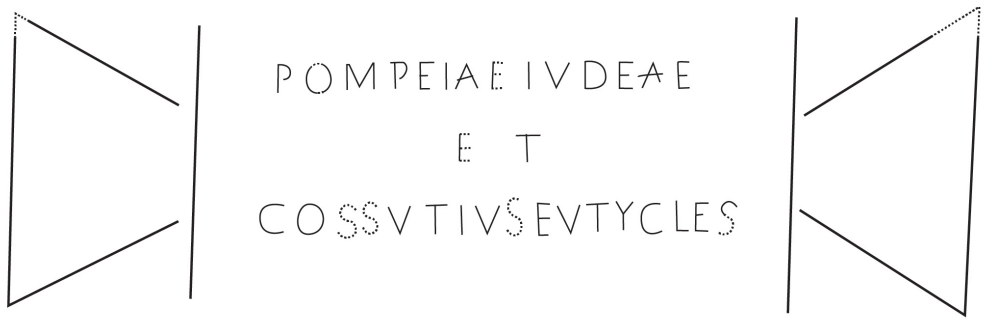
Caroline Bridel, 2025

The Pompeia Iudea Sarcophagus from Arles

This third-century sarcophagus, also known as a *bisomum*, is carved from the soft, yellowish limestone commonly used for sarcophagi in Arles (Latin: *Arelate*). The funerary monument is notable for its imposing dimensions and its internal division into two compartments of nearly equal length. A headrest at the northwestern end of each compartment indicates the orientation of the burial. Analysis of the skeletal remains recovered from the sarcophagus revealed that the western compartment (A) originally held an adult or elderly person, probably a male, while the eastern compartment (B) contained a younger individual, likely a female, both lying on their backs, facing north. Later, numerous scattered bones were deposited in both compartments, likely transferred from nearby graves after decomposition, once the sarcophagus (by then lidless) was reopened. This secondary use as a container for disarticulated bones was a common practice in medieval and modern church cemeteries.

As is typical of monuments of this sort, it bears no decoration other than an epitaph within a frame. But the inscription renders it an object of particular interest for co-production, as it combines a potential Jewish denomination with a local, non-typically Jewish form.



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The epitaph can be translated simply as *To Pompeia Iudea and Cossutius Eutycles* or, more elaborately, *To Pompeia Iudea. Cossutius Eutycles [erected this tomb] by his will*. In the second proposed translation, the E T would be read as *ex testamento*, although this seems less likely. The inscription appears to be consistent with the information provided by the study of the bones of the tomb's first occupants, a man and a woman who were buried close enough to be side by side, possibly husband and wife.

The surname (*gentilicium*) Pompeia was relatively common at the time and particularly well attested in Arles, with at least twenty-five occurrences, and indicates her status as a Roman citizen. By contrast, her *cognomen*, Iudea, which can be translated as "the Jewess" or "from Judaea," is much rarer. This inscription, and by extension the monument on which it is inscribed, is one of the few material testimonies to the Jewish presence in the Western Mediterranean in the first centuries CE. Moreover, applying the adjective to the woman alone suggests that her husband may not have been Jewish, indicating that this would be a mixed marriage.

The Roman city of Arles, a major colony and river port at the entrance to the Rhône delta, stood at the heart of regional exchange networks. The earliest archaeological evidence of Jews in Gallia Narbonensis is a Roman lamp (27 BCE–14 CE) from Orgon, decorated with a double seven-branched menorah. Though not proof of permanent settlement, it suggests contact or trade. A customs seal bearing a menorah—possibly linked to kosher goods or Jewish merchants—further attests to a Jewish presence in the imperial and late imperial periods, although its scale remains difficult to assess.

