

Most of the ritual instructions in Cato's *De agricultura*, such as his directions for the *suovetaurilia* and the prayer to Mars, come in the second half of the work. Here the longer, more connected passages give way to a miscellany of short notes, including recipes, model contracts, brief comments on farm tasks and other seemingly disparate instructions. In discussions of rural religion, Cato's ritual material is usually extracted from this context. However, the sample contracts, and to a lesser degree the recipes, provide useful parallels. By reading the rituals against these other types of directions, they can be seen not as fixed texts to be used verbatim but as guides which invite (and often require) modification by Cato's readers.

The rituals which Cato describes have usually been discussed as canonical, immutable texts. Features such as the formulaic language of the prayers suggest that they were highly traditional (Watkins 1995). Yet the language of Cato's contracts, while also formulaic, clearly invites the reader to change and adapt the text to their own needs. Details of the sample contracts are filled in with generic names and figures; Cato's audience could fill in these "blanks" to suit their own circumstances. Elsewhere a choice of clauses is offered where in a final contract one would have to be chosen. As a whole, the contracts seem to focus on the details, not on the main agreement, leaving the possibility that Cato has not given whole contracts at all, but a selection of clauses covering the trickier points (Brehaut 1933). Readers who used these texts as models would have to select, change, and perhaps supplement them. While Cato frames his relationship with the reader through commands, in practice, his audience would have to take a creative and flexible approach to his book. I argue that the rituals were also sample texts, and that readers were expected to adapt them to their needs in the same way as the contracts. Like the contracts, the rituals appear to be sample texts which provide a framework within which variation is anticipated: they use generic names as examples, focus on details at the expense of completeness, offer options and suggest ways of dealing with different contingencies.

Cato stands near the beginning of the canonization of Roman ritual texts. Rüpke sees a new interest in the second century in establishing "correct" religious forms, in response to new ritual experts and sources of knowledge that threatened the aristocracy's dominance in religious matters (Rüpke 2004). Although Cato expects that his texts will be modified, he still tries to establish models for both ritual and legal procedures. The question may not be how much variation was allowable, but to whom it was allowed; Cato expects his aristocratic readers to choose what they want from his text, but his subordinates on his own properties to follow his guidelines.