

VALENTINA ARENA AND FIACHRA MAC GÓRÁIN

For we were wandering around and lost like visitors in our own city, and it was as if your books led us home, so that we could finally recognize who and where we were. You revealed the age of our homeland, the chronology of our history, you revealed the laws of the rites and the laws of the priests, you revealed our civic and military institutions, you revealed the topography of our districts and places, you revealed the names, kinds, functions, and origins of all things divine and human. Indeed you have shed a flood of light on our poets and in fact on the whole of Latin language and literature. (Cic. Acad. 1.9: editors' translation)

Cicero's celebrated praise of Varro constructs a key moment in the intellectual history of the late Roman Republic. By neglecting and forgetting their past, the Romans had lost their sense of identity. This was recovered — and this was what Cicero saw as the truly innovative event — thanks to the writings of Varro, who revealed and ordered the names (*nomina*), kinds (*genera*), functions or duties (*officia*), and origins (*causas*) of all Roman divine and human things. Only then, so the narrative runs, had the Romans been able to find their own identity again.¹

Varro's exceptional contribution to the history of the late Republic still awaits a comprehensive treatment.² This said, Varronian studies have recently been witnessing a renaissance after relative neglect, especially in Anglophone scholarship. In 2015 David Butterfield published an edited volume *Varro Varius: The Polymath of the Roman World*, Antonino Pittà a new edition of Varro's *De vita populi Romani*, and Grant Nelsestuen a monograph entitled *Varro the Agronomist: Political Philosophy, Satire, and Agriculture in the Late Republic*. In the same year a panel at the Society for Classical Studies in New Orleans focused on *The Intellectual Legacy of M. Terentius Varro: Varronian Influence on Roman Scholarship and Latin Literature* (organized by Anthony Corbeill and Christopher van der Berg). Two monographs on different aspects of Varro's work are shortly to be published;³ and an exciting new project by Katharina Volk on the sociology and politics of knowledge in late Republican Rome, which also contextualises Varro's writing in his time and place, is currently under way. There are also a number of new editions of Varro's texts in preparation: Robert Rodgers's edition of *De re rustica* for the Oxford Classical Text series; Giorgio Piras's edition of *De lingua Latina* for Teubner; Wolfgang de Melo's (with commentary) for Oxford University Press; and Joseph McAlhany's edition of the collected fragments for the Loeb Classical Library. New PhD dissertations on Varro's notion of the

1 For a judicious analysis of the passage see MacRae in this volume at 34–37.

2 For an excellent overview of Varronian studies see Butterfield 2014; see also Riposati and Marastoni 1974 and Cardauns 1982. For the most detailed treatment of Varro's biography and scholarly output, see Dahlmann 1935. For a recent, concise treatment focused on Varro's 'historical' works, see Drummond 2013b: 412–23.

3 Rolle 2017; Spencer (forthcoming).

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past (Irene Leonardis, Paris–Rome) and Varro's *De lingua Latina* (Steven Lundy, Texas) have been successfully completed.

It is within this scholarly context that we at University College London we organized a

