

COSMOLOGY, PLACE, AND HISTORY IN VARRO'S *DE LINGUA LATINA* 5

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Summary: This article interprets Varro's etymological discussion of *locus* in book 5 of *De lingua Latina* (1-56) as representative of a Varronian "place-based" history. It argues that Varro's reconstruction of Rome's *loci* as cosmically essential and structuring elements of both the city and Roman culture in his present day depended upon the author's peculiar understanding of the past and of historical truth – namely, that fundamental principles of truth manifest both on different levels of reality, and at different points in time. Places – temples, hills, groves, or otherwise – therefore were particularly significant in providing access to the essential meaning of Rome's institutions, religion, and people. Varro's consideration of the *Septimontium* is then analyzed within this framework. The argument demonstrates how Rome's natural environment, construed as part of an original *cosmos*, could explain the social and political facts of the present in Varro's reconstruction of word-history. In particular, the religious importance of the Capitoline hill, and the separation of the Aventine from the rest of the city in the first century BCE, are both given etymological explanations that depend upon the long-lost natural topography of the city.

I. Introduction

In book 5 of his *De lingua Latina* (*LL*), Varro presents an extended etymological discussion of the etiologies of Rome's rural and urban *loci*.¹ After an introductory consideration of the philosophical and historical value of his endeavor, as well as a description of the natural and rural world – beginning with terms denoting natural phenomena and ending with those concerning rural production – Varro attempts to elucidate the shadowy names of Rome's urban places and the stories associated with them. In this discussion, Varro outlines the spatial development of the

1 The text of *De lingua Latina* in this article is from de Melo 2019. All translations are my own.

city of Rome, from the original Septimontium (5.41) to the Shrines of the Argei (5.45-54), themselves divided among the four Servian regions, which were conveniently associated in Varro's day with Rome's urban tribes (5.56).² Varro then transitions from place, *locus*, to the things that exist therein, *corpus*, for the remainder of the book. This tour de force treatment of all things *locus* explores the cosmos and Rome's place within it, beginning with the *caelum* and *terra* and ending with Rome's four regions (Subura, Esquiline, Colline, Palatine), in merely forty-two densely packed paragraphs.

This first section of *LL* 5 has received significant scrutiny, most notably for its tidy narrative of Rome's urban development. Varro's depiction of Rome's topography in *LL* 5, in fact, still exerts an enormous influence on modern reconstructions of the Republican city, which typically accept the historical stages of the city's development in their attempts to "map" the extent, for instance, of the Servian regions, or even the precise locations of the Argei shrines.³ Varro's image of the city, however, is

- 2 Elsewhere in his *oeuvre*, according to Solin. 1.17, Varro had described the original foundation of Rome on the Palatine by Romulus, dubbed *Roma Quadrata*, presumably for its division into four equal parts. It is unclear from what Varronian work Solinus draws. See Wiseman 2015 for an account of the relationship between the text of Solinus and the possible text of Varro, and Ziólkowski 2019: 111-46, for a detailed review of all the primary sources mentioning *Roma Quadrata*.
- 3 Many of these modern scholars uncritically accept Varro's reconstruction in pursuing their own mapping of the city, the four regions, and the shrines of the Argei, e.g. Platner 1904: 46; Palmer 1970: 308; Ziólkowski 1998-9: 212; Rodriguez-Almeida 2002: fig. 7; Carandini and Carafa 2012: tav. 1a; Palombi 2017: 27. The idea that Rome was divided into four administrative units, based upon the Servian regions, has long been criticized. Graffunder 1913: 481, comments upon the tendency of modern historians and topographers to conflate territorial divisions with political ones through a sarcastic statement, 'Sie hätten sie besser Viertribusstadt genannt.' Indeed, there is little reason to believe that the four urban tribes, especially by the first century BCE, were strictly territorial entities, especially since the enrollment of non-resident freedpeople and criminals in the urban tribes had taken place since the third century BCE, cf. Taylor 1960: 11 n. 24. Frascchetti 1990: 185 goes as far as to state that the city of the four regions was 'un'invenzione dei topografi Tedeschi,' who misinterpreted Varro's reference to the four *regiones*. Rather, Frascchetti argues, Varro's use of the word *regio* merely referred to the original spatial attributes of both rural and urban tribes rather than to a territorial delineation of the city for administrative purposes,

partial. Not only does he omit any mention of *Roma Quadrata*, which he identifies elsewhere as the site of the original Romulean foundation on the Palatine, he also neglects to include other divisions of urban space known to him, including the epigraphically attested *mons*.⁴ He was certainly aware of the latter's existence, given his discussion of them in other places within the same work.⁵

It is clear that a mere historical explanation of the step-wise development of Rome and its *loci* was not Varro's primary interest in this part of *LL*, even if scholars treat his testimony as unproblematic evidence for the city's growth. I will argue in this article that Varro's discussion of the city of Rome must be considered within the overall context of his etymological books, and in particular within the methodological framework that Varro painstakingly describes in the first fourteen paragraphs of book 5. While unique to *LL*, Varro's methodology for etymological inquiry, as a necessarily historical endeavor, shares much with his approach to uncovering the past of Rome's religious and civic institutions in his other works. In *LL* 5, however, Varro seeks to locate the origins of the Latin language not just in words connected generally to Roman culture, but also in the cosmic structure that he reconstructs in his etymological books. This structure can be understood as both a guiding principle in the organization of his books, and as an explanatory mechanism that places significant meaning in the cosmic and natural world.

My reading of Varro as a cosmologist is not in itself novel – the *ro-tunda* of his *aviarium*, described in *De re rustica* (3.5.9-17), has been convincingly interpreted as a cosmic representation in its own right, with

Cf. Varro *ap* Non. 62: *extra urbem in regiones XXVI agros viritim liberis adtribuit*. Compare to his remarks at *Ling.* 5.46: *In Suburanae regionis parte princeps est Caelius mons*.

- 4 Precisely how the *mons* developed as a territorial unit is unclear. *CIL* 6.32455, an inscription recording a dedication made by the *montani montis oppi* and dated to the late second century BCE, strongly suggests that this territorial administrative unit was partly autonomous, as they both maintained a common fund and held property in common: *M[ag(istri)] et flamin(es) | montan(orum) montis | Oppi | de pe<c=Q>unia mont(anorum) | montis Oppi | sacellum | claudend(um) | et coaequand(um) | et arbores | serundas | coeraverunt*.
- 5 Varro discusses the organization of the *mons* in reference to the ritual of the Septimontium at Varro, *Ling.* 6.24. Another, more informal, division of space can be adduced in the *vicus*, which comes up for discussion twice, at *Ling.* 5.145 and 5.160.

guests seated “in the middle of an evocation of the *kosmos*, placed exactly at the boundary between the supralunar world ... and the part of the world beneath the moon.”⁶ Varro’s interest in cosmological thinking is especially evident in his apparent obsession with numerology. The number three, for instance, was especially attractive to Varro, who followed the Pythagoreans in understanding the number as *perfectum*.⁷ He would utilize this same number as the structuring principle for the types of Roman gods in *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* (*ARD*), as well as the basic organizational template for archaic Roman society (3 *tribus*; 30 *curiae*; 300 *turmae*).⁸ Yet Varro was also extremely flexible in employing different, radically contradictory numerological systems across his scholarship, and even within the same works; he also did not hesitate to ignore them altogether. His *Hebdomades*, for instance, utilized the number seven (in its multiple of 700) to structure his discussion of famous men, while he appears to satirize attempts to apply numerological systems to the messiness of the real world entirely in *De re rustica* (*RR*).⁹ In any case, it is clear that Varro found such numerological systems to be valuable, both through their ability to structure information descriptively, and to imbue information with essential, normative meaning that explained how

6 Sauron 2019: 233.

7 Serv. *Ecl.* 8.75-7.

8 Palmer 1970: 5-26, for a discussion of Varronian numerology and the relevant sources.

9 Volk 2019. Scrofa’s and Stolo’s characterizations in *RR* have been interpreted by Kronenberg 2009 as satirizing the type of pedantic systematization (in which Varro himself often engaged) common in first-century BCE intellectual culture, including attempts to trace Roman agriculture back to the fundamental elements of the *cosmos* (cf. *Rust.* 4.1: *Eius principia sunt eadem, quae mundi esse Ennius scribit, aqua, terra, anima et sol.*). Scrofa, after outlining his division of agriculture into four parts, each with a subsequent two subdivisions (*Rust.* 1.5), for instance, does not hesitate to depart from his systematization throughout his discussion (cf. Skydsgaard 1968). His discussion of farm equipment, for example, posits three subdivisions (*Rust.* 1.17: *instrumenti genus vocale et semivocale et mutum*) rather than the two he initially claims. Given Varro’s framing of the work at the outset (*Rust.* 1.1: *Annus enim octogesimus admonet me ut sarcinas conligam, antequam proficiscar e vita*), it is difficult not to imagine that the author is also poking some fun at his previous self, too, in his old age. But see, too, Nelsestuen 2011, who argues that Varro depicts Scrofa with a combination of genuine praise and self-aware parody.

