

WILD AND CULTIVATED PLANTS: A NOTE ON THE PEASANT ECONOMY OF ROMAN ITALY

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I

It has long been surmised that the Italian peasant in the Roman period could not have subsisted entirely upon his *heredium*, even when it was considerably more than two *iugera*. Juvenal was speaking for many of those before him, as well as for his own contemporaries, when he said of the traditional allocation:

‘ Nunc modus hic agri nostro non sufficit horto ’.
(*Satires* XIV, 172)

Yet amid much speculation upon this point one aspect of the countryman's livelihood seems to have attracted little attention. In addition to any other resources he had the use of the wild plants of the extensive forests, the mountains, pastures and fallow fields. In general, food obtained from wild plants did not in Roman times, any more than it does in Italy today, take the place of grain, the staple article of diet. This may account for Pliny's statement in the *Natural History* XXI, 50 (86) where, after mentioning the large number of ‘ *herbae sponte nascentes* ’ used for food by other peoples, he writes: ‘ In Italia paucissimas novimus, fraga, tamnum (wild vine), ruscum (butcher's broom), batim marinam (sapphire), batim hortensiam, quam aliqui asparagum Gallicum vocant. . . . ’ Such a remark seems astonishing in view of the numerous other examples Pliny himself has previously given,¹ but its interpretation depends on the meaning to be assigned to the word *cibus*, as well as on the limiting effect of the phrase ‘ *herbae sponte nascentes* ’, which may not include all the plants we call ‘ wild ’. It is clear from the conclusion of the paragraph cited above, where ‘ *oblectamenta* ’ are compared with ‘ *cibos* ’, that *cibi* is being used here to mean ‘ staple foods ’.²

Wild plants supplied the deficiencies of a farinaceous diet, and added a relish to the plain fare. This is made clear in relation to primitive peoples, both ancient and modern, by G. W. Dimbleby,³ who remarks that the wild flora contains many more plants which can be used for flavouring than are cultivated in herb gardens. However, before we can discuss the use of wild plants for food in Roman times, we must consider whether the Romans distinguished between wild and cultivated plants in the same way as we do.

The word ‘ wild ’ in reference to plants is usually *silvestris*, while cultivated is *sativus*. *Silvestris* appears in its primary meaning to refer not to the way in which the plant is treated, as does *sativus*, but to the place in which it grows. It is not easy to find a parallel for this expression in Greek. The Greek word for ‘ wild ’, whether describing plants or animals, is ἄγριος and its opposite is ἡμερος. Derivatives from ὄλη seem not to bear the connotation of ‘ wild ’, but rather to retain their connection with ‘ wood ’ in some form. ὄλκοος may be an exception to this, but it was not in common use in prose in any of its meanings. It is unlikely that all the plants described as *silvestris* ever grew in woodlands. Rather we may assume that in the formative period of the Latin language the uninhabited areas were mostly forested—therefore a plant which grew outside the cultivated lands was *silvestris*.⁴ It is true that there are certain special uses of the noun *silva*, as for example where it describes a quantity or ‘ forest ’ of weapons or other items, but this is clearly derived from its literal meaning of ‘ woodland ’. It can also denote a wild area on an estate, a contrived ‘ wilderness ’, as in Columella, *De Re Rustica* XI, 2, 83: ‘ Tum etiam silvam

¹ Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* xix passim.

² cf. Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* xvi, 1 (1): ‘ Pomiferae arbores quaeque mitioribus succis voluptatem primae cibis attulerunt et necessario alimento delicias miscere docuerunt. ’ (References to Pliny are to the Teubner edition.)

³ *Plants and Archaeology* (1967), 31. The point is also made by D. and P. Brothwell, *Food in Antiquity* (1969), 115 ff., where some Roman examples are given. This survey relies heavily upon Apicius, who,

being an exponent of the *haute cuisine* of the Empire, is difficult to handle as evidence for earlier periods or different social classes.

