

## Of holes and a holy man: New discoveries in the Silivri-Kapı mausoleum in Istanbul

**T**he subject of this text, the Silivri-Kapı mausoleum, found between Constantinople's Theodosian Walls in 1988 and dating back to the first half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, has attracted very little interest from critics until now. In fact, the only study entirely dedicated to it is Johannes Deckers's and Ümit Serdaroğlu's

article, written in 1993 (Das Hypogäum beim Silivri-Kapı in Istanbul, in: *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 36, 1993, 140–163), despite the fact that it is the only late-antique Constantinopolitan mausoleum to have retained a pictorial decoration and that it contains sculptures of great interest.

At the time of its discovery, the mausoleum sheltered frescoes: five human figures impossible to identify precisely were represented on the walls. The interior fitting comprised five sculpted sarcophagi, four of which were in limestone, situated symmetrically on either side and decorated with narrative scenes – the Christ doctor amongst the apostles, Abraham's sacrifice, Moses receiving the Law Tables, and praying figures around a cross.



Fig. 1 Istanbul, Silivri-Kapı mausoleum, principal sarcophagus (photograph: author)

The last sarcophagus, made of marble, was placed at the centre of the inner space and raised above the level of the others, adorned with a christogram in a crown flanked by burning candles. Deckers's and Serdaroglu's interpretation, which has not been questioned since, is that this was a family mausoleum. During a recent visit to the site, however, we noticed hitherto neglected elements. The present study will take these into account in order to suggest a new reading of this building's function.

### A SURPRISING OPENING

The first element which surprised us, and remains unexplained, is the fact that the principal sarcophagus is raised and supported on three limestone consoles, thus liberating an empty space beneath it (fig. 1). Deckers/Serdaroglu (142–3; 155) explain the difference in height and material between this marble sarcophagus and the others, which are made of limestone and lie on the ground, by the difference in social status between the deceased. However, they do not explain the void, which is an unusual and surprising occurrence.

The second element we noticed is the opening on the lid of the principal sarcophagus. The lid itself is divided into two symmetrical parts: the first is decorated with a Latin cross, and in the second is carved an opening measuring 51 x 55 cm (fig. 2). This hole is conceived to receive a lid, which has now disappeared, but was certainly present originally. There is a small cross on the edge, on the side of the entrance. Deckers/Serdaroglu mention this opening, but offer no interpretation of its function. Such features can also be found at the Sehremini mausoleum (Jutta Dresken-Weiland, *Sarkophagbestattungen in Rom und Konstantinopel*, in: *Frühes Christentum zwischen Rom und Konstantinopel*, ed. R. Harreither/Ph. Pergola/R. Pillinger/ A. Pülz, Città del Vaticano 2006, 345–351), but their function remains unexplained.

It could be suggested that this opening allowed other burials to take place in the same sarcophagus. This hypothesis has to be discarded, however, as the opening is too small, and is planned to be used way more frequently than for occasional supplementary



Fig. 2. Istanbul, Silivri-Kapı mausoleum, lid of the principal sarcophagus (photograph: author)

burials. The opening could have been planned for libations, a suggestion which cannot be totally excluded, but this time the opening is too big, compared with tradition and needs (Paolo Liverani/Giandomenico Spinola, *Vatican. La Nécropole et le Tombeau de Saint Pierre*, Milan/Città del Vaticano 2010, 29).

### A NEW INTERPRETATION

Our interrogations about this small window, situated at the extremity of the sarcophagus and emphasized by its raised height, allow us to make a third hypothesis: that of a devotional function. According to this interpretation, our object would not have been a simple sepulchre, but rather the tomb of an individual with an aura of sanctity. Various elements converge towards this interpretation. First of all, the central sarcophagus is

