

FRAGMENT OF AN EARLY CHRISTIAN SARCOPHAGUS*

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Bartoš (1956); Bouzek (1979: no. 44. 192 no. M 47); *Antické umění v československých sbírkách* (1973: no. 284 pl. 47); *Římské umění a řemeslo* (1986: no. 1 with ill.); Bažant (1985: 8–16); Koch (2000: 265 no. 77 [II 2]); Dresken-Weiland (1998: P. 1, pl. 1).

Large part of this contribution is based on a paper by Josef Bartoš, which appeared in a periodical widely unknown, of which only a few numbers were published by the Charles University and which is practically unavailable nowadays. The present authors could use much of arguments and discussion given already by Josef Bartoš in his first publication of the fragment (Bartoš 1956).¹

Description of the scene represented

Fragment of upper part of body of sarcophagus, with remains of three figures and trees behind the scene. In the left hand corner head of bearded man, with neck and part of shoulder in cloak (probably pallium), turned to right. The upper parts of the arms, as far as preserved, suggest that the man may have been holding something in front of him.

In the middle head of youth, in three-quarters view, turned to the bearded man; his head is clearly smaller than the bearded head. The slight remains of shoulder suggest that the body was represented in frontal view, and was probably undressed.

Of the third person only palm of hand with thumb above remains. The tips of other four fingers are missing. Of the forearm only tiny part at the ankle remains, it shows that the arm was slightly bent at the elbow. The palm is placed just above the head of the youth, what reminds one of situations in which the hand rests on the head. Remains of the forearm show remains of a sleeve; the person wore similar dress as that of the bearded head.

* Institute for Classical Archaeology, Charles University, inv. 60. 284. Pres. L. 31 cm, pres. H. 14 cm, pres. Th. 5.5–7.0 cm.

¹ PhDr. Josef Bartoš (1 July 1923 – 6 March 1998) was lecturer at the Institute of Classical Archaeology, Charles University, in 1955–60, later worked at Semily and initiated the foundation of the cast museum in Hrubý Rohozec castle, after the University lost its previous location. In the years 1969–1974 he was curator of the new cast museum in Hostinné and was also part-time teaching Classical Archaeology. His PhD dissertation on terracottas remained unpublished, but many used it for their papers and exhibitions; his teaching of Greek art was appreciated by many of his pupils and colleagues.

The three persons represented belonged probably to one group. The left-hand bearded head is turned towards the youth and the hand above the youth shows an act connected with the youth.

Two trees with leaves form the background behind the heads and between them. The tree above the raised hand is in shape of a palmette, the other between the two heads has leaves of oblong shape with veins. On the upper rim part of the frame of the upper rim of the relief. Drill is richly employed in the hair, eye papilla and nostrils of the figures, as well as in other places on the heads and the beard of the head on the left-hand corner of the fragment.

The relief is very high; the figures reach ca. 4 cm from the background. The volume of the heads is relatively good in proportions, but the plastic core is on its surface broken into drilled pits, stressing optical quality against the plastic form. Especially the hair and the beard are changed in sponge-like objects, even if not reaching yet the total dissolution. The faces again show still realistic basic shapes, but even here the drill and sharp cuts dissolve the surface into signs. The schematized drapery is treated by sharp cuts. The trees behind the figures are more simplified, in very low relief, and treated rather like ornaments. The rear side of the relief is not smoothed, with traces of chisel left. Beyond any doubt, the fragment belonged to a wall of a sarcophagus, not to its cover.

Discussion

The Drill Style (*Bohrstil*) was especially popular in late 3rd and early 4th century, and later in the time of Theodosius; our piece belongs clearly to the earlier period of the two for a number of reasons. The style of our fragment is certainly post-gallienic, and the first publisher of the piece in his paper preferred for stylistic reason the dating in pre-Constantine period. G. Koch (2000: 265 no. 77) dates to the Constantine period and ascribes it to his Petrus-Christus group Koch (2000: 260).

After trying again all possible parallels and reconsidering the stylistic features, we have to confirm that stylistically J. Bartoš's conclusion was right: also Dresken-Weiland (1998: p. 1) came to the same dating as Josef Bartoš, who also quoted Gerke (1940: 100: "wird man nicht fehlgehen, wenn man die Reliefs, die den optischen Stil am ausgesprochensten zeigen, in die achtziger Jahre setzt"). So narrow dating is for our sarcophagus too fine, but the date into the last third of the 3rd century is hardly false.

Of the motifs, which appear in the pre-Constantine period the most usual are, as discussed already by J. Bartoš: Jonas swallowed by fish and rescued, Baptism in Jordan, Last Supper, Resurrection of Lazarus, slightly later come also Noah and the Arch, Daniel with lions, Chastity of Susanna, Three Men in Blazing Furnace. Baptism of Christ is not very common subject. G. Koch (2000: 160–161) mentions 5 items of pre-Constantine phase and of Constantine period two from Rome. None of them is closely similar to our fragment; the head of the youth on our fragment is turned to the bearded head, what makes problems. Similar trees behind the scene are on a Campanian (?) relief in Naples, cf. Koch (2000: 30, 241, 450 no. 132, probably the cover of loculus, dated by him ca. 300 A.D.), while the later Tree Sarcophagi are different. The position of hands on the scenes of healing the blind is virtually different, while either Christ



on the mountain, or some orantes, have their hands represented in similar position. Similar position of hands is on the sarcophagus at Aire-sur-L'Adour with resurrection of Lazarus (Christern-Briesenick 2003: pl. 4 no. 18; Bovini – Brandenburg 1967: no. 17 pl. 6), on another from Aix-en-Provence with Christ on Mt. Olives (*o.c.*: no. 25 pl. 8) and was usual with the orantes generally, while also three youths in the oven show similar gesticulation (for ex. Bovini-Brandenburg 1967: no. 121 pl. 30). The bearded head is rather of the type of a philosopher than of Saint Petrus. J. Bartoš examined all of the possibilities in detail and came to the most probable solution: the scene represents the baptism of Christ with a philosopher, suggesting the message that even the philosophers knew the true meaning of baptism, which was for many early Christians the final accomplishment of his divine role; God himself entered fully the human body, changed from Jesus to Christ. G. Koch, however, doubted the interpretation by Josef Bartoš, as did Prof. R. Pillinger,² and the present authors have similar doubts; no exact parallels exist to the Prague fragment.

Anyway, as noticed by many, Early Christian art adopted many stylistic features and iconographical vocabulary from the Graeco-Roman art and also from Jewish representations, though the latter were rare. In search after new artistic language it also used expressions and subjects not clearly understandable through the prism of its more advanced phase. Our fragment, dating from the period to which the last persecutions of the Christians belonged, may well have felt the need to show that also the message transmitted through Greek philosophy brought the prophecy of the future birth of Christ, cf. for ex. Bazant (1986, with bibliography).

² In personal conversation in Vienna, May 2011.

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Summary

Publication of a late 3rd century AD fragment of an Early Christian sarcophagus in the Charles University collection. The subject depicted is unusual, but it represents most probably the Baptism in Jordan, with a figure of philosopher, documenting that the change of Jesus to Christ by the baptism was also part of prophecy of Greek philosophers.

FRAGMENT RANĚ KŘEŠŤANSKÉHO SARKOFÁGU

Shrnutí

Fragment římského sarkofágu ze sbírky Univerzity Karlovy v Praze je datován do pozdního 3. století po Kr. Zobrazený námět představuje pravděpodobně křest v Jordánu, i když kompozice neodpovídá přesně ostatním památkám s obdobnou dekorací.