Remembering the Righteous: 
Sarcophagus Sculpture and Jewish Patrons in the Roman World

by

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Duke University

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate Program in Religion in the Graduate School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Sarcophagi belonging to Jewish patrons are an important source of evidence for reconstructing the variety of ways that ancient Jews interacted with visual culture in Late Antiquity. During this period, from the 2nd to 5th centuries C.E., the sarcophagus was the height of burial fashion across the Roman Mediterranean. Wealthy individuals throughout the late ancient world adopted sarcophagus burial not only to protect their bodily remains, but to visibly display and reinforce their social status, to demonstrate their cultural sophistication, and to memorialize and narrate their sense of self. In this regard, elite members of Jewish communities in Late Antiquity were no different from their non-Jewish neighbors (Chapter 2).

The following considers nearly 200 sarcophagi from the late ancient necropoleis of Jewish communities at Beth She’arim and Rome. This corpus captures a wide range of the possibilities open to Jewish patrons as they went about acquiring or commissioning a sarcophagus and sculptural program. The variety reflects not only the different geographic and cultural realities of diaspora and home, but also the immense diversity characteristic of the myriad visual and cultural resources of the Roman world. In order to make sense of this diversity, I contextualize the styles and motifs favored by Jewish patrons according to the cultural resources they engage, moving from local traditions of stone sculpture in Palestine (Chapter 3) to the influence of Roman portrait sculpture on Jewish patrons (Chapter 7).
I begin with local traditions of stone sculpture in Palestine in order to counter the dominant scholarly narrative that these sarcophagi primarily or even exclusively copy Roman models. I argue instead that many make extensive use of visual resources with a long history of use in Jewish contexts (Chapter 4). Moreover, the corpus of sarcophagi from Beth She‘arim suggests that the preferences of sarcophagus patrons there were shaped by the provincial context of Roman Syria (Chapter 5). On the other hand, certain sarcophagi from both Beth She‘arim and Rome reflect sarcophagus styles with pan-Mediterranean appeal (Chapter 6), and a small group of Jewish patrons in Rome even participated in the ‘portrait boom’ that began in the 3rd century by acquiring sarcophagi with portrait sculpture (Chapter 7).

The corpus of sarcophagi belonging to late ancient Jewish patrons demonstrates a significant degree of mastery of and willingness to engage the visual koine of the Roman world, as well as significant agency with respect to the adoption and appropriation of cultural resources. I argue that the majority of Jewish patrons at both Beth She‘arim and Rome were familiar with ‘Roman’ visual culture first and foremost as it existed in their local environments and were comfortable with its usage. At the same time, I consider how different settings—diaspora and Roman provincial—could influence the choices made by sarcophagus patrons. I conclude that the use of sarcophagus burial by Jewish patrons was a highly variable mode of cultural interaction, representing an ongoing negotiation of Jewishness by different individuals from different communities in the context of enduring cultural exchange.
Contents

Abstract................................................................................................................................................................................. iv

List of Maps ........................................................................................................................................................................... xii

List of Figures ......................................................................................................................................................................... xiii

Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................................................................... xxvi

Chapter 1. Introduction.............................................................................................................................................................. 1

1.1 Sarcophagi belonging to Jewish patrons in the Roman World................................................................. 3

1.2 Statement of the problem: identifying difference (and different identities) in the past................................. 6

1.3 Sarcophagi and sarcophagus burial in the Roman Empire........................................................................... 11

1.3.1 Memory and meaning on Roman sarcophagi.............................................................................................. 19

1.4 Methodological considerations and the limitations of the evidence ......................................................... 24

1.4.1 Romanization, cultural change and the Roman world........................................................................... 25

1.4.2 Visual (/material) culture and identities........................................................................................................ 33

1.4.3 Symbolic interpretations of ancient art ........................................................................................................ 38

1.4.4 Social-practice theory and the construction of identities..................................................................... 40

1.4.5 The limitations of the evidence ...................................................................................................................... 44

1.5 Summary of the contents............................................................................................................................................. 50

1.6 What is Jewish about Jewish art? ......................................................................................................................... 55

Chapter 2. Sarcophagus Patrons and the Communities of Beth She’arim and Rome................................................. 61

2.1 The history and discovery of Beth She’arim................................................................................................. 61

2.1.1 History of excavations at Beth She’arim ................................................................................................. 63

2.1.2 The ancient village of Beth She’arim ...................................................................................................... 67
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Architectural relief carving in the monumental buildings of the Galilee</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.1 Architectural relief carving in the synagogue at Chorazin</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.2 ‘Jewish’ symbols in the stone sculpture of the Galilee</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.3 Monumental buildings and relief carving in the Galilee</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 Architectural relief carving at Beth She’arim</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4. The Persistence of Local Traditions: The Sculptural Programs of Sarcophagi from Beth She’arim</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 The ‘Nikae’ sarcophagus: ‘Roman’ or ‘local?’</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Rosette sarcophagus no. 87 and the ossuary tradition</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 The ‘Shell’ sarcophagus and the influence of contemporary architectural forms</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.1 Combined traditions on sarcophagi with architectural representations</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 The ‘Eagle’ sarcophagus and animal motifs</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.1 Further examples of sarcophagi with animal motifs</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.2 Sarcophagi with animal motifs and local relief sculpture</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5 On the level of execution of the sculptural programs of locally produced sarcophagi at Beth She’arim</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6 ‘Jewish’ symbols on sarcophagi from Beth She’arim and Rome</td>
<td>248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6.1 Jewish ritual symbols on the sarcophagi from Beth She’arim</td>
<td>248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6.2 Jewish ritual symbols on sarcophagi from Rome</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6.3 Jewish ritual symbols and Jewish identities in Palestine and diaspora</td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7 Summary</td>
<td>262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5. Roman Syria and the Provincial Context of Sarcophagus Patrons at Beth She’arim</td>
<td>266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1 The Galilee region and Beth She’arim in the context of Roman Syria</td>
<td>267</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 The Roman stone trade and the province of Roman Syria</td>
<td>273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3 The sarcophagus trade in the province of Roman Syria</td>
<td>282</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.1 A hierarchy of sarcophagus types in Roman Syria</td>
<td>287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.2 A Proconnesian sarcophagus in the Metropolitan Museum of Art</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.3 Proconnesian sarcophagi as a provincial form?</td>
<td>298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4 Tyre and Beth She’arim: two necropoleis of Roman Syria</td>
<td>302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4 Sarcophagi at Tyre</td>
<td>310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.1 Sarcophagi at Tyre and the predominance of the Proconnesian forms</td>
<td>313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.2 Patronage practices and sarcophagus patrons at Tyre</td>
<td>318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5 Sarcophagi at Beth She’arim</td>
<td>322</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5.1 Imported marble sarcophagi from Beth She’arim and the Proconnesian form</td>
<td>322</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5.2 Locally produced sarcophagi and the imitation of imported styles</td>
<td>326</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5.3 The plain sarcophagi at Beth She’arim and the Proconnesian pedimental form</td>
<td>334</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.6 Summary</td>
<td>337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6. Roman Models and Marble Imports: Jewish Patrons at Beth She’arim and Rome</td>
<td>346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1 Metropolitan sarcophagi: major trends and motifs</td>
<td>348</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1.1 Mythological sarcophagi from Rome</td>
<td>349</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1.2 Other developments in Metropolitan sarcophagi</td>
<td>356</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2 Sarcophagi from the Roman East: ‘Attic’ and ‘Asiatic’ exports</td>
<td>360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3 Christian sarcophagi in the Roman world</td>
<td>368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4 Sarcophagi from the Jewish community of Rome: Jewish patrons, Roman themes and narrative scenes</td>
<td>372</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 6.4.1 Popular ‘Roman’ figural motifs and themes on the sarcophagi of Jewish patrons in Rome

6.4.2 On the use of putti and seasons by Jewish sarcophagus patrons

6.4.3 Narrative sarcophagi and Jewish patrons

6.5 The sarcophagi of Jewish communal leaders in Rome

6.5.1 The sarcophagi of Caelia Domnina and Mniaseas

6.5.2 Other sarcophagi belonging to Jewish communal leaders from Rome

6.6 Reviewing the sarcophagi of Jewish patrons from Rome

6.7 The imported marble sarcophagi from Beth She‘arim

6.7.1 The Leda and the Swan sarcophagus from Beth She‘arim

6.7.2 Reconstructing the sculptural programs of imported marble sarcophagi at Beth She‘arim

6.8 Approaching mythological sculptural programs at Beth She‘arim

6.9 Summary

---

### Chapter 7. Portrait Sculpture on the Sarcophagi of Jewish Patrons

7.1 Portrait sculpture on Metropolitan sarcophagi

7.2 The *kline* monument of Monteverde

7.3 Jewish patrons and portrait sculpture in Rome: further evidence

7.5 A portrait sarcophagus without a portrait: reticence towards portrait sculpture among Jewish patrons?

7.6 Summary

---

### Chapter 8. Summary and Conclusions

8.1 Review of the findings

8.2 Further remarks
8.3 Jewish sarcophagus patrons and the question of ‘Jewish art’ ......................... 484

Bibliography ................................................................................................................. 492

Biography ....................................................................................................................... 519

Maps ............................................................................................................................. 520

