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Cover: Tulip among turquoise leaves with spring flowers and poppy heads on a cobalt background. 1561. Iznik tile. Mosque of Rustem Pasa, Istanbul (page 40).

This page: Battle scenes between Romans and barbarians on the Great Ludovisi Sarcophagus. Third century AD. Palazzo Altemps, Museo Nazionale Romano. <https://www.michaelsvetbird.com> (page 26).

# Roman Sarcophagi: Warfare, Myth, Theatre, Nature

Michael Svetbird and Mark Merrony

This summer, Michael Svetbird sought to capture the splendour of Roman sculpture in the ancient capital and elsewhere by concentrating on sarcophagi. In so doing, he has recorded – literally in sharp relief – perhaps the purest and most durable art form in this medium from the classical world. This is qualified by the fact that, unlike sculpture in the round – Roman statues – and especially the portraits that are associated with them, the relief on sarcophagi have perhaps fewer restorations compared with portraits, which were typically reworked in antiquity, and often heavily restored in the seventeenth through eighteenth centuries.

In the present article, Michael presents an exquisite photographic insight into these beautifully crafted artistic works and conveys his personal thoughts and perceptions of the material informed by his study of these extraordinary objects through his lens. As a precursor to his acute and informative insight – categorising the material into scenes of battle, myth, theatre, and nature – it seemed rational to give a brief history of this wonderful artistic medium, which will serve to set the scene more generally.

During the Republican and early Imperial periods, a key element of Roman funerary practice was cremation, whereby the ashes and remnant bones of the deceased



Above and right: the Great Ludovisi Sarcophagus, examined in more detail below. <https://www.michaelsvetbird.com>

were deposited in urns or ossuaries. In the first quarter of the second century AD, the practice of inhumation was adopted as the method of burial used by the Etruscans and Greeks, and it is logical that both civilisations also influenced the development of sarcophagi in different regions of the Roman Empire, principally Rome, Attica, and Asia. ‘Sarcophagus’ derives from the Greek σάρξ, *sarx* (‘flesh’) and φαγεῖν, *phagein* (‘to eat’) – literally ‘flesh-eating’. They were produced in marble, other stone, lead, and wood, according to the wealth of individual patrons.

Most sarcophagi are fashioned in the form of a low rectangular box with a flat lid, but a good number feature a kline lid with full-length sculptural portraits of the deceased reclining in the manner of participating in a banquet; influenced by Etruscan funerary monuments, popular at the higher end of the social scale from the late second century across the Empire. A further variety, paralleling the development of the kline lid type, was the lenos, which is similar in form to tub-shaped grape-pressing troughs, often featuring lion-head spouts on the front panel.

Sarcophagi produced in Rome, often in Carrara marble, were normally placed inside tombs (mausolea) against a wall or in a niche and, for this reason, were only decorated on the front and short sides. It logically follows that in this funerary context, many sarcophagi are carved with garlands of fruit and leaves, a common feature of altar and tomb decoration. Narrative scenes inspired by Greek mythological themes is common and attests Roman aristocratic taste for Greek culture. Other popular themes include battle, hunting, and pastoral scenes, weddings and other aspects of the former lives of those interred, as are abstract designs, such as strigulated designs. Less affluent members of society – freedmen and craftsmen – often featured the profession of their owners.

Attic sarcophagi, mostly produced in Athens in local Pentelic marble for the foreign market, are characteristically rectangular in form, and decorated on all four sides, with particularly elaborate carving along the base and upper edge; their lids imitate steep gable roofs. Popular depictions include scenes from the Trojan War, battles between Greeks and Amazons, and are faithful to Greek artistic traditions.

