

The Vatican just digitized this 1,600-year-old epic

By **Steven Overly** July 8

Virgil wrote his classic poem, “The Aeneid,” more than 2,000 years ago. Thanks to the Vatican, you can now read one of the world’s oldest versions of the ancient Latin text online.

The Vatican Apostolic Library announced Friday that it has digitized a 1,600 year-old manuscript that contains “fragments” of the epic, which tells the tale of the ancient hero Aeneas as he ventures from Troy to Italy. The manuscript also includes portions of Virgil’s second major poem, “Georgics,” which is about agriculture and mankind’s struggle with nature.

Virgil originally wrote “Georgics” and “The Aeneid” between 29 and 19 B.C. The manuscript, which once likely contained the entirety of Virgil’s canonical work, was assembled several centuries later. It was studied by famed Italian painter Raphael during the Renaissance period, and finally donated to the Vatican Apostolic Library in 1602.

The digitization of the manuscript is part of a years-long effort to create electronic versions of the church’s oldest and most sacred texts. In all, that includes some 80,000 manuscripts comprised of 40 million pages being converted into 45 quadrillion bytes, according to Digita Vaticana, a nonprofit organization affiliated with the library that raises money for the project. “*Vergilius Vaticanus*” or “Vatican Virgil” is among the oldest documents to be digitized.

Tokyo-based information technology firm NTT DATA joined the project in 2014 with a contract to digitize 3,000 of the ancient manuscripts, including Vatican Virgil. “We are honored to use our state-of-the-art technology to help the Vatican Apostolic Library preserve these irreplaceable cultural treasures as a legacy for future generations,” NTT DATA President and CEO Toshio Iwamoto said in a statement.

NTT DATA used a specialized scanner that cradles the book so that individual pages can be scanned without opening the book binding to a full 180 degrees, which can be damaging to manuscripts this old. The pages were then scanned using ultraviolet-free rays, examined for quality by an inspector, and logged into a database alongside metadata about the text and imagery.

The first 200 donors who contribute at least 500 euros (roughly \$533 US) to the cause will get certified

reproductions of “Vatican Virgil,” as a part of Digita Vaticana’s efforts to continue raising money for the project.

“Our library is an important storehouse of the global culture of humankind,” Monsignor Cesare Pasini, Prefect of the Vatican Apostolic Library, said in a statement. “We are delighted the process of digital archiving will make these wonderful ancient manuscripts more widely available to the world and thereby strengthen the deep spirit of humankind’s shared universal heritage.”

Steven Overly anchors and edits The Washington Post's Innovations blog, where he explores emerging technologies and groundbreaking ideas. Since joining The Post in 2010, he has also covered technology policy and local business. Steven completed the Knight-Bagehot Fellowship in Economics and Business Journalism at Columbia University in 2016. [🐦 Follow @stevenoverly](#)

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