

# An Early Christian Sarcophagus from Rome Lost and Found

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THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART acquired in 1991 the surviving original portion of a major Early Christian frieze sarcophagus. It was the gift of Josef and Marcy Mittlemann,<sup>1</sup> and it had been a garden ornament at Burrwood, an estate in Cold Spring Harbor on Long Island. On the face of the restored sarcophagus, carved in high relief, are scenes from the life of Christ and the apocryphal life of St. Peter; on the ends, in low relief, events from the Old Testament are depicted. The composition of the sarcophagus—with its solid, almost chunky, figure style and deeply undercut drapery patterns—is typical of Roman early-fourth-century Christian sarcophagi. The juxtaposition of Petrine and Christological scenes makes the sarcophagus one of a group of approximately fifty works that give special preeminence to the story of St. Peter's life in Rome.<sup>2</sup> No other example of this type is known in an American collection.

As it exists today, five scenes appear on the face of the sarcophagus (Figure 1). At the far left end of the sarcophagus a bearded Peter draws water from the rock of his prison cell as attendant figures watch in wonder. Following to the right, across the front, is the Arrest of Peter with two men holding Peter's arms to restrain him. In the center a bearded Christ is shown in profile seated on a stiff-legged ass in an expansive depiction of his Entry into Jerusalem. At the right a bearded Christ stands flanked by two of his disciples behind baskets filled with loaves of bread that identify the event as the Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes. At the far right end of the sarcophagus is the Raising of Lazarus in which a bearded Christ stands before the shrouded figure of Lazarus in his tomb. On the end of the sarcophagus near the Christological scenes Adam and Eve

cover themselves with large leaves beside the Tree of Knowledge after the Fall of Man (Figure 2). On the end near the Petrine scenes the Three Hebrews in the Fiery Furnace raise their hands in prayer (Figure 3). The back and interior of the sarcophagus are roughly finished, like the background of the scene with the Three Hebrews and the figure of Eve.

The Petrine scenes are composed of overlapping figures carved in multiple layers of relief, which allows them to be compressed into narrowly defined spaces. With the exception of the man who grabs St. Peter's arm to the left of the scene of Christ's Entry into Jerusalem, the heads of the major figures in each scene are thrust forward beyond the rim of the sarcophagus making the drama of the events project into the viewer's space. Their hair is defined by short runs of drill holes arranged in rows, and expressionistic shadows are created by the use of the drill at the inner edges of the eyes and mouths. Their clothing is deeply undercut in schematic designs that create vivid patterns of light and dark, which enhance the immediacy of the moment.

In contrast, the heads of the figures in the Christological scenes and that of the man holding the arm of Peter beside the Entry scene are carved with limited, random use of the drill and relatively shallow drapery folds. None of the other compositions is as densely packed with figures as those in the Petrine scenes. Each is essentially composed in two layers of relief arranged in a relatively regular rhythm of alternating highs and lows, with none of the figures projecting far beyond the rim of the sarcophagus.

A comparison of the Museum's sarcophagus with related Early Christian works reveals the extent of the difference between the Petrine and Christological scenes. Most similar in composition to the Museum's work is the sarcophagus Lateran 161 in the Museo Pio Cristiano in Rome, which is generally dated to the end of the first quarter of the fourth

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Figure 1. Front of Early Christian sarcophagus, showing scenes from the Life of Peter and the Life of Christ, Late Roman, first third of 4th century. Marble, L. 213 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Josef and Marsy Mittlemann, 1991, 1991.366

century (Figure 4).<sup>3</sup> The Old Testament scenes on the ends of the two sarcophagi are almost exact replicas. On both, the Three Hebrews stand in an elaborate wood-burning furnace made of brick. The scenes of Adam and Eve with their short fleshy bodies and tubular legs differ only in the presence of the snake twining around the tree in Lateran 161.

