

ACTA CLASSICA UNIV. SCIENT. DEBRECEN.	LVI.	2020.	pp. 281–296.
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## FROM GRIEF TO *SUPERBIA*: THE MYTH OF NIOBE IN GREEK AND ROMAN FUNERARY ART

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*Abstract:* The Greek myth of Niobe was known in the ancient world both by literary sources and visual representations. Both in Ancient Greece and in Ancient Rome, the myth was represented, alongside a variety forms of art, in funerary art, but in a different manner during each period of time. In Ancient Greece, the myth was represented on Apulian and South Italian vases, portraying the finale scene of the myth: Niobe's petrification. In Ancient Rome, a shift is visible: the portrayal of the scene of the killing of Niobe's children on sarcophagi reliefs. The aim of this paper is to follow the iconography of each culture and to understand the reason for the shift in representation, while comparing the two main media forms.

*Keywords:* Niobe, Greek Mythology, Mythology, Greek Art, Roman Art, Art History, Funerary Art, Sarcophagi, Greek Tragedies, Homer, Ovid, Apulian Vases

### Introduction

Many of the Greek myths which are found in a variety of literary and visual sources were developed, represented and adapted in different eras, societies and cultures throughout the ages. The myth of Niobe is one among those Greek myths. The aim of this paper is to examine the differences in the visual funerary representations of Niobe's myth, which were found in ancient Greece and Rome, while also examining the differences in death conceptions in those societies.

Niobe was the daughter of Tantalus and the queen of Thebes, wife of Amphion, king and founder of Thebes. She bore many children, the number varying from version to version. It is told that Niobe boasted about her superiority to the goddess Leto, for she had a large number of children, while Leto had only two: Apollo and Artemis. This statement makes Niobe one of the many *hybristai* characters in Greek mythology, since boasting of superiority over a goddess is considered an act of *hybris*. As in any act of *hybris*, she was punished accordingly: Leto asked Apollo and Artemis to avenge their family's dishonor and to take from Niobe the reason for her boasting: her children. Apollo and Artemis shot and killed all or most of the Niobids with arrows, thus leaving Niobe with nothing to boast about and her

alleged superiority demolished. Some of the sources also present the death of Amphion following the death of his children. In most versions, a metamorphosis element is described: as a result of Niobe's grief she was petrified. It is told that she still weeps, and that water runs from the stone.<sup>1</sup>

The myth of Niobe was featured in art and literature in Greece, Rome and forward to the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period. The use of this myth varies in each context together with the focus on specific scenes or ideas from the myth.

Both in Ancient Greece and in Ancient Rome, the myth was represented, alongside a variety forms of art, in funerary art, but in a different manner during each period of time. In Ancient Greece, the myth was represented on Apulian and South Italian vases, portraying the finale scene of the myth: Niobe's petrification while inside a *naiskos*. In Ancient Rome, a shift is visible: the portrayal of the scene of the killing of Niobe's children, the Niobids on sarcophagi reliefs. The shift is due to the iconographic tradition of each period of time, the difference in death conception and the message which was meant to be represented in each medium and culture.

This paper aims to follow the iconography of each aforementioned culture and era and to analyze the shift in representation in funerary art, while comparing the two main media forms of art which are found in these two cultures.

## The Myth of Niobe in Ancient Greek Literature

The myth of Niobe was featured in many sources in Greek literature, starting with Homer's *Iliad*, the *Bibliotheca* of Pseudo-Apollodorus, which seems to refer to a few older sources, two Greek tragedies which feature Niobe as the main heroine: of Aeschylus and Sophocles, and a few other Sophoclean plays which refer to her character in various situations.

While it is probable that Homer did not invent all the myths which are found in his epic poems the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and that they represent older traditions in Greek society, he is credited with preserving the myths in their fullest written versions. Like many other myths to which Homer refers,<sup>2</sup> and from the phrasing of the story, it is clear that the myth was already known when it was mentioned in the *Iliad*: "For even the fair-haired Niobe was bethought her of meat..." (Hom., *Il.* 24, 602).<sup>3</sup> In the closing book, which revolves around the

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<sup>1</sup> Gantz 1993, 536–540.

<sup>2</sup> Létoublon presents the critical approach, 'Neoanalysis', which is based on the idea Homer already knew the traditions of the myths he told. Létoublon 2014, 28.

