

## Virgil and Ancient Roman Agricultural Ethics Tradition

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### Abstract

Agriculture plays an important role in ancient Roman society, and ancient Roman farmers gradually formed the unique ethical values of the agricultural nation in their agricultural activities. Virgil, as the greatest poet in ancient Rome, embodies these ethical concepts in his three works, *The Eclogues*, *The Georgics* and *The Aeneid*. This agricultural-oriented social fashion also plays an important role in stabilizing the city-state economy and strengthening national cohesion.

### Keywords

Virgil; Ancient Rome; Agriculture; Ethics; Values.

### 1. Introduction

In 30 BC, ancient Rome was ruled by the principality established by Augustus. At that time, the civil war had just ended. On the one hand, Augustus carried out the social moral reform movement to save the fallen Roman values and maintain the new regime; on the other hand, in order to restore the agriculture destroyed by the war, Augustus tried his best to win over intellectuals and let them undertake social and moral obligations. Based on this background, Virgil, who is familiar with farming, was first favored by Augustus.

### 2. Virgil and His Times

Virgil, as the greatest poet in ancient Rome, believed in Epicurus philosophy in his early years, advocated atheism, and later inclined to Stoic philosophy, believing that the universe is dominated by God, and the highest moral standard of happiness in life is that people should obey God through independent consciousness. This theological view of fate runs through his work *The Aeneid*. God's orders and help can't be violated. Aeneas succeeded under the guidance of God and the necessity of fate. In the aspect of personal behavior, he inherited Epicurus's thought, and believed that all personal actions should be based on his own happiness or pain, and he yearned for a peaceful mental state. Therefore, in daily life, Virgil advocates simplicity, opposes extravagance and waste, advocates unity with nature, and obtains peace of mind from nature. These thoughts are also reflected in Virgil's works.

The *Eclogues*, *The Georgics*, as his early representative works, are full of romantic and quiet pastoral colors, expressing the poet's yearning for a peaceful life. He praised the industrious and capable spirit of working people, the ability of unity and cooperation, and the reverence for nature and agriculture. However, Virgil was in the war era of Rome, and had to be attached to the upper class. *The Aeneid* is Virgil's magnificent epic that praises the glorious history of Rome and carries forward the spirit of Rome. To sum up, Virgil created new contents under the influence of popular social thoughts at that time, forming his own unique Virgil style. His works contain his yearning and praise for peaceful life, the idea of harmonious coexistence with nature and deep thinking about politics and war. At the same time, these are closely related to his own experience and social environment.

The ancient Rome where Virgil lived was founded by agriculture. Looking at the development history of various countries, we can find that the development of agriculture plays an important

role in promoting the development of human society. Ancient Rome, which rose in the Latin Plain, relied on the innate advantages such as fertile soil provided by rivers and suitable Mediterranean climate to develop agriculture into a pillar of the country. Marx said in *The Capital*: "As long as you know a little about the history of the Roman Republic, you will know that the history of real estate constitutes the secret history of the Roman Republic." It is enough to see the important position of agriculture in various production departments in ancient Rome, which laid a solid foundation for its future becoming an empire spanning three continents.

In the works of famous ancient Roman agronomists such as Cato and Varo, we can get a general idea of the situation of ancient Roman agriculture. They mainly discussed the slavery manor economy in ancient Rome, which is also the main form of ancient Roman agriculture. Under the manor economy, the hard work of slaves greatly promoted the development of agriculture. Slaves mainly came from the external expansion war of ancient Rome. Slave owners organized them to carry out grain production or animal husbandry activities. This large-scale centralized production gradually evolved into a commercialization model. The other is that ordinary civilians independently carry out agricultural production, but the long-term war has separated farmers from their land, increased their living burden, and then plunged them into bankruptcy. These two modes of production both reflected the difficulty of farming life. Because of this, the ancient Roman farmers gradually developed a simple life style, and further formed the industrious and upright national morality. These thoughts have virtually influenced Virgil's world outlook and are deeply reflected in his works.

### 3. Virgil's Literary Heritage

#### 3.1. Pastoral Poetry-The Eclogues

The Eclogues, as the most important work in Virgil's early period, not only inherits and absorbs the literary heritage of predecessors, but also dissects and analyzes Roman society, which has important value in literature and history, and the implied agricultural ethics of ancient Rome is worth further exploration.

