

Recent scholarship (e.g. Habinek 1997, 88-102; Ando, *Clio and the Poets*, 2003, 123-42) has explored how Cicero, Vergil, and Horace have addressed the “Italian question,” positing different and sometimes competing versions of Rome, Italy and the relationship between the two. In this paper, I seek to integrate Varro into this discussion by exploring his version of Italy as presented in the *de Re Rustica*. Varro’s text is generally understood as a technical treatise with a thin veneer of literary pretensions (e.g. White, *ANRW*, 1973, 492). Although the work offers a plethora of information for the historian of Roman agriculture, this estimation overlooks the programmatic setting of the dialogue and implicitly denies the work’s bearing on contemporary political and ideological questions. By approaching the literary and technical aspects of this work, I argue that one goal of the *de Re Rustica* is to put forth an Italy united through agriculture. In doing so, it seeks to mollify the historically uneasy relationship between Romans and Italians.

The first half of my paper is devoted to an explication of the literary setting of the dialogue. Dedicating the work to his wife, “Fundania,” on the occasion of her recent purchase of a farm (*fundus*), Varro claims to relate to her a conversation on agriculture which he once had. The dialogue opens with Varro arriving at the temple of the earth goddess, Tellus, on the festival of the Sementivae, a traditional agricultural festival following the planting season. There, he comes upon three men, whose names all derive from “field” (*ager*) or “farm” (*fundus*): C. Fundanius, C. Agrius, and P. Agrasius. Moreover, all three are staring at a map of Italy, which, after introductory formalities are exchanged, prompts a *laus Italiae* (2.3ff.). This speech is particularly noteworthy, for in its praise of various regions (*agri*) and their particular agricultural products, it concurrently constructs an overarching Italian *terra*, which is distinct from and superior to the rest of the world. In other words, agriculture functions as a linking device that unites potentially disparate regions and subsumes them to Italy.

In the second half, I turn to the treatise’s technical material, focusing primarily on the *de Re Rustica*’s deployment of the spatial terms *ager* and *terra* in their qualitative and quantitative usages. Qualitatively, *ager* serves as the location for agricultural planting and is what the farmer must work with or against in the production of crops. *Terra*, on the other hand, is what brings forth the produce and is characterized by its fixed nature. This is not to say that *terra* and *ager* are terms that have no semantic overlap or are mutually exclusive. Indeed, *ager* contains *terra*. Instead, *ager* and *terra* represent land in its physical and generative aspects, respectively. On a quantitative level, *ager* can apply to a particular field or region (e.g. *ager Sabinus*), whereas *terra*, as Varro notes in 9.1, signifies a larger unit such as the world (*orbis*) or Italy. In other words, *terra* can be applied to a trans-regional scale and, therefore, approaches the sense of “state” or “nation.” Recalling the programmatic *laus Italiae*, I contend that Varro’s discussion of agriculture seeks to elide the quantitative and qualitative aspects of *terra* to constitute a larger Italian *terra*. In this way, then, the technical and literary aspects of the *de Re Rustica I* conspire to construct an agriculturally and, by extension, ideologically unified Italy.