

Introduction: Virgil and the *Aeneid*

Life of Virgil

- 1 The life of Virgil is a controversial topic. Instead of constructing yet another second-hand ‘life’, I here quote some of the less controversial excerpts from the lives of Virgil composed by Donatus (*Introduction* Sections 1–9 = *Intro* [1–9]) and Servius (*Intro* [10]), both fourth century AD, on which all modern constructions of his life are based:¹

Early life, looks, health

‘Publius Vergilius Maro was a native of Mantua . . . born in 70 BC on 15 October, in the village called Andes, not far from Mantua² . . . Virgil passed the first years of his life at Cremona, until he assumed the *toga* of manhood which he did in his seventeenth year . . . But he moved from Cremona to Milan and shortly after that to Rome.³ He was tall and well-built, with a swarthy complexion and the look of a countryman. His health was mixed; he commonly had problems with his throat and stomach, suffered from headaches, and often spat up blood. He ate and drank little.’

¹ Notes to the early life of Virgil are mainly based on chapter 2 of L.P. Wilkinson, *The Georgics of Virgil* (Cambridge 1969). Much of the information collected in the footnotes to this *Introduction* comes from a collection of short poems called *Catalepton* (‘small-scale’) ascribed to Virgil, some of which are thought actually to have been composed by him. The statements contained in accounts of ancient ‘lives’ are notoriously difficult to assess for accuracy. This one is no different. R.J. Tarrant ‘Poetry and Power: Virgil’s Poetry in Contemporary Context’ in Martindale (1997: 169–87) has much of interest to say on Virgil’s life and Rome in Virgil’s day. Note that our convention is to spell his name ‘Virgil’. In Latin he is *Vergilius*. The translation is based on W.A. Camps, *Virgil’s Aeneid* (Oxford 1969) 115ff.

² Julius Caesar was aged 30 at the time, and the republican system already falling apart.

³ These moves, the last to Rome in 52 BC, were presumably for educational reasons. He learned rhetoric and, we are told, medicine and mathematics, probably including astronomy and astrology. At this time Caesar was conquering Gaul, and Rome was in increasing turmoil (see [12] below). Virgil was probably sympathetic to Caesar.

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Retiring nature

- 2 ‘He was so respectable in life, speech and mind that in Naples⁴ he was usually called Parthenias (“Virginia”/“Maiden”);⁵ and if anyone recognised him in Rome (where he rarely went), he would escape those following and pointing at him by taking refuge in the nearest house . . . He had a house on the Esquiline, next to the Gardens of Maecenas,⁶ though he spent most of his time well out of sight in homes in Campania and Sicily . . . He argued a case in court once, and once only. According to Melissus⁷ he was slow of speech, as if he had not been properly trained.’
 (There follow details of his early poetic efforts.)

Summary of writings: Aeneid and Rome’s origins

- 3 ‘He tried to write on Roman history, but found the subject uncongenial, and turned to pastoral poetry in his *Eclogues*⁸. . . Next he wrote the *Georgics*⁹ in honour of Maecenas . . . Last of all he began the *Aeneid*, a complex and diverse story, a sort of counterpart of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined, involving both Greek and Roman places and characters and designed (Virgil gave special attention to this) to cover the origins of both Rome and Augustus.’

Compositional technique

- 4 ‘When he was writing the *Georgics* he is said to have dictated a large number of lines early in the day, and spent the rest of it working them over and reducing them to a very few, saying that he produced his poetry like a she-bear gradually licking her cubs into shape. He first made a prose sketch of the *Aeneid* and divided it into twelve books, and then, as the fancy took him, and not following any particular order, turned them bit by bit into poetry. Further, not wishing to lose momentum, he left some passages

⁴ Where he lived after abandoning rhetorical education. He went to Naples to study under the Epicurean philosopher Siro.

⁵ Since the Greek for ‘virgin’ is *parthenos*, this name may simply be Vergilius (cf. *uirgō*) in Greek.

⁶ Maecenas was the future emperor Augustus’ agent and general fixer. Virgil was drawn into Augustus’ ‘circle’ by Maecenas soon after publishing *Eclogues* and became rich on the strength of it. Augustus is said to have given him 10 million sesterces.

⁷ An ex-slave of Maecenas.

⁸ Greek *eklogē* ‘short poem’ or ‘selections’; also known as *Bucolics* (Greek *boukolika* ‘To do with herdsmen’). *Eclogues* consists of ten short poems.