##### 3.1.1. Agriculture and Life

Virgil used the realistic style of sketching to outline the pastoral agricultural lifestyle of ancient Rome, and showed the daily farming life of ancient Rome through the singing of shepherds. At that time, due to the low level of social productivity, agriculture as the driving force of survival and production was closely related to people's life, so the factors related to agriculture penetrated into all aspects of life. For example, in the third chapter, Manarcas made a bet with others on a glass made of beech, which was "carved with soft vines and clusters of fruits of grapes, interspersed with thin stems of dill." Grapes, as planting crops, are depicted on common living utensils, which is enough to show the deep influence of agriculture on people's lives. In addition, whether or not agriculture has a good harvest also plays an important role in people's life. All kinds of advanced scientific and astronomical knowledge mentioned in *The Eclogues* are all for the better development of agriculture.

##### 3.1.2. Agriculture and War

The healthy development of agriculture is restricted by the general environment. The war not only threatens people's lives, but also irreversibly affects the land on which they depend for survival and development. In the first chapter, it is written, "Nowadays, the countryside is full of riots ... lawless soldiers occupy newly reclaimed fertile land, barbarians in foreign countries enjoy all the harvest, and disputes in the world have forced the suffering Roman citizens to go where, and we plow and sow for this situation." Because of the war, farmers' land was occupied, crops were barren, livestock were displaced, the destruction of agriculture caused by the war

and ordinary farmers' dissatisfaction with the war frequently appeared in the book, and Virgil expressed the farmers' feelings at that time through poetry.

### 3.1.3. Development of Agriculture

Based on the unshakable position of agriculture, we can get a glimpse of the efforts made by the ancient Romans to ensure the sustainable development of agriculture from *The Eclogues*. It is the first task to provide a stable environment for agricultural production. In Chapter 9, the poet said, "In my lifetime, I will suffer this great disaster." ..... Suffered from aggression, miserable situation, only blame fate overturned, the world changed completely. " It can be seen that the social environment has a great influence on farmers' production and labor, which also reflects the people's deep desire to oppose war, love peace and create a stable and harmonious environment for agriculture, so that ordinary people can have a sense of security and a rich life. Secondly, it is necessary to guarantee farmers' basic land demand. When people have land, hunger and satiety can be solved, and life can continue. Only by giving farmers the land they need most and providing places to live and work in peace and contentment can the country have stronger power support. In addition, Virgil also put forward the strengthening measures of agricultural development, that is, to prevent and reduce the impact of natural disasters on agricultural production. *Da Moeta* said, "I'm afraid that the wolf will break into the sheepfold, the rainstorm will destroy the mature crops and the strong wind will destroy the lush trees", which just reflects that the ancient Romans were wary of natural disasters, paid attention to the protection of agricultural production and tried their best to ensure the healthy development of agriculture. *Mainerkas* said that "the hired shepherd milks twice every hour, which makes the sheep lose their vitality and leaves the lambs without milk to eat" reflects another development measure, that is, to make agriculture sustainable, the law of animal growth must be followed, which also has warning significance for today's economic development.

### 3.1.4. Values Under the Thought of Attaching Importance to Agriculture

The importance of agriculture made people pay more attention to agricultural harvest, which also made the ancient Romans develop a life philosophy of opposing extravagance and advocating frugality. In the third chapter, the betting plot, *Manarcas* dared not gamble with livestock because he had to support his family, which showed his idea of thrift. Putting agriculture in the first place, other recreational activities should be carried out normally without threatening agriculture, thinking calmly, and arranging farm work reasonably is also the expression of the rational spirit of the ancient Romans.

In addition, the works also convey the simple concept of harmony between man and nature, and the poet's love, yearning and respect for nature can be seen in both landscape writing and character dialogue. Simplicity, peace and relaxation are the main themes in *The Eclogues*. The people described by the poet live in a peaceful and beautiful rural life. Compared with the social background at that time, the poet shows the cruelty and harm of war and the people's yearning for a better life. In the preface to the song of *Silenus*, the poet mentioned three elements, which just correspond to the earth, sea and sky, which constitute a typical Roman concept of the universe. This shows Virgil's inner desire to return to the primitive state of the beginning of the universe.

## 3.2. Agricultural Oracle Poetry-The Georgics

*The Georgics* writes that the poet taught the methods of farming, planting trees, planting grapes, raising horses and beekeeping, and taught people to be diligent in farming and return to the simple life of ancestors, which clearly showed the ancient Romans' emphasis on agricultural production. At the same time, the attention to agricultural production also influenced the ancient Romans' values imperceptibly, prompting them to seek harmony with nature outward and enrich their spiritual territory inward.

