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A Missed Monument: Digital Archaeology and AI-Assisted Reconstruction of the Unadorned Sarcophagus from Sidon's Royal Necropolis

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ABSTRACT

The Royal Necropolis of Sidon, excavated in the late 19th century under the direction of Osman Hamdi Bey and Yervant Voskan, is among the most significant archaeological discoveries in the eastern Mediterranean. The richly adorned Alexander, Lycian, and Sarcophagus of the Mourning Women have become defining examples of Phoenician funerary art, and their transportation to Istanbul played a central role in shaping the institutional development of Ottoman museology. However, within this celebrated ensemble lies a notable absence: a plain, undecorated sarcophagus uncovered in the same archaeological context but excluded from the selection transported to the capital. This study examines the sarcophagus not merely as a "secondary" object, but as a key example for understanding broader processes of archaeological selection, curatorial decision-making, and the shaping of institutional narratives. Drawing on archival documents, excavation reports, and contemporary scholarship, the research applies digital archaeology methods, including AI-assisted reconstruction, to generate a theoretical visualization of the object. Rather than serving solely as a technical substitute, this digital approach facilitates deeper reflection on the ethical and ideological dimensions of archaeological representation. In doing so, the study illustrates how digital heritage practices can reframe the visibility and interpretation of modest artifacts, contributing to more inclusive, critical, and balanced representations within the wider field of cultural heritage discourse.

Keywords: Digital Archaeology, AI-Assisted Reconstruction, Museum Studies, Ottoman Archaeology, Cultural Heritage Visualization

Gözden Kaçmış Bir Anıt: Sidon Kraliyet Nekropolü'ndeki Bezemesiz Lahdin Dijital Arkeolojisi ve Yapay Zekâ Destekli Rekonstrüksiyonu

ÖZ

Sayda Kral Nekropolü, 19. yüzyılın sonlarında Osman Hamdi Bey ve Yervant Voskan yönetiminde gerçekleştirilen kazılarla ortaya çıkarılmış olup, Doğu Akdeniz'in en önemli arkeolojik keşifleri arasında yer almaktadır. Zengin bezemeleriyle dikkat çeken İskender Lahdi, Likya Lahdi ve Ağlayan Kadınlar Lahdi, Fenike mezar sanatı açısından belirleyici örnekler hâline gelmiş ve İstanbul'a nakledilmeleri Osmanlı müzeciliğinin kurumsal gelişiminde merkezi bir rol oynamıştır. Ancak bu seçkin grup içinde, aynı arkeolojik bağlamda bulunmasına rağmen başkente taşınmayan sade ve bezemesiz bir lahit bulunmaktadır. Bu çalışma, söz konusu lahdi yalnızca "ikincil" bir eser olarak değil, arkeolojik seçki süreçlerini, küratöryel karar alma mekanizmalarını ve kurumsal anlatıların oluşumunu anlamaya yönelik önemli bir örnek olarak ele almaktadır. Arşiv belgeleri, kazı raporları ve güncel akademik literatürden yararlanılarak dijital arkeoloji yöntemleri, özellikle yapay zekâ destekli rekonstrüksiyon uygulanarak eserin kuramsal bir görselleştirmesi yapılmıştır. Bu dijital yaklaşım, yalnızca teknik bir ikame olarak değil, arkeolojik temsile ilişkin etik ve ideolojik boyutları değerlendirme aracı olarak kullanılmaktadır. Çalışma, dijital miras uygulamalarının mütevazı eserlerin görünürlüğünü ve yorumlanmasını yeniden çerçeveleyerek kültürel miras söylemine daha kapsayıcı, eleştirel ve dengeli katkılar sağlayabileceğini ortaya koymaktadır.

Süreç

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Introduction

Museological practice, far from being a neutral mechanism for collecting and exhibiting objects, functions as a dynamic narrative apparatus through which societies produce, legitimize, and institutionalize collective memory. Museums operate not merely as spaces for the preservation of historical artifacts but also as ideological infrastructures that shape public perceptions of the past. As emphasized by scholars such as Pearce (2013, 15) and Hooper-Greenhill (2000, 34), modern museums are sites of selection; what is included, what is excluded, and how these decisions configure epistemological hierarchies are of critical importance. The display of an object confers legitimacy, visibility, and symbolic authority; conversely, its omission from the exhibition space may result in marginalization or even erasure. Of course, such decisions are not always guided by deliberate intentions to exclude; spatial limitations, conservation priorities, or technical constraints of a given period may also play a role in shaping curatorial choices.

