

# Funeral or ‘Biography’? Re-considering the Potential Identities of Figures on the LM III A2 Agia Triada Sarcophagus

Jacob E. Heywood

**Abstract** *The idea that the iconography of the limestone sarcophagus from Agia Triada depicts the funerary rites of its occupant has long retained favour. One figure has traditionally been interpreted as representing the deceased – the male recipient in the ‘presentation’ scene. Considering the broader archaeological and iconographic context of the sarcophagus at Agia Triada, contemporaneous trends in larnax decoration taking inspiration from elite art and architecture, and the attributes and bodily expression of key figures within the pictorial scenes, the sarcophagus’s production for a high-status woman – perhaps one of the ritual officiants illustrated on the long sides – seems more probable. Rather than serving as a visual source for interpreting Cretan funerary rites, the sarcophagus might be better understood as a biographical statement about the status and social role of its occupant within Agia Triada’s elite community.*

## Introduction

While interpretations of the painted scenes adorning the famed limestone sarcophagus from Agia Triada have varied since the excavation of Tomb 4 in 1903 (Paribeni 1904), their characterisation as depictions of funerary rites has been overwhelmingly favoured. Following the influential studies of Charlotte Long (1974, 72–73, 80–82) and Martin Nilsson (1950, 426–443), the limbless male recipient in the ‘presentation scene’ (Fig. 1, Individual A) has conventionally been regarded as either a representation of the deceased or a ‘heroized’ ancestor worshipped via a cult of the dead. This paper instead argues that a more sustainable reading of the sarcophagus’s decoration suggests its production for a high-status woman. Women (perhaps the same individuals depicted repeatedly) clearly occupy the prominent position in all but one narrative scene (Figs. 1–2). Together with elaborate attire and spatial prominence, gesture and bodily expression serve to communicate their leading roles as ceremonial officiants. While it cannot be assumed that the sarcophagus necessarily depicts its occupant(s), their representation is a firm possibility in view of the object’s wider iconographic context. Indeed, the thematic relationship with frescoed buildings in the nearby settlement suggests that its iconography was intended to draw connections with these spaces and relate important messages about its occupant’s social identity. This interpretation is consistent with the broader context of Postpalatial mortuary iconography, where styles and themes associated with elite art were re-adapted as decorative subjects for larnakes.

## The Sarcophagus in Context

The disrupted state of Tomb 4 and recent scholarly analyses of the sarcophagus’s relationship to the broader program of architecture and iconography at LM III Agia Triada dually complicate views that the sarcophagus portrayed the funerary rites of a male dignitary. Noting the conspicuousness of high-status female burials on Crete during LM III, Jan Driessen (2021) has proposed that the sarcophagus might have belonged to a powerful woman. Gold jewelry and other material from the nearby Tomba degli Ori may have been looted from Tomb 4 (La Rosa 2000), but the lack of finds clearly associated with the sarcophagus beyond the two incomplete skulls it contained undermines efforts to identify its occupants. A third individual in a terracotta larnax buried under the tomb’s floor has tenuously been identified as male based on the discovery of two

