



Virgil, Aeneid VI.756-853

Anchises shows Aeneas his descendants – the future Romans

Name of the author: Virgil

Date: 29 BCE to 19 BCE

Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Literary genre: Epic and Poetry

Title of work: Aeneid

Reference:

VI.756-853

Commentary:

After the appearance of the spirit of Aeneas's father, Anchises, on the shores of Crete, Aeneas has descended into the underworld, on his father's request, to speak with him. Having consulted the sibyl at Apollo's temple at Cumae, successfully retrieved the golden bough which proved his worthiness to enter Hades's kingdom, and performed the necessary sacrificial rites, Aeneas has finally entered the underworld, guided by the sibyl through its various regions (VI.124-263). Wandering through the vast halls of Dis, Aeneas meets the shades of various of his dead crew, and Queen Dido, who refuses to even look at him on account of his abandonment of her. When Aeneas eventually reaches the place where his father's spirit dwells, Anchises teaches him of his progeny – the famous Romans which are to come. This episode, often referred to as 'the parade of heroes', is absolutely central to the epic, and cements the link between Aeneas's family line and the future Golden Age of Rome, providing a much more complex account of Roman history than Jupiter's earlier synopsis (I.297-293). It also functions as an opportunity for Anchises to reassure his son of his task, and warn him against making the same mistakes as some of Rome's most famous figures. Aeneas's doubts and fears are understandable at this stage, considering that at the end of the previous book he has left many of the weaker members of his crew behind in Crete after a devastating loss of morale ("And do we still hesitate to enlarge our prowess by deeds, or does fear forbid our settling on Ausonian land?" VI.806-807).

Strict chronology is less of a concern than centralising the dominance of Augustus. Verses 760-807 list the Alban kings, followed by Romulus, and then Augustus, who is interjected here in a clear attempt to associate him as closely as possible with Romulus, founder of Rome. As David Ross notes (*Virgil's Aeneid*, p. 109-113), it is notable that Romulus's murder of his brother, Remus, is omitted here, and not allowed to cast a shadow over the glory of Rome's establishment. Moreover, Romulus's modest early Roman settlement is outshone by the imperial state of seven hills which Augustus will rule over (VI.781-784). The Caesar that is mentioned next (VI.788-790) divides scholars over whether it refers to Julius Caesar or Caesar Augustus. Ross prefers the former based upon the link implied between Julius and Iulus, but this seems strange given that immediately after, Augustus Caesar is named, and seemingly identified with the figure in the preceding lines: "This, this is he (*hic vir, hic est*), who you so often hear promised to thee, Augustus Caesar, son of a god..." (VI.791-792). The mention of Iulus and his seed would in this case simply be a reference to the adoption of Octavian (Augustus) by Julius Caesar. The elaborate description of Augustus's achievements, most importantly his restoration of the Golden Age, takes up significant space.

Next, we have the Roman kings, followed by the men of the Republic, interrupted by mention of Julius Caesar and Pompey (VI. 808-853). Augustus, Julius Caesar, and Pompey are extremely conspicuous thanks to their historically inaccurate placement. These two sections (760-807 and 808-853) are markedly different in tone. The Alban Kings listed prior to Augustus are described as strong, proud and domineering (they are adorned with the *civica corona*, the oak leaf garland that Augustus was given in 27 BCE, yet those listed after him are lesser qualified, reckless, and more dubious in terms of prowess. Of the three Roman kings mentioned, Numa (not explicitly named), Ancus, and Tullus, the latter two are described as power hungry and bloodthirsty. Ancus is "over boastful", and Tullus rules over a "slothful folk" which he leads into war. Numa, referred to in lines 808-812, is the only one who comes across positively here, as pious and just. Brutus, representing the Republic, comes next, and is condemned by Virgil for having the same lust for power as the Tarquin kings. Brutus is described as having a "proud soul", or



“arrogant spirit” (*animamque surperbum*) which desired the rulership (*fascēs*) (VI.817-818). Brutus did in fact order the execution of his sons, who were attempting to restore the Tarquins, but in Virgil’s eyes, this was not for love of country, but of glory and fame. Rather than being commemorated in history, Brutus should be pitied for his misguided desire for heroism (VI.822-823). The heroes of the early Republic are also reprimanded for their bloodlust; Torquatus and Camillus have a passion for battle that only ends in carnage. Pompey and Julius Caesar are also checked for the suffering that they will bring about through civil war (Caesar, whose troops came through Gaul into Italy, is the “father coming down from the Alpine ramparts”, and Pompey is he who attacked with ‘armies of the East’). Pompey and Caesar and followed by numerous other Republican heroes, some of whom were prominent in civil unrest, such as the Gracchii brothers (Gaius and Tiberius) and Cato, and some whom engaged in battle away from Italy, such as Mummius, who was “triumphant over Corinth”. It is noticeable that for Virgil, however, what characterises the Republic is the hunger for power, renown, and heroism that led Brutus, through his misguided attempts, and later Caesar, to endanger it. It is this dangerous mindset that Anchises firmly warns Aeneas not to embrace (VI.832-835). Aeneas’s *pietas*, despite his trepidation, evidenced by his willingness and ability to enter the underworld, is rewarded by the pageant of great men shown to him. However, Anchises makes clear that Rome’s imperial power comes with a cost.

