

Ariadne at St Margaret's (Kebelj, Slovenia) and the Promise of a New Life

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Abstract

The walls of St Margaret's church in Kebelj above Oplotnica, in north-eastern Slovenia, incorporate two marble spolia with relief depictions, one showing the sleeping Ariadne abandoned by Theseus on the island of Naxos and the other the triumph of Dionysus. They are ash chest fragments that originally most likely formed parts of a single ash chest of the Poetovio production, as its right and left sides. The relief with the abandoned Ariadne on Naxos is the first recorded example of this mythological motif in the Norico-Pannonian sculptural production, which is well-known for its use of mythological iconography. The motif is quite rare in Roman sepulchral production in general, as the narratives on the sarcophagi focus more on the story of Dionysus, in which Ariadne appears as one of the participants. An eschatological reading of the motif provides the main argument for joining the two marble reliefs, though there are also other possible readings of the whole.

Keywords: Ariadne; Dionysus; ash chest; Pohorje marble; spolia; Kebelj

Izvleček

Ariadna pri sv. Marjeti (Kebelj, Slovenija) in obljuba novega življenja

V cerkev sv. Marjete na Keblju nad Oplotnico sta kot gradbena elementa vzdani marmorni spoliji, ena z reliefno upodobitvijo speče Ariadne, ki jo Tezej zapušča na otoku Naksos, in druga z upodobitvijo Dionizovega trumfa. Najverjetneje pripadata isti petovionski pepelnici, prva njeni desni in druga levi krajši stranici. Gre za prvi primer rabe tega mitološkega motiva v noriško-panonski kiparski produkciji, ki je sicer znana prav po rabi mitoloških motivov. Motiv Ariadne, ki jo Tezej zapušča na Naksosu, je v rimski sepulkralni proizvodnji dokaj redek, saj so rimski sarkofagi bolj osredotočeni na Dionizovo zgodbo, v kateri je Ariadna le eden od delov. Predvsem v eshatološkem branju motiva najdemo argument za združitev obeh fragmentov, ki gledalcu sicer puščata možnost tudi za drugačna branja celote.

Ključne besede: Ariadna; Dioniz; pepelnica; pohorski marmor; spolije; Kebelj



Fig. 1: Church of St Margaret of Antioch in the village of Kebelj above Oplotnica (photo L. Pukšič)

Many villages on the southern slopes of the Pohorje Hills have churches built in the Middle Ages of marble products from the Roman period, which were re-used for the quoins of their naves and bell towers, even the foundations. These marble pieces were taken primarily from the cemeteries of the Roman towns, villages and villas on the plain of Dravsko polje. The remains of the Roman colony of Poetovio (modern-day Ptuj) were undoubtedly the main source of this building material. Although there is no firm evidence, we may reasonably assume that these remains even provided a considerable source of income for the medieval inhabitants of Ptuj. Consequently, most sepulchral monuments built into the churches in and around Dravsko polje cannot be ascribed a local origin, though some such cases have been documented.¹ Instead, they should primarily be attributed to the cemeteries of Poetovio and the trade in building material organised in Ptuj.

Ariadne on Naxos

One of the Pohorje churches where Roman monuments of marble – predominantly lower parts of ash chests – were reused for its quoins is the church of St Margaret of Antioch in Kebelj above Oplotnica (Fig. 1). The restoration work of its exterior in 2003² revealed marble spolia that include a fragment of an ash chest with figural decoration (Fig. 2).

The fragment represents the right third or quarter of the lower part of a marble ash chest,³ with a figural relief on its right short side. It is missing half the bottom edge on the left and the upper left corner is crushed, suggesting that the right lateral panel of the presumably tripartite front – embedded into the wall and not visible – is severely

¹ The pieces built into the Church of the Nativity of Mary in Slivnica near Maribor, for example, have been shown to originate from the nearby cemetery of a Roman countryside villa excavated in 2007 by Primož Predan.

² Institute for the Protection of Cultural Heritage of Slovenia, Maribor Regional Office, archaeologist Mira Strmčnik Gulič. For data, see Gulič 2006, 126.

³ Size 75 × 26 × 30 cm; Eastern Alpine marble with horizontal grey bands of mineral inclusions.



