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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://www.mackseyjournal.org/publications/vol1/iss1/228

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Dum Conderet Urbem: Aeneas’s Development and the Personal Cost of War

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Abstract

Vergil begins and ends his epic poem, *The Aeneid*, using the verb “condere,” meaning “to hide or bury.” In the proem, “condere” refers to the act of establishing the long-lasting foundations of the city of Rome. In the final lines of the poem, it describes Aeneas killing the Italian Turnus, and thus destroying the last obstacle to his destiny of establishing a great city. My research examines the uses of “condere” throughout the poem, and explores the word’s journey from a positive, generative meaning to describing an act of violence. Tracking the evolution of “condere” confronts such issues as burial practices, conquest, Roman nationalism, and *pietas*. I look at how Aeneas is transformed throughout the poem, from victim to conqueror, from devoted to family and the gods to merciless in battle. The primary goal of my research is to examine how the meaning of “condere” corresponds to Aeneas’s character development, and to look at the ways in which Vergil comments on the personal and societal cost of war and imperialism.

*Keywords: Aeneid, Vergil, Roman Empire, Augustan Age*

In its simplest form, the *Aeneid* describes the quest to found Rome. Vergil follows Aeneas, the Trojan son of Venus, as he escapes burning Troy and travels across the
Mediterranean in pursuit of fulfilling his destiny, to establish a new city for his people in Italy. The *Aeneid* is constantly looking back and looking forward, and constantly inverting itself. Vergil draws on epic predecessors, Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, but his poetry is even more poignant in the moments where he strays from Homer’s models than areas in which he emulates them. Vergil breaks from these models to transform his epic into something new - a uniquely Roman story designed for contemporary Roman audiences. A point of transformation is Vergil’s use of the verb “condere” throughout the epic. Throughout the *Aeneid*, Vergil equates the act of founding a city with “condere.” “Condere” is first used in the first few lines of the poem to describe Aeneas’ mission to found a new city in Italy. In the first hexad of the poem, “condere” refers to the act of establishing or burying. In book nine, however, a new meaning for “condere” emerges, which has to do with the killing of Italians at the hands of the Trojans and their allies. “Condere” is the verb that Vergil uses at the end of book twelve to describe Aeneas stabbing Turnus with his sword, thus killing him. Prior to the *Aeneid*, “condere” had never been used in Latin to describe the act of killing. The use of “condere” in the epic has far-reaching implications influencing how we read the poem. With this new meaning of “condere,” Vergil creates ambiguity about whether the Latins killed by Aeneas receive burial, and thus raises questions pertaining to the morality of war. The use of “condere” relates to themes of burial, Homeric parallels, the cost of war and power, Aeneas’s transformation, and the *Aeneid* as a story of inversion. The transformation of meaning in the *Aeneid* reveals Aeneas’s simultaneous loss of humanity and acquisition of power, as well as exploring the personal and widespread consequences of conquest and empire.

In the first hexad, “condere” is used to describe founding a city. “Condere is associated with beginnings throughout the first book. In the proem, Vergil writes that Aeneas is being
tossed around the Mediterranean “dum conderet urbem” (until he might establish a city) (Vergil I.5). A few verses later, Vergil writes: “tantae molis erat Romanam condere gentem” (so great a challenge it was to establish the Roman people) (1.33). Vergil also uses “condere” in the prophecy that Jupiter delivers to Venus in book one. Venus is worried about the future of her son and the Trojan fleet as they are ravaged by storms on the Mediterranean, and Jupiter tells her: “laetus/Romulus excipiet gentem et Mavortia condet/moenia Romanosque suo de nomine dicet” (fortunate Romulus will gather the people and establish the walls of Mars, and he will call the Romans by his own name) (Vergil 1.275-277). Throughout these passages, Vergil links the foundation of Rome and the origins of the Roman people with the verb “condere.”

