

Beelden van hoop en verwachting

Een onderzoek naar de afbeeldingen en hun betekenis op Romeinse christelijke kindersarcofagen uit de 3^e en 4^e eeuw

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1. The number of Christian child sarcophagi

This study deals with the 76 remaining Christian child sarcophagi that were made in workshops in the city of Rome between 280 and 400. Some of these survived in larger or smaller fragments. Of the 76 child sarcophagi, 42 are decorated with biblical scenes: 28 are still complete and 14 others are only fragmentary. The remaining 34 (pieces of) child sarcophagi do not have biblical scenes, but on these an inscription or some other depiction alludes to their Christian nature. The 76 Christian child sarcophagi make up a small portion (circa 5%) of the roughly 1,500 preserved Christian sarcophagi. This percentage is higher than the percentage of non-Christian child sarcophagi within the set of non-Christian sarcophagi: of the 15,000 preserved non-Christian sarcophagi, 588 are child sarcophagi (less than 4%).

Of the 76 Christian child sarcophagi, 27 were meant for a boy and 25 for a girl. For the remaining 24, it is unknown to whom they belonged, whether to a boy or to a girl. On 13 boy and 7 girl sarcophagi, the name of the deceased child is mentioned in the inscription. Seven of these, all boy sarcophagi, also include the names of the parents. Eleven boy and five girl sarcophagi list the boy's or girl's age at the time of death; the average age of boys is 7 years, of girls, close to 6 years.

Most of the child sarcophagi (67) are found in museums, catacombs and churches in Rome or the Vatican. Of the remaining 9, two are found elsewhere in Italy (Ravenna and Ventimiglia), and 7 others are in the collection of museums outside Italy: 2 in Arles (France), 1 in Berlin (Germany), Copenhagen (Denmark), Frankfurt (Germany), Oxford (England) and Jerusalem (Israel).

2. Biblical scenes on the child sarcophagi

On the child sarcophagi, there is a strong preference for scenes from the New Testament; scenes from the Old Testaments are mainly meaningful in the light of their relation to the scenes from the New Testament. This study of biblical

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scenes on child sarcophagi is focused mainly on the 28 that have been preserved in a complete state because this study does not only apply to the individual scenes but also to the composition as a whole. The biblical scenes on the 14 fragments are discussed in the catalogue.

Based on the inventory of the biblical scenes on the 28 complete child sarcophagi, it is clear that there was a strong preference to use scenes of the New Testament. Of the 104 recognizable scenes on the 28 child sarcophagi, 75 are based on stories from the New Testament and only 29 on stories from the Old Testament. The preference for the New Testament is also seen in the spectrum of scenes on the individual child sarcophagi: of 28 remaining complete child sarcophagi with biblical scenes, 12 exclusively feature scenes from the New Testament against just 2 that exclusively feature scenes from the Old Testament. The focus of the 14 mixed sarcophagi – depicting scenes from both the Old Testament and the New Testament – is clearly on the scenes from the New Testament. The Old Testament scenes on these sarcophagi are nearly always used in relation to scenes from the New Testament.

The focus of the New Testament scenes is on depictions of events from the life of Jesus (52 out of 75 New Testament scenes), and within them specifically the miracles performed by Jesus: 40 out of 52 scenes from Jesus's life depict a miracle (healings (12), raising of the dead (10), miracle of the multiplying of the loaves (10), wine miracle of Cana (8)). Of the 12 remaining scenes 9 depict the Adoration of the Magi and 3 depict the Entry into Jerusalem.

Besides the 29 Old Testament scenes and the 52 images from the life of Jesus, 10 of the 28 child sarcophagi contain one or more scenes from the life of Peter: 9 times striking water from the rock, 6 times the arrest and 9 times the scene with the cock. Most of the Peter scenes (11 out of 18) appear on child sarcophagi that have only New Testament scenes. Peter scenes are very popular on frieze sarcophagi from the city of Rome in the era of emperor Constantine's rule, probably because Peter was considered the founder of the Christian community in Rome. The number of Peter scenes on the child sarcophagi is relatively small compared to the number on adult sarcophagi.

Besides the 29 scenes from the Old Testament, the 52 scenes depicting the life of Jesus and the 18 Peter scenes, there are 5 scenes which *prima facie* do not have a clear interpretation. These scenes are discussed in 'Theme 10' in chapter 9 and in the description of the relevant sarcophagi in the catalogue.

3. Christian child sarcophagi without biblical scenes

Of the 76 Christian child sarcophagi, 34 do not have biblical scenes, but there are other elements that hint at their Christian nature. On 17 of them there is an inscription that alludes to its Christian nature. They are inscriptions accompanying the vital data of the deceased child, annotating them with terms such as *in pace* or *depositus* (or the Greek language translations), terms which are used almost exclusively on Christian burial monuments. Two child sarcophagi have no

biblical inscriptions or biblical scenes, but the child is represented as standing between two apostles.

