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TRANSLATING ANTIQUITY.
THE IDEOLOGICAL READING OF VIRGIL'S
AENEID IN ITS FIRST GERMAN TRANSLATION

The paper focuses on Virgil's *Aeneid* in the first German translation by Thomas Murner (Strasbourg, 1515). It addresses the historical reach of the Latin classic and the Roman imperial ideology conveyed through it. The discussion therefore centres on the ideological and political meaning of the *Aeneid* and explores the mechanisms by which this model, with its emphasis on peace (*Pax Augusta*), developed a dynamic relevance in the context of German Humanism. Indeed, with regard to the respective contemporary engagements with Virgil's *Aeneid*, one can observe an effort not only to render the ancient classic accessible to vernacular readers but also to establish its function as a cultural key text. In doing so, it serves as a medium for self-affirmation within existing power structures through a distinctly ideological reading. The historical recontextualisation of the Roman epic, as outlined in this article, is closely tied to a contemporary figure of rulership who serves as a focal point for the 'new' imperial meaning attributed to the 'German' *Aeneid*: Maximilian I, King of the Romans from 1486 and Holy Roman Emperor (1508-1519), who constitutes the decisive point of reference shaping the intermedial transformation of Virgilian reception in the translation of Thomas Murner.

1. *A new Genre in German Book Printing: "Translations of Antiquity" (Antikeübersetzung)*

The reception of Antiquity in the Germanic Middle Ages and Early Modern Period reveals a remarkable duality in the processes of appropriation. On the one hand, Antiquity, represented in the scholarly sphere by the canonical texts of Roman classics, forms an integral part of education: Latin serves as the international medium of scholarship and learning, administration and

diplomacy, law and poetry.¹ It provides exemplary models not only for written and oral communication but also for contemporary literary practice. On the other hand, a significant segment of society remains excluded from access to the cultural knowledge of Antiquity, relying instead on secondary forms of transmission. This group comprises readers of the vernacular, for whom Antiquity becomes accessible only through adaptations, transformations, and translations into their own language.²

Characteristic of these two sectors of Antiquity reception are differing reading practices. They are shaped by the educational prerequisites and needs of the respective social groups: The transmission of Virgil's works in over 1,000 medieval manuscripts and 96 early printed editions (up to 1500) reflects a "scholarly" mode of reading, situated within the framework of learned knowledge organization and dissemination.³ This approach begins with the Latin material, which is prepared for deeper understanding in the original language (the scholarly *lingua franca*) through various tools for textual elucidation, such as glosses and commentaries.⁴ By contrast, those without access to the educational culture of the time engage with Antiquity through fundamentally different modes of transmission. Here, oral performance, medievalizing adaptations (adjustments to contemporary cultural frames of understanding), and alignment with the literary 'fashion' of the time (evident, for instance, in the emergence of the 'new' genre of the courtly romance) play a central role.⁵

A closer examination of the reception of Virgil's *Aeneid* reveals two distinct pathways through which the work entered the German vernacular. The medieval adaptation of the material in Heinrich

¹ Bloemendal (ed.) 2015; Guthmüller (Hrsg.) 1998; Henkel 2004, 3171-3182.

² Burke 2007, 7-38; Bampi, Gropper (eds.) 2024.

³ Braund, Torlone 2018; Reynolds (ed.) 1983, 433-440. On the Virgilian tradition in incunabula printing, see Davies, Goldfinch 1992.

⁴ Copeland, Sluiter 2015. For the German-speaking area, see Henkel 2009, 468-496.

⁵ For the reception of ancient texts in the German Middle Ages, see Lienert 2001.

von Veldeke's *Eneasroman* (completed around 1184/86) reflects a specific focus on particular aspects of the narrative, shaped by the context of a courtly society.⁶ Virgil's narrative framework is reinterpreted and imbued with themes of immediate relevance to the twelfth century, heavily influenced by Ovidian reception.⁷ This reinterpretation introduces a novel thematic coupling of love and rulership, diverging from Virgil's original. The relationship between Eneas and Lavine is developed into a distinct narrative strand, adhering to the contemporary poetic objective. Unlike the failed union with Dido, only lawful love within the bounds of marriage can, according to the text, secure the foundation and continuity of a dynasty. This is underscored by the genealogical register presented at the conclusion.⁸ By situating the birth of the Son of God during the reign of Augustus, the text anchors the events of Antiquity within the framework of Christian salvation history. Veldeke's reinterpretation of the most significant poetic work of Roman Antiquity thus positions the historical present as part of a broader cosmic order,⁹ one to which even the preceding Roman history also belongs, despite not yet being under the grace of salvation brought about by the Son of God.

The reception of the *Eneasroman*, however, remained limited, as indicated by its manuscript tradition, to a relatively narrow circle of aristocratic patrons.¹⁰ By the late Middle Ages, its

⁶ Schmitz 2007, 293-310. On the relationship between the *Eneasroman* and the Old French *Roman d'Eneas*, see Dittrich 1966.

⁷ Martindale (ed.) 1990. Ovid not only addresses the story of Dido and Aeneas in the *Metamorphoses* but also in the seventh letter of the *Heroides*. The phenomena of love are explored in the *Amores*, the *Ars Amatoria*, and the *Remedia Amoris*. These texts were received as school readings in the 12th century. For further details, see Hexter 1986.

⁸ Reuvekamp-Felber 2013, 57-74.

⁹ Heinrich von Veldeke mentions the emperor of his contemporary time, Frederick I Barbarossa, in two instances: Barbarossa is said to have discovered the tomb of Pallas during one of his Italian campaigns (*Eneasroman* 226, 16; 227, 10). At the end of the text, the wedding feast of Aeneas and Lavinia is compared to the court festival in Mainz in 1184 (*Eneasroman* 347, 14; 348, 1).