⁴ This attitude to the forest is also observable in the history of the Italian *selva*, as for example in Dante, *Inferno* I, 2 and throughout the poem, where it is a place of wandering and confusion. Owing to deforestation the modern Italian countryman is more likely to regard *la montagna* as the wilderness.

si quis barbaricam, id est consemineam velit facere, recte conseret glandibus et ceteris seminibus'. Again the connection with 'forest' is clear. Varro gives a precise definition of *silvestris*: 'Itaque ita esse docent silvestria, ad quae sator non accessit.'⁵ The use of 'accessit' here is interesting—the cultivator has not reached them. What will he do when he finds them: collect the seeds, foster the plants where they are, or transplant them to his own plot?

Some plants which we should call 'wild', because they are 'herbae sponte nascentes', are not described by the adjective *silvestris*. Pliny says of the poppy:⁶ 'Inter sativa et silvestria medium genus, quoniam in arvis sed sponte nasceretur, rhoeam vocavimus et erraticum'. Wild plants growing on arable land, whether or not *sponte*, are often called *agrestis*, which corresponds to ἀρουραῖος in Theophrastus.⁷ Not only the poppy comes into this 'medium genus', as we see from Cato (*De Agri Cultura* 149, 2). He is laying down the terms of lease for winter pasturage. These include:

'Bubus domitis binis, cantherio uni cum emptor pascet, domino pascere recipitur; holeris, asparagis, lignis, aqua, itinere, actu domini usioni recipitur.'

The whole paragraph concerns pasture-land (*pratium*), so the *holus* and *asparagi* cannot be garden produce. Their proximity in the sentence to 'lignis, aqua, itinere, actu' also suggests a natural resource rather than a cultivated product. The passage in fact implies that it was usual to collect wild or semi-wild greens for food, and the owner was permitted to do this even if he had let the grazing to someone else. Or, as the cook in Plautus' *Pseudolus* expresses it: 'Quas herbas pecudes non edunt, homines edunt.'⁸ Seneca, *De Providentia* III, 6, seems to be picturing Fabricius as engaged in this task of gathering wild food-plants on arable land:

'Infelix est Fabricius, quod rus suum, quantum a re publica vacavit, fodit? quod bellum tam cum Pyrrho quam cum divitiis gerit? quod ad focum cenat illas ipsas radices et herbas quas in repurgando agro triumphalis senex vulsit?'

This could describe a process of gleaning rather than picking wild plants, but if so the field contained a very mixed crop—'radices et herbas'.

Columella is interesting on the subject of wild or semi-wild plants. In XII, 7, 1, writing of methods of pickling herbs, he includes alexanders (*olusatrum*), capers, 'pastinacae agrestis vel sativae cum coliculo silentem florem' (parsnip), asparagus, butcher's broom, bryony, in fact a long list of plants, any or all of which might have been 'wild' in our sense of the word, while others would grow on pasture-land, privately or publicly owned. Of the caper Columella says: 'cultu aut nullo aut levissimo contenta est, quippe quae res etiam in desertis agris citra rustici operam convalescat.'⁹ He also tells us how to prevent it spreading if it is planted in the kitchen garden. The buds from wild caper plants are still collected and pickled or used in sauces at the present day. In XII, 8, 3, Columella writes of peppercorn: 'Sunt qui sativi vel etiam silvestris lepidii herbam cum collegerunt in umbra siccent, deinde folia eius, abiecto caule, die et nocte muria macerata expressaque lacti misceant sine condimentis. . . .' In the next sentence the *satureia* (savory) is described as *comperta*—found, discovered, therefore presumably growing wild. Wild plums and cornel berries are among the many other items preserved.

We have already cited passages from Cato and Columella which mention asparagus. With them should be included the remark of Cato: 'Ibi corrudam serito unde asparagi fiant.'¹⁰ *Corruda* is the name given to the wild form of asparagus,¹¹ from which Cato here

⁵ Varro, *Res Rusticae* i, 45.

⁶ Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* xx, 19 (77).

