

Ancient Epic: Homer and Vergil

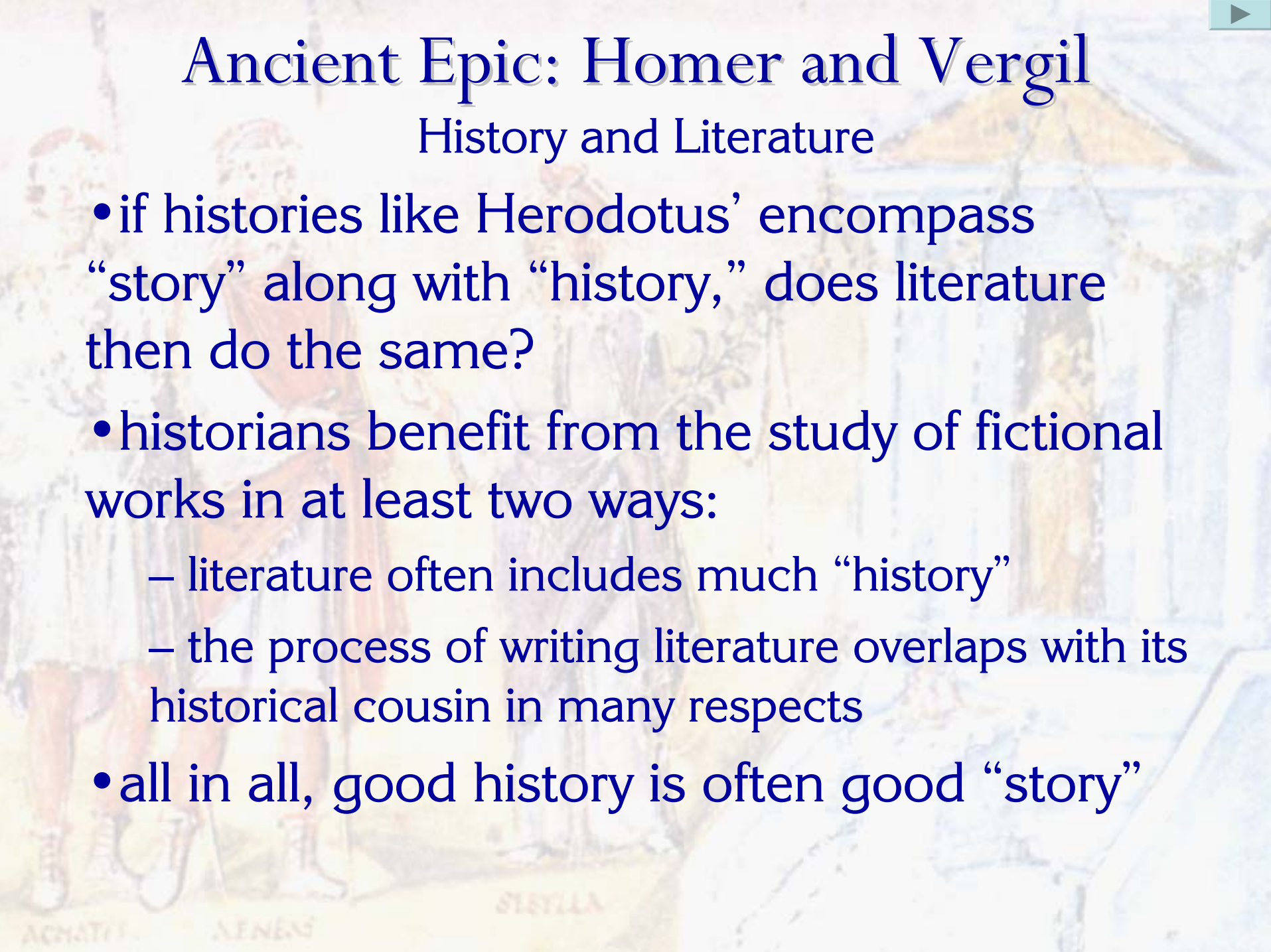
History and Literature



Ancient Epic: Homer and Vergil

History and Literature

- if histories like Herodotus' encompass “story” along with “history,” does literature then do the same?
- historians benefit from the study of fictional works in at least two ways:
 - literature often includes much “history”
 - the process of writing literature overlaps with its historical cousin in many respects
- all in all, good history is often good “story”



