

## **Rebuking the Nazi Racialization of Virgil's Cleopatra in the *Aeneid***

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The idea of “the other” in antiquity permeated Roman thought and society, resulting in cultural clash and assimilation. Cultural, social, and religious differences were indeed palpable during the rise of Octavian and the deterioration of the Second Triumvirate (44-31 BCE), especially surrounding the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE. One of the crucial passages of Virgil's *Aeneid*, and long admired by a wide audience, is the shield sequence in Book 8, depicting the Roman view of “the other” during Augustus' reign. Its prejudicial and stereotypical descriptions of the Orient, epitomized by Pharaoh Cleopatra VII of Egypt, in relation to the Occident (embodied by Octavian) demonstrated the prevalence of xenophobia in the ancient world, accentuating differences among cultures often in a negative light. This example of xenophobia in antiquity has been misappropriated by modern racial thinkers, especially by the Nazis, who racialized these prejudices to advance their own ideologies. Specifically, Virgil's use of Cleopatra as a paradigm for the East and Orientalism has been misconstrued by the Nazis, resulting in superficial, engineered claims about the existence of racially motivated prejudice in the ancient world.

### **Racializing Xenophobia**

Often the Romans are considered civilizers, meaning that they gifted culture and civilization to those they conquered and incorporated into their empire. In tandem with this view is the Roman idea that they were racially superior to other peoples.

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However, the crux of this argument hinges on the blending of two distinct constructs: xenophobia and racism. Since these two ideas have been used interchangeably often, it is essential to define and distinguish them. Christopher Krebs defines racism as “a belief in inherent racial differences ... these differences [were] thought to be visible in physical characteristics, which correlate[d] with intellectual and cultural traits.”<sup>1</sup> This definition differentiates between prejudice specifically targeted at and based on phenotypical characteristics and other forms of prejudice. On the contrary, ancient xenophobia was not prejudice motivated by phenotypic differences.<sup>2</sup> Rather, xenophobia — deriving from the fusion of ξένος, meaning stranger, and φόβος, meaning fear — was motivated by prejudice and stereotypes about culture that resulted from the expansion of contact with various peoples. Michel Dubuisson argues that the Greeks generally believed in the superiority of their own culture and language. He discusses the tensions between Greek and Roman society specifically, and the aversion to the Latin language and Roman culture in Greece. Further, he points out that Greek thinking described other non-Greek speakers as βάρβαρος, the origin of the word barbarian.<sup>3</sup> This

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Krebs, *A Most Dangerous Book* (New York: Norton & Company, Inc., 2011), 191.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Dubuisson, “Some Aspects of Graeco-Roman Relations: The Attitude of Roman Administration Toward Language Use Xenophobia and Disparaging Works in Greek and Latin,” *Prudentia* 15 (1983), 35-47. On page 44, Dubuisson notes specifically that “each people [had] a stereotyped vision of the others.”

<sup>3</sup> Dubuisson, “Some Aspects of Graeco-Roman Relations,” 40. Denise McCoskey, *Race: Antiquity and its Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 54 references this comparison, stating that the “collapsing of all human variation into a single racial opposition — Greek vs. barbarian — [was] the closest parallel in antiquity to the modern racial binary of ‘black’ and ‘white.’” Benjamin Isaac in his seminal study *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) argues for the existence of proto-racism in

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assessment was successful in acknowledging the importance of language differences in antiquity and what bearing these had on views about cultural superiority, adequately elucidating the distinction between xenophobia and racism. Xenophobia was extremely prevalent in antiquity and instances of it were misconstrued for the racialization of classical antiquity, especially in later Nazi assessments of classical sources. The existence of linguistic prejudice in antiquity, in addition to partiality towards various cultural aspects of daily life and religion, factored into the dynamic of differentiating cultures by stereotyping. This dynamic was intricately linked to xenophobia, and ultimately used to justify racism that evolved during the twentieth century, particularly under the Nazi regime.

