

VIRGIL, VARRO'S *IMAGINES* AND THE FORUM OF AUGUSTUS

It has long been realised that many of the figures in Virgil's 'Parade of Heroes' in the sixth book of the *Aenid* are described in such a way as to heighten the reader's visual awareness of them and to suggest clear links with commemorative statuary. For example:

pura iuuenis qui nititur hasta (760; Romulus)
'the lad leaning on an untipped spear',

viden ut geminae stant vertice cristae (779; Romulus)
'see how two plumes stand out on his crest'

or

*aspices ut insignis spoliis Marcellus opimis
ingreditur* (855f; the elder Marcellus)
'see how Marcellus, marked out by the *spolia opima*¹
advances'.

It is, moreover, possible to go further, and draw parallels between the figures Virgil portrays, and actual statues in the city of Rome.²

The other set of parallels which has long excited the attention and speculation of scholars is that between the choice of heroes in *Aenid* VI and that in the Forum of Augustus; there the approaches to the Temple of Mars Ultor were flanked by two sequences of statuary, the ancestors of the Julian family facing the *summi viri*, greatest men³ of Roman history. The links between Forum and poem lie not only in figures chosen in common (Romulus, the Alban kings, Camillus, for example), but also in a common ideology, in as much as Augustus intended the figures in the Forum to stand as models by which he himself and the *principes* of future ages were to be judged (Suet. *Aug.* 31.5), just as the figures in the Parade of Heroes serve as an inspiration not only to Aeneas (e.g. 806 *et dubitamus adhuc virtutem extendere factis?* 'and do we *still* hesitate to spread our valour by our achievements?') but to the reader (8.51 *tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento*, 'do you, Roman, remember to rule in sovereignty over the nations'); so too, in both Forum and Parade, Augustus himself is presented as the apogee, the climax of Roman history up to the point of construction or composition: in vi.791ff. the future Augustus stands between

Romulus and Numa, portrayed in language and details deliberately recalling Dionysus as conqueror, Hercules and Alexander the Great; in the Forum, the chariot set up in his honour by senate, knights and people (*Res Gestae* 35.1) occupied a focal position, probably in the centre, some distance in front of the foot of the temple steps.

But how were these links to be explained? There seemed to be an irresolvable problem of dating, which excited a good deal of relatively futile scholarly debate: Virgil died in 19 B.C., though it would appear that book vi was completed, more or less, four years earlier, whereas the Forum was not finally ready until 2 B.C., though *its* facilities for court sittings had been pressed into use before that date (Suet. *Aug.* 29.1). The answer must lie in a common source, and I think that both Virgil's and the Forum's indebtedness to that source can at last be proved.

I refer to the *Imagines* or 'Portraits', of M. Terentius Varro (116-27 B.C.), which was completed in 39 B.C., the very year in which Asinius Pollio opened the first public library in Rome, adorned with portraits of great men of letters - and of Varro himself⁴. The *Imagines* contained 700 portraits, some at least in colour; the achievements of each were summarised in a short epigram (up to half a dozen lines, it would appear), and copies were exported all over the Roman world⁵.

In the late fourth century A.D., Symmachus, writing to his father about the *Imagines*, says,

*ille pauperem Curium, sed divitibus imperantem, ille
severos Catones, gentem Fabiam, decora Scipionum,
totumque illum triumphalem senatum parca laude
perstrinxit* (Ep. i.4)

A. b all these were die plurals but minor et minor?

'He summarised with terse praise Curius the poor, poor but ruler over the wealthy, the frugal Catos, the family of the Fabii, the glories of the Scipiones, and that whole senate full of *triumphatores*'.

