

The National Museum Contains the World's Largest Collection of Anthropoid Sarcophagi

Thirty one anthropoid sarcophagi housed in the National Museum are of the type frequently described as "Sidonian." They are characterized by a human profile engraved onto stone and originally inspired by the cardboard shell of Egyptian mummy sarcophagi.¹

During the 26th Egyptian or Saite dynasty (663-525 BC) and throughout the entire Ptolemaic period (304-335 BC) stone coffins were used in Egypt for the burial of royal dignitaries or individuals of high rank.

Their Introduction throughout Phoenicia

There are many theories pertaining to the inception of the anthropoid sarcophagus in Phoenicia:

- As spoils of war brought from Egypt, the latter having been defeated by Cambyses with the help of Phoenician kings of Tyre, Sidon and Arados as well as that of the Cypriotes.
- As a "special commission" for the Egyptian general Pen-Ptah then residing in Sidon.
- As an element of the commercial trade that existed between Egypt and Phoenicia in the 5th century BC.²

Their Chronology

The dating of the sarcophagi is still quite problematic. The cultural imprint in the manufacture of the sarcophagi is mixed, the Phoenician sculptors having been inspired by both Egyptian and Greek art. Essentially, E. Kuhahn³ and M-L Buhl⁴ point to the stylistic evidence (e.g. Egyptian influences, followed by a composite of the Egyptian and Greek styles and then Greek art alone). However such an evolution is difficult to follow as the stylistic choice would often be subject to the individual workshops and therefore it follows that the design of the sarcophagus is not always the indicator of its age. J. Elayi⁵ classified the sarcophagi into three major eras in the history of the Phoenician cities and the Persian Empire.

- The "archaic" period corresponding to the western expansion of Persian influence which continued until the end of the 2nd Persian war.
- The "classical" period representing the regression of the Persian domination of the seas in favor of Athenian naval power.
- The "pre-Hellenistic" period dating from the end of the 5th century BC.

Other Criteria are of Equal Importance

- The choice of basic materials. After trying a variety of local components (namely limestone, basalt, gypsum, terra-cotta) marble eventually became the most popular material used.
- The evolution in the specific proportions of the head.
- The general appearance of the sarcophagus the anatomical details of which diminish by the end of the Per-

sian period resulting in a finely shaped mask placed in relief on a near-flat cover.

The Search for an Indigenous Phoenician Style

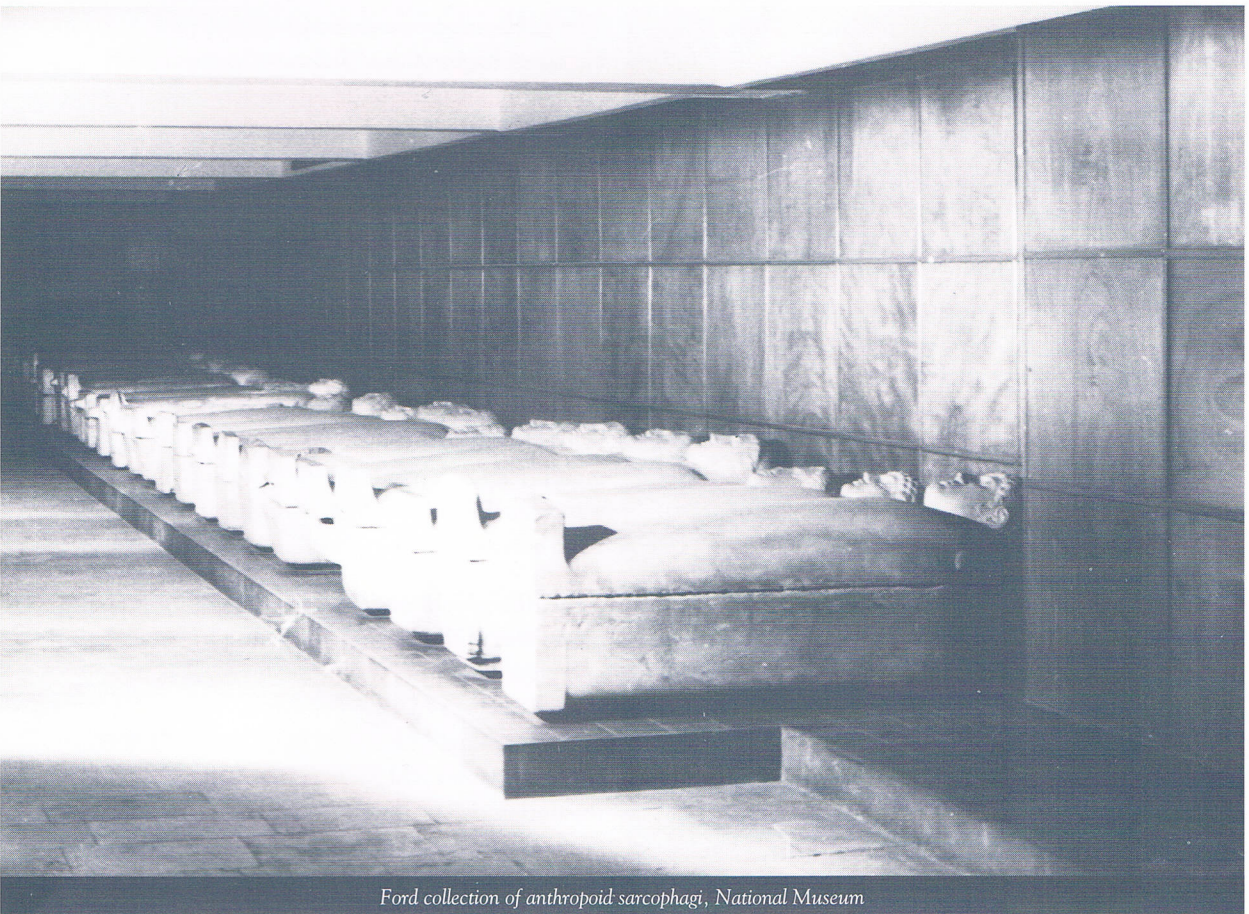
The Phoenician identity of the anthropoid sarcophagi cannot be doubted. This particular type, examples of which can be found in the Eastern Greek islands of the 6th century (Paros, Samos) was widespread throughout Phoenicia proper during the "classical" period (Sidon, Tyre and Tartous, a site belonging to the territory of Arados).⁶ It is however in Sidon that the genre established itself. From the Egyptian models onwards, a change of style occurs very quickly. The true Phoenician manufacture that came about during the Persian era adopted Greek stylistic features firstly from the Ionians and then the Athenians. The style then developed along straightforward lines until eventually emerging at the end of the Persian era in a newly synthesized balance between the Egyptian anthropoids and the best of Greek sculpture from the "classical" period.

