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Staging Execution: New Iconographic Evidence for Damnatio ad Bestias at Perge

İnfazın Sahnelenmesi: Perge'de Damnatio ad Bestias Üzerine Yeni İkonografik Kanıtlar

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Abstract: The two Late Antique figural terracotta vessel lid fragments from Perge depicting *damnatio ad bestias* constitute particularly significant evidence, given the rarity of securely identified representations of this form of execution. Although recovered from different archaeological contexts, the two fragments preserve complementary elements of the same iconographic programme. The Stadium-Amphitheatre example depicts a condemned prisoner on a raised platform approached by a lion and accompanied by a whip-bearing bestiarius, while the West Necropolis fragment provides clearer evidence for the physical restraint of the condemned to the platform. Comparison with established Roman representations demonstrates that the Perge examples belong to the visual tradition of judicial execution in the arena. Significantly, however, they appear to depict not the fatal attack itself but stages immediately preceding it: the restraint of the prisoner and the controlled initiation of the animal attack. The fragments therefore provide rare iconographic evidence for the organisation and staging of damnatio ad bestias in Late Antique Perge.

Keywords: Perge • Damnatio ad bestias • Execution • Roman Period • Late Antiquity.

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INTRODUCTION

The Roman practice of *damnatio ad bestias*, the judicial condemnation of criminals to be killed by wild animals in the arena, is well documented in the ancient literary sources[1] and has been the subject of considerable scholarly attention[2]. Yet visual evidence for this form of execution remains remarkably sparse. Despite the frequency with which such spectacles are described in ancient texts, relatively few secure archaeological or iconographic testimonies have survived that can with confidence be connected to this specific penal practice[3].

Damnatio ad bestias was not simply a method of capital punishment but a carefully staged form of public execution[4]. As Coleman has demonstrated, arena executions could assume a distinctly theatrical character, in which the condemned became participants in performances whose predetermined climax was their own death[5]. Such spectacles depended upon the controlled organisation of space, animals, arena personnel, and, in some cases, temporary architectural installations such as platforms and ramps[6]. The surviving visual evidence is therefore particularly valuable because it can preserve aspects of this staging that are only partially recoverable from literary sources[7].

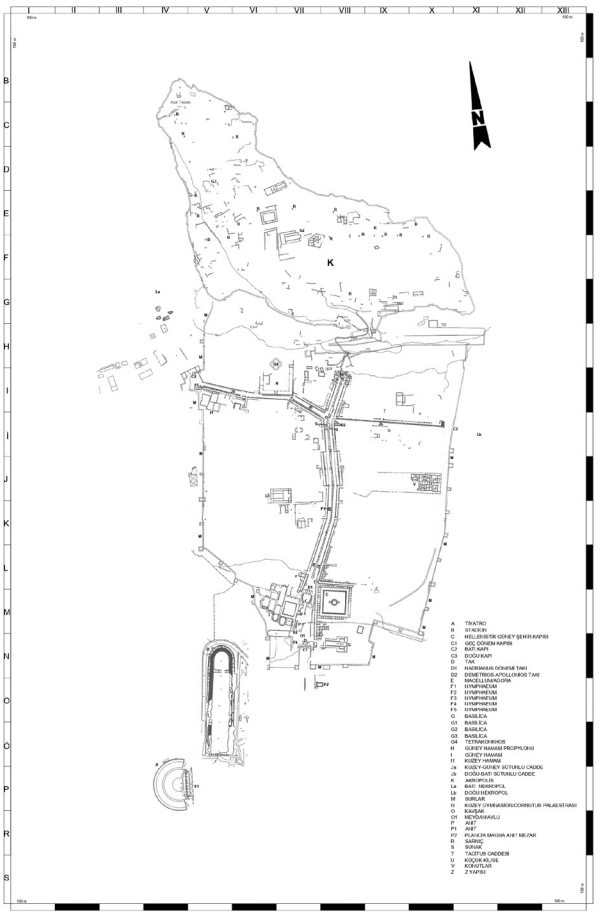


Fig. 1. The city plan of Perge. (ABAUAM Archive).

This article presents two figural terracotta lid fragments from Perge, a city in ancient Pamphylia whose Stadium-Amphitheatre and theatre provide important evidence for the continuation of arena spectacles during Late Antiquity[8] (**Fig. 1-3**). The first fragment was recovered during excavations at the Perge Stadium-Amphitheatre and has previously received only brief treatment in the archaeological literature[9]. The second, examined in detail here for the first time, was recovered from the West Necropolis at Perge. Although found within different archaeological contexts, the two fragments share a closely related iconographic programme centred upon a condemned prisoner displayed upon a raised platform and exposed to a wild animal, placing them within the visual tradition of Roman judicial spectacle.