⁹ Four books ostensibly on farming (Greek *geōrgos* ‘farmer’). See on 1.148–56.

unfinished, and propped up others with temporary verses, joking that they were struts to hold the work up until the solid columns were delivered.’

Recitations

- 5 ‘He finished the *Eclogues* in three years,¹⁰ the *Georgics* in seven,¹¹ and the *Aeneid* in eleven.¹² The *Eclogues* were so successful that they were soon regularly recited on stage. He read the *Georgics* aloud to Augustus on four successive days when the emperor was on his way back to Rome after the victory at Actium¹³ and resting at Atella with a throat infection. Whenever Virgil’s voice gave up and he had to stop, Maecenas took over. Virgil recited poetry sweetly and with a wonderful charm.’

Augustus’ keen interest

- 6 ‘Even when the *Aeneid* was hardly begun, the reports were such that Sextus Propertius [a contemporary poet] did not hesitate to declare:

‘Give way, you poets of Rome and Greece:
 Something greater than the *Iliad* is in the making.’¹⁴

When Augustus was away on his campaign against the Cantabriges,¹⁵ he rather browbeat the poet with a combination of entreaties and joking threats to send him (in Augustus’ own words) ‘either the first sketch or any specimen’. Much later, when the work was essentially finished, Virgil *did* recite just three books – the second, fourth and sixth. This last had a notable effect on the listening Octavia, who is said to have fainted at the verses referring to her son *tū Marcellus eris* and been revived only with difficulty.¹⁶

Death

- 7 ‘When Virgil was 52 and intending to put the finishing touches to the *Aeneid*, he decided to retire to Greece and Asia and do nothing for three

¹⁰ c. 38 BC.

¹¹ 29 BC.

¹² Unfinished at his death in 19 BC.

¹³ In 31 BC. See [12] below.

¹⁴ 2.34.66. Some commentators have seen this as sarcastic.

¹⁵ c. 26 BC.

¹⁶ Marcellus died in 23 BC, aged 20. He was the son of Augustus’ sister Octavia. Augustus had adopted him as his son and successor in 25 BC and married him to his daughter Julia. The reference is to *Aeneid* 6.883.

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years except revise, so that he could leave the rest of his life free for philosophy. But on his way to Athens he met Augustus on his way back to Rome from the East and determined to accompany him. But on a very hot day on a sight-seeing visit to the nearby town of Megara, he became ill. He worsened the condition by refusing to abandon his journey and was seriously ill by the time he reached Brundisium. There he died a few days later, on 21 September.¹⁷

Virgil's wishes ignored

- 8 'Before he left Italy, Virgil had tried to get Varius to agree to burn the *Aeneid* if anything should happen to himself, but Varius had firmly refused to do any such thing. So on his death-bed Virgil repeatedly demanded the box containing the manuscript, intending to burn the poem himself, but no one gave it to him . . . On Augustus' orders Varius published it, but it was revised only cursorily, so that any unfinished lines remained unfinished.'¹⁸

Critical reactions

- 9 'M. Vipsanius¹⁹ spoke of Virgil as inventor, with the encouragement of Maecenas, of a new kind of artificiality, neither extravagant nor affectedly simple, but based on common words and for that reason unobtrusive . . .²⁰ Asconius Pedianus in the book which he wrote against the detractors of Virgil cites only a few complaints against him, and those mostly relating to matters of fact or to his borrowings from Homer, and says that Virgil used to rebut the charge of plagiarising Homer with the following remark: "Why don't they try to do the same themselves? They would soon realise that it is easier to steal his club from Hercules than a line from Homer." Nevertheless (says Asconius) he had planned to retire abroad and wrap the whole poem up to satisfy even his most hostile critics.'

¹⁷ 19 BC.

¹⁸ The unfinished lines (e.g. 1.534, 2.720) are clear evidence that the poem is unfinished. There are more unfinished lines in Book 2 than any other Book.

¹⁹ Presumably the soldier and politician Agrippa, a close friend and supporter of Augustus.

²⁰ L.P. Wilkinson 'The Language of Virgil and Horace' in S.J. Harrison (1990: 418–20), using statistics from A. Cordier *Études sur le vocabulaire épique dans l'Énéide* (Paris 1939), points out that Virgil's use of archaic, rare and compound words is extremely sparse: archaic words, one every forty lines; rare words, one every thirty lines; compound words not used in everyday speech, one every hundred lines. One proviso, however: Cordier does not take repeated incidents of the same word into account.

