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IMAGES OF HOMERIC MANUSCRIPTS FROM THE BIBLIOTECA MARCIANA¹

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Abstract

This paper describes the manuscript Marcianus Graecus Z.454 (=822), the “Venetus A” and the work of capturing high-resolution digital images of its folios. The manuscript is a masterpiece of 9th Century “information technology”, combining a primary text, the Homeric *Iliad*, with secondary texts in the form of scholiastic notes, and other metadata in the form of critical signs. Thus the images of this manuscript provide wide access to an invaluable window into two millennia of the history of the Homeric tradition.

INTRODUCTION

In May of 2007 an international team of Classicists, conservators, photographers, and imaging experts came together in the Biblioteca Marciana—the Library of St. Mark—in Venice, in order to bring to light a cultural treasure that had been hidden away for over 100 years. The Venetus A manuscript of the *Iliad* (Marcianus Gr. Z. 454 [=822]), the

¹ The following paper is about a collaborative project, of which I am one of four primary editors. We have worked together to produce a number of presentations and publications connected to the project over the past year, including the forthcoming book: *Recapturing a Homeric Legacy: Images and Insights from the Venetus A Manuscript of the Iliad*. For this reason, this paper should be considered to be co-authored by Casey Dué, Mary Ebbott, and Neel Smith.

tenth-century manuscript on which all modern editions are primarily based and whose margins are filled with scholia (scholarly notes that date back as far as the 2nd century BCE and the Homeric scholars at the library of Alexandria in Egypt), had last been photographed in 1901. At that time Domenico Comparetti produced a beautiful, sepia-toned facsimile edition, but the camera available then was not able to focus evenly across the entire page of the oversized manuscript.² And since few libraries acquired this deluxe, extremely large (and presumably very expensive) but ultimately flawed volume, the Venetus A was, until 2007, a very inaccessible document.

In 2000, a group of scholars conceived of a plan to change this state of affairs. Our goal was to capture extremely high resolution digital photos of the manuscript and publish them together with XML encoded transcriptions of the text and scholia. In the end, it took seven years to obtain permission from the Marciana, consult and assemble our team of experts, acquire the equipment needed (including a custom built manuscript cradle), and secure funding for the project. The imaging itself was accomplished in only a few weeks.

In this paper, I would like to announce the results of our project, giving a brief overview of the significance of the manuscript and what it contains and a discussion of how this project fits into a larger project at the CHS, the Homer Multitext:

http://chs.harvard.edu/chs/homer_multitext

This project encapsulates many of the goals of the Center for Hellenic Studies, an institution that is now at the forefront of digital initiatives in Hellenic Studies and a leader in the creation of a set of common standards for digital collections. The editors of the Homer Multitext assert that digital criticism of ancient texts, especially in the case of Homer, can illustrate the transmission and reception of such texts in ways that are superior to and not possible in traditional printed editions. I will conclude my paper by

² Comparetti 1901.

stating the project's commitment to three foundational principles that I and my colleagues feel are essential to digital criticism and the digital curation of cultural heritage.

THE MANUSCRIPT

The manuscript Marcianus Graecus Z. 454 [= 822], known to Homeric scholars as the Venetus A, is the oldest complete text of the *Iliad* in existence. A scribe whose name we will never know labored to create the 654 pages of this book during the tenth century CE, the age of the Byzantine Scholar-Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus. The sight of the vellum pages with their red-brown ink brings a reader back a thousand years, but the historical reach of this manuscript extends much further. The poem it contains emerged over the course of a millennium or more from a tradition of songs about heroes and heroic deeds. The writings in the margins of this book preserve the scholarship of the Library of Alexandria, as well as intellectuals who studied this poem in Rome and in Byzantium, scholarship that extends as far back as the second and third centuries BCE. Two thousand years later, we have a new opportunity to rediscover this scholarship, and better understand the epic that is the foundation of Western literature.

