

Roman and Byzantine marble sarcophagi (3rd -13th c. AD): inscriptions, relief decoration and their diverse symbolic meaning

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The paper aims to show the importance of the stone and marble sarcophagi as samples of artistic production and monumentality that contribute to the study of the history and art of the Roman and Byzantine empires. It also intends to underline how their relief decoration and inscriptions give elements of the structure of the society and the taste of the upper class (emperors, clergy and officials) that usually used them. Sarcophagi enrich our knowledge on religious perceptions and burial customs of the time. The most important marble quarries and sarcophagi production centers were in Carrara, Penteli in Attiki and Dokimeion in Phrygia.

The Roman sarcophagi bear relief decoration with mythological, bucolic and bacchic themes, garlands, cupids and Nikae. Common decorative themes are hunting scenes, portrait busts of philosophers and poets and biographical episodes of the deceased. Hercules on a sarcophagus expresses the bravery and virtue of the dead whereas Nikae represent the victory over death. Gorgon faces are apotropaic symbols that protect the grave from the evil forces. The wings of Psyche symbolize the soul of the buried and the Cupid holding a dove, the release of the soul.

The Byzantine sarcophagi on the contrary are decorated with a wide range of motifs in relief carving, including intricate floral and vegetal forms, geometric patterns and animals such as peacocks, lions and snakes coiled around trees. They scarcely bear inscriptions naming the deceased. Besides, the ancient mythological figure of the griffin on sarcophagus panels serves as a guardian for the tomb and draws upon Byzantium's longstanding ties to Greco-Roman art and culture. With the prevalence of Christianity, the main decoration theme is the cross in a great diversity of types and variations. The crosses are often embellished with cypresses, palm trees, vine tendrils and scrolls and symbolize the eternal life and salvation.