

Rhetoric, Resistance, and the Invention of Italian Identity in *Aeneid* 7-12

In the lead-up to the battle of Actium, the events of the year 32 BCE occasioned a new rhetoric of national identity in Italy. In an effort to incite Rome's western sphere to war against the eastern powers of Antony and Cleopatra, Octavian invoked the solidarity of Italy's municipalities by uniting them in an oath of allegiance to his leadership, an event later commemorated in the *Res Gestae* (*iuravit in mea verba tota Italia*, 25). Belying this rhetoric of solidarity, however, the political unity of Italy in the first century BCE was still emergent and ambiguous, as Syme 1939, Toll 1991, Ando 2002, Bispham 2007, and others have described. Octavian's invocation of *tota Italia*, as these scholars suggest, relied more on political rhetoric than actual conditions on the peninsula.

This historical moment provides a context and comparandum for the events of *Aeneid* 7-12, as Turnus and the Italian chiefs, mounting a resistance to Aeneas and the Trojan "invaders," appeal to a common cause and shared identity possessed by the Italian communities. But did those communities enjoy such solidarity as Italians before joining forces in resistance? Recent commentators on Italy's depiction in the *Aeneid*--principally Ando 2002, Pogorzelski 2009, and Fletcher 2014--have taken the position that Vergil's Italy is essentially unified prior to Aeneas' arrival. These commentators have also connected Vergil's poetic representation of Italy to the rhetoric of the year 32, arguing that the epic's portrayal of a unified Italy buttresses the contemporary political ideal of *tota Italia* and the developing "nationhood" of Italians.

In this paper, I challenge this interpretation of Vergil's Italy, and suggest an alternate reading of the epic's relation to the propaganda of 32. Through careful reading of *Aeneid* 7-12, I suggest that Vergil's Italy is, in fact, fundamentally disunited at the time of Aeneas' landing, and that any political, ethnic, or cultural ties between the different communities are rudimentary at

most. Against this backdrop, as Turnus, Venulus, Numanus Remulus, and others lead the coalition against the foreign invasion represented by Aeneas, the Italian chiefs amplify the idea of Italian solidarity through a rhetoric that evokes Italy as a unified whole and appeals to an Italian identity drawn in opposition to the Trojan Other.

Prior to the Trojan landing, the multiple groups residing on the peninsula--Rutulians, Latins, Ausonians, Volscians, Etruscans, and Greeks, among others--are depicted as not only politically independent of one another, but prone to internal conflict (7.183-86, 8.55, 12.22-23). Amata can even make the argument that Turnus is an *externus* because his state is independent of Latium and he himself is ethnically Greek (7.367-72). In contrast to these indications of political and social discreteness, Italian leaders invoke a united front against the foreign enemy who threatens the integrity of Italy's territorial borders and race (7. 469, 7.578-79). Turnus is the most vocal advocate of this movement, from his first rallying cry to "defend Italy" (*tutari Italiam*, 7.469) through his continued emphasis on the solidarity of the Italian communities in the war effort (9.132-33, 11.419-33). Numanus Remulus' speech in Book 9 most clearly expresses the polemical contrast between Italian toughness and "Phrygian" effeminacy that underpins the formulation of Italian identity.

Assessing first the evidence in the text for the Italians' disunity, and then the rhetoric of solidarity deployed by the Italian chiefs, I argue that Vergil's Italy conveys a narrative not altogether different from that of 32 BCE: a narrative of resistance to foreign aggression effecting the construction of national identity, even where a unified identity had not existed before.

Bibliography

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