What can be done with the ubiquitous strigillated sarcophagi

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JANET HUSKINSON, *ROMAN STRIGILLATED SARCOPHAGI: ART AND SOCIAL HISTORY* (Oxford University Press 2015).f Pp. xvi + 349, figs. 90. ISBN 978-0-19-920324-6.

In writing a book on Roman strigillated sarcophagi, J. Huskinson has undertaken a quite courageous and exciting endeavour — and not only because of the immense, seemingly limitless number of sarcophagi decorated with S-shaped or straight, vertical fluting. Whenever one walks through Rome (and not only there), strigillated sarcophagi seem to pop up everywhere, hidden in the courtyards of palazzi or re-used as fountains in parks and on street corners (fig. 1 below). Strigillated sarcophagi were produced from the Trajanic period to the mid-5th c. (Huskinson 3, 26). In his 1993 handbook on Roman sarcophagi,[1] G. Koch assumed that *c.*800 examples of this type of stone chest are known, now clearly an underestimate. Due to the 'simplicity' of their decoration, strigillated sarcophagi were perceived by both collectors and archaeologists as less valuable and less prestigious than sarcophagi with friezes, as a result of which the strigillated examples are seriously understudied. All this makes it virtually impossible to create a comprehensive catalogue of this type, and it comes as no surprise that no volume of the prestigious *Sarkophag-Corpus* (*ASR*), ongoing since 1879, has been dedicated exclusively to strigillated sarcophagi or is planned for the future. In fact, Huskinson's is the first ever monograph on strigillated sarcophagi, and this alone deserves much credit. In addition, her book is revolutionary in uniting three subjects traditionally treated separately by different scholarly disciplines: pagan sarcophagi, Christian ones, and the re-use of both in late antiquity and post-antique periods. A third point also distinguishes this book from many traditional sarcophagus studies: for good reason (and not only because it would have been an endless endeavour in this case), Huskinson chooses not to work from a catalogue, such an essential component of the *Sarkophag-Corpus,* the *Repertorium der christlich-antiken Sarkophage,* and most other monographs on sarcophagi. Instead, she chooses to concentrate on the "real world" of the production and social use of sarcophagi and on the "image world" created by their commemorative representations (15), which she exemplifies through selected case-studies. The result is thus not an extensive study of the genre, as has been done for other types, but an investigation into certain chosen aspects of strigillated chests which can serve as a thought-provoking starting point for further research on this vast group.

Two introductory chapters are followed by three main sections, "Production, use, and viewing", "Representations", and "Reception", each subdivided into several chapters. The first introductory chapter ("Introducing the questions") gives a brief overview of previous research on strigillated sarcophagi and the development of the chests' form and style, introduces new approaches to the material regarding craftsmen, customers, and viewers (5: "human agents"), and presents the outline of the book. The second ("Introducing the sarcophagi") describes the main features of strigillated sarcophagi, the fluting and the figured decoration, and provides a tentative chronological outline of their development.

The first main section of the monograph has 4 chapters. Chapter 3 ("Making and acquiring strigillated sarcophagi") provides a general overview of what is known about the production of sarcophagi. In the case of strigillated sarcophagi, Huskinson observes that there was no standardized process for their manufacture; either the fluting or the figured panels could be carved first (46-47). Chapter 4 ("Strigillated sarcophagi and their burial contexts") reviews some known contexts of strigillated sarcophagi set up inside tombs in Rome and environs. This short chapter lacks a wider perspective, as most of the phenomena described are true for other types of sarcophagi as well. An exception is the author's idea (72-73) that the fluting catches the light and thereby the attention of the viewer inside the tomb. Chapter 5 ("The decoration of

1 G. Koch, *Sarkophage der römischen Kaiserzeit* (Darmstadt 1993) 90.

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strigillated sarcophagi") discusses fluting, architectural motifs, and figures. In chapt. 6 ("Viewing strigillated sarcophagi") she chooses a refreshing approach to sarcophagus iconography, one that seems particularly important for understanding strigillated chests: focussing on the process of viewing the decoration, she discusses which details of the decoration and compositional features lead the eye, facilitating the reading of the reliefs.