1 Mart. Lib. Spect. 7 (Coleman 2006); Tert. Apol. 15.4 (Glover 1931); Euseb. HE 5.1 (Lake 1926); Dig. 48.19.28–29 (Watson 1985).

2 Coleman 1990, 44–73; 2000, 209-258; Cook 2012, 68–100; van den Hoek 2013, 401–434; Kubiak 2014; Kalinowski 2017, 115–128; Géraud 2018,19–46; Carucci 2019, 212–233; Dönmez 2025a, 202–226.

3 van den Hoek 2013, 401–434.

4 Bomgardner 2000, 211, 221. Cook 2012, 76; Kalinowski 2017, 121.

5 Coleman 1990, 44–73.

6 Kalinowski 2017, 123–124; Dönmez 2025a, 216.

7 On the acoustic and sensory dimension of this staging, complementary to the visual evidence examined here, see A. Dönmez, "Audible Violence: Sensory Experience and Punishment in the Stadium-Amphitheatre at Perge", paper to be presented at the 32nd EAA Annual Meeting (Athens, 29 August 2026).

8 Dönmez 2025a; Dönmez 2026.

9 Dönmez 2026, 104, fig. 10; Dönmez 2025b, 22–24 fig.3.



Fig. 2. The Stadium-Amphitheatre and the arena of the theatre at Perge (ABAUAM Archive).



Fig. 3. The arena of the theatre at Perge (ABAUAM Archive).

Considered individually, each fragment preserves only part of the execution scene. Read together, however, these two fragments provide an unusually coherent visual account of the staging of damnatio ad bestias. The Stadium-Amphitheatre fragment preserves the broader interaction between the condemned prisoner, the animal, and the bestiarius, while the Necropolis fragment clarifies the physical restraint of the condemned upon the platform. Their significance therefore lies not simply in expanding the known iconographic corpus, but in preserving complementary aspects of the organisation and staging of an arena execution that are rarely visible from the surviving archaeological record. The aim of this study is therefore to examine these two fragments as complementary iconographic evidence and to reconstruct, as far as the surviving imagery permits, the sequence and staging of the execution they represent. Through comparison with established representations of damnatio ad bestias and with literary evidence concerning the organisation of arena executions, particular attention is given to the raised platform, the restraint of the condemned, the role of the bestiarius, and the controlled initiation of the animal attack.

Archaeological Context

The iconographic observations presented in this study originate from two terracotta lid fragments recovered at Perge. Although both objects depict closely related scenes, they were discovered in different archaeological contexts and entered the archaeological record independently. Their association is therefore not the result of a shared depositional context but due to their remarkably similar iconographic programmes they display and the same method of production employed.

The first fragment was recovered during the excavations of the Perge Stadium-Amphitheatre[10] and has previously received only brief mention, both in a preliminary report and in a subsequent discussion of the monument's Late Antique transformation[11]. At that stage, the object primarily served to support the interpretation of the architectural remains associated with the arena. Because the study focused on the reconstruction of the monument, the iconography of the lid itself was not examined in detail. Several visual elements remained uncertain and some observations could only be proposed as tentative interpretations.

The second fragment, recovered from the West Necropolis at Perge and presented here for the first time, fundamentally changes this situation. Although discovered in a different context, it repeats the same basic visual composition while preserving details that are either damaged or ambiguous in the stadium example. Rather than representing an isolated parallel, the second lid provides an independent point of comparison that makes it possible to re-evaluate the first object from a substantially stronger analytical basis.

Consequently, the significance of these two objects lies not simply in the fact that they depict similar scenes, but fortunately, in the way each clarifies the other. Features that previously appeared uncertain on one lid become considerably more convincing when observed on the second example. The present study therefore treats the two fragments as complementary witnesses to a shared iconographic tradition rather than as two independent artefacts discussed separately.

The broader archaeological context also strongly suggests that both fragments belong to Perge's well-established local ceramic production. Relief-decorated terracotta lids are widely attested at the site, and their manufacture is supported by the discovery of moulds recovered from the Main Street and the Acropolis. Numerous additional examples from the South Bath[12] and domestic contexts[13] have likewise been classified as locally produced relief-decorated lids dating from the fourth to the seventh centuries AD. Although most known examples bear geometric decoration, simple animal motifs, or short inscriptions, the two fragments discussed here expand the known iconographic repertoire of this local production by introducing scenes centred on human figures and the culture of the arena[14]. They therefore provide further evidence for the diversity of Perge's Late Antique ceramic production and demonstrate that arena imagery also formed part of its visual repertoire.

