

The Bethesda Sarcophagi: Testimonies to Holy Land Piety in the Western Theodosian Empire

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ABSTRACT

The Bethesda Sarcophagi are a group of fifteen sarcophagi from the last decade of the 4th century that present a uniform iconographical programme on the front panel. The paper presents the sarcophagi as relics and therefore testimonies to Holy Land Piety in the Theodosian Age, especially in Gaul and Spain, where most fragments were found. It analyses the contents and arrangement of the five biblical scenes presented on the front panel of the sarcophagi, and with the help of literary sources of 4th century pilgrims shows that the selection and order of scenes most probably represent the stops along a late antique pilgrimage route from Jericho to Jerusalem. Thus, the origin of the iconographical programme is to be located in Palestine, whereas the stylistic design was created by Roman artists following either the traditional iconographical schemata or the texts of the Gospels, but not using models from Palestinian miniature art, as scholars supposed. The audience of the sarcophagi seems to be former pilgrims or persons drawn to Holy Land Piety that can be found, for example, in the pious circle of women to which the pilgrim Egeria addressed her report.

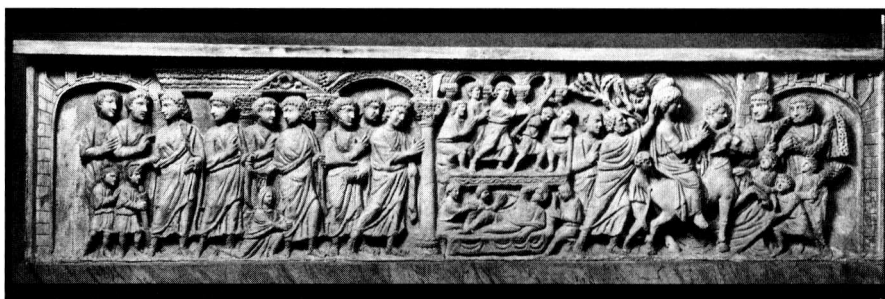
The German scholar Bernhard Kötting once compared pilgrims to bees gathering honey while at the same time pollinating blossoms. Accordingly, the antique pilgrims were ‘bees of the theological, cultic and cultural exchange’.¹ But like the botanist, who has no means of determining with surety whether a blossom was indeed pollinated by bees or merely by the wind, neither can, according to Kötting, the historian decide with certainty whether a cultural phenomenon was directly inspired by pilgrims or not.

In my opinion, Kötting quite rightly points out the methodological difficulties the historian researching processes of cultural exchange is faced with. Nonetheless, it remains worthwhile to look for testimonies to such an exchange. In my habilitation project, I examine literary and archeological sources from the second to the fifth centuries that provide an insight into the impact on, and importance of the Holy Land for Western Christians in Late Antiquity. I present one example of my findings here.

¹ Bernhard Kötting, *Peregrinatio religiosa. Wallfahrten in der Antike und das Pilgerwesen in der alten Kirche*, Forschungen zur Volkskunde 33-5 (Münster, 1950), 414.

The so called Bethesda Sarcophagi are a group of fifteen currently known sarcophagi from the last decade of the 4th century,² which all depict the same succession of scenes from the New Testament on the front panel. These are from left to right: Jesus with blind men, Jesus with a kneeling woman, Jesus passing an archway, then in two registers the healing of the paralytic, and finally Christ entering Jerusalem.

Bethesda Sarcophagus from the Vatican cemetery (390-400 AD, now: Museo Pio Cristiano): front panel



