

MARTIA DEMENTIA

2026

Ancient Figure Descriptions



PEOPLE AND PLACES OF PLINY, VERGIL, AND COMPANION TEXTS

AENEAS

Son of the goddess Venus and the mortal Anchises, the Trojan hero Aeneas survives the fall of his city to the Greeks, eventually making his way to Italy, where he is fated to found what will become a great people, the Romans. Vergil's Aeneid tells the story of Aeneas's wanderings and his war against Turnus, an Italian king who stands in Aeneas's way.

ANCHISES

The father of epic hero Aeneas, Anchises is carried by his son out of city of Troy, which has been sacked and set alight by the Greeks. In the Aeneid, Anchises accompanies and advises Aeneas on his journeys, but dies in Sicily. Aeneas later encounters his father in the underworld, when Anchises reveals to Aeneas the future greatness of Rome.

ARIADNE

After falling in love with Theseus, the Cretan princess Ariadne helps him in his quest to kill the Minotaur by giving him a ball of woollen yarn—a "clew" that allowed Theseus to retrace his steps as he entered the winding maze of the Labyrinth. Abandoned by Theseus on the island Naxos, Ariadne bitterly cursed her once-beloved, as famously recounted in Catullus's carmen 64.

ASCANIUS

Ascanius is the son of Aeneas. During the sack of Troy, Aeneas flees the burning city with his father, Anchises, and Ascanius—but loses track of his wife, Creusa, who dies in the chaotic conflagration. Also known as Iulus, Ascanius is said to be a direct ancestor of gens Iulia, the family to which Julius Caesar and his adopted grandnephew Octavian (later Augustus) belonged.

ATHENODORUS

In one of Pliny the Younger's letters, he recounts how the Stoic philosopher Athenodorus rents a haunted house in Athens. His first night in the home, Athenodorus stays up late writing and encounters the specter that has frightened away other would-be renters of the house. His investigations reveal the cause of the haunting.

AUGUSTUS

The first emperor of Rome, Augustus apparently boasted that "he found Rome a city of brick, and left it a city of marble." He spelled out his achievements in his Res Gestae, a first-person account of his political and military career, which survives in various inscriptions from around the Roman Empire. Under Augustus, Latin literature flourished—his reign roughly corresponds with the "golden age" of Latin literature.

CAMILLA

Camilla, an acolyte of the goddess Diana, fights as a fierce warrior-queen alongside Turnus in the Aeneid.

CATULLUS

A Roman neoteric poet of the first century bce, Catullus is famed for his love elegy; many of his carmina are addressed to a woman he calls Lesbia.

CICERO

A Roman orator, advocate, writer, and statesman, Cicero climbed the ranks of the *cursus honorum*, serving as consul in 63 bce. In addition to his speeches and philosophical works, many of Cicero's letters to friends and family survive.

DIDO

Dido, queen of Carthage, falls in love with Aeneas when he finds himself in her bustling new city after fleeing Troy. Her "marriage" to the hero proves her undoing.

FAMA

The personification of Rumor, Fama is a terrifying divinity described by Vergil as having many tongues, eyes, and ears. Covered in feathers, she flies throughout Africa to spread stories of Aeneas and Dido. The whisperings of Fama inflame the anger of King Iarbas, previously rejected by Dido.

HORACE

A poet active primarily during the reign of Augustus in Rome, Horace's oeuvre encompasses a broad range of genres, from invective iambs to satire, from lyric odes to verse epistles. His phrase *carpe diem* is still frequently quoted today.

JUNO

Queen of the gods, Juno is the Roman counterpart to the Greek goddess Hera. Her antipathy to Aeneas drives much of the Trojan's travails in Vergil's Aeneid.

JUTURNA

A Roman goddess of fountains, wells, and springs, Juturna had a sacred spring in the Forum. In the Aeneid, she is the sister of the Rutulian prince Turnus, giving him aid in his fight against Aeneas.

