

Virgil – Brief Biography

Publius Virgilius Maro was born on the 15th October 70 BC at Andes, a small village near Mantua in northern Italy, in what was then Cisalpine Gaul. As with Catullus, people have speculated about the Celtic origin of Virgil's family, since he was born in an area heavily settled by Celts. His father was a small farmer who had worked hard and done well enough to afford the best available education for his son. Virgil was educated at first in Cremona and Mediolanum (Milan) and later studied rhetoric and philosophy in Rome and Naples, where he learned Greek from Parthenius of Bithynia, a Greek poet and scholar. He is said to have been rather shy and retiring by nature, hating public appearances and reluctant to embark upon the career in the law-courts for which his training had prepared him. After completing his studies he probably returned home to the rural seclusion of his family farm where he began to compose the *Eclogues* in 43 BC.

After the defeat of Brutus and Cassius at Philippi in 41BC Virgil's life was touched by the upheavals of the times when the family farm was included in the land to be confiscated to provide small-holdings for the settlement of the veteran soldiers of the civil wars. But Virgil had friends among the officials dealing with the confiscated land who ensured that Octavian (the future Emperor Augustus) would either restore the farm or else compensate him with an estate in the south of Italy. Virgil expressed his gratitude in the first Eclogue:

.....*deus nobis haec otia fecit*

.....*a god has created this peace for us*

After this Virgil lived for a time in Rome but seems to have spent most of his time in and around Naples where the Emperor Augustus had given him places to live. He had been introduced to Augustus by his patron, the wealthy and cultivated Maecenas, who was also the patron of Virgil's friend and fellow-poet Horace.

Virgil finished and published the *Eclogues* (short, pastoral poems) in 37 BC. Then between 37 and 30 BC he wrote, at the request of Maecenas, the 4 books of the *Georgics* (relating to farm life) which were published in 30 BC. During the remaining eleven years of his life he devoted himself to the composition of the *Aeneid*. In 19BC he set off on a journey to Greece and Asia Minor, where he intended to spend three years, and while he was there, to complete the *Aeneid*. He fell ill, however, at Megara and had to return to Italy. He died on landing in Brundisium on 22nd September 19BC. On his death-bed he requested



that the *Aeneid* be destroyed since he felt it to be incomplete, but it was saved by his literary executors and published at the wish of Augustus.

Virgil was buried in his favourite city of Naples and his tomb is said to have been inscribed with the epitaph:

***Mantua me genuit, Calabri rapuere, tenet nunc
Parthenope; cecini pascua, rura, duces.***
*Mantua gave me life, Calabria snatched it away.
Naples holds me now; I wrote of pastures, farms and heroes.*

These twelve words encapsulate his whole life and work. He was born in Mantua, died in the Calabrian port of Brundisium, was buried in Naples (Parthenope) and his three great masterpieces were the *Eclogues* (**pascua** - about idealised shepherds and herdsmen); the *Georgics* (**rura** -in praise of agriculture); and the *Aeneid* (**duces** -telling the heroic adventures of Aeneas, the refugee from Troy who founded the Roman race.)

Virgil's Poetry

(i) The *Eclogues* ('selections') also known as the Bucolics ('poems about herdsmen'), are the earliest published works of Virgil. They consist of ten short unconnected poems, composed in hexameters. Written between 43 and 37 BC they present a rather artificial, stylised picture of the lives of shepherds and shepherdesses. The first Eclogue reflects the situation in 43 BC in the aftermath of civil war when one farmer must leave his farm while the other rejoices in his good fortune at being able to stay on his farm.

(ii) The *Georgics* (agricultural poems), composed between 37 and 30 BC, consist of 4 books written in hexameters, giving instructions about different areas of farming life. Book 1 is concerned with crop growing and weather-lore; Book 2 with the cultivation of trees, especially the olive and the vine; Book 3 with the tending of cattle; and Book 4 with the keeping of bees. In these poems the didactic element -the giving of instructions - is mingled with stories such as that of Orpheus and Eurydice which contribute to their great poetic charm. They evoke a sense of the struggle between man and nature but also a sense of the deep love of the farmer for the land, for the processes of nature and for the animals and crops in his care.

