

10-2014

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Repository Citation

Pache, C. (2014). Theban walls in Homeric epic. *Trends in Classics*, 6, 278-296. doi: 10.1515/tc-2014-0015

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Theban Walls in Homeric Epic

DOI 10.1515/tc-2014-0015

Throughout the *Iliad*, the Greeks at Troy often refer to the wars at Thebes in their speeches, and several important warriors fighting on the Greek side at Troy also fought at Thebes and are related to Theban heroes who besieged the Boeotian city a generation earlier. The Theban wars thus stand in the shadow of the story of war at Troy, another city surrounded by walls supposed to be impregnable. In the *Odyssey*, the Theban connections are less central, but nevertheless significant as one of our few sources concerning the building of the Theban walls. In this essay, I analyze Theban traces in Homeric epic as they relate to city walls. Since nothing explicitly concerning walls remains in the extant fragments of the Theban Cycle, we must look to Homeric poetry for formulaic and thematic elements that can be connected with Theban epic. While the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* tend to downplay other traditions to foreground their own heroes and narratives, both poems not only exhibit an awareness of poetic traditions dealing with the Theban conflicts, but they also self-consciously appropriate Theban themes as a way of competing with Theban epic.¹

The walls of Thebes are brought into play in several important ways, and the connection between Homeric and Theban traditions can be made both thematically and structurally. Wall building as city founding is an important theme, and walls play a central role in the *Iliad* as the site of battles, while their fall symbolizes the ultimate destruction of cities. City walls are also a place for viewing, which hints at a possible connection between a Trojan and a Theban *teichoscopya*. Finally, as the setting of combat, walls – whether standing or fallen – are also a site of mourning and memory.

Let us start with *Odyssey* 11, which describes the building of the Theban walls. In the *Odyssey*, Thebes does not appear in any explicit martial context, but

¹ For a Theban tradition as oral poetry analogous to Homeric poetry, see Burkert (1981). For extant sources concerning the Theban tradition, see Gantz (1993) 467–530. For a survey of the Theban Cycle and its connections with Homeric epic, see Torres-Guerra (1995). For specific ways in which the Theban tradition interacts with Homeric epic, see Barker and Christensen (2008), Ebbott (2010), and Slatkin (2011).

the walls appear in Odysseus' catalogue of the heroines he meets in the Underworld, and the focus of the episode is on building walls as an act of foundation (11.262–265). To mythographers and scholars, Thebes is well known for its double foundation myth and the chronological puzzle it creates.² In one version, the hero Cadmus consults the Delphic oracle, which instructs him to follow a cow to the site of his future city.³ The Σ to *Il.* 13.302 refer to Pherecydes who states that Amphion and Zethus first built the walls of the city, which was subsequently deserted and refounded by Cadmus (*EGM* 41a). The later arrival of Cadmus is also attested in the Σ to *Od.* 11.262, while [Apollodorus] *Bibl.* 3.5.5, Pausanias 9.5.6, and Diodorus Siculus 19.53.4–5 all agree that the chronology is the opposite, with Cadmus establishing the city first. Pausanias and Diodorus go one step further by ascribing to Cadmus the foundation of the old city, the Cadmeia, and to Amphion and Zethus the fortification of the lower city as they could see it in their own time.

Homeric epic already includes traces of both stories. We can find confirmation of the importance of Cadmus at Thebes in the *Iliad*'s name for the Thebans (Καδμείοι) and in the presence of Ino-Leucothea, the daughter of Cadmus, in the *Odyssey* where the Theban heroine is presented as a goddess, while the Amphion narrative is privileged in both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as the foundation story of the city of Thebes, implicitly placing the story of Cadmus later.⁴

Among the heroines of the past Odysseus meets in Hades in *Odyssey* 11 is Antiope, the mother of Amphion and Zethus:

τὴν δὲ μέτ' Ἀντιόπην Ἴδον, Ἀσωποῖο θύγατρα,
ἧ δὴ καὶ Διὸς εὐχέτ' ἐν ἀγκοίνῃσιν ἰαῦσαι,
καὶ ῥ' ἔτεκεν δύο παῖδ', Ἀμφιονά τε Ζῆθόν τε,
οἱ πρόωτοι Θήβης ἔδος ἔκτισαν ἑπταπύλοιο
πύργωσάν τ', ἐπεὶ οὐ μὲν ἀπύργωτόν γ' ἐδύναντο
βαιέμεν εὐρύχορον Θήβην, κρατερῶ περ ἔόντε.

After her I saw Antiope, who was the daughter
of Asopos, who claimed she had also lain in the embraces
of Zeus, and borne two sons to him, Amphion and Zethus.
These first established the foundations of seven-gated
Thebes, and built the towers, since without towers they could not
have lived, for all their strength, in Thebes of the wide spaces.

Od. 11.260–265⁵

² For a different take on this doubleness as reflecting two different traditions of composition, see Berman (2004).

³ On the sources for Cadmus, see Gantz (1993) 467–473.

⁴ On the various legends surrounding the figure of Ino, see Pache (2004) 135–153.

⁵ The translations of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are modified from Lattimore's translations (1951 and 1965).

The passage equates city foundation with wall building. Amphion and Zethus were the first to found (ἔκτισαν) the city of Thebes, by encircling the city with walls and towers (πύργωσαν). Lines 264–265 emphasize Thebes' status as a city that is fought over. The same connection between walls and city founding is also found in Poseidon's description of how he and Apollo built the Trojan wall and thus made Troy into a *polis* (πολίσαμεν, *Il.* 7.453), a passage to which I will return below.⁶

Whether the building of the Theban walls was included in the Theban Cycle we do not know, but the same story was included in Hesiod's *Catalogue of Women* ([Hes.] fr. 182 M-W), according to Palaephatus' *De incredibilibus* 41:⁷

Περὶ Ζήθου καὶ Ἀμφίωνος ἱστοροῦσιν ἄλλοι τε καὶ Ἡσίοδος ὅτι κιθάρα τὸ τεῖχος τῆς Θήβης ἐτείχισαν. δοκοῦσι δὲ ἔνιοι κιθαρίζειν <μέν> αὐτούς, τοὺς δὲ λίθους αὐτομάτως ἀναβαίνειν ἐπὶ τὸ τεῖχος, τὸ δὲ ἀληθές ἔχει ὧδε. κιθαρωδοὶ οὗτοι ἀριστοὶ ἐγένοντο καὶ ἐπεδείκνυντο μισθῷ. ἀργύριον δὲ οὐκ εἶχον οἱ τότε ἄνθρωποι. ἐκέλευον οὖν οἱ περὶ τὸν Ἀμφίωνα, εἴ τις βούλοιο ἀκούειν αὐτῶν, ἐρχόμενος ἐργάζεσθαι ἐπὶ τὸ τεῖχος· οὐ μέντοι οἱ λίθοι εἴποντο ἀκροώμενοι. εὐλόγως οὖν ἔλεγον οἱ ἄνθρωποι ὅτι λύρα τὸ τεῖχος ἐτείχισθη.