Figures ......................................................................................................................... 538
List of Maps

Map 1: Jewish diaspora sites in the Roman Mediterranean. (Hachlili, 1998) .................520

Map 2: Trade networks in the Galilee and the location of Beth She’arim (‘Besara’). (After Fischer, 1998) ......................................................................................................................................................521

Map 3: Ancient Rome indicating the locations of Jewish catacombs. (After Konikoff, 1986) ......................................................................................................................................................522

Map 4: The village and necropolis of Beth She’arim. (Avigad, 1976) ...............................523

Map 5: Ancient Rome indicating the locations of Christian and Pagan catacombs, with Jewish catacombs plotted. (After Nicolai, 1999) ......................................................................................................................................................524

Map 6: Synagogue sites from late ancient Palestine. (Hachlili, 2014) ...............................525

Map 7: Major overseas transport routes in the Roman Empire. (Freeman, 1996) .............526

Map 8: Roman roads and the distribution of marble in Palestine and Roman Syria. Tyre (Tyrus) and Beth She’arim (Besara) indicated. (Fischer, 1998) ......................................................................................................................................................527

Map 9: The province(s) of Roman Syria in the Severan Period. (Butcher, 2003) ..........528

Map 10: Cities of Roman Syria. (Butcher, 2003) .....................................................................529

Map 11: Quarrying sites in the Roman Mediterranean, with major producers marked. (After Russell, 2007) ......................................................................................................................................................530

Map 12: Sources of luxury stone imported to Roman Syria (Butcher, 2003) .....................531

Map 13: Location of Proconnesus in the Sea of Marmara. (Ancient World Mapping Center, 2011) ......................................................................................................................................................532

Map 14: Distribution of Proconnesian sarcophagi across the late ancient Mediterranean. (Russell, 2013) ......................................................................................................................................................533

Map 15: Distribution of Attic sarcophagi across the Roman Mediterranean. (Russell, 2013) ......................................................................................................................................................534

Map 16: Distribution of Asiatic sarcophagi across the Roman Mediterranean. (Koch and Sichtermann, 1982) ......................................................................................................................................................535

Map 17: Location of Dokimeion in Asia Minor (center top, 200 km from coast). (Ancient World Mapping Center) ......................................................................................................................................................536

Map 18: Major quarrying sites in Asia Minor. (Russell, 2013) .............................................537

xii
List of Figures

Fig. 1.1: Sarcophagus produced in Rome showing flat lid with frieze panel and common styles and tropes of metropolitan sarcophagus industry. Louvre No. 49.1346. (Author).................................................................538

Fig. 1.2: Garland sarcophagus produced in Asia Minor (Proconnesus) with gabled lid and carving on all four sides. MMA Inv. 70.1. (Metropolitan Museum of Art).538

Fig. 1.3: Funerary altar from Rome showing a patron instructing a sculptor in the carving of a funerary monument. (D’Ambra, 1998) .................................................................539

Fig. 2.1: Plan of the village of Beth She’arim. (Mazar, 1973)..................................................540

Fig. 2.2: Plan of Catacomb 20 at Beth She’arim. (Avigad, 1976)........................................541

Fig. 2.4: Endymion sarcophagus produced in Rome with ‘unfinished’ faces on Selene and Endymion. Louvre Ma. 1335. (Author).................................................................542

Fig. 2.5: Simple strigilar sarcophagus with common elements and tropes that could have been carved in advance. Rome, Villa Borghese. (Author).................................................................542

Fig. 3.1: Soft limestone ossuary with chip carved decoration of rosettes and column. MMA Inv. L.2003.10a/b. (Author) ........................................................................543

Fig. 3.2: Hard limestone ossuary with sunken-panel relief carving and three rosettes. MMA Inv. X.248.11a/b. (Author) ........................................................................543

Fig. 3.3: Hard limestone ossuary with ornate and naturalistic rosettes. (Rahmani, 1994) ........................................................................544

Fig. 3.4: Ossuary lid with wreaths and bilingual inscription. (Rahmani, 1994).................544

Fig. 3.5: Front and lid of hard limestone ossuary with vines, acanthus leaves, and grapes. (Rahmani, 1994) ........................................................................545

Fig. 3.6: Left and right sides of hard limestone ossuary with vines, acanthus leaves, and grapes. (Rahmani, 1994) ........................................................................545

Fig. 3.7: Front and lid of hard limestone ossuary from Dominus Flevit. (Jacoby, 1987) ........................................................................546

Fig. 3.8: Front of hard limestone ossuary with facade motif. (Rahmani, 1994).................546

Fig. 3.9: Left and right sides of hard limestone ossuary with facade motif. (Rahmani, 1994) ........................................................................547
Fig. 3.10: Tombs from the Hinnom Valley. (De Saulcy, 1853)..........................547
Fig. 3.11: Reconstruction of the tomb of Umm el-ʿAmed. (Avigad, 1950).........548
Fig. 3.12: Reconstruction of the facade of the Tomb of Queen Helene of Adiabene. (Avigad, 1956)..........................................................548
Fig. 3.13: Reconstruction of the Tomb of the Frieze. (Macalister, 1902).........549
Fig. 3.14: Tomb of Bene Hezir. (De Saulcy, 1853)......................................549
Fig. 3.15: Tomb of the Sanhedrin. (De Saulcy, 1853)..................................550
Fig. 3.16: Cornice fragment from Chorazin with variety geometric, floral and faunal moldings and motifs. (May and Stark, 2002).................................551
Fig. 3.17: Torah shrine from Chorazin as reconstructed by May and Stark. (May and Stark, 2002).................................................................551
Fig. 3.18: Chorazin pilaster with repeating, geometric ‘carpet’ motif. (May and Stark, 2002).................................................................552
Fig. 3.19: Cornerstone with running motif of acanthus medallions and rosettes on frieze panel from Chorazin. (May and Stark, 2002)..............................552
Fig. 3.20: Frieze fragment with bird pecking at grapes, Chorazin. (May and Stark, 2002).................................................................553
Fig. 3.21: Eagle from cornice apex at Chorazin. (May and Stark, 2002)...........553
Fig. 3.22: Frieze fragments with lions emerging from acanthus leaves, Chorazin. (May and Stark, 2002).................................................................553
Fig. 3.23: Scenes of wine making from frieze panel, Chorazin. (May and Stark, 2002)........................................................................554
Fig. 3.24: Frieze with hunt scenes from Chorazim. (May and Stark, 2002)........554
Fig. 3.25: Frieze with mask, scene of the rape of Ganymede, rosette and conch medallions, Chorazin. (May and Stark, 2002)...............................555
Fig. 3.26: Frieze with wreathed figure, aedicula, conch and mask. (May and Stark, 2002)........................................................................555
Fig. 3.27: Torah Shrine fragment with gable, conch and moldings. (May and Stark, 2002)........................................................................556
Fig. 3.28: Fragment with conch and moldings. (May and Stark, 2002)............557
Fig. 3.29: Reconstruction of lintel with menorot from Chorazim. (May and Stark, 2002) .......................................................... 557

Fig. 3.30: Stone (possibly a from the Seat of Moses) with aedicula carving and stylized menorah, lulav and etrog. (May and Stark, 2002) .......................................................... 558

Fig. 3.31: Catacomb 20, with modern reconstruction. (Author) .......................................................... 558

Fig. 3.32: Reconstruction of the monumental facade of Catacomb 20. (Avigad, 1976) .......................................................... 559

Fig. 3.33: Reconstruction of the entrance to the forecourt of Catacomb 20. (Avigad, 1976) .......................................................... 559

Fig. 3.34: Reconstruction of the facade of Catacomb 14. (Avigad, 1976) .......................................................... 560

Fig. 3.35: Reconstruction of Catacomb 14, showing the upper courtyard with benches. (Avigad, 1976) .......................................................... 560

Fig. 3.36: Fragment of architectural relief carving from mausoleum with elaborate moldings. (Author) .......................................................... 561

Fig. 3.37: Fragment of architectural relief carving from mausoleum depicting a heraldic eagle. (Author) .......................................................... 561

Fig. 3.38: Fragment of architectural relief carving from mausoleum depicting dogs fighting. (Author) .......................................................... 562

Fig. 3.39: Fragment of architectural relief carving from mausoleum with gazelle. (Author) .......................................................... 562

Fig. 3.40: Lintel with female face, incised menorah and inscription over the western burial hall of Sokratos, Catacomb 19. (Author) .......................................................... 563

Fig. 3.41: Lintel over the eastern burial hall of Catacomb 19, with naturalistic, six petalled rosette in high relief. (Author) .......................................................... 563

Fig. 3.42: Lintel over the central burial hall of Catacomb 19, with animal face and signs of erasure. (Author) .......................................................... 563

Fig. 3.43: Lintel with egg and dart moulding, Catacomb 1. (Author) .......................................................... 564

Fig. 3.44: Engaged, hewn pilaster with Corinthian style capital, Catacomb 1. (Author) .......................................................... 564

Fig. 3.45: Basalt door carved in imitation of wood and iron work, from Catacomb 22. (Author) .......................................................... 565