⁷ *Agrestis* is also used to mean 'wild', though not by Cato and only in one paragraph by Varro. This is iii, 7, in reference to pigeons, and even here the connection with *agri* is strong. It may also have this sense in ii, 1, 4, where it is combined with *ferus*, perhaps to confirm the meaning. Theophrastus distinguishes another type of plant which he describes as ποώδη. This is usually translated as 'herbaceous', in the sense of the Italian *erbaceo* as defined by

E. Baroni, *Guida Botanica d'Italia*, ed. S. B. Zanetti, (1955) 695: 'Verde o della consistenza molle dell'erba, in opposizione a colorato o legnoso'.

⁸ Plautus, *Pseudolus*, 1, 825. The point is made even more clearly in 1, 811, when he speaks of other cooks 'qui mihi condita prata in patinis proferunt'.

⁹ *De Re Rustica* xi, 3, 54 (ed. Lundström, 1906).

¹⁰ *De Agri Cultura* 6, 3 (ed. A. Mazzarino, 1962).

¹¹ Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* xix, 4 (19): 'Silvestres fecerat natura corrudas ut passim quisque demeteret: ecce atiles spectantur asparagi . . .'

seems to be suggesting that the cultivated form may be produced. He may simply regard 'asparagus' as the name of the edible portion, and be saying no more than Martial (*Épig.* XIII, 21):

'Mollis in aequorea quae crevit spina Ravenna
non erit incultis gratior asparagis.'

Pliny seems to regard Cato's remark as explaining the origin of the cultivated plant: 'De origine eorum e silvestribus corrudis abunde dictum et quomodo eos iuberet Cato in harundinetis seri'.¹² However, Columella refers to the wild form as 'quam corrudam rustici vocant' (XI, 3, 43). Palladius gives some advice about the growing of wild asparagus: 'Mihi etiam illud utile videtur ac diligens, ut asparagi agrestis radices plurimas in unum locum congeramus cultum vel certe saxosum, quae statim fructum dent ex loco, qui aliud nihil alebat, et has annis omnibus incendamus in scopis, ut fructus frequentior surgat et fortior. hoc autem genus est sapore iucundius' (III, 24, 8). Palladius is not referring to a primitive custom, but making a practical suggestion for his contemporaries who wanted to enjoy wild asparagus as a delicacy. Yet the method he describes arises naturally from earlier practice and tradition.¹³

Virgil, writing in *Georgics* II, 47 ff. of the cultivation of trees, describes how the wild varieties ('sponte sua quae se tollunt in luminis oras') can be improved either by grafting or by removing them to prepared ground:

'tamen haec quoque, si quis
inserat aut scrobibus mandet mutata subactis,
exuerint silvestrem animum, cultuque frequenti
in quascumque voles artis haud tarda sequentur.'

In the next two lines he adds that the rootstock which has not as yet produced any fruit will do so when, removed from the woodland, it has room to grow:

'nec non et sterilis quae stirpibus exit ab imis,
hoc faciat, vacuos si sit digesta per agros.'

Columella describes explicitly a process of domestication, this time with reference to a herb. For he says that if the mint you have sown fails to grow 'licet de novalibus silvestre mentastrum conligere, atque ita inversis cacuminibus disponere; quae res feritatem detrahit, atque edomitam reddit'.¹⁴ 'Inversis cacuminibus' may be simply a magical touch,¹⁵ or it may be a way of disposing of the wild foliage and retarding further growth until the roots have benefited from their new environment. There may be a trace of this idea in Theophrastus, I, 6, 10, with reference to the arum.¹⁶ In this passage he states that some people turn arum plants upside down before the leaves have started to grow, and that this is done to make the roots stronger and to encourage their growth.

The clearest statements about cultivation of wild plants are to be found in Palladius. The first example we shall consider is in XI, 4: 'item betam locis siccioribus nec non armoraceam (wild radish) seremus vel transferemus ad culta, ut melior fiat: nam haec agrestis est rafanus'. Here it seems likely that 'transferemus ad culta' means 'we shall transplant (from the wild) to cultivated plots (or cultivation)'. It could simply refer to transplanting seedlings within the confines of a garden, as it often does. But the use of the word *transferre*, as we shall see, is characteristic of passages in which plants are being moved from wild places to cultivation, and the use of *agrestis* in the last part of the sentence supports this connection in the above passage. An example of this is found in Palladius XI, 3, 'si transferendis plantis nodum facias in radice, sessiles fient'. This picturesque

¹² *Nat. Hist.* xix, 8 (42).

