



## AN ALLUSION TO THE BLINDING OF APPIUS CLAUDIUS CAECUS IN *AENEID* BOOK 8?\*

### ABSTRACT

*This article argues that Virgil includes an allusion to the fourth-century censor Appius Claudius Caecus in Book 8 of the Aeneid. Three pieces of evidence point to this allusion: (1) wordplay, especially the near echo of ‘Caecus’ in ‘Cacus’; (2) semantic associations between Cacus and darkness; and (3) repeated references to sight and Cacus’ eyes. By invoking the memory of Appius, whose blinding in 312 B.C.E. allegedly came at the hands of Hercules as punishment for transferring control of the god’s rites at the Ara Maxima to the state, Virgil underscores the importance of properly observing religious rituals. This aligns with Evander’s original intent with the Hercules–Cacus story to prove to Aeneas and the Trojans that the Arcadians’ religious practices are no uana superstitio (8.187).*

**Keywords:** Virgil; *Aeneid*; Hercules; Cacus; Appius Claudius Caecus

The history of Hercules’ cult at the Ara Maxima is marred by a curious incident in 312 B.C.E., when the censor at the time, Appius Claudius Caecus, transferred control of the cult from two private families, the Potitii and the Pinarii, to the state.<sup>1</sup> According to the ancient sources, Hercules was so enraged by this unauthorized move that he blinded the censor, giving Appius his famous cognomen, Caecus.<sup>2</sup> Although the blinding of Appius Claudius Caecus never appears directly in Roman authors’ accounts of the origins of the Ara Maxima, I suggest that we can detect a handful of allusions to this episode in Virgil’s account of the Hercules–Cacus myth in Book 8 of the *Aeneid*.

Virgil alludes to Appius in three ways: with wordplay, with semantic associations between Cacus and darkness, and with a repeated emphasis on sight and Cacus’ eyes. In the first place, one cannot help but wonder whether ancient readers would have heard in the name ‘Cacus’ a play on ‘Caecus’. After all, variant spellings of Cacus’

\* For comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this paper, I extend my sincere thanks to the participants in the 2017 Princeton University conference *Religion and the State in Classical Greece and Rome*, Dan-el Padilla Peralta and CQ’s anonymous reader.

<sup>1</sup> Potitii and Pinarii: Diod. Sic. 4.21.2; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 1.40.4; Livy 1.7.12–14; Verg. *Aen.* 8.269–70; [Aur. Vict.] *Origo gentis Romanae* 8.4; Festus, *Gloss. Lat.* 4.343 Lindsay.

<sup>2</sup> *censorem etiam [Appium] memori deum ira post aliquot annos luminibus captum* (‘even the censor Appius, on account of the mindful anger of the god, lost his sight a few years later’, Livy 9.29.10); *Appius uero luminibus captus est* (‘Appius, moreover, lost his sight’, Val. Max. 1.1.17); cf. Serv. *Aen.* 8.270. For discussion of these passages and the significance of this story, see H.-F. Mueller, ‘The extinction of the Potitii and the sacred history of Augustan Rome’, in D.S. Levene and D.P. Nelis (edd.), *Clio and the Poets: Augustan Poetry and the Traditions of Ancient Historiography* (Leiden, 2002), 313–29. T.P. Wiseman, *Clio’s Cosmetics: Three Studies in Greco-Roman Literature* (Leicester, 1979), 57–139 has suggested, however, that these reports may have been manufactured by a later author intent on maligning the censor Appius, and this one author’s bias then seeped into subsequent accounts by future annalists.

