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The Vengeance of Achilles:
The Impact of Viewing Context and Reception on Visual Narrative

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Thesis Statement

While modes of narration utilized in images of the vengeance of Achilles directed the evolution of that motif’s iconography, the visual function of an image – its viewing context and reception – influenced the use of certain modes of narration in instances of the scene in Graeco-Roman art.
Abstract

This paper attempts to prove the significance of the viewing context and reception of an image for the developments in the modes of narration used to depict a scene and subsequently that scene’s iconography. In particular, it will examine the iconographic and narrative evolution of images depicting the vengeance of Achilles in Late Archaic black-figure vase-painting as well as in a series of Roman artworks. It will additionally consider the viewing context and visual reception of those images and discuss the cultural significance for the use of certain modes of narration. Finally, it will compare the modes of narration utilized and the evolution of the iconography of the scene in the Greek and Roman case-studies.
**Introduction**

One of the most poignant scenes from Homer’s *Iliad* is Achilles exacting his vengeance as he drags Hektor’s defeated body behind his chariot in books 22 and 24. Instances of this scene’s depiction in Graeco-Roman art exist in a variety of media, including vase painting, metal-work, painted wall relief, and ceramic relief decoration. A direct relationship exists between the evolution of the standard iconographic representation of the scene and the gradual alteration of its narrative structure. Considerations of ancient narrative have generally disregarded the form and viewing context of the object or image as determinative of a given mode of narration. While numerous components like patronage, tradition, local style, and contemporary conventions factor into the construction of visual narrative, the intended function of a work played a principal role in the choice of the mode of narration for a few particularly interesting instances of the scene of the vengeance of Achilles in ancient art.

In the context of this paper, the term “narrative” is used to indicate the means by which an image tells a story. As revealed by the work of such scholars as Brilliant, Stansbury-O’Donnell, Shapiro, and Small, visual narrative is conveyed by a number of complex levels of meaning which are present in the composition of an image. Such layers are usually either semiotic in nature or based in content, and while they initially activate the viewing process, they subsequently direct the viewer towards comprehension of what is depicted. Narrative structure is the way the narrative is organized by the physical components of a composition – how the figures relate, the kinds of actions being performed, the interplay of visual elements, etc. The phrase “narrative choice,” on the one hand, assumes that either an artist or a patron made a

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3 Shapiro (1994).
4 Small (1999).
5 For discussion of the creation of meaning through semiotics, see Panofsky (1939).
conscious decision to use a particular narrative structure, and on the other, implies that the visual results of that decision played a heavy hand in the evolution of a scene’s iconography over time. With the term “function” is implicated both the form of the object and the complex notion of viewer response, the latter of which involves the consideration of such factors as the spatial position as well as the aesthetic reception of an image. Focusing on one particular scene, this paper will examine the relationship between the visual structure of a narrative and the function of the object that served as the immediate context for an image.

The elements for consideration when examining the function of the works bearing representations of the vengeance of Achilles both in Greek and in Roman art, though numerous, can be divided into three general categories: physical, spatial, and programmatic / thematic properties. Belonging to the first group are the physical characteristics of an object or image, including size, shape, and medium. Important spatial properties include factors affecting the visibility and viewing conditions of the image, for example, specificities of setting and lighting. An image’s programmatic or thematic properties pertain to its relationship with nearby or related images, whether on the same vase, in the same room, on a different vase from the same workshop, in a different room of the same house, or in a comparable style.

Two case-studies, one Greek and one Roman, will demonstrate that for the vengeance of Achilles, consideration of function (form and viewing context) as well as contemporary visual reception is vital to understanding narrative choice and subsequently iconographic evolution. Additional examples of the scene will serve as supplementary material for establishing the standard motif(s) and significant deviations from them; engaging a larger body of images will also corroborate the primary case-study analyses and lend additional support to the argument for function’s significance.
I. Greek Case-Study & Analysis of Viewing Context

The most exciting evidence for the impact of function on narrative choice, which will serve as the primary case-study for the Greek version of the motif, is a Late Archaic black-figured hydria (fig. 1), produced in Athens ca. 520-510 BCE and now in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. It belongs to a group of vases all bearing the inscribed name (or graffito) Leagros or occasionally the phrase Leagros kalos (sometimes in the shortened form ΛΚ). Most of the vases in the Leagros group were found at Vulci, having been imported from Greece by Etruscans presumably for use in their tombs. The scene of interest is the rectangular frieze of figures on the front of the body of the vase. The composition is “book-ended” by an architectural element, what appears to be a porch with a Doric column, on the left and a white tomb mound on the right. There is a layering of figure planes. One contains a chariot drawn by four horses; the charioteer is in the process of being joined by an armed warrior, whose left leg angles down towards the lifeless body of a figure labeled “ΕΚΤΡΩΠ.” Behind the body on the ground are a porch and two figures, an elderly male (identified by his white beard) and a mourning female (indicated by her gesture of hand to head). On the far right is a funeral mound and a little winged, armed figure rising from it labeled “ΠΙΑΤΡΟΚΛΩ(Σ),” as well as a snake below. In the center foreground of the image is the leaping / flying figure of winged female.

