EXPLORING ROMAN MYTHOLOGY

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER TWO

Aeneas's Quest for a New Homeland

In the years of his boyhood and early manhood, Aeneas had never heard of Rome. After all, in his lifetime that now famous Italian city did not yet exist. Instead, his focus was on the independent trading city of Troy (situated in what is now northwestern Turkey), where he was one of the local princes and a leading warrior. He had attained that lofty position because his father, Anchises, was a first cousin of Troy's king, Priam. Aeneas also commanded respect because his mother was the Greek goddess of love, Aphrodite, who had had a brief affair with Anchises.

During the ten-year siege of Troy by a Greek army, Aeneas proved his bravery by slaying several enemy fighters. Yet he also came close to death himself twice. In the first episode, he engaged in single combat with the renowned Greek warrior Diomedes and survived only because Aphrodite intervened on her son's behalf. Later, Aeneas faced off with the greatest of the Greek champions—Achilles. And this time the Greek sea god Poseidon stepped in and rescued the young Trojan prince.

Poseidon's motivation for that act was that he had heard a rumor among his fellow gods that Aeneas had a crucial, world-altering destiny awaiting him after the war's conclusion. So it

Anchises
Aeneas's father, whom the hero carried on his back from the burning Troy

was important that the young man survive the conflict. Later, when the Greek soldiers entered Troy and began sacking it, writes modern mythologist Michael Stapleton, Aeneas "awoke to find the city in flames. [He] hurried to his . . . father Anchises [who was] still alive. He hoisted his father on his shoulder and took his own son, Ascanius, by the hand. [They] and a [small] band of Trojans who had managed to escape from the city, [boarded some] ships and sailed [away]."[9]

In the massive confusion surrounding the city's demise, the triumphant Greeks did not notice the departing vessels. So the small band of Trojans made good their escape. Little did Aeneas realize at that moment what fate and the gods had ordained for him. It was to sail far to the west and there establish a new, noble people who would, in the fullness of time, come to rule the known world.

Preoccupied with Beginnings

This tale of Aeneas's family background and escape from the burning Troy constitutes the start of the famous and fulsome collection of myths that tell how he founded the Roman race. The Romans came to call the totality of his great journey the *Aeneid*, after the title Virgil gave his epic poem about that grand expedition. During the roughly five centuries of Rome's existence following that work's creation, every generation of Romans looked on it as their national epic. And Aeneas stood out as one of Rome's greatest past heroes.

The Roman people were fascinated by and took enormous pride in the myths about those heroes, including Aeneas. In part this was because such stories explained why Rome had risen to greatness. Also, such tales seemed to justify its conquest of the many lands bordering the Mediterranean Sea.

Still another reason for the enduring popularity of Aeneas's myths was that they explored a key facet of Rome's beginnings. The Romans had a major preoccupation with tales about how various aspects of their civilization were established in the dim

The Greek hero Aeneas rescues his father, Anchises, and his son, Ascanius, from the burning city of Troy. The story of Aeneas and how he established the lineage that would lead the Roman people is told by the Roman poet, Vrigil.

past. Among their favorite foundation stories were those that told how the Roman people, or race, came to be; how the city of Rome itself arose; the exploits and eventual eradication of Rome's early kings; and so forth. Jane F. Gardner points out that during the reign of their first emperor, Augustus (30 BCE–14 CE), the Romans were enthralled by etiology, the study of beginnings, including "the beginning of rituals, of place-names, of institutions, of cities, of the whole Roman people and its history."[10]

A primary reason that the Romans of that period, the so-called early Empire, so tightly embraced these many foundation myths was that it met a vital need. Namely, such tales helped shape their identity as a people. To that end, Gardner says, "they used a variety of materials, such as ideas and motifs [themes] from Greek

mythology and . . . stories from the family traditions of some of the great Roman families."[11]

Indeed, throughout the *Aeneid*, Virgil skillfully molds that national identity. In particular, he emphasizes that Rome is distinct among the world's nations because it was divinely chosen to rule them all. As the late historian R.H. Barrow put it, Virgil suggests that

> the most significant movement of history . . . is the march of the Roman along the road of his destiny to a high civilization. For in that destiny is to be found the valid and permanent interpretation of all [human] movement and all development. . . . The stately *Aeneid* progresses throughout its length to this theme, the universal and ultimate triumph of the Roman spirit as the highest manifestation of man's powers.[12]

The Prophecy and the Flying Fiends

Aeneas's myths show that the noble Roman spirit, with its ability to command others, was present in its formative stages in his own personal character. He demonstrated his sense of decency

Aeneas's Adventures Set to Music

Virgil's *Aeneid*, which tells Aeneas's collected myths in remarkable detail, survived Rome's fall in the late 400s and early 500s CE. That pinnacle of Roman literature went on during medieval and modern times to inspire numerous artistic works, including paintings, sculptures, and musical compositions. Of the musical pieces based on Aeneas's story, one of the first was a 1689 tragic opera—*Dido and Aeneas* by English composer Henry Purcell. It deals primarily with the bittersweet, doomed love affair between Aeneas and Carthage's Queen Dido. Realizing that the man she loves will likely not return to her from Italy, she sings an aria (an operatic song) in which she says he should forget all about her. Then she kills herself. Purcell's work deals with the romance from Dido's point of view, while in comparison, the focus of the more recent opera *Aeneas and Dido* (2007) by Canadian composer James Rolfe is more from Aeneas's viewpoint. The largest-scale and most famous musical excursion into elements of Aeneas's story is French composer Hector Berlioz's opera *Les Troyens*, or *The Trojans*, composed in 1858. Some of the many major US productions of it appeared in New York in 1983, Los Angeles in 1991, and San Francisco in 2015.

SOURCE NOTES

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INDEX

Note: Boldface page numbers indicate illustrations.