¹⁰ Bastert 2019, 317-342.

functional context had shifted, with the work partially abridged to omit the love narrative and positioned as a prelude to chronicle-like accounts.¹¹ By the fifteenth century, the text ceased to be received; it was not printed and thus did not contribute to the body of knowledge available around 1500. The renewed engagement with Virgil's *Aeneid* in early modern literature follows a different interpretative model. The vernacular adaptation of the classical text, canonised as a foundational narrative of the Roman Empire's origins, unfolds a new dynamic. This revival was not confined to the realm of Latinity. While Latin remained far from "dead" during the Middle Ages and Early Modern period, social sectors existed for whom Latin lay beyond their horizon – effectively "dead" in this sense, as vernacularly acculturated readers lacked access to Latin-based educational resources. Access to such knowledge was restricted to a relatively narrow elite. And it is the newly emerging genre of *Antikeübersetzung*¹² in the German Humanism that is used to expose Antiquity and its bodies of knowledge as a medium of self-affirmation. Antiquity thus provided models for constructing historical interpretative frameworks, drawing social and political significance from the reservoir of cultural knowledge.

This article focuses on such a case, examining the historical scope of a classical text made accessible to a broader readership through a new mode of engagement. Thomas Murner's translation of the *Aeneid* (Strasbourg, 1515) exemplifies this renewed interest in the text in its authoritatively recontextualised form. Simultaneously, the translation seeks to offer an updated approach for the ideological reading of the *Aeneid*, profiling its function as a cultural keystone in the political discourse around 1500. The updated interpretation of the Roman epic is primarily linked to a contemporary ruler, portrayed as the focal point of the *Aeneid*'s "new" imperial significance: Maximilian I, Roman-German King from 1486 and Holy Roman Emperor from 1508,¹³ serves as the

¹¹ Dahm 2024, 80-108.

¹² Toepfer *et al.* (eds.) 2021.

¹³ The historical overview is provided by Wiesflecker 1971-1986. For the

central figure orienting the intermedial transformation of Virgilian reception within the new genre of *Antikeübersetzung*.¹⁴

2. “The German Aeneid”. *A Reading Guide for the Ancient Text*

In 1515, Johannes Grüninger published the first German translation of Virgil’s *Aeneid* at his printing house in Strasbourg.¹⁵ This translation was completed by the Franciscan and humanist Thomas Murner (1475-1537),¹⁶ who, prior to the Reformation, had gained some – albeit controversial – recognition for his efforts to make the knowledge preserved in Latinity accessible to a broader audience.¹⁷ The edition includes 112 of the 137 woodcuts from Sebastian Brant’s *Aeneid* edition,¹⁸ forming a continuous “visual narrative”¹⁹ that completes the adaptation of the ancient text into the vernacular. The first German *Aeneid* was introduced to the public with the following programmatic title:

Vergilij Maronis dryzehen Aeneadischen Bücher von Troianischer zerstörung / vnd vffgang des Römischen Reichs. durch doctor Murner vertütst

literary situation in the context of Maximilian I, see Hartmann, Löser (eds.) 2009.

¹⁴ An overview is provided by Worstbrock 1976. Now continued in “ORDA16: Online-Repertorium Deutsche Antikenübersetzung 1501-1620”, funded by the DFG since 2019, <<https://www.orda16.gwi.uni-muenchen.de>> (last accessed July 22, 2025).

¹⁵ *Vergilij Maronis dryzehen Aeneadischen Bücher von Troianischer zerstörung / vnd vffgang des Römischen Reichs. durch doctor Murner vertütst*. Strasbourg: Johannes Grüninger 1515 (VD16 V 1426).

¹⁶ Frick 2019, 1-11; Worstbrock 2013, 300-368.

¹⁷ Murner not only produced translations of literary texts such as the *Aeneid* but also authored several translations in the field of legal literature. See the overview by Erler 1984, 703-795; Erler 1956.

¹⁸ *Publij Virgilij Maronis opera cum quinque vulgatis commentariis expolitissimisque figuris atque imaginibus nuper per Sebastianum Brant superadditis exactissimeque reuisis atque elimatis*. Strasbourg: Johannes Grüninger 1502 (VD16 V 1332).

¹⁹ Frick 2019, 241-271.

(Virgil's Maro Thirteen Books of the *Aeneid* on the Destruction of Troy and the Rise of the Roman Empire, Translated into German by Doctor Murner).

Three key aspects are worth emphasizing. Firstly, the title's reference to the *dryzehen Aeneadischen Bücher* reflects Murner's adherence to the contemporary tradition of Virgilian transmission. His translation not only includes the twelve authentic books of Virgil's *Aeneid* but also incorporates the supplement by the Italian humanist Maffeo Vegio (1407–1458), known as the “13th book”.²⁰ Since its *editio princeps* (Venice: Adam von Ambergau, 1471), this supplement had become a standard component of printed editions of Virgil.²¹ It aims to provide a conclusion to the epic narrative, which ends abruptly in the *Aeneid* with the death of Turnus, fulfilling what was believed to be Virgil's intended closure. The three major prophecies of the *Aeneid* (in Books 1, 6, and 8) serve as points of reference for the “logical” resolution of the narrative, as imagined in medieval adaptations of the material. These often concluded with the marriage of Aeneas and Lavinia, Aeneas's rule over Latium, his death, and his deification.²²

Secondly, the temporal scope indicated in the title – from the destruction of Troy to the rise of the Roman Empire (*von Troianischer zerstörung / vnd vffgang des Römischen Reichs*) – can be understood within the narrative as an allusion to the extensive temporal framework of the story. From a historical perspective, however, and particularly in light of the territorial-political situation around 1500, this provides the potential for a reinterpretation. The “German” *Aeneid* articulates the foundation of an empire whose legacy persists into the present and even ties contemporary claims to imperial authority over the Roman Empire to its ancient model. Visually, the Habsburg dynasty is

²⁰ It was first published in Pavia in 1428. For the edition, see Schneider (ed.) 1985; Putnam 2004.

²¹ For further *Aeneid* supplements, see Schmidt 1964; Schmidt 1973, 517–555; Schindler 2017, 357–376.

²² Frick 2019, 49–55.

prominently represented, with Maximilian I, Emperor-elect in 1508, portrayed as the current representative of the Roman Empire through the construct of *translatio imperii*.²³ The double-headed eagle depicted in one of the reused illustrations from Brant's edition (cf. Fig. 1) serves as an iconic abbreviation of an interpretative framework that makes the contemporary historical-political discourse accessible to vernacular audiences through the translation of a canonical poetic text.