The second main section ("Representations") treats figured decoration on strigillated sarcophagi. Chapter 7 ("Representing Romans"), on portraits on sarcophagi, is unfortunately largely outdated following the 2013 monograph dealing with the same subject by S. Birk[2] (on whose Ph.D. committee Huskinson served). In chapt. 8 ("Mythological imagery") Huskinson discusses the selection of myths shown on strigillated sarcophagi (156-62). She partly explains the choice of motifs through the elongated shape of the panels, which favoured single standing figures (158-59). She also observes a preference for images from the realms of love, hope and commitment, conveying a positive outlook or view of the world (160-61 and 180). Chapter 9 discusses two sample sets of "symbolic figures". The first concerns iconographic motifs often present in certain locations on strigillated sarcophagi — personifications of the seasons, lions, philosophers, and images in the central *mandorle*; the second set has to do with Christian subjects. Chapter 10 ("Representing Christians and their beliefs") is devoted to images with an explicitly Christian subject-matter. Biblical scenes are discussed alongside Christian symbolic figures and portraits on Christian sarcophagi. The author observes that conventional images set into a distinctly Christian context could receive new meanings through juxtaposition with explicitly Christian motifs (235-37). The latter part of this chapter, focussing on portraits, is also somewhat outdated as a result of the 2012[3] book by M. Studer-Karlen on portraits on Early Christian sarcophagi.[4] It is a pity that Studer-Karlen's results could not be considered (perhaps it came out when Huskinson's manuscript was largely complete) as it would have added to the discussion. In the very short chapter 11 ("Strigillated sarcophagi and the Jewish communities in Rome"), Huskinson discusses some examples of sarcophagi which carry Jewish inscriptions or were discovered in Jewish catacombs.

Part 3 on the re-use and reception of strigillated sarcophagi is for its novelty perhaps the most thought-provoking part of the book. In the three chapters Huskinson does not offer a complete overview of re-use and reception of the strigil motif (which would indeed have been virtually impossible), but presents selected case-studies, mostly from Rome and Italy, from late antiquity to the 21st c. The very short chapt. 12 ("The reception of Roman strigillated sarcophagi: approaches to its study"), reviews the scant previous research on this topic. Chapter 13 focuses on "The re-use of strigillated sarcophagi", beginning with ancient re-use from the later 3rd to the 21st c. Huskinson especially points out their rôle as a link to the past, either to ancient Rome or the first Christians. Finally in chapt. 14 ("Adopting the strigillated motif: some case studies"), Huskinson discusses selected examples of both imitations of Roman strigillated chests and the appropriation of the strigil motif in other contexts from "post antique" France and N Africa (276-77), as well as in 18th and 19th-c. Britain and Italy. For the strigillated sarcophagi produced in France and N Africa in the 4th-8th c., after their production ceased at Rome, the term "post antiquity" seems a little unfortunate, for in many regards both N Africa and France of this period can still be considered a part of the "long late antiquity":[5] "post-Roman sarcophagus production" would perhaps have been a better label for this phenomenon. Among the possible motivations for the reception of the strigil motif in modern tombs, fountains

2 S. Birk, *Depicting the dead: self-representation and commemoration on Roman sarcophagi with portraits* (Aarhus 2013) 73-94.

3 Huskinson's bibliography wrongly gives the date of 2008.

4 M. Studer-Karlen, *Verstorbenendarstellungen auf frühchristlichen Sarkophagen* (Bibl. AnTar. 21) (Turnhout 2012).

5 The concept of a "long late antiquity" was established by Peter Brown, *The world of late antiquity AD 150-750* (London 1971) 7 and 197-200, defining the late-antique period as lasting from *c.*200 to 800. For discussion of this concept, see, e.g., A. Marcone, "A long Late Antiquity? Considerations on a controversial periodization," *J. Late Antiquity* 1 (2008) 4-19.

and other media such as furniture, Huskinson again recognizes a desire to create a link to the Classical and Christian past, pointing out (295) that the fluting was seen as a representation of enduring qualities.

