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A Literature Review of the *Odyssey* Landscapes
Rose Kaczmarek '23

The Odyssey Landscapes are a series of frescoes found at Via Graziosa near the Esquiline hill in Rome. They were painted in the first century BCE and were accidentally discovered in 1848 near present-day Via Cavour. The *domus* of which the paintings were part was built in the 2nd century BCE and reconstructed and lavishly decorated in the 1st century BCE.¹ Scholars date them to either c. 50-45 BCE or 45-40 BCE. The paintings were in the second style, which was characterized by *trompe l'oeil*, architectural vistas, and open vistas (though paintings of open vistas were usually reserved for the most important rooms in the house).² The frescoes depict scenes from Homer's *Odyssey*, an epic about the Greek hero Odysseus' journey home after the end of the Trojan War. Though there are 24 books in the *Odyssey*, the frescoes only depict Odysseus' tale to the Phaeacians in Books 10-12.³ There are 11 sections to the fresco, each broken up by painted columns, and each depicting a different scene from the *Odyssey*. The first section has been badly damaged and several of the others were restored heavily in the 19th century.⁴ Only seven and a half are on view at the Vatican because of the damage.⁵

Each panel is 1.16 meters tall and has an approximate width of 1.5 meters, but each width is slightly different. The bottom of each painting was placed four meters up from the bottom of the wall, making it a true frieze.⁶ As its title suggests, this painting is first and foremost a landscape. Though there are figures in each panel, it is still considered a landscape painting. It is credited as being the first known realistic landscape painting because of its intricate details.

In this essay I review the literature on the Odyssey landscapes, discussing the sources chronologically and thematically. I analyze a variety of international scholarly sources coming from Germany, Italy, Greece, Portugal, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Their articles and books span from 1963 until 2009. These scholars are particularly concerned with the frieze's

original placement on the wall, the viewer's perspective, and its status as either an original work or a copy.

Early scholarship assumed that there was a lost Greek original for the Odyssey Landscapes, that it was not an original painting. In 1963, Peter von Blanckenhagen produced a detailed analysis of the Odyssey Frieze. He begins by giving the history of the Landscapes' discovery, condition, restorations, and a short description of each panel. Later, he discusses the authenticity of the Landscapes as an original. In 1963, scholars commonly held the view that most Roman paintings were copies of Greek paintings that have since been lost. He continues this line of thinking and spends pages analyzing each section to determine whether or not it can be original. As I mention later in this paper, modern scholarship has disproven that (most) Roman paintings are copies, including the Odyssey Landscapes.

However, for a long time, scholars held the view that this painting is not an original work. For example, Roger Ling, having published a book on Roman painting in 1991, also argued the Odyssey Frieze was copied. His argument was very similar to von Blanckenhagen's. He used Vitruvius' writing and the inscriptions as evidence of copying. Because Vitruvius said this myth was popular at the time, he argues that it must have been part of emblem books for multiple artists to copy from. Furthermore, he says the fact that the inscriptions were in Greek demonstrated that this painting likely has Greek origins. And because architectural elements were popular during the Second Style, he agrees with Von Blanckenhagen that the copyist added the pillars to the Laistrygonian section.

They are also both concerned with perspective and background. Unlike von Blanckenhagen, Ling provides a visual analysis of the background of the panels. But like von Blanckenhagen, he is interested in perspective – the fact that the horizon makes it look like the viewer is at a high

vantage point and that the perspectives do not match up from panel to panel.⁷ Von Blanckenhagen similarly also discusses the perspective and horizon lines. Ling also acknowledges that this is a very realistic landscape, which has not been known to have been done before in Roman art.⁸ The conversation on perspective does not pick back up until 2004 with Stelios Lydakis, who thinks because of the composition and perspective, a hypothetical original painting would have been placed closer to the ground.⁹

Ling does not comment, however, on von Blanckenhagen's assertion that panels 1-5 are a direct copy of a Greek painting and that sections 6-11 are modified from the original. Through analyzing this painting, Blanckenhagen attempts to describe what the Greek painting would have looked like. Roger Ling's section on the *Odyssey* Landscapes closely matches Von Blanckenhagen's; thus, it seems from the 1960s to the 1990s, the scholarship on this painting has not advanced much.

