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MESSAPUS, CYCNUS, AND THE ALPHABETICAL ORDER OF VERGIL'S CATALOGUE OF ITALIAN HEROES

JAMES J. O'HARA

VERGIL'S LEARNED CATALOGUE OF ITALIAN HEROES at *Aeneid* 7.647–817 begins and ends with the most significant figures: Mezentius and Lausus head the list, and Turnus and Camilla close it. The other eleven warriors are Aventinus, Catillus, Coras, Caeculus, Messapus, Clausus, Halaesus, Oebalus, Ufens, Umbro, and Virbius. A. M. Cook observed that these eleven, with the exception of Messapus, are in first-letter alphabetical order (A, C, C, C, M, C, H, O, U, U, U).¹ The observation has met with some surprise, and some skepticism.² Whether the alphabetization is Vergil's own or, more plausibly, is taken over from an antiquarian source such as Varro's *Antiquitates*,³ why would Vergil put or leave the names in alpha-

¹A. M. Cook, "Virgil, *Aen.* 7.641 ff.," *CR* 33 (1919) 103–104.

²Cf. B. Rehm, *Das geographische Bild des alten Italien in Vergils Aeneis* (Leipzig 1932, *Philologus* Supp. 24) 91 ff.; C. F. Saylor, "The Magnificent Fifteen: Vergil's Catalogue of the Latin and Etruscan Forces," *CP* 69 (1974) 249–257; C. J. Fordyce, *P. Vergili Maronis Aeneidos libri vii–viii* (Oxford 1977) ad 641 ff.; W. P. Basson, *Pivotal Catalogues in the Aeneid* (Amsterdam 1975) 131–132; R. D. Williams, "The Function and Structure of Virgil's Catalogue in *Aeneid* 7," *CQ* NS 11 (1961) 146–153; B. Brotherton, "Vergil's Catalogue of the Latin Forces," *TAPA* 62 (1931) 192–202; J. Perret, "Halaesus ou Messapus (à propos d'*Aen.* VII, 641–817)," *Mélanges de philosophie, de littérature et d'histoire ancienne offerts à Pierre Boyancé* (Paris 1974) 557–568. Williams, Rehm, and Brotherton criticize the idea that Vergil has deliberately arranged or left the names in alphabetical order, but supply no better reason than Rehm's "neckisches Spiel des Zufalls" (91) for the names to be this order, and this is statistically extremely improbable.

³L. W. Daly, "A Common Source in Early Roman History," *AJP* 84 (1963) 68–71, suggests that Vergil may be following an alphabetical list in Varro's *Antiquitates*, since the alphabetical lists in *Aeneid* 7 and at Pliny *HN* 3.5.69, Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 5.61, and Livy 1.30.2 all deal with the names of early Latin peoples or places, and Varro offers an alphabetical list of Greek writers on agriculture at *Rust.* 1.1.8–9, follows alphabetical order in citing from the comedies of Naevius, and may be responsible for the alphabetic arrangement of the plays of Plautus by title in the manuscript tradition. Fordyce ad 641 ff. and Rehm 91 ff. are skeptical about Vergil following an alphabetical source, Fordyce because some of the heroes look to him "as if they were Vergil's own invention," and Rehm because "die Namen ganz verschiedener Herkunft sind." But Vergil of course would be free to add names to an alphabetical list he found in Varro or elsewhere (it would have to be a Latin, not Greek, source, since Halaesus follows the "C" names).

On alphabetization more generally see Lloyd W. Daly, *Contributions to the History of Alphabetization in Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Brussels 1967, Coll. *Latomus* 90), esp. 25: "it is a reasonable and attractive hypothesis that the principle [of alphabetic arrangement] was first put to effective use by the scholars at Alexandria"; see also 50–59

betical order? And why should Messapus be an exception? The answer to both questions may be the same.

The description of Messapus begins in 691–692:

*at Messapus, equum domitor, Neptunia proles,
quem neque fas igni cuiquam nec sternere ferro,
....*

These lines provide more questions: why does Vergil make Messapus a son of Neptune (he “has this pedigree only in Vergil” [Fordyce *ad loc.*]), and why is he invulnerable? The explanations of Servius are implausible, but useful for calling attention to the problems. Servius suggests that Messapus is called son of Neptune simply because he came across the sea to Italy (*hic Messapus per mare ad Italiam venit, unde Neptuni dictus est filius*). But by this reasoning the words could be applied to any of the heroes who came to Italy, including Aeneas. The invulnerability attributed to Messapus in 692 also has no parallel in the tradition,⁴ and is never a factor nor is even mentioned again in Messapus’ numerous appearances in the rest of the *Aeneid*.⁵ Again Servius speculates: Vergil calls him invulnerable, simply because he never dies in the fighting (*invulnerabilem ideo dicit, quia nusquam periit, nec in bello*), and, besides, fire should not be able to harm a son of Neptune (*ignem autem ei nocere non posse propter Neptunum dicit, qui aquarum deus est*). The ingenuity of Servius or his sources here fails, but the attempt is understandable. Why would Vergil make this fighter on the Italian side both a son of Neptune, and invulnerable, especially if his invulnerability will not play a part in the *Aeneid*?

Most scholarship on the question of the alphabetization here, and indeed on the Catalogue of Heroes in general, fails to consider that few parts of the *Aeneid* are as thoroughly Alexandrian as this catalogue. The catalogue form itself is one much favored by Hellenistic and Neoteric/Augustan poets;⁶ in Vergil’s Catalogue in Book 7 we find more use of learned etymologizing than elsewhere in the poem,⁷ and more allusions to and manipula-

on “Roman Literature and Scholarship,” where the alphabetical lists at Plautus *Asin.* 864–866 and Varro *Rust.* 1.1.8–9 are included.

