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Éditorial

Jean-François GERKENS

Voici déjà le troisième volume de la RIDA dans son nouvel emballage... auquel nous espérons que les lecteurs se sont désormais habitués. Après un numéro 62 (en hommage à Jacques Henri Michel) finalement paru en janvier 2017, cette année pourrait bien devenir l'année des trois RIDA, dès lors que d'après nos prévisions (faut-il écrire espoirs ?), le numéro 64 devrait encore paraître avant la fin de l'année 2017.

Le présent numéro comporte les rubriques habituelles, avec un retour d'une chronique de la SIHDA plus complète que dans le numéro précédent, incluant à nouveau les résumés de la plupart des conférences prononcées. Comme le lecteur peut l'imaginer, la différence vient ici en partie de la discipline des conférenciers et des organisateurs de la SIHDA. J'ai dès lors fourni une traduction en français de tous les résumés dont je disposais.

Rendez-vous est maintenant donné pour la 71^e session de la SIHDA à Bologne et Ravenne, dont le thème central sera : La liberté et les interdictions dans les droits de l'Antiquité. Elle se tiendra du 12 au 16 septembre 2017. Dans l'espoir de vous y rencontrer nombreux, je souhaite à chacun une bonne lecture !

Chaufontaine, le 15 juin 2017
Jean-François Gerkens

Bees, slaves, emperors, tyrants Metaphors of constitutional change in Rome between the republic and the principate*

Rachele HASSAN

Université Bar-Ilan

[Moscow] “It was empty as a dying-out, queen-less beehive is empty”

L. TOLSTOY, *War and Peace*

1. The sovereign unarmed. Seneca, Nero and the *clementia* of the king of the bees

Written no later than AD 56, and perhaps earlier, Seneca’s *De clementia* is explicitly addressed to the young *princeps* Nero, whose tutor he was. Nero was acclaimed emperor by the praetorians in October 54, immediately after Claudius’ death by poisoning, and received instruction from Seneca and the prefect of the praetorian guard, Burrus, in the qualities of wisdom and moderation, thus ushering in the happy opening phase of his principate, described, as is known, as the *quinquennium Neronis*. We also know how Nero’s policies rapidly changed — notwithstanding considerable historiographic uncertainty — and how things ended up.

But what interests us here, for our present limited purposes, is an important passage from *De clementia*¹, a kind of pedagogic treatise addressed to Nero, who, not yet seventeen years of age, had recently ascended to the principate. Clemency, Seneca declares, is a necessary requirement for all citizens, but above all for a

* The research for this paper was supported by a post-doctorate scholarship from Tel Aviv University, Faculties of Law and Humanities (thanks to the Cegla Center for Interdisciplinary Research of the Law, Prof. Eyal Zisser, Prof. Aron Shai), under the supervision of Prof. Nili Cohen, to whom I am deeply grateful. I would also like to thank Prof. Oliviero Diliberto, Prof. Leo Peppe, Prof. Jonathan J. Price and Prof. Sharon Hannes for all their precious assistance.

1. On this work, see S. BRAUND, *Seneca, De Clementia, edited with Text, Translation, and Commentary*, Oxford, 2011² [2009], p. 16–76, and cited reading. See also M. SCHOFIELD, “Seneca on Monarchy and the Political Life: *De Clementia, De Tranquillitate Animi, De Otio*”, in S. BARTSCH and A. SCHIESARO (eds.), *Seneca*, New York, 2015, p. 68–77.

prince who — through it — could ensure the loyalty of his subjects. Indeed, a prince distinguished himself from a tyrant precisely by exercising that titular virtue: punishment was not meted out for the pleasure of it, but only when strictly necessary. Clemency, ultimately, was neither compassion nor forgiveness, but the free choice of a gentle and noble mind.

In this context, Seneca makes a comparison between two social organizations, the human one and that of bees; it is a very interesting comparison and, due to the importance of Seneca's role, offers a good starting point.

Sen. *clem.* 1.19.3

Hoc tamen maxime distinguitur: iracundissimae ac pro corporis captu pugnantissimae sunt apes et aculeos in volnere relinquunt, rex ipse sine aculeo est; noluit illum natura nec saevum esse nec ultionem magno constaturam petere telumque detraxit et iram eius inermem reliquit.

Yet the biggest difference is this: bees are highly irascible and, for the size of their bodies, very fierce fighters and they leave their sting in the wounds they inflict, but their king himself has no sting. Not wanting him to be cruel or to seek revenge that would cost a high price, Nature removed his weapon and left his anger unarmed².

To justify the need for the *princeps* to show mercy in his behaviour, Seneca draws a parallel with the king of the bees and the social organization of these insects³. The king⁴, he has previously stated in §2, is exempt from all work and enjoys many privileges the other bees do not. But the biggest difference between the king and the bees (the subjects) is the one highlighted by Seneca, and which interests us here. In fact, while bees are in general very fierce and are endowed with a painful sting (left in the wound they inflict), the king has no sting⁵, because *Nature* did not want him to be cruel: Nature took away his weapon, and left his anger unarmed.

The full power of the animal metaphor unfolds here. Nature itself⁶, in shaping the somatic features of bees, chose to endow every bee except the king with a sting:

2. The translation is from BRAUND, *o.c.* (n. 1.), 127.

3. For more about the political and social organization of bees in general terms, see, most recently, J.-F. LHERMITTE, *L'Animal vertueux dans la philosophie antique à l'époque impériale*, Paris, 2015, p. 325–327.

4. It was only discovered in the seventeenth century that swarms were led by a queen and not a king.

5. The story of the sting had already appeared much earlier, in Aesop (fable 234): Zeus, angered by the malignity of bees, who did not wish to give their honey to men, saw to it that when they struck they lost their sting and died. For a commentary on the lines in question, see BRAUND, *o.c.* (n. 1), p. 343–344.

