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The Death of Myth on Roman Sarcophagi

By

Mont Allen

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

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in

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of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Christopher H. Hallett, Chair

Professor Andrew F. Stewart

Professor Carlos F. Noreña

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Abstract

The Death of Myth on Roman Sarcophagi

by

Mont Allen

Doctor of Philosophy in History of Art

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Christopher H. Hallett, Chair

A perplexing development sweeps over Roman sarcophagi in the middle of the third century: the unexpected *Entmythologisierung* or “demythologization” of their imagery. These lavishly carved coffins, often sculpted with figural scenes of the most astonishing workmanship, had featured bold mythological characters since the very beginning of their mainstream production in the early second century, when inhumation 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 derived visual 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 peculiar withering and subsequent abandonment 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? That it must represent a major shift of some kind in the cultural values of the Late Empire is usually taken for granted, given the central position occupied by sarcophagi in the Roman visual imagination of the third century. But no consensus exists regarding its precise significance; and most explanations proposed for the shift groan and collapse under the weight of other evidence.

This enigmatic phenomenon — the extinction of mythological imagery on Roman sarcophagi — is what this dissertation decisively reframes. For critical traction it turns to both archaeological and textual evidence, examining the altered spatial relationships between house and tomb that came to dominate in the Late Empire. This reveals what was at stake in sarcophagi’s demythologization: new demands among the living, manifested across all social registers, for greater proximity to their dead. The dissertation thus integrates recent archaeological findings, social-scientific analysis of religious change, and analysis of hundreds of Roman metropolitan sarcophagi with a humanist’s eye for shifts in cultural values as refracted through funerary art. The results will be of interest to Classicists, Archaeologists, and Art Historians as well as scholars of religious history and early Christianity.

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INTRODUCTION: THE END OF MYTH

OPENING

A perplexing development sweeps over Roman sarcophagi in the middle of the third century: the unexpected *Entmythologisierung* or “demythologization” of their imagery. These lavishly carved coffins, often sculpted with figural scenes of the most astonishing workmanship, had featured bold mythological characters since the very beginning of their mainstream production in the early second century, when inhumation 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 derived visual 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 peculiar withering and subsequent abandonment 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? That it must represent a major shift of some kind in the cultural values of the Late Empire is usually taken for granted, given the central position occupied by sarcophagi in the Roman visual imagination of the third century. But no consensus exists regarding its precise significance; and most explanations proposed for the shift groan and collapse under the weight of other evidence. This enigmatic phenomenon — the extinction of mythological imagery on Roman sarcophagi — is what my project decisively reframes.

Does the field need such a study? Clearly I feel the answer is yes — not simply out of personal interest in the topic, but because there is no single article, let alone monograph, devoted to the issue in its own right. Discussion of demythologization usually occurs tangentially, in pieces devoted to some other topic (most often to a particular specimen or a category of imagery). The term is sufficiently well known in the field to bear citation without the need for background explanation; yet synthetic accounts of it are entirely lacking. Much of this is due, one senses, to the field’s dominance by Teutonic scholarship and its fondness for the catalog format, which organizes — and thus interprets — objects according to typological criteria. There are many advantages to this approach, and the compendia it yields are of crucial importance. But one side effect is to discourage synthetic studies that cut across such typological categories. Since the phenomenon of demythologization itself shears untidily across these boundaries, affecting multiple types and genres, it may have seemed no ‘natural’ topic of study. It is perhaps not surprising then that most attempts to explain *Entmythologisierung* — not just describe it, but actually explain it — have come from Germans who either work within the English-speaking world (Björn Ewald, Barbara Borg) or are known for their wide-ranging interests (Paul Zanker, Susanne Muth).

The lack of synthetic accounts must also be ascribed, I think, to the origin of the term, combined with the fact that it straddles an entrenched disciplinary divide, one so arbitrary as to seem at times perverse. This is the field’s stark division of study between those Roman sarcophagi

which bear Christian imagery and those which do not.¹ The latter are usually termed ‘pagan’ sarcophagi, but the term is misleading: it seems appropriate enough for pieces decorated with the gods and heroes of classical polytheism, but strangely misplaced when applied to pieces featuring studious philosophers or restful shepherds, let alone legions slaughtering barbarians, or boys squabbling over nuts. Nonetheless this is how the material has traditionally been divided, with each field possessing its own dedicated series of compendia (*Die antiken Sarkophagreliefs* and *Sarkophag-Studien* for the ‘pagan’ pieces,² the *Repertorium der christlich-antiken Sarkophage* for the Christian), and its scholars typically housed in different academic departments (*Klassische Archäologie* for the former, *Christliche Archäologie* for the latter). If there has been no overarching study of demythologization on Roman sarcophagi, I suspect this reflects the phenomenon’s position in the no-man’s-land between what the two fields have staked out. Afflicting nominally ‘pagan’ sarcophagi yet defined precisely by the absence of pagan myth, often ascribed to the influence of a waxing Christianity yet revealing no Christian imagery, *Entmythologisierung* inhabits the murky ground between frontiers. That Roman sarcophagi of the third century undergo demythologization is not disputed. But the study of the phenomenon has no natural home within the disciplines as configured.

This is not a recent development. Indeed, *Entmythologisierung* was positioned at the *limes* in the first work to apply the term to sarcophagi. This was Friedrich Gerke’s seminal 1940 monograph, *Die christlichen Sarkophage der vorkonstantinischen Zeit*.³ The title made the subject clear: Gerke’s concern was with the earliest Christian sarcophagi. Detailing their story, however, required contextualization amidst a pagan sarcophagus production that had already largely emptied itself of classical mythology, a process for which Gerke coined (or, as we shall see, imported) the term *Entmythologisierung*. As used by Gerke, the concept was already a marginal one, or rather, referred to marginal conditions. It denoted the mythologically void space, a kind of religious image vacuum, between a polytheistic tradition whose narratives had faltered and the monotheistic tradition which was eventually to replace it. From its very first use, then, *Entmythologisierung* described a phenomenon already figured as something with no center of its own: it was always a prologue to a different story, or an epilogue to another. Some seventy years have elapsed, yet the perception of *Entmythologisierung* as a liminal and transitional phenomenon remains. Debate over its causes, its nature, its meaning still takes place only within the context of other arguments about other topics, rather than featuring as a prime subject in its own right. Few other concepts within the field of sarcophagus studies are so often referenced, yet so little foregrounded. It is time that it finally receive the spotlight.

¹ For an insightful critique of this division, see Elsner 2011, 8-9.

² *Die antiken Sarkophagreliefs* series in particular has a long history, with many luminaries at the helm. Its directors and chief editors have included (in order) Friedrich Matz the elder, Carl Robert, Gerhart Rodenwaldt, Friedrich Matz the younger, Bernard Andreae, and Guntram Koch. For the series’ history, see Koch 1995.

³ Gerke 1940.

DISCLAIMERS

Before leaping in, however, a few necessary disclaimers. First, my project will, with only a few exceptions, limit itself to so-called ‘metropolitan’ or *stadtrömische* (to use the German) pieces, that is, works carved in the city of Rome itself. The capital had no monopoly on sarcophagus manufacture: the empire could boast of several centers of production outside the metropolis, including workshops in Athens⁴ and throughout Asia Minor (at Aphrodisias, Docimium, Ephesus, and Proconnesus, to name only the most notable),⁵ supplemented by smaller workshops here and there throughout the empire, from northern Italy and Ravenna,⁶ through southern Gaul, to Africa and Egypt.⁷ But when it came to carved relief sarcophagi sculpted with figural scenes, production in the metropolis dwarfed all others by several orders of magnitude. It is these on which I focus.

Second, my work addresses only those sarcophagi carved with mythological scenes and the genres that replaced them: mainly bucolic, season,⁸ and philosopher⁹ pieces, as well as many of the ‘biographical’ types¹⁰ and some of those showing scenes from ‘daily life’.¹¹ Bracketed, thus, are those sarcophagi, large in number, which featured other types of imagery: this includes the various Cupid genres (Cupids as charioteers, Cupids as wrestlers, and so on);¹² and the countless plain strigillated and garland¹³ specimens, to name only some of the vast array. In taking the mythological specimens as a central concern, it is true that my project continues the field’s long-

⁴ Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 366-475; Rogge 1995; Oakley 2011. For a concise introduction to Attic sarcophagi which positions them *vis-à-vis* metropolitan pieces in terms of both numbers and subject matter, see Ewald 2004.

⁵ The best overview of Asian specimens remains Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 476-557.

⁶ Kollwitz and Herdejürgen 1979.

⁷ So extensive are the numbers of surviving Roman sarcophagi that precise tabulation of their numbers is utterly impossible. Elsner (2011, 1) puts their quantity at between 10,000 and 20,000, including unpublished specimens, while Koch (1993, xi, 206) estimates between 12,000 and 15,000, a number endorsed by Russell (2011, 127). Metropolitan pieces make up about half of these: roughly 6,000 have been identified (Koch 1993, 94; Russell 2011, 130). Production dwindled rapidly from the beginning of the fourth century onward; yet despite shrinking production, remnants of roughly 1,200 metropolitan pieces can be assigned to the time between 270/280 and the early fifth century alone (Koch 2000, 220). Given the poor rates of survival of ancient sculpture, particularly marble, such numbers throw the sheer scale of production into stark relief.

⁸ Kranz 1984.

⁹ Ewald 1999.

¹⁰ Andreae 1980; Reinsberg 2006; Wrede 2001.

¹¹ Amedick 1996.

¹² Kranz 1999; Bielefeld 1997; Schauenburg 1995.

¹³ Herdejürgen 1996.

standing interest in this particular sub-section of sarcophagi.¹⁴ Indeed, these have long received the lion's share of attention, despite representing only a fraction of the whole corpus.¹⁵ Some have lamented this, pointing out that the field's insistent focus on the mythological pieces has had the effect of sidelining other kinds of studies.¹⁶ It is true that questions of reuse and spoliation, for example, or of production and distribution — to name the examples given by Elsner of subjects generally ignored — have received less attention than we might desire, perhaps because they cannot be adequately addressed without recourse to multiple other genres.¹⁷ (One has only to think of the enormous number of humble strigillated sarcophagi: simultaneously overwhelming and underwhelming, of little obvious relevance to mythological questions, they are usually passed over. Yet they would make prime material for studies of production, distribution, and attendant issues of social standing and class consumption.¹⁸)

Yet the understandable allure of the mythological sarcophagi remains. Within the enormous corpus of Roman sarcophagi, they are the pieces that exhibit the greatest variety of imagery and subject matter, that most directly seem to channel classical culture, and that, perhaps, provide the best insight into Roman attitudes towards life and death — all through imagery that holds out the allure of symbolic depth (even if, one often feels, this depth is feigned). And then there is the sheer aesthetic attraction: whatever one thinks of their subject matter, the fact remains that mythological sarcophagi were the ones disproportionately preferred by the wealthy, who could afford to pay more for the most detailed, elaborate, exquisitely executed carving that Rome's workshops could offer. Their beauty alone makes them hard to resist.

It is precisely these factors that make the withering and eventual disappearance of this mythological imagery so difficult to fathom. It is easy to understand the allure of these mythological pieces. But the better we understand it, the more unexpected, the more baffling, becomes their later absence. My interest in the mythological sarcophagi thus stems, perhaps a bit perversely, from their decease. It is not the life, but the death, of myth on Roman sarcophagi that drives this project.

¹⁴ For overviews of the history of sarcophagus studies: Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 6-20; Zanker and Ewald 2004, 24-7. Those who prefer to read in English will rejoice in the translation of the latter, just out: Zanker and Ewald 2012.

¹⁵ Newby (2011, 191) puts the number of extant mythological specimens at around 1,200. In light of the estimated total production numbers (see note 7 above), this would mean that roughly every tenth or twelfth sarcophagus carved was a mythological piece.

¹⁶ Most recently, Elsner 2011, 1-2. His critique is well taken, though perhaps exaggerates the dominance of the mythological. Relatively recent and notable exceptions to the field's collective preference for mythological studies include Ewald 1999; Wrede 2001.

¹⁷ Looking at Elsner's list of questions and subjects lamentably bracketed, one notes that they correspond to the beginning (production, distribution) and end (reuse, spoliation) of these objects' lifecycles as objects. Elsner's is essentially a call to consider phases in the life of sarcophagi other than their middle.

¹⁸ See now Huskinson 2012 — the first substantial chapter, as far as I know, to tap strigillated sarcophagi for insight into Roman self-representation. Huskinson is currently working on a monograph devoted to the strigillated pieces, to be published by Oxford.

PRODUCTION OF PAGAN SARCOPHAGI: AN OVERVIEW

The Early (Hadrianic) Sarcophagi: Myth Present from the Beginning

Any discussion of the end of mythological imagery on Roman sarcophagi, however, should say something of its beginnings.¹⁹ Although the occasional Roman sarcophagus was carved during the Republic or the early Empire,²⁰ these were outliers, special commissions carved for the odd member of the Roman — who, against custom, opted for inhumation and the larger receptacle it required.²¹ Mainstream Roman production of sarcophagi only began under the reign of Hadrian, and would not reach full swing for another generation or two.²² Yet the crucial point for our purposes is that mythological subjects figured prominently on them from the beginning. Sarcophagi may have been novel, and their production limited, in the first few decades of the second century; yet trends regarding subject matter were already evident. The second most popular type during this early period featured pairs of griffins, heraldically flanking tripods or *thymateria* (incense burners) (**FIGURE 1**). Its popularity as a motif for ash urns and funerary altars during the late first and early second century had led it to be translated to early sarcophagi,²³ and it enjoyed brief favor on the new form of container. But by far the greatest number of early sarcophagi preferred the garland format.

This too was a scheme whose basic form had been lifted from the ash urns and funerary altars preceding. It had been altered, however, in translation. Not animal heads, bucrania, or the head of Jupiter Ammon, but complete figures, most often Cupids, now do the heavy lifting of garland swags. And — of greater relevance for us — not the spaces beside and below the swags, but the lunettes above them, now take the spotlight. More specifically, these lunettes become spaces for the staging of myth.²⁴ Some present scenes of high drama: the story of Theseus and Ariadne,

¹⁹ For an overview of the chronology and phases of production: Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 252-9.

²⁰ Republic: the sarcophagus, now prominently displayed in the Vatican, of L. Cornelius Scipio Barbatus, consul in 298 BC (Figure 108). Taking the form of an altar decorated with a Doric frieze, it has no parallels in any subsequent metropolitan production. (Inv. 1191; Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 37.) Early Empire: the so-called Caffarelli sarcophagus in Berlin's Altes Museum, the earliest of the garland sarcophagi. (Inv. SK843a; Herdejürgen 1996, 77, cat. 1, pl. 1.2-3, 3.3-4.)

²¹ According to Herdejürgen (1996, 17; cited in Davies 2011, 21 n. 4), Roman sources provide three possible reasons for such idiosyncratic deviation from the custom of cremation: (1) membership in a Pythagorean sect; (2) membership in a family whose peculiar tradition was inhumation, most notably the Gens Cornelia (here one thinks of the sarcophagus of L. Cornelius Scipio Barbatus — see note 20 above); and (3) personal sensitivity to the dramatic conflagration that was cremation.

²² It is easy to take for granted how relatively recently this knowledge has been won. As Davies (2011, 27 n. 2) reminds us, it was not until 1934, thanks to Toynbee, that we learned that the main series of garland sarcophagi were Hadrianic in date, not Augustan.

²³ Davies 2011, 42-3.

²⁴ Davies 2011, 40. See also Giuliani 1989, 25-6. In general Giuliani emphasizes the continuity of imagery between ash urns and early sarcophagi, while Davies reminds us of their important differences.

unfolding over three episodes on a splendid piece in New York²⁵ (Figure 2), or the fate of Actaeon, detailed in four scenes on an astonishing work in the Louvre²⁶ (Figure 3). Others give us vignettes more playful than dramatic: of Cupids riding sea animals, Nereids cavorting with other sea creatures, and members of the Dionysiac retinue making merry. But whether the scenes are tragic or bawdy, they all serve to make the same emphatic point: unlike the preceding ash urns and grave altars, which seldom featured such vignettes,²⁷ the earliest Roman sarcophagi already teem with myth.

These mythological garland sarcophagi were soon joined by others sporting a new format: the mythological frieze. Foregoing garland swags and their rigid division of the surface into equally-spaced compartments, these new ones opted to devote the entire visual field to the uninterrupted staging of mythic narratives.²⁸ One might conceive of it as a reprise, in a different sculptural context, of the shift from the Doric to Ionic frieze format. Not a rhythmic sequence of self-contained vignettes, but a continuous narrative frieze, was the mode they preferred.

When do these frieze sarcophagi appear? Two of the best known, now in the Vatican's Museo Gregorio Profano, were excavated in 1839 from a tomb (the so-called "Tomb of the Medusa") near Rome's Porta Viminalis. One shows the slaughter of the Niobids (Figure 4, Figure 5): Amphion and Niobe huddle at opposite ends while their children expire all around, victims of the vengeful hail of arrows rained down by the diminutive figures of Apollo and Artemis on the lid. The other features episodes from the Orestes cycle (Figure 6): Orestes and Pylades slay Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus in the center, while Orestes encounters the shade of Agamemnon on the left and flees Delphi on the right. Several of the tomb's brick stamps, securely dated to 132 and 134 AD, provide a *terminus post quem* for the tomb chamber and, by extension, a chronological context for the sarcophagi it was built to hold. The general consensus is that these pieces were carved not long afterward, putting them between 134 and 140 AD.²⁹ By the 130s AD, then, the mythological frieze format was already established.³⁰

We do have a limited number of Roman ash urns whose decoration, like that of the frieze sarcophagi, consists solely of figural narratives. Could these have served as inspiration? It seems the answer is no: Davies notes, following Sinn, that all of these urns date to the mid-Antonine period.³¹ That is to say, those few urns with mythological friezes, all of them late, are

²⁵ Inv. 90.12a-b; Herdejürgen 1996, 90-2, cat. 23, pl. 13.1, 5.1-3, 6.1-2, 8.1.

²⁶ Inv. MR878 / MA459; Herdejürgen 1996, 93-5, cat. 26, pl. 8.1-3, 9.1-4, 30.1-2, 1.1-2.

²⁷ Davies 2011, 37.

²⁸ Giuliani 1989, 26.

²⁹ The literature on these two pieces is immense. The most recent and thorough examination is Bielfeldt 2005; see esp. 306-321 for discussion of the archaeological context and concomitant issues of dating. For concise discussions of each piece, see Zanker and Ewald 2004, 357-9, 61-64; also Sichtermann and Koch 1975, 49-50, 2-3, cat. 48, 53, pl. 124-8, 33.2, 35-40. For a succinct compilation of the earliest literature on the Orestes sarcophagus, see Kastelic 1999, 268.

³⁰ Koch 1993, 72.

³¹ Davies 2011, 35 n. 4.

following the sarcophagi — not the reverse. We are dealing, then, with a decorative scheme that did indeed flower first on sarcophagi, not cinerary containers.

The mythological frieze sarcophagi as a whole are impressive pieces. Their monumental size alone can shock and awe. Combine this with compositions and carving often dazzling, and it is easy to see why some specimens number among the most impressive artworks that the Roman world ever produced. This has led some to speculate that the rise of sarcophagi in the second century may have been driven not, above all, by a shift in burial practice (from cremation to inhumation), but by the vastly expanded stone canvas that sarcophagi offered for the conspicuous display of lavish carving, far exceeding what ash urns could offer. After all, we have found sarcophagi whose unsealing revealed not the expected remains of an interred corpse, but only charred bones and ashes. Some Romans thus chose a sarcophagus rather than a cinerary urn as their receptacle, even when incinerated. Perhaps the popularity of this new, much larger, and more luxurious form of box thus prompted the shift to inhumation, rather than the reverse?

The claim takes some getting used to, but proves strangely appealing once digested. It is not without problems, however. One has to do with those examples of sarcophagi recorded to have held cremated remains. Though often mentioned, references to them rely on a mere handful of original citations: a note in Nock's "Cremation and Burial in the Roman Empire,"³² a note in Toynbee's *Death and Burial in the Roman World*,³³ and a three-page report from Cumont³⁴ are cited again and again. It seems there are very few examples. More worrying, most postdate our period, or come from peripheral sites outside of Rome.³⁵ The piece announced by Cumont is instructive here: he reports on a sarcophagus unearthed by Dutch archaeologists in Simpelveld (west of Maastricht, in the province of Limburg). The piece is utterly unorthodox: its exterior was not decorated at all; rather, all four of its *interior* walls were carved in relief. These include a portrait of a woman — doubtless the deceased — reclining on a *kline*, propped up on one arm; and depictions of a villa, probably that in which she lived. (As Cumont says, no depiction could better convey the conception of the tomb as a surrogate house, especially since here the deceased alone was in a position to view the architecture which she inhabited.) Grave goods found in the sarcophagus included a fine terracotta vessel; a glass vial with the mark of a workshop of the second century, used to date the casket itself; a silver mirror; and several pieces of gold jewelry, including a ring bearing the tender inscription *IUNONI MEAE* ("to my Juno"). The final contents: charred bones ("ossements calcinés").³⁶ One can hardly imagine a less typical package.

Such extreme marginality severely diminishes the value of these pieces for the argument. Whether a new fashion for inhumation drove the shift from ash urn to sarcophagus, or whether a new fashion for sarcophagi drove the shift from cremation to inhumation, thus remains indeterminate. The dichotomy as posed may be too strong, however. Perhaps these fashions

³² Nock 1932, 333 n. 61.

³³ Toynbee 1971, 40 n. 107.

³⁴ Cumont 1931.

³⁵ Davies 2011, 22 n. 6.

³⁶ Cumont 1931, 352.

reinforced each other, with a trendy new interest in inhumation intersecting nicely with an unsatiated desire for more lavish and monumental artistic display. Giuliani is right to remind us that the switch from urn to sarcophagus must be seen within the context of a long-term trend towards ever more elaborate outfitting of the grave, a trend which had manifested itself for some time before the change in sepulchral practice.³⁷ Marble relief sarcophagi, no matter what else one may say of them, were always a “pretentious display genre.”³⁸ And mythological imagery was, from the outset, an integral part of this new mode of conspicuous display.³⁹ It is precisely because myth featured so prominently on sarcophagi from the very beginning, in a way it never had on prior Roman funerary containers, that its later disappearance seems so charged.

Antonine Sarcophagi: A Burgeoning Mythological Repertoire

As we have seen, mythological vignettes already figured on some of the earliest specimens of mainstream production, in the lunettes above the swags of garland sarcophagi from the first decades of the second century. It was not until the introduction of frieze sarcophagi in the late Hadrianic period, however, that these figures were freed to colonize the entire available visual field. Now liberated from the confines of the vignette, mythological narratives could be adapted, extended, and elaborated in a riotous profusion. The Antonine period thus stands as the golden age of mythological imagery. The explosion is astonishing. Of those relief sarcophagi carved between 150 and 190 AD, almost one half was devoted to mythological narratives. If one includes pieces celebrating the frolics of fantastic marine creatures and the members of the Dionysiac retinue — i.e., creatures mythological, but not acting out any particular narrative — then the tally of mythological sarcophagi rises to three-fourths of production.⁴⁰

And as the absolute numbers of production surged, so did the number of narratives employed. Of the scores upon scores of narratives that entered the repertoire of Roman sarcophagi over the centuries, the vast majority had already appeared within the late Hadrianic or first few decades of the Antonine period. Achilles discovered on Scyrus, Adonis’s fateful hunt, various forms of Amazonomachy, Daedalus crafting the cow for Pasiphaë, Endymion’s nocturnal affairs with Selene.... (just to select a few examples from the beginning of the alphabet): all had been adapted for the frieze format before 160 AD, if not a decade or two earlier, and the list goes on and on.⁴¹ Some would ride the waves of fashion for a century or more: Endymion and Selene

³⁷ Giuliani 1989, 25.

³⁸ Finney 2002, 107.

³⁹ Ewald (2004, 232), citing Müller (1994, 86-106, 39-70), reminds us that the Second Sophistic, with its love of Greek myth, must be seen as a conditioning context for the explosive growth and broad diffusion of mythological sarcophagi.

⁴⁰ For a helpful graph diagramming the various percentages at different periods, see Ewald 2003, 564; for more detailed but non-chronological tables showing the quantitative distribution of themes on both metropolitan and Attic pieces, see Ewald 2004, 235, 7, 9.

⁴¹ For the various Achilles sarcophagi: Grassinger 1999, 19-69, 195-210, cat. 1-42, pl. 1-37. For the Adonis sarcophagi: Grassinger 1999, 70-90, 211-21, cat. 43-67, pl. 38-63; Koortbojian 1995, 23-62, 111-3, 30-35. For the Amazonomachies: Grassinger 1999, 129-91, 235-59, cat. 88-146, pl. 86-28.

remained a popular choice through the very end of the third century.⁴² Others had a more limited run: sarcophagi showcasing the slaughter of the Niobids, such as the piece from the Tomb of the Medusa near Rome's Porta Viminalis discussed above (Figure 4, Figure 5), do not appear after the Antonine age. Still others were one-offs or close to it: Daedalus and Pasiphaë, for instance, are preserved on only one well-known piece⁴³ in the Louvre, dated to ca. 150 AD. Indeed, the vast majority of our limited-run series and unicas date to the Antonine age, evocative reminders of the experimental vigor and the burgeoning proliferation of narratives unleashed by the development of the frieze format.

Severan and Pre-Gallienic Sarcophagi: Myth Begins To Constrict

The Severan period saw several developments. First, the scale of production of sarcophagi continued to expand dramatically. Though it might be tempting to ascribe this to growing acceptance of inhumation, this is not a likely cause: it seems that most of the Italian peninsula had already accommodated to the new sepulchral practice under the Antonines.⁴⁴ What we are witnessing is an expansion of availability and affordability, as supply chains of marble were better organized to meet demand, Proconnesian marble became widely available as a low-cost alternative to Carrara (see Appendix A: Carrara and Proconnesian Marble), workshops extended and streamlined their operations,⁴⁵ and quarries optimized for shipping ready-to-go blanks already hollowed out and trimmed.⁴⁶ The net effect was greater output with some reduction in cost, bringing these luxury objects into the reach of a greater slice of the elite.

For the Endymion sarcophagi: Sichtermann 1992, 32-58, 103-63, cat. 27-37, pl. 26-14; Koortbojian 1995, 63-102, 30-41.

⁴² One of the last to show Endymion and Selene, found in the Catacomb of Domatilla, is routinely dated to ca. 285 AD or a bit later (Sichtermann 1992, 103, 46-48, cat. 96, pl. 6.1-2, 7.1-5).

⁴³ Sichtermann 1992, 100-1, cat. 25, pl. 24.1-3, 25.1-2.

⁴⁴ Morris 1992, 67-8.

⁴⁵ The major monograph treating the Roman toolkit, sculptural processes, and techniques of carving is Rockwell 1993. For less comprehensive but more accessible discussion, see Strong and Claridge 1976. A well-illustrated basic introduction, organized alphabetically by keywords, is Grossman 2003. For a detailed and sensitive treatment of tools and sculptural process as revealed on a group of related pieces from the same tomb, see Ward-Perkins 1975-1976, 216-34. For particular aspects of Roman sculptural process, see Claridge 1990; Hollinshead 2002; Prusac 2011; Rockwell 1990. For the organization of sarcophagus production in particular, see Russell 2011.

⁴⁶ On Roman improvements in quarrying over Greek, see Waelkens et al. 1990, 59-60. On the third-century development of shipping blanks already trimmed and hollowed out at the quarry — cost-saving because it substantially reduced weight, by as much as half — see Herrmann 1990, 74; Russell 2011, 135-6. Crucial evidence comes from the San Pietro wreck, whose pottery and iron nails date it to early in the third century (Ward-Perkins and Throckmorton 1965, 209). It yielded not only 23 blanks, but also revealed how efficiently they were shipped: to save space and protect them from damage, three smaller blanks were nestled inside larger ones. Further, another six were actually doubled up, as three pairs of 'Siamese twins' left joined along their long faces, to be finally separated (sawed apart?) only upon reaching their destination. This likely reduced potential damage, by

The second development concerns portraiture. Portraits of the deceased had been exceedingly rare on Hadrianic sarcophagi, and relatively so on Antonine. Most of our Antonine examples come from the so-called ‘biographical’ sarcophagi, which typically presented the deceased in full-body form (whether slaughtering barbarians, sponsoring sacrifice, or sealing the wedding bond), and a handful of early clipeus sarcophagi, such as the fine late Antonine or early Severan piece in the Metropolitan Museum (Figure 7). These were small genres, however; on the far more common mythological sarcophagi, portraits were seldom encountered. Exceptions, such as the well-known Vatican piece showing Alcestis and Admetus with portrait features⁴⁷ (Figure 8), or the famous “Cleobis and Biton” unicum in the Venice Archaeological Museum⁴⁸ (Figure 9), stand out for their rarity.⁴⁹ In the third century, however, portraits become standard fare, and in a wide variety of format.⁵⁰ Commonly they took the shape of relief busts, either on the lid, in which case they were frequently framed by a draped *parapetasma* (a small curtain serving as background), or on the chest itself, most often within a dignifying clipeus borne by Cupids or, less often, Victories, while a small vignette, often mythological, occupied the space under the clipeus. On strigillated sarcophagi the deceased might be portrayed in full-body form. Sometimes, however, particularly on the mythological frieze sarcophagi, their portrait features were applied directly to the main protagonists of the narratives, in a form of heroic role-playing.⁵¹ Collectively these testify to a surging interest in inserted portraiture, beginning early in the third century.

The third development concerns the repertoire of narratives employed on sarcophagi. Most succinctly, it began to shrink. As we have already mentioned, a good percentage of the stories

reducing the number of exposed corners. Finally, one came with an extra mass of stone attached, clearly intended to be used for a lid, as indicated by its dimensions and sloped section — it needed only to be sawed off from the rest of the blank. (Ward-Perkins and Throckmorton 1965, 203-5.)

⁴⁷ Sichtermann and Koch 1975, 20-1, pl. 16, 7.2, 8.1-2, 9.1-2; Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 136; Grassinger 1999, 110-28 passim, 227-8, cat. 76, pl. 75.2, 78-81, 84.6-7; Kastelic 1999, 261-6; Koch 1993, 50-1; Zanker and Ewald 2004, 202-4, 98-301, fig. 182-3; Newby 2011, 194-6, fig. 6.1.

⁴⁸ Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 156; Zanker and Ewald 2004, 216-7, fig. 195; Newby 2011, 199.

⁴⁹ Indeed, the Cleobis and Biton slab probably comes from no sarcophagus at all; it was more likely a loculus slab. The earliest mythological sarcophagus to append portrait features may well be a fragment in Ostia; dated to the 140s, it outfits a chariot-driving Demeter with a portrait head (Zanker and Ewald 2004, 94, fig. 78; Newby 2011, 194 n. 23, 9 n. 49).

⁵⁰ Koch 1993, 51-2; Newby 2011, 192-3. For early Christian portraiture later in the century, as it appeared in both sarcophagi and catacomb painting, see Zimmermann 2007.

⁵¹ Henning Wrede (1981, 141, 4-7, 52-53, 56, 71-72), in a highly influential study, termed this phenomenon a form of “apotheosis” (*Apotheose*) and “private deification” (*Privatdeifikation/Privatvergöttlichung*). Zanker (2004, 196-200), arguing from the sarcophagi, and Hallett (2005, 259-64), proceeding from other genres of private portraiture and from imperial portraiture, argue convincingly against Wrede that mythological portraiture was rather a mode of metaphorical praise, a position endorsed and amplified most recently by Borg (2013, 163-4, 77-78). A recent study emphasizing how the inclusion of portraits could channel the reading of the myth is Newby 2011. On the limited adaptation of mythological portraiture for early Christian sarcophagi, see Wrede 1981, 156; Koch 2000, 108; Zimmermann 2007, 160-1.

which appeared on Antonine coffins — Achilles and Patroclus (Figure 10), Meleager’s sad homecoming (Figure 11), the massacre of the Niobids (Figure 4, Figure 5), the family drama of Orestes (Figure 12), and many more — simply do not appear later; and the number of narratives newly adapted during the Severan and pre-Gallienic period did not make up for the number dropped. To a certain extent this may have been part of the drive towards optimized ‘mass’ production mentioned above: the explosive creativity unleashed by the introduction of the frieze format in the Hadrianic and Antonine periods had resulted in many experimental compositions, many of which must have been special commissions. No workshop could hope to offer them all, and mass production required culling from this abundance, offering customers fewer options in exchange for lower price. In other cases, we find that a cluster of different yet thematically related stories has been replaced by a single new one. This was the case most notably with scenes of mythological hunters — Adonis (Figure 13), Hippolytus, and Meleager (Figure 14) — spearing their quarry, which had enjoyed popularity in the Antonine age.⁵² Beginning in the 220s and 230s AD, during the reign of Alexander Severus, these were dropped in favor of, or rather, transformed into, ‘biographical’ depictions: maintaining the basic composition but stripping away the mythological figures, these now staged the deceased himself as the central hunter, who was shown felling his prey (usually a lion) from horseback (Figure 15).⁵³ Such substitutions further reduced the mythological repertoire, and are often cited as the first act in the process of *Entmythologisierung*.⁵⁴

The Second Half of the Third Century: The Surge of Non-Mythological Genres

It was during the second half of the third century, however, that this process of substituting non-mythic scenes for mythological ones accelerated and spread. Beginning around or shortly before 250 AD we witness a marked constriction, even collapse, of the mythological repertoire. It applied not only to the narrative sarcophagi, but also to those mythological sarcophagi that were non-narrative: scenes of fantastic marine creatures cavorting in the waves, and the revelry of the Dionysiac retinue, diminish just as thoroughly as friezes staging the stories of particular mythological heroes. In their place we find some growth in the number of Cupids racing chariots or busying themselves at the vintage — that is to say, mythological figures, but only minor or generic ones, and engaged in ‘everyday’ activities. The real surge, however, comes not

⁵² For the Adonis sarcophagi: Grassinger 1999, 70-90, 211-21, cat. 43-67, pl. 38-63; Koortbojian 1995, 23-62, 111-3, 30-35. For the Meleager sarcophagi: Koch 1975.

⁵³ Andrae 1980, 17-41; Zanker and Ewald 2004, 225-6. Note that this involved substituting lions for the boars which had figured in the mythological narratives. Whether this should be seen as a status-seeking appropriation from imperial relief, where emperors such as Hadrian and Commodus had hunted the royal beasts, or whether the substitution instead served eschatological hopes, proclaiming that the deceased had entered a better state in the afterlife and thereby triumphed over death (the lion being a long-standing symbol for death’s ravages), is debated. Fuller discussion can be found under the section titled “*Libera eas de ore leonis?*” beginning on page 21 below.

⁵⁴ Andrae (1980, 25-7) himself describes it thus, but consistently uses the term *Entmythisierung* instead. It is a pity that this shorter term never caught on.

in these marginally mythological genres, but in the fully mythless ones: above all, in sarcophagi featuring bucolic imagery, the seasons, philosophers, and the hunt.⁵⁵

The term “surge” may not suffice to capture the scale of this shift. Season sarcophagi are a good example. Hardly a new genre, they had already developed most of their basic compositional forms during the Antonine and Severan periods. By the beginning of the reign of Gallienus, their formal development was complete. But that holds only for their formal development. The story of their production numbers is quite different. As many season sarcophagi were carved during the fifteen years of Gallienus’s reign (253-268 AD) as during the entire preceding half of that century; and, even more astonishingly, production continued to grow every decade for the rest of the century, reaching its high point between 290 and 310 AD.⁵⁶ We are dealing with an explosion of non-mythic imagery, with the vast bulk of it limited to a few major genres. Of those coffins with figural scenes carved between 250 and 310 AD, roughly every sixth presented a hunt; every fifth was devoted to the seasons; and every fourth featured bucolic imagery.⁵⁷ Of our extant bucolic sarcophagi, roughly 400 were carved in the half century between 260/70 and 320 alone;⁵⁸ yet despite this late development, their total numbers still make them the single most popular genre of the third century.⁵⁹ In total these three genres (hunt, season, bucolic) by themselves made up three-fifths of production for half a century. If we add to these those sarcophagi featuring philosophers and Muses, the figure approaches 75%. Cupids racing or at vintage, Dionysiac scenes, and marine thiasoi make up the last slender quarter, joined by a handful of narrational mythological pieces. The latter — the mythological pieces — make up roughly 5% of the whole, a mere sliver. Admittedly, some of these count among the finest of the period, in terms of size and craftsmanship;⁶⁰ but their numbers are miniscule.

Notably, the first sarcophagi bearing Christian scenes also appear during this period. The earliest is the famous piece in Rome’s Santa Maria Antiqua⁶¹ (Figure 16): showing Jonah and a baptized Jesus, in bucolic settings, flanking unfinished portraits of husband and wife as a seated man of

⁵⁵ For the general pattern: Ewald 2003, 564; Zanker and Ewald 2004, 252-63. For the trend as it applied to season sarcophagi: Kranz 1984, 24-72, esp. 67-8; to philosopher sarcophagi: Ewald 1999, esp. 30, 3-4, 77-80; to hunt sarcophagi: Andreae 1980, 17-41.

⁵⁶ Kranz 1984, 67-8, 176.

⁵⁷ Ewald 2003, 564.

⁵⁸ Himmelmann 1980, 129; Wrede 2001, 84, 106.

⁵⁹ Ewald 1999, 62.

⁶⁰ Most of these are monumental pieces from the Tetrarchic period, and seem to have been manufactured by a single workshop newly relocated to the city from the East (Zanker and Ewald 2004, 256).

⁶¹ Gerke 1940, pl. 52.2, 8.3, 9-60; Deichmann et al. 1967, 306, cat. 747, pl. 117; Zanker 1995, 269-70, fig. 155 = Zanker 1995, 286-7, fig. 155; Ewald 1999, 75-6, 152-3, cat. C2; Koch 2000, 227-8, 37, 38, 48, list 1.2, pl. 14.

letters and a standing *orans*, it likely dates to the decade between 270 and 280 AD.⁶² Such pre-Constantinian works are very rare, however — the next extant piece to show Christian figures was probably carved a decade later, between 280 and 290 AD — and they were clearly special commissions carved by workshops used to producing ‘pagan’ bucolic specimens.⁶³

The Fourth Century: Dissolution of Pagan Sarcophagi

If the third century saw the high point of pagan sarcophagus production, the fourth century saw its dissolution. While rare before 300, Christian sarcophagi increase considerably in number during the first decade of the fourth century,⁶⁴ but pagan specimens kept them company: as we have seen, the two decades between 290 and 310 AD saw the number of season sarcophagi reach a new high. (Likely carved around 310, Berkeley’s own fragment of a season sarcophagus⁶⁵ (Figure 17) is thus part of this history.) A similar story holds for the bucolic and hunt genres: although bucolic pieces reached their high-water mark in the last decade of the third century, they maintained momentum into the first decade of the fourth;⁶⁶ and pieces featuring hunt scenes carried on into the century unabated. Indeed, hunt sarcophagi even saw the development of a new sub-genre in the first decade of the fourth century, when specimens showing driven hunts, complete with beaters and nets, joined those showing the more traditional lion- and boar hunts.⁶⁷ That these new hunt scenes show no connection with Christian imagery⁶⁸ stands as a reminder of the continued vigor of pagan production.

All this changed under Constantine’s reign. The effect on Roman funerary art was almost immediate. Beginning around 313 AD, following Constantine’s edicts, Christian sarcophagi entered a period of explosive growth, developing new, standardized forms — a sure sign of mainstream popularity — and a distinctive compositional style.⁶⁹ Production decreased during the decades following Constantine’s death in 337, but rose sharply again under Valentinian and remained strong under Theodosius.⁷⁰ The fourth century is thus the great century for metropolitan Christian manufacture. But it also meant the end of pagan production, which

⁶² In general, earlier scholarship gravitated towards earlier dates for these pieces, perhaps from lingering convictions of Christianity’s own personal appeal; hence Matz (1941, 346), for example, tilts towards 270, if not before. Later scholarship tends to be more circumspect.

⁶³ Rodenwaldt (1921-1922, 69) was the first to propose, almost a century ago, that late pagan and early Christian pieces were produced in the same workshops.

⁶⁴ Koch 2000, 226.

⁶⁵ Vermeule 1962, 100, cat. 1; Smutny 1966, 12-4, cat. 7, pl. 9; Kranz 1984, 192, cat. 29, pl. 40.2.

⁶⁶ Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 118-9; Koch 2000, 16.

⁶⁷ Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 95.

⁶⁸ Andreae 1980, 127-8.

⁶⁹ Koch 2000, 249.

⁷⁰ Koch 2000, 281, 98. As Koch points out, this is all the more remarkable given Rome’s diminished status after Constantinople’s foundation in 330, and its irrelevance after 386, when the imperial seat was moved to Milan.

declined precipitously under Constantine and never recovered. Our last pagan examples come from the time of Theodosius, but these are extreme outliers; mainstream pagan production had petered out by mid-century. After a majestic run spanning more than two centuries, the great series of Roman pagan sarcophagi had finally come to an end. Its mythological members, however, had already been long dead.

TWO FORMS OF *ENTMYTHOLOGISIERUNG*

Entmythologisierung as the Rejection of Myth

It is the phenomenon described above — the constriction of the mythological repertoire in the first half of the third century, and its subsequent collapse in the second half alongside a massive surge in ‘mythless’ genres — that the term *Entmythologisierung* is most often used to describe. This is how Zanker repeatedly applies the term,⁷¹ for example, or Andreae.⁷² It means the *Verzicht auf die mythologischen Allegorien* (“abandonment of mythological allegories”), or even more pithily, *die Abkehr vom Mythos*⁷³ (“the rejection of myth”), and its replacement by something else.

Entmythologisierung as the Abstraction of Myth

There is, however, another sense in which the term is used: it can refer to the process observed on some mythological sarcophagi in which ancillary episodes or subsidiary figures are progressively stripped away, yielding a contracted and fragmented narrative. Sometimes this is carried so far as to leave only the central figure, which now, abstracted from any narrative context, functions as a stand-alone symbol. A weak form of this can be traced on the Adonis sarcophagi. Most of those early in the series — such as the piece in the Louvre,⁷⁴ likely sculpted between 150 and 160 AD — show a standardized set of three scenes: the hero’s departure from Venus, his encounter with the boar, and Venus’s embrace of the wounded hero. Several works carved later in the series, however — such as the famous specimen in Mantua’s Palazzo Ducale⁷⁵ (Figure 18), from about 190, or the relief in Rome’s Villa Giustiniani Massimo⁷⁶ (Figure 19), dated near 180 — amputate one or the other of these scenes, in order to bring the remainder into greater focus. (The departure or embrace is usually the one to go, leaving always the pivotal moment of the hunt.)⁷⁷

⁷¹ Zanker and Ewald 2004, 255, 8, 60, 62-63.

⁷² Andreae 1980, 25-7, although as already observed (note 54 above), Andreae prefers the term *Entmythisierung*.

⁷³ Zanker and Ewald 2004, 255-6.

⁷⁴ Grassinger 1999, 211, cat. 43, pl. 38.1, 40.1, 42.1, 45.1, 62.6.

⁷⁵ Zanker and Ewald 2004, 209, fig. 188; Grassinger 1999, 215, cat. 55, pl. 47.1, 48.1, 50.2.

⁷⁶ Grassinger 1999, 214-5, cat. 53, pl. 46.1.

⁷⁷ Koortbojian 1995, 26-8, 41-8.

A stronger form of this process of abbreviation can be seen on a late (mid-third century) Endymion sarcophagus in Rome's Palazzo Braschi⁷⁸ (Figure 20). So thoroughly has the carver here isolated the drowsy shepherd from his narrative setting, expunging other characters in the process, that even Selene, whose nocturnal visits are central to the story, finds herself excised. A lone Cupid is left to admire Endymion on his own. In this context we could also cite the hundreds of strigillated and clipeus sarcophagi outfitted with mythological vignettes. Usually comprising a single isolated figure or two, occasionally three, seldom more, these scenes present another form of narrative detachment and fragmentation.

Accounts of this type of *Entmythologisierung* often emphasize the typological interpenetration of stories as a factor in the collapse of mythic specificity, and the semiotic slippage and narrative deformation that result. Thus Blome calls our attention to the fact that the Adonis on the Villa Giustiniani Massimo piece (Figure 19) leads a horse, that a nurse stands behind Venus, and that Venus storms in directly to witness Adonis's wounding. These jarring motifs — jarring because nonsensical within the story of Adonis — were all borrowed from another source: sarcophagi showing the story of Hippolytus and Phaedra. So Adonis leads a horse here as Hippolytus had, Venus sits before a nurse as Phaedra had, and Venus storms in to witness the hunt as Virtus had. Finally, Adonis's embrace by Venus is dropped entirely, because it has no possible parallel in the other story. The carver of this coffin thus reinterpreted Adonis through typological assimilation to Hippolytus, as one brave hunter to another — the better to press Adonis into service as a symbolic emblem of *virtus*. But this required that he strain the original story of Adonis beyond recognition.⁷⁹ In such cases, we read, turning the mythic figure into an effective symbol requires sacrificing narrative cohesion. It involves “borrowing” motifs⁸⁰ and “wrenching” episodes from their original contexts,⁸¹ and the result is said to be “deformation” of the story,⁸² “contamination” of the myth,⁸³ “narrative incoherence,”⁸⁴ and “absurdity at the mythological level.”⁸⁵

Like the abandonment of mythological imagery discussed above, this process has also been described as an *Entmythologisierung*. This is deeply problematic, because it masks the fact that we are dealing with two different phenomena. The abbreviation, fragmentation, and deformation of mythological narratives just described is manifestly not the same as the constriction of the mythological repertoire as a whole and its eventual replacement by other genres discussed earlier. One refers to a development within how particular narratives are depicted; the other refers to the disappearance of such narratives entirely. The use of *Entmythologisierung* for both implies that

⁷⁸ Sichtermann 1992, 155, cat. 02, pl. 99.3, 08.3-4, 12.13; Koortbojian 1995, 135-41, fig. 49; Zanker and Ewald 2004, 107, fig. 90.

⁷⁹ Blome 1992, 1068-9, 71.

⁸⁰ Koortbojian 1995, 42.

⁸¹ Blome 1992, 1071.

⁸² Turcan 1987, 429-31.

⁸³ Koortbojian 1995, 42.

⁸⁴ Giuliani 1989, 29, 37.

⁸⁵ Blome 1992, 1064.

these are related phenomena, parts of a single trend in Roman funerary relief. Whether they *are* related, however, is precisely what needs to be determined. We must disaggregate the two; only then will we gain necessary traction on a concept framed too broadly. My project is structured around that central conviction; and, as the reader shall see, that these two phenomena are *not* related will emerge as one of its central claims.

STRUCTURE OF THE CHAPTERS

The Rejection of Myth: Cultural, Social, and Political Shifts

Entmythologisierung understood as the rejection or abandonment of myth is the subject of Chapter 1, the longest of the dissertation. Its thrust is critical: it seeks to review and scrutinize various explanations proposed for myth's disappearance. The aim is to articulate precisely which aspects of demythologization they do and do not address; weigh the evidence for their claims; and see what purchase they have.

The chapter first addresses theories involving eschatological hopes or religious change. It begins with the rise of the lion hunt sarcophagi — often held to be the first act of *Entmythologisierung* — and then proceeds to explanations that invoke a burgeoning Christian minority, for whom the a-mythological — which is to say, religiously neutral — imagery of seasons, shepherds, philosophers, and hunters would, it is claimed, have held greater appeal. This is perhaps the explanation with the longest pedigree. It was proposed by Rodenwaldt and has been endorsed variously since, most recently by Zanker. Evaluating it requires weighing several different questions. We might agree, for example, that sarcophagus-buying Christians of the fourth century, under and after Constantine, were “upwardly-mobile and resolutely respectable *parvenus*,”⁸⁶ to quote Paul Finney. But were they upwardly-mobile enough — or were there enough of them at all — to matter in the third? The problem is one of purchasing power: did Christians wield enough of it in the 280s or 270s, let alone the 250s, to account for the massive change of repertoire? A related question concerns workshop specialization and intended audience. If (as we know was the case) the same workshops could and did produce both pagan and Christian coffins, this means that, as of 270 or 280 at the latest, they were already crafting pieces selectively targeted at these two particular markets. But if workshops did not, then, operate according to a ‘one-size-fits-all’ mode of production, what sense does it make to imagine them fighting for market share by producing mythless sarcophagi that supposedly appealed to both (because offended neither)?

The remainder of the chapter turns away from the question of Christianity to consider a cluster of other, slightly more disparate, explanations. These invoke not religious changes, but other cultural, social, and political shifts. Some have proposed that demythologization reflects a widespread decline in education levels, or a diminution in the value Romans assigned to mythological culture. That we see no concomitant decline in the role of myth in other domains of art — such as domestic painting, or, most conspicuously, mosaics — proves a major problem for such arguments.

⁸⁶ Finney 2002, 99.

Does *Entmythologisierung* constitute a response to the Third-Century Crisis? Perhaps Rome's elite were drawn to bucolic, seasonal, and philosophical scenes for their tranquility, a form of refuge from the turmoil of real life? This argument, a popular one, invokes politics as the explanatory mechanism. Another variant holds that as the soldier emperors abandoned both mythological portraiture and self-representation in form of cultivated philhellenes, cultivating instead hard-boiled images of down-to-earth power and pragmatic intensity, so the populace followed in their funerary art, replacing mythological fantasies with 'down-to-earth' scenes of 'real-life' figures.

Weighing these theses requires addressing a host of questions. The first assumes that the chaos at the top levels of government trickled down to destabilize the worldview of Rome's well-to-do (our sarcophagi's main buyers). Is this valid? Perhaps not. The fact is that, while the soldier emperors may style themselves as tough and determined types taking on an uncertain future, contemporary private portraits on sarcophagi do not follow suit. The apparent lack of worry, of any sense of burden, is striking. If we were to write the political history of the third century looking only at private portraits, we would think the Third Century Crisis had never happened. Why, then, do we imagine these men and women nonetheless feeling a great need for compensatory images of tranquility and respite? And even if they did seek refuge from turmoil, why not gravitate towards appropriate *mythological* stories? Surely there were many capable of scratching any itch for bucolic tranquility. Why not adapt Paris's pastoral judgement, or Odysseus's Arcadian interlude on Calypso's island? Why not the goatherd Polyphemus languidly wooing Galatea while tending his flocks, or Hercules relaxing in the Garden of the Hesperides, two compositions already at hand on Roman walls?

Arguments that attribute a preference for non-mythological bucolic and intellectual imagery ('bucolic escapism') to trend-setting Senators must address related questions. It was precisely the importation of villa life in the late Republic, and its creation of a private space removed from the public eye, that had led Rome's elite to adopt Greek myth as the language of luxurious refinement amidst tranquil surrounds, the language for a life free of care. How, then, do we imagine a Senate-led 'bucolic escapism', eager for tranquility, turning *away* from Greek myth?

Finally, some have seen in the rise of mythless genres a growing desire for imagery that more clearly projects social status. But how many of the demythologized types can it be applied to? The ones to fit cleanly are the biographical types. Philosopher pieces might fit the requirements of status-projection too, though less directly. But bucolic and season sarcophagi would seem poor choices for proclaiming social status, if that was the desired message. This thesis thus helps to clarify the appeal of some categories of imagery, but does not give purchase on the widespread abandonment of myth.

The Abstraction of Myth: From Narrative to Symbol?

Chapter 2 turns to our other kind of 'demythologization,' that involving the isolation of mythological figures and/or the fragmentation and deformation of their narratives. This is hardly untrodden ground: Blome, Brandenburg, Brilliant, Engemann, Ewald, Fittschen, Gerke, Giuliani, Grassinger, Koortbojian, Lorenz, Matz, Sichtermann, Turcan, Weigand, Wrede, and Zanker have all addressed one aspect or another of the phenomenon. The burden here is not really to explain the phenomenon, but rather, to adequately conceive it. In what sense does it involve a

weakening or dismissal of myth? Where, or in what, does the ‘Ent’ of *Entmythologisierung* lie? Is it even a process?

For critical leverage on the latter (Is it a process?), this chapter considers the development of particular genres of mythological imagery. A useful example is the Nereids central to the marine thiasoi. In Hellenistic art their appearance was still embedded in a particular narrative context: that of a procession bringing Achilles his armor. But they appear already de-narrativized, abstracted from their mythic context, from their very first *début* on Antonine sarcophagi. Such cases make it difficult to formulate generalizable trends of de-narrativization on sarcophagi. A comparison between strigillated and clipeus sarcophagi with mythological vignettes, and garland sarcophagi with mythological scenes above the lunettes, allows us to develop this point further. There is no chronological continuity between the two groups — they bookend the great mythological frieze sarcophagi — yet both give us isolated figures and truncated, fragmented scenes. It is very hard to discern a *telos*.

It is often said that a growing concern for conveying keyword-like abstractions, such as *virtus* or *pietas*, drove the abbreviation of scenes and the eventual impoverishment of myth. But we must ask whether this too was not already the case from early on. Some of the first mythological friezes in the sequence already bracket specific details of the story, so as to broadcast symbolic abstractions capable of wide application: the Niobid sarcophagi (Figure 4) (Figure 5), for example, with their messages of “death too soon” and “mourning for those cut down early”; or the Achilles and Patroclus sarcophagi (Figure 10), whose take-home message was “this man fought bravely.”

A brief consideration of sculpture in the round provides critical traction from another angle. Formal restrictions always limited freestanding sculpture to representing single figures or, at most, small groups of them. Yet one would hardly describe the Laocoön as “demythologized,” or complain that the Pasquino group failed to evoke a rich narrative background. Why do we do this with our sarcophagus reliefs, imagining that they represent some form of impoverishment?

