Imperial Power in the Cave of Sperlonga: 
An Analysis of Hellenistic Revival in Rome

Cristina Urrutia

At the start of the first century CE, the Roman state entered into the Imperial age under the rule of the Julio-Claudian Dynasty. The first of these emperors was the adopted son of Augustus, Tiberius, who expanded the villa at present day Sperlonga, Italy as a retreat from his duties in Rome. Like other Roman elite families, Tiberius enjoyed hosting elaborate dinner parties and he used the natural grotto in the villa as a setting for these parties. Impressing visitors with its sculptures and mosaics the whole area of the cave was given over to theatrical dinner entertainment. It is during this imperial age, especially under Tiberius, that we see a return to the Greek Hellenistic style, which emphasizes the drama, pathos, and heightened theatricality of a sculptural work.

Grandiose mythological compositions in grottoes were typical during the time of the Julio-Claudians and can be seen among the villas of the imperial family. Because of the connection between the geography of Italy and the heroic journeys of Odysseus and Aeneas, both Homer and Virgil’s epic literature were revived under Tiberius’ reign. Interpretations of this literature were transferred to the sculptural program that decorates the cave at Sperlonga and depicts four episodes of Odysseus’ travels. The style and subject matter of the Sperlonga sculptures displays a renewed interest in the earlier Greek Hellenistic style, epitomized by the Laocoon and the Altar of Pergamon, This style placed emphasis on dramatic poses, highly emotional facial expressions, and a sense of theatricality in its presentation. An examination of the sculptural program at the grotto of Sperlonga, with influences from Greek Hellenistic sculpture and the epic literature of Homer and Virgil, makes clear that the sculptural program commissioned by Tiberius ultimately reflects imperial power.

Four sculptural programs were placed in the grotto of the imperial villa at Sperlonga, each depicting the exploits and wanderings of Odysseus (Fig 1). In the back of the cave was a sculptural group that showed Odysseus and his men in the moment before they blind the giant Cyclops Polyphemus (Fig. 2). Polyphemus is seen in a reclining pose, apparently having just fallen asleep. Odysseus has attempted to lull him to sleep by inebriating the giant in order to escape the Cyclops’ cave. On the right, one of Odysseus’ men has just given the Cyclops a bowl of wine and is retreating, falling backwards in the hopes of not waking the slumbering giant. This figure’s body is twisted and contorted in a dramatic fashion to heighten the emotional tension of a fleeting moment. The other figures in this sculptural group illustrate the moment just before they plunge a spear into the eye of Polyphemus. In keeping with the Hellenistic style each figure, including Odysseus (Fig. 3), is depicted in the moment just before the action, and all are portrayed with both exaggerated musculature and facial expressions.
**Fig. 1.** Tiberius’ Imperial Grotto at Sperlonga, First century CE.

**Fig. 2.** *Blinding of Polyphemus*, by Athanodoros, Hagesandros, and Polydoros. Detail from the Grotto at Sperlonga. First century CE.

**Fig. 3.** *Head of Odysseus*, by Athanodoros, Hagesandros, and Polydoros. Detail from the Grotto at Sperlonga. First century CE.
The placement of this group in a cave of its own heightened the theatricality of the story, especially since the setting for the blinding of Polyphemus in the literature was a cave as well. To further increase a sense of drama and emotion, this sculpture was placed away from a significant light source to give the viewer a sense of eeriness. Viewers were expected to walk around the artwork in order to appreciate and understand the complex poses from all angles, and this was especially true at the Sperlonga cave, where seats had been carved into the circular cave wall, allowing visitors to sit and ponder the sculptural groups from all directions.

Resting on a pedestal in the middle of the cave’s pool was another sculpture group presenting Odysseus’ encounter with the sea monster Scylla (Fig. 4). This group, along with the other three figure groups, is attributed to three Rhodian artists – Athanodoros, Hagesandros, and Polydoros – whose names are inscribed on a section of the ship. As with the Polyphemus sculpture, the figures with Scylla were placed in a water setting to reflect the scene as described in the myth. The fact that Scylla emerges from the cave pool to attack Odysseus’ ship increases the drama for viewers, making it feel as though they are witnessing firsthand the events in Homer's tale. The female Scylla clasps the head of the ship's helmsman, whose face is twisted in agony and whose arms desperately clutch the prow (Fig. 5). The helmsman’s mouth opens in pain and his unruly hair whips in all directions while dogs seem to be appearing from Scylla’s hips to attack the rest of Odysseus’ men. The male figures that compose this sculptural group also have exaggerated musculature, expressions, and poses that contrast with Scylla’s fairly stoic face.

