

## BOOK REVIEW

*Homer in Stone: The Tabulae Ilicae in Their Roman Context.* By DAVID PETRAIN. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. xiii + 260. Hardcover, \$99.00. ISBN 978-1-107-02981-1.

This book provides an excellent study of the *Tabulae Ilicae*, the small Roman tablets in stone best known for iconographical and textual summarizations of the *Iliad* and Trojan Cycle epics. Petrain's exploration of the visual creativity the Iliac tablets, as situated in the context of Roman culture, is part of a rehabilitating trend<sup>1</sup> that has moved beyond earlier negative approaches.<sup>2</sup>

The introductory chapter introduces the tablets and their scholarship before announcing the methodology and purpose of the book. The exposition displays clarity and concision in its argument, as well as a sensible and balanced tone; these characteristics are to be found throughout the work. Chapter 1 prepares the reader for exploration of the tablets' visual strategies by a comparative analysis of literary ecphrasis. This leads to an explanation of the narratological reading of the tablet imagery, which utilizes the Russian formalist terms *fabula* (chronological sequence of actions) and *sjuzhet* (the plotting of the actions in a given work). The second and third chapters employ the evidence of the tablets themselves for strategies of their visualization. Petrain provides an extensive, close reading of the elegiac couplet inscribed on the Capitoline tablet that invites the viewer to learn of *techné* of Theodorus and the *taxis* of Homer, so as to gain all knowledge. For Petrain, the couplet's elusive yet grandiose nature invites an engaged and creative viewing of the tablets.

Though this discussion effectively puts comparative lexical evidence and a variety of interpretations before the readers' eyes, perhaps it over-stresses the open-ended ambiguity of the poem, and by implication, the tablets. It seems clear to me that the "the *taxis* of Homer" employs an objective genitive to boast of the

<sup>1</sup> Seminal is N. Valenzuela Montenegro, *Die Tabulae Ilicae: Mythos und Geschichte im Spiegel einer Gruppe frühkaiserzeitlicher Miniaturreliefs* (Berlin, 2004); a brilliant recent study is M. Squire, *The Iliad in a Nutshell: Visualizing Epic on the Tabulae Ilicae* (Oxford, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> As exemplified by N. Horsfall, "Stesichorus at Bovillae?" *JHS* 99 (1979) 26-48.

tablet's innovative contextualization of the Homeric *Iliad* within (or outside, visually) the Cycle. And in practice Petrain demonstrates that a programmatic direction of visual spatiality exists on the Capitoline tablet. The "magic squares" found on the back of many tablets, which allow the reading of a text from the middle outwards in multiple directions, are thought to be analogously instructive about how to view spatial arrangement on the *recto* side. In Chapter 4 Petrain provides his reading/viewing of the tablets, guiding us through the visual connections between the central panel depicting the sack of Troy (with citation of the *Persis* by Stesichorus), lower friezes referencing the *Aethiopsis* and *Little Iliad*, and surrounding summaries and book-by-book images of the *Iliad*. As widely recognized, the central panel is designed for Roman reception in its emphasis on the departure of Aeneas; Petrain also convincingly points out iconographical patterns that underline sequential and intertwined narratives of Achilles and Aeneas.

In the final two chapters, Petrain first provides a detailed investigation into the provenance of the Capitoline tablet, and then explores the display and usage of the tablets. After surveying theories of possible dedicatory, didactic, and dedicatory purposes of the tablets, the author argues that the Roman public library would be a potential context for all three usages. The Roman villa in which the Capitoline tablet was found would then provide a private and wealthy reflection of this originary context. Much of this is speculative, but Petrain well informs his readers of the evidence and the choices of interpretation before pursuing his own thesis. Two appendices provide a conspectus of all the tablets and comprehensive description of the Trojan ones. There are multiple plates and illustrations, though the press has not been generous with their presentation (in this the book by Squire is much superior).

All in all, this is an instructive and rewarding study of a topic that can seem abstruse and that has engendered controversy. As the author hopes, it complements the recent Squire book while pursuing a distinctive agenda (the two were composed with respectful cooperation). The focus on Hellenistic and Roman aesthetics as a context for the tablets does seem to neglect the genre of early Greek epic that is so central to many of the tablets, but this seems to be an over-correcting aspect of the trend that rightly resists antiquarian mining of the tablets for literary evidence. Given this work's clear presentation of evidence, balance of iconographic and literary interpretation, and lucid argument, I would advise scholars new to the topic to start with it first.

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