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Aitiology and Death, Closure and Immortality in Propertius Book 4

Death, especially in its relation to the lasting value of love, is a prevalent theme throughout Propertian elegy. The subject takes on a particular significance in Book 4, as is evidenced by its appearance in nearly every poem. This is not surprising, as death is a kind of closure, and so it is an apt medium of expression in the elegist's final collection. There are, in fact, close associations between death and *aitia* as well. The purpose of this paper is to explore those connections. I will focus especially on three aspects of the relationship between aitiology and death, using examples to illustrate each:

(1) First, aitiological stories themselves often involve death. The foundation myths for cities, temples, altars, or other significant sites, as well as for specific ritual practices, may center around the necessary destruction of threatening forces, whether human or monstrous. In Book 4, examples of such *aitia* include: the foundation of the Ara Maxima and its ritual practice of exclusion, established in honor of Hercules' victory over Cacus and, more problematically, over the Bona Dea (4.9); the foundation of the Temple of Jupiter Feretrius and dedication of *spolia opima*, in honor of Jove's assistance in the victories of Roman commanders; the Palatine temple of Apollo, dedicated in honor of the god's aid to Augustus at Actium in defeating the 'monstrous' Cleopatra (4.6); and also the *aition* for the Tarpeian rock.

Alternatively, even the death of a victim whose threat is not apparent may serve as a necessary sacrifice for the completion of an *aition*. Indeed, in some cases, the unhappy event of an unwanted death is memorialized for its own sake.

(2) Second, death, like aitiology, is manipulable as a topographical subject; for graves and tombs are themselves monuments, and sepulchral epigrams may be seen as akin to dedicatory inscriptions. In 4.7, Cynthia is very much concerned with the establishment of an epitaph that will memorialize her in the manner she desires (85–86). In 4.11, too, Cornelia includes a suggestion of appropriate wording for her own epitaph (35–36). 4.4, in addition to establishing the Tarpeian grove and rock, also sets up a sepulchral monument for Tarpeia herself (*turpe sepulcrum*, 1). And in 4.5, the poet-lover strives to establish a final (and uncomfortable) resting place for the *lena* who has troubled him so much while alive (esp. 1–4, 75–78).

(3) Third, and finally, both death and aitiology are associated closely with closure and 'fixity', as the *aition* itself affixes a specific meaning to a particular site. Yet both are also simultaneously initiatory and cyclical, and so representative of a kind of immortality, as a gravesite (with its inscribed stone), like a temple (and like a poetic collection), may outlive its own generation to be visited (and read) again and again.