Figures in Transition: The Half-Open Door Motif on the Velletri Sarcophagus

Patricia Tabascio

When a Roman viewer encountered a sarcophagus with closed doors, it was understood as a metaphorical and physical division between the viewer’s position in the realm of the living and the realm of the dead. However, this straightforward relationship between the viewer, door motif and realm for the dead beyond it can be complicated with the inclusion of other elements.

The Velletri Sarcophagus incorporates six scenes of mortal and divine figures in the midst of transitioning between the realms of the living and the dead. This sustained, and unparalleled reference to transition (and preferred utilization of a half-open door) signifies its importance to understanding the sarcophagus’s intended message.

By way of analysing the details of each half-open door scene, their mythologies and contemporary parallels, this article will consider how the half-open door scenes on the Velletri Sarcophagus work together in order to create a cohesive program that uniquely prompts the viewer to contemplate the parameters of life, death, mortality and divinity.
Introduction

To encounter a door that is ajar signals to the viewer that the space beyond its permeable architectural barrier is accessible; that an individual is able to explore the area on the opposite side of the threshold on which they stand and depart this realm whenever they desire. When one perceives a half-open door in a funerary context, however, this rapport is altered in several ways. Commonly interpreted as representing the realm of the dead, or more precisely the doors to Hades, an individual that encounters this motif on Roman sarcophagi is unable to penetrate the realm that the half-open door leads to without joining the departed’s fatal and unalterable state. This firmly distinguishes the metaphorical division between the realm of the living and the dead, as well as the physical division between the body of the living individual and that of the deceased enclosed within the sarcophagus’s walls. This relationship is further complicated when an open door with mortal and divine figures entering and exiting is rendered. Does this represent an invitation to enter? Is it a signal that the realm of the dead can be entered and then subsequently exited? Can this be achieved by anyone?

The Velletri Sarcophagus (Figs. 1-4) is a complex, second-century CE funerary monument that repeats the ambiguous motif of figures in the process of transitioning into and out of the realm of the dead. Discovered in a vineyard about four miles away from the town of Velletri in Contrada Arcione off of Via Ariana, the Velletri Sarcophagus had been uprooted from its original location by grave robbers and was reused by nine individuals (seven adults and two children), whose skeletons span the 12th and 14th centuries, leaving scholars unable to assert its original context and patron.

The sarcophagus’s monumental size (its measurements are 2.57 meters in length,
Figure 2: The Velletri Sarcophagus, Right Short Side, ca. 150-170 CE from the Velletri Museo Civico (Lawrence 1965, fig. 3; courtesy American Journal of Archaeology and Archaeological Institute of America).

Figure 3: The Velletri Sarcophagus, Back, ca. 150-170 CE from the Velletri Museo Civico (Lawrence 1965, fig. 2; courtesy American Journal of Archaeology and Archaeological Institute of America).
1.245 meters in height and 1.45 meters in width), and segmentation into upper and lower tiers (which is the earliest known example of this configuration) makes the inclusion of its 169 figures possible. Simultaneously presented alongside the repeated half-open door motif are scenes that firmly take place in both the realm of the living and the dead that involve a variety of known mythological narratives in addition to secular individuals. Included are all 12 of Herakles’s labors (Figs. 2-4), an animal sacrifice scene (Fig. 2), myths that detail suffering in the underworld (Sisyphus, Tantalus and the Danaides are all included) (Fig. 3) and an idyllic scene of shepherds (Fig. 4).

On the whole, the sarcophagus’ decoration prompts inquiries about its unique configuration, Greek rather than Roman focus and its influence by the Second Sophistic intellectual movement. However, the repeated employment of the door/transition motifs is particularly striking. Not only is the inclusion of multiple doors unparalleled on Roman sarcophagi, but its thematic repetition and its prominent placement on the Velletri Sarcophagus is necessary to understanding the vital conflation of life, death, mortality and divinity. This paper will therefore attempt to highlight the intention of incorporating the half-open door motif.