Even if we do agree that the strategies of representation employed by Roman sarcophagus carvers sometimes involve wrenching figures or motifs out of their original narrative context, we still need to ask whether this led to a reduction in their semiotic potential, rather than an expansion of it. One could argue that such practices opened space for more associative meaning, not less, because no longer constricted by their function within a particular myth.

The chapter closes by turning to the issue of typological assimilation. This is often taken as an index of narrative’s weakening hold. To gain critical distance, I again step outside the domain of funerary art, not this time to sculpture in the round, but to domestic murals. Ensembles such as the mythological room from Boscotrecase, or the atrium of the House of the Tragic Poet, remind us that the typological mode, with its juxtaposed motifs and assimilated figures, was hardly special to sarcophagi, and anything but new. Such typological inter-penetration is a sign that mythological language is *thriving*, not weakening. We should not then take it as an index of, let alone a product of, supposed *Entmythologisierung*.

Distinguishing the Mythological: Function and Form over Content

If Chapters 1 and 2 engage closely with the particular debates over *Entmythologisierung*, Chapter 3 takes a step back to consider whether we have drawn too strong a distinction between the mythic and the non-mythic. The issue may seem relatively clear-cut if we rely solely on iconographical criteria: most of us would accept the label ‘mythological’ for a frieze showing Orestes’s adventures, but would hesitate to apply it to a scene of shepherds milking their flock. Some might grant that generic creatures, such as Cupids and Griffins, pose problems for our classification system. (Is a Cupid ‘mythological’ when embracing Psyche, but not when hoisting a garland? Or mythological in both cases, but narrative in only one?⁸⁷) But such liminal cases aside, we might think that the categories are relatively clear.

What happens, though, if we consider not iconographical criteria, but modal ones? Taken from the viewpoint of function rather than subject matter, the distinction between mythological and not becomes shaky indeed. This is explored through two avenues. First, we revisit the relationship between the mythological and biographical series. If, as we shall see, those pieces showing the deceased felling lions or leading massed battles are just as unreal, as symbolic and allegorical, as Ariadne’s rescue or Creusa’s destruction, what does this mean for our conception of myth and its weakening hold?

Second, we turn to considerations of material facture. This section examines how, early in the third century, Roman sculptors developed new strategies for isolating the image of the deceased from the mythological figures surrounding him by the use of different tools and techniques to render the hair, visually underscoring their separate ontological status. I show that this central convention of sculptural practice, through which Roman carvers accorded technique itself semantic weight, was later extended to the ‘demythologized’ genres, where it served to demarcate the deceased from surrounding flocks of shepherds, soldiers, and magistrates. This stands as further evidence, this time from praxis, for the close relationship between genres mythological and not.

Myth, History, and the Desire for Proximity

With other explanations for demythologization examined and found wanting, Chapter 4 presents my own novel contribution to our understanding of this perplexing phenomenon. After dismissing the possibility that myth’s extinction reflected a mere ‘change in fashion’ — always an act of hermeneutic desperation — I turn to consider images of known *historical* figures found on Antonine sarcophagi, but not on pieces from the third century. That historical figures should suffer the same fate as mythological ones is highly instructive. Their parallel fortunes reveal what was really at stake in *Entmythologisierung*: the viewer’s attitude to chronology, to temporality, to characters defined by their residence in earlier time. Mythological sarcophagi did not speak to an interest in myth *per se*, or in myth alone. Their popularity rather reflected a more general backward-looking orientation, one eager to press specific figures of the past — both mythological characters and historical ones, without distinction — into service as models and

⁸⁷ I thank Andrew Stewart for the formulation.

paradigms. If they were progressively stripped from sarcophagi in the third century, the issue was not their status as *mythic* figures — as opposed to ‘realistic’ ones, or ‘everyday’ ones, or ‘abstract’ ones, or ‘non-narrative’ ones, or any other antithesis proposed by previous scholarship. Nor was their Greek origin the issue. It was their temporal status as figures of the past that had clearly become problematic for our viewers.

For confirmation of this claim, my project turns to new archaeological evidence from Rome’s *suburbium*, examining the altered spatial relationships between house and tomb that came to dominate in the Late Empire. This reveals what was at stake in the third-century disappearance of mythic figures from sarcophagi: new demands among the living, manifested in multiple domains of Roman life, for greater proximity to their dead.

This concludes the introduction. We now plunge into the particulars, beginning with an examination of those theories that seek to explain the wholesale rejection of myth in the third century.

CHAPTER 1 — THE REJECTION OF MYTH: CULTURAL, SOCIAL, AND POLITICAL SHIFTS

This chapter has as its subject *Entmythologisierung* understood as the rejection or abandonment of myth: the constriction of the mythological repertoire in the first half of the third century, and its subsequent collapse in the second half alongside a massive surge in ‘mythless’ genres. As we mentioned, the thrust here is critical: the chapter seeks to review and scrutinize various explanations proposed for myth’s disappearance. The aim is to articulate precisely which aspects of demythologization they do and do not address; weigh the evidence for their claims; and see what purchase they have. We begin with theories involving eschatological hopes or religious change.

LIBERA EAS DE ORE LEONIS?

We will start with what is often cited as the first major act in the process of *Entmythologisierung*.⁸⁸ This centers on sarcophagi showing scenes of mythological hunters — Adonis (Figure 13), Hippolytus, and Meleager (Figure 14) — spearing their quarry, which had enjoyed popularity in the Antonine age.⁸⁹ Beginning in the 220s and 230s AD, during the reign of Alexander Severus, these were dropped in favor of, or rather, transformed into, ‘biographical’ depictions: maintaining the basic composition but stripping away the mythological figures, these now presented the deceased himself as the central hunter, who was shown felling his prey (usually a lion) from horseback (Figure 15). A cluster of different yet thematically-related mythological stories has thus been replaced by a single new and ‘demythologized’ version.⁹⁰

One might ask how we are able to speak in such terms. Sarcophagi may be boxes, but they do not themselves occupy neat conceptual boxes comprised of carefully slotted contents. How, then, are we justified in saying that the one type of scene “substituted for” and “replaced” the others? In this case we can cite both external (chronological) and internal (compositional) evidence. The non-mythological hunt sarcophagi constitute an exceptionally well-delimited and continuous series of monuments, more than 300 strong,⁹¹ whose portrait heads allow the entire array to be ordered and dated.⁹² Thanks to this, it is confidently taken that the earliest pieces were carved in

⁸⁸ Andrae himself describes it thus, but consistently uses the term *Entmythisierung* instead (Andrae 1980, 25-7). It is a pity that this shorter term never caught on.

⁸⁹ For the Adonis sarcophagi: Grassinger 1999, 70-90, 211-21, cat. 43-67, pl. 38-63; Koortbojian 1995, 23-62, 111-3, 30-35. For the Meleager sarcophagi: Koch 1975.

⁹⁰ As the first major act in the process of demythologization, this replacement of mythological hunts with biographical ones sometimes elicits special scorn. Wrede (1981, 150) calls it a “profanation” (*Profanierung*).

⁹¹ Zanker and Ewald 2004, 225.

⁹² Because of their continuity and easy datability, the series of hunt sarcophagi serve as a fundamental scaffolding for ordering and dating other sarcophagi (largely through stylistic comparison with the known sequence of hunt specimens).

the 220s AD, in the reign of Alexander Severus (r. 222-235).⁹³ This correlates very well with the end-point of the mythological hunt sarcophagi: the latest coffins in the Adonis sequence, for example — the famous piece in the Vatican's Museo Gregoriano Profano showing Adonis and Venus enthroned⁹⁴ (Figure 21), along with the fragments in Berlin's Klein-Glienicke Schloß⁹⁵ and in private collection in Cologne⁹⁶ — are routinely dated to the 220s on stylistic criteria.⁹⁷ In chronological terms, then, one group picks up precisely where the other leaves off. And the same holds for their compositions. The early non-mythological hunt sarcophagi typically divide the frieze into two scenes: while the hunter spears his quarry on the right, the left side gives its prelude: the hunter preparing himself, with the aid of an assistant, for the departure. This is internal evidence for their derivation from the earlier mythological scenes, which similarly had presented the hunter's preparation for departure (*profectio* or *Aufbruch*) on the left.⁹⁸ Substitution, then, and replacement.

There was a crucial difference, however, between the two. Replacing the mythological hunt scenes with the new, 'biographical', ones involved substituting lions for the boars that had figured in the mythic narratives. What to make of this? Many have viewed it as a status-seeking switch: an appropriation by private citizens of motifs from the public realm of imperial relief, where emperors such as Hadrian and Commodus had proclaimed their supremacy by hunting that most royal of beasts. One thinks of the Hadrianic roundels employed as *spolia* on the Arch of Constantine, one of which features the emperor presiding over a felled feline; or, as Andreae reminds us,⁹⁹ several of Commodus's mints featuring the emperor on horseback bringing down a lion, stamped with the legend *VIRTUS AVGVSTI*. The mythological hunt sarcophagi had already had as their primary message the *virtus* of the hunters, and, by extension, the *virtus* of the deceased. The new non-mythic format made the same claims about the dead man, if more baldly. Replacing the mythological boar with the imperial lion both underscored this message and further elevated the deceased.

Zanker would have us qualify this formulation slightly. The composition adopted to generate the 'biographical' hunt sarcophagi was lifted wholesale from the Hippolytus pieces. But to an extent that Andreae does not, Zanker, following Blome and others, underscores in turn how thoroughly these Hippolytus sarcophagi themselves had been indebted to imperial imagery for their motif of a heroic mounted hunter kept company by an amiably storming goddess who can only be a

⁹³ Andreae 1980, 17.

⁹⁴ Grassinger 1999, 219, cat. 65, fig. 7, pl. 47.2, 49.3, 52.2, 53.2, 55.1-4, 56.1-4, 57.1-4, 59.1-2, 63.1.

⁹⁵ Grassinger 1999, 218, cat. 64, pl. 58.5.

⁹⁶ Grassinger 1999, 219-20, cat. 66, pl. 58.1.

⁹⁷ We exclude here that other famous Adonis piece in the Vatican's Museo Gregoriano Profano (Zanker and Ewald 2004, 212, fig. 191; Grassinger 1999, 220, cat. 67, pl. 47.3, 60.1-3, 61.1-4): likely carved somewhere in the 310s — i.e., a full century later than the rest — it remains a marvelous and bizarre outlier.

⁹⁸ Andreae 1980, 39.

⁹⁹ Andreae 1980, 23.

personified Virtus, herself borrowed from historical relief, where she had accompanied emperors into battle.¹⁰⁰ When carvers later transform Hippolytus, then, into a noble Roman citizen, still accompanied by Virtus, and replace the boar with a lion, they are not so much turning to imperial imagery as *returning* to it — cutting out the mythological middle-man and -beast.

Andreae would counter that Zanker ignores the particular form that the lion takes on these ‘bourgeois’ hunt sarcophagi. Rearing up on his hind legs to pounce forward, this lion adopts a pose quite different from that on the monumental imperial relief and coins that supposedly served as inspiration. There the lion either coils on the ground flexing to attack, or stands on all four paws underneath the rider; in no case does he leap forward to meet his attacker. For this reason Andreae rejects an imperial origin — and along with it, a simple imperial meaning (status-seeking and *virtus*-proclaiming) — for the lion. If the lion substituted for the boar on sarcophagi takes a different form than in state relief, this should lead us to assume a different, context-specific, meaning for it.¹⁰¹ Seeking an explanation particular to sarcophagi and the funerary realm, Andreae thus turns to the symbolism of death. Citing examples from Egyptian and archaic Greek through Hellenistic and Roman art, he notes how thoroughly the figural and literary trope of the lion served as a long-standing symbol for death’s unpredictable ferocity and relentless onslaught, a notion even preserved in the liturgy of the early Christian Mass for the dead, *Libera eas de ore leonis*. Our sarcophagus sculptors thus give us, through the lion shown mid-pounce, an image of death’s potential ravages — whose defeat by the hunter therefore carries eschatological force: it proclaims that the deceased, through his immortal *virtus*, has triumphed over death and can hope for a better state to come.¹⁰²

Of special relevance is that Andreae presents this as an explanation for the *Entmythologisierung* of the hunt sarcophagi. Replacing mythological boar hunts with ‘biographical’ lion hunts was driven by a desire to make the deceased’s victory over death clear. This desire is what made it possible for Roman carvers and buyers to even consider demythologizing sarcophagi in the first place: “It is only through this connection of ideas that the decision to demythologize sarcophagi was reached at all.”¹⁰³

This is illuminating. It reveals Andreae’s conviction that demythologization was no ‘natural’ or expected process. Instead he imagines the mythological mode as the natural and default one with an inertia of its own, something that required an explicit and particular countervailing force if breaking with it was to be countenanced in any given case.

By extension, however, it also means that his explanation for the demythologization of hunt sarcophagi can have no purchase on any other genres. It is therefore of very limited application, even if one accepts its interpretive validity in this particular case. Whether we should even do

¹⁰⁰ Blome 1992, 1065-6; Zanker and Ewald 2004, 226-7.

¹⁰¹ Andreae 1980, 22-4.

¹⁰² Andreae 1980, 26-7, 41; expanded by Lopes 2008-2009. Generally supportive of Andreae’s reading of the lion: Stroszeck 1998, 67. Expressing doubts: Ewald 1999, 72 n. 391.

¹⁰³ “Durch diese Gedankenverbindung wird erst klar, wieso man überhaupt darauf kommen konnte, die Sarkophage zu entmythisieren...” (Andreae 1980, 26).

that is not clear. Eschatological interpretations hold less allure than they used to, thanks to the broadsides against them launched by Klaus Fittschen¹⁰⁴ and Zanker and Ewald. Where we used to see everywhere signs and symbols promising a blissful afterlife and triumph over the grave, we are more likely now to read the reliefs in this-worldly terms, whether lamenting a life cut cruelly short or celebrating life as it was. Not prospective hopes, but retrospective commemoration, seems the likelier mode of our metropolitan works. Cumont's spirit is being put to rest.

Something else to consider: are the sarcophagi with heroic hunters indeed the first pieces to be transformed and replaced by non-mythological versions? They are often presented as such. But we might object that a similar process had already taken place earlier.¹⁰⁵ Sarcophagi showing mythical Amazonomachies and Galatomachies, typically with no central protagonist, were popular as early as the 150s.¹⁰⁶ However, they were replaced later in the Antonine period by the 'biographical' battle sarcophagi showing 'real', if generic, Roman legions led into massed combat by the deceased,¹⁰⁷ of which the Portonaccio battle sarcophagus¹⁰⁸ in Palazzo Massimo (Figure 22), carved in the 180s, is one of the most famous. Similarly, coffins featuring scenes of petition and *clementia* set in the Trojan War¹⁰⁹ were replaced by another 'biographical' genre, the so-called "commander" (*Feldherr*) sarcophagi that depict the deceased in commander's regalia receiving supplication and displaying his own clemency to vanquished barbarians,¹¹⁰ such as the striking piece in the Vatican's Cortile del Belvedere¹¹¹ (Figure 23).

It is easy to understand why these are often bracketed in references to *Entmythologisierung*. Unlike the various hunt sarcophagi, the number of specimens featuring such mythological battles and petitions for clemency were relatively few, as were the biographical types (battle and commander sarcophagi) that replaced them.¹¹² Furthermore, their substitutes show more independence of composition — the battle sarcophagi develop writhing masses of stacked figures, departing from the carefully staggered duels of the Amazonomachies that they replace — unlike our biographical hunt pieces, which copy wholesale the compositions of

¹⁰⁴ Fittschen 1992.

¹⁰⁵ Zanker (2004, 226, 8, 30) mentions this several times in passing, but does not dwell on it — perhaps because the implications of such an early onset of *Entmythologisierung* do not sit well with his own explanations of it (to be discussed).

¹⁰⁶ For the Amazonomachies: Grassinger 1999, 129-91, 235-59, cat. 88-146, pl. 86-28.

¹⁰⁷ For the battle sarcophagi: Wrede 2001, 21-43.

¹⁰⁸ Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 92; Wrede 2001, 16, 22-5, 32, 4, 7, 40, 51-2, 8-9, 97, 101, pl. 6.1, with extensive bibliography at 22 n. 76.

¹⁰⁹ Many of these present Priam supplicating Achilles: Grassinger 1999, 57-66, 207-9, cat. 35, 37, 39, 40, pl. 34.3, 34.5, 34.6, 36.1, 37.1-3, .

¹¹⁰ For the commander sarcophagi: Reinsberg 2006; Wrede 2001, 21-43.

¹¹¹ Reinsberg 2006, 236-7, cat. 152, pl. 25.1-2, 25.4, 26.1-5, 27.1-2.

¹¹² Biographical hunt pieces number approximately 250, whereas battle sarcophagi amount to less than a tenth of that: about 20 specimens (Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 89).

Hippolytus, swapping only the characters. These factors mean that the process of demythologization is less blatant in these early cases. But it is demythologization nonetheless.

This early onset should produce a certain degree of discomfiture. The discomfort comes from the fact that it pushes the first examples of *Entmythologisierung* back to the Antonine period — uncomfortably early indeed, given that (a) this period is usually conceived to mark the golden age of mythological sarcophagi, and (b) the overwhelming number of explanations for *Entmythologisierung* petition factors in the third century which, as we shall see, can have no purchase in the second. It also introduces distressing disjuncture in the demythologization of closely related genres: if all were heavily indebted for their motifs to state relief and imported imagery of the Emperor, why had some genres already converted this to ‘real-life’ form by the 170s and 180s (the heyday of the commander and battle pieces) while Hippolytus, similarly modeled on the Emperor, had to wait until the 220s to finally shed his mythic skin and transform into a Roman citizen?

To summarize: *Entmythologisierung* seems to have first manifested itself in those genres most indebted to imperial relief for their motifs and resonance. Yet it also involved important departures, such as the pose of the lion, which muddied the relationship between them. Attempts to explain the demythologization of the hunt sarcophagi in terms of otherworldly hopes prove problematic, and in any case can have no application to the other biographical genres (commander, battle) to which these hunt sarcophagi are closely related. Finally, the early *Entmythologisierung* of the mythical battles and scenes of *clementia* pushes the phenomenon back to the Antonine age itself, precisely the time when we imagine the mythological mode to have been at its most vigorous. And it reveals chronological disjunctures in the onset of demythologization between these various genres so clearly derived from state relief, with some (commander and battle) having already axed the mythological trimmings at precisely the time that others (the hunt pieces) were enjoying their greatest popularity in full mythological costume.

DEMYTHOLOGIZATION AND CHRISTIANITY: NEUTRALITY AND PURCHASING POWER

Was the demythologization of Roman sarcophagus reliefs driven by a burgeoning Christian faith? To put it more succinctly, was myth a casualty of Christianity? Of all the explanations put forth for *Entmythologisierung*, this is the easiest to summarize. It proposes that sarcophagi featuring seasons, shepherds, philosophers, and hunters gained in popularity because their imagery was religiously neutral and thus capable of appealing to both old pagan and new Christian clientele alike, a flexibility that the old mythological sarcophagi did not have. To be mythless meant to be non-affiliated, and thus palatable to all. In a time of religious transformation — which for art always means a time of market transformation — this was a selling point.

The argument has a distinguished pedigree. Rodenwaldt had already gestured towards it in 1921. Noting the similarities in craftsmanship between certain neutral ‘pagan’ sarcophagi showing driven hunts (*Treibjagdsarkophage*) and early Christian pieces, he asserted that the same

workshop had carved both groups.¹¹³ And if the same workshops could produce both neutral ‘pagan’ and Christian pieces, so some of the former, such as those staging driven hunts or featuring *stibadium* meals on lids, were commissioned by both pagan and Christian clients.¹¹⁴ Consumption, we might say, was becoming just as ‘catholic’ as production. In 1943 he developed the argument further: if mythological specimens lost their allure during the last third of the third century, to be replaced by a limited repertoire of hunt scenes, seasons, and “purely decorative sarcophagi,” this reflected a growing Christian presence and the ebbing influence of the pagan aristocracy.¹¹⁵

The general form of this argument has changed little since. In its baldest form it attributes *Entmythologisierung* as a whole to Christianity's spread. Other formulations, more circumspect, nominate it as a contributing if not deciding factor, one among several,¹¹⁶ or apply it only to certain sub-classes of imagery.¹¹⁷ But whether stated absolutely or relatively, the argument rests

¹¹³ "Es ist auch kaum zu bezweifeln, daß heidnische und christliche Sarkophage in denselben Werkstätten gearbeitet wurden, und selbst ein christlicher Sarkophagarbeiter, der etwa die Darstellung heidnischer Mythologie ablehnte, kann gegenüber dem profanen, aber religiös indifferenten Thema der Jagd keine Skrupel gehabt haben" (Rodenwaldt 1921-1922, 69).

¹¹⁴ "Jedenfalls müssen wir mit der Möglichkeit rechnen, daß ein Teil der Sarkophage unsrer Gruppe [the *Treibjagd* pieces] von vornherein für Christen gedient hat..." (Rodenwaldt 1921-1922, 71). And above on the same page, discussing a typical piece with *stibadium* meal in Bourges: "Man muß auch mit der Möglichkeit rechnen, daß die Besteller dieser Sarkophage absichtlich eine Form der Darstellung wünschten, die christlich gedeutet werden konnte, ohne eindeutig in diesem Sinne bestimmt zu sein."

¹¹⁵ Rodenwaldt 1943, 18-9. Since he expressly believes (Rodenwaldt 1921-1922, 96) the Christianity of the third and fourth centuries to have been essentially popular and *volkstümlich* in nature, he holds the growth late in the third century of a Christianized sarcophagus-buying class to be intimately related to the turn towards bucolic motifs, driven hunts, the seasons, and their strigillated versions, since these types of imagery are all, in his estimation, *volkstümlich* in character. Synthesizing Rodenwaldt's scattered comments, we would say that the allure of these neutral ‘pagan’ types was not merely passive (because non-affiliated and thus objectionable to no one), but quite active: they spoke directly to the interests of a rising popular current. For related discussion, see the section "Mythological Imagery: Victim of a *Volkstümliche Strömung*?" beginning on page 33 below.

¹¹⁶ So Zanker (2004, 260): "...so liegt die Vermutung nahe, daß Christen und Nichtchristen mit ihrem Interesse an nicht-mythologischen, oder besser religiös 'neutral' Bildthemen nicht unerheblich dazu beigetragen haben könnten, daß die Mythenallegorien langsam aus der Sarkophagkunst verdrängt wurden". His later work reads more strongly: in *Roman Art* (2010, 194-5) he frames demythologization above all as a shift to religiously neutral images, and writes that Christian families "probably contributed quite significantly" to the process. Other circumspect formulations: Ewald 2003, 570. Note, however, that Koch, perhaps the leading expert on Christian sarcophagi, nowhere in his *Frühchristliche Sarkophage* mentions *Entmythologisierung* or proposes that a rising Christian clientele could have contributed to it.

¹¹⁷ As Rodenwaldt himself, for the driven hunt and *stibadium* scenes (see note 114 above). Zanker (2004, 171) cites Christian demand as a contributing factor to the great popularity of the ‘good shepherd’ motif, a figure originally pagan but easily harnessed by Christians to their own Christological symbolism. (For more on the valence of the ‘good shepherd’, see note 128 below.)

on three fundamental assumptions: (1) that Christians did purchase neutral or mythless ‘pagan’ sarcophagi for their own use; (2) that they did so in numbers sufficient to affect the range and repertoire of pieces that pagan workshops produced; and (3) that they continued to do so even when Christian sarcophagi were available. The problem is that none of these assumptions are obviously correct. We shall take up each in turn.

Christians, ‘Neutral’ Sarcophagi, and the Question of Reuse

First, did Christians purchase pagan sarcophagi of neutral (or any other) type for their own use? It is clear that a good number of early Christians were indeed buried in pagan coffins. But equally clear is that most of these were cases of reuse, not first-time use. Often their original inscriptions were erased and replaced by ones bearing Christian formulae (most commonly *in pace*), or the imagery itself was converted to greater or less degree, ranging from simple rebranding through the addition of crosses, to complete recarving of pagan figural scenes into Christian decorative schemes.¹¹⁸ That is to say, the evidence that Christians (re)used them is also precisely what reveals that these Christians were likely not the original owners. This puts us in something of a tight spot. How would we know whether a given pagan piece had *originally* been bought by a Christian, a necessity if Christians were to have any effect on market production? It would need a Christian inscription, one showing no signs of recarving, which we could legitimately associate with its first use; or come from a find-spot making its Christian ownership clear while similarly showing no signs of reuse. But even these cases are fraught, since mere absence of signs of reuse does not prove it did not occur. One cannot prove a negative case. An original-looking Christian inscription could still have been carved for a second occupant, for example, if the first one had left the *tabula* blank. A good example is afforded by a casket with marine creatures flanking a clipeus on the front and motifs from ‘daily life’ (a *stibadium* meal;¹¹⁹ boxers and wrestlers) on the lid.¹²⁰ Both its find-context in the Catacombs of Praetextatus and its inscription (CVRTIAE/CATIANAE/C[larissimae] q[puellae] IN PACE) indicate use by a Christian family. But while the inscription naming Curtia Catiana in peace shows no signs of having been recarved, it is still highly unlikely that she was the first occupant: the portrait in the clipeus clearly shows a *boy*, not a *puella*. We are dealing, then, with another case of reuse.

¹¹⁸ Koch 2000, 7-14.

¹¹⁹ A meal taking place on a *stibadium*, a semi-circular banked construction. It was already in use for outdoor dining by the first century: Pliny the Younger (*Epistulae* 5.6.36-37) delights in describing the *stibadium* sheltered under a pergola in his Tuscan villa, complete with a basin in which floated dishes shaped like birds and boats. By the fourth century — certainly by the fifth — it was the preferred format for dining indoors as well, having replaced the old horseshoe arrangement of three rectangular couches (*lecti*). This process seems to have begun early in the third century, judging from the archaeological evidence. The term ‘sigma meal’ (*Sigmamahl* in German) refers to the curved, (lunate-)sigmatic shape of the *stibadium* and is used interchangeably with ‘stibadium meal’; for consistency I shall use solely the latter. For the archaeological history of *stibadia*: Dunbabin 1991, 128-36; for their depiction on sarcophagi: Amedick 1996, 25-45.

¹²⁰ Amedick 1996, 29-30, 44, 83-4, 6-7, 94, 145, cat. , pl. 88.5; Koch 2000, 7.

Examples of pagan sarcophagi used by Christians whom we can legitimately presume to be the original purchasers turn out to be quite rare. One of the few is the sarcophagus of the nine-year-old Florentius Domitius Marinianus (from the inscription) in the Vatican's Museo Pio Cristiano.¹²¹ It shows two seasons, Tellus, Oceanus, a sea monster (Gr. *ketos* / Lat. *cetus*), and the young deceased standing in armor (!) before a *parapetasma* hoisted by flying cupids. I.e., nothing in its imagery is Christian. It was found *in situ*, however, in the Christian cemetery of Novatianus, pendant to another child's sarcophagus of matching proportions featuring Biblical scenes. Their inscriptions name the same parents, making clear that these sarcophagi were for two Christian brothers. But this is, in many ways, a singular piece. Furthermore, it is universally agreed to be Constantinian, which makes it too late for our purposes by half a century.

Our best evidence may be several stock pieces with 'neutral' imagery whose particular customization, likely done at the workshop, indicates a Christian buyer. Two of these — a fluted sarcophagus in Pisa¹²² and a strigillated one in Rome's Museo Nazionale¹²³ — present standard pastoral motifs and *orantes* on the front, but Christian scenes (Pisa: Jonah; Rome: Christ's baptism) on the ends. Koch proposes, surely rightly, that these were stock pieces, bought by Christians who took no offense at the 'neutral' scenes but who, wanting to express their faith, had the workshop append Biblical scenes to the ends. Koch goes farther: noting the latter's awkward execution, he attributes it to the pagan carvers' unfamiliarity with such motifs.¹²⁴ This is suggestive, although we do well to remember that end scenes were almost universally of hastier carving on Metropolitan specimens. But whatever the reason for the difference in quality between front and end scenes, we have no reason not to assume that the same workshop carved all.

¹²¹ Gerke 1940, 29, 110 n. 3, 340 cat. 3.9, 61 cat. 3.6; Hanfmann 1951, 172, cat. 418 = 175, cat. 460; Deichmann et al. 1967, 265-6, cat. 663, pl. 100; Kranz 1984, 213-4, cat. 112, pl. 62.4; Huskinson 1996, 57, 86, cat. 8.12, pl. 6.3.

¹²² Dresken-Weiland 1998, cat. 90; Koch 2000, 234, 42, list 1.40, pl. 24-26.

¹²³ Deichmann et al. 1967, cat. 777; Koch 2000, 234, 42, list 1.39, pl. 28-30.

¹²⁴ Koch reminds the reader multiple times that our early (i.e., pre-Constantinian) sarcophagi with Christian scenes were overwhelmingly productions of traditional pagan workshops. The examples discussed here, as well as those following — such as the strigillated pieces with Jonah (Figure 24) — are eloquent testimony. Equally eloquent is the Santa Maria Antiqua sarcophagus itself (Figure 16), the earliest preserved Christian specimen (see page 12 above). Only a pagan carver could have thought it fitting to underscore the marine nature of Jonah's adventures by appending the figure of Neptune, god of the sea, to the adjacent small side. It can only have been carved in a pagan workshop, one "that had absolutely no experience with Christian representations on sarcophagi" (...*die keinerlei Erfahrung mit christlichen Darstellungen auf Sarkophagen hatte*) (Koch 2000, 227-8). More general proof, I claim, comes from their utter lack of unified handling. Sarcophagi with Christian scenes so deviate from each other in style that they must be the products of multiple independent workshops. Had there been workshops that specialized in Christian pieces, the market surely could not have supported more than one or two of them — which would lead to greater stylistic and compositional agreement between pieces.

Other pieces were adapted not on the ends, but the front. These are a small group of strigillated sarcophagi featuring under the clipeus a reclining Jonah. Like most strigillated pieces these were stock chests, made in pagan workshops, whose small central motifs could be customized to the customer's desire. In this case our believer declined the more common options — Oceanus and Tellus, theatrical masks, dolphins, cornucopia, etc. — opting instead for the Christian figure that symbolized rest after labor under divine protection. One of the best preserved of these is the coffin in Rome's Villa Medici (Figure 24),¹²⁵ whose stock pagan decoration includes Cupids and Psyche in left and right fields, and Apollo's griffins on the ends.

Such examples are intriguing. They are, however, very few — far too few to argue for routine purchase of pagan sarcophagi of any type by Christians in the third century. Of course, this does not guarantee that Christians did not do so. One can argue from relative absence only so far. Perhaps Christians of the 270s and 280s were indeed buying neutral pagan pieces for themselves in good numbers, but simply not marking them in a way that broadcast their own religious affiliation. Inscriptions are, after all, not common on metropolitan specimens; and in the absence of an inscription, known deposition, or original customization, we can have no way of precluding that any given 'neutral' pagan work might not, after all, have had a Christian buyer.

Tantalizing indirect evidence may come from lids. In three cases a lid with Christian scenes was found capping a chest of 'neutral' pagan type carrying bucolic imagery. The first¹²⁶ is still in the Catacombs of Mark and Marcellianus. The second,¹²⁷ in the Catacombs of Novatianus, consists of a lid showing the three Hebrews in the furnace atop a strigillated chest with 'good shepherds' in the left and right fields and a female *orans* before a *parapetasma* in the center.¹²⁸ The third,¹²⁹ in the holdings of the Museo Nazionale Romano but seldom displayed, presents a *stibadium* meal and a reclining Jonah (including ship and ketos) on the lid, while the strigillated chest shows a shepherd resting with his animals underneath a clipeus containing a couple (Figure 25).

According to Koch, "In these three cases Christian buyers clearly chose stock chests from the workshops, chests with scenes that they deemed 'neutral' or open to Christian interpretation. But they also placed value on making their religious beliefs clear, so added lids that would clearly express their Christian faith."¹³⁰ If so, these three ensembles stand as some of our best evidence for Christians actively selecting and buying (rather than simply reusing) 'neutral' pagan

¹²⁵ Deichmann et al. 1967, cat. 985; Koch 2000, 232, 41, list 1.31, pl. 18.

¹²⁶ Koch 2000, 235, 42, list 1.41; Deichmann et al. 1967, cat. 629.

¹²⁷ Koch 2000, 235, 42, list 1.42, pl. 27; Deichmann et al. 1967, cat. 664.

¹²⁸ Previous generations would puzzle at hearing a sarcophagus chest featuring a ram-bearing shepherd and an *orans* described as "neutral" — let alone "pagan" — as we do here. On the religious affiliation of these motifs see Appendix B: 'Good Shepherd' and *Orans*.

¹²⁹ Koch 2000, 235, 42-43, list 1.43, fig. 18.5, pl. 19; Deichmann et al. 1967, cat. 778.

¹³⁰ "Bei [diesen] drei Beispielen haben Christen in den Werkstätten offensichtlich auf Vorrat angefertigte Kästen ausgewählt, die sie als 'neutral' — oder christlich interpretierbar — ansehen konnten. Die Käufer legten dann aber Wert darauf, Deckel hinzuzufügen, auf denen das christliche Bekenntnis eindeutig ausgedrückt wurde." (Koch 2000, 235.)

sarcophagi. Such evidence is crucial if we are to imagine Christians in the second half of the third century playing any role in the shift of market production towards demythologized pieces. Sadly, however, the first two examples raise problems: the carving on their lids cannot be reconciled with that on the chests. Furthermore, in the second example, the lid is noticeably shorter than the chest. It thus seems likely that they came from different workshops, as Koch notes.¹³¹ This makes them problematic evidence for his point, however, because it leaves open the possibility of reuse, with (Christian) lid and ('neutral'/pagan) chest salvaged from different original ensembles and recombined for secondary use in the catacombs. Only the third example above — that in the Museo Nazionale Romano, with stibadium meal and Jonah capping a strigillated chest with shepherd and clipeus — presents a unified ensemble of lid and chest with matching carving. In this case at least, we have firm evidence that a Christian lid (Jonah) was paired with a neutral bucolic chest (clipeus and shepherd) for original sale to a Christian in the third century. But this is our sole example from lids. Add the few cases, discussed above, of chests customized through the addition of Christian motifs under the clipeus or to the ends, and we are still dealing with only a handful of pieces. How far do we dare extrapolate from these rare examples?

The Problem of Purchasing Power

Even if we decide that the answer is “Relatively far,” and assume that a good percentage of Christians might have been amenable to buying neutral pagan pieces, the question still remains whether this could possibly have mattered in aggregate. Could their supposed preference for neutral types have exerted any influence on what pagan carvers produced? Everything revolves around the resources they commanded. We might agree that sarcophagus-buying Christians of the fourth century, under and after Constantine, were “upwardly-mobile and resolutely respectable *parvenus*,”¹³² to quote Paul Finney. But were they upwardly-mobile enough — or were there enough of them at all — to matter in the third? The problem is one of purchasing power: could Christians have wielded enough of it to account for the massive change of repertoire that pagan sarcophagi underwent in the second half of the third century?

At this point we plunge into the murky world of early Christian social history. How many adherents could Christianity claim in the metropolis in the third century? What classes did it attract? And how many of its converts would have been in the position to buy the extravagant luxury good that was a marble sarcophagus? The short answers would seem to be, in order: not many; the lower; and hardly any. Extensive social scientific discussion of Christian numbers and social class can be found in Appendix C: Christian Numbers; the reader interested in the full analysis is referred there. The results for our argument are easy to summarize however: our best reconstructions are that Christians constituted roughly 4% of the city of Rome's population in 250 AD, had risen to about 6% by 260, reached 8% in 270, and made up around 11% of the city's population by 280 AD. Given these figures, it seems impossible to imagine Christians contributing substantially to the constriction of the mythological repertoire that set in during the 240s and 250s, or the escalating popularity of bucolic, season, and other 'neutral' sarcophagi in

¹³¹ Koch 2000, 235.

¹³² Finney 2002, 99.

the 260s, 270s, and 280s. Christian numbers were simply too low to matter, particularly when we remember that the new religion drew its converts disproportionately from the lower classes, above all the humble free. Elite Christian converts capable of affording one of our dauntingly expensive luxury items would have been rarities indeed before 300. As a result, we simply cannot imagine Christian tastes exerting any real collective influence on what our Metropolitan carvers produced.

Why Choose Neutral Pieces When Christian Sarcophagi Are Available?

But let us, for the moment, bracket the issue of purchasing power entirely, and assume — just for the sake of argument — that there may have been a substantial Christian community in Rome eager and able to buy sarcophagi by the dozens and hundreds required if they were to play any role in the shift of market production towards demythologized pieces. There still remains the question of workshop specialization and intended audience. Why do we imagine that Christians would have purchased *neutral* pieces, when commissioning a specifically *Christian* piece from a pagan workshop was already an option by 270 or 280, as the Santa Maria Antiqua piece (Figure 16)¹³³ and those handful of stock strigillated pieces customized with Jonah (Figure 24)¹³⁴ show? If, as we know from these and others, the same workshops could and did produce both pagan and Christian coffins, this means that, as of 270 or 280 at the latest, they were already crafting pieces selectively tailored to these two particular markets. But if workshops did not, then, operate according to a ‘one-size-fits-all’ mode of production, what sense does it make to imagine them fighting for market share by producing mythless sarcophagi that supposedly appealed to both religious groups (because they offended neither)? There was no need. If the rare Christian client wanted a sarcophagus, it was easy to offer him one directly catering to his preference for Biblical mythology. Just add a Jonah under the clipeus, or insert a baptized Jesus into bucolic surrounds. And as we know from the above examples, this is what happened. Why would a convert ever have wanted or needed to buy a ‘neutral’ piece when Christian ones were available?

One argument for Christian purchase of neutral sarcophagi cites fear of oppression. Perhaps Christians were drawn to religiously unaffiliated pieces because fear of persecution led them to avoid overt displays of their faith? Himmelmann proposes this for the bucolic pieces, but expresses reservations.¹³⁵ He must be right. The Diocletianic Persecution did not begin until 303 AD, far too late for our *Entmythologisierung*. And the availability and relative popularity of the Jonah sarcophagi in the period prior shows that choosing Christian scenes in the decades preceding the persecution carried no risk. One might add: if sarcophagi were displayed in private family tombs, accessible only to those whom one trusted, then what danger could particular types of imagery have entailed anyway?

Zanker suggests elliptically, in two different works, that the production of so many sarcophagi with Christian scenes in the very late-Tetrarchic and early-Constantinian period, after the waning

¹³³ See page 12, and note 124 on page 28, both above.

¹³⁴ See page 29 above.

¹³⁵ Himmelmann 1980, 130.

of the Great Persecution, indicates that this clientele must have been using sarcophagi with some other form of imagery — he has in mind ‘neutral’ pieces — in the preceding period.¹³⁶ This seems questionable to me. The argument only works if one assumes that the number of Christian clients remained constant over the decades involved and had not recently increased. But it is commonly held that Christianity experienced explosive growth under Constantine, and in particular began infiltrating new social classes, most notably those at the top of the social pyramid. Our figures of Christian expansion (see the table on page 145 of Appendix C: Christian Numbers) reinforce this story: the exponential nature of the growth curve means that the Christian population roughly tripled between 280 and 310. The surge in Christian sarcophagi that Zanker observes in the 310s is thus most plausibly ascribed to new converts, particularly among the upper classes. As such it cannot be taken as evidence for substantial purchase by Christians in decades prior of coffins with other (neutral) types of imagery. The explosion of orders for pieces with Biblical scenes did not reflect pent-up-and-now-unleashed demand among old Christians, but new demand among new ones.

Christian Conclusions

To summarize my position: There is very little evidence from the monuments themselves that Christians purchased neutral or mythless sarcophagi for their own use in any number. The availability of Christian pieces from pagan workshops meant that more attractive options were already open to them, making the purported allure of neutral pieces for Christians difficult to accept. And their own low numbers for most of the century, combined with their even lower representation among the upper classes, means that their purchasing power would have been far too low to contribute to the shift in market production towards demythologized pieces, even if they had, for unknown reasons, wanted to buy such. In short, a nascent Christianity can hardly have played a role in *Entmythologisierung*. If mythless coffins swept the field in the second half of the third century, this must have had almost everything to do with changes in pagan demand, not Christian.

DEVALUATION OF CLASSICAL CULTURE?

We turn now from the question of Christianity to consider other explanations of *Entmythologisierung* — explanations that invoke not religious changes, but other kinds of cultural, social, and political shifts. One such cluster of arguments proposes that

¹³⁶ “...die Tatsache, daß nach Ende der Christenverfolgung in spättetrarchisch-frühkonstantinischer Zeit in kürzestem Zeitraum so viele Sarkophage christlicher Thematik bestellt wurden, läßt doch vermuten, daß diese Klientel schon früher reliefgeschmückte Sarkophage benutzte” (Zanker and Ewald 2004, 260). He makes the same argument in *Roman Art* (2010, 195), though here his laconic prose requires even more interpolation to render sensible: "If we assume that these Christian families who were now [after the Edict of Milan] so overtly professing their faith [by commissioning sarcophagi featuring Christian scenes] had always buried their dead in decorated sarcophagi, then they probably contributed quite significantly to the changes described above [third-century *Entmythologisierung*], because they chose [before the Edict of Milan, in the third century] religiously 'neutral' themes instead of amorous scenes or mythological allegories for joy.”

demythologization reflects a diminishment in the value Romans assigned to mythological culture, sometimes presented as a decline in educated literary culture or a crisis of elite culture. Some frame it in broad terms, as a process affecting all of society. Others focus on particular categories of imagery, or subsets of clientele, and sometimes consider changes in style as well as content.

Mythological Imagery: Victim of a *Volkstümliche Strömung*?

One such theory was first proposed by Gerke himself. Gerke's magisterial *Die christlichen Sarkophage der vorkonstantinischen Zeit* had its origin in the dissertation he wrote for Gerhard Rodenwaldt. It was Rodenwaldt who had used stylistic analysis to sequence and date the great lion-hunt sarcophagi in his seminal "Zur Kunstgeschichte der Jahre 220 bis 270,"¹³⁷ which in turn provided the scaffolding for dating other genres such as the seated pagan philosopher sarcophagi.¹³⁸ These in turn served as the anchor by which Gerke dated many of the earliest Christian pieces. But Gerke's project embodied Rodenwaldtian concerns in other ways as well. Rodenwaldt was keenly interested in stylistic change. In 1935 he had been the first to identify the shift still known by the name he gave it, the great late-Antoine *Stilwandel*.¹³⁹ A year later, in "Zur Kunstgeschichte der Jahre 220 bis 270," he articulated another such shift, the *Formzerfall* ('disintegration of form') which, in Rodenwaldt's account, began under the soldier emperors, was temporarily halted under Gallienus's "neo-classicism," and then set in with renewed vigor after his reign.¹⁴⁰ It saw ever greater use of the drill — both in running form, to negatively 'draw' sculptural forms rather than model them, and in standing mode, to bore holes which serve as visual accenting, delimiting forms without rendering them volumetrically. The result was a "pointillist" effect, a style "optic" rather than "plastic", which does not stress form so much as destroy it.¹⁴¹ As for its origin, Rodenwaldt had already ascribed this style to a rising *volkstümliche Strömung*,¹⁴² a "popular/folksy current" quite content to abandon Classical norms in favor of a lively "folk art" (*Volkskunst*).¹⁴³

¹³⁷ Rodenwaldt 1936, 83-97.

¹³⁸ Rodenwaldt 1936, 101-6.

¹³⁹ Rodenwaldt 1935.

¹⁴⁰ Rodenwaldt 1936, most succinctly at 106.

¹⁴¹ A fuller description of the style would note scenes and forms spaced relatively widely, with empty background between; flat figures which hardly project from the relief ground; drapery folds which are merely etched out; drill holes used to separate the fingers and indicate the pupils, nostrils, nasal-labial furrow, and corners of mouth and eyes; brows rendered through etched lines; and flat, cap-like hair, given texture through short drilled grooves (Koch 2000, 237; see also Gerke 1940, 45 for a nuanced, if damning, description of its visual characteristics).

¹⁴² Rodenwaldt 1921-1922, 88, 93.

¹⁴³ "Sie verbindet Mangel an Beherrschung der klassischen Form mit Freiheit von den Hemmungen jener Tradition; sie ist in ihren besten Werken eine gesunde, frisch erzählende, liebevoll beobachtende Volkskunst" (Rodenwaldt 1921-1922, 61). Additionally, in Rodenwaldt's view ({, 1921-1922, Spätantike Kunstströmung in Rom@96}), if not clearly Gerke's, this growing popular current was

Gerke adopts Rodenwaldt's formulations of this third-century shift. More importantly for us, however, is his extension of it: for Gerke goes on to connect this process of the dissolution of form (*Auflösungsprozess*) with *Entmythologisierung*, both of which, in his account, reflect the rising *volkstümlich* current. This current yields not only the drill-heavy 'pointillist' (i.e., stippled) mode of carving,¹⁴⁴ but also ever greater willingness to stack multiple ground lines (*Geländestaffelung*).¹⁴⁵ If the former breaks with volumetrically unified Classical form, the latter breaks with spatially unified Classical composition. And just as these *volkstümlich* sarcophagi reject Classical form and composition, so they also discard Classical — which is to say, mythological — subject matter.¹⁴⁶ The torrent of bucolic and related imagery is the best index of this rising popular sentiment: these scenes from 'real life' — tending animals, harvesting, hunting, and eating outdoors — reflect the "life of the people" (*Volksleben*) and its down-to-earth activities, grounded in "everyday work and zest for life" (*Arbeit und Lebenslust des Alltags*).¹⁴⁷ It is a true *Volkskunst*, and its enemy (and Gerke does use such martial language¹⁴⁸) was the old mythological mode, rarefied and "literary".¹⁴⁹ Despite what we might expect, then, given the subject of his book, Gerke does not ascribe *Entmythologisierung* to a burgeoning Christianity directly, but to the lessening hold of elite culture, classical and literary in its visual values, among sarcophagus-buying pagans.¹⁵⁰

How to evaluate this? Like Rodenwaldt's, Gerke's work has aged well; much is still of great relevance. In this particular case however the argument is less compelling. First, we might note that its purchase is limited in genre. It can apply only to motifs conceived to resonate with or express the *Volksleben*. We can see how bucolic sarcophagi, or the much smaller number featuring driven hunt scenes, might fit the bill. But it is harder to imagine what traction it could

intimately connected with the rising appeal of Christianity, which Rodenwaldt held to be a *volkstümlich* religion (see note 115 above). One also observes that in his earlier work, Rodenwaldt employs the terms *volkstümlich* and *Volkskunst* relatively seldom, preferring a wider range of formal descriptions. Later pieces — such as Rodenwaldt 1940 — use the terms more directly and often. Doubtless Germany's altered political climate provided impetus.

¹⁴⁴ Gerke 1940, 20.

¹⁴⁵ Gerke 1940, 5-7, 18.

¹⁴⁶ Gerke 1940, 15, 8-9, 100, 16-17.

¹⁴⁷ Gerke 1940, 16, 8-9, 20, 116. This also means that Gerke sees the replacement of mythological hunt sarcophagi by 'realistic' 'everyday' ones as the first act in *Entmythologisierung* (which for him is to say, the first area in which the rising *volkstümlich* current makes itself felt) (Gerke 1940, 12, 5). This makes him one of the first.

¹⁴⁸ He explicitly figures their relationship as a battle, or more strongly, a war (*Kampf*) (Gerke 1940, 14, and frequently uses terms of conquering and victory, as when "Das Hirtenidyll hat über den Mythos gesiegt" ("Myth was vanquished by the bucolic idyll") (Gerke 1940, 36). This martial tone prompts one of Matz's few criticisms of the book (Matz 1941, 354).

¹⁴⁹ Gerke 1940, 100.

¹⁵⁰ One should be warned that Gerke does not lay out this or any other argument anywhere near so tidily. He is a maddeningly unsystematic writer. It is left to the reader to connect the dots.

have on season sarcophagi, let alone philosopher pieces (!),¹⁵¹ and it is indicative that Gerke hardly mentions these other mythless genres in the context of *Entmythologisierung*.

Second, it raises questions about clientele. Older accounts of the *volkstümlich* tenor of freedman reliefs gained credibility from knowledge of their commissioners' social status and humble origins. But sarcophagi do not have the same clientele. Even the 'humblest' strigillated sarcophagus must have cost several times more than a typical freedman relief. The need to hew out a complete chest (or assemble one from multiple slabs), sculpt figures in the central and/or side fields, completely cover the remainder of the front with rows of painstakingly parallel strigil-like curves, and fit the whole with a lid far exceeds the requirements, both of material and labor, for a relief slab featuring the busts of a freedman and his family. Not even the master carvers and owners of sarcophagus workshops could afford to be buried in their own products, as the loculus slab of Eutropos (Figure 26) so pointedly illustrates. (On the clientele and cost of sarcophagi, see Appendix D: Who Could Afford Sarcophagi?)

It is safe to say that those buying our coffins had never worked the fields or vineyards in a harvest, or tended flocks. Romulus and Remus, Amphion and Zethus, and Paris may have been raised shepherds, and Perseus a fisherman, only to enter elite life as adults; but that was the stuff of myth, not the real life of our buyers. If bucolic scenes on sarcophagi expressed the *Volkleben*, their occupants and viewers were hardly part of that *Volk*, and certainly did not share that *Leben*. Gerke reads these motifs as evidence for the direct penetration of elite art by non-elite concerns and modes of life. But what they crystallize are surely *elite fantasies of pastoral bliss*, not any real concern for, let alone direct experience of, the peasant's *Alltag*, and certainly not his *Arbeit*. If mythological imagery largely vanishes from our coffins, then, it cannot have been because Rome's upper classes had abandoned elite culture and values. We may agree that the techniques of form and composition — the 'style' — of our third-century pieces departs from 'Classical' norms, if we define that narrowly; but to say the subject matter itself breaks with elite concerns, and that form and content thus manifest a deep connection in this case, as if in Stoic *sympatheia*, seems to go too far.

The Late-Antonine *Stilwandel*: A Crisis of Elite Culture?

Of Paul Zanker's many thoughts on *Entmythologisierung*, two should be addressed here, as they both represent variations on the theme of Classical culture's weakening hold. The first of these centers on the late-Antonine *Stilwandel* described by Rodenwaldt.¹⁵² Noting the long stretched figures, off-kilter poses, jittery movements, jagged contours, crowded compositions, and

¹⁵¹ Every motif of 'everyday life', and every depiction of 'real' people, that sneaks onto our sarcophagi — including generic philosophers, full-body portraits (as on 'biographical' hunt pieces), bust portraits in *clipei*, and mythological portraits — Gerke lumps under the concept of *Verbürgerlichung*, which he then in turn labels *volkstümlich* (Gerke 1940, 11, 2, 5). It seems a strange sleight-of-hand. One can understand how bucolic motifs or scenes of driven hunts might be thought to reflect popular currents. But how are we to imagine impossibly heroic aristocratic hunters on horseback felling lions, or images of loftily contemplative philosophers, as in any way *volkstümlich*?

¹⁵² Rodenwaldt 1935.

chiaroscuro effects of pieces such as the magnificent Medea (more accurately, Creusa¹⁵³) sarcophagus in Basel (Figure 27), Zanker characterizes the new style as a self-conscious and calculated departure from Classical conventions. Its goal is greater psychological tension and visual drama. But this requires nothing less than the sacrifice, the dissolution, of Classical form; and “in this conscious departure from Classical form one can already see the beginning of that crisis of educated culture which then, from the Late Severan period onwards ... led to a thorough-going abandonment of speaking through allegorical mythological images.”¹⁵⁴

Zanker thus frames the rejection of myth in terms of a crisis of educated elite culture, and sees the rejection of Classical formal values — the jettisoning of “equilibrium, balance, visible clarity, and beauty of line”¹⁵⁵ — as part of the same shift. The argument may sound familiar — it bears similarities to Gerke’s treated above — but introduces a twist: it locates the anti-Classical impulse half a century earlier. The origins of the third century’s post-Severan *Entmythologisierung* thus lie not in the third century itself, but the late second.

This is a difficult argument. It encourages much the same questions in response as Gerke’s does: We might agree that the stippled ‘pointillist’ style of the third century, or that of the *Stilwandel* in the late second, both in their own ways break with Classical canons of form. But to frame the turn away from mythological subject matter in analogous terms, as if it represented a kindred and equivalent kind of anti-Classicism, and then proceed to read them as parallel manifestations of the same historical cause (in this case, a putative crisis in elite culture) is untenable. The problem is that the new style does not bear the same kind of relationship to what it replaces as does the new repertoire of subject matter. A style may be more or less ‘Classical’; but the same cannot be said in any meaningful way of a body of content — not if we are talking of “mythological” versus “non-mythological”. The highly dramatic, emotionally wrought style of the Hellenistic Baroque, after all, had been employed for a wide range of mythological subject matter, as had the various phases of the Classical before, and the Archaic before that. We should hesitate, then, to identify the category of “Greek mythological imagery” with the “Classical” style alone.

This is especially the case in the Roman context. Thanks to Tonio Hölscher,¹⁵⁶ developing a thesis first proposed in schematic form by Otto Brendel,¹⁵⁷ we have a much firmer grasp of the

¹⁵³ As Klaus Fittschen ({, 1992, Tod der Kreusa@1052, 1056}) observes, the central subject of these pieces is not Medea but the tragically premature and horrifically cruel death of her victim, the princess Creusa, and the grief-stricken agony of her onlooking father Creon.

¹⁵⁴ “... kann man in dieser bewußten Abwendung von der klassischen Form bereits den Beginn jener Krise der Bildungskultur sehen, die dann seit spätereiverischer Zeit ... zur weitgehenden Aufgabe des Sprechens in Form allegorischer Mythenbilder führt” Zanker and Ewald 2004, 252.

