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Fevziye Eker

THE ROMAN IMPERIAL PERIOD SARCOPHAGUS FROM THE VILLAGE OF KAHRAMANMARAS-ELBISTAN-ALKAYAOGLU (ELBISTAN CITY MUSEUM)*

The subject of this study is a sarcophagus discovered during illegal excavations in the village of Alkayaoglu (Elbistan District) and subsequently transferred to the Elbistan City Museum following a report by the local gendarmerie. Carved from local limestone, the sarcophagus represents a hand-crafted provincial type reflecting regional features of funerary sculpture. In terms of morphology and ornamental design, it closely parallels sarcophagi from Olba in the region of Cilicia and is dated to the Roman Imperial period. Archaeological excavations are currently being conducted in Elbistan at the Kece Cave, Kayahoyuk, and Hamzatepe sites; however, no systematic research has yet been undertaken in Alkayaoglu village, where the sarcophagus was found. As in many areas of Kahramanmaraş Province, this territory possesses considerable potential for future archaeological investigation. Each new discovery contributes to expanding the source base and refining the historical and cultural profile of the region.

Key words: Cilicia, Olba, Kahramanmarash, Elbistan, Alkayaoglu, Sarcophagus, Roman Period, Wreath, Altar.

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САРКОФАГ ИЗ ДЕРЕВНИ КАХРАМАНМАРАШ-ЭЛЬБИСТАН-АЛКАЯОГЛУ ПЕРИОДА РИМСКОЙ ИМПЕРИИ (МУЗЕЙ ГОРОДА ЭЛЬБИСТАН)

Предметом исследования является саркофаг, который был обнаружен и перемещен в городской музей Эльбистана после того, как жандармерия сообщила музею о незаконных раскопках в деревне Алкайяоглу Эльбистанского района. Саркофаг, выполненный из местного известняка, представляет собой изделие кустарного производства, отражающее региональные особенности погребальной пластики. По морфологическим признакам и орнаментальному оформлению он близок саркофагам из Ольбы (регион Киликия) и датируется римским императорским периодом. В Эльбистане ведутся археологические раскопки в пещере Кече, Каяхёйюке и Хамзатепе, но в деревне Алкайяоглу, где был обнаружен саркофаг, научные исследования не проводились. Как и во многих районах Кахраманмараша, территория обладает значительным потенциалом для будущих археологических исследований. Каждая новая находка способствует расширению источниковой базы и уточнению историко-культурного облика региона.

Ключевые слова: Киликия, Ольба, Кахраманмараш, Эльбистан, Алкаяоглу, саркофаг, римский период, венок, алтарь.

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Introduction

Beliefs concerning death and the afterlife have been central to human culture since prehistoric times. The conviction that the living could ensure comfort for the deceased and faith in the existence of life beyond death gave rise to diverse funerary traditions. Among them, the practice of inhumation led to the widespread use of sarcophagi — one of the most characteristic funerary monuments of the Greco-Roman world. The term "sarcophagus" derives from the Greek sarkophagos (σάρξφαγεῖν), which is a combination of the Greek words 'sarks (σάρξ): meat' and 'phagein (φαγεῖν): food' and translated as 'meat eater' (Başaran 1998: 104; Koch 2001: 25; Akçay 2016: 23; Zeren, Hasdağlı 2019: 1; Eker 2019: 576).

The earliest prototypes are considered to be the wooden coffers used for the dead in Egypt during the 3rd millennium BCE (Zeren, Hasdağlı 2019: 3). In the 2nd millennium BCE, so-called larna sarcophagi made of stone, terracotta or clay appeared in Minoan and Mycenaean cultures (Akçay 2007: 22; 2016: 23; Zeren, Hasdağlı 2019: 7; Hürmüzlü 2008: 14). Examples from Kültepe attest to their use in Anatolia in the same period. In the 8th century BCE, rock-cut sarcophagi were discovered at Urartian settlements (Çevik 2000: 43—44). Greek stone sarcophagi from the North Necropolis of Corinth date to the 7th century BCE (Hürmüzlü 2008: 14). Terracotta sarcophagi from Klazomenai represent a major Anatolian type from the mid-7th century BCE onwards (Bakır 2000: 48; Yılmaz 2002: 77; Eker 2019: 577).

In the Classical Period, stone sarcophagi appear both in Attica and in Anatolian centres such as Miletus, Ephesos, Assos, Smyrna, Sardes, Pitane and Rhodos (Akurgal 1998: 47; Hürmüzlü 2008: 14; Zeren, Hasdağlı 2019: 20.v). Notable examples include the Polyxena Sarcophagus (6th—5th centuries BCE), the Satrap Sarcophagus (5th century BCE), and the Persian, Weeping Women and Alexander Sarcophagi (4th century BCE), which demonstrate the long-term popularity of relief-decorated forms (Bayçın 2001: 35; Başgelen 2013; Zeren, Hasdağlı 2019: 22; Koch 2010: 1). Lycian sarcophagi of the 4th century BCE onwards are regarded as the most distinctive Anatolian group (Koch 2001: 47).

