

## **No one is immortal: From *exemplum mortalitatis* to *exemplum virtutis*.\***

Klaus Fittschen for his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday

Barbara E Borg

Mythical images started to appear on Roman sarcophagi around the turn of the first and second centuries AD, and decorated entire sarcophagus fronts in increasing numbers from the Hadrianic period onwards before their production ceased again almost completely around the middle of the third century.<sup>1</sup> Yet admiration for these caskets has never fully subsided, and many items were re-used for burial, as fountain basins, or as display pieces through the centuries and into the modern age.<sup>2</sup> From the later nineteenth century onwards, they have also attracted the interest of scholars, who explored an array of different questions.<sup>3</sup> Among these, the relationship between Greek and Roman elements dominated the debate for a considerable time. After all, the stories depicted on the vast majority of mythical sarcophagi are Greek in origin, and many of the iconographic patterns employed to depict these narratives also derive from Greek models.

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In this paper, I would like to offer some general reflections on the Romans' use of Greek myths in the funerary sphere, and, more specifically, on sarcophagi of the second century AD.<sup>4</sup> In the first part of this paper, I discuss a number of conceptual and methodological concerns around the way Greek myths worked and were actualised in a Roman (funerary) environment. In the second part, I want to show the implications of these general considerations for the interpretation of Roman sarcophagi with narrative mythological images. I would like to stress from the outset, however, that I am neither claiming nor attempting to discuss the chosen examples exhaustively. This paper is intended to propose some rather general lines of thought, along which these images are likely to have been interpreted by their patrons, which, if found convincing, may then be fleshed out elsewhere.

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<sup>1</sup> There is a final revival in the Tetrarchic period, but from the early fourth century onwards, no further caskets with traditional myths were produced. On the cessation of mythical images see Borg 2013, 162-3, 177-8.

<sup>2</sup> Zanker and Ewald 2012, 1-17.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of the scholarly debates see Turcan 1978; Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 6-20; Zanker and Ewald 2012, 18-21; Bielfeldt 2005, 16-25; and most recently Russenberger 2015, 3-9.

<sup>4</sup> Sarcophagi from the third century have received far more attention over the years, and I have presented my own thoughts in Borg 2013, 161-211, and Borg 2014; see also Newby 2011a.

### *Methodological considerations*

When scholarship on Roman sarcophagi started in the nineteenth century, the fact that the myths depicted on the caskets were Greek constituted their main attraction. Research was not really interested in the sarcophagi and their Roman patrons, but rather aimed at reconstructing either lost Greek artworks on which the reliefs were allegedly modelled, or Greek literature, especially lost tragedies, for which the same dependency was assumed. This approach has very few followers today, after the focus shifted from art-historical and literary concerns to enquiries around the meaning that these images held for those who produced and used them.<sup>5</sup> The Greekness of the myths was still very present in earlier studies, but it had moved from being the main research interest to being the background against which an increasing “Romanization” of the stories was studied. In 1992, Peter Blome published an influential article that, at the time, was not necessarily methodologically revolutionary, but spelled out the way Greek myths were seen to be adapted to their new Roman environment.<sup>6</sup> Initially, these myths contained few, if any, genuinely Roman elements, and followed known Greek narratives relatively closely, thus maintaining, so he claimed, their “inherent symbolism” (*inhärente Eigensymbolik*). Later on the stories were increasingly manipulated, and Roman elements, such as portraits or certain props, added to them. He conceded that the early images could be related to the individual bereavement by way of analogy,<sup>7</sup> although he refused to take speculations very far. The later images with their “more intensive *interpretatio Romana*”, however, strongly focussed on Roman themes such as the praise of virtues and deification of the deceased.<sup>8</sup> Independently of whether or not we agree with his readings of individual sarcophagi, there are valid observations in this paper. That the second-century myths convey their message by analogy will be explained further below, and scholars today agree that the third century saw an increasing focus on the praise of virtues. But with regard to the earlier sarcophagi, he still succumbed to the fundamental misunderstanding, shared also by some prominent predecessors and contemporaries, that there once was an autonomous,

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<sup>5</sup> Cumont 1942, who proposed eschatological interpretations for the sarcophagi, and the ensuing review by Nock 1946, were essential for the shift in interest, although it took several more decades until the interpretation of sarcophagi as Roman objects became a majority interest. Pioneering studies in this regard are Fittschen 1970, Fittschen 1975, Blome 1978.

<sup>6</sup> Blome 1992.

<sup>7</sup> Here following Turcan 1978, 1729-33.

<sup>8</sup> Blome 1992, 1071-2.

ultimately enigmatic Greek myth, onto which an *interpretatio Romana* was gradually imposed, a process which, in the end, destroyed the myth.<sup>9</sup>

Others saw more clearly that an autonomous (Greek) myth never existed, and that the traditional stories we call myths used to be manipulated and adapted from the very beginning, always in relation to the special interest of an individual or group, and with changing focus over time.<sup>10</sup> This meant that a Roman interpretation had to be found for the early mythical sarcophagi as well, a task that was hampered by the absence of any written sources that comment on sarcophagi, or on the meaning of the specific myths depicted on them. Many scholars thus looked for guidance to those images that contained the most Roman elements such as portrait heads, with which some gods and heroes were fitted out, and attributes and iconographies known from non-mythological Roman images. These often pointed, as Blome had already observed, to the use of myths for praise of the deceased, with portrait identifications suggesting that the deceased claimed similar character features for themselves as the heroes or divinities possessed. These images, which had generally been manufactured later in the history of sarcophagus production, were now considered to convey only more clearly a meaning – the *interpretatio Romana* – that the myths had possessed all along in the Roman funerary realm, namely to provide *exempla virtutis* for the deceased.<sup>11</sup> While some stories resisted the attempts of even the most persistent hunters for Roman virtues, in the end, not only figures such as Hercules (fig. 1), Hippolytus (fig. 2), and Meleager (fig. 3), who are depicted carrying out their heroic deeds, were identified as *exempla virtutis*, but also some less obvious characters and their actions:<sup>12</sup> Adonis, who is shown fatally wounded by the boar

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<sup>9</sup> Esp. Sichtermann 1966, 80-7; still in 1992, he claimed that the “real Greek myth”, which he identifies on some sarcophagi, is ultimately impossible to interpret (“*letztlich unausdeutbar*”): Sichtermann 1992, 53. Similar ideas guided the study of mosaics: see e.g. Raeck 1992, who concluded: “Der Mythos, der zuvor unveräußerliches und unveränderbares Gemeingut war, wird jetzt [i.e. in late antiquity] zur individuellen Aneignung und Nutzung freigegeben.“ (ibid. 159). For a critique of his approach see Muth 1998, 284-8 and passim.

<sup>10</sup> For scholars focussing on images cf. Hölscher 1993; Koortbojian 1995, 3; Muth 1998, 287-8; Zanker 1999a, 132, 134; Junker 2012, 30-63; Russenberger 2015, 8-9.

<sup>11</sup> Zanker 1999a was particularly influential, in which he concluded that not only on the Tetrarchic sarcophagus, from which he took his departure, both Hippolytus and Phaedra were meant as role models for the deceased, but that also on second-century sarcophagi “Phädra artikuliert demnach nicht nur Trauer und Verzweiflung, sondern umschreibt gleichzeitig in poetischer Weise in weibliches Rollenideal”: ibid. 138 and passim; more recently e.g. Birk 2013, 14, and Linant De Bellefonds 2013. There is a certain irony in this approach, given that it started from the premise that myths change over time according to needs; for a critique see Newby 2011a; Borg 2013, 164-78; Borg 2014.

<sup>12</sup> For a summary see Zanker and Ewald 2012, esp. 179-243.

and is dying in the arms of Aphrodite (fig. 6);<sup>13</sup> Phaeton falling from the sky;<sup>14</sup> Achilles dragging the body of Hector around the walls of Troy or the tomb of Patroclus;<sup>15</sup> Phaedra, who had caused her beloved stepson's death (fig. 2),<sup>16</sup> and even Orestes, who slaughtered his mother and stepfather in revenge for their killing of his father,<sup>17</sup> and Medea, who killed Creusa and her own two children.<sup>18</sup>

With this line of interpretation, the relationship between Greek and Roman was no longer essential to the understanding of these myths, and so in recent years, this relationship has mostly been discussed in different terms, namely how exactly the mythical narratives relate to the real-life situation on which they are said to bear.

### *Visual rhetoric*

From the 1990s, sarcophagus decoration was increasingly understood as a visual rhetoric, and compared to speeches delivered at funerals: while these orations praised and lamented the deceased in words, the mythological images did the same in visual form.<sup>19</sup> The vocabulary used to describe the role of myth – such as symbol, metaphor, allegory, etc. – is based on rhetorical technical terms, but mostly used in a casual, fuzzy way. The main point was often to raise awareness that images do indeed talk – albeit in a language of their own.<sup>20</sup> Yet two concepts have been theorised to some extent, those of allegory and analogy.

### *Allegory*

In an influential paper, Luca Giuliani (adopting Quintilian's definition at *Inst.* 8.6.47-8) proposed the idea that mythical sarcophagus images be considered in terms of an *allegoria*

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<sup>13</sup> Documentation in: Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 131-3; Grassinger 1999, 70-90, 211-21 cat. 43-67; for interpretations including the *virtus* aspect: Koortbojian 1995, 23-62, esp. 32, 34-5, 38; Zanker and Ewald 2012, 207-12. For further discussion see below.

<sup>14</sup> Robert 1919, 332-42, 344-9; Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 180-3; Zanker and Ewald 2012, 372-4. Critical of Phaeton as *virtus* paradigm now Russenberger 2015, 200; see also below for literary references to Phaeton.

<sup>15</sup> Giuliani 1989, esp. 37; Grassinger 1999, 50-7 with cat. 27, 29-33; ambivalent about this particular scene: Zanker and Ewald 2012, 287-91.

<sup>16</sup> See n. 11.

<sup>17</sup> Bielfeldt 2005, esp. 285-8. Contra: Newby 2011b, 307-8; Russenberger 2015, 195-7.

<sup>18</sup> Koortbojian 1996, 435-6, but so far nobody seems to have followed him; cf. the explicit rejection in Gessert 2004, 229-30, although I find her own interpretation as negative *exemplum* equally unconvincing. Koortbojian 1995, 8-9, is more balanced in suggesting that Medea, like Phaedra, exemplify the human condition that is "inextricably bound to the omnipotence of Fate." For a different attempt at finding virtues in Creusa/Medea sarcophagi see Junker 2006, 180-1.

