

Emma Sidgwick

Radiant Remnants.

Late Antique Strigillation and Productive *Dunamis/Energieia*

Between the second and sixth centuries an abstract pattern or, if you will, 'motif' of fluidity arose in the stone, marble and later also silver surfaces of late antique 'pagan' and early Christian art. More precisely, shortly after the transition from classical to late antiquity, this abstract, supposedly purely 'ornamental' and 'decorative' motif proliferated, quite suddenly it seems, on Roman funerary artefacts. This abstract motif of flow consisted of repetitive, undulating, elongated S-shaped channels or flutings posteriorly known as 'strigils'. Generally overlooked in scholarly research, strigillation's pronounced wavy lines, invariably executed with minute precision, seem to vibrate mysteriously in the shade of the elaborate elucidation of the figurative iconographic programs of late antique art. Nonetheless it appears as remarkable that this late antique fluting abounded – literally and figuratively 'moved in waves' – on, precisely, funerary artefacts. Even more: it appears as significant that strigillation was from its very inception bound to funerary artefacts devised to contain bodily remains. While such fluting was initially restricted to a limited corpus of funerary urns and vases, strigillated sarcophagi were profuse during the third and fourth centuries. This consistency conjures an anthropologically oriented question: there must be a meaningful connection between what appears to us, at first sight, as a motif of substantial and pulsational flux and the material remains of a vanished human body. This meaningful connection surely must be specific, since from the sixth century onwards this wavelike carving was no longer applied neither to funerary urns and vases nor to sarcophagi, and disappeared altogether. Moreover, while extremely rare in other regions, including Greece, strigillation was tremendously popular on the funerary artefacts of imperial Rome. Taking root in those preliminary observations, this article aims to revisit strigillation, generally marginalised as a so-called empty decorative motif, and to reassess it, conversely, as a meaningful abstract motif. This prominent motif was undeniably not only fraught with meaning, it must, from the very outset, have expressed fundamental notions and experiences that narrative, figural carvings could not. This is already suggested by the formal rigour with which the motif was repeatedly executed; its precise formal qualities were decisive. Hence in view of strigillation's exposure to full-fledged scrutiny, this article starts off with a concise historical and formal description of this mysteriously proliferate motif and its prior – rather meagre – appearance in scholarly interpretation that ventured beyond its relegation to the realm of the decorative. Subsequently this article will propose an alternative iconographic analysis identifying strigillation as a motif operating in the register of the invisible tipping into abstract, not 'visibility' but, visibility. Thus it will expand the orthodox boundaries of what may be considered as a meaningful motif. Lastly, from an alternative but kindred angle, this reassessment of late antique strigillation will equally offer palpable insight into the very intangible, experiential foundations of the historically situated objecthood of the respective funerary artefacts themselves.