name are preserved among ancient authors such as Diodorus, who relates that the individual known as Cacus was actually a certain Caci (Diod. Sic. 4.21.2). Modern scholars have likewise been willing to see echoes of Cacus in another differently spelled name—specifically, that of the Praenestine king Caeculus who appears in Book 7 of the *Aeneid*.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps more compellingly, scholars have also suggested associations in the *Aeneid* between the name ‘Cacus’ and the adjective *caecus*. M. Paschalis has proposed that the description of Cacus’ cave in Book 8 (*Caci | ... umbrosae penitus ... cauernae*, 8.241–2) recalls the description of the Trojan Horse’s wooden belly in Book 2 (*caeco ... penitusque cauernas*, 2.19), and thus *Caci* is linked with *caeco*.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, K.W. Gransden argued that in Virgil’s description of Cacus’ ‘blinding darkness’ (*caligine caeca*, 8.253), the adjective *caeca* may be a wordplay on the name Cacus.<sup>5</sup> By this logic, there is no reason not to see an inverse relationship between Cacus and Appius Claudius Caecus, where Cacus is a wordplay on Caecus, so that *caeca* can just as easily recall Caecus as Cacus. The evocation of Caecus in Cacus, as opposed to Cacus in *caeca*, is all the more suggestive since both words have masculine endings. This latter reading gains further support through Virgil’s seeming etymological gloss for Cacus’ blinding darkness—namely, that it ‘snatches all sight away from the eyes’ (*prospectum eripiens oculis*, 8.254). Cacus, in other words, generates something *caeca* that can then make someone *caecus*/Caecus.

Cacus’ *caligine caeca*, however, is only one of many ways in which the monster embodies darkness, a quality that defines loss of sight. As Evander first directs Aeneas’ attention to the monster’s cave, he emphasizes its dark qualities: the cave, hidden away in a deep recess (*uasto ... recessu*, 8.193), is inaccessible to the sun (*solis inaccessam radiis*, 8.195).<sup>6</sup> The pale faces of men hanging from the cave’s entryway (*ora ... pallida*, 8.197) are marked by a colourlessness typical of descriptions associated with the Underworld, including a description that appears less than fifty lines later (*infernas ... sedes et regna ... | pallida*, 8.244–5).<sup>7</sup> Even the flames that Cacus himself pours forth are described as black (*atros*, 8.198). As the tale progresses, the cave’s darkness looms larger: when Cacus steals Hercules’ cattle, he hides them within the rocky gloom (*saxo occultabat opaco*, 8.211). When Hercules assaults the cave, he is depicted as laying bare the shadowy cavern (*umbrosae penitus patuere cauernae*, 8.242), wielding light as his weapon (*trepident immisso lumine Manes. | ergo insperata deprensam luce repente*, 8.246–7). Once Hercules commences his physical assault on the cave, the

<sup>3</sup> Verg. *Aen.* 7.678–81, with discussion about his similarities to Cacus in C.J. Fordyce, *P. Vergilii Maronis Aeneidos libri VII–VIII* (Oxford, 1977), ad loc. See also G. Radke, *Die Götter altitaliens* (Münster, 1965), 75–7, who refers to Cacus as the ‘namesake’ (*Namensvetter*) of Caeculus. Given the rivalry between Praeneste and Rome, dating back to the Latin War of the early fourth century B.C.E., using Cacus to invoke the memory of Caeculus would also make sense, especially since Praeneste was caught up in, and was on the losing side of, another civil war in the first century B.C.E., between Marius and Sulla; see A. Brelich, *Tre variazioni romane sul tema delle origini* (Rome, 1976<sup>2</sup>), 17–55.

<sup>4</sup> M. Paschalis, *Virgil’s Aeneid: Semantic Relations and Proper Names* (Oxford, 1997), 289–90 (§8.3.3).

<sup>5</sup> K.W. Gransden, *Virgil Aeneid Book VIII* (Cambridge, 1976), ad loc.

<sup>6</sup> Gransden (n. 5), ad loc. notes that *inaccessam* is a rare word and a Virgilian coinage, appearing also at *Aen.* 7.11–12: *diues inaccessos ubi Solis filia lucos | adsiduo resonat cantu*. Whereas Cacus’ cave is inaccessible to the rays of the sun in Book 8, in Book 7 the rich daughter of the Sun (Circe) causes the inaccessible groves to echo with her constant singing.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Lucr.* 1.456 *ditis profundi pallida regna*; *Tib.* 1.10.38 *pallida turba*.