Fig. 4. Attack of Scylla, by Athanodoros, Hagesandros, and Polydoros. Detail from the Grotto at Sperlonga. First century CE.
The two remaining sculptural groups placed at the mouth of the grotto show scenes of Odysseus’ trials during the Trojan War prior to setting off on his journey home. The first is of Odysseus heroically pulling the body of Achilles, off the battlefield, and the other group is of Odysseus who, with the help of Ajax, is seen in the process of stealing the Palladion (a statue of Athena) from Diomedes (Fig. 6). These statues share the same Greek Hellenistic style of the Polyphemus and the Scylla by depicting fleeting moments of dramatic tension where the figures’ poses and expressions are exaggerated. Educated visitors to the grotto would know that the Athena statue was stolen at night, so it would have been ideal for the sculpture to be placed in the murky, dimly light cave.
In addition to these four main sculptural groups, there were many more that decorated the lavishly adorned grotto, including a figure of Ganymede on top of the cave's entrance. The sculpture of *Ganymede and the Eagle* (Fig. 7) depicts the young man, Ganymede, being carried away by a giant eagle, commonly associated with Jupiter, on his way up to serve wine at Jupiter’s dinner party. Ganymede, like the other sculptural groups, has a dramatic expression with deep-set eyes and his mouth open in both awe and fear. He is shown wearing clothing that an educated viewer would recognize as coming from the East: pants, baggy tunic, and a Phrygian cap. At the Sperlonga cave the four sculptural groups were positioned in a manner to visually enhance the drama. This theatricality was always a primary feature in Hellenistic art. Viewers were able to visually relate to their environment, since it was as if they were looking out through a window frame and witnessing the figures in their real settings.

Sperlonga also contained a sculpture of a rearing ship’s prow that was carved out of the living rock and jutted out of the grotto’s entrance. An inscription on the ship announces it as “The Ship Argo”, and learned visitors would understand it as the ship of Jason and the Argonauts. Viewers would also know that the area of the coast where Sperlonga is located is the only place in Italy where the stories of both Odysseus and Jason overlap. In the ancient literature, the rocky promontory nearby to the Sperlonga cave is the supposed place where Circe entertained both Jason and Odysseus.

Emphasis on drama and the portrayal of extreme emotions were not new concepts in the early 1st century CE, but rather they had been developed in
sculptural works such as the Laocoon and the Altar of Pergamon. The style of these works directly influenced the sculptural program at Sperlonga. There is much debate as to the exact date of the Laocoon (Fig. 8) and many raise the question of whether it is a Greek original, a Roman copy, or a mixture of both. The aesthetic incoherence between the older son and Laocoon with the younger son also contributes to the debate over dating, since the orientation and bent position of the older son indicates that he could have been added later on\(^\text{10}\), whereas Laocoon and the younger son follow the same vertical axis. In the frozen moment of despair, the expressions of Laocoon and the younger son do not show any psychological connection to each other, each appears alone in his agony. The older son, however, seems to be looking at the two other figures for reassurance\(^\text{11}\). Most likely, Laocoon is a marble original based on earlier Greek versions or prototypes.\(^\text{12}\)

![Laocoon](image)

Fig. 8. Laocoon, by Athanodoros, Hagesandros, and Polydoros. First century CE.

Connection with the Laocoon and the sculptures at Sperlonga can be made based on artist since the artists’ names inscribed on the Scylla ship match the names of the artists who created the Laocoon. Thus the two sculptural programs share the same stylistic characteristics of pathos, contorted faces in agony, and dramatic poses, a style that conforms with Hellenistic ideas.\(^\text{13}\) In addition to the stylistic similarities, the Laocoon and the sculptures at Sperlonga also reflect the parallel themes of Hellenistic theatricality. The decision to represent a single moment from the Laocoon story as well as the Odyssean scenes at Sperlonga was not arbitrary. Instead they were specifically chosen to represent moments from the epics of Homer and Virgil.