Emily Vermuele, in a 1965 analysis of this vase for the Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts, discusses the scene’s narrative structure in detail. On the basis of their attributes and poses, she identifies the male and female figures on the left as Priam and Hecuba. The couple gazes directly into the eyes of the man who killed their son, who lies unseen by them at their feet. So the structure in which they stand must represent Troy. What makes that especially interesting is

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6 Though we only see the rear halves of two horse bodies, counting all of the legs reveals the intended number of animals.
7 Vermeule (1965), 39-42.
that at the opposite side of the composition we have the funeral mound of Patroklos with the deceased warrior’s *eidolon* hovering above, whose location was not near Troy but rather the Greek camp. Another interesting element is the winged female, who is commonly identified as Iris. She of course was the messenger sent by Zeus to Thetis to ask her son, Achilles, to cease mistreating his enemy’s body, but she was also sent to Priam with the order to go to Achilles with gifts to ransom his son, Hektor.

Friis-Johansen, in his book *The Iliad in Early Greek Art*, attempts to deduce which episode from the *Iliad* this vase-painting depicts, as Achilles drags Hektor’s body off the field of battle in book 22 and again around the funeral mound of Patroklos in book 24. He concludes that the Doric porch must represent the “Dardanian gate” of Troy, making this depiction decisively (in his mind) referential to the episode in book 22. He also asserts that Iris’ “double mission…” to Achilles as well as Priam “…was of course too complicated to be shown in one single picture.” After examining the imagery carefully, however, depicting that double-mission seems to be exactly what the artist intended to do by showing Iris running in her swift leftwards motion towards Achilles and subsequently Priam. Furthermore, by mixing the two distinct locations in which Achilles dragged Hektor’s body, the artist makes use of a synoptic mode of narration; a term originally used by Snodgrass, synoptic is a mode which combines the impossible elements of two or more distinct locations in order to convey an extended story-line.

In the vast majority of the other extant representations in Late Archaic vase-painting of this scene, only Achilles and Iris are present, accompanied by a nameless charioteer and, of course, Hektor. The figures assume distinct poses and occur in particular locations. The standard form of the scene in Late Archaic Greek works is thus illustrated well by a lekythos in Cracow.

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8 Friis-Johansen (1967), 150.
9 Ibid., 143.
10 Stansbury-O’Donnell (1999), 5-6.
(fig. 2). Because it only includes a single location and event, its narrative can be described as monoscenic. Also, with the exception of a similar hydria in St. Petersburg (fig. 3) and an amphora in London (fig. 4), both of which differ in other significant ways from the scene at hand (discussed further below), the Boston hydria is the only instance with the vengeance of Achilles as the dominant image on a large vase where the entire picture field is viewable without rotating either the vase or one’s position relative to it, and it is without exception the only one that includes the figures of Hektor’s parents. In all other instances, the scene appears on the shoulders of larger vessels as a subsidiary image, as on a hydria in Munich (fig. 5), or on much smaller lekythoi which have fundamentally different viewing circumstances due to their shape.

This movement of the scene onto the large picture frame of the vase makes the Boston hydria especially interesting in terms of viewing circumstances and reception: the visual function of an image when it is located on one part of a vase changes significantly when the image is moved to another part of even the same kind of vase, as it is viewed from a different angle and at different moments during the vessel’s use. An image on the shoulder of a water-jar at a symposium would have been viewed from above and primarily when it was physically in use, which is significantly different from an image on the dominant picture field, which symposiasts would have viewed primarily as it was sitting still and they were reclining and drinking. An additional consideration complicates the notion of viewing context and visual function; the Athenian workshop producing the Leagros vases likely did so with the intent to move their products on the Etruscan market, where they were in high demand. The artists might have even had their buyers’ intended use in mind when creating the vessels; a vase would have been viewed in yet a different manner when placed in an Etruscan funerary setting, seen most likely by members of the family when depositing the remains of the deceased. In the context of Etruscan

11 Ibid., 3.
burials, where tombs were small and windowless, a large scene on the front of a vase might have been the only one visible enough in lamp-light to be legible. The fact that the very readability of the narrative depends on viewing context highlights the importance of that shift from subsidiary to focal position of the vengeance of Achilles motif on the Boston hydria.