Among others, Hesiod relates that it was with a lyre that Zethus and Amphion built the walls of Thebes. Some people imagine this to mean that Zethus and Amphion played their lyres and the stones spontaneously took their places on the wall. But the truth is as follows. Zethus and Amphion were outstanding lyre-players who performed for compensation. But the people of their day did not use money. Instead, Amphion and Zethus told anyone who wanted to hear them to go and work on the city walls. It was not that the stones listened and followed along; yet it was with good reason that people said that the wall was built with a lyre.

Hesiod, according to Palaephatus, agrees with the Odyssean tradition that both brothers were involved in building the walls of Thebes (ἐτείχισαν), though there is no emphasis in the summary of Palaephatus on the building of the walls as an act of foundation.⁸ Palaephatus' main concern instead is to counter the

⁶ On Homeric epic equating wall building with the foundation of cities, see Scully (1990) 47–48. Erwin Cook pointed out to me that the same pattern can be found at *Od.* 6.9, where building a wall is the first act of Nausithoos upon arriving in Scheria. On the *Odyssey's* treatment of Oedipus, who is also mentioned in the *Nekyia*, and his connection to a Theban poetic tradition, see Barker and Christensen (2008) 1–3.

⁷ Text and translation from Stern (1996).

⁸ Like Homer, Palaephatus presents the two brothers as working together, while, as Stern (1996) 74 notes, other authors stress the difference: in several sources, the Theban twin brothers are presented as opposites of one another with Amphion the master of the lyre, and Zethus the cattleman and warrior; see, e.g., Apoll. Rhod. 1.736–741 and [Apollod.] *Bibl.* 3.5.5. There is an analogous distinction in the second version of Poseidon's account of building the Trojan wall, where he tells how he built the wall while Apollo guarded the herds of Laomedon (*Il.* 21.446–449).

seemingly prevalent notion that Amphion and Zethus were able to move stones with the power of their lyres, a detail that is absent from the Homeric version – unsurprisingly given Homer’s avoidance of magical events – but survives in later authors.⁹ According to Palaephatus, Zethus and Amphion are professional poets who perform for compensation, in a time when money does not exist. Instead the brothers take as their pay the building of the wall. Gone is the Odyssean notion of the building of the wall as an act of foundation, but gone along with it is the logic of the narrative. Palaephatus explains the mystery of the self-moving stones but he creates another enigma: why would professional poets want to be paid with a wall?

We can turn to the Roman elegist Propertius for another later source for the story of Amphion and his lyre. In two poems addressed to the epic poet Ponticus, who is writing a *Thebaid* of his own, Propertius contrasts the potential rewards of composing erotic elegy to the fruitless pursuit of epic poetry. In both poems, Propertius equates Homeric poetry with telling the story of the wars at Thebes, agreeing with Greek sources ascribing the *Thebaid* to Homer.¹⁰ In 1.7, Propertius compares his own poetic ambitions to those of Ponticus, who writes of Cadmus and Thebes, and “the sad conflicts of fraternal wars” (*armaque fraternae tristia militiae*, 1.7.2) as a way of vying with Homer (*primo contendis Homero*, 1.7.3). In the second poem, Propertius once again stresses Thebes as a Homeric *topos*:

*quid tibi nunc misero prodest grave dicere carmen
aut Amphioniae moenia flere lyrae?
plus in amore valet Mimnermi versus Homero:*

What good is it for you now, wretched one, to speak your serious song,
or to weep for the walls of Amphion and his lyre?
A verse of Mimnermus is worth more in love than Homer:

Propertius 1.9.8–10

To a lover, Homeric epic is useless compared to the might of a verse of Mimnermus, and “Homer” here is clearly meant as a generic term that encompasses all of Homeric poetry. We do not know if a lament for “the walls of Amphion and his lyre” was in fact included in the Theban Cycle, but be that as it may Propertius’

⁹ Besides the two passages cited in the preceding note, see also the fragmentary *Antiope* by Euripides (fr. 223 *TrGF* 5.1), Hor. *Od.* 3.11.2 and *Ars Poetica* 394–6, Propertius 1.9.9–10 and 3.2.5–6, and Pausanias 9.5.8. Cf. Callimachus’ *Hymn to Apollo* 12–15 for the role of music in restoring old city walls.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Pausanias 9.9.5. The *Certamen Homeri et Hesiodi* 15 (= *Thebaid* fr. 1 *GEF*) also attributes both the *Thebaid* and the *Epigonoï* to Homer and quotes the first line of each poem.

choice to refer to Homeric poetry in this way rather than by alluding to events of the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* is striking and results in a neat formulation that encapsulates the whole Theban narrative, from the foundation of the city's wall to its fall.

We find a similar compressed narrative of the foundation and the fall of Thebes expressed through the variation of the formulaic language used to describe the city in Homeric epic. Slatkin has examined how the *Iliad* keeps the Theban tradition in play with the figure of the Theban hero Diomedes, even as the poem defuses the power of the Theban conflict as a potential poetic rival and threat to the glory of the Greeks at Troy. Diomedes begins as a foil to Achilles, Slatkin argues, but despite his great battle deeds, he eventually disappears from the narrative to make room first for Patroclus and eventually Achilles.¹¹ But while Diomedes takes a back seat in the narrative, Thebes itself, and specifically its wall as we will see below, remain a concern throughout the *Iliad*.