Servius on the nature of the Aeneid and its praise of Augustus' parentage

- 10 'It is clear what sort of poem it is: it is in the heroic metre, and the format is composite, with the poet himself speaking and introducing other speakers too. It is heroic because it consists of human and divine characters, mixing truth with fiction. For it is obvious that Aeneas came to Italy, but it is agreed that Venus' conversation with Jupiter²¹ and Mercury's mission [to Dido]²² are invented. The style is lofty, consisting as it does of refined speech and noble sentiments . . . Virgil's purpose is to imitate Homer²³ and praise Augustus in respect of his parentage.²⁴ For Augustus is the son of Atia, who is the daughter of Julia, the sister of Julius Caesar, whose name "Julius" derives from Aeneas' son Iulus, as Virgil himself confirms in "a name handed down from great Iulus".²⁵

Rome in the first century BC

Rome's rise to power

- 11 Romans were intensely proud of their 'constitution' which they claimed could be traced back almost 500 years to the moment when the Etruscan kings were thrown out and, virtually overnight (they believed), Rome turned into a republic. That constitution lay at the heart, they felt, of Rome's dramatic rise to power, which put them in control of Italy by the 270s BC and, after the conquest of that other great western power, Carthage, in the three Punic wars, made them masters of an expanding empire. By the middle of the first century BC, Rome's provinces spread round the Mediterranean – Spain, Gaul, Greece, much of the Near East and north Africa.²⁶

²¹ 1.229–96.

²² 1.297–304.

²³ Virgil also imitates the *Argonautica* by the Greek epic writer Apollonius from Rhodes (third century BC). This tells of the adventures of Jason and his Argonauts in their efforts to get the Golden Fleece from Phasis (the eastern coast of the Black Sea) and bring it back to Greece. Jason is helped by Medea, the daughter of Aetes, king of Phasis. Virgil models aspects of Dido (with whom Aeneas will have an affair when he arrives in Carthage) on Medea.

²⁴ Cf. [3].

²⁵ *Aeneid* 1.288.

²⁶ Jones and Sidwell (1997: sections 26–44).

The end of the republic and rise of Octavian/Augustus

- 12 But that proud confidence in what it meant to be Roman was almost completely destroyed by the nightmare of the destruction of the republican system. It started in 133 BC, when the senate refused to accept Tiberius Gracchus' sensible reforms designed to help ordinary Romans own land on which to farm and support themselves. Tiberius ignored the senate and forced the legislation through via the people's assemblies, but the traditional concord between senate and people had broken down. A vicious 'Social War' over political rights was then fought between Romans and Italians (91–87 BC), while internal conflict sprang up between powerful Romans, such as Marius, Sulla, Pompey, Crassus and Julius Caesar, with private armies at their back, fighting among themselves to gain power in defiance of every age-old and hallowed constitutional procedure. Caesar appeared to have come out on top in 49 BC when he defeated Pompey; but he was assassinated on the Ides of March 44 BC, unleashing the dogs of yet further bloody civil war. This culminated in a stand-off between Marc Antony and Caesar's nominated heir, his adoptive great-nephew Octavian (later Augustus), which was settled in Octavian's favour in 31 BC at the battle of Actium.²⁷ Rome held its breath. Horace had talked of this period as the result of inherited sin, going back to Romulus killing his twin brother Remus, and of the need for a saviour to appear.²⁸ Virgil described the battle of Actium in terms of Mars raging, Furies descending from the skies, Discord triumphant and Bellona (goddess of war) cracking her whip.²⁹ What was to happen to Romans after all *that*?

Maecenas' wooing of Virgil

- 13 Virgil, born in 70 BC, lived through this terrible period. But it did not stop poets going about their work; indeed, it was poetically the most brilliant period in the whole of Rome's history. Lucretius, Catullus and Horace worked throughout it; Propertius and Ovid were soon to spring on the scene. Horace and Virgil in particular became engaged on Octavian's side through the offices of Octavian's trusted friend and agent Gaius Maecenas, a supreme fixer who made it his business to develop a circle of broadly sympathetic poets (those were the days when the views of poets could be seen as politically significant). Virgil's *Eclogues*, probably appearing about 38 BC,

²⁷ Jones and Sidwell (1997: sections 70–80).

²⁸ *Epodes* 7 and *Odes* 1.2.

