

The Muses' Playground 9

The Augustan Context:
Debates and Dead Ends

Lecture aims

- To survey the debate of the relationship and links between the *Aeneid*, Vergil, and Augustus/Octavian
- To view scholarly debates in context – the connections to 20th century history

The conundrum

'Virgil is not mainly political in his motive (but he may be partly so); he is not 'political' but he may be political; he is not merely a paid hack (but is he a rewarded writer of high expertise?); he is not a mouthpiece for the propaganda of the regime (but is he perhaps the originator of such propaganda?); he is not a paid servant (but is he a rewarded collaborator of higher status?); he is not creating propaganda (but he may be creating display for his ruler); he is not creating propaganda in 'any ordinary sense' (but he may be doing so in an unusual sense); he did not engage in cheap propaganda (but may have dealt in expensive propaganda); he did not act as the regime's agent, issuing propaganda that was imposed on him, but he did in his poetry passionately support the regime; his writing is political and his hero more or less stands for Augustus, though explicit references to the latter are few and the poet not courtly; the character of Aeneas has been influenced by the character of Augustus though it still stands 'essentially' in its own right; the portrayal of Augustus in the Aeneid which went against the poet's consciences was a flattering one.'

Before Syme

- Pre-1930 the appreciation of Augustus' reign was largely positive
 - Christian readings of the *Aeneid*
 - Proba, 4th C. A.D.; typological readings of the *Aeneid* and of Verg. *Ecl.* 4
 - Other potential factors: the role of *Klassizismus* in the 19th C and the preference in Augustan art for Classical rather than Hellenistic models

The Roman Revolution

It is surely time for some reaction from the 'traditional' and conventional view of the period. Much that has recently been written about Augustus is simply panegyric, whether ingenuous or edifying. Yet it is not necessary to praise political success or to idealize the men who win wealth and honours through civil war. (Syme, 1939, viii)

Its imperfections are patent and flagrant. It has not been composed in tranquillity; and it ought to be held back for several years and rewritten. But the theme, I firmly believe, is of some importance. If the book provokes salutary criticism, so much the better. (Syme, 1939, ix)

(Oxford, 1 June 1939)

The Roman Revolution

- Traces developments from 60 BC through to 14 AD: not just about Augustus seizing power
 - ‘The subject of this book is the transformation of state and society at Rome between 60 BC and 14 AD.’ (Syme, 1939, vii)
- Prosopographical approach: tracing the people around Augustus rather than the man himself
 - A way of sidestepping panegyric (research)
- Important to note that Syme’s preface is extremely clear about his biases
 - In terms of sources
 - In terms of agenda
- ...this would not be the last word on the Augustan period, *but start a new debate*

Scholarship and context: 1960s (and onwards)

- The result of the changed view on the Augustan world due to Syme
- The need to distance oneself from the Classical world appropriated by Mussolini in (e.g) *Mostra Augustea della Romanità*
- ‘Readers in the 2nd half of the 20th century increasingly alienated from the idea of empire...’ (Hardie, 2005, 86)



The Harvard School

- Also referred to as the ‘pessimistic’ readers
- ‘We hear two distinct voices in the *Aeneid*, a public voice of triumph, and a private voice of regret’ (Parry, 1963, 121)
- Parry reads the *Aeneid* as a whole as indicating a sense of loss of the heroic past, where fights were fair
- Other big names:
 - Putnam, M. (1966) *The Poetry of the Aeneid*, Oxford.
 - Lyne, R. (1987) *Further voices in Vergil’s Aeneid*, Oxford

The textual basis: Harvard School

- Main passages of interest:
 - Verg. *Aen.* 4
 - Verg. *Aen.* 12
- But also Verg. *Aen.* 5: women's voices

The textual basis of the Harvard School

There stood Aeneas, deadly in his armour, rolling his eyes, but he checked his hand, hesitating more and more as the words of Turnus began to move him, when suddenly his eyes caught the fatal baldrick of the boy Pallas high on Turnus' shoulder with the glittering studs he knew so well. Turnus had defeated and wounded him and then killed him, and now he was wearing his belt on his shoulder as a battle honour taken from an enemy. Aeneas feasted his eyes on the sight of this spoil, this reminder of his wild grief, the, burning with mad passion and terrible in his wrath, he cried: 'Are you to escape me now, wearing the spoils stripped from the body of those I loved? By this wound which I now give, it is Pallas who makes sacrifice of you. It is Pallas who exacts the penalty in your guilty blood.' Blazing with rage, he plunged the steel full into his enemy's breast. The limbs of Turnus were dissolved in cold and his life left him with a groan, fleeing in anger down to the shades.