Within this theoretical framework, the case of a plain sarcophagus uncovered in 1887 during excavations at the Royal Necropolis of Sidon acquires particular significance. Directed by Osman Hamdi Bey, the head of the Imperial Museum (Müze-i Hümayun, today's Istanbul Archaeological Museums), the excavation marked a turning point in both scientific discovery and museological development within the Ottoman Empire. Twenty-two sarcophagi, each with varying styles, typologies, and iconographic features, were unearthed. Of these, eleven—including the Alexander Sarcophagus, Lycian Sarcophagus, and Sarcophagus of the Mourning Women—were selected and transported to Istanbul (Hamdi Bey and Reinach 1892, 21). Their inclusion in the museum's collection not only contributed to the institution's architectural expansion but also positioned archaeology as a state-supported instrument of cultural prestige and imperial modernity (Shaw 2003, 78).

However, not all discoveries from the excavation site afforded equal prominence. Alongside the elaborately decorated sarcophagi was a plain and undecorated example, which, for a range of potential reasons, was not included in the collection. This decision can be attributed to technical limitations, transportation challenges, and conservation priorities. However, it may also reflect the representational and aesthetic biases that shaped the era's curatorial strategies. In this context, the exclusion of an object from a museum display can be viewed as an illustrative example of the multi-layered dynamics underpinning nineteenth-century museological logic.

The prioritization of ornate and symbolically rich artifacts over plain and typologically ambiguous ones exemplifies what Caple (2006, 45) terms "aesthetic bias"—a condition not unique to the Ottoman context but inherent to the broader paradigm of 19th-century museology, in which ornamentation was equated with cultural significance and curatorial value. The selection of objects to represent Sidonian funerary traditions in the imperial capital was not determined solely by logistical or conservation concerns. When viewed in conjunction with the exhibition strategies and collection policies of the period, these choices assumed symbolic significance. In this framework, the preference for visually impressive and symbolically charged artifacts contributes to a constructed narrative of the past, tailored for both national consumption and imperial display. As Cameron and Kenderdine (2007, 63) assert, museums of this era did not merely function as knowledge institutions but also served as performative spaces through which state ideology was enacted. Accordingly, what the museum chose to omit, such as the plain sarcophagus, was as symbolically meaningful as what it chose to include.

The decisions surrounding the display and selection processes reveal deeper structural tensions embedded in museological knowledge systems: between value and visibility, archaeological integrity and curatorial selectivity, and historical reality and institutional representation. Although lacking sculptural ornamentation, the unadorned Sidon sarcophagus nonetheless offers substantial archaeological insights concerning typological diversity, socioeconomic stratification, and funerary practices. Its exclusion may result in specific thematic and formal gaps in the constructed exhibition narrative, particularly limiting the comprehensive representation of Phoenician mortuary culture (Yon 2006, 92; Smith 2006, 110).

Today, such representational absences are understood not merely as historical oversights but as indicators of entrenched priorities and structural constraints within systems of knowledge production. 3D modeling, archival reconstruction, and speculative exhibition design offer both technical and conceptual opportunities to address these curatorial absences, thereby enabling the reconstruction of more inclusive and pluralistic heritage narratives.

This article positions the plain Sidon sarcophagus as a cultural object that may once again be rendered visible through the capabilities of digital heritage technologies. The artifact's omission from Istanbul's collection is directly related to the resource constraints, conservation considerations, and logistical challenges of its time; indeed, Osman Hamdi Bey explicitly referenced such difficulties in his reports. For this reason, the aim of this study is not to criticize historical decisions but to reframe artifacts within contemporary museological discourse, using digital tools, archival data, and ethically informed curatorial approaches. In doing so, this study seeks to reinforce the narrative integrity of the existing collection, while contributing to more inclusive and plural representations of cultural heritage

Literature Review and Historical Context

The historiography of the Sidon Royal Necropolis is largely shaped by the monumental visibility of its most ornate sarcophagi, particularly those that were transported to Istanbul and prominently exhibited at the Imperial Museum (now the Istanbul Archaeological Museum). These sarcophagi have received considerable scholarly attention, not only because of their exceptional artistic features but also because of their continued physical and discursive presence within institutional frameworks. However, this

focus led to significant asymmetries in the documentation and historiographic treatment of sarcophagi that were not selected for relocation. Among the most noteworthy of these lesser-known cases is the plain, undecorated sarcophagus situated in Chamber No. 1 of Hypogeum A.

