JOHN R.C. MARTYN (1934-2019)

This is the text of the lecture given at Schools’ Night at the University of Melbourne on 22 September, 1983; it was then published in the 1984 volume of *Iris*. At the time, JRC Martyn was Senior Lecturer in Classical Studies at the University of Melbourne. He retired in 2000 with the rank of Associate Professor, and remained an Honorary Principal Fellow of Classics & Archaeology for well over a decade.

In the 8th Century BC Greek epic by Arctinus, called the *Iliupersis* or ‘ Destruction of Troy’, Laocoon only had one son, and was blinded, but escaped death. Sophocles’ play *Laocoon* was more significant; unfortunately only fourteen lines or so survive today, but it must have been the major treatment of the story in Greek literature, and of great interest to Virgil.

The three passages that survive can be translated as follows:

(a) Setting: ‘The altar-stone is bright with flames, smoking with melting myrrh and Eastern perfumes.’

(b) Laocoon’s prayer: ‘O Poseidon, who holdest sway over the headlands of the Aegean, on the high crags above the entrance to the blue waters of the sheltered cove.’

(c) Messenger: ‘But now Aeneas, the son of Venus, is waiting at the gates, carrying his father on his shoulders, whose linen robe is draped over his back, once struck by lightning. A great crowd of servants stands around him, and an extraordinary number of Trojans are emigrating with him, keen on the new settlement.’

From Sophocles’ surviving plays, we can guess that the tragedy was as follows:

Act I: Trojans rejoice at war’s end; tour of the Greek Camp-site.

Act II: Debate over the Wooden Horse: Cassandra and Laocoon warn of danger.

Act III: Laocoon insults the horse; sacrifices to Poseidon (Aeneas present).

Act IV: Messenger speech, describing Laocoon’s death and Aeneas’ emigration.

Since Laocoon and Anchises were brothers, the death of Laocoon and his son or sons would have triggered the departure of Anchises and Aeneas (and his young son Ascanius) for safe refuge at Mount Ida. Laocoon’s tragic flaw, I suggest, was his arrogance his *hybris*, first in making love with his wife inside Apollo’s temple at Thymbra and then in physically attacking Athena’s sacred horse and ridiculing its divinity, once the war was over. The play was probably located at the scene of his first crime, Apollo’s temple at Thymbra. Note that Laocoon is the priest of Neptune, as in Virgil’s account (line 201); however, Aeneas remains to lead the fight in Troy in the Latin, and Cassandra waits for the horse inside the city.

The other likely influence on Virgil was the statue of Laocoon and his two sons sculptured in about 50 BC by three artists from Rhodes, and described by the Elder Pliny (*Natural Histories* 36.37) in AD 79:

1 See Austin (1964), 95. For this paper, the assumed background is *Aeneid* II. 31–66, 195–249; the English translation is that by Lewis (1972), 6.

2 For the Greek, see Jebb & Headlam (1917), 38–47, where two additional lines (‘When toil changes, toils are sweet’, and ‘No account is taken of sorrow that is over’), two words (‘I’m wounded’ and ‘Down-swooping’) and the snakes’ names (in Servius, ‘Curifis’ and ‘Periboea’) are also given. The translations are mine.

3 The date accepted by Bieber (1942), 37-41; for circa 150–100 BC, see Havelock (1971), 149–150.
‘The Laocoon group stands in the palace of the emperor Titus, a work superior to any painting or sculpture. Laocoon, his children and the snakes marvellously entwined around them, were carved from a single block, in accordance with an agreed plan, by those eminent craftsmen from Rhodes, Hagesandros, Polydorus and Athenodorus.’

Its first appearance in Rome, late in the first century BC, must have equally excited Roman artists and writers, like Virgil.

Virgil seems to have followed the sculpture in his description of the serpents’ attack and killing of both sons and their father. From Arctinus and Sophocles came the reason behind the snakes’ attack, including his spear-throwing, and the debate over what to do with the horse, and Cassandra’s warning. He also had a lead for Aeneas being an eyewitness, later able to tell the story to Dido. However, it took Virgil’s genius to combine ideas from Greek epic, drama and sculpture into one of the most dramatic, artistic and memorable passages in Latin literature. As a whole, especially with the Sinon interruption, the story is Virgil’s own creation.

