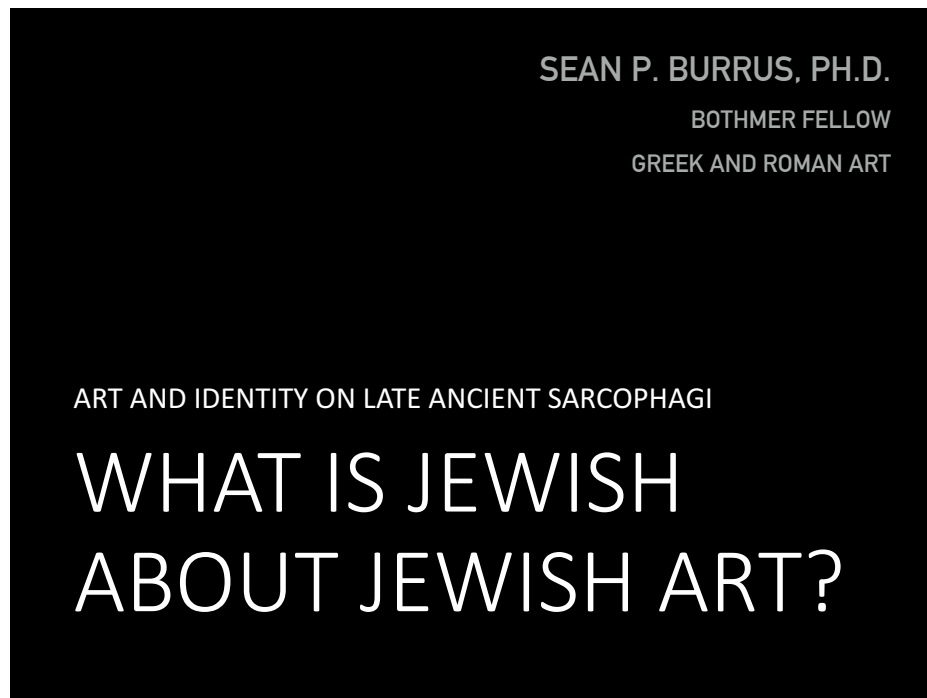


# WHAT IS JEWISH ABOUT JEWISH ART?

Art and identity on late ancient sarcophagi from Rome

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## 1. Introduction



SLIDE 1

I'd like to thank the Metropolitan Museum, the Department of Greek and Roman Art, and the Bothmer Family. I just recently defended my dissertation, which this paper is drawn from, and it's no exaggeration to say that the generous support and stimulating environment that I've found in the galleries and in the people here has made a profound difference in my research.

One of the topics of my work, as my title suggests, is "What is Jewish about Jewish Art"; so I really need to apologize, in advance, for two things. First of all, I won't really address this question until the end. But second, and more importantly, I also don't know the answer.

All of this is by design though. It's a complex question and, when it comes to antiquity, it's one that's best answered by looking at specific art and artifacts. To that end, in this paper I want to share with you some of the sarcophagi from the Jewish catacombs of Rome, which, to my mind, reflect the different ways that the Jewish community there, and especially its elite members, interacted with the cultural world of the city.



production centers. Sarcophagi functioned as tools that patrons could employ to promote their social standing and to protect their memory; they were a natural complement to the desire to protect the physical remains of a loved one: a means to preserve the identity and memory of the departed as well.



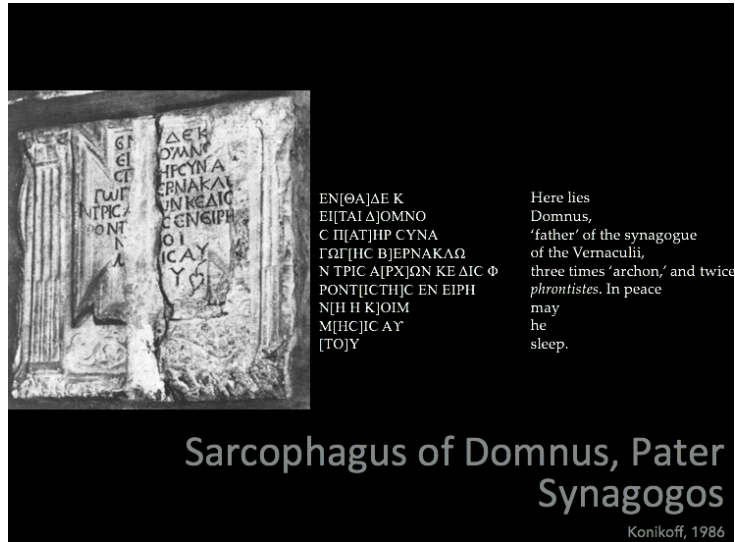
SLIDE 4

Sarcophagi were used by only a small number of Jews in the Roman world, and 'Jewish' sarcophagi represent only a small fraction of the larger corpus. The remains of two dozen marble sarcophagi, mostly fragmentary, have survived from the Jewish community of Rome.



