RES HISTORICA 60, 2025

DOI:10.17951/rh.2025.60.61-92

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Social Reality and the Tasks of the Roman Farmer. Agriculture as a Frame of Morality

Rzeczywistość społeczna i zadania rzymskiego rolnika. Rolnictwo jako ramy moralności

ABSTRACT

Farming activities defined the Roman cultural matrix and played a crucial role in the construction of the empire. Aware of this, Roman patricians associated the rural world with the values of the Republic itself, promoting depictions of farmers as ideal citizens based on the imagery of agricultural labour. This paper aims to describe and analyse the symbolic language of morality through the image of the farmer in Latin literature, using the actual dimensions of the described activities as reference. We will address the practical aspects of farming and assess how they contribute to the construction of abstract symbolism. Our exploratory approach combines semiotics with knowledge of ancient agricultural practices to decode and describe symbolic constructs. Through the application of semiotic principles and the identification of 'signs of meaning', we intend to present the sources of these symbols before their appropriation by Roman propaganda in Latin literature. Furthermore, we seek to explore and understand how the 'symbols of morality' were recognised in Roman popular culture.

PUBLICATION INFO

e-ISSN: 2449-8467
ISSN: 2082-6060

OPEN ACCESS

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SUBMITTED:	ACCEPTED:	PUBLISHED ONLINE:
2024.07.01	2025.09.13	2025.11.28

WEBSITE OF THE JOURNAL:	EDITORIAL COMMITTEE e-mail:
https://journals.umcs.pl/rh	reshistorica@umcs.pl

DOAJ DIRECTORY OF OPEN ACCESS JOURNALS

ERIHPLUS EUROPEAN REFERENCE INDEX FOR THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

„Projekt dofinansowany ze środków budżetu państwa, przyznanych przez Ministra Nauki i Szkolnictwa Wyższego w ramach programu Doskonała Nauka II"

Doskonała Nauka II

Minister Nauki i Szkolnictwa Wyższego

Key words: ancient economies, rural world, Latin literature, semiotics, the Roman farmer

STRESZCZENIE

Działalność rolnicza definiowała matrycę kulturową Rzymu i odegrała kluczową rolę w budowaniu imperium. Świadomi tego faktu rzymscy patrycjusze kojarzyli świat wiejski z wartościami samej republiki, promując wizerunek rolników jako idealnych obywateli w oparciu o symbolikę pracy rolniczej. Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu opisanie i analizę symbolicznego języka moralności poprzez wizerunek rolnika w literaturze łacińskiej, wykorzystując jako punkt odniesienia rzeczywiste wymiary opisywanych czynności. Zajmiemy się praktycznymi aspektami rolnictwa i ocenimy, jak funkcjonują one w tworzeniu abstrakcyjnej symboliki. Nasze podejście badawcze łączy semiotykę i wiedzę o starożytnych czynnościach rolniczych w celu rozszyfrowania i opisania konstrukcji symbolicznych. Poprzez zastosowanie zasad semiotyki i identyfikację „znaków znaczenia" zamierzamy przedstawić źródła tych symboli przed ich wykorzystaniem przez rzymską propagandę w literaturze łacińskiej. Ponadto staramy się zbadać i zrozumieć, w jaki sposób „symbole moralności" były rozpoznawane w rzymskiej kulturze popularnej.

Słowa kluczowe: starożytna gospodarka, świat wiejski, literatura łacińska, semiotyka, rzymski rolnik

PRELIMINARY NOTES[1]

This paper follows the general principles of semiotics applied to material culture and images crystallised by common sense and tradition[2]. The symbiotic approach to signs of meaning constitutes the main methodological guideline for identifying similar signs within different contexts. According to the general approach of this field, a sign of meaning corresponds to a simple visual marker derived from a real image of a 'landscape'. For example, in a landscape where a farmer harvests crops, one may find signs for fruit, quantity, person, and work/movement. Here, a sign of meaning is effectively a visual marker that identifies individual features of a compounded image, conveying a fixed and invariable meaning. The image merely shows a farmer working in the field and its results. The symbolic meaning depends on the selection of signs of meaning, which, in turn, influences how the abstract image is interpreted by the viewer. Since they already know the image, they can spontaneously

[1] This research is funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology, FCT, I.P., within the framework of the CECH-UC project: UIDB/00196/2020.

[2] On signs of meaning linked to material culture, see R.W. Preucel, *Archaeological semiotics*, Malden 2006, pp. 21–92. On semiotics, we are in general following *The Routledge companion to semiotics*, ed. P. Cobley, London 2010.

DOI:10.17951/rh.2025.60.61-92

understand the signs of meaning within it. Regarding the examples presented in this paper, a unique semantic value was identified for each sign of meaning[3]. The source of the symbolic material in question is the rural space, specifically the productive landscapes where the farmer engages with nature. The reason for this research scope is that the suitability of these landscapes for agricultural subsistence tends to be transcultural, regardless of techniques or crop typology[4]. Nevertheless, the textual source selection took into consideration ancient agricultural frameworks. As shown in Table 1, the symbols presented here are only a sample of a larger and expanding corpus.

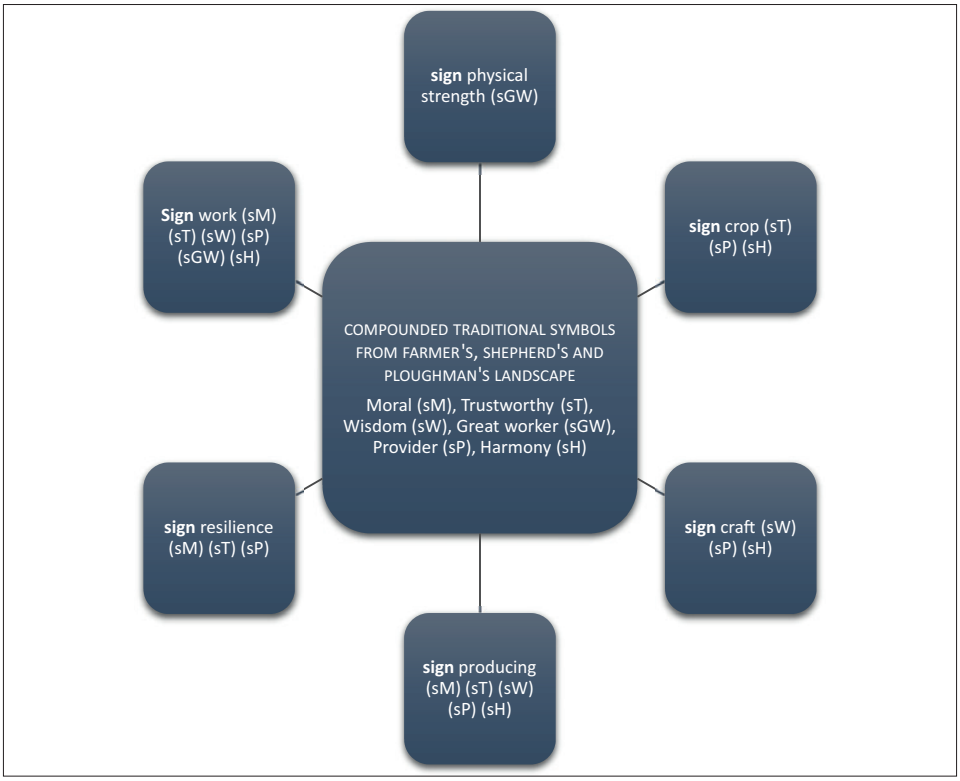

Diagram 1: signs of meaning compounding symbols of rural landscape. s = complex symbol

[3] This paragraph follows the argument published in N.H. Ferreira da Silva, *Contexts of Ancient Rural Landscapes Creating Human Culture and Language*, "Protokolle Zur Bibel" 2024, 33, 1. See also Umberto Eco's definition of signs (U. Eco, *Trattato di semiotica generale*, 18th edition, Milano 2002, pp. 29–43) and V.M. de Aguiar e Silva, *Teoria da literatura*, Coimbra 1997, pp. 76–79. On Umberto Eco's theory, see also A.M. Lorusso, *Cultural Semiotics*, New York 2015, pp. 117–158.

[4] See examples of its materiality described through big data in Leah Reynolds, *Roman Rural Settlement in Wales and the Marches*, Oxford 2022, p. 147.

DOI:10.17951/rh.2025.60.61-92

The following diagram presents the symbols that can be compounded by identified signs of meaning (see Table 1 for sources). These signs of meaning are based on simple images from a practical reality. Once assembled, they enable a symbolic language. However, for functional communication, these signs of meaning must be spontaneously recognisable in an abstract and conceptual landscape[5].

The relationship between land and traditional farming practices, combined with the skills required to sustain human culture[6] created an anthropological symbol in sedentary societies. The aim of this paper is to reconstruct the path of such symbolic constructions by tracking the description of farming activities and the signs of meaning derived from them.

