3

CHRISTIAN SARCOPHAGI
FROM ROME

Jutta Dresken-Weiland

Because they are so numerous, Christian sarcophagi from Rome are the most important group of objects for the creation and invention of a Christian iconography. Although the production of Christian sarcophagi started only towards the end of the third century, later than catacomb painting, the many surviving examples give a good impression of the development of early Christian imagery. More than 2,000 sarcophagi or fragments are preserved; their original number must have been many times higher. They are momentous testimonies for the Christianization of everyday life, which begins in the realm of the sepulchre. The role of laymen as the inventors of a peculiar and innovative iconography has to be stressed.

The production of early Christian sarcophagi

Early Christian sarcophagi were produced in the same way as pagan exemplars. Most sarcophagi were produced on commission. This was different for children’s sarcophagi, where half-finished and finished examples are known. The inscriptions of two Constantinian child sarcophagi mention that the child was buried three days after it had passed away, an interval in which it is not possible to produce a figural sarcophagus ex novo. The nine-year-old Domitius Marinianus Florentius was buried in a half-finished sarcophagus that shows standardized elements, among them erotes (putti). The central image of the young deceased in a military costume was probably worked out on commission of his parents, because children are normally represented in “civilian” clothes. The sarcophagus of the five-year-old Aurelius, eques romanus, is a Constantinian frieze sarcophagus; here one may assume it was already finished to a large extent and only “individualized” by a portrait on the lid.

Most probably, the early Christian sarcophagi of the city of Rome were produced in numerous small workshops, a sort of bazaar industry. Evidence in favor of this includes the surprisingly vast production in the Constantinian period, and the diversity and variety of individual pieces in relation to craftsmanship and elaborateness. No two sarcophagi are identical. This variety in style continues throughout the fourth century until the end of production of sarcophagi in the city of Rome. Painted sarcophagi are preserved only rarely; a painted sarcophagus with bucolic images, dated about 300 CE and preserved in the Museo Pio Cristiano, is very sophisticated and adapted for the semi-darkness of a burial chamber.
Due to their production, there are three distinctive features of late Roman and early Christian sarcophagi.

1 Use of unfinished relief: Beyond unfinished busts of the deceased, known from pagan sarcophagi, early Christian sarcophagi differ from earlier pagan production by using relief that is not completed or completely worked out (Figure 3.1). This phenomenon was not new and occurred a few times during the late third century, becoming frequent in the fourth century. It certainly was not financially motivated, since a sarcophagus was expensive due to the costs of the marble and transportation. In comparison to these costs the expense for the relief was much lower. Since non-finished reliefs adorn even the arch of Constantine, this phenomenon must have been aesthetically and socially accepted. It can be found throughout the fourth century.

2 The traditional production of sarcophagi is from a marble block, but in Late Antiquity a sarcophagus could also be assembled from several pieces or slabs of marble. These are skillfully put together and sealed with lead. This method can also be observed on pagan, “neutral,” and undecorated late Roman sarcophagi, and has systematically been examined only for the city of Arles so far. It seems likely that there was not enough marble for the production of sarcophagi, so the material at hand had to be used in an optimal way; maybe the popularity of marble sarcophagi in the fourth century contributed to the shortage of material. The reuse of architectural elements for sarcophagi can be observed already in the imperial period.

3 Less-skilled workmanship is evident, even in pieces of high quality. For example, the figure of Paul on the upper zone of the sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, second scene from the left, is not standing steadily on his feet but slanting and nearly toppling over (see Figure 18.5). On the city-gate sarcophagus of Milan the artisans obviously had difficulties fitting the
twelve apostles in the space available on the front and back: On the front, the outermost figures are extremely slender, on the back they seem to glide from their seats. No other sarcophagus of the late fourth century exhibits such a mass of figures and is so lavishly worked out on all four sides; the sculpting emphasizes the abundance of elegant details over the completion of a harmonic whole.

Roman sarcophagi were exported into the regions of modern Italy, France, and Spain from Constantinian times until the end of Roman sarcophagus production in general. In Dalmatia, only examples from the later fourth and the end of the fourth century are preserved; the few sarcophagi findings in Algeria and Tunisia date from the fourth century. From the East of the Roman Empire we do not have any Christian sarcophagi produced in the city of Rome.