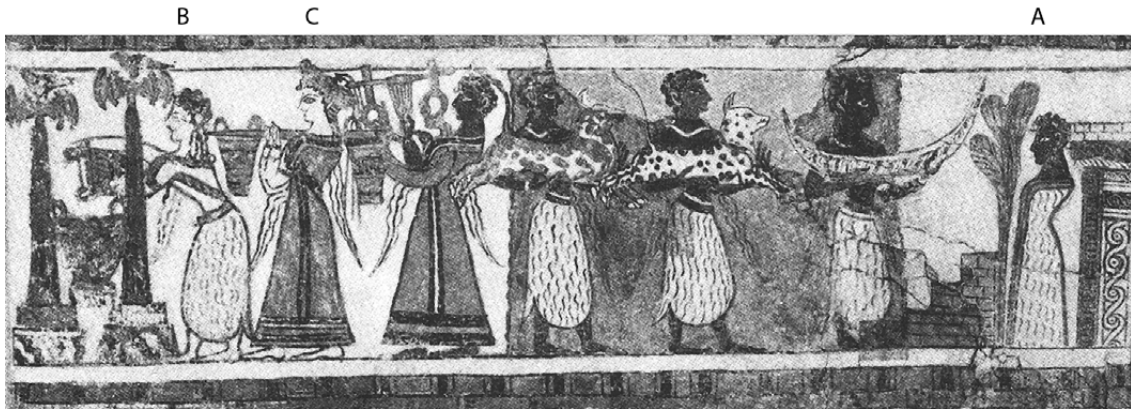


Fig. 1: *Agia Triada sarcophagus, Side A, detail* (after Militello 1998, pl. 14A).

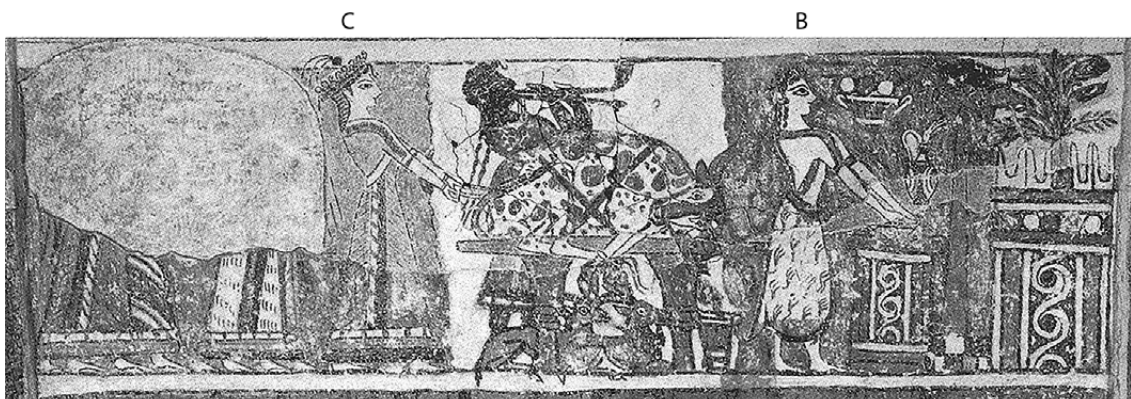


Fig. 2: *Agia Triada sarcophagus, Side B, detail* (after Militello 1998, pl. 14B).

bronze razors (Long 1974, 13); their relationship to the earlier interments in the sarcophagus remains unclear. The corniced ashlar-topped structure behind the presentation scene’s recipient on Side A of the sarcophagus probably marks the extremity of a larger building (Alušík 2005; Militello 2020, 101) and not Tomb 4 as thought by Long (1974, 72). A modest rectangular structure with interior dimensions of 1.95m by 2.39m, Tomb 4’s walls – comprised of regular blocks and re-used ashlar – were preserved to a height of 1.20 m, without tangible evidence of an elaborate plastered superstructure like that shown on the sarcophagus (Burke 2005, 410).

Santo Privitera (2016, 152–153) compellingly argues that the ceremonial imagery on the sarcophagus alludes to Agia Triada’s built environment, perhaps the Piazzale dei Sacelli and its environs. Pyramidal stone double-axe stands like those on the sarcophagus were found in the vicinity of the Piazzale (Cucuzza 2001, 172), as were numerous votive model bulls (D’Agata 1999, 38–102). The LM III C/Subminoan context of the latter objects post-dates the sarcophagus, but nevertheless offers an intriguing analogy for the offerings in the presentation scene. Privitera’s contention consequently strengthens alternative interpretations of the ‘recipient’ – whose stiff pose contrasts with the other figures’ movement – as a wooden or clay ‘xoanon’ (French 1981, 174; Alušík 2005, 41). Moreover, a close stylistic and thematic relationship exists between the sarcophagus’ decoration and contemporary frescoes from Agia Triada’s buildings, particularly the Small and Great Procession Frescoes and the Woman and Altar Fresco from Casa VAP (Militello 1998, 283–320, pls. I, L, M). This directly affiliates the sarcophagus’s occupant with Agia Triada’s elite architectural spaces and ceremonial functions associated with them.<sup>1</sup> Its iconography

<sup>1</sup> Privitera 2016, 153. In making this observation, Privitera questions whether the deceased might be identified as “the priestess” appearing next to the double-axes (Individual B in Figs. 1–2) but does not elaborate further.

could thus relate specific symbolically charged events connected with the social role or biography of the deceased in their capacity as a member of the site's ruling administration.

