

The Shadow of Sextus Pompeius in Virgil's *Aeneid*

Lee FRATANTUONO¹

Abstract. *The article argues that Virgil's Aeneid contains subtle allusions to Sextus Pompeius, a rival of Octavian. These references appear in several key episodes, including the storms faced by Aeneas's fleet, which mirror Octavian's naval disasters against Sextus. The deaths of Aeneas's companions, Palinurus and Misenus, are also seen as symbolic of Octavian's losses, given their names are tied to real-world locations from the conflict. Furthermore, the episode where the Trojan women attempt to burn Aeneas's ships is interpreted as a metaphor for Sextus's later attempts to burn his rival's fleet. The article concludes that Virgil intentionally used these veiled references to depict Octavian's victory over Sextus, a sensitive topic for Augustan propaganda due to the civil nature of the war*

Rezumat. *Articolul susține că Eneida lui Virgiliu conține aluzii subtile la Sextus Pompeius, un rival al lui Octavian. Aceste referințe apar în mai multe episoade cheie, inclusiv furtunile înfruntate de flota lui Eneas, care oglindesc dezaastrele navale ale lui Octavian în lupta cu Sextus. Morțile însoțitorilor lui Eneas, Palinurus și Misenus, sunt de asemenea considerate simbolice pentru pierderile lui Octavian, deoarece numele lor sunt legate de locuri reale din timpul conflictului. În plus, episodul în care femeile troiene încearcă să incendieze corăbiile lui Enea este interpretat ca o metaforă a încercărilor ulterioare ale lui Sextus de a incendia flota rivalului său. Articolul concluzionează că Virgiliu a folosit intenționat aceste referințe voalate pentru a descrie victoria lui Octavian asupra lui Sextus, un subiect delicat pentru propaganda augustană din cauza naturii civile a războiului.*

Keywords: Sextus Pompeius, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Octavian/Augustus, Roman civil wars, propaganda.

Among the noteworthy figures of late republican history, Sextus Pompeius presents a curious enigma². Pompey's younger son was a significant player in Roman political and military affairs for more than a dozen years after the Battle of Pharsalus. From Africa to Spain to Sicily to Asia Minor, Sextus lived a life of adventure and daring, now and again clashing and coming to terms with the men who would constitute the Second Triumvirate (Octavian, Antony, and Lepidus). Famous for his naval clashes with Octavian (and his admiral Agrippa) in 37-36 B.C., Sextus would prove to be a resilient challenge to the maintenance of order in the western Mediterranean. Finally defeated in the waters off Sicily and compelled to flee to the East, Sextus was captured and slain in 35, in an ignominious end to a colorful career.

Sextus is referenced in the *Epodes* of the Augustan poet Horace, where he is identified as the *Neptunius dux* (9.7-8), in something of a dismissive nod to the grandiose place of the sea god in his iconography³. Our purpose will not be to revisit well-trodden paths of Horatian

¹ Maynooth University, Maynooth, Ireland, lee.fratantuono@mu.ie; ORCID: 0009-0002-1828-2678.

² For a detailed biography and appraisal see HADAS 1930. WELCH 2012 is noteworthy for its treatment of numismatic evidence; cf. ROWAN 2019, 72-79. Various aspects of the life and its depiction in literature are considered in POWELL, WELCH 2002. On the history of the period note especially DE MÉRITENS DE VILLENEUVE 2023. The present study focuses on literary evidence, with only occasional forays into coinage. "How the participants in the civil wars following Caesar's murder used coin types is the subject of much debate" (ZARROW 2003).

³ On the depiction of Sextus in Horace note WATSON 2002, 213-228; cf. WATSON 1987, 119-129, his notes *ad loc.* in WATSON 2003, and the commentary of MANKIN 1995. Horace alludes derisively to Sextus' use of freedmen and slaves in his operations (9.9-10). The seventh epode expresses fear about renewed civil war; the reference at 7.3-4 to the question of the shedding of Latin blood on fields and the sea (*Neptuno*) may be generic, but naval engagements with

scholarship by re-examining the ninth epode, but to consider a related question in Augustan poetry: are there allusions to Sextus in Virgil's *Aeneid*?⁴ While certainty is impossible and a degree of speculation inevitable, we shall endeavor to build a case for detecting the influence of Octavian's engagements with Sextus on Virgil's portrayal of aspects of the hazards encountered by Aeneas on his journey to Italy, especially as recounted in the first book of the epic⁵. First, detailed analysis of elements of the storm sequence in *Aeneid* 1 will support the thesis that Virgil intended to evoke memories of the war with Sextus as part of his depiction of Aeneas, with the goal of solidifying connections between his hero and the *princeps*. Second, later evocations of storm imagery (and losses connected to the sea) in the epic will also be considered, as part of an investigation into the development and refinement of the poet's allegorical equation of Aeneas and Augustus. Third, we shall give due attention to Virgil's allusions to Agrippa and his achievements in both military and public works projects and undertakings, as well as the honors he won in battle. Lastly, we shall see how the Sextus war offers a possible explanation for the otherwise seemingly fantastic episode of the attempted burning of Aeneas' ships and their transformation into sea creatures.

