
THE SACRED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ANIMAL SYMBOLISM AND SAINTS ON SARCOPHAGI RELIQUARIES IN SYRIA

Abstract: Throughout the centuries, animals held great significance in every civilization, particularly during the Byzantine period. Animal motifs permeated Byzantine art, bearing profound and significant associations and meanings. A diverse array of animals and birds received a great deal of attention and inspired Byzantine sculptors, which featured plentifully in various works of art and objects, however, Christian reliquaries, especially those fashioned in the form of sarcophagi, played a central role in showcasing these animals. These animal figures often adorned the empty spaces on the surfaces, serving both decorative and symbolic purposes, and notably serving as significant figures within the Christian faith, carrying profound symbolic meanings. They were significant in expressing religious and cultural beliefs while expressing intricate theological concepts. Hence, this article will explore five sarcophagi reliquaries uncovered in Syria, distinguished by the presence of animal figures. It aims to clarify the manner of their depiction and establish their connections to saints.

Keywords: *Sacred Containers, Animal Depictions, Christian Theology, Saints, Syria.*

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INTRODUCTION

Animal depictions were a common motif on Christian sarcophagi and reliquaries during the early centuries, especially in the eastern Mediterranean area. These animal representations played an important role in the realm of Christian art in Syria, primarily serving as symbols for Jesus and his sacrificial legacy, among other connotations. It is worth noting that animals have always held symbolic importance for three of the four evangelists, represented by the ox, eagle, and lion.

As an illustration, the depiction of birds, especially doves, alongside the Chi Rho symbol conveyed a profound message. In this context, they represented human souls meditating on Jesus Christ,¹ considering that the Chi Rho monogram itself symbolized Christ's triumph.² Conversely, when a dove was depicted in the act of drinking, it symbolized the souls drinking the water of life, thus signifying the dove as a representation of baptism in this instance.³

To begin, it is essential to provide a concise overview of sarcophagi reliquaries, their historical use, and their origins. Once we have established this

¹ WETZLER/HUNTINGTON 1962, 12.

² JONES 1966, 145.

³ HEATH 1909, 78.

foundation, we can delve into a discussion of the symbolism associated with the animals depicted in Syrian sarcophagi iconography.

As a beginning, it is important to understand that following the martyrdoms of martyrs, they were believed to ascend directly to heaven, occupying a unique and esteemed place just beneath the altar of Christ. These martyrs were seen as vessels filled with the sanctity of the Holy Spirit, possessing the miraculous ability to heal not only the body but also the mind and soul. This sacred power was believed to reside in their earthly remains and tombs.⁴ The veneration and reverence of these martyrs, as well as the deceased in general, were rooted in the belief that those who had passed away possessed the ability to influence various aspects of the living world. The veneration of holy saints played a pivotal role in the early Christian symbolic world. Their relics, which were the physical remnants of their earthly existence, served as symbols of solidarity, giving rise to the cult of saints. The relics became a source of profound significance for Christians seeking protection and assistance from these sanctified dead persons.

Christians held a deep belief that safeguarding relics within their homes provided a potent source of protection. Consequently, they began collecting the physical remains of saints and other sacred objects associated with them from the sanctified sites. This attempt aimed to ensure the safekeeping of these hallowed relics, ultimately contributing to the development of reliquaries. These reliquaries were crafted as receptacles designed to protect and preserve these revered remains. It was widely believed that not only the act of touching or kissing these relics would grant individuals the protection they sought, but also the act of merely beholding these relics held significant importance.

Within these reliquaries lay everything necessary to facilitate a connection with the divine through touching, smelling, or even seeing the fragments of saints they contained. This was rooted in the belief of *pars pro toto*, where a fragment was seen to represent the entirety of the saint or their sanctity. These reliquaries were indeed repositories of profound spiritual significance.⁵ Interestingly, the collection of martyrs' bones was a practice undertaken by the faithful with the intention of combining and uniting all the remains within a single grave. This act was believed to ensure the eventual resurrection of the entire body. Hence, it can be concluded that reliquaries, in a broader sense, played an essential role in enabling the faithful to engage in the veneration of relics through the acts of seeing, touching, and venerating them.

Starting from the 4th century, as the practice of transporting saints' relics increased and became more widespread, a need for containers to house these sacred remains arose, simplifying the process of their transportation. This necessity was particularly evident when the bodies of saints were dismembered, and later carefully enshrined within reliquaries.⁶

However, as we move into the second quarter of the 5th century, a shift in perspective emerged. It was now considered normal to divide the bodies of saints. Cities would

share these divided remains, enabling them to venerate the saints and designate them as patrons. Many reliquaries were discovered containing various parts of a single saint, such as fingers or other small bones. This physical evidence confirmed the practice of dismembering the bodies of saints and martyrs.⁷ In this historical backdrop, the concept of what we now refer to as Christian sarcophagi reliquaries emerged. These specialized containers were designed to house and honor the fragmented remains of these revered figures.