What remains to be considered for Late Archaic black-figure examples of the scene is the relationship between the monoscopic and synoptic narratives and the change in iconography from the standard iconographic representation, as seen on the Cracow lekythos, to the “extended” iconography on the Boston hydria that includes the new figures of Priam and Hecuba, not present in any other examples. By expanding the narrative to juxtapose the site of Troy against the Greek camp, the artist needed to amend the standard iconographic components to accommodate the figures of Hektor’s grieving parents. Their inclusion instigated the development in the motif, and the artist’s consideration of form and function was integral to that innovation. His choice to move the scene to the dominant (and much larger) picture zone of the Boston hydria – where it would be viewed more easily in either of its potential viewing contexts, symposium or tomb – necessitated the expansion of the narrative and thus the motif.

Returning to those other examples of the vengeance motif as the dominant image on a large vase will clarify the final question of why the artist wished to include Priam and Hecuba. On that hydria in St. Petersburg (fig. 3), the standard representation is not seen: Achilles is shown looking down at Hektor rather than in the process of boarding his chariot, and the figures of Iris and the nameless charioteer are missing. (The lettered inscriptions among the figures are just gibberish, possible evidence that its audience was not expected to be able to read Greek.) The narrative used in this depiction is still monoscopic as in the standard motif, as no indications of multiple locations or events exist in the powerful, yet simple composition. However, the
London amphora (see detail, fig. 6), attributed to the Priam painter, combines the standard iconographic representation of the scene (fig. 2) with the St. Petersburg version to achieve what is literally a reverse image of the former with the addition of Patroklos’ funeral mound and *eidolon* in a static composition, where the horses and chariot are standing fairly motionless while Achilles leans over the body of Hektor. Again Friis-Johansen assigns this to a particular episode in the *Iliad*, book 24, but he fails to consider the reason for this combination of motifs, only explaining the addition of the hoplite *Ολυτευ* on the far left and the dog *Φαιος* as remnant of the standard type of a departure scene.12

The motivation behind the change in the motif’s narrative structure may be understood in terms of an artistic desire to take advantage of the extreme *pathos* of the scene of the vengeance of Achilles and to heighten it. This is accomplished on the London amphora through the alteration of the standard iconography and on the Boston hydria by the juxtaposition of the many victims of Achilles’ wrath: Hektor and his parents, and indirectly, Patroklos. Athenian artists ca. 540-510 seem to have been especially drawn to scenes of morbidity and tragedy; the Leagros group in particular includes depictions of primarily Homeric scenes with a focus on those that are especially gruesome: the painful deaths of Troilos, Astynax, Priam, Achilles, and Ajax accompany the disgrace of the hero Hektor in the workshop’s repertoire of motifs. Though Vermuele does not see narrative as the primary catalyst for the evolution of the scene’s iconography, she summarizes the cultural significance for the changes elegantly:

> It was an age of wars, civil and foreign; in these very years the tyrant Hipparchos had been murdered at the Panathenaic festival (514 B.C.), Spartans had invaded by sea at Phaleron (511 B.C.), and by land across the Attic plain (510 B.C.), the tyrant Hippias was besieged on the Acropolis and his children captured by the enemy (510 B.C.). … The Leagros Group reminds us that myth must have contemporary significance to be reproduced with conviction, and that violence and loss were the daily ingredients of life.

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12 Friis-Johansen (1967), 141.
at this time. Painters consequently felt free to reshape the literary treatment of heroic themes which controlled their imaginations, to adapt the old mythical material to suit the aesthetic canons of their trade and the emotional experiences of their environment.\textsuperscript{13}

A potential objection to the proposed interpretation of the scene on the Boston hydria might question the literary origin of the story of the vengeance of Achilles; it might also point out that basic differences exist between the Homeric version of the dragging of Hektor’s body and the artistic conventions for depicting it in late 6\textsuperscript{th} c. Athenian vase-painting. While the issue is far too complex to discuss in depth here, Shapiro does propose the possibility that the “Homeric” myths, transmitted orally throughout Greece at this time regardless of whether or not Homer’s \textit{Iliad} was roughly settled into its current form by the late 6\textsuperscript{th} / early 5\textsuperscript{th} c., may have existed in multiple versions.\textsuperscript{14} Therefore, artists may have been working in their own visual tradition distinct from a contemporary literary one, rather than simply “illustrating” the Homeric texts. Snodgrass indirectly supports this theory by showing that only the very earliest of instances of the vengeance of Achilles in Greek art can be directly tied to the Homeric telling of the story.\textsuperscript{15} A Clazomenian hydria-fragment (fig. 7) shows Achilles \textit{himself} driving the chariot behind which Hektor is dragged \textit{face-down}; these two details are much closer to the Homeric telling of the scene than later depictions in which a nameless charioteer drives the chariot and Hektor is dragged face-up, leading Snodgrass to state that “it is not difficult to believe that Homer’s description has inspired [this particular depiction]”.\textsuperscript{16} The absence in the given examples of those elements which are unique to Homer demands that the visual artistic tradition be considered as independent of any particular literary one. Images additionally could impact the popular conception of those myths and narratives known from established texts and oral

\textsuperscript{13} Vermeule (1965), 39.
\textsuperscript{14} Shapiro (1994), 19.
\textsuperscript{15} Snodgrass (1998), 137-138.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 137.
traditions. Furthermore, the above evidence for the influence of form and function on the development of the narrative used in the depiction of the vengeance of Achilles is not affected by this kind of objection, which brings to light an interesting discussion but one beyond the scope of this paper.

