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Cleopatra, Rome and the Allure of an Ancient Mystery

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Few exhibition premises are as compelling as an unsolved mystery set against the splendour of the ancient Mediterranean. Opening on 20 October 2026 at Vienna's Neue Hofburg, Tatort Ephesos: Kleopatra und Rom promises an encounter with archaeology, political ambition and the enduring fascination of Cleopatra's world. At its centre stands a discovery made by Austrian archaeologists almost a century ago.

This is an octagonal tomb in Ephesus containing a human skeleton. The identity of its occupant remains unresolved. This uncertainty gives the exhibition its intriguing starting point, inviting audiences to consider how historical narratives emerge from material evidence, scientific investigation and questions that resist definitive answers. The setting could hardly be more evocative. Ephesus, once among antiquity's most magnificent cities, was the place where Cleopatra's sister Arsinoë was murdered and buried. Who ordered her death, and how did it relate to the upheavals surrounding Rome's expanding power? These questions connect an individual tragedy with the political transformations of an entire age.

Crucially, the museum does not present the unidentified skeleton as conclusively belonging to Arsinoë. Cleopatra, Caesar, Mark Antony and Augustus provide the wider historical constellation. Their presence offers more than familiar names: it creates a framework for exploring the intersection of personal relationships, dynastic rivalry and imperial politics. The exhibition's combination of archaeology, history and recent scientific findings promises to make this complex world accessible without diminishing its mysteries. What makes the project especially appealing is its invitation to look beyond legend. Rather than treating antiquity as a closed chapter, its premise presents the past as an investigation still unfolding.

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