**Buyers and commissioners**

The price of sarcophagi was high, and it is clear that they were a luxury good and only accessible for a well-to-do clientele. Their inscriptions inform us about the names and social rank of the buyers and mark an important change: Among the early Christian sarcophagi buyers, members of the upper class can be found more often than in pagan sarcophagi in the second and third centuries. Obviously marble sarcophagi were favored by people ennobled by Constantine; as social climbers, they were intensely interested in a traditional form of sepulcher updated with Christian images.

The buyers were laymen; clerics never chose marble sarcophagi with Christian reliefs for burial until the end of the fourth century. The sarcophagus of bishop Concordius of Arles, (late fourth century) is the first known example. But it was, as the iconography shows, originally produced for a couple, and must have been handed over for the bishop’s interment. A lid fragment of a . . . *opus episcopius* cannot be dated more precisely than fourth–fifth century; nothing can be said about the chest and its possible decoration. For these reasons, it is clear that the iconography of these sarcophagi was invented and created by laymen.

**Dating, sarcophagus types, and chronology**

The beginning of the production of Christian sarcophagi in the late third century can be dated by comparison with contemporary pagan sarcophagi and with dated monuments. Before this, Christians chose the same images as their pagan contemporaries. Some pagan sarcophagi are provided with a Christian inscription. The first known example is the sarcophagus of Prosenes. At first, Christian images were limited to a few themes. Christian images probably first appeared on the lids, whereas the chests, more difficult to produce, kept traditional images. While the choice of Christian themes generally implies a positive attitude towards Christianity, the use of pagan or neutral images does not necessarily indicate a pagan buyer. The relatively late appearance of Christian images on Roman sarcophagi may be explained by their highly traditional and conservative character. It took until the end of the third century, when Christianity was sufficiently widespread among a well-to-do group, before the wish arose for an adequate iconography, peculiar to this group (Figure 3.2).

The historic reliefs of the arch of Constantine (312–315), whose workshops were also active in the production of sarcophagi, are of particular importance. They mark the beginning of the most intensive period of sarcophagus production in the first third of the fourth century. Sarcophagi dated by their inscriptions are rare, see, for instance, the frieze sarcophagus of Marcia Romania Celsa in Arles who died after 328 (Figure 3.3); or the columnar sarcophagus of
Junius Bassus, who passed away when serving as praefectus urbis in 359. The city-gate sarcophagi in Tolentino and Ancona were commissioned by high-ranking officials, whose inscriptions confirm the production of this prestigious group in the 380s. Another sarcophagus probably belonged to Sextus Petronius Probus, rich and notorious, whose death shortly after 390 gives a terminus post quem or ad quem.

The great number of sarcophagi and fragments makes it possible to establish a dense relative chronology. Due to the activities of numerous workshops, the difference in quality, and the crudity of many objects, a cautious and approximate dating within a quarter or third of a century is adequate. Stylistic changes take place and can be described. The rectangular, compact and robust figures of the Constantinian age change at the end of the fourth century into elongated,
discarnate and abstract figures, wearing clothing having ornamental lines. When describing the style of a sarcophagus for the purpose of establishing its date, several criteria should be considered: design/composition of the bodies, shapes, configuration of head and hair, proportions of body and garment, handling of the surfaces, proportions of figure, and the relationship of the figures to the background of the relief.

Frieze sarcophagi appear at the beginning of Christian sarcophagus production and are the most frequently used type. Very few sarcophagi, among them the famous the sarcophagus of S Maria Antiqua, \( \text{\textit{ca.}} \) 290 CE, combine Christian scenes with traditional bucolic elements or with maritime landscapes. Obviously, the buyers were not much interested in them, but opted for the frieze sarcophagus with a sequence of scenes from the Old and New Testament and the Apocrypha.