The Venetus A has resided in Venice's Marciana library since the building's completion in approximately 1565. The book was part of the donation by Cardinal Bessarion, who lived from 1403-1472, to the Republic of Venice. This donation in 1468 formed the core of the library's initial collection.³ Bessarion, who was born in a town on the coast of the Black Sea and educated in Constantinople, was a passionate collector of Greek manuscripts. The Venetus A manuscript was almost certainly produced in Constantinople, but how it came to be in Italy is not known. Bessarion, who spent most of his career in the church in Italy, acquired many of the volumes in his own collection from the Italian humanist Giovanni Aurispa, but the surviving correspondence between the two men

³ For this history of the Marciana library and Bessarion's donation see Labowski 1979.

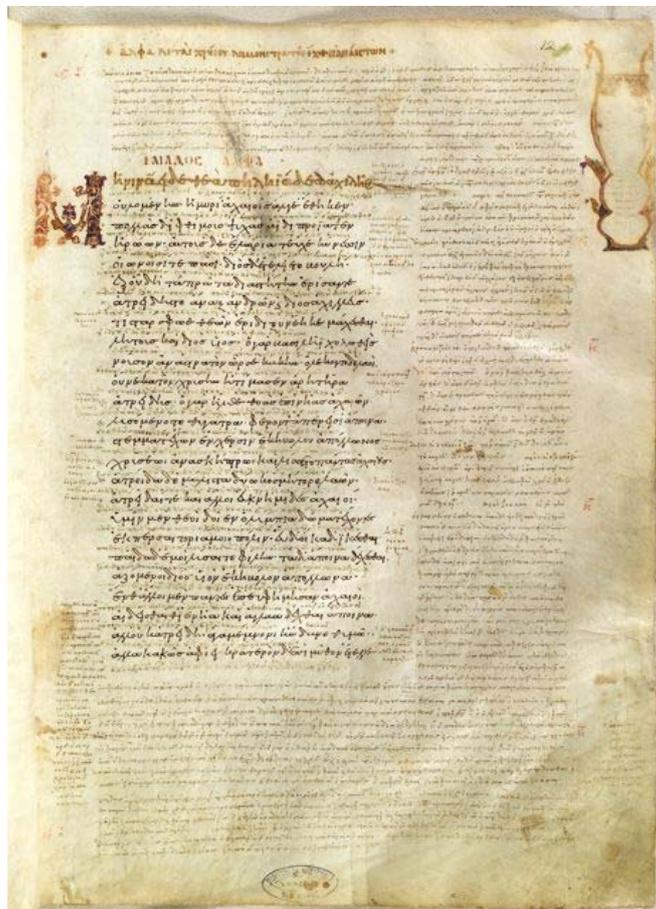
nowhere refers to the Venetus A with certainty. What does seem clear is that Bessarion saw in Venice the potential for a New Byzantium as the fall of Constantinople came to seem ever more inevitable, and when it did fall, the collection became for Bessarion a treasure that belonged to all.

The Venetus A resided among Bessarion's books in the Doge's Palace in Venice until a permanent building was completed to house the Library in 1565. But decades before our Homeric manuscripts came to reside in their permanent home on the Piazzetta San Marco, the technology of the written word had moved on. In 1488, in Florence, Demetrius Chalcondylas produced the *editio princeps* of the *Iliad*, that is, the first printed edition of the poem.⁴

The printing press, with its promise of rapid, exact copies of a literary work, marked the end of a tradition for the Homeric poems. They had arisen in the Greek Bronze Age as performances on heroic themes; they had coalesced into recognizable and discrete songs of the heroes of the Trojan War, their battles and their journeys home from battle; they had solidified into canonical poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Transcripts gave way to scripts, and these scripts gave way to texts, copied by hand in distinct versions city by city, fancy versions and popular versions. This multiplicity of versions passed through the hands of scholars in Egyptian Alexandria and Rome and emerged as two common texts, one of the *Iliad* and one of the *Odyssey*, supplemented with notes that preserved the rich and varying tradition. These were copied by generations of scribes through the first millennium of the Common Era, work that eventually produced the great codices, the bound books of the 10th and 11th centuries like those that Bessarion brought to Venice. But with the first printing, these *texts* became *editions*, and the tradition of multiformity and the impulse to preserve the richness of variation through notes and commentaries fell away. The attention of the world wandered from the hand-written vellum books of the Marciana to the printed paper volumes that emerged from the printing presses of Florence, Milan, Heidelberg, Leipzig, Paris, and London.