In Asia Minor (modern Turkey), sarcophagi had a deep-rooted tradition in some areas. Dokimeion in Phrygia (central Turkey) was the major production centre in the Roman Imperial period. Its speciality was the production of particularly large sarcophagi with architectural decoration consisting of colonnades on all four sides, with male and female figures

populating the space in between columns, and a doorway depicted on one side. Lids are mostly in the form of gable roofs featuring acroteria (architectural ornaments). This regional style may derive from the tradition royal funerary monuments, notably the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus (fourth century BC), one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

Proconnesus on Marmara Island (in the Sea of Marmara) was a major source of marble for sarcophagi, and its proximity to Constantinople (Istanbul) also provided the material for monumental architecture in the city and further afield. It was normal for sarcophagi to be worked but not finished prior to export, and then finished off at their destination by local craftsmen. In some cases, elements remained unfinished, either for financial reasons or those of fashion.

The production of sarcophagi continued though the Christian era of the Romano-Byzantine Empire, their decoration often retaining pagan subjects which were appropriated to the realm of the new religion.

One of the most exquisite sarcophagi produced in the pagan Roman period was the Great Ludovisi Sarcophagus, housed in the Palazzo Altemps (below and page 27), dating to the third century AD. It entered the Ludovisi collection shortly after its discovery in 1621, near the Porta Tiburtina in Rome, as a gift of the Capitulate of Santa Maria Maggiore to the Cardinal Ludovico Ludovisi (1595–1632). Battle scenes are chiselled on the front and on the two shorter sides. The decoration on the front panel is organised



Colossal sarcophagus with battle scenes between Romans and barbarians – the so-called Great Ludovisi Sarcophagus. Third century AD. Proconnesian marble. Palazzo Altemps, Museo Nazionale Romano, inv. 8574. <https://www.michaelsvetbird.com>

on three levels: the victorious Romans are depicted near the top, together with the deceased, dressed as a general; the central part consists of a battle between Romans and barbarians; at the bottom, the defeated barbarians are lying on the ground.

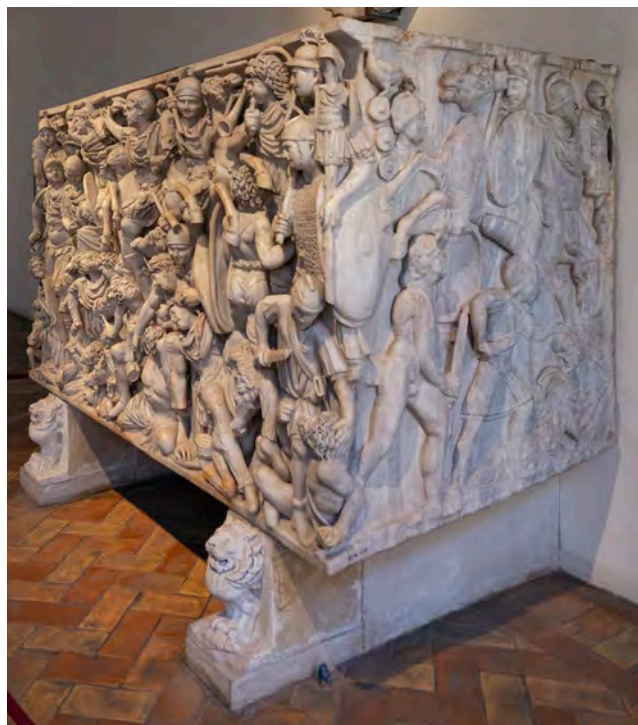
This work is an especially fine example of a battle sarcophagus, commonly produced from the mid-second century through the early third century. The face of the deceased, perhaps reworked in a later period, may depict one of the sons of the emperor Decius (r. 249–251), either Hostilian, who died in 252, or his brother Herennius Etruscus, who was killed fighting against the Goths in 251. It has been suggested that the sarcophagus was made in Rome as the funeral monument of Herennius or his mother, Herennia Etruscilla. Curiously, a sarcophagus cover with a portrait of Herennia Etruscilla once belonged to the Boncompagni Ludovisi collection. This is most likely the original cover for the Ludovisi Sarcophagus and is now in Mainz.