6. Regarding the term *natura* I am referring to what is said by D. MANTOVANI [“I giuristi, il retore e le api. *Ius controversum e natura* nella *Declamatio maior XIII*”, in D. MANTOVANI – A. SCHIAVONE (eds.), *Testi e problemi del giusnaturalismo romano*, Pavia, 2007, p. 322, n. 2 and cited references], who understands it as ‘the conception of nature’, “it [nature] too being a cultural construction, at least from when it was included in an intellectual practice like law”.

precisely due to the naturalness of this characteristic⁷, this example (*exemplar*) can also be instructive for the great kings of men.

The comparison between the social organization of bees and that of humans is certainly very effective, and clearly suggests a positive judgment — from Seneca's point of view — of that particular animal structure.

But it seems equally clear that Seneca is employing an animal metaphor in order to make, as it were, some “constitutional” observations about the nature and exercise of power, and the goals of the principate that was then being consolidated, which part of the old ruling order (senatorial, above all) believed it could still condition or even control.

But how, in the middle of the first century after Christ, had this favourable view of bees, and the parallel with human society, been reached? To grasp both conceptual operations, we need to take a step back in time and to make some preliminary observations.

2. Some remarks about the symbology of bees

Over the centuries, bee society has represented a potent image — not just in philosophical reflection, as in Seneca, but in literature as well — for outlining the model of an ideal organization⁸.

Characterized by the division of labour, subordination and obedience to the king, the structure of the hive fascinated entire generations of writers and poets (and consequently readers), who saw in it a metaphor of the contemporary social and political system, or of the one they hoped for (or sometimes wished to avert).

If the presence of references to bees in Greek literature dates back to the time of Homer, we have to wait until Aristotle (*GA* 3.10.759–761b; *HA* 5.20–22, 553–

7. See P.P. ONIDA, *Studi sulla condizione degli animali non umani nel sistema giuridico romano*, Turin, 2012² [2002], p. 71–118. In Seneca nature seems to be a positive point of reference. On this theme, see G.M. FIORE, “Il concetto di educazione in Seneca”, in P. FEDELI (ed.), *Scienza, Cultura, Morale in Seneca*, Atti del Convegno di Monte Sant’Angelo (27–30 settembre 1999), Bari, 2001, p. 299, who observes that in *De Clementia* Seneca mentions a natural social impulse inherent to every man, which prompts everyone to desire the common good and to act in the light of it. Fiore stresses that the philosopher exalts nature in that it has generated everyone from the same substrate and for the same end, on the basis of *Epist.* 95.52 (*membra sumus corporis magni. Natura nos cognatos edidit, cum ex isdem et in eadem gigneret; haec nobis amorem indidit mutuum et sociabiles fecit*). In the same vein, BRAUND, *o.c.* (n. 1), p. 341 (sub v. 1.9.2–4), points out that “moving through the thought that a king is a natural phenomenon, Seneca develops an analogy between bee society and human chiefly to illustrate the role of *clementia*, which among bees is represented by the ‘king’ bee’s having no sting. In the largely paratactic build-up to this point (*praeterea [...] praeterea [...] hoc tamen maxime*), he invites us to draw several other parallels between the king bee and the human ruler, including living quarters, supervisory role, emergence of the best as king, and impressive appearance. He repeatedly personifies Nature in this section (*commenta est, noluit, est [...] illimos*)”.

8. On the power of bee images, see P. COSTA, “Le api e l’alveare. Immagini dell’ordine fra ‘antico’ e ‘moderno’”, in *Ordo iuris. Storia e forme dell’esperienza giuridica*, Milan, 2003, p. 373–409.

554 f.) for the first scientific treatment of apiculture in the ancient world; he was then followed by others in the Hellenistic age.

In Rome, scientific literature can be found in Varro (*r.r.* 3.16.1–38), Columella (*r.r.* 9.2–15) and Pliny (*n.h.* 11.4–23). Honey was widely used in the city, as attested by the imports from Crete, Cyprus, Spain and Malta⁹, and certainly of great importance for the economy of the time¹⁰.

But aside from the intrinsic value of these hardworking insects, it is the varied symbology associated with bees that acquires the most pregnant significance in literary production from the ancient through to the modern world.

In truth, bees were regarded as creatures immune to the fascination of Venus, averse to vice and adultery, faithful to systems of obedience, altruism, solidarity and abnegation, blessed with prophetic powers, and governed by unbreakable rules regulating their individual movements and those of the entire swarm. Moreover, bees were associated with the divine. From the Bible to Dante they were considered messengers of God¹¹. And from Plato to Virgil, they were viewed as a symbol of eloquence¹².

I do not intend here — nor would it be useful — to trace the polysemic value of bees¹³, from antiquity to the present day; my purpose, in fact, is limited to a close reading of constitutional changes between the end of the republic and the beginning of the principate on the basis of literary sources of the time that deal with bees and their social organization.

The historic period just mentioned is highly complex, and just as widely debated in scholarship: but an interpretation of it based on the metaphor of the animal kingdom (bee society) has not, to the best of my knowledge, yet been attempted. It will therefore be of some interest to tease out the ideologies underlying the different texts that will be examined.

In particular, it will be shown how, in the use — in sources from the period straddling the end of the republic and the first phase of the principate — of that particular organized animal kingdom as a metaphor, we can readily perceive a

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9. P. RADICI COLACE, S.M. MEDAGLIA, L. ROSSETTI, S. SCONOCCHIA (eds.), RADICI COLACE (series editor), v. *apicoltura*, in *Dizionario delle scienze e delle tecniche di Grecia e Roma*, I (A–L), Pisa/Rome, 2010, p. 144.
 10. For a short but good historic overview of the significance of honey and bees in antiquity, see L. CILLIERS and F.P. RETIEF, “Bees, Honey and Health in Antiquity”, *Akroterion* 53 (2008), p. 7–19, and cited references; see also C. SODDU, *Storia del miele. Archeologia, storia e simbologia del miele e dell’ape in epoca classica*, Milan, 2012, p. 62–78.
 11. See *Judges*, 14.8; Dante Alighieri, *Divina Commedia, Paradiso*, XXXI, 7–9 “*si come schiera d’api che s’infiora | una fiata e una si ritorna | là dove il suo laboro s’insapora*”.
 12. For the legend of the bees resting on Plato’s lips, as narrated by Cicero, see *divinat.* 1.78, 2.66.
 13. On the polysemy of the bee metaphor, see G. PURPURA, “Le api, l’accademia e il potere”, in *Atti dell’Accademia di Scienze, Lettere e Arti di Palermo*, Serie 4, vol. 1 (2009–2010), p. 423–442 and cited references.

change of interpretative paradigm in describing the institutional and sociopolitical transformations going on at the time¹⁴.