Thirdly, Murner's translation prominently features a dedication on its title page to the current Roman-German emperor from the House of Habsburg:

“Maximiliano dem durchlüchtigen / Vnüberwintlichen / Milten / Fridsamen vnd angeborner fürsichtigkeit weisen Fürsten dise gelerte gab. A.E.I.O.V.”

(‘To Maximilian, the illustrious, invincible, generous, peaceful, and innately prudent wise prince, this intellectual gift. A.E.I.O.U.’). This dedication is reiterated at the beginning of the preface in slightly altered wording: *“Maximiliano dem vnüberwindtlichen durchlüchtigen Keiser in zeiten des fridens ein gelerte gab”* (‘To Maximilian, the invincible and illustrious emperor in times of peace, an intellectual gift’).²⁴

²³ Goetz 1958.

²⁴ Cited here as in the following according to Frick 2019, 304f.

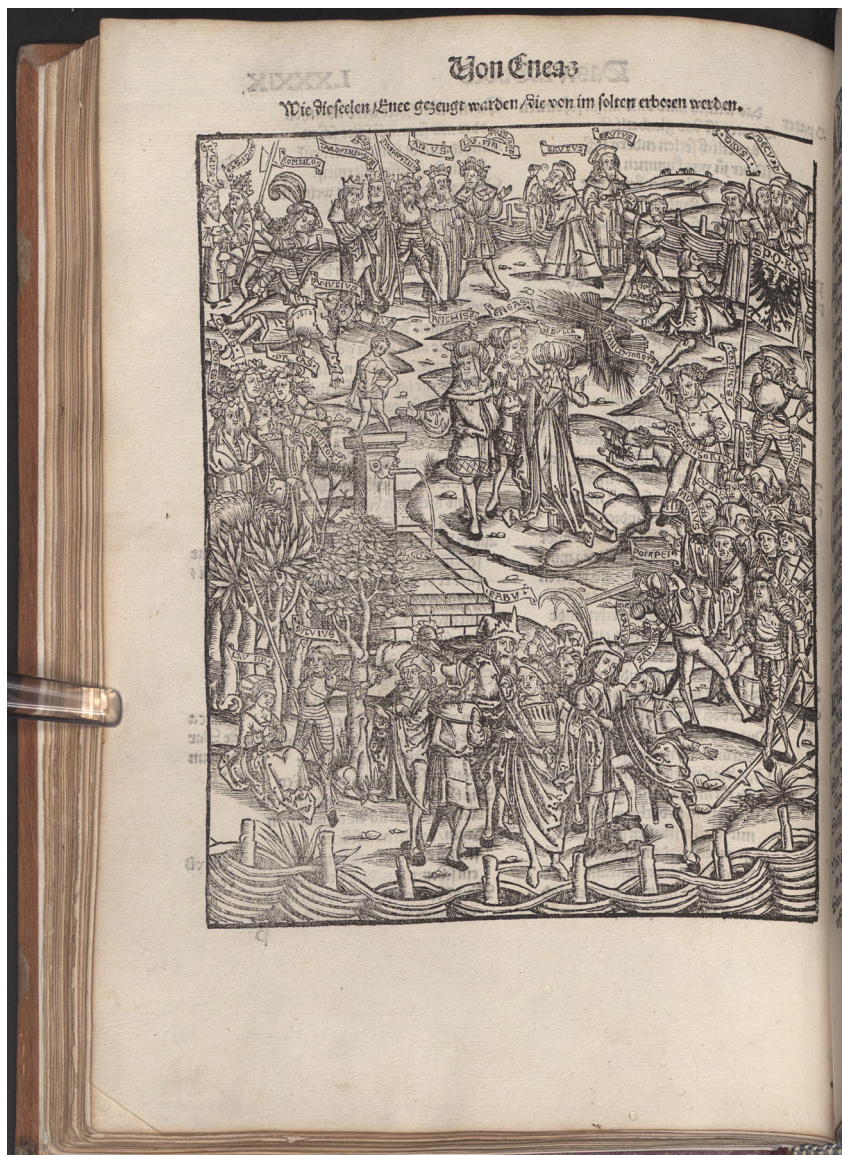


Fig. 1. Vergilij Maronis dryzeihen Aeneadischen Bücher von Troianischer zerstörung / vnd vffgang des Römischen Reichs. durch doctor Murner vertütst. Strasbourg: Johannes Grüninger 1515. München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Res/2 A.lat.a. 349, f. 89v (urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb00002565-8)

Here, the attributes *fridsam* ('peaceful') and the reference to Maximilian's reign as *zeiten des fridens* ('times of peace') indicate the interpretative horizon within which Murner situates his dedication. The lexeme *frid* ('peace') and its derivatives appear twelve times, linked to both Emperor Maximilian I and his father Frederick III, as well as to Virgil and the "peace emperor" Augustus.²⁵ The theme of peace thus functions as a central motif and systematic connective tissue between the ancient and the contemporary "peace emperor". By explicitly linking Maximilian's *zeiten des fridens* to Augustus's *fridsam ewig ruom* ('peaceful eternal fame', l. 21), Murner urges the current ruler to uphold this peace through a *fridenreichs regiment* ('peaceful rule', l. 22). In doing so, he seeks to transpose the political concept of the *Pax Augusta*, or *Pax Romana*, onto the Roman Empire of his own time.²⁶ The era of peace established during Augustus's principate is imagined as being realised under Maximilian. The motto *A.E.I.O.V.*, printed on the title page, underscores the claim to sovereignty of the "second" or "new" Augustus (*alter Augustus*) from the House of Habsburg.²⁷

The Augustus-related dedication preface intentionally invokes the political programme of the *Pax Augusta* or *Pax Romana*. By referencing Augustus and his reign of peace, Murner transposes the Aeneas-Augustus connection onto Maximilian, offering a contemporary reimagining of the imperial interpretative dimension embedded in the *Aeneid*. Maximilian's rule is portrayed as the realisation of a new "Golden Age of peace and justice"²⁸ under modern conditions – an interpretative framework that, as is well known, was particularly resonant around 1500.²⁹

²⁵ Henkel 2017, 111. For a more detailed discussion, see Frick 2019, 95–110.

