The Art of Christian Burial in Late Antiquity

By Angela Moseley

Funerals are an expensive affair in modern day Western society. The cost of a coffin and funeral services are enough to put the average Westerner in a fair amount of financial pain. After all, caskets and services are enough to put the average American coffin.

Ordinary sarcophagi found in the catacombs of Rome are not well represented in mainstream Christian culture. In fact the idea of Christians being inhumed in sarcophagi is an ancient and foreign idea by today’s standards. The sarcophagus is most commonly associated with Egyptian burial practices, despite also being used by some of the earliest sarcophagi were used by the Etruscans (pre-Roman people who would eventually be conquered by Rome).

The Greek term literally means “flesh-eater”. It was believed that the stone of the sarcophagus had the power to literally consume the flesh of the dead body placed within it. The stone of choice was marble which was intricately carved by craftsmen in Greece dating back as the 5th century BCE. Marble, a type of limestone with a molecular structure that has been transformed by intense heat or pressure (making it perfect for sculpting) was commonly found throughout the Mediterranean.

The sarcophagus itself was a stone coffin that was sculpted and adorned with all kinds of imagery. Some of the earliest sarcophagi were used by the Etruscans (pre-Roman people who would eventually be conquered by Rome) to the splendor of burial practices among Christians in Rome in the 2nd through 4th centuries.

The sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, a Roman senator who was baptized as Christian on his deathbed in 359. Some familiar scenes are the sacrifice of Isaac, Christ as ruler of the universe, and Adam and Eve ashamed. Photo Credit: Dr. Joseph Byrne of Belmont University, Nashville, Tennessee.

The Via Salaria Sarcophagus in the Vatican in Rome, created some time in the mid-3rd century. Christ is shown in the center of this relief in the theme of the good shepherd who carries a sheep. Photo Credit: Dr. Joseph Byrne of Belmont University, Nashville, Tennessee.

The richly adorned sarcophagus of Junius Bassus in the Vatican Grottoes of Rome and the hundreds of stone tombs are far more exquisite than the average American coffin. Christianity is a religion with a very long and rich artistic history. Saint Peter’s Basilica, Leonardo da Vinci’s “The Last Supper”, the iconic Jesus Christ and images of the Cross are usually the first things that come to mind when thinking of Christian artwork. Yet burial practices, aside from the well known catacombs of Rome, are rarely mentioned today. The richly adorned sarcophagus of Junius Bassus in the Vatican Grottoes of Rome and the hundreds of sarcophagi in catacombs around the world are an example of the visual splendor of burial practices.

The word “sarcophagus” is actually Greek in origin and is derived from the original word, “sarkophagos”.

The via Salaria Sarcophagus in the Vatican in Rome, created some time in the mid-3rd century. Christ is shown in the center of this relief in the theme of the good shepherd who carries a sheep. Photo Credit: Dr. Joseph Byrne of Belmont University, Nashville, Tennessee.

in the 6th century BCE. Many of these stone coffins had sculptures that memorialized the dead in the form of a person reclining on the lid of sarcophagus. Greek sarcophagi were normally decorated with carvings or sculptures directly related to mythology and Bacchic scenes were some of the most popular depictions. At the time of the Roman Republic sarcophagi were rarely used by families to bury their dead in because cremation was the typical funeral custom in Rome. However the funeral customs changed dramatically in Rome around the 2nd century CE when burial became commonplace among the pagans. It was also around this time that Greco-Roman pagans, Jews and Christians began to use sarcophagi as funerary practices for those who could afford them.

During the Second Sophistic which took place in Rome from roughly 60CE to 230CE burial customs began to change among the pagans. The Second Sophistic was actually a time for a great resurgence or hunger for elements of Greek culture in Roman society. The movement was mainly a scholarly one where literary activity and public speakers held a high place in Rome. In other words the period could have been thought of something akin to a Greek Renaissance, as Greek culture found its footing after years of war and Roman expansion. It was around the 2nd century that Rome adapted the Greek custom of burying their dead in sarcophagi.

This change in state policy helped greatly with Christian burial practices at time when the religion was heavily persecuted. “Apart from the Bible and commentaries on the Bible, Christianity had little literature of its own, and still less art,” writes Liz James in Early Christian Art. “So throughout the early Christian period, Christians were faced with the dilemma of what to do with this pagan culture, both art and literature. Should they reject it completely or absorb it?”