A second distinguished example of the battle type is the Portonaccio Sarcophagus, found near the Via Tiburtina in 1931 in the eastern suburbs of the ancient city (page 28; page 29, above), and dates to the late second century AD. Its front panel depicts a bloody battle arranged on two levels. The focal point details an advancing Roman cavalryman, depicted in the guise of a universal victor in the thick of combat against barbarian people. The bloody scenes are framed by two pairs of enslaved barbarians



whose demeanour expresses the suffering inflicted against those who oppose the might of Rome. The dramatic animation of the combat is emphasised by the deep chiaroscuro (contrasting light and shadow) achieved through the supreme skill of the sculptors who produced the sarcophagus. The relief on each side of this work narrate subsequent events: on one side, barbarian prisoners cross a river at the behest of Roman soldiers on a bridge of boats; on the other, the tribal leaders surrender to Roman officials.

The frieze on the lid, between two corner elements, celebrate the deceased couple, shown joining their right hands in a gesture of fidelity (*dextrarum iunctio*); on the left, the woman shows her virtue (*virtus*) in her home, educating her children; on the right, the patron, in the wake of his military activities, receives the submission of his enemies, demonstrating his clemency (*clementia*). It is notable that the faces of the principal characters were not completed, for reasons stated above. The decorative programme on the sarcophagus was inspired by scenes on the Column of Marcus Aurelius, suggesting that it was produced around 180. The military insignia represented on the upper edge of the casket – the eagle of the Legio III Flavia and the boar of Legio I Italica – may suggest that the deceased was Aulus Pompeilius, a military



Above: front and right panel of the Great Ludovisi Sarcophagus.

Above right: front panel detail.

official serving under the emperor Marcus Aurelius (r. 161–180) during the war against the Marcomanni (172–175).

Sarcophagi depicting the battle between Greeks and Amazons (Amazonomachy) was a popular theme on Roman battle sarcophagi. A particularly splendid work of this type, of the mid-second century BC, is housed in the Corte Nuova of the Palazzo Ducale, Mantua (page 29, below). This was produced in Attica and exported to Rome via Aquileia on the Adriatic coast of north-eastern Italy. This fine panel depicts a mythical battle that took place on the slopes of the Acropolis in Athens, after the Amazon queen Antiope was abducted by Theseus. She is distinctive in her exomis, a short military tunic, which exposes her right breast. It is often the case that sarcophagi were carved with mythological themes concerning death and heroic deeds, which were chosen to extol the life of the deceased, therefore identifying him with the protagonist of the myth that was depicted.

The history of this fine work is especially interesting. It was originally embedded within the Sala di Troia (Troy Apartment), the official room of Federico Gonzaga II, Duke of Mantua (1500–1540) in the Palazzo Ducale, Mantua. At the beginning of the seventeenth century it was moved to the Gonzaga's

Villa Favorita on the outskirts of Mantua, where it was cut in half. In the late eighteenth century, the separate pieces were transferred to the Museo Statuario in Vienna, commissioned by Maria Theresa of Austria (1717–1780). After 1915, the two parts were reunited, restored, and brought back to the Palazzo Ducale.

Another beautiful sarcophagus depicting the Amazonomachy, of the second–third century AD, adorns the Museo Archeologico di Santa Giulia, Brescia (page 30). This was found in the floor of the Church of San Salvatore in 1998. It is generally agreed that the Amazonomachy was symbolical of the struggle between Roman civilisation and barbarism, an ideology that was deeply embedded in the Roman world, although many soldiers came to be recruited from barbarian ranks, as well as senior officials in the later Roman period.

Sarcophagi depicting the Sack of Troy (Illiupersis) were a popular choice. This is masterfully represented on the front panel of a sarcophagus currently displayed in the exhibition 'The Instant and Eternity, Between us and the Ancients', in the Terme di Diocleziano (Baths of Diocletian) (page 31, above). It fuses the themes of battle and mythology. Originally in the collection of Vespasiano Gonzaga Colonna in Sabbioneta, it has adorned the Palazzo Ducale since 1915.

