

Revolutionary Theology: Knowledge Creation and Destruction
in Varro's *Antiquitates Rerum Divinarum*
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I

This paper's guiding premise can be stated without much fuss: the vast and variegated literary output of Marcus Terentius Varro (116 – 27 BCE), lionized already in his own lifetime and for centuries after his death as the most learned of the Romans, is stamped by slavery. Especially in those writings concerned with the retrieval and refurbishment of cultural practices fading into senescence or oblivion, Varro's "antiquarianism" wraps itself around the rhythms of Roman imperialism and the machinery of mass enslavement.¹ On one level, this is to be expected of a cultural moment that is characterized by the rapid transformation of Roman literary culture through slavery and servile work. The contours of this transformation are recoverable from works such as Suetonius' *De grammaticis et rhetoribus*; a host of recent publications has sought to track both named and anonymous protagonists in this revolution, and across the multiple centuries of mass enslavement's redefinition of Roman intellectual life.² But even in this universe, Varro – a slaveholder with many opinions on the art of slaveholding – is a standout.

Typically voicing regret about the vicissitudes of time and transmission that consigned the overwhelming bulk of his writings to oblivion, studies on Varro tend to focus on the identification of the source material for his works, the political and philosophical leanings detectable in what survives of it, or the conditions of their reception and fragmentation.³ To do adequate justice to the scope of Varro's achievement, several contextualizing approaches are possible. One could follow the lead of Elizabeth Rawson and more recently Claudia Moatti and Katharina Volk, whose intellectual histories evoke in rich hues the kinetic exchanges among the late Republic's elite class.⁴ Or one might opt instead to concentrate more narrowly on the brightest stars in the firmament: Cicero has commanded the most attention, but Varro seems to be enjoying a moment nowadays, and interest in the intellectual exploits of Julius Caesar is rapidly surging; his subordinate Sallust is reaping the rewards of reappraisal; and even relatively minor characters in the dramas of late-republican worldmaking such as Nigidius Figulus or the obscure Lucius Saufeius are newly basking in the glow of reanimation.⁵ Or, beginning with the extant writings of some of these aforementioned virtuosi, one might sniff out evidence for

¹ The aptness of "antiquarianism" and "antiquarian" as labels for Varro's intellectual exploits is the subject of ongoing debate: see MacRae 2018 and Smith 2020 for the latest contributions.

² Kaster 1995's commentary on Suetonius *DGR* brings some members of this world to life. On slavery and servile work in Roman literary culture, Howley in progress is enthusiastically awaited; for a preview see Howley 2020a. For one enslaved and eventually manumitted protagonist, see Flower forthcoming on Quintus Lutatius Daphnis. On the literate labor of enslaved persons in Imperial Roman culture see now Moss 2021a and 2021b.

³ The works cited in the next few footnotes take up these issues. For studies of the *ARD* – the main focus of this paper – see Cardauns 1976 and Ferenczy 1989.

⁴ Rawson 1985; Moatti 2015; Volk 2021.

⁵ Caesar: see the papers in Grillo and Krebs 2017. The swell in Varronian studies: see the survey in Volk 2020. Sallust: Feldherr 2021. Nigidius Figulus: Volk 2017 and 2021: ch. 5. Lucius Saufeius: Gilbert 2019.

philosophy “in the streets,” and other signs of an intensifying commitment to innovative knowledge practices that radiated well beyond the circuits of the senatorial (or equestrian) elite.⁶ For present purposes, I will be primarily interested in the question of the cognitive resources that Varro will have had at his disposal to shape his projects. In a Finleyan mode,⁷ I want to plumb the unfreedoms that made his exercise of intellectual freedom possible.

