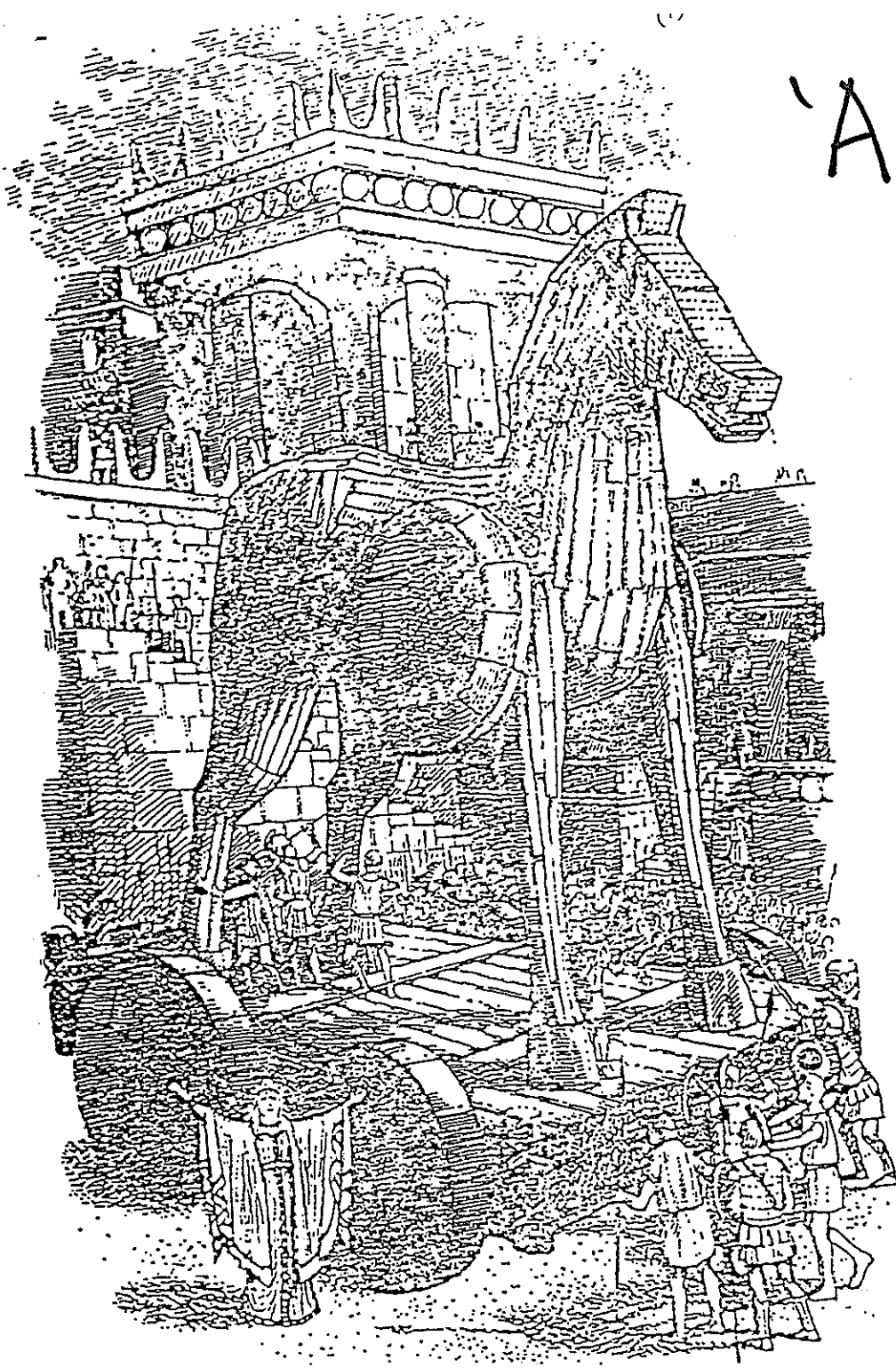
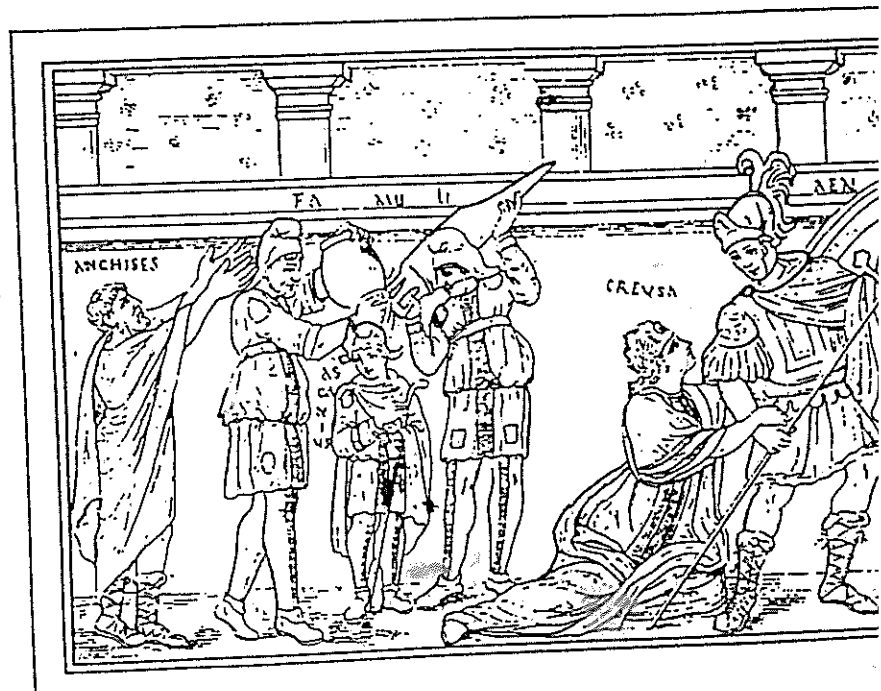


