

IN ORE LEONIS, A METAPHOR FOR DEATH

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Abstract

This article recalls the attention on a sarcophagus relief in Rome at the entrance of the Palazzo San Gallo-Medici-Clarelli in Via Giulia. The frieze shows hunting scenes, whose clou is the lioness attack.

The sarcophagus can be attributed to a Roman workshop, linked to Neo Attic world; a series of comparisons with other contemporary sarcophagi and the features of the deceased man lead to a date between 268-270 AD.

The scope of this paper¹ is to describe a monument almost ignored by the critics, in order to improve our knowledge on the Roman funerary art, and propose new suggestions.

The small portico at the entrance of Palazzo San Gallo-Medici-Marini-Clarelli in Via Giulia, Rome, is decorated with the front panel of a sarcophagus relief representing a lioness hunt. The panel is framed into a modern cornice on the south-eastern wall of the courtyard (*tav.* XVIII, a).

Although an isotopic analysis of the marble has never been made, a visual examination of the slab suggests that the marble is Penthelic. The surviving fragment shows a series of cynegetic episodes. From the left, at the bottom of the scene, a deer hunt, in the foreground, an attack to a wild boar, in the middle the lioness hunt stands out in relief, on the right, a *cursor* scouting.

The frieze shows hunting scenes with a feline, a boar and a pair of deers. The overall composition validates a continuous relationship of representations widely attested in royal contexts – Persian and Macedonian –, among which are the hunting scenes in the painting of Vergina on the façade of Philip II's tomb (including the killing of a bear), and in the monuments at Messene and Delphi². According to the royal patterns, in peacetimes the

paradeigma of virile bravery was conveyed through battle against wild dangers³.

As in Vergina, also this adventure takes place in the winter, as shown by the clothing worn. The rider facing the lioness represents the *clou* of the relief. *Virtus* assists him in the struggle, while a *prodromos* leads the way to beat a path.

The scenes, from left to right, show a dog nips at a powerful boar; the boar hunt represents the climax of the scene, which culminates in the killing of the terrifying boar. On the top left, in the background, in the thick wood, a dog chases a pair of deers. In the background, a bearded man, right arm raised, runs away with a terrified expression (*tav.* XVIII, b). In the vicinity of the running man, another *cursor* rushes in the opposite direction; this huntsman had the task of beating a path for his lord. Holding a dagger and shield, he prepares to face the boar; in the act of dealing a blow to the beast, he bares his teeth as a sign of concentration. The hunter wears a long-sleeved *tunica*; the sleeve is open over the upper part of the forearm; the baldric belt of the sword scabbard crosses the folds of the *tunica*; he is booted. He clasps a round shield; in its centre is an *umbo* from which an eight-pointed star irradiates; only five points of the star are visible. Along the edge, the leather backstitch is also visible.

¹ This article comes out from an RA catalogue: thus, I am grateful to Dr. Daniela Candilio, archaeologist-director coordinating the *Servizio Beni Mobili* (Rome, Archaeological Service), because she gave me the opportunity to study the sarcophagus; besides, I wish to thank Prof. Bernard Andreae, ex Director of the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, who accepted to discuss the topic with me, Prof. Theodosia Stephanidou Tiberiou, Full Professor of Archaeology and History of Roman Art at the University of Thessaloniki, who gave me important advices, finally Prof. Paolo Moreno, Emeritus Professor of Archaeology and History of Roman and Greek Art at the University Roma Tre for his continuous help.

² MORENO 2004, p. 123, fig. 182, p. 132, fig. 196; THEMELIS 2005, p. 60, pl. 35.

³ SEYER 2007, pp. 173-188.

Virtus – extremely frequent on hunting sarcophagi – follows the dead man to personify his military valour; in a word, his bravery (*tav.* XVIII, c, d).

On many sarcophagi the personified *Virtus*' features correspond perfectly to the actual appearance of the deceased man's wife, encouraging her husband in the trial. In this case, however, they are idealized and, from a visual point of view, *Virtus* blatantly "does not dialogue" with the protagonist⁴. Whilst she is not wearing the *chiton* exomis typical of the Amazons⁵, she is dressed like a Scythian woman and her hanging shoulder strap is a motif borrowed from representations of Aphrodite. She is booted with *embades*; the short dress is held tight by a *parazonium*. Her Attic helmet has a scrolled side crest and a visor; its calotte is decorated in relief. On her left arm she holds a shield, whilst in her right hand she once had a spear (now missing); the sharp tip of the weapon is still visible at the breast of the deceased.

