

## Image in Distress? The death of Meleager on Roman sarcophagi

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The recent interest in Roman mythological sarcophagi has been fuelled by their potential to throw light on the ideas and ideals that governed Roman social life and behaviour. In particular, sarcophagi offer genuine insight into Roman approaches to Greek myths as a device for producing meanings related to the context of death, to rituals at the tomb, and to strategies of commemoration in general.<sup>1</sup> This perspective has been opened by moving away from approaches prevalent in the later nineteenth and most of the twentieth century, which concentrated on matters of iconography, the relationship between depicted scenes and literary or philosophical texts, and on how the reliefs on Roman sarcophagi could be used to provide insight into the Greek originals which they allegedly copied.<sup>2</sup>

The most pressing current questions for our understanding of mythological sarcophagi include asking how life and particular lives may be plotted not only against the narratives of myth but particularly against myths borrowed from a different culture: to what extent do mythological reliefs on sarcophagi represent a miraculous or supernatural narrative and to what extent can they be understood as representing or reflecting on the *everyday*? Can one establish the general devices by which either of these two areas of signification is generated within Roman images or signalled for Roman viewers, and can one trace the ways these characteristics play out in any one image? Can certain periods of production or themes within mythological imagery in Roman culture be distinguished by the way in which this relationship between the mythological and the everyday is defined or re-enacted?

Ruth Bielfeldt has recently demonstrated that one answer previously given to these questions, an answer opting for historical development as explanation,

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1 Relevant studies include: Blome 1978; Giuliani 1989; Brilliant 1992; Grassinger 1994; Koortbojian 1995; Zanker 1999; Ewald 2004; Zanker and Ewald 2004; Bielfeldt 2005. The earliest work in this vein: Rodenwaldt 1935; Schefold 1961. See also Junker 2006 on the emergence of the genre and Ewald 2004 and Zanker 2005 on the distribution of mythological topics across the different periods of its use.

2 For recent overviews on sarcophagus scholarship, past and present: Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 6–20; Zanker and Ewald 2004, 24–27; Bielfeldt 2005, 16–22.

can no longer be sustained: in her study of the Orestes sarcophagi of the second century she demonstrated that even in the Hadrianic and Antonine periods myth is used as a paradigm, and thus refuted Peter Blome's hypothesis that a development can be traced from the sarcophagi of the earlier second century as purely enacting a classicistic revival of Greek myths to those of the late second and third century as being devoted to what he labels an *interpretatio Romana*, as geared towards an allegorical reading.<sup>3</sup>

In emphasising the connection between the mythological and the *everyday*, Bielfeldt pursues a line of enquiry first explored by Luca Giuliani who labelled the balance between elements pertaining to the world of factual or lived reality and to that of figurative imagery as an *allegoria apertis permixta*. Here Giuliani followed Quintilian's description of a similar device in rhetoric, in the *Institutio Oratoria*: 'Oratory often has use for allegory of this kind, but rarely in a pure state, for it is generally combined with words used literally. (...) The mixed form is always the commonest [in Cicero]: 'I thought that Milo would always have other storms and squalls to weather. I mean in the troubled waves of our public assemblies.' If he had not added 'of our public assemblies' it would have been a pure allegory; as it is, he has given us a mixture. In this type, we get both splendour from the imported words and intelligibility from those used literally.'<sup>4</sup>

The Quintilian passage vouches for the existence of this line of thought in Roman imperial discourse. But Bielfeldt puts the sarcophagi reliefs at the centre of a still wider discourse about the nature of the *image*. She argues against the explanatory models still current and popular in sarcophagus scholarship that stress *abstracted reading* or *visualised rhetoric*, because of their inability to account fully for the combined, intertwined transmission of myth and *interpretatio Romana* on any one Roman sarcophagus, in no matter what period.<sup>5</sup> In their stead, she introduces a model in which both allegorical paradigm and mythological narrative join forces in order to generate a narrative that is located within the actual myth as well as pointing beyond it.<sup>6</sup> In this proposal, Bielfeldt's discussion leads directly to some of the more prominent black holes of art historical scholarship – questions of the nature and character

3 Bielfeldt 2005, 20–22, 329–332; Blome 1992, 1071–1072.

4 Quintilian 8, 6, 47–48: *Habet usum talis allegoriae frequenter oratio, sed raro totius, plerumque apertis permixta est. (...) Illud commixtum frequentissimum: 'equidem ceteras tempestates et procellas in illis dumtaxat fluctibus contionum semper Miloni putavi esse subeundas.' Nisi adiecisset 'dumtaxat contionum', esset allegoria: nunc eam miscuit. Quo in genere et species ex arcessitis verbis venit et intellectus ex propriis* (transl. Russell 2001). Giuliani 1989, 38–39; cf. Bielfeldt 2005, esp. 277 nr. 810. Zanker refers to this phenomenon as an act of bridge-building for the viewer: Zanker and Ewald 2004, 69.

5 Bielfeldt 2005, 22. For concepts of *abstracted reading*: Koortbojian 1995, 9–15; Zanker and Ewald 2004, 52–54.

6 Bielfeldt 2005, 277–278; 329–332.

of *the image*, of what *the image* is and what it wants.<sup>7</sup> And it touches upon the perennial dispute of *image* versus *text*, on the question of whether an image is descriptive or narrative, or whether it fluctuates between the two concepts, thus negating their heuristic value with regard to the realm of the visual.

Bielfeldt's findings raise a further set of questions with regard to the share of each of the two components – myth and *interpretatio Romana* – in generating visual narrative. In the following, my aim is to break up Bielfeldt's synthesis once more in order to explore how mythological narrative and paradigmatic content are balanced on the sarcophagi to form the distinct narrative voice of a sarcophagus relief. By addressing one particular sarcophagus and by comparing it to sarcophagi with similar decorations and to earlier representations of the particular myth depicted, I want to keep my sample set articulate while at the same time maintaining suitably wide axes of enquiry so as to tackle the Romans' appropriation of the *image* in the funerary realm in general.

The sarcophagus I choose, a piece now in Paris, presents events from the myth of Meleager.<sup>8</sup> This story is frequently told throughout the ancient world,<sup>9</sup> and it gains particular popularity on Roman sarcophagi from the early Antonine period onwards: it provides the storyline for about two hundred sarcophagi still extant today, the largest group of mythological sarcophagi devoted to one hero.<sup>10</sup> Meleager's story unfolds around the hunt for the Calydonian boar. One strand has him fall in love with Atalanta during the hunt.<sup>11</sup> He presents her with the animal's hide and infuriates his uncles whom Meleager kills in the ensuing quarrel. As revenge for this transgression against her brothers, Althaia, Meleager's mother, burns the log, which served as a token for his life, on a pyre, and he dies of a fever in his bed. Another narrative strand of the mythological nexus of Meleager stories does not include the love theme but in the aftermath of the hunt has Meleager being killed in the attempt to conquer Pleuron.<sup>12</sup>

A range of events from these narratives is selected for depiction: the most substantial group of sarcophagi – about seventy examples from workshops in Rome, ten found in the Western provinces and twenty-five from Attic

7 See Mitchell 2005, 28–56, esp. 48–56; cf. also Mitchell 1986, 95–115, extracting this position from his discussion of Lessing's Laocoon.