(iii) The *Aeneid* is an epic in 12 books written between 30 and 19 BC. It is a national epic whose theme is the heroic background and divinely ordained mission of the Roman Empire. It tells the legend of the Trojan hero Aeneas, who, after the fall of Troy and years of wandering by sea, founded a new city in Latium, in Italy, and became the legendary heroic ancestor of the Roman people.

The Aeneid - Summary

On the Mediterranean Sea, Aeneas and his fellow Trojans flee from their home city of Troy, which has been destroyed by the Greeks. They sail for Italy, where Aeneas is destined to found 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 Greek siege. 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 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 embroiled 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, slays him instead.



Dido and Aeneas

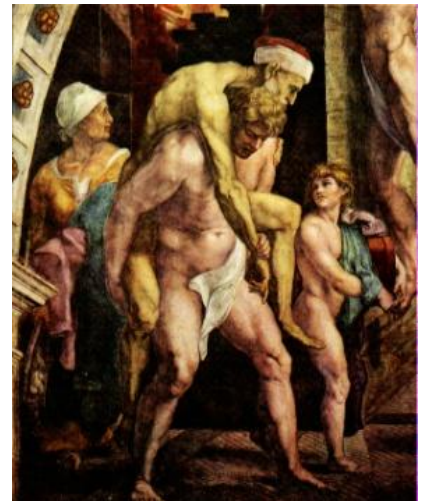
Aeneas, mythical hero of Troy and Rome, son of the goddess Aphrodite and Anchises. Aeneas was a member of the Trojan royal family. He played a prominent part in the war to defend his city against the Greeks.

It was Virgil who gave the various strands of legend related to Aeneas the form they have possessed ever since. The family of Julius Caesar, and consequently of Virgil's patron Augustus, claimed descent from Aeneas. Incorporating these different traditions, Virgil created his masterpiece, the *Aeneid*, the Latin epic poem whose hero symbolized not only the course and aim of Roman history but also the career and policy of Augustus himself. In the journeying of Aeneas from Troy westward to Sicily, Carthage, and finally to the mouth of the Tiber in Italy, Virgil portrayed the qualities of persistence, self-denial, and obedience to the gods that, to the poet, built Rome.

The *Aeneid* (written c. 29–19 BC) tells in 12 books of the legendary foundation of Lavinium (parent town of Alba Longa and of Rome) by Aeneas after he left the burning ruins of Troy to found under supernatural guidance a new city with a glorious destiny in the West.

When Troy fell to the Greeks, Virgil recounts, Aeneas, who had fought bravely to the last, was commanded in a vision to flee and to found a great city overseas. Aeneas gathered his family and followers and left Troy, carrying his father on his shoulders. In the confusion of leaving the burning city, his wife disappeared.

Her ghost informed him that he was to go to a western land where the Tiber River flowed. He then embarked upon his long voyage, touching at Thrace, Crete, and Sicily and meeting with numerous adventures that culminated in shipwreck on the coast of Africa near Carthage. There he was received by Dido, the widowed queen, to whom he told his story. They fell in love, and he lingered there until he was sharply reminded by Mercury that Rome was his goal. Guilty and wretched, he immediately abandoned Dido, who committed suicide, and Aeneas sailed on until he finally reached the mouth of the Tiber. There he was well received by Latinus, the king of the region, but other Italians, notably Latinus' wife and Turnus, leader of the Rutuli, resented the arrival of the Trojans and the projected marriage alliance between Aeneas and Lavinia, Latinus' daughter. War broke out, but the Trojans were successful and Turnus was killed. Aeneas then married Lavinia and founded Lavinium (a city about 30k south of Rome and regarded as a religious centre).