Four of the scenes on the front of the sarcophagi are similar. In both works, the Petrine scenes of Drawing Water from the Rock and the Arrest on the left are balanced by the Christological events of the Miracle of the Loaves and the Raising of Lazarus on the right. Only the central compositions dif-

fer: the expansive Entry into Jerusalem appears on the Museum's sarcophagus, whereas on Lateran 161 a female orans is flanked by two compact Christological scenes—Christ Changing Water into Wine at the Wedding in Cana and Christ Healing the Man Born Blind. In contrast to the Museum's sarcophagus, where only two scenes project forward, the entire face of Lateran 161 is covered by a series of densely composed scenes whose major figures dramatically thrust their heads beyond the rim of the sarcophagus. As in the Petrine scenes on the Museum's sarcophagus, drill holes are found at the corners of the eyes of all the major figures and the



Figure 2. End of sarcophagus in Figure 1 showing Adam and Eve by the Tree of Knowledge

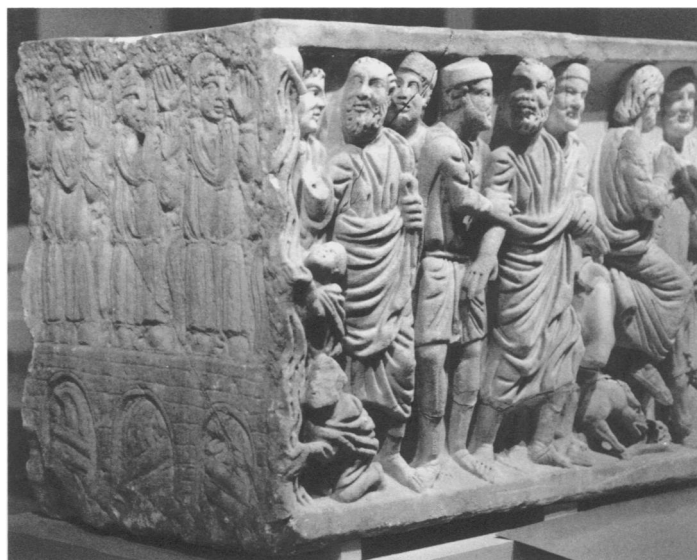


Figure 3. End of sarcophagus in Figure 1 showing Three Hebrews in the Fiery Furnace



Figure 4. Front and end views of Early Christian sarcophagus called Lateran 161. Late Roman, first quarter of 4th century. Marble. Vatican City, Vatican Museum (photos: Monumenti Musei e Gallerie Pontificie)

drapery patterns are consistently deeply undercut in schematic patterns: all characteristics of early-fourth-century sarcophagi.<sup>4</sup>

Not only the carving but also the compositions of the Petrine scenes on the two sarcophagi are remarkably similar. Only minor details in style and iconography differ in the depictions of Peter Drawing Water from a Rock and at his Arrest. The major figures share the same poses, projecting forward from the smooth background in densely packed layers of relief. On the Lateran sarcophagus Peter carries a wand in both of the scenes in which he appears. On the Museum's work the tip of the wand survives at the upper edge of the sarcophagus in the depiction of the water miracle but is not present at Peter's Arrest. In both works those who kneel to wonder at the flowing water in the water miracle wear a pileus, a short cylindrical hat worn by the Roman military elite.<sup>5</sup>

By contrast, the Christological scenes differ dramatically. Most significantly Christ appears as a bearded adult in each event on the Museum's sarcophagus. On Lateran 161, as is usual in Early

Christian art, he is portrayed as a beardless youth. Moreover, secondary figures on the Museum's sarcophagus, like the child beside Christ at the Raising of Lazarus, wear the pileus, a motif unknown in Early Christian narrative scenes of Christ's life. Only the base of the compositions of the scenes of the Miracle of the Loaves and the Raising of Lazarus are the same on the two sarcophagi. Both share the same densely packed groups of feet separated by baskets of bread and ending with a kneeling figure.

Most significant in explaining the discrepancy in the style and iconography on the face of the Museum's sarcophagus are the two breaks on the work which divide the sarcophagus's face horizontally and vertically. The compositional differences below and above the gaping fissure that marks the horizontal break running across the lower legs of the figures from the Arrest of Peter to the Raising of Lazarus have been noted. Equally significant is a narrow, irregular vertical break which follows the contour of the right side of the figure of Peter in the scene of his Arrest beginning at the roughly



Figure 5. Detail of Figure 1

repaired rim of the sarcophagus and ending at the horizontal break. This vertical break is most visible where the arm of the arresting man is joined with grainy mortar to the hand with which he grasps Peter's left arm (Figure 5). Within the rectangle formed by these break lines the marble has a smoother, whiter finish than elsewhere on the work—a contrast again most visible at the join between the figure of St. Peter and the man arresting him.<sup>6</sup> If the rectangular slab of marble filled with the upper part of the Christological scenes is discounted, the remaining elements of the sarcophagus are consistent in style and iconography with early-fourth-century sarcophagi, such as Lateran 161, the earliest example of a sarcophagus with Petrine and Christological scenes.<sup>7</sup> The Museum's work is probably of a slightly later date, although no later than the end of the first third of the century, as it possesses the squat proportions and dynamic compositional rhythm of the earlier works of the type.

