ABSTRACT

Title of thesis: UNCOILING THE *LAOCOON*: REVEALING THE STATUE
                     GROUP'S SIGNIFICANCE IN AUGUSTAN ROME

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Since its rediscovery in Rome in 1506, the *Laocoon* has raised issues regarding its date, its owner, its status as a Roman copy of a Greek original, and which literary account it reflects. It was not until a telling inscription with the names and patronymics of the artists was found on a statue group at Sperlonga that the same atelier working there was found responsible for creating the *Laocoon*. This led prosopographical experts to date the sculptors' activity to the early decades of the Roman Empire and while this date has been accepted by most scholars of Hellenistic art, the implications of situating the *Laocoon* in this period has not been fully explored. This thesis examines the statue group in conjunction to other artistic and literary projects under Augustus, and determines that the *Laocoon* functioned as a symbol of past struggles overcome in order for Rome's glory to be realized.

UNCOILING THE *LAOCOON*: REVEALING THE STATUE GROUP'S
SIGNIFICANCE IN AUGUSTAN ROME

by

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The Belvedere Courtyard is home to a handful of the monumental antiques in stone that the Vatican has amassed for its collection throughout the years. One of these works of art features the Trojan priest Laocoon and his two sons entwined in a serpentine mesh, following the mythological narrative associated with their death (figure 1). Two serpents wind in and out between the three figures and unite the group in a pyramidal composition. The apex of the pyramid is Laocoon, who expresses the suffering inherent to the entire statue group in every inch of his sculpted body. His exaggerated musculature delineates each twist and turn that unfolds in his body and also makes visible the tension that runs through the whole group. Laocoon's left thigh bulges with muscles that partially lift him off the altar beneath him. Meanwhile, his left arm powerfully presses against the snake that is about to deliver a lethal bite to his side. Laocoon's right arm, which was correctly reaffixed in 1942,[1] is bent at the elbow and completes the diagonal thrust seen in the rest of his body. The agony expressed in the torsion and tension of Laocoon's body is reiterated in his contorted face. Laocoon's furrowed brow bears down on his upturned eyes and a faint moan seems to escape from his slightly agape mouth.

On the right side of the group is Laocoon's older son, who shoots a pained look toward the other two. He reaches down to release his ankle from the coiled grip of the snake, but his attention is more closely focused on the horrible fate of his father and brother unfolding before his eyes. The younger son, too fraught to struggle against the monstrous serpent, has not gone completely limp, but all fight has left him. His left arm

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[1] Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny, *Taste and the Antique: The Lure of Classical Sculpture 1500-1900*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 247.

that he throws across his chest to wrest away the snake will at any second drop lifelessly as his life expires.

Ever since the statue was unearthed in Rome on January 14, 1506, it has raised issues regarding its date, its owner, which literary account it follows, and its status as a Roman copy of a Greek original. Scholars now agree that this statue group is not the original as conceived in the Hellenistic period, but a later adaptation.[2] This question, however, is not the one of interest here. This paper will focus on the Roman context of the extant group during the early years of the Empire. After determining a date for the statue group through evidence provided by a comparison with sculptures from Sperlonga, the *Laocoon* can be viewed in conjunction with other Augustan projects. The ideals reflected in other contemporaneous artistic and literary works will elucidate the significance the *Laocoon* held for Romans of the Early Imperial period.

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[2] Scholars have cited various reasons for believing the extant marble statue group to be a copy, adaptation, translation, or emulation of a Greek original bronze. The similarities between the *Laocoon* and the figure of Alkyoneus from the *Great Altar* at Pergamon (figure 2-3) have called attention to the *Laocoon* as specifically a Pergamene project. Not only is the contorted pose and pained expression of Laocoon echoed in Alkyoneus, but the sympathetic look offered by the elder son of Laocoon and Alkyoneus's mother, Ge, has also been compared by John Onians, (*Classical Art and the Cultures of Greece and Rome*. [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999], 144.) Bernard Andreae posits that the original bronze was created under the Pergamene rulers Attalos I or II (3rd to 2nd century BCE) in Bernard Andreae, (*Laokoon und die Gründung Roms*. [Mainz am Rhein: von Zabern, 1988], 34-35, 159-66 and chap. 3). According to Andreae, the marble statue group is an accurate replica of a bronze original and he sees the awkward positioning of the elder son's mantle (figure 4) as evidence of a "copyist's strut." John Onians agrees with Andreae in Onians, *Classical Art and the Cultures of Greece and Rome*, 140-45. Peter H. von Blanckenhagen ("Laokoon, Sperlonga und Vergil," *Archäologischer Anzeiger* [1969]: 256-75; review of *The Polyphemus and Scylla Groups at Sperlonga*, by Gösta Säflund. *American Journal of Archaeology* 77 [1973]: 456-60) sees the *Laocoon* as an adaption of a Hellenistic original with an addition of the elder son. The strict diagonals formed by the figures of Laocoon and his younger son echo one another and unite the two in a composition that could have stood alone without the elder son present. Karl Galinsky, Review of *Laokoon und die Gründung Roms*, by Bernard Andreae. *American Journal of Archaeology* 94 (1990): 164-65 agrees with Blanckenhagen's analysis. One scholar believes that the elder son was turned ninety degrees toward the right side of the altar; see Seymour Howard, "On the Reconstructions of the Vatican Laocoon Group." *American Journal of Archaeology* 63 (1959), 365-69; Seymour Howard, "Laocoon Rerestored." *American Journal of Archaeology* 93 (1989) 417-22.

The Vatican _Laocoon_ and its Early Influences

Just enough information surrounding the statue group survives to pique the

interest of artists, historians, philosophers, writers and scholars of Hellenistic art alike,

and the _Laocoon_ has not ceased to inspire, influence, and intrigue its audience since the

time of its creation. The marble group now in the Vatican was identified as soon as it

was unearthed in the early sixteenth century by a description given by Pliny the Elder

(_NH_ 36.37):

> The reputation of some, distinguished though their work may be, has been
> obscured by the number of artists engaged with them on a single task, because no
> individual monopolizes the credit nor again can several of them be named on
> equal terms. This is the case with the Laocoon in the palace of emperor Titus, a
> work superior to any painting and any bronze. Laocoon, his children and the
> wonderful clasping coils of the snakes were carved from a single block in
> accordance with an agreed plan by those eminent craftsmen Hagesander,
> Polydorus and Athenodorus, all of Rhodes.[3]

Despite Pliny's description that the statue is composed _ex uno lapide_, detailed

examination of the group revealed that it was made of seven blocks of marble.[4] Scholars

have tried to explain this contradiction by interpreting Pliny's statement in a variety of

ways. Some argue that he was referring to the type of marble used and meant that one

kind of marble composed the group rather than a variety of different marbles to achieve

color effects.[5] But based on other uses of the term _ex uno lapide_ in the author's text,

Pliny was more likely praising the technical skill of the artist to produce multi-figural

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[3] Pliny the Elder. _Naturalis historia_ 37.37, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1938).

[4] Filippo Magi. _Il ripristino del Laocoonte_. Atti della Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia, Serie III. Memorie Vol. IX. Tipografia Poliglotta Vaticana, 1960, ch. 2.

[5] Michael Koortbojian, "Pliny's _Laocoon_?" in _Antiquity and its Interpreters_, ed. Alina Payne, Ann Kuttner, and Rebekah Smick. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 202 and n. 24.

works that appear to be carved from a single block.[6] Aside from this discrepancy, the

statue group *does* comprise Laocoon and his two sons coiled together by serpents as Pliny

records.

Nonetheless, efforts have been made to reconcile differences between Pliny's

description of the statue group and the marble one in the Vatican today. Besides the

discrepancy in the number of blocks used to form the group, the find spot of the *Laocoon*

has also complicated matters. While Pliny's account locates the *Laocoon* in the *domus* of

Titus,[7] the actual discovery of the statue occurred in the Sette Sale, the holding tanks of

the Baths of Trajan on the Esquiline.[8] Some scholars have thus concluded that the

Vatican *Laocoon* and the one mentioned by Pliny are two different statues while others

assume that the statue was moved at some point.[9] Other versions of the *Laocoon* were

reportedly found in Rome during the Renaissance, and whether the Vatican *Laocoon* was

the precise one mentioned by Pliny has been questioned since then. Benedetto Egio, a

"most skilled interpreter of antiquity" active during the mid-16th century, wrote of

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[6] Ibid., 202 and n. 25-27. See also Fred C. Albertson, "Pliny and the Vatican Laocoon," *Mitteilungen des deutschen archäologischen Instituts* 100 (1993), 133-40.

[7] The location of the *domus* of Titus is unknown, though some infer that the *domus* was located on the Quirinal Hill since that was the site of the *Domus Vespasiani* and later rebuilt into the *Templum Gentis Flaviae* by Domitian. See, e.g., L. Richardson, *A New Topographical Dictionary of Ancient Rome*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 137-38; see also Albertson, "Pliny and the Vatican Laocoon," 139. E. Papi, "Domus Titi Imperatoris," in *Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae* (hereafter *LTUR*), ed. Eva Margareta Steinby, 6 vols. (Rome: Quasar, 1993-2000), vol. 1 (1993), 199 places the *domus* in a building that was used until 104 CE, east of the *Domus Aurea*. The main reason for this placement however, is based on Pliny's mention of the *Laocoon* in the *domus Titi* and the find spot of the statue group near the *Domus Aurea*. Therefore, the logic is circular and no definite location of the Titus' palace has been found to date.