The story of the Laocoon was taken from Virgil's Aeneid, Laocoon was a Trojan priest who warns the people of Troy not to accept the Greek horse\(^\text{14}\). Earlier Greek versions of this myth describe Laocoon as having only one son, but in the Laocoon sculpture, two sons are represented, which corresponded with Virgil's story\(^\text{15}\). Virgil's Aeneid was a well-known literary work in the Augustan and Julio-Claudian periods, and specific sculptural representations of a section of text was common.
Sculptural groups like those at Sperlonga illustrate the revival of Greek Hellenistic style in which sculptures produced during the Roman Imperial period were influenced by a variety of Greek originals. The *Laocoon*, and by extension the Sperlonga figures, closely resemble the monumental giants in the frieze of the *Altar of Pergamon* (Fig. 9), which depicts the battle between the Greek Gods and the Giants. In this sculpture the moment of greatest violence and agony is visually represented. The monumentality of the figures protrudes from the surface of the altar in a way that suggests the three-dimensional quality seen in *Laocoon* and at the Sperlonga caves. The contorted faces, open mouths, massive hair, and deep facial shadows of both Laocoon and the Scylla helmsman are stylistically similar to the giant whose hair is violently grasped by Athena (Fig. 10). They are sculpted along the same diagonals and display similar torsions of the body. All three sculptural groups clearly show the 2nd century BCE Hellenistic baroque style of massive musculature, large clumps of hair, and highly dramatic facial expressions.

![Fig. 9. Altar of Pergamon. 2nd century BCE.](image)

![Fig. 10. Detail from Altar of Pergamon. 2nd century BCE.](image)

However the Sperlonga sculptures do more than simply exploit emotions and violence. The placement of the figures was intended to show Odysseus in situations that revealed different sides of his character. Loyalty (*pietà*) is shown towards Achilles, treachery (*dolus*) against Diomedes, courage (*virtus*) towards Scylla, and cleverness (*calliaitus*) towards Polyphemus. The images of the hero's contrasting character sit opposite each other in the cave in order to enhance the drama of the space. This is evident in the way Odysseus' courageous rescue of Achilles was placed directly across from the scene of his deceitful behavior against Diomedes. Despite the intense drama and theatricality of the sculptures, the sculptures were carefully positioned not to overlap from the viewer's position in the triclinium. They are not arranged in a continuous or chronological narrative so the viewer must see all four sculptures at once from a single vantage point based on the position of the triclinium. The display was designed to emphasize the sculptures' illusionistic qualities, and the cave acted as the theatrical stage upon which the viewer witnesses Odysseus' travels.
The fact that no clear continuous narrative unites the sculptural program at Sperlonga makes it difficult to find a single literary source that describes all events. Instead we see a series of episodes illustrating the many virtues and characteristics of Odysseus as a stoic hero. In the high culture of Imperial Rome, knowledge of Greek and Roman literature was a basic part of the education of the elite, and so the emperor’s guests could be expected to know not only the stories but also the allusions. Odysseus was chosen as the subject matter due to his geographical ties with the Italian landscape, and exact locations in Italy were well-known as the sites for specific incidents during his journey. According to the Romans, Polyphemus’ cave lies under Aetna, the battle with the Scylla took place in the straights of Messina and the Sirens lived on Capri. The actual location of the Sperlonga sculptures was assumed to be the place where Aeneas first lands on Italian soil. The scenes depicting Scylla and Polyphemus are of particular significance within the context of understanding the hero’s wanderings, since they are part of both Homer's *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeneid*. Odysseus' confrontation with Polyphemus marks the beginning of his trials and the encounter with Scylla marks a new phase of his journey. In Virgil's epic tale, Aeneas encourages bravery among his men by reminding them that Odysseus, who sailed in the same treacherous waters, already defeated two monsters that would have impeded their path.

The emperor Tiberius was most likely the patron of the Sperlonga sculptures and possibly used the villa as an imperial residence. It is during his rule that we see a return to the Hellenistic style following the classical period of Augustus. While the Imperial Age witnessed an increased interest in portraying Odysseus' motifs, there was not the same parallel interest in themes of Aeneas. This was because Homer's literature described past events in locations that were readily identifiable in the present, and these past events held mythological significance. Historical events became important symbols and metaphors for Roman emperors who wanted to emphasize their connection to the past.