AENEID

BOOK TWO



The portent of the flames



What are the main points to remember about book 2?

- the tragic fall of a great city, in scenes of horrible slaughter and despair, is chronologically the first event in the *Aeneid*. It sets the tone of the whole poem, which is both the result of Troy's destruction and the justification for the gods causing such horrors
- Troy's fall is decreed by Fate and engineered by individual gods. Book 2 makes us very uneasy about what the gods do and we look for reasons to justify their deeds
- Aeneas receives his first messages that his job is to leave Troy and found a city elsewhere
- at first he disobeys these orders and fights the Greeks, obeying very reluctantly at the end. We see him as a Homeric hero and get hints he is going to have to change to become a Roman hero
- in the conflict between *furor* and *pietas*, *furor* dominates the whole book, until Aeneas reluctantly obeys orders at the end
- though Rome is only hinted at in brief messages, the account of the carnage and misery must have recalled the civil wars to Virgil's listeners/readers
- the poet shows his hatred for war and his sympathy with the losers. The misery and destruction can only be justified by the future greatness of Rome, and by Rome giving the benefits of peace and law to the world
- we are reminded book 2 was originally poetry, as Virgil uses the images of serpents and flames to highlight Troy's fall.

This book falls neatly into three sections

- the Trojans are tricked into taking the horse into Troy
- the Trojans fight to defend the city till the Palace falls and Priam is killed
- Aeneas, his family and some others escape.

The Trojans and the horse

The first slow section provides a contrast with the speed and drama with which Troy falls. As well, it explains why the Trojans, including Aeneas, allowed themselves to be fooled into destroying themselves by taking the horse inside the walls. Virgil paints a realistic and psychologically convincing picture. The Trojans have been under siege for a long, long ten years and can hardly believe the Greeks have gone, but such is their relief they want to believe it. They don't know what to think about the horse, but the same psychology is at work – they want to believe it is harmless. They are hesitant to accept the obvious truth of what Laocoon says, and are all too ready to believe Sinon because he says what they want to hear.

