

**Robert L. GALLAGHER**  
**Metaphor in Cicero's *de re publica***

Only Ronconi and Zetzel have suggested any relationship between the astronomical imagery of Cicero's *de re publica* and its discussions of political theory. *De re publica*'s discourses on astronomy, however, in fact play a central role in the dialogue on the best constitution. First, they provide metaphors for the political processes discussed and the political theory advanced by Scipio Aemilianus throughout the work. Second, they advance a cosmology within which Scipio can claim that it is possible to prevent the otherwise inevitable degeneration of governments. Third, they serve to frame the dialogues on politics.

*De re publica*'s opening discourse on the orrery of Archimedes (omitted from Zetzel's edition) introduces the idea that the universe revolves in circles or orbits. (An orrery is a mechanical model of the solar system.) Scipio applies this image to commonwealths to advance a cyclical model for constitutional change based on the *anacyclosis* of Polybius. "There are remarkable circles (*orbes*), and, as it were, orbits (*quasi circuitus*)," Scipio says, "in the change and alteration of commonwealths" (*Rep.* 1.45; see also 2.45). Scipio also borrows astronomical language first applied to the orrery (e.g., *conversio*) to describe movements of states. The nature of these metaphors represents an enigma in Scipio's discourse. In so far as "metaphor consists in giving an object a name that belongs to something else" (Aris. *Poet.* 1457b), a metaphor can bring out not only similarities but also essential differences between the objects to which it is properly applicable and those to which it is transferred. While Scipio transfers the language of the movements of planets to the alterations of constitutions, the discourse of *de re publica* interrogates their similarities and differences. The contrast between earthly political processes, which are all defective (1.44), and the 'perfect and eternal' celestial ones (6.17), to which Scipio compares them, represents a problem in his argument. If everything sublunar is doomed to decay (6.17), how can he be confident of holding a state back from its ordinary path of degeneration (as he is in *Rep.* 2.45)? In the *Somnium*, Africanus and Paulus offer a Socratic answer--that through the free will and intellect of the soul (the only exception to mortality in the sublunar realm) (6.17) human beings can preserve commonwealths from degeneration (see 6.15, 26, 28-9). Yet, Africanus' warning of Scipio's death by assassination (6.12) introduces a note of skepticism.

A handout of the relevant passages will be provided.