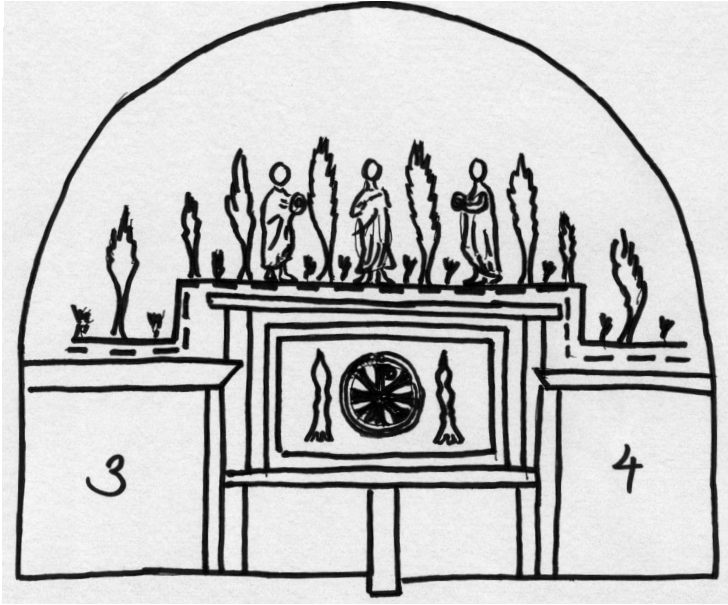


Fig. 3 Istanbul, Silivri-Kapı mausoleum, principal sarcophagus with frescoes on the north wall, sketch of the cross-section (drawing by the author according to Deckers/Serdaroğlu, fig. 4)

made of marble from the island of Marmara, while the adjoining ones are of limestone, which clearly underlines the difference in content. The combination of differences in material and height between the central tomb and the others seems too important to justify the hypothesis that this was simply the resting place of the *pater familias*. Indeed, the central position of this tomb would have been enough to give it this importance. Furthermore, two of the lateral sarcophagi actually lean on the base of the principal sepulchre and are nearly covered by the latter, as if the goal were to be as close as possible to the marble tomb, a phenomenon which reminds us of the *ad sanctos* graves.

Furthermore, the general conception – and notably the independence of the principal sarcophagus, raised on consoles – does not exclude the possibility of the limestone sarcophagi having been added at a later date. In addition, the shape of the lid, as well as its association with the cross, very clearly calls to mind the *fenestellae confessionis* which could be found on altars and allowed access to the relics. Amongst the closest examples are the

function of these openings in altars was to give the faithful a more direct contact with the relics, it also allowed the production of contact relics (Holger A. Klein, *Front Panel of a Box-shaped Altar*, in: *Treasures of Heaven*, Cleveland/Baltimore/London 2010, 40–41).

Considering the proportions and the shape of the opening in the lid of our sarcophagus, it seems difficult to imagine any other function than that of allowing access to an exceptional body, which may therefore be considered to have been a relic. No other function can justify such an opening and such a lid, which both definitely attest frequent use. Compared to the altars, where the *fenestella* was visible, here it remains hidden and is not immediately accessible. It is thus legitimate to wonder about a second function, frequently attested in the Orient at the same period, that of the production of contact relics in a venerated sarcophagus. As an example, let us cite the wide diffusion of contact relics of oriental saints (Josef Engemann, *Palästinische frühchristliche Pilgerampullen: Erstveröffentlichungen und Berichtigungen*, in: *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 45, 2002, 153–169).



Fig. 4 Istanbul, Silivri-Kapı mausoleum, limestone sarcophagus, detail of the relief (photograph: author)

### A CONTACT RELIC

It is indeed in this context that the void created by the consoles underneath the principal sarcophagus – which may seem at first to be useless – can be explained by the presence of a small hole at the bottom of the sarcophagus. We know that amongst the most widespread contact relics was oil which had been consecrated by flowing over a saint's body (Anja Kalinowsky, *Frühchristliche Reliquiare im Kontext von Kultstrategien, Heilserwartung und sozialer Selbstdarstellung*, Wiesbaden 2011, 16–20). The void underneath the sarcophagus would have allowed an easy access to collect the oil, which would have been poured into the sarcophagus through the *fenestella*, using bowls. The hole is sloped to ensure that, although its top opening is at

the centre of the sarcophagus, its lower opening is not barred by the central console. Furthermore, the presence of two layers of two slabs underneath the sarcophagus seems to discard the hypotheses that this would have been the effect of chance or of the ravages of time.

