1. Frugality in *pastio villatica*

The word *frugalitas* is used just once in Varro's three dialogues on different aspects of farming, at the beginning of Book 3, in the course of his elaboration of a conceptual framework for understanding *pastio villatica*, the production of luxury foodstuffs for the urban market.\(^2\) There are, the speaker (Merula) suggests, three divisions of this 'science' – the aviary, the hare-warren and the fish-pond – each of which is further divided, both into two sub-divisions according to specific functional criteria (for example, the distinction between fresh- and salt-water ponds) and, according to a general scheme of historical development, into past and present forms of activity:

> Omnibus tribus his generibus sunt bini gradus; superiores, quos frugalitas antiqua, inferiores, quos luxuria posterior adiecit. (3.3.6)

Each of these three classes has two stages: the earlier, which ancient frugality observed, and the later, which modern luxury has now added.

This contrast echoes the beginning of the discussion of this book, where Varro is concerned to establish *pastio villatica* as both a distinct and as a morally acceptable branch of Roman agriculture. He does this through a complicated argument about the true nature of the *villa*, or the nature of the authentic *villa*, exploring the characteristics of different things that are given that name; it is taken for granted that the *villa* is the basis of proper Roman farming, but that raises the question of what sorts of building can be legitimately given that name, just as in the first book his characters had debated whether every activity carried out on the land should count as *agri cultura*.\(^3\) The Villa Publica, where the third dialogue takes place, is (says Appius Claudius), more frugal (*frugalior*) and better (*melior*) than the villa that his interlocutor Axius owns at Reate, which is decorated with citrus wood, elaborate mosaic work and the like (3.2.4); further, this villa is the common property of the citizens and is suitable for public business, rather than being private property. Axius counters that his villa is, like those of their grandfathers and great-grandfathers, dedicated to agricultural production, even if it is also finely decorated, whereas the Villa Publica also has paintings and

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\(^1\) I am extremely grateful to the editors for organising the conference and for their enormous patience in awaiting this chapter. This was written in Berlin, as part of my activities as Einstein Visiting Professor, and I am grateful to colleagues at the Friedrich Meinecke Institut at the Freie Universität for discussions and advice.


\(^3\) Compare the discussion at the beginning of Book 1 (1.2.13-24) about whether mining or clay-pits or tavern-keeping carried out on the land can be considered as 'farming', with Marzano 2015 on the range of activities carried out on villas; see Nelsestuen 2015: 43-4 on Varro's overall concern with the systematisation and demarcation of the different branches of agriculture.
statues, but has never seen a load of hay or a vintage or a grain harvest (3.2.5-6). This in turn gives Appius the opportunity to introduce the example of the villa of Seius, which has neither pictures and statues nor wine-presses, mills and stables – because it is dedicated to the pasturing of birds, bees and game, which can be just as lucrative (3.2.7-11) – and his description of the potential returns from such an enterprise makes Axius eager to learn more, leading into the substantive discussion of different aspects and techniques of pastio villatica. It is left implicit here that frugalior has a temporal dimension, but it is certainly being contrasted to luxuria in the same manner as the later remark, not least in the evocation of such familiar tropes of Roman luxury as citrus-wood.4