¹³ For a similar practice in later times, see *Culpeper's Complete Herbal* (repr. 1970), 33: (Asparagus Sativus) 'It groweth usually in gardens, and some of it grows wild in Appleton meadows, in Gloucestershire, where the poor people do gather the buds of young shoots, and sell them cheaper than

our garden asparagus is sold in London'.

¹⁴ *De Re Rustica* xi, 3, 37.

¹⁵ cf. Columella, *De Arboribus* 25, 1: 'Amygdala si parum feracia erunt, perforata arbore lapidem adigito: ita librum arboris inolescere sinito'. Also Theophrastus, *Hist. Plant.* ii, 4, 3.

¹⁶ cf. Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* xix, 30 (94).

idea would be impossible to carry out with either cuttings or small seedlings, as the roots would not be long or sturdy enough to tie in a knot. That these words record a practice of great antiquity is also probable because they include what is really a reference to sympathetic magic. The farmer hopes that the plant will take hold upon the soil as firmly as the knot is tied.

In III, 25, 29, after an account of growing the *morus* (mulberry) from seed, Palladius says: 'plantam, si robustam, transferes mense octobri et novembri, si teneram, februario et martio. scrobes desiderat altiores, intervalla maiora, ne umbris prematur alterius.' This surely suggests transferring a plant which is already growing, either wild or in another garden or part of the same garden.¹⁷ There seems to be no indication in any of these passages that an old plant is being divided. *Planta*, though it usually means a cutting or a sucker, must here mean a well-grown plant, especially when it is described as 'robustam'. The same use of *planta* is found in X, 13, 'hoc mense ultimo thymum seremus, sed melius plantis nascitur, quamvis possit et semine.' Thyme does not lend itself to the taking of cuttings, as its stems are short and brittle. It spreads quickly and forms large cushions, so that a portion of a well-grown plant, wild or cultivated, can be broken off and transplanted. Such pieces would very easily be obtained from the *garigue* in many parts of Italy, as Pliny suggests that they were in Greece.¹⁸ Cultivated and wild thyme are mentioned by Columella, who says that they 'studiose conseruntur' only by bee-keepers. Thyme can be grown in gardens, he tells us, and it is better to use young plants than to sow it: 'Locum neque pinguem neque stercoratum, sed apricum desiderant, ut quae macerrimo solo per se maritimis regionibus nascantur.'¹⁹ When the plants have been set in the ground they should be watered with water in which a crushed stalk of thyme has been soaked: sympathetic magic again. It may well be that magic is chiefly found in these agricultural treatises in connection with the older and more basic operations, because it was in association with these in the distant past that magical practices arose.

Another example of *transferre* in the sense of moving a wild plant to cultivation is found in Pliny XIX, 5 (23). Here he is describing a method of growing cucumbers, which as he says is also given by Columella (XI, 3, 53). For our present purpose it is the planting of the bramble, not the cucumber, that is important:

'Fruticem rubi quam vastissimum in apricum locum transferre et recidere dum digitorum relicta stirpe circa vernum aequinoctium; ita in medulla rubi semine cucumeris insito terra minuta fimoque circumaggeratas resistere frigori radices.'

In Columella's more professional account, fennels and brambles are to be planted in alternate rows and used in this way. The word *transferre* is not used by Columella, though he probably does mean wild fennels and brambles. His account seems to be more suitable for the requirements of large-scale producers. Pliny gives the instructions in reference to a single plant, and in his account the method appears more appropriate for use on a small scale, in the way in which no doubt it began. For a garden in which the wild species mix happily with cultivated plants, however, we need look no further than Columella's poem in Book X, where *eruca* (colewort), sorrel, squill and wild asparagus are mingled with leeks, parsley, cucumbers and other cultivated varieties. Yet the wild plants are not there because of neglect, for this garden is described in line 424 as 'excultus'.