Sinon's tale is extremely clever. He uses a mixture of facts the Trojans knew were true and outright lies. The Trojans would have known Ulysses had Palamedes killed, that the Greeks sacrificed Iphigenia, and that Ulysses and Diomedes stole the Palladium. So they accept the lies that Sinon was related to Palamedes (in fact he was Ulysses' cousin), that Apollo wanted another sacrifice for a safe return to Greece, and Minerva was angry at the insult to the Palladium. This leads them to accept the lie they should take the horse into Troy.

The Romans would have appreciated the irony of Sinon's lies. In the short term, of course, the Greeks destroy Priam's empire, but in the long term 'Asia' operating through Troy's descendants in Rome, did invade the 'ramparts of Pelops' and capture the whole of Greece. Right from the beginning of his story, no matter how distant events may seem, Virgil never lets his audience forget Fate had planned the rise of Rome for hundreds of years.

The Trojans wanted to believe Sinon, but they still might have been saved from their foolishness if the gods hadn't stepped in. Minerva (Pallas Athene) hated the Trojans for the same reason as Juno - because Paris had slighted her beauty and awarded the prize "for the fairest" to Venus. As well she had a special affection for Ulysses, because he was the most clever and inventive of the Greeks. Now she sent sea snakes which killed Laocoon and his sons with excruciating pain in full public view. And she left no doubt in the Trojan's minds that she had intervened, since the snakes retreated up to her temple. The Trojans decided Sinon was right and Laocoon was being punished for his 'sin' in damaging the horse. And they were quite right, but the 'sin' was his threatened interference in Minerva's plans to destroy Troy.

The Trojans promptly dragged the horse and its load of Greeks inside, ignoring further warnings from Cassandra and the clashing of armour inside the horse. They spent the day in thanksgiving to the heartless gods and celebrating, which made them an easy target for the returning Greeks. Only the promise given in book 1 by Jupiter that Trojan blood would make Rome great could justify such treachery, and though Virgil could see justice in the overall plan of Fate, he, and other Romans, were uneasy about the spite of individual gods and goddesses.

The destruction of the city

Aeneas has played no important part in these early scenes. We assume he was uncertain what to do and deceived by Sinon and Minerva just like everyone else, but Virgil leaves him as part of the crowd (we ...) because he doesn't want to stress his stupidity.

Now suddenly the scene focuses on Aeneas, and remains there for the rest of the book. While he is sleeping off the effects of the day's celebrations, and the Greeks are quietly returning and entering Troy, he sees in a dream Hector, greatest of the Trojan

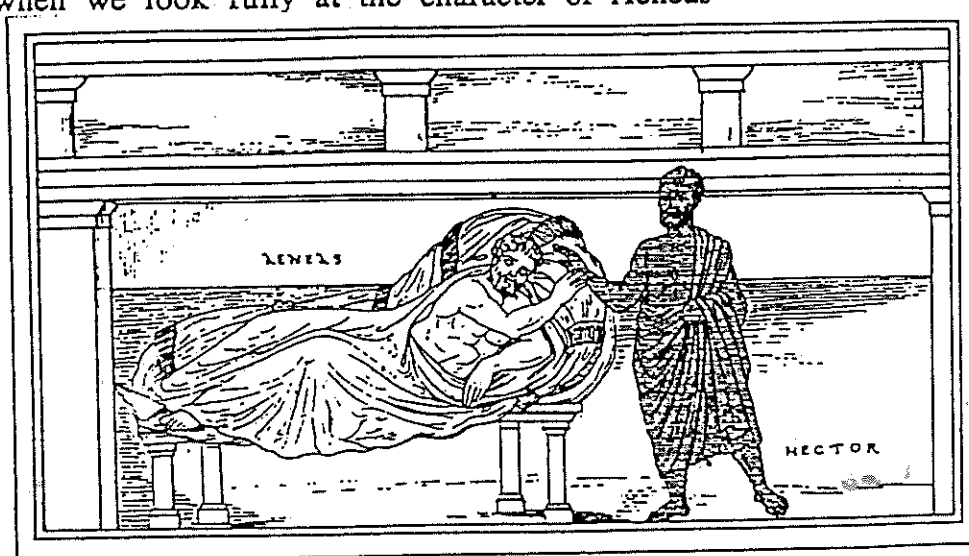
warriors, who was killed and mutilated by Achilles. Hector tells him to take the gods of Troy and flee across the ocean, for their beloved city is doomed. Aeneas is startled from sleep, and rushing up on to his roof, sees and hears all too clearly the battles and the flames. He promptly forgets what Hector has told him to do, and does not even think of his wife, child or father. Instead he seizes his weapons and charges out to fight.