8 Paris, Musée du Louvre, Inv. Ma 539; see below no. 2 (8).

9 LIMC VI 1992, s.v. *Meleagros* (Susan Woodford), esp. 433–436.

10 ASR III, 2, 221–311; Koch 1973; ASR XII, 6, 6; Koch 1975; Fittschen 1975; Brilliant 1986 145–165.

11 Ovid *Met.* 8, 267–546.

12 Homer *Iliad* 9, 529–599; Bacchylides 5, 76–175; *Soph. mel.* (TrGF IV, 345–347); Apollodoros. 1, 8, 3; Paus. 10, 31, 3–4.

workshops<sup>13</sup> – focus on the hunt for the Calydonian boar. In these cases, Meleager kills the monstrous boar amidst a choice team of heroes. Sarcophagi from workshops in Rome also feature other episodes, including a meal made from the boar, now roasted, which appears on fifteen sarcophagus lids.<sup>14</sup> A second group of thirty-eight sarcophagi concentrate on the recovery of Meleager's body as part of the Pleuron episode on the main relief;<sup>15</sup> while a third group of ten sarcophagi display Meleager on his death-bed together with Atalanta, with six further fragments indicating that this episode was more popular than is reflected by the remaining corpus.<sup>16</sup>

13 *ASR* XII,6, 85–106, 138–148; *LIMC* VI, 1992, s.v. *Meleagros* (Susan Woodford) no. 110–130.

14 *ASR* XII,6, 125–129.

15 *ASR* XII,6, 106–118; *LIMC* VI, 1992, s.v. *Meleagros* no. 144–149.

16 *ASR* XII,6, 38–47. The sarcophagi belonging to this group:

- (1) Ostia, Museo Archeologico 101; from Ostia. 160. L 1.37 H 0.40 D 0.36. *ASR* III, 2, no. 282 fig. 575; *ASR* XII,6, no. 112 pl. 96a; *LIMC* VI, 1992, s.v. *Meleagros* no. 150.
- (2) Paris, Musée du Louvre Ma 654. 160. *ASR* III, 2, no. 279 pl. 93; *ASR* XII,6, no. 113 pl. 95a.
- (3) Rome, Villa Albani, Galleria del Canopo. 170. L 1.89 H 0.43. *ASR* III, 2, no. 278 pl. 92; *ASR* XII,6, no. 114, fig. 8; *LIMC* VI, 1992, s.v. *Meleagros* no. 153.
- (4) Rome, Museo Capitolino 623. 170. L 1.95 H 0.385. *ASR* III, 2, no. 281 pl. 93; *ASR* XII,6, no. 120 pl. 96c. 98–101; *LIMC* VI, 1992, s.v. *Meleagros* no. 151.
- (5) Milan, Torno Collection. 170/80. L 2.20 H 0.65. *ASR* III,2, no. 282 pl. 93; *ASR* XII,6, no. 117 pl. 102a; *LIMC* VI, 1992, s.v. *Meleagros* no. 152.
- (6) Rome, Studio Canova. 180. L 0.48 H 0.55. *ASR* III, 2, no. 280 pl. 92; *ASR* XII,6, no. 115 pl. 95b.
- (7) Wilton House, Wiltshire, from Rome. 180. L 2.15 H 0.65. *ASR* III, 2, no. 275 pl. 89; *ASR* XII,6, no. 122 pl. 103a,104.105.113 e. f; *LIMC* VI, 1992, s.v. *Meleagros* no. 154.
- (8) Paris, Musée du Louvre, Inv. Ma 539. 190. L 2.05 H 0.74 D 0.98. *ASR* III, 2, no. 277 pl. 91; *ASR* XII,6, 38–47, 120–1, no. 116, pl. 103b. 106–11. 113a.b; Baratte-Metzger 1985, 97–99 no. 37; *LIMC* VI, 1992, s.v. *Meleagros* no. 155; Zanker and Ewald 2004, 68–75; 351–352 fig. 44. 51. 62.
- (9) Castel Gandolfo, Villa Barberini, once Vatican. Around 230. L 2.06 H 0.47. *ASR* III, 2, no. 276 pl. 90; *ASR* XII,6, no. 121 pl. 96d. 112.
- (10) Florence, Museo Archeologico 1911. *ASR* XII,6, no. 118 pl. 102b.c; *LIMC* VI, 1992, s.v. *Meleagros* no. 156.
- (11) Rome, S. Giovanni in Laterano. *ASR* XII,6, no. 123.
- (12) Rome, Palazzo Giustiniani, lost. *ASR* XII,6, no. 124 pl. 113 g.
- (13) Side panel, lost, once Rome, Villa Borghese. *ASR* III, 2, no. 225b pl. 77; *ASR* XII,6, no. 125 fig. 9.
- (14) Side panels, Vatican. *ASR* XII,6, no. 126 pl. 113c.d.
- (15) Ostia. *ASR* XII,6, no. 196. 197.
- (16) Lost, once Rome, Villa Strozzi. *ASR* XII,6, no. 65 pl. 79 g;
- (17) Lost. 170/80. *ASR* XII,6, no. 119 pl. 96b.

These last two episodes – in contrast to the other events from the story, such as the boar killing – highlight the sarcophagus' funerary function through its mythical subject-matter and thus place it directly in the centre of the contested ground between *the mythological* and *the everyday*. Sarcophagi that display these episodes represent a quintessential *image in distress*, torn between providing an allegorical layer of mythical reflection and documenting real-life situations. And they do so by playing out the funerary theme not outside the human realm, as do the hunting sarcophagi where death is observed as being dealt to animals, but within the human realm proper.

The depictions of these two mythological episodes are constructed in clear homology to the experiential framework within which the reliefs were to be viewed: that of death. Each of them puts particular emphasis on funerary practices, mourning and laying-out of the dead body, thus facilitating an *interpretatio Romana* by reflecting in a mythological frame what scholars have called the theme of *Vita Romana*, an idealised version of Roman everyday life.<sup>17</sup> The relief on the Paris sarcophagus is an example of the third group showing Meleager on his death-bed. And it is this focus on funerary activities, that reflect the actual function of the sarcophagus in its decoration, which renders the Paris coffin an excellent object of study to explore the balancing of mythological narrative and paradigmatic content.

Moreover, the sarcophagus is dated to 190, towards the end of the forty-year period in which this particular episode was popular, while at the same time post-dating the rise of mythological sarcophagi to the peak of their popularity around 160, a time which marks the watershed between classicistic revival and *interpretatio Romana*, according to Blome's postulate. This era is characterised by a varied output of mythological themes in the funerary sphere, just before a decline in interest and a marked streamlining of the visual repertoire can be observed.<sup>18</sup> The iconography of the hunt for the Calydonian boar has a much longer life span which reaches from the middle of the second century to the very end of the third.<sup>19</sup> The Paris image of Meleager on his death-bed serves then as a good visual example for a period in which the appropriation of myth is particularly diverse and wide-spread, but which at the same time heralds the end of the most intensive use of myths on sarcophagi.

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17 cf. *ASR* I, 3.

18 Zanker a.d Ewald 2004, esp. 245–247.

19 *ASR* XII,6, 81.



Figure 9.1: Meleager death-bed sarcophagus. Paris, Musée du Louvre MA 654.  
Photograph: Munich, Museum für Abgüsse Klassischer Bildwerke, Photothek.

### Closing in on myth: an issue of image and text

The Meleager sarcophagus in the Louvre (Figure 9.1) features thirteen characters on the front, arranged in a larger central group and two smaller ones to its sides: in the centre, Meleager appears on his death-bed, surrounded by family members and by Atalanta; on the right, Meleager fights his uncles; and on the left, Meleager's mother, Althaia, is depicted at an altar, accompanied by two figures who bear traits of the Moirai and the Erinyes.<sup>20</sup>

One step towards assessing the casket's design and the ways in which it conveys the myth is to compare it with the most prominent account of the story, provided by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*, largely borrowed it is thought from a no-longer extant tragedy by Euripides.<sup>21</sup> In Ovid, after the killing of the Calydonian boar Meleager courts Atalanta with the hide, but when this is seized by his uncles, Plexippus and Toxeus, he slaughters them in his rage; their sister Althaia, distraught with grief for her brothers and in revenge determined his fate by casting the brand into the fire, at which point Meleager succumbs to fever and dies.

