

Foreword

Living with Death

Timothy J. Clark

This volume derives from a conference held at the University of California, Berkeley in spring 2009. A year before, I had asked Chris Hallett if he would help organize an event that would bring to Berkeley scholars with things to say about Roman sarcophagi, a field that seemed to me to have been given new shape and substance by Paul Zanker's and Björn Christian Ewald's book »Mit Mythen leben«. Hallett immediately said yes (I knew when I asked him how interested he was in Zanker's and Ewald's achievement) and he became the instigator and helmsman of everything that followed. This book is his through and through, and I am deeply grateful to him. That the conference struck the two of us as feasible in the first place, and then became a reality, was in large part due to a grant awarded me in 2006 by the Mellon Foundation. It is good to be able to record my thanks to the Foundation here; and to Mont Allen, who worked hard and long to make the conference a success; and to say a word or two about how the idea for the conference first cropped up, and what I learnt from it.

Ten years ago I was studying a group of paintings by Nicolas Poussin, some Bacchic and some biblical, and came to realize that the basic beat of Poussin's tune – his paintings' processional language, and even the wildness occasionally interrupting the decorum – was borrowed from reliefs of Meleager, Endymion, the Niobids and the rest on Roman coffins. I was in Rome at the time, and the coffins were everywhere. So I found myself standing on the stairs of the Palazzo Mattei, trying to tune into the sensibility behind the solid collision of Mars and Rhea Silvia; or leafing repeatedly through Friedrich Matz's »Die dionysischen Sarkophage« (Berlin 1968). It was a strange world, and in it I thought I might find the clue to Poussin's paganism. Later on, ways led out to the wider world of death. Things rescued from Han grave pits – coffins of stone or wood, carved or painted, funeral banners, ritual objects – seemed a reasonable point of comparison. Perhaps they would sharpen my sense of what was special to the Romans' last rites. And somewhere behind the whole exercise, I now see, was the hope that if I immersed myself deeply enough in the universe of tombstones I might discover that death itself, in faraway places, back at the turn of the world, had been different. That is always the hope.

I came to the subject of ancient sarcophagi, then, as an outsider – much as Poussin did. But a question immediately follows. In what sense did I come to the subject of *death*, and death's figuration, as an outsider? The question is anthropological. Is death something that any human animal relates to from the outside? Or is one main characteristic of the species – one creator of the human – precisely a being on terms with death, or in intimacy with it; an intimacy that allows it to be represented, and therefore passed into and (hopefully) passed through?

Here are two quotations. The first I encountered in a paper on Han sarcophagi by Wu Hung, and is drawn from Mr. Lu's »Spring and Autumn Annals«, completed in 239 BCE but representing a wisdom from a much more distant past. (Lu Buwei was Chancellor in the years before China's First Emperor acceded to the throne. His *Annals* were an effort of scholars summoned to the capital, charged with recording the best of philosophy thus far.)

Burying means hiding away; and that hiding [of the corpse] is from a wish that men should not see it. Hence there are the clothes sufficient for embellishing the body; the coffins all round the clothes [sometimes several, nested one inside the other]; the casket all round the coffins; the earth all round the casket; and a mound further raised over that grave with trees planted on it.

The second is from the great Egyptologist Jan Assmann, at the start of his book »Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt« (Ithaca 2005):

The thesis that underlies this study can be reduced to an extremely simple formula: death is the origin and the center of culture ... When it comes to the importance of death, [Egypt] is admittedly an extreme example. But this has largely to do with the fact that we view ancient Egypt from the standpoint of a culture that is equally extreme, but in the opposite direction. From the point of view of comparative anthropology, it is we, not the ancient Egyptians, who are the exception. Few cultures in this world exclude death and the dead from their reality as radically as we do. Living with the dead and with death is one of the most normal manifestations of human culture, and

it presumably lies at the heart of the stuff of human existence.

Assmann's judgment on our culture – it's being essentially death-denying – is a topos. It crops up everywhere in the literature. The title of Zanker and Ewald's book has the challenge to the present built into it, I think, since »living with myth« on the tomb reliefs, they believe, was above all a way for mourners to go on living with death and the corpse. They came back to the coffin at times of festival through the years. They drank and celebrated. The dying Adonis kept death alive for them. From time to time a great stone lid was levered open and a new family member inserted. Grief and pomp were intertwined.

Maybe the idea that death is no longer present among us in anything like this way is one marker (among various linked negatives) of modernity having arrived. I'd take a bet that historians could discover much the same bill of attainder as Assmann's being issued by humanists in fifteenth-century Burgundy or clerics in seventeenth-century Amsterdam. But the question remains. Is Assmann right that »living with the dead and with death is one of the most normal manifestations of human culture, and ... lies at the heart of the stuff of human existence«? I want to answer Yes and No. Death, after all, as Mr. Lu reminds us, has always presented life with a problem. In simple biological terms, it is dangerous. It smells. It rots. It spreads disease. It is repellent. The human animal draws back from it and wants it sealed off and hidden.