the world should operate.¹⁰ The intellectual culture of the first century BCE was especially typified by this penchant for cosmological thinking, which manifested in as varied generic contexts as philosophical dialogue (e.g. *de Re Publica* and the *somnium Scipionis*), didactic texts (e.g. Lucretius' *De rerum natura* and Ovid's *Fasti*), and epic poetry (e.g. Virgil's *Aeneid*).¹¹

In the following, I first examine to what extent Varro's etymological project in *De lingua Latina* can be interpreted as making historical claims about the city of Rome and, as a consequence, about Roman society more generally. While not explicitly engaging in the *genre* nor techniques of historical writing, Varro nevertheless clearly considered etymological study to be a valid means of understanding Rome's past, as he communicates in several places throughout his treatise. He also presents his inquiry as a fundamentally historical exercise, even if he departs from the typical sequential approach to time, preferred by the annalistic historians, in favor of collapsing space and time together entirely.¹² Integral to Varro's approach to the past in *LL* is his interest in the long-lost natural environment of Rome. These natural spaces are imagined as existing as part of an original cosmic structure that persists into Varro's contemporary moment, in an evocation of a type of *imago mundi* found in literature as early as the Homeric Shield of Achilles;¹³ in Varro's etymological cosmos, Rome itself emerges at the center as part of this natural landscape principally through its seven hills, the *Septimontium*. For Varro, the natural, the essential, and the cosmic – what he refers to as *natura* – are one and the same. As I suggest, in “re-naturalizing” Rome's urban environment and by “coopting the cosmos”, as Katharina Volk has characterized

10 Horkey 2019: 3, “*Kosmos*, as it was deployed by ancient thinkers for their understanding of the world that surrounded them, functioned both descriptively and normatively to structure the knowledge of reality.”

11 Volk 2021: 239-312; Gee 2000: 21-65. The incredible popularity of Aratus' *Phaenomena* in first-century BCE Rome (for which see Gee 2000: 126-53), is surely in part responsible for the embrace of cosmic thinking, as was the dynamic political context, which saw numerous attempts to justify political ideology or hierarchy by making connections to the *cosmos*.

12 Ahl 1985: 275-76, citing *Ling.* 5.12, describes such a conception as a space-time continuum, à la Einstein's theory of special relativity, in which apparently sequential events are in fact coexistent.

13 Hardie 1985.

such intellectual endeavors,¹⁴ Varro subtly construes the city of Rome, recently wracked by internecine bloodshed, in its essential cosmic form, conjuring images of a natural landscape where wooded hills and agricultural land abound. But far from simply depicting the city as an imaginary, divinely ordained sacro-idyllic environment, Varro locates historical “truth” in the environment itself, which, as part of his presentation of the cosmic structure, becomes integral to his understanding of Roman institutions, history, and language in the present.

This hypothesis is then tested on the first section of book 5, with special attention paid to Varro’s discussion of the *Septimontium*. As both “place” (*locus*) and “ritual” (*action*), the *Septimontium* as presented by Varro has been widely discussed by scholars interested primarily in Roman religion or topography. I focus instead on how it both fits within Varro’s cosmology of words, and demonstrates his general approach to uncovering historical “truth.” The argument is particularly indebted to Van Nuffelen’s reconstruction of Varro’s approach to historical inquiry, which, he argues, seeks to define general principles as they manifest in “different guises on different levels of reality.”¹⁵ Varro’s discussion of the *Septimontium*, for example, only explicitly treats two hills, the Capitoline and Aventine, which reflect his general principle of “elemental pairs” (5.13: *initia bina*) that structure the cosmos. Etymologies of names scattered around the Capitoline are tied to the civic development of the Roman *res publica* as well as the essential *actio* of agricultural production, the mark of the good Roman citizen. The Aventine, by contrast, is described as “cut off” (*disclusus*) from the city proper. Justifying this separation of the two hills, in Varro’s presentation, is the original ecology of the region, as the two hills were understood to be divided by a marsh, resulting in the Aventine’s nature as being located “outside” of the city (*ab urbe*). Each of the etymologies accepted by Varro demonstrate these fundamental natural (i.e. cosmic) principles, and are therefore powerful explanatory tools for Varro in his presentation of Roman history and the current state of the city in his own day.

14 Volk 2021: 239-312.

15 Van Nuffelen 2010: 171.

II. History, nature, and cosmos in *LL*

It is important first to contextualize Varro's discussion of the city within his larger scholarly project in *LL* and especially the etymological books, in which he is explicit about the importance of antiquarian inquiry through etymological analysis, and its ability to recover the traditions and virtues of the Roman *maiores*. On the surface, it might appear questionable to assert social and cultural historical claims through an analysis of a work that concerns itself principally with the linguistic and morphological development of Latin.¹⁶ Varro himself, though, was hardly restrained by the conventions of the genres within which he composed. Nelsestuen has convincingly demonstrated, for instance, the complex interplay of form and content demonstrated in Varro's *RR*, which simultaneously engages with political philosophy (through the form of the dialogue), with satire (through irony and humor), and with the traditional form of the agronomical treatise (through the content itself).¹⁷ It is hardly a surprise, then, to find discussions of time playing such a large role in Varro's etymological interpretations. In the prefatory remarks to book 5, Varro discusses the difficulties that *vetustas* brings to any study of the past, including his linguistic one. Varro's choice metaphor is that of the aging person, once a beautiful boy but later ravaged by time and unsightly in his old age. So, too, Varro claims, are words barely recognizable by the third generation due to the constant change to which they are subject. There are few things, after all, that *vetustas* does not distort, and it razes many others (*Vetustas pauca non depravat, multa tollit*, 5.5).¹⁸

But Varro's sense of *tempus* moved beyond the strictly chronological or sequential. Varro sketches out a theory of time that applies not only to the etymological form, but also to cosmological and natural forms that feature in his account of word history. In this account, time represents only one of the organizing principles for how Varro conceptualized the past.¹⁹ In his opinion, historical time could be separated into three parts

16 Cf. Taylor 2011 and 2015 for bibliography on Varro as "language scientist." De Melo 2019: 40-43.

17 Nelsestuen 2015 and Nelsestuen 2017. Cf. Kronenberg 2009.

18 Volk 2019: 187, esp. n. 11.

19 Piras 2017: 8; cf. Piras 1998: 25-56 and Blank 2008: 59-61.

– the distant past, the near past, and the present. Giorgio Piras has demonstrated how these temporal distinctions are not necessarily defined by time itself, but rather by the reliability of information from each period in question. Uncertain data characterized the distant past; false data the near past; verifiable data the present.²⁰ But even if the distant past was characterized by uncertainty or the unverifiable, Varro argues that etymology, as a methodology for studying the past, can at least play a role in arbitrating between uncertain alternatives and, therefore, in finding the truth in fact.²¹ His vivid metaphor of tracking escaped slaves in a dark wood, chasing fugitive etymological prey down untrodden paths beset with obstacles, not only is typical of his aristocratic perspective, but also betrays a certain confidence in a project in which others, such as the great jurist Mucius Scaevola, whom he cites explicitly, had failed (5.5).²² In any case, contemporaries found Varro’s methodology influential and persuasive. Cicero, for example, commented on Varro’s success in the *Academica*, famously remarking that Varro’s books led the Romans back home again to their city through an elucidation of its history, institutions, and, as intimated by the spatial metaphor of wandering (*peregrinantis errantisque*) Romans, its topography.²³ Besides demonstrating the intellectual relevance of Varro’s project to his contemporary moment, Cicero’s comments about Rome’s spaces and places reveal the broader cultural desire for knowing the city’s physical environments in all their current and previous iterations, and the difficulties inherent in undertaking such a process persuasively.²⁴

The antiquarian method, and especially etymological science, allowed Varro to arrange and explicate information about the city’s past and its

20 Piras 2017: 13–14. Censorinus, *DN* 21.1–2.

21 Moatti 2015: 150, “the prime vocation of an antiquarian is to be ‘an archaeologist of memory and language’, an analyst of societies.” See also Blank 2008 and Blank 2019.

22 Spencer 2011: 52–53.

23 Cic. *Acad. Post.* 9: *nam nos in nostra urbe peregrinantis errantisque tamquam hospites tui libri quasi domum deduxerunt.*

24 Wallace-Hadrill 2008: 259–60. Cf. Moatti 2015: 94–163.

historical development.²⁵ His choice metaphor for this process was an arboreal one, in which he compares his intellectual labor and the Latin language with the naturally sprawling root-system of a tree (5.13):²⁶

Sed qua cognatio eius erit uerbi quae radices egerit extra fines suas, persequemur. S<a>epe enim ad limitem arboris radices sub uicini prodierunt segetem. Quare non, cum de locis dicam, si ab agro ad agrarium hominem, ad agricolam peruenero, aberraro.

But where there may be an affinity of a word, an affinity which pushes the roots beyond their own borders, we will follow it. For often the roots of a tree on a property line have spread below the neighbor's field. And so I won't err if I move from *ager* to *agrarius* to *agricola* when I talk about places.

