# Of Coffins, Curses, and Other Plumbeous Matters

## The Museum's Lead Burial Casket from Tyre

*Donald White*

*Many have taken voluminous pains to determine the state of the soul upon disunion; but men have been most phantastical in the singular contrivances of their corporall dissolution; whilst the soberest Nations have rested in two wayes, of simple inhumation and burning.*

Sir Thomas Browne, *Hydriotaphia: Urne-Buriall* (London 1658)

The Classical Greeks and Romans shared a common predilection for conferring on the basic metals spiritual properties as well as intrinsic values. The 7th century BC poet Hesiod expresses in his *Works and Days* a dismal vision of mankind spiraling down from a golden age to one of silver, then brass, and finally iron. From the 5th century BC onwards lead reigned as the preferred medium for written maledictions aimed at hurting or destroying their victims, while gold was used to fashion protective amulets and medical spells intended to cure or heal. In time gold and lead came to be seen as naturally contrasting opposites, the one "noble," the other "base." When Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* has Cupid shoot Apollo to make him fall in love with Daphne, it is with a golden arrow; but when he pierces Daphne it is with an arrow tipped with lead to insure that she will loathe her divine suitor.

*Lead was the material of choice for tablets and nails used for curses and spells, maledictory dolls, amulets . . . cremation ash urns . . . and finally body-size coffins.*

In his classic study of gold sheets found in tombs in the south of Italy, Günther Zuntz brings home the essential distinction between the two metals: "The adoption of gold in particular for objects deposited in graves is unlikely to have been a mere ostentation of riches. The bright and imperishable metal no doubt was chosen to symbolize the perpetuity of life, just as its opposite, the dark and heavy lead, was used to promote destruction and death" (1971: 285–86). It was the alliance of "black lead" (as distinct from "white lead," or tin) with the darker aspects of magic that may have eventually led astrologers to associate the gloomy planet Saturn with decaying old age and death, while the moon and sun were thought to be of silver and gold.

Lead was extracted, usually at low cost, as a by-product of silver mining in many parts of the ancient world including Spain, Italy, Sardinia, England, France and Germany, the Greek mainland and Macedonia, the Levant, and Asia Minor. Forbes (1971) believes the last was the leading producer of lead and silver in antiquity.

The ancient world was cheerfully ignorant of lead's potential health hazards. The metal was set to a

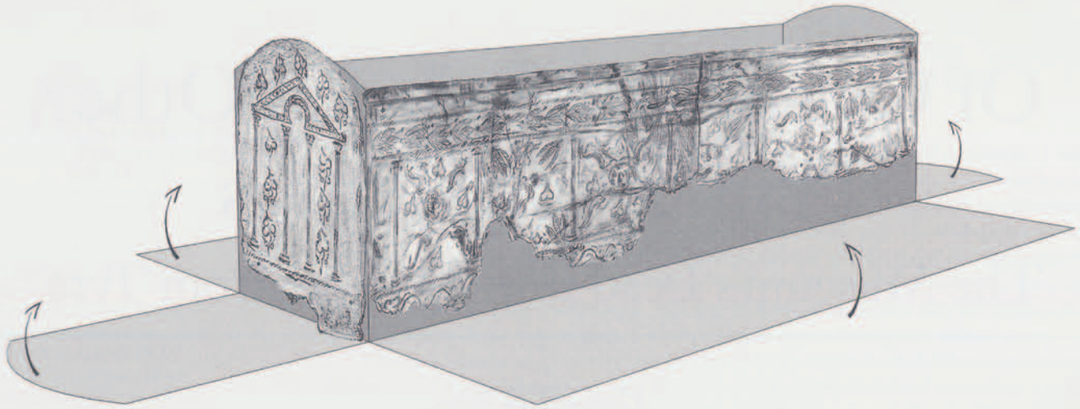

FIG. 1. RECONSTRUCTION OF PROBABLE WAY IN WHICH THE MUSEUM'S COFFIN WAS ASSEMBLED from a single sheet of lead about 5–7.5 cm thick. The short ends would have been folded up to meet the long sides and then hammered around and soldered to create a tightly sealed box.

