

Introduction

Roman Decorated Sarcophagi as a Source for the Cultural Historian

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There survive somewhere between twelve and fifteen thousand decorated marble sarcophagi from the Roman world, equipped with an extraordinary variety of figural scenes carved in relief. About six thousands of these come from the imperial capital itself, the others are scattered all over the Mediterranean area, with important concentrations in Greece and Asia Minor¹. Over the past century or so these sarcophagi have been collected, studied, and classified by a number of dedicated scholars who have made the monuments themselves accessible in a series of extremely useful and well-illustrated reference works². But whilst our knowledge of this rich and well-documented body of material has been consistently growing, as far as most students of the ancient world are concerned the sarcophagi themselves, and their carved decoration, have remained a distinctly marginal field of research. And the study of the »sarcophagus-corpus« has remained the preserve of specialists. Since the early 1990s, however, this situation has come to seem more and more anomalous. For here, surely, is a marvelous untapped resource for the cultural historian of the high and late Roman empire. But what exactly do these thousands of carved marble coffins – with their striking and varied figural designs – tell us about the society that produced them? No consensus has ever emerged on this question.

There are two important reasons for this. The first derives from the reticence of the evidence itself. We have a great many funerary inscriptions and epitaphs from antiquity; sometimes they are carved directly on the monumental tombs in which sarcophagi were housed; more rarely they are inscribed on the sarcophagi themselves. But the inscriptions are mostly quite brief; and they are uniformly uninformative about how we should understand the relief carvings found on the coffins themselves. Remarkably, no ancient written sources come to

our rescue either – by discussing ancient sarcophagi explicitly. No Greek or Latin author ever thought fit to *mention* the great shift from cremation to inhumation that apparently began in Rome in the 2nd century AD, and which gradually spread all over the empire – let alone to offer a full and satisfying description of the custom of using monumental carved »flesh eaters« (*sarcophagi*) to house the corpse. So modern scholars have had little to go on in attempting to understand the carved reliefs that adorned these marble coffins, or in asking what those reliefs might have meant to those who were interred inside.

The second reason is historical, and derives from the way the specialist scholarship on carved sarcophagi evolved over the course of the 20th century. In the early 1940s the imagery of Roman sarcophagi was interpreted – in a very influential study – as expressing hopes for, and beliefs about, an expected afterlife³. Many of the figural scenes found on the sarcophagi, it was argued, were intended to refer to contemporary ideas, well represented among the educated elite, about the post-mortem fate of the soul. (The mythological sarcophagi of Rome itself were especially singled out for this approach.) The choice of subject matter, or myth – it was claimed – was often determined by esoteric pagan learning and philosophy. The afterlife referred to was a matter of private religious faith, and so not something expressed in funerary inscriptions. There were probably fairly few scholars who were ever completely persuaded by this analysis, and some who always rejected it outright⁴. But until relatively recently scholarly interpretations tended to start from the supposition that the myths represented in the reliefs made reference to the personal beliefs of those whose bodies were buried within the coffins, and said nothing about the norms and values of the society in which those individuals had lived their lives. On this reading, the sarcophagus imagery provided little of sub-

1 Guntram Koch gives the total as approximately 12,000 published examples: Koch 1993, 1. – Ben Russel estimates 12–15,000 sarcophagi: Russell 2010, 127. – Jaś Elsner thinks that if we include fragments the total might go as high as 20,000: Elsner – Huskinson 2010, 1.

2 Many of them published under the auspices of the »Deutsches Archäologisches Institut«: one thinks of the many volumes of the

two series »Antiken Sarkophagreliefs«, and »Sarkophag-Studien«; or the standard handbook, Koch – Sichtermann 1982.

3 Cumont 1942. This is today often regarded as a »Christianizing« interpretation of non-Christian sarcophagi: see Elsner – Huskinson 2010, 9.

4 Many sympathized with the position taken up by A. D. Nock in his brilliant review of Cumont's work: Nock 1946.

stance for the cultural historian, other than a widespread admiration for – and familiarity with – Greek myth.

