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Artists and Literacy: The Vatican Vergil

The next best thing to having an original Greek or Roman illustrated manuscript is having a Late Antique one. Of the three major manuscripts with classical texts, two for the *Aeneid* and one for the *Iliad*, I examine illuminations of the *Aeneid* from the *Vatican Vergil*, dated ca. AD 400. Whether the pictures are derived from a classical roll, were created at the time the codex was made, or are some combination thereof is not my concern. I focus only on the issue of how well the text and the pictures match. There are two broad categories: loose, but good fidelity to text; and superficial agreement with, but nagging contradictions to the text.

In the first group are scenes that are generic, such as a city by the sea (folio 27r ad *Aeneid* 3.121-126). The second group comprises more complex scenes where details are important as in, for example, the depiction of the sack of Troy (folio 19r ad *Aeneid* 2.254-258) or the death of Laocoon (folio 18v ad *Aeneid* 2.191-198). In these cases, minor to major discrepancies from the text appear, in part because the artist uses stock artistic types whether or not they agree with the text. Even in scenes, for which no pictorial model exists, such as Aeneas' departure from Troy (folio 22r ad *Aeneid* 2.673-678), the artist liberally adds figures of his own, while ignoring salient details of the text.

Thus the text primes the artist for what he or the scribe wants him to illustrate, but once the artist has made his decision the text ceases to be a concern. While it can be hazardous to compare working habits of artists from different centuries, nonetheless, the fact that Late Antique artists consider the text that is directly before them as a springboard for their illustrations rather than as a control for what goes in those illustrations has major implications for their classical Greek counterparts, who had little or no direct access to the texts *we* believe they were illustrating. In short, the *Vatican Vergil* was made at the end of a very long tradition of artists and writers working in parallel worlds. At the same time the *Vatican Vergil* presages the next stage in the development of text and picture with complex pictures created explicitly to go with specific *full* texts.