colloquium in 2015 with the aim of gauging the temperature (however partial it might be) of current Varronian studies. The papers collected together in the present volume grew out of this event. Contributors were invited to reflect on Varro and his work from the vantage point of their own research. Two major strands emerged in response: the first concerns Varro's reconstruction as well as his use of the past; the second concerns ways in which later authors received him, and consequently the work which needs to be done to reconstruct and situate Varro's own writings, as most of it survives only in fragments. While we have placed first in this collection the essays which deal with Varro's reconstruction of the past and his ordering of knowledge, followed by those concerning the survival and reconstruction of Varro's texts, we nonetheless firmly believe that there can be no analysis of Varro's works, not to mention of their relationship with related works or their significance in political or cultural history, without the scholarly labour of constituting Varro's text in the first place. All of these papers, then, strive to examine the evidence for Varro as much as Varro himself; it emerges throughout that no use or reconstruction of a previous author's text is a neutral, objective exercise, any more than was Varro's own reconstruction of the past.⁴ Whether investigating Roman history, language, genealogy, jurisprudence, religious lore, or political procedure, Varro's main tools were historical research and etymology, a genealogical-reconstructive method which was substantially inductive and aimed to work back from the present to the past. In his notorious predilection for systems of classification and subdivisions,⁵ his main structures were not chronological, but rather, as Piras discusses, synchronic and organized by dimensional categories, which, however, do not preclude diachronic organization within them.⁶ The final aim of his inductive-reconstructive research was to uncover as much as possible that was 'buried by the lapse of time' (Ling. 6.2). The attempt proceeded step by step following the sometimes unreliable testimonies of the veteres, to reach the principium, which coincided with the essence, the principle of unchanging truth, or in Garcea's words, the 'principe universel, dont l'application s'étend bien au-delà de la grammaire'.⁷ In the case of language, this can be investigated via the morpho-etymological analysis of Latin words, but in fact, Varro followed an epistemological strategy most likely derived from his teacher Antiochus of Ascalon. This etymological method, onto which his genealogical research could be mapped, was not so much concerned with words themselves

and their origins, but rather with 'the things from which and for which things are named' and especially the relation between these things, mediated by a name, which could give access to the truth.⁸ Departing, however, from Stoic thinking, Varro accepts that the beginnings of things may be lost to us. He is a realist, or, in the words of Volk, an 'idealist realist'⁹

4 See König and Whitmarsh 2007: 3–39 for a Foucauldian consideration of the organization of knowledge which touches also on the Republic.

5 See Rawson 1978 (= 1991: 324–51) on the introduction of logical organization in accumulated material in the late Republic, with reference to Varro at 1991: 327–31; see also Rawson 1972 (= 1991: 58–79), Rawson 1985, and Mayer 2005.

6 See Volk (forthcoming), who sheds light on Varro's attempts to systematize material.

7 Garcea 2008: 108.

8 Blank 2008: 249.

9 Volk (forthcoming).

and, as Piras reminds us, confident that some useful knowledge can be found: 'if I have no knowledge of the roots (radices) of a tree, still I am not prevented from saying that a pear is from a branch, the branch is from a tree, and the tree from roots which I do not see' (Ling. 7.4).

When scientia of too obscure things cannot be reached, Varro argues, a certain degree of satisfaction must be found in opinio (Ling. 5.7–8). Opinion, however, was not sufficient

for Augustine, whose primary interest was not how the Roman gods had been worshipped, but rather the essence of the divine. In trying to assess the truth about the divine, as Hadas shows, Augustine turns to the final three books of Varro's *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* and, despite some elements of philosophical reflection (to which he cannot in any case give his assent as they aim to justify existing practices), all he can find is that 'Varro himself preferred to be sceptical about everything (*de omnibus dubitare*) rather than to affirm anything. For when he had finished the first of the last three books, on the subject of the certain gods (*di certi*), in the next book, when taking up the uncertain gods (*di incerti*), he says: "If in this book I set down uncertain views of the gods (*dubias de diis opiniones*) I should not be reproved. For if anyone thinks that a definite verdict should and can be given, he will produce one for himself after hearing what I say. As for me, I can sooner be brought to withdraw and leave doubtful (*in dubitationem revocem*) what I have said in the first book, than to bring everything that I shall write in this book to any one conclusion." Thus he renders uncertain not only what he says about the uncertain gods (*diis incertis*), but also what he says about the certain gods (*illum de certis fecit incertum*).¹ By adopting this method of research, Augustine argues, Varro set down what he thought rather than what he firmly knew, 'for in these matters man has opinions, but only God has knowledge' (*'hominis est enim haec opinari', Dei scire; De civ. D. 7.17*). Recasting Varro's *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* in a Christian framework, Hadas argues, Augustine shone such a harsh light on this work that he rendered it not only redundant to his contemporaries, but seemingly unattractive to posterity.