The Stadium-Amphitheatre Lid Fragment

The stadium lid fragment, of which more than half is missing, measures approximately 15 cm in diameter and has an average thickness of 2–2.5 cm (**Fig. 4**). The fragment is circular in form and preserves a relief composition executed within a mould-made frame. Despite minor damage and surface wear, the principal elements of the scene remain

10 For the excavation history of the Perge Stadium and related publications, see Mansel 1956, 18; Abbasoğlu 1995, 560; Abbasoğlu 2001,183; Özdizbay 2012, 78–9; Demirel 2019, 423–425; Çokay Kepçe *et al*. 2022, 251–264; 2023, 150-151, 2024, 9–11; 2025; 7–8; 2026, 175–176; Dönmez 2025a, 202–226; Dönmez 2025b,22–24; 2026, 93–114.

11 See fn. 9.

12 Atik 1995, 107–8, abb. 40, 193–200.

13 Fırat 1999, 83–4, cat. nos. 830–43.

14 A further group of figured terracotta lid fragments depicting venatio, particularly dog hunting scenes, has been recovered from different areas of Perge during various excavation campaigns. Together with the venatio reliefs preserved on architectural blocks from the stage building, these finds form a separate body of evidence for hunting imagery at Perge and will be examined in a study in preparation.

clearly recognisable. The composition is organised around a raised rectangular platform upon which a human figure occupies the central position. A large feline approaches the platform from one side, while a second standing figure holding a whip occupies the opposite side of the composition.

At first sight the scene may appear to represent nothing more than an animal attack. Closer examination, however, reveals that the composition is organised according to a carefully balanced visual structure. Each figure occupies a specific position within the relief and the interaction between them directs the viewer's attention toward the individual standing upon the platform. Rather than depicting a chaotic struggle, the artist arranged the scene as a controlled sequence of actions centred on the condemned figure. When the fragment was first studied, several details of the human figure remained difficult to interpret because of the condition of the relief. In particular, the position of the arms and their possible relationship with the platform could not be established with confidence. These uncertainties limited the iconographic interpretation and encouraged a cautious reading of the scene. As is demonstrated below, the newly identified lid provides crucial comparative evidence for reassessing these features.



Fig. 4. The figural terracotta vessel lid fragment from the Stadium-Amphitheatre at Perge (ABAUAM Archive).



Fig. 5. The Figural Terracotta Vessel lid fragment from the West Necropolis at Perge (ABAUAM Archive).

The West Necropolis Lid Fragment

The fragment from West Necropolis, preserved to considerably less than half of its original extent, measures approximately 14 cm in diameter and has an average thickness of 1.8 cm (**Fig. 5**). The newly identified fragment preserves a markedly different part of the same iconographic programme. Unlike the stadium example, neither the approaching feline nor the whip-bearing arena attendant survives. Instead, the relief focuses exclusively on the condemned prisoner, represented frontally with both arms clearly attached to the sides of the raised platform. This constitutes the clearest evidence that the victim was not merely standing upon the structure but was physically restrained to it. Although the surviving fragment

preserves only the central part of the composition, its close correspondence with the stadium lid strongly suggests that it originally formed part of the same narrative scheme. The missing portions of the relief most probably included the attacking beast and the arena attendant known from the stadium example, although these elements cannot be reconstructed with certainty because they do not survive on this lid fragment.

From Parallel to Interpretation

The significance of the second terracotta lid fragment extends far beyond adding another example to the archaeological record of Perge; it fundamentally changes the interpretation of the stadium relief fragment. Until now, iconographic analysis depended upon a single object whose state of preservation left several important features uncertain. Most notably, although the stadium lid clearly depicted a condemned figure standing upon a raised platform, it remained impossible to determine with confidence whether the prisoner was physically restrained to the structure.

The newly identified necropolis fragment resolves this uncertainty. Rather than simply repeating the composition of the stadium example, it shifts focus to the details of the prisoner's condition. This fragment of a relief lid displays the condemned individual and explicitly shows both arms attached to the sides of the raised platform, demonstrating that the victim was physically restrained before the execution. This observation substantially strengthens the interpretation of the earlier relief and allows its more ambiguous details to be reconsidered from a firmer evidential basis.

This relationship carries an important methodological implication. Neither lid alone preserves the complete composition. Instead, each contributes different information to the reconstruction of the same execution scene, operating in a complementary manner. The stadium example preserves the wider organisation of the spectacle, while the necropolis example clarifies the prisoner's relationship to the execution platform. Their evidential value therefore lies not in exact correspondence but in complementarity. When read together, the two independently recovered reliefs considerably reduce the uncertainties created by damage, artistic simplification, and preservation, making it more likely that the recurring features reflect deliberate iconographic choices rather than being accidental or isolated details. The two fragments should not, however, be regarded as exact copies. Differences in execution and in the treatment of individual figures indicate that they were produced from different moulds within a local workshop tradition that employed a shared iconographic model while allowing for variation in manufacture. The persistence of the same narrative structure despite these differences reinforces the conclusion that the represented scene possessed a stable visual meaning. It is precisely this complementary relationship between the two reliefs that provides the foundation for the iconographic interpretation developed in the following chapter. Seen against the wider corpus of locally produced Perge lids, the two fragments demonstrate that local workshops were capable not only of reproducing conventional decorative motifs but also of adapting the medium to represent complex narrative scenes associated with the contemporary culture of spectacle.