3. Some remarks on bees in Roman law

Once again, it should be stressed at the outset that I will not deal here, even cursorily, with the various issues of a private legal nature connected with bees themselves¹⁵. As is well known, debate has surrounded the question of qualifying this animal species as *res nullius*, and the relative way of purchasing (and perhaps losing) ownership¹⁶.

Bees were also the subject of lively *declamationes* in the first and second century AD, regarding the relations between *ius* and *natura*, entering, therefore, into the more complex debate about the doctrine of natural law. This has recently been emphasized by Mantovani, who points out how the Roman jurists had lively discussions about bees, and regarded them as a case to be learned from. He also clarifies that the intrinsic problem of bees was not that of property, but of *possessio*. They asked, that is, whether the volatile and elusive nature of bees made it possible to possess them¹⁷.

However, such questions concern bees and their hives in the natural world and their intrinsic legal status. They do not concern those texts that deal with bees in a metaphorical and essentially political key in order to draw useful lessons for the social organization of humans. This is the only theme I will consider here.

4. The convulsions of the Roman republic: bees as a sign in Cicero

The echoes of the *bellum servile*, the revolt led by Spartacus and bloodily quashed in 71 BC, had not yet died away in Rome, when Cicero composed his *De haruspicum responsis*. We are in 56 BC, and the seriousness of the danger the republic had faced was still keenly felt: this, as we shall see, is of particular importance for our inquiry.

The speech in question was designed to confute a response given in that same year by the soothsayers, to whom Clodius, then the *curule aedile*, had turned to accuse Cicero of sacrilege and to force him to give up his house on the Palatine,

14. "Animals are good to think with": C. LÉVI STRAUSS, *Totemism*, Boston, 1963, p. 89.

15. Considering, as pointed out by E.J. COHN ["Bees and the Law", *Law Quarterly Review* 218 (1939), p. 289], that "few animals are more prone than bees to furnish lawyers with attractive little problems", on which, more extensively, see B.W. FRIER, "Bees and Lawyers", *The Classical Journal* 78.2 (1982–83), p. 105–114; ID., "Why Did the Jurist Change Roman Law? Bees and Lawyers revisited", *Index* 22 (1994), p. 135–149.

16. I refer here simply to the classic *Istituzioni di Diritto Romano* of P. BONFANTE (Reprinted 10th edn., Milan, 1987, p. 210); ID., *Corso di Diritto Romano*, vol. II, *La Proprietà*. Parte II (revised reprint of the first edition by G. BONFANTE and G. CRIFÒ), Milan, 1968, p. 75–76.

17. MANTOVANI, *l.c.* (n. 6), p. 365.

the object of a long dispute between the two. In the speech, Cicero defends himself by redirecting the charge against Clodius, declaring him to be sacrilegious and an enemy of the republic¹⁸. One of the reasons for Clodius' sacrilege was, according to Cicero, that he had allowed slaves (as spectators and actors) to mix with free men at the *Megalesia* games. The games were thus profaned and Clodius had done something *inquinatum, deformatum, perversum, conturbatum* (*har.* 12.25).

In this regard Cicero's invective also offers an example that is of particular interest to us:

Cic., *de harusp. resp.* 12.25

Si examen apium ludis in scaenam caveam<ve> venisset, haruspices acciendos ex Etruria putaremus: videmus universi repente examina tanta servorum inmissa in populum Romanum saeptum atque inclusum, et non commovemur? Atque in apium fortasse examine nos ex Etruscorum scriptis haruspices ut a servitio caveremus monerent.

Had a swarm of bees come upon the stage or into the auditorium at the games, we should think it necessary to summon soothsayers from Etruria; and do we feel no alarm when not a man of us but sees such numerous swarms of slaves launched suddenly upon the Roman people packed within the walls of a building? Indeed, were a swarm of bees actually in question, the soothsayers might perchance warn us, after reference to their Etrurian books, to beware of our slave population¹⁹.

Cicero likens the games held in the presence of crowds of slaves — promoted by the hated Clodius — to what would happen if a swarm of bees were to invade the auditorium or the stage. In this case, the orator continues, soothsayers would have been called from Etruria: in all probability they would have warned the Romans, seeing the sudden arrival of the bees *in scaenam* as an ill omen²⁰. The swarm signals the danger of masses of slaves suddenly launching themselves on the Roman people, gathered together in an enclosed space and unable to move freely.

Immediately afterwards, Cicero explicitly recalls the example of Spartacus (*har.* 12.26), using the bee metaphor quite unambiguously to convey social alarm.

18. On the *De Haruspicum Responso* as a document that takes the audience right into the processes of the interpretation of divine signs and on the relationship between religion and political discourse, see M. BEARD, "Cicero's 'Response of the Haruspices' and the Voice of the Gods", *The Journal of Roman Studies* 102 (2012), p. 20–39. Beard stresses in fact that Cicero's work offers "a glimpse into one arena within which the Roman élite had long learnt to debate religion" (p. 39).

19. Translation by N.H. WATTS, *Cicero the Speeches*, London, 1961, p. 349.

20. On bee swarm prodigies, see the view of D. MACINNES, "Dirum Ostentum: Bee Swarm Prodigies at Roman Military Camps", in C. DEREUX (ed.), *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History*, 10, Brussels, 2000, p. 56–69. Macinnes explains that the bee swarm prodigies paradoxically enabled the historian to add drama to his narrative and to play on the audience's expectations because of its original religious and cultural significance.

