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**A 1st-century bce Roman polymath's explanation of the mysteries of Latin: Varro.
On the Latin Language**

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Plurilingualism in Traditional Eurasian Scholarship

Thinking in Many Tongues

Edited by

Glenn W. Most
Dagmar Schäfer
Mårten Söderblom Saarela



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A 1st-Century BCE Roman Polymath's Explanation of the Mysteries of Latin

Varro, On the Latin Language

Glenn W. Most and Michele Loporcaro

Marcus Terentius Varro, the greatest scholar of ancient Rome, was born in 116 BCE, in Reate (modern Rieti) in the Sabine territory northeast of Rome, into a wealthy family of the senatorial class. Freed from the need to earn his living, he could study with the leading professors of his age in Rome (Lucius Aelius Stilo, ca. 154–74 BCE) and Athens (Antiochus of Ascalon, head of the Platonic Academy, ca. 120–68 BCE), and then embarked on a political career with some success (arriving as high as the praetorship, probably in 68 BCE). But he had the misfortune to opt in the Civil War for the losing Pompeian side. The victorious Julius Caesar not only granted him clemency but also appointed him to establish the first public library in Rome. After Caesar's assassination (which thwarted the projected library) he was proscribed by Mark Antony in 43 BCE, but he survived (doubtless because he was not considered a serious enough threat politically), though his villa and private library were pillaged. He spent the rest of his life in dignified and highly productive scholarly retirement, dying in 27 BCE at the age of 89.

Varro's long lifetime coincided with a period of enormous political upheaval that saw the bloody collapse of the Roman Republic and the creation of the Roman Principate under the first Emperor Augustus. The Jugurthine War against the Numidians (112–106 BCE) began when he was four years old and was followed during his lifetime by numerous other wars and battles against foreign enemies (Arausio 105 BCE, Aquae Sextiae 102, and Vercellae 101 against the Teutons, Cimbri, and Ambrones; the First Mithridatic War against Pontus, the Greeks, and Bithynia 89–85, followed by the Second 83–81 and Third one 73–63; Pompey's siege of Jerusalem 63; the Gallic War 58–50; Julius Caesar's invasions of Britain 55 and 54; the disastrous Battle of Carrhae against the Parthians 53; Mark Antony's Parthian War 33), disaffected Italians (Social War 91–87 BCE), local slaves (the Third Servile War of Spartacus, 73–71), and Mediterranean pirates (67–66). Varro himself pursued a military career along with his political one, in association with Pompey; in the war against the pirates, he was awarded the highest honor for courage. But foreign enemies, numerous as they

were, obviously did not suffice for the Romans of this period. In addition, one bloody civil war after another pitted Romans against Romans (Sulla's first and second civil wars, 88 and 83; the Sertorian War 80–72; Caesar's Civil War 49–45; the Liberators' Civil War 42). Political turmoil was caused by bitter rivalry between male protagonists (for example, Marius and Sulla) and their competitive support structures, was intensified by conspiracies (Second Catilinarian conspiracy 63), and was formalized rather than being resolved by uneasy temporary alliances (the First triumvirate of Pompey, Julius Caesar, and Marcus Licinius Crassus 63; the Second triumvirate of Octavian, Mark Antony, and Marcus Aemilius Lepidus 43–33). Varro lived long enough to experience not only the defeat of Pompey at Pharsalus (48) but also the assassination of Julius Caesar (44) and the decisive naval victory by Octavian over Mark Antony and Cleopatra at Actium (31) that marked the end of Rome's Republican civil wars. The year he died, the Roman senate awarded Octavian the titles of *Augustus* (august) and *princeps* (the first of all), thereby formalizing the end of the Roman Republic and the beginning of the Principate.

Other Romans reacted to this turmoil by trying to intervene politically, and many of them ended up paying the highest price for this—so for example Varro's friend Cicero, who was also proscribed by Mark Antony but, being not so lucky (or so innocuous) as Varro, was murdered by Roman soldiers in 43 BCE. Varro instead sought a remedy for the ills of his time by helping the Romans to understand their own cultural institutions, in a concerted and systematic attempt to give them a concrete sense of shared values that could provide a solid foundation for social harmony. If only the bewildering profusion of obscure local customs, words, and beliefs could be analyzed so as to be capable of being understood as particular manifestations of a few simple and universally valid principles, it might be possible to harness the violent energies that political dissension created and exacerbated, and to redirect them instead towards more pacific and constructive ends. As Cicero wrote of Varro,

we were wandering and straying about like visitors in our own city, and your books led us, so to speak, right home, and enabled us at last to realize who and where we were. You have revealed the age of our native city, the chronology of its history, the laws of its religion and its priesthood, its civil and its military institutions, the topography of its districts and its sites, the terminology, classification and moral and rational basis of all our religious and secular institutions, and you have likewise shed a flood of light upon our poets and generally on Latin literature and the Latin language ...¹

¹ Cicero, *Academica* 1.3.9, trans. Rackham.