Reading the Arena: An Iconographic Interpretation

The two terracotta vessel lid fragments from Perge should be regarded as complementary representations of the same form of execution. Considered together, they provide a more complete reconstruction of the iconographic programme than either example alone. Both compositions depict a condemned prisoner displayed upon a raised platform and confronted by a wild animal, a visual arrangement that belongs to the established iconography of damnatio ad bestias. The closest parallels are provided by the second-century CE La Graufesenque terra sigillata[15] relief (**Fig. 6**) and a Roman oil lamp (**Fig. 7**) dated to the first–second century CE[16]. In the terra sigillata relief, the condemned prisoner is

15 Lafaye 1892, 244–245.

16 Lafaye 1887, 1574. Also see Coleman 1990, 59; Cook 2012, 76–77, fig. 2.



Fig. 6. La Graufesenque terra sigillata relief depicting damnatio ad bestias, second century CE (from Géraud 2018, fig. 8; originally published in Lafaye 1892, 245).

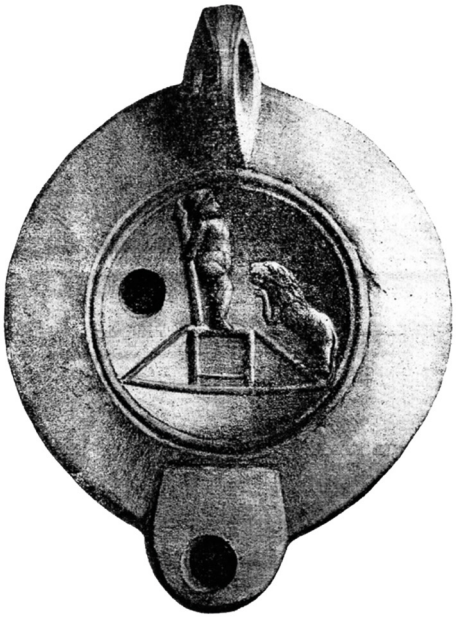


Fig. 7. Roman oil lamp from North Africa depicting damnatio ad bestias, first–second century CE (from Géraud 2018, fig. 6).

bound to a vertical post (palus, stipes)[17] erected on a raised wooden platform, while a lion ascends an attached ramp to attack him. Immediately behind the animal stands a bestiarius. The Roman lamp presents an almost identical arrangement, depicting a prisoner secured to a post on an elevated platform approached by a lion via a ramp. Together, these representations demonstrate that the combination of a raised platform, condemned prisoner, attacking animal, and access ramp constituted a well-established visual convention for representing damnatio ad bestias.

The Perge fragments follow this general compositional scheme while introducing important new iconographic details. The first lid preserves the relationship between the condemned prisoner, the lion, and the bestiarius, whereas the second provides the clearest evidence for the method by which the prisoner was restrained. Unlike the previously known representations, the second lid shows that the prisoner's hands were fastened directly to the platform itself rather than to a vertical post. This observation considerably refines our understanding of the execution apparatus, suggesting that the platform itself functioned as the principal device for immobilising the condemned. The two Perge fragments therefore complement one another. While the first preserves the dynamic interaction between the prisoner, the lion, and the bestiarius, the second clarifies the mechanics of restraint. Rather than depicting two independent scenes, they appear to document different aspects of the same execution arrangement.

Taken together, the Perge material expands the known iconography of damnatio ad bestias. Although its general compositional scheme follows established Roman models, the archaeological context and the newly identified second fragment reveal details that have not previously been documented with comparable clarity. The Perge assemblage therefore provides a unique opportunity to examine not only the visual language of judicial execution but also the practical organisation of the execution apparatus itself.

17 Lafaye describes the palus (stipes) as the "infamous post" (poteau infâme), emphasising its role in the public humiliation of the condemned. Lafaye 1892, 244.

The Staging of Imperial Justice: Reconstructing the Narrative of the Execution

Although the Perge fragments share the same basic iconographic structure as the terra sigillata relief and the Roman lamp, they differ significantly in the narrative moment they represent. In both comparative examples, the lion is already attacking or is about to attack the condemned prisoner. Their dramatic focus lies on the fatal encounter itself. The first Perge fragment, by contrast, depicts an earlier stage of the execution. The lion has not yet reached the prisoner; instead, the composition centres on the bestiarius, who is shown urging the animal forward with a whip. Rather than representing the attack itself, the scene captures the moment immediately preceding it.

