

## Celebration of Life as Shown in Roman Sarcophagi with Greek Mythology and Seasons

The work of art entitled *Marble sarcophagus with garlands and the myth of Theseus and Ariadne* from c. 130-150 A.D. is identified as Roman and falls within either the Hadrianic or early Antonine period. The sarcophagi, which was relatively new to Roman burial culture at the time, is unique for its intricate carvings and specific relief depictions of the Greek mythological figures Theseus and Ariadne. This paper will first analyze the work of art formally in the context of its period, form, and composition, and general facts. Sequentially, the iconography of the work itself and the procession of seasons as shown on the lid of the sarcophagus will be examined as an allegory for the proposed happiness of the afterlife and enjoying life whilst living it. The concept of leading a fulfilling and happy life in Roman culture will also be expanded upon, due to the presence of Theseus and Ariadne on the front relief. Ultimately, this sarcophagus could be defined as commemorative of its inhabitant's life and as a reminder to those visiting the sarcophagus to celebrate and seek happiness in their own lives.<sup>1</sup>

The sarcophagus is argued as either from the Hadrianic or early Antonine period, meaning it comes from roughly the time span of 117 to 161 A.D. The sarcophagus itself is made up of luna and pentec marble, the case being made of luna and the lid made of the latter. Luna marble is better known as Carrara marble, which dozens of remarkable buildings and sculptures are made from, such as the Pantheon or Trajan's Column, which were both also built around the Hadrianic period. The marble is to this day considered the best marble to be used for any works of art or architecture. The dimensions of the entire work are 31 x 85 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 28 inches, or roughly seven feet long to fit the stature of any deceased. It is classified as a stone sculpture due to its artistic reliefs on the two ends, front side, and lid. Typically, one side of a sarcophagus would remain nondescript since they were

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Zanker and Bjorn C. Ewald, Living with Myths: The Imagery of Roman Sarcophagi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 162.

often pushed against walls. The artist is unknown. The sarcophagus was discovered in 1889 near Capranica, Roman Campagna, in the vicinity of Rome. The American Journal of Archaeology wrote: “Near the road from Capranica to Vetralla, along a Roman road, an ancient tomb was demolished and within it was discovered a fine marble sarcophagus intact, with its cover: nothing was found inside it. The reliefs with which the entire surface is covered are the best style of Roman art [...] The work is highly finished and the composition is good.”<sup>2</sup> The sarcophagus was purchased from Dr. Robert Jenkins Nevin in 1890 and now resides in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Considering only 2 to 5% of all Roman sarcophagi from the second and third century A.D. have survived time<sup>3</sup>, for this sarcophagus to be found in such a good condition is worthy of celebration.

To have a complete ability to theorize about Roman sarcophagi and their relevance to the deceased inside, the history of Roman sarcophagi must be somewhat understood. Until the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D., Romans typically practiced cremation.<sup>4</sup> When sarcophagi and inhumation became a popular burial practice, only the upper-class of Roman society took part. Eventually, this practice made its way down to the middle-and-lower-class of Romans. Sarcophagi were then produced in mass numbers, with some estimating that up to 750,000 sarcophagi were created in the peak years of practice.<sup>5</sup> The producers of sarcophagi often had a formula in which could allow for such mass-production on a quick time frame; they would order the marble, roughly shape it into a common shape, and would then leave space for a relief that the customer might

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<sup>2</sup> Frothingham, A. L. "Archæological News." The American Journal of Archaeology and of the History of the Fine Arts 6, no. 1/2 (1890), 220

<sup>3</sup> Elsner and Huskinson, Life, Death, and Respresentation: Some New Work on Roman Sarcophagi, 127.

<sup>4</sup> Jas Elsner and Janet Huskinson, Life, Death, and Respresentation: Some New Work on Roman Sarcophagi (De Gruyter, 2010), 22.

<sup>5</sup> Elsner and Huskinson, Life, Death, and Respresentation: Some New Work on Roman Sarcophagi, 127.

request along with a blank, changeable face. During predictable market times, sarcophagi companies profited more on sarcophagi that were incomplete or visually lacking for quick burials. A sarcophagus that had a complex, unique, and intricately designed relief usually signified that it was commissioned by a wealthy and cultivated person, usually much in advance.<sup>6</sup> Hence, why the *Marble sarcophagus with garlands and the myth of Theseus and Ariadne* is very worthy of examination. Whomever the sarcophagus was commissioned for was of a status high enough for familiarity with Greek mythology, especially the heroic tale of Theseus and his relationship with Ariadne.