For Varro, finding the correct root could take him further down the untrodden path of history's darkened forests.²⁷ In doing so, he argues that the relationship between things as represented through language is itself of the utmost importance, because it represents identifiable historical relationships that could be found nowhere else in his sources. Although explaining the origin of *equus* might ultimately prove impossible, its family tree – cavalry, cavalrymen, etc. – can nevertheless tell us something

25 This connection between Varro's antiquarian and etymological interests has long been noted and remarked upon. See McAlhany 2003: 119-21.

26 Garcia 2008 on Varro's understanding of *veritas* as stemming from universal systemization; Piras 2017: 17-18, discusses Varro's approach to the four *gradus* of etymology as being parallel to his understanding of the chronological stages of the past. While Rüpke 2014: 253-59, focuses only on the *Antiquitates rerum humanarum et divinarum*, his emphasis on Varro's narrativizing – and historicizing – of Rome's religious past displays some parallel with the etymological etiologies of the *De lingua Latina*. Other approaches to Varro's relationship to the past focus more on the material aspect, literal or metaphorical, that Varro's archaeological method entails. Spencer 2011 (and more recently Spencer 2019) sees Varro's annunciation of Rome's topography and the language used to describe it as defining a cultural identity of "Romanness" that consists in a shared cultural memory attached to place.

27 Macdonald 2012: 198.

about the historical and social development of the Roman people.²⁸ In his reference to “talking about places”, Varro also implicitly refers to his quadripartite model of etymology, which categorizes words into four different categories – place (*locus*), body (*corpus*), time (*tempus*), and action (*actio*). This model will receive further scrutiny below, but for now it is enough to remark that Varro did not understand these categories to be mutually exclusive. As he states, the spreading roots of the tree could also lead him away from the category of *tempus* into the property of *locus*, *corpus*, or *actio*. Doing so, Varro contends, would neither be in error nor destabilize his quadripartite model of language, but would only lead to further illumination of obscure words and, by extension, obscure truths about the world.²⁹ Varro’s arboreal metaphor is also revealing in that the terminations of the roots, while physically further from the tree trunk, are nevertheless part of a single organism existing in a single moment; the metaphor would suggest, then, that words and word-histories were simultaneously historical and timeless. In any case, the antiquarian could only start from the trunk that they observed, whether that was the usage of a word or the name of a place.³⁰ The contemporary world, therefore, was both Varro’s vast source material and greatest limitation. As in the case of *equus*, however, Varro at times embraced the historical uncertainty of a word’s original meaning and admitted *aporia*,³¹ yet he nonetheless is surprisingly forthcoming with etymological etiologies for Rome and its peoples, customs, and institutions. The same, too, can be said for Varro’s etymological excavation of Rome’s topography, through

28 Varro, *Ling.* 7.4: *Quare qui ostendit equitatum esse ab equitibus, equites ab equite, equitem ab equo neque equus unde sit dicit, tamen hic docet plura et satisfacit grato, quem imitari possimusne ipse liber erit indicio.*

29 Volk 2019: 198–99. Volk remarks on the “flexibility” of his quadripartite system that Varro admits in this passage. It is interesting to note that Varro here implicitly reveals the limitations of human systems of categorization for the natural world, though he does not suggest that such systems are fruitless. This may in part be due to his understanding of fundamental philosophical principles manifesting on different planes of reality (see below, p. 79–80).

30 Cf. Bernard 2014–2015.

31 Piras 2017: 15.

which he sought to explain Rome as it is through a plausible narration of Rome as it originally was.³²

Even with his overwhelming interest in historical reconstruction, pursued in many of his other works, Varro nevertheless demonstrates a type of historical thinking in his *oeuvre* that eschews both typical narrativization in sequential time and the historiographical tendency to treat the pursuit of historical truth as a zero-sum endeavor.³³ Consider, for instance, Varro's often discussed treatment of Roman aniconism in *ARD*. As reported by Augustine, Varro had originally stated that the Romans worshiped their gods without the aid of images, while noting that this practice represented a more pure form of veneration than that practiced later, when images of the gods had become widespread and had led worshippers into "error".³⁴ Later in *ARD*, however, Varro claims that the images of the gods were "created" (*finxisse*) by the *antiqui*, who sought to allegorize the cosmos by giving the "immortal soul" a human-like manifestation, just as the mortal soul was housed in a human body.³⁵ The result, according to Varro, was that viewers of these images could better understand the immortal soul through the direct comparison to their own. This apparent contradiction gave Augustine – whose own stance on the images of the pagan gods must be acknowledged – an opportunity to both emphasize the seeming inconsistency in Varro's position and propose his own doctrine regarding the true "immortal soul" (*immortalis animus*) in his work. But Augustine's understanding is built upon a misreading of the Varronian method, which, as van Nuffelen has argued, embraces the notion that "truth," which is understood by Varro as a set of fundamental principles,³⁶ can manifest on different levels of reality – whether cosmic or human – as well as at different points in time. From

32 Wallace-Hadrill 2008: 260-64.

33 See Momigliano 1950 and Moatti 2015 for antiquarianism more generally.

34 Aug. *Civ.* 4.31 (*ARD* 18): *antiquos Romanos plus annos centum et septuaginta deos sine simulacro coluisse. Quod si adhuc ... mansisset, castius dii observarentur ... qui primi simulacra deorum populis posuerunt, eos civitatibus suis et metum dempsisse et errorem addidisse.*

35 Aug. *Civ.* 7.5 (*ARD* 225).

36 Varro uses different words to express the general idea of "principles", including, e.g., *initium* (*Rust.* 1.5; *Ling.* 5.11), *principia* (*Rust.* 1.4), and *elementa* (*ARD* 24). Van Nuffelen 2010: 165-170.

this perspective there is nothing contradictory about Varro's two statements, as each posits the same historical, qua cosmological, truth about the nature of and relationship to the divine, though the latter case requires the expert knowledge of an individual like Varro to fully explicate.

Rather than attribute this tendency towards apparent contradiction to a failure of the Varronian method, I suggest that it can be profitably understood to be one of its greatest attributes, as it more closely aligns with how historical knowledge was formed and transmitted, especially in the guise of collective memory and monumentality.³⁷ This type of "both-and" history was especially useful for explicating Rome's topography, as many of the city's physical spaces, monuments, and natural features communicated multiple and apparently contradictory meanings through the stories and memories associated with their pasts. A case in point is that of the *vicus Tuscus*. Several stories are preserved concerning the origin of the neighborhood. Each places the moment of settlement at a different point in time: Propertius' *signum Vertumni*, as an Etruscan representative, settles in the quarter in 264 BCE, after the sack of Volsinii;³⁸ Livy and Dionysius both connect the settlement to Etruscan refugee migration in the aftermath of the Battle of Aricia in the early fifth century BCE;³⁹ and Varro explains that the quarter was originally inhabited by

37 See Galinsky 2016: 1-21, for a useful overview of memory studies and their application to the study of the Roman world.

38 Prop. 4.2.3-4: *Tuscus ego et Tuscis orior, nec paenitet inter / proelia Volsinios deseruisse focos.*

39 Liv. 2.14.9; Dion. 5.36.3-4. Alföldi 1967 has argued that Livy and Dionysius in this instance followed the fabrication of Fabius Pictor, though Dionysius himself appears to have consulted the presumed Cumaean Chronicle preserved in Timaeus in dating the Battle of Aricia. For a recent assessment of the Cumaean Chronicle, see Gallia 2007. Gagé 1976: 91-92 argues that the story masked an emigration event from Aricia, and that it further proves the good relations between Porsenna and Rome as communicated by the Roman annalistic tradition; Dovere 1984 has suggested that the Vicus Tuscus was territory ceded to Porsenna as part of the settlement between Rome and Clusium, and that his defeat led to his withdrawal. Therefore, the now derelict space of the Vicus Tuscus could be given over in kindness to the refugees from Aricia. Hirata 1986: 7-22, contended that the inhabitants of the Vicus Tuscus were merely the remnants of those living in Porsenna's siege camp across the Tiber. See Ridley 2017 for an overview of how the figure of Lars Porsenna has been treated by scholars since the Renaissance.

followers of the Etruscan hero Caeles Vibenna, as part of the *triplex civitas* of Romans, Sabines, and Etruscans that Varro posits in *de Vita Populi Romani* (VPR).⁴⁰ The historical contradictions are apparent, but ultimately unimportant. Connecting each story – and revealing the “truth” of each – is a common principle of migration and marginalization. The *Signum Vertumni* finds itself in Rome as a war captive; the Etruscans of Livy and Dionysius arrive in the quarter as refugees; and Vibenna’s followers are forced to settle in the neighborhood because their former abode on the Caelian hill, given its natural defenses, prompted suspicion among the Romans. Varro, of course, concerns himself in *LL* only with the most ancient story in his explanation of the origins of the *vicus Tuscus* (though he does mention the presence of the *Signum Vertumni* in connection with this origin story, again collapsing historical time to comment upon the essential “Etruscanness” of the *locus*), but he also is the only one to emphasize the role of Rome’s natural topography in characterizing the essential nature of the place and, as a result of this connection, of Etruscan identity within Rome.

