



THE *AENEID*: AN INTRODUCTION

“This suffering will yield us yet a pleasant tale to tell.”

—Virgil, the *Aeneid*—

The *Aeneid* has it all—war, romance, adventure, horror. As the unofficial Roman sequel to the Greek *Iliad*, the *Aeneid* continues the storyline of the Trojan War through the Trojan warrior Aeneas and his search for a new home. From their earliest days the Romans mused about being descended from the mythical Trojans. A series of legends connected to Aeneas and his descendants framed out the basic outline of this relationship, but the *Aeneid* served to connect the dots. Although it was heavily based on its Greek predecessors, the *Aeneid* was Roman from start to finish.

Rome began as an average city-state in the midst of Italy but through military conquest and political maneuvering came to govern the known world. Assimilation into the empire typically meant subjugation but

also improved a region’s standard of living. The Romans were excellent engineers. They made aqueducts, which brought running water to cities. They built sturdy roads (many of which still survive today). Even small towns had public baths and amphitheaters. And the greatest benefit of Roman rule was security and a certain level of peace, the *Pax Romana* (“Roman peace”).

Even though the Romans were experts at broadening their borders, they weren’t what we would call “creative types.” They stuck to their strengths—subduing, organizing, maintaining. But politics and war left little time for philosophy and poetry. So during its formative years, Rome borrowed much of its culture from Greece. Almost every part of Roman life was a direct link back to Greece. The Romans even borrowed the Greek gods (with the names changed to obscure the plagiarism and identify them with established Roman gods). Zeus became Jupiter, Poseidon became Neptune, Ares became Mars, and so on. And why think up your own stories about these gods when the Greeks already had some of the best myths ever told? In essence Greek mythology became Roman mythology. When most historians refer to the common elements between Greek and Roman societies, they often use the adjective *Greco-Roman* because so many things were lifted, nearly unchanged from Greece, and placed in Rome.

It may seem unoriginal of the Romans to borrow a culture, but the modern world owes them a great debt for doing so. Without the Romans, the Greeks would have never had the far-reaching cultural impact that they did. Although the Romans had little to contribute to the Greek ideas, the Roman Empire was the conduit that spread those ideas throughout the world. If

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Rome had never pushed its borders into Gaul and Britannia (France and England), the western world, as we know, it might not exist today. Once Rome officially became the unchallenged ruler of pretty much everything, some Romans were embarrassed to admit that their culture was a Greek knock-off. Romans were fiercely patriotic. Because Rome had proved to be the master of the world, Roman culture needed to be distinguished from Greek. *Roman* ideals had to be exemplified.

Often a culture gets its identity from a central text, a work that one can give to a complete stranger and say, “Read this. It tells you what it’s like to be one of us.” The Greeks had the *Iliad*, a rousing story, one they could look to for inspiration, a chronicle of the good old days of Greece. The Romans had nothing of the same magnitude. They had plenty of political pieces, silly poems, and plays. What they needed was an epic—a Roman *Iliad* filled with an honorable legacy for the citizens to draw upon.

The poet Virgil was the man who rose to the challenge of creating a Roman epic. During his lifetime, Virgil had seen the Roman Republic transform into the Roman Empire. Julius Caesar, the most popular military leader the Roman Republic had ever seen, declared himself dictator for life, only to be murdered by a group of conspiring senators. A bloody civil war followed. At its conclusion, Octavian, Caesar’s adopted son, arose out of the carnage to become the first Emperor of Rome and renamed himself Caesar Augustus. The times were changing, and the future looked bright. With its new emperor, Rome needed a new identity. It was time for Virgil to write.

Unlike Homer, Virgil had a strong political purpose. Many Romans were leery of their new Emperor and feared they would be forced to give up many of the rights they had held under the old republic. Virgil chose to put his support behind the new leader. Rome had been at war for far too long. Caesar Augustus promised peace and a return to the original Roman family values. Virgil, therefore, had multiple purposes with his *Aeneid*: link a heroic past to the present, extol the glories of Rome, create a new national identity, and draw a correlation between the noble hero Aeneas and Caesar Augustus. It was a bold undertaking—taking him nearly 10 years to complete. He died with all but a few lines complete. Fortunately, his final order to burn the book was not carried out. Some say that Augustus himself intervened to save the epic.

Since its publication, the *Aeneid* has delighted generations of readers and inspired others to continue the tradition of epic storytelling. Reading the *Aeneid* today, we are less intrigued by the Roman history and pro-Augustus propaganda than with the human story underlying it all. The utopian society and eternal era of peace that Augustus promised and Virgil hoped for has turned out to be a fairy tale. War continues in our own time and still displaces people from their homelands. Therefore, the *Aeneid* asks a timeless question: How do people continue on when their homeland has been destroyed? Aeneas and his voyage remain relevant, and his final declaration, “Here is our home! Here is our country!” retains the power to stir us all.