LAOCOÖN

In the Aeneid, Laocoön is a Trojan priest who warns against accepting gifts from the Greeks. He dies for his predictions: immediately after striking the Trojan Horse with a spear, he is strangled by sea serpents. His sons meet the same fate.

METABUS

King Metabus, the father of Camilla, famously takes desperate actions when fleeing his enemies: he ties his baby girl to a spear and throws it across the Amasenus River in order to rescue her.

MT. VESUVIUS

Mt. Vesuvius, a volcano in southern Italy near the Bay of Naples, famously erupted in 79 ce, destroying the towns of Pompeii, Herculaneum, and Stabiae. Pliny the Younger describes the eruption and its devastating aftermath in two letters to Tacitus: in one, he recounts his uncle's rescue mission to Stabiae, and in the other, he narrates what he and his mother experienced in Misenum.

OVID

One of the poets of the Augustan age in Rome, Ovid was a prolific writer in several genres: his *Amores* are a twist on love elegy, his *Ars Amatoria* a sly didactic poem instructing young lovers, and his *Metamorphoses* an epic approach to myths about changing forms. He was exiled from Rome for “a poem and a mistake” (and, finally pardoned by Rome’s city council in 2017).

PALLAS

Pallas, the son of King Evander, is one of Aeneas’s allies in Italy who fights alongside him against Turnus. Aeneas views himself as a surrogate father to the young hero; Pallas’s death at the hands of Turnus thus triggers Aeneas’s rage and desire for vengeance.

PERILLA

In *Tristia* 3.7, Ovid writes to his stepdaughter Perilla, a well-educated young woman (Ovid calls her *docta*) who was also a poet.

PLINY THE ELDER

Gaius Plinius Secundus, often called Pliny the Elder, served as a Roman naval commander and wrote prolifically in the natural sciences, producing the massive ten-volume work *Historia Naturalis*. During the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 79 ce, Pliny the Elder sailed to Stabiae both to satiate his scientific curiosity and to provide aid to a friend trapped amid the geologic disaster. Pliny died during his rescue mission; his death was commemorated in one of his nephew’s letters to the historian Tacitus.

PLINY THE YOUNGER

Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus, known as Pliny the Younger, was a Roman writer, orator, and politician. Born in or near Comum in the 60s ce, Pliny received an excellent education in Rome and went on to have a distinguished political career. Ten books of his letters give insight into Pliny’s life; two letters famously recount the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 79 ce.

SIBYL OF CUMAE

In the *Aeneid*, Aeneas visits the Sibyl of Cumae in her cave, where she makes prophecies by writing on oak leaves. The Sibyl sets Aeneas to several tasks, including plucking a golden bough, before she guides him to the underworld.

SOPHONISBA

In Petrarch’s epic poem *Africa*, he recounts the story of Sophonisba, a Carthaginian queen who is part of an alliance against Rome during the Second Punic War. When Massinissa, a Numidian king who is allied with Rome, takes her prisoner, he falls in love with her—with tragic results.

SULPICIA

Sulpicia was the author of six elegiac poems addressed to a beloved named Cerinthus. She was active during the first century bce during the age of Augustus.

SENECA THE YOUNGER

Seneca the Younger wrote philosophical and dramatic works in the first century ce. He wrote tragedies as well as essays and letters, which reflected his Stoic viewpoints. Additionally, he served as advisor to the emperor Nero, although was later caught up in accusations of conspiracy, leading to his demise.

TACITUS

Tacitus was a close friend of Pliny the Younger, who addressed several of his letters to the Roman historian, including his famous letters about the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius. Tacitus is known for his historical works, the *Annals* and the *Histories*, as well as other works including *Germania*, *Agricola*, and *Dialogus de Oratoribus*.

TRAJAN

Born in what is today Spain, Trajan rose to prominence in the military and succeeded the emperor Nerva. As Roman emperor, he oversaw the expansion of Rome's borders to its greatest extent. Pliny the Younger, as governor of Bithynia-Pontus, frequently wrote letters to Trajan asking for advice.