While it is essential to differentiate between racism and xenophobia, it is equally important to examine whether the Romans perceived themselves as superior to other peoples. Romans believed in the efficacy of their laws, customs, and ways of governing, resulting in their imposition of Roman practices on those they conquered. During the Augustan age, this idea was codified, in a sense, by Virgil's *Aeneid*. While the entirety of Virgil's epic played a critical role in delineating and validating Rome's imperial identity, one passage in particular played an integral role in shaping the principate's portrait and affirming Roman views about the supremacy of their rule. The bestowal of the four pillars, or arts, of Rome, which Anchises presented to Aeneas during his time in the Underworld in Book 6 of the *Aeneid* is the most prominent example. After Aeneas witnessed

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antiquity by drawing on these same parallels. Here, I am offering a nuanced assessment of Roman attitudes towards the "other" in line with Erich Gruen, *Rethinking the Other in Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

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the procession of Rome's future kings, Anchises demanded of Aeneas:

*tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento  
(hae tibi erunt artes), pacique imponere morem,  
parcere subiectis et debellare superbos.*<sup>4</sup>

Anchises' gifting of the Roman values established a literary precedent of behavior for Romans, particularly in their relationship with conquered peoples. Lucy Hughes-Hallett has argued that:

Neither the artistry of the Greeks nor the scientific achievements of the Egyptians could save them from subjection ... the archetypal Roman shouldered the White Man's Burden, the arduous but fabulously profitable task of governing those whom, despite all evidence to the contrary, the Romans judged incapable of governing themselves.<sup>5</sup>

Virgil's words of imposing peace and battling down the proud were evident in this assessment, as the Romans appeared to view their own lifestyle as superior. To them it seemed necessary to deliver the Roman *mores* to seemingly inferior civilizations for their own benefit.

However, ostensibly contradictory was the Roman appropriation and incorporation of various aspects of different cultures into their own. A broader view of Roman intercultural relations demonstrated that the Roman tendency to ascribe themselves as culturally superior had little validity because the Romans themselves were an amalgamation of a variety of

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<sup>4</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid*, 6.851-853: "You, oh Roman, remember to rule peoples with power, (these will be the arts for you), and to impose a custom for peace, to spare the conquered and to battle down the proud." All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>5</sup> Lucy Hughes-Hallett, *Cleopatra: Dreams, Histories and Distortions* (Great Britain: Bloomsbury Publications Ltd., 1990), 49.

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cultures.<sup>6</sup> This tendency was particularly evident with respect to Egypt. Octavian himself placed Egyptian obelisks around his mausoleum and the Romans added Egyptian gods to their pantheon, such as Isis, who often had large cult followings in Rome.<sup>7</sup> Erich Gruen points to the prominence of the Isis cult in Rome by stating, “the great popularity of the Isis cult in Rome and increasingly in the empire suffices to show that hostility to Egypt did not pervade the Roman consciousness.”<sup>8</sup> Ultimately these adoptions acknowledge that, despite stereotypes and prejudice that Romans sometimes exhibited against Egyptians, certain features of their culture — Egyptian monuments and aspects of the pantheon — were admired and embraced. Therefore, Roman preconceptions about other cultures were not motivated by an inherent sense of preeminence begotten by the strong foundations of a racial pedigree. When interpreting the Roman view of other peoples, those propagating their own agendas and ideologies often blurred this distinction. The most notorious of these interpretations was employed and perpetuated by the Nazis, who distorted Roman self-representation in relation to other cultures, ultimately imposing the idea of racial superiority on the Romans.

### **The East and West Paradigm in the *Aeneid***

The *Aeneid* is an essential source for interpreting the relationship between Rome and Egypt during Augustus’ reign. One of the themes in Virgil’s *Aeneid* is fulfilling destiny and

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<sup>6</sup> Erich Gruen, *Rethinking the Other*, 345 asserts that “Roman traditions claimed no purity of lineage ... distinctiveness of blood or heritage never took hold as part of the Roman self-conception.”

<sup>7</sup> M.J. Versluys, *Aegyptiaca Romana: Nilotic Scenes and the Roman Views of Egypt* (Boston: Brill, 2002), 357.

<sup>8</sup> Gruen, *Rethinking the Other*, 111.

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obeying the Fates, exemplified by Aeneas' journey to maintain his lineage after the destruction of Troy. For Aeneas, the primary obstacle to founding the new Troy was the Carthaginian queen Dido. Enticed by lust and the lure of complacency offered by an already founded, thriving city, Aeneas stayed with Dido, who, under Venus' influence, became infatuated with the Trojan refugee. Her role in delaying and hindering Aeneas from founding Rome served as a point of comparison for Cleopatra, the contemporary African queen who posed a threat to the birth of the Roman Empire under the growing prominence of Octavian. David Quint notes that "Dido ... stands ... as a North African queen who loves a Trojan-Roman general and eventually commits suicide, she ... stands in for Cleopatra."<sup>9</sup> Dido's lust for Aeneas was reflected by Cleopatra's licentious relationship with Antony, and how he turned away from Roman values in favor of the complacency and comfort Cleopatra provided him in Egypt.<sup>10</sup>

Dido and Cleopatra were not only similar because of their distracting influence on model Roman men, they were also comparable in their fates. After delaying in Carthage for some time, Mercury visited Aeneas and rebuked his idleness, encouraging Aeneas to leave Carthage immediately. Ever described as pious, Aeneas obeyed and abandoned the queen and her city, resulting in her grandiose suicide and demand for vengeance.<sup>11</sup> Quint details Dido's suicide and draws the

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<sup>9</sup> David Quint, *Virgil's Double Cross: Design and Meaning in the Aeneid* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 59.