Dido: Before Aeneas's arrival, Dido is the confident and competent ruler of Carthage, a city she founded on the coast of North Africa. She is resolute, we learn, in her determination not to marry again and to preserve the memory of her dead husband, Sychaeus, whose murder at the hands of Pygmalion, her brother, caused her to flee her native Tyre. Despite this turmoil, she maintains her focus on her political responsibilities.

Virgil depicts the suddenness of the change that love provokes in the queen with the image of Dido as the victim of Cupid's arrow, which strikes her almost like madness or a disease. Dido tells her sister that a flame has been reignited within her. While flames and fire are traditional, almost clichéd images associated with love, fire is also a natural force of destruction and uncontrollable chaos. Dido risks everything by falling for Aeneas, and when this love fails, she finds herself unable to reassume her dignified position. By taking Aeneas as a lover, she compromises her previously untainted loyalty to her dead husband's memory. She loses the support of Carthage's citizens, who have seen their queen indulge an amorous obsession at the expense of her civic responsibilities. Further, by dallying with another foreigner, Dido alienates the local African chieftains who had approached her as suitors and now pose a military threat. Her irrational obsession drives her to a frenzied suicide, out of the tragedy of her situation and the pain of lost love, but also out of a sense of diminished possibilities for the future.



Dido plays a role in the first four books of the epic similar to that which Turnus plays at the end. She is a figure of passion and volatility, qualities that contrast with Aeneas's order and control, and traits that Virgil associated with Rome itself in his own day. Dido also represents the sacrifice Aeneas makes to pursue his duty. If fate were to allow him to remain in Carthage, he would rule a city beside a queen he loves without enduring the further hardships of war. Aeneas encounters Dido's shade in the underworld just before the future legacy of Rome is revealed to him, and again he admits that his abandonment of the queen was not an act of his own will. Through Dido, Virgil affirms order, duty, and history at the expense of romantic love.

Book Four - Summary

The flame of love for Aeneas that Cupid has lit in Dido's heart only grows while she listens to his sorrowful tale. She hesitates, though, because after the death of her husband, Sychaeus, she swore that she would never marry again. On the other hand, as her sister Anna counsels her, by marrying Aeneas she would increase the might of Carthage, because many Trojan warriors follow Aeneas. For the moment, consumed by love, Dido allows the work of city building to fall by the wayside.

Juno sees Dido's love for Aeneas as a way to keep Aeneas from going to Italy. Pretending to make a peace offering, Juno suggests to Venus that they find a way to get Dido and Aeneas alone together. If they marry, Juno suggests, the Trojans and the Tyrians would be at peace, and she and Venus would end their feud. Venus knows Juno is just trying to keep the Trojans from Italy but allows Juno to go ahead anyway.

One day when Dido, her court, and Aeneas are out hunting, Juno brings a storm down upon them to send the group scrambling for shelter and arranges for Aeneas and Dido to wind up in a cave by themselves. They make love in the cave and live openly as lovers when they return to Carthage. Dido considers them to be married though the union has yet to be consecrated in ceremony. Anxious rumours spread that Dido and Aeneas have surrendered themselves entirely to love and have begun to neglect their responsibilities as rulers.

When Jupiter learns of Dido and Aeneas's affair, he dispatches Mercury to Carthage to remind Aeneas that his destiny lies elsewhere and that he must leave for Italy. This message shocks Aeneas—he must obey, but he does not know how to tell Dido of his departure. He tries to prepare his fleet to set sail in secret, but the queen suspects his ploy and confronts him. In a rage, she insults him and accuses him of stealing her honor. While Aeneas pities her, he maintains that he has no choice but to follow the will of the gods: "I sail for Italy not of my own free will". As a last effort, Dido sends Anna to try to persuade the Trojan hero to stay, but to no avail.

