Ludovisi Sarcophagus

Sarcophagus Ludovisi 1

Sarcophagus Ludovisi 2

Sarcophagus Ludovisi 3

Sarcophagus Ludovisi 4

Sarcophagus Ludovisi 5
Sarcophagus Ludovisi 10

Sarcophagus Ludovisi 11

Patron/Sponsor: Hostilianus (251 CE) (?)
Original Location/Place: Tomb near the Via Tiburtina, Rome.

Actual Location (Collection/Museum): Museo Nazionale Romano, Palazzo Altemps, Inv. 8574.

Description: The sarcophagus was discovered in 1621 and named after its first owner, Ludovico Ludovisi. A monumental sarcophagus, carved from one single block of Proconnesian marble, it is one of the finest examples of third-century relief work; these high reliefs were characterised by the way in which many elements of the composition are cut completely free of the background, and by the technique of deep drilling. The main relief is found on the front of the sarcophagus, on which a large battle scene is taking place between Roman soldiers and ‘Barbarians’. The lid of the sarcophagus, which is today in Mainz, Germany, is decorated with the bust of a female figure and a central plaque which although today is anepigraphic, likely once contained the painted epitaph of the deceased.

Date: 255 CE
Material: Proconnesian Marble

Measurements: Height: 1.55 m
Width: 2.73 m
Depth: 1.37 m

Commentary: The so-called Ludovisi Battle Sarcophagus (or the ‘Grande’ Ludovisi Sarcophagus), was discovered in a tomb in Rome in 1621, and acquired by the aristocratic family whose name it now bears. One of the largest and most finely decorated sarcophagi to have been discovered in the ancient capital, it has generated much attention and discussion of its elaborate relief front, and the meaning of the scene that it conveys. The turbulence of the third century CE resulted in few monumental building schemes with architectural sculpture, so the sarcophagus has become a crucial source for the figurative art of that period, as well as the kinds of political and imperial messages that such monuments appear to have conveyed.

The front of the sarcophagus is decorated with a monumental relief that depicts a battle between Roman soldiers
and barbarians. It appears initially to be a chaotic scene, but closer examination reveals that the figures have been carefully balanced in their composition; the action takes place on three ‘tiers’, which work together to construct the single narrative of the battle. The most important of the three tiers has been identified as that at the top of the sarcophagus, in which a Roman soldier can be seen riding on horseback. His central position, military dress and raised right arm, seemingly in a gesture of address - or adlocutio - suggests that he may be the Roman general commanding the battle, particularly given that he is the only soldier to appear without a direct adversary. An X on his forehead has been interpreted as the cross that initiates into the Mithraic mysteries received as a sign of the god Mithras’ favour, suggesting victory over death (Helbig, *Führer durch die öffentlichen Sammlungen klassischer Altertümer in Rom* III, p. 276-283). Unlike earlier battle scenes, such as the reliefs of the Columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius, and even the Arch of Septimius Severus, these figures represent a break away from the traditional Classical perspective; the drilling is deeper than earlier examples allowed, and the faces are “strikingly unclassical,” following a more theatrical tone in which they appear “frozen in the moment before disaster and death overwhelm them” (Strong, *Roman Art*, p. 141). Together with the Portonaccio sarcophagus [22], the Ludovisi reliefs are part of a series of sarcophagus designs that celebrated battle in a tangible and recognisable way; their inspiration was likely the Hellenistic monuments of Pergamon, in which the Pergamene armies are shown in victory against the Gauls (for the influence of Pergamene art in the Roman depiction of barbarians, see Marvin, “The Ludovisi Barbarians,” p. 205-223).

Much has been made of the identity of the central figure, who is presumably the deceased. Some have identified him as the younger son of the emperor Decius, Hostilian, who reigned briefly in the year 251 CE (Kleiner, *History of Roman Art*, p. 273). Decius and his older son, Herennius, whom he had made his co-ruler, were killed in battle against a federation of Scythians under the command of the Gothic king Cniva, with Hostilian himself dying shortly afterwards from illness. Hostilian is not known, however, to have taken part in military activity during his short service as Caesar and Augustus, and so the figure may represent that of Herennius Etruscus, the older son, who was indeed in charge of a military campaign against the Goths in 250 CE. He led a command against the Goths – possibly represented by the barbarian figures here – and died in the battle of Abrittus in July 251 CE (De Angelis d'Ossat and Candilio, *Scultura Antica*, p. 220; for the demise of Decius and Herennius, see Aurelius Victor, *On the Caesars*, XXIX.4-5; Lactantius, *On the deaths of the persecutors*, IV). Whatever the identity of the figure, it is clear that warfare featured heavily in the life of the individual for whom the sarcophagus was made; given the turbulence of the years between the fall of the Severan dynasty and the rise of Diocletian, and the near-continuous civil war that raged between individuals competing for power, it is perhaps unsurprising that this theme found expression in art. As noted by Fred Kleiner, the confidence of the central figure and the relentless nature of the Roman soldier’s treatment of the barbarians must have been intended to communicate that the young general – whether an imperial prince or private citizen – was a “fearless commander assured of victory” (Kleiner, *History of Roman Art*, p. 273). It has also been suggested that the scene of battle on the sarcophagus – particularly if it was commissioned for a member of the imperial family – was motivated by a grander political programme, which sought to advertise the strength and organisation of the Roman army, with the Roman soldiers presented as better equipped and more sophisticated than the wild barbarians (De Angelis d'Ossat and Candilio, *Scultura Antica*, p. 221). There is a more symbolic aspect to the relief too; rather than simply glorifying military prowess, the scene represented “transcending the struggle...triumph over death,” as indicated by the singular nature of the central figure, who
stands apart from those fighting beneath him (Strong, *Roman Art*, p. 141).

Thematic keywords:

- **bravery** [23]
- **Hostilian** [24]
- **Roman power** [25]
- **Roman army** [26]
- **Goths** [27]
- **sarcophagus** [28]
- **barbarians** [29]
- **battle** [30]

**Bibliographical references:**

- Helbig, Wolfgang, *Führer durch die öffentlichen Sammlungen klassischer Altertümer in Rom 4 vols* [33] (Tübingen: Ernst Wasmuth, 1963)
- Klein, Fred S., *A History of Roman Art* [34] (Boston: Wadsworth, 2007)

**Other sources connected with this document:**

- **Portonaccio Sarcophagus** [38]
  - Read more about Portonaccio Sarcophagus [38]

- **Column of Marcus Aurelius (180-192 CE)** [39]
  - Read more about Column of Marcus Aurelius (180-192 CE) [39]

- **Column of Trajan - Reliefs (113 CE)** [40]
  - Read more about Column of Trajan - Reliefs (113 CE) [40]

- **Triumphal Arch of Septimius Severus (202-203 CE)** [41]
  - Read more about Triumphal Arch of Septimius Severus (202-203 CE) [41]

**Realized by:**

- **Caroline Barron** [42]