

## Introduction Notes - Virgil's Aeneid

Although we will be reading the whole of the poem, the following books are on the set list: 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 10 and 12.

### Virgil: life and times

Virgil was born in Andes near Mantua in northern Italy on October 15<sup>th</sup> 70 BC. His father was a peasant farmer who somehow managed to pay for his son to have the sort of education normally experienced only by the very much more affluent. Virgil wrote three poems:

1. *Eclogues* (42BC). There were ten poems in this collection, pastoral in type (that is to say, they concerned shepherds, nature and were in part an imitation of an earlier Greek poet, Theocritus).
2. *Georgics* (30BC). A didactic, but highly symbolic, poem about farming in four books.
3. *The Aeneid* (19BC).

In fact, Virgil did not survive to complete *The Aeneid* (he died in 19BC) and left instructions to his literary executors to destroy the manuscript: they didn't do it!

For most of his poetic career Virgil had a literary patron called Maecenas, who was a very powerful man in Augustan Rome, and a close associate of Augustus himself. Virgil was a friend of one of the other great Augustan poets, Horace.

### Historical and political context

For about 100 years since Tiberius Gracchus challenged the power of the senate in 133BC, Rome had more or less been in a state of civil war. As the size of the empire grew, and the demands of imperial administration grew with it, the institutions of the republic became increasingly unable to cope. The senate turned more and more to powerful individuals (e.g. Pompey, Caesar), to whom they gave extraordinary authority. Those individuals then exploited that authority to increase their own power at the expense of that of the republic. The culmination of this change was Caesar's dictatorship. When Caesar was assassinated in 44BC, one of his political proteges - Mark Antony - and his adopted son - Octavian - joined forces to hunt down the assassins. This they did. Over the next ten years Octavian and Antony were the two most powerful men in the Roman Empire, effectively dividing up between them (the west for Octavian, the east for Antony). The situation could not hold, however, and eventually

Octavian and Antony came into conflict, out of which Octavian emerged as the victor at the battle of Actium (31BC). (Antony committed suicide soon after.) Octavian was now unchallenged master of the Roman world.

Virgil lived through all this.

Once Octavian became the sole source of power in the Roman Empire, he was astute enough to realize that his problem was: how to maintain unchallenged authority without antagonising the former governing class (aristocracy), as it had been members of that class who had assassinated Julius Caesar? That is, how could Octavian rule as a dictator while pretending not to be one? It seems that Octavian (Augustus after 27BC) tried to launch a public relations exercise in which a) the republic was presented as being restored rather than ditched; and b) Augustus was presented as the servant rather than the master of Rome.

A key player in this early version of political spin was Maecenas, who was patron not only to Virgil but also to Horace, Propertius and Ovid (three of the other great Augustan poets). There is evidence that Maecenas (and perhaps therefore Augustus) was keen on one of these poets writing an epic about Augustus. Horace wrote a poem declining the offer. It looks like Virgil may have succumbed to pressure. However, what he wrote - although one can see how it conforms to the Augustan PR in some respects - may not have been quite what Maecenas and Augustus expected or wanted. (They may, for instance, have been expecting a poem about Augustus which referred to the past; the poem eventually written had it the other way round.) Whether *The Aeneid* is a great poem or propaganda for a fascistic regime or both is one of the big problems of the poem. It was probably the case that Maecenas and, through him, Augustus wanted a great Roman epic poem to match the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. We can also guess that he and Augustus were probably after a poem that praised Augustus and linked him to a past that was both more glorious and less sullied by civil wars and constitutional problems.

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### What did this mean for the *Aeneid*?

What they got was a very complicated and ambitious poem. Certainly, Aeneas is equated with Augustus: Aeneas is the original founder of Rome, Augustus the founder of a second golden age; Aeneas is a servant of a great destiny, Augustus wants to be seen as the servant rather than master of Rome; Aeneas dislikes war but fights when necessary, Augustus is similarly prudent in military matters; Aeneas has the support of the gods, Augustus will be deified. There is some apparently explicit praise of

Augustus (notably in Book VI and Book VIII): in book I, look especially at the lines said by Jupiter (286-96).