The immediate impact of Virgil’s story appears in two nearly contemporary works of art, a Pompeian triptych, and a miniature in an early manuscript of Virgil’s Aeneid. The triptych covers three walls in the House of Menander, the model villa in the ‘Pompeii 79’ exhibition that visited Melbourne. It depicts three crucial incidents in the destruction of Troy, the Death of Laocoon, the Wooden Horse’s entry into Troy, and the rape of Cassandra before the eyes of Priam her father. In all three cases I suggest that the unknown but brilliant artist recreated with his paints not some Pergamean original, nor the Homeric saga, nor some contemporary Roman night-fêtes nor the horrors of Lucan, but the second book of Virgil’s Aeneid, that must have been known off by heart by every schoolboy-turned-artist in Pompeii.

The picture of the Trojan Horse entering Troy can be seen on the cover of Craddock’s text of Aeneid II, although there only half of the original is shown. For the full view, see Image 1 below. Note the superb composition and brushwork of this almost impressionistic historical painting. On the right, the monstrous Horse towers threateningly (‘the menace mounts’) over the Trojans, as it ‘comes trundling into the city centre’. Its flaming crest is cleverly balanced by the crest of Athena on the left, and by the crests of the two serpents that escaped ‘towards the shrine of relentless Minerva’ and, instead of ‘disappearing behind her shield’, are wound around the urn or ball at the top of the central pillar. The Horse is on rollers, easily inserted ‘under its hooves’ by a crowd of enthusiastic young Trojans, and the ‘hawsers of hemp
around its neck’ are being pulled by four young men caught in the moonlight, and by six or so in the shadows, including one near the Horse with his arms held above his head, pulling down on the rope; not a carpenter.\textsuperscript{11} On the right, ‘boys and unmarried maidens joyfully grip the traces’, tied to the wooden crosses in their hands. Presumably the Horse has just ‘stopped at the entrance, accoutrements clanging in its belly’, unheard by the ‘psalm-singing’, and ‘madly blind’ crowd, celebrating this unexpected end of a grim, ten-year siege. One man, however, did hear, and was very worried, the crafty Sinon, a key actor in this drama. He will soon (verse 259) open the Horse, on seeing the flames that showed the Greek ships were now returning from Tenedos (from where the snakes had come). He also is caught by the moonlight, which highlights his naked, muscular legs and private parts beneath the rags which helped deceive his captors. His face is grim, and exceedingly sinister. He is certainly not a foreman urging on those pulling the hawsers.\textsuperscript{12}

Behind Sinon there are two rows of people. The front one is caught by the moonlight, and shows, not old women,\textsuperscript{13} but the King, his princes and high-priests. On close examination, their sceptre, robes and beards or bald-heads are visible, as are animal-skin helmets of some army captains in the second row, halyards held high, but soon to be swept aside by the Greek warriors. In the middle at the front an armless beggar sits, one leg thrust forward (balancing Sinon’s), with a gloomy expression, perhaps a symbol of war’s carnage. Next to him, on the same lattice-work seat, a loving couple gaze into each other’s eyes (not a seated woman!),\textsuperscript{14} their repose neatly balancing the strain of the pullers. To their right, a gnarled old tree-trunk rises from a rock; behind it, large green fronds, and the temple of Athena. Together with the plinth on which she stands, looking away from the people she has betrayed, these buildings counterpoise the towers on the right, which are being split open by the giant Horse; part of the large ribbons over the tower is being pulled away by the Horse.

At the very top of the picture a Fury approaches the Trojans, brandishing her torch of destruction, war’s sombre Fury.\textsuperscript{15} Behind her the ghostly walls and towers of Troy stretch out, very effectively depicted with a light brush-stroke. And finally, beneath Athena there are two women, both bearing torches (for illumination). Near the old tree, a young mother holds her child with one arm, as it balances on a dead tree-stump.\textsuperscript{16} And on the extreme left of the picture, a grim, dark-haired woman rushes in, to ‘open her mouth for prophecy’, but never to be believed, the luckless Cassandra. In almost every detail, this picture records the entry of the Horse just as Virgil described it in \textit{Aeneid} II.

