Chapter 4

EARLY CHRISTIAN SARCOPHAGI OUTSIDE OF ROME

Guntram Koch

Three main centers of sarcophagus production existed in Roman imperial times, namely Rome, Athens, and Dokimeion (Phrygia, Asia Minor). In early Christian times Rome remained a center; numerous sarcophagi with Christian themes were produced there. However, in Athens and Dokimeion the production came to an end completely about 250–260 CE because of the political and economic situation. Sarcophagi with Christian themes were never produced in either of those places.

When Constantine the Great became absolute monarch of the whole Roman Empire in the year 324 CE, he transferred the seat of government to the east. Byzantium was appointed as new capital and inaugurated in 330 CE as “New Rome” or “Second Rome,” although it soon acquired the name “Konstantinopolis,” (Constantinople or city of Constantine, today Istanbul). Constantinople became the second center of production of sarcophagi in the empire. After the death of emperor Theodosius I in 395 CE the empire was divided between his two sons. Arcadius became emperor of the east (395–408, ruling from Constantinople), Honorius of the west. Honorius soon realized that Rome was not safe enough, and therefore preferred to reside, initially, in Milan (Mediolanum) and subsequently transferred the seat of government to Ravenna in 402 (or 408). A rather small number of sarcophagi with Christian themes is preserved in Ravenna, most of them made from Proconnesian marble. It is an open problem whether these pieces were produced in Ravenna, which would make that city the third center of production, or were for the most part imported fully executed from Constantinople, as seems more likely.

In addition to these centers, sarcophagi have been carved in many of the provinces of the Roman Empire in local workshops, but in totally different numbers and with various representations. Some pieces are spread over Italy, outside of Rome. A very large number is preserved in Gallia (France), extremely few in Germania and Belgica (Germany). A considerable number have survived in two of the three provinces of Hispania (Spain, Portugal), that is in Tarraconensis and Baetica, as well as a few pieces in the western part of North Africa.

Sarcophagi decorated only with crosses were produced in the provinces of the Balkans, Asia Minor and Syria; in these areas not even one surviving example contains figural Christian themes. Alexandria is a special case for this was the source of porphyry sarcophagi, which were destined for the emperors and their families and exported above all to Rome and to Constantinople.
Early Christian sarcophagi outside of Rome

The sarcophagi in Constantinople

Constantinople was inaugurated as the new capital of the Roman Empire in 330. There are no known sarcophagi with Christian themes from the first decades after this date; rather they emerge in the later fourth century, about 370–380 CE. Only one small fragment survives, made of marble, with wine scrolls and a putto gathering grapes. Although this theme is not distinctively Christian, it could have been used by Christians (about 350). It is unclear whether sarcophagi were used by high-standing persons of the imperial administration, by rich landowners, or by merchants. In contrast to Constantinople, a large number of excellently carved pieces with figural scenes from the years between 330 and 380–390 survives in Rome. Thus, it is unknown how, as one example, the eastern “colleagues” of Junius Bassus, praefectus urbi (d. 359), were buried. Also in contrast to Rome, the few existing examples preserved in Constantinople are mostly in fragments (ca. 160, including the exported pieces; in addition ca. 20–25 examples brought to Ravenna), although whether they were destroyed or their overall numbers were rather small is not known. Among these fragments are examples of figural (frieze and columnar sarcophagi) and decorative (“symbolic”) sarcophagi. In terms of quality they show substantial differences; there are few outstanding works (from marble) and a larger number of examples with modest workmanship (of limestone, with one exception of marble). Byzantium /Constantinople had no sarcophagus production tradition of its own; the sculptors seem to have immigrated from Rome or from the provinces, including from elsewhere in Asia Minor.

There are several evident differences between sarcophagi from Rome and Constantinople. In Rome a sarcophagus usually is a chest with a lid. Although chests with lids were used in Constantinople as well, more frequently the container for the deceased was constructed of bricks or stones with mortar, and only the front side was a marble or limestone slab carved with figural reliefs. Thus the containers are not “real” sarcophagi, but “pseudo-sarcophagi.” Sometimes these “pseudo-sarcophagi” even have acroteria.

