

In-Depth: UNB'S Arts Forum: Professors and Their Research

A Classical Jigsaw Puzzle: Professor Reimer Faber attempts to piece together a 3rd century B.C. manuscript, the *Hecale*, from fragments surviving the Fourth Crusade ambush of Athens.

by Kimberley Branch

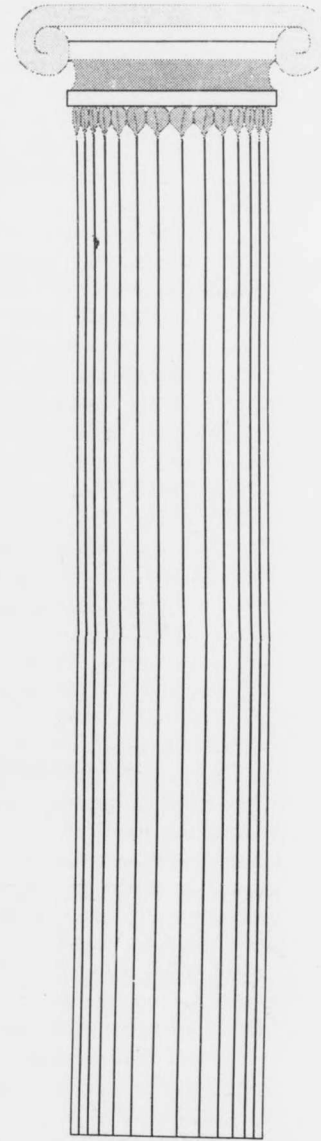
Imagine yourself sitting at a table, having just opened a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle. Suddenly, your city (Athens) is sacked, oh... let's say, by Franks and your house is set ablaze. Seven hundred pieces of the puzzle are lost in the fire and the remaining three hundred are in very poor condition. You no longer have the picture on the box, only a vague idea of what your puzzle resembles, but you remain determined to put the puzzle together as best as you can.

The gratifying work of UNB Classics professor Reimer Faber puts him in a similar situation. He is currently working on a third-century BC manuscript, Callimachus' thousand-line masterpiece, *Hecale*. Only fragments survived the Fourth Crusade ambush of Athens by the Franks. Since then, scholars have been attempting to piece the *Hecale* back together, using techniques such as comparison with other literature of the time, analysis of Callimachus' style,

and an intense examination of ancient lexicons which quote fragments of the poem. Unfortunately, the surviving lines often contain only one or two words and can be just as frustrating as the blank passages in the poem. The longest continuous segment is twenty-five lines, most of the others are incomplete. So his puzzle is full of big holes, and the pieces he does have don't fit together very well.

The *Hecale* belongs to a particular literary genre called epyllion, or mini-epic (as opposed to full-length epics such as Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*). Knowing this, Professor Faber has a basic idea of the identifying characteristics of his puzzle. The typical features of an epyllion help him assume certain things about the writing style, content, and context of this poem. He knows that the complete puzzle will be a landscape rather than a cartoon, so he can expect to look for sky and trees. For example, since long descriptions of objects were commonly employed by other writers of epyllia in Callimachus' era, there is probably one in the *Hecale*. Professor Faber is trying to prove that it is a description of a mantle. The evidence seems to point to this, but he must also place this description in relation to the existing fragments of the poem. He argues that one of the fragments is in fact a preamble to the description; he sees rays of sunlight on some puzzle pieces, we might say, and deduces from them that the sun is in a specific location on the puzzle.

Many people might wonder why anyone would even bother to piece together this monumental manuscript puzzle. But say the puzzle was the last copy of a Salvador Dali painting. Wouldn't you like to be the one to find the last piece and put it in its proper place? That's the goal of the academics working on the *Hecale*. Callimachus was a famous and influential poet: a complete version of this epyllion would improve our knowledge of an early civilization's literary traditions. Professor Faber's research, then, contributes to a better understanding of ancient Greek literature and society.



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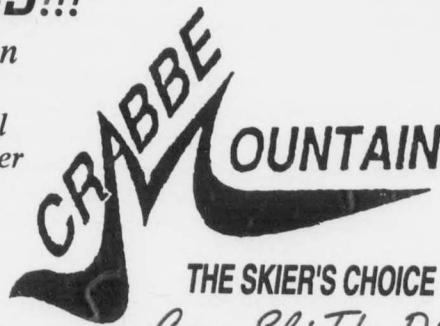
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