

V.S. Lectures, No.67.

VIRGIL'S HOME REVISITED

The substance of a lecture delivered to the Virgil Society

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(Note : This summary should be read in conjunction with Lecture Summary No. 41)

Since 1957, when the writer attempted to show that Virgil's home may be plausibly placed in the area south-west of Valeggio, towards Volta Mantovana, in the northern part of the province of Mantua, he has visited and photographed this area on two occasions. The remarks which follow underline or amplify some of the points made on the earlier occasion.

At a time when classical scholars are accused of paying undue attention to literary puzzles at the expense of literary criticism, an attempt to discover Virgil's home might appear to be one more example of learned trifling. The shepherds and goatherds of the Eclogues, it may be claimed, sing their songs against a stage backcloth, a landscape of the imagination; his Arcadia has never existed and cannot be located upon a map<sup>1</sup>. \* There is however general agreement that Eclogues i and ix (in one ancient edition perhaps the last and first of the collection) portray a historical situation - the evictions in the territory of Cremona and Mantua in 40 B.C. of which Virgil and his father were victims. Even in these two poems there are literary echoes which might discourage topographical identification. The tomb which marks the mid-point in the journey of Lycidas and Moeris to their local town in Ecl. ix is a motif inspired by Theocritus vii, 10, while the name of its occupant, Bianor,<sup>2</sup> has been recently found to be a borrowing from a poem in the Greek Anthology<sup>2</sup>. Against these literary reminiscences one must set the clear allusions to contemporary history: Rome, Octavian, Varus, Mantua, Cremona and the assignation of land to veterans of the civil wars. With caution, we may yet place Virgil upon the map. When an exile writes of his lost home, it is a psychological impossibility that the landscape which he describes, as Virgil does in Ecl. i and ix, should be totally removed from reality. The belief that Virgil introduced the mountains of Campania, Sicily or Greece into the territory of Mantua is repugnant, and should not be adopted except under the compulsion of overwhelming evidence. Let us make the more natural assumption that Virgil faithfully describes the lands of his lost home, and consider whether his allusions can be applied to any part of the territory of Mantua. Only if we fail conclusively in this attempt can we assert that Ecl. i and ix also belong to the world of fantasy.

The venerable tradition that Virgil's home was at Pietole, 3 km south-east of Mantua, has still its champions, notably Bruno Nardi and dal Zotto; but the flatness of the site and its close proximity to the city tell against it. More attractive is the hill area through which the Mincio winds its way from Lake Garda southwards to Mantua, and Sir William Ramsay and Professor Cliffe Richmond

\* The notes and two sketch-maps are on pp. 41-43.

have indicated the area opposite Valeggio and on the west bank of the river as a probable site. The villages of Carpendolo (Conway) and Montichiari (Herrmann)<sup>3</sup> further north-west will not do, and for two reasons: they lie near the river Chiese, not the Mincio; and both now fall within the province of Brescia and are shown by inscriptional evidence to have belonged to a tribe or voting-district (Poblilia) which is not that of Mantua (Sabatina). It is almost certain therefore that they lay outside the ager Mantuanus. Luckily, there is plenty of evidence in Virgil to enable us to pin-point the home. Some eight conditions must be satisfied:

1. Meliboeus, Lycidas, and Moeris have a long day's walk into town (Mantua). This is repeatedly stressed<sup>4</sup>, and no site as near as Pietole is satisfactory. A distance of 12 or 15 or more miles might appear probable.

2. The site must lie in the territory of Mantua, whose boundaries towards Verona can be shown with a high degree of probability to coincide with the modern ones. Thus Peschiera and Valeggio belonged then as now to Verona; westwards of Volta, Guidizzolo and probably Medole belonged to Brixia.

3. We require rupes and alti montes. Within Mantuan territory these can only be found in the north-west, round Volta Mantovana.

4. Virgil's farm was confiscated, and must therefore lie in a plausible relationship to the centuriated area. This occupied the eastern part of Cremonese territory along the Via Postumia and overflowed into Mantuan territory, still following the Via Postumia as it traverses the 15 miles of flat land from the Oglio to the Mincio, and forming a broad belt running from south-west to north-east through the fruitful plain<sup>5</sup>. The highroad crossed the Mincio between Góito and Massimbona, south of Volta.