<sup>3</sup> "...καὶ γὰρ τ' ἠῦκομος Νιόβη ἐμνήσατο σίτου." Trans. by Murray 1924.

dead body of Hector, son of Priam, Niobe's story is featured as a point of comparison for the grief of the king of Troy, thus making the story a *paradeigma*. The myth is told by Achilles, who wants to encourage Priam to eat after they both weep for their losses: Achilles for his friend Patroclus and for his father, Peleus, and Priam for his son, Hector. Niobe is recognized here as the mother of twelve children and the base story, about her boasting and subsequent punishment, is introduced (Hom., *Il.* 24, 607–608).<sup>4</sup>

A question may be raised: Why did Homer choose a woman who committed *hybris* for his *paradeigma*? Priam, although the king of Troy and an enemy of Achilles, did not boast. As will be seen later in this paper, this is not the only case in Greek literature and art in which Niobe's myth is used as a *paradeigma* for a situation in which there was no act of *hybris*. Achilles compares the two personae solely with respect to their grief, and not in relation to an act of *hybris*.

Willcock defines a *paradeigma* as a "...myth introduced for exhortation or consolation".<sup>5</sup> The function of the *paradeigma* was mostly to comfort: "X was in a worse situation than yours, but got through it, so you will get through this" or to encourage: "X persevered through harder times than yours, so you should persevere".<sup>6</sup> In the case of Niobe, the myth is brought up for both purposes: Achilles wants to encourage and to comfort Priam by recounting a story about a grieving mother whose situation is worse than Priam's, since she had lost twelve children and Priam had lost only one.

The *paradeigma* is a common narrative technique in Greek texts, particularly in a so-called historical narrative, as in this case of the Trojan War. It is also common for the point of comparison, the *paradeigma*, to feature to a mythic character rather than a 'historical' one. Thus, Niobe's story is appropriate for Priam's situation according to all the aforementioned criteria: Niobe is a mythic character, she is a relevant point of comparison for the grieving father, and her situation may be interpreted as "worse".

After Homer, for the rest of the Archaic period, there are no other full texts recounting the myth. In later Greek and Latin sources, we learn about the early poets and their references to the myth. The *Bibliotheca* of Pseudo-Apollodorus refers to a few older sources and cites the number of the Niobids mentioned in each

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<sup>4</sup> Even though the specific word "hybris" is not mentioned in the text, it is implied when Niobe puts herself on the same level, or even superior to the goddess Leto: "...οὐνεκ' ἄρα Λητοῖ ἰσάσκετο καλλιπαρήφῃ: φῆ δ' αὐτῆ γείνατο πολλούς."

<sup>5</sup> Willcock 1964, 142.

<sup>6</sup> Livingstone 2014, 126.

source.<sup>7</sup> The composition itself asserts that there were seven sons and seven daughters and described the boasting mother, the punishment, and the act of turning Niobe into stone by Zeus.<sup>8</sup> The text also includes the names of Niobe's seven sons and seven daughters, while no names are mentioned in Homer's version. Pseudo-Apollodorus also adds another detail which was not presented by Homer: the survival of both Amphion and the eldest daughter Chloris (Apollod., *Bibl.* 3.5.6).

The myth is also represented in the Greek tragedies of the fifth-century BCE Athens. Vickers argues that Greek tragedy is "... essentially a representation of human suffering, and the causes and effects of it; and that within and without the play this suffering produces in humane characters or in humane spectators the feeling of sympathy for the sufferer."<sup>9</sup> Although the Greek tragedy derives its main storylines from older myths and traditions, Vickers argues that it is translated into contemporary feelings and values and that there is a continuity in social and religious attitudes, from Homer to the fifth century.<sup>10</sup>

For our purpose, two common themes of Greek tragedy stand out as being relevant to the Niobe myth: the relations between gods and men and the value of family. As Vickers argues, the value of family is one of the most important subjects in everyday life. The concept of family can define and lend identity to an individual, by means of their legacy, continuity, land and property. When the last generation of a Greek family dies without issue, the *oikos* dies with it.<sup>11</sup> In Niobe's myth, we can witness the end of one of a known mythological family: the legacy of Tantalus.<sup>12</sup>

