

## THE ROMAN PEASANTRY IN VIRGIL'S AENEID <sup>\*</sup>

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**Abstract:** *The recollection of the wars that took place in Latium and their concrete consequences for the Italian peasant elite in particular and the Roman peasants and laborers in general, are elements the contemporary reader of Virgil must have recognized immediately in the form of allusions and references, while for us they appear veiled and demand an exercise of search and interpretation. As a citizen of Rome at the peak of its splendor, under Augustus's rule, and as a poet from an Italian county, Virgil is an author that is sensitive to the wounds inflicted on the social body by different wars and he has poured his recollections and his version of history into his work as an act of memory and homage, not only for the heroes who fought for Rome but also for all the soldiers and anonymous peasants who returned to find their farmlands devastated. This work aims to focus on the references to the depopulation of fields in the Aeneid and to analyze them as an act of memory, that is to say, as something that creates a reading horizon for Virgil's contemporaries who undoubtedly bring past wars to the present through one of their most influential consequences, the transformation of the Italian countryside and the peasant elite.*

**Keywords:** *Roman History; roman peasantry; war; Virgil; Aeneid.*

### EL CAMPESINO ROMANO EN LA ENEIDA DE VIRGILIO

**Resumen:** *El recuerdo de las guerras que tuvieron lugar en el Lacio y sus consecuencias concretas para la elite campesina italiana en particular y los campesinos y labradores romanos en general, son elementos que el lector romano contemporáneo de Virgilio debe haber reconocido en la obra inmediatamente en forma de alusiones y referencias, mientras para nosotros parecen veladas y exigen un ejercicio de búsqueda e interpretación. Como ciudadano de una Roma en la cima de su esplendor, bajo el impero de Augusto, y como poeta proveniente de una comarca italiana, Virgilio es un autor sensible a las heridas que provocaron las distintas guerras en*

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*el cuerpo social y ha vertido en la obra épica su recuerdo y su versión de la historia como un acto de memoria y homenaje, no sólo a los héroes que pelearon por Roma, sino a la totalidad de soldados y campesinos anónimos, que a su regreso encontraron desoladas las tierras de cultivo. El objetivo de este trabajo es centrarnos en las menciones del despoblamiento de los campos en Eneida y analizarlas como acto de memoria, es decir como formador de un horizonte de lectura para los contemporáneos de Virgilio, que sin duda hacen presente el pasado de las guerras a través de una de sus consecuencias más influyentes, la transformación del campo italiano y de la elite campesina.*

**Palabras-claves:** historia romana; campesinado romano; guerra; Virgilio; Eneida.

The recollection of the wars that took place in Latium and their concrete consequences for the Italian peasant elite in particular and for the Roman peasants and laborers in general, are elements the contemporary reader of Virgil must have recognized immediately in the form of allusions and references, while for us they appear veiled and demand an exercise of search and interpretation (MARINCOLA, 2010, p. 183-204). As a citizen of Rome at the peak of its splendor, under Augustus's rule, and as a poet from an Italian county, Virgil is an author that is sensitive to the wounds inflicted on the social body by different wars and he has poured his recollections and his version of history into his work as an act of memory and homage, not only for the heroes who fought for Rome, but also for all the soldiers and anonymous peasants who returned to find their farmlands devastated (AMES; DE SANTIS, 2011, p. 7-28). The aim of this work is to focus on the references to the depopulation of fields in the *Aeneid* and to analyze them as an act of memory, that is to say, as something that creates a reading horizon for Virgil's contemporaries who undoubtedly bring past wars to the present through one of their most influential consequences, the transformation of the Italian countryside and the peasant elite.

Book VIII of the *Aeneid* offers an interesting reason to focus on the issue of war and its consequences for all sectors of society. In this book, along with the Etruscans who support Aeneas, is Mezentius, the paradigm of political tyranny in the poem. A note that is rarely remarked upon is added to the description of this character from a series of imaginaries in which *violentia* and *superbia* dominate (SIAM, 2003, p. 352-369). Mezentius, along with Messapus and Ufens, left no farmers in the fields: "Everywhere, plundering farms all round of their planters and reapers" (VIRGIL. *Aeneid*

VIII, v. 8: *latos vastant cultoribus agros*). The image of “plundering farms all around of their planters and reapers” as a result of war leads the Roman reader contemporary with Virgil to reminisce on a repeated situation suffered by the farmland within the context of the different Italic Wars, and it leads especially to an association and concrete reference to Hannibal, as it was during the second Punic war, when the Italian countryside was occupied and literally became the battlefield. In this case, within the actions of Mezentius, the depopulation of farmlands is presented as an undesired political effect of the tyrant’s actions.

