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More Roman than the Romans of Rome: Claudian's Virgilian Debut

On New Year's Day 395, the émigré poet Claudian made his literary debut in Rome by reciting a consular panegyric of 279 hexameters, the *Panegyric for the Consuls Olybrius and Probinus* (*Ol. Prob.*). The audience that day will have noticed that the form of the *laudatio consularis* was not prose, as was customary, but poetry, and that the poetry was a species of Latin epic that harked back to Virgil. Despite Claudian's obvious poetic splash, Alan Cameron has repeatedly dismissed *Ol. Prob.* as "routine panegyric" in order to sharpen his thesis that Claudian first came into his own as a poet a year later when he became the propagandist for Stilicho (*Claudian*, Oxford, 1970; "Claudian Revisited", in Consolino (ed.) *Letteratura e propaganda nell'occidente latino da Augusto ai regni romanobarbarici*, Rome, 2000). The purpose of this paper is to argue *contra* Cameron that *Ol. Prob.* is an important poetic landmark, whose merits should be judged not in terms of whether it is panegyric or propaganda, but in terms of the poetic models that Claudian invokes and adapts. The paper will demonstrate that Claudian alludes programmatically to two key Virgilian texts: the fourth *Eclogue* and the *Aeneid*. These allusions are in turn part and parcel of the poet's strategy to represent himself as the new Virgil and his patrons as the new founders of Rome and bringers of a golden age. This kind of role-playing is not simply panegyric hyperbole. Claudian advertises his own ambitions as a court poet and confirms the political, social, and cultural position that his Christian patrons, the Anicii, had attained as the inheritors and continuators of the secular traditions of the City.