

Building an Empire from the Ground Up: The Imperialist Implications of Soil as a Raw Material in the Roman Agronomists

This paper makes a two-fold argument. First, I show that the Roman agronomists present soil as a raw material. In the same way that crops (e.g. grapes, wheat, or olives) are not as inherently or immediately useful as the goods created by processing them (e.g. milling grain, pressing olives or grapes, fermenting wine, baking bread), the soils from which these products grow must be subjected to processes like plowing and fertilizing in order for their full benefits to be accessible. Second, I argue that treating soil in this way both contributes to and represents Rome's imperial project. Soil becomes another resource subject to transformation and exploitation as the empire dominates the landscape. Mattingly (2011, 269-276) presents ten propositions for the postcolonial study of the Roman Empire. Building on his ideas and those of Ando (2015), I offer a reading of soil in the Roman agronomical corpus that connects working the land with the ideologies underlying Roman imperialism.

Of course, raw material does not provide the only metaphor for thinking about soil. For example, the female body often symbolizes the earth, as both entities create and nurture life (e.g. Lucretius, *DRN* 5.795-6; Columella, *Rust.* 1.praef.2; Keith 2009, 259-260). In considering the differences between understanding soil *qua* mother and soil *qua* raw material, we see the implications each of these metaphors has. If the earth is the mother in this metaphor, then soil is the womb. The womb only requires seed to become fruitful, whereas soil on a farm might need to be tilled, fertilized, and properly tended before it can adequately support crops. Indeed, what marks agricultural land as different from the rest of the countryside is that, like a raw material, it has undergone processes that manipulated and transformed it. Thus, using the metaphor of soil as a raw material emphasizes the centrality of this change in status.

This shift is reflected lexically. Unlike the more neutral *terra*, which has a broad spectrum of meanings (Varro, *Rust.* 1.9), *ager* signifies specifically land that has been marked by its relationship with humans; it has been demarcated for use by people. Furthermore, *seges* can signify both a crop and, by metonymy, the field in which that crop grows (Christmann 1989). In fact, it is in growing a crop that a field (*ager*) becomes identified as *seges* (Varro, *Rust.* 1.29.1). Classifying land as an *ager* or a *seges* indicates that the soil has undergone a process driven by human agency. In much the same way that crops are transformed by human intervention (e.g., the olive (*olea*) being processed into oil (*oleum*), Cato, *Agr.* 64-66; Varro, *Rust.* 1.54; Columella, *Rust.* 12.52; or grapes (*uvae*) being turned into wine (*vinum*), Cato, *Agr.* 23-26; Varro, *Rust.* 1.55), plowed fields are human artifacts, made from soil. In the passages about the tasks which the agronomists indicate as necessary for treating and altering soil (see, for instance, Cato, *Agr.* 29, 34-37; Varro, *Rust.* 1.9, 23-25, Verg. *G.* 1.71-99), we find additional evidence of Roman attitudes towards soil as a natural resource.

Considering that the Roman agronomists present untreated soil as a raw material and fields prepared for agricultural use as manufactured products, I address the implications this framework raises for our understanding of these writers and their authorial agendas. The exploitation of natural resources is characteristic of colonialism and imperialism (Jones and Phillips 2005). Thus, soil in the agricultural texts becomes another *locus* of the imperial project. When the agronomists describe farming and soil in ways that evoke the exploitation of raw materials, they align the goals and outlooks of Roman agriculture with those of Roman imperialism. Green (2012) and Nelsestuen (2015) have shown how Varro depicts the ideal Roman farm as a microcosm of the empire. I take that argument a step further by suggesting that every farm and plowed field enacted the work of empire building.

Bibliography

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