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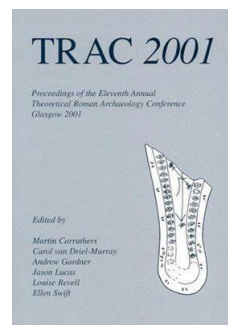
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The Metamorphic Moment: mythological and heroic narratives on Roman sarcophagi

Inge Lyse Hansen

Adaptation and transformation have long constituted key concepts in analyses of Roman art and expression, but especially so for the period of the Empire in which the scope for cross-cultural influences and for ambitious realization of innovative ideas widened considerably. In this paper I will concentrate on a specific medium (marble sarcophagi) with distinct narrative interests (mythological and heroic accounts), belonging to a particular time-span (the third century AD). On the one hand my discussion may therefore be read as a 'case study' in approaches to the representation of narrative, on the other it also represents an analysis of a medium of great expressive vitality with conceptual links to the visual narration of art (and architecture) of previous periods. Roman sarcophagi form an important body of evidence for the period of the late Roman Empire – and one in which not only experimentations of transformation can be seen as becoming increasingly the norm within the pictorial narrative, but also one that offered possibilities of expression pertaining to the individual. In the following I will explore how a particular concept of change – metamorphosis – helps to decipher mythological and heroic pictorial narrations on Roman sarcophagi.

In order to do so, a certain awareness of the temporal relationships within narrative representation is necessary. The diachronic (linear) format that one traditionally expects in a written or oral narrative encourages – directly or indirectly – the reader or listener to organize the narrated events sequentially in time. A pictorial narrative necessarily demands a different approach since the media is inherently static. In order to convey development and complexity the visual arts therefore often make use of a visual conflation of events and a synchronic (concurrent) temporal framework.¹ The combination of flux and continuity that characterizes metamorphosis may be identified also in the pictorial narrative of sarcophagus images. Indeed, it may further be distinguished in the response of the viewer to these representations. In the complex temporal relationships depicted, the viewer is at once required to unravel the individual strands while retaining the overall narrative scheme, and hence acquires a role of participating narrator. The discussion will focus on those reliefs that include portrait representations (or the potential for the same) because these affirm a multiplicity of elements – the (semi-)divine, the social, and the personal or individual identity of the deceased – and therefore most clearly convey a sense of instability or fluidity. However,

I also want to suggest that this concept of continuity and change is applicable to Roman mythological funerary representations generally.

The rectangular shape of a sarcophagus front and the possibility for arranging figural decoration in a frieze-like manner offers a seemingly perfect foil for a diachronic rendering of narrative. The images may be organised from left to right as if the relief is indeed to be read like a text – and several examples of this solution to the depiction of narrative time do, in fact, exist. In most reliefs, however, the centre of the field is emphasised. The narrative elements may then be arranged to be read from the centre of the relief outward, in a ‘hierarchical’ relationship between centre and periphery. Alternatively, the narrative may be reduced to a single element, or moment, which occupies the entire field (cf. Figures 3–5).² Emphasis on a single or a few key moments suggests that these should be read either synecdochically – that is, that the few scenes symbolically refer to the narrative as a whole – or that they (or the single scene) may be seen as being primarily symbolic. Figure 3 provides a good example of this interpretative dilemma: the Calydonian boar hunt, which fills the entire front of the sarcophagus, may equally be read as referring at once to the story of Meleager as a whole (for which the viewer is implicitly required to fill in the narrative elements preceding and succeeding the depicted scene), and as a symbol of the cardinal characteristic of *virtus*, whereby analogy is used to make manifest a personal quality of the couple depicted reclining on the sarcophagus lid. Artistically, the accentuation of key moments encourages the visual cohesion of the picture field and, by combining this with an emphasis on the relief’s centre, aids a synchronic reading by presenting each relief field as an independent and self-contained unit. This selectivity of representation is a common narrative device on Roman sarcophagus reliefs and the choice is predominantly of representing a ‘heroic moment’, the moment of displaying heroic virtues or an encounter with the divine.³

