TEXTS ON THE TABLES: THE TABULAE ILIACEAE IN THEIR HELLENISTIC LITERARY CONTEXT

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Abstract: This article re-evaluates the 22 so-called Tabulae Iliacae. Where most scholars (especially in the English-speaking world) have tended to dismiss these objects as ‘trivial’ and ‘confused’, or as ‘rubbish’ intended for the Roman ‘nouveaux riches’, this article relates them to the literary poetics of the Hellenistic world, especially Greek ecphrastic epigram. Concentrating on the tablets’ verbal inscriptions, the article draws attention to three epigraphic features in particular. First, it explores the various literary allusiveness of the two epigrammatic invocations inscribed on tablets 1A and 2NY; second, it examines the Alexandrian diagrammatic word-games on the reverse of seven Tabulae (2NY, 3C, 4N, 5O, 7Ti, 15Ber, 20Par), relating these to the pictorial-poetic games of the Greek technopaegnia; third, it discusses the possible hermeneutic significance of associating six tablets with ‘Theodorean techne’ (1A, 2NY, 3C, 4N, 5O, 20Par), comparing a newly discovered epigram by Posidippus (67 A-B). All of these allusions point to a much more erudite purpose and clientele: the tablets toyed with Hellenistic visual-verbal relations at large.

After many years of neglect, the 22 so-called Tabulae Iliacae are experiencing something of a resurgence of interest.1 First, in 1997, there was Nikolai Kazansky’s commentary on the most famous ‘Capitoline tablet’ (1A: Figs 1–2).2 Then, in 2004, Nina Valenzuela Montenegro published the most detailed and thorough catalogue to date, based on her Munich doctoral thesis.3 This work has been supplemented by Cristina Salimbene’s summary of research, along with David Petrain’s Harvard doctoral thesis of 2006.4 The field of scholarship on the Tabulae looks very different from that of 1873, when the first inventory of 12 tablets appeared (by Otto Jahn – but completed posthumously by Jahn’s nephew, Adolf Michaelis); it also looks very different from that of 1964, when Anna Sadurska published her own definitive catalogue of 19 tablets.5 Despite these various developments, a number of misunderstandings remain rife. This article attempts to put paid to some of these once and for all: in particular, it responds to Nicholas Horsfall, whose 1979 article on the tablets – published in this same journal – has assumed canonical status in the English-speaking world. Horsfall offered many new and important observations. But his dismissal of the tablets as lowbrow ‘vehicles for adult education’ seems to me wholly and irredeemably flawed: the Tabulae are better understood within a much more erudite culture of Hellenistic-cum-Roman, literary-cum-artistic production.

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1 The 22 tablets are listed in the appendix: ten inscriptions are collected in IG 14 (328–47, nos 1284–93; cf. IGUR 4.93–98, nos 1612–33. I follow Sadurska (1964) in referring to the tablets both numerically and alphabetically.


3 Valenzuela Montenegro (2004); prefigured in Valenzuela Montenegro (2002).

4 Salimbene (2002); Petrain (2006). I am grateful to David Petrain for discussing ideas, and sharing the second and fifth chapters of his dissertation.

5 Jahn (1873); Sadurska (1964).

6 Horsfall (1979a) 35.
My argument here forms part of a larger project on the playful ways in which the Tabulae pitch visual against verbal forms of representation. As such, it takes its lead from recent work on Hellenistic epigram, galvanized by the 2001 publication of the Milan Posidippus, many of them on artistic subjects (P.Mil.Vogl. 1295). Restricting myself to just some of the tablets’ inscriptions, this article focuses on three features in particular: first, the literary allusiveness of two epigrammatic invocations (on 1A and 2NY); second, the Alexandrian diagrammatic word-games on the reverse of seven Tabulae (2NY, 3C, 4N, 5O, 7Ti, 15Ber, 20Par); and third, the possible hermeneutic significance of their artistic attribution – the way in which six tablets associate themselves with ‘Theodorean techne’ (1A, 2NY, 3C, 4N, 5O, 20Par). This study is by no means exhaustive. My hope, rather, is that these preliminary comments may arouse further curiosity among Classical philologists, and from a range of different literary, artistic and cultural-historical angles.

8 Bing and Bruss (2007) testify to this flourishing field. For an excellent guide to the new Posidippus, see Prioux (2008) 159–252.
I. Tabulae illitteratae?

Before proceeding, let me summarize some basics about provenance, materials, date and form. We have only limited information about find-spots: where archaeological provenances are known, they relate without exception to Rome or Roman Campania.9 Materials have not always been identified, but most tablets are made of light-coloured Palombino or Giallo Antico, and at least one (16Sa) reveals traces of red and gold paint.10 As for date, the most recent consensus places the Tabulae in the early first century AD, although at least one tablet (19J) is later – datable to the mid-second century AD.11 Of the 22 reliefs, only two (17M, 19J) preserve all four original corners: the majority constitute broken fragments, many of them no larger than a few centimetres squared.

11 There are strong stylistic reasons for 19J’s Antonine date (Valenzuela Montenegro (2004) 331–33), but not for dismissing 16Sa as ‘ein Imitat, da keine ikonographischen Verbindungen festzustellen waren’ (Valenzuela Montenegro (2004) 415; much more circumspect is Sadurska (1964) 74).
We are on scarcely firmer ground when it comes to subjects, for even the generic title *Tabulae Iliacae* is misleading. While some 13 tablets are very clearly associated with the *Iliad* (five depicting it alongside other Trojan poems – the *Little Iliad, Aithiopis* and *Ilioupersis*, five *Tabulae* pertain to other epic poems). Others depict historical and mythological events: two represent chronicles of Graeco-Roman history (18L, 22Get); one relates to Alexander’s victory at Arbela (17M); and one represents the deeds of Heracles (19J).

So what, if anything, do the tablets have in common? Apart from the fact that all 22 tablets are inscribed in Greek, their most striking shared physical trait is their miniature size. One of the largest and most famous fragments, in the Musei Capitolini (1A), seems originally to have measured just 42cm by 25cm (Figs 1–2). Despite this, the surviving section of the relief (30cm by 25cm – marginally larger than a sheet of A4 paper) contains some 250 figures, many of them named in accompanying inscriptions. To the centre right of the tablet can be seen a monumental pilaster, inscribed with a 108-line summary of *Iliad* 7–24; a corresponding pilaster evidently occupied the other side of the tablet, framing the central *Ilioupersis* depiction and summarizing *Iliad* 1–7 (Fig. 3). The two halves of the *Iliad* were also laid out pictorially, to the side of each pilaster, in 12 lateral bands (each inscribed with the relevant book-letter, from *alpha* to *omega*). Below the central image of the *Ilioupersis* are two further friezes, relating to the *Aithiopis* and *Little Iliad*. A series of inscriptions at the tablet’s lower centre lists the various literary sources: not only the *Iliad* of Homer, but also the *Ilioupersis* of Stesichorus, the *Aithiopis* of Arktinos, and the *Little Iliad* of Lesches. Another inscription, this time an elegiac couplet, appears above the two bands, associating the tablet with a certain ‘Theodorean techne’ – an attribution that we find on six tablets (1A, 2NY, 3C, 4N, 5O, 20Par), and to which we will return shortly.

Quite how typical the Capitoline tablet is of the 21 others is an issue that I explore elsewhere: space prevents me from detailing all the tablet inscriptions here, still less from inspecting their images. Concentrating on just some of the features judged most ‘trivial and bizarre’, my aim is to reopen the question of cultural and intellectual register. The painstaking labour expended on the tablets clearly suggests that they were luxury items. But who used the tablets, and what level of literary and cultural sophistication do they assume?