Within the epistemological scheme of inductive genealogical research, it is possible to reverse the chronological order of research and to work from antiquity to the present. As Nelsestuen discusses, Varro borrows but also innovates on the scheme of the three stages of human history from Dicaearchus of Messana, the distinguished pupil of Aristotle whose thought was very influential in late Republican Rome. He accentuates the moralizing tone which seems to have been much weaker in Dicaearchus,¹⁰ and articulates the Roman present,

luxurious with its *pastio villatica* (intense raising of profitable creatures), as a fourth stage of human existence, albeit without officially labelling it as such. The moralizing reading of the present is consistent with that found in *De vita populi Romani*, written less than a decade prior to *Rust.* and modelled on Dicaearchus's *Bios Hellados*, being structured around the biological scheme of growth and decay. Its fourth book deplores the devastation of the Italian towns, the *bellum horribile*, the civil war, the selfish greed of politicians who would prefer that the sky should fall to not holding a magistracy, and the corrupting profligacy of the likes of Lucius Lucullus.¹¹

Alongside his contemporaries, Varro represented his time as one of crisis, lamenting the loss of past traditions and sharpening, by contrast, the reproaches of the present for

¹⁰ See Momigliano 1950 and Rawson 1985: 235 on the difference between Greek and Roman antiquarianism; Pittà 2015: 11 stresses the presence of moralizing themes also in Dicaearchus at fr. 49W and fr. 65W.

¹¹ Fr. 109P (=115R; 426s); fr. 114P (=120R; 431S); fr. 115P (= 121R; 434S); fr. 118P (= 125bR; 432S); fr. 120P (=126R; 439S) which probably (if not explicitly) refers to Lucullus.

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its inadequacies.¹² In response to this, he proposed a recuperation, a systematization, and an organization of the Roman past. By ordering 'the laws of the rites and of the priests' in the *Antiquitates*, as MacRae shows, Varro was not only taking part in the contemporary debate over the laws of the priestly colleges, but was also contributing to the writing — and hence to the fixing — of those rules which regulated public life. As MacRae argues, Varro's conception of theology was also, to a certain extent, normative in orientation.

As well as in the sphere of the sacred *iura*, Varro also took an active part in the writing of civil law, which had been flourishing since the second century bc. As Todisco discusses, in 70 bc Varro composed for Pompey an instruction manual on how to convene a session of the senate, which he revised and updated forty years later in a letter to a certain Oppianus. As Claudia Moatti puts it effectively, 'at a single stroke, a practical guide thus replaced a period of several years' apprenticeship and imitation of existing models'.¹³ By making choices and selecting customs and institutions for the Romans which he enshrined in his books, Varro elaborated a system of knowledge that not only made the world more legible for his contemporaries,¹⁴ but also transformed patterns of customary behaviour into rules and regulations, which, sanctioned by the authority of the past, granted not only acceptance, but also legitimacy to chosen courses of action.

Responding to the ignorance of magistrates, which, like Cicero, he sorely laments,¹⁵ Varro cast the rules concerning the convening of the senate in terms of continuity with the past, in line with the customs of the ancestors, while also enshrining new customs in his written work (for example, in relation to who could express his opinion first in the senate). In fact, of course, the *mos* was in constant flux; indeed, as the grammarians attest, Varro himself sketched a phenomenology of the *novus mos*.¹⁶ The self-styled custodians of the Roman past constantly had to redefine Roman traditions to maintain a sense of identity amid political and social turbulence, while having to validate contemporary responses to the changing needs of society on the basis of ancient precedent. This was partly a self-serving

exercise to protect and legitimize the interests and political actions of the elite, and also to safeguard Varro and other writers' special status as custodians and, to some extent, 'inventors' of the knowledge that kept the social and political system stable.

In a passage of the *Human Antiquities* (reported verbatim by Gellius) concerning which magistrates may issue arrests and legal summons, Varro states that the tribunes of the commons have no power of summons, nevertheless many of them in ignorance have used that power, as if they were entitled to it; for some of them have ordered, not only private persons, but even a consul to be summoned before the rostra. I myself, when a triumvir, on being summoned by Porcius, tribune of the commons, did not appear, following the authority of our leading men (*auctoribus principibus*), but I held to the old law (*vetus ius tenui*). Similarly, when I was a tribune, I ordered no one to be summoned, and required no one who was summoned by one of my colleagues to obey, unless he wished. (*Gell. 13.12.5–6*)

¹² Wallace-Hadrill 2008: 231. On ancient perceptions of moral decline as a cause of the crisis of the Republic see Lintott 1972.

