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## The signatures of the Rhodian Sculptors in Italy

*For Maja Schroeteler:  
wish you were here*

### Abstract

Before the discovery of the sculptural groups in the Grotto of Tiberius, in Sperlonga, it had been credited with certainty in Italy the signature of an only Rhodian artist, *Athanodoros* as reported on five small bases found on different geographical context. With the find of the Speluncan “marble Odissey”, the debate on the Rhodian artists revived also thanks to a new epigraphic evidence. Moreover, in 1991 Virginia Goodlett published a study, still unavoidable to understand the history and the running of the workshops of the artists in Rhodes: in *Rhodian Sculpture Workshops* the expert reconstructs the activities of the workshops detecting two moments of flourishing, the former between 250 and 170 B.C., coinciding with the economical *exploit* of the island, and the latter, after Delo ascent as free port, from 100 to 40 B.C.

Prima della scoperta della Grotta di Tiberio a Sperlonga, in Italia si conosceva la presenza di un solo artista rodio, *Athanodoros*, del quale si conservano cinque firme provenienti da contesti diversi. Con il reperimento della “Odissea di marmo”, si riaprì il dibattito circa la presenza dei Rodii in Italia. Un lavoro ancor oggi imprescindibile, inoltre, è quello di Virginia Goodlett inerente al lavoro, alla vita e alle frequentazioni straniere delle botteghe rodie.

### **The “double” identity of *Athanodoros* (i.e. on the *status quaestionis*)**

Before the discovery of the sculptural groups in the Grotto of Tiberius, in Sperlonga, it had been credited with certainty, the signature of an only Rhodian artist, *Athanodoros*, as reported on five small bases found on different geographical context: Capri, Anzio, Roma, Ostia, and in an unknown location; the signatures, concerning small bronze statues, were dated by Loewy and by most scholars who followed him, to the second half of the first century B.C. With the find of the Speluncan “marble Odissey”, the debate on the Rhodian artists revived also thanks to a new epigraphic evi-

dence: among the thousands of sculptural fragments found in the cave there was an inscription bearing the signature of *Athanodoros* which was quite peculiar compared with the ones known. The epigraph, infact, is the only one to bear the names of other two sculptors beside the name of *Athanodoros*: *Hagesandros* son of *Paionios* and *Polydoros* son of *Polydoros*, moreover it is the only one to be dated back to the Imperial Age, then following about two centuries compared with the previous ones. The chronological gap between the signatures on the small bases and the inscription on the Scylla has notable consequences also on the archaeological field: if this last inscription reminds to another more recent artist compared with the author of the two small bronzes, consequently it is needed to define the identities and the possible familiar bonds between the two namesakes, the one, author of the small pieces on the small bases and the other one, the maker of the great marble in the cave. On the contrary if it is lived an only Rhodian artist *Athanodoros* of the second half of the first century B.C., the signatures in the Tiberius grotto should necessarily be manufactures of the Imperial Age ascribed to a sculptural group which some experts believe it to be a Hellenistic Rhodian original (Coarelli), while others reckon it a protoimperial copy of an original Rhodian bronze (Andrae). The debate hasn't come to a conclusion yet. (see *infra*, 4. Conclusions and reasonable doubts).

### **The Italian inscriptions**

The Italian testimonies have been found in different periods between the XVIII and the XIX centuries and all of them concern only the sculptor *Athanodoros*.

In 1824 a red limestone small base was discovered in the area of "Valentino" in Capri, inside the complex of the imperial villa of Castiglione. First the base was part of the private collection of the inspector Feola, then of the collection of his nephew, resident in the island. Afterwards in the 30s the piece was acquired by the Metropolitan Museum in New York, after negotiations carried out by an unknown American collector, nowadays the piece is nowhere to be found. The handed down text reports: "Athanodoros, son of Hagesandros, Rhodios made" (fig.1). Paola Lombardi, agreeing with the first editors, dates the inscription to the half of the first century on paleographic basis, that is comparing the signature with the ones belonging to the Caesarian period found in Italy and in Rhodes. According to the scholar this date is confirmed also by the support material, a kind of reddish limestone quarried from the mount Atabirium in Rhodes, first of all between the II and the I century B.C.; as consequence the small base is a Rhodian production "moved" to Italy, bearing the signature of the artist.

Also the small dark marble support, found in the residence of the Cardinal Albani in Anzio (fig.2), and nowadays in the collection Albani

in Rome is dated by the editors to the first century B.C., on the ground of the paleography of the text which reports: "Athodoros, son of Hagesandros, Rhodios made".