[8] K. De Fine Licht, *Untersuchungen und den Trajansthermen zu Rom. 2. Sette Sale*. (Rome: 'L'Erma' di Bretschneider, 1990); G. Caruso and R. Volpe, "Thermae Traiani," in *LTUR*, vol. 6 (2000), 67-69; Amanda Claridge, *Rome: an Oxford Archaeological Guide*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 292-93.

[9] Albertson, "Pliny and the Vatican Laocoon," 133-40, pls. 32-33 thinks the Vatican version is a copy of one that existed somewhere else in Rome; Koortbojian, "Pliny's *Laocoon*?" 199-216 outlines arguments made for both sides since the Renaissance.

Antoniolo Antiquario owning fragments of serpents from another Laocoon statue that was found near the Baths of Titus and deduced that this was the one Pliny described.[10] In a guide to Roman collections written in 1550, Ulisse Aldrovandi describes a "piccolissimo" statue at the house of Mario Macaroni and another at the house of Maffei near "la Cimbella" – the ruins of the Baths of Agrippa near the Pantheon.[11] However, none of these accounts identifies an exact find spot or the precise scale of the work of art; nor are any of the statues extant today.

Similarly in 1588, at the church of Santa Pudenziana on the Esquiline Hill, Francesco da Volterra was present when a leg missing its foot and a fist of a statue of Laocoon similar to the Vatican one were dug out of the ground, but our only source for the account comes from a 1638 publication by Gaspare Celio. While describing churches and *palazzi* of Rome, Celio mentions that a statue group was found "bigger than the one in the Belvedere, and very beautiful in style, so that if one believes the experts, it might be the true original which Pliny names."[12] However, Celio continues to say that the "wicked" masons who worked on contract at this church did not bother to do the extra work and dig up the rest of the statue.[13] Unfortunately, this version of the statue is lost as

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[10] Koortbojian, "Pliny's *Laocoon*?" 204-5; Egio's associate, Pirro Ligorio, mentions the Laocoon group from the Baths of Titus as well and states that the Vatican version was smaller in scale and of lesser quality than the former. The Baths of Titus are situated on the Oppius (southwestern part of the Esquiline Hill), just west of the Baths of Trajan. Richardson, *A New Topographical Dictionary of Ancient Rome*, 396-97.

[11] Koortbojian, "Pliny's *Laocoon*?" 206 and n. 59-64. Aldrovandi also mentions another work that allegedly featured one of Laocoon's sons in the Rustici's Palazzo della Valle.

[12] Quote at ibid., 206. Original in Gaspare Celio, *Memorie fatted al Signor Gaspare Celio dell'habito di Christo, delli nomi dell'artifici delle pitture, che sono in alcune chiese, facciate, e palazzi di Roma*, ed. E. Zocca (1638; reprint in Milan: Electa, 1967), 28.

[13] Ibid., 206 and n. 66 for Celio's full account.

well, and these accounts of various other Laocoons in Rome only attest to the popularity of the subject embodied by the statue group.

Unlike the other Laocoon groups, the Vatican version has survived intact since its discovery and the statue group's history is well documented. Over fifty years after it was unearthed, Francesco da Sangallo wrote of his father, Giuliano da Sangallo, inspecting the sculpture with the artist Michelangelo while it was still being excavated. The impact the statue group had on the Renaissance master is well documented in Michelangelo studies, and its influence can be traced in various works by the artist. His incorporation of the poses from the *Laocoon* group into his own compositions is resonant in the bodily torsion exhibited in such works as his *Rebellious Slave* of 1514.[14] The connection between this marble group and Michelangelo was forged even further when the artist designed a new arm to replace the missing right arm of Laocoon. Michelangelo recreated Laocoon's arm outstretched to the left following the diagonal trajectory running through his whole body (figure 5), yet he left the marble roughly hewn and the arm was not affixed to the statue due to his self-consciousness of not being able to match up to so great a work. Instead, a more finished terracotta version modeled after Michelangelo's recreation fashioned by either Michelangelo's protégé, Montorsoli, or perhaps by Bernini was attached to the statue group until 1942 when an antique, bent arm discovered at the turn of the century took its place.[15]

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[14] One scholar has gone as far as to describe the *Laocoon* as a forgery created by Michelangelo himself, yet the evidence for attributing the work as a Roman one far outweighs her arguments. See Lynn Catterson, "Michelangelo's *Laocoon*?" *Artibus et Historiae: An Art Anthology* 52 (2005): 29-56.

[15] Haskell, *Taste and the Antique*, 243-47.

Beyond attracting attention from artists, the *Laocoon* was admired by members of royal courts and other aristocrats well through the end of the eighteenth century. Baccio Bandinelli created a marble copy in 1523 for Pope Leo X to present to the French King François I as a gift; a bronze version by Jacopo Sansovino passed through the hands of the Signoria of Venice to the Cardinal of Lorraine in the early sixteenth century; and another marble copy, by Jean-Baptiste Tuby, adorned Versailles by 1696. Napoleon stipulated in the Treaty of Tolentino in February 1797 that Pope Pius VI cede the original statue to the French; as a result the statue group remained in France until its return to the Belvedere courtyard in the Vatican Museum in 1816.[16]

The fame of the *Laocoon* persisted and the group was so familiar to a wide audience that by the mid-nineteenth century, Charles Dickens, in *A Christmas Carol*, likened the ornery Scrooge struggling with his stockings to Laocoon and his sons tangled amid the deadly snakes.[17] Literary paeans to the sculptural group do not end here. Johann Joachim Wincklemann, a seminal figure in the development of modern art history, wrote of the *Laocoon* in *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture*:

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[16] Ibid., 244.

[17] Ibid., 243-44.

The general and most distinctive characteristics of the Greek masterpieces are, finally, a noble simplicity and quiet grandeur, both in posture and expression. Just as the depths of the sea always remain calm however much the surface may rage, so does the expression of the figures of the Greeks reveal a great and composed soul even in the midst of passion. Such a soul is reflected in the face of Laocoon – and not in the face alone – despite his violent suffering. The pain is revealed in all the muscles and sinews of his body, and we ourselves can almost feel it as we observe the painful contraction of the abdomen alone without regarding the face and other parts of the body…The physical pain and the nobility of soul are distributed with equal strength over the entire body and are, as it were, held in balance with one another. Laocoon suffers like Sophocles' Philoctetes; his pain touches our very souls, but we wish that we could bear misery like this great man.[18]

Aside from Winckelmann and Dickens, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing also refers to the *Laocoon* in his critical work, *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766), to define the differences between the visual arts and literature.[19] Furthermore, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, in his 1798 essay, "Über Laokoon," reinstated discourses on the statue that his predecessors laid out.[20]

In more recent years, the *Laocoon* has become the subject of monographs dealing with the work's original location, its artists, its patrons, and its significance throughout history.[21] The statue group has also been the topic of debates dealing with a variety of

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[18] Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture*. Translated by Elfriede Heyer and Roger C. Norton. (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1987).

[19] Johann Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoon: an Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*. Trans. by Edward Allen McCormick. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984).

[20] See Simon Richter, *Laocoon's Body and the Aesthetics of Pain: Winckelmann, Lessing, Herder, Moritz, Goethe*. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), for discussion on the authors and their respective works.

[21] See for instance Margarete Bieber, *Laocoon: The Influence of the Group Since its Rediscovery*. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1967); Andreae, *Laokoon und die Gründung Roms*; R.R.R. Smith, Review of *Laokoon und die Gründung Roms*, by Bernard Andreae. *Gnomon* 63 (1991), 351-58; Brunhilde Sismondo Ridgway, "Laokoon and the foundation of Rome." Review of *Laokoon und die Gründung Roms*, by Bernard Andreae. *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 2 (1989): 171-81. Richard Brilliant, *My Laocoön: Alternative Claims in the Interpretation of Artworks*. (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2000) uses the statue group to discuss how works of art are intertwined in the history of philosophy,

issues common to the Late Hellenistic and early Roman period. This study, however, will focus primarily on how the statue group acted as a symbol of Roman imperial ideology during the pivotal time period when the Republic was transforming into Empire. As Augustus, the first emperor of Rome, was legitimizing both his power and that of Rome, he undertook numerous projects to express this rise to power. I believe that by viewing the *Laocoon* in conjunction with other contemporaneous Augustan artistic projects as well as with Virgil's *Aeneid*, the quintessential work of literature of this period, the meaning of the statue group for early Imperial Rome can be uncovered. An examination of the Laocoon episode in the *Aeneid* will show that Laocoon came to embody a sacrifice made for the founding of Rome. While versions of the myth of Laocoon survive through numerous ancient authors, each account varies in the details of the narrative. None of the extant accounts are reflected in the marble statue group completely, but I will argue that Virgil's prevails as the lens through which the work of art was read during the early years of the Roman Empire.