¹³ Moatti 2015: 110.

¹⁴ Moatti 2015: 2 refers to this phenomenon as an 'epistemological revolution'.

¹⁵ Cic. *Leg.* 3.48 and *Gell. 13.12.3–4*.

¹⁶ On the fluidity of the notion of the *mos maiorum* and the establishment of *novus mos*, see Bettini 2011: 87–130 and Arena 2014.

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Varro's view had not been uncontested, and by asserting one version of procedure as the most authoritative account based on ancient practice,¹⁷ he establishes a precedent for future generations to reckon with. Roman construction of the past, as Wallace-Hadrill puts it, became 'the living force that defines action in the present'.¹⁸

The ancestral past in fact provided a successful model of legitimate behaviour and considerable symbolic capital for the elite to exploit.¹⁹ As a result of ignorance or, at times, deliberate fabrications, false ancestral claims became more prominent in the first century bc.²⁰ In response to this trend, and in the face of the constant expansion of the senatorial

elite, Atticus was commissioned to compose genealogies of the Iunii, Fabii, and Claudii (Nep. Att. 18). As Marshall argues, it was in dialogue with, if not in reaction to, Atticus's genealogical work that Varro composed his *De familiis Troianis*, which traced back the lineage of Roman families to the companions of Aeneas. Contrary to readings of Varro's genealogical work as having supported Caesar's claims to pre-eminence (and in the case of the *De gente populi Romani*, divinization),²¹ Marshall contends that Varro's work aimed to undermine, or at least to circumscribe, the role of the gens Iulia. This erudite research had a strong engagement with contemporary politics, being both prompted by and having an impact on the contemporary discussions of the legitimacy of those in power. As Marshall shows, different versions of the mode of execution of the would-be tyrant Manlius have the potential to be politically charged: adopted in political discourse, they may support different visions of the past on which the present should model itself in order to gain wider validity. Some of these erudite formulations of past traditions, Marshall argues, were the result of scholarly conversations, which might have taken place over the dinner table or through an exchange of learned letters. If, on the one hand, scholarship has rightly underlined the importance of the development of writing in the transmission of traditions, which now, entrusted to books (as Cicero states in his praise of Varro in the *Academica*), could be systematized, 'objectified', and thereby potentially also criticized, on the other hand, the traditionally oral transmission of knowledge within a closed circle of friends was not eclipsed, but rather had entered into a dialectical relationship with the world of writing. Atticus may have recorded in his written work Varro's opinion on Manlius's death, which he might have heard during one of those conversations that Cicero recalls took place in Varro's villa.²² And in turn, Gellius cited Varro's view from Atticus's text, creating for us the impression that this idea should necessarily be ascribed to one of Varro's written works. Atticus and Varro, who were personally quite close to one another, conversed about Rome's past and in so doing discussed also Rome's present.

At a time of fragmented Republican legitimacy and competing claims for the primacy of the Republic, Varro also used his erudite writings to negotiate his political position. Having fought alongside Pompey since the 70s, already in 59 bc he served on Caesar's

17 See Cic. Leg. 3.20 and Livy Per. 48.

18 Wallace-Hadrill, 2008: 231.

19 Bourdieu 1977: 171–97.

20 On these issues see Flower 1996: 72–73 and 182–83 and Smith 2006: 15–17, 32–44, and 51–57.

21 See Todisco in this volume, 57–58.

22 Cic. Phil. 2.105: 'think of what previously used to be spoken (*dicebantur*) and thought (*cogitabantur*) and committed to writing in that villa (*litteris mandabantur*): the laws of the Roman people, the achievements of our ancestors, a systematic treatment of all philosophy, of all learning (*iura populi Romani, monumenta maiorum, omnis sapientiae ratio omnisque doctrinae*)'.

