

The Divine Child of Virgil, Part 1



A bust of Virgil
from his tomb at
Naples, Italy.
PHOTO A. Hunter
Wright

1

For two thousand years, readers of Virgil's Fourth Eclogue have speculated, without success, on the identity and nature of the Divine Child described in that poem: How did the prophetic image of the Child enter the poem and why? Where did the image of the Child come from? Who is the Child?. It is the intention of these pages to bring speculation to an end.

Late in the year 40 B.C.E., somewhere in Italy, perhaps in Rome or in Sicily or, more likely, in Campania, at Naples, just south of Cuma, the oldest Greek city in Italy and the home of the Cumae Sybil, the young poet Publius Vergilius Maro, a native of Mantua descended from the bardic Celts and a

citizen of Rome, better known to us as Virgil, was attempting to solve an aesthetic problem. Reclusive and painfully shy, Virgil had recently turned from writing the glorious epic of Rome, thinking himself unequal to the task. He had also resisted writing a heroic poem on the part which his patron, Gaius Asinius Pollio, played two years earlier in the final battle of the civil war, when Pollios, as general, saved Virgil's family farm, the root of Virgil's livelihood, from confiscation when Octavian was awarding land to his troops for their victory at Philippi. Now the glory of his patron was again on the rise: that past September, Pollios salvaged the promise of a lasting peace after a decade of war by designing the Treaty of Brundisium, and he was now about to enter his consulship. Virgil, obligated to Pollios, could procrastinate no longer: the project before him had to be dedicated to his patron.

Virgil had already read with insight the real condition of his troubled and factious time. The ideas he had to express in the poem which he was creating were profound, even soteriological: the world, in need of regeneration, required a new spirit; the Roman Empire had the duty and was intended by Providence to introduce this new spirit; Providence itself would send a special deliverer to begin the act of regeneration, the divine boy-child promised and celebrated each year in the Mysteries of Demeter at Eleusis. Virgil decided: he would praise his patron Pollios in his praise of the blossoming promise of that divine child to come, a child expected to be born within the year, the first year of his patron's consulship. To accomplish this task, Virgil, who owed more to his Greek predecessors than many other great poets, borrowed from them: from Theocritus, his tone, his artistic structure, and his subjects; from Hesiod, his pastoral images; and from the Oracles of the Sibyl, his prophetic vision. Virgil set to work on the poetic composition that would become his Fourth Eclogue, first drafting his solution to the problem in prose, later turning the first proof before him slowly into sixty-

three lines of verse shaped around the mystic number seven (7×9). Suetonius gives us a glimpse of Virgil's method: The poet would take up each part of his argument as he felt moved to do, in no particular order, compose each morning a number of verses, then reduce them in number for the remainder of the day; and so that the flow of his thought might not be checked, he left the unfinished parts bolstered up with a few slight words (put in, he joked, like props to support the structure until the solid columns arrived). In this way Virgil proceeded for many days, turning even the oracular Greek into Roman verses. His poem, when completed, sang of the Roman consul, spoke of a crime committed by the Roman people, of a terror that gripped the world, and of a mysterious act of primeval treachery, and announced the impending birth of a divine boy-child, "the Light of Ages," and praised his coming, the sign of the beginning of a new Golden Age.

Virgil's *Ten Eclogues*, his first series of poems, was published in 39 B.C.E. The poems were so well received by the literary circle of Rome that his patron Pollios introduced him to the leader of the circle, the wealthy and influential government minister Maecenas, who, in turn, introduced him to the future Caesar Augustus, Octavian. Virgil's second series of poems, *Georgics*, was written in honor of Maecenas and with the encouragement of his new patron. Near the end of his life, Virgil wrote his final poem, *Aeneid*, which succeeded magnificently at the task he had set out for himself initially: to write the epic of Rome. With that poem, Virgil gained fame as the "Roman Homer."

[To read Part 2, click HERE.](#)