

Columella's Poetic Garden Catalogues

After nine prose books of practical agricultural precepts on soils and planting, arboriculture and viticulture, the care of farm animals, grafting and pruning, and beekeeping, Columella surprisingly announces at the end of book nine a following poetical treatment of horticulture in *De Re Rustica* Book 10. The 436 hexameters of Columella's tenth book mark out the garden as a separate world, and highlight its special role in his agricultural and literary enterprise. At the opening of his poem (*RR* 10.1-6) Columella justifies his choice of topic and genre by citing Vergil's refusal and bequest of the topic of gardens at *Georgics* 4.116-48. Columella's garden, however, does not represent a Vergilian ideal of solitude, but of fecundity, sexual reproduction, and financial profit. It contains over fifty varieties of plants, ranging from roses to onions. In this talk I want to look specifically at a number of Columella's plant catalogues in *De Re Rustica* 10 and consider how these participate simultaneously in the traditions of learned poetry, agricultural imperialism, and epic poetry.

The tradition of the poetic catalogue is rooted both in heroic epic and in the learned didactic tradition that Columella is following (Nicander *Georgika* fr. 74 Gow and Scholfield consists of a list of flowers). Like Vergil's *Georgics*, his declared model, the poetics of Columella's tenth book engage with both traditions of epic and in both works there is continual interplay between the humble subject matter and the poet's lofty ambitions. Other garden descriptions, such as those in the contemporary *Moretum* (60-84) and *Culex* (398-411) also contain plant lists, which characterize the different types of gardens in the poems. The anonymous poets of these works also use plant catalogues as a feature of their neoteric poetics.

Columella's poetic plant catalogues allow for astrological, mythological, geographical and etymological embellishment. We can compare and contrast them with similar plant

catalogues in his prose books. This paper will show how Columella's catalogues in *De Re Rustica* 10, such as those of flowers and herbs (RR 10.169-77), lettuces (179-88, cf. 11.3.25-7), cabbages (127-39), and figs (10.413-18, cf. 5.10.9), engage with a number of literary traditions and exhibit his nationalistic enthusiasm about new horticultural discoveries and recent imports.

Bibliography

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