

Pim de Klerk

Peatland poetry from the past:
The headgear of river gods in the works of
Virgil and Ovid

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pages 5-7



Correction:
the correct opening of the 'Aeneid'
by Virgil is "*Arma virumque cano*"



Zambezi wetlands, Zimbabwe. Photo: Hans Joosten.

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The in person costs of the Field Symposium and Conference are €950 (all in, excl. your trip to and fro South-Africa), those of the post symposium tours €400 - 600 (implementation will depend on the level of interest). Please express your interest in participating in the genuine field symposium and post-symposium field trips as soon as possible, so that our colleagues can proceed with organization and bookings.

Please use <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSffYEjz63N6buBv6Y2O35tqvmq-HMOEyH-2oMJN7tVwN1kJYg/viewform> to register. The local organization can be reached under imcg2020sa@gmail.com

Mires and Peat

In March - April 2021 the following papers were published in Mires and Peat:

- Comment on 'An overview of the patterned fens of Great Sandy Region, far eastern Australia' by Fairfax & Lindsay (2019). [A.J. McDougall, S.M. Marshall & T. Espinoza] Volume 27: Article 09 <http://mires-and-peat.net/pages/volumes/map27/map2709.php>
- Ecohydrological analysis of a South African through-flow mire: Vankervelsvlei revisited. [S.R. Mandiola, A.T. Grundling, P.-L. Grundling, J. van der Plicht, B.C.W. van der Waal & A.P. Grootjans] Volume 27: Article 08 <http://mires-and-peat.net/pages/volumes/map27/map2708.php>

Find the journal online at <http://mires-and-peat.net/> Electronic submission is required using our dedicated electronic submission system. If you experience any problems please contact the Editor-in-Chief Olivia Bragg (o.m.bragg@dundee.ac.uk) who can offer alternative routes for electronic submission.

Papers

Peatland poetry from the past: The headgear of river gods in the works of Virgil and Ovid

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The ancient Greek and Roman mythology did not only include the well-known major deities that ruled the world and influenced humankind (see Tripp 1970; Grant & Hazel 2005), but also many minor deities with only regional significance. Many rivers were envisaged to be ruled and protected by their own divine beings (Waser 1909). Countless texts refer to such deities, including those of Virgil (70-19 BCE) and Ovid (43 BCE-17 CE), two of the best-known Roman authors who wrote during the reign of emperor Augustus.

Virgil was born in northern Italy near Mantua and lived predominantly in the region of Naples (Büchner 1955; Howatson 1997). He was one of the poets in the entourage of the patron Maecenas (Büchner 1955; Howatson 1997; Fowler & Fowler 2000). Virgil's masterpiece - the epic 'Aeneid' - tells the adventures of a hero on his journey from fallen Troy to Italy where he became the ancestor of the Romans. Virgil wrote this epic during the last ten years of his life. He was already famous during his lifetime but became even legendary after his death: his grave near Naples became a kind of sanctuary for admirers and his birthday was celebrated annually (Howatson 1997). The famous opening of the Aeneid "*Arma verumque cano...*" ("*I sing about the feats of arms and the man...*") was frequently cited in Roman graffiti inscribed on walls of buildings (Hunink 2018; Weeber 2019) and witness of the popularity of Virgil in all layers of Roman society.

Ovid was born in the central Italian Apennine mountains but lived most of his life in Rome, belonged to the circle around the patron Messalla and knew Virgil from sight only (Howatson 1997). In 8 CE Augustus banned him to the west coast of the Black Sea for reasons that are not clear: Howatson (1997) and Kraus (1942) pose that Ovid may have been witness of an adulterous adventure of Julia, the granddaughter of Augustus who was banned also from Rome in 8 CE, but Kraus (1942) quotes various other theories too, and Hinds (2000) states that nothing more can be said apart from that Ovid was connected to some kind of scandal that involved the imperial family. The 'Metamorphoses' by Ovid contains numerous mythological stories from the beginnings of the world to the death of Julius Caesar in 44 BCE. 'The festivals' is a poetical depiction of the Roman calendar and provides the backgrounds of many public holidays. The 'Consolation for Livia' intended to comfort Livia, the wife of emperor

Augustus, on the death of her son Nero Claudius Drusus. The work was actually not written by Ovid but falsely attributed to him (Skutsch 1900; Kraus 1942; Howatson 1997).

