].

A remarkable altar discovered in Gabbari cemetery in Alexandria, dating to the Imperial period, was interpreted by Thiersch as being consecrated to the cult of Isis (GRM Inv. No. 3715; Smith

1922: 163, 165, Figs 4–5).<sup>4</sup> It takes the form of a cup-shaped grave altar, denticulated along its upper edge.<sup>5</sup> The altar bases, designed as Egyptian *naoi* with door motifs, suggest that they originally functioned as independent gravestones (Schmidt 2021: 326, Abb. 23–24).

The altar is composed of two sections: upper and lower. The lower part, set upon a nearly square base that slopes inward at its upper section, is designed in the form of an Egyptian naos. On the façade of this section, a rectangular half-open door with contoured leaves is depicted; the right leaf is shown opened inward. On the right side of the lower portion, there is a plain area between



Fig. 9. Altar from el-Hadara featuring the shape of a semi-closed door. Late Ptolemaic or early Imperial period (Photo S. Kitat)

- 4 For additional examples, see GRM Inv. No. 3737; Thiersch 1900: 21, 38, Taf. VIII, 3; Botti 1900: 531, No. 13; Rostowzew 1911: 66, Figs 33, 37–38; Schmidt 2003: 120, Taf. 29, No. 90.
- 5 Similar Coptic altars were depicted in the scene of the Sacrifice of Isaac, see Smith 1922: 163–166, Figs 4–5. A number of altars was discovered in the el-Shatby tomb; see Thiersch 1900: 21, 38, Taf. VIII, 3; Rostowzew 1911: 66, Figs 33, 37–38.



Fig. 10. Alexandrian imperial altar depicting a semi-closed door (Photos S. Kitat)



Fig. 11. Altar bearing the shape of a semi-closed door. 1st–2nd centuries CE (Photos S. Kitat)



the edges, apparently intended to frame the shape of an additional door. The upper part of the naos is noticeably larger. As in the previous example [Fig. 10], its four corners are sculpted into opposing triangular shapes, separated by a central pointed motif. The lower edge of the upper section is adorned with a dentil frieze (Altmann 1905: 15, Abb. 10; Schreiber 1908: 242, Abb. 181b; Pagenstecher 1919: 17, Abbr. 7; Smith 1922: 163, Abb. 4; Adriani 1966: 120, Abb. N; Haarløv 1977: 117, No. 2; Wildung and Grimm 1979: No. 160; Pensabene 1993: 136, Taf. 117, 3.4; Schmidt 2003: 119, Taf. 30, No. 89) [Fig. 11].



Fig. 12. Altar of the Tomb of Petosiris, Tuna el-Gebel, Minia. 4th century BCE (Photo S. Kitat)

There is a clear resemblance between this type of altar and the pillar-shaped tombs—or “memorial tombs”, as termed by Schmidt—which were excavated on a large scale in el-Shatby. As a rule, these consisted of high, stepped plinths that originally supported an upper element, now lost. The dimensions, number of steps, height of the base steps, and the profiling varied. The width of the discovered examples—visible in various excavation photographs—ranges from smaller monuments composed of square elements that taper toward the top, giving the appearance of stacked forms, to plinths with arrow-shaped sections, whose tops are crowned with projecting cornices and an additional stepped pillar (Breccia 1912: Fig. 23; Rummel, Schmidt, and Simony 2019: 29, Abb. 16).

The same altar form is comparable to those excavated at Tuna el-Gebel in front of the Tombs of Petosiris and Padi-kam. The altar represents a new Greek feature in the tomb complex, used as a substitute for the traditional Egyptian offering table (Lembke 2014: 84; Venit 2016: 8; Haggag and Savvopoulos 2023: 12) and continued in use even after the advent of Christianity [Fig. 12].<sup>6</sup> This altar type became a consistent and significant architectural feature at Tuna el-Gebel from the Ptolemaic period through to the Roman tomb-houses of the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE. Altars were typically placed at the end of the *dromos*, and by the Roman period they were constructed near the entrances of tomb-houses (Lembke 2018: 151).

6 This type of altar is attested in the Christian Chapel of Peace (Chapel No. 80) in Bagawat; see Smith 1922: 162–163, Fig. 3; Wilkinson 1928: 31; Zibawi 2005: 111; Martin 2006: 241, Fig. 22.