²⁶ For the historical context of this idea, see Garber 1989, 108–163.

²⁷ *Austriæ Est Imperare Orbi Vniuerso* ('Austria's task is to rule the entire world'). For the motto introduced by Emperor Friedrich III and its various interpretations, see Lhotsky 1952, 155–193; Koller 1995, 162–170; Schwarz 2024, 79–112.

²⁸ Schmidt 2001, 65–92. Also refer to the studies by Hardie 1986; Hardie 1999.

²⁹ "Für die Zeit um 1500 gehörte der aktualisierende Bezug auf die

2.1. *Augustus and the Age of Peace (Pax Romana)*

Research has emphasised the militaristic disposition of Maximilian I, which permeates his publicly staged glorification project (*gedechtnus*).³⁰ In panegyric writings by contemporary authors – most notably the approximately 40 imperial *poetae laureati* who publicised Maximilian's political activities³¹ – he was celebrated as the greatest of war heroes, leading a united Christendom in battle against the Turks.³² Non-laureate Alsatian intellectuals, such as Sebastian Brant and Jakob Wimpfeling, also contributed to imperial public relations.³³

And precisely here, within the humanist milieu of the Upper Rhine's educated elite, the martial concept of the *heros Germanicus*³⁴ merges with the culturally resonant idea of the *Pax Augusta* or *Pax Romana*, accessible through the works of Virgil. This peace, which brought an end to long-standing internal conflicts and was achieved through military triumphs, aptly fits the notion of a 'peace of victory' ("*Siegfrieden*").³⁵ In light of Maximilian's decade of wars, his portrayal as a prince of peace may seem surprising, as it stands in apparent tension with his self-proclaimed public image. This portrayal, however, aligns with humanist expectations that wars should pave the way for a period of peace, during which the arts and sciences might once again flourish. The literary model historically legitimising and

von Vergil formulierte Friedensidee zum geläufigen Inventar politischer Vorstellungen". Henkel 2017, 114.

³⁰ Müller 1982, 169-179.

³¹ Flood 2006.

³² Mertens 1986, 105-123.

³³ Mertens 1976, 179f.

³⁴ On Maximilian as the "new Hercules", see Braungart 1991, 77-95. Humanist war propaganda drew on ancient motifs to position emperors within the tradition of Roman generals and rulers. Cf. Schindling 2006, 325-342.

³⁵ Mertens 1986, 106, highlights that peace in imperial propaganda is consistently portrayed as the result of military conflict, as a triumph. This approach draws on the Roman concept of *pax* as a legal relationship between two parties who had previously been at war.

integrating this concept into an imperial discourse is the idea of the “Golden Age” (*aurea saecula*), epitomised by the reign of the ancient Emperor Augustus.

On the occasion of Maximilian’s coronation as King of the Holy Roman Empire in 1486, Sebastian Brant composed a Latin poem referencing the mythological notion of the *aurea saecula*. Here, Maximilian is depicted as an *alter [...] pacifer* (‘second bringer of peace’), entrusted with restoring global peace, as once established by the god Saturn.³⁶ The reference point for updating this ancient concept is twofold: firstly, Virgil’s fourth *Eclogue*, a ‘foundational text for the poetic interpretation of history in the Augustan era’.³⁷ It serves as the starting point for peace-related themes, envisaging a Saturnian golden age ushered in by the birth of a boy.³⁸ Secondly, Virgil’s *Aeneid* also contributes to this political argumentative context.³⁹ The epic’s three major prophecies extend the narrative from the temporal realm of Aeneas to the Augustan present, marking it as the ‘culmination of

³⁶ “Alter caesareo sed semine missus ab alto / Maxmiliane quidem pacifer orbis ades” (KT 35, v. 3-4: ‘Now, however, be present, Maximilian, as the second, descended from imperial lineage and sent from above, as the one who brings peace to the world’). Quotation and translation according to Henkel 2021, 45. For Brant’s panegyric poems praising Maximilian, as well as the importance of Vergil ‘in the discourse of the intellectual elites around 1500’, see also Henkel 2021, 39-53. Brant’s poems are cited in the following according to Wilhelmi 1998 [KT].

³⁷ Schmidt 2001, 99.

³⁸ “ultima Cumaei venit iam carminis aetas; / magnus ab integro saeculorum nascitur ordo. / iam redit et Virgo, redeunt Saturnia regna, / iam noua progenies caelo demittitur alto. / tu modo nascenti puero, quo ferrea primum / desinet et toto surget gens aurea mundo, / casta faue Lucina: tuus iam regnat Apollo” (*Ecl.* 4, 6-9: ‘The final age of the Cumaean prophecy has now arrived; a great cycle of the ages is born anew. The Virgin returns, and the Saturnian reign returns; a new generation is sent down from the high sky. You, Lucina, be gracious to the newborn boy, through whom the iron age will first cease, and a golden race will rise across the whole world: now your Apollo reigns’). The citations from the Latin Vergil text follow the critical edition of Mynors (ed.) 1969.

³⁹ Stahl (ed.) 1998.

Roman history'.⁴⁰ Augustus, as a new Aeneas, heralds the Golden Age of peace.

The connection of the Augustan peace with successful expansionist wars – where peace is defined as a legal relationship between formerly warring parties and represents a 'system of governance'⁴¹ – renders Virgil's *Aeneid* a key text for self-definition and a symbol of the Roman concept of eternity (*Roma aeterna*) in relation to Maximilian's reign. For the early sixteenth century, the reign of Augustus gained its fundamental importance through the concept of peace, the *Pax Augusta*, which belonged to the cultural memory as an ideological construct and a political semiotic system. The ancient texts, especially Virgil's fourth *Eclogue* and the *Aeneid*, provided literary models through which, drawing on the idea of *translatio imperii*, the reference to the ancient emperor is realized. Augustus emerges as the prototype for a new era that begins under Maximilian's rule. The concept of *translatio* is not only propagated in printed texts but also explicitly visualised: Maximilian I intentionally presented himself in the monumental *Ehrenpforte* ('Triumphal Arch')⁴² as the culmination of a genealogy of Roman emperors beginning with Julius Caesar – a clear allusion to the public imagery of Augustus.⁴³

The dialectic of war and peace, integral to Maximilian's self-image, was particularly accentuated in the works of the *poetae laureati* and Upper Rhine humanists. Central to this was the 'renaissance' of the Augustan era under Maximilian as an 'ideal collaboration between poet and emperor for the benefit of the realm'.⁴⁴ Conrad Celtis, for instance, praised the Habsburg ruler as an *alter Caesar Augustus*,⁴⁵ guiding the Roman Empire of his era

⁴⁰ Schmidt 2001, 89.