New directions in the study of metropolitan mythological sarcophagi

A slow but decisive shift in thinking about Roman sarcophagi and their carved imagery may be discerned in a remarkable series of essays published in the 1990s, each of which was explicitly attempting to formulate a new approach to the material⁵. And this development may be judged to have reached a decisive moment – a kind of watershed – with the appearance in Germany of Paul Zanker and Björn Ewald's »Mit Mythen leben« in 2004 – a book that has now also been made available in Italian and English translations⁶. The publication of this wholly new systematic address to metropolitan mythological sarcophagi very quickly prompted a number of historians of Roman art to start thinking afresh about the sarcophagus *corpus* as a whole; and a number of other Classicists and ancient historians, who had never before explicitly addressed carved sarcophagi in their research, were prompted to turn their attention to this abundant and intriguing body of material. For the English-speaking world the sequence of events may be traced and documented in the convening of a series of three conferences dedicated to the subject in the period immediately following »Mit Mythen leben« appearance, including a symposium held in Berkeley in 2009, of which this volume is the formal publication⁷.

As one might expect in the wake of so recent an initiative, there is as yet no clear agreement about how the carved sarcophagi should be approached as sources for the writing of *cultural* history. That was quite evident to

all those who attended the recent conferences; and even a cursory look at the publications that have since appeared – on Roman funerary practices in general, and carved sarcophagi in particular – bears this out⁸. There are some fundamental disagreements among ancient historians and Classical archaeologists about the significance of the decorated sarcophagi in their own time, in particular on the question of who primarily purchased them – i. e. what sort of people they were made for. No wonder then that there is as yet little accord about using their elaborate figural ornamentation as a historical source – to allow us to make inferences about the distinctive temper or *mentalité* of high Imperial society.

In this respect the twelve essays of the present volume are no exception. The authors respond in very different ways to this challenge. But the sudden dramatic »turn« in scholarship – towards attempting to understand and analyze Roman sarcophagi in a broader sociological perspective – has undeniably opened up the material to a completely fresh set of questions. And the (perhaps predictable) clash of views, and the conflicting pronouncements of leading authorities, has also inevitably caught the attention of a significant number of younger scholars, and encouraged them to enter the fray. It is probably no exaggeration to say we are currently seeing a kind of Renaissance in sarcophagus-studies – or at the very least, an intense renewal of interest and excitement.

The Berkeley Symposium

The conference for which the majority of the papers in the present volume were written was held at the University of California at Berkeley on September 18 and 19, 2009. It began with a speech of welcome by T. J. Clark, and a keynote address delivered by Paul Zanker. In the program of papers that followed, ten other distinguished

5 E. g. the essays of Giuliani 1989, Blome 1992, Fittschen 1992, and Grassinger 1994; the books of Müller 1994, Koortbojian 1995; Zanker 1999, and Zanker 2000. A much earlier forerunner of this development was Blome 1978.

6 Zanker – Ewald 2004.

7 Three conferences on sarcophagi: (1) »Some New Work on Roman Sarcophagi«, Corpus Christi, Oxford 2008, organized by J. Elsner; published as J. Elsner – J. Huskinson (eds.), *Life, Death, and Representation* (Elsner – Huskinson 2010); (2) »Flesh Eaters: An International Symposium on Roman Sarcophagi«, University of California at Berkeley 2009, organized by T. J. Clark and C. H. Hallett; (3) »The Sarcophagus East and West«, Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, New York University, 2009, organized by J. Elsner and W. Hung, subsequently published as a special volume of »Res 61/62: Sarcophagi (Elsner – Hung 2012)«. – There was previously, of course, a steady stream of conferences on the subject of sarcophagi, mostly in Germany (see below n. 8). But these three

conferences in 2008 and 2009 were the first conferences on Roman sarcophagi ever held in the English-speaking world; and before the publication of Elsner – Huskinson 2010, as J. Elsner writes in the introduction, »there [was] no single volume of essays on Roman sarcophagi in English« (p. 1).

