

“Mythologische Prachtreliefs”: Decorative Elements in Luxury Roman Housing

Mariella Cipriani

This research started from the study of the well-known relief of the Sleeping Endymion at the Capitoline Museum in Rome,¹ which raised important questions about the necessity to define this particular class of materials: *mythologische Prachtreliefs*. The first important *silloge* was Theodor Schreiber’s “*Hellenistische Reliefbilder*”,² which collected and published 112 miscellaneous reliefs of various sizes. It was not until 1974 that Jean Sampson³ updated Schreiber’s work by adding 101 more small reliefs. In a revised version of his dissertation,⁴ Stefan Lehmann⁵ examined only large Roman reliefs (average ca. 150–170 cm × 100–110 cm) sculpted with mythological scenes and he defined a new category.

The survey on luxurious mythological reliefs is very complex. These items have always been joined with other categories and mostly decontextualized. Therefore, after their discovery, they were placed in private collections and important Italian and European museums. Moreover, some of these plates, such as the Endymion relief, were reused. In the 1720s it was found in the remains of the Decius Baths on the Aventine Hill.⁶ The Spada series were turned upside down and used as steps of the central staircase of the Church of S. Agnese fuori le mura on Via Nomentana (Fig. 1).⁷

The luxurious mythological examples have all been considered by scholars, and have been dated, almost unanimously, as being from the late Hadrianic to early Antonine periods.⁸ In reality, such reliefs present an undeniable stylistic and formal diversity, even within the same “series”, as in the case of the Colonna and the Spada reliefs. For this reason, we propose a wider chronological collocation from the Augustan to the Antonine age.

Current research takes into consideration the individuality of the *genre* and the peculiarities of the reliefs. The mythological examples have the following features: 1) the reliefs were usually sculpted in peninsular marble, with a few exceptions such as the Colonna “series”⁹ in Greek marble; 2) they are generally arranged vertically on rectangular panels. The human figure is often either isolated or paired (frontally or sideways) but rarely represented in profile; 3) all the scenes are characterized by a precise mythological content, decodable by the study of literary sources; 4) on retrieving the reliefs, some of them were not displayed individually, but in pairs, or in “series”, based on a precise decorative program.

Within the latter group, there are some “series” consisting of several reliefs found at the same time, and that are homogeneous on stylistic and formal relationships, such as the two Rondinini reliefs;¹⁰ the three Colonna “series”¹¹ and the eight Spada.¹² It is very likely that the reliefs were exposed in cycles, like wall paintings, and have strong similarities starting from “the second Pompeian Style”, not only in their dimensions,



Fig. 1: The Spada relief showing Odysseus and Diomedes.

but also in their iconographic *repertoire*. In this regard, as in a pictorial field, scenes take place in a rocky and bucolic setting; the landscape is often shown by idyllic-sacral contexts with small buildings, sylvan shrines, architectural elements, trees and animals.

The reliefs were destined to decorate the walls of important representative rooms, like the *oeci*, and recreational spaces, or libraries of luxurious suburban villas owned by the Roman aristocracy. Most likely the plates were set into rectangular and shallow wall niches or affixed to them by metal clamps.¹³

The preciousness of using marble as the raw material for these large reliefs is undoubtedly an expression of wealth and social status. However, it may not have been the only reason to justify the choice of material. In ancient times, as a matter of fact, the preference for precious materials such as marble in reliefs of mythological content could have been due especially to their durable nature. This material could immortalize the message of the subjects represented and to emphasize their importance.

Therefore, the mythological reliefs are *nobilis opera*, which in *domus* or in *villas* have only one attestation. In this case, the topographical area of the *Urbs* plays a role in supporting the identification of individual workshops and the diffusion of their products.

Notes

¹ Cipriani 1996, 197–212.

² Schreiber 1894.

³ Sampson 1974, 27–45.

⁴ Lehmann 1989, 221–263 (only about the restoration of the Spada reliefs).

⁵ Lehmann 1996.

⁶ Cipriani 1996, 200.

⁷ Winckelmann 1767, 127; Guattani 1805, 127; Fusco 2004, 399–419.

⁸ Unlike the others, Herdejürgen 2001, 24–34 (Augustan Age).

⁹ Lehmann 1996, 102–120, pls. 32–34; M. E. Micheli in: Picozzi 2010, 269–278. 283–286, nos. 50. 51. 53.

¹⁰ L. M. Vigna in: Candilio – Bertinetti 2011, 108 no 71; 110f. no 74; Marcattili 2016, 209–223; Cipriani 2019, 183–191.

¹¹ See above n. 9.

¹² Wace 1910, 166–200; P. Zanker in: Helbig 1966⁴, 755–768, nos. 2000–2007; Kampen 1979, 583–600; Lehmann 1996, 13–85; Herdejürgen 2001, 24–34; Newby 2002, 110–148.

¹³ Kampen 1979, 597.

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Fig. 1: H. Behrens, Neg. D-DAI-Rom-dig2006.1533.

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