II. Roman Case-Study & Analysis of Literary Viewer Reception

The second primary case-study of the representation of Achilles’ vengeance is focused on a painted Roman wall-relief in the sacrarium of the House of the Cryptoporticus in Pompeii. The house is located on the Via dell’Abbondanza in Regio I, Insula VI, and is known for the painted Iliac frieze in its cryptoporticus, for which it is named. The image of Achilles dragging Hektor’s body behind his chariot occurs as one of five episodes in the stucco frieze which is placed at the very top of the wall of a small sacrarium, at the base of its barrel-vaulted ceiling (fig. 8). As Brilliant’s illustration (fig. 9) makes clear, the five scenes are delimited either by architectural elements within the frieze or by the corners of the room, and at the focal point of the frieze is the scene of Achilles killing Hektor. If viewed from left to right, the episodes are (following Brilliant’s numbering system\textsuperscript{17}): V. Priam returning to Troy with Hektor’s body, I. Hektor setting out from Troy to fight Achilles, II. Achilles killing Hektor, III. Achilles dragging Hektor’s body, and IV. Priam ransoming the body of Hektor from Achilles. This ordering of the scenes obviously does not follow the chronology of the story, so the artist must have altered the order of the episodes to fit his aesthetic or narrative agenda. Placing the duel between Hektor and Achilles at the center of the back wall and making it the second episode in the sequence forced episode number V into its place, but beyond that, the chosen placement allowed the artist to make the architectural element representing Troy (in the center of the left wall) both the

\textsuperscript{17} Brilliant (1984), 63-64.
beginning and ending point of Hektor’s story, as he sets out from Troy in episode I and his father brings his body back to Troy in episode V.

A closer look at the detail scene of interest, episode III (fig. 10), reveals that it follows the basic pattern of the entire frieze, as its left “border” is created by the corner of the room’s back and right walls as well as an architectural element, two towers, and as its frame is completed with another architectural unit, a gate, on the right. Between the two towers on the left is a figure whose body is advancing to the right out of a doorway, although he looks to his left. Further to the right is a group of five warriors, identified by Spinazzola as Greek soldiers, three of whom are in the foreground and modeled three-dimensionally, and two of whom are merely painted in the background.\(^{18}\) Then comes the armed figure of Achilles, joining a charioteer in his biga (which, along with one of the horses is only painted on the background, while the other horse is fully modeled), and the body of Hektor is attached at the feet to the back of the chariot (fig. 11a-b). The deceased hero’s face is, according to Spinazzola, tilted to the left towards the viewer, while his nose and mouth are contorted into a painful grimace.\(^{19}\) Unfortunately, the frieze has been poorly preserved and many of the details obliterated. However, the composition of the vengeance of Achilles episode is easily comprehensible, as is that of the entire frieze, and its narrative structure is both interesting and quite different from the Greek example explored above.

Weitzmann in his investigation into the relationship between literature and visual art attempts to define, like Shapiro and Snodgrass, the methods of narrative utilized by ancient artists. In contrast to the monoscopic and synoptic methods seen above which may be present in a single image, there might exist a sequence of multiple images related iconographically and thematically, as is the case with the sacrarium frieze; Weitzmann calls this series of related

\(^{18}\) Spinazzola (1953), 885.
\(^{19}\) Ibid., 888: “…la meta inferiore del capo reclinata a sinistra, con parte del naso, e con la bocca modellata in una smorfia dolorosa.”
images a *cycle*, thus considering the corresponding type of narrative to be *cyclical*. If images are juxtaposed spatially, delimited by some markers into individual scenes, and if one or more figures are repeated among the images (thus linking them iconographically), they are considered by the proponents of narrative theory to be cyclical.

