

Correspondences in similes

clamores simul horrendos ad sidera tollit:

qualis mugitus, fugit cum saucius aram

taurus et incertam excussit ceruice securim Aeneid 2, lines 222-224

“He raises horrendous shouts to the stars. Like the bellowing when a wounded bull flees the altar and shakes the ill aimed axe from its neck.”

- ① **mugitus - lowing.** In this simile the lowing of the bull *mugitus* as it is being sacrificed corresponds to the shouts “clamores horrendos” raised to the stars by Laocoon as he was being strangled by the snakes
- ② **aram - altar.** Laocoon was the high priest of Neptune. He often performed sacrifices of animals such as these bulls. At this point Laocoon had just sacrificed a bull to the gods to ask for guidance of the matter of the horse “Laocoon ductus Neptuno sorte sacerdos sollemnes taurum ingentem mactabat ad aras.” Laocoon was at the altar sacrificing a huge bull.” The altar in the narrative is literal. It is where the sacrifice was made. This points to how the death of Laocoon was a sacrifice to the gods on behalf of the Greeks.
- ③ **cervice –from its neck.** The mention of the location of the axe-blows links to Laocoon’s death also. Laocoon was strangled when the snakes wrapped themselves around his neck and choked him. This relates to this element because although the bull was not strangled it too was slaughtered from the neck. This relates to the manner in which Laocoon died. “bis collo squamea circum terga dati superant.” “Twice having surrounded the scaly backs to his neck they overpower him.”
- ④ **taurus – bull.** The bull corresponds to Laocoon. He is the high priest of Neptune and a bull is a significant powerful animal just like Laocoon. Bulls are sacrificed to Jupiter. As he was the chief deity this represents how significant the sacrifice was.
- ⑤ **fugit – flees.** As the bull was fleeing from the altar so was Laocoon. Line 41 says “Laocoon summa decurrit ab arce.” “Laocoon runs down from the top of the citadel”. This is where the altar was. And Laocoon was trying to flee from death by snakes like the bull fleeing from the axe.
- ⑥ **saucius – wounded.** This relates to how it was the second attack on Laocoon. His two sons had already been murdered by the snakes. This was like the first blow. He was wounded by that attack. Then the snakes turned on him. He was wounded and presumably killed, like the bull, for sacrifice.
- ⑦ **incertam- badly aimed.** The axe is badly aimed at the bull’s neck and it is implied that the snakes are biting where they can as Laocoon is trying to shake (*excussit*) them off like the bull shook off the axe.

Conclusions

8 One of the reasons Virgil has incorporated similes into his poems is to make it more relatable to the audience. He corresponds unfamiliar events and experiences to things his audience would have background knowledge and experience in. Bulls were a large part of Roman life. They were often used as sacrifices at the temple. This is something they would have been very familiar with and they would have easily understood the concept of something perishing. This context was adapted to the way in which Laocoon died. Before this simile Virgil makes a reference to a bull being sacrificed. "Laocoon was sacrificing a huge bull at the appointed altar." The audience would not have been surprised by this as it was something common. By making a connection to the bull this is something they partake in themselves. It makes it possible for them to relate it to their own lives. With this information they can become personally interested in the story, emotionally invested and sympathetic.

9 Virgil also uses similes as a form of substitution for description in the text. The simile bridges a gap in the narrative which describes Laocoon's death. It is never explicitly stated that Laocoon dies. It says "He raises horrendous shouts to the stars." This is about as far as it goes to indicate that Laocoon perished. This is reinforced and clarified in the simile "shaking off a badly-aimed axe blow from its neck." This would have led the audience to the conclusion that Laocoon dies. From describing the injury similar to the attack of the snakes previously mentioned and general knowledge of Roman citizens of the sacrificial purposes of a bull.