Trojan horseplay in Rome

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The Trojan Horse was a popular theme in Latin literature. It first comes to our attention in the late third century BC, when both Livius Andronicus and Cn. Naevius produced tragedies entitled *The Trojan Horse* (*Equos Troianus*).[1] Of these plays only a few lines survive; Andronicus' version fares marginally better than that of Naevius. Two plays with the same title have led some scholars to suppose that this is one play misattributed or perhaps reworked; for present purposes I will accept that they each wrote a *Trojan Horse*. Little may now remain, but their impact at the time appears to have been considerable. A few years later Plautus is to be found parodying the Trojan Horse in his *Bacchides*.[2] Later still, Cicero in his *Letters to Friends* several times refers to a play called *The Trojan Horse* as if it were well known.[3] And it is, I hope, superfluous to mention Virgil's treatment of the same theme.[4]

What concerns me here is the Trojan Horse's appearance in Rome in the plays of Andronicus and Naevius, perhaps its first appearance in Rome. These two poets are considered to be the founding figures of Roman drama, indeed of Latin literature in general. Their first plays are ascribed to 240 and 235 BC respectively.[5] The repertoire of these early Roman dramatists may be lost but scholars are fairly sure that the plays were based on Greek originals. There are in fact no Greek plays called *The Trojan Horse* or even *The Wooden Horse*, but it would have been an easy matter to change the title; there had to be some scope for originality even on a minimalist interpretation. Possible models suggest themselves: Sophocles wrote a *Laocoon* and a *Sinon*, either of which could have found itself transformed into a Latin *Trojan Horse*. Or perhaps what we are looking at here is an adaptation of a Greek epic poem that tells the story of the Horse, such as could be found in the *Little Iliad*. The focus of this paper, however, is not the importance of the Greek theatrical tradition in the development of Roman drama, but specifically what the *Trojan Horse* reveals about the interplay of Roman and Greek interests.

At first sight there is nothing strange about the Roman fascination with the

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Trojan Horse. Everybody knows that the Romans claimed Trojan ancestry, and so could be expected to be interested in things Trojan. These *Trojan Horse* plays might be taken as further proof that in the third century BC there was already a strong Roman belief in this ancestry.[6] On closer examination, however, these plays can be seen to demonstrate, if anything, the opposite: that Trojan ancestry was not yet a central element of Roman self-identity. The impetus for the *Trojan Horse* and other plays from the Trojan cycle should be sought elsewhere.

We can begin by considering the title. This is in fact an innovation: the Greeks called the horse the Wooden Horse.[7] The transition to the Trojan Horse suggests two things. First, the play was for an audience less familiar than the Greeks with stories of the Trojan cycle and Greek heroes in general: to call it the Trojan Horse located the story in a way in which calling it the Wooden Horse did not. Secondly, the title reflects a Greek perspective: the Horse is not called the Greek Horse. Such a perspective is natural from poets who were using Greek models, or who were themselves Greek, as Andronicus was.[8] There is no sign here that the Romans were identifying themselves with the Trojans.

And what about the subject matter of the plays? It would be rash to try and reconstruct the plays on the basis of a couple of lines, but I think there are certain things we can accept: there was a wooden horse; it was full of soldiers (the suggestion of the *Little Iliad* that it contained three thousand men is perhaps a little on the high side: Apollodorus 5.14); it was a trick; Troy was consequently captured and sacked. The popularity of this subject matter in Rome is a little hard to understand if the Romans were already committed Trojans as early as the third century BC. Here was a great defeat celebrated on the Roman stage. Of course the viewpoint would make a difference; a Greek perspective would contrast sharply with a Trojan one. Virgil after all gives us a Trojan perspective on the fall of Troy – it is narrated by Aeneas. What the third-century poets did we cannot be certain of, but a Trojan perspective seems unlikely.