5. More on Cicero: bees and tyrants

What is more, bees — in this case mentioned in relation to events considered to have taken place historically, and not just as a possible metaphor — also crop up in Cicero's account of a train of events involving Dionysius the Elder, the tyrant of Syracuse.

Once again, their presence relates to an *ostentum*, a portent, thereby evoking divinatory interpretation.

Cic., *divin.* 1.33.73

Facta coniectura etiam in Dyonisio est, paulo antem quam regnare coepit; qui cum per agrum Leontinum iter faciens equum ipse demisisset in flumen, submersus equus voraginibus non existit; quem cum maxima contentione non potuisset extrahere, discessit, ut ait Philistus, aegre ferens. Cum autem aliquantum progressus esset, subito exaudivit hinnitum respexitque et equum alacrem laetus adspexit, cuius in iuba examen apium consederat. Quod ostentum habuit hanc vim, ut Dionysius paucis post diebus regnare coeperit.

A conjecture was also made in the case of Dionysius shortly before he began to reign. When he was travelling through the territory of Leontini, and made his horse go down into a river, the horse was swallowed up in whirlpools and disappeared. When he could not extricate it despite his best efforts, he left, so Philistus says, taking it badly. But when he had gone on a little way, he suddenly heard a whinny, looked back, and to his joy, saw his horse alive and on its mane a swarm of bees had settled. This portent had the following effect that in a few days Dionysius began his reign²¹.

The passage is from *De divinatione*, a philosophical work divided into two books and composed in 44 BC. In it, Cicero criticizes the various aspects of divination, regarding it as a form of superstition, though he concludes by saying that, for the benefit of the republic, the institutions of its ancestors needed to be defended by maintaining old rituals and ceremonies. This aspect is revealed, as will be seen, precisely in the ambivalent use of the bee metaphor.

Let's look at the text. While Dionysius was travelling in the territory of Leontini he led his horse down to the river: caught by a whirlpool, it sank into the water. After long and vain attempts to bring it back to the surface, he finally gave up with great regret, as Philistus recounts. But after having walked some distance, suddenly he heard a whinny and was happy to find his horse alive, quivering with a swarm of bees (*examen apium*)²² clustered together on its mane. The effect of this portent was that a few days later Dionysius became tyrant (Cicero uses the expression *regnare coeperit*) of Syracuse²³.

21. Cicero: *On Divination Book I*, translated and with introduction and commentary by D. WARDLE, Oxford, 2006, p. 69.

22. See A. STANLEY PEASE, *M. Tulli Ciceronis, De Divinatione. Libri Duo*, Darmstadt, 1963, p. 220.

23. On the lines in question, see in particular WARDLE, *o.c.* (n. 21), p. 284–285.

Here Cicero exploits the image of bees once again, but from a different perspective to the previous one. First of all, in the *De divinatione* bees are real animals — albeit in a prodigious context — and so do not represent the imaginary example of a swarm comparable to the slave threat.

In the second place, the bees themselves seem, despite Cicero's evident scepticism, to indicate a prodigious event favourable to the protagonist, Dionysius.

Ultimately, it is fairly evident that for the author it is a simple coincidence and not a portent, to the extent that, in the second book of the *De divinatione*, he is able to affirm, in relation to the same episode:

Cic., *divin.* 2.31.67

Nam Dionysi equus quid attulit admirationis, quod emersit e flumine quodque habuit apes in iuba? Sed quia brevi tempore regnare coepit, quod acciderat casu vim habuit ostenti.

What is astonishing in the fact that the horse of Dionysius came up out of the river, or that it had bees in its mane? And yet, because Dionysius began to reign a short time later — which was a mere coincidence — the event referred to is considered a portent²⁴.

However, irrespective of Cicero's scepticism about divination, in the story in question the bees seem nevertheless to represent a favourable signal. But is this really so? I believe a different hypothesis can be proposed.

The prophecy of the conquest of power in Syracuse (the orator calls it *regnum*), represented by the bees, is certainly a happy omen in the eyes of the tyrant. But the advent of a tyranny must undoubtedly have appeared inauspicious to the eyes of a republican conservative like Cicero (especially in 44, the year *De divinatione* was composed).

Ultimately, for Cicero, bees seem to evoke manifestations hostile to the republic, whether they represent throngs of slaves or prefigure the superseding of the traditional Roman constitutional arrangement, through the installation of a *regnum*.

We are, in other words, in the twilight days of those old social and/or constitutional set-ups. Soon, as we shall see and as we have already observed in Seneca, it will be precisely the evocation of bees and their social organization, orderly and subaltern to a single king, that will represent an eloquent metaphor of the advent of the principate in Rome.

6. Cicero: the social organization of bees and of men

In the two passages from Cicero that we have just examined (*divin.* 1.3.73 and 2.31.67), bees are depicted generically as swarms. Different and rather more complex is the way in which he refers to bees not simply as a mass, but as an organized community, an effective metaphor of the human social structure. That

24. My translation.

is, the swarm is likened to human society, which also prefigures — though certainly with different meanings — the texts from the early principate that we shall analyse shortly.

Cic., *de off.* 1.157

Atque ut apium examina non fingendorum favorum causa congregantur, sed cum congregabilia natura sint, fingunt favos, sic homines, ac multo etiam magis, natura congregati adhibent agendi cogitandique sollertiam.

Moreover, as swarms of bees are not gathered for the purpose of making honeycombs, but make honeycombs because they are gregarious by nature, so, and even much more, men, sociable by nature, bring to their union skill in joint and associate action²⁵.

The passage is from *De officiis* — composed at the end of 44 BC, in more or less exactly the same period as the previous one examined — where Cicero recommends ideals of conduct to the young Roman aspiring to a public career²⁶.