The sarcophagus and Ovid's account share a range of similarities: the relief carving features Althaia burning a piece of wood; also, Meleager is depicted on his deathbed, surrounded by mourning attendants; and there is an argument involving a boar hide on display which seems to have fatal results. And yet, a close inspection also uncovers several differences between the account in the text and what is on display on the sarcophagus, and these differences seem to be anything but accidental.

Firstly, the frieze does not showcase the same narrative sequencing that structures the text: whether one tries to 'read' the sequence from left to right, or

20 Paris, Musée du Louvre; see above no. 2 (8).

21 Ovid *Met.* 8, 267–546.

from right to left, there remain constant inconsistencies in comparison to the sequence in Ovid. Starting from the left, we first encounter the scene of Althaia and two other women around the altar. Meleager's mother puts the log in the fire and so seals her son's fate. This is the perfect prequel for what is then to follow further to the right: the depiction of Meleager's death amidst his family.

After that, however, the sequence as prefigured by the text, and a chronological unfolding of the myth, is broken: the third scene on the relief shows the killing of the Thestiadaï, which is visualised as if in progress, with one uncle fighting against Meleager and the other already dead on the ground, still clinging to the boar's hide in Meleager's hands. This episode presents the cause of the scene on the far left and thus must have taken place before it. At the same time, if we attempt to 'read' the frieze from right to left, the killing of the uncles does indeed precede Meleager's funeral and is one of its causes. But the transition from the death-bed scene to Althaia at the altar, which is the immediate cause of Meleager's death, also constitutes a divergence from the narrative sequence of Ovid's text and the myth as diachronically related.

Secondly, the relief features a range of objects which are not attested in any textual versions of the myth: Althaia burns the log not in a pyre but on an altar which gives the procedure a more institutionalised, Roman, religious flavour. And in the scene of the fight against the Thestiadaï, Meleager is about to attack them with a sword. According to Ovid, this attack took place with a spear. Given that Meleager is a hunter and the murder happens at the scene of the hunt, in an act of unreflective fury on Meleager's part, a spear is in fact the more plausible weapon. Yet, it is only the uncle still standing who carries a spear along with his sword. This deviation with regard to equipment recurs in the central scene where next to Meleager's bed, alongside the spear, appear a shield with a gorgon's head, a helmet and a sword.

### Packaging myth: Meleager and Atalanta

In the second step of this enquiry, I will assess the discrepancies that emerge from the comparison of text and image. What is of particular interest is the way in which Meleager's attributes, which might be thought *descriptive* elements within the imagery, impact on the *narrative* on display. The weapons depicted around Meleager are more characteristic of a warrior than of a hunter. But since they appear on a range of other reliefs from the death-bed group,<sup>22</sup> they can be taken as a defining visual attribute for Meleager in the scenes of his death. These

22 Ostia, Museo Archeologico 101; see above no. 2 (1); Rome, Museo Capitolino 623; see above no. 2 (4); Milan, Torno Collection see above no. 2 (5); Wilton House, Wiltshire; see above no. 2 (7).





Figure 9.2: Calydonian hunt sarcophagus. Rome, Palazzo Doria.  
Photograph: DAIR 1971.1474.

attributes distinguish the group of sarcophagi showing Meleager's death from other depictions of the hero: on the sarcophagi that depict the Calydonian hunt in full action Meleager is never shown using any weapon other than his spear, and never even wears a sword strap around his upper body (Figure 9.2).<sup>23</sup> The same is true for all his fellow hunters.<sup>24</sup>

The only scenes which feature Meleager with the weapons of a warrior are the images of the battle of Pleuron, a version of the Meleager story which is used in Homer's *Iliad* to lure Achilles back into battle.<sup>25</sup> It tells how after the hunt for the Calydonian Boar, Artemis' wrath has still not abated, and she incites a quarrel over the spoils of the hunt between the Aitolians based at Calydon and the Curetes from Pleuron. In the resulting war, Meleager kills his

23 The only exception is a relief in St. Peter in Rome: Rome, S. Pietro in Vaticano. H 0.70 L 2.06 D 0.60. 180/90. *ASR* XII,6, no. 146 pl. 121.

24 An exception form two bearded characters which appear in many of those hunting sarcophagi classified as the main group of the Calydonian boar hunt by Guntram Koch, for example the one in Palazzo Doria (Rome, Palazzo Doria. ca. 180/90. L 2.47 H 0.94 D 1.10. *ASR* III, 2, no. 231 pl. 79; *ASR* XII,6, no. 8 pl. 13c.): Carl Robert interpreted the one on the left who carries a double axe into the hunt as the death demon Orcus: *ASR* III, 2, 273–275; *ASR* XII,6, 8; Bernard Andreae suggested Ankaïos / Hercules, *ASR* XII,6, 8.

25 Homer *Iliad*. 9, 529–599. Robert in *ASR* III, 2, 275–276 who presumes the version without Atalanta to be older than the other one; *ASR* XII,6, 29; LIMC VI.1, 1992, s.v. *Meleagros* 414–415. For example: Rome, Vatican, Museo Gregoriano Profano 3098. L 0.665 H 0.28. Mid-Antonine period. *ASR* III, 2, 284 pl. 94; *ASR* XII,6, 113 no. 85 pl. 80c; Rome, Villa Doria Pamphili. L 2.05 H 0.70. 190/200. *ASR* III, 2, 283 pl. 94. *ASR* XII,6, no. 84 pl. 89a.





Figure 9.3: Meleager recovery sarcophagus. Rome, Villa Doria Pamphili.  
Photograph: DAIR 8336.

uncles. The curse his mother subsequently puts on him makes him avoid further fighting, but when his city is threatened, he enters the battle again and is then killed by Apollo.<sup>26</sup>

With regard to these visual treatments of the Pleuron episode, the choice of armour on the death-bed sarcophagus in Paris could be seen as pointing towards that particular strand of the myth in which Meleager excels as a soldier. And indeed, this seems to be the focus of the so-called ‘recovery sarcophagi’ which feature the Pleuron episode (as on a relief now in the Villa Doria Pamphili (Figure 9.3)).<sup>27</sup> But what still needs to be explained is why one would want to employ one mythological recension of the Meleager story in the context of a quite different mythological narrative. Within a death-bed scene in which Atalanta features prominently, the sarcophagus alludes to the attack on Pleuron and Meleager’s subsequent death in a version of the myth which is characterised by her absence.

One explanation is that the formal template for the scenes of Meleager’s death did not come primarily from versions of the Pleuron episode but from those of the death of Patroclus.<sup>28</sup> In a process Michael Koortbojian has labelled ‘*intermingling*’,<sup>29</sup> a composition featuring different stages in the life of a warrior

26 According to the versions in the *Minyas* and Hesiod: Paus 10, 31.3. Bacchylides has Althaia burn the log and thus cause his death: Bacchylides 5, 138–150. Apollodoros also mentions that she then kills herself: Apollod. 1.8.3.

27 For the sarcophagus see above no. 17. On the relief, the hero’s hunting prowess is alluded to by the decoration on a shield that shows him advancing against the boar.

28 Giuliani 1989, 35–37. The argument is based on: Berlin, *Antikenmuseum* 1982.1. L 2.01 H 0.55 D 0.48. 160. Koch 1983; Giuliani 1989; *ASR* XII, 1. As comparison: Ostia, Museum. L 2.01 H 0.557 D 0.485. 160. Gallina 1993; *ASR* XII, 1, 204–205 no. 27 pl. 28–31; Zanker and Ewald 2004, 283–285. Figure 2.1.

29 Koortbojian 1995, 58–59. For similar strategies in the shaping of different stages of life for the Orestes iconography see. Bielfeldt 2005, 265–270.