This distinction becomes particularly significant when considered in the light of Coleman's interpretation of damnatio ad bestias. As Coleman has argued, the purpose of these executions was not simply to ensure the immediate death of the condemned. Prisoners were frequently placed on elevated structures beyond the animal's immediate reach, deliberately delaying the attack and prolonging the suspense experienced by the spectators. The dramatic effect of the spectacle depended not only upon the moment of death but also upon the uncertainty and anticipation that preceded it[18]. As Géraud likewise observes, damnatio ad bestias extended beyond the simple execution of a sentence to become a carefully orchestrated public performance, in which the sequence of events formed an essential part of the spectacle[19]. Yet such suspense could also extend beyond what was theatrically desirable. If the animal hesitated or failed to attack promptly, the intended sequence of the spectacle could be disrupted, requiring intervention to ensure that the execution proceeded as planned[20].

Within this context, the Perge composition appears to preserve precisely this otherwise invisible stage of the performance. The bestiarius is depicted striking or provoking the lion with a whip, suggesting an active intervention intended to initiate the attack. This interpretation finds additional support in literary evidence indicating that wild animals employed in damnatio ad bestias were trained and deliberately encouraged to attack the condemned, while their behaviour could be manipulated in order to prolong the spectacle[21]. The whip should therefore be understood not merely as an implement used to control the animal, but as the instrument by which the attack was deliberately initiated. Unlike the terra sigillata relief and the Roman lamp, which depict the animal already attacking the condemned, the Perge lid uniquely captures the critical moment immediately preceding the fatal assault.

This intervention may also have possessed a symbolic dimension. In damnatio ad bestias, the wild animal effectively functioned as the agent through which the sentence of death was carried out[22]. The arena was therefore not simply a place where criminals met their deaths, but a public theatre in which imperial justice was enacted before the assembled spectators[23]. The audience did not merely expect to witness a wild beast attacking a condemned prisoner, but to see the judicial sentence fulfilled. When the anticipated attack was delayed, the intervention of the bestiarius may have ensured not only the continuation of the spectacle but also the visible completion of the punishment itself. In this sense, the whip may be understood as symbolising both the practical provocation of the animal and the public enactment of imperial justice.

The second Perge fragment adds a further dimension to this interpretation. Whereas the prisoner on the first lid appears to have only one arm secured to the platform, the second clearly shows that both arms were fastened. This difference suggests that the execution was not staged according to a single fixed formula but allowed for different

18 Coleman 1990, 59.

19 Géraud 2018, 26–27.

20 Dig. 48.19.29: "Those who are condemned to the ultimate punishment straightway lose both citizenship and liberty. Accordingly this condition forestalls death and sometimes occupies a long time: which happens in the case of persons who are condemned to the beasts..." (trans. Watson 1985). An illustrative example occurs in the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis, where the bear refused to leave its cage (ursus de cavea prodire noluit), with the result that Saturus was led away unharmed (Pass. Perp. 19.6; Musurillo 1972, 126–127).

21 Géraud 2018, 30–31.

22 Bomgardner 2000, 211, 221.

23 Carucci 2019, 215, 217.

degrees of restraint. In the first composition, the condemned may have retained limited freedom of movement, allowing him to resist or defend himself briefly against the approaching animal. In the second, however, the complete immobilisation of both arms rendered the prisoner entirely defenceless from the outset. As Géraud has observed, the defining characteristic of damnatio ad bestias was precisely the condemned person's inability to defend himself, distinguishing judicial execution from the venatio[24]. The two Perge lids therefore appear to preserve distinct stages or variants of this same penal practice, demonstrating that the visual language of punishment could accommodate different modes of restraint while preserving the essential condition of the condemned's helplessness.

Taken together, the two Perge terracotta lids reveal aspects of damnatio ad bestias that are absent from the previously known iconographic evidence. Rather than depicting only the fatal attack, they preserve successive stages in the carefully orchestrated performance of judicial execution: the restraint of the condemned, the provocation of the animal, the initiation of the attack, and ultimately the public enactment of imperial justice. In doing so, the Perge assemblage shifts the emphasis from the moment of death to the choreography through which death itself was transformed into a judicial spectacle.

Conclusion

The two terracotta lids from Perge represent considerably more than new additions to the corpus of examples of the minor arts of the Late Antique period. Individually, each preserves only part of the execution scene; considered together, however, they provide an exceptionally coherent visual reconstruction of damnatio ad bestias. Read as complementary compositions, they reveal not simply an act of violence but the carefully orchestrated sequence of a judicial execution, in which the broader arrangement preserved on the stadium lid is completed by the detailed evidence for physical restraint provided by the necropolis fragment.

