The overwhelming frequency of the use of the present tense in Virgil as a narrative tense for past events is a well-known fact that has been discussed by several critics such as Koller (1951), Quinn (1968) and Von Albrecht (1970; 1999). The use of the historic present is normal in stories in comedy, in the fragments of pre-classical historians such as Claudius Quadrigarius and in the pseudocaesarian works (see Militemi della Morte 1996, 11-33 on the Bellum Africum). In longer narrative sections in Caesar and Cicero (see Pinkster 1998a) it is the most frequent narrative tense. However, whereas in Caesar, Cicero, and others the historic present is mainly used in clauses in which a perfect might be appropriate, that is for successive events constituting the main story line, Virgil uses it freely in clauses where the imperfect could have been used instead, for example for background information and for simultaneous events and states, as in the beginning of book four (cf. Kravar 1971). The same thing is reflected in the fact that Virgil uses the present with all sorts of verbs (including durative ones), whereas in earlier narrative texts verbs are much more often typical action verbs ('incep-tive' verbs in Koller's [1951] terminology). Virgil also uses the historic present in subordinate clauses where the main verb is in a past tense, as in the beginning of book five (conlucent in A. 5.4).

The frequency of the use of the historic present and its extension to other domains has been assessed in different ways. Quinn (1968, 78), for example, says that the use of the historic present "amounted to little more than a stylistic mannerism: no real projection of the writer into his narrative accompanied the use of the present tense and none was invited from the reader". The same negative view was presented by Von Albrecht in his 1970 article and is repeated in his recent book: "It is not the present that needs explanation" (1999, 134). He points to the scarcity of historic perfects, which by this very reason mark "what is important to Virgil" (: 139). The sheer frequency of the use of the historic present has
led some Latinists to assume that it is some sort of convenient stop-gap used without a significant contribution of its own to the text and without any effect on the way other tenses can be used.

I have tried to show elsewhere (1998a; 1998b) that a merely quantitative approach to the use of the historic present (and, to any linguistic feature, for that matter) can be misleading, and it is certainly a risk in the case of an accomplished narrator as Virgil. In this paper I will try to show that selecting the present as the basic narrative tense for past events and situations has its consequences for the use of other tenses and other elements of the texts, and that some of the seeming exceptions are due to a narrow view of the function of the present. Moreover, there remain instances of the present that do not seem to allow a simple historic present interpretation and therefore require ad hoc explanations. Finally, it is not sufficient to look at the use of the tenses in isolation. There may be, and in fact there are, other linguistic features correlating with the use of the tenses as well.

1. The present as the basic narrative tense: its consequences

The massive ‘transposition’ of the narrative into the present has certain consequences. Firstly, it creates the possibility to use the adverb *nunc* in a description of past events, as in the passage *A.* 10.495-506:

\[
\ldots \text{et laevo pressit pede talia fatus} \\
\text{exanimem, rapiens immania pondera baltei} \\
\text{impressumque nefas: una sub nocte iugali} \\
\text{caesa manus rapiens immania thalamique cruenti,} \\
\text{quae Clonus Eurytides multo caelaverat auro;} \\
\text{quod n u n c Turnus o v a t spolio g a u d e t que potitus.} \\
\text{Nescia mens hominum fati sortisque futurae} \\
\text{et servare modum, rebus sublata secundis.} \\
\text{Turno tempus e r i t, magno cum optaverit emptum} \\
\text{intactum Pallanta et cum spolia ista diemque} \\
\text{oderit. At socii multo gemitu lacrimisque} \\
\text{impositum scuto referunt Pallanta frequentes.} \\
\]

In line 500 *nunc* might be replaced by *tunc*, and *ovat* and *gaudet* by their respective imperfect forms.\(^1\)

1) An instance of *nunc* in combination with an imperfect is *nunc . . . miscebant in A.* 8.31-2.