

In our world, most people who think about the afterlife suppose that when we die we either cease to exist or receive our due rewards (rewards/punishments). I have pointed out that the latter view did not originate in Jewish or Christian circles, but in pagan, going back some time before the Greek philosopher Plato in the fourth century BCE. The Greeks influenced their later conquerors the Romans in many, many ways, one of which involves their views of the afterlife. The idea of fantastic rewards or horrific torments to come after death be seen in rather graphic terms in the writings of the most famous and talented poets of the Roman world, the great Latin poet Virgil (70-19 BCE), who like his Greek predecessor Homer, some seven centuries earlier, tells the story of a descent to the underworld.

Aeneas En Route to the Underworld

Virgil is best known for his epic the Aeneid, named for its main character, Aeneas, a fugitive from the Trojan War who, in the wake of Troy's disastrous defeat through Greek deception and duplicity (the Trojan Horse), journeyed to Italy to found the city that would eventually lead to the emergence of Rome. The long epic, in short, is the history of the origins of the Roman people, told with all the disinterested observation of any nationalistic propaganda.

For our purposes, the key incident occurs in Book 6, a descent to Hades modeled on the account of Homer we have already considered. In the preceding book Aeneas and his men have left Sicily where they had celebrated the anniversary of the death of Anchises, Aeneas's father, and arrive at Cumae, a port on the western coast of Italy. Aeneas is eager to visit the cavern of the famous Sibyl who lives there. The Sibyl was an ancient semi-divine prophetess who could predict the future when driven into a state of inspired prophetic ecstasy by the god Apollo. Aeneas wants to know his fate and whether he will ever reach his destiny. The Sibyl is the one, filled with the deity, who can tell him.

Aeneas finds the prophetess in her cave, and she immediately is overtaken by the god:

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