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UGS302: Tales of the Trojan War

Attitudes Towards Aeneas in Roman Asia Minor

After falling under Roman rule in the mid-2nd century B.C., the people of Asia Minor, the peninsula of modern Turkey bounded by the Black and Aegean Seas, faced a challenge to their attitudes toward the mythological figure of Aeneas. Prior to the advent of Roman power, each city of Asia Minor had traditions of revering specific gods and heroes, often including Aeneas, as their ancestors or patron divinities. But the burgeoning Romans had their own local tradition of venerating Aeneas and his descendants, Romulus and Remus, as their forefathers. Once absorbed by the Romans, the people and cities of Asia Minor had the option of adopting this Roman myth of Aeneas, though it often conflicted with their cultural traditions. Those that did so often hoped to establish a friendly relationship with Rome through which they might receive favors. Other people and cities, however, maintained their traditional attitudes towards Aeneas or actively rejected Roman claims to descent from him. By refusing to conform to Roman practices regarding Aeneas, they sought to retain their cultural identity or even propose cultural superiority over the Romans. These differing responses in Asia Minor to Rome's myth of Aeneas were a consequence of the people and cities' judgements as to whether the benefits of an improved relationship with Rome outweighed their desire to preserve their cultural heritage.

The responses of cities in Asia Minor regarding Aeneas show their desire to either establish a connection with their rulers or retain their traditional beliefs. Some cities, notably Ilium and Aphrodisias, not only accepted the Roman myth of Aeneas but altered their own city identities in a way that gave them a mythological and ancestral connection to the Romans.

Others, such as Ephesus and Skepsis, instead emphasized their preexisting traditions, claiming them to be just as or more accurate and significant than those of the Romans.

By claiming their own ancestral connection with Aeneas, Ilium and Aphrodisias could apply kinship diplomacy to their relationship with Rome. In the practice of kinship diplomacy, a city would claim to have had a close bond with another city in the mythical past when asking for favors from it in the present. Andrew Erskine describes the importance of this practice between Hellenistic states:

In the many diplomatic exchanges that took place in the Hellenistic world, an appeal for assistance was often reinforced by reference to the kinship that existed between the two states. As a result of the colonial past there were extensive links between cities... The links between cities included not only those which we would consider to be historical; they also included the mythical, based, for instance, on common heroic ancestors (Erskine 163).

Thus, by establishing a connection with Aeneas, cities could claim a mythological bond with the Romans in the hope of receiving favors from them. As Christopher Jones states in his *Kinship Diplomacy in the Ancient World*, “alert Greek communities were quick to exploit the advantages to be gained from kinship with the new power [Rome]. The outstanding example is Ilium, the successor city to Homeric Troy” (Jones 63).

Before and during Roman rule, Ilium claimed itself to be a second Troy, supposedly founded on the site of ancient Troy by the survivors of its destruction. Prior to Roman conquest, this foundation story did not include Aeneas as a central figure. Ilium instead revered the sons of Hector and Aeneas, Astyanax and Ascanius, as its founders. Dionysius of Halicarnassus states that, according to Ilium’s traditional myth, Astyanax and Ascanius “went to Troy” and founded Ilium “to restore their ancestral kingdom” (Dionysius 1.47.6). Marcus Servius Honoratus also quotes Abas, an early writer, who in his lost work stated that “post discessum a Troia Graecorum

Astyanacti ibi [Ilii] datum regnum¹ (Servius 9.262). Although Astyanax is often said to have died during the fall of Troy, he was given a different fate in many ancient works: “the early logographers represented him as surviving and being carried off by Neoptolemus” (Cary 152). Thus, the Ilians did not challenge the accepted story of Astyanax by claiming him as one of their ancestors, but through him affirmed their direct Trojan heritage.