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agrarian commission, dedicated his *Antiquitates divinae* to him, and in the *De vita populi Romani* seems to attribute the outbreak of the first civil war to the intransigence and shortsightedness of the consuls rather than to Caesar's belligerence. As Todisco underlines, there

is no reason not to believe Caesar's claim that Varro had spoken of his close bond to both Pompey and Caesar;²³ who in 47 bc even asked him to organize a library, a project which Pollio later brought to fruition.²⁴

Whether investigating the origins of words, families, and peoples, or establishing the *sacrorum iura* [...] *sacerdotum* and the rules and the regulations of the senate, as a scholar, Varro aspired to establish connections between past and present. Varro's authority

as preserver and (re)builder of Roman tradition did not lie in his extensive military and political career (he reached the rank of praetor, although he never became consul), but rather in the seriousness of his scholarly method, the results of which also positioned him in the ever-changing political landscape.

No act of constructing knowledge, whether reconstructing past traditions or an ancient text, is a neutral or objective exercise. Even what might nowadays appear to be a purely scientific exercise, such as establishing a word's etymology, depends on choices made by scholars past

or present. It is on these choices that our access to and understanding of the text rest: they may well be at the foundation of why a text has survived, why it has been partially or totally lost, or why the fragments survive in the form that they do. The techniques of composing a text and of editing it both involve an inherent element of inventiveness. Accordingly, de Melo offers here a precise object lesson in textual criticism, focusing on select passages of Varro's *De lingua Latina*. Only books 5–10 of the original twenty-four books survive, all deriving ultimately from the eleventh-century Codex Laurentianus. Varro himself predicted that copyists would make mistakes when transmitting a thorny text (*Ling.* 8.51), and indeed the Codex Laurentianus is full of mistakes. De Melo identifies a selection of mistaken readings proposed by modern editors, which arise from attempts to correct the poorly transmitted manuscript readings. His analysis and proposed corrections demonstrate what a wide variety of skills and contexts an editor of Varro needs to bring to the task, from palaeography and linguistics to an imaginative and even creative sense of how Varro understood his own literary and linguistic culture. Crucially, de Melo argues, Varro himself seems to have been subject to similar prejudices to those that affected the judgment of later scholars.

In reconstructing texts which survive mostly in fragmentary form, it is necessary to focus on the rhetoric, agenda, and biases of the transmitting source as well as the testimony itself. As Hadas shows, this applies forcefully to Augustine, such that it is virtually impossible to extricate the testimonies of Varro's *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* in the *City of God* from the polemical use to which Augustine has put them. As Vallat argues, Servius probably derived his knowledge of Varro from intermediary sources such as Pliny the Elder and Gellius. Interestingly, Servius often cites Varro even when the citation does not seem directly illuminating from a Virgilian point of view. While these 'inert' or 'digressive' citations sometimes point to traditions which Virgil chose not to use, Vallat suggests that citation of Varro may also have another function: responding to the ideological debates of the preceding century between pagans and Christians, Servius may tacitly wish to ally himself to the pagans by bolstering Varro's authority, and pitting him as a comparand worthy to stand alongside Virgil.

23 *De vita populi Romani* fr. 111P (= 116R; 427S); *Caes. BCiv.* 2.17.1–3.

24 On Caesar's plans and Pollio's library see *Suet. Iul.* 44 and Neudecker 2013: 316–17.

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Adopting different approaches, the essays in this collection exemplify some of the directions in which Varronian studies are heading. These include the investigation of the interplay between the search for the past and the engagement with the present, the *modus operandi* of these intellectuals, who were also active politicians and generals, and some of the important considerations that need to be taken into account when engaging with Varro's texts and their reconstruction.

While we are not aiming at comprehensive coverage, by collecting these essays together, we hope to contribute to the current regeneration of Varronian studies by highlighting that further work should concentrate on the evidence and what we really know about Varro within his intellectual and historical contexts. By doing so, we believe, we will be able to

move forward towards a much-needed comprehensive treatment of Varro and his intellectual and political contribution to the transformation of the Republic.

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