

Georgics

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Publius, Virgilius, Maro, the greatest Latin poet of his age and idol of all during the last two millennia, was born on a farm near Mantua, the Po Valley, Italy, in 70 B.C. As an adult he composed Virgil's "Aeneid" and grew to be the literary rival of the divine Homer. Virgil's finest poetry, according to critics of his day and to later poets such as John Dryden, was not his famous epic, "Aeneid" but his "Georgics," in translation "Agriculture," which today is little known except to contemporaries and students of Latin. As a youth, Virgil worked long hours on the family farm and learned the sayings and wisdom of farmers; however, his parents recognized his literary talents and exposed him to rigorous instruction in literature and history, especially in the redolent world of Greek religious mythology and of ancient Roman traditions. He attended schools in Milan, Rome, and Naples.

Virgil had grown into a young poet of note when Julius Caesar was assassinated in 45 B.C., a devastating event that led to civil war. Three years later, after the Battle of Philippi, Octavian emerged as the supreme ruler of Rome and thereafter assumed the title of Emperor Augustus. Virgil adjusted promptly to the new order of power, and he earned the favor of the Emperor through his first hand knowledge of horses, which led to Virgil's recommending to Augustus his favorite riding colt. For literary ambitions, Virgil sought and won the patronage of Maecenas, a wealthy supporter of the arts and a confidant of the Emperor. In this manner the poet became a shining light among the highest circles of Roman society. He dedicated "Georgics" to Maecenas and Augustus, sprinkling verses of sophisticated praise to both luminaries throughout the four books of the poem. While Virgil's native instinct led him to financial backers, he more importantly blessed his readers with his extraordinary power of poetic expression.

Few of us in this room can savor the delight of Virgil's music and the beauty and grandeur of his Latin words and verse. Why, we may ask, did he decide at age 34 to devote his genius to the praise of agriculture? This was to be no brief endeavor; it took him seven years and some 2200 lines of hexameter to do justice to the subject, proof enough of his dedication to perfection. While Virgil wished to please his patrons, Maecenas and Augustus, he was above all else inspired by the rugged farm wisdom of his rural youth, by his first hand encounters with nature's demands for successful agriculture, and by his conversations with working farmers. His poem was no bumptious country verse but sophisticated, polished poetry, written for the elite among literates and connoisseurs of culture. He adorned and embellished his work with illustrative classical myths that summoned for the reader the Gods of Olympus and Latium. This technique did not measure the strength of his religious beliefs but rather its importance to the power of his poetic imagery. Virgil primarily wove his verses around the minutiae of agronomy and the care of domestic animals.

In Book I the poet describes the types of soil and countryside best suited for various agricultural usages, always in elegant phrase. The farmer must study the stars for direction of his labor and never plant on the fifth day of the month. He should sow on the 17th day, and keep scanning the weather and keep propitiating the Gods.

Virgil laments the darkness of the solar eclipse on the day Caesar was murdered, and the Book ends with a plea to Augustus to heal the stricken state of Rome. Both Augustus and Maecenas sought the backing and support of conservative landowners to bolster the new imperial regime, and toward that end they encouraged the poet in his paeon to agriculture and in his honoring of farmers. For years Virgil labored, writing, polishing, and rewriting his verses, much to imperial satisfaction, and that invaluable sinecure supported him during the long periods of artistic creation.

Virgil never indulges in effusive praise of handsome shepherds and their alluring loves.

Book II tells how to select the proper soil for a particular plant, rich bottomland for grain, light sandy slopes for vines, clay and gravel for olives. Fruit trees require careful grafting, and groves of oaks and valuable trees must be nursed for their harvest of timber and of nuts. Vines call for much labor in cultivation, pruning, training on trellis, and in erecting barriers of protection from hungry goats and sheep. The poet extolls the many blessings of the farmer's life in contrast to the perils of the city.

In Book III we learn how to raise the swiftest horses and sturdiest cattle. Start with a promising cow, age 4 to 10, fierce in looks, thick in the neck, and long in the flank. She will bear the strongest get for the plow and the most handsome offering for sacrifice. We need to recall that a pair of bullocks served as Rome's farm tractor. Virgil advises that, for race horses, pick the boldest stud, unafraid of fast water, high in head, short in belly, and well muscled in chest and back. Grays and blacks are preferable and avoid the whites and duns. Look for solid hooves that scoop up earth, for ears that stand up and forward at hearing the clash of arms, and for limbs that quiver at the chance of a race. The mare counts for more in breeding and should be lean, while the stallion should be kept well fed. Coddle the pregnant mare and protect her from summer flies, a plague that the poet blames on Juno, who is ever spiteful towards Rome. Once they are born, the colts and calves must receive the farmer's undistracted attention.

Dryden, the famous English poet, has translated the "Georgics" into hexameter couplets and offers this advice to the breeder of horses and cattle.

"Now while their youth is filled with kindly fire
Submit thy females to the lusty sire."

Colts destined for war or chariot should be introduced early to martial sounds, while at the same time calming them with fond petting. Horses should not be raced until after age three, since Roman horsemen are not concerned with the expense of training.

Once farm animals have been exposed to breeding, their passion for mating grows to a powerful force. So Dryden describes it.

"Thus every creature and of every kind
The secret joys of sweet coition find."

Virgil ends Book III with a vivid account of the destructive havoc caused by fatal epidemics among sheep, livestock, and horses. He attributes these catastrophes to inadequate sacrifice and poor propitiation of the Gods.

The final Book IV devotes its lines chiefly to the praise of beekeeping. Bees are saluted for their ordered society, their hard work, and their creation of golden honey, treasured by Gods and kings alike. The poet glorifies the honeybees as models of the perfect citizens for the Roman state, obedient, happy in their allotted task, frugal, and united in productive service for the common good. Virgil makes the understandable mistake of calling the all powerful leader of the hive a King, comparable to Augustus, rather than the correct Queen Bee, so acceptable to our current culture. Virgil recites where to place the hive and how to protect it from weather and pests. He warns of disease in the hive, which can destroy the swarm. To find a new colony of bees, he describes at length the conditions and demands of an ancient Egyptian myth. The poem concludes with elaborate praise of Caesar Augustus.

Only after completing this tribute to Roman agriculture and countryside, so essential to the well being of the young imperial state, was Virgil ready to turn his art to an epic story of Rome's founding. This poem became his famous "Aeneid," which took fourteen more years of artistic creation until his death at age 55, when he still was not satisfied with his final verses, forever striving towards perfection.