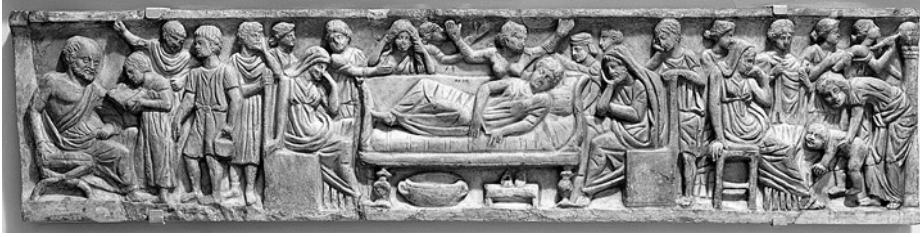


Figure 9.4: Death-bed sarcophagus. Paris, Musée du Louvre MA 319.  
Photograph: Museum (L59).

is appropriated for the death-bed scenes and as a visual template for the story of Meleager, a myth which principally deals with a hunter. The result, the mixture of the hunt and warfare directed towards generating a strong impression of the deceased's *virtus*, can best be compared to the content of the *Vita Romana* lion hunt sarcophagi which become popular from the middle of the third century.<sup>30</sup> But the presentation on the death-bed also ties in with another visual tradition – the depiction of female children or mothers on the death-bed, surrounded by their family, a topic particularly popular on *Vita Romana* sarcophagi of the mid-Antonine period (Figure 9.4).<sup>31</sup> In their combination, these different visual layers allude to various stages in the life of the hero, thus turning the frieze also into a biographical representation.<sup>32</sup>

But the blend of two central areas of Roman male virtue, the hunt and war, within a family context opens up another question: why choose the theme of Meleager to present the different life stages of a courageous fighter amidst his family, when he is a mythological hero with a relationship to his family that is ambiguous, to say the least? One might want to see in this an example of the Romans' great ability to select certain convenient elements of a story without taking too much notice of the potential conflict with the underlying myth that

30 *ASR* I, 2, 42–48; Andreae 1985; cf. the earliest lion hunt sarcophagus in Paris: Paris, Louvre 1808; from the Borghese Collection. L 2.28 H 0.58. 230–240. *ASR* I 2, 65 pl. 1.3; Rodenwaldt 1936, 96–97 pl. 1.3; *ASR* I, 2, no. 65 pl. 24–30; Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 93–94 pl. 82; and: Rome, Palazzo Mattei II. L 2.14 H 1.33. 250. *ASR* I, 2, no. 133 pl. 13.1; 14.3–9; 16.1–5.

31 Toynbee 1971/1982, 44 fig. 10; *ASR* I, 4, 72–73; Huskinson 1996, 95–99, 101–104; George 2000, 202–205; Dimas 1998. For example: Paris, Louvre Ma 319; from Rome, Collection Della Valle. First quarter third century. L 157 H 38 T 7. *ASR* I, 4, no. 115 pl. 56, 1.2. I am using the term *Vita Romana* here in line with Reinsberg's study (*ASR* I, 3.), in order to highlight these scenes, not as documents of how life in the real looked but as another form of cultural construct.

32 On biographical sarcophagi: Geyer 1978; Kampen 1981; Whitehead 1986. Reinsberg in *ASR* I, 3., 170–173 with a critical discussion of the notion of biographical depiction. For similar strategies in the depiction of Orestes on sarcophagi see Bielfeldt 2005, 265–270.

might be implied.<sup>33</sup> But in the case of the Paris sarcophagus, another explanation is possible. The story of Meleager offers a feature that is not provided by other mythological narratives which could serve aspects of military *virtus* and family relations much better; this is the provision of a loving and equally formidable female consort, Atalanta, who in the imperial period is employed as a metaphor for a physically beautiful and loyal wife.<sup>34</sup> Hence the heroic and military implications of the Pleuron recensions of Meleager's death are necessarily intermingled with the personal qualities of the love-narrative of Meleager's desire, which centres on Atalanta.

In contrast to Meleager who appears with attributes that signal different meanings and intimations, the presentation of Atalanta is consistent within all the different groups of sarcophagi devoted to episodes from the story of Meleager: she appears in the guise of the goddess Artemis.

This close connection to the outdoors might then explain the piece of rock visible on the Paris sarcophagus between her leg and the stool on which she sits – a rather surprising element given that the scene is set indoors.<sup>35</sup> The importance of Atalanta is emphasised further by another feature: she is the tallest figure on the frieze. If she stood up, she would burst through the upper edge of the relief; in this, she is only matched by the figure of Meleager fighting on the far right who – if standing properly upright – would have a similar effect. Yet, Atalanta does not appear at the physical centre of the relief. That is marked by the shield adorned with the gorgon's head, which leans behind her right leg. But because she interacts so closely with this reference point, and literally frames it, she becomes the extended centre of the frieze, once more directing the focus towards the right of the relief.

A further feature clearly emphasises Atalanta's role in this scene, something unmatched by the other characters on the frieze. This is the way her face is shown: she is depicted as struck by grief, burying her face in her right hand. This is visualised through a rather odd, unnatural motif: she covers the left part of her face with her right hand. This awkward gesture means that the viewers of the sarcophagus have an excellent snapshot of her face, which would not have been offered if she had – more naturally – covered the right side of her face as she does on some of the other sarcophagi in this group:<sup>36</sup> in the Paris

33 Paul Zanker has demonstrated this in his study on the depiction of Hippolytus on Roman sarcophagi: Zanker 1999; see also Bielfeldt 2005, 25–27, 278 for similar problems with regard to the figure of Orestes.

34 *CIL* VI, 379 65. Hesberg and Tonn 1983, 185; Zanker and Ewald 2004, 72–74.

35 For an interpretation of the rock as a mistake by the artist who copied from a model book: *ASR* XII,6, 39–40, 121; Ewald, in Zanker and Ewald 2004, 352.

36 On the two early pieces in Ostia and Milan, Atalanta covers her face completely: Ostia, Museo Archeologico 101; see above no. 2 (1); Milan, Torno Collection see above no. 2 (5).

sarcophagus the shielding arm works almost like a frame, highlighting her facial features.

In short, the figure of Atalanta is here designed to attract the gaze, a function underlined by the fact that her dog is also looking up towards her and that the shield with the gorgoneion, the epitome of gaze-attracting devices, is positioned directly next to her.<sup>37</sup> Atalanta herself, however, is not actively seeking to establish contact. The way in which she shuts herself off from the action on the frieze opens her to the audience. She is not simply a figure which can offer consolation to a mourning female viewer, which is how she has been principally interpreted.<sup>38</sup> Rather, she functions as a gateway into the image as a whole, and the fact that she is taller than the space provided for by the relief is only another supporting element of her relation to the sphere outside the image.

One final feature underlines Atalanta's central role in the frieze: she occupies the topmost layer of the relief sculpture, the one closest to the world of the viewers. Towards the right, she dominates a hierarchy of layers of relief that reaches down to the fighting uncle on the very right. He is partly covered by the body of his dead brother, in front of which Meleager is positioned, thus dominating the relief arrangement of this scene. In the central scene, in which Atalanta presents the dominating figure, Meleager's bed overlaps the fighting Meleager, thus positioning the death-bed scene hierarchically above that on the right and turning Atalanta into the figure controlling the whole frieze towards her right. Towards the left of Atalanta, the arrangement is less clear-cut. The huntress overlaps in parts with Althaia, but not wholly: they appear to share a relief plane, and this could explain the need for the deeply drilled, vertical ridge that separates their garments from each other. And while the figure with the torch is located on a plane further to the rear, the Moira on the far left could once more occupy the same relief layer as Althaia and Atalanta.

### Personalising myth: Atalanta as a trigger for modular narrative

The staggered arrangement that characterises the frieze in parts supports a modular system of representation, which is facilitated by the sarcophagus' existence as a material object. The result is a very specific take on the story: Atalanta serves as the hook for the construction of this visual and thematic system, based on the compositional emphasis her figure receives. Appropriating Atalanta as a gateway figure and as narrative voice has an important effect on viewing the sarcophagus. She provides a distinctly female perspective on

37 On the Gorgo as shield-device Howe 1954. On the meaning of gorgoneia more generally: Mack 2002, esp. 575–576, 596–598; Hedreen 2007, 221–227.