⁴¹ Klingner 1965, 615.

⁴² Schauerte 2011.

⁴³ Zanker 1997.

⁴⁴ Luh 2001, 60.

⁴⁵ In addition to the dedication, also in the colophon: Celtis. Quattuor Libri Amorum. Nürnberg 1502 (VD16 C 1911), f. aiir^v u. f. riv^v. For Celtis, see Wuttke 1993, 173-199.

to a new rise under the sign of peace. War was thereby depicted as a means of securing the conditions for a flourishing cultural and literary epoch, symbolized by Augustus' peace.⁴⁶ The imperial *poeta laureatus* Heinrich Bebel celebrated Maximilian's victory in the Palatinate Succession War in his *Ecloga triumphalis*,⁴⁷ portraying him as a ruler from whom peace radiates: *de quo pax alba redundat* (f. Gviiiiv). Referring to the *tristia bella* and their conclusion by Maximilian ("*Qui peperit nobis pacem post tristia bella*", f. Hir),⁴⁸ Bebel invoked the Virgilian formula, linking the political dimension of the *Aeneid*'s Augustan peace to Maximilian's reign as a guarantor of restored peace.

Scholars have underlined that Sebastian Brant explicitly linked the *translatio* of the political concept of the *Pax Augusta* to Maximilian I in his panegyric poems and in broadsheets addressing contemporary politics. "Brant proceeded to renew all this in the Holy Roman Empire of his own day with Maximilian now playing the role of the divinely-supported saviour".⁴⁹ The primary sphere of the reference system, which is also linguistically realized, is the domain of scholarly Latin and the cultural knowledge it encompasses regarding the significance of historically-political interpretative frameworks: "Und nur in dieser Sprache gelingt das hier zu beobachtende Konstrukt einer im Mythos begründeten imperialen Idee, die von der augusteischen Zeit in die Gegenwart Brants und seiner Zeitgenossen führt".⁵⁰

⁴⁶ The literary discourse in which the idea of peace is embedded around 1500 is outlined by Frick 2019, 95-110.

⁴⁷ Bebel, *Opera*. Pforzheim 1509 (VD16 B 1303), f. Gvi^r-Hi^r.

⁴⁸ The seer Sibyl announces to Aeneas the *bella, horrida bella* (*Aen.* 6, 86f.). Similarly, the Vergilian narrator begins the action in Latium with: "*dicam horrida bella, dicam acies actosque animis in funera reges*" (*Aen.* 7, 41f.: 'I will speak of dreadful wars, of battles, and of kings driven to their deaths by their courage').

⁴⁹ Harrison 1981, 101.

⁵⁰ Henkel 2021, 45.

Yet Brant sought to bridge cultural gaps by also expressing this concept in the vernacular, thereby fostering a cultural connection.⁵¹ This applies not only to the act of translation, which can be traced in German versions of shorter poems originally written in Latin and circulating through single-sheet prints.⁵² It is also particularly relevant to a medial updating that makes the historical-political reference system available on the visual level of the image.

In 1502, Brant collaborated with the Strasbourg publisher Johannes Grüninger to produce a large-format edition of Virgil's works.⁵³ Alongside the major works (*Bucolica*, *Georgica*, *Aeneid*), the edition included an appendix featuring Maffeo Vegio's thirteenth book and Virgil's *Carmina minora*.⁵⁴ Beyond incorporating the latest humanist commentaries by Domizio Calderini (1446-1478), Cristoforo Landino (1424-1504), and Antonio Mancinelli (1452-ca. 1505), the edition represented a significant innovation in the transmission of Virgil's works: it featured 214 woodcuts, constituting the first comprehensive illustrated cycle of Virgil's texts.⁵⁵

Grüninger had them specially created for this edition, with only four exceptions.⁵⁶ Due to the density and high quality of the

⁵¹ Compare, for example, the Latin and German versions of a single-sheet print in Henkel 2013, 530.

⁵² "Brant, dem das Arsenal u.a. von Bibel, Recht und Klassikern im umfassenden Sinne zur Verfügung steht, nutzt dies in seinen lateinischen Texten, insbesondere den Dichtungen, er macht aber auch immer wieder Versuche des kulturellen Brückenschlags im Gestus eines vertikalen Kulturtransfers, wenn er in der Volkssprache schreibt". Henkel 2021, 565.

⁵³ With a focus on the aspect of intermediality, see Schneider 1983, 202-262; Henkel 2012, 389-419; Hamm 2017, 236-258.

⁵⁴ Cf. Zogg (ed.) 2020.

⁵⁵ The high-quality woodcuts of the 1502 edition are briefly described in Suerbaum 2008, 137-152. For the context of Grüninger's printing office, see Zimmermann-Homeyer 2018, 254-270.

⁵⁶ Three woodcuts come from the 1501 edition of Boethius' *Consolatio Philosophiae*, Strasbourg 1501 (VD16 B 6404), f. 8v; 15v; 11v, and one from the 1496 edition of the Terence (GW M45481), f. 11v. They can be found in the separately foliated appendix of the 1502 Strasbourg Vergil. Schneider 1983, 204, note 9; Zimmermann-Homeyer 2018, 210, note 929.

