

Literature Year 2

Lesson 4



Virgil

Publius Vergilius Maro – Virgil (70 BC-19 BC) is an earlier writer than Pliny and Tacitus. He was from the north of Italy. His family, probably of the equestrian rank,¹ farmed a small estate, kept bees and dealt in timber. Virgil began his studies locally in Mediolanum (Milan), came of age in 55 BC (the year of Julius Caesar's landing in Britain). He set out to study in Rome about 2 years later.

If you look Virgil up on the Synchronological chart you will get a good picture of the times in which he lived. During Virgil's youth, the First Triumvirate—Julius Caesar, Pompey, and Crassus—governed the Roman Republic. He was physically weak and so not suited to the army. He was also shy and had a trace of a provincial accent. These things made him unfitted for a career in the Roman legal system or the *cursus honorum*.

At this time the Roman Republic was disintegrating. Caesar was assassinated in 44 BC and his assassination caused civil war to break out between the assassins and the Second Triumvirate—Octavian, Antony, and Lepidus. By 36 B.C. only Octavian and Antony remained, and they began warring against each other. At the Battle of Actium in 31 B.C., Octavian defeated Antony and his ally Cleopatra of Egypt, finally consolidating power in himself alone. Four years later, he assumed the title Augustus. Virgil witnessed all this turmoil, and the warring often disrupted his life. Octavian was Caesar's great-nephew and his adopted son. He took the title Caesar Augustus and is usually considered the first Roman Emperor, though he himself never used that title.

By this time Virgil had already found his metier. He had written the *Eclogues* (Romantic pastoral poems) and the *Georgics* (poems of nature and farming life) now he began his masterwork, the *Aeneid*.

Virgil had found favour with Augustus and part of the point of the *Aeneid* is to demonstrate that Augustus had a right to rule. It tells the story of the Trojan hero Aeneas and how he fled from Troy after the Trojan war to Italy where his descendants became the founders of Rome. In the *Aeneid*, Virgil repeatedly foreshadows the coming of Augustus. Making him seem to be a ruler decreed by fate in this way may have been an attempt to answer those who accused Augustus of gaining his power by means of violence and treachery. Virgil had lived through times of brutal civil wars and changes in leadership. In the *Aeneid* he portrays these events as having been decreed by fate to usher in the reign of the great Augustus.

¹ As well as the division between the Patricians and the Plebeians there were two divisions that were above the ordinary or common people. These were the Senatorial and (below them) the equestrians ranks.

Watch <https://www.romansinfocus.com/content/constructing-power-augustus%E2%80%99-rome> for an tour of Augustus' achievements in the city of Rome. A digital map of Rome in the time of Augustus can be seen here: <http://digitalaugustanrome.org/>

The lines selected for study this year concern a very minor figure in the story.

When Roman boys came of age they were able to wear a man's toga. See <https://www.romansinfocus.com/sites/www.romansinfocus.com/files/Coming%20of%20age%20%28boys%29.pdf>² for more information on this topic. See if you can answer the worksheet's questions from a Christian point of view using Biblical ideas. Find out what a Roman bulla was.

² Things on websites have a habit of disappearing from time to time. If this link does not work [email me](#) and I'll send you a copy that I have downloaded.