

# Horses, Ships, and Earthquakes: The Trojan Horse in Myth and Art

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...in days to come men shall tell of the  
Wooden Horse,  
with its hidden load of warriors.  
(Eur. *Tro.* 1.13-14)

The *Trojan Epic Cycle* has been used as a source of inspiration for the creation of art and literature for at least three millennia. Despite this long cultural history, there are few surviving ancient visual depictions of the Trojan Horse, the supposed brainchild of the hero Odysseus.<sup>1</sup> The horse of myth is used to penetrate the walls of Troy and seize the city by trickery as described by the epic poet, Homer (*Od.* 4.271-4.289, 8.492-520). It is difficult to ascertain why the motif of the wooden horse was neglected by ancient artists, as it is a symbol that continues to capture the imagination and resonate with audiences from classical to modern times. However, a few ancient images of the Trojan Horse do survive, and here I suggest that the majority of these derive from non-Homeric sources. In fact, it appears that there was an independent convention of iconography associated with the wooden horse that is not entirely consistent with the tale contained within the Homeric *Odyssey*. I have used literary and artistic evidence to decipher the details of the wooden horse and to investigate how and why it appears in our ancient sources.

The ancient Greeks accepted that the Trojan War was a historical reality. However, even in antiquity there was some doubt about whether the events related by Homer were an entirely accurate record of events as they had happened.<sup>2</sup> It can be assumed from the surviving textual evidence that the story of the wooden horse was known to audiences

before the composition of the *Odyssey* in the late eighth century BC. This assertion can be deduced from the relatively brief references to it in the text of the *Odyssey*, implying that it was so well known that it did not need to be retold. Similarly, if the story of the horse and the sack of Troy was relatively unknown, then it could not be requested that Demodocus ‘come to another part of the story, sing us the wooden horse’ (Hom. *Od.* 8.492-493). Odysseus, the man considered by many to be responsible for the plot of the wooden horse, lauds himself for his role in the sacking of Troy: ‘the stratagem great Odysseus filled once with men...it was these men who sacked Ilion’ (Hom. *Od.* 8.494-495). Despite the great achievement by the Greek army in overcoming the Trojan defences, the ploy that led to the fall of Troy is not given a great deal of scrutiny or space in the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*. Rather, the *Iliad* ends well before the sacking of Troy, and the episodic travels during the ten-year homecoming of Odysseus after the city has fallen are the focus of the *Odyssey*.

The narrative of the wooden horse, woven into the third song performed by Demodocus links together the events of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. This is achieved by providing a bridging story to fill the temporal space between the two poems, while also redefining Odysseus as the ‘sacker of cities’ and highlighting his preeminent role in the fall of Troy.<sup>3</sup> The contradiction to be found in this song is that it locates Odysseus in two places simultaneously in relation to the wooden horse: as the man outside the horse who ‘brought it to the upper city ‘as well as the man who is ‘sitting hidden in the horse’ (Hom. *Od.* 8.495-496, 8.502-503). This doubling in the narrative ensures that Odysseus is presented as both a man of trickery, and as a warrior ready for battle. Julian Ward Jones Jr. sees this as a slip in the narrative, which may reveal an earlier iteration of the tale, one where Odysseus is cast in the role later given to Sinon, the character responsible for

1 Sparkes lists only five extant images from the Archaic period. Sparkes (1971), 59.

2 Bryce (2002), 183.

3 Andersen (1977), 6-7.

tricking the Trojans into believing that the Greeks have departed in Virgil's *Aeneid*.<sup>4</sup> The existence of an earlier, pre-Homeric version of events is highly plausible as Odysseus is generally credited for the ruse of the wooden horse, but the extant literary evidence linking him to its creation is slim. There is however evidence in ancient literary texts of a superficial similarity between Odysseus and Sinon, who overcame the misgivings of the Trojans with his 'cunning and false tears' and 'Greek arts and stratagems' in the *Aeneid* (Verg. *Aen.* 2.153, 2.195-197).

The twenty lines devoted to Demodocus' description of the sack of Troy in the *Odyssey* are too brief to do justice to the sacking of Troy, or to offer sufficient inspiration to the painters and sculptors of antiquity to create artistic renditions of the topic that were both textually accurate and consistent. The Trojan horse appears three times within the text of the *Odyssey*, with each appearance serving to inflate the heroic reputation of the protagonist, Odysseus. These passages highlight his unique form of cleverness, one which is 'able to overcome the monumental size and strength of the walls which stand in the way of the Greeks.'<sup>5</sup> However, it is important to remember that the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* form a part of a larger *Trojan Cycle*, which include other epic poems that have not survived, including the *Nostoi* and *Aethiopis*. By relying on the epics which have survived, we have a potentially distorted conception of their importance in the Greek world to the detriment of other epic poems contained within the *Cycle*. This emphasis on the Homeric epics has led to some scholars concluding that there is a 'tendency to misinterpret "Cyclic" scenes as Homeric.'<sup>6</sup> This means that images which contain the characters named in the Homeric Epics are assumed to be depictions using Homer as their source, rather than one of the other poems.

