

**THE TROJAN ORIGIN THEME IN  
BOOK ONE OF VIRGIL'S *AENEID***

**BY KYLE POPE**

**LATIN 200  
DR. JEAN VALK  
MAY 4, 1998  
CORRECTED**

*Progeniem sed enim Troiano a sanguine duci audierat...*  
Yet in truth she had heard that a race was springing from Trojan blood...

– Virgil’s *Aeneid*, I. 19,20  
Ruston Fairclough, pg. 243

In the opening lines of Virgil’s beautiful epic the *Aeneid*, a theme is introduced around which the entire story will revolve — the alleged Trojan origin of the Roman people. We notice Virgil’s carefully crafted words which lay the foundation for this theme:

Arma virumque cano, Troiae qui  
primus ab oris Italiam fato profugus  
Laviniaque venit litora, multum ille et  
terris iactatus et alto ... dum conderet  
urbem inferretque deos Latio; genus  
unde Latinum Albanique patres atque  
altae moenia Romae. (I. 1-7).

Arms I sing and the man who first  
from the coasts of Troy, exiled by fate,  
came to Italy and Lavinian shores;  
much buffeted on sea and land ... till  
he should build a city and bring his  
gods to Latium; whence came the Latin  
race, the lords of Alba, and the walls of  
lofty Rome. (Fairclough, pg. 241).

With these words Virgil makes three assertions: 1.) The *genus Latinum* - “Latin race” sprang from a man “from the coasts of Troy, exiled by fate,” 2.) this *profugus* “exiled one” brought Trojan gods to Latium, and finally 3.) his descendants would build the *altae moenia Romae* - “walls of lofty Rome.” Throughout the epic these assertions are stated and restated repeatedly. Why are such assertions made? Is there any foundation to uphold such claims? In this study we will briefly consider the use of the Trojan origin theme in book one of the epic.

### **GENUS UNDE LATINUM - “From whence (came) the Latin race.”**

Identity is an important thing to any nation of people. What we think about who we are effects how we respond to one another and what we permit from other nations. To Virgil the Romans were a people prophetically destined to be the world power they were swiftly becoming. In lines two hundred and fifty-seven through two hundred and ninety-six we see this clearly. Jupiter

comforts Venus by declaring:

sublimemque feres ad sidera caeli magnanimum Aenean. (I. 259-260).	Thou shalt raise on high to the starry heaven great-souled Aeneas. (Fairclough, pg. 259).
---	---

Such indeed would occur. Aeneas made it through his trials to Italy to found his new nation. The Roman historian Livy would claim in his monumental work, *The History of Rome*, that on the Numicus River (the traditional site of Aeneas' grave) the people called him *Iovem indigetem* - "the local Jupiter" (I. 25-26). It would not have been enough for the Romans to imagine that they had descended from some obscure Italic tribe. They were the once mighty Trojans. These were not, however, the thieving, wife-stealing Trojans of Homer's epics. Instead, as Virgil declares in book three, lines one and two, they were *res Asiae Priamisque...gentem immeritam* - "the power of Asia and Priam's guiltless race" (Fairclough, pg. 349).

Looking again at Jupiter's speech to Venus we can see that not only was it important to establish noble origins for the people as a whole, but for their leaders as well. We notice:

at puer Ascanius, cui nunc cognomen Iulo additur (Ilus erat, dum res stetit Ilia regno)... (I. 267-268).	But the lad Ascanius, now surnamed Iulus— Ilus he was, while the Ilian state stood firm in sovereignty... (Fairclough, pg. 259).
--	---

Ilus was the name of the legendary founder of Troy as well as the region around the city itself (Autenrieth, pg. 145). To call Ascanius, the son of Aeneas, *Ilus*, associated Aeneas' heir with a regal past. Why the name change? We only have to look a few lines further to discover an answer.