This exercise requires several preliminary moves, not all of which will be executed to full satisfaction in the following pages. On Varro’s freedom to intellectualize and the political and social circumstances that facilitated (and constrained) it, it will be enough for now to sample Moatti’s rendering of the late-republican scene:

It is not really true to say that the Romans were never as free as they were during the civil wars. But in that breach that was opened up between the mid-second century and the beginning of the Empire, Roman thought demonstrated remarkable creativity and dynamism. Undeniably, the period was one of violence, conflict, irrational predictions and anxiety, in which the memory of Roman traditions was lost. It was a time of very real cultural crisis. But it was also a time that began to explore the powers of the mind.⁸

Although historians of earlier periods of Roman history might take exception to Moatti’s claim that only in the late Republic did Romans begin “to explore the powers of the mind,”⁹ I am sympathetic to the idea that there is something worth parsing about the relationship between the orgiastic violence of empire (and the destabilization of the *res publica* that it triggered) and the rise of new practices of knowledge production during this period. Elsewhere I have floated the possibility of reading Rome’s imperial expansion as an entry in the annals of epistemicide; but the flipside of that knowledge destruction was knowledge creation, and both Roman elites and Greeks writing about Romans regularly credited Roman culture with a kind of adaptive plasticity.¹⁰ Crucial to this plasticity was a sharp pivot to systematization, especially pronounced in the intellectual apparatus that emerged around Roman public religion in the late Republic but apparent in other domains as well.¹¹ Varro makes a fetish out of this systematization, as best we can judge from the fragments of his most influential intervention in Roman religion, the *Antiquitates Rerum Divinarum* – preserved mainly by one of his most exacting readers and a world-class systematizer in his own right, Augustine of Hippo.¹²

⁶ For the phrase, and an initial foray keyed to Varro’s *Menippean Satires*, see Zetzel 2015. Despite the energizing provocation of Wiseman 2009: ch. 7, the *Satires* remain underexploited as sources for Roman cultural history.

⁷ I have in mind specifically the closing paragraphs of Finley 1981: ch. 6, with its claim – much disputed and finessed in the decades since its first airing – that in Greek world “the idea of individual freedom” and the efflorescence of chattel slavery “advance, hand in hand”.

⁸ Moatti 2015: 44.

⁹ The time-depth of structured abstract thought at Rome, especially on theological matters, is one focus of Ando 2008.

¹⁰ Epistemicide: Padilla Peralta 2020. How Romans and non-Romans narrated and explained this plasticity: the introduction to Loar et al. 2017.

¹¹ Systematization as it manifests in texts: Rawson [1978] 1991.

¹² Varro’s influence on Augustine: Cipriani 1996; MacRae 2016: ch. 6 on Augustine and the *ARD*; for Augustine’s intentional implication in the *ARD*’s disappearance see Hadas 2017. Varro’s role in late-republican religious systematization: Rüpke 2012: chs. 10 and 12.

This systematization was not an inevitable outcome of Rome's collision with the literate scientific cultures of the Mediterranean. Mediated by the arrival of Hellenistic philosophy at Rome, the honing of skills in formalized disputation and disagreement among elites and non-elites in the Late Republic – for which Varro himself offers such tantalizing snapshots in the fragments of his *Menippean Satires* (see e.g. fr. 451 Bücheler) – contributed to this systematization but was not its primary driver. The over-the-top commitment to systematization, arguably nowhere better showcased than in Varro's classification of no fewer than 99 types of soil in one of his few extant works,¹³ is no bug; it is key to understanding what the determinants of the turn to systematic thinking were. I will argue in this paper that the Roman imperial expansion's Mediterranean-wide sweep of mass enslavements, from which Varro himself materially benefited, calibrated his species of systematization in a very specific way. Early modern and modern historians of science have identified multiple points of contact and cross-fertilization between the institution of chattel slavery and forms of knowledge production and systematization, in fields ranging from epidemiology to management theory.¹⁴ The more circumscribed hope for the next few pages is to examine how slavery inflects one proto- or quasi-disciplinized mode of research – antiquarianism – as it is practiced by Varro.

II

Slavery is everywhere in Varro's corpus, and not only where one might most expect it. The peculiar institution's prominence in *De re rustica* has been much remarked, and with good reason.¹⁵ Whether we take the *RR* to be primarily in dialogue with immediate antecedents such as Cato the Elder's *De agri cultura* and the Punic treatise of the Carthaginian Mago, or as enmeshed in a discursive fabric that extends backyards in time to Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* – and that knits together the writing of Varro's contemporary Philodemus (*On Property Management*) with successor-texts such as Columella's agronomical treatise and Bryson's *Management of the Estate* – the Varro that emerges from a close read is an enslaver who is thoroughly conversant with slavery's centrality to elite identity. Joseph Howley has appropriately taken to examining these and kindred texts under the rubric of "despotics."¹⁶ But true to its pervasiveness in Roman society at large, slavery threads its way through Varro's many other writings as well. Even in the domains of philology and lexicography, the figure of the enslaved is a necessary and indispensable medium for abstract thinking. The proof comes in some arresting passages of the *De lingua Latina*, where matter-of-fact references to slavery betray its profound insinuation into the very process of thinking about language. Thus, for example, in Book 8's extensive discussion of inflectional morphology, we read:

[9.21] ... There are two types of inflections, a voluntary one and a natural one. The voluntary type is the product at which an individual has arrived by inflection as his will has carried him. So, when three people have bought one slave each at Ephesus, sometimes one inflects the name from the man who sold him,

¹³ See *RR* 1.9.2-4 with Rawson [1978] 1991: 326.

¹⁴ Epidemiology: Downs 2021. Management theory: Rosenthal 2018. I pass over the obvious synergies of chattel slavery and race science, the focus of a now-voluminous bibliography.

¹⁵ Among recent publications note especially Nelsestuen 2015 and Brown 2019.

¹⁶ Howley 2020.

Artemidōrus, and calls him *Artemās*; another inflects it from the region because he bought him there, *lōn* from *lōnia*; another, because he bought him at *Ephesus*, calls him *Ephesius*; in this way everyone names him after some other thing, as seems appropriate. [22] By contrast, I call natural inflection the one which does not arise from the will of individuals, but from general consensus. Thus when the names have been assigned, everyone inflects their cases alike and says in the same way in the genitive *Artemidōrī* and *lōnis* and *Ephesī*, and so in other cases.¹⁷

A book later, an involved and slightly digressive treatment of grammatical similarity opens up to this attempt at clarification:

[52.92] ... Thus, often we say that apples of identical appearance are not similar, if they have a different taste. So also we say that some horses of the same appearance are not similar, if they give birth to different offspring. [93] And likewise in buying human beings, if one is better by nationality, we buy him for more. And in all these matters we do not only take similarities from appearance, but also from elsewhere, as among horses and donkeys what sort of offspring they beget, and as among fruits what sort of juice they have. Thus, if someone follows the same in the similarity of words, he is not to be criticized.¹⁸

The progression of argument, and notably the associative pairing of the breeding of horses with the traffic in human beings, is significant on multiple counts – for one, it offers indirect testimony for a perceived homology between (animal) reproductive difference and (human) national or ethnic difference, a striking datum for students of slavery’s mutually constitutive interplay with racialization in the Roman Mediterranean. But I cite this passage only to underscore how slavery’s ubiquity patterns and organizes Varro’s thought. Emily Greenwood has shown for Aristotle’s *Politics* what philological analysis can illuminate about an institution that veiled itself through (among other things) grammar. For Varro, we might make the point, borrowing a concept and phrase from Hortense Spillers, that slavery was his grammar book.¹⁹

It is possible that Varro’s intermittently shambolic style, with its sentences sometimes out of joint, holds another clue to the presence of the enslaved: “Where Varro produces long sentences, there are sometimes anacolutha,” Wolfgang de Melo has lately observed, “and these may be explained in various ways; to me, they are the result of hasty writing, combined with dictating the text to a slave.”²⁰ The tendency to read haste and slip-ups into a specific form of technological mediation, in this case the enslaved taking dictation, is not limited to critics of

¹⁷ Varro LL 8.9.21-22 (tr. de Melo): ... *Declinationum genera sunt duo, uoluntarium et naturale. Voluntarium est, quo ut cuiusque tulit uoluntas declinauit. Sic tres cum emerunt Ephesi singulos seruos, nonnunquam alius declinate nomen ab eo qui uendit Artemidorus, atque Artemam appellat, alius a regione quid ibi emit, ab lon<i>a lona[m], alius quod Ephesi Ephesium, sic alius ab alia aliqua re, ut uisum est. Contra naturalem declinationem dico quae non a singulorum oritur uoluntate, sed a co<m>muni consensus. Itaque omnes impositis nominibus eorum item declinant casus atque eodem modo dicunt huius Artemidori et huius lonis et huius Ephesi[s], sic in casibus aliis.*

¹⁸ Varro LL 9.52.92-93 (tr. de Melo): ... *Itaque <a>epe gemina facie mala negamus esse similia, si sapore sunt alio. Sic equos eadem facie nonnullos negamus esse similis, <si> [in] nationes ex <se> procreant[e] dissimilis. Itemque in hominibus emendis, si natione alter est melior, emimus pluris. Atque in hisce omnibus similitudines non sumimus tantum a figura, sed etiam aliu<n>de, ut in equis et asinis cuius modi faciant pullos, ut in pomis quo sint suco. Si igitur idem sequitur in similitudine uerborum quis, reprehendendus non est.*

¹⁹ Greenwood 2020; Spillers 1987.