5. The farm occupied high and low ground, and stretched down to the river<sup>6</sup>. This river must be the Mincio.

6. The swampy plot of Tityrus, exempt from confiscation because it was poor land, lies between the confiscated farm and Mantua.

7. The hills lie to the west of Tityrus' land<sup>7</sup>.

8. They descend gently into the plain, and this gentle descent is a feature of the confiscated land in question.

All these conditions are satisfied by a site on the escarpment which runs south-west from Valeggio to Volta Mantovana. A strong candidate as the modern counterpart of Virgil's farm is the estate now called Montaldo, 5 km. from Valeggio, for it lies just within the Mantuan boundary beneath the higher ground of Monte della Maddalena (121 m.) and looks south-east over the lower Bassa dei Bonori (50-60 m.) to the Mincio.

If this be granted certain doubts and difficulties may still require an answer.

The Virgilian Lives, amid much which is useless guess-work or romance, speak of a tradition that Virgil was born while his mother was away from home, indeed on a journey, and that this birthplace was an otherwise unattested 'pagus qui Andes dicitur' or 'rusticus uicus Andicus' (a distance from Mantua follows, but

what the numeral was is a matter of debate: perhaps XXX or XXV or III). This information cannot be read out of Virgil's writings, and may be genuine. Francese Scipione Maffei's identification of Andes (clearly a remote and unknown spot) with the hamlet of Bande north of Cavriana may well be correct. It lies a kilometer or so south of the Mantua-Verona frontier, which here runs east and west, south of L. Garda, and it now comprises a scattering of cottages and large farms in undulating and fairly well timbered country. Virgil's mother was no doubt on a visit to relations or friends, for Montaldo is only some ten kms. away. The distance from Bande to Mantua by the obvious route (Cavriana-Góito-Sacca-Grazie) is 37 km = 25 mp.

The famous description in Ecl. ix, 7ff:-

certe equidem audieram, qua se subducere colles  
incipiunt mollique iugum demittere cliuo  
usque ad aquam et ueteres, iam fracta cacumina, fagos  
omnia carminibus uestrum seruasse Menalcan

can be easily illustrated by the photographer who wanders around Montaldo and the Bassa, studying the gentle slope by which the ground descends to the level plain and to the Mincio. The apparent vagueness of the description is illusive. It finds a parallel in a passage from Sergei Aksakov's Family History (1846) which deals with the settlement of Bashkir territory by Russian colonists at the beginning of the nineteenth century: 'Whole districts were bought and sold for a mere song. The bargain was clinched by a legal document, but the amount of land was never stated in it, and could not be, as it had never been surveyed. As a rule, the boundaries were settled by landmarks of this kind: "from the mouth of such and such a stream as far as the dead beech-tree on the wolf-track, and from the dead beech-tree in a bee-line to the watershed, and from the watershed to the fox-earths, and from the fox-earths to the hollow tree at Soltamratka" and so on.' The apparent vagueness of Virgil has all the precision to be expected of the conditions of his time before the pertica of Octavian's surveyor was laid upon the land.

Now a word on the lucky Tityrus of Eclogue i. He lives nearer to Mantua than the evicted Meliboeus, on a small, swampy, stony and well-shaded plot sometimes flooded by the reedy Mincio<sup>o</sup>. All these features may be illustrated by present-day conditions which, despite extensive hydraulic improvements over many centuries, have left untouched just such an area a little to the north of the power-station at Molini di Volta, where the contours bring the Canale Virgilio into close proximity to the river. The place lies south of Montaldo, and must have been passed by any traveller proceeding thence to Mantua by the straightest route. Tityrus lives, then, inter (between) flumina nota (the Mincio) and fontes sacros (springing from the higher ground to the west) - a cool spot in a hot Italian summer. The lines that follow are delightful, but a little obscure:-

hinc tibi, quae semper, uicino a limite sepes  
Hyblaeis apibus florem depasta salicti  
saepe leui somnum suadebit inire susurro;  
hinc alta sub rupe canet frondator ad auras.

The co-ordinating hinc ... hinc point in different directions. The vine dresser sings at his task alta sub rupe, to the north or north-west (along the ridge),

while the bees murmur to the south uicino a limite along a sepes, a hedge, fence, enclosure or boundary. Vicino a limite means 'in the direction of the (all too) near centuriated land, delimited and confiscated for the veterans.' We also hear in Ecl. i of silex nuda, lapis nudus - the valley of the Mincio at this point is full of flint moraine. The stones stud the fields of the Bassa and congregate in great clumps here and there; not even two thousand years of cultivation and river-control have produced much alteration in this respect.

