

Fit for a Prince: the Significance of the Myth of Hector in Roman Funerary Art

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There is perhaps no story which emphasizes the importance of proper burial so famously as the story of Hector, prince of Troy. One might want to first suggest a Greek origin for this sarcophagus based on its mythical imagery, but the prevalence of Greek myth in Roman culture and the specific impact of this myth make Hector's ransoming an alluring choice for decorating Roman funerary art. By using a story like that of Hector, the individual commissioning this funerary art was able to speak to the necessity of honoring the dead, and perhaps to say something about the deceased individual in the sarcophagus. In this paper, I will discuss first the details of the sarcophagus itself, then how these details affect its perception and use. In particular, I will situate the sarcophagus within its larger historical and cultural context, consider how the mythological scene depicted could have influenced the perceived identity of the deceased individual, and explore what this choice in mythological scene may have indicated about the mourners themselves.



Fig. 1. A sarcophagus lid showing the ransoming of Hector's body. (Kelsey Museum of Archaeology.)

This particular piece is a fragment of the lid of a sarcophagus, made of marble and carved with a relief scene showing the ransoming of the body of Hector. It is made of marble, and dates to the late 2nd or early 3rd century CE.¹ The scene includes six total figures, though it is only a partially preserved fragment of the larger relief. This piece has not been published, though interpretations of it have been suggested; furthermore, I will suggest some specific

¹ Object Label. KM 1979.03.0001.

interpretations of this sarcophagus with respect to both its physical use and the significance of its mythical decoration.

The central figure is, of course, Hector, who is fully armored and is being carried by unidentifiable men, and is preceded by two men holding jugs. Behind him is a woman who has been identified as his wife, Andromache.² Because this is a fragment of the sarcophagus lid, more individuals involved in the story of the ransoming (for instance, Priam) could have been depicted on other fragments which have been lost.

The two men carrying the offerings are described as wearing Phrygian armor.³ The jugs that they carry are presumed to be the goods exchanged for Hector's body, because Priam amassed a huge quantity of wealth to exchange for his son's body in the *Iliad*.⁴ I am inclined to disagree with this identification on the grounds that these figures are moving in the same direction as Hector's body, which seems as if it has been successfully recovered already. Thus, I find it more probable that these vessels are to be involved in the forthcoming burial rites, not involved in the ransoming that has already happened.⁵

The depiction of Hector is fascinatingly different from the rest of the composition— he is dressed as a Roman officer.⁶ There is perhaps no clearer way to indicate that this is a portrait than to put a figure in contemporary dress within a mythological scene. Sarcophagus images from this period often functioned as portraits of the deceased, with their features projected onto the subject of a myth.⁷ In this instance, then, it is likely that the Hector shown on the sarcophagus was meant to look like the individual inside of it, and thus, this individual assumed the role of Hector. More generally, the sarcophagus portrait was in some ways a continuation of the tradition of wax

² Though Andromache is most likely the woman depicted here, numerous other women did mourn Hector, notably including his mother, Hecuba, and his sister-in-law, Helen.

³ Object Label. KM 1979.03.0001. Whether the armor is truly Phrygian in character or is simply in the imagined style of the Trojan War (something from Bronze Age Anatolia more generally) is not clear. Specific pre-Classical Anatolian identities (such as Hittite, Lycian, Phrygian, etc.) were used to refer to various allies of the Trojans, or the Trojans themselves. These groups were actually distinct, each with their own culture. Phrygia specifically was located in the plains of Anatolia east of Troy, roughly 100 km from the modern city of Ankara, Turkey. Though the distinction of Anatolian identities in Homer is certainly an interesting topic, this is not the place for further discussion of it— to know that the Phrygian armor was meant to denote the Trojan side of the war is enough.

⁴ Hom. *Il.* 24. 272-281.

⁵ This is also a more logical interpretation with respect to the significance of burial rites in this story, as will be discussed later.

⁶ Object Label. KM 1979.03.0001.