Similarly, as can be seen in Image 2 below, the Death of Laocoon follows Virgil’s account in every detail. Laocoon is in the centre, wearing the pure, white robes of a priest, sacrificing to Poseidon, (Neptune), a white fillet around his head. A snake, coiled round his right arm, rises up to strike his head, one leg thrust forward (balancing Sinon’s), with a gloomy expression, perhaps a symbol of war’s carnage. Next to him, on the same lattice-work seat, a loving couple gaze into each other’s eyes (not a seated woman!), their repose neatly balancing the strain of the pullers. To their right, a gnarled old tree-trunk rises from a rock; behind it, large green fronds, and the temple of Athena. Together with the plinth on which she stands, looking away from the people she has betrayed, these buildings counterpoise the towers on the right, which are being split open by the giant Horse; part of the large ribbons over the tower is being pulled away by the Horse.

\begin{enumerate}
\item So Maiuri, 76: ‘Mallet in hand, a carpenter seems to be tinkering with one of the legs of the horse’. Where is the mallet? The hawser are in his hands (very faint).
\item Maiuri, 76: ‘another man a little way off, his movements limned in light, seems to be directing operations and urging the others on’. Hanfmann, xxxiii, ‘a whirl of draperies and limbs, he flies forward as if to whip the horse’.
\item Grant (1978), 159 ‘a flickering light comes from the torches of the long-robed women in the centre’. Likewise Hanfmann, xxxiii, ‘women with torches’. To Maiuri, 76, they are ‘an almost formless mass of hooded men’ — at least the right sex.
\end{enumerate}
as he tries desperately to hold it off; both are dramatically silhouetted. Behind him are the walls of Troy; on either side, Trojan spectators, two on the right looking away in horror, one on the left raising his arm in shock. In front of the spectators on the right a bull rushes away, with an axe-head in its neck (or so it seems) and a broken shaft beneath its right hoof. In front of Laocoon an altar-table crashes to the ground, the sacred wine flask falling to the right, just below his sword, used in vain against the serpents. Below the altar lies the twisted, agonised body of his eldest son, apparently already dead; besides him, the younger boy is encased in snake-coils, looking for help from his father, in vain. Between their pathetic bodies lie two white lilies, symbolizing their deaths.  

In Virgil's account, the two snakes first killed his two sons, ‘cropping their piteous flesh with their fangs’, next they ‘fastened upon Laocoon, as he hurried, weapon in hand’ (by now on the ground), ‘to help the boys’. The snakes intercept him, ‘their heads poised above him… while his hands are struggling to break their knots’. They (or the head) are about to spatter ‘his priestly headband with blood and pitchy venom’ (the headband is still pure), while he bellows as ‘when a wounded bull escapes from the altar, after it has shrugged off an ill-aimed axe blow at its neck’; a simile used ‘to imply Laocoon’s death obliquely’. The artist brilliantly combines Laocoon’s initial sacrifice of ‘a great bull at the official altar’ with the final simile describing a half-killed bull’s bellowing. The effect on the spectators is immediate: ‘Our blood drained away at the sight; we broke and ran’ — the artist shows the same reaction, as they are about to run. Unfortunately, my copy of the wall-painting is a poor one; otherwise, this vivid artistic portrayal of Laocoon’s destruction would probably be just as emotive and memorable as Virgil’s narrative description.

The manuscript illumination (see Image 3 below) probably goes back to the early first century AD, although the manuscript itself is a fourth-century one. It obviously cannot be compared with the wall-paintings from the point of view of artistic excellence; however, it again shows how influential Virgil’s account could be in a different medium. In this case, the artist shows three stages of the story, first, Laocoon sacrificing a bull at a solid altar, in front of the temple of Apollo (note how he holds the bull by a ring in its nose, with a Roman axe at the ready); secondly, two snakes (angues) cross the sea from Tenedos, to the same temple (their paths shown by dots); and finally a naked Laocoon becomes the sacrifice, as he struggles against the snakes, which are squeezing his two tiny sons; one of his knees is on the altar, and his cloak flies above his head, as his eyes look to the heavens in agony.

Elements of this miniature may well derive from the Laocoon sculpture eulogised by the Elder Pliny, such as the priest’s nakedness, and the framing of his body with those of his sons, and it is appropriate now to reconsider this famous work of art, and its impact on the Renaissance, when it suddenly reappeared after centuries of being hidden under the ground. (see Image 4 below). For a modern analysis of this sculpture I quote from C.M. Havelock:

‘Heroically nude, massively built, he struggles in vain against the deadly pressure of the serpents’ coils. One snake with vicious mouth and evil eye sinks his fangs into Laocoon’s side. A long groan, a cry of pain, issues from the tortured, bearded head thrown back in agony. Unseeing and shut off by his own suffering, he is on the point of giving up. At the left, his younger son is

