QUIDQUID ID EST, STUDEAS TITULIS ET DONO INSCRIPTIS: THE TROJAN HORSE AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR EPIGRAPHICAL RESEARCH[*]

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Abstract: *The present paper treats the topic of the Trojan Horse and its imaginary inscription as relevant to Greco-Roman epigraphy.*

1. An epic (non-)discovery

There are many nagging questions in the field of Greco-Roman epigraphy. For perfectly good reasons, the question of what was written on the Trojan Horse is not, and never has been, one of them. While this may not be great loss in the academic pursuit of advancing actual historical knowledge, brief consideration, however, of this – admittedly seemingly absurd – question may prove to be of some interest in terms of our understanding of both Greco-Roman (!) epigraphic habits and cross-cultural translation(s).

But first things first. Was the Trojan Horse even inscribed? Some years ago, and in irregular intervals since, the discovery of the actual Trojan Horse has been reported, and this remarkable discovery was 'proven' 'true' through the observation that the discovered horse was – surprise, surprise! – accompanied by an identifying inscription. The (obviously bogus) story was first reported by the spoof news website *World News Daily Report* ('where facts don't matter', according to their own motto). Remarkably, subsequent publications generally missed out on the satirical element[1]. The original page of the *World News Daily Report* article is no longer on-line. Versions of it, however, have been preserved by the "Way

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[1] Cf., for example, https://en.vestikavkaza.ru/articles/Archaeologists-claim-they've-discovered-the-Trojan-Horse-in-Turkey.html and https://www.unrv.com/forum/topic/17903-archaeologists-discover-remains-of-trojan-horse/ (last accessed: November 2023).

Back Machine" of archive.org, where they continue to remain available for consultation.

The crucial passage of the *World News Daily Report* article read as follows:

'A heavily damaged bronze plate bearing an inscription translated as "For their return home, the Greeks dedicate this offering to Athena" was also found on the site, an additional proof that this could indeed be the Trojan Horse. This plate is in fact described by Quintus Smyrnaeus (*sic*!) is his epic poem "Posthomerica".'

As is true for any good satirical writing, the paragraph is not altogether detached from reality. Notably, the twelfth book of Quintus Smyrnaeus' *Posthomerica* does indeed tell the story of the Trojan Horse in quite some detail. Yet, no mention of an inscription is to be found in it. Rather, the quote was taken from the *Epitome* of a significantly earlier author, namely the author of the mythographical collection *Bibliotheke* ascribed to Apollodorus. Here one encounters the following narrative:

οἱ δὲ πείθονται καὶ τοὺς μὲν ἀρίστους ἐμβιβάζουσιν εἰς τὸν ἵππον, ἡγεμόνα καταστήσαντες αὐτῶν Ὀδυσσέα, γράμματα ἐγχαράξαντες τὰ δηλοῦντα· τῆς εἰς οἶκον ἀνακομιδῆς Ἕλληνες Ἀθηνᾷ χαριστήριον.

They followed the advice of Ulysses and introduced the doughtiest into the horse, after appointing Ulysses their leader and engraving on the horse an inscription which signified, "For their return home, the Greeks dedicate this thank offering to Athena."

(Apollod. *Epit*. 5.15, transl. J. G. Frazer)

The author of the *Bibliotheke* (or rather its *Epitome*) does not, in fact, say that the 'clarifying' or 'elucidating' letters, γράμματα … τὰ δηλοῦντα, were 'engraved' onto a bronze plate and somehow been affixed to the wooden structure as it was claimed in the *World News Daily Report* article. Rather, it sounds as though the horse itself was imagined to display the letters in question. Yet, since the *Bibliotheke* holds roughly the same claim to veracity and historical accuracy as the *World News Daily Report*, it does, of course, not matter too much. What is more interesting, though, is the wording of this imagined inscription, and what it does to its support – the horse. As just seen, the text of the inscription, according to the epitomator, read thus:

τῆς εἰς οἶκον ἀνακομιδῆς Ἕλληνες Ἀθηνᾷ χαριστήριον
"For their return home, the Greeks dedicate this thank offering to Athena."

In keeping with the logic of the narrative (the Greek burn down their tents and pretend to leave Troy's shores for good), this inscription is designed in a way that its readership – the Trojans – must take it to be a votive offering, placed prior to fulfillment of the requested divine intervention: it is a thank-you gift

(χαριστήριον) for the journey (ἀνακομιδή) home (εἰς οἶκον) placed upon departure rather than on arrival.

This terminology, first surfacing in literary sources in the fourth century BC, is attested in the epigraphical record from at least the second half of the third century BC onwards[2]. As the *Bibliotheke*, arguably datable to the first century AD, evidently is not original work, but in itself relies on mythographical sources going back as far as the fourth century BC, it is entirely possible that the notion of a Trojan Horse, 'elucidated' to be a χαριστήριον, goes back to (at least) Hellenistic times.

2. An imagined inscription's mythical protohistory, *or*: the Trojan Horse as an inscribable (though still uninscribed?) object

There is certainly some faint evidence that the idea of an inscription related to the Trojan Horse more generally – or rather: the more general idea of the Trojan Horse as a sacred object potentially deserving of, and destined to receive, an inscription – may already have existed from a relatively early stage of the myth's history. In fact, the origins of this concept may at least hypothetically go back as far as the Homeric Epics and the Epic Cycle itself[3]. Already in the *Odyssey*, the Trojans discuss whether the horse 'that Epeios built with Athena's help' (τὸν Ἐπειὸς ἐποίησεν σὺν Ἀθήνῃ)[4] ought to be turned into a μέγ' ἄγαλμα θεῶν θελκτήριον, a monument to curry the favour of the gods – a proposal that subsequently is moved by the Trojans[5]. In a *Chrestomathia* ascribed to the late antique author Proclus, (part of) the argument of the *Iliupersis* was summarised as follows:

(1) †ὡς† τὰ περὶ τὸν ἵππον οἱ Τρῶες ὑπόπτως ἔχοντες περιστάντες βουλεύονται ὅ τι χρὴ ποιεῖν. καὶ <Κασσάνδρας λεγούσης ἔνοπλον ἐν αὐτῷι δύναμιν εἶναι, καὶ προσέτι Λαοκόωντος τοῦ μάντεως, Ap.> τοῖς μὲν δοκεῖ κατακρημνίσαι αὐτόν, τοῖς δὲ καταφλέγειν, οἳ δὲ ἱερὸν αὐτὸν ἔφασαν δεῖν τῆι Ἀθηνᾶι ἀνατεθῆναι· καὶ τέλος νικᾶι ἡ τούτων γνώμη. τραπέντες δὲ εἰς εὐφροσύνην εὐωχοῦνται ὡς ἀπηλλαγμένοι τοῦ πολέμου.

