This note was written after reading an article by A. Traina entitled *Parole di Virgilio*, RFIC 120.4 (1992), 490-498. This article deals with the current debate on ‘the art of allusion’ and ‘intertextuality’ in Latin poetry, and makes a direct attack when it states (p. 490) “si sollecita il testo a dire quello che apparentemente, e spesso realmente, non dice.” Our intention is to make one more small contribution towards a complete understanding of Virgil’s text, by indicating an element which connects Virgil’s epic piece with its author’s extra-literary context. We have noted among commentaries a complete absence of what we feel to be the proper interpretation of the verse and its references, and thus hope to advance in these few pages a long-standing claim of ours: that among the Latin poets, ‘intertextuality’ operates not only with respect to earlier or contemporary texts but also, with a fair intensity, with respect to the world that surrounded the writers—their contemporary social context.

Traina indicates (p. 496) that ‘per me l’apparente hapax semantico *latro* . . . si spiega con la nota ‘Transfusion for Metaphor’ del West: nel guerriero si vede il leone, nel leone il guerriero, evocato dalle locuzioni militari ‘movet arma’ e ‘frangit telum . . . *latro*’ potrebbe recuperare a livello connotativo l’accezione di ‘combattente irregolare,’ che combatte una guerra di razzie e d’imboscate”.

We believe that Traina’s interpretation is leading in the right direction, but that the text must be seen in its proper context, whereby the appearance of the word *latro* in these verses is not to be explained in terms of a presumed semantic *unicum*, or a ‘metaphorical transfusion,’ etc., but rather as responding to a reference that was very popular in Rome in the poet’s time.

The text which forms the basis of our commentary here is that which begins Book 12 of the *Aeneid* (verses 1-8), in which Turnus is compared to a lion that has been wounded by the spear of a *latro*. The use and interpretation of this word has provoked the curiosity of the critics because, among other reasons, it is . . . the point of departure for the current partial understanding of Virgil’s use of this word. Servius Daniel, ad loc., and Donatus, ad loc., combine the Varronian etymology of the word with the military context to yield a self-sufficient explanation of the verse. From its original meaning of mercenary soldier, it is not known how it should come to be used by Virgil to mean a hunter, with connotations of furtiveness (via the Varronian popular etymology) but also of military features, depending on the views of the individual commentator.
In fact, all the references to the word which we have read present these considerations:

– Of *latronis*, J. Conington and H. Nettleship\(^{11}\) state: “the word was originally used of hired soldiers: see Varro *L.L.* 7, 52 and the Dict. Serv. and Tib. Donatus take it here as simply = ‘venatoris’ saying that no one before Virgil had used it in this sense, and so Heyne”.

– R. D. Williams:\(^{12}\) “The huntsman, an unusual sense of the word, which normally means, ‘brigand’”.

– W. S. Maguinness:\(^{13}\) “*latro* was erroneously supposed by some Roman Grammarians to be derived from ‘latere’ . . . and is therefore used here of one who attacks from a hidden position. Virgil characteristically uses this contemptuous substitute for ‘venator’ only when ‘venantum’ in 1, 5 has made its meaning clear.

– The article by Scarsi in the *Enciclopedia Virgiliana* offers a compilation of the remaining interpretations, all of them in the same vein: Canali 1983, ‘mercenario cacciatore’; Della Corte 1971 (2), ‘cacciatore che coglie la sua preda a tradimento’; Tilly 1969 prefers the literal interpretation derived from Varro’s etymology.

To our way of thinking, the explanation must be sought in the origin: what sort of image or information could Virgil have had as a referent in his day and age, in order to call an ‘armed man lying in wait’ *latro*? We return to Servius Daniel, by means of an important observation made by Scarsi: the usual semantic field for ‘thief’ in Virgil is always occupied by the word *fur*,\(^{14}\) and only in the passage in question *latro* is used. Servius indicates that it refers here to ‘one who is armed and lurks in waiting for his prey,’ ‘a soldier, or one who is under the orders of a soldier, who serves in the front line to clear the way,’ and gives as a textual example of this meaning of *latro* the verse from Plautus cited in n. 9.

In our opinion, the explanation arises from this description. When Virgil used the word *latro* in the context of the plot of the *Aeneid*, he probably had in mind the then most popular game of military strategy in Rome, the so-called *ludus latrunculorum*. At a time immediately posterior to the writing of the *Aeneid*, Ovid makes numerous references to the game.\(^{15}\) It was played by two participants, or ‘combatants’ (the same situation as that described in *Aeneid* 12), who moved pieces (*calculi*), which were called *latrunculi* or *latrones* because they corresponded to precisely that definition which Varro gave to the word and which was reflected in Plautus’ use as well. It was a game of strategy with ‘small-time mercenaries’ as protagonists, in which each band of fighters had to set traps for the other, move forwards or backwards, surround the enemy, and attempt to eliminate all the opposing pieces from the playing board. Once that was accomplished, the victor received the title of *imperator*.\(^{16}\)

The terminology used in the game to describe pieces, moves, and strategies was purely military. From the *Laus Pisonis*, verses 190-208 (the text which contains the most detailed description of the game that we have)