Figures in motion: entering and exiting the realm of the dead

A total of five scenes on the Velletri Sarcophagus contain figures in the midst of transitioning between the realms of the living and the dead, four of which are by way of a half-open door. The sustained reference to the theme of transition and the preferred utilization of the half-open door motif implies its significance to understanding the central message that is being dispelled. This observation therefore prompts the questions: why was the repeated depiction of figures in the midst of transition included as part of this sarcophagus? What do these scenes communicate about death? How do they relate to the intended funerary function of a sarcophagus? In order to answer these questions, this section will first consider each threshold separately in order to determine the details of each scene and highlight any artistic parallels that may exist. This will provide the foundation needed to deduce how the half-open door scenes work together on the Velletri Sarcophagus in order to create a cohesive message.

Protesilaus and Laodamia

The first scene to consider is located on the front of the sarcophagus, particularly its upper register on the left side (Figs. 1
& 5). It displays Protesilaus (clothed in a short tunic) being led through a half-open door by Hermes in order to reunite with his wife Laodamia for three hours. Hermes (who is already securely in the realm of the living) grasps Protesilaus’ right wrist as he emerges from the half-open door. The precise moment of transition is rendered here, as it displays half of Protesilaus’ body still beyond the half-open door in the realm of the dead. Laodamia waits outside the half-open door for her husband; she is adorned with a mantle fastened around her head, which drapes over most of her body.

The Protesilaus-Laodamia scene on the Velletri Sarcophagus appears in a different formulation than that of the ca. 170 CE Protesilaus and Laodamia Sarcophagus from the Vatican Museum. The front of this sarcophagus exhibits scenes from several aspects of the myth: beginning on the left, Protesilaus is rendered stepping off of a boat, alluding to his arrival at Troy and subsequent death at the hands of Hector, who approaches from the right. In the following scene, Protesilaus lies lifeless on the ground as a shrouded shade emerges from his body and is met by Hermes. Immediately proceeding the scene of Protesilaus’ death is that of Hermes assisting Protesilaus in his exit from the underworld. The central scene displays the anticipated reunion of the married couple in front of a door. This scene is reminiscent of dextrarum iunctio scenes (where a male and female figure clasp hands in front of a closed door) that frequently decorate the front of sarcophagi. Glenys Davies interprets its centrally-placed inclusion as a summary of the sarcophagus’ message of marital bond, the hope for reunion in death, as well as an allusion to virtues such as pietas and concordia. In the adjacent scene the shrouded shade makes his return to the realm of the living as he emerges from behind a seated Protesilaus, while Laodamia reclines on a kline, grief-stricken for her husband’s departure for the underworld. Above her is a portrait of Protesilaus, situated in a shrine that honors deceased relatives. The final scene shows Protesilaus’ ultimate return. He is once again accompanied by Hermes as they walk towards Charon, the ferryman, who will transport Protesilaus back to the underworld. A threshold to the right of Charon visually frames the entire scene and also acts as a means of denoting the barrier between the realms of the living and the dead.

**Alcestis and Admetus**

Alcestis, a daughter of Pelias, was to be married to King Admetus of Pherae. On the day of his wedding, Admetus discovered that he was fated to die young (potentially as a result of failing to sacrifice to Artemis). Apollo persuaded the Fates to allow Admetus to live if a family member or friend would die in his place. After Admetus’ parents refused, Alcestis volunteered to take her husband’s place in the underworld and died for him. Herakles, a guest in Admetus’ house during this event, ultimately rescued Alcestis from the underworld, where she was permitted to live out the rest of her life until death took her in old age.
The detail of a hooded Alcestis' exit from the underworld with the help of Herakles is rendered on the right side of the Velletri Sarcophagus, mirroring the scene of Protesilaus and Laodamia on the front (Figs. 1 & 6). Admetus is depicted as waiting outside of the half-open door in the realm of the living.