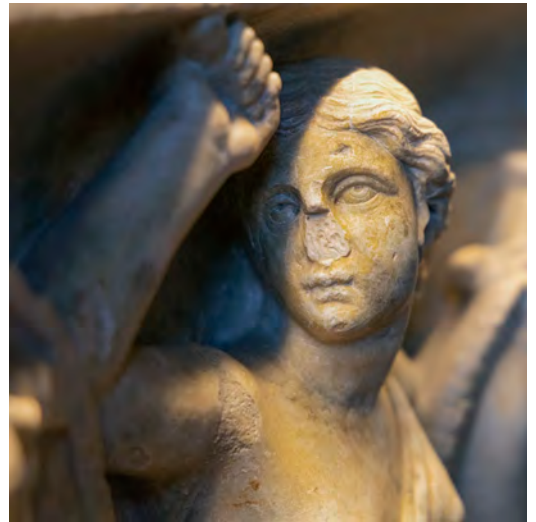


The Portonaccio Sarcophagus, depicting a battle scene between Romans and Germanic peoples with scenes from the life of a general on the lid. From Portonaccio, Via Tiburtina, Rome. AD 180–190. Marble. Palazzo Massimo, Museo Nazionale Romano, inv 112.327. <https://www.michaelsvetbird.com>

Right: detail of the scene on the front panel of the Portonaccio Sarcophagus in the Palazzo Massimo.



Below: various perspectives of the beautiful Amazonomachy depicted on the front sarcophagus panel in the Palazzo Ducale in Mantua.



Front panel of a sarcophagus depicting an Amazonomachy – battle between Greeks and Amazons. Mid-second century AD. Pentelic marble. Palazzo Ducale, Mantua, inv. 6745. <https://www.michaelsvetbird.com>

The panel narrates the conclusion of the Trojan War, a legendary conflict between the Achaean Greeks and the people of Troy in western Anatolia (modern Turkey) and celebrated by the ancient Greeks in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of Homer, and a number of lost works; it was also the theme of Virgil's *Aeneid*, written in the Augustan period. In traditional accounts, Paris, son of the King Priam and Queen Hecuba of Troy, and younger brother of Prince Hector, eloped with Helen, wife of Menelaus of Sparta, whose brother Agamemnon led an expedition against Troy. The protracted war ended when the Greeks pretended to withdraw, leaving behind a large wooden horse with a contingent of soldiers concealed inside. Once inside, the invaders opened the gates of the city, resulting in the sack of Troy, and the death of Priam and his sons, the hero Achilles, and the rout of the Trojan population. This theme alludes to the mythical foundation of Rome by the Trojan hero Aeneas, son of the Dardanian prince Anchises and the goddess Aphrodite.

Some of the most accomplished sarcophagi are carved with scenes from Graeco-Roman myth, as in the case of the latter example, but are devoid of epic battle scenes and, instead, concentrate on the deeds of principal deities and heroes.

A fine example of this category, depicting the god Dionysus (Roman Bacchus) his wife Ariadne (Ariane), and the god's *thiasus* (retinue), was discovered in the Via Labicana area of Rome and is now housed in the Terme

di Diocleziano (page 31). Some of the main characters are instantly recognisable, notably Hermes (Mercury) with his staff (caduceus), and Dionysus holds his pinecone-tipped wand (thyrsus), with various maenads (female followers of Dionysus), and silens (aging rustic spirits) included in the composition, along with Silenus and Eros below Dionysus and Ariadne.

Hercules, one of the most celebrated Greek heroes in the modern era, was a popular subject on Roman sarcophagi. Roman emperors frequently sought to project themselves in the guise of a hero, the Prima Porta statue of Augustus is an early example of this trend, suggestive of Ajax or another hero from the Trojan War. Commodus chose instead Hercules, as expressed in a famous marble in the Capitoline Museum (inv. MC 1120, late second century AD).