*UPM no. B10280. Sketches of short side A and long side D were executed by Ruth Sommersohn. Final drawing computer generated by the Museum Applied Science Center for Archaeology*

wide range of practical uses where cheapness and ready availability, combined with properties of great weight and easy malleability, probably played the deciding roles in its selection. These included sheets for writing, water pipes, baptismal tanks in early Christian churches, *ampullae* or flasks, storage receptacles or boxes, sling bullets, weights, anchors, military dogtags or *bullae*, toy quivers, and clamps to mend pottery. Lead was also used as a soldering agent or fixative to "lead in place" anything from masonry clamps to the feet of statues. Such practical considerations may have also governed its choice for certain types of votive figurines and decorative relief plaques that do not appear to be necessarily connected with death and the spirit world.

On the other hand, lead was clearly also used for other purposes where it can be argued that its physical properties and low cost were secondary to its perceived character as gold's opposite in the broadly metaphysical sense. Lead was the material of choice for tablets and nails used for curses and spells, maledictory dolls, amulets, casings for knucklebones (astragali) employed in soothsaying or divination, cremation ash urns and the outer covers for glass cremation urns, and finally body-size coffins. It is apparent that all of these uses were to some degree thought to be cognate to one another through their connections with the spirit world, the grave, and the afterlife.

## THE MUSEUM'S LEAD COFFIN

The University of Pennsylvania Museum's coffin originated in the region of Tyre in southern Phoenicia, in modern-day Lebanon. (See box on The Acquisition of the Lead Coffin.)

The Latin nomenclature for a casket of this kind was more likely to have been *arca* or *loculus* than the more familiar term, *sarcophagus*. It dates to the later 2nd/early 3rd century AD. What remains of it are the two long sides and most of the two short ends of a rectangular lead box 1.685 meters (or about 5½ feet) long and 0.43 meters deep and wide. The floor and what must have been a separately attached, curved or vaulted lid are both missing. Cracks, which may have been partially in-filled by the dealer, run up and down several of the existing fragments.

While in theory the coffin could have been assembled from more than one sheet of lead, it is much more likely that it was made out of a single sheet folded lengthwise to obtain a bottom and two sides (Fig. 1). The occasional nail holes that pierce the edges all appear to be modern.

The box length of 1.685 meters is not evenly divisible by the modular dimension of 0.43 meters, which means it was obviously not considered critical to use a standard measurement unit throughout. With lead



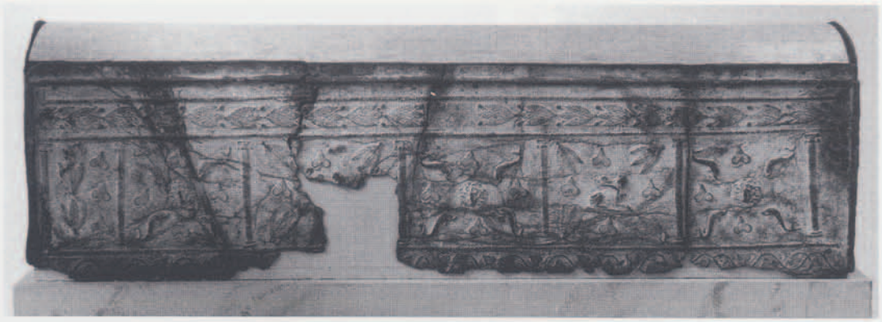

FIG. 2. LONG SIDE C OF THE MUSEUM'S LEAD COFFIN, restored from four separate fragments. (Long side D is made up of three pieces.)

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FIG. 3A. PANEL FROM LONG SIDE C WITH A SMALL MEDUSA HEAD surrounded by four dolphins set at the corners.

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FIG. 3B. PANEL FROM LONG SIDE C WITH SPHINX CROUCHING RIGHT surrounded by triple laurel leaf clusters at corners and ivy leaves placed in between. Medusa heads and crouching sphinxes would have been recognized in antiquity as symbols to turn away evil forces.