¹⁵⁵ “Was die Künstler an der klassischen Form nicht mehr befriedigte, waren offenbar gerade die bis dato so hochgeschätzten Eigenschaften wie Gleichmaß, Ausgewogenheit, übersichtliche Klarheit, Schönlinigkeit” (Zanker and Ewald 2004, 251).

¹⁵⁶ Hölscher 2004, recently extended in Hölscher 2012.

¹⁵⁷ Brendel 1979, 104, 24-37.

logic underlying much of Roman ‘eclecticism’. Roman sculptors routinely selected from a wide variety of available historical styles, matching them to the perceived nature and intended effect of their subject matter. “[F]or traditionally dignified figures of gods and heroes, the noble forms of High Classicism, even of the Late Archaic or Severe Style, were preferred; for soaring or dancing figures like Victories or maenads, the vibrant forms of the ‘Rich Style’ of the late fifth century; while, for epiphanic deities like Apollo, Bacchus, or Venus, models of the fourth century were very often chosen; for agile athletes and the nimble Mercury, works in the Lysippan tradition; for satyrs or giants, Hellenistic ones.”¹⁵⁸ This serves as powerful reminder that no single style — whether classicizing or other — was associated with mythological imagery as a whole. The same surely holds for the latter’s absence. We cannot then assume a connection between departure from classicizing form and rejection of myth.

These observations apply in some measure to both Gerke and Zanker. In addition, however, Zanker’s thoughts on the *Stilwandel* introduce a temporal disjunction between the anti-Classical form he describes (late-Antonine) and the demythologized content (post-Severan) with which it supposedly shares affinity. This further complicates things, since it means the former was never employed for the latter. The new style of the *Stilwandel* was adopted by sculptors eager to break from Classical convention in order to lend greater emotional energy and dramatic pathos to their carving. But to what kind of imagery did they apply the new mode with such fervor? Not bucolic scenes, not seasons or philosophers, but rather... ‘Classical’ myths. There are notable exceptions of course, such as the Portonaccio battle sarcophagus in Rome’s Palazzo Massimo (Figure 22), which implements the tumultuous new style to great effect. Since it seems this style was first pioneered on state relief for martial scenes, with its debut on the Column of Marcus Aurelius, we should not be surprised at its translation to a battle sarcophagus. But by and large our workshops apply it to narratives, above all, mythological dramas¹⁵⁹ — precisely in order to heighten their drama, whether of Creusa’s ghastly incineration (Figure 27) or Priam’s lamentable embassy to Achilles¹⁶⁰ (Figure 28). It is difficult to imagine how this indicates a “crisis of educated culture,” let alone one conceived to result, half a century later, in the abandonment of exactly these dramas.

Strigillated Sarcophagi, Bucolic Imagery, and Popular Interest in Myth

This leads us to Zanker’s second variation on the theme of Classical culture’s weakening hold, this one inflected through social class. The argument here begins from the observation that while bucolic imagery enjoys great popularity in the second half of the third century, its popularity is not evenly spread across all formats. While bucolic motifs do appear with regularity on lavish frieze sarcophagi, they feature even more commonly on strigillated sarcophagi, which, in general,

¹⁵⁸ Hölscher 2004, 69.

¹⁵⁹ In this our Roman sculptors follow those masters of the Hellenistic Baroque, who had similarly applied their highly expressive style — clear inspiration for the late-Antonine one — to, above all, mythological pieces: to writhing Giants, steaming Centaurs, and stormy heroes; *not* ruler portraits, boys strangling geese, or the men, women, and children on Hellenistic grave reliefs. (On the genre specificity of the Hellenistic Baroque see Smith 1991, chapter 7, esp. 99, 108.)

¹⁶⁰ Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 130, pl. 8; Grassinger 1999, 57-63, 208-9, cat. 40, pl. 36.1, 37.1-3.

were a humbler genre, crafted with a slightly less patrician clientele in mind. Since (Zanker implies) this class was less enamored of, or less fluent in, classical culture and its mythology, their fondness for mythless pastoral scenes should not surprise us. Of course bucolic imagery could suit elite tastes too; but if it enjoyed even greater popularity on humbler pieces, this is because it held additional appeal for those “who were not literarily educated”¹⁶¹ and therefore less drawn to mythological scenes.

This raises certain questions. If these buyers were indeed less enamored of classical education, why then should the motif of the *learned philosopher* have been so beloved for these pieces, even if mythological figures were not? — for while bucolic motifs do figure prominently on strigillated sarcophagi, so do vignettes of intellectuals and philosophers. Indeed, they often rub shoulders, with a ram-toting shepherd or a small bucolic vignette occupying one field of a strigillated sarcophagus while a philosopher or a scholar with his scroll poses elsewhere on the same piece (Figure 29, Figure 30).¹⁶² This seems a major objection to theories ascribing the popularity of pastoral scenes to rising *volkstümlich* sentiment (as Gerke above) or to lessened interest in classical education among slightly humbler clientele.¹⁶³

It is also hard to know to what degree we should imagine Rome’s non-elite population displaying less interest in, or familiarity with, classical mythology and its huge cast of characters. Admittedly, the grisly mythological reenactments in the arena, featuring the condemned dressed up as Dirce and tied to a bull, or as Orpheus to try his luck serenading the bears, complete with porters costumed as Pluto to haul the corpses off the sand,¹⁶⁴ did not require extensive mythological knowledge for their popular entertainment value to be appreciated.¹⁶⁵ But

¹⁶¹ “Daß die bukolischen Motive im 3. Jahrhundert vor allem auch auf den einfacheren Riefelsarkophagen so beliebt werden, deutet auf eine weite Verbreitung der Hirtenthematik als alternative, mythologisch neutrale Wunschvorstellung auch in den Kreisen der Bevölkerung hin, die literarisch nicht gebildet waren” Zanker and Ewald 2004, 261.

¹⁶² For pieces which conjoin bucolic and philosopher imagery, see Ewald 1999, 62-77.

¹⁶³ Gerke (1940, 312-3) suggests, perhaps to circumvent this problem, that the motif of the philosopher found favor among Christians as a symbol of their claim that Christ’s message represented the ‘true philosophy’. While likely true, the small number of sarcophagus-buying Christians in the third century cannot account for more than a fraction of those strigillated coffins bearing philosophers (see “The Problem of Purchasing Power” from page 30 onward). The problem of how to reconcile the popularity of this motif with a postulated *volkstümlich* surge or lessened interest in classical education thus remains.

¹⁶⁴ Coleman 1990, 62-3, 5-6, 9.

¹⁶⁵ In this they differ from other, earlier, forms of public mythological address, such as those Late Republican coins showing the esoteric mythic ancestors of Rome’s elite families (Wiseman 1974), whose obscure allusions must have posed serious barriers to their general legibility (Hölscher 1984). Nonetheless the mythological reenactments in the arena did require at least a *basic* mythological knowledge: “These elaborate charades would have misfired unless most of the audience was able to identify the pretend Orpheus and appreciate the horrific joke of his failure to charm real wild beasts,” as Alan Cameron (2004, 231) reminds us. Nor was the repertoire of deadly tableaux brought to life

pantomime is a different matter. It is difficult to exaggerate its mainstream appeal and spectacular power, with rapt throngs thrown into fits of weeping and rival fans coming to blows at performances; it required, we must assume, an audience with more than passing knowledge of the characters and plots if it was to work such magic; and our sources, such as Lucian's *On the Dance* (§§37-63), make clear how extensive was the catalog of stories performed, numbering in the hundreds.¹⁶⁶ The popular appeal of pantomime shows that a literary education was no prerequisite for a familiarity with Greek myth; and clearly many who lacked the former loved the latter.¹⁶⁷ Nor did one's knowledge of myth need to be extensive when entering the tomb. As brought to life on sarcophagi, the stories were simplified and reduced to their most salient and memorable central events. Even a basic level of familiarity would have sufficed to comprehend them.

If bucolic motifs proved especially popular on simpler strigillated sarcophagi, I suggest this may have had to do with compositional limitations imposed by the strigillated format itself. The frieze format gave scope for elaborate narratives and extensive casts of characters. But the strigillated scheme provided only small fields hardly capable of accommodating more than a figure or two. There were limits to what could be presented in such confines. One might just be able to squeeze in a drunk Dionysus and his props (Figure 31), or a Ganymede bearing cup to an aquiline Jupiter (Figure 32). But clearly many mythological scenes could not be easily compressed into these boxes. How to orchestrate Dionysus's Indian triumph, or incinerate Creusa, at this scale? A lone shepherd, however, whether leaning on his staff or carrying one of his fleecy wards, could single-handedly evoke an idyllic pastoral world from within the smallest of frames. Their special preponderance on strigillated sarcophagi may be partially (partially!) due to the demands of the format.

Entmythologisierung Limited to the Funerary Realm

But was there perhaps a *general* slump in education levels or commitment to classical culture during the third century which might have contributed to a diminished interest in mythological imagery? This is proposed by Wulf Raeck.¹⁶⁸ He ascribes demythologization to a widespread

limited to these; our sources enumerate Prometheus disemboweled, Hercules ignited, Attis castrated, Daedalus losing his wings (one can only imagine), and Pasiphaë receiving the bull.

¹⁶⁶ Jones 1986, 73; Cameron 2004, 229-30. See now also Lada-Richards 2007; and most recently, Hall 2013.

¹⁶⁷ This is one area perhaps where Alan Cameron's magisterial work on Roman mythography might call for qualification. Doubtless Greek mythology in Roman hands did become an integral part of literary culture; but that it was *limited* to literary culture as it had not been in Greece, with the basic myths "no longer a routine part of the lives of uneducated folk" (Cameron 2004, 218) seems too extreme a formulation. Indeed, Cameron's own comments on mythological reenactments in the amphitheater (see note 165 above) and on pantomime (note 166) suggest the contrary. For a concise statement of myth's ubiquitous presence in the physical and mental world of Roman society, see Muth 2001, 111.

¹⁶⁸ Raeck 1992, especially 161-3. Although Raeck's main concern is to chart developments in mythological mosaics, he freely acknowledges that many of these developments first manifested

decline in classical education, the result of the “destruction and replacement of the old ruling elite”¹⁶⁹ by new men, military-minded and increasingly of provincial origin, who, we are to think, valued such education and its mythological mode of expression less highly, or who simply lacked the mythological knowledge necessary to understand such images.¹⁷⁰ Objections to this are several. One might doubt, following Muth, whether any functional new elite could possibly have been so ignorant of classical culture and insulated from its tradition of mythological art.¹⁷¹ But even if, for the sake of argument, we admit that this group may have been as classically illiterate as Raeck describes, it is hard to imagine their numbers mattering. Raeck’s description of under-educated provincial elites may have some purchase (if exaggerated) on the new military men of ‘barbaric’ background. But these cannot have made up more than a fraction of our metropolitan sarcophagus-buying clientele.

One might retort that, even if Raeck’s particular explanation does not prove compelling, we still have not addressed the broader question. Relevance of the provincial elite aside, is it not still possible to ascribe the third century’s diminished interest in mythological imagery to a general slump in classical culture? The answer must be “No,” because, it turns out, this diminished interest in mythological imagery was itself not general. The stumbling block for this argument, as others have noted,¹⁷² is that we see no concomitant decline in the role of myth in other domains of art. In the domestic sphere, in the realm of house and villa, mythological paintings and mosaics — those central components of villa culture — continued to form an integral part of the decoration until the end of Late Antiquity.¹⁷³ The upper classes of the third and fourth

themselves on sarcophagi. This includes the insertion of portrait heads, which he takes as the very first act in the simplification of myth (Raeck 1992, 161).

¹⁶⁹ “Vernichtung und Ablösung der alten Machteliten” (Raeck 1992, 161).

¹⁷⁰ The pithiest summary of Raeck’s argument is by Raeck himself, penned in a different context: in his review of Ewald’s *Philosoph als Leitbild*. Peeved that Ewald does not give his thesis the attention he thinks it deserves, Raeck uses the review as a venue to recapitulate his own argument: “The amply documented social restructuring of the third century that resulted in the establishment of a new governing class, and the decline in educational standards that accompanied this restructuring, support the assumption that the change from a mode of expression couched in mythological terms to one formulated in terms more direct and ‘contemporary’ had primarily social-historical causes.” (“Die sattsam bekannten sozialen Umschichtungen vor allem des 3. Jh. mit dem Resultat der Etablierung einer neuen Führungsschicht und das damit einhergehende Absinken des Bildungsstandards begründen die Vermutung, daß der Wechsel von mythologisch verklausulierter zur die Aussage direkter und 'zeitgenössischer' formulierender Ausdrucksweise...primär sozialgeschichtliche Ursachen hat.”) (Raeck 2002, 65.) In response to Raeck’s complaint, Ewald (2003, 566 n. 11), in a review of Wrede, dismisses Raeck in a footnote.

¹⁷¹ Muth 1998, 285.

¹⁷² Muth 1998, 265-90; Muth 2001, 95-116; Ewald 2003, 566; Zanker and Ewald 2004, 260.

¹⁷³ For the third-century domestic murals from the terrace houses of Ephesus, for example — including a triclinium staging Philoctetes’s encounter with the serpent on the way to Troy (!) (house 2, apt. 1, room 6), and another room featuring Apollo, the Muses, and pairs of (yet unidentified) mythological heroes (house 2, apt. 3, room 12) — see Zimmermann and Ladstätter 2010, 94-138, especially 97-02, 14-19.

centuries continued to collect *Idealstatuen* of mythological figures, and commissioned mythological scenes on everything from silver dinner service to textiles.¹⁷⁴ The lack of interest in deploying mythological themes on sarcophagi did not, then, reflect any general lack of interest (or education) in myth among their clientele. We are dealing with something specific to the funerary realm.¹⁷⁵

Nothing bears this out more than the study of mosaics. As Muth explicitly notes, while much has been written on *Entmythologisierung* — or, as she puts it, “Entfremdung vom Mythos” — in the Late Empire, it is simply not visible in the domestic sphere and its floors, where mythological mosaics remain a fixture from the early second century through the fourth and beyond.¹⁷⁶ This does not mean, of course, that the mosaicists’ massive repertoire of subjects is static. On the contrary. It evolves over time, commensurate with changing social and domestic concerns. During the late-second century and most of the third, the preference is for erotic themes (romantic couples, erotically alluring females, scenes of erotic approach or pursuit, and the occasional embodiment of the male erotic ideal) and other celebrations of life’s pleasures (motifs of musical accomplishment, the comical and drunken antics of Hercules, and an endless procession of Dionysiac and marine thiasoi).¹⁷⁷ In the late-third and fourth centuries, the focus changes: many established themes continue to enjoy popularity,¹⁷⁸ but they are increasingly relegated to the *cubiculum*, as the more public rooms (*oecus*, *triclinium*) are taken over by figures blaring a different set of values. Here heroic protagonists embodying *virtus* gain in popularity, with a particular focus on mythic hunters. Parallel to this new emphasis on *virtus*,

¹⁷⁴ Zanker 2010, 195.

¹⁷⁵ Zanker and Ewald 2004, 260.

¹⁷⁶ “Der Umfang der Mythenbilder in den Häusern des 4. Jh. bleibt gegenüber dem späteren 2. und 3. Jh. mehr oder weniger konstant” (“The range of mythological images in the houses of the fourth century remains, in comparison with the late second and the third century, more or less constant”) (Muth 1998, 283, see also 65). She develops the point further, with particular reference to erotic mythological mosaics, in Muth 2001, summarized at 112-3. One might object that Muth’s evidence derives mainly from residences in Spain and North Africa, where mosaics are best preserved, not the metropolis itself. This is no reason, however, to discount their relevance for us — not when used to pressure arguments (such as Raeck’s) that petition culture-wide shifts.

¹⁷⁷ *Romantic couples*: Perseus & Andromeda; Helios & consort; Alpheus & Arethusa; Polyphemus & Galatea; Ares & Aphrodite; Apollo & Nymph. *Erotically alluring females*: Artemis & Actaeon; Leda & swan; Nymphs & Pegasus; Europa. *Erotic approach/pursuit*: Apollo & Daphne; Eos & Cephalus; Alpheus & Arethusa; Satyr & Nymph; Satyr & Maenad; Zeus & Antiope; Eros & Psyche; Mars & Rhea Silvia; Selene & Endymion; Dionysus & Ariadne; Satyr & Ariadne. *Male erotic ideal*: Hylas & Nymphs. *Musical accomplishment*: Polyphemus & Galatea; Apollo & Marsyas. *Antics of Hercules*: Hercules & Omphale; Hercules drunk. All compiled at Muth 1998, 266-7, 71-72. For full-color illustrations of many of these and others cited below, see Muth 2001.

¹⁷⁸ *Romantic couples*: Zeus & Antiope; Poseidon & Amphitrite. *Erotically alluring females*: Artemis & Actaeon; Leda & swan; Nymphs & Pegasus; Europa. *Erotic approach/pursuit*: Poseidon & Amythone; Satyr & Nymph; Dionysus & Ariadne. *Male erotic ideal*: Hylas & Nymphs. *Bildung/musical accomplishment*: Achilles & Chiron; Athena & Marsyas; Apollo & Marsyas; Apollo & Daphne. Compiled at Muth 1998, 266-7.

this period also sees the growth of mythological scenes composed to celebrate status, *auctoritas*, and *dignitas*, as well as the ceremony of marriage itself.¹⁷⁹

We might say that things take a turn towards the bourgeois.¹⁸⁰ But what strikes the student of sarcophagi, accustomed to the disappearance of myth in the second half of the third century, is that this shift in themes inside the house itself sees no comparable abandonment of the mythological mode. Rather than withering under the pressure of new concerns and fashions, the repertoire of mythological subjects simply alters to meet them instead. Indeed, it even expands: the late third century sees the appearance of several new mythic scenes¹⁸¹ — Hercules and Chiron; Leto; Antiope's liberation; the marriage of Cadmus and Harmony — only some of which, such as the last, were clearly chosen for their resonance with the new set of interests.¹⁸² The fact that domestic mosaics were developing new mythological scenes when sarcophagi were abandoning them shows how circumscribed a phenomenon demythologization was.

Even more astonishingly, the newfound popularity in our period of mythological mosaics celebrating heroic *virtus*, mythic hunters, social status, and the ceremony of marriage saw the simultaneous rise of *non-mythological* analogs. Circus scenes proclaiming the benefactor's *munificentia* and *liberalitas*; so-called 'xenia' pictures proclaiming the abundance of the estate and perhaps the owner's generosity to others; depictions of cultivated poets amid Muses; and 'biographical' hunt scenes underscoring the commissioner's *virtus*, aristocratic status, and wealth: all display the same new concern with rank, education, status, and civic prestige, but expressed in 'everyday' clothes.¹⁸³

The relevance for our study is clear: in the late-third and fourth centuries, on the floors of Roman homes, mythological images continue to flourish, co-existing beside non-mythological counterparts; further, the two develop in tandem, as functionally equivalent and equally suitable means for proclaiming the same kinds of messages.¹⁸⁴ Mythic hunters and weddings celebrate the *virtus* and social status of their commissioners, side-by-side with their non-mythological twins. One does not replace the other.

¹⁷⁹ *Martial virtus*: Achilles & daughters of Lycomedes; Achilles & Penthesilea; Achilles & Briseis; Bellerophon; Achilles & Chimaera; Theseus & Minotaur; Hercules & Chiron; Glaucus & Diomedes. *Mythic hunters*: Meleager & Atalanta; Adonis & Aphrodite; Hippolytus & Phaedra. *Status/auctoritas/dignitas*: Agamemnon & Chryses; Agamemnon & Achilles; Philoctetes. *Ceremony of marriage*: Cadmus & Harmony; Bellerophon & Philonoe; Peleus & Thetis. Compiled at Muth 1998, 266-7-8.

¹⁸⁰ Muth 1998, 290.

¹⁸¹ Muth 1998, 283 n. 1144.

¹⁸² Hercules and Chiron, Leto: from the 'Grande Maison', a large *domus* in Portus Magnus (modern Saint-Leu, Algeria) (Muth 1998, 381-3, cat. A25). Freeing of Antiope, marriage of Cadmus and Harmony: from the Villa de la Malena, near Azuara, Spain (Muth 1998, 412-3, cat. H4).

¹⁸³ Muth 1998, 273-5; see also Muth 2001, 108.

¹⁸⁴ "Mythenbilder wie Lebensszenen zeigen also letztlich parallele Veränderungen im Themenrepertoire" (Muth 1998, 281-2).

The *Entmythologisierung* of sarcophagi cannot, then, reflect any general decline in classical education or loss of interest in myth — not when myth continues to thrive in the house and villa. And it bears emphasizing that this phenomenon is not limited to the metropolis, nor to areas long urbanized. It manifests itself in the periphery too, even along the *limes*. Aquincum on the Danube, *castrum* and then capital of Pannonia Inferior, is an instructive case.¹⁸⁵ During the second century the elite of Aquincum commissioned grave stelae and other monumental funerary reliefs staging a strange and wonderful assortment of mythological stories. The popularity here of Mars, or the Dioscuri, is not surprising perhaps, given the town's military nature. But who would have expected Theseus slaying the Minotaur, Medea contemplating the knife, Oedipus before the Sphinx, or Perseus beheading Medusa (Figure 33)? The compositions show a mix of familiar and fantastically novel elements: quirky and compelling material, to be sure.

In the third and particularly the fourth quarters of the second century — that is, at some lag behind the metropolis, as was common¹⁸⁶ — the population of Pannonia switched from cremation to inhumation, and with it, from sculpted stelae to carved sarcophagi. Aquincum's carvers made the transition effortlessly: the local tradition of vibrant mythological imagery was translated directly to the new form of monument. The finds make this clear. One sarcophagus, probably carved in the Antonine period and now decomposed into its separate slabs, features Perseus slaying Medusa while gazing into his mirror (here held, marvelously, by Athena) (Figure 34), Leda and the swan (standing on a plinth, with one webbed foot prodding her backside) (Figure 35), Ganymede's apprehension by an aquiline Jupiter (Figure 36), and Iphigenia's escape from Tauris (Figure 37).¹⁸⁷ The mythological mode is still in full swing on a piece such as this: Perseus beheading Medusa was a popular Pannonian motif for funerary monuments, as we saw above (Figure 33), while the scenes of Leda and Ganymede serve as thematic pendants, presenting gendered variations on the theme of avian rape. The piece was unearthed at Pécs (ancient Sopianae), some distance from Aquincum, but is clearly related to other mythological sarcophagi from Aquincum itself. The front slab of one of these shows Mars — not (as on the stelae) standing iconically but rather flying in (!) towards Rhea Silvia at a jaunty angle (Figure 38) — in a composition inspired by metropolitan works but clearly not bound to them. The right and left slabs of another give us Theseus and Ariadne before the Labyrinth (Figure 39), and Menelaus with Helen, here pushed forward endearingly by a Cupid standing on a plinth (Figure 40).¹⁸⁸ All are dated to the second half of the second or beginning of the third century, and show a mythological tradition as vigorous as before.

When we turn to the later third-century sarcophagi from Aquincum however, a different sight greets our eyes. Mythological narrative disappears, and a tedious uniformity of composition

¹⁸⁵ The Pannonian sarcophagi suffer woefully from scholarly neglect. The best synthetic treatment is still Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 323-32.

¹⁸⁶ On the lag involved in inhumation's spread to the western provinces, see Morris 1992, 62-8.

¹⁸⁷ Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 327-8.

¹⁸⁸ Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 325-6. The left slab was earlier identified as Jason with Medea, in light of Medea's established popularity on the stelae. But Menelaus and Helen seems more likely, given Cupid's prodding.

rules. The basic scheme of these late specimens is dominated by a huge central *tabula* for inscriptions, often possessing the curlicue sides (in German, *Volutenornamentik*) or ‘double-saddle’ volutes characteristic of Norican and Pannonian manufacture,¹⁸⁹ less often straight sides, still less *ansae*.¹⁹⁰ The size of these massive *tabulae* dwarfs any known from metropolitan works and monopolizes most of the front, leaving only small fields to far left and right for figural decoration. These fields are just roomy enough to accommodate a single figure each. Most popular are generic cupids (Figure 41), pendant standing male and female figures likely intended as portraits (Figure 42), and shepherds propping themselves on their crooks¹⁹¹ (Figure 43). This limited repertoire of motifs — generic cupids, portraits, and bucolic figures — corresponds well with those commonly found on metropolitan strigillated sarcophagi. Their compositional schemes echo too, if one imagines the metropolitan strigil field replaced by a *tabula*. But most important for us is the mythological content. There is none.

Here, then, as in the metropolis, *Entmythologisierung* has set in — but, as there, it seems, only in the funerary domain; for in the domestic sphere of the living, mythological imagery continues to decorate the house and the objects therein. We know this from Aquincum’s best-preserved *domus*, the so-called “House of the Painter”. Built in the second century, it was occupied until the end of the third, when the area was abandoned. The finds from the 2007 and 2011 excavations, though not yet published, are already on display in Vienna’s new Roman Museum. They include an architectural fragment carved with the head of a bearded god, a terracotta antefix with grimacing Gorgoneion, and a terracotta statuette of Venus, all dated to the third century (Figure 44). Gods and monsters may be gone from Aquincum’s coffins, but they remain alive and well in the house. To reiterate then: the *Entmythologisierung* of sarcophagi, whether in Rome itself or at the *limes*, reflects no general loss of interest in mythological imagery.

RESPONSE TO THE THIRD-CENTURY CRISIS?

Reaction to the Negative Experiences of the Age?

Does *Entmythologisierung* constitute a response to the Third-Century Crisis? Perhaps Rome’s upper classes were drawn to bucolic, seasonal, and philosophical scenes as a respite from the turmoil of real life? Argued strongly by Wrede and Zanker, and to a lesser extent Ewald, this thesis petitions politics (or the recoil from them) as the explanatory mechanism. Zanker’s presentation is the more accessible, so we shall start with it.

¹⁸⁹ Kastelic 1999, 266.

¹⁹⁰ Koch (1993, 135) notes that this basic scheme follows Upper Italian precedent. If so, it likely spread along the routes linking Aquileia to the Danube provinces.

¹⁹¹ Given their eastern caps, are these shepherds intended to represent Attis? It seems doubtful, given their consistent doubling. Though there are exceptions — one thinks of the chest in Rome’s Baths of Diocletian featuring pendant Achilles-with-Chiron groups (Figure 58) — Roman carvers prefer to multiply generic figures, not individual characters. The same principal underlies the frequent doubling of the ‘good shepherd’ on strigillated sarcophagi: yet more reason to doubt that he was intended as an emblem of Christ, as Himmelmann (1980, 140) notes.

Zanker argues that the *Entmythologisierung* of our sarcophagi reflects a fundamental shift in cultural values. Whether foregrounding death, departure, and mourning (the dominant themes of mythological sarcophagi during the second century)¹⁹² or reveling in the blissful pleasures to be had in life (the dominant theme of those from the Severan period),¹⁹³ our mythological pieces had always taken for granted the basic and traditional premise of pagan culture as it had been formulated since Archaic Greece: that this life was what mattered — that living and feeling it *actively* was what mattered — and that the body and its senses were the locus of pleasure and life’s enjoyment. In contrast, the demythologized coffins of the middle and especially late third century proclaim a different attitude. Their ideal is not the active but the passive life, not striving but contemplation, not the life of the body but the mind and the soul: an endless procession of earnest philosophers, peaceful shepherds, and pious *orantes*.¹⁹⁴

What about the seasons? Zanker tries to fit them in here as well, emphasizing not the earthiness of their fruits and the embodied sensual pleasure which they provide — that would leave them still within the orbit of ‘traditionally pagan’ values — but rather their status as symbols of the harmonious cosmic order, making them ripe for passive intellectual contemplation. One observes that this does not sit easily with what he elsewhere says of their development: that “beginning in the later third century the notion of the seasons’ cyclicity and their eternal return steps into the background.”¹⁹⁵ If so, the seasons’ associations with a lofty cosmic order diminish at precisely the time that we would expect them to grow. But we can bracket this for now.

What is responsible for this shift in cultural values? Zanker nominates the Third-Century Crisis. The harsh unstable times which reigned under the soldier emperors precipitated a withdrawal from the active life and its ever-escalating travails, engendering a retreat into the contemplative. It was all a reaction to the “negative experiences of the age” as the “experience of instability in almost every domain led to a direct feeling of being threatened.”¹⁹⁶ If images of pastoral tranquility, philosophical reflection, and a more consolatory view of the cosmic order gained immensely in popularity, this was because the earthly order was perceived to be ever more insecure. These new images thus represent, above all, “coping strategies.”¹⁹⁷

¹⁹² Zanker and Ewald 2004, 62-115.

¹⁹³ Zanker and Ewald 2004, 116-77.

¹⁹⁴ Zanker and Ewald 2004, 262.

¹⁹⁵ “Seit dem späteren 3. Jahrhundert tritt die Vorstellung vom Zyklus der Jahreszeiten und ihrer ewigen Wiederkehr in den Hintergrund” (Zanker and Ewald 2004, 257). For extensive treatment of this development: Kranz 1984, 128-30, 37-38, 72, 76.

¹⁹⁶ “...negativen Erfahrungen der eigenen Zeit”; “Zum unmittelbaren Gefühl der Bedrohung kamen die Erfahrungen der Instabilität auf fast allen Gebieten” (Zanker and Ewald 2004, 262).

¹⁹⁷ “...Strategien der Bewältigung” (Zanker and Ewald 2004, 263). A similar kind of argument is made by Ewald for the allure of philosopher imagery. As he notes, the popular philosophy current during the Empire was concerned not with physics or metaphysics, but with pragmatic ethics and practical means for achieving tranquility and serenity of soul. This was “decisive” (*bestimmend*) for its broad appeal and “epidemic spread” (*epidemische Verbreitung*) on sarcophagi during the tumultuous third

Before plunging into the particulars of this argument, an admission on my part: I tend to be wary of such ‘reflection’ theories. Much of this has to do with two fundamental problems endemic to the genre: (1) such readings suffer from a lack of control, because the most incompatible types of supposed reflexes can be attributed to the same type of cause; and (2) it is too easy to read visual images as reflexes of troubled times, because practically any time can be defined as troubled.

To expand on my first reservation — that such readings suffer from a lack of control — my concern is that one and the same supposed cause can be invoked to explain diametrically opposed phenomena. It may remind one of late-night dormitory conversations with Freudian friends. Do you deny until hoarse that you want to sleep with your mother? The ferocity of your denial reveals how deeply your guilty desire for her extends. Do you confess that you do, in fact, want to sleep with your mother? Admirable confirmation of the theory. A similar logic informs our reflection theories. If the Third-Century (or any other) Crisis sees a procession of tranquil shepherds and contemplative philosophers, these are taken as escapist ‘coping mechanisms,’ psychological compensation, a consolatory medication against the troubles of the time. Had the period instead, however, produced reliefs brimming with drama, jittery and violent, full of pathos, these could just as easily be accommodated by the same theory — read not as coping strategies, but as direct reflections of the instability and anxiety of the age.

The history of Art History furnishes many examples of this type of argument, in both forms. So the extreme distortion and vaguely menacing emotiveness of German Expressionism has been said to reflect the horrors of the Great War and the turmoil of the 1920s, just as the overwrought and unsettling existential pathos of Romanticism does the Napoleonic Wars, and the burdened expressions on Delian portraits from the late second century the coming of a scary Rome. While, on the side of coping strategies and wish-fulfillment, British Neo-Classicism and the Victorian ‘cult of beauty’ have been said to provide tranquil refuge from the smoke and soot of a destabilizing industrial revolution, as the gentle sensuality and luscious drapery of Athenian sculpture from the late fifth century offers dreamy escape from the plague-ridden horrors of the Peloponnesian Wars. In short, once one assumes that the troubles of a time find expression in art, almost any imagery, whether idyllic or unhinged, can be made a symptom. Falsifiability becomes impossible.

By extension, exactly the same type of argument can be made for times of perceived peace and prosperity, with exactly the same ramifications. So if times of peace and prosperity are marked by placid or self-satisfied imagery, the latter can always be claimed to reflect the former directly. If such times instead see artists producing works of high drama however, fierce and perfervid, or simply agitated and twitchy, these can be read as compensation, a form of fantastic escape from a life of bourgeois security, providing a pleasant jolt of pathos to lives otherwise lacking it.

A weaker form of this argument might claim that such periods offer the stability necessary to explore or vent high emotions without being swept away by them. If ever there were tempting

century: “Philosophie konnte in unruhiger Zeit, in der man in wenigen Jahren den Fall zahlreicher Kaiser erleben konnte, Lebensregeln anbieten und eine Versicherung in Werten von Halt und Dauer bedeuten...” (Ewald 1999, 131).

material for this, it would be our second-century mythological sarcophagi, whose favored stories feature violent ends, senseless slaughter, rape, abduction, and lamentation. It is the time of Achilles and Patroclus, the time of Orestes, of the Niobids, of Medea and Creusa, of Persephone. A time to flail and to die, at least on our coffins.¹⁹⁸ Yet most were carved under Hadrian and the early Antonines — that is, under conditions of sustained prosperity and stability, some of the glory years of the *pax romana*.

What to make of this? If happy times (Hadrianic and early Antonine) are marked by unhappy imagery, and unhappy times (the Third Century Crisis) by happy imagery, one might conclude that our sarcophagi work solely on a logic of consolation, offering the antithesis of whatever the national mood — or at least, mood of the upper crust — happens to be. But this is clearly not the case either. The sarcophagi of the Severan period, a time of general security, turn towards scenes of celebration and joy — the *Glücksvisionen* (“visions of bliss”) embodied in the marine thiasoi and Dionysiac revelry — while those carved under Constantine offer images of Biblical security matching that restored by the *Imperator*. In these cases, periods of peace see pictures of peace. Do we dare think, then, that the former actively beget the latter, or, reversing terms, that the latter reflect the former? The answer is likely no — not when Niobe’s children shriek under a hail of arrows and Orestes hacks Aegisthus with astonishing frequency during the serene and sedate reign of Antoninus the Pious. In short, there seems to be no predictable correlation between the tranquility (or lack thereof) of a period and the tranquility (or lack thereof) of its imagery, at least where two centuries of Roman sarcophagus production are concerned. This should give us pause before assuming any connection between the troubles of the third century and the newfound popularity of philosophers and shepherds.

As for my second reservation: given human nature and human history, there is no end to the events one can latch upon to claim that a period was troubled. The twentieth century alone provides material to make any decade as fraught as one might wish. Fin-de-siècle angst of the 1890s and 1900s; the Great War of the 1910s; jittery recovery, escalating street battles, and the rise of Fascism for the 1920s and 30s; World War Two and the devastation left behind for the

¹⁹⁸ T. J. Clark points out in poignant fashion how unusual it is for tomb monuments of any period to depict the death — or more accurately, the dying — of the main character himself. Yet for a few brief decades in the second century, this is what our sarcophagi bravely, strangely, do. “The new Romans’ coffins are incomparable. . . . We should never lose hold of how unprecedented, and without progeny, this iconography is. For what is death doing at all on the side of a coffin? Death figured not in the form of a spirit or skeleton or cosmological journey [as on contemporary sarcophagi from Han China], but as an event in the here and now. Pain, breathlessness, slackening, narcosis. Women trying one last remedy. There is no mystery to the fact that normally — functionally — death is what tomb sculpture exists to not show. . . . I look again at the slaughter of the Niobids in the Vatican, or Creusa in agony on the astounding sarcophagus in Basel, or Orestes, or Protesilaus, or Alcestis, or Patroclus, and the fact that death occurs at all on the side of a coffin, taking the form of loss and grief, still strikes me as stupendous.” (Clark 2012, 240; see also Clark 2010, 12.) Stupendous and incomparable indeed. Yet even here, on those pieces that foreground corporeal termination, the extinction of the human person, figured in stark relief, is still countermanded by the massive permanence of the coffin itself. No sarcophagus acknowledges its *own* eventual moldering, disintegration, and demise. As proxy bodies for their human contents, stone sarcophagi — imperishable, immortal, adamantine (such was hoped) — always embodied the denial of death.

1940s; Korea and ‘Red peril’ in the 50s; Cuba, the rhetoric of nuclear annihilation, and the upheavals of 1968 for the 60s; the oil embargo, economic slump, and continued turmoil over Vietnam in the 70s; renewed Cold War hostilities and resumption of the arms race in the 80s; the chaos following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and genocide in Yugoslavia in the 90s; and the endless ‘War on Terror’ since 2001. No matter the decade of the object in your hand, history offers a pick of horrors you can cite to claim it was an ‘age of anxiety’. Much the same holds for any other century. Certainly it holds for Rome. Had our third-century *Entmythologisierung* occurred instead in the second under Marcus Aurelius, we would doubtless cite the endless German wars and looming unease at the barbarian threat. Had it occurred under Commodus, we could invoke patrician unease at the unhinged ruthlessness of the purple. Under Caracalla? The destabilizing effects of his murderous paranoia. In the early fourth century? The blood let by the disintegration of the Tetrarchy. The possibilities are endless.

One might respond, with some justification, that the Third Century Crisis is a different case — that its duration was longer, its extent greater, its effects direr, than any comparable period of turbulence since the upheavals of the Late Republic. It seems almost natural, then, to assume that it could have prompted a fundamental shift in values, in turn reflected in art. The last two decades however have seen the Third Century Crisis qualified in important ways, particularly in the German-speaking world.¹⁹⁹ It seems increasingly likely that we have exaggerated its deprivations. Inflation was certainly an issue. But the actual effects of the currency’s devaluation are hard to judge, and likely less severe than typically assumed. Certain regions and times were affected drastically by the crisis, but it did not affect all at all, and certainly not the upper classes in their entirety.²⁰⁰ Hekster summarizes the new consensus succinctly:

“[D]etailed regional analysis of archaeological remains shows that socio-economic change was very different from one province to the next, and that in many zones of the empire, inhabitants seem to have been doing well for much of the third century. From the 240s...one could speak of a military and political crisis, but in socio-economic terms there is less clarity. In this respect, the local differences are pronounced, and as long as there was no fighting and soldiers were not stationed too near, zones could still thrive.”²⁰¹

If the economic ravages were slighter than assumed, and the political turmoil affected only a small number of men at the very top, does this mean that our metropolitan upper classes may well have felt less anxiety than we have imagined? Very likely. But we cannot know. That, however, reveals precisely the problem: we do not know to what extent Rome’s elite living through the troubled years did or did not feel troubled themselves. Did they internalize the chaotic spells? We assume that they must have. But this is not obvious — least of all from their art. If their self-representation on sarcophagi is any index, they seem no more anxious than their forefathers. The fact is that, while the soldier emperors may style themselves as tough and

¹⁹⁹ Strobel 1993; Witschel 1999. Witschel’s findings are encapsulated in Borg and Witschel 2001, 78-90. More recently, see Hekster 2008.

²⁰⁰ Witschel 1999, 85-91, 239-374; Borg and Witschel 2001, 50-78.

²⁰¹ Hekster 2008, 84-5.

resolute types taking on an uncertain future, contemporary private portraits on sarcophagi do not follow suit. The apparent lack of worry, of any sense of burden, is striking. If we were to write the political history of the third century looking only at private portraits, we would think that the Third Century Crisis *as crisis* had never happened. Why, then, do we imagine these men and women nonetheless feeling a great need for compensatory images of tranquility and respite? The retort might be that their placid expressions are themselves a form of compensation. But there is no way out once you have stepped into that particular hermeneutic spiral.

Also troubling for this argument is something discussed above: the fact that demythologization does not afflict all the arts of Rome, or even other ‘private’ (better, domestic) ones.²⁰² As we have seen, there was no general diminution of interest in mythological imagery, no concomitant decline in the role of myth in other domains of art. In the domestic sphere, in the realm of house and villa, mythological paintings and mosaics — those central components of villa culture — continued to form an integral part of the decoration until the end of Late Antiquity. The upper classes of the third and fourth centuries continued to collect *Idealstatuen* of mythological figures, and commissioned mythological scenes on everything from silver dinner service to textiles. The lack of interest in deploying mythological themes on sarcophagi did not, then, reflect any general lack of interest in myth among their clientele. We seem to be dealing with something specific to the funerary realm. But if so, it is unlikely to have been driven by the Third Century Crisis: for if Rome’s upper classes turned to scenes of demythologized bucolic tranquility on sarcophagi as respite from the turmoils of the age, surely they would have sought them in other forms of domestic art too, where their medicinal effect would have been far greater. After all, scenes of peaceful contemplation and pastoral bliss would have worked far greater sedative magic, as tranquilizers against the ills of an age, if displayed where they would be most seen: decorating the floors, the walls, the furniture, the dining ware of the *home* — not sequestered away in the tomb where they availed few. In short, if *Entmythologisierung* manifested itself in the tomb but not the home, it becomes very difficult to imagine that it reflected any form of general psychological anxiety afflicting the age. The symptoms demanded by the theory are lacking where we would expect them most.

The issue of tranquility raises another question, a crucial one. Even if we imagine that the sarcophagus-buying elite of the middle- and late third century did seek refuge from turmoil, why did they not gravitate towards appropriate *mythological* stories? Surely there were many capable of scratching any itch for bucolic tranquility. Why not adapt Paris's pastoral judgement, or Odysseus's Arcadian interlude on Calypso's island? Why not the goatherd Polyphemus languidly wooing Galatea while tending his flocks (Figure 45), or Hercules relaxing in the Garden of the Hesperides (Figure 46), two compositions already at hand on Roman walls? Or if the desired message was the related one of fertility and ever-renewed abundance, why not develop Demeter and Triptolemus, or Persephone’s return from Hades, instead of the abstract and characterless seasons? Given the long-established tradition of mythological imagery on sarcophagi, we would expect Roman carvers to have continued to tap its rich resources. After all, it had already proven its ability to convey a vast range of messages and moods, from lamentation over premature death and the horrors of matricide to the joys of tender romance or ecstatic celebration within the

²⁰² See the section “*Entmythologisierung* Limited to the Funerary Realm” from page 39 onward.

Dionysiac retinue. If clients fleeing from the troubles of the age now sought images of bucolic tranquility, sculptors could easily have adapted well-known mythic stories capable of speaking to the new need. That is to say, theories petitioning a desire for escape from turmoil actually give no purchase on why our buyers should have turned to *demythologized* images for this escape. They may help to explain the change in tone, in message, of the reliefs; but not the change in medium through which such messages were conveyed.

Demythologization and the Question of Senatorial Retreat

A variant of the Third-Century-Crisis argument is proposed by Henning Wrede. This derives from his extensive work on the Senatorial sarcophagi.²⁰³ Collating all examples which may plausibly be identified as Senatorial allows Wrede to then track their development with great precision and — most importantly — link this development directly with the changing political and social fortunes of the Senatorial class. So if the Senatorial ‘biographical’ sarcophagi of the Antonine period often include military scenes, whether full-fledged combat on the battle pieces or scenes of *clementia* towards the vanquished on *Lebenslauf* pieces, this reflected the fact that military command still occupied a central place within the Senatorial class’s self-conception and claims to status.²⁰⁴ Under the Severans and their successors, however, such commands were increasingly given to *homines novi*. This, combined with the emperors’ palpable absence from the metropolis, led established Senatorial families to frame their self-identity increasingly in civilian terms, as ‘republican’ magistrates in contrast to the ‘new men’ in military service to the emperor.²⁰⁵ Their self-representation on sarcophagi followed suit: their *virtus* donned civilian garb, as hunt scenes directly replaced battle and commander sarcophagi as preferred means for demonstrating manliness, while civilian motifs and symbols of office (such as toga and *sella curulis*) replaced the military tropes of the Antonine pieces.²⁰⁶

This shift to the civilian was sealed by the reformation of the army conducted under Gallienus, whose reforms systematically barred Senators other than Consuls from military commands: the *tribunus militum*, legate of the legion, and all praetorian positions were given over to Equestrians,

²⁰³ Wrede 2001.

²⁰⁴ Wrede 2001, 21-60, esp. 21-7, 35-6.

²⁰⁵ Wrede 2001, 60.

²⁰⁶ Wrede 2001, 60-5, 103. It is inconvenient for Wrede’s argument, however, that battle sarcophagi, excluding always the bizarre outlier that is the Great Ludovisi, extend no later than 200 or 210, while the earliest ‘biographical’ hunt sarcophagi can be no earlier than the 220s (see page 21 above). To make things even worse, twelve lion-hunt sarcophagi of the earliest type (the two-scene format) show the deceased accompanied by an assistant wearing a Roman parade helmet (listed in Andreae 1980, 30-2, 136), while the deceased himself wears armor — sometimes a muscled cuirass, sometimes the *lorica squamata* — on at least half of these (Andreae 1980, cat. 75, 128, 31, 204, 6, 13, 17). Wrede (2001, 104) suggests that these pieces were bought by equestrians or officers of others classes, rather than Senators. But even if that is the case, the prevalence of military garb still proves problematic for any argument that biographical hunt sarcophagi in general were developed as a civilian replacement for battle and commander pieces.

thus banishing the Senatorial class from military careers.²⁰⁷ In response came the development of sarcophagi glorifying the entrance of civilian magistrates into high office — the so-called ‘*processus consularis*’ pieces²⁰⁸ — all of which were carved during or shortly after Gallienus’s reign. Finally, under Diocletian, Senators found themselves expressly excluded even from most civilian magistracies.²⁰⁹ What traditional public position was left them? That of sponsoring and presiding over entertainments, especially the races in the circus and the combats, both gladiatorial and animal, in the amphitheater. Hence many under the Tetrarchy commissioned coffins showing themselves in this capacity, as *editor ludi*, or bought pieces with animal combats, most commonly a lion mauling some other animal, whose setting, occasionally underscored by the presence of handlers, evoked the games.²¹⁰

What does this have to do with *Entmythologisierung*’s rising tide of bucolic, philosopher, seasonal, and other imagery? Some Senators may have purchased sarcophagi showing them in the only major public role left open for them, that of giving games. But many more, Wrede posits, opted for public withdrawal instead, and commissioned scenes that glamorized that withdrawal. Expelled from both military commands and civilian magistracies but left their money and estates, they found pleasure in pictures of contemplative retreat and rustic tranquility far removed from the city and the world of public office. The connection of sarcophagi featuring cart journeys, *stibadium* meals, philosophers, and bucolic imagery to the retreat of the *ordo amplissimus* is thus “obvious.”²¹¹ Their underlying psychological tenor is disengagement. All reflect the increasing alienation of Rome’s oldest governing class; and all offer the best possible ‘spin’ on that alienation, reminding viewers of the ideal life to be enjoyed far from the public realm.²¹²

²⁰⁷ Wrede 2001, 66-76, esp. 68, 70, also 95.

²⁰⁸ Wrede’s argument that these are generic scenes of entering unspecified high office, not the *processus consularis* in particular, is compelling (Wrede 2001, 71).

²⁰⁹ Wrede 2001, 77.

²¹⁰ Wrede 2001, 78-83, 107.

²¹¹ “...der Zusammenhang mit dem gleichzeitigen Rückzug des römischen *ordo amplissimus* aus den zivilen Funktionen [ist] offensichtlich” (Wrede 2001, 105). For the pieces showing journeys by cart: Amedick 1996, 46-55; for those with *stibadium* meals: Amedick 1996, 25-45. Both scenes appear almost exclusively on lids, not chests.

²¹² “Denn die Blütezeit der Hirtensarkophage von der nachgallienischen bis zur frühkonstantinischen Zeit dürfte kaum zufällig mit der Periode zusammenfallen, in welcher der *ordo amplissimus* die größte Minderung seiner öffentlichen Bedeutung hinnehmen mußte, weil er seine militärischen und weitgehend auch zivilen Aufgaben verloren hatte. In dieser Situation bot die bukolische Idylle die Vorstellung von einem idealen Leben fern der Öffentlichkeit. ... Das Bild des Hirten vergegenwärtigte das friedvolle und glückliche Leben der Oberschicht auf ihren Landgütern. Es kennzeichnete ihr Otium und ihre Hinwendung zu Bildung und Philosophie. Es charakterisierte ein Ringen um die moralischen und religiösen Werte naturverbundenen Lebens. Daher stehen den Hirten der Sarkophage gewöhnlich Philosophen und Musen zur Seite, Lehrszenen und das Motiv der Orans.” (Wrede 2001, 84, developed further at 105-6.)

The social and political circumstances driving the turn to this imagery were thus new. But the set of values that it celebrated were, in another sense, very old. This imagery tapped into long-standing patrician ideals of leisure and *otium* offered by retreat to one's villa. It is no accident, Wrede implies, that the first independent (i.e., non-mythological) scene of a shepherd to appear on a Roman coffin does so on the end of a Senatorial wedding sarcophagus (*Hochzeitssarkophag*), Antonine in date and now in St. Petersburg.²¹³ If Senatorial pieces were the first to employ such shepherd imagery, we can assume it was because this pastoral motif reminded them of their own rustic country estates. The origins and appeal of bucolic, philosopher, and season sarcophagi are rooted in this, as are those showing harvesting, hunting, and vintage: they stood as emblems of villa life. Scenes of educated men enjoying idyllic contemplation amidst tranquil shepherds thus carried a very specific social valence, as did pieces showing the trip from city to villa, the picnics on *stibadia* to be enjoyed once there, and the various fruits that their great landed estates yielded up season after season.²¹⁴ All conjured up for the viewer not an abstract or generalized vision of bucolic bliss, but the very particular bliss to be had, by the Senatorial classes, within the social and economic framework of their own villas.²¹⁵ This was the source of their evocative power.

There is much to admire in Wrede's argument. It gains strength from its specificity: unlike Zanker's above, it resorts not to the general experiences and culture-wide trauma of an age (a form of *Zeitgeist* theory), but the particular historical experiences of a very particular social group: the progressive political expulsion of the Senatorial class from positions of military and then civil power, and their consequent retreat from public life.²¹⁶ This concrete anchoring in documentable experience lends it plausibility. But this specificity comes at a cost: very limited applicability. The problem for us is that Wrede's thesis is not generalizable. It may provide a

²¹³ Wrede 2001, 83, 106.

²¹⁴ Wrede 2001, 105-7.

²¹⁵ "Bei der Fahrt zu den Landgütern, Jagd und Jagdbeute, ländlichem Stibadiummahl, bukolischer Hirtenidylle, Fruchtbarkeit und Ernte entsteht insgesamt eine Vorstellung von glücklichen, mühelose und ethische positiven Momenten des Landlebens, welche der städtischen Perspektive und den senatorischen Großgrundbesitzern entsprach" (Wrede 2001, 107).

²¹⁶ One notes that this reverses the valence of 'reflection,' from compensatory to direct, or, to put it another way, from fantastic to literal: scenes of bucolic and contemplative tranquility embody not the escape which people *wish* they had (*à la* Zanker), but the real retreat which the Senatorial elite *did* have and increasingly exercised. Wrede himself touches on this difference: "Einschließlich der zuvor genannten Motive [Musen, Philosophen, Weise und andere *mousikoi andres*, Jagden, Sigmamahle, Hirten, Landleben und Jahreszeiten] entwerfen sie ein friedvolles Bild vom metropolitanen Leben, welches von vertieften geistigen Studien geprägt und von angenehmen Aufenthalten auf dem Land unterbrochen wurde. Im Hinblick auf die großen Erschütterungen des Imperiums zu dieser Zeit, auf die zunehmende Militarisierung der Lebensumstände und Lebensnormen, auf einander ablösende gesellschaftliche und wirtschaftliche Krisen, auf einander folgende Thronwirren und unablässige äußere Gefahren erscheint diese Sarkophagikonographie als Beschwörung einer unwirklich glücklichen Gegenwelt, als Flucht aus den Zeitumständen. Ordnet man die Bilderwelt indessen der Perspektive des römischen Senatorenstandes zu, so gewinnt sie ihren Realitätsbezug zurück weswegen sie sich auch parallel zu seinem Selbstverständnis entwickelte."

plausible account of why tranquil rustics and withdrawn philosophers should suddenly have appealed to the Senatorial class. But, as Ewald already noted,²¹⁷ it has trouble explaining the widespread popularity of this imagery beyond that limited group. Most buyers of our sarcophagi — including those with bucolic and philosophical motifs — simply cannot have been Senators. There were not enough Senatorial families to go around to account for them all. This is particularly true of the bucolic sarcophagi. Not only do their pastoral scenes represent the single most popular type of imagery in the second half of the third century,²¹⁸ but such scenes are particularly common on humbler strigillated specimens — which is to say, most common on pieces we *least* envision being purchased by Senators.

The majority of our purchasers were likely Equestrians and rich commoners — that is, groups who could hardly complain of recent expulsion from positions of power. Indeed, the Equestrians had *gained* under the Gallienic army reforms, and gained mightily: they were the ones to receive the prestigious military commands previously occupied by Senators.²¹⁹ It is hard to imagine them chafing at perceived exclusion, let alone retreating from the public sphere into private bucolic escapism as a result. As for rich commoners: while many clearly commanded the resources necessary for a sarcophagus and a family tomb in which to place it, we cannot imagine most owning villas or country estates to which they could retreat. The escape to rustic tranquility figured on our sarcophagi cannot, then, have been a real option for most. If such imagery became wildly popular, it must have represented a form of ennobling fantasy, not a literal possibility; and clearly in the vast majority of cases, its appeal did not reflect any actual exclusion.²²⁰

Additional questions come from the nexus of myth and villa life. How do we imagine the Senatorial classes, eager to withdraw to their country estates, turning *away* from Greek myth, when this myth was central to the very definition of that villa life? Myth was not incidental to the villa but constitutive of it, inscribed on its very walls as nowhere else. To enter one was to enter a mythologized world, where gods and heroes decorated everything from mosaics, statuary, and table ware, to textiles, furniture, plaques and tablets, and, of course, wall after wall of frescoes. They served not as dead decoration but as vibrant conversation pieces, endlessly discussed, metaphorized, and brought to life again in that definitive rite of elite private life, the

²¹⁷ Ewald 2003, 569-70.