Varro was a polymath of astounding erudition and productivity. As Augustine wrote, “he read so much that we are astonished that he had any free time left to write, and he wrote so much that we can scarcely believe anyone could have read so much.”² By the age of 78 he had already produced 490 books; the titles of 55 of his works have been transmitted; scholars estimate that he probably wrote about 74 treatises comprising 620 papyrus rolls. He is known to have written on almost every conceivable subject: Roman history, geography, the Latin language, literary history, philosophy, music, rhetoric, law, religion, architecture, medicine, and agriculture. As far as we can tell from his surviving works, Varro applied contemporary Greek scholarly concepts and methods to Roman materials in such a way as to produce a synthesis that accorded Rome the dignity among the high cultures of the world that its power and wealth deserved. To what extent Varro’s detailed understanding of Greek philosophy and scholarship can be relied upon remains a subject of controversy; but his reporting of Roman matters (history, institutions, language), except, crucially, for the historical explanation of the origins or words, seems to be by and large fairly accurate from the vantage point of the corresponding modern disciplines.

Of all his voluminous scholarly production, almost everything has been lost. Hundreds of fragments and reports are preserved in the form of quotations, paraphrases, and summaries by other ancient authors whose works are still extant, especially Christian ones like Lactantius (ca. 250–ca. 325 CE), Arnobius (died ca. 330 CE), and above all Augustine (354–430 CE), who is probably our most important source for Varro. But only two of his treatises survived antiquity to be transmitted directly by medieval manuscripts: *De re rustica* (*On Agriculture*), in three books, which has survived complete; and *De lingua Latina* (*On the Latin Language*), originally in 25 books, of which Books 5 and 6 survive wholly and Books 7 through 10 partly.³

In its original entirety, *On the Latin Language* presented a typically Varroian systematic and complete classification of the whole of its subject matter, comprising an introduction (Book 1) and then discussions of “etymology,” the derivations of single words and the relations between words and things (Books 2–7); morphology, the inflectional modifications of single words (8–13); and syntax, the grammatical combinations of words into clauses (14–25). Books 2–4 were dedicated to Septumius, Varro’s quaestor (a kind of administrative assistant), the remaining ones to Cicero; and therefore, the whole treatise must have been published before Cicero’s death in 43 BCE.

2 Augustine, *On the City of God* 6.2, our translation.

3 As usual in such cases, we can figure out what the content of the lost books was like from quotations of passages in later authors (grammarians and others).

Varro's analysis of the Latin language is guided, on the one hand, by the principles of Hellenistic Greek linguistics, as these had been developed by philosophers (especially Stoics), grammarians, and textual philologists; on the other, by his profound antiquarian erudition concerning such matters as religious rituals, political and legal institutions, obsolete and regional words, and archaic poetic texts. His discussion of etymology survives only in part, but from the analogy of his expository procedure in his other works and elsewhere in *On the Latin Language*, it seems highly probable that in Book 2 (lost) he argued against the thesis that etymology was a scientific art and in Book 3 (lost) in favor of this thesis, and that, having decided the case in favor, he devoted Book 4 (lost) to expounding the principles of etymology in general terms.⁴

Varro prefers to use Latin technical terminology and so he tends to avoid translating the Greek technical term *etymologia* into Latin (unlike Cicero, for example, who provided it with a Latin calque as *veriloquium*, *Topica* 35), and even the Greek term itself he uses quite sparingly (he introduces and explains it at 5.1.2 as though he were using it for the first time there). In the theoretical pronouncements found in the surviving books, Varro stresses the difficulty of etymological analysis (5.1.3–6, 7.1.4), due in part to the changes in the spelling of words over time, which makes it necessary to add, subtract, or change letters (6.1.2, 7.1.1–3), in part to such other factors as the importation of foreign words, errors in their formation, and forgetfulness about their meanings. He compares the modes of analogical etymology in an ascending order of value, from those performed by ordinary people to those of grammarians, philosophers, and finally mystic initiates (5.1.7–9)—whereby the correct Latin text and meaning of this last category are uncertain.⁵

As for the procedures that Varro himself employs in his etymological practice, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to discern a highly systematic quality

4 “Art” vs. “science” are two labels which occur to this day in discussions of the status of etymology. In contemporary discourse, qualifying it as an “art” is usually tantamount to denial of scientific status: cf. e.g., Zamboni, *Letimologia*, 39. In this connection, one can mention Spitzer's insightful definition of etymology as a “Kunst mit wissenschaftlichem Apparat hantierend” (an “art tinkering with a scientific apparatus,” Spitzer, “Werkstatt des Etymologen,” 158). This stresses the creative component of etymology or the fact that finding a good etymology “è non ‘realizzare un programma’ ma ‘fare una scoperta’” (is not “implementing a program” but “making a discovery”), as Belardi puts it. Belardi, *Letimologia*, 36.

