

# Classical Civilisation A level

## Course plan

The Course Plan below shows the structure of the course and gives an outline of the contents. A sample from the course follows and is highlighted in the plan.

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AS/A English Language Course guide

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## Sample of the Classical Civilisation A level Course from Section 3

### Topic 1

# Beginnings: Virgil and Homer

## Introduction

Virgil's *Aeneid* is thought by many people to be the greatest work of Latin literature. It is a substantial, full-length epic poem, and it has remained pretty much of a best-seller, ever since it was written. It is clear that, in writing the *Aeneid*, Virgil deliberately set out to do something great. It took him 10 years, and, sadly, he died, just as he was giving it its final polish. The qualities which admirers usually find in it include sensitivity, compassion and a romantic feeling for the picturesque. None of these are qualities normally expected in a Roman. Although Virgil almost never includes his own undisguised voice in the narrative, nevertheless quite a strong sense of who he was comes through to the reader.

We could begin our study of the *Aeneid* at many points, but we begin with Virgil's use of Homer. There are several reasons for this choice. One is that we have just been studying Homer's *Odyssey*, so we already have a compass point there. Another is that both the Greeks and cultured Romans felt that Homer was basic to literature. However, perhaps the most important reason is that Virgil himself deliberately used Homer as a starting point, and he made this very obvious. He has been criticised for this, but if he is truly a great poet, we should be able to discover his reasons, and see why this was an important part of the design of his last and greatest work. In the exam, you will have one question, based on

the set passages, in which you will be asked to make a comparison between the two epics you have studied.

You will find that the *Aeneid* continues, expands and in many ways changes the idea of the world of the hero. This Roman epic was written in Latin more than 700 years after Homer wrote his epics in Greek. The form is still the same, the hexameter line. However, even in translation, you will begin to get a feel for a very different atmosphere.

Many of the old characters will appear again, almost always presented from a different point of view. The biggest change affecting the way the story is told is a change of sides. Here, the hero is a Trojan, an escapee and survivor from the fall of Troy – Prince Aeneas. We first meet him, as we did Odysseus, a few years after the war, still struggling to find a home.

Aeneas is not as entirely fictional as Odysseus. Of course he is fictional, but the goal of his story is to get him away from Troy to found a new city – the city of Rome. The original audience of the poem was a Roman one: Rome was very much the centre of their world, whether they actually lived there or elsewhere in the Empire. Rome is mostly viewed as a very positive value, and the successful outcome of Aeneas' quest is essential for the real-life reader. As we shall see, Aeneas was chosen and destined by the gods to found the city, and this was to happen way back in the heroic age, centuries before Romulus and Remus, also famed as founders. (They were the twins who were suckled by a wolf).

Aeneas' task was no easy one and we shall see what special heroic qualities he needed to carry it out.

You will probably need 2.5 hours to complete this topic.



## Objectives

When you have completed this topic you should be able to:

- outline the contents of Book 1 of the *Aeneid*
- explain Virgil's method of creative imitation of Homer
- identify ways in which Virgil differs from Homer.

## Virgil and Homer: creative imitation

Although we are fairly sure that Homer's epics were originally oral compositions – that is to say, they were committed to memory and

recited by bards with musical accompaniment – there is still much uncertainty as to how, when and by whom Homer’s poems were written in the form that we have them today.

Virgil was already well-known for his other poetry, such as the *Georgics* and the *Eclogues*, but he wasn’t the first Roman to write epic in the dactylic hexameter to rival Homer’s work: this had been done previously by Ennius (c.239–169 BC) who had written a history of Rome from the fall of Troy to his present day. We know that Virgil spent approximately 10 years on his epic and died before the final revisions could be completed.

As you read the epic, you may notice how Books 1-6 seem to serve as Aeneas’ wanderings, or *Odyssey* and, if you have read Homer’s other epic, that Books 7-12 are Aeneas’ fight for his city, or *Iliad*. This ‘borrowing’ from Homer was intentional and showed that Virgil sought to achieve in one epic what Homer had taken two epics to do. This ‘refinement’ is typical of the period in which Virgil was writing.

## Activity 1

(Allow 20 minutes)



Re-read the opening lines of the *Odyssey* (up to line 10). Now read the first 11 lines of the *Aeneid*. There are some similarities and some differences between Homer’s opening and Virgil’s; write a list of these.