<sup>19</sup> Giuliani 1989; Müller 1994; Koortbojian 1995; Zanker 2002; Zanker 2003; Zanker and Ewald 2012, 103-5; Newby 2014; for the rhetorical character of Christian sarcophagi see Elsner 2011.

<sup>20</sup> But see Newby 2014, for a close comparison between Statius' rhetorical strategies and sarcophagi, who identifies several similarities that have so far been overlooked. For Statius as a guide to understanding sarcophagi see also Kathleen M. Coleman's contribution to the forthcoming *Sarkophag-Studien* vol. 6 (ed. C. Hallett), which she kindly shared with me.

*apertis permixta* that mixes factual, straightforward elements with allegorical ones.<sup>21</sup> The traditional mythical elements would constitute the allegory, while contemporary Roman elements such as the typically Roman *lectus* on which the Greek hero is lying in state, are the non-allegorical elements of the “mix”. The concept has recently been seized by Katharina Lorenz in a programmatic article.<sup>22</sup> Yet, as Ruth Bielfeldt had already observed, in many cases where the term is used, including Giuliani’s and Lorenz’s, there is little if anything that calls for an allegorical interpretation.<sup>23</sup> Speaking allegorically means “saying something differently” or “saying something else” (i.e. than what is really meant), thus separating the level of what is *apparently* said from the (hidden) *actual* message.<sup>24</sup> In Quintilian’s example (which he took from Cicero), the *tempestates et procellas* (tempests and storms) that Milo had to weather refer to the turmoil in public assemblies; the description of a weather condition “really” meant the heated debates and confrontations the politician had to face in these meetings. Such instances of allegorical expression are, however, rare on Roman sarcophagi. Achilles mourning Patroclus is not an allegory for the Roman mourning over a dead friend or relative, but another instance of a particular situation, an analogy, here used as *exemplum*,<sup>25</sup> a term first proposed as a main principle of how sarcophagus images work by Robert Turcan and later Frank Müller.<sup>26</sup>

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### *Exemplum*

Exempla or *paradeigmata*, including mythical exempla, were a key element of any ancient speech ever since Homer, ranging from the formal public oration to the more casual conversation or written communication. They are often part of an exhortation, suggesting that one should either emulate the individuals and actions of the exemplum, or else avoid such

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<sup>21</sup> Giuliani 1989, 38-9.

<sup>22</sup> Lorenz 2011, where her “Image in Distress” is “torn between providing an allegorical layer of mythical reflection and documenting real-life situations” (p. 313). Explicit approval also by Ewald 1999, 78-9.

<sup>23</sup> Bielfeldt 2005, 377-8 with n. 810.

<sup>24</sup> For a full discussion of the term see Borg 2002, 13-35, 41-8, 83 n. 237, with bibliography.

<sup>25</sup> On analogy see Lloyd 1966, esp. 172-420; Koortbojian 1995, 3-9. To be sure, myths were allegorised in antiquity, but hardly any of the readings of sarcophagus myths in more recent scholarship fulfils the required criteria (although e.g. Cumont’s did). For the difference and visual examples see Borg 2002, for literary examples the index of Dowden and Livingstone 2011, and esp. chs. 10, 15, and 17. Admittedly, as allegories as well as exempla are based on analogies, the distinction between exemplum and allegory is not always entirely clear-cut. On sarcophagi, one might argue that the image of rape could be both an allegory of death or a paradigm, depending on the protagonists. Persephone is raped by Hades and taken to the underworld; as he is essentially Death himself, little translation is needed for an understanding of the “real” significance of the story. In contrast, the rape of the Leucippidae may be seen as allegory since, according to the story, they lived on with the Dioscuri, who were no divinities of the underworld either.

<sup>26</sup> Turcan 1978, 1729-33; Müller 1994, 87-100, 144-5; Gessert 2004; now Newby 2014; Koortbojian 1995, 3-9, 34-7, goes in a similar direction but mainly speaks of analogy. Fittschen 1992, argued already along similar lines but did not reflect on the rhetorical use of analogy or exemplum.

emulation.<sup>27</sup> But they can also be used more generally as illustration, and to confirm general principles, statements, and inferences, without necessarily implying moral judgement or inviting imitation.<sup>28</sup> In all cases, they are meant to support and reinforce the statement or argument by inviting conclusions from analogy. They draw their persuasive power from the fact that the characters or situations referred to are in some way superior to those of the humble present, thus suggesting that these conclusions, statements, etc. are natural, self-explanatory, and quite simply true (cf. Quintilian, *Inst.* 5.11). Even where they serve merely as rhetorical embellishment, they heighten the tone through their reference to a superhuman sphere of beings, to a time when the gods still took an interest and intervened in human life, and to stories ennobled by antiquity or the name of their narrators.<sup>29</sup>

Highly irritating to a modern audience is the fact that the stories chosen as *paradeigmata* can be manipulated, often substantially so, in order to fit a given situation, without challenging the truth status of the story or compromising the exemplum's impact. This practice goes back at least to the *Iliad*. In order to convince Priam, who had come to ransom his son's body, to join him for a meal, Achilles tells the story of Niobe who allegedly enjoyed eating again after having lost not one but "many" children (Hom. *Il.* 24.599-620). The origins of the story are not exactly known, but at least two details are highly suspicious of having been Achilles' (or Homer's) invention:<sup>30</sup> Firstly, the Niobids are said to have lain in their blood for nine days since Zeus had turned "the people" into stone, preventing them from burying the children. Not only is this an awkward and otherwise unknown element of the story, in which normally Niobe is turned into stone, but there is now a closer parallel with Hector, who had been denied burial for the same number of days, and equally lay in his blood. Secondly, that Niobe started eating again is also unknown from other accounts, but is at the heart of Achilles' exhortation. It is thus highly likely that these two details had been invented on the spot to fit the purpose of Achilles' speech.

Similar manipulations have been observed for the even more extended exemplum of Meleager that is used by Nestor to convince Achilles to return to battle (Hom. *Il.* 9.524-605):<sup>31</sup> While the well-known background to the war between the Curetes and the Aetolians is

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Willcock 1964; Nagy 1992. The literature on exempla is vast. On exempla in funerary contexts see esp. Kassel 1958; Griessmair 1966, 85-91; Müller 1994, 91-8; Newby 2014.

<sup>28</sup> For Homer's use of myth as *paradeigma* see Willcock 1964; Létoublon 2011, esp. 40; Livingstone 2011, 126-9.

<sup>29</sup> For the general idea see Coleman 1999, on Statius.

<sup>30</sup> For a full discussion of this passage see Willcock 1964, 141-2; Schmitz 2001.

<sup>31</sup> Willcock 1964, 147-53.

summarised only briefly, and the reason for his mother's curse not mentioned at all, the detailed parts of the narrative are those matching the present situation: the hero's withdrawal from battle in anger, prolonged attempts to make him return, and the offering of gifts. None of these details are ever mentioned elsewhere, where Althea's anger over Meleager's killing of her brothers leads immediately to the hero's death.<sup>32</sup>

Arguably, serving as exempla was one of the main, if not *the* main purpose(s) of myths, which also prevented them from developing any canonical forms.<sup>33</sup> It is therefore misleading to try and set *the* Greek myth and its significance or meaning – or their absence – off against a single *interpretatio Romana*,<sup>34</sup> or against a specifically Roman way of treating myths that is characterised by its manipulation of Greek myth.<sup>35</sup> The traditional stories we call myth were constantly in flux ever since they were first created, and until the present day, with parts of them dismissed or ignored, altered, or added, to make them fit the occasion and the message they were meant to illustrate or support. Homer's account of the events before Troy may therefore be better literature than some later texts, but in terms of content it is not intrinsically "better" or more "correct" than those of, say, Statius' *Achilleis*, the accounts of Dares and Dictys, Benoît de Sainte-Maure's *Roman de Troie*, or indeed Wolfgang Petersen's film *Troy*. For that reason, both individual heroes or mythical figures and their actions could also be evaluated very differently at different times and depending on different contexts. Even remaining in the ancient world, Achilles could be the greatest of heroes, but also *Achill das Vieh* (Achilles the monster) or a ludicrous love-stricken figure,<sup>36</sup> the sack of Troy the greatest victory and a sacrilege.<sup>37</sup> The very notion of *interpretatio Romana* is therefore highly problematic as it suggests a unity of interpretation by "the Romans" or "in the Roman period" that never existed.

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<sup>32</sup> Willcock 1977, for Homeric inventions in general; cf. Nagy 1992, for some valid qualifications, although in insisting that there were no on-the-spot inventions but just choice from pre-existing variants he fails to explain why myths did change over time, and is unconvincing in our examples.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Walter Burkert's conclusions adopted by Nagy 1992, 313, that "Myth is *applied* narrative." Livingstone 2011. For summaries of attitudes to and uses of myths see e.g. Dowden and Livingstone 2011; Junker 2012.

<sup>34</sup> As the scholars cited nn. 8 and 9 did.

<sup>35</sup> This idea still implicit in e.g. Bielfeldt 2005, 21-22: "Auch diese frühe Sarkophagkunst ist demnach bereits bestimmt von einem singulären Spannungsverhältnis zwischen mythologischem Sinn und seiner Realisierung durch eine *interpretatio romana*."

<sup>36</sup> Hoff 2005, borrowing his title from Christa Wolf's characterisation of the hero; Fantuzzi 2012, 267-79, and *passim*.

<sup>37</sup> Ferrari 2000.

### *Modes of reading*

Bearing this in mind has obvious implications for our attempts at understanding the significance of a mythical story, here on Roman sarcophagi, but as Zahra Newby has succinctly observed, understanding that the myths worked as exempla and thus by analogy does not in itself help with identifying the meaning(s) of an individual image.<sup>38</sup> While some figures and events may have been more ambiguous than others, we cannot take for granted the meaning and evaluation of a hero in every context he appears in. So far, the inclusiveness of most modern scholars with regard to the range of possible readings is adequate and welcome. The interpretation of myths on Roman sarcophagi as illustrations of a Roman value system, often reduced to the “cardinal” virtues of *virtus*, *pietas*, and *concordia*,<sup>39</sup> has given way to a more open-minded approach that allows for a range of readings depending on the physical and social context of a sarcophagus and the varied dispositions of its viewers. Zanker and Ewald’s *Living with Myth* is a masterpiece in demonstrating the wide range of potential readings a mythical image could induce.<sup>40</sup>

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However, there is a danger of going to the other extreme and adopting an anything goes approach. To be sure, strictly speaking, anything *does* go – after all, the human mind can take strange directions, and our very own scholarly interpretations sometimes testify to the fact. But I would still hold that there are more and less *likely* ancient readings.<sup>41</sup> It is not inherently wrong to speculate about any individual’s potential interpretation, but from a socio-historical and anthropological point of view general trends may be more instructive. Such likely readings are determined by both the visual clues provided by the iconography, the “rhetoric” of the images, and by what the literary theorist Hans Robert Jauss termed the *Erfahrungshorizont* or “horizon of experience”, the accumulation of experiences one has gathered in the past. This “horizon” or, as I would prefer, background of experience in turn generates expectations regarding the assessment of what one might encounter in any given text or image, with which one is newly confronted (what he termed *Erwartungshorizont* or

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<sup>38</sup> Newby 2011b, 303.