²⁹ *Aeneid* 8.700–3.

refer in parts to the confiscations of land that took place during the civil wars to pay off soldiers.

Virgil's hopes of Octavian/Augustus

- 14 As his next poem *Georgics* shows, Virgil was impressed by what Octavian might achieve. He says there:

Gods of our fathers, local gods, Romulus and mother Vesta,
 Who guard Tuscan Tiber and the Roman Palatine,
 At least do not prevent this young man from saving a world
 Turned upside down. For quite long enough now have we paid
 The price of Trojan Laomedon's perjury;
 For quite long enough, Caesar, has heaven
 Begrudged you to us.³⁰

Georgics 1.498–504

Further, at the end of *Georgics* he talked of Octavian 'giving laws to a willing people and setting out on the road to Olympus' (i.e. deification).

And so it gradually came to be. In the years following Actium, it did indeed become clear that Virgil's and others' hopes might be fulfilled, and Octavian might, just might, be able to restore much-needed peace and security to a war-torn Rome. In 27 BC, he had himself re-named Augustus and declared the republic officially restored. It was nothing of the sort, of course. The machinery had been restored, but everyone knew it was being worked by Augustus who had become, to all intents and purposes, Rome's first emperor. The Romans, nevertheless, seemed to acquiesce in this new settlement.

Virgil's early plans for an epic

- 15 That said, peace was not signed and sealed. Augustus' experiment had only just begun. At such a time of transition, no one could possibly tell how it would all turn out. An assassin's knife (think Julius Caesar) could end it at a stroke. So Virgil and others may have had high hopes, but hopes were all they were. As a result, if Virgil *was* planning an epic with Augustus at the heart of it, he would have to plan extremely carefully. The opening of

³⁰ Laomedon (Priam's father) had commissioned Neptune to build the walls of Troy but had not paid him for his efforts. Romans were descended from Trojans, and Virgil talks here as if they had inherited an ancestral curse from those times (cf. [12]). Octavian had also taken the name 'Caesar' from Julius Caesar, who had adopted him.

Georgics 3 suggested one possibility, where Virgil, rejecting the ‘hackneyed’ themes of mythology, says that he must find a way to rise above such ‘common ground’ and hints at building a great temple to Augustus with him as god in the middle, featuring (among much contemporary history) a beginning in Troy and ‘the offspring of Assaracus [Priam’s grandfather] . . . Tros [Assaracus’ father] and . . . Apollo [a founder of Troy]’. In the event, the *Aeneid* would turn out to be something completely different.

The *Aeneid* and its forerunners

Homer

- 16 Virgil was facing a monumental task in composing a Roman epic at all, let alone one culminating in Augustus. The epics that everyone looked back to were those of Greece’s most famous poet, Homer (c. 700 BC), composer of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.³¹ The *Iliad* means ‘tale about Ilium’, the city in the region of Troy ruled by king Priam, which the Greeks were besieging in order to win back Helen. She was wife of the Greek king Menelaus, and had been seduced to Troy by Paris, Priam’s son. Paris had won her as a reward for giving the golden apple inscribed ‘to the most beautiful’ to Aphrodite/Venus (goddess of sex), thus incurring for the Trojans the everlasting enmity of the two rejected goddesses, Athena/Minerva and Hera/Juno. The *Iliad* does not deal directly with the seduction of Helen, nor with the final capture of Ilium, but took as its theme one event from the ten-year war – the consequences of the anger of the greatest Greek fighter, Achilles, who was insulted by the leader of the Greek expedition to Troy, Agamemnon, and withdrew from the fighting. The *Odyssey* told the story of the return of the tricky Greek hero Odysseus after the war to his home on Ithaca (Virgil calls him *Ulixēs*, derived from a dialect form *Olysseus*, cf. our Ulysses). After three years of adventures at sea and seven years held by the sea-nymph Calypso on her island, he reached home only to find 108 suitors effectively besieging his palace, demanding Penelope marry one of them. These mighty epics had not been designed as nationalistic statements – but that is what they became. They were to have a lasting influence on subsequent Greek and Roman literature.