The effective onset of military actions between Italics and Trojans occurs in Book VII and is marked by the presence of the fury Alecto, who plays a central role by inciting the peasants – *agricolae* – to abandon the farmlands and their working tools and to take arms and go to war (HORSFALL, 2000). From there, the first confrontation between Trojans and Ausones is narrated in verses 582 and following and it occurs as a result of the hunting of Ascanius. Alecto takes advantage of Silvia’s claim and wages war upon Juno’s request, and we read in verse 520: *raptis concurrunt undique telis / indomiti agricolae* (VIRGIL. *Aeneid* VIII, v. 520). But these farmers do not fight with sticks and plows, they now have swords, as we read in verse 526 *horrescit strictis seges ensibus*. (“Bristling the broad fields is unsheathed swords”. VIRGIL. *Aeneid* VIII, v. 526.). As he had done with Turno and would later do to Amata and Camilla, Alecto is once again the force that incites men to go into battle. This is nothing special, as there is nothing unusual about an Erinys inciting war in an epic context, for this is her fundamental role, but in this case it is striking because the onset of military actions occurs through peasants, not through warrior leaders or soldiers. The framework of the epic genre excludes peasants as protagonists of action, as the characters of epics are heroes; farmers do not have, nor ever reach, the prestige required for the fighting that this genre requires.

With this intervention, however, the peasants incited to fight against the Trojans appear in the *Aeneid* as a social body, as protagonists of the story and actors of the narrative plot, at least for a brief segment. No longer is it the chief who commands them; every peasant recruited by Alecto takes up arms and takes part, which implies that the danger of being carried away by the fury is a risk for both the leaders and the anonymous peasants. In this context, special value is given to an individualized peasant, Galaesus: a minor character generally overlooked. Galaesus is a very rich peasant (*ditis-*

*simus arvis*) who does not want war (*dum paci medium se offert*) (VIRGIL. *Aeneid* VII, v. 536). Precisely because of this, he is characterized as *justissimus unus* (VIRGIL. *Aeneid* VII, v. 536) and, instead of depicting him raising arms, Virgil devotes two verses to his everyday work on the land (VIRGIL. *Aeneid* VII, vv. 538-539). Galaesus, along with Almo, a *senior* and a *puer*, are the first Italics from Latium to fall to the Trojans (VIRGIL. *Aeneid* VII, v. 575). An obscure note that reveals that, even though the epic will concentrate on the heroes' deaths, the peasants convened to war will also fall and, unlike the former, they will be the anonymous body whose memory will depend on their leaders' historical fortunes. The mention of Galaesus, however, saves this peasant leader and the group of peasants made up of individualities that could stand out by their virtue and answer the call of the land; Galaesus is the Virgilian peasant of *Georgics*. The framework of the epic excludes these peasants as protagonists of the action. However, Virgil does not want to fail to notice their presence, stressing their absence as an effect of the war that has devastated the farmland.

These peasants appear before Latinus and claim for war. It is the moment of the heroes whose introduction to the catalog of Italic forces contrasts with this group of peasants brought together by a *pastorale signum* (VIRGIL. *Aeneid* VII, v. 513), where *pastorale* means that it is the *bucina* used by shepherds, farmers who are also soldiers (HORSFALL, 2000) who come from all around in response to the call for help. It is an army of shepherds that comes forward with no need for levies or rewards; the mere call from a neighbor suffices for them to rise in their defense.