The Myth of Laocoon in Ancient Literary Sources

The story of Laocoon takes place during the war between Troy and Greece, a narrative known most thoroughly from Homer's *Iliad*. The incident involving Laocoon, however, does not figure in the *Iliad*, though the earliest extant version of the story of Laocoon is roughly contemporary with Homer's work. The story articulated by Arctinus of Miletus (ca. eighth century BCE) is preserved by the later grammarian Proclus, writing

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psychology, and other fields of research. Brilliant's study is interested more in the evolving criticisms, interconnectivity, and interpretation of works of art through modern times than affixing them to their original historical context. Salvatore Settis, *Laocoonte: fama e stile*. (Roma: Donzelli, 1999) traces the group's influence and various interpretations affixed to it, yet returns to the *Laocoon* as a work of art separate from its later associations.

in the second century CE. Proclus relates that in Arctinus' epic, *The Sack of Troy* (*Iliou Persis*), the Trojan priest, Laocoon, tries to dissuade the other Trojans from bringing the wooden horse inside the city walls. The other Trojans ignore Laocoon's pleas and in the course of the festive entry of the gift-horse, two snakes appear and kill Laocoon and one of his sons.[22] Discrepancies exist between Arctinus' account and what we see in the statue group – a characteristic common to all extant versions of the myth. For example, the statue shows Laocoon with two sons whereas Arctinus' narrative makes mention of only one.

Later authors expand on the story transmitted by Proclus, providing further detail, and sometimes even giving a reason for Laocoon's punishment. In Sophocles' now-fragmentary tragedy about Laocoon, written in the fifth century BCE, Laocoon violates his post as a priest of Apollo by sleeping with his wife, Antiope, in front of an image of the god in his temple. As punishment, both their sons, as products of the unsanctioned union, are killed by two serpents, while Laocoon is left to mourn their untimely death. Sophocles' account also provides the names of the two serpents – Porkes and Chariboia.[23] Euphorion, writing in the third century BCE, describes a similar situation of Laocoon violating Apollo's temple, but in Euphorion's version Laocoon is killed alongside his sons.[24]

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[22] Arctinus' account related through Proclus can be found in *Hesiod, the Homeric Hymns, and Homerica,* trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974).

[23] Fragments of Sophocles found in Sophocles, *The Plays and Fragments II*, ed. Lewis Campbell. (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1969), 516-16. See also Samuel E. Bassett, "The Laocoon Episode in Quintus Smyrnaeus," *The American Journal of Philology* 46 (1925): 243-52.

[24] Euphorion's account is known through Servius, *Servianorum in Vergilii carmina commentariorum editoinis Harvardianae volumen II,* ed. Edward Kennard Rand, et al. (Lancaster, PA: Societatis Philologicae Americanae Cvra et Impensis, 1946) 2.201.

Another account of Sophocles' version is given by the first century BCE rhetorician Dionysius of Halicarnassus, who mentions the drama as one of the credible accounts of Aeneas' flight from Troy. Stating that Aeneas left his house on Mount Ida upon his father's orders and from the fate that had befallen Laocoon's family, Dionysius explains that Aeneas saw the recent events surrounding Laocoon as an omen for the imminent destruction of Troy (*Antiquitates Romanae* 1.48.2). Sophocles' tragedy, known by educated Romans during the late Republic and the early Empire either in its original form or through Dionysius' account, made the analogy between the story of Laocoon and the fall of Troy clear.

Virgil places Laocoon directly into the series of events that lead up to Troy's demise in his *Aeneid*, written between 29 and 19 BCE. In Book Two, Aeneas tells the story of the fall of Troy to Queen Dido. In probably the most well known account of the story, Aeneas recounts that upon seeing the Greeks sail away, the Trojans visit the Greek camp and find it deserted save a wooden horse. While they are discussing their plan of action, Laocoon, here characterized as a priest of Neptune, rushes down from the citadel. He exhorts his fellow Trojans to distrust the Greeks even when they bear gifts and impetuously hurls a spear at the wooden horse. His warnings fall upon deaf ears for at this time, the Greek prisoner, Sinon, speaks up and convinces the Trojans that the horse is a gift to replace the stolen Palladium. Sinon's persuasive speech is strengthened when a pair of serpents slither out from the sea while Laocoon is sacrificing a bull on the shore. The Trojans scatter, but the snakes kill Laocoon's two helpless sons. The priest hurries to their aid, but his futile efforts only make him a victim as well. Virgil describes how Laocoon "cries like a wounded bull" and struggles against the deadly serpents. After

Laocoon and his sons are killed, the serpents make toward the citadel and vanish under the feet and shield of Athena. The Trojans interpret the fate of Laocoon and his family as the punishment for his violation of a sacred offering and immediately decide to bring the gift-horse into their city.

Scholars have questioned how important the Laocoon episode is within the entire scheme of the *Aeneid*, but it has been argued that Laocoon's prominent role is one that should not be dismissed as an interruption within the main frame of events, but instead viewed as an integral part of the narrative.[25] The Trojans in Virgil's account see Laocoon and his sons' deaths as the gods' retribution for the foolish action by the priest of defiling a sacred object.   It is the deaths of Laocoon and his sons that cause the termination of all discussions and convince the Trojans to bring the horse within the city.[26] Thus, it is through this casualty that Troy's demise occurs. For Virgil, Laocoon functioned as a sacrifice that led to Troy's fateful downfall and as Aeneas leads the Trojans to their new city, to Rome's subsequent founding. Virgil's comparison of Laocoon's cries to the bull he was sacrificing just prior to his death strengthens this message. While Sophocles based Aeneas' decision to leave Troy on Laocoon's fate, Virgil places Laocoon directly within the line of events that cause the city to fall, Aeneas to flee, and Rome to be founded.

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[25] R.G. Austin, "Virgil and the Wooden Horse." *Journal of Roman Studies* 49 (1959): 16-25; R.R.R Smith, Review of *Laokoon und die Gründung Roms*, 356; Smith argues that the death of Laocoon and his sons in Virgil are unmotivated and act simply as an "unwitting (and dramatic) obstacle in the course of epic events."

[26] S.V. Tracy, "Laocoon's Guilt." *American Journal of Archaeology* 108 (1987): 451-54. Tracy believes that Virgil's mention of Laocoon alludes to a learned version of the myth in which Laocoon is chosen as a priest of Neptune in the account offered by Euphorion (through Servius' retelling). According to Tracy, Virgil's characterization of Laocoon as a priest of Neptune recalls Euphorion's narrative, which punishes Laocoon for his amoral sexual appetite. Thus, by including Laocoon within the frame of events leading to Troy's fall, the city's great demise is placed on the same level as an ignoble human action. Tracy sees this is as a typical Virgilian comment on men suffering and dying for the most mundane reasons.

A similar version of the myth is provided by Hyginus writing in the first century CE. In *Fabulae* 135, Hyginus describes the crime committed by Laocoon as marrying and having children against Apollo's orders. Having been chosen by lot to sacrifice to Neptune, Laocoon was on the shore when Apollo seized the opportunity to send two snakes to kill his children, named Antiphantes and Thymbraeus. When Laocoon came to his children's aid, the snakes killed him as well. The passage in *Fabulae* ends with the statement that the Phrygians believed Laocoon was killed because he threw a spear at the Trojan Horse. Whether Hyginus knew of Virgil's account cannot be certain, but the abridged form seems to combine the accounts of the older Greek authors and his Roman contemporary.

Finally, a unique version of the events is presented by Quintus Smyrnaeus (ca. fourth century CE) in Book Twelve of his *Posthomerica*. Quintus begins the story in a similar fashion to Virgil, but after Laocoon wisely voices his suspicions about the Trojan horse, Athena, angered with him and the Trojans, makes the ground shake beneath them. Quintus includes rigorous detail about the blindness that befell Laocoon, the pain and anguish he felt, and the various stages of ophthalmia that passed before the goddess made him completely blind. Throughout all this, Laocoon persists in urging the Trojans to leave the horse outside the walls but in vain. Laocoon's warnings anger Athena who, in retaliation, summons the serpents to devour the priest's sons. After the serpents disappear, a cenotaph is erected in honor of the boys and Laocoon sheds tears from his sightless eyes.[27]

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[27] Quintus Smyrnaeus, *Posthomerica* 12.353-499. Bassett, "The Laocoon Episode in Quintus Smyrnaeus," 243-52 examines Quintus's account in relation to others.

The debate on which of these ancient authors' accounts is depicted in the statue group remains ongoing. While Laocoon's downfall in some versions alludes to punishment by the gods for hubris, other accounts figure Laocoon into the Trojan saga that ultimately led to the rise of Rome. After Virgil's *Aeneid* was published in 19 BCE, the majority of the Roman *populus* became familiar with the events associated with the fall of Troy and the subsequent wanderings of Aeneas. By the early Imperial period, the Laocoon episode had become imbedded into the series of events that culminated in the rise of Rome. Thus, if the statue group that features Laocoon were created around the time of the *Aeneid*'s publication, it no doubt would have evoked Virgil's narrative.