Unlike the pieces previously mentioned, the third testimony bearing the signature of Athodoros, sited in the Louvre, isn't integral; it is a marble fragment which has been considered for long time as a small part of a vase and at last identified by Rice as a round base fragment. The find would have been brought to France as souvenir by the Count of Caylus on his coming back from *le grand tour* during which he had also visited the land of Campania, probable place of origin of the fragment.

From the Roman theatre of ancient Ostia it comes the fragmentary circular base, made of dark marble, at present sited in the Roman National Museum, signed as follows: "Athodoros, son of Hagesandros, Rhodios made". Loewy suggests with some hesitations, that the base can be a late-ancient copy of an original belonging to the Augustan Age; certainly the marble hasn't got a chronological connection with the theatre in Ostia, the finding area where it was carried in the Neronian period, during the restorations of the building. Fausto Zevi suggests that the piece has been made in the late-hellenistic age and that a Roman collector has moved the base to Ostia and has used it as support for a small sculpture: the surface of the higher pose contains a double groove, that is a little deep circular hollow which is linked to another groove whose shape is less regular and deeper than the first. The small statue, today lost, had to be made of marble as the absence of pin marks suggests.

A signature of Rhodios has been found also in Rome: (- - - -)os son of Hagesandros made". The text is carved on an ancient-red base discovered in Trastevere and kept in Paris in the Froehner collection. Only two pieces of the work are saved, one of which is an epigraph, the other one, inscribed, contains a hole due to a statue pin, on the surface of the higher pose. According to Robert the small base had to support the reduced scale reproduction, a miniature of the imperial period, of a well-known public monument ascribed to Athodoros. Also the inscription would be an imperial reproduction of a Hellenistic original on the ground of the paleographic features of the text, such as the presence of the crescent-shaped sigma and of the *pi* with parallel and equal pothooks. This opinion, shared by various scholars, among whom Paola Lombardi, hasn't received a unanimous consent: first Froehner, who had acquired the piece and then Moretti in his *IGUR* express doubts on the authenticity of the find.

All the signatures cited here are collected in the fundamental publication at the end of the nineteenth century *Inscripfen griechischer Bildhauer* in which Loewy was the first to demonstrate how convenient was the comparison between the inscriptions discovered in Rhodes and the ones coming from other

geographical areas; in particular he correlates the Italian *Athanodoros* with the namesake operating in Rhodes, author of the bronze group of the Athena Lindia temple representing the priest *Philippos* and his wife *Aglauris*, dating back to the second half of the first century B.C. Anyhow, until the 50s of the last century, the most fascinating interpretation and also the most difficult to assert, concerned the *Athanodoros* mentioned by Plinius, the “supreme artist” of the sculptural group of the Laokoon found out in Rome on the Oppium Hill, in the eighteenth century, in *Titi imperatoris domo* (fig.3). Plinius narrates about the creations as result of the cooperation of more artists (N.h. XXXVI, 37): “Nec deinde multo plurimum fama est, quorundam claritati in operibus eximiis obstante numero artificum, quoniam nec unus occupat gloriam nec plures partier nuncupari possunt; sicuti in Laocoonte qui est in Titi imperatoris domo, opus omnibus et picturae et statuariae artis praeferendum. Ex uno lapide eum ac liberos draconumque mirabilis nexus de consilii sentential fecere summi artifices: Hagesander et Polydorus et Athenodoros Rhodii”.

Not even, because of the cooperation the artists acquire much more fame, despite the success for supreme works of art, because an only artist can't obtain the whole merit and all the artists' names cannot be remembered and appreciated in the same way. An example is represented by the Laokoon which is in the Emperor Titus palace, considered the best work of art both in the fields of painting and sculpture. A unique block of marble was sculptured by the artist along with his sons, striking coils of snakes and through common consent, by the supreme Rhodian artists Hagesander, Polydorus and Athenodoros.

The epigraphic confirmation of this cooperation and the consequent identification of the epigraphic *Athanodoros* with the literary artist hasn't occurred until 1953 – 1954: in those years the excavations by the then Sovrintendenza delle Belle Arti di Roma 1 had surveyed a residential complex close to Mount Ciannito in Sperlonga, which could be identified as Tiberius villa for the typology of its structures. In September 1957, while works for the building of a new stretch of the Flacca way, near the coast, were in execution, some explorations were carried out inside a large grotto on the side of the sea. At that time the cave was used as depot for the equipment needed for the work. Inside the cavity the explorations disclosed a circular basin made of bricks, of 20 metres of diameter, filled with thousands of sculptural fragments, whose dimensions for some of them were colossal (figg.4, 5).

