

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 Iliouperis [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 language 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).

letters originate with an earlier monograph that labeled the twelve tablets then available with the alphabetical series A through M.⁷ This practice persisted two letters further (there are tablets N and O), but for the remaining nine tablets it was abandoned in favor of choosing letters descriptive of the tablet's original owner, findspot, or present location: for example, the *Tabula Iliaca of New York*, currently housed in the Metropolitan Museum, is also known as 2NY. The conventional number-letter system for referring to the tablets is thus a strange and somewhat clumsy hybrid of differing classificatory schemes, but a salutary reminder nonetheless of the multiple strata of scholarship that underlie present work on the *Tabulae*. As its designation 1A indicates, however, the *Tabula Capitolina* has consistently been at the head of every list of the *Tabulae Iliacae*, their best preserved exemplar and the natural point at which to begin our own exploration of their narratives.

The following description will serve as a basis for understanding the more detailed investigations of the tablets in subsequent chapters. The *Tabula Capitolina* (1A) is made of a calcite whose off-white color resembles plaster: see Figure 1 (Figures 1–21 may be found at the back of the book).⁸ In its present state it measures 25 cm high by 28 cm wide (about 10 by 11 inches), not much larger than a sheet of paper; originally it will have been the same height but wider by nearly half, 25 cm by about 40 cm (comparable in size, that is, to a 15-inch laptop). The tablet has two principal sections divided by a pillar. On the right are twelve horizontal bands stacked one on top of the other, each of which contains scenes from a single book of the *Iliad*, usually arranged so that the action progresses from left to right (Figures 2, 3). The pillar separates these bands from a square panel that contains the representation of Troy: we see the city's architecture from a bird's-eye perspective while the figures within it are portrayed frontally at eye level, in a mixing of perspectives characteristic of Roman narrative art (Figures 4, 5).⁹ There is a single, longer horizontal frieze above the panel, and two below it (more on these in a moment).

As mentioned above, the *Capitolina* is missing a section. The stack of bands on the right account for only twelve of the twenty-four books of the *Iliad*. Originally, the square panel would have been bordered on the left by a

⁷ Jahn and Michaelis (1873) skipped the letter I.

⁸ Figure 6 is a line drawing of the same by Feodor Ivanovitch, draftsman to Lord Elgin. The drawing cannot be trusted for details or for the placement of inscriptions, but it may facilitate an initial engagement with the content of the *Tabula Capitolina*.

⁹ For the Roman proclivity to combine multiple perspectives in a single image, see von Blanckenhagen 1957: 81–83; Holliday 2002: 106; VM: 23–25 (with further bibliography). In Chapter 4 I treat this mode of representation in greater detail.

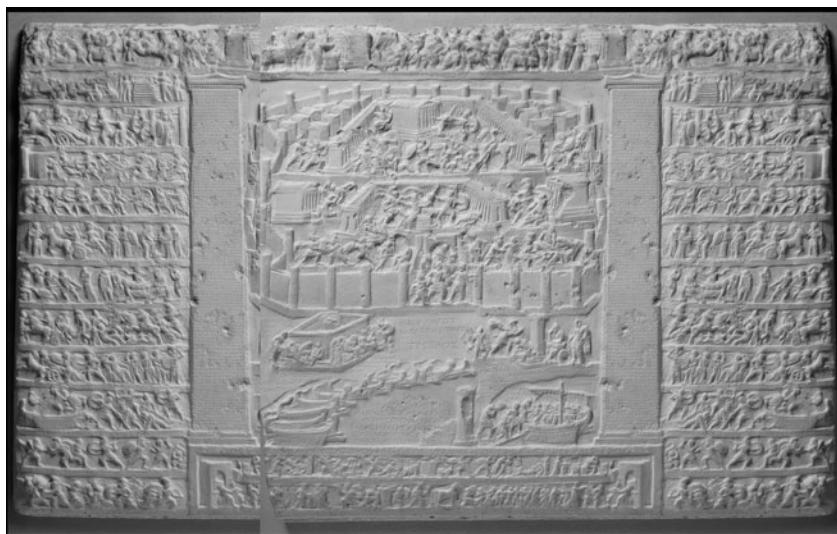


Figure 22 Approximation of the original appearance of the *Tabula Capitolina* (1A), digital manipulation by the author

pillar mirroring the one on the right, and then an additional stack of twelve bands for the rest of the poem. When intact, then, the layout of the *Capitolina* would have been strictly symmetrical, with the central panel flanked to the left and right by stacks of twelve bands each, for a total of twenty-four. Figure 22 is a manipulated image that attempts to convey a sense of the tablet's earlier appearance: I have mirror-reversed the extant pillar and bands and placed them on the left of the existing object. Though the effect is imperfect and will not bear scrutiny in its details, I feel the image offers, more vividly than would, say, a diagram, an impression of the tablet's original disposition in which the bands frame the central cityscape.