All the known surviving Early Christian sarcophagi were carefully catalogued and illustrated by engraving in the fifth volume of P. Raffaele Garrucci's *Storia dell'arte cristiana nei primi otto secoli della chiesa*, published in 1879.<sup>8</sup> While minor details of the surviving sarcophagi were at times inaccurately rendered by the engravers, they are essentially accurate and have been used consistently by later scholars of Early Christian iconography.<sup>9</sup> Among the works il-

lustrated by Garrucci combining Petrine and Christological themes is a damaged sarcophagus that can be shown to be the work now in the Museum's collection (Figure 6).<sup>10</sup> Most significantly, Garrucci's engraving of the sarcophagus shows one of the men at the Arrest of Peter to survive only as the hand which grasps Peter's left arm at the elbow.<sup>11</sup> As seen in Figure 5, the vertical break on the Museum's sarcophagus runs across the arm of the figure holding Peter's left arm; the join occurs where the man's hand grabs Peter's elbow. As in the engraving, the rest of the upper body and the head of the figure are lost.

All other major elements of the Petrine scenes on the Museum's sarcophagus match details of the engraving, even to the position of Peter's wand in the scene of the water miracle. The Old Testament scenes on this sarcophagus also closely resemble those on the Garrucci engraving, including the length of the tongues of flame coming from the furnace in the Three Hebrews scene, the huge leaves held by Adam and Eve, and the notch in the trunk of the Tree of Knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

The sequence of feet and objects that extends across the broken lower portion of the sarcophagus in the engraving matches precisely the lower portion of the Museum's sarcophagus. On both, at the left, a very short-legged, rough-maned colt stretches forward from behind the rear legs of the ass to nibble a leafy branch that lies on the ground. At the

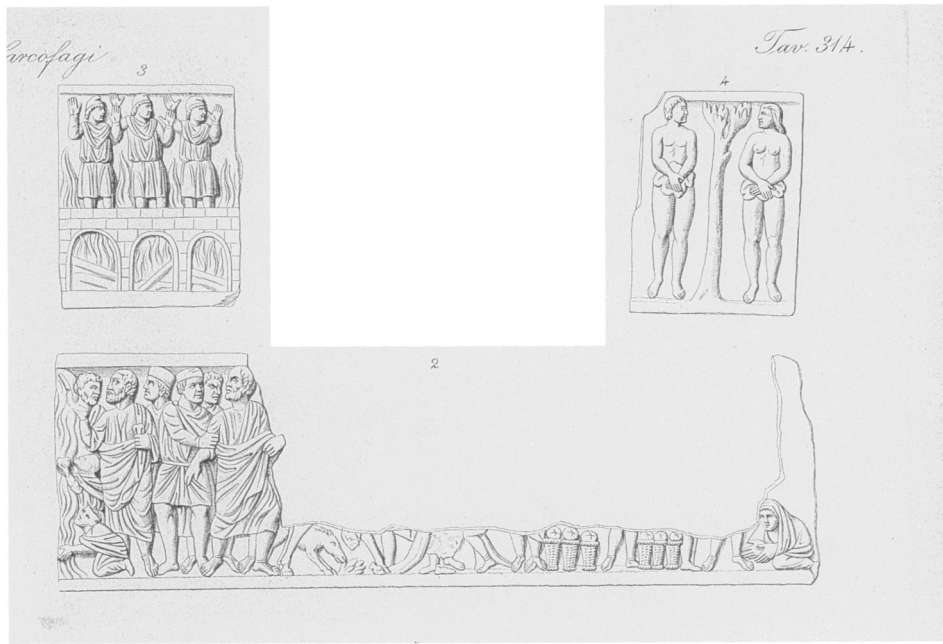


Figure 6. Front and end views of sarcophagus in Figure 1. Engravings from J. Raeffelo Garrucci's *Storia della arte cristiana nei primi otto secoli della chiesa* (Prato, 1879) plate 314

forelegs of the ass, a curve of fabric falls to the ground, one of the garments laid before Christ at his Entry into Jerusalem. The legs of several people are clustered together—a straight one beside the forelegs of the ass, two facing away from the ass between two others that face the scene. The farthest away, bending at the knee toward the ass, is placed in front of the trunk of a tree. Following are a pair of legs with an extra foot projecting from behind the far leg, three tall baskets of bread, another pair of feet, three more baskets of bread, another leg, a pair of legs, and the kneeling figure of Martha with outstretched hands.

