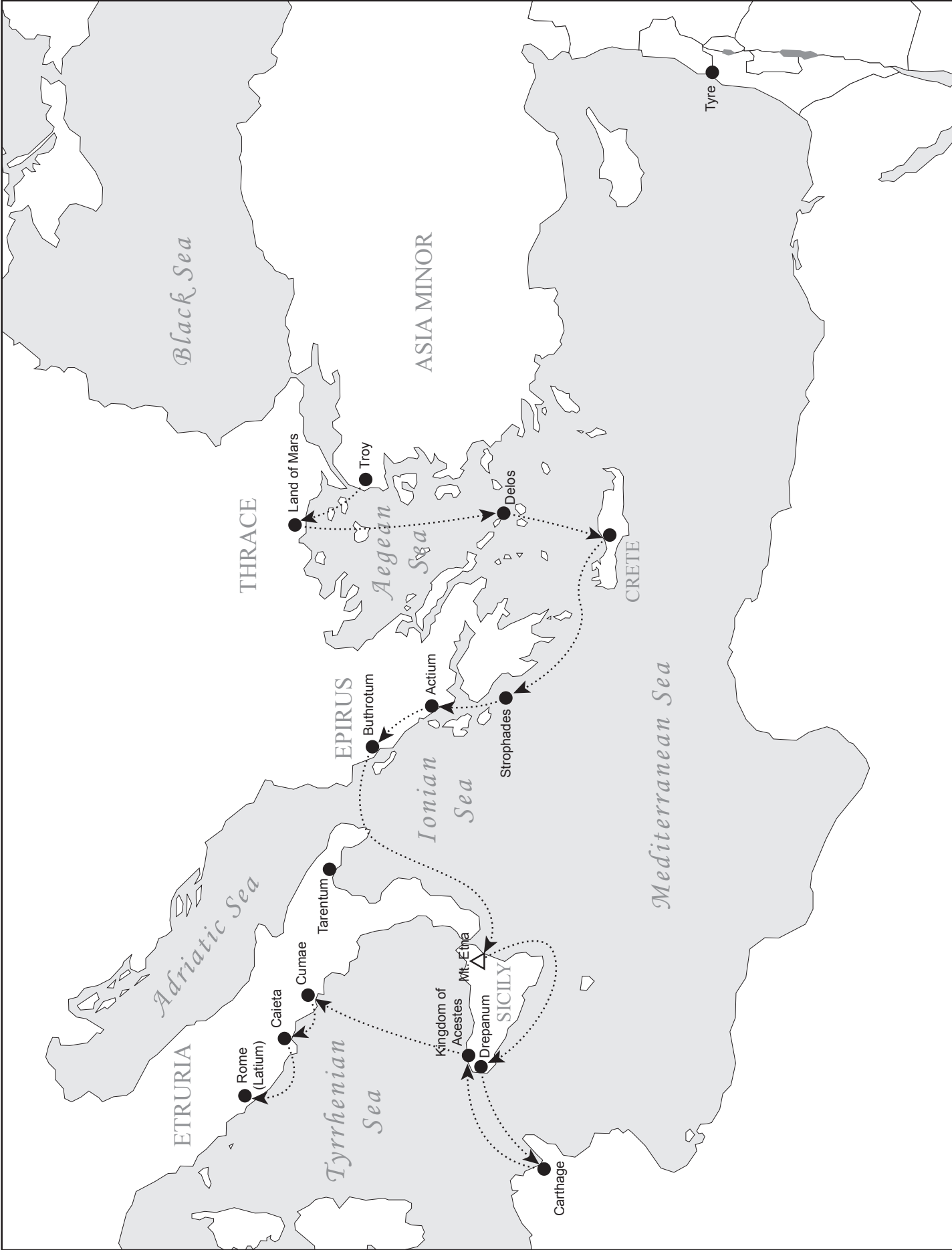


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INTRODUCTION TO VIRGIL: LIFE AND CONTEXT

Publius Virgilius Maro, 70-19 B.C.: Virgil was born in Mantua in north central Italy, the region known to Romans as Cis-Alpine Gaul, and the setting of Shakespeare's famous play *Romeo and Juliet*. As a boy, Virgil was very slow of speech, "almost like someone who had not gone to school." He also experienced tragedy as a young man, losing his entire family—both his parents and his two brothers. That was not the end of Virgil's hardships, however, as he was a man of poor health, suffering "from pain in his stomach, throat, and head; indeed, he often spat up blood."