In Anglophone scholarship, it is standard to associate the tablets with a particular type of owner: the *nouveaux riches*. In a series of commentaries on the *Tabulae* (especially their relation to Stesichorus’ *Ilioupersis*), Nicholas Horsfall suggests that these ‘treasure houses of misapplied ingenuity’ appealed to semi-literate consumers – a new Imperial breed of *liberti* who simply

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12 Cf. Horsfall (1979a) 26: ‘the common name conceals a bewildering artistic farrago’. Jahn (1873) consequently preferred the term ‘griechische Bilderchroniken’.

13 Iliadic scenes are depicted on: 1A (Ili. 1, 13–24, Aithiopis, Little Iliad, Ilioupersis); 2NY (Ili. 18–24, Ilioupersis); 3C (Ili. 1–5, ?Kyprien, Ilioupersis); 4N (Ili. 18.478–608); 5O (Ili. 18.478–608); 6B (Ili. 1–9, Ilioupersis, ?Odyssye); 9D (Ili. 22–24, Aithiopis, Ilioupersis); 12F (Ili. 24); 13Ta (Ili. 22); 15Ber (Ili. 3); 20Par (Ili. 17–20); 21Fro (Ili. 23–24). 14G depicts Homer composing epic (surrounded by Iliadic *lemmata*); Valenzuela Montenegro (2004) 252–56.

14 At least in their current state: 7Ti (Aithiopis, Ilioupersis, Little Iliad); 8E (Ilioupersis); 11H (Odyssye); 16Sa (Odyssye); 10K (Theban cycle).


16 See the helpful discussion in Sadurska (1964) 13–14.

17 The most detailed discussion is Mancuso (1909), supplemented by Valenzuela Montenegro (2004) 26–149.

18 For text, German translation and discussion, see Valenzuela Montenegro (2004) 28–32, 368–76; cf. IG 14.325–33, no. 1264.


20 Squire (forthcoming a) chapter 2 (for the relationship between the extant tablets) and chapter 4 (for the iconographic play).

21 Horsfall (1979a) 29, repeated on 32.
knew no better. Noting detailed inconsistencies between the *Iliad* and the Capitoline tablet’s inscribed summaries and figurative reliefs, Horsfall concludes that ‘Theodorus was concerned not with concinnity but with convenience’:

The serious lover of Greek literature would have been appalled by such a combination of the obvious, the trivial and the false. This expensive rubbish belonged in the homes of the nouveaux riches... — of men such as Calvisius Sabinus, who forgot the names of Achilles, Priam and Ulysses and Trimalchio himself, whom Petronius portrays as having Homeric cups, Homeric scenes on the wall and reading Homer at dinner and yet as utterly ignorant of myth.

‘Trivial’, ‘faulty and jejune’, ‘confused’, ‘simple’, ‘ignorant’, ‘scraps’, ‘rubbish’: there can be no doubting Horsfall’s overriding judgment. Because Nicholas Horsfall is one of the only contemporary scholars to have paid serious attention to the tablets, however, his dismissive verdict has taken on canonical status, especially in Britain and America. Despite the close iconographic and philological work by scholars like Nina Valenzuela Montenegro (unmentioned in Horsfall’s most recent analysis), this approach shows little sign of abating: in 2008, Horsfall...
again declares that ‘the cultural context of the *Tabula Iliaca Capitolina* was ... the exuberant pretensions of the semi-educated’.²⁶ My critique is by no means intended *ad hominem*: we find precisely the same assumption among other philologists and archaeologists alike – from W. McLeod’s dismissal of these ‘tawdry gewgaws intended to provide the illusion of sophistication for those who had none’, to Richard Brilliant’s characterization of a ‘a vulgar clientele that cared little for learning’.²⁷

This article is intended as a preliminary rejoinder to such rhetoric. By drawing attention to the sophistication of some *Tabulae* inscriptions, my aim is to situate these objects within a very different sort of intellectual *milieu*. I will then briefly return, in my conclusion, to the specific issues of social context and clientele.

II. Mastering Theodorean *techne*

Returning to the *Tabula Capitolina* (1A), let me begin with the elegiac couplet prominently inscribed beneath the central scene. The epigram occupies the upper border of the frame containing the two lower friezes, between the *Ilioupersis* and *Aithiopis* depictions (Figs 1–3). The line division is marked by a circular dot at the centre of the inscription:²⁸

![Image of inscription]

Understand the Theodorean techne, so that, knowing the order of Homer, you may have the measure of every wisdom.

Although the left-hand extremity of the hexameter is missing, Umberto Mancuso’s reconstruction is beyond reasonable doubt: the ‘Theodorean’ adjective is unambiguous, and, as we shall see, four other tablets associate themselves with τέχνη ἤ Θεοδώρης in precisely this manner (2NY, 3C, 5O, 20Par).²⁹ A manifestly related inscription, placed in an equally prominent position – this time at the very top of the relief (Fig. 4) – can be found on tablet 2NY in New York. Only 16 letters survive (EXΝΗΝ ΜΕΤΡΟΝ ΕΧΗΣ ΣΟ), but the spacing of the inscription, together with its surviving pentameter fragment, confirms that it too originally comprised an elegiac couplet. Using the Capitoline tablet as his model, Kazimierz Bulas proposed the following reconstruction:³⁰

![Image of inscription]

David Petrain is rightly cautious in judging Bulas’ reconstruction ‘highly uncertain’.³¹ But even if 2NY did not reproduce the 1A hexameter complete, we can be sure that it offered a variation on that verse, just as it did in its pentameter. The two inscriptions on the reverse side of the New York tablet are clearly related to those on the obverse of the *Tabula Capitolina*: as we shall see (below), a hexameter inscription directly addressed the viewer in imperative form, as on

²⁹ Mancuso (1909) 729–30. Only Lippold (1932) 1893 resists the reconstruction (‘erscheint zu künstlich’) – writing before the subsequent publication of tablets 2NY and 20Par.
³⁰ Bulas (1950) 114.
texts on the tables: the tabulae iliacae

the Capitoline tablet, and a second inscription, this time in the form of a so-called ‘magic square’, likewise related the ‘Iliad of Homer’ to the ‘Theodorean techne’ (‘Ἰλιάδος Ὁμήρου Θεόδωρην ἐτέχνην’). Whatever else we make of them, the pentameter’s buzzwords – techne, metron and sophia – are connected to those of the Capitoline tablet.

Discussion of these two epigrams has tended to concentrate on the precise connotations of the noun techne, which I deliberately leave untranslated:32 the overriding issue has been whether the term refers to the artistic or grammatical workmanship of Theodorus – whether to Theodorus as the craftsman responsible for this carefully fashioned object (techne as artistry, perhaps even referring to

32 For discussion, see Horsfall (1979a) 27, 31 (responding to Sadurska (1964) 39); Kazansky (1997) 57; Valenzuela Montenegro (2004) 352–55 (with further references).
this artwork)\textsuperscript{33} or to Theodorus as the author of an Homeric epitome (\textit{techne} as a more literary form of craftsmanship, perhaps referring to this verbal epitome specifically).\textsuperscript{34} To my mind, this has been a rather sterile debate. As I hope to show, the epigrams in fact play upon the dual register of the word, toying self-consciously with the shared critical vocabulary of artistic and literary production.

Fundamental here is the literary allusiveness of both texts.\textsuperscript{35} A fragment of P.Oxy 2619, first published in 1969, now allows us to see that the Capitoline tablet, which explicitly parades its association with Stesichorus, also verbally alluded to his \textit{Ilioupersis} in its programmatic inscription (S 89.6–8 Davies):\textsuperscript{36}

... ἀνὴρ

θεῖας [ό]ρτατι δαεῖς σεμν[ά]ς Ἀθάνας

μέτρα] τε καὶ σοφίαν τοῦ...

The man who learned by the will of the august goddess Athena the measures and wisdom...