<sup>39</sup> Rodenwaldt 1935, who identified the virtues of Augustus’ *clupeus virtutis* as the subject of a range of second- and early third-century commanders’ sarcophagi, has been highly influential here. Perhaps the most dogmatic form of reading myths in this way is found in Grassinger 1994, and elsewhere, but see also Gessert 2004, who believes that “(c)ertainly some conceptual contact was understood between the deceased and the figure of Medea” (p. 231), and Bielfeldt 2005.

<sup>40</sup> Zanker and Ewald 2012; see also Ewald 2012, esp. 53-4, for a critique of the “‘reading for virtue’ model” of interpretation.

<sup>41</sup> Ditto Birk 2013, 14.



“horizon of expectation”).<sup>42</sup> These ideas are, of course, not fundamentally new. They summarise what cognitive psychologists have long established as the way we come to grips with, and make sense of the world surrounding us. There will also be few scholars nowadays who would not embrace them, although most would use a different terminology. They will acknowledge that the context in which an image is viewed impacts on its reading, and that familiarity with specific iconographic formulae will guide a viewer in his or her interpretation.<sup>43</sup> What I like about Jauss’ terminology is its open and – in theory – all-encompassing concept of past experience, which invites reflection on the range of contexts that may have been relevant in any given case, while the term “expectation” avoids any too schematic conclusions of how this past experience may impact reaction to a new situation or image.

Both these factors, the visual rhetoric and the horizon of experience and expectation are equally important, although it is not always easy to reconcile them. To take the by now largely abandoned or at least marginalised eschatological interpretation of Roman sarcophagi as an example,<sup>44</sup> it has been argued that, according to the story as we know it from literary texts, Persephone was eventually permitted to return to the upper world for half of the year, and so the choice of the story for sarcophagi would reflect the patron’s hope for an afterlife (fig. 4). A similar case has been made for Adonis sarcophagi (fig. 6). As these stories were very well known, one may argue that they formed part of the “horizon of experience” and thus influenced the reading of the sarcophagus imagery. But at closer inspection this argument is problematic. On the one hand, the horizon of experience is shaped at least equally if not more urgently by texts from the same context as the sarcophagi such as the consolatory literature and epitaphs. In these, Persephone’s return is conspicuously absent, and the story is used consistently to lament the merciless, irreversible fate of death.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, the

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<sup>42</sup> First explained in his famous inaugural lecture in 1967; Jauss and Benzinger 1970; Jauss 1982, 3-45; cf. Holub 1984, 53-82, esp. 58-63. Jauss has been criticised for limiting his *Erfahrungs-* and *Erwartungshorizont* – against his own aspiration – to the literary and aesthetic qualities of texts, and for a range of other failures. I am here using his terms and explanation more as inspiration than as ready-made model.

<sup>43</sup> Programmatically so already Müller 1994, 86-100; Koortbojian 1995, 9-18 and *passim*; now Russenberger 2015, 10-11 and *passim*; focussing on the context of the tomb: Zanker 2000; for a summary see e.g. Junker 2012, 140-58.

<sup>44</sup> For the debate see Harkness (1899); Cumont (1942); Nock (1946). More recent summaries of the debate include Esteve-Forriol (1962), *passim*, esp. 147-8; Brandenburg (1967), 242-4; Turcan 1978; Wrede 1981; Koch and Sichtermann (1982), 583-617; Müller (1994), 98-106; Pekáry (1994); Zanker and Ewald (2012), 20-1, and elsewhere; Hope (2007), 211-47; Hope (2009), 97-120. Recent revivals of Cumont’s or Cumont-style interpretations such as Balty 2013 (on which see Russenberger 2015, 519 n. 14), and Mucznik 1999 (who seems to be entirely unaware of recent scholarship), are rare exceptions, but it is noticeable that many recent studies consider the interpretation of some myths in eschatological terms still as one possibility (e.g. Platt 2011, 335-93; Birk 2013).

<sup>45</sup> For epitaphs using this metaphor see e.g. Brelich (1937), 20-1; Lattimore (1942), 147-9.

eschatological interpretation privileges the (one) horizon of experience while ignoring the images themselves. Not only is Persephone almost invariably desperately struggling to avoid her fate, but among a total of some 90 sarcophagi there is not a single one that depicts her return from Hades although it would have been easy to include the scene had the intended message been about return to life. To be sure, this does not exclude the possibility that an individual who nurtured some vague hopes for an afterlife may have drawn comfort from the thought that Persephone returned to the upper world for part of the year. But given the general scepticism of the Romans in this regard, the rhetorical common place of the rape by Hades as a metaphor for death, and the lack of any visual hint at the heroine's return, it is probably safe to assume that such a reading was neither intended by those who designed the images, nor a typical and majority one.<sup>46</sup>

For the reconstruction of any likely ancient reading of mythological sarcophagi the horizon of experience and expectation must include, and, in cases of conflict give preference to, similar contexts as the ones in which the images were viewed;<sup>47</sup> and secondly, the creativity of the artists to find images that actually express the proposed message well, should not be underestimated: we should take the images and their own rhetoric seriously and not dismiss them without very good reason.

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### *Exempla in the funerary realm*

Based on these premises, we can now explore the background of experience that is likely to have guided a Roman viewer in his or her reading of a mythological sarcophagus image. For obvious reasons, it is impossible to speculate over idiosyncratic experiences, and within the scope of the present paper, even common experiences cannot be considered comprehensively. I shall focus here on the way exempla, and mythical exempla in particular, were used in texts pertaining to the funerary realm, and which I shall call collectively consolatory texts,<sup>48</sup> to explore the principles according to which the rhetoric of the images was likely to work as well.

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<sup>46</sup> Accordingly, Newby places the Persephone sarcophagi in her category of caskets thematising "death and destruction": Newby 201 1b, 305-6. But I would like to draw a distinction between this subject and the Niobids or Creusa, for instance, since the rape by a god holds some consolation: Borg in print.

<sup>47</sup> Thus also the argument of Cumont's critics here n. 44; see also Zanker 2000. While few would disagree today (but see Mucznik 1999, who seems to be unaware of all of this), it is remarkable how often the principle is ignored in practice.

<sup>48</sup> Equally, when I speak of consolatory literature, I am referring to all literary genres with a funerary context, not just to *consolationes* proper. Bielfeldt 2003, 22-3, has cautioned against the use of such sources, but focussed only on the formal *laudatio funebris*, which may have been the privilege of the upper classes. But while we do not know what exactly "ordinary" Romans said at the tombs of their loved ones, taking the various types of

In 1992 Klaus Fittschen observed that “the importance of these texts has repeatedly been pointed out in recent times .... But one only looked for exact thematic parallels, not for general attitudes to death.”<sup>49</sup> Here, he referred specifically to epitaphs, but the same could be said for consolatory texts at large. The range of attitudes towards death found in these texts, so he suggested, are likely to be expressed among the diverse imagery on Roman sarcophagi. Discussing Creusa/Medea and Niobid sarcophagi, he demonstrated against the then current eschatological interpretations arguing that they depict the inescapability of death, its horrors, and the lament it causes, themes that are all found in epitaphs.

This line of thought was explored further by Frank Müller and, most recently, by Zahra Newby who used Statius’ *epicedia* to identify general ideas and rhetorical strategies of consolation.<sup>50</sup> Müller found that mythical exempla in the consolatory literature and in epitaphs mostly, albeit not exclusively, serve as *exempla mortalitatis*. The consolation consists in the insight that death simply is the fate of mortal men; that even the greatest and the heroes of old could not escape it; and that others have suffered more terrible losses than the present bereaved. The general strategy of consolation is already mocked in a fragment from Timokles (fr. 6 in: Athenaios 6.223 c-d; transl. S. Douglas Olsen), an Attic comedian of the fourth century BC:

One guy, who’s a pauper, finds out that Telephus was poorer than he is, and immediately he has an easier time putting up with his own poverty. The man who’s a bit unstable thinks of Alcmaeon. Someone has an infected eye; Phineus’ sons are blind. Someone’s child has died; Niobe cheers him up. Someone’s crippled; he sees Philoctetes. An old man’s down on his luck; he finds out about Oineus. Because when a person considers all the bad luck even worse than his own that’s hit other people, he complains less about his own troubles.

In consolatory texts, however, the psychological effect is used in all sincerity. The universality and inevitability of death is a recurring motif of consolation in all sorts of texts, and Lattimore concludes that, in epitaphs, the idea that death is common to all is the consolation *par excellence*.<sup>51</sup>

These *exempla mortalitatis* come in two variations. In the majority of literary exempla, the focus is not so much on the deceased as on the bereaved.<sup>52</sup> Their grief is compared to a range of mythological mourners, some more obvious than others. Müller calls

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utterances in different media together, patterns become apparent, which, I am arguing, can be assumed to have been widely accepted and used.

<sup>49</sup> Fittschen 1992, with quote p. 1058 n. 12 (my transl.).

<sup>50</sup> Müller 1994, 88-90, based on Griessmair 1966, 85-91; Newby 2014.

<sup>51</sup> Lattimore 1942, 250-6 §71; cf. Brelich 1937, 55-6; Russell and Wilson 1981, 161-5; Esteve-Forriol 1962, 150-1 §60.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. the overview in Esteve-Forriol 1962, 154-5, and now Newby 2014, 268-71, on Statius.

such exempla *exempla mortalitatis by implication*, although I prefer to call them *exempla maeroris*.