The present investigation is rooted in previous scholarly efforts to find allegories of contemporary history in the *Aeneid*. Yves Nadeau notably saw the figure of Sextus lurking behind the depiction of the Harpy Celaeno in *Aeneid* 3. In Nadeau's argument, Virgil's Celaeno threatened Aeneas and his men with extreme hunger, in allusion to how Sextus threatened the Roman economy and caused privation and want by blockade and quasi-piratical raids⁶. Others have followed a more circumspect course, while acknowledging that "It is conceivable ... that at the time Vergil was writing the *Aeneid*, the presence of Sextus was more strongly felt than is now apparent"⁷. But there has been no comprehensive look at the matter of possible allusions to Sextus in Virgil's epic. By assembling relevant passages and examining closely the connections between candidates for inclusion in the roster of "Sextus scenes" in the *Aeneid*, it will be possible to explore the related questions of why Virgil would allude to the son of Pompey in his Augustan epic, and of how he chose to present the problem of Sextus in the record of Augustus' career. The problem is worthy of investigation precisely because the undeniably civil character of the conflict with Sextus posed appreciable difficulties for Augustan propaganda, at least as compared to the war with Ptolemaic Egypt.

We may commence our study near the beginning of Virgil's epic. The storm in *Aeneid* 1 immerses the reader almost at once in an immense crisis⁸. While Virgil's tempest narrative has formal literary antecedents, the consequences of the storm are of far greater import than in his epic predecessors⁹. Conjured by Aeolus at the behest of Juno, the devastating meteorological

Sextus in particular may have been on Horace's mind. Especially after Actium, it was easy to evoke the difficulties and horrors of the war against Sextus by reference to challenges at sea; the reader would think of the defeat of Cleopatra and her lover, while also remembering Octavian's longer and more arduous campaign against a fellow Roman.

⁴ It is noteworthy that Sextus and Cleopatra are never referred to by name in Augustan poetry. There are clear allusions to Cleopatra in Horace, Virgil, and in Augustan elegy, and the sole reference to Sextus in *Epode* 9. But neither adversary is named explicitly.

⁵ On Book 1 of the *Aeneid* see further AUSTIN 1971; STÉGEN 1975; and FRATANTUONO, ROUMPOU forthcoming.

⁶ NADEAU 2007, 94-98. The same scholar expanded his argument in his subsequent paper NADEAU 2009, 35-42.

⁷ SPENCE 2023, 166, n. 51.

⁸ The bibliography is predictably extensive; cf. in particular RAABE 1974, 74 ff.; HARDIE 1986, 176-193, and VILLALBA SALÓ 2021, 47-48, 54-59.

⁹ Cf. *Od.* 5.282-312, 7.244-55 and 13.403-49, and *Arg.* 4.1225 ff.

disturbance is quelled only by the intervention of Neptune¹⁰. All of this is deeply immersed in the realm of mythology and poetic fancy, though in his crowning scene of the pacification of the sea, Virgil introduces a striking political image, of undeniable immediate resonance to his contemporary audience:

*ac ueluti magno in populo cum saepe coorta est
seditio saeuitque animis ignobile uulgus,
iamque faces et saxa uolant, furor arma ministrat;* 150
*tum, pietate grauem ac meritis si forte uirum quem
conspexere, silent arrectisque auribus adstant;
ille regit dictis animos et pectora mulcet:
sic cunctus pelagi cecidit fragor, aequora postquam
prospiciens genitor caeloque inuectus aperto* 155
*flectit equos curruque uolans dat lora secundo. (1.148-56)*¹¹

This is the first formal simile of the epic, prominent by priority and allusive import¹². Possible historical identifications of the nameless man of the simile have been suggested, in particular Augustus¹³. But it has been recognized that a considerable part of the simile's power comes from its studied ambiguities¹⁴.

