

Myth I

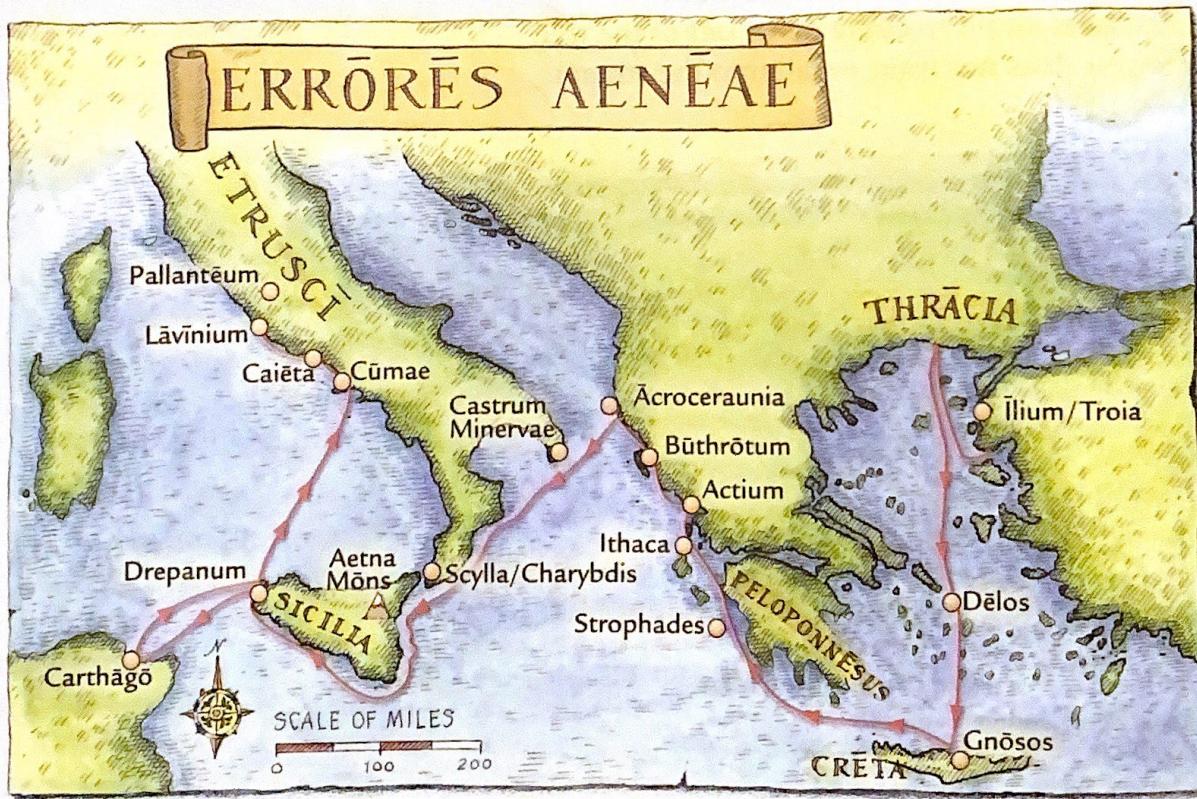
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AENEAS

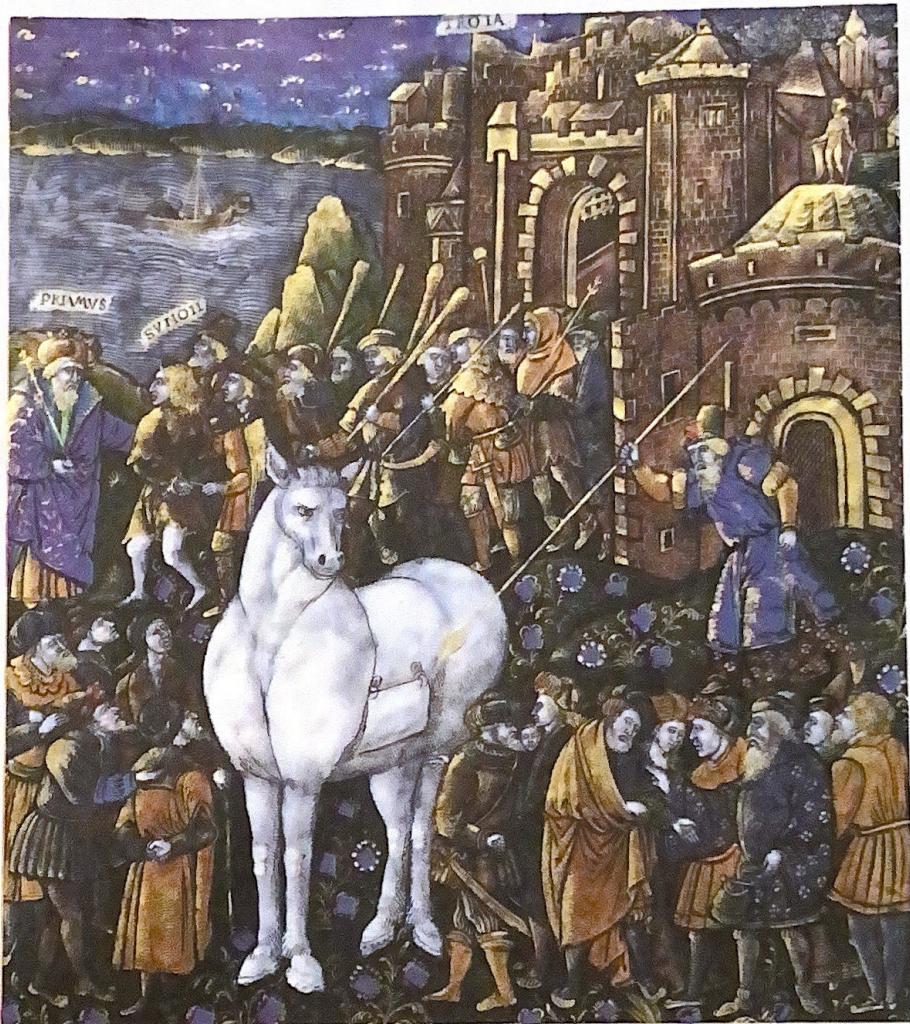
The members of our Roman family are proud of their heritage, and take particular pride in the deeds accomplished by other Cornelii throughout the history of Rome. As a people, the Romans were also proud of their mythological heritage. They traced their origins to the great Trojan hero, Aeneas, son of the goddess Venus and the mortal Anchises. According to the myth, Aeneas lived over 1200 years before the time we are studying and fought in the Trojan War.

