

Text and Practice

Interdisciplinary Dialogues on the Status of the Agricultural Treatise

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"He did not want to instruct farmers but to please his readers¹": as this well-known judgment of Seneca on Virgil's *Georgics* indicates, the practical value of didactic poetry has been questioned since Antiquity. The prose treatises on the other hand do not seem to incur such a reproach, even if Palladius, for example, reproaches the authors who preceded him for their excessive literary research². According to him, this would be detrimental to the intelligibility of the content, and in this Palladius joins the contemporary prejudices according to which the technical and scientific qualities of a text would be inversely proportional to its degree of literarity. In fact, the technical treatise, as a work of non-fictional prose, is essentially a matter of the "conditional regime" of literarity and thus, ultimately, of the reader's perception³. In addition to the question of the inscription in a literary tradition, that of the addressee and the readership is thus essential in defining the status of the technical treatise in prose⁴.

This status is currently discussed by several critical approaches, coming from literature or anthropology studies, which question the link between agricultural texts and agricultural practice and even deny the technical intention of the authors of scientific or technical texts. In the case of agriculture, L. Kronenberg has recently analyzed Varro's *Res rusticae* as a satire in which the very idea of agronomic science, however defended by the characters of the dialogue, would be deeply contested by Varro⁵. To justify such an analysis, the author calls upon several types of arguments, including that of errors in technical information. With regard to Columella's *De re rustica*, without going so far as to deny that the treatise has any intention of transmitting agronomic knowledge, Lars Mielke, in a recent dissertation⁶, nevertheless defends the hypothesis that the author's main objective is the intellectual and moral training of the owner of an estate, by means of rhetorical strategies that include "Praxissimulation", a fiction of practical learning. It is thus a tendency to question, more or less radically, the practical and technical value of these texts; while giving them a plural reading and conferring on them a "literary reading regime", this questioning denies them all or part of their scientific or technical significance.

This new type of analysis of technical treatises thus raises many questions, which require a dialogue with other disciplines, about the authority of these works, their relationship to practice and their scientific validity. Several issues can be addressed (this list is not exhaustive):

¹ Seneca, *Letters to Lucilius*, 86, 15 : [...] *nec agricolas docere uoluit sed legentes delectare*.

² Palladius, *On Agriculture*, I, 1, 1.

³ G. Genette, in *Fiction et diction* (1991), distinguishes a "constitutive regime" of the literary work, based on generic conventions and cultural traditions, and a "conditional regime" based on an appreciation of the reader, susceptible of evolution.

⁴ On the question of the importance of models and the inscription in a literary tradition, see in particular T. Fögen (ed.), *Antike Fachtexte/ Ancient technical Texts* (2005).

⁵ L. Kronenberg (2009), *Allegories of Farming from Greece and Rome, Philosophical satire in Xenophon, Varro, and Virgil*, p. 76-93 et p. 108-125.

⁶ L. Mielke, *Spaliere für Silvinus. Charakterschulung in Columellas Werk über die Landwirtschaft*, Dissertation under the supervision of C. Reitz, defended Oct. 19, 2019, University of Rostock.

- the question of the authority on which the authors of technical texts on agriculture rely, from Antiquity to the present day: is it only knowledge learned through experience, that of the author himself or of contemporary farmers? To what extent do technical treatises rely on literary or scholarly tradition?
- the question of the addressee of these texts, who is not necessarily a farmer, and that of the possible function of popularizer or intermediary between the scientific discourse and the general public that the author of agricultural texts may or may not assume.
- the history of the reception of ancient agricultural texts : these texts sometimes led philologists and editors to question the techniques of the Ancients, and have occasionally served as models for the design of new treatises, or been rejected in the name of practical efficiency and rationality⁷.
- the question of the pluridisciplinary reception of these texts, often considered as authorities because of their scientific and practical value, notably in the field of historical studies or for disciplines that need to interpret archaeological remains (archaeology, archaeobotany, history of techniques). During our previous symposium, Guillaume Huitorel questioned this complex relationship, following the controversy between Alain Ferdière and Philippe Leveau concerning the interpretation of archaeological remains of agricultural buildings⁸. This question also calls for that of experimentation in archaeology, which is informed by technical texts⁹.
- the question of the technical and scientific value of these texts, whose "errors" are sometimes pointed out: to what extent can one speak of error? How can we explain, for pragmatic, anthropological or ethnobotanical reasons for example, certain recommendations on cultivation practices that seem unfounded today, or even go against current scientific knowledge? This is the case, for example, of the idea, widespread in Latin treatises, that chickpeas would exhaust the soil¹⁰, or of the fact that vine cuttings should be chosen in the middle of the plant, because, by analogy with the human body, living beings have their reproductive parts in the center of their body¹¹.
- in the context of the relationship between text and practice, questions relating to the ways of selecting varieties of crop plants. Those modes of selection seem to us to constitute a good example of an object that could be approached in a cross-cutting manner: what do the authors say about them (both for seeds and for grafts)? Does their way of presenting their practices (sorting, comparison with animals...) allow us to understand their concept of selection as