⁴ Proctor 1900 pp.66-69.

Thus our manuscript faded from the awareness of European scholars over the next centuries, until it was rediscovered in the Marciana by the French humanist Jean Baptiste Gaspard d'Ansse de Villoison, who recognized the value of the manuscript and published a printed edition of its contents in 1788.⁵ What Villoison found on each page of the Venetus A can be seen in figure 1. A typical folio in the Venetus A (with a few exceptions) contains 25 lines of the Homeric text, surrounded on three sides by a body of marginal notes, all written in the same minuscule hand.



Folio 12 *recto* of the Venetus A Manuscript of the *Iliad*

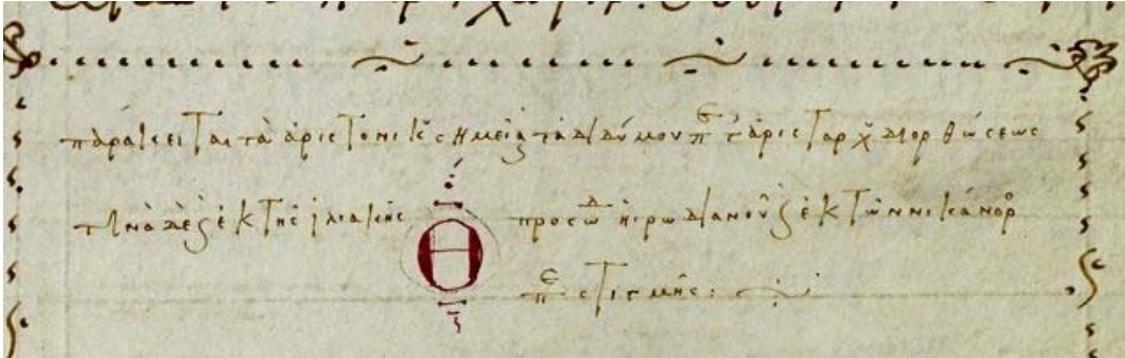
⁵ Villoison 1788.

Individual comments in the main body of scholia are generally but not always preceded by lemmata (short quotations of the text being commented upon), in semiuncial script. In the gutters of each page and in the margins between the text and scholia are written, most likely by the same scribe, an additional set of scholia, in the same semiuncial script as the lemmata. Outside the main column of scholia in the far outside margins of each page are sometimes additional semiuncial scholia; on a few folios these scholia are extensive, as is the case with folios 12v. These additional scholia are often written in the shape of a cross, column, or another object. Still more semiuncial scholia may be found between lines and very near the text in various places around the page. At the far edge of many pages are the traces of (very likely) two correcting hands (see 24r and Allen 1899:172ff.), and from the beginning of the poem up until verse 188 of book 2 an interlinear paraphrase appears in a later (thirteenth century) hand.

What is the source of so much scholarly material? Over the centuries since Villoison first published the manuscript, scholars have debated whether the scholia were copied from an exemplar that was very much like our Venetus A, or whether our scribe took two or more separate traditions and combined them in our manuscript. The Venetus A itself tells us where many of the scholia come from. At the end of most of the books of the poem⁶ there appears this subscription:

Alongside the text lie the *Signs* of Aristonicus, and Didymus' work *On the Edition of Aristarchus*, as well as some things from the *Prosody* of Herodian and Nicanor's *On Punctuation*.

⁶ The exceptions are books 17 and 24.



Detail of folio 111 verso, showing the subscription at the end of *Iliad* Book 8 (Theta)

So, many of the scholia are derived from the work of these four Homeric scholars from antiquity. Didymus and Aristonicus are the oldest, having worked during the 1st century BCE. Nicanor lived during the time of the Roman emperor Hadrian, the 1st and 2nd centuries CE. Aristonicus lived a century later, during the latter half of the 2nd century CE, under the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Scholars refer to the work of these men as the “four-man commentary”, or VMK (from the German *Viermännerkommentar*).⁷

A certain category of scholia, while related to the VMK, has been separately identified and named the “D Scholia.” These were once thought to have come originally from Didymus, hence their name, but this view is no longer generally accepted. The D Scholia appear on several byzantine and medieval manuscripts of the *Iliad* and generally contain information about mythology, the meanings of obscure words, and pieces of allegorical interpretation. On the Venetus A the D Scholia appear as interlinear notes written in a semi-uncial script, and are largely “glosses,” short definitions, of words in the poems. One of the most interesting aspects of the D Scholia is their lemmata, the Homeric passages that a scholion may quote before commenting. In many cases, these lemmata do not match the Homeric text that appears on the manuscript. Thus, these scholia may offer

⁷ On the VMK see Nagy 2004 pp.6-7.

insights into alternative versions of the text, other examples of traditional material that fell out of the common text of the *Iliad* by the 9th century.