I avoided a philosophical approach in this endeavour, as it would distort the traditional preconceptions by adding complex layers of meaning based on individual reflection and specific cultural contexts. This is the primary reason why I have not used Lucretius's *De rerum natura* as a source, despite its importance in Roman literature, philosophical thought, attitudes toward the natural world, and instructive approach to nature. The idea embedded in the farmer's language as a symbol of pure wisdom extends beyond literary purposes. It may be converted into a metaphor or an analogy for philosophical or political speech, even though its origins lie in observable reality. In this sense, all manner of metaphors or allegories linked to agricultural themes can be associated with original signs of meaning based on common sense. For example, Plato's allegory on writing[7] analogises techniques for growing crops. It draws on a universal image that relies on the signs of meaning for craft and crops to construct an analogy between agricultural production and the development of knowledge[8].

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[5] For Greek and Latin texts, the abbreviations stated in OLD, OCD, Liddell & Scott 19 and *L'Année philologique* have been followed.

[6] Columella, Lucius Junius Moderatus, De Arboribus, in: *De Re Rustica*, ed. and transl. E.S. Forster, E.H. Heffner, Cambridge MA 1954 (*Loeb Classical Library*, 407–408) [hereinafter: Col.] 1. *pr*. 6–7.

[7] Plato, *Phaedrus*, ed. J.H. Nichols, transl. J.H. Nichols, J.H. Nichols Jr., Ithaca NY 1998, 276d1–277a4.

[8] N. Worman, *Stylistic Landscapes*, in: *A companion to ancient aesthetics*, eds. P. Destrée, P. Murrey, [Chichester] 2015; cf. G. Danzel, *Why Socrates Was Not a Farmer: Xenophon's Oeconomicus as a Philosophical Dialogue*, "Greece & Rome" 2003, 50, 1, pp. 57–76.

DOI:10.17951/rh.2025.60.61-92

ARISTOCRACY, FARMING, AND ROMAN MORAL VALUES

Amongst the Roman aristocracy, presenting oneself as a farmer was a matter of pride. The farmer could adapt to any kind of dignified activity, because agriculture had granted him the essential skills to participate in public life. Columella, for example, the Roman author of an agricultural almanac (4–70 AD), tells the story of Quinctius Cincinnatus, who was summoned from his farm to the dictatorship to save the Roman army besieged by the Aequians in Algidus[9]. According to tradition, he resigned and returned to his small farm after holding office for 16 days[10]. The honour of serving the state with the utmost competence and without self-interest showcases the value of the ordinary, whose greatness lies in his modest ways and ambitions[11]. Such was the behaviour of the ploughman, the worker who takes what he needs from the land. Quinctius Cincinnatus was summoned from the plough to lead the state and steer the army towards victory, just as one might imagine he would have handled the animals in the fields. Columella glorifies the man but probably had no intention of creating a parallel allegory between controlling the state and the plough. My interpretation of this passage focuses on the value ascribed to the man, who is moulded by farming and learns to apply this profession to his conduct. By applying general semiotic theory to deconstruct the framework, one can conclude that the set of skills needed for ploughing – which were already traditionally recognised as signs – can be interpreted as representing 'strength/resilience', 'work', 'land', 'animal', and 'craft'. Such traditional understanding of abstract speech was based on common sense and spontaneous interpretation of semantic signs, which constitute the symbol of the perfect statesman (*vide infra*). This symbolism starts with the act of providing for society:

> 'Cum etiam si praedictarum artium professoribus civitas egeret, tamen sicut apud priscos florere posset res publica – nam sine ludicris artibus atque etiam sine causidicis olim satis felices fuerunt futuraeque sunt urbes; at sine agri cultoribus nec consistere mortalis nec ali posse manifestum est'[12].
>
> 'Still the commonwealth could prosper as in the times of the ancients – for without the theatrical profession and without pleaders, cities were once happy enough, and would be so again in the future.

[9] Col. 1. *pr*. 13–14.

[10] Cf. *Livy in fourteen volumes*, transl. B.O. Foster, London 1976, 3.26–9.

[11] Cf. Col. 12.46.1.6–7.

[12] Col. 1.*pr*. 6.1–1. *pr*.7.1.

DOI:10.17951/rh.2025.60.61-92

> However, it is clear that without farmers mankind can neither subsist nor be sustained'[13].

Political life and dedication to the Roman state are, at least in theory, the backbone of the social role of the Roman aristocracy. According to this logic, providing for the Roman people was an obligation akin to that of farmers. Of course, in general terms, farming endeavours involving aristocracy would certainly imply great landowners exploiting extensive farms and generating revenue from a considerable surplus. Such great estates were indeed a source of Roman food. Nevertheless, agricultural practices were far from exclusive to great landowners. In fact, most farming took place in small plots of land[14], and the majority of the population was to some degree involved in farming. Thus, excluding the great urban areas that were exceptions in antiquity, most people lived in a rural context. The farm is the 'natural frame' of the farmer, meaning that the image of one is built upon the other. Additionally, considering the farm as the natural landscape providing sustenance and incentivises productivity, its value is not derived from the notions of property or wealth. Instead, the value of the farm seems to hinge on the quality of life it offers, by allowing for a typical happy life or, in other words, a perfect balance between effort and production[15]. Perhaps because of this, Columella uses Virgil's maxim[16]: 'laudato ingentia rura, exiguum colito'. 'Praise large farms, cultivate small ones'.

Labour exceeding necessity is not beneficial. In fact, it could become hazardous if the workload is disproportionate to the yield[17]:

> '[...] quippe acutissimam gentem Poenos dixisse convenit inbecilliorem agrum quam agricolam esse debere, quoniam, cum sit conluctandum cum eo, si fundus praevaleat, adlidi dominum. Nec dubium, quin minus reddat laxus ager non recte cultus quam angustus eximie'.
>
> '[...] the Carthaginians, a very sharp people, used to say that the farm should be feebler than the farmer. Since he must wrestle with it, should the land prevail, the master is crushed. And there is no doubt

[13] Lev. 19:23.

[14] C.M. Isett, S. Miller, *The social history of agriculture: From the origins to the current crisis*, New York 2017.

[15] About the *vir felix* of the rural world, see Virgil, Georgica 2.490–4 and C. O'Hogan, *Prudentius and the Landscapes of Late Antiquity*, Oxford–New York 2016, pp. 113–114.

[16] Virgil (Publius Vergilius Maro), *Georgics*, ed. and transl. H.R. Fairclough, rev. G.P. Goold, Cambridge MA 1999 (*Loeb Classical Library*, 63) [hereinafter: Verg. *G.*] 2.412–413.

[17] Col. 1.3.9.

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> that a wide field, not properly cultivated, gives back less than a small one tilled with extraordinary care'.

According to this logic, the idea of a good life in harmony with nature and oneself implies the avoidance of superfluous labour. If the farm requires excessive effort, instead of being sustained by agriculture, the farmer will be consumed by it. This ability to moderate efforts while pursuing results is indeed a valuable skill for a political actor in Rome. Such men must be capable of balancing and compromising their personal goals with objectives of the common good. However, in which terms can this be an accurate metaphor to defend traditional Roman values?

I would disagree with the general idea that the Roman senator, the supposed 'gentleman farmer', is the main subject of the descriptions in the Latin farming instructions. As previously stated, the connection between the farmer and the natural world transcends any identification of his status or defence of the traditional *mors maiorum*. The Roman aristocrat is the recipient of the traditional image but does not precede it. It is, in fact, aristocratic discourse that attempts to associate the traditional image with the idealised and politicised symbol of the farmer. There was considerable potential for agricultural allegories in public speech and political rhetoric, making such associations very much expected[18], even though they were grounded in common-sense notions derived from tradition.

I argue that the association between the 'farmer of the Latin instructions' and the Roman aristocrat rests not only on assumptions concerning property and its proper management but also on preconceptions of the authors' social status and political activity[19]. Modern readers may be tempted to ignore the fact that the main object depicted in agricultural instructions is the practice of agriculture and its optimisation in terms of effort and profit. When empirical matters are debated in those texts, the farmer is not a character but an 'undescribed figure', whose presence is evident in the depicted activities. Therefore, this farmer does not represent a person but an activity in its purest empirical and visual form.

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[18] Cf. Varro, Marcus Terentius, *On Agriculture*, ed. and transl. W.D. Hooper, H.B. Ash, Cambridge MA 1934 (*Loeb Classical Library*, 283) [hereinafter: Var.] *R.* 2.*pr*.4.7; C. Connors, *Field and Forum: Culture and Agriculture in Roman Rhetoric*, in: *Roman Eloquence: Rhetoric in Society and Literature*, ed. Dominik, Routledge 1997, comments on some examples of agriculture as a subject and stylistic resource in rhetoric.

[19] M.A. Lelle, M.A. Gold, *Agroforestry Systems for Temperate Climates: Lessons from Roman Italy*, "Environmental History" 1994, 38, 3: 2 note the following: 'Columella, unlike Cato, Varro, and Pliny, was a professional agriculturalist who had little involvement in affairs of state. Columella is essentially about the trees and cultivation techniques concerning him'.