We must now deal with three more serious objections to the identifications proposed.

First what of the dumosa rupes and the alti montes<sup>9</sup>? Can it be claimed that the low ridge westward of the Mincio is all that is meant? The answer is 'yes': altus is a purely relative term and the meaning of mons overlaps those of collis and iugum. The hills of Rome (no higher than the Monte della Maddalena) are montes or colles indifferently; and finally 'Monti' stud the map around the Bassa, and the word is reflected in the place-name (rare in Italy)<sup>10</sup> of 'Montaldo' itself. In any case, at evening the trees along the slope throw the lengthening shadows mentioned in the last line in Ecl. i.

More serious is the complaint that there are no caves (antra) in the area, or indeed in the whole territory of Mantua. How are we to explain the habits of Meliboeus?:-

non ego uos posthac uiridi proiectus in antro  
dumosa pendere procul de rupe uidebo.

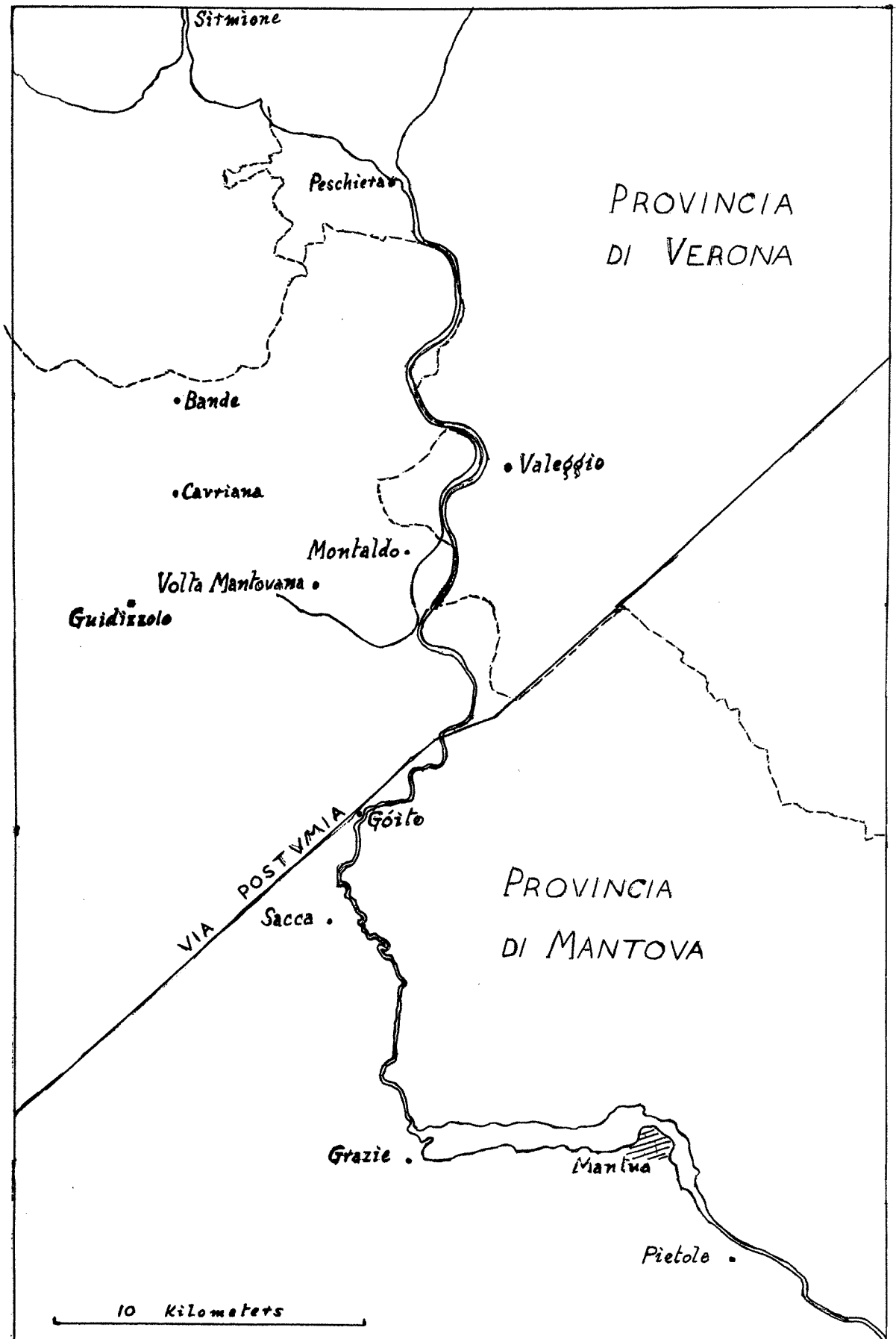
Goats, of course, may be seen clinging to impossible slopes here or anywhere in Italy. But a green (wet) 'cave' seems an odd coign of vantage for the goatherd. The truth is that 'cave' is far too narrow a translation, for antrum means also 'a hollow', 'nook', or indeed 'valley'; in the glossaries it is variously explained as spelunca, obscurus locus, nemus umbrosum et obscurum, uallis and so on. There is no difficulty in finding shady nooks in our area from which Meliboeus can watch in comfort his goats perched and perhaps silhouetted on the hills above him.

