

VIRGIL'S EXPLANATION FOR THE "ROMAN MIRACLE":
A REVIEW OF THE *AENEID*

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Rome likely began as a rustic community of shepherds and farmers, which gradually grew into a thriving metropolis.¹ As it grew, it exerted influence over neighboring tribes, then the whole of Italy, and eventually Rome ruled the entire Mediterranean region for centuries. This unlikely story is what some scholars call the “Roman miracle.”² Ancient Romans wanted their noble city to have a great story to explain such a rise to greatness. They also wanted to rally behind a great hero, which the ancient shepherds and farmers of Rome’s true past had failed to produce. As the Republic waned and an imperial monarchy rose from its ashes under Octavian/Augustus, the celebrated poet Virgil (70-19 BC) collected Rome’s various origin myths into a great national epic, the *Aeneid*. His goal was to explain the Roman miracle through the adventures of the Trojan hero Aeneas, while also setting the stage for and legitimizing Rome’s new imperial government under Augustus. Although the *Aeneid* may not live up to the fame of its models, Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Virgil’s tale has endured for two millennia as one of the world’s greatest epic poems and a showcase of Rome’s intriguing legendary past.

Publius Vergilius Maro, known as Virgil, was a long-time poet, trained at an early age in writing and rhetoric. He wrote a series of dramatic poems known as the *Eclogues*, or *Bucolics*, in c. 42-38 BC, which helped him gain notoriety. He then wrote a four book agricultural poem known as the *Georgics*, or the *Georgicon*, in c. 36-29 BC. His best-known work, however, is his epic masterpiece, the *Aeneid*, written in c. 29-19 BC.³ The time period in which he wrote, c. 42-19 BC, was a tumultuous one for Rome. Julius Caesar’s assassination hung like a dark cloud over the Republic. Octavian joined forces with Marc Antony and Marcus Lepidus in the Second

¹ M. Cary and H. H. Scullard, *A History of Rome Down to the Reign of Constantine*, 3rd ed. (Basingstoke, England: Macmillan, 1975), 32.

² Marcel Le Glay, Jean-Louis Voisin, and Yann Le Bohec, *A History of Rome*, 4th ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), xxvii.

³ The Poetry Foundation, “Virgil,” <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/virgil> (accessed May 29, 2014).

Triumvirate to avenge Caesar's death, but their alliance degenerated into bloody rivalry. At the Battle of Actium in 31 BC, Octavian defeated Antony to take control of Rome's military and eventually the rest of the government as well. As Caesar Augustus, Octavian completed Rome's transformation from Republic to Empire by becoming "first citizen" in 27 BC. Thus, by the time Virgil wrote the *Aeneid*, the Roman Republic was finished and a new era had begun.

Virgil admired Augustus, and he showed this admiration by writing the twelve-book *Aeneid*.⁴ Its purpose was likely Virgil's effort to link the bold new path Augustus set for Rome's future with Rome's legendary past. The problem was that Rome's legendary past was not very glorious. The well-known story of Romulus and Remus found in Livy's *History of Rome* is likely a product of Rome's humble beginnings as a community of shepherds and farmers.⁵ The twin boys, born of the nonconsensual union of the god Mars and a Vestal Virgin, faced death at the hands of a jealous uncle. Left to float in a basket on the Tiber, the baby boys were rescued by a wolf who kept them alive until a shepherd found and raised them. They grew up as warlike shepherds, and eventually sought to claim the throne of Alba Longa. In an argument over the settlements they built on two of Rome's hills, Romulus killed Remus. Romulus then tricked the Sabines, abducting their women in order to provide wives for the men of his settlement on the Palatine Hill. Although ancient Romans venerated Romulus, worshiping him as the god Quirinus, Virgil may have hoped for a nobler hero to link with Augustus. He may have wanted a hero who exhibited the values contemporaneous with the new Rome under Augustus. Whatever his reasons, Virgil added the Romulus and Remus story to other origin myths, such as that of

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Livy *History of Rome* 1.3-7.