After proclaiming the future accomplishments of Ascanius, Jupiter declares:

nascetur pulchra Troianus origine Caesar, imperium Oceano, famam qui terminet astris, Iulius, a magno demissum nomen Iulo. (I.286-288).	From this noble line shall be born the Trojan Caesar, who shall limit his empire with ocean, his glory with the stars, a Julius, name descended from great Iulus! (Fairclough, pg. 261).
--	--

This is political propaganda at its best. Why has Augustus gained such political power? It was ordained by Jupiter. Why in Italy? *Illic fas regna resurgere Troiae* (I. 206) - “There ’tis granted to Troy’s realm to rise again” (Fairclough, pg. 255). To Virgil the emerging Julio-Claudian dynasty is - *revocato a sanguine Teucris* (I. 235) - “from the restored blood of Teucer.” Why was Caesar justified in assuming such power for himself? 1.) He was only avenging - *infandos Troiae ... labores* (I. 597). - “Troy’s unutterable woes” (Fairclough, pg. 283). 2.) He was fulfilling his own destiny (as Jupiter had promised) to - *populos ...feroces contundet* (I. 263) - “crush proud nations” (Fairclough, pg. 259).

This claim of divine ordination is not at all unique in history. Just as claims of “Divine Right” allowed European feudal kings to oppress their people in the Middle Ages or the doctrine of “Manifest Destiny” in America’s early history led Americans to justify the extermination and deportation of Native Americans, so such associations with a Trojan past served to justify the actions of the empire and its “Trojan Caesar.” What is curious, however, is that this doctrine of Roman “manifest destiny” is advanced by Virgil. After the divisive battle of Philippi in 42 B.C., Virgil was himself deprived of his property until Octavian (the future Augustus) restored it to him (Smith, pg. 312). Virgil does not seem to resent the power which assumed the right to confiscate his property, but actually honors the commander of such powers.

### **ILIUM’S VANQUISHED GODS.**

Although in general terms the gods of Greek and Roman mythology are interchangeable, with only the names being changed occasionally, the Romans revered household gods known as *Penates*. This custom, which was shared neither by their Greek nor the Etruscan neighbors, has a

pronounced Eastern ring to it. In Semitic cultures such household gods were not at all uncommon, as may be seen in the biblical account of Rachel (one of the mothers of the twelve tribes of monotheistic Israel itself) stealing her father's household gods. (Genesis 31:19-37).

To Virgil these household gods, which are inseparably tied to all that the Romans, were passed on to them from Aeneas and Troy. When Juno persuades Aeolus to assault the Trojan ships, she speaks of the *Penates* almost as if they pose a threat, as much as the Trojans themselves. She declares:

gens inimica mihi Tyrrhenum navigat  
aequor Ilium in Italiam portans victosque  
Penates. (I. 67-68).

A people hateful to me sails the Tyrrhene sea, carrying into Italy Ilium's vanquished gods. (Fairclough, pg. 245-246).

Why would the queen of all the gods care that mere household gods were carried by Aeneas? We are unfortunately given no answer. Pierre Grimal points out in his *Dictionary of Classical Mythology* "There is no myth connected with these deities" (pg. 354). We do know something of the rituals associated with the *Penates*. William Smith in the revision of his *Classical Dictionary* suggests that the *penates* were kept in the *penetralia*, the innermost part of the house. They had their own place in every home's hearth. In their honor a perpetual fire was kept burning and first-fruits were dedicated to the deities (pg. 216). Even so, there are no stories about their deeds, no explanation of their origins or indication of their power. The very fact that their nature, mythology and significance is held in such obscurity may itself suggest a "transported" past from a forgotten culture.

**ALTAE MOENIA ROMAE - “walls of lofty Rome.”**

If Virgil’s Romans were Trojans reborn, and if the vanquished gods of Troy and the decree of the king of the gods sanctioned Rome’s power, then it would be essential for the new Trojans to have a new Troy. Rome was that city, and loyalty to that city was to be nurtured and cultivated. Just as Aeneas thought it more noble to die under the walls of Troy than in the storms of the sea (I. 95), the Roman citizens were called on to adopt such devotion for their city. Virgil calls upon the Romans to look back through the centuries and identify themselves with their Trojan ancestors. In so doing they are called on to transfer loyalty, compassion, and patriotism from the fallen walls of the ancient city to the grandeur of their own Rome.

