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**Religious Life on the *Villa Rustica*: Cultivating and Controlling the Rural *Familia***

This paper will examine the evidence of Cato and Columella for what they may reveal about the religious practices of the rural *familia* and the complex relationship that existed therein between ritual and juridical status. My analysis will delineate the hierarchies of power that were based on gender and juridical status, and negotiated within the sphere of domestic religion. Although Roman society considered the religious practices of the family (*sacra familiae*) of immense importance (Cic. *Leg.* 2.47), they have largely gone untreated in standard works on the Roman family and religion. When they have been studied, the urban, upper-class household (*domus*) rather than the slave *familia* of the rural estate (*villa rustica*) has been the focus. The agricultural manuals, however, of Cato and Columella, prescriptive works directed primarily at absentee estate-owners (*paterfamilias*), offer substantial insights into rural religious practices and how the slave *familia* should function as a religious community.

From Cato's *De Agricultura*, the fullest extant treatment of rural domestic rites, it is clear that the maintenance of religious life on the *villa rustica* was of considerable import to estate-owners. Cato's recommendations (*De Ag.* 5.3-4, 83, 141.1) that the *paterfamilias* delegate responsibility to the *vilicus* (slave overseer) for the day-to-day management of religious affairs is highly significant given the *vilicus*' servile status and freeborn concerns regarding slaves' involvement in ritual (Brehaut 1933, xxi, xliv-xlv). The *paterfamilias* invests the *vilicus* and, to a lesser extent, his wife, with a surprising degree of power as they become his agents for communication with the gods (*De Ag.* 5.3-4, 83, 141.1, 143). Allowing subordinates to perform religious acts in his stead was a sizable but necessary concession by the *paterfamilias*. Yet in Cato's estimation, because of the perceived vulnerability of slaves to *superstitio* (illicit or excessive forms of worship), it was also potentially problematic. Thus while the *vilicus* and *vilicam* may have derived status and power from their religious roles, as slaves they were subject to the constraints of social and gender hierarchies as other members of the *familia* were. Indeed their strict adherence to sanctioned practices was crucial *because* they held positions of authority within the *familia*.

Improper or excessive rites, whether cultivated internally or introduced from outside, could compromise the *paterfamilias*' ability to maintain control of the *familia* as a socially and religiously integrated unit. Columella expressed similar anxieties to Cato about servile status and ritual, but articulated more directly his rationale for limiting the *vilicus*' religious roles (*Rust.* 1.8.6, 11.1.22). The *vilicus* could not succumb to *superstitio* because he was instrumental in keeping disruptive religious influences beyond the villa's boundaries; his failure could jeopardize the entire religious community.

The agronomists' discussions raise questions about religion as a means of empowerment but also a mechanism for social control. By examining Cato's and Columella's works with greater sensitivity to questions of status and gender than in previous studies, concerns about the power structure in the *familia* emerge, and issues regarding the performance of

domestic religious ritual appear no less relevant on remote, rural estates than in urban households in Rome and beyond.

Select Bibliography: E. Brehaut, *Cato the Censor On Farming* (New York, 1933); J. Kolendo, 'La religion des esclaves dans le *De Agricultura* de Caton,' in J. Annequin and M. Garrido-Hory (eds.) *Religion et anthropologie de l'esclavage et des formes de dependence*, 267-74 (Paris, 1994); R. Martin, 'Agriculture et religion: le tÈmoignage des Agronomes latins,' in D. Porte and J.-P. NÈraudau (eds.) *Hommages Henri le Bonniec*, 294-305 (Brussels, 1988); D. G. Orr, 'Roman Domestic Religion: The Evidence of the Household Shrines,' *ANRW* (1978) 2.16.2: 1557-91.