Evander of Arcadia.⁶ He then wrapped these myths and legends around Aeneas of Troy, who would serve as the hero and central focus of his poem.

Virgil was born in Cisalpine Gaul near Mantua, in Lombardy in northern Italy. The ancient Etruscans once dominated this area, perhaps inspiring Virgil to choose Aeneas as the subject of his epic. According to Herodotus, the Lydians of Asia Minor, known as Tyrrhenians, settled in Italy in the land of the “Ombrici” (in modern Umbria).⁷ The poet Hesiod called the Etruscans Tyrrhenians, further linking western Asia Minor with the Etruscans.⁸ Virgil likely drew on this connection between the Trojans and the Etruscans to construct a tale that followed the displaced Trojan prince Aeneas to a new home in Italy. Virgil may have specifically chosen Aeneas, the son of the goddess Venus, as his central figure to help communicate the legitimacy of Augustus’s new government.⁹ Aeneas and Augustus served as bookends of Rome’s great history to that point, one man starting Rome down the path toward greatness and the other as the exemplification of its greatness.¹⁰

The *Aeneid* begins with the fleeing of Aeneas from Troy, clutching his household gods and carrying his father, Anchises, on his back to escape the flames. His wife, Creusa, was lost in the ordeal, but their son, Ascanius, lives and serves as a means of motivation for Aeneas to find a new home. The goddess Juno, in a hateful rage, attempts to destroy Aeneas and his fellow survivors in a great storm. Echoing some of the trials and tribulations of Odysseus in the *Odyssey*, Virgil’s Aeneas makes his way south through the Aegean and the Mediterranean. Just as Homer wove mythology into his tale, Virgil wrote that Juno’s wrathful storm flowed from her

⁶ Cary and Scullard, 35.

⁷ Herodotus *Histories* 1.94.6-7.

⁸ Cary and Scullard, 17-18.

⁹ Andrew J. E. Bell, “The Popular Poetics and Politics of the Aeneid,” *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (1974-) 129 (1999): 263, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/284430> (accessed May 26, 2014).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 270.

foreknowledge that her beloved city of Carthage would one day fall at the hands of descendants of the Trojans. She hoped to avoid Carthage's ill fate by sealing the doom of Aeneas and the Trojans. Aeneas becomes the lightning rod of her fury, and many of Troy's survivors die in the storm and the long period of wanderings afterward. His fleet travels to Crete, Greece, and Sicily. Ironically, Aeneas's wanderings eventually take him to Carthage, the very place Juno wanted his descendants to avoid. There he stays for many months, becoming intimately involved with the Carthaginian queen, Dido. Aeneas tells Dido about the fall of Troy, including the famous account of the Trojan Horse and the bloodthirsty slaughter of King Priam and his people. A vision from the god Mercury prods Aeneas to leave Carthage, much to the dismay of Dido. He returns to Sicily; and, then, finally, he arrives in Italy. After many hard fought campaigns, he fulfills his destiny and secures a new kingdom on the Tiber for his son and his descendants.

Virgil wrote his poem in dactylic hexameter, just as Homer wrote the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. In addition to this similarity, Virgil used many of the same characters and themes from Homer's stories to make the *Aeneid* seem as though it was a continuation of the Bronze Age story. War, a pervasive theme of the *Iliad* and of Odysseus's heroic return at the end of the *Odyssey*, dominates books eight through twelve of the *Aeneid*. Virgil's battle scenes are gruesome, like those in the Homeric epics. In one example, the Amazon warrior Camilla deals violent death to the Trojan warriors Butes and Orsilochus. Camilla stabs Butes between the helmet and the breastplate. As for Orsilochus, Virgil describes that Camilla, "rears above him—praying, begging for mercy—her battle-axe smashes down, blow after blow through armor, bone, splitting his skull, warm brains from the wound go splashing down his face."¹¹ The cunning warrior Arruns, invoking Apollo, avenges the death of Butes and Orsilochus and kills Camilla. Virgil

¹¹ Virgil *Aeneid* 11.821-824; all line numbers for the *Aeneid* are from Robert Fagles, trans., Virgil, *The Aeneid*, (London: Penguin Group, 2006).

used the theme of war to show continuity with Homer's tales, but he also used it to call attention to the heroism of the Trojans and their allies. Just as the Trojans had been valiant warriors long ago, so now the Romans were, as exemplified by Augustus.

