Reading the Civic Landscape of Augustan Rome: 
*Aeneid* 1.421–429 and the Building Program of Augustus

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The Carthage of Aeneas

In the first book of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, the Trojan hero Aeneas weathers storms at sea and beaches his ships on an unknown shore. Setting out with his faithful lieutenant Achates, Aeneas finds himself on a hill high above the settlement of Carthage. From this vantage point he is able to read the cityscape below to learn about the inhabitants of this foreign land. He sees the Tyrians building their new city:

> Miratur molem Aeneas, magalia quondam,  
> miratur portas strepitumque et strata viarum.  
> Instant ardentes Tyrii: pars ducere muros  
> molirique arcem et manibus subvolvere saxa,  
> pars optare locum tecto et concludere sulco;  
> iura magistratusque legunt sanctumque senatum.  
> Hic portus alii effodiunt; hic alta theatris  
> fundamenta locant alii, immanisque columnas  
> rupibus excidunt, scaenis decora apta futuris.

_Verg. Aen._ 1.421–429

Aeneas admires the mass of the city, once just huts. He admires the gates and the noise and the paving of the roads. Eager the Tyrians press on in their work: some to extend the walls and to fortify the citadel and to roll up stones by hand, others to pick a site for a house and to enclose it with a trench. They select laws and magistrates and a sacred senate. Here some men excavate the harbors; there others place the deep foundations for theaters, and they cut out huge columns from rocks, fitting adornments for future shows.1

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1 The Latin text is from Mynors 1969. English translations here and throughout the paper are my own.
This scene of Aeneas’ initial encounter with the city of Carthage has attracted much attention from scholars. It is the first developed description of city-building in the *Aeneid* and is given great emphasis by the placement in the lines immediately following of an extended simile that likens the busy builders to bees (*Aen.* 1.430–436). The theme of city building that is presented here is developed by Virgil as a leitmotiv of the epic.\(^2\) Scholars have also long debated the relationship between Dido’s Carthage as presented in the epic and the building of a new Roman settlement at Carthage that was initiated by Julius Caesar and continued by Augustus.\(^3\) Finally, Virgil’s description of the on-going construction of Carthage has brought to mind the building that was going on in Rome at the time that Virgil was writing his epic.\(^4\) In particular, Aeneas’ view of Carthage from the hills high above the city has been connected with the view of Rome from Maecenas’ house on the Esquiline Hill presented by Horace: “Stop admiring the smoke, the riches, and the noise of wealthy Rome” (*Carm.* 3.29.11–12: *omittre mirari beatae fumum et opes strepitumque Romae*).\(^5\)

It is the connection between Aeneas’ view of the construction in Carthage and the building in Rome that I will pursue here. First, by surveying the building activities in Rome in Virgil’s day, the connection with the scene in the *Aeneid* becomes clear. Like Virgil’s imagined cityscape of Carthage, Rome was buzzing with building activity carried out by leading citizens. As Virgil is seen to reflect the buildings and traditions of contemporary Rome in his description of Carthage, we might then take Aeneas’ survey of Carthage as a guide for conducting our own survey of the cityscape of Rome. Indeed, through Aeneas, Virgil provides us with a model for how a Roman might view the construction in the city in the 20s BCE and provides us with a new approach for interpreting the building projects undertaken by Augustus during this pivotal era. As Aeneas reads the cityscape of Carthage, we are invited to read the civic landscape of Augustan Rome and examine from a new perspective Augustus’ rise to power.\(^6\) By focusing on public building and civic functions in the city, we are

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\(^2\) Morwood 1991.

\(^3\) For a discussion of the issue and bibliography, see Harrison 1984. Harrison convincingly argues against the notion that Virgil fashioned the scenes in Carthage as a response to contemporary concerns about the curse of Scipio.

\(^4\) See, for example, Favro 1996 228; Clay 1988 195–196.

\(^5\) For more than a century commentators have made this connection. For example, Page 1894 181; Ganiban 2009 70.

\(^6\) As this paper moves between events in the early 20s BCE, for ease of reference I use the names “Augustus” and “Augustan” throughout the paper, although C. Julius Caesar Octavianus did not receive the honorific name Augustus until January of 27 BCE.