Jesus with
blind men

Jesus with
a kneeling woman

Jesus
passing
an archway

The healing of
the paralytic at
the pool of Bethesda

Christ's entry into
Jerusalem



Bethesda Sarcophagus from Tarragona (390-400 AD): front panel

² Antonella Nicoletti, *I sarcofagi di Bethesda. Università di Padova. Studi sull'arte paleocristiana e bizantina* (Milano, 1981), listed sixteen sarcophagi; while Guntram Koch, *Frühchristliche Sarkophage*, Handbuch der Archäologie, im Rahmen des Handbuchs der Altertumswissenschaft (München, 2003), 314-6, took only fourteen, assigning two fragments of Arles (Nicoletti: nrr. 6,7) to one and the same sarcophagus, and assigning the sarcophagus of Clermont-Ferrand not as a Bethesda type, but as a City Gate Sarcophagus (Nicoletti, nr. 14). I agree with Koch in the first case, whereas the fragment of Clermont-Ferrand in my view presents undoubtedly the iconographic programme of the Bethesda Sarcophagi. Only three of the front panels are completely preserved, the sarcophagus of the young woman Bassa, found in the catacombe of Praetextatus in Rome, is a very interesting exception: here, the right half of the front panel is filled with an epitaph, see the recent study of Dennis Trout, 'Borrowed Verse and Broken Narrative: Agency, Identity, and the (Bethesda) Sarcophagus of Bassa', in Jás Elsner and Janet Huskinson (eds), *Life, Death and Representation. Some New Work on Roman Sarcophagi*, Millennium-Studien 29 (Berlin, 2011), 337-58.

The uniformity of this iconographical program is obvious, its origin, however, remains obscure. As I will show, it can neither be explained exclusively on the basis of the gospels nor solely in terms of the iconographical tradition of Roman sarcophagi sculpture. The division of the scenes through architectural depictions brings the Bethesda Sarcophagi in the vicinity of the City Gate Sarcophagi, the movement from left to right reminds us of the Passage Sarcophagi that show the Israelites passing the Red Sea.

Thus, the Bethesda Sarcophagi represent a very ambitious programme of 'narrative art'.³ But what story do they tell?

In 1938, the French scholar M. Simon suggested that the iconographical programme of the Bethesda Sarcophagi presents an eclectic synopsis of events that occurred on Jesus' way from Jericho to Jerusalem. The stylistic design, Simon claimed, is based on Palestinian miniature art, such as can be found in illustrated pilgrim guides.⁴ The problem with Simon's thesis is that we do not have any examples of miniature art from Palestine. Moreover, recent scholarship emphasizes unanimously that the iconographical style of the Bethesda Sarcophagi points to their Roman origin.⁵ On the other hand, there are indeed several indications of a connection between the order of the scenes and certain holy sites in Palestine. The Bethesda Sarcophagi seem to combine knowledge of the holy sites with the artistic tradition of Roman sculpture.

Therefore, I would like to offer a modification of Simon's thesis, arguing that the composition of the Bethesda Sarcophagi reflects the stops along a 4th century pilgrim route from Jericho to Jerusalem, which we can reconstruct on the basis of contemporary literary sources. Unfortunately, we do not have one single pilgrim report that lists all five stops together. Thus, we have to link several pieces of evidence like tesserae of a mosaic.

Beginning on the left of the front panel of a Bethesda Sarcophagus, we see Jesus accompanied by two apostles healing two (sometimes three) blind men.

³ See A. Nicoletti, *I sarcofagi di Bethesda* (1981), 36: 'un corrente d'arte narrativa'; David Knipp, 'Christus Medicus' in *der frühchristlichen Sarkophagskulptur. Ikonographische Studien der Sepulchralkunst des späten vierten Jahrhunderts*, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae 37 (Leiden and Boston, 1998), 140.

⁴ M. Simon, 'Sur l'origine des sarcophages chrétiens du type Béthesda', *Mélanges d'archéologie et d'histoire* 55 (1938), 200-23. In recent times, Galit Noga-Banai examined the connection between the iconography of the Bethesda Sarcophagi and the locus sanctus of the healing of the paralytic: Galit Noga-Banai, 'Loca Sancta and the Bethesda Sarcophagi', in Hugo Brandenburg, Stefan Heid and Christoph Marksches (eds), *Salute e guarigione nella tarda antichità: atti alle giornata tematica dei Seminari di archeologia cristiana (Roma; 20 maggio 2004)* (Città del Vaticano, 2007), 107-23. According to her, the sarcophagi depict a (temporary) tradition, according to which the healing of the paralytic was commemorated at the pool of Siloam.

