INTRODUCTION

The Death of Myth on Roman Sarcophagi

OPENING

A Pair of Sarcophagi: Moonstruck Lovers

A strange thing happens to Roman sarcophagi in the middle of the third century: their mythic imagery vanishes.

These beautifully carved coffins had featured bold mythological scenes since the very beginning of their mainstream production early in the second century CE, when burial had replaced cremation as the favored means for disposing of the dead. Evocative testament to Rome's ongoing love affair with classical Greek culture, they had derived emotional force from their resonance with an artistic tradition centuries old while providing catharsis and consolation to those still living.

How then to make sense of this imagery's own death on later sarcophagi, as mythological narratives were truncated, gods and heroes were excised, and genres featuring no mythic content whatsoever – such as the late third century's endless procession of sarcophagi featuring bucolic shepherds and studious philosophers – came to the fore? What could such a profound tectonic shift in the Roman funerary imagination *mean*, for our understanding of Roman history and culture, for the development of its arts, for the passage from the High to the Late Empire and the coming of Christianity, but above all, for the individual Roman women and men who chose this imagery as the lens through which they wanted to be remembered, and who took it with them to the grave?

A concrete example or two will help to throw the matter into relief. Sometime around 230 or 240 CE, a couple, anticipating their eventual demise, commissioned a pair of lavish sarcophagi to receive their remains.[1] Now, ordering a pair of them – one for each corpse – was indeed unusual. It was far more common for a couple to purchase a single sarcophagus for their joint use. But in this case, our couple clearly had money to spare, and so opted for separate coffins – coffins that, nonetheless, were commissioned to serve as pendants to each other, with dimensions that were almost identical, and carved with scenes that complemented each other, representing female and male variations on a theme.

Both (**Figs. 1 and 2**) are now in the Louvre. And for those unfamiliar with the conventions of sarcophagus imagery, their sculpted scenes may seem bewilderingly busy: as is typical of pieces carved near the end of the Severan period, they display a "horror vacui," or fear of empty space. Every inch of the surface is crammed with figures and objects – bodies intertwining, drapery fluttering, tiny heads peering out – leaving no passage empty. Once one's eye settles, however, individual figures quickly resolve. On the first[2] of the two sarcophagi (**Fig. 1**) we make out the riotous members of the Dionysiac retinue: frisky Satyrs cavort with enraptured Maenads/Bacchants while musically inclined Centaurs pluck their strings and embrace their young. Eventually, one recognizes the protagonists: just to right of center is Dionysus himself, lord of wine and altered consciousness. He daintily approaches the sleeping form of Ariadne, his bride to be, shown reclining on the right. She, marooned by Theseus on the isle of Naxos midway between Crete and Athens, has found temporary relief from her abandonment in the comforting arms of sleep. In a moment, however, her relief will be permanent: Dionysus, stepping down from his Centaur-drawn chariot, advances to embrace her and make her his immortal queen.[3]