While Rome produced frieze, architectural (columnar), and strigillated sarcophagi, strigil decoration was extremely rare in the eastern empire during the second and third century and not used at all for Christian sarcophagi. Frieze and architectural sarcophagi were known in Constantinople, but with some peculiarities, including columns or pilasters bordering the edges of the friezes. Thus the sarcophagi belong to the “Torre-Nova-Group,” examples of which are totally unknown in pagan Rome or Athens. These were initially produced in the third quarter of the second century only in Dokimeion (the third center of production). It is unknown why workshops in Constantinople adopted this kind of decoration for sarcophagi in the late fourth and early fifth century, after a gap of about 220 years.

Another kind of decoration was popular in Asia Minor, above all in the provinces of Bithynia and Pisidia, as well as in Thessaloniki in the second and third century. The sides lack projecting borders at the lower and upper edges; instead they were surrounded by profiled frames. They appear somewhat like wooden chests, and therefore have been called “chest-sarcophagi.” This kind of decoration is totally unknown in the West and in Athens, and it is typical for Asia Minor and the East. One may ask why sculptors reintroduced this century-old decoration as well in the late fourth century.

In Rome sarcophagi had, as a rule, figural decoration on at least the front side. Some examples from the late fourth and early fifth century have a cross in the middle field flanked by panels of strigils. But in Constantinople many sarcophagi are decorated just with crosses, including large and excellently carved examples. The sarcophagi of the emperors and their families have—with one exception—only crosses.
Sarcophagi in Constantinople and Rome feature approximately the same selection of biblical themes, but with differences. Scenes from the Old Testament, which were used in Rome above all in pre-Constantinian and Constantinian times, were popular in Constantinople in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. In Rome the front panels were filled with several biblical scenes, and the figures were packed closely together. But many sarcophagi in Constantinople represent only one theme, with few persons, while large parts of the background are left empty. These distinct differences enable art historians to identify even fragments as belonging to a Constantinopolitan or a Roman sarcophagus. But we do not have any hint to explain these differences.

Another problem concerns the difference between the excellent quality of marble sarcophagi in Constantinople and the roughly cut limestone pieces for which we do not find any parallel at Rome. For instance, the person who ordered the grave building near Silivri Kapi in Constantinople must have been extremely rich, but the building’s limestone “pseudo-sarcophagi” with figural decorations are of a crude, low quality. Comparable pieces cannot be found in Rome. Yet the marble slab with a cross, used for the sarcophagus of the owner of the grave-building, seems to be quite well executed. An explanation for this situation may be that all sculptors in Constantinople who were well trained to carve marble were required to work at the large religious and secular buildings, and only in few cases did they have the time to produce a sarcophagus for a private person.

A masterwork of east-Roman sculpture is the “prince-sarcophagus” (370–380 CE), which has reliefs on all four sides and belongs to the category “chest-sarcophagi” (Figure 4.1). In its time it stands alone. Marble frieze, columnar and “Torre-Nova-sarcophagi” of good quality are represented by several fragments and the slabs in Venice and Barletta, which can be dated to the decades around 400 CE. Among the fragments of limestone have been parts of sarcophagi or “pseudo-sarcophagi” with friezes (Figure 4.2), including, apparently, some double-register

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Figure 4.1 “Prince-sarcophagus,” 370–380 CE. Istanbul Archaeological Museum. Photo: G. Koch.
frieze sarcophagi. Other pieces feature both figural and architectural decoration (e.g., the slabs from Taşkasap and Amberliköy) (Figure 4.3). These are executed rather roughly, and therefore they can be dated only approximately to the end of the fourth and the first half of the fifth century. The slabs from the tomb near the Silivri Kapi must have been carved shortly after 415 CE.11

Figure 4.2 Fragment of a limestone pseudo-sarcophagus with Christ entering Jerusalem, Istanbul Archaeological Museum. Photo: G. Koch.

Figure 4.3 Limestone pseudo-sarcophagus with architectural decoration and miracles of Christ, Istanbul Archaeological Museum. Photo: G. Koch.
The decorative sarcophagi—as well as the figural ones—seem to begin in the late fourth century. One of the earliest examples is made from Proconnesian marble and belongs, like the “prince-sarcophagus,” to the “chest-sarcophagi.” In its proportions, the shape of the roof-like lid, and the acroteria, it is very similar to examples of the late second or early third century. Besides this one there exist various other decorative sarcophagi from the fifth, sixth, and early seventh centuries. The latest pieces are very low and narrow, have simple crosses as decoration, and show inside the outline of a human body with head and shoulders.