Ancient Epic: Homer and Vergil

History and Literature

- two of the best creators of fiction in western literature are **Homer** and **Vergil**
- let's examine their works from a historian's perspective and see what they teach us about what-really-happened-in-the-past



Ancient Epic: Homer and Vergil

Homer

- Quintilian: “Homer is the river from which all literature flows.”
- high quality of poetry: flashbacks, character development, pathos
- to many, he’s both the first and the best Western author



Ancient Epic: Homer and Vergil

Homer

- *The Iliad*

- the earliest preserved **epic** in Western literature
 - an epic is a long narrative poem involving heroic struggle, gods, and often the conquest of death
- set entirely at the walled city of **Troy (Ilium)**
- **Achilles, Agamemnon, Hector, Priam**
- centers around Achilles' anger and his refusal to fight after Agamemnon shames him in public
- does *not* tell the story of the **Trojan Horse** or the **Sack of Troy!**

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Homer

- *The Odyssey*

- in the aftermath of the Trojan War, **Odysseus** (**Ulysses**) returns home

- Odysseus makes it home safely to **Penelope**
- unlike Agamemnon who is killed by his wife **Clytemnestra**



Ancient Epic: Homer and Vergil

Homer

- the gods are major players in both epics
 - e.g. **Zeus** and **Hera**, the King and Queen of Olympus
 - equated with the Roman deities **Jupiter** and **Juno**
 - but unlike God in the Old Testament, these divinities are sometimes treated comically
 - e.g. “The Seduction of Zeus” (*Iliad*, Book 14)
- Homer also explores the tragic side of life
 - e.g. “Odysseus and Argus” (*Odyssey*, Book 17)

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Homer

- Who is Homer?
 - little is known: birthplace? date of birth?
 - he probably was blind
- **Milman Parry**: Homer was an oral bard
 - explains repetitive formulas (**oral formulas**)
 - and also the frequency of **weak joins**
- So how was Homer's text preserved?
 - through **rhapsodes** (“stitchers of song”)?
 - but do we have Homer's actual text?

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Homer and History

- does Homer's work preserve "history"?
 - Unlikely, because Homer:
 - was probably blind
 - lived three dark and illiterate centuries after the fact
 - made a living as an entertainer, not a historian
 - on the other hand, there could be echoes of what-really-happened historically in his work
 - he records accurately the armor of that day
 - cf. Medieval bards who got many things right historically
 - epic was all Homer's society had as a means of remembering their past, which made it valuable

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Homer and History

- the question then is which details are “what-really-happened” and which are “invented history”
 - Troy itself may even have been a real place, as we’ll see in the next Section of the class
 - but exactly the way Homer describes the city?
- finally, even if it is an invented history, Homer’s work preserves the desires and values of a society, and those *per se* are important historical truths

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Vergil

- **Vergil** is Rome's greatest poet
- much reliable biographical information
 - 70-19 BCE; cf. Julius Caesar
 - e.g. middle-class but well educated
 - slow and meticulous perfectionist
- however, very little reliable evidence is preserved about his private life, suggesting he probably didn't have much of one