The deceased man holds an important position on the figurative panel; riding his horse, he wears a long-sleeved *tunica*, with the sleeve open over the upper part of the forearm. As previously noted, he wears *embades*. He makes a gesture of incitement to attack and, when the lioness suddenly appears, stops his steed to fight her. On the horse's back the skin of a wild animal is used as a saddlecloth: an allusion to the rider's aggressiveness. As a reaction to the impending threat the hero draws back his right leg. The man has a square jaw, a pronounced orbital arch with thick eyebrows, hollow cheeks; his nose is large and prominent, his lips are flat and broad. The lioness has distended udders, because she has just risen from the den with her cubs: this figurative invention adds extra drama to the tumultuous scene by emphasising the dangerousness of the beast. This unusual detail is explicitly developed on the sarcophagus at Béziers, where a ferocious lioness defends her young while feeding it⁶.

The lioness advances menacingly towards the hero, as if attracted by the blood smell of the dead deer, portrayed in the first section: their presence can be inferred from the silhouette and from the prongs of the deer's antlers. The deer served as bait to attract the big cat. Near the recumbent deer is a dog. On the right, a servant leads his companions in an exploration of the wood, spurring his horse to a full gallop.

After the main character, the sarcophagus presents a blank, repaired using stucco. The next horse, with a prominent saddle, neighs in terror: as will be discussed later in further depth, this horse carried a rider on horseback (now missing). Above the beast, over the heads of the horses, the deceased man and the lioness, we can still make out his right arm and the rich drapery, remains of the lost rider. Through analogy, the Munich sarcophagus allows us to reconstruct the scene: the rider near the deceased repeats the gesture of incitement; his hand is above the animal's head and the drapery is between the horse and the menacing lioness (*tav.* XIX, a). The dog portrayed attacking the wild boar on the Munich sarcophagus is of the same breed as that on our sarcophagus⁷.

A thick-haired man characterized by a Negroid prognathism, is shown running as he turns his head to follow the entire unfolding of the scene (*tav.* XIX, b). The relative placement of these three characters recurs in other figurative schemes: the Borghese sarcophagus at the Louvre⁸ and that in Pretestato's catacombs⁹. In both these art works the deceased, accompanied by *Virtus*, faces the feline, whilst the beater heads him galloping.

By this time the mythical deeds of Meleager had popularized the subject of hunting and they now add value to its didactic meaning *ad hoc*: just as the mythical hero was unable to elude his destiny, so the dead man (in the act of crossing the fated *limes* that the lioness hunt serves to symbolize) cannot escape the ineluctable abyss.

⁴ TURCAN 1999, p. 87; Id., 2003, pp. 253-268, esp. p. 262.

⁵ Besides the typical belongings of *mundus muliebris*, in the female tombs of high range near Ordzhonikidze (northern slopes of Causasus) were found army (for instance, kourgan no. 13, tomb n. 2): the data are in agreement with the ancient tradition setting Amazons' adventures in the faraway Scythia (*Hdt.* 4, 110, 7); for this unusual role, the strong female warriors roused the curiosity of Greek people, who usually considered the war a "purely male" business: ONYSHKEVYCH 2001, pp. 23-35, esp. pp. 30-31; thus, the Amazon is the "antiwoman": GIUMAN 2005, pp. 38-39, 55-61.

⁶ ANDREAE 1980, p. 146, n. 19, pl. 72.

⁷ ANDREAE 1985, pp. 22-25.

⁸ MELUCCO VACCARO 1966, pp. 9-60, pl. XI, 25; BARATTE and METZGER, 1985, pp. 24-27, n. 1.

⁹ ANDREAE 1980, 146, n. 19, pl. 72, 2.

The mythological prototype for these popular iconographical patterns is Meleager or Hyppolitus. From 220-230 AD onwards the *bourgeois* hunter had become the new hero and protagonist of the hunts. The new hunter, fashionable on monuments dating to the III century BC, draws inspiration from the *Bildtypus* of Meleager; the mythical hero descends to earth and embodies the "human parable": the eminent bourgeois pursues an ambition to emulate this mythical figure¹⁰.