The other subject is the relationship between the gods and men. The *hybris* is a fundamental act presented in Greek tragedies. There is a slight difference between Aeschylus' and Sophocles' use of the term. Fisher defines Aeschylus' use of the term as religious and identifies it as the basis for the understanding of the relations between gods and men in his plays.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, Sophocles, although he sometimes uses the act of *hybris* in a religious sense, his principal use of the term is as an act between mortals: mainly crimes and humiliations.<sup>14</sup> Unfortu-

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<sup>7</sup> For instance, he mentions that Hesiod refers to ten sons and ten daughters, Herodotus to two sons and three daughters, and Homer to six daughters and six sons. Hom., *Il.* 24, 604.

<sup>8</sup> A detail which is not mentioned in Homer.

<sup>9</sup> Vickers 1973, 52.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 101.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 110.

<sup>12</sup> In various ancient sources, Tantalus was a wealthy king, whose kingdom differs according to the sources. In the context of the myth of Niobe, he is identified as king Sipylus in Lydia. He is the father of Pelops, king of Pisa, Broteas and Niobe. See Gantz 1993, 531–536.

<sup>13</sup> Fisher 1992, 247.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 298.

nately, since the plays referring to Niobe have been preserved only in a few fragments and ancient testimonies, the differences that Fisher raises are not discernible. However, the arguments of Fisher and Vickers help define the uses of the myth in tragedies, and thus also shed light on the manner in which the myth of Niobe may have been used in this genre.

A number of scholars have tried to reconstruct Aeschylus' *Niobe* based on the surviving fragments.<sup>15</sup> Both Fitton Brown and Keuls placed the scene in Thebes, because of fragment 160 and its reference to Amphion's home.<sup>16</sup> Fragment no. 154a probably reveals the opening scene:

"... this is the  
[third(?) day that she has been sitting at this tomb, a living mother  
brooding over her dead children, with the unhappy beauty of her  
from [melt]ing away. A [mortal] afflicted is nothing..."<sup>17</sup>

Both Fitton Brown and Keuls agree that in the opening scene, according to fragment 154a, Niobe is already seated on the grave of her children, silent and veiled, and will probably not speak for most of the play.<sup>18</sup> They further agree that according to fragment 158, Tantalus is one of the main characters and arrived in Thebes during the play.<sup>19</sup> This identification of Tantalus will be of help in further discussions of the visual representations of the play.

The remaining fragments are shorter and less informative. It is believed that Niobe speaks following pleadings from her father and that her first words are a long lamentation. At the end of the play Niobe is believed to be petrified.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, only a few fragments of Sophocles' play have survived, which reveal a number of points about the story. Most of the surviving fragments are presented in two papyri, published in 1971 and 1984 (P. Oxy. 2805 and 3653 respectively). The first fragment is as follows:

"*Niobe* which began with this line: The most ... son of Zeus. The plot is as follows: Niobe had an excessive love for her children and often said that her own progeny was better than that of Leto.

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<sup>15</sup> I will refer mainly to Fitton Brown 1954 and Keuls 1978. Neither fragmentary play has been dated, so it is not known which play came first. The order of examination of the plays is mainly arbitrary, but since Aeschylus preceded Sophocles, his play will be discussed first.

<sup>16</sup> Sommerstein 2009, 169: "...the halls and home of Amphion." Fitton Brown 1954, 176.

<sup>17</sup> Sommerstein 2009, 163. "τῆρι τῆρι ἡμῶν τόνδ' ἐφημένη τάφον τέκνοις ἐπέζει ζῶσα τοῖς τεθνηκόσιν, ]κα τὴν τάλαιναν εὐμορφον φύην]ς κακῶθεϊς δ' οὐδὲν ἄλλ' ἐ[ῖ] μή..."

<sup>18</sup> Fitton Brown 1954, 179–180. Keuls 1978, 64–67.

<sup>19</sup> Fitton Brown 1954, 177.

<sup>20</sup> Fitton Brown 1954, 179–180. Keuls 1978, 65–66.

