

🌿 *Crescenzi and the writing of rural life* 🌿

The ancient world understood, far more clearly than we do, that all human life, once it ceases to be nomadic, depends entirely on agriculture. For us, farmers are seen more often as polluters of a food supply which without their interference would appear unsullied on our tables, as if by magic, with no need for tired people to get up before dawn, go out into the mud, and come up with actual solutions to real problems.

Necessity being as much the death of petulance as the mother of invention, the ancient world did not think this, and wrote widely on the management of rural life. Most of this literature, along with most of the rest of the ancient world, has been lost to us, even including any reliable record of what was once there; but much has been saved as well, perhaps an indication of the depth of the tradition.

With the fall of the Roman Empire, that ancient tradition of rural texts came to a sudden end, and did not resume again until the 16th century. In the entire intervening era of more than a thousand years, there are only two significant exceptions. The first of these barely counts as original, since it is a Byzantine anthology of excerpts from the “Geoponic” authors, about whom otherwise we know nothing; not even when they lived. The second is the *Libri XII Ruralium Commodorum* of Piero de’Crescenzi.

Crescenzi (ca. 1228 / ca. 1321), a native of Bologna, engaged himself in its politics, and suffered among the more benign of traditional results, which was exile. He travelled, returned, enjoyed a long career as “*guidice*» quale Rettore e Podestà di numerose città dell’Alta e Media Italia: e cioè (in ordine cronologico) Sinigallia, Asti, Imola, Ferrara, Pisa, Brescia, Piacenza”, and then retired to his Villa dell’Olmo / of which traces apparently still survive / in Rubizzano, some ten miles from Bologna itself. There, beginning his work when he was no less than seventy years old, and completing it between 1304 and 1309, he wrote the most important agricultural text in a thousand years; to the point that it is hard to think of anything European even to put in second place.

His sources included, of course, the classical authors, such as Palladius and Columella, whose works survived in various versions throughout the middle ages. His treatment of wine relies as well on a text entitled *Liber de Vindimis*, which

was a translation into Latin of the sections on wine and wine-making from the Greek “Geoponic” anthology, produced in about 1137 by a Pisan named Burgundio or Borgondione, consul for the Pisan merchants in Constantinople. But by far and away Crescenzi’s most important source was his own experience, and that of his fellow *agricultores experti Bononiæ*; and that is exactly why his work is so valuable to us.

It was an immediate best-seller, if that conception can apply to any mediæval work of a practical nature; Lodovico Frati, in 1933, could find 133 still surviving manuscript copies, which is a remarkable number for a text neither pious nor classical.

And it was translated very quickly from Latin into a number of vernacular languages, no doubt on the understanding that while most persons of an impractical nature could read Latin, those of a practical nature mostly couldn’t. So, as a provisional introduction to Crescenzi, what I have posted at the moment (February, 2001) are brief extracts from three of these vernacular translations, as they appear in three early 16th-century printed books. The translations themselves are undated; to my ear, they’re clearly late medieval, and may well be 14th-century; but I’m not a philologist.

The passages I’ve chosen are essentially of the same text as it appears in each of these different versions: the first passage concerns harvesting & winemaking, and is here because that’s what this website is about; the second passage concerns the thought that the moon is as crucial as the sun in determining the growth of plants, and is here because it’s very beautiful.

Eventually, I’d like to post the complete *Libro IV* on vineyards & wine, in each of these vernacular versions plus the Latin & a translation into English; but needless to say, that’s not going to happen for a while.