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The Romans had a long tradition of identifying the farmer as the good citizen, which meant there was great potential for analogies and links with virtous statesmen. For the established political elite, farming and herding represented the traditional occupations associated with Roman identity and way of life[20]. This traditional representation played a role in both propaganda and the affirmation of status, as it was considered a source of authority for the ruling classes. The logic was simple: they owned land, and this property generated revenue for the state[21]. The examples of Marcus Porcius Cato (c. 234–149 BC) and Marcus Terentius Varro (127–16 BC) are of particular note, since they were both important statesmen from illustrious families and both wrote about agriculture[22]. However, I will not pursue such an analysis, as it is more closely related to hermeneutics and the political context of the texts than with traditional thinking based on common sense.

Extending the value from the individual to the people's collective identity and, thus, to a cultural one, Kapteyn[23] explores Cato's association between husbandry and Roman identity. Kapteyn's work involves a deep inquiry into the social value of agricultural work, rather than an intuitive interaction between meaning and abstract image. Nevertheless, her commentaries on Cato's social criticism are based on traditional presumptions, i.e. the same preconceptions that gave the symbolic image of the farmer meaning within an aristocratic context. Thus, the criticism would have been based on traditional assumptions concerning farming activities, as opposed to empirical social reality: who the landowner really is, rather than who a farmer should be. In other words, owning a farm was one matter, and actually engaging in farming was another.

I would argue that the meaning of the symbol of the farmer predates the growth of Rome and is an integral part of its cultural matrix,

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[20] Cf. Cicero, Marcus Tullius, *De Oratore*, ed. and transl. E.W. Sutton, H. Rackham, Cambridge MA 1942 (*Loeb Classical Library*, 348–349) [hereinafter: Cic.] *Off*. 1.63.

[21] Cf. Var. *R*. 2. *pr*. 4.7; Cato, O*n Farming. De Agricultura. A Modern Translation with Commentary*, transl. and comm. A. Dalby, Blackawton 1998 [hereinafter: Cato *Agr*.] 2; On the state/production relationship in the Roman agrarian economy, see D. Kehoe, *The State and Production in the Roman Agrarian Economy*, in: *The Roman Agricultural Economy: Organisation, Investment, and Production*, eds. A. Bowman, A. Wilson, Oxford 2013, pp. 33–54. On the relationship between food and politics, vide P. Garnsey, *Food and Society in Classical Antiquity*, Cambridge 1999, pp. 198–217.

[22] On the relationship between Cato's writings on agriculture and his aristocratic role, vide B. Reay, *Agriculture, Writing, and Cato's Aristocratic Self-Fashioning*, "Classical Antiquity" 2005, 24, 2, pp. 331–361.

[23] J. Kapteyn, *All Italy an Orchard: Landscape and the State in Varro's de Re Rustica*, [Washington] 2015 [Phdthesis], pp. 22–23.

DOI:10.17951/rh.2025.60.61-92

as the entire societal foundation was constructed upon it. While Kapteyn may be right about Cato's objectives, she does not refer to something Cato's culture would have taken for granted: the value of farming as opposed to other occupations. In other words, the moral value of farming is not based on the figure of the nobleman who preferred his farm to city life. The value lies in the activity itself, as well as the virtue of the individual who adopts it as a way of life. This may explain the traditional metaphor of the honest field worker, since all his profits come from the earth and his hard work, and are thus deserved[24].

REALITY VERSUS LITERATURE

Latin instructions on farming describe the activity in its empirical dimension in the visual and cultural landscape. These texts were written by Roman aristocrats, who were themselves committed to the defence of agriculture for the sake of Roman traditional values. The agricultural framework shaped natural landscapes and social constructions. The rural world was the natural landscape of the human sphere, and to be a farmer was the natural condition in antiquity. Thus, whether literate or not, ancient people were acquainted with its practicalities, being able to spontaneously recognise its signs of meaning without any metaphoric construction.

Rural life was particularly susceptible to social struggles. This is evident in both ancient historical accounts[25] and in Virgil's verses, particularly in *Georgica*. There, farmers are victims of many calamities, namely civil wars. For that reason, Virgil proclaims the good fortune of the farmer who lives far from the battlefield:

> 'O fortunatos nimium, sua si bona norint,
> agricolas! quibus ipsa procul discordibus armis
> fundit humo facilem victum iustissima tellus'[26].
> 'O farmers! If they knew how fortunate they are,

[24] In the same sense, although referring to the *Georgica*, M.S. Spurr (*Agriculture and the Feorgics*, "Greece & Rome" 1986, 33, 2) says: 'Moreover, several of these topics such as the historical-moralising tradition of praising the past, when Rome was supposedly self-sufficient, not reliant on imported foodstuffs, when urban avarice, sloth, and luxury did not exist, and when ancestral moral and religious values were focused in the countryside, belong also to the tradition of the agricultural prose writers, as always an important key to the correct understanding of the *Georgica*'.

[25] Livy makes in the reference to the consequences of war to the rural world, pointing 5 centuries before the crisis of the republic (Livy 3.69.1–3).

[26] Verg. *G.* 2.458–460.

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being far removed from the quarrels of war,
where sustenance flows from the earth'[27].

During the end of the republic, civil war in Italic territory and expropriations of political rivals were frequent. This upheaval potentiated the section of literature with farming procedures as a source of moral balance for the Roman patricians. When only farming is at stake, life is ruled solely by the laws of nature[28]. Accordingly, in Virgil's verses, human sociopolitical affairs are what disturbs the farmers' symbiosis with nature.

'Quos rami fructus, quos ipsa volentia rura
sponte tulere sua, carpsit, nec ferrea iura
insanumque forum aut populi tabularia vidit'.
'The fruits of the branch, which the fields bring willingly and
Spontaneously, giving no thought to inflexible laws
and the madness of the marketplace or the public record'.

Obviously, this is an idealised description that hinges on the primary aim of farming, which is to provide subsistence. In Rome, agriculture was often dependent on state control or the economic interests of the large landowners[29]. Virgil's verses contrast the natural world, in which 'idea of a farmer' is found, with human society. Life amidst all the worries of the city is not natural, and therefore its moral value is put into question (*vide infra*). The farm mirrors social dynamics and events, as any value, action, or disruption in the rural cosmos is bound to affect social life. When farmers suffer, both their lives and the whole of society are disrupted[30].

If one interprets literature outside the semiotic framework, makes it particularly difficult to establish a realistic understanding. For example, due to the lack of archaeological evidence for villas such as those described by Varro[31], it has been theorised that most of these instructional

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[27] Cf. the images that come from the '*Thessalia infelix'* in Lucans' *Bellum civile* of crops and fields covered in blood (Luc. 7.847–872; cf. *War of the Senses – The Senses in War. Interactions and tensions between representations of war in classical and modern culture*, eds. A. Ambühl et al., "Journal for Transcultural Presences and Diachronic Identities from Antiquity to Date" 2016, 4.

[28] Verg. *G.* 2.500–502.

[29] For a study on the idealisation of rustic life in Roman agronomy, see V.A. Wine, *The Idealization of rustic life in the Roman agronomists*, Ann Arbor 1987.

[30] Vergil, *Eclogues*, ed. R. Coleman, Cambridge–London–New York–Melbourne 1977 [hereinafter: Verg. *Ecl.*] 1.70–72.

[31] See the examples of agricultural territories in H. Goodchild, *Modelling roman agricultural production in the middle Tiber valley, central Italy*, [Birmingham] 2007 [Phdthesis], pp. 78–120.

DOI:10.17951/rh.2025.60.61-92

texts reflect an idealised description of how things were done in practice, at the expense of precision (Roth 2007)[32]. In other words, they would not have represented the general economic activity accurately, nor its visual manifestations in the landscape. Nonetheless, I do not subscribe to such assumptions, as it is problematic to attribute artificiality to these texts solely on the basis of a lack of archaeological remains. It should, still be accepted that these agronomist portrayals depict an idealised life in the Roman countryside. However, this idealism might not necessarily extend to empirical tasks and the struggles of those who toil the land.

Even in the realm of poetry, Virgil does not aim to describe any specific group of rustic people. Instead, his focus is on the activity itself, devoid of social implications—which may explain why he does not address slavery[33]. Virgil describes an abstract theme rather than a concrete reality. Therefore it is not possible to fully agree with Spurr (1986), who states: 'Nevertheless the deliberate exclusion of slavery from the *Georgica* can only be seen as highly significant: the contrast with the contemporary assumptions of Varro, a large landowner, is striking. Virgil's lack of any direct discussion of slavery can only be seen as an example of his selectivity. There was nothing inherently poetic about agricultural slavery and thus it was an obvious choice for suppression. By convention also, slaves did not appear in serious literature'[34]. Slaves are absent not by omission, but because they are irrelevant to Virgil's purpose and didactic intent. As previously argued, Virgil's subject is the activity of farming and the image of meaning materialised in the figure of the farmer, not the social conditions or existence beyond the agricultural *topoi*. Virgil bases his verses on the common sense inherent in a traditional symbol, which has no place for the complexity of society. Because of this, his farmer is moral and, in a sense, detached from the reality of other people, embodying more than a representation of an economic activity. The Virgilian husbandman is an ideal untainted by the corruptions of the human condition, aligning with the prototype farmer depicted in Latin didactic literature[35]. When referring to the social symbolism behind the farmer, ancient authors would not have been thinking of a slave working the fields.