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weighing in at 710 pounds per cubic foot, I estimate that the coffin originally used 0.6 cubic feet of lead and weighed around 430 pounds, not including the lid. It was big enough to accommodate what is by today's standards the body of a small adult male or an average-sized female adult.

The slightly vaulted lid overlapped the long sides to rest on a narrow ledge 5 centimeters below the rim. In certain other examples, the edges of the short ends were extended to form tongues or lappets that were keyed into slots in the lid and then hammered over to form a nearly air-tight seal. They were not used here.

Because lead is relatively soft and will bend under stress, a coffin put together in the way just described would have had trouble supporting the weight of a dead body. This meant that a lead coffin was often set in a wooden box which was then interred with it, in the ground or inside a masonry tomb. Whether this was done in the case of this coffin cannot be determined with certainty.

## THE RELIEF DECORATION

The exterior ends and sides were ornamented with raised relief decorations. Judging from examples found elsewhere, the lost lid would also have been decorated, but the bottom left plain.

Scholars are split over how the reliefs were cast. J. Toynbee (1964) argues for a sand mold process, while L.Y. Rahmani (1992) believes that the molds were made from unfired clay left in a leather-hard state. In either case the molds would not have survived the single initial

FIG. 4. DETAIL OF THE ZONE ON THE LONG SIDE C ABOVE THE PANELS DELINEATED BY HORIZONTAL TWISTED ROPE MOLDINGS.
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FIG. 5. SHORT END A WITH FOUR LINES OF ROPE THAT CROSS TO FORM AN EIGHT-SPOKED "STAR" terminating in and interspersed with ivy leaves. The maximum height of the two short ends is 0.51 m, of which the final 0.08 m forms the arc supporting the vaulted lid. The rope motifs may have served to symbolically "tie up" the coffin—keeping something in or out.
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casting, which is why no two coffins are exactly the same. The process called for pressing stamps made of wood or some other perishable material (none seem to have survived) into the soft surface of the sand or clay to make the mold. Molten lead was then poured into the resulting impression to create the decorated sheet with its raised reliefs. The stamp designs tended to be highly repetitive, and scholars hypothesize the use of circulating pattern books, although none survive. The entire process was relatively simple to carry out, involved inexpensive materials (the wooden stamps being reusable), and required little or no artistic skill other than by the carvers of the stamps.

The decorations applied to the ends and long sides, while not distinguished for their originality and artistic excellence, have their own particular interest. Each of the decorative elements carried what were for most ancient observers universally recognizable, if not always explicit, symbolic meanings. The two long sides, C and D, are decorated with a series of six similar but not identical panels separated by columns topped with a variant of palm capitals, the lower third of whose shafts were left unfluted (Fig. 2). Alternating panels are decorated with either a small Medusa head surrounded by four dolphins in the corners and ivy leaves in between (Fig. 3a) or sphinxes crouching right, enclosed by triple laurel leaf clusters and ivy leaves (Fig. 3b). Zones above and below the panels are marked off by parallel horizontal cable or rope moldings laid down by a rolling (roulette) stamp. The top zone is filled with triple laurel leaf clusters and berries (Fig. 4), while the bottom one is filled with a rouletted leaf and vine design. The widths of each panel vary in a way that makes it clear that the dividing columns were applied by a separate stamp. This enabled the artisans to narrow or widen the panels at will and thus, one can only suppose, to adapt the coffin to the dimensions of the deceased.

Short end A (Fig. 5) consists of four intersecting lines of twisted rope interspersed with ivy leaves. While the design superficially suggests an eight-spoked star, the spoke ends terminate in ivy leaves which rules out an astral significance. Short end B (Fig. 6) repre-



FIG. 6. SHORT END B WITH THE FACADE OF A FOUR-COLUMNED CORINTHIAN TEMPLE; the center of the pediment floor is broken into an arch.
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FIG. 7. TEMPLE OF HADRIAN, EPHESUS, TURKEY; 2nd century AD.
*From Lyttelton 1974: fig. 179. Photo reproduced courtesy, British School at Rome*

