Death by Analogy: Identity Crises on a Roman Sarcophagus*

EMILY CLIFFORD

ABSTRACT

This article examines how images on a sarcophagus involved Roman viewers in processes of thinking by analogy and so invited them to engage in meditation on death. This more thanatological slant is sidelined in current approaches that emphasise how exemplary figures on sarcophagi consoled the bereaved and praised the dead. Building on these approaches, together with work on the mediating role played by artefacts in thought, this article proposes that analogies on sarcophagi also invited the living to think about their own death and the possibilities and limitations of analogy for thanatological reflection. It argues, further, that sarcophagi should be read more expansively, allowing for figures and scenes to have more than one identity rather than collapsing them into one: this multiplicity reinforces meditation on death. The article focuses on Roman sarcophagi that feature Adonis, with emphasis on the Rinuccini sarcophagus; this unusual sarcophagus explicitly juxtaposes real-life and mythological scenes.

Keywords: sarcophagi; identity; analogy; death; mythology; examples; multiplicity

> Thus die I, thus, thus, thus.
> Bottom as Pyramus in Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, act 5, scene 1

When Shakespeare's Bottom dies as Pyramus, he dies in his own way and like a tragic hero. The combination generates a parody and prompts reflection on the theatricality of death. Pyramus's problem is one of originality: he dies too self-consciously, too much like a lion-hearted lover. But he also faces a challenge common to all would-be artists-of-dying: ignorance. No one knows what it is like to die. When it comes to *imagining* what it is like to die, the art of analogy can propose a bridge between an object of study and future subjective experience. As a result, ideas about dying are often underpinned and overshadowed by examples; they are shaped by other people's deaths and by models of dying proposed by art. Either way, being an outsider poses challenges.[1] How far can we extrapolate a generalised idea about dying from

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[1] On death and outsideness, see Clark 2012.

examples?[2] Can we compare one death with another?[3] In this article, I explore how one category of ancient objects — Roman sarcophagi — mediated reflection on the possibilities and limitations of analogy for meditation on death.[4] As I discuss in my conclusion, this sort of image-mediated conceptualisation can be emically situated within a specifically Roman cultural regime.

I focus on Roman sarcophagi that have been categorised as featuring the mythological death of Adonis.[5] These offer a productive case study because, as burial containers, sarcophagi are associated with death. But the life history of scholarship on sarcophagi and death has been turbulent. In the 1940s, those interested in classical archaeology and mythological representations (which is to say, non-Christian images and ideas) moved away from looking for ancient beliefs about the afterlife in sarcophagi.[6] More recently, approaches have found a middle ground between classicism and eschatology by emphasising the perspectives of the living: images on sarcophagi console the bereaved and praise the dead by offering analogies with exemplary figures from mythology or Roman life.[7] Sarcophagi have thus been positioned within a Roman phenomenon of exemplarity, a key feature of cultural, especially rhetorical, discourse.[8] There is also a growing body of literature that pursues a thanatological, or death-focused, approach by exploring how the formal features of a sarcophagus — its shape, ornamentation, framing devices, figures and portraits — prompt meditation on death and the dead.[9] This work somewhat closes the rift between the study of classical and early Christian material. It also contributes to a field interested in sensory and embodied experience, materiality and object-oriented approaches to the relationship between Graeco-Roman art and ideas about death.[10] In this paper on analogical viewing and thanatological thinking I build on both current approaches. I dig deeper into how analogies on sarcophagi work, while also considering formal features and the ways in which these features negotiate the challenges of imagining what it is like to die. My point is that analogies on sarcophagi did not just interact with the living as the bereaved and the dead as the deceased, but also invited the living to engage in meditations on death.[11]

My emphasis, throughout this article, on close looking — and on the generative relationship between a visual object and its viewers — raises a practical question of

[2] Compare the challenge underlying pain communication and, generally, subjective experience: see Nagel 1974; Scarry 1985.
[3] On comparing Roman and Chinese sarcophagi, see Clark 2012.
[4] For an ancient spin on 'art', see Tanner 2006 and responses in Platt and Squire 2010.
[5] See especially Grassinger 1975: 70–90, nos. 43–67; Koch and Sichtermann 1982: 131–3; Zanker and Ewald 2012: 298–306. About twenty-five Adonis sarcophagi have been identified. The earliest dates to c. 150/160 C.E.; most fall in the second half of that century. On Roman sarcophagi generally, see Elsner 2011b.
[6] On how Alfred Nock's dismissal of Franz Cumont's religious and symbolic readings of sarcophagi in Cumont 1942 swerved the discipline of non-Christian sarcophagi away from belief-oriented interpretations, see Elsner 2011b: 9–11; Elsner and Wu 2012a: 8–12; Zanker and Ewald 2012: 20; Koortbojian 2015: 288. See further Nock 1946 and, defending Cumont's approach, J.-C. Balty 2013.
[7] See esp. Müller 1994; Koortbojian 1995: 122–6; Zanker and Ewald 2012: 57–109, 199–243; Birk 2013, esp. 21, 181–4; Newby 2016, esp. 228–9, 273–319. On biography on sarcophagi, see Koortbojian 2015: 291–2. For emphasis on grief, see Newby 2014. See further Elsner 2014.
[8] For some recent work on exemplarity in Roman culture, see Langlands 2015; Roller 2015; Newby 2016, esp. 3–4, 320–47; Langlands 2018; Roller 2018, esp. 4–23; Rood et al. 2020: 145–68; Elsner 2022. On mythological exemplarity and rhetoric, see Koortbojian 1995: 278–83. On myth as a space for free thinking, see De Angelis 2015: 581.
[9] See Platt 2011: 335–93; Elsner 2012a; Platt 2017; Elsner 2018a; 2018b; Trimble 2018; Bielfeldt 2019.
[10] See for example Jones 2015; Turner 2015; Walter-Karydi 2015, part 4, esp. 331–4; Estrin 2016; Arrington 2018; Estrin 2018; Gaifman and Platt 2018, esp. 415–16; Squire 2018a. For earlier work in this vein, see Vernant 1983: 305–20; Frontisi-Ducroux 1986; 1988: 34–5; Osborne 1988; Frontisi-Ducroux 1989: 160–1. For the object-oriented turn, see especially Harman 2005; 2012.
[11] In this I concur with Bielfeldt 2019, who has drawn attention to the existentialist framework within which we might set sarcophagi that were commissioned by the living for themselves in anticipation of death.

visibility: to what extent, and under what conditions, can we speak of 'viewers' of Roman sarcophagi? This is a difficult question, not least because for any given example (including most of the sarcophagi that I discuss here) precise contextual information has often been lost. In general, as regards 'viewing', sarcophagi were displayed or concealed in a range of contexts: though some continued to be visible either publicly or privately (at least in principle),[12] others were unlikely to be seen after interment.[13] The sort of viewing that I pursue here might, then, best be imagined as taking place during a funeral,[14] or else before it, perhaps even by its future occupant — an intriguing possibility in the context of this paper.[15]

Sarcophagus studies have often been characterised by a desire to translate and organise, to identify images as specific and to group them as a generalisable and thus recognisable category — 'an image of' or 'images of' Adonis.[16] But Roman sarcophagi resist this approach.[17] The abundance of analogical possibilities presented by sarcophagi invites, even thematises, a more expansive mode of viewing.[18] Others have emphasised the survival of a diverse cultural heritage in sarcophagi images and deliberate variation of motifs to suit different contexts.[19] I would add that intimations of multiple stories within one image produce a scene with a plural identity or a fluid, elusive identity.[20] The 'identity crises' part of my title thus refers to problems of specificity and generality in methodologies historically present in the discipline of classical art and archaeology as well as example-based meditation on death.

Indeed, example-based meditation is a running theme in this article in approach as much as content. Though the sarcophagi that I discuss here are comparable with one another (they are similar objects with similar functions and contexts, originating from a relatively brief time-period), the exercise of constructing a general argument from specific examples stages, in a more extreme fashion, the assumptions that necessarily underpin extrapolation of a cultural-historical story from fragmentary evidence.[21] My examples purport to represent a corpus and a cultural phenomenon. Moreover, the possibilities and limitations of the case studies in this article mirror the promise and deficiency of images of Adonis as exemplars of what it is like to die. Analogies, examples and their shortcomings thus carry and compromise the form and the content of my argument.

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[12] On private visibility in a tomb setting, see Birk 2012: 108–9; Borg 2013: 214–29; Koortbojian 2015: 286–7; Newby 2016: 228–72, 274. Some were publicly displayed, on which see Thomas 2012; Borg 2013: 213–14. See further Elsner 2011b: 4–7; Birk 2013: 34–9.

[13] On the burial or concealment of sarcophagi, see Dresken-Weiland 2003: 185–98; Meinecke 2012; Zanker and Ewald 2012: 25–6; Borg 2013: 229–35; Meinecke 2013: 40–1. Vatican 10409 (Fig. 10, discussed below), a rare Adonis sarcophagus for which we have contextual detail, was piled in a tomb chamber with five other sarcophagi (Meinecke 2014: 224–7, nos. 8–13); it is unlikely that it was seen after interment.

