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Augustine, Vergil and the Foundation of a Christian Empire

Augustine's engagement with Vergil in the *Confessions* has been well documented. He is typically described as using Vergil and especially Vergil's treatment of Dido and Carthage to come to terms with and Christianize the pagan, Roman past. This paper argues that Augustine invokes Book 4 of the *Aeneid* as an intertext to the *Confessions* not merely to "Christianize" Vergil and the pagan past that he embodied; but, more precisely, to create a Christian foundation legend that sets up Augustine as the founding hero and North Africa as the implicit and imaginary center of a new Christian Empire.

After explicating the two variants of the Dido myth available to Augustine, thereby demonstrating that Augustine's engagement with Vergil represented a divergence from patristic tradition, the paper treats the relevant intertexts from the *Aeneid* in the *Confessions*. Augustine casts himself in the role of Aeneas, but in order to overturn Rome's traditional dominance over Carthage and to subvert pagan culture's threat to Christian culture. If the imminent destruction of Carthage was integral to Republican and Imperial Roman identity, so is the defeat of Rome and the pagan culture the city embodied necessary for the prosperity of Christianity in the late fourth and early fifth centuries CE.

Vergil's treatment of the Dido myth was not the only version available to Augustine. Fragments from Timaeus as well as Justin's epitome of Pompeius Trogus's history preserve a version in which Dido never met Aeneas and remained loyal to her husband. It has been suggested that this version reflects an un-Romanized, Phoenician source of a Carthaginian foundation legend. The notion of Dido as a model of chastity survived in Christian authors notably Tertullian and Jerome. Augustine's decision to follow Vergil and the pagan tradition rather than Tertullian and the patristic tradition would have been striking to his Christian and especially North African readers.

I will suggest that Augustine deliberately referenced the Vergilian treatment because it was the only version that preserved the dyadic relationship between Rome and Carthage. Vergil's (or perhaps Naevius's) great innovation was conflating the foundation myths of Rome and Carthage to suggest that Rome's existence and prosperity depended on the domination and ritual destruction of Carthage. Augustine's treatment implies a reversal of this binary: the epic hero (and epic poet) Augustine settles in North Africa; he creates a prototype for the City of God; the prosperity of this Christian community and Christianity writ large depends on the continued submission of Rome and the pagan past that the city embodies.

The *Confessions*, then, posits a kind of foundation myth for the Christian community in which North Africa replaces Rome as the *caput orbis*. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of how this "foundation myth" for a Christian Empire in the *Confessions* (c. 397) anticipates Augustine's symbolic razing of Rome in his *City of God*, written in 413 following Alaric's devastating sack of Rome in 410.; If the *Confessions* furnishes the

foundation legend, the *City of God* provides the blueprint for the new Christian world order.