



Portonaccio Sarcophagus

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Patron/Sponsor: Aulus Iulius Pompilius?

Original Location/Place:

Found in Via della Cava di Pietralata, Portonaccio Neighbourhood, near Via Tiburtina

Actual Location (Collection/Museum):

Museo Nazionale Romano, Palazzo Massimo, Inv. 112327

Description:

Large marble sarcophagus decorated entirely with figurative scenes that show influences similar to those of the Column of Marcus Aurelius. The lid is decorated with a bibliographical frieze, which celebrates the birth and wedding of the deceased and an act of clemency towards a barbarian. The front of the grand sarcophagus represents a battle scene staged on several planes and focused on the advance of a Roman knight depicted in the capacity of universal victor. The battle scenes are framed by two couples of captive barbarians. The bas-reliefs on the sides of the sarcophagus show events subsequent to the clash: on one side, barbarian prisoners crossing a river led by Roman soldiers along a boat bridge, on the other side the chieftains submitting to the Roman officials. The dramatic animation of the combat is emphasized by means of the deep chiaroscuro obtained thanks to a skilful use of intaglios.

Date: 180 CE to 190 CE

Material:

Marble

Measurements: Height: 114 cm

Width: 239 cm

Depth: 116 cm

Commentary: The use of decorative sarcophagi for funerary monuments became enormously popular in the reign of Hadrian, during which time their use spread quickly across the entire Roman world. Although occasionally used for burial purposes in the Republican period and early principate, such as the Scipio Barbatus monument, their use grew quickly in the second century CE, perhaps in conjunction with the increased number of cults promising life after death, or even due to increased prosperity making such expensive items available to a wider audience (Tuck, *History of Roman Art*, p. 263). Many sarcophagi were decorated with Greek mythological scenes, and often feature individuals known to be connected with the Underworld, such as Proserpine and Alcestis (see e.g. Alcestis



sarcophagus from Ostia, c. 165 CE, now in the Vatican Museums).

The sarcophagus discovered at Portonaccio, near the Etruscan city of Veii, north of Rome, however, is decorated with a biographical rather than mythological scene, which reflects contemporary imperial public art (Tuck, *History of Roman Art*, p. 265). Dating to 180-190 CE, the sarcophagus is easily one of the most impressive monuments from the Antonine period, and demonstrates themes and figures that are highly reminiscent of the friezes from both the Column of Trajan and the Column of Marcus Aurelius in the centre of Rome. It is believed that the sarcophagus was used for the burial of a Roman general – possibly Aulus Iulius Pompilius? – involved in the campaigns of Marcus Aurelius due to the similarity of the scenes with the organisation and style of the frieze on his column. The lid is decorated with a frieze divided into four scenes showing the birth of the general and his education, which is followed by one demonstrating the *dextrarum iunctio*, or the ‘joining of the right hands’ in a wedding ceremony. Following this comes a scene of imperial *clementia*, in which the general is pictured demonstrating clemency to a captive barbarian (Ambrogi, “Sarcophago,” p. 327). All of these scenes emphasised his personal qualities “as a Roman citizen, *paterfamilias* conquering general,” and supported the construction of a visible public and private identity (Tuck, *History of Roman Art*, p. 267).

The front of the sarcophagus is decorated with a scene of monumental battle between Roman soldiers and barbarians. A faceless general is positioned in the centre of the frieze, riding into the heart of the battle; his place at the centre of the conflict and the surrounding barbarians that he has struck down are reminiscent of the scenes of Trajan charging against the Dacians in the Great Trajanic Frieze that was later reused on the Arch of Constantine (Kleiner, *History of Roman Art*, p. 227). The battle continues on all sides of the general, in a chaotic and tumultuous riot, which is contained by the subdued pairs of bound barbarian figures, one male and one female, who stand at the front corners framing the scene, along with trophies. The implication of Roman victory is clear. The detail is rich and complicated, and appears at first glance to emphasise the turbulent nature of the battle; however, on closer examination, it becomes clear that the figurative field has in fact been divided up into an intricate network of vertical, horizontal and diagonal lines, which form squares and diamond shapes, according to an abstract figurative plan (Ambrogi, “Sarcophago,” p. 328). The result is a series of gradated fields of action, which are further contrasted by the *chiaroscuro* effect achieved by the carving of deep reliefs. The figures are essentially organised into “tiers,” spread over the full height of the relief surface in a manner very evocative of the panels that decorate the Column of Marcus Aurelius (Kleiner, *History of Roman Art*, p. 227). The individual figures are divided into one of two categories, as also demonstrated by the Column of Marcus Aurelius, ultimately serving as symbols of either the conquered or the conquerors, with the bodies of the vanquished barbarians in fact emphasising their inferior status through their use as ‘fillers’ of space, contorted amongst the action of the Roman soldiers (Ambrogi, “Sarcophago,” p. 328). As Steven Tuck has noted, the central position of the general suggests that the victory in this battle was the central event of his life, with his military *virtus* the quality for which he was to be celebrated in perpetuity (*History of Roman Art*, p. 267). The scenes elevated the occupant of the tomb as one who waged great deeds against Rome’s enemies in her name. The fact that the portrait of the general in question remains unfinished in fact gives the battle an almost mythological quality; without specific features that allow a viewer of the scene to identify the general and the particular battle, the action becomes “no less mythologising than representations of mythical heroes like Achilles, Hercules, or Theseus in battle” (Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, p. 148).

It is, however, important to include the scenes from the lid and the sides of the sarcophagus when attempting any reading of its programmatic message. The sides are decorated with scenes describing events subsequent to the clash: on one side, barbarian prisoners are shown crossing a river led by Roman soldiers along a boat bridge, on the other side chieftains are depicted submitting to Roman officials. When taken together with the scenes of the lid, it becomes clear that the encomiastic intentions of the sarcophagus sought to combine military themes, battle and submission, in order to exalt the “*virtus*” of the general, his *clementia*, with the civic aims of Roman life, which focused on the *concordia* between husband and wife, and the importance of family as implied by the scene of the occupant’s birth (Ambrogi, “Sarcophago,” p. 328).

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- [Marcus Aurelius](#) [15]
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