In addition to the use of war as a theme, Virgil also imitated other aspects of Homer's epics to add continuity between Homer's stories and his own. In book six, Aeneas visits the underworld, likely an imitation of Odysseus's journey to the underworld in book eleven of the *Odyssey*.¹² While there, he sees his former lover Dido of Carthage, who committed suicide after Aeneas left for Italy. Their encounter in the underworld is an emotional one for Aeneas, giving Virgil an opportunity to show the softer side of his great conquering hero. After all, spin-doctor historians of the time wrote that Octavian accepted the title "first citizen" of Rome to usher in a new era of peace and prosperity to the embattled city, not out of greed or personal gain.¹³

Another important encounter for Aeneas in the underworld is with his deceased father, Anchises. Here too Virgil shows Aeneas's emotional side. More importantly, Virgil uses Anchises to connect the genealogical line between Aeneas and Augustus, incorporating the origin myths of Latinus and his daughter Lavinia, whom Aeneas later marries. Their son, Silvius, connects the dots between Aeneas and the mother of Romulus and Remus. Ascanius (Iulus), son of Aeneas, will rule Alba Longa.¹⁴ From Iulus will come the gens of the Julii, which eventually leads to Julius Caesar and Emperor Augustus. Anchises tells Aeneas about the future, including the Tarquin kings and their overthrow, the Gracchi brothers and other famous Romans, the victory over Carthage, the expulsion of the Gauls, and other important events. Virgil exalts the

¹² Guy Lee, "Imitation and the Poetry of Virgil," *Greece & Rome, Second Series* 20, no 1 (Apr., 1981): 14-15, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/642479> (accessed May 27, 2014).

¹³ Cassius Dio *Roman History* 53.1-5.

¹⁴ Cary and Scullard, 37.

glory of Rome through Anchises, fueling patriotic fervor in support of Rome's future under Augustus.

Although the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid* have many similarities, there are also great differences. War in the *Iliad* brought glory and honor to heroes such as Agamemnon and Odysseus, yet it dealt an early death to heroes such as Hector and Achilles. The countless tragedies on the Greek and Trojan sides provided little room for reward, making the Greek victory seem somewhat hollow. In the *Aeneid*, by contrast, Aeneas receives reassurances from the gods that his destiny is to inherit a new homeland and a new kingdom to pass down to his son.¹⁵ In this way, the *Aeneid* is much more a tale of hope than the *Iliad*.¹⁶ The role of women also differs between the two epics. In the *Iliad*, women such as Briseis and Chryseis are used as pawns, and are minor characters in the story. Helen, of course, is the primary woman in the *Iliad*. She too, however, is a pawn in the story, the object over which the Greeks and Trojans fight during the Trojan War. The strongest female figures in the *Iliad* are the goddesses of Mount Olympus. The *Odyssey*, on the other hand, has strong female figures such as Calypso, Circe, and Penelope. In this way, the *Aeneid* has more in common with the *Odyssey*. Dido and Camilla are powerful women indeed, and the goddess Juno seems to wield more power than Jupiter in Virgil's epic.

While it is clear that Virgil wrote the *Aeneid* as a continuation of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* centuries after the days of Homer, what is not clear is why Virgil wrote his story of a Bronze Age hero without more careful attention to anachronisms. The "bronze beaks" on the Trojan ships in book one do not fit Homer's description of ships in his epics. The use of bronze on the beaks of

¹⁵ Virg. A. 4.321-345.