Fig. 3.46: Wall carving of triple arched facade, Hall A, Catacomb 1. (Author) .......... 565
Fig. 3.47: Aedicula wall carving from Hall A, Catacomb 4. (Author) ..................566
Fig. 3.48: Aedicula wall carving from Hall A, Catacomb 4. (Author) ..................566
Fig. 3.49: Large conch motif on rear wall of arcosolium, Catacomb 3. (Author) ....567
Fig. 3.50: A pair of schematic menorahs, on front wall of an arcosolium in Catacomb 26. (Author) .................................................................567
Fig. 3.51: Menorah between arcosolia in Catacomb 12. (Author) .......................568
Fig. 3.52: Menorah between rooms, Catacomb 3. (Author) ..............................568
Fig. 3.53: Menorah headdress atop human figure in Catacomb 3. (Author) .........569
Fig. 3.54: Horse and human figure below arcosolium in Catacomb 1. (Author) .....569
Fig. 3.55: Horse and rider, Catacomb 1. (Author) ............................................570
Fig. 4.1: Front of ‘Nikae’ sarcophagus showing winged victories flanking a central, knotted wreath. (Author) ........................................................................570
Fig. 4.2: Right side of ‘Nikae’ sarcophagus with dolphins flanking a wreathed conch. (Author) .........................................................................................571
Fig. 4.3: Left side and front of ‘Nikae’ sarcophagus, showing incomplete portion. (Author) ...............................................................................................571
Fig. 4.4: Seasons sarcophagus from Rome with winged figures holding wreathed clipeus. (Koch and Sichtermann,1982) .........................................................572
Fig. 4.5: Sarcophagus from Rome with flying erotes holding wreathed clipeus portrait. (Koch and Sichtermann,1982) .................................................................572
Fig. 4.6: Sarcophagus from Rome with winged nikae holding a central roundel. (Koch and Sichtermann,1982) .................................................................572
Fig. 4.7: Sarcophagus from Rome with standing nikae holding a clipeus portrait. (Koch and Sichtermann,1982) .................................................................573
Fig. 4.8: Sarcophagus with winged victories bearing a wreath with a Chi-Rho symbol from Istanbul. (Smith and Ertug, 2001) ...........................................573
Fig. 4.9: Fragments of inner frieze from Chorazim with wreath medallions. (May and Stark, 2002) .................................................................573
Fig. 4.10: Drawings of ed-Dikke lintel fragments. (Hachlili, 1988) ....................574
Fig. 4.11: Larger lintel from Bar’am. (Jacoby, 1987) ...........................................574
Fig. 4.12: ‘Small’ lintel from the synagogue at Bar’am. (Jacoby, 1987) ..............575

Fig. 4.13: Drawing of lintel from Safed with eagles, wreath and ribbons. (Hachlili, 1988) ..................................................................................................................575

Fig. 4.14: Detail of acroteria on a garlanded sarcophagus from Tarsus, showing a dolphin. MMA 70.1. (Author) ..................................................................................576

Fig. 4.15: Sarcophagus no. 87, with rosette theme. (Author) ..........................................576

Fig. 4.16: Drawing of sarcophagus no. 87, with rosette theme. (Avigad, 1976) ........577

Fig. 4.17: Front panel of sarcophagus no. 120 with three circles. (Author) .............577

Fig. 4.18: Right side of sarcophagus no. 120 with stylized rosette. (Author) ..........578

Fig. 4.19: View of Room XXIII with sarcophagus no. 120 and menorah on wall. (Avigad, 1957) .............................................................................................................578

Fig. 4.20: Front panel of sarcophagus no. 43, with rosettes and circle motif. (Author) ..................................................................................................................579

Fig. 4.21: Right side of sarcophagus no. 43, with circle motif and wreath. (Author) ..................................................................................................................579

Fig. 4.22: Drawing of sarcophagus no. 94, showing three sunken rosettes across front panel. (Avigad, 1976) .................................................................................580

Fig. 4.23: Sarcophagus no. 94 with sunken rosettes, right side panel with stylized garland swag and rondels. (Author) ...........................................................................580

Fig. 4.24: Room XVII, showing the deposition of sarcophagi nos. 92-94. (Author) ....581

Fig. 4.25: Body of the ‘Daughters’ sarcophagus (no. 43). (Author) .........................581

Fig. 4.26: Righthand wreath from the ‘Daughters’ sarcophagus showing stylized knot. (Author) ............................................................................................................582

Fig. 4.27: Uncarved left side panel of the ‘Daughters’ sarcophagus. (Author) ........582

Fig. 4.28: Right side panel of the ‘Daughters’ sarcophagus with concave roundel. (Author) .................................................................................................................583

Fig. 4.29: Front panel of gabled lid, bearing Hebrew inscription with large letters. ‘Daughters’ sarcophagus. (Author) ..................................................................................583

Fig. 4.30 ‘Shell’ sarcophagus (no. 117) showing front and right side. (Author) ....584

Fig. 4.31 Detail of ‘Shell’ sarcophagus (no. 117) showing front panel. (Author) ....584
Fig. 4.32 Right side of ‘Shell’ sarcophagus (no. 117). (Author) ........................................585

Fig. 4.33 Left side of ‘Shell’ sarcophagus (no. 117). (Author) ........................................585

Fig. 4.34: Front of ‘Gable’ sarcophagus (no. 103). (Author) ........................................586

Fig. 4.35: Left side and front of ‘Gable’ sarcophagus, showing eagle motif. (Author) ........................................586

Fig. 4.36: Front panel of the ‘Column’ sarcophagus (no. 124). (Avigad, 1975) ....587

Fig. 4.37: Drawing of the ‘Column’ sarcophagus (no. 124). (Avigad, 1975) ....587

Fig. 4.38: ‘Asiatic columnar’ sarcophagus from Tyre. S605-6. (Chéhab, 1984) ....588

Fig. 4.39: The ‘Gate’ sarcophagus (no. 46). (Author) ........................................588

Fig. 4.40: The lid of the ‘gate’ sarcophagus, with tapestry-like motif. (Avigad, 1976) ........................................589

Fig. 4.41: Strigilated sarcophagus with central motif of double leaved door, from Genzano. (Koch and Sichtermann, 1982) ....589

Fig. 4.42: Corner of kline sarcophagus couch from Tyre, showing textile patterns. S3951-2. (Chéhab, 1985) ........................................590

Fig. 4.43: The ‘Eagle’ sarcophagus, no. 56. (Author) ........................................590

Fig. 4.44: ‘Eagle’ sarcophagus, Side A. (Author) ........................................591

Fig. 4.45: ‘Eagle’ sarcophagus, Side A. (Author) ........................................591

Fig. 4.46: ‘Eagle’ sarcophagus, side panel. (Author) ........................................592

Fig. 4.47: ‘Eagle’ sarcophagus, detail of lid, Side A. (Author) ........................................592

Fig. 4.48: ‘Eagle’ sarcophagus, detail of lid, Side B. (Author) ........................................593

Fig. 4.49: The ‘Bull’ sarcophagus, outside of catacomb 20. (Avigad, 1976) ....593

Fig. 4.50: Fragment of a second ‘Bull’ sarcophagus, in the vicinity of catacomb 23. (Author) ........................................594

Fig. 4.51: Fragment of a second ‘Bull’ sarcophagus, in the vicinity of catacomb 23. (Author) ........................................594

Fig. 4.52: The ‘Hunt’ sarcophagus. (Author) ........................................595

Fig. 4.53: The ‘Lion’ sarcophagus (no. 47). (Author) ........................................595
Fig. 4.54: The ‘Lion’ sarcophagus in its niche. (Author)..........................................................596

Fig. 4.55: Front and rear panels of Proconnesian garland sarcophagus with eagle motif, from Tell Barak. (British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem, 1924) .............596

Fig. 4.56: Drawing of lintel from H. ‘Ammudim with lions in stride and central vase. (Hachlili, 2014) ..................................................................................597

Fig. 4.57: Lintel of Torah Shrine from Nabratein with rampant lions. (Meyers, 2009) .......................................................................................................................597

Fig. 4.58: Graffiti of an eagle in catacomb 12, in archway between rooms 1 and 2. (Avigad, 1976) .................................................................................................598

Fig. 4.59: Menorah motif stamped on a lead coffin from Beth She’arim. (Avigad, 1976) .......................................................................................................................598

Fig. 4.60: The left and right sides of the ‘menorah’ sarcophagus (no. 122). (Avigad, 1976) .......................................................................................................................599

Fig. 4.61: View of sarcophagus no. 27 with branch motif. (Author) ........................................599

Fig. 4.62: Seasons sarcophagus from Vigna Randanini with menorah in clipeus. (Beyer and Lietzmann, 1930) .........................................................................................600

Fig. 4.63: Lid of sarcophagus of Faustina, with Jewish symbols and ‘shalom’ accompanying the epitaph. (Goodenough, 1953) ...............................................................600

Fig. 4.64: Sarcophagus from Villa Torlonia with Jewish symbols. (Beyer and Lietzmann, 1930) ..................................................................................................................601

Fig. 4.65: Sarcophagus from Vigna Randanini with Jewish symbols. (Konikoff, 1990) ..............................................................................................................................601

Fig. 5.1: Two imported Proconnesian garland sarcophagi from Tyre in quarry state. (Chéhab, 1984) .........................................................................................................602

Fig. 5.2: Proconnesian garland sarcophagus at Tyre in ‘finished’ form. (Chéhab) ..............602