This connection between the natural environment of Rome and the corresponding historical development of the city is representative of Varro’s tendency in *LL* to locate essential meaning in the natural, cosmological world. In his opening remarks in book 5, Varro explains that the subject of the book – *locus*, followed later in the book by *corpus* – is merely one of the four categories (*locus, corpus, tempus, actio*) that he uses not only to organize his treatise but also as an epistemological system in itself.⁴¹ This “*quadriga* of first principles” (5.13: *initiorum quadrigae*), as Varro dubs it, cites ostensibly Pythagorean notions of the cosmos, in which first principles (*initia*) manifest in contrasting pairs (*bina*). The two etymological books are constructed as reflections of this basic principle. Varro begins by comparing “finite and infinite, life and death, day and

40 VPR 2(P). See Wiseman 2016 for a discussion of the meaning of *triplex civitas*.

41 For Varro’s fondness of the quadripartite model, which appears also in *ARD, ARH,* and *RR*, see Piras 1998: 25-56 and McAlhany 2003: 63-88 and 119-32. Dahlmann 1932 argued that this quadripartite division can be seen throughout Varro’s oeuvre as a fundamental principle of his organizational schema. Blank 2008: 59, remarks that Varro’s quadripartition, while gesturing towards Pythagorean influence in *LL*, has “a Stoic ring to it” (cf. also Dahlmann 1932 16-17). Skydsgaard 1968 reads the influence of rhetorical training, and not Stoic cosmology, into the quadripartite schema.

night” to the fundamental pairing *status* and *motus*, which is then used to explain the four categories:

quare fit, ut ideo fere omnia sint quadripertita et ea aeterna, quod neque unquam tempus, quin fuerit motus; eius enim intervallum tempus; neque motus, ubi non locus et corpus, quod alterum est quod movetur, alterum ubi; neque ubi is agitatus, non actio ibi. Igitur initiorum quadrigae locus et corpus, tempus et actio.

“Therefore it is the case that, for this reason, nearly everything is quadripartite, and these things are universal, since there is never time without there being motion; indeed, motion’s stopping is also time; nor is there motion where there is no place or body, since the latter is that which is moved, the former where it’s moved. Nor where there is movement is there not action. Therefore, place and body, time and action, are the four-horse chariot of first principles.”

Varro is admittedly difficult to follow here, especially as he quickly pivots from the pairing of *status* and *motus* to a discussion of these four *initia*.⁴² But, Varro clearly indicates other pairings in addition; that between the physical (*locus, corpus*) and the temporal (*tempus, actio*), which serves as the structuring principal for books 5 and 6, and that between the container (*locus, tempus*) and things that occur within each (*corpus, actio*). This latter point is clarified by Varro, as he states explicitly at 5.57 and 6.1 that *corpus* refers to “things which are in places” (5.57: *de his quae in locis esse solent*; 6.1: *locorum et ea quae in his in priore libro scripsi*), while *actio* refers to “things that come about with some element of time” (6.1: *earum rerum quae in agendo fiunt aut dicuntur cum tempore aliquo*). Whether Varro was a “Pythagorean” or not – the ancient tradition certainly marks him out as influenced by Pythagorean ideas, at the very least⁴³ – he does make

42 This sudden, almost inexplicable movement from Pythagorean dualism to an apparently Stoic quadripartite model of essentials has prompted a fruitless search for Varro’s intellectual sources. Yet, as McAlhany 2003: 70–72 remarks, each ignores the possibility of Varronian originality in the creation and application of his quadripartite model in *LL*.

43 Plin. *NH*. 35.46.

explicit his reliance upon Pythagoras in this particular instance (LL 5.5). Varro's cosmic *quadriga* would then provide him a justification for the value of etymological inquiry, as well as a structuring principle for the entirety of Rome's past.

This abstract cosmological framework has significant implications for the *loci* that subsequently appear in Varro's account, as it intimates their essential role within the ordered cosmos, which Varro refers to in book 5 explicitly as *natura*.⁴⁴ In books 5 and 6, *natura* is equated with the deepest recoverable origins of the Latin language, which, in Varro's reconstruction, in fact includes essential human (read: Roman) activity; this world of words, an etymological cosmos of sorts, imbues the Latin language and Roman history with essential meaning. After the word *locus* itself, the very first words Varro treats in the book are *terra* and *caelum*, what he refers to as the *loca naturae ... prima duo*, recalling the cosmic *initia bina* mentioned earlier in the book. These two words, Varro insists, account for the entire cosmos: "The places of the sky are 'upper' places and belong to the Gods; the places of the earth are lower, and belong to men" (LL 5.16). This same idea is communicated also in *ARD*, where Varro similarly posits the fundamental bifurcation of *caelum* and *terra*.⁴⁵ While Varro presents two etymologies for *caelum* that he will eventually dismiss,⁴⁶ he advocates for the word's ultimate connection to the primordial Greek Χάος through the word *cavum*, citing Hesiod's cosmography in the *Theogony* as his evidence.⁴⁷ The emptiness of the cavernous sky – where the gods are said to reside – is then made to be an appropriate pairing for the tangible earth; for the final words mentioned by Varro as derivatives

44 For a discussion of the flexibility of the term *natura* in Latin literature and in Varro's *LL*, see McAlhany 2003: 132-35.

45 *Tert. Nat.* 2.3 (*ARD* 24): *Itaque quod mundi erit, hoc elementis ad[scri]betur, caelo dico et terrae et sideribus et igni ...* "And so, that which will characterize the world, will also be ascribed to the elements – I mean the sky, the earth, the stars, and fire ..."

46 The first, attributed to Aelius Stilo, is from *caelare*, "to raise up," while the second is from *celare*, "to hide." The first he dismisses as a reversed etymology, since it is "much more likely that *caelare* is from *caelum* than that *caelum* is from *caelando*." The second is not summarily rejected, though he does raise the issue of *caelum* not, in fact, being hidden at night.

47 *Ling.* 5.20: *sic ortum, unde omnia apud Hesiodum, a chao cavo caelum*. "Thus the sky arose from empty chaos, whence all things arose in Hesiod." Cf. Hes. *Theog.* 123.

from *caelum* each necessitate a lack of *terra*, from cavities (*cavea*) to hollowed valleys (*cavata vallis*). Over and against the *horror vacui* of Chaos we find, then, the realm of men and, most importantly, of Rome.

While Varro's *caelum* represents the divine and, by extension, the incorporeal, *terra* is explained as representing the tangible and the human. The word, Varro claims, lends its root to a number of other words – the shared land of farmers is called *territorium*, because it is a place that is “trodden”, *teritur*, by farmers; the word *termini* rounds out his discussion, since the Romans used them to impose their own social order onto the natural one of *terra*. Nearly all of the words connected to *terra*, in fact, are in one way or another associated with agriculture (*territorium*, *tritura*, *tribulum*) or agricultural property (*terminus*, *terimen*). Read in combination with the preceding discussion of *caelum*, *terra*, as a place belonging to humans, is construed as an essentially agrarian *locus*. The significance of these two *prima loca naturae* is attributed to the cosmic structure itself, which situates the immaterial *caelum* opposite the material *terra* and the divine opposite the mortal. While emptiness and the divine are by definition unknowable, the human *terra* is revealed by Varro in its cosmic essence to be a space destined for agricultural *actio* and, importantly, private property – both fundamental to the notion of the Roman *bonus vir*.⁴⁸

Although the Varronian *terra* presumes agriculture, Varro's etymological *imago mundi* is supplemented, too, with considerations of other natural and geographical features. These include words such as *humus* (soil), *lacus* (lakes), *fluvius* (rivers) and *amnis* (more rivers), which then serve as points of departure for considerations of as varied topics as wells (*putei*), swamps (*palus*), and circuits (*ambitus*). Such a generic image of the natural world is finally given a specific location with his discussion of the Tiber, at 5.29, from which Varro departs towards examinations of the peoples beyond Latium (5.31-2) and a discussion of the different types of land (5.33-40) found and utilized within this etymological world. Varro's cosmos is unsurprisingly centered on the Tiber valley and, as we will observe in the following section, eventually on the city of Rome itself. But his account of this development can be read as a sort of creation myth in

48 Cf. Cato, *Agr. praef.*: *Et virum bonum quom laudabant, ita laudabant, bonum agricolam bonumque colonum*. “And when they praised the ‘good man’, they also praised the ‘good farmer’ and ‘good cultivator’.”

its own right, beginning with the vast emptiness of chaos, which, alongside *terra*, created the conditions within which other Roman “places” can come to be (*locus*), where Roman “things” can exist (*corpus*), where “time” can pass (*tempus*), and where Roman “actions” can be undertaken (*actio*).

Varro returns to the fundamental cosmic structure of *caelum* and *terra* twice more in his etymological books, at 5.57 (when he transitions to a discussion of *corpus*) and at 6.2 and 6.12 (where he describes celestial and mortal *tempus* respectively). As a simple structuring device, this pairing undoubtedly provides Varro with an organizational schema within which to present his inquiry into the Latin language – a vast and likely impossible endeavor without some framework to help curate the information available to the etymologist. Yet, as an image of the *cosmos*, it also allowed Varro to make claims as to how the world *should* be ordered, both historically and in his contemporary moment. His discussion of the city of Rome, understood as arising within this cosmic structure, can be profitably interpreted, therefore, as both descriptive and normative. That is, as an attempt both to describe the past, and to demonstrate to his readers the “correct” order of things in their own world.