The date of the *Laocoon* was under much debate until finds at a grotto in Sperlonga shed light on the issue. Before the discovery at Sperlonga however, the prevailing date of the *Laocoon* stood at the third or second century BCE. Gisela Richter proposed the date based on the style of the Vatican statue in comparison with the *Great Altar* at Pergamon.[28] Besides this stylistic comparison, no other evidence has been found to date the *Laocoon* group to this time period. Thus, the date of the *Laocoon* remained elusive until sculptural fragments were uncovered at Sperlonga that led scholars to distinguish the same atelier working there and on the *Laocoon*. The painstaking reconstruction of thousands of fragments excavated at Sperlonga engendered further research that has led scholars to date the activity of the sculptors responsible for both the *Laocoon* and the groups at Sperlonga.

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[28] G.M.A. Richter, *Three Critical Periods in Greek Sculpture*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), 66-70.

What the Sperlonga Groups Reveal About the *Laocoon*

In September, 1957, numerous marble fragments were uncovered in a seaside grotto near a villa at Sperlonga.[29] After careful reconstruction, four statue groups emerged as the main elements of the sculptural program in the cave (figure 6). These featured the attack of Odysseus' ship by Scylla, Odysseus' attempt to steal the Palladion away from Diomedes, a version of the "Pasquino Group," [30] and the Blinding of Polyphemus. The seemingly Odyssean theme raised the question of whose eclectic tastes these four groups had been sculpted, and consequently engendered scholarship.[31] The style of carving of the Sperlonga finds is reminiscent of that in the *Laocoon*, but it was not until a telling inscription was found that the bond between them was fused. The inscription (figure 7), carved onto the outrigger of Odysseus' ship in the Scylla group

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[29] See B. Conticello and Bernard Andreae, "Die Skulpturen von Sperlonga." *Antike Plastik* XIV (1974) for detailed reconstructions, find locations, and iconography associated with the Sperlonga groups; Gösta Säflund, *The Polyphemus and Scylla Groups at Sperlonga*. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1972), supplies ample analysis of the Polyphemus and Scylla groups; reviews of these sources can be found in Peter H. von Blanckenhagen, review of *Die Skulpturen von Sperlonga*, by Baldassare Conticello and Bernard Andreae. *American Journal of Archaeology* 80 (1976): 99-104 and Peter H. von Blanckenhagen, review of *The Polyphemus and Scylla Groups at Sperlonga*, 456-60 respectively; Brunhilde S. Ridgway, "The Sperlonga Sculptures," *From Pergamon to Sperlonga*, ed. by Nancy T. de Grummond and Brunhilde S. Ridgway. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 78-91, provides the most recent state of research on these statue groups.

[30] The "Pasquino Group" has been given a variety of identities. Some believe the group to represent Menelaos and Patroklos, see J. J. Pollitt, *Art in the Hellenistic Age*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 124. Andreae first identified the group as Odysseus and Achilles based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 13 where Odysseus argues that he, not Ajax, carried Achilles's corpse off the battlefield, see Andreae, "Die Skulpturen von Sperlonga," 90-95. Anne Weis offers another possibility of the group portraying Aeneas and another character from the *Aeneid*, Lausus, see Anne Weis, "Odysseus at Sperlonga: Hellenistic Hero or Roman Heroic Foil?" *From Pergamon to Sperlonga*, ed. by Nancy T. de Grummond and Brunilde Sismondo Ridgway. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 117-25; see also Brunhilde Sismondo Ridgway, *Hellenistic Sculpture I: The Styles of ca. 331-200 B.C.* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 275-81.

[31] See particularly A(ndrew) F. Stewart, "To Entertain an Emperor: Sperlonga, Laokoon and Tiberius at the Dinner-Table," *Journal of Roman Studies* 67 (1977): 76-90.

reads, "Athanodoros son of Hagesandros, and Hagesandros son of Paionios, and Polydoros son of Polydoros, all Rhodians, made this work."[32]

Even before the discovery of these patronymics, Christian Blinkenberg had proposed a stemma for the family of two of the artists, Athanodoros and Hagesandros, whom Pliny had mentioned (*NH* 36.37). His reconstruction, based on Lindian inscriptions, placed the sculptors in the mid-to-late first century BCE.[33] When the Sperlonga inscription surfaced, the patronymics led the prosopographic expert E.E. Rice to effectively narrow down the date that these artists were active to sometime during the reign of Augustus.[34]

Using Blinckenberg's catalogue of sculptors working in Rhodes, Rice notes that only one Athanodoros is listed, and she presents each of the eight cases where his signature appears. The one that is most vital to Rice's argument is an inscription on a base that held the statues of the Rhodian priest, Philippos, and his wife, Agauris. The base has been dated to 42 BCE, the year Philippos began his tenure in the priesthood of Athana Lindia. Besides the signature that reads, "Athanodoros, son of Hagesandros, from Rhodes made this," the inscription includes Philippos' patronymic, commemoration of his newly appointed position, a dedication to the gods, and a long list of other priests and officials who contributed to the making of this monument. Rice points out the

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[32] Säflund, *The Polyphemus and Scylla Groups at Sperlonga*, fig. 29.

[33] Christian Blinkenberg, *Lindos* II: *Inscriptions*. (Copenhagen and Berlin, 1941), cols. 29-30 stemma 1.

[34] E.E. Rice, "Prosophographika Rhodiaka II: The Rhodian Sculptors of the Sperlonga and Laocoon Statuary Groups," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 81 (1986): 233-50. Säflund comes up with a similar date based on other Italian comparisons of various bases made of similar material and discovered in places prominent during the early Imperial period that are signed "Athandoros (of Rhodes), son of Hagesandros," see Säflund, *The Polyphemus and Scylla Groups at Sperlonga*, 98, n. 120 and 121. Stewart, "To Entertain an Emperor," 77, 89 and n. 122 says that the imperial date has been determined by the letter forms of the inscription as well.

significance of the date, for it was the first priestly monument to be erected after the capture of Rhodes by the Roman general Cassius. Rice adduces that following a sack of the city's treasures, installations of 3,000 troops, and the burning of the remaining Rhodian naval fleet Cassius could not man, the erection of the first priestly monument would have had great political significance.[35] The creation of such a monument would have only been assigned to the leading sculptors working in Rhodes who were at the peak of their career.[36] Thus, Rice calculates Athanodoros to be around 40 years old in 42 BCE and therefore to have been born around 80 BCE.[37] Rice continues that after completing such a monument, the sculptor's reputation spread and eventually reached the Italian peninsula where five statue bases containing Athanodoros' "signature" were found. Based on the analysis of the base types, scholars have ascertained that the bases held miniature reproductions of Athanodoros' works and that the inscriptions represent attributions to the Rhodian sculptor, rather than his actual signature. The presence of these reproductions in Italy indicates that Athanodoros' work was appreciated there, and the artist would have enjoyed support in the form of commissions from Roman aristocrats.[38] Thus, soon after 42 BCE, a move to Italy for the sculptor is likely and even

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[35] Rice also points out that the length of the inscription speaks to the "extraordinary character of the honours given to these people," quote at Rice, "Prosophographika Rhodiaka II," 243.

[36] Ibid., 239-43.

[37] Rice also finds evidence for a Hagesandros, the son of Paionios, contemporary to the sculptor Athanodorus in Rhodes yet admits that the identity of the third sculptor, Polydoros of Polydoros, remains a mystery. Ibid., 235, 246-47.

[38] Ibid., 248.

if we remain flexible by about twenty years, the likelihood of Athanodoros and his

collaborators working past the reign of Augustus is highly unlikely.[39]

Despite this closely argued construction, Andrew Stewart argues a date for the

sculptors towards the reign of Tiberius by stating that the Odyssean theme of the groups

and strange dining setting would have appealed to the Emperor's eclectic tastes.[40] He

himself, however, questions the lack of the sculptors' signatures in Rhodes after the

traumatic events of 43 BCE (including a total absence of signatures of the Athanodoros

family after this date) and admits that a move to Italy soon thereafter is distinctly

possible.[41] Rice points out the chronological implications this has for a theory that bases

the construction of the Sperlonga figures on an emperor's bizarre tastes. Having been

born in 42 BCE, Tiberius would have had to have commissioned the Rhodians at an early

age if we are to follow the career of the artist laid out by Rice. Athanodoros' career in

Italy most likely spanned the years between ca. 40 and 10 BCE, and the possibility of his

working past the turning of the millennium is slight. Meanwhile, Stewart uses Tiberius'

exile to Rhodes in 6 BCE as the event that spurred the future emperor's penchant for

Rhodian styles of art. Yet, his adoption into the imperial family did not even occur until

4 CE.[42] This, however, does not entirely rule out the possibility of Tiberius

commissioning the Sperlonga statues since his exposure to the Rhodian sculptors could

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[39] This study conducted by Rice is laid out by Salvatore Settis in *Laocoonte: fama e stile,* 27-40. Settis also juxtaposes this research with that by Virginia C. Goodlett, "Rhodian Sculpture Workshops," *American Journal of Archaeology* 95 (1991): 669-81.