In an article published in 1995, Stephen Lowenstam discusses the painting's potential sources. He first discusses its faithfulness to Homer's *Odyssey* by comparing the composition of each panel to the text. Ling was interested in labels too, but just as proofs for an earlier Greek painting. Lowenstam, however, argues that labels indicate that the painter used the *Odyssey* as a source for his composition. He argues that inscriptions of personifications of nature best prove his point because some of them use Homer's language exactly: for example, calling a personified rock AKTAI, a word found in *Odyssey* 10.87-90 and the personified spring labeled KPHNH from *Odyssey* 10.107-8. He also argues that because the painter avoided using inscriptions on unnamed entities in the *Odyssey*, he was also following it. However, he points out that there is an exception in the "Attack of the Laistrygonians" panel, where two named figures are nameless in the *Odyssey* – Antilochos and Anchialos. Lowenstam cites a twelfth-century Byzantine scholar

Joannes Tzetzes as mentioning these two names in his text and suggests that there must have been some tradition of which they were a part. Thus, he argues that the painter of the *Odyssey* Landscapes was also aware of this Homeric tradition, but that the joining of the Danaids with the water-carriers myth was a Roman idea.

Like scholars before him, Lowenstam is also concerned with the originality of the *Odyssey* Frieze. He summarizes the positions of 15 scholars on the origins of the painting – that either they think it is an original or a copy. He himself argues that the painting is “a synthesis of Greek and Roman elements, the Roman of a Greek tradition,” but ultimately calls it Roman.¹⁰ This position deviates from both von Blanckenhagen and Ling’s analyses. This article marks a shift in scholarship on the originality of the painting.

Recent scholarship has also been interested in finding the sources of the *Odyssey* Landscapes. While Lowenstam’s argument centers around the Landscape’s relationship to the *Odyssey*, he also acknowledges that the compositions sometimes do not completely copy it due to traditions of painting. The main example he cites is the presence of the Danaids in the “Punishment in Hades” panel and how the image joins two separate mythological traditions – the murder of their husbands and carrying broken water vessels in the Underworld. The Danaids are not in the *Odyssey* at all. Lowenstam cites other artworks and literature that depict water carriers and analyzes their potential for depicting the Danaids. He acknowledges that the Pythagorean cult made a comeback in the 1st century BCE, which may have influenced the creation of this painting. Lowenstam further suggests that the painter was aware of Polygnotus’s *Nekuia*, which was still extant at the time, because of the similarities in the composition of women uninitiated in the marriage rites.¹¹ However, Lydakis argues that the scene with the Danaids is a copy of ancient Greek artist Nikias’ *Nekuia* painting instead.

Finally, the last source Lowenstam suggests the painter used was the allegorical *Odyssey* commentary of a twelfth-century Homeric scholar from Byzantium, Joannes Tzetzes. Thus, with all these separate influences, Lowenstam argues that the “Punishment in Hades” fresco was not a copy but was influenced by painterly tradition. This statement contradicts both von Blanckenhagen’s and Ling’s arguments about the originality of the *Odyssey Landscapes* and allows a more nuanced view of them.

Another recent interest in scholars is the physical context of the painting. Filippo Coarelli’s 1998 article “The *Odyssey* Frescoes of the Via Graziosa: A Proposed Context” marks a turn in the scholarly discussion of the origin of the *Odyssey Landscapes*. Though Lowenstam’s article from three years earlier indicates that likely this was an original piece influenced by several sources, Coarelli maintains that the *Odyssey Landscapes* are a copy. In 2009, Marques and Cavicchioli disagree with him because scans of the fresco reveal the pillars were painted first, making them a deliberate part of the composition design. Thus, they cannot be merely copies.

There is still debate on the number of panels in the painting. Where Blanckenhagen said there were 11 extant, Coarelli suggests that there are 10. He further argues that they were part of a larger depiction of the *Odyssey* that could have included up to 100 images. Marques and Cavicchioli, however, say that there are 12 panels, but only eight plus a fragment are still extant today.¹² Therefore, there is still no scholarly consensus on how many panels there were originally or how many remain extant today.

Coarelli agrees with previous scholars on the sources of the *Landscapes*. He asserts that because of the detail of the paintings and the fact that there were likely many more, the artist could not have relied on the *Odyssey* alone as a source text. He agrees with Stephen Lowenstam

on this point for the same reasons – that the captions lead scholars to believe the tradition of the Alexandrian school was another source.