17 See Aeneid VI 883 Manus date lilia plenis ‘Give me armfuls of lilies’ to shower on the corpse of Marcellus.
18 The Latin suggests bites as well as poison (and squeezing) killed the boys, who were acting as their father’s acolytes in this Roman-style sacrifice.
19 Austin (1964), 107.
20 See de Wit (1959), 48–53.
even nearer the end. His smooth body has already gone limp; his mouth, too, is open, not in a protesting cry but in a last gasp. With one pathetic hand he can only pat, as it were, the head of the serpent which has embraced him. The stronger, elder son is the most *compos mentis* and still the freest. But his predicament is perhaps the worst of all, for even while he attempts to unravel and escape from the fleshy windings of the snake he must see and hear the anguished moans of his father.

It is possible to see in the present composition, recently reconstructed by Magi, a kind of triangle with the head of Laocoon as the apex. But the design is not planigraphic. Each of the three figures encompasses the third dimension; there are strong projections such as foreshortened legs and forward-moving torsos. The serpents travel back and forth in ominous spirals. The plastic conception of the whole is revealed particularly well in the expanding and contracting as well as turning form of the father. Echoing rhythms and motifs in the torsos and gestures of the three figures, and in the entire bodies of Laocoon and his younger son, unite them all both compositionally and thematically. Diagonal energies are the most prevalent and emphatic: there is a rush of activity not only toward and away from us, but also to the left and right if we follow, for example, the more obvious paths that the serpents trace. The figures by themselves are sympathetically interrelated, but they are unequivocally interlocked by the coils.

When this Rhodian statue reappeared on January 14, 1506, with Michelangelo standing nearby in a state, one imagines, of intensive excitement, its effect was extraordinary. Artists and poets eulogised it, adapted it, copied it and parodied it for the next 150 years or so, until scholars set about tearing it apart with their pedantic criticisms. At a time when educated men spoke Latin as freely as the Romans ever did, and when Virgil was by far the favourite Latin poet, this sculptured representation of a key moment in the epic narrative they all knew so well was admired as its rival in the field of ancient sculpture. With its baroque qualities, this was especially true in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, as will soon appear.

Two images below show the earliest engravings, in about 1510, by the Italian artist, Marco Dente, before the sculpture had been properly restored by Magi. The first (Image 5) is a faithful reproduction, the second (Image 6) a Baroque variation, clearly made to conform with Virgil’s story, with the more rugged hair and muscles, and the broken children. Contemporary artists were especially interested in the straining muscles, as seen in an etching by Jean de Gourmont (1581)(Image 7 below), a marble copy by Bandinelli for Pope Leo X in 1520, and a bronze cast by Sansovino in 1523. All three shared the pathos of Laocoon’s death, which appears in the altar piece at Brescia by Titian, where his suffering Christ is modelled on Laocoon. And yet Titian later on was ready to caricature the sculpture, as appears in Boldrini’s woodart, with the three agonised monkeys (Image 8 below). However this may have been more a caricature of Bandinelli’s over-muscular marble copy, or it may point to a contemporary controversy over whether Galen used apes rather than humans for his anatomical research.

Image 9 below is one of the fifteen drawings by the painter Peter Paul Rubens, made in Rome between 1602 and 1603. It seems the muscular back of the father, and of his young son, were of special interest to Rubens; the father’s convulsions and the boy’s resignation (in Image 9) provide great pathos in these

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21 Havelock (1971), 149.
22 Most of my material in the next three paragraphs comes from Bieber (1942), 12–28.
23 See Clark (1960), 390–1, where a picture of the woodcut is shown.
excellent drawings. But perhaps the finest version of all in post-classical times is the extraordinary painting (Image 10 below) by El Greco, painted in about 1610, when he was an old man; however, several earlier versions had been painted by him in previous years, all of them now lost. His elongated figures wind around the bearded head of Laocoon; as in the Pompeian wall-painting, he holds the snake’s head clear of his brow, and while one son is dead, the other is still wrestling with a snake. In the background, his city of Toledo represents ancient Troy.

