

P. VERGILIUS MARO (70-19 B.C.)



Vergil was regarded by the Romans as their greatest poet. He was educated at Cremona, at Milan, and finally at Rome and devoted his entire adult life to poetry. His earliest work are the Eclogues, a collection of 10 pastoral poems composed between 42 and 37 B.C.

The fourth eclogue (later regarded as "Messianic") had relevance to the contemporary situation, prophesying the birth of a child who will bring back the Golden Age, banish sin, and restore peace.

The Georgics, composed between 37 and 30 B.C., were a plea for the restoration of the traditional agricultural life. This didactic poem, as Seneca said, was written "not to instruct farmers but to delight readers." The practical instruction is presented with vivid insight into nature, interspersed with poetical digressions. The Georgics are dedicated to Maecenas, the leading patron of the arts under Augustus. Virgil had become by this time a member of the court circle and was personally committed to the ideals of the Augustan regime.

As sole ruler of the Roman world after the battle of Actium (31 B.C.) Augustus used his power to establish a period of peace and stability. Virgil embodied his ideal Rome in the Aeneid, the story of the wanderings of Aeneas, an exiled Trojan prince who founded the Roman race in Italy. Aeneas is presented as the prototype of the Roman way of life and the poem is filled with prophecies and visions, foreshadowing real events in Roman history. Yet to many readers the most memorable figure in the poem is Dido, Queen of Carthago, with whom Aeneas falls in love but abandons in the end in order to fulfil his providential destiny.

The Aeneid occupied Virgil for 11 years. In 19 B.C. he set out for Greece to obtain material for finishing the poem. On the voyage he caught a fever, returned to Italy, and died soon after at Brundisium. Because the Aeneid had not received its final revision, Vergil's dying wish was for his poem to be burned. The request was countermanded by the order of Augustus.

Virgil's poetry immediately became famous in Rome and was used as school textbooks (recommended by the 1st-century Roman critic and teacher Quintilian). The study of Virgil in the schools has lasted as long as Latin has been studied. Near-Christian values expressed in the Aeneid culminated in Virgil's place of honor in Dante's Divine Comedy as the poet's guide through Hell and Purgatory up to the very gates of Paradise.