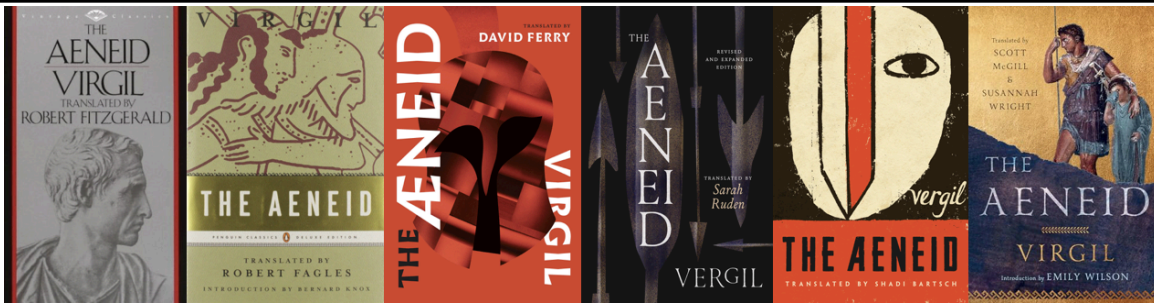




After Gilgamesh's search for meaning against death and Homer's warring, wandering heroes, *The Aeneid* completes the arc: Aeneas subordinates personal desire—for Troy, for Dido, for glory—to a mandated future, founding not a city he chooses but one fate demands. Where Achilles seeks kleos and Odysseus seeks home, Aeneas seeks neither; he seeks *duty*. Virgil, writing under Augustus, transforms Homeric epic into political myth, examining empire's costs alongside its glories. Reading it last shows your group Rome consciously answering Greece—absorbing, revising, and politicizing epic conventions for a new imperial age.

The Aeneid by Virgil: A Four-Session Study Guide

Session 1 — Troy Falls, Aeneas Wanders (Books I–III)

Book I — Storm and Refuge

Juno, still nursing her hatred of Troy, incites a storm that scatters Aeneas's fleet near Carthage. Venus intervenes for her son; Dido, Carthage's founding queen, welcomes the Trojans and, unknown to her, is made to fall in love with Aeneas by divine machination.

1. The poem opens *in medias res*, like the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. What does starting mid-journey (rather than at Troy's fall) tell us about what Virgil considers the "real" story?
2. Juno's wrath drives the plot exactly as Poseidon's does in the *Odyssey*. How does divine grudge-holding function differently in a poem explicitly about Rome's imperial destiny?
3. Dido is introduced as a capable, respected ruler before Venus manipulates her. What does this manipulation suggest about agency and fate in the poem?

Book II — The Fall of Troy

At Dido's request, Aeneas narrates Troy's destruction: the wooden horse, Laocoön's death, Priam's slaughter, and his own escape carrying his father Anchises and leading his son but losing his wife Creusa in the chaos.

1. Aeneas loses Creusa but saves his father and son—compare this to how Gilgamesh's losses (Enkidu) and Odysseus's losses (his men) function in their respective epics.
2. Anchises on his shoulders, carrying the household gods, is one of antiquity's most famous images. What does it establish about the nature of Aeneas's heroism?
3. How does a first-person, flashback narration (Aeneas telling his own story) change our relationship to Troy's fall versus how Homer presents the war directly?

Book III — The Wanderings Begin

Aeneas continues his account: false starts in Thrace, Delos, and Crete; the Harpies' curse at the Strophades; the prophet Helenus's guidance at Buthrotum; and the death of Anchises in Sicily.

1. This book is essentially a catalogue of failed settlements before the "right" one. What does the pattern of trial and error suggest about fate versus free will in the poem?
 2. Compare Aeneas's reliance on prophecy and omens to Gilgamesh's dream interpretations and Odysseus's consultations with Tiresias—how does each hero relate to foreknowledge?
 3. Anchises dies just before Carthage—robbing Aeneas of his father right as Dido enters his life. How does this loss set up the following book?
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Session 2 — Dido, Sicily, the Underworld (Books IV–VI)**Book IV — Dido's Tragedy**

Dido and Aeneas become lovers; Jupiter sends Mercury to remind Aeneas of his destiny. Aeneas abandons Carthage; Dido, betrayed and ruined, curses Rome eternally and dies by her own sword on a funeral pyre.

1. Is Aeneas's departure an act of duty (*pietas*) or a moral failure? Does the poem let you decide, or does it tip its hand?
2. Dido's curse "prophesies" the Punic Wars. How does this retroactive prophecy function as political commentary for Virgil's Roman audience?
3. Compare Dido's death to Enkidu's or to any Homeric death—how does a death driven by love and betrayal, rather than combat, change the epic's emotional register?

Book V — Funeral Games in Sicily

Returning to Sicily, Aeneas holds funeral games honoring Anchises's memory: boat races, foot races, boxing, archery. Trojan women, weary of wandering, burn some ships; Aeneas presses on, leaving the weak behind to found a settlement.

1. Funeral games appear in both this book and *Iliad* Book 23 (for Patroclus). What does the comparison reveal about how each culture ritualizes grief and honor?
2. The burning of the ships is a moment of open rebellion against Aeneas's mission. What does the poem's handling of this dissent say about the cost of destiny to ordinary people?
3. Why might Virgil pause the epic's forward momentum for an entire book of games at this specific point in the narrative?