There can be little doubt that both the Capitoline and New York pentameters were written with this passage in mind: this explains the collocation of the (relatively rare) aorist participle δαεῖς with the nouns σοφία and μέτρα.\textsuperscript{37} Just as the Capitoline tablet claims pictorial derivation from the \textit{Ilioupersis} – ‘the \textit{Ilioupersis} after Stesichorus’ as a large central inscription reads – its epigram is literally mediated through the very language of the poem. If, as Nikolai Kazansky has argued, this Stesichorean fragment formed part of the opening strophe of the poem, the allusion would have been all the more arresting, imbuing these visual objects with the same Greek poetic force that gave rise to the \textit{Ilioupersis} itself.\textsuperscript{38}

Still more significant is the specific context in which the Stesichorean passage appeared. Luigi Lehnus, who was the first to note the connection, has convincingly shown that the lines describe the craftsmanship of the Greek artist Epeius:\textsuperscript{39} the ‘measures and wisdom’ that Stesichorus describes seem to refer to Epeius’ ruse of the wooden horse, aided by the goddess Athena (as we know from numerous other sources).\textsuperscript{40} On the Capitoline tablet, then, the allusion establishes both an artistic and a literary paradigm for Theodorus’ project, within an epigram itself attached to a series of visual representations of this and other poems: on the one hand, it assimilates Theodorus to the craftsman responsible for the Trojan Horse, as represented directly above; on the other, it presents Theodorus as a modern-day Stesichorus – as not just resembling the artist Epeius, but also akin to the poet who describes Epeius’ craftsmanship in verse (forging his own craftsmanship, as it were, within this elegiac couplet).

\textsuperscript{33} For example, Lippold (1932) 1893; Sadurska (1964) 9–10; Horsfall (1979a) 27; Valenzuela Montenegro (2004) 350–58; Petrain (2006) 44–45, n.3.

\textsuperscript{34} For example, Jahn (1873) 91–92; Schefold (1975) 130; Rouveret (1988) 173.

\textsuperscript{35} Petrain (2006) 45–59 provides an independent analysis of the epigram’s ‘elaborate diction and syntax’ (2006) 45; focusing on the collocation δηρα δαεῖς: he suggests that the participle is usually associated with the mastery of knowledge and epic in diction (comparing, for example, \textit{Il.} 10.425, 16.423; \textit{Od.} 9.280).


\textsuperscript{38} Kazansky (1997) 36–43 (supposing a hymnic invocation in the first strophe).


That these epigrams are punning on a shared language of artistic and poetic invention is confirmed by a second allusion, to a clearly related Archaic Greek poem attributed to Solon (13.49–52 West):41

ἄλλος Ἀθήναις τε καὶ Ἡφαιστω πολυτέχνεω ἐργά δαίεις χειροί τί λελέγεται βίοτον, ἄλλος Ὀλυμπιάδων Μουσών πάρα δῶρα διδαχθεῖς ἤμερτης σοφίς μέτρον ἐπιστάμενος.

One man, after he has learned the works of Athena and much-skilled Hephaestus, makes his living with his two hands; another does so, after having been taught his gifts from the Olympian Muses, by understanding the measure of desirable wisdom.

There are of course differences between this passage of Solon and the phrasing of our two tablet epigrams. Condensing two couplets into its single pentameter, the Capitoline epigram seems to make the ‘order of Homer’ (τάξιν Ὠμήρου) the direct object of the participle δαίεις, while nonetheless maintaining the integrity of the phrase σοφίς μέτρου (δύρα δαίεις πάσης μέτρου ἐξῆς σοφίας). These were evidently famous lines. An epitaph on Hesiod, apparently ascribed to Pindar, clearly refers to them,42 as does a tradition of sympotic poetry, descended from a poem by Theognis (873–76 West). Once again, the context of the Solonic passage is significant. Where Solon characterizes two distinct livelihoods – artistic craftsmanship on the one hand and poetic mastery on the other – our epigrams collapse the two cultural spheres into one discrete entity. The Tabulae epigrams fuse artistic with poetic craftsmanship: Theodorus’ techne is a feat of manual craftsmanship, as learned from Athena and ‘much-skilled’ (πολυτέχνεω) Hephaestus; but it is also a literary project, the measure of poetic wisdom.43

The distinct phrasing of the Capitoline epigram, with its promise of possessing the ‘measure of every wisdom’ (πάσης μέτρου... σοφίας), finds further parallels in epic evocations of both artistic and poetic craftsmanship. While in one sense it reminds us of the Homeric analogy of the warring Greeks and Trojans, compared to the sophia of ‘a workman skilled in his handiwork and who knows of his every wisdom through the counsels of Athena’ (τέκτωνος ἐν παλάμμοι δαήμονος, ὡς ρα τε πάσης / εὐ εἰδὴ σοφίς ὑπόθημούσιν Ἀθηνᾶς, Ἰ. 15.411−12), it is also reminiscent of Pigres’ fifth-century BC alleged attempt to recast Homeric epic into a series of elegiac couplets. By inserting a pentameter after the opening hexameter of the Iliad, Pigres invoked ‘the Muse who possesses the limits of every wisdom’ (Μοῦσα: σὺ γὰρ πάσης πεῖρατ’ ἔχεις σοφίς, EGF 65).44 Although we know next to nothing about this


42 The epitaph is preserved in the Tzetzae Vita (see Merkelbach and West (1970) 3) and discussed in Page (1981) 159−60 (χαίρε διέ ἤβθησα και δις τάφου ἀντιβιλήσας / Ἡσίοδο, ἀντίρωπος μέτρου ἔχουν σοφίς). For the connection with the Capitoline epigram, see Lehns (1972) 54, n.15; Valenzuela Montenegro (2004) 352; Petrain (2006) 53; note too the participle ἔχον, which foreshadows the verb of both tablets 1A and 2NY.

43 I respectfully part ways here with Petrain ((2006) 45), who instead argues that ‘the pentameter ... employs language traditionally associated with the acquisition of knowledge about poetry, so that we remain acutely aware of the epic narrative underlying the visual presentation’ (his emphasis). I am not convinced that δαίεις ‘is reserved for the acquisition of the knowledge necessary to practice the art of poetry’ ((2006) 54); indeed, we find a related use of the verb in II. 15.411−12, a passage which refers to artistic craftsmanship, and which has a direct relevance for our epigram (as Petrain (2006) 49−50 notes).

44 On the parallel, see Lehns (1972) 54, n.15; Petrain (2006) 56−57. On the line’s association with the aforementioned passage of Stesichorus (S 89.6−8 Davies), compare Schade (2003) 202.
Carian poet – supposedly the brother of Artemisia – Pigres may well have had the Solonic passage in mind; and it is at least possible that audiences in turn recognized Pigres’ pentameter, preserved in the metrical structure of the Capitoline tablet’s verse (πάσης μέτρου ἔχεις σοφίας).

The overriding point is this: the allusive texture of these two epigrams establishes the inscribed objects as a combined feat of visual and verbal dexterity; better, they leave ambiguous the precise nature of ‘Theodorean techne’, pertaining both to objects for viewing and texts for reading. As such, the two epigrammatic invocations situate themselves within a long literary tradition of analogizing poetry to art (and vice versa). This tradition came to the fore of the Hellenistic aesthetic agenda in particular. Following Simon Goldhill’s seminal article on ecphrasis and the ‘culture of viewing in the Hellenistic world’, numerous scholars have drawn attention to the ways in which the crafted products of visual art served as metapoetic figures for the literary creations of the poet. The locus classicus is arguably Theocritus’ 15th Idyll, in which two women respond not only to an embroidered tapestry displayed in Alexandria, but also to a set-piece hymn, a sung poem that is stage-managed, with characteristic self-reflexivity, within the poem’s larger frame: not for nothing does Gorgo’s praise of the female hymn-singer directly parallel Praxinoa’s praise of the poet. Theocritus’ analogous use of the adjective sophos (‘wise’), in the related contexts of both the woven image and the sung poem, resonates with the dual register of the sophia (‘wisdom’) in the two Tabulae epigrams: on both tablets 1A and 2NY the word pertains simultaneously to the ‘wisdom’ of Theodorus’ visual objects, the poems with which they engage and the epigrams that knowingly occupy both registers at once.