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[32] See U. Roth, *Thinking tools: Agricultural Slavery Between evidence and models*, "Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies" 2007, Supplement 92.

[33] See the example of slaves working on farms directed by a landlord feature in Cato *Agr*. 2 and Col. 1.3.

[34] For an extended debate on this topic, see N.H. Ferreira da Silva, *The silent voices of the past and the abstract thought on the agricultural landscape. A dialogic reading of Sumerian and Latin literatures*, Coimbra 2018, pp. 167–170.

[35] Cf. Verg. *G*. 2.459–74; See C. Nappa, *Reading after Actium: Vergil's Georgics, Octavian, and Rome*, Ann Arbor 2008, pp. 100–101.

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The symbolic construction depends on the abstract context that receives and processes these signs of meaning in order to create or elucidate a more complex symbol. In other words, culture constructs the symbol, while the framed landscape generates the signs of meaning. However, those signs must already exist within the cultural matrix; otherwise, they cannot function spontaneously. In the following section, ancient literature is examined in order to uncover these signs of meaning.

HARDSHIP AS A CULTIVATOR OF MORALITY IN A SEMIOTIC APPROACH

One could say that rural people live hard lives because they struggle with nature. The hardships present in the visual landscape are sources of symbols of morality[36]. The farmer risks losing the fruits of his labour, which means losing part of his existence as he lives to till and harvest the land. This risk naturally implies a resilient mindset. It can be assumed, in abstract terms, that being a ploughman was considered a dignified activity (*vide supra*). Conversely, the moral people the state needed could only be found on farms. Columella and Marcus Varro[37] criticised citizens who were alienated from their obligations when complaining about the abandonment of the plough. Their target was the fading 'morality' in Rome[38]. Consequently, as people moved inside the 'city walls' and devoted themselves to the pleasures of circuses and theatres rather than work in the grain fields and vineyards, society was gradually being corrupted[39]. Citizens out of touch with work and nature lost contact with the teachings of farming. A farmer would have known what needed

[36] Virgil describes "Aristaeus's emotional devastation upon the loss of his hive to 'sickness and famine', he is voicing some of the frustrations of the farmer" (L. Kronenberg, *Allegories of farming from Greece and Rome: Philosophical satire in Xenophon, Varro and Virgil*, Cambridge 2009, p. 76) who endures struggles only to lose the fruits of his labour (vide: Verg. *G.* 4.321–32).

[37] Cf. Var. *R.* 2. *pr*.3.

[38] Cf.: 'et dubitant homines serere atque impendere curam?/ quid maiora sequar? salices humilesque genistae, / aut illae pecori frondem aut pastoribus umbram / sufficiunt saepemque satis et pabula melli'. (Verg. *G.* 2.433–436) 'And men hesitate to sow trees and give their care? / Why pursue greater things? Even willows and humble broom / offer leafage to the cattle or shade to the shepherd, / fences, and nectar for honey'.

[39] Col. 1. *pr*. 15.2–5: 'Omnes enim, sicut M. Varro iam temporibus avorum conquestus est, patres familiae falce et aratro relictis intra murum correpsimus et in circis potius ac theatris quam in segetibus ac vineis manus movemus'. 'Indeed, even as Marcus Varro complained in the days of our grandfathers, all of us who are heads of families have given up on the sickle and the plough and have crept into the city walls; and we occupy our hands in circuses and theatres rather than in grain fields and vineyards'.

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to be done because he was aware of his place in the world. The plough would have represented the nobility of the dutiful man, despite the implied harshness of this way of life[40]. Columella reiterates this idea, stating that those who feel protected within the city walls are simply lazier than those *qui rura colerent* ('who worked the fields')[41].

Agricultural labour 'builds morality'; without it, traditional and crucial values are also abandoned. This is, of course, a potentially philosophical theme, since an image formed by a compounding of signs of meaning cannot be directly extrapolated to the concept of morality. It is important to bear in mind that morality is a highly speculative concept which depends on cultural context and in which idealisation plays a major role. Nevertheless, the idea of morality is constructed from signs of meaning such as those derived from the rural frame. The signs of meaning found in the traditional landscape used to build this symbol are: 'Work', 'Physical strength' (resilience), 'Production', and 'Craft' (see below).

Despite his wisdom or work ethic, the farmer remains dependent on nature and must, therefore, be aware of the misfortunes that natural phenomena can bring. This understanding translates into the idea of accepting suffering and relying on hope (*invitae properes anni spem credere terrae*) in Verg. *G.* 1.219–224:

> 'at si triticeam in messem robustaque farra
> exercebis humum solisque instabis aristis,
> ante tibi Eoae Atlantides abscondantur[42]
> Cnosiaque ardentis decedat stella Coronae,
> debita quam sulcis committas semina quamque
> invitae properes anni spem credere terrae'.
> 'But if for a harvest of wheat, robust spelt,
> or corn, you work the earth and stir the soil
> before the Pleiades, daughters of Atlas, become invisible to you,
> and the Star of Knossos, the shining Northern Crown, retires
> to the furrows the seed that belongs to them
> and entrusts to the reluctant earth the hope of a year'.

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[40] See Verg. *G.* 2.61–62.

[41] Col. 1. *pr.* 17.9–11: 'U't enim qui in villis intra consaepta morarentur, quam qui foris terram molirentur, ignaviores habitos, si eos, qui sub umbra civitatis intra moenia desides cunctarentur, quam qui rura colerent administrarentve opera colonorum, segniores visos'. 'Indeed, those who lived within the confines of the country houses were deemed more sluggish than those who tilled the soil outside. Likewise, those who spent their time in the shadow of the city, inside the walls, were perceived as lazier than those who tilled the fields or managed the labour of the tillers'.

[42] Cf. Col. 2.8.1–4.

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The farmer understands the cosmos and knows how the constellations behave, as he must adapt to them (*vide infra*). Yet, as these verses show, knowledge and dedication alone are insufficient. There is a profound reliance on nature, which must be consistently sustained through hard work. The fickleness of nature defines the high risks involved in agricultural work. In short, farmers develop exceptional resilience to adversity due to their constant struggles with different threats, especially those posed by the unstoppable power of nature[43]. Following this logic, Virgil portrays the farmer as a warrior who combats all manner of enemies, his weapons sustaining life rather than bringing death[44].

The metaphor of the farmer as a warrior highlights the adversities of nature. Certain challenges are inherent in the natural order and must be understood and mastered by the farmer through labour and skill. These struggles form the framework in which the farmer is conceptualized, and the signs of meaning they produce contribute to the symbolic figure of the farmer[45]:

> 'area cum primis ingenti aequanda cylindro
> et vertenda manu et creta solidanda tenaci,
> ne subeant herbae neu pulvere victa fatiscat,
> tum uariae inludant pestes: saepe exiguus mus
> sub terris posuitque domos atque horrea fecit,
> aut oculis capti fodere cubilia talpae,
> inventusque cavis bufo et quae plurima terrae
> monstra ferunt, populatque ingentem farris acervum
> curculio atque inopi metuens formica senectae'.
> 'First, your threshing floor must be levelled with a heavy roller
> and worked by hand, then made solid with firm chalk
> so that the weeds do not cover it, crumbling it to dust.
> And then various plagues will mock you: often a small mouse
> will make its nest underground and hoard grain,
> or moles, deprived of vision, excavate tunnels and nests[46];
> the toad lurks in holes, and the horde of monsters that scuttle
> forth from the earth[47], and the weevil that devours a great quantity
> of grain, as does the ant, fearing the weakness of old age'[48].

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43 Cf. Col. 10.1.329–341, 11.3.63–64; Verg. *G.* 1.311–50.

44 Verg. *G.* 1.160–168.

45 Verg. *G.* 1.178–186.

46 Cf. Palladius, Rutilius Taurus Aemilianus, *Opus agriculturae*, ex recensione J.C. Schmittii, Leipzig 1898, 1.35.16.

47 Cf. Columella, Lucius Junius Moderatus, *De Arboribus*, in: *De Re Rustica*, ed. and transl. E.S. Forster, E.H. Heffner, Cambridge MA 1954 (Loeb Classical Library, 407–408) [hereinafter: Col. *Arb.*] 20.2.

48 Cf. the disasters mentioned by Columella in Col. *Arb.* 14–15.

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The farmer is likened to a soldier in the face of such adversities, although he gives life instead of taking it. The difficulties and knowledge on how to overcome them bring wisdom through an understanding of natural phenomena[49]. Simultaneously, the hardships inspire a constructive response to these phenomena, linking the farmer's craft to natural processes[50]. In fact, it may be said that it is not from resistance, but assimilation that survival and profit may be attained[51].

Thus, farmers are able to enjoy their brief leisure time, even though they still have to work in the winter[52]. Furthermore, the opportunity to enjoy the harvest results from their prior, sustained labour[53]:

> 'Quare agite o proprios generatim discite cultus,
> agricolae, fructusque feros mollite colendo,
> neu segnes iaceant terrae [...]'.
> 'Therefore, you till the land, oh learn the art of growing
> each species and domesticating wild fruits through gardening.
> Do not let your fields lie fallow [...]'[54].