The Trojans are suspicious in the matter of the horse, and stand round it debating what to do: <with Cassandra saying that it contained an armed force, and the seer Laocoon likewise,> some want to push it over a cliff, and some to set fire to it, but others say it is a sacred object to be dedicated to Athena, and in the end their opinion prevails. They turn to festivity and celebrate their deliverance from the war.

(Procl. *Chr*. 3–7, Davies 62, transl. M. L. West)

[2] Cf. JIM 2012, p. 310–337, esp. 323–324.

[3] Reference to inscribed objects more generally, to focus on literary evidence rather than material culture alone, is already made in Hom. *Il.* 6.168–170.

[4] Hom. *Od*. 8.493.

[5] Hom. *Od*. 8.509. Cf. further YALOURIS 1950, p. 65–101, esp. 65–67.

While no fragments of the *Iliupersis* relevant to the question of an inscribed, or inscribable, Trojan Horse survive, and while even the argument preserved in the *Chrestomathia* is not too specific with a view to the questions that are of interest here, one important piece of information is, in fact, included in this text: the proposal, and the decision, to dedicate the wooden structure to Athena. From here it is but a small step, of course, to the imagination of an affixed inscription to indicate such a religious act[6].

It would, of course, be especially interesting to see how Stesichorus handled the matter in his version of the sack of Troy. Unfortunately, nothing certain can be said due to the highly fragmentary nature of his evidence[7]. Centuries later, Tryphiodorus, also in a poem dedicated to the sack of Troy, and a poem that shows a great level of familiarity with early Greek epic poetry at that, depicts this act of dedication as follows:

οἱ δὲ πολισσούχοιο θεῆς ὑπὸ νηὸν Ἀθήνης
ἵππον ἀναστήσαντες ἐυξέστων ἐπὶ βάθρων
ἔφλεγον ἱερὰ καλὰ πολυκνίσσων ἐπὶ βωμῶν·
ἀθάνατοι δ᾽ ἀνένευον ἀνηνύστους ἑκατόμβας.
εἰλαπίνη δ᾽ ἐπίδημος ἔην καὶ ἀμήχανος ὕβρις,
ὕβρις ἐλαφρίζουσα μέθην λυσήνορος οἴνου.
ἀφραδίῃ τε βέβυστο, μεθημοσύνῃ τε κεχήνει
πᾶσα πόλις, πυλέων δ᾽ ὀλίγοις φυλάκεσσι μεμήλει·
ἤδη γὰρ καὶ φέγγος ἐδύετο, δαιμονίη δὲ
Ἴλιον αἰπεινὴν ὀλεσίπτολις ἀμφέβαλεν νύξ.

But the others at the temple of the goddess Athena, guardian of the city, set up the horse on well-polished pedestal, and burned fair offerings on savoury altars; but the immortals refused their vain hecatombs. And there was festival in the town and infinite lust, lust uplifting the drunkenness of wine that unmans. And all the city was filled with foolishness and gaped with heedlessness, and few warders watched the gates; for now the light of day was sinking and fateful night wrapped steep Ilios for destruction.

(Tryph. 444–453, transl. A. W. Mair)

In Tryphiodorus' poem, two monument types are brought into the equation, a 'well-polished pedestal' upon which the horse is transferred (ἐυξέστων ἐπὶ βάθρων) and 'savoury altars' upon which offerings are placed for burning (πολυκνίσσων ἐπὶ βωμῶν). Both structures were used for inscriptions in the Graeco-Roman epigraphic habit, and it is easy to see how, departing from such

[6] For a broader discussion of the Trojan Horse as a cult object see D'AGOSTINO 2014, p. 23–37 (and, previously, in *Annali di Archeologia e Storia Antica / Dipartimento di Studi del Mondo Classico e del Mediterraneo Antico* n. s. 13–14 (2006–2007), p. 185–196), cf. also BREMMER, 1972, p. 4–7.

[7] Further on this see GÄRTNER 2005, p. 138–139 and, more recently, FINGLASS 2017, p. 11–19.

textual clues, even if neither of the two authors of a *Sack of Troy* explicitly said so (or may have explicitly said so, in the case of the *Iliupersis*), other authors found it credible to introduce an inscription specifying the nature and purpose of the dedicated object.

While both the author of the *Iliupersis* and Tryphiodorus would seem to suggest that it was the Trojans who turned the wooden horse into a gift for Athena, Euripides, in *Trojan Women*, has Poseidon say in the prologue that it was, in fact, the Greeks who specified this relationship between the deity and an object made for worship:

ἦ νῦν καπνοῦται καὶ πρὸς Ἀργείου δορὸς
ὄλωλε πορθηθεῖσ᾽· ὁ γὰρ Παρνάσιος
Φωκεὺς Ἐπειὸς μηχαναῖσι Παλλάδος
ἐγκύμον᾽ ἵππον τευχέων συναρμόσας
πύργων ἔπεμψεν ἐντὸς ὀλέθριον βρέτας.

Now the city smolders, sacked and destroyed by the Argive spear. Epeius, the Phocian from Parnassus, built a horse pregnant with weapons by the devising of Pallas Athena and sent inside the walls this image meant for ruin.

(Eur. *Tr.* 8–12, transl. D. Kovacs)

The term (τὸ) βρέτας, at the end of l. 12, signifies a wooden (usually cult-related) image or effigy.

Euripides was not the only fifth-century playwright in whose plays[8] the wooden horse featured. In the present context one would particularly like to know, of course, how Sophocles presented the horse and its religious context(s) in his lost plays *Sinon* and *Laocoon*. The surviving evidence, however, does not lead to any additional insights[9].

Similarly, even though there is copious evidence for illustrations and pictorial representations of the Trojan war from the earliest periods onwards, it would appear that there are no (surviving)[10] visual representations of the Trojan Horse that also contain a depiction of an inscription actually related to the wooden contraption[11] (as opposed to mere labels)[12].