²¹⁸ See “The Second Half of the Third Century: The Surge of Non-Mythological Genres”, from page 11 onward.

²¹⁹ Wrede 2001, 95.

²²⁰ Wrede suggests, rather elliptically, that “...die Ikonographie der ländlichen Welt waren statusspezifisch nicht eingegrenzt und der Allgemeinheit daher abermals zugänglich” (Wrede 2001, 109). Presumably this is why this imagery “...sich dann auch bei der übrigen Bevölkerung Roms durchsetzten” (Wrede 2001, 106). As far as I can tell, these two sentences, separated by three pages, are all he says on the subject. The model gestured at — that imagery first developed for the Senatorial aristocracy is subsequently and unproblematically adopted by other classes, through a simple form of fashion trickle-down — entirely ignores the issue of disjunction I raise here.

convivium,²²¹ by everyone from the vulgar *nouveaux riches* skewered by Petronius²²² and Seneca,²²³ or the more sophisticated diners described by Plutarch,²²⁴ to the guests of Tiberius at Sperlonga prompted to review their own wine through the passed-out form of Polyphemus beside them.²²⁵ It was precisely the importation of villa life from the Greek east in the late Republic that had carved out a private space removed from the public eye and enabled Rome's patricians to adopt Greek myth as they did: as the language for luxurious refinement amidst tranquil surrounds, the language for a life freed from the public gaze and the demands of politics, a life free of care.²²⁶ If Rome's third-century Senatorial class increasingly yearned, then, to escape public life and retreat to the romantic tranquility of their country estates, abandoning

²²¹ See now Michael Squire (2011, 86-126, most punchily at 91-94), who convincingly shows how even plaques such as the *Tabulae Iliacae* must have been intended as cultured conversation pieces for the *cena*, since their sophisticated allusions to obscure texts were too esoteric to have served as the 'crib sheets' for semi-literate freedmen which some have thought them to be. As he reminds us (2011, 77), "learned discussions of myth...were the bread and butter of the Roman *cena*".

²²² *Satyricon* 52, 59. For insight into Trimalchio's hysterical mishandling of the stories, see the corresponding commentary in Smith 1975.

²²³ Seneca devotes a long passage in *Epistulae Morales* 27 to mocking a vulgar millionaire whose inability to summon the names of mythic figures makes him a boor at his own dinner parties: "Within our own time there was a certain rich man named Calvisius Sabinus; he had the bank-account, and the brains, of a freedman. I never saw a man whose good fortune was a greater offence against propriety. His memory was so faulty that he would sometimes forget the name of Ulysses, or Achilles, or Priam — names which we know as well as we know those of our own attendants [*paedagogi*]. No major-domo [*nomenclator*] in his dotage, who cannot give men their right names, but is compelled to invent names for them — no such man, I say, calls off the names of his master's tribesmen so atrociously as Sabinus used to call off the Trojan and Achaean heroes. But none the less did he desire to appear learned [*eridutus*]. So he devised this short cut to learning: he paid fabulous prices for slaves — one to know Homer by heart and another to know Hesiod; he also delegated a special slave to each of the nine lyric poets. After collecting this retinue, he began to make life miserable for his guests; he would keep these fellows at the foot of his couch, and ask them from time to time for verses which he might repeat, and then frequently break down in the middle of a word." (Seneca 1979, 27.5-7.) Among other things, this passage underscores how ready-to-hand one's mythological knowledge needed to be. The rhetoric is striking: the figures of myth should be as familiar and at one's command as clansmen and clients appearing before a patron.

²²⁴ Plutarch reveals that practically any discussion at a *convivium* was enhanced by citing mythological parallels or precedent, the more recondite the better. When his fellow diners debate whether poetry had a legitimate place at the Pythian Games, for example, our author defends it by invoking Acastus, who had set a prize for poetry at the funeral games for his father, Pelias (Plutarch, *Moralia* 5.2).

²²⁵ Suetonius (*Tiberius* 70) revels in relating the obscure mythological questions that Tiberius posed his guests at the dinner table. On the Sperlonga groups as conversation pieces: Stewart 1977, 78, 86; Squire 2003.

²²⁶ "...Greek myth, in literature and art, had originally been adapted [by the Romans] primarily in the context of the *otium*-culture of the 'villeggiatura' and was thus outside the political realm" (Ewald 2004, 255). On Greek myth's centrality in the definition of villa life: Griffin 1976, 90-1; on its importance as the language for expressing private life, freed from the public gaze and the demands of politics: Griffin 1986, 53-7.

mythological imagery would seem the most counter-intuitive way imaginable to express this desire. This is not to claim that it could not have happened. But if Wrede's thesis is right, it opens up far more troubling questions than it answers.

One also wonders about the extent of this imagery's 'disengagement' from public life, or how strongly it would have spelled 'retreat to the villa'. There is little doubt about the pieces showing a journey by cart (*Wagenfahrt*). A few explicitly show an abbreviated villa façade (portico on lower level, balcony or veranda on upper) as the goal; others forego explicit depiction, but evoke it by coupling the journey with a *stibadium* scene on the other side of the lid, leading us to supply a villa as the implied third term.²²⁷ But despite the variations, cart journeys are not particularly common: Amedick compiles 35 examples, all on lids.²²⁸ Far more common are the bucolic pieces. Here too there is no disputing that their setting and mood separate them from images of the city. But would their generic scenes of shepherds and flocks necessarily have conjured up images of *villa* life in particular? It seems unlikely, given the essentially agricultural and viticultural — not pastoral — associations of the villa in the Roman imagination.²²⁹ The iconic vision of a happy and virtuous life on the land was centered on the farmer, not the herdsman. Admittedly, moralists such as Livy, who summons Cincinnatus as a moral whip,²³⁰ or Cato, who claims that *ex agricolis et viri fortissimi et milites strenuissimi gignuntur*,²³¹ have their own particular axes to grind against contemporary luxury.²³² In their hands, the trope of the old-

²²⁷ Amedick 1996, 51-2. On non-mythological *stibadium* scenes (so-called *Sigmamahle* or *Sigmamähler*) as evocations of the villa and its pleasures: Amedick 1996, 38.

²²⁸ Listed at Amedick 1996, 46. Noting the relative paucity of cart journey and *stibadium* scenes, Ewald (1999, 74, emphasis mine) already noted that "Tatsächlich finden sich *konkrete* Hinweise auf den Erfahrungsraum der Villa auf den Sarkophagen auch eher selten". But *indirect* allusions he thinks common, in the form of bucolic scenes: "Für breitere Schichten, denen der Rückzug in die ländliche Villeggiatur nicht möglich war, dürften entsprechende [bukolische] Motive auf den Sarkophagen jedoch zum Glückszeichen schlechthin geworden sein. Sie sind Verheißungen von Frieden und Glück, für die ein biographischer Bezug im Sinne eigenen Villen- oder Domänenbesitzes in aller Regel nicht vorausgesetzt werden muß" (Ewald 1999, 74, repeated at 9. Even if bucolic scenes thus stood for most as emblems of *Frieden* and *Glück* divorced from actual villa ownership, nonetheless their ability to evoke such *pax* and *felicitas* still ultimately derived, at some metonymic remove, from connection with the villa. If it was not the proximate referent of bucolic scenes — that was peace and bliss — nonetheless it remained the ultimate one, the background against which bucolic scenes were to be seen and the source of their symbolic and emotional power (Ewald 1999, 75, 128). As we will see however, I think this still accords too much significance to the Roman villa as referent.

²²⁹ Studies of the place occupied by the villa in the Roman imagination are legion. (The pithiest is perhaps Wallace-Hadrill 1998.) But so far as I know, studies of its particularly agricultural as opposed to pastoral associations are lacking.

²³⁰ Livy, 3.26.6-10.

²³¹ "From farmers come both the bravest men and the most vigorous soldiers" (Cato, *De agri cultura*. 1.4). For discussion of the passage see Bodet 2012, 49-52; Reay 2012, 62-3, with further literature there.

²³² On the complete lack of correspondence between Cato's ideal villa proportions and the archaeological record, along with a punchy political reading of his anti-luxury "rustic shtick", see now Terrenato 2012.

fashioned patrician farmer stands as counterweight against perceived urban decadence, a rhetorical figure to be mobilized. Yet it is precisely the aura surrounding the figure of the farmer that makes this rhetoric crucial evidence for reconstructing the terms through which Rome's rich landholders might have imagined and represented their own country estates. By these standards, the imaginary space occupied by the villa was surely more agricultural than pastoral.

Was the reality different? It may have been, at least in the first centuries BC and AD. There is literary evidence then that Rome's large landowners increasingly (and often illegally) turned their arable lands over to pasture, knowing the latter were easier to manage *in absentia*. Varro and his characters explicitly excoriate the practice in *De re rustica*, denying that a villa given over to herding even counts as one at all.²³³ After all, does the very word *villa* itself not derive from *vella*, a place into which crops are hauled (*vehuntur*)?²³⁴ Their responses illuminate just how strongly the villa in its 'working' form was still conceived and defined through the trope of farming. But even if the first centuries BC and AD may have seen — against traditional status norms — a limited turn towards herding, this was reversed during the second century, when agricultural products, not pastoral ones, became the growth industry.²³⁵

What of the last half of the third century, when our bucolic sarcophagi were themselves a growth industry? Here the evidence is less clear. But even if we were to grant, for the sake of argument, that a greater proportion than imagined of third-century working villas might have been devoted to herding instead of to the higher-status practice of farming, we should not think that all animals were equal. The evidence seems to show that cattle, not sheep, were (by volume) the more common animal in the Roman countryside, and certainly the symbolically preferred one, attested by everything from the centrality of the Forum Boarium to the iconic image of the bull found on Roman coins, "confirmation of the linguistic interrelationship of wealth and cattle"²³⁶ (*pecunia* derived from *pecus*), and concretized socially by the hierarchy of cowherd over shepherd and goatherd.²³⁷ Varro himself points out that the Italians even derived their own name from the Greek word for a bull (*italos*) or its Latin cognate (*vitulus*), for which the cow (*bos*) is to be

²³³ Varro, *De re rustica* 1.2.11-21, 2.intro.4. For commentary: Green 2012, esp. 34, 6, 41-3.

²³⁴ Varro, *De re rustica* 1.2.14. Guy Métraux (1998, 7) suggests that the etymology is false. This in no way detracts from its value however. On the contrary: false or 'folk' etymologies often offer more insight into a culture's conceptual ordering of the world than true ones do.

²³⁵ As Métraux details, the second century saw major expansion of the *annona* and booming growth of great *horrea* in the major cities, to allow for greater storage of agricultural goods and more efficient economies of scale in transport. This meant that second-century trade in villa products was increasingly concentrated, centered on a few nodal entrepôts, and conducted along considerably greater distances (Métraux 1998, 10-1, 4-5). One must surmise that this meant growth in agricultural produce (grain, oil, wine) relative to herding products (meat, milk), since the latter cannot be stored without spoiling (or without massive investment in salting), and the animals themselves cannot be transported long distances at any profit. The dramatically expanded, even 'globalized', scope of markets in the second century must, then, have meant a shift towards agricultural over pastoral yield.

²³⁶ Green 2012, 37.

²³⁷ Skoie (2004, 135, 9 n. 8) points out that, as related by Donatus (*Vita Donati* 215-218), cattleherds exercise precedence over shepherds, who in turn have it over goatherds.

esteemed above all other herd animals.²³⁸ If any animal were to serve as emblem of the Senatorial Roman country estate, we would expect the bovine. Yet cattle almost never appear on bucolic sarcophagi: the coffin of Iulius Achilleus in Rome's Baths of Diocletian, which includes three bovines and as many jaunty horses amidst a flock of eleven sheep and four goats²³⁹ (Figure 47), is an oddball indeed.²⁴⁰ What our bucolic sarcophagi give us instead are an endless procession of sheep and their shepherds. If the goal was to index the Roman villa, these were a poor choice indeed. Clearly that was not the goal. Which world, then, *were* these calculated to evoke? Surely the answer must be the romantic, hazy, and exoticized landscape of the Greek pastoral idyll — not the Roman countryside and its villas, real or imagined.

If the sheep-filled bucolic sarcophagi thus seem poorly designed to denote the villa, what of that handful of pieces that show harvests instead? Were *these* at least, with their agrarian scenes of small figures gathering sheaves of wheat or merrily dumping baskets of grapes — as on an endearing piece in the Getty²⁴¹ (Figure 48) — perhaps intended to conjure up the Senatorial estates? Again, it seems unlikely — not when they are almost universally staffed by Cupids.²⁴² This is instructive. Those agricultural activities that would correspond most closely to the iconic world of the villa are presented in a way that insistently undercuts any such literal associations. Hiring Cupids as laborers ensures that these otherwise everyday activities are transported to the realm of whimsy and fantasy, lending a nebulous mythological patina to what viewers might otherwise take too literally. Like the far more numerous pieces featuring ovine idylls, then, the harvest sarcophagi similarly seek to conjure up a diffusely atmospheric and exotic world, not denote the particularities of villa life. This is not to say that members of the Senatorial class could not have read their own country estates into this imagery. Doubtless they could, given enough metaphoric remove. But to think that this — rather than the Arcadian world of Theocritus or the *Eclogues*²⁴³ — was the primary and intended referent of these scenes, and that the bucolic genre was developed to frame this class and its rural retreats in particular, requires ignoring key features of the imagery.

²³⁸ Varro, *De re rustica* 2.1.9, 2.5.3, as Green notes.

²³⁹ Himmelmann 1980, 121; Stroszeck 1998, 145-6, cat. 301, pl. 52.1-4, 99.1; Friggeri 2001, 94-5; Zanker and Ewald 2004, 171.

²⁴⁰ Cattle do feature occasionally in a different context: on third-century lion sarcophagi, as the feline's prey. But these works are meant to summon a different world: that of the games. They reek of the city's blood-soaked arena, not the farm. Moreover, even in this genre, cattle occur rarely: as Stroszeck (1998, 44) reminds us, they appear on only four pieces.

²⁴¹ Bielefeld 1997, 108, cat. 46, pl. 23.1-5, 24.1-2, 25.1; Stroszeck 1998, 121, cat. 36. Formerly in Rome, the piece found its way to the London art market in 1994 and was subsequently purchased by the Getty in 2008. It is notable for the extent of its recutting: the original strigillated field covering the front was soon recarved in its entirety to yield the current figural frieze (Bielefeld 1997, 36).

²⁴² For the harvest and vintage pieces: Bielefeld 1997.

²⁴³ That sheep and goats, not cows, dominate even the *Eclogues* reminds us how pointedly Greek is the landscape of these Latin poems. The choice of animal thus joins the array of self-consciously Greek names as an integral part of Vergil's Arcadian stage-setting.

And what of our ubiquitous ‘philosophers’? Are they the face of disengagement from society, of elite retreat, crystallizing the ongoing withdrawal of the Senatorial class? It may seem a natural conclusion. Ewald convincingly demonstrates, however, that our pieces with philosophers do not always honor the traditional dichotomy between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*. Rather than oppose philosophic *otium* to civic *negotium*, sometimes they explicitly conjoin the two instead.²⁴⁴ This is most obvious in a handful of ‘*processus consularis*’ pieces where generic philosophers occasionally round out the retinue. Here their presence as advisors underscores not the deceased’s withdrawal from political life, but exactly the opposite: his moral authority and right to hold office.²⁴⁵ On other magistrate sarcophagi, such as the famous “Four Brothers” piece in the Naples Museum²⁴⁶ (Figure 49), the active and contemplative life are unified paratactically through the multiple guises assumed by the deceased himself, who in the center dons the engaged citizen’s toga in order to talk with his *pallium*-clad philosophical double. One can imagine no clearer statement of the perceived harmony between this magistrate’s public/civic and intellectual roles: the latter is what qualifies him for the former.²⁴⁷ Or take that group of sarcophagi featuring a man with a scroll seated frontally and flanked by an adoring retinue of philosophers and Muses or Muse-like women,²⁴⁸ of which the most famous is the so-called “Plotinus Sarcophagus” in the Vatican’s Museo Gregoriano Profano²⁴⁹ (Figure 50). Here too the close connection between public and intellectual life is underscored: our deceased may be ensconced in his reading amidst a flock of philosophers; but his frontally enthroned pose is adopted from depictions of rulers and magistrates, while his thoroughly civic identity is proclaimed through his toga.²⁵⁰ These philosophers are not the face of social disengagement or withdrawal into a world of private *otium*. On the contrary: they proclaim the indispensability of practical philosophy and education for an active civic life.²⁵¹

²⁴⁴ Ewald 1999, 59; see also Zanker and Ewald 2004, 254.

²⁴⁵ Ewald 1999, 91-5.

²⁴⁶ Wrede 2001, 63, 70, 3, 6, pl. 17.1; Reinsberg 2006, 203, cat. 36, pl. 78.3, 83.4-6, 84.1-9, 85.1-9, 86.1-5, 87.1-4, 121.2, 7.3; Ewald 1999, 200-1, cat. G9, pl. 88.1.

²⁴⁷ Ewald 1999, 54-7, 9, 131.

²⁴⁸ Ewald’s “Group D”: Ewald 1999, 38-42, further at 59.

²⁴⁹ Wegner 1966, 47, cat. 116, pl. 64b, 70, 71; Ewald 1999, 167-9, cat. D3, pl. 42.1-2, 43.1-4; Zanker and Ewald 2004, 253, fig. 26.

²⁵⁰ Fittschen (1972, 491-2; cited by Ewald 1999, 39) reads the pose as particularly monarchical: it is a “treffliches Beispiel dafür, daß Bildformen, die für monarchische Selbstdarstellung erfunden worden sind, vom einfachen (natürlich reichen) Bürger übernommen werden konnten, mindestens im spulkralen Bereich.“ Ewald (1999, 39-40) agrees that it is derived from “Staatskunst” and its imagery of rule — hence why on sarcophagi it is never employed for women — but deems it generally magistratual rather than narrowly monarchical in origin. Zanker (2004, 253), as often, prefers not to specify, saying only that “die aus der Staatskunst abgeleitete Vorderansicht die Autorität des Dargestellten betonen sollte.”

²⁵¹ Did Marcus Aurelius serve as model here? It seems unlikely, given the century separating his reign (161-180 AD) from the pieces discussed here (mid-/late-third-century all).

One might respond, justifiably, that the types just mentioned represent only a small fraction of those third-century pieces with philosopher imagery. What about the large group showing a thinker seated in profile, often with a Muse or, later, an *orans*, standing before him to lend inspiration?²⁵² Or those which seat husband and wife at opposite ends of the front, turned towards each other, he in the guise of a thinker with scroll, she usually playing a lyre or cithara with one shoulder exposed in a romantic evocation of luxury and erotic beauty?²⁵³ Of this latter group, it is worth noting that two pieces — one being the sarcophagus in Rome’s Palazzo Corsini²⁵⁴ (Figure 51) — clothe the man not in a *pallium* but a *toga contabulata*, an index of office.²⁵⁵ The particular office at stake may be further specified on the Palazzo Corsini piece through the lid: showing a circus race, it was likely intended to proclaim his status as a sponsor of games, an *editor ludi*.²⁵⁶ But in general these more common schemes, lacking enthroned frontality or clear signs of magistracy, make no explicit reference to the public realm. Whether this means, however, that their ‘philosophers’ and intellectuals were intended explicitly to evoke the opposite — to be read as embodiments of social detachment — seems less than certain.

The best candidates for Wrede’s thesis that philosopher imagery crystallized civic disengagement and spoke to elite retreat are those pieces that join vignettes of thinkers with bucolic imagery.²⁵⁷ The notion that removing oneself to rustic surrounds provided the distance and leisure necessary for intellectual contemplation was already a commonplace by the Flavian period, if not before. Himmelmann²⁵⁸ reminds us of the well-known passage from Musonius Rufus, who in his Eleventh Discourse particularly recommends the life of a shepherd for any philosopher.²⁵⁹ Here the Stoic cites the example of Hesiod, himself a shepherd whose occupation provided the quiet requisite for his poetic unveiling of gods and cosmos.²⁶⁰ Perhaps ideas such as this underlay the conjunctions of bucolic and intellectual imagery? It is an attractive connection.

²⁵² Ewald’s “Inspiration Group / Group C”: Ewald 1999, 42-7. He counts 42 sarcophagi and fragments in this format, noting that it is especially common as a central motif on strigillated sarcophagi. Roughly a third give portrait features to either the seated thinker or the standing Muse/*orans*, but almost never to both. (Ewald 1999, 42-3.)

²⁵³ Ewald’s “Lycian Motif / Group E”: Ewald 1999, 48-53, also 124. He enumerates 37 examples, about equally split between frieze and strigillated pieces, though the former are the earlier: it seems to have been developed first for frieze sarcophagi during the Gallienic period, and subsequently translated to the strigillated format in the last quarter of the century. With few exceptions the woman sits on the left side, the man on the right, corresponding to the general privileging of this half of the coffin: the deceased was usually interred with head to the right, feet to the left. (Ewald 1999, 48-9.)

²⁵⁴ Wegner 1966, 63-4, cat. 162, pl. 10b, 16; Schauenburg 1995, 46-7, 51, 86, cat. 107, pl. 40.4; Ewald 1999, 180-1, cat. E22, pl. 61.3.

²⁵⁵ Ewald 1999, 48.

²⁵⁶ See page 51 above.

²⁵⁷ Cataloged and discussed with nuance by Ewald 1999, 62-77.

²⁵⁸ Himmelmann 1980, 22, 153; see also Zanker 1995, 270 = Zanker 1995, 287; Ewald 1999, 65.

²⁵⁹ Musonius Rufus, *Discourses* 11.8.

²⁶⁰ Musonius Rufus, *Discourses* 11.5-6.

Yet we might still hesitate before assuming that civic disengagement and social withdrawal are necessarily foregrounded in these visual clusters. Sometimes the archaeological evidence itself argues the contrary: as we saw above, the Palazzo Corsini piece (Figure 51)²⁶¹ garbs our deceased intellectual in a *toga contabulata* and further hints at his public office through that most urban of spectacles, a circus race, on the lid; yet the central field of this sarcophagus features that paradigmatically pastoral figure, an ovine-toting ‘good shepherd’. Do we imagine him tranquilly musing amidst the roars of the philosopher-magistrate’s own games? Bucolic and philosopher imagery are here conjoined, but retreat from civic engagement cannot be the subtext.

When looking at a sarcophagus that combines scenes of philosophers and shepherds, what should we imagine these intellectuals thinking and talking about? Practically anything, it seems, if we take pastoral poetry as our guide. Skoie notes that much of the popularity of the genre must be ascribed to its limitless scope: it allows the poet to broach almost any subject imaginable, once the background pastoral scene is set. Hence the importance of sheep as a framing device. Even though domestic animals are not actually mentioned that often in the *Eclogues* — in total volume of references there are lots of shepherds, but few sheep — nonetheless they are invoked at defining moments: often at the beginning of poems or passages, or at their end. The reason: the herd is the constitutive sign of the bucolic, the element that defines the pastoral as such. Thus every poem must reference the herd. Once this fixed pastoral frame is established however, our cosmopolitan shepherds are free to turn to whatever subject it is that our poet really wants to discuss: usually politics, erotics, or poetics; almost never pastoral themes themselves.²⁶² The subject matter itself then is often thoroughly urban, even if the frame is rural. This, I suggest, may be one reason why bucolic and ‘philosopher’ imagery were so easily conjoined on our sarcophagi. The setting of one was felt to give ample space for the far-ranging intellectual musings of the other, whether probing things civic or pacific. This must have constituted much of the appeal of the philosopher-beside-shepherd or thinker-amidst-bucolic-surrounds visual cluster. It presented a romanticized world whose inhabitants could be imagined musing about anything the viewer liked: perhaps social withdrawal, yes; but perhaps the next set of games to be sponsored instead, the lasting social significance of the *dextrarum junctio*, the sustaining glories of a rhetorical education, or the comforting image of Grandpa slumbering as Endymion on the next sarcophagus over.²⁶³

Imitating the Soldier Emperors?

Zanker proposes yet another variant of the argument lodging *Entmythologisierung* in the experiences of the Third Century Crisis. This version invokes not any general sense of anxiety leading to a desire for images of tranquil escapism, but rather changing modes of self-

²⁶¹ See note 255 above.

²⁶² Skoie 2004, 136-8.

²⁶³ This proposal accords nicely with Ewald’s closing point in *Der Philosoph als Leitbild*: that the image of the philosopher on Roman sarcophagi was not intended to evoke a particular philosophical school or even a specific domain of knowledge, but rather a general “Bildungsideal...das eklektischer Natur war und poetische, literarische, rhetorische und philosophisch Kenntnisse gleichermaßen umfaßt haben dürfte” (Ewald 1999, 134).

representation initiated by the emperors themselves. Citing Marianne Bergmann's study of theomorphic ruler portraits,²⁶⁴ Zanker notes that mythological portraiture among Rome's rulers reached its zenith in the late Antonine period, under Commodus — one thinks of the Capitoline's glorious bust of him in the guise of Hercules²⁶⁵ (Figure 52) — and then continued, if less emphatically, under Septimius Severus.²⁶⁶ Starting with Caracalla, however, the 'soldier emperors' abandon both mythological portraiture (no more divine attributes) and self-representation in the manner of cultivated philhellenes (no more luxurious beard, full perfumed hair, and soft or effete facial expressions). Instead, they cultivate a hard-boiled image of down-to-earth power and pragmatic intensity conveyed through short hair and beard, hard expressions, and 'realistic' physiognomies (Figure 53), apparently rejecting the earlier, Antonine, mode of self-representation as too literary and "cultured" (*gebildet*).²⁶⁷ And the populace, Zanker implies, may have followed the emperors' example, replacing mythological fantasies with 'down-to-earth' scenes of 'real-life' figures stripped of mythic trimming.²⁶⁸

It is difficult to know to which categories of sarcophagus imagery this proposal applies. One's immediate response is to ask about timing. As Gerke had already determined, mythological portraiture on sarcophagi is largely limited to the period between 220 and 250 AD.²⁶⁹ Antonine examples, such as the Admetus and Alcestis casket in the Vatican²⁷⁰ (Figure 8), are rare indeed;²⁷¹ and the practice ends abruptly in the last quarter of the third century.²⁷² Granted,

²⁶⁴ Bergmann 1998.

²⁶⁵ Fittschen and Zanker 1985, 85-90, cat. 78, pl. 91-4; Kleiner 1992, 276-7, fig. 43; issues of interpretation: Hallett 2005, 197-8, 253, 60-61, 71-77.

²⁶⁶ Note that where exactly one locates the zenith may depend on the medium considered. Hallett for example observes that "theomorphic imagery continues on Roman coins *after* the rule of Commodus perhaps more strongly than ever before" (Hallett 2005, 254; emphasis in original). He also makes us aware of the categorical difference between portraits of humans given divine attributes and images of gods given human portrait features, a distinction that we tend to collapse but that would have been clear, from architectural and inscriptional context, to ancient viewers (Hallett 2005, 237-47).

²⁶⁷ Bergmann herself (1998, 290) used the term "poetic" (*poetisch*) rather than "cultured" (*gebildet*), which lends a slightly different cast.

²⁶⁸ Zanker and Ewald 2004, 259-60.

²⁶⁹ Gerke 1940, 11 n. 2.

²⁷⁰ Sichtermann and Koch 1975, 20-1, pl. 16, 7.2, 8.1-2, 9.1-2; Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 136; Grassinger 1999, 110-28 *passim*, 227-8, cat. 76, pl. 75.2, 78-81, 84.6-7; Kastelic 1999, 261-6; Koch 1993, 50-1; Zanker and Ewald 2004, 202-4, 98-301, fig. 182-3; Newby 2011, 194-6, fig. 6.1.

²⁷¹ The earliest mythological sarcophagus to append portrait features may well be a fragment in Ostia; dated to the 140s, it outfits a chariot-driving Demeter with a portrait head (Zanker and Ewald 2004, 94, fig. 78; Newby 2011, 194 n. 23, 9 n. 49).

²⁷² Some of the last are a fragment in Kassel, dated to the 270s, that assigns portrait features to Meleager (Borg 2013, 173; Koch 1975, 95-6, cat. 30, pl. 44b-c, 6-51, 3c-e); and another Meleager piece — this one, astonishingly, reduces the hunter and Atalanta to putti, gives Atalanta the wings of Psyche, and reserves portrait features for both — in Basel from the Tetrarchic period (Borg 2013, 173; Koch 1975,

defining the beginning- and end-dates of a phenomenon's heyday always involves a certain amount of generalization. While Wrede, working with a full inventory, confirms Gerke's dates,²⁷³ Newby prefers to set the boundaries a bit further out, naming the entire half-century between 200 and 250 AD as the period when mythological portraiture blossoms.²⁷⁴ But the point remains that examples of it on sarcophagi predating Caracalla are few. This means that mythological portraiture *begins* on our coffins almost exactly when it ends on imperial portraits. A certain time lag might be expected; indeed, trickle-down theories always require it. But in this case the lag approaches absolute disjunction.

Another disjunction lies in the lack of agreement between the image of the soldier emperors and those of private citizens on our sarcophagi. Even if one thinks that the notion of the *Zeitgesicht* ("period face") is sometimes pressed too far in studies of Roman art,²⁷⁵ it does seem a given that our deceased of the third century adopt the short haircuts popularized by Caracalla and his successors. What they do *not* adopt, however, are the facial expressions. As we already noted,²⁷⁶ the portraits on our sarcophagi display no trace of general anxiety or existential burden. The fact is that, while the soldier emperors may style themselves as tough and resolute types shouldering the burdens of an uncertain future, contemporary private portraits on sarcophagi do not follow suit. They do not scowl, nor look remotely haggard. Placidity rules. And the fact that so many, from roughly 250 AD onwards, pose as studious philosophers or cosmopolitan intellectuals only underscores this difference.

If the soldier emperors abandon both theomorphic portraiture and self-representation as cultured philhellenes in favor of a new face — 'realistic' and contoured, manly and resolved — which sarcophagi can we imagine to correspond in both chronology and trajectory? Probably the 'biographical' lion-hunt pieces. They developed in the 220s and 230s, and replaced mythological figures (though not mythological portraits) with 'real' men boldly facing the same wild threat. But beyond these parallels, other ones between the self-representation of soldier emperors and our dead civilians are hard to draw. Again, then, the lion-hunt sarcophagi prove to be the great testing case. Theories of *Entmythologisierung* either stumble against them; or, as here, prove able to encompass them, but offer only limited purchase on other genres.

26-8, 106, cat. 72, pl. 64-67). According to Henning Wrede (1981, 157), the latest known piece to employ mythological portraiture is a Christian columnar sarcophagus in Arles, dated to the second quarter of the fourth century. It figures the deceased as the Dioscuri, probably to proclaim the couple's *concordia*. Its date makes it an extreme outlier.

²⁷³ Wrede 1981, 143, 56, 70; Wrede 2001, 109.

²⁷⁴ Newby 2011, 192.

²⁷⁵ The *Zeitgesicht* thesis: that private portraiture of any given period tends to imitate the hairstyle and portrait style made fashionable by the reigning emperor and his wife. For the thesis: Boschung 1993; Fittschen and Zanker 1983; Zanker 1982. For critique: Bergmann 1982; Smith 1998.

²⁷⁶ See page 48 above.

DESIRE TO PROJECT SOCIAL STATUS?

A final account of *Entmythologisierung* to be addressed here similarly falls within the category of the socio-political, though it may seem less an explanation of the phenomenon than a restatement of it. This account sees in the rise of mythless genres a growing desire for imagery better capable of projecting social status. Sketched by Zanker,²⁷⁷ it has been articulated most compellingly by Barbara Borg as part of an ambitious argument about the changing nature of status projection in the third century. The argument has far-reaching consequences, so is worth summarizing in some detail.

The third century presents an interesting picture when it comes to public buildings and related monuments. In contrast to the flourishing building boom of the second century, the third sees dramatic drop-off: few new public buildings are erected; inscriptions diminish precipitously; and the production of honorific statuary in recognition of public munificence withers. Faced with this constellation, many have postulated a connection between the reduced building activity and the decline in honorific statues, ascribing both to presumed diminished competition for public recognition and prestige among the patrician classes. Shaken by the economic turmoil of the Third Century Crisis and increasingly drained of political power, the argument goes, the Empire's various elite had disengaged from public competition and retreated into the private sphere, a *Rückzug ins Private* which led to decreased expenditure on public works, monuments, and status-projecting imagery in general.²⁷⁸

Borg's contribution is systematically to call many of these assumptions into question, while providing an alternate explanation for what is left. So she argues that the third century's decline in building activity was less dramatic than we have assumed,²⁷⁹ and cites research indicating that the economic troubles of the third century have been exaggerated, particularly for those near the top of the social pyramid: the effects of currency devaluation and inflation were less disruptive than usually assumed, and in the metropolis in particular the upper classes maintained economic and social stability sufficient to allow them to continue purchasing the luxury goods to which they were accustomed, including portrait statues of a quality matching those of the second century when they wanted them.²⁸⁰ (The issue then is not why they were no longer able to fund them — they were — but why they no longer cared to.)

As for the notion that Rome's upper classes had largely disengaged from public competition and retreated into the private sphere, Borg contests this from funerary evidence. We know, thanks to Henner von Hesberg and Paul Zanker, how the bombastic, thoroughly extroverted, public-accosting and status-shrieking tombs of the Late Republic's aristocracy had given way, during and especially after the Augustan age, to a different mode of sepulchral self-representation. Tombs pulled back from the street, their monumental façades shrank, and their eye-catching

²⁷⁷ Zanker and Ewald 2004, 253-5.

²⁷⁸ Borg 2007, 43-4, 50-3.

²⁷⁹ Borg 2007, 45-50, 70.

²⁸⁰ Borg 2007, 45, citing Witschel 1999, 78-91, 239-374.

architectural excesses were excised as their ever-roomier familial interiors replaced their public exteriors as the new site of mourning and commemoration. The dead individual, in short, withdrew from the public gaze.²⁸¹ This emphasis on sepulchral interiority and domestic rather than public commemoration was a necessary precondition for the subsequent shift to inhumation and sarcophagi, and is therefore a crucial episode in the pre-history of our coffins. Borg's contribution is to make us aware, however, that such reticence did not last. This she does by demonstrating that the sepulchral landscape of the third century saw patricians tilt back towards ostentatious display, as stridently showy tombs began reappearing to assault passers-by, their monumental façades again blaring status.²⁸² That is to say, the increasingly extroverted tombs of the third century evince no 'retreat into the private sphere'. On the contrary. They show Rome's patricians rediscovering their zeal for public jockeying in the circus of the dead.

It is here that our sarcophagi enter the picture. If the third century saw a rising tide of mythless genres sweep away the old mythological pieces, it was because these better met the elite's growing hunger for imagery capable of brazenly projecting social prestige.²⁸³ She cites the 'biographical' lion-hunt sarcophagi as a good example: by showing the deceased in 'real-life' form, accompanied directly by the figure of Virtus, it trumpets his own virtue more directly than the older mythological hunts had done. The ubiquitous philosopher sarcophagi, as well as those showing Muses, celebrate the education of the deceased, which had become a decisive means of social distinction for both sexes in the third century. For similar reasons the magistrate sarcophagi (Beamtensarkophage), which had first appeared in the Antonine period, become more popular²⁸⁴ (although with something of a change in emphasis, as the earlier scenes showing a military course — one thinks of the Antonine commander sarcophagi — were replaced by a range of civic occupations and affairs.)²⁸⁵

Such 'biographical' sarcophagi thus serve as crucial pieces for Borg's rebuttal of elite retreat. But they do more: they allow her to trace a shift in how power was proclaimed. If the Third Century does see a decline — less severe than previously thought, but still a decline — in public building activity and honorific statuary, this indicates no reduced competition for status among Rome's aristocrats, but only a shift in how it was projected. The static display of insignia and other marks of office no longer sufficed. Status was increasingly something performative, something ceremonial, enacted in carefully crafted intercourse with entourage and audience: a

²⁸¹ von Hesberg and Zanker 1987; for a condensed version see Zanker and Ewald 2004, 179, 81-83.

Extensively cataloged and confirmed for the Roman *suburbium* in particular by Griesbach 2007, summarized at 162, 4.

²⁸² Borg 2007, 53-63, 70.

²⁸³ "Darstellungsthemen, welche vor allem die emotionale Verbundenheit der Ehepartner und die Trauer um den geliebten Angehörigen thematisierten, traten zugunsten von Themen zurück, welche die...Leistungen des Verstorbenen hervorhoben, die ihrerseits Grundlage von sozialem Status und Prestige waren" (Borg 2007, 60-1).

²⁸⁴ For the lion-hunt sarcophagi: Andreae 1980. For the philosopher and Muse sarcophagi: Ewald 1999. For the magistrate and commander sarcophagi: Reinsberg 2006.

²⁸⁵ Borg 2007, 61.

matter of action and ritualized performance in daily conduct. It just so happens that this mode of enacting power and creating prestige leaves fewer material traces behind for us to savor.

Nonetheless Borg sees this shift towards performative — i.e., temporary and ephemeral — forms of self-representation manifested on our coffins. Central to her argument here are the magistrate sarcophagi. In contrast to their second-century brethren, our third-century pieces emphasize less the protagonist's insignia of office (*sella curulis*, *fascēs*, etc.) than his interactions with audience and retinue. Those showing the deceased giving games furnish good examples;²⁸⁶ but best are those staging his entrance to high office through procession, such as the notable Acilia sarcophagus (Figure 54, Figure 55).²⁸⁷ This presents a scene of public office taking, whether a *processus consularis* or entrance into some other position (on this debate see Appendix E: The Acilia Sarcophagus). Escorted by a personification of the Roman Senate (the *genius senatus*), and accompanied by *equites* and other civilians, the deceased is shown embarking on a ritual procession into his new magistracy. All hinges on the ceremonialized display, the social performance, of power. If honorific statuary was no longer the preferred means for projecting status then, this was because it was poorly suited to the new mode. For staging dramatized conduct with an adoring retinue one needed teeming relief, not isolated sculpture in the round. It is no accident then that sarcophagi burgeoned as honorific statuary withered, nor that they became the third century's single most important form of art: both had to do with changes in how Romans practiced power.

There is much in this piece to admire. Borg's driving point — that the third century saw no elite disengagement from public competition or retreat into the private sphere — is ambitiously and forcibly argued, and I am certainly in no position to disagree. Closer to home, her attitude towards *Entmythologisierung* is refreshing for its explicit insistence on framing the phenomenon in terms positive rather than negative: she wants to emphasize not what is lost through demythologization, but what is gained. What, in her view, *is* gained? “Greater clarity with regard to the message of the representation and more focus on motifs proclaiming status.”²⁸⁸ Mythic allegory, we might say, always runs the risk of obscuring what it intends to illuminate. Equipping mythological protagonists with the portrait features of the dead man or woman — i.e., the mode of mythological portraiture — had been one step towards making the allegorical connection between hero and deceased clearer, in order to claim the virtues of the former for the latter.²⁸⁹ But foregoing the myth entirely was even better. By abandoning the mythological trappings, the fundamental message — the proclamation of status — gained in force, directness,

²⁸⁶ Unexpectedly, Reinsberg 2006 does not collate these. They are recorded and addressed, however, in Wrede 2001, 76-84.

²⁸⁷ Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 86, 102-3; Sapelli 1998, 30-3, cat. 13; Wrede 2001, 63, 72-3, 5, 8, 95, pl. 17.2; Kleiner 2007, 272, fig. 18.14; and especially Reinsberg 2006, 145-7, 218-9, cat. 88, pl. 79.2, 90.1-5, 91.1-2, 92.1-8, 93.1-8, 94.1-2, 120.6, 2.10, which contains the fullest bibliography.

²⁸⁸ “[G]rößere Deutlichkeit hinsichtlich der Botschaft der Darstellungen und eine Fokussierung auf statusrelevante Motive” (Borg 2007, 60).

²⁸⁹ Here she endorses Zanker and Ewald 2004, 45-50. For more on mythological portraiture, see the discussion beginning on page 93 below.

and clarity.²⁹⁰ Borg's prime example, already mentioned, is the metamorphosis of the lion hunt.²⁹¹ But reduced ambiguity was not the only advantage. It also allowed for a wider range of social virtues and public recognition to be staged than the mythological mode could: not just *virtus* and *concordia*, *pietas* and *fidelitas*, but the performative prestige gained from a procession, of carefully crafted conduct enacted before one's peers and inferiors. This, we imagine, might have been beyond the power of mythological imagery to convey.

This makes a great deal of sense. On sarcophagi the mythological mode had always been geared to expressing private values and emotions, not social status or class consciousness.²⁹² Does it not make sense, then, to assume that myth may have been abandoned because of a new desire to proclaim the latter?

My reservations are two. First, who would have seen these sarcophagi? If only the family, no matter how extended, then using them to jockey for prestige would seem silly. A bombastic tomb with a monumental façade certainly could have had major public impact. But the coffin inside it could not. It is also true however that we know almost nothing about who accompanied the family's visits to the tomb.²⁹³ If important clients, friends, or even the occasional high-ranking guest could be expected to figure in the party, then it becomes more plausible to imagine our coffins pressed into service in the battle over social status. The very existence of these status-obsessed sarcophagi may, in fact, be strong reason to deduce a more expanded viewership in the tomb than normally assumed. If so, then this reservation collapses.

The second reservation revolves around a different question: to how many of the demythologized types can Borg's account be applied? The ones to fit cleanly are certain biographical pieces, namely the various hunt sarcophagi and the handful showing magistrates entering office and giving games. But other biographical types, such as those featuring weddings or advertising the couple's martial bonds — far more common in the third century than the

²⁹⁰ Borg (Borg 2007, 61 n. 102) thanks Raeck 1992, 160-6 (to which we might add 78, 83, 139, 155-156) for this concept of "neuen Deutlichkeit," even if she does not entirely agree with his interpretation of its cause. Ewald (Ewald 1999, 78) makes a similar argument regarding the Muse sarcophagi: the insertion of the deceased into their midst, followed by the Muses' own subsequent disappearance, was a way to achieve "clearer allegorical expression" ("deutlicherer allegorischer Aussage"). Wrede (Wrede 2001, 109) extends the argument further, applying it to a variety of genres: the development of Muse and 'biographical' hunt formats in the 220s, concomitant with the rise of mythological portraiture, which had its heyday between 220 and 250 AD, followed by the explosive growth of bucolic, philosopher, season, and other images of "ländlichen Glück" in the last half of the century — all were strategies for achieving "more transparent praise for the qualities of the deceased" ("...durchsichtigeres Eigenschaftslob der Verstorbenen").

²⁹¹ See page 64 above; for fuller discussion of these pieces, see the section devoted to them: "*Libera eas de ore leonis?*", from page 21 onward.

²⁹² Ewald 2003, 563; Zanker and Ewald 2004, 240, 4-5.

²⁹³ Elsner 2011, 7.

magistrate sarcophagi²⁹⁴ — are harder to read in terms of status-projection. They proclaim the deceased couple's *concordia*, an important virtue, to be sure; but it would exceed plausibility to think their rhetoric comparable to the overwrought, prestige-obsessed imagery of pieces showing the deceased entering high office or felling a lion. These latter might admit imagining as true ammunition in the upper classes' bombastic competition for status, fitting companions (assuming they were seen) to the orotund tomb façades beginning again to bluster the streets. But it is difficult to think that scenes of marital *concordia* were ever intended for such a task. Their message is that of tender bourgeois respectability: a happy picture to warm the family (certainly the main audience), but hardly a potent image for political jockeying. This is the face of domestic commemoration, not public competition.

Much the same can be said of the numerous philosopher sarcophagi as well. Pieces portraying the deceased in this garb, as a 'lay intellectual', proclaim his status as a man of letters and culture, while those showing only generic philosophers might convey the same, though at greater remove: in either case, a pleasant reminder for the family of the deceased's respectability. Ewald's argument that the philosopher functions in this context as an abstract emblem of cultivated bourgeois taste is apt.²⁹⁵ But no matter how much the philosopher served here as a general symbol of cultivated education and civic values, it is difficult to imagine these pieces designed to impress a crowd, or serving as tools in the upper classes' competitive jousts over public honor and the prestige of leadership.²⁹⁶ They are too 'bourgeois' for that. The point is underscored by the fact that these philosopher motifs often appear with other emblems of *pax*, *felicitas*, and the *vita felix* (seasons, shepherds and 'good shepherds', *orantes*, Cupid and Psyche, etc.²⁹⁷), but almost never in connection with the shrillest of the status-obsessed genres, the hunt

²⁹⁴ Thanks to Carola Reinsberg's recent ASR volume devoted to the *vita romana* sarcophagi, we now have good numbers on the frequency of these various types. Especially helpful is the table, stretching over six pages, which charts them chronologically (Reinsberg 2006, 268-73). This registers 31 third-century examples of *Beamtenarkophage* or *Magistratssarkophage* (she prefers the latter term): Reinsberg 2006, 129-30), with by far the majority clustered in the years between 240 and 280. Tabulating the pieces celebrating weddings is trickier, because the main motif — that of husband and wife joining right hands (the *dextrarum junctio*) — can appear in a variety of contexts. Sometimes it is combined with vignettes of sacrifice and good generalship, as on the celebrated commander sarcophagi of the Antonine period. At other times it stands alone, most often in the third century on strigillated sarcophagi, where it commonly appears as the central element. In aggregate, however, Reinsberg records 51 third-century examples with the wedding motif: almost time-and-two-thirds the number of magistrate sarcophagi.

²⁹⁵ Ewald 1999, 121-4, and at greater length but less pointedly at 54-62.

²⁹⁶ Exceptions might be the generic philosophers who occasionally round out the retinue on our few '*processus consularis*' pieces, their presence as advisors underscoring the deceased's moral authority and right to hold office (Ewald 1999, 91-5).

²⁹⁷ On seasons, bucolic motifs, philosophers, and *stibadium* meals as *Glücksvisionen* ("visions of bliss"): Zanker and Ewald 2004, 167-74. On seasons, bucolic motifs, *orantes*, philosophers, Cupid and Psyche, Orpheus, *stibadium* meals, and cart journey scenes as emblems of the *vita felix*: Ewald 1999, 65, 9-74, 131-3.

sarcophagi.²⁹⁸ The contrast is instructive: while philosopher imagery could be used to extol the cultivated status of the deceased, its general valence lay closer to impersonal symbols of peace, happiness, and abundance²⁹⁹ than to those flashily showcasing the deceased's personal manly virtue.

Finally, there remain two main groups of mythless sarcophagi: those with bucolic imagery, and those featuring the seasons. To call them hugely important is an understatement. They are the two most popular genres of the second half of the third century, stamping our very impression of half a century's production.³⁰⁰ Yet they would seem poor choices indeed for proclaiming social status, if that was the desired message. Surely they crystallize fantasies of pastoral tranquility and idyllic contemplation amidst nature's abundance, not claims of prestige and the projection of power. Some might argue that the latter is always implicit in the former; but if so, it is so latent as to be nigh invisible on these, the most popular of demythologized pieces. In short, it is difficult to attribute *Entmythologisierung* as a whole to any growing desire for imagery better capable of projecting social status — particularly when mythological figures exemplifying responsible leadership and respectable social status were long at hand and could easily have been deployed for the purpose. Why not develop scenes of Priam, of Lycomedes, of Nestor, rather than seasons and shepherds? The thesis ultimately suffers from the same qualifications as Wrede's:³⁰¹ while it clarifies the appeal and thus helps to explain the rise of a sub-section of mythless imagery (namely, a few of the 'biographical' genres), it cannot give purchase on the widespread abandonment of mythic imagery as a whole.

CONCLUSION: NO UNITARY *ENTMYTHOLOGISIERUNG*

This concludes our survey of arguments invoking cultural, social, and/or political shifts. Is it possible to harmonize or synthesize them? The task proves difficult. Some have not aged well, premised as they are on older social or eschatological assumptions of dated currency. Here we might think of Gerke's proposed *volkstümliche Strömung*,³⁰² Andreae's suggestion that the demythologization of hunt sarcophagi spoke to desires for victory over death and hopes for a better state to come,³⁰³ or earlier estimations of Christian influence.³⁰⁴ Others lack falsifiability

²⁹⁸ Ewald 1999, 73.

²⁹⁹ The seminal work demonstrating that the 'good shepherd' and other bucolic motifs served as impersonal symbols of *pax* and *felicitas* — rather than as allegories of personal *philanthropia* or *humanitas* (à la Klauser) — is Himmelmann 1980, especially 121, 42. The impersonal status of the 'good shepherd', for example, is underscored by the fact that he, in contrast to the *orans*, never carries portrait features: further evidence that he is "keine Allegorie einer persönlichen Tugend, sondern Chiffre für einen unpersönlichen Zustand, nämlich das bukolische Idyll mit all seinen Konnotationen von friedlichem Glück" (Himmelmann 1980, 142).

³⁰⁰ See "The Second Half of the Third Century: The Surge of Non-Mythological Genres", from page 11 onward.

³⁰¹ See the discussion beginning on page 52 above.

³⁰² Page 34.

³⁰³ Page 23.

or possible control (*Entmythologisierung* as a reaction to the negative experiences of the age³⁰⁵), or posit society-wide changes (e.g., slumping classical literacy yielding diminished interest in myth³⁰⁶) untenable in light of evidence from other domains (such as mythological imagery's continued vitality in the domestic sphere). Some suffer from a temporal disjunction between proposed cause and effect (soldier emperors' rejection of theomorphic portraiture and citizens' rejection of mythic fantasies³⁰⁷) or between elements claimed to share affinity (the late-Antonine *Stilwandel*'s abandonment of classical form and the post-Severan abandonment of mythic content³⁰⁸). Still others address the change in tone and message of the reliefs (whether as general flight from turmoil³⁰⁹ or Senate-led bucolic escapism³¹⁰), but give no purchase on why our carvers and clients should have jettisoned the mythological mode *per se* when giving shape to this escape.³¹¹

The greatest obstruction to a synthesis, however, is that many of these proposals offer only limited or indeed no traction on the phenomenon of *Entmythologisierung* as a whole. Andreae's explanation for the demythologization of hunt sarcophagi, for example, can have no application outside of that particular genre.³¹² Gerke's *volkstümliche Strömung* might have relevance for bucolic pieces or the much smaller number showcasing driven hunts, but season sarcophagi largely escape it, and philosopher pieces cause it particular problems.³¹³ Wrede's thesis may illuminate the preferred subject matter of 'Senatorial' sarcophagi, but has trouble explaining the widespread appeal of many of these same motifs to other clientele;³¹⁴ and while our handful of cart journey and *stibadium* scenes clearly resonated with dreams of villa life and perhaps, by extension, crystallized disengagement from public life and 'elite retreat', things are murkier with bucolic scenes, in light of what they conjure,³¹⁵ and questionable too for philosopher motifs, given the civic valence of many.³¹⁶ Zanker's suggestion that civilians discarded mythic trappings in imitation of trend-setting hard-boiled soldier emperors may provide leverage on the lion hunt sarcophagi, but can be extended little further.³¹⁷ And while Borg's proposal of escalating interest

³⁰⁴ Page 32.

³⁰⁵ Page 46.

³⁰⁶ Page 39.

³⁰⁷ Page 60.

³⁰⁸ Page 35.

³⁰⁹ Page 44.

³¹⁰ Page 51.

³¹¹ Pages 49 and 53.

³¹² Page 23.

³¹³ Page 34.

³¹⁴ Page 52.

³¹⁵ Page 55.

³¹⁶ Page 58.

³¹⁷ Page 62.

in status display and jockeying for prestige helps to clarify the appeal of genres such as the magistrate sarcophagi, it provides less insight into philosopher imagery or wedding scenes, and even less for bucolic and season sarcophagi.³¹⁸

All are thus of limited application, with purchase on only certain sub-sections of our demythologized imagery. Here I must pause to make clear: this is emphatically *not* intended to scold, even less sneer, since few of our theorists actually claim or aim to provide explanations of *Entmythologisierung* as a whole. But it does lead to the fear that the phenomenon itself is too fractured to admit of comprehensive explanation. If no theory can account for more than a part of the whole, perhaps this is because there *is* no ‘whole’. Perhaps we are dealing with multiple independent and unrelated processes, strung out over a century, each responding to a particular set of historical circumstances and desires, each with a logic of its own, but with no inherent connection between them. Perhaps we have hypostatized ‘demythologization’, attributing essence to an aggregate of unrelated effects. *Entmythologisierung* may thus be a term of only notional integrity, a hermeneutic red herring, a phantom category that seduces us into assuming that the disparate artistic developments artificially arrayed under its umbrella actually share a deeper unity. If so, *Entmythologisierung* may prove to be like Gertrude Stein’s Oakland: “There is no there there.”

For the moment, however, we shall need to put this fear on hold. So far we have considered *Entmythologisierung* understood as the *rejection* of myth, that is, the complete abandonment of mythological narratives and motifs in favor of other types of imagery. But there remains that other way in which the term is used: *Entmythologisierung* as the *deformation* of myth, in which figures are increasingly abstracted from their narrative mooring to serve as stand-alone symbols, leading first to fragmentation, then dissolution, of the mythic context. It is to this that we now turn.

³¹⁸ Page 66.

CHAPTER 2 — THE ABSTRACTION OF MYTH: FROM NARRATIVE TO SYMBOL?