## The Acquisition of the Lead Coffin

The lead coffin was acquired by one of the more colorful characters in the early days of the University of Pennsylvania Museum, namely Hermann V. Hilprecht, a professor of Assyriology. Since Hilprecht seems to have routinely combined purchasing antiquities for the Museum with his travels for its expedition to Nippur on the Babylonian plain, it might be expected that he had obtained the coffin somewhere in the Middle East. It turns out instead that he bought it on February 16, 1895, in, of all places, Newark, New Jersey, along with the lid and single long side of a second Tyrian lead coffin. The dealer was a Syrian-born Armenian named Daniel Noorian, who served as Hilprecht's interpreter while he worked at Nippur. The wooden frame containing the coffin fragments in storage has a flaking dealer's label that says that the coffin comes from Es-Sur ("the rock"), the modern name for ancient Tyre, the great Phoenician city located on the coast of southern Lebanon. Since scholars did not work out the existence of a school of lead coffin manufacture at Tyre until the 1930s, it seems likely that Noorian knew firsthand that both coffins came from Tyre instead of basing his attribution on learned speculation.

By the Roman period Tyre's prosperous, mixed Greek-Jewish-Levantine population needed a hippodrome big enough to seat 60,000. Extensive cemeteries flanked the main road into the city; a number of the tomb complexes achieved monumental size, with architecturalized fronts, inner courts, and multiple burial chambers. All of the coffins published since the 1980s are stone, not lead. Their contents, which can be rich in gold, on occasion include lead curse tablets.

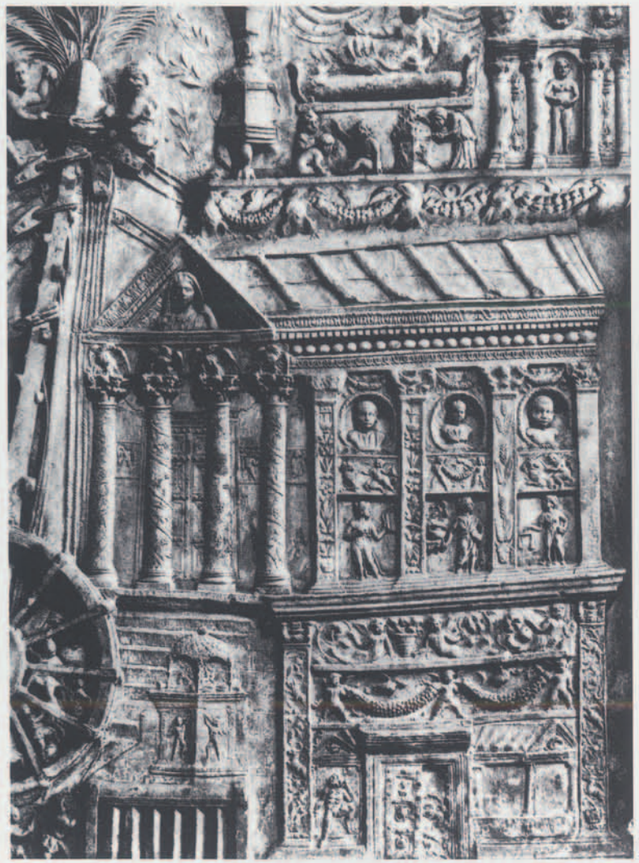

FIG. 8. TEMPLE-TOMB ON LATER 1ST CENTURY AD TOMB OF THE HATERII RELIEF, Lateran Museum, Rome. The pediment on the coffin's short end B may have been intended to recall a tomb such as this one.

*From Toynbee 1971: pl. 17. Photo reproduced courtesy, Alinari/Art Resource, NY*

sents the facade of a tetrastyle (four-columned) Corinthian temple. The lower thirds of the column shafts are again unfluted. The cornices of the pediment are filled with olive leaves, while the center of the floor of the pediment breaks into an arch following the fashion associated with pediments found on 2nd and 3rd century AD buildings, particularly in Asia Minor (Fig. 7), Syria, and Palestine.

