Dum Conderet Urbem: Aeneas's Development and the Personal Cost of War

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The Aeneid
The Aeneid is an epic poem that was written by Vergil between 29 CE and 19 CE. The poem was commissioned by Augustus, the first emperor of Rome, and follows the story of Aeneas, a Trojan who is destined to establish a new city for his people in Italy. Vergil incorporates aspects of the Homeric epics, the Iliad and the Odyssey, as he writes a new foundation myth for the Roman people.
“Condere” is first used to describe the act of founding a new city. In the final lines of the poem, “condere” describes Aeneas killing his rival, Turnus. When does this word’s meaning transform, and what does this suggest about the ethics of war, the cost of empire, and Aeneas himself?
condo, condere, condidi, conditum

- to establish, hide, bury
“condere” in the First Hexad
“condere” as “to establish”

Discussing Aeneas’s destiny in the proem:

“multa quoque et bello passus, dum conderet urbem” (I.5)

And he suffered many things in war, until he might establish a city.

Discussing the challenge of founding a city:

“tantae molis erat Romanam condere gentem” (I.33)

So great a challenge it was to establish the Roman race.

Jupiter delivering a prophecy to Venus:

“laetus/Romulus excipiet gentem et Mavortia condet/moenia Romanosque suo de nomine dicet” (I.275-277)

Fortunate Romulus will gather the tribe and establish the walls of Mars and he will call the Romans after his own name.
“condere” as “to hide”

When the Greek fleet hides on Tenedos:

“huc se provecti deserto in litore condunt”

(II.24)

Having carried themselves away from here they hide on the empty shore.

When the Trojans are being attacked by Harpies:

iussi faciunt, tectosque per herbam/disponunt ensis et scuta latentia condunt (III.236-237)

Having been ordered, they do it, and place their covered swords in the grass and hide their concealed shields.
“condere” as “to bury”

When the Trojans bury Aeneas’s father, Anchises:

“reliquias divinique ossa parentis/condidimus
terra maestasque sacravimus aras” (V.47-48)

we buried the remains and bones of the divine parent in the earth and consecrated the gloomy altars

When the Trojans bury Polydorus, son of Priam:

“ingens/aggeritur tumulo tellus, stant manibus
arae,/caeruleis maestae vittis atraque
cupresso,/et circum Iliades crinem de more
solutae;/inferimus tepido spumantia cymbia
lacte/sanginius et sacri pateras, animamque
sepulcro/condimus et magna supremum voce ciemus” (III.62-68)
“condere” as “to bury” (continued)

A huge amount of earth is heaped up in a mound, the altars to the shades stand, gloomy with blue ribbons and black cypress, and around the Trojan women loosened their hair on account of custom; [they] carry in bubbling bowls of tepid milk and saucers of sacred blood, and [they] bury his spirit in a tomb and call for him in a great voice for the final time
“condere” in the Second Hexad
In the second hexad, the meaning of “condere” takes on a new, violent dimension. The first time that “condere” is used in reference to killing is when Nisus and Euryalus attack the sleeping Rutulians in Book IX. Whenever “condere” is being used in a violent sense, the perpetrator is always a Trojan or Trojan ally, while the victim is always an Italian (James, 623). In the latter books of the epic, “condere” becomes inexplicably linked with conquest and violence, so much so that it loses its traditional meaning of “to bury” with respect to the proper burial of a human being.
“condere” as an act of violence

When Nisus and Euryalus attack the sleeping Rutulians:

“pectore in adverso totum cui comminus ensem/condidit adsurgenti” (IX.346-347)

In close combat he buried his whole sword in the rising man’s hostile chest.

When Aeneas kills Turnus:

“hoc dicens ferrum adverso sub pectore condit/ fervidus” (XII.950-951)

Saying this, the inflamed man buries his sword under the hostile chest.
Why does this matter?

The transformation of the meaning of “condere” throughout the poem causes ramifications in other aspects of the poem. “Condere” no longer refers to burial, but takes on a deadly meaning. This signals an inversion of custom and the natural order in the second hexad, where burial is denied as an act of war and children die before their parents.