III. Rome’s natural places: the case of the Septimontium

The cosmological perspective presented by Varro in the initial sections of book 5 continues with his discussion of the city of Rome itself. *Natura* once again takes precedence in the description of the *Septimontium*, the seven hills of Rome that he states were encircled by the Servian wall (5.41):

Ubi nunc est Roma, Septimontium nominatum ab tot montibus quos postea urbs muris comprehendit.

Where Rome stands now was the Septimontium, named for the number of *montes* which later the city enclosed within its walls.

Varro proceeds to describe only two of the seven hills in question, the Capitoline and the Aventine, before moving onto a description of the Rites of the Argei, which ultimately elucidates the divisions of the remaining five hills within the city's walls. As Varro makes clear in the above passage, the *Septimontium* was a proto-urban concept (*ubi nunc est Roma*), a spatial division dependent upon the natural environment that preceded the Servian encirclement of the city and evoked the image of seven hilltop communities united only loosely by proximity. Fortunately, this pre-Servian geography in Varro's estimation anticipated the later construction of the Servian walls, which merely encompassed the naturally occurring *Septimontium* in an urban space (*postea urbs muris comprehendit*). The hills of the city of Rome itself, then – the Capitoline, the Aventine, the Palatine, the Esquiline, the Caelian, the Viminal, and the Quirinal – are construed as being merely a result of the cosmological order proposed in the preceding paragraphs.⁴⁹

Recent research has revealed that Varro's notion of the *Septimontium* is unlikely to correspond to any historical proto-urban settlement in and around Rome; rather, the archaic *Septimontium* likely corresponded with Antistius Labeo's more geographically limited designation of the Palatine, the Velian, the Fagutal, the Cermalus, the Oppian, the Caelian, and the Cispien.⁵⁰ Antistius Labeo's testimony could very well present a more accurate picture of the earliest extent of Rome's urban history, as many scholars believe it does.⁵¹ Varro's interest, however, was in locating the

49 Although Varro does not explicitly state the seven hills in *De lingua Latina*, Lydus, *Mens.* 155, appears to have taken these seven hills as constituting the *Septimontium* from Varro's discussion elsewhere: "On this [day] also the festival they called 'Septimundius' was celebrated – that is, the circuit around the city, since the walls of Rome were spread over seven hills. And the names of these are: Palatium, Esquilius, Tarpeium, Aventinum, Tiburtium, Praenestium, Viminalium. But among the ancients, [they were named] differently, as follows: Aventinus, Caelius, Esquilius, Capitolinus, Velinensius, Quirinalius, Palatinus."

50 *Fest.* 458-59L, 474L, 476L. Confusingly, *Festus* and *Paulus* both list eight locations, including the Subura, instead of seven. Erckell 1985: 36, has argued that this is due to the fact that the Subura and Fagutal were considered to be one location. Cf. Holland 1953 for an analysis of Antistius Labeo's and Varro's differing versions of the *Septimontium*.

51 E.g. Platner 1911; Holland 1953; Poey 1978; Frascchetti 1990; Ziółkowski 2019; De Melo 2019: 50 is non-committal.

origins of his contemporary world as it stood before him. This was not a story of incremental development, but rather of intentional creation and foundation (*finxisse*) by the *maiores*, one that found its truth echoed in the natural environment. Considering Varro's own world makes this abundantly clear – in the first century BCE, authors often referred to Rome as the *septem montes* enclosed by the Servian Wall, rather than those preserved in Labeo.⁵² The point here is not that Varro was correct in his interpretation of the *Septimontium*, whatever being correct may have meant. Rather, it is that he was responding to a particular conception of the city of Rome prevalent in his own day. Varro, that is, was responding to topographical evidence that he observed around him and connecting those observations to the antiquarian documents or words he sought to illuminate.⁵³

For the *Septimontium*, identifying the *locus* of the word also allowed Varro to explain its broader cultural significance. In the first century BCE, the *Septimontium* was not simply a geographic determination, but also a religious ritual celebrated by the “hill-dwellers” (*montani*) of Rome (6.24):⁵⁴

52 Vergil twice references the seven hills, stating that the city *septemque una sibi muro circumdedit arces* (Verg. *Aen.* 6.783; *G.* 2.534), with the *Georgics* looking back to the distant past from the present, and the *Aeneid* looking forward to the present from the distant past. Tibullus also uses *septem montes* metonymically for Rome (Tib. 2.5.55: *carpite nunc tauri de septem montibus herbas, dum licet | hic magnae iam locus urbis erit*); Cicero wrote to Atticus in June of 50 BCE, describing the city of Rome as ἐξ ἄστεως ἑπταλόφου (Cic. *Att.* 6.5.2); and Aulus Gellius cites the consul of 53 BCE, M. Valerius Messala Corvinus, as describing the city as *septem Urbis montes* (Gell. *NA* 13.14).

53 Vout 2012 focuses on the number seven in Varro's treatment of the *Septimontium* as reflecting an important structural principle for the antiquarian, not unlike his use of the number 3 as the fundamental organizational principle of the Roman constitution under Romulus. See Palmer 1970: 34.

54 The *Septimontium* ritual is shrouded in mystery and is only referenced a handful of times in our sources, typically by later lexicographers or antiquarians. Besides the purported date of December 11th and our knowledge of the feast held for the *montani*, it is difficult to know what other practices characterized the ritual. Tert. *Ad Nat.* 2.15.3-5 suggests that the rites took place alongside the worship of other architectural features characteristic of urbanization, such as arches and doors, while Lydus, *Mens.* 4.155, indicates that a procession was involved. See Palmer 1970: 50-52.

Dies Septimontium nominatus ab his septem montibus, in quis sita Urbs est; feriae non populi, sed montanorum modo, ut Paganalibus, qui sunt alicuius pagi.

That day is called the *Septimontium* from those seven hills on which the city is situated; it is not a festival for the entire *populus*, but only for the *montani*, as is the case with the *Paganalia*, which is attended only by those who are of some *pagus*.

Varro comments upon this ritual in book 6, where he concerns himself with *tempus* and *actio*. His discussion of the rites of the *Septimontium* is presented in the midst of a description of the different fixed festival days (*feriae*) in the Roman calendar. From other sources, it is clear that the *Septimontium* ritual had its own historical development, as is evidenced by the fact that, in the Imperial period, the festival seems to have come to include the entire *populus* (Suet. *Dom.* 4.5).⁵⁵ The restriction of participation in the festival of the *Septimontium* during the Republic to only those dwelling on the seven hills in question (*sed montanorum modo*) then follows from Varro's understanding of the location of the *Septimontium* itself; as urban spaces, only those living within the city walls, the *montani* of Rome's seven hills, could take part.⁵⁶ Religious *actio*, performed by the

Ziółkowski 2019: 41-60, reads Varro's interpretation of the *Septimontium* as diverging from his contemporaries' understanding of the toponym since "he did not accept the list in its entirety," therefore he ends his "tour" after treating only two of seven hills. Varro does, however, explain the other hills in question immediately afterwards, though under the rubric of the Rites of the Argei and the Servian Regions.

55 But see also Frascchetti 1984: 54, who suggests that Domitian's extension of the *Septimontium* feast to the entire population may have been a singular event.

56 Spencer 2019: 134 argues that the exclusion of the *pagani* from the *Septimontium* represents the symbolic hierarchical divisions of Roman society, separating those who live upon the heights from those who live in the valleys. While Varro certainly utilizes this spatial metaphor to make claims about status elsewhere (e.g. *Ling.* 5.46, on the transposition of Etruscan settlers to the *vicus Tuscus* from the Caelian hill after the death of Caeles Vibenna), it is not operative here; the implication that the seven hills referred to are those surrounded by the Servian wall would rather suggest that all of those living within the circuit wall participated, called "the hill dwellers" (*montani*), since they lived in the "city of seven hills" (*Septimontium*).

urban *corpus*, framed within the calendar of Republican *tempus*, logically proceeds from the cosmic *locus* of the *Septimontium* itself.

Varro's discussion of the Capitoline and Aventine hills is illustrative of how Varro applied his unique blend of etymology, history, and cosmology in *LL* to provide explanations of the world around him to his readers. The choice to describe the origins of only two of the seven hills under the rubric of the *Septimontium* is also notable. Admittedly, Varro's decision could simply have been due to constraints of space within the overall work. And Varro would ultimately consider the other hills under the rubric of the Rites of the Argei, as I discuss below. Yet limiting his discussion of the *Septimontium* to only the Capitoline and Aventine also implies an essential character to each that could be representative of the *Septimontium*, and Roman history, more generally. Significant, too, is Varro's insistence on emphasizing the natural separation of the two locations through his etymological and environmental explanations, which consistently stress the cultural, spatial, and symbolic divisions between two of Republican Rome's most notable spaces.