A proliferation of Attic vases that depict the death of Priam, the king of Troy, indicate that the wooden horse was not the most popular motif for vase painters representing the fate of Troy. The historian Susan Woodford describes these painted scenes depicting the death of Priam (and often Astyanax) as part of the vase painters' formula to depict 'the true horror of the sack of Troy'.<sup>7</sup> The scenes on these vases are full of pathos, with Priam often shown being battered to death with the corpse of Astyanax while he seeks refuge at an altar. The death of Priam does not appear in either the *Odyssey* or the *Iliad*, and the use of the dead child Astyanax as a weapon of battery has no complement in any of our Homeric or Archaic fragmentary sources. It seems that this image of heightened horror forms part of a non-literary tradition associated with the *Epic Cycle*. Similarly, it is conceivable that other events and moments which have appeared in ancient artwork were selected by artists and patrons because of their appearance in other, no longer extant, books of the *Trojan Cycle*. We know that the sack of Troy appeared in numerous works of literature from an early date: those whose existence has been verified by modern philologists are the *Iliupersis* by Arctinus of Miletus, the *Little Iliad* by Lesches of Mytilene and a lyric poem also called the *Iliupersis* by Stesichorus.<sup>8</sup> None of these works has survived as much more than scattered fragments and short descriptions within works by other writers such as Proclus, for example:

The Trojans are suspicious in the matter of the horse, and stand round it debating what to do: 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. *Chrest.* ii)

4 Ward Jones Jr. (1970), 243.

5 Mackie (2008), 87.

6 Burgess (2003), 39.

7 Woodford (1993), 108.

8 Wiencke (1954), 286.

This fragment is a description of the *Iliupersis* of Arctinus, as recorded by Proclus, which provides key information about the wooden horse. It is a sacred object that is associated with Athena, it is flammable (wooden), and it is an object of suspicion to the Trojans. The surviving fragments and epitomes of the other lost epics give little more than a brief overview of the events of the *Cycle* outside the Homeric texts, but they are invaluable for piecing together the lost narratives when combined with artwork and later works. For this reason, the images that appear in Greek art reveal aspects of the Trojan myth that might otherwise be unknown to us from any textual source, such as the famous vase by Exekias that depicts Ajax and Achilles playing a board game.<sup>9</sup> Jenifer Neils suggests that further excavations, particularly outside of mainland Greece, might lead to a greater understanding of the popularity of certain images from epic poetry over others.<sup>10</sup>

## GREEK NARRATIVE ART

Relating a myth using visual rather than literary devices is a challenge that has been faced since the earliest times. It is difficult to treat art as independent from the associated myths as the visual scenes are often narrative in character. Many appear as though they are a snapshot of the events taking place and sometimes incorporate labels to identify the heroes and gods shown. It seems that vase painters were often more interested in decorating their vessels in a visually balanced and aesthetic manner rather than ‘producing meaningful interpretations of traditional stories.’<sup>11</sup> The painted pottery produced throughout the Greek world during the Archaic and Classical periods formed ‘an unrivalled medium for retelling myths and legends which customers, whether in Greece

or abroad, would have heard in traditional stories and songs.’<sup>12</sup>

Neils describes a tendency for early works of art to depict scenes that present the action at its highest point, often the middle of a battle, while disregarding the events before and after.<sup>13</sup> In this variety of visual schema, the setting takes a minor role in relation to the action taking place. The landscape of the East is often represented by a palm tree or the interior of a home shown by items hung on the wall or a chair or table. It may be that the wooden horse appears rarely simply because the horse is too big to fit the human-scale drama normally featured on Attic vases. Michael J. Anderson describes this visual convention as adopting the ‘human body as its primary standard of proportion.... [L]arge, architectural objects were generally excluded or only represented in synecdoche.’<sup>14</sup> The few vase images identified as showing the wooden horse usually represent it at a much-reduced scale. The relative smallness of the horse in these instances is shown in comparison with Athena, who may appear to be larger due to the hierarchy of scale used by the artist. However, in direct conflict with this interpretation is the notion that if the human figure of Epeios, the builder of the horse, is depicted alongside Athena, then the scale no longer works (Hom. *Od.* 8.493). Represented within a human context, the horse appears far too small to hold any men, let alone the 3000 that Apollodorus relates were contained within the wooden horse in the *Little Iliad* (Apollod. *Epit.* 5.17).

Identifying the figure of Odysseus in Greek art presents some challenges, even for experts. The figures that appear in sculptural and relief art are rarely accompanied by identifying inscription, and the iconography used for mortal men and women is far less distinctive than the attributes that serve to

9 Exekias, *Attic black figure Amphora*, c. 540-530 BC, Cat. 16727, Vatican Museum.

10 Neils (2007), 302.

11 Woodford (1993) 113.

12 Sparkes (1971), 57.

13 Neils (2007), 291.

14 Anderson (1997), 207.

identify different gods and goddesses. To overcome problems such as this, scholars often use the presence of a *pilos* adorning the head of Odysseus as the key signifier that he is the figure represented: however this hat did not only become a consistent feature until the fifth century BC, when the iconography of the *Epic Cycle* had been cemented.<sup>15</sup>

## THE HORSE

The literary and artistic sources covering the fall of Troy all make mention of a horse that was used to penetrate the walls of the city, whether by deceit or by force. The question arises, why a horse? ‘Doesn’t one normally offer to the gods things that are considered of great value?’ is the response given to this question by John C. Rouman and Warren H. Held.<sup>16</sup> Archaeological evidence from Greece and Cyprus reveals that horse sacrifices are unusual and almost always associated with elite male burials.<sup>17</sup> This evidence aligns with the death of Patroclus in the *Iliad*, who alone of all the Achaeans has horses sacrificed during his funeral rites (Hom. *Il.* 23.170-175).