[8] For additional (potential) evidence from Euripides see also BORGES & SAMPSON 2012, p. 36–129, esp. on *P. Mich*. inv. 3498 + 3250b verso.

[9] For an even richer overview of the (anepigraphic, so to speak) sources for this entire narrative in the ancient sources cf. GÄRTNER 2005, p. 133–226, esp. 159–160 (for a schematic overview of the presence and absence of various elements across the relevant authors) and 185 with n. 125 (on the inscription element).

[10] Remarkably, one of the late(r) versions of the Trojan Horse inscription narrative is directly related to a visual representation, namely the poem in Petr. 89, cf. below, section 6 with n. 45.

[11] Cf. SPARKES 1971, p. 54–90 and, more recently, SADURSKA 1986, p. 813–817. Modern artists, based on the Vergilian version of the myth, gave the idea of an inscription on the horse some consideration, however; cf. e. g. Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo's *Procession of the Trojan Horse into Troy*, in which the horse bears the inscription *Paladi | votum* ('a

Digression: a curious Etruscan mirror

There is an Etruscan mirror (**Fig. 1**)[13], commonly dated to approx. 300 BC, that has been discussed as a potential representation of an inscription attached to the Trojan Horse during its construction phase[14]. The inscriptions on the mirror, it has been claimed, identify the depicted horse as a gift of the Hellenes[15]:

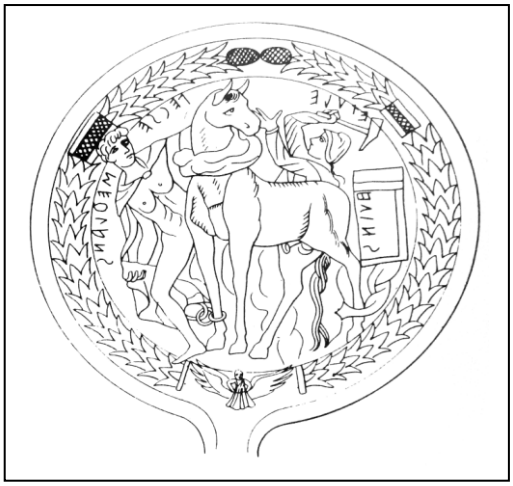

Fig. 1

The central part of the mirror seems to depict two anthropomorphic characters, one of them wielding a mallet or an axe, surrounding a creature resembling a horse. The animal's head is turned towards its tail. One of the rear legs seems to be attached to a structure sustaining an inscription. There are four words engraved, at least three of them didascalia to the three characters on display. The

dedication to Pallas (Athena)'): https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/giovanni-domenico-tiepolo-the-procession-of-the-trojan-horse-into-troy (last accessed: October 2022).

[12] The writing on the famous Proto-Corinthian aryballos from Caere (*CVA* Bib. Nat. I 16, cf. SADURSKA 1986, p. 815, n. 17) is perhaps the most prominent case in which textual elements, while extant in the display, do not pertain to the scene itself, but merely offer image-external explanations to the beholder: see also DARLING 1971, p. 81: 'Although inscriptions appear on the body of the horse on this aryballos, they are of no use for identifying the subject of the representation. Fröhner remarks that the inscription is very lightly scratched in, is definitely not a votive formula but may include proper nouns.'

[13] Paris, *Cab. Méd.* 1333, now available in the edition by REBUFFAT-EMMANUEL 1973, p. 252–258 and pl. 51 (photo and drawing).

[14] Thus it has been interpreted since GERHARD 1843–1868, II, pl. 235.2, III, pl. 219–220. This has been perpetuated e.g. by YALOURIS 1950, p. 72, van der MEER 1995, p. 218–221 (dwelling on the matter of a 'bronze horse' rather than the canonical wooden one, albeit unwilling to challenge the contradictions of all this), De GRUMMOND 2018, p. 95–123 (doi: 10.1515/9783110421453-006), and, arguably more influentially still, in the volumes *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, notably by SANDURSKA 1986, p. 814 n. 4; LAMBRECHTS, 1988, p. 39, n. 1 (image *ibid.*, IV.2 p. 19).

[15] Drawing: Gerhard, *Etruskische Spiegel* (above, n. 14). – For the inscribed texts cf. also Rix – Meiser, *Etruskische Texte*[2] OA S.4 (= Vs S.5 in Rix's first edition).

individual to the left, arguably the most powerful of the lot, is identified as *śethlans* (i. e. an Etruscan deity akin to Hephaistos-Vulcan). The individual with the axe, smaller in stature and less prominently displayed, is identified as *etule*, an aide to Śethlans-Hephaistos. The horse-shaped creature is identified as *pecse* which has been understood to signify Pegasus. The remaining inscription reads *huins*, a word that has no known meaning. The reading is unambiguous, even though it has been argued that it might, in fact, be meant to say *hlins*, which in turn has been interpreted as an Etruscan version of the name *Hellenes* by those who wanted to see a reference to the Trojan Horse in this mirror. All of this is speculation at best, however. The most serious way to deal with the evidence would be to acknowledge that the inscription reads *huins* and cannot (currently) satisfactorily be explained[16].

None of the clearly intelligible legends of the depicted scene suggest an attribution to the Trojan Horse narrative. Only a deliberate change of the problematic but certain *huins* to equally problematic *hlins* and its implausible interpretation as *Hellenes* would remotely point in the direction of the Trojan Horse story (though the manufacturing of the horse at the hands of *śeθlans* and *etule* would still remain a problem)[17]. But all of this is not even the biggest problem related to this scene and its support, as it would appear. While there appears to be little reason to doubt the antiquity of the mirror itself, it is by no means certain that the engraving is genuine or, if not part of an original design of the mirror, at least an ancient addition. This view is based on a number of aspects, including stylistic features of the depicted ornaments, the placement of the inscribed elements, and the proposed chronology of the mirror vis-à-vis the display of a mythical narrative[18]. Undoubtedly, future research will shed further light on the matter.

While there is no robust evidence for any Greek (or, more broadly, non-Latin) literary account that mentions an inscription affixed or related to the Trojan Horse prior to the *Bibliotheke* (even though the subject of the sacking of Troy itself

[16] COLONNA 1988, p. 23–26, esp. 25 (with 26 n. 17–18) not only firmly (and rightly) dismisses the older *Hellenes* interpretation, but – very cautiously – proposes to see a relation between inscribed *huins* and Uni, the Etruscan equivalent of Graeco-Roman Hera/Juno.