The value of the farmer and his endurance are not simply the result of emotional resilience or physical hardiness developed by the arduous nature of his work. They are also fostered by an acceptance of hardships and the capacity to persevere in overcoming it[55].

Considering the hermeneutics of Virgil's *Georgica*, the natural processes of the life cycle compete with the farmer's creative labour, as if two supernatural entities were working within the same frame[56]. An understandable, albeit literary language is possible because the signs of meaning are known. The symbol for resilience, generated from the image

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[49] See B.A. Catto, *The concept of natura in the de rerum natura of Lucretius and the georgics of Vergil: Its characteristics, powers, actions, and effects upon the earth, man, and man's labor*, [Ann Arbor] 1981 [Phdthesis], pp. 288–290: 'In the fourth Book Virgil in passing mentions gardens and recalls an old Corycian gardener who had great success not only with bees but with all other things as well. [...] This humble old man is, then, the unexpected hero of this agricultural story. He is the exemplification of Vergil's motto of man's glorification through the humility of labour. He lives in harmony with nature because he understands the nature of his particular soil and has acted accordingly, using it to its best advantage'. cf. Verg. *G.* 4.125–146).

[50] See Verg. *G.* 1.316–334; Cf. C. Nappa, *op. cit.*, pp. 55–58.

[51] Verg. *G.* 1.300–301.

[52] Cf. Verg. *G.* 4.134–143.

[53] Verg. *G.* 2.35–38.

[54] Cf. Gen. 2:8.

[55] Verg. *G.* 1.118–121, cf. Lucr. 2.1160–1167.

[56] Verg. *G.* 1.121–124.

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of the farmer, is dependent on the observation of the farming landscape. Using symbolic language, Virgil defines the unavoidable hardships.

A pessimistic view of farming life is also evident, as the virtuous farmer must endure various hardships to merit this title. Kronenberg notes this possible interpretation of the *Georgica*, stating: 'The cycles of pessimism and optimism in the *Georgica* show that the farmer's attempts to order the world are never permanent accomplishments because they try to shape nature into something it is not'[57]. Kronenberg's argument is persuasive, but it is possible to find a more straightforward interpretation of the apparent pessimism in this work: hardships and the ability to overcome them[58]. It may be said that the *Georgica* portrays the resilient farmer who struggles against adversity and failure, constrained by the immutable laws of nature. From sunrise to sunset, year after year, the farmer must persist in his labour[59]. This continuity remove makes it seem as if he is part of the natural process, acting in accordance with the life cycle and responding to hardships with hard working (*vide supra*)[60]. In fact, this cycle of work, together with the natural, cyclical rhythm, is clearly exemplified by the tending of vineyards mentioned in Virgil[61]. The hardships of working the fields are tangible, which in turn lends reality to the signs of meaning that construct the symbolic language. The symbol, however, remains distinct, serving as a vehicle for the validation of the text's semantic aims.

THE TASKS, IRONY, AND SATIRE

The farmer's virtue was not inherent to the person, coming instead from the occupation and the tasks that prevent alienation[62]. Those tasks, in turn, are visual signs of meaning. The person does not bring nobility to farming; it is agriculture that fosters virtue in the person. This idea of morality can also be found in perspectives on profit at the time, as wealth from farming was considered reliable and honest, and thus such activities were deemed a respectable way to prosper[63]:

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[57] L. Kronenberg, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

[58] *Ibidem*, p. 183.

[59] Cf. Verg. *G.* 2.399–412.

[60] Verg. *G.* 2.513–518.

[61] See Verg. *G.* 2.397–402; About the endless cycle of labour in Virgil, see also C. Nappa, *op. cit.*, pp. 95–96.

[62] Cf. Col. 1. *pr*. 17.9–11.

[63] Col. 1. *pr*.10.6–11.1.

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> 'Quae si et ipsa et eorum similia bonis fugienda sunt, superest, ut dixi, unum genus liberale et ingenuum rei familiaris augendae, quod ex agricolatione contingit'.
>
> 'If good people are to avoid these pursuits and others which are similar, as I have said, there remains one way of increasing the family assets of a free-born man or gentleman, and it can be found in agriculture'.

Profit from farming is acceptable because it comes from working with nature instead of speculating in the market. This justifies Cato's proposal of the farmer as representative of moral value in terms of virtue borne from rural life[64], as he declares:

> 'Et virum bonum quom laudabant, ita laudabant: bonum agricolam bonumque colonum. amplissime laudari existimabatur qui ita laudabatur'.
>
> 'And when they would praise a good man, they would praise him in this manner: 'good husbandman', 'good farmer'; one praised this way would have deserved the greatest eulogy'.

The farmer is the stereotype of the honest and virtuous person whose wealth is the fruit of his labour. Just as importantly, this enriching labour comes from interaction with nature. Varro denotes the same value, again evoking the traditional comparison between the Roman countryside and the city – denouncing urban Romans as lazier than those who toil in the fields[65]. Moreover, for the Roman aristocracy, a good man also had to be a good soldier – a quality seemingly guaranteed by agricultural life[66]:

> 'at ex agricolis et viri fortissimi et milites strenuissimi gignuntur, maximeque pius quaestus stabilissimusque consequitur minimeque invidiosus, minimeque male cogitantes sunt qui in eo studio occupati sunt'.
>
> 'Yet from rustic people come both the bravest men and the strongest soldiers, and their livelihood is especially respected as it is the most secure and least susceptible to hostility: those engaged in this pursuit are least likely to be disaffected'.

The fact that the farmer's subsistence comes from his own labour, coupled with his ability to produce directly from the land without prejudice

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64 Cato *Agr*. *pr*.2.

65 Cf. Var. *R*. 2. *pr*. 1.1–6.

66 Cato *Agr*. *pr*. 4.

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towards others, favours this image of nobility[67]. The farmer represents an activity that is crucial to a balanced society, embodying, for example, a barometer for harmony by guaranteeing subsistence[68]:

> 'At sine agri cultoribus nec consistere mortalis nec ali posse manifestum est'.
>
> 'Moreover, without tillers of the land, it is evident that mankind can neither subsist nor be fed'.

By contrasting the man who owns both his labour and his life with the slave, Columella describes the responsibilities of the free man. A tenant who leases a field works it properly, managing the produce efficiently and, as a professional farmer, handling the administration of the farm competently. The slave, in turn, will only aspire towards his own profit, causing damage via mismanagement due to the awareness that neither the produce nor the farm belongs to him[69]. By comparing the two types of workers and asserting that a slave would be ill-suited for agriculture, Columella emphasises the special relationship that a farmer maintains with the land, even when it is not his own. However, Columella's assumption is based on a cultural symbol associated with social behaviour, rather than a crystallised representation of the activity. It is Columella's preconception of the slave's behaviour that underpins his claim that such a worker is unsuitable for farming, a notion unrelated to the visual or symbolic representation of the activity.

The moral symbol is created from an image and its signs of meaning from the rural cosmos, before any contextual interpretations. The semantics of literature are always complex and depend on the specific hermeneutic context. Hence, Kronenberg argues that the instructions on farming may also contain a satirical aspect aimed at aristocratic society, reminiscent of the comic and satirical genres. 'In Greek and Roman satire and comedy, the city is the place of vice and the country the place of virtue. These genres pick up on the moralizing tendencies of their cultures and decry the greed and luxury of the city as opposed to the country, as well as the loose morals of the modern age as compared with those of the past. That said, moralizing in satire and comedy

[67] L. Foxhall, *The Dependent Tenant: Land Leasing and Labour in Italy and Greece*, "Journal of Roman Studies" 1990, 80, pp. 97–114.

[68] Col. 1. *pr*. 6.5–7.1.

[69] Cf. Col. 1.7.6–7.

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often has an ironic edge, and the moralizing characters frequently appear hypocritical or are somehow undermined in the course of the work'[70].

In fact, despite my intention to avoid literary contextual matters while analysing the symbology of the agricultural sphere, the potential irony in the moral symbol of the tenant in literature reflects the value of traditional symbols. These symbols were based on shared cultural understanding and were quite generalised. Thus, they could be used in satire, as they did not represent the real life of the farmer as far as his social status was concerned. At the same time, it is precisely the traditional image of the farmer that allows for the perception of irony in these texts.

The simplistic symbol of the virtuous, honest worker cannot be associated with the aristocratic landowners who did not work the land, suffer the vicissitudes of a real husbandman, nor struggle with natural hardships to obtain provisions. Hence, these aristocrats are a potential subject for irony, not corresponding to the traditional image based on an empirical activity.

Nevertheless, I have some reservations regarding Kronenberg's interpretation[71], particularly in terms of the satire on traditional morality associated with the farmer, at least considering the Latin instructional texts[72]. The main reason behind these doubts concerns the fact that the semantic value of the farmer extends beyond the literary topic, with its meaning being supported much more by common sense (*vide supra*)[73]. There is a notion of profit[74] associated with farming, but the farmer's tasks and their characteristics are not directly connected with it. It is the nature of man and society that leads to this kind of interpretation. I believe Kronenberg's arguments are based on an evaluation made out of context, as they do not take the interlocutors of the text into account, and the same goes for the mechanisms of linguistic expression. The idea of satire on profit ignores how natural it would be to aspire for greater production. Of course, Horace's satires (*Epod.* 2) contradict this assumption, since one character (Alfius) praises country life while speculating with money

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[70] L. Kronenberg, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

[71] *Ibidem*.