Sarcophagi reliquaries represent a prominent and well-known category of reliquary shapes and can be considered the most important shapes of reliquaries. They typically take the form of rectangular or oblong boxes with an interior hollow cavity and a removable lid. These lids often take the shape of a pitched roof, which can be barrel-shaped, hipped, or flat, and may or may not feature an acroteria. Sarcophagi reliquaries come in various sizes, ranging from miniature boxes measuring less than 20 cm in length to full-size coffins.⁸ Notably, many of these sarcophagi were equipped with a system of pipes designed to allow the circulation of poured liquids, which could be either water or oil. These liquids were poured into the compartment of the reliquary through a hole in the lid, known as the libation aperture. The liquids would then flow over the bones and eventually collected at an outlet positioned below, referred to as the exit aperture.⁹

However, sarcophagi reliquaries often feature intricate and symbolic iconography that mirrors the religious convictions and customs of the community that created them. Yet, for the purpose of this article, our exclusive focus will be on the integration of animal figures and their correlation with saints. We will delve into which animals were selected, the reasons behind their selection, the meanings they held, and their connection to the primary function of sarcophagi.

Certainly, one of the prevalent animal figures found on Syrian-type sarcophagi reliquaries is the peacock. The peacock is closely linked to the concepts of immortality and resurrection. This symbol, which has roots in pagan symbolism related to renewal, was utilized in various cultures and contexts.¹⁰ It had a substantial impact on Byzantine art and culture as a whole, with particular significance in Syria.

The peacock, representing eternal life, made its appearance on one of the reliquaries discovered in northern Syria, probably from al-ʿAndarīn, dating back to the 5th century. The use of the peacock symbolizes the everlasting essence of life and its profound association with the primary purpose of sarcophagi reliquaries, which is to safeguard and preserve the revered remains of saints and martyrs. In essence, the peacock symbol is linked to the enduring and sacred nature of life encapsulated within these reliquaries (Fig. 1).

Indeed, the choice of the peacock as a symbol on sarcophagi reliquaries carries profound significance. The belief that the peacock's body doesn't undergo decomposition aligns with the idea of eternal life. This is why the peacock was depicted on sarcophagi—it served as a representation of the immortality of the saints' bodies and emphasized the central

⁴ KAZAN 2015, 82.

⁵ NOGA-BANAI 2019, 221.

⁶ PEÑA 2000, 54; KAZAN 2015, 83.

⁷ WIŚNIEWSKI 2019, 164; PEÑA 2000, 54.

⁸ KAZAN 2015, 84, 90; WIŚNIEWSKI 2019, 134.

⁹ CANIVET 1978; WIŚNIEWSKI 2019, 137; BANGERT 2010, 317; KAZAN 2015, 82–83; PEÑA 2000, 74.

¹⁰ FRIDAY 2021, 133.

Christian belief in the hope and promise of eternal life. Saints were thought to attain this state of eternity through their unwavering faith and devotion to God. The association between the peacock and saints emphasizes the importance of faith and devotion in the pursuit of eternal life. It also highlights the spiritual significance of saints as role models for faith and devotion within the Christian tradition. Thus, the peacock on this kind of reliquaries becomes a visual representation of these profound theological concepts.

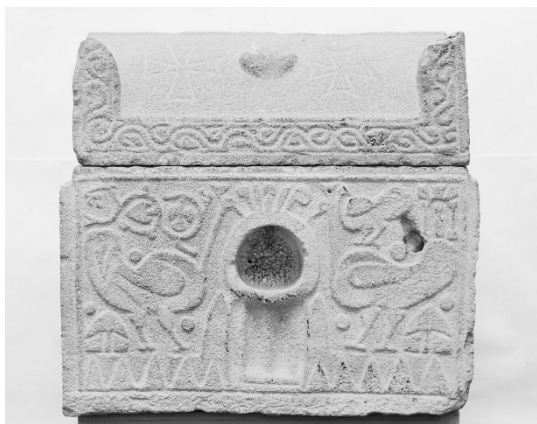


Fig. 1. The peacock symbol depicted on a 5th-century reliquary. Currently housed in the Louvre Museum – Inv. No: AC 877 Source: Louvre Collection.