Occasionally, an image might be taken from a cycle and depicted on its own. One of the other significant Roman cycles containing the vengeance of Achilles is the Tensa Capitolina (fig. 12), a tablet in the Palazzo dei Conservatori which depicts episodes from the life of Achilles. An instance of the vengeance of Achilles scene on the handle of a lamp in the British Museum (fig. 13) matches the iconography of the Tensa Capitolina very closely. In both images, Hektor’s left arm is thrown over his head, Achilles is heroically nude, wears a specific kind of helmet, glances back at an architectural element, and holds both a round shield and the reins of his horses in his left hand. Weitzmann considers this similarity to warrant sufficient proof that the lamp handle was directly modeled after this single image from the biographical cycle of Achilles. He overlooks certain striking differences between these two images, namely the direction Achilles’ spear is pointing, the placement of Priam and Hecuba (above Achilles or in the architectural element to his left), and the presence or absence of the tomb of Patroklos. Regardless of the veracity of Weitzmann’s thesis, the similarity of the images does prove the existence of a Roman prototype for the scene or at least a standard iconography of the scene to which Roman artists conventionally turned when depicting the vengeance of Achilles (this typical iconography is examed well by figs. 12 - 13).

Another of the Roman cycles that includes this scene is the Tabula Iliaca, also in the Museo Capitolino (fig. 14). Weitzmann points out that the lamp handle may also have been

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20 Weitzmann (1947), 21.
21 Ibid., 31.
referencing this tablet, but a much more striking similarity exists between the tiny image of the vengeance of Achilles on the Tabula Iliaca (the third scene from the top of the tablet, to the right of the column inscribed with writing) and the frieze in the sacrarium of the House of the Cryptoporticus. While the sacrarium relief is properly cyclical, dividing the scenes up by event and delimiting them visually, the scene on the Tabula Iliaca might better be described as a form of continuous narrative; according to Stansbury-O’Donnell’s summation of narrative types, Wickhoff’s category of continuous narrative describes a subset of cyclical in which figures are repeated in a frieze containing multiple distinct events without a visual break. Clearly, the figure of Achilles is repeated several times from left to right in the tablet image, entering the field of battle, in the moment of killing Hektor, and dragging Hektor’s body behind his chariot (fig. 15), but there are no visual delimiters like the architectural elements of the sacrarium frieze. Considering the strong iconographic parallels between the sacrarium relief as a whole and the scene on the Tabula Iliaca, the latter seems like a highly condensed version of the former that retains most of the same details; the only major difference is the removal of the nameless charioteer, which is not very surprising considering that Achilles driving his own chariot both matches the standard iconography on the lamp handle and Tensa Capitolina and further clarifies the extremely small and already crowded composition on the tablet scene.

One last Roman instance of the scene illustrates a departure from the tendency towards cyclical narrative: an Arretine bowl, dating to the Augustan period, depicts the vengeance of Achilles along with the sacrifice of a Trojan prisoner (figs. 16 – 18). While Herrmann, like Friis-Johansen, attempts to tie this depiction to the episode in book 24 in which sacrificing captives

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22 Ibid., 31.
was one of the honors for Patroklos, there is an aspect of this piece much more significant in terms of narrative and function. The figures on this bowl were created using stamps pressed into the clay while it was still wet; these stamps might have been specific or general characters of mythology or everyday life. The Hektor stamp, as his is such a unique pose and this figure is not known on any other pottery from Arretium, was presumably made specifically for this bowl. The other figures, Herrmann argues, were more general figures used on other bowls made in the same workshop. He deduces that the female standing behind Hektor’s body (fig. 17) probably represents Thetis or Hellas (the personification of the Greek people) mourning for Patroklos, as particular details seem to rule out the alternatives of Andromache, Hecuba, Briseis, Athena, or Aphrodite, but the form of the figure suggests that the stamp was originally created to depict a raving maenad, just as bowls with identical nude “Achilles” characters (fig. 18) depicted Theseus or other young nude heroes. And despite the inability to view the entire picture field at one glance without rotating the bowl, the type of narrative used is monoscopic since no figures (except possibly Achilles) are repeated and a single event (the funeral of Patroklos) is depicted. The ability to re-use these stamps lends an entirely new perspective to the construction of narrative, which leads to the discussion of the relation of function to narrative in these Roman examples.

For the Arretine bowl, the motif has a similar appearance (Hektor dragged on the ground behind a chariot) but is also fundamentally different than any other Roman depiction of the scene we have encountered thus far. It incorporates four new figures, Thetis/Hellas, the captive, the nude sacrificing the captive, and one other figure (possibly a Myrmidon or Patroklos himself).

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24 Herrmann (1998), 511.
26 Ibid., 507-508.
27 Ibid., 511.
not seen in any other Greek or Roman depiction of this scene. The choice of narrative structure
has been opened up to completely new and limitless possibilities by the very form of the work
and the process of its creation. Based on the argument in favor of function, the way the image
and its figures function spatially on the vase in part dictate the type of narrative which can and
should be used, and in the case of Arretine-ware, the artist’s new ability to recycle and duplicate
figures from a repertoire of various stamps has created an entirely new motif for the vengeance
of Achilles. This is true despite the fact that the artist chose to use monoscenic narrative.
However, that simply underlines the fact that artistic choice is exactly that – a choice, and the
fact that function is one of many interconnected factors affecting the construction of visual
narrative makes the process dynamic and dependent at times on artists’ personal inclinations.

