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Review of *Akten des Symposiums "Frühchristliche Sarkophage," Marburg, 30.6-4.7.1999*, edited by Guntram Koch with Karin Kirchhainer

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Perhaps because these have been examined by G. Wesch-Klein, *Fumus publicum* (Stuttgart 1993) and we know neither their contents nor their speakers, Arce simply notes the *laudationes* of Roman Spain as an anomaly. Such parallels are intriguing, but unsatisfactory since they are not fully investigated.

Because Arce sets out to explore all possible aspects of a Roman funerary ritual that took various forms over time, his goal is elusive. We are left without a clear explanation of the *laudatio funebris*, its developments, and its evident limitation to Rome; further, the end of the book unfortunately has a few typos, repetitions, a bibliography that is less than full, and some unclear illustrations. But in thinking broadly Arce frequently opens us to new information and insights, and both his thorough compilation of known *laudationes funebres* and his detailed analysis of individual matters, such as the Arch of Portogallo reliefs, are very useful. Edmondson, Nogales Basarrate, and Trillmich bring three different specializations to the publication of a significant corpus. Their detailed analyses elucidate those inhabitants of Emerita who chose to have themselves and/or their intimates commemorated for all time by image and text. As Paul Zanker has argued for comparable gravestones in Rome and Italy, most persons attested on Emerita's funerary monuments with portraits were only on the edge of acceptability in the steep Roman social hierarchies (see Edmondson et al., esp. 93). Yet Emerita's immigrants, slaves, freed men and women, and *alumni* resolutely asserted their "Roman-ness" on their funerary monuments, through textual avowals of familial piety, portraits featuring togas and imperial hairstyles, and decorative elements depicting ritual objects. As was true for those celebrated by the funeral laudations Arce examines, this small group in provincial Emerita were dignified as part of a much larger Roman community. In the end, the Roman way of life seems defined by the means individual Romans used to defy death.

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AKTEN DES SYMPOSIUMS "FRÜHCHRISTLICHE SARKOPHAGE," MARBURG, 30. 6.–4. 7. 1999, edited by Guntram Koch with Karin Kirchhainer. (Sarkopag-Studien 2.) Pp. viii + 258, pls. 88. Philipp von Zabern, Mainz 2002. €92.50. ISBN 3-8053-2880-X (cloth).

This volume contains 22 papers from a five-day conference convened at the University of Marburg by Guntram Koch, dean of *Sarkopag-Studien*, in collaboration with François Baratte of the Sorbonne and Thilo Ulbert of the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut. In the brief preface Koch expresses satisfaction that "nearly all the well-known scholars in the field of late antique sculpture" from 10 European countries, the United States, Tunisia, and Japan were in attendance. To an American reader it

is striking how few of this number (two) are compatriots. There is surely a larger pool of U.S. scholars who might have something of interest to say about early Christian sarcophagi, but it may be true that none of those can be called specialists in sarcophagi. Marion Lawrence is perhaps the last of whom one would have said that.

The papers are democratically presented in alphabetical order by author, but they are not equal. Content, format, style, and length vary considerably. There is no attempt to frame or connect the contributions, no editorial introduction or conclusion. Nor is there an index. Anyone truly interested in sarcophagi is evidently expected to read every word. This is a punishing task. Some of the papers consist almost entirely of description or other such documentation, and might better have been posted on a website. Others are more discursive, however, and more rewarding for scholars outside the specialized circle of *Sarkophagforschung*. At least six essays treat the semiotics of early Christian sarcophagi: that is, how their imagery conveyed meaning. One offers an explanation for why Christian sarcophagi died out in Rome in the fifth century; two discuss the influence of patrons; one presents evidence of color; one argues against the existence of the "running drill"; and two discuss the Medieval emulation of sixth-century models. Since any selection would be arbitrary, I will follow my own interests and focus on the semiotic contributions.

Theun-Mathias Schmidt and Sabine Schrenk study specific instances of the creation of Christian signifiers in a Roman matrix, and Bruno Klein offers a larger view of the same development. Klein focuses on the relation between message and image—signified and signifier—observing at the outset that representing the new themes imagined by Christian patrons in the early fourth century posed a "virulent" problem for craftsmen, who were trained in the visual language of late Roman paganism. A particular challenge was visualizing the thematic coherence of episodes from unrelated narratives. Klein argues that over several decades, sarcophagus makers successfully met this challenge by adapting older visual techniques to the representation of Christian models that had been laid down verbally by patrons or "programmers" right after 313. A new Christian language began to emerge around mid-century, and the "*Repräsentationsbilder*" of around 400 were already structurally Medieval. Whether or not he is aware of it (the footnotes suggest not), Klein's essay retraces ground already staked out for anglophone readers in publications like Jaś Elsner's *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph* (Oxford 1998). Klein's fine-grained analysis offers a welcome refinement of more broad-brushed accounts of the origin of Christian visual communication.