Virtus personifies the spirit of the hunter¹¹. Tonio Hölscher has recently re-examined the fortunes of the Roman hypostasis from Settimius Severus to Trebonianus Gallus: coins bearing the legend *Virtus Augusta* present the emperor riding his horse and facing up to a lion (*tav.* XIX, c). The prestige of this coin type rebounds in the stylistic composition of the sarcophagi: the presentation of *Virtus* with shield and legs firmly fixed to the ground is attested on one of the hunting sarcophagi in Palazzo Mattei di Giove¹².

Bernard Andreae has classified hunting sarcophagi according to their typology and chronology. He noted that the Avignon and Dèols sarcophagi (pretetrarchic age) presented a wealth of compositional patterns with hunting scenes featuring lions, deer and other forest animals¹³. The variety of expressive research and its specific style make it reasonable to assume that the San Gallo-Medici-Clarelli sarcophagus dates to this period.

Although in the classical iconography the lion was linked to the funerary world, as an allusion to the unpredictable ferocity of death, lion hunts on Roman sarcophagi represent an unusual eschatological symbology; as a premonition of his impending death, Hadrian – *item somniavit a leone oppressum esse*¹⁴, "similarly he dreamt that he was being attacked by a lion" –, and this analogy finds con-

firmation in the verse of the *requiem* reading *libera eas (animas) de ore leonis*¹⁵, "set free their souls from the lion's jaws". After all, the frequent *venationes* in the amphitheatres made this association a commonplace¹⁶. This specific category of sarcophagi, presenting a combat against a lion, was extremely important: the hunt is an expression of imperial power, since the king, helped by *Virtus*, kills the animal-emblem of royalty¹⁷. The evidence makes clear that sarcophagi with hunting scenes (except for the lion hunt) occur more frequently in the Roman provinces. Bernard Andreae, followed in this suggestion by Hugo Brandenburg, suggested that these sarcophagi were commissioned by the local landed aristocracy, whilst monuments depicting lion hunts were intended to glorify the exclusive province of the king and high ranking officers¹⁸.

In the sarcophagi made in Rome, we have a clear *terminus ante quem* of 315-320 AD for those depicting a lion hunt; later this motif disappears, and *Virtus* no longer protects her hunter; the emphasis is now on the hunting of native game and the exaltation of retreat to rural private estates becomes the "Leitmotiv" of funerary research in Roman art¹⁹. Sarcophagi with mixed hunting themes stand on this important *borderline* indicating a significant change in aesthetic sensibilities. The lion, to report an apt definition by Gehrard Rodenwaldt, is the "boundary of the empire".

Based on a stylistic analysis, our sarcophagus can be dated to a period between that of the front panel, which now embellishes Costanza d'Altavilla's burial monument in Palermo (around 260 AD) (*tav.* XX, a)²⁰, and that in Vienna (260-270 AD)²¹. Our monument is reminiscent of the former for the disposition of the characters and the gesture of the running *cursor*, whilst it recalls the *impetus* of the

¹⁰ ZANKER-EWALD 2004, pp. 225-236.

¹¹ BIEBER 1945, pp. 25-34; GANSCHOW 1997, pp. 273-281; HÖLSCHER 1980, pp. 265-321, esp. pp. 286-290, 290, fig. 25; the coin: MATTINGLY 1940, p. 703, n. 70, pl. 93, fig. 5.

¹² ANDREAE 1985, p. 166, n. 128, pl. 13, 1.

¹³ ANDREAE 1980, p. 113, n. 92, 2, pl. 93, 1; pp. 133-140; 112-119.

¹⁴ *Hist. Aug.* 26. 10; HOHL 1965, pp. 27-28.

¹⁵ TOYNBEE 1965, pp. 65-69; lion's funerary meaning; QUASTEN 1938, pp. 50-69; DEONNA 1950, pp. 479-511; KUNZ 1963, c. 1246.

¹⁶ WREDE 1981, pp. 158-175.

¹⁷ ANDREAE 1985, pp. 8-14.

¹⁸ BRANDENBURG 2002, pp. 19-39; BRANDENBURG 2004, pp. 1-34.

¹⁹ ANDREAE 1985, 34-35; WREDE 2001, 94-109, esp. p. 107; MONSERRAT CLAVERIA 2001, pp. 13-14, n. 17.

²⁰ ANDREAE 1980, pp. 184-185, n. 247, pl. 36.

