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The foundations of art history

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HELLMUT SICHTERMANN, *DIE MYTHOLOGISCHEN SARKOPHAGE, TEIL 2: APOLLON, ARES, BELLEROPHON. DAIDALOS, ENDYMION, GANYMED, GIGANTEN, GRAZIEN* [= Die antiken Sarkophagreliefs, XII.2, ed. B. Andreae and G. Koch] (Gebr. Mann: Berlin, 1992). ISBN 3-7861-1563-X.

Sarkophagforschung has a long history, and despite German predominance in this field, one must look to Renaissance Italy for its origins, its typologies, and above all, the foundation of its methods. The interest of 15th- and 16th-c. artists in the sarcophagus reliefs — for purposes both formal and iconographic — are well known and well documented,¹ but it was Renaissance antiquarianism that had the truly profound effect on scholarship. The desire to collect, to record, to collate these reliefs — and to establish a corpus — was a Renaissance conception, one which epitomizes the fundamental rôle of the ancient monuments in the rise of historical method in general, and of modern archaeology in particular. Such a conception emerged within the context of 16th-c. Rome's Accademia della Virtù, and was articulated in a famous letter written by Claudio Tolomei to Agostino de' Landi on 14 November 1542:

“... si farà una opera de pili [sarcophagi], ritraendo in un libro tutti i pili che sono in Roma, o intorno Roma, o interi, o spezzati che siano, e appresso di ciascun pilo vi si faranno similmente due isposizioni; l'una per via d'istoria, dichiarando che Favola, o istoria vi sia scolpita, e a che proposito, e quel che significhi la tal figura, o la tale. Ove occorrerà dichiarare molte cose de l'antichità, così di sepolture, come di sacrificii a d'altri usi antichi: la qual cosa sarà utilissima, e per la cognizion di se stessa, e per la dichiarazione di molti luoghi de li scrittori Grechi e Latini. L'altra sarà per via di scoltura, mostrando che maniera di scoltura sia quella, in che parte sia buona, dove maravigliosa, dove manchi. S'ella è di mezzo rilievo, se di basso, se spiccato, s'ella è maniera pastosa, s'ella è secca, di che secolo paia: e insomma si sporrà tutto quello, che per l'arte de lo scoltore si può avvertire.”²

For Tolomei, the approach to the monuments was to be marked by an essential distinction between form and content — between an archaeological interest in the sculptural style, condition, and quality of these ancient works, and a fascination with them as historical documents on the basis of their iconography and symbolism. Thus, an appreciation of the sarcophagus reliefs as works of art was to be divorced from a contemplation of the essentially historical and/or mythological character of their imagery. In Tolomei's scheme, the synthesis and integration of these diverse aspects — what would today be regarded as fundamental to a full historical discussion of the sarcophagi as works of art — seems hardly to have played a significant rôle.

Nothing came of Tolomei's grandiose plan.³ But its aims and ambitions were eventually fulfilled when, in the late 19th c., such a corpus — the *Corpus der antiken Sarkophagreliefs* —

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- 1 See P. P. Bober and R. Rubinstein, *Renaissance artists and antique sculpture* (London 1986) with extensive bibliography.
 - 2 *Delle lettere di M. Claudio Tolomei libri sette* (Venice 1547) fols. 83r-83v. For the rôle of this project within the context of the Accademia della Virtù, see M. D. Davis, “Zum Codex Coburgensis: frühe Archäologie und Humanismus im Kreis der Marcello Cervini,” in *Antikenzeichnung und Antikenstudium in Renaissance und Frühbarock* (Mainz 1989) 185-99; on its place within the history of the *Sarkophagforschung*, see H. Wrede, “Die Opera de' pili von 1542 und das Berliner Sarkophagcorpus: zur Geschichte von Sarkophagforschung, Hermeneutik und klassischer Archäologie,” *JdI* 104 (1989) 373-414.
 - 3 Yet see the recent comments of D. Jansen, “Antonio Agustín and Jacopo Strada,” in (ed. M. H. Crawford), *Antonio Augustin: between Renaissance and counter-reform* (London 1993) esp. pp. 223-26.