DEMYTHOLOGIZATION AND NARRATIVE DISSOLUTION

The preceding chapter considered *Entmythologisierung* understood as the rejection of myth: the wholesale abandonment of mythological narratives and motifs in favor of other types of imagery. We turn now to another phenomenon: the process observed on some mythological sarcophagi in which ancillary episodes or subsidiary figures are progressively stripped away, yielding a contracted and fragmented narrative. Sometimes this is carried so far as to leave only the central figure, which now, abstracted from any narrative context, functions as a stand-alone symbol.

A weak form of this can be traced on the Adonis sarcophagi. Most of those early in the series — such as the piece in the Louvre,³¹⁹ likely sculpted between 150 and 160 AD — show a standardized set of three scenes: the hero's departure from Venus, his encounter with the boar, and Venus's embrace of the wounded hero. Several works carved later in the series, however — such as the famous specimen in Mantua's Palazzo Ducale³²⁰ (Figure 18), from about 190, or the relief in Rome's Villa Giustiniani Massimo³²¹ (Figure 19), dated near 180 — amputate one or the other of these scenes, in order to bring the remainder into greater focus. (The departure or embrace is usually the one to go, leaving always the pivotal moment of the hunt.)³²² A stronger form of this process of abbreviation can be seen on a mid-third century Endymion sarcophagus in Rome's Palazzo Braschi³²³ (Figure 20). So thoroughly has the carver here isolated the drowsy shepherd from his narrative setting, expunging other characters in the process, that even Selene, whose nocturnal visits are central to the story, finds herself excised. A lone Cupid is left to admire Endymion on his own. Such isolation makes the heroic sleeper's emblematic status clearer. He serves as a pure image of 'death-as-eternal-sleep'.³²⁴ But gaining this focus required — so it is said — that the myth itself be "squeezed out, repressed, or neutralized."³²⁵

³¹⁹ Grassinger 1999, 211, cat. 43, pl. 38.1, 40.1, 42.1, 45.1, 62.6.

³²⁰ Zanker and Ewald 2004, 209, fig. 188; Grassinger 1999, 215, cat. 55, pl. 47.1, 48.1, 50.2.

³²¹ Grassinger 1999, 214-5, cat. 53, pl. 46.1.

³²² Koortbojian 1995, 26-8, 41-8.

³²³ Sichtermann 1992, 155, cat. 02, pl. 99.3, 08.3-4, 12.13; Koortbojian 1995, 135-41, fig. 49; Zanker and Ewald 2004, 107, fig. 90. The famous piece in the British Museum's Cook collection (Figure 70) features a similarly abstracted and extracted Endymion, likely recarved from an Ariadne (Gerke 1940, 17-8; Wrede 1981, 154; Walker 1990, 38, cat. 43, pl. 16; Sichtermann 1992, 46, 54-5, pl. 99.4, 108.1; Koortbojian 1995, 135-41, fig. 50; Ewald 1999, 76, esp. n. 415).

³²⁴ Wrede (1981, 150) points out that the motifs of Cupid sleeping and Ariadne with eyes closed perform the same task, especially when presented in isolated fashion under the clipeus or in the central field of strigillated pieces.

³²⁵ Weigand 1941, 414.

Or we could cite the dozens of third-century strigillated and clipeus sarcophagi outfitted with mythological vignettes. Sometimes these occupy the central panel, like the rapt Ganymede and eagle hovering over a reclining Mount Ida on a casket in the Vatican's Pio-Clementino³²⁶ (Figure 32), the Leda reclining with the swan on a chest in the Capitoline (Figure 56), or the Hercules emerging from the doors of the underworld with Cerberus in tow on a satin-smooth piece in the Montemartini (Figure 57). In other cases these vignettes occupy the end fields instead, like the young Achilles with Chiron doubled on a work in Rome's Baths of Diocletian³²⁷ (Figure 58, Figure 59). But no matter which position they occupy, such scenes seldom exceed two figures; often they feature only one. Abstracted from their narrative mooring, these isolated figures are all that remain of a mythic context now dissolved.³²⁸

Accounts of this phenomenon often emphasize the typological interpenetration of stories as a factor in the collapse of mythic specificity, and the semiotic slippage and narrative deformation that result. Thus Blome, writing about the Adonis sarcophagus in the Villa Giustiniani Massimo (Figure 19), notes that the hero here is accompanied by a horse, that Venus has a nurse, and that the goddess rushes in directly to behold Adonis's wounding. These jarring motifs — jarring because nonsensical within the story of Adonis — were all borrowed from another source: sarcophagi showing the story of Hippolytus and Phaedra. So Adonis leads a horse here as Hippolytus had, Venus sits before a nurse as Phaedra had, and Venus storms in to witness the hunt as Virtus had. Finally, Adonis's embrace by Venus is dropped entirely, because it has no possible parallel in the other story. The carver of this coffin thus reinterpreted Adonis through typological assimilation to Hippolytus, as one brave hunter to another — the better to press Adonis into service as a symbolic emblem of *virtus*. But this required that he strain the original story of Adonis beyond recognition.³²⁹ In such cases, we read, turning the mythic figure into an effective symbol requires sacrificing narrative cohesion.³³⁰ It involves “borrowing” motifs (Koortbojian) and “wrenching” episodes from their original context (Blome), and the result is said to be “loss of feeling for the mythic type” (Wrede), “deformation” of the story (Turcan), “narrative incoherence” (Giuliani), “absurdity at the mythological level” (Blome), and ultimately the “contamination” (Koortbojian) and “decay” (Brilliant) of myth.³³¹

This trend towards greater abstraction and narrative dissolution, like the abandonment of mythological imagery discussed in Chapter 1, has also been labeled a form of *Entmythologisierung*. I find this deeply problematic, because it conflates unlike phenomena. The abbreviation, fragmentation, and deformation of mythological narratives just described is

³²⁶ Sichtermann 1992, 166-7, cat. 43, pl. 15.1, 16.2.

³²⁷ Matz 1968/1975, 79-80; Grassinger 1999, 195, cat. 3, pl. 2-3.

³²⁸ On the fragmentary compositions and stand-alone symbols favored for strigillated sarcophagi, see Gerke 1940, 15, 36, 311; Ewald 1999, 80; Ewald 2003, 568.

³²⁹ Blome 1992, 1068-9, 71. Here he follows Turcan 1978, 1727-9 and Turcan 1987, 430-2.

³³⁰ Zanker and Ewald 2004, 52, 4.

³³¹ Koortbojian 1995, 42; Blome 1992, 1071; Wrede 1981, 154, 71; Turcan 1987, 429-31; Giuliani 1989, 29, 37; Blome 1992, 1064; Koortbojian 1995, 42; Brilliant 1984, 161. As the reader will see below (see page 79), I reject such doomsday rhetoric as needlessly apocalyptic.

manifestly not the same as the constriction of the mythological repertoire as a whole and its eventual replacement by other genres discussed earlier. One refers to a development within how narratives are depicted; the other refers to the disappearance of such narratives and their figures entirely. Applying the term *Entmythologisierung* to both implies that these are related phenomena, parts of a single trend in Roman funerary relief. Whether they *are* related, however, is precisely what needs to be determined. We must disaggregate the two; only then will we gain necessary traction on a concept framed too broadly.

Are they, then, related phenomena? Gerke thought that they were. More specifically, he assumed that one led to the other. In the sarcophagus reliefs of the second century, he wrote, myth had been “depicted for its own sake”.³³² But attitudes and desires changed during the third. Mythic figures were increasingly detached from their narratives to serve as stand-alone symbols, above all, as symbols of death or its denial. Such reduction was most visible on strigillated specimens, but it manifested itself on frieze sarcophagi as well. Eventually these figures from myth became so abstracted as to lose their power to speak at all.³³³ Reduced almost to nothing, they were abandoned, or replaced by non-mythological elements such as bucolic motifs that better resonated with the rising “popular/folksy current” (*volkstümliche Strömung*) already discussed.³³⁴ His paradigmatic example for this process is Endymion. As our somnolent hero is progressively isolated from his dramatic context to serve as an emblem of deathless sleep, the generic shepherds and other bucolic motifs previously limited to the sides and ends come to colonize ever more of the front. In the end even Endymion himself succumbs, and we are left with a pure bucolic genre, fully demythologized.³³⁵

In Gerke’s view then, myth’s abstraction led to its final abandonment. Extract a character from his narrative context, make him carry excessive symbolic weight, and eventually he too will die and disappear from the picture, leaving the non-mythic behind to carry the field. It is thus no wonder that this pioneering thinker grouped both phenomena — the reduction of myth and the rejection of myth — together under the single rubric of *Entmythologisierung*. They were simply two different phases in a single process.

As the first scholar to apply the term *Entmythologisierung* to the study of sarcophagi, Gerke’s seminal description of its logic continues to carry enormous weight. Many now might object to certain parts of his argument, particularly the weight he ascribed to a putative ‘popular current’. But his assumption that the banal reduction of myth to a set of detached symbols resulted in its withering and final replacement continues to be the default position. It is often said for example that a growing concern for conveying keyword-like abstractions, such as *virtus* or *pietas* — the value-symbolism of the *interpretatio romana* — drove the mutilation of scenes and the eventual

³³² “...um seiner selbst willen dargestellt” (Gerke 1940, 12). A desperate statement. What can it even mean? Gerke does not develop the claim, but this does not prevent others from repeating it: see page 74 below.

³³³ Gerke 1940, 12, 5.

³³⁴ See the discussion on page 34 above.

³³⁵ Gerke 1940, 17-8, 32-6.

impoverishment and final abandonment of myth. A classic formulation is Peter Blome's, oft cited:

“The carvers of the Hadrianic and Antonine periods, concerned with honoring and preserving their classical models, represented the old myths so as to bring out their own inherent symbolism. Heroic testing, love, and death were performed before the viewer as if on a stage. Any link to the personal fate of the Roman buyer was forged only at the level of analogy; if identificatory similes occasionally surface, they remain rare. But in the late-Antonine and, above all, Severan periods, the demand for a more direct identification of the Roman citizen with Greek god or hero seems to have grown rapidly. It can be no accident that, at the same time, the prototypes for mythological sarcophagi reliefs were now subjected to strong modification...: from the inherent classical symbolism of the myths to a more intensive *interpretatio romana*, which strives to insert Roman virtue-symbolism into the mythological frieze: *virtus*, *pietas*, and *concordia* will be forcibly inserted over and over again. Historically, it is clear that this...finally led in the end to the loss of the original mythic component.”³³⁶

This should sound familiar. Blome wrote half a century after Gerke, but the lines of the argument remain the same — even down to the notion that the earlier Hadrianic and Antonine sarcophagi, as part of a classicistic revival during the second century, had mounted Greek myths in a way that respected their ‘original’ themes and their ‘inherent’ symbolism³³⁷ (whatever one imagines those could be). More recent voices, reflecting a post-structuralist turn, have rejected the notion that second-century sarcophagi simply reproduced the myths for their own sake.³³⁸ But the presumed connection between myth’s heavy-handed symbolic loading in the third century and its subsequent disappearance still goes unquestioned, even by scholars highly attuned to the workings of myth and allegory. Most recently for example, Katharina Lorenz has written that “in the course of the third century, ...more explicit and less discursive forms of representation came to be of interest on the sarcophagi — an interest which quite swiftly led to the abandonment of mythological stories altogether.”³³⁹ It is an argument with a long pedigree.

³³⁶ Blome 1992, 1071-2; emphasis mine. Wrede (1981, 174-5) similarly blames the Roman obsession with banal value concepts for myth’s diminished variety and power.

³³⁷ So also Wrede (1981, 142-3): unlike their third-century successors, second-century carvers had reproduced Greek myth for its own sake, respecting its “independence” (*Unabhängigkeit*) as a “far-reaching world of its own” (*als weitgehend eigene Welt*) — whatever that could mean. Similarly Brilliant (1992, 1035): in the third century “the myth itself [was] no longer primary”; things had been different during the preceding second century.

³³⁸ As Ruth Bielfeldt (2005, 20-2, 329-32; endorsed by Lorenz 2011, 310) has shown, the Orestes sarcophagi of the second century already press myth into the service of particularly Roman values. These include some of the earliest securely dated pieces we have, such as the famous piece from the “Tomb of the Medusa” (Figure 12) (page 6 above).

³³⁹ Lorenz 2011, 334. Björn Ewald (1999, 80) too assumes that both forms of *Entmythologisierung* — the dissolution of narrative in favor of abstract symbols, and the subsequent abandonment of mythic

The reader will have guessed that I have serious reservations about coupling the two phenomena causally, for several reasons. First, I think that the supposed shift from a ‘narrative’/‘discursive’ mode in the second century to a ‘symbolic’/‘explicit’ one in the third lacks temporal or developmental clarity, and may thus be no process at all. Second, even if we agree that mythic narratives *are* subjected to ever greater truncation and deformation in the third century, we err if we take this as evidence that myth’s hold was weakening. In that sense it represents no demythologization. And third, we have positive external evidence — from other domains of contemporary Roman art — that abstracting figures from their mythic context led to no abandonment of myth. Let me unpack these points.

FROM NARRATIVE TO SYMBOL: IS THERE A *TELOS*?

One cannot deny that many third-century sarcophagi selectively deform our mythic stories and/or isolate their heroes in order to make the intended symbolic message — often reducible to a few banal keywords — as obvious and comprehensible as possible. But — and here I emphasize — the question is whether this was not already the case much earlier. Some of the first mythological friezes in the sequence already bracket specific details of the story, so as to broadcast symbolic abstractions capable of wide application. Take the Niobid sarcophagi, such as the one from the so-called “Tomb of the Medusa” near Rome’s Porta Viminalis (Figure 4), dated to the 130s by brick stamps.³⁴⁰ Its front teems with figures. But despite the writhing composition, only a single moment in Niobe’s story is shown. As we might expect, our carver has chosen the pivotal moment — or to be more specific, the one pivotal for conveying the message desired. But the point remains that the entire narrative has been reduced to a lone scene: the instant of annihilation. Only on the short right end, where Niobe sits mourning before her children’s tomb (Figure 5), are we given a second, marginal episode in the tale. In short this piece, like all other Niobid sarcophagi, puts the myth on the chopping block and hacks off every limb. Here in the 140s we already face narrative truncation of an extreme kind, enacted to make sure that two simple and related messages — “death too soon” and “mourning for those cut down early” — are presented in as concentrated a fashion as possible.

Or consider the famous Achilles and Patroclus sarcophagus formerly in the Berlin Museums and now in Ostia³⁴¹ (Figure 10). Luca Giuliani already noted that its carver deliberately broke with the sequence of events canonized in the *Iliad*: here Achilles arms to face Hector (bottom left) before he mourns the fallen Patroclus (bottom right). In the terms of Homer’s narrative this order is absurd, since it is Achilles’s grief at Patroclus’s death that drives him finally to fight. Why tamper with the story’s fundamental logic of cause and effect? So as to present the viewer with the essence of military life and death, distilled into their normal sequence as experienced: a soldier arms for battle; a soldier is mourned. The altered order thus allows the imagery to be generalized and mapped onto the life of any fighting man. At the same time, the mythic garb

figures altogether — are related, although his comments are limited to the Muse and philosopher genres.

³⁴⁰ See page 6 above.

³⁴¹ This piece is the main subject of Giuliani 1989. See also Grassinger 1999, 44-8, 204-5, cat. 27, pl. 28-31, with extensive bibliography; Zanker and Ewald 2004, 68-70, 283-5, cat. 2, fig. 50.

adds pathos and invites allegorical comparison: it boasts of the courage and skill of the deceased (he was like Achilles) while proclaiming him worthy of lament (as Patroclus was). The take-home message is thus “this man lived bravely” and “you should grieve for him”, or in the chisel-like language of Roman value-symbolism, “(this man had) *virtus*” and “(he deserves your) *pietas*” — regardless of the fact that the warrior departing on the left and the corpse laid out on the right are not the same mythological character. Such is irrelevant to the allegory.³⁴² Here then the *Iliad* has been deformed — its narrative sequence altered, its characters collapsed — for the sake of a funerary message reducible to a few abstract keywords. Yet the piece dates not to the third century, but the middle of the second.³⁴³

Words such as “deformation” and “collapse” when describing such sarcophagi’s treatment of their sources are not intended as criticism, as least not by me, nor meant to imply that any sculptural version of the *Iliad* could render the story transparently or ‘faithfully’. It goes without saying that there is no intrinsic meaning or original message of the myth, and no way to translate it — across time, across culture and language, across artistic medium — without reinterpreting it. As Susanne Muth and Ruth Bielfeldt remind us, every telling and every rendition of myth is always already a ‘misappropriation’ that selectively tweaks elements so as to bring the story into commensurability with contemporary concerns.³⁴⁴ And such has always been the case, from the very beginnings of these myths (beginnings which of course they never had). Selection from various versions of a story, accentuation of one or another moment in the narrative, modification or transformation of the narrative substance, insertion of contemporary motifs external to the myth, invention of new versions: all are means of forging commensurability between myth and present, and one or another of them is always to be expected.³⁴⁵

What differentiates various epochs, various regions, even various workshops, then, is not whether they remain ‘true’ to their mythic sources — they never do, and never can — but their varying preferences for the particular strategies employed. My point here is that the cluster of strategies said to mark our third century sarcophagi and herald myth’s imminent withering — narrative fragmentation and symbolic abstraction — are indeed that: strategies, not indices of decline. Moreover, they are already in operation a century earlier, at the beginning of the sequence of great mythological sarcophagi. The shift from second-century ‘narrative’ to third-century ‘symbol’ thus begins to grow murkier.

³⁴² Giuliani 1989, 37-9.

³⁴³ Giuliani (1989, 27) dates it to the 160s, a date endorsed by Grassinger (1999, 205) and Zanker (2004, 285).

³⁴⁴ Muth 1998, 287-8; Bielfeldt 2005, 1078. A subtle examination of the forms this could take on Meleager sarcophagi is Lorenz 2011. Equally instructive in their reworking of source material, I assert, are the Medea/Creusa coffins. All stage Creon as direct witness to Creusa’s death, to highlight the helpless grief of a surviving parent. In this they explicitly violate Euripides’s canonical *Medea*, where the king only learns of his daughter’s death via a messenger: a prime example of narrative alteration wrought for greater resonance in a funerary context.

³⁴⁵ To drive the point home, Muth (1998, 288) reminds us that several of these strategies for making myth commensurable with the present — such as inserting contemporary elements external to the source material — are already visible on Attic black-figure pots of the sixth century BC.

The reader may complain that I am misrepresenting the third century. Alteration of narrative sequence, typological conflation of characters.... these are commonly encountered, to be sure, but they may not be the most dominant transformations. If asked to describe the mode that most clearly stamps our pieces of the later third century, one would probably cite the extraction of figures from their narrative mooring and the reduction of scenes to stand-alone vignettes.

Yet this too represents no clear shift. Think of those sarcophagi staging marine thiasoi, a genre second only to the Dionysiac ones in popularity during the second century and first half of the third. Central to these watery frolics are the Nereids, those sea nymphs regularly shown cavorting with Tritons, sea Centaurs, and other aquatic hybrids. As Hugo Brandenburg reminds us, Hellenistic art had still embedded the Nereids and their mounts in a particular narrative context: that of a procession bringing Achilles his armor.³⁴⁶ An impressive funerary example is the third-century BC wooden larnax excavated in Gorgrippia (modern Anapa), a Greek colony on the Black Sea, and now in the Hermitage (Figure 60). There is no mistaking the heroic background of its relief: gilded Nereids, borne by sea monsters (Greek *ketea* / Latin *ceci*) and other marine beasts, carry greaves, shield, and other pieces of armor (Figure 61). But in the hands of Roman sarcophagus carvers the Nereids are stripped of their arms, and with them, any dramatic anchoring: they appear already de-narrativized, abstracted from their mythic context, from their very first *début* on Antonine sarcophagi.³⁴⁷ On our coffins the flirty Nereids simply pose. Except for the occasional stringed instrument, their hands are empty. There is no allusion to any narrative.³⁴⁸

Another group of minor goddesses, the Muses, are similarly relocated, or better delocated, very early. While Hadrianic and early Antonine pieces still root them in a particular mythological locale — their sacred grove on Mt. Helicon — by the mid-Antonine period they are pulled out of all context and inserted into a purely symbolic space.³⁴⁹ These two genres refuse to wait for the third century to be de-narrativized. Were these marginal genres, they could easily be bracketed or disregarded, but they are not. And in neither case does the narrative dislodging of their figures lead to their subsequent withering and disappearance. On the contrary, both Nereids and Muses thrive for another century.

A comparison of late strigillated and clipeus sarcophagi with the early garland sarcophagi provides additional leverage. As we have seen, both groups give us isolated figures and

³⁴⁶ The reader will remember that Thetis, mother of Achilles, was herself a Nereid and often figured as their leader. Although Homer (*Iliad* 19.1-14) still presents her as an individual agent who delivers the armor to her son unaccompanied, other Nereids join her in the delivery service already on red-figure pots, as on a lekythos in Munich from the second quarter of the fifth century by the Baudouin Painter (Brandenburg 1967, 211).

³⁴⁷ Brandenburg 1967, 209-11.

³⁴⁸ I have been able to find only a single exception: a chest in the Vatican's Pio-Clementino (Figure 109). Likely late Hadrianic or early Antonine judging from the carving, its four Nereids carry greave, shield, helmet, and cuirass.

³⁴⁹ Ewald 1999, 30.

truncated narratives, whether under the clipeus or flanking the strigils,³⁵⁰ or in the lunettes above the swags.³⁵¹ Yet there is no chronological continuity between the two groups. On the contrary: separated by a century and a half, they bookend the great mythological frieze sarcophagi which devote their entire surface to mythic flesh. From this long-term perspective, the sequence ends where it began. Single figures and isolated vignettes early give way to extensive friezes which later give way to...single figures and isolated vignettes. It is hard to discern a *telos*.

To sum up: such cases make it difficult to formulate generalizable trends of de-narrativization on sarcophagi, or at least force us to qualify them heavily. And as the purported shift from a narrative/discursive mode to a symbolic/explicit one in the later third century comes to look increasingly untidy, any causal relationship to myth's subsequent abandonment appears more dubious.

MYTH'S WEAKENING HOLD? THE EVIDENCE OF PAINTING, STATUARY, AND MOSAICS

Let us for the moment however bracket our doubts about the transparency of this shift towards de-narrativization and follow the consensus. Even if mythic narratives *were* subjected to progressive deformation over the third century; even if characters *were* conflated, and later isolated; why do we assume this means that myth's hold was weakening? Though it may seem a plausible, even natural, assumption at first glance, the oddity of its logic becomes apparent when one considers other classes of Roman art.

The Question of Typological Assimilation

First, take the issue of typological assimilation. As we know, some Roman sarcophagi invite the viewer to read one character in terms of another. This may take the form of repeating a composition or theme but altering the characters involved. In this case the juxtaposition invites comparison. Or it may involve lifting elements and motifs associated with a character from one story and inserting them into another. We have seen both modes already. The first dominates the Achilles and Patroclus sarcophagus formerly in Berlin and now in Ostia (Figure 10). The mourning of a corpse that occupies half the main frieze and the ritual washing of a corpse that takes place directly above it on the lid are so close, in both spatial and thematic terms, that the viewer cannot help but assume that the same corpse is represented in both scenes. Are we not given two successive moments in a hero's post-mortem care? The answer is no: the corpse above is Hector's, that below is Patroclus's, but their treatment here leads us to conflate them. Similarly, as we saw,³⁵² our carver invites us to see a warrior's arming for battle on the left and a warrior's mourning on the right as two successive stages in the same man's life and death, even

³⁵⁰ Page 72 above.

³⁵¹ Page 5 above.

³⁵² Page 75 above.

though once again the heroes are different: Achilles sets out, Patroclus comes back. Juxtaposition here, it is said,³⁵³ elides difference.

The second mode — lifting motifs associated with a character from one story and inserting them into another — we saw displayed on the Adonis sarcophagus in the Villa Giustiniani Massimo (Figure 19).³⁵⁴ Adonis is given a horse, and Venus an old nurse, though neither makes any sense within the terms of the story. (How could an Olympian goddess — particularly one born of sea foam — have a mortal nurse anyway?³⁵⁵) These incongruous elements come from depictions of Hippolytus, inserted here to assimilate one hunter to another.

Such conflation — a loss of mythic specificity, it is said — leads to scholarly lamentation. Giuliani bewails the “narrative incoherence” effected on our Achilles/Patroclus/Hector piece,³⁵⁶ a harbinger of the total breakdown of myth to come in the third century,³⁵⁷ while Blome bemoans the “absurdity at the mythological level” that he feels plagues the Adonis-*cum*-Hippolytus sarcophagus.³⁵⁸ The subtext is almost always that something has been lost. Why this type of response should be so common I do not know. These laments seem to overlook the fact that typological assimilation was hardly special to Roman sarcophagi, and anything but new. It was already employed, a good century and a half earlier, on Roman walls, as a central part of the mythological painter’s toolkit. And there it is clearly evidence of myth’s vitality, not its enervation. Let me unpack those claims.

Roman murals provide unparalleled examples of mythological programs in action in a private setting. The large surfaces offered, and the demand for aesthetic coordination of all walls in a given room, led to programs of mythological panels that linked facing surfaces and enveloped the viewer. It is clear that the particular scenes chosen to adorn a room were often selected for their compositional similarities. A good example is the “Pentheus room” (triclinium N) in the House of the Vettii at Pompeii (Figure 62). Dated to 62-79 AD, its three facing walls each feature a central mythological panel: on the northern wall the baby Hercules manfully strangles serpents (Figure 63) while to the east Pentheus is rent by Bacchants (Figure 64) and to the south Dirce writhes under the bull (Figure 65). Clearly the compositions were intended to resonate: each takes the form of a ‘V’, with the central protagonist pressed to the bottom of an inverted pyramid, flanked by higher onlookers who sometimes double as executors.

³⁵³ Giuliani 1989, 38-9.

³⁵⁴ Page 72 above.

³⁵⁵ Andrew Stewart reminds me that some deities did indeed enjoy the services of nurses: Dionysus was nursed by Nysa, Despoina/Persephone by Anytos, and Apollo and Artemis by Leto. If their services were plausible within the categories of Greek myth, however, this was because all were themselves immortal: Nysa was a nymph, Anytos a Titan, and Leto of the circle of Olympians. The aged nurse who here accompanies Venus does not meet this requirement.

³⁵⁶ Giuliani 1989, 29, 37.

³⁵⁷ Giuliani 1989, 39.

³⁵⁸ Blome 1992, 1064. Similarly Turcan 1978, 1727-9; Turcan 1987, 430-2; Brilliant 1984, 161; Brilliant 1992, 1035.

Whether such ensembles were also chosen for possible allegorical links is still debated. Roger Ling, for example, thinks that they usually were not. In his view Roman painters and patrons cared above all for compositional resonances. Formal considerations ruled the selection process. Our efforts to uncover sophisticated programmatic messages underlying these cycles are thus misguided in most cases, or can yield little more than the most banal of thematic commonplaces, such as “unrequited love” — the kind of thing that could be said about every other Greek myth.³⁵⁹

Others grant that, while this may be true of many ensembles on Roman walls, it is likely not true for all.³⁶⁰ Some simply seem too thematically tight, too coherent in subject matter or pregnant allusions, to dismiss. One thinks of the cycles of paintings adorning Pompeii’s Macellum,³⁶¹ the “black triclinium” of the House of Marcus Fabius Rufus,³⁶² the atrium of the House of the Tragic Poet,³⁶³ or the small cubiculum (room E) in the southwest corner of the House of Jason. The latter’s three main walls present Helen weighing whether to leave with the handsome Paris (Figure 66), Medea contemplating the murder of her sons (Figure 67), and Phaedra in the act of handing her nurse the letter that will kill Hippolytus (Figure 68). Here we are given not just tragic loves, but three women caught by eros in the moment of momentous decisions, with consequences none can see. Surely more than mere formal suitability drove the selection of these three scenes, as Bettina Bergmann points out.³⁶⁴ Yet their calculated proximity, both spatial and thematic, invites us to think through the telling contrasts as well: Helen, for whom the door stands easily and beckoningly open; Medea, her door closed, yet able to escape, we know, through magical means; and Phaedra, for whom there is no door, and no escape, at all.

Another instructive example is provided by the paintings, now in the Metropolitan Museum, from the so-called “mythological room” (room 19) of the Villa of Agrippa Postumus at Boscotrecase. One wall was decorated with a huge landscape showing Andromeda chained to her seaside rock while Perseus swoops down to rescue her from the sea monster (Figure 69). Facing it on the other wall was a landscape of the same dimensions and similar composition, showing the love-stricken Cyclops Polyphemus seated on a rocky perch while singing his passion for the sea nymph Galatea, who bobs alluringly in the waves before him (Figure 45). Presented with these two pendant images on facing walls, the viewer was invited to assimilate unrelated figures, put them in dialog, and savor the strange correspondences that emerged. How delicious to reconceive the normally terrifying Polyphemus as a helpless prisoner, bound and chained by his love, just as Andromeda, here his double, is fettered to the rock. Or to view

³⁵⁹ Ling 1991, 136-40. In this Ling is more conservative than Mary Lee Thompson (1960-1961), who doubts the existence of deep allegorical meanings in the cycles she collates but still acknowledges their shallower thematic linkages.

³⁶⁰ Arguing for erudite programs: Brilliant 1984, 59-83 (with nuance and an eye towards rhetorical theory); Wirth 1983, 449-55; and those in the following notes.

³⁶¹ Barringer 1994, esp. 261-5.

³⁶² Lorenz 2005, 214-6.

³⁶³ Gorgeously reconstructed and analyzed by Bergmann 1994, esp. 240-6.

³⁶⁴ Bergmann 1996, esp. 200-8, 11-12.

Galatea, the sea nymph, as the true sea monster, threatening to overwhelm and consume the poor Polyphemus, as her pairing with Andromeda's monster would suggest. Or conversely, to linger on the sheer physical beauty of this sea monster, as his pairing with Galatea invites us to do, noting with pleasure how he too bobs alluringly in the waves, showering Andromeda with an inviting spray.

These ensembles give us mythic figures artfully assimilated through juxtaposition, encouraging the viewer to read one situation or one character through another. Yet we would hardly complain that figures were being conflated, or lament myth's withering. On the contrary: the typological assimilation of these figures encourages us to view them in new ways as we tease out both their provocative similarities and differences, to the enrichment of the stories and ourselves. Why not assume the same true of our sarcophagi? When the carver of our piece in Ostia (Figure 10) stacks the corpses of Hector and Patroclus in successive phases of post-mortem care, are we not teased into articulating the differences as well as the similarities in the stories of these two men, or their varying significance for the family's own dead man? In what sense was the deceased interred within like Hector, we ask, and in what sense like Patroclus? Similarly, when the carver of our Adonis piece inserts horse and nurse, why take this as a sign of incoherence instead of an invitation to contemplation? Seeing an Olympian goddess accompanied by a mortal nurse is a bit jolting indeed. But surely this was intentional. And if it asks us to reconceive Venus as Phaedra, so the reverse is true: it also asks how we might imagine Phaedra as Venus, or a surviving mortal mourner as either.³⁶⁵ There is no loss of mythic substance here, only a reaffirmation that myth is good to think with.³⁶⁶

One might grant these points yet object that they have purchase only on sarcophagi which — like our Achilles and Adonis specimens — still preserve a modicum of narrative content. What of those pieces whose mythic figures have been fully extracted from any dramatic mooring? — surely they suffer a loss, not a gain, of semiotic potential? Such is the general assumption. As the reader may guess though, I have serious reservations. In some cases freeing figures from their narrative context clearly opened space for more associative meaning, not less, because it left them no longer constricted by their function within a given myth. Our Nereids and their mounts *needed* to be stripped of — liberated from — Achilles if their thiasoi were to speak widely. This was Hugo Brandenburg's suggestion: that the marine genre owed its success to the fact that its creatures were no longer bound to the meaning imposed by a particular myth.³⁶⁷ The point could easily be extended to other genres.³⁶⁸

³⁶⁵ For a nuanced discussion of how even small changes in composition could encourage viewers to identify with different characters or dwell on different aspects of the same character, see Newby 2011, esp. 206, 18, 20-22.

³⁶⁶ One of the few to frame this positively is Michael Koortbojian (1995, 133-4): what these pieces lose in "mythographic specificity" they gain in "typological efficacy". He frames Endymion's isolation in similarly positive terms (1995, 140-1).

³⁶⁷ "The marine sarcophagi owe their great popularity and long life as a genre precisely to this: the fact that their depictions of sea creatures, unlike those of the Classical and Hellenistic periods, were no longer bound to particular myths. Unconstricted by the particular interpretations that might have been

Truncated Compositions: Sculpture in the Round

Consideration of sculpture in the round provides critical traction from another angle. Formal restrictions always limited freestanding sculpture to representing single figures or, at most, small groups of them. Yet one would hardly describe the Laocoön as “demythologized,” or complain that the Pasquino group failed to evoke a rich narrative background. Why do we do this with our late sarcophagus reliefs, imagining that an isolated Hercules with Cerberus on leash (Figure 57), or an Endymion slumbering alone (Figure 20, Figure 70), represents some form of impoverishment?

The point is sharpened when we remember how many figural compositions on Roman sarcophagi were themselves modeled on sculpture in the round. Take the strigillated casket in the Vatican’s Pio-Clementino showing a rapt Ganymede and eagle hovering over a reclining Mount Ida (Figure 32).³⁶⁹ There is no reason that Ganymede should prop his weight on a conveniently placed pillar, as he does here — unless he were modeled on a statue, perhaps something like the Louvre Narcissus, as Sichtermann observes.³⁷⁰ In other cases we recognize the freestanding models directly: the Mars and Venus occupying the central niche of a columnar sarcophagus installed in the wall of Rome’s Palazzo Mattei (Figure 71) directly reproduce those freestanding second-century confections — such as the groups in the Capitoline (Figure 72) and Louvre (Figure 73) — that combine the Capua Venus (Figure 74) and Borghese Mars types and add portrait features.³⁷¹ And in still other cases a carver will mount atop pedestals figures that cannot possibly derive from freestanding statues — such as the Seasons on a late third-century piece in the Metropolitan Museum (Figure 75) — in order to lend an air of whimsical grandeur or tease the viewer’s expectations: a jest that foregrounds standard conditions and makes them explicit in order to render them absurd.

Examples such as these remind us of the debt, both formal and genetic, that the presentation of isolated figures on sarcophagi owes to sculpture in the round. Seen in this light the putative shift from ‘narrative’ to ‘symbol’ on our third-century specimens must be reconceived. When our

preordained through mythological [i.e., narrative] representations, they were now acceptable as funerary decoration to a wider clientele.” (“Gerade der Tatsache, daß die Meerwesendarstellungen der Sarkophage eben nicht wie in klassischer und hellenistischer Zeit an bestimmte Mythen gebunden waren, verdanken die Meerwesensarkophage wohl ihre große Beliebtheit und lange Lebensdauer als Gattung: ohne auf bestimmte Deutungen eingeengt zu sein, die durch die Mythendarstellungen vorgezeichnet sein mochten, waren sie einem weiteren Personenkreis als Grabschmuck akzeptabel.”) (Brandenburg 1967, 210 n. 50.)

³⁶⁸ Richard Brilliant (1984, 163) gestures Laconically in this direction: “reduced, highly concentrated images [he speaks of our denarrated sarcophagi] could reveal greater content through association.”

³⁶⁹ Sichtermann 1992, 166-7, cat. 43, pl. 15.1, 16.2.

³⁷⁰ Sichtermann 1992, 166.

³⁷¹ Diana Kleiner (1981, 540) notes that sarcophagi reproducing these Mars-Venus ensembles almost always mount the figures on pedestals, in explicit acknowledgement of their derivation from freestanding sculptural groups. This piece is unusual in foregoing the pedestal — although the carver *does* provide them for the figures in the end niches, who are equally derivative.

carvers discard narrative setting to depict mythological characters as lone figures or isolated groups, they are above all translating into relief a mode of representation long known from freestanding sculpture.³⁷² Yet no one would accuse statues such as the Knidia, Hermes of Olympia, baby Hercules strangling snakes, Narcissus, Omphale, San Ildefonso group, Orestes and Electra, or Marsyas of inviting no story. Freestanding statuary had been successfully evoking rich mythological narratives for seven centuries before our Metropolitan workshops adopted its conventions for sarcophagi. To figure this adoption as an *Entmythologisierung*, a sign of myth's dwindling power or a harbinger of its final demise, thus seems misguided.

To summarize: neither the 'conflation' of mythological characters (really an invitation to read them more expansively³⁷³) nor their isolation as stand-alone figures gives indication of myth's weakening hold. Quite the opposite: they testify to its ongoing vitality and associative power. In that sense neither represents a demythologization. But if so, we have no reason to couple them with that other *Entmythologisierung*, the final rejection of the mythic repertoire.

The Lesson of Mosaics

For final leverage we turn to yet another domain of Roman art. Once again Roman mosaics provide external traction. Susanne Muth's extensive analysis of the subject notes that Roman mythological mosaics undergo a modal shift in their approach to narrative during the late third and early fourth centuries:

“Examples that display the greatest possible modification or even transformation of the narrative substance of the myth (dissociation from their original context within the plot; surrender of narrative cogency; insertion of motifs foreign to the story such as fashionable hairstyles or figural types drawn from scenes of contemporary life) as well as greater assimilation to 'biographical' schemata (representations of the *dominus* as a high-status hunter; wedding scenes) all stem chiefly from this period.”³⁷⁴

Dissociation of mythic figures from their dramatic context; surrender of narrative coherence; assimilation of mythological hunt scenes to 'biographical' versions... All should sound familiar: mythological mosaics undergo much the same shift towards narrative dissolution and figural

³⁷² This connection is seldom articulated. Koortbojian (1995, 141) points it out, though he still frames it in negative terms, as an “encroachment” upon relief.

³⁷³ A trenchant formulation comes from Andrew Stewart through private correspondence: “perhaps they testify to a growing desire to increase the ‘beholder’s share’ — to make him/her work harder to supply the narrative envelope and thus contextualize the scene.” This must be right.

³⁷⁴ “Die Beispiele einer möglichst weitreichenden Modifizierung oder gar Transformierung der narrativen Substanz des Mythos (Lösung von der eigentlichen Handlungssituation, Aufgabe der Handlungsstringenz, Einfügung mythosfremder Motive wie z.B. Modefrisuren, Figurentypen der zeitgenössischen Lebensszenen) sowie der betonteren Angleichung an Szenenschemata der Lebensbilder (Statuspräsentation des *dominus* als Jäger; Hochzeitsszene) stammen vornehmlich aus dieser Zeit” (Muth 1998, 283-4).

isolation as our sarcophagi, if at a slight lag. But as we know from Chapter 1,³⁷⁵ this does *not* result in any final disappearance from floors of the mythic repertoire. Mosaics featuring mythological characters remain a constant fixture in the houses of the Empire from the early second century well into the fifth and beyond,³⁷⁶ and their stock of figures even expands as several new characters are added late in the third century³⁷⁷ — at precisely the time that the repertoire tilts towards abstraction. In the realm of mosaics, then, the progressive abstraction of myth clearly does *not* lead to any abandonment of it. But if so, we are left with no reason to think that one would have led to the other on sarcophagi.

Perhaps none of this should surprise us. After all, the *non*-mythological imagery of sarcophagi from the late third century was often just as abstract as the mythological imagery that it replaced. We need think only of the bucolic motifs analyzed by Himmelmann. Highly concentrated, they were reduced to mere symbols: an individual shepherd or an individual animal stripped of any setting.³⁷⁸ (Hence the popularity of the ‘good shepherd’: he most succinctly condensed both motifs into a single symmetrical figure.³⁷⁹) But this observation deprives abstraction of any purchase on why the mythological was ousted by the non-mythological, if the latter simply continued in the same symbolically concentrated mode as the former.

To summarize, the tendencies towards abstraction and narrative dissolution discussed in this chapter are emphatically not symptomatic of a growing lack of interest in myth, and cannot be made to presage the abandonment of myth for something else. We shall have to look elsewhere for an explanation of why myth disappears from sarcophagi.

³⁷⁵ See the discussion from page 41 onward.

³⁷⁶ Muth 1998, 265, 83.

³⁷⁷ Muth 1998, 283 n. 1144.

³⁷⁸ Himmelmann 1980, 121.

³⁷⁹ Himmelmann 1980, 143.

CHAPTER 3 — DISTINGUISHING THE MYTHOLOGICAL: FUNCTION AND FORM

If Chapters 1 and 2 engaged closely with the particular debates over *Entmythologisierung*, Chapter 3 takes a step back to consider whether we have drawn too strong a distinction between the mythological and the non-mythological, or, to use the terms of the scholarship, between “scenes of myth” and “scenes of life”.

This distinction is central to the organization of the field’s major compendia. The *Antike Sarkophagreliefs* series (*ASR*) devotes an entire set³⁸⁰ to the mythological pieces. And Koch and Sichtermann’s handbook,³⁸¹ largely following the *ASR*’s organizational scheme, similarly gives them a section (4.3.2 — *Mythologische Themen*) of their own. The separate status of the mythological pieces seems to be a given. But if one asks under which definitional criteria they are siphoned off from the others, one encounters a few surprises. Sarcophagi devoted to the Muses, for example, are not included among the mythological specimens. Neither are the numerous pieces staging the antics of the Dionysiac retinue; those featuring Nereids, Tritons, and other sea creatures; or the huge array of pieces dominated by Cupids.

One quickly realizes that the criterion is not the mere presence or absence of mythological characters. It is instead a question of narrative. Dionysiac coffins typically feature an array of known mythological figures, from generic Maenads and Satyrs to individual characters such as Silenus. But they do not, as a rule, show anything we would identify as a particular narrative. Their frolics are generic; they call to mind no specific story. Exceptions are those eleven or so Dionysiac sarcophagi that parade elephants and other motifs associated with the god’s Indian triumph.³⁸² These we might say tell a story, or at least invoke a backstory. Even more explicitly narrative are two coffins depicting Dionysus’s fight with Lycurgus,³⁸³ and nine his battles in India.³⁸⁴ But these represent a mere fraction of the wine god’s corpus; the vast majority present only generic revels. As a result the Dionysiac pieces with recognizable narratives are lumped together with the rest of the Dionysiac specimens in a category of their own, rather than grouped with the other ‘mythological’ (i.e., narrative) sarcophagi.

The primacy of narrative to the operational definition of ‘mythological’ may be a bit unexpected. The fact that no *ASR* volume contains anything like a prefatory note articulating the series’ organizational logic does not help. But at least there is a logic, if a largely unspoken one. For our purposes, the user need only keep in mind that the “mythological” category does not encompass many pieces that most of us would recognize as mythological; many more appear

³⁸⁰ *Band 12: Die mythologischen Sarkophage*. So far three monographs in the row have been published: *ASR* 12.1 (Grassinger 1999), covering Achilles through the Amazons; *ASR* 12.2 (Sichtermann 1992), covering Apollo through the Graces; and *ASR* 12.6 (Koch 1975), devoted to Meleager.

³⁸¹ Koch and Sichtermann 1982.

³⁸² Cataloged in Matz 1968/1975, 2:267-79, cat. 130-41.

³⁸³ Matz 1968/1975, 3:416-22, cat. 235-6.

³⁸⁴ Matz 1968/1975, 3:422-34, cat. 237-45.

under the “Dionysiac”, “marine”, and “Cupid” headings instead. But once internalized, the categories seem relatively clear.

What happens though if we consider not iconographic criteria, but modal ones? Taken from the viewpoint of function and form rather than subject matter, the distinction between “scenes of myth” and “scenes of life” becomes shaky indeed. This is explored through two avenues. First, we revisit the relationship between the mythological and biographical genres. And second, we turn to the conventions of tool use and carving developed by sarcophagi workshops during the third century, that is, to considerations of material facture.

“SCENES OF MYTH” VS. “SCENES OF LIFE”: WHERE IS THE REALITY?

‘Biographical’ Sarcophagi: Grounds for Scare Quotes

Let us cast our minds back to what is often described as the first act in the drama of demythologization: that replacement, beginning in the 220s and 230s, of mythic hunters with figures of Roman citizens.³⁸⁵ Because the new scenes forego mythological trappings and depict the deceased himself as the scene’s main hunter, these supposedly ‘biographical’ depictions are sometimes described as “real”, “literal”, or “everyday”. They are nothing of the kind, however, for they present the hunt in compositions just as epic, as unrealistic, and as impossible as those used earlier for depicting the mythological hunts. Even more damning is the knowledge that most of the Roman men depicted could never have partaken in any such hunts — emphatically not the lion hunt, which (1) remained the preserve of the emperor alone; and (2) was by this time possible only beyond the frontiers, since lions long had been eradicated from the Greco-Roman world.³⁸⁶ These were scenes of sheer fantasy. Any reader with doubts can savor a sarcophagus in Rome’s San Sebastiano³⁸⁷ (Figure 76): here we meet not a hunter but a huntress, shown wearing a fashion hairdo while she effortlessly spears her leonine prey from horseback.³⁸⁸

Equally fantastical were many other ‘biographical’ genres, particularly those showing the deceased as a victorious commander granting clemency to vanquished barbarians or offering state sacrifice to Jupiter. Even had some of these men been high officers in life, it is statistically

³⁸⁵ See the discussion from page 21 onward.

³⁸⁶ I am grateful to Andrew Stewart for reminding me of the latter.

³⁸⁷ Andrae 1980, cat. 150; Amedick 1996, cat. 167; Birk 2011, 248-9; Koortbojian 2013, 157. Whether the extant portrait is original or a recutting is, obviously, completely irrelevant to this argument.

³⁸⁸ Was she intended to be read as a mounted Atalanta? It seems unlikely. Atalanta never appears mounted — not on Roman sarcophagi nor, as far as I can tell, anywhere else in Roman art — and with good reason: she was famous as a sprinter, a huntress who relied on her own footspeed to run down her prey (or to elude her own, male, predators). Then there is the fact that her quarry was no lion, but a boar — the most famous boar in all of Greek mythology. We cannot, then, imagine Roman viewers processing this figure as an Atalanta. We are dealing with another fantastic ‘biographical’ hunt sarcophagus, not a mythological one.

impossible that all could have been commanders of such rank as to pardon conquered enemies or sacrifice before the Capitol, prerogatives increasingly monopolized by the emperor himself. This confirms how little these pieces documented real, specific lives. Instead, they figured the values suitable to men of that class, proclaiming that the deceased exemplified the virtues — courage (*virtus*), clemency (*clementia*), piety (*pietas*), concord (*concordia*), and so on — symbolized by such scenes.³⁸⁹ Like their mythological counterparts then, the images on these ‘biographical’ sarcophagi functioned in a non-literal and allegorical mode.³⁹⁰

The same holds for those pieces featuring lions mauling various ungulate prey (goats, sheep, horses, deer, antelope, boar, cattle),³⁹¹ the so-called *Löwen-Kampfgruppen*. Often including figures of handlers, they evoked not the smell of the farm but the visceral stench of the arena, and glorified the deceased through synecdoche as an *editor ludi*, a sponsor of the games.³⁹² In that sense they fall within the orbit of the magistrate sarcophagi. Yet the sheer number of these pieces, almost all produced in the few decades between 270 and 310, is vast — too vast for more than a fraction of them to have housed a real *editor*. In most cases we must be dealing with proxy status and symbolic aspirations, not any literal, biographical reference to the deceased.³⁹³

The Fantasy of the Bucolic

Nor are things different when we turn to the hordes of bucolic sarcophagi. They can have had no biographical relationship to the deceased either. A case in point is the coffin of Iulius Achilleus, now in Rome’s Baths of Diocletian³⁹⁴ (Figure 47). It is perhaps the most elaborate bucolic specimen yet discovered. Horses prance beside bulls while goats nibble on leaves, rams butt

³⁸⁹ In many cases, one suspects, the tone must have been retrospectively aspirational: the scenes crystallize what *might* have been possible, what the deceased *might* have achieved, had his life not been cut down prematurely. If so, they share the same mode as those many children’s sarcophagi that portray the deceased as years older than the age at death given in the inscription, and typically equip him with a scroll: an image of the young man he would have become, and the civic education he would have mastered, had he been allowed to live. (For this feature of children’s sarcophagi, see Huskinson 1996.)

³⁹⁰ The pithiest formulations of this point are Zanker and Ewald 2004, 226, 9-30, 56, also at 51; Kleiner 2007, 224-8, 55. Arguing for it in more sustained fashion: Reinsberg 2006, 170-4. Developing the thesis at (half-)article-length: Koortbojian 2013, esp. 147-57, most pointedly at 51-53. Although often ignored — our culture’s impulse towards biographical literalism still wields tremendous power — this crucial concept has a long pedigree, as Reinsberg reminds us. It was first articulated almost eighty years ago by Rodenwaldt (1935, 3-5): recognizing the symbolic thrust of the commander- and wedding sarcophagi and their derivation from state relief, he questioned the tenability of reading them in literal biographical terms.

³⁹¹ Compiled in Stroszeck 1998, cat. 200-411.

³⁹² Stroszeck 1998, 66; Wrede 2001, 78-9, 107.

³⁹³ In this I share Ewald’s doubts of their literalism (Ewald 1999, 72).

³⁹⁴ Himmelmann 1980, 121; Stroszeck 1998, 145-6, cat. 301, pl. 52.1-4, 99.1; Friggeri 2001, 94-5; Zanker and Ewald 2004, 171.

heads, and lambs are birthed under the peaceful guardianship of shepherds: a multi-register marvel, with some of the lushest effects of surface texture to be found in the third century. (The contrast between sleekly polished horses and bulls and shaggily drilled sheep and goats is delightful.) Yet the piece's inscription names its owner, Iulius Achilleus, as a magistrate of Rome's training ground for gladiators, the Ludus Magnus near the Colosseum. One can hardly imagine a less bucolic occupation.³⁹⁵

Most bucolic sarcophagi are nowhere so lavish, of course. The vast majority feature only shepherds and sheep. As I have already argued, this was a poor choice indeed, if the goal was to index the Roman villa. Clearly that was not the goal. Which world, then, were these calculated to evoke? Surely the romantic, hazy, and exoticized landscape of the Greek pastoral idyll — not the Roman countryside and its villas, real or imagined.³⁹⁶ But if so, this, the most popular of the demythologized genres, is just as fantastical as the mythological ones that it replaces. This is not to claim that bucolic scenes are themselves mythological. All myth may be fantastic, but not all fantasy is mythic.³⁹⁷ This distinction will concern us greatly in the next chapter. For the moment, however, the point is simply that bucolic imagery was not intended to represent real life, or to index real places. And through this common fantasticality it shared more features with the mythological sarcophagi than is generally recognized. The fact that this bucolic imagery strove to project an atmosphere as thoroughly and emphatically Greek as the Greek stories staged earlier on the mythological pieces only underscores their common valence.³⁹⁸

³⁹⁵ It is this piece that Himmelmann cites after exclaiming “The great bucolic landscapes on sarcophagi of the late third century neither have a real relationship to the deceased nor are symbols of wealth.” (“Die großen Hirtenlandschaften auf den Sarkophagen des späten 3. Jhs. z.B. haben weder einen realen Bezug auf den Verstorbenen, noch sind sie Sinnbilder von Reichtum.”) (Himmelmann 1980, 121.)

³⁹⁶ See the discussion from page 55 onward.

³⁹⁷ A distinction that Michael Koortbojian's provocative meditation (Koortbojian 2013) tends to collapse.

³⁹⁸ Hence I must differ with Koortbojian (2013, 156), who attributes the popularity of the demythologized pieces to their (supposedly) better suitability for representing Roman values rather than Greek ones. The bucolic sarcophagi, the most numerous of all demythologized pieces, show little interest in creating a specifically Roman ambience. On the contrary: their idyll-tinged coloring remains decidedly Greek. Much the same holds for that other great class of demythologized works, the ‘philosopher’ sarcophagi. As we saw (page 59 above), they come in several forms. One of the most common schemes shows a thinker seated in profile, often with a Muse or, later, an *orans*, standing before him to lend inspiration (Ewald's “Inspiration Group / Group C”: Ewald 1999, 42-7). Another scheme, almost as common, seats husband and wife at opposite ends of the front, he in the guise of a thinker with scroll, she usually playing a lyre or cithara with shoulder exposed in a romantic evocation of luxury and erotic beauty (Ewald's “Lycian Motif / Group E”: Ewald 1999, 48-53, also 124). Muses in one case, music and luxurious eroticism in the other, philosophers in all: the atmosphere is thickly Greek.