If we follow the conventional view that frugalitas is one of the basic virtues of the ancestors in Roman tradition – and if we recognise that Varro's work is much more than a simple technical manual, with at the very least a significant philosophical and moralising strand – then the relative absence of the concept from the work may initially seem surprising.5 One possible explanation is that frugality was understood by the Romans primarily in terms of consumption, at least in a negative way: it is the absence of decoration, the limitation of expenditure on unnecessary things, the antonym of luxury, the avoidance of any behaviour that might threaten to waste a Roman aristocrat's patrimony. The problem with modern pastio villatica, in this discourse, is that it may become a form of superfluous consumption, rather than being dedicated to utility and profit as much as to pleasure (as Varro defines the correct approach to farming at 1.4.1, following on from 1.2.12). The remainder of the third book offers many examples of such a contrast, between aviaries constructed for pleasure and those constructed for utility (3.4.2 – going on to recount a failed attempt by Lucullus at combining the two by having his guests dine within the aviary, where they could watch birds at the same time as eating them), and salt-water fish-ponds that cost as much to run, let alone construct, as they brought in from the sale of the fish (3.17.3). Whether we interpret Varro's work as a 'mirror of virtues' for the landed elite, as Silke Diederich has suggested, or as a deliberate attempt at rationalising new forms of activity and new sources of profit in terms of the traditional Republican elite value system, as Grant Nelsestuen argues, pastio villatica is a topic that requires careful negotiation from the beginning; it blurs the conceptual boundary between production and consumption (at least in some of its contemporary forms) and so requires a certain amount of intellectual work to be claimed as a legitimate activity for a respectable member of the elite and hence as a legitimate subject for consideration. 'Frugality' is a key Roman moral concept for such a project; it is necessary to argue that this deviation from ancient frugalitas does not necessarily lead one into deplorable luxuria, provided that the expenditure on aviaries, fish-ponds

5On the literary, philosophical and moralising aspects of Varro's work, see the different perspectives offered by Diederich 2007 (with a summary account in Diederich 2005), Kronenberg 2007 and Nelsestuen 2015.
and game reserves can still be justified in terms of their financial return. Conversely, the absence of any mention of *frugalitas* in the first two books of Varro's work is easily explained by the fact that the discussion of agrarian cultivation and conventional pasturing is unproblematically focused on production rather than consumption.

The problem looks rather different if, as Ingo Gildenhard argues in this volume, we put in question whether *frugalitas* is actually the age-old Roman virtue, of more or less fixed and traditional meaning and connotations, that it is often assumed to be (not least by Diederich and Nelsestuen, who seem to take it as part of a fixed background of established Roman values against which a given practice or act can be measured). If it is instead a relatively recent coinage, closely associated with Cicero's 'invention' (with a clear political and cultural agenda) of a complex of 'traditional' Roman values, then the absence of the term from most of Varro's work needs little explanation, while the passages in which the term is used (or effectively implied, as in the various examples of unacceptable or misconceived *pastio villatica*) need to be considered from a different perspective: his characters are not simply evaluating some relatively new and potentially problematic agricultural practices against a fixed backdrop of established elite values and expectations, but simultaneously exploring the nuances and ambiguities of this moral category against a backdrop of existing (if not necessarily well-established) practices.

The complexity, and indeed incoherence, of the term *luxuria* as the antonym of *frugalitas* has long been recognised. There is no fixed or objective standard for what constitutes 'luxury', in Rome or in any other society, let alone a neutral and apolitical definition; rather, any given act is more or less open to accusations that it is, in some sense, luxurious. We could read the opening section of Varro's third dialogue as a similar critique of the concept of *frugalitas*, revealing it to be more complicated than it first appears. The political implications of the debate are made explicit in the contrast between the frugal, communal Villa Publica (associated with political activity and military service) and the private villa estate (associated with individual, anti-social pleasure) – but are immediately problematised, both by questioning whether that frugality is actually as useful as it pretends (since it does not involve the production of goods that Roman society needs) and by exposing the confusion around the identification and definition of frugality. Is it the presence or absence of statues, paintings, mosaics and citrus-wood – or is it the purpose for which the building exists? Is it linked to the very conventional contrast of city and country, or can a country villa be wholly unproductive and hence the opposite of frugal? Is frugality necessarily an ancient virtue, if

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6 Compare Purcell 1987 on other problematic aspects of the Roman villa.
8 Which might also bring to mind a later iteration of this debate, when the younger Pliny claims that his suburban retreat is more productive than his farms because he is able to write there: *Ep.* 4.6.
new-fangled forms of *pastio villatica* – which seem to be thoroughly luxurious in contrast to the practices of the ancestors – can be shown to be wholly productive activities, both economically (in terms of the profit to be drawn from them) and socially (since they help support such social occasions as triumphs and the dinners of the *collegia*?). What these two short passages show is that it depends on what you mean by frugality, which is thus revealed to be not in fact a useful means of evaluating the activities of the landed elite. This effectively offers a critique of the Ciceronian moral agenda; *frugalitas* works as a term of analysis and moral evaluation only if you don't think about it too much, or only if it is not tested against reality.9 This is just one minor strand in the complex architecture of Varro's work, its blurring of generic boundaries and combination of satirical, philosophical and practical elements as a means of, among other things, commenting on Roman moralising and political discourse as well as participating in it.