The implications of stressing the heroic aspects of a particular narrative, and thereby the symbolic or allegorical content in a depiction, also has implications for the perception of time. At face value, the emphasis upon the ‘heroic moment’ seems to attach a timeless, universal quality to the narration suggesting that the scenes function outside of time. However, I think that they are more appropriately read as set within a synchronic present.⁴ The possibilities in these reliefs for symbolically articulating personal qualities and achievements may undermine the mythological stories’ formal concern with and narrative structure of the history of a hero – and thereby also the implicit diachronic structure of the narrative. However, the personal element remains: the description of the protagonist, the hero, may rather be seen as having been changed from a historical account to a characterisation of essential qualities. The specificity of the account challenges an interpretation of universality and anchors the characterisation in time as pertaining in some way to the deceased.⁵ No formal dichotomy necessarily exists between the depiction of the ‘heroic moment’ and the synchronic narrative format in these reliefs – as long as it is accepted that the moment presented to the viewer is made up of a simultaneity of aspects.

In those cases where the mythological protagonist(s) is depicted with a portrait face, as in most of the reliefs chosen for illustration, the possession of exceptional, heroic characteristics is particularised and individualised. This aspect adds complexity to the

image in as far as the depiction conflates mythological and contemporary time and space, and creates a composite, even seemingly incongruous, image of the individual as part human, part hero. The relationship between heroic guise and portrait representation can be viewed as a costume applied to the individual, to the narrated self. A preferable interpretation that relies less on seeing the relationship of the parts as one of 'self' and 'other', is to emphasize the inter-related process of 'self' to 'self' that stresses the 'synchronic present' of the narrative format. It is in this sense that these depictions may advantageously be interpreted as metamorphoses – as fluid processes of change and continuity.

The visual depiction of metamorphosis necessitates, as already noted, a certain artistic manipulation of the image in order to obtain a sense of fluidity. The diachronic rendering of a change from one state to another – which in a narrated version can be described in a gradual revelation of characteristics – must by necessity be delivered synchronically when rendered in visual form. In this sense, a representation of an individual within a mythological narrative and in the guise of a deity or hero is a depiction of a part-metamorphosed person. By incorporating seemingly disparate elements, like portrait individuality and corporeal divinity, the representation invites the viewer to disentangle these elements and (re)create a narrative of development and change centring around the subject depicted.

The most efficient way to translate the motion of change into a single image is to depict the metamorphosis as a double moment.⁶ Artistically this may be achieved in various ways, for instance, through a straight-forward representation of a partial metamorphosis, like the depictions of Daphne in the paintings of Apollo and Daphne from Pompeii. In Painting I from the Casa dei Capitelli Colorati (Figure 1), Daphne, naked apart from a mantle around her hips and with a distraught look on her face, is shown seated in front of a standing Apollo who reaches out with his right hand to take hold of the hem of her mantle – seemingly to further reveal her naked form. The representation does not follow the Ovidian version of the narrative (*Metamorphoses* 1.452–567) in which the chase of the nymph by the god is a central element. However, the right hand of Apollo, placed at the centre of the composition, and his firm grasp of her mantle communicate the violation as efficiently, just as Daphne's facial expression conveys her reaction to the gesture. From the top of Daphne's head sprouts a single leafed branch as the first indication of the transformation to a laurel tree, which will free her from the god's advances and determine her future shape. She is depicted in the very process of metamorphosis: part human, part laurel tree. A similar approach is used in the painting from cubiculum 29 in the Casa dei Dioscuri.⁷ Here, however, the transformation is implied by the physical proximity and the compositional analogy between the raised right arm and hand of Daphne and the long arching branches depicted next to her. The narrative implications also in this case relate to the transformation of Daphne from a human form to a tree. In this painting the chase leading to the capture, unlike the previous painting, is suggested by Daphne's billowing veil and drapery as well as by her kneeling posture. However, the moment of capture is still the central element: her upper body leans away from the embracing grasp of Apollo and her arm and gaze are raised to heaven in an appeal for help. In the arrangement of the latter the interpretation of the relationship between arm and



Figure 1. *Apollo and Daphne, Pompeii: Painting I, Casa dei Capitelli Colorati VII iv 31/5.* (After Richardson 1955: plate 27.2)



Figure 2. *Detail of sarcophagus relief depicting Actaeon attacked by his dogs. From Torre Nova, Rome; date c. 130 AD. Paris, Louvre, Inv. MA 459.* (After Grassinger 1999: plate 73.2)

branches as a representation of the process of her transformation is given support.

