



Classical Art and Archaeology: Teaching Latin and the Humanities with the Monuments of Rome with Karen Moore

Lecture 7: Tiberius'
Grotto and the Sperlonga
Group

Outline:

“The Sperlonga collection, especially the Polyphemus and Scylla groups, when considered alongside their predecessor, the Laocoön, tell a remarkable story. They are a series of statues for whom ancient testimony, both written and material, affirms a shared heritage—each taken from the same quarry, each carefully crafted by the same hands, and for the same patron.”

Introduction

In this video, Karen Moore tells the story of the discovery of the Grotto of Tiberius and what messages about the Julio-Claudian dynasty its sculptures may reveal to us today.

The Grotto of Tiberius

- In 1957, archaeologists discovered a Roman villa in Sperlonga, Italy with an unusual outdoor dining area.
- It featured a small platform in a lagoon before a cave with several submerged sculpture groups.
- Identified as Tiberius's dining grotto, described by Tacitus.

Archaeological Findings

- Villa dated to the late Republican period, later owned by the Julio-Claudian family.
- Renovations during the early Augustan era created the grotto, known as the Spelunca (“cave”).
- The large sculpture groups discovered in the grotto are known as the Odyssey Group since they mostly feature Odysseus and his exploits.



- Key sculptures: Scylla attacking Odysseus's ship, the death of Polyphemus, the theft of the Palladium, Odysseus rescuing Achilles' body, and Ganymede carried by Zeus's eagle to Mt. Olympus.

The Sculptors

- The names Hagesandros, Polydoros, and Athenodoros of Rhodes are inscribed on the giant Scylla sculpture, linking this group of sculptures to the Laocoön Group.
- As per the previous lesson, these men were artistic ambassadors from Rhodes, creating diplomatic gifts for the Imperial family.
- What then was the purpose of the Sperlonga Group?

Purpose and Function of the Sculptures

- Initial purpose of the Laocoön Group: diplomatic gift and expression of loyalty to the Imperial family post-Battle of Actium.
- Complexity and number of the grotto sculptures suggest a different purpose for the Sperlonga collection.
- Challenges in transporting and installing such large sculptures as the Scylla and Polyphemus groups suggests they were finished *in situ*.
- It seems the Laocoön Group was so well received that the imperial family commissioned another.

Tiberius's Tastes in Dining and Mythology

- Both Suetonius and Pliny note Tiberius's keen taste in art, literature, and dining.
- Dining experience designed to cater to Tiberius's preferences especially for fresh seafood.
- The grotto setting was complete with a fish spawning area and outdoor kitchen.
- The sculptures were part of a luxurious dining environment, reflecting the passion and fury of the Hellenistic Baroque style.
- Tiberius had a penchant for Greek mythology and literature which he loved to discuss.
- Suetonius writes,
 - *Fecit et Graeca poemata imitatus Euphorionem et Rhianum et Parthenium, quibus poetis admodum delectatus scripta omnium et imagines publicis bibliothecis inter veteres et praecipuos*



auctores dedicavit; et ob hoc plerique eruditorum certatim ad eum multa de his ediderunt. Maxime tamen curavit notitiam historiae fabularis usque ad ineptias atque derisum; nam et grammaticos, quod genus hominum praecipue, ut diximus, appetebat, eius modi fere quaestionibus experiebatur: "Quae mater Hecubae, quod Achilli nomen inter virgines fuisset, quid Sirenes cantare sint solitae."

- Translation: He composed Greek poetry in imitation of Euphorion, Rhianos and Parthenios, delighted by these poets, he dedicated the writings and portraits of all these in the public libraries among the ancient eminent writers; and for this reason many academics established competitions with one another in these for him. However, he greatly took note of a knowledge of mythology, all the way to the laughable and ridiculous; for he used to assess the *grammatici* (a class of men in whom, as we have said, he was especially interested), by questions of nearly such a kind as: "Who was Hecuba's mother? What was Achilles' name among the maidens? What were the Sirens accustomed to sing?"
- Each sculpture in this group was created to suit various aspects of the grotto and enhance the theatrical composition.
 - Suited to hosting grand dinners or diplomatic guests.
 - The centrality of Odysseus seems to be a nod to Tiberius, suggesting Homer as its literary inspiration.