As discussed in detail above, the other monoscenic instance of the scene, on the lamp
handle in London, exhibits an almost identical motif to that of the Tensa Capitolina. The fact that
the types of narrative they utilize are entirely different might be of some concern, then. When
considering the impact the change from cyclical to monoscenic narrative had on the lamp handle,
those minute details which changed within the motif must be further examined. The figures of
Priam and Hecuba have been moved upwards so they are looking directly down on the scene of
violence from what appear to be the ramparts of a wall (fig. 13), and the architectural element
seems now to have little actual function in the scene, whereas before, the wall from which Priam
and Hecuba watched the scene was the large architectural element and had an integral role in the
narrative. In addition, when removed from its cyclic origin, there was no longer a need to
conform the details of the vengeance motif to those in other episodes of a cycle; the reason for
depicting Priam and Hecuba on a wall in that specific manner on the Tensa Capitolina (fig. 12)
can be deduced by looking to the episode immediately to the left, in which they are standing
upon the same kind of wall. Thus the change in narrative structure had consequences for the motif in that it made certain elements obsolete, and the change as well in the form of the object upon which the motif was employed, from a bronze tablet which would have decorated a carriage to a hand-held oil lamp, altered the shape of the composition and the viewing circumstances significantly. The changed motif fit well on the new shape, and in addition, the personal function of a hand-held lamp entirely dictated the mode of narration, as its very size and medium demanded a much scaled-down and simplified version of the motif employed on the Tensa Capitolina.

Finally, the primary Roman case-study, the sacrarium relief, should be examined in terms of its iconography and function. While one might argue that the form of the motif, stucco relief, was dictated by the frieze’s location at the top of the wall / base of the barrel-vaulted ceiling, one counterexample disproves the point immediately: in the cryptoporticus of the same house, a roughly contemporary Iliac frieze executed in paint alone can be found running along the length of three walls in the same exact position as the sacrarium frieze (fig. 19). Thus the choice of relief for these scenes from the life of Hektor was not due to the lack of visibility of its position on the wall; instead, the great similarity between the Tabula Iliaca and the sacrarium episode of the dragging of Hektor’s body seems to indicate that the artist was familiar with this “life of Hektor” trope from other works and felt it to be best expressed in relief form (or perhaps he was actually looking to a specific existing relief).²⁸

Regardless of the motivation for executing this frieze in stucco rather than just paint, the use of cyclical narrative is unique in Pompeian wall-relief for the motif of the vengeance of Achilles. As well, the individual episodes on the Tabula Iliaca function almost independently of

²⁸ For further discussion of the relationship between types of wall-decoration and the rooms in which they are most frequently used, see Allison (1992) and Clark (1993).
each other as self-contained rows of narrative, exactly the opposite of the sacrarium relief’s episodes. So despite the similarities between the two instances of this scene, each one’s relative narrative structure (a monoscenic episode from a cycle vs. an isolated row of continuous narrative within a cycle) dictates the particular development of the vengeance motif: the addition of several Greek warriors to the scene and the particular use of architectural “frames” is called for by the cyclical nature of the sacrarium frieze, while the removal of such frames and the condensation of Hektor’s storyline into such a small space on the tablet required the removal of unnecessary elements like an additional charioteer, slightly altering the motif.

The functionality of the Tabula Iliaca is quite different from the functionality of a wall-relief; the scale and location of each is distinct and must have played a role in determining the type of narrative used. The tablet as a miniature (fig. 14) demanded a detailed approach, and the significance of certain scenes (Aeneas’ escape from Troy) to the ideology of the artist’s society gave them higher visual precedence (in the largest picture-square on the tablet). With the left-over space, rows of small “friezes” allowed for the telling of the rest of the Trojan saga in condensed form. For the sacrarium relief, the span of several meters around the base of a vault dictated the use of several images (and the size of the space called for at least a few figures within each image); the artist then decided to use related images from the life of Hektor, spaced out in a highly readable form, calling for a cyclical mode of narration.

