



HOME

Images of heroism and martyrdom: borrowings from the Vatican Laocoon during the early modern period

Maria Berbara

Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro
- UERJ



Fig. 1. Hagesandros, Athenodoros, Polidoros. Laocoon. Vatican Museums, Belvedere.



Fig. 2. Unknown artist. Miniature of the Aeneid representing the Laocoon episode. Vat. Lat. 3223, f. 18v.

Why is the Vatican Laocoon ([fig. 1](#)) sitting down? Why would a man who is being, together with his two sons, mortally wounded, not stand up, or, on the contrary, fall down completely? And why does this unnatural position, after all, does not seem so strange to us?

As early as in the 1980's, Dieter Blume noticed that the death of Laocoon, the Trojan priest attacked by two sea monsters after having warned the Trojans against the wooden horse the Greeks had left in front of the city walls, could be paralleled to Christ's sacrifice^[1]. This interpretation was later developed by Bernard Andreae in his *Laocoon and the Foundation of Rome*, of 1988, in which the scholar masterly connects recent archaeological findings to the history of the group's reception in the 16th century in order to link Laocoon's death not only to Christ's sacrificial death, but also, to the *topos* of the *renovatio Romae*. In the books and papers that followed the 500th anniversary of the group's exhumation, in 2006, this view has been mostly reaffirmed.

Let us remember how the story goes. The

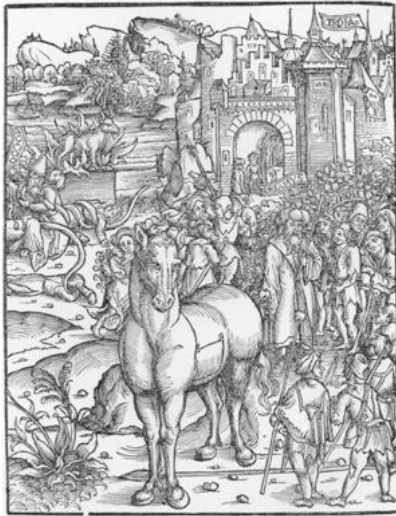


Fig. 3. Attributed to Sebastian Brandt. Aeneid woodcut from Strasbourg (edition of Johannes Grüniger, 1502, f.162v) representing the wooden horse and the death of Laocoon and his sons.



Fig. 4. Filippino Lippi. Drawing representing the death of Laocoon. Destroyed during the Second World War.

literary tradition related to the myth of Laocoon, as in the case of so many mythological characters, does not maintain a single version, but rather develops many variations introduced by the numerous authors who have treated the subject. The earliest known mention of the myth is in the *Iliou persis* – one of the poems of the so called Epic Cycle (7th-5th centuries BC) – composed by Arctinus and transmitted through the compilation of Proclus, probably written in the second century AD. According to this version, the Trojans debated about what was to be done with the wooden horse left by the Greeks in front of the city gates; some suggested burning it, others throwing it from the cliffs, others still dedicating it to Minerva. The third view finally prevailed, and the Trojans, believing that the war was over, held a high festival to celebrate the supposed peace. At that moment, however, two serpents sent by Apollo appeared and attacked Laocoon and one of his sons. The portent alarmed Aeneas and his family to such an extent, that they decided to escape immediately. The relationship between the attack of the reptiles and Aeneas flight is, therefore, explicit; Laocoon's and his son's death constitute the omen thanks to which the warrior may be saved. The divine intervention could be thus understood as a manifestation of Apollo's favor towards the Trojans: the god knew that Troy was already doomed to destruction, but at the same time wished to allow the survival of at least a part of it – symbolized by Aeneas and the Trojan penates. There is no hint, therefore, of any demerit on the part of the victim.

If Arctinus, however, does not attribute any guilt to Laocoon, in the 5th century



Fig. 5. Gian Francesco de' Maineri (attr.). Sacrificial Scene. Chicago, Art Institute.