There seem to have been three types of wild plant, not always considered separately by Roman writers, but which can be differentiated: those which grow outside the bounds of cultivation or fallow land or pasture; those found on pasture-land; those growing in fallow fields. Plants in the last two categories may not all be growing *sponte*, that is, without human aid or intervention. It is worth recalling here the very varied and sturdy collection of plants to be found growing in pockets of unused arable land throughout the Mediterranean

¹⁷ For another example of *transferre*, where it may have the meaning 'move from the wild to cultivation', see Pliny xix, 54 (170) where in reference to mustard (*sinapi*) he says it grows 'nulla cultura, melius tamen planta tralata.' Cf. xix 29 (92): 'siser

transferre melius', where he has not mentioned sowing it, and has just been writing about elecampane (*inula*) being propagated 'oculis ex radice excisis'.

¹⁸ *Nat. Hist.* xix, 55 (172).

¹⁹ *De Re Rustica* xi, 3, 39 (ed. A. Josephson, 1955).

area in the spring. It is also useful to remember that in antiquity, as in the remoter areas even today, such plants did not have to contend with the powerful modern weed-killers. These diminutive meadows are described by Columella when he is suggesting suitable conditions for the keeping of bees. 'Mille praeterea semina vel crudo cespit virentia, vel subacta sulco, flores amicissimos apibus creant. . . .'²⁰ Again: 'Iam vero notae vilioris innumerabiles nascuntur herbae cultis atque pascuis regionibus, quae favorum ceras exuberant.' Columella is only concerned here with plants attractive to bees, but even so he lists a considerable number.²¹

Pliny in the last chapter of Book XX says he is about to leave 'garden-plants' (*hortensis*). But he has written of almost as many wild as cultivated varieties in that book. Often in respect of herbal remedies he considers the wild variety better than the cultivated. This may be true in some cases, but it may also reflect the fact that these recipes were originally devised for wild plants. In *The Geography of Domestication* Erich Isaac suggests that some plants used by the ancients may not have been domesticated at all, because obtaining the plant was part of the curative process. A cultivated plant would not have the same potency as a rare specimen growing in a wild and remote place.²² Even in the last years of the Roman Empire the collecting of wild plants by individuals for immediate use as remedies seems to have continued. Marcellus Empiricus, who lived in the reigns of Theodosius I and II, says that he has not only obtained remedies from authors such as Pliny and Celsus 'sed etiam ab agrestibus et plebeis remedia fortuita atque simplicia, quae experimentis probaverunt, didici' (*Praef.* 2).²³ The large variety of herbs mentioned is notable, even if only those locally available in Italy are counted. It is clear that the physician or even the patient is expected to be able to find them. For instance, in XXIII, 71, instructions are given for recognizing and picking the caper root.

Some of the above examples seem to suggest that there are in the work of Pliny and other Roman writers on agriculture and horticulture traces of very early food-gathering and gardening practices. They are not for the most part attributed by these writers to past generations, but offered to their contemporaries as possible alternative methods, or sometimes as the universal way of cultivating a particular plant. It seems therefore that they were either still in use at the time, or if derived from another literary source, they were in use when that was written. The period in which wild and cultivated plants were not fully differentiated in Europe, and when an intermediate category existed, has usually been regarded as earlier than the classical age of Rome. J. G. D. Clarke refers to it: '... under primitive conditions the distinction between 'wild' and 'domesticated' plants is often slight and a multitude of gradations in status may exist between wild, protected and fully domesticated species.'²⁴ In his *Histoire de l'alimentation végétale* Adam Maurizio includes a list²⁵ of 'plantes du ramassage' in which there are six hundred and twenty-one separate items, each accompanied by details concerning the sources of information. These consist of wild plants used for food in prehistoric times, those still used by primitive peoples, and those used in time of food shortage in Europe in the years 1914-18. The Roman period is not specifically treated in this work, though many of the plants tabulated are mentioned by Roman authors as being used in this way. One of the reasons why the Romans are omitted from such lists is given by Jacques André, *L'Alimentation et la cuisine à Rome* (p. 22) with reference to the plants he himself is enumerating. He thinks that the Romans must have used many more wild roots and bulbs for food than appear in his own lists, but they are not mentioned in the surviving literature because the authors belonged to the upper

²⁰ *De Re Rustica* ix, 4, 4.