THESEUS

Athenian hero Theseus sails to Crete to slay the Minotaur; on his return voyage, he abandons the Cretan princess Ariadne, who helped him navigate the Labyrinth, the winding lair of her half-bull half-brother. Catullus recounts this story in his *carmen* 64.

TURNUS

Turnus, king of the Rutuli, proves a formidable foe to Aeneas in Vergil's epic. Originally betrothed to Lavinia, the daughter of King Latinus, Turnus becomes enraged and wages war when the king of the Latins promises Lavinia to newcomer Aeneas. His allies include Camilla, queen of the Volsci, and his sister Juturna.

VENUS

The Roman goddess of love and beauty, Venus is the mother of the hero Aeneas. In the *Aeneid*, she frequently appears to offer protection and guidance to her son.

VERGIL

A poet of the Augustan age, Vergil wrote bucolic poetry (the *Eclogues*), a didactic poem about farming (the *Georgics*), and an epic that recounted the founding of Rome (the *Aeneid*). Vergil, who died before fully completing the *Aeneid*, had supposedly asked his literary executors to burn the poem, but Augustus himself (so the story goes) stopped the destruction.

MILITARY FIGURES OF THE ANCIENT WORLD

AGRIPPA

Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa served as the "right-hand man" to Octavian, later the emperor Augustus. His military prowess brought about some key victories for Octavian, particularly Agrippa's defeat of Antony and Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium. He also proved a competent administrator and oversaw a noteworthy building program in Rome.

ALARIC I

Alaric I, king of the Visigoths, famously sacked Rome in 410 ce—the first time in nearly eight centuries that the city of Rome itself had been successfully invaded.

ALEXANDER THE GREAT

The son of Philip II of Macedon, Alexander the Great succeeded his father at the age of twenty, soon embarking on a massive military campaign in which he conquered all of the Persian Empire, including Egypt, Asia Minor, the Levant, and Babylonia. Undeclared in battle, Alexander and his armies made it as far east as India. At thirty-two, Alexander died of a fever in Babylon, leaving his empire to be split (acrimoniously) among his generals.

AMANIRENAS

A queen of the Kingdom of Kush in Nubia, south of Egypt, Amanirenas ruled from about 40 bce to 10 bce. She led her armies successfully against Roman forces, victoriously returning from battle with a bronze head of the emperor Augustus. The geographer Strabo described the actions of a one-eyed queen he calls Candace (perhaps from the Meroitic word “kandake,” meaning “queen”), elaborating that she buried the bust of Augustus in the sand. This bronze head was found in 1912.

ARTEMISIA I OF CARIA

A Greek queen of Halicarnassus, Artemisia fought as a Persian ally when Xerxes I invaded Greece in the early fifth century bce. She supplied five ships in the effort, leading them in battle herself. According to Herodotus, she advised Xerxes against attacking the Greek fleet at Salamis. He did not take her advice—to disastrous effect.

AURELIAN

Through an illustrious military career, Aurelian rose from humble beginnings to become emperor of Rome in 270 ce. As emperor, Aurelian's successes in war helped reunify a fractured empire that had suffered throughout the “crisis of the third century.” In addition to defeating a number of Germanic tribes that posed a potential threat, Aurelian built defensive walls around the city of Rome itself—a measure that was previously not needed. Other military achievements include the defeat of Zenobia and the Palmyrene Empire.

BOUDICCA

A queen of the Icenii Celts in Britain, Boudicca led a revolt against the Romans in the 60s ce. She and her forces destroyed several Roman settlements, including Londinium, before defeating the Legio IX Hispana. The Roman governor finally reassumed control of the province, and Boudicca reportedly either died by suicide to avoid capture or died of an illness. She is still considered a hero in the United Kingdom today.