The Fury Alecto even promises Juno to disperse the war further afield if Juno orders it so:

*finitimas in bella feram rumoribus urbes,  
accendamque animos nsani Martis amore  
undique ut auxilio ueniant; sparga marma per agros.*

*I'll draw the neighbouring cities right into the conflict with rumours,  
I'll set their souls on fire with love for the lunatic War God, I'll get  
them in from all round to assist. I'll seed farmlands with armour.*  
(VIRGIL. *Aeneid* VII, vv. 549-551)

Alecto could gather *auxilia* from all over (*undique*) and, with a precise metaphor for the occasion, could seed farmlands with armour. This is an in-

teresting point insofar as the shepherds are the force of this army. But the catalog of heroes and peoples, in the epic mode, restricts the idea of “general participation” of shepherds in the army. On the contrary, every chief arrives with a fixed number of men, the best each town can muster for the fight.

The presence of shepherds is not replaced by trained soldiers, but rather the presence of all the shepherds is replaced by a “group of peasants better prepared for war.” Nor is it a question of rationalizing concrete figures of men who accompany the leaders of each ethnicity. The epic code that regulates the catalog has a decisive influence on the characterization of the Italic forces, as much in the organization of the army as in the ethnographic notions the poet has to build the image of each of the peoples included in the Italic army. This catalog of Italic forces in Book VII opens with Mezentius. We shall not mention here studies regarding the structure, organization, and function of this catalog. However, it is necessary to point out that the first mention of every catalog is emphatic and therein appears Mezentius, the first mention of whom is in principle an Italic leader:

*Primus init bellum Tyrrhenis asper ab oris  
Contemptor diuum Mezentiu sagminaque armat.  
Filius huic iuxta Lausus, quo pulchrior alter  
No n̄fuit excepto Laurentis corpore Turni;  
Lausus, equum domitor debellatorque ferarum,  
Ducit Agylli nane quiquam ex urbe secutos  
Mille uiros, dignus patriis qui laetior esset  
imperii et cui pater haud Mezentius esset.*

*First to enlist in the war is a tough man from Tuscan dominions,  
God-despising Mezentius, who arms and now leads out his forces.  
Riding beside him is Lausus, his son. There was no other person  
Lovelier than he, if we don't count the body of Laurentine Turnus.  
Lausus, a tamer of horses and deadly slayer of wild beasts, Leads  
out a thousand troops from their city, Agylla, who've followed all in  
vain. He deserved more cheer than he got from his service under his  
father, deserved that his father should not be Mezentius. (VIRGIL.  
Aeneid VII, vv. 647-654)*

Mezentius then appears at the beginning of Book VIII:

*Ductore sprimi Messapus et Vfens  
contemptorque deum Mezentius undique cogunt  
auxilia et latos uastant cultoribus agros.*

*The leading commanders, Messapus and Ufens, God-despising Mezentius too, are enforcing conscription everywhere, plundering farms all round of their planters and reapers. (VIRGIL. Aeneid VIII, vv. 6-8)*

It is remarkable that immediately after the Catalog, these three *ductores* recruit more troops, as this distances us from the epic presentation of the chief-king-leader with his men, with which Book VII ended and it leads us to a situation of peasants being levied. The expression *coger auxilia* belongs to the military lexicon. Virgil tells us that, besides the men who accompanied each chief, these three take charge of recruiting more soldiers, who are the peasants from central Italy, *undique*, irrespective of their ethnic origins, and the point we want to stress is that, as a conclusion, the poet underscores the depopulation of the farmlands.

It is true that they face a full-scale war and that they need all the forces they can muster but two issues must be considered: on one hand, the epic norm, as we have already pointed out, does not include “everyone” in the troops, but rather those capable of fighting alongside their chiefs, whereby this way of recruiting *auxilia* is an anachronism which makes reference to the times of *Bellum Sociale*, on the other, the image of the countryside devoid of farmers shows the fate of the Italic regions involved in the war: possible defeat means emptying vast tracts of land which, once again, in anachronistic terms, would be redistributed among the victorious war veterans.

The election of the three chiefs in charge of this indiscriminate levy may be thanks to the geographical range his command connotes. However, Mezentius is the only one of the three who cannot impose the levy on any peasant in territories under his power, as he has been expelled from Agylla by his fellow citizens and, literally, he is not *rex* of any people.