A 2-page conclusion recapitulating the most important results is followed by an appendix consisting of 4 tables listing strigillated sarcophagi from the *Repertorium* (presumably meant as a supplement to chapts. 9-10), a glossary, an extensive bibliography and a helpful index. It may be a little inconvenient for readers who are not specialists in sarcophagus studies that the single volumes of the *Sarkophag-Corpus* (*ASR*) are not included in the bibliography, even though they are frequently mentioned in footnotes.

All in all, Huskinson's book offers many new insights and alternative approaches to an extremely popular and, for its combination of ornament and images, remarkably flexible type of sarcophagus decoration, as well as for its post-antique reception. One of her points worth considering (and also for other types of sarcophagi) concerns the short sides, which are frequently carved in a lower relief than the front: departing from the conventional interpretation of reduced visibility of the sides due to being set in niches, Huskinson convincingly argues (50) that they were carved in low relief in order to minimize abrasion when the sarcophagus was placed against walls or against other stone chests. These practical considerations seem to have influenced the choice of motifs too: for the strigillated sarcophagi, Huskinson observes (50-51) that scenes whose iconographic features created solid edges, such as the Raising of Lazarus (where the tomb forms the outer edge at the sarcophagus' corner), were particularly popular for the figured corner panels. Of core importance for understanding the decorative scheme of strigillated sarcophagi is her sub-chapter "Sources, antecedents, and associations", where she argues (85-88) that contemporary viewing habits in wall-painting as well as the set-up of statues may have influenced the composition of sarcophagus reliefs: statues displayed in arcades, as at Hadrian's Villa in Tivoli, or wall-painting depicting architectural frameworks with a central *aedicula* flanked by figures all provided a similar hierarchy of images as found on the strigillated sarcophagi, where figured images usually filled a prominent central panel, with secondary panels at the corners. This is supplemented by her observation in chapt. 8 that many mythological motifs used on strigillated sarcophagi recall famous statues such as Cupid and Psyche, Mars and Venus (following the imperial model of Marcus Aurelius and Faustina Minor), Meleager, Narcissus, and the Three Graces. Huskinson convincingly links these images to the lifestyle of Roman villas, seeing them (163-64) as representations of élite cultural space and of learning, which supports Birk's conclusions on the popularity on sarcophagi of portraits representing learned Roman men and women.[6] The last part of chapt. 7 ("Changing communities and sense of self": 145-49), where she relates the iconographic development on strigillated sarcophagi to historical events, also has to be highlighted. The popularity in the 3rd c. of standardized portrait figures is convincingly linked to the *Constitutio Antoniniana* of 212 and the desire of the new citizens to express Roman norms and ideals embodied by generic portrait figures (145-46). The juxtaposition of such portraits with Christian images is likewise explained through the Edict of Milan of 313, after which Christians too wished to represent themselves as influential members of the Roman society (146).

Unfortunately, however, these thought-provoking ideas are hidden between many repetitions occurring between chapters and sub-chapters. These repetitions may be useful for those reading only selected chapters and should actually facilitate use of the book for teaching purposes and by students, but for those reading the whole book or for scholars in sarcophagus studies the repetitions often make the text seem lengthy and redundant. One example is the thrice-repeated (106-7, 132, 166) comparison of the distribution of figures in the panels of strigillated sarcophagi to K. Lorenz's categories of juxtaposed figured scenes in Pompeian wall-painting.[7] Instead of simply repeating Lorenz's categories ('affirmative', 'complementary', 'contrasting'), it would have been desirable to explain how exactly these same categories are recognizable on the sarcophagi they are applied to. In some cases, the desire to bring up