### 2. Controlling expenditure

Considered in these terms, Varro's few uses of *frugalitas* and related terms can offer a small contribution both to the interpretation of his overall philosophical-political agenda and to understanding moralising debates in the late Republic. For the rest of this paper, I want to offer a different perspective, focused on the wider complex of ideas to which *frugalitas* may be related – by modern observers, even if not by the Romans themselves.10 A concern with the control and management of expenditure is certainly not confined to issues related to consumption in Roman thought, as seems to be the case with *frugalitas*; on the contrary, it is also recognised as central to the processes of agricultural production.

This is unmistakable in the case of Cato's work on agriculture, and his notorious insistence that the landowner should cut costs at every possible opportunity.11

Sell your oil, if it has a price, wine, sell surplus grain; worn-out oxen, blemished cattle, blemished sheep, wool, hides, an old wagon, old tools, an old slave, a sickly slave, and whatever else is surplus. It is appropriate for the paterfamilias to be a seller not a buyer. (2.7)

This is the culmination of a series of injunctions about the need for the landowner to monitor and manage costs. This begins with the acquisition of a farm, where he advises careful observation of the situation and the neighbours – 'it should lie among farms which do not often change owners,'

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9 Kronenberg (2009: 102-7) reaches a similar conclusion about Varro's ironic moralising and satire on Cicero by a different route, focusing on the internal contradictions and hypocrisy of Appius' contribution to the dialogue rather than on the contradictions of the moral terminology.  
10 These perspectives are therefore by no means exclusive.  
where those who have sold farms are sorry to have done so’ (1.4) – as well as indicators of its current performance, such as whether there are numerous oil presses and wine vats on the premises: 'where there are not, know that the yield/return (fructus) is in proportion' (1.5).

The farm should not have much equipment, but be well situated. See that the equipment is not minimal and the land not extravagant (sumptuosus). Know that a farm is like a man, however productive/lucrative (quaestuosus), if it is extravagant then not much is left over. (1.6)

Cato's advice for the owner on visiting his estate is similarly focused on cost – and the risk of unnecessary cost, waste or underemployment of resources. The owner should inspect the farm himself to see what work has been completed and what remains to be done, then demand a full reckoning from the vilicus of work completed, work still to do and crop yields, and then make a calculation of the labourers and the time involved which can then be used to hold the vilicus to account (2.1-2). Cato summarises the likely excuses for underperformance – the weather, illness, runaway slaves, demands on the labour force for public works – and the response: there are always things that could have been done, even on rainy days and festivals, and sick slaves should be given reduced rations (2.3-4). The owner should then inspect all the different rationes (a term which here seems to mean 'calculations' or 'totals', but certainly involves a written record of purchases, sales, outstanding balances and surplus produce): cash, grain, fodder, wine and oil (1.5). Surplus livestock, wine and grain should be sold, as should oil if the price is right (oil can be stored for longer than the other goods if there's a glut on the market) – which then leads to the list quoted above of other superfluous items that should be disposed of (1.7).