In the three names and associated "histories" that Varro presents for the Capitoline hill, the fundamental principle underlying each is its original connection to Saturn, and especially the notion of "seed" or "insemination" that Saturn represents more generally in the Varronian corpus.⁵⁷ Varro's etymological excavation of the Capitoline begins from the contemporary name for the hill in his own day, the *Capitolinus*. In the case of the Capitoline, current usage possessed a deep Republican antiquity, as the origin of the name "Capitolinus" was traditionally tied to the transition between Monarchy and Republic. As Varro states, during the construction of the foundations for the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus – according to legend, dedicated in the Republic's inaugural year⁵⁸ – a human head, *caput*, was discovered (*cum fundamenta foderentur aedis Iovis*,

57 Van Nuffelen 2010: 169. Cf. Aug. *Civ.* 7.19.

58 Legend and historical tradition at Rome agreed that the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, though begun by the King Tarquinius Priscus, was formally dedicated in the transition from monarchy to Republic, though the precise year sees some disagreement. Aside from Tac. *Hist.* 3.72 and Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 5.35.3, who attribute the dedication to M. Helvilius Pulvillus during his second consulship of 507 BCE, all other sources agree that the dedication came in the inaugural year of 509 BCE by the same man during his first consulship, including Liv. 2.8, Polyb. 3.22, and Plut. *Popl.* 14.

caput humanum dicitur inventum, 5.41).⁵⁹ In this version of events, the Romans interpreted the interred head to portend their ultimate domination of the Mediterranean and transformation into the *caput orbis*.⁶⁰ Varro was not the first to record the story. Gemstones dating to the third century BCE represent a scene in which an Etruscan *haruspex* is engaged in the examination of a *caput*,⁶¹ and Fabius Pictor seems to have included the legend in his history.⁶² Although the etymological connection is sound, the story of the *caput Capitolini* appears to resemble a popular folk legend meant to explain contemporary usage.⁶³

59 Spencer 2019: 136 n. 41 states that this is the only time that the words *dicitur inventum* are found together, citing Lacan to make a claim about performed *auctoritas*. While it is true that this is the only occurrence of the two words together, Varro consistently uses the passive voice of *dico* to refer to information as being sourced orally, i.e., from conversations, from folktales, or from generally held knowledge among the *populus*. The participle *inventum* is merely the verbal idea expressed in *oratio obliqua*.

60 Cf. Liv. 1.55, Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 4.59.2, Flor. 1.7.9, *De vir. ill.* 8.4, and Zonar. 7.11 for other versions of the *caput Capitolini* story.

61 Zazoff 1983: 294-5. The disembodied head in these depictions is sometimes interpreted generically as a “prophesying head” of Orpheus or Tages, referencing a moment of epiphany during Etruscan divinatory practice. Cf. de Grummond & Simon 2006.

62 *FRHist* Q. Fabius Pictor F30 (Arnob. 6.7). The story is further fleshed out by Livy (1.55), who mentions that the excavated head possessed a “perfect face” (*integra facie*) that portended the future greatness of Rome. The provenance of the *facies* described by Livy, as in Varro, remains mysterious in both narratives, but one cannot help but think of the *imagines* of Republican Rome; the *integra facies* appears again in Servius (*ad Aen.* 8.634), who mentions that *fictores*, working with bronze or wax, were responsible for the production of *imagines* that resembled the faces of the deceased (*et ad integram faciem arte producere significat; inde fictores dicuntur qui imagines vel signa ex aere vel cera faciunt*). And Polybius (*Hist.* 6.53.5), too, found the uncanny resemblance of the wax masks remarkable (ἡ δ' εἰκῶν ἐστὶ πρόσωπον εἰς ὁμοιότητα διαφερόντως ἐξεργασμένον καὶ κατὰ τὴν πλάσιν καὶ κατὰ τὴν ὑπογραφὴν).

63 Nicolaisen 1976: 153; Baker 1972: 368. Varro’s inclusion of the legend evokes his earlier statement that etymological inquiry itself can be divided into four increasingly difficult-to-attain levels as regards the origins of words (*quattuor gradus*). The lowest level, Varro explains, is that reached ‘even by the common folk’ (*infimus [in] quo populus etiam venit*), and therefore is of less interest to the antiquarian (*Ling.* 5.7-9). In *LL*, Varro rather aims for the subsequent levels – the origins of poetic diction, common language, and, finally, archaic *verba* concerning Rome’s religion and culture, the latter obscured to the greatest extent by the dreaded *vetustas* mentioned above. See

As Varro promises, his investigation of the Capitoline goes beyond the “common” etymology posited in the name itself and probes further back into the depths of legendary time with two other names for the hill. “Before this, the hill was called Tarpeia,” Varro writes, inspired by the Tarpeian Rock that he subsequently refers to as a *monimentum relictum* (5.41).⁶⁴ There, according to L. Calpurnius Piso, some urban-dwelling Romans participated in an annual sacrifice during the Republic in which libations were made at the tomb of Tarpeia.⁶⁵ This hint – a *locus* complete with religious *actio* – prompts a Varronian metonymy, in which the *Tarpeium Saxum* refers not only to the tomb and place of cult, but also to the entire hill where the young Tarpeia legendarily met her end. Here, Varro traces his metaphorical root into uncertain territory, unraveling the historical obscurities of the *monimentum* and claiming to recall its former topographical importance. Following the likes of Fabius Pictor and Cincius Alimentus, Varro can confidently place the Tarpeia story in the twilight years of Rome’s formation, before the Sabine rapprochement, the revelation of the *caput Capitolini*, and the construction of the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus; as the single event of importance for that era, Tarpeia’s death and burial, Varro implicitly argues, must have lent its name to the entire hill. As for Varro’s abbreviated version of the Tarpeia story, it appears on the surface to maintain a neutral stance towards the

Piras 2017: 17–18; Piras 1998: 57–71; and Blank 2008: 69–71, for a discussion of the *quattuor gradus* and *Ling.* 5.7–9.

- 64 *Hinc mons ante Tarpeius dictus a virgine Vestale Tarpeia, quae ibi ab Sabinis necata armis et sepulta; cuius nominis monimentum relictum, quod etiam nunc eius rupes Tarpeium appellatur saxum.* “Before this, the hill was called Tarpeia, from the Vestal Virgin Tarpeia, who was killed by Sabine arms and buried there; a reminder of her name remains, namely that, even now, the hill’s cliff is called the Tarpeian Rock.” The precise location of the *Tarpeium Saxum* is disputed by modern scholars; cf. Neel 2019.
- 65 *FRHist* L. Calpurnius Piso F7 (DH 2.38.2–40.3). Piso’s Tarpeia cuts a positively heroic figure next to the images provided in other Republican histories, including those of Fabius Pictor and Cincius Alimentus. In these stories, Tarpeia is represented as either misguided by love for a Sabine man, or merely drawn greedily to the gold bracelets adorning their arms (cf. Liv. 1.11.9). Crawford’s commentary at *FRHist* F7 (cf. also *FRHist* Fabius Pictor F7) suggests that Piso’s rationalizing account of the Tarpeia story was more his own reworking of the traditional account than evidence for local traditions.

actions of the young woman, merely describing the events – *Vestale Tarpeia, quae ibi ab Sabinis necata armis et sepulta* – instead of ascribing motivations of forlorn love or greed that are advanced in traditional accounts of the story.⁶⁶

Yet Varro does in fact make a significant claim regarding the nature of Tarpeia's legendary behavior in his indication that Tarpeia was a Vestal Virgin, a role that appears to have been a novel addition to the story made by Varro himself.⁶⁷ Varro's language is therefore revealing. Tarpeia's death by Sabine arms and subsequent burial (*ab Sabinis necata armis et sepulta*) could be read instead as simultaneous actions, with the *Sabina arma* acting at once as the instruments of death and burial.⁶⁸ Given Varro's insistence on Tarpeia's status as a Vestal, one is also reminded of the ritual interment of unchaste, living Vestal Virgins in the Campus Sceleratus during the Republic.⁶⁹ By assigning Tarpeia to the Vestals, Varro subtly draws a connection between the death and interment of Tarpeia, Rome's first Vestal in his retelling, and the ritual practice of live inhumation as punishment for unchaste Vestals in his own day. In any

66 Welch 2015: 9-17 examines the various treatments of Tarpeia's story by Roman authors from the Republic to the Empire and from the Roman to the Greek. Greed is the typical motive for Tarpeia's actions, as communicated by Fab. Pict. *FRHist* F7 (cf. Dion. Hal. 2.38.2-40.2), Liv. 1.11.6-9, Ov. *Fast.* 1.260-62, Val. Max. 9.6.1, and Plut. *Rom.* 17.2-4, amongst others. Prop. 4.4, picking up on the treatment of Tarpeia by Hellenistic poets such as Antigonos and Simyllus, ascribes love to the maiden as her principal motivation.

67 Welch 2015: 105. Welch reads this addition by Varro as a commentary on the social and political crises of the first century BCE. Varro's Tarpeia, a traitorous Vestal, not only transgresses the expected political role of a Roman citizen but also the expected social role of the Vestal (for the gender nonconformity of the Vestals, see Beard 1980). Cf. Neel 2019.