Another manner in which to represent the double moment of change is by juxtaposing elements from, for instance, the very beginning or the very end of the narrative. The implicit suggestion of the 'missing' elements thereby constructs an entire narrative of transformation. An example of this approach may be found in the depiction of Actaeon on the front of a garland sarcophagus (Figure 2). In the right part of the relief the hunter Actaeon is shown coming upon the scene of the naked Diana as she is bathing, in a field on the left Actaeon is being punished by the goddess for this act of (unintentional) voyeurism by being attacked by his own dogs. The physical metamorphosis of Actaeon, his transformation into a stag, which causes the dogs to attack him, is not shown: the figure of Actaeon is depicted in human form. Rather, the change is contained implicitly in the juxtaposition of two narrative elements framing the metamorphosis itself: the figure of the initial, un-transformed Actaeon and the attacking dogs belonging to his post-transformation state. The reliefs on the end panels of the sarcophagus also allude to the transformation: on the left two hunters are gathered in a wooded clearing with three dogs jumping on their leads, on the right the dead and naked figure of Actaeon is being mourned and laid on the ground by two women while a dog watches this scene from the top right hand corner of the panel. The ubiquitous presence of the dogs suggest both the manner of Actaeon's death and his change in status from hunter to prey.⁸ However, the double moment may also be achieved by a combination of the two approaches described, which would seem to be the case in the statue-group of Diana and Actaeon described by Apuleius:

In the middle of the marble foliage the image of Actaeon could be seen, both in stone and in the spring's reflection, leaning towards the goddess with an inquisitive stare, in the very act of changing into a stag and waiting for Diana to step into the bath.

(Apuleius *Metamorphoses* 2.4)

Here the composition situates the protagonists at the beginning of the narrative while simultaneously Actaeon is described as half metamorphosed, in this way conflating the two approaches by representing a partial transformation as well as juxtaposing elements from various points of the narrative.

This combination of approach can also be found in some sarcophagus depictions – especially those in which the representation of the person is situated within a known narrative framework, and in which the interpretation of the image is complemented by the viewer's knowledge of the complete story-line. Ariadne, after helping Theseus defeat the Minotaur, is abandoned by him on the island of Naxos. There she is discovered by the god Dionysus who falls in love with her and marries her, and through that marriage she herself becomes elevated to a divine status. The sarcophagus relief in Figure 4 illustrates the most common manner in which her story is rendered in funerary contexts, that is, by depicting the sleeping Ariadne at the moment when Dionysus discovers her and falls in love with her. The woman depicted in the guise of Ariadne may be seen as being simultaneously part-metamorphosed as Ariadne, and as being a participant in the narrative concerning Ariadne. Since most of these representations rely on the suggestive force of implying the future events (the consequence of the encounter between Ariadne and Dionysus), so the individual



Figure 3. Calydonian boar hunt; on the lid the deceased couple reclining, their faces unworked. From tomb on the Via Valeria between Tivoli and Vicovaro; date mid to late third century AD. Rome, Palazzo dei Conservatori, Inv. 917. (Photo DAIR 62.789)



Figure 4. Dionysus and sleeping Ariadne. Found in a secondary context on Via Labicana near Torre Nova, Rome; date c. 230 AD. Rome, Palazzo Borghese. (Photo DAIR 55.349)