The primary published source referencing this object is *Une Nécropole Royale à Sidon* (Hamdi Bey & Reinach 1892, 21), co-authored by Osman Hamdi Bey and Théodore Reinach. This comprehensive volume serves not only as an excavation report, but also as an ideological instrument, framing the archaeological endeavor as a high point of Ottoman scientific modernity and international prestige. Richly illustrated and meticulously narrated, the publication presents the Sidon necropolis as a site of grandeur, narrative complexity, and cross-cultural exchange.However, within this visually and textually dense context, a singular moment of restraint and omission emerges: Osman Hamdi Bey's brief reference to the sarcophagus left in situ in Hypogeum A.

This description is exceptional in both tone and content. Located just north of the Weeping Women Sarcophagus, a centerpiece of the Istanbul display, the artifact is described as a white marble sarcophagus with a completely unornamented geometric form (Hamdi Bey & Reinach 1892, 21). It lacked relief, inscriptions, decorative moldings, or symbolic imagery. A partially fractured lid revealed sparse bone fragments. However, despite or perhaps because of its formal austerity, Osman Hamdi Bey identified the piece as uniquely valuable. He explicitly expressed regret that the artifact was not brought to Istanbul, lamenting the resulting incomplete typological spectrum of the museum's collection.

This moment of curatorial reflection is rare in 19th-century archaeological reporting, which generally prioritizes grandeur, iconographic richness, and historical resonance. This sarcophagus, which did not meet the curatorial criteria of the period, illustrates a broader representational logic in which aesthetic values frequently guide institutional selection. As Pearce (1995, 15) observed, the process of collection is inherently selective, and the narratives these collections construct are shaped not only by what is present but also by what is absent. In this light, the plain sarcophagus's non-inclusion in the Istanbul display is not simply an oversight but a silence that holds interpretive weight within the archive of imperial heritage.

Indeed, a survey of institutional registers and acquisition records from the late 19th century reveals no mention of this object, either under its hypogeum designation or by its typological characteristics. Its absence from museum records suggests that it was left unrecorded not only physically, but also symbolically and epistemologically. In effect, it has been doubly distanced from the archaeological site and institutional memory of the museum responsible for preserving the site's legacy (Shanks & Tilley 1992, 87).

The architectural and spatial context of Hypogeum A further underscores the significance of this non-inclusion. As one of the earliest and most elaborately constructed tomb complexes within the Sidon necropolis, Hypogeum A functioned as both a monumental burial space and a symbolic axis within the site's topography. The positioning of the plain sarcophagus adjacent to one of the most ornamented examples suggests a visual and ideological contrast that could have enriched museological interpretation. The deliberate juxtaposition of austerity and opulence would have allowed for a more nuanced reading of Phoenician funerary diversity—one that acknowledged not only elite self-fashioning through iconography, but also alternative expressions of mortality and status through simplicity. However, this contrast remained unrealized within the museum because of the absence of the object.

Although not explicitly documented, the reasons for this absence are likely rooted in a combination of aesthetic preferences, logistical constraints, and emergent nationalist curatorial ideologies. As Cameron and Kenderdine (2007, 63) argue, 19th-century museums increasingly function as instruments of ideological authority, reinforcing state-sponsored narratives of culture, hierarchy, and identity. Within this framework, objects that did not conform to dominant visual or symbolic expectations were routinely bypassed through intentional curatorial filtering, rather than through neglect. Contemporary scholarship has begun to explore such absences not merely as historical accidents, but as reflections of deeper structural dynamics within heritage epistemologies. The case of Sidon sarcophagus points to the endurance of a visual canon that privileges ornaments and spectacles over contextual integrity and completeness. As Grigoriadis (2023, *26*(2), 209-225) notes in her re-evaluation of Ottoman museological strategies, absence itself can serve as an archival trace—one that exposes the mechanics of curatorial selection and the limitations of institutional memory.

Thus, this section argues that the archival quiet surrounding the plain Sidon sarcophagus is not incidental but rather constitutive of the museological system that produced the authoritative voice of the institution. The fragmentary references that remain Osman Hamdi's expression of regret, the spatial records of Hypogeum A, and the object's omission from formal inventories constitute a negative archive. They point toward an alternative museological history that calls for reconstruction through interdisciplinary research, critical historiography, and digital imagination.

