

Martial Matters: Statius' *Thebaid* 7 and the Temple of Mars Ultor

Statius' *Thebaid* illustrates a war-torn city drenched in civil blood and built upon a foundation of civil war. Given this focus on civil dissension, a theme that is constantly relevant to Roman poets, one may expect the events to take place in central Italy. But this is of course not the case; instead the focus rests upon the city most closely associated with Greek tragedy and paradigmatic fraternal strife: Thebes. Yet, in Book 7, Statius creates a dramatic parallel between a divine palace and a temple with its related complex constructed in early Imperial Rome: the temple of Mars Ultor in the Forum of Augustus. These characterizations of Mars's divine palaces are the subjects of this paper, as there are remarkable connections between the infernal house of Mars in his poem and the physically constructed house of Mars in the Forum of Augustus. These connections have some interesting implications for our appreciation of the *Thebaid*'s ideological investments.

After numerous delays, enough to postpone the action for half of the *Thebaid* itself, Statius begins to describe the warfare between the brothers, Eteocles and Polynices, by recounting an episode wherein Mercury is sent down to Mars in order to tell the god that Jupiter insists that the war finally begin. While describing the palace of Mars (7.34-63), the poet presents the audience with a dark and sinister image of the god's abode, and both the language and physical description of the temple relate directly to ancient accounts and modern reconstructions of the corresponding temple complex in Rome.

Although there has been much research conducted on ekphrases with respect to architecture in other works of ancient literature, few scholars have examined the passage in question here and its connection to the Augustan building program. Smolenaars, in his commentary on *Thebaid* 7, goes into some detail, although not great, of the potential connections

between built environments and the ekphrasis of the Palace of Mars. He makes a connection between the Forum of Augustus and the Palace of Mars, but not directly between the Palace and Temple of Mars Ultor (Smolenaars 1994, 32-3).

Keith has also analyzed the ekphrases of Statius and Ovid in her article on imperial built environments in Rome and epic poets, the final section of which goes into some detail concerning *Thebaid* 7.34-63. She notes, as does Smolenaars, that there are major influences seen in this passage stemming from Homer, Vergil, and Valerius Flaccus, but she takes particular note of the impact of Ovid's corpus on Statius, especially his *Metamorphoses* (Keith 2007, 19-22; Smolenaars 1994, 23). The connections between the two works are strong, as she convincingly argues, but another of Ovid's writings should be examined in light of Statius' ekphrasis: Ovid's *Fasti*, which is discussed at length in the second half of this paper as a source for ancient descriptions of the Temple of Mars Ultor in Rome.

These analyses still beg the question as to what implications ensue with the identification of this Palace of Mars in Statius with the Forum of Augustus and the Temple of Mars Ultor in Rome. If we can truly see the great Forum of Augustus as the model for Statius' fiendish house of Mars, perhaps then Statius wryly alludes to the atrocities of war, particularly civil war, both in the broader history of Rome and in particular the history of the early Principate. This temple of Mars Ultor became the crowning glory the *Fori Imperiali* in general and of Augustus in particular. The rhetoric of this complex in Rome, especially as expressed in Ovid's *Fasti*, whether his sentiments concerning the emperor are sincere or not, proclaims the power and greatness of Rome. By turning the greatness of this building on its head – by reversing the positive language of Ovid and the positive political propaganda of the building's sculpture –

Statius remarks upon not the greatness of Rome, but the bloodiness and *furor* that accompanied the establishment of the empire.

Bibliography

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