In the economy of the second part of the *Aeneid*, as we have seen, Alecto plays a central role in the genesis of the confrontations between Trojans and Italics. The Fury induced the peasants to become soldiers through ire and exchanged their work tools for swords. We have already mentioned Alecto’s intention to expand the war but Juno forbids it. Now Mezentius

takes his place and does exactly what the Fury had promised to do: to gather *auxilia undique*. It is necessary to bear in mind this lexical recurrence that makes Mezentius Alecto's double and, therefore, the consequence of both interventions is necessarily the same. In Book VII, 635 and 636, the peasants turned into soldiers prepare their shields and swords (*Uomeris huc et falcis honos, huc omnis aratri cessit amor; recoquunt patrios fornacibus ensis* / Here's where they've shifted respect for the sickle and share, where they've transferred all love for ploughing. They reforge their fathers' swords in the furnace - VIRGIL. *Aeneid* VII, vv. 635-636).

The peasants dispense with *honos* and *amor* for the farmland and their working tools and exchange them for honor and love of war. The image of "shifting the sickle and share for the sword" is one of the most traditional motifs when it comes to talking about social war and, in the case of *Georgics* at the end of Book II (VIRGIL. *Georgics*, vv. 539 and ff.) the peasant devoted to farm work contrasts with the forging of swords, an image that summarizes the counterpoint between the kingdoms of Saturn and Jupiter. But, besides, it is this peasant devoted exclusively to farm work who gave greatness to Rome, Etruria and Sabina:

*Hanc olim ueteres uitam coluere Sabini,  
hanc Remus et frater; sic fortis Etruria creuit  
scilicet et rerum facta est pulcherrima Roma,  
septemque unas ibi muro circumdedit arces.*

*Such a life the old Sabines once lived, such Remus and his brother:  
Thus, surely, Etruria waxed strong; and Rome has thus become the  
fairest thing on earth, and with a single city's wall enclosed her seven  
hills. (VIRGIL, Georgics, vv. 532-535)*

Indeed, the idea of a general levy that depopulates the countryside is the opposite image that of the decadence that Mezentius fails to foresee.

There is no doubt that this Virgilian message must have been clearly noticed by his audience. And the fact that Mezentius is a chief who removes all the peasants from the countryside cannot be separated from the tyrannical connotations that make up this Virgilian character. The story of Mezentius is told by Evander:

*Hanc multos florentem annos rex deinde superbo*

*imperio et saeuis tenuit Mezentius armis.  
 Quid menorem infandas caedes, quid facta tyranni  
 effera? Dicapit ipsius generi quereseruent!  
 Mortua quin etiam iungebat corpor auiuis  
 componens manibusque manus atque oribus ora,  
 tormenti genus, et sanie taboque fluentis  
 complexu in misero longa sic norte necabat.  
 atfessi tandem ciues infanda furentem  
 armati circumsistunt ipsumque domumque,  
 obruncant socios, ignem ad fastigia iactant.  
 ille inter caedem Rutulorum elapsus in agros  
 confugere et Turni defendier hospitis armis.  
 Ergo omnis furiis surrexit Etruria iustis,  
 Regem ad supplicium praesenti Marte reposcunt.*

*Over the years it succeeded and thrived. Then a king named Mezentius crushed it with powerful pride maintained by a ruthless militia. Why recall slaughter that words can't describe, or a tyrant's subhuman actions? May gods bring it back on his head and the heads of his children! He, I'd point out, made a habit of tying dead bodies to live men, hands bound together with hands, even faces lashed against faces, his special version of torture. It killed people ever so slowly, strapped in a grisly embrace as they oozed with decay and corruption. Finally, citizens tired of his passion for horrors beyond words, took up arms, set siege to the tyrant himself and his palace, slaughtered his henchmen, bombarded his rooftop with torches of fire. During the carnage, he slipped out across the Rutulian border, made his escape and, as guest, was protected by Turnus' forces. All Etruria rose in a righteous fury, demanding, on pain of instant war, that they hand back the king to be punished. (VIRGIL. Aeneid VIII, vv. 483-495)*

The figure of Mezentius turns towards a Roman concept of tyranny associated to the cruel and arrogant king, later repeated in the figure of another Etruscan, Metabus, (VIRGIL. Aeneid IX, vv. 540-541) and in Aeneas's Shield; we need to relate it to *Lars Porsena* and his attempt to restore the Tarquins in Rome. On the other hand, Evander also refers to the *facta* of a political nature in which a double dimension can be observed:



towards the inside of Agylla and towards the outside of the city, influencing the interethnic and intercitizen relationships of central Italy. Inside the city we observe that the procedure, according to Evander, is to refer to the *imperium superbum* (VIRGIL. *Aeneid* IX, v. 481-482), the *saeva arma*, the “cruel arms,” (VIRGIL. *Aeneid* IX, v. 482) and the *facta...effera*, and one in particular among them (*quin etiam*) which is monstrous (*effera*), recognized by tradition as typically Etruscan.

