

### Statius' *Via Domitiana*: The Elements in Balance

Poem 4.3 of Statius' *Silvae* praises the Via Domitiana, the major road construction project of Domitian's reign, which joined Rome (via the Appian Way) more closely to the area around Naples. The building of this road, and the associated improvement of the river Volturnus, were both feats of technology that required significant changes to the natural countryside. It has been argued that Statius portrays Domitian's extensive alteration to the natural landscape as a violent and potentially transgressive exercise of imperial power (Newlands 2002, 292-297). Statius' many evocations of the vocabulary and didactic style of Vergil's *Georgics* could be seen as supporting such an interpretation. The *Georgics* stress man's unending struggle to survive in a world where, by Jupiter's design, *labor vincit omnia / improbus et duris urgens in rebus egestas* (Geo. 1.145-146), and this endless struggle is, at least at times, one that involves a morally problematic violation of nature (Thomas 1988, 1.195).

But Statius' hendecasyllables convey a very different mood than the *Georgics'* hexameters, even as they draw on many of their themes. In this paper I will argue that Statius uses the allusions to the *Georgics* to both raise and allay concerns about the potential dangers of these projects of imperial power; the key is Domitian's divinely appointed status as guardian of thresholds and boundaries, particularly the boundary between earth and water. Like the farmer in the *Georgics* who is forever struggling to balance the elements (Ross 1987, 44-54), irrigating the dry and draining the wet, Domitian balances the opposing elements of water and earth as he builds the Via Domitiana on a marshy roadbed, bridges the muddy river Volturnus, and transforms the river into a clean, straight-flowing thoroughfare. Domitian is thus not a Xerxes-like figure who violates the natural order, but rather one who maintains boundaries and restores the elements to their proper place. Domitian's road and river represent the progress of swifter travel, a progress no longer subject to the natural forces of decay and destruction that have power in the *Georgics*; the Via Domitiana will endure, Statius has the Sibyl prophesy, until it becomes older than even the ancient Appian way. Statius' Domitian is thus presented as one who has some power to remedy the *labor improbus* imposed by the *Georgics'* Jupiter—at least, for as long as he continues to rule.

Select Bibliography

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