¹⁶ F. E. Harrison, "Homer and the Poetry of War," *Greece & Rome, Second Series* 7, no. 1 (Mar., 1960): 12, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/640724> (accessed May 27, 2014).

ships was a later invention, used for ramming.¹⁷ A glaring anachronism is the abundant use of iron or steel in the *Aeneid*. During the funeral games for Anchises in book five, Aeneas affixed a dove to the mast of Serestus' ship, "a mark for steel-shod arrows."¹⁸ The scarcity of iron or steel during the Bronze Age makes using steel-shod arrows quite unlikely, especially during funeral games and not in a life-or-death situation.

In some translations of the *Aeneid*, notably that of C. Day Lewis (2009), Camilla kills Orsilochus by rising up in her stirrups and hacking him with her battle-axe.¹⁹ Stirrups, an invention of the Chinese, would likely have arrived in Europe much later and therefore would not have been part of Bronze Age horse tack. The Stanley Lombardo translation (2006) has Camilla "rising in the saddle," but not necessarily stirrups. In this case, stirrups may be implied in the translation.²⁰ The Robert Fagles translation simply states that Camilla "rears above him."²¹ The original Latin uses the phrase *altior exurgens*, which does not directly indicate the use of stirrups either, but may indirectly indicate the anachronism.²²

Virgil's use of anachronisms may have been unintentional in some instances and intentional in others. Virgil may not have had enough background knowledge about the Bronze Age to avoid anachronisms. For example, he describes "tight ranks [of Trojan fighters] that don't throw down their shields and spears," perhaps indicating the accidental inclusion of the phalanx formation into his Bronze Age story.²³ Would he have known how Bronze Age soldiers fought?

¹⁷ F. H. Sandbach, "Anti-Antiquarianism in the *Aeneid*," a lecture delivered to the Virgil Society, March 19, 1966, <http://virgil.vacau.com/?p=330> (accessed May 29, 2014).

¹⁸ Virg. A. 5.543.

¹⁹ C. Day Lewis, trans. Virgil, *The Aeneid*, Oxford World Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 281.

²⁰ Stanley Lombardo, trans. Virgil, *The Essential Aeneid* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2006), 172.

²¹ Virg. A. 11.821.

²² J. B. Greenough, trans. Vergil, *Bucolics, Aeneid, and Georgics Of Vergil* (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1900), Perseus Digital Library, <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:latinLit:phi0690.phi003.perseus-lat1:11.690-11.724> (accessed May 31, 2014).

²³ Virg. A. 12.657.

It is also certainly possible that Virgil included anachronisms like the phalanx, iron weapons, and bronze beaks on ships intentionally to help his audience relate to the story. Very few Romans of his time would have noticed the anachronisms, so writing a historically accurate poem may have been awkward for his audience.

Despite the anachronisms that might make a modern reader question the validity of Virgil's work, the story remains coherent and believable in its own context. In writing the *Aeneid*, Virgil accomplished his goals regardless of his epic's few detractors. Virgil cleverly blended Rome's many origin myths into an interesting tale of adventure, tragedy, and triumph. He linked Rome's mythological founding with the reign of Augustus, a new era in Roman history. In addition, Virgil infused Roman values into the founding story to make readers or listeners believe that such values had always been part of Rome's greatness. The *Aeneid*, like the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* for the Greeks, provided a national epic for the Romans that could entertain and teach valuable lessons. St. Augustine, in his *Confessions*, compared his own soul-search with the wanderings of Aeneas. He also commented on the epic's usefulness as an educational tool.²⁴ Although Augustine was less than thrilled with reading Virgil's work, the fact that he, a resident of northern Africa, read the *Aeneid* over three hundred years after Virgil wrote it exemplifies the long-lasting impact of the *Aeneid*. For that and many other reasons, the *Aeneid* is a must-read for anyone interested in a deeper understanding of Roman history.

²⁴ Saint Augustine *Confessions* 1.13.

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