Fig. 5.3: Two imported marble sarcophagi in the pedimental gable style, with two local imitations in basalt. (Chéhab, 1984) ...........................................................603

Fig. 5.4: Proconnesian garland sarcophagus from Tarsus. MMA 70.1. (Author) ..............603

Fig. 5.5: Rear of the Proconnesian garland sarcophagus from Tarsus. MMA 70.1 (Author) ..................................................................................................................604

Fig. 5.6: Left and right sides of the Proconnesian garland sarcophagus from Tarsus. MMA 70.1. (Author) .............................................................................................604

xix
Fig. 5.7: Complex 28 at Tyre showing built masonry platform with sarcophagus placement and loculi. (Chéhab, 1984) .................................................................605

Fig. 5.8: Proconnesian ‘pedimental gable’ style sarcophagus from Tyre. (Chéhab, 1984) ........................................................................................................605

Fig. 5.9: Proconnesian ‘pedimental gable’ sarcophagus with Medusa rondel. (Chéhab, 1984) ........................................................................................................606

Fig. 5.10: Two Proconnesian sarcophagi from Tyre in quarry state form, undressed. (Chéhab, 1984) ........................................................................................................606

Fig. 5.11: Proconnesian imported sarcophagus from Tyre in quarry state form, finely dressed. (Chéhab, 1985) ........................................................................................................607

Fig. 5.12: Imported Proconnesian sarcophagus with bulls and rams’ heads. (Chéhab, 1984) ........................................................................................................607

Fig. 5.13: Imported Proconnesian sarcophagus with winged victories. (Chéhab, 1984) ........................................................................................................608

Fig. 5.14: Proconnesian imported sarcophagus with rosette in gable. (Chéhab, 1984) ........................................................................................................608

Fig. 5.15: Three sarcophagi of local limestone imitating the simple, pedimental gable style. (Chéhab, 1984) ........................................................................................................609

Fig. 5.16: Local limestone sarcophagus from Tyre carved in imitation of the Proconnesian quarry state form. (Chéhab, 1985) ........................................................................................................609

Fig. 5.17: Local hard limestone sarcophagus carved in imitation of Proconnesian garland form. (Chéhab, 1985) ........................................................................................................610

Fig. 5.18: Local hard limestone sarcophagus carved in imitation of Proconnesian garland form. (Chéhab, 1984) ........................................................................................................610

Fig. 5.19: Marble fragments from imported Proconnesian quarry state sarcophagus. (Avigad, 1976) ........................................................................................................611

Fig. 5.20: Reconstruction of imported marble Proconnesian quarry state sarcophagus from Beth She’arim. (Avigad, 1976) ........................................................................................................611

Fig. 5.21: Fragments of imported marble sarcophagus with grape clusters. (Avigad, 1976) ........................................................................................................612

Fig. 5.22: Fragment of imported marble sarcophagus showing garland knotted with ribbon. (Avigad, 1976) ........................................................................................................612
Fig. 5.23: Fragment of imported marble sarcophagus showing winged victory with garland. (Avigad, 1976)..........................613

Fig. 5.24: Fragment of a gabled lid and acroteria with tendrils from imported marble sarcophagus. (Avigad, 1976)..........................613

Fig. 5.25: Sarcophagus no. 55 in local limestone imitating the Proconnesian quarry state form. (Author)..........................614

Fig. 5.26: Drawing of ‘tabula ansata’ sarcophagus (No. 54). (Avigad, 1976)...........614

Fig. 5.27: ‘Acanthus’ sarcophagus no. 101. (Author)..................................................615

Fig. 5.28: Reconstruction of ‘Acanthus’ sarcophagus no. 101. (Avigad, 1976)........615

Fig. 5.29: Central garland swag with lion. (Author)..........................616

Fig. 5.30: ‘Acanthus’ sarcophagus no. 97. (Author)..................................................616

Fig. 5.31: Reconstruction of ‘Acanthus’ sarcophagus no. 97. (Avigad, 1976)........617

Fig. 5.32: View of ‘Acanthus’ sarcophagus no. 97 showing front panel and left side. (Author)..................................................617

Fig. 5.33: ‘Mask’ sarcophagus, no. 84, showing front and right sides. (Author).......618

Fig. 5.34: Right side of ‘Mask’ sarcophagus showing garland and mask medallion. (Author)..................................................618

Fig. 5.35: Sarcophagus no. 119, with rosettes and possible Proconnesian influence. (Author)..................................................619

Fig. 5.36: Detail of rosette fragment, sarcophagus no. 119. (Author)......................619

Fig. 5.37: Two sarcophagi (no. 9, 10) from Room II.1 illustrating the simple, gabled form. (Author)..................................................620

Fig. 6.1: Endymion sarcophagus from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. MMA 47.100.4. (Metropolitan Museum of Art)..........................620

Fig. 6.2: Endymion sarcophagus from the Metropolitan Museum of Art with similar composition. MMA 24.97.13. (Metropolitan Museum of Art)..........................621

Fig. 6.3: Metropolitan garlanded sarcophagus with scenes from the story of Theseus. MMA 90.12. (Metropolitan Museum of Art)..........................621

Fig. 6.4: Strigilated sarcophagus from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. MMA 2005.258. (Metropolitan Museum of Art)..........................621

xxi
Fig. 6.5: The Badminton sarcophagus at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. MMA 55.11.5. (Metropolitan Museum of Art) ..........................................................622

Fig. 6.6 Metropolitan sarcophagus with clipeus held by flying putti. MMA 56. 145. (Metropolitan Museum of Art) ..................................................................................622

Fig. 6.7: Scene from an Attic sarcophagus from Tyre depicting the arming of Achilles at the court of King Lycomedes. (Chéhab, 1984) ..................................................623

Fig. 6.8: Scene from Attic sarcophagus from Tyre depicting the defense of Troy. (Chéhab, 1985) .............................................................................................................623

Fig. 6.9: Attic sarcophagus from Tyre depicting the final battle over Troy. (Chéhab, 1985) .............................................................................................................624

Fig. 6.10: Scene from an Attic sarcophagus from Tyre depicting an Amazonomachy. (Chéhab, 1984) .........................................................................................................624

Fig. 6.11: Attic sarcophagus from Tyre depicting scenes from the myth of Phaedra and Hippolytus. (Chéhab, 1985) ..................................................................................625

Fig. 6.12: Attic sarcophagus from Tyre with a kline lid depicting a couple. (Chéhab, 1985) .............................................................................................................625

Fig. 6.13: Attic sarcophagus from Tyre with rear narrative scene depicting the treatment of the corpse of Hector. (Chéhab, 1984) ..............................................................626

Fig. 6.14: Attic sarcophagus from Tyre with rear motif of flanking lions. (Chéhab, 1984) .............................................................................................................626

Fig. 6.15: Attic sarcophagus from Tyre with rear motif of flanking griffins. (Chéhab, 1984) .............................................................................................................627

Fig. 6.16: Asiatic columnar sarcophagus from Turkey with architectural façade and ‘Learned Figures’ motif. (Wiegartz, 1965) .................................................................627

Fig. 6.17 Fragment of Asiatic columnar sarcophagus showing a ‘learned figure.’ MMA 18.108. (Metropolitan Museum of Art) .................................................................628

Fig. 6.18: Asiatic sarcophagus from Tyre of the ‘Torre-Nova-Type.’ (Chéhab, 1984) .............................................................................................................628

Fig. 6.19: Sarcophagus of the Christian Senator Junius Bassus, Rome. (Malbon, 1990) .............................................................................................................629

Fig. 6.20: The ‘Dogmatic’ sarcophagus, Rome. (Malbon, 1990) .............................................................................................................629

Fig. 6.21: Sarcophagus fragment with strigils and lions head from Villa Torlonia. (Beyer and Lietzmann, 1930) .....................................................................................630
Fig. 6.22: Sarcophagus fragment with male torso from Villa Torlonia. (Beyer and Lietzmann, 1930) ................................................................. 630

Fig. 6.23: Corner fragment of sarcophagus from Villa Torlonia with theater masks and griffin. (Beyer and Lietzmann, 1930) ........................................... 631

Fig. 6.24: Sarcophagus with a bucolic scene from Villa Torlonia. (Konikoff, 1986) 632

Fig. 6.25: Sarcophagus fragment with bathing scene. (Goodenough, 1953) .......... 632

Fig. 6.26: Fragment of sarcophagus lid with cupids at play. (Konikoff, 1986) .... 632

Fig. 6.27: Fragment of sarcophagus with putti and cornucopias, Monteverde. (Konikoff, 1986) ................................................................. 633

Fig. 6.28: Drawing of Monteverde sarcophagus fragment. (Goodenough, 1953) .... 633

Fig. 6.29: Sarcophagus fragments with putti and cornucopias, Villa Torlonia. (Beyer and Lietzmann, 1930) ................................................................. 633

Fig. 6.30: Fragment of sarcophagus lid with putti picking grapes, Villa Torlonia. (Beyer and Lietzmann, 1930) ................................................................. 634

Fig. 6.31: Seasons sarcophagus with menorah, Villa Torlonia. (Beyer and Lietzmann, 1930) ................................................................. 634

Fig. 6.32: Sarcophagus fragment with personified season, Vigna Randanini. (Goodenough, 1953) ................................................................. 635