[14] Even if ultimately hidden, some sarcophagi may have been displayed during the funeral: see Borg 2013: 236–40; Meinecke 2014: 144; Borg 2019: 152–4.

[15] On the choice involved in sarcophagus selection, see Birk 2012; Russell 2013: 293–310. Brilliant 1992: 1031 argues that the Rinunccini sarcophagus was specially commissioned.

[16] Note especially Robert et al. 1890. Sarcophagi also appear in catalogues of collections and thematic publications. On the history of scholarship on sarcophagi, see Elsner and Wu 2012a, esp. 7–9; Zanker and Ewald 2012: 18–21; Koortbojian 2015: 287–8.

[17] Indeed, on a more object-oriented model, efforts to pin down 'the essence' of a stone box and its images are doomed to failure. See Clark 2012; Vout 2014, with n. 10 above. See further Elsner 1995: 33–9; 2007: 128–31; Neer 2010.

[18] The mode of viewing invited is more expansive than the approach to the 'openness' of sarcophagi in Zanker and Ewald 2012: 49, which privileges artistic intention, and 51, on narrative "excess"'.

[19] See especially Koortbojian 1995: 49, 132–5; Zanker 1999; Lorenz 2011; Zanker 2012; J. Balty 2013.

[20] On sarcophagi as narrative and allegory, see especially Giuliani 1989: 37–9. See further Huskinson 2012: 89.

[21] On our evidence, see especially Elsner 2010; Elsner and Wu 2012a: 12; Elsner 2017. On classicism and exemplarity, see Goldhill 1994; 2017; Güthenke 2020. One story that risks being lost in an example-based study is change over time; for this, see Borg 2014: 248–51.

FIG. 1. Rinuccini sarcophagus front panel, *c.* 200 C.E., marble, length 212–15 cm, height 101 cm. Berlin State Museums, Berlin, 1987.2. (*Artwork in the public domain; photograph by the author*)

Why Adonis? Adonis, beloved of Venus, died after being wounded in the thigh by a boar during a hunting expedition. The myth is a tale of love and loss, death and grief.[22] In ancient Greek tradition, the story had a cyclical dimension, with Adonis dying and returning annually in rhythm with the seasons.[23] Adonis also comes with a scholarly tradition, a history of views deriving existential beliefs about mortality, immortality and resurrection or rebirth from the cult of Adonis and his representations in Graeco-Roman culture.[24] So even when not on a sarcophagus, Adonis's death has a claim to exemplarity. He is a natural subject for example-based meditation on death.

Though I refer to several sarcophagi, I focus on the Rinuccini sarcophagus (Figs 1–6).[25] I consider first how resemblances within the sarcophagus's rectangular field invite a mode of viewing and thinking based on equivalence. Then, I discuss the numerous identities that might inhere in representations of Adonis himself and what this multiplicity does in the context of death. In my conclusion, I turn to more reflexive ways in which sarcophagi make the process of meditation by analogy an object of discourse. I suggest, finally, that the way of conceptualisation explored in this paper is recognisably Roman.

I DEATH BY ANALOGY

The front face of the Rinuccini sarcophagus presents two spaces divided by a pier that swoops outwards at the top; the illusion is that the pier supports an open archway that connects and demarcates two areas (Fig. 1).[26] Viewers of the sarcophagus relief are situated, as it were, in an imaginary vaulted space that is created by the sarcophagus relief, and are provided with views in either direction from beneath the arch, one looking into the left-hand space, one to the right. These spaces are filled with figures carved in high relief that seem to inhabit two different realms, real and mythological.[27]

In the left-hand scene (drawn from Roman life, a *vita Romana* scene), figures are clothed, women accompany men and most figures stand upright (Fig. 2). This is a domain of layers and folds, with bodies wrapped in fabric and figures in the foreground partially concealing those behind. The bodies of two male figures on the group's fringes form other partitions, their heads turning towards the space between them, an interior space shielded by their bodies and inhabited by a woman, a smaller kneeling figure and a domestic animal, a bull. By contrast, the right-hand scene is a display of macho nudity, with bodies twisting and sprawling (Fig. 3). While, on the left, up-standing bodies and the deep folds of their garments emphasise verticals, figures on the right ride and lunge above the arch of the cave, or loll and crouch below, upon the ground: the arc composed by their bodies reinforces the cave's curvature to encircle the boar,

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[22] For the myth: Apollod., *Bibl.* 3.14.3–4; Bion, *Lament for Adonis*; Hyg., *Poet. astr.* 2.7.4; Ov., *Met.* 10.298–739; Sappho, fr. 140a Lobel–Page; Theoc., *Id.* 3.46–8 and 15.100–44. See further Atallah 1966, esp. 53–91; Gantz 1993: 729–31; Cyrino 2010: 95–6.

[23] For the cult: Ar., *Lys.* 387–98; Lucian, *Syr. D.* 6; Men., *Sam.* 38–46. See further Atallah 1966: 259–73; Frazer [1914] 2013: 223–35; Cyrino 2010: 97–8. On Rome's inheritance of oriental religions: Cumont 1911; 1922: 8–43.

[24] See Cumont 1922: 116–17, 203–4; see further n. 23 above.

[25] For images, discussion and bibliography, see Grassinger 1975: no. 59. See further Gori 1743: 104–5, pl. 24; Dütschke 1875: 129–32, no. 316; Heilmeyer 1987; Blome 1990; Zanker and Ewald 2012: 44–6, 303–6; Reinsberg 2006: 26–9, 192, no. 6; Newby 2016: 287–91.

[26] I am grateful to Mont Allen for drawing my attention to this architectural detail.

[27] On the association of mythical and real on sarcophagi, see Zanker and Ewald 2012: 305; Koortbojian 2013; Stilp 2013, esp. 60–2; Allen 2022: ch. 6, esp. 167–80 (the Rinuccini sarcophagus is discussed on 171–2). On the complexities of the interface, see Giuliani 1989: 38–9; Bielfeldt 2005: 19–22, 329–32; Lorenz 2011, esp. 309–11 and nn. 3–6. There is also a juxtaposition of Greek and Roman and of sculptural styles: see Newby 2016: 10–14 on the difficulty of dividing Greek and Roman myth; Heilmeyer 1987: 224 on the styles.

FIG. 2. Rinuccini sarcophagus front panel (Fig. 1), detail of the left-hand side. (*Artwork in the public domain; photograph by the author*)

producing a vigorous space of circles, spy-holes and traps. Indeed, the halo of smooth, sculpted flesh around rough pitted textures — bulbous crannies in the rock and craggy waves that ripple about the boar's chest and neck — revels in surface, a riposte to the left-hand insistence on depth. Though the three figures in the top right of the mythological scene are usually interpreted as Adonis's companions (and so human not divine), their position in the upper field alongside two horsemen complicates their ontological status, because the latter are usually read as the Dioscuri, the twins Castor and Pollux, mortal and divine respectively. On the left, then, we have an ordinary realm with people arranged in layers and figures' feet planted firmly on the ground (even, it seems, the feet of the two figures usually identified as personifications of harmony and duty). On the right we have an alternate one, where human, divinity and hero intermingle in a flatter but sky-high plane.[28] The sculptor has distinguished two zones.

The demarcation is, however, ruptured by a nude, sprawling male body, usually interpreted as Adonis since he is injured and alongside a boar (Fig. 1). This figure (and the animal beneath him) connects the two spaces by slumping through the arch, which works, effectively, as a gateway between the spaces.[29] He encourages viewers to link one

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[28] On the expansion and amplification offered by myth, see De Angelis 2015: 574–5.
[29] See for example Heilmeyer 1987: 224. Indeed, viewers might also move between these spaces, since they are

FIG. 3. Rinuccini sarcophagus front panel (Fig. 1), detail of the right-hand side. (*Artwork in the public domain; photograph by the author*)

scene with another, to view two halves as one, to think by analogy. One possibility is that he connects two scenes of harmony and duty with a third scene of courage: he links a marriage symbolised by joined right hands and a sacrifice and libation, probably before battle,[30] with a wounded hunter's parting shot, spearing the boar that gored him.[31] Or perhaps he glosses two exemplary scenes from a Roman man's life (marriage and sacrifice) with the universal message that all men must die.[32] Both these interpretations fit with a principle (widely endorsed in scholarship) that mythological scenes enact consolation rhetoric by introducing, in a loosely analogous way, solace for the bereaved and praise for the dead. But the reflections that are prompted by this scene are also thanatological and epistemological. The slumped male figure puts dying centre-stage

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implicitly situated in the imaginary vaulted space beneath the arch, which appears to project outwards from the relief and into the real world: see the opening paragraph of this Section.

[30] On the handshake (*dextrarum iunctio*) on sarcophagi and suppression of individuality in the motif, see Huskinson 2012: 84–91.

[31] See especially Newby 2016: 281–2. On nude Adonis as an example of courage, see Brilliant 1992, esp. 1032, 1038; Koortbojian 1995, esp. 34–9. For focus on senatorial virtues, see Wrede 2001: 21–35, 103. The spear is lost: see Grassinger 1975: no. 59. Grassinger emphasises the Adonis scene as a picture of wounding and death rather than courage (*virtus*).

