

Imperium sine moenibus: The Rhetoric of Walls in Vergil's Aeneid

Vergil makes city walls the epic *telos* at the outset of his poem, declaring Aeneas to be the origin of the *altae moenia Romae* (1.7). As the narrative unfolds, however, we find Aeneas involved in a series of failed building projects, and his promised role as successful *conditor* is never depicted in the epic.

Scholars have long connected Vergil's descriptions of architecture with the physical environment in which he wrote—the bustling and expanding city of Rome. Paul Zanker comments that Vergil's account of construction in Carthage “mirrors the feelings of excitement and optimism that must have permeated Rome in the 20s BC, with new buildings going up all over” (Zanker 1988:154). James Morwood lists eight Augustan buildings alluded to in the *Aeneid*, remarking that “such references will surely have been obvious to Virgil's contemporaries. After all, these buildings were going up—or being restored—before their very eyes” (Morwood 1991:219). Similarly, Andrew Feldherr connects the games of *Aeneid* 5 with the circus spectacles popular under Augustus, who renovated and enlarged the Circus Maximus to accommodate larger crowds (Feldherr 1995). As these studies have already demonstrated, Vergil's seemingly generic descriptions of architecture can in fact conceal remarkably specific references which would be apparent to an urban Augustan audience.

Although allusions to buildings are already well-established as an “aspect of the *Aeneid*'s rich intertextuality” (Harrison 2006:60), it is surprising that the most ubiquitous of these remains neglected in Vergilian scholarship—that is, the persistent and abundant references to wall-building. City walls are often read simply as a metonym for Rome, but we should be wary of equating the two so completely. Rome's appearance today may be partly responsible for this conflation, as the impressive Aurelian walls are difficult to think away. In Vergil's time,

however, Rome's only walls were the crumbling and defunct 4th century BCE Servian walls. No repairs had been attempted since 87 BCE, and the walls seem to have been actively abandoned under Augustus. Dionysius of Halicarnassus comments that it was difficult even to locate them in most parts of the city (*Ant. Rom.* 4.13.5), and archaeological evidence supports his claim. Indeed, portions of the wall on the Oppian hill were systematically dismantled in order to clear space around Maecenas' *Auditorium*, perhaps to improve the view from his nearby *domus*. A similar situation is also attested on the Esquiline and Caelian hills (Häuber 1990; Haselberger et al 2002).

Such casual attitudes stand in stark contrast to descriptions of Republican reliance on the Servian walls (Livy 7.20.9, 22.8.7; Cic. *Div.* 1.45.101; App. *Bell. Civ.* 1.66.303, among many others), and can best be explained in terms of the changing Augustan *Zeitgeist*. City walls, consistently linked by ancient authors with defense against hostile attacks, were incompatible with Augustus' *Pax Romana*. Rome was an "open city," and the conspicuous *lack* of walls symbolized its universal and indisputable dominance (*Aen.* 1.279: *imperium sine fine*).

Although unexplored in previous scholarship, this physical aspect of Augustan Rome is central to Vergil's portrayal of walls in the *Aeneid*. Despite the epic's misleading opening, Vergil consistently equates *muris* and *moenia* with death, destruction, and a misinterpretation of divine will. Aeneas sets out to find the walls of Rome, but never does so. Journeying towards their promised home, the Trojans repeatedly build walls, and are repeatedly met with dire omens. When they finally do build the walls of a military camp in Italy, they are killed by collapsing towers (9.542-2) or hemmed in by encroaching Rutulians (9.725-30). Vergil explicitly separates Aeneas from walls at the very moment of his military success (12.698: *deserit et muros et summas deserit arces*). This separation constitutes the pre-condition for Turnus' defeat, and

signals the heroic act by which Aeneas secures Rome's future, and becomes Roman himself. The potent symbolism of city walls can be traced throughout the *Aeneid*, and is crucial to our understanding of Vergil's epic and its complex relationship with Augustan Rome.

Bibliography

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