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The Laocoon: Between Style and Iconography

The Laocoon created by the three artists from Rhodes: Hagesandros, Polydoros and Athenodorus, is analyzed here purely as a work of art. This has been done regardless of the fact that to investigate the artistic qualities of this formidable piece of sculpture one should take into account a large number of archaeological and philological texts. As an art historian I cannot discuss these texts from a professional point of view, but some of them I have felt tempted to comment on.

In art history it is common practice, if a work of art is to be placed in a historical context, to follow the creative process, if documentary material can be provided, either from inventories or aided by other sciences. As a consequence we think we can deduce the way in which the artist worked, that we can cover the scope of his learning, his prototypes, his sociological ambience, his psychology, and consequently provide an explanation of the work of art.

For better or worse, this methodology has proved inconclusive in relation to the Laocoon, now in the Vatican. This sculpture was famous even before anyone knew of *a* sculpture which could match the text of Pliny, who states that the sculpture group *he* knows represents Laocoon and his two sons. To him this group is one the sculptural won-

ders of the world. But we do not know if the Laocoon we see, dug up in 1506, is also the group Pliny saw or knew about in the first century AD.¹

The Laocoon we know was famous even before anyone in modern times had seen such a sculpture, and when it was found, this particular specimen became famous in the history of art and has remained so ever since, perhaps because it was thought to be the one mentioned by Pliny. The Laocoon is therefore a special case in point. Until 1506 its destiny was fixed in history as something precious lost. But the Laocoon we know also raised a gamut of problems in aesthetics not easily settled. It has always been famous, but has not always been accepted stylistically or aesthetically. The evaluation of its style has more or less followed the history of taste, which does not necessarily run parallel to the history of art or the history of aesthetics. There has in certain periods been an uneasiness about the group, as for example, when Margarete Bieber in the 40's characterized the artists of the Laocoon as having "lost the finer instinct for sculptural fitness".²

Apart from Pliny, we have stylistic and aesthetic evaluations of the Laocoon from Michelangelo, Lessing, Goethe, and in our own time Kenneth Clark. It is more or less its eloquence, its "rhetoric" as Clark points out that so directly affects us or as Lessing in an almost paradigmatic way stated: its frozen moment of despair.³

¹The literature on the Laocoon is overwhelming, The first mention of a Laocoon is Pliny's, (Book 36, chap. 37) In modern times restoration reports and evaluations are legion, I should like to mention: Walter Amelung, *Die Sculpturen des vaticanischen Museums*, Bd. II, Berlin 1908. Margarete Bieber, *Laocoon, The Influence of the Group Since its Rediscovery*, Detroit, 1942. Ernesto Vergara Caffarelli, "Studio per la restituzione del Laocoonte", *Rivista dell'Istituto Nazionale d'Archeologia e Storia dell'Arte*, NS, 3, 1954. Filippo Magi; "Il ripristino del Laocoonte", *Atti della Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia*, Memorie V.IX,1, Citta del Vaticano, 1960. Helmuth Sichtermann, *Laokoon*, Stuttgart 1964. Horst Althaus, *Laokoon, Stoff und Form*, Bern 1980. Erika Simon, "Laokoon und die Geschichte der antiken Kunst", *Archaeologischer Anzeiger*, 1984. Ellen Rice, "Prosopographica Rhodia", *The Annual of the British School of Athens*, 81, 1986. Bernard Andreae, *Laokoon und der Gründung Roms*, Mainz am Rhein. 1986. Bernard Andreae, *Laokoon und die Kunst von Pergamon*, 1991. German Hafner, "Die Laokoon-Gruppen: ein gordischer Knoten", *Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur, Abh. d. Geistes- und Socialwissenschaftlichen Kl.* 1992, 5.

²Margarete Bieber, op.cit., 17.

³Kenneth Clark, *The Nude*, Norwich, 1970 (1956), 219. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laokoon. Wie die Alten den Tod gebildet*, Berlin 1766, esp. chap II, 14ff..

When the Laocoon was brought to light in 1506 its aesthetic qualities were recognized instantly.⁴ But since then it has been subject to a complicated discourse characterized by uncertainty and arbitrariness. Neither in art history nor in archaeology can the Laocoon be fixed with more than tentative certainty in history. It is connected with both the problem of its style and its iconography. It has been dated from Hellenism to the early imperial period, a span of time covering some 300 years and, as far as iconography goes, the question has not been settled as to whether the group can be understood both as a three figure group and a two figure group altered into a three figure group.