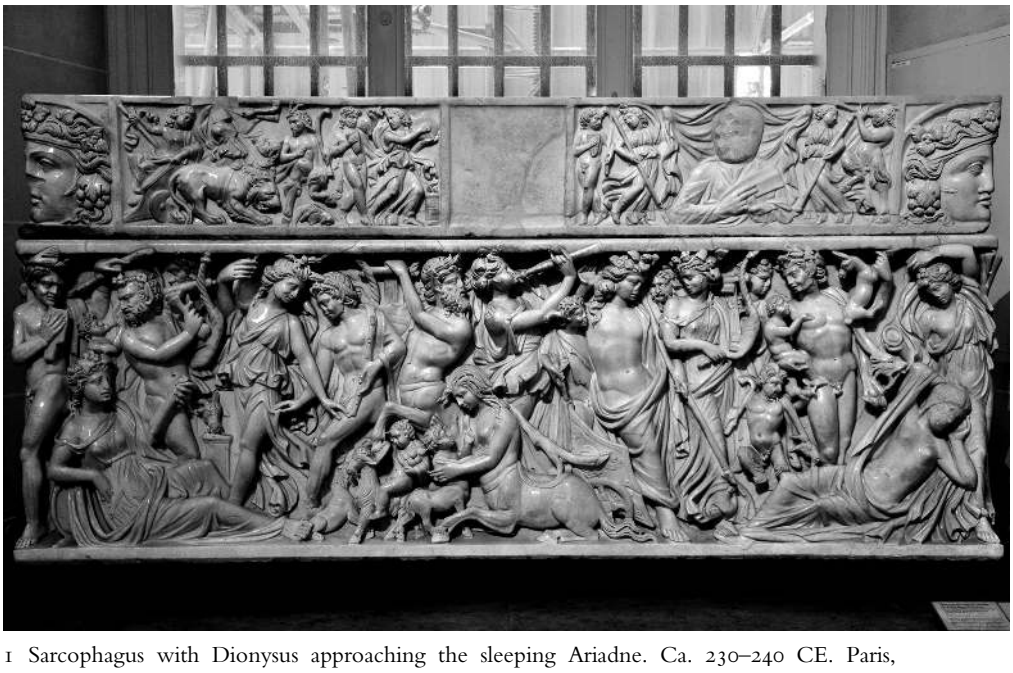
The other sarcophagus[4] of the pair (**Fig. 2**) depicts the story of Selene, goddess of the moon, and Endymion, the handsome young shepherd

[1] For discussion of sarcophagi commissioned by the pre-deceased themselves – i.e., by the occupants-to-be, while they still lived (in contrast to sarcophagi commissioned for the deceased by surviving family members) – see Bielfeldt 2019.

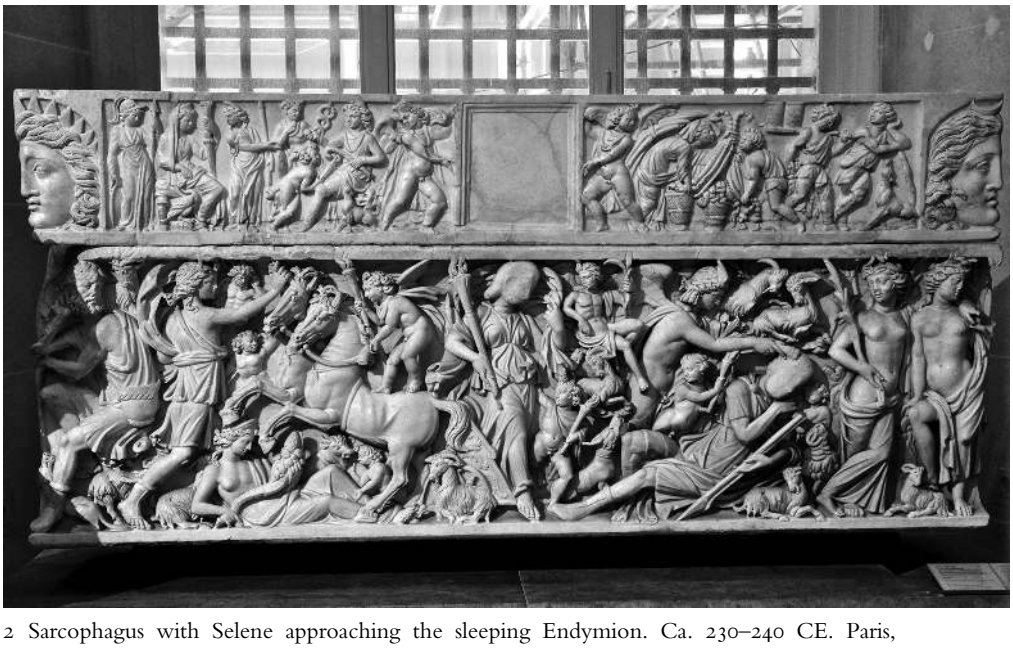
[2] Matz 1968/1975, 394–397 cat. 222, pl. 234, 237.2, 238–245; Wrede 1981, 139, 210 cat. 50; Baratte and Metzger 1985, 138–142 cat. 67; Bartman 1993, 70–71 fig. 14; Platt 2011, 379; Zanker and Ewald 2012, 102–103 fig. 92, 131–132 fig. 118; Birk 2013, 301 cat. 562; Borg 2016, 266–267 fig. 3.