I would argue that for the poem's first, programmatic simile, Augustus is the likeliest comparand. The context is a storm at sea, which metaphorically may recall the victory over Antony and Cleopatra at Actium, but more properly evokes the memory of the struggle against Sextus, where stormy weather was as much a hazard (if not more) as anything mustered by Sextus and his officers. Especially given the place of the god Neptune in Sextus' iconographic propaganda, a case could be made that Virgil's audience would have thought first and foremost of what Augustus had achieved in 38-6 in his dealings with the son of Pompey. The first simile is invested with importance by its very priority; the comparison describes the work of a god. It befits Augustus.

Octavian faced enormous challenges in dealing with Sextus. The storm that wrecked his fleet during the Sicilian campaign in the late spring/early summer of 38 was one of the gravest¹⁵. The embellished account in Appian is a masterpiece of rhetorical prose¹⁶. The disaster would spur the energetic and ultimately supremely efforts of Agrippa in 37 to refurbish

¹⁰ At 1.65-75, Juno makes her appeal to the wind god Aeolus, who accedes to her plan at 76-80. At 81-101 the storm is unleashed; the Trojan ships are wrecked (102-23). Neptune becomes aware of the crisis, and he summon the winds (124-31). He vents his anger, and sees to the priority of restoring peace to the waves (132-41). The storm is calmed (142-56).

¹¹ Quotes from the *Aeneid* are cited from CONTE 2019.

¹² Cf. here CARLSON 1972, 22 ff.; GLEI 1991, 24 ff., and ADLER 2003, 92 ff.

¹³ See CONWAY 1935, *ad loc.* in favor of the view that the simile recalls an event that Virgil himself saw that left a vivid impression (*contra* Austin, who argues for a more general application). MOUNTFORD 2017 argues that Maecenas may be the intended referent. Certainly, Maecenas played a significant role in quelling discontent in Rome during the Sextus crisis. "Maecenas stayed behind to govern affairs in Rome and the rest of Italy. Sextus had become a magnet for those who had become disenfranchised by the Triumvirs' violent initiatives, and his effective sea force had placed the grain supply to Rome under constant threat" (LAW 2024, XIV).

¹⁴ BECK 2014, 67-83.

¹⁵ For the date see HADAS 1930, 110-111 (citing Appian 5.89, and comparing Suetonius, *Augustus* 16.1).

¹⁶ 5.89-90; see also the narrative in Dio (48.48.1-4), with the notes *ad loc.* of FREYBURGER, RODDAZ 1994.

Octavian's navy and to train an effective marine force; victory at sea would follow in 36¹⁷. A key impetus for the intense attention to naval matters was the fact that Octavian's forces seemed to suffer from a lack of experience in dealing with spring storms compared to Sextus' fleet¹⁸.

Apart from this major weather-related crisis, Octavian's fleet suffered an earlier, ominous loss on account of a storm¹⁹. His commander Lucius Cornificius lost only one ship en route to Tarentum, but the vessel was the flagship intended for Octavian's use. Appian notes that the sinking of the ship was taken to be a harbinger of future ills (... καὶ ἔδοξε τοῦτ' ἐς τὰ μέλλοντα σημεῖναι).

And there was more. Dio relates the storm-related catastrophe suffered by another of Octavian's commanders, Gaius Calvisius Sabinus²⁰. His fleet was wrecked off the promontory of Scyllaeum while he was pursuing forces allied to Sextus. In other words, first there was the tempest that sank Octavian's newly commissioned flagship that Cornificius was conducting to Tarentum. Then a storm wreaked havoc with a significant deployment of his navy under Calvisius. Further, there was the aforementioned meteorological disaster of the late spring/early summer of 38.

Storms were a regular feature of ancient naval operations; the peril they posed was impossible to predict with anything approaching reliable accuracy. Lepidus himself suffered appreciable losses from a storm system when he made his landing in Sicily in July of 36 to support the campaign against Sextus. Octavian's vessels also fared poorly in this period, when a storm struck near the promontory of Palinurus in Lucania. One ship was lost, while the rest were able to hurry to shelter in the Bay of Velia²¹. Relief was momentary. A southwesterly wind followed on a southerly, and the ships were effectively trapped in the bay given its westward opening. The vessels could not be properly moored or anchored, and they began to crash into each other and the shoals. The coming of night only worsened the situation. In the end, the losses were considerable: six heavy ships, twenty-six lighter vessels, and still more of the fast-moving Liburnians that constituted so potent a force with which to confront Sextus²². It would take a month for Agrippa's shipbuilding elves to make up for the catastrophe in the bay. There was serious consideration of delaying the campaign, but the privations occasioned by Sextus' effective harassment of Roman commerce demanded a rapid resolution of the problem.

