

Overseeing the Republic: Farmers and Overseers in Roman Political Ideology

One common paradigm for Roman aristocratic self-representation was that of the small farmer: the *agricola*. Embodied best in men like Cincinnatus and Atilius Serranus, these farmers came from the plow to save their beloved *patria* once and sometimes twice (e.g. Livy 3.26.7-10). Within this exemplary tradition, it is crucial that these citizen-farmers manually worked their own, pointedly meager plots to earn their livelihoods. By the mid-first century BC, however, Roman elite were no longer hands-on farmers, but rather, absentee farmowners, whose estates relied on the labor of slaves and overseers. This paper considers the effects of this change in production on the political ideology of the Roman elite, for whom the *mos maiorum* – that is, the “custom of the ancestors” – placed a premium on maintaining an unbroken and unchanged link with the past and whose writings testify to this crisis in identity.

Reay, for example, has convincingly argued that Cato’s veneration of both *agricolae* and *maiores* in the preface to his *De Agricultura* seeks to integrate these absentee landlords into the tradition of the valorized small farmers of the past, thereby endowing the descendants with the honorable and unassailable corporate identity of their ancestors. One attractive aspect to Reay’s thesis is its resolution of the oft-noted “contradiction” between Cato’s claims that he himself worked in the fields with the slave-based reality of production. As is well attested in a variety of textual sources, the ideology of Roman (and Greek) slaveowners constructed slaves as “prosthetic limbs” or “speaking tools” of their owners. The “solution” to this apparent contradiction, then, is to acknowledge that this difference is simply not an issue within the ideological landscape of Roman slavery. When Cato states that he himself worked in the fields of Sabine country, it does not matter whether he was physically there or not; so long as the slaves were out in the fields, Cato could plausibly claim to be there too.

In this paper, I attempt to nuance the simple dichotomy of owner/*dominus* and slaves by focusing on the *vilicus* (“overseer”), who cuts a crucial but problematic figure for the owner of an estate. The bailiff was generally either a freedman or a current slave of the owner. While the fundamental difference in social status dictates that the *vilicus* was to be distinguished from the *dominus*, the *vilicus* was also necessarily interchangeable with the owner when he was absent. Practically, it is the *vilicus* who is in charge of the farm and its operations on a day-to-day basis. In these respects, the *vilicus* presents a potential – but necessary – challenge to the owner’s authority. By examining a series of texts written by Cato, Cicero, Livy, and Columella, this paper will delineate the challenges presented by this figure and, more importantly, their implications for traditional Roman agricultural ideology. In particular, I will argue that, whereas the rise of large-scale estates, grounded in slave labor, prompted Cato’s correction of the traditional ideology, Cicero openly acknowledges this sea change in agricultural practice and avails himself of it to present a new role for the ideal statesman as a *vilicus* in the ideal estate as specified in *De Republica* (5.5).

Works Cited:

Reay, B. (2005). “Agriculture, Writing, and Cato's Aristocratic Self-Fashioning.” *CA* 24.2:331-61.