Fig. 6. Andrea Riccio. Sacrifice to Aesculap. Originally made for the tomb of Girolamo della Torre and his son Marco Antonio. Presently in Paris, Louvre.



Fig. 7. Lorenzo Costa. Madonna dei Bentivoglio. Bologna, San Giacomo

BC a *hubris* is introduced at the root of the events which would result in his death: in a poem originally composed by Bacchylides and recorded by Servius (*ad.Aen.*, 2,201), Laocoon, a priest of Apollo, has sexual intercourse with his wife before the image of the god, who for this reason punishes him by sending two serpents to kill his sons; after the attack, the reptiles are transformed into men. The idea of guilt seems to have been retained in a tragedy by Sophocles on the Laocoon subject, from which, unfortunately, only a few fragments have subsisted[2].

Servius also quotes the Alexandrian poet Euphorion (end of the 3rd century and beginning of the 2nd century BC), a very important model for Vergil[3]. As in the *Aeneid*, Euphorion's Laocoon is chosen priest to Neptune by lot, since the original priest of the god, whose sacrifices failed to prevent the Greeks from landing, had been stoned to death by his countrymen. Also as in Vergil, Laocoon is immolated together with his two sons[4]. In this version, one still encounters the idea of the priest's guilt for having had intercourse with his wife before an image of Apollo ("*ante simulacrum numinis cum Antiopa uxore sua coeundo*").

Let us briefly cite, finally, the references to the Laocoon myth in the *Posthomerica* of Quintus Smyrnaeus; the *Bibliotheca* of Apollodorus; the *Fabulae* of Hyginus, and Petronius' *Satiricon*[5]. The main reference to the Laocoon myth, however, the one which has made it so familiar to modern and contemporary people and by which it is normally identified, is undoubtedly in the second book of the *Aeneid*. The passage related to the Trojan priest's terrible fate is included in the



Fig. 8. Giovanni Bellini.
The Redeemer. London,
National Gallery.



Fig. 9. Moderno. Sacra
Conversazione. Vienna,
Kunsthistorisches Museum.

painful narration Aeneas makes to Queen Dido about the Greek deceits and the Trojan misfortune, which begins at the end of the first book. The hero tells how the Achaean sailed to the island Tenedos so that the Trojans would believe that they were returning to Greece, but instead deposited before the city gates the insidious wooden horse, whose internal cavity bore armed warriors. The Trojans were unsure about what to do with the simulacrum when Laocoon, a priest of Neptune, rushing inflamed before a crowd, exhorted his countrymen not to trust the Greeks and their gifts.

After this powerful speech, Laocoon throws his spear at the horse's side, evoking a loud prophetic reverberation. As pointed out by R.G.Austin^[6], Vergil's Laocoon is presented as a well-known character of great authority and strong temper: while the other leaders waver, he knows his own mind, and his fiery words, which immediately draw the attention of the crowd, for a moment seem to be able to ward off Troy's ruin. His action of flinging his spear at the horse, characteristic of a strong man in his prime, reinforces the impression of a firm and decided personality. In this same moment, however, Sinon suddenly appears with his hands tied, and with a deceitful speech, seeks to convince the Trojans to introduce the wooden horse inside the city walls: he states that the Greeks had left the simulacrum as an offering to placate Minerva, offended by the theft of the Paladium; if they destroyed it, their city would be ruined; if, however, they brought it within their walls, Troy would attain the most glorious future. Sinon had practically convinced the crowd, when a terrible event occurred to give credence to his tale

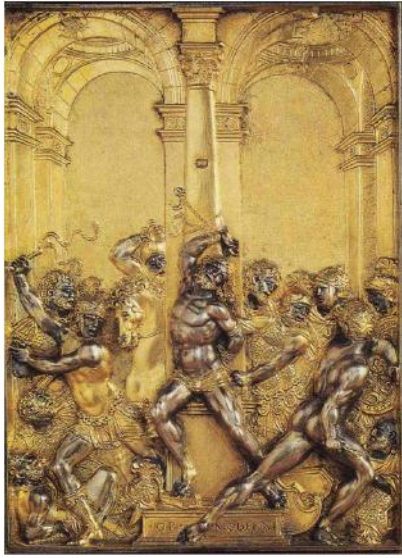


Fig. 10. Moderno.
Flagellation. Vienna,
Kunsthistorisches Museum.