Still other scholia on our manuscript derive from the work of the scholar and philosopher Porphyry, who lived during the 3rd century CE. And finally, there are scholia related to a group known as the “bT” scholia. These get their name from the Townley Manuscript of the *Iliad*, an 11th century codex now in the British Museum (BM, Burney 86); this manuscript is believed to have been one of several copied from an even older manuscript, which is now lost, to which scholars refer by the *siglum* “b”, hence the “bT” scholia. These scholia, which may also be derived from the work of Porphyry, offer explanations of thematic matters found in the *Iliad*, cultural practices, questions of cosmology or theology, and so forth.

There is disagreement among scholars as to how and when the VMK was created (proposed dates range from the fourth to seventh centuries CE) and whether or not the semiuncial scholia and the main scholia have the same redactor, that is, whether they were compiled by the same editor.⁸ The 20th century scholars most interested in the Homeric scholia believed that the VMK tradition was combined with the D Scholia and the bT Scholia at some time during the 8th century BCE, about a century before our nameless scribe produced the elaborately annotated manuscript we call the Venetus A.

The Venetus A is remarkable for the care with which it was produced, and the richness of the many features that ornament the text and scholia. On the first page of each book of the *Iliad*, we find an illuminated capital marking the first word of the book. At the top of each page that begins a new book of the *Iliad*, the manuscript includes a one-line summary or highlights of the contents of that book, in red ink. These summaries are, themselves, in the dactylic hexameter meter of Homeric poetry.

⁸ Standard treatments are Erbse 1960 and 1969 and Van der Valk 1963. See also Ludwich 1884-1885.

Also remarkable are the critical signs that can be found next to many of the verses of the *Iliad* and in the corresponding notes in the scholia. These signs take us back to the second century BCE and the editorial work of the great Homeric scholar, Aristarchus of Samothrace. These signs, which served to link the Homeric text with the commentary that Aristarchus published in a separate volume, have specialized meanings, with the result that their content can often be surmised where the corresponding note has been lost. They are a precious resource, and they teach us a great deal about how Homer was read more than a thousand years before the Venetus A was created.

Last but not least, there is the front matter. Some of the initial folios of the Venetus A became detached and were rebound out of order, with several folios now missing. What we have contains extremely valuable material, including excerpts from Proclus' *Chrestomathy* (the Life of Homer and summaries of all of the poems of the now lost Epic Cycle except the *Cypria*) and Aristonicus' work on the signs of Aristarchus. Painted around this text and in one case over it are illuminations from the twelfth century CE. These illuminations depict mythological scenes from the Judgment of Paris up to the fighting of the Trojan War.

The Venetus A contains the oldest complete text of the *Iliad* and it is the one on which all modern editions are primarily based, but it is invaluable to us for much more than its text of the *Iliad*. As we have seen this manuscript contains not only the texts of the poem but also excerpts from the commentaries of the scholars associated with the library of Ptolemaic Alexandria, excerpts which are copied into its margins and between lines of the text. These writings contain notes on the text that explain points of grammar, usage, the meaning of words, interpretation, and disputes about the authenticity of verses. The material contained in these marginal notes derive from scholarly works that predate the manuscript's construction by a thousand years or more. And like the ancient papyri, which give us their surprising picture of the fluid state of the Homeric text in the

antiquity, the scholia give us an historical window into the evolution of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.⁹

The book is then more than the sum of the text on each page, and more than the sum of the text and the beauty of its presentation. The value of the Venetus A lies in the precise, intentional, compilation and juxtaposition of all of these elements, and we can assess this value, and profit from it, only through access to the pages as they appear, in full color and with a definition sufficient to make clear the tiniest and faintest of the writings they contain. Even were the physical volume in perfect condition, as when it was first produced in the 10th century, we would want high-resolution images of it; A thousand years into its life, we need the enhanced view of these folios that modern imaging makes possible, because the faintest of the text, faded by the years, is no longer legible, or even apparent, to the naked eye.