In art history, the dating of art works from the past 500 years has related to the arrangement of an artist's oeuvre from year to year on the basis of style and iconography. This bears on a Romantic idea that the artist is an individual who creates unique art works from an inner urge to create. This idea of the artist as a genius is prevalent even today. Understood methodologically, this reflects connoisseurship, also a Romantic conception, according to which a master hand is clearly distinctive from those of his pupils and followers. Underlying connoisseurship is also a concept of the aesthetic. But we also apply this methodology to art works from remote periods such as Phidias' work on the Parthenon frieze, Skopas' on the Mausoleum and the three Rhodians: Hagesandros', Polydorus' and Athenodorus' on the Laocoon. This methodology ran parallel to the natural sciences, especially diagnostics in medicine, based on visual observation of patients and also on the concept of evolution. Furthermore, some of the researchers who tried to apply medical diagnosis to art, made a contribution to stylistic analysis in art history, notably Giovanni Morelli, or, as far as interpretation of expression goes, Sigmund Freud.

This classification of an artist's oeuvre is related to another visual parameter, namely the general style of a given period, for example Baroque, where it is understood that any artist's creation is a variant of a general stylistic trend. This part of stylistic analysis or interpretation is, seen from a modern standpoint, by the far most interesting, and is obviously necessary, even compulsory, as a tool in the efforts to place the

⁴Abundantly described in Bieber op. cit.

Laocoon safely in history The problem of how to place the Laocoon in relation to style has nevertheless proved complicated and problematic. We know the names of the artists who made it and we know they were Rhodians, but we cannot determine the period in which they lived. Therefore we try first to grasp the general style of the group and then to place the artists in time and place. In this case we *first* try to find the context for the statue, and *then*, so to speak, slot the artists in.

From a theoretical point of view, this approach is much more difficult and uncertain than the other way round, that is when we know approximately the data of the artists. We can handle this methodology when we have a well documented set of artistic oeuvres to compare it with. In the case of the Laocoon this has proved inconclusive. But we cannot just skip stylistic analysis however many uncertainties are apparent, since we are convinced that basically a style cannot be imitated. Furthermore, iconography has a bearing on the epistemology of a given period. Besides, ideally, we want to anchor theory in empiricism, otherwise no explanation, however elegant or logical, will seem to explain anything in history.

The Laocoon not only belongs to art history and archaeology, but also has a prominent position in Western intellectual history, and therefore we constantly make interpretations of it. Aesthetically it has been judged differently, but a range of observers have been uneasy about the technical and stylistical incoherence of the group. Baccio Bandinelli realized this in the 16th century when he made a splendid "replica" for Francis I, King of France. The missing left arm of Laocoon, found in 1902, was reconstructed more bent both in the Bandinelli "replica" and in the version by Michelangelo (?) than suggested by any restorer. The artist's interpretation of the composition of the group, before the finding of the missing arm, was therefore definitely the best.

Raphael Mengs sensed the incoherence of style in the 18th century, R. Kekulé saw it in the 19th, as has recently been mentioned in archaeological publications.⁵ Perhaps Pliny did not see any of this, ei-

⁵R. Kekulé, *Zur Deutung und Zeitbestimmung des Laokoon*, Berlin and Stuttgart 1883. Raphael Mengs, *Oeuvres complètes*, 1787, 43. Mengs' description is evaluated by L.J.F. Janssen, *Over de Vaticaansche Groep van Laocoon*, Leyden 1840, 67ff.

ther because what he saw, was not what we see, or because he was simply uninterested..

The aesthetic incoherence of the group is due to various factors and can be summarized like this: first the stylistic, compositional and technical differences are easy to see between Laocoon, the younger son of Laocoon as compared to the elder one. The two are composed around an imagined vertical, but the elder son is not, he is bent. This could be a result of different hands or workshop practices, and does not necessarily tell us much of place and dating. Iconographically the point might be of importance. Technically Laocoon and the younger son are very different from the elder son, for example is the undercutting of mouth, eyes and hair. Laocoon and the younger son are cut from the same piece of stone and not necessarily the same as the elder son. The composition of the group of two and the group of three justifies the observations by Mengs and Kekulé. Aesthetically the most disturbing feature is the enormous snake coming from behind the back of Laocoon. We can gather, though, that Laocoon and the younger son will do very well as a group, seen both from the front and from the back, but the elder son definitely does not fit in. We have two coils around Laocoon and the younger son. They follow the same direction and form, and formally repeat each other but the space between the left arm and the thigh of Laocoon is too open, the coil is hanging. The base of the group of Laocoon and the younger son has been cut to the right at some time and has not retained its original form, that is its width. We must therefore ask: why should not the left leg of Laocoon have rested on the part of the base which is cut off, and why could the coda of the lower snake not have ended there too?⁶