Anchises now states unequivocally the Roman mission: to rule the nations, to instigate peace with law, to be compassionate to the humble, and to crush the arrogant with military force (VI.851-853). However, it seems that Aeneas himself is not really the recipient. Rather, Anchises addresses *tu... Romane* (VI.851), as though Aeneas now represents a generic, or even all Romans. Proponents of a “pessimistic” reading of the *Aeneid*, such as Richard Jenkyns, argue that Anchises’s speech is concluded with war imagery that could indicate a more pessimistic view of the future than is immediately obvious. While the mission statement acknowledges the power that the Romans will seize, the phrase *haec tibi erunt artes* (“these will be your arts”) indicates that power has come at the expense of something else, intellectual and artistic culture (*artes*). In the same line of interpretation, this concession can be linked to Roman victory over the Greeks, seen here in Anchises’s mention of the conquering of Corinth (also recalling Jupiter’s speech in book I, especially 284-285). While Greece held the crown for cultural prowess, Rome would ultimately win out through military triumph.

As has been discussed by Nandini Pandey, the procession of heroes recalls the depictions of the Julians and other Roman greats on the northwest and southeast sides of the Augustan Forum respectively. He argues that in much the same way as the arrangement of figures in the Forum was significant, Anchises’s arrangement (and omissions) of certain individuals reveals something of Virgil’s broader aims. The Forum’s separation of the Julians from all the other Romans that Augustus chose to honour implies that he viewed this family as being as valuable as every other put together. The difference between the first set of characters Anchises lists, up to and including Romulus, and the second group, beginning with the Roman kings, is that the latter are real historical figures, with clearly identifiable flaws. The former, however, belong to the realm of idealised legend, and as such, Augustus’s placement at the end of this group reveals to us a significant element of Virgil’s portrayal – Augustus is esteemed in the same manner as a legendary hero, free from the pitfalls that plagued his historical predecessors.

Augustus will usher in the Golden Age, which will restore the glory of the reign of Saturn (VI.792-793). The Golden Age of Saturn, characterised by a utopian ideal of peace and leisure (see, for example, Ovid, *Metamorphoses* I.89-112), was brought to an end when Jupiter overthrew his father. Jupiter’s reign was a time of lawful order, but also understood as bringing strife and hardship (see Ovid, *Metamorphoses* I.113-125). Nicholas Horsfall has argued that there may also be Jewish influence upon Virgil’s notion of the Golden Age, as the idea of a messianic figure signalling the start of a new era is expressed clearly in his fourth *Eclogue*. While Greco-Jewish texts were rare in Rome when Virgil was writing, Horsfall argues that there is strong evidence for cultural contact between Roman and Jewish texts (see Horsfall, “Virgil and the Jews,” p. 67-80). The representation of Jupiter’s style of rule in the *Aeneid* is something that is much debated, with scholars such as Julia Hejduk and James O’Hara claiming that he is distinctly harsh and power hungry. What is clear, seen for example in his speech to Venus at I.257-296, is that Jupiter’s universal plan for the establishment of Rome is unchangeable, and will be brought about no matter what hardships cause it delay. Augustan propaganda sought to bring together the ages of Saturn and Jupiter, with their relative advantages, in the new Golden Age of Augustus.

Augustus was represented as incorporating the best of both, with the peace and bounteousness of Saturn’s rule combined with the law and order of Jupiter’s. The Ara Pacis, for example, depicts the goddess Italia in an idyllic scene of fertile abundance, while the monument is surrounded by symmetrically patterned vegetation, effectively drawing together the plenteousness and order that Augustus’s Golden Age brings (see Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images*, p. 172, 174, 180). The final verse of the passage (I.852) asserts that one of the achievements of the Romans will be to “crown Peace with Law”, sparing the humble and taming the proud. The inference, then, is that



while imperial dominion may at times seem harsh, law is absolutely necessary in order to bring peace; subjugation is naturally a part of this, but the overall result is the restoration, or creation of order.

Keywords in the original language:

- animus
- bellum
- fatum
- gens
- gloria
- imperium
- laus
- lex
- Olympus
- pax
- pietas
- progenies
- rex
- Roma
- saeculum aureum
- trepidus
- triumphus
- Troiana gens
- ulciscor
- virtus

Thematic keywords in English:

- Augustus
- destiny
- empire
- fame
- fate
- glory
- Golden Age
- heaven
- Italy
- Julius Caesar
- Latium
- peace
- posterity
- pride
- Roman peace
- Roman people
- Rome (city)
- Romulus
- Seven Hills of Rome
- sovereignty
- triumph
- Trojan descent
- Trojans
- valour
- vengeance

Bibliographical references: Horsfall, Nicholas, Virgil, "Aeneid" 6: A Commentary, Vol. 2 (Berlin: Walter de



Gruyter, 2013)

Horsfall, Nicholas, "Virgil and the Jews" , Vergilius 58 (2012) : 67-80

Jenkyns, Richard, "Pathos, Tragedy and Hope in the Aeneid", Journal of Roman Studies 75 (1985) : 60-77

Pandey, Nandini B., "Reading Rome from the Farther Shore: Aeneid 6 in the Augustan Urban Landscape" , Vergilius 60 (2014) : 85-116

Ross, David O., Virgil's Aeneid: A Reader's Guide (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007)

Other sources connected with this document: Architecture

Ara Pacis (13-9 BCE)_Architecture

Reconstruction of the Ara Pacis



[Ara Pacis: frontal view](#)



[Ara Pacis: side view](#)



[Ara Pacis: side view](#)



- [Read more about Ara Pacis \(13-9 BCE\) Architecture](#)

Text



[Ovid, *Metamorphoses* I.89-112](#)

The Golden Age of Saturn

- [Read more about Ovid, *Metamorphoses* I.89-112](#)

Text

[Virgil, *Aeneid* I.257-296](#)

Jupiter outlines the future descendants of Aeneas – Rome's great leaders

- [Read more about Virgil, *Aeneid* I.257-296](#)

Realized by:

[Kimberley Fowler](#)



Source URL: <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/virgil-aeneid-vi756-853>