THE IMAGES

In May of 2007 the Venetus A was photographed with a Hasselblad H1 camera with a 39 megapixel Phase One P45 digital back. The imaging took place at the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, under the direction of David Jacobs and with the supervision of the library's director and conservation team. Jacobs and his team of conservators had spent months monitoring the condition of the book and the environment of the room at the Marciana where the work would take place. In late April, the team assembled a custom-built, mechanized conservation cradle, which Manfred Meyer designed and fabricated. This cradle would hold the codex, gently but firmly, and the cameras, ensuring both a consistent angle for photography and protection for the artifact at all times.

Images came from the camera and were analyzed by Classicists, both for clarity and to determine which areas of which folios merited detailed photography. Ultimately, the

⁹ For more on the fluidity of the Homeric text in antiquity, see further below. On the ancient papyri, see Dué 2001.

team took several dozen images of details on the pages. Many of these were under natural light, simple close-up images of particularly small features on the manuscript. Time was the limiting factor for the natural-light details. The Classicists also requested a number of images, either full-page images or details, to be taken under ultraviolet light. UV imaging can reveal ink too faded to be seen normally, but it is also damaging to the manuscript. Ultraviolet photography was therefore used only sparingly, but to spectacular effect.

For example, on the first page of the text of the *Iliad*, folio 12r (featured on the first page of this article), there is a beautiful lyre adorning the top right corner, and inside that lyre is writing that is completely illegible in both Comparetti's facsimile of 1901 and in the 2007 natural light image. (See figures 2 and 3). Ultraviolet light revealed the bulk of the text, and we were able to determine that it consists of a previously known comment from the D scholia about the way that the action of the poem begins in the tenth year of the war.



Detail of folio 12 *recto* in Comparetti's 1901 facsimile



Detail of folio 12 *recto* (2007 imaging, natural light)



Detail of folio 12 *recto* (2007 imaging, ultraviolet light)

This comment happens to survive in three other manuscripts as well, but it is certain that other valuable material to be found only the Venetus A is fading from view just as

quickly as that text in the lyre. Indeed, throughout the manuscript both the natural light images and those captured with ultraviolet light reveal text that cannot now be seen with the naked eye. The manuscript is vast, and this project resulted in over a thousand images, which as of this writing have not all been studied thoroughly. With the online publication of these images, freely accessible to all interested readers, we expect scholars, professional and amateurs alike, to add new discoveries about this manuscript, its meticulous construction, and indeed the *Iliad* itself. This process of discovery began already when we were in Venice. But it is not our intention to limit the investigation of these pages to a select group of our people. By making the Venetus A available in this new way, we hope to encourage new and collaborative ways of exploring the *Iliad*, and new methods of scholarship.

The initial publication of all images produced in the course of this project are available through links from this address:

http://chs.harvard.edu/chs/homer_multitext

The original images are Copyrighted © 2007, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana and licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 License.¹⁰ The images posted online are derivatives of these originals, in several formats: uncompressed, full-sized TIFF images (approximately 250 mb each), and three versions of JPEG images (ranging in size from 20mb down to 7 mb each). These derivatives are, of course, also licensed under the same Creative Commons License.

The Center for Hellenic Studies is committed not only to creating tools that help readers interact with these materials, but also in providing direct, unmediated access to the data itself. Accordingly, the address given above provides links to a file-directory listing of all

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2,211 images, with MD5 checksums for each. It also provides a link to the Manuscript Browser application, which allows readers to turn to a page in a manuscript according to its folio-enumeration (e.g. “12v”), or by a citation to the *Iliad* (e.g. “12.1”). Using the Google Maps interface, readers can zoom and pan images in their web-browsers, can select alternative images of a given page, can download complete images, and can navigate forward and back in the document. This open-source web-application is based on the Canonical Text Services protocol, developed by the Center for Hellenic Studies.¹¹

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