What Virgil lost in personal health, he gained in reputation. He was seen as an upright man, often referred to as *Parthenias* ("The Virgin," which held more the connotation of general purity). Virgil also never sought out attention as he gained fame for his poetry, often hiding from those who pointed him out in public. Apparently, though, Virgil was a hard man to miss in a crowd, being quite tall and of large stature.

As a man, Virgil came into great wealth through his friendship with Augustus Caesar. It is said that Virgil gained the attention of the emperor after curing the diseases of his many horses, since Virgil was apparently skilled in medicine and mathematics in addition to poetry. These deeds earned Virgil a comfortable life supplied with bread and housing by the emperor himself, which, over time, made Virgil a rich man. These riches, though, did not result in extravagant living. Rather, Virgil was a man of moderation, "sparing of food and wine," and preferring a quiet and simple life over the life of the city.

This love for the quiet life is reflected in Virgil's early poetry. His earliest work, the *Eclogues* (37 B.C.), is a poem of an exchange between two shepherds talking and singing about the rural life and love. This style of poetry was a commonly used convention known as "pastoral" (referring to shepherds) poetry. Virgil's second work, which shot him into greater fame, is the *Georgics* (29 B.C.), the title coming from a Greek word meaning "to farm." As the title suggests, the poem, composed of four books, is about the farming life and the virtues gained from a life of hard work. Indeed, hard work has a redemptive quality in this poem; a man is purified by his hard work. This theme is not unlike what we find in the *Aeneid*, that through suffering Aeneas and his people are purified as the worthy ancestors of the Roman people.

Virgil's writing process was laborious. He took three years to complete the *Eclogues*, and seven years to complete the *Georgics*, averaging about a line of poetry a day. Taking even more time was his epic, the *Aeneid*, which Virgil wrote and drafted for 11 years before his untimely death. Ironically enough, Dante also took 11 years to complete his great poem, *The Divine Comedy*. Every day he would dictate a large number of verses in the morning and spend the rest of the day revising, turning his many lines into very few, often a line or even half a line. Virgil was obviously a very meticulous writer.

Virgil's life was unfortunately cut short at the age of 52. In his last year, Virgil wanted to retire to Greece in order to finish his revisions of the *Aeneid* and then dedicate the rest of his life to the study of philosophy. Virgil decided to return to Rome as Augustus was himself returning to Rome from the East. Before he could do this, however, Virgil became ill in the city of Megara, near Athens. He eventually passed away in the port city of Brindisi, in Italy, on September 21, 19 B.C. At the end of his tombstone's inscription, which sits in Naples, reads the simple words, "I sang of pastures, fields, and princes."

Because of Virgil's untimely death, the *Aeneid* left to us is an unfinished work; at least "unfinished" in the sense that Virgil had not completed his revisions. Knowing that he would die before he was able to finish the *Aeneid*, Virgil requested that his work be burned, even trying to burn it himself after his friend Varius refused to honor his request. Unsuccessful in getting the work burned, Virgil entrusted his scrolls to his friends Varius and Tucca "on the condition that they publish nothing which he himself had not revised." At the behest of Augustus Caesar, who had supported the work from its inception, Varius and Tucca did not fully honor Virgil's request. They published the entire unfinished work, though not without some revision. Mostly, though, the friends left Virgil's work untouched, often leaving lines unfinished.

Goal of Work: Virgil desired that his *Aeneid* would be for Rome what the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were for the Greeks. The intention was to encapsulate the Roman character and spirit in the story of Aeneas, the quintessential Roman and the father of the Roman people. Though all the particulars of the story may not be true, the point was that such a story was one worthy of the Roman people.

Virgil conveys this intention in the structure of his work. It is often recognized that the *Aeneid* is split into two parts: Books 1-6 are like another *Odyssey*, and Books 7-12 are like another *Iliad*. Books 1-6, much like the *Odyssey*, speak of Aeneas' wanderings and travels. Books 7-12, now like the *Iliad*, has war as the central setting. The aware reader may also see this intent in the first works of the poem in Book 1. Virgil writes, "I sing of arms and of the man." Virgil sings of "arms" and war; the *Iliad* is the story of war. Virgil also sang of a man; the *Odyssey* is about the trials of a man returning from war.