In his *consolatio ad Liviam*, for instance, (allegedly) consoling Augustus' wife for her son Drusus Nero's death, Pseudo-Ovid first cites examples of bereavement from Augustus' and Tiberius' families, and continues then with references to mythical mothers, wives, and sisters lamenting the death of their sons, husbands and brothers in order to demonstrate the ubiquity of death and grief (106-18: Prokne, Alkyone, Meleager's sisters, Clymene, and Phaeton's sisters; 317-22: Andromache and Euadne).<sup>53</sup> In his elegy on the death of Tibullus, Ovid compares his grief with that of Eos over Memnon and Thetis over Achilles (*Am.* 3.8.1). Statius, on the occasion of his father's death, recalls the laments of Erigone, Andromache, Phaeton's mother and sisters, and Niobe over their children, husband and brother (*Silv.* 5.3.74-79; 85-7).<sup>54</sup> In a rare epigraphic example, Philomela, Alcyone, Echo, and Zeus share into the laments of a man over the death of his wife and child.<sup>55</sup>

*Exempla mortalitatis* proper are much rarer and serve to demonstrate that no one is immortal; they remind us that all humans are bound to die, be they young and innocent (in which case death is particularly tragic), strong and powerful, of high birth, or even the son of a god. The earliest example of such an *exemplum* goes straight back to the *Iliad*, where Achilles, before he kills Lykaon, reminds him that not only Patroclus, who was better than he, had to die, but that also Achilles himself will not escape this fate (*Il.* 21.107-13). Propertius, in his elegy on the occasion of Marcellus' death, notes:

What availed him his lineage, his worth, the best of mothers? What availed him his union with the house of Caesar, or the rippling awnings of the theatre but now so thronged and all that his mother's influence had procured? He is dead, ... Beauty saved not Nireus, nor his might Achilles, nor Croesus the wealth produced by Pactolus' stream (3.18. 11-15, 27-8, transl. G.P. Gould).<sup>56</sup>

On sarcophagi, these two strands normally converge in that the death of a hero serves as paradigm of the present death while the ensuing lament is paradigmatic of the grief of the bereaved. This has long been recognised for some stories. Ever since Fittschen's 1992 article, scholars have identified these motifs as the main message of the above-mentioned sarcophagi

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<sup>53</sup> For this *consolatio* see Schoonhoven 1992.

<sup>54</sup> For a fuller list of examples in literature see Esteve-Forriol 1962, 154-5.

<sup>55</sup> Courtney 1995, 176-7, 387-8 no. 187 = *CIL* VI 25063.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Hor. *Carm.* 1.28.7-10 quoting Tantalus, Tithonus, Minos and Euphorbos. For the motif in Greek epitaphs cf. Peek 1960, 208-11 no. 360 (Hylas, even though he is the best of heroes and beautiful like the gods = fourth century inscription [not a sarcophagus, as Peek has it] from Nea Isaura); 236-7 no. 417 (Achilleus, who is strong and the son of a goddess = funerary altar from Thera, *IG* XII 3, 870). I have not found a Latin epitaph with the same motif.

depicting the death of the Niobids, that of Creusa and Medea's children, of the women and children at the sack of Troy, and several others.<sup>57</sup> It has also been acknowledged that this is part of the message of those sarcophagi that are otherwise claimed as *exempla virtutis*. After all, the two notions are by no means mutually exclusive. But as Müller observed, mythological *exempla virtutis* are extraordinarily rare in epitaphs and other consolatory texts. Moreover, they are limited to Greek, metric texts, and almost exclusively used for the praise of children, adolescents, and women.<sup>58</sup> Given the rarity of mythological *exempla virtutis* in consolatory texts, arguably resulting in little expectation to find such a message on sarcophagi, how likely is it that they were as ubiquitous as is often claimed?

### *Exempla virtutis*

To be sure, there is an encomiastic potential even in the plain *exempla mortalitatis*. At least implicitly, they are meant to let the glorious past upon which they draw rub off on the more mundane present, to elevate the present by suggesting a relationship of similarity with the heroic past,<sup>59</sup> and perhaps also supplement in some cases, the “bourgeois” and sober content and style of prose inscriptions.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, even lament and grief must be earned. It is the exceptional character of the deceased that caused the deepness of sorrow – and rendered it acceptable. Lament and mourning for an undeserving, average, or even inherently base character would just be ridiculous and reflect badly on those who cannot adequately control their emotions. Lament thus is a form of honour the deceased needs to merit. This is consistent with the general strategy of elegies, funerary orations, and consolations, where encomiastic parts are interwoven with lament, and the bereaved's grief is justified by the loss of an outstanding friend or relative.<sup>61</sup> The comparison of situation also invites a more specific comparison between the deceased and the mourners of both the mythical past and the present. But this is not the same as claiming that any such exemplum is also suitable for identification with the protagonists, that it is automatically an *exemplum virtutis*. In other words: an exemplum is not necessarily an exemplar.<sup>62</sup> The latter assumes not only the general similarity of a situation, fate, or reaction to it, but entails a value judgement and proposes a positive assertion that the character or his or her actions are exemplary. The implicit invitation to

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<sup>57</sup> Zanker and Ewald 2012, 57-84; Newby 2014, 268-85, drawing on Statius for comparison.

<sup>58</sup> This becomes clear from the overview in Esteve-Forriol 1962 (for literary texts), Lattimore 1942, Peek 1960, and others. On Statius' use of mythical figures as *simile* see Newby 2014, 264-7.

<sup>59</sup> This is the strategy applied by Statius in many contexts: Bright 1980, esp. 18; Coleman 1999.

<sup>60</sup> E.g. Zanker 2003, 345-6; Zanker and Ewald 2012, 240-2; Muth 2005, 264.

<sup>61</sup> Esteve-Forriol 1962, 127 §27 for examples.

<sup>62</sup> Nagy 1992, 326, drawing also on the Roman lexicographical tradition as in Paulus ex Festo 72.5.

extend the comparison, to turn the exemplum into an exemplar, may therefore be frustrated by elements of the story that render any closer identification with the characters and their actions undesirable – as is the case in the examples given above.

So again: to what extent are we permitted to read the mythological images as *exempla virtutis* and reflections of a Roman value system? There is no simple answer to this question, but I would argue that, where there is a lack of a corresponding horizon of expectation it would need very strong visual incentives to support such a reading, such as portrait features given to mythical figures. One criterion must surely be that the alleged virtue is also visually present in the image and not just implicit in our knowledge of the characters; another one, that any behaviour present in the image that is not acceptable according to what we know about Roman values, should count as discouragement of such a reading.

The following cases are meant as examples for how I think an argument based on the methodological premises outlined above could be constructed. I would like to stress that I am not suggesting that sticking a label such as *exemplum mortalitatis* or *exemplum virtutis* onto an image is equivalent to an interpretation. Sophisticated readings that take into account the details of each story, and the way it is being depicted, are needed to gain a fuller understanding of the significance of these sarcophagi for their patrons. Moreover, to state that a hero such as Hippolytus or Heracles is an *exemplum virtutis* only suggests in the most general terms the excellence of the patron(s) of the casket, but not what this excellence may consist of. In addition, as Björn Ewald has reminded us most forcefully, there are elements that are related to such interpretations only in an oblique way, and relate to the Roman value system in a much less **reflected** way, such as the changing focus on physicality and levels of emotionality transmitted by the style of the images.<sup>63</sup> What I want to outline is how considering the kind of exemplum we are looking at can be a helpful starting point and guide further analysis.

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### *Hercules*

Hercules and his labours are a popular subject on sarcophagi, shown on 30 Roman caskets (fig. 1), as well as six Attic and Asiatic ones from Rome.<sup>64</sup> Explanations of this choice have either taken Hercules as *exemplum virtutis* or as a prefiguration of the casket's patron's apotheosis, an *exemplum deificationis*, if you want, or a combination of the two. Both

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<sup>63</sup> Ewald 2012. This excellent paper presents a more sophisticated approach to the phenomena than e.g. Zanker 2002; Zanker 2003; Ewald 2005; Muth 2005; Russenberger 2011; Zanker and Ewald 2012, 203-15; for some qualifications of the views presented in these earlier discussions see Borg 2015.

<sup>64</sup> Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 148-9; Jongste 1992, for the most complete list; Grassinger 2007.

readings could be supported by the stories around this hero, who was not only famous for his labours but also rewarded by joining the Olympian gods after his death. On the other hand, already in the *Iliad* Achilles, facing his own death, states: “For not even the mighty Heracles escaped death, albeit he was most dear to Zeus, son of Cronos, the king” (Hom. *Il.* 18.117-8), and we find him to be a popular *exemplum mortalitatis* elsewhere.<sup>65</sup> Given the general rarity and vagueness of expressions of hope for an afterlife in Roman consolatory texts, and the complete absence of mythical exempla illustrating such ideas, we would need strong visual incentives to read the images as an eschatological message. Significantly, neither his death nor his entrance into Olympus are ever depicted on the caskets, which is hard to explain had the main significance been eschatological. Moreover, his adventures with Cerberus and the Hesperids, which both have the potential of serving as symbols or allegories of overcoming death, are depicted, with a single exception, only on the secondary short sides, if at all. We thus have to conclude that these events were less relevant to the sarcophagus patrons, who were not interested in Hercules’ relation to death and the afterlife.

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In contrast, there is ample evidence suggesting that a viewer’s first reaction would have been to read the images as an encomiastic comment on the deceased, even when the hero received portrait features only twice in the third century – notably without any further changes to the iconography.<sup>66</sup> Comparisons of men with Heracles are well known since classical times when individuals and entire dynasties claimed descent from the hero, and sometimes even styled themselves as a new Heracles; Alexander is the most famous example.<sup>67</sup> In Rome, Hercules started his career as a god of victory and triumph, who was credited for his support by victorious military commanders, and to whom they erected temples and altars. His epithet “Victor” stayed with him into late antiquity. In the early imperial period, due to Mark Antony’s close connection with the hero, his career floundered, but only temporarily so, and from Trajan onwards, he returned prominently onto the political stage, becoming the favoured god of many emperors.<sup>68</sup> Commodus’ portraits with the lion scalp are just the most well-known visual proof.<sup>69</sup> Small children were depicted as baby Hercules strangling the deadly

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<sup>65</sup> Müller 1994, 107-9, with further examples.

<sup>66</sup> Grassinger 2007, who points out that some sarcophagi show the hero aging over the course of his deeds, so that we are presented with a kind of *curriculum vitae*; for the caskets with portraits see Wrede 1981, 139 cat. 136-7; Jongste 1992, cats. F5-6.

<sup>67</sup> See the summary in Rawlings 2005, 164-6, with bibliography.

<sup>68</sup> For Hercules’ career in Rome see Ritter 1995; Rawlings 2005; Hekster 2005; and Rees 2005, for his career under the empire. His other main significance in Rome since the second century BC was that of patron of trade and commerce (Ritter 1995). There is nothing in the sarcophagus images that hints at this aspect, but it is possible that, given the choice, merchants preferred him as *exemplum virtutis* over other options.

