



Menorah Sarcophagus

The Menorah Sarcophagus



[1]

Name of the artist: Unknown.

Patron/Sponsor: Unknown.

Original Location/Place: Unknown. Attributed to the Villa Randanini catacombs in early scholarship, but this has now been widely dismissed. Earliest known provenance was in the Kirchner collection in Rome in the 17th century.

Actual Location (Collection/Museum): Museo Nazionale Romano, Rome. Inventory number: 67611

Description: Fragment of the front of a marble “Season Sarcophagus”; two Victories hold a *clipeus* (shield), within which is depicted a seven-branch menorah. Of the personifications of the Four Seasons, only the figure of Autumn remains entire, to the right of the menorah scene; he carries a basket of fruit in one hand and a pair of wild fowl in the other. To the right of Autumn are the fragmentary remains of Winter, who also holds an animal – perhaps a boar or a hare. The figures of Spring and Summer should stand to the left of the *clipeus*, but are missing. Underneath the *clipeus* are three *putti* or cupids, who are depicted treading grapes in a vat, which is itself decorated with two lions-head spouts. Beneath Autumn, a further two *putti* are shown riding a hare and dog (Konikoff, *Sarcophagi from the Jewish Catacombs*, p. 38, no. 14).

Date: 251 CE to 350 CE

Material: Marble.

Measurements: Height: 70 cm

Width: 126 cm

Commentary: This fragment of a sarcophagus front, dated tentatively on an iconographic basis to the late third century CE, is often described as the “best known” remnant of a Jewish sarcophagus from the city of Rome. Believed to have been a “Seasons sarcophagus” depicting the personifications of the four seasons, it displays a carved menorah in relief within a shield held by two Victories, where traditionally a portrait of the deceased might have been placed. The provenance of the sarcophagus is unknown; much early scholarship attributed it to the Villa Randanini catacombs, but its earliest confirmed origin has been demonstrated to be in the private collection of Athanasius Kircher in Rome in the seventeenth century, meaning that its actual findspot remains unknown (for a synthesis of the scholarship on the sarcophagus’s provenance with bibliography, see Konikoff, *Sarcophagi from the Jewish Catacombs*, p. 38-41).

From what remains of the front of the sarcophagus it appears that the relief decoration once depicted the Four Seasons, a fashionable feature of sarcophagi from the second-fourth centuries CE; the representations of the Seasons and the attributes that defined them – usually agricultural elements or animals – stood for concepts to do with the passing of time, of growth and decay, which could be linked with an allegorical understanding of death that hoped for a happy afterlife (Zanker, *Roman Art*, p. 193-194). The addition of the menorah was, however, unusual. The seven-branched lampstand became the most frequently occurring cultic symbol among Jews in the Roman world through its association with the wilderness Tabernacle of the Israelites and the Jerusalem Temple (Pearce, “Introduction,” p. 6). It represented a design for seven lamps revealed to Moses by God, which was constructed and placed within the Temple, and which symbolised universal enlightenment and wisdom. In the Pentateuch, the Tabernacle (and later the Temple) menorah signified the presence of the divine, with the constantly burning lamps an allusion to the Burning Bush (Exodus 25:8 and 31-40; Williams, “The menorah in a sepulchral context,” p. 80. For detailed discussion of the history and origin of the menorah, see Hachlili, *The Menorah*, p. 7-39).

Following Vespasian and Titus’s despoliation of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE it gained ever greater fame, particularly in the city of Rome where the golden menorah seized by them was displayed in the ‘public art gallery’



created by Vespasian in the *Templum Pacis* complex (see [Arch of Titus Reliefs](#) [2] and [Temple of Peace](#) [3]). That said, images of the menorah from the Second Temple period itself are extremely rare; Steven Fine notes a coin image dating to the last Hasmonean king, Mattathias Antigonus, which was minted in 39 BCE, along with five menorah that were inscribed into the walls of the entry hall of Jason's Tomb in western Jerusalem, as well as three ossuaries and one incised on a piece of plaster from a house excavated in the Jewish Quarter of the city (Fine, *Art and Judaism*, p. 148-149). The menorah did not predominate as the most recognisable Jewish symbol until the third century CE, during which time it began to appear in catacombs in both Rome and Judea, most notably in the Beth She'arim burials (Fine, *Art and Judaism*, p. 153; Williams, "The menorah in a sepulchral context," p. 86-88). Margaret Williams has noted that the presence of menorah on funerary monuments – whether scratched into walls or carved in high relief, such as this example here, was used to invoke the protection of the deity over the deceased, a practice adopted by Jewish society from Roman burial practices, which favoured apotropaic elements in the forms of protective epitaphs and curses (Williams, "The menorah in a sepulchral context," p. 79). By the time of the arrival of the diaspora communities across the Mediterranean after the destruction of the Second Temple, the menorah had come to stand for both a utilitarian object and symbol at the same time, and by the time of this sarcophagus's execution in the late third century CE, was "a memorial to the lost menorahs of the Tabernacle and the Solomonic and Hasmonean temples, and a living symbol of the lives (and deaths) of many members of late antique Jewry" (Fine, *Art and Judaism*, p. 155).

In Rome, the evidence for menorah in the funerary sphere is "overwhelming in its abundance and variety" (Williams, "The menorah in a sepulchral context," p. 83; for a survey of this evidence, see Williams, "Image and Text," p. 328-350). The catacombs contain a multitude of examples, from scratched graffiti to grand marble sarcophagi such as that under consideration here. Margaret Williams has noted that occasionally the menorah appears in a position of prominence, such as on the lid of a sarcophagus – where it might be said to 'protect' the remains beneath – or in the centre of the frontal relief (Williams, "The menorah in a sepulchral context," p. 83). In the case of this sarcophagus, only a fragment of the right side remains, but were the missing left side to be reconstructed, it would become clear that the *clipeus* in which the menorah is carved would be at the centre of the sarcophagus's front. Although it is unlikely that the sarcophagus was commissioned specifically by a resident Jew in the city of Rome – a more likely scenario is that it was part of the 'stock' of a stonemason's workshop, awaiting the purchase after which the portrait of the deceased could be sculpted – the addition of the menorah was surely a symbol of Jewish identity (Konikoff, *Sarcophagi from the Jewish Catacombs*, p. 39). It represented one way for Jews of the Diaspora communities to assert their Jewishness, whilst at the same time indicating the presence of the Jewish God and his watchful protection (Williams, "The menorah in a sepulchral context," p. 88). Although free Jews in Rome had been legitimate Roman citizens since the *Constitutio Antoniniana* of 212 VE, a distinct sense of Jewishness continued to be expressed in such a way, as well as through other media.

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Hachlili, Rachel, [The Menorah, the Ancient Seven-armed Candelabrum: Origin, Form, and Significance](#) [14] (Leiden: Brill, 2001)

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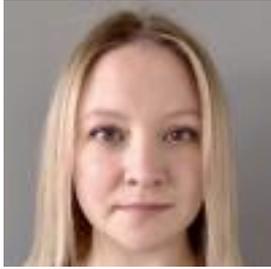
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