

The Christian sarcophagus population of Rome

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Many marble sarcophagi illustrating scenes and themes from the Old and New Testaments and Christian Apocrypha were produced in Rome during the period beginning a few decades before Constantine's accession and ending shortly after the sack of Rome in A.D. 410. Their consumers — those who occupied these monuments — may be called the "Christian sarcophagus population of Rome". This group was not restricted to the titular aristocracy, but neither can it fairly be said that "there was a sarcophagus for every, or almost every, purse".¹ Indeed, few Romans had purses at all, in the sense of disposable income available for luxury purchases like sarcophagi. Most settled for more modest funerary arrangements, if any.² The composition of Rome's Christian sarcophagus population depends upon the cost of the monuments and a number of demographic parameters, many subject to mutually reinforcing uncertainties. Quantitative assessments are limited to what K. Hopkins called numerical metaphors;³ they may, nonetheless, suggest inferences of serious consequence for our understanding of the production, patronage and reception of Christian sarcophagi.

The cost of a Christian sarcophagus

Epigraphic and documentary indications of cost are few, geographically disparate, and mostly chronologically remote: a Flavian-era epigram, the 18th-c. notation of an undated inscription, a very few prices recorded from 5th- and 6th-c. Rome, and others closer in time but from Salona, Dalmatia or Egypt.⁴ These sources provide little or no indication of the monument's size, quality or even material. Most scholars conclude merely that sarcophagi were expensive.⁵ An alternative, if ambitious, approach is to estimate the value of material and labour inputs, adapting the methodology applied in J. DeLaine's study of the Baths of Caracalla.⁶ DeLaine's point of reference was Diocletian's Prices Edict of 301, which set maximum prices for a broad range of raw materials, manufactured goods and services, expressed in a newly-created currency unit, the Diocletianic *denarius*.⁷ The reliability, scope of application, and effects of the Prices Edict have all been questioned.⁸ One concern is geography. The drafters were probably officials in Antioch relying on local information. Only one of the c.40 surviving copies or fragments was found in the West.

1 Koch (1982, 167), referring to the 2nd and 3rd c.: "Wie für – fast – jeden Geldbeutel ein Sarkophag zu finden war".

2 Hopkins 1983, 205-11. Income distribution (discussed below) puts in question the claim by MacMullen (2009, 69) that the "vast majority" of Roman Christians could avoid mass burial, having family to pay for a proper funeral and deposition.

3 Hopkins 2002, 199, referring to the minimum size of the Roman imperial economy. Similarly, his estimates of Christian numbers were "speculative and exploratory", an attempt to examine "competing probabilities" rather than "established or establishable facts": id. 1998, 185-86.

4 Summarized by Dresken-Weiland 2003, 76-80. See also Koch 2000, 89.

5 Dresken-Weiland 2003, 80; Deichmann and Klauser 1966, 7; Koch 2000, 90.

6 DeLaine 1997. Her approach was foreshadowed in far less detail by Fittschen (1975, 17) and Wiegartz (1974, 355-56).

7 References for the Prices Edict are to Giacchero 1974, supplemented where indicated by Reynolds 1989, 265-318.

8 Illustrating the range of opinions: Ermatinger 1996; Corcoran 1996, 225-29; Rathbone 2009, 323.