Fig. 2: Right side of a marble ash chest built into the SW corner of the church (photo author)

damaged. The rear side of the ash chest is finely dressed. The hole carved into the relief on the right side shows that the ash chest had previously been used as a trough. The figural scene has a simple frame, the lower section of which is broader than the lateral ones, as is characteristic of the ash chests (and sarcophagi) of Poetovio.⁴

The fragment bears slightly less than half of the entire relief. The surviving relief is vertically composed of two parts, with the upper part showing a reclining female figure occupying two thirds of the relief's width together with the rocky support on the right-hand side. She is depicted in a three-quarter view facing the spectator, draped in a cloak that covers her left shoulder, envelops her left arm and continues down her body so as to leave the part from her chest to her thighs exposed. Her left arm is bent at the elbow and supports the weight of her upper body, the forearm rests on the ground, the large palm is turned downward and the fingers are extended. Her left leg is extended, while her right leg is bent at the knee and positioned in front of the left. The right foot is the only bare part of her legs, protruding from beneath the cloak. The left third of the relief shows a male figure striding energetically toward the right and into the background. Only the bare legs up to the knees survive of this figure. His right leg is behind the reclining figure, hence only the calf is visible. The lower section of his left leg is touching the ground with the toes, the heel is raised. Behind his left leg is a narrow flat object, positioned diagonally to the leg. The bottom part of the relief is occupied by an elaborately shaped element resembling a horizontal palm frond with the tip on the right.

The reclining figure supported on a rock is shown in the foreground in a pose characteristic of sleeping or reclining male, and even more commonly female figures.⁵

⁴ See Djurić 2024.

⁵ For sleeping figures, see McNally 1985; Stafford 1993.

The missing head and right arm, as well as the damaged chest area prevent an immediate and clear identification of the figure; she could represent a sleeping maenad or nymph,⁶ Rhea Silvia,⁷ Venus⁸ or Ariadne,⁹ to name only the most common depictions. The identity of the male figure is equally uncertain; he could be Mars, a satyr, Theseus or someone else. Only the object beside his left leg is more easily identifiable, resembling a footbridge or gangway leading from the shore to a ship¹⁰ and suggesting the presence of a ship in the background. Individually, these three elements – a reclining figure on a rocky support, a striding male figure and a gangway – cannot be precisely identified. Jointly, however, this combination positively identifies the scene as that of a well-known mythological motif of Theseus abandoning Ariadne on the island of Naxos (*Dia*). In this interpretation, the bottom motif of a ‘palm frond’ also becomes clearer as a decorative rendering of Ariadne’s bed made of seaweed, similar to the depictions on the wall paintings from Pompeii, for example in the House of Caecilius Iucundus¹¹ or those recently found in House V 6, 2bis.¹²

The story of the sleeping Ariadne on Naxos forms part of both the myth of the Athenian hero Theseus and the myth of Dionysus. After the Cretan princess Ariadne helped Theseus slay the Minotaur, she fled with him aboard his ship. They landed on the island of Naxos in the middle of the Aegean Sea. There, Ariadne fell asleep on the shore. While she slept, Theseus quietly abandoned her and sailed away to Athens – according to the most widespread version of the story – at the urging of Athena. When Ariadne awoke, she searched for Theseus in despair, only to realise he had abandoned her. Exhausted and overcome by sorrow, she sank into a restless sleep. In this state, she was discovered by Dionysus, who seduced and married her. In this divine role, Ariadne henceforth appeared alongside Dionysus in his *thiasos*.¹³

⁶ See Fabbricotti 1976; Fabbricotti 1980.

⁷ Albertson 2012; Gersht, Mucznik 1988.

⁸ E.g. on the sarcophagus held in the cathedral in Amalfi; Robert 1904, 237, No. 193, Tab. 61, Fig. 193 a-b.

⁹ Wolf 2002.

¹⁰ E.g. on the reliefs showing Iphigenia at Tauris such as the stela from Székesfehérvár (Fitz 1976, 77, No. 27; lupa 3592) or the wall paintings from Pompeii and Herculaneum (cf. Parise Badoni 1990, Figs. 1–9).