As patron of the Sperlonga sculptures, Tiberius intended to show both the positive and negative sides of Odysseus’ character as a reflection of his own multiple characteristics. As an emperor adopted into the Julian family, Tiberius wanted to draw attention to this family since the Julian family claimed descent from Aeneas. Tiberius also saw himself related to Odysseus and wanted to emphasize his mother’s Claudian line, since it was thought that the Claudians were descended from Telegonos, the son of Odysseus and Kirke. The two families, Julian and Claudian, were united when Tiberius became emperor. As a result, many believe that his ascent to the Roman imperial throne was “symbolically shown to have been predestined since [...] the fall of Troy.”

In addition the placement of Ganymede made it seem as if the “Trojan youth was being carried by the eagle to Zeus on earth thus the Roman emperor Tiberius himself.” Odysseus carried out the will of the Greek gods and brought about the downfall of Troy, therefore causing Aeneas to flee and eventually to establish the Roman Empire. By extension then, he was connected to the emperor himself. Both Aeneas and the emperor were crucial in the formation of Rome, just as the Julian line of Augustus and the Claudian line of Livia were united when Tiberius became emperor.

In the late Republican Age the entire Roman coastline from Antium to the Bay of Naples became a recreational area for the Roman elite. Grottoes with and
without sculpture were frequently used as outdoor theatrical dining rooms to entertain guests. It was during this time that a great appreciation for all things Hellenistic emerged, and educated Romans like the imperial family would have recognized the importance of visual representations of ancient literature. Virgil was one of the first to recognize the dramatic possibility of using the interior setting of grottoes to enhance the emotions of a sculptural narrative. During the time of the Julio-Claudians, the use of natural man-made caves as evocative settings for the visual representation of literature became common practice.

Tiberius’ cave at Sperlonga was one of the first to depict the Polyphemus and Scylla episodes from Homer’s poetic cycle. At Sperlonga, the theatrical nature of the sculptural display serves as an expression of imperial power since it was looked upon as if the emperor had the power to bring the mythical story to life. It is only after Tiberius asserts his imperial authority with an Odyssean theme that an imperial tradition begins during the Julio-Claudians to show sculptural representations of Odysseus, especially of the episodes involving Polyphemus and Scylla.

North of Naples at Baiae, Claudius’ villa contained an artificial apse with sculptures of the Polyphemus and Scylla groups (Fig. 11). In contrast to Sperlonga, Claudius’ sculpture of Polyphemus does not depict the moment of blinding but rather the moment just before. Here, the grotto and sculptures merge as a result of the intimacy of the sculptural arrangement, and visitors are given the illusion that they are dining in Polyphemus’ cave. Nero’s Golden House also contained images of Polyphemus and Scylla, but in mosaic form rather than sculptural. The emperors’ possession and display of these two Odyssean groups, as at the original imperial grotto at Sperlonga, identifies these areas as imperial space.

![Fig. 11. Claudius’ Imperial Grotto, Baiae. 1st century CE.](image)

Tiberius thus used the grotto at his imperial villa in Sperlonga to stage a lavish presentation of the wanderings and exploits of the mythological hero Odysseus based on the accounts of Homer and Virgil. It was here that the imperial tradition of placing sculptures of Odyssean scenes in a cave was born, thereby emphasizing the close relationship between the architectural setting and the
sculptural display. These scenes reflected stylistic ideas from Greek Hellenism concerning the display of dram and theatricality. To assert their imperial power and to demarcate imperial space, the Julio-Claudian emperors after Tiberius continued to represent these Odyssean themes. The Odyssean subject matter of these sculptures soon lost its connection to the myths they were based upon and became solely a representation of Roman imperial power.

Notes
4. Identification of this figure as Achilles is circumstantial, as it can be attributed to other Greek heroes.
5. Beard 75.
7. Stewart, Greek Sculpture, 98.
10. Pollitt, J.J., Art in the Hellenistic Age (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pg. 120.
12. Marcussen 40.
15. Pollitt 121.
17. Pollitt 122.
19. Stewart “To Entertain an Emperor” 78.
22. Stewart ”To Entertain an Emperor,” 87.
23. Marcussen 44.
25. Pollitt 120.
26. Marcussen 46.
27. Grummond 125.
28. Grummond 84.
29. Grummond 84.
30. Grummond 125.
31. Stewart, “To Entertain an Emperor” 78.
32. Stewart, “To Entertain an Emperor” 79.
34. Carey 50.
36. Carey 52.
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