⁵ A. Nicoletti, *I sarcofagi di Bethesda* (1981); D. Knipp, 'Christus medicus' (1998); G. Koch, *Frühchristliche Sarkophage* (2003).

The healing of more than one blind man is mentioned only in *Matthew* 20:29-34 and occurs near Jericho, on the way to Jerusalem.⁶ Jerome reports in his *Epitaphium Paulae* (i.e. *Ep.* 108) that, in the year 404, the sites of Jesus' healing of the two blind men and his entry into Jerusalem were stops on the pilgrim route from Jericho to Jerusalem.⁷ Given the structural function of the architectural depictions on the Bethesda Sarcophagi, it seems valid to assume that the archway on the left marks the city gate of Jericho, and the one on the right a gate of Jerusalem. But how do the kneeling woman and the paralytic man of Bethesda fit into this context?

There are many ways to relate the kneeling woman to gospel stories, the most common being that of the Canaanite woman (*Matth.* 15:22; *Mark* 7:28) or the woman who had been plagued by bleeding for twelve years (*Matth.* 9:20-2; *Mark* 5:24-34; *Luke* 8:43-8).⁸ Both stories are set in Galilee and do not fit into the context of the route from Jericho to Jerusalem. But one can also identify the kneeling woman with Mary, the sister of Lazarus,⁹ who according to *John* 11 ran hastily to meet Jesus near Bethany, where Lazarus was buried. As the pilgrim Egeria reports, the meeting of Mary and Jesus was commemorated in the 380s not only by a church on the route from Jericho to Jerusalem, but also with a particular liturgy on the Saturday of Lazarus, that is the day before Palm Sunday. Egeria writes:

Going from Jerusalem to the Lazarium, there is at about 500 feet distance, a church (*ecclesia*) on the way at the site where Mary, the sister of Lazarus, went up (*occurrit*) to the Lord. When the bishop comes, all monks go up (*occurrent*) to him, and the people join them. They sing a hymn and an antiphon and read that passage from the gospel

⁶ Even *Mark* 10:46-11:11 and *Luke* 18:35-19:40 combine the healing of a – but only one – blind at Jericho next to Christ's entry to Jerusalem. The sarcophagi of the Catacombe of Praetextatus (Nicoletti, nr. 4) and Tarragona (Nicoletti, nr. 2) have three blind men, but none of the fragments shows only one blind. Obviously, for the artists the plural was essential, not the exact number. Maybe, the depiction of three blind men can be interpreted as a synopsis of the gospel-versions.

⁷ Hieron., *Ep.* 108:12 (CSEL 54, 320,9-321,19 Hilberg): '*reuertar Hierosolymam ... ingressa sepulchrum Lazari Mariae et Marthae uidit hospitium et Bethfage, uillam sacerdotium maxillarum, et locum, in quo pullus lasciuiens gentium domini frena suscepit apostolorumque stratus uestibus mollia terga praeibit ad sedendum. Rectoque itinere descendebat Hierichum cogitans ... et arborem morum Zacchei, id est bona paenitentiae opera, quibus cruenta dudum ex noxia rapinis peccata calcabat exelsumque dominum de excelso uirtutum intuebatur, et iuxta uiam caecorum loca, qui receptis luminibus utriusque populi credentis in dominum sacramenta praemiserant.*' The epistle was written immediately after the death of Paula, in 404 AD. In the 5th century, the Christian community of Jerusalem commemorated the two events together on Palm Sunday, reading and hearing the entire lecture during mass (see the Armenian lectionary: Lecture on Palm-Sunday *Matth.* 20:29-21:10). On textual, historical and reception studies of *Ep.* 108 see recently A. Cain, 'Jerome's *Epitaphium Paulae*: Hagiography, Pilgrimage, and the Cult of Saint Paula', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 18 (2010), 105-39.

⁸ See A. Nicoletti, *I sarcophagi di Bethesda* (1981), 47-52.

