

# Gladiators and circus horses in the *Iliad* frieze in Pompeii's Casa di D. Octavius Quartio?

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The only three surviving frescoes from the Roman world to depict a series of episodes from Homer's *Iliad* in continuous frieze format are all found on a single street in Pompeii. They were published in 1953 in V. Spinazzola's *Pompei alla luce degli scavi nuovi di Via dell'Abbondanza (anni 1910-1923)*, vol. 2, under the editorship of S. Aurigemma, whose detailed descriptions and interpretation of the iconography and epigraphy have remained largely unchallenged.<sup>1</sup> Relatively poorly preserved, they exhibit a puzzling interplay between their iconography, epigraphy and the Homeric text, and even the chronology of the epic itself. Each of the *Iliad* friezes, like the *Odyssey* frescoes in the Vatican Museums, in parts reflect close adherence to the text of their respective epics, yet each contains details which do not derive from the Homeric account:<sup>2</sup> some alter it in subtle ways, noticeable only to those who know their Homer well, but there are also extra-Homeric figural scenes and painted epigraphy in the form of labels which, although traditionally considered to be errors made by an ill-educated artist or even evidence of the use of hypotheses of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, must derive from some external source. This paper seeks to show that in the *Iliad* frieze of the Casa di D. Octavius Quartio it may be possible to establish the source of the extra-Homeric insertions: the details appear to refer not only to the erudite realm of Homeric epic, but also to the thrill and violence of contemporary arenas.

## *Iliad* friezes in Pompeii and extra-Homeric insertions

The earliest extant *Iliad* frieze from the Roman world (c.40s B.C.) runs around the walls of the cryptoporticus in Pompeii's **Casa del Criptoportico** (I 6,2). It has recently undergone extensive restoration works. Although now only around 30% of the fresco survives, the extant scenes suggest that it conveyed the narrative of the *Iliad* from the plague in the Greek camp up to the funeral games, and then offered a small selection of episodes relating to the *Aethiopsis*, commencing with the Amazon Penthesilea's entry into Troy.<sup>3</sup>

The following extra-Homeric insertions and alterations are worthy of note. On the very short S wall in the E wing of the cryptoporticus the two Ajaxes are shown carrying Patroclus' body from the battlefield, with painted labels provided for each warrior: ΑΙΑΚ, ΠΑΤΡΟΚΛΟC, ΑΙΑΚ (fig. 1). In the *Iliad* (17.722-46), however, Menelaus and Meriones

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1 The three have traditionally been used as evidence of the existence of illustrated scrolls or *Bilderbücher* on Homeric themes: R. Bianchi Bandinelli, *Hellenistic-Byzantine miniatures of the Iliad (Ilias Ambrosiana)* (Oltend 1955); K. Weitzmann, *Ancient book illumination* (Cambridge, MA 1959); K. Schefold, *Wort und Bild: Studien zur Gegenwart der Antike* (Basel 1975); id., "Roman visions and Greek inventions at the foot of Mount Vesuvius," *Art Inst. Chicago Mus. Studies* 10 (1983) 20-39. They are briefly addressed in R. Brilliant, *Visual narratives: storytelling in Etruscan and Roman art* (Ithaca, NY 1984) 60-65; J.-M. Croisille, *La peinture romaine* (Paris 2005) 154-65; S. Santoro, "I temi iliaci nella pittura pompeiana," in G. Burzacchini (ed.), *Troia tra realtà e leggenda* (Parma 2005) 97-124.

2 See R. Biering, *Die Odysseefresken vom Esquilin* (Munich 1995), for discussion of the *Odyssey* frieze.

3 V. Spinazzola, *Pompei alla luce degli scavi nuovi di Via dell'Abbondanza (anni 1910-1923)*, vol. 2 (Rome 1953) 905-70; I. Bragantini, "I 6,2: Casa del Criptoportico e Casa del Sacello Iliaco," *PPM* I (1990) 193-95 and 201-22.