In a few cases sarcophagi produced in workshops of Constantinople were exported, but only pieces made of Proconnesian marble, not those rather rough examples of limestone. They have been found, for example, in north-western and northern Asia Minor, on the island of Naxos, in Nikopolis (western Greece), in Doclea (Doljani, Montenegro) and in Massilia (Marseille). Some fragments from Bithynia (north-western Turkey), and pieces in Venice, Barletta, and Trani also seem to come from Constantinople. But presumably they were not imported in the early Christian era, but in medieval times, perhaps during the Crusades of 1204 or later.

In some cities in the west—Milan (Mediolanum), Marseille (Massilia), Arles (Arelate), Las Vegas de Pueblanueva (near Toledo, Spain; now in Madrid) and Ecija (southern Spain)—there are figured sarcophagi that do not have any connection with the production of Rome or with the local tradition, but show some influences from Constantinople. One might add a limestone fragment, perhaps from a sarcophagus, carved in Roman Syria apparently in imitation of a sarcophagus imported from Constantinople. These pieces enrich our knowledge about the production of early Christian sarcophagi in Constantinople.

Sarcophagi of the emperors and their families

A special category of sarcophagi in Constantinople are those made of colored stone and destined presumably for members of the imperial family. They have only crosses as decoration (Figure 4.4). The varieties of stone used include the greenish sprinkled marmor Thessalicum

Figure 4.4 Porphyry sarcophagus with christogram, possibly meant for the imperial family. Istanbul Archaeological Museum. Photo: G. Koch.
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(from Thessaly, Greece; “verde antico”); a reddish sprinkled stone (perhaps “puddinga di Hereke”); another reddish stone (origin not yet clarified); a black granite (from Egypt); a stone which looks like alabaster; and another type which has not yet been identified.

Most of the emperors and their wives were buried in sarcophagi in an annex of the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople. Medieval sources describe the material of each sarcophagus, but it is not possible to ascribe any of the preserved pieces to a certain emperor, with two exceptions. The exceptionally large chest made of the unidentified stone may have been created for Justinian (d. 565), and the example made of alabaster for Herakleios (d. 641). These, however, are only presumptions. The porphyry sarcophagi, which certainly were used only for the emperors and their families, presumably were produced in Alexandria (see below).

Early Christian sarcophagi from Constantinople decorated with crosses and other ornaments were very famous still in medieval times. They were represented in wall-mosaics and paintings (for example, in Constantinople and Greece), in reliefs of stone or ivory, in Bible illustrations, or in other materials. In these illustrations the sarcophagi contain various decorations. It is not known whether there was still a relatively large number of these 500–900-year-old sarcophagi visible for medieval artists to see, or if there were drawings of the sarcophagi that artists used as patterns.

The sarcophagi in Ravenna

About 35 sarcophagi with Christian decoration survive at Ravenna, dating to the period after the emperor moved his residence there from Milan in 402 (or 408?). The local production of pagan sarcophagi had ended about 260–270 CE. It is clear that there was no production of sarcophagi in Ravenna in the fourth century. There are a few imports from Rome, and in some cases older local sarcophagi were recut and reused. The Christian sarcophagi of the fifth century show totally new shapes and representations that do not have any connections with the styles produced in Rome or the few Christian pieces from northern Italy, nor the much older pagan examples in Ravenna or other regions in northern Italy (Figure 4.5). Presumably most of the examples were imported from Constantinople fully executed, and thus they are precious works of the capital. The series began in the early fifth century with some “Torre-Nova-sarcophagi.” Few figures appear in the reliefs. The back sides depict symbolic figures (lambs, stags, pigeons, or peacocks) beside a christogram. This kind of decoration spread a little bit later to the small sides and even to the front panels. A few examples of columnar sarcophagi date perhaps to a little later than the “Torre-Nova-sarcophagi,” but still in the early fifth century. No figural sarcophagi date to after the middle of the fifth century; thereafter only decorative ones are preserved—a pattern that corresponds exactly with Constantinople.