Not only is it a defeat for the Trojans, it is one in which the Trojans look particularly stupid. And this is not only to the modern eye. The Greek travel-writer Pausanias reckoned that if we accept that the Wooden Horse was a horse, then we also have to accept that the Trojans were completely simple-minded. So Pausanias concluded that it could not have been a horse but was instead some kind of siege engine.[9]

In the early second century Plautus had parodied the Trojan Horse in his play the *Bacchides*.[10] This parody, which probably drew on the earlier plays of

Andronicus and Naevius, was presented from the Greek viewpoint. Was there yet any other? The victim in the *Bacchides* is Nicobulus, a man who in spite of his eminently sensible name, turns out to be especially gullible. It is hard to imagine a Roman audience thinking of their Trojan ancestry and identifying with this credulous old man. Rather they would have felt no affinity with the Trojans in this context. The gullibility of the Trojans may well have been a feature of the earlier *Trojan Horse* dramas, one of which seems to have ended with the words 'The Phrygians are wise too late' ('sero sapiunt Phryges').[11] Together the plays and the parody suggest that the Roman sense of being Trojan was fairly weak in the third and early second centuries BC.

Much later, Cicero can be found employing the Trojan Horse as a simile on several occasions and it is instructive to consider his approach. Sometimes the Trojan Horse is a good thing, at other times a bad. In the *pro Murena* the Catilinarians are like the horse within the city, but Cicero is ever alert; so here the Catilinarians represent the Greeks and Cicero represents the Trojans. In the *Philippics*, however, the whole analogy is reversed: Cicero himself is in the horse along with the conspirators as they seek to undermine Mark Antony. It is what R.G. Austin describes as 'a nice Ciceronian example of backing a horse both ways'.[12] Such flexibility does not suggest a particularly strong identification with the Trojans, even in the first century BC. So Rome's Trojan ancestry provides an unsatisfactory explanation of the popularity of the horse theme.

There was, however, something about the theme of the Trojan Horse that did appeal to the Romans. I suspect that what provided the long-term attraction was the stereotype of the devious Greek which is so integral to the plot. This feature of the story reaches its peak with Virgil's Sinon. Loquacious, deceitful and plausible, this Greek deserter persuades the Trojans that the Greeks have abandoned their siege and so the horse should be admitted into Troy. He is skilled in the Greek art of deceit ('ille dolis instructus et arte Pelasga', *Aeneid* II, 152) and uses all the tricks: lengthy stories, fake tears and false oaths. It is an image of the Greek which continues into the second century AD. Juvenal in his *Satire 3* launches a xenophobic attack on the Greeks who now fill the city of Rome; here there is a Greek who is so duplicitous and eager to please that if someone comments on the heat he starts to sweat. Like Sinon, such men could weep at will.[13]

This negative stereotype of the Greeks was already well established by the first half of the second century. The subversion of the basic principles of Roman

morality which is so much a part of Plautus' plays is rendered acceptable to Roman audiences by its Greek setting. Greeks can be expected to be sly, self-interested and deceitful. In a striking phrase of the *Asinaria* (l. 199) Plautus manages to overturn the meaning of *fides* simply by placing the adjective *Graeca* in front of it. This is but one of more than seventy-five different expressions that Plautus comes up with to convey Greek perfidy.[14] Roughly contemporary, Cato the Elder wrote a letter to his son to warn him to be wary of the Greeks, a depraved and intractable people, 'nequissimum et indocile genus'. Greek deceit is apparent in Cato's injunction to his son to avoid Greek doctors: 'whenever that nation gives us its literature, it will corrupt everything, and all the more so if it sends its doctors here. They have conspired together to murder all barbarians with their medicine, and they even charge for it so that they may win our confidence and destroy us more easily.'[15] It is such anti-Greek prejudices as these that Cicero later exploits to win over the jury in his defence of Flaccus in 59 BC, on trial for corruption while governor of Asia. Greek witnesses could hardly be expected to tell the truth in the witness box.[16]

Here lies the appeal of the Trojan Horse story for a Roman audience. The duplicity which was so much part of the story helped to highlight Roman honesty and virtue, not because the Romans identified with the simple-minded Trojans but because they themselves were not Greeks.