Sarcophagi continued in uninterrupted use during the Hellenistic and Roman Imperial Periods. Mass production began under Emperor Hadrian (117—138). From the 2nd century CE onward, the transition from cremation to inhumation increased the demand for stone sarcophagi, which were expensive but durable funerary monuments. The crafting of a finely executed sarcophagus could take about a year (Koch 2001; 2010: 2) and was normally commissioned by wealthy individuals.

One such example, the sarcophagus from the village of Alkayaoglu in Elbistan district, now housed in the Elbistan City Museum, represents a rare find from the northern part of Kahramanmaraş Province (Fig. 1). The artefact was recorded in the museum inventory on 13 December 2022 following its recovery from illicit excavations reported by the gendarmerie. Unlike most archaeological work in Elbistan, which has focused on prehistoric mound sites, this sarcophagus along with the example from Ekinozu, provides valuable evidence for the later funerary traditions of the region (Eker 2019). Although damaged when discovered, the sarcophagus was conserved upon transfer and is currently exhibited in the museum garden.

Materials and methods

Firstly, scaled photographs of the sarcophagus were taken and measurements were taken. The inventory information of the sarcophagus was recorded, and the details of the sarcophagus were given by drawing in the computer environment. The work, whose information is given in the form of a catalogue, has been studied in detail within the study, and dating has been made by comparing it with similar examples in the regionally close cities.

The sarcophagi, which constitute an important part of Roman culture and art, are generally tombs built at the request of rich and noble people or built for them. Regardless of the period, sarcophagus tombs are decorated with detailed reliefs and ornaments reflecting the artistic understanding of the period as well as simple ones. The reliefs and inscriptions on the sarcophagus provide information about the personality and life of the grave owner. In this study, information on

the use or production of sarcophagus tombs of the period and the region will be given within the scope of the Alkayaoğlu Sarcophagus example.

The sarcophagus is rectangular in plan and carved from a single block of light-coloured local limestone. The sarcophagus measures 230 cm in length, 117 cm in width, and 120 cm in height including the lid. It is of the freestanding type, with a four-cornered, gable-roofed lid fitting directly onto the cist. The lid is mostly intact and plain, with no decorative motifs, mouldings, or acroteria. A small opening is visible on the front short edge of the lid where it rests on the cist, another drilled hole is located at the centre of the pediment, and one more occurs on the long edge of the lid (Fig. 2). Along the side of the lid, three grooves were carved with precision, and an additional groove is present on the back side (Fig. 3). A single groove can also be observed on the pediment of the short face bearing the altar relief (Fig. 4: 1—2).

Vertical mouldings are present at each corner of the cist. The intact short side of the sarcophagus (Fig. 4: 1—2) is roughly planed, and a relief altar is placed at the centre. The altar, carved in high relief, has rectangular upper and lower parts that are prominently profiled and executed in a naturalistic manner. The upper and lower edges of the altar are decorated with mouldings. No inscription is present. The opposite short side of the sarcophagus was partially damaged (Fig. 3) later or during the period of use.

On one of the repaired long sides, six wreaths of different sizes and decoration are preserved. The other long side, part of which partially damaged and later repaired, is decorated with two large and two small wreaths in relief (Fig. 2).

The front face of the sarcophagus (Fig. 5) shows wreaths and rosettes in relief in different sizes. The wreaths on the face, which were roughly shaved, were placed in the form of four more miniature wreaths between two large wreaths. They are decorated with rosettes surrounded by geometric and floral motifs arranged in circular composition and made in incised technique. The back side of the sarcophagus (Fig. 6) is designed similarly to the front side; again, rosette wreaths are carved in relief. The number of wreaths here is less than on the front side. On the sides, one small wreath was added to the two large wreaths. One of the large wreaths is damaged.

The decorative work on the Alkayaoğlu sarcophagus is incomplete, and the carving remains unfinished in some parts.

Discussion

During the Roman Imperial period, sarcophagi were produced in several major centres, including Rome, Athens, and Dokimeion, where the artistic influence of the Empire was most prominent. Anatolian sarcophagi of the 2nd—3rd centuries CE can be classified into several groups: locally produced sarcophagi, semi-produced sarcophagi, local copies, imported sarcophagi from Attica and Rome, and sarcophagi made by travelling craftsmen. Dokimeion, located in the Phrygia region of Anatolia, was the most important production centre for garlanded sarcophagi from the early 2nd century CE. Its products differed from those of the Roman and Athenian workshops in both style and decorative details. The wide distribution of Dokimeion sarcophagi across Anatolia indicates its dominant role. From the mid-3rd century CE onward, economic difficulties within the Roman Empire, Sassanid invasions, and Gothic attacks affected sarcophagus production in Dokimeion. As a result, production and use declined with the spread of Christianity. Nevertheless, the manufacture of sarcophagi reflecting Christian beliefs continued until the 5th century CE (Koch 2001: 88; 2010: 4; Akçay 2016: 24; Eker 2019: 577).