[17] P. Amann, *per epistulas* suggested that the scene might instead be related to the creation of automata at the hand of Hephaistos, in which case the story might be related to the Horses of the Cabeiri: the chain might thus have been introduced to depict a need to control and restrain the movements of these agile creations.

[18] S. Kluge, *per epistulas*: 'Ich habe ganz große Zweifel, ob die Darstellung und / oder das Kranzornament auf der Spiegelrückseite als original gewertet werden können: Neben stilistischen Aspekten der Figuren und des Pferdes sind für mich nicht stimmig das Ornament in Form eines Kranzes sowie die bakchoi-Gebinde, hier vor allem der obere Abschluss des Kranzes. Weiterhin muss die geflügelte Figur oberhalb des Zwickels vermutlich als fraglich eingestuft werden' and 'Zudem befinden sich die Beischriften auf Kranzspiegeln in erster Linie nicht im Bildfeld selbst, sondern im oberen Bereich oberhalb des Kranzes. Weiterhin sind narrative Szenen aus Mythen untypisch für Kranzspiegel. Die Darstellungen zeigen vorwiegend stereotype Vierfigurenszenen.'

was explored)[19], it should be evident that an understanding of the object itself existed of such a nature that an added inscription would seem a logical extension to already fully developed characteristics.

Though not strictly relevant to the myth itself, there is evidence for actual inscriptions in conjunction with actual representations of the Trojan Horse. In this regard, one must note a dedication of a Trojan Horse made from brass placed at the Brauroneion of Athens' acropolis, datable to 420 BC[20], with an inscription identifying one Chairedemos, son of Euangelos, of the demos Koile as its donor and Strongylion as the artist, as well as an inscribed statue base pertaining to a sculpture representing the Trojan Horse at Delphi, datable to 414 BC[21], donated by the Argivians and made by Antiphanes[22].

In conclusion, while there no direct evidence for the notion of an inscription related to the Trojan Horse has come to light in sources that pre-dates the Hellenistic period, it is clear, and in fact even proven by actual monuments, that the sculpture that is the Trojan Horse, and its discussion in Troy narratives, from the earliest period is equipped with all the features and notions that would make the presence of an inscription a perfectly plausible and logical twist of the story. In other words: the Trojan Horse of the pre-hellenistic period may not have been inscribed in any mythical account, but it was both inscribable as an object – and actually inscribed in re-uses of this mythical creature in actual dedications placed by actual individuals in the Greek world.

3. Digging up the hatchet

Incidentally, the Trojan Horse itself is not the only object that was imagined to have been inscribed in ancient versions of this particular sub-plot of the Trojan myth – and it is not even the only object that has been imagined as a dedication to Athena. The Hellenistic poet Simias (or Simmias) of Rhodes, author of several famous *carmina figurata*[23], created a poem called *Pelekys* ('The Axe' or 'The Hatchet'), whose shape resembles the blade of a double-bitted axe (and whose text must be read by alternating between the lines from the top down and the lines from the bottom up). The text reads as follows:

[19] Cf. most notably Lycophron's *Alexandra*, but also Euphorion: further on this see GÄRTNER 2005, p. 144–147.

[20] IG I³ 895, reported by Paus. 1.23.8; further on this piece in the context of ideological offerings in the space of the Athenian acropolis see e. g. KRUMEICH & WITSCHEL 2010, p. 1–53, esp. 16–17 (with nt. 91 for further bibliography).

[21] FD III 1.573 = LSAG² 170 n. 47 (with pl. 30) ([Ἀργεῖοι τἀπόλλονι] ἀπὸ Λακεδαίμονος δεκάταν), see also Thuc. 6.95 and cf. JIM 2011, p. 312, n. 18 (https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:46767d83-0b32-4ebd-8f26-457a785f2478) (last accessed: November 2023).

[22] Cf. also YALOURIS 1950, p. 72–73.

[23] On Simias' *carmina figurata*, as well as on Simias' poetry more generally, see GUICHARD ROMERO 2006, p. 83–103 and KWAPISZ 2019a, esp. p. 1–53; KWAPISZ 2019b; FINGLASS 2015, p. 197–202, argues that Simias in turn was inspired by Stesichorus (on whom see above, n. 9).

1 Ἀνδροθέᾳ δῶρον ὁ Φωκεὺς κρατερᾶς μηδοσύνας ἦρα τίνων Ἀθάνᾳ
3 τᾶμος ἐπεὶ τὰν ἱερὰν κηρὶ πυρίπνῳ πόλιν ἠθάλασεν
5 οὐκ ἐνάριθμος γεγαὼς ἐν προμάχοις Ἀχαιῶν,
7 νῦν δ᾽ ἐς Ὁμήρειον ἔβα κέλευθον
9 τρὶς μάκαρ, ὃν σὺ θυμῷ
11 ὅδ᾽ ὄλβος
12 ἀεὶ πνεῖ.
10 ἵλαος ἀμφιδερχθῆς.
8 σὰν χάριν, ἁγνὰ πολύβουλε Παλλάς.
6 ἀλλ᾽ ἀπὸ κρανᾶν ἰθαρᾶν νᾶμα κόμιζε δυσκλής
4 Δαρδανιδᾶν, χρυσοβαφεῖς δ᾽ ἐστυφέλιξ᾽ ἐκ θεμέθλων ἄνακτας,
2 ὤπας᾽ Ἐπειὸς πέλεκυν, τῷ ποκὰ πύργων θεοτεύκτων κατέρειψεν αἶπος.

Epeus of Phocis presented to Athena, the manly goddess, in gratitude for her sound advice, the ax with which he once brought down the lofty god-built towers at the time when he, with fire-breathing destruction, reduced to ashes the holy city of the Dardanids and knocked its gilded lords from their secure seats. He was not numbered among the foremost Achaean fighters but, little known, he used to carry water from pure springs. Now, however, he has gone along the road of Homer thanks to you, wise and holy Pallas. Thrice blessed is he whom you look upon propitiously and with favor: good fortune of that sort lives for ever.

