Endymion spent the day hunting. At nightfall he sank into a deep sleep in the mountain wilderness. Selene, the Moon, driving her course across the sky in her chariot, noticed the sleeper and, fascinated by his beauty, turned her steeds downward to the earth. With a kiss she awakened Endymion and with her love endowed him with the eternal life of the gods.

All this, which according to the myth took place on Mount Latmos on the West coast of Asia Minor, not far from Miletos, is the subject of the Roman sarcophagus here illustrated. On the front, between the two decorative lion heads, is the principal scene. At the right we see the sleeping hunter. The winged figure above him, partly hidden by a rock, is Night. In one hand she holds a poppy plant, gone to seed, in the other a horn, from which she pours its opiate over the sleeping Endymion. The central figure is Selene. Carefully, as if under a spell, her gaze fixed on the sleeper, she dismounts from her chariot. The veil that billows out over her head, crescent-topped, and softly frames her figure, stands for the veil of the night. Sometimes, in similar pictures, this veil is starred. In her right hand she holds a wreath with ties. Six small Erotes enliven the scene. Four of them stand holding flaming torches to light the sleeping youth, two others are apparently told off to watch over the waiting chariot. But they do not put their minds on it; the love story interests them far more. The horses are wild with impatience and strain upward in their zeal for the course through the sky that is their nightly round. A girl in a high-girt dress, standing at the horses’ heads with a whip in her hand, has seized the reins. She too is a divinity, for she is winged. Thus it is implied that the horses are well in hand, and yet their plunging gives excitement and contrast to the composition. An idyllic note is given by a seated herdsman on the left with his dog and herd, taking no part in the action but lending a pastoral air to the scene. The small figures under each lion head are also not actors in the love scene but provide a commentary on it. On the left Eros and Psyche embrace each other; on the right two Erotes are romping together.

The reliefs on the two ends and on the back complement the scene in the same spirit. On the left end we see the rising chariot of the Sun and under the horses the recumbent figure of Ocean. The Eros who flies ahead with a torch is the Morning Star. The corresponding place is taken on the right by the setting Moon in her chariot. Below her horses is the reclining figure of Earth, who appears also under the horses on the front, there holding a snake in her hand. Above, a small Eros with burning torch falls headlong downward (his wings are now broken off and missing). He is the setting Evening Star. The pastoral theme is continued on the back of the sarcophagus, which is decorated in low relief. Here two herdsmen are shown with their cattle and horses. They are aloof from the events on the front, yet one of two girls standing at the right points out the scene to her companion and to us. Both of these girls wear reeds in their hair, and one of them has a jar from which water is flowing. They are nymphs.

In the panels of the lid the small and more cursory scenes are similarly connected with the subject of the main relief. The mountain gods at the two ends hint further at the landscape setting. The panels adjacent to these are decorated each with a Season, Autumn on the left and Spring on the right, which belong to a familiar cycle. In recalling the recurrent seasonal changes of the year as nature renews itself, they add a further cosmological allusion to the life of the soul after death, indicated on the main relief by the presence of Sun and Moon, Earth and...
Roman sarcophagus decorated with the story of Endymion. In structure the sarcophagus resembles the troughs used for pressing grapes. Rogers Fund, 1947
The left end of the sarcophagus, showing the rising Sun in his chariot. On the right end the Moon is setting, and a falling Eros represents the Evening Star.
The back of the sarcophagus with two herdsmen and their animals in low relief. Two nymphs are observing and pointing out the happenings on the other side.
Another Endymion sarcophagus in the Museum. It is about thirty or forty years earlier. Fletcher Fund, 1924

Ocean. The next panel inward from the left, with Eros and Psyche, is paired with one on the right with Aphrodite. The same goddess is shown in the next panel on the right, while the corresponding one on the left shows her partner, the war god Ares. These four pictures are therefore full of allusions to the love story of Selene and Endymion. This happily united couple appears finally to the left of the inscription, while in the corresponding place on the right is a portrait of the deceased, for whose burial the sarcophagus was intended.

The inscription on the central panel tells us that the woman’s name was Arria and that she belonged to the caste of freedmen. When she died, not long before completing her fifty-first year, her daughter Aninia Hilara buried her in this sarcophagus. Her portrait, poor as it is, is of value because the way her hair is dressed can be dated. It is the style made fashionable by Julia Domna, the wife of the emperor Septimius Severus (A.D. 193-211). Julia Domna lived to see the reign of her son Caracalla (211-217), but the fashion in hair had changed by that time. The sarcophagus was therefore made within the two decades around the turn of the century.

Not only because it is so well preserved but also because it is a masterpiece from a workshop to which certain other important works can be assigned, the sarcophagus throws a much needed light on these somewhat obscure years in the history of art. In addition to the famous sarcophagus with the Judgment of Paris, immured in the garden façade of the Villa Medici in Rome, others from this workshop are: a sarcophagus in the cathedral at Salerno with Dionysos and Ariadne watching the pressing of wine, two from the Villa Ludovisi, now in the Museo delle Terme at Rome, of which one shows Dionysos triumphant in a chariot drawn by elephants, the other a battle between Greeks and giants, and a third, likewise in the Museo delle Terme, with scenes from the life of a boy who died young.

The Endymion myth is highly suitable for a grave monument, for it transfigures in a poetic image the common belief of a waning paganism in a life of the soul after death. Almost seventy sarcophagi with this subject from the second and third centuries A.D. are completely or partially known. The model used for them in the workshops was probably a famous painting of the third or second century B.C. The Museum has another sarcophagus of this series from near Rome that is about thirty or forty years earlier. Except for the mourning Erotes with inverted torches at the corners it has the same pictorial elements in another grouping. In comparison, the later sarcophagus with the lion heads is artistically the better piece. But the style itself has undergone a change. The forms have become more restless and fragile, their firmness and masses have loosened up. The relation with the tectonic frame has also become looser. The figures are distributed more freely over the plane, with an increasing release from the convention of the classical Greek relief. A kind of ancient baroque style is in preparation. Indeed, this loosened and enlivened play of forms served the artist’s purpose well—to give a spiritual and symbolic turn to the ancient myth. Even the structure of the sarcophagus is symbolic. It is modeled after the troughs in which grapes were pressed, with the lion masks serving as spouts for the new wine, and this too hints at the life of the human spirit after death.

Modern prejudice has held that the period
that produced this work lacked the vitality to oppose a new, creative spirit to the decline of classical forms. We have now read the testimony of this fine sarcophagus, which calls in several ways for a revaluation of the artistic and spiritual currents of these years.

The height of the sarcophagus (acc. no. 47.100.4) with cover is 28\frac{3}{4} inches; length 73\frac{1}{4} inches; width 27 inches; maximum depth of relief about 3 inches. Broken off and missing: on the left end, part of the chariot and the left knee of Oceanus; on the right end, Selene’s left forearm, reins, the right foot and wings of the Evening Star; and both ends of the flat portion of the lid.


Portrait of the deceased Arria, from the lid of the sarcophagus, and a wooden medallion of the Empress Julia Domna and her family, formerly in Berlin. The similar hair styles serve to date the sarcophagus.