

VENUS' BOOTS AND THE SHADOW OF CAESAR IN BOOK 1 OF VIRGIL'S *AENEID**

uirginibus Tyriis mos est gestare pharetram,
purpureoque alte suras uincire cothurno.

It is customary for us Tyrian girls to carry a quiver
and to lace our calves up high in red boots. (Verg. *Aen.* 1.336–7)

With these words a disguised Venus explains the accessories of her costume to Aeneas and Achates shortly after the Trojan landing in North Africa. Even detailed commentaries on this passage¹ overlook an important feature: the lines contain a reference to Julius Caesar, who claimed descent from Venus and made a political point of wearing red boots during his dictatorship. This allusion to Caesar connects in significant ways to adjoining passages of the first book of the *Aeneid*.

Venus explains that her quiver (*pharetra*) and red-purple boots (*purpureus cothurnus*) are typical accessories for Tyrian maidens. The colour *purpureus* in its visual similarity to *puniceus* underlines the Carthaginian setting of the scene, while the *cothurnus* brings to mind the buskin, the boot of the tragic actor.² The theatrical significance of the *cothurnus* seems appropriate given Virgil's description of the Trojan landing site on the North African coast as a *scaena*, or stage (*Aen.* 1.164). But the *cothurnus* also had a political connotation: because it could be worn on either foot, it could indicate a politician who aligned himself with popular opinion to further his own agenda, the most famous example being the Athenian Theramenes.³

The political connotation is significant, since no Roman in the first century B.C.E. could have forgotten that Julius Caesar had worn high red leather boots as a means of political legitimation. The report comes from Cassius Dio (43.43.2–3):

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¹ See esp. E.L. Harrison, 'Why did Venus wear boots? – Some reflections on Aeneid 1.314f.', *PVS* 12 (1972–3), 10–25. Cf. M.P. Wilhelm, 'Venus, Diana, Dido and Camilla in the "Aeneid"', *Vergilius* 33 (1987), 43–8; K. Reckford, 'Recognizing Venus (I): Aeneas meets his mother', *Arion* 3.2 & 3 (1995–6), 1–42; F. Ahl (trans.), *Virgil: Aeneid* (Oxford, 2007), 330–5.

² Harrison (n. 1), 20 and n. 52. On the correspondence (close but not identical) between *purpureus* and *puniceus* see Varro, *Ling.* 5.113; J. André, *Étude sur les termes de couleur dans la langue latine* (Paris, 1949), 88–102; R.J. Edgeworth, *The Colors of the Aeneid* (New York, 1992), 52–3, 150–1. On Virgil's purples see also J. Del Ton, 'De uario purpurae colore apud Vergilium', *Latinitas* 1 (1953), 31–7. For the identification in Augustan literature of the *cothurnus* with the tragic buskin see also J.P. Poe, 'The cothurnus and Greek tragedy', in S. Heilen (ed.), *In Pursuit of Wissenschaft: Festschrift für William M. Calder III zum 75. Geburtstag* (Hildesheim/New York, 2008), 341–50. Cf. Verg. *Ecl.* 7.32 *puniceo stabis suras euincta coturno*.

³ Xen. *Hell.* 2.3.30–1; Isid. *Etym.* 19.34.5; Poe (n. 2), 345.

τῆ τε γὰρ ἐσθῆτι χαυνοτέρᾳ ἐν πᾶσιν ἐνηβρύνετο, καὶ τῆ ὑποδέσει καὶ μετὰ ταῦτα ἐνίστε καὶ ὑψηλῆ καὶ ἐρυθροχρόῳ κατὰ τοὺς βασιλέας τοὺς ἐν τῇ Ἄλβῃ ποτὲ γενομένουσ, ὡς καὶ προσήκων σφίσι διὰ τὸν Ἴουλον, ἐχρήτο.