6 Birk (supra n.2).

7 K. Lorenz, *Bilder machen Räume: Mythenbilder in pompeianischen Häusern* (Berlin 2008) 272-328.

Fig. 1. Strigillated *lenos* with lion heads re-used as a fountain in front of Palazzo Spada, Rome (Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Abteilung Rom, D-DAI-ROM-2007.0538 [Daniela Gauss]).

a particular topic in several chapters even leads to arguments being torn apart. This is particularly unfortunate for discussion of the origin and interpretation of the strigil motif, here dispersed between the introduction (8-11) and two sections in chapt. 5 (76-80 and 92-94). This central argument for the topic of the book would have deserved an integrated discussion, if not its own chapter. In chapt. 1, Huskinson briefly reviews possible ways of seeing the strigil decoration, one of which is the association with water (9-11; now elaborated upon by J. Elsner[8]). Early in chapt. 5 (76-80) she then recalls different possible origins of the motif, such as textile hangings, metalware, and spiral columns. Surprisingly, J. Stroszeck's hypothesis that the tub-shaped strigillated sarcophagi with lion heads were derived from bath tubs is not considered.[9] This is even more astonishing as this is a type of sarcophagus which is almost exclusively decorated with fluting; in addition, it is the only type of strigillated stone chest discussed at length in one of the volumes of the *Sarkophag-Corpus* (fig. 1). Instead, Huskinson finds parallels for the fluting in Etruscan architectural decoration, to support her conclusion (80) that, overall, strigillated sarcophagi are to be understood as architectonic. This argument is not illustrated with images, unfortunately, where one would be able to see that, in contrast to the sarcophagus decoration, the examples on Etruscan terracotta simas cited at 80 n.32 are straight and curved outward at the top, following the profile of the sima. Although labelled as strigils by the authors she cites,[10] they should rather be called pipe friezes (*Pfeifenfries*), as in later stone architecture. In my view, this analogy is less convincing than other suggestions made so far, such as the comparison with prestigious metal vessels. Their S-shaped fluting is also found on alabaster vases which were used as precious urns in the Early Imperial period and which could thus provide a link to the later sarcophagi. Later in chapt. 5, Huskinson (92-94) discusses visual qualities of the fluting which fits the principles of *symmetria* and *eurythmia* also present in tomb architecture and tomb furnishings.

8 J. Elsner, "Ornament, figure and *mise en abyme* on Roman sarcophagi," in N. Dietrich and M. Squire (edd.), *Ornament and figure in Graeco-Roman art* (Berlin 2018) 369-73.

9 J. Stroszeck, *Löwen-Sarkophage: Sarkophage mit Löwenköpfen, schreitenden Löwen und Löwen-Kampfgruppen* (ASR 6.1; Berlin 1998) 26-29.

10 M. Strandberg Olofsson, "Herakles revisited: on the interpretation of the mould-made architectural terracottas from Acquarossa," in I. Edlund-Berry, G. Greco and J. Kenfield (edd.), *Deliciae fictiles* III: *architectural terracottas in ancient Italy* (Oxford 2006) 123; F. M. Cifarelli, "Le terrecotte architettoniche del tempio di Giunone Moneta a Segni: la fase tardo-repubblicana," in Edlund-Berry *et al*. ibid. 224-25, fig. 21.1.

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Fig. 2. Attic *Klinenriefel* sarcophagus with secondary additions on the lid (2nd quarter of 3rd c. A.D.), found on *Via Appia* between S. Maria delle Mole and Frattocchie, now Rome, MNR - Museo delle Terme, Inv. 112119 (Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Abteilung Rom, D-DAI-ROM-75.1372 [Christoph Rossa]).

