



# Revelations of Rome in Virgil's Aeneid

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Ancient Rome, so important in its day that people said all roads led to that city, was the capital of one of the most powerful civilizations in all of history. The Romans conquered many lands and territories, their power stretching all the way from the British Isles to the Persian East. At first glance it appears as if the Romans of old were unbeatable. However, it is important to remember that first glances are not always what they seem: in actuality, the ancient Romans were conquered from the inside out. In the year 146 B.C., Rome had officially conquered Greece, even though there had been functioning Greek colonies on Italy's peninsula for many years (Atchity 323). Rome's physical might had overpowered that of Greece, but, as the philosopher Horace stated, "Conquered Greece conquered, in turn, the uncultivated victor and introduced the arts in rustic Latium" (Constable 53). Ancient Rome absorbed all that was ancient Greece. In all aspects of its culture, Rome adopted the ways of Hellas, and that adaptation is manifested in the epic tale The Aeneid.

Virgil, the author of The Aeneid, was born in 70 B.C. in ancient Rome (Atchity 100). In the year 49 B.C., he moved to Cumae, a city located west of modern-day Naples. Cumae was founded in 750 B.C. by the Greeks; the city of Cumae was the "oldest Greek mainland colony in the West" that was still in existence ("Cumae"). With Rome in power, Cumae was subdued and controlled by the year 338 B.C. ("Cumae"). At the time of Virgil, Cumae was considered to be an Epicurean society, following the pleasure-seeking ideas, antithetical to the stoic Romans, of the Greek philosopher Epicurus (Anderson 110). Virgil was educated in Cumae and started writing there. In 31 B.C. he began writing The Aeneid. It was the Roman ruler Augustus who initiated this project for Virgil, wishing him "to provide for Rome what Homer had done for the Greeks" (Atchity 101).

Homer, the Greek to whom the writing of The Iliad and The Odyssey is attributed, whose tales had "reasonably sound texts" available to the public by the end of the sixth century B.C., was the

writer whose reputation Augustus wanted Virgil to transcend for the glory of Rome (The Iliad of Homer 13). Augustus wanted Virgil to tell a story that grandly mythologized the founding of Rome. Therefore, Virgil went right to the source: the Greek epic literature of Homer. In reading the product of Virgil's art, it is only obvious to see the major influence that Homer had on the construction of The Aeneid.

The parallels between The Iliad, The Odyssey, and The Aeneid are evident from the first page to the last. In fact, it seems that the very structure of The Aeneid was taken from the two epic poems of Homer: with "the first six books modeled on The Odyssey and the second six on The Iliad" (Atchity 101). The way that Virgil's tale can easily be split into two halves also reflects the two legends of Homer: the first six books of The Aeneid being that of the great journey, or "nostros," like Odysseus' voyage to Ithaca, and the second six being like that of the battles of Troy; though Aeneas fought on the Italian peninsula, he and his men were of Trojan blood (Commager 89).

The connection to Homer's Troy is evident in the very essence of The Aeneid. Virgil's whole idea starts with the escape of Aeneas from his home, the burning Troy from The Iliad. It was there, when Achilles was fighting Aeneas in the twentieth book of The Iliad, that Homer prophesized the future of the young Trojan (The Iliad of Homer 412). Homer wrote: "His fate is to escape to ensure that the great line of Dardanus may not unseeded perish from the world... Therefore Aeneas and his sons, and theirs, will be lords over Trojans born hereafter" (Fitzgerald 404). These few lines in Homer's epic tales gave Virgil the opportunity to succeed the mission Augustus put before him.

In the very opening of The Aeneid, there is a connection to the epics of Greece. Virgil opens with "I sing of warfare and a man at war / Tell me the causes now, O Muse," and "For years / They wandered as their destiny drove them on / From one sea to the next: so hard and huge / A task it was to found the Roman people" (Virgil 4). The way the story begins, between the way that the narrator invokes a sense of entertainment through song and the interaction between him and the Muse, known to be a Greek goddess of the creative arts, as well as the description of the long journey by sea, is very similar to the opening scene of The Odyssey, in which the narrator states: "Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the

story / of that man skilled in all ways of contending,  
/ the wanderer, harried for years on end, / after he  
plundered the stronghold on the proud height of  
Troy" (Homer 1).

Continuing, it is unmistakable that there are not only numerous parallels to the tales of Homer in the story of Aeneas, but that it is all due to the Greek influence on the Roman way of life. On any manner of subjects, Virgil illustrates how the stylings of Greece were tightly intertwined in the society of ancient Rome, including: philosophy, religion, mythology, or literature.

