



# ***FROM TROY TO ROME: THE HERO'S JOURNEY IN VIRGIL'S AENEID***

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# Fact check about the Aeneid

- **Major epic narrative: a landmark of Latin literature. Probably published in 19BCE (in writing for a decade).**
- **Plot: journey from Troy to Italy, arrival and war against local tribes.**
- **2-in-1 package: An Odyssey (Book 1-6) and an Iliad (Books 7-12)**
- **Target: the foundation of Rome as Fate has decided.**
- **Main protagonist: Aeneas, son of Anchises, cousin of Hector.**
- **A parallel plot -Aeneas' journey: from Iliadic and/or Odyssean hero to Roman Leader**

# A note on the translation

**A note on the text: the translation used in this presentation is by Sarah Ruden for Yale University Press, easily accessible via the usual bookstores. Importantly, it is the first English translation of the Aeneid by a woman. I hope you enjoy it!**

# Before Virgil...

**Aeneas was only a minor figure in the Greek epic narratives**

**Aeneas: the big Unknown, a hero in the making**

Aeneas only mentioned in:

✓ *Iliad* 20.307-8

✓ 'And now the might of Aeneas shall be lord over the Trojans and his sons' sons, and those who are born of their seed hereafter.'

✓ Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite 196-8

✓ 'You will have a son of your own, who amongst the Trojans will rule, and children descended from him will never lack children themselves. His name will be Aeneas...'

- Homeric Hymns: celebrations of Greek Gods written in the Homeric style, around the same time as the Homeric epics.

# Book 1 The temple of Juno

❖ The strange sight of an 'old' and famous war:

- **Aeneas now looking at 'his' war from 'the outside': a sign that he is abandoning his Homeric traits behind?**

'Here a strange sight relieved Aeneas' fear for the first time ... while waiting for the queen and looking over the whole huge temple, marvelling at the wealth is showed, at the work, the varied artistry...'  
(1.450-55)

❖ The events all laid out in order on the walls:

'He saw Troy's battles painted in their sequence, a worldwide story now.'  
(1.456-7)

**Aeneas sees everything: but does he recognise it?  
How he feel about it? Reassured but also stunned.  
Is this his world, or not any more?**

# Leaving Troy behind; the view from outside

- **Aeneas removed from Troy, emotionally as well as physically: does not understand the depictions on Juno's temple.**

## Spellbound by his own war

- ✓ Murals haunt and bewilder Aeneas
- ✓ 'Dardanian Aeneas gazed in wonder, transfixed and mesmerised.' (1.494-5)

## Seeing his Trojan self from the outside

- ✓ He saw himself among Greek chieftains, fighting. (1. 488)

## Aeneas gets it wrong:

- ✓ 'What land isn't full of what we suffered in that war, Achates? ... Don't worry. Somehow our fame will save us.' (1.459-63)

- **What is it that makes Aeneas uncomfortable?**

# Reading after Homer: What did Aeneas/Virgil see?

- **The dark side of the war at Troy.**

- ❖ **Victims are hunters and vice versa:** 'He saw men fight around citadel – Trojan troops routing Greeks, crested Achilles driving his chariot at the Trojan's backs' (1. 466-8)
- ❖ **Butchery:** 'He wept to recognise the white tents of Rhesus: savage Diomedes stormed and massacred the camp on its first night.' (1.469-71)
- ❖ **War wasteful of youth:** 'Here Troilus, wretched boy who'd lost his armour, and no match for Achilles sprawled behind his empty chariot...' (1. 474-6)
- ❖ **Pointless supplication:** 'The Trojan women, hair unbound, went begging to the temple of implacable Athena.' (1.479-80)

# Leaving Troy Behind: Deviant Focalisation

◦ This is a narrative 'from a distance' that chooses what to show and what to ignore: Virgil pushing Aeneas (and the readers) to notice the disaster that was the Trojan war?

- Troy at/from a distance
  - We follow Aeneas' gaze, assessing the Trojan War and thus also Homer's *Iliad*!
- Selective Aeneas – manipulative Virgil?
  - The text says that Images on the temple tell the whole war, in order (*ex ordine*)
  - Aeneas, though, chooses random sequences: e.g. 'Three times Achilles dragged the corpse of Hector.' (1.483)
- Aeneas: the emotional/involved narrator:
  - 'Groaning a great deal, bedewing his face with a river of weeping' (1.465)