The use of the Latin terms *Iudeus* and *Iudea* in Greco-Roman inscriptions, as well as their Greek counterparts *Ioudaios* and *Ioudaia*, has been widely debated. Of the hundreds of surviving Jewish inscriptions from this period, about forty contain these words, mainly epitaphs dating from the late second century CE or later. Their meaning and function have elicited various interpretations and disputes, particularly between Tomson, who saw *Ioudaios* as a term of external identity (i.e. when Jews saw themselves from a non-Jewish point of view and in largely non-Jewish environments), and Kraemer, who saw it as having a range of connotations, such as a geographical indicator, a proper name, or even a sign of pagan sympathy toward Judaism. One could, however, simply side with Williams' interpretation, which emphasizes the term's potential for highlighting religious affiliation. In fact, *Iudaea*/*Iudaeus* and their Greek counterparts long carried both religious and geographical meanings. The date and context in which

the distinction between the two was established remains debated. Some argue that the Greek term *Ioudaios* had lost its geographical meaning, "coming from Iudea," to a religious signification from the second century onward. Others emphasize the late antique construction of the category "Jews" in opposition to "Christians" as a figure for religious alterity. Yet, this ambiguity is also found with other geographical terms primarily associated with a cult or religion, and it was common for authors to employ such terms to designate religious groups. For example, the word "Syrian" was often used with reference both to ethno-geographic origin and to religious affiliation, and could at times designate Jews, though not exclusively (Strab. *Geo*. 16.1–2; Them. *Or*. 5.9, 70a).

Two notable facts are still worth mentioning. Firstly, as Kraemer strikingly observed in what she classifies as "European inscriptions" (opposed to Asia Minor, North Africa, and Egypt), women are referred to as *Iudea* or *Ioudaia* twice as often as men are referred to as *Ioudaios* or *Iudeus*. Secondly, religious identification using a term such as "Jew" seems to be a distinctive feature of Jewish inscriptions, since neither Christians nor pagans appear to use a similar term in their epitaphs. Instead, they can be identified by their onomastic and the decoration of the grave or, in the case of Christians, by phrases such as *in pace* or *in Christo*. The sarcophagus of Pompeia Iudea therefore underscores a distinctive feature at play in a figcaption subset of Jewish epitaphs: a deliberate intention for self-representation through the explicit designation "Jew." This phenomenon—though difficult to understand—seems to appear more frequently among women. It is possible that the spouse or family played a role in this identification, seeking to mark the deceased, and by extension their lineage, as Jewish, particularly given the maternal transmission of Jewish identity. This self-assertion may itself be an index for religious co-production, since the impulse to name oneself so explicitly as Jewish presupposes encounters and engagement with other religious groups and their own sense of self-definition. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, it is possible that Pompeia was married to a non-Jew. This would make the desire to assert her different religious identity even more understandable.

A more tangible instance of co-production is visible in the monument itself. Arles has yielded at least a dozen double sarcophagi of this undecorated local-limestone type, typically used for individuals who were kin or otherwise closely connected. Although this phenomenon is not unique to Arles, such pieces are rather uncommon elsewhere in the empire; the type thus seems particularly prevalent in the region, without sufficient grounds to claim it as a distinctly Arlesian tradition. The sarcophagus of Pompeia Iudea belongs to this local production made by workshops operating independently of religious affiliation, a standard practice that nonetheless could result in religious co-production. Yet the commissioned monument, although it partly blended into the local norm, asserts distinction through its unique epitaph. Additionally, it sets itself apart from late-antique Jewish sarcophagus production. In fact, within the corpus of Jewish sarcophagi—understood as pieces whose decoration situates them within a Jewish context and bears distinctive iconography—this monument is a *unicum*, for it displays none of the customary motifs (menorah, etrog, etc.). Its singularity is best read as the product of local conditions: a commission by and for a Jewish woman living in Arles, realized through regional workshop practices and ultimately, an instance of religious co-production in which Jewish patronage and local craftsmanship jointly fashioned a commemorative form outside standard iconographic conventions.

To conclude, the Pompeia Iudea sarcophagus provides new insights into religious co-production in the Western Mediterranean. This funerary monument stands as a testament to the inclusion of a Jewish woman in Arlesian society during that period. The woman—who was likely married to a non-Jew—could have become established in the region, adopting its funerary traditions and being buried alongside non-Jews, a practice

that, contrary to lingering scholarly preconceptions, was quite usual for this period. She may also have been born there. In either case, the deceased's Arlesian roots did not entail the erasure of her Jewish affiliations in favor of Roman/pagan funerary monuments. Instead, one can observe a co-production characterized by the fusion of the traditional local form and the addition of the surname *Iudea*. This encounter between two worlds—pagan/Roman and Jewish—resulted in a unique monument among the corpus of ancient Jewish sarcophagi.

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