



The approximately 4,300 foot-long underground tunnel, *from the Smithsonian Magazine and the Egyptian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities.*

A Tunnel Leading to Cleopatra: Publicly Posted but not Published

A 4,281 foot-long tunnel found under a temple in Egypt is speculated to potentially lead to the lost tomb of Cleopatra, the problem is none of the excavation's findings are being academically reviewed or published.

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The Discovery (TL;DR)

While earthquakes have flooded, damaged, and destroyed sections of it, the recent discovery of a 4,281-foot-long tunnel 43 feet underground under the temple of Taposiris Magna in Egypt, by excavator Kathleen Martinez, is a significant and impressive feat of engineering by the Ancient Egyptians. In and around the tunnel, Martinez has found over 1,500 objects, busts, statues, golden pieces, and a collection of coins depicting Alexander the Great, Queen Cleopatra, and the Ptolemies. Because of the state of the tunnel, Martinez's team will continue examining the site with underwater excavations next.

Competing theories have arisen as to the nature of the tunnel's purpose with some arguing that it was likely an aqueduct as it closely resembles the Eupalinos Tunnel in Greece that carried water for over one thousand years on the Greek island of Samos. Others, such as Martinez, are outspoken believers that it will lead to the lost tomb of Queen Cleopatra.

Cleopatra was believed to be the human incarnation of Isis, and her husband Mark Antony was understood as the human incarnation of Isis' husband Osiris. The temple under which the tunnel was found—the temple of Taposiris Magna—was dedicated to the god Osiris, which is why Martinez began excavating at that specific site.

Unfortunately, all communications about the actual findings come via social media postings, *National Geographic* documentary episodes, and interviews with the lead excavator, Kathleen Martinez. These frequently highlight intense themes of discovery and adventure, focus on Martinez's unwavering devotion to finding specifically Cleopatra, and emphasize her lack of formal archaeological education (as she was previously a lawyer before leaving her job to pursue Cleopatra). There are no available academic publications about the tunnel raising issues of authority and credibility, and begging the question: who gets to 'do' archaeology?



The temple of Taposiris Magna in Egypt, *from CNN Style*.

If there aren't any academic publications, how do we know about the findings?

Martinez has made no formal academic publications about her excavations at the temple of Taposiris Magna, and instead I've had to rely on her social media postings and occasional *National Geographic* documentary episode appearances. She mainly posts on Instagram and Facebook, sharing various pictures from her digs with only a few specific findings. The posts also have varying degrees of descriptions in the captions, oftentimes with very minimal information provided.

While receiving pictures and updates about the dig in real time and on such widely accessible platforms allows for more people to learn about the discoveries, it also means that none of the shared information is subject to peer review. Martinez is able to post whatever information about the excavation that she wants and is able to share her conclusions without any formal review process.

Her captions frequently offer her own interpretations of the findings and are usually originally written in another language before being translated into English (creating an interesting and potentially restrictive language barrier).

Only in her most recent Facebook post, from November 14, 2022, does Martinez mention that it is too early to draw conclusions, writing: "It is important to clarify that, so far, NO grave has been found, or specific structure under the Mediterranean Sea. Neither my team nor I know yet the dimension of the findings that could be found under the sea. Upcoming underwater explorations will help us complete information on this important archaeological site of Taposiris Magna, so it's still too early to make guesses." This is a necessary note because of the informal nature of the presentation of her findings. People in the comment sections frequently commend her on her search for Cleopatra, and they are willing to see almost any possible connection to what Martinez posts and her mission.

In almost every other portrayal of herself and her evidence, she is drawing connections to finding Cleopatra—even her Instagram bio is "Dominican archaeologist in search of Cleopatra." This is an overt display of her bias and motivation for excavating only for a named historical figure, and likely influences her interpretations and presentations of evidence to the world.

The other direct source of information about the excavations from Martinez are in episodes of the *National Geographic* documentary series *Lost Treasures of Egypt*. These episodes feature numerous excavations happening around Egypt and don't focus solely on Martinez. In addition, they heavily portray themes of discovery and adventure, dramatizing and reproducing the idealized, stereotypical experience of archaeology that the mainstream media understands.



Kathleen Martinez at the site of the tunnel, captioned “Preparing myself to go down inside the ‘promising’ shaft,”
from Instagram @drkathleenmartinez.

Who even ‘does’ archaeology? Who produces knowledge?

The lack of academic publications about such a supposedly important discovery presents an interesting narrative about who is allowed to formally participate in archaeology and produce knowledge. Typically, archaeologists need advanced degrees and specialized training to excavate. If you’re working in a foreign country as an archaeologist or hoping to become a professor, you are almost always expected to have earned a PhD. Archaeologists are predominantly, white, highly educated men. Kathleen Martinez, however, is not.

Martinez is a Dominican woman, who was formerly a criminal lawyer before she quit her job to pursue finding the lost tomb of Cleopatra. She is not a white, highly educated man with access to the same privileges for grant funding, excavation, and publication (although she does now research for the University of Santo Domingo). She posts her findings on social media and appears in documentaries, but she has not created academic publications or ‘produced knowledge’ in the typical way for an archaeologist.

This leads to an interesting discussion about overall academic gatekeeping and the authority of her research if it is not peer-reviewed. It asks if formal publications and peer-review processes are required for ‘properly’ producing and sharing ‘credible’ knowledge? Peer-review publishing processes are also heavily subject to in-group bias—favoring elite, white men. Another question I’ve considered in my research is: does her work have less validity if it is not convolutedly written and published in an academic journal? In addition, can she share her research publicly and accessibly without drawing premature conclusions? These are all questions I find difficult to

make a clear, definitive argument about as much of what they are asking can be so context dependent.

While Martinez does only post her work online via social media, it is a much more accessible form of publication than an academic journal or database that costs money to view. Martinez is contributing to digital public history as she disseminates information to a broader, non-academic audience and represents history creatively.

Her research should be respected as ‘real’ archaeology while also noting that any interpretations made need to be supported by factual evidence. Her clear pursuit of a named historical figure in the archaeological record can cause premature conclusions about her findings, but that should also not dismiss the overall importance of what she has discovered. While there is little to no direct evidence that the tunnel will lead to Cleopatra, it is still an impressive feat of engineering and important archaeological discovery.



Kathleen Martinez in the tunnel, captioned “We managed to extract some of the water and move forward. Looks promising 🍷,” from Instagram @drkathleenmartinez.

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