²¹ cf. a much later example, this time from pasture-land, in *Travels in the Two Sicilies*, 1777-80, by Henry Swinburne, London, 1783-1785, Vol. i, 227: 'Our next stage was to Manfredonia, twenty miles through a flat pasture covered with asphodels, thistles, wild artichokes, and fennel-giant; of the last are made bee-hives and chair-bottoms; the leaves are given to asses by way of a strengthener, and the tender buds are boiled and eaten as a delicacy

by the peasants. . . . The artichokes are given to buffaloes.'

²² E. Isaac, *The Geography of Domestication* (1970), 114.

²³ *Marcelli de Medicamentis*, ed. G. Helmreich, 1889.

²⁴ *Prehistoric Europe: The Economic Basis* (1952), 115.

²⁵ *Histoire de l'alimentation végétale depuis la préhistoire jusqu'à nos jours*, trans. F. Guidon (1932), 608-28.

classes of society. They were therefore unfamiliar with the technique of obtaining food from the wild. This does not seem to apply to Galen, who discusses wild food-plants as freely as he does the cultivated varieties. In this way *De Alimentorum Facultatibus* and *De Probis Pravisque Alimentorum Succis* differ from any modern book on dietetics. In the former he writes for example of plants of the thistle type: 'Ἀνίσχοντα τῆς γῆς ἄρτι τὰ τοιαῦτα φυτά, πρὶν εἰς ἀκάνθας αὐτῶν τελευτῆσαι τὰ φύλλα, πολλοὶ τῶν ἀγροίκων ἐσθίουσιν οὐκ ὠμὰ μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ δι' ὕδατος ἔψοντες (L. p. 635). In *De Probis Pravisque Alimentorum Succis* he discusses pine kernels as food. Although Galen considers, as for example in *De Alimentorum Facultatibus* II, 38, p. 621 (Teubner), that most wild plants provide very little nourishment, he again and again finds it necessary to discuss them, and he distinguishes between those which are used διὰ λιμόν and those which are used χωρὶς λιμοῦ (II, 64).

II

For purposes of comparison we may consider the situation not long after the Roman period as described by Georges Duby.²⁶ He draws attention to the scattered settlement of seventh-century Europe, when only a small amount of land was under continuous cultivation. He considers that at this time the peasants derived only a part of their livelihood from agriculture, the rest being obtained by fishing, hunting and gathering wild fruits in the surrounding waste lands and forests. Duby sees this situation as the result of technological weaknesses which prevented agriculture from becoming sufficiently productive in the period with which he is dealing. It seems likely that this was a problem of long standing.

Within the Roman period it is not only probable that wild plants were extensively used for food in Italy but it is also possible that there was an intermediate stage in which a plant was protected and used though not actually transplanted from the wild. This is sometimes the case nowadays with bushes of rosemary, and the writer of the Virgilian poem *Culex* may be referring to the practice of caring for wild rosemary near the cottage when he says: 'et roris non avia cura marini.' The idea mentioned by Pliny of sowing what he calls *hipposelinum* (alexanders) in uncultivated land near a stone wall is probably another instance of the protection of a wild plant. Often however wild plants used for food would become established near dwellings in the areas where the refuse from meals was deposited. Erich Isaac (op. cit. p. 27) thinks that, in the primitive setting, if property rights were so strong that they were protected even in the absence of the owners, a similar idea of possession may have attached to certain plants which were considered to belong to individuals or small groups. Such a custom could have formed part of the process of development to which André refers (op. cit. p. 50).

In *Plants and Archaeology*, p. 39, G. W. Dimbleby writes that it is difficult to produce 'incontrovertible proof' of the association between wild species and man. This is said with reference to more primitive societies, but many of the plants discussed (especially on p. 32) are also mentioned by Roman writers as being useful for food in their wild or transplanted form. Dimbleby also suggests that it would be simple to transfer a useful plant from a remote spot to a place nearer one's home, and that this is being done today in tropical gardens. It seems that it was also being done in Roman Italy at a time when true cultivation was already established. The instructions given by the agronomists about the growing of grain and the cultivation of the vine suggest a much more developed technique. These were also the province of the commercial grower. The work of the Roman agricultural writers may therefore be said to contain material representing two very different levels of culture.

Wild vegetables tend to be tougher and more fibrous than cultivated varieties,²⁷ and in the early stages of cultivation much of the toughness would be retained. Galen, whose low opinion of vegetables seems until recently to have exercised a strong influence upon European diet, warns his readers against wild and cultivated varieties alike. Their roots

²⁶ *The Early Growth of the European Economy*, (1974), 16-17, cf. idem, *Rural Economy and Country Life in the Medieval West* (1968), 9 and 21-22.

²⁷ Theophrastus, *Hist. Plant.* vii, 6, 1; G. W. Dimbleby, op. cit. (n. 3), 31, et al.

περιττωματικά τε εἰσι καὶ δύσπεπτοι.²⁸ He is also worried about the wild varieties being dry.²⁹ Some can be improved by steeping and boiling, as he says of the asphodel: ἐγὼ δ' οἶδα διὰ λιμὸν ἀγροίκους τινὰς ἐψήσεσι τε πλείοσι καὶ ἀποβρέξεσιν ἐν ὕδατι γλυκεῖ μόλις αὐτὴν ἐδώδιμον ἐργασαμένους.³⁰ However the buds of any plant may be eaten: καλλίους δ' αὐτῶν εἰσιν οἱ τῆς περιμίνθου τε καὶ ἄχνου καὶ ἀμπέλου καὶ σχοίνου καὶ βότου καὶ κυνοσβάτου (*De Alimentorum Facultatibus* II, 60). The toughness may also account for the vigorous pounding recommended in ancient recipes, and described in the *Moretum*³¹ ll. 111-112. Earlier in the poem (94 ff.) the poet recounts in great detail the process of removing the outer skins of the garlic, as if this was in itself a particularly important and interesting activity. In Ovid's account of a *moretum* being offered to Cybele (*Fasti* IV, 304):

'candidus elisae miscetur caseus herbae'

the use of *elisae* indicates the crushing of the vegetables, and the next line:

'cognoscat priscos ut dea prisca cibos'

emphasizes the antiquity of such a process. The descriptions of the various kinds of lettuce by the agronomists are also noteworthy in relation to the question of texture and toughness. Pliny says that the wild varieties of lettuce all have rough stalks and leaves.³² He lists at least five wild varieties which can be used for medicinal purposes. Two are said to grow 'in arvis'. With reference to one of his remedies Pliny says: 'quidam et e sativis colligunt sucum minus efficacem.'³³ There are also instructions in Pliny XIX, 38 (131) for blanching lettuce, which may have been necessary when tough or strongly-flavoured varieties were commonly used. Nowadays it is more usual to blanch endive than lettuce, because it is more bitter.

Pliny would probably have explained the frequent use of the pestle and mortar in Roman cookery in a different way. In XIX, 19 (58) he suggests that salads (not *moretum* here but *acetaria*, pickled salad vegetables) were eaten in earlier times because they needed no cooking and saved fuel. However the emphasis upon the steeping and pounding of vegetables is very noticeable in Roman writings on horticulture and cookery. It could well have become traditional owing to the use originally of wild varieties, even if they were produced in cultivated plots.

The practices which have been discussed here form only a very small part of the traditional lore used by the Italian peasant to enable him to subsist on a poor or scanty land-holding. They suggest that the stage of transition from food-gathering to cultivation in Italy may have continued into Roman times. Yet at any particular date within this period regional differences must have been very marked. Even if we discount those crops and techniques which clearly belong to the realm of the market-gardener in the suburban areas of Latium and Campania, we must take note of the various climatic zones of Italy and the remoteness of the *montani*. To take just one example, Liguria, we have a description of land use there in *Comunità rurali nell'Italia antica* by Emilio Sereni (Rome, 1955), p. 539. Sereni writes of the different types of land to be found in Liguria in antiquity, and of particular interest to us here is his mention of the *debbi*—plots of land once cultivated but

²⁸ Περὶ λεπτινότητος διαίτης (ed. Nino Marinone, *La Dieta dimagrante*, Torino, 1973), 9, 72 (p. 86). Galen does make an exception in favour of γογγυλίδες and βολβοί. On the latter Marinone has an interesting comment: 'I suoi bulbi (non le radici, come ritiene Galeno) sono mangerecci e costituiscono un cibo noto ancor oggi nell'Italia meridionale con il nome di lampascioni'.

²⁹ *De Alimentorum Facultatibus* xlii (p. 628, Teubner editions, 1965): διαφέρει δὲ τῶν ὀμοειδῶν φυτῶν ξηρότητι μὲν τὸ ἄγριον, ὑγρότητι δὲ τὸ κηπευόμενον.

³⁰ *De Alimentorum Facultatibus* ii, 64.

³¹ The *moretum* has often been described as a cake, most recently by Bertha Tilly in a note to Varro, *R.R.* i, 13, 2, in *Varro the Farmer* (1973), 166. The ingredients mentioned in the *Moretum* of the *Appendix Vergiliana* (cf. Columella xii, 59) produce

a mixture of softer consistency than a cake, unless a disproportionate amount of cheese is used. This might sometimes have been done, and the product would have been a herb-flavoured cheese. But cheese was not an essential ingredient of the *moretum*, as may be seen from Columella, xii, 59, where two of the recipes given omit the cheese. Although the use of the word *globus* in l. 117 suggests a cake, the *moretum* of the *Appendix Vergiliana* is to be eaten as a relish with bread. It forms a *globus* when it is being mixed and the fragments are gathered in from the edges (cf. the use of *conglobari* in reference to similar processes). The mention of *aioli* by D. and P. Brothwell, op. cit. (n. 3), 109, also has some bearing on this question.

³² *Nat. Hist.* xx, 24-6 (58-68).

³³ *Nat. Hist.* xx, 26 (64).

now in process of dereliction or actually abandoned. He emphasizes how quickly one can pass to a different type of land, where there are no specific boundaries between forest, woodland pastures, *macchia* and moorland.

III

Our ancient literary sources contain statements of two distinct types concerning wild food-plants. First, there is advice to the comparatively affluent Roman reader on the ways in which wild herbs and vegetables can be used to enhance the attractions of an already well-supplied table. Secondly there are accounts of peasant usage, either contemporary or archaic, in which both wild and cultivated plants form a necessary part of a subsistence economy. There is also mention of the enforced use of a wider variety of plants in time of scarcity.³⁴ The use of terms implying 'wild' and 'cultivated' by Latin authors does not correspond exactly with our own categories and reflects the more varied sources of the food-supply in ancient times. It may indeed be arguable that such terms as *silvestris* and *sativus* first attained precise definition in medical and magical works, that is in contexts where the distinction was felt to be particularly important. We have found the customs of the poor chiefly among those attributed to the *rustici*, the *pastores* and the *veteres*. The *veteres* may have lived a few generations before the writer who quotes them, but that will still bring them within the Roman period. Alternatively the practices thus designated may have been part of the contemporary scene in remote areas or among people with less pretensions to modernity than the Roman *littérateur*.

In this discussion of food-plants we have only touched upon one aspect of the life of the agrarian poor in Roman Italy, and considered some of the literary evidence. Further study of the life of shepherds and peasant cultivators in the various regions of the peninsula in ancient times may well modify any conclusions which can be drawn at this stage. Moreover we have not attempted here to trace any chronological development. Change takes place very slowly in this sphere, but its pace and direction may be perceptible if comparison is made with the rural customs of later ages.

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³⁴ These, as we are reminded by R. MacMullen in *Enemies of the Roman Order* (1966), 253, must have occurred frequently in the ancient world. In the anecdote from Galen to which he refers, the peasants suffered not because they were eating wild foods,

but because they were forced by famine to do so indiscriminately. For remarks upon the incidence of famine, see C. Clark and M. Haswell, *The Economics of Subsistence Agriculture* (1967), 60.