SLIDE 5

Eleven of these include inscriptions, all but two of which mention a title or an honorific. This is a revealing fact and suggests that Jewish patrons were among the most prominent members of their community. For example, the epitaph on the sarcophagus of Domnus, a strigilar sarcophagus with a *tabula ansata* flanked by columns, reads: *Here lies Domnus, father of the synagogue of the Vernaculii, three times archon and twice phrontistes.'*



SLIDE 6

These and other similar titles, which may or may not have corresponded to real positions in the synagogues of the city, certainly reflect the high social standing of the deceased and their families within the Jewish community of Rome.

## 2. A 'Jewish' seasons sarcophagus

I want to begin though by showing you the sarcophagus that first captured my attention, actually one of the most famous pieces of art from the Jewish catacombs of Rome.



SLIDE 8

Often called the 'Jewish' Seasons sarcophagus, it's one example of a type extremely popular in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E. Aside from one prominent departure, it's indistinguishable from its nearest parallels. The *clipeus* is held aloft by two winged victories who are flanked on either side by two personified and nude Seasons, and putti are interspersed in the remaining space of the composition.



SLIDE 9

All these elements are common to the type and most are illustrated in the **Badminton** sarcophagus, the pièce de résistance of the Metropolitan Museum's sarcophagus collection.



SLIDE 10

Dating to the late Severan period, this sarcophagus is sculpted in extremely high relief, with a complex program of more than three dozen figures including Dionysus,

the Seasons, and Tellus and Oceanus, and of course putti. Though Dionysus features prominently, and although the playful, wine-making and bucolic putti suggest a Dionysian theme, the equally prominent representation of the four seasons as nude youths establish this sarcophagus as an exceptionally high quality example of the Seasons sarcophagus style.



SLIDE 11

Yet, returning to our example, somewhat less impressive in the shadow of the Badminton sarcophagus, I'm sure you've noticed the departure already: in the clipeus, space typically reserved for portraiture, a large menorah is sculpted. Just as we do today, an ancient viewer must have immediately felt the weight of such an obvious, and even odd departure from convention.

So what can we make of this sarcophagus? Consider the way it adopts popular Roman tropes at the same time subverting the expectations of the viewer for portrait sculpture. The choice of a Seasons sarcophagus in the first place illustrates that the preferences of the patron ran towards all things Roman; they were purchasing a sarcophagus style very much in vogue. The substitution of the menorah—the most recognizable symbol of Judaism in antiquity—in place of the portrait seems to me to be best explained by a deeply felt discomfort or avoidance of portraiture for particular reasons; a very visible statement made by this particular patron in favor of rejecting common representational practice.

Now, if every sarcophagus belonging to Jewish patrons were like this one, recognizing what's Jewish in 'Jewish art' here would be easy. Jewish art would consist of two things: of borders or limits to the acceptable use of Roman culture and sculpture,

such as avoiding portraiture, together with a veneer of 'Jewishness' — the inclusion of a recognizably Jewish symbol for instance. But, of course, our task is not so easy. In fact, this sarcophagus is one of only three from Rome that has Jewish symbols in the sculptural program. In most cases, 'Jewish' sarcophagi were more or less indistinguishable from those of non-Jews.