According to mythical tradition, Hercules' twelve labours were a punishment inflicted upon the eponymous hero by the goddess Hera, inducing him to lose his mind and kill his wife and children in a fit of anger. As penitence, he was obliged to serve King Eurystheus of Tiryns and Mycenae for twelve years and perform twelve labours, albeit assisted by Hermes and Athena. His virtuous struggle, known as *pathos* to the Greeks, brought him great fame and immortality, a perfect complement to the desired virtue of a Roman emperor. Hercules' labours were as follows: to slay the Nemean Lion, also the Lernaean Hydra, capture the Golden Hind, also the Erymanthian Boar, clean the



Sarcophagus panel depicting an Amazonomachy – battle between Greeks and Amazons, Attica, from ‘the floor of the Church of San Salvatore’, found in October 1998. Third century AD. Proconnesian marble. Museo Archeologico di Santa Giulia, Brescia, inv. MR 10710. <https://www.michaelsvetbird.com>

Sarcophagus depicting the Sack of Troy, from the area of Mantua. Mid-second century AD. Proconnesian marble. Gonzaga Collection, Palazzo Ducale, inv. 6722, Mantua. Presently displayed in 'The Instant and Eternity, Between us and the Ancients', Terme di Diocleziano, Museo Nazionale Romano. <https://www.michaelsvetbird.com>



Stables of King Augeas, defeat the Stymphalian Birds, Capture the Cretan Bull, bring Back the Mares of Diomedes, obtain the Belt of Hippolyta, also the Cattle of Geryon, procure the Golden Apples of Hesperides, and capture Cerberus. A splendid sarcophagus of the late second century, in the collection of the Terme di Diocleziano, depicts the first six of Hercules' labours (page 32, above); another beautiful panel shows nine, this dates to the mid-third century AD, and is housed in the Palazzo Altemps (page 32, below).

Embedded in Graeco-Roman mythology are minor deities which are often linked with personifications of concepts and places, and these are often expressed in the artistic realm, as on a sarcophagus discovered on

the Via Latina in Rome, now housed in the Palazzo Massimo, dating to the later third century AD (page 33, above). It depicts a married couple joining their right hands to seal their mutual fidelity (*dextrarum iunctio*) with the personifications of Portus (the port of Rome), Annona (corn dole/tax), Concordia (harmony), *Genius Senati* (genius of the senate), Abundantia (abundance), and Africa.

Our excursus on mythological sarcophagi would not be complete without mention of a beautiful sarcophagus panel depicting the Greek tragedy Hippolytus, exquisitely crafted to form a compelling narrative scene. This dates to the late third century AD and is housed in the Terme di Diocleziano (page 33,



Sarcophagus depicting Dionysus and Ariadne sitting on a rock surrounded by members of the gods' retinue, found in the area of the Via Labicana in Rome. Early third century AD. Marble. Terme di Diocleziano, Museo Nazionale Romano, inv. 124682. <https://www.michaelsvetbird.com>



Sarcophagus panel depicting six of Hercules' labours, found close to the Via Cassia near Rome in 1963. Late second century. Marble. Terme di Diocleziano, Museo Nazionale Romano, inv. 154592. <https://www.michaelsvetbird.com>



below). So, the myth goes, Hippolytus, son of Theseus, king of Athens, fell in love with the Amazon queen Phaedra. When Phaedra's passion was revealed to Theseus, he acted with revulsion, forcing the queen to kill herself, and ultimately, Theseus banished his son and despatched a sea monster to kill him, and Hippolytus ultimately perished.

Theatre became especially popular towards the end of the late Republican period in Rome and flourished across the Empire from the Augustan period onwards, aided by technological innovations in architectural techniques that enabled free-standing edifices to be constructed rather than a dependency on natural topography, as in the Greek world. The construction of theatres in the provinces became an obligation of local aristocrats who also chose this theme to decorate their sarcophagi, attesting their contribution to society during their lifetime, and perhaps their hope to enjoy theatrical productions in the afterlife. A fine work in this context, discovered at Fiumicino in 2008, dating to the second half of the second century AD, is housed in the Museum of Ostia, and depicts the nine Muses (page 34). Flanking Athena, from left to right: Polyhymnia (sacred hymns), Calliope (epic poetry), Terpsichore (dance), Thalia

(comedy), Urania (astronomy), Erato (love poetry), Euterpe (lyric poetry), Melpomene (tragedy), and Clio (history). Between Urania and Erato stands Athena, goddess of wisdom, presiding over the arts and literature. At the far right is Apollo, who presided over them.