In addition to referring to the foundation of a city, throughout the first hexad, Vergil uses “condere” to mean “to hide” or “to bury.” When describing Aeneas’ travels and the fall of Troy in books two and three, the word is used to mean “to hide” frequently. An example of this is when Aeneas is describing the trick of the Trojan horse. He describes the Greek fleet sailing away and hiding on Tenedos: “huc se provecti deserto in litore condunt” (having carried themselves away from this place, they hide on an empty shore) (Vergil 2.24). Another example occurs when the Trojans are attacked by harpies in book three. Vergil writes: “iuessi faciunt, tectosque per herbam/disponunt ensis et scuta latentia condunt” (they do as they were ordered and place their covered swords in the grass and hide their concealed shields) (3.236-237). In both of these examples, “condere” means “to hide.” The majority of the uses of “condere” in the first hexad refer to hiding things.

“Condere” also refers to rituals of burial and shows the significance of proper burial to the Trojans and to contemporary Romans. In book five, Vergil describes burying Aeneas’ father, Anchises: “reliquias divinique ossa parentis/condidimus terra maestasque sacravimus aras”
([they] buried the remains and bones of the divine parent in the earth and consecrated the gloomy altars) (5.47-48). This passage shows how “condere” is used to mean a burial performed according to proper customs. The significance of burial and burial rituals to the Trojans is further exhibited in book three, when Aeneas recounts to Dido the story of Polydorus, son of Priam. Polydorus was sent to Thrace by Priam with payment to the Thracian king, so that if Troy fell, the king would keep Polydorus safe. Instead, when Troy fell, the Thracian king killed Polydorus and kept the payment. Polydorus never received a proper burial. Aeneas discovers Polydorus when he is in Thrace performing a sacrifice. As he pulls up plants to make room for the altar, blood oozes from them. He hears a voice that tells him: “Polydorus ego. Hic confixum ferrea texti/telorum seges et iaculis increvit acutis” (I am Polydorus. Here an iron crop of weapons covered me and grew sharp javelins) (Vergil 3.45-46). Before leaving Thrace, the Trojans bury Polydorus properly. Vergil writes that they “instauramus Polydoro funus” (repeat the burial for Polydorus) (3.62). “Instauramus” here can mean “repeat,” “renew,” or “restore.” Christine G. Perkell, in her commentary on book three, writes that the use of “instauramus” refers to “repeating a religious ceremony invalidated by some error or omission in the first performance. Polydorus’ body, covered only by the chance action of wind and wave, had not received formal burial; therefore this second, ritually correct burial is an instauratio funeris” (277). Here, Perkell exemplifies the significance of burial- not only that it is performed, but that it is done in a certain way.

Vergil describes the Trojans performing the funeral rites for Polydorus, revealing that burial is an important custom to Aeneas and the Trojans. He writes:

“inges
aggeritur tumulo tellus, stant manibus arae,
caeruleis maestae vittis atraque cuppresso,
et circum Iliades crinem de more solutae;
inferimus tepido spumantia cymbia lacte
sanguinus et sacri pateras, animamque sepulcro
condimus et magna supremum voce ciemus”

(a huge [amount of] earth is heaped up in a mound, the altars to the shades stand, gloomy with blue ribbons and black cypress, and all around the Trojan women loosened their hair according to custom; [they] carry in bubbling bowls of tepid milk and saucers of sacred blood, and [they] bury his spirit in a tomb and call for him in a great voice for the final time) (Vergil 3.62-68).

Here, the verb “condere” refers to burial- burial performed in the proper way, according to custom.

In the second half of the Aeneid, “condere” takes on a new meaning, one of violence. The first time that “condere” is used in reference to killing is when Nisus and Euryalus attack the sleeping Rutulians in book nine. Vergil writes: “pectore in adverso totum cui comminus ensem/condidit adsurgenti” (in close combat he buried his whole sword in the rising man’s hostile chest) (9. 346-347). In the second hexad, Vergil establishes a theme- whenever “condere” is being used in a violent sense, the perpetrator is always a Trojan or Trojan ally, while the victim is always an Italian (James 623). At the very end of the poem, Aeneas “ferrum adverso sub pectore condit” (buries his sword in the opposing chest) (Vergil 12.950), thus killing Turnus.