This reconstruction is supported by the convergence of archaeological, iconographic, and literary evidence. The architectural remains of the Stadium-Amphitheatre indicate the existence of a raised wooden installation within the arena, while the terracotta lids preserve complementary evidence for its probable appearance and function. Literary descriptions and comparative iconographic material firmly situate these scenes within the wider tradition of Roman judicial spectacle, demonstrating that the Perge reliefs reflect genuine penal practices associated with the Late Antique arena rather than a conventional decorative or symbolic motif.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of the Perge assemblage lies in its narrative structure. Unlike previously known representations, which generally emphasise the moment of attack, the Perge lids preserve successive stages in the execution itself. The raised platform, the restraint of the condemned prisoner, the controlled approach of the lion, and the probable intervention of the bestiarius together reveal the carefully managed sequence through which judicial punishment was transformed into public spectacle. Rather than focusing solely upon the fatal encounter, the Perge compositions emphasise the deliberate prolongation of anticipation immediately before the attack, offering a rare visual insight into the choreography of damnatio ad bestias.

Beyond their significance for the study of Roman spectacles, the Perge terracottas also illuminate the remarkable continuity of arena imagery during Late Antiquity. Produced within an increasingly Christianising society, they demonstrate that the visual language of the Roman amphitheatre remained meaningful well beyond the period in which such spectacles flourished. As Kalinowski has demonstrated[25] for the fifth-century mosaic of Daniel from Borj el Youdi, the established visual language of damnatio ad bestias, including the condemned figure, aggressive lions, and the architectural apparatus of the arena, could be appropriated and reinterpreted within Christian imagery to convey a fundamentally different meaning (Fig. 8). The Perge fragments are fundamentally different in that they are archaeological products of the arena itself rather than Christian appropriations of the iconography of arena.

24 Géraud 2018, 28–29.

25 Kalinowski 2017, 121–124.

Nevertheless, the comparison illustrates the continued vitality of this visual vocabulary across different ideological contexts during the fourth and fifth centuries.

Equally significant is the fact that these reliefs were almost certainly produced within the well-documented local ceramic workshops of Late Antique Perge. Rather than merely reproducing established decorative conventions, these workshops adapted everyday ceramic production to depict scenes associated with the city's arena spectacles. As archaeological images securely connected with damnatio ad bestias remain exceptionally rare, the Perge terracottas constitute one of the most informative archaeological visual testimonies currently available for reconstructing the organisation, staging, and visual language of damnatio ad bestias in the Roman East.

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Genişletilmiş Türkçe Özet

İnfazın Sahnelenmesi: Perge'de *Damnatio ad Bestias* Üzerine Yeni İkonografik Kanıtlar

Roma dünyasında suçluların vahşi hayvanlar aracılığıyla öldürülmesini ifade eden damnatio ad bestias, antik edebî kaynaklarda ayrıntılı biçimde belgelenmiş ve modern araştırmalarda üzerinde sıklıkla durulmuş bir infaz uygulamasıdır. Buna karşın, bu ceza biçimini doğrudan ve güvenilir biçimde tanımlamaya imkân veren arkeolojik ve ikonografik kanıtların sayısı oldukça sınırlıdır. Antik kaynakların arena infazlarından sıklıkla söz etmesine rağmen, bunların görsel temsilleri nadiren günümüze ulaşmıştır. Bu nedenle, damnatio ad bestias uygulamasının yalnızca infazın sonucunu değil, aynı zamanda hazırlanma ve sahnelenme süreçlerini de yansıtan her yeni ikonografik buluntu, Roma arena kültürünün anlaşılması açısından özel bir önem taşımaktadır.

Damnatio ad bestias, yalnızca bir idam yöntemi değil, seyirci önünde kontrollü ve aşamalı biçimde gerçekleştirilen kamusal bir gösteriydi. Mahkûmun arenadaki konumu, vahşi hayvanın yönlendirilmesi, arena görevlilerinin müdahalesi ve infaz sırasında kullanılan geçici mimari düzenlemeler bu gösterinin temel unsurlarını oluşturuyordu. İnfazın dramatik etkisi yalnızca ölüm anından değil, mahkûmun savunmasız bırakılması, hayvanın yaklaşmasının geciktirilmesi ve seyircinin beklentisinin artırılmasından da kaynaklanıyordu. Bu çalışma, Perge'de ele geçen iki figürlü terrakotta kapak parçasından hareketle söz konusu sahneleme sürecinin bazı önemli ayrıntılarını yeniden değerlendirmeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Çalışmanın temel materyalini Perge'nin iki farklı alanında ele geçen iki kabartmalı terrakotta kapak parçası oluşturmaktadır. Bunlardan ilki Stadium-Amphitheatre kazılarında, ikincisi ise Batı Nekropolü'nde bulunmuştur. Farklı arkeolojik bağlamlardan gelmelerine rağmen iki örneğin benzer ikonografik programlara sahip olması ve aynı üretim geleneğini yansıtması, bunların birlikte değerlendirilmesini mümkün kılmaktadır. Stadium-Amphitheatre örneği daha önce yayımlanmış olmakla birlikte ikonografisi ayrıntılı biçimde ele alınmamış, özellikle merkezdeki insan figürünün platformla ilişkisi ve kollarının konumu konusunda bazı belirsizlikler devam etmiştir. Batı Nekropolü'nde ele geçen ve bu çalışmada ilk kez ayrıntılı biçimde değerlendirilen ikinci kapak parçası ise söz konusu belirsizliklerin önemli ölçüde giderilmesini sağlamaktadır.

