From Liminal Space to Specific Context: The Development of the Iconography of Alcestis in Roman Funerary Wall Painting*

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A common visual motif in Roman funerary art is the figure of Alcestis, a queen who sacrificed herself in order to save her husband's life. The myth, fully extant in Euripides' third-century BCE play Alcestis, tells the tale of Alcestis, the beautiful daughter of King Pelias and the wife of King Admetus.[1] When Admetus commits a sacrificial mistake requiring the ultimate retribution—his death—his wife Alcestis, a paradigm of wifely fidelity, offers to die in his place. She is rescued from the afterlife by Hercules and reunited with Admetus. The myth is visualized in a number of ways: Hercules appears leading Alcestis out of the underworld in some examples; Alcestis appears reuniting with Admetus in others. Some images depict her in the underworld, while others depict her death.

The imagery associated with the myth of Alcestis in wall painting lacks a comprehensive investigation. This article attempts to remedy the situation, providing both an analysis of the imagery on wall paintings and an interpretive framework that could be applied to other funerary images. This article suggests that the interpretive framework must take into account the physical position and context of the wall painting. Using images of Alcestis as a case study, this article will suggest that motifs depicting Alcestis were multivalent images that could be interpreted in a number of ways depending on the physical context in which it was displayed. I will argue that between the second and fourth centuries CE, the standardized visual representations of the Alcestis myth in wall painting transformed from motifs decorating large columbaria that focus on the transition between the earthly and

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1 See J.E. Thorburn, *The Alcestis of Euripides* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), 1–43.

otherworldly realm, where Alcestis appears as a passive figure being led by Hercules, to a motif found in individual niches of columbaria and catacombs that highlight the role of Alcestis as exemplum, facilitating her integration into either the underworld or domestic context.

Representations of the myth of Alcestis in Roman art have received only sporadic attention. Scholars have referenced such representations in studies of specific tombs, e.g., Bernard Andreae discusses the representations of Alcestis in his study of the Tomb of the Nasonii,[2] and Beverley Berg, Antonio Ferrua, and Andre Grabar all discuss the juxtaposition of Alcestis imagery with Christian imagery in the Via Latina Catacomb.[3] Iconographic analyses of the imagery, however, are contingent on specific representations and do not take into account the broader repertory of Alcestis imagery.

Francisca Feraudi-Gruénais discusses Alcestis imagery as part of her study on wall-painting decoration in Roman columbaria. She provides a catalog that compiles extant wall paintings found in Roman columbaria, both figurative and decorative. Her analysis suggests that there is resonance between imagery found on immovable elements, i.e., in wall painting and in columbaria with movable decorative elements, such as sarcophagi. She further links the imagery found in Roman columbaria with domestic decoration that makes use of similar themes.[4] Her interpretative framework takes into consideration other decorative elements in the context of the columbarium, but it does not take into account the implications of the physical space itself on the choice of the iconography and its interpretations.

The most comprehensive study of Alcestis imagery was undertaken by Sonia Mucznik. She compiled a corpus of examples of the myths of Alcestis and Phaedra on various media ranging from sarcophagi and other relief carvings to wall painting in both funerary and non-funerary contexts. Her research addresses two elements: the identification and re-identification of figures and comparison of types across various media as well as an

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[2] B. Andreae, *Studien zur römischen Grabkunst* (Heidelberg: F. H. Kerle, 1963), 121–22.

[3] B. Berg, "Alcestis and Hercules in the Catacomb of Via Latina," *Vigiliae Christianae* 48 (1994): 219–34; A. Grabar, *The Beginnings of Christian Art, 200–395*, trans. S. Gilbert and J. Emmons (London: Thames & Hudson, 1967); A. Ferrua, *Catacombe sconosciute: Una pinacoteca del IV secolo sotto la Via Latina* (Florence: Nardini, 1990).