Once under the influence of Rome in the second century BC, Ilium continued to honor this Trojan past, but began venerating Aeneas instead of Ascanius and Astyanax. During the early Roman empire, the city erected a statue of Aeneas with an accompanying inscription, of which only the following remains: “ΙΑΙΕΙΣ ΤΟΝ ΠΑΤΡΙΟΝ ΘΕΟΝ ΑΙΝΕΙΑΝ”² (I.Ilion 143). While the verb in this fragment is lost, from the nature of the statue and the words “ΠΑΤΡΙΟΝ ΘΕΟΝ,” it can be assumed that the Ilians established the statue and inscription to honor Aeneas as their forefather. So, Ilium still sought to stress its identity as the reincarnation of Troy, but now with an emphasis on Aeneas as its primary ancestor. Additionally, in the reign of Vespasian, Ilium minted its own coins depicting Aeneas fleeing Troy with his father, Anchises, on his back (Bellinger 48). This recreation of a scene distinct to the Roman myth of Aeneas shows that Ilium publicly accepted their myth. Ilium’s decision to honor Aeneas in his Roman form was likely “moulded and reinforced by the importance of Troy in the Augustan empire” (Erskine 103), for Ilium could claim kinship with Rome by emphasizing its role as the home of Aeneas, whence he set out for Italy. This kinship enabled Ilium to receive more freedom and immunity from taxation under the Roman empire. According to the historian Suetonius, the Emperor Claudius “allowed the people of Ilium perpetual exemption from tribute, on the ground that they were the founders

¹ “After the departure of the Greeks from Troy, the kingdom there [at Ilium] was given to Astyanax.” This is my translation, as I was unable to find a reputable translation of Marcus Servius Honoratus’ works.

² “The Ilians [?] Aeneas, the Ancestral God.” Again, my translation, due to the lack of any other.

of the Roman race” (Suetonius 5.25.3). Thus, by propagating the Roman myth of Aeneas and incorporating itself into that myth, Ilium earned the favor of Rome.

The city of Aphrodisias similarly glorified the family of Aeneas to befriend Rome. As its name suggests, Aphrodisias placed much weight on the worship of Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty and mother of Aeneas. When Aphrodisias fell under Roman power, it leveraged this connection with Aphrodite to establish kinship with the Romans, especially the powerful Julian family, which claimed descent from Venus, the Roman version of Aphrodite (Evans 39). In conjunction with loyalty to the Romans in war, this enabled Aphrodisias to gain freedom from taxation. An inscription on the walls of Aphrodisias dating to 39 B.C. notes that “the Senate decided to reaffirm the relationship of favour, friendship and alliance with the people of Plarasa and Aphrodisias” and that these people were “exempt from all levies and removed from all taxation documents of the Roman People” (IAph2007 8.27). Aphrodisias maintained this relationship in the 1st century A.D. by demonstrating its faithfulness to Augustus and the Julio-Claudian dynasty with an elaborate temple dedicated to Aphrodite and the Roman Emperors, the Sebasteion. In addition to portraits of Aphrodite and the emperors, the Sebasteion contained “panels showing the Flight of Aeneas from Troy (on his way to Rome, of course) and Romulus and Remus with the She-wolf” (Smith 100). Thus, while Aphrodisias did not worship Aeneas to the degree of Ilium, it accepted the myth of his journey to Rome and honored him as the son of their patron divinity, Aphrodite, through whom they could also claim kinship with Rome.

Although cities such as Ilium and Aphrodisias adapted their religious traditions to make room for veneration of Aeneas, other cities refused to worship Aeneas as the ancestor of Rome. These cities, such as Ephesus and Skepsis, instead maintained their preexisting religious practices to show the importance of their own divine heritage.

Ephesus, one of the most prosperous cities in Roman Asia Minor (Akurgal 143), made no noticeable attempt to venerate Aeneas or develop kinship with Rome through him. Ephesus instead preferred to emphasize its identity as the birthplace and center of worship for the goddess Artemis. Ephesus was located just next to the small island of Ortygia, where Leto supposedly gave birth to Artemis. Strabo notes that Ephesians often showed visitors the river at which “Leto bathed herself after her birthing pains” and the grove of olive trees where she “rested after being relieved from the birthing pains” (Strabo 14.1.20). Ephesus also established itself as the center of worship for Artemis by building the elaborate Temple of Artemis, which by some ancient authors “was considered the most impressive of the seven wonders of the world” (Akurgal 153). Additionally, Ephesus minted numerous coins honoring Artemis, striking one of her symbols – a stag, bee, or quiver – onto their backs (Akerman 82). Thus, Ephesus’ identity was closely tied to Artemis. Ephesus preferred to maintain this identity rather than follow the Roman practice of venerating Aeneas. Ancient writers give no indication of Aeneas being venerated in Ephesus, and he was not mentioned on its coins nor in any of the numerous engravings and statues in the Temple of Artemis. Therefore, Ephesus placed more value on its proud tradition of worshipping Artemis than on any favors that could be gained by honoring Aeneas.