Scenes from everyday life were also popular on Roman sarcophagi, which is logical from the point of view that the Roman world – outside of the political and military context – was fundamentally agricultural, the landowning elites deriving the bulk of their wealth from the countryside across the Empire, which in turn fed the demands of imperial taxation. A large sarcophagus depicting pastoral scenes was found near the Terme di Caracalla (baths of Caracalla), dated to the later third century, is now housed in the Terme di Diocleziano. The inscription on the lid is dedicated to Julius Achilleus from his wife. Achilleus had been conferred with the title illustrious man (*vir perfectissimus*), and was a senior official in the imperial chancellery (*proximus a memoriae*), later becoming a superintendent (procurator) of the gladiatorial barracks of Rome (*Ludus Magnus*).

Michael's thoughts on this splendid corpus of material are summarised as follows. While they often



Front panel depicting nine of Hercules' twelve labours from the Ludovisi Collection. Mid-third century AD. Luna marble. Palazzo Altemps, Museo Nazionale Romano, inv. 8642. <https://www.michaelsvetbird.com>

Sarcophagus depicting a married couple making a *dextrarum iunctio* (joining of the right hands) with, from left to right, the personifications of Portus, Annona, Concordia, *Genius Senati*, Abundantia, and Africa, found on the Via Latina in Rome. AD 270–280. Proconnesian marble. Palazzo Massimo, Museo Nazionale Romano, inv. 40799. <https://www.michaelsvetbird.com>



portray the deceased, they also convey some narrative associated with history or mythology and this has always fascinated me. This is mainly because they present a living cast of ongoing events – ideological, mythological, or a fusion of both. In a sense, they express a sort of history unfolding in a dynamic way, unlike statues or portrait busts, which, by definition, are static, depict individual characters, deities, or heroes (and limited social groups less often). Friezes on sarcophagi almost always represent a developing

and compelling story involving several characters, groups of people, mythical creatures, allegorical scenes, or those from daily life. Representations are artistic masterpieces that tend to be considered more as works of art rather than as mere utilitarian objects, even if their intent was to emphasise the greatness or wealth of specific (deceased) individuals in the private sphere.

In the present article, I consider four principal themes in their artistic production – battles, mythology, theatre, and



Front panel of a sarcophagus depicting the myth of Hippolytus and Phaedra. Some of the principal figures include a seated Phaedra (near the far left); Eros, god of love (below her to the right); a naked Hippolytus (in front of the horse); and a seated Theseus (far right).

Late third century AD. Marble. Terme di Diocleziano, Museo Nazionale Romano, inv. 112444. <https://www.michaelsvetbird.com>

nature. Generally speaking, this thematic division reflects the main aspects of ancient Roman life and seems to be echoed in the modern era – war and peace, gender relations (battles); religion (myth); culture (theatre); everyday life (nature), creativity and constructive approaches (corner and/or other architectonic elements).

Curiously, none of the types of sarcophagi considered in the present article are directly associated with representations of death or any negative associations in this regard unlike, for example, sarcophagi that were dedicated to deceased spouses or children, at least in my opinion. Despite some deliberate exaggeration and drama of the story lines (intended, however, to emphasise the greatness, social status or achievements of the deceased individual), I observe with interest an attempt to praise or show the superiority of some forces (or groups) over others; and there is something in this that can be associated with modern propaganda. To a large extent, this was ‘propaganda’, transmitted by available means.

However, if we discard the ‘ideological’ component, then general plots and their details (groups of combatants, duels, individual characters) are of even greater interest, being, as it were, a visual cast of some event and a history of interaction between individual participants in this event.