On the existing sarcophagus the upper portion of the figure of Martha has been lost, but photographs survive of it in situ at Burrwood (Figure 7).<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the existing hands and knee on the Museum's sarcophagus match their position on the engraving. The angular patterns over the colt's head and to the right of the curve of the fabric in the engraving were meant to represent broken areas on the face of the stone. The area by the colt still exists, covered on the Museum's restored sarcophagus by the foot of Christ as he sits on the ass. The other area, located over the feet beyond the curve of the garment, is still visible on the sarcophagus. It is cleverly used as part of the lost lower portion of the body of the young child shown clutching the legs of the man holding the garment before Christ, a child's pose without precedent in Early Christian art.

The only significant discrepancy between the engraving and the Museum's sarcophagus is the route of the break across the baskets of bread. The engraving shows the front of the sarcophagus broken off in an irregular line that juts up to run over the baskets of bread. On the Museum's sarcophagus the break is a relatively straight line that runs across the rims of the baskets. The original break must have been regularized when the restoration was added to provide a stable base for the massive rectangular fill. That may also explain why the relief carving on the restoration is generally thickest at its base. The heads of the figures do not project as far forward as they do in the Petrine scenes, yet the rear of the ass and the frightened child in the Entry scenes are in such high relief that, if complete, their feet would project beyond the plane of the sarcophagus's base.

Garrucci's original identification of the missing scenes as consisting only of the Entry into Jerusalem, the Miracle of the Loaves, and the Raising of Lazarus has remained unchallenged in all subsequent publications.<sup>14</sup> A careful consideration of the pattern of the feet in the original portion of the sarcophagus suggests that another event in the life of Christ should be added to Garrucci's three scenes and their later restoration. While the figures of the existing Entry into Jerusalem, with the exception of the small child, are standard for Early Christian iconography, they are spaced too far apart to be an

accurate reconstruction of the original composition.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the two feet, and therefore the body, which turn away from the ass just beyond the fall of the garment cannot have been part of the original Entry. The restorer, who accounted for every element of the original portion of the sarcophagus in his work, solved the problem of the feet by inserting a frightened child turning to an adult for comfort. This solution, however, is not possible in an Early Christian image where everyone always faces Christ in welcoming him to the city.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, the arrangement of the figures in the Miracle of Loaves, the following scene, is a variant on the standard Early Christian formula. Typically, as in the scene on Lateran 161, Christ is fully visible with the baskets of bread almost hiding the feet of the disciples who stand beside him. On the Museum's sarcophagus, it is Christ, the central figure in the event, whose feet are hidden. If the body of Christ was placed originally in the standard pattern, between the baskets over the surviving pair of feet, the foot barely visible in low relief beyond the baskets at the left would have been that of a disciple. The pair of feet beside the baskets and the feet turned away from the Entry would then have belonged to another event in the life of Christ.

The previously unrecognized event must have been Christ Healing the Man Born Blind. The scene, which is popular on Early Christian sarcoph-

agi, appears to the right of the orans in Lateran 161, where the man as small as a child stands in front of a larger figure. Christ stands alone, solidly set on both feet as he reaches out to touch the blind man's eyes (Figure 4). In reverse order the scene on Lateran 161 would have fit well on the Museum's sarcophagus with the blind man overlapping the figure of the man laying a garment before Christ and Christ standing alone. Depictions of the scene with the figures in reverse order, as they must have originally been on the Museum's sarcophagus, are known.<sup>17</sup> With the addition of the scene of the Man Born Blind, the Christological subjects would have been compressed into dynamic, densely packed narrative compositions comparable to those on Lateran 161 and to the Petrine scenes on the Museum's sarcophagus.<sup>18</sup>

The history of the damaged sarcophagus of the engraving without the inaccurate restoration of the Christological scenes can be traced with some certainty into the early twentieth century when it was recorded as lost. After its identification by Garrucci, it was published a number of times in studies of Petrine and Christological iconography.<sup>19</sup> In 1909 it was identified as missing from the Villa de Felice (formerly the Villa de Carpegna) in Rome.<sup>20</sup> No subsequent information about it was known until the work entered the Museum's collection.<sup>21</sup> Research into its history at Burrwood, however, sug-



