Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus (CIL VI, 32004)

Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus

Name of the artist: Unknown.
Patron/Sponsor: Junius Bassus
Original Location/Place: Exact location unknown; close to the crypt of St Peter, Rome.

Actual Location (Collection/Museum): Treasury Museum of St Peter's Basilica, Rome.
Original Inscription/Graffito: CIL VI, 32004

Diplomatic: IVN BASSVS V C QVI VIXIT ANNIS XLII MEN II IN IPSA PRAEFECTVRA VRBI NEOFITVS IIT AD DEVM VIII KAL SEPT EVSEBIO ET YPATIO COSS

Edition: Iun(ius) Bassus, v(ir) c(larissimus), qui vixit annis XLII, men(sibus) II, in ipsa praefectura urbi neofitus iit ad Deum VIII Kal(endas) Sept(embres) Eusebio et (H)ypatio coss.

Translation: (The translation is my own) Junius Bassus, vir clarissimus, who lived 42 years, 2 months, in his own prefecture of the city, a convert (to Christianity) he went to God, on the 8th day from the Kalends of September, in the consulship of Eusebius and Hypatius.

Description: A large, white marble sarcophagus, decorated with figurative reliefs on three sides. The front of the sarcophagus is organised into a “double-register,” with reliefs on two levels. The top level of reliefs are situated underneath an entablature, and divided by carved Corinthian columns to create five niches. Beneath these are a further five niches, divided again by columns, but set within an arch and gable register. The ten niches contain scenes of biblical characters and stories; on the top level, from left to right, the scenes depict the sacrifice of Isaac, the arrest of Peter, Christ enthroned, with disciples to each side, the arrest of Christ, and the judgement of Pilate. On the lower level, the scenes are (from left to right): Job’s distress, Adam and Eve, Christ arriving in Jerusalem, Daniel in the lion’s den and the arrest of Paul. Within the spandrels of the lower register – now badly damaged – scenes from both the Old and New Testaments are depicted, with lambs acting symbolically in the place of men, which are believed to represent the three youths in the fiery furnace, the striking of the rock, the multiplication of the loaves, the baptism of Christ by John, the receiving of the Law, and the raising of Lazarus (Malbon, The Iconography of the Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, p. 5). The short ends of the sarcophagus are decorated with traditional pagan scenes representing the Four Seasons, with putti or Cupids harvesting. The lid survives only in very fragmentary form; the main dedicatory inscription was inscribed along the front edge of the lid, with a tabula placed on top and in the centre originally containing a funerary epigram (CIL VI, 41341a = EDR109751 [3]), describing Bassus’s career and funeral, but which is again much damaged. Fragments of carved reliefs survive on either side of this inscription, with the right side potentially identified as a funerary banquet, or kline meal for the dead. The remains of a mask representing Luna, the moon, at the right-hand end of the lid is presumed to have complemented one of
Date: 359 CE  
Material: White marble.  
Measurements: Height: c. 182 cm  
Width: c. 234 cm  
Depth: c. 152 cm

**Commentary:** The sarcophagus of Junius Bassus is one of the earliest marble relief sarcophagi to have survived with overtly Christian themes. The double registers and intercolumniations create niches for ten individual figurative reliefs, which combine in a complex iconographic programme that uses both Old and New Testament stories. Although the sarcophagus has generated more than a century of scholarship on the theological relationships between these narratives, and their importance for an early Christian audience, it is the evidence that it provides for the “Christianisation of Rome and the Romanization of Christianity” that is this commentary’s primary focus (Malbon, *The Iconography of the Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus*, p. 140); unlike the highly decorative, figurative sarcophagi of the second and third centuries CE, which celebrate ideals of conquest and martial power, the sarcophagus of Junius Bassus promotes a message of Christian salvation, which both appeals and responds to traditional Roman imperial models.