The geographical position of the Kahramanmaraş—Elbistan district, situated between the ancient regions of Cilicia and Cappadocia, exposed it to artistic influences from both areas. In Cilicia, numerous sarcophagi have been discovered, whereas Cappadocia has yielded only a few, although of high quality. The similarity of the Elbistan—Alkayaoğlu sarcophagus to examples from Cilicia suggests that regional artistic traditions influenced its production. Since marble deposits are absent in Cilicia, marble sarcophagi found in the region were imported from Dokimeion and Athens

(Koch 2001: 42). Locally produced sarcophagi, however, were typically made of light-coloured yellowish limestone. Comparable limestone sarcophagi are also known from Syria, Pamphylia, Pisidia, and Dalmatia (Koch 2001: 22; Karaüzüm 2005: 30). The Alkayaoğlu sarcophagus, made of light-coloured local limestone and sharing features with Cilician types, can therefore be regarded as a product of local manufacture rather than an imported work.

The Alkayaoğlu sarcophagus was carved as a monolith from local limestone in the form of a rectangular cist with a gable-roofed lid. The base was flattened and carved without a profile, suggesting that it rested directly on bedrock. Vertical mouldings were applied to each of the four corners of the cist. The lid contains small drilled holes — one at the centre of the pediment and others along the edges — as well as shallow grooves on the sides and back. Similar grooves are known on other independent sarcophagi from Cilicia and are interpreted as features facilitating transport or assembly (Akçay 2016: Lev. 13, Fig. 21). The surface of the sarcophagus exhibits uneven workmanship, with portions left unfinished. This indicates a simple, possibly incomplete execution. Within Machatschek's classification, the piece corresponds to the group of independent sarcophagi without podium (Aydınoğlu 2012: 134).

The wreath motif represents immortality or the victory of the deceased during their lifetime and reflects Roman artistic influence (Zeren, Hasdağlı 2019: 62). Rosettes are generally circular symbols of the sun, decorated with geometric or floral patterns (Doğanay 2005: 147; Aydınlıoğlu 2013: 19). Similar depictions appear on sarcophagi from the necropolis of Kanytella in Cilicia (Aydınlıoğlu 2013: 19) and on examples from Olba dated to the 2nd—3rd centuries CE (Koch 2010: Res/Abb. 56). One Olba sarcophagus features a tabula ansata placed between two wreaths. Both the Olba and Alkayaoğlu sarcophagi are carved from local limestone and are similar in the arrangement of the wreaths, although the Olba example is executed with finer workmanship.

Sarcophagi from Kanytella, Elaiussa Sebaste, and Korykos, dated to the mid-2nd to early 3rd centuries CE, frequently bear altar reliefs (Karaüzüm 2005: 49, Lev. 45, fig. 69a). These altars are typically placed at the corners of the cist, carved in high relief, with rectangular upper and lower parts and grooved decoration. The altar on the Alkayaoğlu sarcophagus, positioned at the centre of the short side, follows this regional pattern. Comparable examples occur in the Çanakçı necropolis, where Machatschek dated this altar type to the late 2nd—early 3rd century CE (Aydınoğlu 2012: 134). In Cilicia, altar motifs were often accompanied by garlands, inscriptions, or, in later periods, crosses incised on the vessel surface. Their recurrence across sites indicates that altar depictions had become a standard component of regional funerary iconography.

The decorative composition of the Alkayaoğlu sarcophagus combines geometric, floral, and symbolic elements. Incised geometric and floral designs appear on rosette wreaths executed in both low and high relief.

The combination of limestone material, modest craftsmanship, and the mixture of motifs suggests local production. While not identical to any known example, the sarcophagus closely resembles Cilician types in dimensions and in the use of altar and rosette-wreath decoration.

Although garlanded sarcophagi are predominant in the region, parallels are found among Cilician pieces decorated with rosettes and altar motifs carved on multiple faces (Fig. 7).

The frequent repetition of such motifs indicates the persistence of a regional decorative canon. Considering the proximity of Elbistan—Alkayaoğlu to Cilicia and the diffusion of similar iconography, it is reasonable to associate the piece with the activity of local or itinerant craftsmen who perpetuated the Cilician sarcophagus tradition.

Conclusion

The fact that no finds were found inside the sarcophagus when it was unearthed indicates that it was robbed in antiquity. The absence of accompanying materials makes precise chronological determination difficult. However, its structural and decorative features allow attribution to the group of independent sarcophagi without podium. Carved as a monolith from light-coloured local

limestone, the sarcophagus reflects local production rather than import from major marble workshops. The workmanship is relatively simple, and several details appear unfinished, suggesting that it was either a locally commissioned or semi-completed piece.

Although the item has no direct parallel, its overall form and decoration correspond to the Cilician tradition, particularly the group of sarcophagi from Rough Cilicia (Olba) that combine altar and wreath motifs. The stylistic parallels suggest that the Alkayaoğlu sarcophagus was produced under the influence of the Rough Cilikia (Olba) workshops. Perhaps the owner of the sarcophagus was in the Rough Cilicia region and wanted to have a sarcophagus made in accordance with his tradition. Alternatively, the travelling craftsmen from that region made a sarcophagus in accordance with their own traditions. Taking into account the comparative evidence and the recurrence of similar decorative elements on sarcophagi from Cilician centres, the Alkayaoğlu sarcophagus can be assigned to the Roman Imperial period, approximately the mid–2nd to early 3rd century CE. The absence of an exact parallel further supports its interpretation as a locally produced variant within the broader Cilician funerary tradition.

