RESTORING THE POLYPHEMUS FROM SPERLONGA

Author(s): BALDO CONTICELLO

Source: *Archaeology*, JUNE 1969, Vol. 22, No. 3 (JUNE 1969), pp. 204-207

Published by: Archaeological Institute of America

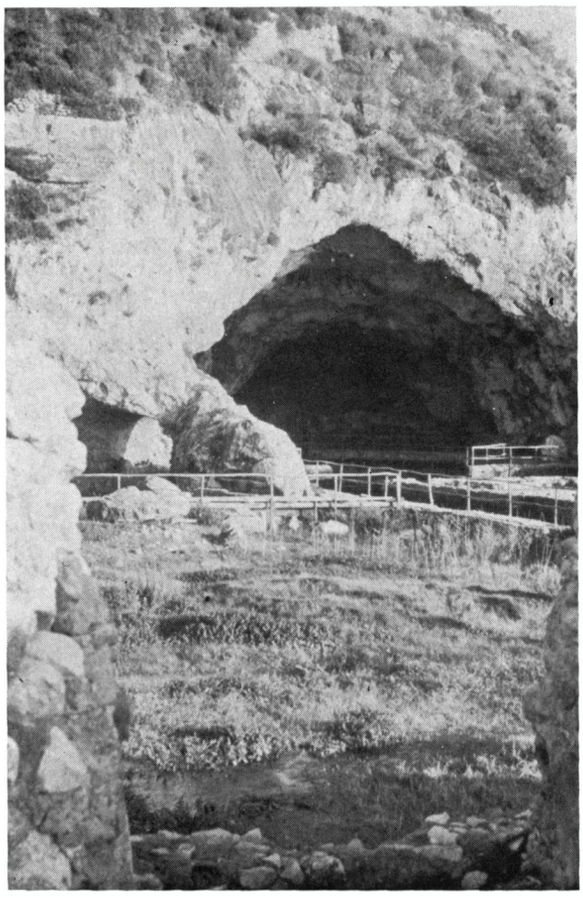
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/41667998

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

*Archaeological Institute of America* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Archaeology*

This content downloaded from
151.41.105.87 on Sat, 30 Dec 2023 15:24:04 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms



The Cave of Tiberius at Sperlonga, Italy; site of the discovery of thousands of fragments of marble sculpture.

# RESTORING THE POLYPHEMUS FROM SPERLONGA

BY BALDO CONTICELLO

THE PROLOGUE TO THE OPENING of the National Archaeological Museum of Sperlonga in 1963 and the restoration of the sculptural groups housed there is an exciting story of chance discovery and the proud tenacity of the people of Sperlonga. Engineers designing and building a new road south from Rome along the coast in 1957 had reached the fishing village of Sperlonga about twenty kilometers from Fondi, a major stop on the Appian Way. Its very name (*spelunca* is the Latin for *cave*) recalls its main geographical curiosity, the Cave of Tiberius which though much silted up still served as a shelter for fishing boats. When Engineer Erno Bellante, director of the road works in the Sperlonga area, decided on a September morning to employ some of his workmen to dig up the entrance of the cave, he came upon marble fragments of human and animal figures and monstrous serpent-like coils. News of the finds were reported to the archaeological service in Rome and the work of the construction engineers was stopped to be resumed by professional archaeologists. A land mine was discovered and mine detectors had to be brought in. Storms and tides menaced the many fragments of sculpture lined up along the shore and a breakwater had to be built at the opening of the small bay facing the cave.

In the meantime fragments of a marble slab were found bearing a Greek inscription with the names of three famous Rhodian artists of the Hellenistic age: Athanodoros, Agesandros and Polydoros. The sculptors were renowned as the artists who had created the Laocoon group which depicts Laocoon the priest of Apollo being strangled by the serpents sent by Athena to punish him for trying to keep the fatal Trojan Horse out of Troy. The original rests in the Vatican Palaces. The discovery of this inscription and the presence of snake-like coils and of human limbs in strong torsion among the fragments found in the cave led to the theory that a new replica—if not the original itself—had been found of the Laocoon group and thus the news of the discovery of a new Laocoon group was diffused around the world by radio, television and newspapers. Although the identification with the Laocoon group was mistaken, the connection between the finds in Sperlonga and the famous, evocatory name of the Trojan priest proved to be helpful in arousing interest and funds to carry on the research.

The great discovery made a strong impact as well on the remote, archaic world of the fishermen of Sperlonga. The whole village was in ferment. The excavation site and the cave soon became the favorite



This content downloaded from
151.41.105.87 on Sat, 30 Dec 2023 15:24:04 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

**The head of Polyphemus was modeled in clay after the head of the giant in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, but on the scale of the Sperlonga fragments. By comparing the many surviving marble pieces with the clay model, some belonging to Polyphemus' head were recognized and inserted in place.**

place for Sunday walks until access had to be forbidden for technical and security reasons. The extent of the popular interest in the excavations fully revealed itself when it was decided to move the fragments of sculpture (there are around five thousand) to Rome for restoration and study. The workmen employed in the excavations immediately took the news to the village and in a mood of general excitement a popular committee was set up. The morning when the trucks went along the shore to the cave to carry away the sculptures, the committee was ready to organize roadblocks. All attempts to run the blockade failed and the peasants did not trust the formal promise that, after restoration, all the sculptures would come back to Sperlonga. Day after day the peasants faced the trucks loaded with marble fragments and when it was decided to resort to force with an escort of twenty-five armed policemen, the situation came close to tragedy: stones were hurled, the commanding officer was wounded, the peasants tried to set fire to the trucks.