The dedicatory inscription on the front of the sarcophagus states that it was made for Junius Bassus, a *vir clarissimus* (senatorial rank), who – at the time he died – had held the office of the Prefect of the City of Rome (*in ipsa praefectura urbi*). The sarcophagus is also dated by the inscription, which gives the date of Junius Bassus’s death as the “8th day from the Kalends of September, in the consulship of Eusebius and Hypatius” (*VIII Kalendas Septembres Eusebio et Hypatio coss*), or the 25th August, 359 CE. Little is known of his family or career, other than that his father – also a Junius Bassus – had been praetorian prefect in Rome from 318-331 CE, before becoming consul in 331 (*PLRE I*, p. 154-155). Junius Bassus the younger, as city prefect, was “the highest official residing in Rome, head and leader of the Senate” at the time of his death, making his sarcophagus an important, and rare, example of Christian conversion amongst the elite; the senatorial class of Rome were amongst the last to convert, remaining predominantly pagan until the end of the fourth century CE (Malbon, *The Iconography of the Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus*, p. 4). That Junius Bassus had converted to Christianity before his death is indicated by the statement in the dedicatory inscription that he was *neofitus* – a “neophyte” or convert – who had “gone to God” (*ad Deum*), apparently indicating a death-bed conversion or baptism. Whatever the situation that led to Bassus’s conversion, his high rank in the city of Rome and the fine quality of the sarcophagus, along with its reliance upon traditional imperial models in its depiction of biblical scenes, renders the sarcophagus a unique monument worthy of the scholarship that it has generated.

The niches on the front of the sarcophagus are divided into two registers, which mix episodes from the Old and New Testaments; the top register depicts, from left to right, the sacrifice of Isaac, the arrest of Peter, Christ enthroned with disciples to each side, the arrest of Christ, and the judgement of Pilate. On the lower register, Job’s distress, Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, Christ arriving in Jerusalem, Daniel in the lion’s den and the arrest of Paul are shown. These figures are carved in very high relief and separated by an elaborate and ornate framework of columns, entablature, gables and arches. The result is a “multitude of miniature stages...[with] the amount of space and depth in each [varying] according to the demands imposed by the setting and the disposition of the figures” (Kitzinger, *Byzantine Art in the Making*, p. 26). Although these techniques were well-established in the production of marble sarcophagi by the mid-4th century CE – one need think only of the Portonaccio [4] (late 2nd century CE) or Ludovisi [5] (mid 3rd century CE) sarcophagi reliefs – the arrangement of scenes that communicated a series of different stories or episodes, rather than a complete narrative, was a new innovation. Much scholarship has focused on the theological relationships between the different scenes and has questioned how their messages should be interpreted, with the majority noting a common theme of salvation and the proclamation of Christ’s sovereignty (see Malbon, *The Iconography of the Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus*, p. 22-38 for a good synthesis of the main studies). However, perhaps the most interesting aspect of this interpretation can be found in the presentation of Christ in two of the niches. In the central upper register he appears seated on a throne, with Peter and Paul on each side. He holds a scroll in one hand and his feet are positioned with one slightly below the platform on which the other rests, in a pose reminiscent of imperial images of the emperor; although the position of their arms is slightly different, the seated Christ is perhaps modelled on figures such as the seated statue of the emperor Tiberius, now in the Vatican Museums. Beneath the throne is a bearded figure, interpreted as a “sky god,” suggesting that Christ’s power supersedes all others in the universe. Fred Kleiner has noted that a very similar image appears of the enthroned tetrarchs on the Arch of Gallerius at Thessaloniki (Kleiner, *A history of Roman Art*, p. 304). Much scholarship has interpreted this scene as a representation of the *traditio legis*, the
“handing over of the law,” an iconography with no direct scriptural source; it represents Christ, with right arm raised in blessing and holding a scroll in his left, which is to be received by Peter flanking him on one side, with Paul the recipient of the acclamation on the other (Couzin, *The ‘Traditio Legis,’* p. 2). The expression *traditio legis* was not in use by the sculptors of the sarcophagus either, but is rather attributed to scholars of the late nineteenth century who made a visual connection between the iconography and the terminology of contemporary scholarly discourse about the transferal of Christian law to a convert or initiate (Couzin, *The ‘Traditio Legis,’* p. 2).