And yet of course an immense, constitutive ambivalence takes hold of human beings when they find themselves with other dead members of the species. Pascal Boyer, in his indispensable book »Religion Explained« (Haifa 2002), has things to say on this. Different, and largely unconscious, worlds of inference are set in motion, he thinks, when the living and the dead confront one another. Corpses are (still) persons. They are people we cannot help treating, at one level, as entities with wishes, fears, awareness, powers over us, subservience to us. We still desire their presence – their regard. And therefore we resent their failure to give it, or imagine a reciprocity still lingering on. But corpses (for the hunter-gatherer mind in all of us, which goes into overdrive at such moments) are taboo. Our recoil mechanisms, always on the alert for pollution, are immediately operative; and they are cruel, absolute – one touch of the defiled or contaminated (maybe even one look) will be enough for the disease of death to spread. Surely Freud was right when he said that the terrible excessiveness of human grief is powered by a primary (maybe unrecognized) recoiling from the corpse, and then guilt at the reflex.

One way to sum this up – the thought is implicit in Mr. Lu's layer on layer of defenses – is to say that death

for us humans, whether we look at it or bury it deep, is always something in excess of fact or event. It is a state we project ourselves into, or try to. Some would have this be a way to draw the line between man and animal. We know that animals fear death, avoid it, fight it off. They too know it is dangerous (they often have a keener nose for putrefaction than us). Sometimes their grief for a fallen member of the group is palpable. But do they imagine what death consists of? Is it part of their picture of the world? The difficulty in answering such questions – it would be the beginning of an argument with Assmann – derives from the fact that it is hard to be entirely confident that, in contrast to animals, our species does imagine death, if we mean by the word »imagine« putting the mind in contact with the object's specificity. Is it death we imagine, in other words, or always a form of non-death – of death *lived*, of life in place of non-life?

Humans imagine death in some form – it would be foolish to deny the overwhelming evidence of their doing so – but at the same time their culture is haunted by the knowledge that death is unimaginable, and that its true nature is nothing, or worse than nothing. Death equals beginning to smell bad. Life – so culture knows unconsciously – may not have an opposite at all, just an ending. The very category Death – the making of nothing into something: a terrain, a concept, an object of knowledge, maybe even a person – is one of the species' consolations.

This leads me to Rome. You will gather that the material from the Chinese excavations is astonishing, and in a sense primordial; but it does not dislodge the late-Imperial Roman sarcophagi from the special place they have in history. Some of us continue to believe that what happened in Rome during the second, third, and fourth centuries – the end of paganism and the establishment of Christianity as a state religion – put its stamp on the frame of understanding we still inhabit. The why and how of the transformation remains a puzzle. If Assmann is right, and living with death stands at the heart of human existence, then the story told by the sarcophagi – Ewald counts between twelve and fifteen thousand of them surviving in the wider Roman world – ought to be one clue to the world-historical turning.

Perhaps it is. But the more I came to know the Roman tombs, and to understand what the scholars had to say about them, the more the paganism-and-Christianity question was displaced, or reframed, by another: a growing awareness, as I took the measure of the tombs' iconography and visual language, of the sheer »strangeness« of the Romans' image-world as compared with the normal material culture of death through the ages. It is particularly the first strong surge of sarcophagi production from the mid-2nd century on that seems to leap out of (or at least accelerate) the historical sequence. The

facts bear repeating. There is a sudden rush of objects, with the scale and intensity of their craftsmanship owing little or nothing to Roman funerary precedent; and the rush seems to happen in a way that suggests a whole workshop apparatus – a specialized market – being set up in less than two decades. Death and marble become inseparable, and for a while (till the murder of Commodus, say) an extraordinary diversity of possible stories and modes of figuration are acceptable. The whole phenomenon – though here historians fall to arguing, and in the Berkeley conference arguments were keen – does not seem to make sense unless one posits some kind of expansion, in the years after 140 CE, of the Death-imagining (Death-monumentalizing) classes. Not a total reconstellation of the mortuary elite – the old senatorial families held aloof from the fashion, and in any case we have no way of safely counting the number of coffins ordered decade by decade – but surely a slight and decisive opening out. Large-scale builders and bakers, brokers and contractors, producers of military and household hardware, ships chandlers, real estate dealers, staggers and financiers of public spectacles: creatures of a complex trading Empire. They wanted their bodies encased in myth. We should no doubt avoid the words »middle« or »middling« for the new customers – they were part of a still minuscule upper crust – and borrow a term from the Han bureaucracy: like the occupant of a fine carved tomb from Lushan, these were »hundred bushel people«. (The sum appears in the Chinese records as the Lushan official's allotment of grain per year: a low-end salary, but one that established him firmly as part of the state.)