[40] Stewart, "To Entertain an Emperor," 76-90.

[41] Ibid., 89, n. 119.

[42] Rice, "Prosophographika Rhodiaka II," 249, argues that Tiberius would have had to have commissioned the Sperlonga sculptures long before he could have fully developed the particular tastes and predilections that Stewart neatly packs up as characterizations of the ruler that would have prompted his commission of such a program.

have occurred at any point in his life. As Tiberius became emperor late in his life, the commission of works of art by Augustus and Tiberius during the early decades of the Empire need not be mutually exclusive. Accounts like those of Suetonius (*Tiberius*, 39-40), in which Tiberius is described as having almost lost his life in the cave in 26 CE when a falling rock narrowly missed his head, provide a link between the Emperor and Sperlonga.[43] While a connection between Tiberius and Sperlonga remains established based on the Emperor's eclectic tastes, the prosopographical research conducted by Blinkenberg and Rice has provided more conclusive evidence for an Augustan date than for one during the reign of Tiberius.[44]

The architectural history of the grotto at Sperlonga supports the Augustan date. The period of greatest development of maritime villas on the west coast of Italy occurred between 50 and 30 BCE,[45] and the presence of both round and rectangular pools as well as a triclinium facing into the cave points to an early Augustan date as well.[46] An analysis of the villa in conjunction with the architectural history of the grotto by Christian Kunze reveals that the villa at Sperlonga had three main phases of construction.[47] The

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[43] Tacitus (*Annals* 4.57) provides another account of the incident yet reveals no other information except that the Head of the Praetorian Guard, Sejanus, protected Tiberius from the roof collapse. The decoration of the grotto is not mentioned at all, and the sources say nothing to indicate that Tiberius commissioned the atelier from Rhodes. Therefore, it could be argued that the grotto could just as easily been conceived by an earlier owner whose designs later appealed to Tiberius.

[44] R.R.R. Smith agrees and mentions another detailed study of Rhodian joint signatures that produced matching results. See Smith, review of *Laokoon und die Gründung Roms*, 353, n. 5.

[45] Rice, "Prosophographika Rhodiaka II," 249, n. 96.

[46] Säflund, *The Polyphemus and Scylla Groups at Sperlonga*, 98, n. 123.

[47] Christian Kunze, "Zur Datierung des Laokoön und der Skyllagruppe aus Sperlonga." *Jahrbuch der deutschen archäolgischen Instituts* 111 (1996): 165-81; see also E. Salza Prina Ricotti, "Il gruppo di Polifemo a Sperlonga - Problemi di sistemazione." *Rendiconti della Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia* 42 (1968-1970): 118-134, plates 1-3, fig. 5-9.

second of these has been dated relatively securely to between 30 and 20 BCE based on its Second Style painting and the *opus quasi reticulatum* type of wall construction in the area that surrounds the round basin in the middle of the grotto as well as in the substructure where the *Blinding of Polyphemus* group was situated.[48] Kunze also offers convincing stylistic parallels between the figures in the *Laocoon*, the Scylla group and the Polyphemus group that effectively date the *Laocoon* to the early decades of Augustus' reign (ca. 30 to 20 BCE).[49]

Renovations following the initial construction at Sperlonga are indicative of an Augustan date as well. The floor of the circular basin in which the statues were placed was paved with polychrome marble slabs – typical of the Augustan period. Since it is most logical for the sculptures to have been installed after the marble paving was laid down, it can be inferred that the groups were not installed before the Augustan period.[50] Andrew Stewart has also noted that the statue groups were specifically created to be placed within this grotto after the architectural setting had been finished. Features of the groups and their locations within the grotto show that the statue groups were constructed to be arranged in this specific setting and viewed from particular locations. Stewart points out that the Pasquino group and the Palladion group were placed on the flat, curving rim of the basin to simulate the plains before Troy, the Scylla group was situated in the center of the pool to mimic the sea where the attack occurred, and the Polyphemus

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[48] Kunze, "Zur Datierung des Laokoön und der Skyllagruppe aus Sperlonga," 139-223.

[49] Ibid., 204-22. Though he attributes the Polyphemus group to a different school of sculptors than the *Laocoon* and the Scylla group, he posits them all into this decade as Hellenistic works. See Anne Weis's rebuttal in Weis, "Odysseus at Sperlonga," 137-39.

[50] Säflund, *The Polyphemus and Scylla Groups at Sperlonga*, 98. Stewart reiterates in, "To Entertain an Emperor," 77.

group was in the dimly lit small cavern at the rear to mimic the dark cave in which the

Cyclops resides.[51] Therefore, they were most likely commissioned specifically for

Sperlonga and transported there from a workshop nearby soon after the architectural

setting had been finished.[52]

Both prosopographical evidence pinpointing the sculptors' activities and the

architectural and archaeological evidence of the installation of the Sperlonga groups

accord with a date in the Augustan period. [53] This date has now been accepted by most

scholars, and due to the stylistic similarities between the four groups at Sperlonga and the

Laocoon, the same atelier responsible for the work at Sperlonga has been assigned to the

Laocoon group.[54]

Besides the epic subject matter that ties the Laocoon to the Sperlonga groups, the

figures within each sculptural group show stylistic variation. Some figures in the group

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[51] Stewart, "To Entertain an Emperor," 78.

[52] The transportation of the statues is deduced from struts like the ones between Polyphemus' toes, which were left to prevent breakage during the move. See Conticello and Andreae, "Die Skulpturen von Sperlonga," 47. cf. Blanckenhagen, review of *Die Skulpturen von Sperlonga*, 103.

[53] Some like Andreae, Stewart, and Pollitt present the case that the marble forming the back part of the altar in the *Laocoon* is Luna/Carraran marble. Believing that the quarries at Carrara were not opened until shortly before the reign of Augustus, they use this evidence to further rule out the pre-imperial date. See Bernard Andreae, review of *Fynden I Tiberiusgrottan*, by Gösta Säflund. *Gnomon* 39 (1967), 82-88, at 87; Stewart, "To Entertain an Emperor," 88; Pollitt, *Art in the Hellenistic Age*, 125. While an attractive proposal, isotopic analyses of a Roman sarcophagus dated to the second-century BCE revealed that the marble forming the lid was from Carrara; Susan Walker and Keith Matthews, "Recent Work in Stable Isotope Analysis of White Marble at the British Museum," *Ancient Marble Quarrying and Trade*, ed. by J. Clayton Fant. (Oxford: BAR, 1988), 117-25. See also Amanda Claridge, "Roman Statuary and the Supply of Statuary Marble," 139-52 in the same publication. cf. Barbara A. Barletta, "Archaic and Classical Magna Graecia," ch. 3 in *Greek Sculpture: Function, Materials, and Techniques in the Archaic and Classical Periods*, ed. by Olga Palagia. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), who states that the quarries were in use as early as the second half of the sixth century BCE.

[54] Kunze believes there is more than one school of sculptors at work at Sperlonga, but this does not disrupt the purposes of using evidence of Sperlonga to date the *Laocoon*. Kunze, "Zur Datierung des Laokoön und der Skyllagruppe aus Sperlonga," 204-22.

are depicted in great anatomical detail, while others are rendered more freely.[55] For

instance, the veristic depiction of Diomedes' hand holding the Palladion (figure 8) finds

its counterpart in the highly naturalistic treatment of Laocoon's feet (figure 9) while other

parts of each group are less detailed. Similarities between the so-called Wine-skin Bearer

from the Polyphemus group and the elder son in the *Laocoon* have also been seen as

evidence that the same artists were working at Sperlonga and on the *Laocoon* (figure 10-

11).[56] With these stylistic consistencies and with the inscription on the Scylla group

providing the names of the sculptors that Pliny assigns to the *Laocoon*, it is beyond doubt

that the atelier responsible for the Sperlonga group created the *Laocoon*. Thus, we can

now date the *Laocoon* to the early decades of Augustus' reign based on the evidence that

Sperlonga has yielded. Though this dating of the *Laocoon* has been acknowledged and

accepted in the past decade, the significance of the statue group during this period begs to

be explored.

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[55] See Stewart, "To Entertain an Emperor," 76-77; Blanckenhagen, "Laokoon, Sperlonga und Vergil," 256-75; Conticello and Andreae, "Die Skulpturen von Sperlonga," 42-5.

[56] Comparisons of the Wine-skin Bearer to the elder son of Laocoon have been made in the past. See Blanckenhagen, Review of *The Polyphemus and Scylla Groups at Sperlonga*, 457-59; Blanckenhagen, Review of *Die Skulpturen von Sperlonga*, 100; Säflund, *The Polyphemus and Scylla Groups at Sperlonga*, 97. Säflund notes that the elder son and Wineskin Bearer both act as the right bookends of the statuary groups, their heads are turned to the right, their right arms are raised while the left arm is in a grasping motion, and both signal the form of a flight schemata – the "preparedness for flight" in the Sperlonga figure and an "attempt at flight" in the *Laocoon*.

