

## Introduction: Greek Myths, Roman Lives

Greek myths saturated the Roman visual environment. From paintings and sculptures in houses and villas, to reliefs on sarcophagi, and the imagery on tableware and furnishings, myths surrounded ancient viewers. But why were they so popular? What needs did they fulfil, and what did they say about those who chose them to decorate their houses and tombs? This book aims to answer those questions. It is a book about the representation of Greek myths in Roman art, but it is also more than that. I use mythological images as a means to cast a broader look at the changing nature of Roman culture and society over the period considered here, roughly the mid-first century BC to the mid-third century AD. It is my contention that during this period Greek myths came to play an important role in changing discourses around social values and identities. The ways that myths were used in art can inform our wider understanding of the uses of Greek culture in Italy in this period, and also of the role of art in constructing and debating senses of identity.

Perhaps because of its omnipresence, for much of classical scholarship the taste for mythological imagery in Roman art seems to have been taken for granted, explained, if at all, as a sign simply of the Romans' desire to show off their classicising tastes. In his rebuttal of Cumont's complex eschatological readings of the images on Roman mythological sarcophagi, Arthur Derby Nock asserted that the primary significance of these themes, which he noted were also common in domestic art, lay in their dignifying allusion to classical culture:

[M]ythological scenes gave the context which the Muses as well as time had now hallowed: they had all the values of classicism.<sup>1</sup>

The wider significance of those values, and what they meant to Roman purchasers and viewers, he left unexplored. So, too, in other areas of Roman art, mythological scenes in sculpture or paintings were traditionally seen

<sup>1</sup> Nock 1946, quotation at 163.

as part and parcel of the Roman taste for copies of Greek art-works.<sup>2</sup> Scholars interested in Roman art often chose to look at the types of art that were seen as specifically Roman – realistic portraits and historical reliefs – while mythological images could be seen instead as a continuation of the history of Greek art in Roman times.<sup>3</sup> With the arrival of the twenty-first century the tide started to turn, with scholars now focussing on how classical forms and themes worked in their Roman contexts.<sup>4</sup> Over the last two decades there have been a number of studies looking at the representations of Greek myths in Roman art, substantially changing our understanding of their uses and significance. Yet thus far these studies have been confined to particular genres of art, most notably Late Antique mosaics, mythological sarcophagi and Campanian wall-paintings.

Mythological sarcophagi have proven a particularly fruitful area for research, producing important studies such as those of Koortbojian, Zanker and Ewald, and Bielfeldt that move us on from the old stalemate between eschatology and classicism to a new understanding of the ways these images spoke out to their viewers through mythological analogies.<sup>5</sup> Mythological paintings in Roman houses have also received important treatments, including Lorenz's 2008 monograph and a number of stimulating articles.<sup>6</sup> Building on the work done by Schefold and Thompson in the 1950s and 1960s, these studies apply new insights gained especially from rhetoric and gender studies to look at the ways mythological images offered and debated paradigms of behaviour for their Roman viewers.<sup>7</sup> In a similar vein Susanne Muth has looked at domestic mosaics showing

<sup>2</sup> For the historiography of attitudes to Roman 'ideal sculpture' see Marvin 2008. On paintings see Bergmann 1995.

<sup>3</sup> For discussion of the problem see Brendel 1979. Early defences of the Romanness of Roman art can be found in Wickhoff 1900 and E. Strong 1907. On continuity see e.g. Toynbee 1934: 164–230 on sarcophagi; for more recent interpretations see Beard and Henderson 2001 and Zanker 2010: 1–47.

<sup>4</sup> Much of the work has been on sculpture: Zanker 1974 provided a crucial basis; more recently see Gazda 2002; Perry 2005; Marvin 2008; Kousser 2008; Trimble 2011. For a review of the scholarship to that point see Kampen 2003. For studies of Roman viewing see especially Elsner 1995, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Koortbojian 1995; Zanker and Ewald 2004, English translation 2012; Bielfeldt 2005. See also the papers in Elsner and Huskinson 2011, especially Lorenz 2011, and further bibliography below, Chapter 6, n. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Lorenz 2008; see also Hodske 2007 for a statistical analysis of mythological paintings in Pompeii. Other important contributions include Brilliant 1984: 52–89; Bergmann 1994, 1995, 1996; Trimble 2002; and Dickmann 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Schefold 1952/1972; Thompson 1960, 1960–1; following important earlier work by Trendelenburg 1876.