Fig. 6.33: Nude male on sarcophagus fragment from Torlonia. (Beyer and Lietzmann, 1930) ................................................................. 635

Fig. 6.34: Fragment of a sarcophagus with a hunt scene from Villa Torlonia, possibly Meleager and the Calydonian boar. (Beyer and Lietzmann, 1930) ................................................................. 636

Fig. 6.35: Fragment of sarcophagus with narrative scene, identified by Goodenough as ‘Moses striking the rock.’ (Goodenough, 1953) ................................................................. 636

Fig. 6.36: Lid of sarcophagus of Faustina, with Jewish symbols and ‘shalom’ accompanying the epitaph. (Goodenough, 1953) ................................................................. 637

Fig. 6.37: Sarcophagus of Caelia Domnina, with side panels of griffins. (Konikoff, 1990) ................................................................. 637

Fig. 6.38: Lenos sarcophagus of Mniaseas. (Konikoff, 1990) ................................................................. 638

Fig. 6.39: Sarcophagus fragment of the Archon Caelius Quintus, with strigilar form and prominent tabula ansata. (Konikoff, 1986) ................................................................. 638
Fig. 6.40: Fragment of a strigilated sarcophagus from Vigna Randanini. (Jessica Dello Russo) ................................................................. 639

Fig. 6.41: Fragment of a strigilated sarcophagus from Vigna Randanini. (Jessica Dello Russo) ................................................................. 639

Fig. 6.42: Fragment of a strigilated sarcophagus from Vigna Randanini. (Jessica Dello Russo) ................................................................. 640

Fig. 6.43: Front panel from the “Leda and the Swan” sarcophagus, Beth She’arim. (Avi-Yonah, 1981) ................................................................. 640

Fig. 6.44: Attic sarcophagus from Tyre depicting Achilles at the court of King Lycomedes. (Chéhab, 1984) ................................................................. 640

Fig. 6.45: Fragment from the rear panel of the “Leda and the Swan” sarcophagus, showing a hunter on horseback. (Avi-Yonah, 1981) ......................... 641

Fig. 6.46: Fragment from the rear panel of the “Leda and the Swan” sarcophagus, showing standing hunters and dog. (Avi-Yonah, 1981) ......................... 641

Fig. 6.47: Left side-panel of the “Leda and the Swan” sarcophagus. (Avi-Yonah, 1981) ................................................................. 642

Fig. 6.48: Fragments of moldings from imported marble sarcophagi. (Avigad, 1976) ................................................................. 642

Fig. 6.49: Fragments of imported marble sarcophagi with conches. (Avigad, 1976) ................................................................. 643

Fig. 6.50: Possible arch on an imported marble sarcophagus fragment. (Avigad, 1976) ................................................................. 643

Fig. 6.51: Robed, static figures on imported marble sarcophagus fragments. (Avigad, 1976) ................................................................. 644

Fig. 6.52: Nude male torso on imported marble sarcophagus fragment. (Avigad, 1976) ................................................................. 644

Fig. 6.53: Female head on imported marble sarcophagus fragment, probably an Amazon. (Avigad, 1976) ................................................................. 645

Fig. 6.54: Spear and swords, sculpted with significant under drilling, on imported marble. (Avigad, 1976) ................................................................. 645

Fig. 6.55: Imported marble sarcophagus fragment with male torso clad in chlamys and tunic. (Avigad, 1976) ................................................................. 646

Fig. 6.56: Bared knee with high, military boot on imported marble sarcophagus fragment. (Avigad, 1976) ................................................................. 646

xxiv
Fig. 6.57: Fragment of imported marble sarcophagus with a braying horse. (Avigad, 1976) .................................................................647

Fig. 6.58: Attic sarcophagus with a scene of Amazonomachy. Louvre, Ma. 2119. (Author) .................................................................647

Fig. 7.1: Sarcophagus of a Greek physician. MMA Inv. 48.76.1. (Metropolitan Museum of Art) .................................................................648

Fig. 7.2: Kline sarcophagus of a young child from Monteverde. (Goodenough, 1953) .................................................................648

Fig. 7.3: Kline monument of a young girl. (Getty Museum) .................................................................648

Fig. 7.4: Marble stele of a young girl. Paros, 5th c. B.C.E. MMA 27.45. (Author) ..............649

Fig. 7.5: Sarcophagus fragment with 'learned figure' and nude erote, Vigna Randanini. (Beyer and Lietzmann, 1930) .................................................................650

Fig. 7.6: Sarcophagus fragments with 'Learned Figure' motif. (Raccolte d'Arte Antica, Milan; after Birk, 2013) .................................................................650

Fig. 7.7: Sarcophagus from Vigna Randanini with portrait in wreath and cornucopias. (Goodenough, 1953) .................................................................651

Fig. 7.8: Fragment of sarcophagus with portrait clipeus from Vigna Randanini. (Jessica Dello Russo) .................................................................651

Fig. 7.9: Gold glass from Rome with open Torah Shrine revealing rolled scrolls. (Morey, 1959) .................................................................652

Fig. 7.10: Wall painting with rolled scroll from ceiling of Cubiculum II in the Jewish catacomb of Villa Torlonia. (Beyer and Lietzmann, 1930) .................................................................652

Fig. 7.11: Child’s kline lid from the Rome showing learned figure theme. (Huskinson, 1996) .................................................................653

Fig. 7.12: ‘Seasons’ sarcophagus from Vigna Randanini. (Beyer and Lietzmann, 1930) .................................................................653

xxv
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Chapter 8. Summary and Conclusions

Sarcophagus burial was a popular funerary mode widely practiced by elite members of the Roman world for over three hundred years, from the 2nd to 5th centuries C.E. Over this period, tens if not hundreds of thousands of sarcophagi were produced in workshops across the Roman world for export and for local consumption. The spread of the sarcophagus across the Roman Empire in this time was associated with increasing connectivity in the Mediterranean and with significant changes to the Roman stone industry and trade.¹ Major sarcophagus producers whose styles appealed to patrons across the Mediterranean existed in Rome, Greece and Asia Minor.² Local workshops in other regions also proliferated and produced sarcophagi in local materials that emulated the styles exported by the major producers, and often creatively combined them with local visual resources and sculptural traditions.

One explanation for the broad appeal of the sarcophagus form among elite patrons across the Roman Empire is that sarcophagi functioned not only as burial vessels used to protect bodily remains, but also as funerary monuments which efficiently and effectively fulfilled important social functions. They were one tangible product of an empire-wide ‘ideology of stone’ founded in Rome and associated in the provinces with processes of urbanization from the Severan period on.³ As such, sarcophagi were used by wealthy

³ Russell 2013.

467
patrons across the Roman Empire as an effective medium for communicating their social standing as well as an important vehicle for self-representation to protect their memory against the passage of time.

Beyond the conspicuous display entailed in acquiring and setting up such a monumental burial vessel, the sculptural programs that many sarcophagi bore were widely understood as orchestrations of ‘self-narratives’ that represented the values and virtues of the deceased.⁴ The content and form of these self-narratives varied widely, as we have seen; the conventions of sarcophagus sculpture were flexible enough to communicate different meanings for different patrons and for different viewers. At the same time, there is little evidence to suggest sarcophagi and their sculptural programs were ever considered as ‘mere decoration’ for the enjoyment of the deceased in the afterlife. Rather, across the Roman world of Late Antiquity the use of sarcophagi and other funerary monuments was regarded as an important mode of representation and social competition, and their sculptural programs were viewed as visual mediums for communicating messages about self and status to family, friends and passersby. As we have seen, these functions were confirmed in inscriptions, by ancient authors, and even enshrined in Roman law (Chapter 1).

In this study, I have considered the variety of ways in which Jewish patrons participated in the practice of sarcophagus burial. The important role that sarcophagi—

as funerary monuments—played in the processes of mourning and memorialization renders the sarcophagus and its sculptural programs a valuable source of evidence for reconstructing the cultural interaction of Jewish individuals and communities with the dominant culture and visual resources of the Roman world. This examination is a necessary part of the puzzle for any holistic understanding of the cultural history of Jewish communities in the Roman world. While the use of sarcophagi was a practice restricted to the most elite members of these communities, we have also seen that these same individuals were often esteemed members and leaders of their respective communities. Across the Roman world, the choices and tastes of local elites have long been granted a driving force role behind cultural interaction and processes of cultural change.

8.1 Review of the findings

Indeed, it is clear that Jewish sarcophagus patrons were, in every sense, local elites. As we saw in Chapter 2, all signs indicate that the patrons of sarcophagi at Beth She’arim and Rome were among the wealthiest members of their communities. In this context, it is important to reiterate that the acquisition of a sarcophagus was regarded as a visible display of wealth and social status across the Roman world. While more recent scholarship has revealed that in Late Antiquity, sarcophagi and similar funerary monuments appealed to increasingly mobile social classes as a strategy for social advancement and competition, sarcophagus burial was never within the means of more
than a small segment of any community; the use of sarcophagi was restricted to members of the elite and sub-elite. The inscriptional evidence that accompanied the sarcophagi of both Jewish communities amply demonstrated that, in addition to being wealthy, Jewish sarcophagus patrons were often prominent members of their local Jewish communities who held positions of honor and leadership therein.