(Simias, *Pelekys* (= *AP* 15.22), transl. N. Hopkinson)

Both the shape of the poem and its actual wording allowed its interpreters to imagine an object that was thus inscribed[24]. Of course, as is always the case with literary epigram, the question whether or not it had any relation to real objects, real settings, and real scenarios is a controversial one – and ultimately it does not matter much in the present case. What is important, however, especially as far as the origins of the notion of a Trojan Horse inscriptions are concerned, is that by the Hellenistic period at the very latest such a concept is likely to have emerged.

4. Accius' *interpretatio Romana*

While it is not entirely clear from which period exactly, or which author(s) or traditions precisely, the notion of an inscribed Trojan Horse originated (even if a Hellenistic origin at the very latest ought to be assumed), it is irrefutable that there is literary evidence that pre-dates that of the *Bibliotheke*. Our knowledge of a tradition older than the *Bibliotheke* is, however, altogether serendipitous. One of the most important ancient narratives as regards the sack of Troy is, of course, Vergil's *Aeneid*. It is in a note on *Aeneid* 2.17 in the commentary of Servius auctus that one encounters the following information:

[24] This observation is the starting point of the interpretation of ancient *carmina figurata*, including the *Pelekys*, by WOJACZEK 1993, p. 125–176.

Accius in Deiphobo inscriptum dicit (sc. equum)—

. . . 'Minervae donum armipotenti abeuntes Danai dicant.'

Accius in *Deiphobus* says the horse had this inscription on it—

'To Minerva, mighty in arms, a gift dedicated by the Danai as they depart.'

(Acc. *trag.* 260 Dangel = 127 Ribbeck = 251
Warmington, transl. E.H. Warmington)

Through Vergil, Accius' version of the story embarked on a not altogether insignificant afterlife. The date of the Accian play *Deiphobus*, from which the fragment is reported, is unknown, which means that the play may only loosely be dated to the second or early first century AD[25]. There does not appear to be a Roman version of the Deiphobus theme earlier than Accius, which in turn implies that Accius paved the way for subsequent Latin retellings of the specific matter. Already Livius Andronicus, however, had already produced a play *Equus Troianus*, and the same title is also attested for Gnaeus Naevius.

Whether or not Accius was the first Roman author to suggest that the Trojan Horse was inscribed, and to come up with the text of an actual inscription, is unknown[26]. Similarly, it is unknown whether he commented on the same matter on more than one occasion: at least in his play *Persis* he might have made a similar reference to the notion of an inscribed horse. Finally, the precise setting and plot of Accius' play *Deiphobus*[27], as well as the role of the fragment, are also unknown[28].

A small number of further observations may be made regardless: Deiphobus, the play's eponymous hero, is one of the sons of Priam, a brother of Hector's and Paris's. After the death of Paris, Deiphobus succeeds to his role of Helen's husband, and it is with Helen that he explores the wooden horse that leads to Troy's sacking. He is killed by Menelaus in revenge. Left unburied initially, Deiphobus eventually receives a proper burial by Aeneas. Which element(s) of this narrative were explored more fully by Accius, is anybody's guess due to small number of surviving fragments. Within the constraints of the storyline[29], realistically it is possible that the inscription –

[25] KEITH 2020, p. 163–164, n. 16 suggests that the play was written in the early first century; the rationale behind this view is not explained.

[26] It might have featured already in Livius Andronicus' *Equus Troianus*, for example.

[27] Cf., however, GÄRTNER 2005, p. 147–149, on the play's likely plot based on the surviving fragments.

[28] MANUWALD 2011, p. 136, suggests that the presence of the Trojan Horse inscription 'might point to the trickery of the Greeks' as it seems plausible, in the context of the genre, that 'this narrative was used for an opposition between honest Romans and sly Greeks'.

[29] For this, as well as a number of other, reasons, one may wish to rule out a fourth option, namely that the inscription was mentioned by Accius as discussed and incised by the Achaeans.

1. was reported by one person to another, *or*
2. was read *in situ*, or explained, by one of the stage characters[30], *or*
3. was proposed for inscription by one of the Trojans after deliberations of what to do with the Achaeans' gift.

The first and third options would seem to be the most plausible ones. In the case of (I) or (II), the inscription, just like in the *Bibliotheke* would be a votive inscription placed prior to fulfillment of the requested divine intervention. Scenario (III), however, would render the text (and its associated object) a dedication.

Scenario (III) may not be the most intuitive option, as the usual point of intellectual departure is the narrative of the *Bibliotheke*. There are, however, a small number of problems with the *Bibliotheke* narrative from the perspective of a Roman audience. First, inscribed votives placed prior to fulfillment of a requested divine intervention are not especially well known: the *do ut des* transaction of the Roman *votum* typically comes with a sense of paying up for services received, not paying for services expected. The term *dicant* does neither fit this transactional approach nor the genre.

Secondly, the wording of Accius' inscription is somewhat odd if one were to imagine it the words of the Achaeans. After all, their (faked) departure has to be construed as an admission of defeat: then why charge a warrior goddess with the tutelage of a safe return from an unsuccessful expedition? Thirldy, what about *abeuntes*? Some translators aimed to get around the apparent problem with this phrase by coming up with rather imaginative translations, such as '[t]he Danaans departing proclaim this as an offering to Minerva potent in arms'[31]. This makes little sense of course from a religious point of view: why make the horse an offering just ahead of 'departing'? Did Accius somehow misunderstand a Greek precedent of the phrase τῆς εἰς οἶκον ἀνακομιδῆς Ἕλληνες Ἀθηνᾷ χαριστήριον (as it was subsequently phrased in the *Bibliotheke*), making the imminent departure merely a point in time rather than the actual reason behind the votive? This may not be the best explanation. If one were to assume that the *Deiphobus* fragment in actual fact preserves an inscription that was decreed by the Trojans, not the Achaeans, then it would make substantially more sense both in its current wording and in its place in Roman religious thought[32]:

. . . '*Minervae donum armipotenti abeuntes Danai dicant.*'

'. . . to Minerva, mighty in arms, a gift – through their departure the Danai made (*sc.* this object) a dedication (*sc.* to her).'

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[30] In this context, it would be especially important to consider its link to the likely role of Sinon in Accius' play; cf. further SCAFOGLIO 2007, p. 76–99, esp. 80 (See also below, section 6 with n. 47.)

[31] Cf. MURLEY 1927, p. 658–662, esp. 660.