Figure 5. *Rhea Silvia and Mars (left), Luna and Endymion (right)*. Without provenance; date c. 210–215 AD. Vatican, Museo Gregoriano Profano, Inv. 9558. (Photo DAIR 74.535)

appearing in her guise may also be seen as being visually in a pre-metamorphic state and, by implication, already metamorphosed. A similar interpretation may be applied to depictions of Rhea Silvia, the Vestal who becomes the mother of Romulus and Remus (Figure 5).⁹ The most common depiction of her on sarcophagi is in a sleeping pose very similar to that of Ariadne, with the god Mars gazing upon her as he approaches her. As in this case of Ariadne, the fame of Rhea Silvia and the elevation of her status is still in the future in respect of the moment actually depicted: in Rhea Silvia's case she is not made divine by marriage but famous by being the mother of the founder of Rome – the consequence of her encounter with Mars. Hence a woman depicted in the guise of Rhea Silvia is both partly metamorphosed and evoking juxtaposing moments in the narrative sequence belonging to Rhea Silvia.

In both of these examples the visual rendering emphasises the 'heroic moment' of the narrative – the moment that may be read as summarizing the essential qualities of the protagonist and offering an explanation for their heroic status. The essentiality of the account implicitly suggests qualities of an enduring, immutable nature, which retain a permanence despite the transitory nature of the narrative. The interpretation, on the other hand, offers multiple possibilities in how to understand the relationship between the person portrayed and the mythological heroine, thereby adding a fluid transient quality to the depiction. It is in this combination of stability and flux that the mythological sarcophagi depictions most clearly suggest that they may be read as images of metamorphosis. Indeed, a defining aspect in the metamorphic process is the simultaneous occurrence of change and continuity.¹⁰

Faced with a depiction of this process the viewer plays a decisive role not just in deciphering the various elements but in the construction of the narrative of change itself. Complex visual and narrative approaches of the kind noted in representations of Ariadne and Rhea Silvia not only require the viewer's participation in the deconstruction of the representations – in the analysis of the individual parts of the depiction – but more importantly introduces the spectator as an active participant in the configuration of the whole that is being presented. Similarly, the statue-group described

by Apuleius in the quote above may be interpreted as depicting solely the start of the narrative – and not, as suggested, as representing Actaeon as half-metamorphosed – in which case the sentence ‘in the very act of changing into a stag’ must be read as a statement of the suggestive force of the composition, able to create in the viewer’s eyes and imagination the process of transformation. The viewer is, in other words, encouraged to appear as the narrator of the message that the image contains.

The oscillation created by the viewer’s juxtaposition of the identifying parts produces the effect of change necessary for understanding the image as being metamorphic. The hybrid as a simple metamorphic being may provide a good example of the oscillating effect in the viewer’s interpretation of the representation. In the hybrid duality is not achieved through change but is part of the nature of the being; however, an oscillation of perception as a means of characterizing them is used in both literary and visual representations.¹¹ The Minotaur is described by Ovid (*Ars Amatoria* 2.24) as “the half-bull man and half-man bull” eloquently summarizing its composite and synchronic nature.¹² The double-gendered hermaphrodite, whose “double form” (Ovid *Metamorphoses* 4.378) is admittedly created through metamorphoses, represents an even more intricate example. Its dual nature is revealed not just through juxtaposition of composite male-female parts, but because its most common sculptural form reveals its nature through an articulation linked to the spectator’s process of viewing this form: confronting the viewer’s expectation of what they think they will see with what they do see.¹³

Attempting to ‘read’ the reliefs, like those in Figures 3–5, the viewer is faced with a complex set of points with which to anchor the depiction in time: a contemporary styled portrait, a heroic body, and a composition highly selective in its narrative rendering – aspects pointing respectively towards a historical, mythological and symbolic interpretation. However, since the viewer is clearly not being asked to see three (or more) different depictions but to view the sarcophagus relief as a single entity, so the multiple aspects presented must equally be viewed as a single synchronic whole. By deconstruction of this synchronic present, the viewer may identify the past events and personal virtues of the protagonist, which can be reconstructed in a new narrative as explanatory factors for a future outcome. Just as the interpretation of, say, the Minotaur simultaneously invites an investigation of each of the separate man and bull parts and of the interpenetration of these as a whole, so the mythological sarcophagus reliefs may be seen as depicting a narrative that is simultaneously constituted by divisible parts and a multiple whole.