On this particular reliquary, the representation of peacocks took the form of two peacocks facing each other. They were accompanied by a variety of other symbols, including crosses, as well as additional motifs like the sun, moon, bird, aedicula (a small shrine-like structure), and a tendril of vine leaves. These symbols were incorporated to enhance the religious significance of the reliquary (as depicted in Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Depiction of two peacocks facing each other on the front wall of the reliquary surrounding the Chalice (the exit outflow). Source: Louvre Collection.

According to some scholars, the two peacocks facing each other are believed to carry a symbolic meaning, representing the souls of the faithful drinking from the Fountain of Life.¹¹ This imagery is closely associated with the sacraments of the Eucharist. The placement of the two peacocks on the reliquary, flanking the chalice and pointing towards the libation aperture, is closely tied to the Eucharist, a central element of Christian faith and practice.

¹¹ SWAMY/RAVI 1993, 45.

The ram, a notable animal figure showcased on these sarcophagi reliquaries, holds symbolic significance. Recognized as the leader of the herd, the ram is closely associated with Christ. As highlighted by St. Ambrose, the ram symbolizes divine guidance by leading the flock, embodying the sacrifice in the story of Abraham and Isaac, and representing Jesus' victory over Satan in safeguarding the flock from the threat of the wolf. Consequently, the ram embodies concepts of sacrifice, redemption, and spiritual guidance within the narrative of these reliquaries.

The depiction of a ram on sarcophagi indeed carries a significant symbolism, which can represent the idea of the saints offering their lives as a sacrifice for their faith, mirroring Christ's sacrifice, and bearing witness to it. The use of a scroll carried by the ram on his back, as found on one of the sarcophagi from northern Syria, adds another layer of meaning. While it may not be entirely clear what the ram is holding, it is reasonable to assume that it represents a scroll, which symbolizes the written word of God or the teachings of Christ. This connection underscores the importance of faith, divine guidance, and the spiritual significance of the saints within the Christian tradition, making the ram a potent symbol on these reliquaries.¹² (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Representation of the ram and the acanthus leaves on a sarcophagus reliquary from the early 6th century. Currently housed in Sivas Museum – Inv. No: 309. Source: Ayşe Aydın.

The presence of acanthus leaves surrounding the depiction of the ram on the sarcophagus adds another layer of symbolism to the composition. In general, acanthus leaves are often viewed as symbols of life and rebirth. However, within the context of Christian art, they take on a distinct significance associated with pain and sin.¹³ This association is attributed to the spiky and thorny nature of acanthus leaves, which symbolize the suffering endured during Christ's crucifixion. The growth of these leaves can be seen as a symbol of hope and renewal, representing the resurrection.

Consequently, acanthus leaves are interpreted as a symbol of the new life brought about by the resurrection of Jesus. In conjunction with the ram, which symbolizes sacrifice, this imagery emphasizes the idea that sacrifice paves the way for this new life. This symbolism is closely linked to saints, who are considered exemplars of the sacrificial life that Christians are called to lead. Therefore, the representation on this sarcophagus serves as a means to commemorate the

¹² DEWBERRY 2011, 180.

¹³ VARNER 2006, 192.

lives of saints, particularly within the early Christian Syrian community. Given that northern Syria was a significant center of early Christianity and home to numerous influential saints and church leaders, who were venerated after their death; after threatening them with torture and death, they demanded that they renounce Christ, it is plausible that the depiction of the ram symbolizes the unique characteristics and virtues of these saints, emphasizing their sacrificial and transformative impact on the Christian faith.

The inclusion of a goat as a symbol on Syrian sarcophagi reliquaries (Fig. 4) carries contrasting meanings within different cultural and religious contexts. The interpretation of goats can vary due to their differing meanings in various cultural and religious contexts. In Christianity, goats are often associated with negative symbolism, representing the cursed or evil person.¹⁴ However, in Jewish tradition, goats hold a different significance, symbolizing sacrifice.¹⁵



Fig. 4. A sarcophagus reliquary from northern Syria, dating back to the middle of the 6th century, features two goats facing each other. Currently housed in Şanlıurfa Museum – Inv. No: 6344. Source: Ayşe Aydın.

Given this complexity, the interpretation of the goat’s presence on the reliquary becomes challenging. It could be seen as an influence of Jewish traditions on early Christianity, as many of the first followers of Christianity were Jews who adopted the Christian faith, and who brought their cultural and artistic traditions with them. This influence is particularly notable in Syria, where Jewish and Christian communities intertwined.¹⁶

Such an influence can be seen throughout the use of the goat as a symbol to sacrifice on a reliquary that is normally connected with saints, who somehow are related to sacrifice. On the other hand, the positioning of the two goats facing each other, flanking the libation outflow, can introduce another hypothesis. It could symbolize the conflict between good and evil, light and darkness, and life and death in the Christian tradition.