[32] The nature of the verse (arguably an iambic octonarius), as well as the question as to whether it is complete (e. g. with a hiatus between *donum* and *armipotenti*), are subject to debate, cf. DANGEL 1995, p. 317–318.

In this scenario, a Trojan Athena-Minerva is the perfect recipient for the dedication, as she (within the logic of the ruse) maintained the upper hand against the Achaeans. It is at the very moment of, and through, the Achaeans' departure that the spoil becomes a (shortlived) trophy, and this trophy gets dedicated to the very deity that seemed to the Trojans to have averted defeat. This scenario would ensure that (a) Accius' Trojan play *Deiphobus* presented the Trojan hero as honourable (he follows the concept of religious *pietas* and, unlike the Greeks hidden in their horse-shaped vessel, he is not treacherous)[33], and (b) an element of *hubris* is planted that leads to Deiphobus' inevitable downfall, as not even Accius would have been able to allow him to escape his destiny at the hand of Menelaus.

5. Vergil's *votum* vs. Accius' *donum*

Although there a very considerable argument to the contrary can (and must) be made, there is a very obvious point that speaks in favour of the view that the Accian inscription was not, in fact, a Trojan addition to their horse of doom. As already indicated, Accius' *Deiphobus* fragment is reported by Servius auctus as a comment on Vergil, *Aeneid* 2.17, a passage that reads as follows:

(…). *fracti bello fatisque repulsi*
ductores Danaum tot iam labentibus annis
instar montis equum divina Palladis arte
aedificant, sectaque intexunt abiete costas;
votum pro reditu simulant; ea fama vagatur.

Broken in war and thwarted by the fates, the Danaan chiefs, now that so many years were gliding by, build by Pallas' divine art a horse of mountainous bulk, and interweave its ribs with planks of fir. They pretend it is an offering for their safe return; this is the rumour that goes abroad.

(Verg. *Aen.* 2.13–17, transl. H. R. Fairclough – G. P. Gould)

The assonance of *abiete* (Vergil) ~ *abeuntes* (Accius) was duly noted (and its actual obviousness overstated) in scholarship, suggesting that all of this conclusively proves that Accius' inscription must thus be deemed invoked by Vergil[34]. More generally, it has been argued that Vergil quite extensively followed Accius' model – a claim that cannot be backed up by the scarce evidence of Accius' fragments of *Deiphobus*. The question thus is: does line 17 demonstrate that Accius' inscription was reported as a votive, in the *fama* 'that goes abroad'? Hardly, even if one were to accept the claim that Vergil followed Accius' model. Yet, even this claim is problematic, for all one really has to support this view is the tenuous assertion of Vergil's late antique commentator.

[33] This would support the point made by MANUWALD 2011, p. 136

[34] A useful overview of the various voices in this debate is provided by ADKIN 2011, p. 11–26, and esp. 15–16 with n. 33 (for the *abiete ~ abeuntes* assonance).

Vergil says that the Achaeans pretended (*simulant*) that the horse was a votive offering *pro reditu*[35] – a (deceptively) well-known phrase in Roman epigraphy, of course: more on this a bit further below. But it is precisely this *pro reditu* bit that is missing in Accius, and *abeuntes* does not do much in order to rise to the challenge of replacing it in a meaningful way. What is more, Vergil very specifically says that in his version the Achaeans' false story spreads by word of mouth (*ea fama vagatur*), not on the basis of tangible, legible evidence that was planted as bait on the wooden horse. The whole point here is that the Trojans cannot, in fact, be sure what they have in front of them. Investigatively Priam asks:

150 *quo molem hanc immanis equi statuere? quis auctor?*
quidve petunt? quae religio? aut quae machina belli?

To what end have they set up this huge mass of a horse? Who is the contriver? What is their aim? What religious offering is it? What engine of war?

(Verg. *Aen.* 2.150–151, transl. H. R. Fairclough – G. P. Gould)

And in Verg. *Aen.* 2.31 the horse is called a *donum exitiale Minervae*, a doom-laden gift *of* (and not just *to*) Minerva, arguably a grammatically playful allusion to Accius, making *Minervae* a genitive whereas in Accius it was a dative. Vergil's Trojans, like in the *Odyssey*[36], eventually decide take the horse to their Minerva temple to appease the goddess[37] – making the *donum* truly *exitiale*.

At this point, instead of delving into the Vergilian narrative any deeper (as others with a greater interest in narratology and intertextuality have done before) and asking why no actual inscription has been mentioned[38], it seems sensible to seek clarity regarding another matter. As just stated, Vergil says that the Achaeans pretended (*simulant*) that the horse was a votive offering, a *uotum*, *pro reditu.* (Subsequently, the *donum* also transforms into an expiatory offering in Vergil's narrative, but this is another matter entirely)[39]. The phrase *pro reditu* is, of course, familiar to epigraphists from votives made *pro salute*, *pro itu*, *pro reditu* (commonly of the emperor).

As far as the surviving epigraphic evidence is concerned, however, two observations must be made: (i) these votives are not requests for divine interventions ahead of an event, not χαριστήρια (as the Trojan Horse is imagined in the *Bibliotheke*), but *vota* in the Roman sense, votives to pay for favours

[35] Further on this (as well as the subsequent transformation of the cultic purpose of the offering that is the Trojan Horse in Vergil's narrative) see MANUWALD 1985, p. 183–208, esp. 198 (with n. 57).

[36] See above, section 2 with n. 5–6.

[37] Verg. *Aen*. 2.230 ff.

[38] Cf. AUSTIN 1964, p. 42 (ad *Aen.* 2.31): 'Virgil's whole story depends for its dramatic effect on the gradual discovery by the Trojans that the Horse was in some way connected with Minerva', endorsed – rightly – e.g. by HABERMEHL 2006, p. 169.

[39] Further on this see MANUWALD 1985, p. 183–208, esp. 198 (with n. 57).

received[40], and (II) *pro reditu* votives only appear to have become part of the Roman epigraphic habit in the second half of the first century BC, i. e. around the same time at which Vergil wrote his epic. [41] Was Vergil even aware of such an (emerging) epigraphic habit, one must wonder? The offering that Vergil describes, however, the *votum pro reditu* that is the Trojan Horse, does not conform to Roman religious practice: it is precisely imagined as a down payment on services expected, a χαριστήριον – though, arguably, with the delightful added twist that, eventually, it would become precisely a *votum pro reditu*, for the Achaeans had indeed returned from their departure (from plain sight).