Strigillated sarcophagi, already a very frequent form in pagan sarcophagi, remain popular. They could be produced more quickly and by less specialized workmen, as only the central and the two lateral panels were decorated with figures (Figure 3.4; see also Figures 20.1 and 20.4). The production of columnar and tree sarcophagi starts in the second third of the fourth century; the latter are a creation of early Christian art. The creation of these sarcophagus types coincides with the creation of private mausolea as annexes of cemeterial basilicas, where a series of them have been excavated.\(^{36}\)

In the last third of the fourth century, new sarcophagus types are invented: the “stars and crowns” type, the Bethesda-type, and the city-gate sarcophagus. The “stars and crowns” sarcophagi show the twelve apostles in front of a neutral background, with apocalyptic clouds and stars in its upper part. These and the hand of God, giving crowns to the apostles, indicate a situation at the end of time, when the apostles are recompensed for their deeds. In the middle of the front, the tropaion points to Christ’s victory over death, his resurrection and his time-transcending sovereignty, in which the apostles take part and to which they render homage.

The Bethesda sarcophagi show several healing scenes from the New Testament and therein hark back to the Constantinian frieze sarcophagi, where these scenes were popular (Figure 3.5). They may be interpreted as hope in afterlife.\(^{39}\)

A single theme decorates the front of the sarcophagi with the passage of the Red Sea. At the right end of the front, the Israelites have already traversed the Red Sea, while at the left half of the front the Pharaoh with his chariot and his soldiers are sinking and drowning in the flood (Figure 3.6). In the theological literature, this story is interpreted as a reference to baptism and the overcoming of death.\(^{41}\)

### Table 3.1 Sarcophagus types of the fourth century and their dating.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sarcophagus type</th>
<th>Dating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frieze sarcophagi</td>
<td>Entire fourth century, most examples from the first third.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strigillated sarcophagi</td>
<td>Entire fourth century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Columnar sarcophagi</td>
<td>Second third of the fourth century to the end of the fourth century.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tree sarcophagi</td>
<td>Second third to later fourth century.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Stars and crowns” sarcophagi</td>
<td>Last third of the fourth century.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bethesda sarcophagi</td>
<td>Last third of the fourth century.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarcophagi with the passage of the Red Sea</td>
<td>Last third of the fourth century.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City-gate sarcophagi</td>
<td>Last third of the fourth century.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarcophagi with symbols</td>
<td>End of the fourth/fifth century.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 3.4  Fragment of a strigillated sarcophagus with Jesus between apostles in the center, end of the fourth century (Rep. II 114), Germany, private collection. Photo: Jutta Dresken-Weiland, with kind permission of the owners.

Figure 3.5  Bethesda sarcophagus, detail, healing scenes and Christ with Zachaeus, end of the fourth century (Rep. II 145), Ischia, Museo Diocesano. Photo: Jutta Dresken-Weiland, with kind permission of the Museo Diocesano.
Christian sarcophagi from Rome

The denomination “city-gate sarcophagi” refers to the architectural elements that are used in high relief and as a background decoration (see Figure 20.5). H. von Schoenebeck has argued against interpreting this decoration as a reference to the heavenly Jerusalem. As this small and prestigious group of sarcophagi uses the “city gates” in different manners and dimensions, it is probable that they were meant as a decorative element or a sumptuous background and do not have any deeper sense.

Themes of Christian sarcophagi

Late third and first third of the fourth century

On Christian sarcophagi, the orans and the (good) shepherd are two important themes taken and reinterpreted from the earlier pagan art. Orans figures very often occupy the center of the front; they may be understood as a symbol of the soul of the deceased. As the Latin word *anima* (soul) is female, the female orans is used for women and for men. There is no difference in meaning between orans figures with ideal features, with portrait heads, contemporary hairstyles, fashionable clothing, or jewelry. Their frequency harks back to the wish of the commissioners to represent themselves in the context of images that express the hope for afterlife. Interestingly, the orans figure with raised hands is more numerous than the figures of the deceased with a scroll in their hands: The orans refers to the praying soul of the deceased who wants to represent his positive fate in the other world. Of particular interest is the figure of the orans or the deceased accompanied by two male figures (Figure 3.7). When these men perform gestures of escort and protection, these may refer to different aspects: (a) To the interim state, where the soul of the dead is protected; (b) to the escorting of the soul on its voyage after death; (c) to the arrival of the dead before Christ, maybe in the moment of judgment.