Here are our suggestions. You may have noticed different things.

### Study hint

Remember that any points you make in your assignments or in your exam responses are valid as long as you can back them up with evidence from the text.

Similarities:

- In both epics, the heroes are introduced immediately, in the first line, with extra comments to characterise them. We are told that both heroes will suffer – a hint at the exciting events of the stories to follow.

- Odysseus will see many cities and add wisdom to his natural sharp wits. He will be a hero who learns from his own experience. Also he is 'prevented from returning to the home and wife he yearned for'.
- Aeneas is 'fated to be an exile ... Great too were his sufferings in war before he could found his city ...' Already, then, Aeneas is characterised as finding his personal meaning within a much larger context than a 'homecoming'. Aeneas does not only live for himself but for others: he is the man of Duty and of Destiny.
- There will be an 'upstairs, downstairs' element in each of the poems. The gods are involved in the doings on earth, and each hero has an implacable enemy in one of the Olympian gods, as well as supernatural allies. In the *Odyssey*, Poseidon is the enemy. In the *Aeneid*, it is Juno (Greek: Hera).

Differences:

- Homer's introduction is fairly straightforward and quickly leads into the flow of the actual narrative. Virgil introduces more complex issues, including reference to Rome, the intended reader's own city.
- Homer asks the Muse for straightforward narrative information. Virgil asks a question which reflects his own personal reactions to the story he tells: 'Can there be so much anger in the hearts of the heavenly gods?' We already hear the poet's own voice invading the narrative, with his philosophical questioning, sensitivity and doubt.

### Study hint

You may notice that the line numbers given in the Penguin text do not always match the line numbers you will get by counting. This is because you are reading a translation, so the text covered by a group of, say, 10 lines in the original may occupy a line or two more in the translation. If you are using a different translation, the line numbers may also vary slightly from those given in these course notes. However, the line numbers should be accurate enough for you to navigate whichever text you are using.

## Themes

Important non-Homeric themes are introduced in the opening passage of the *Aeneid*: for example, there is reference to 'the high walls of Rome' and 'the Latin race', and Aeneas is spoken of as 'fated'. The ideas of Rome and destiny are large linked themes that

Virgil develops throughout the poem. This introductory passage acts like the overture to an opera, where some of the themes are hinted at very briefly in the expectation that they will be fully developed later on, in the main work.



Now read the whole of Book 1. Focus on the story for now, reading at your natural pace. Let yourself respond to the imaginative world that Virgil is creating for you.

## Activity 2

(Allow 10 minutes)



Carefully re-read the passage during which we are introduced to our hero, Aeneas, by name for the first time. Begin at the words 'At these words ...' and end at '... timbers sprang' (lines 82–123). Then re-read *Odyssey* Book 5, lines 282–351.

Why does Virgil introduce his hero in this seemingly unheroic way? Is Virgil taking a risk? If so, why do you think he has done this?

Here are our ideas:

- A glance at the *Odyssey* passage shows us that Aeneas' speech is very closely modelled on that of Odysseus in a similar situation. (*Aeneid*: 'A sudden chill went through Aeneas'; 'Odysseus' knees shook and his spirit failed'; *Aeneid*: '... many, many times more fortunate than I'; *Odyssey*: 'Three times and four times blessed ...') This continues the imitation that we noted in the 'prologue' section.
- Any Roman reader of the poem would immediately recognise the literary source of this passage. He or she would then make associations between the great hero, Odysseus, and this hero, Aeneas, newly brought to life by Virgil. The new Roman epic is subtly acquiring a kind of pedigree or authentication.
- Aeneas mentions as many of the heroes of the Trojan War as possible in his brief speech. This links him firmly with the famous heroic struggle, even though here we see him weak and despairing. Our first glimpse of Odysseus on Calypso's isle also showed him weeping and despairing. If a hero starts at the bottom, his only possible direction is up. This will evoke empathy for the character from a compassionate reader.



- It is exciting to meet our hero struggling for his life in a storm at sea, a dramatic opening. Like Odysseus' shipwreck, it is flatteringly caused by a god, and therefore is heroic.
- The reader has no idea yet how Aeneas has arrived at this point. In terms of narrative structure, both poems have started **in medias res** (i.e. half way through the story), and will return to the beginning by means of 'flashbacks'.