A still closer parallel for the tablets’ epigrammatic concern with combined artistic-cum-poetic craftsmanship is to be found in Hellenistic epigram, especially in those epideictic epigrams that pose as make-believe inscriptions attached to artworks. Todying with their own ontological status between physical monument and collectible literary entity on the page, these poems explored what is at stake in translating an object designed for viewing into a miniature text now destined for reading; in verbally mediating the image, moreover, epigrammatists delighted in appropriating for their own (meta)poetic ends the standard language of artistic production. As a single elegiac couplet detailing the name of the artist and purpose of the artwork, both the Capitoline and New York inscriptions might be compared with supposed ‘artistic signature’ epigrams surviving in the Palatine and Planudean Anthologies. But their express concern with techne and sophia also bears comparison with the 36 extant poems on Myron’s cow, gathered together in the ninth book of the Palatine Anthology, and now supplemented by Posidippus’ own epigram on the subject (col. XI 6–11, 66 A–B). Within this surviving sequence of epigrams, spanning a period from the early Hellenistic to the late Byzantine world, there are some dozen references to the techne of Myron’s make-believe creations; in these

poems, moreover, the description of the ‘wise Myron’ (Μύρων σοφός, AP 9.795.1), who has forged this ‘wise thing’ (σοφὸς χρέος, Posid. 66.3 A–B), is itself made to prefigure the carefully-wrought textual simulations of the clever poet, now herded within the literary confines of the epigrammatic anthology.50

Where Hellenistic epigram explores the poetic techne involved in ecphrastically turning artistic techne into language, the Tabulae present viewer-readers, as it were, with techne squared—with a combined form of poetic and artistic craftsmanship. In verbally describing Theodorus’ intermedial feat, moreover, these epigrammatic inscriptions do not substitute the artwork that they evoke, but rather appear alongside—and indeed as part of—its visual imagery. The Tabulae stress their techne at every available opportunity. At the same time, they remain sensitive to the metapoetic significance of shrinking that techne into such virtuoso miniature form. The ideological debt seems clear. The most famous articulation comes in the Aetia prologue, with its programmatic instruction ‘henceforth to judge poetic-wisdom [sophia] by its craft [techne] and not by the Persian acre’ (αὐθὶ δὲ τέχνη / κρίνετε, μὴ σχοινῷ Περσῶδι τὴν σοφίν, fr. 1.17–18). According to this broader ‘Callimachean’ Hellenistic aesthetic, what matters are such qualities as leptotes, akribeia and ponos.51 The miniature scale of the Tabulae is surely comparable here: on a poetological level, Theodorus’ techne lies in encapsulating the grand themes of epic into something small, laboured and refined (the ‘Iliad in a nutshell’, as one artist was said to craft it—offering the ultimate in visual-verbal, grand-cum-small leptotes, Plin. HN 7.85). In this capacity, it is worth noting the additional pun in the word metron: on the one hand, the term refers to the poetic precisions of epic metre, as though Theodorus’ imagery grants access to the very hexameters of epic poetry; on the other, metron alludes to the literal scale of these objects—the way in which they at once celebrate Homer’s sophia and trump it through their miniature art.

To my mind, these two microscopic inscriptions therefore encapsulate some of the Tabulae’s most macroscopic complexities. We are clearly dealing with highly allusive texts, derived from a broad spectrum of different literary precedents. At the same time, these texts point to the intermediality of the tablets between image and text: they resonate against a Hellenistic aesthetic in particular, concerned with playing upon (and breaking down) boundaries between visual and verbal representation, and between the little and the large.

III. Poetic figures and figurative poems

beside the corresponding pictorial scenes, pithily summarizing events in Books 4–7 and 24 of the *Iliad* respectively. A clear parallel for this is to be found in *AP* 9.385, where each book of the *Iliad* is summarized in a single verse, forming a 24-lined acrostic that stretches from *alpha* to *omega*.

Such academic, urbane and witty recto inscriptions – always in Greek, never in Latin – help to make sense of the texts inscribed on their verso. Of the 22 surviving tablets, 12 were in fact inscribed on both sides (2NY, 3C, 4N, 5O, 7Ti, 9D, 10K, 14G, 15Ber, 18L, 20Par, 22Get). My interest here lies in just one particular type of inscription, found on seven tablets, and in each case offering a verbal title for the scenes depicted on their obverse side:

- **2NY**: [ʹΙλιαδ ʹΟμήρου Θεοδώρησ ή[η] τέχνη]
The *Iliad* of Homer: the *techne* is Theodorean.

- **3C**: [ʹΙλιαδ ʹΟμήρου Θεοδώρησ ή[η] τέχνη]
The *Iliad* of Homer: the *techne* is Theodorean.

- **4N**: [ʹάστις ʹΑχιλλής Θεοδώρης καθ ʹΟμήρον]
The shield of Achilles: Theodorean, after Homer.

- **5O**: [ʹάστις ʹΑχιλλής Θεοδώρης ή τέχνη]
The shield of Achilles: the *techne* is Theodorean.

- **7Ti**: [ʹΙλιων Π]όρσιος
The Sack of Troy.

- **15Ber**: άνάξικτων σύνθεσις
An epitome of the lords.

- **20Par**: [ʹΙλιαδ ʹΟμήρου Θεοδώρη[τ]ος ή τέχνη]
The *Iliad* of Homer: the *techne* is Theodorean.

What is most remarkable about these inscriptions is their visual mode of presentation (‘magic squares’, ‘Kreuzwortlabyrinthe’, *quadrati cubi*): in each case, the letters are laid out in a grid, inviting a diagrammatic mode of reading, and in a variety of different directions – horizontally, vertically and (from the centre) diagonally, from left to right, as well as from right to left. Whichever way the reader proceeds, the sequence of letters make up the same words. Although none of the grids survive complete, their compositions were clearly related, as M.T.
Bua demonstrated of tablets 2NY (Fig. 5) and 3C (Fig. 6), which reproduce the same pattern of letters (Fig. 7).\textsuperscript{62} Both tablets, moreover, preserve parts of a second inscription, this time a hexameter, written above the letter-grid, directly instructing the reader to ‘grasp the middle letter and glide whichever way you wish’ (γράμμα μέσον καθ(ελών, παραλίσθα)νε οὗ ποτε βούλει).\textsuperscript{63}

These inscriptions frequently go unmentioned in discussions of the tablets, especially in Anglophone scholarship.\textsuperscript{64} When they are discussed, they are most often compared with

\textsuperscript{62} Bua (1971) 9–11.
\textsuperscript{63} My supplement follows the most common reconstruction (Bua (1971) 9; cf. Guarducci (1974) 426); Gallavotti (1989) 49 instead suggests γράμμα μέσον καθ(ερων, παραλίμμα)νε οὗ ποτε βούλει (‘Look at the middle letter and continue whichever way you wish’).
Fig. 6. Reverse of tablet 3C, Tabula Veronensis I (© La Bibliothèque nationale de France: Monnaies, Médailles et Antiques inv. 3318 (revers))

Fig. 7. Reconstruction of the ‘magic square’ inscribed on fragmentary tablets 2NY (top left) and 3C (top right) (after Bua (1971) 10, fig. 2)
Egyptian magical papyri and inscribed hieroglyphic puzzles; the standard *comparandum* is an early third-century AD *stele* from Xois (modern-day Sakha, in the central Nile Delta), adorned with a similar ‘magic square’ inscription in both Greek and Egyptian hieroglyphs. Scholars have therefore adduced the inscriptions as evidence of the tablets’ origins, of Theodorus’ supposed ‘Egyptian connections’.