[32] See for example Newby 2016: 291.

FIG. 4. Rinuccini sarcophagus front panel (Fig. 1), detail of the centre. (*Artwork in the public domain; photograph by the author*)

and, by establishing a way of viewing predicated upon making connections and comparisons, turns attention upon the process of thinking about death by analogy.

There is nothing simple about drawing analogies with the images on this sarcophagus.[33] Repetitions and correspondences accumulate to thematise figurative viewing, its problems and its possibilities. The relief is a collection of groups and pairs: moving from the left, a husband and wife join hands; a soldier pours a libation beside a sacrificial victim; the injured figure of Adonis faces the boar; the Dioscuri ride; Adonis's three companions lunge; two dogs frame Adonis; two attack the boar. In some ways these groups are mirror images, in others alternatives. We see a reflection of marital harmony in the partnership between hunters and Dioscuri and its inversion in the struggle between hunters, gods and boar. The Dioscuri are nude with a short cloak and ride rightwards, their motion bringing them towards, even against, Adonis's unmounted companions, who are similarly dressed but unmounted. The groups are matched and distinguished: on horse, on foot; bodies in profile, bodies in front and rear view; two (or four with the horses) moving as one, two converging in a triangle; heads turn apart, faces look in the

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[33] See n. 27.

same direction. Each group is also joint and several, replicating themes of similarity and difference at a micro level. If the two mounted figures are Castor and Pollux, one is mortal, the other divine (but we cannot identify which is which), and arguably each has more in common with his horse than his brother: though their bodies seem to move in the same direction, their heads (and their horses' heads) turn apart. The repetition distinguishes as much as it aligns.

This has implications for more generalised meditation on dying, mediated by the combination of examples. I will focus on three sets of ideas thrown together by the images: sacrifice, hunting and marriage. Let us begin with an interpretation that traces male bodies to make a general argument about Roman virtues, specifically those of the deceased (who is often presumed to be male, though this is a tenuous assumption: the identity of the deceased is unknown).[34] The male figures differ in appearance: the left is in a toga; the central figure in military dress; the third nude; the hunters and Dioscuri partially draped.[35] The combination mixes sobriety, strength and erotic appeal, but a common thread prevails: the male body is repeatedly a model of harmony, duty and courage.[36] As such, the figures might represent the deceased in admirable guises, as enshrined in his family's memory. This is a fairly standard interpretation.

We can, however, push the analogies further, such that similarities become an exercise in the figurative nature of meditating upon dying. I begin with the central scenes of sacrifice, libation and death (Fig. 4). To the left, a kneeling figure prepares to pierce a bull's throat while a butcher strikes from behind (a similar butcher to the one on the sarcophagus's left-end relief, Fig. 5).[37] In the centre, a man stands with his armoured torso in frontal view, his head turned to the left and his right arm extended to pour a libation from a bowl over the bull. To the right, Adonis falls from one realm into another, his right arm bent in a mirror reflection of the soldier's left and extended backwards to touch, or almost touch, that figure's left knee. These events are bound closer by visual parallels between Adonis's drooping head and the bowed neck of the bull, intimating, perhaps, two blood sacrifices. Mythological accounts survive in which a god (variously Mars, Diana or Apollo) drove the boar to wound Adonis,[38] so Adonis's death, and the blood he sheds, picks up on the power and violence latent in the left-hand scene of religious dying; in each scene the gods receive or take a victim.[39]

Enclosed by two scenes in which bodies (bull, Adonis and boar) pour out their life's blood, or will soon do so, the figure of the soldier takes on a thanatological significance.[40] He too sheds liquid, but from a hollow vessel. In the context of the sarcophagus, his libation might, among other associations, look backwards, honouring a past death, or deaths, with a liquid memorial.[41] But his military dress also accommodates the possibility of death in battle, perhaps, like Adonis in some accounts,

[34] For a confident assertion that a male corpse occupied the sarcophagus, see Heilmeyer 1987: 220; Newby 2016: 287. For a cautionary tale, see Neer 2012a: 102–4.
[35] The portraits of the two Roman male figures also differ. For some explanations, see Newby 2016: 287–8.
[36] See Zanker and Ewald 2012: 44–6, and also 47–9 on abstract viewing. See further Koortbojian 1995, esp. 29–32; Borg 2014, esp. 249–51. For emphasis on the deceased's areas of life (family, gods and community), see Muth 2004.
[37] Blome 1990: 66 notes that the right hand of the crouching figure grasped a slaughter knife, of which only traces have survived. On the practicalities of Roman bull sacrifice and its standard iconography, see Aldrete 2014, esp. 33; the axe-wielding figure is the *popa*.
[38] See for example Atallah 1966: 57–62; Cyrino 2010: 95; Frazer [1914] 2013: 11.
[39] See Koortbojian 1995: 25, nn. 10 and 11. Though note Schultz 2016 on the alignment (or not) between emic and etic perspectives on Roman sacrifice, esp. 62–3 on the relative scarcity in Roman art of scenes showing the moment or aftermath of killing. See further Elsner 2012b on images of sacrifice in late Roman art as rhetorical statements; here, the rhetoric surrounds not just religion and virtue (at least), but also death.
[40] On another libation in a funerary context (on a south Italian pot), see Gaifman 2009.
[41] Compare Gaifman 2013. On sacrifices to the dead, see Birk 2013: 63.

FIG. 5. Rinuccini sarcophagus left-end panel, marble, depth 94 cm. Berlin State Museums, Berlin, 1987.2.
(*Artwork in the public domain; photograph by the author*)

slain by Mars, whether Mars be god, boar, war or all three.[42] In mythology, Adonis is sometimes injured by a god-as-boar (or a god-sent boar), which is similar to how, in the *Iliad*, warriors are slain by gods, gods-in-men and men-like-boars.[43] Adonis's death by boar thus presents an analogy for military death, and vice versa. Indeed, the round libation dish in the soldier's hand echoes the circular perimeter of the cave that holds the gory scene between Adonis and the boar, visually reinforcing the equivalence of the scenes. One implication is that Adonis's death is exemplary insofar as his death is *not* extraordinary; he, like everyone else (a soldier, or any mortal creature), dies like (in the same sort of simile as) everyone else — like, for example, a boar or a bull.

What does it mean, then, for Adonis to look like a slayer as well as a victim? His body is also twinned with that of the small figure crouching beside the bull: another sacrificial slayer.[44] This draws attention to the spear (now lost) that this Adonis once directed into

[42] Compare how Artemis sends a boar against Meleager in Hom., *Il.* 9.527–99.
[43] Ares slays men in, for example, Hom., *Il.* 5.704 and 6.203. See further 16.543, 17.210, 22.72, 24.260, 498. Hector fights like Ares in 15.605 and like a boar in 12.41–50. Other men attack like boars in 11.413–20, 12.146–52, 13.471–7, 17.281–5. On the hunt as a metaphor for battle, see Koortbojian 1995: 34, n. 41.
[44] See n. 37: Gregory Aldrete argues that both the *popa* (who strikes from above with the axe) and the *cultrarius* (who kneels with a knife) deal fatal blows.

FIG. 6. Rinuccini sarcophagus right-end panel, marble, depth 99 cm. Berlin State Museums, Berlin, 1987.2. (*Artwork in the public domain; photograph by the author*)

the boar's throat.[45] Imagine that the spear is still in Adonis's grip. Not only do both figures pierce (or will pierce) their victims with a weapon in the neck, but their positions and poses are similar. Each is set to the left of the animal they kill. In addition, though Adonis sits and the other kneels, the lines of their shoulders incline gently to the right, both left legs are bent and the upper portions of their right arms trace the same gradient. Given the possibility of analogies not just between two scenes of dying but between two scenes of killing (with boar and Adonis doubling as aggressor and victim), the circular dish in the soldier's hand offers the mythological scene as a *mise en abyme* of sacrificial dying and a mirror reflection, a reversal in which the exemplary death is not that of Adonis but the boar, enclosed within the darkness of the cave, opening its mouth in a voiceless scream.[46] In this respect, the arcs of sculpted masonry at the relief's centre pick up the circle of the cave (also sculpted, but sculpted to look natural) and tighten the correspondences between the soldier and the boar, two masculine figures with heads turned to the left. It is no coincidence that a sacrificial bull and a boar feature on the sarcophagus's left- and right-side friezes respectively (Figs 5 and 6).

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[45] See Blome 1990: 66 on reconstruction of the lost spear from surviving traces: he proposes that Adonis's spear, broken in two places, was held in his right hand (lost), crossed his thighs (breaks and traces survive) and ended with its tip in the boar's throat (traces survive beneath the boar's jaw and a break in its throat).
[46] On *mise en abyme* on funerary sculpture, see for example Elsner 2018a; Trimble 2018.