‘contentually complex and artistically demanding’ illustrations,⁵⁷ the edition is regarded as an undisputed masterpiece of contemporary Strasbourg book art: “chef-d’oeuvre d’illustration strasbourgeoise de l’époque”.⁵⁸ The woodcuts demonstrate remarkable attention to detail, requiring not only an extremely precise knowledge of the Latin original, but also of the accompanying commentaries and other paratexts. Research has established that their conceptualization must be considered the result of Brant’s scholarly expertise, while the craftsmanship was entrusted to the specialists working in Grüninger’s workshop.⁵⁹

A key feature of the illustrations is the transposition of the ancient material into the contemporary world of the early sixteenth century.⁶⁰ Depictions include half-timbered houses, turrets, and church towers with bells and crosses reflecting late-medieval northern Alpine cities (e.g. *Vergil, Opera*. Strasbourg 1502 [VD16 V 1332], f. 121r, 159r, [222r]). Clothing, hairstyles, and beards align with the fashions of circa 1500 (e.g. *ibid.*, f. 145v, 151r). The heroes fight in knightly fashion (e.g. *ibid.*, f. 171v, 406v, 408v), while the infantry under Turnus even bears a *Bundschuh* banner (e.g. *ibid.*, f. [319]v).⁶¹

The visual transfer of textual content into the contemporary imagination underscores the cultural transmission of the ancient text. It exemplifies the distinctive humanist reception of Antiquity north of the Alps, where classical works were adapted to contemporary contexts.⁶² Imperial constructs were also integral:

⁵⁷ Zimmermann-Homeyer 2018, 203.

⁵⁸ Dupeux *et al.* (éd.) 1992, 16.

⁵⁹ Henkel 2021, 389-419.

⁶⁰ The characteristics of the woodcut sequence are discussed by Zimmermann-Homeyer 2018, 214-221.

⁶¹ Bischoff 2010.

⁶² According to Henkel 2012, 389, note 44, a ‘historicizing representation, that is, one incorporating ancient forms,’ was ‘not pursued north of the Alps at this time, and was probably hardly even possible’. For further details, see Toepfer *et al.* 2017, 3.

Several woodcuts in the edition depict Emperor Augustus, who, as the ancient peace emperor, prefigures the peace ruler of the time around 1500, Maximilian, by wearing the imperial insignia crown, scepter, and orb (*f.* 34r; opening of *Georg.* 1; similarly mourning at Virgil's grave, appendix *f.* 33r). The connection is most explicit in scenes where Roman imperial elites are associated with the Habsburg dynasty through heraldic symbols, such as the double-headed eagle. It appears in a key scene of the programmatic depiction of the underworld, assigned as a banner to the very group representing the Roman Senate (*cf.* Fig. 1). In this illustration, Julius Caesar, the first Roman emperor, is presented as the leadership figure of the state's 'organ'. Thus, the double-headed eagle refers to a contemporary interpretation of the *Aeneid* around 1500, oriented towards Maximilian, embedding the new 'Golden Age' he established through his military campaigns into the visual art of the time.⁶³

2.2. Pax Romana and Maximilian I: An ideological framework for Virgil's *Aeneid*

The encomiastic interpretation of the imperial concept of the *Pax Augusta* as established in the *Aeneid* was ubiquitous around 1500 as a historical construct. It constituted a familiar symbolic framework in scholarly circles, represented by figures such as Conrad Celtis, Heinrich Bebel, Sebastian Brant, as well as Jakob Locher, Matthias Ringmann, and others.⁶⁴ This discourse,

⁶³ Maximilian's coat of arms was present in contemporary publications: for example, Brant had the coats of arms of the Habsburgs and other ecclesiastical or secular imperial princes printed at the head of a single-leaf print on the occasion of the 'Reichstag zu Worms' (1495), calling on them to support Maximilian in the campaign against the Turks. *Cf.* Sebastian Brant: "De Alexandri VI. confoederatione cum Maximiliano facta congratulatio" [Basel, nach 1. April 1495]. Staats- und Stadtbibliothek Augsburg, 2° Ink 651, hinterer Spiegel (VE15 B-77). See also Müller 2004, 95-122; Müller (ed.) 2015.

⁶⁴ This symbolic framework is based on the intention described by Servius, in which Vergil aims to praise Augustus through his ancestors: "Intentio Vergilii haec est [...] Augustum laudare a parentibus". Compare the preface of Servius

however, was not confined to the medium of Latinity, as exemplified by Sebastian Brant's deliberate transfer of its themes into the vernacular communication system.⁶⁵ The first German translation of Virgil's *Aeneid* likewise significantly participates in the historical discourse surrounding the idea of peace, which, around 1500, was a common component of political conceptions.⁶⁶

The dedication preface of Thomas Murner's German translation of the *Aeneid* draws a parallel between the idea of the *Pax Augusta*, present in contemporary readings of Virgil's epic, and the promise of a reign of peace under Maximilian I.⁶⁷ Murner's presentation of the emperor as a 'bringer of peace' is particularly noteworthy when compared to the dominant panegyric construct of peace achieved through war in contemporary publications. The dialectic of war and peace is entirely absent. Murner instead seeks to transpose the image of the peace era established under Frederick III onto Maximilian I by advising the current emperor:

[ich] ermane [...] dein Keiserthuom so bei deinen vnd deiner genaden heiliger gedechtniß vatters zeiten vor allen anstösseren fridenreich ist geregieret worden / weiters in friden bewarest / den ruom Augusti / so du gegenwirtig hast mir dir in ewigkeit zuotragen (ll. 17-20)

(I exhort you [...] to preserve in peace your empire, which in the days of your father – of gracious memory – was governed in pious remembrance and in peace despite all adversities, and to carry with you into eternity the glory of Augustus, which you now possess).

Murner refers solely to the concept of *pax* and the model of Augustus as the peace emperor, portraying Maximilian I as the successor of Augustus, representing the Holy Roman Empire

to his commentary on Vergil in Thilo, Hagen 1878, 4, l. 10f.

⁶⁵ Henkel 2021, 565.

⁶⁶ Henkel 2017, 114.

⁶⁷ Cf. Redzich 2009, 107-121.

under altered circumstances. By deliberately omitting the martial component of Maximilian's image propagated by the *poetae laureati*, Murner simultaneously distances himself from the panegyric 'mainstream'.⁶⁸

The phrase "on dyner gnaden gewonliche title" (line 1: 'without the customary titulature of Your Grace'), used at the beginning of the preface, already hints at the extraordinary. Beyond the topical rhetoric of prefaces and a potential implicit critique of the emperor's ongoing military campaigns, the dedication of Murner's 'German *Aeneid*' documents the enduring presence of the ideological concept of the *Pax Augusta* in the historical-political discourse of the intellectual elite of the period. Murner explicitly updates this concept for a vernacular audience, which, due to a lack of classical education, was generally excluded from the reference level of scholarly Latin. He emphatically underscores, in a typological correlation, that Maximilian I, as the peace emperor of his era, resembles Augustus, for whom Virgil conceived his *Aeneid*.