38 Zanker and Ewald 2004, 68–75, esp. 69–70.

Meleager's life, and on the display of male virtues; and it is this which explains the appropriation of a range of different visual templates in order to present this particular myth. In the *conclamatio* scene around the death-bed, this function of Atalanta does not change the basic descriptive content: a young man, associated with the trade of war and the hunt by means of his weapons, is dying. It is a death which occurs prematurely, to judge by the grief of old and young who surround him.<sup>39</sup> This could be understood as a straightforward *allegoria apertis permixta*., an addition of elements which directly refer to the reality existing outside the image – of bereavement and a corpse newly buried inside the sarcophagus – in order to aid the understanding of the myth. But Atalanta adds two further layers of meaning: firstly, she triggers our understanding that this is not a *Vita Romana* scene but a mythological one. She is the only figure in the *conclamatio* scene characterised by features which locate her outside the normal – her hunting attire, the rock and the dog at her feet, and the gorgon-shield. With this baggage of narrative detail, she vouches for the mythological pedigree of the rest of the scene.

And yet, because she has become part of this descriptive setting and also sports features – her hair and the stool on which she sits – that belong to the sphere of the normal, the differentiation between the mythological sphere and the *everyday* world is blurred. Viewers are invited into the picture by a mythological character, who clearly marks the scene as one located in the mythological world of dreams and wishes; but what they are to encounter with the help of her gateway figure is actually not that different from the real world outside the image. Atalanta's presence both creates the grounds for a mythological interpretation, while at the same time it also questions its very existence since the myth reflects the actualities of real-life mourning.

Secondly, with Atalanta as starting point for the experience of the central scene, the grief of the whole extended family – of siblings, nurse and teacher – which takes up most of the space in that scene, is clearly channelled and subordinated to the sorrow of the wife and lover. Her exposed position highlights that – while death is a family affair and orchestrated by poignant collective grief – the real, perennial grief, so intense that it cannot be part of the general mourning, is that of the faithful partner.

39 cf. *conclamatio* scenes on sarcophagi depicting the *Vita Romana*: ASR I,4, 72–74, 79–81; George 2000, 202–205. For example: Child's sarcophagus, Agrigento, Museo Regionale. 120–130. L 90 H 39 T 41. ASR I,4, , no. 2 pl. 53.1–3. Child's sarcophagus, London, British Museum GR 1805.7–3.144; from Rome, Palazzo Capranica. Mid-Antonine period. L 105 H 36. ASR I,4, no. 60 pl. 70, 2.4. Sarcophagus, Rome, Museo Torlonia 414; from Via Portuense. Around 200. L 157 H 36. ASR I,4, no. 198 pl. 54, 1–3. Sarcophagus, Paris, Louvre Ma 319; from Rome, Collection Della Valle. First quarter third century. L 157 H 38 T 7. ASR I,4, no. 115 pl. 56, 1.2.

Atalanta's impact as a focalising figure for the scene on the right is even greater. Experienced through her perspective, Meleager's fight is removed from the potential ethical ambivalence that the killing of family members and the merciless treatment of the dead could convey. Meleager is not an over-emotionalised hero, blinded by love and acting in the heat of the moment, nor is he simply a select image of generic virtue and fighting prowess. From this viewpoint, Meleager is the man who protects the claims of his lover and wife, and fights for them with all his might. He is turned into a visual *exemplum* of deep and unconditional marital love.

Yet, taking Atalanta's point of view in this way also has a destabilising effect on the categories of the narrative and the descriptive,<sup>40</sup> and on the clear differentiation of what belongs to the myth and what is part of an *allegoria apertis permixta*. On the one hand, the towering size of Atalanta in the central scene and of Meleager in the scene on the right, and the elements of the *non-normal* mythology which characterise them (such as Atalanta's attire and, in the case of Meleager, the arrangement around a boar hide and a dead body), establish clear links between them across the two scenes. They support each other in their mythological roles and provide a narrative framework for the *conclamatio* scene around the death-bed which otherwise veers towards the non-mythological. These two presentations of Atalanta and Meleager have the potential to turn description into mythological narrative, and to elevate the suffering on display to a heroic level.

On the other hand, as the fighting Meleager on the right becomes a model of virtue through the perspective of Atalanta, he is turned into a descriptive attribute for what displayed in the centre of the frieze, the mourning of a formidable fighter. He is exploited specifically in this way to explain the state of sorrow in which Atalanta is depicted, that is because she was loyally devoted to her partner who went so far as killing members of his own family to secure her claim to the boar's hide. In this way, Meleager's mythological pedigree is once more dissolved in order to be used as an explanation for the depth of grief felt by the huntress and by the extended family. And within this context, the fact that Meleager is marching forward not with a spear – as one would expect in an unplanned assault by a hunter, and as indeed Ovid reports it – but with a sword, the Romans' close combat weapon of choice, only supports the *normative* function of his character.

Atalanta's appearance, which is compositionally closely linked to the fighting Meleager on the far right, also revives the scene where she is present at the fight that is depicted on the earliest version of Meleager's death on Roman

40 These categories are here employed as defined by Luca Giuliani: Giuliani 2003, 35, 283, 285–86 (*narrative*); 36, 222–24 (*descriptive*).





Figure 9.5: Meleager death-bed sarcophagus. Ostia, Museo Archeologico 101.  
Photograph: DAIR 1967.1068.



Figure 9.6: Meleager death-bed sarcophagus. Rome, Museo Capitolino 623.  
Photograph: DAIR 3160.

sarcophagi (Figure 9.5).<sup>41</sup> And it also bears reference to the scene of the loving get-together between Meleager and Atalanta that can be found on the sarcophagus depicting the Calydonian hunt in Museo Capitolino (Figure 9.6).<sup>42</sup> In this context, then, the puzzling remnant of rock under Atalanta's foot, earlier interpreted as a marker for her relation to the outdoors, could also be taken as an indication that the huntress is functionalised in a two-fold way. Not only is she the gateway for the external viewers to connect with the relief, but she also links two different stages of the mythological narrative – the love between the two hunters as manifested in Meleager's fight against his uncles on the one hand and his death on the other – relating them to female emotion as point of reference. With this doubled metaleptic function<sup>43</sup> (that is the crossing of the threshold between viewers and picture and between different stages of narrative) the figure of Atalanta turns what is labelled the *Death of Meleager* into a tableau of female sorrow, contemplating both its causes and its results.

41 Ostia, Museo Archeologico 101; see above no. 2 (1); Rome, Palazzo Doria; see above no. 16.

42 Rome, Museo Capitolino 822; see above no. 2 (4).

43 For metalepsis as a phenomenon of visual narrative cf. Lorenz 2007.

For the scene on the left, the huntress as a gateway figure is of minor importance, not least reflected in the fact that she shares a relief plane on the sarcophagus with Althaia. Like Atalanta, all the characters in this scene are marked as belonging to a sphere outside the normal by the attributes they carry and the actions they perform with them. Of particular interest are the two women towards the left, one with the torch, the other holding a book and standing on a wheel: together with the figure on the far right who stands between Meleager and the uncle, they form what one could call a group of Fates, the Greek *Moirai*, but a group in which the individual members are also charged with attributes that normally characterise Nemesis (the torch) or the Furies (the scourge held by the figure on the very right).<sup>44</sup> The three are linked with each other by a particular stylistic feature, in the drilling of their hair. The effects of light and shade which this creates, generate an expressive appearance, and set them off from the rest of the cast of figures.

