

Viewing Ancient Jewish Art and Archaeology

VeHinnei Rachel – Essays in Honor of Rachel Hachlili

Edited by

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Two Groups of Non-Figurative Jewish Sarcophagi from Galilee

*Mordechai Aviam**

The topic of figurative art in ancient Judaism has been widely studied, discussed, and debated by scholars since the sensational discovery of the Beth Alpha mosaic floor, adorned with its zodiac and biblical scenes. In the years following this discovery, numerous scenes of figurative art were revealed, mainly decorated mosaic floors, but also architectural fragments originating from ancient synagogues. An important place in this discussion is given to the discoveries at the Beth She'arim Jewish cemetery, where many sarcophagi, decorated with figurative art, were retrieved. Some of these sarcophagi were decorated with mythological scenes such as Leda and the Swan, Achilles, Amazons, and even Victorias. A scholarly approach to the topic of figurative art was thus shaped during the twentieth century, which suggested that the Jewish and rabbinic attitude toward animal and human images was rather a tolerant one. Some scholars even proposed that occasional scenes were reinterpreted to assume a Jewish meaning (Foerster 1985). It was emphasized recently that figurative art might be found in synagogues because they were regarded as “public space” in contrast to domestic buildings, such as private homes, which were considered “private space” (Aviam and Green 2005). I suggest that the funerary world acted in a seemingly similar fashion, in which “burial space” was considered “private space.” As a result, Galilean Jews avoided the use of imagery and instead developed non-figurative artistic designs to decorate sarcophagi, which can be divided mainly into two types.

I conducted a survey in order to locate all the remains of sarcophagi in the Jewish regions of Galilee (Fig. 1.1).¹ My attention was drawn to the fact that outside of Beth She'arim, there is only one basalt sarcophagus from Capernaum, decorated with a figurative scene—two lions flanking a crude bull's head (Corbo and Loffreda 1976). Another figurative decoration was found on a lead

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1 The survey included visits to cemeteries of many ancient sites and searches within the old quarters of Arab villages.

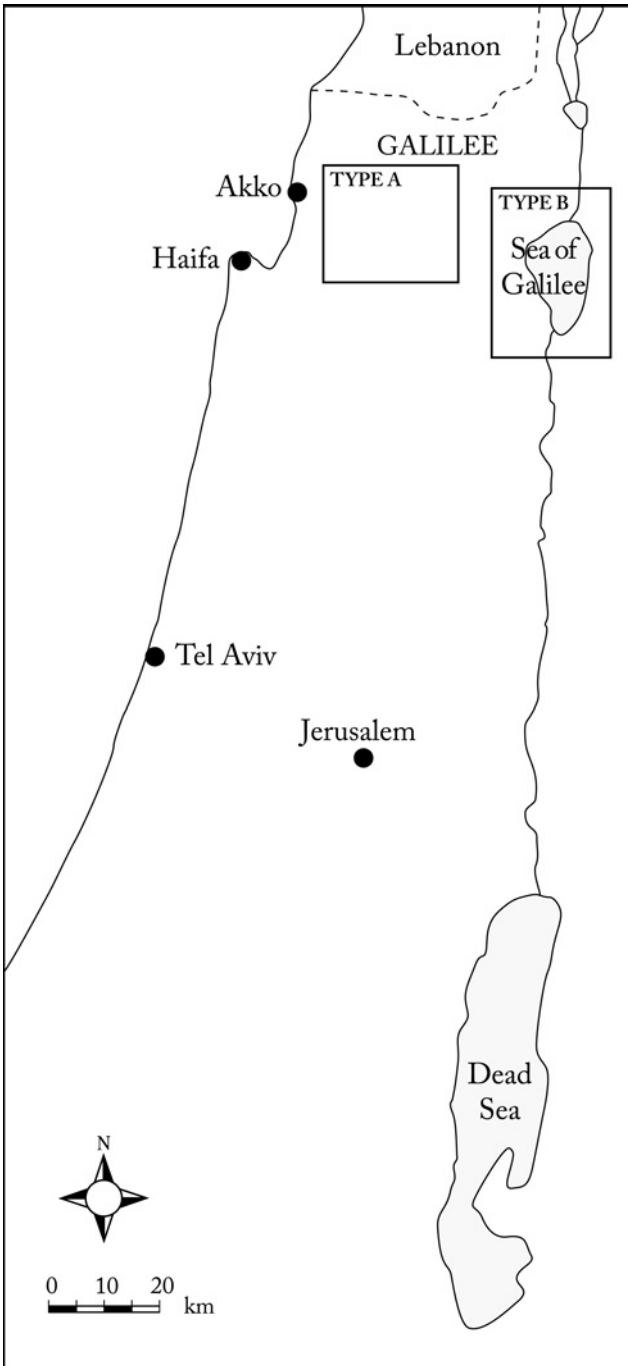


FIGURE 1.1 *A map showing the areas surveyed to locate the remains of sarcophagi in the Jewish regions of Galilee.*
(MAP BY DINA SHALEM.)

coffin from a mausoleum, probably belonging to a rich Jewish family in Kefar Gil'adi, north of the Jewish region in Upper Galilee (Kaplan 1967).