This is not the only place where especially readers specialized in sarcophagus studies might have hoped for a more thorough, detailed discussion and more venturesome hypotheses. Much of Huskinson's analysis is based on strigillated sarcophagi with figured panels at the corners and in the centre. It would have been interesting to include other types of strigillated sarcophagi, such as the tub-shaped lenoi with lion heads (fig. 1) (only very briefly discussed on 22) and the Klinenriefelsarkophage (fig. 2) (mentioned on 77 in regard to textile hangings as a possible origin for the fluting);[11] they might have added to the discussion, and not only concerning the origin and significance of the strigil motif. A question left unanswered concerns mythological figures on strigillated sarcophagi. Twice (160-61, 205-6), Huskinson mentions Zanker's hypothesis[12] that symbolic images representing a happy life (e.g., Nereids, Seasons, the Dionysian *thiasos*) became increasingly popular due to the threats occurring in the 3rd c. Zanker's observations are confirmed by the figures on strigillated sarcophagi, where the Seasons in particular appear frequently, as Huskinson points out, but it remains unexplained why Nereids and sea creatures are not depicted on the strigillated chests (they do appear on lids) and why there are comparatively few Dionysiac figures on chests with fluting, considering the large number of Dionysiac sarcophagi overall. With respect to Zanker's hypothesis, it might have been interesting to turn things around and assume a more prominent rôle in the discourse for the strigillated sarcophagi: perhaps they are not only evidence of the development perceived by Zanker, but their strigillated decoration became so popular in this period precisely because it provided an opportunity for bold depictions of these symbolic images and thus of an alternative world of peace and happiness?

A final area where a more thorough discussion would have strengthened the overall aim of the book has to do with the advantages that strigillated sarcophagi offered in contrast to other types of sarcophagi, a point continuously made by Huskinson: on the one hand, they allow the juxtaposition of images from different contexts;[13] on the other, through the limited space in the panels between the fluting, the meanings conveyed by the figures are condensed.[14] The fluting guides the eye towards the spaces in between, the panels with figured motifs or inscriptions (11). These observations are crucial for understanding strigillated sarcophagi, I believe, and, here once again, the special decoration of these chests can be placed within Roman principles of visual composition in general. Not only the display of statues and wall-painting mentioned

11 H. R. Goette, "Attische Klinen-Riefel-Sarkophage," *AthMitt* 106 (1991) 309-38; id., "Attische Klinen-Riefel-Sarkophage," in G. Koch (ed.), *Grabeskunst der römischen Kaiserzeit* (Mainz 1993) 107-10.

12 P. Zanker, "Ikonographie und Mentalität: Zur Veränderung mythologischer Bildthemen auf den kaiserzeitlichen Sarkophagen aus der Stadt Rom," in R. Neudecker and P. Zanker (edd.), *Lebenswelten: Bilder und Räume in der römischen Stadt* (Wiesbaden 2005) 243-51.

13 E.g., on 12, 101-2, 108-10, 120-21, 148, 166, 170-72, 194, 209 and 231-32.

14 E.g., on 12, 89, 98 and 187-88.

above but also mosaics provide parallels. Contemporary mosaics often show a similar combination of geometrical ornament and figured panels, only the figures on mosaics are separated by geometric or vegetal motifs, rather than fluting. The panels on mosaics can be filled freely with iconographic motifs of diverse origin and from different contexts, which allows for a similar juxtaposition of different subjects to that found on strigillated sarcophagi. For example, the 4th-c. Hinton St. Mary mosaic (now in the British Museum) from a bipartite room unites two medallions, one of a mythological scene of Bellerophon spearing the chimera, the other the Christian image of a human bust with a chi-rho monogram behind the head, with rectangular and semi-circular panels which contain busts of Winds, plant motifs, and animal hunts, which perhaps equate with the abundance and happy life associated with the Seasons on strigillated chests.[15] The panels are surrounded and divided by various geometric bands. The juxtaposition of bold, easily recognisable motifs from different topics seems to have been a trend in the 3rd and 4th c. when strigillated sarcophagi were especially popular, and geometric ornaments facilitated this thematic mix on the same medium. Another advantage of the strigillated sarcophagi was the possibility of easily integrating portraits, another major concern of the 3rd c.