[4] F. Feraudi-Gruénais, *Ubi diutius nobis habitandum est: Die Innendekoration der kaiserzeitlichen Gräber Roms*, Palilia 9 (Wiesbaden: Ludwig Reichert, 2001), 221.

evaluation of the symbolism in reference to literary sources, namely, to Euripides' *Alcestis*.[5] However, her evaluation of wall paintings was typographic and cursory in comparison to her analysis of other media such as sarcophagi.[6] A few prominent examples of Alcestis imagery in funerary wall painting are also mentioned in passing in various studies, but not in a comprehensive manner.[7]

This study draws together the images of Alcestis found on wall paintings that decorate columbaria and catacombs and analyzes them in relation to their overall physical context. The majority of images are drawn from areas of the western empire and date from the second to fourth centuries CE, with one example from Tyre.[8] The examples are delineated into three distinct typologies that represent three distinct phases in iconographic development. Each phase was found in a specific physical context: the first phase originated in Roman columbaria and large family tombs; the second phase represents a phase of transition, where motifs illustrating the myth of Alcestis start to decorate individual cubicula within larger funerary complexes. The final phase is found in fourth-century catacombs in the city of Rome.

The majority of extant examples of the Alcestis myth in wall painting were produced in the latter half of the second century CE and are found in Roman columbaria. These examples represent the earliest phase in Alcestis iconography and almost exclusively depict Hercules leading Alcestis from the underworld.[9] The composition of the images is relatively standard, with

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5 S. Mucznik, *Devotion and Unfaithfulness: Alcestis and Phaedra in Roman Art* (Roma: G. Bretschneider, 1999), 26.

6 There are a number of studies that analyze the representations of Alcestis on sarcophagi; see S. Wood, "Alcestis on Roman Sarcophagi," *American Journal of Archaeology* 82 (1978): 499–510; G. Gessert, "Myth as Consolatio: Medea on Roman Sarcophagi," *Greece and Rome* 51 (2004): 219–20; P. Zanker and B.C. Ewald, *Living with Myths: The Imagery of Roman Sarcophagi*, trans. J. Slater (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 307–10.

7 V.J. Platt, "Framing the Dead on Roman Sarcophagi," in *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 61/62 (2012): 217–18.

8 The concordance of imagery found on the examples from the East with the imagery common in columbaria of the West suggests that they can be included in an analysis of imagery.

9 There is one example of a wall painting dating from the second century CE from the Tomb of the Nasonii that purportedly represents the figures of Alcestis and Mercury leading a small female figure towards an enthroned Pluto and Proserpina. The identification of the scene is not definitive; there are no inscriptions or iconographical attributes that could identify the figure. Platt ("Framing the Dead," 217–18) suggests that the image could depict the figure of

minimal modifications of gesture and stance. Hercules appears in the nude holding his club, often with a lion's skin draped over his shoulder, such as in the wall painting from Tyre.[10] Alcestis is generally portrayed in an idealized form, fully veiled with the garments completely covering her body. Hercules reaches towards Alcestis and either leads her by the hand or places an arm on her shoulder, leading her forward. The motif is often delineated from other images by garlands, flowers, architectural elements, or apotropaic images such as gorgon faces.[11] They can be integrated into a broader narrative program, or they can exist in isolation.

The image of Alcestis and Hercules has multiple levels of meaning. On the one hand, the rescue of Alcestis by Hercules highlights his role as savior.[12] Hercules rescues Alcestis from the afterlife and provides an antecedent for the potential salvation of the deceased housed in the columbarium. Alcestis takes on a passive role, while Hercules becomes the active agent of transition: a liminal role that provides potentiality for movement between two realms, the earthly sphere and the underworld. The motifs tend to lack indication of a physical context; many are presented as floating figures walking along garlands or with no architectural or geographic landscape. The negation of context emphasizes the liminal role of the figures. Some images imply a context that is earthly, depicting the passage to the underworld through which Alcestis and Hercules have already passed; however, this does not indicate any sense of temporal or historical contingency. Rather, the images blur the distinction between earthly and otherworldly contexts, reality and mythological temporal horizons. Such images of undifferentiated context are infinitely suitable for the funerary context, in which physical movement through the tomb seeks to break down temporal and physical barriers, blurring the distinction between the living and the dead and providing a space for contemplation of the transgression of the boundaries.[13] These images decorate large spaces that house the bodies of many individuals. The decoration and imagery must

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Laodameia rather than Alcestis. Due to this discrepancy in identification, I have excluded the image from this analysis. For tables compiling the images of Alcestis leading Hercules on all media, see Mucznik, *Devotion and Unfaithfulness*, 70.