This study also underscores the importance of expanding systematic archaeological investigations in the districts of Kahramanmaraş. Such research will enhance our understanding of the region's social, cultural, and religious development during and after the Roman period and will contribute significantly to the reconstruction of its historical landscape.

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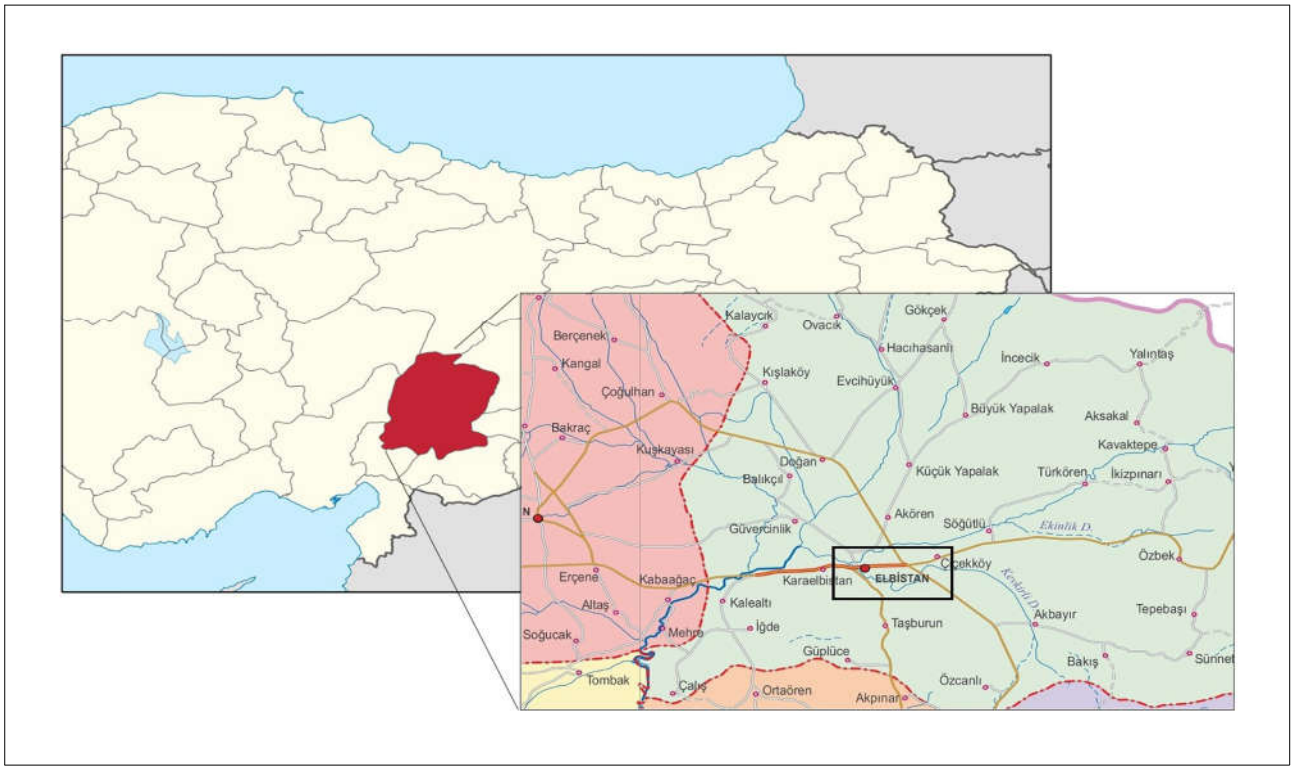
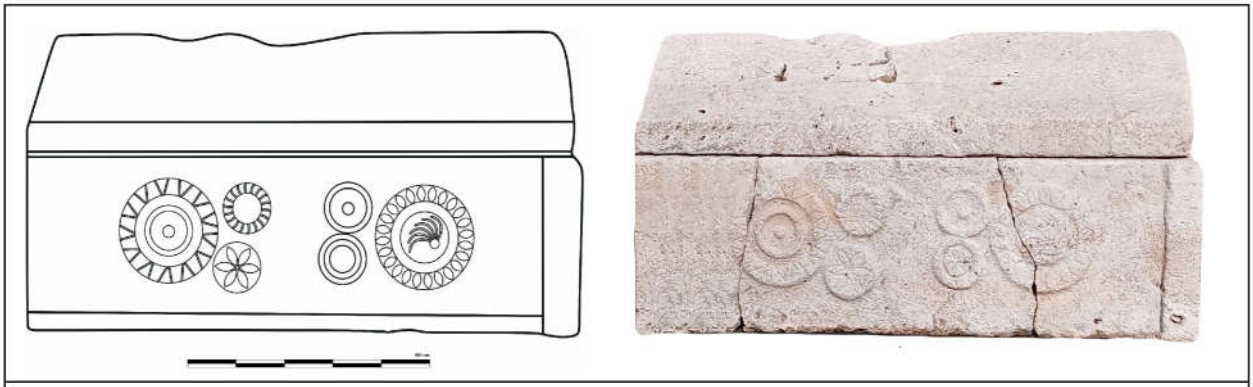


Fig. 1. Kahramanmarash Province Map-Elbistan and districts. Prepared by Kasım Eker.