However, some scholars have argued that the *Aeneid* is not simply a poem in praise of a dictator, but one which both celebrates and questions. The questioning cannot be too explicit, because you had to be careful what you said in Augustan Rome: someone might come knocking at your door. This means that it can be difficult to see it at all, and Book I is not an book which is often cited in this respect. However, the enmity of Juno, although it was a fact from myth and is important as a plot device, is rather inconvenient for a Rome that prided itself on divine support. The comparison between Augustus and Romulus (see 292) leaves out that Romulus became the single founder of Rome by killing his brother. Is Remus supposed to stand for Antony? Is Virgil praising Augustus for starting and finishing off a civil war by killing his rival? The hint of a mention of Julius Caesar (286-8) also recalls the ugly end of Augustus' adoptive father: Augustus wants to assert his difference from, not similarity to Julius Caesar.

### **The Aeneid: the basic story, important people and places**

*The Aeneid* tells the story of the founding of Rome. Aeneas and some comrades escape from the destruction of Troy at the end of the Trojan War. Aeneas is told that it his destiny to found a city in Italy. Having set sail and reached Sicily, they are then blown off course by a storm sent by Juno (she is opposed to Troy and Rome). Aeneas and the Trojans arrive in Carthage, where a new city is being built by Queen Dido.

Dido welcomes the Trojans. At a banquet Aeneas tells the story of the fall of Troy and the travels of his group until their arrival in Carthage. Juno makes Dido fall in love with Aeneas; an affair follows. Aeneas is warned by Mercury to move on and fulfill his destiny. He does but sees from his ship that Dido has committed suicide.

The Trojans return to Sicily and commemorate the death of Aeneas' father with funeral games. They then sail onto Italy, where Aeneas travels into the underworld to receive further information about his destiny, and where he sees a pageant of future Roman heroes.

The Trojans finally arrive at the river Tiber (the river on which Rome lay) and are welcomed by the Latin king Latinus. However, Juno inspires Turnus, from a neighbouring tribe, to start a war with the Trojans.

The rest of the poem mainly concerns either the fighting or attempts by Aeneas to seek aid from elsewhere. There are some famous scenes and stories - the arms made for Aeneas by the god Vulcan with their

depiction of future Roman scenes on the shield, and the great single combat between Aeneas and Turnus which ends the poem (Aeneas wins).

### Important background information

#### **The Judgement of Paris**

There were many versions of this story in ancient times. This one has most of the important features.

King Priam of Troy was warned by an oracle that his newly born son, Paris, would grow up to cause the destruction of Troy. This type of oracle is a popular theme in Greek mythology (cf. Oedipus for example). Every time an attempt to circumvent the oracle is made, it fails because, as every ancient knew, what an oracle foretells is fated to happen. On this occasion Priam gave orders that the infant Paris should be left on the nearby Mt. Ida, to die of starvation or be eaten by wild beasts. The shepherd entrusted with this task thought he knew better and decided to rear Paris as his own son.

Paris therefore grew up under the impression that he was the son of a shepherd, and he was perfectly happy with this status. One day, however, something happened to change this idyllic existence. The gods and goddesses were invited to the wedding of Peleus, king of Thessaly, and Thetis, a sea-nymph. Though the pair are principally famous as the parents of the Greek super-hero Achilles, the wedding was a posh affair and all the deities attended, except for one goddess. This was Eris, the goddess of Strife, who was never invited to happy parties. Stung by her rejection, Eris fashioned a golden apple, on which she inscribed the words: 'For the most beautiful.' While no one was looking, she crept up and lobbed it into the middle of the party. An unseemly row broke out between those goddesses who each naturally assumed that the apple was intended for her, the leading contenders being Juno (or Hera), Queen of the gods, Minerva (or Athena), goddess of wisdom, and Venus (or Aphrodite), goddess of love. Since all three were quite powerful, this was quite a confrontation and immensely gratifying for Eris.