FIG. 7. Sarcophagus with the abduction of Proserpina, *c.* 160–180 C.E., marble, length 210 cm, height 75 cm, depth 63 cm. Uffizi Gallery, Florence, 1914, 86 (*Photograph by Gerhard Singer, provided by the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Rom, D-DAI-ROM-72.120, cropped by the author*)

FIG. 8. Sarcophagus with the abduction of the daughters of Leucippus by the Dioscuri, *c.* 160–180 C.E., marble, length 220 cm, height 56 cm, depth 75 cm. Uffizi Gallery, Florence, 1914, 104. (*Artwork in the public domain; photograph by Gerhard Singer, provided by the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Rom, D-DAI-ROM-72.131, cropped by the author*)

The bull is led; the boar is chased; both move away from columned archways. Are the bull and the boar central figures here?

Let us return to the interpretation that I introduced above: the repeated male figure and implications for the deceased's good character. So far, my discussion has focused on males and masculinity: dying like a soldier, Adonis, a bull or a boar. But what about the woman in the foreground at the frieze's left-hand end (Figs 1 and 2)? It has been suggested that, as one of three male figures (also including the soldier and Adonis), the man grasping her right hand (though the hands are lost) enacts one virtue for which the deceased is praised, the harmony of marital union.[47] This is an attractive interpretation, not least because the heads of the two male figures that frame the left-hand scene turn towards one another in an implicit mirror reflection; this might be the same man in two differently commendable contexts (harmony and duty). But an over-specific mapping of identity here does not account for similarities between the woman and the soldier. These two stand in a frontal pose, their weight upon their right leg, the left relaxed. Their right arms are extended, while the left bend and clasp the fabric of their cloaks, pulling it across their hips and upwards to reveal the folds of the clothing beneath. Both stomachs are accentuated, one by stretched fabric, the other by a moulded breastplate. Both heads

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[47] This man also enacts harmony generally: see Zanker and Ewald 2012: 303.

FIG. 9. Sarcophagus with Adonis, *c.* 200 C.E., marble, length 237 cm, height 58 cm. Casino Rospigliosi, Rome. (*Artwork in the public domain; photograph by Franz Schlechter, provided by the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Rom, D-DAI-ROM-86.48, cropped by the author*)
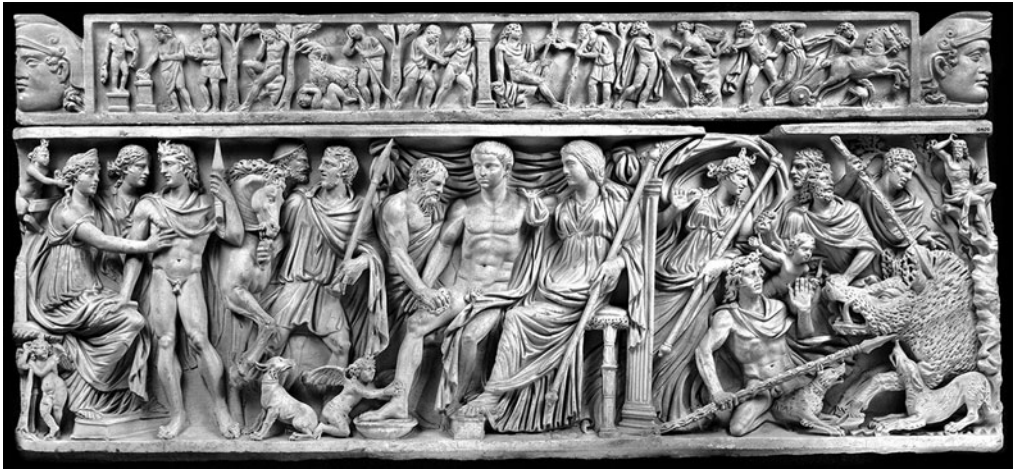

FIG. 10. Sarcophagus with Adonis, *c.* 220 C.E., marble, length 215 cm, height 72 cm, depth 71 cm. Museo Gregoriano Profano, Vatican, 10409. (*Artwork in the public domain; photograph by Gisela Geng, provided by the Forschungsarchiv für Antike Plastik, FA-S-GEN-5710-01a_21252, cropped by the author*)

turn to the left and the figures are similar heights. The soldier is linked visually, and thereby conceptually, with the woman.

Aside from resisting any neat organisation of who's who here, the visual analogy intensifies thanatological meditation: any ideas about dying generated by him are also shaped by her. This matters, because if the male marital figure evokes union, the female imbues that concept with additional narratives of power, consent, abduction, departure, death and loss. Traditionally a Roman woman's marriage staged a mock kidnap from her father's house, a cultural re-enactment of, among other stories, the mythical abduction of Proserpina, goddess of spring (and life), by Pluto, god of the underworld (and death).[48] This sculpted woman's split pose (body turned towards the viewer, head towards the man grasping her hand) is thus ambivalent. Does she turn towards or from him? If towards, where has she come, or been taken, from?[49] Admittedly, the female figure in the background between these two has been identified as a personification of harmony (which

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[48] See Hersch 2010: 144–8. See further Brown 1995 on themes of harmony in Rome's foundational story of marriage by abduction.

[49] It would not be unusual to think of Proserpina in the context of Adonis. In some versions of his story, she

is the obvious emphasis of the scene).[50] But what about the figure behind the married woman's left shoulder, who tilts her face towards the sky? Might this hint at distress, desperation, an appeal to the gods?[51] A woman taken in marriage on a sarcophagus might import themes of abduction, loss and death as well as union; in fact, this was a popular association.[52] Consider one sarcophagus held in the Uffizi, which deals more explicitly with these themes in the story of Proserpina's abduction by Pluto (Fig. 7).[53] Proserpina's body is outstretched in his arms as if already deceased. Another sarcophagus shows the kidnap of two sisters, the daughters of Leucippus, by the Dioscuri and mourns in its epigraph the death of a young bride (Fig. 8).[54] The sculpted girls appear alive, but their torsos are rigid and near horizontal. These are the sorts of images and stories that formed the cultural backdrop to the Rinuccini sarcophagus, and which might well have coloured the impact of the marriage scene when viewed alongside the other more noticeably violent scenes.[55] Indeed, if anyone did remember the role played by the Dioscuri in the abduction of the daughters of Leucippus, the glance by the left-hand twin on the Rinuccini sarcophagus towards the scenes on the frieze's other end might acquire a troubling edge.[56]

In addition, the visible presence of one woman might make another's absence more striking. Usually Venus, Adonis's bereaved lover, plays a prominent role.[57] On the Rospigliosi sarcophagus, for example, she appears four times (Fig. 9).[58] Each time, her arm connects her with Adonis, bridging the gap between them. A sarcophagus in the Vatican, Vatican 10409, has a similar impact (Fig. 10):[59] to the left, the figures turn towards each other, connected by Venus's hand; in the centre, the curtained backdrop connects them in a private space; to the right, Venus's drapery arcs above them, grouping them in another pseudo-indoor scene.

On the Rinuccini sarcophagus (Fig. 1), by contrast, Venus is absent from the hunt and possibly the whole frieze, except by analogy with the wife,[60] or perhaps the husband. The composition still conveys intimacy with its abundance of groups, but Adonis is remarkably isolated. The vault of the cave fails to bring him within its embrace: the right calves of the Dioscuri trace its curve downwards to meet his shoulder, separating him from the boar. The body that spans mythological and real zones also sits outside both. The nude male on the right and the draped female on the left therefore also work as each other's analogies:[61] the man or the god that takes a woman in his grip (and so implicitly removes her from her family) accentuates the impotence and loneliness of the bereaved, who has been taken out of the picture.

competed with Venus for his affections and she appears, facing Venus, on one side panel of an Adonis sarcophagus in Rostock. See Grassinger 1975: no. 47; Koch and Sichtermann 1982: 133.
[50] Huskinson 2012: 85 suggests a conflation of identities (Concordia and Juno Pronuba).
[51] In fact, Blome 1990: 39 observed that the raised arm of the butcher is positioned so close to her head as to give the impression that she is almost, in a figurative sense, artistically killed by the axe.
[52] On Proserpina sarcophagi, see Zanker and Ewald 2012: 84–8, 384–9; Borg 2014: 240–4. Compare the violent and erotic associations between killing and marriage in the sacrifice of Polyxena, discussed in Neer 2012a: 109–10. Stine Birk finds more consolatory resonances in images of Pluto and Proserpina: Birk 2013: 100–3. Hans Dütschke suggested the Rinuccini left-hand panel featured a wedding sacrifice, which would further link marriage with death: Dütschke 1875: 129–32, no. 316; see further Blome 1990: 38–42.
[53] Image permalink: arachne.dainst.org/entity/6486982. Proserpina was a popular funerary motif: see Newby 2011: 219–24; 2016: 232–6.
[54] Image permalink: arachne.dainst.org/entity/6208553. See further Zanker and Ewald 2012: 88–90, 314–18.
[55] On an object-oriented model: see n. 10.
[56] For a symbolic reading of the Dioscuri here (representing the cosmic cycle), see Blome 1990: 55–9.
[57] See for example Grassinger 1975: nos. 53, 55, 61, 62, 65, 67. She does not, however, appear in the hunt scene in earlier sarcophagi: Koortbojian 1995: 33, n. 37.
[58] Image permalink: arachne.dainst.org/entity/6222820. See Grassinger 1975: no. 62; Zanker and Ewald 2012: 209–10, 300–1.
[59] Image permalink: arachne.dainst.org/entity/5406902. See Grassinger 1975: no. 65; Koortbojian 1995: 50–3; Zanker and Ewald 2012: 301–3.
[60] See Brilliant 1992: 1038.
[61] On cross-gender application of role models, see Newby 2014: 269–70.