Among the fragments there were marble torsos, a juvenile head, pieces of coils of a snake, a hand, a thigh, a foot of a huge size and the Greek inscription bearing the names *Hagesandros*, *Athanodoros* and *Polydoros*. The signatures and the presence of remains of an anguiform sculpture led to believe that the fragments belonged to the original exemplar of the Lao-

koon, whose sculptural group, nowadays, in the Vatican Museums, would have been a copy. Maiuri and Lugli expressed serious doubts about this charming interpretation and they suggested that the remains belonged to different groups portraying episodes of Ulysses voyage. This correct evaluation was soon confirmed by the find of a Latin inscription in hexameter, made by a certain *Faustinus Felix*, in which there were described the equipment placed inside the cave (fig.6): “Mantua si posset divinum redder[e] vate[m], / immensum miratus opus hic ceder[et] a ]ntro / adq(ue) dolos Ithaci flammās et lumen ademtum / semiferi somno partier vinoque gravati / speluncas vivosq(ue) lacu[s cy]clopea saxa / saevitiam Scyllae fract[amq(ue)] im gurgi]te pupp[im] / ipse fateretur nullo sic ca[rmine- - -] / vivas ut artificis expressé[- - -]”.

The rearrangement of the statues from thousands of pieces and their position have aroused controversies; nowadays the groups are visible as rebuilt by Schroeteler, Moriello and Bertolin according to the interpretation of Conticello and Andreae and their presumed position is the one conceived by the two eminent archaeologists and by Coarelli. On the wall, at the bottom of the cave, towards right it was located the “Blinding of Polyphemus” (fig.7), wholly visible from the outside only if placed in this position; on the lateral extensions of the cave, symmetrically, the “Rape of Palladium” on the right and on the left “Ulysses who dragged the corpse of Achilles”, the so called “Pasquino”; a Ganymed had been placed on the extrados of the entrance vault (figg.8, 9).

In a prominent position, in the centre of the circular basin, it appeared the Scylla, the greatest monumental group of the antiquity up to now and the first representation of the Homeric episode in the full relief sculpture (fig.10).

Despite the presence of the sea monster has been recurrent between the I and the II century A.D. in the arrangement of the imperial residences (just to cite Anzio, Castel Gandolfo, Tivoli), the Speluncan Scylla presents an absolute novelty, the representation of Ulysses ship, of which it is reproduced the back end, that is the stern and the *aphalaston*. The inscription carved on nine lines on the aft-castle bears the three signatures (da *SEG* 19, 623): “Athodoros son of Hagesandros and Hagesandros son of Paionios and Polydoros son of Polydoros son of Polydoros Rhodii made” (fig.11).

Compared with Plinius’ text, it emerges clearly that the names of the three artists appear with the patronymics and in a different order. Jacopi, the first editor dated the signatures to the Hellenistic Age (II/I century B.C.) on paleographic basis; afterwards the notable opinion of the expert Guarducci has persuaded most scholars to date the signatures to the Augustan Age, recognizing in the Speluncan marble the latest Italian signature of Athodoros among the ones preserved. Also Coarelli accepts the date even if he believes that the sculptural groups are Rhodian originals of the

late-republican period, imported for Tiberius decision, then he imagines that the sculptures have been adapted to the cave and that the signatures are a trustworthy copy of the original ones. The exceptional circumstance of the triple signature and the implications this cooperation involves historically, have led archaeologists and epigraphists to go beyond the simple reading of the text of "Scylla"; following the direction already suggested by Loewy, a lot of scholars have reckoned *in primis* to have to clarify the possible familiar bonds of the *summi artifices* with their colleagues operating in Greece.

### **Conclusions and reasonable doubts**

In 1991 Virginia Goodlett published a study, still unavoidable to understand the history and the running of the workshops of the artists in Rhodes: in *Rhodian Sculpture Workshops* the expert reconstructs the activities of the workshops detecting two moments of flourishing, the former between 250 and 170 B.C., coinciding with the economical *exploit* of the island, and the latter, after Delo ascent as free port, from 100 to 40 B.C. During the former period the artists who work are above all itinerant whose ancestry and descendants in the workshop are not possible to trace back; during the latter period familiar workshops, whose activity lasts more than a generation, prevail. A lot of foreign sculptors arrived in Rhodes in that period and decided to settle there, after some generations they obtained the citizenship. This situation changes radically when Rhodes was sacked (42-43 B.C.) after it had denied its own fleet to Brutus and Cassius, after Caesar's killing; the base of *Philippos* and *Agauris*, signed by Athanodoros in 42-41 B.C., previously mentioned, is one of the last signatures as sculptor in Rhodes, soon after the flourishing activities of the workshops ceased to exist sharply.