Most of these injunctions imply calculations, estimates and assumptions about the future, without offering any detail about the owner should go about them: how to determine what grain is surplus to the need to keep the workforce fed, given the risk of a poor harvest; how to determine whether a slave is morbosus – chronically prone to illness and hence a liability – rather than just suffering from a temporary illness; how to decide at what age a slave becomes old enough that they no longer earn their keep – but are still young enough still to fetch a price while clearly being on the way out. Tools are treated in a similar manner, to be sold rather than thrown out – implying, unless Cato is being hopelessly optimistic, that there is still some use to be made of them but new tools will contribute more to the productivity of the estate and its workers. What should be stressed here is that Cato's advice does not fit the caricature of the sort of miserliness that will use things until they fall apart in order to delay the expense of replacement (unlike some later passages, where he insists on using only windfall and old olives as food for the familia, and on using old clothes for patchwork: 58-9). The nature of his work is that it offers bullet points and prompts rather than full

12On the written records of estate management from Roman Egypt, see Rathbone 1991.
instructions – and, while that prevents us from reconstructing his calculations in full, it is enough to indicate his priorities: an obsessive concern with controlling costs, certainly, fuelled by a permanent suspicion of the laziness and dishonesty of slaves and their overseers and a fear of anything that might be labelled extravagance, but also an awareness of the need to invest (buying a well-managed farm at the outset rather than a run-down bargain, choosing the right moment to buy new tools and healthy slaves and sell the old ones, ensuring that the estate has all the supplies it needs), provided that this is always kept within the bounds of sensible expenditure.

Varro's work is often presented as being far more sophisticated than Cato's, in its content and outlook as well as in its literary form and weight of learning, but when it comes to the theme of costs, expenditure and returns it falls squarely within the same tradition, even if it pursues it less obsessively. Varro's stated aim at the beginning of book 1 is to teach his wife how to make a newly-purchased estate fruitful/profitable (fructuosum) through good cultivation (1.1.2). When the dialogue begins, the key question posed to Scrofa, the recognised authority, is whether agriculture has as its end (summa) utility, pleasure or both; Scrofa turns initially to the question, discussed above, of how true agriculture is to be defined, making it clear that not every source of fructus based on the land falls within the definition (e.g. 1.2.21, 1.2.23), but then offers a clear statement of principle:

Equipped with this knowledge, farmers should aim at two goals, at utility and pleasure [ad utilitatem et voluptatem]. Utility aims at fruitfulness/profit [fructum], pleasure at enjoyment; that which is useful takes priority over that which is pleasurable. And yet those methods of cultivation which improve the appearance of the land, not only make it more fruitful, as in the cultivation of fruit trees or olive trees in rows, but also more saleable, and add to the value of the farm. For any man would rather pay a high sum for a piece of land that is attractive than for one which is fruitful but unsightly. Still more useful is a piece of land which is healthier than others, because there the return is certain; on the other hand, in a farm that is pestilential, however fertile it is, calamity prevents the farmer from making a profit. For where the calculation is with death, not only is the return uncertain, but also the life of the farmers. Where there is no healthfulness, farming is nothing other than a roll of the die for the life and property of the owner. (1.4.1-2)

Agriculture has two goals – but in most cases, Varro claims, they are compatible and mutually supportive, if not one and the same; this is the same set of values that governs the later judgement on pastio villatica, where the possibility of deriving pleasure from the consumptive aspect of such activities does not necessarily work against the profits to be derived from them. We might note a certain confusion, or inconsistency (which may be deliberate, if we follow Kronenberg's view that the entire work is satirical), as to whether the value of a piece of land is derived from its actual
fruitfulness and ability to deliver a return or simply from the price it can make in the market. Does a statement of fact that no one would pay more for land which is productive but unsightly than for an attractive plot (1.4.2) necessarily represent an endorsement of that view? However, throughout the work the speakers focus consistently on the returns to be realised from different activities on the estate (rather than directly on the realisable value of the estate itself), and the underlying assumption is that farming is all about the techniques to be used to obtain material benefits.