It is difficult to be certain, but the two short end compositions could have been applied from two single wooden stamps. If, on the other hand, the eight-spoked "star" motif was created by a roulette stamp, the individual ivy leaves must have been added by means of a separate stamp. Lids decorated with a vine trellis framed by two running laurel wreath motifs normally went with lead coffins of this type (Fig. 9).

Scholars largely agree that Medusa heads and crouching sphinxes function in their setting here as apotropaic signs (from Gk. *apotropé* meaning "turning away") or "averters of evil." Guardian sphinxes were placed on top of Greek grave stelae centuries earlier for much the same reason. Because of their powers to protect and appease, laurel wreaths, leaves, berries, and branches are a common feature of Roman funerary altars and appear as garlands over tomb entrances. Olive leaves carry a funerary association because the dead are occasionally shown bedded on a couch of olive, bay, or vine leaves. Grape leaves, ivy leaves, and vines, as well as dolphins, are all loosely tied to the worship of Dionysus, as indeed are all of the vegetal motifs just listed. The cult of Dionysus was centered in later antiquity on the pleasures of a fruitful Afterlife.

The single columns used to separate the long sides into six panels may be designed to remind the viewer of the architecturalized fronts of tombs, but this is hardly certain. The motif of the tetrastyle Corinthian facade with its pediment breaking into an arch has been much studied. It appears in pagan, Jewish, and eventually Christian contexts. Where attached to Jewish ossuaries, for example, it has been interpreted as representing



FIG. 9. CURVED LID FROM A ROMAN IMPERIAL LEAD COFFIN FOUND IN ISRAEL, with vine trellis decoration similar to what may have been used on the Museum's coffin.

*From Avi-Yonah 1935: pl. 57, 7,iv. L. ca. 1.66 m*

FIG. 10. ROMAN IMPERIAL COFFIN FROM SALAH AL-DIN ROAD, JERUSALEM, with its lid and two long sides bound by crisscrossing rope designs.

*No. IAA 75-642; from Rahmani 1992: fig. 1. L. ca. 1.6 m*

FIG. 11. COFFIN LID WITH CROSSING STRAPS from a rock-cut tomb near Syrian Orphanage, Jerusalem; Roman Imperial date.

*From Avi-Yonah 1935: pl. 59, 13,i. L. ca. 1.63 m*

Torah shrines in synagogues. Since the remaining iconography of our coffin is clearly neither Christian nor Jewish, it may represent here the idealized facade of an architecturalized pagan tomb or *heroon* honoring the dead as a hero (Fig. 8).

Unlike the other decorative motifs, that of the cable or rope has not received much attention, although it may hold an important key to unraveling the meaning of the coffin. Despite the strikingly different ways the motif is deployed on the short and long sides, I would argue that in both contexts the rope symbolizes the act of binding or tying up the coffin. In other words, what looks like a rope should be read as a rope even when—as on end A—it has been arranged like an eight-spoked star. This interpretation is strengthened by the more explicit use on other examples (mostly found in the Levant but some as far afield as Britain) of ropes that crisscross the lid and occasionally the two long sides to form rhomboidal patterns (Fig. 10). These, for Rahmani (1987:136), create the impression, "perhaps intentional—of a box securely tied with cord." Other coffins use molded, raised straps instead of ropes to achieve much the same effect (Fig. 11).

## THE RESTRAINT OF SPIRITS

What was the point of tying up a coffin? Surely nothing so banal as keeping the body from tumbling out during transportation to the grave site! We are in any case dealing here with symbolic bonds, not actual ropes or straps. For all of that, when considered along with the container's tightly sealed joints and locked-down lid, the motif of a rope (see box on Ropes) must symbolize a wish to prevent *something* from either entering or escaping the coffin.

The inscribed curse tablets already mentioned as one of the cognate uses to which lead was put may provide a clue for what is going on. According to the latest tally reported in 1992 by J.G. Gager, over 1,500 *tabellae* have been found in a variety of contexts and

FIG. 12. LEAD CURSE TABLET OF ROMAN IMPERIAL DATE found on Via Appia, Rome; 9 by 10 cm. The lower scene depicts, left to right, the curse's dedicator, bound victim, and bird-headed *daimon*.