¹¹ House of Caecilius Iucundus V 1, 26, Triclinium O, Wall E, central scene, now held in Napoli; Parise Badoni 1990, 76, Fig. 3.

¹² Catoni, Osanna 2018; Catoni 2020, Fig. 1.

¹³ The myth of Ariadne is incorporated in the myths of both Theseus and Dionysus. In literary sources, we already find it in Homer (*Odyssey* 11.320 ff) and Hesiod (*Theogony* 947 ff). For the myth of Theseus and the Ariadne story, see Plutarch (*Lives* 19–20) and Ovid (*Heroides* 10). For Dionysus and Ariadne, see Ovid (*Fasti* 3.459 ff). For the variants of the myth of Ariadne and the relevant ancient sources, see <https://www.theoi.com/Georgikos/Ariadne.html>.

History of the motif

The motif of the sleeping Ariadne appeared in art relatively late, only toward the end of the Archaic period in red-figure vase painting. It grew in popularity in the late fifth century BCE, when a monumental painted cycle was created in the temple of Dionysus in Athens. Pausanias,¹⁴ who describes this cycle, writes of “*Ariadne asleep, Theseus putting out to sea, and Dionysus on his arrival to carry off Ariadne*”. Some¹⁵ have interpreted this description as synchronous events depicted in a single painting, while others¹⁶ have seen it as a successive narrative represented in two separate paintings. Both types of depictions can be found on Apulian red-figure pottery of the late fifth and early fourth centuries BCE.¹⁷

In the Roman milieu, the focus in the story of Theseus and Ariadne shifted onto Ariadne and her despair at Theseus’ deceitful departure,¹⁸ as expressed first in the poetry of Catullus¹⁹ and later Ovid,²⁰ and also frequently depicted in Pompeian wall paintings. In these painted versions, the two scenes – Theseus’ departure (Fig. 3a) and the arrival of Dionysus (Fig. 3c) – were consistently separated. There also appeared a third, entirely new iconographic motif of the awakened Ariadne, who weeps inconsolably upon seeing the departing ship (Fig. 3b).²¹

The classic iconographic composition of the first scene shows Theseus in the foreground, stepping onto or toward the ship while looking back at the sleeping Ariadne reclining in the foreground (Fig. 4). Their bodies are consistently oriented in opposite directions. In the background is the bow of the ship on one side, while on the other side we usually find a seated Athena, in some cases accompanied by the winged Hypnos next to Ariadne. The prototype of this composition can be seen on a stamnos kept in Boston. In Pompeian wall painting, Ariadne is most frequently depicted on the left side, while Theseus, stepping onto the ship’s gangway, is on the right; only in

¹⁴ Paus. *Description of Greece* 1.20.3; transl. W. H. S. Jones and H. A. Ormerod.

¹⁵ Simon 1954, 77; Brommer 1982, 90.

¹⁶ Salis 1910, 134; Lippold 1951, 49.

¹⁷ Theseus with Ariadne, Athena and Hypnos on a stamnos by the Ariadne Painter, held in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and Theseus with Ariadne and Dionysus on a bell krater in the Museo Nazionale in Taranto; cf. Bernhard, Daszewski 1986, Nos. 54 and 96. Catoni (2020) identifies a scene with Theseus, Ariadne and Dionysus on a fragment of the lid of an Attic lekanis from c. 400 BCE (Bonn, Akademisches Kunstmuseum, Inv. No. 354) and argues it proves the existence of a composite motif also in Greece and supports the hypothesis of a single painting in Pausanias’ description.

¹⁸ Differently on the Campana reliefs, cf. Colpo 2012, 115.

¹⁹ Cat. 64.124–129 when describing the cover of a wedding bed, perhaps using a Hellenistic model.

²⁰ Ovid *Heroides* 10.47–48.

²¹ F. Parise Badoni (1990) writes that this motif only occurs in Pompeii in the paintings of the Fourth Style; e.g. in House VI 9, 2.13, House of Meleager; Napoli, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Inv. No. 9051.



