
Janusz A. Ostrowski

**REPRESENTATION OF RURAL WORKS
ON A SARCOPHAGUS LID FROM
THE COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL
MUSEUM IN CRACOW**

From among 37 fragments of the Roman sarcophagi kept in the museums of Cracow, most have been published in recent years¹. However, some fragments still await publication. This ensues, among others, from the fact that they are rather modest in size, which in turn renders the identification of scenes impossible. Moreover, the poor state of preservation of some fragments prevents a more precise iconographical and stylistical analysis, thus hampering the object's dating².

In the Czartoryski Collection of the National Museum in Cracow a fairly large sarcophagus lid fragment has survived, decorated with the scenes connected with harvest and the gathering of olives (Fig. 1)³. Four people take part in these works: one (perhaps a woman), leaning towards the earth, cuts corn ears with a sickle; another carries the sheaves thrown over his arm; the third carries two baskets on a *ferculum* held on his arm, whereas the fourth

¹ A full list of the Roman sarcophagi fragments kept in Cracow together with the bibliography of the published objects are given by J. A. Ostrowski, *Cracow Collections of Roman Sarcophagi Fragments*, [in:] *Studies in Ancient Art and Civilization* 1, ZNUJ CMLXXXIX, *Prace Archeologiczne* 49, *Studia z Archeologii Śródziemnomorskiej* 13, Kraków 1991, pp. 35—48.

² All fragments of the sarcophagi kept in Cracow will be published in CSIR, *Pologne II/2*, Warszawa 1992 (forthcoming), prepared under the editorship of A. Sadurska.

³ National Museum in Cracow, Czartoryski Collection, Inv. No. MNK XI—1250. Purchased 1893 in Rome by Władysław Czartoryski. White fine-grained marble. Height 0,34 m, width 0,53 m. Cf. J. A. Ostrowski, *Cracow Collections...*, No. 26, fig. 6.



figure which is hooded stands in front of a branchy tree, picking its fruits, most probably olives. Between him and the tree there is a basket filled with fruits. On the right side of the fragment, a part of a *tabula ansata* bordering is visible, that could have contained an epitaphic inscription. The fragment has, on the top and at the bottom, original borders delimiting the composition.

Suchlike representations are relatively rare among Roman sarcophagi reliefs. The images coming from daily life (*Menschenleben*) are dominated by war scenes and lion hunts, wedding and offering scenes, whereas the sarcophagi that show the work of craftsmen, merchants or farmers are scarce⁴. The rural scenes (apart from bucolic pastoral representations) with people are extremely rare.

In a vast majority, the scenes on the Roman sarcophagi that are connected with fruit gathering are accompanied with putta. This is the case with both pagan and Christian sarcophagi, which naturally bears definite symbolical significance. The putta, placed amid grapevine tangles and shown plucking its bunches, in pagan art are linked with the cult of Dionysos, symbolizing the annual regeneration of nature (as in the group of the sarcophagi with the representation of Eroses — personifications of the Four Seasons⁵). In Christian art, a grapevine bunch symbolizes the Eucharist, thus also the rebirth, and more strictly speaking the transition of human soul to the sphere of eternal life.

When the people were represented in rural scenes on the Roman sarcophagi, they were normally shown only in minor game hunting scenes⁶ where they make a battue or carry killed animals in nets⁷.

However, a relatively small group of sarcophagi exists (or mainly their lids) where the people are represented at various farming activities, fishing or fruit gathering. The objects in question here are made in the years 270—320 A.D. executed under the influence of the native Italic currents composing the so-called folk art (*Volkstümliche Kunstströmung*), noticed among others by G. Rodenwaldt and F. Gerke⁸. According to the classification by R. Bianchi-Bandinelli, these currents can be reckoned among the plebeian art⁹, which

⁴ Cf. the list of motives in the publication by G. Koch, H. Sichtermann, *Römische Sarkophage*, München 1982, pp. 88—126.

⁵ Problems connected with the sarcophagi with the Seasons are exhaustively discussed by P. Kranz, *Jahreszeiten-Sarkophage*, *Antiken Sarkophagreliefs* V, 4, Berlin 1984.

⁶ The sarcophagi adorned with the scenes of a lion or boar hunt (excluding the Calidonian Hunt representations, since this scene belongs to mythological themes) were reserved for the deceased coming from the upper social level. They are discussed by B. Andreae, *Die römischen Jagdsarkophage*, *Antiken Sarkophagreliefs* I, 2, Berlin 1980.

⁷ E. Schmidt, *Ein Treibjagd-Sarkophag in Potsdam-Sanssouci*, *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Universität Rostock* 17, 1968 Heft 9/10, pp. 783—788, Pls. 47—51.

⁸ G. Rodenwaldt, *Über den Stilwandel in der antoninischen Kunst*, *Abhandlungen der Preussischen Akademie* 1935, Phil.-Hist. Klasse 3, Berlin 1935; F. Gerke, *Die christlichen Sarkophage der vorkonstantinischen Zeit*, *Studien zur spätantiken Kunstgeschichte* 11, Berlin 1940.

⁹ R. Bianchi-Bandinelli, *Arte plebea*, [in:] *Dall'Ellenismo al Medioevo*, Roma 1978, pp. 35—48.

already in the later half of the 3rd century A.D. began to penetrate into the official Roman state art (senatorial, as Bianchi-Bandinelli defined it) and, together with the elements borrowed by the artists from various art centres of the Roman Empire (mainly from its eastern regions), created the phenomenon of the late antique art.