### 3. Portrait sarcophagi



SLIDE 12

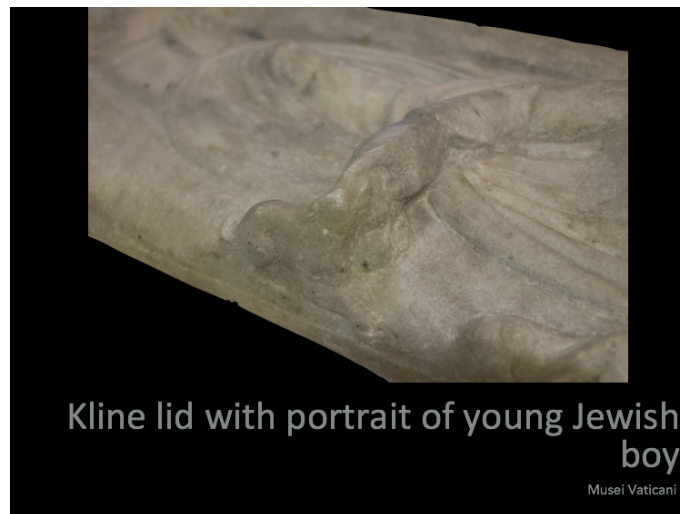
In fact, and in direct contrast to the example here, one of the things I've uncovered in my research is that portraiture is much more popular among Jewish patrons than has ever been acknowledged. From the 3<sup>rd</sup> century on the Roman sarcophagus industry experienced a 'portrait boom.' Portraiture was featured on a wide variety of sarcophagi, and the portrait styles Jewish patrons chose reflected the very latest in Roman funerary fashions.





SLIDE 13

Our most complete example happens to be a portrait of a young Jewish boy. Only the find spot in the catacombs of Monteverde indicates that it once belonged to a Jewish patron. Everything else, from the positioning and dress of the youth to the animals beside him suggests a sculptor and a patron closely following Roman sculptural conventions. The child lies on his left side, propped up on his elbow, and gazes calmly towards his feet. The chubby cheeks, the smooth skin and taciturn expression, and short, ephemeral hair are all common elements of Roman children's portraiture.



SLIDE 14

A small dog sits playfully below the child's right hand, and a pair of birds sit at the head and foot of the couch. This use of pets as a sign of childhood was adopted very

early on in Greek and Roman funerary portraiture, a feature amply captured in the Met's collection.



SLIDE 15

On a Parian funerary stele of a young girl from the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, the youth is depicted holding two doves, clutching them to her chest and gazing intently down at them. On funerary altar from Rome from the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, a long term loan in our collection, a young boy is accompanied by a playful dog. Such animals happily inhabiting the same space as children function as indices of Roman childhood, while other tropes such as the idealized and round facial features, the wispy hair all operated in similar fashion.



SLIDE 16

In privileging the signs of a Roman childhood, no markers of Jewish difference are offered here; instead the Jewish patron of the our *kline* portrait selected visual

resources drawn directly from Roman culture that would have offered a familiar and conventional expression of Roman childhood to any family, Jewish or not. This suggests that the patron held similar conceptions of childhood and the appropriate representation of it as other wealthy Roman patrons.

Other portrait sculpture on sarcophagi of Jewish patrons paint a similar picture. Especially popular among Jewish patrons was the so-called learned figure motif. Portraits of this type were actually the most popular portrait motif in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries, and they include depictions of the deceased in the guise of philosophers, in the company of muses, and, most commonly, holding a symbolic scroll.



*SLIDE 17*

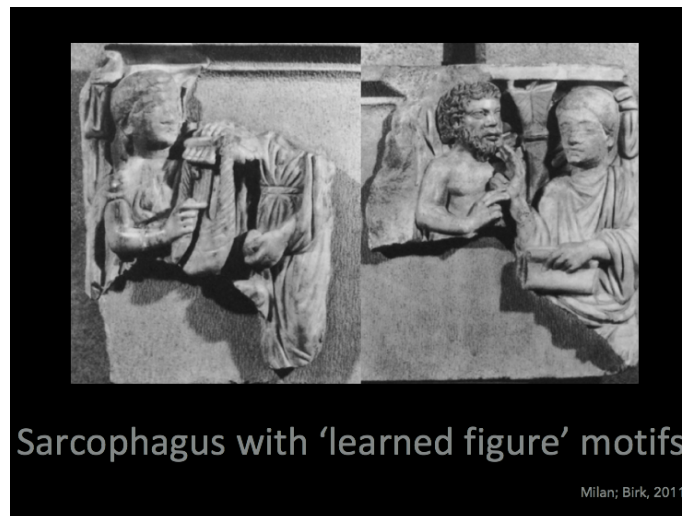
The “Sarcophagus with a Greek Physician” is a good example of the motifs that define the group and narrate a learned identity. This sarcophagus is dated stylistically to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. The pose, the scroll, the clothing—even the shape of the chair—are familiar from other sarcophagi of the type and the beard and clothing that the deceased wears further establish the genre by depicting the deceased as a Greek philosopher.

There are at least four, fragmentary sarcophagi from the Jewish catacombs that show that the learned figure motif was popular among Jewish patrons. For example, one fragment depicts the torso of a male holding a scroll. Behind the figure is the nude body of a winged putto.