Fig. 3: (a) Theseus abandoning the sleeping Ariadne, Pompeii, House V 6, 2bis (photo M. Osanna); (b) weeping Ariadne, Pompeii, House VI 9, 2.14 (Naples, MANN 9051) (photo Marie-Lan Nguyen); (c) Dionysus discovering the sleeping Ariadne, Pompeii, House IX 3, 5 (House of Marcus Lucretius; MANN Inv. No. 9271) (photo Marie-Lan Nguyen)

the triclinium painting of the House of Caecilius Iucundus (V 1, 26)²² and the newly found painting in House V 6, 2bis do we see the depictions reversed.²³ In the opinion of Franca Parise Badoni, the prototype for all other depictions of this scene in Pompeii, which itself derived from an Apulian/Tarantine prototype, was the fragmentarily surviving scene in Hall A of the Imperial Villa.²⁴

In Pompeian painting, the sleeping Ariadne in the scene of Theseus' departure is most often shown in a calm pose, with her arms placed alongside her body or with her head resting on a bent arm. In contrast, the scenes with Dionysus show her in a dramatically erotic pose²⁵ of the famous Hellenistic sculpture of *The Sleeping Ariadne* (Fig. 5),²⁶ which served as the model for the later relief depictions of sleeping female figures ranging from Ariadne²⁷ to maenads and even Rhea Silvia. Of the wall

²² Parise Badoni 1990, Fig. 3.

²³ For a list of Pompeian depictions of this scene, see Parise Badoni 1990 (Series I) and Fontana 2022, 61–62. Franca Parise Badoni postulated the prototype for these Pompeian depictions not in the Classical Athenian painting, but in a prototype created in Apulia or, more precisely, Taranto (Parise Badoni 1990, 73–74).

²⁴ Parise Badoni 1990, 75.

²⁵ Sheila McNally (1985, 172) emphasises Ariadne's restless, oppressive sleep expressed with this pose.

²⁶ The Vatican, Museo Pio Clementino, Inv. No. 548; Hadrianic copy of a Hellenistic original from the Pergamene school, second century BCE; Wolf 2002; Valeri 2019. Copies held in Wilton House (GB), Prado, Louvre, Uffizi, San Antonio, Antalya.

²⁷ In Pannonia, the sleeping Ariadne discovered by Dionysus is depicted on a travertine relief from the foundations of the Roman bridge across the Drava at Osijek (*Mursa*). Kept in the Arheološki muzej Osijek. Zubčić 2011, Fig. on p. 31; lupa 26323. She also appears on two other reliefs, one from Dunaújváros (lupa 3967) and one from Tata (lupa 3860).



Fig. 4: Theseus abandoning Ariadne on Naxos, Pompeii, triclinium in the House of Caecilius Iucundus (V 1, 26) (photo Marie-Lan Nguyen)



Fig. 5: *The Sleeping Ariadne*, Vatican, Museo Pio Clementino, Inv. No. 548 (photo Wknight94 CC BY-SA 3.0 DEED)

paintings in Pompeii, only the Ariadne from the House of Caecilius Iucundus, of the Fourth Style, adopts the pose of the Hellenistic sculpture.

The posture of the Hellenistic Ariadne, with both arms bent and raised under and over her head, is used in the depictions of Ariadne in all three surviving reliefs on the Antonine sarcophagi featuring Ariadne and Theseus, namely the relief from Hadrian's Villa (Fig. 6a)²⁸, the Attic sarcophagus kept in the Istanbul Archaeology Museum (Fig. 6b)²⁹ and the garland sarcophagus from Capranica (Fig. 6c).³⁰ In all three reliefs, Ariadne lies in the foreground on the left, while Theseus in the background strides resolutely to the right toward the ship, of which only the bow is shown. The basic iconographic composition, which is a mirror version to that on the stamnos from Boston that later continues in Pompeian wall painting, clearly conveys the idea of separation with the divergent positioning of the main figures. All other figures, when present, only serve to clarify the scene (Athena and Hypnos in the relief from Hadrian's Villa) or add genre details (sailors in the relief from Istanbul).

The focus of these reliefs is primarily on the sleeping Ariadne rather than on Theseus, the latter characteristic of the Pompeian depictions of this scene. This shift in

²⁸ Now kept in the Vatican, Inv. No. 540; Bernhard, Daszewski 1986, 1058 No. 68 with bibliography.