We may tabulate the storm incidents. Apart from the ominous loss of the flagship that Cornificius was escorting and the storms that struck Calvisius and Lepidus, there were two weather-related disasters that befell Octavian himself. The storm of 38 inspired a long program of refurbishment and preparation for naval war. The storm of 36 caused chaos in what was supposed to be a safe, sheltered haven. The loss of one ship was but a harbinger of the disaster to come.

From Sextus' vantage point, it is easy to see how the readily exploitable propaganda coup developed that he was nothing less than a son of Neptune²³. After either the Velia disaster or the earlier storm of 38, Sextus is said to have begun to don a dark blue robe and to subscribe to

¹⁷ For a definitive account of Agrippa's career see POWELL 2014.

¹⁸ See further here HADAS 1930, 110-111.

¹⁹ Appian 5.80.

²⁰ 48.47.1-3.

²¹ Appian 5.98.

²² Appian 5.99.

²³ Cf. here GURVAL 1995, 91-92, and SUMI 2015, 197.

the conceit of Neptunian origins²⁴. The idea seems to have arisen from the role that Pompey the Great played in the history of the Roman navy; he was celebrated for his successful efforts to curtail pirate raids in the Mediterranean²⁵. It was no surprise that his son would seek to inherit the naval mantle, especially after Octavian seems to have so many disasters on the water.

Sextus had no monopoly on the employment of the sea god in his propaganda²⁶. Antony utilized Neptune for his own image enhancement: “sesterces minted c. 36-35 BC show Antony and Octavia as Poseidon and Amphitrite ...”²⁷. We cannot be sure how much of this reflects an Antonian response to Sextus. Any military hero projecting power on the waves would be tempted to embrace Poseidon as patron.

I propose that the first simile of the *Aeneid* would seem to equate Augustus with Neptune. The god plays an interesting role in the epic, as he did in the propaganda of the variegated history of the wars of the late republican civil wars²⁸. Not surprisingly, Octavian made solemn offerings to Neptune at Puteoli before his climactic clash with Sextus²⁹. There is an element of appropriation here, of tactfully encouraging a god to transfer his allegiance to the winning cause. In the history of Octavian’s eventual consolidation of power, naval supremacy encompasses Actium as well as his earlier achievements against Sextus. Actium was a comparatively far easier campaign, in no small part because of the extensive experience of naval operations mastered by Agrippa.

Neptune constituted but one element of Sextus’ iconographic image. The concept of *pietas* was another³⁰. In Virgil it is Aeneas’ signal quality from the proem of the epic (cf. 1.10 *insignem pietate uirum*)³¹. And *pietas* is also highlighted as an attribute of the nameless man of the simile (*tum, pietate grauem ac meritis si forte uirum quem / conspexere, silent arrectisque auribus adstant*). This is a key detail that diverges somewhat from the events that prompted the simile. Neptune is annoyed that the winds have usurped his marine prerogatives; *pietas* is not really a factor. But the man who calms the crowd clearly succeeds in his pacification of the civil disturbance in no small part because of this storied quality.

To be fair, as was true for Neptunian imagery, so also in the matter of *pietas* it was not uncommon for Roman luminaries to invoke the virtue; both Octavian and Antony donned its mantle³². The sons of Pompey (Sextus and his older brother Gnaeus) employed *Pietas* as the watchword for their cause at the Battle of Munda in 45³³. Given their violent deaths, both Pompey the Great and Julius Caesar were potent catalysts for demonstrations of this characteristic Roman quality on the part of their sons by blood or adoption.

²⁴ Cf. Dio 48.48.5 (describing the aftermath of the storm of 38) and Appian 5.100 (after Velia).

²⁵ See WELCH 2012, 43-91 (“Sons of Neptune”) on Pompey’s naval strategy with both the pirates and Caesar, and the question of what his sons did with what they inherited from their father. On Sextus’ particular role in naval history note also CALIRI 2024, 111-123 (a helpful study).

²⁶ On the topic of claims of the particular favor of certain gods in this period, note FREYBURGER-GALLAND 2009, 17-30.

²⁷ WATSON 2003, 320.

²⁸ DREW 1927, 71-72 considers the place of the god in the epic in light of the conflict with Sextus in particular; more generally, see POWELL 2008, 93 ff. and FRATANTUONO 2015, 130-148.

²⁹ Cf. WELCH 2012, 273.

³⁰ See further KOPIJ 2011, 203-218; GOŁYŹNIAK 2020, 135-138.

³¹ See further here SUERBAUM 1999, 207-209. ERDMANN 2000, 184-187, and VON ALBRECHT 2006, 173-174; cf. LOVATT 2019, 394-397. On less commendable traditions surrounding Aeneas, note CALLU 1978, 161-174.