If, in general, the battle scenes are ancient analogues of propaganda posters (and/or sometimes to some extent analogue of the ‘universe of superheroes’, so to speak), ‘fragmented’ groups of battling participants do amaze with a focus on individual dramatic stories, on more personalised emotional interactions, on a range of feelings and, in general, on separate stories. Battle scenes are, from my point of view, a ‘kaleidoscope of events’ that can be studied for hours. Some figures may provoke the question: what thoughts were rushing through the minds of ancient people represented at that

moment in time? Almost certainly ‘imperial’, ‘dominant’, ‘heroic’, ‘achievement’, ‘greatness’, ‘deeds’, ‘struggle’, ‘immortality’, and not least ‘statement’.

More calm than the theme of battles, mythological scenes nevertheless often reflect the emotional component and/or topical questions of being, which is inherent in metaphysical and religious scholarship.

First, ordinary mortal people are often depicted among mythological characters/deities (which brings a somewhat mundane accent to the scene). Second, vital questions of being are often transmitted through mythological characters (for example, questions of life and death, as in the case of Hercules, visible in the progression of his aging and in his attempt to prevail over death).

Personifications evoke the idea that many depicted characters are actually portraits of real people, which makes purely mythological scenes even more interesting, for instance, when it is considered that a particular character, such as say Pan, is someone’s portrait.

Of course, mythological stories (tales of specific characters) as such in this case are known and ‘formalised’ orally or in writing, but it is interesting that sarcophagi not only visualise them (like sculpture), but also place them in the context of a developing story with specific scenes. Often this may even resemble a type of graphic novel with the visualisation of images. The key concepts in the mind of ancients in this thematic regard were, perhaps, personification, understanding of death, beliefs/religion, hope/despair, immortality/mortality, mystery/mythology, achievements/deeds.

Relief depicting theatre, or scenes associated with theatrical events, or cultural life in general, are not only interesting from the perspective that they depict personifications, but also from the perspective that they often add various objects to the story, such as musical



Sarcophagus depicting the nine Muses, Athena (centre) and Apollo (far right), from Isola Sacra (Fiumicino, Rome), found in Porto Necropolis in 2008. AD 150–200. Thasian marble. Museum of Ostia, inv. SBAO 59954/59955. Currently on display in ‘The Eternal Fame of Heroes’, Terme di Diocleziano, Museo Nazionale Romano. <https://www.michaelsvetbird.com>

instruments, theatrical masks, items of scenery, and so on. Interestingly, sarcophagi depicting theatrical scenes allow the viewer (past and present) to place personifications (or portraits if they were inspired by real characters) in some imaginary world and present fictional or real characters in almost any context. The question though remains to what extent representations (besides those whose identity can be established and if the origin of the depicted scene is clear) may be construed as either personifications or portraits.

Theatre itself is a somewhat mysterious phenomenon appealing to the play of imagination, both on the part of actors and observers alike, especially the ancient theatre (without modern technical features). So to watch images of reincarnations in their original, 'initial', so to speak, form, especially if these images are presented in the form of relief on a panel of a sarcophagus – this is a double mystery. The panel in this case can be perceived as a border between two parallel worlds (mystical and real).

Particular attention should be drawn to the details of props and musical instruments, which add an element of charm to this specific context. For instance, we can single out lyres which, in addition to draperies, create some 'lyrical mood'. This heady mixture of pictorial language could have conjured up a game (of shadows), theatre of life, creativity, sociability, irony (bitter), mystery, hope, personification/identification, mortality, lyrical, imagination.

Natural scenes predominantly comprise floral decoration, hunting, and pastoral scenes. I think in this

regard we could find some obvious associations – as borne out by a host of ancient literature – (intentional or not) with the 'circle of life, the development and course of ordinary natural phenomena – birth, life, and death, in both the lives of ancient people and nature, as dictated by the patrons who commissioned this artistic medium, its intent being purely decorative, describing the natural world, or allegorical in its intent.