THE *LAOCOON* DURING THE AGE OF AUGUSTUS

       While scholars of Hellenistic sculpture have publicly acknowledged the Augustan

date of the Vatican statue group as a likely possibility, few have ventured to fully

examine the implications of assigning the work of art to this period.[57] J.J. Pollitt

examines the *Laocoon* in conjunction with the Sperlonga groups and agrees with the

conclusions reached by Kunze and Rice. Nonetheless, the parameters of his essay do not

allow him to expand upon his statement that "since in Pliny's time the *Laokoön* belonged

to the emperor Titus, it is quite possible that the work was an imperial possession from

the beginning and that, in view of its date, it was commissioned by Octavian."[58] Pollitt

acknowledges the efforts made by Stewart and Andreae to connect Tiberius to the

Laocoon and Sperlonga groups, but he concludes that this scholarship only provides

insight into subsequent interpretations of the statues, not their original meanings.[59] Peter

Green also has noted Pollitt's missed opportunity to explore how the statues acted as

instruments of early Augustan propaganda, but Green himself prefers to stay out of the

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[57] Pollitt and Smith agree on this dating; Pollitt, *Art in the Hellenistic Age*, 120-26; R. R. R. Smith, *Hellenistic Sculpture*. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 108-11. Brunilde Sismondo Ridgway accepts the possibility of the group's date during the first century of the empire, but she is hesitant to narrow it down any further. See Brunilde Sismondo Ridgway, *Hellenistic Sculpture III: The Styles of ca. 100-31B.C.* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 87-90.

[58] J. J. Pollitt, "The Phantom of a Rhodian School of Sculpture," *From Pergamon to Sperlonga*, ed. by Nancy T. de Grummond and Brunhilde S. Ridgway. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 92-110; quote at 100. Despite the essay's title, Pollitt does not express a definitive conclusion about the existence of a Rhodian school of sculpture. The existence (or non-existence) of a Rhodian school, however, is not necessary for the purposes of this paper since the connection between the statue groups at Sperlonga and the *Laocoon* is forged regardless as demonstrated above.

[59] Stewart's analysis is found in "To Entertain an Emperor," and Andreae's is in Bernard Andreae, *Praetorium Speluncae: Tiberius und Ovid in Sperlonga*. (Mainz am Rhein: P. von Zabern, 1994).

"Sargasso Sea of possible symbolic religious or political implications in the various groups."[60]

Yet when we examine Augustan projects such as Virgil's *Aeneid*, the relief sculpture on the *Ara Pacis*, and the sculpture from the pediment of the Temple of Mars Ultor, we see that there are other examples from the period that acted as literary and visual propaganda to promote Augustus' imperial ideology. In these projects, it is clear that the Emperor's agenda was to trace his own lineage to divine and legendary ancestry. In order to do so, Augustus commissioned works of art and literature that showed the *pietas* and *virtus* of his ancestors as well as the struggles overcome in order for Rome to be founded.

Examples of Imperial Ideology in Contemporary Works of Art

On the *Ara Pacis*, the monument erected to commemorate Augustus' triumphal return from Spain and Gaul, an entire panel is reserved for Aeneas (figure 12) and another features the god Mars with Romulus and Remus (figure 13).[61] Augustus connected himself to Aeneas because of his divine descent from Venus as well as for his role as the founder of the Julian family. Consequently, Aeneas is depicted as the one who is worthy of bridging the gap between divine ancestry and the new imperial family. He is shown as a pious man, making a sacrifice to the *penates*, the household gods seen in the

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[60] Peter Green, "Pergamon and Sperlonga: A Historian's Reactions," *From Pergamon to Sperlonga*, ed. by Nancy T. de Grummond and Brunhilde S. Ridgway. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 185-89; quote at 188-89.

[61] Augustus describes the dedication of the monument himself: "On my return from Spain and Gaul, after successfully restoring law and order to these provinces, the Senate decided under the consulship of Tiberius Nero and Publius Quintilius to consecrate the Ara Pacis Augustae on the Campus Martius in honor of my return, at which officials, priests, and Vestal Virgins should offer an annual sacrifice," Augustus, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* 12, trans. Frederick W. Shipley (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1924).

temple on the upper left corner of the relief. On the pendant panel of the same

monument, it is typically taken to believe that the allusion to Rome's mythical origins is

portrayed. Next to the god Mars, scholars have reconstructed the She-Wolf nursing

Romulus and Remus. While Mars represents the battles fought in order for Augustus to

bring peace to Rome, his son Romulus acts as the founder of the state. Romulus was

Rome's first *triumphator*, and Propertius relates that he erected the Temple of Feretrian

Jupiter after his victory and became the "father of Rome and father of valor" (*Propertius*

4.10).[62]

The decoration in the Forum of Augustus also testifies to Augustus' penchant for

promoting the legendary founding of Rome. Statues of Aeneas and Romulus adorned the

exedrae of the Forum and sculptures of the two also once decorated the Temple of Mars

Ultor, the focal point of the Forum. Having vowed the temple's construction in 42 BCE

to commemorate his revenge against Julius Caesar's assassins, Octavian dedicated it to

Mars the Avenger. A relief from the *Ara Pietatis Augustae* (figure 14) that includes the

Temple of Mars Ultor shows that Mars was the central figure on the pediment, and to his

left was Venus followed by Romulus. Yet, rather than exploit the vengeful side of Mars,

Augustus made a deliberate choice to depict the mythical founders of Rome in order to

remind the populus upon which the city was founded. A coin from the reign of

Antoninus Pius (figure 15) shows that set above the pediment of the Temple of Mars

Ultor were acroteria depicting Romulus on the left and Aeneas with his father and son on

the right. The sculpture on each side faced toward the center where another acroterion

featured Augustus standing on his quadriga. With such displays of Aeneas and Romulus

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[62] Propertius, *Elegies* 4.10, trans. G.P. Goold (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

incorporated into his public monuments, there is no doubt that Augustus used his divine

and legendary genealogy as a vital part of his imperial ideology. Showing himself as a

descendant of Aeneas and Romulus, Augustus incorporated the *pietas* and *virtus*

demonstrated by his ancestors into his own identity.[63]

The Identification of Rome's Noble Ancestors in Virgil's *Aeneid*

In literature, nowhere is the mythical founding of Rome made more apparent than

in Virgil's *Aeneid*. Published in 19 BCE under Augustus' order, the *Aeneid* took old tales

and imbued them with new meanings. The events that led up to and following the Fall of

Troy were shaped in a way that culminated with the rise of the Julian family as well as

founding of Rome. While Aeneas eventually arrives in Italy to begin the Julian line, it is

not the glorious founding of the Empire that dominates the epic. Instead, the struggles

encountered and the necessary toil endured form the majority of the *Aeneid*. Virgil

himself wrote, "so massive was the labor of founding Rome" (*Aen*. 1.33).[64] It was on the

backs of the fallen that the Empire stood and, the sacrifices made for Rome to flourish

were commemorated. In this light, Laocoon figures into the story not as a mere "set-

piece interruption within the Troy narrative" as R.R.R. Smith argues,[65] but as a vital

character sacrificed in order to fulfill the destiny of Rome's rise. As one of the many

who perish while trying to protect the city, Laocoon is memorialized as a defender of

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[63] Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*. Trans. by Alan Shapiro. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1988), 201-10.

[64] Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.44, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

[65] Smith, review of *Laokoon und die Gründung Roms*, 356.

Troy and a venerable character who died in order to fulfill the city's fate.[66] Following

the narrative of the *Aeneid* then, Laocoon's death figures into the series of events that

ultimately culminate in the founding of Rome. Thus, I disagree with R.R.R. Smith and

believe that the character and episode of Laocoon, as described by Virgil, would have

been a suitable subject for an imperially commissioned work of art.

Laocoon plays another major role in the *Aeneid* as his loyalty to his city is

juxtaposed against the deceit of Sinon. Sinon's crafty speech is what convinces the

Trojans to bring the wooden horse inside their city walls, and it eventually leads to the

downfall of Troy. In fact, Book Two of the *Aeneid* is rife with characterizations of the

Trojans as moral versus the Greeks as treacherous. For example, Helen incenses the hero

Aeneas by her presence during Troy's destruction (*Aen*. 2.567-603) and Achilles's son,

Neoptolemus, brutally murders Priam's sons and then the king himself (*Aen*. 2.469-

558).[67] Laocoon's inclusion in the story enhances the sense of untrustworthiness not

only of Sinon, but of the Greeks in general. Laocoon questions, "Poor citizens, what wild

insanity is this? Do you believe the enemy have sailed away? Or think that any Grecian

gifts are free of craft?" and proclaims, "I fear the Greeks, even when they bring gifts."[68]

Through the characters of Sinon and Laocoon, Virgil illustrates how the Greeks

prevailed. Aeneas explains, "Such was the art of perjured Sinon, so insidious, we trusted

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[66] See Jasper Griffin, "The Creation of Characters in the *Aeneid*," in *The Age of Augustus: Interdisciplinary Conference held at Brown University*, ed. by Rolf Winkes (Providence, Rhode Island: Center for World Archaeology and Art, Brown University, 1985), 118-34. Griffin states that the epic poem showed the greatness of Rome not only through the divine ancestry of its rulers, but also through the countless lives lost.