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Vergil's *Aeneid*

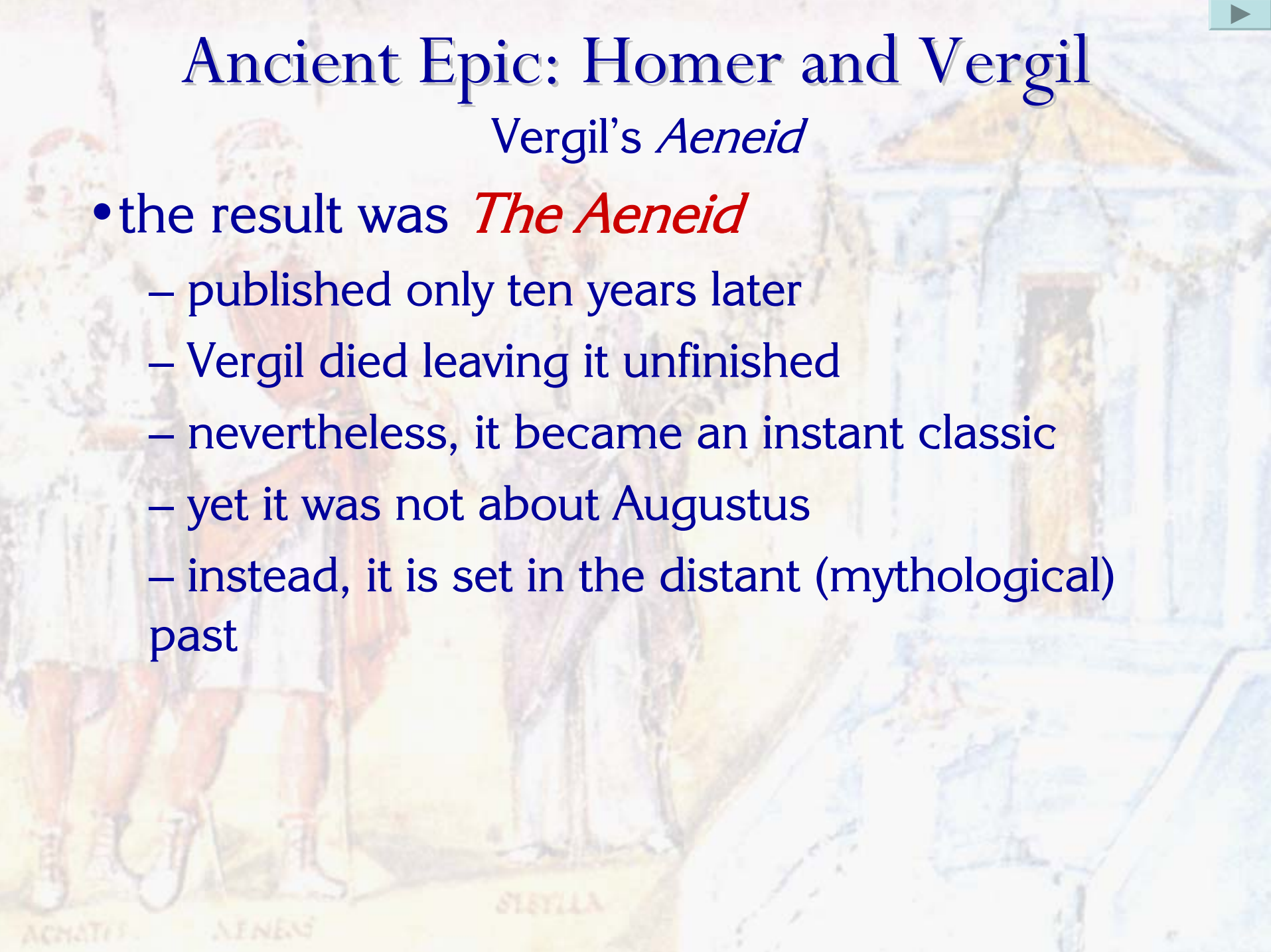
- early in his career, Vergil wrote pastoral poetry (about life in the country)
- in the early 20's BCE, the Roman emperor **Augustus** commissioned Vergil to write an epic poem glorifying Rome



Ancient Epic: Homer and Vergil

Vergil's *Aeneid*

- the result was *The Aeneid*
 - published only ten years later
 - Vergil died leaving it unfinished
 - nevertheless, it became an instant classic
 - yet it was not about Augustus
 - instead, it is set in the distant (mythological) past



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Vergil's *Aeneid*

- the central character is **Aeneas**
 - problem for Vergil: Aeneas in Homer's *Iliad* is a braggart and a coward
 - at one point, his mother **Venus** has to save him from being killed in battle
 - Vergil's solution: ***pius Aeneas***
- twelve “books” of *The Aeneid*
 - vs. 48 (24 + 24) of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*
 - thus, *The Aeneid* is a “miniaturized” Homeric epic