Alcestis' departure from the underworld also decorates the short side of the Rape of Persephone sarcophagus in the Uffizi Gallery (from ca. 170 CE). Grasping her hood, Herakles guides the veiled Alcestis from under the archway to her right. Here, Herakles is bearded, holds a club in his right hand and has a lion's skin in his possession, as on the Velletri Sarcophagus.

**Hades and Persephone**

While the remaining scenes on the front of the sarcophagus do not render figures at half-open doors, one scene shows figures in transition and all remaining scenes are significant to interpreting the half-open doors' prevalence.

The enthroned Hades and Persephone are positioned in the center of the upper, and most prominent register (Figs. 1 & 7). They are sculpted on the sarcophagus' primary side, signaling their importance in the decorative program of the sarcophagus as a whole. This observation is further emphasized by the entire register beneath, a scene which precludes Hades and Persephone's union in the underworld. Interestingly, this particular formulation of Hades and Persephone is unparalleled. Scenes exhibiting these two divinities either display the abduction of Persephone or if the two gods are shown enthroned in the underworld, the scene always includes Hermes in the midst of retrieving Persephone for her six-month return to the realm of the living, as in the Rape of Persephone sarcophagus in Casino Rospigliosi. Notably, on a sarcophagus that chooses to display so many figures moving between the two realms, an artistic decision was made to defy a scene's artistic precedent.

The lower register of the front side prefaces the Hades and Persephone scene that surmounts it, demonstrating how that scene came to be by displaying the Rape of Persephone (Figs. 1 & 8). The
Figure 7: The Velletri Sarcophagus, Detail of Hades and Persephone, ca. 150-170 CE from the Velletri Museo Civico (Lawrence 1965, fig. 29; courtesy American Journal of Archaeology and Archaeological Institute of America).

Figure 8: The Velletri Sarcophagus, Detail of the Rape of Persephone, ca. 150-170 CE from the Velletri Museo Civico (Lawrence 1965, fig. 12; courtesy American Journal of Archaeology and Archaeological Institute of America).
center shows the main act of the rape and abduction of Persephone – Hades guides a four-horse chariot to the right as he carries Persephone, who has her right arm flung up over her head in a state of distress. The chariot charges towards the cave in the next register to the right, signalling an entrance into the underworld.

Entering Hades by way of a cave was widely understood as a valid entrance into the realm of the dead in antiquity, such as the supposed cave entrance located at the Bay of Naples. Despite this, the cave motif was seldom utilized with a single example found in the third century CE Tomb of the Nasonii. While the majority of the hypogeum’s wall paintings are fugitive, the seventeenth-century engravings of Pietro Santi Bartoli have recorded their decoration.\textsuperscript{20} The panel that is of particular interest is the lateral painting that depicts Herakles emerging from a cave with Cerberus.\textsuperscript{21}

\textit{The patera scene}

The central scene on the Velletri Sarcophagus’s right short side (Figs. 2 & 9) has been the subject of much scholarly debate,\textsuperscript{22} as it lacks a precise typological parallel. Nonetheless, it consists of known components. In this scene, an older, bearded male figure hands a \textit{patera} to a beardless male figure. The bearded male wears a mantel that drapes over one shoulder and fastens around his waist, leaving his torso bare. The beardless male is naked with the exception of the chlamys that is fastened around his neck; holding a sceptre, he steps into the space beyond the half-open door. This door is distinct from all the other doors that decorate the sarcophagus as it opens inward.

