

COLUMELLA'S WORK ON AGRICULTURE

MIELKE (L.) *Spaliere für Silvinus. Charakterschulung in Columellas Werk über die Landwirtschaft.* (Hypomnemata 219.) Pp. 602. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2024. Cased, €100. ISBN: 978-3-515-30225-5.

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The volume under review presents the reworking of a dissertation, as explained in the preface (p. 9), and extends for approx. 600 pages (with over 2,000 notes) or rather 484 pages of text followed by an extensive section consisting of an appendix, the bibliography and an index of cited passages. The subject is Columella's treatise *De re rustica* (or *Res rustica*, as M. prefers), examined for its non-technical-agrarian, namely its rhetorical, philosophical and political aspects. What emerges is the image of Columella not as an expert in agriculture, but as a technical writer. The title 'Spaliere für Silvinus' (something like: 'Trellis for Silvinus') alludes to the recipient of Columella and, with 'Spaliere', perhaps to the 'support' (like the agricultural item that supports trees and vines) for his training; but Silvinus seems to have been a landowner, friend and neighbour of Columella, cultured and therefore already educated (to the point of asking Columella to write Book 10 on vegetable gardens in verse, see 9.16.2).

In the introduction (p. 14) various ambitious objectives of the research are set out: to read the philosophical-political implications in the 'right' way, to explain how Columella connects the 'außerökonomische' ('extra-economic') dimension with economic success, to clarify whether he has a social, moral or 'worldview' programme ('gesellschaftliches, moralisches oder weltanschauliches Programm') and, again, how the work can be used as a historical source; however, ultimately, the agricultural content also comes into play. The result is an abundance of themes, which could be to the detriment of the cohesion of the volume and the specificity of the research. Furthermore, the order of the topics does not seem to follow a precise thread; instead, they simply seem juxtaposed.

The volume is divided into four chapters, which are in turn divided into further sections, sometimes corresponding to very short texts (e.g. 3.4.1.1, p. 252: 'Der gesellschaftliche Nutzen der Landwirtschaft'). After the introduction (Chapter 1) Chapter 2 deals with agriculture and eloquence, Chapter 3 with systems of values and education in values, and Chapter 4 with economic optimism and confidence in progress. This is followed by a conclusion and an appendix on some *partes suadendi* (*utilitas, honestas, voluptas*), the bibliography and the *index locorum*.

An index of ancient names and notable things and words contained in the volume is missing, which would have been useful to find easily information on topics of interest for readers (e.g. the character of Silvinus, the presence of Cicero or Virgil in Columella etc.). Some historical and biographical information is provided at the end (pp. 478–9).

Among Columella's sources, Celsus and Xenophon are considered, but others, such as Cato and Varro, are mentioned occasionally and in sections whose titles do not indicate their presence. Greater attention is paid to Virgil, especially regarding the theme of *voluptas* (3.3.1, p. 214), but in a somewhat reductive vision of his influence and 'hidden' within sub-chapter 3.3 ('Das Verhältnis von Nutzen und Vergnügen').

The idea expressed in Chapter 1 might be correct, that is, that Columella wanted to offer a practical example, to influence readers through style and to educate them by dealing with social, moral or naturalistic-philosophical questions, but the provocative interpretation expressed in Chapter 2, according to which Columella subordinates moral values to profit,

is perplexing incomprehensible, partly because M. also ultimately agrees on the fact that Columella tries to reconcile the two aspects. Moreover, M. exaggerates Columella's desire for personal fame among contemporaries and posterity through his refined work (Chapter 3); in fact, Varro had already elevated the style of literature about agriculture, compared with Cato's manual.

The metaliterary interpretation of sub-chapters 3.4.2.3 and 3.4.2.4 'Demontage der "Mutter Erde"-Metapher' and 'Nymphenvergewaltigung' (pp. 288–319) also seems far-fetched: at first M. imagines a trap set by Columella to seduce the nymphs (sic) as an example of the violence used in agriculture; but, even if the idea of violence is sometimes possible in this context, it is connected to the theory of the two kinds of 'earth', one material (soil) and one divine (Mother Earth), as Columella explains in 10.55–70. Secondly, M. supposes metaphorically a deception by Columella towards the farmer-reader, as a form of provocation, and even abuse of ethical values (p. 319).

Unconvincing is M.'s interpretation of Columella's *De re rustica* as a 'Medium' (4.4.2, p. 476) useful for obtaining personal social fame and the final reductive and negative portrait of Columella (p. 484), presented as a pragmatic writer, astute and ambitious, aware of philosophical and political issues, but without taking a position, against the interpretation of R. Martin of him as a 'écrivain engagé' (in: *Recherches sur les agronomes latins et leurs conceptions économiques et sociales* [1971]). M. underestimates Columella's civil commitment and cultural-scientific interest, shared with many Roman citizens in the republican and imperial age, going back to Cato and Cicero, who wrote to contribute to the civilisation, prestige and well-being of the community of Rome. The careful preservation of his extensive work in twelve books over the centuries demonstrates the vast and constant esteem of posterity.

M.'s writing style is sometimes unclear, as in the case of the statement about the preface of the first book, according to which the treatise is characterised by an 'excess of content and language' (1.1, p. 12: 'inhaltlichen und sprachlichen Überschuss'). Moreover, M. seems to take the so-called 'städtische Dekadenz der Gegenwart' (*ibidem*) – a sign of a refined society, to which Columella also belonged – too seriously; in reverse, the influence of Cicero, Columella's principal prose model, is not sufficiently highlighted, though he similarly lamented the crisis of oratory in the preface of *De oratore*. At least inelegant is the definition of Columella's style as 'elastic' (2.2.4, p. 186).

Regarding the bibliography, although extensive, the lack of some perhaps useful titles can be noted, both on Roman education (e.g. H.-I. Marrou, *Histoire de l'éducation dans l'Antiquité* [1948] and later editions; S.F. Bonner, *Education in Ancient Rome. From the Elder Cato to the Younger Pliny* [1977]) and on Roman agriculture or Columella's concept of the earth (e.g. A. Marcone, *Storia dell'agricoltura romana. Dal mondo arcaico all'età imperiale* [1997]; F. Boldrer, 'Communis omnium parens: Mother Earth and agriculture in Latin treatises from Cato to Varro and Columella', *IJA* 33 [2018], 181–91).

Overall, the volume demonstrates deep commitment, but contains an excessive amount of topics, covered in a manual style, some provocative interpretations that try to question the value of the Latin writer and little attention to the historical context. A more specific selection of topics would have allowed for more focused and in-depth research to understand Columella's teaching, culture and *humanitas*.

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