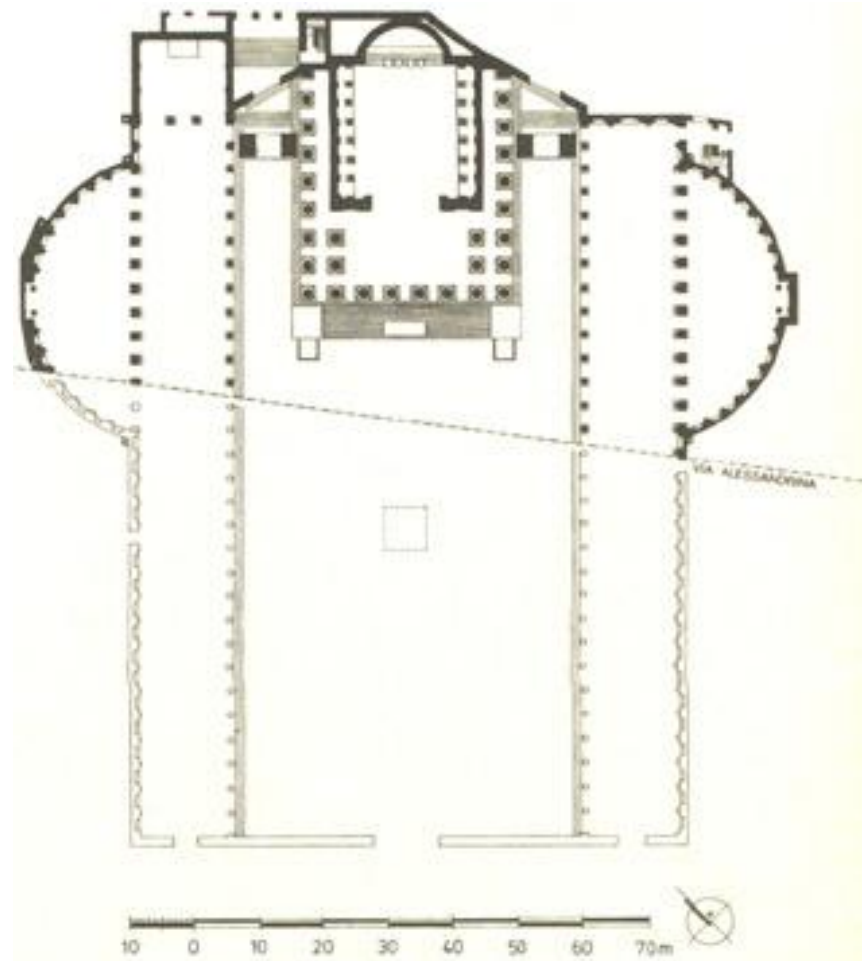
(Aen. 12.940-952)

Putnam & Turnus

- ‘Why, one tends to ask, does Virgil, if he wishes his poem as a whole to stand as praise of Augustus, conclude in a tone of such gloom and sudden bitterness that the only afterglow reflects an image of Aeneas’ personal spite, not the glory that remains for Rome?’
(Putnam, 1966, xii)

The textual basis: Turnus

- Why is this passage so central?
- Aeneas and *pietas*
- Augustus and *pietas*
- Augustus and *clementia*



Augustus Forum: pietas



Clementia

- Cic. *Marc.* 1-2 (held in 46 BC)
- *For I cannot by any means pass over in silence such great humanity, such unprecedented and unheard-of clemency, such moderation in the exercise of supreme and universal power, such incredible and almost godlike wisdom. [...]*
- *For it was seen by me before in many instances, and especially in my own, and now it is clearly understood by everybody, since you have granted Marcus Marcellus to the Senate and people of Rome, in spite of your recollection of all the injuries you have received at his hands, that you prefer the authority of this order and the dignity of the republic to the indulgence of your own resentment or your own suspicions.*

Zanker and Galinsky

- Readings of Augustan poetry much influenced by Paul Zanker's study *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* (1980)
- Zanker highlights the multireferential and nuanced nature of Augustan art...
- ...and focuses on widespread interaction with certain motifs that capture the *Zeitgeist* of the period without being imposed by a power structure

Studies on literary patronage

- Our knowledge of the workings of literary patronage has also become more sophisticated
- Williams, G. 'Phases in political patronage of literature in Rome', in: B.K. Gold (1982) *Literary and artistic patronage in ancient Rome*, Austin
- White, P. (1993) *Promised verse : poets in the society of Augustan Rome*, Cambridge

Fashions of scholarship

- Political readings of the *Aeneid* go hand in hand with readings of Horace and of Roman love elegy:
 - Scholars like H.P. Stahl, R. Lyne and M. Glatt, but cf. the approaches by F. Cairns and J.K. Newman
- An entrenched society of readers? A debate that cannot end?
 - Ultimately, each reader has to make up their own mind
- Several attempts to temper the debate:
 - Kennedy, D. 'Augustan' and 'Anti-Augustan': reflections on terms of reference' in: A. Powell (1992) *Roman Poetry and Propaganda in the Age of Augustus*, London. (Library-only; essential reading)

Scholarship and a changing world

- Focus of scholarship changes!
- Syme was interested in the workings of public systems, deliberately leaving out 'soft' aspects
- ...that has not appealed to the late 20th/21st C where the focus is so much more on the individual
- ...but the lessened focus on the pro- or anti-Augustan debate also depends on the decreasing interest in biographical readings from the 1970s onwards
- How to use biographical sources?
 - Donatus, *Life of Vergil*: 13: *Thanks to the generosity of his friends, he had almost 10,000,000 sesterces, and he owned a house in Rome on the Esquiline, next to the gardens of Maecenas (though he had the use of a retreat in the Campania and several in Sicily).*
 - Donatus dated to mid-4th C AD

Where we're at today: two views

'[...] we are looking at the Augustan age with different eyes in the 1990s than our forebears did in the 1930s. We have witnessed that 'ideology' and 'propaganda' are inadequate foundations for lasting political systems. [...] We see daily that transformation is not sudden, but often proceeds imperceptibly. Hence the attention in this book to such matters and to the complexity, nuance, and experimentation that are found in the Augustan age.' (Galinsky, 1996, 5)

The conundrum

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(Powell, 2008, 9)

Augustus' rule

- During Augustus' reign the Roman world changes dramatically:
 - Territory
 - Rule
- Augustus is in power for nearly forty years – attitudes will change