density of dark descriptors intensifies: Cacus first veils his dwelling in a blinding darkness (*inuoluitque domum caligine caeca*, 8.253), and he then wraps himself up in his cave's smoke-filled night, where its blackness is mixed with flames (*glomeratque sub antro | fumiferam noctem commixtis igne tenebris*, 8.254–5). As Hercules pushes deeper into the cave, Cacus redoubles his efforts to shroud it in darkness, so that the massive cave eventually seethes with a dark cloud (*nebulaque ingens specus aestuat atra*, 8.258). In the next line, Cacus appears in his final throes, vomiting forth useless fires amidst the darkness (*hic Cacus in tenebris incendia uana uomentem*, 8.259). Finally, after Hercules has choked the life out of his monstrous foe, he tears the doors off the black abode (*domus atra*, 8.262). Ultimately, this repeated emphasis on darkness throughout the passage strengthens the semantic links between Cacus and *caecus*/Caecus, recasting the conflict between Hercules and Cacus as one between light (vision) and dark (blindness).

The third and final piece of evidence in favour of an allusion to Appius Claudius Caecus in Book 8 comes from Virgil's repeated focus on Cacus' eyes, a physical feature of the monster that no other Augustan author even mentions. Most significantly, Virgil always refers to Cacus' eyes in response to some action undertaken by Hercules: when Hercules begins raging for his stolen cattle, Cacus is depicted with 'worried eyes' (*turbatumque oculis*,<sup>8</sup> 8.223); when Hercules finally kills Cacus, the monster's eyes pop out of his head (*elisos oculos*, 8.261); and when the Arcadians come to gaze upon the monster's corpse, they are struck by his 'fearsome eyes' (*terribilis oculos*, 8.266). It is suggestive, too, that in the first and last appearances of Cacus' eyes the monster and his eyes are being looked at by the Arcadians (*uidere*, 8.222; *tuendo*, 8.265), heightening the thematic significance of sight. In the end, Cacus, like Appius, is punished by Hercules with a literal loss of vision, and just as Appius' cognomen eternally associates the censor with his lost eyesight, so, too, is the enduring image of Virgil's Cacus one of a monster deprived of his eyes.

So, what does Virgil accomplish with this allusion? By referring to Appius' blinding in a passage that describes the origins of an early Roman religious practice, Virgil emphasizes the importance not merely of performing religious rituals but of performing them properly and with the assent of the god. After all, Evander's principal motive in recounting the myth in the first place is to demonstrate to Aeneas and the Trojans the religious propriety of the Arcadians' practice, to prove that it is no *uana superstitio* (8.187) but rather, by implication, its converse: *religio*.<sup>9</sup> And, in a potential further nod to the plight of Appius, what imperative does Evander first direct at Aeneas as

<sup>8</sup> Although *turbatum oculis* is the reading transmitted in most manuscripts and is printed in R.A.B. Mynors, *P. Vergili Maronis opera* (Oxford, 1969), ad loc., Servius (*Aen.* 8.223), while seeming to endorse the reading of *oculis*, acknowledges an alternative tradition in which the reading is *oculi*, and thus the 'eyes' in question are presumably Evander's (*nostri ... oculi*). Gransden (n. 5), ad loc. likewise favours the reading of *oculi* for a couple of reasons: (1) the pairing of *nostri* and *oculi* gives the lines (8.222–3) an 'effective "enclosing word-order"', and (2) it inserts Evander into the story and heightens the sense of autopsy. Leaving *oculis*, however, retains the thematic emphasis on Cacus' eyes, which are a marked feature of the monster in his death. For a survey of the manuscript tradition, see L.M. Fratantuono and R.A. Smith, *Virgil, Aeneid 8. Text, Translation, and Commentary* (Leiden, 2018), ad loc., who suggest that the line is 'perhaps a textual crux that should never have been'.

<sup>9</sup> On the distinction, see e.g. Cic. *Nat. D.* 2.71–2, *Inu. rhet.* 2.165. For discussion of the distinction, see F. Santangelo, *Divination, Prediction and the End of the Roman Republic* (Cambridge, 2013), 38–47; C.A. Barton and D. Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion: How Modern Abstractions Hide Ancient Realities* (New York, 2016), 33–7.

he launches into the story about Hercules and Cacus? ‘Look!’ (*aspice*, 8.190). The myth in Virgil thus becomes a cautionary tale, a warning to all subsequent celebrants of Hercules’ rites to follow the prescribed ritual lest they arouse the god’s eye-popping rage.

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doi:10.1017/S0009838824000260