Assuming that Accius was not equipped with the gift of foresight so as to anticipate subsequent developments of the Roman epigraphic habit, therefore cannot talk about the horse as a *votum pro reditu* (or, for that matter, an expiatory votive).[42] At the same time, one may infer from the wording, Accius appears to have been less familiar with (or here, for narrative purposes, not interested in) the Greek practice of offering χαριστήρια. For him, therefore, the horse has to be something that the Achaeans, upon their departure (*abeuntes*) (rather than upon their safe return), made as an offering to their tutelary goddess, Minerva – a *donum* out of make-believe *pietas*, not a *votum*. If – as is likely – Accius aimed to present the Trojans (= Proto-Romans) as pious and righteous as well as the Achaeans (= Proto-Greeks) as devious and underhanded, then this precise scenario would suit his narrative aims, for then the Trojans must have felt obliged to honour the *donum* of their (not-actually-)departed foes by transferring it as a sacred object of worship into their citadel.

6. Further *interpretationes Romanae*

While the origins of the notion of the Trojan Horse inscription are obscure and do not seem to be traceable with certainty beyond Accius, a brief look into the story's continued life in the ancient world are not at all without merit.

First, and roughly contemporary to Vergil, Horace refers to the Trojan Horse in the phrase *equo Minervae / sacra mentito*, 'a horse, falsely claiming to be sacred to Minerva'[43]. While the wording does not explicitly mention an inscription, it is obvious that an *equus mentitus* ought to be a horse that itself somehow deceives with words rather than a horse about which deceptive words have viciously been circulated by humans[44]. The phrase *Minervae sacrum* itself resembles the common wording of Roman (votive) altars.

[40] Cf. EHMIG 2013, p. 297–329, esp. 305 (with n. 32) on *pro reditu* and the like.

[41] The use of this formula appears to be first attested in the late Republican or, arguably, only from the early Augustan period onward, cf. e. g. CIL IX 4751 (cf. p. 2400) = Suppl. It. 17-R 3, IX 4182 (cf. p. 2118) = ILS 3701, CIL VI 36789 = ILS 8894, CIL VI 385 (cf. p. 3005, 3756) = VI 30751a = ILS 95, CIL VI 386 (cf. p. 3005, 3756) = VI 30751b = ILS 88 for some of the earliest examples. *RGDA* 12 records the dedication of the Ara Pacis Augustae as consecrated by the *pro reditu meo*.

[42] On this last point cf. MANUWALD 1985, p. 194 and n. 49.

[43] Hor. *Carm.* 4.6.13–14.

[44] Cf. HABERMEHL 2006, p. 169.

Next, in Petronius' *Satyrica*, Eumolpus – inspired by (an emotional reaction to) a visual representation of it – sings of the sack of Troy[45]:

o patria, pulsas mille credidimus rates
solumque bello liberum: hoc titulus fero
incisus, hoc ad furta compositus Sinon
firmabat et mens semper in damnum potens.
iam turba portis libera ac bello carens
in vota properat. (…)

Ah, my poor country. We thought the thousand ships had been beaten off and our land was free from war: the inscription carved into the beast, Sinon complicit in defeat, and our mindset always driving toward our own doom, all strengthened our faulty perception. Now a crowd, free and unoppressed by war, hurries from the gate to pay its vows.

(Petr. 89.11–16, transl. G. Schmeling)

Petronius' version of the story almost seamlessly works around those of Accius and Vergil in that it (a) uses a technical term for the act of inscribing (*incisus*, l. 13) whereas for Accius we only have Servius *auctus* saying that the text was 'inscribed', and (b) highlights the Trojans' piousness through the claim that the crowds rushed to pay their respect to the *vota* (in Vergil's sense). When Petronius' Eumolpus calls the inscription *incisus* this need not mean, of course, that he imagined an inscription scratched into the actual Trojan Horse, but merely that this is how the inscription presented itself in the painting. What Petronius does not present, however, is the actual text imagined to have been inscribed.

Finally (for the Latin side, that is), there is the Trojan Horse entry in Hyginus' mythological work *Fabulae* – a work whose actual date cannot be ascertained, but may be as early as the Augustan period, as some have argued, while a majority of scholars prefer a date in the second century AD[46]. Hyginus writes:

Achivi cum per decem annos Troiam capere non possent, Epeus monitu Minervae equum mirae magnitudinis ligneum fecit eoque sunt collecti Menelaus Ulixes Diomedes Thessander Sthenelus Acamas Thoas Machaon Neoptolemus; et in equo scripserunt DANAI MINERVAE DONO DANT, castraque transtulerunt Tenedo. Id Troiani cum viderunt arbitrati sunt hostes abisse; Priamus equum in arcem Minervae duci imperavit, feriatique magno opere ut essent, edixit; id vates Cassandra cum vociferaretur inesse hostes, fides ei habita non est.

[45] Further on this passage and the poem (excluded from the study of COURTNEY 1991 see HABERMEHL 2006, p. 149–207, and, more recently, SCHINDLER 2019, p. 167–190 (emphasising the ekphrastic nature of the text and its composition).

[46] For an overview of the debate see BREEN 1991, p. 1–19. An early date, though now less fashionable a view, is still maintained e. g. by SCHMIDT & SCHNEIDER 1998, p. 778–779 (and cf. doi: 10.1163/1574-9347_dnp_e519090), but cf. in contrast HUYS 1996, p. 168–178, esp. 168–169 (with n. 5) (doi: 10.1515/apf.1996.42.2.168). GÄRTNER 2005, p. 153.

As the Achaeans were unable to capture Troy in ten years, Epeus, admonished by Minerva, built a wooden horse of wondrous size, and Menelaus, Odysseus, Diomedes, Thessander, Sthenelus, Acamas, Thoas, Machaon, and Neoptolemus gathered therein? And on the horse they wrote 'The Danaans give (*sc.* this) to Minerva as a gift', and they retreated to Tenedos. When the Trojans saw this, they concluded that the enemy had left. Priam ordered for the horse to be transferred into Minerva's citadel and proclaimed that everyone was to celebrate a holiday to the utmost. When the soothsaying priestess Cassandra shouted that the enemy was in it, she was not believed.

(Hyg. *fab.* 108 (s. v. *Equus Troianus*), transl. P. K.)

