

Frugality and Roman Economic Thinking in Varro's *Rerum Rusticarum*¹

How should we approach the study of 'Roman economic thinking'? This has been a surprisingly neglected topic in recent years; in part, we may surmise, as a reaction against the stagnation of the debate about ancient economic rationalism and mentality since the 1970s and early 1980s. The different doctrinal positions in this debate are familiar, not least because the question of how far the people of classical antiquity thought like us in economic matters has long been at the heart of wider arguments about the nature of the ancient economy. On the one hand, the 'modernising', 'formalist' position tends simply to assume that the model of rational utility-maximisation employed in mainstream classical economics identifies essential features of human behaviour, and so can be unproblematically extended to pre-modern societies – in practice, often in an unsystematic and unreflective manner.² On the other hand, the observation of the 'substantivist' tradition that this model is not in fact universal, and that there are significant differences between ancient and modern conceptions of such basic categories as 'labour', 'money' and 'value', has been taken at times as justification for insisting on an absolute distinction between the two societies; this becomes an argument against the use of any modern economic concepts whatsoever, as well as grounds for seeing antiquity as both alien and primitive.³ In neither case is ancient economic mentality taken seriously as a subject in its own right, but is conceived simply in positive or negative terms in relation to a taken-for-granted and idealised conception of modern economic rationality.⁴

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 of the recent neglect of this theme.⁵ The most charitable explanation is that the volume's declared focus on the performance of the ancient economy rather than its structure (the latter category including the mental structures that influenced economic behaviour) is a justifiable attempt at side-stepping an impossibly polarised argument. However, this decision creates the impression that either the editors consider economic thought to be irrelevant to the actual operations of ancient economies, or that they are taking the

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² Discussed by e.g. Bang 2008 and (more positively) Bresson 2014.

³ Exemplified by Finley 1999; see the discussions in Jew, Osborne & Scott 2016.

⁴ Cf. Carandini 1983.

⁵ Scheidel, Morris & Saller 2007: 1-6.

familiar modernising ideas about human motivation for granted once again – or, that they believe that the impressive performance of ancient economies in some periods, demonstrated in different chapters of the volume, could only have been achieved if the Greeks and Romans possessed something close to modern economic rationality. More recent accounts, such as Josiah Ober's modernising interpretation of ancient Greek history, explicitly adopt the neoclassical view of motivation and mentality as a set of "parsimonious microfoundations" on which the analysis can be built, testable in theory but not actually tested in practice – thereby again creating the impression that the picture being offered of economic dynamism and ancient entrepreneurship must be attributable at least in part to the rational mentality that has been built into the argument from the beginning.⁶

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 observation that the ancients had little that resembled the abstract analysis of modern economics.⁷ The idea that the absence of an abstract concept of 'the economy' both implies and potentially explains the absence of a complex developed economy is one of the basic arguments of Finley's account – and it remains the case, as critics have long observed, that there is no necessary connection between economic development and the emergence of economics as a specialist branch of knowledge.⁸ As Finley himself observed, the ancients did pursue a wide range of activities that we would call 'economic', without having developed that analytical category for themselves; the absence of such theorising is no impediment to productive and profitable activity – and the study of the ideas and concepts that shaped such activity, by determining or influencing the decisions that ancient actors made with respect to their expenditure of energy and resources, cannot be limited to the question of whether (or how) they theorised them.

The current neglect of the theme of ancient economic thinking (perhaps a better term, if 'economic thought' is too closely associated with formal economics) is a little curious, given that this has been one of the most fertile areas of contemporary economic research in recent years. 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, have become increasingly prominent and influential, especially in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash and the subsequent critique of mainstream neoclassical assumptions.⁹ The 'parsimonious microfoundations' of rational

⁶ Ober 2015: xvi-xvii; criticised by Vlassopoulos 2016, but with the claim that therefore we should abandon social-scientific approaches to the ancient world altogether, and more cogently by Seaford 2016.

