



## [Tibullus, \*Elegies\* II.5.39-62](#)

Prophecy of the Sibyl on the destiny of Rome.

**Name of the author:** Tibullus

**Date:** 19 BCE

**Date:** 1st BCE

**Language:** Latin

**Category:** Roman

**Literary genre:** Poetry

**Title of work:** *Elegies*

**Reference:**

II.5.39-62

### **Commentary:**

Books 1 and 2 of Tibullus's *Elegies* open with a dedication to Tibullus's literary patron, M. Valerius Messala Corvinus, a senator who crossed over from Antony to Octavian after Philippi, and who was then designated consul (with Octavian) in 31 BCE, before leading a fleet at the battle of Actium. Tibullus was a member of Messala's literary circle (as the young Ovid), but he also followed him into some military operations. Even if Tibullus never mentions explicitly Augustus, nor Actium in his poems, some of his elegies seem connected with political themes. Tibullus wanted both to praise some aspects of the Augustan ideology, but also to please his literary patron. The poem *Elegy* II.5 meets these two criteria.

In *Elegy* II.5, Tibullus addresses an hymn to Apollo to celebrate the induction of Messala's son, M. Valerius Messala Messalinus, among the *quindecimviri sacris faciundis* (the college of the "fifteen men for the performance of sacred rites") who were in charge of the Sibylline books. This election occurred in 19 BCE – the year of Tibullus's death. Among Tibullus's work, this elegy has probably the longer development on some main themes of Augustan ideology before the Secular Games of 17 BCE: as for instance the emphasis on the importance of the Sibylline oracles and of the members of the *quindecimviri sacris faciundis* (v. 1-18), and also the excursus on the foundation and early history of Rome (v. 19-64; Maltby, *Tibullus*, p. 53). Our text comes after an introductory part in which Tibullus asks Apollo to welcome and to help Messalinus in the sacred priesthood (v. 1-18). Then, after an interesting depiction of the site of the future Rome ([v. 19-38](#)), Tibullus quotes the prophecy that the Sibyl would have addressed to Aeneas (v. 39-64).

Our text is thus a large excerpt from this prophecy in which the Sibyl forecasts Aeneas's successful settlement in Italy and Rome's greatness. As Robert Maltby underlines, the theme of the prediction on the destiny of Rome is a very common theme in Augustan poetry (see the references in Murgatroyd, *Tibullus*, p. 192). The Sibyl's prediction in Tibullus and the prophecy addressed by the god Tiberinus in [Virgil, \*Aeneid\* VIII.36-65](#) share a common point, they both open with a reference to Aeneas's divine descent. Tibullus uses the expression "brother of winged Love" (v. 39) to refer to the fact that Aeneas was the son of Venus and thus the brother of Cupid. It is interesting to note that, with Virgil, *Aeneid* I.667, it is one of the first specific reference to Aeneas's divine kinship (see Maltby, *Tibullus*, p. 444).

Then, Tibullus's Sibyl explicitly says that it is Jupiter who gave to Aeneas the "Laurentine fields" (v. 41), that is the land situated on the left bank of the Tiber where Aeneas would have founded the "Laurentum's fort" (mentioned v. 49). Tibullus's association of Jupiter's will with Aeneas's destiny, implicit in the prophecy of Jupiter in [Virgil, \*Aeneid\* I.257-296](#), is made obvious in Tibullus to prove Aeneas's legitimacy to become the founder of Lavinium (mentioned v. 49). In verses 45 to 54, Tibullus's Sibyl put some spotlights on the mythical Trojan origins of Rome. First she insists on the fact that Aeneas's destiny was fated to succeed. To support her position, she uses the image of the winged Victory escorting Aeneas's boat (v. 45-46); and she forecasts Aeneas's victory over the Rutuli and their chief Turnus (v. 47-48). Then, the Sibyl presents the main places associated with the expansion of the Trojans' influence, in order to connect Aeneas (the founder of the Laurentum's fort and of Lavinium) and his son Ascanius (the founder of Alba Longa, v. 50) to Ilia or Rhea Silvia (v. 51-54), who was the mother of Romulus



and Remus and who was also the daughter of the thirteen king of Alba Longa.

Verses 55 to 62 are the most interesting because they deal with Rome's future expansion. With an apostrophe to some bulls located in the place of the future Rome (v. 55), Tibullus's Sibyl starts with a pastoral reference which echoes [verse 25](#), when Tibullus depicts Rome's original location with cows "grazing then a grassy Palatine." Thus, the Sibyl highlights the contrast between this pastoral landscape and the fact that, in this place, a mighty city, *magna Urbs*, will be built. As Paul Maltby recalls, the use of the expression *magna urbs* to symbolize the city of Rome appears also in Virgil, *Aeneid* VI.872 which mentions "the mighty city of Mars," *magna Mavortis urbs* (Maltby, *Tibullus*, p. 449).