²⁰ de Melo 2019: 1.237.

Varro; students of Pliny the Elder have speculated along similar lines. Whether this type of claim problematically and mistakenly reinstates the figure of the enslaved as forever the imperfect because *deficient* medium of transcription is a question I will set aside for now. As noted earlier, enslaved persons were fixtures in the literary industry of the Roman Mediterranean. But to return to the coupling of slavery and grammar in the *De lingua Latina*, let me tee up the provocation that this is no incidental – or traditional – feature of Varronian philology, but rather a central device for the world-making program that animates much of Varro’s writing in other precincts of intellectual activity. It is also one vital element of what makes Varro’s project revolutionary.

The revolutionary flavor of Varronian thinking is sharpest in what might seem on a first take his most avowedly conservative exploit: the *Antiquitates Rerum Divinarum*, sixteen books of a forty-one-book tour of human and divine antiquities, completed by 47 BCE and outfitted with a dedication to Caesar as *pontifex maximus*. As Christopher Smith has reminded us, “Varro was no ivory tower academic,”²¹ and the circumstances of his personal involvement in the crises of the Late Republic – not least his Pompeian allegiances – bear on the motivations and directions of this work. In several cases, the *ARD* takes an active interest in communities and cultic practices that collided directly with Rome’s imperial expansion: when we read, in one of the many fragments preserved by Augustine, that the god of the Jews was Jupiter (fr. 16 Cardauns), or in another fragment that among the religious experts of the Jews the god went by the name of Iao (fr. 17), the history of Pompey’s campaigns in the Near East looms in the background. But it is when Varro turns to the painstaking identification, in *ARD* 14 and following, of the gods responsible for the oversight of discrete human and non-human biological processes (*di certi*), that the gravitational force of Roman mass enslavement as an organizing principle for his own thought becomes apparent.

Differentiation and taxonomy are integral to Varro’s work in this stretch of the *ARD*. Indeed, the penchant for an almost maniacal hairsplitting of divine entities and functions is what would earn Varro lampooning from Augustine – our main source, together with Tertullian and (less frequently) Servius, for these fragments. Varro begins with human conception, crediting as its tutelary deity Janus who “makes an opening for the receiving of seed” (fr. 90); the divinity Consevius takes charge of the act of sexual procreation (fr. 91), while Liber oversees the “deliverance” or freeing of men and women from their seed (fr. 93). Mena and Fluvionia control the menstrual flow, while Alemona nourishes the implanted fetus (frs. 94-96) to which Vitumnus and Sentinus impart, respectively, life and sense-perception (fr. 97). Still other divinities oversee birth, according to the month and specific stages of delivery (frs. 98-106); and the very first acts that follow birth likewise receive their own tutelary deities, from the newborn’s first exclamation to their rocking in cribs and even their feeding (frs. 107-114). Corresponding to this differentiation of divinities in connection with embryology and natal science is, unsurprisingly, a similar scheme for non-human birth and growth, preserved more or less in full – and again, largely thanks to Augustine’s cantankerousness – for plants. Proserpina is entrusted with the care of germinating crops; next comes Volutina, for when nodes and buds appear on stalks; Patelana takes over when follicles open, and Hostilina when the crop is

²¹ Smith 2018: 1091.

uniformly eared; it is Flora's turn when the crop is in full bloom, and Lacturnus when the crop becomes juicy; and so on (frs. 167-177).

