

# New fragment of an Amazon sarcophagus from Laconia<sup>1</sup>

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In contrast to the relief grave stelai of the Roman imperial period in Laconia, which have been studied extensively over the past years, the grand and impressive sarcophagi with reliefs showing mythological representations have not been studied systematically.<sup>2</sup> Few monuments of this category have been fully published so far, despite the fact that the sarcophagi from Laconia constitute a large group of sculptures of this period.<sup>3</sup> The fragment exhibited in the Sparta Museum (SM 322–323), showing the Homeric scene of Achilles handing over the dead body of Hector to Priam, is widely known.<sup>4</sup> New prospects for research have been opened up by discoveries over recent years. The piece presented here constitutes such a case (FIGS. 29.1–4). It was found by chance while a storeroom of a private house in Molaoi was being cleaned in 2002 and was handed over by the owner to the Sparta Museum, where it was inventoried as SM 15044.<sup>5</sup>

## DESCRIPTION AND ICONOGRAPHY

A small part of the scene from the long side of the larnax (chest) of a sarcophagus survives. The fragment has a maximum height 0.45 m, width 0.50 m and depth 0.08 m. The moulding, maximum height 0.04 m, above the depiction is in the form of an ovolo (astragalus); this formed the transition from the relief surface to the cornice of the chest. The back side, which remains intact, is worked with a chisel (FIG. 29.2). The marble is white, fine-grained, with a brownish-red patina, and therefore strongly resembles Pentelic marble.<sup>6</sup> The relief depiction is extensively cracked and chipped but, despite its wear and tear, the quality of its work is clearly evident.

What survives is the part of the body above the hip joints of a naked helmeted warrior (maximum height 0.41 m) who is moving violently to his left (FIG. 29.1). The figure holds, in his raised and bent right hand, a spear of which only the lower part survives. The left arm of the figure, which survives up to the elbow, is lowered and stretched forward. On the right shoulder of the body, traces can be seen of the *telamon*, which held the warrior's sword, now lost. All the difficulties in understanding this composition come from the poor preservation of our piece, but these can be overcome

if we accept that the warrior who leans vigorously to his left originally grabbed a kneeling opponent by the hair. It comes, that is, from a group-composition known as the 'hair-pulling' motif, which can be found from the Geometric period onwards in many variations in scenes in ceramics, sculptures in the round and also architectural and decorative reliefs.<sup>7</sup> The scene taken from the Amazonomachy on the outer surface of the shield of Athena Parthenos, with the Greek warrior grasping his wounded opponent by the hair, ready to strike her the death blow, is one of the most common

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- 2 On the imperial relief grave stelai from Laconia see Papaefthimiou 1992, 1993.
- 3 Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 361–2; 1993b.
- 4 Rogge 1995, 140, no. 30, table 16.1, 69.3, with earlier bibliography.
- 5 In the register of delivery, it is stated that the ancient piece presented to the Sparta Museum on 7 August 2002 by Charilaos Evagelou Kyriakakos was found 'during the cleaning and tidying operations of a storeroom in the old house of his mother-in-law, Eleni Panagiotou Roumani (ex-owner Papamichalopoulou) in Molaoi'. For the archaeological sites and surveys in the area of Molaoi, see the catalogue in Cavanagh *et al.* 1996, 308. Recently, remains of a free-standing built grave of the Roman period of the *columbarium* type have been located in the area of Loutro near the modern cemetery of Molaoi (Themos and Zavvou 1998, 182).
- 6 The marble used for the Laconian sarcophagi has not been analysed systematically. Only the fragment of the Amazonomachia sarcophagus from Sklavochori, in the British Museum, has been analysed; isotopic analysis showed that the marble is Prokonnesian (from the island of Prokonnesos/Marmaras) (Walker 1990, 41–2, no. 47, table 19). During the imperial period, the mining and trading of local, coloured Laconian marbles was greatly developed (Moschou *et al.* 1998, 267–88).
- 7 Moret 1975, 193ff.



Fig. 29.1. Sarcophagus SM 15044.



Fig. 29.2. The back side of the sarcophagus SM 15044.



Fig. 29.3. Detail of FIG. 29.1.

