



## Sarcophagus from Palmyra

### garden\_of\_palmyra\_archeological\_museum\_2010-04-21.jpg



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**Name of the artist:** Unknown

**Patron/Sponsor:** Unknown

**Original Location/Place:** Palmyra, Syria

**Actual Location (Collection/Museum):** Palmyra Archaeological Museum (Tadmor), inventory number: 2677B/8983

**Description:**

Low rectangular sarcophagus with relief decoration on three sides. The lid of the sarcophagus shows it to be of the *kline* type – representing the kinds of couches used for banqueting - with a full-scale figurative portrait of the deceased reclining and wearing Palmyrene costume, as though at a banquet. The relief on the front of the sarcophagus shows a series of figures, about to perform a sacrifice, framed by the 'turned' legs of the couch. On the short sides are two reliefs depicting gods.

**Date:** 3d CE to 3d CE

**Material:** Limestone

**Measurements:** Height: 1.10m

Width: 2.32m

Depth: 0.9-1.07m

**Commentary:** This sarcophagus and its lid were discovered in 1990, reused as *spolia* in Temple Tomb no. 176 in Palmyra, which had been incorporated in the Byzantine city wall (Schmidt-Colinet & al-Asaad, "Zwei Neufunde Palmyrenischer Sarkophage," p. 271). It is a *kline* sarcophagus, which depicts a full-size portrait of the deceased on the lid as well as relief detail on all sides. In this particular case, the imagery of the sarcophagus is interesting for the combination of figures that it presents; some of the figures are dressed in Palmyrean or Pathian garb, but a single togate figure in the centre of the front of the sarcophagus appears to suggest that the deceased was a Roman citizen. This is significant due to the date of the sarcophagus – the second quarter of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE – as it may have been commissioned or selected by its patron due to their own award of Roman citizenship following the *Constitutio Antoniniana* in 212 CE.

The sarcophagus has been dated to the second quarter of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE owing to its similarity with other *kline* sarcophagi from Palmyra from that period. In a relief between the front legs of the *kline* couch seven standing male figures face the viewer in a scene of sacrifice. The central figure is a man who holds a sacrificial bowl or *patera* in his lowered right hand, above an octagonal altar, as well as a scroll – to indicate his literacy – in his now destroyed left hand. The man wears sandals, a tunic with a '*clavus*' – a broad band of purple - visible on his right shoulder, and a toga, indicating his Roman citizenship. The face of the man has not survived, but the hairstyle has been dated to portraits of the second quarter of the 3rd century AD (Schmidt-Colinet and al-Asaad, "Zwei Neufunde Palmyrenischer Sarkophage" p. 272). On either side of his head are a wreath (on the left) and a priest's cap or *modius* on the right, indicating the man's role as a high priest in Palmyrene society (*ibid*). To each side of the man stand three barefoot servants in knee-length, girdled tunics. In contrast to the short-cut hair of the togate figure, these have longer, 'Parthian' style hair; they carry the various implements required for the performance of a sacrifice, including (from right to left) a jug, a bird (possibly a chicken or a duck?), fruits and box. The attendant to the far right of the central togate figure has a hatchet over his right shoulder and leads the sacrificial animal (Schmidt-Colinet and al-Asaad, "Zwei Neufunde Palmyrenischer Sarkophage" p. 273, esp. n. 8 for further discussion of the implements they carry).



On the right, short side of the sarcophagus, a woman in a long chiton is depicted who points to the left of the chest; in her right hand she holds a lance with its point pointing upwards and with her left she leads a camel. According to iconographic parallels, it is the goddess Astarte, who, as protector of the caravan, is shown here introducing the camel that belonged to the burial-god of Palmyrene religion. A woman is also depicted on the left short side, this time reclining on a *kline* and receiving a necklace from a servant who stands besides her, emphasising the social aspect of the family to which the deceased belonged (Schmidt-Colinet, *Das Tempelgrab*, p. 110). Finally, the full-sized figure that reclines upon the lid of the sarcophagus is a man in Parthian dress, wearing boots, trousers, long sleeves and a cloak, which is fastened to his right shoulder by a *fibula* brooch (Schmidt-Colinet and al-Asaad, "Zwei Neufunde Palmyrenischer Sarkophage," p. 274). He is clearly of wealthy and important status, given the jewelled belt and weaponry (a dagger and a sword) that he carries, the fragmented remains of a horse that stands close to his feet, and the ornate decoration of the mattress and couch that he is lying on (see Schmidt-Colinet and al-Asaad, "Zwei Neufunde Palmyrenischer Sarkophage," p. 274-275 for detailed discussion of the ornamentation of the couch itself, the decoration of which places it in the third century CE. A plan of the arrangement of the figures is given on p. 276).