Figure 7. The sarcophagus in Figure 1 used as a fountain base at Burrwood, Cold Spring Harbor, New York (photo: Archives of American Gardens, Smithsonian Institution)





Figure 8. Detail of heads of Peter and attendant figure from scene of Peter drawing water from a rock on the sarcophagus in Figure 1

gests that the sarcophagus may have been brought to this country for Burrwood at approximately the date it was published as lost; it probably came to this country with the restorations.<sup>22</sup> The Parke-Bernet sale catalogue for the furnishings of the estate in 1949 includes an early photograph of the house with the sarcophagus, fully restored, mounted on plinths in a place of honor.<sup>23</sup> By 1926 the sarcophagus had been placed against the brick wall of the estate's sunken garden as the base for a lion-head fountain (Figure 7).<sup>24</sup> The existing break at the end of the sarcophagus must have occurred after it was in use as a fountain.

While it is unfortunate that many of the original figures on the Metropolitan's sarcophagus have been broken and worn by years of being part of a garden ornament in Italy and then America, those heads protected by being carved in low relief under the sarcophagus rim offer startling insight into the sculptural tradition of Rome in the first third of the fourth century (Figure 8). Their intense expressions, like the dynamic rhythm of the compositions of the original portions of the sarcophagus, reveal the power of the earliest Christian art of Rome. In the original portions of the lost Early Christian sar-

cophagus, The Metropolitan Museum of Art has acquired a major Roman work of the early fourth century whose iconography is critical to the understanding of the development of Christian art.

## NOTES

1. The MMA's acquisition of the sarcophagus was facilitated by Josef Mittlemann's interest in classical art and his faith in the quality of the sarcophagus.

2. *Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century*, exh. cat., MMA (New York, 1979) pp. 416–418; E. Dinkler, "Die ersten Petrusdarstellungen," *Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft* 11 (1938/39) pp. 1–80.

3. F. W. Deichmann, *Repertorium der Christlich-Antiken Sarkophage* (Wiesbaden, 1967) no. 6, with bibl.; *Age of Spirituality*, pp. 416–418.

4. G. Hanfmann, *The Sarcophagus in Dumbarton Oaks* (Cambridge, Mass., 1951) pp. 53–55.

5. B. Brenk, "The Imperial Heritage of Early Christian Art," in *Age of Spirituality: A Symposium*, Kurt Weitzmann, ed. (New York, 1980) p. 40, argued that the presence of the hats, which had been worn by Roman officers who had had an important role in the persecution of Christians, was meant to stress that scenes of St. Peter being taken captive or in jail should be understood as events from the history of the persecution of Christians.

6. The vertical break is among many minor cracks that cover much of the face of the sarcophagus. Details of the scenes have been lost, including the hand with which Peter draws water from the rock, the rear leg of the ass, the base of the tomb of Lazarus, and the upper portion of the figure of Martha, who kneels beneath it at Christ's feet.

7. Dinkler, "Die ersten Petrusdarstellungen," p. 59.

8. P. R. Garrucci, *Storia dell'arte cristiana nei primi otto secoli della chiesa* (Prato, 1879) V.

9. Deichmann, *Repertorium*, used the engravings whenever photographs were not available as with the MMA's acquisition; 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) fig. 12, used the engraving of the MMA's sarcophagus for his study of Entry-scene iconography.

10. Garrucci, *Storia dell'arte cristiana*, pl. 314, figs. 2–4, pp. 27–29, where he identified the damaged base as containing the three Christological scenes found on the restoration today. He correctly identified the Old Testament events but could only identify the Petrine scenes as a bearded man drawing water from a rock and a bearded man being arrested.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 28, specifically noted the presence of the hand in the scene.

12. According to Alan Reiver, who supervised the removal and the subsequent restoration of the work, the diagonal breaks—clearly visible on the sarcophagus today and not indicated on the engraving—occurred when it was pulled from its setting at Burrwood.

13. The photograph of the garden is from the files of Mac Griswold, who also provided me with information on the development of the gardens at Burrwood. Mrs. Florence Nelson, a granddaughter of Walter Jennings, the builder of the estate, provided a photograph of a 1926 painting of the sunken garden, including the sarcophagus, by Helen Sides, thus confirming the location and condition of the sarcophagus at that time.