Biography and Mythology: Related Worlds

In short, neither bucolic nor ‘biographical’ sarcophagi present any more direct or realistic relationship to the world of the deceased than do the mythological pieces. This is precisely the lesson offered by the so-called Rinuccini Sarcophagus³⁹⁹ in Berlin (Figure 77). The left half of this massive work cleaves to standard ‘biographical’ conventions: it portrays the deceased twice, celebrating first a wedding in a citizen’s toga, then a sacrifice in military armor. The right side however transports the viewer to the realm of myth: here, separated from the world of Rome by a faux-brick pier, Adonis reels back from his monstrous porcine quarry while his companions, including the Dioscuri, observe the fateful turn of events. As Richard Brilliant observes,⁴⁰⁰ the youth’s valiant if doomed hunt, like the more successful ones of Hippolytus and Meleager (Figure 14), serves as a symbol of *virtus*. It thus rounds out the *concordia* and *pietas* emblemized in civic form on the left, completing a standard ‘holy trinity’ of Roman values. This canonical cluster of virtues is well known from other — purely ‘biographical’ — sarcophagi. In the case of the Rinuccini sarcophagus, however, the package takes a hybrid form instead, with a mythological tableau swapped in to supply the missing last term. The reciprocity extends even further. If the scene of Adonis’s hunt supplies the expected *virtus* needed to complement the *concordia* and *pietas* of the ‘biographical’ repertoire on the left, so in turn the *concordia* of this Roman couple supplies in civic garb what the Adonis repertoire demands but what the pruned version here lacks: a scene of the concord between Adonis and Venus. Each side here — ‘biographical’ facing mythological, each deficient in itself — thus provides the symbolic terms necessary to complete the other.⁴⁰¹ One could ask for no clearer demonstration of the functional equivalence, indeed co-dependence, of the two modes.⁴⁰²

But of course none of this was new. Centuries earlier a Republican *censor* had dedicated a monumental statue base — the misnamed “Altar of Domitius Ahenobarbus” — in a temple in the Campus Martius to celebrate his office and his virtues. The base juxtaposed dramatically different reliefs. One set, now in the Louvre, shows a census and a *suovetaurilia* before Mars in

³⁹⁹ Blome 1992, 1070; Brilliant 1992; Koortbojian 1995, 82, 135, fig. 44; Grassinger 1999, 216-7, cat. 59, pl. 46.4, 52.1, 53.1, 63.2.6; Wrede 2001, 21, 3, 7, 9, 32, 4-5, 7, 9, 45, 8, 50, 6, 8 n. 460, 103, pl. 4.1-2; Zanker and Ewald 2004, 50-1, 292-4, cat. 6, fig. 35; Reinsberg 2006, 192-3, cat. 6, 19.4-5, 21.1-4, 6, 22.1-2, 23.1-3, 25.6; Koortbojian 2013, 153-5.

⁴⁰⁰ Brilliant 1992, esp. 1033-4, 8; endorsed by Koortbojian 1995, 82; Zanker and Ewald 2004, 50-1.

⁴⁰¹ Brilliant 1992, 1038.

⁴⁰² A sarcophagus in Pisa (strangely absent from Wegner 1966) demonstrates another form that this reciprocity between myth and ‘life’ could take. The frieze of this piece is divided into two halves, separated by a clipeus with a portrait of the deceased. The left half presents a bucolic scene (a shepherd and his flock before a rocky landscape), while the right gives us a line of Muses. Michael Koortbojian (2013, 149) reads the pendant scenes as allusions to the “contrasting spheres of nature and culture”; the deceased is thus “to be understood as having lived in a delicate harmony of both of these spheres”. If the virtues staged on the Rinuccini are intended to complement each other, completing a package set, the domains symbolized here are intended to contrast instead. But in both cases, figures of ‘myth’ and of ‘real life’ are pressed into service side by side, dutifully shouldering their allegorical loads in tandem.

the sober and stiffly paratactic style standard for depictions of civic ceremonies (Figure 78); the other set, in Munich's Glyptothek, depicts the marriage of Poseidon and Amphitrite in a whimsical Hellenistic idiom (Figure 79). This, one of our earliest examples of Roman state relief, was, it turns out, part of yet another 'biographical'/mythological hybrid. In the memorable formulation of T. P. Wiseman, the Altar of Domitius Ahenobarbus thus "shows us how a Roman statesman, and one thoroughly imbued with his ancestral traditions, wished to project himself to the citizens of Rome — half as a censor [that most dignified of magistrates], half as the descendant of Greek sea-nymphs. [T]his startling juxtaposition is a dramatic reminder of how the men of the late Republic lived simultaneously in two worlds, and took seriously the idioms of each."⁴⁰³ As the Rinuccini Sarcophagus reminds us, the same still held centuries later. Projecting himself as half a sober Roman statesman, half an Adonis, our deceased Roman utilized both idioms, equally allegorical, to claim the package of abstract virtues that these figures symbolized.

If the 'biographical' and mythological modes were often functionally equivalent — indeed, mutually reinforcing — this was because their messages often overlapped. No clean semantic separation of the categories is possible. We have already seen this in connection with the battle, commander, and lion hunt sarcophagi: all had the proclamation of *virtus* as a prime message — but so did many mythological sarcophagi, not only those featuring mythic hunters (Adonis (Figure 13), Hippolytus, Meleager (Figure 14)), but also the many glorifying Achilles (Figure 10, Figure 80, Figure 81), and the numerous pieces staging the Labors of Hercules (Figure 82, Figure 83).⁴⁰⁴ Sarcophagi showing the Indian Triumph of Dionysus — such as the magnificent specimen in Boston complete with giraffe and elephant-drawn chariot⁴⁰⁵ (Figure 84), and others in Baltimore⁴⁰⁶ and New York⁴⁰⁷ (just to name works in the United States) — present another set of examples. These are, of course, mythological pieces. But their imagery of victorious conquest clearly resonated with the themes of commander and battle sarcophagi, a connection underscored in two cases by the known status of their clients: the Baltimore specimen was found in the direct vicinity of the tomb of the Licinii, linking it with the Calpurnii Pisones, while the inscription on the Boston piece gives the rank and name of its occupant: a Praetor, Marcus Vibius Liberalis, whose father we know was consul in 166.⁴⁰⁸ Such men could easily have chosen commander or battle pieces to celebrate their martial prowess. In their hands, or rather,

⁴⁰³ Wiseman 1974, 163-4.

⁴⁰⁴ These pieces pose serious problems to the argument of Mayer 2012. If his dichotomy between sober status-obsessed elite 'biographical' sarcophagi and whimsical mythological 'middle class' ones seems stable in any way, it is only because he ignores all those cases in which the messages of the two categories overlapped.

⁴⁰⁵ Comstock and Vermeule 1976, 153, cat. 244; acquired in 1972, hence absent from Matz 1968/1975.

⁴⁰⁶ Matz 1968/1975, vol. 2, 231-3, cat. 95, pl. 116-20.

⁴⁰⁷ McCann 1978, 88-90; missing from Matz 1968/1975.

⁴⁰⁸ Wrede 2001, 38-9; see also Reinsberg 2006, 187, n. 1665.

arrayed around their corpses, such ‘biographical’ imagery would almost have been plausible. Instead they opted for mythological equivalents.⁴⁰⁹

Perhaps the best examples of equivalent messages, however, involve the wildly popular ‘biographical’ motif of husband and wife sealing their wedding vows with the traditional handshake, the “joining of right hands” (*dextrarum junctio*).⁴¹⁰ This motif appears early in the sequence: it is already a constitutive element of the commander sarcophagi from the 160s and 170s, such as the well-known work in Mantua’s Palazzo Ducale (Figure 85). Note that here it only appears as part of a package, one motif of a set of three, beside scenes broadcasting the deceased’s piety and clemency. During the third century however it gains its independence: often featured in its own right, it becomes a popular central vignette, not only for strigillated specimens (as on pieces in the Vatican Museum’s Galleria Lapidaria (Figure 86) and Munich’s Glyptothek (Figure 87)) but also for columnar works (such as the rich specimen in Rome’s Palazzo Massimo (Figure 88), or the weather-beaten one in Ostia⁴¹¹). Glorification of the conjugal bond is the point: it celebrates a couple’s harmonious relationship and mutual affection, summed up in the Latin virtue of *concordia*. As Björn Ewald has shown,⁴¹² its surging popularity as an independent motif during the third century spoke to a changed cultural valuation of marriage itself, as a new emphasis on romantic tenderness and emotional intimacy within the marital relationship increasingly pressured the dynastic conception of marriage prevalent before. (Hence the notable absence of children from these familial depictions, in stark contrast to the earlier freedman reliefs.) But of course the same valorization of romantic affection also drove the third century’s earlier devotion to sarcophagi featuring smitten mythological couples: not only Dionysus coming to Ariadne, and Selene to Endymion (Figure 89) — two of the century’s most popular scenes — but also Mars and Rhea Silvia (Figure 90), Achilles and Penthesilea (Figure 80, Figure 81), and Adonis and Venus (Figure 21). Of course there were differences in tone. But whether Roman couples chose to celebrate their bonds in civic garb or in mythological form, they were opting for scenes that told the same story, in response to the same new need.⁴¹³

⁴⁰⁹ Like the mythological pieces blaring *virtus* (see note 404 above), these works too are highly inconvenient for Mayer’s argument. Here we have a Praetor, son of a Consul, who nonetheless opted to be commemorated not via the stuffy terms of a ‘biographical’ piece, but through Dionysus and his riotous retinue. One can only imagine how many other aristocrats were similarly buried in mythological specimens: given the general paucity of inscriptions we will never know with certainty, but it seems reasonable, extrapolating from the example of Marcus Vibius Liberalis, to assume quite a few. But if so, Mayer’s dichotomy between ‘traditional elite’ and ‘middle-class’ taste looks increasingly precarious. I thank Michael Squire for sharing his recent review of Mayer’s monograph with me; there he (2013, 316) comes to much the same conclusions.

⁴¹⁰ Cataloged in Reinsberg 2006: see note 294 above.

⁴¹¹ Reinsberg 2006, 204, cat. 41, pl. 96.2, 99.1-3, 120.8, 8.5.

⁴¹² Ewald 1999, 126; Ewald 2003, 569.

⁴¹³ Precedent was already set, it seems to me, by ash urns and funerary altars. On these forerunners of sarcophagi the space below the inscription panel might stage a mythological scene, but just as often showed animals or a ‘biographical’ depiction of the deceased (Davies 2011, 35). This does not mean

The close relationship between ‘biographical’ and mythological modes is confirmed by cases in which elements of one penetrate the other. Here one thinks of the Moirai, the Fates. They sometimes appear on Meleager sarcophagi, presiding over the hero’s life and death, as on the highly polished Antonine piece in the Louvre⁴¹⁴ (Figure 11). But as Katharina Lorenz notes,⁴¹⁵ the Moirai can also appear on ‘biographical’ *vita privata* sarcophagi, clustered around the deathbed of a Roman child, as on a blocky piece in the Louvre.⁴¹⁶ Or we might recall the helmeted goddess Virtus, who accompanies our citizen Nimrods on numerous lion hunt sarcophagi (Figure 15);⁴¹⁷ or Juno Pronuba, patroness of weddings, who enfolds so many Roman couples in her embrace as they seal their vows,⁴¹⁸ as on the columnar piece in Rome’s Palazzo Massimo just seen (Figure 88), or another fine frieze sarcophagus, the so-called “Annona sarcophagus”, in the same room⁴¹⁹ (Figure 91, Figure 92). Then there are ‘biographical’ pieces showing the course of a young child’s life, such as the coffin in Rome’s Museo Torlonia,⁴²⁰ whose diminutive subject manages to rub shoulders with two Muses, Pluto, and Mercury during his brief span; and another in Rome’s Doria Pamphili,⁴²¹ whose small occupant enjoys the audience of the Moirai, two Muses, and Mercury (twice). Now one might object that the figure of Virtus is a rather colorless personification lacking mythological credentials. But the Moirai and Muses are authentic mythological characters; and Juno and Mercury are no less than Olympian deities. In short, Roman carvers insist on inserting mythic figures even in genres whose referent we imagine to be ‘real life’.

We should not think these figures’ infiltration of the so-called ‘biographical’ pieces to be a novel development, or something patented on sarcophagi. Precedent had been set already in 81 or 82 AD by the northern panel of the Arch of (better, for) Titus. Here the triumphant emperor enjoys the tender ministrations of Victoria herself (Greek, *Nike*) while Virtus (or is it the goddess Roma?) leads his chariot: the earliest extant example in Roman public art of divinities directly mingling with known mortals in a supposedly ‘biographical’ scene. As Fred Kleiner notes, such interaction between mortals and immortals would quickly become a staple of Roman narrative relief sculpture.⁴²² Given the general debt owed by the ‘biographical’ sarcophagi to state

that the two forms of imagery were *identical*... But it does indicate that they were interchangeable options, functionally fungible.

⁴¹⁴ Koch 1975, 38-42, 4-7, 120-1, cat. 16, pl. 03b, 06-11, 13a,b; Zanker and Ewald 2004, 68-73, 351-2, cat. 26, fig. 44, 51, 52; Clark 2012, 240-1.

⁴¹⁵ Lorenz 2011, 324.

⁴¹⁶ Amedick 1996, 140, cat. 15, pl. 56.1-2, 57.1-2.

⁴¹⁷ See discussion on page 22 above.

⁴¹⁸ Zanker and Ewald 2004, 50; Reinsberg 2006, 174.

⁴¹⁹ Discussed at greater length below: see page 96.

⁴²⁰ Wegner 1966, 53, cat. 132, pl. 46b; Amedick 1996, 154, cat. 98, pl. 54.1-3, 55.3-4; Huskinson 1996, 11, 22, cat. 1.31, pl. 3.1 .

⁴²¹ Wegner 1966, 80, cat. 209; Amedick 1996, 159, cat. 236, pl. 55.2; Huskinson 1996, 11, 22-3, cat. 1.33.

⁴²² Kleiner 2007, 131.

monuments for their compositions and motifs,⁴²³ it is not surprising that our carvers should have adopted this strategy from state relief as well. The convention was thus a derivative one. But this in no way detracts from its value for our argument. All that matters for us is its ubiquity on sarcophagi: a trenchant reminder of how porous was the border between “scenes of life” and “scenes of myth”.

So far my arguments for the functional equivalence of mythological and ‘biographical’ modes have focused on the fungibility of their subject matter. But what if we consider questions not of content but form: questions of material facture and technique, tool use and carving? To these we turn next.

CHISEL AND DRILL: TOOLS OF STATUS

Applying Myth to Man: Mythological Portraiture

As the main artistic product of the Late Empire, sarcophagi served as important 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 gap between audience and image had to be bridged. This was especially the case with mythological imagery, whose power to move the viewer always depended on metaphorical or symbolic connections. 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.

Thanks to Paul Zanker and Björn Ewald,⁴²⁴ we are well equipped to appreciate the various ‘tricks of the trade’ employed by Roman carvers to clarify relationships and forge links that would pull their audience into the picture frame. Scenes of groups banqueting on the lids of sarcophagi,⁴²⁵ for example, would have evoked the *refrigerium*, that honorary meal brought by the family to the tomb, whether during the feast of the *parentalia*⁴²⁶ or on the birthdays of the deceased, and consumed in the presence of those same sarcophagi.⁴²⁷ The chiseled garlands festooning many coffins served as permanent stone reminders of the real garlands of fresh flowers that the family

⁴²³ Reinsberg 2006, 174; Koortbojian 2013, 151.

⁴²⁴ Zanker and Ewald 2004.

⁴²⁵ See Amedick 1996, 37-45 for categorization of these scenes and lists of catalog entries.

⁴²⁶ Toynbee 1971, 63-4.

⁴²⁷ Katherine Dunbabin (2003, 128) 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 *triclina*, 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.”

draped over coffins in the tomb.⁴²⁸ 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 — Hector (Figure 28), Meleager (Figure 11), Patroclus (Figure 10), the Niobids (Figure 5) — gave mythological visage to the lamenting family itself, channeling their grief and crystallizing their loss.

But of all the ways to integrate 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 sporting the facial features of real individuals (whether the already-deceased or the soon-to-be-so).⁴²⁹ It was a peculiarly Roman practice, one of those things that would have struck Greeks as strange and a bit brazen.⁴³⁰ But it went some way towards 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 by itself on a sarcophagus did nothing to ensure that visitors would actively read the coffin’s inhabitant and owner through the lens of that myth, any more than a guest reclining in one of the House of the Vettii’s triclinia would have assumed he was meant to identify the room’s owner with the dismembered Pentheus (Figure 64), gored Dirce (Figure 65), or ever-spinning Ixion he saw on the walls.⁴³¹ Grafting the deceased’s portrait features directly onto the body of a 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 have remained merely a vague possibility. It demanded that the myth be applied to the man.

But if mythological portraiture were to work, it required one thing: that the viewer be able to recognize a portrait when he or she saw it. Otherwise there would be no way to differentiate, say, a Demeter with the head of Demeter from a Demeter with the head of grandma Julia. Everything

⁴²⁸ The practice of laying flowers at the tomb is frequently mentioned in Latin epitaphs — far more often than in Greek ones, as Lattimore (1942/1962, 129) notes. Its institutionalized echo was the *rosalia* (also called the *rosaria*, *dies rosae*, and *dies rosationis*), an annual festival which saw graves showered with roses (Lattimore 1942/1962, 137-40; Toynbee 1971, 63).

⁴²⁹ Good introductions to mythological portraiture as a category are Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 606-17; Zanker and Ewald 2004, 45-50, 196-200; and, most recently, the perceptive synthesis of Newby 2011. See also previous discussion above: note 51; “Imitating the Soldier Emperors?” from page 60 onward; and discussion of Borg’s argument on page 65.

⁴³⁰ Studies of mythological portraiture on Roman sarcophagi seldom emphasize the peculiarly Roman conceptions that enabled 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 constitutive personhood and able, thus, to represent the total individual. Hence that characteristically Roman form of portraiture, the bust. For further discussion, see Appendix F: Head and Body in Roman Portraiture.

⁴³¹ See page 79 above.

rested on this. How, then, were the heads of mythological characters and deceased humans made visually distinct?

Separating Mythic from Mortal: Chisel vs. Drill

For the period of greatest sarcophagus production at least, the answer is quite simple yet seldom articulated: through the tooling of hairdos.⁴³² Consider, for example, the fragmentary left half of a child's sarcophagus sitting in the basement of U.C. Berkeley's Hearst Museum of Anthropology (Figure 17). Dated to 300-320 A.D.,⁴³³ it presents two of the four Seasons, Summer and Autumn, holding their seasonal attributes, beside a Cupid carrying a clipeus containing a portrait bust of a deceased boy. (The other two Seasons, Spring and Winter, assuredly occupied the other, missing half.) What immediately strikes the viewer is the selective drill work. The surfaces of cupid and Seasons are punctured by drill holes: see their pupils, corners of eyes, nostrils, edges of mouth, chin, knuckles, navel, genitalia, and above all, their hair. In contrast, however, the portrait of the boy shows no trace of any drill work: everything here appears to have been rendered solely with the chisel. Not even the eyes are bored, and the hair in particular stands out for showing neither holes nor grooves cut by the drill.

This is not to say that the drill was not employed to block out the hair in the initial phase of work or to hew out its rough form in the intermediary stages. It is only to say that in the case of the deceased, the chisel alone is used for the last stage: the detailed modeling of surface line and texture that produces the final appearance of the form. By relying solely on the chisel to carve individual locks and render the final surface effects, all optical traces of the drill are removed from the finished appearance of the deceased's hair. This is in sharp contrast to the treatment of the mythological figures. Here the drill is used in every phase of carving, including the last: the locks are modeled, or rather delineated and punctuated, with the drill, and its distinctive optical 'bite' is intentionally left visible, purposefully thematized.

Should we assume from this that multiple carvers worked on this specimen, each with his own particular technique? Perhaps a specialist sculpted the portrait separately? It is entirely possible, even likely, given what we know of Roman workshop organization.⁴³⁴ But even if this were the

⁴³² The major monograph treating the Roman toolkit, sculptural processes, and techniques of carving is Rockwell 1993. For less comprehensive but more accessible discussion, see Strong and Claridge 1976. A well-illustrated basic introduction, organized alphabetically by keywords, is Grossman 2003. For a detailed and sensitive treatment of tools and sculptural process as revealed on a group of related pieces from the same tomb, see Ward-Perkins 1975-1976, 216-34. For particular aspects of Roman sculptural process, see Claridge 1990; Hollinshead 2002; Prusac 2011; Rockwell 1990. For the organization of sarcophagus production in particular, see Russell 2011.

⁴³³ Vermeule 1962, 100, cat. 1; Smutny 1966, 12-4, cat. 7, pl. 9; Kranz 1984, 192, cat. 29, pl. 40.2.

⁴³⁴ Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 84-6. The sheer number of sarcophagi with blank portrait heads is clear evidence that these were usually carved separately — presumably after sale, when the facial features of the occupant-to-be were finally known. Those many found with unworked portraits likely reflect cases in which death struck unexpectedly, requiring that the family procure a coffin and put it to use immediately, leaving no time to chisel in the deceased's face. A survey of my own photographs on

case, the workshop had still made a conscious decision to retain this contrast in tooling. We can understand why: it isolates the portrait figure. The differential use of the drill serves to underscore the fact that the deceased boy inhabits a separate realm, occupies a different reality, from the mythological or symbolic figures surrounding him. In short, a difference in technique is used to visually underscore a difference in ontological status, and with it, a difference in representational function.

This phenomenon is hardly unique to the Berkeley fragment. It is nigh universal on pieces from the third century. From an almost endless list of examples, we might return to the so-called “Annona sarcophagus”⁴³⁵ in Rome’s Palazzo Massimo (Figure 91). As we saw,⁴³⁶ it depicts a husband and wife, clasping their right hands in the symbol of marital fidelity and harmony (the *dextrarum junctio*), while a regally diademed Juno Pronuba, patroness of weddings and emblem of marital *concordia*, stands between the couple, enfolding them in her symbolic embrace. Various other personifications and divine abstractions round out the scene.⁴³⁷ An eye to the carving reveals astonishing disparities in technique, as a detail of the central scene (Figure 92) shows. Again we find the hair of the deceased conspicuously lacking any traces of the drill, in stark contrast to Juno and the other mythic figures, whose richly textured hair undulates in a dramatic rhythm of drilled holes and grooves.

Or we might consider the tiny Prometheus sarcophagus, made for a child, in the Capitoline Museum (Figure 93).⁴³⁸ A work of incredible delicacy and dazzling smoothness, it tells the story of the creation and death of man. In the center, Prometheus (cleverly depicted as a modeler, clay-knife in hand) holds his stiff little childlike creation, while Athena/Minerva prepares to pour the life-giving soul (*psyche*) into its head in the form of a butterfly with Psyche’s distinctive wings. Just to the right we see the result of Minerva’s infusion: the diminutive human now stands, alive, his vitality humorously indicated through a traditional *contrapposto* stance. But human life is transient, the coffin insists, for further to the right we encounter the mortal again, stretched out on the ground, his stiffened corpse mourned, as so often, by a cupid leaning on an inverted torch, its flame extinguished. Around these figures are arrayed a vast cast of characters, all of whom participate in the complex symbology of life and death (Cupid and Psyche

hand shows that, of 114 specimens featuring (or intended to feature) portraits, 39 of them — a good one-third — were pressed into service with the portrait features still blank. This serves as a sober reminder of how sudden death often was in the ancient world. But it also reveals that many, likely the majority, of third-century metropolitan sarcophagi were not special commissions. They were rather stock pieces, carved on the workshop’s own initiative, which were only ‘personalized’ once a buyer was found. Such at least is the standard view; for a recent reassessment, see Russell 2011.

⁴³⁵ Sapelli 1998, 38-9, cat. 15; Wrede 2001, 47, 9, 71 n. 598, 73; Wegner 1966, 130. Fullest bibliography in Reinsberg 2006, 124-5, 216, cat. 82, pl. 67.1-3, 68.1-3, 69.1-9, 123.6.

⁴³⁶ See page 92 above.

⁴³⁷ From left to right: Portus, Annona, Juno Pronuba (with couple), the Genius of the Senate, Abundance, and Africa.

⁴³⁸ Robert 1919, cat. 355; Gerke 1940, 278; Panofsky 1964, 30-1; Huskinson 1996, 29, cat. 2.5; Zanker and Ewald 2004, 59-60, fig. 40-2.

embracing; Oceanus and Tellus; the Fates; Helios and Selene; Hermes *Psychopompos*, leader of the soul to Hades; and more).

If we pay attention to the childlike human shown here in his full lifecycle of birth and death, it immediately becomes clear that he represents, in all three of his appearances, a portrait of the deceased child interred within. For amidst this vast panoply of mythological and divine figures, he alone has purely chiseled hair (Figure 94). Though shown participating in this cosmic drama as its humble and diminutive subject, the inviolable gulf separating the deceased mortal from the immortals surrounding him is marked out visually through technique: his hair alone will receive no drill work.

On pieces such as these, then, Roman carvers pressed the contrasting visual effects of chisel and drill into service as semiotic markers. Differences in tooling were turned into a stylistic language, a technical grammar that allowed sculptors to isolate the deceased from the mythological figures around him, ensuring that viewers would not conflate the two and the separate realms that they inhabit.

Once the eye becomes attuned to this contrast in tooling, it seems obvious. But we must not take this strategy for granted. Although the drill had been employed for working marble as far back as the Archaic period in Greece and was already widely used by the Early Classical,⁴³⁹ nothing compared to the popularity it enjoyed in Roman hands, where it was used to render a wide variety of surface effects. This depended on a fundamental change in attitude towards traces of tooling: a willingness to advertise, rather than hide, tool marks. This stood in marked contrast to earlier practice. Greek sculptors had already employed the drill extensively for carving; but the Archaic and Classical ideal was a final surface devoid of any trace of tooling. Hence sculptors of these periods took obsessive care to efface such marks, whether of chisel or drill.⁴⁴⁰ Roman sculptors, in contrast, actively thematized the tool, harnessing its distinctive mark for semiotic purposes. Its use on sarcophagi to segregate figures stands as yet another example of Roman artists loading technique itself with meaning, turning it into something capable of bearing semantic weight.⁴⁴¹

⁴³⁹ Palagia 2013.

⁴⁴⁰ Adam 1966, 13-4.

⁴⁴¹ The idea can take some getting used to, given our tendency to dig an epistemological ditch between iconography and technique. Many of us do so reflexively, and in the process limit what each can tell us: the former alone becomes the domain of symbolism (and thus meaning), while the latter speaks merely of the work's position in time, its chronological location within a sequence of objects. This reduces technique to an impoverished language, or rather to baby talk: unable to convey semantic value, it indicates solely the speaker's age. It is becoming increasingly clear, however, that Roman artists and viewers habitually attached semantic value to material facture itself. Indeed, it was a central feature of ancient image-making, providing an additional conduit of meaning above and beyond what could be conveyed through mere iconographic content. We overlook it to our loss. For a survey of the topic, see Allen 2014.

In our case, the use of the drill for visual effects seems to begin a little after the middle of the second century, in the mid-Antonine period. Used very sparingly at first, it was gradually put to ever greater use. By the latter part of the third century its grooves, channels, and isolated bore holes had taken over the entire surface, becoming the main means of rendering optical effects. This was especially the case in the face and hair of figures.⁴⁴² The result was a style that German scholarship has called “stippled” (*pointillistisch*) and “form-destroying” (*formzerstörend*), in contrast to the “form-stressing” (*formbetonend*) effect of chiselwork: purely “optical” (*optisch*) rather than “volumetric” (*plastisch*). Friedrich Gerke sketched it well:

“The hair is utterly fragmented by drill holes, and displays neither volume nor individual strands. No value whatsoever is placed on modeling individual facial features. The ear is almost invisible; where it doesn’t disappear entirely underneath the hair, it is merely indicated through a drill hole. The eye, too, is merely feigned; its corner is drilled emphatically, while the rest is dominated by a single drill hole for the pupil, bored directly under the upper eyelid. Nor has the mouth been modeled in three dimensions; instead, its structure is merely intimated, through the two drill holes in the corners. This style is best described in terms of negative carving, in which the modeling of volumetric form has been replaced by chiaroscuro visual effects. In this manner the structure of the entire face is defined through drill holes, which delimit forms without clarifying them. We even find such drill holes inserted between the fingers and toes, so that these features, no longer individually modeled, can still be differentiated.”⁴⁴³

As illustration of this artistic mode, consider a sarcophagus in Rome’s Baths of Diocletian. Likely carved during the reign of Constantine or a decade later, it depicts a drunk Dionysus flanked by the Seasons (Figure 95).⁴⁴⁴ Here the face of a tiny Cupid perched on a Season’s shoulder is given ‘features’ not through any plastic modeling with the chisel, but by simply

⁴⁴² Koch 1993, 34.

⁴⁴³ “Das Haar ist durch Bohrlöcher ganz aufgelockert und zeigt weder Massigkeit noch Strähnigkeit. Es ist gar kein Wert darauf gelegt, einzelne Gesichtsformen herauszuarbeiten. Das Ohr ist fast nie sichtbar; wo es nicht unter dem Haar verschwindet, ist es durch ein Bohrloch lediglich angedeutet. Auch das Auge ist nur vorgetäuscht; es ist in den Winkeln angebohrt und im übrigen von einem Pupillenloch beherrscht, das sich unmittelbar unter dem Oberlid befindet. Auch die Mundform ist nicht eigentlich plastisch herausgearbeitet, sondern erhält ihre Struktur durch die beiden Bohrlöcher in den Mundwinkeln. Wir bezeichnen diesen Stil am besten als den der negativen Formsicherung: in der gleichen Weise wie die plastischen Geländeformen durch optische Schwarz-Weiß-Wirkung ersetzt werden, sichert man die Struktur des Gesichtes durch Bohrlöcher, welche die nicht mehr verdeutlichten Einzelformen begrenzen. Wir finden solche Bohrlöcher auch zwischen Zehen und Fingern; man will hier die nicht mehr einzeln herausgearbeiteten Glieder deutlich voneinander absetzen.” (Gerke 1940, 45.) A fuller description of the style would add scenes and forms spaced relatively widely with empty background between; flat figures that hardly project from the relief ground; drapery folds that are merely etched out; and brows rendered through etched lines (Koch 2000, 237).

⁴⁴⁴ Hanfmann 1951, 180, cat. 501, fig. 75; Matz 1968/1975, 448, cat. 256, pl. 66.2; fullest bibliography is in Kranz 1984, 62-3, 220-1, cat. 133, pl. 57.5, 58.1, 59.1.

drilling six holes into his amorphous head to index the eyes, nostrils, and the corners of the mouth (Figure 96). Note that this style produces an utterly unnaturalistic surface — the human form is not, after all, pockmarked and beehived with numerous cavernous holes — yet this seldom strikes the viewer. This is because the drill work serves as highly effective visual accenting: since the holes are used to emphasize areas where the eye is normally arrested (the genitals, for example, or the eye itself), or features which the eye is normally accustomed to differentiating (such as the point near the knuckles where the fingers separate), its optical effects are often perceived as ‘naturalistic’ — especially at a distance — even though the impossible surface form that it produces is profoundly artificial.

In our case, however, this description of third-century carving is most useful when contrasted with what it does *not* apply to: portraits, because the technique itself was pointedly not applied to them. The more hyperbolic the flourishes of the drill on the mythological figures, the more clearly the deceased, spared the drill, stood out. This contrast in tooling thus articulated his separate status: it marked him as dead, yet more *real* than they. We can speak, then, of an existential language of the drill. And nowhere was this language spoken more emphatically than when carving the hair. This should not surprise us. Roman carvers and viewers had already been preconditioned by two centuries of lock-differentiated imperial portraiture to view the hair as conveyor of identity. When our sarcophagus sculptors exploited the particulars of its technical treatment as a means of articulating ontological status, they were simply taking advantage of their viewers’ inculcated sensitivities.⁴⁴⁵

Would the application of paint have muddied this distinction, perhaps even have rendered it invisible? It is true that Roman sarcophagi, like most other sculptural works of the ancient world, had their artistic effect enhanced through pigment. Many preserve traces of paint, and remnants of red bole for gilding are found as well. We must, then, imagine them richly colored, with red, blue, and yellow the common palette in the second century, giving way to a preference for ever more red and gilding in the third.⁴⁴⁶ But that these could ever have been applied so thickly as to level surface modeling is highly doubtful. Drill channels half a centimeter wide could not have been obscured by pigment washes or waxes only a fraction of a millimeter thick, and the gold leaf employed by Roman sculptors was no thicker than several microns,⁴⁴⁷ worked deep into crevices. The drill’s signature visual bite would have remained. Indeed, the funerary display context of our sarcophagi — their deep relief animated in the dim light of the tomb by flickering

⁴⁴⁵ The literature on locks as index of identity in imperial portraiture is large. Seminal works are Bergmann 1978; Schmaltz 1986; Boschung 1989; Boschung 1993. For an accessible introduction, see now Fejfer 2008, 404-7.

⁴⁴⁶ The study of polychromy in ancient sculpture is a burgeoning field. So far Greek art has received greater attention, thanks in no small measure to the pioneering work of Brinkmann and his students. The seminal work is Brinkmann 2003. Research in Roman polychromy is expanding, however; a good introduction is Bradley 2009. For polychromy on sarcophagi in particular, see Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 86-8; and most recently, the detailed (and magnificently illustrated) technical study of Sargent 2011.

⁴⁴⁷ Artal-Isbrand et al. 2002, 199.

oil lamps and torches — would only have amplified shadows and made them dance, enhancing the drill's effect.⁴⁴⁸

Some might object that I attach too much significance to the tooling of hair. After all, doesn't the short chiseled hair of the deceased reflect contemporary portrait fashion? And aren't the luxuriously drilled locks of the mythological figures a form of *Idealfrisur* (a hairstyle marking an idealized or mythic figure)? Yes, and qualifiedly yes again — but we err if we think that invoking these concepts by themselves provides critical leverage. Treating them as givens is to bracket the issue, for they are precisely what need to be explained. Why should the fashion haircuts of men and gods diverge in the first place? When do they diverge, and what is at stake in this separation of powers? To gain purchase here, we turn to sculpture of the second century, casting an eye on the new conventions in both imperial portraiture and private funerary art that were developed in the Antonine period.

Antonine Portraiture and Caracalla

While Hadrian had already popularized a hairstyle much longer and curlier than the military cut favored by his predecessor Trajan, his portraits do not yet thematize the drill: though used to delineate locks and curls, its effects are limited to surface etching, as the emperor's curls are merely traced, not hollowed out.⁴⁴⁹ Extensive use of the drill to hew out deep pockets of shadow is first seen in Antonine imperial portraiture of the late 130s, corresponding with the very beginning of Antoninus Pius's reign. It is already visible, in subdued initial form, in his earliest portraits, where we find the curls of both hair and beard already dramatized with pockets of drilled shadow. The volume of the curls — and their hollowing out with drill — then increases as his reign progresses. This development is clear when we look at later portraits of Antoninus, such as the bust in the Glyptothek of ca. 150 (Figure 97),⁴⁵⁰ which gives the emperor a thicker mass of drilled curls.

The portraits of Marcus Aurelius follow the same pattern. While not all do, many copies of his earliest, most youthful, portrait type, showing him in his late teens — a good example is the bust in the Berlin Museums (Figure 98), likely carved about 140 — already feature locks gouged by the drill. Marcus's later portraits continue this trajectory, thematizing the dramatic effects of the drill ever more strongly. His regnal portraits, such as the fine specimen in the Glyptothek (Figure 99),⁴⁵¹ revel in hair “so extensively drilled that there seems to be more shadow than curls.”⁴⁵² And the portraits of Commodus follow the lead of his father, showcasing the same self-conscious and flashy use of the drill. Of these the portrait of Commodus as Hercules (Figure

⁴⁴⁸ For an especially evocative account of sarcophagi's display context and the effect this had on viewing, see Zanker and Ewald 2004, 31-2.

⁴⁴⁹ The following discussion of Antonine and Severan imperial portraiture follows that of Kleiner 1992, 269-77, 319-24; the reader is directed there for full bibliography.

⁴⁵⁰ Wünsche 2007, 142-3.

⁴⁵¹ Wünsche 2007, 144-5.

⁴⁵² Kleiner 1992, 271.

52), carved ca. 190-192 AD and now in the Capitoline Museum, is undoubtedly the most famous. The technique is now familiar to us: we see the drill wielded ferociously, ripping open the masses of curls, leaving long crescent-shaped trenches.

The fashion for long locks and voluminous curls for men — and the drill-heavy technique used to render it⁴⁵³ — is thus an Antonine phenomenon. Thematizing the drill in ways never seen before in male portraiture, this new style lends a novel visual effect to the sculpted portrait image.⁴⁵⁴ But although it begins with the Antonine dynasty, it does not end with it: Septimius Severus (r. 193-211), seeking legitimacy, adopts Antonine precedent, taking as model for his own portraits those of Marcus Aurelius. His most widely disseminated type — dubbed the “Serapis” type because it introduces corkscrew locks trickling down the forehead (Figure 100), presumably in imitation of the common Roman depiction of the god himself⁴⁵⁵ — continues the loose tousled locks and distinctively drilled treatment pioneered by the previous dynasty.⁴⁵⁶

It is with Caracalla that portraiture, ever the most fashion-conscious of genres in the Roman world, undergoes its most profound shift in style and sculptural technique in seventy-five years. The radical departure from the heavily-drilled Antonine style is set into motion by his first adult portraits, of which the most famous is the Tivoli type, exemplified in the portrait head in the Metropolitan Museum (Figure 53). Gone are the voluminous locks gouged out with the drill. Instead we find ourselves staring at a closely cropped ‘military’ hairstyle, one conspicuously lacking pockets of shadow or any obvious drill work. And just as the hair foregoes the optical

⁴⁵³ Note that while this drill-happy technique was used for the portraits of Antonine men, it was not used for Antonine women. Eschewing the flamboyant style favored by their male counterparts, they opted instead for a relatively subdued coiffure, parted simply down the middle — and carved rather than drilled. Typical examples are the portraits of Faustina the Elder and Younger. In a humorous twist, we observe that this precisely reverses the pattern of the Flavian period: then it was the men who preferred simple, chiseled hairstyles, while the women favored dense, curly, ‘bee-hive’ coiffures rendered with the drill. The famous portraits of Marcia Furnilla, Julia Titi, Domitia, and Vibia Matidia all follow this pattern. Note the slight differences in hairstyle and workshop technique, however, between the Flavian women and the Antonine men. The former show much less relief in the rendering of individual locks; with the exception of Vibia Matidia, the effect is of simply etching and boring the surface of a dome (to draw the outlines of locks and indicate their empty centers respectively), rather than actually modeling the locks in three dimensions before drilling their centers and ripping them open, as in our Antonine examples.

⁴⁵⁴ It is worth noting that such visual effects are impossible to produce in bronze. Hence it is no accident that now, for the first time in antiquity, bronze loses artistic primacy to marble. Constitutionally unfit for drilling, and so unable to receive the pockets of shadow on which the new portrait style is premised, bronze suddenly finds itself upstaged. In a reversal of the traditional roles, we now find bronze trying to imitate the visual effects achieved in marble through the drill. The well-known bronze equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius in Rome provides a good example: though obviously a masterful work, it still cannot begin to capture the striking visual effect of its drilled marble siblings.

⁴⁵⁵ On the development of the god’s image, see Hornbostel 1973.

⁴⁵⁶ It seems clear that Antonine precedent was carried over into Severan female portraiture as well. Julia Domna’s coiffure — parted in the center, falling in deep waves — is obviously indebted to the Antonine female style popularized especially by Faustina the Younger.

effects of the drill, so too does the beard: now shown as no more than stubble, it does not project from the surface of the jaw or show any modeling at all. Instead it has simply been “stippled in,” using only the chisel, in a display of negative carving.⁴⁵⁷ The visual contrast with the earlier Antonine/Severan style could hardly be more striking. This must have been the point.

Once introduced by Caracalla this new style swept the field, utterly dominating male portraiture for the rest of the third century and through the Tetrarchy. Ultimately more successful in the artistic than in the military realm, Caracalla’s adult portraiture clearly served as the most important model for the torrent of third-century military emperors and portraits to come. Macrinus, Alexander Severus, Maximinus Thrax, Balbinus, Gordian, Philip the Arab, Trajan Decius, Valerian, Claudius Gothicus, Aurelian, Probus, and Carinus: all adopt the same close cap of hair, roughed or stippled with the chisel to lend some semblance of texture, and foregoing the drill.⁴⁵⁸ The only apparent exception to this century-long domination of the undrilled style of hair are the portraits of Gallienus, which seem to derive their demeanor from Alexander and their sculptural technique from Antonine works: the curls are undercut with the drill in Antonine fashion, punctuating the locks with pockets of shadow; equally Antonine is the beard, which has been actively built up and modeled rather than negatively carved with the chisel.⁴⁵⁹ But his portraits are unique in this regard. Hence their value: they are the exception that throws the third-century rule of the chisel into sharpest relief.

Making the Deceased Distinct

With the stage now set, let us return to our sarcophagi. We should not be surprised that the voluminous hairstyles and beards of Antonine portraiture, and the drill-heavy technique used to render them, had been translated to coffins. The interesting thing about the translation, however, is that it saw this style of hair and carving applied to figures on both sides of the ontological divide. That is, it was applied not only, as we might expect, to portraits of the deceased (still rare on sarcophagi in the second century), but to mythological figures as well. Take, for example, the famous specimen in the Capitoline showing Meleager and the hunt for the Calydonian boar, dated to the reign of Commodus (Figure 14).⁴⁶⁰ On the left Meleager speaks with Oeneus about admitting Atalanta to the hunt, while on the right we find arrayed (from left to right) Orcus with axe, the Dioscuri, Meleager spearing the boar, Atalanta, and various hunting companions. Inviolable convention required that Meleager, his young companions, and the Dioscuri all forego beards, regardless of contemporary fashion, as an index of their youth, even as the older Oeneus and Orcus were required to wear them. But when it comes to coiffure, all here take their cues from Antonine fashion and the tool that shaped it: the hair varies from mildly thick to positively bushy, and is universally drilled. Or another example: the astonishing piece in the Louvre

⁴⁵⁷ Kleiner 1992, 324

⁴⁵⁸ Note that all of these forego drilling the beard as well. The only exception here are portraits of Macrinus.

⁴⁵⁹ Kleiner 1992, 373.

⁴⁶⁰ Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 162; Koch 1975, 14, 89-90, cat. 12, pl. 6b, 7c-d, 8-21.

featuring episodes from Book 24 of the *Iliad*⁴⁶¹ (Figure 28). Carved between 190 and 200 AD, it gives us Priam's embassy to Achilles (on the left), followed by the return of Hector's corpse. The contemporary late-Antonine/early-Severan locks, long and tousled, punctuated by the drill, are impossible to miss: every male figure possesses them, and all but one (including Hector) also sport an accompanying Antonine-inspired beard.⁴⁶²

But if mythological figures were outfitted with contemporary fashion hairstyles just as everyday mortals were, how did one distinguish that rare figure among them equipped with a portrait head? Only with some difficulty. Consider the famous piece carved between 160 and 170 AD, now in the Vatican's Chiaramonti collection, devoted to the tale of Admetus and Alcestis⁴⁶³ (Figure 8). In the center, Alcestis expires on her *kline* while Admetus steps forward with manly vigor to clasp her arm, with Apollo inserted behind him. To the right, Admetus extends a hand of welcome to Herakles, freshly back from the underworld with Alcestis, a diminutive hellhound at his feet serving as a reminder. Persephone and an enthroned Hades round out the scene at far right, Admetus's hunting companions the far left. The drill is used more sparingly here than on sarcophagi to come, but the hairstyles of most figures are still recognizably Antonine. And that is precisely the problem: it makes mythological portraiture rather tricky to pull off. True, nobody would mistake Apollo's head here for a contemporary portrait — not when he has his signature girlish locks, bound up at the back. But how is the viewer supposed to tell that the figure of Admetus, in his several appearances, carries a portrait head, when his hair differs so little from his companions' (or are they portraits too?), or, for that matter, from Herakles's, reduced in volume only because compressed under a fillet? Facial features must bear the brunt of the labor. Admetus's curved nose and downwardly pursed lips deviate sufficiently from the ideal (contrast his face with Herakles's) to mark him as a portrait. But this demands keen powers

⁴⁶¹ Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 130, pl. 8; Grassinger 1999, 57-63, 208-9, cat. 40, pl. 36.1, 37.1-3.

⁴⁶² This piece displays certain features of the 'late-Antonine style shift' (*spätantoninischen Stilwandel*) first identified by Rodenwaldt (1935). Beginning around 180 AD — the Column of Marcus Aurelius is usually cited as the first major example — and then filtering down from public to private art, its features include elongated figural proportions, angular and broken poses, denser packing of figures both vertically and horizontally, emphatic outlining, and stark contrasts of light and shadow, with heightened emotional expressivity and drama the goal. Paradigmatic examples among sarcophagi include the Portonaccio Battle Sarcophagus in Rome's Palazzo Massimo, and the Medea/Creusa Sarcophagus in Basel. Through its dense composition and, above all, stretched figures, this piece joins that circle, if at greater remove. Given that late Antonine imperial relief stands at the origin of this new style, we should not be surprised that the sarcophagi adopting it also adopt Antonine hair and beard, along with the drillwork that serves it. (For general introduction to the *Stilwandel* and extensive bibliography: Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 255-6; see also Zanker and Ewald 2004, 250-3, 75 n.7, discussed above under "The Late-Antonine *Stilwandel*: A Crisis of Elite Culture?" (page 35 onward).)

⁴⁶³ Sichtermann and Koch 1975, 20-1, pl. 16, 7.2, 8.1-2, 9.1-2; Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 136; Grassinger 1999, 110-28 passim, 227-8, cat. 76, pl. 75.2, 78-81, 84.6-7; Kastelic 1999, 261-6; Koch 1993, 50-1; Zanker and Ewald 2004, 202-4, 98-301, fig. 182-3; Newby 2011, 194-6, fig. 6.1.

of observation on the part of the observer — keener than carvers and commissioners might wish. They clearly realized the risk of ambiguity.⁴⁶⁴

Hence why the shift in portrait style initiated by Caracalla was so important. The style he popularized — close-cropped and defined solely with the chisel — was quickly adopted for private funerary portraiture, as our third-century specimens make clear. The first generation of sarcophagi to employ the new, undrilled technique for the deceased, such as the specimen in the Vatican's Museo Gregoriano Profano featuring a portrait-headed Adonis enthroned⁴⁶⁵ (Figure 21), or a notable clipeus sarcophagus in the Baths of Diocletian⁴⁶⁶ (Figure 58, Figure 59), arise in the years between 210 and 220, and so follow the emperor's own shift in portrait preference by less than a decade.⁴⁶⁷ And just as Caracalla's chisel-based style would then dominate portraiture in the round for the rest of the century, so it would on sarcophagi. But — and here is the crucial point — *only* for the deceased.

Why such selective application? We can appreciate its allure: it solved the problems of identification. While the style used for the deceased was updated sometime between 210 and 220 to reflect the new taste for a short and chiseled style, the carving technique popularized during the Antonine period, with its luxurious drilled locks, was purposefully *maintained* for mythological figures. That is, the shift in portrait style that took place during Caracalla's reign is what provided our sculptors with the opportunity to disengage the image of the dead man on sarcophagi decisively from the mythic figures with whom he often shared space. Easily legible and emphatically discriminating, this contrast provided exactly what was needed: a way to isolate the deceased within the visual field and highlight his separate ontological status within the metaphorical equation. With the risk of ambiguity thus eliminated, mythological portraiture could blossom.

The dates support this thesis. As Gerke first determined⁴⁶⁸ and other have since confirmed,⁴⁶⁹ mythological portraiture on sarcophagi is largely limited to the period between 220 and 250 AD. Antonine examples, such as the Admetus and Alcestis casket in the Vatican that we just saw

⁴⁶⁴ The utter lack of consensus in the literature as to how many times Admetus/the deceased himself is represented in the frieze, and how many of his companions also carry portrait features, underscores precisely this ambiguity.

⁴⁶⁵ Koortbojian 1995, 50-3, fig. 7; Grassinger 1999, 74, 219, cat. 65, fig. 7, pl. 47.2, 49.3, 52.2, 53.2, 55-57, 59, 63.1; Zanker and Ewald 2004, 210-2, 90-92, fig. 189-90.

⁴⁶⁶ Matz 1968/1975, 79-80; Grassinger 1999, 195, cat. 3, pl. 2-3.

⁴⁶⁷ Admittedly, the traditional method of dating here risks the charge of circular reasoning, since the pieces are dated largely by comparing their portrait hairstyles with those of Imperial portraiture. This in turn is premised on the *Zeitgesicht* thesis articulated by Dietrich Boschung, Klaus Fittschen, and Paul Zanker: that private portraiture of any given period tends to imitate the hairstyle and portrait style made fashionable by the reigning emperor and his wife. For the thesis, see Boschung 1993; Fittschen and Zanker 1983; Zanker 1982. For critique of the thesis, see Bergmann 1982; Smith 1998.

⁴⁶⁸ Gerke 1940, 11 n. 2.

⁴⁶⁹ Wrede 1981, 143, 56, 70; Wrede 2001, 109; Newby 2011, 192.

(Figure 8), are rare indeed.⁴⁷⁰ The practice only begins to bloom during the reign of Caracalla. That this occurs only after sculptors had developed a technical language for unambiguously differentiating the image of the deceased from his mythological entourage can be no accident. Nor should we think it incidental that as the third century progresses, the non-portrait figures are subjected to ever-escalating drill work. We are dealing with phenomena that develop in parallel: as the portrait of the deceased gains ever more currency on Roman coffins, so the mythic figures are increasingly differentiated from him through ever more extensive drilling, ensuring that the two parts of the equation remain distinct.

The Technique Extended to Biographical Sarcophagi

And yet — and this is the crucial point for us — this convention was not applied solely to mythological sarcophagi. It was put to use on the third century's various biographical pieces as well. Two examples will make this clear: the Acilia sarcophagus in Palazzo Massimo, likely carved around 280; and the Great Ludovisi sarcophagus in Palazzo Altemps, generally dated to ca. 260.

The Acilia sarcophagus⁴⁷¹ (Figure 54) presents a scene of public office taking, whether a *processus consularis* or entrance into some other form of high office.⁴⁷² Escorted by a personification of the Roman Senate (the *genius senatus*), and accompanied by *equites* and other civilians, the deceased is shown embarking on a ritual procession into his new magistracy. What strikes us, however, is that all his companions are depicted with the deeply drilled hair and beards we would expect for mythic figures (Figure 55). As images not of gods, heroes, or abstract personifications but of 'real' — if not specific — people, we might expect the *equites* and the rest of the mortal entourage to wear the same short, chiseled hairstyle reserved here for the deceased. But the coffin insists on drilling their hair nonetheless.

The same holds for the Great Ludovisi battle sarcophagus⁴⁷³ (Figure 101): though we fully expect the portrait of the deceased commander (here mounted in the center of the upper register) to display a short chiseled cap of hair, we are surprised that the hair, where visible, of every other figure in the battle — Roman and barbarian alike — is drilled, even though, we protest, these are

⁴⁷⁰ The earliest mythological sarcophagus to append portrait features may well be a fragment in Ostia; dated to the 140s, it outfits a chariot-driving Demeter with a portrait head (Zanker and Ewald 2004, 94, fig. 78; Newby 2011, 194 n. 23, 9 n. 49). Its early date makes it an extreme outlier.

⁴⁷¹ Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 86, 102-3; Sapelli 1998, 30-3, cat. 13; Wrede 2001, 63, 72-5, 8, 95, pl. 17.2; Kleiner 2007, 272, fig. 18.14; and especially Reinsberg 2006, 218-9, cat. 88, pl. 79.2, 90.1-5, 91.1-2, 92.1-8, 93.1-8, 94.1-2, 120.6, 2.10, which contains the fullest bibliography.

⁴⁷² On this debate see Appendix E: The Acilia Sarcophagus.

⁴⁷³ The work has been variously dated to anywhere between 230 and 270, depending on the identity proposed for the central portrait figure. Opinion used to take him to be one of the sons of Decius — most likely Hostilianus but perhaps Herennius Etruscus — which would date the work to ca. 260. More recent scholarship (Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 92; Wrede 2001, 22, 5, 64, 6-7, 95, pl. 6.3; Zanker and Ewald 2004, 230, fig. 07) has questioned whether he is indeed the son of an emperor, while still accepting a date of ca. 260 on stylistic grounds.

surely not mythological figures but ‘real’, if generic, contemporaries. (For confirmation that even the legionnaires possess drilled locks, see the bare-headed soldier whose shoulder is grazed the general’s extended foot: Figure 102.)

By the second half of the third century, then, the chisel/drill distinction had taken on broader semiotic significance. A technique originally developed to differentiate the deceased from surrounding mythological characters was now used to segregate him from all surrounding figures, whether mythic or ‘real’. Of course, this does not mean that all distinctions between ‘scenes of myth’ and ‘scenes of life’ had been collapsed, or that their valence was absolutely identical. But it does reveal that any difference in status between mythic and non-mythic figures paled in comparison to the special status of the deceased.

CONCLUSION

The first part of this chapter demonstrated that the scenes that characterize the various ‘biographical’ genres were no more real, nor less allegorical, than their mythological brethren. We should not be surprised, then, that ‘scenes of myth’ and ‘scenes of life’ were largely fungible, interchangeable options. Nor does the evidence from technique and tooling countermand this conclusion: as we have seen, demarcating the deceased within the scene and making his special status legible was the primary semiotic concern of differentiated tool use; against the image of the dead man himself, mythic and non-mythic figures were tooled similarly. In both functional and technical terms, then, there was little to differentiate the two.

“But,” the reader may be thinking, “they cannot have been *absolutely* equivalent! Otherwise there would have been no reason for one class of imagery to disappear while the other thrived!” He is right. What we have done here is show that, if mythless imagery replaced mythological scenes, this surely was not because it was less allegorical or more literal, or offered a truer glimpse of everyday life. It wasn’t, and didn’t. But what, then, was the newly perceived problem with the mythological mode in the funerary context? Why was it felt to be increasingly inadequate, or rather, actively objectionable? I offer my suggestions in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4 — MYTH, HISTORY, AND THE DESIRE FOR PROXIMITY

At this point, some may think — perhaps with a hint of relish — that my project has backed itself into a corner, or sawed off its own perch. If, as we saw, the various political, social, and cultural explanations offered for *Entmythologisierung* fail to hold water or else suffer from extremely limited application (Chapter 1); if there is no connection between myth’s abstraction and its abandonment, no causal relationship between its reduction to a set of stand-alone symbols and the total rejection of the mythic repertoire (Chapter 2); and if ‘scenes of myth’ and ‘scenes of life’ were functionally equivalent and mutually reinforcing (Chapter 3); then what *did* drive the demythologization of Roman sarcophagi?