A further imperial reference, however, might be found immediately beneath this on the lower register; here Christ is depicted entering Jerusalem on a donkey, following the representations of Roman emperors entering cities on horseback, such as the scenes of Trajan in the reliefs of his Column in Rome, from which Gospel narrative some New Testament scholars have interpreted as a direct parody of a Roman triumph (see *Mark 11:7-11* [6] for further discussion of this). Christ’s right arm gestures towards two figures, in a further borrowing of traditional imperial gestures of clemency or of *adlocutio* (for the latter, see Couzin, *The ‘Traditio Legis,’* p. 25-28). Elizabeth Malbon has suggested that these scenes should be understood as part of the process by which Christianity was “Romanized,” stating that “political power structures and images are being taken over by religious power structures and images, as Christianity is transformed from a persecuted faith to a tolerated tradition” (Malbon, *The Iconography of the Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus,* p. 140). The inference here is that the growing confidence and assertiveness of the Christian message in 4th century CE Rome was expressed through the appropriation of more traditionally “Roman” models, such as imperial relief poses. The “Romanness” of Junius Bassus’s own culture also found a place in these expressions; as a member of the senatorial elite, his cultural repertoire was conditioned by traditional images associated with the authority and dominance of Rome’s historic power, which was connected through the emperors to the gods. The use of imperial models to convey his devotion to the Christian god “marked a transitional step in the process of moving from late antique “pagan” imagery to early medieval Christian imagery” (Malbon, *The Iconography of the Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus,* p. 146).

Jas Elsner has noted that the sarcophagus displays an interesting “range of times” in its sculptural reliefs, with the Old Testament events foreshadowing the New Testament narrative, which is carried into the present by the scenes which depict the arrests of Peter and Paul, which in turn echo and mirror the arrest of Christ (Elsner, “The role of early Christian art,” p. 85-86). The central image of Christ enthroned and holding a scroll he interprets as the giving of the Law to the Roman apostles, which “is the guarantee of the presentness of Biblical time and salvation in the apostolic Church established in the city by the very saints to whom Christ entrusted his salvific? message” (Elsner, “The role of early Christian art,” p. 86). This is part, therefore, of the reinvention of the city of Rome as *Roma Christiana*; in order for the Christian message to succeed, Christianity had to accept the material significance of the capital city as much as her inhabitants might accept Christ, which in the case of this sarcophagus was done both by referring to familiar imperial models in its execution, and through the allusions to saints whose stories were inextricably linked with Rome. The Christian narratives “encase the body of the dead Prefect in a symbolic structure rooting his baptism is both scripture and the specifically Roman inheritance of scripture…[giving] a strongly Rome-centred emphasis to the Christian heritage of initiation and death, of which Bassus is (in the rhetoric of the sarcophagus) the most recent heir” (Elsner, “The role of early Christian art,” p. 86). Rome’s dominance was no longer guaranteed by the pagan gods, but had been supplanted by an all encompassing, persuasive rhetoric of Christian faith, which was linked to the city by the saints that came to represent her; the power of that system was represented by the relief detail of the sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, which combined the direct connection of Christianity and the city with traditional symbols of imperial power.

Thematic keywords:

- sarcophagus [7]
- Rome (city) [8]
- Christianity [9]
- paganism [10]
- imperial image [11]
- Jesus [12]
- Romanization [14]
- adlocutio [15]
- traditio legis [16]
Bibliographical references:


Other sources connected with this document:

- Portonaccio Sarcophagus [23]
  - Read more about Portonaccio Sarcophagus [23]

- Ludovisi Sarcophagus [24]
  - Read more about Ludovisi Sarcophagus [24]

Text

**Mark 11:7-11** [25]

Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem

  - Read more about Mark 11:7-11 [25]

Realized by:

**Caroline Barron** [26]

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