While sending the boys off to hunt with some friends she boasted of them again, saying that she was the mother of the best of all children..." (P. Oxy. 3653, Fr. 1.).<sup>21</sup>

In this fragment, we learn that Niobe sent her boys to hunt, and it is probable that they were slaughtered off stage and that their death was revealed to us by a messenger.<sup>22</sup>

In the second fragment<sup>23</sup> we learn about Amphion's death, which Easterling argues announces by a messenger whom he identifies as the old *paidagogos*.<sup>24</sup>

Fragment 441a, which is not from the papyri, reveals a few lines, spoken by Apollo to Artemis, as follows:

"<Apollo>

"Do you see that frightened one inside, the one who is cowering alone trying to hide, in the tun-store and by the bins? Will you not aim a swift arrow at her, before she can hide out of sight?"<sup>25</sup>

Apollo turns Artemis' attention to a girl who is hiding. Easterling argues that this fragment indicates that the slaughter scene of the daughters was shown on stage, and places Apollo in the acting area and Artemis inside the stage building.<sup>26</sup> A few more fragments of the play survived, quoted by different authors, but none of them reveals many details about the essential and basic components of the play.

From the reserved fragments of the two plays, it seems that there are two different beginnings to the story: while it seems that Aeschylus' play began with Niobe seated and grieving on her children's grave, Sophocles' play seems to have begun at an earlier point in time as it appears to include the slaughter of Niobe's daughters. This discrepancy implies that the plot of each tragedy focused on a different part of the myth: the grief in the first, and the immediate punishment in the second.

These two plays are not the only tragedies which feature Niobe. She is presented in two others of Sophocles' tragedies: *Antigone* and *Electra*. In these plays, Niobe is mentioned briefly, as a *paradeigma*, and not as the main heroine.

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<sup>21</sup> Lloyd-Jones 2007, 228–231. "Νιόβη ο[ἷ] ἀρ[χή] ἦδε· ]ις ἡλίου τέκνα. ἡ δ' ὑπόθεσις· Νιόβη τοὺς παῖδας περισσότερον στέρξασα πολλάκις τὴν γονὴν τὴν ἰδίαν ἀμείνονα τῆς Λητοῦς ἔφησεν. ἀποπέμποσα] δὲ ἐπὶ θήραν τοὺς ἄρρενας μετὰ φίλων τινῶν πάλ]ιν ἐμεγαλορημ[όν] ησενῶς παναρίστων ὑ]πάρχουσα μήτη[ρ] τῶνδε κατὰ τὰς."

<sup>22</sup> Easterling 2006, 12.

<sup>23</sup> Lloyd-Jones 2007, 231.

<sup>24</sup> Easterling 2006, 12.

<sup>25</sup> Lloyd-Jones 2007, 231–233. "<ΑΠΟΛΛΩΝ> ὄρ]ᾶς ἐκείνην τὴν φοβουμένην ἔσω, τ]ὴν ἐν πιθῶνι κἀπὶ κυψέλαις κρυφῆμό]νην καταπτήσουσας; οὐ τενεῖς ταχύνιό]ν κατ' αὐτὴν πρὶν κεκρυμμένην λαθεῖν;"

<sup>26</sup> Easterling 2006, 11.

Mythological *paradeigmata* are common in the realm of Greek tragedies and are mostly introduced by a way of a comparison, often for the purpose of exhortation or consolation, much like in other genres in Greek literature. The author often focuses on different aspects of the myths from those emphasized in the pre-Classical period and occasionally introduces original elements. The portrayal of the classical myths in the genre of Greek tragedy is an intriguing area of study, which examines the manner in which tragedies approached the myths and processed them into something distinctive to the genre.<sup>27</sup>

In lines 823–833, in Sophocles' *Antigone*, while talking to the chorus about her fate, Antigone compares herself to Niobe and gives an extensive description of the latter's petrification. Interestingly enough, she does not mention the *hybris* act or the slaughter of Niobe's children. Like Homer, Sophocles has an agenda too: to compare the two heroines by pointing out their similarities. Antigone cries about her fate and matches her fate to that of Niobe. The chorus rejects the comparison, stating that Niobe is a goddess and an offspring of the gods, while Antigone is merely human (Soph., *Ant.* 834–835).<sup>28</sup>

There are a few points of comparison between Antigone and Niobe, the most obvious one being their respective punishments; Antigone was doomed to die a 'rock-bound death', as Griffith defines it, while Niobe was trapped forever in a rock form. However, it seems that the theme of grief itself is the main reason for invoking Niobe as a *paradeigma*.