10 See Mucznik, *Devotion and Unfaithfulness*, pl. 8.

11 Mucznik, *Devotion and Unfaithfulness*, 34.

12 Grabar, *The Beginnings of Christian Art*, 228.

13 Platt, "Framing the Dead," 218.

be sufficiently general to create a common liminal space that transcends temporal reality. Images of liminal figures resonate well in this context and provide hope for the transgression of boundaries, the potential of return or continued existence in the earthly realm.

The focus on the role of Hercules as a guide for the deceased and an implied passive role for Alcestis can be further emphasized by the juxtaposition of the image with other mythological images. The image of Hercules leading Alcestis found in Tyre appears near two other images: the rape of Proserpina and Tantalus.[14] The rape of Proserpina is a common motif used to symbolize both the sudden loss of life and the descent of the soul into the underworld,[15] while the image of Tantalus grasping for fruit that he can never reach and water that can never quench his thirst is a common image of afterlife punishment.[16] The juxtaposition of images focuses on the power of Hercules to guide Alcestis back from the afterlife and offers a powerful image of the potential of salvation from death. The image concludes the visual narrative of descent, the afterlife, and salvation.

The return-of-Alcestis motif depicts Alcestis being led by Hercules to a seated Admetus, such as the second-century example from the tomb of the Nasonii.[17] The image is incorporated into an elaborate decorative frieze depicting ten mythological figures.[18] In one motif, a figure identified as the veiled Alcestis is led by Hercules towards a seated Admetus. Hercules is depicted nude, but identifiable by his club and arrow. He turns his head towards Alcestis as he leads Alcestis to the right with his right hand behind her back. The figure of Admetus appears nude with only a cloak wrapped around his lower body. He sits with his head resting on his right hand in a gesture associated with mourning.[19] This representation provides a male exemplum for the appropriate display of grief in the context of heroic lamentation. Roman masculine cultural expectations provided no accessible

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[14] Mucznik, *Devotion and Unfaithfulness*, 33.

[15] Zanker and Ewald, Living with Myths, 384.

[16] The motif of Tantalus is described by many authors; see, e.g., Lucian, *Luct*. 2–9, translated by V.M. Hope, *Death in Ancient Rome: A Source Book* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 216.

[17] See Mucznik, *Devotion and Unfaithfulness*, pl. 1.

[18] Platt, "Framing the Dead," 217; Feraudi-Gruénais, *Ubi diutius nobis habitandum est,* 68.

[19] Corbeill suggests that this specific gesture form implies an inward reflexivity and contemplation, but can also contain connotations of repentance and lamentation; see Anthony Corbeill, *Nature Embodied: Gesture in Ancient Rome* (Princeton University Press, 2004), 77.

public display of emotions; tears and other displays of grief were considered feminizing.[20] The representation of contemplative grief allows an appropriate exemplum for masculine grief within a funerary context that maintains male virtue and honour. However, the motif of the exemplary husband and wife is subordinated when read within the broader decorative context. The image is incorporated into an elaborate decorative frieze depicting ten mythological figures.[21] The myths depicted in the frieze highlight narratives of transition between the earthly realm and the afterlife, such as the return of Eurydice to Orpheus and Mercury as *psychopompos* leading the deceased. The power of divine guides as liminal figures to lead the deceased back from the underworld seems to function as an organizing mechanism within the frieze.[22] The image of Alcestis, Hercules, and Admetus is integrated into the frieze because of Hercules' role as a transitional figure. Despite the fact that the image presents the union of the couple, the iconographic focus subordinates the relationship in order to focus on transition between realms within the iconographic program that correlates the imagery with the function of the physical space.

A second phase in the development of Alcestis iconography represents a subtle transformation. The figure of Alcestis reunited with Admetus comes to be associated with the exempla of an ideal Roman couple. There is only one example of this type dating from the early decades of the third century in Mausoleum Phi on the Via Cornelia.[23] The image presents Hercules leading Alcestis towards the seated figure of Admetus and a standing female figure holding a shield. Hercules is portrayed in heroic nude holding his club in his left hand and leading Alcestis with his right hand towards two partly destroyed figures on the right. The identification of the seated figure as Admetus is based on comparisons with the example from the Tomb of the Nasonii, which presents a similar composition. The female figure on the right is variably identified as Athena or *Virtus*.[24]

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[20] Charles Segal, *Euripides and the Poetics of Sorrow: Art, Gender, and Commemoration in Alcestis, Hippolytus, and Hecuba* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 62.