²⁹ Right side, Istanbul Archaeology Museum, No. 125; Bernhard, Daszewski 1986, 1058 No. 70 with bibliography.

³⁰ New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Inv. No. 90.12a, b; Bernhard, Daszewski 1986, 1058 No. 69 with bibliography.

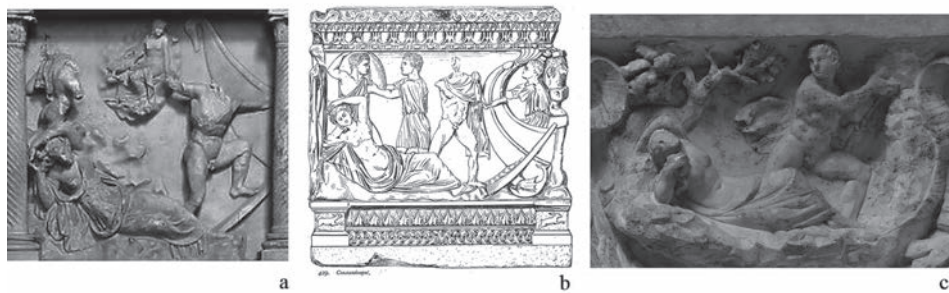


Fig. 6: (a) Plate from Hadrian's Villa, Vatican (from LIMC III2); (b) sarcophagus, Istanbul Archaeology Museum (from Robert ASR III.3, 429); (c) garland sarcophagus from Capranica, MMA New York, Acc. No. 90.12a, detail (photo MMA)

focus is the result of the different context, understanding and use of the topic, which in the sepulchral realm emphasises the correlation of sleep with death or transformation.³¹ In the case of Ariadne (as with Psyche), this transformation leads to the joining of the human and the divine. A spectator familiar with the mythological narrative knew that Ariadne would awaken and be united with Dionysus.

A different depiction and specific use of the motif is on the Gallienic sarcophagus from Castel Giubileo (*Fidene*),³² which Valeria commissioned for her son Artemidorus. Among other scenes on the sarcophagus, Theseus as the son is shown on the already departing ship, his gaze turned away from the abandoned Ariadne as the mother, who still sleeps on the shore in a pose with one arm extended and the other bent above her head.

The rather rare use of the motif of Theseus abandoning Ariadne on either the Roman Metropolitan or Attic sarcophagi of the Hadrianic-Antonine period is in stark contrast with the large number of sarcophagi depicting the scene of Dionysus discovering the abandoned and sleeping Ariadne; the scene occurs on the Metropolitan sarcophagi,³³ mostly made in the final decades of the second century CE. Attic sarcophagi, on the other hand, rarely feature Ariadne in any of the scenes.³⁴ It is therefore quite surprising to find one depiction of Theseus abandoning Ariadne on Naxos, that at Kebeļj, in the sepulchral production of Norican workshops, which were heavily influenced by Attic models.³⁵ Also surprising is the iconographic composition used in this depiction,

³¹ McNally 1985, 192.

³² Cliveden House, Buckinghamshire, England; Bernhard, Daszewski 1986, 1060 No. 92 with bibliography; Ewald in Zanker, Ewald 2012, 405–408.

³³ Koch, Sichtermann 1982, 193; “unter den dionysischen Mythen ist am zahlreichsten die Auffindung der Ariadne durch Dionysos vertreten, etwa 23 mal ...”.

³⁴ The above-mentioned sarcophagus No. 125 kept in the Istanbul Archaeology Museum or another, Antonine sarcophagus from Thessalonike kept in the same museum, Inv. No. 366; Bernhard, Daszewski 1986, 1063 No. 131 with bibliography.

³⁵ Pochmarski 2010.