Ephesus’ decision to maintain its cultural heritage rather than seek favor from Rome through Aeneas was made easier by its low chance of gaining such favors. Unlike Ilium and Aphrodisias, Ephesus could not claim unwavering loyalty to Rome. Ephesus briefly rebelled against the Romans during the Mithridatic Wars, in which Mithridates VI led an uprising of Greek cities. In 88 B.C., the Ephesians welcomed Mithridates into their city and “overthrew the Roman statues which had been erected” (Appian 12.21). Once Mithridates was defeated, they faced a fine and increased taxes for these actions. As a formerly rebellious city, Ephesus had

little chance of being granted exemption from taxes or any other benefits from Rome, no matter how strong of a connection with Aeneas it could claim. Such a connection would have been weak, in any case, as Ephesus had few historical or mythological ties to the Trojans or Aeneas. Therefore, because Ephesus had such a strong cultural identity and little to gain by altering this identity, its attitude towards Aeneas did not change throughout Roman rule.

While Ephesus maintained its traditions without expressing an opinion towards the Roman myth of Aeneas, the city of Skepsis disputed Roman claims of descent from Aeneas, which conflicted with its own foundation story. Like Ilium, Skepsis claimed to have been founded “by Skamandrios [Astyanax] the son of Hektor and Askanios the son of Aineias” (Strabo 13.1.52). Unlike Ilium, Skepsis was not willing to adapt this story to make it compatible with the Roman myth of Aeneas. When Ilium sought to establish kinship with Rome, it discontinued its myth that Ascanius ruled in Ilium, which contradicted the Roman claim that Aeneas and his son settled in Italy, and instead venerated Aeneas somewhat vaguely as an ancestral god. Skepsis, however, would not change its foundation myth to fit a Roman mold. It sought no kinship with Rome and maintained its traditional belief that Ascanius, Astyanax, and their descendants “ruled Skepsis for a long time” (Strabo 13.1.52). This belief “served to refute the thesis of a Trojan origin for the Romans” (Gabba 197). Thus, Skepsis attempted to assert its historical primacy over Rome by refusing to change its foundation story and claiming that it, not Italy, was the site of Aeneas’ dynasty.

The contrast between Skepsis’ attempt to establish cultural superiority over Rome and Ilium’s willingness to adapt to the Roman myth of Aeneas reflects the cities’ chances of receiving benefits through kinship diplomacy. While Ilium was known across the Hellenistic world as a continuation of Troy itself (Erskine 228), Skepsis was a small and remote city.

Skepsis could have altered its foundation myth and claimed kinship with Rome, as Ilium did, but it faced a lower probability of being recognized. Therefore, as Skepsis believed itself to be the true site of Aeneas' household and could gain little by giving up this belief, it chose to reject the Roman myth.

Thus, the cities of Asia Minor responded to the Roman myth of Aeneas in varying ways, depending on their existing practices and likelihood of receiving benefits from Rome through kinship diplomacy. Works of literature from Asia Minor during Roman rule also reflect their authors' nonuniform attitudes towards Aeneas. Some writers, such as Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Dio Chrysostom, glorified Aeneas and promoted the Roman myth of descent from him. These writers adapted to the Roman story of Aeneas to promote unity between the Greek and Roman worlds. Others, such as Demetrius of Skepsis and Strabo, rejected the notion of Aeneas' settlement in Italy. In doing so, they claimed that, though Greek cities were subject to Rome politically and economically, they retained cultural superiority over Rome.