This change in meaning also corresponds with a change in Aeneas’s character, as Vergil suggests that conquest and empire come at a great personal cost. On his path from victim to victor, Aeneas gains power, but loses so much more.
Aeneas: Arms and a Man

In the beginning of the poem, founding a city is an abstract, immaterial concept. We know that it will be a great task, but we do not know what exactly that task entails. From the beginning of the poem, “condere” is linked with establishing a city. In the second hexad, the Iliadic half of the poem, when “condere” takes on its violent meaning, we discover what founding a city really entails.

The phrase “arms and a man” that Vergil opens the poem with refers to the Iliadic and Odyssean halves of the poem, but the phrase is also significant when examining Aeneas’s character throughout the epic. In the first hexad, Aeneas displays compassion and strong leadership capabilities. As he is swept up in war and conquest in the second hexad, Aeneas loses himself and the defining characteristics that made him a hero.
Aeneas’s Loss of *Pietas*

When we are first introduced to Aeneas in the proem at the beginning of Book I, Vergil describes him as “insignem pietate virum” (a man outstanding in his devotion) (I.10). His “pietas” refers to his devotion: devotion to family, devotion to country, devotion to the gods, devotion to custom.

Aeneas’s *pietas* was once his defining characteristic, but gradually throughout the second hexad he loses this quality. This shift in character is most prominent through his treatment of his enemies in war. In Book X, the young Italian, Lausus, faces Aeneas in defense of his father, Mezentius. Aeneas reproaches him, saying: “quo moriture ruis maioraque viribus audes?/fallit te incautum pietas tua” (why do you, about to die, rush, and dare things greater than your strengths? Your devotion deceives you, incautious one) (10.811-812). Aeneas mocks Lausus for being devoted to his father, a trait that Aeneas is renowned for.
Aeneas’s loss of pietas culminates with his killing of Turnus at the end of Book XII. In Book VI, Aeneas travels to the underworld, and his father Anchises shows him the great Romans of the future, all descended from the city Aeneas is destined to establish. Anchises also tells Aeneas the Roman way, which is to “parcere subiectis et debellare superbos” (to spare the conquered and vanquish the proud) (6.853). In Turnus’s speech before his death, he is neither proud nor arrogant. Vergil describes him as “humilis supplexque” (humble and a suppliant) (XII.930). He says to Aeneas: “equidem merui nec deprecor” (indeed I have earned this and I do not complain) (12.931). Turnus has clearly accepted his defeat.

Instead of honoring what his father told him, however, Aeneas kills Turnus out of rage. He goes against Roman custom and thus disobeys his father.
Denial of Burial

To the ancients, burial was an extremely important practice. In the *Aeneid*, as evidenced through the Polydorus episode in Book III, it is not only important that someone is buried, but that they are buried in the proper way, according to custom. In the second hexad, Vergil creates ambiguity around whether or not the Italians killed by the Trojans receive a proper burial.

Denial of burial in the second hexad shows how brutal Aeneas has become and his loss of humanity— he is not only killing the Italians, but he is also depriving them of an important cultural rite. In Book X, Aeneas mocks the body of the Italian Tarquitus by saying he will not receive a proper burial. He says: “Non te optima mater/condet humi patriaque onerabit membras sepulcro” (Your greatest mother will not bury you in the earth and burden your limbs with the ancestral tomb) (10.557-558).
Conclusion

The changing meaning of “condere” corresponds to Aeneas’s transformation from victim to perpetrator. Turnus illustrates this dynamic when he says to Aeneas: “vicisti et victum tendere palmas Ausonii videre” (you have conquered, and the Ausonians have seen me, conquered, extend my palms) (XII.936). In the first book, Aeneas, having fled Troy and the destruction of the Trojan war, is “tendens ad sidera palmas” (holding his palms to the stars) (I.93) to beg the gods for mercy from the horrific storm he and his men are facing. The repeated image of holding up one’s palms in supplication further exemplifies Aeneas’s transition from victim to victor, and Turnus slipping into the role of the conquered man, with his home taken away from him. What the Greeks did to the Trojans, the Trojans now inflict upon the Italians.

Through this transformation of meaning, Vergil reveals the link between establishing a city and violence, and the personal cost of war through Aeneas’s loss of pietas and compassion
Citations