Horses were important to the Ancient Greeks but were even more significant to the Trojans of the *Epic Cycle*. The great wealth of Troy may have been derived from the horse breeding and taming by Trojans, with a wild herd of horses on the nearby island of Lesbos forming a possible connection with the Bronze Age horse culture.<sup>18</sup> Some scholars even suggest that a desire to possess these horses forms part of the motivation for the Greeks to go to war with Troy.<sup>19</sup> The references throughout the *Iliad* to the Trojans as horse-taming may very well recall the memory of a time when that region of Asia

Minor was a place famed for the breeding of horses.<sup>20</sup> The stem ‘*hippo-*’ appears often in the *Iliad* as part of the name of Trojans, with only four instances among the Greeks, as well as more than twenty instances in the poem of an epithet that marks the Trojans as horse masters.<sup>21</sup> The very last word of the *Iliad* similarly emphasises the significance of horses to the Trojans when the dead Hector is referred to as *hippodamoio* (breaker of horses), foreshadowing the horse that his death prevents him from conquering: the wooden horse.<sup>22</sup>

Poseidon Hippios is an aspect of Poseidon associated with both land and horses, rather than the sea. Mackay suggests that because of this, and because of an existing relationship between the horse and underworld powers, horses were seen as having *chthonic* significance.<sup>23</sup> Multiple aetiologies for the horse attribute its creation to Poseidon, sometimes as part of the contest to be the patron god of Athens: Poseidon struck a rock from which sprung a horse, which Athena bridled and rode.<sup>24</sup> This myth best delineates the relationship between horses and the gods: Poseidon reflects the wild nature of horses while Athena represents the taming of horses. Julian Ward Jones Jr. even goes so far as to suggest that the wooden horse might be a theriomorphic representation of *Poseidon Hippios* with no cultural equivalent by the time of Homer’s composition, as the Greeks had ceased to believe in gods in animal form, such as those worshipped by the Egyptians.<sup>25</sup>

Athena is the main reason for the appearance of the horse, rather than a Trojan bull, sheep or some other animal. Among her many names and epithets, Athena is ‘*Athena Hippias*’

15 Burgess (2003), 39.

16 Rouman and Held (1972), 330.

17 Kosmetatou (1993), 31-41.

18 Wood (2005), 190.

19 Donaghy (2014), 78.

20 Donaghy (2014), 72.

21 Macurdy (1923), 50.

22 Franko (2006), 123.

23 Mackay (1946), 153.

24 Cook (1995), 185.

25 Ward Jones Jr. (1970), 245.



Fig. 1: Attic Red-Figure Kylix attributed to the Foundry Painter, c. 480 BC  
Munich 2650/J 400

which translates to ‘Athena of the Horses’. Following the theft of the *palladion* from her temple, her favour left the Trojans (if any favour at all remained by that point) and the horse was consecrated to her at her temple on the Acropolis.<sup>26</sup> Athena’s association with horses is one defined by mastery: through control using the bit, and through the mastery and *metis* required to use a chariot.<sup>27</sup> Another aspect of Athena, linked to her role as *Athena Hippias*, is her place as *Athena Chalinitis* or ‘Athena of the Bit.’<sup>28</sup> The technical skill and intelligence involved in inventing the bit and bridle, the tool used to subjugate the will of horses, finds a complement when those same qualities are harnessed to execute the plan of the wooden horse.

26 Burkert (1983), 158-159.

27 Detienne and Verth (1971), 183-184.

28 Detienne and Verth (1971), 174.

## BUILDING THE HORSE

Epeios, following an initiative of Athena’s, <fells timber from Ida> and constructs the wooden horse.

(Procl. *Chrest.* 4)

This version of the horse’s creation, recorded by Proclus, omits Odysseus completely, despite a long tradition touting his established role in the Greek tradition as the person who devised the trickery of the Trojan Horse.<sup>29</sup> Epeios is given the credit for the sack of Troy in many ancient sources, through his role as the builder of the wooden horse. That he uses timber harvested from Mount Ida, which is also used to build the funeral pyre of Patroclus in the *Iliad*, adds additional significance to the material used in the construction of the horse (Apollod. *Epit.* 5.14; Hom. *Il.* 23.110-140). In addition to this, a variety of tree currently growing

29 Ganiban (2009), 61.

in Western Turkey bears the scientific name *Abies equi trojani*, so named because the horse, if it existed, would possibly have been built from this specific species of local fir tree.<sup>30</sup> Mount Ida additionally appears in the *Iliad* when Priam requests a temporary truce with Achilles so that the Trojans can mourn Hector and collect wood from the mountain to use for his funeral pyre (Hom. *Il.* 24.660-665). The wooden horse is therefore associated with death long before it penetrates the walls of Troy.

There has been some debate whether the kylix in Fig. 1 is actually a depiction of the creation of the wooden horse, owing to the scale of the horse in contrast with the unidentified craftsman, assumed to be Epeios. However, the tree to the right of the seated figure informs us that this is an exterior scene, rather than the interior of a workshop or foundry, and this setting is entirely consistent with the literary sources that tell of the horse being created in the Achaean camp.<sup>31</sup> The figure of Odysseus is either absent or unidentified. His distinctive traveller's cap does not adorn any of the figures, and no inscription or detail suggests his presence in the scene. It is noteworthy that Odysseus does not appear in any of the extant images showing the creation of the wooden horse: Athena is always the main figure of such scenes.

The role of Athena has not been neglected by Classical Attic vase painters despite a scarcity of depictions of the horse itself. In fact, all artworks that portray the wooden horse which are known to us from this period appear to be associated with Athena. At least one such example of red figure pottery appears to depict the goddess creating the horse rather than just aiding or inspiring Epeios<sup>32</sup>. The physical material of the horse varies throughout the artworks. On a *chous*

jug dating from the middle of the fifth century BC, Athena appears to be sculpting the horse from clay. The tools hanging behind her do not add any additional information as they could easily be those of a woodworker rather than a potter.