⁴Cf. Strabo 9.2.12 (405), Steph. Byz. “Messapion,” Festus 112 Lindsay, Enn. Ann. 524 Skutsch (= Servius *ad Aen.* 7.691).

⁵Cf. 8.6; 9.27, 124, 160, 351 ff., 458, 523; 10.354, 749; 11.429, 464, 518 ff., 603; 12.128, 289 ff., 488, 550, and 661. He is called *Neptunia proles* at 9.523, 10.354, and 12.128. N. M. Horsfall surveys Messapus’ appearances in the poem in “*Non viribus aequis*: Some Problems in Virgil’s Battle-scenes,” G&R 34 (1987) 48–51, at 51.

⁶Cf. Peter E. Knox, *Ovid’s Metamorphoses and the Traditions of Augustan Poetry* (Cambridge 1986, Cambridge Philological Society Supp. Vol. 11), 12–14, 19, 24, n. 23, and 48–51.

⁷Cf. 7.684 *Hernica saxa*, 707–708 *Clausus/Claudia*, 712 *Rosea rura*, 713 *Tetricae*

tion of obscure myths in the Hellenistic manner. In the Messapus passage Vergil alludes to and adapts a myth from Hellenistic poetry. Conington noticed that "Virgil may have borrowed" the property of invulnerability that he attributes to Messapus "from the legend of Cycnus, who was a son of Poseidon."⁸ Cycnus son of Poseidon was killed by Achilles in the early stages of the fighting at Troy; he was hindering the Greeks' landing, and Achilles killed him either with a stone or, in Ovid's version, by strangling him with a helmet strap. The story belongs to the *Cypria*, and is mentioned by Pindar, Isocrates, and Aristotle;⁹ more significantly for Vergil's learned catalogue, Cycnus is treated or mentioned by Alexandrians such as Theocritus, Lycophron, and Hegesianax Alexandrinus.¹⁰ The metamorphosis of Cycnus into a swan featured in Ovid's story (*Met.* 12.64-167) is likely to have been an Alexandrian innovation.¹¹

In making Messapus an invulnerable son of Poseidon Vergil does not simply borrow from the legend of Cycnus: in Alexandrian fashion he alludes to the earlier hero, confirming in one of the similes describing Messapus' men that the resemblances between the two figures are not simply due to chance (699 f.):

*ibant aequati numero regemque canebant:
ceu quondam nivei liquida inter nubila cycni
....*¹²

The reader who understands the allusion to Cycnus also sees that the alphabetical order of the Italian heroes has not really been broken: if Messapus is a double for Cycnus, then he is in his proper place in the list: Aventinus, Catillus, Coras, Caeculus, Cycnus-Messapus, Clausus, Halaesus, Oebalus,

horrentis, 753-759 vipereo generi/Angitia, 740 maliferae . . . Abellae, and see G. J. M. Bartelink, Etymologisering bij Vergilius (Amsterdam 1965, Mededelingen der Kon. Neder. Akad. van Wetenschappen Deel 28, no. 3) passim, and D. O. Ross, "Uriosque apertos: A Catullan Gloss," Mnemosyne 26 (1973) 60-62.

⁸John Conington, *The Works of Vergil with a Commentary*, rev. by Henry Nettleship, 3 vols. (London 1883-84; reprint Hildesheim 1963) *ad loc.*

⁹Cf. Proclus, *Chrest.* 1 (*Homeri opera*, T. W. Allen, ed., [Oxford 1912] vol. 5 p. 105) and Apollod. *Epit.* 3.31; Pind. *Ol.* 2.90, *Isthm.* 5.39; Isocr. *Hel.* 52; Arist. *Rhet.* 2.22, 1396b17. More in Adler, "Kyknos," *RE* 11 (1922) 2438-41, and F. Bömer, *P. Ovidius Naso: Metamorphosen. Kommentar. Buch XII-XIII* (Heidelberg 1982) *ad Met.* 12.64-145.

¹⁰Theoc. 16.49, Lycoph. 232-239, Hegesianax *apud Ath.* 9.393d. = *FGrHist* 3.69.

¹¹"Die Metamorphose ist sicher alexandrinisch," Adler (above, n. 9) 2439. On metamorphoses in general and those into birds in particular in Hellenistic and Latin poetry see R. G. M. Nisbet and M. Hubbard, *A Commentary on Horace's Odes. Book II* (Oxford 1978), introduction to C. 2.20 (334).

¹²For the idea that Messapus' men are "singled out as music-makers" as a tribute to Ennius, who is said by Servius to have claimed descent from Messapus, see Williams (above, n. 2) 151.

Ufens, Umbro, and Virbius. It may not be unreasonable to suggest further that Vergil's wish to play with the Messapus-Cyncus identification is one reason for his putting or leaving the Italian heroes in alphabetical order. "No one will believe that Vergil deliberately put them in alphabetical order," one scholar has said.¹³ Rather no one should believe that Vergil did not notice that they were in such an order, or that he did not have some reason for what he did. In this most Alexandrian section of the *Aeneid*, Vergil must have weighed every choice and decision with great care.

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¹³Williams (above, n. 2) 149. Neither he nor any of the scholars who have discussed the alphabetical order of the list (above, n. 2) connect it with Vergil's interest in Alexandrianism.