An Iliadic speech echoes the language from the Odyssean passage about the building of the walls of Thebes, but instead describes the city's fall. Sthenelus reacts to Agamemnon's denigration of Diomedes with a reminder of the superiority of the Epigonoι over the Seven (including Diomedes' father, Tydeus) praised by Agamemnon:

ἡμεῖς τοι πατέρων μέγ' ἀμείνονες εὐχόμεθ' εἶναι·
 ἡμεῖς καὶ Θήβης ἔδος εἴλομεν ἐπταπύλοιο
 παυρότερον λαὸν ἀγαγόνθ' ὑπὸ τείχος ἄρειον

We two claim we are better men by far than our fathers.
 We actually took the seat of the seven-gated Thebes
 though we led fewer people beneath a wall that was stronger.

Il. 4.405–407

Here again we find “the seat of seven-gated Thebes,” as we did in *Odyssey* 11, but the verb to found (ἔκτισαν, 11.263) is replaced by the verb to seize (εἴλομεν, 4.406).¹² It is of course not surprising that descriptions of city walls would resemble one another, but as Bakker observes, repetitions “are not merely uttered in similar contexts; they actively *create* similarity between contexts.”¹³ The *Odyssey's* and the *Iliad's* use of ἔδος to describe a city is uncommon, and occurs only

¹¹ Slatkin (2011, 116–117) notes that as soon as Patroclus “rises up – Diomedes disappears, and with him the traces of Thebes”; see also Nagy (1979) 162–163.

¹² On this passage and the ways in which the *Iliad* represents competing versions of its own epic past, see Turkeltaub (2010) 136–144; on the metapoetic connotations of this passage, see Tsagalis (2012b) 217–220.

¹³ Bakker (2013) 164; for more on his concept of “interformularity”, see 157–169. For more on intertextuality in the Homeric poems, see Tsagalis (2008).

twice in the *Odyssey* (once of Thebes, once of Ithaca, 13.344) and twice in the *Iliad* (once of Thebes, and once of Lesbos, “the seat of Macar,” *Il.* 24.544). Because the expression is otherwise used of the seat of the gods, Olympos, the description of Thebes as “the seat of seven-gated Thebes” stands out.¹⁴ When Homeric epic evokes “the seat of seven-gated Thebes” moreover, it is always in the context of the rise and fall of that city’s walls, a narrative of foundation that leads to war and culminates in the city’s annihilation.

The *Iliad* creates another set of associations with the Theban tradition by using the same epithets for both Troy and Thebes, thereby actively creating a link between the two. The two cities have much in common: encircled by walls supposed to be impregnable, they are both besieged, and ultimately destroyed. The *Iliad* consistently stresses the similarity between what befalls the two cities through the use of common language focusing on the two cities’ strength, beauty, and sacredness.

Thebes and Troy are both remembered in epic poetry as everything they no longer are: high-gated (ὕψιστος), well-built (ἔυκτίμενος), and holy (ἱερή). Thebes and Troy are both renowned for their gated walls, and for being “high-gated” (ὕψιστος), but this adjective is always used in the *Iliad* in the context of the sacking of a city, in fact (6.416) or in intention but prevented by divine intervention (16.698 and 21.544). In *Il.* 16 and 21, Patroclus and Achilles get very close to breaching the walls of “high-gated Troy” and we see the walls, as it were, from the perspective of the attackers. While it is true that such epithets as “high gated,” “well-walled,” and “well-made” are almost always spoken by the Greeks and “evoke a view of the city as it is seen from the eyes of the besieger,” there is one intriguing exception to this rule.¹⁵ When Andromache narrates the sack of her own city, she uses ὕψιστος, perhaps because Plataean Thebes cannot help but be drawn into the same formulaic world as its seven-gated Boeotian homonym (“high-gatedness” is also implicit in the epithet “seven-gated,” e.g., at *Od.* 11.263–264 and *Il.* 4.406, which implies a monumental wall), but the epithet also adds pathos to her remembrance. Plataean Thebes, like Boeotian Thebes and like Troy, from the perspective of the poet and his audience, was “high-gated,” and is no more.¹⁶

¹⁴ For ἔδος used to describe Olympos, see *Il.* 5.360, 5.367, 5.868, 8.456, 24.144, and *Od.* 6.42. The word is also used to describe simple chairs: of the gods at *Il.* 1.531 and 581, 23.205; of mortals at *Il.* 9.194 and 11.647. For the connotations of Macar as “blessed” (*selig*), see Kamptz (1982) 128. Bacch. 9.46 mentions “the seat of high-gated Troy” following a reference to Thebes.

¹⁵ See Scully (1990) 49.

¹⁶ The improvised protection built by the Trojans and Athene to give shelter to Heracles as he battles a sea monster is also described as a high wall, but with a different epithet that involves no gates, τεῖχος... ὑψηλόν, *Il.* 20.145–146.

A similar incongruity is present in the description of Thebes in the catalogue of ships:

οἱ θ' Ὑποθήβας εἶχον ἐϋκτίμενον πτολίεθρον,

they who held the lower Thebes, the strong-founded citadel,
Il. 2.505

Hypothebai must refer to the settlement “below the city” that survived the destruction of the Cadmeia by the Epigonoι. Kirk argues that the epithet ἐϋκτίμενος, “well-built,” thus “does not accord with a particularly low status for Hypothebai, but seems to be applied somewhat arbitrarily.”¹⁷ While the epithet ἐϋκτίμενος may seem out of place, it is not used arbitrarily, and as in Andromache’s description of her own fallen city of Placaean Thebes as “high-gated,” “well-built” lower Thebes also calls our attention to what once was but is no longer there. Thebes may have been “strong-founded”, to use Lattimore’s evocative translation, just as Placaean Thebes once may have had an impressive wall, yet both cities have been reduced to nothing. The epithet ἐϋκτίμενος thus calls attention not to the present condition of Hypothebai, but to the glorious past of Thebes and the ominous fall of its supposedly impregnable walls.

