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## **Migrating with Your Gods: The Roman Myth of Origins as Shaped by Virgil**

Peoples who do not claim autochthony ('we sprang from the ground itself') generally tell stories about how they arrived where they did. These tend to be legitimating stories, displaying the necessity of, and the divine warrant for, their travels and relocation in their new land.

Two great myths of divinely sanctioned migration come down to us from antiquity, the Jewish and the Roman. The former still casts its long shadow today; the latter, as one says, is of 'academic interest' only.

The Roman myth, that their ancestors were refugees from conquered Troy, received its definitive and authoritative form in the *Aeneid*, the national epic composed by the poet Virgil (died 19 BCE) under the patronage of the emperor Augustus. Unlike most official propaganda pieces the *Aeneid* proved an enduring success. It succeeded not just on its aesthetic merits, considerable though these are, but because it was deemed to have defined the quality of responsible and pious Roman-ness in a way which could never be surpassed.

Key players in the story of the migration of Aeneas and his band of proto-Romans from Troy to Italy are the gods. The gods are present in the narrative not merely as accessories required by the conventions of epic or even as superior causal agents to move the story briskly and purposefully along. Rather, the gods are integral subjects of the story, which is about how they shape and are themselves shaped by the migrants, about how gods and humans alike grow into a common destiny.

The Jewish and the Roman migration stories tell how God/ the gods turn losers into winners. Both open with episodes of extraordinary divine violence. In the Jewish story those on the receiving end are the Egyptian oppressors who must be persuaded to 'let go' the Israelites. God himself, or his supernatural agents, works the miracles of destruction and effects the liberation which his enslaved people cannot realize themselves.<sup>1</sup>

In the *Aeneid* the story begins with the fall and sack of Troy, told retrospectively by Aeneas to Dido in the second book. The proto-Romans are both victims and refugees from that disaster. But the perpetrators are not simply the Greek victors pouring from their hiding place in the belly of the Trojan Horse. As Virgil makes clear in a passage of extraordinary power (2.588-623), Troy's real destroyers are the gods. As the maddened hero Aeneas seeks out Helen for a final act of vengeance — if I go I'm taking her with me — his mother Venus appears to him in plain sight and tells him that he must indeed go, but in another sense, and that those he must take care of are his wife, his father, and his son. The effective cause of Troy's ruin isn't Helen but the implacable hostility, the

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<sup>1</sup> That this myth is still sharply contested is well illustrated by an item in the current (April 2006, p. 22) issue of Harper's Magazine. Among the 'Readings' for the month is an excerpt from a list of changes 'proposed by religious organizations and scholars' to 'sixth- and seventh-grade social-science textbooks used in California'. One of the suggested changes reads as follows: 'Delete: "He set them free after the tenth plague. In this plague, God had killed all Egyptian firstborn sons." Change to: "Moses led the people from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land." A companion suggestion: 'Delete: "Unfortunately, Egyptian records from the time don't mention the Exodus of the Israelite slaves. And archaeology hasn't uncovered any evidence of their years in Egypt, nor of their dramatic departure."'

*inclementia*, of the gods. To make her point she reveals to him the actual presence of the gods intent on their works of destruction.

*apparent dirae facies inimicaque Troiae  
numina magna deum.*

The dreadful forms and the great powers of the gods hostile to Troy appear. (2.622-3)

Aeneas has no choice but to cut and run.

Aeneas' flight from Troy with his family generated one of the most enduring and fundamental images of Roman piety (2.707-20): the hero carrying his decrepit father Anchises on his shoulders and holding his young son Iulus/Ascanius by the hand,<sup>2</sup> while Anchises aloft carries the precious burden of the family gods, the Penates, destined to be the household gods alike of the gens Iulia and the people of Rome.<sup>3</sup>

This is neither the first nor the last appearance of the Penates in the *Aeneid*. Earlier in the tale of Troy's fall the ghost of Hector had appeared to the sleeping Aeneas with the first intimations of the catastrophe already unfolding. He urges Aeneas to fly, with the words,

*sacra suosque tibi commendat Troia penatis;  
hos cape fatorum comites, his moenia quaere  
magna, perarrato statues quae denique ponto.*

To you Troy entrusts her *sacra* and her household gods; take them as the companions of your fate and with them seek the mighty walls which you will find at last .... (2.293-5).

In the dream Aeneas then sees Hector 'carry forth from the inmost shrine [the image of] powerful Vesta and the ever-burning fire' (296-7).