8 A whole series of books on Roman attitudes towards death and Roman funerary practices have appeared since 2005: Edwards 2007; Erasmo 2008; Hope 2007; Hope 2009; Rüpke – Scheid 2010; Carroll 2011; Carroll et al. 2011; Hope – Huskinson 2011; Borg 2013. Some of these books have chapters on sarcophagi; but few new monographs explicitly on sarcophagi have appeared; two exceptions are Bielfeldt 2005 and Birt 2013. There has, of course, continued to be a constant flow of specialist work on various aspects of sarcophagus-studies, much of it published in the form of conference papers: F. Işık on Sarcophagi of Aphrodisias: Işık 2007; Koch – Baratte 2012; Oakley 2011.

visitors either presented papers themselves, or responded to the presentations of others. Much time was given over to questions from the audience and to discussion among the participants; and on the afternoon of the second day a formal roundtable was convened, where Mary Beard responded to some of the general themes that had emerged during the conference, and then served as informal moderator for what turned out to be a spirited debate.

As is usual with the publication of conference proceedings, the essays that are collected here are somewhat different from the original presentations⁹. And there is naturally no account of the many individual exchanges that took place at the event itself. But it is fair to say that some of what transpired in Berkeley has made it into the resulting essays; at least in terms of careful reformulation of interpretive claims, and some reprioritization of evidence and argument. The papers themselves bear the traces of the heightened scrutiny that this kind of public debate inevitably brings.

The Organization of the Book

The organization of the papers in the present volume does not follow that of the original conference; and it is perhaps worthwhile setting out here in the introduction something of the rationale for the new arrangement. In their presentations the conference participants criticized, or expressed unease with, three major aspects of the new approach to the mythological sarcophagi that is currently being advocated.

The Function of Greek Myth in the Roman Funerary Sphere

There was some disagreement among participants about the way in which we should understand the *function* of the mythological narratives on Roman sarcophagi. What sort of engagement with myth do we see here? How seriously should we take the *narrative intentions* of the relief carvings? And how does the use of myth on these monumental coffins relate to other currents within contemporary Roman culture? Currents such as the fashion for citing Greek myth in the many Latin speeches of consolation delivered at funerals, for example; or in funerary poems (*epicedia*), like some of those included in Statius' *Silvae*. More generally, is this migration of Greek mythological narratives into the repertoire of im-

agery of Roman tombs to be linked in some way with the increased prestige of Greek Classical learning that was part and parcel of the ›Second Sophistic‹?

Sarcophagus Factice and Production

The way that we interpret the mythological reliefs is strongly affected by the circumstances in which we imagine that these marble coffins were generally produced. To what extent were successful sarcophagus designs shipped around the empire ready-made, and then bought ›from stock‹? Were they mostly selected for purchase, from an already existing inventory, on the occasion of an unexpected death – and for a single individual – by a surviving spouse or other relative(s)? Or were mythological sarcophagi for the most part specially commissioned? That is, ordered well in advance – when the (projected) sarcophagus-occupant(s) was still very much alive? And perhaps ordered by couples, or families, who had no way of knowing which of them would be buried first? Is there any way we can decide between these two possibilities, working from the reliefs themselves? For how one answers these questions will inevitably condition the way one interprets and understands the mythological reliefs.

Differing Display Contexts and Imagery

Many of the new interpretations of the mythological reliefs depend on the sarcophagi being *visible* at the tomb – or at least at the funeral – and perhaps on festival days over many years. If we are to base our understanding of the function of the reliefs on a detailed analysis of the way these mythological narratives are composed and adjusted over a number of generations, then the question of the intended ›display context‹ becomes crucial. How visible (or not) do we think metropolitan sarcophagi were over long periods? How different was the display context of sarcophagi from one tomb to another? Or, for that matter, in different parts of the empire? And how does the use of myth differ in other centers of production – such as Aphrodisias?

Of course the essays in this collection raise a lot of other questions too. But these are probably the three most important areas where opinion among the conference participants turned out to be divided, and where new ideas were considered or proposed. Hence the eight individual contributions have been grouped under these three headings.

⁹ In particular Michael Koortbojian submitted a new paper on a different subject; and the essays of Ruth Bielfeldt and Mont Allen,

who had served as respondents at the symposium, were composed specially for this publication.