This use of “condere” is a great departure from how the word is used at the beginning of book one, when it describes Aeneas establishing a city.

Sharon James, in her article “Establishing Rome with the Sword: Condere in the Aeneid,” writes about the conflicting uses of the verb: “The one a slow, constructive struggle to settle
down and build a civilization, the other a swift, destructive act of enraged killing” (623). The use of “condere” to describe both the foundation of a city and the killing of enemies links Rome to conquest and war. Regardless of how “condere” is used in the poem, Vergil creates a clear link between “condere” and power. This thematic link is present when Jupiter foretells Romulus founding Rome. Vergil writes: “Romulus excipiet gentem et Mavortia condet/moenia” (Romulus will gather the race and build the walls of Mars) (1.276-277). The elision between “gentem” and “et” brings together “gentem” and “Mavortia” in the line. Thus, Vergil creates a link between “gentem,” the Roman people, and “Mavortia,” Mars and war. This connection defines both the Roman people and the act of founding a city. James writes: “In liking the slow founding of Rome to the swift stabbing of Turnus, Vergil suggests that the former rests on the latter” (624). Killing Turnus and eliminating his lineage is the final step that Aeneas takes to ensure both his marriage to Lavinia and his foundation of his own city.

The changing meanings of “condere” correspond to a shift in Aeneas’ character. James writes that the themes of violence in the second hexad “appear to suggest the personal cost, in private life, for public glory, conquest, and empire” (624). Indeed, Aeneas does undergo a drastic transformation from the beginning of the poem to its abrupt end. This shift in character is evident when it comes to how Aeneas treats his enemies in war. In book ten, the young Italian, Lausus, faces Aeneas in defense of his father, Mezentius. Aeneas reproaches him, saying: “quo moriture ruis maioraque viribus audes?/fallit te incautum pietas tua” (why do you, about to die, rush, and dare things greater than your strengths? Your devotion deceives you, incautious one) (Vergil 10.811-812). Here, Aeneas is mocking Lausus for being loyal to his father. This moment especially reveals the shift in Aeneas’ character. When Aeneas is first introduced to the reader at the beginning of the poem, Vergil describes him as “insignem pietate virum” (a man outstanding
in his devotion) (1.10). His *pietas* refers to his devotion—devotion to country, devotion to the gods, devotion to custom, or particularly the devotion a son has to his father. While his devotion was once his defining feature, now Aeneas is mocking a man for possessing that same characteristic. This moment marks how throughout the poem Aeneas has lost his “pietas.”

The loss of his *pietas* culminates when he kills Turnus at the end of book twelve. In book six, Aeneas visits the Underworld. He encounters Anchises, who shows him the great Romans of the future and tells him to remember “parcere subjiciis et debellare superbos” (to spare the conquered and vanquish the proud) (Vergil 6.853). These principles are introduced as a moral code to guide Romans. In Turnus’ speech before his death, he certainly is not proud or arrogant. In fact, in his final moments, Turnus begs for mercy for the sake of his father. He appeals to Aeneas’ *pietas* and his memory of his own father. Vergil describes Turnus as “humilis supplexque” (humble and a suppliant) (12.930). He says to Aeneas: “equidem merui nec deprecor” (indeed I have earned this and I do not complain) (Vergil 12.931). In both of these instances, Turnus clearly accepts his defeat. Turnus goes on to say:

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“miseri te si qua parentis
tangere cura potest, oro (fuit et tibi talis
Anchises genitor) Dauni miserere senectae
et me, seu corpus spoliatum lumine mavis,
redde meis”
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(if any concern for an unhappy parent can touch you, I beg (and such a father Anchises was to you) pity the old age of Daunus and, if you prefer my body to be deprived of life, return me to my people) (Vergil 12.932-936). Here, Turnus asks Aeneas to return his body to his family after his death. He appeals to Aeneas’ *pietas* by referencing his relationship to Anchises and likening
it to Turnus’ own relationship with his father Daunus. The repetition of ‘m’ in this speech- in “miseri,” “me,” “miserere,” and “meis”- creates a link between Turnus and his people and being deserving of pity. In this moment, Turnus is “subjectis,” rather than “superbos.” According to the set of Roman values laid out by Anchises in book six, Aeneas should not have killed Turnus. In doing so, he directly disobeyed what his father told him.

In Turnus’ final speech to Aeneas, he also stresses the importance of burial. As is shown throughout the Aeneid, burial was viewed as an essential practice. Burial is “the proper conclusion for death” (James 628). During the war in Latium in the second hexad, Vergil sets up purposeful ambiguity concerning whether or not the men slain by Aeneas receive proper burial. James writes that: “Denial of burial constitutes not only a personal act of revenge but a political act, a sign of conquest” (599). The verb “condere” is inextricably linked with conquest in the second half of the Aeneid, so much so that it loses its traditional meaning of “to bury” with respect to the proper burial of a human being. This reveals how brutal Aeneas is in war; he is not only killing the Italians, but he is also depriving them of a necessary cultural rite. This inhumanity culminates when he mocks the body of Tarquitus. He says: “istic nunc, metuende, iace. Non te optima mater/condet humi patrioque onerabit membra sepulcro” (lie there now, one to be feared. The best mother will not bury you in the earth and burden your limbs with the ancestral tomb) (Vergil 10.557-558). “Condere” only refers to burial when it comes in the form of Aeneas taunting the corpse of his enemy. The denial of burial in the Aeneid reveals Aeneas’s transformation and loss of humanity.

The second hexad of the Aeneid and its description of the war in Italy correspond to the Iliadic half of the epic. The ambiguity surrounding whether or not Turnus receives burial establishes a dynamic where Aeneas plays the part of Achilles. In book twenty-four of the Iliad,
following Hector’s death and the mistreatment of his body, Priam goes to see Achilles to ask for Hector’s body to be returned to him, so that he can give him a proper burial. In Priam’s speech to Achilles, he says: “Remember your father, godlike Achilles, whose years are like mine, on the grievous threshold of old age” (Iliad 599). This quotation, referencing Achilles’ father, bears a striking resemblance to how Turnus attempts to appeal to Aeneas before he is killed. The difference is that Priam wins Achilles over, while Turnus’ plea does not move Aeneas. After Priam entreats him, Achilles says: “Do not provoke me further, old sir; I intend myself to give Hector back to you” (Iliad 605). The Iliad then ends with Hector’s funeral rituals in Troy. The Odyssey ends with a conclusion of the poem’s action by reuniting Odysseus with his family and Athena bringing an end to the civil strife in Ithaca. In “Sine Fine: Vergil’s Masterplot,” Robin N. Mitchell-Boyask writes about “the role of the Homeric epics in shaping the Vergilian readers’ expectations” (303). The ending of the Aeneid does not have much in common with the ending of the Odyssey, but it does bear resemblance to the final lines of the Iliad. The final lines of both epics focused on the defeated antagonists, Hector and Turnus.