Hylas and Achilles, arguing that they helped to construct social identities and explore gender relationships through the dream world of myth.<sup>8</sup>

Despite these excellent individual studies, a cohesive treatment that seeks to set the visual representation of Greek myths into its broader social and cultural contexts is still lacking.<sup>9</sup> In this book I ask why Greek myths were so attractive to Roman patrons and viewers. It is only by asking ‘why’, and thinking about the other options that were not (or less often) taken, that we can fully appreciate the significance of the plethora of myths for our understanding of how Roman culture changed over this period, and the ways in which Greek myth, as Greek culture more generally, provided a wealth of material that was ‘good to think with’. In this book, then, I seek not just to look at the different contexts in which myths appear in Roman art, and the ways that they were used and viewed, but also to ask ‘why myth?’, and in particular, ‘why Greek myth?’

As recent scholarship has rightly noted, myths could provide paradigms for human lives, offering comparisons and, sometimes, ethical models to their Roman viewers.<sup>10</sup> This is especially clear on sarcophagi, where the deeds and relationships of Greek heroes could be used to assert key Roman values such as *pietas*, *virtus* and *concordia*.<sup>11</sup> Yet there is a striking anomaly here that has not yet received the attention it deserves. Roman history already supplied plentiful examples of good virtuous behaviour that were specifically offered up as models for emulation.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, an oft-quoted line of Ennius made ancient customs and the example of past heroes the very basis of the Roman state: *moribus antiquis res stat Romana virisque*, ‘the Roman state stands by virtue of its ancient customs and its men’.<sup>13</sup> Polybius declares that the practice of parading ancestor masks in elite funerals and listing the great deeds of the deceased and his predecessors

<sup>8</sup> Muth 1998, 1999.

<sup>9</sup> Some initial thoughts are given in Zanker 1999a. A number of works focus on myths in Greek art with only brief comments on their use in Roman art, e.g. Junker 2012: 110–19, 161–9; Giuliani 2013. Woodford 2003 is mostly concerned with how to identify myths in ancient art rather than with their meanings for the viewer. Lorenz 2016 will make a major contribution to this area, though with a different emphasis from here.

<sup>10</sup> See especially Koortbojian 1995: 1–9 on the use of analogy. <sup>11</sup> See below, Chapter 6.

<sup>12</sup> For an excellent introduction to the Roman use of *exempla* see Roller 2004; also Bell 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Ennius 5.1. Skutsch 1968: 51–3; 1985: 317–18 suggests that the line related to harsh military discipline, and puts it into the mouth of the father of T. Manlius, who condemned his son to death for breaching military discipline (Livy 8.7.16). However, it seems to have been more widely quoted as a statement of the importance of ancient Roman customs: Cicero’s reference to it in *De republica* is cited by Augustine, *City of God* 2.21, and the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, *Avidius Cassius* 5.7 includes it in a letter of Marcus Aurelius as *omnibus frequentatum*, ‘much cited by all’.

was one of the central mechanisms by which Rome encouraged its citizens onto great deeds, while others attest to the exhortatory function played by images of the ancestors and annotated family trees in great houses.<sup>14</sup> Livy's *History* and the compilations made by figures such as Varro and Valerius Maximus also diffused these models to the wider populace.<sup>15</sup> If Roman history was already so full of models for good ethical conduct and the expression of key Roman values, why did houses and tombs become filled instead by images of Greek heroes? This is a central question that this book aims to address, and which I discuss in more detail in the Epilogue. It is a choice which suggests that the old models for the creation of Roman identity were losing their power, and that myth offered new and enticing possibilities which suited the changing nature of Roman society.

My discussion sits at the intersection of a number of different scholarly debates that are worth outlining here. The first, which has already been mentioned, is the scholarship on mythological images in art, which itself has sometimes formed part of the broader study of the influence of Greek art and artistic traditions in Rome.<sup>16</sup> Second is the identification of 'myth' in the Roman context, and what we (and the Romans) mean by this; and third is the debate over the impact of Hellenic culture on Rome, to which my focus on mythological images is intended to contribute.