### History

When it comes to history, much of what is passed down through generations is oral- tradition. In the time of Virgil, around 49 B.C., it was known that the land of Rome was not always Roman. It was known by Romans that their ancestors came to the Tiber somehow, and somehow, and that it was most likely connected to the movements of other peoples around the area. In looking at the ancient Greeks, their history was directly related to that of the people of Rome. Not only are they very close geographically, but there is a definite background of war and conflict. The Trojan War, between the Greeks and King Priam's people, was the eternal account of Hellenistic power, immortalized by Homer's work. The Romans, though their past was different from the Greeks on an individual basis, acknowledged the fact that their history was influenced by the culture of Greece and that there must be a correlation between their two empires. This acceptance of history by Rome can be seen in the pages of *The Aeneid*, where there is reference to the wars between Greece and Ilium, (Troy) ( trans. Fitzgerald 403). Virgil dedicated a whole book in *The Aeneid* to the fall of Troy and all that happened within those walls: "Ilium was going down in fire" (Virgil 55).

### Literature

The arts of Greece are seen in every aspect of the Roman aesthetic. From the statues that were stolen from Greek lands and adapted to the culture of Rome, to plays and poems, to the actual concepts and forms in writing, Ancient Rome attempted to make it all their own. In *The Aeneid*, the most obvious way that this is seen is through literary form. Written in iambic pentameter, Virgil incorporated two major literary concepts that came from Greece: that of the epic simile and that of the Homeric motif.

A simile is a figure of speech, used often in literature, involving a comparison between two different objects. Unlike a metaphor, in a simile, "the

resemblance is explicitly indicated by the words 'like' or 'as'" ("Simile"). An "epic" simile, also called a "Homeric" simile, is an extension of the basic simile. Within an epic simile there are often several lines, found in poetry usually, used to "intensify the stature of the subject" ("Epic Simile"). Virgil used these epic similes throughout the whole tale of Aeneas. Beautifully written, these epic similes, began in the first book and continued through to the last.

In the beginning of the tale, when Virgil was describing the fall of Troy, Aeneas had said to his in Carthage:

From that time on, like predatory wolves  
In fog and darkness, when a savage hunger  
Drives them blindly on, and cubs in lairs  
Lie waiting with dry famished jaws- just so  
Through arrow flights and enemies we ran  
Toward our sure death. (Virgil 46)

Here Virgil incorporates a technique that allows those, even without an interest in military matters and warfare, to be greatly intrigued by the events surrounding the characters, thus demonstrating the reason behind using epic similes as a literary technique; namely, intensity.

In *The Aeneid*, Lavinia, princess of Latium, (modern-day Italy), kept close to her mother during the battles between their people and Aeneas' Trojans., Virgil wrote:

Lavinia, listening to her mother, streamed  
With tears on burning cheeks; a deepening  
blush  
Brought out with a fiery glow on her hot face.  
As when one puts a stain of crimson dye  
On ivory of India, or when  
White lilies blush, infused with crimson roses,  
So rich the contrast in her coloring seemed.

(Virgil 369).

Describing the feeling Lavinia had when she began to realize that she would soon become the wife of the opponent, Aeneas, Virgil created an epic simile that reached out to his audience, enabling them to feel her distress.

In the last book, "The Fortunes of War," during the battle between Turnus' men and Aeneas', there was a moment in which Turnus had an outburst of energy. Virgil writes:

Like blood-stained Mars himself he rode,  
when Mars  
Goes headlong by the frozen Hebrus river,  
Beating out claps of thunder on his shield  
And lashing on his furious team for war-  
That team that on the open ground outruns  
The south and west winds, while the farthest  
land

Of Thrace re-echoes to their drumming  
hooves;  
And riding with him go black visages  
Of Fright, Ambush, and Anger, Mars'  
companions.

That was the way of Turnus, (Virgil 379)

The imagery conjured up by Virgil's epic similes are nothing less than amazing. It is no wonder that Augustus decided to publish his work, even while Virgil, ever the artist, was not satisfied with it.

The Homeric motif is that of a "revival of heroic myth in successful poetry" (Otis 95). Virgil "recreated a Homeric hero in the Homeric age" through the embodiment of Aeneas and his arrival on the land that would soon become ancient Rome. The conventions and styles Virgil used, such as the epic similes, were first seen in the writers of Greece.

