

A ROMAN BATTLE SARCOPHAGUS AT CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY, MONTREAL

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IN 1966 A MONTREAL ART COLLECTOR DONATED a Roman/early Christian sarcophagus to Loyola College in Montreal. In 1992 this artifact was moved to the newly created Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery at Concordia University. It is composed of a long, narrow casket carved with a scene of Romans fighting barbarians on the front (Plate 1) and a single griffin on each short side. The lid is flat and shows episodes from the Old and New Testament (Plate 2). These two pieces were purchased together in Rome, but on the basis of style and subject matter do not seem to be contemporary.

The shape of the lid indicates that it is a re-cut front panel from a later, early Christian casket (Plate 2).¹ This is a column sarcophagus with composite capitals and plain, uncarved shafts; its entablature carries alternating pointed and rounded arches. This colonnade creates seven niches, each showing a separate scene. Between each arch are figures of putti with grapes. The scenes represented are as follows, from left to right: the sacrifice of Isaac (*Genesis* 22); Moses receiving the tables of the law (*Exodus* 20.1–17); healing of the blind man (*John* 9.1–35); Peter's denial (*Matthew* 26.38); woman with the issue of blood (*Luke* 8.43–48); the loaves and fishes; and Moses smiting the rock (*I Corinthians* 10.4). Although the panel is now very worn, it is evident that the carving is flat and simplistic, with little modelling of forms. However, all its scenes are well-documented in early Christian art: a much better version of the same scenes and composition can be seen in a casket now in the Vatican.² Its inscription, iconography, and style date the Vatican casket to the mid- to late-fourth century A.D., and the Concordia lid panel is probably contemporary with it.³

Less well understood is the battle scene on the front of the Concordia sarcophagus (Plate 1). Its front and sides are made of a white-grey marble with light-grey veins and medium- to fine-grained crystals, most likely from Proconnesus, the most common source of marble imported into Italy and the

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¹The lid panel was dropped and broken; it has not to date been restored. Prior to this, a report had been written about the lid by an unknown author and it had been photographed.

²Vatican, Museo Pio Cristiani, 152 (Deichmann, Bovini, and Brandenburg 1967: 50–52, no. 52, pl. 17).

³For a discussion of the motifs found on this sarcophagus, see Deichmann, Bovini, and Brandenburg 1967: 50–52, no. 52.

Western Empire for sculpture, sarcophagi, and architectural details in the imperial period.⁴ The casket is unusually small: 171.45 cm long x 39.37 cm deep at the outer corners and 35.5 cm high; the carved panel is 30.5 cm high.⁵ The front panel displays a battle of eighteen figures: ten Romans and eight barbarians. The figures are organized into nine groups of two or three combatants that move from left to right. A standing Roman with a trophy marks the beginning and the end of the scene. The Romans are all clean-shaven, and are shown fully dressed in battle gear with cuirass, boots, helmet, and cloak. They brandish short daggers and long spears, and are represented both mounted and on foot. The barbarians are unarmed, although two defend themselves with a shield and several other shields are depicted on the ground; all are portrayed on foot. These figures are either fully dressed in long pants, a short, tunic-like top, and cloak, or stripped to the waist with only trousers, and are further distinguished by their full beards.



The small size of the Concordia sarcophagus suggests that it was created for a youth; the size of the casket is only slightly larger than the average for a child's sarcophagus (1.70 m).⁶ The Roman in the center of the panel (Plate 3) probably represents the deceased. Placed in a visually striking location in the frieze and spatially isolated from the other figures, he dominates the battle with his cloak billowing out behind him and a raised, outstretched right arm. He is further marked out by his lack of a helmet: he is the only Roman without one. He is slightly smaller than the other soldiers in order to allow his rearing horse to fit within the frieze panel. There are no other examples of battle scenes represented on children's sarcophagi, although scenes from adult daily life, such as hunting, dining, and chariot races, are common.⁷ In these the participants are rendered either as adults, with iconography borrowed directly from the repertoire of adult caskets, or as young children; the Montreal battle scene clearly belongs to the former category.⁸ There are traces of a portrait in his face: the eyes are large but

⁴Walker 1985: 28–31.

