

A Night in Cyprus (Verg. *Aen.* 1.657-697)

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Abstract In a short and unprecedented episode of Book 1, the *Aeneid* has Venus swap Iulus and Cupid: the goddess transfers Iulus to Cyprus for one night only, and has Cupid impersonate Iulus at the court of Carthage. This paper examines the reasons why the model of Cleopatra and Caesarion is relevant to the episode, in particular via the political significance of the Cypriot location and the reference to Cleopatra's visual propaganda.

Keywords Roman epic and politics. Cleopatra. Caesarion. Augustus. Virgil. Body doubles. Cyprus. Venus. Aphrodite. Civil wars at Rome. Impersonation. Carthage and Alexandria in the *Aeneid*.

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exuit, et gressu gaudens incedit Iuli.
at Venus Ascanio placidam per membra quietem
inrigat, et fotum gremio dea tollit in altos
Idaliae lucos, ubi mollis amaracus illum
floribus et dulci adspirans complectitur umbra.
(1.689-694)

It is a summer¹ night in Cyprus, and the sacred grove breathes aromatics: a suitable setting to celebrate my friend Willy Cingano. The alternative, no less beautiful (and musically resonant for a jazz aficionado like Willy), is a night in Tunisia: we are now in a palace in

¹ For the season cf. *Aen.* 1.756, where *aestas* is the last word of Book 1.



Carthage, a magnificent city of the past. In both settings, a beautiful boy is being pampered by a loving queen. In Carthage, we see Cupid, god of love, and Dido, queen of lovers; in Cyprus, Iulus, son of Aeneas, and Venus, goddess of love. But it all lasts only one night. What kind of world is this? We are reading the first book of Virgil's *Aeneid*, and in particular the moment when Venus hides Iulus in an Idalian grove and sends Cupid in his place. What we see is a bizarre example of Virgil's favourite pattern, the chiasmus, recently studied as *Virgil's Double Cross* by a great critic, David Quint (Quint 2018). This one-night chiasmus across the Mediterranean requires explanation. The two boys are not only supremely beautiful; they are identical.

As will become clear, this episode is intimately related to another duplication, namely one in the final sequence of the civil war at Rome, right before the victory of Octavian. The two sides were fighting over Caesar's legacy, dividing their loyalties between a love-child of Caesar, Caesarion, "Ptolemy and also Caesar, the god who loves his father and loves his mother", and a posthumously adopted son of Caesar, C. Iulius Caesar Octavianus. The importance of Caesarion in the conflict was greater than we sometimes remember: he was, unlike other family members who were saved for the triumph and a dynastic future, the one who was killed on the spot after the death of Antony and Cleopatra in Alexandria. The advice of the despicable Greek philosopher Areius, quoting the *Iliad* to Octavian, was 'there should be only one king' (Plut. *Ant.* 81.4): Caesarion was a dangerous, troubling duplicate for the new Caesar. Before the final conflict, Antony had publicly testified (Cass. Dio 50.3.1-5) that Caesarion was the true blood and heir of Caesar.

In his seminal reading of the imperial politics of the *Aeneid*, David Quint (1992, 28) explains that "when [...] Dido embraces Cupid who has been substituted for Ascanius, the scene suggests Cleopatra's love child Caesarion, whom she and Antony, at a ceremony in Alexandria in 34 B.C., attempted to pass off as Julius Caesar's heir".² Yet, as this paper will ask, what about Iulus in Cyprus? Are there any historical parallels to be drawn to the other half of the Virgilian chiasmus?

Cyprus is a node in the network of power in the *Aeneid*, and it connects both to Dido and Venus. Dido explains in her first speech to Aeneas in the poem (1.619-622) that her father Belus had established a Phoenician empire in Cyprus. Venus retires to her home at Paphos after her first appearance to Aeneas (1.415-417); she moves Iulus to Idalium in Cyprus, after considering the alternative of Cythera at 1.680; she shows again the intention of bringing him to Cyprus in

² The idea is developed at Quint 2018, 76 and 125: the entire book is based on ideas of duplication, exchange and mirroring, viewed as a rhetoric of the civil wars creating an emotional imprint on the *Aeneid*.

10.51-52 (cf. Juno in 10.86), and mentions the cult places at Amathus, Paphos and Idalia or Idalium, plus the alternative of Cythera. Her signature sanctuary in the Western Mediterranean, at Eryx in Sicily, is founded in this poem at 5.759 with explicit reference to Venus Idalia: Sicilian Venus, which is the archetype of Roman Venus, is actually transferred from Cyprus. The island is also well known as an interface for Greeks, Phoenicians, and Egyptians, and Venus in Cyprus can be seen as Aphrodite, Astarte, and Hathor or Isis.

