

## Columella's *Vilicus* and the Difficulty of Management in Ancient Rome and the American South

This paper proposes an examination of managerial figures in two distinct slave societies, the American South and the Roman Empire. Through a comparative approach, I seek to understand the role of hierarchy in generating the various attitudes centered around these managerial figures in order to elucidate their position within their respective societies. I focus on the similarities between the two managerial figures. My research builds on the work of scholars who have examined the *vilicus* and other Roman managerial figures through legal sources and epigraphy (Aubert 1994; Carlsen 1995). I build specifically on Carlsen's use of a comparative perspective to examine the recruitment and training practices of Roman agricultural managers (Carlsen 2010). My focus, however, is on the importance of the *vilicus* to Columella's project in the *De Re Rustica*. I argue that in the treatise, the *vilicus* is positioned over the estate's slave staff and in many ways parallel to the figure of the ideal farmer and landowner. While the position of the overseer in the American South does not offer a direct correspondence, the importance of hierarchy in this context is evident. The American South is particularly illustrative of hierarchy because the prejudices faced by the overseer in this context can be directly attributed differences of race and class. These prejudices speak to the challenges of integrating into social circles for the managerial figures in the American South, thereby illuminating these challenges in the Roman context.

First I begin with the Roman context. I look at the *vilicus* in Columella's *De Re Rustica*, who I argue is parallel to the ideal farmer in the treatise. In addition to being placed in a position of authority over the estate, he was expected to have mastery over the knowledge and practice of farming. As is evident from Columella's precepts, and from other ancient *testimonia*, the *vilicus* was seen by some to contain fair degree of autonomy, due in no small part to the prevalence of

absentee management. I then argue that Columella's precepts indicate that the *vilicus* faced some difficulty integrating into his social circles because of the ambivalence of his position. As these managers could also be freedmen, I consider his treatment as part of the broader treatment of freedmen under the Principate.

In my consideration of the American South, on the other hand, I emphasize the ambivalence of various managerial figures, including the overseer, who was cast as both aspiring upstart and lazy drunkard, and the black slave driver, who, as evident in the debate over his character, could be despised by his fellow slaves, favored by owners, and, in disputes, seen as having sided with his fellow slaves over owners (Scarborough 1966; Van Deburg 1979). I consider how the treatment of these managerial figures reflects both class and racial prejudices held against African Americans and poor Whites through analysis of various textual sources such as letters, testimonies from slaves, journals, newspapers, and pamphlets (Scarborough 1966; Van Deburg 1979; Richard 2009). To close, I offer some reflections on the importance of each of these figures to the functioning of the agricultural estate.

#### Bibliography

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