Genre: The *Aeneid* sits primarily in the genre of *epic poetry*, which is a work of narrative poetry conveyed in elevated language. The epic typically centers on a single hero who performs near superhuman feats or performs a task of great difficulty. Another characteristic of the epic is its larger-than-life quality. In addition to the language of the poem being elevated and dramatic, so are the characters, events, and places. Everything in the poem is "bigger." More specifically, one may find three additional characteristics, the first of these being the technique of *in medias res*, which is the technique of beginning the story in the middle of the action. Many stories set the scene at the beginning to explain the events which come later; it is customary in epic, however, to drop the reader immediately in the action to explain the events at a later time. A second epic convention is the *invocation of the muse*. As we will see in the *Aeneid*, the Muses were summoned for inspiration and memory in order to help the poet tell the story with optimal beauty and accuracy. This convention is not unique to epic, but was also customary in Greek drama. Third, a common epic convention is the use of *extended simile*, often employed in descriptions of nature and specific characters.

Prominent Characters:

1. Aeneas – The hero of the epic, and destined founder of the Roman race
2. Anchises – The father of Aeneas
3. Ascanius/Iulus – Aeneas' son and thus the living promise of Rome's future
4. Dido – Queen of Carthage and victim of Fate
5. Turnus – Italian warrior and prince; foil to Aeneas

Themes: Many themes may be identified throughout the work. The three most salient themes, however, arise in the first lines of the poem and continue to have a daunting presence throughout the *Aeneid*. In the opening lines of the poem, the invocation, Virgil first speaks of the "man, fated to be an exile." The first theme of note, thus, is fate. Aeneas did not choose his destiny, nor did he choose what would happen on his way to fulfill his destiny; it was chosen for him. Fate governs every event in this book. Even the gods are subject to the will of the Fates. With this theme, therefore, Virgil asks some very important questions: How much of life do we control? Are we the authors of our own destiny? *Who* is in control?

Secondly, Virgil says, "Great too were his sufferings in war before he could found his city and carry his gods into Latium." This work is filled with suffering and hardship. Forced to wander the seas in search for a home after his own has been destroyed, Aeneas slowly moves towards Italy, where he is then reintroduced to a life of war by the hand of Turnus. Aeneas sees little rest in this story and is thrown about by the precarious wills of many various gods. This suffering, though, is not meaningless, but has a purpose. Aeneas is being refined; he is being purified. Only through great trials may Aeneas rise as a man worthy to found the city of Rome—a city which itself will experience much suffering, but will "overcome it by enduring it."

A third theme is made known by Virgil in these words: "This was the beginning of the Latin race, the Alban fathers and the high walls of Rome." This story of Aeneas is not about Aeneas only. Rather, this poem of Virgil's is a story of Rome herself—her beginning, her miraculous birth from the womb of Troy. This birth, though, did not come without its birth pangs, for an empire superior in war must be born in strife. The story of Rome's beginning is the story of Rome's life. Therefore, contained in this story is the story of the Roman people. That, at least, was the intention.

BOOK I

Places & Characters: Identify the following. Mark starred (*) items on the map given in the back of this study guide.

1. Troy* Native city of Aeneas (Aye nee yuhs); setting of *Iliad*; located on NW coast of Asia Minor
2. Lavinium (Lah vi nee yuhm) A port city in Italy, founded by Aeneas, 19 miles south of Rome
3. Juno (Joo no) The Latin name for the Greek goddess Hera; the wife of Jupiter
4. Muse (Myooz) A goddess often invoked for inspiration and memory
5. Tyre* (like "tire") Located in ancient Phoenicia, modern Lebanon; NW of Galilee, NNW of Jerusalem
6. Carthage* (Khar thij) Located in Modern Tunisia (N. Africa); almost directly south of Rome
7. Samos (Sa moss) Island in the Aegean close to the coast of Asia Minor; east of Athens
8. Sicily* (Si si lee) Large island directly below the peninsula of Italy
9. Aeolus (Ay yoh luhs) King of Aeolia (the place where the winds are kept in caverns); keeper of the winds
10. Penates (Pe nah tayz) The Latin gods of the household, along with the Lares (Lah rayz)
11. Neptune (Nep toon) Latin god of the seas; Latin name for the Greek god Poseidon; Juno's brother
12. Libya (Li bee yah) Area in N. Africa bordering modern Tunisia to the east; SE of Carthage
13. Jupiter (Joo puh tur) King of the gods and husband of Juno; Latin name for the Greek god Zeus
14. Venus (Vee nuhs) Daughter of Jupiter; mother of Aeneas; Latin name for the Greek goddess Aphrodite
15. Mercury (Mur cyoo ree) Messenger of the gods; Latin name for the Greek god Hermes
16. Achates (Ah kay teez) The companion of Aeneas; rarely mentioned without the qualifier "faithful"
17. Cupid (Kyoo pid) A son of Venus and the god of love; Latin name for the Greek god Eros
18. Ascanius (Ah skay nee yuhs) Son of Aeneas; also called Iulus
19. Dido (Dy doh) Founder and queen of Carthage; sister of Pygmalion; falls deeply in love with Aeneas

