

# NON-ASSESSED ASSIGNMENT 2. ANALYSIS OF VIRGIL'S INTERWEAVING OF MYTH AND HISTORY IN BOOK 4 OF THE *AENEID*

VÍCTOR GARCÍA MARTÍNEZ

MA ANCIENT RELIGIONS – UNIVERSITY OF WALES TRINITY SAINT DAVID

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Virgil, like every artist, is but a product of his time, and as such must be studied within his context. His most ambitious work, the *Aeneid*, is plagued by the situation of the author within Augustus' court through the patronage of Maecenas, a close ally of the *princeps*. As Salema<sup>1</sup> puts it, "among the most revered of this group were Horace, Virgil and Propertius, whose works reflect directly or indirectly the expectations of a more auspicious era, in which order and peace had ensured a new golden age, favouring the *imperator's* agenda and image". Much scholarship has been given about if the *Aeneid* was, indeed, a directly propagandistic work or not, but what is undeniable is the close relationship between history and myth present throughout the poem that could be interpreted in a certain way by Virgil's contemporaries, be it intentionally or not. In this paper I wish to analyze this phenomenon only partially, by looking at the intertwining of historical context in the fictional narration of book four.

The fourth book of the poem observes Dido and Aeneas' union, followed by Mercury reminding Aeneas of his mission and his consequently decision to departure from the city without telling his now consort. Dido then becomes mad and decides to end her own life by a pyre with a sword. Just as the previous books, this all happens in the city of Carthage, which is said to be a colony of Tyre, founded by Dido after she was forced to leave her homeplace when her brother Pygmalion killed her husband, Sychaeus. This backstory is built into the character of Dido, adding more dramatism to it and equating it to Eneas' flight from a burning Troy in order to find some common ground between the lovers. It appears to be that this backstory was built upon some historical accuracies.

The case of the foundation of Carthage by Tyre has received plenty of scholarship given its unique situation. Traditionally, it had been believed that Carthage was a planned colony destined to become the economical center of the Western Mediterranean. However, there is no evidence that Tyrian commerce declined immediately after the foundation of Carthage or that this colony was a powerful center since its inception<sup>2</sup>. Even ancient historians treated this foundation as an isolated incident. Philistus of Syracuse first stated that Carthage was built by some Tyrians with suspicious names<sup>3</sup> immediately

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<sup>1</sup> Salema, 2020, p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> Alvar & Wagner, 198), p. 79.

<sup>3</sup> In Alvar & Wagner, 1985, p. 80 it is stated that the names of these Tyrian founders, Azoros and Karchedon, are but distorsions of the names for Tyre and Carthage, and as thus shouldn't be given much credibility.

before the Trojan War<sup>4</sup>. This would line up perfectly with the *Aeneid*'s own chronology, in which Carthage is a newly founded city still to be completely built. Given that there is evidence of this line of thought as late as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD via Appian<sup>5</sup>, it is highly likely that Virgil was aware of it.

Moreover, Virgil was greatly inspired by the other main Carthage foundation story, which was much more plausible. This other etiological Carthaginian story is mainly brought to us by Justin in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, and it relates the tale of the king Mutus of Tyre who, upon his death, bestowed his son Pygmalion as his successor. Given the short age of the ruler, his older sister, Elissa, became regent until he was of age but, for unknown reasons, she was relegated out of power. To maintain some political control, she married her uncle, Acerbas, who was the high priest of Melqart, but the move was not liked by the court, and Pygmalion ended up killing Acerbas. This prompted Elissa (and her faction)'s self-exile and, given that they were not welcomed in any of the already settled Tyrian colonies, they resorted to founding a new one, Carthage<sup>6</sup>, in the same way as Dido did in the *Aeneid*. This tale is, of course, strikingly similar to the one told in the *Aeneid*, with only some minor changes like the role of Acerbas, who becomes Sychaeus, and the name of Elissa, who is none other than queen Dido. Given that Justin's work postdates the *Aeneid*, two possibilities rise from this tale: either Justin adapted Virgil's tale to more historical standards, which is highly unlikely given the changes between both stories; or there was an older tradition examined by both Virgil and Justin.

However, even if Dido's backstory might have been historically accurate, it very much is not chronologically wise. Alvar & Wagner make an in-depth analysis of it on their article<sup>7</sup>, discussing the disparity between literary and archaeological sources before setting for a foundation date on the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century BC<sup>8</sup>, centuries after the mythological date for the Trojan War. In Virgil's time considerations around the chronology of Carthage were already taking place, however it is logical to conclude Virgil disregarded these new chronologies to fit the narration he wanted to tell.