As is also well known, Venus has a Homeric tradition in Cyprus. She regularly goes by Cytherea in the *Aeneid*, not Kypris as in Greek epic, but nevertheless there is a spatial connection with Cyprus. The idea of the goddess returning to her abode in Cyprus connects three divine encounters in the family of Anchises: the episodes involve Anchises himself in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, Aeneas in *Aen.* 1.415-417, and now Iulus: lover, son, grandson. This is the dynasty that the *Aeneid* offers to Augustus. The conclusion of the encounter with Aeneas is very specific:

Ipsa Paphum sublimis abit, sedesque reuisit
laeta suas, ubi templum illi, centumque Sabaeo
ture calent arae, sertisque recentibus halant.
(1.415-417)

“She enacts...a Sapphoesque fantasy of a Near Eastern goddess of love” (Reed 2007, 194), and frankincense from Sheba is significant. The passage as a whole is an allusion to a moment in the *Odyssey* (8.362-363) and to one in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* (58-59; Olson 2011; Barchiesi 1994, 116-17; Sainte-Beuve 1857, 274-85). Both are transgressive intertexts, linked to ideas of pleasure: adultery with Ares, accidental sex with Anchises. So in Virgil Venus chooses her love shack in Cyprus over her other birthplace in Cythera (the two locations that are most closely associated to her, because of her peculiar generation from sperm and sea-foam, cf. Hes. *Theog.* 198-199 “Kythereia because she happened upon Kythera and Kyprogenes because she was born in much-surging Kypros”) to lodge her grandson for one night only. The passage from the Hymn is particularly erotic: while in the *Odyssey* the goddess seeks shelter in her favorite Paphos after the adultery and the scandal, the poet of the Hymn is visualising preparations for adultery:

When Aphrodite, lover of smiles, saw him,
she fell in love with him. A terrible desire seized her in her
phrenes.
She went to Cyprus, entering her temple fragrant with
incense

regalis inter mensas laticemque Lyaeum,
cum dabit amplexus atque oscula dulcia figet,
occultum inspires ignem fallasque ueneno.
(1.680-688)

In the end, as we saw at the beginning of this paper, Venus opts for Cyprus not Cythera:

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The herb *amaracus* belongs to the same botanical genus as *dictamnus*, the Cretan herb that heals Aeneas in *Aen.* 12.412, Venus being the agent of healing. But unlike *dictamnus*, *amaracus* has a hint of *amor*, and Catull. 61, a marriage poem, associates *amaracus*, Venus, and Idalium (61.6 and 14): Denis Feeney (2013, 78) points out that *amaracus* has a special resonance if we think of the common pun between *amor* and *amarus*, the bittersweet nature of desire. Mention of Aphrodite from Cypriot Idalium is also prominent in the Adonis song of Theocritus 15, a poem set in Alexandria and focusing on Ptolemaic celebrations of Adonis (cf. Theoc. 15.100-101: Golgoi, Idalion and – same association as in Virgil – Sicilian Eryx; for the link with Adonis cf. Prop. 2.13, 53). The *altos...lucos* in this context are not simply a revelation of the lush landscape on the hillside of Cyprus: a *lucus* is a normal expectation when approaching a temple of Venus, if we think for example of the evidence of the Venus shrine at Pompeii (cf. Carroll 2009). In a parallel situation, after the foundations of Segesta and the sanctuary of Venus Erycina in Sicily, we see a sacred grove (*lucus*) with a priest adjoining the grave of Anchises (*Aen.* 5.761-762).

Cyprus was, in the age between Caesar's victory at Pharsalus and Octavian's victory at Actium (48-31 BCE), a surprising example of a Roman conquest that had been returned to a foreign power. The restitution of Cyprus to the Ptolemies happened between 48 and 47 and was probably associated with Cleopatra and Caesarion (born in the early summer of 47), perhaps even perceived as the statement of a donation by Caesar to Cleopatra in the name of this new 'heir.' So, for young Virgil, and for all the Romans at the time, Cyprus was not just a Greek place: it was quintessentially Ptolemaic, and one of the few remainders of what had been a Ptolemaic Mediterranean empire: an empire that Antony had a plan to revive. Now Caesarion, if we look to Cyprus, is not just a 'love-child;' he is Eros himself, the son of Aphrodite.

There is evidence connecting Caesarion to Paphos and to Cyprus in Ptolemaic coinage;³ Caesarion in this tradition can be seen as Eros and as Adonis, a beloved child and also a prospective teen lover.⁴ Both divine figures have a place in Cyprus. Cleopatra as Aphrodite-Isis balances Caesarion as Eros-Horus-Adonis. Venus in Virgil creates a duplicitous Ptolemaic scenario: the fake Iulus appears as Cleopatra's son in Ptolemaic visual propaganda, real Iulus is being groomed as Caesarion.