There are no clear indications that the horse is constructed from wood, but the relative lack of detail in all vase paintings could account for this. An additional interpretation could be that the image being referenced is, in fact, the creation of one of the bronze horses that were described by Pausanias as residing on the Acropolis at Athens, as well as at Delphi.<sup>33</sup>

Some later sources emphasise the role of Epeios and Athena in the creation of the horse, with Quintus Smyrnaeus skimming over the involvement of Odysseus in the formation of the ruse in his fourth century *Fall of Troy*:

Athena left the high mansions of the Blest,  
Clothed her in shape of a maiden tender-fleshed,  
And came to ships and host. Over the head  
Of brave Epeius stood she in his dream,  
And bade him build a Horse of tree: herself  
Would labour in his labour, and herself  
Stand by his side, to the work enkindling him.  
(Quint. Smyrn. 12.105-112)

Were it not for the existing tradition of Odysseus as the originator of the ruse of the horse, it would be quite easy to argue that he had no role in its creation. Certainly, the visual evidence that we have from the Classical period affords Odysseus no credit at all, with most of the images connecting the horse to Athena. A quotation from Stesichorus embedded within the *Deipnosophistae* of Athenaeus implies to P. J. Finglass that the inspiration for the horse was given from Athena to Epeios because 'the great daughter of Jove pitied him' (Ath. 11.84).<sup>34</sup> The literary sources similarly give

<sup>30</sup> Leaf (1912), 33-34.

<sup>31</sup> Sparkes (1971), 60.

<sup>32</sup> Sparkes (1971), 60-61.

<sup>33</sup> Sparkes (1971), 60.

<sup>34</sup> Finglass (2013), 3.

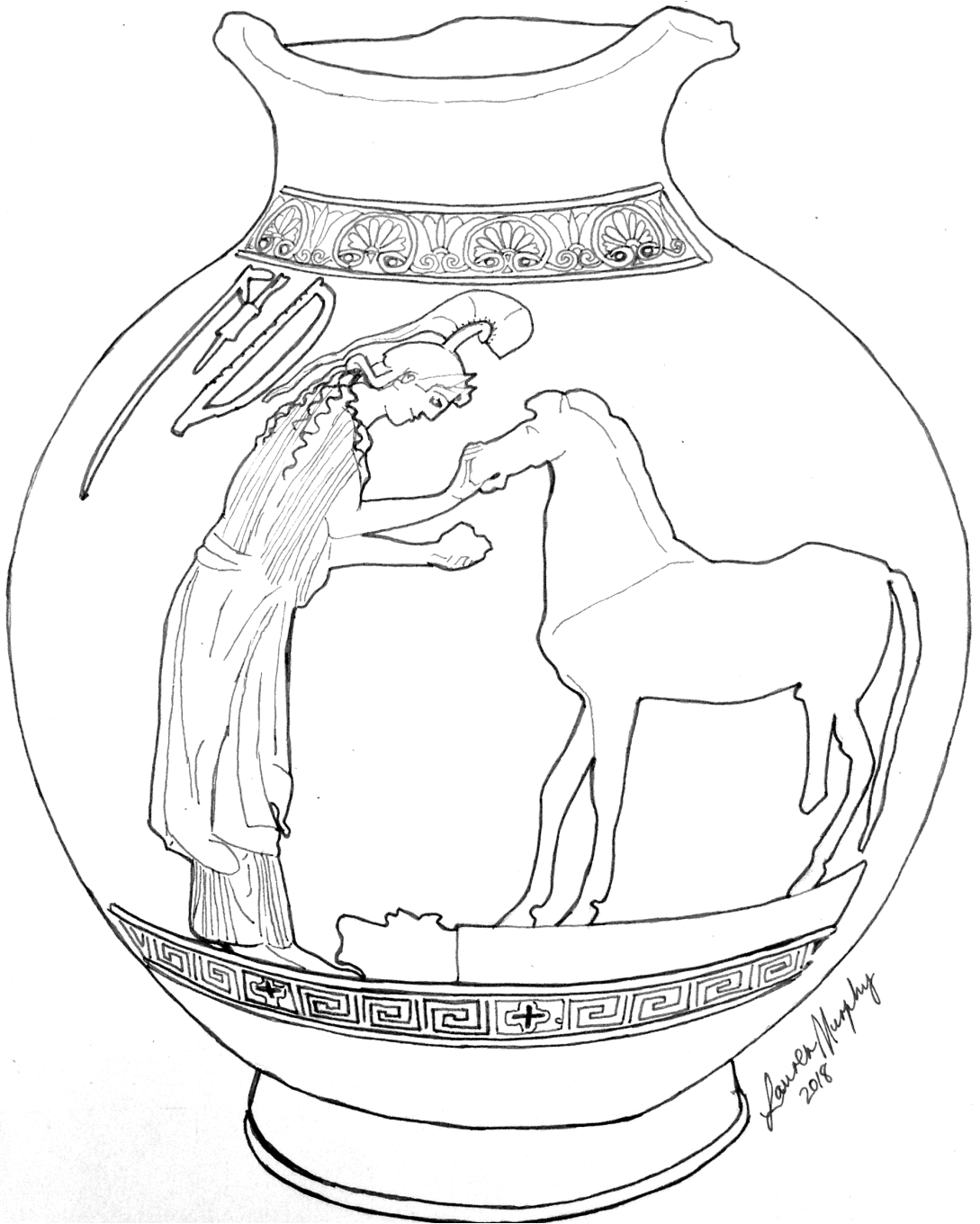


Fig. 2: Attic Red-Figure Chous, c. 475-425 BC  
Berlin F2415  
Image by the author

credit for the idea for the horse to Epeios, with only a few exceptions, such as the *Epitome* of Apollodorus where it is related that Odysseus ‘invented the construction of the Wooden Horse and suggested it to Epeios’ (Apollod. *Epit.* 5.14).

## ENTERING THE CITY

Come to another part of the story, sing us the wooden horse, which Epeios made with Athene helping, the stratagem great Odysseus filled once with men and brought it to the upper city, and it was these men who sacked Iliion.