What this scene is meant to convey has been interpreted in several different ways. Klauser relates it to the flanking Labors of Herakles scenes, in that it shows \textit{Zeus} admitting Herakles to Olympus.\textsuperscript{23} As Haarlov points out, however, this interpretation is doubtful because of the absence of attributes that commonly accompany the two figures. In each of the labor scenes, Herakles is rendered with a lion skin and/or a club, as well as sporting a beard. Additionally, the ordering of the labors (which holds true to the chronology of the mythologies) would be disrupted.\textsuperscript{24} The reading that the scene displays Herakles entering Olympus also conflicts with all other half-open door scenes on this sarcophagus. Whether exiting or entering the realm of the dead, the three other half-open door scenes unanimously distinguish the other side of the door as Hades. It is therefore doubtful that this half-open door scene would defy this precedent. Subject to the same criticism that Haarlov gives to Klauser, Andreae retains the interpretation that the beardless male figure is Ilerakles but instead views the other figure as Hades and that it shows \textit{a katabasis}. Andreae concludes by stating that the scene shows an entrance into the underworld as a result of the presence of the \textit{patera}.\textsuperscript{25} Bartoccini and Lawrence eliminate
the mythological interpretation all together, agreeing that the beardless figure represents the deceased, not only because the figure possesses portrait features, but because his possession of a *patera* can be understood as his bringing a libation to the god of the underworld. Libations were also poured by the family of the deceased (directly into the sarcophagus by way of a pipe, called *profusio*) at ceremonies following the funeral. They then interpret the second, bearded figure as his familial ancestor. Haarlov echoes this interpretation and observes parallels between this scene with Greek grave stelai (rightfully so, as the Velletri Sarcophagus possesses Greek influence). One stele he calls upon is from Piraeus and shows a standing, younger man (Hippomachos), who is propped up by the staff nestled under his left arm, shaking the hand of an older, seated man (Kallias). Friis Johansen instead thinks that the scene shows a father with his son, but is uncertain as to what the scene represents: is it a father mourning the loss of his son or the other way round? Recent scholarship has favored the deceased-ancestor interpretation put forth by Bartoccini and Lawrence. I am also in favor of this interpretation, as it is the only hypothesis in which a convincing artistic parallel has been provided.

**Herakles and Cerberus**

The remaining scene that employs the door motif is on the Velletri Sarcophagus’ left short side. It shows Herakles exiting the underworld with Cerberus, which is the 11 of his 12 labors (Figs. 4 & 10). This motif has many parallels in the Roman funerary realm. For instance, these two figures dominate the center scene of the ca. 180 CE Strigilated Sarcophagus from the Capitoline Museum. The Tomb of the Nasonii also employs this motif on one of its lateral walls, which features Herakles emerging from a cave instead of a door.

![Figure 10: The Velletri Sarcophagus, Detail of Herakles and Cerberus, ca. 150-170 CE from the Velletri Museo Civico (Lawrence 1965, fig. 33; courtesy American Journal of Archaeology and Archaeological Institute of America).](image)

Aiding the mourner: the didactic component of figures in transition

Scholars have, for the most part, maintained a similar position when interpreting the inclusion of mythological narratives on Roman sarcophagi from the Antonine period: that their display encourages the viewer to associate the deceased with the same virtues and values that the protagonists possess. For example, the utilization of the 12 labors of Herakles, which span the upper registers of the right short side, back and left short side of the Velletri Sarcophagus, is one common method of paralleling the *virtus* of the hero with the deceased on marble sculpted sarcophagi.

This interpretation has also been applied to mythological narratives that include figures in transition between the realms of the living and the dead. For instance,
sarcophagi that depict or merely allude to Alcestis' sacrifice, which also appears on the Velletri Sarcophagus, solidifies her as an exemplum pietatis. In addition, Alcestis' inclusion in sarcophagi decoration not only promotes the application of the same set of virtues to the deceased, but it also reminds the viewer that the continued imitation of these virtues in life could result in their reunion in death.

While the above interpretation has the potential to explain the intended function of half-open doors on the Velletri Sarcophagus, I propose an alternative method for understanding their inclusion — that its five transition motifs invite the viewer to reflect upon death, life and mortality, ultimately assisting with their mourning process.