5 Some linguists (cf. Pisani, “Non solum ad Aristophanis lucernam,” 203–204, or Pfaffel, *Quartus gradus etymologiae*, 238) have argued that this is comparative philology, involving inspection of older attested and/or reconstructed forms, as well as cross-linguistic comparison, but this is highly controversial.

in them. Attempts have been made by scholars to distinguish between Stoic, Alexandrian, and historical elements and methods in Varro's etymologies,⁶ but while his method is no doubt eclectic, a strict separation of those components proves difficult. The unifying factor characterizing his own etymological practice with respect to his Greek predecessors can be identified in the shift from a preoccupation with philosophical issues to one mainly directed to language. The quest for the origin of language and the hypothesis of an original intrinsic adequacy of words to their referents, which was initiated by Heraclitus and for which the earliest extant testimony is Cratylus's stance in Plato's homonymous dialogue (cf. Chapter 2.3), was later advocated by the Stoics, at whose school Varro's teacher Aelius Stilo had studied. These philosophical discussions of etymology yielded in Rome to a more praxis-oriented etymology in the service of grammatical analysis: however one understands Varro's "fourth level" (see above, and fn. 5), it is a fact that philosophical etymology is just the third level, hierarchically subordinate to the fourth. Thus, while the procedures stayed largely the same as the ones inherited from the Greek (philosophical) tradition, emphasis was laid on different aspects. For example, for the Stoics, operations on the word sounds (and letters), replacing or displacing them, were a means to restore the original alleged adequacy, still seen transparently (by hypothesis) in onomatopoeia, but not elsewhere. Accordingly, onomatopoeia is appealed to by Varro, but this accounts for a minority of his etymologies,⁷ while his focus is clearly on historical and structural links between words, including those attested somewhere else than in the standard Latin forms he purports to explain. He often refers to loan words from foreign languages, which he identifies as the source for a Latin word and does not trace back any further within those languages themselves, thus aiming at what we now call "immediate/proximate etymology" rather than the remote etymology. He also capitalizes on historical knowledge when he points to older forms of Classical Latin words which he is aware of from his expertise in Roman antiquarian matters. He often derives words by metaphorical extension from other words. However, most of Varro's etymologies are based upon what seem to us to be only very slight similarities between the forms of two words that he claims to be linked with one another by some vague or arbitrary semantic connections that fit the

6 See especially Pfaffel, "Prinzipien," and Pfaffel, *Quartus gradus etymologiae*.

7 Where Varro applies this procedure for the names of animals (5.11.75), like *upupa* "hoopoe," *cuculus* "cuckoo" or *corvus* "raven" (5.11.75), deriving their names *ab suis vocibus* (from the sounds they make), modern philology concurs with him, while this is not the case in most other instances of onomatopoeic explanation, as e.g., for *puls* "porridge" (5.22.105).

proposed formal link.⁸ And, like most ancient etymologists, Varro saw no problem in a word having more than one etymology.

Varro's etymologies are plurilingual in various senses. For one thing, he is very attentive to the introduction into Latin of words from other languages, a preoccupation which attests to the shift from philosophical to purely linguistic focus. Thus, a considerable number of Latin words are said to be derived from Greek ones—not because, as many of Varro's contemporaries believed, the Latin language as a whole was derived from Greek, but because cultural contact led to the importation of a certain number of terms from one language to the other. But Greek is not the only source that Varro mentions: other Italic languages like Sabine also appear often. Again, Varro is very attentive to regional and local differences and to the changes in spelling and meaning of words over time: there is an intrinsic plurilingualism within the Latin language itself, sedimented in its historical development and reflected in its geographical heterogeneity. Because Varro's whole approach is descriptive rather than prescriptive, he regards these anomalies and inconsistencies as important elements, ones that need to be preserved by the linguist rather than being leveled out. This stance also led him to be probably the only one among the scholars of classical antiquity who did not conceive of the change of language over time as language decay, a long-held idea that goes from the *Cratylus* until the early scientific studies of historical linguistics (in particular with August Schleicher) and still remains in the view of many laypeople. In particular, his observation that “the usage of speech is in motion. Thus, better things become worse and worse things, better” (9.11.17), shows that “Varrone ... è ... l'unico antico ad impostare una teoria linguistica che tenga conto della diacronia e della sincronia” (Varro ... is ... the only ancient to construct a linguistic theory that takes into account diachrony and synchrony).⁹

Varro's treatise exercised an enormous influence upon all later scholars working on the history and grammar of the Latin language, from the pagan grammarians and commentators of later Antiquity through the Christian authors of the early and later Middle Ages up to the Renaissance humanists and well into modern times. It was only with the growth of a modern linguistic science of etymology that his work was finally superseded once and for all and came to be recognized for what it is: a supreme example of Roman indigenous

8 This is not to say that he did not proceed with intellectual rigor: quite on the contrary, as Pfaffel, “Prinzipien” convincingly shows. Simply, the method for controlling—in a way that appears scientific to us—such operations on the forms of words was a much later discovery (see Chapter 2.1).

