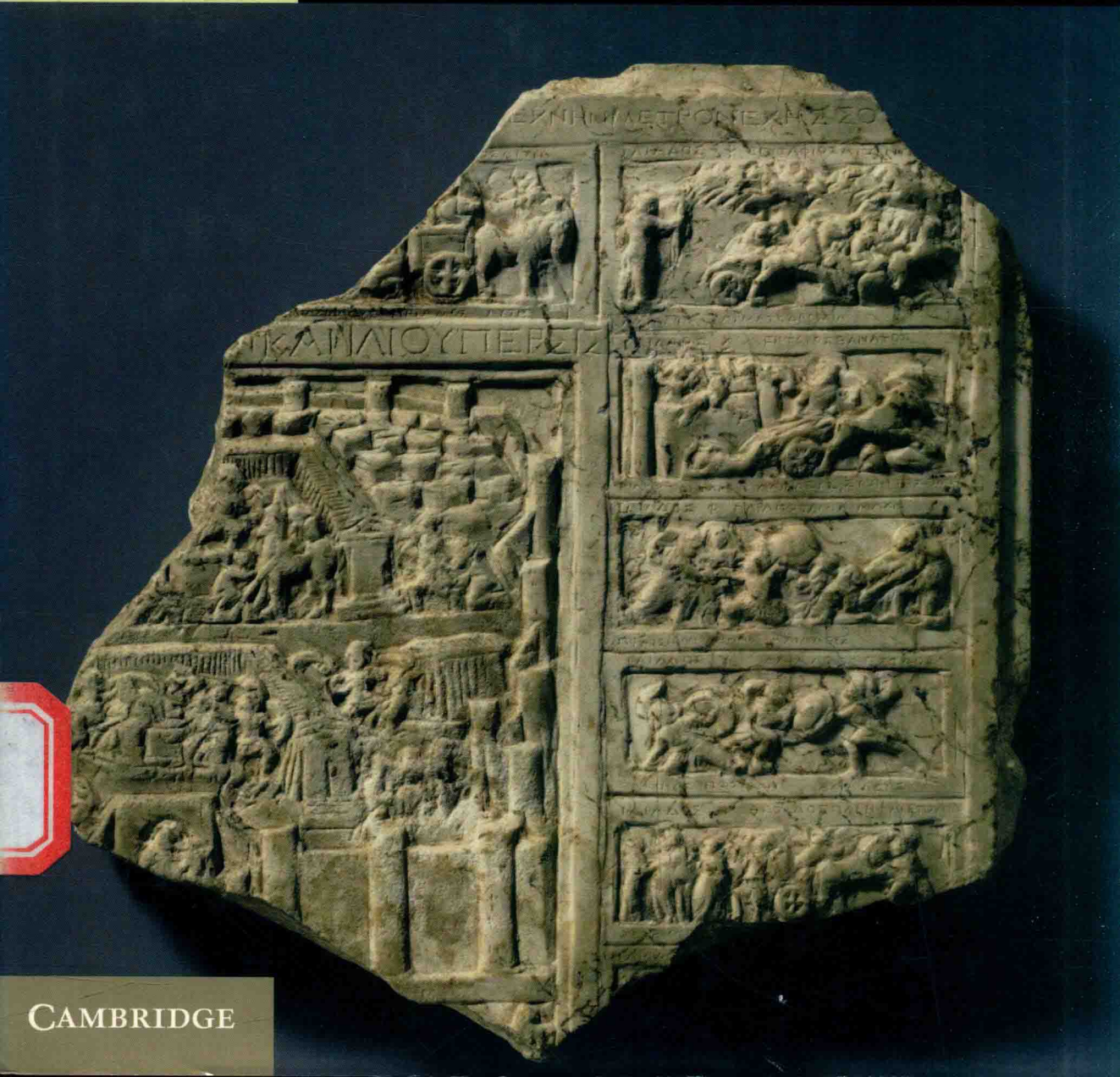
David Petrain

GREEK CULTURE IN THE ROMAN WORLD

Homer in Stone

The *Tabulae Iliacae* in their Roman Context



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Homer in Stone

The *Tabulae Iliacae* are a group of carved stone plaques created in the context of early imperial Rome that use miniature images and text to retell stories from Greek myth and history – chief among them Homer's *Iliad* and the fall of Troy. In this book, Professor Petrain moves beyond the narrow focus on the literary and iconographic sources of the *Tabulae* that has characterized earlier scholarship. Drawing on ancient and modern theories of narrative, he explores instead how the tablets transfer the Troy saga across both medium and culture as they create a system of visual storytelling that relies on the values and viewing habits of Roman viewers. The book comprehensively situates the tablets in the urban fabric of Augustan Rome. New photographs of the tablets, together with re-editions and translations of key inscriptions, offer a new, clearer view of these remarkable documents of the Roman appropriation of Greek epic.