The new Romans' coffins are incomparable: that remains the point. Of course Mr. Lu's imperative rules: the massive basins and lids of the containers were intended to seal off the body and help it rot away full speed: the word »sarcophagus« famously insists on technical efficiency. But along the sarcophagus's side was figured – strongly, insistently, at full rhetorical volume – *life*. Achilles, Orestes, Meleager, Hippolytus, Medea. It may be that sometimes the scenes chosen from the mythological repertoire hinted at the idea of existence continuing after death, but in Rome (I give my verdict, knowing the risks) the eschatology does not seem strong. What has Phaedra to do with the realm of the spirit? There are no journeys through the cosmos on the coffins (this in contrast to the Chinese material), only an occasional zodiac or half-open door. And the stories depicted, at least in the first late-Antonine decades, have a central, repeated place for the representation of death *as it occurs in life* – as it appears ordinarily, in the home, on the deathbed. Dishevelment and pain are part of the picture. Death on

the coffins is regularly – of course, not always – a family matter, taking place among intimates tearing their hair; something that happens to the dying as we look, and at the same time to those who »live with death« in the most literal sense: the carers, the mourners, the inconsolable. Stoic impassivity is in short supply. (Paul Zanker remarked at the Berkeley conference that maybe the strongest distinguishing feature of the late-Antonine material was its sheer emotionalism.) In the deathbed scene of Meleager now in the Louvre, which meant so much to artists from Nicola Pisano on, a young woman leans over the huntsman's wrecked body and seems to be squeezing the dust of a poppy under his nose. (This is Richard Neer's suggestion.)

We should not lose hold of how unprecedented, and without progeny, this iconography is. For why have death figured at all on the side of a coffin? And death not in the form of a spirit or skeleton or extra-terrestrial journey, but as an event in the here and now. Pain, breathlessness, slackening, narcosis. Women trying one last remedy. Surely there is no mystery to the fact that normally – functionally – death is what tomb sculpture exists *not* to show.

In due course normality, even in Rome, asserted itself. Deathbed imagery on the sarcophagi largely ceases, so the experts say, by the end of the second century. Dionysos and the Nereids crowd out the competition. Real mass production – standardized set-ups, garlands and Seasons, strigillated panels in easily varied arrangements – takes over. Myth eventually gives way (in the late 200s) overwhelmingly to pastoral – a sign of the pagan tapestry unraveling. Shepherds tend flocks, huntsmen seem in no danger. The stage of emotion is emptied, ready for the arrival of the saints. And it was never the case, even in the golden age of the workshops, that deathbed scenes were dominant numerically; or, in a sense, experientially. For surely the whole mythological setting of Meleager's or Adonis's death worked to put the event of dying at a distance, to inflate and aggrandize it, to convert even this ending into passage. Scholars better attuned to the language of the sarcophagi than I am will insist (as Francesco de Angelis did at the conference) that we enter into our reading of the relief's death-episodes the unique figural density of the surface as a totality, the whole crowded processional panel. The density – and density is what is most characteristically Roman about the sculpture – is, if you like, *life* once again taking over and making death part of its continuum.

Nonetheless, I look again at the Vatican's slaughter of the Niobids (fig. 1), or Creusa in agony on the astounding sarcophagus in Basel¹, or Orestes², or Protesilaos, or

1 See de Angelis in this volume, fig. 1.

2 See Smith in this volume, fig. 7.



1 Vatican City, Musei Vaticani, Museo Gregoriano Profano, inv. 10437. Niobids sarcophagus



2 Paris, Musée du Louvre, Meleager sarcophagus, inv. Ma 539. Detail with the conclamatio scene

Alcestis³, or Patroclus, and the fact that death occurs at all on the side of a coffin, taking the form of loss and grief, still strikes me as stupendous. It is a phenomenon of lateness, I guess – of the beginning of the disintegration of an ideological world. The nexus of paganism releases its strongest and strangest recognition of worldliness – the very recognition that makes it unique as an episode in history – just as other-worldliness begins to overtake it.

Which leads to a last question. Is there a way in which the Roman and Chinese materials truly belong together historically, as more than convenient foils? Wu Hung, in discussing the basic themes and variations to be seen in the Han material, intimates that there may be. It was in Rome and China at just this period, he points out, during the four or five centuries on either side of 1 BCE, that there came into being the main lines – the underlying imagery – of the ideological world that so many of us still belong to. On the one hand the arrival of Taoism and Buddhism in their international, theologized forms; and on the other, paganism giving way to Christianity. We are looking at the moment of emergence – of first elaboration – of the other-worldly, after-worldly imagining of death. Could we say, then, that the brief and exceptional episode of the sarcophagi in Rome – in particular, the appearance of ›the reality called dying‹ within the realm of death – was an anomaly made possible by the fact of this turning, this coming to an end? »Haunters of tombs«, a pagan called Christians at the time. Meaning, I think, that he felt they were men and women who had too much oriented their lives *on* death, spending their time looking gloomily (exultantly) at skulls. They lived with death too imaginatively: their intimacy with it was cloying. »Ich freue mich auf meinen Tod.« Look at Meleager (fig. 2), by contrast (the wholesaler turns to his tomb). Nothing awaits him. He has no idea what is happening as death comes on. None of his life has been spent preparing for it. He sniffs the poppy and ceases. And that is his glory.

Illustration credits

Fig. 1 Neg. D-DAI-Rom-71.1766 (detail)

Fig. 2 Neg. Fitt71-25-3. Photo: G. Fittschen Badura

3 See Bielfeldt in this volume, figs. 5. (Alcestis). 7 (Protesilaos).