**Personal voice/perspective here replacing the impersonal distant epic narrator.**

**A new type of epic emerges: one where the *personal* matters.**



# Ugly (Homeric) heroism

**Book 2: 268-98:**

**Hector visits to Aeneas in his dream.**

**Aeneas recoils at the unsavoury sight.**

- Hector's physical appearance is shocking
  - 'A desolate Hector... black with dust and blood. His feet swollen... his beard was dirty; dried blood caked his hair.' (2.270-277)
- War wounds are traditionally a badge of honour: not here.
  - 'How different from that Hector who returned wearing the plundered armour of Achilles ... [in Book 3] he had the many wounds he got defending his city's walls.' (2.274-79)

**Here the wound: a reminder of loss and hardship**

# Struggling to leave (Troy and the Iliad behind)

**Book 2. 289-98: Hector orders Aeneas to stop being a Homeric warrior; to escape the flames and resist the calling of the battle.**

And yet, Aeneas fails to abandon Homeric fighting and life, multiple times.

- 'Blindly, I seized my weapons – senselessly, but my heart burned to gather friends and rush to some high space. Rage, furor, pitched my mind ahead: how beautiful to die in battle!' (2. 314-17)
- '...by the flames that took my people, I swear: in that collapse I shirked no fighting or other hazard. If my fate had been to fall, I would have earned it' (2. 431-4).

# A hero in limbo

- **Homeric heroism dies with Priam. Aeneas needs (to embrace) a new mission but he lacks both training and commitment.**

So in the opening of the epic...

Old heroism is bankrupt

- ✓ 'This wasn't how Achilles fought. He had respect.... The old man [Priam] threw a weak, unwarlike spear... The king was dragged to the altar shaking and slipping in his own son's blood... death took him.' (2.539-55)

But Aeneas: at best, a reluctant hero

- ✓ Easily distracted – e.g. by Carthage's civilisation 'Aeneas was amazed at those great structures ... the gates, paved roads – the hubbub, laws, offices, a sacred senate' (1. 421-6)
- ✓ Lacking direction: 'whatever country calls me ahead...' (1.610)

# Book 3: Lost in-between two worlds

◦ **The journey towards Rome and a Roman epic a tortuous one: Narrative and characters slow to turn away from Troy.**

- Second (and last) book of the retrospective narration to Dido (whom the Trojans met at Book 1)
  - Seven years of journeying around the Greek seas.
  - A number of false starts and wrong decisions
  - Reluctant to leave the Aegean, say goodbye to the familiar world around Troy.
  - Unable to contemplate the world 'beyond' and dare the 'bigger step'.

**A slow journey during which Aeneas grapples with the past and tries to imagine the future..**

# The stop at Buthrotum

Andromache and Helenus have founded a new city, Buthrotum in Epirus (Western Greece). Helenus the first to point Aeneas clearly to the direction of Italy...

- **A pivotal encounter at Buthrotum: challenged by the past and offered the future, Aeneas sets off on the final leg of his mission.**

... But Andromache still lives in Troy

- ✓ 'Andromache was in the woods beside the river 'Simois' offering the ritual food and gifts to Hector's ashes to call his spirit at the hollow green mound' (3.302-4)
- ✓ 'I approached a little Troy, a tower shaped like the great one, and a dry stream 'Xanthus'. I kissed the threshold of a Scaean Gate. (3. 349-51)

Yet again, Aeneas drawn to the past even as he needs to face the future

- ✓ 'As I was leaving, tears rose to my eyes: "Be happy, since your destiny is finished. We are called on to one and then another. You have your peace: no ocean field to plough, no land to seek that falls away from you forever." (3. 492-6)
- ✓ 'If I ever come to Tiber's country and see the ramparts granted to my people, we'll make Epirus and Italy ... brothers: we'll make a single Troy.' (3. 500-05)

# Honouring the Father – Sicilian games in honour of Anchises (Book 5) – A Homeric set piece in Roman times.

- **4 competitions**

**Boat race, running, boxing, archery**

- **A ghost from Troy: arrogant, disrespectful youth; oppressed and derided old age; cruelty in the face of suffering.**

- **Father-Son relationships of fundamental significance in Roman ethos and society.**
- **But ugly heroics creep in again and ‘father-son’, old-young relationships do not always work in the Aeneid.**

**Check out Gyas the young captain and his older pilot Menoetes during the boat race:**

‘Fury flamed in the captain’ [Gyas] young bones. Tears on his cheeks, forgetting dignity and safety, he threw circumspect Menoetes out of the lofty stern into the sea. He himself took the helm now as the pilot... Menoetes (in a while) escaped the sea floor. Old as he was and hampered by his wet clothes. He climbed the rock and settled on a dry ledge. Trojans laughed to see him fall and swim, and now they laughed to see him spewing brine (5. 172-82)