Fig. 7: The sleeping Ariadne and a satyr on an Attic sarcophagus held in the Istanbul Archaeology Museum (from Matz 1968)

which was previously unknown – showing Theseus moving in the same direction as the reclining Ariadne, rather than in the opposite direction, as consistently shown in all other known examples. It is not possible to ascertain whether this indicates another, as yet unidentified prototype, or a deliberate modification in a Norican workshop of the established composition. The damage to the Kebelj relief also prevents us from identifying the position of Ariadne's right arm. Considering the position of her left arm, we might reconstruct it in accordance with the depiction on sarcophagus No. 366 in the Istanbul Archaeology Museum (Fig. 7) or in the sarcophagus from Castel Giubileo (now in Cliveden). The Kebelj relief may additionally have depicted a

third figure, such as Athena or Hypnos above Ariadne, although this is not crucial for the composition that could also be complemented by a landscape feature.

The presence of the Theseus-Ariadne-Dionysus iconographic motif on the Metropolitan sarcophagi of the Antonine period suggests that the marble ash chest from Kebelj, with the relief of Theseus abandoning Ariadne on Naxos, can be dated to the Late Antonine or (Early) Severan period. This is the time when the early ash chests were created in Poetovio.

The missing Dionysus

Of interest regarding the ash chest fragment with Ariadne from Kebelj is the associated relief on the other, left side, which presumably complemented the motif on the right side. It is highly probable that the left relief is related to Dionysus, which, in an eschatological sense, would complement Ariadne's departure-death motif with an element that implicitly or explicitly promises new life after death. This could be either the epiphanic motif of Dionysus discovering the sleeping Ariadne (and everything that follows from it),³⁶ the motif of the Indian triumph of Dionysus, en route to which

³⁶ This epiphanic motif is quite common on the numerous wall paintings from Campania and on the Roman Dionysian sarcophagi; see e.g. the sarcophagus in Rome, Palazzo Borghese (ASR IV.3, No. 223), or the sarcophagus in Paris, Louvre, Inv. No. Ma 1346 (Baratte, Metzger 1985, No. 067).



Fig. 8: Fragment of the left and rear sides of a marble ash chest built into the northwest corner of the bell tower of St Margaret church in Kebelj (photo author)

he finds Ariadne on Naxos,³⁷ or the motif of the Dionysian *thiasos* that features Dionysus and Ariadne on a 'wedding' chariot. These are also generally among the most frequently depicted motifs on Roman Dionysian sarcophagi.³⁸

Built into the bell tower of the church in Kebelj is a heavily damaged fragment³⁹ of the left side of a marble ash chest (Fig. 8). It bears a relief depiction of a two-wheeled chariot drawn by at least one large cat, most likely a panther, facing right (Fig. 9). The figures on the chariot are missing, with the possible exception of the lower part of an unidentifiable figure. The poor condition notwithstanding, the surviving elements do allow us to identify the motif as the Triumph of Dionysus, such as is known from several sarcophagi of the Metropolitan production (Fig. 10).⁴⁰ This motif in-

³⁷ A rare example of Dionysus accompanied in triumph by Ariadne on a two-wheel chariot (closer to the wedding motif in this respect) survives on a sarcophagus from the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, Ann Arbor, Michigan, Inv. No. 1981.1.31 (de Grummond 2000) (<https://kornbluth-photo.com/KelseySarcophagus.html>). See Leveritt 2016, 265 and Note 117.

³⁸ Matz 1968a; Matz 1968b; Matz 1969; Matz 1975.

³⁹ Size 50 × 16 × 63 cm.

⁴⁰ In the catalogue in Leveritt 2016, part of his Group A (Strongly Triumphal Sarcophagi): ASR IV.2 95, IV.2 96, IV.2 97, IV.2 98, IV.2 99, IV.2 100, IV.2 101; the animals pulling the chariot in all these cases are large cats, but the chariot with Dionysus is largely hidden behind individual figures and its shape unidentifiable.



Fig. 9: Surviving part of the left side of an ash chest with the relief of the triumph of Dionysus (photo author)



Fig. 10: Triumph of Dionysus, sarcophagus in the Musée et Théâtres Romains, Lyon, Inv. No. 2001.0.305 (CC BY 4.0 Mark Landon)

volves the triumphal two-wheel chariot (*currus triumphalis*) drawn by panthers and driven by Dionysus,⁴¹ who is depicted standing either alone or in the company of Victoria, rarely some other figure. The chariot has the characteristic elongated shape