⁹ See M. Simon, 'Sur l'origine' (1938), 213-7.

where the sister of Lazarus went up (*occurrit*) to the Lord. And after the prayer is done and all have been blessed, they go to the Lazarium singing hymns.¹⁰

Three times Egeria uses the verb *occurrere* that means not only 'going up to', but indicates also a meeting where the one who goes up 'falls down before'. This fits with the iconography: It is a meeting between the woman and the Lord like the hierarchy between the monks and the bishop. It is noteworthy that Egeria pays more attention to the liturgical act at the church of Mary than to the ceremony at the Lazarium. This conforms with other sources which testify to the special adoration of the sister of Lazarus by Christians in the East.¹¹ The Italian scholar Antonella Nicoletti rightly emphasized that the representation of Mary or Martha without the edicula of Lazarus is not coherent with the Roman iconographical tradition.¹² These facts reinforce the impression that literary sources of 4th century Holy Land pilgrims can shed more light on the interpretation of the iconographical programme of the Bethesda Sarcophagi than Roman iconographic traditions.

I move on to the central scene, the healing of the paralytic at the Bethesda pool, which is told in the gospel of *John* (5:1-11), where it is connected to Jesus' second appearance in Jerusalem. Traveling from Jericho to Jerusalem, one did in fact automatically pass the Eastern gate¹³ (today: Lions Gate) and the pool of Bethesda. In my opinion it is noteworthy that Cyril of Jerusalem, in his homily on the healing of the paralytic, brings together the healing at Bethesda and the healing of the two blind men near Jericho.¹⁴ It can be assumed that combining these two biblical accounts seemed plausible to Cyril as well as to his audience due to a common familiarity with the respective stops along the pilgrim route from Jericho to Jerusalem.

With regard to the origin of the iconography of the Bethesda Sarcophagi the iconographical details are especially interesting. The upper panel presents a detailed depiction of the architecture which is unique in Roman sarcophagi art. It shows the water pool that divides the two registers, and above it four columns.

¹⁰ *Itin. Eger.* 29:4 (CChr.SL 175, 76,20-8 Franceschini/Weber): '*Euntibus autem de Ierusalem in Lazarium forsitan ad quingentos passus de eodem loco ecclesia est in strata in eo loco, in quo occurrit Domino Maria soro Lazari. Ibi ergo cum venerit episcopus, occurrent illi omnes monachi, et populus ibi ingreditur, dicitur unus ymnus et una antiphona et legitur ipse locus de evangelio, ubi occurrit soror Lazari Domino. Et sic facta oratione et benedictis omnibus, inde iam usque Lazarium cum ymnis itur.*'

¹¹ See A. Saxer, 'Les Saintes Marie Madaleine et Marie de Béthanie dans la tradition liturgique et homilétique orientale', *Revue des Sciences religieuses* 32 (1958), 1-37.

¹² See A. Nicoletti, *I sarcophagi di Bethesda* (1981), 50.

¹³ See *Itin. Burd.* 594:5 (CChr.SL 175, 17 Geyer/Cuntz): '*Item ad Hierusalem euntibus ad portem, quae est contra orientem, ut ascendatur in monte Oliueti.*'

¹⁴ Cyr. Hier., *Hom. in par.* (408 Rupp). Emphasizing the importance of Jesus' question to the paralytic: 'Do you want to be made whole?', Cyril interrupts his exegesis of *John* 5 and says: 'Once the savior was on the way, there were sitting two blind men' (Περὶ τοῦ ποτὲ ὁ σωτὴρ κατὰ τὴν ὁδόν, καὶ τύφλοι δύο ἐκαθέζοντο).

The healing of the paralytic was a popular motif in early Christian art,¹⁵ but its precise depiction at Bethesda with pool and its archways is a novelty. This depiction concurs with the Gospel of *John*, which mentions one pool (κολυμβήθρα) and five columned halls (πέντε στοαί). The 4th century sources however describe twin pools, and their references to the five halls are very inconsistent or even contradictory.¹⁶ It was apparently difficult to identify the five halls within the ruins of the site in the 4th century.¹⁷ It is therefore highly improbable that the iconography of the Bethesda Sarcophagi is based on sketches or miniature art from Palestine. This depiction is much more likely based on the biblical text.

