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Review of The Iliad in a Nutshell: Visualizing Epic on the Tabulae Iliacae, by Michael Squire

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Michael Squire, *The Iliad in a Nutshell: Visualizing Epic on the Tabulae Iliacae*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. xxv, 467; 24 p. of plates. ISBN 9780199602445. \$160.00.

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The *Tabulae Iliacae* have never been widely known or studied among classicists. They are miniature marble tablets, typically with images on one side and some form of text on the other, although sometimes image and text are combined on the recto. Many deal with themes from Homer and the epic cycle; others present the deeds of Herakles or chronicles of Greek and Roman history. The relatively few recent studies in English have focused on such topics as their value (or lack thereof) for reconstructing the *Ilioupersis* or their function.¹ Squire offers the first comprehensive treatment of the tablets in English, which includes a catalog of the twenty-two known tablets, with a possible twenty-third (23Ky) in a separate appendix.²

Squire lays out his approach in the first chapter. Decrying the excessively philological approach of his predecessors, he proposes to look at the interplay of the visual and verbal on the tablets, taking these as an integrated whole. Logocentrism is a particular *bête-noire* for Squire, although he seems to miss the irony that he must lodge his objections and make his case in words—"I gotta use words when I talk to you," as T.S. Eliot observed long ago.³ Squire also adumbrates other key themes to which he returns throughout the book: the sophisticated and playful nature of the tablets, the big and the small (e.g., containing epic themes in a small tablet), the Greek and the Roman (e.g., the relation of the fall of Troy to the founding of Rome).

Squire next surveys the subject matter of the surviving tablets. He gives much attention to the prevalence of Augustan ideologies in the tablets both here and throughout the book. Squire also discusses the date, provenance, and materials used for the tablets. Nearly all can be dated to the late first century BC/early first century AD (although 19J dates to the Antonine period); reasonably sound provenances all point to villas in the vicinity of Rome. Finally, he addresses their purpose. The prevalent view in recent times, especially among anglophone scholars, has been that of Nicholas Horsfall, who argues that the tablets were used as cultural cribs by vulgar

nouveaux riches such as Trimalchio.⁴ Squire undermines this by demonstrating the sophisticated nature of the tablets. He instead argues that they were stimulants to learned conversation at dinner parties, comparing them to mythological panel paintings at Pompeii and Roman tableware adorned with literary and mythological figures. Squire notes similarities to epigrams in the *Palatine Anthology* in tablets 6B, 12F, 17M, 19J. He also argues for traces of Alexandrian scholarship in several tablets; for example, 8E follows Zenodotos's chronology of the first book of the *Iliad*. There are repeated references to the *Ilioupersis*, the *Aithiopsis* and the *Little Iliad* (e.g., tablet 1A). None of these are likely to resonate with the uneducated, which supports Squire's contention that the tablets were aimed at a highbrow audience.

Then Squire covers his major themes in a series of chapters that examine particular aspects of small groups of tablets. One is the relation of text and image. Squire argues that the images do not illustrate the text as such, but that there is a complex interrelation of the two that encourages multiple readings and viewings. A detailed analysis of the *Tabula Capitolina* (1A) illustrates this. Squire discusses the relationship of the images to the *Aeneid* and to earlier epics, the portrayal of the fall of Troy as a geographical unity with a polychronic approach that depicted different moments in one image (Aeneas appears at three different places; Polyxena twice, etc.). The image can be read/viewed spatially, temporally, or through excerpting specific details. Squire notes its "playful hermeneutic agenda" in a section titled "Troy Story" (an allusion to "Toy Story"?).⁵ This leads to a discussion of playfulness in other tablets, such as 2NY in which scenes from the *Iliad* surround a central *Ilioupersis* in a way that invites reading backward, undermining the temporal sequence.

Another instance of playfulness is the use of magic squares on the versos of seven tablets. 2NY and 3C have the same text above their magic squares, which can be reconstructed as γράμμα μέσον καθ[ελών παρολίσθα]νε οὐ ποτε βούλει or γράμμα μέσον καθ[ορῶν παραλάμβα]νε οὐ ποτε βούλει. This ties in with Squire's argument for a multiplicity of readings/viewings throughout the tablets (even the varying restorations play into his hand). Many of the actual magic square texts refer to the *Iliad* (or Shield of Achilles or *Ilioupersis*) and to Theodorean τεχνή in providing a title for the images on the recto. All of the magic square phrases lack verbs and particles, forcing the reader to use the image(s) on the rectos to decode them. As Squire argues, images on the rectos visually represent texts, while the squares on the versos make text itself a fluid and visual element, sometimes even creating an image (e.g., an altar on 4N). Squire rejects earlier efforts to connect the magic squares to Egypt and relates these games to Hellenistic epigrams, the so-called *technopaegnia* (*Anth. Pal.* 15.21-22, 24-27), which also use words to form images. He then circles round to the meaning of γράμμα, arguing that the directions on 2NY and 3C have broader significance. The rectos of each have images summarizing books of the *Iliad*, themselves traditionally designated by γράμματα; thus they invite the reader/viewer to choose his own sequence in Homer as well.