We may clearly compare in *Aeneid* vi the sequence *magne Cato* 841; mighty Cato) ... *geminos, duo fulmina belli, Scipiadas, cladem Libyae* (842-3, 'the two sons of the Scipios, thunderbolts of war, the ruin of Libya') ... *quo fessum rapitis, Fabii?* (855; 'where are you hurrying me on, tired as I am, Fabii?'). In 844 Virgil refers to Fabricius and Serranus (Regulus), rather than to Curius: the three were regularly and naturally associated as the archetypal frugal soldier-heroes of early Rome⁶. This degree of coincidence is very striking, as is the

fact that both authors are at pains to lay emphasis upon the continuity of achievement within the *gens* - explicitly, in the case of Symmachus/Varro within those of the Fabii, Catones and Scipiones. The collection of family busts in the *atrium*, publicly displayed in the funeral of a noble Roman, and a source of pride and inspiration to living members of the *gens*, must have been in the minds both of Virgil and of Varro; for Varro, such family portraits must have been an important visual source - and we know that on occasion he did specify his visual sources⁷ - and perhaps we might even go so far as to suggest that the Roman *gens* was one of the ways in which groups of portraits were arranged within Varro's colossal work.

The links between Varro and the Forum have taken longer to emerge: the statues in the Forum showed individual heroes with their traditional visual attributes (one is drawn irresistibly to think of the attributes of Christian saints, such as St. Catherine and her wheel!): Corvinus was shown with a raven on his head - the raven which explained his *cognomen* (Gellius, ix.11.10), and Scipio Aemilianus must have worn the *corona obsidionalis* ('siege crown'); certainly it was mentioned in the inscription under his statue, and we can hardly suppose that the statue itself did not represent visually the decoration mentioned in the text underneath. Moreover, we are told explicitly that Varro (though not necessarily, it has to be admitted, in the *Imagines*) did discuss the decoration (Pliny *N.H.* xxii.13).

It will be recalled, moreover, that Symmachus referred to 'that whole senate full of *triumphatores*' as portrayed in Varro's work (*supra*); the dress of the triumphator was striking and elaborate, and it is not impossible that in the illustrations in the *Imagines*, they were portrayed in glorious purple! Suetonius tells us (*Aug.*31.5) that Augustus honoured the memory of the generals (*duces*) who had raised the empire to its present greatness and *statuas omnium triumphali effigie ... dedicavit* in his Forum ('dedicated statues of them all in triumphal form'). Not only *triumphatores* were portrayed down the non-Julian row of statues in the Forum, but they were clearly a major category, as we can tell from the surviving inscriptions. It is therefore at least a possibility that depiction in Varro was a significant factor in the delicate matter of choosing who was to be commemorated in the Forum. It would be splendid if one could also prove that Varro's verse text lay behind the inscriptions in the Forum (bipartite: name, filiation and *cursus honorum* at the foot of the statue, *res gestae* on the base), but the surviving inscriptions are, many of them, too long and too detailed to have derived from Varro's terse verses. It is perhaps worth adding, however, that Varro was not the only scholar to compile

Imagines; Cicero's friend Atticus did so too, at much the same time, and we are told that Atticus' explanatory epigrams contained *facta magistratusque*⁸ ('deeds and magistracies'). So, then, may Varro's likewise have done, upon occasion. All we can say is that Varro may have been a source for the texts in the Forum of Augustus, as he was, so far as we can tell, for the actual statues.

NOTES

- 1 Won by him, by Romulus and by Cossus - when a Roman commander killed the leader of an enemy army.
- 2 For fuller discussion and references, see Horsfall, *Prudentia* viii (1976) 84.
- 3 *SHA* Alexander Severus 28.6.
- 4 Plin. xxxv. 10, 11.
- 5 Plin. *l.c.*; A. Momigliano, *Development of Greek Biography* (Harvard 1971) 98.
- 6 Horsfall, *Latomus* xxx (1971) p.1108f., Nisbet and Hubbard on Hor. *Odes* i.12.40.
- 7 Aeneas, after a statue at Alba, Lydus, *de magistratibus* i.12.
- 8 Nepos, *Atticus* 18; cf. Momigliano, *l.c.* (n.5)

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