³¹ See [10] and footnote 23. There is debate about the date of Homer (anywhere between 750 and 650 BC), and whether he was in fact sole author of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

Virgil's use of Naevius' 'Punic War' epic

- 17 Romans had been in contact with Greeks for hundreds of years through Greek settlements in southern Italy, before they conquered Greece in 146 BC and turned it into a province. They saw themselves as culturally backward by comparison and, captivated by Greek artistic and literary culture, began to look to Greek models to see how to do it. Naevius, who was not Roman but came from the south of Italy, where Greek influence was strong (thanks to its colonising from the eighth century BC), made the first serious attempt at a Roman epic, composing a *Bellum Pūnicum* (the first Punic war fought by Rome against Carthage over Sicily, 264–241 BC, in which Naevius himself had served). The very few fragments from it survive only because they were quoted by later authors, e.g. Servius [51]. They indicate that Naevius mentioned Anchises and his son Aeneas leaving Troy (we have references to Anchises seeing an omen, women fleeing, etc.); a storm at sea; and their arrival in Latium, where Romulus (Aeneas' grandson in this version) was born and Rome was founded. This seems to have been integrated somehow or other into the narrative of the Punic war. But how? Since in Book 1 the Roman consul Valerius is mentioned as going to Sicily, and there is also a reference to the temple of Zeus at Agrigentum where the capture of Troy was depicted, it may be (this is controversial) that the consul or one of his men was described seeing a depiction of Aeneas there and told his story.³² If so, Virgil lifted the idea at 1.450–93, where Aeneas sees depictions of the Trojan war in Juno's temple in Carthage. However, we can be fairly sure that in Naevius Aeneas did not play any part in starting the eternal enmity between Rome and Carthage by having a disastrous affair with the local queen Dido, as in Virgil (though Naevius does mention Dido).³³ But the result was the first 'national' epic – celebrating a nation's historical achievements.

Naevius' use of Aeneas

- 18 An important move on Naevius' part was to focus on Aeneas. He was a great Trojan hero, destined (Homer tells us) to survive the war and rule Troy (*Iliad* 20.294–308). Naevius, however, picks up the tradition (reported in Greek historians in the fifth century BC) that Aeneas came to Italy and founded the Roman race. The great advantage of Aeneas was that he could

³² See Goldberg in Boyle (1993: 28–9).

³³ See Horsfall 'Dido in the Light of History' in S.J. Harrison (1990: 139–44) for the argument that there was enough in Naevius to *prompt* Virgil's new conception of Dido.

bring with him a range of myths and gods, an authentic Homeric ancestry and a justification for a Roman attack on Greece (Troy, as it were, having its revenge, which happens in the second century BC: see on **1.278–88**). As Hainsworth puts it, ‘he was the Roman passport to membership in the civilised world’.³⁴ Aeneas brought with him a slight problem, of course, because Greek Eratosthenes had dated the fall of Troy to 1184 BC, while Romulus and Remus founded Rome in 753 BC. But myth was ever flexible. As a result of later juggling of dates (of which Virgil took advantage), Aeneas was portrayed settling down and dying in Lavinium south of Rome, while his son Ascanius subsequently moved to Alba Longa; over 300 years later, his descendants Romulus and Remus actually founded Rome itself (see 1.265–74). The idea that Carthage and Rome were of equal age was, of course, a complete invention, but necessary for nationalistic purposes.

Naevius’ use of Venus

- 19 Of equal importance was the role Naevius assigned to Venus, who at that time was coming to be recognised – how, we do not know – as the ‘mother’ of the Roman race. Macrobius (c. AD 430) reports that, early on in Naevius’ epic, ‘when the Trojans are in trouble because of the storm, Venus complains to Jupiter, and there follow words of Jupiter comforting his daughter with hope for the future’. Venus may well have begun with a line quoted by the historian Festus (c. AD 350) *summe deum rēgnātor, quianam mē genuisti?* ‘Greatest ruler of the gods, why did you beget me?’ (Cf. especially 1.223–96.) Venus was to loom large in Virgil’s plans.

Ennius imitates Homer: a nation’s destiny

- 20 Ennius (239–169 BC), from south Italy like Naevius, dramatically developed this nationalistic, epic genre with his eighteen-book epic *Annālēs* (note the technical title, used of priestly records). He did this by consciously adopting the metre – the hexameter – and much of the style of Homer (who at the beginning of the epic, he claims, appeared to him in a dream). To do this in Latin at this time was no mean feat. Ennius has Books 1–3 deal with the early kings of Rome (starting, of course, with Aeneas); 4–6 with the conquest of Italy and the defeat of the Greek chieftain Pyrrhus who had come to help the largely Greek-colonised southern Italian states; 7–9 with the Punic wars (at the end of which the hostile pro-Carthage Juno yields to Jupiter);

³⁴ (1991: 78).