Type A: Sepphoris Group

The most frequent kind of decorated sarcophagi found in the Jewish regions of Galilee was named the *tabula ansata* type by Nachman Avigad (1971, 113–14). It appears frequently in Catacomb 20 at Beth She'arim, where all the specimens are made of hard limestone. The long side features a *tabula ansata* in the center (none of which were inscribed) flanked on each side by a disc and a crude garland. Their short sides have a disc with the same type of garland. The backside, in most cases, is not decorated (Fig. 1.2). Avigad stated that the type is known from other sites in the Land of Israel as well as sites of the Late Roman period in the Mediterranean (1971). However, as the sarcophagus from Rosh Ha'ayin (Eitan 1967) as well as others were clearly identified later as part of a Samaritan group (Barkay 1989), it seems that this specific type of “crude garlands and *tabula ansata*” is typical mainly in Galilee. The origin of this type seems to be the marble “garland” sarcophagi, which feature not only garland, discs, and *tabula ansata*, but also cupids (or a space to depict them) over the long side and Victorias (or a space to depict them) over the corners. They were sent mainly from Asia Minor quarries in an unworked state and completed in the workshops of their final destination. The rough design was imitated in local workshops, mostly in limestone (e.g., Beth She'arim) or rarely in basalt (e.g., Sepphoris). The crude garlands were sometimes completed with detailed leaves and flowers, while the discs provided a place to depict flowers. It was quite common to sell the sarcophagi in their raw shape, and it seems that the Jewish population in Lower Galilee favored the roughly carved type. A similar basalt stone sarcophagus with rough garlands, discs, and *tabula ansata* was found near Sidon (Contenau 1921, 151–52, Fig. 53). This sarcophagus originated from a painted rock-cut tomb in which a clay sarcophagus was also found. The dating of the clay coffin, if accepted, places the basalt sarcophagus in the second–fourth centuries CE (Aviam and Stern 1997), the same period for the sarcophagi from Beth She'arim.

Four sarcophagi of this type are imbedded in the corners of the Crusader tower at Sepphoris, probably looted from the large necropolis of the Jewish city (Fig. 1.3). Inside the well-preserved mausoleum in the center of the Arab city of Sakhnin,² two sarcophagi with crude garlands, discs, and *tabula ansata*

² Known today as the traditional tomb of Rabbi Yosi of Sakhnin.

are visible (Fig. 1.4), while a third large sarcophagus is decorated with a wreath and Amazon shields on the long sides and rosettes on the short. Over the centuries, many decorated sarcophagi disappeared, although some were thankfully described and thus preserved, for example, in the villages of Er Reina (Guèrin 1880, 111), Kafr Kana (ibid., 3:116; Fig. 1.5), Khirbet Zivda (Guèrin 1880, 264), Kabul (ibid., 286), Sha'ab (ibid., 307–8; Avi-Yonah 1950, Pl. xx:8), and Kafr Manda (Guèrin 1880, 332).

There are three sub-types in the Sepphoris group. In Catacomb 23 at Beth She'arim, there is a single sarcophagus with three crude garlands and three discs (Fig. 1.6). A sarcophagus with three crude garlands and no discs is imbedded in the northeastern corner of the watchtower at Sepphoris (Fig. 1.7). At Nazareth, a decorated sarcophagus was found during excavations, bearing three garlands, a *tabula ansata* in the center, and two discs (Fig. 1.8).

The map in Fig. 1.9 shows the distribution of the Sepphoris-type sarcophagi, revealing a large circle around Sepphoris and leading one to assume that an artesian workshop was located in the capital of Jewish Galilee, and its products were sent even to the fast-growing cemetery at Beth She'arim.³ Possibly a branch of this workshop was established at Beth She'arim when the cemetery rapidly expanded in the third century CE.

Type B: Tiberias Group

The group of sarcophagi that constitutes the second type was identified in the eastern part of Lower Galilee. Almost all these sarcophagi, found in four to five sites, are nearly identical and there are no subtypes.