The next sentence, "Rome, the name predestined to rule the world" (*Roma, tuum nomen terris fatale regendis*, v. 57) is very interesting as it explicitly deals with the ideological foundations of Rome's greatness. As Paul Maltby recalls, the Sibyl alludes here to the etymological origin of the word *Roma*, and to the fact that the Romans thought that it derived from the Greek word *ῥομή*, meaning "strength" (for the references, see Maltby, *Tibullus*, p. 449; Murgatroyd, *Tibullus*, p. 202). The use of the word *fatale* implies that Rome is predestined to rule the world and to be an imperial power. This idea was also developed in various passages of the *Aeneid*, as in Jupiter's prophecy ([I.286-287](#)), in Anchises's prophecy in the Underworld ([VI.781-784](#), [794-805](#)) and in the depiction of the scenes represented on the shield given by Venus to Aeneas, especially the depiction of the triumphs which will be celebrated by Augustus after Actium, triumphs which are represented as a sort of procession of all the nations ([VIII.714-728](#)) (Maltby, *Tibullus*, p. 449; Murgatroyd, *Tibullus*, p. 202). However, Jane Burkowski remarks that the word *fatale* in Tibullus's elegy could be understood in a different way. Actually, as the Sibyl further emphasizes the exceptional dimensions of Rome's dominion, the use of the word *fatale* may also be understood as "fatal to the lands it is destined to rule" (Burkowski, "Apollo," p. 164).

In verses 58-60, the Sibyl gives some details about the scope of Rome's territorial domination. She forecasts that Rome's power will extend to all cultivated lands, here embodied by Ceres, the goddess of agriculture, harvests and fecundity. Representing the goddess looking upon the Earth from heaven, Tibullus's Sibyl gives to Ceres a role which is more often that of Jupiter (as we can see in Ovid, *Fasti* I.85-86; Maltby, *Tibullus*, p. 449). Afterwards, the Sibyl forecasts that Rome's future empire will extend to the whole Earth, that is from the lands where the sun rises (*quaque patent ortus*, v. 59), to the "the tidal stream" (*fluantes undae*, v. 59) of the Ocean (*amnis*, v. 60) in which the Sun-God is said to "bathe" his chariot of "panting steeds" (*anhelantes ... equos*, v. 60). As Robert Maltby recalls, the theme of the Sun-God washing the horses of his chariot in the Ocean is quite common and can be found in Virgil, *Georgics* III.359 or in Ovid, *Metamorphoses* IV.633-634 (Maltby, *Tibullus*, p. 450). Thus, with this image, the Sibyl forecasts that the dimensions of Rome's future empire will be so huge that its boundaries will follow the course of the sun from the Levant to its setting in the Ocean.

To conclude her prediction about Rome's future domination, the Sibyl ends by saying that Troy will be amazed by Rome's greatness (v. 61). The Sibyl makes Troy speak to herself and express her gratitude to Aeneas who "served her well by so long wandering" (v. 61). Tibullus's Sibyl revives a well known theme of Augustan poetry: Rome's foundation was a sort of rebirth of Troy (see Virgil, *Aeneid* XII.829-840; Ovid, *Fasti* I.523-526; Propertius, *Elegies* IV.1.47, 53-54, 87; for the references see Murgatroyd, *Tibullus*, p. 204-205, Maltby, *Tibullus*, p. 450).

Keywords in the original language:

- [Aeneas](#)
- [Alba](#)
- [amnis](#)
- [arvum](#)
- [Ascanius](#)
- [barbarus](#)
- [caelum](#)
- [Ceres](#)
- [diva](#)
- [equus](#)
- [fatalis](#)
- [hospitus](#)



- [Ilia](#)
- [Iupiter](#)
- [lares](#)
- [Laurens](#)
- [Lavinium](#)
- [magna urbs](#)
- [nomen](#)
- [ortus](#)
- [regendo](#)
- [Roma](#)
- [Rutuli](#)
- [septem montes](#)
- [Sol](#)
- [taurus](#)
- [terra](#)
- [Troia](#)
- [Troianus](#)
- [Troicus](#)
- [Turnus](#)
- [unda](#)
- [victoria](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [Aeneas](#)
- [Ascanius](#)
- [expansion](#)
- [fate](#)
- [prophecy](#)
- [Rhea Silvia](#)
- [Roman future](#)
- [Roman hegemony](#)
- [Rome \(city\)](#)
- [Rome \(foundation\)](#)
- [Seven Hills of Rome](#)
- [Sibyl](#)
- [sun god](#)
- [Troy](#)
- [Universe](#)
- [Victoria \(goddess of victory\)](#)

**Bibliographical references:** Murgatroyd, Paul, [Tibullus, Elegies. II](#) (edition with introduction and comment; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994)

Maltby, Robert, [Tibullus: Elegies. Text, introduction and commentary](#) (Cambridge: Francis Cairns, 2002)

Burkowski, Jane, "[Apollo in Tibullus 2.3 and 2.5](#)", in *Augustan poetry and the irrational* (ed. Philip Hardie; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 155-169

**Other sources connected with this document:** Text

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Text

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Text

### [Virgil, Aeneid VIII.26-65](#)

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Text

### [Virgil, Aeneid VI.756-853](#)

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Text

### [Virgil, Aeneid VIII.615-731](#)

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