

From Atlas to Aeneas: Mercury's Mission in *Aeneid* 4.238ff.  
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Commentators have been perplexed, even vexed, by details of content and of style in Vergil's description of Mercury's mission from Jupiter to Aeneas in order to bid the Trojan hero to move on from Carthage. The description of Atlas in 4.248-51, a stop on the journey, has been especially bothersome and has prompted some to propose its rejection or to view it as lines of an early draft. The narrative of the entire mission is undoubtedly striking; but could its meaning be richer rather than poorer? The alternative to finding a deficiency in the impact of its details is to seek a special significance in the very fact of their force.

Mercury's mission is an adaptation of Hermes' mission (*Odyssey* 5.43ff.) to Calypso, daughter of Atlas, to bid the release of Odysseus. Calypso's home is on a wooded isle at the navel (*omphalos*) of the sea (*Od.* 1.50-51), a geographical fact perhaps no less curious than certain attributes of Atlas in the *Aeneid* (e.g., *piniferum caput*, 249). Calypso's father Atlas is described as knowing the depths of the sea and holding pillars separating heaven and earth (1.52-54). Such singular features as these can in fact be brought into a single concept that has been delineated by historians of religion, namely, the special power of a special center found in the myths and religions of many peoples.

The *axis mundi*, a mountain, tree, column, giant, etc., which supports the universe, also accesses the sky, the earth, and the underworld and the respective powers thereof. The navel is a source of vital power, further demarcated by implications of death. As Odysseus dallies with Calypso, he revitalizes himself for his return home after so many encounters with death on the sea. As Mercury alights on, and then departs from, Atlas, his message is imbued with life and death that then inform the circumstances of Aeneas and Dido at Carthage and their narrative. Through such mythic considerations the proposed paper will enlarge and provide a further dimension to Beye's insightful appraisal of Aeneas at Carthage in his *Ancient Epic Poetry*: "He says goodbye to Dido and chooses instead the career that destiny rather than his personal will has assigned to him, thereby effectively killing in himself any further chance of authentic individual human experience.... [He] will be born again as an icon for his age" (p.239f.)