Theoretical Framework: The Concept of Cultural Heritage

The selection and exhibition of archaeological artifacts are guided by a complex set of values and priorities that extend beyond mere historical documentation. Central to this understanding is the concept of cultural heritage itself, which is not a static collection of objects inherited from the past, but a dynamic and selective social construct. As scholars like Meskell and Harrison argue, cultural heritage is a structure continually shaped, interpreted, and rendered visible through institutional mechanisms. This process of "heritagization" is inherently political, as it involves decisions about what is worth preserving, what narrative to construct, and whose history to prioritize.

This theoretical lens is crucial for analyzing the case of the unadorned Sidon sarcophagus. The institutional mechanisms of the 19th-century Ottoman museum system, influenced by prevailing aesthetic biases and goals of imperial prestige, actively shaped what would be defined as significant Sidonian heritage. The decision to transport the ornate sarcophagi while leaving the plain one behind exemplifies this selective process. Consequently, the absence of the unadorned sarcophagus from the museum is not a simple curatorial footnote; it is an active part of the heritage construction process, a silence that speaks to the hierarchies of value embedded within the institution. Understanding cultural heritage as a curated, rather than a given, reality allows us to interpret such absences not as oversights, but as indicators of the structural constraints and priorities that define institutional knowledge production.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a hybrid methodological fxramework rooted in digital heritage technologies and archival archaeology to engage with the limited curatorial attention surrounding the plain sarcophagus of Hypogeum A. The objective is not to reconstruct the physical artifact in the conventional sense of material replication but rather to conceptually reposition it within the narrative field from which it has historically remained absent. In doing so, the project aligns with recent shifts in digital humanities and critical museology that frame reconstruction as an act of epistemological recovery and a form of historiographic intervention (Cameron & Kenderdine 2007, 63).

Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Primarily, historical archival documents and excavation reports constitute the qualitative data collection methods, while digital reconstruction and simulation processes involve quantitative and visual analyses. The research aims to explore the potential of digital tools in reinterpreting this object, using a critical approach to understand the historical context and museological position of the unadorned Sidon sarcophagus.

Data Collection and Analysis

The reconstruction process began with a close reading of the primary description in Une Nécropole Royale à Sidon (Hamdi Bey & Reinach 1892, 21), which characterizes the sarcophagus as a white marble piece with a steep gabled lid, undecorated panels, and no inscriptions or sculptural ornamentation. Although no photographic documentation exists, the detailed textual reference, including its spatial context within Chamber No. 1, offers a foundational set of parameters for conceptual modeling.

Initial speculative models were generated through structured prompts based on archaeological typologies of undecorated sarcophagi in Phoenician and Greco-Roman traditions, utilizing Google Labs' Whisk. The goal was not to produce a finalized visual model through AI, but rather to use Whisk as a critical generative assistant capable of synthesizing formal characteristics, proportional logic, and typological comparisons based on academic literature and excavation data. This process facilitated the formation of an initial conceptual design, which was then refined through archaeological reasoning.

Comparative analysis played a central role in verifying plausibility. Typological parallels were drawn from known examples of unornamented sarcophagi from the Byblos, Tyre, Amathus, and Italian regions, with particular attention paid to the lid geometry and box-body ratios. These analogs provide proportional anchors and stylistic context. While regional variance exists, trends such as steep-angled lids and plain vertical surfaces inform decisions about form, dimension, and proportion, grounding the reconstruction in archaeological precedents (Dallas 2007, 12; Beale & Reilly 2017, 4).

In addition to textual modeling, technical 2D drawings were produced using the AutoCAD software. These were based on measurements extrapolated from the excavation report and scaled against fixed elements within Chamber No. 1, particularly the base of Weeping Women Sarcophagus. Because no exact measurements were recorded for the plain sarcophagus, relative scaling methods and architectural referencing were applied to maintain fidelity. Hypothetical features and uncertain elements were clearly distinguished from those inferred from the verified data.

Each iteration, whether textual description, plan drawing, or comparative model, was subjected to an interpretive review. Whisk's output was treated not as final knowledge, but as a discursive tool: a way of testing hypotheses, generating alternatives, and identifying overlooked typological possibilities. This approach follows recent digital heritage theory, which frames generative AI as a partner in critical inquiry rather than as a producer of definitive representations (Jeffrey 2015, 148; Gillings 2012, 605).