Work Etude Holder No: ETD A 2023-186
Tomb Type: Freestanding Sarcophagus
Material: Light-coloured local limestone
Dimensions: Long side: 230 cm; short side: 117 cm; height (including lid):120cm
Findspot: Elbistan-Alkayaoglu Village
How it came to the museum: Illicit dig
Description: The rectangular sarcophagus has a four-corner-hipped roofed lid. The mostly intact lid is left plain. There is a small opening on the front short edge of the lid where it rests on the cist, a hole in the centre of the pediment, which was formed by a drill, and one of these holes on the long edge of the lid.

There are vertical mouldings on the four corners of the cist. One of the short sides is intact, and a representative altar is depicted in relief in the centre. The upper and lower parts of the altar are decorated with mouldings. The other short side of the sarcophagus was broken later or during the period. On one of the repaired long sides, there are six wreaths of different sizes and decorations. The other long side, part of which was broken and repaired later, is decorated with two large and two small wreaths in relief.

Condition: Largely intact; one short edge and one long edge are broken and repaired.
Period: Roman Imperial Period - mid-2nd to early 3rd century AD

Fig. 2. Elbistan-Alkayaoglu Sarcophagus Catalogue Information. Drawing by and Photo by Fevziye Eker.

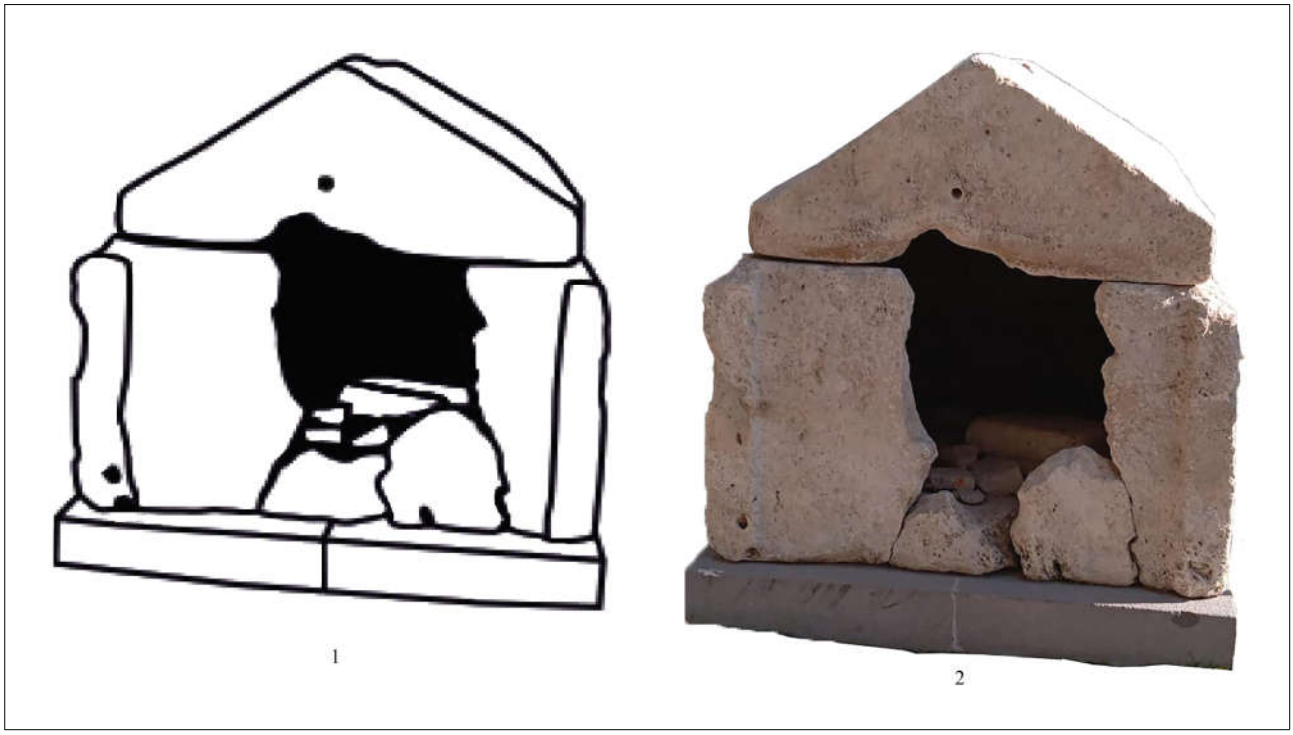


Fig. 3. Elbistan—Alkayaoglu Sarcophagus Side Face (2). Photo by İ. Anlaş.