[3] On the Dionysus-and-Ariadne sarcophagi as a group, with all known examples (as of 1968) cataloged: Matz 1968/1975, 360–404. On the compositional type and its emotional resonance: Zanker and Ewald 2012, 158–162.

[4] Wrede 1981, 139, 265–266 cat. 185; Baratte and Metzger 1985, 71–75 cat. 25; Sichtermann 1992, 125–127 cat. 72, pl. 86.1, 88.1–2, 89.1–3, 94.1–4, 113.2–3; Platt 2011, 379; Zanker and Ewald 2012, 101–103 fig. 91, 203 fig. 184, 337–340 cat. 15 with unnumbered figure; Birk 2013, 303 cat. 578; Borg 2014, 245–246 fig. 7.8.



1 Sarcophagus with Dionysus approaching the sleeping Ariadne. Ca. 230–240 CE. Paris, Louvre, inv. LL 49/Ma 1346.



2 Sarcophagus with Selene approaching the sleeping Endymion. Ca. 230–240 CE. Paris, Louvre, inv. LL 50/Ma 1335.

who caught the goddess's eye and whom she continues to visit nightly, in love, for eternity.[5] No other mythological story could rival it for popularity on Roman sarcophagi. Our eyes are now primed to recognize the general composition – it is essentially the same as that we just saw used for Dionysus and Ariadne (matching pieces indeed) – and so we have no trouble identifying the protagonists. In the center, Selene gracefully alights from her sky-tracing chariot and advances toward the reclining form of her lover at the right. A torch-bearing Cupid at her feet helpfully tugs her forward ("Yes, thank you, but I *know* where I'm going!" we can imagine her replying gently), while another, further forward, holds his torch aloft to illuminate Endymion's features for the approaching goddess. We know that he already slumbers, not only from his pose – fully reclining, one hand curled as a pillow to support his slumped head – but from the youthful figure of Hypnos ("Sleep") himself, recognizable through the diminutive wings sprouting from his forehead, who bends over Endymion to pour out his potent narcotic – essence of poppies – into the youth's eyes.

A variety of subsidiary figures, many evoking a pastoral context, help to round out the scene. These include, at left, a seated shepherd whose flock of fluffy goats peek out placidly here and there across the entire frieze; Aura, cloak fluttering, who holds Selene's rearing horses in check; the reclining form of Tellus, personification of the fertile Earth; Cupids and more Cupids; and, finally, four figures who personify the local landscape and thus ground the story in a particular geographic context: behind Aura's outstretched arm, a small bearded divinity, yet unidentified; standing at the far right, two nymphs of a local spring; and seated high up in the background just to the right of Selene, holding reeds, the personification of Mount Latmos itself, the mountain in Caria on whose slopes the story of Selene and Endymion unfolds.

The viewer will also notice that the pastoral elements woven into the main frieze are picked up and continued on the lid. On the lid's right half, we confront a small garland-weaving workshop: one man carries a basket of flowers, while a boy and an older woman, facing each other, string the fragrant blooms together. The scene is eminently idyllic – a shepherd at right leans languidly on his staff, bookending the scene – and note how cleverly it plays

[5] On the huge corpus of Selene-and-Endymion sarcophagi: Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 144–146; Sichtermann 1992, 32–53, 103–163 cat. 27–137; Koortbojian 1995, 63–102, 105–106, 109–112, 130–141; Zanker and Ewald 2012, 96–103, 203–207; Borg 2013, 167–169. Björn Ewald discusses these scenes' particular resonance with the greater importance attached to the marital bond, romantically conceived, in imperial-age conceptions of personhood (Ewald 2012, 46, with extensive bibliography at 46 n. 21; see also Newby 2016, 339–342, and further discussion below in Chapter 6, section on "Biography and Mythology: Related Worlds"). On the latter's expression on sarcophagi through other visual motifs, such as the common vignette of a couple sealing their wedding vows through "joining of their right hands" (*junctio dextrarum* in Latin), see Ewald 1999, 126; Ewald 2003, 569; Huskinson 2015, 147.