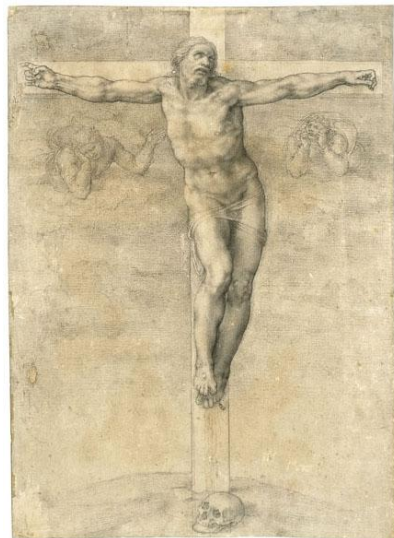


Fig. 11. Michelangelo.
Crucifixion (drawing).
London, British Museum.



Fig. 12. Hagesandros,
Athenodoros, Polidoros.
Laocoön. Vatican Museums,
Belvedere (detail).

in the eyes of the Trojans: while Laocoön immolated a bull before the sacred altars, two monstrous serpents appeared on the sea, coming from Tenedos. When they gained the shore, the reptiles attacked both of Laocoön's sons; the father came rushing with a weapon to help them, but was himself destroyed by the dragons. His death is compared by the poet to the sacrifice of a bull:

"Ille simul manibus tendit divellere nodos,

Perfusus sanie vittas atroque veneno,

Clamores simul horrendos ad sidera tollit,

Quales mugitus, fugit quum saucius aram

Taurus et incertam excussit cervice securim."

With Laocoön and his children dead, the snakes hide in Minerva's temple, under the goddess' feet. The Trojans were then convinced that Laocoön was killed because he had offended Minerva by throwing his spear against the sacred simulacrum, and at last brought it into the city walls. Believing that the war was over, they celebrated the supposed peace. When night fell and the Trojans were asleep, Sinon opened the horse and liberated the warriors hidden inside it, while the Greek fleet returned from its hiding place in Tenedos. In this moment, Aeneas is visited in dreams by Hector, who, crying, exhorts him to escape: the ruin of Priam's citadel was unavoidable – says the ghost – but he himself could still be saved, and take with him the penates of Troy. Meanwhile, the battle begins;



Fig. 13. Hagesandros,
Athenodoros, Polidoros.
Laocöon. Vatican Museums,
Belvedere.

Aeneas, awakened by the cries of the people and the sound of the weapons, prepared to fight and join his countrymen. Many Trojans were killed; Priam's palace was assaulted, and the king murdered by Pirros. The hero then sees Helen, who, frightened, tries to hide; furious, he wants to kill her, when his mother appears to him in a second vision, again exhorting him to abandon Troy – doomed to destruction – and escape. Aeneas rushes home, and, taking on his shoulders his father Anchises – who holds in his hands, not stained with blood, the penates – begins his flight accompanied by his wife Creusa and his son Iulus. While proceeding to the city gates, nonetheless, Aeneas realised that his wife was no longer with them; leaving his father and son in a safe place, he returned to look for her, when her specter suddenly appeared to him in a third vision: the gods would not allow her to accompany him – she says – but he should escape to the distant land where the calm Tiber flows, where he would find a new reign and deserve a royal wife. Returning to the place where he had left his family, Aeneas finds many other countrymen, who were ready to follow him. They all set off, then, on the long journey which would take them to Italy.