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Vergil's *Aeneid*, Book 1

- Vergil leaps *in medias res* (“in the middle of things”)
 - Aeneas is caught in a storm sent by Juno to destroy him ([Book 1](#))
 - n.b. Aeneas is depressed and suicidal
 - he and his ragged band of Trojan refugees wash up on the shores of North Africa where he meets **Dido**, the Queen of **Carthage**



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Vergil's *Aeneid*, Book 2

- Dido hosts Aeneas and his men at a banquet and then asks him to tell the assembled crowd how Troy fell

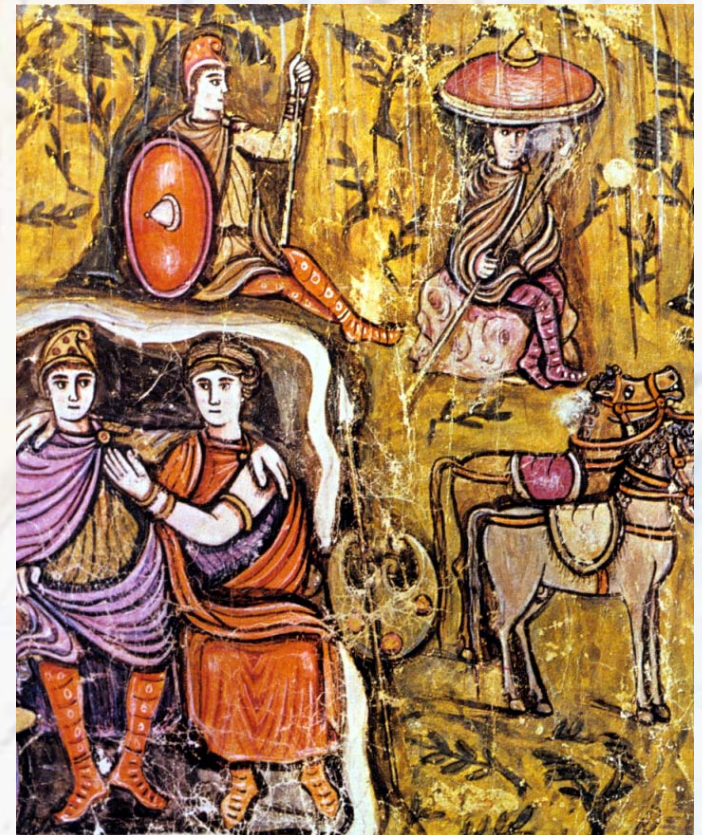
- again, Vergil's focus is psychological as Aeneas “relives” the Sack of Troy
- at the climax of [Book 2](#), Aeneas recalls having seen **Priam** killed by **Pyrrhus**
- Priam's death recalls **Pompey's** murder



