Cicero and Varro were not the closest of friends. We know of only comparatively few letters of Cicero’s addressed to Varro, and we remember how embarrassing a task it proved for Cicero to dedicate one of his works to the Reatine polymath.¹ Scholars have always wondered why their relationship was not a particularly intimate one, and in fact rather the opposite. Both were born from regional elites and had to work their way through the Roman cursus honorum (Varro stopped after having reached the praetorship); both joined Pompey’s side in the Civil War and, later on, fell victim to the proscriptions which only Varro was lucky enough to survive. They had close friends in common, most conspicuously Pomponius Atticus; both were interested in philosophy and in research on the Roman past, illustrious protagonists in the process of rationalization Claudia Moatti has described so impressively in her magisterial book La raison de Rome;² both were deeply worried about imminent loss of tradition.³ So we might imagine that their similar biographical backgrounds, similar interests and similar conservative anxieties should have provided more than enough common ground, but what we encounter from Cicero’s part amounts to nothing more than distant politeness and a less than enthusiastic and sometimes rather grudging acknowledgement of Varro’s merits.

To try to explain what may have prevented them from becoming close friends would amount to indulging in psychological speculation; what will be attempted here is rather to take a closer look at what has been labeled their ‘conservativism’ or, to put it in a more neutral way, their perspective on the

¹ Wiseman (2009), 107–129. I would like to express my thanks to the participants in the discussion – for having pointed out this then newly-issued volume to me and for far more else. No less do I feel indebted to the editors, especially to Christopher Smith, who has provided valuable advice in all respects. I am aware that where I chose not to follow his suggestions I do so at my own (and not inconsiderable) risk.


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Roman past such as we encounter it in the texts. It will turn out, or so I hope, that behind the label of conservativism there lie very divergent outlooks on Rome’s early history and, to put it more precisely, whose history it is, and how and by whom it should be written. Reverence towards the past can take very different forms, and even two people who are in perfect agreement about how one should best look to the past, when seeking remedies for present evil, may still conceptualize this past, its driving forces, and its relation to the present in a very different manner, and find themselves in fierce competition. I would like to propose that in this respect, Cicero and Varro diverge fundamentally; whether this divergence can explain at least part of the lack of intimacy between these men, we may leave to others to decide.

1 The Staging of the Archaeology and Scipio’s Qualifications as Main Speaker

Cicero, as is well known, offered numerous reflections about historiography, but refrained from publishing history himself. The closest he ever came to history was the second book of his De republica, where he has Scipio Aemilianus present a short summary on early Roman past, a so-called ‘archaeology’. Now, if we consider the development of the dialogue, an archaeology is not what the reader has been led to expect. First, and most obviously, any reader must have been well aware that he was not reading historiography, but philosophy. When Book 1 is approaching its end, Scipio first discusses the three well-known types of constitution, favouring monarchy among the pure types, but the mixed constitution even above that, because it alone can guarantee stability (if – and this is a big ‘if’ – the leading persons abstain from committing grave sins); then he

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4 Griffin (1994), following Kumaniecki (1962), diagnoses different priorities concerning the importance of politics (as chosen subject) and stylistic polish (as principle of presentation), but I am going to argue that their differences went deeper than that. For a thorough discussion of all the relevant testimonies, see Rösch-Binde (1998); for a new treatment Wiseman (2009), 107–129.

5 Cornell (2001). Here, ‘archeology’ is to be understood as in Greek ἀρχαιολογία (e.g. Plat. Hipp. mai. 285d, where ‘archeology’ functions as a generic term for genealogies of heroes and men and foundation stories).

6 Cic. rep. 1.69: quod ita sit, ex tribus primis generibus longe praestat mea sententia regium, regio (scil. generi) autem ipsi praestabit id, quod erit aequatum et temperatum ex tribus primis rerum publicarum modis. (...) Hoc (namely, a revolution) in hac iuncta moderateque permixta conformatione rei publicae non ferme sine magnis principum vitii sunt. Non est enim causa conversionis, ubi in suo quiscumque est gradu firmiter collocatus, et non subest, quo praecipit et ac decidat.