The next Sophoclean heroine who mentions Niobe is Electra, in Sophocles' tragedy by the same name. Electra, lamenting the death of her father, Agamemnon, turns to two figures from Greek mythology, Procne and Niobe (Soph., *El.* 145–149, 150–152).<sup>29</sup> Both of these mythological women, as Electra claims, are the ultimate mourners, who do not forget the deaths of their family and mourn forever. Electra admires Niobe and gives her goddess-like quality, since she weeps forever as a rock.

Like Antigone, Electra turns to Niobe's grief to emphasize her own. Interestingly, she also does not recall the *hybris*, and only mentions the death of Niobe's children, without expanding on the subject. The eternal mourning is what interests her, despite the major difference in their circumstances: while Niobe is responsible

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<sup>27</sup>Konstantinou 2015, 476–477.

<sup>28</sup> "Yet she was a goddess, as you know, and the offspring of gods, while we are mortals and mortal-born." Trans. by Jebb 1900. This claim will be discussed below in the context of *Electra*.

<sup>29</sup> "Foolish is the child who forgets a parent's piteous death. No, closer to my heart is the mourner who eternally wails, "Itys, Itys," that bird mad with grief, the messenger of Zeus."; "Ah all suffering Niobe, you I count divine, since you weep forever in your rocky tomb!" Trans. by Jebb 1900.

for her children's death, Electra is not responsible for the death of her father. This detail is irrelevant with regard to making the *paradeigma* stand.

In both of these references of *Antigone* and *Electra*, two details stand out: Niobe's grief and her petrification. The above analysis shows that, just like in the *paradeigma* of Homer, here too there are some difficulties in comparing the characters one on one. Furthermore, Sophocles, like Homer, alters and leaves out some details of the story, to match his agenda.

It may be concluded that the use of Niobe as a *paradeigma*, both in Homer and in tragedies, does not concern the act of *hybris* but rather the portrayal of Niobe as a symbol of grief. Her unique grieving process, until the point of petrification, grants her the prestigious status of the ultimate grieving mother, and this is probably the reason for her use in a variety of *paradeigmata*.

From the literary evidence, it seems that the myth has two main uses: Niobe as a stand-alone story and Niobe as a *paradeigma*. Even though Niobe is considered to be one of the most renowned hubristic characters in mythology, it is the theme of her loss, mourning and metamorphosis which stands out in different literary sources and is the main the reason for her use as a point of reference and *paradeigma*. The only surviving representations of the myth as a stand-alone story are in the two fragmentary tragedies which feature her as the heroine. It is possible, especially in the case of Aeschylus' version, that in these representations too, the theme of mourning played a significant part. However, as may be seen in most Greek tragedies of fifth-century Athens, acts of *hybris* are found in abundance. Therefore, we may assume that the stand-alone stories of the myth focus on the *hybris*, as well as on the mourning and metamorphosis. In the representations of the myth as a *paradeigma*, the *hybris* play a secondary role, and sometimes, as was seen in *Electra*, was overlooked entirely. It seems that based on the Greek literary evidences, Niobe is mostly presented as the ultimate grieving mother, and it is this part of the myth which takes the lead.

This survey of Greek literature in the context of the myth of Niobe shows us that the myth was featured mostly as a *paradeigma*, concentrating on Niobe's grief rather than her act of *hybris*. To complete this survey, we now move to Greek funerary art, which seems to continue this line of conception.

### **The Myth of Niobe in Ancient Greek Art**

The myth of Niobe was well-known to the Greek society and was a part of an oral and visual tradition as well as a literary one. The oral tradition was not preserved, and we rely only on the literary and visual traditions. There are many different



representations of the Niobe myth in Greek and South Italian art. However, for the purpose of this paper, the examination will focus on a specific group of pottery.