Varro's characters are less ostentatiously concerned than Cato with reducing costs as a means of guaranteeing these returns – but they do show awareness of risk and uncertainty, and the need for rational calculation. This applies most obviously to the initial choice of a farm, but also to the ways in which it is managed:

The Italian seems to have had two things particularly in mind in his farming: whether the land would yield a reasonable return for the expense and labour, and whether the situation was healthy or not. If either of these elements is lacking, any man who nevertheless desires to farm has lost his wits, and should be taken in charge by his family, For no sane man should be willing to undertake the outlay and expenditure of farming if he sees that it cannot be recouped; or, supposing that he can raise a crop, if he sees that it will be destroyed by the unwholesomeness of the situation. (1.2.8)

In a similar manner, in the passage quoted above (1.4.2), farming in adverse circumstances is compared to gambling, not only with profit but with the lives of the cultivators (which are of course to a great extent the same thing), and Scrofa goes on to argue that the science of agriculture can do much to reduce or modify these risks:

And yet science may reduce this. For granted that healthfulness, which comes from climate and soil, is not in our power but in that of nature, nevertheless it depends greatly on us, because we are able, with effort, to reduce the evil effects. For if the farm is unwholesome because of the land or the water, from the miasma which is exhaled in some places; or if on account of the climate the land is too hot or the wind is not salubrious, these faults can be alleviated by the science and the investment of the owner. (1.4.4)

Roman agriculture is haunted by concern that the expenditure, both the initial investment and the ongoing costs, may not be justified by the returns; the task of the agronomists is to help their readers manage such risks and uncertainty. Cato focuses on the tight control of the whole enterprise, and implies the need for careful judgement about the right moment to spend or to invest; Varro's speakers put more faith in the knowledge gained from the advancement of agricultural science as a

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basis for reducing risk through the right investment – for example, in the layout of the farm buildings – at the outset, though we might also note Scrofa's passing remark that the science of agriculture is also concerned with maximising the returns in the long term (*perpetuo*) (1.3).\(^{14}\)

This is not 'frugality' in the narrow sense, either as the term is used in Varro's third book or as set out by Cicero. It bears a certain resemblance to *parsimonia*, as defined by Seneca, 'the science of avoiding unnecessary expenditure or the art of using one’s income with moderation' (*De Beneficiis* 2.34.4), but here too the emphasis of the concept seems to be too strongly on consumption and lifestyle, rather than on the careful balance between investment and returns that concern the agronomists – not to mention the fundamental problem of determining whether a given cost will turn out to be justified, and of identifying the right moment to sell, buy or invest.\(^{15}\)

3. 'Roman economic thinking'

My main interest in this topic is as part of the wider theme of what we might call 'ancient economic thinking'. This has been a surprisingly neglected topic in recent years – in part, we may assume, in a reaction against the tendency of some historians in the 1970s and early 1980s to present any differences between modern and ancient conceptions – including or perhaps especially basic categories like 'labour' and 'money' – as evidence of an absolute distinction between the two societies, and as an argument against the use of any modern economic concepts in studying antiquity.\(^{16}\) The absence of any substantial discussion of economic thought or concepts in the *Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World* might be taken as symptomatic: either economic thought is assumed to be irrelevant to the actual operations of ancient economies, or it is taken for granted that the basic precepts of modern economics (human beings as rational maximisers of utility, for example) are more or less universal, or the applicability of those basic precepts to the Greeks and/or Romans is assumed to have been demonstrated by the impressive development of their economies (as in the volume's stated aim to focus on performance rather than structure).\(^{17}\) More recent accounts, such as Josiah Ober's modernising interpretation of ancient Greek history, explicitly accept this view of motivation and mentality as a microfoundation on which the analysis can be built, testable in theory but not actually tested in practice.\(^{18}\) Meanwhile, what might be termed a 'history of ideas' approach to the subject, seeking the roots of modern economic concepts in classical thought, largely results in the true but not necessarily helpful

\(^{14}\text{Cf. Nelsestuen 2011 on Scrofa's overall approach to agronomy.}\)

\(^{15}\text{There is clearly scope for exploring the possible connections to or overlaps with virtues like *prudentia* and *providentia*.}\)

\(^{16}\text{Exemplified by Finley 1999.}\)

\(^{17}\text{Scheidel, Morris & Saller 2007: 1-6.}\)

\(^{18}\text{Ober 2015: xvi-xvii.}\)
observation that the ancients had little that resembled the abstract analysis of modern economics.  