### Postpalatial Larnax Iconography and the Memorialisation of Social Identities

Decorative features of LM III clay larnakes not only caution against an *a priori* interpretation of the sarcophagus's iconography as an illustration of funerary rites, but also underline the potential capacity of burial containers – including the sarcophagus – to present narratives relating to the lives of their occupants. Despite tendencies to interpret Cretan larnax decoration through a primarily funerary/eschatological lens (for a survey of key scholarship, see Warren 2007) overt scenes of mortuary rites and emotive mourning like those on mainland larnakes are lacking. Currently, the only definitive exception is a 'prothesis' scene on a larnax from Pigi (Baxevasi 1995, 27–33, figs. 10–11). More evident are efforts to assert authoritative social identities by appropriating elite symbolism (Merousis 2000, 78–89). Themes

traditionally associated with non-funerary 'palatial' iconography – particularly subjects derived from the repertoire of wall painting, including high-status activities such as hunting, martial display, seafaring, and chariot-riding – were widely re-adapted. Given the iconographic prioritisation of such activities on many LM III burial containers (including the sarcophagus) it is logical to consider that figures depicted engaging in them might constitute idealised representations of the deceased.

Fresco-style compositions were occasionally replicated directly, marking a point of similarity with the sarcophagus via similar thematic emphases on elite architecture, space, and ceremonial performance. For example, an LM III B larnax from nearby Kalochoraftis (Fig. 3) shows a procession of male and female figures across two registers. The stylistic and thematic affinities to Agia Triada's wall paintings underlines the artist's familiarity with that iconographic program (Antonakaki 2015, 131–136), and thus their attentive effort to reproduce it on a burial container. The clear influence of wall art in the representation of female figures on a larnax from the North Cemetery (Morgan 1987, 175–184, 192, figs. 3–5, 7) implies similar intentionality at Knossos. Transferring symbolically potent imagery connected with centers of political and ceremonial power to the domain of funerary rites via burial containers conceivably facilitated the communication of strong ideological statements about the social identity and status of the deceased, and by extension about their living relatives and kin (Heywood and Davis 2019, 703–707).

### Action and Bodily Expression on the Sarcophagus

Two women – individuals B and C in Figs. 1–2 – might cautiously be identified as appearing on the sarcophagus more than once. Their dress, positioning, and actions serve to differentiate their identities and roles from those of surrounding figures, communicating their status as the leading ceremonial agents. That Sides A and B each represent the same two individuals is potentially confounded by colour and pattern variations in their garments. The interpretation, however, need not be considered problematic if the various activities depicted on the sarcophagus are under-



Fig. 3: LM III B larnax from Kalochoraftis Tomb D (after Karetsou and Girella 2015, pl. VIII).



Fig. 4: *Agia Triada sarcophagus, griffin-drawn chariot, detail (after Militello 1998, pl. 15B).*



Fig. 5: *Sealing from Malia (CMS II 6, no. 173).*

stood as a temporal sequence of events, perhaps even occurring across different times of day and night in line with Walter Pötscher's interpretation of the coloured background panels behind the figurative scenes (Pötscher 1997). Moreover, the separation of ritual activities across opposite long sides means that it cannot be taken for granted that they represent a unified sequence of activity in which each figure must necessarily represent a unique personality. On the contrary, the division of these sides into *different* sequences seems reinforced by the running spirals that vertically frame (and thus compartmentalize) the figurative scenes on each surface, and the lack of an obvious narrative link with the decorative content on the ends (one of which is compositionally discontinuous due to its division into two horizontal registers). While these observations cannot unequivocally prove the repeated appearance on the sarcophagus of certain personalities, at the very least they make the visual and performative similarities between the two pairs of 'leading' women represented on each long side more difficult to overlook.