Aeneas - the Homeric hero

The situation is obviously hopeless, and it is not immediately clear to us why Aeneas disobeys Hector's orders and ignores the safety of his family. We need to understand that he is reacting the way any hero in Homer's poems would and should have reacted. Homer described a society ruled by nobles who spent most of their time fighting or preparing to fight. They enjoyed warfare, and fought mainly for their own honour and glory. All that mattered was fighting bravely, and courage and strength in battle were the greatest virtues. Conversely cowardice was the only vice. These warriors were total individualists, fighting for their own honour and caring little for their fellow warriors, their country or even their families. In book 2 Aeneas could not in honour flee Troy until the situation was quite hopeless, and even then he goes reluctantly and only with lots of prodding.

The Roman hero

But 1200 years later Roman attitudes in war and towards the family were very different. A Roman hero fought with equal courage, but for his gods, his country and his family rather than for personal glory. The Roman army was trained to fight in disciplined co-ordinated units, and, incidentally, easily overcame the undisciplined individualist barbarians such as the Gauls, despite immense Celtic vigour and courage. The ultimate Virgilian hero was the organiser, Augustus, with ideals of *pietas* - service to the state and duty to his people. In time Augustus would be called *Pater Patriae*, the father of his country, and Aeneas had to change from lone warrior to caring leader to earn this title also. Much of the interest in the poem lies in observing his change from Homeric to Roman hero, and we will discuss it when we look fully at the character of Aeneas



The apparition of Hector's ghost

The pathos of the doomed

Virgil wins sympathy for the Trojans because they are the losers, but he increases it because the Greeks are so brutal. On page 59 we see Hector with the wounds he received as he was dragged round Troy. The Greeks inflicted wounds on the corpse they could not inflict on the powerful living man, which gives us a glimpse of what they will do to Troy and its people.

We also disapprove of the Greeks' use of deceit to take the city. Sinon swears an oath to tell the truth (p56) and the gods not only let him get away with it, but use deceit themselves. By killing Laocoon they use the Trojan's own devotion to the gods to destroy them. But when the Trojans use deceit by putting on Greek insignia (p63) they are massacred by both sides. Holiness counts for nothing, as Panthus dies, (p64) and the gods do nothing to prevent the Greeks seizing and killing women and men sheltering at their altars (pp63, 67).

Escape from Troy

The death of Priam seems to convince Aeneas the situation is hopeless. Now Venus intervenes and prevents Aeneas from taking vengeance on Helen - slaying a woman was shameful act for a Homeric hero. Instead Venus shows how the gods themselves are destroying Troy and sends our hero home to look after his family. Now we meet Anchises who obstinately refuses to leave Troy and tells the others to go without him. Aeneas could easily have carried off his crippled old father, but this never occurs to him. Nor does it occur to him, in his overwhelming concern for his own father, that his wife Creusa might be upset by the death of her father, Priam, which he announces so casually. Aeneas is no longer capable of rational thought, and because he can't bear to leave his father behind, he decided to abandon all his family to the enemy. All is chaos and despair, but Jupiter intervenes by bathing little Ascanius' head in harmless flames. We have the ironic picture of the anxious parents trying to douse the flames while all Troy burns around them, but Anchises accepts the supernatural fire and shooting star Jupiter sends for good measure, and decides to leave. This is the only hopeful sign in the whole book, for as the family leaves Aeneas is too busy looking after Anchises to think of Creusa, and she is killed by the Greeks.