²¹ ANDREAE 1980, pp. 154-155, n. 64, pl. 36.

protagonist, the gesture of incitement made by the *prodromos*, the attack of the big cat and, more generally, the bloody and crowded scrum that we find in the latter.

If we search for a comparison for the protagonist's face, the bust of a private citizen in the Selçuk Museum is vital (*tav.* XX, b); Karsten Dahmen has dated the portrait of this individual, very similar to the hero of the Palazzo San Gallo Medici Marini Clarelli sarcophagus, to the decade 250-260²²: like our hero he has short, cropped hair and beard, deep-set and expressive eyes, and high cheekbones, a broad chin.

The vivid expressionism characterizing the figures on the sarcophagus suggests a date between 268 and 270 AD, as confirmed by the *Zeitgesicht*, "the face of the period", with the face of the deceased man being reminiscent of Trebonianus Gallus' features²³.

The beard is a chronological indicator: in late antiquity hunters are generally depicted as young men without beard or caps. The characters on the sarcophagus are very similar to those on the amphora of Conçesti in terms of features and the portrayal and rendering of their characters²⁴.

The sarcophagus can be ascribed to a Roman workshop, linked to Neo-Attic world; it is inspired by the Athenian style.

Concerning the location of this monument, it can be deduced that it was not part of the original decoration of the Renaissance building, since the drawing by Dosio – (active in Rome in 1566-1576), now in the Uffizi, and based on Antonio da Sangallo's project – makes not mention it²⁵. Leone Ghezzi only records the inscription on the tablet serving as a parapet in the fountain built in the courtyard of the building (still *in situ*) but there is no mention of this sarcophagus²⁶.

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²² INAN-ALFÖLDI-ROSENBAUM 1979, pp. 181-182, n. 143, pl. 116; DAHMEN 2001, pp. 181-182, pl. 140.

²³ ANDREAE 1980, p. 139.

²⁴ CHAMAY-GUGGISBERG-ANHEUSER 2007, pp. 123-169, esp. pp. 143-159.

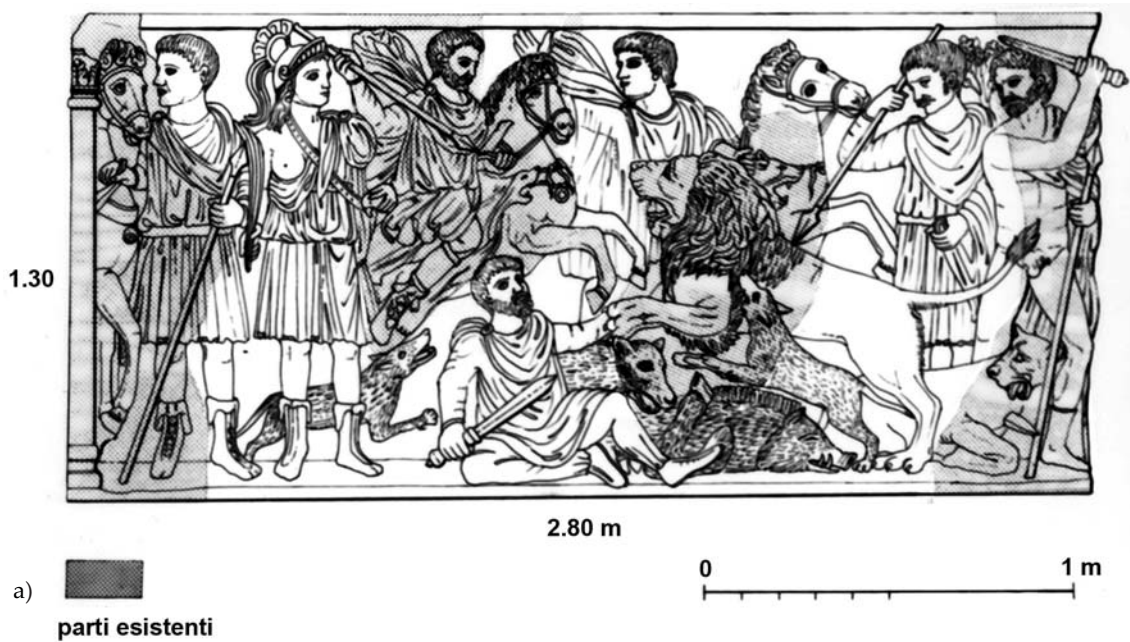
²⁵ TAFURI 1973, p. 275, fig. 172.