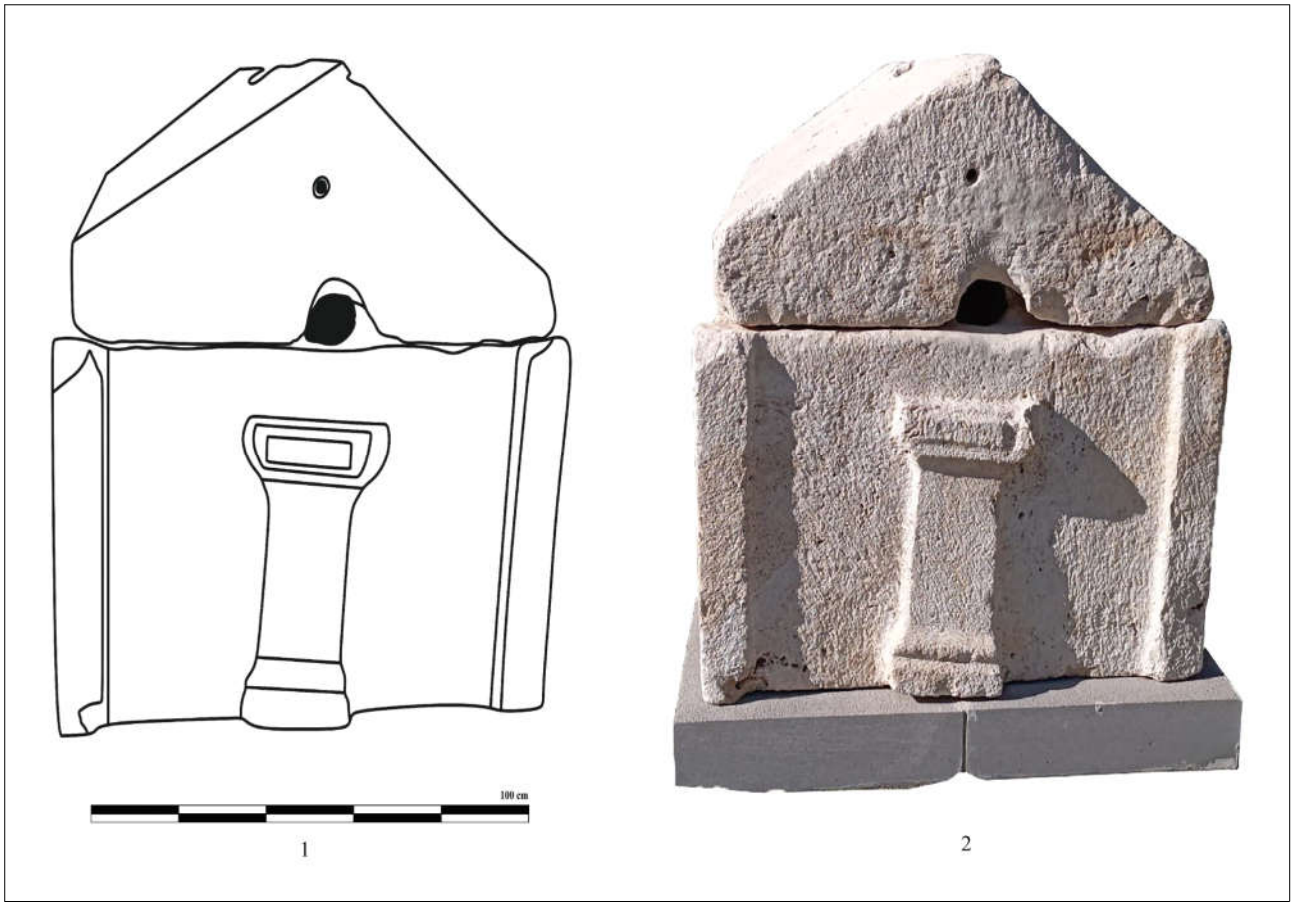


Fig. 4. Elbistan—Alkayaoglu Sarcophagus Side Face (1) Drawing. Drawing by R. Gönen.