Squire then returns to the idea of big and small, placing the tablets in the context of Hellenistic art, Callimachaeian aesthetics, and the Hellenistic epigram. Among his examples is the production of smaller versions of monumental sculptures for domestic use; he notes that the marble used for the tablets is hard to work on a miniature scale,

but is characteristic of monumental art. Squire also discusses engraved gems as examples of miniaturization of big themes, tying these also to epigrams through discussions of the *Lithika* of Posidippos and various epigrams of Martial (including, *inter alia* 14.183-96, his summaries of Homer, Vergil, etc.). Thus again, we have the tension of capturing monumental works, whether sculpture or epic, in a small container. Squire also connects the Theodorus who is frequently mentioned in the tablets and often taken as the artist who created them, to the Archaic Greek artist Theodorus of Samos, famous for his miniatures. Squire here invokes Posidippos's description (67 A-B) of one of this Theodorus's miniatures, again bringing together the influences of Hellenistic art and epigram. Thus he sees mention of Theodorean τέχνη as positioning the tablets in a Hellenistic aesthetic rather than a reference to a workshop.

Then Squire turns to the tablets that portray the shield of Achilles, another run at the relation of text and image. While the shield figures in a number of other tablets (1A, 6B, 13Ta, 20Par), both 4N and 5O offer images of it, turning Homer's ecphrasis back into an image. Both have magic squares on the verso, which link the shield of Achilles as the title to Theodorean τέχνη. Squire examines the ways the tablets play with the Homeric ecphrasis, the literary reception of Homer's shield as verbalizing the visual, and the tablets as visualizing the verbal. He concludes his treatment of the shields by turning again to Theodorean τέχνη, playfully relating the name Theodorus, "gift of god," to the shield, gift of Hephaestus. Thus he again undercuts the old notion that Theodorus was the craftsman who made the tablets.

A final chapter, "Taking the Tablets," attempts to find contemporary relevance for the tablets. Squire laments the growing specialization in classics that separates Greek and Roman, material and visual, philology and archaeology; he rightly notes that this separation hinders full understanding of works such as the tablets. His subsequent remarks about the tablets putting "the individual in the driver's seat" and their "revolutionary potential" for both Augustan and contemporary politics seem strained. He has argued successfully throughout that the tablets were the playthings of a small sophisticated elite, which might rather suggest that the now politically marginalized Roman nobility were taking solace in cultural games.

Squire's relative neglect of the historical tablets (17M, 18L, and 22Get) is perhaps the greatest weakness of his work. He focuses primarily on the tablets that are based on Homer and the epic cycle, which best fit his major contentions. The relation of text and image is less clear for the historical tablets. The chronicle found on 18L and 22Get does not display the same aesthetics or playfulness found in the other tablets. [6](#) His case would be stronger if he had incorporated these tablets more fully.

This is a remarkable and challenging book, full of learning and imagination. I have only been able to touch on a selection of his ideas and arguments here. Squire successfully challenges much of the received wisdom about the *Tabulae Iliacae*, provoking us to look at them anew even when we may not agree with his take on them.

Notes:

1. See, for example, N. Horsfall, “Stesichorus at Bovillae?” *JHS* 99 (1979), 26-48, and D. Petrain, *Epic Manipulations: The Tabulae Iliacae in their Roman Contexts* (diss., Harvard University 2006), who anticipates some of Squire’s interpretations, places the *tabulae* in the context of the library of the Roman villa.

2. Previous studies with detailed catalogs include O. Jahn, *Griechische Bilderchroniken* (Bonn 1873); A. Sadurska, *Les tables iliaques* (Warsaw 1964); and N. Valenzuela Montenegro, *Die Tabulae Iliacae: Mythos und Geschichte im Spiegel einer Gruppe frühkaiserzeitlicher Miniaturreliefs* (Berlin 2004). Squire is among the first anglophone scholars to make significant use of Valenzuela Montenegro’s important work, both here and in his earlier study, “Texts on the Tables: The *Tabulae Iliacae* in Their Hellenistic Literary Context” *JHS* 130 (2010), 67-96.

3. For a better understanding of Squire’s theoretical underpinnings here, see his *Image and Text in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (Cambridge 2009). For the quotation from Eliot’s “Sweeney Agonistes,” see his *Collected Poems and Plays, 1909-1950* (New York 1958), 84.

4. Horsfall, “Stesichorus at Bovillae” (above), 31-35.

5. As he discusses the playfulness of the tablets, Squire also indulges in a fair amount of toying himself. Often this is found in chapter titles and section headings as here, but many examples occur in the text as well, e.g.: “my thesis, in *in nuce*” (p. 127) and “but it is inherently taxing, this self-described *taxis*” (p. 195).

6. Nor does Squire note in his catalog of the tablets that 18L and 20Get are both derived from the same source text (the *Chronicon Romanum*), for which see S.L. Burstein, “A New “Tabula Iliaca”: The Vasek Polak Chronicle” *J. Paul Getty Museum Journal* 12 (1984), 157; D. Petrain, “Two Inscriptions from the “Tabulae Iliacae” the Epic Canon of the Borgia Tablet (“IG” 14.1292.2) and the Roman Chronicle (“SEG” 33.802B)” *ZPE* 166 (2008), 83; and the reviewer’s forthcoming edition of the *Chronicon Romanum* (*BNJ* 252).

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