The relationship as well of the relief to the other images in the sacrarium is significant for understanding the function of this instance of the scene.29 The upper semi-circle of decoration, very poorly preserved, held an image of Diana and Endymion, while the tondo in the center of

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29 For the significance of considering programmatic relationships in Roman wall-decoration, see Bergmann (1996) and Thompson (1960-1).
the vault held the apotheosis of Ganymede.\textsuperscript{30} Brilliant comments on the use of these three images in a program calling to mind the life, death, and afterlife of a hero, as Hektor’s actions in life and Zeus’ command that Achilles release the hero’s body to his father permitted Hektor to find rest.\textsuperscript{31}

As in the Greek case-study, contemporary significance can be elicited from the types of narrative choices the artists made regarding the vengeance of Achilles. The fact that three of these five Roman works of art utilize cyclical narrative is in itself important to note, and we have already considered the reasons behind the artists’ use of monoscenic narrative in the two instances of the lamp-handle and the Arretine bowl. Why then did Roman artists, whether they were working in bronze, stone, or stucco, whether they were executing a work in a house, for a carriage, or in miniature, repeatedly choose to use a cyclical mode of narration to tell the story of the vengeance of Achilles? The answer lies at the heart of the issue of viewer response: although certain modes of narration dictate the viewing process – the sacrarium relief demands that the viewer begin at a certain point, the center, and work his way around the room to comprehend the story of Hektor’s life and death – the viewer ultimately creates an internal narrative based on the images he sees, their composition, narrative structure, and combination with other nearby images, and that internal narrative must necessarily be understandable to the viewer for the image to be considered successful. The questions must then be posed, would Roman viewers have understood cyclical narrative more easily or naturally than other modes of narration, and if so, why?

Instead of proposing an imagined ancient viewer response to answer the above questions, examining an actual description of a response (albeit poetic) seems more appropriate. In lines

\textsuperscript{30} Brilliant (1984), 64.  
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 65.
483 – 487 of the *Aeneid* book 1, Virgil describes Aeneas’ response when he views the very scene we have been discussing:

> Ter circum Iliacos raptaverat Hectora muros,  
> exanimumque auro corpus vendebat Achilles.  
> Tum vero ingentem gemitum dat pectore ab imo,  
> ut spolia, ut currus, utque ipsum corpus amici,  
> tendentemque manus Priamum conspexit inermis.\(^{32}\)

> “Three times around the walls of Troy has Achilles dragged Hektor, and he’s sold his lifeless body for gold. Then he [Aeneas] gives a huge groan from the depths of his chest, as he saw the spoils, the chariot, and the very body of his friend, and the hands of Priam reaching out unarmed.”

Aeneas’ emotional response is understandably one of personal sorrow, but Virgil’s description of the vengeance of Achilles on the temple at Carthage sounds remarkably similar to the cyclical images seen above.\(^{33}\) In his description, Virgil implies that somehow the temple’s artist has conveyed that Achilles has dragged the body of Hektor around the walls of Troy three times and also included the motif of Priam ransoming Hektor’s body from Achilles, another popular episode from the story of Hektor depicted fairly regularly in Graeco-Roman art (see figs. 20 – 21). The description of the vengeance of Achilles and the ransom of Hektor as two events in a single image, with the protagonist Achilles repeated, or as two immediately adjacent images rules out the possibility of monoscenic and synoptic as the modes of narration used on the temple. Most likely, then, some kind of cyclical or continuous narrative was employed in the frieze on the temple as Virgil imagined it. While function influenced the actual development of the narrative used for the scene, contemporary aesthetics dictated the prevalence of the use of cyclical narrative in Roman art, as supported by Virgil’s detailed description.

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\(^{32}\) The Latin Library, *Aeneid* I.

\(^{33}\) For discussion of subtleties in literary ekphrasis, see Fowler (1991), in *Aeneid* I specifically, see Williams (1960).
Conclusion

Briefly entertaining the following question invites speculation on additional significance for the prevalent modes of narrative: why did Roman viewers comprehend this form of narrative so easily and respond to it so naturally, as in the case of Aeneas (who thoroughly understood what was depicted on the temple at Carthage)? The very source that prompts such a question might also prove to be the one to answer it: literature. Although the idea of cycles seems to be rooted more broadly in the lifecycles of humanity and nature – and those might provide parallel models for the development of cyclical narrative – the popularity of cyclical as a mode of visual narration in the Roman period might best be explained through consideration of text. The literacy rate in Rome at the time around which the majority of the given examples are from, the Augustan or closely post-Augustan period, was of course fairly high for the upper-class patrons of the works of art that have come down to us to study. The cyclical narrative *reads* in much the way a line of text reads, with subjects depicted performing actions delimited syntactically by architectural frames like punctuation, so the fact that Roman viewers were able to understand the cyclical mode easily does not seem overly surprising. Perhaps the cycle could be further dissected syntactically to show that the composition “reads” similarly to Latin prose; after all, the primary actions in each episode of the sacrarium relief are pushed to the end of the composition (i.e. – the end of the “sentence”). Unfortunately, that investigation belongs in another essay entirely. What is remarkable, however, and what seems especially to call for further investigation of the above form, is that cyclical narrative could prove to be so flexible that such diverse media as miniature and wall-relief would call for it as the most fitting form of visual narration. Thus the combination of these elements of the function-narrative relationship and Roman viewer response
is what explains the prevalence of this particular form of narrative for the motif of the vengeance of Achilles and possibly for many other scenes in Roman art.