<sup>10</sup> David Quint, *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 29 discusses the danger Cleopatra posed to the West, the same danger that consumed Antony, namely "the danger for the West ... to repeat the fate of Antony, to become Easternized and womanish."

<sup>11</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid*, 4.584-705.

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comparison that “Cleopatra would also take her own life, and Virgil on the shield of Aeneas sculpted by Vulcan in Book 8, [paired] her through textual echo with Dido.”<sup>12</sup> The story and death of Dido were reflected in the *Aeneid* by Cleopatra and her rule of Egypt, her corruption of Antony’s *virtus*, and her suicide.

A poignant example of the East versus West paradigm in the *Aeneid* is the shield sequence in Book 8, containing Augustus’ extravagant and famed Triple Triumph. The description of Aeneas’ shield, forged on Vulcan’s anvil, was the symbolic representation of Rome’s — or rather Augustus’ — future glory. Aeneas’ godly mother, Venus, implored her husband to create an outfit of armor for her son as he prepared to fight for the perpetuation of the Trojan kind. Vulcan forged a series of images on the shield, with Augustus’ triumph at the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE as its focal point. Virgil described this particular vignette in detail:

*Hinc Augustus agens Italos in proelia Caesar  
Cum patribus populoque, penatibus et magnis dis,  
Stans celsa in puppi, geminas cui tempora flammis  
Laeta vomunt patriumque aperitur vertice sidus.*

...

*Hinc ope barbarica variisque Antonius armis,  
Victor ab Aurorae populis et litore rubro,  
Aegyptum virisque Orientis et ultima secum  
Bactra vehit, sequiturque (nefas) Aegyptia coniunx.*

...

*Regina in mediis patrio vocat agmina sistro,  
Necdum etiam geminos a tergo respicit anguis.  
Omnigenumque deum monstra et latrator Anubis  
Contra Neptunum et Venerem contraque Minervam  
Tela tenent.*<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Quint, *Virgil’s Double Cross*, 77.

<sup>13</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid*, 8.677-681, 8.685-688, 8.696-700: “On this side Augustus Caesar leading the Italians into the battles with the Senate and the people and the great household gods, standing on the lofty stern, for whom the happy brow spews twin flames and the paternal star is manifested on his head ... on that side, Antony, with barbarian wealth and with diverse arms, ushered in Egypt as victor from the

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Virgil's description of the Battle of Actium had a powerful bearing on the image of *divus Augustus* and, thus, of Rome. With the Battle of Actium at the forefront of the imagery on Aeneas' shield, Virgil binarily characterized the East and West with the primary actors Augustus, Antony, and Cleopatra, in his lines. The juxtaposition began with Virgil employing the correlatives *hinc* (677, 685) before describing Augustus in relation to the West, and Antony with Cleopatra in relation to the East. This distinction physically separated East and West not only during the battle itself, but also implied the wide cultural and social gulfs between the two. After establishing the literary binary with *hinc*, Virgil continued to enhance the contrasting portrait of the East versus the West by invoking religion. Virgil branded the East in this conflict as being supported by a *latrator Anubis* and the *omnigenumque deum monstra*, whereas Virgil distinguished the West as being defended by Neptune, Venus, and Minerva. Virgil also established a distinct divergence in his allusion to the fate of both Cleopatra and Augustus. He used the same adjective *geminus* to describe Augustus and the unnamed Cleopatra. Augustus was described as having *geminas flammis* spouting from his head, which was characteristically supernatural and indicative of his future preeminence.<sup>14</sup> On the contrary, Virgil described Cleopatra as ignorant of the *geminis anguis*, the means of her looming suicide. The use of *geminus* to describe the future of Augustus and Cleopatra distinguished

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peoples of the East and the red shore, and (he ushered in) the powers of the East with him and most remote Bactria, and the Egyptian consort followed him (dreadful!) ... the queen in the middle calls the battle lines with the paternal *sistrum* and not yet does she even notice twin snakes at her back. And barking Anubis and terrors of gods of all sorts held weapons against Neptune and Venus and against Minerva."