But no ‘exotic’ foreign culture is needed to explain these word-games. As Margherita Guarducci has shown, such ‘giochi letterali’ were *de rigueur* by the first century AD, and paralleled in surviving graffiti from all corners of the Roman Empire. Among the most famous examples are two palindromic ‘letter squares’, one from Pompeii (*CIL* 4.8297) and the other found in numerous contexts, including Ostia, Dura Europos, Siena and Watermore (near Cirencester). The texts could be read along both a horizontal and a vertical axis, from left to right as from right to left and from top to bottom as from bottom to top:

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R O M A
O L I M
M I L O
A M O R
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Although the semantic ‘content’ of both texts remains unclear (‘Rome – once – Milo – love’; ‘Sower – Arepo – holds – (through?) his works – the wheels’), such inscriptions were clearly intended to draw self-conscious attention to the mediating *form* of language. As such, these ‘letter squares’, like the *Tabulæ recto* inscriptions, can be compared with the sorts of literary puns, anagrams and palindromes that reflect the ‘bookish self-consciousness of the [Hellenistic] age’. That we are dealing with a cultural trait common to both the literary and epigraphic records is suggested by the related poems collected in epigrammatic anthologies and scribbled as wall graffiti – so-called *karkinoi stichoi*, or *uersus recurrentes*. As with the *Tabulæ* inscriptions, these verses could be read from left to right and from right to left. The first line of *APl.* 387c.1, also known from a graffito from Pompeii (in Greek, as well as Latin transliteration), provides just one example: ἡδη μοι Δίος δρα πρόγη παρά σοι, Διομήδη (‘Here is the spring of Zeus, by your side, Diomedes’).

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65 On the *stele*, dedicated to Osiris by a certain Moschion, see Bresciani (1980); Rouveret (1989) 363–69; Ernst (1991) 393–97; Squire (forthcoming a) chapter 5.


69 Cf. Guarducci (1965) 266–70.

70 Cf. Habinek (2009) 133: ‘It is hard to see what function the palindromes have other than that of calling attention to writing’s insistence on arbitrary patterns of visual perception’.


73 See Guarducci (1965) 254, 261, on *CIL* 4.2400a; the first eleven letters are also found as *CIL* 4.2400b. Cf. Guarducci (1965) 249–56 on a second-century AD inscription from Obuda, as well as the comparanda cited in Guarducci (1965) 261–62, nn.135–37.
about the spatiality of the written word. In negating the linear sequentiality of words, however, the tablets go still further in drawing images out of texts: they encourage us not just to read the inscription, but also simultaneously to view it.74

As I have argued elsewhere, each recto ‘magic square’ inscription is best approached in terms of the pictorial games played out on its verso. Just as the tablets’ images invite viewers to ‘choose their own adventure’ in pictorial response, these inscriptions expressly (and verbally) legitimate the practice: their multidirectional mode of reading forms the flipside of the multidirectional viewing modes played out on their obverse.75 If the inscriptions therefore offer the ultimate in Barthesian jouissance – ‘we read, we skip, we look up, we dip in again’76 – they also return us to the objects’ knowing ambiguity between visual and verbal forms. Of course, both sides of the tablets were decorated with ‘letters’ (remember how individual friezes are frequently laid out from *alpha* to *omega*): the instruction to ‘seize the middle *gramma* and go wherever you like’ consequently pertains to both recto and verso. Still more important, though, are the recurrent literary puns on the dual sense of *γράμμα*, referring to the ‘strokes’ of both words and pictures.77 When, in Theocritus’ 15th *Idyll*, Praxinoa exclaims ‘what painters have painted such true *grammata*!’ (*ποίοι ξωγράφοι τάκριβη γράμματ’ ἐγράψαν*, Th. *Id.* 15.81), the self-reflexive reference is simultaneously to the tapestry that Praxinoa describes and to the virtual reality of the poet’s larger verbal description (‘what “writers of living beings” have written such true letters’).78 This sort of pun is a mainstay of Hellenistic *ecphrastic* epigrams, taking its lead from Erinna’s earlier poem on a painting of Agatharchis: the *grammata* are said to be the work of delicate hands, displaying a *sophia* that therefore matches Prometheus’ own (*ἐξ ἄταλαν χειρῶν τάδε γράμματα: λόστε Προμηθεύ / ἐντι καὶ ἀνθρώποι τίν όμαλοι σοφίαν*, *AP* 6.352.1–2).79 Within a larger meditation on the respective resources of words and images, Erinna’s epigram flirts with its icono-textual liminality between the two media: it offers *grammata* on *grammata* – both lines on lines and strokes on strokes.80

Once again, the *Tabulae* ‘magic square’ inscriptions are best understood against this intellectual backdrop. But a still closer parallel can be found in six Greek epigrams that, in the absence of any ancient name, have come to be called *technopaegnia*, *carmina figurata* and picture-poems (*AP* 15.21–22, 15.24–27).81 Three of the epigrams are attributed to Simmias of Rhodes, probably dating to the early third century BC; a fourth is (wittily) ascribed to Theocritus and the two remaining poems are probably Imperial, attributed to Dosiadas and Besantinus respectively.82 All six poems share a common conceit, using their verse length to figure...

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74 On these ‘magic squares’ as intermedial entities between words and pictures, see Elkins (1999) 243–44 (although omitting reference to the obverse decoration!).

75 See Squire (2009) 137–39; (2010a); (forthcoming) a chapters 4 and 5.

76 Barthes (1990) 11–12.


80 *Cf.* Männlein-Robert (2007a) 255–56: ‘Erina uses this term [*γράμματα*] specifically because of its ambiguity and hints not only at the painting, but also at her own poem, a device found elsewhere in Hellenistic poetry’.


‘calligrammatically’ the visual appearance of the objects that they evoke – an egg, an axe, a statue of Eros, panpipes and two altars. The original manuscript presentation of these epigrams remains unclear: two of the poems attributed to Simmias (AP 15.22, 15.27) seem to have made semantic sense only when readers physically unscrambled their sequence of increasing and decreasing choriambic verses. Readers, in other words, had to tackle first the opening line, then the last, and so on, thereby disfiguring the calligram even as they read it just as seeing the picture meant reordering the poem, reading the poem entailed collapsing the picture. Perhaps, as Christine Luz argues, the poems instead worked in reverse: the challenge was to ‘figure out’ (quite literally) the picture from the poetic clues; the prosaic appearance of the text served as a griphos for the image latent within.

Like the Tabulae, the technopaegnia delight in occupying a range of different ontological levels. ‘Gaze upon me’ (λέοσσε με), reads the opening line of one of Simmias’ epigrams, arranged in the shape of the wings of Eros (15.24: αἱ πτέρυγες Ἠρωτος). This exhortation to look is of course commonplace in ecphrastic epigram, as is the use of the first-person pronoun, as though the poem were physically attached to a visual object imbued with voice. In this poem, though, we really can see the image that the epigram ‘ecphrasises’: in a mise-en-abyme of replications, the speaking first person refers at once to Eros himself, his statue, its calligrammatic image, the attached dedicatory inscription and the papyrus scroll that represents all of these registers and still others.