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Vergil's *Aeneid*, Book 3-5

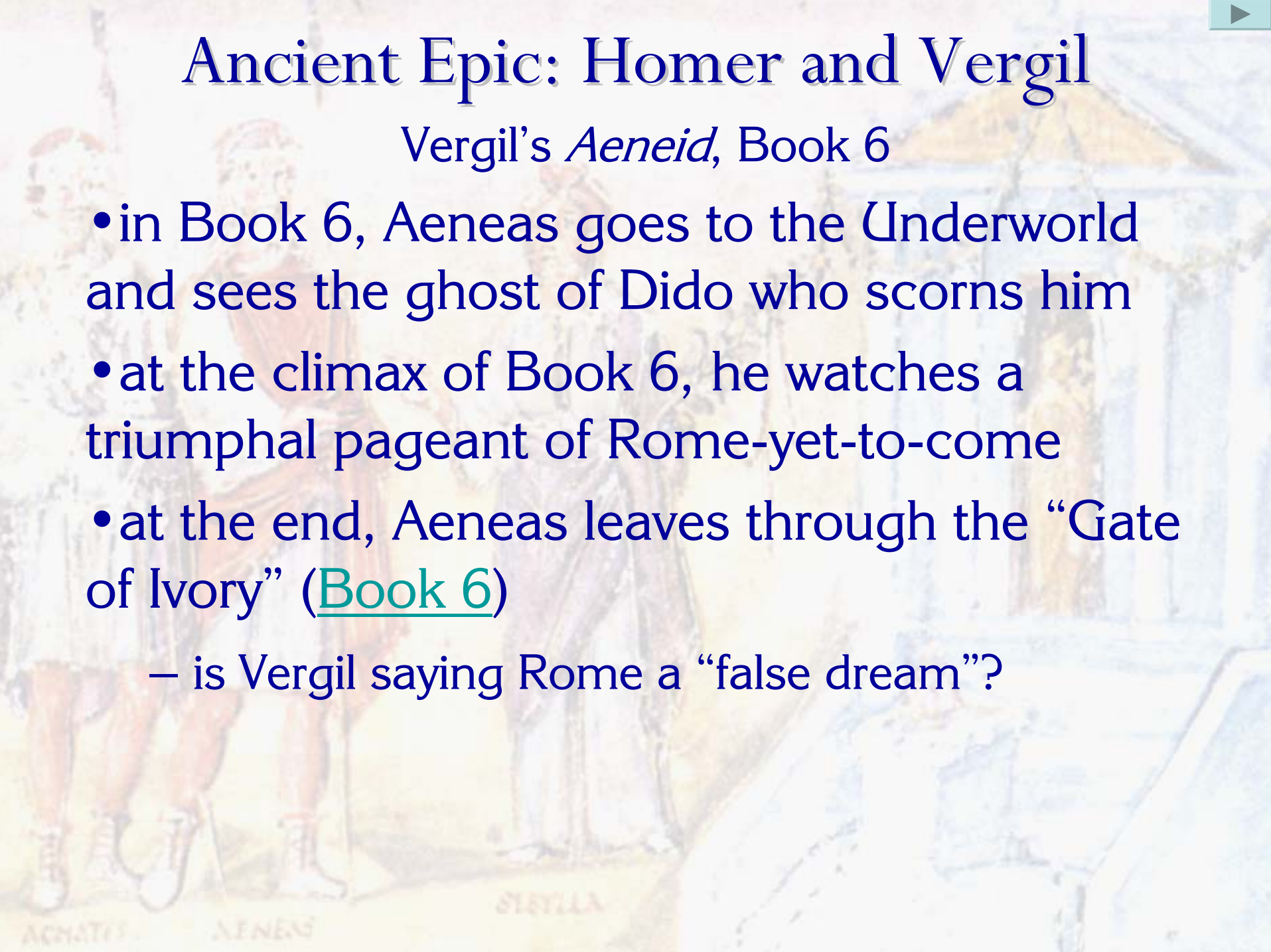
- Aeneas and Dido have an intense love affair but duty calls and the gods order Aeneas to serve a higher calling, the founding of Rome
- Dido begs him to stay in Carthage but he refuses and leaves
- Dido commits suicide