Let us return to the extant portion of the tablet. The illustrations for book 13 of the *Iliad* are at the bottom of the stack on the lower right. Then the books are presented in numerical order up to the poem's conclusion in *Iliad* 24 at the upper right corner, so that the images can be read in the same way as we might process a modern comic strip, with the exception that the bands run from bottom to top. The missing left-hand section of the *Capitolina* will have carried the first half of the *Iliad*, books 1 through 12. Book 1 began in the upper left-hand corner of the tablet: it is longer than the other bands and extends over the top of the central panel until it meets the *Iliad* 24 band at the start of the right-hand section in a literal ring composition. Because the section of the *Iliad* 1 frieze directly above the central panel is preserved, we can reconstruct the organization of the missing section with confidence: the

Iliad bands on the left ran in the opposite direction from those on the right, with *Iliad* 1 at the top and *Iliad* 12 in the lower left corner.¹⁰ Thus the story runs downward on the left (books 1–12), then inverts its course to move upward on the right (books 13–24).

Viewers were not left to figure out on their own what material each frieze contained. Several of the friezes carry in their upper left corner the Greek letter corresponding to the number of the book of the *Iliad* they portray: not all the friezes preserve this alphanumeric designation, but it seems likely that the full series from alpha to omega was originally inscribed.¹¹ Most of the *Iliad* bands also have labels in Greek that clarify the identity of the figures and events that they depict, though this is not the only textual support that the *Capitolina* provides for its illustrations of the *Iliad*.¹² The pillar to the right of the central panel is inscribed in minute Greek script with a summary of the events of the same poem, beginning with the final section of book 7 in which the Greeks construct a defensive wall around their ships, and continuing through to the end of the poem. The pillar's missing twin on the left will have carried the summary for books 1 through 6 and the earlier sections of book 7.¹³

Though the *Iliad* receives a considerable amount of space on the *Tabula Capitolina*, pride of place in the central section is reserved for poems that take up the story of the Trojan War where Homer leaves off. Two of these belong to a group of epics that were known in antiquity as the Epic Cycle and included a connected account of the fall of Troy and its aftermath: the *Aethiopis* and *Little Iliad* come after the *Iliad* in the Epic Cycle and provide the subject matter for the two friezes under the central panel. Directly below the panel is the *Aethiopis*: the middle of its frieze portrays a key scene from that poem, the death of Achilles framed within a representation of the gates of Troy. In the second of the friezes, the action of the *Little Iliad* culminates just before the city's fall with a lengthy procession depicting the Trojan Horse, prominently featured at the center, being drawn within Troy's walls.

The central panel presents the denouement of the story in a more dramatic format that sets the city and coast of Troy before the viewer's eyes as famous

¹⁰ This reconstruction is confirmed by tablets 3C and 6B, which organize their narratives in the same way as the *Capitolina* and preserve part of the section to the left of the central panel: *Iliad* 1 starts in the upper left corner, and subsequent books appear below running downward in numerical order.

¹¹ Comparison with other tablets helps: 2NY, 3C, 6B, and 20Par consistently equip their extant Iliadic friezes with book numbers (though each tablet uses a different format, for which see Chapter 3).

¹² For a detailed description of the figures and inscriptions in each band, see Appendix 2.

¹³ Once again, this reconstruction is confirmed by another tablet: 8E preserves a pillar to the left of the Troy panel whose inscription is devoted to the first books of the *Iliad*.

events from the city’s destruction play out in its different quarters. At the top of the panel is a trapezoidal court in which the Trojan Horse stands at the lower right-hand corner; the temple of Athena looms at the top of the trapezoid, where the Trojan priestess Cassandra is being dragged away by Ajax. A second trapezoidal space below represents the palace of Priam: the king of Troy is seated on an altar and about to be killed by Neoptolemus, son of Achilles. To the right of this palace is the temple of Aphrodite: in front of it Menelaus, his sword drawn, faces his wife Helen as her mantle slips off her body.