Indeed, in discussing the nature of centaurs (cf. Figure 4), Philostratus the Elder in ‘The Education of Achilles’ (*Imagines* 2.28–32) makes the point that to represent the various aspects of a hybrid is easy; the difficulty is the juncture that makes them into a whole while still challenging the viewer to search for the parts. The same process is true for the more complex, ‘true’ metamorphoses in which a change is effected – Actaeon may serve as an example. Actaeon’s change from a man to a stag represents at its essence a causal event, his punishment for spying on Diana. Yet, it may also be understood as a revelation of the nature of Actaeon: as a hunter the stag is not just his opposite (the prey) but an integral part to his identity as a hunter. His physical change, in this way, represents simply a change in view-point on an identity already existing.

The transformation is also a mirroring of himself in the divinity – a juxtaposition of two hunters – and a way of entering the goddess' sphere by taking on the guise of one of her attributes. The metamorphic moment – the moment of juncture between the various identities – is difficult to pinpoint exactly because in that lies the identity of the metamorphic being: the whole being created by the interpenetration of the different parts. A person represented within a mythological narrative and in the guise of the protagonist deity or hero may similarly be understood as a characterisation of a composite identity in a complex temporal space – that is, as a part of the metamorphic process. The juxtaposition of the female centaur and the sleeping Ariadne in Figure 4 makes an interesting comment on the nature of the woman depicted in the guise of Ariadne. The two are arranged to form symmetrical diagonals framing the figure of Dionysus, who, despite not being perfectly central in the composition, achieves a centrality in the narrative moment depicted. However, whereas the gaze of practically all the secondary figures in the relief is turned towards the main protagonists – and thereby supporting the gaze and visual link between these – that of the female centaur is entirely turned towards her child. On the one hand the composition establishes the two females as similar: they both embody female virtues of sexual desirability and motherhood, and they are both composite beings. On the other the arrangement highlights their differences: the composite nature of the centaur is part of her being, it will not change, and hence she is represented in a self-contained visual arrangement in which even her future, as represented by her child, is a perpetuation of her own form. Instead the composite nature of the Ariadne figure is rather one part of her narrative of change – in her sleeping figure is suggested her past, which brought her to Naxos, and in the centrality of Dionysus and his gaze upon her is suggested her future elevation of status. The woman in the guise of Ariadne partakes in this narrative, firstly, by the analogy established between the two that allows her to appear as the mythological heroine, secondly, by the metamorphic nature of the narrative that suggests that she too has arrived at her present position by virtue of her past achievements, and that through her personal distinction she may be considered in even more essential form as the transformed heroine.

A representation in heroic guise, like the process of metamorphosis, draws on pre-existing characteristics – the change apparent to the eyes of the spectator is effected and not created as in the hybrid. At the same time the image, the metamorphic identity, presented is an entirely new and different identity – it is more than the sum of its parts, in other words. A parallel may be found in Seneca's correspondence with Lucilius in which he exclaims:

now I recognize my Lucilius! He is starting to reveal himself as the man he promised to be
(Seneca *Letters* 31.1)⁴

The revelation is a revelation of the self achieved through a process of self-improvement intended to lead to a transformation of the self. Similar to a metamorphic change is the self-transformation entirely rooted in the actual existing identity of the individual, and similarly the result of the transformation is the creation of a new, transfigured identity. Like Actaeon revealing an essential part of himself in the transformation to a stag, Lucilius draws on his own characteristics to effect a self-transformation. In the same

manner, the mythological format of the sarcophagus representations is, therefore, not just a foil for a message but part of the creation of a new message.

