

The Classical Tradition in West-European Farming: the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries

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NO vernacular textbook of farming was written in Western Europe during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Anyone who wanted to study the best farming methods, or at least those recommended by written authority, was forced back upon the *Scriptores Rei Rusticae* if they were to hand, or upon the treatises written by Crescentius and the English writers of the thirteenth century. Only one translation of a Roman writer into a vernacular language appears to have been made during this period, that of Palladius into fifteenth-century English verse, made for Duke Humphrey of Gloucester.

It is true that the art of printing was discovered in the fifteenth century, and was brought to England by Caxton, but there was no writer on agriculture who took advantage of this new process to inscribe an original farming treatise and get it into circulation. What did happen was that the Roman writers were printed in the language in which they were written. But before discussing the printed editions of these books it will be well to consider how widely they were dispersed in manuscript, and who owned the copies. A complete list is now probably impossible to compile, but the location of some copies is known. Whether they were consulted for practical purposes remains open to question, and, indeed, is very doubtful.

Palladius' *De Re Rustica* seems to have been the most widely distributed of the Latin texts in manuscript form, though any kind of assertion about this must be accepted with very great reserve. J. C. Schmit, who edited a Teubner print in 1898,¹ believed the work was frequently both transcribed and read, and the number of manuscripts in being almost infinite. This is undoubtedly an exaggeration. Although he supplied a list of a large number of recorded manuscripts, it could not by any stretch of imagination be called infinite. Only two years before this edition was published Mark Liddell edited a version of *The Middle English Translation* . . . which was printed in Berlin in 1896, but there was no intention here of examining the practical value of Palladius.

¹ J. C. Schmit, *Paladii Rutuli Tauri Aemiliani Viri Illustris Opus Agriculturae*, Leipzig, 1898, Preface.

Liddell's edition was produced for the purpose of linguistic study, and he casts some scorn on the earlier edition, oddly written in verse, which was made for Duke Humphrey about 1420 (?). A copy of the manuscript of this translation into Middle English was in Colchester Castle Museum in the 1870's, and a version was printed by the Early English Text Society in 1873.

Duke Humphrey of Gloucester was one of the growing number of princely *literati* of the fifteenth century, a patron of Caxton, and a great book collector though somewhat ruthless in his methods. He seized the library at the Louvre to form the foundation of his collection, which he later presented to the University of Oxford. Was this the library, or part of it, originally accumulated by Charles V of France? Some of his books he kept in the tower at the Louvre; others were stored at Melun, Vincennes, St Germain en Laye, and Beauté sur Marne. Amongst them was more than one copy of Vegetius in translation, but the catalogues of his library do not mention either the Latin text of Crescentius, or a translation of his book. The Duke of Berry, however, procured a copy of the original text and a translation. There seems to be no trace of any of the Roman writers in this royal library. Duke Humphrey sent lists of *desiderata* to agents in Italy, which included Pliny the Elder and Varro, so it seems possible that he ordered the translation of Palladius for use as a textbook for the improvement of the farming on his estates.¹

This, however, was after printing had been invented, though of course people continued to collect manuscripts of classical writings as they have done ever since. Indeed, the arrival of new works in Venice, for example, was an event for rejoicing among the *virtuosi* of the early Renaissance, and had been for some long time.

The monastic libraries have been credited with the preservation of the works of the classic agricultural writers. Usually this statement is made in a broad general way, and appears to be little more than an inspired guess—if it is inspired! How frequently the monks consulted them cannot now be determined. Some have been credited with following their precepts on their estates, which are also credited with being generally better cultivated than those of lay lords or peasants. If that is so, these improved systems were not widely, or perhaps even narrowly, imitated. The continual copying of Virgil's *Georgics*, which really contain a scrappy rather than a systematic account of farming, continued as in previous ages, and many of these copies were beautifully illustrated, possibly more as literature than as a textbook. The treatise of Jean de Brie, *Le Bon Berger*, was in the same category as Duke Humphrey's translation of Palladius. It was a practical textbook ordered by Charles V of

¹ J. R. Green, *Short History of the English People*, 1907 edn, London, p. 298; James Westfall Thompson, *The Medieval Library*, Univ. of Chicago Studies in Library Science, 1939, pp. 404-5; Leopold Delisle, *Recherches sur la librairie de Charles V*, Paris, 1907, I, pp. 3, 4, 8, 33, 116.

France in 1379, and passed through many editions after it was printed about 1540.¹

Some doubt was cast upon monastic interest over a century ago, and this I should like to underline. It was recognized that many ancient manuscripts were defaced in order to provide parchment on which to copy "the psalms of a breviary, or the prayers of a missal," and that to some minds of the time reading the classics was an idle occupation.² But a widening of intellectual interest took place not only in the monastic but also in the growing university world, and this must have led, as is well known, to the collection of, and commentaries on, texts quite outside the realm of theology. It is perhaps significant that the Carmelites at Florence had none of the rustic authors in their library at the end of the fourteenth century. They did have an Isidore, and other later, almost contemporary, works. Isidore, indeed, figured in a good many medieval libraries, but was of trifling aid to anyone wishing to study farming technique.³

Other ecclesiastical organizations and eminent churchmen had one or other of the agrarian works. The Archbishop of Riga (1304-41) owned a Cato. There was a variety of classical manuscripts at Pisa about 1355, amongst which was one of Palladius. St Croce, Florence, had Servius on Virgil, Vegetius, and Lucretius. A Servius was left by Boccaccio to St Spiritus, Florence, amongst other manuscripts, but this is very scrappy. Humphreys asserts that no college (library) had the range of the friars' libraries, and none had many agricultural books.⁴

In England during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the monasteries were becoming more and more lax and indolent. The cathedral schools with their libraries were more active as were those of the Franciscans and Dominicans. This is not to say that the books disappeared, but they were no longer assiduously copied, or perhaps looked after. Yet Abbot Whethamstede, St Albans, had Cato copied. Durham had a Palladius and a Virgil in the late fourteenth century or early fifteenth. St Paul's possessed the *Bucolics* in 1458, and an Isidore. Peterhouse owned a Virgil in 1399. There had been a Palladius at the Cistercian Abbey at Byland, Yorkshire, in the twelfth century, and another at the Benedictine Abbey of St Augustine, Canterbury. Other copies were at the Augustinian Abbey at Waltham and in the Benedictine Cathedral Priory at Worcester in the thirteenth century. Moreover, there were three copies of Walter of Henley's *Hosebondrie* in Canterbury Cathedral Library in the thir-

¹ Michel Augé-Laribé, *La Révolution Agricole*, Paris, 1955, p. 14.

² Isaac D'Israeli, *Curiosities of literature*, 14th edn, London, 1849, vol. I, pp. 18-19.

³ K. W. Humphreys, *The Library of the Carmelites of Florence at the End of the Fourteenth Century*, Studies in the History of Libraries and Librarianship, vol. II, Amsterdam, 1964.

⁴ Idem, *The Book Provisions of the Medieval Friars, 1215-1400*, Amsterdam, 1964, pp. 101-5, 112-14, 130.

teenth and fourteenth centuries, and rather surprisingly copies of Crescentius in Hereford Cathedral, York Cathedral Church of St Peter, and also at New College, Oxford, in the fifteenth century. Copies of Virgil, whether of the *Aeneid*, or of the *Georgics* or *Bucolics* is not disclosed, were scattered about the country.¹

The devastations of the Hundred Years War did not spare the libraries of France, but additions were also made. Jean de Montreuil, chancellor to Charles VI, brought home a Varro, *De Re Rustica*, when he returned from his travels in Italy as well as other Latin works, till then unknown in France. The monks in the great monasteries of St Gall, Corbie, and Fulda seem at this time to have been disastrously ignorant.² Scholars and collectors were, however, busy in the fourteenth century, especially in Italy. Petrarch owned a Pliny, Varro, Palladius, and Virgil's *Bucolics*. The question whether Boccaccio was the first man to possess Cato has been asked, Coluccio Salutato disputing precedence. Columella was known to Petrarch, but the first complete Varro, Martial, and other works were restored to unity by the energy of Boccaccio, or so it is said. Poggio Bracciolini (1380-1459) is credited with having discovered some twenty manuscripts of Columella which he took to Italy. Petrarch tried to get a Hesiod from Constantinople. One Guglielmo de Pastrengo (? of Verona, fourteenth century) knew the works of Vegetius, Palladius, Pliny, and Varro. There were other copies of Columella, Pliny, Varro, and Cato in the private library of the Medicis; but the details become tedious. Sabbadini's index lists six copies of Cato, seven of Columella, eight of Palladius, fourteen or so of Pliny, eight of Varro, and a good many of Virgil.³

All this seems to show that there were only a few copies of the *Scriptores Rei Rusticae* scattered over Western Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, a conclusion confirmed by the exhaustive researches of Manitius. In Spain there was none except a couple of printed copies of Virgil's *Bucolics* and one of the *Georgics* in the last years of the fifteenth century.⁴ Of manuscripts there seems to be no list.

Though the Greek work compiled by Cassianus Bassus for Constantine Porphyrogenitus was translated into Arabic either direct from the Greek or

¹ Thompson, *op. cit.*, pp. 378, 381, 387; but see also Strickland Gibson, *Some Oxford Libraries*, O.U.P., 1914, whose index gives no reference to Cato, Columella, Varro, or, astonishingly, Virgil; Raymond Irwin, *The English Library*, London, 1966, p. 132; N. P. Ker, *Medieval Libraries of Great Britain. A List of Surviving Books*, 2nd edn, Roy. Hist. Soc., London, 1964, pp. 22, 35, 42, 98, 168, 193, 208, 216.

² Thompson, *op. cit.*, pp. 414, 425, 453.

³ Thompson, *op. cit.*, pp. 510-86; R. Sabbadini, *Le Scoperte dei Codici Latini e Greci ne' Secoli XIV e XV*, Florence, 1905, vol. I, pp. 16, 25, 34, 74, 82, 87, 151, 184; vol. II, pp. 14, 44, 50, 68, 74, and Index; Columella, Loeb edn, 1955, ed. Harrison Boyd Ash, vol. I, p. xvii.

⁴ Max Manitius, *Handschriften antiker Autoren in mittelalterlichen Bibliothekskatalogen*, Leipzig, 1935, *passim*; Conrado Haebler, *Bibliografía Ibérica del siglo XV. Enumeración de todos los Libros impresos en España y Portugal hasta el Año de 1500*, Leipzig, 1903.

through Syriac or Pehlevi, I have found no mention of any manuscript in Western Europe in the catalogues to hand. Kraus said that amongst the Jabirian treatises is one *Kitab al Filaha* (*Book of Agriculture*), in which the majority of agricultural methods mentioned in *Kitab al Hawass* are repeated, and which was composed of almost literal versions of passages from ancient sources. The book was translated into French, German, and Italian, and printed in the sixteenth century. It was printed in England in Greek and Latin in the early eighteenth century. To this may be added Bolgar's assertion that Greek texts were available, presumably in manuscript, in Italy before 1450, including Xenophon's *Oeconomica*, six copies of Theophrastus, and seven of Hesiod, but the evidence for this is of unequal value.¹

The duplication of books was simplified and made more rapid after the invention of printing. The second half of the fifteenth century saw the production of many classical works, amongst them the *Scriptores Rei Rusticae*. Indeed Augé-Laribé believes that books about farming were then impatiently awaited,² which is an opinion of substantial probability with no equally substantial basis of proof. Be that as it may, a collection, *Scriptorum Rei Rusticae Veterum Latinorum*, was printed at Venice in 1470, and five other editions before 1500. Two editions, of 1494 and 1496, entitled *Opera Agricolationum*, which included Columella, Cato, Varro, and Palladius, were issued from Bonn. An Aldine edition of Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants*, was printed from an imperfect manuscript at Venice, 1495-8.³

How can the effect of these works upon the actual practice of farming be measured? Were they perhaps read only as literature, as the wisdom of the ancients who were reputedly much wiser than contemporary men? Was practical farming only the result of traditional knowledge handed down verbally from father to son, or perhaps from grandfather to grandson while the father was actually working in the fields? These are questions to which there is no possible definite answer. Since the only medieval farming textbooks were those of Crescentius, Walter of Henley, Fleta, the anonymous *Seneschaucie*, and the work of Grosseteste, and these were already a century old, little or no comparison of theory is valid for the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

In the field it is obviously likely that the methods of the old Romans would still be practised in Italy, if not modified by the effluxion of time and the inattention of disheartened peasants. It was in this country, too, that the taste for collecting the ancients first flowered into enthusiasm greater than ever before, where Dante "incessantly" studied Virgil, Petrarch added fuel to the

¹ Paul Kraus, *Jabir ibn Hayyan: Contribution à l'Histoire des Idées scientifiques dans l'Islam*, vol. II, *Jabir et la Science Grecque*, *Memoires de l'Institut d'Egypte* 45, Cairo, 1942, pp. 79, 80, 84; R. R. Bolgar, *The Classical Tradition and its Beneficiaries*, New York, 1964, p. 276.

² Augé-Laribé, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

³ Schmit, *op. cit.*; British Museum Catalogue of Printed Books; Bibliographies in Loeb editions.

passion for collecting, and Boccaccio's writings and other activities helped the cause along. Great nobles, the Visconti and the Medici, became assiduous in adding priceless manuscripts to their libraries.¹ The purpose for which these works were studied was not precisely practical. Linguistics played a large part. The study of Greek, never wholly neglected, fascinated the men of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. From an extinct world they hoped to derive unprecedented wisdom in morals and philosophy rather than guidance in the management of production, trade, and mundane affairs, "to make life here below worthy of a creative God."²

This is not for one moment to suggest that Duke Humphrey, when commissioning a translation of Palladius into the vernacular, did not have a practical purpose in view, but he was far away on the outskirts of civilization and late in the period. Virgil was generally more or less worshipped, and his works were read and admired all over the west, but Virgil is not a real guide to the practice of farming.³

Tangible evidence for the use of the few manuscripts of the classical textbooks in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England is scanty, if not completely non-existent. Notable historians have asserted that they were consulted by great landowners, both ecclesiastical and lay. No doubt there were copies to be consulted, and the duplication of the thirteenth-century books of Crescensius, Walter of Henley, etc., provided the opportunity for reading them.⁴ But the changes in farming that took place were on the whole the consequences of disastrous social conditions, rather than of studying or reading the small quantity of literature stored in scattered libraries spread through the west. The changes were indeed rather in social organization than in technology.

New libraries were established and older ones expanded in England as learning increased. Examples are St Albans, built in 1452-3, the library of the Black Monks at Oxford, and also of the White Friars. The Austin Friars built a library in London before 1364. The Grey Friars' library was founded by that famous man, Dick Whittington. An inventory of the library of the Austin Friars at York was made in 1372. The early fifteenth century has been called the age of library building at monasteries and universities. Some owned no less than two or three thousand volumes, but in his list of classic authors, admittedly selective, Ernest A. Savage does not mention any one of the rustic

¹ J. C. L. Sismondé di Sismondi, *Historical View of the Literature of the South of Europe*, 2nd edn, 1846, tr. Roscoe, vol. I, pp. 246, 276-7, 304, 311; Denys Hay, *Italian Renaissance in its historical Background*, C.U.P., 1966, p. 119; Maud F. Jerrold, *Francesco Petrarca, Poet and Humanist*, London, 1909, pp. 49, 208, 210-11, 232-3.

² Sismondi, *op. cit.*, p. 313; Hay, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

³ L. P. Wilkinson, 'The intention of Virgil's *Georgics*', *Greece and Rome*, vol. XVIII, 55, Jan. 1950, pp. 19-21.

⁴ See for example Eileen Power, 'Peasant life and rural conditions c. 1100-1500', *Camb. Med. Hist.*, vol. VII, 1932, pp. 729-31; Bolgar, *op. cit.*, pp. 262-3.

authors,¹ perhaps because he was mainly occupied with the contemporary interest in theology and philosophy.

Whether the books were studied or not, there was little change in the actual processes of farming during these two hundred years. The fall in population reduced the possibility, and necessity, of maintaining the expanded arable acreage that had been cultivated in the thirteenth century. Deserted villages became a commonplace of the countryside. Farms, for which no tenant could be found, lay vacant on many manors. There had always been large-scale live-stock undertakings in the more isolated hill country, and landlords, desperate for a return from their estates, began, first, to use vacant land for sheep to increase the remunerative production of wool, next to depopulate and enclose land, which had formerly been arable, for this purpose. This story is so well known that it requires no repetition here. Certain agricultural advantages were consequent on this action, though the men who were cast out and deprived of their traditional way of life were reduced to the level of paupers, or at best wage labourers. Still they were able to offer their strength and skill in a seller's market, and some of them benefited accordingly. It is said, too, that more forage crops were grown, such as beans, peas, lentils, and oats, but little of this owes anything to the classical tradition.²

Climatic and epidemic disasters were as bad, if not worse, in France as in England. The French countryside, too, was devastated in the long years of the Hundred Years War, intermittent though the campaigns were. Germany suffered as much as the rest of Western Europe from weather, pestilence, and war. Eastward expansion ceased, and there was a shrinkage of the area under cereals. The Black Death decimated the population, and noble warriors destroyed many towns. There was no stimulus to seek for improved methods. Consequently, there is no indication that people turned to the *Scriptores Rei Rusticae* for guidance, even supposing the books to have been conveniently to hand, and the farmers able to read them. The peasants could not be expected to make any improvements in their methods at a time when their numbers had fallen so sharply, and did not rise again until the very end of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. A greater handicap was the bad seasons, to which were added continual war and banditry. The peasants could have learned improved systems only from the great landowners who were able to study the available textbooks, but these people either let their estates piecemeal or turned to live-stock, the majority of the animals being sheep for wool, meat, and milk.

The only changes that seem to have been made were on land favoured by

¹ Ernest A. Savage, *Old English Libraries. The Making, Collection and Use of Books in the Middle Ages*, Antiquaries Books, London, 1911, pp. 51-6, 63, 258, App. B.

² Even the general histories of England for the period confirm these conclusions, but they are far too numerous and consistent to be set out in a footnote. But see Maurice Beresford, *The Lost Villages of England*, London, 1964, *passim*.

exceptional conditions, for example in Lombardy near the rich towns, and in parts of Spain developed by the Moors by means of irrigation canals. Here the olive, the mulberry, and the vine flourished.¹ In Flanders, too, near the towns and on land reclaimed from the sea, farming was not fettered by regulations, though some of this land suffered from disastrous floods. Agriculture was comparatively highly developed, and interest shifted from grain alone to increased attention to fodder crops. Here it is possible that cattle breeding may have increased at the expense of arable farming.² This is a subject I hope to expand elsewhere.

Towards the end of the fifteenth century recovery began, and printed versions of the *Scriptores Rei Rusticae* circulated. In Augsburg Crescentius was first printed in 1471, of whom Fraas rather condescendingly said that he only repeated the maxims of the Roman writers, a statement which is imprecise, but relatively true. Crescentius also used Arabic sources as well as his own observations of the contemporary scene—one of the reasons why his instructions are not invariably applicable to farming in Northern Europe.³ Doubtless these books were examined because the ancient wisdom was more and more highly regarded, and was easier to get at. An estimate of the number of volumes in existence, based on what authority I do not know, is that before 1440 less than 100,000 manuscripts were in existence while by 1500 there were more than nine million books in print.⁴ These figures must include all sorts of works, and what proportion were agricultural texts it is impossible to guess. It is safe to say that more were circulating than ever before, but beyond that it is impossible to go. It is only with the appearance of vernacular textbooks in the sixteenth century that the influence of the classical writers can be surely traced; and even then it is possible to measure its impact on literature only and not on actual farming practice.

¹ P. Boissonade, *Life and Work in Medieval Europe*, tr. Eileen Power, London, 1927, p. 316; H. C. Darby, 'The face of Europe on the Eve of the great Discoveries', *New Camb. Mod. Hist.*, vol. I, 1493-1520, 1957, pp. 25-7; Angel Flores, ed., *Medieval Age; Specimens of European Poetry from the ninth to the fifteenth centuries*, London, 1965; Edouard Perroy, *Le Moyen Age. L'Expansion de l'Orient et la Naissance de la Civilisation Occidentale*, Paris, *Histoire Générale des Civilisations*, vol. III, 1955, pp. 403-8.

² Charles Seignobos, *The Rise of European Civilisation*, tr. C. A. Phillips, London, 1939, p. 208; B. H. Slicher van Bath, 'Economic and Social conditions in the Frisian Districts from 900 to 1500', *A. A. G. Bijdragen*, no. 13, 1965, pp. 125, 129-30.

³ Wilhelm Abel, *Geschichte der deutschen Landwirtschaft*, Stuttgart, 1962, pp. 109-13, 115-18; C. Fraas, *Geschichte der Landbau und Forstwirtschaft*, München, 1865, pp. 31-2.

⁴ Grant C. Cannon, *Great Men of Modern Agriculture*, New York, 1963, p. 17.