While Beth She’arim served a diverse group of both local and diaspora Jews, the inscriptions—especially from Catacomb 20 where the vast majority of sarcophagi were uncovered—indicated that sarcophagus patronage was associated with Jewish patrons local to the village, or possibly the Galilee region. While certain aspects of Catacomb 20 differed from other catacombs at the site, commonalities in the burial types and the funerary practices observed within confirmed that sarcophagus burial was practiced as part of—and not apart from—local funerary customs. At the same time, I suggested that the complications and costs of overland transport to a remote inland site such as Beth She’arim must have made the purchase of imported marble sarcophagi an especially expensive proposition. Though some patrons clearly had the wealth and means to import marble sarcophagi to Beth She’arim (Chapters 5 and 6), the majority favored locally produced sarcophagi of limestone quarried nearby: patronage patterns which mirrored those of many other local communities in the Roman world.

Most of the sarcophagi from Beth She’arim did not bear inscriptions, but those that did further indicate that the sarcophagus patrons were prominent members of the local community. While all the inscriptions of Catacomb 20 were in Hebrew, the names of the
deceased and their families were a mixture of traditional Hebrew names and Greek and Roman ones. The title ‘rabbi’ appeared on three decorated sarcophagi, as well as on several undecorated examples, together with other honorifics derived from both Greek and Jewish custom.

A similar picture obtained from the sarcophagi belonging to Jewish patrons in Rome. These patrons too were among the leading segment of the local Jewish community, a fact amply demonstrated by the inscriptions as well as by the find-spots of the few sarcophagi (mostly in cubiculae) discovered in controlled excavations. Roughly half of the sarcophagi belonging to members of this community bore inscriptions. Almost all of these were composed in Greek, a somewhat unique feature we dealt with in Chapter 2. The sarcophagus patrons and their families in Rome made use of common Latin names more often than Hebrew ones. Many inscriptions on sarcophagi from Rome mention a specific synagogue with which the deceased was associated. Most importantly, nine inscriptions on sarcophagi from the Jewish community of Rome mention one or more communal leadership positions or honorifics such as archon, archisynagogos, gerusiarch, phrontistes, priest, or ‘father’ or ‘mother’ of a synagogue.

Since the practice of sarcophagus burial at Beth She’arim was first and foremost a local phenomenon restricted to members of the Jewish community residing at Beth She’arim and in the Galilee, our examination began by considering the ways in which local traditions influenced the local production of sarcophagi at the site. Three major traditions of stone sculpture existed in ancient Palestine (Chapter 3). Two of these, the
decoration of stone ossuaries and of monumental tomb facades, both emerged in Jerusalem in the late Second Temple period (ca. 1st century B.C.E. – 1st century C.E.). The third tradition, the monumental buildings of the Galilee and their relief sculpture, emerged in the region well after the turmoil of the 1st centuries C.E. and was roughly contemporaneous with the use of the catacombs at Beth She'arim. As we saw, each of these traditions creatively adopted and adapted the visual resources of the Greek and Roman Mediterranean and combined them with motifs with long histories of local use.

I argued that it was through these traditions—and not via the influence of imported marble sarcophagi—that many of the individual tropes and motifs traditionally associated with ‘Roman’ visual culture entered the sculptural programs of sarcophagi at Beth She’arim (Chapter 4). As such, I questioned the extent to which motifs such as winged victories, garlands, eagles and other popular figural imagery can be associated with the influence of Roman culture or interpreted as signs of acculturation. Each was a familiar part of the visual koine of the Galilee, often with a long history of use in Jewish contexts. I also examined additional ways in which the sculptural programs of sarcophagi at Beth She’arim draw on local traditions in stone sculpture, for example in the use of rosettes and wreaths as well as of representations of familiar architectural forms of the Galilee. I concluded that the choices of the patrons and sculptors responsible for the composition of sculptural programs on these sarcophagi demonstrated not only a cultural memory of earlier, Second Temple period sculptural
traditions but a deep stylistic and technical engagement with local visual resources, an indebtedness that is rarely acknowledged.

I also contextualized the sarcophagi of Beth She’arim and their visual programs within the funerary landscape of Roman Syria and the practices and preferences characteristic of sarcophagus patronage therein (Chapter 5). We saw that across Roman Syria, sarcophagus burial was closely associated with areas of Roman rule. In these places, the use of sarcophagi was associated with certain patterns of cultural and material changes visible in the archaeological record of the region, particularly the ongoing urbanization of the province. Much like monumental civic building projects, the adoption of the sarcophagus form was one aspect of broader process of cultural change, and particularly of the provincial adoption of the ‘ideology of stone’ promoted by the Roman stone trade.5 Based especially on the research of Ward-Perkins and Russell,6 I suggested that in Roman Syria the acquisition of a sarcophagus was a form of conspicuous consumption and a particularly effective scaling down of the same cultural dynamics (and pressures) that also promoted elite display in the form of monumental buildings and civic statues.

The sarcophagi excavated at the necropolis of Tyre served as a case study against which to compare the sarcophagi from Beth She’arim. We saw that, aside from some local particularities, both communities shared many of same the patronage and viewing

5 Russell 2013.
practices that accompanied the use of sarcophagi, from the deposition of sarcophagi in large, heterogeneous groups, to the semi-private nature of their display. We also observed similar patterns of preferences in the style and sculptural programs on sarcophagi at both sites, from the gabled lid to the preference for simple designs in local stone. Above all, we argued that all three forms of imported Proconnesian sarcophagi—‘pedimental gable,’ quarry-state and ‘finished’—occupied such a prominent position in both corpuses, and exerted such an outsized influence on the locally produced sarcophagi at both Beth She’arim and Tyre, that the style should be considered characteristic of sarcophagus trade and burial in the province. This understanding was further supported by several internal dynamics of the sarcophagus production in Proconnesus.

Other sarcophagi belonging to Jewish patrons demonstrated a broader cultural literacy through the adoption of styles popular across the Roman Mediterranean (Chapter 6). This was particularly the case for members of the Jewish community of Rome. By virtue of their location in the heart of the Roman Empire, Jewish sarcophagus patrons in Rome had access to one of the largest sarcophagus markets in the ancient world. With it came a wide array of popular sarcophagus styles produced in Metropolitan workshops that were famous throughout the Roman Mediterranean. We saw, therefore, that the majority of Jewish patrons in Rome selected sarcophagus styles that were in fashion, with popular tropes drawn from ‘neutral’ figural imagery including representations of the seasons and putti. I hypothesized that the popularity of
such neutral imagery over narrative sarcophagi with specific mythological content may have been driven by a desire to avoid the allegorical association between the deceased and mythic characters. The leaders of the Jewish community, identified by the titles and honorifics in their inscriptions, likewise purchased fashionable Metropolitan sarcophagi, and especially favored the strigilar style. On the whole, however, they preferred more visually restrained examples, with little to no figural imagery and prominent inscriptions.

We also examined fragments of imported marble sarcophagi from Beth She‘arim. These indicated that some patrons at the site had the means and ability to specially commission and import sarcophagi from Attic and Asiatic producers. We saw that, like patrons at Tyre, sarcophagus patrons at Beth She‘arim especially imported narrative sarcophagi that included scenes of Greek myth and epic battles, including more than one Amazonomachy. Contrary to traditional interpretations of the evidence, I argued that for the Jewish patrons who acquired these sarcophagi, the sculptural programs must have been more than ‘mere decoration.’ This conclusion was based on evidence for the use of mythological narrative on sarcophagi among non-Jewish patrons. It was confirmed by the inscriptions found in the same context as the Leda and the Swan sarcophagus in the mausoleum above Catacomb 11, which provided additional evidence of high levels of Greco-Roman cultural literacy among Beth She‘arim patrons.

We also examined the evidence for the use of portrait sculpture in the Jewish community of Rome, long considered in modern scholarship to be a taboo among
ancient Jews. I especially highlighted the use of the “Learned Figure” motif among Jewish patrons and raised possible creative appropriations of its meaning in Jewish contexts. I argued that among Jewish patrons, the decision to include funerary portraiture went hand in hand with the decision to adopt conventional Roman style and motifs, and to employ Roman modes of representation. As Rutgers observed already, the “most salient characteristic of imagery on sarcophagi found in the Jewish catacombs is not Jewishness, but rather preference for Greco-Roman styles and subjects.”7 I ended on a cautionary note that while the five examples surveyed suggested a high mastery of Roman culture and acculturation, we should be wary of reading such sarcophagi as evidence of certain Jews abandoning a Jewish identity in favor of a Roman one, or the Jewish community in favor of the Roman polis and its civic structures—narratives of funerary art never capture the totality of the patron’s identity.

8.2 Further remarks

The foregoing narrative has overwhelmingly emphasized the degree to which Jewish sarcophagus patrons at Beth She’arim and Rome behaved in the same ways as non-Jewish patrons in their adoption of the sarcophagus form and its visual culture. Their sarcophagi, and the sculptural programs that they chose, more often than not indicate shared conceptions about appropriate forms of memorialization and representation. Rarely do they suggest significant points of cultural difference or the representation of

7 Rutgers 1988, 377.
different identities. Indeed, throughout the corpus we observed only a few differences between the sarcophagi of Jewish patrons in Late Antiquity and those of their non-Jewish neighbors in places like Rome and Tyre.