Like the Tabulae, such picture-poems comment explicitly on their combined visual and verbal techne. Besantinus’ epigram on an altar, boasts the poet, is not composed of gold or silver, but crafted by the Muses to whose visual-verbal techne the king of the gods granted immortality (τάων ἄειξων τέχνην / ἐνεισε πάλμις ἀρφίτων, AP 15.25.16):

83 Guichard (2006) especially 85–89 provides a good overview.
85 Luz (2008) 23: ‘Der Leser muss also, wenn er das Gedicht in der Figur lesen will, mit den Augen auf- und niederspringen, und kommt am Schluss der Lektüre in der Mitte des Textkörpers an’.
As with the Tabulae ‘magic square’ inscriptions, Besantinus’ epigram could simultaneously be read along a vertical as well as a horizontal axis, revealing an acrostic (‘Ολύμπιε, πολλοῖς τεσσεράξις, ‘Olympian, may you sacrifice for many years’). But the very image that the poem materializes also compares with the ‘magic square’ on tablet 4N (Fig. 8). Where the tablet’s recto visualizes the Homeric description of the Shield of Achilles (the ultimate ecphrastic representation of images in words), the 614 squares of its verso are arranged as a hexameter verbal title in visual altar form (ἐσπερίων Ἀχιλλεώς Ἑυδωρός καθ’ Ὀμήρου). The arrangement of letters not only allows the text to be read like a picture, in a multitude of directions; the letters are themselves here designed to be read as a picture, forming the silhouetted outline of an altar.88

IV. Theorizing Theodorus

The various associations between the Tabulae and the technopaegnia argue against the ‘low-brow’ interpretation of the tablets’ images and texts. Indeed, one of the few surviving literary references to the technopaegnia confirms their reputation as highly demanding poems: referring to Dosiadas’ calligrammatic poem on an altar (AP 15.26), Lucian expressly compares such epigrams to the arcane and riddling glosses of Lycophron’s Alexandra (Lex. 25).

88 For full discussion of tablet 4N – its obverse imagery, the mind-bogglingly minuscule verbal inscription of I.I. 18.483–608 around its rim and the significance of this altar shape – see Squire (forthcoming a) chapter 7. Of the seven ‘magic square’ inscriptions, only three are ‘square’ (2NY, 3C, 20Par): apart from 4N, two were apparently arranged to form a lozenge (7Ti, 15B: Bua (1971) 12–13), while one was laid out as a 12-sided polygon (5O: Bua (1971) 11).
Fig. 8. Line drawing of the reverse of tablet 4N, *Shield of Achilles* (after Bienkowski (1891) tav. v)
It is in this connection that I want to make a third and final suggestion about the tablets, or rather about the ‘Theodorus’ to whom six of them ascribe their techne. As we have now seen, six fragments claim to be the work of this artist, of which one (4N) undoubtedly paraded that name on both its obverse and reverse sides:

1A (recto) [téxhvn tìn Θεòdòrhoñ mòtì táxvin Ὠμήρου ὀφρα δαιεὶς πάσῃς μέτρων ἐχψις σοφίας.
2NY (recto) [téxhvn tìn Θεòdòrhoñ mòtì táxvin Ὠμήρου ὀφρα δαιεὶς τὲ χιν πέμτων ἐχψις σοφίας.
   (verso) [Ἠλίας Ὠμήρου Θεòδωρης ἣτι τέχνη
3C (verso) [Ἡλίας Ὠμήρου] Θεòδωρης ἣτι τέχνη
4N (recto) ἄσπις Ἀχιλλῆος Θεòδωρης καθ’ Ὠμήρου
   (verso) ἄσπις Ἀχιλλῆος Θεòδωρης καθ’ Ὠμήρου
5O (verso) [ἄσπις ᾿Αχιλλῆος Θεòδωρης ἢ τέχνη]
20Par (verso) [Ἡλίας Ὠμήρου Θεòδωρη[ος ἢ τέχνη]

Scholars have speculated about the identity of this Theodorus, but have failed to reach any consensus. Some have viewed Theodorus not as the artist of the tablets, but rather as the grammarian mythographer responsible for their epitomization of epic (see above); others have supposed a connection with Theorus, the painter of a series of Trojan War paintings displayed in the Portico of Philip in Rome (Plin. HN 35.144). Others still have drawn attention to a certain Theodorus of Ilium, to whom the Suda attributes an independent Troica. Nikolai Kazansky, on the other hand, has fancifully argued that the signature refers not to the maker of the tablets, but rather to the (unattested) name of an earlier artist, supposed to have been responsible for the Iliadic mosaics of Hieron II’s third-century floating palace (Athen. 5.207c). By far the most common assessment, though, is that Theodorus hails from Egypt. This interpretation is premised on the supposedly ‘Egyptian’ formulation of the ‘magic squares’ already discussed: as I hope to have shown, it is wholly unfounded.

Of course, Theodorus is an exceedingly common name. Diogenes Laertius lists 20 persons of that name, including a Theban sculptor, three painters and (interestingly) an epigrammatist (2.103–04). But it is seems more than coincidental that, among the most celebrated ‘Theodori’, at least in the first century AD, there was an Archaic Greek sculptor from Samos. This Samian Theodorus is described by (among others) Pliny the Elder (HN 34.83):

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89 The following section has developed out of discussions and correspondences with Jim Porter: my sincere thanks.
90 Following Bienkowski (1891) 185 (contra Sadurska (1964) 45).
91 On the Θεòδωρης spelling, see above, n.57.
94 Cf. Sadurska (1959) 10; Horsfall (1979a) 27, n.6 (though concluding that ‘the name is exceedingly common’).
95 Kazansky (1997) 74–79. This is, alas, pure fantasy; cf. Petrain (2006) 187, n.117 also notes.
96 Cf., for example, Horsfall (1979a) 29: ‘It was perhaps to an Egyptian that such a “jeu de lettres” might most naturally occur’.
Theodorus, who made the labyrinth at Samos, cast himself in bronze. Besides its marvellous reputation as a likeness, it is celebrated for its great precision. In his right hand he holds a file, and with three fingers in his left hand he held a little chariot and team of four horses that was carried off to Praeneste as a marvel of miniaturization: a fly that was made at the same time would cover the painted object—chariot and charioteer alike—with its wings.

What is so interesting about this Theodorus is his aptitude for miniature artistic invention. Such was the sculptor’s magna suptilitas that he rendered in the left hand of his self-portrait a tiny chariot and horses, something so small as to be held between three fingers; these figures were sufficiently esteemed as to be removed to Praeneste—a miniaturist wonder in their own right (paruitatis ut miraculum). 98 Indeed, so tiny is the chariot that, were it to be rendered in painting (pictam), the wings of a modelled fly would cover it.99

Pliny’s description is apparently corrupt, which is why some editors posit fictam in the final clause (‘the fly would cover the moulded quadriga’), while others prefer totam (‘the fly would cover the whole quadriga’). Still, the general thrust of Pliny’s evaluation is unambiguous. The reference might not have added up to much had it not been for the discovery of the new Posidippus: far from some Plinian curiosity, Posidippus’ new-found reference to Theodorus reveals his workmanship to have been legendary, and over a much longer timespan (Posidippus, we recall, was writing in the early third century BC). Posidippus provides an independent reference to Theodorus’ miniature chariot and charioteer, in the context of one of his nine poems on statues, or Andriantopoiika (col. X 38–XI 5, 67 A–B):

> J. ἄντυγος ἐγγυθὲν ἄθρει τῆς Θεοδώρεις χειρὸς δος κάματος· ὡςι δὲ γὰρ ζυγόδεσμα καὶ ἡνία καὶ τροχοῦ ἵππων ἄξονα· ἴμιο καὶ ἄκρα χερῶν· ὡςι δὲ ε’ ἐν [μήκεσος, ἀλλ’ ἐπὶ τῶδε ἐξομήνην ἄν ἦν ἅρματι μυίαν ἰδοῖς.

Observe from nearby... of the rim... how great was the labour of the Theodorean hand. For you will see bands, reins, the ring for the horses’ bit, the bit’s axle, and the charioteer’s face and finger-tips. And you will see clearly... of its size, but you could see a fly of the same size as the chariot sitting upon it.