The later examples are much simpler. The animals seem to be carved with poor skill; there is much empty space between them. Columnar sarcophagi from this period depict only animals, crosses, and trees. These modest pieces can be dated perhaps to the rule of the Ostrogoths, thus after 493. It is uncertain whether they were imported from Constantinople or locally produced. On the few later examples of the sixth century, after the reconquest of Ravenna by the Byzantines in 540, the representations are even more simplified. The relief is totally flat, and the pieces are obviously local works. The last products were carved in the seventh century.

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The sarcophagi in the provinces of the Roman Empire

There are very few sarcophagi preserved from pre-Constantinian times. They include examples in Velletri and Naples (Italy), Berlin (exported from the area of Rome), Aire-sur-l’Adour (southern France), London (origin not known), and maybe Belgrade (Serbia) and Trier (Germany). Two sarcophagi in Ikonion (Konya, Turkey) stand in the local pagan tradition (dating to 200 and the mid-third century), but their inscriptions indicate that they were used by Christians. A few lead sarcophagi from the province of Syria (from Sidon, today southern Lebanon) may have been produced in the pre-Constantinian period.

Constantinian and post-Constantinian period

Italy (outside of Rome)

A larger number of sarcophagi exported from Rome are preserved from the north to the south of Italy and over the islands of Sardinia and Sicily. Additionally some local works followed prototypes from the city of Rome; the same is the case with the pagan sarcophagi of the second and third centuries. A chest in Milan is presumably a local work, which copies an original from Constantinople.

Gallia (France)

In the Constantinian and post-Constantinian period, the provinces of Gallia remained under the influence of Rome, as they had in the second and third centuries. In this region some imports
of originals from Rome and one from Constantinople are preserved,\textsuperscript{33} in addition to numerous local works, which follow patterns of sarcophagi from Rome. One sarcophagus in Marseille and one in Arles are possibly copies of pieces from Constantinople.\textsuperscript{34} Altogether about 580 Gallic sarcophagi are preserved, many times only in fragments. This is the largest number of sarcophagi after Rome (which has about 1,200 examples).

A considerable number of the Gallic pieces (about 250) differ from the sarcophagi in Arles, Marseille, Narbonne and other sites in Gallia Narbonensis. These examples were produced in Aquitania (south-western France) in local workshops, made with local marble (from the Pyrenees) and constitute a totally separate group. A striking characteristic of this group is the preference for variety—no two pieces have the same decoration (early fifth to early sixth centuries).\textsuperscript{35}

**Germania-Belgica (Rhine-Mosel region; Germany)\textsuperscript{36}**

Most of the sarcophagi of the Germania-Belgica region that may originate from early Christian times do not have any decoration. Only in Trier are there two examples with figural scenes. One of them, which shows Noah with his family in the ark, is totally unique in early Christian art (early fourth century).\textsuperscript{37}

**Spanish peninsula\textsuperscript{38}**

Some sarcophagi imported from Rome are preserved in the Spanish peninsula,\textsuperscript{39} but a larger number seem to be local works, which copy examples from Rome. One example from Pueblanueva and another in Ecija are obviously imitating prototypes from Constantinople.\textsuperscript{40} In the first half of the fifth century, several strigillated sarcophagi were produced in Carthage to Tarragona (Tarraco) and from Aquitania to northern Spain, at a time when sarcophagi from the city of Rome were no longer available.\textsuperscript{41} In addition there are a few late pieces produced by local workshops (e.g., a piece from the Bureba in north-western Spain),\textsuperscript{42} that contain images not found on any other sarcophagi.

**Western North Africa\textsuperscript{43}**

There are relatively few finds preserved in North Africa. Some follow the style of Roman frieze sarcophagi. A small group of strigillated sarcophagi were produced in Carthage (or another city of that region?), presumably in the first half of the fifth century, using local limestone and marble imported from Proconnesus.\textsuperscript{44} Some pieces of this group were exported to Tarragona (Tarraco).\textsuperscript{45} An outstanding example is the marble frieze sarcophagus found in Leptis Minor (Lamta, Tunisia), which is well preserved with its lid (\textit{ca.} 400); it must have been carved in a local workshop by sculptors who were excellently trained and probably came from Rome after production there came to an end, \textit{ca.} 400–410 (Figure 4.6).\textsuperscript{46} They must have produced a large number of sarcophagi, and it is a pity that only one example has survived.