⁵Contrast, for example, the dimensions of the Amendola sarcophagus: 231 cm long x 74 cm deep: Heibig⁴ III, no. 2141 (Andreae).

⁶Huskinson 1996: 2.

⁷For scenes of daily life on children's sarcophagi, see Huskinson 1996: 9–24.

⁸For an instance of actual children shown on a sarcophagus relief, see Ostia, Museo Nazionale, 1141 (Huskinson 1996: no. 1.15, pl. 1.1).

shallowly carved; the eyebrows are oblique; and the nose is small and straight. The upper lip is particularly distinctive and overhangs the lower lip slightly. None of the other Romans display any such characteristics or specific features, although their faces seem carved in the same style.

The pose of this central figure is well known from other reliefs. A rider with a raised right arm charging against a foe, cloak flying behind him, appears in both military and hunting scenes, usually holding a spear. This motif is used in both public monuments set up by emperors (for example, the Great Trajanic Frieze, the Hadrianic boar hunt tondo) and privately commissioned sarcophagi (for example, a lion hunt sarcophagus in Rome).⁹ A variation on this pose, as on the Montreal casket, shows an open outstretched hand without a weapon. In all these examples, this rider is the main figure in the scene, and the arm gesture not only emphasizes this role but also indicates that the implied triumph belongs to him. This pose represents the power, *virtus*, and supremacy of the Roman state, whether against a barbarian enemy or a savage beast, and whether in a public or in a private context. When the gesture is combined with a portrait, these qualities are conferred upon the deceased.

The poses of the remaining Romans are those of a dominant force and they are recognizable as the eventual winners in the contest. In contrast, the appearance of the barbarians indicates their role as the uncivilized enemy of the Roman State, destined for defeat. The barbarians depicted cannot be identified. They exhibit none of the distinctive ethnic or racial features that commonly distinguish non-Roman barbarians and instead show only generic barbarian traits. In some Roman battle reliefs, the barbarians can be identified, but these tend to be public monuments with a clear historical context. The enemy represented in the battle scenes on the column of Trajan and the Great Trajanic Frieze is meant to be Dacian, while the adversaries on the Great Antonine Altar at Ephesos are likely Parthians.¹⁰ Even in these examples, however, the barbarians rarely reveal specific attributes or characteristics, and it is rather the recognition of the dedicant, i.e., the main figure in the scene(s), and the circumstances of the monument's erection that supply this information. Privately commissioned works such as sarcophagi infrequently contain such specifics, even when a historical personage seems indicated.¹¹ By the second century A.D., the norm for most battle reliefs is a generic barbarian type that could be turned into any specific ethnic group,

⁹ Kleiner 1992: figs. 185 and 220; Touati 1987. Lion hunt sarcophagus: Rome, Palazzo Mattei (Bianchi Bandinelli 1971: fig. 50).

¹⁰ For Dacians on the Column of Trajan, see, for instance, scene LXXVI (Hannestad 1986: fig. 96); for Dacians on the Great Trajanic Frieze, see Kleiner 1992: fig. 185. For the Ephesos reliefs, see Eichler 1971.

¹¹ For instance, the main protagonist on the Great Ludovisi sarcophagus, dated to the mid-third century, is usually recognized as one of the two sons of Trajan Decius, but the barbarians that surround him are not securely identified; they may be east Germans, possibly Goths. See further De Lachenal 1983; Helbig⁴ III, no. 2354 (Andreae).

if warranted, through the addition of attributes (i.e., the torque of the Gaul) or an historical context.¹² Such precision, however, is rare on sarcophagi. Each barbarian type is diluted to its common elements and then represented in a wide variety of poses—falling, dying, dead, which convey to the spectator the outcome of the battle and the general theme: the conquest of the non-Roman enemy by the Roman forces. For the purchaser of a battle sarcophagus, the desire to ally himself with the glories of Rome and the part that he had played in them, whether directly or indirectly, was more important than the commemoration of a specific foe. This attitude would have been particularly convenient for men who had seen no significant military action but who could still claim to be part of the war machine of the empire. Just as the emperor advertises his victories in a public sphere against a barbarian, so too does the owner of a sarcophagus display his own prowess in a private but no less meaningful venue.