⁷ Cf. Vivenza 2012, who concludes as a result that Varro's work has nothing substantial to contribute to the discussion of Roman economic thought. In a narrow sense – in terms of the emergence of a proto-economics – this is probably true.

⁸ Cf. Winch 1996 on the intellectual and cultural roots of modern political economy.

⁹ See for example Kahneman 2000 and 2011; Akerloff & Shiller 2009.

actor theory 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 detailed study of Roman decision-making, but there is certainly the possibility of re-reading our sources in the light of these modern psychological studies. Still more, we can adopt an anthropological approach, and take the concepts and assumptions of the Romans seriously in their own terms; not merely as indicators of whether they should be categorised as ‘primitive’ or ‘modern’ in a binary manner, but because these were the mental structures and world-views that influenced, if not determined, their decisions and behaviour.¹⁰ This paper seeks to explore one small corner of this new field of study: the place of the idea of ‘frugality’, often taken to be a cornerstone of Roman thought and ideology, in the work of the first-century BCE agricultural writer Varro.

1. Frugality in *pastio villatica*

The word *frugalitas* is in fact 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.¹¹ 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 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 rhetorical contrast between ancient frugality and modern luxury echoes the discussion at the beginning of the book, where Varro was concerned to establish *pastio villatica* as both a distinct and 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 in his discourse that the *villa* is the basis of proper Roman farming and hence of its virtuous associations, 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

¹⁰ Cf. Viglietti 2011, taking an anthropological approach to the study of archaic Rome.

¹¹ On this passage see Nelsestuen 2015: 189-90. On *pastio villatica* in general, Rinkewitz 1984, Kolendo 1994, Morley 1996: 86-90.

whether every activity carried out on the land should count as *agri cultura*.¹² 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 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 the different aspects and techniques of *pastio villatica*. It is left implicit in this exchange that *frugalior* has a temporal dimension, contrasting (more virtuous) past and (less virtuous) present, 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.¹³

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.¹⁴ One possible explanation is that frugality was understood by the Romans primarily in terms of consumption, and so has only a subsidiary role in any discussion of production: frugality is about the absence of decoration, the limitation of expenditure on unnecessary things; it is 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*, from this perspective, is that introducing such activities into the villa may become a form of luxury, rather than ensuring that the estate remains 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 productive activities and those that become a form of consumption: 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

¹² 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.

¹³ Edwards 1993: 137-72 on tropes of Roman luxury; on citrus-wood tables, Pliny *NH* 13.91-102.

¹⁴ On 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.

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 for a Roman author to claim it 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 for defenders of such practices to argue that such a deviation from ancient *frugalitas* does not necessarily lead one into deplorable *luxuria*, so long as the expenditure on aviaries, fish-ponds and game reserves can still be justified in terms of their financial return.¹⁵ Conversely, the absence of any mention of *frugalitas* in the first two books of Varro's work may be easily explained by the fact that the discussions of agrarian cultivation and conventional pasturing are unproblematically focused on production rather than consumption. Growing grain or herding sheep is unlikely to lead a member of the Roman elite to indulge in excessive expenditure on illegitimate pleasures; only *pastio villatica* threatens to undermine the traditional moral categories.

This problem looks rather different if 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).¹⁶ If *frugalitas* was instead a relatively recent coinage in Varro's time, closely associated with Cicero's 'invention' (with a clear political and cultural agenda) of a complex of 'traditional' Roman values that is projected back onto the imagined/imaginary virtuous past, then the absence of the term from most of Varro's work needs little explanation. The passages in which Varro does use related terms (or effectively implies the same moralising agenda, as in the various examples of unacceptable or misconceived *pastio villatica*) need then to be considered from a different perspective: his characters are depicted 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 new moral category against a backdrop of existing (if not necessarily well-established) practices. The Romans, according to this newly invented moral tradition, have always been frugal, but they still need to determine what this means, and what the implications are for their economic behaviour.

¹⁵ Compare Purcell 1987 on other problematic aspects of the Roman villa.

¹⁶ Gildenhard forthcoming.