Red-figure pottery of local manufacture is known in South Italy from the fifth century BCE, and from the fourth century, drama and performance scenes begun to appear in its decorations. Scenes from Attic tragedies were particularly common, especially on large Apulian vases. These were usually variations on scenes and characters from a certain tragedy, rather than accurate depictions of specific episodes.<sup>30</sup> It has been argued that the South Italian and Apulian painters who adopted tragic themes did so for funerary purposes, unlike their Attic counterparts, which mostly represented scenes from oral and other literary traditions.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, it is thought that painted vases discovered in graves were not placed there directly, serving merely funerary gifts, but were first used in the burial ceremony.<sup>32</sup>

A group of fourth-century South Italian vases have been identified by a number of scholars as a representation of Aeschylus' *Niobe*.<sup>33</sup> Most vase paintings follow the same iconography: Niobe is depicted inside a *naiskos* with a variety of characters around her. Her father, Tantalus, is identified on most vases. Several other figures re-occur: an old woman, mostly portrayed with white hair and often seated in a lamentation position, can be identified as an old nurse. A group of women carrying funerary offerings is often depicted, perhaps representing the chorus of the play.<sup>34</sup>

One of the most elaborated vases in this group is the Naples loutrophoros (fig. 1).<sup>35</sup> At the center of the composition, Niobe is placed inside the usual *naiskos*, touching her head in a gesture of grief. The lower part of her garment is painted white, indicating the petrification process. To her right an old man, identified as Tantalus, reaches towards Niobe. In the upper left, Leto, Artemis and Apollo appear. Their connection to the story is clear, and therefore their appearance is appropriate to the scene. In the upper right, Zeus and Hermes are portrayed, which may be connected to the petrification of Niobe, a detail included in some versions of the story.<sup>36</sup> This scene presents the full iconography of this Apulian group depicting the myth of Niobe. However, most vases in this group describe only parts of the full iconography.

Eva C. Keuls argues that the fourth-century vases from South Italy served funerary purposes, unlike the Attic painted vases, which were usually used for symposia. She also suggests that most Apulian vase paintings were intended to

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<sup>30</sup> Trendall and Webster 1971, 11.

<sup>31</sup> Keuls 1978, 41.

<sup>32</sup> Giuliani 1996, 71.

<sup>33</sup> This group appears in the LIMC 1981 article of Niobe in this order: Schmidt 1981 Nr. 10, Taranto 8923. 11, Sydney, NM 71.10. 12, Naples 3246. 14, Taranto 8928. 16, Bonn 99. 17, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, F 4282. 18, Malibu 82.AE.16. 20, Princeton Art Museum, y 1989–29.

<sup>34</sup> Keuls 1978, 65.

<sup>35</sup> *Naples: Museo Nazionale 82267 (H3246)*.

<sup>36</sup> Trendall 1972, 309–312. Keuls 1978, 47.

deliver a message of hope and consolation. It is difficult to see the optimistic message in the Niobe myth, but Keuls argues that the fact that Niobe is petrified, and therefore reunited with her children in death, may be the element of hope that these artists were aiming to convey.<sup>37</sup>

### The Niobe Myth in Ancient Rome

The Niobe myth was adapted and developed in literature and art of ancient Rome. One of the central themes regarding the moral aspects of Roman society was the theme of *superbia*,<sup>38</sup> and even the great emperors were to be reminded of their humanity while they were professing their divinity. *Superbia* is the Latin name for *hybris* and thus Niobe was described in Roman times as '*superba*'. Most of the myths in ancient Rome, including those which had been transferred from the Greek mythology, were used as a way of explaining the foundation and history of Rome, along with dealing with moral questions in the Roman society, especially those related to appropriate behavior.<sup>39</sup>

The myth of Niobe appeared for the first time in Roman literature in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Ov., *Met.* 6, 146–312) and this is also the fullest and longest version of the myth given that the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles have not been fully preserved, and that other Greek sources presented the myth as a *paradeigma*. Ovid's version of the myth may be divided into three elaborated parts: Niobe's *superbia*, the slaughter, which is the focus in this version, and the metamorphosis. The slaughter scene is described in length, focusing on each Niobid and the way in which he or she dies, while also mentioning all of the male Niobids' names: Ovid starts with a description of the slaughter of the male Niobids, who are hunting on their horses near the walls of the palace. Each Niobid is identified by name and is afforded an individual depiction of the manner in which he dies. After their deaths, Ovid's turns his attention Amphion's suicide, stating that he stabs himself in the chest with a sword (Ibid. 271). The vivid descriptions not only of the deaths of each individual male Niobid, but also the death of Amphion, serves as a rich source for later visual representations, which may have partially relied upon this text.