The representation, however, of Christ entering Jerusalem that covers the entire right-hand third of the front panel follows the traditional Roman iconography.¹⁸

Connecting the tesserae, I conclude that the selection and order of the scenes depicted on the Bethesda Sarcophagi are inspired by the 4th century pilgrim route from Jericho to Jerusalem, comprising the following points: the healing of the blind men near Jericho, the site where Mary met Jesus near Bethany, the Eastern Gate, the pool of Bethesda, and Christ's entry into Jerusalem. With regard to the iconographical design, however, there are no indications of a Palestinian origin. As I have shown, the details follow either the Roman iconographic tradition or – in the case of Bethesda – the description given by the Gospel. Thus, it seems likely that Holy Land pilgrims were the ones who inspired the selection and order of scenes of the Bethesda Sarcophagi. The stylistic design, however, was created by Roman artists following either the traditional iconographic schemata or the texts of the Gospels, but not using models from Palestinian art.

¹⁵ See D. Knipp, 'Christus Medicus' (1998), 141-3.

¹⁶ Eus. Caes., *Onom.* (GCS 11,58,21-3 Klostermann): Βηζαθά. κολυμβήθρα ἐν Ἱερουσαλήμ, ἧτις ἐστὶν «ἡ προβατική», τὸ παλαιὸν ἐστοῦς ἔχουσα. καὶ νῦν δεῖκνται ἐν ταῖς αὐτόθι λίμναις διδύμοις. *Itin. Burd.* 589.8-10 (CChr.SL 175,15 Geyer/Cuntz): 'interius uero ciuitati sunt piscinae gemellares quinque porticus habentes, quae appellantur Bethsaida. Ibi aegri multorum annorum sanabantur. Aquam autem habent hae piscinae in modum coccini turbatam.' Cyr. Hier., *Hom. in paral.* 4 (408 Rupp): 'Ἐν γὰρ Ἱεροσολύμοις ἦν προβατικὴ κολυμβήθρα πέντε στοῦς ἔχουσα, τέσσαρας μὲν περιτρεχούσας, μέσην δὲ τὴν πέμπτην, ἐν ἣ κατέκειτο πλήθος ἀσθενούντων. Hieron., *Onom.* (GCS 11, 59, 22-4 Klostermann): 'Bethsaida piscina in Ierusalem quae uocabatur προβατική, et a nobis interpretari potest pecuali. haec quinque quondam porticus habuit, ostendunturque gemini lacus.'

¹⁷ Thus, Max Küchler, *Jerusalem. Ein Handbuch und Studienreiseführer zur Heiligen Stadt*, Orte und Landschaften der Bibel 2 (Göttingen, 2007), 331.

¹⁸ This is valid at least with regard to the Bethesda Sarcophagus from the Vatican, which I believe to be a representative of the series' prototype. Here, the man in the tree is integrated into the whole scene, corresponding to the former iconographical tradition of the Adventus motif, see E. Dinkler, *Der Einzug in Jerusalem. Ikonographische Untersuchungen im Anschluss an ein bisher unbekanntes Sarkophagfragment*, Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Forschung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen, Geisteswissenschaften 167 (Opladen, 1970). On the Bethesda Sarcophagi from Tarragona and Ischia, however, the man stands in the tree and has a conversation with Jesus. In my view, this depiction marks the spin-off of the traditional entry scene that shows the conversation of Jesus and Zachäus.

Taking into consideration the respective sites at which the Bethesda Sarcophagi were found, it is interesting to note that eight of the fifteen sarcophagi and fragments were found in Gaul and three in Spain.