<sup>69</sup> Fittschen and Zanker 1994, 85-90 cat. 78 pls. 91-4.

snakes sent by Hera<sup>70</sup> and compared to the hero in epitaphs,<sup>71</sup> and in rare cases grown up men imitated Alexander and Commodus' habit by posing with the lion skin (fig. 5).<sup>72</sup> Used to such encomiastic comparisons both in and outside the funerary sphere, a viewer will surely have been encouraged to read the sarcophagus images along similar lines as Cicero. Speaking of the everlasting fame of the great men of Rome such as Brutus, Camillus, the Scipios etc., he evokes the exemplum of Hercules to illustrate that “the body of a brave and great man is mortal, yet the impulses of the mind and the glory of virtue are eternal”.<sup>73</sup> Here, as on the sarcophagi, it is not Hercules, who achieves immortality, but the glory won by his deeds, a message that fits in very well with the scepticism regarding an individual afterlife and the prominence that commemoration of the dead had in ancient Rome. The afterlife that most people hoped for was in the memory of future generations.<sup>74</sup>

### *Hippolytus*

Another obvious candidate for an *exemplum virtutis* is Hippolytus (fig. 2).<sup>75</sup> His hunt occupies a major part of the sarcophagus fronts. The hero is shown on horseback attacking the huge boar and just about to deliver the fatal blow. As if this was not clear enough, the hero is even accompanied by the personification of Virtus herself. His departure from Phaedra is often depicted in an iconography similar to a Roman *profectio*, and celebrates his beautiful athletic body. His death, on the other hand, is marginalised – only hinted at by Phaedra's grief. Moreover, there is nothing in the image that contradicts an unambiguously positive reading of this character, and might discourage from identifying with the hero more directly. It is therefore no surprise that his iconography was deemed suitable for “real-life” hunting sarcophagi, which replaced the Hippolytus theme in the third century.<sup>76</sup>

### *Adonis*

This is quite different from Adonis sarcophagi (fig. 6).<sup>77</sup> To be sure, the images of his departure as well as the fact that he dared to face the boar indicate that he was a brave young hunter. Yet, as Russenberger has correctly observed, he is not actually shown hunting, but

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<sup>70</sup> Wrede 1981, 238-40 cat. 121, 124, 125 pls. 17.1-2.

<sup>71</sup> E.g. *IG XIV* 2126 = Peek 1960, 190-1 no. 323.

<sup>72</sup> Wrede 1981, 239-42 cat. 122, 126, 127 pls. 15.1-2, 16.1-4.

<sup>73</sup> Cic. *Sest.* 143, quoted by Grassinger 2007, 116. Heracles is also listed by Menander Rhetor among those heroes an orator delivering a *logos epitaphios* may refer to for comparison (Soffel 1974, 151; Russell and Wilson 1981, ca. 176-7); cf. Müller 1994, 109-10 n. 452; Grassinger 2007, 115.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. Lattimore 1942, 241-6 §67-8; Esteve-Forriol 1962, 150 §56.

<sup>75</sup> Robert 1904, 198-217 nos. 161-76; Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 150-3.

<sup>76</sup> Andrae 1980, esp. 17-32; Borg 2013, 178-82.

<sup>77</sup> See above n. 13.



rather as the victim of his prey.<sup>78</sup> He is falling or fallen to the ground fatally wounded, no longer capable of raising his spear, or disarmed altogether. In most cases, he faces the deadly boar with alarm, even fear, sometimes even causing Aphrodite to rush onto the scene in panic and despair.<sup>79</sup> Lateral images show him dying in the arms of his lover. The measures of *virtus* and death are obviously inversely proportional to those in Hippolytus sarcophagi, suggesting that Adonis is primarily an *exemplum mortalitatis*. The message is: even a beautiful, brave hero like Adonis, loved by the goddess of love herself, had to die. His beauty and accomplishments are background knowledge and alluded to, but not the main subject of the present discourse.<sup>80</sup>

This interpretation is also consistent with the observation that, in the unique case where Adonis – and also Aphrodite – received portrait features in the third century, the iconography was profoundly changed by adding a rather regal and unprecedented scene in the centre (fig. 7).<sup>81</sup> Adonis is obviously injured but this does not seem to affect him very much. With Aphrodite to his left, he is enthroned rather than just sitting, not leaning on her shoulder breathing his last breath but looking rather confident next to his similarly behaved partner. Except for his nudity, the two look entirely like a couple, or maybe rather: mother and son, of some distinction ready to receive some guests or clients. Only the couple in this image is equipped with portrait heads while the protagonists in the two flanking, traditional scenes showing the hero's departure and death respectively, are generic figures, who are also depicted in smaller size, detaching the deceased from Adonis and Aphrodite's more passionate and dramatic moments of love and death. As in other examples where problematic stories previously used as *exempla mortalitatis* or *maeroris* are getting encomiastic overtones

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<sup>78</sup> Russenberger 2015, 199-200, 365-6.

<sup>79</sup> Koortbojian 1995, 32, for a different reading.

<sup>80</sup> The famous Rinuccini sarcophagus provides no counter argument, as is often suggested (already Blome 1990; Brilliant 1992; and still Zanker and Ewald 2012, 44-6). True, the death of Adonis on the right is here combined with two scenes known from *vita romana* sarcophagi, the *concordia*-marriage and the general's formal sacrifice, which praise the deceased's achievements and virtues. But the standard sequence of the scenes has been changed on the Rinuccini sarcophagus, so that there is no need to equate the Adonis scene with the battle scene that sometimes appears at the far left end of the *vita romana* caskets. Moreover, as Muth 2004, has shown, the *vita romana* sarcophagi do not actually focus on the canon of virtues suggested by Rodenwaldt 1935, and which has influenced sarcophagus studies so much, but on the offices and very tangible achievements of the sarcophagus patron. Given the difficulties discussed above, I prefer to see the mythical image as an attempt to include in the range of messages expressed by the reliefs the notion of death through an *exemplum mortalitatis*. That it is the death of a hero makes the story suitable for the deceased (and his wife), but does not distract from the message of achievement. That death is here illustrated by a mythical image distances the notion of death and "defeat" from the sarcophagus patron, and leaves his confident self-representation untinged.

<sup>81</sup> On this sarcophagus: Blome 1990, esp. 54-5 fig. 22; Koortbojian 1995, 50-3 fig. 7; Grassinger 1999, 74 no. 65 fig. 7 pls. 47.2, 49.3, 52.2, 53.2, 55-7, 59, 63.1; Zanker and Ewald 2012, 210-1, 301-3 no. 6 fig. 189; for the interpretation suggested here see Borg 2013, 169-70 fig. 87; Borg 2014, 249-50 fig. 7.10.

by the introduction of portraits, the aspects of death and drama were marginalised, and the story became an ornate backdrop to the celebrated deceased in this one instance where a third-century patron dared to draw upon this challenging myth as *exemplum virtutis*.

Aphrodite's role, on the other hand, is primarily marked by her relationship to Adonis, her love of the hero, whom she hugs and kisses on some caskets, whom she bids farewell, and whom she desperately but vainly tries to rescue. She thus strongly encourages the viewer to also look at the story as an *exemplum maeroris*, like Ovid did when he compared his grief for Tibullus with that of Venus over Adonis (Ov. *Am.* 3.9.16). Her active role and passionate and demanding love of Adonis, which has irritated scholars as inconsistent with Roman decorum, explains her devastation at his death, but can happily be contained within the mythical realm.<sup>82</sup> Again, on the single example where she assumed portrait features, it was only in the central, strangely unemotional scene just described.

There is yet another aspect to her presence. As I have argued elsewhere, the frequent images of gods loving mortals – apart from Aphrodite these include Selene and Endymion, Dionysus and Ariadne, Mars and Rhea Sylvia, and even Hades and Persephone – may visualise the deceased's desire to somehow dwell in the vicinity of the gods, that their death may be sleep-like and/or guarded over by a caring divinity.<sup>83</sup> This desire is also expressed in epitaphs, where no specific gods are, however, mentioned.<sup>84</sup>

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There is thus no need to assume that Aphrodite's passion and the physicality of her love were meant as a role model to be advertised to a Roman female audience, that she was an exemplar. Such a reading is discouraged by both a lack of precedents or parallels for such an understanding (which would have created the appropriate background of experience), and the adjustments deemed necessary in the single case where Aphrodite (and Adonis) actually did assume portrait features.

### *Meleager*

Meleager sarcophagi are interesting here as they demonstrate the range of interpretations of this hero and his deeds even in a single medium and at the same time. Some

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<sup>82</sup> Against a reading of the encounters between Venus and Adonis as reflections of or models for Roman gender relations proposed especially by Zanker 2003, Ewald 2005 and Russenberger 2011, see Borg 2015.

<sup>83</sup> Borg in print.

<sup>84</sup> Peek 1955, nos. 613, 743, 770, 909, 1146, 1768, 1773, 1830; Moretti 1979, no. 1143; Peres 2003, 106-21, 141-8, 196-207, 217-32 (who notes that the point of living on among the stars or in Elysium is also proximity to the gods); *CIL* VI 26251 and 26282; *IG* XIV 1856.

32 caskets show the Calydonian boar hunt (fig. 3).<sup>85</sup> They differ in the prominence they award the deliberations preceding the hunt, but they all focus on the hunt itself, which is shown as a heroic deed with the hero fearlessly approaching the boar. Unlike the Adonis reliefs, and similar to Hippolytus sarcophagi, there is little indication of his death. Sometimes his death is not even alluded to and his victory is further enhanced by the depiction of the meal following the hunt on the lid, and/or real-world hunts on the short sides. There can be no doubt that he served here as *exemplum virtutis*, and it thus hardly comes as a surprise that the third-century sarcophagi which equipped the hero with portrait features kept the iconography largely unchanged.<sup>86</sup> In other cases, however, the dead hero and his mother's despair are depicted on the lid,<sup>87</sup> serving as a gentle reminder that even this great hero had to die.

However, we would be mistaken in generalising this message and imposing it also on the two other types of Meleager sarcophagi, which put his dead body centre stage.<sup>88</sup> On one group of over 18 caskets (fig. 8), the return of Meleager's body to Calydon features most prominently, with his father leading the way and his equally desperate mother greeting them to the right; typically, Meleager's chariot, now only manned by his charioteer, is seen to the left of the group.<sup>89</sup> Other scenes are normally added and vary. On the left, several caskets show Apollo killing the hero, and some include Althaia's suicide on the right. Even though the chariot hints at Meleager's previous deeds, especially in the one instance where it is decorated with a Victory writing on a shield, and one example depicting him fighting before Pleuron, the key message is clearly death and despair, mitigated only by the care with which the hero is returned home, but aggravated where his mother's suicide is shown.