³² Cf. WELCH 2012, 26-31, 219-220, and 304 ff.

³³ See here WELCH 2012, 113.

The hero Aeneas had associations with *pietas* that predate Augustan poetry³⁴. But let us consider more closely the Virgilian context in which Aeneas is introduced. The epic action commences *in medias res*, and the first trial that Aeneas endures is the great storm. One prominent feature of the tempest is how ships are driven toward hidden rocks, shoals, and sandbars (1.108-12). While the fleet will be sorely discomfited and rendered largely inoperable absent repairs, in the end only one vessel is actually lost (1.113-17).

The action into which the reader is immersed is heralded by mention of Sicily (1.34 *Vix e conspectu Siculae telluris in altum*). After their sojourn with Acestes, the Trojans set sail for the mainland, only to be hampered by Juno's machinations with Aeolus³⁵. While Sicily evokes memories of the First Punic War (and its bard Naevius), for Virgil's audience the long conflict with Sextus would be more readily recalled³⁶. For the Trojans, disaster strikes almost as soon as they are out of sight of the island.

Aeneas is associated with *pietas* in the epic poem, and the signal quality is mentioned as a defining attribute of the anonymous man of the simile. If Augustus is referenced, we are invited to compare the *princeps* to Aeneas.

Notably, stormy conditions will compel the Trojans to make a return visit to Sicily after their Carthaginian interlude (5.1-34). The meteorological conditions described there do not cause any harm to the refurbished fleet, but they do compel Aeneas and his men to make a detour back to the island. Calm conditions will then prevail for the next leg of the journey to Hesperia³⁷. But the sea's serenity is paid for with the life of Aeneas' helmsman Palinurus, whose mysterious death at the close of *Aeneid* 5 (833-71) has been studied as part of a reminiscence of Octavian's experiences in the Sextus campaign³⁸. There has been speculation that the trumpeter Misenus was the actual life that Neptune demanded, and at the very least Misenus has been viewed as a "doublet" of Palinurus. Misenus challenged the gods and was hurled into the sea by Triton (6.171-4), while his funeral was a necessary antecedent of Aeneas' descent to the underworld (6.158-82), his death was not Neptune's price. His name, however, would have been associated with the locus of the ill-fated Treaty of Misenum in 39, that brief interlude of hopeful peace before the resumption of conflict with Sextus.

In Aeneas' rendition of the journeys of the Trojans at Dido's banquet, he recalls the stormy conditions that befell his fleet and that compelled him to make a stop at the Strophades, where he encountered Celaeno (3.192-210). Palinurus was unable to navigate successfully given the bad weather.

What we have then are three storms: 1) the tempest that forced the landing at the Harpies' lair, 2) the major disturbance en route from Sicily to Italy that led to the arrival in North Africa, and 3) the deteriorating conditions that prompt Palinurus to recommend a detour back to Sicily before proceeding to Italy. There were thus two storms that Aeneas' fleet actually weathered, one far more grievous than the other. These two storms from *Aeneid* 1 and 3 may have been

³⁴ Cf. Xenophon, *Cyn.* 1.15: Αἰνεΐας δὲ σώσας μὲν τοὺς πατρώους καὶ μητρῶους θεούς, σώσας δὲ καὶ αὐτὸν τὸν πατέρα, **δόξαν εὐσεβείας** ἐξηγέκατο, ὥστε καὶ οἱ πολέμιοι μόνῳ ἐκείνῳ ὦν ἐκράτησαν ἐν Τροίᾳ ἔδωσαν μὴ συληθῆναι (text from MARCHANT 1920).

³⁵ On Sicily in Virgil see especially MONACO 1984, 274-282.

³⁶ For reminiscences of the First Punic War in Virgil note GOLDSCHMIDT 2013, 110. The fact that the conflict with Sextus was fought in the same waters would be a feature in commemorative artwork; on this see BIGGS 2018, 47-68, especially 49-50. On all things Punic in the epic see especially GIUSTI 2018.

³⁷ See further here the perceptive article of JOHNSTON 1981, 23-30.

³⁸ BRENN 1988, 69-80.

intended to correspond to Octavian's disasters in 38 and 36. The major storm hits just out of sight of Sicily, while the threat of a new disturbance is what prompts a return visit to the island.