At the exact middle of the panel the story of Aeneas comes to the fore. Under the arch of Troy’s main gate, the Trojan prince flees the city: he grasps his son Ascanius by the hand and on his shoulder bears his father Anchises, who clutches a casket containing the Penates, Troy’s ancestral gods (all three figures are labeled). This image of Rome’s national hero engaged in an act of piety toward family and gods is modeled after a monumental statue group of the same commissioned by Augustus: the emperor claimed Aeneas as his ancestor and installed a statue of the hero in flight in his forum at the heart of Rome.¹⁴ The *Capitolina* adopts the iconography of this public monument for its central scene – evidently the linchpin of the narrative – but adds the detail of the god Hermes, who stands to the right of Aeneas and guides his escape. Aeneas appears in the panel a second time to the left of the gate, in the lower left corner of Troy’s city walls, where he receives a casket from another figure: this is a scene from earlier in the story, when he is entrusted with the divine images that he and his father will rescue from the city.

The lower third of the panel depicts the plain and coast outside Troy. In front of the city’s walls are the tomb of Hector on the left and a column for Achilles on the right, both of them thronged by figures caught in the aftermath of Troy’s destruction. At the bottom of the panel the ships of the Greeks are lined up along the shore and Aeneas appears for the third and last time in the lower right corner. He boards a ship along with his family, his household gods, and his companions. An inscription states explicitly that he is departing for Hesperia, the land of the west.¹⁵

In addition to its reliefs and their labels, the central panel carries two other important texts to which we will be returning often. On the lower border of the panel there is a fascinating inscription that promises those who study the tablet a revelation of Homer’s wisdom, and names the artist responsible for its creation, one Theodorus whose signature appears on several other tablets as

¹⁴ For the connection to the statue group in Augustus’ forum, see VM: 131 and below.
¹⁵ The caption reads, “Aeneas with his companions setting off for Hesperia” (Αἰνῆας σὺν τοῖς ἰδίοις ἀποαἰ[ρ]ῶν εἰς τὴν Ἑσπερίαν). See Appendix 2 for full details on the inscriptions pertaining to this scene.

well. In the neutral space below the central group of Aeneas and his family, another prominent inscription begins that extends downward past the Greek ships and continues all the way to the lower border of the panel. This text cites by title and author all of the poems that the *Tabula Capitolina* purports to represent. The first two lines below the ships, for instance, name “the *Iliad* according to Homer” (*Ilias kata Homēron*). The citation that begins the inscription, just underneath Aeneas’ feet, has probably excited more discussion than any other feature of the *Tabulae*: it claims that the tablet carries “the *Sack of Troy* according to Stesichorus” (*Iliou Persis kata Stēsichoron*). If the citation is accurate, and the events shown in the panel really do derive from the archaic Greek poet (the poem in question is now lost save for fragments), Stesichorus would be our earliest source for the tradition that Aeneas departed from Troy and sailed westward.

While the *Tabula Capitolina* is the best preserved member of its class, it is not the only one of the *Tabulae Iliacae* that take on the entire Trojan War. Eight other tablets feature an analogous organization: though several are highly fragmentary, in their intact state each had a panel in the center showing the Sack of Troy, surrounded by texts and images that present earlier events in the story drawn from the *Iliad* and the poems of the Epic Cycle.¹⁶ None of these tablets is a carbon copy of the *Tabula Capitolina*, however. Individual details in the images and texts are subject to a restless variation from tablet to tablet, and each tablet preserves at least one detail that is not found in any of the others. As a group these tablets afford us the opportunity, practically unique for the ancient world, to study nine different instantiations of a single, synoptic schema for visualizing the story of Troy.

Trends in scholarship

As we saw at the start of the previous section, the history of prior scholarship on the *Tabulae Iliacae* is partially inscribed in the very system we use to name them, with its mismatched assortment of numbers and letters drawn from different monographs. In the following brief sketch, I hope to suggest that the earliest studies of the tablets also established a method of approach that continues to yield fruitful results to this day but tends to leave some of the most distinctive features of the tablets underexamined.¹⁷

¹⁶ The eight tablets are 2NY, 3C, 6B, 7Ti, 8E, 9D, 20Par, 21Fro. See Chapter 3 for descriptions of each.
¹⁷ For a history of scholarly research on the *Tabulae* with a somewhat different emphasis from the following sketch, see VM: 11–15. Sadurska begins her discussion of each tablet with a