⁷ On the reception of agricultural treatises from Antiquity to the modern era, see the virtual exhibition *Le ménage des champs. Du savoir agricole antique aux livres d'agriculture de la Renaissance* (https://www.bm-lyon.fr/expositions-en-ligne/agriculture_antique_renaissance/).

⁸ G. Huitorel, « Columelle, les équipements agricoles et les archéologues. Approche heuristique et pratique », in Blandenet M. et Bretin-Chabrol M. (éd.), *La terre et le grain. Lectures interdisciplinaires de Columelle De re rustica, I et II*, Lyon, éditions CEROR, 2020, p. 189-198 ; A. Ferdière, « Interprétation fonctionnelle des bâtiments et structures dans les parties productives des établissements agro-pastoraux des Gaules : historiographie et questions méthodologiques », in Trément (éd.), *Produire, transformer et stocker dans les campagnes des Gaules romaines. Problèmes d'interprétation fonctionnelle et économique des bâtiments d'exploitation et des structures de production agro-pastorale*, éd., Bordeaux, Aquitania, p. 23-50 ; P. Leveau, « Certitudes et incertitudes dans l'interprétation des structures archéologiques : une réponse à Alain Ferdière », in Trément (éd.), *Produire, transformer et stocker dans les campagnes des Gaules romaines. Problèmes d'interprétation fonctionnelle et économique des bâtiments d'exploitation et des structures de production agro-pastorale*, Bordeaux, Aquitania, p. 51-65.

⁹ The colloquium "TECHNO - Experimentation in Archaeology", which should have been held in November 2020 and was cancelled due to the Covid crisis, was precisely intended to address the question of experimentation within the framework of a reflection on the history of techniques: see <https://ager.hypotheses.org/2185>.

¹⁰ This idea, however, is still indicated in Eugène Gueidan's *Le Jardinier Provençal* in 1914.

¹¹ Cf. Columella, *De re rustica*, III, 10.

analogous to ours? Can the observations of archaeobotanists confirm or invalidate what we assume from technical treatises?

- the question of the edition of these texts and the treatment of technical information, whether it is a scientific edition or the digital treatment of technical data.

This conference is organized within the framework of the [AgroCCol](#) project, funded by the French National Research Agency (2018-2022). This project brings together a interdisciplinary team working on the constitution of agronomic knowledge in Greco-Roman antiquity from texts devoted to field crops (cereals and legumes).

Organizing committee:

- Maëlys Blandenet (Latin Literature; ENS de Lyon – HiSoMA, Lyon, France)
- Marine Bretin-Chabrol (Latin Literature ; Lyon 3 University – HiSoMA, Lyon, France)
- Pascal Luccioni (Greek Literature; Lyon 3 University – HiSoMA, Lyon, France)

Scientific committee :

- Laurent Bouby (Archaeobotany; Institut des Sciences de l'Evolution de Montpellier (ISEM), Montpellier, France)
- Michel Chauvet (Ethnobotany; former INRA researcher, Montpellier, France)
- Jean-Yves Durand (Ethnology; Universidade do Minho, Centro em Rede de Investigação em Antropologia, Braga, Portugal)
- Thorsten Fögen (Latin Literature ; Durham University, UK, Department of Classics & Ancient History; IZAW, Berlin, Germany)
- Guillaume Huitorel (Archaeology; project manager for the promotion of archaeological heritage, Département de la Seine-St-Denis – ArScAn, Paris, France)
- Michel Jourde (French literature of the 16th century; ENS de Lyon – IHRIM)
- Georges Raepsaet (Archaeology; Université libre de Bruxelles – CReA, Bruxelles, Belgium)