[67] Yasmin Syed, *Vergil's* Aeneid *and the Roman Self*. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2005), 200.

[68] Virgil, *Aeneid* 2.43-44 and 2.49, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

what he told. So we were taken in by snares, forced tears – yes, we, whom neither

Diomedes nor Achilles of Larissa could defeat, nor ten long years, a thousand-galleyed

fleet."[69] Laocoon acts as the foil to the treacherous Sinon and is one agent through whom

Virgil is able to characterize the moral Trojans in contrast to the furtive Greeks. Thus, in

the *Aeneid*, Laocoon is characterized as an exemplary ancestor of the Romans who had to

be sacrificed in order to fulfill the fate of Troy and the founding of Rome. In order to

prove that this characterization of Laocoon was the prevailing one during the early

decades of the Empire, the influence Virgil's writing had on the Romans needs to be

considered.

The Impact of Virgil's *Aeneid* on Early Imperial Rome

Yasmin Syed has argued that the *Aeneid* articulated the Roman sense of

identity.[70] Her study argues that Roman readers identified with or differentiated

themselves from the characters in the *Aeneid* in the favorable or unfavorable light cast

upon them by Virgil.[71] Laocoon, a defender of his city and a necessary sacrifice made

for the rise of Rome, embodied one such character who deserved admiration.

Evidence suggests that even during the poet's own lifetime, Virgil enjoyed

acclaim and widespread popularity. Tacitus (*Dialogus de oratoribus* 13) reports that

when the *Aeneid* was recited in a theater, the audience "all rose and cheered the poet, who

happened to be present, as if he were Augustus himself."[72] Seneca the Elder (*Suasoriae*

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[69] Ibid., 2.196-198.

[70] Syed, *Vergil's* Aeneid *and the Roman Self*, particularly 1-32 and 199-223.

[71] Ibid., 53-86.

[72] Tacitus, *Dialogus de oratoribus* 13, trans. Sir W. Peterson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970).

1.12) informs us that just one generation after the poet's death, speeches imitated Virgil's lines for rhetorical instruction; Virgil's *Aeneid* became a school text during this lifetime and the epic was used as a teaching tool in the Latin language in both Rome and abroad.[73]

Thus, when the first century BCE or CE viewer, who had been imbued with the messages of the *Aeneid*, was confronted with a statue featuring a subject as evocative as the death of Laocoon, it is hard to imagine that he or she would not have recalled the events that followed Laocoon's death. Discrepancies between Virgil's account and what is actually pictured in the statue group do exist, which has caused hesitation in viewing the statue as a visual counterpart of Virgil's narrative. For instance, in the *Aeneid* (*Aen.* 2.239-269), both sons perish before Laocoon even arrives at the scene, whereas in the marble group, Laocoon and the younger son face mortal peril. But the elder son's fate is ambiguous for he is very much alive and may even escape from the snakes' coils. The father and younger son are placed in front of an altar like sacrificial victims while the elder son stands to the altar's right side.[74]

Nonetheless, even though the statue group does not explicitly follow the Virgilian account, the ubiquity of the *Aeneid* as attested by ancient sources indicates that the narrative embodied by the group would have triggered the memory of the rest of events laid out in the *Aeneid* and the mytho-historical founding of Rome.[75] Whether the

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[73] Syed, *Vergil's* Aeneid *and the Roman Self*, 13-19.

[74] Attention has been drawn to this seeming disjunction between the two left hand figures and the son at the right. See n.2.

[75] Syed offers an analysis of the literary tradition in Rome that may account for the disparities between Virgil's narrative and the statue group. She argues that based on Quintilian's observations on the extensive uses of the *Aeneid*, most Romans enjoyed the epic through readings performed for them rather than by

sculptors could have been aware of the *Aeneid*'s narrative before its publication in 19

BCE cannot be ascertained, but dating the *Laocoon* a little after 19 BCE still easily

accords with the early Imperial date advocated by Blinckenberg, Rice and Kunze.

Other representations of the Laocoon episode from the early Imperial period

additionally act as instances in which Virgil's account is not exactly reproduced in art. A

wall painting from the House of Menander in Pompeii shows a configuration of father

and sons that is similar to the marble statue group (figure 16). One son lies dead in the

foreground while the other son and Laocoon struggle with the deadly snakes. An

upturned table and Trojans in the background, horrified at the event occurring before

them, add to the tumultuous scene. Meanwhile, to the right of Laocoon, the allusion to

Virgil's account is made vividly clear as four men stand over a bull that has been

sacrificed. The juxtaposition of the bull and Laocoon likens the Trojan priest to the other

sacrificial victim, just as Aeneas describes in the *Aeneid*, "while he lifts high his hideous

cries to heaven, just like the bellows of a wounded bull when it has fled the altar, shaking

off an unsure ax."[76]

An almost identical depiction is found in another wall painting in Pompeii in the

Casa di Laocoonte (figure 17). The partially preserved fresco shows one son lying

lifeless on the ground while Laocoon and the other son battle the writhing snakes. The

bull is depicted alive this time, but a sacrificial altar set behind him indicates his fate.

The walls of Troy form the backdrop, and three cowering Trojans look toward Laocoon,

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poring over the text and reflecting on it themselves. Thus, viewers of the statue may not have been
bothered by the slight incongruities between the story and the work of art. They would rather have
appreciated the emotion and *pathos* captured in stone of Laocoon and his sons' demise. See Syed, *Vergil's*
Aeneid *and the Roman Self*, 19-28.

[76] Virgil, *Aeneid* 2.223-224, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

who dominates the scene by his monumental size and expressive stance. Nevertheless, despite the clear debt to the *Aeneid* through the direct connection made between the sacrificial bull on an altar and Laocoon, in neither of these cases did the artist show both sons already dead before their father arrives at the scene. Like the Vatican group, the painted visual account does not accord directly with Virgil's literary one, but through the story made ubiquitous by Virgil, the narrative and its successive events are understood.

Yet some scholars still hesitate to apply a Virgilian reading to the *Laocoon* group. This may be due to the fact that the statue group depicts Laocoon suffering immensely amid the coils of the snakes – a typically unheroic mode of representation. While the expressive torment of the figures in the *Laocoon* group is not normally associated with depictions of heroes in art of the Augustan period, an examination of other works from this time will show that the style of the *Laocoon* follows a longstanding Hellenistic tradition.

A Seeming Disparity Between Traditional Representations of Heroes and the *Laocoon*

The view of Laocoon as a hero by Romans of the early Empire has been voiced by John Onians. He briefly states that for the Romans, Laocoon was a brave ancestor who died a noble death. Yet, believing the marble statue group to be a direct copy of a Greek bronze original, Onians does not pursue this point any further.[77] His hesitation to discuss the work as heroicizing Laocoon in an Augustan context may be due to the seeming discrepancy between the Roman reception of Laocoon as a hero and the extremely agonizing image of Laocoon's death seen in the statue group. Other examples

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[77] Onians, *Classical Art and the Cultures of Greece and Rome*, 144.

in art from this period generally show heroic figures bearing a certain dignity. Figures such as those on the Aeneas panel from the *Ara Pacis* (figure 12) are depicted in the classical style reminiscent of the art from Periclean Athens. The bearded Aeneas has his head veiled and pours a libation over the altar to demonstrate his piety, but his action seems frozen in time and his gaze is distant. He is classically posed with a slight contrapposto running through his body, and he faces toward the two idealized youths bearing sacrifices.

Perhaps it is the stark difference between this type of depiction of Rome's ancestral heroes and an overtly expressive death of another in the *Laocoon* that has caused hesitation in grouping the *Laocoon* with the artistic projects from the Age of Augustus. R.R.R. Smith, for example, rejects the possibility of the *Laocoon* commemorating the heroic sacrifice of the Trojan priest for the benefit of the state and instead posits a negative character to Laocoon by assigning as the basis of the group an account like that offered by Sophocles or Euphorion. In these versions of the story, the priest offends Apollo by succumbing to his sexual desires. Smith argues that the demise of an "eastern sensualist" and his two sons at the hands of Apollo should be taken as an allegory of "the defeat of the promiscuous 'orientalizing' Marc Antony by the Apolline forces of Octavian."[78] Ancient writers attest to the practice of these two triumvirs likening themselves to the deities Dionysus and Apollo. Plutarch (*Antony* 24-25) recounts that Marc Antony paraded through both Ephesus and Tarsus dressed and inebriated as if he were the god of wine, while young women and men garbed as maenads, satyrs, and Pans accompanied him. In the latter city, Cleopatra in the guise of

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[78] Smith, review of *Laokoon und die Gründung Roms*, 357; Pollitt, "The Phantom of a Rhodian School of Sculpture," 100, sees plausibility in this reading.