For Augustine, Varro's step-by-step specification of caretaker divinities was ripe for mockery but also demanded some explanation. It is important for us not to assimilate Augustine's derision and in the process overlook or sideline the cultural logics of Varro's buzzing world of functional gods (*indigitamenta* or "Sondergötter"): as Micol Perfigli has demonstrated, what Varro's reader receives in this section of the *ARD* is nothing more and nothing less than a "taxonomy of reality."²² Nonetheless, it is productive to think with Augustine's construal of Varro as a means of gaining a handle on this taxonomy and its sociocultural underpinnings. Among the weightier questions engaged in Augustine's take-up of a system of religious thought whose orientating principles were shrouded in obscurity – and all too liable to polemical distortion – by late antiquity was how best to explain this Varronian science. (That there was a substantive science to Varro's work I hope to show momentarily.) In Augustine's opinion, the best inroad into this system's explication was analogy, and his choice of a specific one for elucidating Varro's "select gods" is very revealing.²³

We observe that in these tiny duties which are distributed in tiny fragments to a plurality of gods these "select" deities operate on a footing of equality, like a senate in conjunction with the *plebs*; and we find that some of the gods who have not been considered at all worthy of selection are in charge of more important and dignified functions than those performed by gods entitled "select".²⁴

This analogy is to Augustine's credit, being the historian-with-an-agenda of Republican Rome that he was. In figuring the relationships of these minor gods to each other and to the major gods of the Roman pantheon as akin to that of senate and *plebs*, he participates in a tradition of calquing the theological on the political with very distinguished precedents: one might cite, purely by way of illustration, the council-of-gods *topos* that is repeatedly reworked across multiple genres with varying degrees of acknowledgment (and occasionally parody) of senatorial deliberative procedures.²⁵ Against this backdrop, Augustine's analogy makes perfect sense. But another, even more powerfully explicative analogy stares at him right in the face yet goes unremarked; in fact, Augustine's failure to reach in the direction of this analogy is symptomatic of the strategic occlusion that marks Varro's work and his interpretation of it. The

²² Perfigli 2004: 176-7; this book should be read with the criticisms of Driediger-Murphy 2007. For earlier bibliography on *indigitamenta* note also Cardauns 1976: 2.184-85.

²³ The *di certi* are not the same as the *di selecti* – Varro's distinction is preserved and acknowledged at Aug. *CD* 6.4 – but I am less interested in the subtleties of Varro's original classification than in the suggestive force of Augustinian analogy. For the specifics of Augustine's criticism of the Varronian scheme of *di certi/incerti/selecti* see MacRae 2016: 133-34.

²⁴ *CD* 7.3 (tr. Bettenson): *Cum igitur in his minutis operibus quae minutatim diis pluribus distribute sunt etiam Ipsos selectos uideamus tamquam senatum cum plebe partier operari, et inueniamus a quibusdam diis qui nequaquam seligendi putati sunt multo maiora atque meliora administrari quam ab illis qui selecti uocantur, restat arbitrari non propter praestantiores in mundo administrationes, sed quia prouenit eis ut magis populis innotescerent, selectos eos et praecipuos nuncupatos.*

²⁵ On this *topos* see Barchiesi 2008; Goh 2018 on Lucilius' *Concilium Deorum* is also helpful. Besides the Republican Senate, the other relevant political institution that supplied models (and metaphors) for prudential deliberation is the magistrates' *consilium*, on which now see Rosillo-López 2021.

single best analogy for probing the prolific abundance of specialized gods in Varronian theology is not politics but the Roman home, and more concretely the aristocratic enslaver's household with its bewildering occupational hyperspecialization.

It is regularly argued that the taxonomic drive of late-republican thought responds in part to the diversity of Rome's empire, and to the perceived need to make that diversity legible.²⁶ But I am proposing a more specific stimulant for the urge to classify as it receives expression in the cladistic ambitions of Varronian theology: the occupational hyperspecialization and differentiation that took off in the course of Rome's transformation into a slave society. While first detectable in late-republican evidence, this hyperspecialization crystallizes in the literary and epigraphic testimonies for slavery in the early Empire. The most celebrated instances of occupational differentiation on steroids all come from the *familia Caesaris*, and especially the household of Augustus' wife Livia. Attested roles range from stewards (*dispensatores*) and financial record-keepers (*arcarii, tabularii*) to copyists and clerks (*librarii*) and managers of the bedroom (*cubicularii*); dressers and keepers of the wardrobe (*ornatrices*), with one person even deputized to oversee purple clothes (*a purpuris*). At Livia's disposal was a cohort of provisioners and craftspersons, from catering officers (*opsonatores*) to a wool-wheaver for spinners (*lanipendus*) and a shoemaker (*calciator*).²⁷ A precise account of Roman slavery's catalytic role in Republican and Imperial labor specialization and stratification is a task for another paper; for present purposes, it will suffice simply to note that one meticulous effort to tabulate occupational titles for Imperial Rome arrived at a final (but, given the limitations of the evidence, necessarily incomplete) tally of 192.²⁸ But why exactly should we see the occupational hyperspecialization of Rome's slave society as imprinting on Varro's delineation of functional gods, and what about the emergence of that feedback channel rises to the level of "revolutionary"? I will take up the second question shortly. With respect to the first, it may be clarifying at this stage to bring into the discussion another Roman writer and philosopher – one who, in addition to being well versed in Varro's work,²⁹ was also an aristocratic slaveholder.

Here is Seneca the Younger, in a fragment of a treatise *De superstitione* (for which Augustine is once again a major source), holding forth critically on the cult services that were offered to the Capitoline deities:

But if ever you go up on the Capitol, it will make you feel ashamed just to see the crazy performances put on for the public's benefit, all represented as duties by light-hearted lunacy. So Jupiter has a special attendant to announce callers, and another one to tell him the time; one to wash him and another to oil him, who in fact only mimes the movements with his hands. Juno and Minerva have special women hairdressers, who operate some distance away, not just from the statues but from the temple; they

²⁶ See MacRae 2016: 18-26. For the effort to organize local ecological variety under theological and divinatory rubrics see Padilla Peralta 2018.

²⁷ On the inscriptions from the *Monumentum Liviae* (CIL 6.3926-4326), Treggiari 1975 remains foundational, and 1976 supplements by tracking occupational differentiation according to gender. The *familia Caesaris*: Weaver 1972.

²⁸ Pleket 1990: 121. For more on labor specialization in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean – with a teaser of work to come – see Bernard 2021.

²⁹ And aligned himself against some of its tenets: see MacRae 2016: 116-20.

move their fingers in the style of hairdressers, while others again hold up mirrors. [...] Meanwhile craftsmen of every trade stand around waiting for work on behalf of the immortal gods.³⁰

Even making allowance for exaggerating distortion on Seneca's part, one can only with difficulty overlook the centrality of slavery to the ministrations of cult that he describes: every single one of the occupational performances referenced in the passage is documented in the literary and epigraphic sources for servile and freedperson occupational specialization at Rome. And while it is correct to stress, as Justus Lipsius first did in the 16th century, that the Capitoline Jupiter's retinue is akin to that of a Roman magistrate,³¹ the more correct framing to adopt here is of Jupiter as a slaveholding *paterfamilias*, with Juno and Minerva as *materfamilias* and *filiafamilias* respectively. But in addition to emphasizing that the best comparison for this structure of service is the Roman slaver household, I want also to subject to scrutiny the theology of service that is bundled into the activities typical of what Markus Krajewski has (following Marshall McLuhan) taken to calling servomechanisms.³² In a Roman context, this theology of service was instantiated or made real through the activities of attendants announcing the time to Jupiter and hairdressers tending to Juno and Minerva's tresses – all acting at a physical remove, in a repetitive quasi-mechanical praxis with distal affinity to the robotic devices of Hero of Alexandria's *Spiritualia Pneumatica*.³³ If we are willing to look beyond Seneca's calculated derision, a system of belief that is predicated not just on the presumed isomorphy of human social relations and their divine counterparts but on the constitutive role of slavery in the visualization and representation of that isomorphy comes into view.

In order to gauge how far this reading of Seneca can take us on Varro's flights of functionalist detail, let me turn more attentively to Krajewski's notion of the servomechanism. His critique of data transmission's dependence on (and routing through) agentive media in various states of unfreedom has two relevant insights for this paper. The first is that techniques of service, and especially those cued to the most sharply graded or carefully parceled responsibilities, are always interwoven "in recursive patterns" within "a hierarchically established operational chain"; the second is that communication processes sustain themselves "on an excess of human agents ... which can claim greater significance in their aesthetic arrangement and their optical overpowering logic than mere functional necessity would require. The power of the ruler is duplicated in his footmen, who ostentatiously flaunt their idleness for him in vicarious inoccupation."³⁴ It is these two dimensions of a cultural technology of service that can be located within the taxonomic obsessions of Varronian theology, provided we entertain the possibility that the functional gods of the *ARD* are at their core servomechanisms: they exist to discharge a duty in much the same way that the empress Livia's