However, from our point of view, we can assume that the goats represented on this sarcophagus, are part of the Jewish tradition. It is possible that the reliquary was either created by Jews and later reused by Christians or crafted by Christians who were influenced by Jewish culture. The presence of the cross between the two goats beneath the aperture emphasizes the Christian religious impact and significance within the composition.

¹⁴ MATTHEW 25: 31–34, 41.
¹⁵ STEFFLER 2002, 110.
¹⁶ GRAVES 1876, 257.

And finally, the dove figure. The depiction of the dove figure on sarcophagi reliquaries is of profound significance within Christian symbolism. The dove has consistently served as a symbol of the Holy Spirit, a representation that has remained unchanged from the early days of Christianity to the present. Its significance is notably rooted in its appearance at Jesus’ Baptism.¹⁷

In Syria, three specific sarcophagi reliquaries are notable for featuring two doves facing each other. However, this article will focus on discussing only two of them. The dove was a recurring motif on Christian sarcophagi reliquaries in this region, and it was linked to the Holy Spirit. It carried symbolic meanings of purity and spiritual renewal within Christian art.

The positioning of the doves could vary, with some depicted in flight, wings outstretched, symbolizing the active presence of the Holy Spirit. In some instances, doves were shown holding an olive branch in their beaks, a symbol of peace. Additionally, doves were occasionally depicted sitting or perched on a branch. All of these representations contribute to the rich tapestry of Christian symbolism, emphasizing the role of the Holy Spirit in the faith and the hope and renewal it brings to believers.

The first reliquary from northern Syria, features a unique representation with two doves facing each other, appearing on both the front and back sides of the reliquary. On the front side, the doves are depicted as if they are drinking from a small basin, symbolizing a baptismal font, which in this context represents the exit outflow. In the center of this depiction, a cross is prominently featured.



Fig. 5. A reliquary from the 5th century displaying two doves around the exit outflow. Currently housed in the Menil Collection. Source: Jacqueline Elizabeth Mann.

The imagery of two doves surrounding a cross holds symbolic significance, representing the themes of hope and new life stemming from the resurrection. Here, the cross serves

¹⁷ MATTHEW 3:16.

as a powerful symbol of Christ's victory over sin and death (Fig. 5).

It is possible that the representation of the two doves drinking on the sarcophagus, which once held the remains of holy individuals and saints, conveys the idea that saints serve as guides and supports for those undergoing baptism. They set an example, highlighting that baptism is the initiation of supernatural life, assuring the importance of this sacrament.

The second reliquary also follows a similar pattern of decoration, featuring two doves alongside a four-petal rosette. It is possible that these four petals symbolize the four Evangelists, with each petal associated with one of the written gospels. However, it could also serve as a decorative motif without a specific symbolic meaning. These two doves are portrayed with their wings outstretched, encircling the rosette, and facing each other (as shown in Fig. 6).



Fig. 6. A sarcophagus reliquary featuring two doves and the four-petal rosette. Currently housed in Masyaf Department of Antiquities. Source: Author.

The precise reason behind the use of the rosette on sarcophagi, particularly when combined with two doves, and its connection to saints remains unconfirmed. However, one interpretation could be that the rosette symbolizes the celestial or heavenly realm, serving as a representation of the saints who dwell in heaven. Meanwhile, the two doves may signify the souls ascending to heaven after death. And here we can recall that the saints are seen as intercessors who pray for and aid these souls in drawing closer to God. Furthermore, the depiction of doves on sarcophagi reliquaries, particularly when positioned around the apertures, might be a reference to the baptismal font and the purification of sins. This imagery could evoke the idea of cleansing and rebirth, aligning with the symbolism of baptism and its transformative power.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the sarcophagi reliquaries in Syria exhibit a rich array of decorative animals depicted on their lids or sides, each carrying nuanced symbolic meanings. The selection of these animals likely depended on cultural influences, religious beliefs, or the personal convictions of those for whom these reliquaries were created, as well as the artisans responsible for crafting them. As a result, it becomes evident that the imitation of animals on sarcophagi-shaped reliquaries

was a prevalent artistic tradition during the Byzantine era in Syria, particularly in the northern region. These animals were chosen to convey specific virtues, including concepts like immortality, sacrifice, and spiritual renewal. By representing animals on sarcophagi while highlighting their symbolic significance, a profound connection was established between these depicted creatures and the underlying meaning and purpose of this type of reliquary.

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