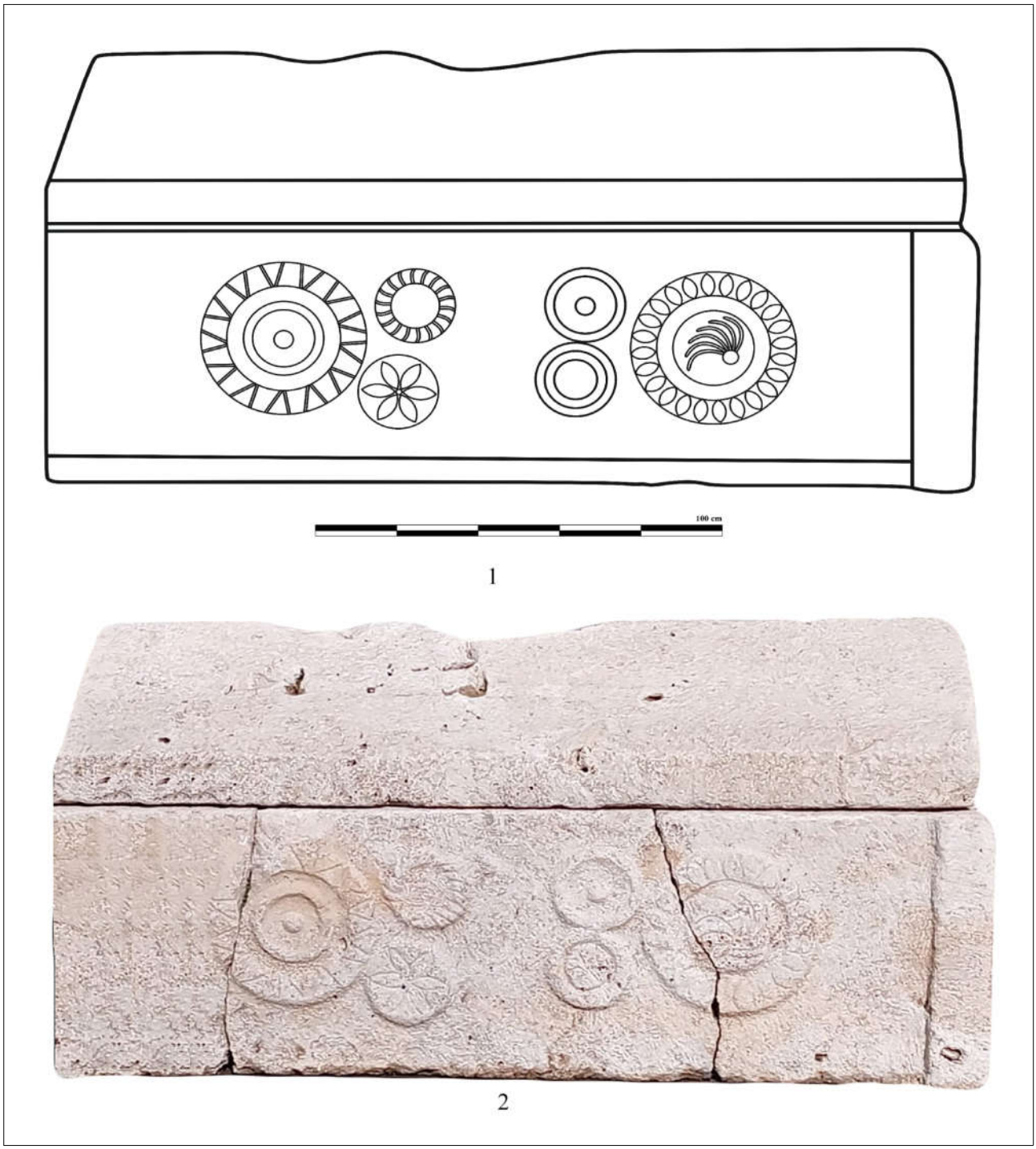


Fig. 5. Elbistan—Alkayaoglu Sarcophagus: *1* — Front Face Drawing. Drawing by R. Gönen; *2* — Front Face. Photo by I. Anlaş.