## ANALYTICAL STUDY

### ORIGINALITY AND SIGNIFICANCE

The earliest examples of false doors in Alexandrian funerary art date to the Hellenistic period (Pagenstecher 1919: 85–86). Rudolf Pagenstecher (1919: 85–88) proposed two possible explanations for their presence. The first suggests that these doors were inspired by the shape of traditional Egyptian false doors, which were attested as early as the Old Kingdom. However, this explanation remains a topic of debate, since the motif appears in the early Ptolemaic period — a time when Greek communities in Egypt had not yet fully embraced ancient Egyptian religious beliefs.

Despite sharing the same function — as a symbolic link between the world of the living and the deceased in the afterlife — ancient Egyptian false doors differ significantly in religious concept, architectural design, and decoration from those depicted in Alexandrian tombs. In ancient Egypt, the false door was associated with the presentation of offerings inside tombs. It was believed to enable the *ka*, or spiritual essence, of the deceased to pass through and receive offerings from the living. This feature became common in elite non-royal tombs during the Old Kingdom and was usually placed on the west wall of the chapel to correspond with the westward association of the afterlife. The Egyptian false door typically included eight main architectural elements: a central niche, cornice, torus, apertures, jambs, lintel, and panel. The central panel often depicted the deceased seated before an offering table, accompanied by inscriptions of the

*Htp di nsw* formula and offering lists. By the Sixth Dynasty, detailed table scenes emerged, featuring nested ewers, basins, and vessel racks. The false door also incorporated protective symbols such as *wedjat* eyes, along with biographical inscriptions and appeals to the living (Brovarski 2006; Takenoshita 2011: 8–60). False doors, which were later replaced by stelae, appear from the end of the Old Kingdom until the beginning of the Middle Kingdom. Many examples have been discovered at sites throughout Upper and Lower Egypt, including Memphis, Giza, Meir, Qubbet el-Hawa, Beni Hassan, and Thebes (Brovarski 2006; Takenoshita 2011: 33–60; Pitkin 2015: 261–265).

Pagenstecher's second explanation is that the iconography of false doors in Alexandrian funerary art was instead derived from Asia Minor or Macedonia, where Greek tombs often feature similar motifs. Venit (1999: 656–666) noted that the concept of the false door is strikingly similar in ancient Egypt and Greece, particularly in Macedonian tombs. In both cultures, the false door served as the gateway to the other world and, symbolically, the entrance through which the soul could return to this world. One of the remarkable architectural features of Macedonian tombs is the depiction of doors on their façades. For example, the façade of Tomb III of the Great Tumulus at Vergina — known as the “Tomb of Eurydike” — features the shape of a closed wooden door with marble jambs and lintels (D’Angelo 2010: 61–64).

In the Greek world, doors functioned as *naos* doors — symbolic entrances to

the space where the deceased ultimately resided after attaining immortality. Thus, false door motifs were usually found on tombs and gravestones (Özgen and Öztürk 1996: 48–52; Roosevelt 2006: 65–76, 79–81, 84–85, Cat. No. 10; Bingöl 2016: 450, Fig. 20). According to Haggag (2018: 103, Fig. 18; Haggag and Savvopoulos 2023: 12–16), this type of door reflects the connection between the world of the living and the realm of the dead. This practice may have originated in Macedonia, where it was customary to open the doors and windows of the deceased's residence to awaken any lingering spirits. The belief among Macedonians was that upon a person's death, it was essential to open the windows and doors of their homes, allowing the unobstructed departure of the deceased's soul. In certain regions of Macedonia, even after the body had been removed, the doors of the home were to remain open. Folklore suggests that if the body was taken away while the soul remained behind, the two would be unable to reunite in the afterlife, resulting in eternal separation (Kovacheva 2013: 36).

In Alexandrian funerary art, door motifs —whether closed, open, or semi-closed— have been interpreted by many scholars as symbolic bridges between the realm of the dead and that of the living (Empereur 1998: 194–195; Guimier-Sorbets, Nenna, and Seif el-Din 2001: 172–173, Figs 4.5, 4.23; Guimier-Sorbets 2018: 87–88, Figs 1–3). The semi-closed door gives the depicted scene a three-dimensional quality and evokes the viewer's curiosity about what lies beyond — namely the afterlife. The symbolism of the door extended into the Roman world. In the *Aeneid* (VI.126–127), Virgil

states that the door to Hades remains open day and night: “Easy is the descent to Avernus: night and day the door of gloomy Dis stands open.” (Casagrande-Kim 2012: 94, 113–114).