Dionysius of Halicarnassus, born in 60 B.C., devoted his greatest work, *Roman Antiquities*, to the foundation and history of Rome, emphasizing its Trojan heritage. In it, Dionysius gives a Roman version of the myth of Aeneas, stating that "the Trojans who had fled with Aeneas from Troy after its capture landed at Laurentum" and, after living there for many generations, sent out colonizers to establish a new city, which "they called Rome, after Romulus, who was the leader of the colony and the seventeenth in descent from Aeneas" (Dionysius 1.45 1-3). This is the same sequence of events as that of Vergil's *Aeneid*, published just after *Roman Antiquities*, which was accepted as the official Roman story of Aeneas. Thus, it is likely that this version of the myth was generally accepted by the Romans in Dionysius' time. Dionysius chose to include this clearly Roman myth to convince his fellow Greeks to accept Roman rule. In the

introduction to his translation of *Roman Antiquities*, Earnest Cary describes Dionysius' reason for depicting the Romans as descendants of the mythological Trojans:

He will also show that Rome from the very beginning produced countless instances of men as pious, just, and brave as any other city ever did, and it was due to these early leaders and to the customs and institutions handed down by them that their descendants advanced to so great power. Thus he hopes to reconcile his Greek readers to their subjection to Rome (Cary xiii).

So, by glorifying Rome as being founded and led by descendants of heroic Aeneas, Dionysius intended to show the Greeks of Asia Minor that Rome was a strong, noble state. This was meant to ease any Greek resentment towards their overlords, for it was more acceptable to be ruled by people descended from pious Aeneas than by people descended from barbarians. Therefore, Dionysius adopted the Roman story of Aeneas in hopes of promoting peace between his fellow Greeks and their Roman rulers.

The late first century A.D. writer and orator Dio Chrysostom, based in Bithynia, a northern region of Asia Minor, gave an even more flattering account of Rome in his version of Aeneas' flight from Troy. Like Dionysius, Dio hoped to praise Rome and convince the rest of the Greek world to accept their rulers. Dio affirms the Roman story of Aeneas while lavishing praise on Rome itself, stating, "Aeneas became master of all Italy and founded the greatest city in the world" (Dio Chrysostom 11.138). Dio even makes the strange claim that Aeneas, once settled in Italy, was approached by one of his former enemies, the Greek hero Diomedes, and asked for assistance: "When Diomedes in exile from Argos heard of Aeneas' expedition, he came to him, since peace and friendship existed between them, and asked for his help" (Dio Chrysostom 11.143). As this event was not part of the *Aeneid*, which by this time was well known, Dio likely added it to support his message to the Greeks. By stating that "peace and friendship existed" between Aeneas and Diomedes, Dio "communicates a fundamental message of harmony between Greek and Roman, a coming to terms with the changed world of the Roman peace"

(Kim 89). By showing Diomedes' reconciliation with Aeneas, he encouraged the Greeks to be peaceful and friendly with Rome, their ruler and former enemy. Therefore, Dio adapted the Roman myth of Aeneas to convince his audience in Asia Minor that they should submit to Roman rule and be willing vassals, as Diomedes was to Aeneas.

Thus, Dionysius and Dio both treated the myth of Aeneas in a way that portrayed the Romans in a favorable light, reassuring the Greeks that being their subjects was acceptable. However, this attitude towards Aeneas and Roman rule was not ubiquitous among the writers of Asia Minor. Demetrius of Skepsis and Strabo instead refuted the theory that Aeneas even settled in Italy, fighting to hold onto their region's mythological past and cultural eminence over Rome.