Finally, what of the aequor which comes in sight when the two interlocutors of Ecl. ix are half-way to Mantua from the farm of Lycidas?<sup>11</sup> There is no need to adopt the desperate remedy of supposing that aequor here means the flat plain, a sense forbidden by the Theocritean exemplar (ii, 38: ἠνίδε σιγῶν μὲν πόντος, σιγῶντι δ' ἄηται). The still, flat surface is that of the mere to the west of Mantua, the Lago Superiore into which the Mincio expands. Its western edge lies at a distance of 8 km from the town, and Lycidas' farm is therefore some 16 km from Mantua, near Sacca. But Moeris, the slave of the dispossessed Menalcas (who corresponds to the dispossessed Meliboeus of Ecl. i) has already covered a considerable distance before reaching Lycidas. And this is only natural upon our hypothesis that the confiscated farm lay at or near Montaldo, 30 km (20 mp) from Mantua by the route Molini di Volta-Góito-Sacca-Grazie-Mantua. Thus the three objections vanish on a nearer inspection of the Latin and of the topography of the ager Mantuanus. It would in fact be difficult to imagine a closer correspondence between the data provided by the poet, and the landscape as it was and is.

In 40 B.C. Virgil lost his farm at Montaldo, and settled near Naples. He travelled widely in Italy, Sicily and Greece, and was to see many more dramatic landscapes than the quiet plains and hills of Mantua. But an exile remembers his patria, and loves to think and write of it. Whether he ever returned to the lost home is more than doubtful. But the Virgilian who makes his pilgrimage to Cumae and Naples, the lakes of Italy, the hill-top towns of Umbria or the Clitumnus with its white oxen will also be well advised to spare a day or so to wander around the gentler scenes of Virgil's youth<sup>12</sup>.

NOTES

1. Cf. Bruno Snell, 'Arkadien, die Entdeckung einer geistigen Landschaft' in Die Entdeckung des Geistes, 1946. The article has now been reprinted in Wege zu Vergil, ed. H. Oppermann, 1963.
2. Cf. S. Tugwell, 'Virgil, Ecl. 9.59-60', CR NS 13(1963), 132f.
3. For Conway see V.S.Lecture Summary No.41; L. Herrmann's article 'Le domaine rurale de Virgile' is in Latomus 19(1960), 533-8.
4. i, 21-2 and 80; ix,1 and 55-65.
5. G ii, 198.
6. ix, 7-10.
7. i, 84.
8. i, 47-59.
9. i, 77 and 84.
10. Cf. D. Olivieri, Dizionario di toponomastica lombarda, s.v.
11. ix, 59.
12. The visitor should be armed with the following maps, published by the Istituto geografico militare at Florence : 1:100,100:F<sup>o</sup>48 ('Peschiera del Garda') and F<sup>o</sup>62 ('Mantova'); together with the appropriate portions of the 1:25,000 edition, in which, however, Montaldo lies at the junction of four sheets.







PROVINCIA  
DI MANTOVA

1000 meters

Valeggio

Monte  
Ogheri

PROVINCIA  
DI VERONA

Monte della  
Maddalena 121

Montaldo  
85

Volta Mantovana

Bassa dei  
Bonori

Molini  
di Volta  
66

Canale

Virgilio

Pózzolo

Peschiera

Bande

Verona

Cremona

Góito  
& Mantova

VIA POSTUMIA