Dido writhes between fierce love and bitter anger. Suddenly, she appears calm and instructs Anna to build a great fire in the courtyard. There, Dido says, she can rid Aeneas from her mind by burning all the clothes and weapons he has left behind and even the bed they slept on. Anna obeys, not realizing that Dido is in fact planning her own death—by making the fire her own funeral pyre. As night falls, Dido's grief leaves her sleepless. Aeneas does sleep, but

in his dreams, Mercury visits him again to tell him that he has delayed too long already and must leave at once. Aeneas awakens and calls his men to the ships, and they set sail.

Dido sees the fleet leaving and falls into her final despair. She can no longer bear to live. Running out to the courtyard, she climbs upon the pyre and unsheathes a sword Aeneas has left behind. She throws herself upon the blade and with her last words curses her absent lover. As Anna and the servants run up to the dying queen, Juno takes pity on Dido and ends her suffering and her life.

Analysis

Although her relationship with Aeneas spans only this one book of the *Aeneid*, Dido has become a literary icon for the tragic lover, like Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. Though at times Aeneas's happiness in his love for Dido seems to equal hers, it is with considerably less grief and anxiety that he is able to leave her in Carthage and go back about the business of bringing the survivors of Troy to Italy and founding Rome. Whereas Dido not only loves Aeneas but hopes he and his warriors will strengthen her city, Aeneas's actions are the result of a momentary abandonment of his true duties and responsibilities. He indulges temporarily in romance and the pleasures of the flesh, but when Jupiter, through Mercury, reminds Aeneas of his destiny, he is dutiful and ready to resume his mission.



When Aeneas says good-bye to Dido, we see two sides to the hero as in Book I, when he hides his worries to appear brave before his crew. Aeneas's statement that he is forced to sail to Italy and Virgil's remark that Aeneas "struggle[s] with desire to calm and comfort [Dido] in all her pain" demonstrate Aeneas's conflicted nature. He piously carries out the duties allotted him by fate; though he feels emotions and experiences desires, he is powerless to act on them. From Virgil's perspective, Aeneas is not heartless, as Dido thinks him, but merely capable of subordinating matters of the heart to the demands of duty. Aeneas's reminder to Dido that they were never officially married suggests, somewhat dubiously, that had they entered into such an ordained commitment he would not leave. But, he argues, without a true marriage, he is sacrificing only his own desires by leaving Dido.

Virgil treats love as he treats the gods—as an outside force acting upon mortals, not a function of the individual's free will or innate identity. He does not idealize love; rather, he

associates it with imagery linked to madness, fire, or disease, presenting love as a force that acts on Dido with a violence that is made literal by the end of Book IV in her suicide. Virgil's language in the first lines of the book indicates that Dido's emotions corrode her self-control; he describes her love as "inward fire eating her away". Later, Dido's decision to have a funeral pyre erected and then kill herself upon it returns to this imagery, and Virgil compares Dido's suicide to a city taken over by enemies, "As though . . . / . . . / Flames billowed on the roofs of men and gods". Cupid's arrow, shot to promote love between Aeneas and Dido, causes hatred, death, and destruction.

Love is at odds with law and fate, as it distracts its victims from their responsibilities. While with Aeneas, Dido abandons her construction of Carthage. She even admits to Aeneas that her own subjects have grown to hate her because of her selfish actions. Aeneas, too, must move on because the time he spends with Dido only keeps him from his selfless task of founding an empire.

In the *Aeneid*, civic responsibility resides with the male. An attitude that might be termed misogynistic seeps into Virgil's descriptions of Juno and even Dido. Aeneas's dream-vision of Mercury articulates this sentiment: "woman's a thing / forever fitful and forever changing". Virgil clearly enjoys making Juno look foolish, and he also likes to depict Juno's vain efforts in comic terms as a domestic quarrel—a battle of wills between husband and wife played out



before an audience that knows Jupiter has the power in the divine family. Dido also shows herself to be less responsible than her partner. Whereas Dido kills herself for love, leaving the city she founded without a leader, Aeneas returns to his course, guiding the refugees of a lost city to the foundation of a new city.