My interpretation stems from the artistic decision to compress the wider narrative of each of the four half-open door scenes in favor of highlighting the moment of transition from one realm to the other. Concerning the Protesilaus-Laodamia and Alcestis-Admetus scenes, the emphasis on the moment of transition and the imminent reunion of the spouses brings about an alteration of the mythologies' typical decoration and ultimate iconographic significance as it is known on other Roman sarcophagi from the period. For instance, the previously considered Protesilaus and Laodamia Sarcophagus from the Vatican displays the entirety of this myth on the sarcophagus' front. While the Vatican sarcophagus highlights Protesilaus' four transitions between life and death by the assistance of a divinity, the central scene, which is reminiscent of dextrarum iunctio, is what ultimately influences the decoration's central message of marital love and feminine devotion, paralleling the relationship the deceased shared with their partner with that of the mythological couple.

More similar in form and overall message is the Alcestis-Herakles scene on the short side of the Rape of Persephone sarcophagus in the Uffizi Gallery. It contains decoration of Persephone's abduction and imminent transition into the underworld on the front, Herakles leading Alcestis out of Hades on one short side and Hermes escorting Eurydice out from the underworld on the other short side. The sarcophagus' message is therefore centered around the transition between life and death and the ability of all female mythological figures included as part of the decoration to traverse this boundary with help from a divinity. Where it differs from the Velletri Sarcophagus is the omission of Alcestis' husband waiting for her return in the realm of the living. The Protesilaus-Laodamia and Alcestis-Admetus scenes on the Velletri Sarcophagus thus fall somewhere uniquely in the middle of their respective parallels — it displays whom among the living are affected by the ability of their deceased loved ones to temporarily return to life and also isolates the precise moment of transition, as both Protesilaus and Alcestis have half their bodies in the realm of the living and the other half on the other side of the door. The depiction of figures straddling the boundaries of the realms of life and death is also portrayed on the remaining two half-open door scenes — Herakles' foot and half of the creature he guides remains in the realm of the living, while the deceased-ancestor scene displays the departed with his foot in the realm of the dead.

The inclusion of the repeated half-open door motif showing the precise moment of transition between life and death helps the viewer in their process of mourning the deceased. It may initially seem that this hypothesis assumes that the various scenes showing figures emerging from the underworld to be reunited with their loved ones provides a sense of hope that Herakles or Hermes will too assist the deceased in their miraculous return to life. This is, of course, not what I am suggesting, for it is the inevitability of death which the half-open door scenes allude to that assist in the
mourning process. As Elsner has suggested, not only do the exit scenes on the Velletrì Sarcophagus reinforce that the boundary between life and death is only permeable for select, mythological figures, but that it also possesses a didactic component. Furthermore, Proteisilau's temporary return to life only left his wife to grieve to an even greater extent than after his initial death, leaving the viewer to wonder if Proteisilau's short return was even worth the aftermath.

This reading of the front's half-open door scenes raises a further consideration: in both the Proteisilau-Laodamia and Alcestis-Admetus exit scenes, although they return to the realm of the living, both mythological figures eventually return to Hades permanently. For Proteisilau, his return to the underworld is almost immediate, while Alcestis is permitted to live out her life until death takes both her and Admetus in old age. Both scenes therefore act as a helpful visual reminder that death is unavoidable, even for those chosen few brought back to the realm of the living temporarily.

The conclusions pertaining to the two half-open door scenes above also pertain to the remaining decoration on the front, detailing the abduction of Persephone. Furthermore, the Proteisilau-Laodamia and Alcestis-Admetus exit scenes prompt the viewer to recall aspects of Persephone's mythology that are not artistically rendered, specifically the detail that she is required to spend half of every year with Hades in the underworld. Like Proteisilau and Alcestis, Persephone is able to break free from Hades with help from the transitional divinity Hermes, but is required to ultimately return. This feature of her mythology is further reinforced through Persephone's static positioning in the central scene. Interestingly, the Velletrì Sarcophagus's central scene defies the artistic precedent set by all other surviving, parallel scenes by way of omitting the figure of Hermes, who collects Persephone for her six-month stint in the realm of the living. The formulation of the center scene is additionally noteworthy as a result of the decision to not show transition when all those surrounding it show figures moving between the realm of the living and the dead. The conscious decision to render Persephone in a static state therefore is intrinsic to communicating its message about the inevitability of permanently crossing the metaphorical threshold from life into death. All scenes on the front of the Velletrì Sarcophagus therefore provide a visual commentary on the ancient understanding of death and what the viewer already knows to be true – that all, even those few mythological figures permitted to exit Hades for a time, must ultimately return to the underworld and thus confront Hades and Persephone in death.