The Essays: a Brief Summary

The essays in this volume have all been furnished with an abstract that sets out the main points of the argument. But as is customary in introductions to conference proceedings, I shall offer here a succinct account of each contribution in turn. It is my impression that the editor's introduction in publications of this type frequently seeks to find common ground between the papers, and to accentuate areas of general agreement among the contributors. Here – in the spirit of the Berkeley symposium, where there was considerable disagreement, and which featured some sharp exchanges – I shall pursue the opposite goal, and focus on points of disagreement.

In his keynote address **Paul Zanker** gives a succinct and condensed account of the various »pictorial devices« that sarcophagus workshops developed to adapt their inherited repertoire of mythological narratives to a new – specifically *funerary* – function. These devices he describes as »visual cues« intended to invite mourners at the tomb to respond to the reliefs in a number of different ways, in order to elicit a range of emotional responses. These »pictorial devices« include: (1) equipping the protagonists of the mythological stories with portrait heads, and contemporary fashion hairstyles, to encourage (or even compel) mourners to identify the figures in the myth with the deceased, or with other members of the family; (2) incorporating additional scenes that are not really part of the story, but which make explicit references to grief and to mourning; and (3) employing various formal strategies to concentrate the viewer's gaze on *one specific aspect* of the mythological story – a particularly pitiful death, or an image of heroic bravery, for example – shifting attention away from the other less relevant parts of the story. Zanker argues that each of these pictorial devices or »visual cues« has been carefully contrived to prompt or invite a particular kind of emotional engagement with the image. In this way, they enable a kind of personal and intimate dialogue to take place at the tomb, so that mourners were able to regard the reliefs as encoding a wide assortment of specific messages, of various kinds. E. g. that the admirable qualities of the deceased are not forgotten; that love and devotion can survive separation by death; or that death is a kind of sleep, a release from mortal cares; and so on.

Alan Cameron starts by asking why it was that Greek mythology came to enjoy such a vogue in Roman funerary monuments of the 2nd century AD. He considers

the various explanations that have so far been proposed: (1) the well-known Philhellenism of the emperor Hadrian; (2) the intense contemporary engagement with the Greek past that we call »the Second Sophistic«; (3) the extensive use of mythological *exempla* in contemporary funerary speeches and poems (*epicedia*); this latter explanation being one that has been advanced and elaborated with considerable ingenuity by Paul Zanker. Cameron finds all of these explanations wanting, in one way or another: the arguments based on false assumptions, the reasoning implausible. He proposes instead a connection with the well-known interest in the *Roman* and *Italic* past. The phenomenon is probably not to be understood as an adoption of a contemporary Greek custom, as has been claimed, but is rather a revival of an old Italic custom. That is, the use of sarcophagi by elite Roman families of the Republican period, and in particular the use of sarcophagi decorated with Greek myth by the Etruscans. It is thus a development quite compatible with the new interest in Archaic Latin in the second century; and with the preference for authors like Cato, Ennius, and Coelius Antipater. Cameron also rejects the (once common) assumption that the mythological knowledge represented by sarcophagus reliefs was solely the province of the Roman educated elite. He argues that the theater, painting, and the popularity of pantomimes, would have made the myths on the coffins accessible and intelligible to a wide public in the ancient world.

Francesco de Angelis takes as his subject a group of mythological sarcophagi on which we find death and suffering depicted with extraordinary vividness. While he accepts Zanker and Ewald's general reading of the reliefs, as explicitly designed to invite particular kinds of emotional response, he argues that other elements of the narrative composition are deliberately retained – and sometimes even emphasized – in order to prevent any straightforward or unqualified identification with the protagonist in the story. Here De Angelis is arguing against (or at the very least qualifying) two of Zanker and Ewald's premises for their general approach: (1) that the fitting out of mythological figures with portrait heads, on sarcophagi of the 3rd century, gives us the key to understanding how representations *without* portrait heads were likely read and interpreted in the previous century¹⁰; and (2) that awkward elements of the story that do not fit with the intended *funerary* message of the sarcophagus (e. g. Niobe's hubris, Orestes' matricide, Meleager's killing of his uncles) were demonstrably *not* intended to be easily discounted or disregarded by the

10 See P. Zanker in: Zanker – Ewald 2004, 3: »And the insights we glean about how the reliefs were understood in such cases [sc. where portrait features have been inserted] are likely transferrable

to many of the mythological reliefs that do *not* have portraits.« – This view has also been challenged by Newby 2011. See also Birt 2013, ref.