In what was a moment of acute social and political crisis, Cicero wished to reaffirm the values he had always believed in and fought for. His aim was to reconfirm “the cultural and ideological foundations of the Roman state, bound up also with the historic justification of the empire, the ideal (but also idealized) bases of Roman life, the forms of political behaviour that should be ingrained in political life itself”²⁷.

In this context, Cicero, to describe human society, employs, amongst other literary expedients, the metaphor of bees, placing the human need to socialize and to join together with others at the centre of his reflection on human society.

In the passage in question, taken from the first book and essentially dealing with the development of the concept of *honestum*, Cicero sustains that, like swarms of bees, which do not congregate to make honeycomb but build it because they are inclined *by nature* to group together, so too humans, more than bees themselves, eagerly dedicate themselves to action and speculation insofar as they are *natura congregati* (sociable by nature)²⁸ in society.

The author makes it clear — and this is worth stressing — that bees gather and organize themselves *by nature*: building hives is the consequence, not the cause, of their natural urge to be gregarious. The same can be said of humans.

The comparison between bees and humans (between the hive and human society) is evident and explicit in this case. What is more, it seems to me to be very

25. Translation by A.P. PEABODY, *Cicero De Officiis*, New York, 2009, p. 99–100.

26. For more about the content of *De officiis*, see, as a general introduction, E. NARDUCCI (ed.), *Introduzione a Cicerone*, Rome/Bari, 1992, p. 21–26, and cited references. See also the more recent and dense work by R. FIORI, *Bonus vir. Politica filosofia retorica e diritto nel de officiis di Cicerone*, Naples, 2011.

27. NARDUCCI, *o.c.* (n. 26), p. 16.

28. See A.R. DICK, *A Commentary on Cicero, De Officiis*, Michigan, 1996, p. 339.

significant that Cicero theorizes that the associative instinct of bees (and thus of humans as well) does not derive from the forming of a pact, but is instead a *natural* phenomenon. In truth, in *de officiis* 1.157 Cicero seems to reject the theory that men come together in communities by mutual agreement, in favour of the view that men possess social instincts by nature.

It is a key aspect of the structure of this work: as we shall soon see, the use of this bee image as a symbol of an innate sociality acts as a mirror of Cicero's political vision²⁹. It would soon be overturned, and placed on a wholly new ideological plane by Virgil.

7. On the collective organization of bees: Varro and Virgil

Before moving on to Virgil's text, it is worth recalling that the metaphor of the social organization of bees as an ideal "model" for men was widespread in late republican intellectual circles, and may have been one of the premises for the great Virgilian ideological construct we shall examine shortly.

As regards the hive metaphor, it will suffice here to mention one of the most explicit texts on the theme:

Varr., *r.r.* 3.16.4–5

Apes non sunt solitaria natura, ut aquilae, sed ut homines. Quod si in hoc faciunt etiam graculi, at non idem, quod hic societas operis et aedificiorum, quod illic non est. Hic ratio atque ars, ab his opus facere discunt, ab his aedificare, ab his cibaria condere. Tria enim harum: cibus, domus, opus, neque idem quod cera cibus, nec quod mel, nec quod domus.

Bees are not of a solitary nature, as eagles are, but are like human beings. Even if jackdaws in this respect are the same, still it is not the same case; for in one there is a fellowship in toil and in building which does not obtain in the other; in the one case there is reason and skill — it is from these that men learn to toil, to build, to store up food. They have three tasks: food, dwelling, toil; and the food is not the same as the wax, nor the honey, nor the dwelling³⁰.

The author explains that bees are not by nature solitary animals like eagles, but should instead be compared to humans. The behaviour of jackdaws is similar, but not identical: while there is a fellowship of work and a common dwelling among bees, this aspect is absent in the other case; among bees everything takes place according to reason and is the fruit of artfulness — and so they learn how to work, to build and, finally, how to gather food. This, says Varro proudly, is the three-fold aim of their activities: food, home and work.

It is a lively and very suggestive description. The organization of bees is transformed into a highly effective metaphor of a healthy, well-structured society. First

29. M.A. LEVI, *Augusto e il suo tempo*, Milan, 1986, p. 322.

30. Translation by W. DAVIS HOOPER (revised by H.B. ASH), *Marcus Porcius Cato, On Agriculture. Marcus Terentius Varro, On Agriculture*, London, 1960, p. 501.

of all, bees are compared to men, above all for being distinguished (unlike eagles, which travel alone) by a spirit of aggregation. Varro explains, in fact, that *by nature* bees are not solitary — it really does seem as if we are reading Cicero here³¹.

Once again, then, the element of naturalness is highlighted, that is, of the spontaneity of the community spirit of bees. In this way, stress is also laid on the innate human predisposition towards collective systems of organization, where everyone — as Varro says further on — performs a precise task according to rational criteria. Food, dwelling, toil: these are the same elements we will shortly find, albeit amplified, in Virgil.

8. Virgil and the reversal of the bee metaphor: the birth of the principate

These, then, were the conceptual premises on which Virgil would work. Not many years elapsed, but the context and intentions — political, literary, moral — of the poet represent the transition from Cicero's aristocratic republic to the principate of Augustus.

In fact, Virgil, while starting from a motif not dissimilar to that of Cicero and Varro, overturns the interpretative paradigm. The poet outlines a grand representation of bee society (*Georg.* 4.149–227) as an exemplary model of human society during the acclaimed “new golden age” ushered in by Augustus³². The poet thus references the analogy between bees and men, but uses it in a completely new interpretative key in line with the new ideology of the principate³³.

In truth, in his description of the organization of bees, Virgil draws on Varro, who is the poet's source both for the classification of bees (*hist.* 9.40) and for the use of the image of their organization as a symbol of human society.