**Provinces of the Balkans \textsuperscript{47}**

Very few early Christian sarcophagi are preserved in the whole of the Balkans and the islands of the Aegean. This region produced a variety of sarcophagi in the second and third centuries, and in some regions such as Thessaloniki it was a rather rich production, but everywhere it
Sarcophagi from early Christian times, beside a few particular pieces, include only the very modest pieces decorated with crosses, which were carved from local limestone on the island of Brattia (Brac, near Split) and exported in some cases even to eastern Italy. An outstanding work is the “Good Shepherd sarcophagus” found in Salona, the capital of the province Dalmatia (early fourth century). The images are not Christian, but the piece obviously was ordered by a wealthy Christian and used in his grave precinct in the Christian cemetery of Manastirine (Salona).

Asia Minor

Sculptors in Asia Minor produced a very large number of sarcophagi in the second and third centuries, and many local workshops and production centers can be identified. The tradition came to an end soon after the middle of the third century. Very few sarcophagi in this region date to early Christian times. This stands in contrast to the churches that were built in very large numbers in many regions of Asia Minor during the fifth and sixth centuries, and which were supplied with rich furnishing, floor mosaics and wall-paintings or wall-mosaics. Evidently well-to-do people did not spend much money for their grave buildings and sarcophagi, but donated to churches and their furnishings. The few preserved sarcophagi are nearly all decorative ones (Figures 4.7 and 4.8). Exceptions are a few imports from Constantinople and two columnar sarcophagi in Adrassos (Balabolu, “Rough Cilicia,” now destroyed) with several figures; these two pieces may have been carved about 400, but they do not have Christian themes.

Syria, Palaestina, and Arabia

In these regions the situation is comparable with Asia Minor. In Syria a relatively large number of sarcophagi survive from the second and third centuries. One can even recognize local peculiarities typical of some of the towns (e.g., Tyrus, Sidon, Berytus [Beirut] or Tripolis). Very few
sarcophagi survive from early Christian times, and only pieces decorated with crosses, predominantly from Syria, with exceptions from Palaestina (Israel, Palestine) and Arabia (Jordan). They are mostly disparate, idiosyncratic pieces (Figures 4.9 and 4.10).
An unusual example in Emesa (Homs) was a half-finished marble garland sarcophagus from Proconnesus from the late second century; in Emesa, probably about 432, it was totally reworked and crosses were added, to receive the bones of Mar Elian (Saint Ioulianos), a local saint of Emesa (Figure 4.11). In Kanatha (Qanawat, southern Syria) two examples made from
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One piece is a pagan example, which was reused in early Christian times; the other one was produced in a local workshop for a Christian customer. A unique fragment with architectural and figural decoration is mentioned above. If it was really part of a pseudo-sarcophagus, one can argue that it was not the only one produced in Syria, but that there must have been many comparable examples that are now lost. Also in early Christian times some lead sarcophagi were produced in the provinces Syria and Palaestina.

Aegyptus (Egypt)

Almost nothing is known about early Christian sarcophagi in Egypt. A group of painted wooden examples from early Christian times is not yet published. Some sarcophagi were modest works made of clay. It was presumably in Alexandria where the porphyry sarcophagi were carved, which are now found in Rome, Constantinople, and a few other sites. Few of these contain figural decoration. The huge battle sarcophagus from the mausoleum of Helena, the mother of Constantine, in Rome (Tor Pignattara), perhaps originally was destined for emperor Constantine the Great (d. 337), and was given to Helena when he moved to the east. The comparably large porphyry sarcophagus with Erotes gathering grapes stood in the mausoleum of Constantina (d. 357), the daughter of Constantine. A fragment in Istanbul also shows Erotes gathering grapes. Later, plain porphyry sarcophagi were used for the funerals of some of the emperors. These pieces are huge in size, feature profiles at the lower and upper border, and in several cases contain crosses in the gables of the roof-like lids. There have been several attempts to assign some of these pieces to a certain emperor or another, but certain identifications seem to be impossible. To provide only one example, there are some hints that the only porphyry sarcophagus preserved with rounded small sides might have been destined for the emperor Julianus (Julian “the apostate,” d. 363), but this is not at all certain. Written sources mention...
that the sarcophagus of emperor Constantine was decorated with gilded bronze ornaments.\textsuperscript{70}  
A porphyry sarcophagus in the atrium of St Eirene in Constantinople has on its lid numerous drilled holes in which bars of gilded bronze might have been fitted, but it remains uncertain whether this piece really was destined for Constantine.\textsuperscript{71}

