The Bee Omen at Vergil, *Aeneid* 7.64-68

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At the beginning of Book 7 of Vergil’s *Aeneid*, an omen appears in the sacred laurel of Apollo located within the palace of Latinus:

> laurus erat tecti medio in penetralibus altis  
sacra comam multosque metu servata per annos,  
quam pater inventam, primas cum conderet arces,  
ipse ferebatur Phoebō sacrasse Latinus,  
Laurentisque ab ea nomen posuisse colonis.  
huius apes summum densae (mirabile dictu)  
stridore ingenti liquidum trans aethera vectae  
obsedere apicem, et pedibus per mutua nexis  
examen subitum ramo frondente pependit. (59-67)

Thereupon, an anonymous vates interprets the omen: ‘we see that a foreigner is arriving and that troops from the same place are seeking the same place and that they rule from the top of the citadel’ (*externum cernimus ... / adventare virum et partis petere agmen easdem / partibus ex isdem et summa dominarier arce*, 68-70). An examination of the behavior of this swarm reveals that the prophet’s interpretation (and that of his commentators) is uncalled for.²

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1 I quote from Mynors’ OCT. All translations are my own.
2 For bees and prophecy, see Robert-Tornow 1893, especially 57-58; Cook 1895, 7-8; Pease 1921, 220 n. 1. For the significance of bees in Vergilian poetry, see Whitfield 1956, 99-117; Haarhoff 1960, 155-170; Johnson 1984, 1-22; Habinek 1990, 209-223; Morley 2007, 462-470. For the ‘king’ bee, see Col. 9.9.1-11.5; MacInnes 2000, 58 n. 8.
The Trojans should not be seen as an invading army, but as a group of fugitives seeking a new home.3

Behavior similar to that exhibited by the bees in this passage is found elsewhere in Latin literature. Columella (9.9.7-8) says that a swarm will sometimes hang in a shrub like a bunch of grapes, while Varro (R. 3.16.29) notes that the formation of clusters of bees is an indication that they are about to swarm.4 Modern research has confirmed that a group of bees will sometimes leave a hive, often to ease overpopulation. While scouts search for a place to build a new home, the swarm will alight on a tree branch and form a cluster around the queen before moving to a permanent location.5 Vergil's bees, however, are not clustering in a bunch, but festooning. This occurs when an entire hive is abandoned because the bees are starving or have been attacked by destructive insects, animals, or humans.6 The 'absconding' bees then embark on a quest for a new home.7 The festooning described in the Aeneid (pedibus per mutua nexion, 66) usually occurs when they are in the process of making comb for a hive inside a man-made receptacle or a hollow tree.8 On rare occasions, they exhibit this behavior in the open when they cannot find a hidden location for a new hive and must construct it in a tree.9 In this situation, they link legs, form a curtain, and excrete wax from their abdomens in order to build comb directly onto the tree limb.

3 Servius' comments on this passage are not very illuminating: obsedere (66) denotes a siege and presages a war; per mutua invicem recalls how 'bees hold themselves with two feet and support others with two'; partes petere agmen easdem (69) means 'that they are seeking the height of affairs, just as the bees seek the top of the laurel, through which the victory of the foreigners is announced.' Modern commentaries are concerned solely with literary parallels and the question of whether this is a good or a bad omen. See La Cerda 1617, 15-16; Heyne 1830, 438; Benoist 1872, 8; Forbiger 1875, 9; Henry 1881, 485; Williams 1973, 172; Horsfall 1999, 87-88. See also Johnson 1984, 18-19; MacInnes 2000, 57; Fratantuono 2007, 383.

4 At G. 4.257, Vergil says that sick bees 'hang next to the threshold [of the hive] with their feet connected' (pedibus conexae ad limina pendent). They, however, are not permanently leaving the hive. For bees hanging together by the feet, see also Isid. Orig. 12.8.1.

5 Butler 1959, 165; Graham 1992, 338. For a swarm of bees on a horse's mane, see Cic. Div. 1.73; for swarms in military camps, see MacInnes 2000, 56-69.

6 Butler 1959, 154. For the enemies of bees, see Verg. G. 4.242-250; Plin. Nat. 21.47.81. This behavior is rare in European bees, which may explain why it is noteworthy in the Aeneid. See Graham 1992, 94 and 360.

7 Vergil (G. 4.557-558) describes absconding behavior when he speaks of the bougonia: the bees have abandoned the rotten carcass and are searching for a location for a new hive.

8 Ribbands 1953, 198-199.

9 Butler 1959, 14 and pl. 1; Graham 1992, 301 and fig. 32.