[21] Platt, "Framing the Dead," 217; Feraudi-Gruénais, *Ubi diutius nobis habitandum est,* 68.

[22] Platt, "Framing the Dead," 217.

[23] Feraudi-Gruénais, *Ubi diutius nobis habitandum est*, 53–56.

[24] Mielsch and Hesberg and Mucznik consider the figure to represent Virtus. Mucznik suggests that the iconography of Athena/Minerva was used to depict Dea Roma as well as Virtus in Roman art; see Harald Mielsch and Henner von Hesberg, *Die heidnische Nekropole*

The standardized depiction of the motif suggests influence of earlier examples. The motif appears in an undifferentiated space and time frame. The figures stand upon the ground, but there is no attempt to render a specific location. The scene is framed by the arches of the arcosolium niche rendering them isolated from any further context. They appear as tableaux in a context that is specifically mythological. Again, the motif focuses on Hercules as savior and as an agent of reunion. However, the motif is juxtaposed with an image of Mars and Rhea Silvia, the mythological couple associated with the founding of Rome, to nuance the nature of the relationship between Alcestis and Admetus. In this example, Mars looks upon the sleeping Rhea Silvia while Venus stands in the background.[25] When found on sarcophagi, the image of Mars and Rhea Silvia tends to suggest death as a form of sleep followed by the potential awakening[26]; however, the image also has connotations of divine love with Rhea Silvia becoming an object of desire.[27] The amorous divine relationship is juxtaposed with the image of Alcestis being led to Admetus and suggests that the relationship between Alcestis and Admetus also needs to be evaluated in relation to the divine couple. Alcestis and Admetus become an exemplum of love that parallels divine love, with the focus on Alcestis specifically as an object of attractiveness and desire. The role of Hercules as a divine intercessor is maintained, but the interpretive focus shifts to the nature of the couple's relationship.

The image is located in a mausoleum within a larger complex of the Via Cornelia catacomb. The mausoleum was commissioned in the early third century CE and owned by the Marcii family, likely a wealthy family of freedmen.[28] It held the cremated remains of family members in four niches.[29] Both the individuals interred in the mausoleum and the visitors to the tomb would be part of or intimately connected to the family and would likely have

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unter St. Peter in Rom (Rome: L'erma di Bretschneider, 1995), 254; Mucznik, *Devotion and Unfaithfulness*, 33–34.

[25] See Feraudi-Gruénais, *Ubi diutius nobis habitandum est*, pls. 30–33. Mielsh and Hesberg (*Die heidnische Nekropole*, 254) suggest that this is the most complete example of the myth found in the Roman catacomb.

[26] Anna Marguerite McCann, *Roman Sarcophagi in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1978), 75.

[27] Zanker and Ewald, *Living with Myths*, 213.

[28] Feraudi-Gruénais, *Ubi diutius nobis habitandum est*, 60.

[29] Ibid.

had direct experience of the deceased individuals. The decorative program of the mausoleum had a specific communicative function within this context. It was intended to impart specific status messages to the visitor about the Marcii family. The imagery of Alcestis and Admetus as the exemplum of the ideal couple becomes part of this communicative system and reflects the values of the commissioners. The commissioners of the tomb were freedmen, who held some wealth, but who lacked family lineage; only upon manumission would the individuals gain a *nomen*.[30] By associating themselves with the imagery of divine couples, the commissioners were casting themselves as the ancestral couple or originators of the *familia*. The Marcii family exploited the rhetorical potential of multiple images of exempla of divine love and fidelity within the matrimonial relationship, while at the same time providing images of consolation and reassurance for bereaved visitors. Alcestis no longer represented a liminal, transitional figure; rather, she became an exemplum of union. The focus on the exemplary nature of the motif adumbrates the final phase of the imagery found in catacombs, where Alcestis as an exemplum of wifely virtue becomes an organizing principle of decorative programs.