with the imagery directly below it on the chest, where another flower-bearing figure (Hypnos with his poppies) similarly approaches another shepherd (the reclining Endymion). But the vignette would also, in this context, have resonated directly with Roman funerary ritual and the viewer-visitor's own actions: Roman families typically brought garlands of flowers such as these into the family tomb, draping them directly over the sarcophagi of their honored dead. The scene of garland production on this sarcophagus thus served as a concrete reminder of the honors that this family paid to the deceased buried within – a permanent promise, in stone, of the real, transient, yet endlessly repeated floral gifts that the family brought to their dearly departed whose corpse lay just on the other side of this carved stone slab.

The left half of the lid, meanwhile, offers another mythological image with bucolic overtones: Paris, the princely shepherd, charged by Zeus with judging the beauty of Hera, Aphrodite, and Athena. He is shown seated, as every judge should be – although here not on a curule chair but on the only thing available in the wilds of Mount Ida, a handy rock. Playfully marking him out as a rustic too is what he holds in his left hand: not the scepter expected of a magistrate but the short, curved, knob-topped throwing stick of a shepherd or hunter (*pedum* in Latin, *lagobolon* in Greek, *bunny-bopper* in colloquial English). Before him the three goddesses display themselves, while Hermes waits in the background to bring the trio, and Paris's verdict, back to Olympus. What, we may ask, is Paris doing here on the lid of this sarcophagus? He is included not for any direct narrative connection with Endymion – their stories never intersect, after all – but for thematic reasons. Both are mountain-dwelling herders – mortal shepherds who, moreover, both have the good fortune to be approached by goddesses with beauty and love on their mind.

What was the *allure* of this imagery? Did commissioning a sarcophagus covered with gods and heroes from Greek mythology merely serve to broadcast one's cultivated classicism, one's education and refinement, and thus proclaim the deceased's rank while lending him dignity, as Arthur Nock first proposed decades ago?[6] Surely, the mythological imagery must have done this – among many other things. But to think that it did *solely* this and nothing more, as if making a generalized claim to elite status exhausted its significance, would be myopic. It would give no insight into why some mythic tales appear far more frequently than others on these coffins (it so happens that Selene and Endymion were a very popular choice[7]), nor why the repertoire of mythological scenes preferred by Romans for their sarcophagi should have differed so starkly from the repertoire of mythological scenes that they commissioned to decorate the

[6] Nock 1946.
[7] They feature on approximately 120 surviving Roman sarcophagi, making them the single most popular mythological subject (Borg 2019b, 73).

walls of their houses, their floors, and their tableware. Nor can it be that Romans simply chose certain mythological tales over others according to random personal preference – that is, that these were scenes that individuals "just happened to like" – as modern teenagers might choose posters of favorite movies, or whatever band was popular that month, to decorate their bedroom walls.

Body Divine, Head All Too Human: Mythological Portraiture

In this case, as in most, we can be sure that our Roman couple selected the mythic figures that they did for a pointed purpose. These figures were meant to serve metaphorically as stand-ins for the couple themselves, a lens through which the viewer was to apprehend the deceased and reimagine them in mythic terms. Our couple wanted to be read *as* Selene and Endymion, and as Ariadne and Dionysus – not only wanted it, but *demanded* it, as a closer look at the relief carving makes clear: note that while the heads of every other figure are completely sculpted, the faces of Selene and Endymion (and Ariadne on the matching piece) – that is, the main mythic protagonists – remain strikingly blank. They were never completed. This is because they were intended to be customized with the specific portrait features of the deceased couple themselves (an intention that, in this particular case, was not finally realized).