The *Georgics*, as is known, were composed over a relatively long period of time (37–29 BC), between the *Bucolics* and the *Aeneid*. The work reflects, on the one hand, a period of uncertainty and sociopolitical change in Rome, resulting from the civil wars, and on the other, the connection between the ideology of peace and the return to the golden age. Book IV, which interests us here, is devoted to bees and clearly shows this link: the image of the organization of these hardworking insects, connected, as will be seen, to the divine world as well, is taken by Virgil as a model for describing the ideal society, completely in tune with Augustan propaganda.

31. As regards the element of naturalness, see n. 6 above.

32. On this point, see M.A. LEVI, “Il regno delle api e la ‘Domus Augusta’”, *La Parola del Passato* 37 (1983), p. 345.

33. On bees in Virgil, also as a model of juridical and political organization, see above all F. DELLA CORTE, v. *ape (apis)*, in *Enciclopedia Virgiliana*, I, Rome, 1984, p. 211–214, and D.E.W. WORMELLS, v. *apicultura*, in *ibid.*, p. 214–216, and cited works. For more in the same vein, see F. SINI, *Bellum Nefandum. Virgilio e il problema del ‘diritto internazionale antico’*, Sassari, 1991, p. 159–160 and p. 229–230.

The fresh presentation of ancient peasant civilization in the *Georgics* is in perfect keeping with Augustus' desire to restore the ancient *mores maiorum*, after the excessive corruption of the late republic. These are well known considerations³⁴.

In the final book of the *Georgics*, however, the poet focuses on the contrast between the smallness of bees and the noble greatness of the way they live. In fact, in Virgil the similarities serve to represent the macroscopic³⁵, his aim being not to speak to his readers of the single man, but of humanity as a whole³⁶. In other words, through the account of the natural world depicted by the bees, Virgil takes the opportunity to describe human society³⁷. This is in line with what is said by Büchner, according to whom the nature of bees is “absolutely unique” among animals, representing the “superhuman” symbol of the idea of the state³⁸.

The main sources of Book IV of the *Georgics* are Aristotle (Book IX, chap. 40)³⁹, and, as we have already said, Varro (*r.r.* 3.16). But Virgil's choice of the theme is not linked to the fact that apiculture was appreciated by the Romans (honey, regarded as a gift of god, was used as a sweetener instead of sugar, and for medicinal purposes). Instead, with this image, Virgil wanted to express his ideology and his own political vision⁴⁰.

Admiration for this hardworking, disciplined community, one of a kind in the animal kingdom, offered the poet the occasion to create new images capable of pointing to the (ideal) society of men and their culture⁴¹.

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34. For a brief summary of the fourth book, see, most recently, M. VON ALBRECHT, *Virgilio. Un'introduzione. Bucoliche, Georgiche, Eneide* (Italian translation A. SETAIOLI), Milan, 2012, especially p. 87–116.
35. A. BARCHIESI, *Virgilio, Georgiche*, Milan, 1980, p. 102, especially about the contrast between the small size of bees and the noble grandeur of their way of living, which, in his view, is a central theme of Book IV.
36. T.N. HABINEK, “Sacrifice, Society and Vergil's Ox-born Bees”, in M. GRIFFITH – D.J. MASTRONARDE (eds.), *Cabinet of the Muses: Essays on Classical and Comparative Literature in Honor of T.G. Rosenmeyer*, Atlanta, 1990, p. 209–223, republished in P. HARDIE (ed.), *Vergil. Critical Assessment of Classical Authors*, London/New York, 1999, p. 328–343. See also R.F. THOMAS, “The ‘Sacrifice’ at the end of the *Georgics*, Aristaeus, and Vergilian Closure”, *Classical Philology* 86 (3) 1991, p. 211–218.
37. On Book IV of the *Georgics*, see M. ERREN, *P. Vergilius Maro, Georgica*, Band 2. Kommentar, Heidelberg, 2003, p. 781–1003.
38. K. BÜCHNER, *Virgilio. Il poeta dei Romani* (Italian translation E. RIGANTI), Brescia, 1986² [1959], p. 372–373.
39. Arist., *GA* 3, 10, 759b 1–4. It does not even seem logical that bees are female and drones male, given that nature does not attribute weapons of defence to any female; while drones do not have a sting, bees do.
40. S. VAN OVERMIRE, “The Perfect King Bee Visions of Kingship in Classical Antiquity”, *Akroterion* 56 (2011), p. 32–38.
41. See S. VAN OVERMIRE, *l.c.* (n. 40), p. 44, who points out acutely that “terms and concepts [about bees] from a familiar domain were used to make more difficult aspects of life comprehensible. Still the portrayal of the king bee was not merely a subconscious process: these authors [who

9. Virgil, the hive and a pacified society

So let's look then at what Virgil has to say in the *Georgics*⁴² about the community of bees⁴³.

Right from the proem of book four, Virgil stresses that he wants to conclude the poem by praising the heavenly gift of honey: it is no accident that he writes *protinus aërii mellis caelestia dona* (v. 1). The poet affirms that, continuing in his treatment of animals, he will speak of the substance that the ancients believed came from the dew of the sky⁴⁴, which, falling onto the flowers in the morning, was consumed by bees⁴⁵.

Virgil did not know that honey was the result of patient gathering, but believed it fell onto flowers during the night or early hours of the morning, as can be seen also in *Buc.* 4.30 (*et durae quercus sudabunt roscida mella*) and *Georg.* 4.183 (*pinguis tilia — distendunt cellas*). The idea of *caelestis* completes that of *aërius*: honey is, in Virgil's words, both of the sky⁴⁶, and of the "celestials", namely the gods, and thus related to the divine sphere.

The theme of Book IV is made clear right from the first verse: the poet intends to celebrate apiculture and the world surrounding it: there is a description of the collective life of bees (53–62), echoes of the civil war (67–87) and an account of the end of the battle between the two queens (88–94). This is followed by a description of bees and the work of the beekeeper (95–148), before we get to what interests us here: the organized life of bees (153–169). After having explained that Jupiter gave natural privileges to the bees as reward for having nourished him in Crete, Virgil moves on to a description of their lives. Bees alone have offspring and houses in

refers to bees] also hoped to influence their readers, and with a natural example of their choice. Their ideal of society was confirmed in nature." In a similar vein, see also DELLA CORTE (translation and commentary), *Le Georgiche di Virgilio, Libri III–IV*, Genoa, 1986, p. 107.

