

David MEBAN

Primus* Language and Poetic Strategy in Virgil's Third *Georgic

In the elaborate temple metaphor at the beginning of the Third *Georgic*, Virgil accentuates the magnitude of his future poetic project through repeated claims of primacy: he will be the first to lead the Muses down from the Aonian peak and the first to bring back the Idumaeian palms to Mantua (*primus...primus*, 3.10-12). Critics traditionally interpret Virgil's employment of *primus* here as a poetic intertext, connecting it with similar claims in the works of, for example, Lucretius (1.117-119), Propertius (3.1.3-4), and Horace (*Epistles* 1.19.23-24) [Thomas, 1988; Mynors, 1990]. While these literary parallels constitute an important part of the intertextual matrix of the passage, what has been neglected by critics in the interpretation of Virgil's proem is the consideration of comparable boasts in other sectors of Roman society. Ample epigraphical evidence, such as the *columna rostrata* of C. Duilius, and numerous prose sources, including Livy, Suetonius and Tacitus, confirm that the claim of being the first to accomplish something was one of the key ideals in the field of personal achievement in the Roman aristocracy. Moreover, comparison of the context of these wider cultural claims of primacy with those of their poetic counterparts further supports the conclusion that we are to interpret Virgil's boast within this larger setting. Roman aristocrats, for example, frequently employ *primus* language to celebrate a triumph or victory and to mark the crossing of geographical boundaries. These are also prominent features of Virgil's proem. He too frames his 'firsts' within the context of being a victor (*uictorque*, 3.9), who brings the Muses from Greece to Rome (3.10-11). But this homologous usage of *primus* language indicates more than participation in a common idiom. There is an underlying strategy on the poet's part. Virgil appropriates *primus* terminology, I suggest, in order to set his poetic achievement on a par with the military and political accomplishments of Roman aristocrats.

For the purposes of corroboration and development, I argue that this strategy may be extended to the temple metaphor itself. Much as is the case with Virgil's claims to primacy, attempts to trace the source of Virgil's metaphor focus mainly on poetic parallels in the works of poets such as Pindar and Callimachus. Yet a closer, and perhaps more complete, parallel can be found in the extensive building programmes of Roman aristocrats in the 30s B.C. Such projects not only constituted a visible contribution to the physical setting of the *respublica*, but also enabled prominent Romans to exalt their achievements over those of their rivals [Zanker, 1988]. This latter purpose also finds extensive analogy in the proem. Virgil likewise boasts that his future project will differ from, and surpass, current literary trends (3.3-9). Both Virgil's choice of metaphor and his adaptation of terminology from aristocratic cultural practice exhibit a clear strategy: to advance the status of literature and demonstrate the concrete and contributory role the literary text might assume.