[72] 'I argue that it (*De Re Rustica*) is a subversive work, which uses farming as a vehicle to expose the hypocrisy and pretensions of Roman morality, intellectual culture, and politics in the Late Republic. It does this primarily by debunking the cultural myth of the virtuous farmer. While a satirist like Horace revealed the hypocrisy of urban fantasies about rustic life in Epode 2'. (*ibidem*, p. 74).

[73] For a discussion on Kronenberg's approach (L. Kronenberg, *op. cit.*, p. 94), see N.H. Ferreira da Silva, *The silent*, pp. 169–171.

[74] Cf. Cic. *Off*. 1.63.

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loans and having no intention of living outside the city[75]. However, Horace's objective is to satirise the man's intentions and hypocrisy, not the work of the potential farmer. The criticism focuses on those who idealise an activity without any intention of living in accordance with its common practices. In other words, the person's behaviour and pursuit of profit – what is truly being satirised – are distinct from farming itself. On this basis, one can argue that the satire does not target the activity, but the idealised symbolic practice that conveys moral value to society. It denounces the practices of those who idealise agriculture, namely the average person who aspires to wealth without participating in the actual labour that farming entails.

Considering the moral value of the farmer's symbol and the implied empirical reality, Spurr (1986), quoting Wilkinson (1982, apud Spurr 1986), states that: '[...] there was a feeling abroad among thinking people, reflected also by Horace, that a simple, Sabine-type, peasant life was happier and morally healthier'[76]. Wilkinson's statement suggests that the farmer leads a happier life than other people, which seems to be a generalised preconception. It is irrelevant whether this coincides with the idealised aesthetic notions transmitted by literary art or propaganda defending Roman traditions. My position is that the symbolic farmer is happier because he expects less, lives in harmony with the natural world, and is capable of supporting himself. By adapting to nature, the farmer attains fulfilment and happiness[77]. However, it may be very misleading to interpret the *Georgica* as a depiction of the farmer as the happiest of men given its idealised depiction of rural life. Such a portrayal is neither immediately relatable nor consistent with the interpretive aims of this study.

As previously mentioned, the representation of farming activity serves as the source for an abstractly constructed image that featured in the linguistic spectrum of the ancient speaker. Working the land by ploughing and tilling is a compelling example of how a concrete activity and its results can be crystallised into a meaning applicable in a variety of expressive contexts. Columella quotes Virgil's verses on the ploughman's *imitatio* of nature in his attempt to transform bad soil into perfect soil for growing crops[78]:

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[75] L. Kronenberg, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

[76] L.P. Wilkinson, *The Georgics*, in: *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature*, eds. E.J. Kenney, W.V. Clausen, Cambridge 1982, pp. 320, 323.

[77] Col. 10.1.23–24.

[78] Col. 5.4.2.5–6; On the technical practice and the tools of ploughing and reaping in the Roman context, vide: B.D. Shaw, *Bringing in the sheaves: economy and metaphor in the Roman World*, Buffalo 2013, pp. 120–147.

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> 'Quae tamen ipsa paene supervacua est his locis, quibus solum putre et per se resolutum est: namque hoc imitamur arando' ut ait Vergilius, id est etiam pastinando'.
>
> 'Which indeed is superfluous in places where the soil is rotten and the quality lost, for, as Virgil says: 'this is what we imitate by ploughing.' In fact, that is to say by trenching'.

By realising the potential of nature, the farmer becomes a model for attitudes towards labour and life. The farmer acts like a supernatural entity, creating life not only by manipulating nature to his ends but also by imitating its processes. The symbol that is generated is a 'potential' metaphor, but before it is used as such, it is already an image compounded by signs of meaning[79].

The general preconception of the farmer's activities supports the argument that the farmer was represented in linguistic thought the way Varro describes[80], since agricultural labour requires obedient sacrifice to nature's will, regardless of his strength to withstand a hard life[81]. Without dedication, the land will not yield fruit; therefore, the farmer must maintain a considerable effort in the fields to be the provider. This way of live implies social responsibility and specific skills. The most immediate symbol created from these necessary skills and activities is that of the diligent worker. This symbol combines the signs for 'work', 'hardship', 'crops', and 'craft'. As clarified in Diagram 1, literature rearranges these signs of meaning to convey a symbol that is context-dependent while still maintaining a connection to an empirical agricultural framework, as evidenced in the following passage of Columella[82]:

> 'Quippe aliqua sunt opera tantummodo virium tamquam promovendi onera portandique, aliqua etiam sociata viribus et arti, ut fodiendi arandique, ut segetes et prata desecandi; nonnullis minus virium, plus artis adhibetur, sicut putationibus insitionibusque vineti; plurimum etiam scientia pollet in aliquibus, ut in pastione pecoris'.
>
> 'Indeed the nature of each task must be taken into consideration: as much as some labours require just strength, such as moving and carrying heavy loads, so too do others require a combination of strength and skill, such as digging and ploughing, harvesting crops, and clearing meadows. In some others, less strength and more craft is employed,

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[79] Col. 10.1.68–74.

[80] Var. *R.* 2.1.1–6.

[81] Cf. St. Augustine's metaphor on the hard life of the farmer (Augustine of Hippo, *De Civitate De*i, ed. and transl. R. W. Dyson, Cambridge 1998, 22.22).

[82] Col. 11.1.8.

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such as in the pruning and grafting in a vineyard. Furthermore, simultaneously, some knowledge of feeding and tending to cattle is crucial'.

The symbol of a capable farmer acknowledges the following[83]: working the soil is difficult and requires craft, dedication, and a combination of skill and strength[84]. A large part of Columella's commentaries on the skills required for farming recall a notion probably derived from common sense, i.e. traditional imagery: the farmer must be a capable person. Without this competence, he would be unable to perform his duties properly; in other words, he would not be a farmer[85]. Concerning the qualities of field workers, Columella reinforces the idea that the best *uilicus*, overseer of a farm, should possess a combination of physical strength and experience[86].

Obviously, the *uilicus* is not precisely a farmer, so it would be an extrapolation to consider this professional role a direct reflection of the traditional farmer symbology. However, the *uilicus* is a part of the agricultural world and must therefore reflect the qualities required to transform a piece of land into productive fields. The two signs of the farmer, namely 'craft' and 'work', are implied in the text. Wisdom tends to come with experience, which in turn comes with age. However, age also diminish the ability to apply knowledge to the implied physical demands of farming activities. Furthermore, experience in cultivating the land generates expertise regarding the management of supplies[87]. Therefore, the farmer should be neither too young nor too old to work efficiently[88].

The description of the ideal worker presents an image which, while idealised, matches a kind of reality recognisable through observation. The resulting signs for the image of the activity in this textual example would be 'strength', 'work', and 'craft'. These signs can create abstract language expressed through compounded symbols such as 'resilience' and 'knowledge of nature'. This represents a servant rather than an ideal 'aristocratic farmer'[89]. Nevertheless, this model can also be extended to small farm owners or individual workers and the image their work generates in the collective mind.

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[83] Cf. Col. 11.1.7.

[84] Col. 3.10.6–7.

[85] Cf. Columella's sententious quotation from Xenophon (Xenophon, *Oeconomicus*, ed. and transl. E.C. Marchant, O.J. Todd, Cambridge MA 1979 (Loeb Classical Library, 168) 22.16) on the best worker.

[86] Cf. Col. 11.1.3, 11.1.8; On the vilicus, vide also Cato *Agr*. 2.1–2.2.

[87] Col. 1. *pr*. 12.1–4.

[88] Cf. Col. 11.1.3.

[89] Columella insists that the *vilicus* needs knowledge of the craft in Col. 11.1.4.

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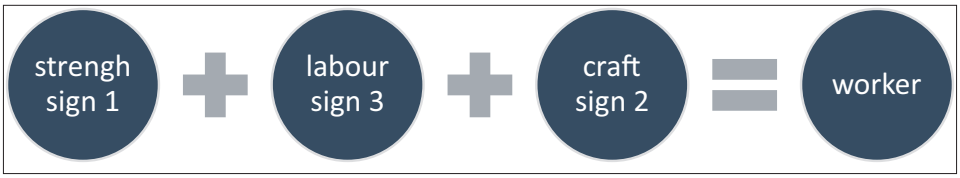

Diagram 2: compounding signs for the symbol of the 'good worker'

Thus, according to Columella's perspective on physical and mental fitness, the middle-aged man seems to be ideal for farm work. Knowledge (the sign for craft) and physical strength (the sign for 'labour' + 'strength') are required to succeed in agriculture. Therefore, Columella argues that the *uilicus* should serve as a model to his servants, so they may emulate his skills and work ethic[90].

Regarding the aforementioned characteristics of the farmer, his class suffering from exploitation and dishonesty is a clear indicator of social corruption. This is demonstrated by Cicero's speech *In Verem*, where he comments on the exploitation and injustice of depriving ploughmen of their own produce[91]:

> '[...] tu de optimo, de iustissimo, de honestissimo genere hominum, hoc est de aratoribus, ea iura constituebas quae omnibus aliis essent contraria?'.
>
> 'Would you (despoil) one of the worthiest, fairest, and most honest of humankind, the man from the farming class, and allocate his rights to those that in all senses are his opposite?'.