²⁶ *CIL* VI, 4, 2, n. 36353 = *ILS* II, 2, n. 8548.

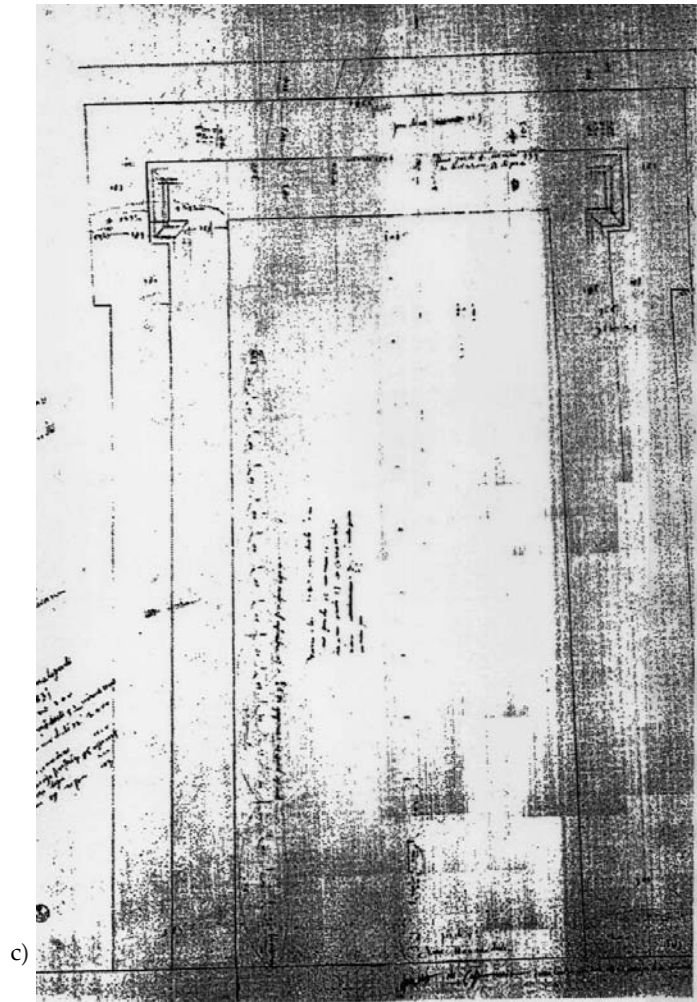
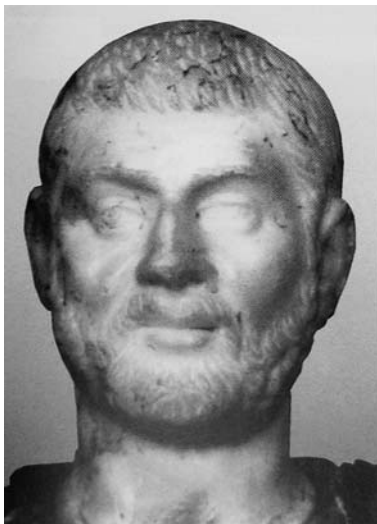
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a) Sarcophagus, Lioness hunt. Rome, Palazzo Medici-Clairelli; b) Sarcophagus, Lioness hunt, detail. Rome, Palazzo Medici-Clairelli; c-d) Sarcophagus, *Virtus* and the deceased, detail. Rome, Palazzo Medici-Clairelli. (Author's photographs)



a) Sarcophagus, Lion hunt. Reconstruction: surviving portions in black. Munich, Antikensammlung. (DAI, Rome); b) A man characterized by Negroid prognathism running on the right. (Author's photograph); c) *Aureus* (180-192 AD). London, British Museum, Department of coins. Commodus fighting against a lion. In the legend *Vir(tus) Aug(usta)*. (HÖLSCHER 1980, 290, n. 25)



a) Front panel of sarcophagus, lion hunt. Within are the ashes of Costanza d'Altavilla. Palermo, Cathedral. (DAI, Rome); b) Private citizen, marble. Selçuk, Archaeological Museum. (DAHMEN 2001, pp. 181-182, pl. 140); c) Drawing by Dosio UA 375, 1005. Project for a Serlian door, according to Vitruvius' description. (TAFURI 1973, p. 275, fig. 172)