

## VERGIL'S AENEID – INTRODUCTION

Vergil, the preeminent Latin poet, was born Publius Vergilius Maro on October 15, 70 BCE, near Mantua, a city in northern Italy. The son of a farmer, Vergil studied in Cremona, then in Milan, and finally in Rome. Around 41 BCE, he returned to Mantua to begin work on his *Eclogues*, which he published in the early 30s BCE. Soon afterward, civil war forced him to flee south to Naples, where seven years later he finished his second work, the *Georgics*, a long poem on farming. At this time, Vergil's writing gained him the recognition of the public, support from patrons, and the favor of the emperor.



Botticelli (1445-1510), *Dante and Vergil*

**Nota Bene:** Much of Vergil's biography is based on interpretations of his poetry and ancient testimony of dubious reliability. In general, the biographies of all ancient authors should be approached critically.

Vergil lived at the height of the first age of the Roman Empire, during the reign of the emperor Octavian, who later became known as Augustus. Before Augustus became emperor, Roman society suffered through a century of intermittent social unrest and civil war. During Vergil's youth, the so-called First Triumvirate—Julius Caesar, Pompey, and Crassus—governed the Roman Republic. After Crassus was killed in 53 BCE at the Battle of Carrhae, relations soured between Caesar and Pompey and eventually

Caesar invaded Italy. After defeating Pompey, Caesar reigned alone until the Ides of March in 44 BCE, when he was assassinated by a group of Republican senators. A confused, multi-sided civil war erupted between Caesar's assassins and the Second Triumvirate—Octavian, Antony, and Lepidus. By 36 BCE only Octavian and Antony remained, and they began warring against each other. At the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE, Octavian's fleet defeated Antony and his ally Cleopatra of Egypt. Finally, politically consolidating power in himself alone. Four years later, he assumed the title Augustus. Vergil witnessed all this turmoil, and the warring often disrupted his life.

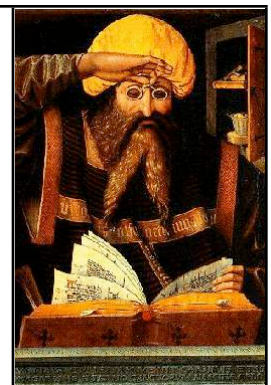
Immediately after finishing the *Georgics*, Vergil began his masterwork, the *Aeneid*. The *Aeneid* tells the story of the Trojan hero Aeneas' perilous flight from Troy to Italy following the Trojan War. In Italy, Aeneas' descendants would go on to found Rome. In the epic, Vergil repeatedly foreshadows the coming of Augustus, perhaps to silence critics who claimed that he achieved power through violence and treachery (Whether or not Vergil truly believed all the praise he heaped upon Augustus is a matter of debate). Yet the *Aeneid* is by no means a purely political work; like other epic poems, its subject stands on its own as a story for all time.

Vergil did not invent the story that Rome descended from Troy; he crafted the events narrated in the *Aeneid* from an existing tradition surrounding Aeneas. In Book XX of the *Iliad*, Aeneas faces off with Achilles, and we learn about Aeneas' lineage and his reputation for bravery. However, in that scene, he is no match for Achilles, who has been outfitted in armor forged by the divine smith Hephaestus. Poseidon rescues Aeneas from certain doom and praises the Trojan for his piety. Poseidon also prophesies that Aeneas will survive the Trojan War and assume leadership over the Trojan people.

Even after a decade years of composition, the meticulous Vergil did not consider the *Aeneid* fit for publication. He planned to spend three years editing it, but fell ill returning from a trip to Greece. Just before his death on September 21, 19 BCE, he ordered the manuscript of the *Aeneid* to be burned. Augustus intervened, however, arranging for the poem to be published with as few editorial changes as possible. The poem shows obvious signs of being incomplete, such as minor plot contradiction and 58 incomplete lines (called *tibicines*, or props). Regardless it became an instant classic, the centerpiece of Roman education, and the foundation of the Western literary tradition.

### Vergil or Vergil? Vergil's correct but...

Why the confusion? Words from other languages are often anglicized (i.e. rendered in English) in different ways but Vergil's name is a special case and both spellings have a long history. "Vergil" is the correct Anglicization of the poet's Latin name - Vergilius - but "Vergil" is more common in English. There are several theories for how the "i" intruded into his name. It may have come from a pun on the Latin word for a virgin or maiden (*virgo, virginis f.*) because Vergil was said to have avoided the sexual openness typical of Roman males. Alternatively the "i" could have come from a pun on the Latin word for a wand (*virga, virgae f.*) because later generations, especially during the Middle Ages, thought that Vergil with the son of a Celtic wizard and Vergil (and after his death, his bones and even his writings) possessed magical powers (as depicted Ludger tom Ring der Aelter's (1496-1547) portraits of Vergil on right.



## VERGIL'S LIFE

Date	Vergil's Life	Contemporary Events
70 BCE, Oct. 5	Vergil born near Mantua	Pompey and Crassus consuls; restoration of tribunician powers. Frequent wars in East.
67-64		Pompey routs pirates and then Mithridates; peace throughout Mediterranean
63	Vergil living in Cremona	Cicero consul; Cataline's conspiracy. Birth of C. Octavius (later Augustus)
60	Vergil studying in Cremona	Formation of the 'First Triumvirate': Caesar, Pompey and Crassus.
59		Caesar's failed consul
58		Caesar begins Gallic campaigns
55		Pompey and Crassus are consuls again
54	Vergil completes school in Cremona; goes to Milan.	Crassus sets out for Parthia; Caesar in Britain
53	Vergil goes to Rome for legal training.	Crassus killed at Carrhae; loses standards.
52-50	Vergil gradually rejects other vocations, devotes self exclusively to poetry.	Urban unrest; tension between Pompey and Caesar moves Rome to brink of civil war.
49	Vergil in Epicurean society at Cumae, writing	Caesar crosses the Rubicon, rapidly drives Pompey out of Italy
48-45		Caesar defeats Pompeian forces.
44		Caesar assassinated; by his will C. Octavius adopted (hence Octavian)
42		Philippi: Brutus and Cassius, the assassins, defeated by M. Antonius and Octavian
41	Vergil begins <i>Eclogues</i> : I and IX deal with farmers facing confiscation.	Octavian confiscates much of the land around Cremona for his veterans.
39-38	<i>Eclogues</i> completed; <i>Georgics</i> started	M. Antonius marries Octavia, Octavian's sister
31	<i>Georgics</i> completed; <i>Aeneid</i> started	Octavian and Agrippa defeat Antonius and Cleopatra at Actium.
27		Octavian assumes the name Augustus. First 'constitutional settlement'
19	Having completed most of the <i>Aeneid</i> , Vergil sets sail for Greece to devote three years to revision. But Augustus persuades him to return to Italy. Ill on his return trip, Vergil dies after landing at Brindisi, Sept. 21.	Augustus travels in East to secure empire, esp. against the Parthians. On the death of Vergil, publication of the <i>Aeneid</i> entrusted to Vergil's friends, talented poets named Varius and Tucca.
17	<i>Aeneid</i> probably published as part of Augustus' celebrations	Secular games are held; Horace, friend of Vergil, commissioned to write the <i>Carmen Saeculare</i> .