There can be no doubt that Posidippus is referring to the same artist as Pliny: this explains not only the allusion to the ‘Theodorean’ miniature chariot and charioteer, but also the reference to the fly.100 Like all the other images described in this sequence of poems, Theodorus’ was evidently an iconic sculpture: the poet assumes his readers will know the image (and sculptor),

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98 On Pliny’s description, and its derivation, see Metzler (1971) 175–79.
99 For a related story about a sculpted ‘fly that could cover with its wings a chariot drawn by four horses’, see HN 36.45 (cf. Overbeck (1868) 51; with discussion in Bartman (1992) 170).
and so omits any contextual information (not least any suggestion of a self-portrait).\footnote{See Bastianini and Gallazzi (2001) 193: ‘Posidippo, senza descrivere la scultura nel suo complesso, si sofferma esclusivamente sulla perfezione dei dettagli visibili nella pur piccolissima quadriga’.} What evidently interested Posidippus, rather, is the miniature scale of Theodorus’ craft: as Evelyn Prioux puts it, ‘Théodore... était cité parce qu’il préfigurait, par son timae labor, les qualités miniaturistes de la poésie alexandrine’.\footnote{Prioux (2007) 40, n.62. \textit{Cf.} Petrain (2006) on the metapoetics of Posidippus’ \textit{Lithika}.} This sheds light on a second allusion to Theodorus in the same papyrus, this time in the \textit{Lithika} (col. II 3–6, 9 A–B): describing the seal-ring of Polycrates (adorned with the insignia of the poet), Posidippus does not mention Theodorus by name; in a famous passage, though, Herodotus informs us that Theodorus was responsible for the ring (Hdt. 1.51).\footnote{Kuttner (2005) 154–56, concluding that ‘the story was widely proverbial, not just anecdotal’ ((2005) 155).} Taken together, Posidippus’ two petite poems on Theodorus, both celebrating name; in a famous passage, though, Herodotus informs us that Theodorus was responsible for the various horse and rider statues of Posidippus’ \textit{Hippika} (described in poems 71–88 A–B).

For ancient readers, Posidippus’ emphasis on Theodorus’ \textit{miniature} artistry must have been all the more striking. After all, Theodorus seems to have been more famous for his \textit{grander} works – a giant silver crater (Hdt. 1.51, 3.41), a golden vine (Hdt. 7.27; Athen. 12.514) and a Samian temple to Hera (so large as to receive the nickname ‘labyrinth’: Plin. \textit{HN} 34.83, 36.90).\footnote{Pollitt (1990) 181–82. \textit{Cf.} Kuttner (2005) 156: ‘None could miss Posidippus’ polemic for little poems like his own in \textit{AB} 9 and 67, which choose to celebrate Theodorus’ tiny things, not his colossal temple, images and vessels’.} What instead seems to have interested Posidippus, as later Pliny, is what Jim Porter calls a ‘dynamic contrast of extremes’.\footnote{Porter (forthcoming).} Posidippus emphasizes Theodorus’ finely-wrought chariot group, a miniature, as it were, on the grandest scale: despite (or rather because of) its size, Posidippus presents Theodorus’ quadriga as the result of immense labour (\textit{dóxos kàmptos}). In this context, there was additional significance in positioning an epigram on Theodorus’ \textit{miniature} craftsmanship directly before one on Chares’ \textit{giant} statue of the colossus of Rhodes (col. XI 6–11, 68 A–B): in stark contrast to Theodorus’ chariot, Chares’ statue is so large that it matches the magnitude of earth (γαῖς μεγ[ο[ν]ς παρ[α]γίας[ω]ν, 68.6 A–B).\footnote{On the antithesis, see Gutzwiller (2002b) 56–57: ‘This pair of epigrams thus provides a progression from the miniaturization of Theodorus, to the human-sized stately of Myron, to the colossal artistry of Chares’ (2002b) 57; Coleman (2006) 19–21 (ad Mart. \textit{Spect.} 2.1); Prioux (2007) 122–23; (2008) 239–52; Männlein-Robert (2007b) 72–74.} The great labour and diminutive scale of Theocritean artifice is exploited to play out all-encompassing concerns about contrastive opposites, which themselves prefigure the metapoetic games of Posidippian epigram.\footnote{Fundamental is Prioux (2007) 108–13.}

What, though, has all this to do with the \textit{Tabulae Iliacae}? The evident celebrity of this Samian Theodorus means that we should at least consider the possibility that there is more to these six ‘Theodorean’ attributions than meets the eye. The name might be read as a deliberate and knowing allusion to the small-scale craftsmanship of the Archaic artist, celebrated for his \textit{magna supplitias}.\footnote{Petrain (2006) 188 hints at a related association in a sentence towards the end of his doctoral thesis (‘it seems at least possible that the use of the adjective on the \textit{Tabulae} is meant to activate an association between our Theodorus and the more famous Samian...’).} This helps to make sense of one of the most puzzling but overlooked aspects of all six inscribed signatures: their adjectival form. Rather than associate themselves with some ‘Theodorus’, as so far supposed in this article, each and every inscription parades an archaizing possessive adjective, ‘Theodorean’;\footnote{Sadurska (1964) 9 on ‘cette façon de signer, étrange et exceptionnelle’:} the reference is always to a \textit{techne} or shield that concerns...
or pertains to Theodorus (Θεοδωρίς ή τέχνη; 1A, 2NY, 3C, 20Par; ἀστίς Ἀχιλλῆος Θεοδωρίς; 4N, 5O). This is no simple signature, then, and as far as I can tell, there is no epigraphic parallel for such adjectival form rather than nominative or genitive substantive.\(^{111}\)

Posidippus, on the other hand, now supplies an unambiguous textual parallel for the adjective, describing the ‘great labour of the Theodorean hand’ (τῆς Θεοδωρεῖης χειρὸς ὀσος κάματος).\(^{112}\)

Posidippus’ concern with the contrasting extremities of Theodorus’ labour perfectly captures the Tabulae’s larger aesthetic of miniaturizing the grand themes of epic. We have already noted the tablets’ size-games, not least in the punning references to metron on tablets 1A and 2NY, referring at once to the poetic precisions of metre and to the diminutive scale of these objects. But what greater paradigm for the labour involved than the techne of this artistic celebrity, famous, as Pliny puts it, for his paruitatis miraculum and magna suptilitias?

Needless to say, I am not suggesting that our ‘Theodorus’ was literally the same artist as the Archaic artist. Given the stories that evidently grew up around Theodorus, at least by the third century BC, my tentative suggestion is that the Tabulae allude to ‘a Theodorean techne’ that at least some viewers and readers could associate with the earlier artist. The tablets lay claim to a techne that is expressly descended from Theodorus’ own, celebrated in the intermedial medium of Posidippian ecphrastic epigram.

Although archaeologists have a habit of taking names literally, there are in fact numerous comparanda for such artistic pseudonyms. We know of several ‘Myrons’ working in Imperial Italy, all removed from their fifth-century namesake,\(^{113}\) and at least one ‘Praxiteles’ was working in Imperial Athens.\(^{114}\) A certain ‘Phidias’ similarly signs a second-century statue in the Campus Martius in the second century AD, claiming descent, along with his purported ‘brother’ Ammonios, from yet another person of the same name.\(^{115}\) That artists might take on false identities is clear from Phaedrus’ Fables, which complains of numerous first-century forgeries by those impersonating ‘Praxiteles’, ‘Myron’ and ‘Zeuxis’ (5.pr.4–9).\(^{116}\)

The harnessing of artistic celebrity for playful hermeneutic effect is even clearer in the context of Greek and Roman gems.\(^{117}\) Over 60 artistic inscriptions are preserved, but among them are some rather unlikely sounding names: ‘Sostratos’, ‘Pheidias’, ‘Skopas’, ‘Polykleitos’, ‘Pamphilos’;\(^{118}\) in one case, we even find a semi-mythical ‘Daidalos’, which lays claim, as it

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\(^{111}\) No parallels in, for example, Loewy (1885); Guarducci (1974) 377–561; Calabri Limentani (1958) 151–80; IGCUR 4.1491–651.