9 Cavazza, *Varrone etimologo e grammatico*, 158.

antiquarianism rather than a transhistorically reliable guide to the etymology of Latin words. It is easy to belittle Varro; but to do so does justice neither to his own achievement nor to his historical significance. The judgment of his most recent editor, de Melo, is finely balanced:

The contrast between ancient and modern etymology is not meant to make Varro look like a dilettante. There are areas where the tools available to Varro would have enabled him to do better, but on the whole he achieved what was achievable in the first century BCE, and for that I cannot help but respect him, even if by modern standards he is mostly right where an etymology is obvious and mostly wrong where it is not. But being wrong does not mean being stupid. Every journey begins with a first step.¹⁰

¹⁰ Varro, *De lingua Latina*, ed. and trans. de Melo, 1:36.



Latin Text

Varro, *On the Latin Language*, excerpted from *De lingua Latina*, vol. 1: *Introduction, Text, and Translation*, ed. and trans. Wolfgang David Cirilo de Melo (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), round parentheses and angle brackets in the original.; punctuation and capitalization by Glenn W. Most and Michele Loporcaro.

Excerpt 1: 5.1.1–3

- 1 Quemadmodum uocabula essent imposita rebus in lingua Latina, sex libris exponere institui. de his tris ante hunc feci quos Septumio misi, in quibus est de disciplina, quam uocant ἐτυμολογικήν: quae contra ea⟨m⟩ dicerentur, uolumine primo, quae pro ea, secundo, quae de ea, tertio. in his ad te scribam, a quibus rebus uocabula imposita sint in lingua Latina, et ea quae sunt in consuetudine apud ⟨populum et ea quae inueniuntur apud⟩ poetas.
- 2 Cum unius cuiusque uerbi naturae sint duae, a qua re et in qua re uocabulum sit impositum (itaque a qua re sit *pertinacia* cum requi⟨ri⟩tur, ostenditur esse a *perten⟨den⟩do*; in qua re sit impositum dicitur cum demonstratur, in quo non debet *pertendi* et *pertendit*, *pertinaciam* esse, quod in quo oporteat manere, si in eo perstet, *perseuerantia* sit), priorem illam partem, ubi cur et unde sint uerba scrutantur, Graeci uocant ἐτυμολογίαν, illam alteram περ⟨ι⟩σημαινομένων. de quibus duabus rebus in his libris promiscue dicam, sed exilius de posteriore.
- 3 Quae ideo sunt obscuriora, quod neque omnis impositio uerborum exstat, quod uetustas quasdam deleuit, nec quae exstat sine mendo omnis imposita, nec quae recte est imposita, cuncta manet (multa enim uerba li⟨t⟩teris commutatis sunt interpolata), neque omnis origo est nostrae linguae e uernaculis uerbis, et multa uerba aliud nunc ostendunt, aliud ante significabant, ut hostis:

11 Publius Septumius had been Varro's *quaestor* (a public financial administrator in the Roman Republic).

12 Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BCE), celebrated Roman statesman and philosopher, a friend of Varro's.

13 Ancient grammarians used the term *littera* promiscuously to designate both “letter” and “sound.”

14 The Latin word's polysemy developed, as Varro rightly says, out of an original meaning “foreigner (as guest),” as proven by IE comparison, as cognates such as Russian *gost'* or German *Gast*, both only “guest,” point, formally and semantically, to PIE **ghosti-* “stranger, guest” (*EDL* 291). Only in Latin did the word develop the “hostile” meaning rightly reported as a secondary one by Varro, which lives on in Romance giving words for “army”: cf. Spanish *hueste*, Romanian *oaste*, Old Italian *oste*, while the modern Italian homophonous *oste* “innkeeper” ultimately comes via Old French *hoste* from Latin *hospitem*, the accusative of *hospes* “guest, host.” The latter, originally a compound of the same PIE base + the root of *potis* “able, master of” (< PIE **pót-i-* “able, master of”), was the Latin word that inherited

English Translation

Translated by Glenn W. Most.