Challenges to the Homeric Theory

- Two problems:
 - Story of Ganymede does not appear in the Iliad or Odyssey.
 - Homer is not the sole proprietor of stories about Odysseus and the Trojan War.
- 2017 research by Dr. Steve Tuck supports Vergilian influence. Vergil writes,
 - *At Scyllam caecis cohibet spelunca latebris,
ora exsertantem et navis in saxa trahentem.
Prima hominis facies et pulchro pectore virgo
pube tenus, postrema immani corpore pistrinx,
delphinum caudas utero commissa luporum.*



- Translation:
But the cave holds Scylla in obscure shadows,
thrusting forth her mouth and dragging the ships on the rocks.
First before the faces of men a maiden with a beautiful chest
down to her waist, below a sea monster with an immense body,
the tails of dolphins from her belly are set wolves.
- *The Aeneid*, Book 3.424-428
- Descriptions of Scylla in both Vergil's *Aeneid* and *Eclogues* are similar.
 - Vergil conflates the monster Scylla with the tale of Ciris.
 - Suggests a theme of impiety.
- Polyphemus sculptures accurately portray the work of Vergil and Homer.
- An inscription by the poet Faustinus (3rd or 4th century AD) praises the sculptures for outdoing Vergil's descriptions, suggesting that later observers are connecting these statues to Vergil, not Homer.

Sperlonga as an Imperial Sculpture Group

- Though published shortly after the Laocoön Group (~19 BC), *The Aeneid* was Rome's best seller by the time of the Sperlonga Group.
- Tacitus writes of a near catastrophe at the grotto in A.D. 26, before which (*terminus ad quem*) the sculptures must have appeared.
 - This suggests that Vergil's *Aeneid* could have served to influence the Sperlonga Group.
 - Per previous lesson, Nathan Badou suggests Euphron as the inspiration for the Laocoön Group.
 - Suetonius notes that Euphron was a favorite of Tiberius.
- It's possible that both Euphron and Vergil inspired the artistic ambassadors from Rhodes' designs of the Sperlonga Group.

Real stories with Real Warnings

- The statues can be viewed as reflections of loyalty and warning to opponents of the Julio-Claudian dynasty.
- Before the rift between Antony and Octavian, Sextus Pompey (son of Pompey the Great) posed the greatest threat to the second triumvirate.
- Many Romans were loyal to him and possibly hoped he would restore the Republic.
- This prompted the second triumvirate to make Sextus Pompey the #1 enemy of the state, who responded by setting up base in Sicily.



- Sextus Pompey was vilified as an impious pirate and loser.
- Imagery of Scylla on Sextus Pompey's coins link him to the sculptures and perpetuate his legacy as an impious monster rather than a son of Neptune (i.e. Pompey the Great).
- Augustus boasted of defeating the pirates in *Res Gestae* 25:
 - *Mare pacavi a praedonibus. Eo bello servorum qui fugerant a dominis suis et arma contra rem publicam ceperant triginta fere millia capta dominis ad supplicium sumendum tradit.*
 - Translation: I, Augustus, made this sea peaceful from pirates in that war of slaves who had fled from their masters and seized arms against the Republic.
- Lucan also portrays Sextus Pompey as a monster and a disgrace in his *Pharsalia*, Book 6:
 - *...Turbae sed mixtus inerti
Sextus erat, Magno proles non digna parente,
cui mox Scyllaeis exul grassatus in undis
polluit aequoreos Siculus pirata triumphos.*
 - Translation: ...but mixed in that unskilled crowd was Sextus, offspring not worthy of his great parent who, as an exile having rioted about in the waves of Scylla as the victorious Sicilian pirate, polluted the waters.

Messages Immortalized in Stone

- The 3 Rhodian sculptors appear to have immortalized in stone the unflattering images of Sextus Pompey as Polyphemus and Scylla.
- The Sperlonga sculptures serve as a combination of artistic mastery and political messaging:
 - Honor to the Augustan principate;
 - Warning against opposition to the Julio-Claudian dynasty.
- The choice of Rhodian sculptors indicates Tiberius' personal tastes and affinity for Rhodes.
- Details in Laocoön, Scylla, and Polyphemus may represent the poetry of Vergil and Euphorion, favored poets of Augustus and Tiberius.
- Final Takeaway: the Julio-Claudian dynasty is to be respected and feared.