

Vatican library digitises 1,600-year-old edition of Virgil

Seventy-six pages and 50 illustrations from the great Latin epic made available to all, part of a project to put all its 80,000 manuscripts online

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The Vatican Apostolic Library has digitised one of the world's oldest manuscripts, an illustrated fragment of Virgil's Aeneid that dates back 1,600 years.

Created in Rome around 400AD, the Vatican Virgil consists of 76 surviving pages, and 50 illustrations. The fragments of text are from the Latin poet's Aeneid, his epic tale of Aeneas's journey from the sack of Troy to Carthage, the underworld and then Italy, where he founds Rome. It also contains fragments from Virgil's poem of the land, The Georgics, but the original manuscript is likely to have contained all of Virgil's canonical works. According to Fine Books magazine, it is "one of the oldest [copies of The Aeneid] to survive the centuries".

The 1,600-year-old document is one of more than 80,000 manuscripts, running to 41m pages, in the library, which was founded in 1451 by Pope Nicholas V. With its delicate texts ranging from Sandro Botticelli's 1450 illustration of The Divine Comedy, to a collection of 111 pages of manuscripts containing poems, technical notes, and preparatory sketches by Michelangelo, the library only allows access to its materials by specialised scholars. But even with these restrictions, according to the library, "the need to consult the library's documents puts their very survival and their future availability and accessibility at risk every day".

A major project to digitise all 80,000 documents will ensure that scholars have less need to consult the originals, and also make the texts available to the general public. Digita Vaticana, which is raising the funds needed for the digitisation, has estimated that the project will take more than 15 years to complete and cost more than €50m (£42m). Its latest initiative is offering the first 200 people to donate €500 or more a limited edition reproduction of a page from the Vatican Virgil, depicting Creusa trying to keep her husband Aeneas from battle.

"Our library is an important storehouse of the global culture of humankind," said Cesare Pasini, prefect of the library. "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."

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