As in the former type, the center of the long side is decorated with a *tabula ansata*, flanked on both sides by a disc design. At both ends, the façade of a building is depicted, consisting of two pillars supporting a round arch that is crowned by a flat roof (Fig. 1.10). The piers stand on high, sculpted pedestals. This specific façade design is not known from any synagogues, either in stone or in mosaic, or other Jewish ornamentation. Different designs of façades are typically associated with the Torah Shrine; however, in those cases they are usually accompanied by a gabled roof, a conch, or an arch, never an arch with a flat roof. On the short sides of lead coffins from Beth She'arim, there is a depiction of an arch supported by two pillars on pedestals (Avigad 1971, 178, Fig. 89). Façades identified as representing the Ark or the temple were also observed

3 Avigad suggested that the *tabula ansata* sarcophagi were made at a center other than Beth She'arim since they were made from hard limestone and delicately carved (1971, 119).



FIGURE 1.2 *Two Type-A sarcophagi from Catacomb 20 in the Jewish cemetery at Beth She'arim.*

(PHOTO BY MORDECHAI AVIAM.)



FIGURE 1.3 *A Type-A sarcophagus repurposed as a cornerstone in a Crusader tower at Sepphoris.*

(PHOTO BY MORDECHAI AVIAM.)



FIGURE 1.4 *One of the Type-A sarcophagi from Sakhnin featuring a crude garland.*
(PHOTO BY MORDECHAI AVIAM.)

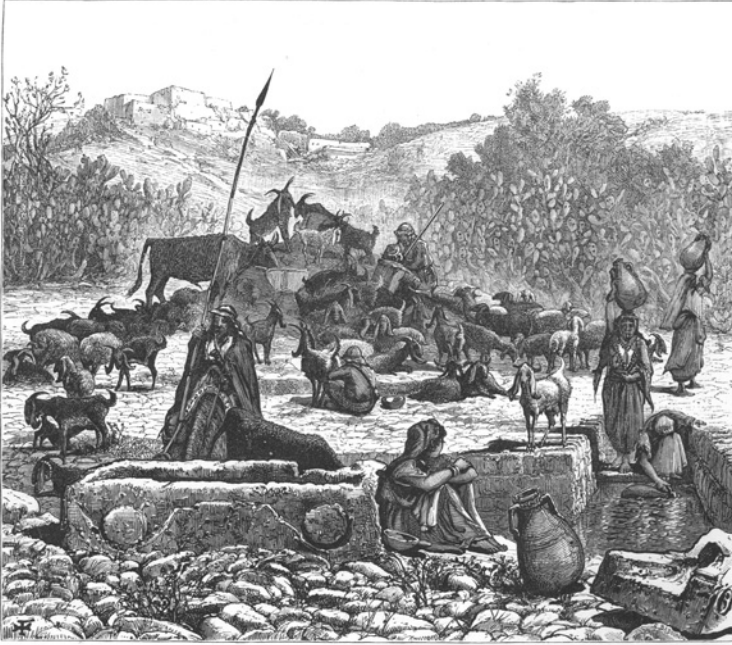


FIGURE 1.5 *A drawing of a Type-A sarcophagus at the well of Kafir Kana.*
 (DRAWING FROM PICTURESQUE PALESTINE
 [www.lifeintheholylan.com] AFTER WILSON 1881, 55.)



FIGURE 1.6 *A Type-A sarcophagus from Catacomb 23 in the Jewish cemetery at Beth She'arim.*
 (PHOTO BY MORDECHAI AVIAM.)



FIGURE 1.7 *A Type-A sarcophagus repurposed as building material in a watchtower at Sepphoris.*
(PHOTO BY MORDECHAI AVIAM.)



FIGURE 1.8 *A Type-A sarcophagus from Nazareth.*
(PHOTO BY MORDECHAI AVIAM.)