But why should there have been a play about the Trojan Horse at all? In fact, why was so much of Andronicus' and Naevius' tragic output concerned with the Trojan War and its repercussions? Of the eight tragedies attributed to Andronicus five are known to have been on this theme (*Achilles, Aegisthus, Aiax Mastigophorus, Hermiona*, and *The Trojan Horse*). Naevius' output too reveals a similar pattern; out of the seven known plays four are Troy-orientated (*Andromacha, Hector proficiscens, Iphigenia*, and *The Trojan Horse* again). This had, of course, been a popular theme in fifth-century Athenian tragedy, but what is popular in one generation and place need not be popular in another.[17] The little information that we have in fact suggests that Andronicus and Naevius were more interested in the Trojan War and its consequences than their Athenian predecessors had been. Andronicus' interest in this area famously extended to writing a translation of the *Odyssey*. To explain this preoccupation it might be useful to look not to the audience but to the poets themselves. Both poets, at least on the basis of the only available evidence, came from the Greek world of South Italy, Livius Andronicus from Taras, Naevius from Campania.[18]

Not only was southern Italy Greek, it was a region alive with Homeric heroes and the Trojan war. By this I mean not simply that its people read the epics and had vases decorated with figures such as Achilles. It was more than this. Numerous local traditions told how heroes from the Trojan war had actually been in South Italy and Sicily. Often they had gone seriously astray on their travels back to Greece. Odysseus, Menelaos, Epeios, Philoctetes, and Diomedes are all reported to have come this way, along with Trojan refugees such as Aeneas. The evidence of their presence was to be seen all around – they had founded cities, there were cults of them, local landmarks were associated with them, they had left precious objects in the local temples.[19] Competitive claims to heroes and their relics were common. Philoctetes' tomb provided incontrovertible proof of his presence, although it was to be found at both Makalla and Thurii.[20] In Taras, home of Andronicus, there was a plethora of cults – sacrifices were offered to the Atreidai, the Tydeidai, the Aiakidai, and the Laertiadai; there was also a cult of the Agamemnonidai which had a curious prohibition on the participation of women.[21] An environment such as this may well have influenced the subject matter of Andronicus' plays.

And what about the Trojan Horse itself? Further round the Gulf of Tarentum we come to Metapontion, a city supposedly founded by Epeios, builder of the Trojan Horse. If you visited this city you would probably be taken to the temple of Athena and shown Epeios' tool-kit, the very tools he had used to construct the famous Wooden Horse.[22] You would also be told that these were the real ones: the tools on display in the temple of Athena Hellenia down the road at Lagaria were fakes. Lagaria was another city which claimed Epeios as its founder.[23] Modern historians, unhappy with the idea that the tools were in two cities at the same time, have come up with various solutions: that there was only one temple of Athena, located somewhere between Lagaria and Metapontion, or that at some stage the story and perhaps the celebrated tools moved from one city to the other, or even that our sources may not be competent.[24] I myself find competition between the neighbouring cities a more satisfactory explanation: the combination of founder and his relics suggests that each city had a cult of Epeios.[25] Such competition between cities is a sign of the continuing vitality of these traditions in the Gulf of Tarentum.

Many of these stories would have developed out of the process of colonization, as the Greek immigrants looked to the heroic past to supply themselves with antecedents in an otherwise alien environment. But the literary evidence for

particular cults and stories is often late. The dedication of Epeios' tool-kit at Lagaria is first attested in Lycophron, in the first half of the third century BC (though some would shift Lycophron's poem into the second century),[26] but these relics had surely been in the temple for some time before that. A comparison can be made with Menelaos, who is associated with many places in Southern Italy and Sicily and made a dedication (which oddly included his wife's shoes) at the temple of Athena on the Iapygian peninsula. Again, the main evidence is Lycophron, but a strong case has recently been made to date the origin of these traditions to the sixth century BC.[27]

Archaeology adds a curious element to the story of Epeios and his cult. Over twenty years ago Italian archaeologists excavated a necropolis at Francavilla Marittima at the western end of the Gulf of Tarentum. Here they found a large tumulus (probably of the eighth century BC), at the centre of which was a collection of tools, including an axe and chisel. The suggestion was made that this could be a heroon of Epeios. Though not convinced, I would not want to dismiss this possibility completely. Perhaps there was an Iron Age tradition in the area of revering tools in some way, which then merges with the Greek story of Epeios.[28]