### Religion and Mythology

Greek gods and goddesses are well-known, even in today's modern society. They were also popular in ancient Rome, but they were given new names. "From a range of deities adopted from the Greeks, Romans altered the gods' identities but left their characters unchanged" (Constable 32). The Greek king of the gods, Zeus, was in Rome the god Jupiter. Hera was called Juno, Aphrodite called Venus. Every Greek god could be found in Rome: going through the same drama, the same complications and conflicts. Both cultures, Greek and Roman, incorporated the idea that the gods were susceptible to making mistakes, much like humans. Gods and goddesses were just as likely to fall into temptation as mortals. In fact, Roman gods were even "prone to sexual liaisons as their Greek counterparts" (Constable 32).

Beginning in the culture of the Greeks, and then moving onward through that of the ancient Romans, there was also a "tangled parallelism of human and divine action" (Otis 100). In the absence of rational explanations for what the people of these cultures witnessed around them, it seemed as if everything that happened, good or bad, was due to the intervention of the gods. "Military triumphs were a sign of the celestial rewards, regardless of the comparative strength of the armies involved. Defeats were an example of divine retribution and an indication that certain gods demanded to be appeased" (Constable 32).

During the intense battle sequences depicted in the last book of *The Aeneid*, Aeneas is badly injured. For a moment, it looks as if he would not survive. However, instead of leaving it to happen naturally, Aeneas' mother, the goddess Venus,

intervenes:

Now, shaken by the pain unmerited  
Her son bore, mother Venus picked a stalk  
Of dittany from Cretan Ida -  
Venus now brought this down, veiling her  
face  
In a dark cloud, and for a secret poultice  
Dipped the leaves to imbue a shining bowl  
Of Tiber water, sprinkling in ambrosia's  
Health-giving juices and the fragrant Heal-all.

(Virgil 382)

This intervention of Venus is but one of many instances of divine action entangled with the lives of mortals. Occurrences like this happen in just about every book of *The Aeneid*.

Besides the many gods and goddesses adapted by ancient Rome from the Greeks, there were many mythological monsters as well. In *The Aeneid*, Virgil incorporates many of the same monsters that can be found in Homer's *Odyssey*. It was during the sea-wanderings of Aeneas that he and his crew encountered these mythological beasts. Located in the Strait of Messina, Aeneas has to navigate carefully, in an attempt to avoid the creatures Scylla and Charybdis. It was written: "Now Scylla haunts the starboard side, Charybdis, / never appeased, the side to port," where "Scylla lies immured in a rocky cave / in clefts of inky darkness, darting out / her faces, pulling ships on to the reef" (Virgil 80 and 81). Scylla and Charybdis have a history in Greek mythology. Most commonly they are both seen in *The Odyssey*, where they are "beset in the natural waters traversed by the hero Odysseus" ("Scylla and Charbydis"). It was believed that Scylla had many heads and shark-like teeth, while Charybdis could best be described as a "personification of a whirlpool" ("Scylla and Charybdis").

The infamous Cyclops also had his debut in *The Aeneid*. After surviving the strait of Scylla and Charybdis, Aeneas and his men landed on the island of the Cyclops:

Out of the forest,  
Out of the mountains, poured the Cyclops  
tribe  
To crows the bay and shoreline: we could see  
them  
Standing there, each with his awful eye  
In impotent rage (Virgil 89)

Cyclops was made popular, again, in the tales of the Greek hero Odysseus. In Greek legend the Cyclops was a one-eyed giant who practiced cannibalism and lived the pastoral life of a shepherd ("Cyclops"). In fact, even the word Cyclops comes from the Greek word "round-eye" ("Cyclops").

There were all types of religious and mythological examples found sprinkled throughout Virgil's epic, all leading to the transformation of Roman culture from that of the Ancient Greeks. Even the fables, actions, and faults have a direct correlation to those that had been believed in Hellas.

### Philosophy

Throughout the twelve books of The Aeneid there are at least three major philosophical movements that can be seen. Each stemming from Greek culture, the theories of Stoicism, Epicureanism, and the Pythagorean Metempsychosis Doctrine, are used by Virgil in numerous settings and verses.

Stoicism, a philosophy still common today, has been around for many centuries. "The spread of Stoicism" in Rome was most prominent during the years of 214 through 129 B.C. (Constable 58). Stoicism was a philosophical movement during the Hellenistic Period, 323-30 B.C., during which it was believed to be a way of life, not merely a thought or idea (Baltzly). It was in the year 155 B.C. that the city of Athens sent "a delegation of three Stoic philosophers on an embassy to Rome," and, though at first the Romans were hesitant, it was gradually accepted by many of them (Baltzly). The Stoics believed that a "person who had attained moral and intellectual perfection would not undergo" the emotions that arose from bad judgment, such as fear or envy (Baltzly).