SLIDE 18

Another sarcophagus surviving only in descriptions reportedly included figures at either end: on one end, a man in Greek garb played a harp before a muse while on the other end two men debated while holding scrolls, much like this one now in Milan:



SLIDE 19

Fragments like these suggest that some Jewish patrons were not only comfortable with portraiture, but were also eager to emphasize their social status and identity using very Roman modes of representation. Nothing here suggests an effort to alter the sculptural programs to fit cultural sensitivities different from Roman ones or to include evidence of Jewish difference. Quite the opposite in fact. More to the point, it seems likely that the patrons of such examples felt no inherent tension between being Jewish and being Roman.

Yet, as our seasons sarcophagus example so clearly demonstrated, the question of how to engage with (or even whether to engage) the conventions of Roman portrait sculpture may have been an active issue, one that confronted Jewish patrons in Rome, and one that could elicit very different responses.



SLIDE 20

Still, the popularity of the 'Learned Figure' motif among Jewish patrons is worth noting, especially since this trope represented the cultured status of the individual in a very general way. The scrolls themselves are never identifiable on Roman sarcophagi, the learning embodied within is left to the imagination of the viewer. Would an ancient Jewish viewer have seen a coded reference to the Torah, perhaps? If so, would they have viewed them as a reflection of the deceased's learning in Jewish law and culture? I suspect that the ambiguity of the scroll, as well as the generic nature of the 'Learned Figure' and the idealized virtues it suggests, may have offered Jewish patrons a way of simultaneously engaging Roman and Jewish conceptions of learning and literacy.

#### 4. Figural imagery and Jewish patrons

Indeed, many fragments demonstrate that most Jewish patrons bought in (literally and figuratively) to the language of Roman sarcophagus sculpture. By far the most common tropes on Jewish sarcophagi were putti.



SLIDE 21

Just as in the broader corpus of Roman sarcophagi, these characters can be seen engaged in a variety of activities: at play, reclining with cornucopias and baskets of fruit and picking grapes and stomping them in a wine vat. Second most common among Jewish patrons were personified seasons. Of course, the Seasons sarcophagus with a menorah is a clear example of this, but an additional example of the Seasons motif was found in the Vigna Randanini catacombs. Moreover, the several sarcophagi with putti holding baskets and cornucopias may well have been a variation on the theme.



SLIDE 22

Now, on account of the allusions to banqueting, abundance and wine, putti and seasons are often regarded as allusions to the cult of Dionysus, and problematic, therefore, for Jewish patrons. Indeed, so-called 'Dionysian' themes and motifs were some of the most popular iconography in sarcophagus decoration. Yet, due in part to the ubiquity, it's often very difficult to make out whether a particular motif is an allusion to the cult. Easily identifiable Dionysian motifs are those at the 'core' of the repertoire, including scenes of Dionysian mythology and thiasoi such as the one depicted on the Badminton sarcophagus.



SLIDE 23

Notably, no such scenes occur on 'Jewish' sarcophagi. Rather, we should understand Jewish patrons as taking part in a broader shift towards 'neutral' figures and themes that took place in the 3rd and 4th c.



SLIDE 24

Motifs like pastoral scenes, the seasons, muses, winged victories and putti, All enjoyed a broad range of associations and lacked links to specific myths. On 'stock' sarcophagi, produced without a specific commission and in advance of a buyer, these figures were extremely versatile characters that could appeal to many different patrons; to pagans, Christians and clearly Jews as well. Set within the broader Roman corpus, the Jewish use of these putti seems ambiguous at best, and such programs could have been popular among Jewish patrons precisely for their neutrality and widespread popularity, rather than any desire to evoke Dionysian themes.

## 5. Leaders of the Jewish community

At the same time, the popularity of simple, largely undecorated sarcophagi among a particular subset of Jewish patrons is worth considering. With no fewer than nine examples, this group forms the largest portion of our corpus. These sarcophagi are typically very plain, with prominent *tabulae* for inscriptions, and sometimes carved with strigilations. Those that do have figural decoration opt exclusively for animal figures, and employ them in places where they are of lesser importance.



SLIDE 25

Examples include sarcophagus of Caelia Domnina, which has an entirely strigilar front, and a pair of griffins carved on either end of the sarcophagus, paralleled by countless examples, including several in the collection here.





Sarcophagus of Caelia Domnina

Konikoff, 1986

SLIDE 26

The sarcophagus of Mniaseas, now lost, represents the opposite pole. It was totally undecorated except for a *tabula ansata* on the front with a Greek inscription. This sarcophagus is an example of the *lenos*, or trough type, which was popular in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century.