⁷ Borg, 2013: 163-164.

imagines, and a means of assembling a family group even in death, when placed within a family burial chamber.⁸

From an artistic perspective, the relief shows a significant amount of movement, with depth and detail in each figure. Their clothes drape, they overlap one another, and they are clearly in motion. The woman is lunging after the body, while the body itself shows a limp lifelessness. The men carrying the body are bent from its weight, as is the man ahead of him, while the man on the far left looks back at the whole ordeal, balancing the jug on his shoulder. It is a detailed composition with multiple figures engaging with one another, and showing depth both on their own and in their engagement with the other figures. The quality of this piece suggests wealth on the part of whoever commissioned it. Not only did they highly value the proper burial of the deceased individual, but they had enough money to purchase a sizable marble sarcophagus, and to pay a talented craftsman to carve it with this scene. As previously mentioned, this is also only the lid of the sarcophagus— the rest could have been lavishly decorated as well.

In terms of its origin, this sarcophagus dates to the late 2nd or early 3rd century BCE. This sets the piece near the end of the High Empire, when civil wars and external wars were draining Rome of its money, and other provinces were gaining importance as Rome lost it. In terms of mortuary culture, this period bridging the second and third centuries is remarked on for the abundance and quality of its sarcophagi.⁹ This can in part be accounted for by a shift away from cremation and towards inhumation.¹⁰ In the early 3rd century, around 220 BCE, there was also a trend away from mythological scenes, which were replaced by symbolic images rather than ones with narrative relevance.¹¹ This piece, then, dates to one of the later periods of mythological representation in the mortuary sphere.

It is also essential to consider how sarcophagi were used. At the most basic level, they contained the body of the deceased. From there, once initial mortuary rites were conducted, the sarcophagus probably would have been displayed in a family burial chamber. It would have been visited and re-visited, all the while being viewed by the living. It perhaps would have also been nestled among other mortuary images, which were depicted on the decorations of the chambers

⁸ Platt, 2012: 224-227.

⁹ Borg, 2013: 2.

¹⁰ de Hemmer Gudme, 2018: 357-360.

¹¹ Borg, 2013: 162.

or on other sarcophagi and mortuary objects.¹² The sarcophagus, then, was not meant to be a single-use representation of the individual inside of it, but it was woven into an ongoing perception of death within the context of repeated mortuary rites.¹³

The role of myth is important here as well. Myths were ever-present in Roman life. They were taught, they were used as architectural decoration, they were reworked in shows, and they were, of course, featured in mortuary art. There was a myth for every occasion. As Zanker says, “... the myths created religious and moral traditions as well as cultural identity. They set norms, they provided patterns and models for all conceivable situations.”¹⁴ Thus, the choice to place a myth on a sarcophagus is not an exceptional one; however, the specific choice of myth does offer more unique insight into the identity being constructed for the deceased individual.

This choice of myth is a very clear means of expressing identity. By identifying the dead with the mythological subject (as is done through the portraiture on the sarcophagus in question), a parallel is drawn. In the case of the ransoming of Hector’s body, there are a number of implications which this could carry. Perhaps the most significant among these is the idea of treatment of the dead. To receive a proper burial was to be immortalized, to gain passage to the afterlife, and to be honored in a way befitting one’s life. As Polybius put it, “...the fame of every great and noble action become immortal. And the glory of those, by whose services their country has been benefited, is rendered familiar to the people, and delivered down to future times.”¹⁵ No mythical hero so precisely exemplified this idea as Hector. In life, he was renowned for his battle skill, his bravery, and his nobility, and in death, his father Priam fought hard to get his body back from Achilles in order to bury him properly.

When Hector was killed, Achilles, in a characteristic fit of rage, strung Hector’s corpse to his chariot by the heels and dragged him around for days. This was, of course, after he had stripped Hector of his armor and allowed the other Achaeans to stab at his body.¹⁶ This was an act of blatant disrespect to Hector’s body, made all the more grievous by Hector’s words to Achilles shortly before his death: “I beg you, beg you by your life, your parents— don’t let the

¹² Zanker, 2012: 30.

¹³ There is also the possibility of reuse of sarcophagi, though it is difficult to say if this sarcophagus was reused. As such, it is probably best to consider it in the context of one use, while keeping in mind that its relevance was not limited to the life and death of the deceased individual for whom it was first made.

¹⁴ Zanker, 2012: 35.