On the remaining 15 child sarcophagi, it is the archeological background and the combination of scenes that is the reference to the Christian background. The discussion of these items in the catalogue mentions the reasons for characterizing these sarcophagi as Christian.

4. The majority of the Christian child sarcophagi were nearly always made to order

Chapter 2.7 argues that Christian child sarcophagi, those displaying biblical scenes as well as those that do not, were made to order. No two sarcophagi are identical; they vary in physical dimensions, their decoration with scenes and the iconography of the individual scenes.

5. Continuity and discontinuity with the decoration of non-Christian child sarcophagi

The comparison between the Christian and non-Christian child sarcophagi shows that on Christian sarcophagi, some of the *non-biblical images* derive their themes from the traditional non-Christian child sarcophagi. Common themes such as pastoral scenes or depictions of sea creatures that were popular on non-Christian child sarcophagi are also found on Christian child sarcophagi. Apparently, Christian parents were comfortable with decorations derived from non-Christian imagery on Christian sarcophagi. There were, however, some limitations in the choice of images. Images of other deities (for example Dionysos) were not used on Christian child sarcophagi. Popular were those images that suited the Christian line of thinking about life after death. They had to emanate peace, quiet and security: clients were comfortable with images of a garden, hinting at the Garden of Eden, shepherds with a sheep on their shoulders, echoing the parable of the Good Shepherd, or swimming dolphins, which evoke associations with the Ichthus sign. Such images could be interpreted as Christian because of the inclusion of certain formulaic inscriptions (such as *in pace*) or because of the combination of certain images (such as the shepherd carrying a sheep on his shoulders combined with an *orante*).

The *biblical images* on Christian child sarcophagi establish a completely new tradition, away from the traditional imagery on non-Christian child sarcophagi.

Many of the non-Christian child sarcophagi are decorated with retrospective pictures, images that reminisce the life of the deceased child, such as the so-called *curriculum vitae* sarcophagi which have depictions of typical events in the life of a child: the first bath, children playing games like throwing nuts, chasing with ropes and sticks or playing with a goat's cart, being schooled or exercising sports. A popular retrospective image is the *klinè scene*, where parents and caregivers, brothers and sisters are gathered around the death bed of the child and

quietly mourn the loss of the child. In contrast, the Christian child sarcophagi with biblical scenes do not have such retrospective scenes anymore. They are replaced by prospective bible scenes, scenes that look ahead to the coming Kingdom of God and which express the hope for or the expectation of the new life after death and a future raising of the dead. These are the scenes that give comfort to the survivors, because they express the confidence that God's plan will apply to the deceased child.

A *combination of non-Christian and Christian images* is mainly found on some early Christian child sarcophagi from the end of the 3rd and the beginning of the 4th century, such as the Jonah sarcophagus in Copenhagen which has, besides the Jonah cycle, images of blowing wind gods, shepherds with a sheep on their shoulder and a fisherman; and the *loculus* plate in the Musei Capitolini in Rome, which contains a philosopher's scene in conjunction with an image of the raising of Lazarus.

6. Child sarcophagi do not have a unique repertoire of biblical scenes specifically for children

The comparison between biblical images on sarcophagi for children and on those for adults shows (chapter 8) that child sarcophagi do not have a unique repertoire specifically for children. The decoration of child sarcophagi uses imagery from the same repertoire that is used for sarcophagi for adults. There are no biblical scenes that are used exclusively on child sarcophagi.

There is no evidence to suggest that the choice of a particular biblical theme was affected by the specific group for whom it was intended: on one girl's sarcophagus (cat.nr. 26) a raising is represented by an image of a general raising of the dead, not by an image of the raising of Jairus's daughter, an image that was not unknown in early Christian art, and was what one might expect on a sarcophagus made for a girl.

7. Many child sarcophagi with biblical scenes have a clear and deliberate composition

Chapter 6 discusses the interpretation of the compositional context on sarcophagi in general: many researchers, such as Gerke, Klauser, Engemann and Koch, find that there is no clear ordering of scenes on most of the frieze sarcophagi from the 4th century, and that no clear meaning can be assigned to the positioning of the scenes within the composition as a whole. There is no evidence that there was an ideal ordering (*Ideal-Anordnung*) of scenes that was seen as authoritative or guiding or was prescribed by the Church. We have attempted to show in chapter 10 that the views of Gerke, Klauser, Engemann and Koch do not apply to the composition on most of the child sarcophagi with biblical scenes. In particular the child sarcophagi with scenes from both the Old Tes-

tament and the New Testament show a clear composition, with deliberate choices for the scenes and their positioning.