Discussing the art of Cleopatra's empire, Kleiner (2005, 144-5) insists on the importance of Cypriot bronze coinage. Cleopatra suckles Caesarion, like Isis with her child. Protection and motherhood are crucial for this dynastic ideology: at Dendera in Egypt little Caesar is king next to Cleopatra, the Queen of Kings, and at Edfu the baby king is "a diminutive Caesarion... well protected by huge falcons at the temple's entrance" (Kleiner 2005, 85). Ptolemaic coins with Caesarion have been found by J.B. Connelly at Yeronisos near Paphos: she suggests the existence of a Ptolemaic cult place, connected to the cult of Aphrodite and to Cleopatra's dynastic celebrations (Connelly 2008, 86-8). Certainly, the location, a tiny island west of Paphos, never a place of regular settlement, makes one think of naval routes from Alexandria to Cyprus, and of rituals of royal cult. The protective iconography of Venus in Virgil, nesting Iulus in a bed of aromatic plants in a sanctuary, is a good match for the operations of Cleopatra's dynastic ideology.

Cleopatra issued coins in Cyprus, advertising Caesarion as her heir, and also his connection to Caesar [fig. 1]. It would be hard to find a more Venusian image for a ruler: Caesarion has a mother who is also Isis/Aphrodite, a father who belongs to the Roman lineage of Venus from Aeneas and Iulus, and is the new ruler at Paphos, the birthplace of the goddess Aphrodite. The swap between Iulus and Cupid in the *Aeneid* episode has a strange effect of doubling: in both places, at Carthage and Cyprus, we see a moment of dynastic propaganda, as if there is no escape from the Cleopatra mirage. This duplication brings back the tension of the civil wars: later on, Dido will famously complain that she has not given birth to a *paruulus Aeneas* (4.328-329), the mythical equivalent of 'little Caesar' Caesarion. For Cupid, Aeneas is nothing but a *falsus genitor* (cf. 1.716), more exactly a stepbrother (1.667 *frater... tuus... Aeneas*).⁵ In the banquet at Carthage, Iulus/Eros is associated with royalty, with an emphasis that goes beyond the standards of the *Aeneid*: he is one *regius puer*

3 See e.g. Havelock 1995, 219, and Kleiner and Connelly quoted below.

4 On incest, Ptolemaic propaganda, religious imagination in the *Aeneid* see the rich and suggestive essay by Hardie 2006.

5 On Ptolemaic style viewed as confusion of family roles note again Hardie 2006.



Figure 1 Bronze Coin of Cleopatra VII/Ptolemy XV, Paphos, 47-29 BC. 1951.116.420. Courtesy of The American Numismatics Association

(1.677-678), bringing *regia dona* to a *regina* (1.695-697) and exchanging hugs and kisses *regalis inter mensas* (1.686). When she welcomes him to her lap, Dido is styled a *regina...aurea*, 1.697-698 (the interpretation of Putnam 2018), an epithet that connects her to the Homeric *Venus aurea* of *Aen.* 10.16.⁶

- a. Cleopatra had a gilded statue in the Caesarian temple of Venus Genetrix at Rome (see Cass. Dio 51.22.3). The statue had a great impact: it is a possible guess that Cleopatra was supporting little Caesarion on her shoulder. In that case (Kleiner 2005, 137, cf. Curtius 1933) it is attractive to speculate that the cult statue of Venus herself had a matching iconography, with Cupid/Eros on a shoulder. A Pompeiian painting is also relevant to this discussion: it is from the triumphal age and, Susan Walker argues, “the infant Caesarion is represented [...] as Cupid to Cleopatra’s Venus” (Walker 2008, 42). But the image of Caesarion apparently suffered erasure and concealment in subsequent years, in the age of Octavian. One wonders if Caesarion himself was interpreted as Cupid, a fitting companion image for such a Queen of Hearts. Or perhaps he was explained away as Cupid by observers who were

⁶ The physical connection of Dido and Cupid is reactivated in the connection of Dido and Ascanius at 4.82-85; on the passage see the comments of Ziogas 2010.

pro-Octavian and not so keen to associate themselves with the Egyptian competitor of their Roman leader. In any case, there is one further troubling suggestion of impersonation, right in the temple of Julian Venus. Before the identification of the Pompeian painting as “Cleopatra in the guise of Venus Genetrix” (Kleiner 2005, 154-5), one scholar had suggested the image represented (Leach 2004, 106-7) “an actress playing a queen”, a reasonable reaction to this play of substitutions. In the *Aeneid*, the plot of Venus backfires on Dido as Cleopatra. The night in Cyprus is suggestive of a road not taken in this game of thrones. The Venus-Iulus pipeline of power that the epic is working hard to construct could have been hijacked, and the alternative Alexandrian plot is still part of the ideological fabric of the *Aeneid*. The effect is highlighted in the crucial narrative hinge at 1.690-691, where the metamorphosis of Amor into the son of Aeneas is marked by the dynastic name Iulus,⁷ while the son of Aeneas who is transported to Cyprus is mentioned as Ascanius. The disquieting aspect of the divine swap in *Aeneid* 1 is that, while Cupid (a Cupid without wings) is impersonating Iulus, Ascanius is impersonating, for one night only, Caesarion.

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⁷ On the importance of the two names for the son of Aeneas and of their positioning in the narrative see Barchiesi 2016. I thank Michael Putnam for his friendly advice on this paper.

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