Comprehension Questions: Write your answers neatly on the lines provided. Please write in complete sentences, giving the fullest answers possible.

1. Why does Juno's anger burn against the Trojans? _____

2. What does Juno request from Aeolus? What does Juno offer in return for the favor? _____

3. For what does Aeneas pray when he and his men are caught in Aeolus' storm? _____

4. What is Neptune's reaction to the storm incited by Aeolus? _____

5. What does Aeneas say to comfort and encourage his men after they reach the shore? _____

6. Summarize Venus' complaint to Jupiter. _____

7. What does Jupiter send Mercury to do? _____

8. Whom does Aeneas meet as he "walked through the middle of the wood"? How is she disguised?

9. Summarize the story of Dido conveyed to Aeneas by the goddess. _____

10. What is Aeneas' reaction when he finds the Spartan woman to be his mother? _____

11. What image does Virgil use to describe Carthage as Aeneas sees it? _____

12. What does Aeneas see that both allays his fears and causes him much grief? _____

13. What is Ilioneus' request of queen Dido? How does Dido respond to this request? _____

14. Upon meeting Aeneas, what does Dido do for the Trojans? _____

15. What plot does Venus devise as Dido and the Trojans banquet together? Why does she do this?

16. Now caught in a stupor of love, what does Dido request of Aeneas? _____

17. How long have the Trojans been at sea since the fall of Troy? _____

Quotations: Read over the quotes below carefully. Make sure you can identify the context of each quote.

**I sing of arms and of the man, fated to be an exile, who long since left the land of Troy and came to Italy to the shores of Lavinium; and a great pounding he took by land and sea at the hands of the heavenly gods because of the fierce and unforgetting anger of Juno. Great too were his sufferings in war before he could found his city and carry his gods into Latium. This was the beginning of the Latin race, the Alban fathers and the high walls of Rome. Tell me, Muse, the causes of her anger. How did he violate the will of the Queen of the Gods? What was his offence? Why did she drive a man famous for his piety to such endless hardships and such suffering? Can there be so much anger in the hearts of the heavenly gods? - Virgil's poetic summary of the work and invocation of the Muse (p. 3, Lns. 1-11)*

"My friends, this is not the first trouble we have known. We have suffered worse before, and this too will pass. God will see to it. ... So summon up your courage once again. This is no time for gloom or fear. The day will come, perhaps, when it will give you pleasure to remember even this. Whatever chance may bring, however many hardships we suffer, we are making for Latium, where the Fates show us our place of rest. There it is the will of God that the kingdom of Troy shall rise again. Your task is to endure and save yourselves for better days." These were his words, but he was sick with all his cares. He showed them the face of hope and kept his misery deep in his heart. - Aeneas encouraging his men, and Virgil commenting on his courage (pp. 8-9, Lns. 200-208)

Discussion Questions: Discuss in class and/or respond in essay form on a separate sheet of paper.

1. What can the reader surmise about the *Aeneid's* main themes from the first paragraph?
2. According to Jupiter, as he reveals the content of the scroll of the Fates, how is Rome founded? What will the Romans be like? How is Aeneas the "father" of Rome?
3. Describe Aeneas as a leader from the opening book of this epic. What predominant characteristic describes him? Where do we see this characteristic? What does the personality of Aeneas tell us about the main themes and purpose of the work?