In focalising death through the eyes of the bereaved Venus, it is clear how sarcophagi such as these might have participated in consolatory rhetoric: grieving viewers may have seen themselves and their sorrow repeated in the decoration and been comforted that gods and heroes suffered the same or worse. They might have found solace in reinforcement of their status by identification with exemplary figures. They might have experienced hope of victory over death, particularly in the context of Adonis's association with cyclical renewal.[62]

But my point here is that the profusion of analogies also becomes something more thanatological.[63] Indeed, within the group of objects that Dagmar Grassinger categorised as 'Adonis' sarcophagi, there often appear scenes in which Venus bids farewell to Adonis as he departs for the hunt (a *profectio*, or 'departure' scene) and scenes in which the lovers embrace while figures such as winged cupids tend his wound (a union that precedes another sort of departure — in death).[64] On the Rinuccini sarcophagus, the reconfiguration of the more familiar scene of two lovers separating (before the hunt) or embracing (before Adonis's death) in an image of marriage (itself conceivably, though more subtly, associated with separation — separation from the bride's family) gives the latter scene an emotional twist that chimes with the theme of departure in death that overshadows the relief as a whole.[65] The dominant emphasis of the Rinuccini marriage scene may be union, but the cultural and artistic tapestry against which the image is viewed imbues it with thanatological significance.

In these ways, resemblances across the frieze set up a mode of viewing based on association and transference of impressions. In the context of death, this shapes the processes and results of thanatological thinking.[66] But in addition, given the discrepancies as well as similarities between details, resemblances might provoke meditation on the essential but flawed role played by examples and the challenges of extrapolating from them generalised ideas about what it is like to die.[67]

II DYING LIKE ADONIS (OR A. N. OTHER)

On this note, let us consider how resemblances might generate a provocative lack of specificity in the context of death. What does it mean for multiple identities to be immanent in one figure? An assumption runs through much scholarship on Roman sarcophagi that figures have an identity. They may allude to other traditions, but there is a core story to be unearthed.[68] On Michael Koortbojian's analysis, for example, the

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[62] See n. 23.
[63] See Newby 2014: 260, 262, 271–80.
[64] For example, *profectio* scenes appear on the right end of Grassinger 1975: no. 46 and on the left of nos. 53, 61, 62, 65, 67; wound-tending scenes appear on, for example, the left end of nos. 43, 45, 46, 47, 48, 52, 55.
[65] Compare Zanker 1999 and Linant de Bellefonds 2013 on the idealised love and despair of a mourning woman. See further Koortbojian 1995: 40–1. It is striking, in fact, that the bride on the Rinuccini sarcophagus looks not only like the soldier beside her, but like her counterpart in departure scenes on other (later) sarcophagi — Adonis. See Grassinger 1975: nos. 65 and 67.
[66] See for example Newby 2016: 318–19.
[67] Compare the claim in Koortbojian 2015: 290 that Roman life scenes (by contrast with mythological scenes) 'might have highly specific resonance'. In fact, an image of marriage or military sacrifice can also be figurative; see especially Koortbojian 2013: 149, 153–5; Allen 2022, esp. 167–72, 174–6.
[68] We might describe the relationship between image and identity as one of frame and framed (or, in Kantian terms, *parergon* and *ergon*). On frames and ornaments in classical art, see Platt and Squire 2017b and Dietrich and Squire 2018, especially the introductions to those volumes (Platt and Squire 2017a; Squire 2018b). On the relationship between head, body, hair and dress and the 'visual power of formula, repetition and analogy' see Trimble 2017.

FIG. 11. Sarcophagus with Meleager, *c.* 180–200 C.E., marble, length 247 cm, height 94 cm, depth 110 cm. Palazzo Doria Pamphilj, Rome. (*Artwork in the public domain; photograph by Peter Barritt, provided by Alamy, G3DJN3*)

FIG. 12. Sarcophagus with Adonis, *c.* 190 C.E., marble, length 218 cm, height 73 cm. Palazzo Ducale, Mantua (*Artwork in the public domain; photograph by Gisela Fittschen-Badura, provided by the Forschungsarchiv für Antike Plastik, Fitt77-03-01_12159, cropped by the author*)

sprawling nude on the Rinuccini sarcophagus is a variant of Adonis and a vessel for the generalised idea of mortality.[69] But at what point does variation risk producing someone else entirely? When is resemblance simply reality? Ovid's playful description of Adonis in his *Metamorphoses* is instructive here (*Met.* 10.515–18):[70]

> laudaret faciem Liuor quoque: qualia namque
> corpora nudorum tabula pinguntur Amorum,
> talis erat; sed, ne faciat discrimina cultus,
> aut huic adde leues aut illis deme pharetras.

> Envy, too, would praise his appearance, for his body was just like
> the bodies of nude Loves that are painted on a panel;
> but, so that clothing does not distinguish them,
> either give him light arrows or take them from them.

Ovid's visualisation of Adonis's body plays with the boundary between resemblance and identification. The image of Adonis that emerges from the text draws on images of 'Loves' familiar from the iconographic tradition.[71] Ovid distinguishes the textual image by the absence of the Loves' usual attributes, arrows, but undercuts the difference by suggesting that Adonis would be better with arrows, a depiction that might render him visually indistinguishable from a Love and allow him to defend himself successfully against the boar.

This last possibility anticipates the mercurial mythological identification invited by sarcophagi. Give Adonis a weapon, allow him to defeat the boar, and he might become … Meleager.[72] Consider one sarcophagus in the Palazzo Doria Pamphilj (Fig. 11):[73] a central nude male figure is shown in a three-quarters stance, striding with his left leg forwards as he thrusts his spear into a boar's forehead. This figure is usually identified as Meleager.[74] A similar body schema, alike in pose albeit with his head tilted further forwards, appears on the Rospigliosi sarcophagus, beside the seated figure usually identified as the wounded Adonis (Fig. 9).[75] We also see hints of this man in hunter figures in the background to 'Adonis' sarcophagi in the Vatican and Mantua (Figs 10 and 12).[76]

Usually, identification of these figures is subordinated to that of the male nude in the foreground, whose leg wound sets the tone (as an 'Adonis' scene). But what happens when that fallen figure also deals the killing blow, as on the Rinuccini and Vatican sarcophagi (Figs 1, 3 and 10)? By combining more than one body schema (for

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[69] Koortbojian 1995: 47–8. The allegorical approach in Brilliant 1984: 159–65 is comparable: behind the combinations (in his words, a 'conflation', 161) of motifs stands the 'heroic hunter' who 'serves the needs of the deceased beyond the limits of narrative integrity'.

[70] Text: OCT. My translation. Comparable interest in the ambiguity generated by the absence or presence of visual attributes is discernable in Hellenistic and Second Sophistic literature: see Gutzwiller 2002: 93–4 on pointed ambivalence in Hellenistic epigrams; see further Lucian, *Heracles* 1 and *Syr. D.* 36, where a mismatch between body and attribute is notable and understood to be significant.

[71] Variously called *erotes*, cupids, *amorini*, *amoretti*, *putti* and so on (with symbolic or mythological associations accordingly, on which see Nock 1946: 144, 148–9).

[72] On the body schema of the nude male hunter (in Roman wall painting), see Elsner and Squire 2015: 192. On visual allusion, see Elsner 2014: 332–3. On typology and assimilation of one myth by another, see Koortbojian 1995, esp. 134–5. For the origins of the Adonis hunt scene in Calydonian boar hunt imagery (involving Meleager), see Grassinger 1975: 80–1. On the participation of the Dioscuri in the Calydonian boar hunt, see Blome 1990: 55.

[73] Koch 1975: nos. 6, 8.

[74] Nearly all boar-spearing Meleager figures in Koch 1975 are shown in this pose (including Loves posing as Meleager, as in no. 12). Grassinger 1975: 81 observes similarities between Adonis's stone-throwing hunting companions on the Rinuccini sarcophagus and spear-throwing hunters on Meleager sarcophagi. Compare the dead Meleager in the superior frieze (discussed below).

[75] Zanker and Ewald 2012: 300.

[76] Vatican: see n. 59. Mantua: image permalink: arachne.dainst.org/entity/1935791. See Grassinger 1975: no. 55.

