

Niels Hannestad: *What Did the Sarcophagus of Symmachus Look like? Late Antique Pagan Sarcophagi*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press 2019. 98 p., 30 figures with a total of 79 illustrations. € 25.00. ISBN: 978-87-7184-743-7.

While a considerable number of early Christian sarcophagi survive from Rome, late antique sarcophagi with an explicit pagan iconography are comparatively few. Niels Hannestad proposes that the deficit in pagan sarcophagi is caused by erroneous dating: many works conventionally dated to the third century, the author maintains, should be assigned to the fourth. The principal objective of this short book is therefore to revise the standard chronology.

In the Introduction (7–10), the author poses the rhetorical question of what the sarcophagus of the pagan aristocrat Q. Aurelius Symmachus, who died in 402, may have looked like, admitting that the question will plausibly remain unanswered. Hannestad argues that since mythological sculpture in the round was produced in the fourth century and possibly even later, it is reasonable to assume that sarcophagi with pagan iconography also continued well beyond the peak of the third century. ‘The revival of mythological sculpture’ (11–14) is a vast theme that deserves a fuller treatment than these few pages allow. Hannestad states that “[t]he presumed disappearance of mythological sarcophagi following the reign of Constantine has a parallel in the idea that mythological sculpture – or Idealskulptur, a more apt term – disappeared at the same time” (11). Precise dating of sculpture in traditional and retrospective classical style is difficult, one problem being that late antique sculpture collections often comprise both newly made and old material. Still, it has by now been accepted by many scholars that *Idealplastik* was indeed produced in the later fourth/early fifth centuries.¹

1 In addition to Hannestad himself, see e.g. B. Küllerich/H. Torp: *Mythological Sculpture in the Fourth Century AD: the Esquiline Group and the Silah tarağa Statues*. In: *MDAI(I)* 44, 1994, 307–316; L. M. Stirling: *The Learned Collector: Mythological Statuettes and Classical Taste in Late Antique Gaul*. Ann Arbor 2005; L. M. Stirling: *Pagan Statuettes in Late Antique Corinth: Sculpture from the Panayia Domus*. In: *Hesperia* 77, 2008, 89–161; I. Jacobs: *Production to Destruction? Pagan and Mythological Statuary in Asia Minor*. In: *AJA* 114, 2010, 267–304; B. Longfellow: *The Silah tarağa Statues in Context*. In: B. Shilling/P. Stephenson (eds): *Fountains and Water Culture in Byzantium*. Cambridge 2016, 68–86.

In the following short chapter, ‘The Question of Pagan Sarcophagi in Late Antiquity’ (15–17) Hannestad concedes that “[i]t has never been ruled out that pagan sarcophagi could have existed in Late Antiquity as more than a fading tradition. Rather, it has simply not been a topic of discussion” (15). Yet, German scholars, such as Guntram Koch, Henning Wrede, Hugo Brandenburg and Jutta Dresken-Weiland, have addressed the phenomenon in various publications.² To argue his case, the author focuses on a strigillated sarcophagus in Museo Nuovo, Rome. Dated by Brandenburg to 320/330, Hannestad uses hairstyle as a criterion for re-dating the sarcophagus to the later part of the fourth century. Since Theodosian ladies often wore their hair in much the same *Scheitelzopf* as Constantinian ladies before them, hairstyle is problematic for establishing a precise date.³ The author further maintains that “the anatomy of the figures is unnatural and abstract [...]. The right arm of the male is absurdly elongated – the hand goes below the knee.” (15). It may be counter-argued that such formal traits are no more likely to be found in the later than in the earlier fourth century. Thus, neither the stylistic nor the iconographical arguments for a later date are compelling.

Having introduced the Museo Nuovo sarcophagus as a first candidate for re-dating, the author inserts a brief note about ‘The City of Rome’ (18–20) in which he reminds the reader of the large amount of mythological sculpture found in various parts of Rome and the existence of pagan sanctuaries. The arguments might have benefitted from discussions of pertinent topics such as syncretism, anti-pagan laws and the pagan community in fourth-century Rome.