For he [Caesar] would dress effeminately among everyone in his loose-fitting clothing, and later on he wore footwear which was both high and red in colour after the fashion of the kings who had once ruled in Alba Longa, on the grounds that he was related to them through Iulus.

While Dio is the only author to mention the boots, several other sources attest that the costume of Caesar's dictatorship featured the regal red-purple colour.⁴ Caesar also passed legislation that restricted the wearing of purple garments (*conchyliatae uestes*) to certain people on certain days; as he wore the colour more, he ordered others to wear it less.⁵ Festus confirms the Alban kings' use of the boots, which he calls *mullei*; according to Isidore of Seville, the *mulleus* resembled the *cothurnus* in certain respects and was also red in colour.⁶

In Dio, Caesar justifies his choice of footwear by claiming descent from the kings of Alba, of whom Iulus, the son of Aeneas and the grandson of Venus, was the first.⁷ The author's next sentence emphasizes Caesar's total devotion to Venus, a reverence that is evident in other sources as well.⁸ The connection helps explain why Virgil's Venus appears in red boots. A major component of Caesar's self-presentation at Rome was his promotion of Venus as his ancestor and patron goddess, a claim he advanced through coins, art and building projects.⁹ It was above all his putative descent from Iulus, Aeneas and ultimately Venus herself that gave Caesar the right to wear the boots of the Alban kings. While other Roman aristocrats had cultivated their own versions of Venus, Caesar broke new ground in encouraging public worship of Venus as *genetrix*, an epithet that, while not unprecedented, showcased his special relationship to the goddess.¹⁰ As she speaks to her son Aeneas, Virgil's Venus wears the boots of the man who venerated her beyond all others as *mother*.

Nor was it only in Alba Longa that red boots indicated royal power. The footwear was also attributed to Romulus, who as Rome's first king furnished Caesar with an important monarchical model.¹¹ The boots might have functioned as a sign of kingship in a Greek context as well, for the Hellenistic dynast Demetrius Poliorcetes had worn purple boots as part of his kingly costume.¹² Like Caesar, Demetrius was celebrated

⁴ Cic. *Phil.* 2.85; *Div.* 1.119; Nic. *Dam. Aug.* 21; Val. *Max.* 1.6.13; Plin. *HN* 11.186; App. *B Civ.* 2.117. See the discussion in S. Weinstock, *Divus Julius* (Oxford, 1971), 271.

⁵ Suet. *Iul.* 43.1. But note the view of M. Reinhold, *History of Purple as a Status Symbol in Antiquity* (Bruxelles, 1970), 45–7, that this legislation may have been relatively limited in scope. Dio (49.16.1) says that Augustus later passed a similar law, though—as Reinhold notes—the passage is a problematic one.

⁶ Festus 128L; Isid. *Etym.* 19.34.10; cf. H.R. Goette, 'Mulleus-embas-calceus', *JDAI* 103 (1988), 401–67, at 446–7.

⁷ A. Alföldi, 'Insignien und Tracht der römischen Kaiser', *MDAI(R)* 50 (1935), 1–171, at 30. On the origins of the *gens Iulia* in Alba Longa, see Weinstock (n. 4), 5–7.

⁸ Dio 43.43.3 τὸ τε ὄλον τῆ τε Ἀφροδίτῃ πᾶς ἀνέκειτο. Cf. App. *B Civ.* 2.76; Suet. *Iul.* 6.1, 49.3, 49.61, 78.1, 84.1; Nic. *Dam. Aug.* 28; Cic. *Fam.* 8.15.2.

⁹ Weinstock (n. 4), 80–90.

¹⁰ Weinstock (n. 4), 85.

¹¹ Dio, fr. 6.1; W. Burkert, 'Caesar und Romulus-Quirinus', *Historia* 11 (1962), 356–76.