When it comes to the Stoic attitude in The Aeneid, we can see it in a couple of places. For Aeneas, "his fate is to sacrifice every present enjoyment or satisfaction to an end he cannot hope to witness himself" (Otis 96). This emphasizes the Stoic belief that a "wise man should be free from passion, unmoved by joy or grief, and submissive to natural law" (Baltzly). Besides Aeneas' Stoic calm, there is that of Turnus. In the tenth book of The Aeneid, during the battles between the tribes of Italy and the Trojans, Hercules addresses dying Turnus:

"Every man's last day is fixed.  
Lifetimes are brief, and not to be regained,  
for all mankind. But by their deeds to make  
their fame last: that is labor for the brave.  
Below the walls of Troy so many sons  
of gods went down, among them, yes, my  
child,  
Sarpedon. Turnus, too, is called by fate.  
He stands at the given limit of his years."

(Virgil 310)

This confirms the belief held by Stoics that mankind is merely part of the cycle. Essentially they believed that death happens, life happens, and that is the way it is. Hercules tells Turnus to be satisfied with

his lot and that it is the same for all mankind. This exemplifies all that is at the root of Stoicism.

Epicurean philosophy in Roman territory. That of Cumae, the very place that Virgil resided, was considered to be an Epicurean society. Epicurus was an Ancient Greek who lived from 341 to 270 B.C. in Athens (Konstan). Epicurus "placed an extremely high value on friendship," believing that a "wise man would feel the torture of a friend no less than his own, and would die for a friend rather than betray him, for otherwise his own life would be confounded" (Konstan). Evidence of Epicurean beliefs is seen in The Aeneid when Aeneas ventures down into the underworld with the Sibyl. There he sees Palinurus, one of his loyal crewmembers, as well as his father Anchises. The reader can feel Aeneas' anguish as he sees the shades of those who meant so much to him, and feel his anguish in being utterly helpless in saving them or bringing them back to the world as he knew it.

A less common philosophical movement that came from Ancient Greece is visible in Aeneas' story, thus reflecting the acceptance and curiosity of Rome's people. Known as the Pythagorean Metempsychosis Doctrine, it is based on the concepts of Pythagoras, a Greek who lived from 570 to 490 B.C. (Huffman). In fact, though Pythagoras was Greek, he moved to the city of Croton in southern Italy where he did most of his philosophizing (Huffman).

The Pythagorean Metempsychosis Doctrine is the compilation of several ideas. Metempsychosis surrounds the idea of reincarnation, and deals with the concepts of the after-life, much of that relating to the "transmigration of the soul" (Huffman). Pythagoras was considered, and is still considered today, to be an expert on the "fate of the soul after death"; he believed that the soul is immortal and that one would never technically die, but instead go to a place where there are only "good things" (Huffman). This is seen in Virgil's epic in "The World Below," the sixth book of The Aeneid, in which Aeneas travels down to the underworld to see his father, Anchises. The descriptions in this book that are applicable to Pythagoras' doctrine are found when Aeneas arrives below the place of the living. There, "they [Aeneas and the Sibyl] came to places of delight, to green park land, / where souls take ease amid the Blessed Groves. / Souls here possess their own familiar sun and stars" (Virgil 182). In Virgil's description of the shades of those who had passed on, he wrote that "these other souls, / when they have turned Time's wheel a thousand years...they may see again the heavens and wish re-entry into bodies" (Virgil 186).

It is interesting for one to see so many

different philosophical ideas in this one tale. This is important, because it shows the experimentation and adaptation of the people of ancient Rome. As new ideas became popular, the people had to decide what fit best for them. Some chose pieces of each philosophy, while some tended to lean more to one idea or the other. Virgil's toying with different concepts is an excellent validation of this thesis.

### Conclusion

It is certainly amazing how cultures can withstand the tests of time: conquest, disaster, the rising and falling of empires and people. One of the most famous empires is ancient Rome. Today's society owes so much to their society, placing them on a pedestal above all others. It is important, however, to understand that it was not merely Roman invention that created that for which we pay tribute to them. In actuality, Roman culture is really that of Ancient Greece, and the manifestation of this is evident throughout the epic tale of *The Aeneid*, by the Roman, Virgil. In every aspect, through the conquest of Hellas, ancient Rome absorbed, and adapted to, all that was ancient Greece, integrating that into their own lives and societies.

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