

The Long Backstory: Statius' *Thebaid*, Vergil's *Aeneid*, and Epics that Never Were

In his near despair over the magnitude of the topic he proposes to sing about in his *Thebaid*, Statius describes the potentially very long series of stories he might include by the striking phrase (*Th.* 1.7) *longa retro series*, which I translate here as “a long backstory....” This phrase bears a resemblance to a phrase from the first book of Vergil's *Aeneid* (1.641): *series longissima rerum*. The coincidence of the word *series* modified in some degree by *longa*, both accompanied by a word beginning with *re-*, may seem to be only a superficial link between the Statian and Vergilian passages, but an additional connection between the two warrants further investigation: Statius' *longa retro series*, if he were to sing it, would consist of the stories of the royal house of Tyre from its beginnings through the stories of the house of Oedipus in the Greek city of Thebes. Vergil's *series longissima rerum*, inscribed on the cups at Dido's banquet, consists of the very same history: Dido's royal ancestry beginning from the origins of Tyre. Commentators have not mentioned the connection (see, e.g., Caviglia 1973, 88).

Thus the similar phrases both advertise a potential epic narrative that will not actually be told in the epics that do the advertising. Vergil's *Aeneid* tells us that Dido's cups display the history of her noble Tyrian lineage, but the stories on the cups are not told to Vergil's readers. Ralph Hexter has discussed the way that Vergil's depiction of Dido intersects with Roman prejudices about both the Phoenicians and the Near East (Hexter 1992); the treatment of her banquet in this paper supports Hexter's conclusion (360) “that Sidonian Dido is the one Dido that Vergil's foundation epic does not present, and by showing that it cannot do so, it reveals considerably more.” The long story of Tyrian legend that Statius would have to tell if he started at the beginning is indeed not told directly in the *Thebaid*. Statius alludes to it here and there, but his epic, like Vergil's, refuses to tell the stories of Tyre.

This paper will argue that Vergil's phrase is indeed the ancestor of Statius' and that each author uses his "long series" of suppressed Tyrian stories to help define an epic form that is essentially Roman. For Vergil, Dido's cups contain an epic that he will not tell. It remains inertly on the cups in her dining room, just as she will not leave Carthage or be a part of the founding of Rome. Statius' set of stories is explicitly passed over in favor of that subset that is most relevant to the Greek city of Thebes. Here too a potential epic narrative of Near Eastern stories is omitted in favor of something Greco-Roman; Statius' Thebes, of course, has many affinities with his Rome.

Statius' reuse of Vergil's line also serves to relate the two Roman epics. By introducing the lengthy potential epic of the Tyrians—but then denying it—Vergil made clear that epic was now a vehicle for Roman supremacy. By doing the same thing with a phrase so reminiscent of Vergil, Statius performs a more complicated manoeuvre. His Rome is secure in its empire. His nod to Vergil is not only an homage, it is a way of acknowledging and accepting the premises of the *Aeneid* while using the exclusion of what could have been Tyre's epic, one that might have privileged Cadmus over Oedipus, to focus on a Thebes with its own strongly Roman overtones. Statius, like Vergil, had before him an immense task of sorting through extensive series of traditional tales in order to select the right ones for his epic. By echoing Vergil's phrase, he owns up to his debt to Vergil, who showed him how a Roman should make his choices.

He also one-ups Vergil, in the traditional Roman practice of *aemulatio*. Vergil had written of a *series longissima rerum* describing the great deeds of the Tyrian house and its descendants. In Statius, this "very long story of events" becomes "a long backstory." In a process well described by Stephen Hinds (52-74), Vergil is thus acknowledged, thanked for his service, and dismissed. Statius' adaptation of Vergil's *longissima series rerum* makes it clear that Vergil

is now a predecessor and Statius is the current face of Roman epic. Both operate by suppressing the stories of Tyre that took place outside of Greece and that do not lead to Roman *imperium*.

Bibliography

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