
Contrasting Virgil's Aeneid and Early History of Rome by Livy

Virgil and Livy were the authors of two substantially different works; one a propagandist epic in the style of Homer, the other an informed account of Rome's history. This said, it is interesting to note Virgil's inclusion of short historical narratives within the fictional tale, a fact which allows a historiographical comparison to be made between him and Livy: namely what effect they intended their accounts to have on the Roman reader. Moreover, *The Aeneid* and the *Early History of Rome* both provide a view on the subject of Rome's founding. That Virgil's historical passages differ drastically from Livy's is not in doubt, and the view could even be taken that they are not history at all. However, this essay will seek to demonstrate, by using the view of Sempronius Asellio, that history could be used to 'make men more eager to defend their country, or more reluctant to do wrong'[1].

Virgil's accounts were more than just a list of events that may or may not have happened. Though largely biased, and in essence mere islands of history in a sea of fiction, Virgil's take on historical events were intended to have an effect on the Roman reader every bit as powerful as Livy's purposeful and scholarly documentation. The first obstacle to cross when discussing history in the context of Ancient Rome is what history meant to the Ancient Roman. In discovering this, it can be shown that whilst Virgil was a poet, and Livy a historian, they were both equally able to employ history as a tool to strongly influence a Roman reader. In antiquity, history was not the same as the modern sense of the word and consequently, the line between the fact and fiction of the past would have been a lot thinner to an ancient Roman. Today, history is a rich academic pursuit intended to provide society with an understanding of the past as full and informed as possible. It is often taught as an obligatory subject to younger students, and continues as an optional one through all tiers of education, providing much of the populace with a rudimentary ability to interpret history. In Rome, par contra, history was not an academic profession in nearly the same way. Instead, only those with enough financial freedom and time on their hands could pursue the writing of history, meaning most average Romans had to rely upon the collective memory of the Empire, something created and sustained by public objects, statues and engravings.

Though masses of Romans would not have been able to read Virgil or Livy, by contributing to the legends of well-known figures like Aeneas and Romulus, both writers would have had an indirect effect on a Roman's take on their Empire's history as people who did read them would have attached the contents of poem and histories alike to figures or events from the distant past. Both writers enjoyed intimacy with the Emperor, and widespread respect,[2] further

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

increasing their influential capacity, leading to the conclusion that whether poet or historian, the average Roman would have taken their inputs to history seriously. The first point of comparison to consider is why each writer set out to present their writings in the way that they did. This consideration reveals the intent of the poet and the historian was one and the same. Traditional values that permeated Rome at the time of both writers included military prestige and *pietas* – devotion to one's Gods and society. Livy and Virgil both played on these values in an effort to improve their readers in some way.

At the start of his prolific series of histories, Livy states 'The study of history is the best medicine for a sick mind... fine things to take as models, base things, rotten through and through, to avoid.' [3] It is clear here that one effect he intended to have on a reader is for them to learn from the mistakes, and emulate the positive deeds of the past, thereby improving themselves in the process. When taken in conjunction with his opinion that the Roman society of his own time was tormented by troubles [4], it can be postulated that Livy wished for his histories to ameliorate Roman society. Virgil's *Aeneid* too includes similar themes. As a confidant of Augustus, Virgil presumably wrote the epic as an elaborate piece of propaganda, and in doing so, he would have tried to invoke in readers respect for Roman values and society. The description of Aeneas from Darius Phrygius depicts him as eloquent, courteous, prudent, pious, and charming [5], meaning Virgil had presented the progenitor of Rome as possessing a number of upstanding Roman values, intending to have them rekindled in those who read his work.

Livy and Virgil could have also sought to improve their societies by making Augustus an emperor to admire, raising the standard of *pietas* in Rome. Virgil constructs a tacit link between Aeneas and Augustus, founder and re-founder, and if the aforementioned qualities of Aeneas are used in this context, then readers may well have been encouraged to consider Augustus equally great. The perfect line to use as an example would be 'Augustus Caesar... the man who will bring back the golden years to the fields of Latium' [6], and of course Vulcan's depiction of Actium and Augustus' behavior after the battle also present the emperor as pious and mighty [7]. If readers were convinced to follow their emperor with the same zeal as those who in the past followed Aeneas to the great deeds he achieved, it would serve to bolster patriotism and respect for Rome and its emperor, aiding social cohesion and development. As said before, this was the intended aim of Livy's histories and a similar reference to Augustus can be observed in the sentence 'Augustus Caesar brought peace to the world by land and sea' [8], used in comparison to the paragon Numa Pompilius. These examples serve to show that both Livy and Virgil presented historical figures as to be emulated, then went on to compare the best of them to Augustus for as much positive impact as possible on society as a whole.

After establishing why each book was written, the question of how each writer presented their history unveils a new similarity. This lies in the shared reliance on the nature of historical

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

characters to develop an account of the past. This can be seen quite evidently in Virgil's Underworld procession[9], and indeed throughout all of Livy's writing. The view was posited by Ogilvie that Livy sought to recreate the style of Thucydides[10], on the basis that human nature was constant and thus predictable.[11] For example, he praises to a great extent the aforementioned Sabine king Numa Pompilius[12]. In doing so, he was attributing a good reign to a man who was said to be just, wise and pious. His race would have impacted on a reader too; as a Sabine, he was theoretically a foreigner at the time. Livy portrays him as a good king in spite of this, encouraging the acceptance of and goodwill towards non-Roman people.