The complexity, and indeed incoherence, of the term *luxuria* as the antonym of *frugalitas* has long been recognised.¹⁷ 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, almost any given action is more or less open to the accusation that it is, in some sense, luxurious. We could read the opening section of Varro’s third dialogue as a similar critique or exploration of the concept of *frugalitas*, revealing it to be more complicated than it first appears. The political implications of this 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 communal 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 in a given building that determines whether or not it counts as ‘frugal’ – or is it the purpose for which the building exists and the activities that take place there? Is the definition linked to the very conventional contrast of virtuous countryside and luxurious city, or can a country villa be wholly unproductive (effectively, a piece of the city in the middle of the countryside) and hence the opposite of frugal?¹⁸ Is frugality necessarily an ancient virtue, if new-fangled forms of *pastio villatica* – which may 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 in Varro 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. Varro’s account of the concept 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 try to define it too precisely, or only if it is not tested against reality.¹⁹ 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.

¹⁷ Edwards 1993: 137-72 on *luxuria*, and 201-2 on *frugalitas*; *passim* on Roman moral discourse and its political dimension. More generally on the idea of luxury in the early modern period and its earlier antecedents, Berry 1994, Morley 1998.

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ 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.

2. Controlling expenditure

Considered in this way, 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 our understanding of 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.²⁰ A concern with the control and management of expenditure is certainly not confined in Roman thought to issues related to consumption, as seems to be the case with *frugalitas*; on the contrary, it is also recognised as central to the processes of agricultural production. Indeed, one might suggest that Cicero's moral-philosophical project can succeed precisely because it is piggy-backing on an established set of elite values and assumptions, more closely related to the process of actual economic activity, which he draws upon in constructing his discourse of *frugalitas*.

A concern with the management of expenditure is unmistakable in the case of Cato's earlier work on agriculture, and his notorious insistence that the landowner should cut costs at every possible opportunity.²¹

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 passage is the culmination of a series of injunctions about the need for the landowner to monitor and manage costs. The list begins with the acquisition of a farm, where Cato advises careful observation of the situation and the neighbours – 'it should lie among farms which do not often change owners, 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 costs, 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, and demand a full reckoning from the *vilius* of work completed, work still to do and crop yields; he should then make a

²⁰ These perspectives are therefore by no means exclusive.

²¹ On Cato's work, see Diederich 2009: 157-72 on its literary qualities, "between orality and literature", and 273-97 on *mos maiorum* and Machtpolitik. Habinek 1998: 60-4 on Cato's written style and attitude to Greek culture.

calculation of the labourers and the time involved which can be used to hold the *vilicus* to account (2.1-2). Cato summarises the expected excuses for underperformance – the weather, illness, runaway slaves, demands on the labour force for public works – and offers a prepared 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). Following this interrogation, the owner should 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).²² 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 how the owner should go about making 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 young enough still to fetch a reasonable price. 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 that 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 windfalls and old olives as food for the *familia*, and on using old clothes for patchwork: 58-9); he is conscious of the risk of false economies. The nature of his text is that it offers bullet points and prompts rather than full 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. When it comes to the theme of costs, expenditure and returns, however, it falls squarely within the same tradition, even if it pursues these issues less obsessively. Varro’s stated aim at the beginning of book 1 is to teach his wife how to make a

²² On the written records of estate management from Roman Egypt, see Rathbone 1991.

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 within the group of characters, 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, these 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 set of priorities?²³ However, throughout Varro's 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 on an ongoing basis.

Varro's characters are less ostentatiously concerned than Cato was 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:

²³ Cf. Kronenberg 2009: 97-8.