DAVID PETRAIN received his Ph.D. in Classical Philology from the Department of Classics at Harvard University. He is a scholar of Greek and Latin language and literature with expertise in the art and material culture of ancient Rome. His articles about ancient poetry and other texts written on papyrus or inscribed in stone have appeared in the *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, and *Mnemosyne*. His co-edited volume, *The muse at play: Riddles and wordplay in Greek and Latin poetry* (with Jan Kwapisz and Mikołaj Szymański), was published in 2012.

GREEK CULTURE IN THE ROMAN WORLD

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Preface

I began studying the *Tabulae Iliacae* more than a decade ago, when I first encountered a black-and-white image of the *Tabula Iliaca Capitolina* and began poring over the version of Homer's *Iliad* and the fall of Troy that it unfolded through an intricate configuration of image and text. My work is still animated by a sense of fascination with the tablets, and by a desire to vindicate the interest and complexity of the stories they have to offer. Gratifyingly enough, I am not the only one who in recent years has been taking a second look at the *Tabulae Iliacae*. As I finished my own dissertation on the tablets in 2006, I became aware of the monograph by Nina Valenzuela Montenegro, which sets the study of the images and social context of the tablets on a new footing. And when my manuscript for the present book was substantially complete, I learned that Michael Squire was about to put out a new treatment of the *Tabulae*, one that builds on his earlier work with image and text in the ancient world. Though Squire and I naturally cover some of the same ground, our books are independent and, I hope, complementary: objects as rich as the *Tabulae Iliacae* only benefit from having different types of questions asked of them and being observed from different points of view.

I have been helped along the way by many people and institutions. The American Academy in Rome with its community of scholars and artists provided an ideal environment in which to complete my dissertation. A stipend from the National Endowment for the Humanities and a summer residency at the University of Cincinnati as a Tytus Fellow allowed me to develop the project further, and it was as a member of the Institute for Advanced Study that I revised the manuscript with the benefit of incomparable library resources, and a group of incredibly generous colleagues. A fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities helped to make that sabbatical possible.

I owe a considerable debt to the staff and directors of the museums where the tablets are held, for indulging my protracted viewing sessions and being willing to put up with repeat visits. I would like to thank Joan Mertens of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York; Mathilde Broustet of the

Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris; and Elena Bianca Di Gioia, Marina Mattei, and Daniela Velestino of the Capitoline Museum in Rome. My especial gratitude goes to Michel Amandry, director at the Cabinet des Médailles of the Bibliothèque Nationale, for allowing me both to photograph the tablets there and to use the photos in this book.

Kathleen Coleman, Gloria Ferrari, and Richard Thomas guided my work at the dissertation stage, and thereafter. I have benefited from the support and advice of Rebecca Benefiel, Bettina Bergmann, Farouk Grewing, Peter Holliday, Franco Mondini-Ruiz, and too many others to mention. Michael Squire read the entire book in manuscript and offered invaluable comments that have saved me from gaffes and never failed to be illuminating. I also thank Jaś Elsner and an anonymous reader for many helpful suggestions. The errors that remain after all this belong to me.

My sister Emily, my parents Ovila and Diane, and my grandmother Marguerite Vaillancourt encouraged me when I needed it: their support means the world to me. And without Leo Coleman, finally, I could never have finished. He's not responsible for the errors that remain either, but whatever good there is in the following pages, he has a hand in it.

Acknowledgments

A condensed version of Chapter 1 appeared as "Moschus' *Europa* and the narratology of ecphrasis," in M.A. Harder *et al.*, eds., *Beyond the canon. Hellenistica Groningana 11* (Leuven, 2006): 249–269.

An expanded version of part of Chapter 5 appeared as "Visual supplementation and metonymy in the Roman public library," in J. König *et al.*, eds., *Ancient libraries* (Cambridge, 2013): 332–346.