By contrast, his account of the despotic Tarquinius Superbus is less than flattering. Asserting that his 'brutal and unbridled lust' and 'arrogant and tyrannical behavior'[13] was not to be emulated, he was attempting to ward off like-minded behavior in his own society. The list of characters goes on, a couple more being Lucius Brutus as the Republican hero[14] and Appius Claudius as the 'heartless tyrant'[15]. Howe draws attention to some of the behavioral patterns of Aeneas' character too – his devotion to family and in particular the mercy and tenderness displayed at the funeral games of Anchises[16]. When Dares draws near to death against Entellus, Aeneas checks the fury of the latter and prevents further harm from being done[17], something Virgil clearly saw to be a noble gesture, emphasized so as to be repeated. The subsequent quote from Aeneas to Dares: 'yield to God'[18] also adds a measure of piety, another commendable value. Howe goes on to say that the passages wherein Aeneas is presented as having such worthy virtues are 'so rich' that 'space forbids a mere enumeration of instances of it'[19], serving to demonstrate just how much effort Virgil expended in order to make Aeneas as impactful a character as possible on the reader.

The underworld procession also provides some evidence to suggest Virgil's writings can be viewed as historical. The characters in this procession are presented as prophecy to Aeneas but would have been history to Virgil's audience. Virgil hails Romulus with grandiose language, 'the man who founded Rome in all her glory... whose spirit shall rise to the heights of Olympus'[20], thereby attempting to invoke a sense of reverence towards such a founder, and a possible desire to see Virgil's words come to fruition by working to improve the Roman empire. Ancus is said to be 'overly boastful, too fond even now of the breath of popular favour'[21]. This is rather difficult to interpret, but a return to Livy's assertion that his society was in decay could suggest Virgil was attempting a warning, using Ancus as an example. Historically, this king was responsible for the ascendancy of the Tarquin kings in letting Lucumo gain political prominence[22]. If Virgil was implying that Ancus was not politically aware enough, overly-comfortable in his position, it is possible he intended to spark some social awareness in readers by referencing this past mistake.

As is now evident, both writers clearly portray the characters of historical figures to present contemporary readers with examples to follow or disregard. One area in which both writers

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

certainly differed were their attitudes towards history, yet both attitudes may nevertheless have created the same effect on a reader. It is clear that, as a poet, Virgil had little interest in sticking to fact, and indeed, even if the foundation myth of Aeneas was believed, there would even then have been a dearth of evidence with which to write a whole book. In contrast, Livy explicitly states that he wishes not to make 'extravagant claims'[23], and his treatment of Roman myth is refreshingly fleeting, as he progresses swiftly on to more reliable periods of time. Consequently, Virgil's epic only employed history if it meant it could make Rome appear worthier to a Roman; whereas Livy employed history for history's sake. Yet as Ogilvie states, Livy's historian predecessors were all senators writing in the interest of Rome, much like Virgil[24]. With the works of these men being sources used by Livy, alongside his clear love for Rome[25] inevitably affecting his bias, the effect of his history may have been strikingly similar to Virgil's regarding the creation of patriotism and love for Rome.

It is apparent that there were fewer differences between Virgil and Livy than may have been assumed. While the poet was inevitably more flamboyant than the historian, both approached their historical narratives with the same desire; to instill within readers a set of positive Roman values and a love of their Empire intended to improve a society 'in love with death both individual and collective'[26]. Both writers were in an excellent position to manipulate the collective memory of the Empire and so whatever they wrote would have impacted somehow on the populace. Finally, the early history of Rome is a time for which little evidence has ever been accessible – the first historian to write on it did so 200 years after the monarchy[27]. As such, all 'history' for this period is subject to debate, and it can be argued that the impact on the reader of such writings is more important than the accuracy of the history itself, creating a similarity between Livy and Virgil that disregards their genres.

Bibliography

Howe, G. (1930), 'The Development of the Character of Aeneas'. *The Classical Journal*. The Classical Association of the Middle West and South: 182-193

S?incourt, A. and Ogilvie, R.M. (1971), *Livy. 'The Early History of Rome'*. Penguin.

West, D. (2003), *Virgil. 'The Aeneid'*. Penguin.

[1] Sempronius Asellio, *Rer. Ges. Lib.* 1 [2] Pliny, *Epistles* 2.3 [3] Livy, *Early His.* 1.0 [4] *ibid* [5] Dares Phrygius, *His. Troy* [6] Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.792-793 [7] *ibid* 8.675-728 [8] Livy, *Early His.* 1.18 [9] Virgil, *Aeneid* 6. [10] Ogilvie 1971:2-3 [11] Thuc. 1.22.4 [12] *ibid* 1.18 [13] Livy, *Early His.* 1.59 [14] *ibid* 1.57-1.59 [15] *ibid* 3.44 [16] Howe 1930:191 [17] Virgil, *Aeneid* 5.462-464 [18] *ibid* 5.467 [19] Howe 1930:192 [20] Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.781-783 [21] *ibid* 6.818 [22] Livy, *Early His.* 1.34 [23] *ibid* 1.0 [24] Ogilvie 1971:7 [25] Livy, *Early His.* 1.0 [26] *ibid* [27] Ogilvie 1971:7

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

gradesfixer.com

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP