

## MISZELLEN

## A WISE MAN IN AN OLD COUNTRY

Varro, *Antiquitates rerum diuinarum*  
and [Plato], *Letter 5*

In his *Antiquitates rerum diuinarum* (*ARD*), Varro famously distinguished three “theologies” or ways of thinking about the divine: the *genus mythicon* comprises the stories about the gods told by poets, the *genus physicon* encompasses the theological insights of natural philosophy, and the *genus ciuile* consists in the religious institutions of actual human communities.<sup>1</sup> To the dismay of Augustine, our main source for the *ARD*, Varro largely disdained not only the mythological approach but also the philosophical one, dedicating the greater part of his work to a discussion of the Roman state cult. His avowed reason for doing so (Augustine reports) was that the author did not see himself as designing a new city and its religious practices from scratch, but simply as describing the Roman status quo.

These are the relevant passages:

*Varro ... in rebus diuinis ludos scaenicos poneret ... quod profecto non auctoritate sua fecit, sed quoniam eos Romae natus et educatus in diuinis rebus inuenit.*

(Augustin. Civ. D. 4.1 ~ Varro, *ARD* Bk. 10 testimonium)

Varro ... included theatrical games among the divine matters ... which indeed he did not do by his own decision, but because born and raised at Rome he found them among the divine matters.

*quid ipse Varro, quem dolemus in rebus diuinis ludos scaenicos, quamuis non iudicio proprio, posuisse, ... nonne ita confitetur non se illa iudicio suo sequi, quae ciuitatem Romanam instituisse commemorat, ut, si eam ciuitatem nouam constitueret, ex naturae potius formula deos nominaque eorum se fuisse dedicaturum non dubitet confiteri? sed iam quoniam in uetere populo esset, acceptam ab antiquis nomen et cognominum historiam tenere, ut tradita est, debere se dicit, et ad eum finem illa scribere ac perscrutari, ut potius eos magis colere quam despiciere uulgi uelit.*

(Augustin. Civ. D. 4.31 ~ Varro, *ARD* fr. 12)

And doesn’t Varro – who to our chagrin included theatrical games among the divine matters, though not by his own choice – ... himself admit that it is not by his own judgment that he sticks to the institu-

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1) *ARD* frs. 6–11. Fragment numbers are those of the edition of B. Cardauns, M. Terentius Varro: *Antiquitates Rerum Diuinarum*, Wiesbaden 1976.

tions that he reports the Roman commonwealth established, and does he not without hesitation confess that if he were founding that community anew, he would instead set up the gods and their names according to the formula of nature? But he says that since he lives in an already old people, his task is to keep to the tradition of names and epithets as it has been handed down by the men of old, and to research them and write them up for the purpose that the people might worship rather than despise them [the gods].

*quod apertius alibi posuit, sicut in quarto libro commemoravi, ex naturae formula se scripturum fuisse, si novam ipse conderet civitatem; quia uero iam ueterem inuenerat, non se potuisse nisi eius consuetudinem sequi.*

(Augustin. Civ. D. 6.4; quoted by Cardauns as supporting material for fr. 12)

This he said more clearly elsewhere, as I mentioned in the fourth book: he would have written according to the formula of nature if he himself were founding a new community; but since he found one already old, he couldn't avoid following its custom.

Varro's reasoning is clear: because he has been born into an "old people" and found a society with religious institutions already in place, he considers it his task to preserve its traditions and customs, even if these do not adhere to the "formula of nature" and may be unsatisfactory from a philosophical point of view.

It has not to my knowledge been noted that in justifying his non-interference in matters of public religion, Varro is alluding to a passage in the pseudo-Platonic fifth letter (addressed to the Macedonian king Perdiccas), where Plato explains why he never entered Athenian politics:<sup>2</sup>

Πλάτων ὄνῃ ἐν τῇ πατρίδι γέγονεν καὶ τὸν δῆμον κατέλαβεν ἥδη πρεσβύτερον καὶ εἰθισμένον ὑπὸ τῶν ἔμπροσθεν πολλὰ καὶ ἀνόμοια τῇ ἐκείνου συμβουλῇ πράττειν· ἐπεὶ πάντων ἄν ἥδιστα καθάπερ πατρὶ συνεβούλευεν αὐτῷ, εἰ μὴ μάτην μὲν κινδυνεύσειν ὅτε, πλέον δ' οὐδὲν ποιήσειν.

([Pl.] Epist. 5.322a8–b4)

Plato was born late in his fatherland and found the people already quite old and having been accustomed, by earlier generations, to do much that was against his own judgment. He would have found nothing sweeter than to counsel it like a father, if he hadn't thought that he was going to put himself in danger to no avail and would achieve nothing.

I have highlighted the similarities: both Varro and Plato are born (*natus*; γέγονεν)<sup>3</sup> late into their respective cities (*Romae*; ἐν τῇ πατρίδι) and thus find (*inuenit*; accep-

2) The passage speaks of Plato in the third person because the author is here formulating the kind of response he would like people to give to anyone who criticizes Plato for refusing to benefit the Athenian people with his political advice.

3) If Augustine's *Romae natus et educatus* (Civ. D. 4.1) is a verbatim quotation from Varro, then the Platonic intertext might explain why the supposed native

*tam; inuenerat; κατέλαβεν*) an already old people (*iam ... in uetere populo; iam ueterem* [sc. *civitatem*]; τὸν δῆμον ... ἤδη πρεσβύτερον) that has been accustomed (*consuetudinem; εἰθισμένον*) by preceding generations (*antiquis; τῶν ἔμπροσθεν*) to behave in ways that do not agree with the writers' own judgment (*auctoritate sua; iudicio proprio / suo; τῆ ἐκείνου συμβουλῆ*).<sup>4</sup> Apparently, Varro was aiming to legitimate his own non-interventionist stance with a learned reference to an illustrious predecessor, the founder of the philosophical school to whom Varro himself claimed allegiance.<sup>5</sup>

While modern scholars consider all or most of the “Platonic” letters spurious (and *Letter 5* in particular has not found many champions – or indeed elicited much interest), in antiquity they were believed to be genuine documents and included in Thrasyllus' edition of Plato's collected works in the first century A. D. That specifically the fifth letter was known in Rome already in the late Republic is apparent from an allusion to the very same passage in a letter by Cicero to Lentulus Spinther from December 54 (Fam. 1.9 = SB 20).<sup>6</sup> In this long letter, which may have been intended for circulation beyond its immediate addressee, Cicero is responding to criticism of his political conduct after the Conference of Luca, and on three occasions

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of Reate calls himself a “born” Roman: *natus* would be a translation of γέγονεν, and Varro would be somewhat stretching the truth by presenting his situatedness in Roman culture in terms of an actual birth in the city. (It is, however, also possible that Varro was in fact a born and bred Roman: the epithet *Reatinus* itself is attested only in Symmachus [Epist. 1.2], though scholars have often detected in Varro's writings a particular affinity to matters Sabine. Cf. H. Dahlmann, M. Terentius Varro, RE Supp. 6 [1935] 1172–1277, at 1173.)

4) While Augustine here as elsewhere is reporting Varro's opinion, not quoting him directly (see H. Hagendahl, Augustine and the Latin Classics, Göteborg 1967, 590), the similarity in diction across the three passages gives us a reasonably good idea of what Varro wrote; crucially, the phrase *iam uetus*, applied to the Roman people, would appear to be guaranteed by its occurrence in both Civ. D. 4.31 and 6.4. In all three places, Augustine seems to paraphrase the same Varronian passage: Civ. D. 6.4 explicitly refers back to a place in Augustine's fourth book, which must be 4.31 (both times, Augustine mentions not only the “old people” but uses the expression *naturae formula*, which Cardauns [n. 1] ad fr. 12 considers “wohl varronisch”); Civ. D. 4.31 in turn is linked to 4.1 by the mention of the *ludi scaenici*. Varro apparently explained his acceptance of the customs of his “old people” specifically in the context of justifying his inclusion of theatrical games among the *res diuinae*; whether this occurred in Book 1, as Cardauns believes, or only in Book 10 *de ludis scaenicis*, must remain open.

5) For Varro as an adherent of Antiochus' “Old Academy,” see T. Tarver, Varro and the Antiquarianism of Philosophy, in: J. Barnes / M. Griffin (edd.), *Philosophia Togata II: Plato and Aristotle at Rome*, Oxford 1997, 130–164 and D. Blank, Varro and Antiochus, in: D. Sedley (ed.), *The Philosophy of Antiochus*, Cambridge 2012, 250–289.

6) On the Platonic allusions in this letter, see P. Boyancé, *Trois citations de Platon chez Cicéron*, in: J. Bibauw (ed.), *Hommages à Marcel Renard*, Brussels 1969, 1.126–132 and now S. McConnell, *Philosophical Life in Cicero's Letters*, Cambridge 2014, 35–44.

compares and contrasts his own attitude and actions explicitly with those of Plato.<sup>7</sup> The reference to *Letter 5* runs as follows:

*atque hanc quidem ille causam sibi ait non attingendae rei publicae fuisse, quod, cum offendisset populum Atheniensem prope iam desipientem senectute cumque eum nec persuadendo nec cogendo regi vidisset, cum persuaderi posse diffideret, cogi fas esse non arbitraretur.*

(Cic. Fam. 1.9.18)

And he [Plato] said that his reason for not engaging in politics was that he had met with the Athenian people when it was already nearly demented with old age and not being ruled by either persuasion or force, and while he doubted it could be persuaded, he thought it would be wrong to subject it to force.

Cicero continues by noting that his own situation is different from that in which Plato found himself: unlike the Athenians, the Roman people has not yet lost its mind (*neque desipiente populo*), and unlike the aloof Greek philosopher, Cicero no longer has a choice (*nec integra re mihi ad consulendum*) but is already involved (*implicatus*) in Roman politics and cannot extricate himself now.

We thus have evidence that educated Romans in mid-first century B. C. Rome knew the pseudo-Platonic fifth letter and apparently considered it a point of reference appropriate in such diverse contexts as an open letter to an optimate politician and an antiquarian treatise. McConnell observes apropos of Cicero's allusion to this and other Platonic passages in Fam. 1.9 that the author "presupposes a wide familiarity and sympathy on the part of his target audience . . . with these Platonic texts and the ideas and arguments therein" (37), and the same must be true for Varro's use of the same material. The letter to Lentulus is our earliest piece of evidence for the existence of *Letter 5*, and Varro most likely wrote his *ARD* just a few years later.<sup>8</sup> Note that in light of the fact that Varro is echoing Plato's words beyond the snippet quoted by Cicero, it cannot be the case that the antiquarian is simply imitating his contemporary's letter (though it is certainly possible that he knew it).

It is striking how for all their Platonic posturing, both Cicero and Varro use the fifth letter essentially as a negative foil. When Plato realizes that the Athenian δῆμος is already too old (in Cicero's tendentious paraphrase: "gaga," *desipientem*), he regretfully decides that there is no point in getting politically involved and elects the role of a bystander. Cicero, by contrast, considers himself the member of a still

7) Fam. 1.9.12 (~ Pl. Leg. 4.711c5–8; though see D. R. Shackleton Bailey, *Cicero: Epistulae ad familiares* 1977, ad loc. for the observation that Cicero's actual "quotation" is much closer to Xen. Cyr. 8.8.5) and 1.9.18 (~ Pl. Epist. 7.331b4–d5 [or otherwise Cri. 51b9–c3] and Pl. Epist. 5.322a4–c1). For the identification and interpretation of these quotations, see McConnell (n. 6) 35–44.

8) A terminus ante quem for the *ARD* is constituted by its mention in Cicero's *Academica* (1.9) of 45 B. C. Scholars usually assume that the work – dedicated to Julius Caesar – was published shortly before, perhaps in 46 (thus N. Horsfall, *Varro and Caesar: Three Chronological Problems*, BICS 19 [1972] 120–128, at 122). Varro may well have been working on it for a number of years, possibly already in the 50s.

vigorous people, an already engaged citizen for whom political non-involvement is not an option, however challenging the situation. In the *ARD*, finally, the question of whether the wise man should enter politics has been reformulated into the more general problem of the intellectual's relationship to the real (read: less than ideal) circumstances in which he finds himself. To the horror of Augustine, Varro has no interest in founding the City of God, nor does he wash his hands of his "old people" the way the Plato of the fifth letter does. All the while acknowledging that there is such a thing as a "formula of nature," Varro without any apparent regret settles for Roman *consuetudo*.<sup>9</sup>

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## CIRIS 524: AN EMENDATION

After Scylla has been transformed into the *ciris*, Jupiter takes pity on her father Nisus and gives him life back in the form of a sea eagle (520–528):

*nec tamen hoc ipsum poena sine: namque deum rex,  
omnia qui imperio terrarum milia uersat,  
commotus talem ad superos uolitare puellam,  
cum pater extinctus caeca sub nocte lateret,  
illi pro pietate sua (nam saepe fuidemusf  
sanguine taurorum supplex resperserat aras,  
saepe deum largo decorarat munere sedes)  
reddidit optatam mutato corpore uitam  
fecitque in terris haliaetos ales ut esset.*

There is no doubt that line 524 requires emendation, nor that the corruption can be located in *uidemus*: a verb in present, first person, is obviously out of place here. Lyne conveniently sums up earlier attempts to solve the problem: "One line of correction supplies us with an epithet for *aras*, the other with an epithet for *taurorum*".<sup>1</sup> The latter approach is represented by *nitentum* (ed. Ascens. 1500), *bidentum* (Scaliger), and *nigentum* (Ellis); the former, by *rubentis*, tentatively conjectured by Housman.<sup>2</sup> There is also a third line of correction not mentioned by Lyne, namely to introduce an epithet for *sanguine*, which is represented by *tepentis* (ed. Ald. 1517).<sup>3</sup> It will hardly be an exaggeration to say that all these conjectures, including

9) Varro's attitude here is in keeping with his realistic stance throughout his oeuvre; see now K. Volk, *Varro and the Disorder of Things*, HSPh 110 (forthcoming).

1) R. O. A. M. Lyne, *Ciris: A Poem Attributed to Vergil*, Cambridge 1978, 316.

2) A. E. Housman, *Remarks on the Ciris*, CR 17, 1903, 303–311, at 303 n. 1.

3) See e. g. the *apparatus* in D. Knecht, *Ciris: Authenticité, histoire du texte, édition et commentaire critiques*, Brugge 1970, 38.