While, on the one hand, a stronger focus on specific questions regarding strigillated sarcophagi would have been desirable in this book, on the other, what is also lacking in many cases is the contextualization of sarcophagi with strigil decoration within the larger picture of imperial and Early Christian funerary culture and its post-antique tradition. That would have made the implications and scope of the author's interpretations more comprehensible. Especially Jewish strigillated sarcophagi raise the question of whether they were deliberately selected by their patrons because they were aniconic. For a better understanding, it would have been necessary to know the total number of sarcophagi and fragments with fluting compared to other types of sarcophagi used by Jews (e.g., the season sarcophagus from the Jewish catacomb in Vigna Randanini, now in the Museo Nazionale Romano, that features a menorah instead of a portrait in the central *clipeus* and is thus clearly identified as Jewish despite its figured decoration[16]).

Where the 'big picture' is needed the most, however, is in chapts. 13-14, in order to understand whether the associations with *Romanitas* and Early Christianity which Huskinson establishes, both for the re-use of strigillated sarcophagi and the reception of the fluting, were limited to strigillated pieces or applied to Roman sarcophagi in general. The prominent rôle of strigillated chests as references to early Christianity can be easily understood because they were often decorated with recognizably Christian motifs. Yet it remains a question if stone chests with a different type of decoration were equally used as reliquaries or for the burial of saints. In cases such as strigillated sarcophagi serving as a reference to *Romanitas*, as Huskinson argues (e.g., for a chest decorated with fluting and a central open door, later re-used in a Fascist burial in Rome's Torre dei Conti [271-72]), the motivation for the choice of this type of sarcophagus is not immediately apparent. Here some more clarification would have been necessary.

With the re-use and reception of strigillated sarcophagi, which Huskinson discusses only in a few chosen examples, there is still much to discover. One context which may be mentioned here is a 3rd-c. strigillated *lenos* decorated with a learned couple and Muses in the corner panels; it was re-used in the family tomb of the pharmaceutical manufacturer Dompé di Mondarco built in Milan's Cimitero monumentale in 1959-63 by Giorgio Clerici di Cavenago and Stefano Lo Bianco with sculptures by Nando Conti (fig. 3).[17] For the reception of strigil decoration, another example is found in the fluted panels in Milan's Stazione centrale built in the Fascist period (1930/31) by the architect Ulisse Stacchini (fig. 4). In this building's eclectic decoration (which includes acroteria rather following Greek models) it would be interesting to examine

15 S. R. Cosh and D. S. Neal, *Roman mosaics of Britain*, vol. II: *south-west Britain* (London 2006) 156-60, Mosaic nos. 172.1-2.

16 P. Kranz, *Jahreszeiten-Sarkophage* (*ASR* 5.4; Berlin 1984) 204 cat. no. 69, pl. 45.1.

17 Milan, Cimitero monumentale, section 7, tomb 174. The sarcophagus is published in B. C. Ewald, *Der Philosoph als Leitbild: Ikonographische Untersuchungen an römischen Sarkophagreliefs* (RömMitt Ergh. 34; Mainz 1999) 177, cat. no. E15, pl. 60.1, as being in a private collection in Milan.

Fig. 3. Sarcophagus in the Tomb of the Dompé Di Mondarco family (Cimitero Monumentale, Milan) (author).

Fig. 4. Detail of architectural decoration resembling that of sarcophagi in Stazione Centrale, Milan (author).

the rôle of the strigil ornament in that modern period and its possible link to *Romanitas*, a link which Huskinson suggests for the re-used sarcophagus in the Torre dei Conti.

Naturally, one cannot expect all aspects of strigillated sarcophagi to be discussed in a single monograph: the material is much too vast. But this incompleteness is actually one of the strengths of the book: no matter what else could have been included, a major achievement of Huskinson's monograph is that it creates a new awareness for the often-overlooked genre of strigillated sarcophagi and their post-antique tradition. It will serve as a starting point for much further research on this topic.

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