The composition of the two person group is definitely the most interesting. In the two-person group the vertical of Laocoon is the axis of symmetry of the group. And the diagonals seem to cross close to the genitals of Laocoon, just as the hands holding the heads of the snakes lie in a horizontal line. This aesthetic incoherence has a consequence for the iconography of the group.

⁶Marianne Marcussen, "Laokoon og skønheden – før og nu", *Nordisk Estetisk Tidsskrift*, 7, 1992, 37–59.

Therefore, at one time the iconography seems to have switched from a two-person group to a three-person group. Or, alternatively, the two-person group was moved away from its original base, put up somewhere else and restored with the elder son. Or, perhaps the elder son was damaged in the original group and restored. It tells us nothing really of dating, but the two-person group idea seems to contradict Pliny's account, as he cannot be possibly be talking about a group with only one son.

The last comment I want to make about the differences of Laocoon and the younger son as compared to the elder son concerns the expression on their faces. Laocoon and the younger son have no psychological connection between them, they are both alone with their agony. But the elder son looks anxiously at the other two. This is a shift of psychology in such a measure that it seems impossible to think that one overall conception of the Laocoon myth is shown here or that we are looking at a coherent stylistic concept.

Therefore we must ask again if there are really two hands, two periods of creation, two iconographical traditions? The text of Pliny seems neither to gainsay nor to confirm these ideas.

And therefore the question of style and iconography is raised with force and demands an answer.

Dating

The stylistic incoherence might lead to some suggestions as to dating. Not that I think we can decide on the matter, but it might help to pose some questions.

First there *must* have existed a marble sculpture group with the subject of Laocoon and his two sons, if we can trust Pliny at all.

As with art of later periods, dating is imperative for our evaluation. So I should like to start with a question which I regard as relevant since comparisons of the Laocoon with Hellenistic or republican art down to the beginning of imperial time are inconclusive: are there

enough arguments for dating Laocoon anywhere earlier than early imperial times? My favorite quotation here is by Martin Robertson:

“As an initial date, the Sperlonga marbles (and therefore the Laocoon) were surely designed for the grotto (and Tiberius); a duplicate arrangement on Rhodes or elsewhere, plundered by some unknown Roman, strains all credulity. This in turn excludes a mid Hellenistic date (so, much of the older literature on the Laocoon, such as Richter 1951 and more recently Continello 1974) indeed any period before the Augustan, when the circular basin (in Sperlonga) was built. On the cusp of Greco-Roman sculpture, the three Rhodian’s pivotal position has been neatly characterized by (Erika) Simon (1984). This region, comprising Rhodes, Tralleis and Aphrodisias, must be regarded as the center of marble sculpture in the imperial period”.⁷

The reason for adhering to this authority is the commonsense it provides. But Robertson could also have found very interesting support for his view in one of the finest theoreticians of stylistic analysis, namely the Viennese Alois Riegl, born 1853. In his *Historische Grammatik der bildende Künste* he says:

“In dieser hinsicht hat namentlich die Laokoon-Gruppe bereits Aufsehen erregt, zu einer Zeit, da die heute noch junge Wissenschaft der Kunstgeschichte erst in der Kinderschuhen stand. In der Tat ist die in dieser Gruppe verkörperte Verherrlichung des Leidenden unerhört in der griechischen Kunstgeschichte....Der Laokoon erscheint hienach geradezu als Vorläufer der christlichen Kunst.“⁸

However, both dicta are taking us away from the much discussed problem of copying.

⁷Martin Robertson, *A History of Greek Art*, Cambridge University Press, 1973, 310.

⁸Alois Riegl, *Historische Grammatik der bildenden Künste*, Graz 1966, 28.

