A ROMAN SARCOPHAGUS FROM BADMINTON HOUSE

BY CHRISTINE ALEXANDER
Curator of Greek and Roman Art

There are in all, around three sides of this large oval sarcophagus, forty human and animal figures, the tallest of which are half life size. The relief is high, five inches in places, and undercut so that much of the modeling is nearly or entirely in the round. The figures are on two contrasting scales, large and miniature. The former are soft-muscled and smooth, standing out in large planes, and providing a fairly simple architectonic structure for the sarcophagus. The latter, the miniatures, swarm all around them and, with the draperies and the equipment, fill up almost every inch. So adeptly planned are the balance of one group against another and the directions of gaze of the many pairs of eyes that a degree of unity and repose is achieved in this multifarious picture.

These beings are here to celebrate their lord, Dionysos, and the bounty of nature. The god is in the middle, with the four Seasons to the left and right. A River, Oceanus, watering the earth from a jar, half reclines at one bend of the oval, and at the other Tellus, Earth herself, is also half reclining. Together, with the god’s help, these six will bring to pass the harvest and the vintage, turn the water into wine. To read the picture in detail: Dionysos, whose steed is like a lioness (its tail is tufted) and was perhaps thought of as a panther, has his thyrsus and deep cup (kantharos) and wears a garland of vine and, over his shoulder, what is actually a goatskin with head and hoofs, rather than the fawnskin (nebris) of his cult. At his feet are the paraphernalia of his mysteries, including a hamper from which a serpent issues. He is attended by a satyr, a maenad, and Pan. The satyr, whose profile only is well seen, is moustached like an outlander and has a tympanum and crook (pedum). The maenad plays the cymbals and wears the goatskin. Pan carries a wineskin and holds up a horn which Dionysos fills from his own cup. The four Seasons are winged youths. Spring has a cornucopia and a hare, like an Easter hare; Summer a basket of grain in the ear, a sickle, and a garland of grain; Autumn a basket of strung figs and a fig bough; Winter a brace of live water-fowl, a water plant, and a garland of rushes. The River is bearded and goat-horned and carries a cornucopia and a water plant. Earth

ABOVE: Dionysos with Pan, a satyr, and a maenad. Detail from the central group of the sarcophagus.
The ends of the sarcophagus shown on the opposite page. Earth, a River, and their attendants
The front of the sarcophagus: Winter holds two waterfowl. Autumn has a basket of strung figs. The small satyr has appropriated two strings, wearing one as a garland. Pan, filling his horn from the cup of his master, is about to drink from a wineskin. Below, the paraphernalia of the Bacchic cult.
Dionysos is attended by a maenad playing cymbals. Summer holds a broken sickle and basket of grain, Spring a cornucopia and a hare, which a small satyr teases. Another satyr, with goatskin, gives orders to the panther, a third caresses a goat. A deer, a dog, and a bull look up at the actors.
has a cornucopia. Beside the River, at the end of the oval, are two winged youths, one carrying a goat and holding a full cup, the other a fruit basket and bough. At the other end, beside Earth, are two satyrs. One makes of his goatskin a pouch to hold fruit, the other is wattled in his neck like a goat, and carries a pedum and basket. Beside him, a panther guards a basket.

The miniature figures that people the intervals of the composition include a dozen small beings that behave like Erotes, teasing or caressing animals, making music, begging fruit or stealing
it. Some of them have adult, muscular bodies, some have puggish faces, all are wingless, one has a tail, another carries a goatskin over his arm. In other words, some of them are miniature grown-up satyrs, others have the air of Erotes. They push in about the legs of the tall figures, or above, between their heads, wherever there is room. They contrast with their betters in psychology, as well as in scale. Over against the callow Seasons, the focus of whose mild, religious gaze is outward and at a distance, they are busy, intent, and sly. Their activities are an obligato
for the main theme, like the fidgeting of choir boys. What the two orders have in common is an awareness that is free from self-consciousness, which is seen nowadays in animals more often than in human creatures and is a part of our lost human birthright. Among them all, they at once embody and celebrate the mystery of the seasonal year.