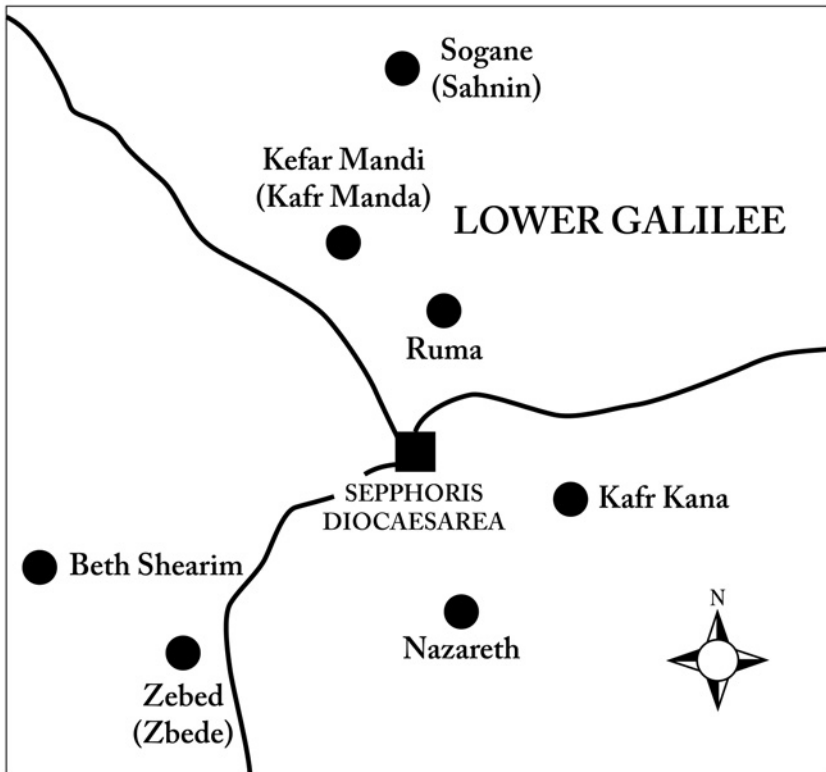


FIGURE 1.9 A map showing the location of the Type-A sarcophagi.
(MAP BY DINA SHALEM.)

above the stone doors of Jewish tombs (Aviam 2004, 299–304). Although, in the case of Type-B sarcophagi, it would be more reasonable to identify the design as depicting a mausoleum (*nefesh*).

Two of these sarcophagi are on display in the Tiberias Archaeological Garden and their provenance is obscure, probably from Tiberias itself (Fig. 1.11). A third is exhibited in Moshav Arbel (on the outskirts of ancient Arbel, south of its border fence; Fig. 1.10), discovered while plowing the land east of the site. A fourth rested at the entrance to the resort site of Kibbutz HaOn (transferred by the IAA to be displayed somewhere in the south of the country; Fig. 1.12). It originated from the ancient cemetery east of the kibbutz. The fifth was discovered near an ancient mausoleum at the cemetery of ancient Migdal (Fig. 1.13). Although no report of its discovery was ever published, it was dated to the third century CE (A. Druks, pers. communication).

When the road from Zemakh to Tiberias was constructed in the early twentieth century, a few sarcophagi were retrieved, some of which were decorated with identical patterns, while two carried inscriptions within the *tabula ansata*.⁴ The group was discussed by Erwin Goodenough, who presents a drawing of the second inscription (1953, 157–58 and bibliography therein).⁵ According to my survey, there is evidence for at least eight sarcophagi of this type around the Sea of Galilee (Fig. 1.14).

An exceptional group of sarcophagi were imbedded in the lower course of the Crusader castle at Afula. As they have no similarity to either one of the aforementioned Galilean-type groups, it would be reasonable to assume that they originated from the sarcophagi cemetery, which lies west of the north-western city gate of Nysa-Scythopolis (Beth Shean), or represent a group of a similar type from the borders of Galilee.

During the survey, other sarcophagi were listed that did not belong to any of these types. Most were plain and certainly without figurative decoration.

Conclusions

The common motif of both groups is the central *tabula ansata* flanked by discs. The central *tabula ansata* is known from some types of imported marble sarcophagi, such as the one from Tyre (Chéhab 1985, Pl. CL:29–30). Another sarcophagus, from the same cemetery, seems to be an imitation of the Tyrian type in local limestone (*ibid.*, Pl. CXXXVI:1283–84). Yet, in the huge sarcophagi cemetery of Tyre, there is not even one sarcophagus that is an exact parallel to Type A or B. There are similarities, shared elements, but no exact parallels. It would be reasonable to assume that the imported sarcophagi and their local imitations as well as other types of sarcophagi originating from cemeteries of the Hellenic *poleis* served as prototypes for these main Galilean types.

Avigad (1971), Michael Avi-Yonah (1950), and Goodenough (1953) deemed the sarcophagi of the first group Jewish since they were discovered in a Jewish cemetery. However, they failed to distinguish them from similar ones found in other parts of the country (such as Samaria), although those were known at

4 One of these sarcophagi was transferred by the IAA from the courtyard of the Holiday Inn Hotel near Hammath Tiberias into the IAA storage yard at Beth Shemesh.