Coarelli picks up the conversation on dating from Von Blanckenhagen's 1963 article. He more precisely dates the frescoes than other scholars. Coarelli analyzes a calendar found with the Landscapes which has not been addressed before. This artifact could influence the fresco's dating; its dates do not line up with the Augustan calendar, so Coarelli interprets it as a pre-Julian artifact. Since the Roman calendar changed in 46 BCE, Coarelli thinks that the painting must be dated a few years before that. Similarly, Marques and Cavicchioli lay out the different dates the fresco could have been painted, acknowledging that it is normally dated around 50 BCE but that some think that it was closer to the Augustan period.

Around the turn of the 20th century, scholars also became very interested in analyzing the physical context of the painting. In terms of topographical contextualization, Coarelli argues that because of the proposed length of the portico, where the frescoes were painted, there was room for 100 paintings. It was a large private *domus*. He also briefly attempts to identify the owner of the house and concludes the house could have been the Domus Papiria and was related to the cult of Mefitis.¹³ Timothy O'Sullivan in 2007 disagrees with Coarelli's assertion that the house was connected to the Mefitis cult or that it was the *domus* Papiria because the house reportedly has a different axis than the house that held the Odyssey Landscapes.¹⁴

O'Sullivan's article discusses contextualization but from more of a human perspective. Like Coarelli, he is concerned with the contextualization of the painting, but rather than in a purely architectural way, he ponders how the Romans would have interacted with it. There were many ambulatories in the city with porticoes and artworks, so O'Sullivan argues that this frieze is meant to remind viewers of that experience and that the portico frame "serves not only a

narrative function but also an interpretive one.”¹⁵ Marques and Cavicchioli build off of O’Sullivan’s work to create a hypothetical reconstruction of what the panels would have looked like *in situ*. They put forth several hypotheses about where in the house they would have been. They settle on the peristyle as the most likely place.¹⁶ Marques and Cavicchioli also spend a section discussing O’Sullivan’s argument against continuous narration. They discuss the contradictions in O’Sullivan’s argument about the hypothetical *ambulatio* and solve it by thinking about the paintings in the asymmetrical perspective of the Second Style. They assert that some of the perspectives may have been shaped for the viewer’s position as he or she walked, for example, mosaics placed on the floor to indicate where the viewer should stand.¹⁷ They then create a hypothetical reconstruction of the panels, hypothesizing the location of the fragment in relation to the panels and the potential location in the house, mostly focusing on its possible location in a peristyle because of the paintings’ compositions and connection to each other. The placement of shade also influences the proper perspective.

Recent scholarship has been concerned about wall placement. O’Sullivan disagrees with the previously established idea that the friezes were 4 meters up on the 5.5-meter wall because it is unclear whether that measurement pertained to the height of the room or just the depth of the excavation during the dig. Two years later, Marques and Cavicchioli concur with O’Sullivan about the height of the frescoes.¹⁸

Conclusion

Since their discovery in 1848, the Odyssey Landscapes are a popular topic in classical archaeology because of their status as the first true landscape painting and the interesting nature of their composition. Scholars have disagreed over their dating, origins, and status as a continuous narration or episodic work. Through this literature review, I hope to have delineated

the scholarly debate from 1963 to present. Some scholars, such as Von Blanckenhagen, O'Sullivan, and Marques, et al. have clearly well-researched their pieces and present well-argued ideas, though some scholars have since disproven them. Other scholars, such as Ling and Coarelli, and Lydakis provide useful information, but some of their claims need more citations and evidence to go with them. This literature review has been helpful as an art historian to question my reliability on sources, and I plan to use this as a starting point for Chapter 3 of my thesis.

Appendix



Figure 1. Odysseus Landscapes, 4 panels. 1st century BCE. Roman. Vatican Museums.



Figure 2. Odysseus Landscapes, 4.5 panels. 1st century BCE. Roman. Vatican Museums.

