

The image of Aeneas in antiquity

Aeneas, the son of Trojan Anchises and Venus, was a popular figure in Roman literature and art. Observing how he is portrayed is fundamental in understanding the values he represented to the Roman audience. Depicted in Roman art for nearly a millennium (and chosen as a subject by a number of Renaissance artists), Aeneas is also a good case study for juxtaposing different types of evidence from different periods in history. Art plays a fundamental role in revealing which of the scenes from the work were most popular and readily identified by a Roman audience. When examined chronologically, this source can also reveal what aspects of the imagery changed over time as well as what remained.

Aeneas in literature

Given the number of scenes involving Aeneas in literature, it would be difficult to know which of these scenes were considered the most important. Pious Aeneas has a number of difficult, somewhat less conventionally ‘heroic’ moments in Virgil’s epic (e.g. turning to the gods in despair as his ships are lost (Book 1); ditching Dido in Africa and seeing the flames of her pyre as he sails away (Book 4); falling asleep exhausted and dejected on the banks of the Tiber (Book 8); madly killing Turnus in a final fit of rage (Book 12)). Some have compared Aeneas to Jesus – the pious son of a god whose divine virtues combine beautifully with human frailties to create an inspiring but relatable character. Given these traits, it is not surprising that Aeneas was also popular among the emperors, who identified with a number of his qualities.

The flight of Aeneas in archaic art

True to form, the most iconic image of Aeneas in Roman art is not a scene of victory but one of defeat and survival: Aeneas’ flight from Troy (*Aeneid* 2.162–179). If your home was on fire, what would you take with you? For Aeneas the question was simple: his armour and his family (albeit perhaps not in that order). The scene of Aeneas fleeing the city with his father and his son represents a fundamental role in Roman society: that of the *paterfamilias*. After the ghost of his wife urges him to flee the city, a defeated and grieving Aeneas does his duty, even though that means carrying his elderly father on his shoulders. Depictions of this scene can be found on vases as early as the sixth century BC, made by Attic painters in Greece. (Greek vases were very popular with the Etruscans, and many survive in Etruscan tombs.)

An Attic black figure *oinochoe* (wine jug) by the Louvre painter (Louvre Vase 118), dating from c. 520–510 BC, shows Aeneas fleeing from the city, possibly following Hermes (**Figure 1**). In full body armour, which would have weighed at least fifty pounds (probably more), a helmeted Aeneas walks as though into battle, carrying his shield with one hand and his father (as well as some spears) in the other. His father is fully clothed but unarmed and visibly smaller than Aeneas.



Figure 1

With vases, the artist sometimes had to deal with constraints of space, which can draw figures out of proportion, and Anchises was not always made smaller. For example, a red figure amphora from a Greek workshop in Etruria, dating from c. 470 BC (now in the State Collection of Antiquities in Munich), depicts a large Anchises whose feet reach the below knees of Aeneas (Figure 2). On this vase, Aeneas wears armour and carries a small sword at his waist, but he is bareheaded, without a shield or spears, and uses both hands to carry his father.



Figure 2

The scene is completed with the figure of Ascanius – a young boy of decidedly manly proportions with a six pack. (Youngsters were often depicted as small adults rather than true representations of children in the ancient world.) It is Ascanius' height and the child-like gesture of gripping his grandfather's robes that signify his age, not his body shape.

Despite the differences between these two vases, both convey a similar ideology about duty (both familial and military) and the role of the *paterfamilias* in early Roman (Etruscan) culture. This imagery was also recreated in Etruscan art, for example in a terracotta statuette from Veii (early fifth century BC) depicting Aeneas carrying Anchises (weblink:

<https://www.utexas.edu/courses/mythmoore/imagefiles20/aeneasfleeingtroy.html>).

Other images of Aeneas on vases can be found at:

http://faculty.goucher.edu/eng230/aeneas_carrying_father_anchises_Greek-vase.html.

Finally, to put the images of Aeneas into context, one should note that while scenes from Homer's epic poems (the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*) were used extensively on Greek vases, the flight of Aeneas from Troy was not a common theme and seems to have been of far greater interest to the Etruscans than to the Greek audience at large. This has led some scholars to the conclusion that the Etruscans originated in Asia Minor, and were exiles themselves.