<sup>14</sup> R.D. Williams, *Virgil: Aeneid VII-XII* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1996), 272.



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the West from the East as well as demonstrated the positive and negative associations with the culture of each faction. In these lines, Virgil alluded to the prejudicial and stereotypical Roman views towards Eastern culture and directly contrasted them to the culturally advanced civilization of the Romans themselves.

Virgil also defamed her with regards to her relationship with Antony by adding the parenthetical *nefas* (688). This addition was no after-thought; its sole purpose was to further demonize both Cleopatra and the East by claiming her relationship with Antony as *nefas*, or against divine law. Consequently, this characterized Antony's fall from *virtus*, as he, a previously decorated general, was now "hardly recognizable any more in the orientalization of his entourage here."<sup>15</sup> This orientalization was accomplished by his consort, Cleopatra, who was stripped of any and all accomplishments in Virgil's poem. In Eastern discourse, Cleopatra was the embodiment of not only motherhood, but also legitimate political power.<sup>16</sup> Although famous for her affairs with both Julius Caesar and Mark Antony, she ruled efficiently as well. Hughes-Hallett references Cleopatra's portrayal by Jewish historian Josephus and states that "under [Cleopatra's] management the economy was strong, despite massive debts incurred by her father ... [she was a] working queen, one more interested in the [economy] than in the pleasures of love."<sup>17</sup> Her capabilities as a ruler were matched by her intelligence. Despite her lineage as a Ptolemaic

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<sup>15</sup> Yasmin Syed, *Vergil's Aeneid and the Roman Self: Subject and Nation in Literary Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 179.

<sup>16</sup> Maria Wyke, "Augustan Cleopatras: Female Power and Political Authority," in *Roman Poetry and Propaganda in the Age of Augustus* (London: Bristol Classics Press, 1992), 101.

<sup>17</sup> Hughes-Hallett, *Cleopatra*, 23.

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Pharaoh, she learned demotic Egyptian while also assuming a more genuine and active role in Egyptian religion than her predecessors.<sup>18</sup>

Despite her qualifications and talents for ruling, these were notably absent from Virgil's text. Maria Wyke states that "[Cleopatra was] described neither as the daughter of kings nor as a mother of kings and, in the Roman narratives, her kingdom seem[ed] to consist of only the vanquished ... Cleopatra [was] effectively denied both her ancestral powers and her claims to patriotism."<sup>19</sup> Virgil's labelling of her as only *coniunx, regina*, and the unnamed subject of the verbs *sequiturque, vocat*, and *respicit*, lacked attestation to her accomplishments and capabilities as a ruler. These lines in Virgil served to perpetuate the idea of Roman cultural and social prejudice against the East, as epitomized by Cleopatra, during a time of intense civil strife. In his battle against Antony, Octavian relied heavily on stereotypes to perpetuate fear of and hatred towards the East. Several authors, notably Horace, Propertius, and Ovid, provided examples of how preconceptions about the Egyptians, in particular, created fear of Eastern despotism.<sup>20</sup> Josiah Osgood reflected on one such example, notably that "devastating ... rumors ... circulated anonymously from one Roman to the next on the street, from one Italian town to another, all of them suggesting that Antony, should he prevail over Octavian, would give Rome to Cleopatra and transfer the seat of empire to Alexandria."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>19</sup> Wyke, "Augustan Cleopatras," 103-4.

<sup>20</sup> See Horace *Odes* 1.37, Propertius *Elegies* 3.11, and *Metamorphoses* 15.826-8.

<sup>21</sup> Josiah Osgood, *Caesar's Legacy: Civil War and the Emergence of the Roman Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 354.

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Although unnamed, Cleopatra's presence and authority casted a conspicuous shadow on Virgil's lines, her presence potentially bearing more literary relevance than even Antony's, who was actually named. Hans Volkmann argues that "in the [Battle of Actium] Vergil assign[ed] [Antony] no part; in contradiction to the accounts of the historians, he [placed] Cleopatra, the real enemy, in the midst of the *mêlée*: with the *sistrum*, the rattle of Isis, she issue[d] orders to her multitudes."<sup>22</sup> Virgil placed Cleopatra, who ruled over and therefore represented the East, in direct contrast with Augustus, representing the West, who appeared as a collected military leader systematically and strategically deploying his forces. The thought that the illustrious and thriving Rome would be stolen from the Italian Peninsula and reestablished in Egypt seemed the ultimate shame for the Romans, who viewed their ability to rule as superior to stereotypes about governance in the Egyptian seat. Virgil capitalized on this fear, which Octavian also exploited during his conflict with Antony, to demonstrate the deliverance of Rome from the despotism of Eastern rule.