Unlike Petronius and Vergilius, Hyginus does present his readership not only with the knowledge, but an actual text, of the Trojan Horse inscription[47]. The author of a mythological compilation drawing extensively on Greek sources, it is possible, and in fact credible, that the text given here is an attempt at a Latin rendering of a Greek tradition, albeit a Greek tradition potentially slightly different from the one that led to the *Bibliotheke*'s version that was mentioned above in section 1:

τῆς εἰς οἶκον ἀνακομιδῆς Ἕλληνες Ἀθηνᾷ χαριστήριον

For their return home, the Greeks dedicate this thank offering to Athena.

This (hypothetical) second strand of a Greek tradition related to the Trojan Horse inscription might be palpable in the final instance of it, namely in the eleventh (viz. Trojan) Discourse of Dio Chrysostom, arguably pre-dating Hyginus' version by a few decades (depending on the actual date of the surviving version of the *Fabulae*). The Greek orator writes:

εἰ δέ τινα δεῖ δίκην γενέσθαι τοῦ εὐπρεποῦς χάριν, αὐτὸς εὑρεῖν. καταλείψειν γὰρ αὐτοὺς ἀνάθημα κάλλιστον καὶ μέγιστον τῇ Ἀθηνᾷ καὶ ἐπιγράψειν, Ἱλαστήριον Ἀχαιοὶ τῇ Ἀθηνᾷ τῇ Ἰλιάδι. τοῦτο γὰρ φέρειν μεγάλην τιμὴν ἐκείνοις· καθ᾽ ἑαυτῶν δὲ γίγνεσθαι μαρτύριον ὡς ἡττημένων.

This he (*sc.* Odysseus) urged to deter the Trojans from a campaign against Greece, and said that if any indemnity should be necessary for propriety's sake, he was ready with a plan. For the Greeks would leave a very large and beautiful offering to Athena and carve upon it this inscription: "A Propitiation from the Achaeans to Athena of Ilium." This, he explained, conferred great honour upon the Trojans and stood against the Greeks as an evidence of their defeat.

(D. Chr. 11.121, transl. J. W. Cohoon)

[47] Cf. SCAFOGLIO 2007, p. 80.

With this, however, we see yet another spin on the story: now the Trojan Horse is no longer imagined as a χαριστήριον, nor as a *donum*, nor as a *votum*, but conceived as a gift to a local deity to seek relief from guilt[48].

Later accounts do not seem to have picked up on this element of the myth. The Trojan novel of Dictys Cretensis, even though this author relates the Trojan Horse narrative and dwells on the horse being sacred to Minerva, does not mention any inscription[49]. Finally, Dares the Phrygian would seem to explain away the Trojan Horse plot altogether[50].

7. Instead of a conclusion: why exactly should epigraphists care … ?

For perfectly good reasons, the question of what was written on the Trojan Horse is not, and never has been, one of especially nagging questions in the field of Greco-Roman epigraphy. At the same time, it should have become clear that careful consideration of this – admittedly seemingly absurd – question ought to be of some interest to epigraphists in terms of advancing and sharpening our understanding of both Greco-Roman epigraphic habits and cross-cultural translation(s). So what is might one take away, professionally, from the discussion of this mythical episode?

Two aspects stand out. A first important point to take away lies in the way in which Petronius frames his reference to the inscription in Eumolpus' poetic rendering of the sack of Troy[51]:

(…): *hoc titulus fero*
incisus, hoc ad furta compositus Sinon
firmabat et mens semper in damnum potens.

The inscription carved into the beast, Sinon complicit in defeat, and our mindset always driving toward our own doom, all strengthened our faulty perception.

(Petr. 89.12–14, transl. G. Schmeling)

There were three decisive elements that let to Troy's downfall, the narrator suggests: the inscription (*titulus fero incisus*), a deceptive character telling a misleading story called Sinon (*ad furta compositus Sinon*), and a frame of mind that was unprepared for the level of deception (*mens semper in damnum potens*), leading to Troy's doom. All three elements caused Trojan resolve (*firmabat*!) – the message, a messenger, and mind that was a fertile ground for deception. This, in conjunction with an observation made by Bernd Manuwald, namely that such

[48] The Greek term ἱλαστήριον is subject to some discussion as regards its actual meaning, cf. WEISS 2014, p. 294–302.

[49] Cf. Dictys 5.9.

[50] Cf. Dares 40 (imagining a Greek attack at a Trojan city gate decorated with a horse's head).

[51] Cf. above, section 6 with n. 45.

accounts of the sack of Troy that do not contain a reference to the inscription tend to give Sinon, the Achaeans' spy who was left behind in order to trick the Trojans into accepting the horse into their city, a larger, more substantially crafted part[52]. This in turn means, however, that the inscription itself is a provider of counsel, of advice, of instruction for future behaviour, an extension to the human voice (and thus to human intention, be it good or bad or neutral). This is not an insignificant matter to bear in mind at a time in which inscriptions generally are considered additions to larger functional structures or decorative objects rather than central part of their functionality and communicative purpose in a specific setting. The Trojan Horse inscription, to an extent, has the potential to aid (and even to replace much of the job of) Sinon the storyteller.

A second, vitally important point to take away from the range of manifestations and versions of the Trojan Horse inscription is that, *wenn zwei das gleiche tun, ist es noch längst nicht dasselbe*, if two people would seem to act in the same way, it still is not necessarily the same thing. Across the Greek and Roman sources, the message of the inscription itself changes but little. Yet, the range of cultural, cultic, and religious meanings of the inscription is thought to take on from author to author, very much depends on their own chronological, cultural, linguistic, and even epigraphical background and experience – and even in cultural spheres that often seem rather homogeneous, there often is important nuance. A crucial element in this matter is precisely the earliest (surviving) mention of the Trojan Horse inscription in Accius – originating from a culture that is not especially familiar with χαριστήρια, and written at a time in which certain formulae of the unfolding Roman epigraphic habit, available to subsequent authors, had not yet been shaped[53].

Facts may not matter to the *World News Daily Report* spoof news page at large, and they may not have mattered when it comes to their bogus report of the Trojan Horse's rediscovery. It is a fact, however, that even a purely mythical inscription certainly does matter, and that it is, and remains, worthy of scholarly investigation.

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[53] Cf. above, section 5 with n. 42.

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