

Love at Last Sight:
On the *Erotes* Embedded in Roman Persephone Sarcophagi

This paper analyzes Roman Persephone sarcophagi dating to the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE and argues that the presence of Eros or several *erotes* within their frontal bas-reliefs was influenced by Ovid's account of the Proserpina (i.e. Persephone) myth in his *Metamorphoses*.

On the heels of 20th-century research into Roman mythology sarcophagi, which treated their characteristic frontal reliefs as metaphors for life or afterlife (Cumont 1942), scholars like Koortbojian (1995) and Zanker & Ewald (2004) began to privilege the reliefs' visual and emotional impact within their funerary context. One symptom of this development was an indifference to literary readings; Zanker even claims that literary readings of mythology sarcophagi are "irrelevant, because they are not articulated in the image itself and we therefore have no way to verify them," (Zanker & Ewald 2004). In comparison, Salvo put forth evidence linking the iconographic schemes of most mythology sarcophagi to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* — yet, Salvo only briefly mentions the abundance of *erotes* on Persephone sarcophagi (Salvo 2015), and this detail deserves more attention.

In Section 1, I demonstrate that Ovid deviated from literary tradition by emphatically including Cupid in his Proserpina narrative, and I begin by outlining this literary tradition across prior accounts of the Persephone myth. The earliest full account is the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, which attributes the infamous separation of mother Demeter and daughter Persephone to the decision of autocratic father Zeus (which reflected social conditions in Archaic Greece [Foley 1999]). This is apparent in lines 2-3 (among others), "her trim-ankled daughter, who was raped by Hades and given by the far-seeing thunderer Zeus." This trope persisted in several other Greek accounts, such as that by Diodorus Siculus which in turn inspired early Latin accounts by Cicero, Vergil, and Hyginus (among others), until it was modified by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* (Ov. *Met.* 363-384). Ovid was the first author to shift the blame for instigating Persephone's abduction from

Zeus onto Venus (i.e. Aphrodite) and her accomplice Cupid (i.e. Eros). In this passage of the *Metamorphoses*, Venus monologues about her intention to extend her own and Cupid's *imperium*, conquering the third realm (i.e. the Underworld) and the otherwise virginal daughter of Ceres in one fell swoop. Additionally, Ovid places Venus in opposition to Pallas and Diana, both of whom have "rejected her" (*abscessisse mihi*). Ficklin argues that this passage alludes to the Julio-Claudians, self-proclaimed "descendants" of Venus, and that Venus' monologue gestures towards the "compulsory sexuality" propounded by Augustan values (Ficklin 2021).

In Section 2, I demonstrate that the inclusion of Eros/*erotes* on the frontal bas-reliefs of Persephone sarcophagi is significant, rather than random or singular, by analyzing select Persephone sarcophagi and summarizing trends across the ca. 100 extant examples. In line with Ovid's account rather than the previous Archaic tradition, Persephone sarcophagi almost always (with only two exceptions) feature one visual formula wherein Eros flies above Hades' chariot, and often adopt *erotes* as an omnipresent decorative motif. The "Persephone Sarcophagus" at the Walters Art Museum is a prime example. Typically, Eros/*erotes* are either included in sarcophagal reliefs as parts of visual formulae, which could have been replicated across sarcophagi, and/or included as an overwhelming decorative presence that would have required more improvisation by the manufacturers. I argue that the numerous examples of either one or both display styles attest to Eros' narrative, rather than just stylistic, significance.

Furthermore, a number of Persephone sarcophagi depict some sort of struggle between Athena and Aphrodite, whereby Athena attempts to prevent the abduction and Aphrodite hinders her (see "Persephone's Rape" at the Uffizi Gallery). Although Athena and Artemis have been traditionally included in the scene since the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, this power struggle is distinctly Ovidian.

In conclusion, the prevalence of *erotes* on Persephone sarcophagi not only reflects Ovid's cultural primacy —supporting Salvo's argument— but also indicates a broader cultural engagement with themes of love, loss, and power dynamics in the myth of Persephone.

Bibliography

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