*sic ait et manibus vittas Vestamque potentem  
aeternumque adytis effert penetralibus ignem.*<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The first three generations of males thus taken care of, what of Aeneas' wife Creusa? She tags along behind and is separated from the others in the confusion of their escape. Aeneas, when he has settled the refugees in temporary safety, plunges back into the looted and burning city to look for her. But he is restrained by an apparition of Creusa who tells him to desist because she has been taken into service by the Great Mother goddess to be her companion on Mount Ida: the consolation prize, since by the gods' will Aeneas must later take a new indigenous wife in Italy.

<sup>3</sup> The image enters the coinage as early as Julius Caesar; it is found on coins of Augustus and, much later, of Antoninus Pius: H. Mattingly, *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum*, Vol. 1 (London 1965), 5, note \*; Vol. 3 (1966), 141, Pl. 23.4; Vol. 4 (1968), 36, no. 237, Pl. 6.5; 203, no. 1264; 207, no. 1292, Pl. 30.5. Interestingly, the Antonine, i.e. post-Aeneid, coinage introduces Ascanius who is absent from the earlier issues. Also, while the Antonine coinage shows Anchises carrying a small chest, presumably with the Penates inside à la Aeneid, the earlier types show Aeneas carrying the Palladium, the image of Pallas Athena actually preserved in Rome as the talisman of the city's security and believed to have been brought from Troy by one intermediary or another (see *Oxford Classical Dictionary* s. 'Palladium').

<sup>4</sup> The verb 'carry forth' (*effert*) is significant. It indicates a pre-emptive move against *evocatio*, the practice of summoning forth a doomed city's gods and persuading them to side with the victor. The Greeks, as Aeneas will see all too soon, already have the vengeful Olympians on side, but they will not now be able to

Already then, the transfer of the essentials of the nation's sacred survival kit is under way, the sacred fire and the family gods. At the start of Book Three the moment of literal launch is captured thus:

*feror exsul in altum  
cum sociis natoque penatibus et magnis dis.*

I'm borne away an exile on the deep with my companions, my son, my Penates, and the great gods. (3.11-12)<sup>5</sup>

Early in the migration narrative the Penates make another appearance. Misled by Anchises (in one of his 'senior moments'), the Trojan refugees have tried to settle in Crete. Predictably everything goes wrong, and it is at this juncture that the Penates, who of course are physically present with Aeneas in the settlement, appear to him in a dream to explain that Italy is the refugees' proper destination, thus obviating the need to return to Delos and consult the oracle of Apollo all over again. They speak to him of their function as guardians past, present, and future.

*nos te Dardania incensa tuaque arma secuta,  
nos tumidum sub te permensi classibus aequor,  
idem venturos tollemus in astra nepotes  
imperiumque urbi dabimus.*

From Troy's burning we have followed you and your arms; under you we have measured out the billowing sea; the very same, we shall raise your descendants to the stars and bestow empire on their city. (3.156-9)

Sacred baggage: for the proto-Romans, as we have seen, the images of the Penates, the image of Vesta, and the sacred fire; for the Israelites, no images — certainly not a golden calf (Exodus 32) — but instead the Ark of the Covenant and the Tabernacle (Exodus 25 ff.). Unlike the *sacra* retrieved from Troy, the Ark and the Tabernacle are created during the migration, foreshadowing the Temple where they will come to rest. Together with the Law which they literally enshrine, they are at the centre of the cult of Jahweh instituted beneath Mt. Sinai.

Being a self-proclaimed 'jealous' god, Jahweh commands his Israelites to extirpate the *sacra* of the Canaanites & co. and to make no covenant with them: 'no, you shall demolish their altars, smash their sacred pillars and cut down their sacred poles' (Exodus 34:13). Aeneas' mission is more nuanced, partly because the *Aeneid* was written

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neutralize the recuperative forces implicit in her inmost *sacra*. On the persistence of the idea of *evocatio*, if not the actual practice, see John Kloppenborg's study: 'Evocatio deorum and the date of Mark,' forthcoming in *Journal of Biblical Literature*. Also note the allusion to the Penates in the adjective here translated 'inmost' (*penetralibus*).

