

PRESS RELEASE

WHAT DID THE SARCOPHAGUS OF SYMMACHUS LOOK LIKE?

One of the prominent figures in pagan resistance against the rising Christianity in Rome was the city prefect Q. Aurelius Symmachus (c. 345-402). The non-Christian aristocracy in Rome thrived even throughout the 4th century and their opposition to Constantinople did apparently not affect their careers. By the beginning of the 5th century, however, the imperial house and the church overpowered them, and the whole empire became Christian. Niels Hannestad argues that these rich aristocrats of Rome must have been buried in sarcophagi with non-Christian iconography, i.e. traditional Roman mythological subjects.

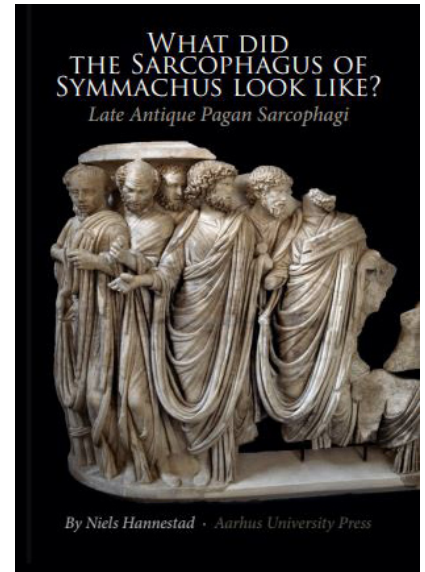
The established chronology of Roman mythological sarcophagi assumes a peak in production during the reign of emperor Gallienus (AD 259-268) that fades away in the reign of Constantine (AD 306-337).

With the reign of Constantine came wealth, and the so-called 'villa boom' that also revived sculpture in the round. At that time, it is believed that production of pagan sarcophagi had ceased, to be replaced by Christian sarcophagi. However, this raises a very simple question: how were pagans buried?

Niels Hannestad argues that production of pagan sarcophagi continued beyond the turn of the century, and that Symmachus, who died in AD 402, was buried in such a sarcophagus.

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Niels Hannestad is professor emeritus of Classical Archaeology at Aarhus University. His publications cover a variety of Roman topics, with his main focus being portraiture. He is the author of *Roman Art and Imperial Policy* (Aarhus University Press 1984, paperback 1988). A new area of research was opened up by *Tradition in Late Antique Sculpture. Conservation – Modernization - Production*. (Aarhus University Press 1994).



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Late Antique Pagan Sarcophagi

By Niels Hannestad

ISBN: 978 87 7184 743 7

98 pages

Hardback, illustrated

PRICE DKK 149.95 (incl. VAT) / €

25.50 (incl. VAT) / £ 20 (excl. VAT) /

\$ 30 (excl. VAT)

TO BE PUBLISHED 11 October

2019

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