As a threesome, these women serve as a set of those demons Althaia also turns to in Ovid's account of the myth: 'Behold, o triple goddesses of vengeance, you three well-wishers, behold these rites of fury. I avenge an evil deed, commit another. A death for a death, a crime for a crime, and a trouble added multiplied!'<sup>45</sup> So, while individually bearing the more specific attributes related to Nemesis and the Furies, which herald fate and revenge, collectively they add another layer of discourse into the depiction that is concerned with the different stages of life as expressed by the Fates or *Moirai*, on the level of abstract allegory. And their presence again establishes an iconographic link to *Vita Romana* biographical sarcophagi,<sup>46</sup> where the *Moirai* can be found particularly in scenes around a child's death-bed.<sup>47</sup>

The scene on the left with its mixture of allegorically and mythologically charged figures matches the significative quality of the scene on the right, and both provide a framework for the central *conclamatio* scene which on its own leans towards the representation of a human life (as opposed to mythological) event. And yet, even though Atalanta's impact on the left scene is reduced, her figure still introduces some instability around the categories of narrative and descriptive, even in this part of the imagery. With Althaia and Atalanta on the same relief plane, both depicted in poses of distress – the former outwardly trying to fend off fate, the latter inwardly grappling with it – the focus is

44 *Moirai*: LIMC VI, 1992, s.v. *Moirai* (Stefano De Angeli); Brendel 1936, 76–95. Nemesis: LIMC V, 1992, s.v. *Nemesis* (Pavlina Karanastassi, Federico Rausa).

45 Ovid *Met.* 8,481–484: '*Poenarum*' que *'deae triplices, furialibus'* inquit *'Eumenides, sacris vultus advertite vestros. Ulciscor facioque nefas. Mors morte pianda est, in scelus addendum scelus est, in funera funus.'* (trans. Humphries 1955).

46 LIMC VI, 1992, s.v. *Moirai* no. 38–44.

47 For example: Paris, Louvre Ma 319, see above no. 1. On the symbolic value of the globe in these scenes: Brendel 1936, 92–95.

directed towards an intimation of female attitudes of piety. The pair become a visual sign of the mourning of sons, brothers and husbands, and of sacrificing on their behalf.<sup>48</sup>

In this context, another difference from Ovid's text gains heuristic value: Althaia burns the log that seals the fate of her son not on a pyre, as reported by the poet, but on an altar, decorated with garlands to show that it is a proper Roman altar ready for the performance of sacrifice. This reference to Roman religious realia pushes Althaia out of the sphere of myth and into the realm of normative everyday life, as someone performing a Roman sacrifice; and so it supports a descriptive function for Althaia that is also confirmed by the comparative analogy with the figure of Atalanta.

Thus, in linking the two figures, the line between narrative and descriptive is once more blurred, and the figures of Atalanta and Althaia fulfil a combined *mythological* and *everyday* function: the joint presence of the huntress and the Roman altar means that Althaia appears not only as the grief-struck mother, blinded by anger and incited by the Moira-Nemesis to seal the fate of her son. Rather, she can become a mother desperate to fight off the evil powers by fulfilling her religious duties in sacrifice. As Bielfeldt has argued, this ambivalence in Althaia's figure is also conveyed through her twisted pose – a posture nicely reflecting her inner turmoil as stressed in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.<sup>49</sup> And yet, the personification on the left, together with the figure with the scourge on the far right (who are the calmest characters in the scene) signal that all these attempts are futile, both in the narrative realm of myth and the descriptive realm of life: things will go according to what is written in the Moira's book of fate, towering over the wheel of life.

All in all, then, Atalanta's function on the frieze appears two-fold: her figure delivers a descriptive visual image of the state of mourning, and this is enriched by the two scenes towards the right, which showcases the qualities of the lover she has lost. In this way, the scene on the far right, which was originally a narrative image, can also be turned into a scene of allegorical paradigm for the sphere of *Vita Romana*. At the same time, she also serves as the root and cause of the events which unfold towards the right and this makes her an element of narrative: she provides the narrative voice to guide the viewer through these events, first the death, and then the events which lead to this death. And she can have the same ambivalent narrative-cum-descriptive power in relation to the

48 cf. Ovid *Met.* 4, 488–490 where Althaia announces the *officium* she fulfils for the *manes* of her brothers by burning the log.

49 Bielfeldt 2005, 133–134. Ovid *Met.* 8, 462–468: 'She tried to toss the log on, and four times held back her hand. Mother and sister duelled, each name conflicting, in her heart, with the other. (...) One moment she looked menacing, in the next all mild and pitiful.' (trans. Humphries 1955).



Figure 9.7: Meleager death-bed sarcophagus. Castel Gandolfo, Villa Barberini.  
Photograph: DAIR 1970.4136.

figure of Althaia, providing the reason for her state, while at the same time offering a parallel visual of mourning. The only figures on the frieze which are not exposed to shifting narrative and descriptive values are the *Moirai*. While everything else on the frieze is up for debate, they provide a constant frame of reference, which tells of an unchanging direction leading to the ultimate fate, which is death.

### Meleager and Atalanta in Roman art: a lateral narrative

The narrative structure of the Paris sarcophagus – and particularly Atalanta's role in it – can be specified further by comparing it to other versions of the death of Meleager on sarcophagi, and to depictions outside the funerary sphere on the walls of Pompeian houses which feature Meleager and Atalanta, from about a century earlier. On all the extant sarcophagi, the composition consists of three modular scenes, except for the one in Castel Gandolfo where there are four (Figure 9.7).<sup>50</sup>

On the earliest sarcophagus of the group, the casket in Ostia, a *Vita Romana* scene is combined with the depiction of the death-bed, and of Atalanta present at the fight of Meleager against one of the Thestiadaï (Figure 9.5).<sup>51</sup> From right to left, the relief tells Meleager's story, starting from the quarrel, which is clearly marked out as a mythological event by the attributes given to the characters. Following this, in the centre of the relief, is the scene around Meleager's death-bed, but in the absence of Atalanta it lacks any mythological marker: only the shield with gorgoneion signals that here might be more at stake in the scene than just the death of a formidable fighter, mourned by his siblings, nurse and teacher. The relief ends on the far left with a *normal* visual image of grieving, the depiction of a veiled man and woman mourning in front of a tomb. So, on this early piece, the mythological is already gradually traced back into the realm of

50 Castel Gandolfo, Villa Barberini; see above no. 2 (9).

51 Ostia, Museo Archeologico 101; see above no. 2 (1).

the normal. Formally, however, the relief is arranged in such a way that the scene at the tomb is not the end-point but the very gateway into the picture, since it is placed on the topmost layer of the relief. From there, the frieze develops to the right, step-by-step immersing itself ever more into the mythological sphere while regressing in narrative time.

The Ostia relief thus presents an actual *allegoria apertis permixta*: it feeds on *Vita Romana* scenes in order to channel the meaning of the mythological elements. And this, in return, means that the *mythological* and the *everyday* are approached on the relief as separate entities; another of the early reliefs presents a similar scene.<sup>52</sup> In contrast, on the later Paris sarcophagus layers of the *mythological* and the *everyday* are merged into a single, homogeneous visual language in order to showcase different forms of female sorrow.

On the later sarcophagi, any reference to the real-life funerary sphere has disappeared. Instead, an allegorical layer of meaning is introduced with the appearance of a *Moir*a to show that the image's meaning resides in the sphere outside the picture, as happens, on a sarcophagus in Milan.<sup>53</sup> Here, the *Moir*a is depicted on the topmost layer of the relief on the far left, with her left leg on the wheel of fortune, and writing into her book. She has commanding presence in relation to the figure of the mourning Atalanta, who is here characterised as being outdoors, sitting on a rock in front of a statue of Artemis.<sup>54</sup>

In the death-bed scene further to the right the depiction once more leaves the realm of the narrative, only to give way to another mythological image, of Meleager's fight. Thus, the death-bed scene appears enclosed by a mythological framework similar to that on the Paris sarcophagus. But the experience of this particular arrangement is directed not by a mythological figure (such as Atalanta), but by a figure – an allegory of fate – that operates outside both the real and the mythological spheres while having resonances in each. The figure serves as an *allegoria apertis permixta* personified, and so can facilitate a gradual transition from one sphere to the other.