### 3.2.1. Seek Harmony with Nature

#### (1) Pursue Peace and Oppose War

Civil wars in ancient Rome were frequent and bandits were rampant, which made the fields barren and the natural environment greatly damaged. Farmers lost their land security and lived in dire straits all the time, always facing the survival crisis. Living in such a social environment, farmers' agricultural production activities have suffered a huge blow, as described in the first volume, "The world is full of wars, crimes and all kinds of crimes; The neighboring cities have broken their vows with each other, and sword to sword, Mars is raging everywhere. "Between the lines, there is a deep suffering brought by the war to the people. For this reason, Virgil's ancient Roman farmers are so tired of the turbulent society that they have a strong yearning for a peaceful life.

#### (2) Respect Nature and Follow the Law.

The ancient Romans thought that managing agriculture was a glorious and sacred cause. The thought of agriculture-oriented cast the glorious soul of agriculture. The agricultural economy handed down from generation to generation by ancestors provided Roman small farmers with food and clothing. In order to ensure the steady development of this survival mode, ancient Roman farmers must respect the laws of nature and carry out agricultural production according to the laws of everything. For example, in the first volume of the book, it is mentioned many times that while farming, the natural land should be protected by rest. "Every second season, let the land idle and fallow, and let what happens happen .....", so The Georgics can also be regarded as the poet's understanding and judgment of his own ecological environment.

#### (3) Fear of Natural Disasters and Pray to Gods.

Due to the backwardness of productivity and lack of scientific understanding of natural disasters, ancient Roman farmers deified nature and developed a kind of awe. On this basis, they constantly sacrificed and sang in order to quell the wrath of God and gain a good harvest of land. This kind of mythical thinking frequently appears in the work, "When spring comes and winter is over, give the great Ceres the birthday gift you owe her", "Let all your workers attend the ceremony of worshipping the goddess, and wash the honeycomb sacrifice with milk and soft wine." The harvest of agricultural production needs suitable natural conditions. The ancient Romans prayed for the blessing of the gods for the ideal natural conditions. Therefore, the attitude of the ancient Roman farmers towards the gods was admiration and expectation. "You gods and goddesses treat us with such kindness". The reverence for the gods is actually a respect for nature. Therefore, in the final analysis, it is the need of agricultural production that drives people's mythical thinking.

### 3.2.2. Enrich the Spiritual Territory

#### (1) Hold High the Banner of Rationality.

In order to increase agricultural output, people have to try various scientific farming methods. The article says, "Before our plough breaks the soil, it is necessary to study the way of wind and the way of sky change", "The seeds I have seen are the best, no matter how carefully selected they are, but they will still deteriorate, unless people try to find the biggest seeds year after year, again and again". The ultimate exploration of the scientific nature of farming method makes people substitute this attitude into all aspects of life, and gradually forms a rational spirit of non-perception and keeping pace with the times. They must use a pragmatic attitude to solve the problems in farming in order to achieve the development of production and the improvement of life, otherwise they will have no food and clothing to endanger their survival. The cruelty of reality and the nature of farmers gradually created the rationalism spirit of the ancient Romans, which paid attention to practicality and emphasized practicality.

#### (2) Advocate Self-worth

As mentioned earlier, agriculture is a glorious and sacred cause, and the bumper harvest of agricultural production has brought great sense of honor to the ancient Roman people, from which they realized the value of themselves- "Mia and Galgara are ecstatic and will gain glory in the harvest." People's values can also be reflected from the perspective of observing the world, for example, "such a beautiful creature should respect his age and great heart, what he has done, the excellent pedigree he derived, the sadness he experienced when he failed, and the joy he won." This passage seems to be about the horse's desire for respect, but it deeply reflects people's empathy that they also want others to give them respect and hope their personal values to be realized.

### (3) Love Land and Homeland.

Because of the importance attached to agricultural production, farmers have an inexorable attachment to the land they cultivate, which eventually turns into their love for their homes. It can be seen in the article that "the farmer's humble house is pure, his children are kissing around him, he is lying leisurely on the grass, making a fire, and some shepherds are naked with their strong limbs, all ready for the wrestling competition in the country." Quiet and harmonious rural life is the product of people's tacit understanding with their homes, and it is the expression of people's heartfelt love for their homes.

## 3.3. Heroic Epic-The Aeneid

The Aeneid, as an epic of ancient Rome, not only shows people's living environment at that time, but also reveals the national values of ancient Roman people. The interaction between environmental factors and values factors jointly promoted the formation of agricultural ethics in ancient Rome.

### 3.3.1. Ethnic Orientation

Aeneas, described by Virgil, is a Roman national hero who knows restraint, sacrifice, piety and responsibility. His life is already a rational life of "superego". Just as when God inspired Aeneas Mo to forget the mission of building the city of Rome, Aeneas immediately woke up from his love with Dido, resolutely abandoned his feelings and continued to devote himself to the grand project of building the city of Rome. Aeneas reflected the long-standing inheritance of the ethnic orientation.