Importantly, this reconstruction is not intended as a substitute for the lost artifact but as a speculative contribution addressing representational gaps in museological interpretation. By generating a plausible scholarly representation of what the sarcophagus might have looked like, this study reclaims its interpretive potential and repositions it within the broader discussion of material culture, funerary diversity, and curatorial selectivity. As Meskell (2011, 56) observes that**,** heritage is never neutral; it is shaped by the visibility, framing, and influence of institutional priorities.

Ultimately, this reconstruction functions not only as a visual or technical exercise but also as a curatorial provocation. This raises questions about which forms of commemoration are given visual space, what kinds of mortuary expressions are emphasized, and how digital tools might be used to reintroduce, rather than erase, ambiguity. This study contributes to the evolving ethics of digital heritage and highlights the potential of AI-assisted reconstruction to engage in representational absences as opportunities for renewed historical imagination

Fındıngs

AI-Assisted Visual Reconstruction of the Plain Sidon Sarcophagus

As part of the digital restitution process described above, this study utilized artificial intelligence technologies to generate a visual reconstruction of the previously unrepresented Sidon sarcophagus from Chamber No. 1 of Hypogeum A. Drawing on historical descriptions provided in Une Nécropole Royale à Sidon (Hamdi Bey & Reinach 1892, 21), combined with refined technical dimensions based on field documentation, a series of representative visual reconstructions was created using Google Labs' Whisk image generation system.

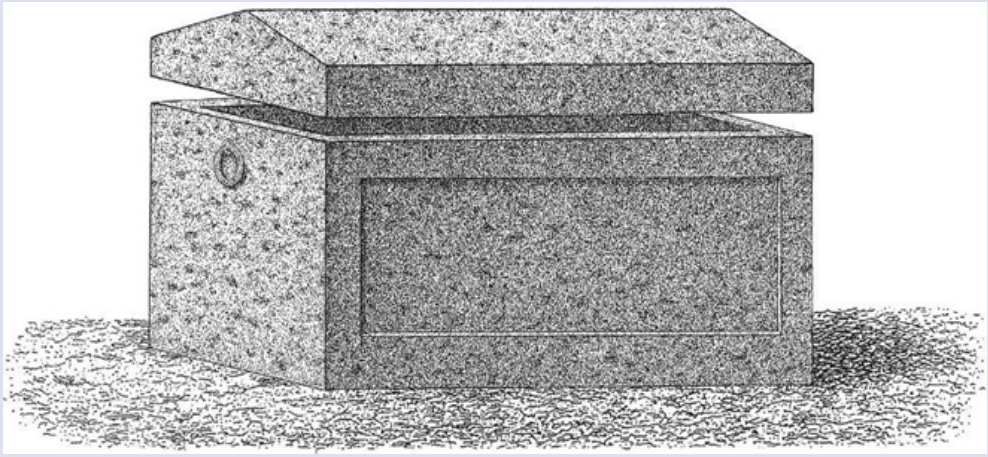

Figure 1.1 AI-assisted digital reconstruction of the unadorned sarcophagus from Chamber No. 1, Hypogeum A, Sidon Royal Necropolis.

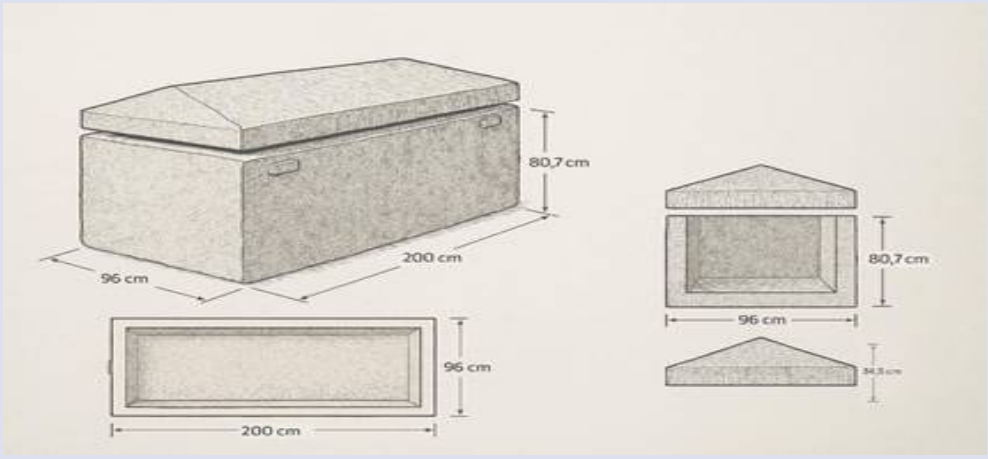

Figure 1.2 Geometric modeling parameters for the unadorned sarcophagus, including dimensions and functional lifting bosses.