The general phenomenon, typically termed "mythological portraiture,"[8] is well known. While it may strike our modern sensibilities as an odd habit, equipping the idealized bodies of mythological protagonists with the portrait

[8] Good introductions to mythological portraiture as a category are Schauenburg 1980, 153–159; Wrede 1981; Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 606–617; Fittschen 1984, 129–161; Koch 1993, 49–53; Zanker and Ewald 2004, 45–50, 196–200; the perceptive study of Newby 2011; the very helpful overview, with catalog, of Birk 2013, 94–107; Borg 2013, 163–177 (with focus on its role in status projection); Zanker 2019, 10–17; and Borg 2019b, xxiii–xxiv, 191–290, which brilliantly synthesizes the poles represented by Wrede and by Zanker/Ewald and Hallett below while considering questions of divinity and belief. As for its general significance: Henning Wrede (1981, 141, 144–147, 152–153, 156, 171–172), in a highly influential study, termed this phenomenon a form of "apotheosis" (*Apotheose*) and "private deification" (*Privatdeifikation/Privatvergöttlichung*), a position endorsed by Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 616. Zanker and Ewald (2004, 196–200), arguing from the sarcophagi, and Hallett (2005, 259–264), proceeding from other genres of private portraiture and from imperial portraiture, have argued at greatest length instead that mythological portraiture was rather a mode of metaphorical praise. Other articulations and variants of the latter position include Blome 1992; Brilliant 1992; Grassinger 1994; Koortbojian 1995; D'Ambra 1996, and Kampen 1996 (on mythological portraiture in freestanding sculpture); Hansen 2007; Newby 2011; Platt 2011, 377–384 (who reads them as epiphanic images); Huskinson 2012; Birk 2013, 95 (who worries that this approach ignores the power of mythological portraiture to channel bereavement); Borg 2013, 163–177; Borg 2014, 249; Newby 2014; de Angelis 2015, 573–574 (who, like Newby and Birk, emphasizes its power to channel bereavement and amplify emotion); Huskinson 2015, 151–180; Newby 2016, 29; Zanker 2019, 10–17. See also further discussion in Chapter 3, section on "Imitating the Soldier Emperors?"; and discussion of Borg's argument in Chapter 4, section on "Desire to Project Social Status?" On the limited adaptation of

heads of real people – often grizzled and craggy with age – was, it turns out, a relatively common practice on Roman sarcophagi. It served a crucial representational function: it made clear to the viewer who was to be identified with whom. Sarcophagi served, after all, as central loci for self-representation, for both the individual dead and the familial group. Sometimes their imagery was calculated to express the hopes and vision, the ideal self-image, of the deceased-to-be. At other times it was composed to speak instead to the emotional needs of those left behind. Often it did both. But whatever the particular content, if its message was to reach its intended audience, the audience had to be drawn into the scene. This was especially the case with mythological imagery, whose power to move the viewer always depended on metaphorical or symbolic connections rather than any claims to literal depiction. Relationships between various figures within the scenes thus had to be clarified, and links between those figures and the audience had to be forged, if viewers were to read life – the life of the deceased, their own life, the life *here* – through the images in front of them.

Precisely how these links were forged and relationships clarified depended on the genre of imagery. Roman carvers had at their disposal numerous "tricks of the trade," all designed to bridge the gap between the real world and the image world.[9] Scenes of groups banqueting on the lids of sarcophagi,[10] for example, served to evoke the *refrigerium*, that honorary meal brought by the family to the tomb, whether during the feast of the *parentalia*[11] or on the birthdays of the deceased, and consumed in the presence of those same sarcophagi.[12] The chiseled garlands festooning many coffins served as permanent stone reminders of the real garlands of fresh flowers that the family draped over coffins in the tomb.[13] Onlookers whose only "job" within the scene is to view the main action were injected to serve as internal surrogates for the viewers themselves, modeling and directing their own gaze. And ancillary figures inserted to mourn the passing of other mythological heroes and victims (Persephone, Creusa,

mythological portraiture for early Christian sarcophagi, see Wrede 1981, 156; Koch 2000, 108; Zimmermann 2007, 160–161.