- 2 G. Koch: *Frühchristliche Sarkophage*. Munich 2000, 346–353; H. Wrede: *Senatorische Sarkophage Roms. Der Beitrag des Senatorenstandes zur römischen Kunst der hohen und späten Kaiserzeit*. Mainz 2001 (*Monumenta artis Romanae* 29), 76–84; H. Brandenburg: *Das Ende der antiken Sarkophagkunst in Rom. Pagane und christliche Sarkophage im 4. Jahrhundert*. In: G. Koch (ed.): *Akten des Symposiums „Frühchristliche Sarkophage“*. Marburg, 30.6.–4.7.1999. Mainz 2002 (*Sarkophag-Studien* 2), 19–39; J. Dresken-Weiland: *Sarkophagbestattungen des 4.–6. Jahrhunderts im Westen des römischen Reiches*. Rome 2003 (*Römische Quartalschrift für christliche Altertumskunde und Kirchengeschichte. Supplementband* 55), 64–65.
- 3 See, e.g., B. Küllerich/H. Torp: *Hic est: hic Stilicho. The Date and Interpretation of a Notable Diptych*. In: *JDAI* 104, 1989, 319–371, at 321–325; K. Schade: *Frauen in der Spätantike – Status und Repräsentation. Eine Untersuchung zur römischen und frühbyzantinischen Bildniskunst*. Mainz 2003, 95–99.

In the chapter ‘Luxury Crafts’ (21–33), the author claims that “[m]arble sculpture in the round, reliefs and sarcophagi are rarely put into context with other art forms, despite the fact that these groups of artefacts came into existence in the same cultural milieu: the upper class” (21). Be that as it may, at least art historians and archaeologists have not excluded sarcophagus reliefs from general discussions: ivories and silverplate have been treated in connection with sculpture, and sculptural styles have been compared with painting styles.⁴ The Parabiago silver plate is mentioned but the focus of the chapter is on ivories. The Consecratio or Apotheosis diptych in the British Museum is associated with the Symmachi by virtue of its monogram. Basing his reading mainly on Archer St Clair’s article from 1964, Hannestad follows the Julian the Apostate interpretation.⁵ The ivory is highly debated and has been treated in many subsequent articles; references to recent discussions of the ivory are, however, left out.⁶ Although the interpretation of the diptych leaf per se has no direct bearing on the overall thesis of the book, it should be noted that the five figures in the cloud that Hannestad interprets as “three females to the left and a married couple to the right” (26) are surely all male togati: four shorthaired youths and one elderly man. Another work associated with the Symmachi is the Nicomachorum-Symmachorum diptych (28–29), a prime example of mannerist classicism that might indicate a possible style for the potential Symmachus sarcophagus.⁷ The Poet and Muse diptych at Monza is a somewhat

4 B. Kiilerich: *Late Fourth Century Classicism in the Plastic Arts. Studies in the So-called Theodosian Renaissance*. Odense 1993 (Odense University Classical Studies 18); B. Kiilerich: *What is Ugly? Art and Taste in Late Antiquity*. In: *Arte Medievale* N.S. 6,2, 2007, 9–20; L. M. Stirling: *Prolegomena to the Study of Portable Luxury Goods and Shared Aristocratic Culture in the Theodosian Age*. In: I. Jacobs (ed.): *Production and Prosperity in the Theodosian Period*. Leuven/Walpole, MA 2014 (Interdisciplinary Studies in Ancient Culture and Religion 14), 191–213; E. Russo: *Contributo a problemi e aspetti formali dell’arte tardoantica*. In: *AAAH* 29, 2017, 131–162; B. Kiilerich: *In Search of the Patron: Late Antique Styles in Context*. In: *AAAH* 30, 2018, 1–21; E. Russo: *La scultura della seconda metà del IV secolo d.C.* In: *AAAH* 30, 2018, 249–308.

5 A. St. Clair: *The Apotheosis Diptych*. In: *ABull* 46, 1964, 205–211.

6 B. Kiilerich: *Boethius, Symmachus and the Consecratio Ivory Diptych*. In: *AntTard* 20, 2012, 205–215.

7 To the bibliography may be added D. Kinney: *First-Generation Diptychs in the Discourse of Visual Culture*. In: G. Bühl et al. (eds): *Spätantike und byzantinische Elfenbeinbildwerke im Diskurs*. Wiesbaden 2008 (Spätantike, frühes Christentum, Byzanz. Reihe B: Studien und Perspektiven 24), 149–166.

later work in a different, if still vaguely ‘classical’ style.⁸ Hannestad relates it to late antique Aphrodisian sculpture and an Ares Borghese copy from Antioch, which he assigns to the fifth century on the grounds that “[t]he mode of expression has changed his face so that he looks like a sage, with staring, almost Byzantine eyes, and a deeply wrinkled brow” (31). The author concludes the survey of the luxury arts that given the persistence of the classical tradition in various art forms, an absence of pagan sarcophagi seems unlikely.