At this point the authorities gave it up. The marbles were carried back to the shelters, the roadblocks were removed and it was officially promised that the government would build on the spot a new, large museum adequate to house and display the sculptures as soon as they were restored. This promise was kept and in November 1963, six years after the first find, the National Archaeological Museum of Sperlonga was open to visitors. It lies at the sixteenth kilometer of State Road 213, the new "Via Flacca."

THE VARIOUS GROUPS OF SCULPTURE exhibited in the museum are almost all connected with episodes from the Homeric world and myth—the theft of the Palladium, Menelaus carrying the body of Patroclus, the rape of Ganymede, Scylla attacking Ulysses' companions, the wreck of Ulysses' ship. Even at the very opening of the museum, thousands of fragments of sculptures still remained in the storerooms. Some were clearly parts of human and animal limbs, but for the most part they were quite unrecognizable.

When the Sperlonga storerooms were opened to scholars, free discussion of the difficult problems raised by the sculptures began. Most archaeologists were particularly interested in the iconographical questions, especially in regard to a fragmentary group formerly thought to represent Laocoon, and now generally agreed to be the giant Polyphemus at the moment of his blinding by Ulysses and his companions.

The suggestion that this group should be identified as the blinding of Polyphemus was first made after a fragment of a man's arm bent at the elbow into a



This content downloaded from
151.41.105.87 on Sat, 30 Dec 2023 15:24:04 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

This content downloaded from
151.41.105.87 on Sat, 30 Dec 2023 15:24:04 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

*(Left)* At the beginning of the restoration we believed that the left foot of Polyphemus rested flat on the ground. *(Right)* As more fragments of the foot of Polyphemus were assembled and as restoration progressed, we realized that only the toes and the ball of the foot rested on the ground. The dark areas are plaster restorations; the light areas the original marble fragments.

right angle, and holding a piece of knotty pole in the hand was discovered in the museum's storerooms. Two other fragments, one ending in something that looked like a burning torch, were connected with the arm. I thought it best to give precedence to the restoration of this group because scholarly attention from the very first had been focused on the "Laocoon" group and because there clearly had been technical mistakes in its reconstruction in the Museum.

A SHORT CAMPAIGN OF RESTORATION took place in the summer of 1967. As a result of our work, it appeared certain that a gigantic leg previously assigned to Laocoon was actually connected with another leg, recently reconstructed from fragments, which could not possibly have stood in the erect position of the Laocoon. Then we found a piece of a giant's arm resting on some rocks, with a few locks of hair adhering to the rocks. Our giant could only have been reclining or semireclining, since there were pieces of rock under his leg as well. The possibility that the group might represent Laocoon struggling with the serpents of Athena had to be abandoned, while the theory that this statue might represent Polyphemus reclining drunkenly on the floor of his cave began to gain credence. The bent arm could belong to a companion of Ulysses preparing to thrust the flaming pole into the giant's single eye.

The most exciting discovery we made, toward the end of this first period of work, was the identification of large pieces of Polyphemus' head: the neck, part of the mouth with the teeth, part of the upper lip and moustache, a portion of the nose, and part of the forehead and hair. Across the bridge of the nose was a clearly marked line, which seemed to be the lower lid of Polyphemus' central eye. From what has so far come to light, the giant's head does not seem greatly different from the head of Polyphemus in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

IN RESTORING THE SPERLONGA SCULPTURE, I decided to adopt a new method of working. Instead of approaching the usual restorers, excellent as they are, who work by bringing the pieces together until they find points of juncture, I entrusted the work to a sculptor expert in ancient art, Professor Lorenzo Ferri, and his staff, who modeled certain missing parts in clay, as counterparts of those which were preserved. The full clay models were made in the same scale as the original marble fragments. This is an important part of the process of finding fragments for it is the scale that actually allows recognition of quite unrecognizable parts, such as a piece of calf-muscle too small to show tendons or veins. Then single marble fragments, brought to the clay for comparison, could be recognized and inserted in their proper places. Naturally, the clay models did not always correspond exactly to the marble originals; they merely served to suggest surfaces and planes, and to assist the work of identifying the often tiny fragments.

For example, when we restored the giant's left foot, we already had the right one. Using this as a basis, the left foot was modeled in clay, as if it rested firmly on the ground. But as the fragments of the left foot were assembled, we noticed that it was not resting flat, but was bent so as to rest mainly on the toes. The clay was useful in recognizing the fragments to be assembled, but of course, in the final analysis it was the fragments themselves which determined the definitive restoration.

This brief, painstaking season of restoration begins the road leading to results of even greater scientific interest. Our method of restoration in the face of this unique and huge collection of fragments has proven fruitful.

From September 4 to 8, 1968, the Department of Antiquities for Latium held in the Museum of Sperlonga a symposium on Hellenistic art. Many well-known scholars participated as well as thirty research fellows from both Italian and foreign universities. The heart of the discussion was, of course, the sculptures from the Sperlonga Grotto and their iconographical and stylistic problems. Attention focused especially on the Polyphemus and Scylla groups.

The renewal of interest in the Sperlonga sculpture, after the newly made restorations and particularly after the meetings, led the Ministry of Public Instruction to provide new funds adequate to continue work for two more years. In February of this year begins another campaign of restoration: our prime objective will be the completion of the Polyphemus group and the study of the others.

*(Left)* Two fragments of sculpture from the storerooms of the National Museum, Sperlonga: a bent arm holding a piece of a knotty pole and the flaming end of a torch. The arm belongs to one of the companions of Ulysses who helps to thrust the torch into the eye of the giant Polyphemus.



This content downloaded from
151.41.105.87 on Sat, 30 Dec 2023 15:24:04 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms