Language, nature, and the politics of Varro’s De lingua Latina

Abstract
This dissertation is a historical analysis of Varro’s De Lingua Latina, a linguistic treatise composed in the 40s BCE during Rome’s transition from oligarchic Republican government to the monarchic settlement of the Augustan Principate. I advance a reading which restores contemporary political and intellectual context to the treatise, complementing and revising previous scholarship which has traditionally focused on the Greek philosophical pedigree of Varro’s work. As such, I explore Varro’s thematic emphasis on natura (‘Nature’) in his linguistic programme, which, as a term with wide-ranging intertextual functions, embodies its complex philosophical, political, and literary character. This five-chapter dissertation is subdivided between the surviving books on etymology (Chapters 1-3) and inflection (Chapters 4-5). In Chapter 1 (“Organisation and Meaning in Varro’s Etymologies”), I explore Varro’s etymologies in De Lingua Latina, Books 5-7, and explain how his programmatic emphasis on natural philosophy conveys his unique etymological authority. In Chapter 2 (“Grammatical Discourse in De Lingua Latina”), I consider Varro’s reception of grammatical techniques of etymological exegesis, elucidating his preference for philosophical readings of poetry and the social value of literary sophistication in the late Republic. Chapter 3 (“Ethnography and Identity in Varro’s Etymologies”) develops Varro’s etymological project as a kind of ethnography of the Roman people, which contextualises Varro’s philosophical intervention in the changing circumstances of his era. Chapters 4-5 are devoted to an analysis of Books 8-10, in which Varro describes his theory of morphological inflection (declinatio naturalis) as a platform for Latin linguistic standardisation. In Chapter 4 (“Declinatio and Linguistic Standardisation in the late Republic”), I survey the politics of linguistic standardisation in the late Republic. Mediating in a debate between Cicero and Caesar, I describe Varro’s nuanced revision of existing models of analogical inflection, and characterise his use of natura to explain linguistic standards. In Chapter 5 (“Linguistic Analogy and Natural Ratio in De Lingua Latina, Books 8-10”), I relate Varro’s linguistic innovations to contemporary shifts in cultural authority, and demonstrate how his transference of linguistic standardisation to philosophy entails a radical reorganisation of the existing political status quo.
This dissertation is a historical analysis of Varro’s De Lingua Latina, a linguistic treatise composed in the 40s BCE during Rome’s transition from oligarchic Republican government to the monarchic settlement of the Augustan Principate. I advance a reading which restores contemporary political and intellectual context to the treatise, complementing and revising previous scholarship which has traditionally focused on the Greek philosophical pedigree of Varro’s work. As such, I explore Varro’s thematic emphasis on natura (‘Nature’) in his linguistic programme, which, as a term with wide-ranging I find that book 6 has an interesting bit on the bruma and the solstice; quoted in this post of mine. I’d like to see a professional translation. UPDATE: There are two volumes in Loeb, and they’re on Archive.org: Vol. 1 and Vol. 2. Roger, thought you’d like to know, Hippolytus is the first to reference December 25th as the birthday of Christ. I blogged about it here. http://www.chronicon.net/blog/hippolytus/hippolytus-and-december-25th-the-birthday-of-christ/. Roger Pearse says: December 9, 2009 at 8:06 am.