viewer. On the contrary artists frequently work hard to keep these aspects of the story alive. De Angelis proposes instead that there are a number of techniques at work in the mythological reliefs all intended to *distance* the beholder from the scenes represented on the coffins; and the most important of these is the insistent retention of episodes from the myth that emphatically work against straightforward ›identification‹. The aim, as he sees it, is rather to produce a ›controlled empathy‹. An attempt is made to arouse strong emotions; but at the same time some highly specific details of the myths are consistently retained (e.g. the corpses of Medea's own children, the Fury driving Althea to destroy her own son) – because they provide the means to hold such overwhelming feelings at arm's length.

At the Berkeley conference **Kathleen Coleman** was the respondent to the papers of Alan Cameron and Francesco de Angelis; and her published contribution to this volume responds to each of their essays in some detail. She finds Cameron's proposal of a revival of earlier Roman and Etruscan practices implausible; and the link postulated by Zanker and Ewald between the early mythological sarcophagi and speeches of consolation and funerary poetry much more credible. For her that link becomes more persuasive still if we focus not so much on the Roman elite itself, but on the prosperous ›class below the élite‹ – including wealthy freedmen; able to share in and emulate some of the practices of their social superiors, but in doing so perhaps inventing forms that had not previously existed. She takes as her example Statius' *Silvae*, a source dismissed by Cameron as having no relevance; and presents a detailed analysis of the funerary poem (or *epicedion*) *Silvae* 5, 1, written for the death of Priscilla, wife of the imperial freedman, Abascantus. Coleman shows that, though the poem was written a half century before the great vogue for mythological sarcophagi, and though it employs myth in a very different way – with a series of glancing allusions to various different stories, not a sustained address to a single narrative – nevertheless, myth *functions* within the *epicedion* in a very similar way. Mythological figures serve as »analogues for the grief of the survivors, without fitting the circumstances of the bereaved to the circumstances of the myth«. This accords very well with the account of sarcophagi in Zanker and Ewald; and perhaps even better with the analysis of Francesco de Angelis, for the rapid series of allusions in the poem can also be seen to have a useful *distancing* effect, preventing the mourner from fixing upon any one mythological analogue too closely. Coleman's commentary on *Silvae* 5, 1 offers another even more remarkable discovery: a close analysis of Statius' Latin reveals that Priscilla's embalmed body must have been enclosed in a marble sarcophagus. Un-

fortunately it is not possible to say whether or not that sarcophagus bore relief decoration; the poem is silent on that score. But regardless of this, the wife of an imperial freedman, a woman who died in the reign of Domitian, becomes the first known historical individual to have been interred in the new fashion.

Ruth Bielfeldt argues that our interpretations of the mythological sarcophagi have, up to now, not taken sufficient account of those individuals who purchased a tomb monument for themselves while still living. Ancient funerary inscriptions sometimes specify that when a tomb monument was set up the tomb owner was still very much alive (*vivus fecit*). Given the time it took to build a tomb, or to commission a specially made sarcophagus, this was surely a natural precaution to take – to make arrangements for one's monument well in advance. Bielfeldt asks whether any mythological sarcophagi show signs of having been commissioned or carved ›pre-need‹ (as the funeral parlors have it); certainly some of them must have been. In particular, she finds two mythological sarcophagi – with depictions of the story of Alkestis, and that of Protesilaos – that seem to her eminently suitable to have served as a satisfying intended resting-place for a married couple, while both were still alive. Bielfeldt believes that considering the mythological narrative from the point of view of the *living individuals* (*vivi*) who may have commissioned the sarcophagus as their ›prospective‹ monument (the ›*vivus-perspective*‹) opens a quite different sort of reading for the reliefs. A reading that may perhaps be confirmed by detailed observation of the way the story and its protagonists have been depicted; and one that supplements the variety of interpretive strategies that have so far been offered for understanding the choice of story, and scene selection, on the part of patrons and sculptors.