The shepherd is one of the most complex and chameleonic figures of early Christianity. When it appears without Christian themes or inscriptions and without iconographic particularities, it continues the pagan tradition of the *vita felix*, the idea of a blissful afterlife. Together with the orans or figures of the dead, it expresses a personal hope of life after death; when these
Figure 3.7 Orans with apostles from the center of a strigillated sarcophagus, Barcelona, Museo d’Arqueología di Catalunya. Photo: Jutta Dresken-Weiland, with permission of the museum.

Table 3.2 Most frequent biblical themes of Christian sarcophagi.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequent scenes from the Old and New Testaments and the Apocrypha on sarcophagi</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Frequency of occurrence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jonah scenes</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>Late third century, first third of fourth century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiplication of the loaves</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>Fourth century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healing of the blind</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>First third of fourth century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth of Christ/adoration of the magi</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>Fourth century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resurrection of Lazarus</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>First third of fourth century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter striking water from the rocks</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>First third of fourth century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sacrifice of Abraham</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>Fourth century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter with his guards</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>First third of fourth century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christ, Peter and the cock</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>Fourth century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel in the lion’s den</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>Fourth century</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Christian sarcophagi from Rome

Figure 3.8 Fragment of a sarcophagus lid with the image of a family, first third of the fourth century (Rep. I 896, Schaffer Inv. A 0004), Rome, Campo Santo Teutonico. Photo: Archive Jutta Dresken-Weiland, with kind permission of the rector of the Erzbruderschaft zur Schmerzhaften Muttergottes der Deutschen und Flamen am Campo Santo Teutonico.

are represented together with Christian scenes, this hope is a Christian one. Christ as the Good Shepherd can be recognized on some sarcophagi mainly of the later fourth century.44

From the late third century, images of the deceased appear in various forms and contexts on Christian sarcophagi (Figure 3.8).45 Singular is a sarcophagus lid in New York presenting an allegory of the Last Judgment, dated about 300 CE.46

Among the most frequent scenes, images from the New Testament are dominant on sarcophagi. This preference of Jesus’s life and deeds is distinctive to sarcophagi, as scenes from the Old Testament are generally more frequent in early Christian art. Most of the images are Christian inventions de novo.47 The sequence of the scenes does not follow any rule, nor should they be addressed as “images of salvation” taken from the commendatio animae.48 More simply, the choice of many images is motivated by a theological interpretation as an indication of afterlife. So Jonah is a sign of the hope of resurrection and life after death (Figure 3.2), as is Daniel and the sacrifice of Abraham.49

The multiplication of the loaves (Figures 3.3, 3.9) was interpreted as a symbol of the eucharist and eternal life very early on. Interestingly, both the multiplication of the loaves and the multiplication of the loaves and fishes are represented. The miracle can be operated by the imposition of the hand and by touching the food with a rod, the virga. Both procedures cannot be distinguished in their meaning. The transformation of water into wine at the wedding in Cana is frequently represented with the multiplication of the loaves, but does not develop a separate meaning.

The importance of the multiplication of the loaves is underlined by the fact that this image replaces the so-called sigma meal, which shows people reclining around a semicircular table. This image, very popular on sarcophagus lids of the later third century, disappears about 300 from Christian sarcophagi, probably substituted by the multiplication of the loaves. In the catacombs, where different social groups are active, the sigma meals continue to be represented.50
A special eucharistic interpretation of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes can probably be read on the so-called “eucharistic sarcophagus” in Arles, a columnar sarcophagus of the second third of the fourth century.\textsuperscript{51} It depicts only the multiplication with the apostles, Abraham, and Daniel as spectators, and thus gives a particular emphasis to this theme.\textsuperscript{52}

The resurrection of Lazarus was a popular image on sarcophagi as the most direct expression of the hope for afterlife. The healing of the blind is not only the most popular of Christ’s healing miracles in the New Testament, but also frequently mentioned in sermons and connected to the hope of resurrection.\textsuperscript{53} The \textit{virga}, or wand-like staff that is the frequent attribute of Christ when healing men or executing miracles, was not used in reference to healing in pagan iconography, but it is a genuine Christian invention.\textsuperscript{54}

Not all frequently used themes refer to hope of afterlife. In theological texts, the birth of Christ (the nativity and the adoration) is interpreted as a soteriological event, which is the reason for the future overcoming of death. The fall of Adam and Eve has many theological interpretations with different facets, which means that the image was not used to express ideas on afterlife.