Excerpt 1: 5.1.1–3

I decided to explain, in six books, in what way words have been applied to things
 in the Latin language. Of these, I wrote three, before this one, which I dedicated
 to Septumius,¹¹ in which the discipline they call “etymology” is discussed: in the
 first volume, what is said against it; in the second, what is said in its favor; in
 the third, what is said about it. In the following ones, dedicated to you,¹² I shall
 write from what things words are applied in the Latin language, both those that
 are customary among <the people and those that are found among> poets.

Every single word possesses two natural aspects, from what thing and to
 what thing the word is applied—so for example, when it is asked from what
 thing *pertinacia* “obstinacy” is, it is shown to be from *pertendendo* “persisting,”
 while on what thing it is laid down is stated when it is explained that there
 is *pertinacia* “obstinacy” when someone should not *pertendere* “persist,” and
 yet *pertendit* “persists,” whereas when someone ought to continue, if he *per-*
stat “perseveres” in it, this is *perseverantia* “perseverance.” That first part, which
 studies why words come about and from what source, the Greeks call “etymol-
 ogy”; the second part, “on the things signified.” I shall speak about both of these
 things in the following books without keeping them separate, but less about the
 latter one.

These matters are rather obscure because not every word that has been
 applied is still extant, since the passage of time has eradicated some; and not
 every word that is extant has been applied without an error, nor are all those
 that have been applied correctly still extant (for many words have received a
 new appearance by changes in the letters);¹³ nor has every source for our lan-
 guage been from homeborn words; and many words now indicate one thing
 but previously signified another—like *hostis*,¹⁴ for they used to call with that

the meanings that the outcomes of PIE **ghosti-* preserve in Germanic and Slavic, keep-
 ing these together with the symmetrical one of “host”: this coexistence is probably due
 to *hostis* and *hos(pes)* ultimately coming from a PIE abstract noun meaning “exchange”
 (EDL 291).

nam tum eo uerbo dicebant peregrinum qui suis legibus uteretur, nunc dicunt eum quem tum dicebant *perduellem*.

Excerpt II: 5.1.6–10

- 6 Quorum uerborum nouorum ac ueterum discordia omnis in consuetudine com⟨m⟩uni, quot modis commutatio sit facta qui animaduernerit, facilius scrutari origines patietur uerborum. reperiet enim esse commutata, ut in superioribus libris ostendi, maxime propter bis quaternas causas: litterarum enim fit demptione aut additione et propter earum tra⟨ie⟩ctionem aut commutationem, item syllabarum productione ⟨aut correptione et adiectione aut detractione⟩. ...
- 7 Nunc singulorum uerborum origines expediam, quorum quattuor explanandi gradus. infimus quo populus etiam uenit: quis enim non uidet unde ar⟨g⟩e⟨n⟩tīfodinae et uiocurus? secundus quo grammatica escendit antiqua, quae ostendit quemadmodum quodque poeta finxerit uerbum quod confinxerit, quod declinarit. hic Pacui:
- rudentum sibilus,
hic:
incuruicercuicum pecus,
hic:
chlamyde clupeat b⟨r⟩acchium.
- 8 Tertius gradus, quo philosophia ascendens peruenit atque ea quae in consuetudine communi essent aperire coepit, ut a quo dictum esset *oppidum*,

15 Latin *perduellis* “state enemy” derives from *bellum* “war,” still *duellum* in Plautus (see fn. 29), *Amphitryon* 189, which is in turn of uncertain origin: Pinault, “*Bellum*,” proposed that it comes from earlier **duen(u)lum* “quite good” (*EDL* 70)—and so is ultimately identical with the word that lives on in It. *bello*, Fr. *beau* “beautiful, handsome”—though, as de Melo remarks, the meaning “brave” which this proposal implies is not attested. Varro, *De lingua Latina*, ed. and trans. de Melo, 2:960. (A different proposal in *LEW* 1.100, comparing Greek *déios* “inimical, terrible,” is formally dubious, especially since the Greek word seems to be a loan from some non-Indoeuropean language, see *EDG* 323). Be that as it may, Varro (7.3.49) grasps the relationship between *perduellis* (also attested since Plautus, *Amphitryon*), which preserved original *du-* possibly as fixed juridical terminology, and *bellum*, commenting on the change: “*Perduelles* dicuntur hostes. Vt *perfecit*, sic *perduellis*, ⟨a *per*⟩ et *duellum*. Id postea *bellum*.” (Enemies are called *perduelles*. Just as there is *perfecit* “he accomplished,” so there is *perduellis* “enemy,” ⟨from *per* “thoroughly”⟩ and *duellum* “war.” This became *bellum* later.)

word a foreigner who was subject to his own laws, but now they use it to call someone whom they used to call *perduellis*¹⁵ “enemy.”