According to legend, the Trojan War began when Paris, the son of King Priam of Troy, abducted Helen, Queen of Sparta, from her home and brought her back to Troy. Helen's outraged husband Menelaus appealed for help to his brother Agamemnon, King of Mycenae, who was then High King of the Greeks. Agamemnon assembled a huge army with contingents drawn from all regions of Greece. Each part of this force was, in turn, led by a king or prince of a region. These were the mighty Homeric heroes, so called because their stories were told by, among others, the Greek poet Homer in his epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The Greek army contained the most famous heroes



Sinon explains to King Priam why the Greeks left the horse (top). The priest Laocoön thrusts his spear into the horse's side to protest accepting the Greek gift (bottom).

Episode of The Aeneid: The Trojan Horse, painted enamel, ca. 1530–1540, Master of The Aeneid Series



of this age, including Ulysses (called Odysseus by the Greeks), the most cunning of the Greeks, and Achilles, the mightiest warrior. With this army Agamemnon set sail for Asia Minor and laid siege to the city of Troy.

The Trojans had their own heroes for defense, primarily the sons of King Priam; the greatest warrior among these was Hector, who commanded the Trojan army. Second to Hector in reputation was Aeneas, a Dardanian from the area north of the city. He had brought his own contingent of Dardanian troops to help in the defense and had moved into Troy with his men and his family early in the war. Powerful though the attacking Greek army was, it was unable to lay an effective siege around such a large city, and the Trojans were able to draw supplies and reinforcements from the surrounding countryside. The resulting stalemate lasted ten years, according to legend.

In the tenth year of the war, after the deaths of many warriors on both sides, including Hector and Achilles, the Greeks finally managed to take the city, owing to a wily deception devised by Ulysses. The Greek army constructed a huge wooden horse, inside of which they hid Greek soldiers. They gave the horse to the Trojans on the pretext that it was a gift to appease the goddess Minerva, whom they had offended, and they pretended to depart the area in force. Actually, though, once the horse was inside the city, the Greek soldiers emerged from its belly and proceeded to lay waste Troy and its inhabitants. That night as the Trojans, caught utterly by surprise, tried desperately to defend their city, the gods themselves spoke to Aeneas. They told him that Troy was destined to fall and that he should not waste his life defending the city. Instead, they revealed that Aeneas's mission was to leave Troy and found a new city where a new nation could be



The arrival of Aeneas at Pallanteum, the future site of Rome
Landscape with the Arrival of Aeneas at Pallanteum, detail, Claude Lorrain

established, springing from Trojan stock. Aeneas hurriedly gathered his family and his men and left the city in the confusion of the Greek assault. Although his wife Creusa was tragically lost during the flight, Aeneas and twenty shiploads of companions, together with Anchises his father and Ascanius his son, successfully escaped the ruin of Troy.

Aeneas wandered the lands of the Mediterranean for many years, for although the gods had told him to found a new city, they had not told him where. After abortive attempts to settle in Thrace, on Crete, and at Carthage with Dido, an exiled Phoenician queen, Aeneas finally arrived at Italy where he was destined to found his city. That city was not actually Rome. It was Lavinium, named after Lavinia, the daughter of King Latinus, ruler of Latium, who became the wife of Aeneas. After the marriage of Aeneas and Lavinia, the name of Latins was bestowed upon their combined peoples, the Italians of the kingdom of Latium and the exiled Trojans resettling in the new land.

The story of Aeneas's wanderings from Troy, his many adventures in the waters and lands of the Mediterranean, his struggles and his loves, through to his arrival in Italy and the founding of his city in Latium, was told by the Roman poet Publius Vergilius Maro in his epic poem, the *Aeneid*.

The opening lines of that epic are:

Of war and a man I sing, who first from Troy's shores, an exile by the decree of fate, came to Italy and Lavinium's shores. Much was he tossed on sea and land by the violence of the gods, because of cruel Juno's unforgetting anger. Much, too, did he endure in war as he sought to found a city and bring his gods to Latium. From him are descended the Latin people, the elders of Alba, and the walls of lofty Rome.

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1. Why do you suppose the Romans traced their origins back to Aeneas and the Trojan War?
 2. In the modern world, there is even a computer virus named after the mythical Trojan Horse. Why does this story have such staying power?