In the end early Christians who had spent their lives surrounded by traditional pagan artwork and customs adapted it into their own culture. Christian artwork was cleverly adapted in such a way that it would remain hidden in plain sight to pagans but was clearly visible to worshipers within shared catacombs. Many types of Christian artwork in the forms of frescos, tombs and sarcophagi could be found in the catacombs that prevailed all over Rome. The sarcophagus was of great importance for the burial of the dead. Many of the scenes depicted on the sarcophagi consisted of pagan motifs that were customized for the buyer by the marble worker artists.

the cemetery do not come cheaply, even the coffins of today seem rather simplistic when compared to the splendor of burial practices among Christians in Rome in the 2nd through 4th centuries.
Some of the most popular themes to adorn the sarcophagi were scenes of salvation and an efigy to the person inhumed within. The narrative of Jonah and the whale, Christ as the Good Shepherd, Christ being approached by Peter and Paul, Christ as Orpheus the musician and even numerous pastoral scenes were carved into the sarcophagi of many Christian patrons. Symbolic pagan imagery such as lions, peacocks and fish were also used in Christian artwork and symbolism.

“Such images were not designed to be explicit. Their meaning was apparent to the believer, but for the non-initiate, they seemed merely traditional pastoral or animal representations,” James continues to write in Early Christian Art.

Many of the artists themselves who carved the marble stone into beautiful works were in fact pagans, which also might have explained why early Christian art adopted pagan traditions. Some sarcophagi could only be identified as Christian by inscriptions, Biblical scenes or symbols unique to the religion. It wouldn’t be until Christianity was a well established religion in Rome. The catacombs and sarcophagi became more elaborate as Christianity’s influence grew beyond the reach of the majority of the citizens. Except for a few notable examples in the 13th and 14th Centuries for the most powerful members of society (the wealth and higher-ups within the Church) the use of sarcophagi in the Christian and Roman had been more or less ready made. The period from the 4th to the 10th centuries was interested period as sarcophagi fell out of use with the common people and became limited to the extremely well-off Christians in Roman society. With the trend toward exclusivity the sarcophagi themselves became even more richly decorated and adorned as high ranking officials within Rome and even emperors would come to be buried within them. By the Middle Ages sarcophagi were rarely used and were beyond the reach of the majority of the citizens. Except for a few notable examples in the 13th and 14th Centuries for the most powerful members of society (the wealth and higher-ups within the Church) the use of sarcophagi as defined by the 2nd, 3rd and 4th Centuries was effectively dead.

In creating that space the sarcophagi also honored and respected the dead while showing his or her status in society. The more richly decorated the sarcophagus the higher the status of the person who was inhumed within. The motifs carved into the sarcophagus also revealed the occupation and beliefs of the deceased in life. The richly adorned and exceedingly complex sarcophagus of Junitus Bassus in the Vatican Grottoes of Rome is one of many famous examples.

Bassus was a Roman senator who died a few decades after Emperor Constantine declared Christianity as the sole religion of Rome, in 359. On his very deathbed he was baptized (a practice that many Christians did at the time) and he was laid to rest in his now famous sarcophagus. The sarcophagus itself depicts ten scenes from both the Old and New Testaments ranging from Adam and Eve’s deception by the serpent, Jesus’ dominion over the universe to the arrest of Paul. The lid of sarcophagus is damaged but it is said that a sculpted effigy of Junitus Bassus himself in full Senatorial Robes rested on the lid.

Bassus’ sarcophagus is a prime example of the future elevation of Christianity to an official religion in Rome. The catacombs and sarcophagi became more elaborate but not long afterwards church yards became the official places to house the dead as people began to move out of the cities and ancient laws against burying people inside of the walls of Rome became lax. Around the same time the way that sarcophagi were produced began to change.

“In the middle of the 4th Century the method of producing sarcophagi changed fundamentally,” writes William Tronzo and Anthony Cutler for their work Sarcophagi. “Previously mass produced and thus widely available to even a relatively modest clientele, they became much less common and were mainly custom-made affairs for the very rich.”

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The narrative of Jonah and the whale or sea beast, which runs from left to right, located in the Vatican in Rome. The relief is symmetrical and the left-bottom half shows the narrative of Jonah being eaten by the sea creature. The right lower half depicts Jonah’s salvation as the sea beast spits him out on the shore. In the upper-left corner, Christ is shown raising Lazarus. Photo Credit: Dr. Joseph Byrne of Belmont University, Nashville, Tennessee.

Monuments to the dead enduring the test of time. Glimpses of Sarcophagi dating back to the 3rd and 4th centuries.