Silius Italicus described the entrance to Orcus as one of ten gates within the walled circuit surrounding Hades. Each gate was dedicated to a specific category of souls, based on their final destination: warriors entered through the first gate, men of law through the second, country folk through the third, artists through the fourth, and shipwreck victims through the fifth. The sixth gate was used by the guilty, the seventh gate by women, and the eighth by children. The ninth gate led to Elysium, while the tenth, a golden gate, allowed souls destined for reincarnation to depart the Underworld (Virgil, *Aeneid* VI.126–127; Casagrande-Kim 2012: 113–114). Apuleius, in his *Metamorphoses* (6.18.2), portrayed the entrance to Orcus as an open city gate through which a road passes continuously (Casagrande-Kim 2012: 114).

The semi-closed door was also depicted in Roman funerary art, in which the deceased is shown standing beside the door and making a welcoming gesture toward visitors to the tomb. In other words, the semi-closed door is regarded as a symbolic threshold between the deceased and their living relatives. According to Ovid (*Fasti* II.565–566), written at the beginning of the 1st century CE, the Romans believed that the dead were transformed into *manes*, or spirits, who lingered near the grave (Scheid 2007: 271). This belief is reflected in a painting from Tomb 43 at Isola Sacra in Roman Ostia, dated to the 2nd or 3rd century CE, which depicts the

deceased standing at a semi-closed door and greeting visitors to the tomb (Gee 2008: 64–65, Fig. 5).

### DESIGN AND DECORATION

The façade adopts the characteristics of a naos influenced by Greek architecture, featuring piers adorned with anta capitals. These piers support an entablature topped with a triangular tympanum, bordered by prominent cornices and crowned with a central disc acroterion. While the overall design may appear conventional, the Stagni Tomb reveals distinctive details that set it apart from other tombs from the Roman period in Alexandria. At the center of the pediment, the disc acroterion projects outward from the rock face, matching the full depth of the sloping cornice (Venit 1999: 656–667).

In general, semi-closed doors can be categorized into two types. The first and most common type shows both leaves of the door half-closed, concealing anything behind them. The second type features one door leaf open while the other remains closed. This latter type appears

frequently on Alexandrian Imperial altars. In a striking example [see *Fig. 10*], the figure of a cobra is visible behind the partially opened door. In most cases, the door leaves are sculpted without decoration; however, rare examples show that each door leaf was divided into two panels, upper and lower.

Initially, the semi-closed door motif was marked by simplicity in both sculpted and painted forms. The door is framed by Greek architectural elements, such as Doric pilasters, a pediment, and a small rounded acroterion, sometimes accompanied by a dentil frieze. In sculptural examples, the leaves are shown partially open, revealing a central gap; painted versions emphasize form and color, often including details such as door knockers. By the Roman period, more elaborate renderings of the semi-closed door emerged in Alexandrian funerary art. These depictions frequently incorporated protective elements such as griffins, sphinxes, falcons, and cobras, reflecting the motif's expansion into a mythological context in Roman art.<sup>7</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The iconography of the semi-closed door represents an innovative artistic theme that emerged in Alexandrian funerary art as early as the 3rd century BCE. Initially executed in a simple form, this motif evolved during the Roman period into a more elaborate expression in which the fusion of Egyptian and Greek elements is clearly evident. Regardless of

whether its origin is Egyptian or Macedonian, the semi-closed door symbolized the connection between the world of the living and that of the dead. Unlike the closed or fully opened false doors in Alexandrian tombs, the semi-closed door invites the viewer's curiosity, encouraging contemplation of what might lie beyond — namely, the Otherworld.

7 See the sarcophagus from Genzano (AD 150), where Mercury is depicted about to exit through a half-open door; Ghini 2005: 97–106, Fig. 1; Casagrande-Kim 2012: 191, 302, Fig. 78.

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**How to cite this article:** Kitat, S. (2025). Between closed and opened; the iconography of the semi-closed doors in Alexandrian funerary art. *Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean*, 34.1, 403–418. <https://doi.org/10.37343/uw.2083-537X.pam34.1.19>

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