The chapter on ‘The Getty Sarcophagus’ (34–42) is devoted to a single item, the large Muse sarcophagus in the J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu. The fragmentary relief was acquired on the art market in 1972 and has no secure provenance. It is generally dated to the mid-third century. Based on a stylistic comparison with four muse statuettes, likewise in the Getty Museum, Hannestad argues for the fourth century. Unfortunately, these large statuettes bought in 1968 and 1971 from private collectors are similarly without secure provenance – they are rumoured to stem from Cremna in Asia Minor and placed around AD 200. Hannestad maintains that they date from the later fourth century. At least, the uncertainties with regard to chronology and geographical origin of the statuettes and sarcophagus alike make it difficult to use the sculptures in Malibu as evidence for the production of pagan sarcophagi in fourth-century Rome.

The main section of the book, ‘Mythological Marble Sculpture of Late Antiquity – an Overview’ (43–78), focuses on a series of cases that according to the author are likely to have been erroneously dated. The Muse sarcophagus in the Palazzo Massimo, Rome shows an excellent sculpture that is conventionally placed in the late Gallienic period. Hannestad draws attention to the drilling of Euterpe’s hair, which appears more haphazard and perfunctory than otherwise in Gallienic reliefs (45, 49). The difference between the elegant carving of the drapery and the sketchy head is certainly worth noting. But, does it indicate a late date for the sarcophagus as a whole – the author suggests one or two generations after Junius Bassus (AD 359) – or could the head at some point in time have been re-carved? Further investigations would be of interest. Concerning a muse sarcophagus from Porto Torres on Sardinia, housed in the Basilica di San Gavino,

8 F. Troncarelli: *La consolazione del dolore. Nuove ipotesi sul dittico del Poeta e della Musa*. In: *Arte Medievale* 4th ser. 1, 2010–2011, 9–29.

the author states that the portraits of the couple provide “a secure dating to c. A.D. 400” (51). Recent scholars place the sculpture in the beginning of the fourth century.⁹ Indeed, since the coffin was found in a necropolis that by the mid-fourth century had become an exclusively Christian burial place, a date after 350 seems less likely.¹⁰ Turning to Dionysian/Season sarcophagi (56–65), the author adjusts the chronology of the Dumbarton Oaks sarcophagus from late Constantinian, 330–340, to Valens, 364–378, perhaps a not unreasonable proposition. Among other mythological sarcophagi, a fine Meleager sarcophagus in the Palazzo dei Conservatori, Rome, is assigned a late fourth-century date, again based on comparison with undated material (67–73). As for the large Phaedra and Hippolytos sarcophagus from Salona, Split Archaeological Museum, for which the prevailing view is c. 300, the author finds that the relief looks very different from “the odd brutal style of the period” (73). Nevertheless, several stylistic idioms were current under the Tetrarchy, for instance, the Decennalia base in the Forum Romanum presents two different stylistic modes; also the reliefs on the Small Arch at Thessaloniki differ considerably in style from those of the Triumphal Arch in the city despite that both monuments are from the reign of Galerius.¹¹ Hannestad further argues for a late-fourth-century date of the Hippolytos sarcophagus on formal criteria: “Stressing a late date is the donkey lying below the hoof of the horse. It looks rather medieval.” (76). Turning to a head of Odysseus in Aachen, the author notes similarities with the statue of Jupiter from the Esquiline group but suggests that the Odysseus head stems from a sarcophagus. Measuring 30 cm, it is, however, difficult to imagine a sarcophagus of such dimensions

- 9 A. Teatini: *Repertorio dei sarcofagi decorati della Sardegna romana*. Rome 2011 (Bibliotheca archaeologica 48), no. 26; S. Birk: *Depicting the Dead. Self-Representation and Commemoration on Roman Sarcophagi with Portraits*. Aarhus 2013 (Aarhus Studies in Mediterranean Antiquity 11), no. 164.
- 10 V. Fiocchi Nicolai/L. Spera: *Sviluppi monumentali e insediativi del santuari dei martiri in Sardegna*. In: R. Martorelli et al. (eds): *Isole e terraferma nel primo cristianesimo. Identità locale ed interscambi culturali, religiosi e produttivi*. Atti dell’XI congresso nazionale di Archeologia Cristiana. Cagliari 2015 (Studi e ricerche di cultura religiosa N.S. 8), 84–85.
- 11 Compare H. P. Laubscher: *Der Reliefschmuck des Galeriusbogens in Thessaloniki*. Berlin 1975 (Archäologische Forschungen 1), and Th. Stefanidou-Tiveriou: *Το μικρό τόξο του Γαλερίου στη Θεσσαλονίκη*. Athens 1995 (Βιβλιοθήκη της εν Αθήναις Αρχαιολογικής Εταιρείας 151).

– it would have required a coffin of close to 2.5 m height. In comparison the *Acilia lenos* with full-length figures measures 1.49 m in height.