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Abbreviations

A–B	*Posidippi Pellaei quae supersunt omnia*, C. Austin and G. Bastianini, eds. (Milan, 2002)
CIG	*Corpus inscriptionum Graecarum* (Berlin, 1828–1877)
CIL	*Corpus inscriptionum Latinarum* (Berlin, 1862–)
EG	*Epigrammata Graeca*, D. L. Page, ed. (Oxford, 1975)
FGrH	*Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker*. F. Jacoby, ed. (Berlin, 1923–1958)
GVI	*Griechische Vers-Inschriften I, Grab-Epigramme*. W. Peek, ed. (Berlin, 1955)
IG	*Inscriptiones Graecae* (Berlin, 1903–)
IGUR	*Inscriptiones Graecae urbis Romae*. L. Moretti, ed. (Rome, 1968–1990)
J–M	*Griechische Bilderchroniken*, O. Jahn and A. Michaelis (Bonn, 1873)
Kaibel	*Inscriptiones Graecae, volumen xiv: Inscriptiones Italiae et Siciliae*, G. Kaibel, ed. (Berlin, 1890)
LfrgrE	*Lexikon des frühgriechischen Epos* (Göttingen, 1955–)
LIMC	*Lexicon iconographicum mythologiae classicae* (Zurich and Munich / Dusseldorf, 1981–2009)
LSJ	*A Greek–English Lexicon*, 9th edn, H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, and H. S. Jones, eds. (Oxford, 1940; with revised supplement by P. G. W. Glare, 1996)
LTUR	*Lexicon topographicum urbis Romae* (Rome, 1993–2000)
NP	*Der neue Pauly* (Stuttgart, 1996–2003)
OCD	*The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd edn revised, S. Hornblower and A. Spawforth, eds. (Oxford, 2003)
OLD	*Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford, 1982)
RE	*Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* (Stuttgart, 1893–1978)
Sadurska	*Les Tables Iliaques*, A. Sadurska (Warsaw, 1964)
SB	*Sammelbuch griechischer Urkunden aus Ägypten* (Wiesbaden *et al.*, 1915–1993)
SEG	*Supplementum epigraphicum Graecum* (Amsterdam, 1923–)

Sp–A	*Pompei alla luce degli scavi nuovi di Via dell'Abbondanza (anni 1910–1923)*, 2 vols., V. Spinazzola and S. Aurigemma, eds. (Rome, 1953)
TLL	*Thesaurus linguae Latinae* (Leipzig and Stuttgart, 1900–)
VM	*Die Tabulae Iliacae: Mythos und Geschichte im Spiegel einer Gruppe frühkaiserzeitlicher Miniaturreliefs*, N. Valenzuela Montenegro (Berlin, 2004)

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Introduction

In the latter half of the seventeenth century, a priest by the name of Arcangelo Spagna was wandering among the ruins of an ancient Roman villa about ten miles southeast of Rome itself, when he made a surprising discovery. Lying on the ground before him, surrounded by fallen walls and barely visible because of the dirt that clung to it, was a small tablet of stone covered with miniature figures carved in relief and texts written in Greek. As a man of letters well versed in the myths of Classical antiquity, Spagna must have realized immediately what he was looking at: the plaque, obviously ancient, carried a version of the story of the Trojan War told through images and text. One part of the plaque presented the fall of Troy as a panoramic tableau, with the city shown in a bird's-eye perspective that allowed viewers to peer within its walls and witness the battles between Greeks and Trojans playing out in its different quarters. In another section, scenes from the *Iliad* were set out in a manner so comprehensive that each book of Homer's poem was allotted its own space on the stone. Spagna would never have seen anything like it; the tablet is still one of the most detailed visual representations of Troy's final moments to reach us from the ancient world.

The left-hand edge of the tablet was broken, and Spagna could see that in its present state it was incomplete: about half of the twenty-four books of the *Iliad* were unaccounted for. He began a search for the missing piece, but not alone. Spagna was the house chaplain of Francesco Barberini, a powerful Roman cardinal who had jurisdiction over a nearby abbey, and it was doubtless thanks to this connection that Spagna could draw on a sizeable band of workmen to help locate the rest of the tablet. Yet his own diligence and the labor of his workers were to no avail, and the piece was not found. Spagna's tablet would remain a fragment. He retained it as a prized possession in his own collection of antiquities, and about a century later it was donated by Pope Clement XIII to the Capitoline Museum in Rome, where it is still on display.[1]

[1] The preceding two paragraphs are based on the account of the tablet's discovery at Fabretti 1683: 316, with additional biographical detail for Spagna provided by Herczog 1993; I treat this material in greater detail in Chapter 5. For the alternative versions of how the tablet made its way from Spagna's possession to Clement's, see Sadurska: 24, VM: 27.

