



Anatomy of a Sarcophagus

National Maritime Museum, Haifa, #5454, the front of what was once a sarcophagus, depicts a harbor scene (plate I.1) reminiscent of the well-preserved harbor relief (II.10) in the Museo Torlonia at Rome. Only 14 maritime sarcophagi are known in the world, but they tell us about harbors no longer able to be excavated, further supporting the observation, "If the ancients had not died, they could not have lived."

The Torlonia relief, originally disputed whether it was from Ostia, Alexandria or Puteoli, is the mental image of a port, but its complex iconography has never been completely deciphered. Its figures include Portunus (god of harbors), Heracles, Antinous (the beautiful, soft-looking young favorite of the emperor Hadrian), an elephant biga (2-animal chariot), a huge eye, 2 ships, all crowded against the background of the harbor's breakwater.

The Haifa sarcophagus shows the gate to Rome's port, Ostia, with (in the center) a lighthouse surmounted by an eagle. (Alexandria had its Pharos and Ostia and Caesarea both had their equivalent.) The lighthouse depicted looks like it has four stories, but the lowest stage is actually the marble gate to the port. Two channels are seen here, whereas the Torlonia relief has only a single entry. Four gods are shown, probably representing colossal statues and symbolizing the divine power that controlled commerce and the life and luck of sailors. An initial reading of the iconography would suggest Bacchus/Dionysos and Ariadne as the right and left central figures (I.5). Bacchus as a god of death and immortality was an appropriate (and common) figure on a sarcophagus and emerged from the sea during the Anthesteria, the spring festival, and Ariadne's resurrection from death to life was symbolic of the constant revival in nature. But the female figure is not crowned with the seven stars through which she became a constellation and the cornucopia which she holds is not one of Ariadne's attributes. In archaic times, Dionysos was bearded and robed, while later on he was shown naked and young, but the figure here wears a toga, after the fashion of visual representations of togated figures during the Augustan principate. However, as presented, he looks more like Antinous (often represented as the god Silvanus), not unreasonable since Antinous was also the patron saint of weighers (sacromari) at ports, but the style is Julio-Claudian, not later than Nero, while the eagle does not appear on the lighthouse beH ° H ce atra