
[BMCR 2014.09.57](#) on the BMCR blog

Bryn Mawr Classical Review 2014.09.57

Valentina Prospero, *Omero sconfitto: ricerche sul mito di Troia dall'antichità al Rinascimento. Temi e testi*, 125. Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2013. Pp. xi, 108. ISBN 9788863725889. €16.00 (pb).

**Reviewed by Alexandra Trachsel, University of Hamburg
(alexandra.trachsel@uni-hamburg.de)**

This study consists of three essays, which illustrate selected aspects of Prospero's ongoing research on the reception of the Trojan legend in Western culture. They can therefore be read independently, although they have a common theme and are in many ways complementary to each other. Indeed all three focus on two ancient retellings of the Trojan story, the *Ephemeris belli Troiani* by Dictys of Crete and the *De excidio Troiae historia* written by Dares the Phrygian. Moreover, both texts share the peculiarity of having been known for a long time only in Latin translation, so that modern readers started to doubt the existence of the Greek originals from which they claim to derive. However, papyrological finds have now proved, at least for Dictys' text, that the Latin work was indeed a translation of a Greek original. Prospero starts from this point and observes that modern mistrust towards these texts is a fairly recent phenomenon. Indeed, throughout late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, and well into the Renaissance period, they were highly regarded and even preferred to the Homeric poems or Vergil's *Aeneid*, at least as long as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were not accessible to Western readers. This peculiar reception of Dictys' and Dares' retellings is precisely what fascinated Prospero and made her undertake the investigation of which she presents the first results in the present study.

In her first essay Prospero focuses on the time when Dictys' *Ephemeris belli Troiani*, seems to have been composed. This is the period of the Second Sophistic, and Prospero uses some of the characteristics of this literary movement to explain the creation of Dictys' work. She highlights for instance the fact that other authors belonging to the Second Sophistic were rethinking the concept of storytelling and responded to historians' claims to tell the truth by parodying their accounts in a way that Prospero associates with the modern concept of *pseudo-documentalism*. This notion has been used to describe the frame story of ancient novels [1](#) and by applying it to the two works under discussion, Prospero confirms that there was a link between ancient novels and Dictys' and Dares' works. She compares the two narratives more explicitly with Lucian's *True Story*, Philostratus' *Heroikos* and Dio Chrysostom's *Trojan Discourse* (Or. 11), and highlights the fact that, in contrast with these other texts, the narrative strategy employed by Dictys and Dares was successful in the

sense that readers started to believe that their stories were more authentic and trustworthy than the poetic accounts given for instance by Homer. This observation allows Prosperi to focus more specifically on the reception of the two works. She dedicates the end of her essay to this topic, taking Lucius Septimus, the author of the Latin translation of Dictys' *Ephemeris belli Troiani*, as a first example of a reader who believed that this text contained the truth about the Trojan War. This part of the chapter, in which she moves from this first Latin translation to the 17th and very briefly even to the 18th century, announces her second and third essays, which are dedicated to the medieval and early modern reception of the two texts.

In her second essay, Prosperi deals with Dante and analyses his *oeuvre* in an attempt to identify traces of his use of the two works. She does this by singling out some passages connected to the Trojan story in which Dante diverges from Vergil's account and examines what could have been Dante's source for the episode in question. In particular, she looks at the death of Odysseus, the tradition about Aeneas' and Antenor's betrayal, and finally Achilles' love for Polyxena. The aim is to show that Dante used sources other than Vergil and Servius' commentaries and that these other sources, mostly medieval retellings of episodes from the Trojan legend, were ultimately based on Dares and Dictys. In order to strengthen the link between Dante and the two ancient authors she also takes into account more popular sources such as the medieval cantari, thus giving her study an interestingly broad scope.

Finally, Prosperi's third essay is concerned with the scholars of the 15th and 16th centuries. She starts, however, by emphasising the influence Petrarch's and Boccaccio's positive view of Dictys and Dares had on subsequent readers. Indeed, most of them still preferred the two prose retellings to the Homeric poems, although scholars like Salutati were more sceptical about their accuracy. In this connection, Prosperi highlights the fact that the Homeric poems initially came as a disappointment to Renaissance scholars: they did not correspond to their ideals of poetic composition. Therefore, even when Homer's poems started to be available again and became the subject of scholarly commentaries, they were not welcomed as enthusiastically as their fame may have suggested. The better-known medieval narrations and their sources, Dares and Dictys, corresponded better to the aesthetic values of the time and were often privileged over the two Homeric poems. The end of Prosperi's essay is dedicated to explaining the reluctance with which Renaissance scholars approached the Homeric poems. She suggests for instance that the delay in the recognition of Homer's poems was due in part to the fact that their rediscovery coincided with a revival of interest in Dares' and Dictys' works, since by then other ancient retellings of the Trojan story, such as Philostratus' *Heroikos*, Dio Chrysostom's *Trojan Discourse* (Or. 11) and also Quintus of Smyrna's *Posthomerica* were rediscovered and circulated among scholars.

All in all, this is an interesting and well-conducted study which illuminates the sometimes surprising ways in which the reception and transmission of ancient texts developed through the ages. Prosperi's choice of Dictys' *Ephemeris belli Troiani* and Dares' *De excidio Troiae historia*, turns out to be extremely interesting: these texts started off as responses to the Homeric poems and their influence, in a literary context that encouraged playful engagement with the

Homeric heritage. At some point, however, they became completely independent and surprisingly popular so that they finally replaced Homer as a source of information about Troy throughout the Middle Ages. It is only relatively recently that scholars started disregarding them as minor works. Prosperi's study not only contributes to bringing the two texts back to the attention of a wider readership but also provides an interesting new perspective on the reception of the Homeric texts, and on the history of ancient scholarship.