Similarly to the Aeneid, the Iliad does not discuss the fate of the hero Achilles. The Aeneid does not end with Aeneas establishing his city, nor does it make any allusions to the future greatness of Rome. Both epics end with the focus on the defeated opponent. In the final lines of the poem, Aeneas is likened to the great Greek warrior, Achilles, while parallels are drawn between Turnus and Hector. Looking back at the Iliad, the Aeneid’s abrupt ending is not subversive, but its treatment of how a hero acts is subversive. In the Iliad, more is resolved as the epic poem closes. Achilles has come to peace with himself and with Priam, and Hector’s burial funeral games are described within the last book of the epic. None of that is seen in the Aeneid. Carl P.E. Springer writes: “When the Aeneid closes, the hero’s sword is dripping with the blood
of Turnus. The reader’s last vision of Aeneas finds him still in the throes of blood-lust” (312). The ending of the *Aeneid* is notable in how it crosses paths with the *Iliad*, but even more notable in how the two endings differ. The image of Aeneas in the final lines of the poem is drastically different from how Aeneas is introduced in the beginning of the *Aeneid*. This final image shows that the intention of the *Aeneid* is not to glorify war and conquest and violence, but to instead reveal the personal cost of war, and to explore Aeneas’s loss of self.

Another example of inversion in the text occurs within the relationship between Juno and Aeneas. James writes that Aeneas’s killing of Turnus reveals “the enraged, murderous passion that has previously characterized not the city’s founder and the poem’s hero, but his chief opponent, Juno” (625). In fact, the ways that Aeneas is described at the end of the poem and the ways that Juno is described at the beginning of the poem are quite similar. Mitchell-Boyask points out:

“The epic proem introduces a set of words that resonate throughout the epic: *dolor, ira, insignis, condere, saevus, memor, profugus*. These words return all together in the last nine lines of the *Aeneid*, but they are given different associations; words which characterized Juno now describe Aeneas, and ones for Aeneas move to Turnus” (302).

Vergil writes about the “saevique dolores” (savage griefs) (1.25) that compel Juno to hate the Trojans, and in Aeneas’s case, “saevi monimenta doloris” (the reminders of savage grief) (12.945) cause Aeneas to kill Turnus. For each of them, their grief and anger lead them into the perpetrator role, harming someone who cannot fight back against them. Turnus illustrates Aeneas’s transformation from victim to perpetrator when he says to Aeneas: “vicisti et victum tendere palmas Ausonii videre” (you have conquered, and the Ausonians have seen me, conquered, extend my palms) (Vergil 12.936). This is a complete reversal of Aeneas’s situation.
at the beginning of the epic. In the first book, Aeneas, having fled Troy and the destruction in the aftermath of the Trojan War, is “tendens ad sidera palmas” (holding his palms to the stars) (Vergil 1.93) to beg the gods for mercy from the horrific storm he and his men are facing. The repeated image of holding up one’s palms in supplication further exemplifies Aeneas’s transition from victim to victor, and Turnus slipping into the role of the conquered man, with his home taken away from him. What the Greeks did to the Trojans, the Trojans now inflict on the Italians. The dynamic reveals how the conflict of the Trojan War continues to play out in the Aeneid.

The shifting meaning of “condere” is both an indicator and a symptom of the change in Aeneas and in the tone of the epic. “Condere” is first used to describe the foundation of Rome, and it is last used to describe Turnus being killed at the hands of Aeneas. With this parallel, Vergil creates a link between Rome and conquest, thus offering a critique of Roman imperialism and the widespread and personal costs of empire. One of the personal costs that Vergil explores is the shift in Aeneas’s character and his loss of humanity during the war against the Italians. In the epic, Vergil follows Aeneas from powerless to powerful, and this arc allows the reader to watch as Aeneas loses humanity in the second hexad of the poem. Aeneas’s transformation and disregard of custom raises questions about burial, and burial being denied to the slain Italians. He ignores what is right in the times of war. Vergil’s use of his Homeric predecessors is poignant as the conflict of the Trojan War plays out again in Italy, with Aeneas taking up the role of the invader. Ultimately, the change in meaning of “condere” corresponds to the themes of inversion throughout the epic and Aeneas’s transformation from a hero with humanity and pietas to a conqueror who is merciless and cruel in battle.
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