



## Anatomy of a Sarcophagus

National Maritime Museum, Haifa, #5454, the front of what was once a sarcophagus, depicts a harbor scene (plate I.1) reminiscent of the well-preserved harbor relief (II.10) in the Museo Torlonia at Rome. Only 14 maritime sarcophagi are known in the world, but they tell us about harbors no longer able to be excavated, further supporting the observation, "If the ancients had not died, they could not have lived."

The Torlonia relief, originally disputed whether it was from Ostia, Alexandria or Puteoli, is the mental image of a port, but its complex iconography has never been completely deciphered. Its figures include Portunus (god of harbors), Heracles, Antinous (the beautiful, soft-looking young favorite of the emperor Hadrian), an elephant biga (2-animal chariot), a huge eye, 2 ships, all crowded against the background of the harbor's breakwater.

The Haifa sarcophagus shows the gate to Rome's port, Ostia, with (in the center) a lighthouse surmounted by an eagle. (Alexandria had its Pharos and Ostia and Caesarea both had their equivalent.) The lighthouse depicted looks like it has four stories, but the lowest stage is actually the marble gate to the port. Two channels are seen here, whereas the Torlonia relief has only a single entry. Four gods are shown, probably representing colossal statues and symbolizing the divine power that controlled commerce and the life and luck of sailors. An initial reading of the iconography would suggest Bacchus/Dionysos and Ariadne as the right and left central figures (I.5). Bacchus as a god of death and immortality was an appropriate (and common) figure on a sarcophagus and emerged from the sea during the Anthesteria, the spring festival, and Ariadne's resurrection from death to life was symbolic of the constant revival in nature. But the female figure is not crowned with the seven stars through which she became a constellation and the cornucopia which she holds is not one of Ariadne's attributes. In archaic times, Dionysos was bearded and robed, while later on he was shown naked and young, but the figure here wears a toga, after the fashion of visual representations of togated figures during the Augustan principate. However, as presented, he looks more like Antinous (often represented as the god Silvanus), not unreasonable since Antinous was also the patron saint of weighers (sacomari) at ports, but the style is Julio-Claudian, not later than Nero, while the eagle does not appear on the lighthouse before the time of the Antonines. The female figure paired with Antinous here is Ceres, holding her cornucopia, reminding us that in Hadrianic times the empress Sabina was often shown as Ceres. The figure of Heracles (II.8) on the far right is also appropriate in light of a dedication in Ostia that links Antinous and Heracles and Heracles' own reputation as a traveler. The figure on the far left (I.3 and 4) is clearly Neptune (in a sort of mirror image to the Torlonia relief), as one might expect at a port.

Depictions of harbor scenes are also found in a mosaic at the Museo della Civiltà (EUR), where loading/unloading at a port is underway, and in a mosaic at Pompeii, which shows the harbor and its warehouses.

In the space bounded by Ceres and Neptune looking at each other (I.4) we see a busy warehouse with crenellated walls and a trumpeter outside. On the opposite side (between Antinous and Heracles, II.8) a ship is manned by nude males, as in reality and in the representations of the ships of souls.

In an attempt to determine what is going on in the Torlonia relief, a close look at the inscription (I.2) immediately beneath the elephant biga is helpful. QQ C F NAV probably equals Quinquennialis Censor Feliciter Navigatio (or something similar): The Quinquennial Magistrate - Happy Sailing. The elephants may suggest this consular personage's departure for a 5-year task in Africa or Alexandria. Furthermore, elephants were supposed to have a long life and the ability to see their way well in the darkness (or, in sea terms, fog). This may correlate with the oculus, the big eye further below the inscription.

Turning back to the Haifa sarcophagus, we note that the pediment is balanced on 3 columns, not attested for the Julio-Claudian period (the apparent date of the carving), and the style of the cloud forms is 16th century. The vanishing point perspective of the orthogonals sophisticatedly centers on the eagle, a technique not known before the 15th century. These points and the syncretistic use of iconography in the figures suggests that the sarcophagus is not ancient Roman.

Unfortunately we do not know where the Haifa sarcophagus was found. Venice, with its many crenellated walls and maritime tradition, felt a close kinship with Rome. Ludovico Foscarini was very interested in Roman ships and Mantegna had strong connections with Venice, but fascination with Roman ports was present in other places as well. The sarcophagus was probably made by a brilliant artist of the 16th century who knew the iconography of Julio-Claudian and Hadrianic times. Had it been a product of the antiquarianism of the 19th century, the carvers would probably have supplied some "authentic" damage to the carving to show its authenticity.

The Haifa sarcophagus is almost surely a masterpiece of Renaissance imitation, but whether a copy of some specific sarcophagus then existing but now lost or merely a result of the employment of the spirit of Roman sarcophagi we cannot know. Sarcophagi produced in mass in workshops were the most visible mementoes of ancient craftsmanship in the Middle Ages and even the Renaissance. They were first-hand inspirations to Renaissance artists, who were also known to have recarved ancient sarcophagi; Michaelangelo was accused of having done so.