Mont Allen chooses to focus on the ›pictorial device‹ with which Paul Zanker started his keynote lecture: the superimposition of identifiable portrait heads on the figures of heroes and heroines in mythological narratives. He argues that these heads are intentionally made easier to recognize – as portraits – since they are visually set off by means of sculptural technique. The sarcophagus sculptors deliberately finish the portrait heads using only the chisel, removing all traces of drillwork; in this way the heads instantly stand out in contrast to the deeply drilled faces and hairstyles of the ideal (or background) figures all around them. This contrast in sculptural technique for portraiture was not, of course, invented in the sarcophagus workshops. It emerged independently, because of the changing hairstyles of imperial portraiture in the third century: the characteristic tooling of *late* Severan hairstyles does not involve con-

spicuous drillwork. But once this distinction arose, between the chiseled finish of portrait hairstyles and deeply drilled *ideal* hairstyles, it was quickly exploited – and even exaggerated – by the sarcophagus sculptors, as a genre-specific technique; and the »mythological portrait« emerges as one of the most characteristic devices of third century sarcophagi. Allen refers the skeptical reader, who might be disposed to doubt that this contrast in tooling ever amounted to a fully self-conscious »technique«, to the *Acilia sarcophagus* and to the *Great Ludovisi sarcophagus*. Both of these examples clearly demonstrate that the hairstyles of subordinate figures are regularly heavily drilled, in contrast to the hairstyle of the central portrait – even when these background figures explicitly represent *contemporaries* (in this case Roman senators and Roman legionaries), people who should by rights be wearing contemporary hairstyles. The author goes on to note that the distinction in tooling between the deceased and the other figures on sarcophagus reliefs is abandoned in Early Christian art; on Early Christian sarcophagi all figures, whether portraits or not, are finished very carefully with the chisel, so that no drill-holes are left visible. But for »pagan« themes the workshops continue to maintain the distinction: giving us a surprising – and easy to recognize – contrast in technique and tooling between the two groups of sarcophagi. Allen concludes by proposing an ambitious and provocative interpretation of this – consistently observed – difference in *facture* devised for Early Christian sarcophagi.

Michael Koortbojian in his paper directs his interest to the sarcophagus industry, and the serial production of monumental coffins from roughed-out »blanks« prepared in the quarries. And he argues that the sarcophagus-workshops had a great deal more flexibility in how they completed such blanks than has previously been recognized. He selects *lenoi*, or »bathtub« sarcophagi, furnished with projecting lion-head *protomes*, as the focus of his paper; since many blanks for this kind of sarcophagus – on their way to Italy from Asia Minor – were found in the cargo of the San Pietro shipwreck. He then looks at the relationship between finished sarcophagi of this type, and the blanks as they appear in the shipwreck; and he argues from a selection of specific finished examples that the workshops in Rome were able to re-fashion and individualize such blanks to a quite remarkable degree, either in answer to the demands of the market, or perhaps more likely at the request of specific patrons. His careful observations of sarcophagus-facture further undermine the (once prevalent) notion that

the imperial capital's sarcophagus trade was to a large extent based on heavily standardized »ready-made« types.

In her paper **Barbara Borg** addresses an apparent conundrum: a not inconsiderable number of sarcophagi of various types that were discovered buried, so that the marble coffin – with its often beautifully carved reliefs – was not visible to visitors to the tomb. She cites a series of examples that basically divide into two groups: (1) sarcophagi that were completely concealed, under earth or concrete; and (2) sarcophagi that were partly buried, but which had lids that projected above the floor of a tomb, permitting the later inclusion of new burials. She asks whether the existence of such cases – where there can never have been any opportunity for viewing of the carved reliefs during family visits to the tomb – invalidates the great importance that is now being assigned to the sophisticated compositional properties of sarcophagus reliefs. Her answer to this question, however, is a resounding »No«. For even within the set of examples she lists there is evidence for display at the *funeral* itself, if not subsequently. In some cases the coffins were found to contain an embalmed body (like that of Priscilla, wife of Abascantus) wrapped in silks, and decked out with expensive jewelry. We have examples of buried sarcophagi with lids in the form of *empty klinai* – that may even have served as the bier, where the body was laid out at the funeral; or sarcophagi with openings in the lid through which the carefully adorned corpse could be viewed even after burial. According to Borg, then, the selection of an elaborately carved marble coffin was for the funeral; and the burial of such a beautiful object was an act of conspicuous consumption, something that conferred great honor on the deceased, like the burning of expensive and luxurious possessions and furniture on the funeral pyre.