*From* Curse Tablets and Binding Spells *by J.G. Gager, fig. 10. © 1992. Used by permission of Oxford University Press, Inc.*

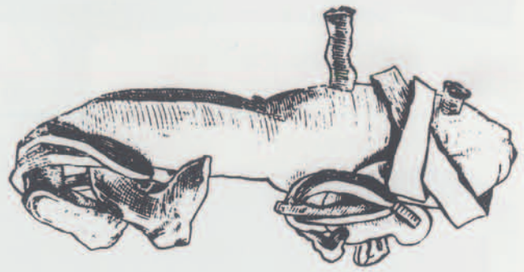

FIG. 13. LEAD CURSE FIGURINE FROM PRE-CHRISTIAN GRAVE IN ATTICA, GREECE. The figure, with bound hands and feet, has lost its head and is pierced with two iron nails.

*From* Curse Tablets and Binding Spells *by J.G. Gager, fig. 2. © 1992. Used by permission of Oxford University Press, Inc. L. ca. 6.75 cm*

places, including the cemeteries at Tyre. They date from as early as the 5th and 4th centuries BC down into later antiquity, and many were buried in graves. A high percentage were made of lead or lead alloys.

The meaning of their names (in Greek, *katadesmoi*, "bound up," "tied down," and in Latin, *defixiones*, "fastened" or "nailed down") suggests how these tablets were thought to function: by binding or restraining the objects of the curses inscribed on them through magical means. Folded over and in some cases nailed together, their opening preambles frequently urge the infernal gods "to restrain" or "to bind" the targets of their maledictions. Gager (1992) has a particularly relevant example from Rome (Fig. 12). Written on both sides, it pictures on the bottom of one side a human figure (apparently the curse's instigator), joined by a bird-like demon, roping up a certain Artemios. Artemios, who was apparently a rival charioteer, is portrayed without his head or feet. Part of the curse reads:

> (I appeal) to you, Phrygian goddess and Nymph goddess EIDONEA in this place *that you may restrain Artemios* . . . and make him headless, footless and powerless with the horses of the Blue colors [i.e., a rival racing club]. (Gager 1992:72; emphasis added)

Another way of attaching a curse to its victim was to drop into a grave a doll or figurine fashioned sometimes of mud or wax but more often of lead. These effigies, which often survive with the names of their victims scratched on their surfaces, either have their hands trussed up their backs or are shown mutilated. One such lead figure, found minus its head in an Attic grave (Fig. 13), was pierced with iron nails and then had its hands and feet bound with lead straps for good measure.

The frequency with which the lead tablets and dolls end up in graves stems from their donor's need to place the curses in as close physical contact with the



## Ropes: Candles or Magical Restraints?

Given their apparent phonetic similarity, how does the Latin word for "rope" (*funis*) relate to "corpse" or "burial" (*funus*)? The answer is that it probably doesn't, even though some late (4th to 6th century AD) commentators claim that the two words were related because ropes coated with wax (i.e., candles) were burned before corpses. A more useful, albeit non-linguistic connection is to be found in the early practice of magically binding or shackling images of destructive gods, demons, and ghosts that turns up in Etruria, Roman Italy, Greece, Egypt, and elsewhere in the Middle East during times of danger or crisis, viz., the lead curse effigy bound, mutilated, pierced, and then buried in an Athenian grave (Fig. 13). The ritual of binding was understood by its practitioners to be a form of defensive magic, was even extended to full-scale statues, and normally concluded with their burial in the earth. In other words, when applied in the proper way, ropes could restrain the power of a hostile god inhabiting a statue. (For more on the subject of spiritually empowered statues, see White 1992.)

avenging gods of the Underworld as possible. Since the persons being cursed are almost always living, it follows that the tablets and figurines are not aimed at the ghosts of the dead. So how then do they relate to persons already dead?

