

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

VIRGIL

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(70 B.C.E.-19 B.C.E.)

Works

Eclogues (39 B.C.E.)

Georgics (37 B.C.E.-29 B.C.E.)

Aeneid (29 B.C.E.-19 B.C.E.)

Biography

Virgil was born in Cisalpine Gaul around 70 B.C.E., from a modest background, but one which supported a good education for the young man, in centers like Cremona, Rome, and Naples. At first he studied rhetoric and medicine, then went on to philosophy. By stages he found himself engaged in Roman literary circles, possibly Catullus' circle of young writers. (Virgil was, however, extremely shy and aloof, and dubbed 'parthenias,' or maiden, by his fellow writers. His health was poor, throughout his life, and he was at no time a jovial social figure. Indications are that he was gay.)

His first important work was the hexameter *Eclogues*, which he began in 42 B.C.E. and finished a few years later. The eclogues were ten pastoral poems based on the work of the Hellenistic Greek poet, Theocritus. In their background may lie some personal material, Virgil's saddened response to the sale of his family farm, but by and large this series of poems appears to reflect an effort to refresh the bucolic traditions with new styles and vocabularies. The notion of Arcadia plays an important role in the bucolic conception of these poems—and remained a Virgilian legacy to western literature, to our day. (Eclogue 4 contains a reference to a golden age, and to the birth of child—whom occasional visionaries have surmised represented an intuition of the birth of Jesus Christ.)

Sometime after the publication of the *Eclogues* Virgil joined the circle of Octavian's finance minister, the wealthy Maecenas—legendary for his support of the arts. Through his exposure to this sophisticated and wealthy milieu, Virgil came into many prominent and influential acquaintances. At the insistence of Maecenas, Virgil spent several years-- perhaps 37 B.C.E.-29 B.C.E.—on the long hexameter poem, the *Georgics*—the 'poem about farming and working the earth'-- which he was to dedicate to Maecenas himself. Virgil follows, in this work, the model of the Greek poet Hesiod, who, in his *Works and Days*, discusses agricultural products and crops. (The *Georgics* deal with trees and crops, horses and livestock, and beekeeping. There are rich digressions such as a history of the discovery of the art of beekeeping, or an extensive poem on the visit of Orpheus to the underworld. Virgil and Maecenas, it is said, took turns reading the *Georgics* to Octavian, after he returned from defeating Antony and Cleopatra at the battle of Actium (31 B.C.E.).

During the last ten years of his life, we gather, Virgil worked on his masterwork, the *Aeneid*. This poem, commissioned by Augustus Caesar, consisted of twelve hexameter Books; they dealt with the wanderings of the Trojan hero Aeneas, after the battle of Troy, and the eventual settling of this hero and his men in Latium, where they would establish the origins of the Roman people. The first half of the text deals with the wanderings of the Romans after their departure from Troy, while the second half concerned the foundation of the Roman state in Italy.

In 19 B.C.E. Virgil decided to travel to Greece, a trip in the course of which he died.

Achievements

Artistic

Virgil's greatest achievements had to do with his work on the *Aeneid*, his masterpiece which he composed from 29 B.C.E.-19 B.C.E. As he went to work on this epic achievement, he had already proven his mastery of the dactylic hexameter and of the art of interpreting ancient texts. He had polished his form, leaning as he did on the predecessor work of Homer himself, but also of the earlier Roman epic poet, Ennius (239-169 B.C.E.) and the Hellenistic poet Apollonius of Rhodes (early 3rdcent. B.C.E.-late 3rdcent. B.C.E.). The model established by Virgil, in artistic genius, was to inspire and redirect any number of great writers in the later millennia of the western literary tradition.

Philosophical / historical

In addition to the artistic skills he brought to creating the *Aeneid*, and his earlier works, Virgil brought to his epic a vast concept, which was to prove fruitful as a thought model throughout the course of the Roman Empire, and which has gone on, through European cultural development, to lay down a pattern of thought about the centrality of Roman (not to mention Greek) culture. The notion of the foundational place of Rome, in the western cultural tradition, was configured in the imaginative thinking of Virgil. Let us explain.

By modeling the *Aeneid* on Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Virgil was able to adapt the greatest Greek literary achievement to the imaginative self-awareness of the Roman people, whose Empire and culture were destined to be formative for the western Middle Ages and modernity. Virgil's modeling required him to grasp the wanderings of Odysseus (the *Odyssey* of Homer) and the Battle of Troy (Homer's *Iliad*) in a single grasp, the tale of the wanderings of Aeneas and the subsequent founding of Roman culture. Because he brought the energy and profundity of Homer's two epics into a single profoundly Italic epic, Virgil was able to leave to the Romans, and their successors, a profound account of their historical grounding.

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. While he lacks the humanity and ingenuity of Homer's Odysseus, he bears on his shoulders the responsibility of world history, not just of individual resolution.

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, but she has proven herself deeply sympathetic, perhaps the most hauntingly human of Virgil's characters.

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. In one of the most profound scenes in Roman literature, Turnus is saved from death by a trick played on him by Juno. Seeing that Aeneas is near to killing his victim, Juno sends to Turnus a ghostly form of Aeneas, who lures Turnus onto one of the Latin ships, where he is saved. Becoming aware of what has befallen him, Turnus is deeply humiliated and, after a fashion virtually unknown in Roman literature, meditates on killing himself.