R. R. R. Smith's contribution also takes as its subject the rather different choices made for sarcophagus decoration and sarcophagus display in the Greek east; his focus, however, is Aphrodisias, a small but prosperous city in Roman Asia Minor. Here the contrast with Rome is quite stark. The public buildings of Aphrodisias, like those of other cities of Asia Minor, were often richly adorned with representations of Greek myth: Smith takes as his example the huge series of mythological reliefs from the Julio-Claudian *Sebasteion*¹¹. But although there was also a large and developed sarcophagus production at Aphrodisias (in terms of the size of the local population there are proportionately more sarcophagi

11 See now Smith 2013.

preserved at Aphrodisias than at Rome), the local people hardly ever make use of myth in the relief decoration of their marble coffins. And this is generally true of all the other cities of Asia Minor as well. The inhabitants of the Greek East did, however, make use of myth in connection with funerals – in the speeches of mourning and consolation that were delivered. And it is here that Smith sees the single most telling comparison with the mythological sarcophagi of the imperial capital.

Smith emphasizes the originality and novelty of the kind of narrative compositions found on Roman mythological sarcophagi: the sheer density – the imbrication – of the figures; the compression of the story, the often unexpected selection of scenes, and the abrupt transitions between them. Moreover, in contrast to some of the other speakers (notably Zanker and Cameron), Smith sees the Roman mythological stories on sarcophagi as difficult to read, intentionally so. They not only demand detailed prior knowledge of the stories (all mythological representations required that); they also demand an »advanced practice in reading this kind of sarcophagus frieze and its special kind of visual rhetoric«. Smith sees in the characteristic style of the sarcophagi a connection with a style of speaking recommended

in the Greek rhetorical handbooks of the period (two survive), for the speech of consolation (*paramythētikos*) given at funerals. The most important ingredient of all funerary speeches in this period is mythological comparison; but in the *logos paramythētikos* intensity of emotion is sought, and a rapid, distracted style is recommended – because the speaker aims to give the impression of being overcome with emotion. More importantly, the mythological comparisons should not be spelled out, or made explicit, as in other speeches; they are too well known, too hackneyed. They should be abbreviated and adapted, referred to allusively; the obvious should be avoided so that the comparisons retain their emotional force, their psychological impact. The parallel with the characteristic style of the sarcophagi seems obvious.

Smith concludes with an account of the very different imagery of Aphrodisian sarcophagi. The most popular types – the columnar sarcophagus and the garland sarcophagus – do not speak of myth, or of emotional drama, but of civic pride, and civic participation. They celebrate the traditional, shared values of *polis*-life, and the family members represented on the sarcophagi are shown as model citizens.

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Putting the Deceased in the Picture: ›Pictorial Devices‹ as Visual Cues

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In the second and third centuries AD many prosperous inhabitants of the Roman Empire, after their deaths, chose to have their bodies entombed in marble sarcophagi that were richly decorated with figured reliefs. Especially popular subjects for these reliefs were scenes from Greek Myth; representations that could be understood as allegories, referring to death, or to the reference to the high-flown and philosophical interpretations of Greek Myth that are found in our extant literary sources for the period. More recent studies, however, attempt to place the emphasis instead on the reliefs themselves – their formal qualities and their visual impact¹. This approach is based on the assumption that the sarcophagi were not, as a rule, purchased by writers, poets, and other philosophically sophisticated buyers, but by anyone who could afford one.

