

SARCOPHAGUS WITH THE “GATES OF HADES”

ROMAN, 2ND – 3RD CENTURY AD
MARBLE

HEIGHT: 69 CM.

LENGTH: 216 CM.

DEPTH: 68.5 CM.

PROVENANCE:

*FORMERLY IN THE COLLECTION OF SIR
JOHN CHARLES ROBINSON (1824-1913),
C.B AND F.S.A, NEWTON MANOR,
SWANAGE, DORSET, ACQUIRED
BETWEEN 1852 AND 1869.
SOLD BY HENRY DUKE & SON, THE
NEWTON MANOR COLLECTION.
SWANAGE, DORSET, 1-4 SEPTEMBER 1913,
LOT 503.*

*ACQUIRED BY A MEMBER OF THE
ROOTES FAMILY, RAMSBURY MANOR,
WILTSHIRE.
IN THE COLLECTION OF LADY MARIAN
ROOTES, THROUGH INHERITANCE,
UNTIL 2012.*

*DUKE'S FINE ART, THE ROOTES
COLLECTION, 28 SEPTEMBER 2012, LOT
987.*



This monumental marble sarcophagus, rectangular in shape, displays extremely lavish, meticulous relief decoration on one side. In the middle of the front panel, a miniature temple is represented. Its triangular tympanum is adorned with a laurel crown from which delicate ribbons stream.



The thick horizontal cornice and raking cornices are individually carved while the roof is decorated with two acroteria, showcasing the attention to detail. The pediment is supported by two fluted pilasters adorned with capitals of the composite order, combining the acanthus leaves of the



Corinthian order with the delicate volutes of the Ionic order. The thick bases of both columns stand on a small platform, which elevates them, reinforcing the impression of monumentality conveyed by the miniature temple and recalling the buildings constructed at that time. Between the pilasters stand double doors, one of which is mysteriously ajar. The door frame is sculpted in relief, while the doors are more lightly carved, giving quite a realistic impression of depth. The lower parts of the doors are adorned with lion heads holding rings in their mouths while the upper parts are decorated with trophies. All these features add to the impression of realism and demonstrate the artist's desire to recreate the actual appearance of the temples built at the time in the marble. This attention to detail is even visible in the very discreet representation of the stones used for the construction of the temple, the edges of which are delicately carved and still visible between the pilasters and the doorposts of the double doors.

On either side of the miniature temple is a massive laurel wreath, the narrow leaves of which are individually sculpted. The irregular edges and round fruit sticking out of the branches give an impression of thickness. The ends of the leafy branches are elegantly tied with ribbons, the ends of which fall delicately. Once again, there is great attention to detail. The sculptor played with the textures, creating folds that give an impression of thickness and a spectacular depiction of the different materials.

Finally, the composition is framed by two pilasters, taking up the motif of the supports of the miniature temple and giving the composition a sense of unity.

Both the side faces of the sarcophagus are plainly decorated with circular shields, while the back is devoid of ornamentation, indicating that it was probably placed in a larger architectural complex or along a wall.



The iconography used for this sarcophagus, rich in symbolism, shows the desire of the artists of the time to concretely represent a rite of passage and the separation between the worlds of the living and the dead. The representation of these "gates of Hades", the doorway of the famous god of the underworld, thus has several meanings and has been used to decorate various funerary objects over the centuries.

The double doors, or gates, could be sculpted closed, ajar or thrown open. In some cases, the doors also represent the entrance of the tomb and, by extension, the way to the world of the dead. The deceased are thus sometimes portrayed next to them, illustrating their souls arriving in the afterlife, as in the example conserved at Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen (Ill. 1). Other examples depict only the doors, symbolising simply the separation between the worlds of the living and the dead. Gorgeous examples are thus conserved in Rome and Saint Petersburg

(Ill. 2-4). Finally, these doors are sometimes linked to mythological tales, wherein characters such as Hercules, Cerberus and Protesilaus leave the underworld by the slightly open door. These are the kinds of scenes represented on sarcophagi currently exhibited in Rome and Velletri (Ill. 5-6).