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Vergil's *Aeneid*, Book 6

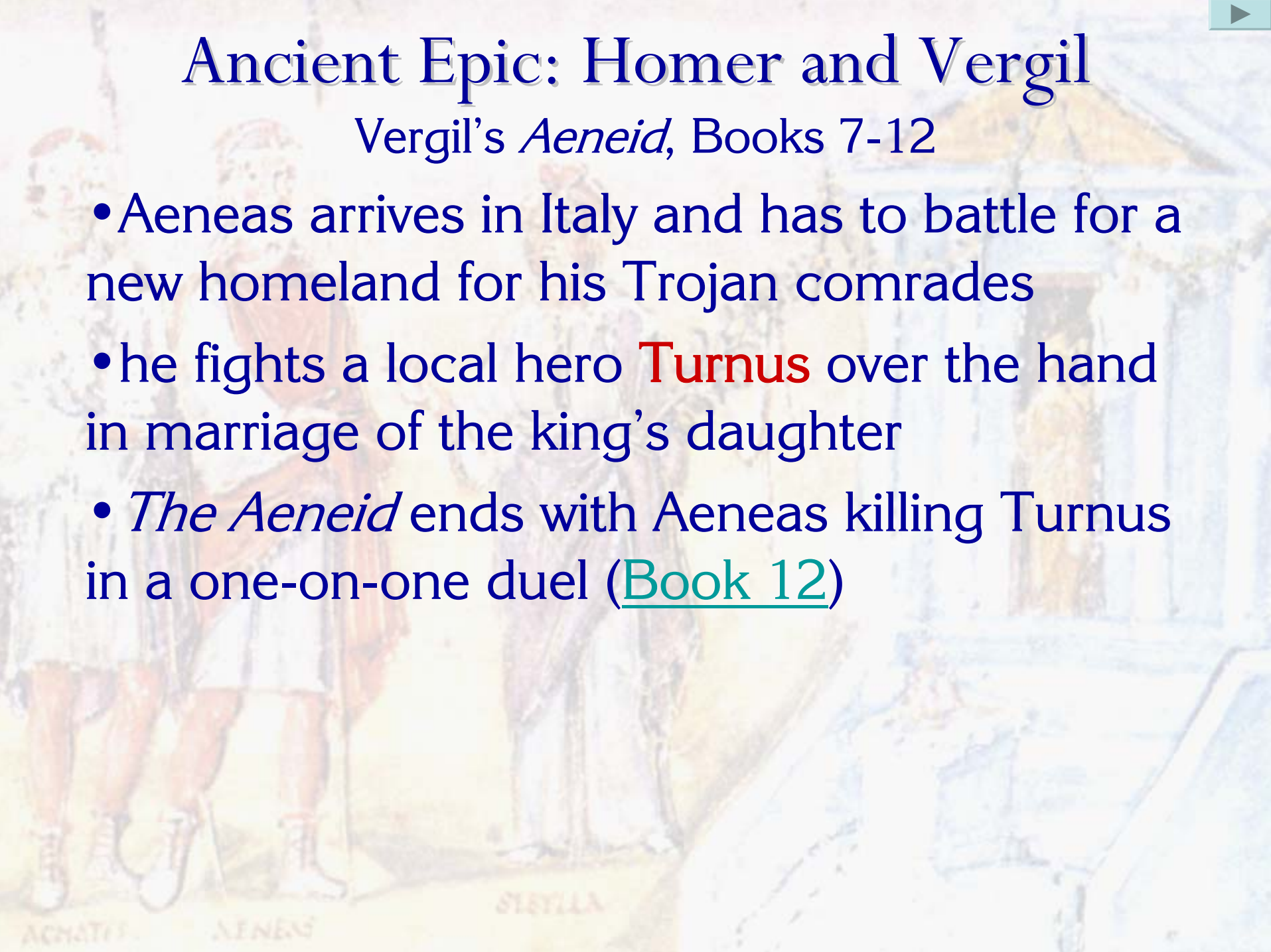
- in Book 6, Aeneas goes to the Underworld and sees the ghost of Dido who scorns him
- at the climax of Book 6, he watches a triumphal pageant of Rome-yet-to-come
- at the end, Aeneas leaves through the “Gate of Ivory” ([Book 6](#))
 - is Vergil saying Rome a “false dream”?



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Vergil's *Aeneid*, Books 7-12