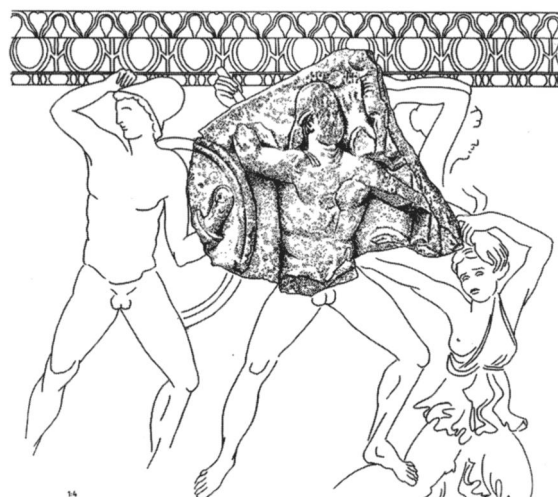


Fig. 29.4. Drawn reconstruction of sarcophagus SM 15044.

examples found in later years.<sup>8</sup> The theme of this composition also appears on small-sized copies of the Pheidian pattern, for example on the Strangford shield<sup>9</sup> and on the relief decorative tablets from the harbour of Piraeus that date back to the early years of the Antonines.<sup>10</sup> The Greek grasping his defeated opponent by the hair is a commonly repeated iconographic motif on the Amazonomachy sarcophagi of the imperial period.<sup>11</sup>

The closest iconographic parallel to the depiction on our piece is the central composition of the main side of a monumental Amazonomachy sarcophagus in the Museum of Thessalonica (no. 283), which dates to AD 220–30 (FIGS. 29.5–6).<sup>12</sup> In the middle of a crowd of fighting figures, both on foot and on horseback, the rival couple of a Greek and an Amazon identifiable as Achilles and Penthesilea holds the most prominent place. The hero is depicted with his legs apart, looking directly in front, ready to kill the

kneeling Amazon while grasping her by the hair. She appears to be folding her left hand round his forearm while repelling him with her right hand which is stretched across his chest. The piece in the Museum of Thessalonica helps us to understand that the traces of a left hand holding a shield at one end of our fragment come from a figure similar to the defending Greek warrior holding a shield and a sword and fighting on foot alongside Achilles. The similarities

8 Stefanidou-Tiveriou 1979, 113–15; Harrison 1981, 281ff., pls. 46–54; Strocka 1984, I, 188ff., II, notes 409–10, pl. 13; Meyer 1987, 295ff., pls. 29–34.

9 London, British Museum 302; Devambe and Kauffmann-Samaras 1981, 603, no. 246f\*; Nick 2002, fn. 1175.

10 Stefanidou-Tiveriou 1979, 64ff.

11 Grassinger 1999, 139 (Trettergruppe B1), 140, fig. 1, B1.

12 Stefanidou-Tiveriou 1997; Kintrop 1998, 209–10, pl. 93.4.



*Fig. 29.5. Sarcophagus, Thessalonica Museum no. 283.*

*Fig. 29.6 (below). Detail of FIG. 29.5.*



between these two depictions make it imperative that we dissociate the vestiges of the garment that can be seen in the bottom left corner of the Laconian piece from the missing Amazon and attribute them to another fighting figure on a second level.

Let us look now at the differences between these two compositions. The warrior in the Museum of Sparta differs in that he does not look directly in front of him but turns slightly and leans more to his left, in contrast to the posture of Achilles, which is more decorative. Consequently, the movement of his legs should be depicted differently even in a reverse of Achilles' pose. We can infer, therefore, that our protagonist had his legs firmly on the ground with his right leg outstretched

and his left leg slightly bent forward.<sup>13</sup> Finally, we must imagine the movement of the right hand of the Amazon differently, since there seem to be no traces of her palm on the man's torso: the woman is either trying to push the Greek warrior away with her hand, not yet having managed to touch him,<sup>14</sup> or she is wrapping her hands round the wrist of her opponent.<sup>15</sup>

For a full restoration of the original composition (FIG. 29.4), many problems are created by the traces in the

<sup>13</sup> Similar to Grassinger 1999, 251–2, no. 130, pl. 113:2.

<sup>14</sup> Similar to Baratte and Metzger 1985, 259 with figure.