For my presentation today the question I wish to focus on is this: What special *artistic or pictorial devices*

were employed in the sarcophagus workshops to make intelligible to the beholder the desired relationship between the mythical figures represented in the reliefs, and the deceased family-members enclosed within the sarcophagus itself? In other words, how did these reliefs speak to those who visited the tombs? I am concerned, if you will, with the ›visual cues‹ that were incorporated into the reliefs in order to facilitate their being properly understood in their new, *funerary* context. The challenge for the sarcophagus workshops – at least at the beginning when the mythological reliefs first came into fashion – was not an easy or straightforward one. The sculptors were, on the one hand, tied to the pictorial *schemata* that they had inherited for the various myths. That is, they had to follow the traditional iconography in order that the myths could be recognized and correctly identified. But, on the other hand, they were able – from the very first – to rework these *schemata* in various ways: by



1 Rome, Galleria Doria Pamphilj. Sarcophagus with Luna and Endymion

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1 Zanker – Ewald 2004, now published in English as P. Zanker – B. Ewald, *Living with Myths* (Oxford 2012).

making additions; by highlighting new and different aspects of the traditional story; and by incorporating motifs and scenes drawn from elsewhere in the repertoire.

It is the *pictorial devices* or *strategies* developed by the sarcophagus workshops that will be the focus of my paper.

Including the deceased in the picture by means of an inserted portrait

Sarcophagus workshops sometimes explicitly identify or equate a leading figure in a famous myth with the individual buried inside the sarcophagus. They do this by giving that figure a more or less realistic portrait face, and a contemporary fashion-hairstyle – two things that immediately set him or her off from the surrounding figures. These inserted portrait faces constitute a direct address to visitors to the tomb, and compel them to identify the figure in the myth as someone well known to them; that is, the deceased. Moreover, these portraits are very important – methodologically speaking – for the interpretation of the genre of mythological sarcophagi as a whole; because they provide a specific framework within which we can understand why any particular myth was chosen. And the insights we glean about how the reliefs were understood in such cases are likely transferable to many of the mythological reliefs that *do not* have portraits. Accordingly, this particular ›artistic device‹ stands at the heart of my approach to the whole genre.

Realistic portraits are most often found inserted into stories about famous couples. The deceased individuals whose portraits are inserted are probably mostly married couples; and by means of this device they are presented in their tombs as famous lovers drawn from Greek mythology. As my example I show here the well-known Endymion sarcophagus in the Galleria Doria Pamphilj in Rome (fig. 1), on which Luna eagerly approaches her beloved Endymion, who is sunk in sleep². Luna and Endymion have each been given the facial features of the tomb owners. Now married couples do not, as a rule, die at exactly the same time. This means that, in this case, not only is a deceased husband or wife represented in the guise of a hero or divinity (Endymion and Luna); the surviving spouse was evidently also presented in this way. And since the surviving partner often will also have been the one who ordered the sarcophagus, he or she will frequently have selected their own ›role‹ in this game of mythological charades.

The inserted portraits specify and make concrete who is speaking and who is spoken about. In such an image, the two lovers are enabled to say ›I‹ or ›you‹, and to address each other directly, as they sometimes do in inscriptions. In this specific case the wife, if she is the surviving partner, may be imagined saying: ›For me you are not dead at all. For my love, like that of Luna for Endymion, will never die. In my thoughts and dreams I am incessantly drawn to you, my beloved‹; or something along these lines. The wife – or indeed both of them – could even be addressed by the visitor to the tomb: ›You were an unforgettable couple; like Luna and Endymion – perfect in your devotion to one another.‹ The various possibilities for dialogue that are generated by the image – a dialogue between the deceased family members and the visitors to the tomb – creates a concrete framework for what is being said; and gives the statements a personal, indeed intimate character: a *familiar* character in the sense of the Latin word *familia*. This concrete ›framework for dialogue‹ also derives from the special circumstances of the personal encounter at the tomb; the direct encounter between family members and these portraits of the deceased. Statements of a more general and more abstract kind (for instance, ›Love conquers Death‹) are not to be completely ruled out; but they quite plainly withdraw into the background.

I will now seek to show by means of some examples, how the ›framework for dialogue‹ created by the insertion of portraits into these reliefs can change the way we perceive and understand the myths. In this I will limit myself to discussing pairs of lovers, in order to illustrate the wide variation of possible responses that may be evoked by the same stories, even when represented according to the same iconographic *formulae*. In most cases, the emphasis is on the romantic ardor of famous mythical lovers. This is not surprising, for many sarcophagi were clearly intended for married couples.

In contrast to what is shown in the depictions of Luna and Endymion, the reliefs that represent Venus

2 Zanker – Ewald 2004, 25 fig. 17. 47 fig. 32.