The scenes “Peter walking between two soldiers” and “Peter striking water from the rocks in his prison” (Figure 3.3) refer to stories about St Peter, which were so common and famous in fourth-century Rome that nobody bothered to write them down. They are known only...
in outline from the later Apocrypha: Peter converts the soldiers who have arrested him and baptizes them in his cell. The scene with Christ, Peter, and the cock is another favored theme on sarcophagi, but refers to New Testament texts. This choice of Peter scenes is extraordinary and probably to be explained by the intensive veneration of Peter by the upper class, motivated by their self-conception and the self-image. Feeling themselves as the elite of Rome, they put the image of a leading figure on their marble coffins; they chose the image of the man who was venerated as the founder of the Roman community and as the successor of Christ. In St Peter’s basilica, the most distinguished church in fourth-century Rome with the greatest number of sarcophagus burials, Peter is especially frequent in the images on sarcophagi. Probably persons buried in a sarcophagus depicting scenes with Peter expected from him as the prince of the apostles some help in the afterlife, and thus expressed their hope of well-being and his protection. Interestingly, soldiers appear in these images, and thus reflect the contemporary reality: In fact, soldiers assumed a multitude of administrative tasks after the reorganization of the public administration in the third century and were, according to these functions, present in everyday life. Their clothing with a short tunic and a cloth cap shows their contemporary dress. The prevalence for Peter-scenes is peculiar to the Christian sarcophagi and cannot be found in this intensity in any other group of objects. It suggests that this iconography was created by a theologically educated elite.

Themes on sarcophagi since the second third of the fourth century

As indicated in Table 3.2, some themes disappear whereas others continue to be represented. There may be different reasons for this. On the one hand, the interest in images may shift for reasons we cannot fully explain from a distance of more than 1,500 years. In the second third of the fourth century, the appearance of columnar sarcophagi, which offer less space for images than the frieze sarcophagi, resulted in fewer represented themes. On the other hand, it has long been noted that in the course of time Christ the miracle worker was replaced by Christ the sovereign. The first examples of this concept are the sarcophagi with a representation of the enthroned Christ, venerated by apostles and the deceased who enshroud their faces. The oldest example, a frieze sarcophagus in Florence, belongs to the first decade of the fourth century; two other pieces in Rome and Arles to the later first third of the fourth century.

As to the miracle scenes, the interest shifts from the resurrection of Lazarus, only rarely represented after the first third of the fourth century, to Christ’s resurrection. It appears in a fairly abstract form, a tropaion with sleeping soldiers underneath, which occupies the center of a sarcophagus front (see Figure 18.6). Tropaion and soldiers point to the resurrected Christ, who has vanquished death and whose sign of triumph is the christogram in the laurel wreath. Christ or the angel with the women at the tomb is represented only rarely.

Themes on sarcophagi in the last third of the fourth century

The scene dominus legem dat (“The Lord gives the law”) is not mentioned in the New Testament. It shows Christ standing on the mountain of paradise between Peter and Paul. He raises his right hand and holds the end of a scroll in his left; the other end of the scroll is held by Peter, who carries a cross bar. This scene is often called unfoundedly traditio legis (“handing over of the law”) because, according to the rules of ancient iconography, Christ does not hand over anything here. When handing something over, Christ (or the emperor) is portrayed sitting. On the contrary, the standing position and raised hand characterize Jesus as speaking; in imperial iconography, both elements are known from the adlocutio, which can be seen on the reliefs of
the arch of Constantine.\textsuperscript{50} The addendum \textit{dominus legem dat} on a few monuments\textsuperscript{61} should be used as its ancient name. Other meaningful components of this image are the apocalyptic elements, i.e., the mountain of paradise with its four rivers, the apostles as lambs, the lamb of God, the palms, and the Phoenix.\textsuperscript{62} They show that the image of Christ proclaiming his message is not only a historical yet time-transcending event, but also the epiphany of the resurrected Christ at the end of time. There are different temporal levels: Christ is at the same time the historical, the future, and the present sovereign. Beyond any doubt, Peter receiving the scroll is of particular importance to the scene. Peter’s cross indicates his martyrdom, the scroll his missionary work and priority. His priority falls into line with his significance on earlier Constantinian sarcophagi, but is here transformed in a new image and a new context.