³⁰ Sen. *De superstitione* fr. 69 Vottero = frs. 35-36 Haase (trs. Beard, North, and Price): *In Capitolium perveni: pudebit publicatae dementiae, quod sibi uanus furor adtribuit officii. Alius nomina deo subicit, alius horas Iovi nuntiat, alius lictor est, alius unctor, qui uano motu brachiorum imitator unguentuem. Sunt quae Iunoni ac Minervae capillos disponant (longe a templo, non tantum a simulacro stantes, digitos mouent ornantium modo), sunt quae speculum teneant ... Omne illic artificum genus operatum diis immortalibus desideret.*

³¹ For Lipsius' comments on this passage see Vottero 1998: 309-10.

³² For this concept see Krajewski 2013.

³³ For discussion of these devices compare Rüpke 2016: 63-64 and Bosak-Schroeder 2016: 124-30.

³⁴ Krajewski 2013: 96, 99.

stewards and copyists existed to discharge theirs. In other words (and inverting the apparent lesson of the Seneca fragment), it is not that the Roman slave economy's imprinting on cult and theology primarily asserts itself in the identification and installation of specially tasked ritual performers, such as the figure of the *camillus* who attracts Varro's attention in the *De lingua Latina*;³⁵ it asserts itself instead through the multiplication of duties and competencies among the gods themselves, as one reflex of a slaver mentality that strove to analyze the universe of the divine as decodable according to the precepts of occupational differentiation.

On its face, such a reading does not resolve the difficult question of the *ARD*'s tone, nor does it tilt matters decisively in favor or against Leah Kronenberg's recent effort (2017) to develop a "Menippean reading" of Varro's theological project that is alert to registers of satire and parody. While there is something goofy about the doggedness with which the functional offices of the *di certi* are laid out, the state of the fragments does not justify any strong claims about authorial tone. Where Kronenberg must be right, however, is in flagging both Varro's own professed rationale for embarking on his work ("fear lest the gods perish not by the enemy's assault but by the negligence of citizens") and Cicero's shower of praise for the *ARD*'s author at *Academia* 1.9 as suspicious.³⁶ In any case, what my reading does do is help establish what makes the work so revolutionary. For all that the *ARD* may have been branded as an undertaking of recovery and conservation, it was extraordinarily and almost fiendishly inventive. As has been repeatedly noted, the text has no obvious literary precedent or predecessor in Greek or Latin. But it also represents a spectacular and arguably game-changing irruption of slaveholding into theology. Varro's thinking took shape in a "revolutionary atmosphere," of that there is no question;³⁷ but a revolution is immanent in the *ARD* as well, not least because of the audacity with which it welded together the slaver worlds of the late Republic to its philosophy of religion. For contemporary students of Christian theology, Willie James Jennings has unlocked the manifold routes by which the "slave legacy of Western education, especially theological education, is lodged deeply in our educational imagination."³⁸ If one were to go casting about for a charter or exemplar text for theology's imbrication with slavery, the *ARD* ought surely to appear in the nets before long. The charismatic force of its coupling of slavery and theology for elites being formed in the crucible of "despotisms" ultimately proved irresistible for Augustine, who eventually found himself in quite the bind: how to debunk a work whose twisting itemizations of assorted divine functions seemed so risible, yet whose scheme for routing theological thinking through the institution and thought-worlds of slavery had already sunk its teeth into him.³⁹

³⁵ *LL* 7.34.

³⁶ *ARD* fr. 2a: *se timere ne pereant [sc. dei], non incurso hostili, sed civium neglegentia...*; read with Kronenberg 2017: 314-18 on the *ARD*'s "pious impiety."

³⁷ The phrase, with contextualization: Momigliano 1984: 199.

³⁸ Jennings 2020: 82.

³⁹ Benjamins 2021 on Augustine's recourse to "structural metaphors" of slavery builds and expands upon some of the ideas in Garnsey 1996: ch. 13; but a comprehensive inquiry into Augustine's "doulology" (for this concept, see de Wet 2015 on John Chrysostom) as it takes shape specifically around and in resistance to Varro remains a desideratum.