The reconstruction process began with key geometric parameters: an external length of 200 cm, width of 96 cm, body height of 80.7 cm, and a flat lid of approximately 34.5 cm in height. Functional lifting bosses were noted on the short sides of both the lid and sarcophagus body, whereas all surfaces were kept undecorated to reflect the object's austere aesthetics. These inputs were encoded as structured textual prompts and processed using an AI model trained to synthesize visual representations from textual and dimensional data.

The resulting images included a four-view technical drawing comprising a perspective view, top-down layout, cross section, and annotated elevations, which together offered a plausible representation of what the object might have looked like if it had been properly documented or preserved. Importantly, this visualization is not intended as an authoritative or finalized reproduction but rather as a discursive tool—a speculative visual artifact that helps address the interpretive gap caused by its historical invisibility.

To highlight the dynamics between institutional visibility and representational absence, we created a separate set of comparative visualizations using Google Labs' Whisk tool. These images, though entirely artificial, depict stylized, ornamented sarcophagi rendered in photorealistic quality to simulate conventional museum display expectations.

Figure 2 Photorealistic rendering of stylized sarcophagus types for comparative aesthetic analysis.

Figure 3 Comparative juxtaposition of AI-generated austere model and speculative "ideal" ornamented types.

While not meant to represent the Sidon sarcophagus itself, these photorealistic renderings exemplify the aesthetic vocabulary commonly encountered in institutional collections. The contrast between these stylized reconstructions and the plain AI-generated model offers insight into how visual preferences particularly those associated with ornamentation and notions of "completeness" may have influenced curatorial decisions and contributed to shaping the artifact's historical visibility.

By juxtaposing the digitally rendered austerity of Chamber No. 1's sarcophagus with these speculative "ideal" types, the images collectively invite reflection on the evolving notions of cultural representation. In this context, they seek to reintroduce the interpretive potential of a funerary object that has remained historically underrepresented owing to aesthetic considerations. Here, absence becomes a space for inquiry and digital proxies serve as constructive tools for epistemological exploration.

Discussion

Typological Integrity and Representational Gap

Unlike the richly adorned sarcophagi that dominate both scholarly and public discourse, the plain sarcophagus from Hypogeum A embodies a stark, unmediated materiality that invites a reconsideration of the prevailing hierarchies of archaeological and museological values. Devoid of iconographic narrative, decorative program, or textual inscription, the artifact resists conventional metrics, through which significance is typically assigned within both archaeological typologies and curatorial strategies. Its aesthetic austerity, marked by the absence of relief sculptures, symbolic motifs, or epigraphic content, renders it not only visually distinct but also conceptually thought-provoking. It occupies a liminal position: archaeologically attested, yet absent from museological frameworks.

Thus, the absence of this sarcophagus in the Istanbul collection reflects more than a logistical or spatial decision. It gestures toward a broader curatorial tendency in the representation of mortuary practices, where visually elaborate and narratively rich forms often take precedence over simpler, potentially more common, expressions of death and burial. As Pearce (1995, 15) argues, the process of collection is not merely accumulative, but constitutive; it shapes cultural meaning by defining what is considered worthy of preservation, study, and display. In this context, the non-inclusion of the undecorated sarcophagus highlights a curatorial perspective informed by 19th-century aesthetic

preferences in which ornamentation was closely associated with both value and visibility.

Had this artifact been incorporated into the museum's display strategy, it could have initiated meaningful visual and conceptual dialogue. Positioned adjacent to the Weeping Women Sarcophagus— An exemplar of emotional intensity, allegorical richness, and high craftsmanship. The plain sarcophagus might have served as a curatorial counterpoint. Such a juxtaposition could have opened an interpretive space for considering not only funerary art traditions but also broader questions of social stratification, access to funerary expression, and material economy in the Phoenician context. This might have encouraged a more inclusive museological approach, one that recognizes the multiplicity of deathways rather than presenting a homogenized, elite-centered vision of the past (Meskell 2011, 56; Shanks & Tilley 1992, 87).

