

AENEID

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Aeneid by Vergil

Story

This long epic poem, 29-19 B.C.E., is a brilliant tribute to the Emperor Augustus, who at just this time was founding, in Rome, a new empire—the Roman Empire—which was to emulate the great empire founded, in the *Aeneid*, by the legendary hero Aeneas, one of the many great refugees of the Trojan War.

At the outset of the epic, Aeneas and his men are sailing toward Italy, which is to be their new home, but are thrown off course by a violent storm which deposits them in the royal domain of Queen Dido of Carthage. Aeneas tells her the long story of his group's wandering, and before it the destruction of Troy and the fall of the Trojan Horse, which did so much to bring about the Trojans' downfall. Aeneas goes on to tell Dido of his own escape from the burning city, carrying his father Anchises on his shoulders, and taking with them both Anchises, Aeneas' father, and the hearth gods which would be foundational for any new home the Trojans were to found. Aeneas further recounts the previous efforts the group had made, to make landfall, and settle, though in each case they were driven onward by foul storms and the hatred of the goddess Juno.

Dido, who has been looking for a royal consort, and who has liked Aeneas from the start, falls heavily in love with him, and urges him to stay with her in Carthage. His destiny, however, is to found a new city—it will be in Italy—and he informs Dido that he must be going. Devastated, Dido has a huge funeral pyre constructed outside of Carthage, and there, having stabbed herself with Aeneas' sword, she has herself immolated.

The Trojans make their way across the Mediterranean, but are blown ashore in Sicily, and while there proceed to hold delayed funeral games for Aeneas' father, Anchises. Some of the travelers are at this point exhausted, and remain behind, but Aeneas and many of his men proceed. Finally they reach Italy, and Aeneas is taken down into the underworld by the Cumaean Sybil, on a spiritual adventure destined to bring him together with his father, and to show Aeneas scenes of the greatness of the Empire he is about to establish, as his band of men continues up the shore of Latium.

The arrival of the Trojans in their destined homeland begins peacefully, but is soon sidetracked by marital issues. King Latinus hopes that Aeneas is the foreigner destined to be the husband of his daughter, but Latinus' wife, and the suitor Turnus, turn against Aeneas, and before long a full fledged war has broken out on the Italian peninsula. The two sides agree to a truce, then settle on the idea of a hand to hand combat between Aeneas and Turnus, as a way to close down the bloodshed. When the two leaders square off, the warriors on both sides grow restless, and begin to fight again. Aeneas is wounded in the thigh, but eventually the Trojans begin to turn the tide. Aeneas finally engages mano a mano with Turnus, and, despite a momentary hesitation for compassion, kills him.

Characters

Aeneas is an upright and honorable hero, faithful to his mission—which is to found a new Troy—and ultimately able to overcome all obstacles, whether in the form of a furious fighter, like Turnus, or of a *femme fatale*, like Dido.

Dido is a passionate and lonely regent, who is faced with the difficult challenge of establishing a kingdom by herself. She is ultimately destroyed by sexual desire and self-hatred.

Turnus is the hard fighting and rather faceless hero of the resistance to Aeneas, in Latium. He is not only a warrior antagonist to Aeneas, but a rival for the same girl, Lavinia.

Themes

Destiny. In itself destiny is the ruling theme of this long epic. Deeply embedded in Greek mythology lies the conflict between the Greeks and the Trojans, each favored and directed by one faction of the gods—the Trojans forever bitterly hated by Juno, who was spurned by Paris in the famous beauty pageant that gave the golden apple of beauty to Helen.

Duty. Aeneas was not only a willing vehicle of destiny, but consummately dutiful in his carrying out of destiny. No Dido or Turnus could eventually redirect him from his appointed course.

Interplay with Homer. The thematic development of the *Aeneid* links into that of both of Homer's two epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Warfare, sea voyaging, and return to a kind of homeland—all these are thematic elements which interlink the *Aeneid* with Homer.