BRENNUS OF GAUL

A Gaulish leader, Brennus successfully sacked the city of Rome in the early fourth century bce—the last time that this would happen until the Visigoths occupied the city in 410 ce. Under Brennus, the Gauls captured all of Rome except the Capitoline Hill. When the Gauls attempted to scale the Capitoline at night in a surprise attack on the Romans, a flock of geese sacred to Juno raised the alarm, alerting the Romans and allowing them to fend off their assailants.

CLEOPATRA VII

Cleopatra VII Philopator navigated (and participated in) intense dynastic competition to become the final ruler of Ptolemaic Egypt. Her personal relationship and alliance with Julius Caesar solidified her power in Egypt. After the assassination with Caesar, she allied herself with Mark Antony, a relationship that allowed her to acquire significant territories previously held by Egypt. At the Battle of Actium, Cleopatra led a fleet of sixty ships, although she and Antony lost to Octavian's general, Agrippa. To avoid capture by Octavian, Cleopatra died by her own hand (as one popular story has it, using an asp to poison herself).

CONSTANTINE THE GREAT

Rising to the rank of Caesar in the western half of the Roman Empire after the death of his father, Constantius, Constantine emerged from a series of civil wars to become the sole ruler of Rome. Most famously, Constantine defeated political rival Maxentius at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. According to legend, Constantine adopted the Christian symbol of the chi-rho before this pivotal battle because of a dream or vision that indicated to him *in hoc signo vinces*, “in this sign you will conquer.”

CYRUS THE GREAT

The founder of the Achaemenid Persian Empire, Cyrus conquered and ruled over vast swaths of the ancient near east. Originally a vassal of the great Median Empire (in what is modern-day Iran), he revolted against his grandfather, King Astyages, cementing his rule over the entire region. He quickly moved into the Lydian Empire and Asia Minor before conquering Babylon in Mesopotamia. Not only a great soldier, Cyrus also created a very

effective administrative structure within the massive empire he built. Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, which described Cyrus as an ideal ruler, influenced leaders from Alexander the Great to Thomas Jefferson.

GAIUS JULIUS VINDEX

A member of a noble Gaulish family, Vindex became a governor in Gaul under Emperor Nero. He rebelled against the emperor in 67 or 68 ce, throwing in his support for Galba, then a governor in Spain. Vindex was defeated in battle by Roman army commander Lucius Verginius Rufus. As a result, he did not live to see Galba succeed Nero as emperor of Rome (although, not for long—Galba was quickly dispatched by Otho in what came to be known as the “year of the four emperors”).

HANNIBAL BARCA

The general who led Carthage during the Second Punic War, Hannibal Barca is often cited as one of the greatest military commanders of all time. According to legend, his father, Hamilcar Barca, required Hannibal at age nine to swear an oath to be an eternal enemy of Rome. He is perhaps most famous for his overland invasion of Italy, in which his troops—including African war elephants—crossed the Alps before going on to defeat the Romans in a number of key battles. Ultimately, the Carthaginians lost to Rome at the Battle of Zama, after which Hannibal became a successful statesman in his native Carthage until he was forced into exile.

JUGURTHA

Jugurtha was the ruler of Numidia, a kingdom in northern Africa allied with Rome in the late second century bce. Very popular among his own people, he gained experience fighting with the Romans in Spain, where he made important contacts among the Roman aristocracy. After killing one rival to the throne and defeating the other in battle, Jugurtha incurred the displeasure of Rome—but by repeatedly bribing Roman officials, Jugurtha was largely able to continue his activities. Finally, after a long war (during which Marius made his name), Jugurtha was defeated by Rome.

JULIUS CAESAR

A Roman politician of the first century bce, Julius Caesar was involved in all kinds of competitive maneuvering during the twilight of the Roman Republic. In the *De Bello Gallico*, he chronicled his often brutal conquest of Gaul, a years-long effort that both expanded the borders of Rome and helped him consolidate extensive power personally. After winning the civil war against his political rival Pompey, Caesar was declared “dictator for life”—an office that did not last long since he was soon assassinated.