Placaean Thebes is again drawn into the nexus of parallels between Troy and Thebes when Achilles describes it as a “holy” city:

ῥχόμεθ' ἐς Θήβην ἱερὴν πόλιν Ἡετίωνος,
 τὴν δὲ διεπράθομέν τε καὶ ἦγομεν ἐνθάδε πάντα

We went against Thebe, the sacred city of Eetion,
 and the city we sacked, and carried everything back to this place
Il. 1.366–367

Here too Placaean Thebes partakes of the same formulaic language as Boeotian Thebes, but it is important to stress again that the similarity is not simply a *reflection* of the similarity of contexts, but rather the result of a poetic choice to emphasize the similarity between those cities, effectively reduplicating Thebes, whose image is thus refracted and multiplied. In this passage, Achilles uses an unusual (as is usual for him) phrase, combining ἱερὴν with πόλιν at *Il.* 1.366, although

¹⁷ See Kirk (1985) 194, though I do not share his assumption that the passage necessarily refers to an actual historical location. On the poetic topography of Thebes, see Mastronarde (1994) 647–650. See also Berman (2004) and (2007), especially 87–115, on the connections between Theban myth and geography.

ἱερός is otherwise a traditional epithet for Troy. Just as “well-built” Hypothebai reminds us of the past glory of the Theban citadel, Achilles remembers Placaeon Thebes as both holy and fallen. And while the epithet “holy” commonly applies to cities, only two cities have walls that are specifically described as “holy:” Troy and Boeotian Thebes.¹⁸ Agamemnon remembers how Tydeus gathered men to attack the city:

οἳ δὲ τότε ἔστρατόωνθ' ἱερά πρὸς τείχεα Θήβης,

since these were attacking the sacred walls of Thebe

Il. 4.378

The holiness of the city walls provides no protection and is brought into play at a city's most distressing moments.

The holiness of the walls of Troy and Thebes is also connected to the feminine aspect of walls imagined as a woman's crown or a head-binding. When Achilles fantasizes about destroying Troy with Patroclus, he pictures their undoing the city's ἱερά κρήδεμνα (“holy head-binding”, *Il.* 16.100).¹⁹ Many have already noted the ways in which epic equates a city's walls – a symbol of a city's manly strength – to a woman's headdress, equating a city's sacking to rape, as if city walls became more feminine when they fall.²⁰

The city can also be refigured as a maternal figure, for example, in the prophesies concerning the fall of Troy, where the city is envisioned as a mother bird whose offspring's death portends the sack of the city (*Il.* 2.311–320) or in similes that describe the city as a place where soldiers take refuge away from the fighting, like “fawns” (*Il.* 22.1).²¹ The poet plays upon the same association when Hecuba, standing on the wall, begs Hector to pity her and come back within the walls (*Il.* 22.79–89). As Scully already noted, when Hecuba holds her breast to her son, “[t]he figures of sheltering mother and protecting walls naturally merge”.²²

18 On Achilles' language and his ability to combine traditional motifs in new ways, see Martin (1989) 146–205; on “holy” Troy, see, e.g., *Il.* 7.20, with Kirk's commentary; on “holy” as a generic attribute, see Scully (1990) 16–40, and on the holy walls of Thebes and Troy, see 20 and 50.

19 For Hera adorning herself with a “headband” see *Il.* 14.184; see also the [Hes.] *Asp.* 104–105; for Poseidon as defender of Thebes, who guards the city's κρήδεμνον; see also Hoekstra (1990) 187–188.

20 Nagler (1974) 44–60 for metaphorical connotation of head-coverings.

21 For an analysis of the simile of the fawn, see Tsagalis (2008) 188–205; for the Scaean gates as the “dividing line” between the feminine and masculine worlds of the *Iliad*, see Katz (1981) 31.

22 See Scully (1990) 66 and 64–68 for his discussion of the city's identification with the female.

While Troy partakes both in the feminine and maternal imagery for city and walls, Thebes is feminized in a unique way in Homeric epic. When Agamemnon remembers how Zeus was deluded by Hera when Alcmena gave birth to Heracles in Thebes, he describes the city as “well-crowned:”

καὶ γὰρ δὴ νῦν ποτε Ζεὺς ἄσατο, τὸν περ ἄριστον
 ἀνδρῶν ἠδὲ θεῶν φασ’ ἔμμεναι· ἄλλ’ ἄρα καὶ τὸν
 Ἥρη θῆλυς εἰούσα δολοφοροσύνης ἀπάτησεν,
 ἦματι τῷ ὄτ’ ἔμελλε βίην Ἡρακλεΐην
 Ἀλκμήνη τέξεσθαι εὖστεφάνω ἐνὶ Θήβῃ.

Yes, for once even Zeus was deluded, though men say
 he is the highest one of gods and mortals. Yet Hera
 who is female deluded even Zeus in her craftiness
 on that day when in strong wall-circled Thebe Alcmena
 was at her time to bring forth the strength of Heracles.

Il. 19.95–99

At first glance the epithet may seem unsurprising: Heracles was born in Thebes, which is famous for its walls, and thus “well-crowned” or “wall-circled” as Latimore interprets the epithet. A crown resembles the imagery of the κρήδεμνον, or headband, which we have seen is a common way of referring to walls, yet there is something unique about this way of describing Thebes. “Well-crowned” is typically used elsewhere in Homeric epic to describe Aphrodite, and often in conjunction with her erotic allure and power of deception.²³ “Well-crowned Thebes” thus is a way of connecting the city to deception and the kind of delusion brought about by Aphrodite’s power.²⁴

While the *Odyssey* does not use εὖστεφάνος to describe Thebes, it does emphasize a similar quality in Thebes with a different epithet in a passage involving Oedipus:

ἀλλ’ ὁ μὲν ἐν Θήβῃ πολυηράτω ἄλγεα πάσχω
 Καδμείων ἦνασσε θεῶν ὀλοὰς διὰ βουλὰς·

²³ For “well-crowned Aphrodite,” see *Od.* 8.267, 8.288, and 18.193. As Tsagalis (2012b) 223–224, notes, the birth of Heracles is remembered twice, once by Zeus (*Il.* 14.323–5) and once by Agamemnon (*Il.* 19.95–99, 112–113) in two passages that highlight deception.