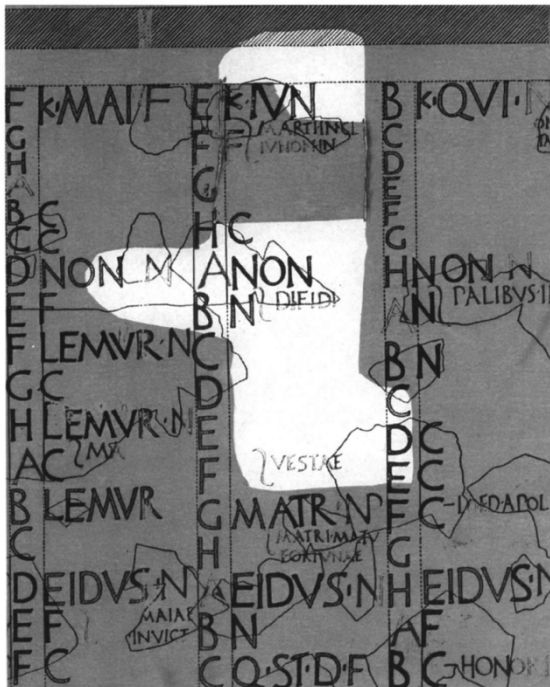


Figure 3. Fasti Antiates Maiores. Detail of Iunius from the calendar found with the Odyssey Landscapes. (Image and caption source: Coarelli).



Figure 4. Fragments of the Via Graziosa painted fasti. (Image and caption source: Coarelli).

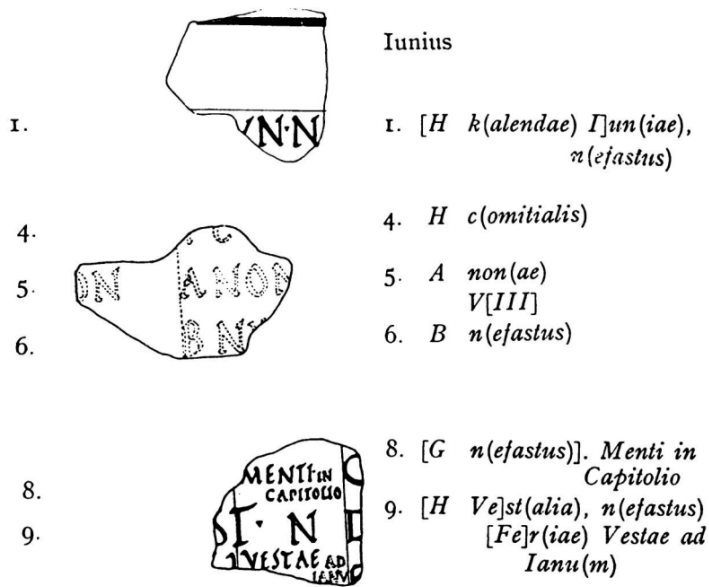


Figure 5. Reconstruction of the fragments. (Image and caption source: Coarelli)

Endnotes

1. Filippo Coarelli. "Odyssey Frescoes of the Via Graziosa: A Proposed Context" (1995): 31.
2. Volker Michael Strocka, "Domestic Decoration: Painting and the 'Four Styles'" in *The World of Pompeii*, ed. Peter Foss and John J. Dobbins (London: Routledge, 2007), 308.
3. Roger Ling. *Roman Painting*, 1991: 108.
4. Von Blanckenhagen "The Odyssey Frieze" (1963): 100-1. This assessment was later contradicted by Coarelli who says they "do not seem to have undergone any restoration," Coarelli (1995): 33.
5. Stelios Lydakis, *Ancient Greek Painting and its Echoes in Later Art* (2002): 198.
6. Coarelli (1995): 33.
7. Ling (1991): 110.
8. Ling (1991): 110.
9. Lydakis (2004): 209.
10. Lowenstam (1995): 222.
11. The Nekyia is Book 9 of the *Odyssey*, where Odysseus summons spirits from the Underworld. Polygnotus was an artist active during the 5th century BCE who painted the Nekyia. Though the painting is no longer extant, a description by Roman author Pausanias still survives.
12. Marques, et al. (2009): 19; Lydakis (2004): 198; Von Blanckenhagen (1963): 101-2.
13. Coarelli (1995): 35-7.
14. O'Sullivan (2007): 502.
15. Timothy O'Sullivan, "Walking with Odysseus" (2007): 500.
16. Marques, et al. (2009): 21.
17. Marques, et al. (2009): 19.
18. Juliana Bastos Marques and Marina Regis Cavicchioli "Re-reading the Odyssey Landscapes from the Esquiline" (2009): 9.

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