The earliest evidence for battle reliefs on sarcophagi comes on two caskets: the Amendola sarcophagus in the Capitoline Museum and a casket in the Museo Nuovo in the Vatican. Both of these are dated in the decade A.D. 160–170.¹³ The type continues through the mid-third century A.D., with the Ludovisi sarcophagus representing a later use of this motif.¹⁴ This is a relatively small group, with only twenty-one known examples, including the Concordia casket, whose style and composition suggest that it should be dated to the earlier part of this series.

The composition of the Montreal battle scene is characteristic of all Roman battle reliefs prior to the carving of the column of Marcus Aurelius.¹⁵ Around A.D. 180 reliefs began to be organized with multiple ground lines and stacked groups of men. This arrangement was almost immediately carried over into sarcophagus reliefs, for example, on the Portonaccio sarcophagus, also dated to ca 180.¹⁶ It may also be that the small size of the Concordia sarcophagus dictated the single ground line composition, but other elements confirm an early date. The relief does not contain abundant drill work, which increases in the period following the column of Marcus Aurelius; this feature is evident in neither of the other early battle sarcophagus reliefs. The Concordia casket displays the short, stocky figures with elongated limbs that are characteristic of Antonine mannerist style.¹⁷ The figures, aside from the central Roman, have slightly oversized heads, a feature that appears also on the Museo Nuovo sarcophagus and on a casket from Ostia representing Alcestis.¹⁸ The somewhat unrealistic scale between the riders and

¹² Hamberg 1945: 184.

¹³ Capitoline Museum, Rome; Museo Nuovo 2141, Vatican. Andreae 1956: 13–14; McCann 1978: 110.

¹⁴ De Lachenal 1983.

¹⁵ For instance, scene 32 (Becatti 1960: pl. 20).

¹⁶ Rome, Terme Museum, 112327 (Kleiner 1992: fig. 269); see also Helbig⁴ III, no. 2126 (Andreae).

¹⁷ Vermeule 1979: 101–103.

¹⁸ Rome, Vatican Museums, 1195 (McCann 1978: fig. 146).

their horses on the Montreal sarcophagus is also present in the *decursio* reliefs on the column base of Antoninus Pius, carved ca 161.

The Concordia battle sarcophagus thus represents one of the earliest examples of the type. It was created in the decades between 160 and 170, prior to the carving of the column of Marcus Aurelius, and displays numerous elements also found on the Amendola and Museo Nuovo sarcophagi. It may have been fashioned for an upper-class youth who was either destined for a military life or who died early in his career, and whose unfulfilled promise was commemorated in the sarcophagus decoration. Whether he had actually taken part in a battle or perhaps died in one is unknown, but his family, who, we may presume, purchased his casket, evidently wanted to glorify his minimal military career or eulogize the hope of what might have been.¹⁹

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PLATES

1. Roman battle sarcophagus. Concordia University. Photo: courtesy of the Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University.
2. Lid of sarcophagus with biblical scenes. Photo: courtesy of the Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University.
3. Detail of battle scene: central figure. Photo: J. Francis, with permission of the Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University.

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¹⁹On the commemorative nature of sarcophagus reliefs, see Hamberg 1945: 172–173; Koch 1993; Koortbojian 1995.

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Plate 1. Roman battle sarcophagus, Concordia University



Plate 2. Lid of sarcophagus with biblical scenes

PHOENIX



Plate 3. Detail of battle scene: central figure