Following the tragic and graphic deaths of the male Niobids and Amphion, Niobe and her daughters grieve over the loss of their family. It is during this scene that the female Niobids are slaughtered by the two gods as well. In contrast to the slaughter of

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<sup>37</sup> Keuls 1978, 42.

<sup>38</sup> Since we now move to Rome, which does not have a direct equivalent of the term *hybris*, I will use the term *superbia*, which has a reasonably close meaning, and as will be shown later on, is used in the same manner as *hybris* in Ovid's version of the myth.

<sup>39</sup> Fox 2014, 249–252.

the sons, the daughters' deaths are described only briefly, without any identifications by name. The youngest daughter is the main focus, as Niobe entreats the gods to spare her life, although this is in vain. The moment when Niobe pleads for her daughter's life seems to correspond to the pinnacle of the myth (*Ov. Met.* 6, 185–194).

This focus shows that the slaughter scene, the punishment part of the myth, was in the center of Ovid's attention, and as will be shown now, also in Roman art.

In ancient Rome, along a variety of other media, we find a group of second-century CE sarcophagi with reliefs depicting the myth, and in particular the scene of the killing of the Niobids.

Depictions of Greco-Roman mythology in Roman funerary art seem to begin in the Hadrianic period and continued until the late third-century CE. Around a dozen themes were featured on these sarcophagi, which can be grouped into scenes of violent death or abduction and scenes of heroism.<sup>40</sup> Toynbee defines the mythological narratives that were depicted over and over on these Imperial sarcophagi as 'stock-designs'.<sup>41</sup>

The discourse around the symbolism and purposes of mythological scenes in these funerary representations started in the 1940s. While Cumont argued for complex allegorical symbolism, Nock drew a simpler conclusion and, through comparison with other forms of Roman art, suggested that the scenes served an educational purpose and were an expression of classicism.<sup>42</sup> The latest examination on the subject was made by Zanker and Ewald who believe that these images can be read as consolations to the bereaved: scenes of violent death could express the pain of the loss of a loved one, and scenes of feasting may represent the banquets which took place during the funerary rituals.<sup>43</sup> In addition, Toynbee argues that the mythological symbols depicted on the sarcophagi are 'ideal' rather than 'realistic': they present the myths as a symbol of the after-life or as trials of the soul.<sup>44</sup>

The Niobe myth was one of the 'stock-designs' on Hadrianic sarcophagi.<sup>45</sup> The Niobe iconography on Imperial sarcophagi generally depicts the slaughter scene, like most Roman visual representations of the subject. In this medium, the male Niobids are slaughtered on their horses, while the female Niobids are also shot dead, but in keeping with the myth, are not on horses. In Ovid (*Ov. Met.* 6, 218–226) the killing of the male Niobids occurred while they were hunting, while the female Niobids were killed inside the walls of the palace. In addition to the Niobids, most sarcophagi depict

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<sup>40</sup> Newby 2014, 305.

<sup>41</sup> Toynbee 1967, 180.

<sup>42</sup> See these authors' full discussion of the subject in Cumont 1942, Nock 1946 and Newby 2014, 302.

<sup>43</sup> Newby 2014, 303. Zanker and Ewald 2012, 18–21.

<sup>44</sup> Toynbee 1967, 172.

<sup>45</sup> A full discussion on all of the discovered Niobe sarcophagi can be found in Robert 1975.

two pedagogues, a nurse, Amphion and Niobe on each sides of the scene, and the gods. Thus, these sarcophagi display the fullest visual description of the myth in ancient art.

For example, the Lantern sarcophagus is dated to 132–134 CE and depicts the scene of the slaughter arranged on two levels (fig. 2).<sup>46</sup> The scene shows the dying and dead Niobids, with Niobe on the right sheltering her two youngest daughters and Amphion on the left end, trying to storm heaven. On the upper frieze, on each side of the lid, Apollo and Artemis are depicted shooting down some of the Niobids and Amphion himself. The victims are looking upwards, indicating that they are aware of the gods and their actions. This design group shows sophistication and a highly organized composition.<sup>47</sup> This elaborated depiction could have been inspired by Ovid's version of the myth, since the focus of the writer on this scene resembles the image portrayed on the sarcophagus.