Interpreting Roman mythological and heroic sarcophagus reliefs as metamorphic narratives has a further consequence in the context of 'time': their potential for acting within the world of the viewer as a prospective image of identification. This aspect is worth noting, not simply for the theoretical interest it may hold regarding the temporal or structural implications of the pictorial narratives, but also for the social implications that are thus suggested by the use of these types of funerary images. Accepting that the transformation, the metamorphic identity, represented is based on a combination of existing characteristics and deliberate effort makes the ideal depicted an achievable ideal and the person represented an individual to be emulated. The use of portrait features and the participation of the viewer in the interpretation of the image may draw the depiction into the contemporary world of the spectator and function as a bridge between them. The response and inspirational impetus generated may therefore allow the spectator to enter into the world of the image, and encourage the transportation of salient points of the image into the life and world of the spectator. The narrative in this way then not only pertains to a complex description of an individual, which may be understood as a manner of recognising and honouring the deceased, but it may also function as an invocation to perpetuate family ideals and familial identity.

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Notes

1. By 'visual arts' is here intended sculpture, painting, etc., not including the performing arts, like theatre etc.
2. An example of the former approach may be seen in the Vatican sarcophagus (Museo Gregoriano Profano Inv. 10409) depicting the story of Adonis. The narrative sequence starts on the far left with Adonis' departure and continues on the far right of the panel with the boar hunt; the central part depicting the couple enthroned may be interpreted as a postscript or conclusion, though visually it represents the starting-point for the investigation of the relief. In other reliefs a particular narrative element is emphasised by giving it visually more space and by situating the participating figures at or towards the centre of the field, or by juxtaposing the main scene on the front sarcophagus relief with reliefs on the lid and/or sides.
3. Richard Brilliant, in his overview of aspects depicted on Meleager sarcophagi notes how the

- hero's life is described as if beginning *in medias res*: the early history is deliberately neglected, his later history altogether ignored, and the emphasis is on the heroic part of his history (from hunt to entombment), with a clear preference for the Calydonian boar-hunt, Brilliant 1984: 147–148, figure 4.4; cf. Koch 1975: 79.
4. Another pertinent term could be 'a temporal present' – thereby making a link with literary characteristics, cf. Erich Auerbach who in his analysis of ancient literature describes the Homeric style as 'a procession of phenomena [that] takes place in the foreground – that is, in a local and temporal present which is absolute', Auerbach 1953: 7.
 5. Even in the absence of a portrait depiction, it is still possible to establish an implicit relationship between the (unknown) individual for whom the sarcophagus was intended and the articulation of personal characteristics rendered symbolically through the choice of decorative subject-matter.
 6. For a fuller discussion of the representation of metamorphoses, and the relationships between art and text, see Sharrock 1996.
 7. Richardson 1955 plate 44 (Painting A, Casa dei Dioscuri VI ix 6, cubiculum 29).
 8. A similar method of allusion may be found also on a sarcophagus fragment in the Vatican (Museo Chiaramonti, Inv. 1711) depicting Actaeon looking at the bathing Diana, while in high relief looking at Actaeon is an animal that may be interpreted as either a dog or a hind, cf. Grassinger 1999 no. 72, plate 72.1.
 9. The heads of Luna and Endymion, in the scene on the right half of this sarcophagus, have both been restored and it is not now possible to determine if they originally had portrait features.
 10. See, for instance, Barkan 1986: chapter 2 and Solodow 1988: 174–192 for an interpretation of Ovid; Murray 1998 and Sharrock 1996 for representation; and Onians 1999: 217ff. for examples of transformation in Roman art and architecture, and the cultural messages signalled in this way.
 11. Indeed, in 'Female centaurs' Philostratus the Elder emphasises their status as a species – that they are not transformed but born in their given form, and then describes them through the juxtaposition of their composite human and horse form (*Imagines* 2.3).
 12. *semibouemque uirum semiuirumque bouem* (I have here followed Alison Sharrock's more expressive translation, cf. Sharrock 1996: 109–110), or *tauri iuuenisque forma* – 'the bull-man form' in *Metamorphoses* 8.169.
 13. Cf. Barkan 1986: 57–58 and Sharrock 1996: 130. For a discussion of the various visual representations of the hermaphrodite, see Ajootian 1997.
 14. Translated by Catherine Edwards; cf. also *Letters* 6.1, "I am being not just reformed but transformed." For a discussion of these passages and the letters of Seneca in general, see Edwards 1997.

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