This interruption of the activity, according to my opinion, is one of the convincing elements to consider the transfer of the Rhodian workshops from the homeland to Italy. Well-grounded cases demonstrate the existence of these "luxury" migrations, that is of eastern artists arrived in the west to work on behalf of great customers: as Settis suggests, one of them is *Ophelion* son of *Aristonidas* operating in Italy, in Tusculum. *Ophelion* could be identified as a distant descendant of the Rhodian *Mnasitimos*, the creator of one of the most important atelier in the island. Rhodians are also the workers who operated for the Emperor request and settled on Oppium hill, as evidenced by La Rocca in his studies related to the waste materials found in great amounts nearby via delle Sette Sale on the Exquilinum, all of them concerning marble copies of well-known Greek sculptures. The same experience could have been done shortly before, in the first century B. C. by the sculptors of Sperlonga and of the "Laocoons" who moved here

their activity as copyists converting the bronze Hellenistic originals of their tradition either into great marble groups after imperial orders ( the plastic composition in the grotto of Tiberius, the Laokoon, the “Farnese Bull”), or into small copies to satisfy private citizens’ request. It can’t be excluded that the marbles used for their works and their supports, I mean of the small base in Capri made of marble from Atabirium, are mostly of eastern origin, I think that the artists used, above all, marble blocks imported from their homeland. Moreover the case of Rhodian artists, “fugitives” establishes a convincing comparison with the well-known case of the sculptors from Afrodisia whose job as copyists is evidenced in the Augustan Age. As consequence we could think of Athanodoros and his colleagues, active between 80 and 10 B.C., as dr. Rice suggests, at first in Rhodes and then in Italy where he promoted a familiar activity in the *atelier*, according to the Rhodian tradition. Such activity would be continued until the protoimperial age; the only inscription that cannot be ascribed to the first century B.C. and certainly attributable to a work of the *summi artifices*, the Scylla, could be a signature which is not original but transcribed in a phase of rearrangement of the sculptures in the cave. It has been noted in fact that at least Scylla (and perhaps also Polyphemus) was refined on the spot after using rough-hewn blocks, if we consider the great amount of waste material found during the excavations. To connect the research outlined here with the epigraphic testimonies it is necessary then to imagine that the most important inscription relative to the Rhodian artists is a rearrangement and this is possible theoretically but not assertable with certainty. The assumption of the workers’ transfer, in particular to Latium and to Campania that is to the areas beloved by the Claudii, is asserted nowadays by various scholars, such as Rice, Andreae, Settis and Cassieri, but reasonable doubts are raised by other experts. Coarelli is a notable dissenting voice among others, he reckons, as I have already mentioned, that the Rhodian artists have worked in their homeland until the period of Cassius raids and that the great marble groups are Rhodian originals imported to Italy; the question is still a debatable point.



Fig.1 Little base from Capri, Lombardi 1998, p. 310, fig.11.6a.

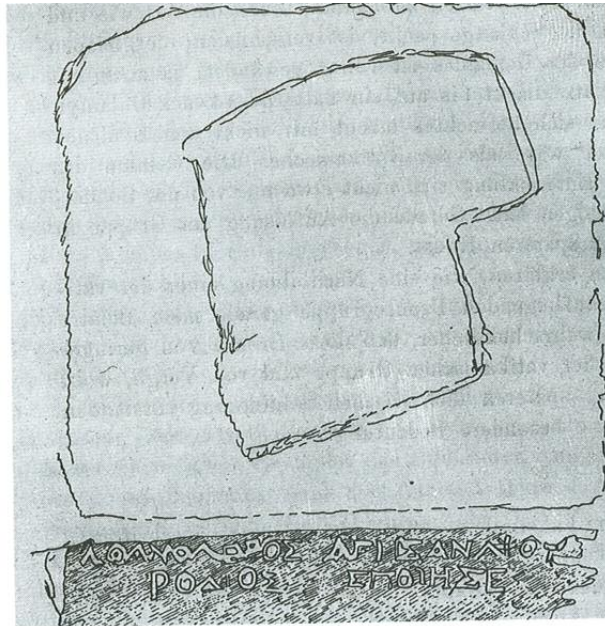


Fig.2 Foersters's sketch of the little base from Antium. Lombardi 1998, p. 311, fig.11.6b.