However, in such cases as with the Julius Achilleus Sarcophagus, for example, the question arises of why in honour of a high-ranking official scenes of pastoral life, domestic and wild animals, predators and victims, hunting scenes, and vegetal motifs were commissioned? To what extent do these decorative programmes reflect the greatness, or at least the scope, activities, of the deceased? These questions have, of course, been analysed in considerable depth by specialists, and opinions of course vary as to their inherent meaning, but it seems clear that it is obviously related to the world-view of the patrons/deceased, whether it is purely decorative, allegorical, mythological, or ideological (also related to that of the Empire) in its intent or a combination of these factors (Koortbojian, 1993). In this regard, one could understand and admit that all this is was carved simply because it is beautiful, pastoral and peaceful, but the elements of aggression and non-peaceful scenes provoke other associations. My immediate thoughts through the lens of the ancient mind centre on associations and connotations, the picturesque, beliefs, hope, mortality, thoughts, life, and death.

Corner elements are an enigmatic feature of Roman sarcophagi (below). I perceive these not just as some kind



Sarcophagus depicting pastoral scenes found near the Terme di Caracalla. Later third century, c. AD 270. Marble. The inscription on the lid is dedicated to the important official Julius Achilleus from his wife, its content is detailed above. Terme di Diocleziano, Museo Nazionale Romano, inv. 125802. <https://www.michaelsvetbird.com>

Corner elements from the Portonaccio (below left), Dionysiadic (below), and nine Muses sarcophagi (below).



of sculptural artistic add-ons, although in terms of emotional perception they seem to add ‘mood’ to the plot of what is more comprehensively depicted on the larger panels which are associated with them; thereby emphasising the theme of a sarcophagus, but for the most part as independent artistic architectural elements they resemble architectonic objects. Interestingly, even in the case of the Portonaccio Sarcophagus, these elements have a somewhat hypertrophied-grotesque appearance, deriving from the theatrical context. I cannot help but think that the intent here was to convey drama, irony, sarcasm, the grotesque, and architectonic.

This article was inspired by the sheer enjoyment I get from just looking at Roman Sarcophagi as they seem to capture particular moment, like snapshots, on the one hand, yet convey some feeling of duration in time having past, present and future, on the other (at least the battle, mythological, and theatrical types). Yet, there are certain aspects that sit uncomfortably with me. While I do appreciate the clarity of images (or scenes on the whole), sometimes I get disconcerted by ‘the pretentious’, it would seem (the Romans were rather self-satisfied), and the grotesqueness of some of them (especially in battle scenes): the Romans – and Greeks who inspired them – depicted (excessively) as very determined, glorious, resolute and invincible; while ‘barbarians’ (interestingly, not the Amazons) massively humiliated, restricted, and defeated (facial expressions and poses). The authors’ intents could be understandable considering their time and culture, however, I do not like this one-sided asymmetry when looking at sarcophagi; as in the case of viewing works of art in the modern era – ‘objectification’. Also ‘their poster style’ representations sometimes look a little simplified,

but appear rectilinear and intelligible, ‘straight-to-the-point’, so to speak. From my perspective, many sarcophagi are more like a storyboard rather than a utility item of funerary culture.

However, these observations should be tempered with what I do like. The complexity of the artistic compositions on some of the major works is remarkable, as is the attention to details – faces, poses, armour, clothing, and so on. This is all the more incredible considering that most works were produced for exclusively private spaces and, therefore, not for public consumption. They demonstrate, in my opinion, a disregard for the strict rules of perspective with, to reiterate, a ‘poster’ or ‘storyboard’ style, designed to emphasise the scene – the story itself – to a greater extent, and not its individual components. This makes for a compelling first impression: the observer is immediately engrossed in the pictorial whole, noticing smaller details, groups or background images, as fabulous as they are, is a secondary consideration. Such is the wonder of Roman sarcophagi, an artistic form that was destined to take on a new and fascinating dimension through late antiquity and beyond.

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#### Further Reading

M. Allen, *The Death of Myth on Roman Sarcophagi: Allegory and Visual Narrative in the Late Empire*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022.

M. Koortbojian, *Myth, Meaning, and Memory on Roman Sarcophagi*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.