

from *Cassell's Dictionary of Classical Mythology* (1998) By Jenny March

Dido. The founder and first queen of Carthage. Dido, whose Phoenician name was Elissa, was the daughter of a Phoenician king of Tyre, Belus (or Mutto), and was married to her wealthy uncle Sychaeus (or Sicharbas). Her wicked brother Pygmalion, now king of Tyre, murdered Sychaeus out of greed for his riches. Dido escaped with her sister ANNA and a band of followers and fled to Libya. A native king, Iarbas, sold her a piece of land as large as could be encompassed by a bull's hide, so she cut the hide into such thin strips that, tied together, they encircled enough territory to build her city, Carthage. The city prospered and grew, until Iarbas was alarmed by its potential power. He pressed Dido to marry him, threatening to attack Carthage if she refused. She pretended to agree, but rather than succumb to him she built a pyre, as though for a sacrifice, and leapt into the flames.

Virgil took this legend for his *Aeneid* and transmuted it into what has become the classic version of Dido's tragedy. When AENEAS lands on the coast of Carthage, his mother, VENUS, takes him to Dido's new city, then sends her son Cupid (EROS) to inspire Dido with love. The queen welcomes Aeneas, and at a banquet given in his honour he tells of his adventures and of the fall of Troy. Dido falls deeply in love with him, and is encouraged to yield to her passion by her sister Anna. Virgil likens Dido to a deer, shot by a shepherd in the woods, that runs away far over the wooded slopes of Mount Dicte, while all the time, lodged in her side, is the arrow that will bring her death. While out hunting, Dido and Aeneas take shelter in a cave during a violent storm and there they consummate their love. 'That day was the beginning of her death', says Virgil (4.169-70), 'and the beginning of all her sufferings.'

Now Dido and Aeneas have no thought but for each other, until at last JUPITER sends down MERCURY to remind Aeneas of his destiny and to urge him to sail for Italy. Against his will, and despite all Dido's pleas, he departs, obedient to the call of fate. Anna unknowingly helps Dido to prepare for death by having a pyre built, supposedly so that she can destroy everything reminiscent of her lost lover. But Dido climbs on top of the pyre and kills herself with Aeneas' sword. Her dying curse on the Trojans will be fulfilled in the historical wars between Rome and Carthage. The pyre is lit, and its flames rising over the city and lighting the sky are seen by the departing Trojans. Although they know nothing of Dido's death, their hearts are filled with foreboding.

When Aeneas goes down to the Underworld, accompanied by the Sibyl of Cumae, he sees the shade of Dido wandering among the dead with the wound in her breast still fresh. Weeping for her fate, he swears to her that he left Carthage against his will, but in hatred and bitterness she moves away, without a look, without a word, to rejoin her first husband, Sychaeus, in the shadows.

Although Aeneas' determined abandonment of his love in response to the call of duty would have been understood and appreciated by a Roman audience, Dido's love and death have made her a sympathetic heroine to romanticists of all ages, and her love affair with Aeneas has been a tremendously inspirational subject in music, drama, literature and the visual arts.

[Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.335-756, 4.1-705, 5.1-7, 6.450-76; Ovid, *Heroides* 7.]