(Hom. *Od.* 8.492-495)

Apollodorus relates that there was an inscription on the wooden horse that read ‘For their return home, the Greeks dedicate this thank-offering to Athena’ (Apollod. *Epit.* E.5.15). The trickery is very much Odyssean in character, with the dedication of the horse truly leading to the return home of the Greek armies. The wooden horse is offered in exchange for the stolen Palladion of Athena and it is dedicated to her twice: first by the Achaeans as part of their ruse, then by the Trojans who take it to Athena’s temple within the citadel of the city.<sup>35</sup> The survival of the horse and the fact that it is brought into the city, despite the misgivings of the Trojans, can be interpreted as occurring at least partly because horses were significant to the Trojans. The other likely reason for the Trojan acceptance of the wooden horse is the association of horses with Athena,

The deception of soldiers entering the city of Troy through trickery has a precedent in a Bronze Age tale about an Egyptian city called Joppa. Dating the event to several hundred years before the fall of Troy, an Egyptian papyrus describes a general of Tuthmosis III sending two hundred soldiers into the city hidden in baskets that were supposedly full

of gifts of tribute.<sup>36</sup> The story is different: there is no horse, but the soldiers penetrate the walls of the city and end a siege through trickery rather than brute force. In common with the sack of Troy, the army has arrived by sea and failed to take a well-fortified city by direct attack, they then pretend to abandon the siege and leave, causing the inhabitants to relax their guard and accept the offered tribute.<sup>37</sup> Thus it has become accepted for scholars to refer to the taking of Joppa as the earliest appearance of a ‘Trojan horse motif’ despite the absence of a horse from the tale.<sup>38</sup> Homer’s description of Odysseus in the horse reinforces the idea that the destruction of the city will enter in a benign guise, concealed within a sculpted offering to Athena.

Here is the way that strong man acted and way he endured action, inside the wooden horse, where we who were greatest of the Argives all were sitting and bringing death and destruction to the Trojans.

(Hom. *Od.* 4.271-274)

One of the earliest depictions of the Trojan horse appears on a badly damaged fibula brooch from Boeotia. In this image, two legs of the horse are visible which are identifiable as belonging to the Trojan horse of mythology by the wheels where the hooves would usually be. This convention later aids in determining whether the horse motif in an artwork is simply a horse or the Trojan Horse. The wheels show that the artist is familiar with the story of the wooden horse, as they indicate knowledge of the need for the horse to be moved.<sup>39</sup>

Damage to the brooch in Fig. 3 means that it is difficult to see the entire image depicted by the engraving. The linework visible on the

<sup>35</sup> Anderson (1997), 19.

<sup>36</sup> Easton (2010), 54.

<sup>37</sup> West (1997), 488.

<sup>38</sup> Ward Jones Jr. (1970), 242.

<sup>39</sup> Sparkes (1971), 55-56.



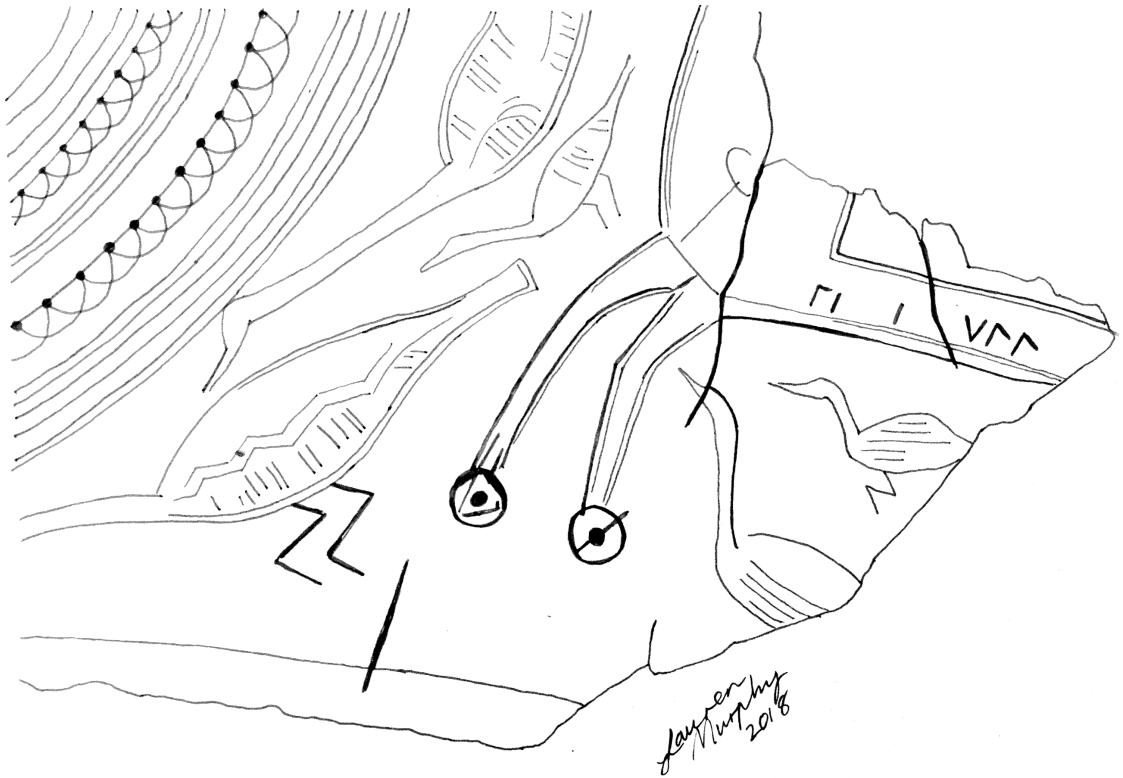


Fig. 3: detail of Boeotian bronze fibula c.680 BC. British Museum 1898, 1118.1  
Image by the author

side of the horse may represent carpentry, or perhaps the windows that reveal the soldiers within that occasionally appears on clear examples of the Trojan Horse. There also appears to be some illegible text or perhaps decoration inscribed upon the belly of the horse.

