

(Re)Constructing Carthage in the *Aeneid*
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Vergil's construction of Carthage and the man and woman who build that city is deeply implicated in the historical context in which the poet composed his work. In this paper, I will explore the role of construction in the early Empire and its connection to Augustan leadership by suggesting that Augustus' extensive building programs, at Rome and abroad, would have informed a first-century audience's understanding of the construction of Carthage in Books I and IV of the *Aeneid*.

In Book IV of the *Aeneid*, Vergil plants the seeds of enmity between Rome and Carthage deep in the mythological past with Dido's final curses upon the Trojans (IV.625-9). Although P. Cornelius Scipio had utterly annihilated Carthage in 146 B.C.E., well over 100 years before the composition of the *Aeneid*, the Punic wars remained an important reminder to the Romans of the military power and unflappable determination required to become – and remain – a major world power. Carthage was the great enemy. Why, then, does Aeneas help construct the city (IV.260)?

While Vergil wrote about the mythical founder of Rome helping to build the enemy city, Augustus was actively colonizing Carthage (Colonia Iulia Concordia Carthago). Archaeological evidence (Rives, 22-24) reveals a city that was both massive and complex. It consisted of six *decumani* on either side of the *decumanus maximus* and twenty *cardines* on either side of the *cardo maximus*. Byrsa Hill, which had been the acropolis at the center of the ancient city, was leveled off and foundations erected on the slopes for a 30,300 square meter platform (about 1.5 times the size of the fora of Caesar and Augustus combined!).

References to the active construction of Carthage appear several times in Books I and IV. Venus, disguised as a local huntress, describes the city to the shipwrecked Aeneas as *moenia surgentemque novae Karthaginis arcem* (I.366), and when Aeneas first beholds Carthage (I.421-437) he exclaims *o fortunate, quorum iam moenia surgunt!* (I.437), for he is watching the city rise before his very eyes: walls, citadel, harbors, theater are all being built in a bustle of activity which is *qualis apes aestate nova per florum rura/ exercet sub sole labor* (I.430-1). For Vergil's contemporaries, these descriptions of monumental could call to mind not only Augustus' colonization of Carthage but also the widespread renovation taking place at Rome.

We never see Aeneas participate in the construction of Rome or Lavinium, but his work at Carthage would likely evoke for a first-century audience Augustus' extensive domestic and foreign building programs. Reading the *Aeneid* in light of these Augustan building projects thus resolves the question of why Aeneas helps to build Carthage in the narrative: Just as Augustus performs the ultimate act of appropriation of the enemy through rebuilding Carthage, so does Vergil allow Rome's mythological founder a place in the creation of its greatest enemy.

Work Cited:

Rives, J.B. 1995. *Religion and Authority in Roman Carthage from Augustus to Constantine*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.