

**THE SELF-CONSCIOUS KINGS: AGENCY AND THE REPRESENTATION OF  
POWER ON THE FIGURAL RELIEF SARCOPHAGI FROM THE AYA'A  
NECROPOLIS, SIDON  
KIERNAN ACQUISTO**

Boston University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 2024

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Architecture; Archaeology

**ABSTRACT**

In this dissertation, I focus on four architectonic sarcophagi with Greek-style figural reliefs found in the Aya'a or Royal Necropolis of the Phoenician city of Sidon. These objects are collectively referred to in scholarly literature as "the Sidonian relief sarcophagi" and include the Satrap Sarcophagus (ca. 390 BCE), the Lycian Sarcophagus (ca. 380-370 BCE), the Mourning Women Sarcophagus (ca. 360-350 BCE), and the Alexander Sarcophagus (ca. 310 BCE). The sarcophagi are counted among the most celebrated examples of classical sculpture due to their preservation and technical virtuosity. Scholars have, however, infrequently discussed them in the context of Near Eastern art and Phoenician mortuary practice in the Persian period (539-332 BCE). In neglecting to do this, scholars have failed to adequately consider why the sarcophagi were made in the first place, stripping the objects of their fundamental Phoenicianess.

The central premise of this project is that the Sidonian relief sarcophagi are the product of a series of strategic artistic choices made by their patrons, generally assumed to be Sidonian kings, and that these choices are mediated by the social worlds in which these kings operated. While all of the four sarcophagi differ in their particulars, they are deliberately

linked by their shared stylistic and iconographic features, indicating conscious affinity across the reigns of several kings in a period that spans nearly a century.

The first chapter is an account of the excavation of the relief sarcophagi and discussion of the ways in which their display and early interpretation have had a lasting impact on our understanding of these objects. The second chapter is a detailed analysis of the archaeological context of the sarcophagi, highlighting their use in Phoenician mortuary ritual. In the third chapter, I situate the relief sarcophagi within the broader history of sarcophagus use in Sidon and explore the narrative and rhetorical potential of figural relief. The fourth chapter is a discussion of the ways in which the visual rhetoric of the relief sarcophagi signals participation in communities of rulers in the western Achaemenid Empire, while the fifth chapter situates the relief sarcophagi in the Sidonian religio-political context. The text closes on a discussion of the Alexander Sarcophagus as evidence for continuity rather than rupture in early Hellenistic Sidon.

By establishing the sarcophagi within their broader context in the ways mentioned above, I will provide a deeper, more accurate understanding of the visual rhetoric of these important objects. I argue that the imagery on the relief sarcophagi is intended to reinforce a shared identity: that of a male ruler participating in the interconnected world of the Persian period. However, the form and context of the sarcophagi also honors local tradition and conceptions of kingship. In this project I therefore consider the Sidonian relief sarcophagi as multivalent political objects, focusing on the ways in which the Sidonian kings used the form, style, and iconography of their sarcophagi to articulate their power in both the imperial and Phoenician milieux.