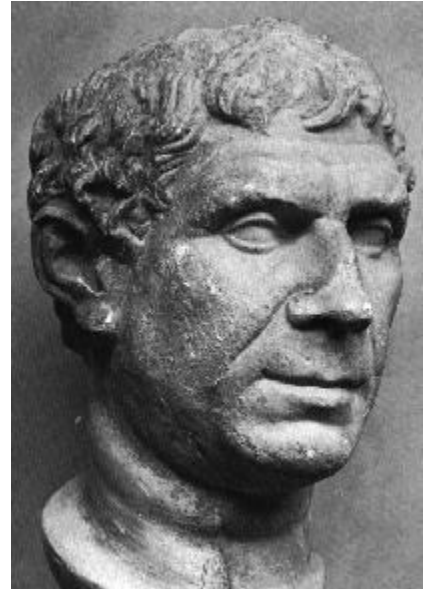


Quintus Ennius

Quintus Ennius, (born 239 BC, Rudiae, southern Italy—died 169 BC), epic poet, dramatist, and satirist, the most influential of the early Latin poets, rightly called the founder of Roman literature. His epic *Annales*, a narrative poem telling the story of Rome from the wanderings of Aeneas to the poet's own day, was the national epic until it was eclipsed by Virgil's *Aeneid*.



Because of the place of his birth, Ennius was at home in three languages and had, as he put it, “three hearts”: Oscan, his native tongue; Greek, in which he was educated; and Latin, the language of the army with which he served in the Second Punic War. The elder Cato took him to Rome (204), where he earned a meagre living as a teacher and by adapting Greek plays, but he was on familiar terms with many of the leading men in Rome, among them the elder Scipio. His patron was Marcus Fulvius Nobilior, whom he accompanied on his campaign in Aetolia and whose son Quintus obtained Roman citizenship for Ennius (184 BC). Nothing else of significance is known about his life.

Only 600 lines survive of Ennius's greatest work, his epic on Roman history, *Annales*. The poet introduced himself as a reincarnated Homer, addressed the Greek Muses, and composed in dactylic hexameter the metre of Homer. Ennius varied his accounts of military campaigns with autobiography, literary and grammatic erudition, and philosophical speculation.

Ennius excelled in tragedy. Titles survive of 20 tragedies adapted from the Greek, mostly Euripides (e.g., *Iphigenia at Aulis*, *Medea*,

Telephus, and *Thyestes*). About 420 lines remain, indicating remarkable freedom from the originals, great skill in adapting the native Latin metres to the Greek framework, heightening the rhetorical element and the pathetic appeal (a feature of Euripides that he greatly admired) through skillful use of alliteration and assonance. His plays on Roman themes were *Sabinae* ("Sabine Women") and, if they really were plays, *Ambracia* (on the capture of that city in Aetolia by Fulvius) and *Scipio*.

In the *Saturae* (*Satires*) Ennius developed the only literary genre that Rome could call its own. Four books in a variety of metres on diverse subjects, they were mostly concerned with practical wisdom, often driving home a lesson with the help of a fable. More philosophical was a work on the theological and physical theories of Epicharmus, the Sicilian poet and philosopher. *Euhemerus*, based on the ideas of Euhemerus of Messene, argued that the Olympian gods were originally great men honoured after death in human memory. Some epigrams, on himself and Scipio Africanus, are the first Latin elegiac couplets.

Ennius, who is credited also with the introduction of the double spelling of long consonants and the invention of Latin shorthand, was a man of wide interests and was conversant with the intellectual and literary movements of the Hellenistic world. He created and did not fall far short of perfecting a mode of poetic expression that reached its greatest beauty in Virgil and was to remain preeminent in Latin literature.

Cicero and others admired the work of Ennius throughout the republican period. Critical remarks appeared in Horace, becoming more severe in Seneca and Martial. The Neronian epic poet Lucan studied Ennius, and he was still read in the 2nd century AD; by the 5th century AD, copies of Ennius were rare.