When Virgil had Aeneas arrive in Italy in the regions of the River Tiber, the hero was insecure what to do. In a dream Tiberinus, the god of the river, came to speak words of encouragement. The text states: *"The god of this place, old Tiberinus, appeared to him from the pleasant river between the leaves of the poplars (he was clad in a thin blue linen robe and his hair was covered with shade-bringing reed) ..."* (*"huic deus ipse loci fluvio Tiberinus amoeno populeas inter senior se attollere frondes visus (eum tenuis glauco velabat amictu carbasus et crinis umbrosa tegebat harundo) ..."*) ('Aeneid' VIII:31-34).

Ovid wrote in the Metamorphoses about the Achelous, the famous longest river of Greece that crossed the regions of Calydon. The river was so well-known that it was not only worshipped regionally but in entire ancient Greece (Waser 1909). Ovid did not even mention its name but referred to it as the Calydonian river that his audience will have identified immediately: *"... then the Calydonian stream – his disorderly hair garlanded with reed – replied..."* (*"... cum sic Calydonius amnis coepit inornatos redimitus harundine crines..."*) ('Metamorphoses' IX:1-3).

In 'The festivals' Ovid had written about the ritual to sacrifice people by drowning them in a river until Hercules replaced the living people with straw dummies. Ovid let the River Tiber talk about the background of this rite: *"The Tiber raised his reed-bearing head from the mid of the riverbed and said with a rough voice..."* (*"Thybris harundiferum medio caput extulit alveo raucaque dimovit talibus ora sonis..."*) ('The festivals' V:637/638).

In the spurious work 'Consolation for Livia' also the River Tiber plays a role: *"Even father Tiber shivered in his yellow waves and raised his cloudy head from the mid of the stream. Then he wiped with his great hand his hair - intertwined with willow, mosses and reed - from his deep-blue face..."* (*"Ipse pater flavis Tiberinus adhorruit undis, sustulit et medio nubilus amne caput. Tum salice implexum muscoque et arundine crinem caeruleum magna legit ab ore manu ..."*) ('Consolation for Livia' 221-224).



Two versions of the 'Dream of Aeneas' by Salvator Rosa, displaying the hero sleeping on his shield being spoken-to by the river god Tiberinus depicted with riverine plants on his head. Metropolitan Museum of Arts, New York. Left: etching, c. 1663-1664, accession number 17.50.17-85. Right: oil painting c. 1660-1665, accession number: 65.118;

The gods were depicted with reed, one of the most prominent riverine wetland plants, on their heads. In the 'Aeneid', Tiberinus had his hair covered with reed, which suggests that it may have been some ornamental headgear like a crown. In the text passage on the Achelous the reeds clearly were an ornamental addition to the head of the god. The text-passage from the 'Consolation for Livia' tells that the hair was intertwined with reed, which suggests that the plants were not ornamental but that plants had got entangled with the hair of the god. In 'The festivals', however, the notion "reed-bearing head" may possibly also depict that the hair actually was reed. Furthermore, the wetland trees/shrubs poplar and willow were related to the heads of the divine river gods, as well as unspecified mosses.

Evidently, the riverine vegetation was seen by Virgil and Ovid as a firm element of the river gods that underline the close connection of the deities with their landscape: in the same way as the rivers, the river deities were depicted to be fringed by wetland plants.

I am grateful to Immanuel Musäus for his help with the translations of the Latin quotes.

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