42. L.P. WILKINSON, *The Georgics of Virgil*, Cambridge, 1969, p. 260–261, stresses that the frequency — sixteen occurrences — and accuracy of Virgil's references to bees in his other works suggest he had a special interest in them.
43. It is worth emphasizing here that bees had already been mentioned by Virgil in *Ecl.* 1.54 (*Hyblaeis apibus*), where mention is made of Hyblaeian bees, on which see A. CUCCHIARELLI (introduction and commentary), A. TRAINA (translation), *Puùlio Virgilio Marone, Le Bucoliche*, Rome, 2012, p. 158–159; they would then reappear in the *Aeneid*.
44. *Hist. Anim.* V, 22, 554 a 4. Pliny would say that honey is the sweat of the sky (*n.h.* XI, 30). On this point, see A. SALVATORE, "Lettura del quarto libro delle Georgiche", in *Lecturae Virgilianae*, M. GIGANTE (ed.), *Le Georgiche*, II, Naples, 1982, p. 126, n. 6.
45. A. SALVATORE, *l.c.* (n. 44), p. 112, who underlines how the image of the sky from which honey falls was drawn on by Virgil (*Buc.* 4.30) even before he thought of writing the *Georgics*. Cf. Ovid (*met.* 1.112), Seneca the philosopher (*epist.* 84) Pliny the Elder (*n.h.* 11.12), who associate bees with a divine image.
46. J.L. WHITELEY, *P. Vergilius Maro. Georgics. Book Four*, New York, 1969, p. 29, observes that the ancients believed that honey fell like dew from the skies (cf. *Ecl.* 4.30 *roscida mella*) — a superstition that arose from the confusion of honey with honeydew, which is exuded by aphids and scale-insects on leaves.

common, live a life governed by austere laws, have a fatherland and a fixed dwelling. Observe the following in particular:

Verg. *Georg.* 4.153–159

*Solae communes natos, consortia tecta
urbis habent magnisque agitant sub legibus aevum,
et patriam solae et certos novere penates,
venturaeque hiemis memores aestate laborem
experiuntur et in medium quaesita reponunt.
Namque aliae victu invigilant et foedere pacto
exercentur agris;*

They [the bees] alone have children in common, hold the dwellings of their city jointly, and pass their life under the majesty of law. They alone know a fatherland and fixed home, and in summer, mindful of the winter to come, spend toilsome days garner their gains into a common store. For some watch over the gathering of food, and under fixed covenant labour in the fields⁴⁷.

And again speaking of bees (vv. 162–169):

*[...] aliae spem gentis adultos
educunt foetus, aliae purissima mella
stipant et liquido distendunt nectare cellas.
Sunt quibus ad portas cecidit custodia sorti,
inque vicem speculantur aquas et nubila caeli
aut onera accipiunt venientum aut agmine facto
ignavum fucos pecus a praesepibus arcent.
Fervet opus, redolentque thymo fragrantia mella.*

Others pack purest honey, and swell the cells with liquid nectar. To some it has fallen by the lot to the sentries at the gates, and in turn they watch the rains and clouds of heaven, or take the load of incomers, or in martial array they drive the drones, a lazy herd, from the folds. All aglow is the work, and the fragrant honey is sweet with thyme⁴⁸.

And vv. 197–202:

*Illum adeo placuisse apibus mirabere morem,
quod neque concubitu indulgent nec corpora segnes
in Venerem solvunt aut fetus nixibus edunt:
verum ipsae e foliis natos, e suavis herbis
ore legunt, ipsae regem parvosque Quirites⁴⁹
sufficiunt aulasque et cerea regna refigunt.*

47. This translation (like the other ones of Virgil that follow) is by H. RUSHTON FAIRCLOUGH, *Virgil, Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid I–VI*, London, 1999, p. 229.

48. Translation by RUSHTON FAIRCLOUGH, *o.c.* (n. 47), p. 231.

49. On verse 201, see, in particular, F. DELLA CORTE (translation and commentary), *Le Georgiche di Virgilio, Libri III–IV*, Genoa, 1986, p. 150. The author comments that bees are not only worthy of being compared to men, but also of being esteemed higher than them. In truth, Virgil does

You will also marvel that this custom has found favour with bees, that they indulge not in conjugal embraces, not idly unnerve their bodies in love, or bring forth young with travail, but of themselves gather their children in their mouths from leaves and sweet herbs, of themselves provide a new monarch and tiny burghers, and remodel their palaces and waxen realms⁵⁰.

Finally, vv. 212–218:

[...] *Rege incolumi mens omnibus una est;
amisso rupere fidem constructaque mella
diripuerunt ipsae et crates solvere favorum.
Ille operum custos, illum admirantur et omnes
circumstant fremitu denso stipantque frequentes
et saepe attollunt umeris et corpora bello
obiectant pulchramque petunt per vulnera mortem.*

While he is safe, all are of one mind; when he is lost, straightaway they break their fealty, and themselves pull down the honey they have reared and tear up their trellised combs. He is the guardian of their toils; to him they do reverence; all stand round him in clamorous crowd, and attend him in throngs. Often they lift him on their shoulders, for him expose their bodies to battle, and seek amid wounds a glorious death⁵¹.

In this long exposition, from lines 153 to 218, Virgil basically stresses that the existence of the hive is based on the virtues of bees. Tough laws govern their lives, which are devoted entirely to the community, the beneficiary of their toil. Bees are accustomed to sharing ownership of their houses and city (*consortia tecta urbis* v. 153); to unifying the results of their labour and enjoying a single rest.