The neglect of this theme is a little curious, given that one of the most fertile areas of contemporary economic research has been behavioural and cultural economics, analysing the actual behaviour of economic actors (rather than taking the simplifying assumptions of economic modelling to be direct reflections of reality), and exploring the concepts, beliefs and emotions that influence or govern their decisions. The 'parsimonious microfoundations' of rational actor theory, taken as a starting point by historians in the social-scientific tradition of Ober, are all in fact being placed in question for modern contexts, let alone for ancient. Of course we lack the kinds of evidence that would enable a proper study of Roman decision-making in its own terms, but there is certainly the possibility of considering our sources in the light of modern psychological studies. Still more, however, we can adopt an anthropological approach, and take the concepts and assumptions of the Romans seriously in their own terms; not as indicators of whether they should be categorised as 'primitive' or 'modern' in a binary manner, but as the mental structures and world-views that influenced, if not determined, their decisions and behaviour.

The agronomists, writing about the primary economic activity in the Roman world, are clearly important sources for such a study. Varro's work, it must be said, is potentially problematic in this respect, more so than the other agricultural texts. The twentieth-century tradition of reading him solely as a source of straightforward factual information about Roman farming, and somehow failing to notice literary/rhetorical features of the text such as the dialogue form, the humorous names of the characters or the very specific historical settings of the three books, has now finally been abandoned. However, there is a risk of heading to the opposite extreme of seeing it as a wholly literary or intellectual exercise with no connection to the realities of farming, as Kronenberg does. I prefer to follow Diederich and Nelsestuen in seeing a hybrid form – a 'philosophico-satirico-technical dialogue', as the latter puts it – and in emphasising the complex and literary nature of most ancient technical writing. Varro's text does engage with the 'real world' of Italian agriculture and with the practicalities of estate management – even, at times, at the expense of 'dissonance' between these elements and the more direct engagements with contemporary philosophical and political issues. The problem for my purposes is the extent to which his deployment of economic concepts and principles is self-conscious and multi-layered; not merely reflecting Roman values and attitudes but exploring and criticising them. The work can never be taken at face value; certain passages are over-determined – as Diederich suggests, it can be seen as a staging (Inszenierung) of Roman

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19Cf. Vivenza 2012, who concludes as a result that Varro's work has nothing substantial to contribute to the discussion of Roman economic thought.
23'Dissonance' is Nelsestuen's term; 2015: 3.
economic behaviour for the purposes of critique as much as pedagogy - and so demand a multi-
faceted interpretation.

What then can we draw from the examples discussed above of Roman concern with costs
and expenditure in farming? It is relatively easy to 'modernise' such statements by presenting them
as a concern with profit that then becomes the basis for the rational employment of resources in
order to maximise returns. This is especially true if, as in the Loeb edition, the Latin term *fructus* is
predominantly translated as 'profit', obscuring its more complex (and less modern) connotations
such as the actual harvest and the general fruitfulness of the land as much as any monetary benefit;
if we want a single English translation, 'returns' or 'yield' might better represent the various senses
of the Latin. In other respects, too, we need to be careful not to make a direct equation between the
acquisitiveness of the Roman land-owning elite and the assumptions of modern rational actor
theory, without thinking this through in detail. The Romans had only limited ideas of capital
investment as a source of greater profit in the longer term; the discussion in the agronomists is
mostly focused on the start-up costs of the agricultural enterprise, rather than ongoing enhancement.
Further, a strategy of limiting costs wherever possible may be self-defeating in the longer term, or at
the very least rules out various potentially profitable strategies. Finally, it should be emphasised that
*fructus* is not the only stated or implied goal of farming. For Cato, farming is simply a better and
more moral way to make a living, besides being less risky than trading (an idea which sits slightly
awkwardly with his subsequent obsession with the insecurity of agricultural incomes unless costs
are controlled...). Meanwhile, Varro's characters retain (or assert) some sense that farming is more
virtuous and more Roman than other sources of income by seeking to limit the range of activities
deemed to be appropriate for the farmer; not all profit is necessarily regarded as equal, while at the
same time non-material gains (*voluptas*) are claimed as legitimate. If we define the ends of farming
very loosely as 'utility', which can include social capital and individual pleasure as well as material
returns, then the authors' statements echo modern assumptions about human motivation - but at the
risk of becoming a truism. It may be more productive to read these statements in terms of different
expressed preferences, which are not fully or consistently substitutable, and not necessarily well
defined. If we accept the basic picture conveyed by Cato and Varro as a reflection of actual Roman
thinking about decisions on production, then the criteria used by the Romans to evaluate different
courses of action are not solely financial or even utilitarian – and in particular they involve
calculations of risk and expectations about the future.