## Defining Myth in a Roman Context

Myth is notoriously difficult to define, with inherent problems of circularity. Definitions have often mapped closely onto scholars' own theoretical approaches, such as a belief in an integral link between myth and ritual, or the utility of comparative studies.<sup>17</sup> This has led many recent scholars

<sup>14</sup> Polybius 6.53; Sallust, *Jugurthine War* 4.5–6; Pliny, *Natural History* 35.6–7; compare Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings and Sayings* 2.1.10 and Seneca, *Controversiae* 10.2.16 for verbal retellings of the deeds of ancestors within the house to urge the young to emulate them. On the *imagines* see Flower 1996.

<sup>15</sup> Livy, preface 10 and Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings and Sayings* 1 preface both explicitly identify their desire to provide examples for imitation. For discussion see Chaplin 2000; Skidmore 1996; Lobur 2008: 170–207; Langlands 2008, 2011, forthcoming. Varro's *Imagines* is known only by name; it seems to have contained portraits and a brief epitaph for both Greek and Roman figures.

<sup>16</sup> Further discussions of the scholarship can be found in the individual chapters below: sculpture in Chapter 2, painting in Chapter 4; funerary art in Chapters 5 and 6.

<sup>17</sup> See Csapo 2005: 1–9, esp. 2–3 on the competing definitions offered by Harrison 1924 and Bascom 1965.

to question the usefulness of definition. Dowden and Livingstone trenchantly state: ‘We know a Greek myth when we see one and have need of no definitions, guidance, or code of practice to identify it as such.’<sup>18</sup> Similarly, in his study of Greek mythology in the Roman world, Alan Cameron asserts:

by the Roman age there was one (by implication) universally accepted definition of mythology: a corpus of stories every educated person was expected to know. Greek mythology had become a central element in the literary culture of the age, Greek and Latin alike.<sup>19</sup>

This problem of definition plagues, in particular, the study of myth in Roman society. Both of the assertions quoted above are made in relation to the study of Greek myth, yet for the Roman world we are struck by the problem of deciding what category of material ought to be studied under the term ‘myth’. The traditional view of Roman religion, formed by scholars such as Georg Wissowa and Kurt Latte, was that the Romans lacked myths, in the sense of a series of complex genealogical stories woven around their gods and goddesses, such as those that circulated around the Greek Pantheon.<sup>20</sup> In antiquity too, this was identified as one of the differences between the Greeks and Romans, as observed by Dionysius of Halicarnassus at the end of the first century BC:

He (Romulus) rejected all the traditional myths concerning the gods that contain blasphemies or calumnies against them, looking upon these as wicked, useless and indecent, and unworthy, not only of the gods, but even of good men; and he accustomed people both to think and to speak the best of the gods and to attribute to them no conduct unworthy of their blessed nature.<sup>21</sup>

Yet this also seems a very narrow definition of Roman religion and culture. At around the very time that Dionysius was writing, Rome witnessed an outpouring of literature that can be seen as mythological – from the *Aitia* for various religious rites expounded in Ovid’s *Fasti*, to the tales of Rome’s legendary past collected in Livy’s *History*.<sup>22</sup> One of the responses modern historians have made to Rome’s alleged ‘mythlessness’ is to redefine how we think of myth, moving away from definitions conditioned by studies of

<sup>18</sup> Dowden and Livingstone 2011b: 3.      <sup>19</sup> Cameron 2004: xii.

<sup>20</sup> Wissowa 1912: 9; Latte 1926. See also Rose 1950.

<sup>21</sup> Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 2.18.3, trans. E. Cary, Loeb Classical Library 319 (Cambridge, MA, 1937), 363. See, however, Borgeaud 1993, stressing that Dionysius is speaking specifically about myth’s role in religious cult and ritual, rather than in the wider culture.

<sup>22</sup> As observed by Beard, North and Price 1998: 171–4. On the *Fasti* see Newlands 1995; Herbert-Brown 2002; Murgatroyd 2005; on Livy see Feldherr 1998 and Chaplin 2000.