LEONIDAS

Leonidas I, a warrior king of Sparta, led the Greek forces at Thermopylae as they defended the pass against the invading forces of Persian emperor Xerxes. When the Persians learned of a mountain route by which they could attack the Greeks from the rear, Leonidas sent away the majority of the troops under his command. He remained with a small force and fought to the bitter end, most likely in order to guard the retreat of the other Greek troops.

MARCUS AURELIUS

Emperor of Rome from 161–180 ce, Marcus Aurelius spent much of his rule engaged in military conflicts. He campaigned for years against Germanic tribes in what is often called the Marcomannic Wars. During these campaigns, the emperor wrote his work on Stoic philosophy, the *Meditations*.

MARCUS CLAUDIUS MARCELLUS

Elected consul in Rome five times, Marcus Claudius Marcellus had an illustrious career as a Roman soldier and general. When fighting the Gauls in the 220s bce, he won the *spolia opima*—the weapons and armor taken by a Roman general after defeating (and killing) an enemy general in hand-to-hand combat. This was one of three instances during the Republic when *spolia opima* were taken. In his later life, he served as a general in the Second Punic War, bringing about several decisive victories until eventual dying in battle.

MARIUS

Gaius Marius's rise to power in Rome was bolstered by his military experience in Spain and Numidia, where he fought against and defeated Jugurtha. As consul at the very end of the second century bce—he was elected an unprecedented six times in a row—Marius experienced continued success in battle. At the same time, he reformed the Roman military. After the Social Wars, Marius and his faction clashed with rival Sulla in a civil war indicative of the increased political strife at the end of the Roman Republic.

MARK ANTONY

Mark Antony was one of Julius Caesar's generals who served alongside him during the Gallic and Civil Wars. After the assassination of Caesar, Antony allied himself with Lepidus and Octavian, forming the Second Triumvirate. Defeating Caesar's assassins at the Battle of Philippi, the Second Triumvirate then divided up the administration of Rome's territories; Antony was assigned the eastern provinces. His love affair with Cleopatra VII, ruler of Egypt, likely added to existing tensions with Octavian—especially since he was technically married to Octavian's sister at the time. Tensions continued to build between Octavian and Antony, leading to civil war. Antony and Cleopatra were defeated by Octavian's forces at the Battle of Actium.

MITHRIDATES VI OF PONTUS

A king of Greek and Persian descent, Mithridates VI ascended the throne in Pontus (a region in northern Anatolia along the Black Sea) in the late second century bce. He expanded his territory northward and westward, taking control of Anatolia after defeating Roman forces present in the region. In these conflicts, he framed himself as a protector and liberator of the Greeks against the Romans. Defeated by Pompey in the 60s bce, he went into exile and unsuccessfully attempted to raise new forces. Mithridates is perhaps most famous for his immunity to poison, which he carefully achieved by regularly ingesting small doses of toxins.

POMPEY THE GREAT

Gnaeus Pompeius earned his cognomen Magnus, "the Great," while serving as a commander in Sulla's civil wars (he was also called *adulescentulus carnifex*, "teenage butcher"). After his first term as consul, he campaigned for years in the eastern Mediterranean, attempting to subdue a plague of pirates and Mithridates VI. Upon returning to Rome, he formed a loose alliance with Julius Caesar and Marcus Licinius Crassus, sometimes called the First Triumvirate. Tensions built between Caesar and Pompey until civil war broke out. Losing the decisive Battle of Pharsalus, Pompey fled to Egypt, where he was assassinated.

PYRRHUS OF EPIRUS

Born in the late fourth century bce, Pyrrhus's early life was thrown into turmoil during the conflicts among Alexander the Great's successors. As king of Epirus in Greece, he launched a military campaign against Rome, replete with thousands of troops and war elephants. His costly victory over Rome at the Battle of Asculum gave rise to the term "Pyrrhic victory," in which winning results in such heavy losses that it is not worthwhile.