The final phase of the iconography dates from the fourth century and represents a compositional departure from the standardized motifs of the second and third centuries. The two examples of this type decorate the cubicula of catacombs. The motifs highlight Alcestis' status as a feminine exemplum and integrate her into a specific domestic or underworld context. Her role as feminine exemplum provides an organizing mechanism for these depictions. I will argue this focus is a result of the change in physical context from the columbaria to catacomb cubicula.

The first example depicts Alcestis in the context of the underworld where she accompanies the deceased in the underworld. In the fourth-century tomb of Vincentius and Vibia in the Catacomb of Praetextatus in Rome, the deceased, Vibia, is depicted with Alcestis in the underworld palace of Dis Pater and Aeracura, a version of Proserpina.[31] Alcestis and

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[30] The slave would take on the nomen and praenomen of their master. For a discussion of Roman naming conventions, see L. Keppie, *Understanding Roman Inscriptions* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 20.

[31] See Joseph Wilpert, *Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms* (Freiburg: Herder, 1903), pls. 132–33.

Vibia, both completely covered by their garments, are depicted on the right and led by Mercury Nuniatius, who holds his *caduceus* and wears a short *chiton* and *chalmis,* toward a high throne surmounted by the figures of Dis Pater and Aeracura. The three Divine Fates, *Fata Divina,* appear on the left side of the throne. The identification of the figures and the context of the scene is facilitated by inscriptions that name each of the individual figures. This image depicting Alcestis is part of a decorative cycle that portrays the death of Vibia and her journey to the afterlife.[32] The image of Alcestis and Vibia is juxtaposed vertically with a scene depicting a banquet. Vibia is led through a doorway by a figure identified as *Angelus Bonus*. A banquet simultaneously takes place in a meadow, with six reclining figures seated on cushions. A long inscription implores the reader to join the banqueting.[33]

The image of Alcestis in the underworld is a unique presentation of the motif. Alcestis is now an otherworldly figure; there is no connotation of transition, but rather she appears to be part of the landscape of the underworld. The scene is often interpreted by scholars as a depiction of the judgment of Vibia.[34] In this reading, Alcestis takes on the role of *advocata* on behalf of Vibia.[35] Alcestis presents the deceased to the underworld rulers; Vibia is judged worthy in reference to the exemplary nature of Alcestis, who

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[32] William Palmer, *An Introduction to Early Christian Symbolism, Being the Description of 14 Compositions from Fresco-Paintings, Glasses and Sarcophagi* (London: Longman, Green, Longman and Roberts, 1859), 73–75; Katherine M. D. Dunbabin, *The Roman Banquet: Images of Conviviality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 189–90; Zanker and Ewald, *Living with Myths*, 171–72.

[33] A chariot with four horses is driven by a male figure who carries off Vibia, depicted with her hair, arms, and robe flying back into the wind in the guise of Persephone. The inscription makes explicit the interpretation of the scene: *abreptio vibies et descensio*, the carrying off of Vibia and her descent. The final image presents a funerary banquet, which depicts seven men sitting at the table, the *septe*(*m*) *pii sacerdotes*; see Antonio Ferrua, "La catacomba di Vibia," *Rivista di archeologia cristiana* 47 (1971): 56–61. The cycle also includes a scene depicting Vibia's journey to the underworld. Heever suggests that the frescoes testify to adherence to the Sabazian mysteries. The owner of the property on which the catacomb was built, Praetextatus, held various priesthoods that included the cult of Sabazios, which appears to be named and venerated here; see Gerhard van den Heever, "Making Mysteries: From the *Untergang der Mysterien* to Imperial Mysteries – Social Discourse in Religion and the Study of Religion," *Religion and Theology* 12 (2005): 272–73; Ferrua, "La catacomba," 56–61.

[34] Van den Heever, "Making Mysteries," 272.

