

## BOOK REVIEW

*Roman Strigillated Sarcophagi: Art and Social History.* By JANET HUSKINSON. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. xvi + 349. Hardcover, \$125.00. ISBN 978-0-19-920324-6.

An orphan has found a home. Familiar but overlooked, the strigillated sarcophagus has patiently awaited its moment. Produced in Rome over a span of three centuries, strigillated sarcophagi have attracted far less attention than the city's more glamorous frieze or "city gate" types. Because the wavy lines (or curved fluting) from which they get their name dominate their front surface and relegate other imagery to a central panel and the two corners, strigillated sarcophagi have seemed less eloquent to art and social historians alike. To set the record straight, Janet Huskinson focuses on "makers and users" to write an "ethnography" (iii) of the type's journey from the second to the fifth century CE (and beyond). Neither a narrowly typological study nor a rumination on masterpieces, Huskinson's study is a clear expression of those forces that now anchor Roman art in social history, elevate the status of "the viewer" in the process of making meaning, and close the gap between textual and visual literacy. In this case, the stakes are further raised by the type's potential to index continuity and change across the divide separating pagan and Christian Rome.

Following a chapter establishing the type's general features, the study falls into three parts: four chapters on original production, use, and viewing; five on imagery; and three on reception and reuse through the twentieth century. Chapters two and three introduce many of the basic questions of manufacture and consumption raised by all Roman sarcophagi as they move from quarry to tomb: sources of marble (in this case, Asia Minor, Proconnesus, and Carrara); the location of workshops (Rome, but also eventually the provinces); the roles of craftsmen and patrons in choosing iconography and style; and visibility and effect in burial contexts, particularly when burial (rather than display in mausolea) appeared in the later third century.

The third chapter assays the sources and associations of the type's decorative elements: fluting, common architectural motifs (columns, pediments, and doorways), inscription panels, and symbolic and human figures (including portraits)—all of which could evoke a wide range of "memories and emotions" (81).

The distinctiveness of the type, we learn, lies not in its deviation from the traditions of Roman visual culture but in its easy accommodation of idiosyncratic configurations of images in its central zone and corners (and sometimes lid and sides). This “combination of tradition and flexibility” (102) meant the strigillated sarcophagus could respond to changing tastes and attitudes. Finally, chapter six considers how “intended” viewers might have negotiated the type’s ensembles of images by coordinating relations between the corner images and the central panel (though rather little is said about the epigraphic component’s role in this mix).

Many readers will gravitate towards Part Two, “Representations.” Although individual lives and communal ideals were portrayed less by true portraiture than by conventional signs, the imagery, Huskinson believes, seems initially selected to permit a capacious sense of “Roman-ness” (117). Chapter seven focuses on portrait figures, though these, too, relied heavily on conventional vocabulary (dress and activities) and coded settings (the resilient *dextrarum iunctio*) to suggest individuality. Huskinson considers what portraiture across time reveals about gender and the relations of self and community, concluding that from the early third through the fourth century, while male representation changed relatively little (a trend at odds with other media), women were more frequently represented and increasingly intellectualized with such male attributes as the scroll and scroll-box (141–143, 227). Overall, however, as sexual difference was elided and military and civic statements faded, domestic and private values, such as marital harmony and piety, were called upon to emblemize personal and communal values. The next three chapters pursue these themes through myth, symbolic figures, and Christianity’s impact.

From a welter of finally scaled detail one notable story emerges. The references to myth (e.g. Meleager and Bacchus) on strigillated sarcophagi in the second and third centuries, though relatively limited in repertoire, parallel visual strategies seen elsewhere (e.g. frieze sarcophagi), displaying a preference for symbolic representations of harmonious marriage and the *vita felix*. This messaging depended upon distilling a myth’s “core values” (179) and eschewing explicit references to death and the afterlife. As myth receded in the later third century generic philosophical and pastoral images gained ground for women as well as men. Many of these, exemplified by the “Good Shepherd” and the *orans*, were initially “open” to multiple interpretations, but the contemporary inclusion of distinctly Christian images (Jonah and Lazarus) on some monuments began to close them down (199–203). The fourth century witnessed the further development of Christian imagery, narrative and emblematic and also often “reduced to essentials” (210).

Yet, at the same time, portraiture style saw little change (the *dextrarum iunctio* remained popular) and religious affiliation and status were signaled primarily by the imagery in associated panels, though even there often blended with traditional symbols of intellectual and spiritual fulfillment. That is, from the third through the fourth century continuities are as pronounced as innovations and both proceeded within “the traditions of Roman visual culture” (209).

In *Roman Strigillated Sarcophagi* an accomplished scholar provides a grammar for reading (below) the surfaces of Rome’s most popular and long-lived sarcophagus type. She also realizes, however, that the inherent ambiguity of images, many evoking a range of meanings now “unknowable” (155), makes translation a fraught enterprise. Still, this comprehensive study clarifies the syntax of a type whose “greatest creative strength” (128) derives from the interplay of its discrete figural fields and the accommodation therein of endless permutations of novel and conventional images.

DENNIS TROUT

*University of Missouri*, troutD@missouri.edu