²⁴ The same epithet in two Hesiodic passages: in *Th.* 978 “well-crowned Thebes” is where the children of Harmonia and Cadmus were born, and in the [Hesiodic] *Asp.* 80, Heracles describes how Amphitryon sinned against the gods when he came to “well-crowned Thebes”.

But he, for all his sorrows, in beloved Thebes continued
to be lord over the Cadmeians, all through the bitter designing
of the gods;

Od. 11.275–276

“Beloved”, “much loved”, or “very lovely” is an epithet otherwise used in Homeric epic for marriage, bed, and youth. Scholiasts, troubled by this description of Thebes, tried to explain the incongruity away by interpreting the adjective as “much cursed”.²⁵ Like εὐστέφανος, πολυήρατος points to the erotic rather than the heroic and epic realms, and Homeric epic’s emphasis on Thebes as a “well-crowned” and “very lovely” city paint Thebes as a city of excessive love or perhaps a city that is ultimately, from the perspective of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, out of place in epic.²⁶

There is only one “lovely” city in the *Iliad*:

τὴν δ’ ἐτέρην πόλιν ἀμφὶ δὺν στρατοὶ ἦατο λαῶν
τεύχεσι λαμπόμενοι· δίχα δέ σφισιν ἦνδανε βουλῆ,
ἦ ἐ διαπραθέειν ἢ ἀνδιχα πάντα δάσασθαι
κτῆσιν ὅσπιν πτολιεθρον ἐπήρατον ἐντὸς ἔεργεν·
οἱ δ’ οὐ πω πείθοντο, λόχῳ δ’ ὑπεθωρήσσοντο.
τείχος μὲν ῥ’ ἄλοχοί τε φίλαι καὶ νήπια τέκνα
ῥύατ’ ἐφεσταότες, μετὰ δ’ ἀνέρες οὓς ἔχε γῆρας·
οἱ δ’ ἴσαν· ἦρχε δ’ ἄρα σφιν Ἄρης καὶ Παλλὰς Ἀθήνη

But around the other city were lying two forces of armed men
shining in their war gear. For one side counsel was divided
whether to storm and sack, or share between both sides the property
and all the possessions the lovely citadel held hard within it.
But the city’s people were not giving way, and armed for an ambush.
Their beloved wives and their little children stood on the rampart
to hold it, and with them the men with age upon them, but meanwhile
the others went out. And Ares led them, and Pallas Athene.

Il. 18.509–516

²⁵ Marriage: *Od.* 15.126; bed, *Od.* 23.354; and youth, *Od.* 15.366. See the discussion of this word in Barker and Christensen (2008) 24–25, on the ways in which the *Odyssey* brings in the Theban tradition through the figure of Oedipus, and how Thebes is a “much-loved” city but effectively consigned, along with its poetic tradition, to Hades by Odysseus.

²⁶ Barker and Christensen (2008) 25, already make this point about Thebes in the *Odyssey* passage: “its ruling family is much loved, excessively so, as the son marries his mother and begets his brothers and sisters”.

The city at war depicted on the shield of Achilles is in many ways generic, and as such could stand in for various cities, but the epithet ἐπίρατος is unusual and echoes the Odyssean passage about πολυήρατος Thebes. The scene from the city at war also suggests three other famous passages of the *Iliad* when women look upon the battlefield from the city walls, the *teichoscopia* (3.145–244), Hecuba's supplication of Hector (22.79–89, discussed above), and Andromache's lament (22.475–515).

On the basis of the Iliadic *teichoscopia* and the description of the besieged city on the shield of Achilles, it is likely that a poem narrating a Theban siege would have included scenes taking place on the wall. Some have tried to argue for a Theban source for the Iliadic *teichoscopia* on the grounds that it seems out of chronological place in the poem and thus must have been imported from a different one.²⁷ But even if the scene from *Iliad* 3 is inspired by Theban epic, Homeric epic develops the motif of looking from the wall in a unique way. We can look towards later sources, such as Euripides' *Phoenissae*, which must have drawn on a Theban *teichoscopia*, to reconstruct earlier traditions, and by exploring the similarities and contrasts between the Iliadic passage and the *Phoenissae*, we can recover some aspects of the relationship between a Theban and a Trojan *teichoscopia*.²⁸

In *Iliad* 3, Helen describes the Greek warriors for Priam as if he were seeing them for the first time in the tenth year of the war. The scene has seemed anachronistic and thus problematic to readers from antiquity on, but it fulfills an important narrative function of introducing the characters to the poem's audience, while also linking the present conflict to the past by alluding to Helen's suitors and the Greeks' agreement to defend her union to Menelaus. On the basis of Indic parallels, Jamison has connected the Iliadic *teichoscopia* to an Indo-European narrative pattern about wooing, bride abduction and counter-abduction.²⁹ And Helen in fact goes to the wall after Iris disguised as Laodice tells her Menelaus will fight Paris:

²⁷ See Torres-Guerra (1995) 55 for attempts to connect the Iliadic *teichoscopia* to Theban epic. Cook (2012) xxxvi, argues that the scene is less implausible than it seems, since Priam would have mostly seen the Greek leaders while they were wearing their armor.

²⁸ While some scholars have argued that the Euripidean *teichoscopia* is a later addition to the text, Mastronarde (1994, 168–173) argues for its authenticity. Besides *Iliad* 3, Euripides may have also drawn on the *parodos* of Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*; see Mastronarde (1994) 168, and 29–30 on our “total” ignorance of the origins of stories concerning Antigone.

²⁹ See Jamison (1994), where she describes how the Iliadic *teichoscopia* forms a mirror image of the motif of the wooing of a bride by a groom's companions who describe him and his lineage in Indic epic.

αὐτὰρ Ἀλέξανδρος καὶ ἄρηΐφιλος Μενέλαος
μακρῆς ἐγγείησι μαχήσονται περὶ σεῖο·
τῷ δέ κε νικήσαντι φίλη κεκλήσῃ ἄκοιτις.

But Menelaus the warlike and Alexandros will fight
With long spears against each other for your possession.
You shall be called beloved wife of the man who wins you.