At this point young Paris wandered by. The wedding was being held on Mt. Ida and he was tending his flock there. The gods, unwilling to make the decision as to which of the goddesses was the most beautiful, decided to ask Paris to be the judge instead.

Paris, who was not totally naive, realized that there might be something in this for him and indicated that he was not averse to a bit of bribery. Whereupon, Juno offered him power, Minerva wisdom and Venus - judging correctly perhaps what might turn on a lusty young shepherd - the love of the most beautiful woman in the world, Helen of Sparta. Paris declared Venus the winner.

Perhaps he should have realized that this was not all that clever, despite Helen's undoubted attractions, to alienate such powerful characters as Juno and Minerva. But he was neither the first nor the last young man to allow his judgement to be affected by a beautiful woman.

Such was the Judgement of Paris and the source of the enmity of Juno and Minerva (who, as the Greek goddess Athene had a built-in partiality towards the Greeks) towards all Trojans, and therefore towards the unfortunate Aeneas. Paris, as Juno and Minerva very well already knew, was a Trojan and shortly afterwards he was summoned to Troy in his capacity as one of the king's shepherds. He was recognised as the son of the king, of course, and was restored to his rightful position. The oracle had been conveniently but dangerously forgotten.

Paris was now in a position to collect on his deal with Venus: as a prince he could claim his princess. There was one problem, however: Venus had forgotten to mention that Helen was already married - to king Menelaus of Sparta. Paris, though, reasoning that Venus would not have made her offer if she could not deliver, made a state visit to Sparta, carefully choosing the very time when Menelaus was absent on pressing business. Venus kept her side of the bargain and made Helen fall in love with Paris. They ran off together back to Troy. When Menelaus found her gone, he asked his brother - king Agamemnon of Mycenae - for help. A Greek army was assembled to attack Troy and get Helen back. The rest is myth . . .

### **Homeric matters**

There is no doubt that Virgil was deliberately using Homer as a model in various ways, which can be summarized under the following headings:

1. The basic background - Virgil inherits and uses all the basic ingredients of the story of the Trojan war and its aftermath: the key events are the same, the main characters are the same, and the gods and fate play an

essential role in the events in both Homer and Virgil. Most particularly, Virgil uses the enmity Juno feels for Troy.

2. The epic hero - The dominant characters in Homer are what are called 'epic heroes', great warriors and debaters, such as Achilles, Ajax, Odysseus and Hector. In Homer the Greek heroes share certain characteristics: they are individualistic, strong-willed, super-human. Aeneas is slightly different, showing more compassion for others (though Hector has some of these qualities). [There is more on this in the section below under 'Important themes'.]
3. Narrative techniques - Virgil adopts the same grand tone as much of Homer; he also uses epic similes, highly rhetorical speeches and great set-piece events, such as Funeral Games (*Aeneid V; Iliad XXIII*) and the making of armour for a hero by a god (*Aeneid VIII; Iliad XVIII*). Some also argue that the structure of the *Aeneid* as a whole is an imitation of the two great poems of Homer, but in reverse order. That is to say, the first six books of the *Aeneid* concern the travels of a hero, trying to find a (new) home (the *Odyssey* tells the story of the experiences of Odysseus returning home after the end of the Trojan War); the final six books tell of a war around a (new) city (the *Iliad* tells the story of the siege of Troy).

The Romans took total control on Greece in the second century BC. They were unimpressed by the level to which they thought the Greeks had sunk and were very confident, of course, in their own imperial destiny.

