

Educating Farmers. Economic Strategies in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* and Their Applications in the Agricultural Landscape

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The works of authors recounting exact agricultural practices in Classical Antiquity are rare. Ancient texts often do not mention the methods of cultivation and production as well as the elements that comprise the rural landscape. This has been seen as paradoxical, considering the numerous sources that refer to the critical importance of agriculture at a theoretical and idealistic level.¹ However, works aimed at the systematic record of agricultural knowledge are not entirely unknown. Many authors of works that vary greatly in subject and style refer to techniques and procedures related to agricultural production, namely the organization of the farm, techniques for the cultivation of various crops and tips for optimizing production. Some authors even raise questions about the moral behavior of the farmers.

From the Archaic to the late Roman period, it is a fact that the systematization of agricultural knowledge was treated in several and different ways. The first sporadic references to rural economy appear with Homer.² Apart from the Homeric works, texts of a greater agronomic interest are preserved; these more or less attempt to record and spread knowledge regarding the rural economy. In the Archaic period, important insights into rural life are provided by Hesiod in his *Works and Days*.³ In the Classical era, Xenophon is the main exponent of systematized agricultural knowledge in his work *Oeconomicus*. Unquestionably richer is the written production of the Roman period on this subject, as many texts emerge clearly for the purpose of organizing and disseminating agricultural knowledge. Consequently, they systematically describe and analyze a plethora of aspects relevant to the agricultural process.⁴ The contribution of relevant works of Classical and Roman advice-literature is multiple. These constitute documents and guidelines for the proper administration of a farmhouse, and as such they are a precious source of information on the organization of the countryside (by extension, of the rural landscape too). Considering the techniques they outline, they indubitably aim to optimize agricultural production.

The focus in this study will be the *Oeconomicus*, one of Xenophon's Socratic works.⁵ The text, which dates to the first half of the 4th century BC,⁶ is often described as a treatise on farming and household management, disguised in the form of a Socratic dialogue.⁷ Its main characters are Critobulus, Ischomachus, and Socrates, the teacher *par excellence*. The first part is more theoretical and outlines the conversation between Socrates and Critobulus and gives the definition of economy according to Xenophon: *οικονόμου ἀγαθοῦ εἶναι εὖ οἰκεῖν τὸν ἑαυτοῦ οἶκον* (1.2).⁸ In the second part, Socrates delivers an earlier conversation that he once had with Ischomachus, a *kalos kagathos*⁹ man. This part addresses several topics of a practical nature on the subject of a farm-