### 3.3.2. Love Homeland

As the ancestors of the Romans, the Trojans experienced various wars before the establishment of Rome, in order to maintain the rule of the nation. This warlike habit continued into the continuous expansion of the Roman Empire in later generations. People were in such a turbulent environment that it was difficult to preserve their land and maintain their livelihood, so they longed for a stable and peaceful life more and more, so they formed a spiritual dependence on their own homes. For the Romans, home is no longer the lost Troy, but their spiritual hometown, which has become an abstract symbol deeply rooted in people's hearts. The wandering of ancient Roman ancestors, Aeneas' abandonment of love and determination to build a Roman city are all for the reconstruction of the spiritual home of the Romans.

### 3.3.3. The View of Destiny and Heroism

The two contradictory bodies of destiny and heroism were unified in the Romans. In The Aeneid, the exile and revitalization of the ancestors of the Romans were at the mercy of fate, and even the gods on Mount Olympus could not get rid of the bondage of fate. However, in the face of fate, the Romans showed their bravery by making great efforts to build great achievements, so as to gain honor. For example, Jesus and Euryalus are all scrambling to shoulder the dangerous task of rushing out of the enemy's encirclement to find Aeneas, rather than being useless people who live and enjoy the reward.

## 4. Agricultural Ethics Under the Dual Role of Material Production and Spiritual Accumulation

Virgil's poetry creation is a wonderful movement played by the classical literary tradition, the social and humanistic environment of Augustus era and the poet's own personality and talent. His *The Eclogues* has a strong pastoral color, which describes the shepherd's leisurely rural life with the countryside as the background, and *The Georgics* teaches people to be diligent in farming and return to the simple life of their ancestors. These two works provide the necessary ideological premise and artistic basis for his creation of the epic *The Aeneid*. Although the main ideas reflected in the three works have different emphases, generally speaking, these three works deeply reflect the ethical values of the Romans, and the formation of these ideas is closely related to their agricultural activities. In addition, it should be noted that war is a hidden topic in Virgil's three works. Whether it is the scene of soldiers and men oppressing farmers and occupying land described in *The Eclogues*, the scene of "Mars raging everywhere" described in the first volume of *The Georgics*, or the wandering of Roman ancestors in *The Aeneid*, it is inseparable from the background of war. Virgil's cruelty of war and his complaints about war are reflected from the side.

### 4.1. Agriculture-oriented, Love the countryside

Similar to our country, ancient Rome was founded on agriculture, attached great importance to agriculture, and its thought of attaching importance to agriculture even surpassed that of Greece, which can be seen from various works circulating in ancient Rome. From Cato to Varo to Virgil discussed in this paper, the thought of attaching importance to agriculture in his works is self-evident, which also reflects the ancient Romans' love for land and pastoral areas.

However, due to the low productivity of ancient society, farmers' agricultural production conditions were very unstable, and they were always threatened by natural and man-made disasters, which also prompted them to cherish the land they cultivated, and then rose to love the countryside. In Virgil's three works, there are descriptions of the desolate scenes of the countryside destroyed by the war, and between the lines, there are deep sufferings brought by the war to the people. For this reason, Virgil's ancient Roman farmers are so tired of the turbulent society that they have a strong yearning for a peaceful life. What they yearn for is the quiet life in the poem "The farmer's humble house is pure, his children kiss around him, and he lies leisurely on the grass, making a fire ...", which is not only the ancient Roman farmers, but also the aspirations of all the people who yearn for peace and stability in ancient society. In Virgil's later work *The Aeneid*, this attachment to the countryside is sublimated to the obsession with the construction of spiritual home. At this time, the hometown countryside has become an abstract spiritual symbol, which also reflects the deepening of Virgil's thought.

### 4.2. Govern Agriculture Scientifically and Put Reason First.

Citizens in ancient Rome took agriculture as the foundation to form the traditional virtue peculiar to the agricultural nation, that is, the social fashion of advocating poverty and thrift. In *The Eclogues*, Manarcas doesn't want to gamble with livestock, which shows that the diligence and thrift of ancient Roman farmers will not affect the agricultural harvest for other reasons. As mentioned earlier, farmers in ancient Rome had to face the threat of natural disasters or wars, and their agricultural harvest was limited. Besides, the working process in the era of low production level was extremely difficult. In order to ensure the continuation of peaceful and happy life, they had to be diligent and thrifty, and because industrious people in Agriculture-oriented ancient Rome were generally respected by society, this moral character of advocating poverty and thrift gradually became a social fashion.