Excerpt II: 5.1.6–10

With regard to those words, both new ones and old ones, among which there is every kind of variation in ordinary usage, someone who has considered in how many ways alteration has come about will find it an easier task to study the origins of words: for he will find that they have been altered, as I showed in the earlier books, above all for two groups of four causes. For this can come about by the subtraction or addition of letters and on account of their transposition or alteration; and again, by the lengthening of syllables <or their shortening, and finally by their adding or removal>. ... 6

Now I shall explain the origins of individual words, of which there are four levels of explanation. The lowest is the one to which even ordinary people arrive: for who is there who does not see where *argentifodinae* “silver-mines”¹⁶ and *uiocurus* “road-overseer”¹⁷ come from? The second is the one to which ancient grammar ascended: it shows in what way poets invented each word that they invented, each one that they distorted. It is here that belongs Pacuvius’s¹⁸ *rudentum sibilus*¹⁹ “the whistling of ropes,” here his *incuruiceruicum*²⁰ *pecus* “crooked-necked flock,” here his *chlamyde clupeat*²¹ *bracchium* “with his cloak he shields his arm.” 7

The third level is the one to which philosophy ascends and then arrives, where it begins to disclose the secrets of the words that exist in ordinary usage, as for example from what source *oppidum* “town,” *uicus* “village, block

16 *argentifodinae* < *argentum* “silver” + *fodinae* “mines.”

17 *uiocurus* < *uia* “road” + *curo* “to take care of.”

18 Marcus Pacuvius (220–130 BCE), a celebrated early Roman tragic poet.

19 *sibilus* is a widely attested, originally poetic word, derived onomatopoeically from the sound it signifies.

20 *incuruiceruicum* is an invented poetic word occurring only in the passage cited (and then in Varro and the Roman rhetorician Quintilian, who discuss it); it derives from the combination of *incuruus* “crooked” and *ceruix* “neck.”

21 *clipeo* (also spelled *clupeo*) is a rare verb, originally poetic, deriving from the substantive *clipeus* or *clupeus* “shield.”

uicus, uia. Quartus, ubi est adytum et initia regis: quo si non perueniam <ad> scientiam, at opinione aucupabor, quod etiam in salute nostra nonnunquam facit cum aegrotamus medicus.

- 9 Quodsi summum gradum non attigero, tamen secundum praeteribo, quod non solum ad Aristophanis lucernam, sed etiam ad Cleanthis lucubraui: uolui praeterire eos, qui poetarum modo uerba ut sint ficta expediunt. non enim uidebatur consentaneum qua<e>re<re> me in eo uerbo quod finxisset Ennius causam, neglegere quod ante rex Latinus finxisset, cum poeticis multis uerbis magis delecter quam utar, antiquis magis utar quam delecter. an non potius mea uerba illa quae hereditate a Romulo rege uenerunt quam quae a poeta Liuio relicta?
- 10 Igitur quoniam in haec sunt tripartita uerba, quae sunt aut nostra aut aliena aut obliuia, de nostris dicam cur sint, de alienis unde sint, de obliuiis relinquam: quorum partim quid ta<men> inuenerim aut opiner scribam. in hoc libro dicam de uocabulis locorum et quae in his sunt, in secundo de temporum et quae in his fiunt, in tertio de utraque re a poetis comprehensa.

Excerpt III: 5.2.14–15

- 14 Incipiam de locis ab ipsius loci origine. locus est, ubi locatum quid esse potest, ut nunc dicunt, collocatum. ueteres id dicere solitos apparet apud Plautum:

22 Varro mentions these etyma as being not obvious to ordinary people; we know his views on them from other passages in this same treatise: *oppidum ab opi dictum* (the *oppidum* is so called from *ops* “power, wealth”), 5.32.141, and *sic qua uehebant, uiae dictae* (the *uiae* are so called because they used to *uehere* “lead”), 5.6.35. *Vicus* is in turn explained from *uia*: *in oppido uici a uia* (in a town there are *uici* “blocks,” [i.e., so-called] from *uia*), 5.32.145. In terms of modern etymology, *oppidum* is derived from *ob-* “towards” and the same root as *pes* “foot” (< PIE **ped-o-* [n.] “stepped” > “place, step,” EDL 431), while *uia* and *uicus* are in fact unrelated (and there is no consensus as to whether the former is connected etymologically to *uehere* “to carry”). *Vicus*, like its Greek cognate *oikos* “house,” is to be traced back to PIE **weik-o-s* “settlement” (EDL 675), while for *uia* two hypotheses face each other: one connects it to a PIE root **weih₁-* “to strive for” (LEW 2.774f., EDL 673), the other to PIE **weg^h-* “to carry” (DELL 731) (the same root as found in English *way*). Under the former view, the derived noun PIE **wih₁-eh₂-* must have originally meant “pursuit” (EDL 673), while the latter view converges with Varro in linking a PIE noun **weg^h-ya-* (DELL 731) or rather **wǵ^h-ya-* (Mancini, *Scrittura*, 256) “vehicle” to the verb *uehere*. Varro’s explanation for *uia* was almost unanimously accepted in antiquity, albeit with two notable exceptions, viz. Augustine and Cassiodorus: the former was uncertain between *uis* “power” and *uitis* “vine,” while the latter pointed to *uiolentia* “violence,” since a person on the road stamps the ground. Varro, *De lingua Latina*, ed. and trans. de Melo, 2: 667.