5 The sarcophagi were all *in situ*, although robbed. As the shore of the Sea of Galilee at this point was not very wide, it is clear that the sarcophagi were placed close to the main road, which leads south from Tiberias. This is the first time that the phenomenon of placing sarcophagi along the main road, so common in Roman-period *poleis*, is attested for a Jewish city.



FIGURE 1.10 *The Type-B sarcophagus from Arbel, showing the rounded arch.*
(PHOTO BY MORDECHAI AVIAM.)



FIGURE 1.11 *A Type-B sarcophagus on display at the Tiberias Archaeological Garden.*
(PHOTO BY MORDECHAI AVIAM.)



FIGURE 1.12 *The Type-B sarcophagus at Kibbutz HaOn.*
(PHOTO BY MORDECHAI AVIAM.)



FIGURE 1.13 *The Type-B Sarcophagus from Migdal.*
(PHOTO BY MORDECHAI AVIAM.)

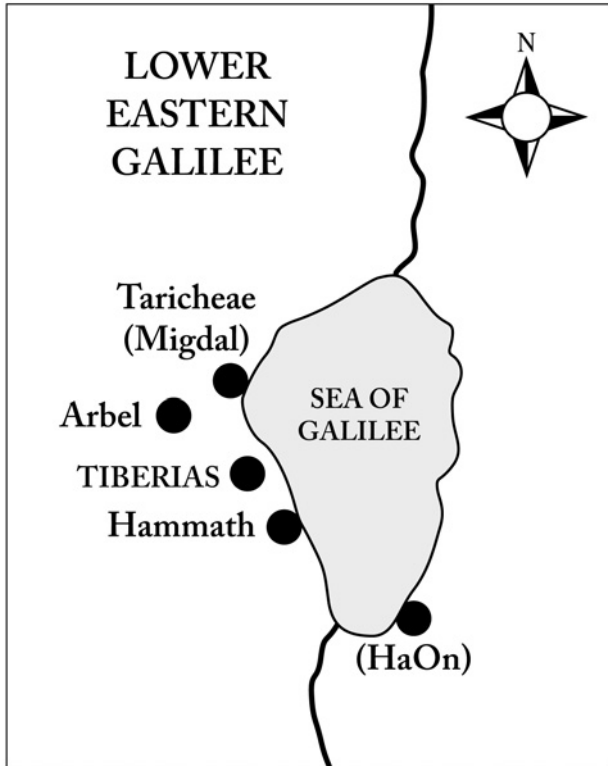


FIGURE 1.14 *A map showing the location of the Type-B sarcophagi.*
(MAP BY DINA SHALEM.)

the time. It should be noted that Avi-Yonah (1950) and Goodenough (1953) did not identify the second type as a typical Jewish group.

One should emphasize a similar phenomenon in the burial customs of the Samaritan population. Keeping the strict laws of the written Torah, the Samaritans did not permit the use of imagery in their artistic world. There are no images on the mosaic floors of the Samaritan synagogues, and the Samaritan sarcophagi are of a “non-figurative” type. Although they do have their own characteristics, such as legs and handles, some of them were decorated with *tabulae ansatae* and discs (Barkay 1989).

Although scholars researching the Jewish attitude toward figurative art tend to seek evidence from Beth She‘arim’s sarcophagi to prove their point, it seems that a fresh approach should be taken, at least regarding the funerary world. Decorated coffins from Beth She‘arim should be considered an exception because this huge, public, and unusual Jewish cemetery was mainly designed

for Diaspora Jews and Jews from various Hellenic *poleis* around Galilee. On one hand, they wished to be buried in the Land of Israel as the Talmud states “everyone who is being buried in Eretz-Israel is like to be buried under the altar” (*b. Ketub.* 111a), expressing and indicating their Judaism by using Jewish symbols.⁶ On the other hand, they imported their tradition and “fashion” reflecting Late Roman-period funerary art as exhibited in its figuratively decorated sarcophagi.⁷ Jews in Galilee did not use figurative art on their sarcophagi, and their craftsmen designed types of decoration patterns adequate to their beliefs, the first type at the workshops of Sepphoris and the second at Tiberias.

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6 There are almost no Jewish symbols in Jewish graveyards in the rural areas of Galilee and Judea.

7 There is clear proof for the “import” of foreign traditions and burial customs to Beth She’arim. In front of Catacomb 23, shaft tombs faced with bricks were discovered, which are so different from any other burial in Israel that the find immediately brought Avigad to identify them as the tombs of Mesopotamian Jews (1971, 94–95).

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