The exploitation of farmers represents the greatest injustice due to their value to the community. Those who perpetrate such injustices, meanwhile, are deemed the worst and most dishonest men of all. The farmer is a benign element in the world, dedicating himself to the work of the land and to producing goods the community needs. When the farmer is attacked in any way, the whole of society is threatened[92]. In fact, one may say this would have been a universal concern in antiquity[93]. Cicero extends this argument by noting that, if farmers are driven off their land[94], their departure represents a loss for the entire social fabric, even if the farmers own only 'a single yoke of oxen' (*qui singulis iugis arant*). In other words,

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90 Cf. Col. 11.1.14–15.

91 Cic. *Ver*. 2.3.27.5.

92 Cic. *Ver*. 2.3.27.10–28.1.

93 For an example, see Amos (9:14–15), E.F. Davis, *Scripture, culture, and agriculture an agrarian reading of the Bible*, Cambridge 2009, p. 129.

94 Cf. Cic. *Ver*. 2.3.27.10–28.1.

DOI:10.17951/rh.2025.60.61-92

according to Cicero's *In Verrem*, even the departure of hardworking farmers who are not major landowners can be considered a loss.

It is important to note that state revenue was closely tied to land cultivation, meaning state legislation could directly impact the production and property dichotomy[95]. Thus, considering the contemporary general assumptions regarding agriculture, Cicero employs a rhetorical strategy in his defence of agriculture that emphasises state harmony. Nevertheless, caution is required to avoid overinterpreting either the text itself or the image presented in *In Verrem*.

UNDERSTANDING NATURE: THE PATHWAYS TO EXPLAINING NATURAL PHENOMENA AND PRODUCTIVITY

The farmer who works with nature understands it through his labour, which means his attitude connects economic activities with the natural world. The essential knowledge implied in farming and its value for ancient societies suggests that tradition would recognise the farmer as someone who understood the universe, followed the rhythms of the seasons and elements, and was aware of the unpredictability of the natural world (*vide supra*)[96]. Symbolically, the farmer is patient and resilient, associated with the simplest yet most profound knowledge. This is because nature rules the universe around him, and the farmer perceives this sovereignty. Columella acknowledges this, stating that agriculture is almost synonymous with 'building knowledge'[97]:

> '[...] denique animi sibi quisque formatorem praeceptoremque virtutis e coetu sapientium arcessat, sola res rustica, quae sine dubitatione proxima et quasi consanguinea sapientiae est, tam discentibus egeat quam magistris'.
>
> '[...] and then, everyone calls on the company of the wise a man to fashion his intellect and instruct them in virtue; but agriculture alone, without doubt, most closely related and almost a sister to wisdom, lacks both learners and teachers'.

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[95] C.K. Kosso, *Public policy and agricultural practice: An archaeological and literary study of Late Roman Greece*, [Chicago] 1993 [Phdthesis]: presents a study on this subject in Late Roman Greece, which justifies the state's interference and attempts to influence the rural economy on a global scale.

[96] Cf. Verg. *G.* 1.121–124.

[97] Col. 1. *pr*. 4.6–5.1.

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As Columella observes, while there are schools for every type of study, and even schools of vices or vanities[98], there are few who profess to teach or learn agriculture. This statement, of course, is rhetorical rather than factual[2]; there are several known Latin instructional texts on farming, indicating that it was taught, at least to those with access to such texts. Columella notes the difficulty of finding the necessary commitment to farming in order to learn and teach it properly. This difficulty was likely due to the hardships associated with the activity and the agricultural need for knowledge bridging its practicalities and the natural world. Columella's idea that agriculture is profoundly linked to wisdom (*quae sine dubitatione proxima et quasi consanguinea sapientiae est*) is found in Latin instructional texts, and likely reflects broader patterns of 'social thought'.

Roman cities were not self-sufficient, being heavily reliant on agricultural production from rural areas[99]. This was, in fact, the general rule concerning the economy in Roman cities[100]. Thus, farming knowledge was essential for societal sustenance. This sentiment is echoed in the words of Varro´s character Scrofa, who claims that farming is not only an art but also a productive science[101]. In short, knowledge was indispensable for successful farming and future prosperity. Conversely, ignorance could prove disastrous for agricultural ventures, since it would jeopardise the delicate balance of natural elements which required skill and care to manage[102].

The farmer's knowledge enables him to withstand adversity, while his resilience and natural wisdom result in profitability or personal fulfilment[103]. Virgil emphasises the wisdom of accepting natural circumstances and adapting to them rather than resisting them. Catto's commentary[104] on the character of the old Coricyan gardener[105] aptly summarises what a good farmer represented for Virgil: 'This humble old man is, then, the unexpected hero of this agricultural story. He is the exemplification of Virgil's motto of man's glorification through the humility of labour. He lives in harmony with nature because he understands the nature of his particular soil and has acted accordingly, using it to its best advantage'. Ultimately, the implicit wisdom in the farmer's expertise and labour rewards

[98] Col. 1. *pr*. 5–6.

[99] See P. Erdkamp, *The grain market in the Roman Empire: A social, political and economic study*, Cambridge 2005.

[100] P. Erdkamp, *Beyond the Limits of the 'Consumer City'. A Model of the Urban and Rural Economy in the Roman World*, "Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte" 2001, 50, 3, pp. 332–356.

[101] Var. *R*. 1.3.

[102] Col. 11.28.

[103] Verg. *G*. 4.127–133.

[104] B.A. Catto, *op. cit.*, pp. 288–290.

[105] Verg. *G*. 4.127–133.

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him even under the most adverse conditions. The farmer's knowledge derives essentially comes from experience, observation, and symbiosis with nature, enabling him to transform the natural world into productive fields[106]: 'Coloni ea quae agri cultura factum ut nascerentur e terra [...]', 'in that realm of the husbandman, where things are made to sprout from the earth through cultivation of the land [...]'.

Thus, the wise man is able to generate more with fewer resources, even when he seeks sustenance instead of wealth[107]. The symbolic value of the farmer lies in his capability to change the nature of things and reap benefits from the soil, as indicated in Marcus Varro[108]:

> 'Armentum enim id quod in agro natum non creat, sed tollit dentibus. Contra bos domitus causa fit ut commodius nascatur frumentum in segete et pabulum in novali'.
>
> 'Certainly, the herd does not produce what grows in the field but tears it off with its teeth; in opposition, the domesticated ox becomes the cause for the grain to grow easily in the ploughed land and the fodder in the fallow land'[109].

In this example, the farmer transforms herds which eat and destroy the crops[110] into productive livestock. The farmer generates value where it had not existed before, thereby epitomising the perfect producer[111]:

> 'Res est agrestis insidiosissima cunctanti; quod ipsum expressius vetustissimus auctor Hesiodus hoc versu significavit: Αἰεὶ δ' ἀμβολιεργὸς ἀνὴρ ἄταισι παλαίει. Quare vulgare illud de arborum positione rusticis usurpatum Serere ne dubites, id vilicus ad agri totum cultum referri iudicet credatque praetermissas non duodecim horas, sed annum perisse, nisi sua quaque die, quod instat, effecerit'.
>
> 'For agriculture is very insidious to the dilatory man; as the very author Hesiod has forcefully pointed out in this line through the very ancient expression: 'He who always delays wrestles with ruin' (Hes. *Op.* 413). Wherefore let he (*vilicus*) hold that the common opinion among rustic people about planting trees, 'the husbandmen never hesitate to plant', extends to all farming, and let him know that not only twelve hours but a whole year will be lost if pressing work is not carried out on the proper day'.

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106 Var. *R.* 2. *pr.* 5.1–4.

107 Verg. *G.* 4.134–143.

108 Var. *R.* 2. *pr.* 4.7.

109 Cf. Col. 5.4.2.5–6; Var. *R.* 2. *pr.* 5.

110 Cf. Col. 11.2.7–8.

111 Col. 11.29.5–30.1.

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In another example, to describe his rhetorical technique through metaphor, Pliny the Younger (C. Plinius Caecilius Secundus) resorts to the farmer's techniques for improving production and overcoming difficulties through avoidance and resistance[112]:

> 'Utque in cultura agri non vineas tantum, verum etiam arbusta, nec arbusta tantum verum etiam campos curo et exerceo, utque in ipsis campis non far aut siliginem solam, sed hordeum fabam ceteraque legumina sero, sic in actione plura quasi semina latius spargo, ut quae provenerint colligam. Neque enim minus imperspicua incerta fallacia sunt iudicum ingenia quam tempestatum terrarumque'[113].
>
> 'With agrarian land, as with vineyards, I tend and oversee my fruit trees and fields. And in the fields, besides spelt and wheat, I sow barley, beans, and other legumes; so too, when I am making a speech, do I sprinkle various ideas around like seeds, in order to assemble whatever crop comes forth. There are as many obscure and uncertain artifices in the minds of judges as there are in the uncertainties of weather and soil'.