Murner's intention is to provide a text comprehensible to a vernacular audience, reviving Virgil's work "*von latynschem todt in tütsches leben*" (ll. 12-13; 'from Latin death to German life').⁶⁹ Of course, Virgil was far from "dead", enjoying overwhelming prominence in the context of scholarly education.⁷⁰ Access to such literature, however, was restricted to the circle of humanist scholars.⁷¹ Virgil becomes "alive" through Murner's translation for those outside the Latin educational tradition. A key strategy

⁶⁸ The martial image of Maximilian, as Mertens 1986, 108, points out, was focused on the campaign against the Turks.

⁶⁹ Murner applies the humanist-formed topos of the Latin expression for the revival of ancient science and literature (*renascentes litterae*) to the process of translation into the vernacular. This topos is a humanist *locus communis*, as discussed in Manger 1983, 100, note 55. For further details, see Worstbrock 1974, 503.

⁷⁰ "One thing we can be sure of, is that in the sixteenth century Virgil [...] reigned supreme amongst Classical authors". Harris 2013, 51.

⁷¹ In relation to the German-speaking world, see Kühlmann 1989, 194.

in this endeavour is the cultural transfer achieved throughout the translation: Driven by the formal innovation – the adaptation of Virgilian hexameters into German rhymed couplets – the “German *Aeneid*” aims, in large part, to accommodate the text to the experiences of its contemporary readers. In this regard, the translation predominantly follows the target language and target culture as guiding principles. This becomes evident both in the adaptation of the ancient text into a specific poetic register established in the vernacular, as well as in the transposition at the level of societal conventions (e.g., military structures, social hierarchies, fashion, religious practices) and architectural details – topics that have been discussed extensively.⁷²

This process of adaptation of the ancient text to the cultural situation of around 1500, and to the expectations and conceptual frameworks of its audience, is characteristic of the contemporary engagement with classical texts, especially within the new genre of *Antikeübersetzung*. It is complemented by the 112 illustrations in the 1515 first edition, selected from the 137 woodcuts originally created for Sebastian Brant’s 1502 Strasbourg edition of Virgil. The German translation combines this continuous visual narrative into a comprehensive transfer of the knowledge contained in the ancient cultural heritage, the *Aeneid*, against the backdrop of the familiar contemporary context. The lack of consideration for historical difference can be seen as an epoch-specific characteristic of the reception of Antiquity in the Early Modern period.⁷³

Although Murner never adopted the title of *poeta laureatus* during his lifetime,⁷⁴ he was legally part of the nearly 40 poets crowned with laurels by Maximilian, who celebrated the emperor’s war- and triumph-oriented political programme in their panegyrics.⁷⁵ The political, literary-supported concept of the *Pax*

⁷² Frick 2019, 132-162.

⁷³ Müller 2007, 84.

⁷⁴ Flood 2006, vol. 3, 1390-1396.

⁷⁵ Mertens 1986, 105; Redzich 2009, 117-119.

Augusta, developed and propagated during the Augustan era, was transferred by the *poetae laureati* to the time of Maximilian I, forming a chapter of political intellectual history around 1500. The already noted absence of the typical dialectic of war and peace in Murner's dedication preface is extraordinary: by focusing programmatically on Maximilian's peacefulness, he deliberately frames the political concept of the *Pax Augusta* as a peace that is realized in the present.

The imperial significance of the *Aeneid*, omnipresent in the works of leading contemporary intellectuals, makes explicit references to Maximilian I or direct praise of the emperor within the text of the translation itself superfluous. Murner's preface serves as a guide for an imperial reading of the German *Aeneid*. The connection between Augustus and Maximilian is so firmly entrenched in the intellectual discourses of circa 1500 that it can be readily established by readers through their own knowledge.

3. The Ideological Reading of Ancient Texts in the Early Modern Period

The transposition of the textual content into the experiential framework of contemporary recipients serves to bridge the cultural and historical distance between the source text and its intended audience. In this context, Murner's programmatic statement in the preface – that Virgil's work had been revived 'from Latin death into German life' ("von latynschem todt in tütsches leben [...] erquicket worden"; ll. 12f.) – can be read as an attempt, grounded in the established conceptual model of *translatio studii*, to make foreign cultural knowledge accessible for national needs.⁷⁶

The 1515 edition of the first "German *Aeneid*" presents a multimedia work, with complementary layers of meaning evident at multiple levels: a literary mediation of the Roman classic, associating and concretising the ancient text in the visual mode with ideas from the contemporary conceptions. Its cultural-

⁷⁶ Redzich 2017, 173.

historical significance is derived from its connection to a distinctly “national” paradigm, which makes the ideological reading of the *Aeneid* relevant to the historical situation around 1500.

Thomas Murner’s translation derives its historical profile significantly from its affiliation with the cultural milieu of Maximilian I,⁷⁷ whom Murner’s preface emphatically portrays as the emperor of peace (“*Friedenskaiser*”) of his time, akin to the ancient “*Friedenskaiser*” Augustus. Through Murner’s updating of the imperial concept of the *Pax Augusta*, the translation aligns with the panegyric works dedicated to Emperor Maximilian I by contemporary humanists. Although Murner does not offer a Latin national epic like Riccardo Bartolini’s *Austrias*,⁷⁸ his choice of verse form connects to established vernacular traditions of Maximilian’s literary *memoria* or *gedechtnus*: Not only historiographical works, such as Jakob Mennel’s rhymed German *Cronica Habsburgensis*,⁷⁹ but also rhyming epic works like *Theuerdank*, commissioned by Maximilian himself, contributed to propagating the emperor’s glory beyond the scholarly Latin sector.⁸⁰ Maximilian’s *gedechtnus* in the German language aimed to consolidate his rule among the new ‘court society’ of noble and bourgeois provenance.⁸¹

By choosing the translation of an ancient text as a dedication gift for Maximilian I, Murner followed a common practice at the beginning of the 16th century. It consists in the use of Roman classics not only as princely instruction but also as an updating of their ideological dimension within the contemporary political context.⁸² For the *Aeneid*, this is a practice that can be observed

⁷⁷ For more details, see the contributions in Hartmann, Löser 2009.