In 1961 a large pithos was unearthed during the excavation for a well on the island of Mykonos. This pottery vessel, originally used as a burial urn, was damaged during the digging and fragments of both the pot and the disarticulated bones it contained, in its original use as a funerary urn, were found in the piles of dug earth.<sup>40</sup> The vase depicts scenes from the fall of Troy, the *Iliupersis*, through a series of panels reminiscent of temple metopes upon the body of the vessel.

A stylised relief panel depicts the Trojan horse occupied and surrounded by heavily armed Greek soldiers on the neck of the *pithos*. The body panels depict the suffering of the people of Troy: multiple scenes show children being killed or about to be killed. The suffering finds a later echo in the *Trojan Women* of Euripides, and it may be the case that both this play and the vase made several hundred years earlier, were inspired by descriptions in the lost *Iliupersis*. This is a narrative configuration, and one that has been presented in clay relief which does not appear to have translated into the painted surfaces of later Classical black figure vases.<sup>41</sup>

The identity of the figures on the Mykonos *pithos* are difficult to determine as they are

40 Ervin (1963), 38.

41 Schapiro (1994), 163.



Fig. 4: The Mykonos Pithos c. 670 BC  
Archaeological Museum of Mykonos

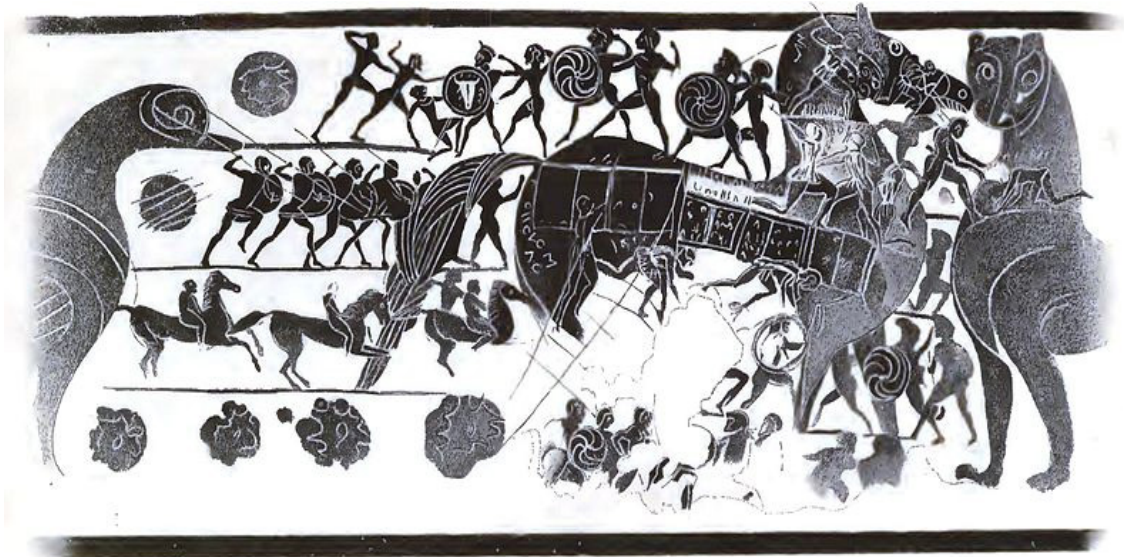


Fig. 5: Corinthian Black-Figure Aryballos  
Paris, Cabinet des Medailles: 186.<sup>42</sup>

not labelled. However, we can assume that Odysseus, the traditional architect of the ruse, is included in their number as he is located inside the horse in the *Odyssey* (Hom. *Od.* 4.271-274). The seven windows on the side of the horse show the men within variously holding shields and swords, foreshadowing the events to come and functioning as a narrative device within the scene. The Archaic smiles of the soldiers adds pathos: the slaughter of the men and women of Troy is always depicted as grim and horrific. Odysseus was moved to tears by the third song of Demodocus, which tells of the wooden horse and the sacking of the city (Hom. *Od.* 8.521-534). However, this display of emotion appears to have been self-pity for his ‘mournful sufferings’ rather than any sympathy for the fate of the Trojans (Hom. *Od.* 9.12-13).

The available photographs of this *aryballos* in the Beazley Archive depict very little detail, although there are both figures and horses visible. An illustration of the vessel reveals a greater degree of information, including men climbing from the horse, leaping from its neck and shoulders and fighting across its back. Window panels on the horse’s side appear to show figures emerging from

within. Unfortunately, the bottom of the *aryballos* is damaged and it is difficult to ascertain whether there were wheels. This attribute is not required in this instance to identify the horse as the Trojan Horse as that identification can be made through the rich imagery of the vase.

The distinction between Trojan and Greek warriors is difficult as only a small number of the figures wear the crested helmets common in Archaic art. Unlike the Attic images of the creation of the horse, where the horse appears small in comparison to Athena, the many bands of Corinthian pottery allows for the depiction of more figures, and therefore more information. Similarly, the appearance of a panther and a large bird, both of similar scale to the horse, is a convention of Corinthian art and not suggestive of multiple large, hollow animals. The window openings on the side of the horse reflect a similar iconographic language to the Mykonos *pitios*, where soldiers emerge from the sides rather than the back or belly.

42 ‘Troianische Vasenbilder II’, 1892, in Kaiserlich Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, *Jahrbuch des Kaiserlich Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts* (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1893), taf. 2.



Fig. 6: Athenian Black-Figure Fragment, c. 550-500 BC  
 Berlin, Antikensammlung: F1723  
 Image by the author.

This fragment shows the soldiers disembarking from the wooden horse, one of whom is already wearing a helmet. The leg of the wooden horse is visible, but there are no other details, and, were it not for the soldiers clambering upon each other's shoulders, it would be unrecognisable as an episode from the *Epic Cycle*, due to the lack of information within this scrap of pottery. The most significant aspect to note is that yet again Odysseus is not named as one of the figures, nor does he appear to be present, but 'EPEUS' identifies the figure on the left.