¹⁵ Poly. *Hist.* 6.53-54.

¹⁶ Hom. *Il.* 22.442-476.

dogs devour me by the Argive ships! ... give my body back to my friends to carry me home again, so Trojan men and Trojan women can do me honor with fitting rites of fire once I am dead.”¹⁷ It was made apparent how important his burial rites were to Hector, and still he was denied them by Achilles.

However, after keeping Hector’s body even through Patroclus’s funeral games and dragging it repeatedly around the plains of Troy, Achilles was finally moved to give the body back. Priam paid him a visit to bring the ransom, and coaxed him to release Hector’s body by appealing to his humanity, and his own affection towards his father.¹⁸ Finally, as he was brought back into the city, Hector was mourned by his siblings, his parents, his wife, and even by Helen. They delivered heartbreaking speeches about his death, and the *Iliad* ends by describing how the Trojans performed the proper funerary rites, buried Hector, and held a fitting feast in his honor, with the final line, “And so the Trojans buried Hector breaker of horses.”¹⁹

The appeal of Hector’s story as a scene in mortuary art is largely contingent upon the strong need for proper burial in Roman culture. The significance of Hector’s burial rites is heightened by their initial denial, and by the explicitness with which they are described when his body finally is returned. Roman funerary inscriptions attested the importance of honoring the dead and protecting their passage to the afterlife.²⁰ By putting this scene on a sarcophagus, that importance of mortuary rites was echoed.

Additionally, Hector’s story is more emotional than most, and offers points of access for almost anyone. The grief of his family is overwhelming, and so many grieve for him. In Hector’s death, different people were left without a son, a brother, a husband, a father, and a friend. The city itself is suddenly bereft of its greatest protector. In this way, the mythical scene shown was not just for the deceased— after all, the deceased individual was probably not the one who commissioned the sarcophagus. This sarcophagus also involved the mourners, and said something about them in addition to the deceased individual. Any mourner of the deceased individual could find some reflection of their own grief in Hector’s story, and the representation of his ransoming suggests a desire to be mourned and missed.²¹

¹⁷ Hom. *Il.* 22.399-405. = Fagles, 1990: 552.

¹⁸ Hom. *Il.* 24.537-785.

¹⁹ Hom. *Il.* 24.944 = Fagles, 1990: 614.

²⁰ Chioffi, 2015: 641-643.

²¹ A note on Roman mourning is important here. Roman mourning was not a particularly sentimental process; unlike modern mourning, it was meant to be for the dead, not the living. Excessive displays of

Hector's story, while it is perhaps most poignant, is not the only popular tale of reclaiming a body for proper burial rites. Other possible depictions with the same themes could have been the funerary games of Patroclus or Antigone's burial of her brother. These surely would have been familiar to the Roman audience, and would have had a similar effect. However, by emphasizing a commonality with Hector, it is also possible that the family of the deceased individual was able to project a stronger degree of Roman identity based on the mythical origin of Romans as Trojans.

The *Aeneid*, an epic commissioned by Augustus in the first century BCE, describes how refugees from Troy were led by Aeneas (the brother-in-law and dear friend of Hector) to found what would become Rome. Throughout this story, Hector is presented as a beacon of Trojan valor, which would in turn become Roman valor. Notably, he appears to Aeneas and urges him to flee, taking the spirit of Troy with him, and later, Andromache mourns Hector to Aeneas and his men.²² In this way, Hector's depiction on the sarcophagus serves the dual purpose of stressing the importance of grief and burial rites, and strengthening Roman identity through association with the Trojan hero.

As previously discussed, the images shown on the sarcophagus were not just for the deceased. The story of Hector, as someone so widely grieved, had value for mourners as well. One specific possibility of this value for mourners is in the idea of those left behind by casualties of war.²³ Andromache exemplifies this as she laments (both in the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*) how without Hector, she and the other Trojan women are doomed to be slaves to the Achaeans, and Hector's son will suffer fatherless, or simply be killed. The story of Hector, as shown on the sarcophagus, speaks not only to the burial of the deceased, but to the tragedy of those left behind, and to the horrors that violent conflict can inflict even on the survivors.