The scattering of anthropoid sarcophagi throughout Phoenicia can be traced to the existence of a Phoenician elite in power in Cyprus (Kition, Amathus)⁷ and Carthage and to the Phoenician immigration to Sicily (Cannita) and Spain (Cadix).⁸

The Chronological History of Excavations

Ernest Renan first visited the Near East between 1860 and 1861. In a publication entitled "Mission de Phénicie" (1864-1874)⁹ he mentions the archaeological potential of the region. "The idea of digging in the back gardens of *Saida* (Sidon) never occurred to us the earth is plowed regularly every year. Surely it would reveal by itself any treasures buried beneath it and yet one of the most unique necropolis ever bequeathed by antiquity was found in a field just to the east of the city." In fact six "quite exceptional" sarcophagi made of marble with sculpted heads and some still bearing traces of red paint were found in tombs near the *Magharet Abloun*. Ernest Renan was to christen them "anthropoid" according to Herodotus. One of the sarcophagi, discovered near *Magharat Abloun* and now housed in the *Musée du Louvre* is known as the sarcophagus of Eshmunazor II, King of Sidon (5th century BC). The king is identified by the funerary inscriptions on the cover. After succeeding his father Tabnit I to the throne, Eshmunazor II lived and reigned 14 years in all.

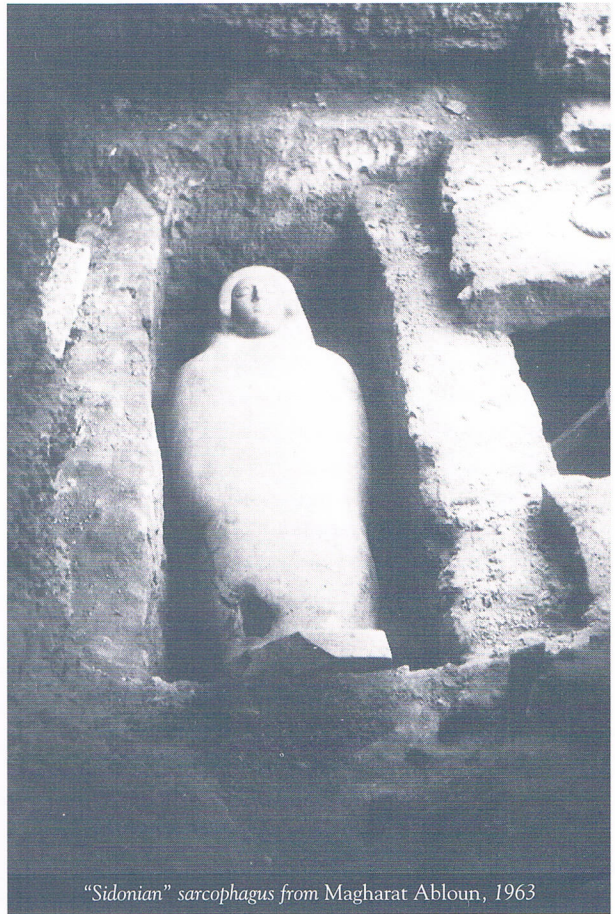
The tombs from where sarcophagi originated, were invariably carved in bedrock. Access to them was through a stairless rectangular well-like cavity about three to four meters deep and two to three meters wide. Notches in the walls of the well serve as footholds for climbing in and out. At the bottom of the cavity in the shorter juxtaposed walls, doors open into rectangular chambers where the anthropoid sarcophagi were placed.



Ford collection of anthropoid sarcophagi, National Museum



"Sidonian" sarcophagus being unearthed



"Sidonian" sarcophagus from Magharat Abloun, 1963