

Prolegomena ad Columellam: An assessment of Columella's major treatise on agriculture in
light of the Catonian and Varronian tradition

Despite being quoted frequently as an authority in the technical field of agriculture, Columella's major treatise is seldom discussed for its own worth. Recent studies on Varro's *De re rustica*, such as Kronenberg (2009) and Nelsestuen's (2015), quote Columella's major treatise extensively in order to advance their own arguments, but do not open the door towards any comprehensive or partial assessment of the latter work. Nelsestuen (2015, 69, n.103) goes as far as to promise a study on 'the implications and purpose' of the neologism *agricolatio* used by Columella, instead of the later more successful term *agricultura* of Varro. Kronenberg (2009), on her part, interprets certain aspects of form and content in Varro's work as an allegory which represents the late Roman republic through the lens of irony, and uses Columella as a reliable source to support her arguments.

These approaches work well for the work of M. Terentius Varro, a prolific author of many genres, who lived throughout many of the tumultuous years of the late republic. Columella, however, an author known for having written the most substantial extant treatise on agriculture in antiquity (and a lost work against astronomers) during the reigns of Claudius and Nero, but who is far from sharing the philological and antiquarian interests of Varro, seems to have fallen somewhere beyond the scope of the modern literary critic. His work deserves, in my view, adequate study, not only for being the greatest contributor to the empirical field of agriculture and, arguably, to empirical scientific writing during Roman times; but also because the position of Columella's work is essential to our understanding of the evolution of Roman political discourses, as it deals with the subject of M. Porcius Cato's only extant sample of Rome's earliest literary prose.

We are fortunate enough to have solid manuscript and print traditions of the three agricultural treatises so far mentioned (and of later treatises), as well as a tradition of modern critical editions from J.M. Gesner (1735) to the Uppsala edition (V. Lundström *et al.* 1897–1968). There has been all along a continuous interest in the exceptionality of book 10, in which Columella claims to be taking upon himself Virgil's injunction in book 3 of the *Georgics* that a future poet continues his brief narrative on the cultivation of the vegetable–garden illustrated in the passage of Virgil's modest Cilician farmer in Rome. J. Henderson (2002), by 'resisting the sin of excerpation' of book 10 from the rest of the work, in fact suggests that Columella's book in hexameters can only be understood as integral part of our author's whole extant output, and has effectively opened the road to a new critical approach to this work.

This new approach, in turn, finds itself in need of reading the major treatise under the light of the tradition of agricultural writing, including Columella's own earlier minor version of which only the current *Liber de arboribus* is extant. (R. Goujard (1979 & 1986, 21) has confirmed the discovery by Jucundus Veronensis in the edition of 1514 that, what constituted book 3 in the manuscript tradition, is in fact a book belonging to an earlier minor version of the treatise by Columella himself.)

In this paper, I propose situating the work of Columella with respect to that of Cato and Varro. Both Kronenberg (2009) and Nelsestuen (2015), with their respective studies on Varro, provide useful models for a comparative assessment of Columella's treatise *vis-à-vis* his republican predecessors, and allow us to establish those elements which Columella accepts from the tradition to advance the science of agronomy, and those elements which he leaves behind. The eventual goal of this discussion will be an interpretation of how this particular technical treatise advanced the practical science of agriculture, as Dallinges (1964) has rightly pointed out,

and how it reflects the development of technical and scientific writing within Rome's literary history during the times of the early principate – namely the years of Claudius and Nero.

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53

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