This book is defined not by Dido's death, but by her curse before her suicide, as it serves as an origin story for the future quarrel between Carthage and Rome which, as per the *Aeneid*, is seen as inevitable. She proclaims:

“Then do you, Tyrians, persecute with hate his stock and all the race (*stirpem et genus*) to come, and to my dust offer this tribute! Let no love or treaty unite the nations (*nullus amor populis nec foedera sunt*)! Arise from my ashes, unknown avenger (*aliquis [...] ultor*), to harass the Trojan settlers with fire and sword – today, hereafter, whenever strength be ours! May coast with coast conflict, I pray, and sea with sea, arms with arms; war may they

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<sup>4</sup> Alvar & Wagner, 1985, p. 80.

<sup>5</sup> Alvar & Wagner, 1985, p. 80.

<sup>6</sup> Alvar & Wagner, 1985, pp. 87-90.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Alvar & Wagner, 1985, pp. 80-84.

<sup>8</sup> Alvar & Wagner, 1985, pp. 84.

have, themselves and their children's children (*pugnent ipsique nepotesque*)!"<sup>9</sup>

This curse is interesting not only in the way I have addressed above, but also in the sense that it serves as a reflection of how the Augustan society might have seen Carthage, more than a century after the end of the Punic Wars and the raze of the city by the Romans. This view is explored further throughout the first half of the poem in the setting and characterization of Dido, a character treated, above all, with the utmost respect. However, this curse uses strong and violent language embedded in the passion and drama of this scene to prefigure a future Carthaginian race with a lust for Roman blood and insistent to wage war against them. This is especially clear in the characterization of the *aliquis ultor* Dido mentioned whom, although shrouded in somber mystery within the poem, the contemporary Roman reader would identify with the general Hannibal, one of the most feared enemies in the history of Rome that clearly still inspired dread in Virgil's time.

It is also interesting to note the use of *foedera* in this curse, as the *casus belli* for the Romans to start the Second Punic War was the breaching of the Ebro Treaty by the Punics. This way, this curse retroactively puts all the blame on the Carthaginians, for they would not accept any treaty after Dido's disgrace. Furthermore, this disinterest by Carthage on *foederae* of any type completely negates Polybius' previous assessment of the Roman-Carthaginian conflict, in which he had revealed that both nations had signed up to six treaties – one of which has been deemed as false – before the advent of the Punic Wars<sup>10</sup>. Overall, it seems like Virgil either intentionally or not wanted to project a certain image of Carthage in his work, deeming the wars as unavoidable and stemming from Dido's tragedy – albeit caused by Aeneas – while shoving some sort of admiration for the lost civilization. This way, Aeneas and Dido become more than their own characters, and their love affair serves as an origin for the future incompatibility of Rome and Carthage.

But Dido, apart from being a symbol of the Carthaginian people, was also equated to a figure more recent to the contemporary reader's worldview: Cleopatra, for she was also an Eastern queen that caused trouble for the future of Rome via seduction and ended up taking her life. As Martínez Astorino puts it<sup>11</sup>,

“Dido-Cleopatra is a character admired by her beauty and whose tragedy moves people, without ever stop instilling fear due to the threat she poses to the future of Rome. The allusion [...] allows Virgil to interpret recent history without oversimplifying and offering a nuanced picture with poetic significance that, despite the affinity between the *princeps* and the poet, is not reduced to the so-called Augustan ideology.”

It is in this clear allusion and comparison between the two African queens in which resides Virgil's expertise and genius; he is capable of treading between the creation

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<sup>9</sup> Verg.A.4.621-9. Trans. Rushton Fairclough. Rev. Goold (1916).

<sup>10</sup> Serrati, 2006, p. 113.

<sup>11</sup> Martínez Astorino, 2020, p. 277.

of a compelling and complex fictional character and the infusing of recent historical agents in order to favour his and his allies' ideals.

The expertise of Virgil, thus, gets proven throughout book four in his interweaving of fiction and history, constructs and local memory, in order to generate a work greater than a simple reduction to a propagandistic or conformist "pamphlet", with rich and varied characters and actions than breach time in a uniquely Virgilian way that still fascinates to readers millennia later.

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