[9] These various bridges are the subject of Zanker 2019.

[10] See Amedick 1991, 37–45, for categorization of these scenes and lists of catalog entries.

[11] Toynbee 1971, 63–64.

[12] Katherine Dunbabin notes that so close was the connection between dining and the tomb that it led "to a merging of categories, so that by a sort of metonymy *triclinium* and the related form *triclia*, technically a pavilion or bower such as is used for dining in a garden, came to be used as a term for the tomb itself" (Dunbabin 2003, 128).

[13] The practice of laying flowers at and in the tomb is frequently mentioned in Latin epitaphs – far more often than in Greek ones, as Lattimore notes (Lattimore 1942/1962, 129). Its institutionalized echo was the *rosalia* (also called the *rosaria*, *dies rosae*, and *dies rosationis*), an annual festival that saw graves showered with roses (Lattimore 1942/1962, 137–140; Toynbee 1971, 63). On the mimetic issues raised by carved garlands serving as permanent stone reminders of, or surrogates for, real ones, see Elsner 2012a, 186, and at greater remove, Elsner 2007, 42–43.

Patroclus, the Niobids, Hector, Meleager – the list goes on) gave mythological visage to the lamenting family itself, channeling their grief and crystallizing their loss, just as figures shown reclining with their eyes closed – whether in death (Meleager, Patroclus) or in death-like sleep (as with our Endymion and Ariadne) – mimicked in mythic guise the real corpse reclining within the coffin. But of all the ways to link real human subjects with mythological subject matter, none was more direct than the strategy of mythological portraiture: the outfitting of mythological characters with portrait heads bearing the facial features of real individuals (whether the already-deceased or the soon-to-be-so).

It was a peculiarly Roman practice, one that would have struck Greeks as strange and a bit brazen. Yet studies of mythological portraiture on Roman sarcophagi seldom emphasize the peculiarly Roman conceptions of personhood that underlay this practice. This is a shame. If Romans found it easy to equip mythological figures with portrait features of real individuals – or to reverse terms, found it natural to mount portrait heads on idealized mythic bodies – this was because Roman culture, in contrast to Greek, had long held the head by itself sufficient to constitute personhood and able, thus, to represent the total individual.[14] Hence that characteristically (and, in ancient comparative terms, bizarrely peculiar) Roman form of portraiture, the bust.[15]

The crucial corollary: it meant that the depiction of the rest of the body needed bear no literal resemblance to the real woman or man. The body type and its costume – and here we should imagine nudity as just another type of costume – was thus free for choosing according to other interests, to serve desires other than the mimetic. To put it baldly, we should think "body as symbolic prop." Did a husband commissioning a statue of his wife wish to proclaim her matronly virtue? Her portrait head could be mounted on a statue body wreathed modestly in stola and palla. Did he prefer rather to proclaim her beauty? Her head could be placed atop the nubile body of Venus instead.[16] The repertoire of well-known and endlessly copied Greek statue figure types, supplemented by the system of attributes, offered any number of gods and heroes who, recognizable through their bodies alone, could serve Romans as props for mythological

[14] Among many examples we could cite to illustrate this point, let me single out one: to be legally recognized as a tomb (a *locus religiosus*), a tomb had to contain the deceased's remains – and for this, the entire body was *not* required, as long as the head was present. That is, the head by itself sufficed to represent the entire body. This is made explicit by a surviving passage from book 3 of the eminent Roman lawyer Iulius Paulus's *Quaestiones*, excerpted in Justinian's *Digest* (11.7.44): *videtur ilium religiosum esse, ubi quod est principale conditum est, id est caput* ("it seems that the religious [place] is the one where the principal part [of the body] is buried, that is, the head"). (Discussed in Thomas 2004, 50–51; see also Platt 2011, 381; Platt 2012, 226 = Platt 2017, 379.) Hence "whenever they wished to deprive their enemies or victims of a tomb, Roman 'head hunters' carried the spirit of vengeance to its extreme by amputating the head from the body" (Thomas 2004, 51).