Imperial images of Aeneas

It is worth noting that semi-divine characters such as Aeneas, although popular during the regal period in Rome (c. 753–510 BC) and possibly in Etruria in the early republic (early–mid-fifth century BC), fell out of fashion in Roman imagery for the remainder of the republic, perhaps because of their association with a heroic kingly figure. Aeneas' 'revival' under Julius Caesar and Augustus (no doubt due to Livy's *History of Rome* and even more so to Virgil's *Aeneid*) can be seen in a number of media, from terracotta figures and domestic art (e.g. wall paintings and mosaics) to public statues and coins. The popularity of such imagery indicates a change in the perception and ideology of leadership and rulers that can be seen throughout the imperial period.

Julius Caesar certainly started the Aeneas ball rolling again with a *denarius* that was minted in 48–47 BC (Figure 3). This depicts Venus on one side and Aeneas carrying Anchises in one hand and the Palladium (statue of Athena Pallas) in the other.



Figure 3

There are a number of differences between this scene and earlier depictions of the hero. While Aeneas is large and his father is almost in miniature (similar to the Louvre Vase 118 described above), Aeneas is depicted in the 'heroic nude', with no armour (although his father, as in the vase painting, is fully clothed). In contrast to the vase painting, Aeneas is facing the viewer, and instead of a sword and shield he carries a wooden statue of Athena Pallas. According to legend, Zeus handed this statue to Dardanus (the founder of Troy), and later it was rescued by Aeneas before being deposited in the Temple of Vesta in Rome (Ovid, *Fasti* 6.419–436). This is clearly a somewhat different spin on the myth, with a subtle nod to Caesar's descent from the Julian *gens*, who claimed descent from Ascanius (also called Iulus), and thus semi-divine parentage from Venus (who was conveniently depicted on the other side of coin). While some elements of the original myth have remained, Caesar is presenting himself as part of Rome's divine heritage and glory. He is also apparently unconcerned that his ancestor is 'baring all' to the general public.

Augustus took the imagery a step forward, commissioning an epic poem by Virgil, among other works, that cast Augustus in the light of Aeneas. The emperor also used the traditional mythology as a model for both his 'family values' legislation and his dynasty. Inspired by the imagery of Aeneas, Augustus created his own holy trinity: a divine parent, a heroic leader and an heir (future leader). It was this image that he sought to perpetuate in his own Forum, with a temple dedicated to Venus Genetrix (Venus the Procreator/Mother) and a larger-than-life-size statue group of Anchises, Aeneas and Ascanius (Figure 4). Only fragments of this group survive, but models found in Spain have been used to recreate a sense of the statues.



Figure 4

Recalling a more traditional representation, Augustus' Aeneas is shown in armour (though the military dress has been given a fashionable update). The statue of Athena Pallas is nowhere to be seen, suggesting that the role of Ascanius (and that of an heir) were far more important to Augustus than the wooden image of a goddess. The heavily robed and hooded figure of Anchises is raised towards the sky like a divine father, while Ascanius, in the short-skirted toga of youth, creates a balance on the lower register. Aeneas is larger than life and clearly the central focus of the composition. Only the skirts part of his cuirass survives, but this is richly decorated with gorgon heads, which also recall the mythological origins of the story.

Similar imagery appears on coins of the emperor Antoninus Pius (AD 138–161), which also reflect family and dynasty by depicting an armored Aeneas holding a hooded Anchises on one side and young Ascanius in a short-skirted toga on the other side (weblink: <http://www.the-romans.co.uk/legends.htm>).

Everyday Aeneas

Aeneas was not only a figure for imperial propaganda. He also became a subject for private life and everyday objects. Some of the most common graffiti in Pompeii are lines from the *Aeneid*, seen alongside wall paintings (Figure 5) and terracotta figurines (Figure 6) that date from the mid-first century AD.