The absence of this object, therefore, does not simply signify a missing physical form but may also be understood as a silent space in the museum's visual and narrative structure. It interrupts curatorial completeness and coherence. Notably, Osman Hamdi Bey himself appears to have recognized this gap. His expression of regret in *Une Nécropole Royale à Sidon* constitutes a rare moment of curatorial reflection and a subtle acknowledgment of the institutional constraints and representational priorities present in museological practice (Hamdi Bey & Reinach 1892, 21).

Curatorial Re-Imagination: An Interpretive Exhibition Scenario

Building on the digital restitution of the plain Sidon sarcophagus, this study proposes a speculative, yet historically grounded, curatorial scenario that reconsiders the object's institutional trajectory. Rather than treating the digital model as an end in itself, the project offers a conceptual exhibition proposal—one that reintegrates the sarcophagus into the Istanbul Archaeological Museum's display, not simply as a supplementary object but as an interpretive focal point. This imagined installation proposes a curatorial intervention that invites new readings of visual hierarchies, aesthetic assumptions, and typological frameworks shaping the representation of the Phoenician funerary culture.

The proposed exhibition situates the plain sarcophagus in considered proximity to more elaborately adorned examples, such as Alexander Sarcophagus and Weeping Women Sarcophagus. This juxtaposition is not only formal, but also interpretive, designed to open space for understanding diversity in burial practices, socio-economic contexts, and expressions of identity. Instead of reinforcing the established narratives of the visual splendor, the layout suggests a dialogical encounter between ornamentation and simplicity, encouraging a broader understanding of historical realities and curatorial practices (Pearce 1995, 15; Hooper-Greenhill 2000, 34).

Interpretive panels would further articulate this encounter by comparing stylistic features, material sources, and symbolic meanings across sarcophagus types. The unembellished geometry of the plain sarcophagus could be explored not as an absence or lack, but as a potential reflection of alternative values—modesty, regional practice, or different conceptions of status and remembrance. In doing so, the exhibit promotes a more inclusive curatorial language, one that acknowledges variety rather than defaulting on canonical aesthetic norms.

Multimedia components, including immersive projections or 3D reconstructions, could animate the spatial context of Hypogeum A and allow audiences to visualize how these burial forms coexist. Rather than aiming for total realism, such technologies can contextualize material culture within its original architectural and ritual environment (Jeffrey 2015, 148; Cameron & Kenderdine 2007, 63).

This curatorial approach resonates with current discussions in critical museology and reflexive heritage practices. As Shelton (2013, 10) noted, curating alternative scenarios—what might have been—can illuminate the implicit structures through which collections have historically taken shape. In this sense, the imagined reinsertion of the plain sarcophagus is not merely restorative but dialogic; it makes visible the dynamics of visibility itself and invites reflection on how museums engage with the complexity of the past.

Moreover, the digital nature of reconstruction facilitates extended accessibility. The proposed display can be adapted for virtual platforms, enabling global audiences to experience and reflect upon this interpretive gesture. This open-ended curatorial design can be recontextualized by other institutions facing similar representational challenges, thus functioning not only as an exhibition, but also as a transferable framework for interpretive engagement (Gillings 2012, 605; Dallas 2007, 12).

Finally, this speculative exhibition operates both as homage and reflection. It acknowledges Osman Hamdi Bey's recognition of the sarcophagus's typological relevance while also considering the institutional and logistical factors that may have constrained its inclusion. In doing so, it offers an opportunity to reflect on inherited museological paradigms and suggests new ways to approach curatorial practice—one that expands narrative space for lesser-seen artifacts and encourages ethical engagement with institutional memory.

Conclusıon

The understated sarcophagus from the Royal Necropolis of Sidon, an unembellished funerary monument that remained physically and discursively outside the canon of Ottoman archaeological heritage, serves as a compelling locus for reflecting on the dynamics of institutional memory, ethics of selection, and conceptual potential of digital imagination. Its non-inclusion in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum's collection is not merely a logistical anecdote or a peripheral curatorial decision; rather, it is indicative of broader museological patterns that have historically favored the visible, the ornate, and the narratively rich over the quiet, the modest, and the formally minimal. As such, this study positioned the sarcophagus not as an inert object lost to

history but as a focal point—an evocative artifact of absence whose invisibility encourages reflection on the structural mechanisms of institutional representation.