Despite the fact that the scenes on those lids are recognized as being inspired by daily life, it seems that they could have had symbolical significance. As in the battle scenes or on the sarcophagi with lion hunt scenes where the deceased person's courage was emphasized, his piety is accentuated on the sarcophagi with the offering scenes, his fidelity on those bearing wedding representations, whereas the scenes related to trade, craft or agriculture stress his great pains taken in order to achieve his social status. Of course, still another aspect exists of this symbolical significance. Like in the case of the mythological sarcophagi with the images of Demeter, Persephone or, foremostly, with the immensely popular Dionysiac cycle the figures and attributes represented there symbolize the annual regeneration of nature, in the case of agricultural scenes the cutting of corn ears or ripe fruit gathering bear the same significance. The sepulchral art (as has already been noticed many times) uses the language of symbols, personifications and allegories, which reveal their concealed sense only after an exhaustive iconological analysis. For this reason, the harvest or hunt scenes represented on the sarcophagi have quite a different meaning from those on the contemporary mosaics, adorning, among others, the interiors of the North African villas.

The sarcophagi and their lids made under the influence of those folk currents in Roman art display, when compared to other objects of the same period, some workmanship clumsiness and simplifications which coincide, anyway, with general artistic trends of the plebeian current. In compliance with these tendencies, they are characterized by unusual faithfulness of details, which assume the same forms on different objects. Thus, there we encounter the trees treated in an almost identical way as in the case of the Cracow object¹⁰, similar baskets¹¹, or equally precisely depicted ears of corn¹². On these lids we also see identically represented garments — the tunics with wide and shallow folds, tucked up at the waist and revealing part of the torso¹³. The persons shown on the lids belonging to this current of Roman art have their coiffures and hair identically rendered by means of a high-speed drill, leaving deep cavities¹⁴.

In the sepulchral plastic art, a yoke stretcher (*ferculum*) with baskets on it is extremely rare. It appears on some objects of the official state reliefs where,

¹⁰ Cf. G. Wilpert, *I sarcofagi cristiani antichi*, Roma 1929—1936, No. 217, 1; F. Gerke, *Die christlichen Sarkophage...*, Pl. 23, 3.

¹¹ E. g. F. Gerke, *Die christlichen Sarkophage...*, Pl. 26, 1.

¹² Compare F. Gerke, *Die christlichen Sarkophage...*, Pl. 23, 2—3.

¹³ Among others F. Gerke, *Die christlichen Sarkophage...*, Pls. 17 and 23, 2.

¹⁴ Cf. F. Gerke, *Die christlichen Sarkophage...*, Pl. 17.

however, it has a somewhat different shape and is usually carried by the legionaries¹⁵. An identical *ferculum* and similarly rendered baskets are represented on a sarcophagus lid with the depiction of a sleeping Endymion in the Louvre¹⁶. This object is however earlier (220—230 A.D.) and remains beyond the plebeian current. The image indicates, after all, the existence of a certain tradition in the representation of the real objects of daily use, retaining their form for centuries.

The manner of rendering the *tabula ansata* bordering, protruding above the surface of the background and equalling the height of the relief, is to be encountered in many sarcophagi from the end of the 3rd century A.D.¹⁷

One detail, on the object being discussed remains obscure. This is the fragment of a plant (?) with two stems (?), intertwining in their upper part with a runner or grass, placed at the right leg of a hooded man. It may also depict young tree stems. No such detail has been so far encountered on another object from this group of lids.

Summing up this brief communique, it should be stressed again that the Cracow fragment, belonging to the folk or plebeian stream of the sepulchral sculpture flourishing in the second half of the 3rd century A.D., enriches our knowledge of these relatively scarce monuments.

¹⁵ A *ferculum* appears in triumphal scenes, amongst others, on a frieze from the temple of Appolo Sosianus in Rome, cf. among others Th. Kraus, *Das römische Weltreich*, Berlin 1967, No. 178; W. Helbig, *Führer durch die öffentlichen Sammlungen klassischer Altertümer in Rom*⁴, Tübingen 1963—1972, II, No. 1670 a; P. Zanker, *Augustus und die Macht der Bilder*, München 1987, fig. 55; J. A. Ostrowski, *Les personnifications des provinces dans l'art romain*, Varsovie 1990, p. 207. It is also known from a relief from the Museo Nazionale Romano (former Buoncompagni-Ludovisi Collection) dating back to the times of Antoninus Pius or Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus, or to the period of Septimius Severus, cf. among others, E. Strong, *La scultura romana*, II, Firenze 1926, fig. 180; W. Helbig, *Führer...*⁴, III, No. 2357; E. Künzl, *Der römische Triumph*, München 1988, p. 77, fig. 44; J. A. Ostrowski, *Les personnifications...*, p. 104 (ARMENIA? 15).

¹⁶ C. Robert, *Einzelmythen. Actaeon-Hercules*, Antiken Sarkophagreliefs III, 1, Berlin 1897, No. 72.

¹⁷ Among others, G. Wilpert, *I sarcofagi...*, Pls. 177, 5 and 280, 3 A. Rumpf, *Die Meerwesen*, Antiken Sarkophagreliefs V, Berlin 1939, Nos. 9 and 28.