Figure 5

It is incredible how different a scene can appear when it is in colour (it is worth noting that the statues in Augustus' Forum would have been painted, too). For instance, who would have thought that Aeneas was blond (in an echo of depictions of Alexander the Great)? However, the painting's composition is similar to those found in Augustus' statue group and the coins of Antoninus Pius, with the figure of Anchises as tiny as ever. Also, Ascanius is seen – as on Antoninus' coins – in a Phrygian cap (from Asia Minor) and carrying a shepherd's rod.

The terracotta figurine (also from Pompeii) has the same sense of motion and flight, with Aeneas leaning in one direction, and small adult versions of Ascanius and Anchises. Ascanius, who is absent on some Greek vases and on the coin of Julius Caesar, is depicted (as in the wall painting) with a Phrygian cap (from Asia Minor) and a shepherd's rod. Although the positions of the figures are very similar, as is their dress, there are some differences in the depictions of the scene. The terracotta statuette, like Caesar's coin, shows a bare-chested Aeneas, perhaps implying that he left Troy without even a shirt on his back. He also has a beard both here and on the coin of Antoninus Pius, but not on the wall painting or one of the Greek vases. Such differences in hair and beard styles are often simply reflections of the times when the art was made: artists generally want to produce items that will seem fashionable to contemporary audiences. Moreover, wall paintings, which were obviously designed

for private homes rather than public display, are subject to personal tastes, so one should be careful about trying to read too much into them.



Figure 6

The flight of Aeneas was not the only scene from the *Aeneid* to be depicted in Roman art, but it was clearly one of the most popular. It served as a reminder of a number of Roman ideals: duty, family and the ability of an individual to rise from the position of exile to become a powerful leader. It also inspired a number of Renaissance artists (weblink:

<https://www.utexas.edu/courses/mythmoore/imagefiles20/aeneasfleeingtroy.html>).

Dido and Aeneas

The tragic lovers Dido and Aeneas have inspired numerous works of art, from a fourth-century AD mosaic in a Roman house in Somerset, England, to Henry Purcell's opera, composed in the late seventeenth century. The Low Ham Villa in Somerset tells their story in a series of five panels, with Aeneas sailing to Carthage, his meeting with Dido, a hunting scene, an embracing scene (Figure 7) and finally Aeneas mourning his lover. In these scenes, a bearded Aeneas is fully clothed, with dark skin and a Phrygian cap, while Dido has lighter hair and is naked save for a floating scarf that hides nothing.



Over the course of a millennium numerous images of Aeneas were produced at different times, in different places and with different objectives, so it is perhaps unsurprising that there is considerable variation in his depiction. Nevertheless, many elements of the original scenes – especially the flight scene – were retained throughout. This is a central feature of myths, both ancient and modern: the fact that they can be altered over time, to suit different individuals and circumstances, yet continue to retain elements of the original story.

Image credits

Figure 1

Aeneias Ankhises Louvre F118, Louvre, Paris. Licensed under public domain via Wikimedia Commons:

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Aeneias_Ankhises_Louvre_F118.jpg#mediaviewer/File:Aeneias_Ankhises_Louvre_F118.jpg

Figure 2

Amphora Aineias Ankhises, 470 BC. Licensed under public domain via Wikimedia Commons:

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Amphora_Aineias_Ankhises_470_BC_Staatliche_Antikensammlungen.jpg#mediaviewer/Datei:Amphora_Aineias_Ankhises_470_BC_Staatliche_Antikensammlungen.jpg

Figure 3

Denarius, 48–47 BC. Image from Andrew McCabe: <http://andrewmccabe.ancients.info/>

Figure 4

Models of flight of Aeneas statues from Iberia, Museo Dei Fori Imperiali, Rome.

Figure 5

'Flight of Aeneas' wall painting, Pompeii. Romans website: <http://www.the-romans.co.uk/>

Figure 6

Terracotta Aeneas MAN Naples 110338, by Alphanidon. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike via Wikimedia Commons: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Terracotta_Aeneas_MAN_Naples_110338.jpg#mediaviewer/File:Terracotta_Aeneas_MAN_Naples_110338.jpg

Figure 7

Low Ham mosaic, Somerset County Museum, Taunton. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike via Wikimedia Commons: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Low_ham_mosaic.jpg#mediaviewer/File:Low_ham_mosaic.jpg