68 Two later visual representations encourage this interpretation. A denarius of Augustus minted by a Turpilianus, dated to 19 BCE, shows Tarpeia on the reverse half buried by shields (*RIC* 299). The same motif appears earlier on a denarius of 89 BCE, minted by L. Titurius Sabinus (*RRC* 344/2). The most evocative of representations, however, appears on the frieze relief of the Basilica Aemilia. The image shows Tarpeia flanked by two men and half-buried under shields, which metamorphosize into stone as they approach the ground, clearly connecting her death, her burial, and the hill that once bore her name (Vacínová 2017: 44).

69 Schultz 2012: 122-35.

case, much as the interment (and discovery) of the *caput Capitolini* signaled the transition from monarchy to Republic, so too did Tarpeia's interment indicate the passing of an old, Roman, order for a new, Roman and Sabine, one.⁷⁰

Where Varro's first two explanations of the Capitoline toponym connect transitional moments of the *Res Publica* to human interment, his explanation of the original name of the hill reveals the general principle that links each of these "historical" explanations together (5.42):⁷¹

Hunc antea montem Saturnium appellatum prodiderunt et ab eo Latium Saturniam terram, ut etiam Ennius appellat. Antiquum oppidum in hoc fuisse Saturnia<m> scribitur. Eius vestigia etiam nunc manent tria, quod Saturni fanum in faucibus, quod Saturnia Porta quam Iunius scribit ibi, quam nunc vocant Pandanam, quod post aedem Saturni in aedificiorum legibus privatis parietes postici muri <Saturnii> sunt scripti.

70 In Varro's own day, in which the Social War and Italian municipalization had raised concerns regarding 'Romanness' and citizenship in the Italian peninsula, the morbid story of Tarpeia and its Capitoline *locus* was particularly relevant; in 89 BCE, the aptly named L. Titurius Sabinus oversaw the minting of *denarii* bearing the head of Titus Tatius on the obverse, and the scene of Tarpeia's burial under Sabine shields on the reverse (fig. 7-8), emphasizing Sabine loyalty in the midst of the Social War (Crawford 1996: 344). The Tarpeian rock itself would also serve as a focal point for public execution during the Civil strife between Marius and Sulla (Cadoux 2008: 215-17): in 88 BCE, Sulla had the tribune P. Sulpicius Rufus executed by fall from the Tarpeian rock (Plut. *Sul.* 10); in 86 BCE, Marius in turn ordered the senator Sextus Licinius be hurled from the rock, along with an unnamed tribune of the people (Liv. *Per.* 80, cf. Plut. *Mar.* 45 and Cass. Dio *Frag.* 31, 103.12); and in 84 BCE, one tribune, P. Laenas, condemned the tribune of the previous year, Sextus Lucilius, to death by mortal plunge (Vel. Pat. 2.24). The Tarpeian Rock would again serve as the stage for the public execution of Roman citizens in the aftermath of Caesar's death (App. *B. Civ.* 3.3.1; Cass. Dio 44.50). Varro's recovery of the toponym *Mons Tarpeius*, therefore, with its associated legend of the Vestal Tarpeia's death, also explained the contemporary deaths of Roman citizens on the Capitoline itself; while hardly justifying such actions, it nonetheless provided a believable precedent that implied the treasonous acts of those put to death on the craggy rocks of the Tarpeium Saxum.

71 Spencer 2019's reading of the 'patriotic Capitoline' comes to a similar conclusion as mine, though taking far different steps to arrive there.

There is a tradition that this hill was earlier called the Saturnian and because of this that Latium was called the Saturnian land, as Ennius also calls it. It is written that there was an ancient town on this hill, Saturnia. There are three remnants of this fact today: first, the Temple of Saturn sitting along the approach to the hill; second, the Gate of Saturn which Junius writes is there, which they now call ‘Pandana’; and third, behind the Temple of Saturn, in the private laws of construction, the posterior walls of these buildings are written about as ‘Saturnian walls.’

Varro here provides his reader the deepest recoverable origins of Rome’s most important religious and political space, the Capitoline hill. The connection with Saturn, as Varro explains, is evident given the spatial evidence he marshals for his explanation, including the Temple of Saturn itself, the former *Porta Saturnia*, called Pandana in Varro’s day, and the *muri Saturnii* indicated in the *leges privatae aedificiorum*.⁷² Elsewhere in book 5, Varro provides two hints for the importance of the foundational, Saturnian moment of Rome’s religious center – first, the fact that Saturn “was named from *satus*,” sowing (5.64), and therefore referenced the *bonus labor* of the Roman citizen, discussed by Varro in his *Res Rusticae* (RR 2.praef).⁷³ Second, Varro picks up on the Sabine thread woven into his story of Tarpeia; the name Saturn, he explains, has roots in both the Latin and Sabine languages and could refer to either one (5.74). Varro revisits the arboreal metaphor of the tree on the boundary line, proclaiming that the name Saturn especially is like a tree that “springs up along the property line and spreads through both fields” (*ut arbores quae in confinio natae in utroque agro serpent*, 5.74). Allegorically, for Varro, Saturn “symbolizes

72 Enn. *Ann.* 21 refers to all of Italy as *Saturnia terra*, cf. Skutsch 1985: 179-81. See Guittard 1983 for a discussion of the location of the Temple of Saturn and this passage.

73 Spanier 2010; Nelsestuen 2015: 31-72; Blandenet 2016. Pace Kronenberg 2009: 94-107, who reads Scrofa’s account as deeply satirical rather than a genuine reflection of Varronian thought.

all processes of insemination, covering all kinds of seeds, from the cosmic cycle of the *seminalia caeli* to human sperm.”⁷⁴ The previous two etymologies then are construed as acts of sowing in their own right, each of which yields new forms of state as a result. The fundamental nature of the *locus* of the Capitoline hill, as Varro explains, is one that is characterized by *satus*, both in an agricultural and metaphorical sense. Coincidentally, Varro’s description of the Capitoline hill also emphasizes the cosmic origins of agriculture in the *Saturnia tella*, itself a golden-age image that would later be explored in Virgil’s fourth *Eclogue*.⁷⁵ Seen from his present moment, the contemporary urban city paradoxically finds its true, essentially rural nature in Varro’s excavation of the urban edifice and recovery of the cosmic *terra* upon which it was situated.⁷⁶

The cosmic significance of the Capitoline hill is emphasized by Varro’s subsequent reading of the Aventine hill. Where he reconstructs the names of the Capitoline hill as all centering on the nature of the Roman *civitas* and its place within the structure of his etymological *cosmos*, here he provides what reads as a chaotic competition between etymologies for the Aventine (5.43):

Aventinum aliquot de causis dicunt. N<a>evius ab avibus, quod eo se ab Tiberi ferrent aves, alii ab rege Aventino Albano, quod <ibi> sit sepultus, alii A<d>ventinum ab adventu hominum, quod co<m>mune Latinorum ibi Dianae templum sit constitutum.

They call it “Aventine” for several reasons. Naevius says it’s due to birds, since birds conveyed themselves there from the Tiber. Others mention that it’s because of the Alban King Aventinus, since he is buried there. Still others that it’s *adventine*, from the arrival of men, since the Temple of Diana was built there in common for the Latins.

Varro’s competing tricolon sows etymological uncertainty. Naevius’ connection with birds would appear to reference the augural competition

74 Van Nuffelen 2010: 169. Cf. Varro *ARD* 239: *penes quem sationum omnium dominatum est*.

75 Whittaker 2007.

76 Discussed by Spencer 2019: 129–60.

between Romulus and Remus, and therefore the state of the *pomerium* itself, which excluded the Aventine hill in Varro's day.⁷⁷ The connection with King Aventinus taps into the well of Alban kings, whose connections to Aeneas and his descendants had been carefully constructed by the end of the third century BCE.⁷⁸ And the youngest of the etymological explanations, the construction of the Temple of Diana by Servius Tullius, depicts the Aventine as a *locus* of the Latin federation and of plebeian secession.⁷⁹ Although diverse in their temporal characteristics, each nevertheless describes the Aventine as something of an outlier: the etymologies surrounding Remus' failed foundation, the Alban King Aventinus' presence even before the Romulean foundation, and the center of religion for the Latins and secession for the *plebs* share a desire to understand why the Aventine was different, including why it was excluded from the *pomerium* in the first century BCE and why it had become associated so closely with the *plebs* and their secessions.

Unlike in his exploration of the Capitoline, Varro disagrees with these other attempts at understanding the mythical, legendary, and religious exclusion of the Aventine. The nature of the Aventine, he argues, can only be understood by reference to its original place within the environment and, therefore, the etymological *cosmos* that he has to this point established (5.44):

Ego maxime puto, quod ab advectu: nam olim paludibus mons erat ab reliquis disclusus. Itaque eo ex urbe advehebantur ratibus, cuius vestigia, quod ea qua <vec>tum dicitur Velabrum, et unde escendebant ad <in>fimam Novam Viam locus sacellum <Ve>labrum.

77 Mignone 2016b: 391-405, esp. 399 n. 36. As Mignone argues, the Aventine was not accursed by Remus' augury (suggested by Gellius) but rather was the seat of Romulus' own *augurium*.