To examine the Roman artistic tradition’s interaction with the Greek tradition of visual narrative is also far beyond the scope of this paper. However, a cursory discussion of the relationship between the iconography of the vengeance of Achilles in the Greek and Roman examples will provide additional evidence for the impact of form and viewing context on changes in narrative and subsequently in the scene’s standard iconography. The primary differences between the iconography of the Greek and Roman representations are the following: Iris is not present in any Roman instances of the scene, and while only the Boston hydria includes the figures of Priam and Hecuba, the inclusion of Hektor’s mourning parents is a standard feature of some of the Roman motifs. Regarding the first discrepancy, many would argue that the Roman artistic tradition for the Trojan saga was not based on that of the Greeks but on its own interpretation of the Trojan myths as the Romans received them in legend and literature, or perhaps the Greek models to which Roman artists were looking when depicting this scene with Achilles and Hektor were the ones which did not include Iris. As for the second, the inclusion of Priam and Hecuba in almost every Roman instance of the scene proves their pertinence to a thorough understanding of the scene by a Roman viewer. The Arretine bowl, the only example discussed above which did not include Hektor’s parents in some portion of the depicted scene, has already been shown to be unique. Its focus on Patroklos and the funerary rites for the deceased Achaean hero must have overcome the necessity to include Priam and Hecuba in the motif.

The most significant change from the Greek to Roman examples is the medium with which artists depicted the vengeance of Achilles: the scene was popular on pottery only with
Athenian black-figure vase-painters in the late 6th century and then fell out of use until a few Apulian vase-painters picked it up much later. However, the Roman uses of the scene are much more diverse, as it can be found on sarcophagi and in mosaic form in addition to the instances examined here. There is diversity as well in the modes of narration utilized in the Roman instances, ranging from monoscenic to synoptic (on a sarcophagus in the Louvre, cf. note 34) to cyclical. The limitations of Greek artists in the Archaic period to monoscenic and the occasional synoptic narrative was of course primarily due to established conventions, and the nature of the media on which they worked, largely ceramics, must necessarily not have called for the innovation to cyclical which occurred in the Roman period.

Besides the above suggestions and speculations, there are several paths along which this research may be continued and expanded. This paper’s examination is limited to the largest groups of available evidence: Late Archaic black-figure vase-painting and various Augustan and closely post-Augustan pieces. However, several instances of the vengeance of Achilles exist which are outside those two areas, and an investigation into their narrative structure may lend further support for or challenge the proposed theory. Also, finding examples of this scene in Late Antique art or the illustrated manuscripts of Homer might bring more diverse evidence to the table or nuance my readings of the archaic Greek and imperial Roman works. Finally, looking at related works, such as those depicting the ransom of Hektor’s body or the fight between Hektor and Achilles, or even those other vases in the Leagros group using similar narrative structures but depicting altogether different scenes, could be useful and interesting.

34 See the Achilles sarcophagus, Louvre, and the Alexander Severus sarcophagus, Museo Capitolino in Brilliant (1984), 139-141, figs. 4.2a-b.
35 See the vengeance of Achilles mosaic in Museo Naz. Romano alle Terme di Diocleziano in Spinazzola (1953), 890, fig. 887.
To revisit my thesis, changes in the choices regarding modes of visual narration in the depiction of the vengeance of Achilles directly influenced the evolution of Greek and Roman representations of the scene. Those narrative choices were themselves partially determined by the form and spatial function of the images in their respective contexts, while a close examination of the types of narrative used in many instances has suggested possible social connotations beyond the artistic tradition for the relationship of narrative to function. Works such as the Boston hydria and the sacrarium relief in the House of the Cryptoporticus are perfect for this type of investigation, and despite the limitations of this paper, this type of consideration of the impact of form, viewing context, and reception on narrative choice may be extended to other similar mythological scenes in Greek and Roman art with potentially successful and exciting results.
Bibliography


Friis-Johansen, K. *The Iliad in Early Greek Art*. Munksgaard (Copenhagen), 1967.


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About the Author

I was born in Woodbridge, Virginia, on September 25, 1989, and lived there through high school until enrolling at the University of Richmond in the autumn of 2007. I chose to attend a liberal arts university because I was completely uncertain of my academic and career goals, but after struggling through Economics 101 and 20th Century American Fiction, I decided to take Greek Art & Archaeology and a course on the fall of the Roman Empire in the spring of my first year. A few more courses in the Classics department sealed my fate as a Classical Civilization major, though I quickly found that my primary interest in antiquity was not only its art and material culture but gaining a contextual understanding of ancient art through a study of history and literature as well. This thesis is the result of my broad interests in Homer and visual narrative, and I hope to expand this research during graduate study in the near future.