The sarcophagus depicts several scenes relevant to Theseus and Ariadne; on the far left, Ariadne is shown giving Theseus a spool of thread that will assist him in escaping the labyrinth after defeating the Minotaur. In the middle, Theseus is shown slaying the Minotaur that resides within the labyrinth. The third and final scene on the right shows Ariadne in desolation after Theseus has abandoned her on the island of Naxos. The choice to carve a relief showing this specific Greek tale could be rationalized by a variety of explanations. The commissioner could have wanted to commemorate the deceased's life by comparing them to the very figure of a Greek hero. The morals associated with the myth of Theseus and the minotaur are usually perseverance, bravery and skill. Funerary art that contained mythological tales could exist either to claim that the deceased inside followed said moral values, or that they came from a family with a status that elected them to be able to comprehend and furthermore recount complex mythological tales.<sup>7</sup> Although Ariadne is a major figure in Theseus' tale, after he abandons her, she goes on to wed the god Dionysus and continues her own individual story. Since the

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<sup>6</sup> Elsner and Huskinson, Life, Death, and Respresentation: Some New Work on Roman Sarcophagi, 59.

<sup>7</sup> Zanker and Ewald, Living with Myths: The Imagery of Roman Sarcophagi, 23.

sarcophagus' relief ends with Theseus abandoning Ariadne, it could be alluding to how the next logical step in the story is her beginning of a happier life with Dionysus and her eventual immortality. This could indicate that the deceased is continuing a happier life, unseen to their mourners and family left behind as Ariadne's tale remains unseen on the sarcophagus, or the opposite; that those mourning the loss of the deceased should go on to lead a happy, fulfilling life. The lid of the sarcophagus furthermore supports this possibility, which will be expanded upon later. This sarcophagus is unique because Theseus abandoning Ariadne is usually forgotten in favor of lauding Dionysus as the god that brought joy to such an inconsolable woman. Many sarcophagi show the wedding scenes between Dionysus and Ariadne as an allegory for transitioning into a lighter, happier life after one that was full of tests and stresses.<sup>8</sup> Such an example can be seen in the *Sarcophagus with the Myth of Dionysus and Ariadne* from 230 A.D. The choice to not depict Dionysus arriving on Naxos to give Ariadne salvation could be in order to provoke viewers into recalling the rest of Ariadne's story, ultimately providing them with hope for the future of either the deceased or even themselves.

In support of the possibility that the sarcophagus represents the celebration of life as it occurs, the lid front relief depicts six winged *putti* or *erotes* leading chariots drawn by various animals. The winged *putti* are participating in a chariot race, which was a huge part of Roman entertainment culture. Massive monuments were erected to host chariot races, such as the *Circus Maximus* in Rome. The choice to show the Seasons in the midst of a chariot race could be another method of recommending that those mourning the deceased go and celebrate the joys that life has to offer, such as chariot races and leisurely activity, while they still can. It is also

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<sup>8</sup> Zanker and Ewald, Living with Myths: The Imagery of Roman Sarcophagi, 161.

believed that the *putti* shown are representations of the male Seasons. Spring controls a chariot lead by two bears, Summer by two lions, Autumn by two bulls, and Winter by two wild boars. All of the Seasons hold or are framed by floral items that furthermore represent themselves, such as wheat for Summer, and laurel for Winter. The procession of the seasons on top of the sarcophagus could represent the inevitable cycle of life; birth in the spring and death in the winter, endlessly repeating with no pause. The realization of seasons passing so forcefully with no regard to humanity makes the life and death of the deceased within the sarcophagus is suddenly much less burdensome to mourners. This acts as perhaps a gentle reminder to those visiting the dead that life goes on and that rebirth will come in some form as spring does without fail each year. The seasons liberate mourners from the shackles that bind them to dwelling over the death of their loved ones, forcing them to move on and continue with their own lives.

The sarcophagus exemplifies a subset of beliefs, such as the appreciation of Greek mythology, the concept of an enthralling life, and the customs involved with commemorating the deceased. The commissioner of this sarcophagus most likely had a specific meaning in mind when they requested the relief of Theseus and Ariadne be sculpted alongside the *putti* racing in chariots. Unless their ideas were documented, the overall purpose of this work can be theorized in dozens of different ways, the above being just a single explanation. Romans had such distinct beliefs and customs around Greek mythology and life as a whole, but they had a tendency to leave many things up to interpretation. Since mythology was also passed down orally, the variations of Theseus' and Ariadne's tale are endless. The one used here fits the desired narrative of celebrating life. Nonetheless, as Roman culture and beliefs changed over time, the intricacies of funerary art did too. Greek mythology had a prevalence in the first and second century A.D, but as time progressed, these practices faded into new ones. To comprehend a piece of funerary

art from perhaps the third or eighth century A.D., or even pieces from today's artists, it is necessary to have analyzed a piece such as this sarcophagus.

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