An obvious conclusion arises from one key statement: he was productive due to his hard work. The knowledge that made him productive, in turn, was acquired through the experience of tilling and harvesting. To this valuable insight, one must add the knowledge required to domesticate nature and transform it into a productive asset[114]. This aspect seems to have been neglected by the Roman patricians, often criticised in farming instructions for delegating this knowledge to others[115]:

> 'Nunc et ipsi praedia nostra colere dedignamur et nullius momenti ducimus peritissimum quemque vilicum facere vel, si nescium, certe vigoris experrecti, quo celerius, quod ignoret, addiscat'.
>
> 'Currently, we disdain tilling our lands ourselves, and we consider it of no importance to appoint someone very experienced as a *vilicus* (bailiff), or if inexperienced, one who is determined and energetic so he may learn quickly'.

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[112] Pliny the Younger, *Letters, Volume I: Books 1–7*, transl. B. Radice. Cambridge MA 1969 (*Loeb Classical Library*, 55) [hereinafter: Plin. *Ep.*] 1.20.

[113] Cf. Cic. De *Orat*. 2.89, 2.96, 2.130–131; Var. *R*. 1.29.1; Tacitus, Publius Cornelius, *Dialogus de Oratoribus*, ed. and transl. W. Peterson, London–Cambridge MA 1914 (*Loeb Classical Library*, 35), 40.4; *vide* also Tacitus's metaphor comparing rhetoric to uncultivated plants (*ibidem*, 6.6).

[114] Verg. *G*. 2.35–38; C. Nappa, *op. cit*., pp. 73–74.

[115] Col. 1. *pr*.12.1–4.

DOI:10.17951/rh.2025.60.61-92

The importance of agricultural knowledge should not be underestimated, and experience and dedication to learning are essential. This notion is fundamental to what seems to have been traditional thought. Skills are needed to farm properly, and agricultural labour cultivates the visual and moral values inherent in its symbolic representations of the worker. As Catto notes: 'The earth cooperates happily with man if he will expend labour. The result of this cooperation is fertility. The life of the farmer, though necessarily full of labour, is nonetheless one of plenty. Moreover, along with this plenty comes contentment with his life'[116]. This harmony and fulfilment represent an ideal state attainable only by a diligent labourer/worker. The farmer thus embodies this symbolic potential, which is grounded in a simple yet profound crystallised image encompassing the signs of 'labour', 'crops', 'harvest,' 'person', and 'natural cosmos'.

CONCLUSIONS

The symbol of the farmer as the good man has 'hard work', 'wisdom', and 'steadfast dedication to labour' as its semantic markers. In this way, morality is expressed symbolically through his actions. While the Roman patrician does not literally have his 'hands in the mud', the portrayal of a farmer exemplifies the pragmatic worker endowed with skills that potentiate productivity and virtues applicable to public life. This paper demonstrates that semiotics serves as a valuable tool to unveil the practicalities implied by an idealised image. It also aimed to resonate with the overlooked rural populace by showing the rural landscape crystallised in traditional thought. Nature moving at its own pace, combined with the absence of artificiality, integrates the farmer into the natural cycle. The farmer lives in accordance with nature and can enjoy its fruits without becoming entangled in the societal struggle for survival. In summary, the farmer's *fortuna* lies in the simple things, from an idealised perspective. The Virgilian farmer appears to be an evocation of the *locus amoenus*, idealised by Virgil's depictions of the lives of farmers and shepherds[117]. However, such an image is more than a literary *topus* (*locus amoenus*).

[116] B.A. Catto, *op. cit.*, pp. 286.

[117] Verg. *G.* 2.467–471: 'At secura quies et nescia fallere vita, / dives opum variarum, at latis otia fundis, / speluncae vivique lacus, at frigida tempe / mugitusque boum mollesque sub arbore somni / non absunt; [...]' 'Yet they rest free from care, a life ignorant of being deceived/ and rich in various treasures; moreover, leisure is plentiful: / caverns, and lakes with life, and cool valleys, / the lowing of oxen, and the gentle slumbers / beneath the trees are not absent [...]'.

DOI:10.17951/rh.2025.60.61-92

Despite the highly idealised reality, it invokes a landscape of easy production and subsequent social harmony founded on prosperity. The signs of meaning that help construct an ideal scenario come from a reality[118]. This reality is undoubtedly challenging to achieve but still a potential one – and from a semiotic perspective it is irrelevant whether it actually existed. Nature, combined with the farmer's toil, provides the means to render a prosperous landscape real in abstract thought through symbolic speech. This assumption implies the rustic Roman was in some way superior to the rest of Roman society. Nevertheless, this does not reflect the social status of the real people who worked the fields. In other words, it is the concept of the farmer's tasks that constructs the symbol, rather than the farmer's social standing or individuality.

Appendix, table 1. Signs of meaning of the farmers' image (sources):

work
Col. 1. *pr*.4.6–5.1, 1. *pr*.6–7, 1. *pr*.10.6–11.1, 1. *pr*.12.1–4, 12.46.1.6–7, 1. *pr*.13.4–14.1, 1. *pr*.15.2–5, 1. *pr*.17.9–11, 1. *pr*.18.4–6, 1.3.8, 1.3.9, 3.10.6–7, 5.4.2.5–6, 6.2.10, 11.1.3, 11.1.7, 11.1.8, 11.1.14–15, 11.1.26, 11.28, 11.30; Var. *R.* 2.pr.1.1–6, 2.*pr*.4.7, 2.*pr*.4–5, 2.*pr*.5.1–4, 2.1.1–6; Cic. *Ver.* 2.3.27.5, 2.3.27.10–28.1; Cato *pr*.2–3, 1.6.1–3; Plin., *Ep*. 1.20; Verg. *G.* 1.118–124, 1.160–168, 1.178–186, 1.219–224, 1.300–301, 2.35–38, 2.412–413, 2.458–460, 2.513–518, 4.127–133, 4.134–143; Verg. *Ecl.* 1.70–72
resistance
Verg. *G.* 1.121–124, 1.178–186, 1.219–224, 4.127–133; Col. 1.3.9, 10.1.329–341, 11.1.8, 11.363–364
crops
Verg. *G.* 1.121–124, 1.160–168, 1.178–186, 1.219–224, 1.300–301, 2.35–38, 2.371–375, 2.412–413, 2.458–460, 2.500–502, 2.513–518, 4.127–133, 4.134–143; Col. 1. *pr*.6–7, 1. *pr*.10.6–11.1, 1. *pr*.17.9–11; 1.7.6–7, 1. *pr*.6.5–7.1, 1.3.8, 1.3.9, 5.4.2.5–6, 11.1.8, 11.28, 11.30, 12.46.1.6–7; Cic. *Ver.* 2.3.27.5, 2.3.27.10–28.1; Cato 1.6.1–3; Plin. *Ep*. 1.20; Var. *R.* 2.*pr*.4–5, 2.*pr*.5.1–4, 1.3; Verg. *Ecl.* 1.70–72
providing
Col. 1. *pr*.6–7, Col. 1. *pr*.6.5–7.1, 5.4.2.5–6, 11.1.8, 11.28, 11.30; Cic. *Ver.* 2.3.27.5; Verg. *G.* 1.160–168, 2.500–502, 4.127–133, Var. *R.* 2.*pr*.5.1–4, 1.3; Verg. *Ecl.* 1.70–72
craft
Col. 1. *pr*.4.6–5.1, 1. *pr*.10.6–11.1, 1. *pr*.12.1–4, 1. *pr*.15.2–5, 1. *pr*.17.9–11, 1. *pr*.18.4–6, 1.3.9, 3.10.6–7, 11.1.3, 11.1.4, 11.1.7, 11.1.8, 11.1.12, 11.1.26, 11.28, 11.30, 12.46.1.6–7; Verg. *G.* 1.118–121, 1.121–124, 1.160–168, 1.178–186, 219–224, 2.35–38, 2.458–460, 2.513–518, 4.127–133, 4.134–143; Cato *pr*.2–3, 1.6.1–3; Cic. *Ver.* 2.3.27.5; Plin., *Ep*. 1.20; Var. *R.* 2.*pr*.5.1–4, 2.1.1–6
physical strength
Col. 1.3.9, 3.10.6–7, 11.1.3, 11.1.7, 11.1.8; Verg. *G.* 1.160–168, 1.178–186

[118] Cf. Col. 7.3.23.

DOI:10.17951/rh.2025.60.61-92

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DOI:10.17951/rh.2025.60.61-92

NOTA O AUTORZE

Nelson Henrique Ferreira da Silva – dr, jest pracownikiem naukowym na Uniwersytecie w Coimbrze, specjalizującym się w filologii klasycznej, lingwistyce i historii starożytnej. Posiada dwa tytuły doktorskie uzyskane na Uniwersytecie w Barcelonie i Uniwersytecie w Coimbrze. Jego badania koncentrują się na otwartych infrastrukturach naukowych, medycynie starożytnej i wpływie praktyk rolniczych na kultury sumeryjską i rzymską, a także na praktycznych metodach przekazywania wiedzy akademickiej społeczeństwu.

DOI:10.17951/rh.2025.60.61-92