As indicated by Bernard Andreae^[7], Laocöon's and his sons' death constitute the first of a series of signs – followed by the apparition of Hector, Venus and Creusa – which gradually revealed to Aeneas his high mission: to save the penates of Troy, renewing it in the Roman people. Although the cause-effect relationship between the attack of the serpents and Aeneas flight (consequently the foundation of Rome) is not, therefore, explicit, the attentive reading of the

second book shows that the Vergilian passage maintains this link established by the archaic tradition and, very likely, followed by Sophocles. The high relief given to the laocoontian episode in comparison to the previous texts, on the other hand, may be explained by the fact that Vergil was writing a poem to celebrate Rome, and therefore trying to accentuate every element that concerned its mythical origins.

Through a metaphor of maximum density and poetic value, i.e., the comparison between the priest and a victim before the altar of sacrifices – *quales mugitus, fugit quum saucius aram / Taurus et incertam excussit cervice securim* – Laocoon, who not by chance was making a sacrifice when the serpents appeared, becomes himself the sacrificial victim^[8]. The priest's death is the decisive element which gives credibility to Sinon's tale, making the Trojans believe that they should bring the horse into the city; concomitantly, it also constitutes the first of a succession of signs which would reveal to Aeneas the unavoidability of Troy's destruction and at the same time his own destiny, which would lead him to renew Troy in Rome. Inserted in this magnificent poem which glorified the Roman people and their origins, therefore, Laocoon's death constitutes the necessary sacrifice to the foundation of Rome. If Laocoon's sacrifice in Vergil announces the ruin of Troy, at the same time it also allows the salvation of the one who could perpetuate it in the Roman people.

So far, it is not difficult to understand why this political interpretation of the myth found such a fertile ground when, in

January 1506, the statuary group was exhumed up on a Roman hill, the Colle Oppio. According to a letter written in 1567 by Francesco da Sangallo, at the time only eleven years old, Michelangelo himself went to the site of the excavations; Francesco also tells us that his father, Giuliano, immediately recognized the group: *questo è Laocoonte, di cui fa menzione Plinio*, This is the Laocoon mentioned by Pliny, he would have stated. Pliny the Elder, indeed, in a famous passage of his *Naturalis Historia* mentions “the Laocoon, which is in the palace of the emperor Titus, [as] a work to be preferred to all others, either in painting or sculpture”. He also names the artists who carved it: the Rhodians Agesander, Polydorus, and Athenodorus. Those names would re-emerge when, in 1957, a spectacular group of sculptures, signed by those same artists, were found in Sperlonga.

Both in the times of Vergil and in 1506, therefore, the Laocoon could symbolize the rebirth of Rome; its political potential was certainly noticed by Giuliano della Rovere, then Pope Julius II, who promptly acquired the sculptures, to the detriment of many illustrious gentlemen – including the Cardinal of S.Pietro in Vincoli, the Cardinal of S.Giorgio and the Conservatori themselves, who intended to place them up in the Capitolio. The first letters written about the exhumation of the group invariably mention Vergil, Pliny, and the fact that Laocoon was performing a sacrifice. So does Bonsignore Bonsignori, Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti and Filippo Casavecchia, for example, in letters written less than a month after the discovery of the group.