You may have picked out at least one or two of these points – or discovered other equally valid ones.

Virgil uses Homeric echoes very deliberately to show that he is challenging the great Homer at his own game of epic writing. He intends to outdo Homer with a heightened situation – a more dramatic shipwreck, the outraged intervention of Neptune that follows, etc.

### Activity 3

(Allow 10 minutes)

Write two or three sentences comparing each of the following:



- 1 *Aeneid*, Book 1, lines 158–70, from 'Aeneas and his men ...' to 'to hold them fast'; *Odyssey*, Book 13, lines 93–112.
- 2 *Aeneid*, Book 1, lines 180–209, from 'Meanwhile, Aeneas climbed a rock ...' to 'deep in his heart'; *Odyssey*, lines 145–77.

- 1 The harbour that Aeneas finds at Carthage clearly borrows details from the bay of Phorcys on Ithaca (Ithaka). In each example, no ship need be tied up because it is so sheltered, and there is a cave of the nymphs with shaped stones inside. Virgil will expect his readers to be aware of this similarity. But why would he use these similar details for such a different situation? Odysseus was arriving home to meet his wife; Aeneas is about to meet the only woman with whom he will have a passionate relationship in the poem, but it will be an impossible one, brought about by the power of Venus and the enmity of Juno. Virgil gives us a little nudge here, which turns out to be deceptive: it looks like a homecoming, but in fact Aeneas has been blown right off course and Carthage can never truly be his home.
- 2 In the second *Aeneid* passage, Virgil deliberately confuses the picture. Soon after landing at Carthage, Aeneas climbs to a high

point for a lookout, and then shoots deer to feed his companions. These were the first actions of Odysseus on Circe's island, so we are now getting a thoroughly mixed message from this selection of allusions to the *Odyssey*. In other words, is this a homecoming or a distraction? The passage ends with Aeneas' words of encouragement to his companions. They have escaped all the same dangers as Odysseus, but their destiny is something much greater and more complex than his: 'Latium ... Fates ... place of rest' (line 207).

## Activity 4

(Allow 10 minutes)

Now re-read these two passages:



*Aeneid*, Book 1, lines 371–418, from 'In reply to her questions Aeneas ...' to 'fresh-cut flowers', where Aeneas meets Venus; *Odyssey*, Book 1, lines 80–318, where Telemachus meets Athene. List any differences and similarities you notice.

These are our answers – yours may be different:

- In each passage, a disguised goddess meets a mortal man in order to help him.
- In the *Odyssey*, Athene meets Telemachus, who is the son of her favourite, Odysseus. In the *Aeneid*, Venus meets her own son, Aeneas.

Athene has taken the disguise of a particular man, Mentos, and her appearance is described in a non-emotive, matter-of-fact way. She has a clear agenda for Telemachus – to 'instil more spirit in him' and urge him on to a more adult sense of responsibility. This is clearly accomplished and Telemachus takes on the tasks Athene suggests. Telemachus feels satisfied and strengthened by his contact with the goddess. He feels, as a fatherless young man, that the stranger has spoken to him 'like a father talking to his son'.

Venus is described twice, as a beguiling and seductive figure. First she appears like a chic and sporty huntress (lines 319–21):

... her hair was unbound and streaming in the wind and her flowing dress was caught up above the knee.

Notice also her delightful 'purple boots with this high ankle binding'. Later, Venus is revealed as the sensuous goddess of love (lines 402–5):

When she had finished speaking and was turning away, her neck shone with a rosy light and her hair breathed the divine odour of ambrosia. Her dress flowed free to her feet and as she walked he knew she was truly a goddess.

But, delightful as she appears, there is no rapport between the mother and son. There is even a moment of ironic humour when Aeneas unconsciously parodies Odysseus:

I am Aeneas known for my devotion ... and my fame has reached beyond the skies.

(*Aeneid*, lines 377–9, cf. *Odyssey*, Book 9, paragraph 3)

Venus has no patience to listen to all this, and brusquely interrupts to give him his instructions. Aeneas finally recognises his own mother – just as she departs. Although he has received helpful information, he is emotionally unsatisfied and pleads with her for an open, straightforward relationship which he is obviously never going to have (line 408, 'You too are cruel.'). However, the goddess seems indifferent to his pleas; having done what she came to do, she hurries 'happily' back to her luxurious home in Paphos.