The small size inherent in child sarcophagi made some parents choose for a composition with only a few biblical scenes. This limitation on the number of biblical scenes makes it easier to detect the deliberate nature of the composition of the scenes.

The deliberate positioning of images is most apparent on the child sarcophagi which have a composition consisting of a few scenes from both the Old Testament and the New Testament. The scenes from the New Testament on these always include the scene of the Adoration of the Magi.

8. The child sarcophagi with scenes from the Old Testament and the New Testament have a typological structure

Because of the juxtapositioning of scenes from the Old with scenes from the New Testament, the compositional structure of the 14 mixed child sarcophagi – with scenes from the two – can be said to have a typological structure. The scenes from the Old Testament refer directly or indirectly to the Resurrection of Christ and to an impending raising of the dead, directly through the underlying texts (such as the vision of Ezekiel) or indirectly through the way in which the stories are interpreted in the New Testament (such as Adam and Eve at the tree, the sacrifice of Isaac, Jonah in the fish). The scenes from the New Testament show that with the coming of Jesus, promises and prophecies from the Old Testament have been fulfilled and that the miracles that Jesus performed are signs in which “the works of God might be displayed” (John 9, 3).

Scenes from the Old Testament and from the New Testament are typologically juxtaposed in such a way that they contrast promise, hope and expectation with the fulfillment of those. Not only does this stress the unity between the Old and New Testament, but it also places the events from the two Testaments in the wider context of the continuing salvation history (*Heilsgeschichte*).

9. The biblical scenes on the child sarcophagi refer directly or indirectly to the Resurrection of Christ, the eternal life and the future raising of the dead

The biblical scenes on the child sarcophagi have several levels of meaning. First, they refer to underlying stories and texts from the Bible. For example, the scenes of Daniel among the lions, or of the three young men in the fiery furnace or of Jonah vomited out by the sea monster, will have referred to the underlying bible stories and as such will have had the meaning of ‘rescue scenes’, in which God made it apparent that he will not abandon his servants. Possibly, these stories also evoked associations with the stories of contemporary martyrs. Second, the typological structure of the composition partly determines the interpretation of the scenes on the child sarcophagi. The scenes from the Old

Testament are scenes of promise, hope and expectation, which refer to the coming, the works and the resurrection of Christ. The images from the New Testament reflect that the promises and expectations of the Old Testament about the coming and the acts of Jesus have been fulfilled.

But perhaps more important than the earlier discussed meanings is the interpretation that the scenes receive within and from the compositional context on the child sarcophagi. The choice of scenes depicted on child sarcophagi shows a preference for images that refer directly or indirectly to the Resurrection of Christ, a life after death and a future raising of the dead. This explains the preference for images of a raising of the dead on the child sarcophagi, but also for other scenes that have a more indirect relation – through the underlying biblical texts and stories or through the interpretation given to these texts by the New Testament – to the Resurrection of Christ or to a future raising of the dead. For example, the ultimate message of the vision of Ezekiel is: “This is what the Sovereign LORD says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them” (Ezekiel 37, 12). And the New Testament says of the sacrifice of Isaac that Abraham was able to comply with God’s will because “Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death” (Hebrews 11, 18-19). The scene of the ‘old Adam’ in the Garden of Eden who caused there to be death evokes the image of the coming of the ‘new Adam’ who will defy death (Romans 5, 16-17); and it is Jesus himself who calls the three days and nights Jonah spent in the belly of a huge fish a sign for the three days and nights “the Son of Man will be (...) in the heart of the earth” before his Resurrection (Matthew 12, 40).

The positioning of images within the composition reinforces this layer of meaning. For example, the depiction of the raising of the dead is placed adjacent to the portrait of the deceased child, which connects the implied future raising of the dead directly to the child. And we see again and again the combination of the images of a raising of the dead, the miracle of the loaves (where Jesus refers to the “food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you” – John 6, 27) and the cure of the blind man (whoever wants to see the salvation will have to be cured of his ‘blindness’).

From the choice of scenes and from the compositional context it may be inferred that the images were not only references to the literal biblical stories but also references to the promises of the eternal life and of the future raising of the dead. This is not surprising, given the place of child sarcophagi within the burial context.

10. The typological structure and the hope of a future raising of the dead determine the ‘code’ which guides the choice of individual scenes and the positioning of images within the composition

The choice of scenes and their position within the composition is based on a ‘code’.

It is the 'code' of the salvation history, as written down in the stories of the Old Testament, continuing through Jesus' life and his works. The depictions of the events in the Old Testament point forward to the coming of Jesus and his works of salvation, those from the New Testament show that the promises and prophecies from the Old Testament are fulfilled by Jesus' advent and the miracles he performed. But the scenes also refer to the victory over death through Christ's resurrection and to the promise of a raising of the dead to be expected in the future, a promise that is to the surviving relatives a message of consolation, hope and expectation.