Sicily is also associated with the hazard posed by the marine monster Scylla. In Virgil, she is presented as a threat that Aeneas must take pains to avoid as he follows in something of the footsteps of Odysseus (3.410-32)³⁹. Scylla figured in the numismatic iconography of Sextus⁴⁰. Anton Powell has argued that Virgil alludes to Sextus' use of Scylla imagery in association with Octavian's losses in the strait of Messina⁴¹. The storm that struck Calvisius just off Scyllaeum would have been all too easy to associate with the monster who lent the promontory her name, as would the troubles that ensued in the same vicinity in the immediate aftermath.

Leaving aside Nadeau's ingenious speculation about Celaeno's evocation of Sextus, we are left with storms in Sicilian waters and deaths (Palinurus, Misenus) associated with places that recall Octavian's conflict with Pompey's son. Why is there is no explicit reference to Sextus in the *Aeneid*? Antony is depicted on the shield of Aeneas (8.675-713), which for its centerpiece has a depiction of the Battle of Actium, complete with Augustus, Agrippa, Antony, and Egypt's queen (as well as a host of deities)⁴². Antony, however, was associated with the foreign Cleopatra; the civil dimension of the war was more or less easily glossed over by depicting Augustus and Agrippa as defenders of Rome against Egypt. Sextus presented a more uncomfortable situation, not least because of the respectful, indeed venerable place of his father in the Roman consciousness. In the vision of Roman history that the shade of Anchises reveals to his son in the underworld, the civil war between Caesar and Pompey is glimpsed with dread and the prayer that it might be averted (6.826-35)⁴³. The conflict between Octavian and Sextus was not so easy to incorporate into the portrait of Augustus as conqueror of external foes and bringer of peace and a restored Golden Age. Sextus could be cast in the role of pirate in triumphal propaganda, indeed as a betrayer of his father's cause and the liberation of the Mediterranean from pirate raids. But such attempts were by no means universally accepted, and if the war with Antony had uncomfortable associations, the Sextus problem was even more fraught with the distasteful memory of long decades of bloody civil war.⁴⁴

There is a subtle allusion to Sextus in the picture of Actium on the shield. Agrippa is explicitly identified by his *corona navalis*, the decoration that he received for his victory over Sextus at Naulochus in 36 (8.682-4)⁴⁵. Naulochus was the occasion for a flurry of commemorative acts, and in time it was all too easy to confuse and conflate Actium and

³⁹ On Virgil's Scylla passage see WILLIAMS 1962; HORSFALL 2006; HEYWORTH, MORWOOD 2017, *ad loc.* At 7.302-3, Juno laments that Scylla and Charybdis were of no avail to her in her efforts to thwart the Trojan arrival in Hesperia. *Scyllae biformes* are among the bogeys at the threshold of the underworld (6.286). In a less ominous context, Cloanthus' ship at the regatta is named the *Scylla* (5.122-3).

⁴⁰ See, e.g., KERSTEN 2024, 80-81.

⁴¹ POWELL 2008, 100-107; see further here KAYACHEV 2020, 94. On the appeal of the vivid association of Sextus and Scylla for employment in literary imagery, note GERRISH 2016, 193-217.

⁴² On this passage note *ad loc.* EDEN 1975; FRATANTUONO, SMITH 2018.

⁴³ See further here AUSTIN 1977; HORSFALL 2013, *ad loc.*, and cf. the pessimistic reading of FARRON 1980, 53-68. Attempts have been made to find allusions to Pompey elsewhere in the epic; note Bowie 1990, 470-481 (and cf. Moles 1983, 287-288). More generally on the question of the portrayal of Caesar in the epic, note White 1988, 334-356.

⁴⁴ Lange 2014, 69-98 is an insightful assessment of how some of the problems inherent to portraying internecine strife were handled in this period.

⁴⁵ We may note here that the argument has been made that Virgil allegorical alludes to Agrippa in his depiction of Aeneas' colleague Achates (see, e.g., POWELL 2018, 106; cf. DREW 1927, 86 ff.). Achates has received more attention than this relatively brief appearances in the epic might seem to warrant, with a monograph (WEBER 1988) and several shorter studies devoted to him.

Naulochus⁴⁶. Whether Agrippa was the first to receive the decoration or the only one, the very rarity of the award made it noteworthy for inclusion on the shield, but no contemporary reader would have failed to remember Sextus⁴⁷. The very subtlety of the reference further displays the problems that Sextus posed for Octavian's reputation. Horace's labeling of Sextus as the *Neptunius dux* reflects a certain criticism of those who would foolishly don divine trappings. Virgil follows a more indirect path than his poetic colleague.