Book VI — The Underworld

Guided by the Sibyl of Cumae, Aeneas descends to the underworld, meets Dido's unforgiving shade and his father's spirit, and receives a vision of Rome's future greatness through the parade of unborn Roman heroes.

1. Compare this underworld to Enkidu's grim vision in Tablet VII of Gilgamesh, Achilles's underworld regret in *Odyssey* XI, and Utnapishtim's world of the dead—what does each culture's afterlife reveal about its values?
 2. The pageant of future Romans (including Augustus) turns the underworld into political propaganda. How does this compare to Enkidu's underworld report in Gilgamesh Tablet XII, which ties comfort in death to earthly legacy (sons, burial)?
 3. Dido's shade refuses to speak to Aeneas. What does her silence accomplish that words could not?
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Session 3 — *War Begins in Latium (Books VII–IX)*

Book VII — *Arrival and the Seeds of War*

The Trojans reach Latium. King Latinus welcomes Aeneas as the fated husband for his daughter Lavinia, but Juno incites the Fury Allecto to provoke war between Trojans and Latins, backed by the rejected suitor Turnus.

1. This book functions as a second Iliadic "invocation"—Virgil explicitly signals a shift to war narrative. Why split the *Aeneid* into an "Odyssey half" and an "Iliad half"?
2. Divine interference (Allecto) creates a war that arguably didn't need to happen. What does this say about the poem's view of human agency versus fate versus divine caprice?
3. How does the extended catalogue of Italian warriors compare functionally to Homer's Catalogue of Ships?

Book VIII — *Alliance and the Shield*

Aeneas seeks allies among the Arcadians under King Evander (on the future site of Rome itself) and receives a shield from his mother Venus, forged by Vulcan, depicting Rome's future history and the Battle of Actium.

1. Compare Aeneas's shield to Achilles's shield in *Iliad* XVIII. What's different about depicting a specific historical future (Actium, Augustus) versus Homer's timeless scenes of peace and war?
2. Evander's Rome is a humble pastoral village, not yet the empire. What effect does this "before" image have on a Roman reader who knows what it becomes?
3. Why does Virgil place the poem's most explicit celebration of Augustus inside an object of war?

Book IX — *Nisus and Euryalus*

While Aeneas is away, Turnus attacks the Trojan camp. Two young Trojan soldiers, Nisus and Euryalus, attempt a daring night raid and are killed—one of the poem's most emotionally devastating episodes.

1. The Nisus and Euryalus episode is often read as a critique of war's waste of youth. Does the poem endorse or undercut their heroism?
2. Compare this pair's devoted friendship and shared death to Gilgamesh and Enkidu, or Achilles and Patroclus—what makes this relationship distinct?

3. Turnus is shown here as genuinely formidable and even sympathetic. How does the poem complicate the idea of a clear "villain"?
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Session 4 — *War's Cost and Resolution (Books X–XII)*

Book X — Pallas Falls

Jupiter permits the gods to stop intervening directly. Turnus kills young Pallas, Evander's son entrusted to Aeneas's protection; Aeneas, enraged, becomes a killing force on the battlefield, foreshadowing his final act.

1. Pallas's death mirrors Patroclus's in structure (a beloved young protégé killed, triggering the hero's rage). What does this parallel set up for the poem's ending?
2. Once the gods withdraw, does the poem read as more or less "fated"? Does removing direct divine intervention change how we judge human violence?
3. Aeneas's battlefield rage here is the first time he seems to lose his characteristic self-control (*pietas*). Is this a flaw or simply what war requires?

Book XI — Grief and Camillia

A funeral truce follows Pallas's death; Latin leaders debate suing for peace. The warrior-maiden Camilla, one of the poem's most striking figures, leads the Latin cavalry into battle and is killed.

1. Camilla is unique in ancient epic—a female warrior given a full heroic death scene. How does her portrayal compare to Amazon figures elsewhere in classical myth, or to the epic's other women (Dido, Lavinia)?
2. The Latin council scene stages open political debate about whether the war is worth continuing. What does this suggest about the poem's attitude toward war itself?
3. Why does Virgil slow the pace here, with funerals and debate, right before the climactic final book?

Book XII — The Death of Turnus

Aeneas and Turnus meet in single combat to end the war. Aeneas nearly spares the defeated Turnus—until he sees Pallas's belt on Turnus's shoulder and kills him in a final burst of rage. The poem ends abruptly on this act.

1. The poem's final line is Turnus's death, not a triumphant homecoming or founding. Why end on an act of violence rather than resolution, and how does this compare to the endings of the *Iliad* (Hector's funeral) and *Odyssey* (peace restored)?
2. Is Aeneas's killing of the suppliant Turnus an act of justice (avenging Pallas) or a betrayal of the *pietas* and self-mastery he's embodied throughout? Does the poem want you to be troubled?
3. Virgil died before fully revising the *Aeneid* and reportedly wanted it burned. How does knowing the poem may be "unfinished" change your reading of its abrupt, unresolved ending?