Il. 3.136–138

Helen's viewing from the wall is thus connected to the narrative of her marriage: the scene recalls the wooing of her suitors before she married Menelaus by gathering them all beneath the wall, while it also brings to mind her subsequent abduction by Paris, and it also has the potential to develop into a counter-abduction (following the Indic parallels) that would restore her to her lawful husband, Menelaus.³⁰

After a prologue spoken by Jocasta, Euripides' *Phoenissae* opens with Antigone and a servant climbing onto and looking out from the wall, discussing what they see. There are many superficial resemblances and a few explicit allusions to the Homeric scene, but also several indications that Euripides was drawing on a Theban tradition significantly different from the Homeric scene. In both the Iliadic and the Euripidean *teichoscopiai*, Helen and Antigone are observing warriors about to attack a city and its walls, but whereas Helen recognizes old suitors and a former husband, Antigone sees enemies intent on taking her city. Another important contrast is between Helen's knowledge and Antigone's ignorance. While both scenes include a dialogue, Helen answers Priam's questions, while Antigone questions her servant.

Priam asks Helen about the identity of the Greek warriors in surprisingly positive terms: Agamemnon is "noble and huge", "beautiful", "lordly", and "like a king" (ἦϋς τε μέγας τε, καλός, γεραρός, βασιλεύς, *Il.* 3.166–170), while Antenor praises Odysseus' extraordinary speaking skills (*Il.* 3.221–224). To Antigone, by contrast, the warriors she sees from the wall are "haughty," "threatening" (γαῦρος, φοβερός, *Phoen.* 127), half-barbarian (μειξοβάρβαρος, *Phoen.* 138), and terrible (γοργός, *Phoen.* 146), and her first concern is for the gates and locks and solidity of the wall built by Amphion (*Phoen.* 114–116).

Despite the fundamental difference between Helen's and Antigone's perspectives on what they see from the wall, there are several points of contact between the two scenes. Helen and Antigone both express a desire to see their brothers.

³⁰ See, for example, the catalogue of Helen's Suitors in the [Hesiodic] *Gynaiikon Katalogos*, frs. 196–204 (M-W). On the connection of the catalogue and the Epic Cycle, see Cingano (2008).

Unaware of their deaths, Helen looks for her brothers but cannot find them on the battlefield. Euripides' *Phoenissae* alludes to this passage at line 156, when Antigone asks the servant about her brother:

ποῦ δ' ὃς ἔμοι μᾶς ἐγένετ' ἐκ ματρὸς
 πολυπόνωι μοίραι;
 ὦ φίλτατ', εἶπέ, ποῦ 'στι Πολυνείκης, γέρον;

And where is he whom my selfsame mother bore
 to a painful fate?

Dear ancient, tell me, where is Polyneices?

Eur. *Phoen.* 156–159 (Wyckoff transl.)

Antigone's language is very close to Helen's (τῷ μοι μία γείνατο μήτηρ, *Il.* 3.238), and Euripides here (and elsewhere) self-consciously alludes to the Iliadic scene.³¹ Antigone does get a glimpse of Polyneices in the distance, resplendent with his golden weapons in the light of the dawn, standing near the tomb of Niobe's daughters (*Phoen.* 168–169).

Both Homeric epic and Euripides also highlight the pleasures of seeing. Priam and Antenor seem to take delight in observing the Greek leaders, and even as Antigone describes what she sees as threatening, she also enjoys the play of reflected light on bronze weapons that brighten the scene.³² The spectacle of impending war has its pleasures, even for the besieged, who look upon the battlefield from the wall like Zeus watching with pleasure from Olympos (ὀρόων φρένα τέρψομαι, *Il.* 20.23). And as we can already see in the north frieze from Thera, *teichoscopiai* and sieges were popular early on as subjects for visual artists.³³

Besides these similarities, important differences between Euripides' *Phoenissae* and the *Iliad* point to the ways in which a Theban *teichoscopia* must have differed from the scene with Helen on the wall. While *Iliad* 3 draws on an Indo-European pattern of bride abduction, Antigone on the wall would emphatically not be looking upon former or potential suitors. Other Iliadic wall scenes, such as Andromache's lament and the city at war depicted on Achilles' shield thus provide better parallels for a Theban tradition that would have emphasized the

³¹ See Mastronarde (1994) 195, who describes the line as “borrowed” from *Il.* 3.238. See also Mastronarde (1994) 184, on the description at *Phoen.* 110–111 of the plain shining with bronze and the parallel at *Il.* 20.156 when gods watch the battlefield just before Aeneas and Achilles fight.

³² Mastronarde (1994) 186 notes that Antigone is particularly attuned to “details of reflected light and graceful movement”.

³³ See Morris (1989) 524–529.

destruction of both a city and a family. The *teichoscopia* of *Iliad* 3 is in effect distancing itself from Theban tradition.

But there is one important way in which both scenes resemble one another: they both look towards the past, with Helen and Antigone looking for long lost brothers and seeing physical reminders of the past such as tombs. Both scenes also bring in the past by having characters reminisce about their own past as they contemplate the view from the wall. Helen remembers her former life, while Priam recalls his youthful trip to join the Phrygian forces against the Amazons, which he expresses in the form of a compliment for the great force that Agamemnon oversees, with no apparent discomfort at the Greeks' intentions towards his city. The servant in *Phoenissae* remembers how he accompanied Eteocles on an expedition to attempt a truce with Polyneices, which is why he is able to recognize the warriors on the plain (*Phoen.* 95–98). Euripides here again plays up the contrast between his and the Homeric scene: instead of a noble king reminiscing about the wars of his youth, the servant remembers accompanying his master on a doomed mission. Tombs of ancestors, including city founders, are also visible from both the walls of Troy and Thebes: Ilus at Troy, Amphion and Zethus, and the children of Niobe at Thebes, providing a connection between past and present, but also pointing toward the destruction awaiting both Thebes and Troy.³⁴ The *Iliad* thus constantly calls attention to the supposedly permanent qualities of objects such as walls and tombs while alluding to their relative impermanence compared to the everlasting power of poetry. And the walls at Troy, including the one built by Poseidon and Apollo, by the Trojans and Athene for Heracles, and by the Achaeans to protect their camp, can also be seen as repositories of memories of different stages of the Trojan tale, and taken together, “the memories evoked by the walls amount to a history of Troy”.³⁵

I want to turn now to the building and the destruction of the Achaean wall in *Iliad* 7 and 12, an episode much commented upon for its strangeness, both in terms of the narrative's lack of rationale for such an action at this late stage of the war, and for the poem's insistence that the wall will be completely destroyed. Many ancient and modern commentators have been bothered by the ill-timed edifice, and some have resorted to interpolation to explain its oddness. But the Achaean wall, and its eventual destruction, are in many ways central to the narrative of the *Iliad*. It makes sense for the Greeks to need more protection once Achilles withdraws from the fighting. And the wall allows the poet to stage battles near the Achaean camp in a move that turns the Greeks into the besieged rather than

³⁴ For more on the topography of Thebes, see note 17.