FIG. 13. Sarcophagus with Adonis, *c.* 200 C.E., marble, length 198 cm, height 52 cm, depth 55 cm. Chiesa Santa Maria Assunta, Blera. (*Artwork in the public domain; photograph by Barry Ferst*)

FIG. 14. Sarcophagus with Adonis, *c.* 180 C.E., marble, length 210 cm, height 49 cm. Villa Giustiniani Massimo, Rome. (*Artwork in the public domain; photograph by Gerhard Singer, provided by Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Rom, D-DAI-ROM-68.5200, cropped by the author*)

FIG. 15. Sarcophagus with Mars and Rhea Silvia, Selene and Endymion, *c.* 200–215 C.E., marble, length 225 cm, height 82 cm. Museo Gregoriano Profano, Vatican, 9558. (*Artwork in the public domain; photograph by Gisela Geng, provided by the Forschungsarchiv für Antike Plastik, FA-S-GEN-5713-01_21259*)

example Adonis and Meleager), these reliefs challenge attempts to specify the identity of the figure or scene.[77] On the Vatican sarcophagus, a fallen male figure, nude apart from a cloak, is shown upon his knees, his head turned towards the boar and his left hand raised palm outwards in defence (Fig. 10). His right hand, by contrast, grasps a large spear that he thrusts into the boar's throat. The balance of power is unclear. Leaning ever so slightly backwards and kneeling with his genitals exposed, the fallen nude appears in a position of erotic vulnerability. But the line of his spear, braced upon the ground, is strong and stiff, virile even, projecting from his groin. The figure subjugates and succumbs in one.

This highlights the fragility of extrapolating a story from identification of a specific figure: if a fallen man is Adonis, Meleager-like people around him become generalised hunter companions, background figures as opposed to named characters. But when defeat is mixed with victory, as on the Rinuccini and Vatican sarcophagi, it becomes more difficult to determine the figure's identity and, in turn, the identity of the wider scene. What would it take to accept that a figure alongside a boar is not specifically Adonis, and not a participant in a generic hunt scene or another mythological hunt scene, but all of them at once? We either accept that scenes include images that are variously generic 'hunter attacks a boar' figures and specific mythological characters (and that it is possible to distinguish the two),[78] or we must consider the possibility that figures and scenes can hold more than one identity. If the spear-wielding, nude male shown at disadvantage on the Rinuccini and Vatican sarcophagi were a literary figure, he might be 'Adonis-Meleager', neither an Adonis, nor a Meleager (likewise, it is Bottom-as-Pyramus who dies, not one or the other).

In fact, even as a wounded, dying hunter, Adonis still recalls Meleager. This is notable on examples in Blera and the Villa Giustiniani Massimo (Figs 13 and 14).[79] On these the semi-recumbent nude figure usually identified as Adonis looks remarkably similar to depictions of the prostrate Meleager, such as that on the narrow superior frieze of the sarcophagus in the Palazzo Doria Pamphilj (although this raises a question as to whether the latter could be Adonis) (Fig. 11). Repetition of the boar and male figure prompts viewers to recognise a specific scene (Adonis, say, rather than Hector) and opens the possibilities to include other identities such as Meleager and the deceased. Why see one story in any one scene? Given that there are not only examples such as the Rinuccini sarcophagus that encourage analogy between real and mythological scenes, but also ones that set Mars and Rhea Silvia alongside Endymion and Selene (Fig. 15),[80] for example, we should consider the possibility that images on sarcophagi work in an altogether more expansive way, becoming multiple stories and identities at once.[81]

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[77] On 'iconographic promiscuity' and the rhetoric of translating scenes between Christian and non-Christian sarcophagi, see Elsner 2011a, and n. 72. In fact, Antonio Gori initially identified the Rinuccini scene as featuring Meleager: see Gori 1743: 105.

[78] This is the suggestion in Grassinger 1975: 85–8. Non-mythological hunters might appear on horseback: see Birk 2013: 107–13. On the challenge of distinguishing mythological and generic scenes, see Newby 2016: 268. See further Borg 2013: 178–82. On the popularity of portraits on non-mythological hunt sarcophagi, see Newby 2011: 215–16. On a shift over time from mythological stories to more philosophical narrative-free lion-hunt scenes, see Ewald 2012.

[79] Image permalink: arachne.dainst.org/entity/6282311. See Grassinger 1975: nos. 61, 53.

[80] Image permalink: arachne.dainst.org/entity/5406909. See Sichtermann 1992: nos. 2, 99, who emphasises contrast. Compare no. 145 in that volume, which frames a central portrait with Ganymede and Leda (each attended by Zeus in bird form, as eagle and swan). For the combination of two scenes featuring Patroclus's death in a lower frieze with two featuring Hector's in a narrow upper frieze, see Grassinger 1975: no. 27. See further Koortbojian 1995: 102–6; 2015: 293–4; Newby 2016: 343–7.

[81] This is true of other scenes on supposed Adonis friezes. Scenes of departure may not just borrow from Hippolytus and Phaedra iconography but actually represent them. Compare Koch and Sichtermann 1982: 131–3. Koortbojian 1995: 30–1 notes the connection, called 'a form of contamination' in Koortbojian 2015: 294. See further Brilliant 1992: 1035, 'a blurring of identities'; Zanker and Ewald 2012: 302. This sort of 'montage' (a term used in Giuliani 1989: 35) does not fit within the four-fold categorisation in Snodgrass 1982: 5 and Shapiro 1994: 8–9. For a similar approach to mine, see Allen 2022: 154–60 on how 'typological

FIG. 16. Sarcophagus with Hector brought back from Troy, *c.* 200 C.E., marble, length 175 cm, height 50 cm. Louvre, Paris, Ma 353. (*Artwork in the public domain; photograph by Gisela Fittschen-Badura, provided by the Forschungsarchiv für Antike Plastik, file Fitt71-24-08, cropped by the author*)

A more expansive reading is supported by the multiplicity of directional imperatives on sarcophagi friezes.[82] Carl Robert categorised Adonis sarcophagi according to whether their scenes run from left to right or right to left, but the density of analogies within a sarcophagus frieze offers numerous routes for eyes to follow,[83] and so frustrates categorisation according to one linear pattern.[84] For example, while the Rinuccini scene can be read as a left-to-right progression through an adult male Roman's life,[85] it also invites convergence on a central twin sacrifice (Fig. 1). The variety of options for exercising visual attention leaves narrative possibilities open-ended, both as a matter of sequence and content.

Moreover, latent within the image of the outstretched male nude is a long, diverse visual tradition of dead and dying figures. The sprawling nude on the Blera sarcophagus is charged with possibilities (Fig. 13). His slumped body, lifted by a companion, could be (at least) Adonis, Meleager or even Hector (Fig. 16).[86] Polymorphous identity is not an

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assimilation' invites viewers to think, to explore affinities and discrepancies. On replication, repetition and death, see especially Elsner 2018a: 353–4.

[82] See Elsner 2012a: 188–93. See further Koortbojian 1995: 41–6.

[83] Robert 1897: 7–24. The double departure in, for example, the left-hand scene of the Mantua sarcophagus (on which see Koortbojian 1995: 41–6) acts as beginning and end.

[84] Moreover, Vatican 10409 sits outside either category because the 'care scene' is in the centre. See Grassinger 1975: 76, 90; Koortbojian 1995: 50–3.

[85] Birk 2013: 65–6.

[86] Image permalink: arachne.dainst.org/entity/1075027. For outstretched nude figures with different identities, see

accidental result of one schema being especially aesthetically pleasing or, more prosaically, there being limited options for representation of a dying or dead body. Scenes on sarcophagi are not generic: they are specific, but abundantly, multifariously specific, pointing viewers in more than one direction at once (as on the Rinuccini sarcophagus, where the slumped pose of the figure indicates Adonis, but the presence of the Dioscuri and the killing blow indicates Meleager).[87]

Indeed, the Rinuccini sarcophagus foregrounds movement between the specific and general by combining myth and Roman life in an unexpected and conspicuous way. While analogy is implicit on other sarcophagi, a side-by-side comparison of realms is unusual.[88] However, even if most sarcophagi do not juxtapose scenes like this, they do experiment with situating the departed or bereaved explicitly within a mythological scene, moving closer towards closing the gap between representation and reality and so between one particular, the analogue, and another, the target.[89] On the Vatican sarcophagus the two central seated figures (read as Adonis and Venus) have portrait features (Fig. 10). Figures on the Rinuccini sarcophagus also had portraits (Figs 1 and 2).[90] We cannot know whether Adonis had one because all that survives of his head is a flat surface prepared for an attachment (and it is unclear whether this is an original or a later feature).[91] Other heads are also missing and the dowels and dowel holes suggest these might have been supplemented, although the existence of sarcophagi with unfinished portraits leaves open the possibility that the absence of faces was a choice.[92]