⁷⁸ Füssel 1987; Pulina 2022, 160-272.

⁷⁹ Jakob Mennel, *Cronica Habsburgensis rigmatica*. Konstanz: Hans Schöffeler 1507 (VD16 M4611).

⁸⁰ *Die geuerlicheiten vnd einsteils der geschichten des loblichen streytparen vnd hochberuembten helds vnd Ritters herr Tewrdannckhs*. Nürnberg: Johann Schönsperger d. Ä. 1517 (VD16 M 1649). Cf. Füssel 2003.

⁸¹ Müller 1982, 78.

⁸² Hammerstein 1984, 265-285.

in the French and English translation traditions of Virgil's epic.⁸³ In the German-speaking world, other works from the new genre of 'Antikeübersetzung' are also associated with an ideological reading. Works such as Bernhard Schöfflerlin's Livy translation (later expanded by Ivo Wittich),⁸⁴ Matthias Ringmann's translations of Caesar's writings,⁸⁵ and Dietrich von Plieningen's translation of Pliny's works were all dedicated to Maximilian.⁸⁶ These translations offered their dedicatee a 'mirror and example, where everything that can be found is to benefit and service of the empire' ("*Spigel vnd exempell [...] Dar Inn alles waß zu merung des reichs nütz vnd dinstlich sein [...] erfunden wirdt*").⁸⁷

While the preface to the *Römische Historie* from Livy profiles the political function of the symbiosis between ruler and scholar, the mirror metaphor in Dietrich von Plieningen's work aims to provide the noble addressee with guidance through exemplary models worthy of imitation:

*ain täglichen Spiegel [...] nit der gestalt das sy sich on den nit wiß
kayserlichen zuhalten: sonder do durch getröst werde: das sy das
anngefanget sorfaltig römisch regiment loblich piß an ir endlich
menschlich leben [...] der Christenhayt vnd dem heyligen Reich
zu nutz guet vnnd allenn vnderthon zu wolfart lang aufenthalten
woll.*⁸⁸

⁸³ Braund 2025.

⁸⁴ Schöfflerlin / Wittich, Livius dt. Mainz 1505 (VD16 L 2102); Schöfflerlin / Wittich, Livius dt., Straßburg: Grüninger 1507 (VD16 L 2103). Cf. Worstbrock 1976, 94-98.

⁸⁵ Ringmann, Caesar dt., Straßburg 1507 (VD16 C 54). A revised edition was published the following year after the first print, in which the preface and paratexts were adjusted: Ringmann, Caesar dt. Straßburg 1508 (VD16 C 55).

⁸⁶ Plieningen, Plinius. Landshut 1515 (VD16 P 3499).

⁸⁷ For example, in the German *Livy*, cited after the first edition (VD16 L 2102), here: verso of the title page [without pagination].

⁸⁸ Cited after the first edition: Plieningen, Plinius. Landshut 1515 (VD16 P 3499), f. AAiiij^r.

(A daily mirror [...] not in such a way that His Imperial Majesty would not know how to conduct himself imperially without it, but rather that he might be consoled by it – that he may be encouraged to uphold the careful Roman governance he has begun in praiseworthy fashion until the end of his earthly life, for the benefit of Christendom and the Holy Empire, and for the welfare of all his subjects).

Matthias Ringmann, likewise, offered genealogical and dynastic legitimization of Maximilian's rule by incorporating him into a succession of Roman emperors, beginning with Caesar and culminating in Maximilian I as the 118th.⁸⁹ Ringmann's preface explicitly refers to Maximilian's election as Roman King in 1486 during his father's lifetime: 'Maximilian, the son of Emperor Frederick mentioned above, Archduke of Austria, the hundred and eighteenth [emperor] elected' (*"Maximilianus des gemeldeten Keiser Friderichs sun / Ertz hertzog von Osterych / der hundertst vnd achtzehendest [...] erwelet"*, f. Aviiir). This preface exemplifies the humanist practice of portraying Maximilian in dedicatory letters as both a second Julius Caesar and a second Augustus.⁹⁰

By referencing Augustus, Murner explicitly frames the reading of the "German *Aeneid*" in his dedicatory preface as programmatically directed towards Maximilian. This situates the translation within the ideological discourse of emperor, empire, and German nationhood, which was particularly vibrant in southwest Germany during Maximilian's era.⁹¹ In the preface, but also in several visual details of the woodcuts included in the print, the interpretation of the classical text is linked to the ruling structure of the present. For example, representatives of the Roman Republic are depicted bearing the double-headed eagle, symbolizing the House of Habsburg (as seen in Figures 1 and 2). In this way, the imagery establishes a subtext positioning Maximilian as the universal Roman emperor in continuity

⁸⁹ Suerbaum 2009, 317-334; Suerbaum 2013, 229-243.

⁹⁰ Toepfer 2009, 85.

⁹¹ Worstbrock 2013, 734.

with his ancient predecessors. This accords him the status of a legitimate *Verwahrer* ('custodian') of the Roman Empire, as Murner highlights in his preface.⁹²

Thus, the *Aeneid* translation serves not only as a 'stepping stone' to Virgil's Latin text, making the educational potential of the work accessible to broader audiences.⁹³ It is also a contribution to the history of political ideas around 1500 and therefore documents the cultural and ideological capital of classical translation.⁹⁴ The "German *Aeneid*" is, on the one hand, a testimony to an educational historical tradition and its adaptation to new contexts. On the other hand, it facilitates an ideological reading that merges the legacy of Rome with the contemporary present. By linking the educational knowledge embedded in the *Aeneid* to the imperial significance of the text, Murner makes the ancient classic relevant to current events – thus re-coding it into a 'modern' text *sui generis*.

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⁹² Frick 2019, 304.

⁹³ Henkel 2017, 119.

⁹⁴ For the translation of Virgil, see Braund, Torlone 2018.

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