At stake at Actium then was much more than a civil war, but a culture clash, one which posed a theoretical but widely felt danger to the Romans and their culture. Hughes-Hallett posited that "Cleopatra, who threatened to conquer Rome, or, worse, to taint its civilization by mingling it with her suspect, effeminate Oriental one ... was ... to those of Augustan Rome, the personification of everything they had rejected in order that their civilization may flourish."<sup>23</sup> Consequently, propaganda against Cleopatra was not imbued with racial prejudice, but was

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<sup>22</sup> Hans Volkmann, *Cleopatra: A Study in Politics and Propaganda* (London: Elek Books Limited, 1958), 216.

<sup>23</sup> Hughes-Hallett, *Cleopatra*, 222.

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aimed to support the prolongation of Roman hegemony. Thus, Actium was more than a political victory, it was the culmination of a cultural conquest that attempted to restore balance and create peace.

### **Nazi Racialization of the *Aeneid***

The rise of the National Socialist German Workers' Party brought with it the rise of intense racism and, thus, the need for justifying such explicit and radical hatred. Several Nazi ideologists and thinkers willfully misinterpreted famous texts specifically from the Roman imperial era in an attempt to ground and legitimize such ideologies because "Rome [was] the cultural anchor of Europe."<sup>24</sup> The multiplicity of passages in Virgil's *Aeneid* detailing Roman reactions to and perceptions of otherness were easily and widely misinterpreted.

Many Nazis looked to antiquity to justify their racial ideology and actions. Nazi historians and classicists capitalized on the cultural significance of Rome in Europe and drew comparisons for their own regime. As a professor of Latin literature and a staunch proponent of the classics in education, Hans Oppermann crafted many essays and longer works, many of which were racialized, to maintain the prevalence of classics in German society during the Nazi regime.<sup>25</sup> When discussing Augustan poets, Oppermann proposed that Horace racialized the Battle of Actium in his famous "Cleopatra Ode." In 1938, Oppermann described the Battle of Actium as "the decisive and final battle in a long struggle between East and West, like the

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<sup>24</sup> Richard Thomas, *Virgil and the Augustan Reception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 16.

<sup>25</sup> Johann Chapoutot, *Greeks, Romans, Germans: How the Nazis Usurped Europe's Classical Past* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 130.

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liberation of the Roman nation from the threat of encirclement by the East, incarnated by Antony, Cleopatra, and their hordes of barbarian slaves, defiled by unnatural vices.”<sup>26</sup> While Oppermann’s argument primarily targeted and racialized Horace’s work, it also pertained to Virgil’s work because the *Aeneid* was part of a larger commentary about “the other” in the Roman perception. Additionally, Virgil alluded to similar cultural prejudices about Egypt and the East that were simply more explicit in Horace’s Ode, making Opperman’s judgment applicable to him as well. While Oppermann was correct to point out the cultural stereotyping apparent in Horace’s and Virgil’s lines, he departed from the sources and the history by racializing an originally xenophobic narrative.

Additionally, the Nazis bolstered their misinterpretation by developing a schema for the continuance of a race war between the East and West throughout antiquity. Nazi thinkers identified turning points in history, particularly famous battles, and linked them to their racial ideologies against the East, and more specifically, the Jews. Johann Chapoutot points to an SS pamphlet published in 1941, entitled *Das Reich und Europa*, and circulated as propaganda in an attempt to create the visage of a racial war traced throughout world history. The pamphlet stated:

An enormous historical process began, which we understand as the battle of West against East, a battle that continues to this day. The soldiers of Marathon and the conquerors of Carthage are the same as the warriors of Poitiers and Vienna, the same as our soldiers in the East, combatants in defense of the values that we call European.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Chapoutot, *Greeks, Romans, Germans*, 131-2.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 290-1.

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The Nazis espoused a lineage for the supposed racial conflict between the East and the West, connecting important historical moments to justify and ground their own assault on the East. Their identification of the Battle of Marathon in 490 BCE coupled with the Roman decimation of Carthage in 146 BCE explicitly racialized the Persians and the Carthaginians as the Eastern enemies of the Greeks and Romans, who they demarcated as European. The pamphlet then compared these turning points in ancient history to the Nazis' current military situation, in an attempt to justify their racially motivated ideologies and attack on the East.