Aeneas' carelessness is unforgivable in human terms, and his remorse overdone and too late, but we are reminded again of the sacrifice of individuals required so that Rome may come into being. Creusa dies so Aeneas may wed a foreign bride, as her ghost sadly tells him, and begs him to look after their son. Aeneas now sees that Troy is hopelessly lost, and as morning approaches, he sets out with his father, symbolising Troy's past, and his son, Troy's future.

And because he cannot find a race of people on his own, he also has a band of refugee women, children and men, who look to him as leader. He has to learn to forget the self-love of a Homeric hero and replace it with *pietas* - care for others. He has a long way to go to find the western land, and even further to go to become a Roman, but in book 2 he makes a start.

Virgil's imagery

In a later period we will look at the imagery Virgil uses throughout his poem. In this book he uses vivid images to match the violence of war - raging flood and fire which destroys crops, ravaging wolves, storms at sea, the fall of ancient tree. Two images, however, constantly reoccur. The snake or serpent is appropriate to the attackers - their deceit, their concealment, their viciousness and violence - and they use flames to complete their task. In Latin as in English, similar words are used of snakes and flames - hissing, creeping, flickering, gliding. At first there are parallels between snakes and Greeks.

- snakes strike from concealment, as the Greeks do from the horse
- the snakes and Greeks come from Tenedos
- snakes rear above their victims, as flames will tower above the city
- the snake reveals itself to kill, as does Pyrrhus

Pyrrhus means flame-coloured, and he is compared directly to a snake which has shed its skin. Fire takes over and finishes the task the snakes have begun, as Troy crashes down in flames. But just when things seem to be at their most hopeless, the gods send fire which is non-destructive. This is the flames which lick about Ascanius' head and the shooting star which directs the little band to Mt Ida, so the book ends with hope. And as a snake sheds its old skin, so too is Troy to be transformed, generations hence, into Rome. The death pains of Troy are in fact the birth pains of Rome.

Virgil's attitude to war

The poems of Homer tell of war from the winners' point of view. Essentially fighting is fun and death in battle is glorious. But though Virgil belonged to the most successful nation in military terms the ancient world had ever known, he refused to take a similar view. War may be necessary, and the benefits of Rome may be worth it, but Virgil always counts the cost in individual human terms, and in book 2 the cost is almost the entire Trojan race. The message to Augustan Romans is clear. "Your nation was paid for by the blood of these people - see that you repay the debt in terms of peace and civilisation". We will return to this theme again throughout the *Aeneid*.

EXERCISE

- 1 Aeneas receives two explicit messages about his future, from Hector (pages 59-60) and Creusa (page 74).
 - a What does Hector tell Aeneas to do?
 - b What does he predict about Rome?
 - c What does Creusa promise Aeneas?
 - d What does she predict about Rome?
- 2 Why does Aeneas not obey Hector at once?
- 3 What finally forces Aeneas to leave?
- 4 Aeneas is so concerned about his own father, Anchises, he doesn't think that he has in fact callously told Creusa of the death of her own father, Priam (p70). Why do you think Virgil ignores the fact that Priam is Creusa's father?
- 5 Why does Creusa have to die?
- 6 What do the deaths of Creusa and many other people represent to Virgil?
- 7 Virgil uses two main images to depict the fall of Troy. Name them.

EXERCISE

Why did the Trojans take the wooden horse inside the wall?
How much were they responsible for their own destruction?
How much were the gods to blame?
Write half to one page in your answer.