RHODOGUNE OF PARTHIA

Rhodogune, second-century bce Parthian princess, had an interesting method for military success: learning of a revolt while preparing for her bath, she vowed not to bathe or brush her hair until the rebellion was quashed. She then successfully led her army in battle. As a result of her vow, she was typically depicted with unkempt hair.

SCIPIO AFRICANUS

A prominent Roman general and statesman, Publius Cornelius Scipio earned his honorary agnomen Africanus from his conquest of Africa during the Second Punic War. After a protracted, brutal battle against Hannibal at Zama, Scipio and the Romans proved victorious over the Carthaginians.

SEPTIMIUS SEVERUS

Founder of the Severan dynasty, Septimius Severus became emperor of Rome in 193 ce. Rising to power amid the chaos following the assassination of Commodus, he quickly had to subdue the Syrian forces that were agitating for a rival claimant to the throne. Severus also waged war against the Parthians, even sacking their capital Ctesiphon. After consolidating his power, Severus extended his military activity to Africa, and later Britain, where he died of an illness. His reign oversaw an expansion of the Roman military, as well as increased military spending.

SHAPUR I

A Persian king of the Sasanian dynasty, Shapur I successfully engaged the Romans in war during the third century ce. In addition to capturing important Roman cities like Antioch, Syria, he notably took the Roman emperor Valerian captive.

SPARTACUS

Most likely originally from Thrace, Spartacus was enslaved by the Romans and forced to train as a gladiator. While at a gladiatorial school in southern Italy, Spartacus and seventy other enslaved people were able to break free, in the process seizing weapons and armor. Repeatedly defeating the Roman troops sent to quell their revolt (known as the Third Servile War), Spartacus and his forces finally fell to legions led by Marcus Licinius Crassus. Those who were captured by the Romans were brutally tortured and killed for their actions.

SULLA

Lucius Cornelius Sulla rose to power in Rome under Marius's shadow, gaining military experience during the Jugurthine War and assorted wars against the Cimbri and Teutones. After the Social Wars, he was elected consul of Rome, which enabled him to obtain a lucrative command fighting Mithridates VI of Pontus. Sulla and his army, which was personally loyal to him, marched on Rome several times. In the late 80s bce, he was appointed dictator without any term limit, though he eventually stepped down from office. His actions contributed to the continued political violence during the end of the Roman Republic and served as a precedent for Julius Caesar's march on Rome and dictatorship roughly forty years later.

TOMYRI

Queen of the Massageteans, Tomyris defeated and killed Cyrus the Great of Persia in 530 bce when he had invaded her lands and attempted to conquer her people. According to the historian Herodotus, Tomyris sought revenge after Cyrus had captured her son in battle. She allegedly addressed the fallen Cyrus with a dramatic speech proclaiming her vengeance, ending with, "just as I threatened, I give you your fill of blood" (Herodotus, 1.214).

VERCINGETORIX

This Gaulish leader was able to unite many different tribes of Gaul, leading a large-scale revolt against the Romans in 52 bce. Despite some early military successes stemming from his innovative tactics, the Romans—under Julius Caesar's leadership—defeated Vercingetorix and his forces at the Battle of Alesia. Vercingetorix ultimately had to surrender himself to the Romans, an act that Plutarch describes as incredibly brave and dramatic. Held prisoner for years and forced to take part in Caesar's triumph at Rome, he was then executed by the Romans. He is still considered a French national hero.

ZENOBIA

A third-century ce queen of Palmyra in Syria, Zenobia added to the empire established by her husband as she began to conquer vast regions of the eastern Roman Empire. In 270 ce, Zenobia was able to take advantage of the fact that Roman military efforts were focused along the German frontier: she established rule over the rest of Syria, while also successfully invading Judaea and Arabia. After annexing Egypt, she then turned to Asia Minor, her army making its way as far west as Ancyra. Ultimately defeated by the Roman emperor Aurelian, Zenobia is still honored as a patriotic figure in modern-day Syria.