To cement this parallel as a justification for war, Hitler himself verified in November 1941 that "first of all, it was the Greeks attacked by the Persians, then the Carthaginians' expedition against Rome ... and now we're facing the worst attack of all, the attack of Asia mobilised by Bolshevism."<sup>28</sup> This direct parallel from Hitler reflected the Nazis' fabricated idea of a continuum of a race war between the East and the West begun when classical Greece and Rome were targets of the East's assault on European-ness. The idea of continuing a cultural and racial conflict first waged against its fatherland painted Nazi ideology and action as filial retribution, perpetuation, and completion of centuries of conflict, misinterpreting history and the existence of race in antiquity. This possibility for a misappropriation of an East versus West conflict could be found in Virgil's *Aeneid* and his portrayal of the Battle of Actium, which contrasted forces of the East, led by Cleopatra and Antony, with forces of the West, led by Octavian.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 292.

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Joseph Vogt's 1943 publication *Rom und Karthago*, in addition to several of his other pieces, further racialized the East versus West paradigm, with special examination of Rome's and Egypt's relationship in the *Aeneid*. In his works, Vogt capitalized on the modern use of the conflict between Rome and Carthage as propaganda against the East. Volker Losemann describes Vogt's usage of this conflict as identifying the "Nordic Romans" and contrasting them with the Carthaginians, who Vogt identified as Semitic.<sup>29</sup> Losemann describes *Rom und Karthago* as "an unequivocal shift toward a more radically Nazified interpretation of history ... the anti-Semitism ... is clearly recognizable [in it and in other works by Vogt]."<sup>30</sup> Consequently, the racialization of the controversy between Rome and Carthage applied also to the conflict between Rome and Egypt in the *Aeneid*, because in Virgil, Egypt and Cleopatra were the paradigm for Carthage and Dido. This further grounded Nazi justification for their racist ideologies in their misappropriation and annexation of Virgil's *Aeneid*.

This misinterpretation comes to its most apparent conclusion with Hitler being identified and self-identifying with Aeneas/Augustus. Hitler envisioned himself and his movement as the perpetuation of one of the greatest civilizations to have ever existed. Chapoutot wrote that "the Roman empire was, for Hitler, both precursor and pedagogue to the greater Nazi Reich."<sup>31</sup> According to Nazi supporters, Rome's imperial identity set a precedent for the western, particularly Germanic, domination of other peoples. Nazis believed that Rome asserted

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<sup>29</sup> Wolfgang Bialas and Anson Rabinbach, *Nazi Germany and the Humanities* (England: Oneworld Publications, 2007), 324.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 325.

<sup>31</sup> Chapoutot, *Greeks, Romans, Germans*, 230.

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its superiority by impressing aspects of itself on other peoples, notably language and culture.<sup>32</sup> Not only did the Nazis look to Rome to validate their ideologies, they specifically targeted Augustus, *princeps* of the Roman Empire. This particular comparison seemed to Nazi thinkers to fit perfectly because there existed for Augustus and Hitler “a climate of civil war and delinquent behavior by a state threatened by the prospect of a global war between East and West — until the appearance of a savior sent by providence saved Rome and in doing so revived its most profound tradition.”<sup>33</sup> By paralleling Hitler with Augustus, Nazi goals and beliefs seemed to be legitimized in the minds of the public. In addition, by using Virgil’s work to draw this comparison, it not only identified Hitler with Augustus, but also Aeneas, the mythical founder of Rome. Aeneas’ journey to found Rome was stalled by his stay with Dido but he was ultimately brought back to his duty by the will of the gods. This divinely ordained mission to found Rome, bestowed upon Aeneas, was employed by Nazi visual culture through tapestries and tableaux to support the regime’s ideologies and goals.<sup>34</sup> While the Nazis misconstrued much of ancient history and many classical texts, Virgil’s *Aeneid* offered a comparison to the lineage of Aeneas, who established the seat of the greatest empire in history.

Virgil’s national epic fashioned an identity for the birth of Rome’s new imperial age, detailing Aeneas’ journey and encounters with other peoples. The *Aeneid* created a binary of the East versus the West, epitomized by Cleopatra and Augustus at the Battle of Actium as described on the shield sequence.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 264.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 257.



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However, the cultural and social prejudices on the shield, which aligned more clearly with ancient xenophobia, were later racialized by Nazi thinkers who looked to justify their ideologies in the context of Roman history.

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