

The Struggle Against Oblivion:
Buthrotum, Aeneas, and Troy's Commemoration in Vergil's *Aeneid*

Of all the losses which Aeneas suffers in the Trojan War, perhaps none haunts him so much as the destruction of Troy. Even though his wife, his king, and many of his comrades perish at the hands of the Greeks, it is Troy that Aeneas is consumed with finding a proper way to commemorate as he sails through the Mediterranean

When Aeneas arrives at Buthrotum in *Aeneid* 3, he enters a city built to imitate Troy in nearly every respect. Most scholars claim that Buthrotum is nothing more than a failed commemoration: by recreating Troy's physical layout on a miniature scale, Buthrotum's founders Helenus and Andromache succeed only in constructing a stale and dead city with a stifling obsession with the past (Bettini 1997; Henry 1989; Reed 2007; Saylor 1970).

This paper argues that such an assessment misreads one of Vergil's most intense and nuanced explorations of commemoration. It overlooks the intricacies of Aeneas' reaction to Buthrotum and misconstrues his overall attitude to commemoration, and it leads to equally erroneous assumptions about larger issues in the epic such as the psychological value of remembering and forgetting.

Close attention to Aeneas' depiction of his visit to Buthrotum reveals that he respects Helenus and Andromache's manner of commemorating Troy even while he sets forth his own unique way of honoring the past. It hints that remembering, even of a painful sort, may ultimately be necessary and that forgetting is not the panacea it is sometimes made out to be.

To Aeneas, Buthrotum's mimicry of Troy represents a commemoration that is static and concrete but nonetheless satisfying for the city's inhabitants. Helenus and Andromache's replication of Troy produces a complex mixture of emotions in Aeneas. He terms some of the city's geography false ("the false Simois river," *falsi Simoentis*, *Aen.* 3.302) and notes that the Xanthus, named after the Trojan River, runs dry. Nevertheless, he also tells Dido that "I embrace the threshold of the Scaean gate" (*Scaeae... amplector limina portae*, *Aen.* 3.351), and, in his departing words, he calls Helenus and Andromache's existence a happy one.

Although Aeneas is sympathetic to Helenus and Andromache's need for this type of memorial, he will take a different tack in his commemoration of Troy. When Aeneas imagines a future, he does not envision a city that will memorialize Troy by its physical construction or geographical layout. The key word in Aeneas' farewell speech is "spirits" (*animis*, *Aen.* 3.505). By promising that his city and Buthrotum will form a single Troy in "our spirits," he proposes a less literal commemoration of his lost homeland, one where Troy may evolve into a new idea that still honors the original.

These two approaches to commemorating Troy, one taken by Helenus and Andromache, the other by Aeneas, reveal how two groups might each find a certain degree of solace and fulfillment in their own separate ideas about how best to honor the past. This paper closes by considering how Aeneas' experience at Buthrotum impacts his intensely personal and emotional effort over the course of the epic to ensure that Troy's memory is not lost to future generations.

Works Cited

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