The representations of the Laocoon group prior to its exhumation in 1506, similarly, seem to always have maintained the Virgilian link between Laocoon's death, the sacrificial altar and the bull. In a miniature from a IV century manuscript of the *Aeneid* presently kept in the Vatican Library ([fig. 2](#)), for example, the episode is presented to us in two different moments: in our left, we see Laocoon about to sacrifice the white bull; in the right, he is being attacked by the serpents together with his two children on the very same altar which he intended to use to sacrifice the bull. The rhyming of both altars almost literary suggests the parallelism between the bull's sacrifice and Laocoon's death. Centuries later, a woodcut attributed to Sebastian Brandt from a famous edition of the *Aeneid* published by Johannes Grüniger in Strasbourg (1502; [fig. 3](#)) depicts, in the foreground, the wooden horse, and in the background a crowd before the gates of Troy. On the left Laocoon appears being attacked by the serpents, having next to him an altar on which a calf is burning. His two sons, still encircled by the reptiles, lie lifeless on the ground. The connection between the story of the Trojan priest and the representation of a sacrificial ritual is, again, the keynote of a work which probably constitutes the most famous modern representation of the Laocoon myth produced before 1506: the unfinished fresco of Filippino Lippi in the Medicean *villa* of Poggio a Caiano, which not by chance Vasari refers to as "*un sacrificio*" ([fig. 4](#): here we see one of the two known preparatory drawings – the fresco itself is presently in poor conditions). The fresco, produced sometime in the 1490's, probably uses as prototype ancient images of the *Suovetaurilia*, representations – normally

in reliefs – in which a bull, a pig and a lamb are taken to the altar of sacrifice in front of which a priest is preparing the sacred ritual. Lippi's fresco demonstrates, in fact, a true interest not only in citing, but also in recreating the ancient world.

In his seminal article of 1938 – *Pagan Sacrifice in the Italian Renaissance* – Fritz Saxl points out the high interest Italian artists took in the representation of Pagan sacrifices, which were not conceived as incompatible with Christian beliefs[9]. The fundamental importance of the sacrificial ritual – and its representation – has been amply recognised in diverse fields of investigation, be it theological or anthropological, historical or artistic, philosophical or sociological. A moment of maximum unity between men and divinity, it is placed at the epicentre of every religious ritual, and contains in itself the elements essentially necessary to the comprehension of a given theological system. Christianity inherited, both from Paganism and Judaism, the fundamental concept of sacrifice, and many different characteristics belonging both to sacrificial ceremonies and conceptions from the Graeco-Roman and Jewish world are preserved in Christian tradition.

Especially towards the end of the 15th century, not only Pagan sacrificial representations started to be recreated as independent works of art – such as for instance by Gian Francesco de' Maineri in a drawing, or Andrea Riccio in the relief of the Della Torre Tomb ([fig. 5](#) and [fig. 6](#)) – but also Pagan sacrificial elements began to infiltrate in Christian representations. In such images Pagan sacrifice was in general introduced *sotto voce* in the composition, more frequently under the

guise of some decorative feature in the architectonic structure simulating either painting or sculpture[10]. Warburg referred many times to the generic insertion of ancient scenes *en grisaille*, usually simulating reliefs, in works representing Christian scenes[11]. This method allowed the artist to establish a relation of conciliation with the classical past on the one hand, and on the other to keep a safe distance between the Pagan universe – confined in a fictitious space and treated as an explicit metaphor – and the Christian “real” scene. In the particular case of sacrificial representations, this scheme began to appear quite frequently from the last decades of the *Quattrocento* on; in Lorenzo Costa’s *Madonna dei Bentivoglio* (fig. 7), for example, a scene of Pagan sacrifice is figured on the Virgin’s throne, functioning as a clear allusion to the future sacrifice of Christ; the same detail is repeated in Bellini’s *Redeemer* in the National Gallery (fig. 8) and in Moderno’s bronze plaquette depicting a *Sacra Conversazione* (fig. 9) [12].