Procreation, the home, laws and a common fatherland represent the cornerstones of this ideal society, organized according to the strictest “communism”⁵². There are echoes of Varro here, with the addition of new terms such as law and procreation, evoking the values of Augustan society (and of Virgil’s main interests⁵³, including purely political ones).

The community organization of bees and their characteristics depend, however, on absolute devotion to the chief, in a theoretical-ideological vision that reflects the new Augustan values of society.

not seem to raise bees here to the level of the human race, but to pay a tribute to the Romans, comparing them with these insects from the *mens divina*, and depicting them as citizens who loved their *rex*.

50. RUSHTON FAIRCLOUGH, *o.c.* (n. 47), p. 233.

51. RUSHTON FAIRCLOUGH, *o.c.* (n. 47), p. 233 and 235.

52. BÜCHNER, *o.c.* (n. 38), p. 373.

53. On the theme of law in Virgil, see R. HASSAN, “Tradizione giuridica romana antica e ideologia augustea. Un catalogo di dannati nel Tartaro virgiliano (Aen. 6.608–614)”, in B. SANTALUCIA (ed.), *La repressione criminale nella Roma repubblicana fra norma e persuasione*, Pavia, 2009, p. 493–510, and cited references.

It is worth underlining in this regard that, in *Georg.* 4.158–159 (*Namque aliae victu invigilant et foedere pacto exercentur agris*), Virgil says bees are organized on the basis of a *foedus pactum* (a fixed covenant) among themselves, which envisages a perfect division of roles and labour: a pact that is made thanks to a conscious acceptance of order, subordinate and guaranteed by a single king⁵⁴.

The king is presented by Virgil as at once the *custos* of labour (v. 215) and as the guarantor of the unity sealed by the covenant. So when the sovereign dies, the bees break the *fides* that bound them together, and sack and destroy everything they had previously built (vv. 213–214). The reference to the civil wars that had just ended with the advent of Augustus is quite evident.

But equally clear is the reference to the values of chastity and reproduction in bee society⁵⁵ (vv. 197–209), once again exalted by Augustan ideology and legislation.

The hive therefore offers Virgil the occasion to sing the praises of an orderly, pacified, chaste and honest society, respectful of laws and of ancient customs⁵⁶: the lynchpin of all this, however, lies in there being a sole command, the guarantee and bastion of those values. When the king goes, chaos and fratricidal impulses return to the bee community as well.

10. The natural instinct of bees. A comparison between Cicero and Virgil

The conceptual difference separating Virgil from Cicero is evident. But there is one point that is of great interest in my view and deserves to be stressed. Remember that in *De officiis* Cicero laid emphasis on the instinct of bees (like humans) to be gregarious by *nature*. Not dissimilar is the description of the bee colony in Varro, who describes them as naturally sociable.

Bees do not, then, join together, as has already been highlighted, for a specifically political and/or somehow juridical agreement, but as a result of natural instinct.

In Virgil all this is reversed. Bees make a pact, indicated with a legal terminology with which Virgil was competently familiar (*foedere pacto*)⁵⁷. What we have

54. O. DILIBERTO, v. *pactum / paciscor*, in *Enciclopedia Virgiliana*, III, Roma, 1986, p. 918.

55. They do not give in to the desire to marry, nor allow their bodies to be unnerved by love, nor produce young through labour. They gather their children in their mouths from leaves and sweet-smelling plants, renew their monarchs and their young. As they fly around they bruise their wings among the rocks, and surrender up their lives under the burden of work: so great is their love of flowers and the glory of producing honey.

56. On the legal significance of Virgil's bee society, see L. CANALI, "Introduzione e traduzione", in *Virgilio, Bucoliche. Georgiche. L'amore profondo per la terra, per gli animali, per i cicli della natura*, Milan, 1992, p. 236, n. 25.

57. See above, n. 54.

here is *a choice*, not an instinctive necessity. Its guarantor is the chief, the sole depositary of power, without whom that pact crumbles away.

The citizens of Rome likewise *choose* to have a chief, a prince — Octavian Augustus — who guarantees a “social pact”. This will safeguard the new values, which represent, according to Augustan propaganda, a return to the ancient values of early Rome: hardworking, incorrupt, sober and internally cohesive.

11. Concluding remarks. Bees in Seneca

And so we can return to Seneca, from whom we began.

Authors living in the late republic, though valorizing the cohesion of bee society, also saw in those animals a premonition of the end: Cicero likens them to the throng of slaves threatening the *res publica*, or to the advent of tyranny.

Seneca took the parallel between the organized community of bees and human social structure for granted. At the same time the philosopher had taken on board once and for all the metaphor of the king of the bees as a model for the *princeps* of Rome in the first century AD. But while Virgil, at the dawn of the principate, still had to stress the role of the “chief” as a guarantor of social order (king of the bees — *princeps*), in Seneca the example of the *rex* of the bees (without a sting, and therefore devoted to *clementia*) is paradigmatic in its moral pedagogic intent, directed at the education of the young Nero. In Seneca too, as in Cicero and Varro, there is the reference to *nature*: but it no longer denotes a *natural* instinct for aggregation — a concept already superseded, as we have seen, with Virgil — but refers instead to the absence of sting in the king of the bees: it is precisely nature that wishes the king-*princeps* to be clement.

Basically, the issue now is no longer the role of the *princeps* as guarantor of the “social pact”, but, once again thanks to the metaphor of bees and the hive, his characteristics, responsibilities and the very way in which he should exercise power.

The exemplarity of the animal kingdom and, as argued here, of bees, thus follows — sometimes with radical modifications — the contours of the constitutional changes that occurred in Rome over the course of less than a century, echoing and even favouring them in the restless times between the end of the republic and the stabilization of the principate⁵⁸.

58. See COSTA, *l.c.* (n. 8), p. 409, “Perhaps the secret of the continual [bee] metaphors coincides with the ability not to suggest an answer but to step back, creating the illusion of reflecting [...] that mysterious arrangement of parts and of the whole that continues to be posed again and again as one of our essential ‘great questions’”.

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