Spagna's efforts inaugurated a series of discoveries that continues to the present day. Over the years no fewer than twenty-two additional tablets have appeared that likewise represent scenes from Greek mythology and history with a distinctive combination of miniature illustrations and inscribed texts: they derive most of their subject matter from epic poetry, but a portrait of Homer and even a victory by Alexander the Great also appear. Though information on the provenance of these tablets is frequently sketchy, most of them come from Rome or its environs and seem to have been produced by the same workshop: we are dealing with objects created to mediate Greek subject matter, particularly the stories of Homeric epic, for a Roman audience. Because the majority of the tablets carry material related to the *Iliad* and the story of Troy, the entire class is known by the suggestive, if not entirely accurate, label *Tabulae Iliacae*, the "Iliac Tablets."[2]

Ever since Spagna's day, students of the ancient world, its myths, and its art have taken a keen interest in the *Tabulae Iliacae*, sometimes for the abundance of their illustrations, sometimes for the opportunity they seemed to offer of reconstructing the plotlines of epic poems whose texts have not survived. The continuing discovery of new objects belonging to the class has allowed a progressive revelation of the intricacies of their narratives, yet despite this gradual but steady increase in our data set there is considerable disagreement over how we should evaluate the significance of the *Tabulae*, or even over whether we have any idea of what they are at all. The tablets have been ranked among "the least understood of all ancient artistic monuments."[3] Others are not so agnostic but reach very different assessments. One study on the fall of Troy in Greek art, for instance, commences with the tablets and presents them as "a comprehensive model for the Ilioupersis [Sack of Troy] myth as it emerged in the art and poetry of the Archaic and Classical periods."[4] Yet some see in the tablets little more than deluxe crib sheets designed to jog the memory of owners who had trouble recalling their Homer, "probably the Roman equivalent of students' flash cards."[5]

In the present study I begin from the premise that the *Tabulae Iliacae*, by reimagining the Troy saga in pictures for a Roman audience, necessarily produce something more than a mere transcript of pre-existing material. In transferring the stories of Greek epic across both medium and culture, the tablets create a system of visual storytelling unprecedented in ancient art for

[2] Appendix 1 is a list of the twenty-three tablets that have been counted among the *Tabulae Iliacae*. On the workshop and the pertinence of individual tablets to the class, see the final section of this introduction. For more on the provenances, see Chapter 5.

[3] Burstein 1984: 153. [4] Anderson 1997: 3.

[5] The quotation is from Stewart 1996: 51; on the history of this idea, see below.

its variety and compression. This system draws on the values and viewing habits of contemporary Roman viewers in order to present a compelling version of epic myth that is as much a product of Roman interests as of the Greek traditions to which the tablets lay claim. The artisans of the tablets were well aware of the novelty of their project, for they equip the images they have assembled with inscriptions designed to guide viewers through the story: both explicit viewing instructions and, on the verso side of several tablets, a series of remarkable letter grids that convert written languge into a multi-directional game. These texts are some of the most explicit reflections we possess by an ancient artist about what it means to "read" a visual narrative. Far more than ancient flashcards, the *Tabulae* demand to be considered alongside other Roman attempts to appropriate the story of Troy, such as Vergil's *Aeneid* or the uses made of Trojan myth in the monumental art commissioned by the emperor Augustus: as we shall see, the tablets themselves were fashioned in the decades following the appearance of Vergil's poem and Augustus' most prominent public works. This is a book, then, about how a group of small stone plaques rewrote Homer's *Iliad* and the saga of Troy at the dawn of the Roman empire, and what meanings their radically reshaped vision of Troy's fall conveyed. Ancient scholarship, literature, and art, both Greek and Roman, inform my analysis, which reveals the complexity of visual communication in the early imperial period, and the insights to be gained when we pay attention to the cultural forces that shape the way in which a story is told.

The *Tabula Capitolina*: A description

Because of its current location in Rome's Capitoline Museum, the tablet unearthed by Arcangelo Spagna is now known as the *Tabula Iliaca Capitolina* (*Tabula Capitolina* for short). In addition to its full name, each of the *Tabulae Iliacae* has a convenient shorthand designation consisting of a number followed by one or more letters: the *Tabula Capitolina* is 1A.

A brief word on these number–letter designations before we turn to the *Capitolina* itself. Numbers 1 through 19 were assigned in a monograph of 1964, which tried to use the numerical order to sort the tablets into four more or less cohesive groupings, primarily on the basis of the content of their images and inscriptions.[6] Any tablets found thereafter simply receive the next number in sequence (as of 2009, we have perhaps reached 23). The

[6] Sadurska suggested that some of her groupings might represent the productions of different workshops (on the workshop question, see the final section of this introduction).

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