Moderno’s plaquette, as well as its pendant, the *Flagellation of Christ*, was studied in depth by Dieter Blume, whom we mentioned at the beginning of this paper. The scholar indicates several iconographical correspondences between the saints represented in Moderno’s plaquette and Graeco-Roman divinities. For example, Saint Sebastian, at our right hand side, wears a vine garland in his hair, in a clear allusion to the ancient Bacchic rituals. Saint George, on our left hand side, offers, with his left hand, three fruits – probably pomegranates – to the Virgin. Although these fruits constitute, in Christian iconography, a symbol of the

Resurrection, they are not traditionally related to St George, but rather to another dragon-killer, i.e. to Hercules, who had to kill a dragon in order to steal the golden apples from the Hesperides garden. The analogy is confirmed by the clear quotation of the celebrated bronze statue of Hercules, also holding the Hesperides fruits, which since the end of the 15th century had stood in the Conservatori Palace, in Rome. Moderno's second plaque (fig. 10) represents the flagellation in ancient-like scenery[13]: Christ is bound to a column which stands symmetrically at the centre of a construction structured by eight pillars forming four arches partly in ruins; his torturers, archaeologically dressed in the Roman manner (except for the soldier in the foreground, at the right, who is naked), completely fill the space around the victim. Diverse figures relate directly back to classical models: the two soldiers who flank Christ are probably inspired by the horse-breakers of Monte Cavallo[14], while the remaining torturers were probably taken from battle scenes of ancient Roman sarcophagi. Crowning this real *pasticcio* of ancient quotations – to use the expression employed by Blume – the engraver chose, for the figure of Christ, nothing less than the central figure of the famous Vatican *Laocoon*, almost exactly copied by the artist from the group[15]. The utilisation of the laocoontian model goes beyond the pure wish of formal quotation from the Antique. What makes the identification between Christ and Laocoon possible is the sacrificial nature of their death. Just like other traditional Hebrew types such as Isaac or Melchisedek, Laocoon here functions as a Pagan typological allusion to Christ and his sacrifice. Laocoon's

sacrifice, moreover, assumed, as said above, a particular meaning in the context of the *renovatio Romae*, the idea according to which Rome, founded as a consequence of the sacrifice of Laocoon and converted into the Holy See through the sacrifice of Christ, would again become *caput mundi*.

Some years after the making of Moderno's plaquettes, Michelangelo would again draw inspiration from the Vatican group to create a new type of representation of Christ in the Cross ([fig. 11](#)). In Italy, from the second quarter of the 13th century onwards – namely with the Crucifixions of Giunta Pisano and Cimabue – the model of the dead Christ on the cross was practically omnipresent. Michelangelo breaks this tradition by representing him alive, twisted and suffering. According to Condivi, Michelangelo wished to represent the passage of St Matthew's Gospel in which Christ, just before dying, cries: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Christ's upraised head, the eyes turned upwards, the violent torsion of the body, the sense of imprisoned strength, the expression of suffering, are all elements which unmistakably point out the borrowing of the Vatican group, which inspired Michelangelo to create a new, heroic type of Christ on the cross.

As far as the general interpretation of the *Laocoon* group is concerned, it would not be impossible that the priest's death alludes to ancient literary traditions according to which he did have a *hubris* to atone, as well as to other forms of political connotation, such as, for instance, the fate of Mark Anthony, as it has been recently

suggested[16]. The interpretation according to which Laocoon's death is sacrificial, though, is evident in the Virgilian passage, which happens to be the most widely known literary source of the episode and, as such, the most important reference to artists, who have not failed in representing the episode according to the verses of the Mantuan poet. The presence of the sacrificial altar in engravings, paintings and miniatures made before 1506 corroborates the idea according to which Laocoon's death was sacrificial. This is also the answer to the question formulated at the beginning of this paper, i.e., why is the Vatican Laocoon sitting down while being so aggressively attacked. If one looks closely enough, there can be no doubt that the rectangular object on which the priest is sitting down is, in fact, a sacrificial altar ([fig. 12](#)).

