

**E. H. Gombrich, A Classical Quotation in Michael Angelo's 'Sacrifice of Noah', *Journal of the Warburg Institute*, Vol. 1, 1937, pp.69 [Trapp no.1937A.1]**

The group of men and women in Michael Angelo's "Sacrifice of Noah" who are engaged in front of the altar in slaughtering the animals and preparing the fire, have long been recognized as a classical "motif"; but it has passed unnoticed that one of the chief figures behind the altar—the woman kindling the flame (Pl. 8a)—is a literal quotation from Meleagros sarcophagi (Pl. 8b). In the story of Meleagros, she represents the mother of the hero, Althaea, who burns the enchanted faggot, magically connected with the life of her son, thus avenging his murder of her brother. It may be that Michael Angelo saw in her strange gesture—head turned away, the hand before the eyes—some ritual gesture of sacrifice which he copied. A passage in Leonardo's manuscripts, however, explains the meaning of the pose more simply. Speaking of how to represent a night scene, he writes: "As to their gestures, make those who are near it (the flame) screen themselves with their hands and cloaks as a defence against the intense heat, and with their faces turned away as if about to retreat (fugire). Of those further off, represent several as raising their hands to screen their eyes, hurt by the intolerable glare."<sup>[1]</sup> Of course, Leonardo, who codifies and enriches the formulae of the Quattrocento, is not to be considered as a direct source for Michael Angelo, but he provides a parallel worth mentioning.



a—Michael Angelo. Detail of the Sacrifice of Noah, Sistine Ceiling (p. 69)



b—Meleager Sarcophagus in Villa Albani. Detail after Robert, III, 2, 278 (p. 69)

1 J.P. Richter, *The Literary Works of Leonardo da Vinci*, 1883, No. 604.