### LATER ANTIQUE BELIEFS IN THE AFTERLIFE

Rather than subscribing to the older Greek poetical vision of a neatly compartmentalized Underworld made up of Hades, the Elysian Fields, and "limbo," pre-Imperial Roman eschatological belief seems to have pictured the collective spirits of the dead—the *Manes*—as simply residing underground or near their burial place where they could be placated with food and drink. By the early 3rd century BC this gave rise in Italy to a complicated schedule of offerings and funeral meals consumed at the grave site by the survivors for the benefit of the departed. (The souls of the dead were presumably sufficiently sentient to enjoy the ceremonies taking place above ground in their honor.) This could even lead to "force-feeding" the dead through tubes run into the graves, and laying out attractive garden enclosures next to the tombs. According to such beliefs the grave was in some sense the place in which the dead continued to reside. This is why tombs often recall either externally or internally the houses of the living (Fig. 14).

*the motif of a rope . . . must symbolize a wish to prevent* something *from either entering or escaping the coffin.*

The spirit universe of the Mediterranean world under Roman domination swarmed with a host of supernatural beings. This was nowhere more evident than along the coastal Levant, where Greek, Oriental, Egyptian, Jewish, and, in time, Christian beliefs all converged. In addition to the traditional gods this company of apparitions included a broad array of demons, incubi, succubi (Fig. 15) and other terrifying female bogies; angels, cherubim and seraphim; the seven astrologically charged planets and various magically puissant stars; and, of special relevance to the present discussion, the *Lares* or ghosts of the dead. According to popular belief, the ghosts of persons with lives cut short by accident or by acts of violence hovered near their buried bodies to seek retribution from the living. Some of the angry dead were classified as *lemures*, who were, according to Toynbee (1971), kinless and hungry ghosts, others as *larvae*, dangerously mischievous spirits that left the grave site to prowl round the house. Beyond this, any burial containing a freshly interred body, whose intact flesh was believed to block the soul from flying free to its eternal destination, was the potential haunt of ghosts and other malignant spirits. (The word *sarcophagus*, incidentally, derives from a type of limestone quar-

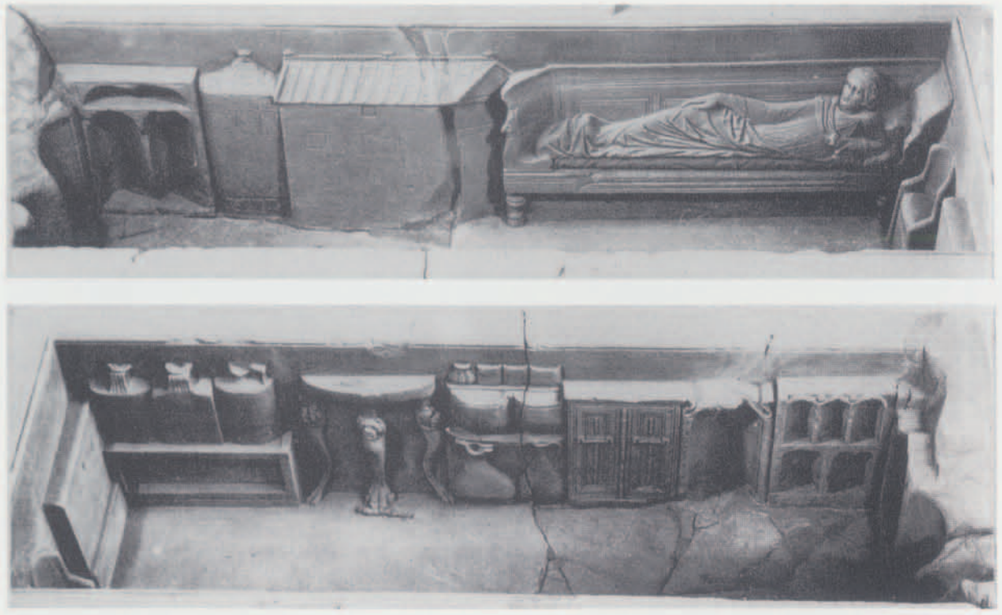

FIG. 14A, B. TWO VIEWS OF A ROMAN IMPERIAL STONE SARCOPHAGUS of a wealthy lady from Simpelveld, replicating the interior of the deceased's house. (Object now in Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden, Netherlands.)