[15] Fabricius 2012; Stewart 2012.

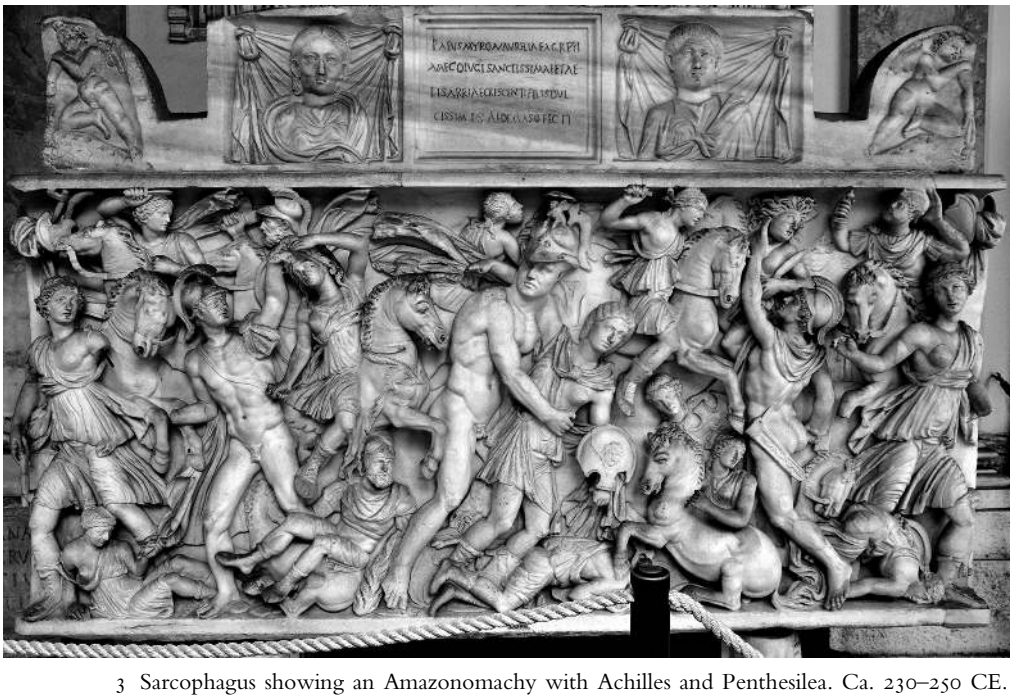
[16] On this particular combination, see D'Ambra 1996.

portraiture. Sarcophagi, with their mythological friezes featuring dozens of different character bodies, offered all the same options and many more.