However, whenever they looked at the Greek cultural achievement (in literature, the arts, philosophy and the sciences), they were dazzled and felt an irritating sense of inferiority. Famously in Book VI of the *Aeneid* Aeneas is told by his father about the destiny of the Romans (*Aeneid VI* 847-53). This is an example of how Virgil writes of Rome's imperial destiny. As has been said before, they didn't lack confidence in their military abilities. But Virgil's poem is itself part of an attempt by Romans generally and by the Augustan regime in particular to match the cultural achievement of the Greeks by taking on the biggest poet of them all - Homer. To Romans at least, Virgil succeeded.

### **Romulus and Remus**

Numitor, king of Alba Longa, was deposed by his brother, Amulius. Numitor had a daughter, Rhea Silvia. To prevent the possibility of there being any descendants of Numitor who might eventually mount a rival claim to the throne, Amulius forced Rhea to become a vestal virgin and

therefore to take a vow of chastity, the breach of which caused unpleasant things to happen.

But gods do not consider themselves bound by mere mortal rules and, in any case, as Jupiter himself said, the founding of Rome had already been determined in advance by fate. So Rhea was seduced by Mars, the god of war, and she produced the twins Romulus and Remus.

Amulius was not to be thwarted. He ordered the destruction of the twins by natural means, and they were cast adrift on the river Tiber in a leaking boat. They were saved, however, by a she-wolf, who suckled and raised them until they were found by a local peasant called Faustulus. He brought the twins up as his own, until they were old enough to kill Amulius and restore their grandfather, Numitor, to the throne.

Romulus and Remus then decided to found a new settlement on a site next to the river Tiber. At this point sibling rivalry took over and Romulus and Remus argued over who should be the one to mark out the city boundaries and build walls there. Romulus decided he should do it and started. Remus demonstrated his contempt by jumping over them. Romulus responded by killing him, and the city he was founding was Rome.

Virgil wants to keep both Aeneas and Romulus as founders of Rome. After all, both are descended from gods (Venus and Mars respectively) and both are great names to have in one's past. If you're confused the various foundings work like this:

Aeneas founded **Lavinium**, near the site Rome.

His son, Iulus (or Ascanius) founded **Alba Longa**.

Romulus, whose mother was from Alba Longa, founded Rome.

### **The nature of Aeneas' character and heroism**

Aeneas is an epic hero in the sense that he is the hero of an epic poem. However, he is rather different in character from the heroes that populate the two great epic poems of antiquity, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Homeric heroes - the most famous is Achilles, but there are also Ajax, Odysseus, Diomedes, Agamemnon and Menelaus - tend to have the following qualities:

- they are individualistic, caring only for their own fame and reputation
- they are extreme, most especially in the violence they mete out

Aeneas, on the other hand, shows himself to be a leader who cares for his remaining Trojans, and who often puts others before himself. He is not keen to wage war and seems, on some occasions at least, to dislike violence.

In fact, his character most often consists of **piety** (*pietas*). He is often called **pius Aeneas**. Piety is a calm acceptance of the superiority of gods and fate (something a real Homeric hero was not always eager to admit) and an acceptance as well that one must do as the gods have instructed. Aeneas always in the end follows the orders of the gods, even when it causes him personal grief, as it does at the end of Book IV when he is forced to leave Dido. Indeed, it may be an important part of Aeneas' heroism that he is prepared to sacrifice himself for the greater good, for the founding of Rome. Such an attitude of self-sacrifice was keenly described in many stories in Livy's history of early Rome and Romans generally tended to look on it as an important part of their national character, and as an essential ingredient in their success as an imperial power. Aeneas is therefore a Roman hero. (However, to modern readers he can seem a little empty, a mere vessel for the imperatives of fate and the orders of the gods.)

As well as dedication to the Gods and the founding of Rome, the Roman concept of piety also meant loyalty and dedication to family and friends. We can therefore expect Aeneas not to be the individualistic type of Hero that we find in the characters of Odysseus and Achilles.