Greek mythology to think instead about how myth might be understood in the context of Roman culture.<sup>23</sup>

As these studies have shown, models based on the study of Greek myth, whether they are focussed on rituals and origins or adopt a structuralist approach to myth, are a bad fit for the Roman material, which, as Dionysius noted, does not conform to these norms. One response has been to rehabilitate Roman myth, seeking out ‘original’ Roman myths (such as the story of Romulus and Remus) and downplaying the role of the many myths of Greek origin which, as Cameron notes, were common currency in both art and literature.<sup>24</sup> Thus Nicholas Horsfall distinguishes between ancient Roman and Italian myths and what he describes as ‘secondary myth’, which he sees as largely the result of antiquarian activity.<sup>25</sup> This includes myths told about Roman and Italian pasts, places and rituals which can be seen as influenced by Greek culture and literature, as well as imported Greek myths. Yet this posits a clear divide between the two categories of material that seems untenable. Indeed, Horsfall himself acknowledges that ‘there never seems to have existed any perception that there might be a difference in kind or degree between the myths of Italy and those of Greece’.<sup>26</sup>

Keeping the focus on distinctively Roman stories, but broadening the scope, Peter Wiseman’s *Myths of Rome* offers another approach, identifying myth as ‘a story that matters to a community, one that is told and retold because it has a significance for one generation after another’, allowing him to consider ‘historical, pseudo-historical or totally fictitious’ tales all as forms of myth.<sup>27</sup> Thus Wiseman asserts the crucial role that stories about the legendary figures associated with Rome’s past played in the construction of Roman values and identities.<sup>28</sup> He also argues against the idea that Greek myths came relatively late to the Roman thought-world, drawing attention to archaeological evidence that shows knowledge of Greece and Greek myths from the very earliest periods.<sup>29</sup> While Wiseman’s scope is broader than Horsfall’s, in allowing Greek myths a place in the construction of Roman myth, he too excludes the imported material from serious consideration. When the Greek Dionysus becomes the Roman

<sup>23</sup> See especially the papers in Graf 1993b and Feeney 1998: 47–75.

<sup>24</sup> Cameron 2004: 217–303 discusses the uses of Greek myth in Roman society and literature.

<sup>25</sup> Bremmer and Horsfall 1987: 1–11, esp. 1. <sup>26</sup> Bremmer and Horsfall 1987: 6.

<sup>27</sup> Wiseman 2004: 10–11. See, however, Arena 2007: 375–6 for some problems with this inclusive definition of myth.

<sup>28</sup> Wiseman 2004: esp. 119–77.

<sup>29</sup> Wiseman 2004: 13–118. See also Wiseman 2008: 84–139 on bronze *cistae* with Dionysiac imagery.

Liber he fits into Wiseman's remit, but outside this the myths that reappear on floors, walls and in sculpture in the imperial period are excluded from consideration.

Wiseman's definition of myth is close to that suggested by Csapo, arguing the need for a functional definition of myth: 'Myth might be more usefully defined as a narrative which is considered socially important.' The way we can judge this social importance is through use: 'if it is important a story will be represented or alluded to frequently in social discourse'.<sup>30</sup> In an influential paper Mary Beard followed the lead of Roland Barthes, by looking at the 'mythic capacity' that other elements of Roman culture could have possessed.<sup>31</sup> She suggested that Roman declamations can be seen as a form of cultural myth-making in the ways that they negotiated and debated the rules of Roman society, an argument which has been more recently pursued by Margaret Imber with reference to Roman *controversiae*.<sup>32</sup>

Another set of narratives that feature prominently in Roman culture are the Greek mythological stories which are 'told and retold' in Roman art. Just like the stories studied by Wiseman, or the rhetorical texts analysed by Beard and Imber, these stories crop up again and again in sites of social interaction and self-representation, most notably the home and the tomb. Yet they have generally been passed over when looking for 'Roman myth'. As Denis Feeney noted, the struggles to re-identify the Roman in Roman myth generally leave the extensive Roman engagement with Greek culture to one side.<sup>33</sup> The implication often seems to be that Greek myth in Rome is not a matter for serious study, that rather than doing real cultural work in constructing and debating the values of society it is merely the result of antiquarian dabbings, literary embellishment or artistic borrowings. Feeney argues strongly against this view, suggesting that Greek mythology (and culture more generally) played important roles in Roman self-fashioning.<sup>34</sup> While Feeney's primary focus is on literature, many of the questions he asks about the ways Greek culture was used for the formulation of and debate about Roman identities and values can and should also be asked of the visual material.