\(^{112}\) On the adjective, see Bastianini and Gallazzi (2001) 193, who compare 70.3–4 A–B (χειρὸς /... Λύσιππες/ιωμ).


\(^{114}\) Loewy (1885) 228–29, nos 318, 319, 319a. Compare references to the ‘sons of Praxiteles’ in surviving inscriptions (Loewy (1885) 379–80, nos 555–56) and texts (Her. Min. 4.23–24).


\(^{116}\) Cited by Loewy (1885) 319, no. 488a (comparing Zenobius 5.82). Stewart ((1979) 101–14) rightly notes that there were family dynasties of craftsmen; but such name-games should also be understood against the Hellenistic ‘cultural rationalisation’ of the visual arts (Tanner (2006) especially 205–76). On Roman artistic signatures more generally, see Squire (forthcoming c).


were, to the ultimate in artistic invention.²¹ Such ‘pen-names’ should make us suspicious of engravers who sign themselves as (or rather after?) famous practitioners in their art: whether or not the surviving gems signed by ‘Dioskourides’ have anything to do with the famous artist responsible for Augustus’ seal-ring (Pl. HN 37.38; Suet. Aug. 50; Dio Cassius 51.3.6–7), it is surely significant that three subsequent gem-cutters claimed Dioskourides as their ‘father’.²² As on the Tabulae, these gem inscriptions stage not only a claim about authorship, but also a boast of ‘grand master’ techne.

This mode of reading the ‘Theodorean’ attribution of the tablets has much to recommend it. Quite apart from explaining the adjectival form ‘Theodorean’, the celebrity of Theodorus helps to account for why some inscriptions should pitch ‘Theodorus’ against ‘Homer’ (1A, 2NY, 3C, 20Par; cf. 4N, 5O). On a more mundane level, the association also explains the stylistic diversity of the inscriptions and images, often attributed to a single artist: while Anne Sadurska has taken the inscriptions literally, assigning all of the ‘Theodorean’-inscribed tablets to one master artist or workshop, Nina Valenzuela Montenegro has persuasively shown that even those signed as ‘Theodorean’ were in fact crafted by different hands.²³ We can be absolutely sure that, while parading a single ‘Theodorean’ banner, numerous individuals were working behind the (pseudo-) name.

V. Conclusion: ‘The serious lover of Greek literature’?

If I am right in this final ‘Theodorean’ manoeuvre, there can be no room for thinking the tablets ‘profoundly trivial’, as so often maintained.²⁴ Whatever we conclude of the tablets’ makers, the various literary resonances leave little doubt about their erudite viewer-readers. The three preceding arguments – about the two programmatic epigrams (1A, 2NY), the ‘magic square’ inscriptions (2NY, 3C, 4N, 5O, 7Ti, 15Ber, 20Par) and the ‘Theodorean’ attributions (1A, 2NY, 3C, 4N, 5O, 20Par) – serve to demonstrate that overarching point.

What might this mean for the original function and purpose of the Tabulae? The question returns us to our opening debates about clientele, and above all to Nicholas Horsfall’s influential ‘Trimalchio thesis’. The ultimate difficulty with Horsfall’s position – as indeed my own – is its argumentum ex silentio. Although the archaeological provenances of tablets 1A, 7Ti and 17M evidently point to rich aristocratic villas, we have very little concrete information about context.²⁵ Whatever their intended markets, it is not impossible that the tablets (or at least some of them) could have ended up in the ‘utterly ignorant’ hands of a ‘Trimalchio’.

By looking at the formal qualities of some of the tablets, this article has attempted a different approach: to my mind, the erudition of the Tabulae texts points to a much more sophisticated social milieu. Like Margherita Guarducci, I would therefore see them as catering to an ‘ambiente di cultura e di ricchezza’ – part of the ‘Bildungslandschaft’ of the aristocratic Roman villa.²⁶ Passed around a room during the Roman cena, they could serve as entertaining amuse-bouches, prompting innovative and creative displays of learning and erudition: these are tablets for high tables. How else to understand the literary complexities that I have explored? To move from the

²¹ Richter (1968) 168, no. 675.
tiny to the gigantic, one might compare the Imperial sculptures at Sperlonga, which similarly challenged viewers to chart their own epic stories and adventures (reflected in Faustinus’ highly ambitious ephrastic epigram, set up alongside the statues in later antiquity). The Tabulae epitomize an élite Greek and Roman tradition of pitching images against texts: the objective, as I have said, was to choose your own adventure.

The ramifications of these tiny tablets consequently prove very substantial indeed. If, rather than cater to the gauche ‘lower’ classes, the tablets reflect some cultured and refined ‘high’ culture, they necessitate some long and hard thinking about those categorizations in the first place. At issue here are much larger ideologies about ‘good’ vs. ‘bad’ ‘art’, invested in modern currencies of ‘élite’ vs. ‘popular’ culture. Modern scholars have condemned the tablets, declaring that they would have outraged the ‘serious lover of Greek literature’ in antiquity, as indeed the ‘serious lover of art’, because they do not subscribe to modern ideals of good ‘literature’ and ‘art’, argues Nicholas Horsfall, the tablets must reflect some downmarket (i.e. non-serious) ‘pop culture’. But there are dangers in this mode of argument. Yes, odd citations can be found to support the position. And yet one cannot help but wonder: are these ‘serious lovers’ ancient characters or modern bogeymen? Do they not in fact derive from our rather different concepts of ‘art’ and ‘literature’? Have we not ended up imposing our own anachronistic notions onto antiquity – with all their class, gender and political associations?

The Tabulae Iliacea, I would suggest, force us to rethink some of our most fundamental cultural assumptions. What modern scholarship deems the ‘infidelities’ and ‘deviations’ of the tablets could actually have made them all the more erudite. In the final analysis, it is not the tablets that prove ‘faulty and jejune’, but rather our logocentric modes of interpreting them: to understand these objects in ancient context means revising modern assumptions about verbatim visual and verbal reproduction. Above all, it means challenging post-Enlightenment notions of ‘illustration’, whereby to engage with a text is to follow it to the letter. But that is a story – and a critique – best left for elsewhere.

Appendix: inventory of surviving Tabulae Iliacea

1A Tabula Capitolina. Rome, Museo Capitolino, Sale delle Colombe, inv. 316.
3C Tabula Veronensis I. Paris, Cabinet des Médailles (Département des Monnaies, Médailles et Antiques de la Bibliothèque nationale de France), inv. 3318.
5O Shield of Achilles. Rome, Museo Capitolino, Sale delle Colombe, inv. 83b.
6B Tabula Sarti. Lost (known from a 19th-century drawing).
7Ti Tabula Thierry. Lost (known from a single 19th-century photograph).
9D Tabula Veronensis II. Paris, Cabinet des Médailles (Département des Monnaies, Médailles et Antiques de la Bibliothèque nationale de France), inv. 3319.
11H Tabula Rondanini. Warsaw, Muzeum Narodowe, inv. 147975 MN.

126 Horsfall (1994) 79.


16Sa Tabula Tomassetti. Rome, Museo Sacro del Vaticano, inv. 0066.

17M Tabula Chigi. Rome, Palazzo Chigi, no inventory number.

18L Chronicum Romanum. Rome, Museo Capitolino, Sale delle Colombe, inv. 82.


21Fro Tabula Froehner II. Paris, Cabinet des Médailles (Département des Monnaies, Médailles et Antiques de la Bibliothèque nationale de France) Froehner, inv. VIII 146.


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