After the appearance of the book by Bernard Andreae, in 1989 – certainly the most important text written on the *Laocoon* in the second half of the 20th century – two major works have been written on the group: Salvatore Settis' *Laocoonte, Fame e Stile* and Richard Brilliant's *My Laocoon*, both originally published in 2000. The two texts emphasize the fact that the Laocoon group is so deeply rooted both in our visual collective memory and cultural repertoire that it takes a scholarly work to actually rescue its original meaning and connotations. Settis opens his book by quoting the letter in which the Italian poet Cesare Pavese compares himself to Laocoon: *Io sono come Laocoonte*, he writes only six days before committing suicide. Settis points out that even though the Laocoon group constitutes a

Pathosformel, it remains suspended between the crystallization of art and the very authentic pains of life. However, Settis' efforts all go in the sense of understanding the Laocoon sculpted by the Rhodian masters, instead of inventing our Laocoon, i.e. one that could be adapted to our vision of Greek art.

One of the strongest merits of Richard Brilliant's *My Laocoon*, on the other hand, is to clearly demonstrate that the traditional academic views according to which historical interpretation is progressive and will eventually lead us to a final, undisputed truth, cannot possibly embrace the complexity of the many layers of meaning added to the Laocoon throughout the centuries. The group's interpretations are kaleidoscopic, sometimes contradictory, and certainly ever changing. What Brilliant's book reaffirms, perhaps most importantly, is the inexhaustibility of the Laocoon group as an intellectual subject; as stated by Bernard Andreae in his review of the book, every time period has the Laocoon it deserves. Which one is ours? Certainly it is the expression of suffering which seems to captivate most of viewers nowadays, as well as the nature of this expression in the footsteps of the debate generated by Winckelmann, Lessing and Goethe in the XVIII century. Maybe one of the main elements we have inherited from the conception according to which Laocoon is an innocent sacrificial victim is the fact that, for most contemporary observers, he looks like an essentially good man suffering the arbitrariness of fate. For us, the idea according to which Laocoon's death symbolize the destruction and renewal of empires is historically too distant, but Laocoon's

heroism, here understood as his capacity to accept and endure his destiny, seems to be immediately perceived. Moreover, his visual identification with the image of Christ on the cross seems to have forever transformed him into a kind of saint, just like in the 20th century the atheist Ernesto Che Guevara would be sanctified by the – maybe unintentional, or maybe not – click of a local photographer when he was killed in the Bolivian jungles.

(This article is an expanded version of the paper presented during the 33rd Congress of the International Committee of the History of Art (CIHA) in Nuremberg, in July 2012).

Figura - Studi sull'Immagine nella Tradizione Classica, n° 1, 2013.

[1] BLUME, D. “Antike und Christentum”. In: *Natur und Antike in der Renaissance*, Cat. exhib. in Liebieghaus. Frankfurt am Main: 1985, p.88 ff., cat. n.64.

[2] For a reproduction of the fragments and a brief introductory study, see PEARSON, A.C. *The Fragments of Sophocles*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1917 (3 vols.) v.2, pp. 38-47. According to the reconstruction made by C. Robert in 1881 (“Bild und Lied”. Berlim: *Philologische Untersuchungen*, v.5, 1881, p.192-212) and admitted in its general features by most scholars, Sophocles seems to have inherited elements from both the archaic tradition and from Bacchylides: as in the

latter, the two children perish, while the priest himself survives; on the other hand, the most characteristic aspect of Arctinus' version, i.e., the relation between the attack of the serpents and Aeneas' flight, is kept. Dionysius of Halicarnassus states that, according to the tragedy of Sophocles, Aeneas abandons Troy on the advice of his father, Anchises, who had inferred the destruction of Troy from the warnings of Aphrodite and of those recently given "peri tous Laocoontidas". Based on these last words, Robert concludes that in this version both sons die (Robert, 1881, p.197). Förster impugned Robert's theory in *Verhandlungen der 40 Versammlung deutscher Philologen in Gorlitz*, 1889, p.432 f., arguing that the word "Laocoontidas" could include the father as well as the children.