**T**he iconography of this sarcophagus seems to point in the same direction. Indeed, this is the only case, in the late-antique world, in which a christogram is surrounded by two burning candles (Thilo Ulbert, *Studien zur dekorativen Reliefplastik des östlichen Mittelmeerraumes. Schrankenplatten des 4.–10. Jh.s*, München 1969 [Miscellanea Byzantina Monacensia 10]). We find an example thereof in tomb 4 of the Sofia necropolis, as well as in a funerary mosaic in a tomb of a church in Kilibra, Tunisia. Two candles surrounding a person indeed seem to indicate the presence of a saint, as in the capsella africana (Claudia Lega, *Capsella Africana*, in: *Treasures of Heaven*, 41), or in San Gennaro in Naples (Umberto Fasola, *Le catacombe di S. Gennaro a Capodimonte*, Rome 1975, 92–107, tav. VII). There are certainly exceptions, but in our case the convergence of the aforementioned elements supports this identification. All the more so as in Ravenna and Constantinople we never find christograms surrounded by candles (Giselda Valenti Zucchini/Mileda Bucci, *Corpus della scultura paleocristiana bizantina ed altomedioevale di Ravenna*, Rome 1968, t. II, n° 14 d; 17 a; 23 a; 25 a; and figs. 14 d; 17 a; 23 a; 25 a).

### A PATRON SAINT

This reading seems to be supported by the frescoed decoration, which is now invisible, but known through the photographs published by Deckers/Serdaroğlu (fig. 3). On the wall next to the central sarcophagus, separated by trees, were three figures of which only the inferior part remains. The authors suggested that these can be interpreted as the Christ surrounded by his apostles (158–160). This reading is admittedly possible, but can be specified. Indeed, the figure situated to the left of Christ is exactly above the *fenestella*. In other

words, it seems to emerge from the latter. It would seem legitimate, therefore, to imagine that this could be a local saint, who was buried at this same place, and whose relics could have been accessed through the opening at the feet of his representation. Considering the state of conservation of these frescoes, it is impossible to go any further, as the heads of the figures are not visible. However, the visual connection seems too important not to be mentioned.

**F**inally, on the limestone sarcophagus to the right of the entrance – in a scene featuring two praying figures surrounding the cross, probably the deceased – one can see a mysterious little figure, dressed in a toga (*fig. 4*). Its chubby face obviously indicates that this is a child, who is holding a codex in his left hand and giving a blessing with his right hand. Deckers/Serdaroğlu thought this figure was the son of the represented couple, an identification which seems legitimate when one takes into account a parallel such as that of the Stylicon diptych in Monza, on which Serena, the general's wife, is represented with their son Encherius. In the decoration of a sarcophagus, however, it is astonishing to find a child differentiated from the two praying figures by his clothes and gestures, and giving a blessing.

The most immediate parallel to this composition is to be found on the Saint Ambrose sarcophagus in Milan, where the commissioner – according to Adolf Katzenellenbogen's lecture (The sarcophagus in S. Ambrogio and St. Ambrose, in: *The Art Bulletin* 29/4, 1947, 249–259, here: 252) – is advancing towards Christ, accompanied by his saint protector. The gesture and clothes of the latter are very similar to those of the Silivri-Kapi figure. Considering the similarities between the iconography of the narrative scenes of the Milan sarcophagus and that of the scenes of the Constantinople mausoleum – all the scenes which are to be found in the mausoleum can be seen on the sarcophagus too, except the scene with the praying figures – it seems legitimate to imagine that there was a reservoir of standardized images which

were repeated systematically. Taking into account this fact, as well as other known cases in which the deceased are accompanied by their protectors (cf. Jutta Dresken-Weiland, Sulla rappresentazione dei defunti nei sarcofagi paleocristiani, in: *Corsi di cultura sull'arte ravennate e bizantina* 4, 1994, 109–130), we can suggest that the child-figure represents the couple's patron saint, who is probably also the *confessor* buried in the mausoleum.

**S**ome questions remain unanswered, such as the mausoleum's position within the graveyard surrounding it, or the identity of the buried *confessor*. However, what seems crucial to us at this stage is to have noted, in Constantinople, a totally new development in the cult of holy bodies. Indeed, the situation of the Silivri-Kapi mausoleum, with the arrangement of the raised sarcophagus, with the *fenestella confessionis* and the opening for flowing oils, points towards a funeral cult which would have been more intimate and local than that of the big *martyria*. What appeared at first to be a family tomb thus finally turns out to have had a public function.

---

DR. IVAN FOLETTI

GILLES MONNEY

translation:  
LUCIE MONNEY, DESMOND-BRYAN KRAEGE