of houses," *uia* "way" come.²² The fourth is the one where the holiest shrine and the high priest's sacred mysteries are: even if I myself do not succeed in arriving at wisdom there, nonetheless I shall strive for a hypothesis, something that with regard to our health a doctor sometimes does too when we are ill.

But even if I do not attain to the highest level, nevertheless I shall pass 9
beyond the second one, because I have studied by the light not only of Aristophanes's²³ lamp, but also of Cleanthes's²⁴ [that is, I have used the instruments not only of grammar but also of philosophy]. It was my desire to surpass those who only explain how the words of the poets have been created. For it did not seem appropriate for me to seek the cause in some word that Ennius²⁵ created but to neglect one that King Latinus²⁶ had created earlier, given that I derive more delight than utility from many poetic words but more utility than delight from ancient ones. And, as a matter of fact, is it not rather the case that my words are the ones that have come to me as my inheritance from King Romulus²⁷ rather than the ones that were left behind by the poet Livius?²⁸

Therefore, since words are divided into these three groups—they are either 10
our own or foreign or obsolete—I shall state about ours what their causes are, about the foreign ones from what source they come, and the obsolete ones I shall omit (but concerning some of these I shall nonetheless write what I have discovered or suppose to be the case). In this book I shall speak about the words for places and for the things that are located in them; in the following one about those for times and the events that occur in them; and in the third I shall speak about both things as they are expressed by the poets.

Excerpt III: 5.2.14–15

Concerning places, I shall begin with the origin of the word *locus* "place" itself. 14
A *locus* is where something can be *locatum* "placed" or, as they now say, *collocatum* "put." That the ancients were accustomed to use the word in this way is clear from Plautus:²⁹

23 Aristophanes of Byzantium (262–185 BCE), a celebrated Greek grammarian and philologist.

24 Cleanthes of Assos (331–232 BCE), a celebrated Greek Stoic philosopher.

25 Quintus Ennius (239–169 BCE), a celebrated early Roman tragic and epic poet.

26 A legendary king of Rome and father of the Latin people.

27 The (possibly) legendary founder of Rome.

28 Livius Andronicus (284–205 BCE), the earliest recorded Roman poet.

29 Titus Maccius Plautus (254–184 BCE), a celebrated early Roman comic poet.

filiam habeo grandem, cassa⟨m⟩ dote atque *inlocabilem*,
 neque eam queo *locare* cuiquam
 apud Ennium:

O terra Thraeca, ubi Liberi fanum inclutum
 Maro *locaui*⟨t⟩

- 15 Vbi quidque consistit, ⟨st⟩*locus*. Ab eo praeco dicitur *locare*, quod usque idem it, quoad in aliquo constitit pretium. In⟨de⟩ *locarium* quod datur in stabulo et taberna, ubi consistant. Sic *loci* muliebres, ubi nascendi initia consistunt.

Excerpt IV: 7.1.1–2

- 1 ⟨Difficilia sunt explicatu poetarum uocabula. saepe enim significationem aliquam prioribus temporibus impositam⟩ repens ruina operuit, ⟨a⟩ut uerbum quod conditum est e quibus litteris oportet, inde post ⟨si⟩ aliqua dempta est, obscurior fit uoluntas impositoris. non reprehendendum igitur in illis qui in scrutando uerbo litteram adiciunt aut demunt, quo facilius quid sub ea uoce subsit uideri possit: ut enim facilius obscuram operam Myrmecidis ex ebore oculi uideant, extrinsecus admouent nigras s⟨a⟩etas.
- 2 Cum haec amminicula addas ad eruendum uoluntatem impositoris, tamen latent multa. Quod si poetice, ⟨quae⟩ in carminibus seruauit multa prisca quae essent, sic etiam cur essent posuisset, fecundius poemata ferrent fructum; sed ut in soluta oratione, sic in poematis uerba ⟨non⟩ omnia quae habent ἔτυμα possunt dici, neque multa ab eo, quem non erunt in lucubratione litterae proscutae, multum licet legeret. Aelii hominis in primo in litteris Latinis exercitati interpretationem carminum Saliorum uidebis et exili littera expedita⟨m⟩ et praeterita obscura multa.
- ...