THE QUESTION OF FASHION

It is tempting to throw up one’s hands and simply ascribe it to changing tastes in funerary fashion. Like labeling a motif “decorative”, proposing a “ritual” purpose for a prehistoric artifact, or postulating an origin in “fertility cult” for a later myth or rite, an appeal to “fashion” is always an act of hermeneutic desperation. At least in our case, however, it would resonate with arguments over our objects’ origins early in the second century: as we saw in the Introduction,⁴⁷⁴ it is still debated whether a new fashion for inhumation drove the shift from ash urn to sarcophagus, or whether a new fashion for sarcophagi drove the shift from cremation to inhumation. Either way, “fashion” remains the best term we can summon for the sudden ascent to popularity of carved stone coffins in the second century under Hadrian and the Antonines.

This is because we no longer have any viable alternative. The century-old theory that attributed the shift from cremation to inhumation to the rising popularity of Christianity and other ‘oriental’ cults still found supporters as late as the 1970s and 80s,⁴⁷⁵ despite mounting problems of chronology and evidence. If Christians for most of the third century were still too few, and too low in social class, to exert any real collective influence on what Roman metropolitan workshops produced,⁴⁷⁶ then their aversion to cremation can have had absolutely no effect whatsoever on pagan burial practice a century and a half earlier; and there is next to no evidence that other ‘eastern’ cults, or the various mystery religions, preferred inhumation at all.

But what then? Jocelyn Toynbee spoke for many against the ‘fashion thesis’ when she wrote “the view that mere fashion or a purely ostentatious taste for elaborate and expensively decorated coffins could have brought about a change in burial rite so widespread and lasting is not convincing.”⁴⁷⁷ But her preferred alternative — the consensus view that “the change of rite would seem to reflect a significant strengthening of emphasis on the individual’s enjoyment of a

⁴⁷⁴ Page 7 above.

⁴⁷⁵ Anna McCann’s endorsement (1978, 20) is a good example.

⁴⁷⁶ See “The Problem of Purchasing Power” on page 30 above.

⁴⁷⁷ Toynbee 1971, 40.

blissful hereafter”⁴⁷⁸ — now faces severe pressure. Such eschatological interpretations hold less allure than they used to, thanks to the liberating broadsides of Fittschen⁴⁷⁹ and Zanker and Ewald.⁴⁸⁰ Where we used to see everywhere signs and symbols promising a blissful afterlife and triumph over the grave, we are more likely now to read the reliefs in this-worldly terms, whether lamenting a life cut cruelly short or celebrating life as it was. Not prospective hopes, but retrospective commemoration, seem the likelier mode of our metropolitan works. Cumont’s spirit is being put to rest. But if so, we cannot conjure otherworldly obsessions for the shift from cremation to inhumation.

Another theory, recently revived by Ian Morris, attributes the spread of inhumation under Hadrian to Hadrian directly. Drawn to the rite for its Greek associations, this argument goes, the philhellene emperor adopted it for himself. It then spread through “competitive emulation, with the mighty jumping to copy the emperors...and the rest of the population following suit within a couple of generations.”⁴⁸¹ My objections here are multiple: (1) Burial in sarcophagi had already begun to spread in the metropolis well *before* Hadrian died. (2) Although the switch from burning to burying began during Hadrian’s reign, it took at least a generation or two to percolate through Rome’s upper classes — which is to say, the bulk of the process occurred not under Hadrian, but Antoninus Pius, who was no proclaimed philhellene. (3) The general view is still that emperors continued to be *cremated* during the second century and well into the third, as inscriptions and coins suggest. Morris spends some pages⁴⁸² marshaling all the evidence he can to argue that some were likely inhumed instead, starting with Hadrian; but he does not succeed in dispelling the specter of imperial cremation, as he himself grudgingly admits.⁴⁸³

When attempting to explain the surging popularity of sarcophagi in the second century, then, we can do little better than vaguely invoke changes in fashion. Why suppose that anything more profound underlay the disappearance of the mythological repertoire a century and a half later? — perhaps that too reflected nothing more, nor less, than mere changing taste, signifying nothing?

THE PROBLEMATIC OF THE PAST

Historical Figures on Sarcophagi

I think not. But to grasp what was at stake, we must shake off the very term *Entmythologisierung* itself, along with its various relatives and translations (*Entmythisierung*, ‘demythologization’, etc.). The problem is that the term misleads. Built into its very structure is the assumption that what is at stake in the “disappearance of myth” is *merely* the disappearance

⁴⁷⁸ Toynbee 1971, 41, see also 33.

⁴⁷⁹ Fittschen 1992.

⁴⁸⁰ Zanker and Ewald 2004.

⁴⁸¹ Morris 1992, 67-8, see also 53, 9-61.

⁴⁸² Morris 1992, 54-6.

⁴⁸³ Morris 1992, 56

of myth, rather than something else, or rather, something larger. The error is one of synecdoche: it mistakes a part for a whole, isolates and elevates what is only a sub-set of a more encompassing phenomenon. That larger phenomenon is not the disappearance of myth, but of history, or better, of figures considered to have inhabited the past.

If this is often overlooked, it is because non-mythological, properly historical figures were never common on sarcophagi in the first place. Nonetheless we do have a few examples. The best come from the corpus of Muse and philosopher pieces. Philosophers are relatively rare in the second century, appearing mainly on the ends of Muse specimens; but when they do appear, they typically feature individualized features and/or iconographical oddities that index known historical sages. In a few cases we can identify them with certainty: Diogenes appears on the left end of a mid-Antonine Muse sarcophagus in the Getty (Figure 103), supporting himself with his stick while standing in his *pithos*, his cynical canine crouching atop as emblem of his identity.⁴⁸⁴ Socrates dominates the left end of another early- or mid-Antonine (ca. 160) Muse sarcophagus in the Louvre (Figure 104), inhabiting, as we would expect, a conspicuously civic locale: here the “gadfly of the *Agora*” sits framed by an arcade, a device that firmly lodges him within the public sphere.⁴⁸⁵ His emphatically Silenus-like features seal the identification. Hesiod is likely the shepherd-poet shown on a fragment in Naples, although we cannot be certain here; and it may be third-century rather than Antonine: the date is debated.⁴⁸⁶ Homer appears on a fragment of a Gallienic frieze sarcophagus in Montpellier, flanked by Muses, his eyes staring blankly. His identification derives from the inscription OMHR[OS] above him on the top edge of the chest, although its authenticity is disputed.⁴⁸⁷ Finally, Homer greets us again as a seated philosopher or poet on the left end of a Prometheus coffin in the Louvre, variously dated between 200 and 240; he is similarly identified through the abbreviation OMH[ROS] inscribed above on the top edge, whose authenticity is similarly disputed.⁴⁸⁸

The most specific, and most secure, depictions of known historical philosophers and poets are thus Antonine in date. In the following century these historical figures will disappear, as images of purely generic sages come to dominate instead.⁴⁸⁹ That is to say — and this is the crucial point — their fortunes and trajectories exactly parallel those of the mythological pieces: they bloom contemporaneously with the mythological sarcophagi, enjoying their greatest flowering in the Antonine age; and then proceed to give way in the third century to generic philosophers inhabiting no particular space or time, just as the mythological repertoire as a whole withers to be replaced by a host of other generic figures, from shepherds to seasons, in apparent lockstep.

⁴⁸⁴ Ewald 1999, 84, 136, cat. A2, pl. 2.3, with further literature.

⁴⁸⁵ Wegner 1966, 36-7, cat. 75, pl. 3, 5, 6, 13a, 135, 43a; Ewald 1999, 84-6, 135-6, cat. A1, pl. 1, 2.1-2, 3, with further literature.

⁴⁸⁶ Wegner 1966, 29, cat. 58, pl. 138c; Ewald 1999, 87-8, 144, cat. A20, pl. 16.1, with further literature.

⁴⁸⁷ Wegner 1966, 27, cat. 54, pl. 73b; Ewald 1999, 89, 200, cat. G7, pl. 85.3, with further literature.

⁴⁸⁸ Wegner 1966, 38; Ewald 1999, 89, 137, cat. A6, pl. 5.3-4, with further literature.

⁴⁸⁹ Ewald 1999, 90.

The Desire for Temporal Proximity

The fortunes of historical and mythological figures on sarcophagi are thus linked. This is highly instructive. It demands that we ask what underlay both, or what they had in common, that both should have suffered the same fate. Framed thus, the common denominator becomes clear: the fundamentally *past* status of the characters involved. In the case of those figures that we label “historical”, this may seem a banal observation, one approaching tautology: their ‘pastness’ is clear to us. It was clear to ancient viewers as well. But equally so to them was the pastness of mythological figures.

This is easy for us to forget, largely because our natural reflex is to define ‘myth’ in terms of fantasticality, not temporality, and to assume that myth’s metaphorical application to the present, endlessly applied, reapplied, and renewed, lent it an air of timelessness. But this is to ignore myth’s distinguishing feature, that which sets it apart from other forms of fiction such as folktales. Myth, we may say, is an inherited body of narratives set in the distant past featuring *specific persons from that distant past*.⁴⁹⁰ A particular stance towards the past is thus intrinsic to myth as a category. Its telling and retelling always affirms the ontological superiority of those figures who came before: incomparable warriors and founders of cities, those men of the Golden Age or the Age of Heroes, “better and mightier” than we; and if myth is pressed into service to enoble those who come later and to make sense of the present, it can do this only by assimilating the present to the past, and the near past to the far. The mythological mode turns always towards a prior event horizon; otherwise myth cannot function as allegory.

Here we must keep in mind as well that the ancient world never systematically distinguished as we do between an age of myth and history proper. That the Giants had once tried to storm Olympus, and that the Amazons had attacked Athens, was as certain as the Persian invasions, or Rome’s later conquests. The imagery on Roman coffins bears this out: the fact that ‘historical’ characters such as Homer and Socrates rise and fall in tandem with mythical ones on our sarcophagi suggests not only that they were instrumentally equivalent, but also that they and their times (‘historical’ and ‘mythical’) were not perceived to be fundamentally distinct.

The parallel fortunes of ‘historical’ and ‘mythological’ figures on Roman sarcophagi thus reveal what was really at stake in *Entmythologisierung*: the viewer’s attitude to chronology, to temporality, to characters defined by their residence in earlier time. Mythological sarcophagi did not speak to an interest in myth *per se*, or in myth alone. Their popularity rather reflected a more general backward-looking orientation, one eager to press specific figures of the past — both mythological characters and historical ones, without distinction — into service as models and paradigms.⁴⁹¹ If they were progressively stripped from sarcophagi in the third century, the issue was not their status as *mythic* figures — as opposed to ‘realistic’ ones, or ‘everyday’ ones, or ‘abstract’ ones, or ‘non-narrative’ ones, or any other antithesis proposed by previous scholarship.

⁴⁹⁰ I am grateful to Andrew Stewart for the trenchant formulation.

⁴⁹¹ Ewald 1999, 89 gestures in this direction, as Trimble (2002, 509) notes, but he does not expand it beyond the Muse/philosopher genre.

Nor was their Greek origin the issue. It was their temporal status as figures of the past that had clearly become problematic for our viewers.

Thus we err if we frame *Entmythologisierung* as a shift away from myth to themes of human life ('vita humana'),⁴⁹² conceive of it as a new preference for scenes of "human existence"⁴⁹³ ("What about the Seasons?!" one always wants to ask), or imagine that what now mattered was showing 'real' humans instead of idealized ones, or 'realistic' ones instead of fantastic ones. As we saw in Chapter 3, the characters of myth were just as human, and no more unreal, than those that replaced them. What was at stake was the desire to give extra *presence* to the deceased by avoiding imagery that distanced him or her any further chronologically. The deceased already inhabited, we might say, the past tense; that was a given. The new objection to mythological allusion, and to historical allusion — both of which work by likening those past to those yet more past, the deceased to figures even older — was that they *doubled the dead's remove*, turning an already remote perfect into an even more painfully remote pluperfect. Clearly mediation had come to feel like estrangement, the figures intended as bridges now perceived as barriers instead: a common enough development from a comparative historical perspective.⁴⁹⁴

By the mid-third century such mediation — now perceived as a lack of immediacy, or unwelcome estrangement — had clearly become a concern. One response was that surge in imagery that lodged the deceased *solely in his own time* and thus imposed no additional temporal estrangement: hence the explosive growth of 'biographical' sarcophagi, above all the wedding sarcophagi, but also the magistrate pieces, the various 'vita humana' types, and so on. The other response — more radical, and more important — was to develop imagery that was *timeless*, that invited no equation of the deceased with mythological/historical figures of the deep past whatsoever and acknowledged no temporal distance between the living and the dead at all: an endless procession of timeless shepherds, generic philosophers contemplating timeless truths, and eternally, timelessly, cycling seasons. If my dissertation can be boiled down to a single claim, it is this. *Entmythologisierung* was, above all, an answer to new demands for the maximum presence and ongoing contemporary *proximity* of the deceased, a demand met by imagery that would always speak in the present tense.

⁴⁹² As Ewald 1999, 78-9.

⁴⁹³ À la Wrede 2001, 109.

⁴⁹⁴ One thinks of the sixteenth century Protestant response to Catholic intercessory figures: rejection of the lot — whether priests, the Pope, the saints, or even Mary herself — in favor of whitewashed walls and the figure of Christ alone, that one intercessory figure who could not, within the terms of Christianity, be eliminated. Or the genesis in the seventh century of Islam, which rejected both contemporary Arab polytheism and the crypto-polytheism embedded in Christianity in favor of a stark monotheism marked by the adherent's unmediated submission to God. Or the rise in the sixth and fifth centuries BC of Upanishadic Hinduism, which rejected the efficacy of intercessory sacrifice and with it, the spiritual superiority of the Vedic priestly class.

The Desire for Spatial Proximity

For confirmation that demythologization was driven by a new desire to minimize one's distance from the dead, we should recall that the impulse manifested itself not only in temporal terms but in spatial ones too. The archaeological record makes this clear. Here we turn to another form of evidence: not the reliefs carved on our sarcophagi, but the tombs in which they were housed, and the positions of those tombs relative to the houses of their viewers. The crucial work here is by Jochen Griesbach who, in a monograph and a series of articles,⁴⁹⁵ has analyzed the shifting spatial relationships of graves and mausolea to residences of the living in Rome's immediate surrounds. At the core of his project is an exhaustive archaeological catalog, extending from the second century BC to the sixth AD, of every known burial site from Rome's *suburbium* that shows a clear connection to a villa or other residential building.⁴⁹⁶

The results of his research are striking. Suburban graves from the Late Republic rigorously maintain that classical separation from the domicile deemed absolutely necessary to protect both the living and the dead from defilement.⁴⁹⁷ In the first century AD tombs turn inward, away from the public gaze and the street,⁴⁹⁸ but they still preserve their clear segregation from the abodes of the living. This 'firewall' between domicile and sepulcher was assiduously maintained for another two centuries. Not until the latter part of the third century was it breached when, by the Tetrarchic period at the latest,⁴⁹⁹ an unprecedented migration sets in: graves began to move inside the walls of residential complexes. In some cases graves were dug, and mausolea constructed, inside and against the foundations of the enclosure walls.⁵⁰⁰ In other cases they were built in open spaces near the buildings, or even inside them. And in still other cases, the walls of villas were deliberately built outwards to encompass tombs that previously had lain outside them.⁵⁰¹ The particular strategies varied — local topography had to be taken into account,

⁴⁹⁵ Di Gennaro and Griesbach 2003; Griesbach 2003; Griesbach 2007; Griesbach 2010.

⁴⁹⁶ Griesbach 2007, 165-204.

⁴⁹⁷ They thus recapitulate at the microcosmic level of individual residence the macrocosmic ordinance that graves be located outside the *pomerium* of city or town itself.

⁴⁹⁸ Here Griesbach's findings confirm the pattern earlier noted by von Hesberg and Zanker 1987 and recapitulated in Zanker and Ewald 2004, 179, 81-83: that the bombastic, thoroughly extroverted, public-accosting and status-shrieking tombs of the Late Republic gave way, during and especially after the Augustan age, to a different mode of sepulchral self-representation. Tombs pulled back from the street, their monumental façades shrank, and their eye-catching architectural excesses were excised as their ever-roomier familial interiors replaced their public exteriors as the new site of mourning and commemoration. The first century, in short, saw the deceased withdraw from the public gaze.

⁴⁹⁹ Griesbach 2007, 150.

⁵⁰⁰ Griesbach 2007, 163.

⁵⁰¹ A good example is the famous "Villa ad duas lauros" in Centocelle, three miles out on the Via Labicana. Here a large tomb in the form of a temple was erected during the Severan period at the beginning of the third century, near but outside the walls of a villa. Sometime around 300, however,

as did one's means — but all clearly pursued the same desired end: the convergence of the houses of the living and the dead.⁵⁰²

What to make of this? One might take the construction of tombs inside villas as a sign that these buildings had been already abandoned — pressing things, that is, into a narrative of decline — in which case these villa-dwelling dead would not actually be nearing the living. Griesbach convincingly refutes the suggestion.⁵⁰³ Sepulchers inside buildings were typically erected in peripheral rooms, not central ones, an indicator that the remainder of the building likely still accommodated the living. Nor can the practice have had mere labor saving in mind — not when digging such a tomb required cutting through residential floors of *cocciopesto*, *opus sectile*, or mosaics, as was the rule. Digging outside was not only less destructive, but easier. And of course, those cases in which walls were extended to integrate already-extant sepulchers can have nothing to do with scenarios of residential abandonment. Then there is the fact that even imperial complexes join the new trend of erecting mausolea within villa grounds: one thinks of the tomb for himself and his mother that Galerius built within his own fortress-like villa Felix Romuliana,⁵⁰⁴ the suburban residence of Maxentius on the Via Appia, whose villa walls touched those surrounding the temple-tomb of his prematurely departed son Romulus (Figure 105, Figure 106), or — perhaps best of all — Diocletian's palace at Split (Figure 107), a residential complex entirely organized around the towering mausoleum at its center. Finally, as Griesbach notes, there was nothing to keep these later inhabitants from inhuming their departed away from the domicile, as had been the earlier practice, had they still wanted to.⁵⁰⁵ Clearly they did not want to.

The conclusion: by the latter part of the third century, Romans of the metropolis — precisely those that concern us — had come to want their dead as close as possible,⁵⁰⁶ and were knocking down doors, ripping up floors, and extending circuit walls in order to do so. Griesbach observes, aptly, that “this apparent desire for ‘physical’ contact with the dead is reminiscent of forms of

the walls were extended to embrace the mausoleum, incorporating it into the villa complex. (Volpe 2003, 214-5, 34, fig. 2-4, 12; Griesbach 2003, 259; Griesbach 2007, 176-7, cat. T53, pl. 11.1-3.)

⁵⁰² Griesbach 2003, 255-6; Griesbach 2007, summarized at 150, 63.

⁵⁰³ Griesbach 2003, 255, 7.

⁵⁰⁴ Griesbach 2007, 153.

⁵⁰⁵ Griesbach 2003, 257.

⁵⁰⁶ Goodman (2005, 307) suggests that this late-third-century congruence of tomb and residence documented by Griesbach for the Roman *suburbium* is replicated elsewhere in Italy during the same period, a suggestion which Griesbach (2007, 152) subsequently endorses and supports by adducing several extra-Roman examples. This is convenient, if not necessary, for my argument: it indicates that we are dealing with more than a merely metropolitan phenomenon from the beginning. By the fourth and fifth centuries, propagated now in Christian terms, it had spread throughout the empire: in Late Antiquity “the connection of graves, mausolea, and Christian cult places [i.e., shrines of martyrs] with villa buildings is a phenomenon that apparently extends through every province” (“Die Verbindung von Gräbern, Mausoleen und christlichen Kultstätten mit Villengebäuden ist ein Phänomen, das sich vermutlich durch alle Provinzen erstreckt”) (Griesbach 2007, 153).

early Christian martyr worship,⁵⁰⁷ but is quick to point out that most of these sites show no recognizably Christian features.⁵⁰⁸ Indeed, we would be surprised if they did, since the shift he documents sets in, crucially, several decades too early for any rising Christian tide to have played a part.⁵⁰⁹ If Griesbach is right to deduce a new “belief in the benefit of a closer connection between the living and the dead”⁵¹⁰ from these altered relations of home and tomb — and he must be right — this can have had nothing to do with Christianity and its martyrologic habit. The reverse is almost certainly the case: the Christian crush on martyrs, meant literally — believers’ eagerness to pile homes and churches of the living directly upon the physical remains of these honored dead, their ‘spiritual’ if not genetic ancestors — simply translated into the terms of the new faith an attitude, and a building practice, that had recently swept (pagan) Roman culture. The ground (one will excuse the pun) had already been laid.

This should not surprise us. After all, the fledgling faith’s central rite, its celebration of the Eucharist — a meal shared by the gathered ‘family’ with an esteemed dead ancestor (or in their terms, a meal shared by The esteemed dead ancestor with His gathered ‘family’) — had similarly extended, in new clothes, the venerable Roman *refrigerium*.⁵¹¹ Christian repackaging of pagan practice was not uncommon — its converts were and remained Romans too, after all. But neither was it random: note the common thread uniting these various adoptions of pagan practice. If the Christian impulse to live directly beside, sometimes atop, tombs of martyrs channeled a longing for physical contact with the honored dead, then the Eucharist offered the ultimate in proximity to the corpse. One can get no closer than ingestion. These central aspects of Christian practice — one ritual, the other residential — thus amplified what was already an established trend in late Roman culture generally: that push to bring the dead nearer that had set in in Rome’s *suburbium* by the late third century. Hence the value for us of Christianity’s martyrology and its fierce desire to crowd around the grave. It is useful, above all, as a kind of retrospective magnifying glass for enlarging and bringing into focus the dominant themes of late Roman — *pagan* Roman — burial practice.

I must be clear here: I absolutely do *not* wish to imply that this new pagan desire for proximity to their departed reflected any growing belief in an afterlife or the continued existence of the soul. Griesbach assumes that it did,⁵¹² but I think this goes too far. At any rate, it is unnecessary:

⁵⁰⁷ Griesbach 2007, 163, see also 82.

⁵⁰⁸ Griesbach 2003, 258.

⁵⁰⁹ For estimates of Christian numbers and purchasing power in the late third century, see Appendix C: Christian Numbers.

⁵¹⁰ Griesbach 2003, 260.

⁵¹¹ On the traditional pagan *refrigerium*, that meal shared by the living family with their ancestral deceased at or in the tomb itself, see page 93 above. The affinity of the Christian Eucharist and the feasts of the martyrs with the pagan *refrigerium* was already pointed out with polemical relish by Viktor Schultze (1887/1892, 2:351-3), who went on to derive the former from the latter. For more recent formulations of the *refrigerium*’s translation and repackaging within the terms of a nascent Christianity, see Brown 1978, 77-8; Moss 2010, 134-5.

⁵¹² Griesbach 2007, 150; also at Griesbach 2003, 260.

belief in the soul's immortality is surely no prerequisite for seeking a closer connection with one's dead. Nor do the reliefs on the sarcophagi themselves give us any reason to think otherwise: our late-third-century coffins may have been deposited in chambers now located within villa walls, next to or even inside the abodes of the living; but the demythologized imagery of these pieces no more points to belief in an afterlife than did the earlier mythological coffins. This new integration of residence and sepulcher is a form of denial through architecture, no doubt — but what it denies is 'merely' the deceased's distance, not death's permanence. (On the subject of death and the extinction of the individual person, see Appendix G: Roman Views of the Afterlife.)

And here we return to *Entmythologisierung*. The altered orientation of houses to tombs dug in Rome's environs spoke, I claim, to the same longing that led their mourning owners to lower into those tombs coffins lacking mythological imagery — for these too, in contrast to their mythological predecessors, offered the family a new relationship of immediacy (in this case, temporal immediacy, timeless immediacy) to their departed. The disappearance of mythic figures from sarcophagi, and the simultaneous migration of these sarcophagi ever closer to the residences of those still breathing, were responses to the same yearning: a desire to slash the distance — both spatial and temporal, corporeal and chronological — separating the dead from the living.

Myth's Continued Life at Home

We are now equipped to return to what is ostensibly the most vexing issue regarding *Entmythologisierung*: the fact that it is a phenomenon limited to the tomb. As we saw,⁵¹³ demythologization did not afflict all the arts of Rome, or even other 'private' (better, domestic) ones. Patricians of the third and fourth centuries continued to collect *Idealstatuen* of mythological figures for their houses and villas, and commissioned mythological scenes for everything from mural paintings to mosaics, textiles to silver dinner service. These remained an integral part of domestic decoration. The lack of interest in deploying mythological themes on sarcophagi emphatically did not, then, reflect any general lack of interest in myth among their clientele. We are dealing with something specific to the funerary realm.

On this fact founders a host of arguments. Hardest hit are those that attribute demythologization to an altered *Zeitgeist* or other widespread change in cultural attitudes — in particular those that propose a craving for tranquility in response to the Third Century Crisis (supposedly myth was too violent), a surging popular or 'folksy' (*volkstümlich*) current (supposedly myth was too elitist), or reduced educational levels and interest in classical culture (supposedly the elite had become too illiterate). Each would lead us to expect a *general* demythologization of art and culture, and each is thus laid waste by *Entmythologisierung*'s refusal to manifest itself outside the domain of death. Any explanation proposed for demythologization will have to accommodate this fact.

⁵¹³ See the discussion under "*Entmythologisierung* Limited to the Funerary Realm", from page 39 onward.

I am confident that mine does; indeed, demythologization's restriction to the tomb is exactly what it would predict. To put the matter baldly: if the figures of myth continued to be welcome on the walls, floors, and furnishings inside the house above ground, it was because there were no dead there to suffer the distancing effects of mediation. Even had there been, they would have been less affected by it. This is because the mythological scenes and characters arrayed in a house did not invite the same kind of direct equation with the living inhabitant as did those carved on the side of a sarcophagus; their human referent was not as precisely defined, nor as consistent, nor as limited. Granted, their application to any particular person on any given occasion would still be channeled by the room's specific function. Commissioners knew, for example, that any mythic figure chosen to adorn the dinner service, or painted on a *triclinium* wall, might end up eliciting playful comparison with a host or guest;⁵¹⁴ as conversation pieces for the *convivium*, such was to be expected. But even if we imagine a reclining guest of the Vettii likening his skilled hosts to Daedalus,⁵¹⁵ or joking that another wine-addled diner was likely to be torn apart, Pentheus-style,⁵¹⁶ by his family if he didn't sober up quickly, such party comparisons imposed no lasting temporal estrangement, no distancing; not when one term of the equation was present in the flesh. No amount of mythological mediation could reduce the undeniable presence of the living referent. *Entmythologisierung* was a phenomenon specific to the funerary realm because the direct relationship of the living to the dead — to those already absent, to those who could not talk back — was at its heart. Not the changing political fortunes of the traditional elite, not the reduction of narrative to abstract symbol, nor any desire for the 'real' or 'everyday' propelled the flight of myth and history from sarcophagi, but a desire on the part of the living for the maximum possible immediacy with their departed. And this manifested itself only where the two met and mingled: in the tomb, at the interface that was a sarcophagus relief.

The *Imagines* Leave the Stage

At this point one might ask about the *imagines maiorum*, those masks of illustrious male ancestors that were made of wax, kept in cupboards in the atrium, and displayed at funerals to serve as a 'welcoming committee' of the dead happily receiving the most recently deceased into their ranks.⁵¹⁷ They occasionally served other, more passive uses: their cupboard doors were opened to let them participate, as mute witnesses, in coming-of-age and other familial rituals taking place in the atrium. At other times their mere presence might serve as general reminders

⁵¹⁴ Comparison...or contrast, we should add. In some cases the latter was obviously the intended response. What guest at Sperlonga would not have felt compelled to praise his host's lavish hospitality, so different (he hoped) from that of Polyphemus?

⁵¹⁵ Daedalus bringing the wooden heifer to Pasiphaë: triclinium P (the "Ixion Room"), House of the Vettii, Pompeii.

⁵¹⁶ Pentheus rent by the Bacchantes: triclinium N (the "Pentheus Room"), House of the Vettii, Pompeii (Figure 64).

⁵¹⁷ The definitive historical monograph on the *imagines maiorum* is Flower 1996. She gathers and reproduces every ancient source to mention the *imagines* (more than a hundred in total), reconstructs their use, and traces their changing fortunes from the Middle Republic through Late Antiquity. The reader seeking further references is referred there.

of the glory of one's ancestors and spur one to match them. But their main role, hammered home by the ancient sources, was played at the funeral. Donned by actors or surviving members of the family, they accompanied the corpse to the forum where they formed a living audience of the dead at the funeral itself. The funeral eulogy (*laudatio*) for the deceased was addressed to them, and typically celebrated their deeds as well as his. The point of this elaborate drama (and it must have been impressive) was to remind everyone that the deceased's public image — and by extension, the public image of the surviving family, and those generations yet to come — “could not be separated from that of his ancestors.”⁵¹⁸

The reader will spot the potential ramifications for my argument immediately. The function of the *imagines* was to reframe the recently deceased through comparison with the deeds of figures even older. In that sense they were direct analogs to the historical and mythological characters on our sarcophagi, figures similarly deployed as *comparanda* for the deceased, intended to reframe her or him in terms of the deeper past. Were the *imagines* still playing their role as active functionaries in Roman commemoration during the later third century? — if they were, I would have difficulty attributing demythologization to any new perception that such comparisons only distanced the dead further and were thus to be avoided.

Granted, *imagines* of ancestors were an aristocratic prerogative, the preserve of the magistrate classes. The number of families who could boast of them would have been much smaller than the number able to afford a sarcophagus, particularly in the third century, when streamlined production had brought these luxury objects into the reach of a larger segment of the (very) well-to-do.⁵¹⁹ Nonetheless one would assume a certain overlap in sensibility among their owners and occupants. Continued use of the *imagines* at elite funerals might thus cast doubt on my account of what drove the demythologization of sarcophagi. Were, then, the *imagines* still in use?

Thankfully the answer seems to be no. Ample ancient sources testify that the *imagines* still played a role in public funerals of the *second* century, and remained so familiar as to need no additional explanation for the reader, as Harriet Flower notes.⁵²⁰ Appian, composing around AD 165, is a good example: his eyewitness account of contemporary funeral processions of the Cornelii clan mentions the public appearance of their *imagines*. We must conclude that they were still worn and paraded as participants in patrician funerals of the Antonine period.⁵²¹ By the third century, however, this was no longer the case. Our sources for the period — Cassius Dio;

⁵¹⁸ Flower 1996, 15.

⁵¹⁹ See page 9 above.

⁵²⁰ Flower 1996, 263. As sources she cites Plutarch (*Caesar* 5.1-4; *Marius* 9.2); Tacitus (*Annales* 2.27.2, 2.32.1, 2.43.6, 2.73.1, 3.5.1-2, 3.76, 4.9.2, 4.35.2; *Dialogus* 8.4; *Historiae* 2.76.2, 4.39.3); Pliny the Younger (*Epistulae* 2.7.7, 3.3.6, 5.17.6, 8.10.3); Suetonius (*Augustus* 4.1; *Nero* 37.1; *Galba* 2-3; *Vespasianus* 1.1, 19.2); and Appian (*Iberica* 89).

⁵²¹ This leads Flower to reject emphatically a thesis she ascribes to Bianchi Bandinelli: the thesis that by the Early Empire the *imagines* had already been replaced by busts, carried (rather than worn) in aristocratic funeral processions. As a corollary, she sees no reason to think that the statue in Rome's Montemartini Museum of a togate patrician holding two busts (the “Barberini Statue”) represents him in a funeral procession. (Flower 1996, 5-6, 256.)

and Pomponius Porfyrio, commentator on Horace — both assert that *imagines* were now reserved solely for funerals for the emperor; and we have no other evidence that might possibly contravene their testimony. Dio's is particularly important, since he himself was, as Flower reminds us, a senator, a consul (in 229 with Alexander Severus), close to the imperial family, and should have been entitled, by traditional custom, to his own *imagines*. If anyone knew who could and could not parade ancestral masks under the late Severans, it was he.

With this monopolization of the *imagines* by the emperor, another tradition with long Republican roots was finally laid to rest. It seems likely that some patrician families may have continued to keep their old ones at home,⁵²² consigned to their cupboards in a permanent state of house arrest;⁵²³ but with their use at funerals banned for all but the emperor, their original function was lost. From the Severan period onward they no longer served as a deathly welcome, and deathly comparison, for the more recently deceased. Within a generation or two, the *Entmythologisierung* of sarcophagi would begin in earnest. One cannot help but wonder: did the former development help to clear the field for the latter? Of course there may be no deeper correlation between these two historical developments at all. But at least the *imagines* pose no problems for the later disappearance of historical and mythological figures from sarcophagi: they had already left the stage.

The Death of Mythological Portraiture

If my account of *Entmythologisierung* is correct, it has consequences for how we understand several other aspects of our sarcophagus imagery. Most importantly, we gain new perspective on that strategy that, more than any other employed on our reliefs, is likely to leave the modern viewer either bewildered or amused: the Roman practice of mythological portraiture.⁵²⁴ What relationship does it bear to the wholesale abandonment of mythological imagery that sets in later in the third century?

On this there is strong consensus. Mythological portraiture, we are told, represented a midway point on the road to full demythologization. Equipping mythological characters with known human features reduced their status as mythic figures, pointing the way towards the increasing emphasis on 'real', fully 'human existence' that finally culminated in the disappearance of these characters and their narratives entirely.

Like so many other arguments about demythologization, this one too can trace its pedigree back to Friedrich Gerke's seminal work. He is a maddeningly unsystematic writer, but in this case his thesis is relatively easy to piece together. The essential notion is that an ever-greater impulse towards the 'personal' and 'everyday' relevance of sarcophagus imagery is to blame for both mythological portraiture and demythologization. The insertion of portraits in our reliefs —

⁵²² Though if so, increasingly not often in the *atrium*, given how few houses of the third century preserved this room: Clarke 1991, 363-4.

⁵²³ A scrap of Justinian Code includes *imagines* as possible items of domestic inheritance; there is no hint, here or anywhere else, however, of public use (Flower 1996, 267).

⁵²⁴ Discussed in some depth from page 94 onward.

especially when added to mythological figures — spoke directly to this desire for contemporary relevance. But, as he puts it, the practice also brought with it a “Verbürgerlichung” of those mythological motifs.⁵²⁵

Verbürgerlichung is one of those German words impossible to translate. It builds upon *bürgerlich*, an adjective meaning “civic”, but also “bourgeois”, and by extension can mean “staid” or even “banal”. *Verbürgerlichung* means, then, something like (and I know these are not all proper English words) “civification” as opposed to sacralization, “bourgeois-ification”, or even “banalization”. Gerke’s thrust is thus clear enough, even if one needs a paragraph to render it. Putting civic Roman faces on mythological figures lent them contemporary force, but it also desacralized and trivialized these figures of myth, even as it elevated the Roman men and women involved. This trivialization itself represented a form of *Entmythologisierung*, while laying the ground for the total abandonment of myth to come.⁵²⁶

Reworded, extended, and modulated by later scholars, but apparently never rejected, Gerke’s thesis remains the standard view. So Henning Wrede on mythological portraiture: the insertion of portraits introduces a base note of everyday realism that weakens both the aura and the allusive potential of the mythic figures. Subsumed under the trivial mortal whose portrait features he now carries, the god or hero loses first autonomy, then believability, and ultimately slips into unreality. *Entmythologisierung* is the result.⁵²⁷ Similarly Peter Blome: the surge in inserted portraits during the Severan period reflected escalating demand for a more direct identification of the citizen with god or hero; this “finally led in the end to the loss of the original mythic component.”⁵²⁸ So also Richard Brilliant: “The tendency to demythologize funerary imagery in the third century came about under the influence of an interpretative strategy which emphasized...the progressive heroisation of the deceased [through mythological portraiture], as if he were a mythical actant.”⁵²⁹ The argument has even been extended outward from mythological portraiture to the insertion of full-body portraits.⁵³⁰

The idea seems commonsensical enough. When well-to-do Romans commissioned their husbands’ decrepit heads atop the body of Hercules (Figure 83), or their wives’ potato features for the figure of Venus, it is easy to imagine this robbing god and hero of any lingering numinal aura they might possess. Who *could* take Achilles seriously when he, holding the queen of the Amazons in his arms, had the features of old uncle Rufus (Figure 80, Figure 81)? Did this not deprive him of his numinal aura? The notion that mythological portraiture stood as a halfway house toward total demythologization would seem to carry intuitive force.

⁵²⁵ Gerke 1940, 11.

⁵²⁶ Gerke 1940, 12. Weigand 1941, 413 synthesizes Gerke’s rather scattered argument well.

⁵²⁷ Wrede 1981, 142-4, 52, 71, 75.

⁵²⁸ Blome 1992, 1071-2.

⁵²⁹ Brilliant 1992, 1035.

⁵³⁰ So Björn Ewald (1999, 78) writes that the introduction of full-body portraits of the deceased among the Muses marks the “transition from myth to *vita humana*” (“Übergang vom Mythos zur *vita humana*”), and is equivalent to the *Entmythologisierung* of the hunt sarcophagi.

Nonetheless I think it is wrong, for three reasons. First, as we saw in Chapter 3, the biographical, bucolic, and other genres that dominate the latter half of the third century were hardly more ‘everyday’, or less fantastic, than the mythological ones they replaced. Thus I doubt that the note of ‘realism’ earlier introduced to mythological scenes by the insertion of portraits could have contributed to demythologization. (Or rather, I doubt that this insertion of portraits introduced a note of realism at all.) Second, I doubt that equipping the bodies of mythological characters with contemporary portrait heads at all trivialized them in the Roman mind. If we imagine it did, it is only because *we* find the aesthetic effect jarring and comical. As I argue in Appendix F: Head and Body in Roman Portraiture, that is our response, and our problem, not the Romans’. And third — and this is my main point here — I think that mythological portraiture represents not a weakening of the mythological mode, but an emphatic amplification of it. As we saw,⁵³¹ the point of the strategy was to forge a stronger connection between the deceased and the mythological figures arrayed around him. It sought to make explicit and emphatic a comparison that might otherwise have remained slumbering. It demanded that the myth be applied to the man — or that the dead man join the even more ancient company of myth.

The reader will see where I am going. The latter was now precisely the problem. Hence we should not be surprised that mythological portraiture’s disappearance (in the 250s) corresponds precisely with the surging popularity of biographical motifs and, above all, the torrent of what I have called the “timeless” genres (seasons, philosopher, bucolic). When mediation comes to feel like estrangement and comparison imposes temporal remove, then mythological portraiture — the strategy that most explicitly projects the deceased back into deeper time — must be excised. Mythological portraiture was, then, no halfway point in a steady process of demythologization, but rather the last extension of the old order. The relationship between it and what followed was not one of evolution (or as many would put it, devolution), but caesura.

CONCLUSION

Such is my proposed account of what was at stake in the demythologization of our sarcophagi. It offers, I think, several advantages over its competitors. First, it can boast of wide purchase: unlike the majority of previous explanations,⁵³² it offers traction on the phenomenon of *Entmythologisierung* as a whole, rather than pertaining to only one subset or another of the genres involved. Not only the disappearance of the mythological sarcophagi, but the positive allure of those that replaced them — including not only the bucolic, philosopher, and season pieces, but all those with ‘biographical’ motifs (weddings, magistracies) and scenes of ‘everyday life’ (cart journeys, *stibadium* meals, etc.) — are all accounted for under these terms: the rejection of figures conceived to precede the deceased. Second, it casts light on other contemporary archaeological data, hard external data, such as the simultaneous migration of tombs inside the grounds of villas in Rome’s environs; my project shows that the two phenomena — the demythologization of sarcophagi, and the convergence of the houses of the living and the dead — were mutually reinforcing reflexes speaking to the same need, and it reveals the shift in attitude that drove both. Third, it accommodates what every theory of

⁵³¹ See the discussion under “Applying Myth to Man: Mythological Portraiture”, on page 93.

⁵³² See the summary at the end of Chapter 1, beginning on page 69.

demythologization *must* accommodate: the fact that mythological imagery vacates only the tomb, not the home. Fourth, it accords with the end of the use of *imagines maiorum* at aristocratic funerals, objects whose function had been precisely to reframe the recently deceased through comparison with ancestors even older. Fifth, it offers greater understanding of mythological portraiture and why it was abandoned. And sixth, it offers a new context for reconceiving what was long held to be a feature particular to Christianity — its living adherents' fierce desire to crowd around the grave — but which must now be understood as a translation into the terms of the new faith of an altered orientation that had first manifested itself in pagan funerary practice during the second half of the third century: the desire among the living for maximal proximity — ongoing, tangible, timeless — to their dead.

Above all, I hope to have given demythologization a positive valence, or at least a more active one. All too often it is framed as a constriction, a disintegration, or a fall from grace. The overwhelming tone in most scholarly accounts is of loss: loss of mythic content, of mythological literacy, of allusive power, of discursive depth. *Entmythologisierung* “abandons”, it “rejects”, it “retreats”, it “anaesthetizes.” I would rather imagine it — I think we *must* imagine it — speaking instead to new desires, and in a strong voice. *Entmythologisierung* was no passive decay, but an active protest — not against fantasy or fiction, elite taste, political disenfranchisement, or the third century crisis — but against *history* and *pastness* as it sundered the dead from the living: a plea for presence against the distancing effects of death itself.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: CARRARA AND PROCONNESIAN MARBLE

Carrara and Proconnesian marble show too much overlap in their isotopic signatures to be clearly differentiated through isotopic analysis. The problem was solved in the late 1980s, when it was discovered that they could be reliably distinguished using neutron activation analysis. This enabled confirmation of what had already been suspected through visual analysis: that while Carrara remained the usual stone for metropolitan sarcophagi of the second century, the early third century saw a decisive and long-lasting shift to Proconnesian.⁵³³

Note that we are speaking only of its use for sarcophagi; Proconnesian had already come into widespread use for architectural purposes a century or so earlier, as analysis of monuments in both Rome and the Bay of Naples shows.⁵³⁴ Our greater awareness of how many pieces were indeed carved in Proconnesian also leads to some re-evaluation of what effects could be achieved in that stone. Its grains tend to be less fine and compact than Carrara's, leading to claims that it "did not lend itself to meticulous detail, but...was ideally suited for producing the broader effects of an uncluttered, almost heraldic classicism."⁵³⁵ Yet it is now clear that works such as the Triumph of Dionysus piece in Boston's Museum of Fine Arts (Figure 84), and the Great Ludovisi in Palazzo Altemps (Figure 101), were carved in Proconnesian. One would never say that they lacked great detail; and the Great Ludovisi is as far from "uncluttered, almost heraldic classicism" as one can get.

⁵³³ Walker, 1990, Carrara Marble@125, 131-132}; see also Rockwell 1993, 29.

⁵³⁴ Bruno et al. 2002, 294-8; Bruno et al. 2002, 282.

⁵³⁵ Ward-Perkins 1975-1976, 213, see also 34.

APPENDIX B: ‘GOOD SHEPHERD’ AND *ORANS*

Previous generations would puzzle at hearing the term “religiously neutral,” or even “pagan,” applied to sarcophagi featuring ram-bearing shepherds and *orantes*. These figures were long taken to be self-evidently Christian. When Matz, for example, in 1941 described the good shepherd and *orans* as “the oldest Christian motifs in sculpture” and derived them from Christian catacomb painting,⁵³⁶ he was simply speaking the consensus. Opinion on them has shifted, however, largely because of our greater knowledge of their pedigrees. *Orantes* are known as far back as Greek art of the fourth century BC, whence taken up later into Roman art. Single *orantes*, accompanied by the label PIETAS, were occasionally employed for the reverses of Roman coins as early as the Trajanic period, and had been translated to sarcophagi by the late second century. Christian art may indeed have taken up the *orans* early, as staffage accompanying Old and New Testament scenes — one already appears on the earliest preserved Christian sarcophagus, that in Rome’s Santa Maria Antiqua (Figure 16)⁵³⁷ — but Christians had no monopoly on her (occasionally him). Whether they would have been read as pagan, Christian, or neutral depended entirely on their artistic context.

The same holds for figures of shepherds bearing animals on their shoulders, a motif whose lineage extends back to the Archaic *moschophoros*. As Klauser was the first to argue in sustained fashion in a series of articles,⁵³⁸ the ‘good shepherd’ as he appears on sarcophagi is absolutely not a Christian invention. He first debuts on a piece dated to ca. 200, and was developed as a kind of ‘bucolic shorthand’, combining those two crucial pastoral elements — shepherd and sheep — in a single space-saving figure ideally suited to cramped conditions. If he ever carries a particular religious affiliation and significance later, it is wholly dependent on context.⁵³⁹

Note that our greater awareness of their long pedigrees is by no means limited to these two motifs. The last four decades have seen the origins of entire genres of imagery backdated, sometimes by several decades or even half a century, as ever-earlier pieces to feature a particular motif or composition are adduced. Peter Kranz, for example, described his discovery that season sarcophagi developed two or three generations earlier than previously assumed as “the most momentous result” (*das folgenreichste Ergebnis*) of his magisterial ASR volume⁵⁴⁰ — testament to the importance accorded such backdating and the stir caused when it is confirmed.

⁵³⁶ Matz 1941, 347.

⁵³⁷ See page 12 above.

⁵³⁸ Klauser 1958; Klauser 1960.

⁵³⁹ Himmelmann 1980, 138-46, especially 40-43; Koch 2000, 16-22, with extensive literature; Koch 1993, 70-1; Ewald 1999, 63-5, 76.

⁵⁴⁰ Kranz 1984, 162.

APPENDIX C: CHRISTIAN NUMBERS

How many adherents could Christianity claim in the metropolis in the third century? The question is famously tricky, not because we lack ancient sources — we have those, of a kind, in abundance — but because those sources are so partial, in both senses. While their claims are often impossibly sweeping — think of Tertullian, writing early in the third century that modest Christians such as himself were “almost a majority in every city”⁵⁴¹ — our authors can, in most cases, have had no way of knowing beyond the very local. And on the polemical subject of religion, then, as now, reliable and unbiased voices are hard to find. Statistical accuracy was nobody’s concern then: numbers would have been hard if not impossible to come by, and in any case, would have diluted the prime concern of our sources, which was rhetorical. “As a result, to put it bluntly, most ancient observations about Christian numbers, whether by Christian or pagan authors, should be taken as sentimental opinions or metaphors, excellently expressive of attitudes, but not providing accurate information about number,” as Hopkins puts it.⁵⁴² Hence any attempt to estimate Christianity’s spread, both ‘horizontally’ (geographically) and ‘vertically’ (in terms of numbers up and down the social pyramid) must necessarily be heavily inductive: we can but muster a welter of impressionistic and disparate sources, sort through them as best as possible, read between the lines, discard many, qualify others, extrapolate where we can, and see what patchwork quilt seems most plausible at the end.⁵⁴³

The grandfather of this endeavor is Adolph von Harnack. His groundbreaking work, *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums*⁵⁴⁴ continues to be cited with astonishing frequency.⁵⁴⁵ Aware of the biases and limitations of our sources, he massages them gingerly, avoiding sweeping generalizations; but after 945 pages of erudition he finally ventures a tentative estimate of what Christian numbers may have been: in 312, he proposes, roughly 10% of the empire’s population was likely Christian.⁵⁴⁶ This educated guess continues to meet with approval. Stark surveys later estimates and notes that most come to similar conclusions, disagreeing little more than a few percentage points: they range from 8 to 12%.⁵⁴⁷ Hopkins endorses these figures.⁵⁴⁸

⁵⁴¹ “Tanta hominum multitudo, pars paene maior civitatis cuiusque, in silentio et modestia agimus” (Tertullian, *Ad Scapulam* 2).

⁵⁴² Hopkins 1998, 188.

⁵⁴³ One might object that the same holds for *any* historical inquiry into antiquity. Perhaps true. What makes the endeavor particularly fraught here, however, is the sheer extent of our sources’ polemical and self-congratulatory rhetorical coloring.

⁵⁴⁴ Von Harnack revised and dramatically expanded his *magnum opus* over two decades. The last edition was von Harnack 1924. Weighing in at exactly 1,000 pages, it had almost doubled the 561 pages of the first (1902) edition.

⁵⁴⁵ It is with delight that I type these words while sitting in the main library building of the Freie Universität Berlin. The building lies on Harnackstraße, named in his honor.

⁵⁴⁶ von Harnack 1924, 946-8.

⁵⁴⁷ Stark 1996, 6.

⁵⁴⁸ Hopkins 1998, 192.

And Drake sums up the consensus with characteristic pith: “Almost everyone is willing to admit that this number feels about right.”⁵⁴⁹ The best guess, it seems, continues to be that Christians comprised some 9 or 10% of the total population of the empire on the eve of Constantine’s accession.

They were not, however, spread evenly. Christianity was from its beginning almost exclusively an urban phenomenon. Peter Brown proposed that the new religion had begun to ‘win the countryside’ as early as the second half of the third century,⁵⁵⁰ but he later retracted this. What Fox wrote in 1987 still seems to be the consensus: “There was certainly no ‘winning of the peasantry’ in the Greco-Roman world of the third century”; until Constantine, the new religion remained confined to the towns,⁵⁵¹ a history reflected in the etymology of the term *pagan* itself.⁵⁵² This means that Christians must have represented considerably less than 10% of the rural population, and considerably more of the urban. In particular this must have been the case for Rome herself. Her status as capital made her a lure for immigrants, for visitors, for foreigners — including foreign religions, which could count upon a large potential ‘consumer’ base in this, the most cosmopolitan of cities.⁵⁵³ Christianity had established itself early at Rome, and its adherents could gloat at relatively greater saturation of the capital.⁵⁵⁴ It seems reasonable to guess then, very roughly, that 30% of the city’s masses, or 300,000 in a city of a million, may have professed the new faith on the eve of Constantine’s accession.

But that is around 310 AD — far too late for our purposes. Bracketing *Entmythologisierung*’s prelude in the 220s and 230s, when mythological hunt sarcophagi are replaced by their mythless brethren, we would say that the main story of demythologization begins in the 240s and 250s as the mythological repertoire noticeably constricts, and is in full swing by the 260s and 270s as the production of bucolic and season sarcophagi kicks into high gear. What we want to know, then, is the size of Rome’s Christian population in the middle and second half of the century, when they might have contributed to the process, not at century’s end when demythologization was already a *fait accompli*.

The consensus remains that Christianity’s absolute growth was slow indeed during the first century,⁵⁵⁵ and remained moderate during the second and first half of the third, quickening

⁵⁴⁹ Drake 2005, 2.

⁵⁵⁰ Brown 1971, 93.

⁵⁵¹ Fox 1987, 293.

⁵⁵² *Paganus* originally meant just “a villager” or “a rustic”, someone from the *pagus* (“countryside”). If in Christian hands the term came to denote a non-Christian, this was because the new religion was essentially an urban phenomenon, with no real rural presence.

⁵⁵³ Fox 1987, 269.

⁵⁵⁴ Stark 1996, 9.

⁵⁵⁵ This can lead to some startling conclusions. Given small initial numbers, slow growth in the first century, and ancient literacy rates among the classes that Christianity attracted, Hopkins proposes it likely that in 100 AD, Christians who were fluent literates probably numbered fewer than fifty (Hopkins 1998, 212, 9). Hopkins does not intend us to take the number literally, or hypostatize it as

substantially only during the second half of the third as the compounding effects of the growth curve began to mount. As a result we must assume that Christian presence in the city was exponentially lower in 250 than in 310. Our best point of access here is Eusebius, who is our only ancient source to provide even a single statistic on Christian numbers.⁵⁵⁶ He cites only one: a letter of 251 AD from Cornelius, bishop of Rome, to Bishop Fabius of Antioch, in which Cornelius boasts that the church at Rome supports 46 priests, more than 100 lesser clergy and adjutants, and 1,500 widows and beggars.⁵⁵⁷ This is all we have to go on. The good news is that this, our only statistic, dates to precisely the period we want. The bad news is that Cornelius is hardly likely to be an impartial journalist when boasting of the scale of his own church's relief efforts; and Eusebius himself, citing the letter second-hand at more than a half-century's remove, is highly selective in what he chooses to pass along. But we have nothing better, so must extrapolate as best we can from these figures. Gibbon proposed that a Christian community of roughly 50,000 would be required to support these 1,646 widows, beggars, and clergy. In a city of a million, this would mean that one out of twenty inhabitants, or 5% of the metropolis's population, confessed the new faith.⁵⁵⁸

As one might expect, these figures have been much disputed. Twentieth-century opinion almost universally finds Gibbon's estimate too high. Even if we take Cornelius's claim at face value, the main issue lies with the gender- and class make-up of the Christian congregation. Gibbon had assumed parity between the genders and proportionate representation up the social hierarchy. As von Harnack recognized, however, much of the surviving textual evidence seemed to indicate that Christianity in its first three centuries appealed more strongly to women than to men, and by far to the poorer classes. But if widows and beggars were thus strongly represented, even overrepresented, in the Roman church, then the total congregation extrapolated from their numbers must be lower. Von Harnack thus deemed 30,000 a more likely figure, or about 3% of the city's population.⁵⁵⁹

Von Harnack's reconstructions of Christianity's appeal have held up well: tweaked here and qualified there, but not, in the main, overturned. Slaves likely formed a smaller component of Christian congregations than once thought.⁵⁶⁰ they were at little liberty to choose their own

an historical certainty: as he says, it is "a symbol for a small number of unknown size" (Hopkins 1998, 212). But it still serves to put the matter in perspective.

⁵⁵⁶ This excludes the 'statistics' given by New Testament writers themselves. The author of *Acts* writes at 1:15 that there were some 120 believers within a few months of Christ's crucifixion, but at 4:4 claims 5,000, and, at 21:20, describing the situation in Jerusalem in the sixth decade of the century, (i.e., some twenty years after the crucifixion), writes that there were "many thousands of Jews" there who now believed. This is utterly impossible, given that Jerusalem itself likely had a population numbering between only 10,000 and 20,000 at the time. What the author of *Acts* gives us "are not statistics", as Stark pithily puts it (Stark 1996, 5), but rhetorical fancies.

