1. Introduction

The development of Latin literature in the Middle Republic is one of the most enigmatic aspects of a period already remarkable for its fast pace of cultural change. The first steps of Latin literature came in the poetry of Livius Andronicus, Naevius, Ennius, and Plautus, but Latin prose soon arrived with the works of Cato the Elder. His first work, the De Agricultura, is interesting in its own right, but in this paper I will address the cultural associations and implications of his later work, the Origines. The Origines is unique not only as the first work of Latin historiography, but also in its inclusion of two books on Italian foundation stories. Furthermore, there is a remarkable lack of personal names in the historical portion of the work.¹ Whereas Cato’s use of Latin to write history was widely emulated by later historians, the two aspects mentioned above did not find followers.

Both of these aspects, as well as the revolutionary use of Latin for a prose, historical work, represent conscious choices on Cato’s part. What these choices actually mean, however, has been debated at length. In this chapter, I will argue for a new understanding of Cato’s potential audience, and I will trace the effects of that understanding on our assessment of Cato’s methods and motives. While in previous studies the audience of the Origines has nearly always been treated as being made up entirely of Romans, I hope to show instead how we may reevaluate the work by supposing an audience made up of Italians and potentially Italic Greeks as well.

¹ The source for the lack of names is Nepos, Cato 3.4: horum bellorum duces non nominavit, sed sine nominibus res notavit, “he did not name the leaders of these wars, but noted their deeds without names”. From what fragments we have, this assertion appears to be true for the historical portion, though names are used for mythological figures in the first three books. Cf. Plin. NH 8.11.
2. The Audience of Cato’s Origines

The Origines consisted of seven books, now unfortunately reduced to fewer than 150 fragments. Cato wrote it in the later years of his life, from perhaps the 160s on, and continued adding material until he died in 149.2 The first book dealt with Rome’s own mythological foundation stories, while the second and third related the origins of Italian cities; these books appear to be the source of the work’s title. The fourth and fifth books covered the First and Second Punic Wars respectively, and the sixth and seventh books narrated Rome’s history from the Second Punic War to the year 149. The legacy of the Origines is limited to its use as a source for later historians and its use of the Latin language.

Needless to say, the many interpretations of the Origines frequently conflict with one another. Many different explanations and interpretations have been offered for each of Cato’s three notable choices: the choice to write in Latin, to include Italian origins, and to omit proper names. The choice to write in Latin has been understood generally as a part of Cato’s larger anti-Hellenistic mode,3 or, much less emphatically, as part of a desire to experiment with the Latin language.4 The inclusion of Italian origins is most frequently read as an attempt to build a picture of Rome and Italy as a collective state, but this reading has varied greatly in its subtleties: Cato’s ‘Italy’ has been read variously as a geographical, political, moral, or historical collective.5 As for the names, their omission has been read mostly as anti-elite, and thus also as contributing to a sense of collectivity, but occasionally also as pro-elite.6

---


3 Gotter (2009) especially reads the Origines as primarily anti-Greek and anti-elite, and views the inclusion of Italian origins as an act of appropriation from Greek sources (see esp. 115), and as a method for Italianizing Roman history. See also Beck (2007).

4 Astin (1978, 220–1).

5 For some scholars, the collectivity has been pro-Italian in nature, e.g. Letta (1984, esp. 416–18) reads Cato’s Italy as two Italiæ, one geographic and strategic, and one moral. Villa (1955) considers it a moral unit. Gotter (2009) reads the inclusion of Italian origins as creating both ethnic unity and as an elaboration of the theatre in which Rome rose to greatness. Williams (2001, esp. 48–58) reads it similarly as an exploration of an evolving concept of Italia and its component parts and neighbors. Contra: Astin (1978) sees no purpose at all. Chassignet (1987) views it as a catalogue of imperial resources, and emphatically not pro-Italian. Forsythe (2000) suggests a similarly practical, resource-motivated understanding of the Italian section.