<sup>5</sup> The identity of the 'great gods' is left ambiguous. What is entirely unambiguous is the power conferred on the phrase by its archaism: *et magnis dis* at a line-end breaks just about every principal of euphony in Augustan hexameter poetry. In fact it deliberately echoes Ennius two centuries earlier — *volentibu' cum magnis dis* (*Ann.* 201).

in more civilized and cosmopolitan times (and by a very civilized and cosmopolitan author), but mostly because the Roman myth of origins was genuinely inclusive. For example, to populate his new city Romulus, so the story goes, declared Rome an 'asylum' open to any riff-raff on the run, no questions asked. In Virgil's time and long before, Rome's self-conscious objective was to turn 'them' into 'us', or at least into potential 'us'-material.<sup>6</sup> Two peoples in particular merited customized treatment: first and to us more obviously, the Greeks, whose pantheon, it was long recognized, was or could be made virtually identical with Rome's, and whose cultural supremacy was universally acknowledged; secondly and closer to home, the Italians, with many of whom at the start of the first century BCE (91-87) Rome had fought a ferocious war, the so-called Social War (i.e. 'War of the Allies'), ending with the concession of Roman citizenship to all free Italians south of the River Po. When Virgil was writing the Social War was no more than a generation beyond living human memory. Healing its final scars was, as we shall see, one of Octavian's propaganda aims in the final round of the subsequent and even more catastrophic Civil Wars cunningly repackaged as united Italy versus Cleopatra's degenerate orient.

For Aeneas, therefore, a scenario of divinely sanctioned genocide on arrival in the promised land was not an option. What then was Virgil's solution? War there had to be, for the Homeric model required an Iliadic second half to the *Aeneid* to complement its Odysseyan first half. But, as Virgil told it, it was a war triggered by a misunderstanding, prosecuted by what one might term extremist elements on the Latin side, and overshadowed in the telling by the reconciliation and harmony of Latin and Roman which is fated to follow. On the divine plane it is of vengeful Juno's making and will be ended when she is won over by her patient and less obsessively partisan husband, the sovereign Jupiter.

Two episodes, separate but interwoven in the narrative Book Eight, merit our particular attention. One of them has a precedent in the *Iliad*, the other not. First the episode without precedent, Aeneas' visit to the site of Rome. According to tradition, the site of Rome was not vacant real estate when Aeneas came to look. It was already settled by a company of refugees, like the Trojans, but in this instance *Greek* refugees from Arcadia, led by Evander and his son Pallas, the latter destined to fight in Aeneas' cause and lose his life thereby. When Aeneas arrives at the site, the Arcadians are celebrating at the Ara Maxima a festival in honour of that quintessentially Greek demigod, Herakles/Hercules. Thus Greek *sacra* are pre-positioned on Rome's site even before the arrival of the Trojan proto-Romans. The contrast between the *Aeneid's* respect for local religion and local deities and the implacable hostility enjoined by Jahweh on the Israelites could not be starker. Virgil's attitude to other peoples' *sacra* is typically Roman: why trash what you can usefully recycle, unless of course there's a problem of public order or morals? Why risk alienating a god who might if appeased be helpful, or at the worst merely neutral.

Our second episode from Book Eight is the forging of new armour for Aeneas by Vulcan at the behest of Venus. The episode is calqued on the forging of new armour for Achilles by the same god at the behest of Thetis in *Iliad* Eighteen. In both accounts the

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<sup>6</sup> That there were numerous atrocities and much exploitation along the road is undeniable. Moreover, these days one is again rightly sceptical of great powers with self-declared missions to spread freedom, democracy, whatever, to the less enlightened, not necessarily by violence but by violence if necessary.

shield is the centrepiece. But whereas the shield of Achilles depicts the natural and human world as it actually is in peace and war, Aeneas' new shield features an encounter of gods and men in a battle far ahead in Rome's history, yet from the poet's external point of view fresh in the recent traumatic past — the battle of Actium (31 BCE) in which Octavian's fleet defeated the combined fleets of Marcus Antonius and Queen Cleopatra of Egypt, thus effectively bringing the Civil Wars to a close. The battle of Actium on the shield, like the fall of Troy as narrated by Aeneas, is played out at the supernatural level as well as the human. This time, though, the gods are 'on side'. They are the gods of Rome, of Italy, of the West, arrayed against the thetheriomorphic gods of Egypt.

On the one side, Augustus, leading the Italians into battle, with the senators and the people, the Penates and the great gods. (8.678-9)

(Yes, the phrase *penatibus et magnis dis* is indeed repeated from Book Three.) On the other,

the monstrous, multiform gods, barking Anubis, stretch forth their weapons against Neptune and Venus and against Minerva. (8.698-700)

Like Aeneas and his band of Trojan refugees, the gods too — at least our Western lot — have learned Responsibility.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> When I first read this book of the *Aeneid* some fifty years ago in England in the twilight of the British empire, I thought it stirring stuff indeed. Less so nowadays.