I have an adult daughter without a dowry and *inlocabilem* “unplaceable,”
And I am not able to *locare* “place” her with anyone

from Ennius:

O Thracian land, where Maro *locavit* “placed”
Dionysus’s famous shrine

Where something comes to a stop is a <st>*locus* “place.” From this an auctioneer is said *locare* “to place,” for he keeps going until the price comes to a stop with someone. From which *locarium* “rent,” which is paid in a habitation or an inn, where people come to a stop. So a woman’s *loci* “places,” where the beginnings of birth-giving come to a stop. 15

Excerpt IV: 7.1.1–2

<The words of poets are difficult to explain. For often some meaning that was applied in earlier times> a sudden disaster has covered up; or because with just which letters a word should be composed has been concealed, since some of these have been removed, the intention of the person who established it becomes quite obscure in this way. Therefore there should be no criticism against those who, when they study a word, add or subtract a letter, so that what underlies that word can more easily be seen: just as people place black hairs under the hard-to-see ivory carvings of Myrmecides³⁰ on the outside so that their eyes can see them better. 1

Even if you apply such aids in order to bring to light the intention of the person who established it, nonetheless many things remain obscure. For if poetry, which has preserved in poems many words that existed in ancient times, had also set down for what reason they existed, poems would bear fruit more fruitfully; but just as in prose, so too in poems, it is not always possible to indicate what the *etyma*³¹ are for words, not even, in many cases, for someone who has not pursued his studies by lamplight, even if he reads a lot. You will see that the interpretation of the *Salian Hymns*³² by Aelius,³³ a man of the greatest experience in Latin literature, has been expedited by his attention to a single little letter and that much would have remained obscure if that had been neglected. 2

...

30 A Greek sculptor celebrated for his tiny carvings in ivory and other materials.

31 On the original meaning of this term, see the introduction to this part (Chapter 2.1).

32 Texts written in archaic Latin that accompanied rituals performed by the Salian priests.

33 Lucius Aelius Stilo Preconinus (154–74 BCE), a famous Roman philologist and Varro’s teacher, is often mentioned as an authority in this treatise.

Excerpt v: 7.1.4

- 4 Igitur de originibus uerborum qui multa dixerit commode, potius boni consulendum, quam qui aliquid nequierit reprehendendum, praesertim quom dicat etymologice non omnium uerborum posse dici causa⟨m⟩, ut qui a⟨c⟩ qua re res u⟨tilis sit⟩ ad medendum medicina; neque si non norim radices arboris, non posse me dicere pirum esse ex ramo, ramum ex arbore, eam ex radicibus quas non uideo. quare qui ostendit *equitatum* esse ab *equitibus*, *equites* ab *equo*, neque *equus* unde sit dicit, tamen hic docet plura et satisfacit grato, quem imitari possimusne ipse liber erit indicio.

Excerpt v: 7.1.4

Therefore one should be content with people who have made many appropriate statements about the origins of words, rather than criticizing those who have not been able to do so with regard to a single issue, especially since the art of etymology states that it is not possible in the case of all words to state the cause—just as medicine states with regard to how and why something is useful as a remedy. And even if I do not possess knowledge about the roots of a tree, I can still say that a pear comes from a branch, the branch from a tree, and that tree from roots that I cannot see. And thus someone who demonstrates that *equitatus* “cavalry” comes from *equites* “horsemen,” and *equus* from *equus* “horse,” but does not say where *equus* comes from,³⁴ nevertheless provides much teaching and satisfaction for a grateful person. This very book will provide evidence whether I myself am capable of imitating such a man.

4

34 In fact, Latin *equus* derives from an Indo-European root **h₁ek-u-* (EDL 193) found also in Sanskrit *áśvas* and Greek *híppos*. Varro speaks of this word several more times, but always as here in terms of its morphological derivatives, which indicates that he could not venture any etymological hypothesis. Cf. Varro, *De lingua Latina*, ed. and trans. de Melo, 1:38f.

Abbreviations and Symbols

- DELL* Alfred Ernout and Antoine Meillet, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine*, repr. of the 4th edn. with additions and corrections by Jacques André, Paris: Klincksieck, 2001
- EDG* Beekes, Robert. *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*. 2 vols, Leiden: Brill, 2010.
- EDL* de Vaan, Michiel. *Etymological Dictionary of Latin and the Other Italic Languages*, Leiden: Brill, 2008.
- LEW* A. Walde and J.B. Hofmann, *Lateinisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 2 vols. 5th ed. Heidelberg: Winter, 1972.
- PIE* Proto-Indo European
- < > editorial insertion

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