Aphrodite-Isis awaited Antony, and the pair acted as the supreme harbingers of joy, gentleness, and love. Octavian's connection to Apollo came as early as the 30s BCE, when tales circulated that he was born from the union of his mother, Atia, with the god in the form of a snake.[79] Suetonius (*Augustus* 70.1) relates that Octavian also came to a dinner party dressed as the god while some of his peers were garbed as other Olympians. The construction of the Temple of Apollo on the Palatine, directly adjacent to the emperor's own residence, forged an even closer relationship between Augustus and Apollo. Augustus welcomed associations with a god ruled by control, stability and modesty, the foil of Antony's divine counterpart – a god of excess and *luxuria*.[80]

Smith's theory that the *Laocoon* alludes to Octavian's victory over Antony is supported by other works of art that refer indirectly to the Battle of Actium. Symbols such as ships, parts of ships, marine creatures, the figure of Victoria, and the *tropaion* commemorated Octavian's victory over Antony without actually showing the conquered enemy. For example, a part of a frieze from the Porticus Octaviae (figure 18) displays an anchor, ship's bow and *rostra* adorned with a dolphin, and rudder to point to the victory at Actium. Thus, an implicit reference to Antony's defeat may be represented in the *Laocoon* and would explain the depiction of Laocoon and his sons in such great torment. This does not, however, rule out the possibility of the statue group also heroicizing Laocoon in his death. While Smith's argument remains attractive and could be one applicable reading of the *Laocoon*, the theory first posed by Andreae that the statue group

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[79] Karl Galinsky, *Augustan Culture: An Interpretative Introduction*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 215-16; Galinsky posits that Augustus chose to align himself with Apollo specifically because the god did not have "constraints of a previous tradition, which left him with much creative latitude for shaping the image of Apollo in Rome and, especially, his association with the god," quote at 216.

[80] See Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, 33-77.

was a symbol of a sacrifice made for the founding of Rome need not be ruled out.[81] For

although the majority of extant works during the Augustan period memorialize Rome's

leaders in a classical and timeless style, there are surviving examples as expressive and

violent as the *Laocoon* that follow a Hellenistic tradition. When viewed in the context of

other works of art from this period that continue a Hellenistic legacy, the *Laocoon* could

certainly be included in that category.[82]

The *Laocoon* as a Part of a Hellenistic Tradition

To find parallels to the torment and agony seen in the *Laocoon*, one need not look

any further than the statue groups at Sperlonga. Set around a triclinium to entertain

diners, theatricality is an innate characteristic of all four of the major groups at Sperlonga.

Yet none rival the *Laocoon* in its depiction of violence better than the Scylla group

(figure 19-21). Here, as in the *Laocoon*, the artists have captured a scene that shows a

struggle that will end in death. The hounds that spring forth from Scylla's legs

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[81] Andreae, *Laokoon und die Gründung Roms*, 24-28 and 184 shows Andreae's discussion of the Laocoon episode in Virgil and how for the Romans, the statue group was a *sacrificium* for the founding of their city. Yet, Andreae believes that the marble group was made for Tiberius, not Augustus, and so his analysis lacks any investigation of the work in context of Augustan Rome.

[82] Philip Hardie discusses Attalid ideology influencing the arts during the Age of Augustus much as it did in the *Aeneid*. Hardie divides the national image set forth in the epic poem into two types: 1) setting up of the "genealogy and institutional aetiology" on which Rome is based and 2) the struggles overcome in order for Rome's rise. The first finds its counterparts in Augustan art readily (for example: Aeneas performing sacrifices [figure 12] and the Romulus and Remus scenes [figure 13] on the *Ara Pacis*). The second method Virgil adopted from Pergamon possesses only a few partners in Augustan art and Hardie turns to the ivory reliefs that once adorned the doors to the Temple of Palatine Apollo and notes how the defeat of the Galatians and the Niobids were violent acts necessary for the State's preservation and punishment for impiety respectively. Public display of such scenes lead Hardie to postulate that what we consider as "Augustan classicism" may have been a gradual development, and stylistic proclivities toward calm simplicity as seen on the *Ara Pacis* were not in place during the early years of the Empire. Furthermore, Hardie suggests that since the *Aeneid* is a product of the first decade of Augustus' reign, it is more logical to compare the main theme of dynamic struggles and journeys in the poem to works of art characterized as "baroque" from the early years of the Empire. See Philip Hardie, *Virgil's* Aeneid: *Cosmos and Imperium*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 125-43. I believe the *Laocoon* can be grouped in this "baroque"-style of artworks from the early Augustan period.

ferociously sink their fangs into Odysseus' men while a steersman, who may be Odysseus

himself, is grabbed by the sea monster's giant hand.[83] Scylla firmly grasps the

steersman's head and pins him against the bow of the ship leaving him virtually

powerless. If the steersman is indeed Odysseus, the hero here is depicted in a typically

unheroic fashion as is Laocoon. And, even if the steersman is not Odysseus, but only one

of his men, the *pathos* induced by this sculptural group is reflective of that evoked in the

Laocoon. As the signature of the three Rhodians is fortunately preserved on the Scylla

group, it may point to an artistic choice particularly favored by this atelier.

In fact, the *Laocoon* can be taken as a part of a whole Hellenistic tradition that

depicted subjects in high *pathos*-evoking situations, poses and expressions. In the

Ludovisi Gaul for instance (figure 22), the Gallic chieftain is shown thrusting his sword

into his neck after he has killed his wife. He would rather take his own life and that of

his wife than be taken prisoner. The chieftain's powerful, up-stretched stance is boldly

contrasted against the slumped, lifeless form of his wife below him, and the viewer

cannot help but feel sympathy for the couple who has resorted to such an act. A frieze

depicting Romans fighting Gauls from the Temple of Apollo Sosianus dated between 30

and 20 BCE (figure 23) shows that this dramatic style was adopted during the Augustan

period. Two Gauls have already resorted to their fate on the right side of the frieze and in

the center, another Gaul trudges along carrying his fallen comrade. A Roman soldier,

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[83] Andreae and Conticello first proposed to add a fragmentary striding figure to the Scylla group as
Odysseus (see Bernard Andreae and B. Conticello, "Scilla e Cariddi: Il gruppo di Scilla a Sperlonga
trent'anni dopo la scoperta," *La Parola del Passato* 42 [1987], 357). Anne Weis questions this addition
since it was based on no other evidence than counterparts in the minor arts that show Odysseus in a similar
way. Weis disagrees with the striding figure's placement on the ship and believes the steersman to be
Odysseus based on his wearing of an *exomis*, a garment often associated with the hero. Furthermore, Weis
argues that in the other statue groups at Sperlonga, Odysseus is draped and heavily bearded. Because the
steersman is also draped and bearded, in contrast to the nude, clean-shaven men of the group, he should be
identified as Odysseus. Applying this visual vocabulary for a mere steersman in the Scylla group would
confuse the viewers. See Weis, "Odysseus at Sperlonga," 114-17.

starkly contrasted against the Gauls by his full armor, follows closely behind with his sword drawn out. In a minute, the standing Gaul will meet the same end as his companions, but the determination with which he moves through the rocky terrain remains firm. All the Gauls are depicted nude and their defined musculature deems them worthy opponents for the Romans.

These works have been created with the notion of ennobling the enemy. Glorifying foes as brave, strong opponents made the victors appear even greater for having conquered them. It is this ennobling that illustrates the struggles overcome in order for a current greatness to be realized. The *Laocoon* fits perfectly into this scheme, for it shows Laocoon suffering for the foundation of Rome. For the enemy of the Gauls, depicting a Gallic chieftain as a noble and loyal fighter to the end shows what great struggle was required in order to defeat such a powerful foe. Statues like the *Ludovisi Gaul* put the might of the enemy on display and reminded viewers of the countless lives lost and sacrifices made in order to overpower this enemy. Likewise, for the Romans, showing Laocoon in his most vulnerable state right before his death alludes to the sacrifices made for Rome's rise.

When viewed in conjunction with the widespread popularity of the *Aeneid*, a statue group featuring the death of Laocoon would have been read as Virgil describes – an important event that led to the fall of Troy and thus, the rise of Rome.   As a brave and noble ancestor of the Romans, Laocoon was remembered for the extreme pain he suffered that eventually took his life. His death was memorialized through this work of art, and as a sacrifice made for the foundation of Rome, Laocoon will always be remembered for his struggles that have been made visible and permanent through the work of its sculptors.

As it rests in the Belvedere Courtyard of the Vatican Museum, the *Laocoon* continues to tell the tale made legendary by Virgil. Just as the *Aeneid* told of numerous losses and toil endured for the rise of Rome, the statue group depicting the death of the Trojan priest and his sons functioned as a symbol of past struggles that were necessary for Rome to be founded. Likewise, as the *Aeneid* has become the iconic tale of the mythical origins of Rome, so the *Laocoon* has become the symbol of a noble ancestor's sacrifice for the city. Just as he was honored in his death when the group was constructed during the Age of Augustus, captured in stone, Laocoon will continue to be memorialized for years to come.

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