⁵⁵⁷ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.43.11.

⁵⁵⁸ This summary of Gibbon's calculations comes from Fox 1987, 268; I have been unable to confirm the original.

⁵⁵⁹ von Harnack 1924, 806.

⁵⁶⁰ Fox 1987, 299-300, 11; Klutz 1998, 174.

religious practice, their elite owners were among those least likely to be Christians, and there is little evidence that Christian churches tried to evangelize them. But we should not take this to mean that this strange monotheism found many ears among Rome's putative middle classes instead.⁵⁶¹ Christianity's center of gravity before Constantine was firmly lodged among the humble free, those urban poor of little education and very modest means. As for its appeal to women, opinion still tilts towards thinking them heavily represented within the church, if not quite as overrepresented as Harnack thought.⁵⁶² For these reasons, we might want to bump his estimate up slightly.

A Christian population of 35,000 or 40,000 in the capital in 251 AD thus seems our best informed guess. Let us be generous, and go with 40,000. What role can we imagine that this 4% of the city's population might have played in the constriction of the mythological repertoire and the shift towards 'neutral' mythless imagery on metropolitan sarcophagi? Virtually none. At anything like 4%, their numbers would simply have been too small to matter.

One might object that while this might be the case in 251, the dramatic growth in Christian numbers during subsequent decades might have sufficed to alter the picture by the 260s or 270s. This is when production of bucolic and season sarcophagi began to surge. Perhaps a burgeoning Christian clientele contributed to their demand? To gain any traction on this suggestion, we shall have to calculate some likely growth figures, decade by decade. Given a thoroughly credible starting estimate of perhaps 1,000 Christians in the empire in 40 AD, and the widely-accepted estimate of roughly 6 million Christians (10% of a population of 60 million) in the empire on the eve of Constantine,⁵⁶³ Stark derives an average growth rate of 3.4% per year, or 40% per decade, for the new religion over its first three centuries. As he and others note, this is lower than the growth rates of many modern cults — Mormonism averaged more than 40% growth per decade for the entire twentieth century,⁵⁶⁴ while Jehovah's Witnesses doubled their ranks every 15 to 20 years during the same century⁵⁶⁵ — so there is no reason to think these figures for Christianity exceptional. Others have endorsed them.⁵⁶⁶ Let us then crunch some rough numbers for Rome's

⁵⁶¹ If Alföldy is correct, the ancient world had little in the way of a middle class — not in any sense we would commonly recognize (Alföldy 1988, 106-15). Mayer's recent argument to the contrary (Mayer 2012) leaves me uncompeled: see notes 404 and 409 above.

⁵⁶² Fox 1987, 299-300, summarizing the consensus that women were strongly represented. Endorsing it: Stark 1996; Hopkins 1998, 204-5 (with qualification). For a dissenting view arguing for greater parity, see Castelli 1998, 242-57, especially 242, 254.

⁵⁶³ See page 142 above.

⁵⁶⁴ Stark 1996, 4-7, 14-21

⁵⁶⁵ Drake 2005, 3 n. 9.

⁵⁶⁶ Hopkins 1998, 205; Klutz 1998, 171-2. Drake perhaps puts it best: "What is significant about this finding [Christianity's calculated growth rate] is not that it gives us scientific certainty; nor is it meant to suggest that Christian growth occurred in such an even and regular progression. Rather, it is that such a calculation, based on generally agreed numbers, takes the story of early Christianity out of the realm of the mysterious. The posited growth rate, while robust, is not unheard of, especially for high-maintenance groups that provide a clear alternative to mainstream religion." (Drake 2005, 3.)

Christian population, beginning with our estimated 40,000 in 250 AD and applying an average growth rate of 40% per decade.

YEAR	CHRISTIANS in ROME	as % of ROME'S POPULATION
250 AD	40,000	4 %
260 AD	56,000	5.6 %
270 AD	78,000	7.8 %
280 AD	110,000	11 %
290 AD	154,000	15.4 %
300 AD	215,000	21.5 %
310 AD	301,000	30 %

These results are gratifying. Our starting estimate for the capital in 250 AD, compounded by the average growth rate derived from the empire as a whole, yields an expected Christian population in Rome of approximately 300,000, or 30% of the city, in 310 AD. This accords beautifully with the estimate of 30% derived by other means above.⁵⁶⁷ Such corroboration of our methods is welcome, and gives confidence that our calculations of the Christian population for the intervening decades can be taken as good approximations as well.

Given these figures, can we imagine Christians contributing substantially to the escalating popularity of bucolic, season, and other 'neutral' sarcophagi in the 260s, 270s, and 280s? It seems unlikely. Christian numbers were still too low. Perhaps their consumer power began to be felt by the century's end, as Christian percentages rose into the teens, leading our sarcophagus carvers to cater to their putative preference for mythless imagery? I remain highly skeptical. Any argument for Christian influence must wrestle not only with their numbers, but also with their social composition. Against the latter it founders. As we saw, the general opinion remains that the core of Christian membership before Constantine lay among the humble free. This is not to say that such classes had a monopoly on the new faith. We should count on the occasional conversion of men of status and means. But such must have been few. Our best evidence for converts of prominence comes from Valerian's edict of 258, which sought to eliminate Christianity among the highest echelons of the imperial order. It specified that senators, equestrians, members of the imperial household, and other men of prominence (*egregii*) who persisted in Christian practice were to be stripped of goods and property. But Fox doubts that this could have applied to more than a handful of men, and deems Valerian's targets more rhetorical than real.⁵⁶⁸ Harland gives it more weight, but agrees in thinking the edict can have described no more than a few isolated individuals.⁵⁶⁹ Eusebius himself can name only one Christian senator of the third century, and Eck's study could identify no others; besides

⁵⁶⁷ See page 142 above.

⁵⁶⁸ Fox 1987, 302-3.

⁵⁶⁹ Harland 2002, 398.

Eusebius's single citation, every Christian senator attested before Constantine dates to the early fourth century, not the third.⁵⁷⁰ Christian men of real rank during the third century must have been rarities indeed.

Of course, it is true that not all sarcophagi were bought by senators and equestrians. Data are scarce, but the buyers most commonly attested for metropolitan pieces were members of the administration, middle-ranking as well as high.⁵⁷¹ Given the steep nature of the Roman social pyramid, however, all should be considered members of the upper classes, and all must have commanded substantial wealth. The inescapable fact remains that our coffins were dauntingly expensive luxury items, "a massive, once in a lifetime, investment,"⁵⁷² something we must imagine only a small sliver of Roman society able to afford (see Appendix D: Who Could Afford Sarcophagi?). Few Christians before Constantine moved within these social circles. We may estimate that Christians in 280 made up roughly 10% or so of the city's population; but they were not spread proportionately up the social ladder. What percentage of the sarcophagus-capable elite should we imagine them constituting? All figures here must be speculation. But a figure of 1 or 2% sounds reasonable. Whatever their precise numbers, they must have made up far less than 10% at the top.

In short, when it came to sarcophagi, Christian purchasing power must have hovered close to zero until the very end of the century, with the (very) occasional Christian commission reflecting the rare elite convert. As a result, we simply cannot imagine Christian tastes exerting any real collective influence on what our Metropolitan carvers produced during the third century.

⁵⁷⁰ Eck 1971, 388-91; Harland 2002, 399.

⁵⁷¹ Dresken-Weiland 2003, 23-6.

⁵⁷² Russell 2011, 123.

APPENDIX D: WHO COULD AFFORD SARCOPHAGI?

The most recent and detailed treatment of sarcophagus production and the costs involved is by Russell,⁵⁷³ who confirms how monumentally expensive these objects were. The labor alone was vast: Koch⁵⁷⁴ endorses Wiegartz's calculation⁵⁷⁵ that a lavish large-format Attic sarcophagus from the second quarter of the third century likely required between 1,000 and 1,200 work days to carve. That translates to roughly three years' work for a single man working every day — nearer four if he took holidays — or about a year for a workshop of three or four.

Admittedly, such Attic pieces were meticulously sculpted on all four sides, and typically included a *kline*-style lid, putting them at the top end of labor requirements (even if this was partially offset by carving them in series with little customization, as they were overwhelmingly destined for the export market). A metropolitan specimen would have demanded considerably less labor — at least for the relief carving. But all still had to be quarried and hollowed out regardless, itself a huge labor. Russell calculates that the 'simple' preliminary act of quarrying a block, trimming it to shape, and hollowing it out into a medium-sized blank likely required a team of three men to labor for a month.

Such figures are staggering. However humble the decoration of the final product, then, their buyers could not have numbered among those of middling means: these luxury goods — “a massive, once in a lifetime, investment”⁵⁷⁶ — were simply too expensive. Their purchasers must have commanded wealth indeed. (Whether they likely counted, in addition, among the *nouveaux riches* rather than the old elite, as Mayer suggests,⁵⁷⁷ seems less certain, and ultimately does not matter for our argument.)

It is a harsh testament to the costs involved that not even the master carvers and owners of sarcophagus workshops could afford to be buried in their own products, as the loculus slab of Eutropos so pointedly illustrates (Figure 26). This etched carving shows the deceased, named Eutropos in the accompanying inscription, as a master carver at work on a lenoid strigillated sarcophagus embossed with lions' heads. He holds a drill in his right hand and stabilizes it with a rod held in his left, while a smaller man, likely a slave though perhaps his son, grunts away at spinning the shaft.

This is our only ancient depiction of sarcophagi being sculpted, and is crucial evidence for the additional use of guide-rods when drilling.⁵⁷⁸ It also provides insight into ancient naming strategies: as far as I am aware, no one yet has noted that *Eutropos* — i.e., “Good Turn” — is itself a pun on drilling, designed to call attention to the man's occupation and the quality of his

⁵⁷³ Russell 2011.

⁵⁷⁴ Koch 1993, 47

⁵⁷⁵ Wiegartz 1974, 365.

⁵⁷⁶ Russell 2011, 122-3.

⁵⁷⁷ Mayer 2012, chapter 4.

⁵⁷⁸ As observed by Rockwell 1993, 53 n. 12.

craft. But equally eloquently, this slab reminds us that Eutropos himself could not afford to be interred in what he carved and sold. He had to be content with a humble *loculus*, this simple sketch its only figural decoration.

Koch⁵⁷⁹ wonders whether the necessity of owning a grave chamber large enough to accommodate a sarcophagus may have been the limiting factor in Eutropos's case. Perhaps so. But this further underscores the immense additional costs of interment in one of our coffins. The cost of the thing itself was only one part of the equation, and for many, it would have been a small part. For those who did not already possess a family tomb — or whose inherited tomb had been designed with much smaller cinerary urns in mind, when cremation prevailed⁵⁸⁰ — the cost of acquiring or building one capacious enough to house sarcophagi would have been a monumental additional expense. This must be taken into account when evaluating Wrede's theory that sarcophagi and inhumation were popularized above all by freedmen,⁵⁸¹ and Mayer's suggestion that our objects were disproportionately purchased by the *nouveaux riches* rather than the old elite: while members of long-established lines could expect a family tomb ready at hand, the newly-made almost certainly could not. Those *nouveaux riches* who fancied a sarcophagus thus faced a vast additional investment in infrastructure. Even for those who already possessed a suitable family tomb, the costs of its upkeep alone could be daunting. In sum, sarcophagi were expensive propositions indeed.

⁵⁷⁹ Koch 1993, 40.

⁵⁸⁰ On the problems of space this posed, see Morris 1992, 61.

⁵⁸¹ Wrede 1981, 169-70, 74.

APPENDIX E: THE ACILIA SARCOPHAGUS

The Acilia sarcophagus (Figure 54, Figure 55), long held to show a consular procession, is the subject of much controversy. Some centers on the age of the deceased. A teenaged boy (as he appears to be) could not have served as consul, for which the minimum age was 42. Does the current portrait thus represent a later recarving, or at least a deviation from original intention? It seems likely; the fully adult proportions of his body and especially hands would seem to indicate that he was initially envisioned as an adult male.⁵⁸² Others note⁵⁸³ that his protruding hands correspond in position to the lion-head bosses common on lenoid pieces,⁵⁸⁴ such as those carved by our friend Eutropos (Figure 26) (see page 147), and speculate that the Acilia was carved from a blank intended for one of these.

If, however, the sarcophagus depicts not a *processus consularis* in particular but rather entrance into office in general, as Wrede⁵⁸⁵ and Borg⁵⁸⁶ argue, then the youthful appearance of our main protagonist may be slightly less problematic — although given Roman age requirements for various offices, his youth would still render him an unlikely candidate for most.⁵⁸⁷

But perhaps such objections are too literal-minded. There is good precedent among other biographical sarcophagi for depicting the deceased twice (as the Acilia surely did as well), once with beard and once without.⁵⁸⁸ It was, one can only assume, a strategy for symbolizing the full span of an adult life and the experience — and hence, for Romans, the social and political authority — that advancing adulthood brought. In the particular case of the Acilia, the unbearded portrait simply happens to be the only one preserved.

We might note that this strategy for expressing the accumulation of experience was not limited to such ‘biographical’ specimens. We encounter it on mythological pieces as well, notably on metropolitan frieze sarcophagi showing the Labors of Hercules. Good examples are the piece in Mantua’s Palazzo Ducale, from ca. 170 AD (Figure 82), and the compositionally identical but substantially later piece (ca. 240-250) in Rome’s Palazzo Altemps (Figure 83). Both show Hercules beardless during the earlier labors, but bearded during the later ones, with his adventures with the Cerynian Hind and Stymphalian Birds marking the point of transition. This strategy must have been strikingly effective for ensuring that the viewer did not fail to grasp the intended mythological correspondence between Greek hero and Roman citizen: it turns

⁵⁸² Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 103.

⁵⁸³ Ward-Perkins and Throckmorton 1965, 205; endorsed by Russell 2011, 138.

⁵⁸⁴ For the lion-head sarcophagi, see Stroszeck 1998.

⁵⁸⁵ Wrede 2001, 71.

⁵⁸⁶ Borg 2007, 62 n. 107.

⁵⁸⁷ For the esteem in which Romans held age, embodied in such minimum age requirements, see Hallett 2005, 277-80.

⁵⁸⁸ Wrede 2001, 74.

Hercules's labors into a life-long process, and by extension, figures the deceased's life span in its entirety, from beardless youth to bearded age, as a single long string of glorious deeds.

APPENDIX F: HEAD AND BODY IN ROMAN PORTRAITURE

Studies of mythological portraiture on Roman sarcophagi seldom emphasize the peculiarly Roman conceptions that enabled 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 constitutive personhood and able, thus, to represent the total individual. Hence that characteristically Roman form of portraiture, the bust.⁵⁸⁹

The crucial corollary: this meant that the depiction of the rest of the body needed bear no literal resemblance to the real man or woman. 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, think “body as symbolic prop.” Did a husband wish to proclaim his wife’s matronly virtue? Her portrait head could be mounted on a body wreathed in stola and palla. Did he prefer to proclaim her beauty instead? Her portrait could crown the nubile body of Venus instead.

Writing of such mythological portraiture on our sarcophagi, Michael Koortbojian 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.”⁵⁹⁰ But to term it a “clash of appearances” is already a modern response, one that betrays our own difficulties in (the reader will forgive me) entering the Roman head. We expect depiction of body and head to be governed by the same logic. To the Roman mind, however, each had a logic of its own.⁵⁹¹ If we giggle at seeing the craggy and battered face of an elderly magistrate crowning the body of Adonis or Achilles, the joke may well be on us.

⁵⁸⁹ Stewart 2012; Fabricius 2012.

⁵⁹⁰ Koortbojian 2013, 150.

⁵⁹¹ The definitive work on this subject is Hallett 2005.

APPENDIX G: ROMAN VIEWS OF THE AFTERLIFE

Roman views of the afterlife have proven both varied and difficult to reconstruct.⁵⁹² The image one gleans depends upon the kind of sources used. But which categories of evidence to privilege, and which to bracket? The mindless spirits inhabiting the gloomy book 11 of the *Odyssey*, and their slightly more mindful brethren in book 6 of the *Aeneid*, provide our canonical views of the Greek and Roman underworld. Whether an undifferentiated mass of gibbering shades (Homer) or segregated according to their deeds (Vergil), they dwell severed from the company of the gods, in a land whose coordinates could not lie further from the Olympian domain. But did Romans' intimate familiarity with these canonical descriptions of the underworld translate into full credence?

Eager for other sources, we might turn to the tantalizing musings on the afterlife found in philosophical texts. But while such sources are valuable for gaining insight into the particulars of the various schools, they are next to useless for reconstructing widespread patterns of belief. After all, philosophy only earns the name when it departs from or exceeds commonly accepted thought, not when it cleaves to it. This makes it a prime source for writing intellectual history, but a poor one for cultural history.

It is probably funerary inscriptions that provide the clearest window onto lived belief about what follows life itself.⁵⁹³ Reading epitaphs, we find expressed a bewildering array of attitudes, from vague hopes for more wine in the afterlife to saucy denial that anything whatsoever follows the grave.⁵⁹⁴ Certain patterns do emerge, however, particularly when we attend to omissions. Even in epitaphs lodging requests for an agreeable state to come, or anticipating reunion with loved ones, the implied geography is typically infernal, seldom celestial. Communion with the gods seems notably absent; and while more Latin inscriptions explicitly deny immortality than affirm it,⁵⁹⁵ the vast majority say absolutely nothing about an afterlife at all,⁵⁹⁶ a significant absence indeed. The final sentence of Lattimore's extensive study will make a good last word for us as well: "...in general, from the evidence of epitaphs, the belief of the ancients, both Greek and Roman, in immortality, was not widespread, nor clear, nor very strong."⁵⁹⁷

⁵⁹² For Roman views on the afterlife through the lens of philosophy, see Warren 2004. For representations of the underworld, see Bernstein 1993. For Roman thoughts on ghosts and shades, see Felton 1999; Ogden 2002. For the relevance of necromancy, see Ogden 2001. For the cult of the dead, see Toynbee 1971. For synoptic accounts of Roman attitudes towards the afterlife, see Bremmer 2002; Davies 1999; Knight 1970; and most recently, Hope 2009, and the succinct summary in Borg 2013, 161. For sources on Roman views of the afterlife, see Hope 2007, esp. 211-47. For Roman attitudes towards the act of dying itself, see Edwards 2007.

⁵⁹³ A concise introduction to Roman epitaphs is Rošková 2009.

⁵⁹⁴ Fittschen 1992, 1048-9.

⁵⁹⁵ Lattimore 1942/1962, 78.

⁵⁹⁶ Lattimore 1942/1962, 85-6, 342.

⁵⁹⁷ Lattimore 1942/1962, 342.

FIGURES

FIGURE 1.

Sarcophagus with lion griffins flanking tripod incense burners. First third of the second century AD. Ostia, Ostia Archaeological Museum.



FIGURE 2.

Garland sarcophagus with vignettes of Theseus and Ariadne. Ca. 130-150 AD. New York, Metropolitan Museum, inv. 90.12a,b.



FIGURE 3.

Garland sarcophagus with vignettes of Actaeon and Artemis. Ca. 125-130 AD. Paris, Louvre, inv. MR 878 / Ma 459.

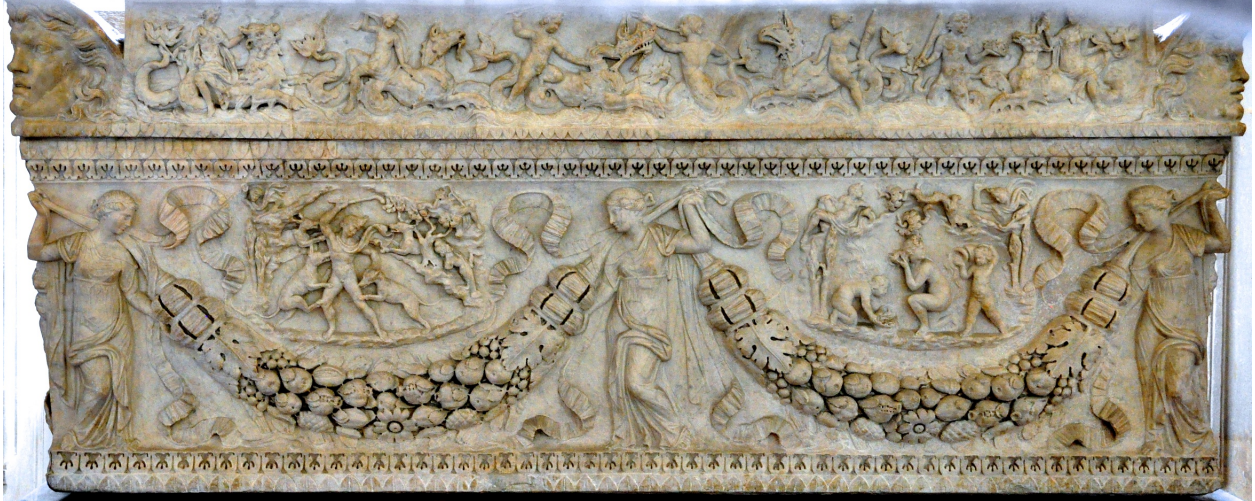


FIGURE 4.

Sarcophagus showing the massacre of the Niobids. Ca. 134-140 AD. Rome, Vatican Museums, inv. 10437.



FIGURE 5.

Detail of the right end of a sarcophagus showing the massacre of the Niobids: Niobe sits mourning before her children's tomb. Ca. 134-140 AD. Rome, Vatican Museums, inv. 10437.



FIGURE 6.

Sarcophagus showing episodes from the Orestes cycle. Ca. 134-140 AD. Rome, Vatican Museums, inv. 10450.



FIGURE 7.

Clipeus sarcophagus with pendant Cupids and Psyche. Ca. 190-200 AD. New York, Metropolitan Museum, inv. 56.145.



FIGURE 8.

Sarcophagus showing the story of Alcestis and Admetus. Ca. 160-170 AD. Rome, Vatican Museums, inv. 1195.



FIGURE 9.

Sarcophagus or loculus slab showing Cleobis and Biton. Ca. 140-160 AD. Venice, Venice Archaeological Museum, inv. 235.



FIGURE 10.

Sarcophagus showing Achilles departing for battle, mourning Patroclus, and dragging Hector's corpse. Ca. 160-170 AD. Ostia, Ostia Archaeological Museum, inv. 43504.

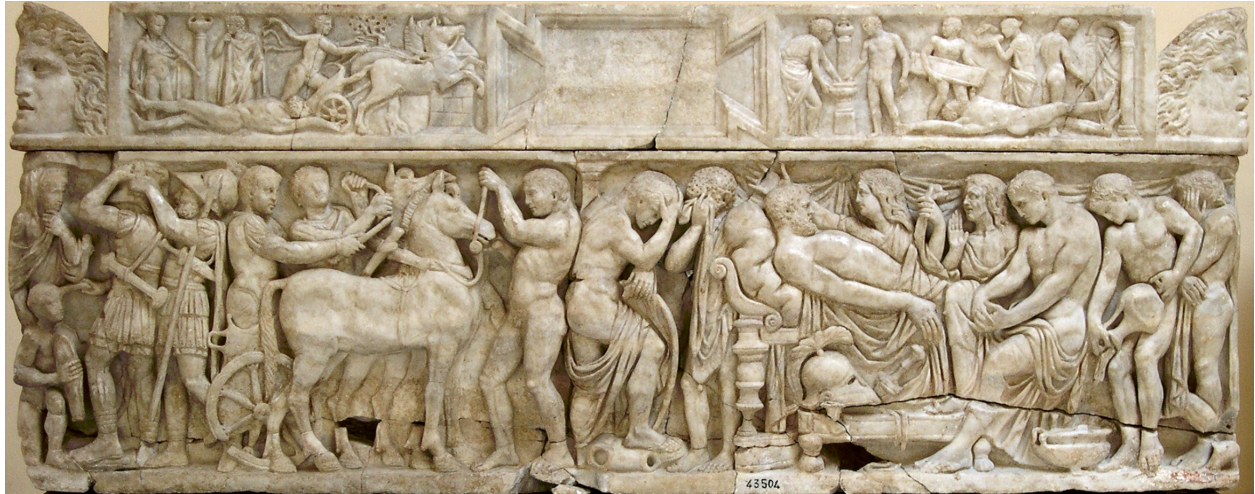


FIGURE 11.

Sarcophagus showing the death of Meleager. Ca. 180 AD. Paris, Louvre, inv. MR 879 / Ma 539.



FIGURE 12.

Sarcophagus showing episodes from the Orestes cycle. Ca. 134-140 AD. Rome, Vatican Museums, inv. 10450.



FIGURE 13.

Sarcophagus showing (R) Adonis wounded by the boar, (L) Adonis healed in Venus's embrace. Ca. 190 AD. Mantua, Palazzo Ducale (Zanker and Ewald 2004, fig. 188).



FIGURE 14.

Sarcophagus showing Meleager hunting the Calydonian Boar. Ca. 180-192 AD. Rome, Capitoline Museum, inv. MC 822.



FIGURE 15.

Sarcophagus showing the deceased hunting a lion from horseback. Ca. 230 AD. Rome, Capitoline Museum, inv. MC221.



FIGURE 16.

Sarcophagus with orans, seated intellectual, and 'good shepherd', flanked by (L) Jonah and (R) Christ's baptism. Ca. 270-280 AD. Rome, Santa Maria Antiqua (Zanker and Ewald 2004, fig. 232).



FIGURE 17.

Fragment of a child's clipeus sarcophagus featuring the Seasons. Ca. 310 AD. Berkeley, Hearst Museum, inv. 8-4278.



FIGURE 18.

Sarcophagus showing (R) Adonis wounded by the boar; (L) Adonis healed in Venus's embrace. Ca. 190 AD. Mantua, Palazzo Ducale (Zanker and Ewald 2004, fig. 188).



FIGURE 19.

Sarcophagus showing (L) Adonis leaving Venus for the hunt, (R) Adonis wounded by the boar. Ca. 180 AD. Rome, Villa Giustiniani Massimo (Koortbojian 1993, fig. 14).



FIGURE 20.

Sarcophagus showing the reclining Endymion admired by a lone Cupid, flanked by (L) a drunk Dionysus and (R) Mars and Venus. Mid third century AD. Rome, Palazzo Braschi (Zanker and Ewald 2004, fig. 90).



FIGURE 21.

Sarcophagus showing Adonis and Venus enthroned, flanked by scenes of his departure and wounding. Ca. 220 AD. Rome, Vatican Museums, inv. 10409.



FIGURE 22.

The "Portonaccio battle sarcophagus" showing Romans in massed combat against barbarians. Ca. 180-190 AD. Rome, Palazzo Massimo.



FIGURE 23.

Sarcophagus showing a victorious commander receiving conquered barbarians. Second half of second century AD. Rome, Vatican Museums, inv. 942.



FIGURE 24.

Strigillated sarcophagus with a vignette of Jonah reclining under the clipeus, flanked by pendant Cupids and Psyche. Late third century AD. Rome, Villa Medici (Koch 2000, pl. 18).



FIGURE 25.

Strigillated sarcophagus with a bucolic motif under the clipeus; vignettes of Jonah and a stibadium meal on the lid. Late third century AD. Rome, Museo Nazionale Romano (Koch 2000, pl. 19).



FIGURE 26.

Loculus slab of Eutropos, from the Catacomb of St. Helena, showing the sculptor and an assistant (perhaps his son) at work carving a strigillated lenoid lion-head sarcophagus with a drill. Early fourth century AD. Urbino, Museo Archeologico Lapidario (Strong and Claridge 1976, fig. 327).

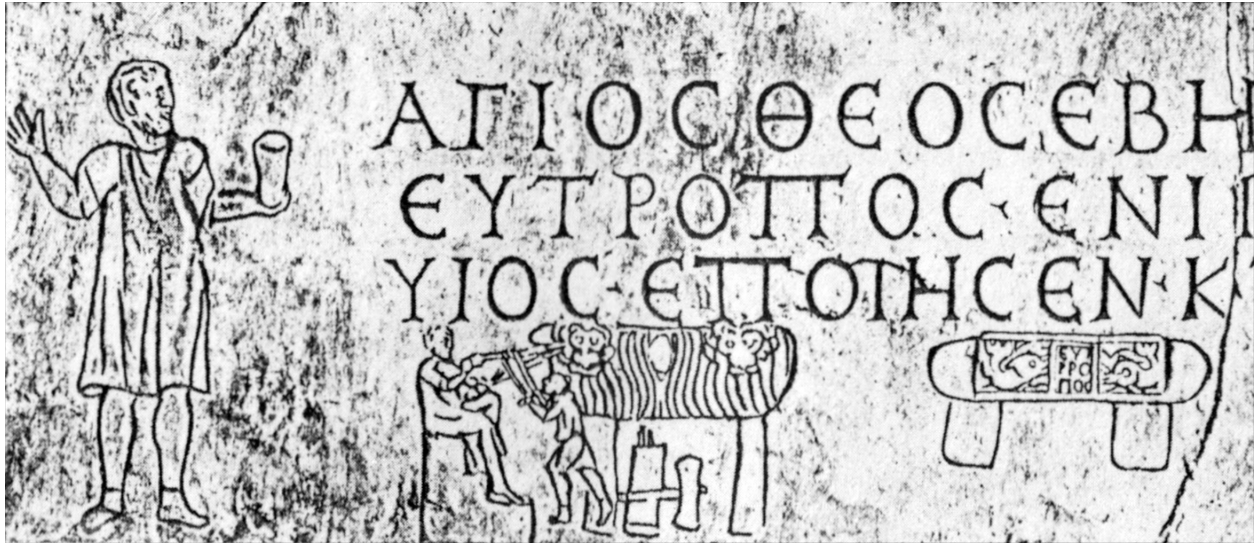


FIGURE 27.

Sarcophagus showing Creusa's incineration at the hands of Medea. Ca. 190 AD. Basel, Antikenmuseum (Zanker and Ewald 2004, fig. 224).



FIGURE 28.

Sarcophagus showing Priam's embassy to Achilles and the return of Hector's corpse. Ca. 190-200 AD. Paris, Louvre, inv. MR 793 / Ma 353.



FIGURE 29.

Strigillated sarcophagus with portraits of a couple; bucolic scene under clipeus, flanked by (L) Muse-like woman and (R) philosopher. Second half of third century AD. Rome, Capitoline Museum, inv. MC813.



FIGURE 30.

Strigillated sarcophagus with standing portrait of the deceased as an intellectual, flanked by pendant 'good shepherds'. Ca. 300 AD. Berlin, Neues Museum, Museum für Byzantinische Kunst, inv. 3020.



FIGURE 31.

Strigillated sarcophagus with a drunk Dionysus, flanked by a Maenad and a Satyr. Middle of third century AD. Rome, Vatican Museums, inv. 36PE.



FIGURE 32.

Strigillated sarcophagus with Ganymede and the eagle. Middle of third century AD. Rome, Vatican Museums, inv. 32PE.



FIGURE 33.

Corner of a sepulchral monument from Vác: Perseus beheads Medusa. First half of second century AD. Budapest, Hungarian National Museum, inv. 72.1857.



FIGURE 34.

Slab of a sarcophagus from Sopianae (modern Pécs): Perseus beheads Medusa. Ca. 140-160 AD. Budapest, Hungarian National Museum, inv. 62.84.1.



FIGURE 35.

Slab of a sarcophagus from Sopianae (modern Pécs): Leda and the swan. Ca. 140-160 AD.
Budapest, Hungarian National Museum, inv. 62.85.2.



FIGURE 36.

Slab of a sarcophagus from Sopianae (modern Pécs): the rape of Ganymede. Ca. 140-160 AD. Budapest, Hungarian National Museum, inv. 62.85.1.



FIGURE 37.

Slab of a sarcophagus from Sopianae (modern Pécs): Iphigenia escapes from Tauris. Ca. 140-160 AD. Budapest, Hungarian National Museum, inv. 62.84.2.



FIGURE 38.

Slab of a sarcophagus from Vác showing Mars and Rhea Silvia. Second half of second century AD. Budapest, Hungarian National Museum, inv. 72.1857.



FIGURE 39.

Slab of a sarcophagus from Vác: Theseus and Ariadne before the labyrinth. Second half of second century AD. Budapest, Hungarian National Museum, inv. 72.1857.



FIGURE 40.

Slab of a sarcophagus from Vác: Helen and Menelaus. Second half of second century AD. Budapest, Hungarian National Museum, inv. 72.1857.



FIGURE 41.

Sarcophagus from Szöny-Bélapusztá showing cupids flanking an inscriptional panel. Third century AD. Budapest, Hungarian National Museum, inv. 45.1925.1.



FIGURE 42.

Sarcophagus of Iulius Sabinus showing the deceased flanking an inscripational panel. Third century AD. Budapest, Aquincum Archaeological Museum.



FIGURE 43.

Sarcophagus of L. Septimius Fuscus showing shepherds flanking an inscripational panel. Third century AD. Budapest, Aquincum Archaeological Museum.



FIGURE 44.

Finds from the 2007 and 2011 excavations at the "House of the Painter" at Aquincum, including an architectural fragment carved with the head of a bearded god, a terracotta antefix with grimacing Gorgoneion, and a terracotta statuette of Venus. Third century AD. Vienna, Roman Museum.



FIGURE 45.

Detail from the "mythological room" (room 19), Villa of Agrippa Postumus, Boscotrecase: Polyphemus and Galatea. Ca. 10-1 BC. New York, Metropolitan Museum, inv. 20.192.17.



FIGURE 46.

Wall painting featuring Hercules in the Garden of the Hesperides. Ca. 45-62 AD. Oplontis, Villa of Poppea, center of the east wall of the caldarium.



FIGURE 47.

Sarcophagus of Iulius Achilleus showing cattle and horses amidst other bucolic scenes. Ca. 270 AD. Rome, Baths of Diocletian.



FIGURE 48.

Strigillated lenos sarcophagus with lion heads, recarved in antiquity to show a vintage scene. Ca. 290-300 AD. Malibu, Getty Villa, inv. 2008.14.



FIGURE 49.

The so-called "Four Brothers" sarcophagus showing episodes in the life of the deceased. Ca. 260 AD. Naples, Naples Archaeological Museum, inv. 6603 (courtesy Michael Anderson).



FIGURE 50.

The so-called "Plotinus" sarcophagus showing the deceased as a seated intellectual. Ca. 270-280 AD. Rome, Vatican Museums, inv. 9504.



FIGURE 51.

Strigillated sarcophagus with pendant seated portraits of husband and wife. Rome, Palazzo Corsini (Ewald 1999, pl. 61.3).



FIGURE 52.

Portrait bust of Commodus in the guise of Hercules. Ca. 190-192 AD. Rome, Capitoline Museum, inv. MC 1120.



FIGURE 53.

Portrait head of Caracalla. Ca. 211-217 AD. New York, Metropolitan Museum, inv. 40.11.1a (© The Metropolitan Museum of Art).



FIGURE 54.

The "Acilia sarcophagus" showing a young man's entrance into public office. Ca. 270-280 AD. Rome, Palazzo Massimo.



FIGURE 55.

Detail of the "Acilia sarcophagus" showing a young man's entrance into public office. Ca. 270-280 AD. Rome, Palazzo Massimo.



FIGURE 56.

Fluted clipeus sarcophagus with Leda and the swan. Middle of the third century AD. Rome, Capitoline Museum, inv. MC 2412.



FIGURE 57.

Strigillated sarcophagus showing Hercules emerging from the doors of the underworld with Cerberus in tow. Third century AD. Rome, Montemartini Museum, inv. MC 1394.



FIGURE 58.

Sarcophagus with flying Cupids bearing clipeus aloft; Oceanus, Tellus, and eagle underneath; Achilles and Chiron (doubled) on ends. Middle of the third century AD. Rome, Baths of Diocletian, inv. 124735.



FIGURE 59.

Detail of a sarcophagus with flying Cupids bearing clipeus aloft; Oceanus, Tellus, and eagle underneath. Middle of the third century AD. Rome, Baths of Diocletian, inv. 124735.



FIGURE 60.

Wooden larnax from the necropolis of Gorgrippia (modern Anapa) decorated with gilded Nereids bearing the armor of Achilles. Third century BC. Saint Petersburg, Hermitage, inv. Gp.1882.45.



FIGURE 61.

Detail of a wooden larnax from the necropolis of Gorgrippia (modern Anapa) decorated with gilded Nereids bearing the armor of Achilles. Third century BC. Saint Petersburg, Hermitage, inv. Gp.1882.45.



FIGURE 62.

The "Pentheus Room" (triclinium N). Ca. 62-79 AD. Pompeii, House of the Vettii (Kleiner 2007, fig. 10.15).



FIGURE 63.

Detail of the "Pentheus Room" (triclinium N): baby Hercules strangles the serpents. Ca. 62-79 AD. Pompeii, House of the Vettii (© 2006, SCALA, Florence).



FIGURE 64.

Detail of the "Pentheus Room" (triclinium N): Pentheus rent by Bacchantes. Ca. 62-79 AD. Pompeii, House of the Vettii (Mazzoleni 2004, 349).



FIGURE 65.

Detail of the "Pentheus Room" (triclinium N): the punishment of Dirce. Ca. 62-79 AD. Pompeii, House of the Vettii (Mazzoleni 2004, 350).



FIGURE 66.

Detail from the south wall of cubiculum E, House of Jason, Pompeii: Helen contemplates leaving with Paris. Ca. 10 AD. Naples, Naples Archaeological Museum, inv. 114320.



FIGURE 67.

Detail from the south wall of cubiculum E, House of Jason, Pompeii: Medea contemplates killing her children. Ca. 10 AD. Naples, Naples Archaeological Museum, inv. 114321.



FIGURE 68.

Detail from the south wall of cubiculum E, House of Jason, Pompeii: Phaedra hands her nurse the letter that will kill Hippolytus. Ca. 10 AD. Naples, Naples Archaeological Museum, inv. 114322.



FIGURE 69.

Detail from the "mythological room" (room 19), Villa of Agrippa Postumus, Boscotrecase: Perseus and Andromeda. Ca. 10-1 BC. New York, Metropolitan Museum, inv. 20.192.16.



FIGURE 70.

Lenos sarcophagus featuring a sleeping Endymion, recarved in antiquity from an original figure of Ariadne. Ca. 250-280 AD. London, British Museum, Cook Collection, inv. GR 1947.7-14.8.



FIGURE 71.

Front slab of a columnar sarcophagus centered on the standing figures of Venus and Mars. Third century AD. Rome, Palazzo Mattei.



FIGURE 72.

Sculptural group of a deceased couple portrayed in the guise of Mars and Venus, from the Isola Sacra necropolis, Ostia. Ca. 145-150 AD. Rome, Capitoline Museum, inv. 5.18.



FIGURE 73.

Sculptural group of Hadrian and Lucilla (wife of Lucius Verus) in the guise of Mars and Venus. Ca. 120-140 AD; female's features recarved into Lucilla's ca. 170-175 AD. Paris, Louvre, inv. MR 316 / Ma 1009.

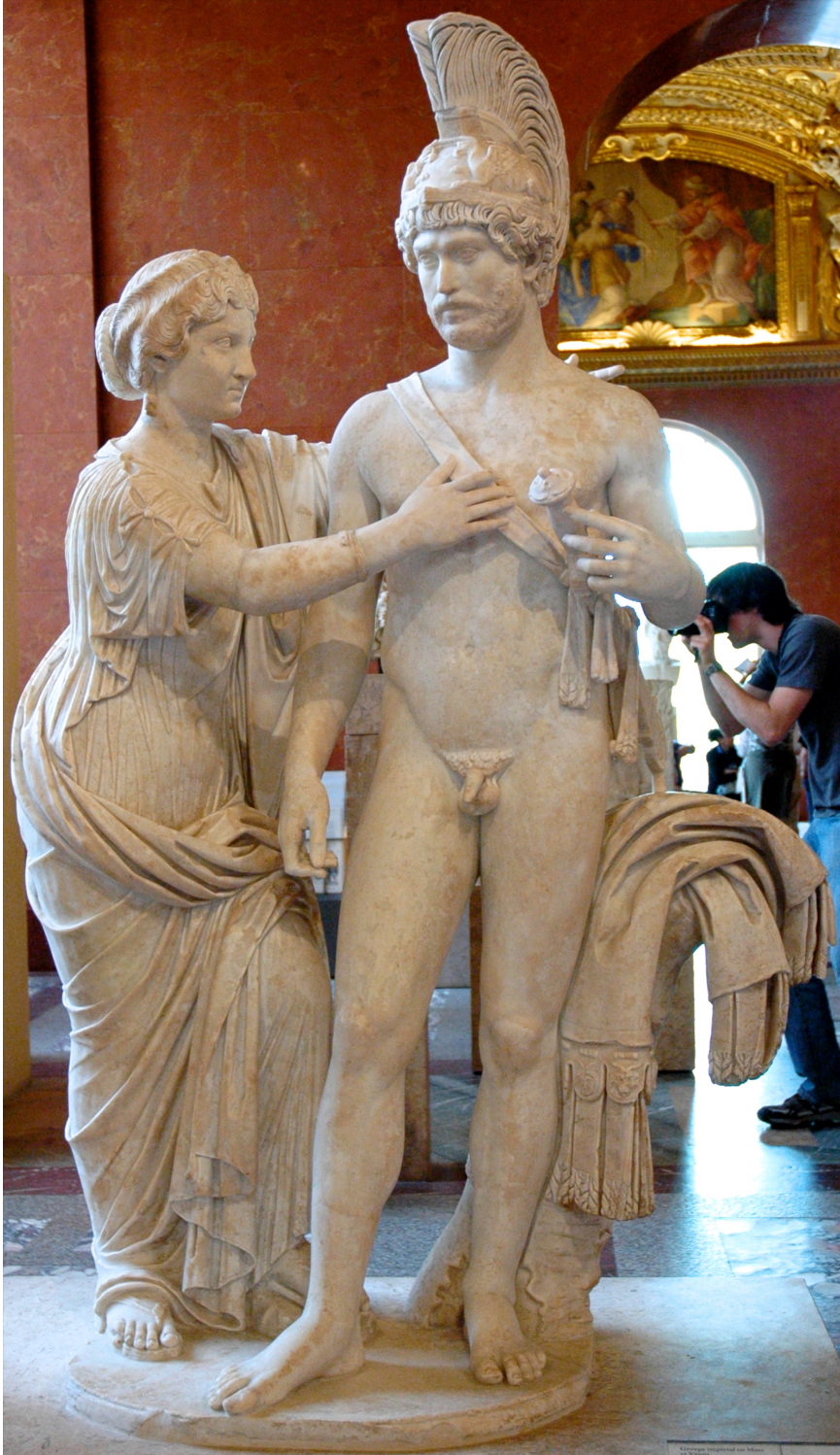


FIGURE 74.

The "Capua Venus": a Hadrianic Roman copy in marble of an early Hellenistic bronze original. Ca. 120-140 AD (Roman copy); late fourth century BC (Hellenistic original). Naples, Naples Archaeological Museum, inv. 6017.



FIGURE 75.

Columnar sarcophagus with personifications of the four seasons atop statue bases. Ca. 290-300 AD. New York, Metropolitan Museum, inv. 18.145.51.



FIGURE 76.

Fragment of a sarcophagus showing the deceased as a huntress spearing her quarry from horseback. Ca. 290-300 AD. Rome, San Sebastiano (© ArtStor).



FIGURE 77.

The "Rinuccini sarcophagus" showing episodes from the life of a commander (celebrating a wedding and a sacrifice) and the wounding of Adonis. Ca. 200 AD. Berlin, Antikensammlung, inv. 1987.2.



FIGURE 78.

Relief from the so-called "Altar of Domitius Ahenobarbus": a census, sacrifice to Mars, and enrollment of troops. Late second or early first century BC. Paris, Louvre, inv. LL 399 / Ma 975.



FIGURE 79.

Relief from the so-called "Altar of Domitius Ahenobarbus": the wedding of Neptune and Amphitrite. Second half of second century BC. Munich, Glyptothek.



FIGURE 80.

Sarcophagus showing an Amazonomachy with Achilles and Penthesilea. Ca. 230-250 AD. Rome, Vatican Museums, inv. 933.



FIGURE 81.

Detail of a sarcophagus showing an Amazonomachy with Achilles and Penthesilea. Ca. 230-250 AD. Rome, Vatican Museums, inv. 933.



FIGURE 82.

Sarcophagus showing the Labors of Hercules. Ca. 170 AD. Mantua, Palazzo Ducale (Kleiner 2007, fig. 15.6).

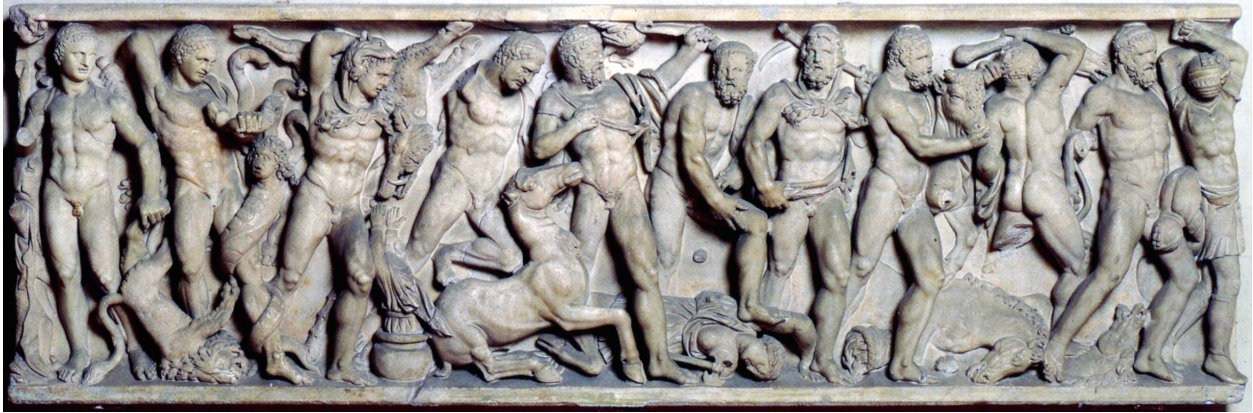


FIGURE 83.

Sarcophagus showing the Labors of Hercules. Ca. 240-250 AD. Rome, Palazzo Altemps, inv. 8642.



FIGURE 84.

Sarcophagus showing the Indian Triumph of Dionysus. Ca. 215-225 AD. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, inv. 1972.650.



FIGURE 85.

Sarcophagus with episodes from the life of a Roman commander. Ca. 170 AD. Mantua, Palazzo Ducale (Kleiner 2007, fig. 15.14).



FIGURE 86.

Strigillated sarcophagus with central aedicula showing the wedding of the deceased couple. Ca. 270-280 AD. Rome, Vatican Museums, inv. 9253.



FIGURE 87.

Strigillated sarcophagus with central aedicula showing the wedding of the deceased couple. Middle of the third century AD. Munich, Glyptothek.



FIGURE 88.

Columnar sarcophagus showing the wedding of the deceased couple. Ca. 240-260 AD. Rome, Palazzo Massimo.



FIGURE 89.

Sarcophagus showing Selene approaching the sleeping Endymion. Early third century AD. New York, Metropolitan Museum, inv. 47.100.4a,b.



FIGURE 90.

Front slab of a sarcophagus showing Mars approaching the sleeping Rhea Silvia. Ca. 230-250 AD. Rome, Palazzo Mattei.



FIGURE 91.

The "Annona sarcophagus" showing husband and wife in *junctio dextrarum* with Juno Pronuba/Concordia between; Portus and Annona to left; Genius of the Senate, Abundance, and Africa to right. Ca. 270-280 AD. Rome, Palazzo Massimo.



FIGURE 92.

Detail of the "Annona sarcophagus" showing husband and wife in *junctio dextrarum* with Juno Pronuba/Concordia between. Ca. 270-280 AD. Rome, Palazzo Massimo.



FIGURE 93.

Child's sarcophagus showing Prometheus and the lifecycle of man. Ca. 300 AD. Rome, Capitoline Museum, inv. 329.



FIGURE 94.

Detail of a child's sarcophagus showing Prometheus and the lifecycle of man. Ca. 300 AD. Rome, Capitoline Museum, inv. 329.



FIGURE 95.

Sarcophagus showing a drunk Dionysus flanked by personifications of the Seasons. Ca. 320-335 AD. Rome, Baths of Diocletian, inv. 407.



FIGURE 96.

Detail of a sarcophagus showing a drunk Dionysus flanked by personifications of the Seasons: a tiny Cupid perched on a Season's shoulder. Ca. 320-335 AD. Rome, Baths of Diocletian, inv. 407.



FIGURE 97.

Portrait bust of Antoninus Pius. Ca. 150 AD. Munich, Glyptothek.



FIGURE 98.

Portrait bust of Marcus Aurelius (nose restored). Ca. 138-144 AD. Berlin, Antikensammlung, inv. Sk 370.



FIGURE 99.

Portrait bust of Marcus Aurelius (nose restored). Ca. 161-170 AD. Munich, Glyptothek.



FIGURE 100.

Portrait head of Septimius Severus (parts of nose, eye, brow, and chin restored). Ca. 200-211 AD.
Berlin, Antikensammlung, inv. Sk 382.



FIGURE 101.

The "Great Ludovisi sarcophagus" showing battle between Romans and barbarians. Ca. 260 AD. Rome, Palazzo Altemps, inv. 8574.



FIGURE 102.

Detail of the "Great Ludovisi sarcophagus" showing battle between Romans and barbarians. Ca. 260 AD. Rome, Palazzo Altemps, inv. 8574.



FIGURE 103.

Left end of a Muse sarcophagus: Diogenes the Cynic stands in his pithos, his dog perched atop. Ca. 160-170 AD. Malibu, Getty Villa, inv. 81.AA.48 (Ewald 1999, pl. 2.3).



FIGURE 104.

Left end of a Muse sarcophagus: Socrates declaims in the public sphere. Ca. 160 AD. Paris, Louvre, inv. MR 880 / Ma 475.



FIGURE 105.

Plan by G. Ioppolo of the Villa of Maxentius on the Via Appia. Built ca. 306-312 AD (Leppin and Ziemssen 2007, fig. 68).

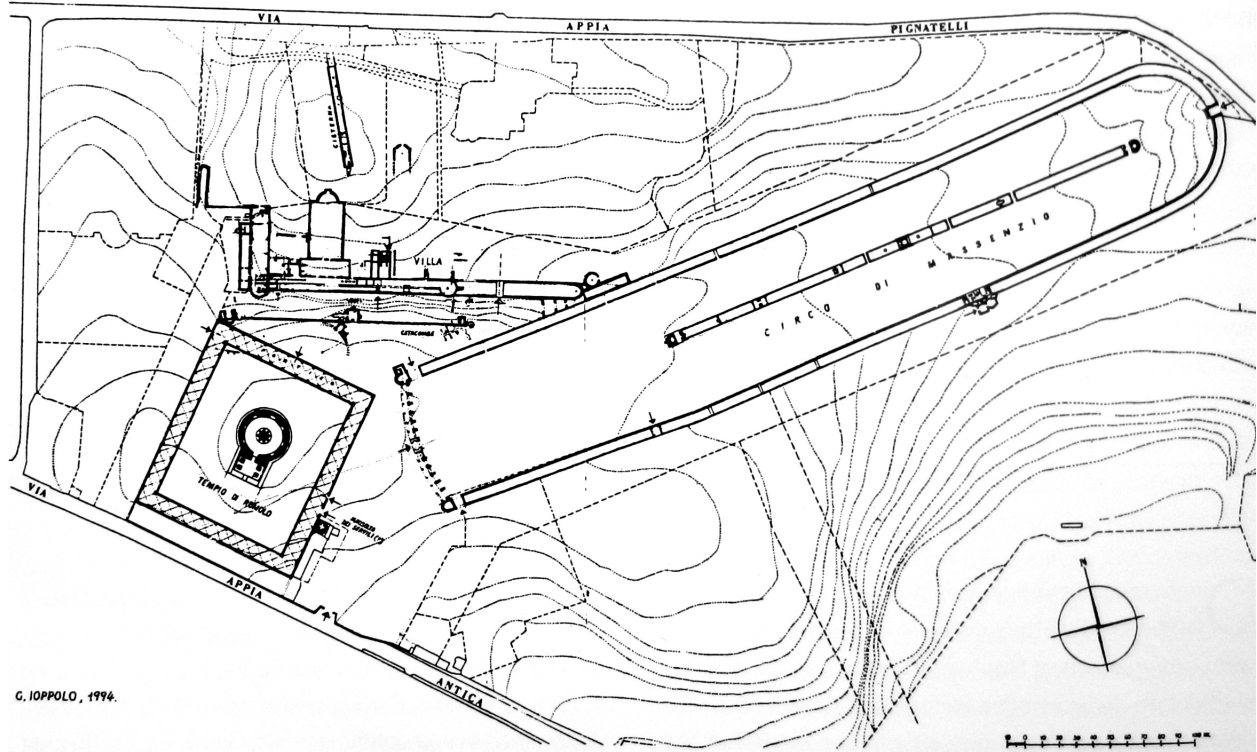


FIGURE 106.

Bird's eye view of the Villa of Maxentius on the Via Appia. Built ca. 306-312 AD (GoogleMaps).



FIGURE 107.

Bird's eye reconstruction by Ernest Hébrard of Diocletian's palace at Split, Croatia. Built ca. 300 AD (Zeiller and Hébrard 1912).



FIGURE 109.

Marine sarcophagus with Nereids bearing the armor of Achilles. Ca. 140-150 AD. Rome, Vatican Museums, inv. 874.