There are two important points to make here about specificity and identity. First, many sarcophagi, including the Rinuccini sarcophagus, present figures with at least two specific identities simultaneously (Adonis, for example, and a real Roman person).[93] This fits within a third-century movement away from mythological narrative and towards more overt identification between Romans and characters.[94] But, secondly, the combination of specifics also highlights their distinction. On the Vatican sarcophagus the portraits and central position of the enthroned couple present them as representative figures, not

for example Sichtermann 1992: nos. 27–137 (Endymion); Grassinger 1975: nos. 40 (Hector), 75 (Alcestis); Koch 1975: nos. 8, 64, 78, 79, 80, 83, 88, 91, 92, 93, 98, 101 (Meleager), as well as 73, 74, 75, 77 (Loves as Meleager). Koortbojian 1995: 59–62 finds intimations of Aeneas in the central Adonis figure on the Rospigliosi sarcophagus (Fig. 9). Grassinger 1975 notes echoes of falling figures inherited from Greek art such as the Dying Gaul or the fallen soldier on the grave marker of Dexileos. See further Giuliani 1989 on similarities between Achilles and Meleager compositions. There are also echoes here of the fallen Sarpedon in Greek art; on that dead-body motif and its afterlife, see Spivey 2018: chs 7 and 8.
[87] See n. 77.
[88] Zanker and Ewald 2012: 44–6. On mingling biography with mythology or allegory on sarcophagi, see Koortbojian 2015: 292.
[89] See especially Koortbojian 2013: 150–1 on the simultaneous 'intensification of individuation' and 'de-personalization' when mythological figures are given portraits. In fact, we might treat any figure on a sarcophagus as a portrait, as in Elsner 2018b, esp. 548. On how portraits control (and 'tie down'), as well as enhance, the messages of mythological representations, see especially Newby 2011; 2014: 280. See also Zanker and Ewald 2012: 39–44. For further discussion of portraits on sarcophagi and what they do for death, see Huskinson 1998: 131; Platt 2011: 377–84; Elsner 2012a: 179–80; Platt 2017: 379–80.
[90] On the unusual portraits on the Rinuccini sarcophagus and implications for its use over time, see Reinsberg 2006: 28–9. See further n. 35 above.
[91] Early drawings of the sarcophagus, such as the one by Antonio Gori, suggest that Adonis may once have had a portrait (argued in Brilliant 1992: n. 3 on Gori 1743: pl. 24), but we cannot be sure that these features were not supplemented by the artist.
[92] See Huskinson 1998: 149–55; 2012: 84; Birk 2013: 55–8; Elsner 2018b: 561–2.
[93] This might have been especially noticeable in 'cross-gendered figures', though see Birk 2011 and 2013: 115–56. See further Allen 2019 on techniques for distinguishing portraits of the deceased and De Angelis 2015: 573–4 on how though, for Romans, individuality was restricted to the head with the body communicating general qualities or status, some examples (such as a lack of portraits on figures of Bacchus) indicate that bodies did not completely lose their identities.
[94] Zanker and Ewald 2016: 254–60; Borg 2013: 161–211; Koortbojian 2015: 296. Though see Allen 2022: 197–214 for the suggestion that Romans did not so much reject mythology as embrace the present and proximate.

participants in a fictional narrative: the portrait that belongs to Adonis, gazing out of the scene with apparent lack of concern for his wound,[95] isolates him from mythological events.[96] On the Rinuccini sarcophagus, juxtaposition of Adonis's nude wounded body alongside the portrait belonging to the armoured Roman forces viewers to acknowledge the gap between identities. It appears that the point is to notice combinations or disparities, either because portraits are left blank or because they jar in a surprising way.[97] The idea is to recognise more than one specific identity, not to collapse them into one.

This has implications for how Roman sarcophagi invite viewers to think about what it might be like to die, and what they are doing when they engage in meditation on death in response to an image. On the one hand, multifarious figures are generative: they pull together several sets of ideas and combine them to produce something new. This line of thought has been comprehensively pursued, for example by Michael Koortbojian.[98] As Koortbojian emphasises, the presence of images and motifs within the cultural tradition lingers in later variations. But what is important about his argument for my purposes is that it emphasises survival (survival of identities via the enduring influence of artistic renditions), and the generation of a new generalised — and generalisable — idea ('mortality', for example).[99] Familiarity with visual and literary mythological traditions enabled artists to vary stories, viewers to recognise them, and both to construct new ideas from the reconfigurations.[100] Multiplicity is deliberate, sophisticated and generative of stable and cohesive meaning.

However, the proliferation of specifics on sarcophagi also draws attention to the more destructive implications of death for identity and individuality.[101] What is lost when a dying man looks like himself and also like Adonis and Meleager and others? For Simone Weil, war transformed men into things, 'inert matter' or 'blind force', and this was reflected in the similes of the *Iliad*, which liken men to forces of nature and wild animals (like boars).[102] When the Rinuccini sarcophagus sets Adonis opposite a boar, face-to-face in the approximation of a mirror image, it stages a similar transformation in a similar way. Dying like Adonis is likened to dying like a boar, and this visual analogy, by presenting the possibility of transformation in either direction, echoes the transformation of both identities into something else (a corpse) on death. Thus, the survival of multiple identities from literary and visual traditions (as recalled, deliberately or not, by specific details) and their combination (but not their blending) in a sarcophagus frieze also draws attention to the possibility of a loss, the transformation or dissolution of discrete identity on death.[103] When Adonis looks like Meleager, or Hippolytus, or a boar (or a Roman, living or dead, looks like Adonis and so on),

[95] Ewald 2012: 62–4; Zanker and Ewald 2012: 301–3.
[96] On the alienating effect of their self-presentation as an expression of death, see Bielfeldt 2005: 326–7.
[97] See especially Vout 2014: 294, 'unconvincing is the point'. Compare De Angelis 2019 on the distancing effect of second-century mythological sarcophagi, which, he argues, helped regulate excessive emotions. The impact here is consistent with the disjointed combination of individualised heads and generic bodies: see below, Section III, esp. nn. 113 and 124.
[98] Koortbojian 1995.
[99] Koortbojian 1995: 135–41. The reasoning is similar in Brilliant 1984, esp. 159–65 (see n. 69 above): for Brilliant, combinations of mythological motifs dissolve into allegory; his emphasis on the 'inner truth' (164) behind such allegory misses the meaningful impact of the combination's plurality. See further Borg 2013: 177.
[100] On familiarity with and formalisation of myths and their images, see Koortbojian 1995: 10–13. See further Huskinson 2012 on how strigilated sarcophagi enabled and encouraged viewers to explore associations between the figured images that were set amidst the fluting.
[101] See Koortbojian 2015: 287 on loss of individuality in death in Roman tradition; Elsner 2018b: 557 on a sarcophagus's 'meditation on both the particularity and the general implications of life and death'.
[102] Weil 2005: 26–7.
[103] On the potential for 'mythological emplotment' to erase individuality, see Ewald 2011: 264. Compare the play in one Greek inscription from the Roman imperial period (*IG* XIV 2131) on the impossibility of knowing whether a 'fleshless corpse' is Hylas or Thersites (discussed in Vout 2014: 292–3, with n. 22). See further n. 70 above.

Adonis ceases to be, well, Adonis — what viewers encounter in these unstable and fragmenting images is a vision of death.

Analogies on sarcophagi might have been consoling for some: even Adonis died; even Venus grieved.[104] And they might have reinforced the confidence with which viewers extrapolated a generalised concept of what dying is like from observation of other people's experiences, whether mythological or real. But, to the extent that being more than one person means being no one in particular, the fact that we cannot say with conviction that a nude dying figure 'is' Adonis, or is 'just' Adonis, also points towards a crisis of identity. This has two ramifications, both of which are in tension with the suggestions just offered. The possibility that the end of life involves the end of the self may inspire and express grief, even fear, as opposed to relief. And the survival of multiple similar but not same identities undermines the premise that the living might know from another's example what it is like to die. Analogy on sarcophagi is generative, but any generalised concept of death that emerges is mystifying and not enlightening.

III CONCLUSION: A ROMAN ART OF ANALOGY

Over the course of this article, I have argued two things: that analogies on sarcophagi invited the living to reflect upon death and on the possibilities and limitations of analogy for thanatological reflection, and that sarcophagi should be viewed more expansively, allowing for figures and scenes to have more than one identity, rather than collapsing them into one: this multiplicity reinforced meditation on death.

I conclude by returning to the Vatican sarcophagus (Fig. 10). Consider the Adonis on the left, who stands in a frontal pose with his head in profile. His left leg is slightly bent, the right straight; his right arm is extended by his side, the left raised to clasp a spear. This figure needs no pedestal: though sculpted in relief, he is another Roman copy of Polykleitos's Doryphoros.[105] The cultural echo calls to mind not just the thanatological implications of making an object or image a substitute for a flesh and blood body,[106] but the very idea of art and the artistic tradition as a medium for thought.[107] On objects that draw extensively on that tradition to create a multiplicity of analogies and identities, this presentation of the exemplary figure of Adonis, the analogue himself, in the guise of one of the most famous sculptures of the Graeco-Roman world turns attention upon the entwined forces of art and exemplarity that enable and limit meditation on dying.[108] Like Ovid's Adonis, who looked like not a Love, but a painted Love,[109] the analogies presented by the Vatican sarcophagus are themselves works of art, individually and as a whole.

Thinking with Adonis involves an artistic mode of thought (analogy) and extrapolation from or comparison with an example that is known, primarily, through the artistic tradition.[110] One way of imagining what it is like to die requires movement

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[104] Zanker and Ewald 2012: 305.