Crouching along the ground, alert and attentive to the movement of the scene but taking no active part in it, are small grown-up animals—bulls with pendulous dewlap, a dog, two deer, a goat, and Winter's boar.

There is no cover for the sarcophagus and therefore no identifying inscription. The fourth side of it stood against the wall of the tomb, and is undecorated; the upper half of this side is rough as it came from the quarry, the lower half cut back and smoothed off to fit some feature of the wall. On this smooth surface are numerous circles, compass-drawn in antiquity, some concentric and others intersecting to make patterns; they are placed at random and their function is unclear, unless they were used to test the leveling.

A date around 220 to 230 A.D. has been suggested for this work. Roman sarcophagi were turned out in shops, after patterns. If the reader will compare the illustration of the Cassel sarcophagus, referred to below, he will see that the two are made from the selfsame sketch, with small variations. The sarcophagus here illustrated is an interpretation, in the style and in the spirit of its own time, of a much borrowed theme. The modeling is flexible and soft in the third-century fashion, owing as much to the drill as to the chisel. The drill, indeed, is used almost like a paintbrush, to produce dark shadows wherever they are wanted. Between the hardness of the Middle Empire and the austerity of the Late Antique lies this soft and sensitive style. Roman society was at this time permeated with the spirit of the mystery cults that grew in the same soil as Christianity; another three generations saw the baptism of Constantine. There is something here, in style and in feeling, that draws near to the Renaissance and to the modern mind.

This great Season sarcophagus was brought to England in the early eighteenth century,
where until recent years it escaped the notice of archaeologists, including that of Michaelis on his tour in the 1870’s. A photograph of it was at length published by Sir Osbert Sitwell in 1942 (see below), and the public knowledge of its history is due to his researches in the muniment room at Badminton House, Gloucestershire. It was part of a large collection purchased by the third Duke of Beaufort when he made the Grand Tour in 1726-1729 and was presumably acquired by him in Rome with the help of Cardinals Albani and Alberoni. The young duke caused it to be installed in the great hall at Badminton House, in a décor by William Kent, where it remained as the property of the Dukes of Beaufort until its recent removal to the Museum. On the back of it is carved the inscription “1733 hic posm” (set up here in 1733). Presumably at this time the relief was cleared of the incrustation that still covers the back and underside. Some of the noses, most of which had been broken in antiquity, were cut back and restored in marble, others replaced in plaster. The latter were removed at the Museum. The sarcophagus was represented to the young duke as “Augustus’s bath,” and it is perhaps to this fiction that we owe the regrettable loss of its cover, which, though it may well have been at hand, and borne the epitaph, would have had to be spirited away as inappropriate to an emperor’s bathtub.

The length of the sarcophagus (acc. no. 55.11.5) is 7 feet 3¾ inches, width 3 feet 4½ inches; height 2 feet 11½ inches; thickness of wall 5½ to 5⅜ inches. The dog’s head is reattached, and its position is uncertain. The dating is by F. Matz. Thanks are due to C. C. Vermeule for valuable help and for the loan of his photographs before acquisition. The sarcophagus has been published by: Sir Osbert Sitwell, “The Red Folder,” Burlington Magazine, 80-81 (1942), p. 117 (ill.); C. C. Vermeule, American Journal of Archaeology, 59 (1955), p. 130, pl. 41, fig. 1. For Season sarcophagi cf. G. M. A. Hanffmann, The Season Sarcophagus in Dumbarton Oaks, 1951 (reviewed by A. Rumpf, American Journal of Archaeology, 58 (1954), pp. 176 ff.). For the Cassel piece cf. M. Bieber, Die antiken Skulpturen und Bronzen des kgl. Museum Fridericianum in Cassel, 1915, no. 86.

From the front of the sarcophagus: satyr and hare