The stories examined here are those which reappear repeatedly in paintings, sculptures and sarcophagi from the first few centuries of the Roman

<sup>30</sup> Csapo 2005: 9.

<sup>31</sup> Beard 1993: esp. 63–4; Barthes 1970, see esp. 191–247 on mythology as a semiological system.

<sup>32</sup> Beard 1993: 51–62; Imber 2008. See also Bloomer 1997.

<sup>33</sup> Feeney 1998: esp. 47–50. <sup>34</sup> Feeney 1998: 67–70.



Empire.<sup>35</sup> They feature interactions between gods, heroes and mortals. Some come from narratives taken from epic cycles, particularly the Trojan War, but many more deal with erotic or violent subjects: doomed love affairs, seductions and violent deaths. They are set in a timeless world, separate from that of the present, though sometimes the separation between present reality and the mythological realm can be elided, and they include interactions between mortals as well as between mortals and gods. While the Roman stories of Romulus and Remus or Aeneas also fit this description, the myths that interest me in particular, and indeed appear most commonly in art of the imperial period, are those which come originally from the Greek world but were eagerly adopted in literature, theatre and art in Rome and Italy more broadly.<sup>36</sup>

It is the Greek myths of Roman Italy which are my focus here, and whose deeper significance has often been overlooked in attempts to find a different sort of myth. What did these mythological images mean to viewers of the first centuries BC and AD, and how did they serve the needs of their Roman patrons and viewers? Readings of the uses of myth in Latin literature have shown that it can play a variety of roles; as well as offering the possibility for poetic artistry and sophisticated intellectual entertainment, myth also enabled the poet to universalise individual concerns, and to play out the concerns of contemporary society in a virtual, mythological world.<sup>37</sup> Marianne Hopman's recent analysis of Scylla also reveals the polysemous nature of myth, showing how a single mythological symbol encompasses a changing combination of different concepts and associations.<sup>38</sup> My aim is to subject art to the same sorts of analysis,

<sup>35</sup> For reviews of the themes popular in different genres of art see Neudecker 1988 on sculpture; Hodske 2007 on painting; Feraudi-Gruénais 2001 on tomb decoration; and Koch and Sichtermann 1982 on sarcophagi.

<sup>36</sup> The myth of Aeneas was, of course, also originally an external myth, turned to play a central role in constructions of Roman identity, especially from the time of Augustus onwards. For discussions of the origins of the myth see Bremmer and Horsfall 1987: 12–24; Gruen 1990: 11–16; 1993: 6–51. Erskine 2001: 15–43 analyses the role of the Julii in making the myth central to Roman identity. See also Schneider 2012 on the importance of Aeneas' Trojan origins. For discussion of the representation of Romulus and Aeneas in Roman art see Aichholzer 1983 and Dardenay 2010. On the overwhelming absence of Roman themes in Pompeian painting see Hodske 2007: 36–7.

<sup>37</sup> For examples relating to myth in Latin love elegy see Veyne 1988: 116–31 (esp. 117 on myth as 'learned entertainment'); Whitaker 1983 (myth as universalising personal experience); and Griffin 1985, esp. 1–31 and 112–41, arguing for elegy as a reflection of the concerns of contemporary society.

<sup>38</sup> Hopman 2012. Although Hopman considers text and image alongside one another for the Greek period, it is interesting that she omits discussion of the visual representations of Scylla



to see how mythological images reflect society to itself, and what this tells us about the changes in Roman identities and values.