[3] As pointed out by D'Alfonso (*Il Ritrovamento del Laocoonte vaticano e due umanisti di quel tempo*. Gubbio: Gubbio Scuola Tipografica, 1929, pp. 4-5, note 2), Vergil demonstrated his knowledge of Euphorion from Calcides when Cornelius Gallus, in the *Bucolics*, alludes to the elegies which he had composed in the "calcidic verse" (i.e. Euphorion's verse): "*Ibo et Chalcidico quae sunt mihi condita versu / carmina, pastoris Siculi modulabor avena*" (*Bucolics*, X, 50). The "Sicilian shepherd" would be, of course, Theocritus.

[4] "(...) *et ob hoc inmissis draconibus cum suis filiis interemptus est.*" Lessing thought that in Vergil alone the reptiles kill both the father and the sons, a belief which led him to suppose that the sculptors of the Vatican *Laocoon* would have used the model of the *Aeneid* –

where the three characters are attacked by the serpents.

[5] For a wider discussion on the text of Quintus Smyrnaeus and the *Bibliotheca* cf., FUNAIOLI, G. "Sul mito di Laocoonte in Virgilio"; *Atti del I congresso di studi romani*, v.2, 1929, p.300 segg, and PARATORE, E. "Sull'episodio di Laocoonte in Virgilio". In: -. *Studi di poesia latina in onore di Antonio Traglia*. Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, v.1, 1979, pp.405-430, p.407 f.. For Hyginus' *Fabulae* see GRANT, M. *The Myths of Hyginus*. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1960, p.112.

[6] "Vergil and the Wooden Horse"; *Journal of the Roman Studies*, v.49, 1959, p.18.

[7] ANDREAE, B. *Laokoon und die Gründung Roms*. Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1988, part 1.

[8] Andrae, 1988, p.25.

[9] "Pagan Sacrifice in the Italian Renaissance"; *Warburg Journal*, v.2, 1938, pp.346-67

[10] According to E. Panofsky in *Early Netherlandish Painting*. Cambridge-Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1953 (2 vols.) p.137f., Jan Van Eyck was the first one to express this relation of continuity between the ancient and the modern faith, in works such as for instance the *Annunciation* in the National Gallery of Washington; in this case, however, one has again a proposal of harmonisation exclusively with Judaism, and not with Paganism.

[11] Cf. GOMBRICH, E. *Aby Warburg. An intellectual Biography*. London: The

Warburg Institute, 1970, p.176, 247 and 296.

[12] Costa's work, from 1488, is presently in the Church of San Giacomo Maggiore in Bologna, and Moderno's plaquette, executed in the first half of the 16th century, belongs to the Kunsthistorisches Museum of Vienna.

[13] For a list of copies and variants made after the plaquette, as well as for a vast bibliography on them, cf. LEITHE-JASPER, M. *Renaissance master bronzes from the collection of the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna*. Scala Books & Smithsonian Institution, 1986, pp.125-126. For an hypothesis according to which it was commissioned to Moderno by the Cardinal Grimani, cf. LEWIS, D. "The plaquettes of Moderno and his followers"; *Studies in the History of Art*, National Gallery of Washington, n.22, 1989, p.129 f..

[14] PLANISCIG, L. *Die Bronzeplastiken. Statuetten, Reliefs und Plaketten*. Vienna: Anton Shroll, 1924, p.247, n.408, compared the naked warrior to the *Tyrannicide* which was at the courtyard of the Medici-Madama palace in the beginnings of the 16th century, being presently kept in the Archaeological Museum of Naples.

[15] The dating of Moderno's work could not be exactly established; the *terminus post quem* would be obviously determined by the exhumation of the *Laocoon* in 1506, but the *terminus ante quem* is more difficult to determine. Similarities with the version given to the right arm of the Trojan priest by the Montorsolian restoration of 1532 may suggest a later date, although that could be by no means later than

1540, the year in which the north-Italian engraver supposedly ends his artistic activity.

[16] R.R.R.Smith, review of Bernard Andreae's *Laocoon un die Gründung Roms*. *Gnomon*, 63, 4 (1991), pp. 351-58.