In leaving Troy, Aeneas carried - *Troia gaza* - “Trojan treasure” (I.119). The Romans were to see their own riches as *Troia gaza* restored. It is surely no coincidence that in the same book Virgil will speak of the - *Troiae...moenibus altis* (I.95) - “high walls of Troy.” (Fairclough, pg. 247), and the - *altae moenia Romae*. (I. 7) - “walls of high Rome.” (Fairclough, pg. 241). This description of Troy is quite common. Some have suggested that it may go all the way back to Luwian texts which refer to *ali Wiliusa* - “steep Ilium[?]” (Wood, pg. 209). By changing placement of the adjective from *alta moenia* - “high walls” to *altae Romae* - “high Rome,” does Virgil suggest that Rome surpasses Troy in grandeur?

Later, (456-493), we see Aeneas carefully studying the scenes outside of the walls of Troy during the war. Painted on Carthaginian walls, are the offenses committed against the Trojans. Each offense could be thought of as one of those unspeakable woes (mentioned above). Not only does Virgil suggest that Rome is ordained to lead and conquer, but as the new Troy it is in a position to exact vengeance for ancient aggression.

## HISTORICAL VALIDITY.

As with many things about the Bronze-Age world, testing claims made by Classical writers hundreds of years after the fact is difficult if not impossible. The very character of epic is such that the line between historical reality and magnified legend becomes blurred. As Livy observed in the *prefatio* of *The History of Rome*:

Events before Rome was born or thought of have come to us in old tales with more of the charm of poetry than of a sound historical record... (De Sélincourt, pg. 33).

As a result, basic questions such as “was Aeneas really from Troy?” or “did Aeneas really flee to Italy?” or even “was there actually a historical character named Aeneas?” cannot be answered with any degree of certainty. What is clear is that the Romans believed in these people and accounts. In such tales they found values to cherish, an ancestry to take pride in, and a sense of self-worth that no one could take from them.

Even the most fantastic tales, which are overtly used as propaganda for the advancement of political or ideological goals, may contain some kernel of truth upon which the tale is built. Could this be the case with the Aeneid? Could it be that race of people which evolved into the most powerful empire of the ancient world actually traced their lineage to the “lofty walls of Troy”?

To fully explore this question in depth is beyond the scope of this study. A few observations regarding this might add to our consideration of the Trojan-origin theme. Michael Wood in his book *In Search of the Trojan War*, based upon excavations done at Hisarlik (modern-day northwestern Turkey), suggests that the Trojan War (if indeed it ever occurred) took place around 1250 B.C. (Wood, pg. 16). During these same years (and earlier) the cultural and political force which dominated

virtually all of modern-day Turkey was the Hittite empire. It has long been suggested since the discovery of the royal archives of the Hittite capital of Hattusas at modern-day Boghaz Köy that references to Troy might actually exist in these archives. Although some have dismissed such claims, Wood reintroduces the evidence, pointing out four references to people and places to the west of the Hittites which seem to be more than coincidence (Wood, pg. 207). In the chart below, we observe the Hittite names with their suggested Homeric equivalents:

Hittite	Homeric Greek		Meaning
Ahhiyawa	Achaiwoi	Ἀχαιοί	“Achaeans”
Alaksandus	Alexandros	Ἀλέξανδρος	“Alexander”
Wilusa	Wilios	φίλιος	“Ilios”
Taruisa	Troia	Τροία	“Troy”

Now, let us suppose that there was in fact some contact between the Hittites and the Trojans. Let us imagine further that from these same Trojans (as the *Aeneid* claims) descended the Romans, through exiled Aeneas. Given that language, through its borrowing, adaptation and gradual evolution of words, serves as a vast repository of the history of a culture, could it be that there exists in the Latin language itself any hints of such past contact?