I do not want to imply that Andronicus and Naevius were unaware of the supposed Trojan origin of the Romans, but rather to emphasize the importance of the Greek world of South Italy and Sicily in their work. This western Greek perspective is evident also in the writings of the Sicilian historian, Timaios of Tauromenion, who had earlier written a history of the wars between the Epirote king Pyrrhos and the Romans. Again the Trojan Horse appears. Timaios looked for evidence of Rome's Trojan origin and thought he had found it in the ritual of the October horse, the annual killing of a horse in the Campus Martius. This, he believed, was a relic of the fall of Troy, recalling the Wooden Horse. Polybius, who had little respect for Timaios, dismissed this argument as nonsense: 'for it would then be necessary to say that all barbarians were descended from the Trojans. For almost all of them, or certainly the majority, whenever they are about to go to war or embark on some perilous campaign, sacrifice a horse and interpret the future from the way the animal falls.'[29] Timaios, like Andronicus and Naevius, was accustomed to a world in which myths of migrating Greeks and Trojans were a vital part of local traditions. For him such an argument made sense, but it contained little to convince a Peloponnesian historian reared in a different mythological environment.

To return to the theatre: what does all this add up to? First, the choice of plays

to be staged was not as it was because the Roman audience felt a strong affinity with the Trojans; nor even because the Trojan War and its consequences had always been a subject of tragedy. More important was the South Italian background of these poets, a world which was awash with Homeric heroes. Stories of Rome's Trojan ancestry were probably known to both Greeks and Romans, but this ancestry was not yet a significant part of the Roman self-image. Perhaps it amused Andronicus to slip a play about Greek craft and Trojan (or should it be Roman?) stupidity into the city of Rome, literally a theatrical Trojan Horse.

NOTES

My thanks to Theresa Urbainczyk, *Dialogos*' editors and anonymous referees, and a lively audience in Leeds for helpful comments.

1 Andronicus: Nonius 475M; Naevius: Macrobius 6.1.38; both quoted in O. Ribbeck, *Tragicorum Romanorum Fragmenta* 3. For discussion and further bibliography on Andronicus and Naevius, including the controversial question of their date, W. Beare, *The Roman Stage* (New York 1964) 25-44 ; M. Drury in E.J. Kenney (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature,* II.1, The Early Republic (Cambridge 1983) 172-7; E. Gruen, *Studies in Greek Culture and Roman Policy* (Leiden 1990) 79-106.

2 Plautus, *Bacchides* 925-1075, cf. *Pseudolus* 1244.

3 *Ad familiares* 7.1.2, 7.16.1.

4 Virgil, *Aeneid* 2.1-280, fully discussed by R.G. Austin, 'Virgil and the Wooden Horse', *Journal of Roman Studies* 49 (1959) 16-25.

5 Cicero, *Brutus* 72; Gellius, 17.21.45; on which Drury, 173, 175, Gruen, *Studies,* 80-2, 92.

6 Cf. E. Gruen, *Culture and National Identity in Republican Rome* (Ithaca 1993) 31: 'The Trojan connection had *entrenched* itself in Roman self-consciousness by the early third century [BC]' (my italics), cf. A. Momigliano, 'How to reconcile Greeks and Trojans', in *Settimo contributo alla storia degli studi classici e del mondo antico* (Rome 1984) 437-62 and T.J. Cornell, *The Beginnings of Rome* (London 1995) 68, who would go earlier still.

7 *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, s.v. Equus Troianus, gives δούρειος ἵππος, ἵππος δουράτεος, ἵππος ὁ καλούμενος δούριος; cf. Homer, *Odyssey* 8.493, 512; Euripides, *Troades* 14; Plato, *Theaetetus* 184d; Pausanias 2.29.4, 3.13.5; Apollodorus 5.14.1; Polybius 12.4b.1. Its Latin equivalent, *equos ligneus*, is found very occasionally: Plautus, *Bacchides* 936, 988, *Rudens* 268, Propertius, *Elegies* 3.9.42, Hyginus, *Fabula* 108.1, are the only examples I can find. In the *Bacchides* it is used to describe the horse in the context of the sack of the city rather than to identify it, but even so it suggests the strength of the Greek influence before the 'Trojan Horse' had fully taken hold.

8 Cicero, *Brutus* 72; Suetonius, *De grammaticis* 1.2, where Andronicus is described as 'semigraecus', a word which is not intended to question his Greekness but rather his Romanness; in the context of the history of *grammatica* at Rome it indicates that early Latin grammarians were not properly Roman.