By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, scholars were looking at the sculpture in a very different way, in Germany especially. In 1764, Johann Winckelmann, the first eminent art-historian, argued that its success lay in Laocoon’s noble soul being visible, in his intense suffering and stifled groan, and he compared Laocoon with prototypes like Philoctetes. Meanwhile Gotthold Lessing was finishing his famous treatise, Laocoon, or the Limitations of Poetry, wherein he agreed basically with Winckelmann, but argued that beauty was the supreme law for the true artist; hence the avoidance of disfiguration on Laocoon’s tortured face. He also rightly stressed the difference between the pregnant moment of artist representation, and the extended drama of narrative poetry, which allows the reader actually to hear Laocoon’s scream, as he recovers the breath squeezed out by the snakes. Finally Johann Goethe, in his essay ‘Upon the Laocoon’, written in 1797, stressed the importance of the transitional moment of art, comparing Laocoon with ‘fixed lightning’, or a surf wave frozen in motion, when just about to break. Goethe demanded both character and beauty in art, as well as variety, complexity and symmetry, all of which were so evident to him in the Laocoon sculpture. The father, for example, excites terror, and is old, the elder son arouses fear, and is a teenager, and the younger son arouses pity and is an infant.

To conclude, let us look at an English version of a fine early Renaissance Latin poem, written by Jacobus Sadoletus, who was there to witness that thrilling moment of rediscovery in 1506:

**THE STATUE OF LAOCOON**

Translated by H.S. Wilkinson

From heaped-up mound of earth and from the heart
Of mighty ruins, lo! long time once more
Has brought Laocoon home, who stood of old
In princely palaces and graced thy halls,
Imperial Titus. Wrought by skill divine
(Even learned ancients saw no nobler work),
The statue now from darkness saved returns
To see the stronghold of Rome’s second life.
What shall begin and what shall end my lay?
The hapless father and his children twain?
The snakes of aspect dire in winding coils?
The serpents’ ire, their knotted tails, their bites?
The anguish, real, though but marble, dies?
The mind recoils and pity’s self appalled,
Gazing on voiceless statues beats her breast.
Two serpents flushed with rage gather in coils
To one loose ring, and glide in winding orbs,
And wrap three bodies in their twisted chain.

24 The original Latin can be seen in Austin (1964), 293–4, together with Patrick Dickinson’s evocative poem ‘No second Troy to burn’ (296). The English version is cut off by me at line 49 (omitting the final moralizing).
Scarce can the eyes endure to look upon
The dreadful death, the cruel tragedy.
One serpent darting at Laocoon’s self,
Enraps him all, above, below; then strikes
With poisonous bite his side; the body shrinks
From such embrace. Behold the writhing limbs,
The side that starts recoiling from the wound.
By keen pain goaded and the serpent’s bite,
Laocoon groans, and struggling from his side
To pluck the cruel teeth, in agony
His left hand grapples with the serpent’s neck.
The sinews tighten, and the gathered strength
Of all his body strains his arm in vain;
Poison overcomes him; wounded sore he groans.
The other serpent now with sudden glide
Returned, darts under him its shiny length,
Entwines his knees below and binds him fast.
The knees press outward, and the leg compressed
By tightening windings swells; the blood confined
Chokes up the vitals and swells black the veins.
His sons no less the same wild strength attacks,
And strangles them with swift embrace and tears
Their little limbs; even now the gory breast
Of one whose dying voice his father calls
Has been its pasture; round him wrap its coils
And crush him in the mighty winding folds.
The other boy, unhurt, unbitten yet,
Uplifts his foot to unloose the serpent’s tail;
His father’s anguish seen he stands aghast,
Transfixed with horror — his loud wailings stay,
His falling teardrops stay — in double dread.

Bibliography

Primary Texts and translations (by editor)


Secondary Sources


*Image 1. Pompeii, House of Menander, wall painting of Trojan Horse entering Troy*
Image 2. Pompeii, House of Menander, wall painting of the Death of Laocoon
Image 3. Illustration of Laocoön in the ‘Vatican Virgil’ (Biblioteca Apostolica, MS Vat. lat. 3225, 18v), 4th-5th century AD
The Laocoon Tableau in Virgil’s Aeneid

Image 4. The Laocoon sculpture, discovered in 1506
Now in the Vatican City, Museo Pio Clementino
Image 5. Engraving of the Laocoon sculpture by Marco Dente, the faithful reproduction, c. 1515
Image 6. Engraving of the Laocoon sculpture by Marco Dente, the Baroque variation, c. 1515
Image 7. Engraving of the Laocoon sculpture by Jean de Gourmont, 1520s.
Image 8. Woodcut of an original drawing (c. 1545) by Titian, a Caricature of the Laocoon sculpture
The Laocoon Tableau in Virgil’s Aeneid

Image 9. Drawing of the younger son of the Laocoon sculpture by Peter Paul Rubens, c. 1603