Raffaele Fabretti is author of the first full-length treatment of a *Tabula Iliaca*: his description of the *Tabula Capitolina* was attached as an appendix to his monograph on Trajan's column that appeared in 1683, not many years after Arcangelo Spagna discovered the tablet. Since both Fabretti and Spagna were associated with the cultured circle of the Barberini family in Rome, it is perhaps unsurprising that Spagna entrusted publication of his find to the Italian scholar.¹⁸ According to his nineteenth-century biographer, Fabretti's monograph is the first to employ on a large scale the so-called "comparative method" of deciphering unfamiliar scenes on an ancient monument by making an exhaustive collection of similar scenes preserved on other monuments or described in ancient texts.¹⁹ Thus Fabretti atomizes the scenes on the *Tabula Capitolina* and organizes his work as a discrete series of investigations into the possible sources for each.²⁰ Regardless of whether he was a pioneer in the use of this method, later studies of the tablets would adopt his *modus operandi*.

In 1873 the earliest monograph on the *Tabulae Iliacae* as a class appeared. *Griechische Bilderchroniken* ("Greek picture-chronicles") is the composite work of Otto Jahn and his nephew Adolf Michaelis, who completed the project after Jahn's death.²¹ Jahn assembles twelve tablets and explores the relationship between them and the literary sources. Apart from a brief conspectus at the beginning, he does not focus individually on each tablet that features Homeric material but rather organizes his analysis according to the books of the *Iliad*, as Fabretti did: proceeding through the books one by one, Jahn describes the relevant images on each tablet and considers the passages from Homer to which they seem to be related. From the numerous discrepancies that this method reveals between the images and the poem itself, Jahn infers that the artisans of the tablets worked not from the actual text of the *Iliad* but from a prose epitome of the same. It fell to Michaelis to work up the monograph's final section on the inscriptions of the tablets; his painstaking work on these often intractable texts has not been superseded. The content of the inscriptions, usually expository in nature but on occasion showing signs of deeper learning, suggests to Michaelis that the *Tabulae* may have served as teaching aids – though he is careful to specify that they

précis of earlier research that is particularly valuable for pre-twentieth-century publications (see also *ibid.* 21–22).

¹⁸ Cf. Herczog 1993 and Micheli 2006: 77, 90.

¹⁹ Visconti 1830: 379–381. On Fabretti and his methods, see also the papers collected in Mazzoleni 2006.

²⁰ Micheli 2006: 85–86.

²¹ Michaelis writes that Jahn's last sight on his deathbed was a new drawing of the *Tabula Capitolina* (J–M: vii).

would have been suitable only for more advanced students, and that this need not have been their original or exclusive purpose.

A second standard reference work on the *Tabulae* is Anna Sadurska's *Les Tables Iliques* of 1964, by which time nineteen tablets had come to light. Sadurska distances herself from the strongly literary orientation of Jahn and has little to say on agreements or disagreements between the tablets and literary texts. As for the inscriptions, her study generally does not represent an advance on the prior work of Michaelis and others, with the significant exception that she is the first to use the paleography of the inscriptions to assign them to the hands of five different stonecutters (her attributions have met with general acceptance). Her monograph opens with a treatment of questions related to the production of the tablets and their purpose. Building on an observation by Georg Lippold that the *Tabulae* fall into distinct but interrelated groups according to subject matter or the presence or absence of an artist's signature,²² she daringly proposes that such groups might be used to assign the tablets to different workshops active during the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius. As for their purpose, she finds in the reliefs of the tablets an ideological import tied closely to the Julio-Claudian dynasty, and goes so far as to suggest that some of the plaques might have been exchanged as gifts by members of the imperial court.

In the bulk of the monograph Sadurska, unlike Jahn, devotes a separate treatment to each tablet, though her descriptions of individual tablets still proceed through the reliefs section by section in an order that respects the narrative sequence of the poetic works that underlie the illustrations. Because she was trying to produce comprehensive descriptions of the tablets, it was sensible of her to employ a mode of description both methodical and easy to follow; I adopt the same procedure in my second appendix. This procedure does, however, impose on the tablets the principles of ordering that govern their literary sources. It tends to preclude discussion of the ways in which they might use their visual medium to impart a new organization to the stories they represent, even to create a narrative that viewers will experience in a way fundamentally different from the way they might a text.

Scholars have an additional motive for comparing the *Tabulae* closely to their literary sources. As I noted in the description of the *Tabula Capitolina*, a key inscription attributes that tablet's version of the Sack of Troy, including presumably the scenes involving the escape of Aeneas, to a lost poem on the same subject by Stesichorus. Before Stesichorus may be counted as the earliest source for Aeneas' journey westward, however, we need to know just

²² See Lippold 1932: 1891 and the evaluation of his contribution at Sadurska: 22.