Outside the city, the actions of tyrant Mezentius also have an effect, as the *furor* (VIRGIL. *Aeneid* IX, v. 489) of the people of Agylla results in social strife (VIRGIL. *Aeneid* IX, vv. 489-491) and Mezentius is expelled by his fellow citizens and receives asylum from Turnus (AMES; DE SANTIS, 2011). Further strife originates as the Etruscans, “duly furious” (VIRGIL. *Aeneid* IX, v. 494), wage war on the Turnus and his Latin allies. This war is of an interethnic nature and leads us to consider that the memory of *Bellum Italicum* is present in the *Aeneid*, because Evander refers to the breaking of ancient covenants between the different peoples who inhabited central Italy. Faced with this new situation of interethnic political change of alliances, Evander urges Aeneas to seek support from those Etruscans who are now against Turnus and the Latins, foreshadowing the events in Book X. The characterization of the tyrant embodied by Mezentius can be summarized in the notions of *violentia* and *superbia* that dominate Latin literature in the 1st century BC and which are even associated with the monster Cacus in the *Aeneid* (GALINSKY, 1966, p. 18-51). The unfolding of Virgilian narrative requires the reader to bring together what has been said about Mezentius in Books VII and VIII in connection with Evander’s words. Thus Mezentius’s depopulation of the farmland cannot be separated from his being a tyrant, from his wickedness, his violence and arrogance or, ultimately, from his similarity to the Fury Alecto.

In Book XI, the Latin king proposes a peace agreement with the Trojans in view of the defeats that the Italics are suffering. Obviously Turnus opposes this. In this context, Drances speaks severely against the Rotulian leader. Regardless of the duplicity of his speech, Drancês attempts to undermine Turnus’s leadership with a series of arguments, among which is the depopulation of the land:

*primus ego, inuisum quem tu tibi fingis (et esse  
nil moror), en supplex uenio. miserereturorum,*

*pone animos et pulsus abi. Sat funera fusi  
uidimus ingentis et desolauimus agros.*

*Look! I'm the first to come begging your mercy. Take pity on your own people. Disarm your aggression. Be gone! You are beaten. We're routed, we've seen enough death, we've turned huge fields into desolate wastelands. (VIRGIL. Aeneid XI, vv. 364-367)*

Drances's argument insists on the issue posed by Mezentius's levy but from the perspective of what has already occurred, from the present *vas-tant* to the perfect *desolauimus*, there is a variation in time that evidences an outcome, the product of a process: the indiscriminate levy and the lack of foresight of its consequences in view of military defeat. It is remarkable how Virgil has developed a narrative arc between the beginning of the war and its closure in terms of "draining the farmers from the fields". A manner of writing history that emphasizes a recurrent theme for the transformation of Rome and which in the context of writing it continues to be as current as in the times of Sila or the social war.

Indeed, the deaths of peasant soldiers has left vast tracts of land devastated and, beyond the final outcome of the war, the problem is installed with strongly anachronistic and striking resonance for the reader of the *Aeneid*: the Italian peasant elite and peasantry suffer a deep transformation, repopulating the countryside will involve new relationships between generals and soldiers, installing colonies will create a new socio-economic map in Italy and, as a consequence, agriculture, as an economic activity in Italy, will need to redefine itself. The *Aeneid* as a text is also sensitive to Italy's historical processes, especially to the recurrent problems in the history of Rome. The problem of the depopulation of the countryside in the *Aeneid* is not restricted, as in *Georgics*, to the concrete activity of the peasantry and its attachment to farming. As we hope to have presented for subsequent discussion, it is here associated to issues such as tyranny, the imposition of an unreasonable levy and a series of personal political discrepancies that hardly allow the peasant soldier and the peasant elite to emerge as an important subject in Roman history.

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