Of course, in the face of cruel survival reality, on the one hand, the ancient Roman farmers developed the national virtue of diligence and thrift, on the other hand, they solved problems

and improved living conditions with a pragmatic attitude. This is especially reflected in their efforts to try various scientific farming methods and actively explore the best way to develop agricultural production, that is, rational sustainable development—they study the way of wind and sky changes, carefully select seeds, point out that the frequency of milking goats should be controlled, and other farming methods mentioned everywhere in the book, such as fallow rotation, Reasonable cultivation ,etc. The ultimate exploration of the scientific nature of farming methods has enabled people to substitute this attitude into all aspects of life, gradually formed a rational spirit of non-perception and kept pace with the times. In *The Aeneid*, heroes like Aeneas, the ancestor of ancient Rome, resisted the temptation and made constant progress towards the goal of building a Roman city. This is a kind of restrained rationality. The rational national character and the policy of improving agriculture permeate and influence each other.

### **4.3. Worship the Gods and Admire Yourself.**

Due to the limitation of the times, ancient Roman farmers lacked scientific knowledge of natural disasters. In order to eliminate the fear of unknown things, people imagined natural phenomena as the will of God. People constantly sacrificed and sang songs to calm the wrath of God and get a good harvest of land. From the perspective of mythology, the special worship of Demeter, the god of agriculture, Dionysus, the god of harvest in ancient Greece and Rome also reflected their emphasis on agriculture and awe of gods.

However, the ancient Romans did not become slaves of faith because of this. Their inheritance of Greek culture and yearning for a happy life enabled them to give full play to their initiative as human beings. "Mia and Galgara are ecstatic and will gain glory in the harvest." It is in agricultural activities that they fully realize their self-worth and find the meaning of human beings to God. What is reflected in *The Aeneid* is the unity of the view of destiny and heroism. Neither god nor man can get rid of the trick of fate, but they never forget their mission and strive to make contributions to gain honor. The ancient Romans didn't want to be the mollusks wandering around the gates of hell in Dante's works. If they want to live, they must live with dignity and value and become heroes of their own lives.

## **5. The Agricultural Ethics of Ancient China and Ancient Rome from the Perspective of Comparison**

As a big agricultural country, many agricultural thoughts in ancient China are very similar to those in ancient Rome, which are clearly recorded in ancient books and records. At that time, Ling Ding recorded that the Emperor of Heaven led officials and common people to personal farm in the native land, and the complexity of the ceremony shows that people attach importance to agricultural production. Another example is the detailed regulation of tree cutting time in *Book of Rites Month Order*: "In the month of Meng Chun, logging is prohibited; In the month of Meng Xia, it is forbidden to cut down trees; In the autumn of the season, the vegetation shakes down, and the firewood can be cut into charcoal; In the mid-winter month, cut down trees to get bamboo ", the twelve measures to protect farmers from disasters were recorded in Zhou Li, and the decree to give people farmland in Jin Shi. From the previous discussion, it can be seen that the agricultural ethics thoughts such as agriculture-oriented, awe of nature and scientific governance of agriculture revealed behind these measures are all reflected in Virgil's three works, which shows that China and ancient Rome, both big agricultural countries, have similarities in agricultural ethics, which just reflects the common virtue tradition of agricultural nations.

However, in the Chinese concept, land is an organic existence rather than an object that can be transformed by others. On the contrary, the ancient Romans advocated using humans' reason to know the laws of nature and using technology to change nature. For example, *The Georgics*

once wrote: "If trees are grafted, picked up and replanted in carefully prepared holes, they will give up their wildness and be ready to learn anything you want them to learn." Although the ancient Romans violated the law of plant growth to some extent by sacrificing the wildness of plants for the harvest of crops, it is undeniable that their idea of transforming nature still has certain reference significance for China's current agricultural production. In today's society, in order to achieve rapid development of agriculture, we should learn from the experience of all ethnic groups comprehensively, and then explore a development model that suits us, and embody our national characteristics in agricultural production.

To sum up, Virgil, as a "royal scholar" in Augustus' era, was limited to some extent, but his works were not simply political sounding pipes but truly reflected the social situation, especially the agricultural situation at that time, and put forward their reasonable demands for the bottom peasants to speak. Among them, the permeated agricultural ethics and the values of ancient Romans are important cuts for later generations to study the history of ancient Rome, and at the same time provide valuable reference experience for the sustainable development of similar agricultural countries. Virgil is a real poet of the times.

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