Yaklaşık 15 cm çapındaki Stadium-Amphitheatre parçası, kalıp kullanılarak oluşturulmuş kabartmalı bir kompozisyonu korumaktadır. Sahnenin merkezinde yükseltilmiş dikdörtgen bir platform üzerinde bulunan insan figürü yer almaktadır. Platformun bir tarafından büyük bir kedigil figürü yaklaşırken karşı tarafta elinde kamçı bulunan ikinci bir insan figürü görülmektedir. İlk bakışta sıradan bir hayvan saldırısı olarak yorumlanabilecek sahnenin kompozisyonu ayrıntılı incelendiğinde, figürlerin rastlantısal biçimde değil, merkezdeki mahkûma yönelen kontrollü bir eylem dizisi içerisinde düzenlendiği anlaşılmaktadır. Kamçı taşıyan figürün bir bestiarius olarak değerlendirilmesi, sahnenin arena bağlamını güçlendirmektedir.

Batı Nekropolü'nde bulunan ve yaklaşık 14 cm çapında olduğu anlaşılan ikinci parça, aynı ikonografik programın farklı bir bölümünü korumaktadır. Bu örnekte hayvan ve bestiarius günümüze ulaşmamış; bunun yerine sahnenin merkezindeki mahkûmun durumu daha açık biçimde korunmuştur. Figür cepheden gösterilmiş ve her iki kolunun yükseltilmiş platformun yanlarına sabitlendiği açıkça belirtilmiştir. Böylelikle mahkûmun yalnızca platform üzerinde durmadığı, infaz öncesinde fiziksel olarak platforma bağlandığı anlaşılmaktadır. Bu ayrıntı, Stadium-Amphitheatre örneğinde belirsiz kalan kol ve platform ilişkisini yeniden değerlendirme olanağı sağlamaktadır.

İki parça bu nedenle birbirinin birebir kopyası olarak değil, ortak bir ikonografik geleneğin birbirini tamamlayan örnekleri olarak değerlendirilmelidir. Stadium-Amphitheatre parçası infazın genel düzenini; mahkûm, vahşi hayvan ve bestiarius arasındaki ilişkiyi gösterirken, Batı Nekropolü parçası mahkûmun infaz düzeneğine nasıl sabitlendiğini açıklığa kavuşturmaktadır. Üretim ayrıntılarındaki farklılıklar parçaların farklı kalıplardan üretildiğini göstermektedir. Bununla birlikte aynı anlatı şemasının sürdürülmesi, Perge'deki yerel atölyelerde ortak ve anlaşılabilir bir görsel modelin kullanılmış olduğunu düşündürmektedir.

Perge örneklerinin ikonografik açıdan en yakın karşılaştırmalarını MS 2. yüzyıla tarihlenen La Graufesenque terra sigillata kabartması ile MS 1.–2. yüzyıllara tarihlenen bir Roma kandili oluşturmaktadır. Her iki örnekte de mahkûm yükseltilmiş bir platform üzerindeki dikey bir direğe bağlanmış, aslan ise bir rampa aracılığıyla mahkûma yaklaşırken betimlenmiştir. Perge kapakları genel kompozisyon açısından bu Roma ikonografik geleneğiyle uyumludur. Bununla birlikte Batı Nekropolü örneğinde mahkûmun ellerinin dikey bir direğe değil, doğrudan platformun yanlarına sabitlendiğinin anlaşılması, bilinen örneklerden farklı bir infaz düzenlemesinin varlığına işaret etmektedir. Böylece platform yalnızca mahkûmu yükselten bir yapı değil, aynı zamanda onu hareketsiz kılan infaz düzeneğinin temel parçası olarak karşımıza çıkmaktadır. Perge örneklerinin bir diğer önemli özelliği, infazın hangi anının betimlendiğiyle ilgilidir. Bilinen diğer örneklerde aslan saldırıya başlamış ya da mahkûma ulaşmak üzeredir. Stadium-Amphitheatre kapağında ise vahşi hayvan henüz mahkûma ulaşmamıştır. Bunun yerine bestiarius, kamçısıyla hayvanı ileri doğru yönlendirmekte veya saldırıya teşvik etmektedir. Dolayısıyla kompozisyon, ölüm anından ziyade saldırının hemen öncesindeki kritik aşamayı göstermektedir. Bu durum, damnatio ad bestias infazlarının dikkatle planlanmış gösteriler olduğu yönündeki antik kaynaklar ve modern araştırmalarla uyumludur. Hayvanın saldırmakta tereddüt etmesi veya beklenen biçimde davranmaması durumunda arena görevlilerinin müdahalesi gerekebilmekteydi. Bu bağlamda bestiarius'un elindeki kamçı yalnızca hayvanı kontrol eden bir araç değil, infazın planlanan biçimde başlamasını sağlayan bir unsur olarak değerlendirilmelidir.