Another option which leads towards the imagery on the Paris sarcophagus is explored on the relief of a sarcophagus in the Capitoline Museum (Figure 9.6).<sup>55</sup> Here too, the *Moir*a with her book opens the scene on the far left, once more dominating the topmost relief plane; and again she is succeeded by Atalanta. But although the huntress sits on a rock, there are no other signs of an outdoors setting, such as a statue of Artemis. Instead, Atalanta turns her face

52 Rome, Villa Albani, Galleria del Canopo; see above no. 2 (3).

53 Milan, Torno Collection; see above no. 2 (5).

54 A similar combination of *Moir*a and Atalanta in the outdoors can be found on the sarcophagus in the Villa Albani which also shows a scene in front of a tomb: Rome, Villa Albani, Galleria del Canopo; see above no. 2 (3).

55 Rome, Museo Capitolino 623; see above no. 2 (4).

openly towards the viewers of the relief, and she is screened by a parapetasma that serves as a background for the death-bed scene as a whole. By making her part of the death-bed scene, the differentiation between the *Vita Romana* presentation of death and the mythological episodes around Meleager's life is abolished on this relief and replaced by the theme of the grieving wife. And while feeding on elements which characterise an *allegoria apertis permixta*, the result of this combination is of a rather different quality: it does not use elements of the everyday in order to facilitate an understanding of the *mythological* and the abstract on display. Rather, by merging these elements visually, it generates a virtual sphere located outside these categories. In this it is helped by the modular composition which does not present the episodes in their actual sequence as a consecutive narrative would require.<sup>56</sup>

The focus on Meleager and Atalanta as a couple, and in particular on Atalanta as eminent part of the relationship on the sarcophagi, is not an entirely new focalization of the myth in Roman art. It is an approach similar to the one which can be found in the nine frescoes from the walls of Pompeian houses which feature the two Calydonian hunters (Figures 9.8 and 9.9).<sup>57</sup> These Pompeian depictions are solely focused on the encounter between Meleager and Atalanta after the successful hunt gathered around the dead boar,<sup>58</sup> in what Wulf Raeck has referred to as *conversation pictures*,<sup>59</sup> and which bear similarity to the depiction of the two on some of the column sarcophagi.<sup>60</sup>

In the Pompeian versions, Meleager is always seated, and Atalanta stands next to him, equipped with her usual weapons, the spears and her bow. Meleager is generally characterised with sword and spear.<sup>61</sup> Comparison with other mythological wall-paintings shows that the sword is employed as an

56 Two sarcophagi in this group continue the consecutive arrangement of the Ostia casket: Wilton House, Wiltshire; see above no. 2 (7); Castel Gandolfo, Villa Barberini; see above no. 2 (9).

57 Lorenz 2008, 55–83 for a detailed discussion; cf. also *LIMC* II, 1984, s.v. *Atalanta* (John Boardman); *LIMC* V,I 1992, s.v. *Meleagros* (Susan Woodford); Raeck 1992, 71–76; Muth 1998, 216–217.

58 The only exception is: Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale 8980. From Pompeii, Casa del Centauro (VI 9,3). Third Style. Lorenz 2008, 67–70.

59 Raeck 1992, 78–80.

60 For example: Rome, S. Pietro in Vaticano. H 0.70 L 2.06 D 0.60. 180/90. *ASR* XII,6, no. 146 pl. 121. And similarly on an Attic and an Attic-inspired sarcophagus: Chicago, Alsdorf Foundation, from Antiocheia Orontes. L 1.20 H 0.95. First half third century. *ASR* XII,6, no. 168 pl. 133a. Autun, Musée Rolin no. 66, from Arles. H 0.85 L 2.25 D 0.86. Third century. *ASR* III, 2, 219 pl. 72; *ASR* XII,6, 136–137 no. 159 pl. 133b.

61 cf. fresco from the Casa delle Danzatrici (Pompeii VI 2,22). Fourth Style. *PPM* IV 238–239 fig. 18–19; Lorenz 2008, 56–60 fig. 5. In the Villa Imperiale, the sword is his only weapon: Pompeii, Villa Imperiale, *cubiculum* (B). Third Style. Schefold 1957, 292; Lorenz 2008, 60–64, fig. 6.





Figure 9.8: Meleager and Atalante. Pompeii, Villa Imperiale. Photograph: author.

attribute in order to add a layer of military *virtus* to Meleager, elevating him out of the context of the ordinary hunter and into the role of a manly warrior.<sup>62</sup> This is the same strategy which can be observed later on the sarcophagi.

Another key characteristic of the Pompeian versions is that the couple are displayed in a symmetrical relationship in which they both have equally active roles, and this is indicated by their position towards each other, as well as by their weapons. Not all mythological couples on the Pompeian walls are displayed in such a symmetrical way – some are asymmetrical in favour of the male, some in favour of the female partner.<sup>63</sup> And yet, with Atalanta always presented as standing, she is the partner who has the ability to alter the relationship between the two.

The final characteristic of the Pompeian frescoes is that while Meleager is depicted in a similar way on both the walls and the sarcophagi, the iconographical range for the figure of Atalanta is wider in Pompeii than on the sarcophagi. Her presentation can either lean towards that of Artemis, the goddess of the hunt, or towards Aphrodite, the goddess of love: like Artemis, she can appear as competent and active huntress, depicted in the outdoors (

62 Lorenz 2008, 246–247.

63 Lorenz 2008, 246–249.

Figure 9.8);<sup>64</sup> or she can be depicted as sensual and attractive woman, for example in frescoes in the Casa della Venere in Conchiglia (Figure 9.9) and the Casa della Danzatrice. Then, she is also shown with clear markers of civilization in the background, either the interior of a house or the facades of a temple. Essentially, this means that her character can be charged with different characteristics of *pulchritudo*, and with different shades of beauty – on the one hand a dynamic, but chaste fitness, on the other an elaborate sensuality. And frequently, a mix of the two appears.

In the Pompeian images, the male hero is not depicted as the central figure to whom Atalanta's depiction defers. Rather, she is the character who facilitates the encounter. But in the scenes of the Calydonian hunt on the sarcophagi and mosaics, Atalanta is turned once more into an exotic element amidst the large group of hunting comrades. On those monuments, Meleager forms the distinct centre of attention and action, and Atalanta appears as his trustworthy consort. Thus, the coherent presentation of the two heroes on the Pompeian walls gives way to a conception of the story which puts a clear focus on the male protagonist throughout the second and third century.

In this sense, the presentation of Meleager and Atalanta on the sarcophagi of the death-bed group appears to be much closer to the conception of the mythological protagonists on the Pompeian walls than to those on the 'Calydonian hunt' sarcophagi. But they also differ from the frescoes in the way in which they facilitate the figure of Atalanta; and this is precisely what heralds a change in the use of myth that distinguishes the appearances of the myth in first century domestic settings from those found in funerary contexts of the second century. On the Pompeian frescoes, the shifts in the representation of Atalanta demonstrate a certain uneasiness and fluidity about the ways in which myth can be appropriated to the world outside the picture.<sup>65</sup>

But on the death-bed sarcophagi such unease does not exist. Instead, a blend of multiple layers of meaning leads the viewer into a virtual sphere which feeds on the everyday, the mythological and a more generic form of the allegorical, all at the same time. The discursive engagement with the status of myth so characteristic of the Pompeian frescoes has been solved, and has been turned into an almost pervasive use of myth. The mobility between the different spheres of reality and fiction that characterises the framework of reception for which the relief is intended is proved by two particular features – Atalanta's role as gateway-figure, which aids the understanding of a scene taken from the *Vita*

64 For example: Villa Imperiale: see above no. 49. Pompeii, House Regio VII 15,3. 45x47. Third Style. Schefold 1957, 207; *PPM* VII 772 fig. 9; Lorenz 2008, 56–60 fig. 4. Casa della Venere in Conchiglia (Pompeii II 3,3). 32x37. Fourth Style. *PPM* III 166 fig. 82; Lorenz 2008, 64–66 fig. 9. Casa delle Danzatrici: see above no. 49.