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 in an estate managed using slave labour), 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 a concern that expenditure, both initial investment and 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 basis for better decision-making; for example, reducing risk through the right investment – for example, in the situation, or the layout of the farm buildings – at the outset, but also through the manner in which the estate will be managed. As Scrofa remarks in passing, the science of agriculture is also concerned with maximising returns in the long term (*perpetuo*) (1.3).²⁴

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 later defined by Seneca, 'the science of avoiding unnecessary expenditure or the art of using one's income with moderation' (*De Beneficiis* 2.34.4). Here too, however, the emphasis of the definition seems to be too strongly focused on consumption and the manner of one's 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

²⁴ Cf. Nelsestuen 2011 on Scrofa's overall approach to agronomy.

invest.²⁵ In other words, what we find in these discussions is not a moral/philosophical/political discourse wholly removed from practice concerns – though there are certainly elements of this in Cato's thought and in the complex, multi-layered conversations of Varro's work – but rather a set of practical concerns and principles that both reflect the realities of agricultural production and must have influenced the decisions that Roman landowners took about the management of their estates.

3. 'Roman economic thinking'

The modern tradition of reading Varro 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. It seems preferable 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.²⁶ 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 pragmatic elements and his more direct engagements with contemporary philosophical and political issues.²⁷ The problem for the purposes of reconstructing Roman economic thinking is the extent to which Varro's deployment of what we can call 'economic' concepts and principles is self-conscious and multi-layered; not merely reflecting Roman values and attitudes but exploring and criticising them. His work can never be taken at face value; certain passages are over-determined – as Diederich suggests, they can be seen as a staging (*Inszenierung*) of Roman economic behaviour for the purposes of critique as much as pedagogy – and so demand a multi-faceted interpretation.²⁸ But it seems reasonable to conclude that this self-conscious sophistication and even playfulness is an essential feature of Roman thinking about economic matters, in contrast to modern attempts at developing a form of analysis that excludes everything beyond a narrow, instrumentalised agenda.

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 in terms of a concern with profit that becomes the motive for the rational employment of resources in order to

²⁵ There is clearly scope for exploring the possible connections to or overlaps with virtues like *prudentia* and *providentia*.

²⁶ Nelsestuen 2015: 11. Generally on technical literature, Fögen 2015.

²⁷ 'Dissonance' is Nelsestuen's term: 2015: 3.

²⁸ 2007: 180.

maximise returns. This is especially the case 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 and potential ambiguity of the Latin word. 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 discussions in the agronomists are mostly focused on the start-up costs of the agricultural enterprise, rather than its 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. Again, what is important in this project is to understand Roman categories and patterns of thought in their own terms, rather than seeking immediately to associate them with modern assumptions or to insist on the opposite.

Finally, it should be emphasised again that *fructus* was not the only stated or implied goal of farming for the Romans. 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 ends of agricultural activity. 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, including calculations of risk and expectations about the future, are not solely financial or even utilitarian.

That suggests a second way of considering the attitudes and assumptions revealed by these statements and costs and expenditure: we can understand these authors’ focus on cost management and control as an entirely rational response to conditions of 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.²⁹ 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).³⁰ Further, they show clear awareness of the impact of changing market conditions on the profitability of the villa’s products, from Cato deciding whether or not the price is right for selling oil to the recognition in Varro’s third dialogue of the dependence of *pastio villatica* on specific activities in the city of Rome, closely related to peculiar historical circumstances which cannot 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 transformed into viable enterprises.³¹ Cost management – reducing exposure to risk – can be seen as part of the range of techniques that writers like Varro seek to put at the landowner’s disposal.

Thirdly, we have to acknowledge how far these texts offer a self-conscious commentary on the dilemmas faced by members of the Roman elite, 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 Varro’s Book 3 is the potential flexibility of Roman economic conceptions, which are able (with some intellectual ingenuity on Varro’s part) 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 obsession with 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 by Varro’s characters; 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 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

²⁹Horden & Purcell 2000: 78. Generally on climate, Cheyette 2014.

³⁰Kronenberg (2009: 91) suggests rather that this is part of Varro’s satire of Ciceronian philosophy, showing the inability of human *ars* to overcome nature.

³¹Compare Garnsey 1988: 48-55 on different means of reducing risk in ancient grain cultivation.

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 contemporary society and its values. As we would expect, Roman economic thinking remained thoroughly embedded in Roman social, political and cultural life.

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