It will be clear that among the many possible approaches to myth, I am clearly on the side of the functionalists rather than those looking for origins.<sup>39</sup> I am interested in what these myths do in their Roman context, and how they reflect and construct the values of that society. In his introduction to Greek mythology Graf suggests the following:

A myth makes a valid statement about the origins of the world, of society and of its institutions, about the gods and their relationships with mortals, in short about everything on which human existence depends. If conditions change, a myth, if it is to survive, must change with them.<sup>40</sup>

A little further on he underlines this cultural relativity: ‘The cultural relevance of a myth varies with the social context in which it is narrated.’<sup>41</sup> As I aim to show here, the converse of this is also true: the types of myths that are particularly prominent in a particular society reflect something about the nature and concerns of that society. It is this potential for the myths that appear repeatedly in Roman homes and tombs to reveal the concerns of Roman society that interests me. The iconographical choices made, and the contexts in which the images were viewed, will also affect our understanding of how they worked as a social discourse. This assumes a significance for myth, and for art, which has often been underplayed in past scholarship. Rather than seeing Greek myth in Roman art as ‘secondary’ and of little social importance, I wish instead to examine its serious role as one of the means by which Romans could debate and construct social values and identities.

The focus of this book is on how popular Greek myths were reformulated for their Roman contexts, and the new meanings they took on. Rather than seeing Roman identities as constructed only from sources that can be directly related to Rome’s history or culture (such as her legendary past, or declamations), important though both of these were, it explores how the Greek myths that appear on wall-paintings or sarcophagi came to play comparable roles, fulfilling a function that went much deeper than mere cultural ‘window-dressing’.

from the Roman period, furthering the notion that Roman visual reworkings of Greek myth are not worthy of study.

<sup>39</sup> For discussions of the scholarship on myth see Bremmer 1987; Graf 1993a; Csapo 2005; and Dowden and Livingstone 2011a, among others.

<sup>40</sup> Graf 1993a: 3. <sup>41</sup> Graf 1993a: 4.

## Greek or Roman?

So far I have used the term ‘Greek myth’ to distinguish this material from the stories more clearly associated with the history and origins of Rome. But, of course, there are numerous overlaps, as well as inherent problems in the use of the very terms ‘Greek’ and ‘Roman’. The use of these myths in a Roman context can itself be seen as making them, in some sense, ‘Roman’. As Mary Beard asks:

How far is the re-writing of Greek culture in Rome part of a mythic tradition in its own right? ... First, how far does the *re*-inscription of a Greek myth within a Roman context necessarily turn that myth into *Roman* myth – whatever its origin? Second, how far is Greece and Greek culture itself always already a Roman myth? How far is “Greece” in Rome necessarily “Roman myth”?<sup>42</sup>

There is a distinction to be drawn here between origins and use, and also between the definitions used in scholarship and those which might have made sense to an ancient inhabitant of Italy. To a scholar of Roman culture anything that is produced or used in the Roman period and within the Roman Empire can in some sense be described as ‘Roman’. To describe these stories in Roman art as Roman myths is to draw attention to the different ways they were used and represented in their new Roman context.<sup>43</sup> Yet it is also important to ask whether their ancient viewers would have seen these stories as ‘Greek’ or ‘Roman’, and here the evidence is mixed. Stories of Greek heroes had long been familiar in Italy, and many of the events described in the epic poems of Homer and Hesiod were associated with the very landscapes of Italy itself.<sup>44</sup> Inhabitants of these areas may well have thought of these as being ‘their’ myths, rather than identifying them as specifically ‘Greek’. While the myths that appear on Roman sarcophagi or paintings are often those which are familiar to us from the works of the Greek tragedians – such as the tales of Medea, Hippolytus and Orestes – these tales had long been part of Roman culture too. Mythological themes were a staple of Latin poetry, as Juvenal famously complains; they were also portrayed on the stage and in the arena in the form of plays, pantomimes and gruesome re-enactments, as well as being included in mythographical handbooks such as those by Ps-Apollodorus (in Greek) and Hyginus

<sup>42</sup> Beard 1993: 50 and n. 15, italics in the original. As Feeney 1998: 49 notes, she does not explore this question further in that paper, though some of the issues are discussed further in Beard 1996.

<sup>43</sup> These issues were insightfully discussed in relation to Roman art by Brendel 1979, esp 1–9.

<sup>44</sup> Phillips 1953; Wiseman 2004: 13–38.