Sarcophagus of Mniaseas

Konikoff, 1986

SLIDE 27

Its shape imitates that of an ancient wine trough, and examples frequently have lions' heads at the ends which replicate in form, if not in function, the spigots of a trough. Given the distinctiveness of this sarcophagus type, the patron must have been conscious of their decision to take part in a Roman funerary fad. At the same time, it's impossible to miss the fact that our patron chose as restrained an example as possible; one which not only avoids the lion's heads but also any other form of ornamentation.



Marble strigilated sarcophagus

MMA 2005.28

SLIDE 28

Other sarcophagi of this group fall somewhere in between those of Caelia Domnina and Mniaseas.



'Jewish' sarcophagi from Rome

Museo Nazionale Roma, Terme

SLIDE 29

One remarkable aspect of this group though is the way in which they depart from the standards of their types, most obviously by avoiding portrait sculpture. In fact, not a single Jewish example of the strigilar form departs from this pattern, while in pagan and Christian examples portraiture is exceedingly common.



SLIDE 30

Throughout, the absence of portraiture and other figural imagery coupled with a clear preference for simple visual programs unites these as an alternative to other sarcophagi we have seen which make use of conventionally Roman imagery.



SLIDE 31

It's also noteworthy that these sarcophagi were considered uniquely suited for the leadership of the Jewish community and their message about Jewish interaction with Roman culture; a message that seems to have precluded portraiture. In fact, it's entirely from this group of simple sarcophagi that the Jewish leadership chose—eight of

these sarcophagi bear inscriptions that indicate that the deceased held a leadership role in the Jewish community of Rome.

## 6. Conclusion



SLIDE 32

Time and time again we have seen that the visual resources and conventions of Roman sarcophagi inform the basic content of almost every sarcophagus encountered, although they do so in very different ways and to different extents. On one end of the spectrum are sarcophagi, like the kline sarcophagus of a young Jewish child, that wield the visual vocabulary of Roman sarcophagi in ways that demonstrate the patrons preference for Roman modes of representation. At the other end of the spectrum was the sarcophagus of Mniaseas, which partook of the same cultural currents but in a restrained and limited way. The sarcophagi of the majority of Jewish patrons in Rome fell somewhere in the middle, and show the rich and varied ways in which elite Jews in Rome selected sculptural programs that betray their sense of identity, their values, and their attitudes towards Rome and Roman culture. This was a balancing act enacted in sculpture, and to me it suggests a community that was actively engaged in the process of figuring out how to maintain Jewish identities while being part of Roman society.

So, by way of concluding, I want to return to the question I left unanswered at the beginning: 'What is Jewish about Jewish art?' If these sarcophagi are any indication, we'll be very disappointed if we hoped that we would find something distinct or completely different. In fact, we might be very tempted to answer 'nothing' —to conclude that little, if anything at all about this art is 'Jewish'. We encountered little evidence that Jewish patrons wished to distinguish different religious practices, values

or identities, and there is not much here that is identifiable as distinctively 'Jewish'. Moreover, certainly few if any of the sculptors themselves were Jewish. From the standpoint of art history then, it would be easily defensible to call these sarcophagi simply "Roman art" used by Jewish patrons, and to leave it at that.

But I think there's another option, which is to say that, as far as the sarcophagi reflect the experiences and identities of Jewish communities and individuals, *everything* about them is Jewish. What's more, this answer corresponds with conceptions of art that were common to the ancient world, where emulation and appropriation bore none of the negative connotations it bears now, and where, in fact, the extensive appropriation and acculturation we've seen was encouraged by the diversity and syncretism of the Roman world. In the context of such conceptions the 'identity' of an object might be better associated with its patron and with the cultural context of its use, in our case by Jewish patrons within Jewish catacombs. than with the artist who created it.

Seen in this light, these sarcophagi attest to the tastes, the culture and the ideas of the Jewish individuals who used them. They indicate Jewish attitudes and uses of visual culture, and are a vital part of the writing of the socio-cultural history of Jewish communities. What's more, this is the answer that I opt for because it forces us to accept that our subjects—wealthy Jewish patrons in Rome—defined themselves as much or even more by what they held in common with their non-Jewish neighbors, as by their differences; and it forces us to celebrate the fact that these sarcophagi communicate sameness, and not difference, just as their patrons must have celebrated their mastery of the culture of Rome. I think that by answering this way, we'll be truer to the intentions of the patrons. Thank you.

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