Fig.3 Laokoon from Vatican Museums. Settis 1999, tav.2.



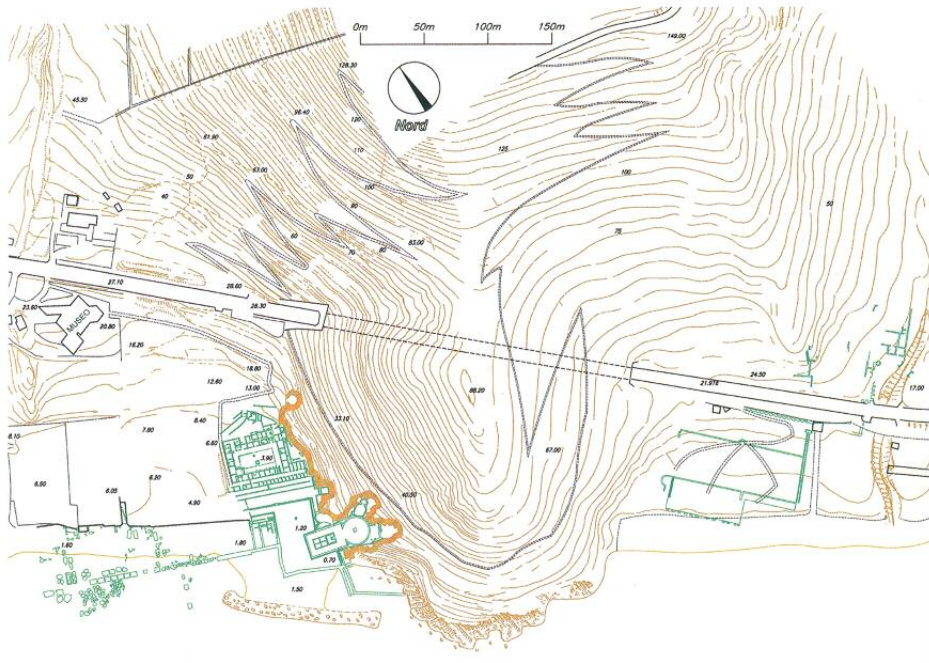


Fig.4 Plan of Tiberius' grotto at Sperlonga. Cassieri 1996, p. 271, fig.1.

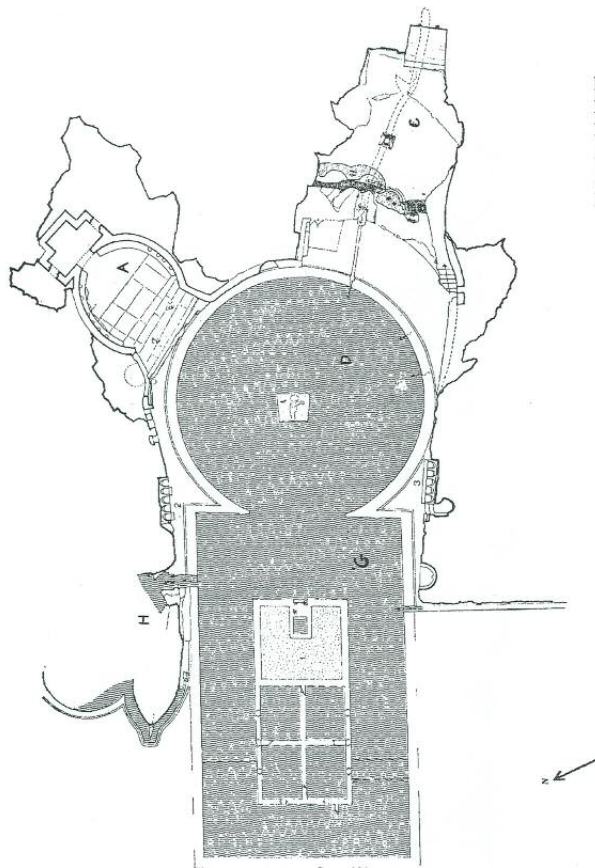


Fig.5 Tiberius' grotto. Andreae 1995.