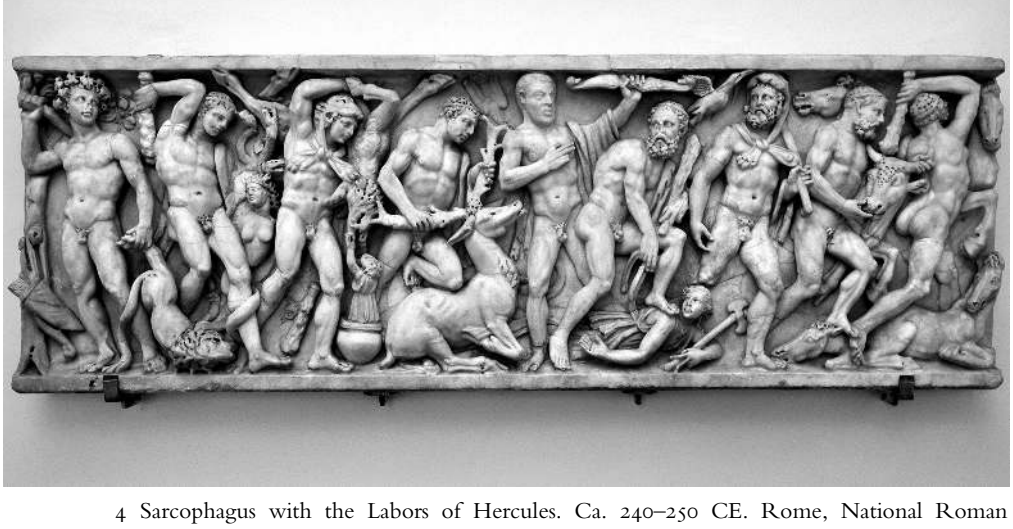
The modern response to this Roman habit is not usually kind. Students often greet it with befuddled chuckles. It can be hard, even for professional Romanists long used to studying this material, to fight off a reflexive aesthetic aversion to its perceived incongruities. Hence, for example, writing of such mythological portraiture on our sarcophagi, one scholar calls attention to "the change of style from the rest of the reliefs' elements that is displayed so often by these portraits," and goes on to deduce, with a hint of surprise, "that both artists and patrons had little concern about the clash of appearances that results from the portraits' imposition."[17] But to term it a "clash of appearances" is already a modern response, one that betrays our continuing difficulties in (the reader will forgive me here) entering the Roman head. Our cultural conditioning may lead us to giggle at seeing the craggy and battered face of an elderly magistrate crowning the body of an Achilles (**Fig. 3**)[18] or a Hercules (**Fig. 4**),[19] because *we* expect the depiction of a body and its head to be governed by the same aesthetic conventions, a single, unifying logic. To the Roman mind, however, each had a logic of its own. Mythological portraiture thus presented no incongruity.[20]

But why deploy it on sarcophagi? It went some way toward solving one of the issues inherent to using myth as metaphor: the problem of knowing who was to be identified with whom. Within the open-ended framework of mythological allusion, mythological portraiture provided an anchor. After all, the mere presence of mythological imagery on a sarcophagus did not by itself ensure that viewers would actively identify the coffin's occupant with one of the mythic protagonists shown and proceed to read the deceased's life – or death[21] – through the lens of that myth, any more than guests reclining in, say, one of the House of the Vettii's dining rooms would have assumed that they were meant to identify the house's owner with the gored Dirce, ever-spinning Ixion, or dismembered Pentheus that they saw painted on the walls.[22] Grafting

[17] Koortbojian 2013, 150.
[18] Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 139–140, fig. 149; Fittschen 1984, 143–149, 160; Grassinger 1999, 179–185, 250–251, cat. 127, pl. 111.3, 119; Newby 2011, 214; Zanker and Ewald 2012, 47–48 fig. 36, 291–294, with exhaustive bibliography at 294; Birk 2013, 104–105, 298 cat. 547; Borg 2013, 170 fig. 104; Borg 2014, 247–248 fig. 7.9; Russenberger 2015, 472–473 cat. 28 with extensive literature.
[19] Robert 1897, cat. 103; Wrede 1981, cat. 137; Jongste 1992, cat. F6; Zanker and Ewald 2012, 231–232, fig. 209–210; Birk 2013, 305 cat. 588.
[20] Seminal works on the subject are Hallett 2005; Trimble 2011.
[21] Sarcophagi from the third century tend to use mythic protagonists as exemplars of virtues, while second-century specimens are more likely to use them as poignant examples of death and mourning. (On this, with excellent discussion of earlier scholarship on the matter, see Borg 2018.)
[22] On the relatively greater distance (in terms of identification and affect) between image, owner, and viewer that characterized mythological murals in private houses, in contrast to the mythological scenes decorating sarcophagi, see Ewald 2012, 45.



3 Sarcophagus showing an Amazonomachy with Achilles and Penthesilea. Ca. 230–250 CE. Rome, Vatican Museums, inv. 933.



4 Sarcophagus with the Labors of Hercules. Ca. 240–250 CE. Rome, National Roman Museum, Palazzo Altemps, inv. 8642.

the deceased's portrait features directly onto the body of a goddess or hero was thus a way to channel myth's rich yet allusive semantic potential. It put into motion, made explicit and emphatic, a comparison that would otherwise