In terms of the plot, Venus is used to tell Aeneas, and the reader, all they need to know about Dido. But psychologically and emotionally, we are left with an impression of rejection and loneliness on the part of Aeneas.

## Activity 5

(Allow 5 minutes)

As you read on, notice how Virgil has Aeneas move through a sequence of descriptive episodes. Each one yields another emotive reaction from Aeneas.



Read to the words 'no one saw him' (line 441), and note down Aeneas' reaction. Can you explain it?

Virgil makes us 'see' the new city being built. Not only is building going on, but also laws are being given, government set up and a cultural life catered for. The senate, theatre and other features mentioned were characteristic of the future Rome, as the Roman audience would know. Aeneas wistfully sees in it an image of his own quest for a city: 'How fortunate they are!' This is not unlike the

moment when Odysseus pauses to admire the beautiful estate of Alcinous on Scherie.



## Activity 6

(Allow 5 minutes)

Now read on to 'his cheeks' (line 468). Explain Aeneas' reaction in this passage.

Aeneas is now looking at a work of art, a kind of mini-epic in picture form. He sees that the story can be read from the Trojan point of view. Where Homer has Achilles as hero of the winning Greek side, Trojan Aeneas can 'read' him as 'hostile'. At the sight, he weeps, bursting out with one of the most famous lines of the whole *Aeneid*: '... there are tears for suffering and men's hearts are touched by what man has to bear'.

At last he feels understood and comforted – the consolation he wanted but didn't get from his mother, Venus.

The Latin is perhaps worth quoting since you may meet it in other literature:

Sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt.

This untranslatable line, occurring in this context, is perhaps also intended to sum up something of Virgil's philosophy of art. It suggests that the purpose of art is not only to depict human suffering, but also to reflect it back to the audience themselves. Aeneas is able to feed upon these images of suffering and to ease his own soul through the comprehension shown there. For us, Aeneas himself is a fictional and therefore 'insubstantial figure', but this does not take away from the purpose of the fiction – to speak to our hearts.



Now read on to 'men in battle' (line 495). Note how this image of a warrior maiden, the Amazon Penthesilea, leads on to the entrance of Queen Dido, another splendid woman doing a man's job.

This transition works beautifully as Aeneas turns from the image to the reality. There is an extra twist for those who know the story of Penthesilea: the Amazon met her death at the hand of Achilles. As she died, so the story goes, the eyes of the two warriors met and they fell in love – too late. Many vase paintings show this famous

scene – and the sequel, where Achilles tenderly carries her corpse from the battlefield. Clearly this story does not bode well.

### Study hint

The extended description of a work of art is known as **ekphrasis**. Virgil will use ekphrasis several times in the *Aeneid*.

## Activity 7

(Allow 5 minutes)

Carefully re-read the passage describing Dido in Book 1 (lines 496–509), from 'While Trojan Aeneas ...' to 'allocating it by lot'.

Now re-read the passage describing Nausicaa in the *Odyssey* (Book 6, lines 99–109).

Jot down any similarities and differences that occur to you. What do you think is the effect of each passage? Remember to take into account the way each author develops his story before and after the passages we are examining.



Among the similarities, you may have noticed:

- In each passage, a young woman is compared to Diana (Greek: Artemis), the virgin huntress, goddess of the moon.
- Each young woman is the leader of a group, just as Diana is the leader of her group of nymphs.
- It is stated or implied that both Dido and Nausicaa are the tallest and most beautiful, like the goddess.
- In each passage, it is mentioned that Latona (Greek: Leto), the mother of the goddess, takes pleasure in seeing her daughter's beauty.

Note: Cynthia is another name for Diana/Artemis.

You may have noted these differences:

- Nausicaa is a princess, but we see her doing laundry at the river, having a beach picnic, and playing ball with young girls as playmates.
- In contrast, Dido is a great queen in her own right. She is accompanied by men who are her subjects. Her tasks are

queenly; she arrives at a temple and then gives 'laws and rules of conduct', seated on a throne