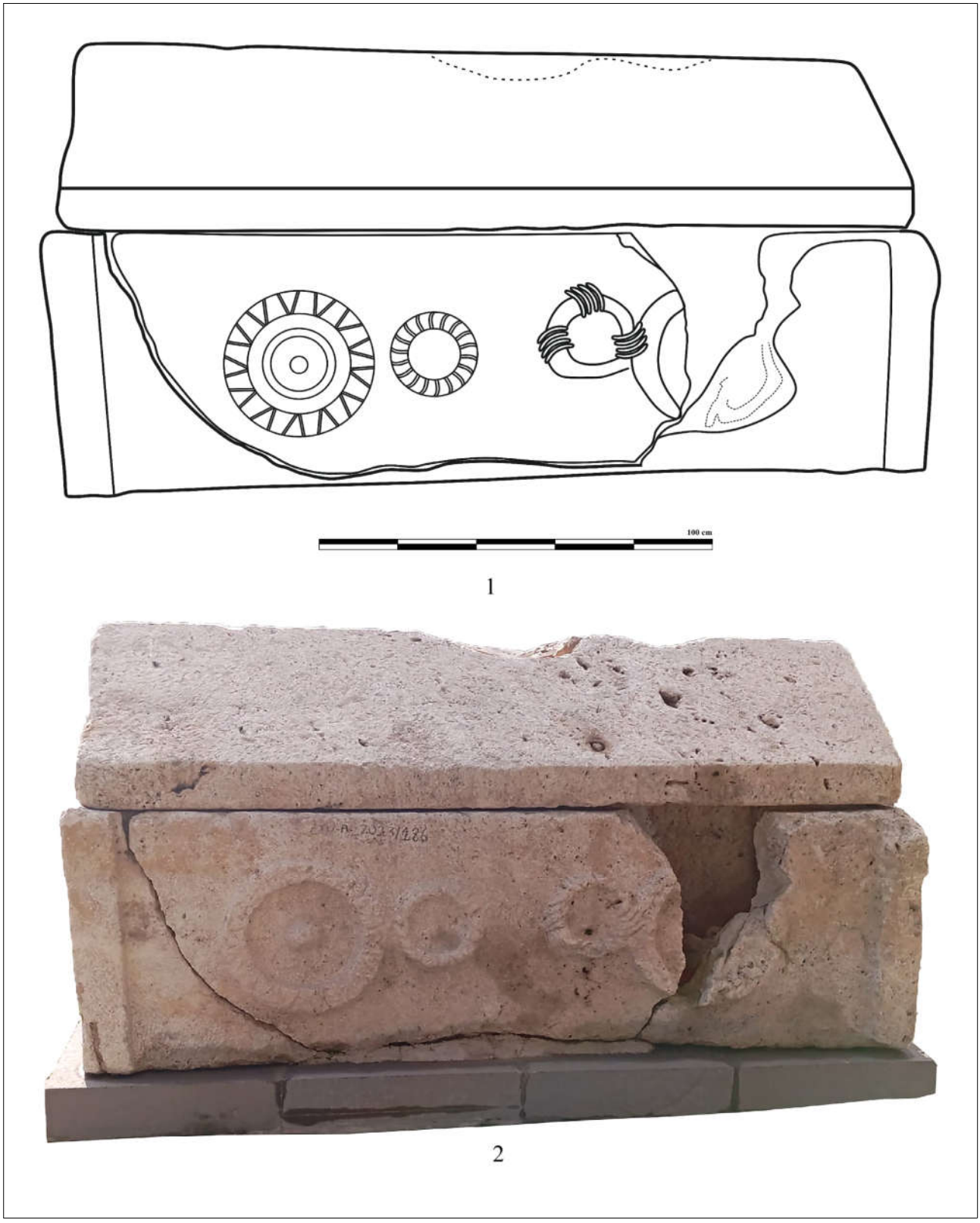


Fig. 6. Elbistan—Alkayaoglu Sarcophagus: *1* — Back Side Drawing. Drawing by R. Gönen; Back Face. Photo by İ. Anlaş.

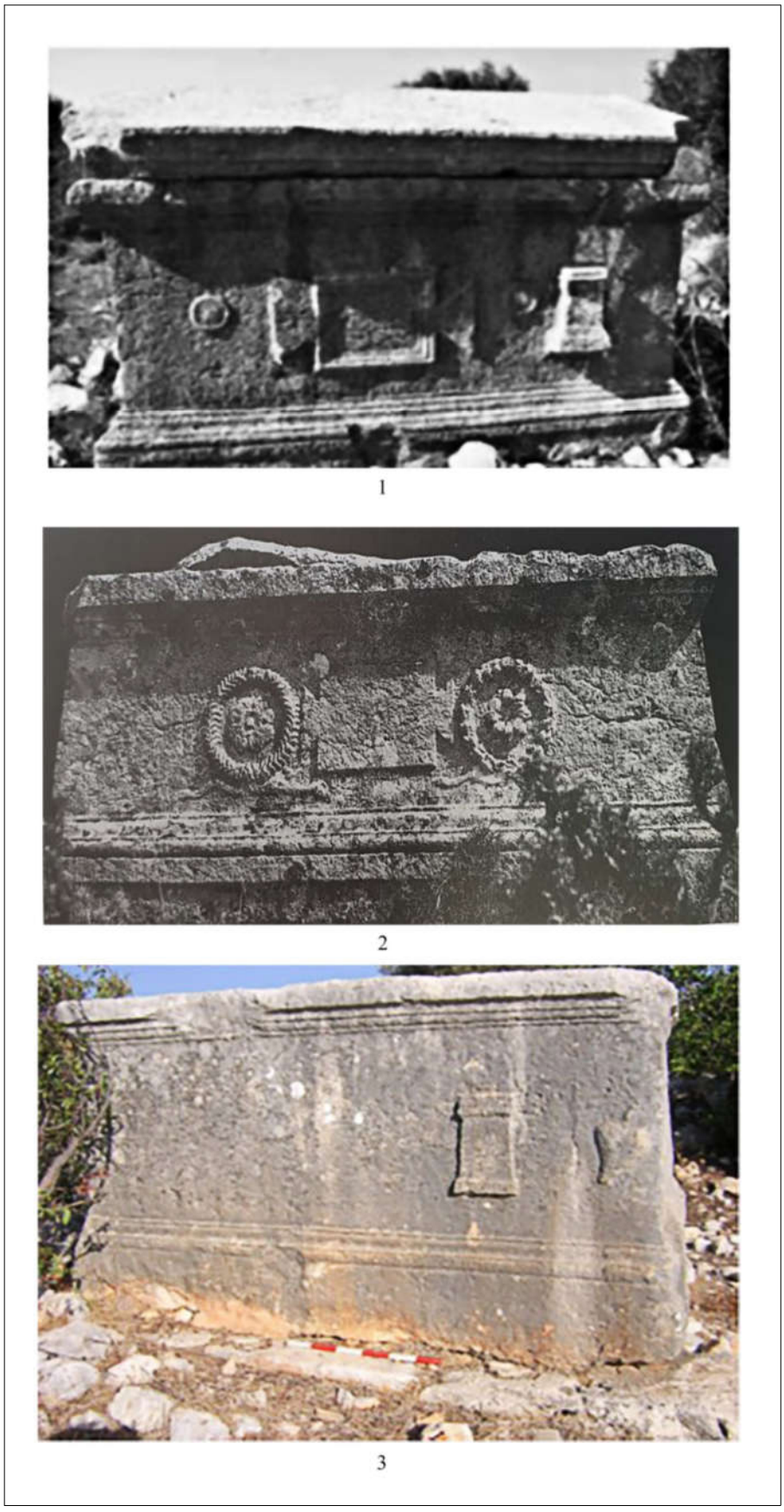


Fig. 7. Kanytella Tomb 1C sarcophagus with tabula ansata, altar and rosette decoration on the top (after Aydınoğlu 2012: Res.14); *2* — **Olba Sarcophagus Sample** (after: Koch 2010: Res. Abb. 56); **Kanytella, sarcophagus with altar depiction** (after Karaüzüm 2005: Level 48, fig. 73).