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The same applies to the second group of over ten caskets<sup>90</sup> that display in the centre Meleager lying in state and being mourned by his parents and other figures in an iconography taken over from Roman "real life" *conclamatio* scenes (fig. 9). It is flanked on the left by Althaia throwing the log into the fire on which Meleager's life hinged, and on the right by Meleager killing his uncles. Placed in different locations within the reliefs, the mourning

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<sup>85</sup> Koch 1975, 7-16, 85-102 pls. 1-55; six sarcophagi imitating Asiatic sarcophagi from the second half of the third century can be added: *ibid.* 16-28, 102-5 pls. 56-63.

<sup>86</sup> The only change consisted in moving the hero even more into the centre of the representation: Borg 2013, 172-3.

<sup>87</sup> Lid with its sarcophagus: Koch 1975, cat. 8 pls. 10, 13, 82-3; isolated lids: cat. 80, 89, 102, 103, 107, 109; see also the mourning woman on a short side: *ibid.* cat. 21 pl. 52. Since the lids would have duplicated scenes if placed on one of the other types of Meleager sarcophagi, they must have belonged to the boar hunt type.

<sup>88</sup> Similarly Newby 2014, 271-6; Russenberger 2015, 198-9; contra: Lorenz 2011.

<sup>89</sup> Koch 1975, 28-38, 106-18 pls. 68-94; Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 164-5 with n. 37.

<sup>90</sup> Koch 1975, 38-47, 119-29 pls. 95-113; Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 165-6; Lorenz 2011.

Atalante normally features prominently, thus inviting identification with the bereaved. Not only is the narrative sequence of events disturbed in order to put the *conclamatio* centre stage. The flanking scenes both display the killing of kin, appropriately accompanied by Furies in some cases. We are presented with another example of death and destruction that leave only grief behind.<sup>91</sup> It is consistent with this interpretation that epitaphs and the consolatory literature refer to the hero exclusively as *exemplum mortalitatis/maeroris*.<sup>92</sup>

Meleager sarcophagi are thus an excellent illustration of some of the observations made above. One and the same hero can serve as *exemplum* for different claims. Moreover, where he is used as *exemplum mortalitatis*, even contradictory versions of the story were used to express different ideas. The story according to which he is killed by Apollo is incompatible with the one used for the *conclamatio* sarcophagi, where his own mother kills the hero. While both groups put the death of the hero centre stage, the first group presents it as a fate caused by a god. The fighting in which he proved his *virtus* was a military campaign, to which the chariot and the escort of his comrades also draw attention. The mourning takes up different amounts of space, sometimes including his mother's suicide but sometimes relegated to a small part at the right-hand end of the relief or to the short sides. While death and mourning feature most prominently on these caskets, there is nothing that compromises the hero's *virtus*, making him an excellent *exemplum mortalitatis* with enough positive overtones to invite closer identification by those who felt so inclined.

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On the *conclamatio* sarcophagi, some key aspects are changed. Mourning is the main theme in the centre, sometimes supplemented with scenes of mourning at a tomb on the front or a short side. Atalante is a prominent and unambiguously positive figure with whom any mourner, but especially a wife or female lover of the actual deceased could identify, and Katharina Lorenz has shown how she is used to draw the viewer into the mythical scene.<sup>93</sup> At the same time, the horror of death is taken to the extreme. Not only are more deaths added – that of Meleager's uncles. Meleager and his family are depicted, like Orestes, as entangled in a tragic fate that eventually even makes them kill their own kin. The message may be the mercilessness of Fate/fate, often lamented in epigraphs, but it still leaves them morally

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<sup>91</sup> Differently Lorenz 2011, 322, who thinks that Meleager is presented as a “formidable fighter”, and protector of “the claims of his lover and wife”. But as with Orestes' killing of his mother, I cannot see how the killing of kin can ever be perceived as an unambiguously positive act, and the furies seem to confirm this view; ditto Russenberger 2015, 198.

<sup>92</sup> See example above.

<sup>93</sup> Lorenz 2011, 319-22; she further assigns her the role of mitigating the levels of an *allegoria aperta permixta*. But as explained above, this concept is problematic.

compromised, unsuitable as *exempla virtutis*. While Meleager is still a heroic figure, not every hero is also an exemplar. His usefulness as *exemplum mortalitatis* and *maeroris* is unaffected by this fact, as these do not necessarily involve any moral judgement.

### *Female death*

Female mythical protagonists serve a similar range of meanings as their male counterparts, although with different emphasis. One prominent role is that of mourners, which is in tune with the role of women in Roman society. The degree to which they invite identification by the viewer varies, however. Phaedra's often dramatic reaction to Hippolytus' departure (fig. 2), for instance, highlights the fact that the myth is not just about Hippolytus as an *exemplum virtutis*, but that he will actually never come back, and thus is also an *exemplum mortalitatis*. Her love and grief underline the hero's desirability and the grief his death will cause,<sup>94</sup> but this does not turn Phaedra into a role model or positive figure.<sup>95</sup> Altaia is a somewhat more agreeable character on those sarcophagi where Apollo does the killing, and possibly also on those where the cause of Meleager's death is left open. But she also adds another tragic death to the repertoire, and I see no room for reading her in any positive way on the *conclamatio* sarcophagi (fig. 9). In contrast, Atalante is a figure easy to identify with, and so is Aphrodite to the extent that she is a loving woman desperate at her lover's death, as explained above.

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The second prominent role assigned to women is that of a victim. Creusa/Medea sarcophagi put Creusa's death centre stage, heightening the drama by including the marriage scene and pointing to the extent of her fall.<sup>96</sup> They may have been used primarily for women (and children?), as the subject and a cinerary urn from Ostia dedicated by a T. Flavius Carpus to his wife and daughter suggests, and again the story serves as *exemplum mortalitatis* and *maeroris*.<sup>97</sup> More often, women's deaths are presented with consoling overtones in that they are shown as sleeping beauties (Rhea Sylvia; Ariadne), or abducted by a god like Persephone (fig. 4). In such cases, encomiastic elements are inherent in the story, as invariably they are worthy of the love of a divinity, and both Ariadne and Rhea Sylvia frequently obtain portrait features. On the second-century Persephone sarcophagi, however, this aspect is marginal, and

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<sup>94</sup> Zanker 1999b; Zanker and Ewald 2012, 92-3; Linant De Bellefonds 2013.

<sup>95</sup> Differently the authors in the preceding footnote, but also Muth 2005, 280; contra Borg 2015. Phaedra receives portrait features only on a few Tetrarchic sarcophagi that radically change the iconography.

<sup>96</sup> Gaggadis-Robin 1994; Zanker and Ewald 2012, 76-8, 354-7 no. 20 fig. 64; Russenberger 2015, 161-4.

<sup>97</sup> A Creusa/Medea sarcophagus from a tomb found near Porta Maggiore contained three skeletons, but their age and sex were not determined: *NSc* 1911, 395-6 (E. Ghislanzoni); Herdejürgen 1996 143-4 no. 116 pl. 44.4; *MNR* I.8, 279-83 no. vi8 (L. Musso).

only with changes in the overall composition and iconography is she given portrait features in the third century.<sup>98</sup>

But there are also slightly more active female role models such as Alcestis and Laodameia. The famous Alcestis sarcophagus from Ostia with its many portraits depicts the heroine on her deathbed (fig. 10), but also claims the heroine's virtues as is occasionally done in epitaphs.<sup>99</sup> Two more Alcestis sarcophagi were dedicated to a girl of 12 and a woman, and it is plausible to assume that also the other 11 Alcestis sarcophagi were used for deceased females or a wife together with her husband.<sup>100</sup> Alcestis here obviously serves not just as *exemplum mortalitatis*, but also as *exemplum virtutis*, more precisely: as *exemplum pietatis*.<sup>101</sup> Laodameia, who committed suicide when her husband fell before Troy, was suitable for the same end, and accordingly, both she and Protesilaos could be given portrait features on a casket from around 170.<sup>102</sup>

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These female *exempla virtutis* may be fewer than those for deceased males, and they always include clear reference to death. But if my argument above is accepted, the discrepancy appears already less dramatic. Given the frequent use of sarcophagi for married couples in the third century, one also wonders how often caskets were used in the same way in the second century. For instance, a Meleager sarcophagus from the Isola Sacra was dedicated by Berria Zosime to herself and her husband – in this sequence.<sup>103</sup> A late-second-century Meleager sarcophagus from Mausoleum R in the Vatican necropolis contained the skeletons of an adult and a child.<sup>104</sup> We may see here a similar attitude to that often found in

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<sup>98</sup> Newby 2011a; Borg 2013, 164-78; for the additional aspect of divine presence see above with n. 83.

<sup>99</sup> Sarcophagus: Grassinger 1999, 227-8 cat. 76 pls. 75.2, 78.1-2, 79.1-2, 80-1, 84.6-7; cf. Newby 2014, 280-3, who draws the interesting parallel with Statius' way of projecting the deceased into the mythological realm. For epitaphs see e.g. *IG XIV 1356* = Peek 1960, no. 393 (Rome); *IG XIV 607* = Peek 1960, no. 463 (Sardinia).

<sup>100</sup> Grassinger 1999, 110-28, 227-32 cat. 75-87 (a portrait on cat. 86, an inscription on cat. 75); Mucznik 1999, 25-79, esp. 36-52 (her conclusions 75-9 miss the point as they are entirely based on misguided preconceptions of eschatological messages and literary sources); Newby 2011a, 194-6, 200; Zanker and Ewald 2012, (200-2, 306-10).

<sup>101</sup> Against most modern accounts, Bielfeldt 2005, 324 with n. 954, has observed that the Heracles scene does not show Alcestis' return but Admetus' eventual arrival in the underworld, and Zanker and Ewald 2012, 298 rightly note that none of the epitaphs referring to Alcestis mentions her return to life. Alcestis' return is only depicted on one sarcophagus front at the left hand corner and on one short side (Grassinger 1999, 231-2 no. 86 pls. 75.4, 83, 84.1-4; 229-30 no. 82 pls. 74.1, 85.4-5), and Zanker and Ewald 2012, 94, interpret it as referring to love of the husband for his wife, which proverbially can transcend death (cf. *ibid.* 201-2).

<sup>102</sup> Robert 1919, 498-500 cat. 422-3. For a comparison in an epitaph see *CIL X 5920*, on which see Keegan 2008, 3-4 with transl. Again there is no indication that these sarcophagi symbolised apotheosis; they rather focus on the tragic departure: Zanker and Ewald 2012, 94-5, 392-6 no. 32 figs. 84-5; Bielfeldt 2005, 324, who observes that the protagonists appear both as surviving dependant and as deceased; Newby 2011a, 197-9.

