

VIRGIL, *AENEID* – Context

Virgil, the preeminent poet of the Roman Empire, was born Publius Vergilius Maro on October 15, 70 B.C. , near Mantua, a city in northern Italy. The son of a farmer, Virgil studied in Cremona, then in Milan, and finally in Rome. Around 41 B.C. , he returned to Mantua to begin work on his *Eclogues*, which he published in 37 B.C. Soon afterward, civil war forced him to flee south to Naples, where seven years later he finished his second work, the *Georgics*, a long poem on farming. At this time, Virgil's writing gained him the recognition of the public, wealth from patrons, and the favor of the emperor.

Virgil lived at the height of the first age of the Roman Empire, during the reign of the emperor Octavian, later known as Augustus. Before Augustus became emperor, though, internal strife plagued the Roman government. During Virgil's youth, the First Triumvirate—Julius Caesar, Pompey, and Crassus—governed the Roman Republic. Crassus was killed around 53 B.C. , and Caesar initiated civil war against Pompey. After defeating Pompey, Caesar reigned alone until the Ides of March in 44 B.C. , when Brutus and Cassius, two senators, assassinated him. Civil war erupted between the assassins and the Second Triumvirate—Octavian, Antony, and Lepidus. By 36 B.C. only Octavian and Antony remained, and they began warring against each other. At the Battle of Actium in 31 B.C. , Octavian defeated Antony and his ally Cleopatra of Egypt, finally consolidating power in himself alone. Four years later, he assumed the title Augustus. Virgil witnessed all this turmoil, and the warring often disrupted his life.

Immediately after finishing the *Georgics*, Virgil began his masterwork, the *Aeneid*. The *Aeneid* tells the story of the Trojan hero Aeneas's perilous flight from Troy to Italy following the Trojan War. In Italy, Aeneas's descendents would go on to found Rome. In the epic, Virgil repeatedly foreshadows the coming of Augustus, perhaps to silence critics who claimed that he achieved power through violence and treachery. (Whether or not Virgil truly believed all the praise he heaped upon Augustus is a matter of debate.) When Rome was at its height, the easiest way to justify the recent brutal events was to claim that the civil wars and the changes in leadership had been decreed by fate to usher in the reign of the great Augustus. Yet the *Aeneid* is by no means a purely political work; like other epic poems, its subject stands on its own as a story for all time.

Virgil did not invent the story that Rome descended from Troy; he crafted the events narrated in the *Aeneid* from an existing tradition surrounding Aeneas. In Book XX of the *Iliad*, Aeneas faces off with Achilles, and we learn about Aeneas's lineage and his reputation for bravery. However, in that scene, he is no match for Achilles, who has been outfitted in armor forged by the divine smith Hephaestus. Poseidon rescues Aeneas from certain doom and praises the Trojan for his piety. Poseidon also prophesies that Aeneas will survive the Trojan War and assume leadership over the Trojan people.

After eleven years of composition, the meticulous Virgil did not consider the *Aeneid* fit for publication. He planned to spend three years editing it, but fell ill returning from a trip to Greece. Just before his death on September 21, 19 B.C. , he ordered the manuscript of the *Aeneid* to be burned. Augustus intervened, however, arranging for the poem to be published against Virgil's wishes.

Plot Overview

In the Mediterranean Sea, Aeneas and his fellow Trojans are sailing in flight from their home city of Troy, which has been destroyed by the Greeks. They are headed for Italy, where Aeneas is destined to become the founder of Rome. As they near their destination, a fierce storm throws them off course and lands them in Carthage. Dido, Carthage's founder and queen, welcomes them. Aeneas relates to Dido the long and painful story of his group's travels thus far.

Aeneas tells of the sack of Troy that ended the Trojan War after ten years of the Greeks besieging Troy. In the final campaign, the Trojans were tricked when they accepted into their city walls a wooden horse that, unbeknownst to them, harbored several Greek soldiers in its hollow belly. He tells how he escaped the burning city with his father, Anchises, his son, Ascanius, and the hearth gods that represent their fallen city. Assured by the gods that a glorious future awaited him in Italy, he set sail with a fleet containing the surviving citizens of Troy. Aeneas relates the ordeals they faced on their journey. Twice they attempted to build a new city, only to be driven away by bad omens and plagues. Harpies, creatures that are part woman and part bird, cursed them, but they also encountered friendly countrymen unexpectedly. Finally, after the loss of Anchises and a bout of terrible weather, they made their way to Carthage.

Impressed by Aeneas's exploits and sympathetic to his suffering, Dido, a Phoenician princess who fled her home and founded Carthage after her brother murdered her husband, falls in love with Aeneas. They live together as lovers for a period, until the gods remind Aeneas of his duty to found a new city. He determines to set sail once again. Dido is devastated by his departure, and kills herself by ordering a huge pyre to be built with Aeneas's castaway possessions, climbing upon it, and then stabbing herself with the sword Aeneas leaves behind.

As the Trojans make for Italy, bad weather blows them to Sicily, where they hold funeral games for the dead Anchises. The women, tired of the voyage, begin to burn the ships, but a downpour puts the fires out. Some of the travel-weary stay behind, while Aeneas, reinvigorated after his father visits him in a dream, takes the rest on toward Italy. Once there, Aeneas descends into the underworld, guided by the Sibyl of Cumae, to visit his father. He is shown a pageant of the future history and heroes of Rome, which helps him to understand the importance of his mission. Aeneas returns from the underworld, and the Trojans continue up the coast to the region of Latium.

The arrival of the Trojans in Italy begins peacefully. King Latinus, the Italian ruler, extends his hospitality, hoping that Aeneas will prove to be the foreigner whom, according to a prophecy, his daughter Lavinia is supposed to marry. But Latinus's wife, Amata, has other ideas. She means for Lavinia to marry Turnus, a local suitor. Amata and Turnus cultivate enmity toward the newly arrived Trojans. Meanwhile, Ascanius hunts a stag that was a pet of the local herdsmen. A fight breaks out, and several people are killed. Turnus, riding this current of anger, begins a war.

Aeneas, at the suggestion of the river god Tiberinus, sails north up the Tiber to seek military support among the neighboring tribes. During this voyage, his mother, Venus, descends to give him a new set of weapons, wrought by Vulcan. While the Trojan leader is away, Turnus attacks. Aeneas returns to find his countrymen thick in battle. Pallas, the son of Aeneas's new ally Evander, is killed by Turnus. Aeneas flies into a violent fury, and many more are slain by the day's end.

The two sides agree to a truce so that they can bury the dead, and the Latin leaders discuss whether to continue the battle. They decide to spare any further unnecessary carnage by proposing a hand-to-hand duel between Aeneas and Turnus. When the two leaders face off, however, the other men begin to quarrel, and full-scale battle resumes. Aeneas is wounded in the thigh, but eventually the Trojans threaten the enemy city. Turnus rushes out to meet Aeneas, who wounds Turnus badly. Aeneas nearly spares Turnus but, remembering the slain Pallas, instead finishes him off.