The viewer would subsequently move on to the right short side and perceive the half-open door motif of the deceased receiving a patera from his ancestor and entering Hades. This scene seeks to reinforce the message expressed on the front; immediately after viewing the front and the messages it communicates about the inevitability of joining Hades and Persephone in death, the mourning viewer is able to approach the deceased-ancestor scene with a sense of understanding that death was the departed's ultimate fate, as it will also be the viewer's in time. While obviously metaphorical in its artistic formulation, the deceased-ancestor scene visually articulates the genuine and compulsory transition from life to death that is alluded to on the front and that the deceased experienced. This interpretation and similar artistic rendition of parting with a loved one at death has been previously expressed by Friis Johansen concerning similarly formulated Classical Greek funerary stelai.

The final half-open door scene is of Herakles exiting the underworld with Cerberus. The 11th labor of Herakles is not only included to complete the entire labors cycle on the Velletrì Sarcophagus, but it may additionally contribute to and reinforce the
message of the other transition scenes, as it displays a divinity that possesses a unique ability to traverse the realms of the living and dead.

**Conclusion**

As it has been alluded to throughout this paper, inclusion of an artistically rendered half-open door in a funerary context has the potential to be interpreted several ways: as a method of aligning the virtues of a hero with the deceased,\(^3\) signalling untimely death\(^4\) or the hope for reunion beyond life.\(^5\) However, the anomalous decoration of the Velletri Sarcophagus (both in terms of its unique paring of mythologies and artistic rendition of each myth) requires an alternate lens which one should interpret its message.

By way of considering the Velletri Sarcophagus’ prominent placement and repeated use of the half-open door, rendition of the precise moment of transition, associated mythologies (when applicable), and contemporary parallels that meticulous inclusion of the half-open door intends to aid the mourning viewer, which is achieved through the repeated nod to the inevitability of death for both the deceased and the viewer, and the prospect of reuniting with the deceased in death.\(^6\)

---

**Endnotes:**

3. The Velletri Sarcophagus dates to the second century CE (Elsner 2012, 185; Lawrence 1965, 222; Newby 2016, 247; Platt 2012, 224), but narrowing down its creation during this hundred-year period has proved difficult. Considering the decoration from comparable sarcophagi and additional factors such as its customization, it is reasonable to date the artifact to 150-170 CE (Jongste 1992, 9-10; Platt 2012, 224).
6. Edmund Thomas suggests that the sarcophagus was originally located in the villa of Fontana Sant’Antonio, as it is the villa closest in proximity to its findspot (Thomas 2011, 408). Several other scholars have instead argued that the sarcophagus was made for the family of the Octavians, a recognized family in Velletri (Bieber 1966, 65; Wagener and Ashby 1913, 399), and that its original location was the villa of San Cesareo (Wagener and Ashby 1913, 413-14).
15. Huskinson 2012, 84.
17. Tonybee 1971, 44.
29. Friis Johansen 1951, 40.
30. Friis Johansen 1951, 40.
36 Wood 1978, 510.  
37 Zanker 2012, 169.  
38 Elsner 2012, 186.  
39 Elsner 2012, 186.  
40 as outlined by Glenys Davies  
41 Davies 1985, 629.  
42 Ewald and Zanker 2012, 229; Jongste 1992, 11 and 32.  
43 Wood 1978, 504.  
44 Wood 1978, 504.  
45 Davies 1985, 629.  

Works Cited:  