Schmidt and Schrenk both appeal to Roman sources to decode unexpected Christian adaptations. Schrenk argues that the earliest representations of the offering of Cain and Abel on sarcophagi were modeled on the iconography of Months and Seasons, and so express a different understanding of the episode than that suggested by the Biblical narrative and by the alternative visualization used elsewhere. Presenting the brothers in a formula denoting homage, these images decontextualize Cain and Abel from the narrative of the first murder,

allowing them to function equally as models of reverence. Schmidt traces the significance in Roman imagery of the gesture and pose of an enigmatic female figure shown on the lid of a sarcophagus in Boville Ernica, seated with hands crossed over her knee by Christ's crib. He concludes that she is a unique fourth-century representation of the doubting midwife, who reappears with a different gesture in Byzantine iconography two centuries later.

Moving to the level of allegory or metonymy ("iconology"), two elder statesmen, Josef Engemann and Hans Georg Thümmel, invoke rules for contextual interpretation. Acknowledging that this might seem old-fashioned ("Nein, nicht schon wieder Interpretationsmethodik!"), Engemann insists on the principle that signs are a limited system: signifieds do not exceed their signifiers, or in his terms (adopted from Kirschbaum), "das Denkmal selbst" delimits its correct interpretation. Using the example of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the furnace, he argues that the meaning of the conventional image is entirely determined by its relation to its textual source (Daniel 3), the denotations of gestures and other such details, and context. On a funerary object the image of the three youths "means" salvation of the faithful. Interpreters who have found extended meanings (martyrdom or baptism) by searching in a domain outside the image, in patristic explications of the episode, have exceeded their brief.

Thümmel is not so parsimonious. He allows that images on sarcophagi might have political connotations and biographical significance for the prospective deceased. He poses the question whether the many new scenes added to the image-store of Christian sarcophagi in the time of Constantine have a common denominator, or pattern of interpretation (*Erklärungsmuster*), and is attracted to the "*Deutungssystem*" proposed for pagan mythological sarcophagi by Dagmar Grassinger in her *Habilitationsschrift* (Marburg 1999). He summarizes her model as a reduction to *exempla*: regardless of their meaning in the context of literature, on sarcophagi scenes from myth exemplify moral or physical virtues, or death. In this role they are often redundant; thus Medea sarcophagi contain one emblem of fortunate marriage and three of terrible death. The seemingly unrelated scenes juxtaposed on early fourth-century Christian sarcophagi (here we are back to the same development studied by Bruno Klein) could also be redundant exempla.

P.C. Finney takes on an entirely different issue and a different approach, focusing on signifieds rather than signifiers and on reception rather than intention. He aims to debunk a chapter in Thomas Mathews's *The Clash of Gods* (Princeton 1993, reprinted 1999), a book unnoticed by all but Finney in this volume, though it raised a clamor when it appeared in the United States. Appealing to social and cultural factors and pseudo-psychology, Finney argues against Mathews's "The Magician" that representations of Christ performing miracles could not have been seen by fourth- and fifth-century viewers of sarcophagi as acts of magic, because their "public brain" had been too adversely conditioned to magic to make the connection. The argument is unfair to Mathews, who anticipated these objections with good patristic sources.

It also ignores the first rule of "Iconography 101" (explain the conventions), as well as Engemann's injunction to notice discrepancies between an image and its textual source. The wand held by Christ in certain miracle scenes is not in the New Testament. Mathews explained it as the magic staff (*virga*) given to Moses (Exodus 4), and argued that the wand denotes Christ as the new Moses, invested with "good magic" by God. I still find his argument convincing.

It is only the reviewer's predilection for *Interpretationsmethodik* that dictated the selection of essays discussed here; the contributions by Hugo Brandenburg, Jean-Pierre Caillet, Johannes Deckers, Bente Kiilerich, and Rainer Warland in particular invite equally extended consideration and response. The gathering of such luminaries in Marburg must have made for many stimulating exchanges, and it is a tribute to Professor Koch that, even without a *virga*, he brought it about.

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ANCIENT ABILA: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL HISTORY, by John D. Wineland. (BAR-IS 989.) Pp. vi + 216, figs. 83, tables 9, maps 4. Archeopress, Oxford 2001. £32. ISBN 1 84171 274 4 (paper).

This book presents a preliminary history of ancient Abila, one of the cities in the Decapolis of northern Jordan. The author utilizes the following sources: ancient texts, both Semitic and Classical, as well as Medieval Arabic; the reports of 19th- and early 20th-century explorers; the survey conducted of Jordan by Nelson Glueck in the 1930s and 1940s; and excavations after World War II. The bulk of the excavation data comes from the American excavations conducted since 1980 under the direction of W. Harold Mare of the Covenant Theological Seminary in Saint Louis, Missouri. The text is divided into seven chapters, including an introduction. Chapter two covers early exploration and excavation at the site, and chapter 3 provides a concise and selective summary of the results of the American excavations. Chapter 4 is devoted to early texts related to Abila. The Greek texts are quoted in the original language, with English translations, while the Semitic texts are given primarily in translation. Chapter 5 presents the inscriptions and graffiti found in the American excavations. Chapter 6 is devoted to numismatic and iconographical evidence (i.e., gems, painting, sculpture, etc.) from the site, and chapter 7 offers a historical overview. There are useful tables of coins found at the site, and of tombs by type and date.

The book, though oddly conceived and in some ways poorly executed, does provide a useful summary of the history of the site and of some of the results of recent excavations. In some respects the most important result is the demonstration that the site does go back to the Bronze Age, as Glueck had hypothesized. Bronze Age