<sup>103</sup> D'Ambra 1988; Koch 1975, 126-7 cat. 130 pls. 114-45, and 48-50 on the subject of the meal after the hunt.

<sup>104</sup> Koch 1975, 131 no. 146 pl. 120c; 121; the sex of these skeletons was not determined at the time.

epitaphs where the praise of a deceased woman or child consists in their relation to a husband or father with some achievement.

### *Female exempla virtutis*

But more recently it has also become clear that some narratives were deemed suitable for women that previous scholarship had not considered. As Christian Russenberger has demonstrated, Amazonomachy sarcophagi (fig. 11) were not all about the victorious Greeks, and thus a mythological equivalent to the battle sarcophagi and *exempla virtutis* for a male audience, as has been the consensus so far.<sup>105</sup> At least sometimes, and possibly even typically, they were dedicated to girls and young women,<sup>106</sup> as is confirmed by the only preserved inscribed lid of an Amazonomachy sarcophagus, which was dedicated to 15-year-old Arria Maximina – together with a statue showing her as Venus.<sup>107</sup> The Amazons' death and desperation make them excellent *exempla mortalitatis* and *maeroris*, not least since Amazons, and Penthesilea in particular, had been admired for their bravery and beauty ever since archaic Greece.<sup>108</sup> The imagery thus also contains an element of praise that is reflected in some written sources. According to her epitaph, 20-year-old Marcia Helike, whose beauty equalled that of Venus in life, is said to have become even more beautiful and desirable to her husband in death.<sup>109</sup>

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And yet, it is not necessarily only beauty but also *virtus* in the sense of courage in the face of adversity that may be compared. The *Laudatio Turiae* famously praises the deceased for avenging her parents' death (1.3), as well as for her courageous actions on behalf of her husband during the proscriptions, and is credited with *firmitas animae* (2.a and 15: firmness of mind), and *virtus* (2.6a and 19).<sup>110</sup> Emily Hemelrijk has collected similar descriptions of women and shown that she is not alone in such a role: Ovid urges his wife to intervene on his behalf while he is in exile.<sup>111</sup> Cicero praises his wife for similar interventions, and calls her as

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<sup>105</sup> Russenberger 2015, 67-114.

<sup>106</sup> Russenberger 2015, esp. 151-93, who draws on both a detailed analysis of the iconography and written evidence; for a similar suggestion see already Borg 2013, 170 with n. 51. As Russenberger notes, however, the sarcophagi were also suitable as “metaphors” for male death. Attic sarcophagi, however, do focus on Greek heroism, and so does a unique western exception, a sarcophagus in Toronto from Ostia: *ibid.* 342-4 fig. 157 cat. 13 pl. 19.2. Cf. on the sarcophagi more generally: Grassinger 1999, 129-94, 235-59 cat. 88-146, with Russenberger 2015, 17-64.

<sup>107</sup> Russenberger 2015, 189-90, on *CIL* XIV 1839.

<sup>108</sup> Arrigoni 1982, 58-9; Arrigoni 1981; Fantuzzi 2012, 267-79. For an argument that South Italian vases drew upon the motif in funerary contexts as well see Russenberger 2015, 239-97.

<sup>109</sup> *IG* XIV 1838: Arrigoni 1981; Russenberger 2015, 190-2.

<sup>110</sup> Kierdorf 1980, 33-48; Flach 1991; Hemelrijk 2004.

<sup>111</sup> Hemelrijk 2004, 190-1, with further examples from literature; cf. also n. 115.

well as his daughter Tullia “more courageous than any man” (*fortiores ... quam quemquam virum: Fam. 14.7.2*).<sup>112</sup> The epigraphic *Laudatio Murdiae* alleges that the deceased woman “was second to none ... of courage, energy, and prudence in the face of danger” (*neque ulli cessit virtutis laboris sapientiae periculorum*).<sup>113</sup> Seneca responds to Livia’s fictive objection that she is only a woman and cannot be expected to be as courageous as men:

But who has asserted that Nature has dealt grudgingly with women’s natures and has narrowly restricted their virtues (*virtutes*)? Believe me, they have just as much force (*vigor*), just as much capacity (*facultas*), if they like, for virtuous action (*Consolatio ad Liviam* 16, transl. J. Henderson).<sup>114</sup>

These examples most likely all come from the uppermost echelons of society, but their ideas are not limited to the upper class. In his *consolatio* to Abascanthus, the powerful *ab epistulis* of Domitian, Statius praised his recently deceased wife not only by admiring her beauty, charm and devotion to her husband in general, but by suggesting that she would have fought for him like a soldier or other brave man: “But if some formidable danger had summoned her to a larger role, she would gladly have confronted armed bands or lightning fire or the hazards of mid ocean for her man”. She would have endured all sorts of inconveniences, “and, if the army allowed, even been fain to bear a quiver and shield her flank with Amazonian targe, so long as she might see you in the dust-cloud of battles” (*Stat. Silv.* 5.1.66-9; 130-2; trans. D.R. Shackelton Bailey).<sup>115</sup>

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This kind of praise may help explain the choice of some other subjects for sarcophagi of girls or women. An enormous sarcophagus depicting Achilles’ discovery on Skyros was dedicated to the senatorial girl Metilia Torquata (fig. 12).<sup>116</sup> This episode is by far the most popular subject involving Achilles on Roman sarcophagi, appearing on a total of 23 Roman, and 6 Attic caskets found in Italy.<sup>117</sup> Grassinger and others have read them as male *exempla virtutis*, and there can be no doubt that the depictions hint at the hero’s bravery and victory.

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<sup>112</sup> Cf. Grebe 2003, who seems to exaggerate the uniqueness of Terentia.

<sup>113</sup> *CIL* VI 10230, with Hemelrijk 2004, 193-4; Lindsay 2004.

<sup>114</sup> On female virtue in Seneca see Wilcox 2006, with pp. 79-80 on the passage. To be sure, since the first century BC, the term *virtus* can be used in the general sense of (moral) virtue (Thome 2002, 75-8; McDonnell 2003, 238-58), but except for the Seneca passage, which is more ambiguous, the contexts in these examples make it clear that courage is a key element of this female *virtus*.

<sup>115</sup> *Stat. Silv.* 5.1.127-34. For comparisons with Amazons in the later literature see Russenberger 2015, 192-3. Cf. Gibson 2006, 104-5, 125-6, for other women enduring hardship and misfortunes for their husbands and even prepared to accompany their husbands on campaign and/or take up arms.

<sup>116</sup> Sichtermann and Koch 1975, 5-6 no. 1 pls. 1-3; Rogge 1995, 133 cat. 19 pls. 26.2, 30.2, 31, 37.1, 38.3; Müller 1994, 106; Wrede 2001 15 with n. 14. For Metilia Torquata, who was related to and possibly the daughter of M. Metilius Aquillius Regulus Nepos Volusius Torquatus Fronto, *cos. ord.* AD 157, cf. *CIL* IX 658; *PIR*<sup>2</sup> M 556; Raepsaet-Charlier 1987, 454 no. 549 stemma 27.

<sup>117</sup> Grassinger 1999, 25-43, 196-204 cat. 4-26; Rogge 1995, 26-30, 43, 44-5, 125-6 cat. 4, 131 cat. 15, 134 cat. 21, 136-8 cat. 23-6.



On the Roman sarcophagi, the hero's entire pose is one of a warrior ready for attack, and in several examples, he has set his foot on a helmet, a pose of victory known from many other contexts including the victorious emperor and Victory herself.<sup>118</sup> Some reliefs further stress his masculinity by showing him entirely nude. One casket depicts his later fights on the short sides, while the lid of another depicted the ransom of Hector's body.<sup>119</sup> But these hints at his *virtus* and (ensuing) victories, which only become more prominent in the third century, are only secondary to the main topic, which is his discovery among the daughters of Lykomedes.<sup>120</sup> Had *virtus* and victory been the primary intended message, other scenes would have been much more suitable to express them. The choice of the discovery scene must therefore be motivated differently.

As Grassinger observed, the iconography of the daughters of Lykomedes has close parallels in scenes of rape and abduction:<sup>121</sup> From Deidameia and the other girls' point of view, his departure for Troy is a great loss, and so they can be taken as a visual hint at the fact that Achilles will not survive this departure for long. The event is in fact a major turning point in Achilles' life. Not only did Odysseus' trick of blowing the trumpet make him expose his real character – that of the hero and fighter – but in accepting this role, he also sealed his own fate as he knew he had to die young should he join the Achaeans in the fight against Troy. This consent to his own death is obviously another indication of his superior character, but also qualifies him as the prime *exemplum mortalitatis*, especially for a *mors immatura*, that he is in epitaphs and the consolatory literature.<sup>122</sup> As such, he was obviously suitable also for a girl, but the comparison may have been taken further. On Metilia's as well as many other sarcophagi, Achilles is shown playing music with the daughters of Lykomedes on the short sides.<sup>123</sup> The implication therefore surely is that the deceased girl stood out among her peers in terms of both character and education, as Achilles did among the daughters of Lykomedes. He is depicted still in transformation from “girl” to (male) hero, a transformation that suggests

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<sup>118</sup> Grassinger 1999, 41-2.

<sup>119</sup> Grassinger 1999, cat. 4 pls. 4.1, 12.3-4; 35, 199-200 cat. 15 with p. 208 cat. 39. The battles which he will now join are hinted at by the helmet displayed at the feet of the hero in some cases, which twice is even decorated by fighting scenes (ibid. cat. 21 pls. 17.1, 25.2; cat. 24 pls. 17.2, 25.3).

<sup>120</sup> Ditto Russenberger 2015, 416, but he concludes that the main theme was the “relationship between man and woman and the tragic farewell”. Yet Achilles and Deidameia can hardly be understood as a paradigm of marital love as the hero is still shown half-dressed as a woman in most cases.

<sup>121</sup> Grassinger 1999, 42-3.

<sup>122</sup> Müller 1994, 103-6; Griessmair 1966, 89; cf. Statius, *Silv.* 2.6.30-1, praising a slave boy. For the epitaph see Peek 1960, 236-7 no. 417.