The theme of the \textit{dominus legem dat} is most frequently represented on sarcophagi from the last third of the fourth century; in other monuments, it is not documented before the middle of the fourth century.\textsuperscript{63} As the theme appears earlier in other monuments, it cannot have been invented for sarcophagi. The most appealing hypothesis is that this iconography was invented for the apse of Old St Peter. In contrast to the widely accepted date about 350, the attribution of the apse inscription to the age of Constantine makes it possible to think of an earlier date for apse decoration.\textsuperscript{64}

For other images characteristic of the late fourth century see Table 3.1 above and the respective commentary. As a singular image, the first known representation of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ in a Christian context has been reconstructed on a fragment of a frieze sarcophagus dating from the end of the fourth century.\textsuperscript{65}

\section*{The location of early Christian sarcophagi}

Like their pagan predecessors, Christian sarcophagi were placed in tomb buildings. Due to the fact that fewer tomb buildings were erected after the third century, only a few examples are known from such contexts.\textsuperscript{66}

Both pagan and Christian sarcophagi could be placed outside of buildings, namely in caverns dug in the earth or in tuff, or built with bricks. Frequently, these sarcophagi were additionally protected by brickwork. A location of sarcophagi above-ground, on a pedestal or a stone platform, or in a prestigious manner near the street, is documented for only a few pieces. Inscriptions that claim the payment of a fine in the case of an unauthorized inhumation may indicate the above-ground location of a sarcophagus.\textsuperscript{67}

Christian sarcophagi were also deposited in the new burial spaces in catacombs and in churches. Due to their dimensions, sarcophagi could be positioned only in niches near the catacombs’ entrance. Alternatively, they could be placed in burial chambers situated near an entrance or a lightwell, through which the sarcophagus could be let down. The majority of the sarcophagi found in the catacombs date from the first third of the fourth century, which was also a period of intensive expansion of the catacombs. Predominant are sarcophagi with non-Christian images,\textsuperscript{68} which illustrate the acceptance of these themes by Christian commissioners and the early origins of the catacombs. A peculiarity of the catacombs are special areas reserved for the interment of children, who were buried outside their family contexts. Such an area is known for the Praetextatus catacomb, where a chamber unites children of the noble \textit{gentes} Insteia, Postumia, and Annia, interred in sarcophagi with inscriptions.\textsuperscript{69} In one room of the catacomb of Novatian there were three children’s sarcophagi and a fourth sarcophagus whose owner is unknown.\textsuperscript{70} In Ponticello near S Paolo fuori le mura, three children’s sarcophagi, dated to about 300, were found probably in a subterranean tomb. The sarcophagi show pagan and neutral scenes that were prevalent at this time.\textsuperscript{71} In the catacomb of Domitilla, a third-century
cubiculum with niches for the location of children’s sarcophagi has been interpreted as a special burial room for children.72 This phenomenon deserves further research.

Most Christian sarcophagi were placed in the early Christian cemetery churches, in the connecting or nearby constructed mausolea, and in the surrounding cemeteries, where they were interred very often with supplementary brickwork with concrete above them. The use of brickwork even in churches shows how much people cared to avoid the reuse of a sarcophagus, and that even a church was not necessarily a safe place to wait for resurrection. Areas of privileged burials were the apses.73 The most sumptuous sarcophagi were found in mausolea, which were generally constructed as family graves.74 Burials within cemetery basilicas could take place while the basilicas were still under construction.75

Although some sarcophagi may have been displayed openly in churches, most of them were not visible at all after the funeral, where they must have expressed the rank of the dead and the prestige of his or her family. The images were apparently directed to the deceased and were, like the inscriptions, to express his or her hope in afterlife and for community with God.