In the years after Actium, Sicily was a major agenda item in the Augustan settlement, as consolidation followed on the suppression of military threat⁴⁸. In short, what had been a respectably prosperous, increasingly urbanized landscape was radically transformed economically into what Shelley Stone has labeled "a purely agricultural appendage of Italy". Sicily was of immense strategic value, and the Augustan reduction of the island to pastoral breadbasket served in part to ensure that it would never again be a bastion of potential military or economic threat to Rome⁴⁹.

Virgil's Sicily is the locus for the attempt of the Trojan women to burn Aeneas' ships (5.604-99). It is significant that Virgil chose to set this episode on the island, given that traditionally it seems to have been associated with the founding of Rome⁵⁰. The burning of the ships has parallels to the storm of *Aeneid* 1. Juno is once again the instigator, and she uses another minion (Iris for Aeolus). Neptune's realm was infringed in the case; for the burning, the disguised Iris recommends using fire from four altars to the god (5.639-40), and in the end four ships are entirely lost (5.698-9). Water is the element of the one assault, fire of the other. In the end, a Trojan settlement (Acesta/Segesta) is established in Sicily, though it is composed of the survivors of the four lost ships, and from those who did not have the energy or spirit for the struggles to come (5.713-8). To the best of our knowledge Segesta was largely irrelevant to the Sextus campaign. What matters most in Virgil's narrative is that the Trojans who stay behind in Sicily include the weak and the infirm. The episode of the ship-burning is transferred from Latium to Sicily, and in consequence Sicily is associated with betrayal (the women are engaging in a profoundly civil act of violence), and, ultimately, with pacification and a degree of enervation. This all accords with what happened in the 30s (including how some of Octavian's ships were burned after Velia)⁵¹.

We have mentioned the immense labors that Agrippa oversaw in 37 as part of the effort to refurbish Octavian's navy. The public works projects connected with this undertaking were centered on the lakes of the Gulf of Baiae (Lucrinus and Avernus) that served as Agrippa's main naval base⁵². Cumae was part of the building program that Agrippa undertook at the behest of his colleague, and the temple of Apollo that was rebuilt and renovated is memorably recalled in Aeneas' visit to the god's shrine in the opening scene of *Aeneid* 6 (9-41)⁵³. The memory of the

⁴⁶ On the former see ROLLER 2018, 148; on the latter, note POLLINI 2012, 74.

⁴⁷ Cf. here VERVAET, DART 2018, 313-345; BARAZ 2020, 175; MAXFIELD 1981, 74-75.

⁴⁸ On this subject see further the important study of STONE III 1983, 11-22, which was reprinted (with revisions) in POWELL, WELCH 2002, 135-165.

⁴⁹ On the strategic value of the island note DENIAUX 2014, 127-144.

⁵⁰ See further here GALINSKY 2014, 1172.

⁵¹ Cf. HADAS 1930, 125 (referencing Dio 49.1.3).

⁵² On Virgil's reminiscence at G. 2.160-4 of the veritable conquest of nature accomplished by Agrippa see LEACH 1999, 115-116.

⁵³ It is beyond the scope of this study to consider the question of the temple artwork that captivates Aeneas' attention, let alone the implications of the poet's introduction of Daedalus and Ariadne lore. For a start to a vast subject, see SYED 2005, 79 ff.

campaigns against Sextus is thus recalled at a significant juncture in the narrative, namely on the cusp of Aeneas' descent to the underworld. Aeneas encounters Palinurus' shade in the underworld (6.337-83), and we have mentioned the Misenus episode from the same book. The Palinurus passage closes with an emphasis on the everlasting memorial that will be accorded to the lost hero (6.378-81); similar attention to the locus of Misenus' *tumulus* (6.232-5). The grave honors of both Trojans reflect something of the great losses incurred by Octavian in the same vicinities. The sixth *Aeneid* palpably recalls both what Octavian suffered, and how Agrippa assisted him in resolving the crisis in Sicilian and adjacent waters. Whatever mastery of naval warfare was attained by the experience of fighting Sextus was then employed in the campaigns of 31.

There is one last episode of note in conjunction to the Sextus peril that Octavian endured. While Aeneas is away from his camp in search of local allies (not to mention his reception of the divine shield), Turnus is frustrated by the unwillingness of the Trojans to engage in an open, pitched battle. He decides to try to set fire to the Trojan fleet (9.69-76)⁵⁴. The ships are magically transformed into sea creatures after Cybele appeals to Jupiter (9.77-122). There are obvious parallels here to the Sicilian episode. In Sicily disaster was averted by a timely Jovian rainstorm; in Latium, we have the fantastic metamorphosis of ships that are no longer needed.