¹² Athen. 12.535F; Plut. *Dem.* 41.4; Reinhold (n. 5), 31; Weinstock (n. 4), 325. Demetrius' boots are called πορφύρα, a red-purple colour associated (like *purpureus* and *punicus*) with Phoenicia, since the dye used to produce it was manufactured there: D.W. Thompson, *A Glossary of Greek Fishes* (London, 1947), 209–18; M.C. Astour, 'The origin of the terms "Canaan," "Phoenician," and "purple"', *JNES* 24 (1965), 346–50, at 348–50.

as a descendant of Venus: an Athenian hymn preserved in Athenaeus calls him the son of Aphrodite.¹³ Caesar's red boots might therefore have advertised his claims to descent from Venus to a wide audience, both at Rome and in the Greek East.

Such evocation of Venus, the Alban kings and Caesar's identification with them at this point in the poem is fitting, given that these are the topics of Jupiter's prophecy to Venus in the immediately preceding passage. Here Jupiter prophesies that, after Aeneas' death, Iulus will reign for thirty years and found the kingdom of Alba Longa (1.267–71). Special emphasis is placed on his assumption of the name 'Iulus' (1.267–8):

at puer Ascanius, cui nunc cognomen Iulo
additur—Ilus erat, dum res stetit Ilia regno

But the boy Ascanius, now with the *cognomen* "Iulus"—
he was Ilus, while the kingdom of Ilium still stood

The new name is further highlighted when Jupiter mentions a ruler of Virgil's own day (1.286–8):

nascetur pulchra Troianus origine Caesar,
imperium Oceano, famam qui terminet astris,
Iulius, a magno demissum nomen Iulo.

From this illustrious source a Trojan Caesar will be born
to bound his empire with the Ocean and his fame with the stars:
Iulius, a name handed down by the great Iulus.

The question of whether these lines refer to Caesar or Augustus cannot be settled here.¹⁴ But if Virgil had wanted the text to point unambiguously to Augustus, he could have expressed the emperor's name in a different way. The name Julius Caesar—even when clearly in reference to Augustus—cannot have failed to bring the former dictator to mind. This echo is surely important if one recognizes Venus' costume as an allusion to Caesar's footwear.

Another aspect of Caesar's legacy is on display when Aeneas enters Carthage. Virgil's description of the construction of a theatre (1.427–9) anachronistically recalls Roman Carthage, since there was no stage during the earlier Punic period.¹⁵ It was Julius Caesar who refounded Carthage as a Roman city in 44 B.C.E.¹⁶ The extent to which he was able to execute his vision for the city is a matter of debate among scholars,¹⁷ and there is no archaeological evidence for a theatre at Carthage before the reign of Augustus.¹⁸ But the impetus at any rate came from Julius: Appian claims that Augustus

¹³ Athen. 6.253E. On Demetrius and Aphrodite see S. Müller, 'In the favour of Aphrodite: Sulla, Demetrius Poliorcetes, and the symbolic value of the hetaira', *AHB* 23 (2009), 38–49, at 44–7.

¹⁴ See R.F. Dobbin, 'Julius Caesar in Jupiter's prophecy, *Aeneid*, Book 1', *CLAnt* 14 (1995), 5–40, at 6 n. 1, with references.

¹⁵ On the theatre, see Ahl (n. 1), 333. The importance of Carthage's refoundation to the composition of the *Aeneid* is fully discussed in E.L. Harrison, 'The *Aeneid* and Carthage', in T. Woodman and D. West (edd.), *Poetry and Politics in the Age of Augustus* (Cambridge, 1984), 95–115.

¹⁶ Strabo 17.3.15; Plut. *Caes.* 57.8; Dio 43.50.3–5; App. *Pun.* 136.644–5. Gaius Gracchus first proposed the establishment of a *colonia* at Carthage in 123/2 B.C.E., but the Senate cancelled the project owing to bad omens (Livy, *Epit.* 60; Plut. *C. Gracch.* 10–11; App. *Pun.* 136.644–5; *B Civ.* 1.24).