The general style

In art history, quotations or copies of older types or prototypes/affiliations to earlier art are legion. In the late nineteenth century Alois Riegl was the first art historian to take a serious look at the development of style internally in art. *Stilfragen*, 1888. Heinrich Wölfflin also contributed with *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe* 1915. They both thought of style as something bound to a certain period of time, being supra-personal. Riegl coined the phrase “Kunstwollen” and Wölfflin developed a system of stylistic interpretation based on five logically exclusive pairs of adjectives where the first is named “linear” and “painterly”. He developed those properties from an examination of the art of the Renaissance and the Baroque, representing a development of style *from* a “linear” and static form *to* (and opposed to) a “painterly” and moving form. Riegl coined the concepts of “haptic” and “optic” in order to characterize the development of style. This development was to him historically unavoidable. Both Riegl and Wölfflin advocated the idea that no style *per se* could demand priority aesthetically.

We are still greatly dependent on their thoughts and they continue to guide us in the characterization of the Laocoon. Margarete Bieber, with a touch of dismay, characterized the Laocoon group as Baroque. The Laocoon group *is* “baroque” but is it also “painterly” in the Wölfflian or “optic” in the Rieglian sense? The characterization of Laocoon as “baroque” is correct, since the Laocoon is composed obliquely in space, like, for example, the reliefs in Titus’ Triumphal arch, (ca. 71 AD) and is not parallel to the picture plane as are sculptures on the Ara Pacis. (ca. 13 AD). Wölfflin would understand this as a shift from “linear” to “painterly” and Riegl would regard this as a necessary historical development from “haptic” to “optic”, and see it as a forerunner of the Baroque of the 17th century, or even of Impressionism. But can Wölfflin’s and Riegl’s parameters decide the matter? It is tempting to answer in the affirmative, since this will point to a comparative analysis of Laocoon with other sculpture groups of the period, e.g. Sperlonga.

The dating problem should also contain a renewed discussion of the problem of copying. This difficulty has been entangled in the problem of style, and therefore in the question of dating the Laocoon, and I shall therefore summarize some of the points.

First we cannot by merely saying that something is a copy also say something about its quality. A copy by Poussin of a minor work by someone else is a Poussin. And generalizing this argument: a Roman copy by a superb master might be a better work of art than the one it has been copied from. The three masters of the Laocoon group *are* masters, at least the ones who cut Laocoon and the younger son are. Now it is also correct that often a copy of a masterpiece from the past is just a more or less uninteresting piece of sculpture or painting, but a copy by Botticelli of the Knidian Venus is still a Botticelli, however masterly the Knidian Venus may be.

And it is possible for us to look *through* the style of Botticelli and find the Knidian Venus. We will never take the Botticelli for an art work of the same period as the Knidian Venus. For this reason it must also be possible to look *through* the Laocoon to an earlier prototype, if it exists, whether good or less interesting. So the distinction copy/prototype/replica/ is important, but perhaps less easy to come to terms with as far as Greek and Roman art is concerned.

A practical problem has to be solved in the history of copies or copying: if someone wants a copy of a famous original it follows that the first copyist must have had access to the original. Did he then copy it in true measure or not? If a bronze is the original, the copyist must have seen it, measured it or made a cast of it, before it was melted.

I understand that one is tempted to think of bronze originals as a basis for marble copies, considering the number Pliny talks about as being in Rome at his own times. Again, listening to Pliny, it also seems that marble was very popular at this time. Provided that we accept a late date for the present Laocoon, Pliny's dictum certainly makes sense, because of his chronological way of giving the history of sculpture in marble. He ends up with the Laocoon, which could be a sign that it belonged to his own period. In that case, what is meant by an original? If the Laocoon has an artistic prototype somewhere, this is of course in a certain respect *an* or *the* original. But it does not make a later version

less original or artistically less important. The statue we know could as a matter of fact be *the* masterwork, and therefore matches Pliny's assertion that the Laocoon surpasses most other art works.

And we do not have many Laocoons – or at least we do not know of them, either in copies or in writing. I quote Bernard Andreae in this context. He says:

“Als Schöpfung ist die Laokoon-Gruppe in der Zeit voll entwickelten römischen Kunstvollens unverständlich. Muss man die Marmorskulptur im Vatican aus äusseren Kriterien in die Zeit des Kaisers Tiberius datieren, dann bleibt nur der hier vorgeschlagene Ausweg, sie, wie die Skulpturen von Sperlonga, als Kopie anzusehen. Dann jedoch ist besonders bedeutungsvoll, dass die Kopisten oder ihre Auftraggeber die enge geistige Beziehung, die zwischen dem Odysseus-Bild wie es in Sperlonga überliefert ist, und dem Gegenbild, das der Laokoon bietet, offenbar erkannt haben, als sie diese beiden Skulpture, wenn auch offensichtlich an verschiedenen Orten, des Kopierens für würdig erachtet haben.”⁹

In this case we must regard the “Kopisten”, both for the Laocoon and the Sperlonga marbles, as the *same* artists. There are some stylistic parallels between the Laocoon and the Sperlonga marbles, for example in the treatment of hands, that could do justice to the inscription on the Skylla group in Sperlonga, saying that the artists who did this sculpture also did the Laocoon.