[105] See Grassinger 1975: 78.

[106] See Elsner 2012a; Trimble 2018: 341–2; Elsner 2018b: 551–2. Notable here is the late third- or early fourth-century C.E. child's sarcophagus in the Capitoline Museum (Koch and Sichtermann 1982: no. 215, 183–4), which combines a three-dimensional sculpture of a sleeping or dead boy on the lid with themes of artistic creation (including the myth of Prometheus) on the base in relief: see Elsner 2018b: 556–8 for discussion.

[107] See especially Neer 2012b: 118: the act of seeing a person (or the idea of a person) as a work of art is, in itself, a sort of violence. Seeing Adonis as a statue might enact the experience of seeing a person as a cold, stiff corpse. See further n. 106.

[108] On imitation, allegory and reflexivity in art, in a different context, see Neer 2002. For further examples and discussion of the influence of sculpture in the round on sarcophagi, see Allen 2022: 160–3.

[109] See above, Section II.

[110] On art's mediation of myth, see Gaifman 2009: 580–1.

from another's specific example to a general idea. Art, sculptural or poetic, facilitates that movement, partly by indicating and staging resemblance, partly by presenting and perpetuating an experience or action as exemplary.[111] When images on sarcophagi spotlight this process, they reveal the possibilities offered by art for vicarious experience, imagining what it is like to die from the position of an outsider. But they also call attention to art's limitations: it offers what is, ultimately, an artistic way of dying.

The self-consciousness here, and the interest that it reveals and stirs in conceptual possibilities, is markedly Roman. Think back to the jarring impact of the portraits on the Vatican and Rinuccini sarcophagi, which serve to align apparently comparable identities (real and mythological) and to demarcate them, thus turning attention upon the process and possibilities of analogy (see above, Section II). Such disjuncture (head/body and specific/general) is a provocative hallmark of Roman portraiture more generally: as Michael Squire argues, Roman artists were interested not just in extracting heads to produce busts or portraits (or combining more individualised heads with generic bodies), but in the conceptual implications of that extraction for an ontology of portraiture — namely, portraiture as a marker of present and absent identity.[112] This conceptual point sharpens against the backdrop of death, as can be observed not just on sarcophagi, but in the Roman tradition of *imagines*, funerary portraits that played upon the simultaneous presence and absence of dead ancestors (carried in the memories and arms of their descendants; departed in body).[113] In funerary contexts, theorisation of art and its representational possibilities becomes thanatologically inflected — it mediates meditations on identity and its loss.

This presents an additional lens through which we might think about the increased prominence of portraits on sarcophagi in the early third century C.E.:[114] it seems plausible that a desire amongst the living for greater proximity to their dead (as proposed by Mont Allen to explain the 'death of myth' on Roman sarcophagi)[115] went hand-in-hand with more intense theoretical meditation upon the possibility of achieving that proximity through an image and, more generally, on the nature of death; as death drew closer, its conceptual implications grew more provoking.

That said, the image-mediated thanatology explored here was already a feature of sarcophagi in the previous century. Analogous thinking was always a conceivable response, though invitations may have been more implicit, tapping into viewers' readiness to make links and draw distinctions, underpinned for some by their rhetorical training.[116] When combinations and comparisons were more overt (for example, in noticeably composite scenes or composite figures), reliefs became a particularly fertile

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[111] On the 'presence' of mythological art, see De Angelis 2015: 569–70.

[112] Squire 2015a, building on especially the 'appendage aesthetic' of Brilliant 1963: 26–31 (discussed on 89). For approaches to the head/body disjuncture, see further Brilliant 1974: 166–87; Nodelmann 1993, esp. 20–5 (on the allegorical nature of Roman portrait heads); Stewart 2004: 47–59; Hallett 2005: ch. 7, esp. on portrait heads as somewhat idealised (277–81) and a dramatisation of character (281–9) (note that Hallett sees no head/body contradiction); Fejfer 2008: 181–3, 203–5; Trimble 2011: ch. 4 (on how visual head/body assemblages could 'shape and extend social identity').

[113] On the mediation by *imagines* of ideas about portraiture and memory, see Squire 2015a: 81–2, 88. See further Trimble 2011: 152–3 and especially Vout 2014: 294–8.

[114] For a review of the changes in style and subject on Roman mythological sarcophagi, and interrogation of the explanations offered in scholarship, see now Allen 2022: 24–40, chs 1–5. Note his section on how a new portrait style (chiselled rather than drilled) in the reign of Caracalla enabled sculptors of sarcophagi to distinguish portrait heads (190–5). See further nn. 93 and 94 above.

[115] See n. 94 above.

[116] The preparatory educational exercises in Greek (*progymnasmata*) undertaken by elites as a foundation for rhetorical training might include practice in comparison (*synkrisis*): see Webb 2001: 294; Goldhill 2009: 230–1. Such comparative exercises appear in surviving Greek handbooks: see for example Theon, *Prog.* 10.112–15 Pat. (first century C.E.); ps.-Hermog., *Prog.* 8.42–4 Rabe (possibly third century C.E.). For *synkrisis* on Roman

site — with a fitting thanatological slant — for what was a long-standing Roman discourse on representation and identity, but a rhetoric of analogy had long permeated the Roman and imperial Greek world and is likely to have conditioned exactly the sort of responses explored in this paper.

Indeed, such analogical thinking was encouraged not only as part of formal education, but by the cultural and, especially, the visual environment in which viewers were immersed (and viewing of the latter would have been reinforced by the former).[117] Key here is Arne Reinhardt's study of image reproduction in Roman reliefs, in which he argues that formal and substantive visual analogies within a series (both diachronic and context-specific) assume and generate a 'comparative seeing' (*vergleichenden Sehens*) that is similar to the comparative analysis exhibited in and stimulated by contemporary literature and rhetoric.[118] In the funerary sphere, we might point to Roman funerary speeches, which, according to Polybius, involved not just praise of the deceased, but praise of his or her ancestors,[119] all also juxtaposed in a visual congregation of *imagines*, with the deceased nearby on a bier.[120] Mythological comparisons, by contrast, were a feature of verse consolations and epitaphs, as well as funerary monuments.[121] As observed above, the encomiastic and consolatory rhetoric of examples in the funerary sphere has been well established.[122] But when we look closely at the images discussed in this paper, visual analogies also articulate a more provocative, deliberative rhetoric:[123] they retain their plurality, fragmenting as much as they blend, and the disjuncture invigorates exploratory thought.[124] What is more, the idea of image-mediated conceptualisation (including about death) might not have been unfamiliar to thinkers in this period.[125]

The phenomenon that I explore here through one set of objects can thus be emically situated within a specific cultural regime characterised by emphasis on examples, analogies and the visual. Though death — and the conceptual challenge that it poses — might be considered a transcultural phenomenon (as intimated in my opening paragraph), the way in which it was conceptualised by Romans was culturally mediated; what I hope to have sketched out here, then, is both a philosophy-of-sorts of image-mediated thanatology and a specifically Roman way of figuring death by analogy.

Christ Church College, University of Oxford
emily.clifford@classics.ox.ac.uk

sarcophagi, see Elsner 2014: 330–3. Moreover, the use that *progymnasmata* exercises make of examples from classical literature as models drilled pupils in analogical thinking: see Webb 2001: 307–8.

[117] See n. 116 above with Rousselle 2001 and especially Elsner and Squire 2015. Indeed, invitations to think in analogical terms were not limited to funerary media: consider the networks of images orchestrated by Roman domestic wall paintings. The classic work here is Bergmann 1994. See further, for example, Lorenz 2014; Elsner and Squire 2015: 190–203, esp. 192–3. Allen 2022: 155–60 also observes the common theme.

[118] Reinhardt 2019, esp. 122–8 (citation at 123).

[119] Polyb. 6.53–4. On comparison with historical exempla as a feature of funerary speeches, especially under the influence of Greek rhetoric, see Newby 2016: 279–82 (noting on 282–3 that prose consolations also made use of historical exempla).

[120] See Beck 2018: 269–70; Pepe 2018: 288.

[121] Newby 2014; 2016: 282–3. See further Elsner and Squire 2015: 183–5 on the interaction of image, text and memory on an early Hadrianic funerary altar.

[122] See n. 7 above.

[123] See n. 97 above: the notion of failure or aporia in Vout 2014 offers a powerful corrective to the idea that Roman rhetoric was full of answers (as argued by Meyer 2014). See further Elsner 2014, emphasising the panegyrical qualities of Roman rhetoric: the deliberative (which he identifies in Christian art) can also be found in Graeco-Roman visual culture.

[124] Compare Squire 2015a: 95 on Roman portrait statues as simultaneously 'an assemblage of eclectic parts and a single coherent whole'. In a similar vein, Rebecca Langlands's work on Roman exemplarity has emphasised its role in promoting controversial thinking: see Langlands 2018, esp. ch. 12. See further n. 8 above.

[125] See Webb 2015 on ideas in the Roman imperial period that sight influenced imagination and speech.

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