By focusing on this case, this study aimed at reframing the curatorial gaze itself, shifting focus from celebrated artifacts that have traditionally or institutionally shaped museum collections. This shift in orientation is not merely a revisionist, but also constructive. It encourages the field of museum studies and archaeological heritage to reconsider the frameworks by which value has historically been attributed and to reflect on the overlooked aspects embedded within those systems. In so doing, absence is not treated as a void to be filled but as a generative epistemic terrain—a space wherein the silences of the archive become legible, interpretable, and open to ethical engagement.

Throughout this study, multiple layers of inquiry—archival, typological, spatial, and digital— were woven together to trace the historical trajectory and museological considerations surrounding this singularly underrepresented sarcophagus. Each methodological strand—whether the close reading of *Une Nécropole Royale à Sidon* (Hamdi Bey & Reinach 1892, 21), the spatial reconstruction of Chamber No. 1, or generative modeling using Google Labs' Whisk—has contributed to a renewed curatorial imagination that is both historiographically grounded and critically reflective. This hybrid approach offers a conceptual museum model that operates not only in the realm of material recovery, but also in the ontological reconsideration of the unseen.

Importantly, the case of Sidon sarcophagus raises broader questions regarding the criteria by which cultural heritage is defined, categorized, and displayed. The fact that its omission was accompanied by a note of regret, even by Osman Hamdi Bey himself, suggests that aesthetic and logistical limitations were already perceived as interpretive constraints at the moment of decision-making. This instance of curatorial awareness, uncommon in 19th-century archaeology, points to the potential for a more reflexive museology—one that not only inherits systems of value, but also engages with them critically. As museums today navigate the complexities of colonial legacies, repatriation discussions, and selective classifications, revisiting such moments has become not just relevant but increasingly necessary.

Moreover, this study contributes to the evolving field of digital heritage by advocating its conceptual potential, not simply by leveraging technology for visualization. Digital reconstruction is not presented here as a substitute for the original object or a definitive restoration of historical facts. Rather, it is embraced as a method of critical engagement, a means to reflect on institutional absences and bring attention to elements that remain unrepresented in historical narratives. The resulting reconstructions, interpretive exhibition scenarios, and hypothetical museographic layouts are not attempts to fabricate certainty but to cultivate interpretive openness. As Jeffrey (2015, 148) and Gillings (2012, 605) argue, digital heritage tools must be approached not as technologies of replication but as dialogic frameworks for epistemological innovation.

This study also proposed a new mode of museological agency that situates reconstruction within a broader curatorial and ethical narrative. This agency resists totalizing claims of completeness or objectivity. It is an agency grounded in humility—recognizing that absence is inevitable, but not immutable; that representation is selective, but not irredeemable. In this way, the project does not claim to "restore" the Sidon sarcophagus in any final sense, but instead mobilizes its absence as a generative force within the historiography of archaeological heritage. As Dallas (2007, 12) has noted, "digital curation is not just about preservation—it is about interpretation, participation, and negotiation across epistemic boundaries."

Furthermore, the methodological and theoretical frameworks developed in this study are relevant beyond Sidon's singular case. Countless archaeological collections around the world harbor similar lacunae, objects that remain undocumented, underrepresented, or were not selected due to prevailing standards of aesthetic value or institutional focus. The curatorial model proposed here, a fusion of speculative exhibition design, digital visualization, and critical historiography, can serve as a replicable paradigm for other institutions that grapple with their own histories of selective visibility. This is particularly important in the context of inclusive museology, where increasing attention is being paid to stories that have been underexplored and why.

In conclusion, Sidon sarcophagus is both a reminder and an invitation. This reminds us that the act of collecting is never neutral—behind every museum display lies a web of decisions, limitations, and interpretive frameworks. At the same time, it invites us to imagine what museology might become if it were oriented around the unseen, overlooked, and structurally marginalized. What if absence was understood not as a deficit but as a generative space for reflection? What if museums created rooms for objects and stories they had previously left aside?

This study suggests that they can, and perhaps should, do so. By turning to absence as a subject of curatorial inquiry and employing digital tools with epistemological care, it becomes possible to envision a reimagined museum: one that not only presents history but also critically engages with it; one that does not merely conserve artifacts but also explores the underlying structures of preservation itself. In this process, silence is reclaimed as a curatorial gesture, not as an erasure but as a thoughtful re-engagement with the act of remembering

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