<sup>15</sup> Like Grassinger 1999, pl. 99.2, 115.2, fig. in text 19.

top left corner of our fragment (FIG. 29.3). A double axe is shown together with part of its handle. We can also discern traces of the fingers of the right hand and the outline of the tip of the left hand belonging to the figure which held the weapon. The parallel piece in Thessalonica cannot help us to interpret this part of the depiction because iconographically different figures appear on it at a lower level. One has to imagine a figure with a gesture of the hands that would fit neatly on to the upper part of the larnax/chest and under the ovolo/astragalus moulding. The only satisfactory solution seems to lie in the motif of an attacking figure holding in her hands, which are raised and bent behind her head, an axe ready to strike a blow at her opponent. An Amazon attacking on foot and holding an axe behind her head with one or both hands is a well-known motif in the repertoire of the Amazonomachy sarcophagi.<sup>16</sup> It is also hard to imagine the Amazon on horseback, since Amazons on horses held — as was only natural — the reins of the horse with one hand.<sup>17</sup> However, the vestiges of the garment that we mentioned above belong to the same Amazon who is attacking to the left and has turned her back on the central couple.

Sarcophagi with Amazonomachy depictions were popular in Rome from the middle of the second century AD and continued to be produced until the end of the third century.<sup>18</sup> In fact, at the turn of the second to third century AD the main side of these monuments forms the central core, with the motif of a Greek pulling his defeated Amazon by the hair occupying the most prominent position at the centre of the depiction. On the Mazzara sarcophagus the group of these two figures is surrounded by Amazons attacking on horses with their backs turned on the central scene.<sup>19</sup>

On the Attic sarcophagi, the most luxurious items of the kind widely distributed in the eastern Mediterranean during the second and third centuries AD, Amazonomachy became a particularly popular theme only after the later part of the second century.<sup>20</sup> This follows if we accept that the Louvre sarcophagus (Ma 2119), reliably dated to AD 180 on the basis of the portraits on its cover, constitutes the earliest depiction of this theme.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, on one side of the Louvre monument there is the oldest known depiction of the pair also found on our piece.<sup>22</sup> On the sarcophagus from Ephesos, which is slightly later, the pair of our piece is portrayed on a secondary side.<sup>23</sup> On the sarcophagus at Thessalonica of AD 220–30, mentioned above, the motif of Greek and Amazon is repeated not only on the main side but also on the left side.<sup>24</sup> However, the pair on the main side is of primary importance since they are at the centre of the depiction, a fact that allows us to recognise Achilles and Penthesilea as the two dominating figures of the Trojan Amazonomachy. There is no parallel to this central group on the Thessalonica sarcophagus on the Attic monuments of this type. In the next example, on the London sarcophagus of AD 230–50, this iconographic motif

appears again but only on a secondary side,<sup>25</sup> while on one of the latest Attic sarcophagi in Jerusalem the couple is depicted again on the main side but not in a central position.<sup>26</sup>

## DATE

The piece in the Sparta Museum does not itself offer any external clues to assist in its dating. Furthermore, its poor condition makes it difficult for us to compare the stylistic features of the depiction with the artistic style of other, better dated pieces of this type. Only the unique iconographic parallel of the monumental sarcophagus at Thessalonica, which dates to 220–30, can offer some help. It is highly likely that the Laconian piece predates this parallel, because the depiction in the Macedonian piece is more crowded.<sup>27</sup> The presence of the astragalus above the depiction is another indication that enables us to date the piece to the early third century, although this element also appears sporadically in the later Attic sarcophagi.<sup>28</sup>

## ATTRIBUTION TO A WORKSHOP

The sarcophagus SM 15044 can be added to 11 known Laconian examples of this kind with Amazonomachy scenes.<sup>29</sup> The number clearly shows the preference of

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- 16 Grassinger 1999, pl. 99.2, 115.2, fig. in text 19.  
 17 E.g. Baratte and Metzger 1985, 261–2, no. 167.  
 18 Grassinger 1999, 136ff., nos. 94–137.  
 19 Grassinger 1999, 246, no. 116, pl. 110:1.  
 20 Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 390–2.  
 21 For the appearance of the Attic Amazon sarcophagi see Koch 1993a, 415ff.; Kintrup 1998. For the Louvre sarcophagus see: Baratte and Metzger 1985, 256–61, no. 166.  
 22 Baratte and Metzger 1985, 259 with figure.  
 23 Selçuk Museum 260: Rudolph 1989, 33ff., 35, pl. 18, fig. 25; Kintrup 1998, 207–8, pl. 93.6.  
 24 Stefanidou-Tiveriou 1997, fig. 337.  
 25 Walker 1990, 40–1, no. 45, pl. 18; Kintrup 1998, 210–11, pl. 94:1.  
 26 Kintrup 1998, 211–12, pl. 94.2 (AD 240–50).  
 27 See also Kintrup 1998, 209–10.  
 28 Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 370.  
 29 These are: 1. Athens, National Archaeological Museum 2716: Kallipolitis 1958, no. 21; Giuliano 1962, 35, no. 101; Devambez and Kauffmann-Samaras 1981, 619, no. 502; Datsouli-Stavridis 1984, 185, pl. 26α. 2. London, British Museum GR 1839.8-6.5: Robert 1890, 135, no. 113, pl. 47; Devambez and Kauffmann-Samaras 1981, 617, no. 467; Walker 1990, 41–2, no. 47 pl. 19. 3. SM 35: Robert 1890, 135, no. 114, pl. 47; Tod and Wace 1906, 139; Kallipolitis 1958, no. 69; Devambez and Kauffmann-Samaras 1981, 620, no. 518. 4. SM 67+279: Robert 1890, 136, no. 118, pl. 47; Tod and Wace 1906, 144, 159; Kallipolitis 1958, no. 22; Giuliano 1962, 35, no. 94. 5. SM 499: Robert 1890, 138, no. 123, pl. 47; Tod and Wace 1906, 185; Kallipolitis 1958, no. 186; Giuliano 1962, 35, no. 95; Devambez and Kauffmann-