³⁵ Grethlein (2008) 34, and see also discussion of walls in 32–35.

the attackers.³⁶ The foretold destruction of the wall also allows the poet to extend his narrative well beyond the confines of the story of Troy.

There is a thematic connection with the Theban tradition in the motif of the *teichomachia*, the battle at the wall, yet by its very nature, the motif is also somewhat generic, as we can infer from the siege scene on Achilles' shield.³⁷ Both the motifs of the Theban *teichomachia* and the Iliadic destruction of the wall also share intriguing ancient Near Eastern parallels: Burkert has argued that the "tale of the 'Seven Against Thebes is the epic transposition of a purification ritual of ultimately Babylonian origin", while Scodel points out the resemblances between the destruction of the Achaean wall and ancient Near Eastern flood myths.³⁸ Burkert's theory argues for the direct influence of a Babylonian text and ritual on a Greek oral poem sometime after 750 BC, suggesting that while the Theban tradition, and especially the story of the Epigonoï, may have included memories of a Mycenaean Thebes, the story of the Seven and the seven gates of Thebes were a later innovation.

The story of the seven warriors and gates and the Achaean wall may thus share an ancient Near Eastern origin. While the *Iliad* does not explicitly connect the Achaean wall to the seven gates of the Theban tradition and remains vague about the number of gates, seven leaders are named as guardians (ἕπτ' ἔσαν ἡγεμόνες φυλάκων, 9.85).³⁹ The numerical correspondence stops there, with Hector sending five contingents of warriors to attack the wall, but the number of Achaean leaders nevertheless suggests a connection between the Achaean and Theban wall.

The Theban tradition may also be key to understanding the role of the wall in the narrative. The *Iliad* may be deliberately vague about the number of gates, but, as others have noted before, the wall is crucial in allowing the poet to turn the longest day of battle at Troy (*Iliad* 11–18) into an unexpected kind of narrative, one that portrays the Greeks as defenders rather than besiegers, an obvious connection with Theban epic: the Greeks, like the Trojans, and like the Thebans

36 See West (1969); for the wall as a fictional object and the critical response to it, see J. Porter (2011). For the function of the wall in the poem and its identification with Achilles, see Nagy (1979) 160, and Boyd (1995).

37 See Torres-Guerra (1995) 55–57 for a discussion of this motif in its connection with the Theban tradition.

38 See Burkert (1981) especially 42, and Scodel (1982); see also West (1997) 455–457.

39 See Hainsworth (1993) 313–314 for a summary of the question and Aristarchus' determination to argue for a single gate. Singor (1992) argues on the basis of the seven leaders and the river named Ἑπτάπορος ("Seven Streams") that the idea of a wall with seven gates, both in the *Iliad* and the Theban tradition, go back to Mesopotamian myth.

before them, are put in the position of defending their wall.⁴⁰ The building, and eventual destruction, of the Achaean wall are also both included in the poem, transforming the few days of battle witnessed by the *Iliad* into a narrative of a city's symbolic foundation, siege, and destruction.⁴¹

Homeric epic thus presents a typology of walls, including three stages (building, battle at the wall, destruction), that connects the Theban and the Trojan narratives. When the Greeks build their walls in *Iliad* 7, they effectively become city founders, doomed to lose their city on the Trojan shore:

τοῖσι δὲ μύθων ἦρχε Ποσειδάων ἔνοσίχθων·
 Ζεῦ πάτερ, ἦ ῥά τίς ἐστι βροτῶν ἐπ' ἀπείρονα γαῖαν
 ὅς τις ἔτ' ἀθανάτοισι νόον καὶ μῆτιν ἐνίψει;
 οὐχ ὀράς ὅτι δ' αὐτε κάρη κομόωντες Ἀχαιοὶ
 τεῖχος ἐτειχίσσαντο νεῶν ὕπερ, ἀμφὶ δὲ τάφρον
 ἦλασαν, οὐδὲ θεοῖσι δόσαν κλειτὰς ἑκατόμβας;
 τοῦ δ' ἦτοι κλέος ἔσται ὅσον τ' ἐπικίδναται ἠώς·
 τοῦ δ' ἐπιλήσονται τὸ ἐγὼ καὶ Φοῖβος Ἀπόλλων
 ἦρω Λαομέδοντι πολίσσαμεν ἀθλήσαντε.
 Τὸν δὲ μέγ' ὀχθήσας προσέφη νεφεληγερέτα Ζεὺς·
 ὦ πόποι ἔνοσίγαι' εὐρυσθενές, οἷόν ἔειπες,
 ἄλλός κέν τις τοῦτο θεῶν δεισιεῖ νόημα,
 ὃς σέο πολλὸν ἀφαιρότερος χεῖράς τε μένος τε·
 σὸν δ' ἦτοι κλέος ἔσται ὅσον τ' ἐπικίδναται ἠώς.
 ἄγρει μὲν ὄτ' ἂν αὐτε κάρη κομόωντες Ἀχαιοὶ
 οἴχωνται σὺν νηυσὶ φίλην ἐς πατρίδα γαῖαν
 τεῖχος ἀναρρήξας τὸ μὲν εἰς ἄλα πᾶν καταχευῶι,
 αὐτίς δ' ἠϊόνα μεγάλην ψαμάθοισι καλύψαι,
 ὥς κέν τοι μέγα τεῖχος ἀμαλδύνηται Ἀχαιῶν.

and the god Poseidon who shakes the earth began speaking among them:

“Father Zeus, is there any mortal left on the wide earth
 who will still declare to the immortals his mind and his purpose?
 Do you not see how now these flowing-haired Achaeans
 have built a wall landward of their ships, and driven about it
 a ditch, and not given to the gods any grand sacrifice?
 Now the fame of this will reach as far as dawn scatters her light,
 and men will forget that wall which I and Phoebus Apollo
 built with our hard work for the hero Laomedon's city”.
 Deeply troubled, Zeus who gathers the clouds answered him:
 “What a thing to have said, earth-shaker of the wide strength.