[35] Mucznik, *Devotion and Unfaithfulness*, 77.

stands as her companion. Vibia's worthiness is evinced by her proximity to the exemplary figure of Alcestis. However, the motif of divine judgment does not appear in any of the literary sources associated with the myth; the journey of Alcestis to the underworld is not presented in Euripides' play, nor are there references to scenes of Alcestis' introduction to the underworld. In the play, the chorus makes an entreaty to the god of the underworld and the oarsman Charon, so that they know the virtue of Alcestis, but the narrative focuses on the earthly implications of the death of Alcestis.[36] When afterlife judgment does appear in other literary contexts, the judges are not Dis and Aeracura, but rather Minos and Rhadamanthus of Crete, sons of Zeus, who would send the worthy soul to the Elysian Fields or hand the unworthy soul over to the Furies for punishment.[37] Pluto and Proserpina are presented as the divine rulers of the underworld and the sources of highest power, but not as judges.

I suggest that the scene depicting Alcestis and Vibia does not represent an explicit tribunal, but rather the visualization of the integration of Vibia to the underworld. The incorporation is predicated upon the equation of the two women with respect to their virtue. Visually the women are linked: they are depicted side by side, draped in their cloaks in a similar manner, and make the same gestures. Both women maintain relatively passive gestures; there is no indication that Alcestis is stepping forward to take on a role as *advocata* for Vibia, rather she is presented in relation to Vibia. I suggest this composition functions in a manner semantically similar to a number of funerary inscriptions that make the comparison between the deceased and Alcestis. An inscription written in the first person commemorates a woman named Callicratia:

> I am a new Alcestis, and died for my good husband Zeno, whom alone I had taken to my bosom. My heart preferred him to the light of day and my sweet children. My name was Callicratia, and all men reverenced me.[38]

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[36] Thorburn, *The Alcestis of Euripides*, 19.

[37] Hope, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 217.

[38] Trans. W.R. Paton, quoted by Andrzej Wypustek, *Images of Eternal Beauty in Funerary Verse Inscriptions of the Hellenistic and Greco-Roman Periods*, Mnemosyne Supplements, Monographs on Greek and Latin Language and Literature 352 (Boston: Brill, 2012), 26.

Callicratia envisions herself as a new Alcestis, who dies on behalf of her husband. The deceased woman does not directly take on the identity of Alcestis, but places herself in parallel to the mythological figure.

A second bilingual Greek and Latin inscription commemorates a woman named Pomptilla, who proclaims that she died on behalf of her husband. The Latin portion of the inscription describes how Pomptilla prayed to die in place of her ill husband.[39] The Greek portion of the inscription compares her to Alcestis and also Penelope, Evadne, and Laodameia. The inscription focuses on Alcestis in her role as a good wife, as a divine exemplum of wifely fidelity. The relationship established is semantically similar to the representation of the relationship visually articulated between Alcestis and Vibia in the tomb of Vibia. The deceased is presented in comparison to the figures, rather than taking on the explicit identity, creating a parallel rather than direct equation.

The parallel between Alcestis and Vibia in the tomb image functions to locate Vibia and Alcestis within the differentiated hierarchy in the underworld. The prominence of the rulers of the underworld is visually articulated by their placement above the other figures. Alcestis and Vibia are ushered in by Mercury and are placed within the hierarchy among assistant deities such as Mercury and the Divine Fates. The visual negotiation implied by the composition of the motif suggests both Vibia's integration into the landscape of the underworld as well as a place within the hierarchy. This prized place is negotiated in reference to Alcestis who is portrayed as Vibia's parallel. The Alcestis figure facilitates this integration into the specific otherworldly context. There is no narrative of salvation, but rather Vibia takes her place in the Underworld.

This narrative of Alcestis as an integrative figure is not found in the myth, but the focus on exemplarity resonates within the later literary representations. The Alcestis *Barcinonensis,* dating to the fourth century and probably originating in Egypt, represents a later interpretation of the myth. Here, the myth ends with the death of Alcestis. Hercules does not appear. There is no reunion between the couple. Rather, the focus of the poem is on the exemplary life of Alcestis and her decision to die on behalf

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[39] See: CIL X. 7563/7578. Zahra Newby, "In the Guise of Gods and Heroes: Portrait Heads on Roman Mythological Sarcophagi," in *Life, Death and Representation: Some New Work on Roman Sarcophagi*, ed. Jaś Elsner and Janet Huskinson (New York: De Gruyter, 2011), 196.