78 Serv. *ad Aen.* 7.657. Servius remarks that some referred to King Aventinus as the king of the *Aborigines*. See Syed 2004: 217-24 for further comment on Vergil's interest in cultural identity and ethnicity in the *Aeneid*. For the constructed relationship between Aeneas and the Alban kings, see Casali 2010: 48, who demonstrates that it was Fabius Pictor (cf. Plut. *Rom.* 3.1-3) who first made this connection.

79 Mignone 2016a: 17-47.

But I actually believe that it is called this because it comes from “conveyance”: for long ago, the hill was cut off from the others by marshes. And so people were carried *from the city (ex urbe)* to the hill on rafts, evidence of which is the fact that the area where the conveyance took place is called the “ferry” (*Velabrum*), and where they landed, at the lowest part of the Via Nova, there is a shrine there too called “ferry.”⁸⁰

As with his description of the Capitoline hill, Varro’s articulation of the Aventine’s sordid history depends upon the essential environmental nature of the place.⁸¹ For the Capitoline, agricultural practice, represented by Saturn, defined the use of the Saturnian lands and the lives of those living on and around the Saturnian hill. But for the Aventine, the hill’s consistent exclusion in the historiography of the Republic – from the death of Remus to the Gracchan Secession of 121 – painted it as the “other” location outside of Rome, located *ex urbe*. Again, the truth of the historiographical tradition is hardly relevant; it is difficult, in fact, to assert the historicity of any of the Plebeian secessions and their connection to the Aventine.⁸² Yet Varro’s stated goal was to describe Rome as it appeared to him, including the social and cultural data as he perceived and understood them to be in his own day. And by leading the reader on a journey from the golden, grain-gilt lands of Saturn near the Capitoline to the *disclusus* Aventine, located outside of the political development of the city as represented by the Capitoline and in the midst of marshes, only reachable by Velabrum, he depicted a very specific version of how Rome’s deepest origins contributed to its present social and cultural state.⁸³ Varro depicts his reconstruction as both environmentally deter-

80 According to De Melo 2019: 687, Varro’s preferred etymology for *Aventinus* from *advectus* is in fact the weakest of the bunch due to the phonological dissimilarities between the two words.

81 Spencer 2019: 139, interprets Varro’s environmental explanation of the Velabrum as demonstrating the “Roman hydraulic innovation” in the transformation of the city.

82 Mignone 2016a.

83 According to coring data in the Velabrum, Varro was correct that the area was marshy, though never so inundated as to be navigable by boat, see Ammerman 1990 and 2018.

mined (through the *disclusus Aventinus*) and cosmically justified, the Capitoline-Aventine *bina* fitting neatly within the cosmological system that Varro emphasizes from the outset of book 5.⁸⁴

In reality, the Aventine was always an important part of Rome's urban fabric in the middle Republic, as Ennius suggests in his placement of the augural contest between Romulus and Remus on that hill, and as archaeological evidence indicates. In the middle Republic, the Aventine was the site of numerous manubial temple dedications, public infrastructure projects, and important religious festivals. The majority of public construction was undertaken there from 318 BCE to 228 BCE, with further dedications throughout the second century BCE to the west and north of the hill in the *forum Boarium*.⁸⁵ Strikingly, after 121 BCE there appears to have been no public construction on the Aventine or its slopes; whether a result of C. Gracchus' failed attempt at secession on the Aventine in that year or for other reasons, the hill likely saw no major public infrastructural investment until Agrippa's aedileship in 33 BCE. From Varro's perspective, then, the very material fabric of much of the Aventine's civic and religious architecture would have betrayed their exclusion, for some time, from the typical acts of construction and renovation undertaken by Rome's aediles and censors in other parts of the city. To sharpen the irony, the archaic *Septimontium* was more likely to have corresponded to Antistius Labeo's description as containing the Palatine, the Velian, the Fagatal, the Cermalus, the Oppian, the Caelian, and the Cispan – entirely excluding the Capitoline and Aventine hills that Varro makes central to Rome's place within the etymological cosmos of book 5.

84 The historical reality of Varro's depiction of Rome's urban development, of course, does not account for what we know of the middle Republic. In the first instance, the exclusion of the Aventine from the city described by Varro in geographical terms found a parallel in a first century BCE account of that hill's exclusion from the pomerial boundary. M. Valerius Messala Rufus, who was made augur in 81 BCE and elected consul in 53 BCE, wrote in *de Auspiciis*, published in the second half of the first century BCE, that the Aventine was not included in the pomerium due to its ominous location southwest of Romulus' *auguraculum* on the Palatine. See Gell. *NA* 13.14.4-6. Cf. Mignone 2016c: 400-2, for a discussion of Messala's augural authority and his role in propagating this idea.

85 Davies 2017: 82-83.

IV. Conclusion

Varro's treatment of the *Septimontium*, then, must be understood with regard to its engagement with contemporary topography and the reimagined cosmic structure posited in book 5 of *LL*. While his discussion should not be utilized as evidence for the historical development of Rome's cityscape and the divisions of the city as actually experienced by its inhabitants in previous centuries,⁸⁶ it is nevertheless an important datum for understanding the shifting perceptions of urban space in the first century BCE and, most importantly, their ideological implications. By construing the etymological books of *LL* within this cosmological framework, Varro engages in a far more interesting exercise than simple etymology; he presents, in fact, a unique way of engaging with the past, in which place and time collapse to reveal fundamental truths about Rome, its citizens, and its institutions.

If one were to extend the foregoing analysis to the remainder of the *locus* section of *LL* 5, other observations of interest arise. The infamous Shrines of the Argei, which have attracted immense interest principally for their role, again, in Roman ritual and in the spatial divisions of the city, become merely vehicles for Varro to access the long-lost natural landscape of the city.⁸⁷ In each instance, religious *actio* is guaranteed by *natura* – the name of the Esquiline is derived from the oak trees (*aesculi*) that once populated the hill, evidence of which is apparent in the Beech

86 Mommsen 1876: 143-44 and 163, interpreted Varro's description of the city's development, alongside other evidence recounting the Servian tribes of Rome, to reflect the existence of the "dual cities" of Republican Rome, of which one was claimed by the *patres*, the other by the *plebs*. Mommsen's analytical framework necessitated that the *plebs*, if they were to be considered an essential and primary "community" (*Gemeinwesen*) of Rome, possessed their own legal and political institutions, along with their own communal spaces. Given that the Aventine itself was only connected to Plebeian secession after 121 (cf. Mignone 2016a), and that the entire notion of the patrician *gentes* and their privileges was a constantly contested "fiction" (cf. Smith 2006), the idea of "essential" communities of patricians and *plebs* stretching back to Rome's foundation is suspect.

87 For a recent bibliography on the rites and shrines of the Argei, see Palombi 2017: 15-47, esp. 16 n. 2-3.

Tree Grove (*fagutalis*) and the chapel of the oak-grove Lares (*Larum Querquetulanum sacellum*); the Viminal is explained as having been populated by willow-copses (*vimineta*); the Palatine, rather than being named from Evander's or the Latins' settlements, is connected to flocks (*pecus*), and in particular the bleating (*balare*) sheep that once roamed the hill (*Balatium*); the Germalus, while referring to the brothers Romulus and Remus (*germani*), focalizes the *Ficus Ruminalis* under which the boys were found; and, finally, the Velia, in an incredible leap of etymological reasoning, is demonstrated to have been named from the Balatine shepherds who plucked (*vellere*) the fleeces (*vellera*) from their sheep there. To be clear, few of these etymologies are supported in the ancient world or by modern etymological method, but they nevertheless together form an essential, natural, and cosmic image of the city of Rome that serves as the basis for Varro's exploration of *locus*, *corpus*, *tempus*, and *actio* in books 5 and 6.

I have made the case in this article that Varro's project in *LL* 5 should be examined both for the sophisticated cosmological structure that guides his etymological inquiry and for how it creates a persuasive, all-encompassing image of the Roman past, present, and future, an approach reminiscent of contemporary engagements with cosmography among the Roman literati. The sacro-idyllic image conjured by Varro in *LL*, written, we think, in the years between the end of the civil war between Pompey and Caesar and Caesar's assassination, could plausibly be read as a retreat into the arcane past by a man whose political fortunes were complex and varied – a partisan of Pompey who, nevertheless, was named by Caesar as the director of his public library.⁸⁸ But one would also be justified in interpreting this image as simultaneously a representation of Rome's perceived place as the *caput mundi*, and a stark reminder of the civic, religious, and social institutions, and the resulting *mores*, that had led Rome to its apex. Elsewhere it is clear that Varro did not consider many of his contemporaries to be fulfilling those traditional ideals that he painstakingly illuminated elsewhere in his *oeuvre*.⁸⁹ The etymological books of *LL*, then, might be fruitfully understood in a similar light, as an expression and embrace of the shared word-history that united Romans

88 Horsfall 1972: 121-22.

89 E.g. *Rust.* 1.13.7, 2.praef.2-4, 3.3.10, 3.6.6; *VPR* 65 and 115-16 (P).

and cosmically guaranteed their place at the center of the Mediterranean world – if only those living in Rome could remember it.

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