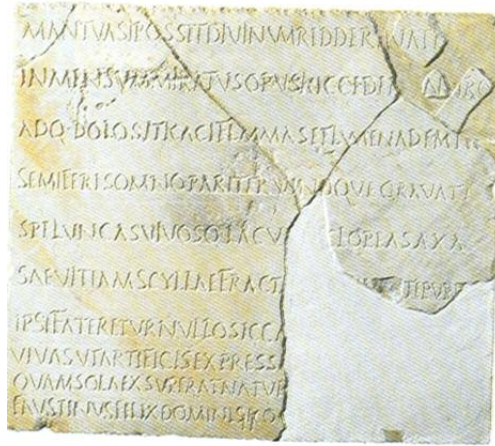


Fig.6 Epigram of Faustinus Felix, end of the I century A.D. Cassieri 1996, p. 110, fig.50.



Fig.7 Polifemus from Sperlonga. Schroeteler-Kreis 2007.

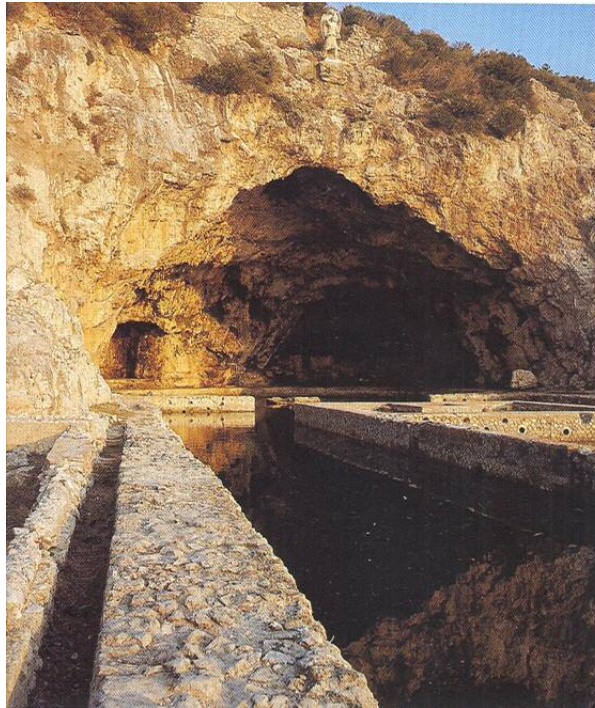


Fig.8 Tiberius' grotto at Sperlonga. Viscogliosi 1996, p. 257, fig.5.

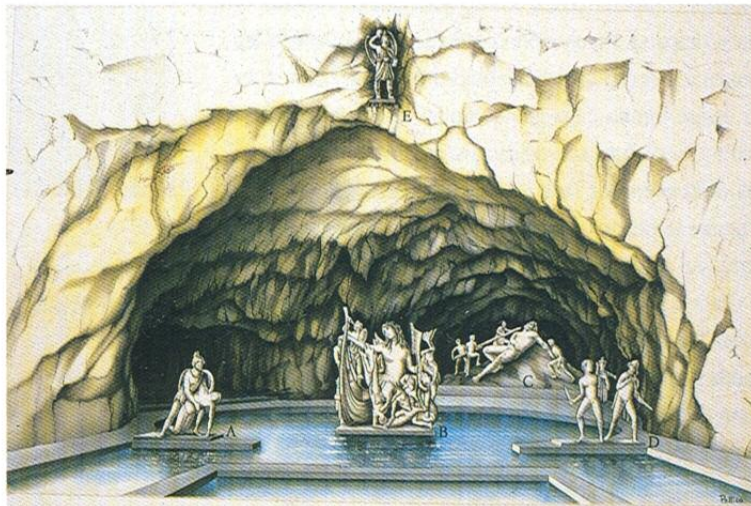


Fig.9 Reconstruction of Tiberius' grotto at Sperlonga. Cassieri 1996, p. 55, fig.27.



Fig.10 Scylla from Sperlonga. Conticello 1996, p. 281, fig.1.



Fig.11 Signatures of Athanodoros, Haghesandros e Polydoros Rhodii on the Scylla from Sperlonga. Conticello 1996, p. 282.

I warmly thank Prof. Carla Ciucarilli for her beautiful translation in English. The italian longer version of this study with some variances is "Le firme degli scultori rodii in Italia", in "*Aretes eneken kai sophias. Un omaggio a Paola Lombardi*", *Giornata di studio- Roma, 28 ottobre 2010* (Roma 2012), 43-60.

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