So, talking about copies in this context more or less stresses the definitions and distinctions, and we will have to accept the Sperlonga marbles as well as the Laocoon as originals, whatever prototypes could be behind them.

To conclude, we can regard the present Laocoon as a marble original which is perhaps dependent on earlier versions or prototypes, and having either two periods of carving and/or representing two iconographical versions.

⁹Andreae, op. cit. 1986,

Style, dating and iconography

Whatever material has come down to us, we have found no general iconography for the group. Furthermore, if we do accept that there are some stylistic features that do not fit the concept of a sculpture group produced by a single hand or a single working process, the iconography also becomes somewhat blurred.

As there are many versions of the story of Laocoon, there might also exist different visual versions of this story. Erika Simon has numbered them, and decided on the following:

“Die rettung des einen Sohnes ist also bewusste künstlerische Gestaltung. Zugleich entspricht sie der Iliupersis des Arktinos. Nicht Vergil sondern altepische Tradition diente den rhodischen Künstlern als Vorlage”.¹⁰

I prefer to twist the argument. The two-person group should be enough to match the Iliupersis, but *what* iconography depends on is also the decisions made by the person or persons who commissioned the work. For the Laocoon the first commission could belong to a version of the legend which shows one son being killed, to be subsequently altered into the other version, where an escape seems to be shown. It could relate to a change in emperor or patron, or the statue could have been moved. We do not know.

To come to terms with this demands a historical context. Most scholars have reservations as to the idea that Nero may have ordered the Laocoon to match Nero's own writing on the subject *The Troica*, not left to posterity. Can the Flavians' so-called plundering of Nero's Golden House, if Nero owned it, and the re-erection of the sculpture group some other place be the reason for the incoherence of style in the Laocoon? If Nero commissioned the group, the dating is before 68 AD, but then we have the problem of the dating of the Sperlonga sculptures if they belong to the time of Tiberius, who died in 37 AD. And if the inscription on the Skylla group in Sperlonga postdates the Laocoon then everything is again in an impossible mess.

¹⁰Erika Simon, op. cit., 650

Now a summary of this problem is needed. The inscription in Sperlonga need not have been by the proud artists, but made at a later date: that is, the Laocoon could have been made later than the Sperlonga sculptures. The Skylla group then must have been intact at a later date, and not have been demolished by persons vengeful towards Tiberius. As far as the evaluation of the inscription goes it is deemed poor by Ellen Rice and therefore hard to date, although the sculptures must lie, in her opinion, well back in the first century BC.¹¹ To problematize this, according to the latest investigations into statistics, I should like to mention Virginia C. Goodlett's research on the Rhodian workshops in 1991, in which it is apparent that the three names on the Skylla group, the authors of the Laocoon, are not mentioned in her material which goes up to early imperial times, that is well into the Augustan era.¹²

I hope I have been able to raise some doubt as to whether we can trust anything at all, but I also hope that I have been able to support the arguments that favour a late and imperial date for the Laocoon.

There is reluctance in the literature on the Laocoon and the Sperlonga marbles to regard them as commissioned by one of the two most famous villains in history: Nero or Tiberius. As far as the Sperlonga marbles are concerned, nothing seems to gainsay the possibility that Tiberius ordered them. But the comparison with the Laocoon is then problematic as far as size goes: the Sperlonga marbles are huge, the Laocoon is small. The Sperlonga marbles seem to fit a sacred place as we could regard Sperlonga, given its situation close to Circeum, close to the Cumean Sibyl – the first place in Italy to receive Aeneas.

If we read the archaeological text concerning Sperlonga, the villa or villas may predate the sculptures, since we know they were begun in early imperial times. But the use of different building material cannot be used to date the different parts of them with certainty, just as no building material can be dated precisely according to the placing of the sculptures.

¹¹Ellen Rice, *op. cit.*, 233ff

¹²Virginia Goodlett, "Rhodian Sculpture Workshops", *American Journal of Archaeology*, V. 95, 4, 1991, 669–81.

The next problem is the date at which the Sperlonga sculptures were destroyed: we do not know. There are conflicting theories. They could have been intact at the time of the Faustinus inscription, as Per Krarup suggested. In my opinion, he has convincingly advocated a late date for the inscription. But of course the inscription in itself says nothing whatever of the dating of the marbles, although it says something about the site still being used. Krarup says:

“The later dating of the inscription does not involve a corresponding later dating of the sculptures. They – or at any rate – a part of of them – must be Greek originals from the first or even second century B.C. The inscription might then originate from a renewal or restoration of the imperial villa...”¹³

I have quoted Krarup for more than one reason: first he too is not sure that the sculpture group was made in one single span of time; secondly he refutes an early date for the inscription, which makes it plausible that the sculptures of the grotto in Sperlonga were not commissioned by one person, and therefore also not definitively by Tiberius, nor demolished shortly after the death of Tiberius, if he did indeed order them to be put there. This re-opens the question of iconography, since iconography could have changed from the original concept of the grotto's sculptures to a later version, better fitting a new policy or change of mythology. Nevertheless, in my opinion the style of the Sperlonga marbles seems coherent, unlike that of the Laocoon.

What the Sperlonga marbles and the Laocoon group have in common is therefore in some measure style but especially iconography: both are related to the Odysseus theme.

Then of course we must ask if the Odysseus theme can have any connection with imperial iconography? Vergil, in the Aeneid favours Aeneas as the hero, but we must also admit that Aeneas follows much of Odysseus' journey, especially in Aeneid III. The story of Polyphemus and of Skylla are stressed, as in the grotto in Sperlonga. Odysseus stole the Palladium as shown in another sculpture in Sperlonga, and Troy fell, but Aeneas retained the true Palladium and

¹³Per Krarup, “Zur Faustinus-Inschrift von Sperlonga”, *Acta ad Archaeologia, et artium historiam pertinentia*, 1969, 22.

brought it to Rome. There has been much discussion about the so-called Pasquino group. Menelaus with the body of Patroklos or Odysseus with the body of Achilles? On the helmet is someone with a club slaying a centaur. Can the relief on the helmet allude to the Odysseus theme? Or the Aeneid? We can say that whatever the motif, it is the same on the Pasquino group in Florence, which has the same motifs on the helmet.

We can sense an enormous interest in Odysseus motifs in the imperial era. But we cannot find a parallel interest in Aeneas themes. To account for that, one reflection is important: that the story of Homer and of Virgil belongs to two periods in history. The first is a recording *from* the past, and has therefore the role of a past description of a present that has later become mythological, having affinity to the present, but it is not a description *of* the present. Virgil's Aeneid is a history related *to* the present. If we compare the situation to modern politics, historical events often become symbols or metaphors for the present. We can point to the Renaissance and the iconography of for example Francis I of France or the complicated iconography of the Medicis in Florence. We can point to Neo-classicism and Napoleonic iconography. The past becomes a referent and brings fortunes or misfortunes of the present into the realm of abstraction or ideology. This would have been significant in imperial Rome too, for all that we also have historical realism in the Ara Pacis, the Tiberius relief, and reliefs on the Titus' triumphal arch or the Trajan column.

The interest in Odysseus themes also influences painting, for example those in the Vatican, dating probably from the later half of the first century B.C.

W.B. Stanford, whose vast literary knowledge highlights the contradictory problems in the Odysseus iconography, says:

“One can hardly blame Aeneas for calling the purposeful Odysseus of the Trojan campaign harsh, he did too call him infelix later (sic!). If one looks deeply into *causas rerum* here, one finds that Homer and Virgil (as well as Homer's Odysseus and Virgil's Aeneas) are ultimately one in this golden quality of all humane letters – compassion”.¹⁴

¹⁴ W.B. Stanford, *The Ulysses Theme*.

But his theoretical argument is the most important: that there is more than one interpretation of Virgil's Aeneas and Homer's Odysseus, who was favoured in Italian mythology for more than 700 years before Augustus' time and that Virgil, Ovid, Seneca and others favoured the Odysseus theme and interpreted Odysseus-Aeneas in different ways. This, at least as far as I am concerned, makes the stylistic incoherences of the present Laocoon understandable, and suggests that it should be subjected to far more detailed epitemological analysis, nor would I hesitate for a moment to search more intensily for its context in imperial iconography.¹⁵

¹⁵ The iconographical aspects of the Laocoon group will be further developed in another paper.