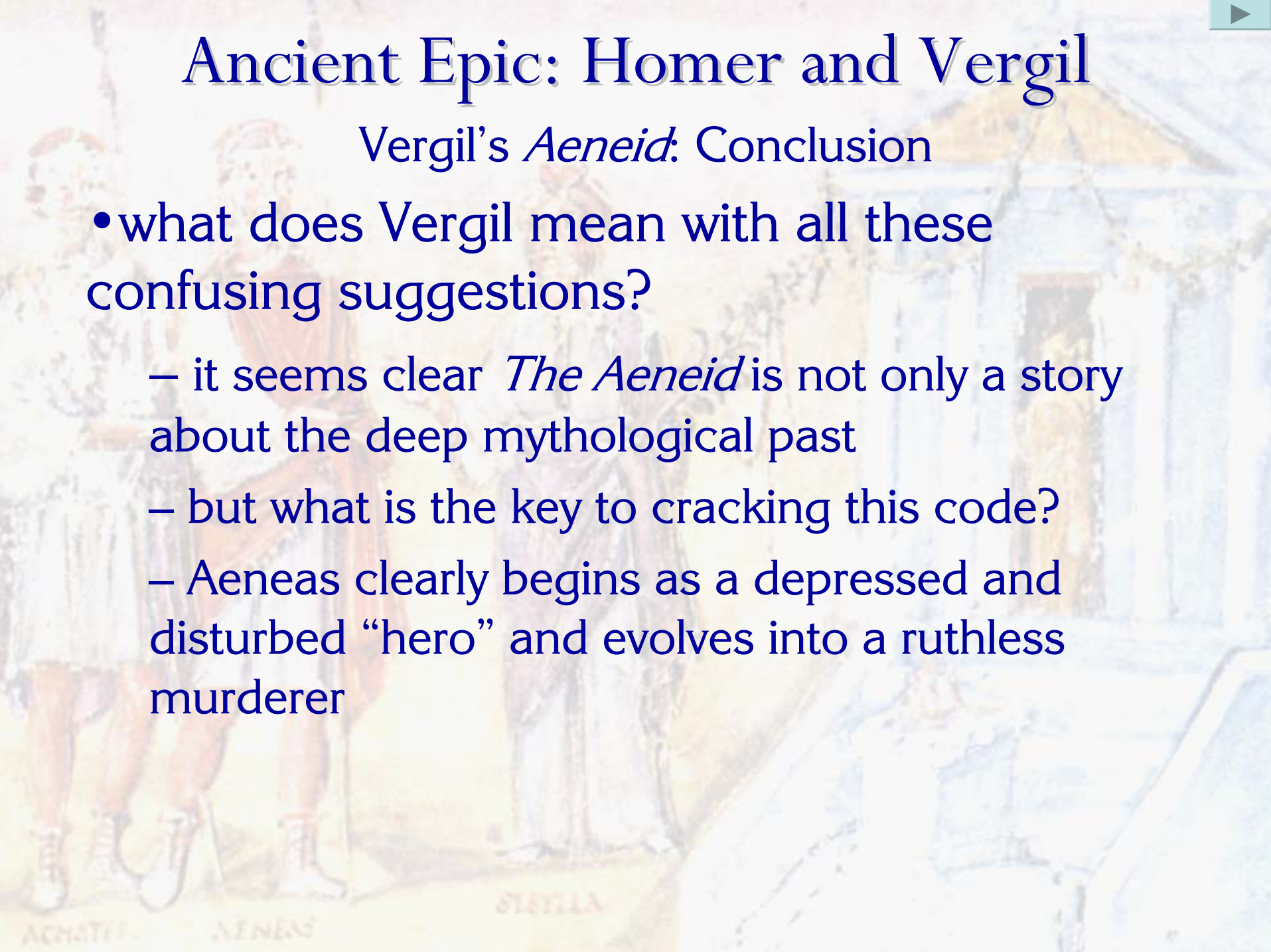
- Aeneas arrives in Italy and has to battle for a new homeland for his Trojan comrades
- he fights a local hero **Turnus** over the hand in marriage of the king's daughter
- *The Aeneid* ends with Aeneas killing Turnus in a one-on-one duel ([Book 12](#))



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Vergil's *Aeneid*: Conclusion