⁴⁰ The point has been made before, see, e.g., Clay (2011) 59 who notes that “during the longest day of battle, the Greeks besieging Troy become the besieged, their camp a city under attack” with note. On building walls as the equivalent of founding a city, see Scully (1990) 48.

⁴¹ For the Greek camp as a symbolic *polis*, see Raaflaub (1993) 47–48.

Some other one of the gods might fear such a thought, one who is a god far weaker of his hands and in anger than you are; but your fame will reach as far as dawn scatters her light. Come then! After once more the flowing-haired Achaeans are gone back with their ships to the beloved land of their fathers, break their wall to pieces and scatter it into the salt sea and pile again the beach deep under the sands and cover it; so let the great wall of the Achaeans go down to destruction.”

Il. 7.445–463

The Achaean wall exists in an agonistic relationship with other walls. As Poseidon points out, he made Troy into a city (πολίισσαμεν) by encircling it with a wall, and so are the Greeks notionally founding a city when they build their wall. Poseidon is angry on two counts: the wall has been built without any sacrifice to the gods, and the wall's κλέος will reach the ends of the earth. Some have dismissed Poseidon's complaint about the absence of sacrifice as trivial, but it points to the uniqueness of the Achaean wall, which is built by human beings without recourse to divine help, and has its very foundations up against the remains of warriors burned on the funeral pyre that day.⁴² The humanity thus embodied in the wall contrasts with the divinely and quasi-magically built walls of Troy and Thebes.

Another crucial detail makes the Achaean wall unusual. The conversation between Poseidon and Zeus takes place as the wall is in the process of being finished, and so the audience learns of its future destruction before its completion in the narrative. The spectacular act of erasure is foretold by Zeus in *Iliad* 7 and again by the narrator in *Iliad* 12:

ὄφρα μὲν Ἐκτωρ ζωὸς ἔην καὶ μῆνι Ἀχιλλεύς
καὶ Πριάμοιο ἄνακτος ἀπόρθητος πόλις ἔπλεν,
τόφρα δὲ καὶ μέγα τεῖχος Ἀχαιῶν ἔμπεδον ἦεν.
αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ κατὰ μὲν Τρώων θάνον ὅσσοι ἄριστοι,
πολλοὶ δ' Ἀργείων οἳ μὲν δάμεν, οἳ δὲ λίποντο,
πέρθετο δὲ Πριάμοιο πόλις δεκάτῳ ἐνιαυτῷ,
Ἀργεῖοι δ' ἐν νηυσὶ φίλην ἐς πατρίδ' ἔβησαν,
δὴ τότε μητιόωντο Ποσειδάων καὶ Ἀπόλλων
τεῖχος ἀμαλδύνα ποταμῶν μένος εἰσαγαγόντες.
ὅσσοι ἀπ' Ἰδαίων ὄρεων ἄλα δὲ προρέουσι,
Ῥῆσός θ' Ἐπτάπορος τε Κάρησός τε Ῥοδῖος τε
Γρήνικός τε καὶ Αἴσηπος δῖός τε Σκάμανδρος

⁴² See, e.g., Kirk (1990) 289 on *Il.* 7.450; similarly Scodel (1982, 34) argues that Poseidon's complaint about the lack of hecatombs “seems like motive-hunting”. The lack of sacrifice provides another connection with the Trojan wall, which is built through the treachery of Laomedon so that in both instances the construction of the walls can also be understood as cheating the gods.

interesting is the poet's choice to use this end-of-the-world motif specifically to describe the divine erasure of one single man-made wall.⁴³

Because it shares in the same unusual diction, the passage has often been connected with Hesiod's description of the fourth race of the heroes, whom he also calls the ἡμίθεοι, and who include both those who fought at Thebes and those who fought at Troy (Hes. *WD* 156–65). The Hesiodic passage implies that these two groups are the subjects of comparable poetic traditions, but Homeric epic by contrast singles out those who fought at Troy as constituting the race of ἡμίθεοι.⁴⁴

Homeric epic thus seems not only aware of Theban traditions, but is also keen on referring to it in an agonistic way. The *Iliad* alludes to Thebes directly, by comparing its heroes to those of the past, or indirectly by using epithets and motifs common to both the Theban and Trojan settings, but highlights its own uniqueness, as in the episodes of the *teichosopia* and the Achaean wall. Consequently, in the typology of epic walls, the construction and annihilation of the Achaean wall is the most spectacular of all. We can be certain that the audience listening to the *Iliad* would never be able to think of Homeric poetry as the equivalent of mourning “the walls of Amphion and his lyre”. Homer's Achaeans manage to be better than the Thebans at everything, both at winning the war and losing their wall in an unforgettable cosmic event, which, by ignoring it, also erases the Theban tradition.⁴⁵

⁴³ See Scodel (1982); West (1992) 377–380.

⁴⁴ See Nagy (1979) 159–160; see also Barker and Christensen (2008) 3. ἀμαλδύνειν (‘to efface’ or ‘to wipe out’) only appears in these two passages in Homer; for a metapoetic reading of the erasure of the wall, see Ford (1992) 150–152.

⁴⁵ I would like to thank Christos Tsagalis for inviting me to participate in this collection of essays, and Nicolle Hirschfeld, Tom Jenkins, Shannon Mariotti, Tim O’Sullivan and David Rando for conversations on writing, Homer, and walls. For reading this essay and offering their insights and many helpful suggestions, I am grateful to Erwin Cook and Peter Mazur.