

We are often told that the main influence of the classical world was passed on to the West through the Romans. It is less well known how deep and pervasive was the anti-Greek bias transmitted through Rome to the western world. The name of Vergil, for example, was long honoured even by those who knew little of his work, but Vergil's master was despised. Thus Chaucer can say of Homer that he "made lies, feynung in his poetries, and was to Greekes favourable." The usage reported by the Oxford English Dictionary illustrates a common attitude: one definition of Greek is "a cunning or wily person, a cheat, sharper, esp. one who cheats at cards." How was this bias created and perpetuated?

When the Romans were becoming powerful in Italy and in the Mediterranean world they had in effect no history. They did not know clearly when their city was founded, or whence came the first inhabitants. To them, and also to the other peoples that they met, it was unthinkable that a powerful state should have no distinguished ancestry, and so what was unknown must be discovered or invented. There were some powerful reasons for looking to Greek antecedents. The Greek tradition went far back into the past, and was the best-known throughout the ancient world. Efforts were in fact made to link Rome with Greece. We find in Vergil that the Greek Evander was there at the site of Rome well before the city was established.

Despite the advantages of finding a link between early Rome and the Greek world, there were over-riding reasons for rejection of a possible Greek ancestry. The Greek world that Rome came to know was not the world of Pericles or Sophocles. It was a world described as Hellenistic, strongly influenced by Greek culture, but lacking the power and confidence of the 5th Century. To the Roman masters of the world Greeks seemed weak, disorganized, and unreliable, not a people to be admired or among whom suitable ancestors might be found.

In the Greek tradition, however, there was mention of another people, once powerful but now vanished. Since nothing was known of them after the destruction of their city, there was no evidence to refute the notion that survivors might have sailed west and founded Rome. These people were the Trojans, and it was in Troy that Roman antecedents were found. As the story went, most of the Trojan heroes perished with their city, but one distinguished figure did not. This was Aeneas, a prince who had the added distinction of divine ancestry. Even in the Greek tradition there was much to be said for the Trojans. Few readers of Homer fail to admire the loyalty, courage, and self-sacrifice of the Trojan hero Hector. Such qualities were especially admirable to the Romans, and the general view of Trojans survives in another definition in the O.E.D: "Trojan: a brave or plucky fellow: a person of great energy and endurance."

Much of this pro-Trojan and anti-Greek view drew strength from a work known now to only a few scholars. Homer mentions a Trojan priest named Dares, and it came to be believed that Dares had written about the Trojan War long before Homer's Iliad had been composed. Whether or not the original ever existed, somewhere around 500 A.D. an unknown Latin writer issued what purported to be a translation of the old Trojan account. This Latin version is brief, only about some twenty printed pages, and is a bare catalogue of events with little literary merit. It may be, however, that the brevity and prose form of this work help to explain its appeal in an age when literature and scholarship were undergoing an eclipse in western Europe.

Just as the Romans had sought to connect their ancestry with ancient tradition, so did their successors, and the work of Dares became very like a sacred text in Europe. Thus Fredegarius, in the 7th century, describes how Trojan survivors had settled between the Rhine, the Danube, and the North Sea to become the ancestors of the Franks. This was an official as well as a literary tradition, and King Dagobert (629-39) describes his Franks as 'ex nobilissimo et antiquo Troianorum reliquiarum sanguine nati.' The tradition of Trojan ancestry, based on Dares' account, grew more popular as the centuries passed, and is perhaps best expressed in the Romance of Troy of Benoît de Sainte-Maure, in the 12th century. In the next century Benoît's work was adapted and turned into Latin, and this version was so popular that it in turn was translated back into French, as well as Italian, German, Danish, Icelandic, Czech, Scots, and English. But, for English speakers, the most interesting part of this story concerns their own ancestors. The first printed book in English was Caxton's version of the History of Troy, and the legend of a Trojan ancestor goes back much earlier, at least to Mennius, about 800, and Geoffrey of Monmouth in the 12th century. The story was that Brutus, a son or great-grandson of Aeneas, came to Britain and founded a new Troy on the banks of the Thames, in a land previously inhabited only by giants. From Brutus, of course, the British took their name; Scotland too could boast of Trojan ancestry, and there were German, Flemish and Irish versions of the tale. Most of these versions go back, directly or indirectly, to the work ascribed to Dares. Seldom, if ever, has a book of so little intrinsic merit had such a wide influence: in the western tradition the great Roman writers had their importance, but it was far outweighed by that of the unknown Dares.

NOTE: Anyone interested in reading more about Dares and his influence on western literature might well start with Gilbert Highet's The Classical Tradition, Oxford 1949, page 50 ff.