65 Lorenz 2008, 250–258.



Figure 9.9: Meleager and Atalante. Pompeii, Casa della Venere in Conchiglia (II 3,3).  
Photograph: DAIR 57.879.

*Romana* repertoire but using the visual template of another myth, and the selective use of the *Moirai*-cum-*Erinyes*-cum-*Nemesis* figures. The relief demonstrates a familiarity with, and an interest, in the sphere of the virtual that is not even matched by the scenes of the Calydonian hunt which are much more strongly based within the realm of myth.

## Distress dissolved: life, death, and myth

The Paris sarcophagus stands out from the other versions of the death of Meleager produced in the last quarter of the second and the early third century in the way in which it functionalises Atalanta as an intermediary for viewers of the sarcophagus and as a narrative voice for the experience it chooses to represent. Some other reliefs, especially the sarcophagus in the Capitoline Museum, use similar strategies, but the Paris sarcophagus develops these more fully and presents them within a particularly well-balanced, organic composition.

The Paris sarcophagus also explores the interfaces between mythological and everyday content and the permeability of these categories, as it moves away from the rhetorical concept of the *allegoria apertis permixta*; and this journey is primarily linked to the figure of Atalanta. In this respect, the sarcophagus continues some strategies of reception aesthetics which can already be found about a century earlier in representations of the story of Meleager and Atalanta on the walls of Pompeii. There, in the Casa della Venere in Conchiglia, for example, it is also Atalanta who – with a period face and contemporary clothing – makes direct advances to the viewers, turning from a mythological into a descriptive character (Figure 9.9).<sup>66</sup> But in contrast to representations like that in Pompeii and on some of the other sarcophagi, on the Paris sarcophagus the mythological and everyday spheres are combined not just to trigger a discourse about each other, but also to generate a new narrative force: through the eyes of Atalanta, the mythological story is personalised in its entirety. The modular narrative structure does not merely offer points of identification for those outside the image. Rather, it allows them to immerse themselves fully in its mythological world, generating a type of mediated reality that is very different from the juxtaposition of mythological and everyday on sarcophagi like the one in Ostia.

This means that the narrative voice constructed around Atalanta is not just testimony to the strategies of selection that characterise the Romans' use of myth in which certain elements from individual myths are employed while others are discarded in order to generate distinct Roman messages;<sup>67</sup> nor does it merely represent a move from classicising symbolism to an *interpretatio Romana* which Peter Blome attests for the late-Antonine period,<sup>68</sup> and against which Bielfeldt convincingly argued;<sup>69</sup> but it is not simply a mixture of myth and allegorical

66 Lorenz 2008, 63–66.

67 see Zanker 1999; Zanker and Ewald 2004, 247–266; cf. also Giuliani 1989; Koortbojian 1995, 120–126; Bielfeldt 2005, esp. 321–328.

68 Blome 1992, 1071–1072.

69 Bielfeldt 2005, 22.



paradigm either. The Paris sarcophagus is clearly concerned with the allegorical and emotional content which mythological scenes are capable of transmitting. Thus it is designed around the assumption that its viewers are willing and able to engage in acts of abstracted reading, to select specific aspects of mythological knowledge while ignoring others in order to make sense of this particular representation and grasp its allegorical meanings. But the significance of the sarcophagus does not stop there: it is not just a reference to something else in an iconological sense, it does not just present a case of Greek myths emulated in order to generate and transmit behavioural ideals and allegorical messages related to the context of death and religious rites at the tomb, nor does it only present a paradigmatic narrative. Instead it offers a pervasive narrative experience that feeds off the specific characteristic of its two constitutive components, the mythological and the everyday. As such, it immerses the viewers and invites them to a reading of the myth – through the eyes of Atalanta – very different from the known textual versions of the story, while at the same time, by means of the modular setup, the individual scenes can constantly generate their own narrative scenarios, adding to, or counter-acting Atalanta's perspective.

These different voices are facilitated by the material carrier, the sarcophagus, which provides them with narrative space, but at the same time also determines and frames their workings through its funerary function. Turned into a narrative engine, the Paris sarcophagus demonstrates that a multitude of perspectives and the ambivalence between the descriptive and the narrative do not cause any kind of breakdown in the way pictures may direct their viewers, which is usually regarded as a crucial problem of visual narrative.<sup>70</sup> On the contrary: on the Paris sarcophagus, these elements facilitate the great potential of visual narrative. This scenes on this coffin demonstrate that descriptive and narrative elements can be both immanent in one and the same visual form, waiting for the viewers to unlock their workings, providing them with a story, and at the same time also with a counter-reading of it.

These strategies of modular, shuffled narrative, breaking with a linear pattern of story-telling, are a brilliant means of enticing the complexities out of a story, by inviting the viewer to re-visit and re-think previous assumptions about the development of the story-line. But it is also notable that these multilayered strategies are not extended to all the figures depicted, thus facilitating a particularly subtle transmission. The *Moirai*, who belong to an allegorical realm somewhere between the spheres of the mythological narrative and everyday life, are not affected by multiple interpretations: their meaning and their role on the frieze remains unchanged in that they point to the inescapability of fate and the inevitability of death. This quality is also manifest

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70 cf. Mitchell 1986, 95–115 and his discussion of Lessing; also: Giuliani 2003, 21–37.

on the side panels of the Paris sarcophagus which show two Sphinxes striding towards the frontal frieze. Together the *Moirai* and the Sphinxes have an apotropaic significance that is matched by the gorgon-shield in the centre of the front, and they provide a robust and clearly shaped framework that enfolds the mythologically-articulated world of female sorrow and grieving.

The Paris sarcophagus might be said to feature a two-way system of transmitting its meanings: a framework constituted by the side panels and the *Moirai* corroborates a direct message about the power of death that is already inherent in (or generic to) the sarcophagus as an object, while the rest of the frieze confronts its viewers with a paradigmatic narrative, immersing them in a discourse that stands at the interface of myth and *Vita Romana*. In combining these two forms of transmission, the selection of allegories and ideals forms only one element within a vibrant set of significations, while the key to the images on these monuments seems to lie in their strategies of packaging the different spheres of meaning and explanation. In contrast to earlier forms of combining elements of myth and *Vita Romana* that are found in Roman imperial art, on the walls of Pompeii, and on other sarcophagi, reliefs like the Paris sarcophagus no longer represent a simple or straightforward state of distress. Nor do they show any uncertainty about whether they want to showcase the consoling world of mythological fantasy to make real life more bearable, or to offer affirmative ideals that give guidance to the grieving. Depictions like the relief of the Paris sarcophagus want to be all of these things, while playing their constitutive elements against each other. This is why these reliefs are designed to absorb their viewers into the pictorial sphere, with the certainty of death provided as the only framework to delimit this process of immersion.

The vitality and interest of such images in an intense discourse between the different categories of virtuality, and in the power and versatility of visual narrative, starts earlier than the stylistic changes which can be observed on the sarcophagi of the late-Antonine period at the end of the second century,<sup>71</sup> but they highlight once more the search for new ways to develop visual expression that took place in these decades.<sup>72</sup> This particular set of qualities was lost in the course of the third century, when more explicit and less discursive forms of representation came to be of interest on the sarcophagi – an interest which quite swiftly led to the abandonment of mythological stories altogether.

71 Rodenwaldt 1935.

72 Wegner 1931, 61–62, 167–174; Rodenwaldt 1935, 1944/45, 84–86. For a recent overview: Newby 2007.



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