Demetrius of Skepsis, writing as Rome began to take power in Asia Minor in the second century B.C., rejected the story of Aeneas' journey to Italy. Instead, he maintained the foundation story of his own city, Skepsis, which claimed Ascanius, the son of Aeneas, as its founder. Demetrius was a vocal proponent of his city's decision to refuse to change this foundation story to match the Roman myth of Aeneas. Though his works are lost, Strabo states that "the Skepsian [Demetrius] believes that Skepsis was the royal residence of Aineias" (Strabo 13.1.52). Contradicting the Romans, Demetrius insisted that the house of Aeneas reigned not in Italy, but in Skepsis. This small act of cultural rebellion was likely due to Demetrius' desire to retain some sense of superiority over the Romans. As Demetrius and his city lost their political and economic independence to Rome, they clung to anything that made them superior to their rulers. In this instance, Demetrius could claim his city's historical preeminence over the Romans by declaring the Skepsians the true descendants of Aeneas. Therefore, because Demetrius hoped to show his city's cultural superiority over the Romans, he did not adopt their myth of Aeneas.

Strabo himself, a geographer of the first century A.D., also denied the truth of the Roman tale of Aeneas, even rebuking writers such as Dionysius, Dio, and Vergil for their belief that Aeneas settled in Italy. In his *Geographica*, Strabo uses this short passage from Homer to support his account of Aeneas' life:

Now he has come to hate the generation of Priam,
and now Aeneas will rule the men of Troy in power—
his sons' sons and the sons born in future years (Homer 20.306-308).

Strabo claims that this passage implies that Aeneas never left Troy, stating, “He [Homer] indicates that Aeneas remained in Troy and succeeded to the rule, handing the succession over to the sons of his sons” (Strabo 13.1.53). Authors such as Dionysius, who accepted the Roman version of events, interpreted this passage more openly, noting that “it was not impossible for Aeneas to reign over the Trojans he had taken with him, even though they were settled in another country” (Dionysius 1.53). Strabo rejects this argument, contending, “He [Homer] disagrees far more with the others who say that he wandered as far as Italia and who would have him end his life there” (Strabo 13.1.53). Thus, Strabo refused to accept the Roman story of Aeneas' settlement in Italy, instead claiming that he remained and ruled in Troy.

But why would Strabo so adamantly state that the Roman myth of Aeneas was false, especially with just one ambiguous selection from Homer as evidence? He surely was not critiquing Augustan rule or attempting to be revolutionary, for he in fact praised Augustus: “Such peace and abundance of good things have never been available to the Romans and their allies as what was provided by Sebastos [Augustus] Caesar” (Strabo 6.4.2). Instead, Lawrence Kim suggests that, though Strabo accepted Roman military and administrative prowess, he “makes significant effort to establish Greek primacy over Rome... in the *cultural* sphere (comprising art, literature, and scholarship)” and “in the *chronological* precedence of Greek culture (based on its antiquity and distinguished history) in comparison to Rome” (Kim 83).

Strabo therefore refused to accept the story of Aeneas founding Rome because it conflicted with longstanding Greek traditions, which, to him, were more accurate and impressive than Roman traditions. Like Demetrius, Strabo was not willing to sacrifice Greece's cultural eminence when it had already lost its political eminence.

Additionally, Strabo, a geographer, faced less risk in dissenting from the Roman myth of Aeneas than historians such as Dionysius. Strabo's *Geographica* discusses the geography of all of Europe and Asia known to Strabo, whereas Dionysius' *Roman Antiquities* concentrates on the early history of Rome. Therefore, while the rejection of Rome's foundation myth was little more than a footnote in *Geographica*, such a rejection would have altered the entire first book of *Roman Antiquities*. So, because Strabo was able to reject Roman tradition without greatly affecting his work, he chose to do so and declare Greece's mythological primacy over the Romans.

These variances between Strabo and Dionysius, Ilium and Skepsis, and other cities and authors show that Asia Minor did not have uniform attitudes towards Aeneas once under Roman rule. However, these attitudes can be grouped into two distinct categories: those of people willing to alter their culture to adapt to Roman rule and those hoping to retain their mythological past. Each city and writer made a calculated choice between their own longstanding traditions and those of the Romans. Some cities and writers valued their culture more highly than any benefits that could be gained from adopting the Roman myth of Aeneas, such as Ephesus, Skepsis, Demetrius of Skepsis, and Strabo. However, glorifying Rome's Trojan heritage provided practical benefits for the cities of Ilium and Aphrodisias and served to emphasize an important message of reconciliation with Roman rule to the Greeks for the authors Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Dio Chrysostom.

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