Mahkûmun bağlanma biçimleri de infazın sahnelenmesine ilişkin önemli bilgiler sunmaktadır. İkinci kapakta her iki kolun platforma sabitlendiği açıkça görülürken, Stadium-Amphitheatre örneğinde bir kolun daha serbest bırakılmış olabileceği düşünülebilir. Bunun farklı infaz uygulamalarını veya mahkûma sınırlı bir hareket alanı tanıyan değişik sahneleme biçimlerini yansıtması mümkündür. Bununla birlikte her iki örnekte de temel amaç mahkûmu hayvan karşısında savunmasız bırakmaktır. Bu özellik, damnatio ad bestias ile profesyonel veya kontrollü hayvan avı gösterileri olan venatio arasındaki temel farklardan birini oluşturmaktadır.

Perge terrakottalarının önemi yalnızca Roma infaz ikonografisine yeni örnekler eklemelerinden kaynaklanmamaktadır. İki kapak birlikte değerlendirildiğinde, bir arena infazının birbirini izleyen aşamalarını görsel olarak yeniden kurmaya olanak sağlamaktadır: mahkûmun yükseltilmiş platform üzerinde sergilenmesi ve bağlanması, vahşi hayvanın kontrollü biçimde yaklaştırılması, bestiarius tarafından saldırıya teşvik edilmesi ve nihayet infazın gerçekleştirilmesi. Bu açıdan Perge örnekleri ölüm anından çok, ölümün kamusal bir gösteriye dönüştürüldüğü koreografiyi görünür hâle getirmektedir. Buluntular aynı zamanda Geç Antik Çağ Perge'sindeki yerel seramik üretiminin ikonografik çeşitliliğine ilişkin önemli kanıtlar sunmaktadır. Kentte ele geçen kalıplar ve kabartmalı kapaklar, söz konusu eserlerin büyük olasılıkla yerel atölyelerde üretildiğini göstermektedir. Daha önce bilinen örneklerin çoğunda geometrik bezemeler, hayvan figürleri veya kısa yazıtlar görülürken, burada ele alınan parçalar insan figürlerini ve arena kültürünü konu alan daha karmaşık anlatıların da yerel seramik üretimine dâhil edildiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Böylelikle Roma arena dünyasına ait görsel dilin Geç Antik Çağ boyunca canlılığını koruduğu anlaşılmaktadır.

Sonuç olarak Perge'nin Stadium-Amphitheatre ve Batı Nekropolü'nde ele geçen iki terrakotta kapak parçası, damnatio ad bestias uygulamasının organizasyonu ve sahnelenmesine ilişkin son derece nadir ikonografik veriler sunmaktadır. Birbirini tamamlayan bu iki kompozisyon, mahkûmun fiziksel olarak bağlanmasını, infaz platformunun işlevini, vahşi hayvanın kontrollü biçimde yönlendirilmesini ve bestiarius'un saldırının başlatılmasındaki aktif rolünü ortaya koymaktadır. Bu yönleriyle Perge örnekleri, yalnızca Roma'nın adli infaz pratiklerini değil, cezanın seyirlik bir performansa dönüştürülmesinde kullanılan görsel ve mekânsal araçları da anlamamıza katkı sağlamaktadır. Özellikle damnatio ad bestias ile güvenilir biçimde ilişkilendirilebilecek arkeolojik imgelerin son derece sınırlı olması nedeniyle bu terrakottalar, Roma Doğusu'nda arena gösterilerinin organizasyonu, infazın sahnelenmesi ve Geç Antik Çağ'daki görsel belleğin devamlılığı açısından özgün ve önemli bir belge niteliğindedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Perge • Damnatio ad bestias • İdam • Roman Dönemi • Geç Antik Çağ.

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