III

There is much truth to Malcolm Schofield's remark that "Varro was turning living tradition into text – indeed into a database. Internalized ancestral knowledge becomes objectified ancient history."⁴⁰ If my read of Varronian practice is correct, in a theological context this objectification sought (and ultimately could not be realized without) the medium of the most objectified: the enslaved. It was the practice of systematized objectification that cultivated and sustained those habits of mind around which Varro's religious "antiquarianism" took shape and gained momentum. Taking to heart Moatti's recognition that both Varro's embrace of linguistic *ratio* and Caesar's ordering of time through calendrical reorganization are understandable as feats of coercion,⁴¹ we would do well to acknowledge that the late-republican intellectual revolution was at its core a business of force, exerted with equal vigor and violence over abstract entities and flesh-and-blood people.

In redescribing slavery as conceptually generative for Varro's theology, I am moving to the beat of recent research into Roman philosophy's investments in the peculiar institution. My objective has not been to dwell on explicit references to slavery in Varro, or to inventory the "stock of concepts and beliefs ambient in the slave society of Rome" that the *ARD* raided in the preparation of its intellectual arsenal,⁴² but to examine the deep structural affinity between the taxonomic urges of Varronian theology and the hypertrophied occupational specialization that Roman mass enslavement enabled and fueled. This interlacing of slavery and theology was centuries in the making, presaged by the sport with abstract divinities in Roman comedy – a genre in which Varro was expert – and, before that, the rise of cultic personifications as a Mediterranean-wide phenomenon.⁴³ Yet one will search in vain for a coherent attempt to assert a causal or symbiotic relationship between the escalation of mass enslavement on the one hand and the cultivation of new habits of religious thinking on the other. The problem is not dissimilar to what we encounter in studies of Hellenistic science, which tend not to grapple with the conceptual generativity of slavery in their discussions of methods and practices. The silence on the subject in G.E.R. Lloyd's *The Revolutions of Wisdom* is far from atypical: whenever enslaved persons do make an appearance in the secondary literature, it is either in connection with the familiar Aristotelian contortions to justify natural slavery, or as individual case studies for the diagnosis of disease, or – less explicitly – as victims of scientific experimentation.⁴⁴ But slavery's worming into the core of the classificatory zeal that is customarily held up as a distinguishing feature of Hellenistic science is what needs centering. With Varro as my guide, I have attempted to do just that, and in the process related the systematizing theology of the late Republic not only to the expropriation of texts through conquest (so, for example, the looting of Apellicon's library, containing many of Aristotle's and

⁴⁰ Schofield in Moatti 2015: ix-x.

⁴¹ See Macr. *Sat.* 1.14.2 (*omnem inconstantiam temporum ... in ordinem statae definitionis coegit* [sc. Caesar]) with Moatti 2015: 3.

⁴² I am quoting Seal 2021: 109, in the set-up of an invigorating study of slavery in Seneca.

⁴³ Abstract deities on the comic stage: see Plaut. *Bacch.* 120-24 with Padilla Peralta 2017: 333. The historical timing of a Mediterranean vogue in abstract qualities is briefly treated in Padilla Peralta and Bernard forthcoming.

⁴⁴ In the case of the latter, Leroi 2015: 62 must be right to speculate that at least some classical and Hellenistic scientists commandeered the cadavers of the enslaved for dissection.

Theophrastus' works) but to the traffic in human beings.⁴⁵ Many centuries before abolition came to assume credibility and persuasive force not only as a moral demand but as a scientific project,⁴⁶ slaveholding achieved standing as a master-science that pervaded and suffused other sciences – agronomical, lexicographical, and theological. For this reason, I conclude by raising my voice in protest against intellectual history that organizes itself around “great men” simply because they “were, in fact, great men”:⁴⁷ any intellectual history insensate to or only minimally conversant with the material and structural conditions of mass enslavement is neither fully intellectual nor properly historical.

⁴⁵ References on the pilfering and expropriation of libraries in the second and first centuries BCE are collected in Padilla Peralta 2020: 157 n. 21. On Apollonius' library specifically see Barnes 1997.

⁴⁶ On the science of abolition see now Herschthal 2021.

⁴⁷ I quote from, and respond to, the justification advanced in Volk 2021: 9.

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