⁴¹ Dionysus can be depicted clothed (Cambridge type), e.g. on the reverse of a coin of Marcus Aurelius minted in 161–162 CE in Methymna on Lesbos (RPC IV.2, 9752), or nude (S. Agostino type), as seen on the reverse of a coin of Commodus minted around 192 CE in Cyzicus, Mysia (RPC IV.2, 741), while there are also the Lyon and Lateran types (Leveritt 2016, 91–97). The very poor condition of the Kebelj relief prevents us from identifying the exact type.

of a 'fast' chariot,⁴² such as can be seen on a Late Antique floor mosaic from the Roman villa in Santa Cruz (Baños de Valdearados, Burgos), in Spain.⁴³ On sarcophagi, this chariot form is distinctly represented primarily when drawn by centaurs, in some cases also by elephants.⁴⁴ Only in one instance is such a chariot pulled by a panther and elephant;⁴⁵ in principle, this could also be the case on the Kebejlj relief. According to Leveritt's analysis,⁴⁶ panther-drawn chariots on sarcophagi are limited to the Late Antonine and (Early) Severan periods, which would also be the most likely time frame for the ash chest to which this fragment belonged.

It seems fairly likely that the two fragments built into St Margaret's church formed parts of the same relief-decorated ash chest, more precisely its left and right short sides. In addition to the related motifs, this hypothesis is supported by three other observations. The first is the fact that they belong to opposing short sides. The second is the identical surface finish of the rear side in both fragments. The third observation concerns the chest length, as the joint length of the two fragments measures around 100 cm, which is the most common length of the marble ash chests of Poetovio.⁴⁷

The mythological motifs on both sides complement each other and correspond with the motifs recurrent on the Dionysian sarcophagi from the Antonine and Severan periods. Their complementary reading can be eschatological, symbolising death and a new life thereafter, with Dionysus understood "as the god who comes to wake human beings to real life..."⁴⁸ The motifs can also be interpreted as representations of the deceased wife and mourning husband, in which the husband, in the guise of Dionysus, reunites with his beloved wife – Ariadne.⁴⁹ The images depend on the wishes and interests of the spectators, and are as such open to different readings, as outlined by Zanker and Ewald:⁵⁰

as comfort for the members of the family, that the wife, like Ariadne, after much suffering has found peace in death; as a eulogy in praise of the love that bound her to her husband; as the expression of how much the bereaved husband misses her; as the hope that the dead enjoy a blissful existence, or to illustrate the hope that the lovers will again be reunited.

The viewer may perceive all these possibilities equally well and simultaneously, as a melange of different emphases and meanings. The reliefs of such a non-finite nature

⁴² For Roman chariots, see Sandor 2012.

⁴³ Blázquez Martínez 2001.

⁴⁴ E.g. sarcophagi with centaurs: ASR IV.2 108, ASR IV.2 115, ASR IV.2 118, ASR IV.2 120, ASR IV.2 153, ASR IV.2 154, ASR IV.2 155.

⁴⁵ Rome, Villa Medici, ASR IV.2 130, 269–271, Pl. 158.1.

⁴⁶ Leveritt 2016, 99–101, Fig. 3.3.

⁴⁷ See Djurić 2024, Fig. 17.

⁴⁸ "... an interpretation that was already present in ancient mysteries, but that was particularly underlined in his comparison with Christ"; Hernández de la Fuente 2020, 226.

⁴⁹ Cf. Zanker, Ewald 2012, 161.

⁵⁰ Zanker, Ewald 2012, 161.

leave room for the imagination and knowledge of the viewer to complete and conclude the story according to their own wishes and perceptions. Given the widespread popularity of the Dionysian cult in the Severan period, also in Poetovio,⁵¹ it seems that the eschatological reading of both reliefs may have been the most dominant interpretation among the various possibilities.

Translated by Andreja Maver

⁵¹ See Djurić 2020; Djurić 2023.

Bibliography

Abbreviations

ASR = *Die antiken Sarkophag-Reliefs*, Berlin.

LIMC = *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, Zürich-München.

lupa = F. und O. Harl, Ubi Erat Lupa (Bilddatenbank zu antiken Steindenkmälern).
<https://www.lupa.at>

RPC = Roman Provincial Coinage Online (RPC online). – <https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/>

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