

Sarcophagus with Scenes from the Life of Achilles, Unknown Artist

Sarcophagus with Scenes from the Life of Achilles

Unknown artist

Roman, Athens, A.D. 180–220

Marble

52 3/4 x 83 1/16 x 57 7/8 in.

95.AA.80



Background Information

In ancient Rome, stone coffins called **sarcophagi** were often displayed proudly in large family tombs. Elaborate decoration on sarcophagi would be one way for a family to show its love and respect for the deceased.

Four separate episodes from the life of the Greek hero **Achilles** decorate the sides of this Roman sarcophagus. The front shows Achilles desecrating the corpse of the fallen Trojan hero Hector by dragging it behind his chariot. While Achilles is armed, Hector and other warriors are depicted in “heroic nudity,” which communicated in ancient times their honor.

On one end of the sarcophagus (shown here), Achilles is depicted arming for battle. On the other end, **Odysseus**, the king of Ithaca, is shown finding Achilles among the daughters of King Lycomedes, who ruled the Aegean Sea island of Scyros. In King Lycomedes’ palace, Odysseus convinced Achilles to accept his fate of an early but heroic death so that he would become immortal. The back of the sarcophagus, which was not completed, depicts a battle of Greeks and centaurs. This scene probably also refers to the life of Achilles, since he was educated by the centaur Chiron.

On the lid, a man and a woman recline on an upholstered couch. As was the common practice, the heads of the figures were left unfinished so they could be carved as portraits of the deceased when the sarcophagus was purchased. In this instance, however, the portraits were never completed; the reason is unknown.

Burial in a sarcophagus was a popular custom during the period from about A.D. 150 to 250. Before this time, Greeks and Romans were typically cremated. Sarcophagi were mass-produced in a few centers, one of which was Athens. Athenian sarcophagi were carved on all four sides and often surmounted with reclining figures.

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Sarcophagus with Scenes from the Life of Achilles (detail)

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Education



The J. Paul Getty Museum
at the Getty Center

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Questions for Teaching

Take the time to look closely at the work of art. What do you notice?

What do you notice about the figures on the panel? What do their poses communicate about what is happening? (*The contorted body and closed eyes of the outstretched figure on the ground indicate that he is dead. The figure whose foot is on the dead body is looking down at the deceased, indicating his power over the fallen figure, and perhaps revealing his responsibility for killing him.*)

What are the figures holding? What are some of them wearing? What do these details reveal about who the figures are? (*Because the figure touching the horse's mane is wearing a helmet and holding a shield, he may be a warrior who was in a battle. Other figures wearing helmets and holding weapons could also be warriors. The figure below the horse pulling the chariot is holding a part of the chariot; he could be the chariot driver adjusting the harness.*)

Notice the figure of Achilles in the panel. What did the artist do to communicate that this is the main character? (*i.e., his helmet protrudes into the frame; he is the only figure with this treatment*)

The panel depicts a dramatic moment from *The Iliad*. Achilles has just slain the Trojan prince Hector and is about to drag his corpse behind his chariot. What do you think happens next?

The panel is part of a **sarcophagus** (stone coffin). Why do you think a family living in ancient times would choose to decorate a sarcophagus with scenes from the life of Achilles?