14. See note 10 for Garrucci's identification of the scenes; R. Grousset, *Étude sur l'histoire des sarcophages chrétiens. Catalogue des sarcophages chrétiens de Rome* (Paris, 1885) p. 81, no. 94 without illustration, where Garrucci's identification of the scenes on the sarcophagus was amended only by the identification of the Petrine scenes as events in the life of Moses; E. Becker, *Das Quellwunder des Moses in der altchristlichen Kunst* (Strasbourg, 1909) p. 44, accepted Garrucci's identification of the Christological scenes and continued the identification of the Petrine scenes as depictions of Moses; G. Stuhlfauth, *Die apokryphen Petrusgeschichten in der altchristlichen Kunst* (Leipzig, 1925) p. 88, also accepted the identification of the Christological scenes while being the first to identify correctly the scenes with the bearded man as events from the life of St. Peter; J. Wilpert, *I sarcofagi cristiani antichi* (Rome, 1929) II, p. 311, pl. 195, followed Garrucci's identification of the Christological events; M. Sotomayor, *S. Pedro en la iconografía paleocristiana* (Granada, 1962) p. 66 n. 120, also accepted the identification of three Christological events while supporting the identification of the other scenes as Petrine imagery; Deichmann, *Repertorium*, pp. 394–395 and pl. 151, figs. 946, 1–

946, 3, accepted Garrucci's identification of the Christological scenes while recognizing the Petrine imagery of the complete scenes. There the sarcophagus is dated to the first third of the 4th century. E. Dinkler, *Einzug in Jerusalem*, pp. 18, 22 and fig. 12, also accepted Garrucci's identification of the events without considering the feet turning away from the Entry.

15. Dinkler, *Einzug in Jerusalem*, p. 22, figs. 4 and 12, suggested the scene should be compared to the Entry on the Lateran sarcophagus 186. Deichmann, *Repertorium*, nos. 14 (Lateran 180), 21 (Lateran 186), 28 (Lateran 150A), for examples of Entry scenes on Early Christian sarcophagi where the colt also stands beneath its mother. On each, Christ sits astride the ass with one or two disciples in the background. Before him one figure leans forward on bended knee to spread a garment before the feet of the ass. In a tree beside the man, Zacchaeus peers through the branches to see Christ. No other figures are present.

16. See note 15 above.

17. Deichmann, *Repertorium*, nos. 6 (Lateran 161), 8 (Lateran 146), 10 (Lateran 166), 12 (Lateran 191), 14 (Lateran 180), 17 (Lateran 160), 20 (Lateran 173), 21 (Lateran 186), 22 (Lateran 222 and 227), 23 (Lateran 135), 621 (Cemetery of Sts. Mark and Marcellinus), 674 (St. Peter's), 771 (Museo Nazionale Romano, Aula III, Inv. 455), 772 (Museo Nazionale Romano, Aula III, Inv. 113302), and 919 (Villa Albani) for other early 4th-century frieze sarcophagi with the event. On nos. 17 and 23 Christ stands to the right of the Man Born Blind as he cures him, as he must have on the Museum's sarcophagus.

18. *Ibid.*, nos. 21 (Lateran 186), 23 (Lateran 135), 24 (Lateran 115), and 807 (Musei Capitolini, Sala I, Inv. 2400) shows that the composition of the remaining Christological scene, the Raising of Lazarus, is accurate as to the number of figures. However, the small child watching the event in the pileus of a Roman officer must have been originally a depiction of the risen Lazarus as on the sarcophagi in Deichmann. No small child attends the Raising of Lazarus on Early Christian sarcophagi, but at times Lazarus is depicted both dead, wound in his shroud in his tomb, and risen, a small naked figure beside Christ.

19. See note 14 above.

20. Becker, *Quellwunder des Moses*, p. 44, published the sarcophagus as lost.

21. Deichmann, *Repertorium*, p. 394, citing Becker, repeated the identification.

22. Mrs. Jackson Ravenscroft, a granddaughter of Walter Jennings, has the journals of the Jennings's family stay in Rome in 1908 when furnishings for Burrwood were being purchased. However, no specific record of the purchase of the sarcophagus could be found.

23. *Sale from the Estate of the Late Walter Jennings by Order of the Heirs, New York, October 25 and 26, 1949*, Parke-Bernet Galleries, 1949. The sarcophagus was not listed in the items in the auction, as by that date it had been built into the wall of the sunken garden. After the auction, the estate became The Brooklyn Home for the Blind, where the sarcophagus remained as part of the garden decoration. The reference to the illustration in the catalogue was provided by Josef Mittlemann.

24. See note 13 above.