It is noteworthy that despite the soldier climbing from the back of the horse, there are no wheels or castors on the horse to indicate that it was designed to be moved. Were it not for this opened hatch on the horses back, then this image would be difficult to recognise as part of the *Cycle*. The depiction of the horse is more naturalistic than the horse on the Mykonos *pthos* or Boeotian brooch, and the quality of the rendering is quite a feat considering the small scale and hardness of the gem. The context is interesting because although during this period there were Greek colonies in Southern Italy, this gem has been identified as being of Etruscan workmanship



Fig. 7: Etruscan Carnelian Scarab c. 500-475 BC  
MM. 32.11.7

at a time when there is no evidence of similar visual representations of the Trojan Horse in either mainland Greece or Magna Graecia.<sup>43</sup>

### OTHER INTERPRETATIONS OF THE HORSE

There has been much scholarly ink spilled in analysing the wooden horse but nearly all

scholars can agree that the horse itself is a work of fiction. However, the destruction of the historic city of Troy is also accepted by historians. The cause of this destruction, and why the horse motif is linked with it, is still under debate. Barry Strauss lists a variety of explanations from both ancient and modern historians about the true nature of the Trojan horse, including:

...a siege tower, or an image of a horse on a city gate left unlocked by pro-Greek Antenor, or a metaphor for a new Greek

43 Carnelian Scarab', *The Met* [website], (500-475 BC) <<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/253376>>, accessed 11 Dec. 2018.

fleet because Homer calls ships ‘horses of the sea,’ or a symbol of the god Poseidon, who destroyed Troy in an earthquake, or a folktale similar to those found in Egyptian literature and the Hebrew bible.<sup>44</sup>

Each of the possible interpretations given by Strauss bears some merit, although none conclusively so. The use of a movable siege tower covered in horse hides for the protection of the soldiers operating within the tower provides a plausible explanation for the wooden horse of myth.<sup>45</sup> A gypsum relief panel dating from approximately 729 BC depicting a Neo-Assyrian siege tower demonstrates visually why the link between horses and siege towers is so persuasive for historians. The shape of the tower is vaguely animal-like and it is not a huge stretch to describe it as being horse-like. Strauss adds an additional tantalising detail to the debate with the revelation that Bronze Age Assyrians named their siege towers after horses.<sup>46</sup>

Pausanias, writing in the second century AD, describes the bronze statue of a horse standing before the temple of Artemis on the Athenian Acropolis. This seems an odd location for a statue associated with the Trojan War, and with Athena herself. The commonsense approach of Pausanias to the story of the wooden horse forms an entry point into a discussion of the relationship between the horse and Bronze Age siege engines:

That the work of Epeios was a contrivance to make a breach in the Trojan wall is known to everybody who does not attribute utter silliness to the Phrygians. But legend says of that horse that it contained the most valiant of the Greeks, and the design of the bronze

figure fits in well with this story. Menestheus and Teucer are peeping out of it, and so are the sons of Theseus.

(Paus. 1.23.8)

This use of wood harvested from the slopes of Mount Ida ties the creation of the wooden horse to the shipbuilding of the Trojan exiles in the *Aeneid* (Verg. *Aen.* 3.5-8). The similarity between the wooden horse of the Greeks and wooden ships of the Trojans is also present within the *Epic Cycle*. Certainly, the horse was designed and constructed to carry a similar number of men as a ship, and the vocabulary used by Proclus and Apollodorus to describe both boarding and moving the horse is the same as that used when describing a ship.<sup>47</sup> Euripides compares the horse to a ship in the *Trojan Women* when he describes it being moved into the city: ‘[a]nd with nooses of cord they dragged it, as it had been a ship’s dark hull’ (Eur. *Tro.* 537-539). The horse, like a ship, is a vessel used for the movement of men from one destination to another for the purpose of sacking and plundering a city. In the *Odyssey*, a similar situation occurs when Odysseus and his crew are blown to shore near the city of the Kikonians where he:

sacked their city and killed their people,  
and out of their city taking their wives and  
many possessions  
we shared them out, so none might go  
cheated of his proper  
portion.

(Hom. *Od.* 9.40-43)

It is evident that the wooden horse of the Greeks functioned as a transport, and therefore the similarity of the language used for embarking and disembarking is therefore unsurprising. Some scholars have theorised that the wooden horse could be a poorly understood metaphor for a ship, but this theory falls apart as the sources emphasise that the horse was seen as a remarkable act of trickery which was delivered to an inland town.<sup>48</sup> A story about a ship would not have the same associations with cunning and genius strategy. However, the human contents and the material of the horse, with

44 Strauss (2008), 172.

45 Tucker (2010), 6.

46 Strauss (2008), 172.

47 Anderson (1997), 22-23.

48 Mackay (1946), 151.



Fig. 8: Neo-Assyrian Relief Panel c. 728 BC  
British Museum 1848, 1104.7  
Image by the author

their similarity to a ship, are the tenuous links that makes this idea so tantalising.