## The Homeric simile

You probably recognised that Virgil is here using the special feature of epic style known as the Homeric simile. Remember that a simile is a form of description where something is directly compared to something else, for example, 'as good as gold'. The Homeric simile is a comparison which is drawn out and elaborated, sometimes almost into a little story, as here. The basic image, or simile, is the same in both passages. It is quite evident that Virgil is deliberately copying Homer here, and wants us to know it. The little detail about Latona emphasises this, since it can hardly be a coincidence. The basic situation is similar. The hero has been shipwrecked on a strange shore. He meets with a woman and has to ask for her help. But Virgil has transposed the whole situation to something very much grander. The situation between Odysseus and Nausicaa has been potentially rather romantic, but it is kept well within the bounds of propriety and it will not develop as a relationship. In part, that is its charm. But the meeting of Dido and Aeneas will become (as it were) material for grand opera. It will form the major theme of the first half of the story, and be (to many readers) the most memorable aspect of the *Aeneid*.

### Activity 8

(Allow 5 minutes)



At the end of Book 1, we meet Venus again. How does her behaviour from the words 'But Venus ...' (line 656) to the end of Book 1 match up with our impression of her in the passage in Activity 4? Write a sentence or two exploring your own reactions to her behaviour.

Venus is clearly a tricky, untrustworthy person. There is something very sinister in the way she abducts the little Ascanius in a drugged sleep, even though she lifts him into the 'high Idalian woods, where the soft amaracus breathed its fragrant shade and twined its flowers around him' (lines 693–5). But poor Dido is the real victim, as she embraces Cupid (the pretended Ascanius) on her lap, not knowing 'what a great god was sitting there marking her out to

suffer' (line 719). It will never be quite clear why Venus plays this elaborate trick, except that it perfectly fits her nature.

These two passages about Venus may leave us with an impression of foreboding, ambiguity and uncertainty. However, the negative feeling is balanced by richly colourful visual impressions and a conscious evocation of beauty, apparent throughout Book 1 but especially noticeable in the descriptions of Venus herself and of Dido's gorgeous feast.

## Activity 9

(Allow 5 minutes)



Write two or three sentences comparing the feast of Dido (line 696 to the end of Book 1) with the feast of Alcinous on Phaeacia in Book 7 of the Odyssey.

These are our ideas:

- The palace of Alcinous is clearly as fantastic and splendid as Homer could make it. The grounds are well-ordered and productive, the palace decorated and colourful, and the feast features the expected hospitality. The palace of Dido, though her city is only partly built, is as luxurious as possible in the most opulent Roman style of the first century BC: the 'lamps ... hung from the gold-coffered ceiling', the 'golden bowl heavy with jewels', Dido's 'golden couch' under a rich awning, the 'purple coverlets', and the 'embroidered couches', and so on.
- Dido herself stands in for Nausicaa, Arete and Alcinous simultaneously, because she is queen, monarch and romantic, unattached woman.
- Each hero arrives as a castaway.
- Each host has an establishment that is like what the hero is seeking for himself: Alcinous has a harmonious family and kingdom; Dido has already founded and is building her city.
- A bard, Iopas, sings at the feast, like Demodocus the bard on Phaeacia.
- The feast of Dido gives Aeneas a chance to tell his 'odyssey', the tale of his adventures so far, as Odysseus did at the court of Alcinous. This introduces the 'flashbacks' of Books 2 and 3.

- The big difference between Dido and Alcinous is her involvement with her guest: she is falling madly in love with him.

## Self check

(Allow 20 minutes)

Search out and list in your notes as many Homeric echoes as you can from Book 1, whether brief or more extensive.

You will find feedback to self checks at the end of the section.

## Summary

You have now reached the end of Book 1 of Virgil's great Roman epic, the *Aeneid*. As with the *Odyssey*, Book 1 covers quite a lot of ground, introducing themes, characters, setting, and also acclimatising the reader to the poet's style, method of story-telling, and major concerns.

Like Homer, Virgil has started his story in *medias res* – i.e. halfway through. He will employ flashback in the next two books to bring us up to date with the current situation. From these books we will find out who Aeneas is and where his idea of a special destiny has come from.

We have been exploring the nature of Virgil's creative imitation of Homer. This is an activity which Virgil himself intends his readers to engage in.

## Key terms

**dactylic hexameter:** a poetic metre consisting of six feet – a foot being made up of two long syllables or one long and two short syllables, thus enabling the poet to vary the speed and mood of each line

**in medias res:** starting halfway through the story

**ekphrasis:** the extended





## What next?

We hope this sample has helped you to decide whether this course is right for you.

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact us using the details below.

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