In the final chapter titled ‘Chronology – the End of Production’ (79–87), the author turns to the Ravenna sarcophagi, concluding that the Pignatta sarcophagus, generally placed in the early fifth century could be as late as the early seventh.¹² The argument rests on a comparison of the animals carved on the back of the coffin with animals represented on later art work. He concludes that even though it is uncertain what Symmachus’ sarcophagus looked like, the pagan aristocracy remained wealthy and influential. One such wealthy person Rutilius travelled from Rome to his hometown Arles in 417. To strengthen his case for Rutilius being “buried in a pagan sarcophagus produced in Arles” (87), the author might have referred to the study by Vassiliki Gaggadis-Robin.¹³

In the very same year, 2019, that Niels Hannestad wonders how pagans were buried in Late Antiquity, another scholar, Robert Couzin discusses the question in a lengthy article.¹⁴ Couzin surveys three possible explanations for the paucity of pagan sarcophagi: erroneous dating, a decline in production, and a difference in survival rates. He dismisses the first two explanations, arguing that the main reason for the scarcity of late antique sarcophagi with pagan iconography is the circumstance that when sarcophagi were reused in the Middle Ages, the customers preferred Christian themes. As a consequence, the Christian sarcophagi survived through reuse in churches and elsewhere, while the pagan ones, when re-used, were more likely to be given totally new images, to be re-carved beyond recognition or to be placed with the front turned against the wall. Also, a very large number probably ended up as building material, as convenient fill in walls and floors or they simply went into the lime kilns. In short, Couzin attributes the shortfall of sarcophagi without explicit Christian iconography to a difference in survival rates.

12 For the complex situation regarding the use and reuse of sarcophagi in early Medieval Ravenna, see E. M. Schoolman: Reassessing the Sarcophagi of Ravenna. In: *DOP* 67, 2013, 49–74.

13 V. Gaggadis-Robin: *Les sarcophages païens du Musée de l’Arles antique*. Arles 2005.

14 R. Couzin: Where Did All the Pagans Go? The non-Christian Sarcophagi of Fourth-Century Rome. In: *PBSR* 87, 2019, 145–175.

The question of the missing pagan sarcophagi is complex and the answer probably lies in a combination of several factors that all require further investigation. Some indications of chronology might be found in the material and physical aspects of the objects. Late Roman sarcophagi, both Christian and pagan, were often made of reused blocks and pieces. Rather than hewing a case from a single block, scarcity of marble lead to the patching together of cases by use of smaller sections.¹⁵ It may be speculated whether wealthy patrons, who were not satisfied with such patchwork coffins, might have preferred to be buried in a second-hand coffin of superior technical and artistic quality. Late antique reuse of older pagan sarcophagi rather than the fabrication of new ones could therefore be one of many reasons for the scarcity of extant late pagan sarcophagi.

The archaeological records from antiquity are notoriously fragmentary. Hannestad's propositions for a revised chronology show the uncertainty we are facing when corroborating evidence is lacking. Plausibly, certain pieces assumed to date from the third century could be later. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that the vast majority of sarcophagi have been wrongly assigned to the third century. To present a more balanced view, the author might have acknowledged other opinions and included more references to recent relevant publications.¹⁶ While few will be convinced by his drastic re-dating, Niels Hannestad's ideas urge us to reconsider problems of chronology and make us think not only about the extant works but also about the no-longer-extant ones. At least, whether pagan, neutral or Christian, late antique sarcophagi still present plenty material for further studies.

- 15 See, for instance, J. J. Hermann: Late Roman Sarcophagi in Central Italy Made from Scavenged Blocks. In: A. Gutiérrez García-Moreno (ed.): *Interdisciplinary Studies on Ancient Stone. Proceedings of the IX Association for the Study of Marbles and other Stones in Antiquity (ASMONIA) Conference (Tarragona 2009)*. Tarragona 2012, 93–103. For the widespread re-use of funerary material in Rome, see C. Murer: From the Tombs into the City. Grave Robbing and the Reuse of Funerary Spolia in Late Antique Italy. In: *AAAHS* 30, 2018, 115–137.
- 16 J. Elsner/Hung Wu (eds): *Sarcophagi = RES. Anthropology and Aesthetics* 61/62, 2012; B. Borg: *Crisis and Ambition: Tombs and Burial Culture in Third Century CE Rome*. Oxford 2013; J. Huskinson: *Roman Strigillated Sarcophagi: Art and Social History*. Oxford/New York 2015; V. Platt: Framing the Dead on Roman Sarcophagi. In: V. Platt/M. Squire (eds): *The Frame in Classical Art. A Cultural History*. Cambridge 2017, 353–382; J. Elsner: The Embodied Object: Recensions of the Dead on Roman Sarcophagi. In: *Art History* 41, 2018, 546–565.

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