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The Return of Saturn: Reception and Revival in Augustan Religion

By the time of Augustus, the concept of a Golden Age had been widely accepted as both a central feature of the religious ideology of the time and as a pervasive goal for Augustan society to attain. Just as Saturn brought the Golden Age to Latium, now Augustus will found a Golden Age in Rome. This paper examines the role Saturn plays in Golden Age ideology within the Vergilian oeuvre (*Eclogues* 4, *Georgics* 1 and 2, and *Aeneid* 8). It builds on a growing body of Vergilian scholarship (Thomas, 2001; Barker, 1996; Galinsky, 1996; Smolenaars, 1987; Johnston, 1980; Wallace-Hadrill, 1982) that has begun to reconsider how the poet engaged in the complex discourse on social order in the Augustan Age. In particular, previous scholars have considered the inconsistency of the portrait of the Golden Age in Vergil. In the *Georgics*, there is no need for labor and humans remain idle. This appears to be incompatible with the civilizing influence of laws and customs that are Saturn's contribution to humankind in the Golden Age of the *Aeneid*. However, when these passages are examined in the broader context of the Augustan religious program, it is possible to reappraise the Golden Age of Saturn as part of a nexus of closely interrelated themes that contributed to the institutions that defined and preserved Roman cultural and religious identity.

This paper argues that while previous Vergilian scholars have depicted the Greco-Roman aspects of the god -Hesiod's Kronos-Saturn and Saturn as the Italian farmer-god - combining to become a benevolent deity who brings the Golden Age to humans, another interpretation emerges from Vergil's reading of the Golden Age that yields a new role for Saturn in the religious ideology of Augustan Rome. Vergil's allusion in *Georgics* 2 to Aratus' account of the Golden Age (*Phaen.* 101ff.) gives Saturn a significant connection with *Iustitia*, a key virtue in Augustan Rome associated with *mores* and *leges*. Through a close reading of passages that refer to Saturn as the founder of the Golden Age in Vergil, this paper argues that it is possible to find that Saturn's role in Augustan Rome is not merely as the marginal god whose holiday, Saturnalia, has become more popular than the deity himself, but instead as the progenitor of social order and justice.