of her husband. She finds Admetus distraught at his impending death and agrees to die in his place; she understands the sacrifice she is making, but is cognizant of the eternal glory that awaits her as an example of a dutiful pious wife. There is no salvation; only fame through her memory. Similarly, the focus on the power of Alcestis as exempla appears in a third-century Virgilian cento. The centos represented verbal verse games in which authors would show off their ability to rearrange words and phrases.[40] They used a number of mythological personae: Alcestis, Hercules, among others. The Virgilian cento *Alcesta* presents the truncated version of the myth ending with an emotional speech by Alcestis and her death. In this version, Admetus makes a speech to Alcestis where he acknowledges his guilt and promises to be faithful to the memory of Alcestis. There is no reunion, no salvation narrative; rather the representation of pathos is associated with the untimely death of a female figure and the potential repercussions within the domestic context. As a female exemplum who could be elided with the deceased, Alcestis becomes useful as semantic tool; an appropriate rhetorical device that can be used within the catacomb context to discuss the ideal feminine.

Alcestis as an ideal wife is also found in the last example. The fourth-century Via Latina catacomb in Rome presents the myth in a series of wall paintings in cubiculum N.[41] The myth is presented in two images; a representation of the dying Alcestis[42] and a depiction of the reunion of Alcestis and Admetus facilitated by Hercules.[43] The unique presentation of the Alcestis myth is juxtaposed to a narrative cycle that includes a number of scenes from the labours of Hercules, including Hercules defeating the Hydra, Hercules in the garden of the Hesperides, and Hercules fighting a figure generally identified as Thanatos.[44]

The first motif of the decorative program depicts a dying figure on a *kline* surrounded by members of their *familia*. This image is heavily damaged to the point that a conclusive identification of the figure is not

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[40] Scott McGill, *Virgil Recomposed: The Mythological and Secular Centos in Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 71.

[41] Ferrua (*Catacombe sconosciute*, 110–31) provides the most complete description of the catacomb art; cf. Grabar, *The Beginnings of Christian Art*, 225–28.

[42] See Ferrua, *Catacombe sconosciute*, pl. 124.

[43] See Grabar, *The Beginnings of Christian Art*, 228, pl. 251.

[44] Berg, "Alcestis and Hercules," 224–25.

possible.[45] Some scholars identify the figure as the dying Admetus, while others suggest that the figure represents Alcestis.[46] If the figure is Admetus, this would represent the only example of a dying-Admetus motif. Mucznik suggests the figure is more likely a depiction of the dying Alcestis, which has precedence in second century antecedents in both wall painting[47] and on sarcophagi. I am inclined to follow Mucznik in identifying the figure as Alcestis, but ultimately, for the interpretation of the motif, the identity of the figure is superfluous. The essential interpretive element is the explicit rendering of the mythological figures within an explicitly domestic context. The dying figure is surrounded by a group of eight individualized figures that make various gestures of mourning.[48]

The composition of the scene parallels the representations of the death of Alcestis found on Roman sarcophagi of the second century. On the sarcophagus of Metilia Acte, a second-century example currently housed in the Vatican (Museo Chiaramonti, inv. 1195), the dying Alcestis reclines on a *kline* while Admetus approaches the foot of the bed in a composition that resembles the image from the Via Latina catacomb.[49] Alcestis' young children kneel at side of the bed while other figures including attendants, servants, and potentially her parents gather around the *kline*. The composition of the motif alludes to the effects of the death of Alcestis on the *familia*; however, further nuances in the depiction of Alcestis provide further interpretive cues. Alcestis is depicted with individualized portrait features and reclining with her clothing falling off her shoulder in a mode reminiscent of Venus.[50]

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[45] Beverly Berg (ibid., 221) suggests that the image depicts the death of a male figure. Her interpretation is based on the assumption that the tomb decoration was commissioned by a wife to commemorate her husband. There is no inscriptional evidence to suggest the gender of the individual interred in the arcosolium.

[46] Mucznik, *Devotion and Unfaithfulness*, 35.

[47] Mucznik (ibid., 32) provides a number of comparanda including the Vatican sarcophagus; cf. Feraudi-Gruénais, *Ubi diutius nobis habitandum est*, 55.

[48] There are a number of gestures associated with mourning, e.g., a figure standing slightly bent over with head held downward; see Mucznik, *Devotion and Unfaithfulness*, 32.