If the horse were a ship rather than an ingenious ploy, then it is likely that it was a Phoenician *hippo*. These 'horses' first appear in reliefs dated to the middle of the ninth century BC and appear as stylised vessels with horse figureheads at the front of the

ship.<sup>49</sup> The dating of some of the Assyrian relief panels that illustrate horse-headed vessels places the appearance of these ships before the epics of Homer. The name for this kind of watercraft, *hippo*, could easily have been misinterpreted by people who had never seen the ships and only knew them by

49 Friedman (2015), 19.

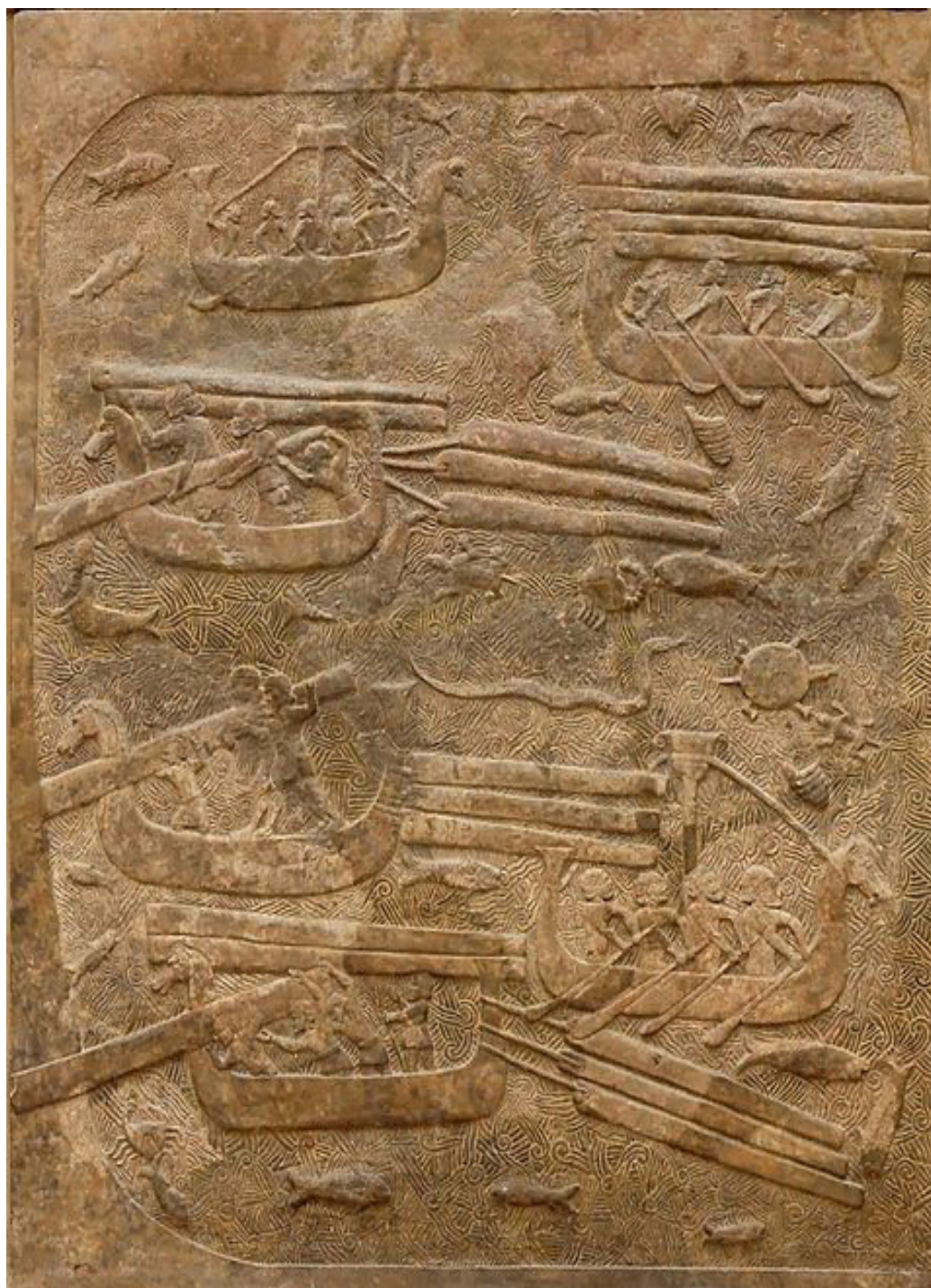


Fig. 9: Relief from the palace of Sargon II at Dur Sharrukin c. 721-705 BC  
Louvre AO 19890



reputation. In this way, the idea of a wooden horse-head ship could metamorphose over time to eventually be recalled as a literal horse-shaped statue, much as the *pythos* of Pandora became a box (*pyxis*). Francesco Tiboni is emphatic that ‘the wooden horse of Epeios was indeed one of the ships ancient Greeks used to call *Hippot*’ and it is evident that some scholars feel very strongly that the horse was a ship.<sup>50</sup>

The idea that the Trojan Horse might have been an earthquake relies on the archaeological evidence for the destruction of some of the layers of the city in the mound at Hisarlik. There are references to earthquakes in the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*, the latter caused by direct action from Neptune (Hom. *Il.* 20.57; Verg. *Aen.* 6.10-14). The description given by Aphrodite that Neptune ‘has loosened the foundations with his great trident and is shaking the walls ‘certainly sounds like an earthquake. However, in the *Aeneid* this instance occurs after the wooden horse has breached the city walls and been unburdened of its cargo. It is conceivable that the horse symbolises an earthquake through its association with Poseidon, and L. A. Mackay sees this link as being a way for artists to depict the fall of Troy: an earthquake is difficult to convey in art.<sup>51</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The ruse of the wooden horse in the *Trojan Cycle* has been the source of inspiration for painters and poets since the time before the Homeric *Odyssey* was composed. However, there are only a small number of surviving artefacts that depict the wooden horse, and fewer yet that show Odysseus in a central role, let alone as the creator of the ruse. The literary and artistic evidence that remains from the Greek Archaic and Classical periods does not provide conclusive proof

for a consistent belief that the wooden horse of Odysseus breached the walls of Troy. In fact, there is some evidence to suggest that the horse may have been a ship or siege engine rather than a statue. It is apparent that the incident was more known than told in antiquity, and that the Trojan Horse could not compete with the human-scale tragedy of the *Iliupersis* as a motif for art and literature.

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<sup>50</sup> Tiboni (2006), 104.

<sup>51</sup> Mackay (1946), 153-154.

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