We observed of course that many of the locally produced sarcophagi from Beth She'arim drew on local sculptural traditions to a deep and generally underestimated degree, occasionally combining them in new and creative ways with conventional forms of sarcophagus sculpture (Chapter 4). However, this persistence of local cultural resources and the creative adoption of Roman material and visual culture was far from unique to Jewish communities in the Roman world. Indeed, the same phenomenon is observable across the Roman provinces in local communities of all stripes. Moreover, as scholars like Elsner and Hölscher have amply demonstrated, Roman culture—especially Roman visual culture—was itself a complex and heterogeneous assemblage encompassing different traditions and influences.\(^8\) Thus, the use of local visual resources on sarcophagi at Beth She'arim hardly marked something unusual or unique about the cultural engagement of Jewish sarcophagus patrons with the broader Roman world.

The first true difference we encountered was the relatively low level of skill and technique evident in the sculptural programs of locally produced sarcophagi at Beth She'arim (Chapter 4). Many of the sculptural programs these sarcophagi are often judged—with much justification—to be aesthetically naïve and of underwhelming

craftsmanship. Considering this highly visible and undeniable facet of the corpus, I suggested that a close examination of contemporary stone sculpture and a nuanced understanding local workshop practices throws a more favorable light on the level of sculpture observed on locally produced sarcophagi at Beth She’arim. I argued that when viewed in this way, the low evaluations of the quality and execution are tempered somewhat. I also suggested that, whatever their aesthetic deficiencies, the sculptural programs at Beth She’arim were proudly displayed by their patrons and must have been seen as successful in conveying their intended messages.

We also observed that few Jewish sarcophagus patrons consciously incorporated common ‘Jewish’ ritual symbols—the menorah, lulav, etrog and shofar—on their sarcophagi that would have communicated a different, or unconventional identity (Chapter 4). This was exceedingly rare at Beth She’arim—a menorah was sculpted in relief on the side of a single sarcophagus—and only somewhat more common in Rome, where Jewish ritual symbols appear on four sarcophagi. The Seasons sarcophagus with a menorah in the clipeus was especially suggestive in this regard, indicating that at least one Jewish patron had starkly different conception of appropriate modes of representation. Jewish ritual symbols were incised below an inscription on the lid of the sarcophagus of Faustina. Both the Seasons sarcophagus, and that of Faustina otherwise made extensive use of tropes and styles popular among Metropolitan sarcophagi. However, the same set of symbols also predominated on two sarcophagi that were stylistically quite different than sarcophagi produced in Metropolitan workshops.
On the whole though, we observed that the use of Jewish ritual symbols by sarcophagus patrons was extremely rare. Moreover, we discerned no pattern or rule that governed their use. Rather, the use of Jewish ritual symbols seemed to be the (infrequent) decision of individual patrons and generally unconnected with collectively determined norms or communal customs for sarcophagus patronage. We suggested above several possible reasons for the highly individual and infrequent way in which Jewish ritual symbols appear on sarcophagi. These include the fact that the Jewishness of the deceased may have been presumed by their burial in catacombs used exclusively by other Jews, but also that conventions of sarcophagi as a medium of self-representation and the use of the same workshops by Jewish and non-Jewish patrons may have heavily favored the use of conventional Roman formulae and motifs. We also suggested that Jewish sarcophagus patrons, by virtue of their elite social status, may have been among the least likely to employ Jewish ritual symbols. Social achievement and elite display across the Roman world was premised on the successful deployment of Roman cultural resources, and the sarcophagus as a funerary monument was widely regarded as one strategy of social competition.

Finally, we observed certain absences in the corpus. I pointed out for example that in Rome, there is no conclusive evidence of the use of sarcophagi with scenes of Greek or Roman myth. Though there are fragments that suggest narrative scenes, on the whole I suggested that Jewish patrons preferred figured motifs—especially seasons and putti—that were ‘neutral’ and capable of sustaining multiple meanings (Chapter 6). Moreover, I
suggested that these motifs were not only those with the least explicit reference to pagan cult or myth, but also those that were incapable of sustaining an allegorical association with the deceased. The fact that sarcophagus patrons at Beth She’arim felt differently—there is ample evidence that these patrons imported Attic sarcophagi with mythic, narrative content—indicates just how locally determined the preferences and practices of sarcophagus patrons were. In a similar way, the use of portrait sculpture among Jewish patrons was restricted to the community in Rome (Chapter 7). Despite kline lids with full body portraits appearing often at Tyre, there is no evidence that patrons at Beth She’arim commissioned portraiture.

For the most part, though, the differences would have been unremarkable and unnoticeable to the average Roman viewer. The possible avoidance of figured reliefs by the leaders of the Jewish community in Rome, for example, is only observable by considering the corpus as a whole. On an individual basis, it must be reiterated that these sarcophagi were selected from among popular Metropolitan styles. Only in a few cases, such as the substitution of a menorah for a portrait in the clipeus of the Seasons sarcophagus, would the departure from conventional modes of representation and sarcophagus sculpture be conspicuous to the average Roman viewer. In these cases, we have suggested that the alteration and manipulation of sarcophagus conventions was intentional, and must be understood as a conscious decision on the part of the patron to signal meaningful differences of identities, ideas or values.
These kinds of differences in the appropriation and use of visual and material culture are characteristic of any number of local peoples in the Roman world. All local communities in the Roman Empire were engaged to some extent in a balancing act to preserve their distinctive culture and traditions while still participating in meaningful ways in the dominant and attractive Roman cultural world. The fact that the foregoing analysis has revealed few differences between the patronage practices of Jews and non-Jews in Late Antiquity is probably not surprising to anyone familiar with the current state of the study of the Roman provinces in the field of classical archaeology. Our findings correspond well to the emerging conceptions of local peoples and the heterogeneity characterizing the Roman provinces. From this perspective, the Jewish sarcophagus patrons at Beth She'arim and Rome look more or less like any other local people—especially local elites—negotiating the cultural changes brought on by Roman rule and the increasing connectivity and cultural exchange in the Roman Mediterranean in Late Antiquity. All the same, most previous analyses of the sarcophagi from Beth She'arim and Rome have tended to emphasis one side of the equation—the persistence of local traditions or the adoption of Roman culture—to the exclusion of the other, with little reflection on how the diverse cultural resources of the late ancient Mediterranean were playfully and creatively combined.

Ultimately however, it must be concluded that the differences observed were far outweighed by the similarities. The visual culture of these two communities is stylistically distinct—as Rutgers observes, “it is impossible to mistake the artistic products manufactured for the Jews of Rome with those originating in Roman Palestine”—in large part because sarcophagus patrons in both communities were mostly served by local workshops. Despite this, (or more probably because of it) the sarcophagus patrons of both communities behaved similarly in so far as their patronage practices and preferences mirrored those of their non-Jewish neighbors. In Rome, this most often meant the patronage of Metropolitan producers who created sarcophagi for Jews and non-Jews alike. Not surprisingly then, most sarcophagi of Jewish patrons in Rome evince a desire to partake in the same popular styles and forms favored by non-Jewish Romans. The provincial location of sarcophagus patrons at Beth She’arim on the other hand, meant participating in the same cultural changes as other provincial elites, and being, for the most part, like other Roman Syrians. The sarcophagi and patronage practices of Beth She’arim show significantly more parallels with corpus from Tyre than differences.

More than anything else, this analysis of the sarcophagi from the Jewish communities of Beth She’arim and Rome has demonstrated just how much Jewish sarcophagus patrons from both places participated in the common funerary and visual cultures of the late ancient Mediterranean. On the balance, we saw little evidence of expressions of difference that would indicate that Jewish sarcophagus patrons
approached interactions with the Roman world and its visual and material culture as a source of tension and conflict. Indeed, the extent of the commonalities, and the smallness of the differences that we are able to discern, are powerful reminders that Jewish sarcophagus patrons seldom if ever saw themselves in binary terms as ‘Roman’ or ‘Jewish.’ As far as their adoption of the sarcophagus form and the sculptural programs of their sarcophagi indicate, their identities were not ‘identities of difference’ born out of conflict or tension with their cultural environs. It is for these reasons that I believe that the sarcophagi and their sculptural programs that were acquired and commissioned by Jewish patrons in antiquity indicate much more than the obvious fact that Jewish patrons were familiar with Roman visual culture as it existed in their local environs and comfortable with its use as a means of self-representation. The evidence also indicates a significant degree of cultural literacy and agency concerning the adoption and appropriation of this visual culture.

A remaining task for future scholarship is to integrate these findings with other forms of visual culture and artifacts from the catacombs of Beth She’arim and Rome. Sarcophagi are only one kind of visual artifact produced in these places. Moreover, as we have repeatedly emphasized, their use was restricted to wealthy elites in both communities. Other visual artifacts from both necropoleis—including the wall paintings, gold glasses, lead sarcophagi, lamps, loculus seals and inscriptions—all deserve the same socio-cultural treatment given to the sarcophagi above. The cultural resources they engage and the patronage practices that generated them deserve clarification.
Furthermore, as these artifacts may have been used by different members of the community, including less wealthy Jews, it will be interesting to assess whether we can observe similar patterns of cultural interaction and participation in local, provincial and pan-Mediterranean Roman culture.