*From Toynbee 1971: figs. 91–92. Reproduced courtesy, Rijksmuseum van Oudheden*

FIG. 15. GRECO-ROMAN MARBLE RELIEF DEPICTING A WINGED SUCCUBUS or female bogy having sex with a sleeping man; Hellenistic. Protection from such evil spirits was considered essential in antiquity.

*From Comstock and Vermeule 1976: fig. 115. Gift of Edward Perry Warren; photo reproduced courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. H. 0.40 m*



ried near Assos in Asia Minor that was supposed to consume the flesh off bones more rapidly than other materials and thus possessed the added cachet of reducing the time the soul had to hover in limbo near its tomb.)

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LEAD COFFINS

By the time of the later Roman Empire, coffins for inhumation burials could be made of wood or clay, as well as various types of stone and lead. Coffins of the first two materials were cheap to manufacture and were available to persons of no great means. The truly destitute were routinely dumped in the ground without a receptacle of any description or with at best a hastily improvised cover of discarded roof tiles.

In terms of the costs of quarrying, transportation, and, perhaps most of all, final artistic finish, the standard Roman stone sarcophagus, sculpted in deep relief on either three or four of its sides as well as on its lid, was a definite cut above a conventional lead *arca*. The richly carved exterior scenes on stone sarcophagi were intended to remain visible to the living, a fact that seems to be borne out by the way in which they are often deployed inside of tombs (Fig. 16).

Tombs of the Roman Imperial age have been described as "retrospective" on their exteriors, while "prospective" on their interiors. Thus, the past achievements of their occupants were usually recorded on the tomb facades, while the world to come was anticipated in scenes on the tomb interiors and in the iconography and contents of the individual coffins (Fig. 14). But does this pat formula apply to lead coffins? Unlike their stone equivalents, lead coffins were seldom inscribed, and their occupants nearly always remain anonymous; even references to the decedent's sex are missing, apart from what the grave gifts can tell us. Also, the repetitive cast reliefs on lead coffins, themselves often boxed in outer wooden containers before being shoved into long, nar-

FIG. 16. THREE FREE-STANDING STONE SARCOPHAGI OF ROMAN IMPERIAL DATE set in the central part of the first enclosure of Complex V, Necropolis at Tyre. Unlike such richly ornamented coffins, lead burial caskets would not have continued to be seen by the living.

*From M. Chéhab, "Fouilles de Tyr: La Necropole," Bulletin du Musée de Beyrouth 34 (1984), pl. 18. Photo reproduced courtesy, O. Chéhab*

row compartments cut in the bedrock, were clearly never intended to be seen by the living once burial had been carried out. Instead, it seems virtually certain that their symbolic messages were directed toward the spirit world alone.

It is here where we return full circle to lead. If it is correct to view the cast symbols on the coffin exteriors as forms of magical incantations to insure, on the one hand, a happy existence after death and, on the other, to fend off evil spirits hovering around the grave, what part is played by the coffin's material? We have seen how lead, the dark, plumbic element, had been used as the chosen medium for delivering curses to the powers of the Underworld, as well as to restrain or bind the targets of their incantations long before its use for coffins. Centuries later in medieval times, according to the *Encyclopedia of Magic and Superstition* (p. 211), "religious relics were often encased in lead caskets to keep their sacred force within an effective boundary and prevent it from dissipating into the air" (presumably echoing the same impulse that led the Greeks to wrap their fortune-telling astragals in lead). In the case of the coffins, the metal's menacing link with the powers of the Underworld seems to be prophylactic as well as preventative, since the tightly sealed coffins were often themselves tied with symbolic ropes or straps which worked both to keep out, as well as to hold in, malignant spirits.

"Prophylactic" implies that the objective behind the use of lead was to shield or protect the dead from the powers of evil before their admission to a blessed Afterlife (a wish that also led to the practice of encasing the ashes of the dead in lead urns). The use of lead was also to *prevent* the ghosts of the deceased from escaping their coffins to haunt the living.

Either way, the Museum's coffin permits the alert observer to penetrate into the murky substratum of popular religion, superstition, and magic of later antiquity.

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