



## [Tibullus, \*Elegies\* II.5.19-26](#)

Tibullus's description of the site of the future city of Rome.

**Name of the author:** Tibullus

**Date:** 19 BCE

**Date:** 1st BCE

**Language:** Latin

**Category:** Roman

**Literary genre:** Poetry

**Title of work:** *Elegies*

**Reference:**

II.5.19-26

### **Commentary:**

Books 1 and 2 of Tibullus's *Elegies* open with a dedication to Tibullus's literary patron, M. Valerius Messala Corvinus, a senator who crossed over from Antony to Octavian after Philippi, and who was then designated consul (with Octavian) in 31 BCE, before leading a fleet at the battle of Actium. Tibullus was a member of Messala's literary circle (as the young Ovid), but he also followed him into some military operations. Even if Tibullus never mentions explicitly Augustus, nor Actium in his poems, some of his elegies seem connected with political themes. Tibullus wanted both to praise some aspects of the Augustan ideology, but also to please his literary patron. The poem *Elegy* II.5 meets these two criteria.

In *Elegy* II.5, Tibullus addresses an hymn to Apollo to celebrate the induction of Messala's son, M. Valerius Messala Messalinus, among the *quindecimviri sacris faciundis* (the college of the "fifteen men for the performance of sacred rites") who were in charge of the Sibylline books. This election occurred in 19 BCE – the year of Tibullus's death. Among Tibullus's work, this elegy has probably the longer development on some main themes of Augustan ideology before the Secular Games of 17 BCE: as for instance the emphasis on the importance of the Sibylline oracles and of the members of the *quindecimviri sacris faciundis* (v. 1-18), and also the excursus on the foundation and early history of Rome (v. 19-64; Maltby, *Tibullus*, p. 53).

Our text comes after an introductory part in which Tibullus asks Apollo to welcome Messalinus in the sacred priesthood (v.1-10), and to help the young priest by giving him the inspiration to interpret the Sibylline books in the right way (v. 11-18). Then, Tibullus recalls the importance of the Sibyl's oracles. Before quoting the prophecy that the Sibyl would have addressed to Aeneas – which forecasts his successful settlement in Italy and Rome's greatness (v. 39-64) – Tibullus makes an interesting depiction of the site of the future Rome (v. 19-38).

Our passage, between the verses 19 and 26, appears at the beginning of Tibullus's depiction and is of particular interest because of the sentence: "Not yet had Romulus drawn up the Eternal City's walls, where Remus as co-ruler was fated not to live; but cows were grazing then a grassy Palatine and hovels raised low roofs on the hill of Jove" (*Romulus aeternae nondum formaverat urbis moenia, consorti non habitanda Remo, sed tunc pascebant herbosa Palatia vaccae et stabant humiles in Iovis arce casae*, v. 23-26). Karla Pollman recalls that Tibullus's narration is built according to a "progress model" as the poet first mentions the humble and agrarian origins of Rome, before insisting, especially in the next Sibyl's prophecy, on Rome's endless domination over the world (v. 57-60). The contrast between the pastoral origins of the city and the greatness of modern imperial Rome is a literary technique, also used in the book 8 of the *Aeneid* and in Propertius, *Elegy* IV.1A, which enables to highlight the exceptional development of Rome (Pollman, "The Emblematic," p. 13). However, as Robert Maltby underlines, Tibullus's depiction seems "much more idealised" than Evander's description of the early site of Rome in *Aeneid* VIII.314-329. Tibullus wanted to idealize the pastoral dimension of the site, that is why he rather used Virgil's *Eclogues* as a source of inspiration for this part of his description (see Maltby, *Tibullus*, p. 64; Murgatroyd, *Tibullus*, p. 185).

The second interesting detail of Tibullus's depiction of the early history of Rome is that the poet makes an implicit

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allusion to Romulus's murder of his brother Remus: "where Remus as co-ruler was fated not to live." This reference implies that fratricide and violence were, from the beginning, "inextricably bound up in Rome's genetic make-up" (Pollman, "The Emblematic," p. 14). The contrast between the pastoral depiction of the early site of Rome and this veiled reference to the internal violence as an unavoidable element in Rome's foundation is all the more striking that it was not present in Jupiter's prophecy in [Aeneid I.292-293](#), which only mentions that "Quirinus with his brother Remus, shall give laws." However, such a contrast can be found in Propertius, who refers both to the pastoral image of the early Rome with the cattle on the Palatine and to the walls of Rome "established by the slaying of Remus" (Propertius, *Elegy* III.9.49-50; Maltby, *Tibullus*, p. 64-65). Finally, the idea that Remus's murder determined the fate of Rome, in particular its capacity to be disposed to internal conflicts, is an idea which had been already developed in [Horace, Epode VII.19-20](#).

But the most interesting element of this passage is the use of the expression *aeterna Urbs*, "eternal city" (v. 23). A consultation of the *Thesaurus linguae latinae* enables to say that it is the first mention of the expression *Urbs aeterna* in a Latin literary source. It appears again, a few years later, in [Ovid, Fasti III.72](#). Of course, Cicero had previously dealt with the eternal existence (*sempiternum*) of the name of the Roman people (*populi Romani nomen*) in *Philippica* II.51, but Tibullus was the first who explicitly associated the *aeternitas*, the eternity, with the city of Rome (Murgatroyd, *Tibullus*, p. 183). However, reflections about Rome's endless nature were not new. In [Aeneid I.275-279](#), Jupiter assures that Rome will impose its military and civic dominion without any limit in time or space: "Then Romulus, proud in the tawny hide of the she-wolf, his nurse, shall take up the line, and found the walls of Mars and call the people Romans after his own name. For these I set neither bounds nor periods of empire; dominion without end have I bestowed (*imperium sine fine dedi*)." As Robert Maltby rightly recalls, even if Virgil's *Aeneid* was published posthumously in 16 BCE, it is highly probable that Tibullus read some preliminary version of the work (Maltby, *Tibullus*, p. 56). Such an interpretation is confirmed by the existence of various echoes or linguistic correspondences between the *Aeneid* and Tibullus's *Elegy* II.5. Concerning the motif of the eternity of Rome, we can see that Virgil, in the *Aeneid*, and Tibullus in his *Elegy* II.5 present the endless existence of Rome in a quite similar way. The appearance of the theme of the *Urbs Aeterna* during the last years of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE, a theme which later on became that of the *Roma aeterna*, was the starting point of what Hervé Inglebert calls a "majority certainty" ("certitude majoritaire") – which lasted for four centuries after Augustus's reign – according to which the Roman empire had surpassed all other preceding empires and marked the end of history (Inglebert, *Le Monde, l'Histoire*, p. 252).

Keywords in the original language:

- [Aeneas](#)
- [arx](#)
- [casa](#)
- [consors](#)
- [deus](#)
- [Ilium](#)
- [Iupiter](#)
- [lares](#)
- [moenia](#)
- [palatium](#)
- [parens](#)
- [Remus](#)
- [Roma](#)
- [Romulus](#)
- [sors](#)
- [urbs aeterna](#)
- [vacca](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [Aeneas](#)
- [eternity of Rome](#)



- [fratricide](#)
- [Remus](#)
- [Rome \(city\)](#)
- [Rome \(foundation\)](#)
- [Romulus](#)

**Bibliographical references:** Inglebert, Hervé, [Le Monde, l'Histoire. Essai sur les histoires universelles](#) (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2014)

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