Notes

5. For the “Torre-Nova-Group” see Koch and Sichtermann, \textit{Römische Sarkophage}, 500 f.
11. See n. 7.
12. Koch, \textit{Frühchristliche Sarkophage}, s. Register 645, pl. 120; Deckers and Koch, \textit{Repertorium} 5, no. 92. Presumably it dates to the end of the fourth century, perhaps reworked from an older example.
16. Koch, \textit{Frühchristliche Sarkophage}, s. Register 641, pl. 159 (Arles); 643 pl. 187 (Ecija); 647 pl. 186 (Madrid); 648, pl. 134 (Milan); 648 (Marseille).
17. Private collection: Koch, \textit{Frühchristliche Sarkophage}, 409 with n. 66; 573; Deckers and Koch, \textit{Repertorium} 5.
20. Koch, \textit{Frühchristliche Sarkophage}, 426, no. 14; 431, fig. 54; s. Register 646; Deckers and Koch, \textit{Repertorium} 5, no. 94.
26. Dresken-Weiland, \textit{Repertorium} II, 130 f. no. 419 pl. 118 (Belgrade); no 420 pl. 119, 1 (Trier); Koch, \textit{Frühchristliche Sarkophage}, s. Register 660 pl. 180 (Belgrade); 13, 549 pl. 194 (Trier).
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28 Koch, Frühchristliche Sarkophage, 580–584 fig. 87; Deckers and Koch, Repertorium 5.
29 Koch, Frühchristliche Sarkophage, 368–371.
31 See n. 16.
32 Koch, Frühchristliche Sarkophage, 466–514 pl. 135–176; Christern-Briesenick, Repertorium III (2003), e.g., pl. 45–50, 63 f. 105, 2–3; 106, 125–135.
34 See n. 16.
37 See n. 26.
38 Koch, Frühchristliche Sarkophage, 519–535 pl. 177–188, 190, 191.
40 See n. 16.
42 Koch, Frühchristliche Sarkophage, 530–533, fig. 75, 2–3, pl. 188.
45 See n. 41.
49 Koch, Frühchristliche Sarkophage, 550–554, pl. 204.
50 Koch and Sichtermann, Römische Sarkophage, s. Register 665, pl. 351; Dresken-Weiland, Repertorium II, 105 f., no. 297, pl. 97; Koch, Frühchristliche Sarkophage, 550, 552, fig. 80; s. Register 659.
52 Koch, Frühchristliche Sarkophage, 558–571; Deckers and Koch, Repertorium 5.
54 Deckers and Koch, Repertorium 5, nos 147, 148 (?), 149–151, 154.
55 Koch and Sichtermann, Römische Sarkophage, 552 f.; Koch, Frühchristliche Sarkophage, s. Register 539 pl. 202–203; Deckers and Koch, Repertorium 5.
56 Koch, Frühchristliche Sarkophage, 571–584; Deckers and Koch, Repertorium 5.
57 Koch and Sichtermann, Römische Sarkophage, 560–576, pl. 561–582.
58 All included in Deckers and Koch, Repertorium 5.
60 See n. 17.
61 Koch, Frühchristliche Sarkophage, 580–584, fig. 87, pl. 219; Deckers and Koch, Repertorium 5.
62 Koch, Frühchristliche Sarkophage, 584–590.
The following sources include mostly works that came out after Koch, *Frühchristliche Sarkophage* (2000), or could not be considered there.

### Constantinople


### Ravenna


### Italy (outside of Rome)


### Gallia


Early Christian sarcophagi outside of Rome

Germania – Belgica


Hispania


Western North Africa


Provinces of the Balkans, islands of the Aegaeis


Asia Minor


Guntram Koch

Roman Syria and Palaestina

J. Deckers and G. Koch, Repertorium V.
G. Koch, Frühchristliche Sarkophage, 571–584, pl. 205–209, 222.

Alexandria

N. Asutay-Effenberger and A. Effenberger, Die Porphyrsarkophage der oströmischen Kaiser; reviewed:

Afterlife

Koch, Frühchristliche Sarkophage, 600–609, esp. 608 f.