These “gates of Hades” were hugely successful from the 2nd century, when inhumation became widespread to the detriment of cremation. Our sarcophagus and the aforementioned examples attest to a certain codification of the double-doored temple motif. The building was thus given particular attention by the sculptor: the architectural elements reflect archaeological reality and the decoration on the panels is worthy of actual goldsmithing. In each example, the panels are very finely and meticulously adorned with common funerary motifs. Our work is thus a perfect example of the production of sarcophagi from the 2nd century AD onwards, illustrating the

importance Romans gave the graves of their dead.



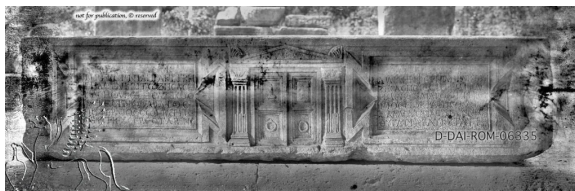
The unique nature of our sarcophagus also stems from the charming anecdote of its rediscovery. In 2012, Duke's Auction House in England sent an expert to the Rootes family house. William Edward Rootes (1894-1964), 1st Baron Rootes, was the founder of Rootes Motors, then the biggest English car manufacturer. He worked for personages such as the Duke of Windsor and Sir Winston Churchill. Upon his death in 1964, his son, William Geoffrey Rootes, headed the company. In 1946, the Rootes' son married Marian Slater, with whom he enhanced the art collection he had inherited from his father (Ill. 7). When she died, the collection was put up for sale. The expert assigned by Duke's then discovered our sarcophagus, abandoned in the garden for almost a hundred years and partly covered in thick vegetation. The irony of the situation resides in the fact that, after some research,

he discovered that the object had been sold nearly a century before, in 1913, by his own auction house (Ill. 8). Before being placed in the Rootes family house, our sarcophagus was in the collection of Sir John Charles Robinson (1824-1913). An English painter and sculptor, he was mainly known as the curator of the South Kensington Museum, now known as the Victoria and Albert Museum. He was also named Queen Victoria's 'Surveyor' and put in charge of the royal collections from 1880 to 1891. Our sarcophagus was exhibited in his residence of Newton Manor in Dorset until his collection was dispersed.

Comparatives:



Ill. 1. Urn inscribed for Sextus Allidius Symphorus, Roman, 2nd century AD, marble, H.: 41 cm. Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen, inv. no. 862.



Ill. 2. Sarcophagus with the "gates of Hades", Roman, 2nd century AD, marble, W.: 205 cm. Museo Nazionale Romano, Rome, inv. no. 72838.



Ill. 3. Sarcophagus with the "gates of Hades", Roman, 3rd century AD, marble, W.: 229 cm. Villa Riva, Genzano di Roma, inv. no. 45.



Ill. 4. Sarcophagus with slightly open doors, Roman, 3rd century AD, marble, H.: 131 cm. The State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, inv. no. 3086.

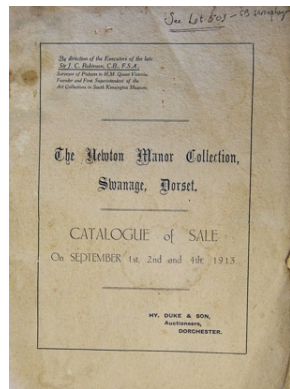


Ill. 5. Sarcophagus with Hercules and Cerberus, Roman, 2nd century AD, marble, W.: 240 cm. Centrale Montemartini, Musei Capitolini, inv. no. S.1394.



Ill. 6. Side face of the Velletri sarcophagus, Roman, 2nd century AD, marble, W.: 260 cm. Civic Archaeological Museum of Velletri, Velletri.

Provenance :



Ill. 7. Marian Rootes.

Ill. 8. Henry Duke & Son, *The Newton Manor Collection. Swanage, Dorset*, 1-4 September 1913, lot 503.