Individual B – the only woman on any one side of the sarcophagus to wear a hide skirt, a ritual garment attested in Cretan iconography from MM II (Boloti 2014, 251) – appears at the forefront of both processional activities in which she participates and is shown as the 'active' ritual performer in both the libation scene on Side A and at the altar on Side B. Standing behind Individual B in the libation scene and officiating the bull sacrifice on Side B, Individual C wears the same type of long robe with a vertical band worn by other processional participants on the sarcophagus (often associated with 'priestly' figures in Mycenaean-era iconography) but is distinguished by an elaborate headdress often associated with sphinxes and other high-status women (Boloti 2014, 247–262). One out of each pair of chariot-riding women adorning the sarcophagus's ends – in a griffin-drawn (Fig. 4) and agrimi-drawn chariot respectively – might also represent Individual C despite the identification by Long (1974, 29–34, 55–57) of all four individuals as goddesses. The near-identical attire of the figures riding a chariot drawn by fantastical creatures and those depicted on the long sides of the sarcophagus need not confound the in-

terpretation; it is conceivable that an acolyte would intentionally adopt their deity's dress and 'insignia dignitatis' (Boloti 2014, 261–262).

While contextually reminiscent of a LM II–III A sealing from Malia (Fig. 5) that shows a man standing with arms extended over a trussed bull on a sacrificial table, the gesture displayed by both women on Side B – hands held palms-down in front of the waist – has no exact Aegean parallel. Explained as an indicator of chthonic rites (Long 1974, 67) or an act of consecration (Marinatos 1986, 25), the position of the hands hovering directly above the cult furnishings might also emphasise the gesturer's proactive control over the rites in progress. That this posture – with distinctively forward-facing shoulders – was able to communicate the figures' ritual agency is reinforced by its general resemblance to the profiles of other 'priestly' women in palatial frescoes, including those from the Mycenae Cult Centre (Tournavitou 2017, fig. 12c), the Small Procession from Casa VAP (Militello 1998, pl. 10), and especially La Parisienne at Knossos, whom Brendan Burke (2005, 413) contends may have held a similar role to the woman at the altar on Side B. While the gesture on the sarcophagus is idiosyncratic, two near-identical glyptic scenes (one an LM III A1 lentoid sealing from Knossos (*CMS* II 8, no. 250), the other (*CMS* IX, no. 153) an unprovenanced seal attributed to LBA III A1) provide further Aegean evidence for the capacity of a palms-down gesture to emphasise control over the activities or entities with which the gesturer engages. Both scenes show a male 'Master of Animals' with arms outstretched and hands directly above the heads of lions that flank them. The Aegean 'Master of Animals' formula frequently communicates creatures' subjugation via manual restraint or tethering (Marinatos 1993, 167–169), yet these representations convey it through the implication of manual control without physical contact. While the bodily expression of both female officiants on the sarcophagus (and the male on the Malia sealing) was undoubtedly intended to illustrate specific ritual performances in action, the emphatic placement of hands directly above key ritual objects (sacrificial victim and altar) may equally work to emphasise their claims of authority in this context.

## Conclusion

While it cannot be assumed that the Agia Triada sarcophagus portrays its occupant(s), either of the two leading female figures – set apart by their positional prominence, differential attire, and performed actions – seem viable candidates. Despite views as to the material and narrative exceptionality of the sarcophagus (Burke 2005, 416), its conspicuous reference to architectural spaces and ceremonial activities affiliated with elite identity is a feature replicated on clay larnakes, underlining a dually ideological and biographical aspect to LM III burial container decoration. On the sarcophagus, the two main female officiants on each side are not simply positioned at the forefront of the ceremonial activities that they perform, but through their proactive movements are perhaps singled out from other ceremonial participants as possessing the authority and prerogative to lead them.

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