

What Did a Statesman Look Like: Memorial Statues and Vergil's Simile (*Aen.* 1.148-156)

Whom did Vergil have in mind when he wrote his simile of the statesman at the end of the sea storm in *Aeneid* 1? This question continues to vex commentators of this passage (Weeda 138f.). Indeed, it would have great bearing on the interpretation of the entire *Aeneid* if we could find out which particular person Vergil was referring to if he wanted to do so. Scholars have linked the pious and meritorious statesman (*pietate gravis et meritis*) to Augustus (Fratantuono 7), Cato (MacLennan 93f.), or Menenius Agrippa / M. Vipsanius Agrippa (Morwood, Nadeau 97).

On the other hand, there are scholars who are of the opinion that Vergil used the statesman in this simile in order not to portray somebody in particular, but to portray a Roman ideal in general (Austin 68f., Weeda 139). This ideal description of a statesman who brings a peaceful end to a turbulent situation that is in terrible danger of immediately erupting in brutal violence is thought to be rooted in similar events which are imagined to have happened rather often during the civil wars of the 1st century BC (Conington/Nettleship 21).

As recent studies have shown (overview in Weisweiler 74), Roman senators of Vergil's times were portrayed by honorific statues in a twofold way. Either their military prowess was remembered when they fought against enemies of state. Then these members of the aristocratic elite with whom the emperor had to reckon were remembered by portraits that showed them in their military gear. Over time, the emperors became careful not to overemphasize the achievements of potential rivals. Or the senators were shown as benevolent civilian leaders who – especially as good governors in the provinces – had merited these statues (Inscriptions read, e.g., *ob merita!*) .

Vergil in his *Aeneid* presents us with the latter image of a statesman in the first simile of his epic poem. Clearly the make-up of the simile is quite unusual and thereby emphasizes this very simile as highly important. A scene taken from the human world serves as a parallel to what is happening in nature. Normally, a simile works the other way round. Neptune is styled as role model for Aeneas by this simile. And Aeneas, who at the beginning of the *Aeneid* still has to learn how a good ruler should behave, will soon enough follow that model (*pectora mulcet* 1.153 and 197) rather instinctively. Thus, Aeneas is brought to the stage in a way in which Vergil's readership probably would have envisioned his honorific statue in their time as long as internal affairs were concerned.

The military side of Aeneas then is shown in the last scene of the *Aeneid* in which he fights against a deceitful external enemy. As a result of both the end and the beginning of the *Aeneid*, we see Aeneas represented in the fashion of both types of the honorific statues mentioned above.

The reason why all this is important for our interpretation of the *Aeneid* lies in the fact that Romans dedicated honorific monuments not primarily to honor the past, but first and foremost to transform the future. Vergil's efforts, therefore, tie in with a general trend in society which comes to light, e.g., in Livy's way of writing exemplary history and also in art. Whether any particular Roman had any particular statue of any particular historical person in mind when he read the *Aeneid* is not as important as Vergil's reminder that any good Roman *vir* will in the future act like Neptune, like that good statesman, and like Aeneas. In turn this trend resonates, e.g., with Jupiter's prophecy of the Romans as *rerum domini gensque togata* (1.282). In addition, in this way the very first simile already forecasts the future of Rome after the wars that Rome has

to fight will have been fought and after the *Aeneid* itself will have been told. This future, however, was already visible to every Roman at the public fora and private gardens.

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