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Vergil, a biography

# VERGIL

*A Biography*





Amice H. Weber

1922

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# VERGIL

*A Biography*

*By*

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1922

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*To*  
THE MEMORY OF  
W. WARDE FOWLER

CORRIGENDA

Page 8, line	19,	read	“Vergilius”
“ 29, “	25,	“	consensus
“ 30, footnote 1,	“	“	Velleius
“ 38, line	2,	“	naïveté
“ 52, “	22,	“	δργῆς
“ 53, “	1,	“	περὶ
“ 57, “	21,	“	necromantic
“ 68, “	18,	“	Syracosio
“ 94, “	17,	“	thoroughly
“ 106, “	15,	“	Zephyrique
“ 113, “	3,	“	monotonous
“ 116, “	14,	“	Theocritean
“ 131, “	16,	“	validas





## PREFACE

MODERN literary criticism has accustomed us to interpret our masterpieces in the light of the author's daily experiences and the conditions of the society in which he lived. The personalities of very few ancient poets, however, can be realized, and this is perhaps the chief reason why their works seem to the average man so cold and remote. Vergil's age, with its terribly intense struggles, lies hidden behind the opaque mists of twenty centuries: by his very theory of art the poet has conscientiously drawn a veil between himself and his reader, and the scraps of information about him given us by the fourth century grammarian, Donatus, are inconsistent, at best unauthenticated, and generally irrelevant.

Indeed criticism has dealt hard with Donatus' life of Vergil. It has shown that the meager *Vita* is a conglomeration of a few chance facts set into a mass of later conjecture derived from a literal-minded interpretation of the *Eclogues*, to which there gathered during the credulous and neurotic decades of the second and third centuries an accretion of irresponsible gossip.

However, though we have had to reject many of the statements of Donatus, criticism has procured for us more than a fair compensation from another

source. A series of detailed studies of the numerous minor poems attributed to Vergil by ancient authors and mediaeval manuscripts — till recently pronounced unauthentic by modern scholars — has compelled most of us to accept the *Appendix Vergiliana* at face value. These poems, written in Vergil's formative years before he had adopted the reserved manner of the classical style, are full of personal reminiscences. They reveal many important facts about his daily life, his occupations, his ambitions and his ideals, and best of all they disclose the processes by which the poet during an apprenticeship of ten years developed the mature art of the *Georgics* and the *Aeneid*. They have made it possible for us to visualize him with a vividness that is granted us in the case of no other Latin poet.

The reason for attempting a new biography of Vergil at the present time is therefore obvious. This essay, conceived with the purpose of centering attention upon the poet's actual life, has eschewed the larger task of literary criticism and has also avoided the subject of Vergil's literary sources — a theme to which scholars have generally devoted too much acumen. The book is therefore of brief compass, but it has been kept to its single theme in the conviction that the reader who will study Vergil's works as in some measure an outgrowth of the poet's own experiences will find a new meaning in not a few of their lines.

T. F.

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VERGIL



# I

## MANTUA DIVES AVIS

AMONG biographical commonplaces one frequently finds the generalization that it is the provincial who acquires the perspective requisite for a true estimate of a nation, and that it is the country-boy reared in lonely communion with himself who attains the deepest knowledge of human nature. If there be some degree of truth in this reflection, Publius Vergilius Maro, the farmer's boy from the Mantuan plain, was in so far favored at birth. It is the fifteenth of October, 70 B. C., that the Mantuans still hold in pious memory: in 1930 they will doubtless invite Italy and the devout of all nations to celebrate the twentieth centenary of the poet's birth.

Ancient biographers, little concerned with Mendelian speculation, have not reported from what stock his family sprang. Scientific curiosity and nationalistic egotism have compelled modern biographers to become anthropologists. Vergil has accordingly been referred, by some critic or other, to each of the several peoples that settled the Po Valley

in ancient times: the Umbrians, the Etruscans, the Celts, the Latins. The evidence cannot be mustered into a compelling conclusion, but it may be worth while to reject the improbable suppositions.

The name tells little. *Vergilius* is a good Italic *nomen* found in all parts of the peninsula,<sup>1</sup> but Latin names came as a matter of course with the gift of citizenship or of the Latin status, and Mantua with the rest of Cisalpine Gaul had received the Latin status nineteen years before Vergil's birth. The cognomen *Maro* is in origin a magistrate's title used by Etruscans and Umbrians, but *cognomina* were a recent fashion in the first century B.C. and were selected by parents of the middle classes largely by accident.

Vergil himself, a good antiquarian, assures us that in the *heroic* age Mantua was chiefly Etruscan with enclaves of two other peoples (presumably Umbrians and Venetians). In this he is doubtless following a fairly reliable tradition, accepted all the more willingly because of his intimacy with Maecenas, who was of course Etruscan:<sup>2</sup>

Mantua dives avis, sed non genus omnibus unum,  
Gens illis triplex, populi sub gente quaterni,  
Ipsa caput populis; Tusco de sanguine vires.

<sup>1</sup> Braunholz, *The Nationality of Vergil, Classical Review*, 1915, 104 ff.

<sup>2</sup> *Aeneid*, X, 201-3.



Pliny seems to have supposed this passage a description of Mantua in Vergil's own day: Mantua Tuscorum trans Padum sola reliqua (III. 130). That could hardly have been Vergil's meaning, however; for the Celts who flooded the Po Valley four centuries before drove all before them except in the Venetian marshes and the Ligurian hills. They could not have left an Etruscan stronghold in the center of their path. Vergil was probably not Etruscan.

The case for a Celtic origin is equally improbable. From the time when the Senones burned Rome in 390 B. C. till Caesar conquered Gaul, the fear of invasions from this dread race never slumbered. During the weary years of the Punic war when Hannibal drew his fresh recruits from the Po Valley, the determination grew ever stronger that the Alps should become Rome's barrier line on the North. Accordingly the pacification of the Transpadane region continued with little intermission until Polybius<sup>3</sup> could say two generations before Vergil's birth that the Gauls had practically been driven out of the Po Valley, and that they then held but a few villages in the foothills of the Alps. If this be true, the open country of Mantua must have had but few survivors. And the few that

<sup>3</sup> Polybius, II. 35, 4 (written about 140 B. C.).

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