9 Pausanias, 1.23.8 (referring to the Trojans as Phrygians), cf. Servius on *Aeneid* 2.15.

10 Plautus, *Bacchides* 925-1075, cf. J. Barsby's 1986 commentary, which dates the play between 194 and 184BC.
11 Cicero, *Ad familiares* 7.16.1 with Festus p. 343M, see D.R. Shackleton Bailey, *Cicero: Epistulae ad Familiares* (Cambridge 1977) 1. 335.
12 Cicero, *Murena* 78; *Philippics* 2.33, cf. *Caelio* 67, II *Verrines* 4.52, *De oratore* 2.94; Austin, 'Virgil and the Wooden Horse', 17.
13 Virgil, *Aeneid* 2.57-198; Juvenal, *Satire* 3.101-3; on such views of the Greeks, A. Erskine, 'Greek gifts and Roman suspicion', *Classics Ireland* 4 (1997) 33-45.
14 E. Segal, *Roman Laughter: the Comedy of Plautus* (Oxford 1987), esp. 36-41 with p. 38, on the 75 expressions.
15 Pliny, *Natural History* 29.7.14, cf. Plutarch, *Cato the Elder* 23.
16 Cicero, *pro Flacco* 9-16, cf. *Ad familiares* 1.1.16, Erskine, 'Greek gifts', 35-8.
17 B. Knox, *Word and Action* (Baltimore 1979) 8-9, for statistics: the Trojan War and its ramifications yield 68 (plus 10 on Odysseus) out of 293 known fifth-century plays.
18 Andronicus: see n. 8; Naevius: Gellius 1.24.2.
19 The evidence is collected in J. Bérard, *La Colonisation grecque de l'Italie méridionale et de la Sicile dans l'antiquité. L'histoire et la légende* (2nd ed., Paris 1957) 303-83, cf. also J. de La Genière (ed.), *Épéios et Philoctète en Italie* (Naples 1991).
20 Lycophron, *Alexandra* 927-29; Justin, 20.1.16.
21 Ps.-Aristotle, *De mirabilibus auscultationibus* 106, on which I. Malkin, *Myth and Territory in the Spartan Mediterranean* (Cambridge 1994) 60-1.
22 Justin, 20.2.1; Velleius Paterculus, 1.1.
23 Lycophron 948-50, Ps.-Aristotle, *De mirabilibus auscultationibus* 108 (perhaps it should be read as Athena Eilenia), Strabo, 6.1.14. The northern city of Pisa also claimed Epeios as founder: Servius on *Aeneid* 10.179.
24 Some solutions are summarized by Bérard, *La Colonisation,* 336-7, and T.J. Dunbabin, *The Western Greeks* (Oxford 1948) 35.
25 For an example of civic competition for valued relics see T. S. Scheer, 'Ein Museum griechischer "Frühgeschichte" im Apollontempel von Sikyon', *Klio* 78 (1996) 353-73, on Sicyon and Ampelius 8.5.
26 Lycophron himself is dated to the the first half of the third century BC but many have felt the need to detach the poem from its purported author; for the debate see P.M. Fraser, 'Lycophron', *OCD*^{3}, 895-97, A. Momigliano, '*Terra marique*', *Journal of Roman Studies* 32 (1942) 53-64, 'The Locrian Maidens and the date of Lycophron's *Alexandra*', *Classical Quarterly* 89 (1945) 49-55, and S. West, 'Lycophron Italicised', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 104 (1984), 127-51.
27 Lycophron, 852-76, on which Malkin, *Myth and Territory,* 57-64.
28 P. Zancani Montuoro, 'La leggenda di Epeo', *Atti e Memorie della Società Magna Grecia* 15-17 (1974-6) 93-106 on excavations at Francavilla Marittima.
29 Polybius 12.4b (= F. Jacoby, *Fragmente der griechische Historiker*, no. 566, Timaios, F36), cf. also Dionysius of Halicarnassus, 1.67 (= Jacoby no. 566, Timaios, F59). Political exile forced Timaios to spend much of his life in Athens (F34), but this did nothing to diminish his interest in the West as his histories of Sicily (T6-8) and of the Pyrrhic Wars (T9) testify.