Toward the end of his career, Sextus tried to flee into the interior of Bithynia, with locales like Armenia on his ultimate itinerary. He burned his fleet, deciding to rely solely on a land force as he sought to escape his pursuers by heading inland⁵⁵. He was pursued, and in the end, he conceived the bold plan to try to set fire to the ships of Marcus Titius, who had been sent by Antony with an army and a fleet to bring Sextus to Alexandria⁵⁶. Appian is of the opinion that Sextus could have succeeded in his daring enterprise, had his friend Scaurus not deserted him.⁵⁷

In Virgil's narrative, there is one final scene that recalls the image of naval disasters, as Turnus makes his incendiary threats against the Trojan ships. The fiery peril is averted by the dramatic intervention of the Trojan mother goddess Cybele, who successfully importunes Jupiter to allow her to save the fleet. The ships will not be burned, but they are also unnecessary. And so, they are transformed into nymphs.

Critics and commentators have rendered various judgments on the success of Virgil's scene. It is one of the more fantastic and otherworldly sequences in the epic. It makes more sense if viewed in light of the resolution of the Sextus problem.

After Octavian's victory at Naulochus, Sextus was able to escape to Asia. He had had success in his career playing the triumvirs against each other, and his eastward flight took him to Antony's sphere of influence, thus complicating the already thorny question of Octavian's possible pursuit of his adversary. Sextus had a brief, checkered career in this period, winning some victories that were reminiscent of the flair and spirit of the commander at his best, while also suffering setbacks that were indicative of how unlikely it was that he would regroup and rebuild successfully yet again. In the end he contemplated burning the ships of his adversary, only to be stymied by Scaurus' desertion. Responsibility for his death would be somewhat open to dispute. There was the question of whether Titius acted on his own responsibility, or on orders from Antony⁵⁸. Octavian would formally celebrate the death with games, only later to

⁵⁴ Cf. here HARDIE 1994; DINGEL 1997, *ad loc.*

⁵⁵ See here HADAS 1930, 156-158 (with reference to Appian 5.139-40).

⁵⁶ Appian 5.141-2.

⁵⁷ On Scaurus see HADAS 1930, 158.

⁵⁸ Cf. Appian 5.144.

blame the death on Antony – clear enough evidence that the Sextus question was a delicate one⁵⁹.

In Virgil, Aeneas is not present for Turnus' attempt to burn the ships. The threat from Turnus is quelled by the intervention of Cybele, the preeminent goddess of the Troad. For Virgil's contemporary audience, this would not be a mere instance of poetic, fanciful adventure and magical whimsy. Rather, it would recall how Octavian's Sextus problem was solved in his absence, in the region of the world famous for Troy and the Trojan origins of the Julian *gens*, after a failed attempt by an enemy to burn the ships of his foe.

Without question, Sextus Pompeius was an awkward figure in the résumé of Octavian's early career. The war was both indisputably civil and against the son of the widely revered Pompey. Dismissing Sextus as a buccaneer with delusions of godhead would be more or less persuasive, depending on the audience. Apart from public relations, confronting Sextus was a long and arduous process, one that involved military and political efforts in tandem with surviving and overcoming the vicissitudes of bad weather and severe storms at sea. If there was any stroke of luck for Octavian in the whole enterprise, it came at the end. Sextus' final defeat was achieved without Octavian's involvement, and when relations with his triumphal colleague collapsed beyond repair, it was all too easy for Octavian to pin the blame for Sextus' defeat on Antony, and to claim that he would have spared Pompey's son.

The delicacy of the Sextus question is reflected in Virgil's refraining from direct mentioning him. Aeneas' experience of storms both moderate and severe recalls the peril Octavian endured from the same threat. The double loss of his companions Palinurus and Misenus further evokes the war with Sextus, given the geographical associations of their names, the emphasis on onomastic memorial, and the circumstances of their deaths. Reference to the areas transformed by Agrippa's building projects and naval enterprises adds to the picture, as does the remembrance of his *corona navalis* at Actium, where the Sextus problem is neatly elided into the more readily celebrated victory over Cleopatra and her Roman lover.

But perhaps most strikingly, Octavian's experience with Sextus offers a cipher to aid in understanding the point of the magical interlude of Cybele with the Trojan ships. In the foiling of the burning of ships under the auspices of the Trojan mother goddess, we recall the foiling of Sextus' plan to burn his adversary's ships in Asia Minor. The specter of Sextus haunts the *Aeneid*, notwithstanding any valiant efforts to focus attention on Actium and a less awkward episode of the Roman civil wars.

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⁵⁹ Cf. HADAS 1930, 159.

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