8.3 Jewish sarcophagus patrons and the question of ‘Jewish art’

By way of concluding, I want to return to the question I left unanswered at the outset of this inquiry, namely, ‘What is Jewish about Jewish art?’ If the sarcophagi and sculptural programs we have just examined are any indication, if we are looking to answer this question by locating something distinct and different about ‘Jewish art’ we must inevitably be disappointed. Time and time again we saw that sarcophagi of Jewish and non-Jewish patrons look more alike than not.

What’s more, throughout we have seen that the visual resources of the Roman world appear in abundance across the corpus of sarcophagi belonging to Jewish patrons, whether directly imported or purchased from a major production centers (Chapters 6, 7), or mediated by provincial culture (Chapter 5). Even many of the sarcophagi that drew on visual resources local to Roman Palestine and the Galilee still indicated the influence of dominant visual forms from the Roman world, only mediated through local culture and sculptural tradition (Chapter 4). Moreover, we encountered very little evidence that Jewish sarcophagus patrons wished to signify different religious ideas and practices on the sculptural programs of their sarcophagi. Indeed, we observed that the few Jewish
ritual symbols we did encounter likely operated as much as signifiers of cultural Jewishness as of Jewish religious practice and observance. This is all the more notable given that the sarcophagus, as a burial vessel, was intimately bound up in funerary practices and religious custom. On the evidence of the sarcophagi of Jewish patrons, at least, ‘Jewish art’ can scarcely be defined as a separate and distinct category of visual culture in the Roman world.

And yet, the sarcophagi we encountered above provided abundant evidence of a local peoples negotiating their place in a broader world. This kind of cultural negotiation is timeless, and moreover was simultaneously undertaken by local peoples across the Roman Mediterranean. This should not necessarily surprise us. Seen in this light, as the product of cultural negotiation by a local people, ‘Jewish art’ seems at least as defensible a category as ‘Palmyran’ or ‘Nabataean art.’ Furthermore, we have seen that Jewish sarcophagus patrons were among the most elite members of their communities. In this light, that they would use the same visual culture as their non-Jewish neighbors, and use it in much the same ways, comes as no surprise. Rather, it correlates well with what we know about elite display and consumption as means of social competition in local communities across the Roman Empire. Let us recall that Gardner has pointed out that Roman cultural resources could be used to ‘tell together’ just as much as they could be used to ‘tell apart.’

In this sense, the foregoing analysis amply has amply illustrated an observation that Baigell made concerning his primary objection to the identification and definition of ‘Jewish art.’ He argued that the use of the term ‘Jewish art’:

“… flies in the face of reason unless one sets up very narrow parameters for discussion about an essentialized past and present. It assumes that Jewish experience is static rather than evolutionary and it omits interesting and obviously contradictory possibilities derived from the experience of individual artists and the way they have self-identified as Jews in different countries over the centuries.”

It would indeed ‘fly in the face of reason’ if we were to narrowly define Jewish art in antiquity on the basis of the sarcophagi and sculptural programs we have just encountered. Even within this limited corpus, which represents only a fraction of the visual culture that ancient Jews engaged with, we have often observed ‘contradictory possibilities’ adopted by Jewish patrons in the orchestration of their sarcophagi (for example, the use or avoidance of portraiture). If our analysis has been at all successful in meeting its goals, it has steered well clear of reconstructing an ‘essentialized past’ and a ‘static’ or monolithic experience of Jewish sarcophagus patrons in Late Antiquity. Instead, we have emphasized the variety of different ways that Jewish sarcophagus patrons in different places employed the myriad visual resources of the Roman world.

It is worth pointing out that, underlying Baigell’s argument against the construct of ‘Jewish art’ as a meaningful category is a limited definition of art based on modern conceptions. In the world of Late Antiquity however, two aspects of art which matter a

\[11\] Baigell 2005, 83.
great deal today mattered little or not at all: 1) the identity of the artist, and 2) the originality of the composition. Regarding the first, though there are exceptions to the rule and ancient artisans occasionally achieved great renown—for example, the Greek sculptors Phidias and Praxiteles and the painter Makron, or the Roman glassmaker Ennion—these exceptions do not substantially alter the picture. While certain Greek artisans were often celebrated by the Roman authors, we know very few names of Roman artisans. In the Roman world, the patrons and the communities who used and viewed a work seem to have been regarded as much more important than the artist who created it. In this way, Roman conceptions of art may have been a step ahead of the cultural turn in art history in their recognition that the creation of meaning lay as much or more with the patrons and viewers of art as with the producers. We saw, furthermore, that the production of a sarcophagus was more often the work of a team of sculptors with discrete talents and responsibilities than of any one artisan.

Concerning the second aspect of art, originality, we noted already the call from an eminent history of Roman art, Hölscher, to “break free of the expectation of ceaseless innovation.” Similarly, Gazda has observed that “Roman notions of originality… in contrast to our own, were firmly rooted in the traditions of their past.” In other words, the creativity of Roman art and artisans was rooted in its emulation of (past) visual

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12 Hölscher 2004.
traditions.\textsuperscript{14} Emulation (and appropriation) bore none of the negative connotations it bears now, and in fact, carried many positive ones that connected the ‘copy’ to a respected past. Moreover, the extensive appropriation and acculturation that emerged from our analysis of elite Jewish sarcophagus patrons was in fact encouraged by the heterogeneity and syncretism of visual resources of the Roman world.\textsuperscript{15} From this perspective, it seems likely that the best sarcophagi were regarded as those that most skillfully rendered known forms and content with the highest faithfulness and technical sophistication. Furthermore, the status and identity of patrons was probably not primarily conveyed through the originality of their sarcophagi, but by the adept adherence to precedent and the ‘mastery’ (by the artisan or patron) of familiar visual resources evident in the sculptural program.

Given these differences between ancient and modern evaluations of art, which are by no means trivial, it may be that the term ‘art’ itself is a red herring which should be avoided. Such differences create a large separation between conceptions of art ancient and modern. Perhaps it is indeed better if we use the term ‘Jewish visual culture,’ as we have throughout, to avoid confusion. Nonetheless, on the grounds of the same differences between ancient and modern notions, we should continue to include under that term not only the visual culture and artifacts that were \textit{created} by ancient Jews, but all artifacts and images that were used by Jewish patrons and communities as well.

\textsuperscript{14} Gazda 2002, 14.
\textsuperscript{15} On heterogeneity and syncretism of the visual resources of the Roman world, see Elsner 2003.
In the context of such conceptions—which placed emphasis not on the creativity of artisans and visual cultural but on their faithfulness emulation of conventions, their skillful execution and effectiveness—the cultural, ethnic or religious ‘identity’ of a visual form or object might be better associated with its patron than with the artist who created it. Indeed, if we take our cues from the treatment of images in antiquity, we might find that ‘Jewish visual culture’ in fact, does exist and could be defined as visual culture belonging to and used by Jewish patrons and individuals.

The sarcophagi we have examined were not intrinsically possessed of some quality of Jewishness. Any Jewishness that can be ascribed to them derives through their use by and association with Jewish individuals. This is the case with all cultural forms, which, as we have argued above, are given meaning only in the context of their uses in human practice. If the mosaics of a synagogue floor—many of the artisans of which were almost certainly non-Jews—are properly considered a form of ‘Jewish’ visual culture in antiquity by virtue of their commission and use by Jewish communities, the sarcophagi belonging to Jewish patrons should be considered a form of Jewish visual culture as well. They too attest to the tastes, culture and ideas of the Jewish individuals who used them. In fact, they offer a lot more information about these things than they do about the artists who created them. They indicate Jewish attitudes and uses of visual culture, and are a vital part of the writing of the socio-cultural history of Jewish communities in the ancient world.
Is there such a thing as Jewish visual culture? And, if so, what is Jewish about it?

Where Baigell answers “No,” and “Nothing” (and not without some justification), my answer here is “Yes” and “Everything.” In so far as the visual culture used by Jews in antiquity reflects on their cultural experiences and their negotiation of the diverse world of Late Antiquity, these answers affirm the value of Jewish visual culture as a source of historical knowledge. They are answers that, grounded in the analysis of the artifacts themselves, celebrate the diversity of Jewish experience in the Roman world and the pluralism of the visual culture adopted by Jewish sarcophagus patrons.

Indeed, these answers need not obscure the different experiences and attitudes towards visual culture that emerge from discovering that different Jewish patrons, from different communities and different places, could have appreciated such different sculptural programs as a large and beautiful menorah carved in the clicheus of a sarcophagus, or narrative scenes from the life of Achilles and the myth of Leda and the Swan. Or that Jewish sarcophagus patrons could elect to mark their Jewishness in obvious ways or not at all. Answering these questions in the affirmative does not imply imposing a monolithic response to visual culture on the part of ancient Jewish individuals or communities: throughout we observed no evidence of overriding principles which governed the use of Roman or Jewish visual and cultural resources. Instead, we considered the different ways that varieties of local histories, the cultural

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16 Baigell 2007, xiii.
distance between home and diaspora, and differences of provincial and urban location could impact the choices made by Jewish sarcophagus patrons. Most importantly, the foregoing analysis illustrates the ways in which these choices are a valuable source of knowledge about the historical experiences of Jewish individuals.
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Biography

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