<sup>123</sup> Grassinger 1999, cat. 21 pl. 14.1-2; cat. 17 pl. 14.3-4.

the permeability of gender boundaries.<sup>124</sup> In light of the *virtus* discourse just discussed, the image may therefore also advocate bravery in the face of death for both sexes. If the much-discussed Albani sarcophagus showing Achilles receiving his new weapons, the second decisive moment in Achilles' acceptance of the inseparability of heroism and death, did indeed belong to a young woman, a similar choice was made for her.<sup>125</sup> As Müller concludes from these two examples and an epitaph from Thera comparing a girl or young woman to Achilles, the hero "was apparently regarded as a universal symbol of mortality, which could be applied to members of either sex."<sup>126</sup>

Scenes of Iulus Ascanius hunting in Africa were chosen for the burial of another girl, who was embalmed and fitted out with rich grave goods (fig. 13).<sup>127</sup> On the left short side, the location is indicated by the personifications of a river and Africa. On the front, the boy is leaving Dido and Aeneas on the left; he is seen on horseback in the centre, and the hunt is unfolding in front of him. Dido is shown like a Diana in hunting gear, suggesting that this kind of pursuit was not just for men. The only person actually hunting (apart from his anonymous male companions), however, is Iulus Ascanius, who is more similar in age to the deceased girl. Unlike the other examples discussed here, there is not even a hint of death present in this case. Moreover, we are dealing with a Roman myth, and the most likely point of comparison probably was the upbringing of the child and the noble character and status of its parents.<sup>128</sup> But like the Amazons and Achilles before, the hunting Iulus Ascanius and Dido in her hunting gear will also have hinted at the *virtus* of the girl, not suggesting that she was actually trained in hunting, or that she would have adopted male roles in society, but in more general terms as a courageous and confident individual.<sup>129</sup>

That such a reading is not arbitrary is demonstrated by an even more daring early third-century sarcophagus for six-year-old Octavia Paulina (fig. 14). The girl is shown as a

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<sup>124</sup> Gender boundaries have been much discussed in relation to the texts cited above (at nn. 110-114), and would merit further exploration. For sarcophagi see Birk 2011, which deserves separate discussion.

<sup>125</sup> Müller 1994.

<sup>126</sup> Müller 1994, 106; for the report on the skeleton see *ibid.*, 1. For the epitaph see Peek 1960, 236-7 no. 417. On the various interpretations of the myth in literature and images see also Muth, 1998, 151-85, whose ideas could be explored further for the funerary realm.

<sup>127</sup> Grassinger 1999, 91-8; 222 cat. 68 pls. 64-9; Dimas 1998, 130-2.

<sup>128</sup> Rogge 1995, 98; she doubts, however, the connection with the Cornelii, following Bordenache Battaglia 1983, 111-4 no. 3. Dimas 1998, 131, is reminded by the central scene of the riding protagonist of reliefs with *equites* on their horse and suggests an owner from this class. Birk 2013, 120.

<sup>129</sup> For female *virtus* see also Birk 2013, 136-7, where she discusses sarcophagi of the third century showing *Virtus* as well as huntresses with female portraits. While she is certainly right in her claim that few if any virtues were monopolised by men (*ibid.*, 115-56 on "Visualising Gender"), I find her terminology, contrasting the sex of the portrait with the gender of the figure's activity unhelpful as it suggests that the deceased was meant to be shown specifically with male characteristics rather than as being equal to men in certain regards.

nude athlete throughout, crowning herself and with a palm of victory in the centre. On the left, she is being rubbed with oil, and wrestling with a boy; at the right, she is fighting a boy in a boxing match. Hardly did Paulina take part in any athletic competition of the kind we see in the relief, but the idea of superiority and victory in competition was obviously considered important enough for her parents to commission this unique casket.<sup>130</sup>

### *Conclusion*

These examples demonstrate that exempla could work at various levels of analogy. We would be in an infinitely better position to understand the details of how sarcophagus images may have been read, if we knew who was actually buried in these caskets, as the degree to which the deceased may have been identified with the mythical protagonists much depends on who they were. A male adolescent may have invited closer identification with Adonis (fig. 6) or Endymion than an adult man or a woman, and a young woman may have been compared with Persephone (fig. 4) more closely than an old lady or a man. Because of the well-known connection between hunting and warfare, a member of the military buried in a Hippolytus (fig. 2) or Meleager-hunting sarcophagus (fig. 3) may have identified with the hero more closely than the smith from Portus and his wife, who did not even have the opportunity to go hunting, let alone to go to war. Like the women and girls buried in Amazon or Achilles sarcophagi (figs. 11-12), they would have read the hero's (and Atalante's) *virtus* in the wider sense the word had assumed in the imperial period as signifying general excellence, possibly involving also some degree of bravery in their own, probably rather mundane, lives and deaths.

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Unfortunately, inscriptions or skeletal remains tell us only very rarely who the deceased were. But given the total number of known patrons from the second century, it is remarkable in how many cases gender and/or age of the deceased do not match those of the mythical heroes. We already noted a number of instances in the previous section, and could add the depiction of the childhood of Dionysus deemed suitable for a one-year-old girl.<sup>131</sup> Of four inscribed Endymion sarcophagi, two were used for women, one for a couple but dedicated on the occasion of the wife's death, and only one for a young man.<sup>132</sup> No Persephone sarcophagus bears an inscription but of seven inscribed altars from the second

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<sup>130</sup> Huskinson 1996, 19, 21 no. 1.14 pl. 5.2; Amedick 1991 132-3 no. 67 pls. 82-3, on the sarcophagus, and pp. 82-96, on *palaestra* sarcophagi in general; Dimas 1998, 152-62, 239 no. 84 pl. 12.3.

<sup>131</sup> Matz 1969, 353-4 no. 201 pl. 210.1; Dimas 1998, 207.

<sup>132</sup> Sichtermann 1992, nos. 27, 35, 79, 80; cf. Borg 2015, 85; Newby 2014, 269, for two of these examples with similar conclusions. Only one of these was reused for the burial of a woman, a certain Blera, in Late Antiquity, and may be dismissed as an ill judgement, simple incompetence, or neglect on the part of a late usurper.

century depicting her rape, four were dedicated to men, two to a couple, and only one to a single woman, suggesting similar practice for Persephone sarcophagi.<sup>133</sup> Accordingly, the myth is also sometimes evoked in epitaphs set up for deceased males.<sup>134</sup> Moreover, Ruth Bielfeldt has drawn attention to the fact that the images on sarcophagi were often intended, not only to speak about a single deceased person but about the wider group or family using the same tomb.<sup>135</sup>

Similar variation is found in literary exempla, where the gender and age of the deceased or the bereaved could, but by no means necessarily did, coincide with that of their mythical comparanda, and only in few instances is a closer comparison intended, e.g. where Apollo is mourning Linos in Ovid's elegy on Tibullus (3.8.23-4). Discrepancies are most frequent in *exempla maeroris*, where the mourning characters are, as on the sarcophagi, predominantly women even when a man is the grieving party,<sup>136</sup> but gender and age do not need to coincide in *exempla mortalitatis* either.

As in exempla more generally, analogies can obviously be pushed to various degrees,<sup>137</sup> and do not even necessarily require a positive evaluation of *any* element of the comparandum – just consider the Niobid sarcophagi.<sup>138</sup> On second-century sarcophagi, the point of comparison is often the poignancy of grief and the horror that is death, aggravated when it is premature and hits the young and innocent, or when it hits several individuals at once. Alternatively it can be the peace and quiet achieved in death, the relief from all toil and hardship, and closeness to the divine. The potentially offensive parts of the stories remain securely contained within the realm of myth. They are part of the *ornatus* of the rhetoric, and they illustrate the human condition more generally, the tragedy, uncontrollability, and inescapability of death. Phaedra's love is inappropriate, more so her causing Hippolytus' death, but it is still love and she is already devastated when Hippolytus leaves. Althaea killed her son by throwing the log into the fire, but deeply mourns Meleager's death later on and eventually commits suicide. The death of Meleager who is also shown killing his own uncles,

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<sup>133</sup> Altars: Lindner 1984, 60-4 nos. 56-66 (her no. 58 is perhaps a second altar for a woman but it is lost and was never illustrated); Boschung 1987, 51 with n. 750.

<sup>134</sup> E.g. *CLE* 1066 = *CIL* VI 6319; *CLE* 1219 = *CIL* VI 25871; *CLE* 1223 = *CIL* VI 25128. Cf. Newby 2011b, 306; Borg 2013, 177 with n. 76.

<sup>135</sup> Bielfeldt 2003; Bielfeldt 2005, esp. 319-26; similarly Zanker and Ewald 2012, 40-3.

<sup>136</sup> Newby 2014, 269, 274-5, for Statius and sarcophagi.

<sup>137</sup> See already the conclusions by Koortbojian 1995, 9, that "the sarcophagi present analogies, not identifications: they do not merely equate the lives of those commemorated with the ancient stories but compel us to contemplate those lives in terms of the fundamental truths the myths reveal."

<sup>138</sup> This aspect is overlooked by Gessert 2004, but also in the attempts noted above (nn. 94-695) to interpret the emotional (love) stories on second-century sarcophagi as reflections of a Roman value system.

and the tragic entanglements that brutally destroyed Orestes' family, can stand as *exempla mortalitatis* and *maeroris* without suggesting that the protagonists act as role models for a contemporary Roman, that the exempla are also exemplars.

The latter are not entirely absent during the second century, but often secondary or only implicit, able to be activated where the match is relatively close and a patron really wants to push for it. They become more clear-cut and more frequent from the late Antonine period onwards, and in particular in the third century when portrait identifications appear more widely. It has long been observed that the emotional depictions of *exempla mortalitatis* and *maeroris* such as the Creusa/Medea or Niobid sarcophagi disappear entirely. From the Meleager repertoire, only the hunting sarcophagi survive. Characteristically, also Adonis sarcophagi disappear from around the turn of the second and third centuries, and Russenberger has suggested that the encomiastic Hippolytus sarcophagi, which start to be produced only from the 180s and continue to be produced into the third century, are their successors and replacement.<sup>139</sup> This is also the time when Hercules sarcophagi become more popular. For other myths such as Hades and Persephone, Endymion and Selene, or the Amazonomachy, new iconographies were introduced in order to visually encourage identification and remove aspects as far as possible that were incompatible with an encomiastic, more direct comparison of hero and deceased.<sup>140</sup> The artists and patrons of Roman sarcophagi continued the creative process of using Greek myths as exempla for a range of different meanings and messages, adapting them to the desires of individuals and changing preferences over time. This process is what makes these myths excellent sources for our understanding of Roman ideology and values more broadly, and such exciting objects for study.

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<sup>139</sup> Russenberger 2011, 157-8; Russenberger 2015, 402-3.

<sup>140</sup> Newby 2011a; Borg 2013, 164-78.

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