There is also the possibility of more general themes in the myths shown. As discussed, Hector's ransoming deals with themes of treatment of the dead, grief, and unavoidable mortality. As Borg says, these mythical images, "provided consolation by compassion, and the reminder

grief were discouraged, and a stoic attitude towards death was expected. As such, the primary purpose of the mythological scene was probably the stressing of burial rites, not the depiction of emotional mourning. Nevertheless, as much as stoic mourning may have been expected, private sentimental mourning surely occurred, and so this mythological scene met the secondary purpose of providing some representation of that.

²² Virg. *Aen.* 2.319-350., Virg. *Aen.* 3.339-396.

²³ Zanker, 2012: 75-76.

that all humans, even the greatest heroes of old, had had to die and lose their loved ones.”²⁴ Many mythological scenes, and that of Hector in particular, offer themes that would be applicable to almost anyone. He was beloved by his family and revered by his city. His father worked to get his body back and give him the proper burial that he deserved, and he was thoroughly mourned. In Rome, where both a noble life and a noble death were held in such high esteem, this would have been the ideal model for anyone’s death. To be honored, grieved, and buried properly was a universal aspiration.

Aside from just ideas regarding death and burial, this sarcophagus could have also alluded to the status and identity of the deceased individual. Though only part of it survives, it is clear that this sarcophagus was well made, and presumably fully decorated. This, then, would have been expensive, and anyone who saw it would have recognized that. The subject matter, being Greek in character, also suggested a Greek education, which was accessible only to those who could afford it. As such, this sarcophagus suggests wealth even in its most basic details.

In terms of non-economic status, this image could potentially suggest a position of martial importance (after all, what was Hector known for, if not his skill in combat?), and the portrayal of Hector in a Roman officer’s armor strengthens this point. This particular scene could be important to a Roman officer for any number of reasons. If an officer had been killed in battle, this provided a direct connection to Hector. Even if an officer’s death was unrelated to his military position, the use of Hector in funerary art suggests talent and prestige in the martial sphere. However, it should be noted that while it is possible that the use of Roman armor on Hector is meant to suggest officer status on the part of the deceased individual, it is impossible to say this with certainty.

One must also consider what this sarcophagus suggests about the religious life of the individual— this is particularly important in this period, when Judaism and Christianity were becoming increasingly common in the Roman Empire. Jewish and Christian burials were most frequently inhumations at this time, though beyond that there was great variety in burial practices. For instance, Roman Palestine has examples of Jewish and Christian burials in the form of pit and trench graves, rock-cut tombs, and monumental tombs.²⁵ Among these were a number of funerary vessels, including wooden and stone sarcophagi. As such, the form of the

²⁴ Borg, 2013: 177.

²⁵ De Hemmer Gudme, 2018: 358-360.

burial itself (a stone sarcophagus) offers no insight into the religious identity of the deceased. The imagery, however, might. The choice of a Homeric scene could suggest observance of the Roman polytheistic religion (the gods of which were so closely tied with Greek mythologies), but this is far from conclusive. As previously discussed, there are a number of non-religious reasons why this scene may have been chosen— its association to the founding of Rome as described in the *Aeneid*, its emphasis on proper burial, and its emotional impact, to name a few. To discern religious identity from this sarcophagus is virtually impossible, though it should be kept in mind during this period of religious change within the empire.

As Koortbojian so succinctly puts it, “The sarcophagus sculptures are vehicles for remembrance.”²⁶ In light of the various facets of the sarcophagus as they have been discussed, I believe that here we can recognize two different forms of remembrance here: memory and memorializing. The idea of “memory” means that these funerary images were intended to capture the reality of the deceased individual. In the instance of this specific sarcophagus, possibilities for this would have been portraiture in the sculpture, indications of status (such as military status or wealth required to commission the piece), and suggestion of Greek education. “Memorializing” was a different function, rooted more in the practice of mourning than in the real life of the individual being mourned. The Hector myth also has enormous potential for memorializing, both in the emphasis that it places on proper burial rites, and in the depth of mourning that is shown through the myth. Through these two forms of remembrance, this sarcophagus offers numerous possible interpretations, rooted either in the identity of the individual or in the process of their funerary rites.

²⁶ Koortbojian, 1995: 114.

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