¹⁷ See Harrison (n. 15), 95–6 and nn. 2–3, with references.

¹⁸ K.E. Ros, 'The Roman theater at Carthage', *AJA* 100 (1996), 449–89, at 484.

began settling Carthage ‘directly upon finding the plans of his father’.¹⁹ What Aeneas witnesses upon his arrival, then, is the realization of not Augustus’ but Caesar’s vision for Carthage.

The poem draws on the traditions concerning Caesar’s physical appearance, as Aeneas, his beauty enhanced through Venus’ arts, reveals himself to Dido (1.588–91):

restitit Aeneas claraque in luce refulsit,
os umerosque deo similis; namque ipsa decoram
caesariem nato genetrix lumenque iuuentae
purpureum et laetos oculis adflarat honores.

Aeneas stood and gleamed in the clear light
like a god in his face and shoulders. For his mother herself
had imparted to her son beauty in his hair, and the shining light of youth
and to his eyes a joyful charm.

It is surely not a coincidence that the three features the text highlights—Aeneas’ hair, his youthful glow and his eyes—are traits for which Caesar, too, was supposed to be renowned.²⁰ Virgil’s *lumen iuuentae purpureum* recalls Caesar’s claim of having received the ‘bloom of youth’ from Venus.²¹ Ancient authors saw an etymological connection between *Caesar* and *caesaries*, especially in light of the tradition that Caesar had been born with a full head of hair, so they surely would have seen the pun here.²² Equally striking is the poet’s use of the word *genetrix* to refer to Venus: whereas Sulla’s Venus was Venus Felix and Pompey’s was Venus Victrix, Caesar specifically cultivated Venus Genetrix in keeping with his claims of descent from the goddess.²³

Virgil calls the glow of youth that Venus imparts *purpureum*. The colour has a different nuance here than at 1.337; it is a corporeal quality, a sign of the radiance of beauty and health.²⁴ As in the earlier passage, however, the word occurs at the beginning of the line. The goddess’ boots were *purpurei* when she revealed herself to her son; she has now made Aeneas himself *purpureus* as he stands before Dido. Both scenes draw on Caesar’s self-presentation as a descendant of Venus and as a ruler worthy of wielding the power she conferred.

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¹⁹ App. *Pun.* 136.645–7 ἐντυχὼν ἄρα τοῖς ὑπογραφαῖς τοῦ πατρὸς. Cf. J. Richardson, ‘Spain, Africa, and Rome after Carthage’, in D. Hoyos (ed.), *A Companion to the Punic Wars* (Malden, MA, 2011), 467–82, at 480–1.

²⁰ Weinstock (n. 4), 23–6.

²¹ Dio 43.43.3 πείθειν πάντας ἦθελεν ὅτι καὶ ἄνθος τι ὄρας ἀπ’ αὐτῆς ἔχει. Cf. the claim attributed to Cicero that Caesar had lost his *florem aetatis a Venere orti* to Nicomedes of Bithynia: Suet. *Iul.* 49.3; Weinstock (n. 4), 18 and n. 3.

²² SHA, *Ael.* 2.4 (where the author also mentions Caesar’s *oculi caesii*); Lydus, *Mens.* 4.102; Festus 50L.; Isid. *Etym.* 9.3.12. Plutarch (*Caes.* 4.9) has Cicero remarking on the young Caesar’s excessive attention to his hairstyle, though the author views the remark as apocryphal. Given this etymological connection, Caesar’s baldness later in life (Suet. *Iul.* 45.2; Dio 43.43.1) was a particular embarrassment. See F. Ahl, *Metaformations: Soundplay and Wordplay in Ovid and Other Classical Poets* (Ithaca and London, 1985), 74–81.

²³ Above, p. 691.

²⁴ See André (n. 2), 98, citing comparable uses of *purpureus* in Verg. *Aen.* 11.819; Tib. 3.4.30.