[49] See Wood, "Alcestis on Roman Sarcophagi," 500, fig. 1.

[50] Kleiner suggests that the image of the stola slipping off the shoulder represents a late fifth-century Aphrodite sculpture type that became popular in Rome as the Venus Genetrix. Diana E. E. Kleiner, "Second-Century Mythological Portraiture: Mars and Venus," *Latomus* 40 (1981): 520; Rachel Kousser, "Mythological Group Portraits in Antonine Rome: The Performance of Myth," *American Journal of Archaeology* 111 (2007): 685.

This representation of potential nudity alludes to Alcestis' feminine virtues, highly valued within the domestic sphere, both her beauty and her desirability. Although there is no way to make a conclusive link between the image of the dying Alcestis in the Via Latina wall painting and the image as it appears on sarcophagi, similar compositional features such as the depiction of children and mourners suggest that both scenes focus on the effects of the death within the domestic context. The representation of context makes the scene historically contingent and elides the funerary context with the domestic sphere. The viewer is intended to make the connection between the image of Alcestis, the dying pious wife, and the virtues of the commemorated individual. The image oscillates between the mythological narrative and the representation of the dying female figure that is historically contextualized and commemorated in the catacomb cubiculum.

Similarly, the representation of the reunion of Admetus and Alcestis from the Via Latina also locates the scene within a specifically domestic context. The motif draws on second-century antecedents depicting the reunion of Alcestis and Admetus. Hercules holding the three-headed dog Cerebus leads Alcestis through the entrance of the underworld. Admetus sits on a chair with a curtain draped in the background.[51] The artist attempted to render the palatial domestic context, rendering the context specific with an associated temporality that is earthly and can be connected to specific individuals. The motif can function as allegorical representations of historically contingent individuals or narrative mythological representations that evoke specific virtues. The image highlights the role of Hercules as a divine savior figure and the inclusion could represent personal religious adherence.[52] The function of the motif in funerary context has changed from the original function in columbaria. Rather than being part of a repertory of mythological figures that are incorporated into iconographic programs creating a generalized liminal space, the motif in catacombs establishes a parallel between historically specific individuals such as Vibia and the mythological exempla. The image oscillates between different temporal boundaries, mythological narrative, and historically contingent individuality. By focusing on the exemplary nature of Alcestis, the commissioner of the

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[51] Mucznik, *Devotion and Unfaithfulness*, 32.

[52] Josef Engemann, "Altes und Neues zu Beispielen der Katakombenbilder," *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 26 (1983): 141–51.

wall paintings in catacombs was able to make direct connections between the deceased individual and the exempla.

To sum up briefly, the image of Alcestis in Roman wall painting was a multivalent motif that resonated in different physical contexts. The basic visualization of the myth could be modified and nuanced to highlight the role of Alcestis in specific situations and contexts. Early representations found in columbaria with spaces for multiple burials visualize the myth of Alcestis in a standardized manner, which highlights the role of Hercules as a savior figure and the role of Alcestis as a liminal figure. The exemplary status of Alcestis underlies the motif. Only through her role as the ideal wife is Alcestis deemed worthy of salvation by Hercules; however, her status is referred to indirectly in the visual material. A later representation illustrates the ability of the artist to nuance the motif by juxtaposing the standardized image of reunion of Alcestis and Admetus with other mythological couples in order to highlight their exemplary status. The artists of the fourth century take more artistic license with the representation of the myth in order to incorporate it into the context of Christian catacombs, where individuals interred in cubicula are elided with the divine exempla. The artist of the tomb of Vibia set Alcestis in parallel to representations of the deceased to visually suggest a relationship based on virtue. In doing so, Alcestis and the deceased are integrated into the underworld hierarchy. Alternately, the images of Alcestis in the Via Latina catacomb integrate the image of Alcestis into the domestic context, focusing on the impact of a death on the familial networks. The figure of Alcestis is elided with the deceased. The resonance between the physical context of the catacomb and the context in which the action takes place within the image becomes integral to the visual articulation of the myth. The figure of Alcestis had the potential to express multiple values, hopes, and beliefs of individual commissioners, *familia* members, and visitors.