Sites of Discovery of the Bethesda Sarcophagi

Province	Find spot	Sarcophagus/Fragment
Italia	Rome Rome Ischia	Nicoletti 1981: nr. 1; Koch 2003: nr. 28 Nicoletti 1981: nr. 4; Koch 2003: nr. 29 Nicoletti 1981: nr. 3; Koch 2003: nr. 35
Gallia	Arles Avignon Clermont-Ferrand Die Die Poitiers Valence Vienne	Nicoletti 1981: nr. 6-7; Koch 2003: nr. 31 Nicoletti 1981: nr. 8; Koch 2003: nr. 32 Nicoletti 1981: nr. 14; Koch 2003: nr. 32 Nicoletti 1981: nr. 9; Koch 2003: nr. 33 Nicoletti 1981: nr. 10; Koch 2003: nr. 34 Nicoletti 1981: nr. 12; Koch 2003: nr. 37 Nicoletti 1981: nr. 11; Koch 2003: nr. 40 Nicoletti 1981: nr. 15; Koch 2003: nr. 41
Hispania	Tarragona Tarragona Jerez	Nicoletti 1981: nr. 2; Koch 2003: nr. 38 Nicoletti 1981: nr. 16; Koch 2003: nr. 39 Nicoletti 1981: nr. 13; Koch 2003: nr. 36
Mauretania	Algier	Nicoletti 1981: nr. 5; Koch 2003: nr. 30

While most scholars are in agreement that the prototype of the Bethesda Sarcophagi was created in Rome,¹⁹ it is a matter of controversy whether or not local workshops in Gaul produced copies.²⁰ In any case, the diffusion of fragments corresponds to the fact that most Holy Land pilgrims in the Theodosian age did in fact come from Gaul and Spain. This diffusion illustrates, therefore, the Holy Land piety in these regions, the homelands of pilgrims such as Melania, Egeria, Poimenia, Silvia. The Bethesda Sarcophagi show that Holy Land pilgrims did indeed act like bees disseminating knowledge about the holy sites of Palestine in the Western Empire.

While it seems very likely that the iconographical programme of the Bethesda Sarcophagi was inspired by pilgrims, it is not necessary to conclude that a Christian who did not know the pilgrim route from Jericho to Jerusalem could not understand the meaning of the iconography. Considering the burial context,

¹⁹ Thus, A. Nicoletti, *I sarcofagi di Bethesda* (1981); G. Koch, *Frühchristliche Sarkophage* (2003); D. Trout, 'Borrowed Verse' (2011); only D. Knipp, 'Christus medicus' (1998), 175-8, believes that the sarcophagus of Tarragona is the prototype of the series.

²⁰ For the former discussion see A. Nicoletti, *I sarcofagi di Bethesda* (1981).

the iconographical program of the Bethesda Sarcophagi can and must be interpreted allegorically. The scenes show the way of man through life, identifying the deceased with the small depicted biblical figures.²¹ The blind men and the kneeling woman represent people imploring Christ for salvation. The central scene marks the conversion of one's life, the pool of water symbolizing a baptismal font.²² Finally, the healed man represents a Christian who follows his saviour to the heavenly Jerusalem. This allegorical interpretation, however, was based on and was inspired by a very real pilgrimage route. Thus, the Bethesda Sarcophagi realize iconographically what Jerome refers to in his letter to Dardanus on the *terra repromissionis*, namely that 'historical truth is the foundation for spiritual comprehension.'²³

²¹ I suppose that the selection of the stations of the pilgrim route depended on the possibility to interpret the relating biblical stories allegorically. The metonymal character of Roman Sarcophagi art (pagan as well as Christian) was pointed out by R. Brilliant, 'Mythological Sarcophagi: Proleptic Visions', in *id.* (ed.), *Visual Narratives: Storytelling in Etruscan and Roman Art* (Ithaca and London, 1984), 124-65; M. Koortbojian, *Myth, Meaning, and Memory on Roman sarcophagi* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1995).

²² For the baptismal interpretation, see Cyr. Hier., *Hom. in paral.* (ed. Rupp), and Manuel Sotomayor, *Sarcófagos romano-cristianos de España: Estudios iconográfico* (Granada, 1975); A. Nicoletti, *I sarcophagi di Bethesda* (1981); Françoise Monfrin, 'La Guérison du Serviteur (Jn 4,43-54). Une nouvelle interprétation des sarcophages de Bethesda', *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome. Antiquité* 97 (1985), 979-1020.

²³ Hieron., *Ep.* 129:6:1 (CSEL 56, 173,2f. Hilberg): '*auferam historiae ueritatem, quae fundamentum est intelligentiae spiritalis.*'