With Hittite being the oldest known Indo-European language, while it would not be unusual to observe similarities between Hittite, Greek or Latin, what would be unusual is if one could identify instances in which Latin and Hittite were similar, but the corresponding Greek words were dissimilar. If such were the case it could not be argued that the words passed from Hittite through

Greek to Latin, but instead it would suggest that the ancestors of those Latin speakers in Italy themselves at some point had independent contact with Anatolian culture.

A brief examination of Hittite reveals that while most similarities between Latin and Hittite are shared with Greek, there are some striking instances where they are not. The chart in the Appendix, outlines seven words which are found in the *Aeneid*. Let us consider the use of four of these words:

**QUIS.** We observe first that when Aeneas cries to those - *quis ante ora patrum Troiae sub moenibus altis contigit* - “who before the eyes of (their) fathers died under the high walls of Troy” (I.95), he actually used a Hittite pronoun *-quis*.

**ITER.** When Venus asks Aeneas - *quove tenetis iter?* - “or to what road do you hold?” (I. 370), she uses the word *iter*, “road” which any Hittite could have understood to hold the same meaning.

**NOS.** In Aeneas’ claim - *nos Troia antiqua* - “we (are from) ancient Troy” (I. 375), he used a pronoun which the Hittites attached to a word to give it the very same meaning as the Latin *nos*.

**IUNGAM.** Finally, when Juno promises Deiopea to Aeolus, declaring - *conubio iungam stabili* - “I will yoke in stable marriage” (I.73), she uses a verb whose root meaning Hittite shares - “yoke.”

Does this prove that the Romans were Trojans? No. Are there other explanations for these similarities? Probably. Yet, what this does show is that there are some striking linguistic similarities shared by two cultures vastly separated by time and space. This demands a fair consideration of the cause for these similarities. Would linguistic change take a more diverse track in Greece, than in Italy? Would not those who lived closer to one another be more likely to share linguistic similarities? Could it be that Virgil has been explaining to us the cause for this all along?

APPENDIX

**WORD COMPARISON OF HITTITE, LATIN & GREEK**  
**Hittite & Latin Relationships**

Meaning	Hittite	Latin	Greek
'knee'	 gi-e-nu	genu	γόνυ gonu
'white'	 al-is	albus	λευκός leukos
'road'	 i-tar	iter	ὁδός hodos
'who?'	 ku-iš	quis	ὅς hos
'we'	 -na-aš	nos	ἡμεῖς hemeis
'yoke'	 i-ú-gán	iugum	ζυγόν zeugon
'cloud'	 ne-bi-eš	nubes	νέφος nephos

Composed from:

*Beginning Hittite*, by Warren H. Held.

*A Comparative Grammar of Sanskrit, Greek & Hittite*, by Satya Swarup Misra.

*Hittite Glossary*, by Edgar H. Sturtevant.

**WORKS CITED**

- Autenrieth, Georg, *A Homeric Dictionary*, (University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, OK, 1987).
- De Sélincourt, Aubrey , *Livy: The Early History of Rome*, (Viking Penguin Inc.,: New York, 1987).
- Fairclough, Ruston H. *Virgil: Eclogues, Georgics & Aeneid I-VI*, (Harvard University Press: London, 1994).
- Grimal, Pierre, *The Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, (Blackwell Publishers: Malden, MS, 1996).
- Held, Warren H., *Beginning Hittite*, (Slavica Publishers Inc.,: Columbus, OH, 1987).
- Misra, Satya Swarup, *A Comparative Grammar of Sanskrit, Greek & Hittite*, (World Press Private Ltd.,: Calcutta, 1968).
- Smith, William, *Smaller Classical Dictionary*, (E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc.,: New York, 1958).
- Sturtevant, Edgar H., *Hittite Glossary*, (University of Pennsylvania: Philadelphia, 1936).
- Wood, Michael, *In Search of the Trojan War*, (British Broadcasting Corporation: London, 1986).