Fig. 29.7. Sarcophagus SM 35.

Fig. 29.8 (below). Sarcophagus SM 499.



Laconian patrons for this theme. The two fragments in the Sparta Museum, SM 35 and SM 499, in which the pair of Greek warrior and Amazon is depicted following the same pattern as our piece, are also of great interest<sup>30</sup> (FIGS. 29.7–8). It is plain that the carving in these two examples is of poor quality and the treatment is summary and lacking in detail. Clearly, they are pieces of work that have come from local workshops in Laconia, without any artistic value and in no way comparable with the quality of our piece. So, the question of which workshop our piece came from is of special interest.

A great number of sarcophagi that are imitations of the Attic monuments are connected, because of their find place, with Sparta and Laconia, where we have, on the one hand, imported Attic examples and on the

Samaras 1981, 622, no. 541. 6. SM 498: Robert 1890, 138, no. 128, pl. 47; Tod and Wace 1906, 184; Kallipolitis 1958, no. 71; Giuliano 1962, 35, no. 96. 7. SM 4302: Kallipolitis 1958, no. 23; Giuliano 1962, 35, no. 97. 8. SM 481: Tod and Wace, 182; Kallipolitis 1958, 78; Giuliano 1962, 35, no. 98. 9. SM 987: Robert 1890, 137, no. 121, pl. 47; Kallipolitis 1958, no. 67; Giuliano 1962, 35, no. 99. 10. SM 990: Robert 1890, 137, no. 120, pl. 47; Kallipolitis 1958, no. 129; Devambez and Kauffmann-Samaras 1981, 621, no. 533. 11. SM 4302: unpublished. 12. SM 6712: unpublished.

<sup>30</sup> No. 35: Robert 1890, 135, no. 114, pl. 47; Tod and Wace 1906, 139; Kallipolitis 1958, no. 69; Devambez and Kauffmann-Samaras 1981, 620, no. 518, no. 499; Robert 1890, 138, no. 123, pl. 47; Tod and Wace 1906, 185; Kallipolitis 1958, no. 186; Giuliano 1962, 35, no. 95; Devambez and Kauffmann-Samaras 1981, 622, no. 541.

other hand, a workshop of sculpture with a local character.<sup>31</sup> Guntram Koch, on a first approach to the subject, distinguished three main classes of imitations of Attic sarcophagi, according to the degree to which the prototype model was followed and the quality of work.<sup>32</sup> Of great importance are those Laconian pieces which follow the Attic prototypes closely without any essential change, so that it is only by the material or some other details that one can discern if the piece is of Attic origin or a local copy.<sup>33</sup>

So, in the case of our discovery, are we dealing with an imported Attic piece or with a creation by a gifted local artist who imitated Attic models with great success? The theory that the piece in the Sparta Museum comes from an Attic workshop is supported by the following arguments: the close iconographic affinity of our fragment to the Attic sarcophagus in Thessalonica, the variety of marble showing the same external appearance as Pentelic marble and the high quality of the workmanship. These elements lead to another more daring theory: could our piece be a second example of an Attic sarcophagus with the depiction of the final confrontation between the great hero of Greek mythology and the queen of the Amazons? In order to answer this and other relevant questions we need something more: an analytical study of the sarcophagi of the imperial period on the basis of which we could reach more reliable conclusions.

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32 Koch 1993b.

33 Koch 1993b, 247.