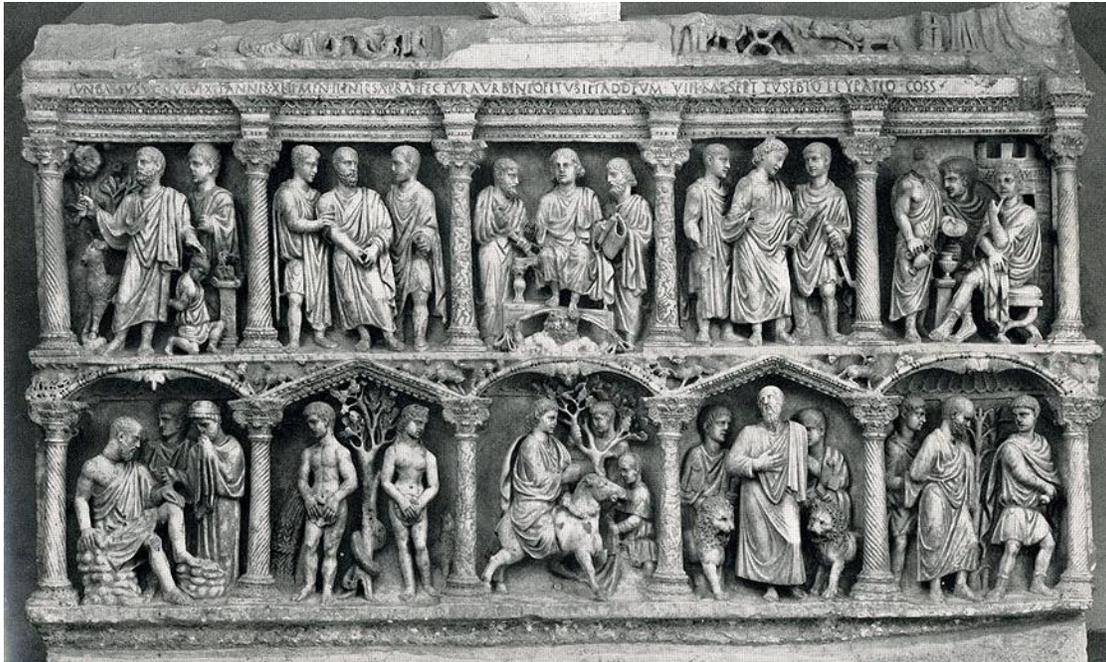


The Sarcophagus - Excerpts from Research



Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus

A sarcophagus (meaning "flesh-eater" in Greek) is a coffin for inhumation burials, widely used throughout the Roman empire starting in the second century A.D. The most luxurious were of marble, but they were also made of other stones, lead, wood. Prior to the second century, burial in sarcophagi was not a common Roman practice; during the Republican and early Imperial periods, the Romans practiced cremation, and placed remaining bones and ashes in urns or ossuaries. Sarcophagi had been used for centuries by the Etruscans and the Greeks; when the Romans eventually adopted inhumation as their primary funerary practice, both of these cultures had an impact on the development of Roman sarcophagi. The trend spread all over the empire, creating a large demand for sarcophagi during the second and third centuries. Three major regional types dominated the trade: Metropolitan Roman, Attic, and Asiatic.

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Rome was the primary production center in the western part of the empire, beginning around 110–120 A.D. The most common shape for Roman sarcophagi is a low rectangular box and a flat lid. Lids with full-length sculptural portraits of the deceased reclining as if at a banquet was inspired by earlier Etruscan funerary monuments. This type of lid gained popularity in the later second century, and was produced in all three production centers for very lavish sarcophagi. The lenos, a tub-shaped sarcophagus resembling a trough for pressing grapes, was another late second-century development, and often features two projecting lion's head spouts on the front. Most western Roman sarcophagi were placed inside mausolea against a wall or in a niche, and were therefore only decorated on the front and

two short sides. A large number are carved with garlands of fruit and leaves, evoking the actual garlands frequently used to decorate tombs and altars. Narrative scenes from Greek mythology were also popular, reflecting the upper-class Roman taste for Greek culture and literature. Other common decorative themes include battle and hunting scenes, weddings and other biographical episodes from the life of the deceased, portrait busts, and abstract designs such as strigils. Simpler, less expensive sarcophagi were commissioned by freedmen and other nonelite Romans, and sometimes featured the profession of the deceased.

The main production center of Attic sarcophagi was Athens. The nearby quarry on Mount Pentelicus supplied the marble, and the workshops produced sarcophagi mainly for export. Attic sarcophagi are typically rectangular in shape, decorated on all four sides, with elaborate ornamental carving along the base and upper edge. Lids usually have the form of a steeply pitched gabled roof. Mythological subjects were the most popular form of decoration, especially the Trojan War, Achilles, and Amazon battles, and reflect the style and compositions of Classical Greek art.

In Asia Minor, the use of sarcophagi has a long history in certain regions. During the Roman Imperial period, the major production center of Asiatic sarcophagi was Dokimeion in Phrygia. The Dokimeion workshop specialized in large-scale sarcophagi with an architectural form. Colonnades extend around all four sides, with male and female figures in the intercolumniations, and a doorway motif on one side. The lids are mostly the gabled-roof type with ornamental akroteria. The architectural style may have been inspired by earlier royal funerary monuments such as the fourth-century B.C. Mausoleum of Halicarnassos. Some scholars see this style of sarcophagus as a "house" for the deceased, while others consider it a "temple" to a heroized deceased. Other cities in Asia Minor also produced large quantities of sarcophagi, some following the architectural format, and others decorated with leafy garlands supported by Nikai and Erotes, inscribed tabulae, and Gorgon faces. They were decorated on either three or four sides, and were displayed in a wide variety of ways. Many were viewed in the round in open-air settings, either elevated on pedestals or placed on the roofs of built tombs, but some were also placed inside tombs against walls.

Some quarries, for example Prokonessos in Asia Minor, produced and exported half-finished sarcophagi. These had the main decorative elements roughly blocked out, to be more fully developed at their destination according to a client's taste. Sometimes the sarcophagi were used with some elements unfinished, perhaps due to constraints on time or finances, but possibly due to a client's preference. In Roman Egypt, a special form of coffin developed, which combined traditional Egyptian mummy cases with painted portraits on wood panels, rendered in the Roman style.

Mythological iconography on sarcophagi has been a subject of considerable interest; the myths shown on sarcophagi are often the same as those chosen to decorate homes and public spaces, but they can acquire different meanings when viewed in a funerary context. Some scholars think the images are highly symbolic of Roman religious beliefs and conceptions about death and the afterlife, while others argue that the images reflect a love of classical culture and served to elevate the status of the deceased, or that they were simply conventional motifs without deeper significance. For instance, the myths of Endymion and Eros and Psyche are tales of mortals who are loved by divinities and granted immortality; in funerary art, these scenes are thought to express the hope for a happy afterlife in the heavens. Scenes featuring heroes such as Meleager or Achilles can be expressions of the bravery and virtue of

the deceased. Dionysiac scenes evoke feelings of celebration, and release from the cares of this world; the cult of Dionysos also seemed to offer hope for a pleasureable afterlife. Gorgon faces are apotropaic images for protection against evil forces. The Seasons can represent nature's cycles of death and rebirth, or the successive stages of human life. Nikai, personifications of Victory, are often said to represent victory over death, but they could also represent the success of the deceased during his or her life. It is likely that these images had multiple levels of interpretive possibilities, which varied among individual viewers.

The use of sarcophagi continued into the Christian period, when they became an important medium for the development of early Christian iconography.

Source: Metropolitan Museum of Art