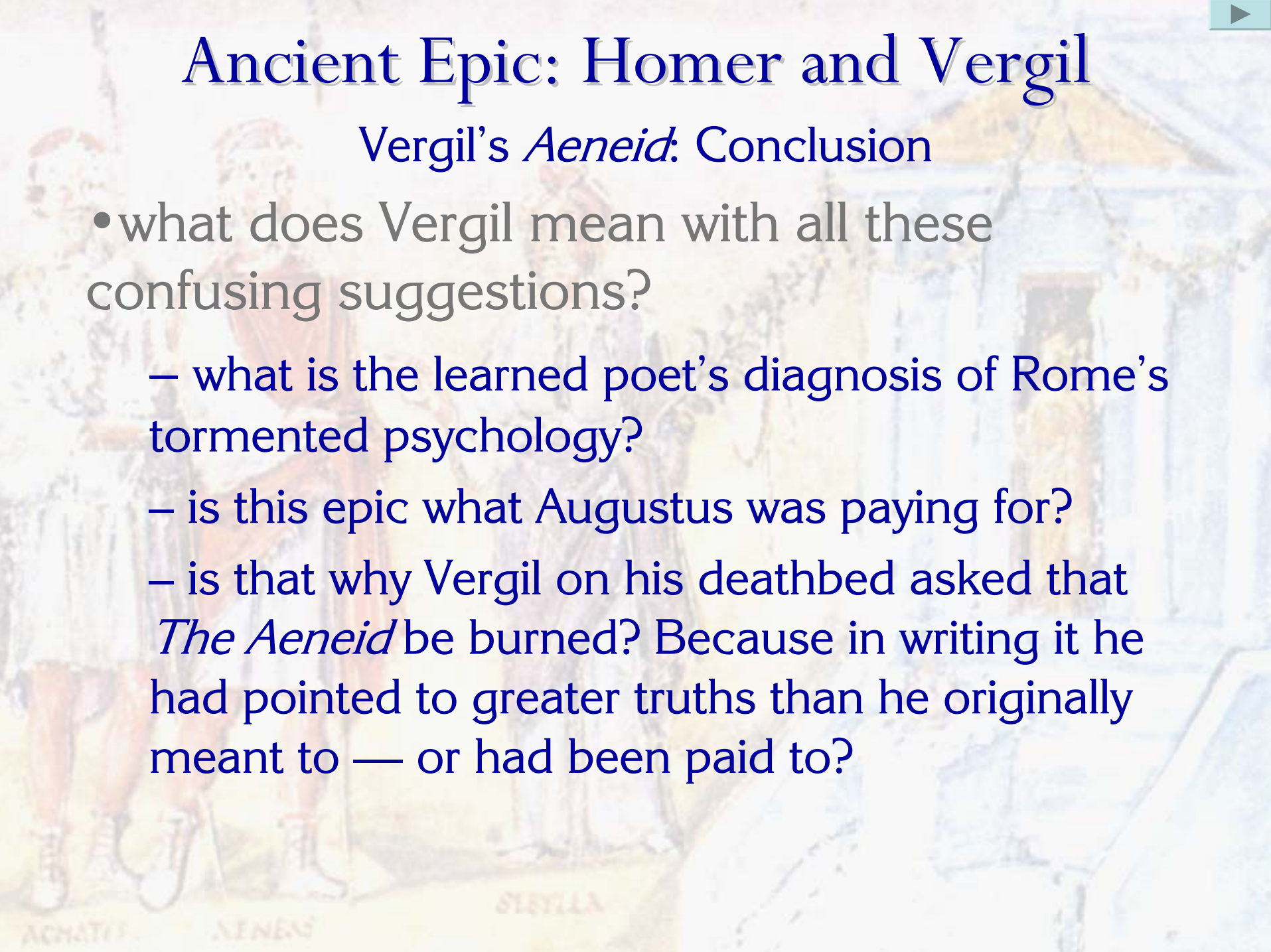
- what does Vergil mean with all these confusing suggestions?
 - it seems clear *The Aeneid* is not only a story about the deep mythological past
 - but what is the key to cracking this code?
 - Aeneas clearly begins as a depressed and disturbed “hero” and evolves into a ruthless murderer



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Vergil's *Aeneid*: Conclusion

- what does Vergil mean with all these confusing suggestions?
 - what is the learned poet's diagnosis of Rome's tormented psychology?
 - is this epic what Augustus was paying for?
 - is that why Vergil on his deathbed asked that *The Aeneid* be burned? Because in writing it he had pointed to greater truths than he originally meant to — or had been paid to?



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Conclusion: History and Literature

- great questions are what great literature brings to the feast of history
 - fiction can reveal very real facets of the past abstracted as myth and fantasy
- for instance, Homer shows how early the human heart formed, where a noble dog's death is worth a “salt tear”
 - and those at the top don't always comport themselves with the dignity of their position
 - so, is this Homer's version of “chaos theory”?

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Conclusion: History and Literature

- in a very different way, Vergil gives voice to the murmurs of discontented “slaves” who work for the regime oppressing them
- if literature cannot stand alone as a gateway to the past, it enriches and brings a healthy confusion to our assessment of history
 - and even if that doesn’t actually take us nearer to what-*literally*-happened, it shows the psychological complexity underlying the ways in which the past has unfolded