### Comparing the Myth in Ancient Greece and Rome

An intriguing point to consider is the differences between the funerary representations of the myth in ancient Greece and those in ancient Rome. In ancient Greece, the Apulian vases represented the funerary use of the myth and depicted the grieving Niobe and her petrification, while the Roman funerary art focused on the slaughter scene. This shift shows the Roman way of thinking about the myth: no longer was Niobe the ideal grieving mother, but a warning against *superbia*. It seems that in Imperial Rome, the *superbia* element was more significant than the more human theme of grieving that had predominated in ancient Greece.

The examination of these two societies through those visual representations seems to show a shift in the conception of the myth and death ideals: Keuls has shown the way in which Niobe's petrification may show her union with her dead children, thus making it a scene of consolation. This scene and interpretation take us back to literary sources featuring Niobe as an ideal grieving mother: Achilles in Homer's Iliad compares Priam's grief to that of Niobe, while entreating him to eat, Electra and Antigone seem to admire Niobe for her grief, and it seems that also Aeschylus' play about Niobe focuses on her sorrow.

Contrary to this conception of the myth, the Roman literary sources seem to be less forgiving: no longer was Niobe the ideal grieving mother, but a warning against *superbia*. It seems that in Imperial Rome, the *superbia* element was more significant than the more human theme of grieving that had predominated in ancient Greece.

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<sup>46</sup> Rome: Lateran XII.

<sup>47</sup> Toynbee 1967, 175.

## Conclusion

As demonstrated in this paper, the myth of Niobe was translated into images in funerary art: on the one hand, the depiction of the grieving Niobe in her process of petrification on Apulian vases: thus, Niobe's act of *hybris* was mostly overlooked in comparison with her burden of grief. On the other hand, the depiction of the slaughter of the Niobids, the main punishment for her *superbia* on Roman sarcophagi. There, the Niobe myth was no longer used as a message of consolation, but as a warning for those who are still among the living. Thus, it may be concluded that the Niobe myth shifted from being an example of *hybris* to the portrayal of *superbia*.

In Greek literature, the main use of the myth was as a *paradeigma*, which featured Niobe as a grieving mother, rather than as a hubristic woman. Two exceptions are the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles, which feature Niobe as the main heroine. Since they have not survived in full, it is difficult to draw definitive conclusion concerning the purpose and focus. However, it was postulated that Aeschylus mainly focused on Niobe's grief, while Sophocles emphasized her punishment. In contrast, most of the Greek art portrayed the slaughter of the Niobids, mostly a shortened version of it, and showed only a subset of the dying or dead Niobids rather than the whole group. An exception to this iconography is the aforementioned group of Apulian vases which show the petrified Niobe inside a *naiskos*. This group has a funerary purpose and may be considered as a representation of consolation in that Niobe is being reunited with her dead children.<sup>48</sup>

The Roman representations, which are mostly from the Late Republic period, show a significant shift in focus. Ovid seems to be influenced by the already existing visual representations in the Roman landscape and thus his main focus is on the slaughter, which he describes in detail over 85 lines (*Ov. Met.* 6, 218–305). Visual representations that were created after Ovid's poem also showed an interest in the slaughter. However, a small shift in iconography was seen again in the Roman sarcophagi: while in Greek and earlier Roman art, the depiction of the myth was a shortened version, showing only a subset of the Niobids, and perhaps excluding Niobe and/or the gods, the sarcophagi provided a convenient surface for a full expression of the myth. Thus, on the surviving sarcophagi, all of the dying and dead Niobids are depicted, along with Niobe, Amphion, pedagogues, a nurse and the gods.

When comparing these representations in funerary art in these two different societies, while keeping in mind also the different literary sources, a clear shift is seen – from a message of consolation to a violent scene of warning.

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<sup>48</sup> Keuls 1978, 42.

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**List of images**



1. Apulian loutrophoros, red-figure, from the workshop of the Varrese Painter, *The Mourning Niobe, Partially Petrified*, ca. 340 BCE, Naples: Museo Nazionale 82267 (H3246), LIMC *Niobe* 12.



2. Sarcophagus, *Niobe Sarcophagus*, ca. 135 CE, Rome: Lateran XII, 813, Cook (1963), 32(1), Toynbee (1967), pl. XXXVII, Robert (1975), no. 315, pl. 100.