The end of sarcophagus production in the city of Rome and its reasons

The sarcophagus production in the city of Rome is assumed to have ended at the beginning of the fifth century; it is not possible to give a more exact date. The traditional opinion attributing the end of sarcophagus production to the conquest of Rome is obsolete, because the economic consequences were less serious than supposed by earlier research. The hesitant start of sarcophagus production in southwestern Gaul may indicate that at least a few sarcophagi were produced in Rome at the beginning of the fifth century. It is possible that at this time sarcophagi with “symbolic” representations with a cross in the center of the front76 were produced because they were still exported (Figure 3.10).77

Probably changes in burial customs caused the end of sarcophagus production. In the course of the fourth century, burial in churches became more and more popular. In order to offer burial space, many deceased had to find their place under the pavement in graves. The grave inscription became, as the increasing number of dated tomb slabs in the course of the fourth century shows, the monuments that commemorated the deceased. From the middle of the

Figure 3.10  Sarcophagus decorated with a cross in a wreath, end of the fourth century (Rep. I 859, Schaffer Inv. A 0018), Rome, Campo Santo Teutonico. Photo: Archive Jutta Dresken-Weiland, with kind permission of the rector of the Erzbruderschaft zur Schmerzhaften Muttergottes der Deutschen und Flamen am Campo Santo Teutonico.
fourth century, metric epitaphs gain some popularity; they make use of the language of Virgil and express an interest in education and culture of well-to-do classes and aristocracy. This applies to Gaul, where the importance of epigraphic grave monuments is underlined by their great quantity in the fifth and sixth centuries. Most purchasers belonged to the upper class and metrical epitaphs were so important to them that they had texts composed even for family members who had died long ago.

For the city of Rome, the end of sarcophagus production with figural representations, a leitmotif of Roman art since the second century, marks an important break and a step towards the Middle Ages.

Notes


3 ICUR VII, 20373, 20422.


5 Deichmann, Repertorium I, 662; Jutta Dresken-Weiland, Sarkophagbestattungen des 4.–6. Jahrhunderts im Westen des römischen Reiches (Rome: Herder, 2003), 57, 358f.; see also ibid. 91 with further examples of inscriptions that indicate the days of death and burial.


13 Deichmann, Repertorium I, no. 680.

14 Dresken-Weiland, Repertorium II, no. 150, pl. 60–61.

15 Dresken-Weiland, Repertorium II, nos. 146, 153, 219.


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19 Christern-Briesenick, Repertorium III, no. 65.
21 Deichmann, Repertorium I, no. 141.
28 Christern-Briesenick, Repertorium III, 37, fig. 3.
29 Deichmann, Repertorium I, no. 680.
30 Dresken-Weiland, Repertorium II, no. 148 (Tolentino), no. 149 (Ancona).
31 Deichmann, Repertorium I, no. 678.
32 Deichmann, Repertorium I, no. 747.
33 Dresken-Weiland, Repertorium II, nos 241, 243.
34 Deichmann, Repertorium I, no. 35; Dresken-Weiland, Repertorium II, no. 7, fig. 2.
37 Koch, Frühchristliche Sarkophage, 315f.
38 Koch, Frühchristliche Sarkophage, 314f.; Rep. II 31 and 32 belong to the same sarcophagus.
40 Koch, Frühchristliche Sarkophage, 313f.
44 E.g., Deichmann, Repertorium I, nos. 30, 829; Dresken–Weiland, Repertorium II, nos. 113, 148.
45 Studer-Karlen, Verstorbendarstellungen auf frühchristlichen Sarkophagen.
46 Dresken–Weiland, Repertorium II, 162.
48 This view was persuasively refuted by Paul Styger, Die altchristliche Grabkunst, Ein Versuch der einheitlichen Auslegung (Munich: J. Kösel and F. Pustet, 1927).
51 Christern-Briesenick, Repertorium III, no. 61.
52 Dresken–Weiland Bild, Grab, und Wort, 167; Dresken–Weiland, Immagine e parola, 143.
55 Dresken–Weiland, Bild, Grab, und Wort, 144–146; Dresken–Weiland, Immagine e parola, 125–127.
56 Dresken–Weiland, Repertorium II, no. 10.
Further reading

For the sarcophagi in the Museo Pio Cristiano, it is important to consult Gennaccari (1996), who, on the basis of an analysis of the account books, describes the extent of the complements and the revisions of these pieces.


Christian sarcophagi from Rome