That leads to a second way of considering the attitudes and assumptions revealed by these
statements: we can understand a focus on cost management and control as an entirely rational

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response to uncertainty, reflecting an overall concern with the sustainability of the economic enterprise in a highly unpredictable environment. The Mediterranean can be seen, as Horden and Purcell characterise it, as unified by its fragmented and unpredictable nature, with a climate defined by the high degree of variability from season to season, from year to year and between different microregions.\(^{25}\) The Roman agronomists certainly conceived their climate in such terms, and were well aware of the consequences for agricultural practice in different regions (see e.g. 1.6.2-3), insisting on the need to vary such things as sowing and harvesting times according to local conditions, and making adjustments to the timing of different activities depending on the weather – so that even apparently invariable rules may be set aside “if a necessary reason compels you” (1.34.1).\(^{26}\) Further, there is clear awareness of the impact of changing market conditions for the profitability of the villa's products, from Cato deciding whether or not the price is right for selling oil to the emphasis in Varro's third dialogue on the dependence of pastio villatica on specific activities in the city of Rome, closely related to peculiar historical circumstances which can't be assumed to be permanent. Farming – and especially farming orientated directly towards the market and its new opportunities – is an uncertain business, even if trade may be considered still riskier. The aim of the new science of agriculture is to help manage this risk, by increasing the farmer's knowledge of different environmental, market and political conditions and of how to adjust practices to take advantage of them or alleviate disadvantages – not least so that a wider range of estates in different regions can be made into viable enterprises.\(^{27}\) Cost management – reducing exposure to risk – can be seen as part of the range of techniques put at the landowner's disposal.

Thirdly, we have to acknowledge how far these different texts, but especially Varro, offer a self-conscious commentary on these dilemmas, exploring and examining the role of traditional Roman values of thrift and risk aversion in the face of unprecedented new conditions and opportunities. What we see in Book 3 is the flexibility of Roman economic conceptions, which are able (with some intellectual ingenuity) to encompass activities that seem on the face of it to contradict inherited values. The character of Axius in particular shows the dangers of an all-encompassing drive for gain driven by and dependent on the new wealth of Rome – it is entirely appropriate that he knows all about fish-ponds, the most resource-intensive and hence risky element of the resource-intensive and risky pastio villatica portfolio. But this moral and political perspective does not invalidate the practical advice offered; rather, it shows the potential dangers of technical advice that is completely separated from a framework of values and that pays insufficient attention to issues of risk and sustainability. Varro's account offers a justification for the continuing relevance

\(^{26}\)Kronenberg (2009: 91) suggests rather that this is part of Varro's satire of Ciceronian philosophy, showing the inability of human ars to overcome nature.
\(^{27}\)Compare Garnsey 1988: 48-55 on different means of reducing risk in ancient grain cultivation.
of traditional practices and conceptions, if properly evaluated (hence his willingness to question the idea of *frugalitas*) and deployed as practical wisdom rather than abstract, inflexible principles. The traditional Roman emphasis on cost management and calculation is shown to be still applicable to new economic and political conditions, and capable of being adapted to cover new practices – but it also serves as a site for debate about the state of society and its values. As we would expect, Roman economic thought remained thoroughly embedded in Roman social, political and cultural life.

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