# Still with the Games: from Troy to Rome

- **A 'playful' transition; from Homer's muscular bodies, cruel young competitors, derision of the elderly and the infirm to Roman values: gifts for participation, consolation prizes, respect for the old and for justice, care for those suffering: *pater Aeneas* emerges**

- ✓ Homeric monster ships ( Dragon, Chimaera, Centaur, Scylla) BUT captains are named after later Roman families (Mnestheus, Memnian, Gyas, Sergestus, Cloanthus).
- ✓ Rewarding perseverance and resilience in the boat race: 'Aeneas, happy that the ship and crew were safe, still gave Sergestus what he'd promised' (5. 282-3)
- ✓ Consideration for the fallen in the running race: 'But I can sooth a friend who's been unlucky.' (Aeneas offering a prize to Salius, whom Nisus had tripped to help his friend Euryalus, 5. 350)
- ✓ Looking after his people and highlighting the importance of intelligence over physical might: 'Father Aeneas now was moved to check the savage anger of Entellus, ending the fight – a rescue for the exhausted Dares – with sympathetic words: poor friend ... don't you sense some strength here more than his? Gods are against you: relent' (5. 461-66)

# Book 8 The shield of Aeneas: Looking forward to Rome

A step change in the journey away from Troy. A Roman hero is rising: |Aeneas (and/or Augustus?)

- ✓ Recalls the Homeric parallel...
  - ✓ Thetis giving the shield to Achilles in Iliad Book 18.
- ✓ ... But tells the story of Rome's history...
  - ✓ Yet another prophecy marker
  - ✓ Does not shy away from dark episodes
  - ✓ Pities Roman against Italian
- ✓ ... And highlights the imperial expansion of the Roman Empire.
  - ✓ Battle of Actium dominates the shield



# Book 8: the emperor and the monster

- **There is the best epic hero: a Roman emperor, elevated and terrifying in equal measure.**

- ✓ The monster then caught the sudden daylight in the rocky hole... as Hercules harassed him from above ... he plunged straight to the centre ... there he caught Cacus, spewing useless flames' (8. 247-59)
- ✓ 'The bronze-braced fleets of Actium, in the middle, were lined up ... Caesar Augustus led the Roman forces ... high on the stern he stood; from his glad forehead poured two flames...' (8. 675-81)

# Book 10: the endgame starts; hero (- emperor - monster)

United in joyful  
luminescence,  
Aeneas (and  
Augustus) look  
back at a  
threatening  
Achilles (and a  
fuming Cacus): the  
spectre of fury  
unleashed only a  
step away ...

An evil omen  
pointing towards  
the final scene of  
the epic...

'Now [Aeneas] could see the Trojans and his camp from the high stern. He raised the flaring shield on his left arm. His people on the walls shouted up to the sky ... A flame poured from Aeneas' feathered crest; the gold boss of his shield was spewing fire...' (10. 260-71)

'Old Priam was first to see him, racing over the plain, his bronze breastplate gleaming like Sirius, the star of harvest, brightest of stars in the dark of night. The old man groaned aloud, and raising his arms, beat his head with his hands, shouting entreaties to his dear son, who stood before the Gate, ready to turn his fury on Achilles.' (*Iliad* 22)

# Aeneas: the Roman Achilles1

- **So Father Aeneas emerges – can we always trust him to honour his new role?**
- **As his troops and people travel through the Mediterranean and build a colony in Italy, he is, in parallel, on a separate journey, his own personal journey, a struggle with both the past and the future, fury and reason, competitiveness and empathy, love and duty.**
- **The conflict survives all the way to the last scene of the epic....**

# Aeneas: The Roman Achilles 2

- ❖ **Virgil Romanises epic narrative.**
- ❖ **A new kind of epic hero: a Roman leader is needed.**
- ❖ **Aeneid and Aeneas: examples of this long, difficult transition.**
- ❖ **Aeneas abandons his own past and struggles to believe in, and build, the future.**
- ❖ **(Roman) Pity and (Trojan) fury vie for Aeneas' soul to the end.**
- ❖ **Where does Augustus sit in all this? Powerful and disturbing links created between the Founder and the Emperor, lingering in the mind to the bitter end.**

# Food for (further) thought...

For any of you that may want to pursue some of these broad issues further, I append here, as I draw to a close, a couple of teaching focused books on the Aeneid – I trust you find something of interest in them to set you thinking on!

William Anderson and Lorina Quartarone (eds), *Approaches to Teaching Vergil's Aeneid*, Modern Languages Association of America: New York, 2002.

Christine Perkell, *Reading Vergil's Aeneid. An Interpretative Guide*, University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, 1999.

David Ross, *Virgil's Aeneid. A Reader's Guide*, Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2007.