Overall the sarcophagus exhibits an eclectic mix of iconographic styles and subjects that are common to both the Greco-Roman and Near-Eastern worlds. Although funerary monuments more typically took the form of reliefs that were placed over *loculi*, or niches in walls that contained the inhumed remains, and which depicted single or pairs of figures, the introduction of sarcophagi to Palmyrene funerary culture in the second century CE expanded the available field for decorative elements and increased the possibility of incorporating complex scenes, which might communicate a greater wealth of detail about the deceased and their position in Palmyrene society (Rubina, "Networking beyond Death," p. 121-136. For more information regarding the role of portraits in Palmyrene funerary monuments, see *ibid*; Kropp and Rubina, "The Palmyra Portrait Project," p. 393-408). It is clear from this example that the sarcophagus was intended to commemorate – and communicate – a variety of messages about the deceased, and his status within the city. As noted by Andreas Schmidt-Colinet and Khaled al-Asaad, the reliefs and sculpture of the lid and sarcophagus case must be read together in order to understand the various areas of life that the owner of the monument intended to convey; the full-scale reclining figure promotes his role as a native Palmyrene, most likely a caravan leader, of the highest social and economic rank, based on his fine dress and the size of the sarcophagus. The imagery on the left side of the relief intimated wealth and social status, whereas the depiction of Astarte and a camel on the right side demonstrated that he was under the protection of one of the most important caravan-goddesses, and thus expresses his loyalty to his local gods (Schmidt-Colinet and al-Asaad, "Zwei Neufunde Palmyrenischer Sarkophage," p. 275-276). The sacrificial scene at the front is the most interesting however; the deceased is presented as a "*cives Romanus*," a Roman citizen, wearing the toga, and emphasising his elite status under the protection of Rome. The depiction of a togate figure in the multitude of figurative funerary reliefs from Palmyra is relatively rare – Andreas Kropp and Raja Rubina have noted only a very few in their compilation of the corpus for the Palmyra Portrait Project (for which, see Kropp and Rubina, "The Palmyra Portrait Project," p. 393-408, esp. p. 394, n.10) – suggesting that this was a particularly important aspect of the deceased's identity that he wanted to emphasise; the figure is found in the centre of the front of the sarcophagus, and his Roman dress visibly stands out amongst the traditional Palmyrene and Parthian styles that surround him. However, although the scene is one of sacrifice, his head is not veiled, as was traditional in Roman religion, and immediately to either side of his head are the attributes and insignia of a high priest of Palmyra. Although dressed in Roman costume, the sacrifice he is about to undertake must be to his local, Palmyrene gods, and not to those of Rome. Andreas Schmidt-Colinet and Khaled al-Asaad suggested that the combination of images and themes on this sarcophagus was indicative of an "ambivalence" on the part of the tomb's owner; he was clearly proud of his Roman citizenship, but not at the expense of his Palmyrene identity, which is demonstrably highlighted here through images that carry demonstrable social and religious connotations. The adoption of Roman citizenship was not understood, therefore as an alternative or contradiction to Palmyrene identity and tradition, but rather as a complement to it (Schmidt-Colinet and al-Asaad, "Zwei Neufunde Palmyrenischer Sarkophage," p. 276). The date of the sarcophagus – the second quarter of the third century CE – has led to suggestions that the sarcophagus's occupant may have been one who benefitted from the empire wide gift of Roman citizenship made by the *Constitutio Antoniniana* in 212 CE, and that it was this new status that was being celebrated in the relief decoration (see e.g. Hekster, *Rome and its Empire*, p. 51). However, in the absence of an accompanying inscription that might confirm the date or reveal the adoption of Antonine nomenclature, as is so often used to identify the recipients of the grant, it is impossible to say whether or not this is indeed the case. Given the number of Palmyrene and Parthian references made in the reliefs, it would seem unlikely that the award of Roman citizenship, made evident by one single figure among many, was the primary message of the sarcophagus. It is, in fact, more likely that the sarcophagus was commissioned or purchased following the colonial status given to Palmyra under Caracalla, and that the deceased – who was clearly wealthy and successful in the city – enjoyed some benefit as a result of his social rank that resulted in an individual award of citizenship. This individual award of citizenship could also have been given to a family member at an earlier period and inherited by him. Regardless of when Roman citizenship



was acquired, it was clearly one aspect of the deceased's life that was considered worthy of celebration and commemoration; alongside his capacity as high priest and successful caravaner, the occupant of this sarcophagus noted his cosmopolitan and elite status by advertising his right to wear a toga, whilst also maintaining his loyalty to his own home-gods.

Over the course of the first three centuries CE, Palmyra had grown both in terms of its urban infrastructure, and its social diversity, due to an expansion of contact with the Mediterranean; although Greek and Roman customs and values became more familiar to this remote community of the Near East, the Palmyrenes did not abandon their ancestral habits, but rather integrated them with those now imported by contact with the West. As demonstrated by the 'layers' of identity depicted on this sarcophagus, it was possible to be both Roman and Palmyrene, both citizen and caravaner; the assumption of Roman citizenship is promoted here as an addition that increased one's social presence in Palmyra, but that did not challenge existing status, customs or religious practices.

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