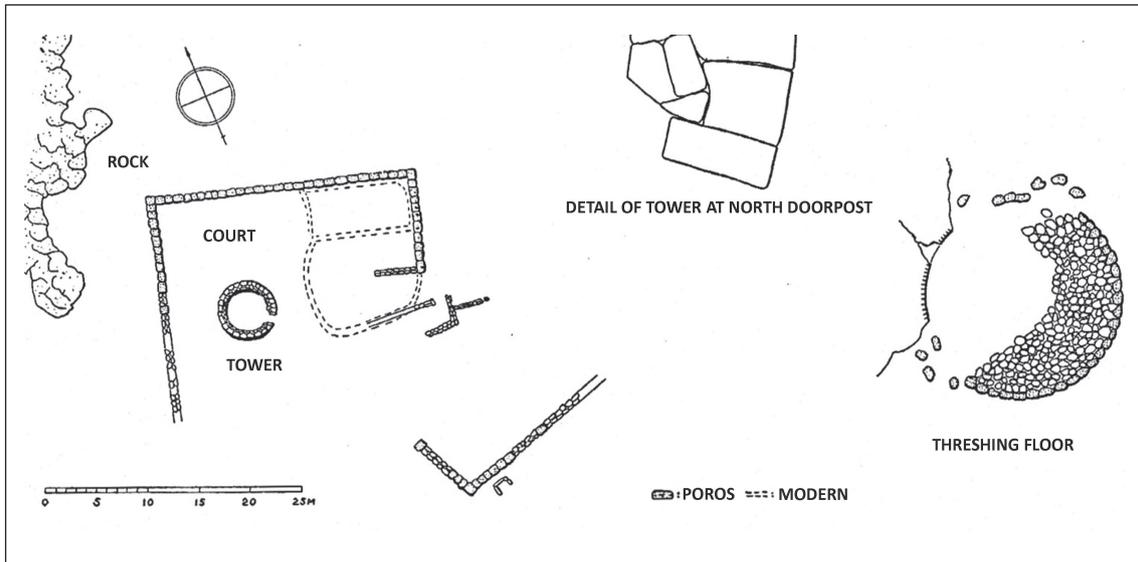


Fig. 1: The Princess Tower farm and threshing floor, Sounion.

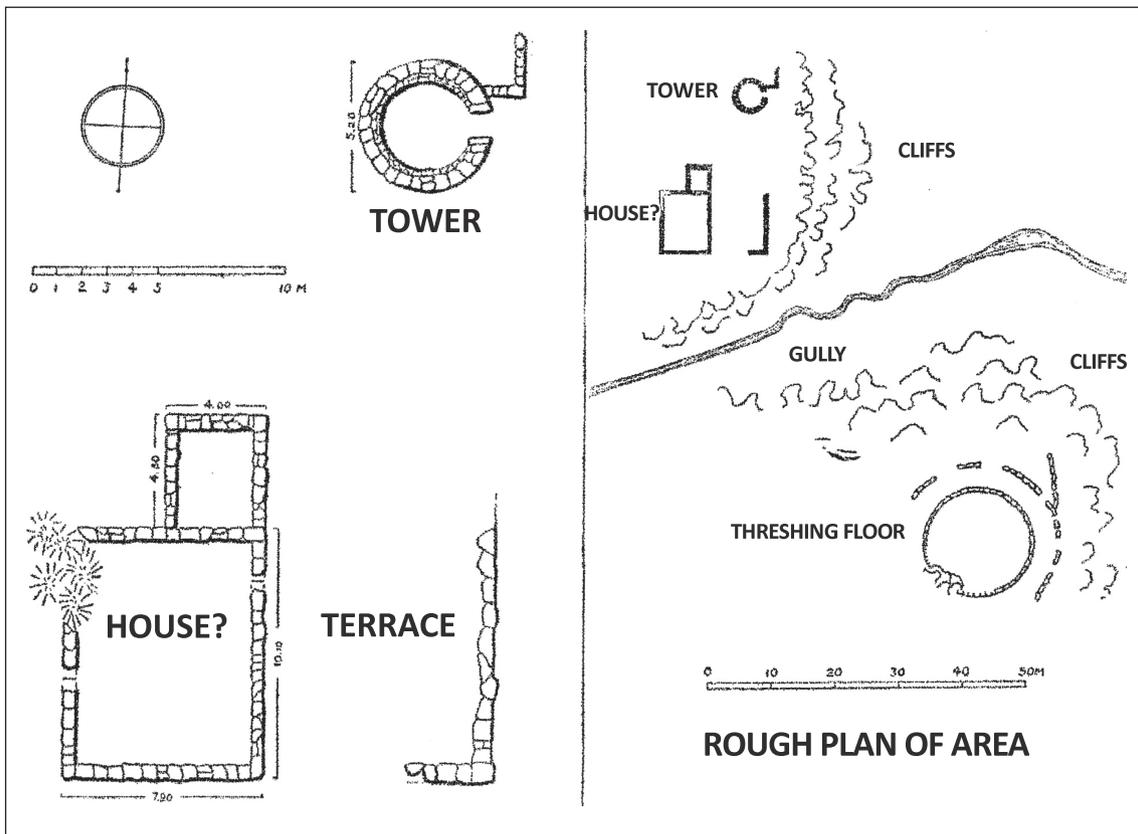


Fig. 2: The Cliff Tower farm and threshing floor, Sounion.

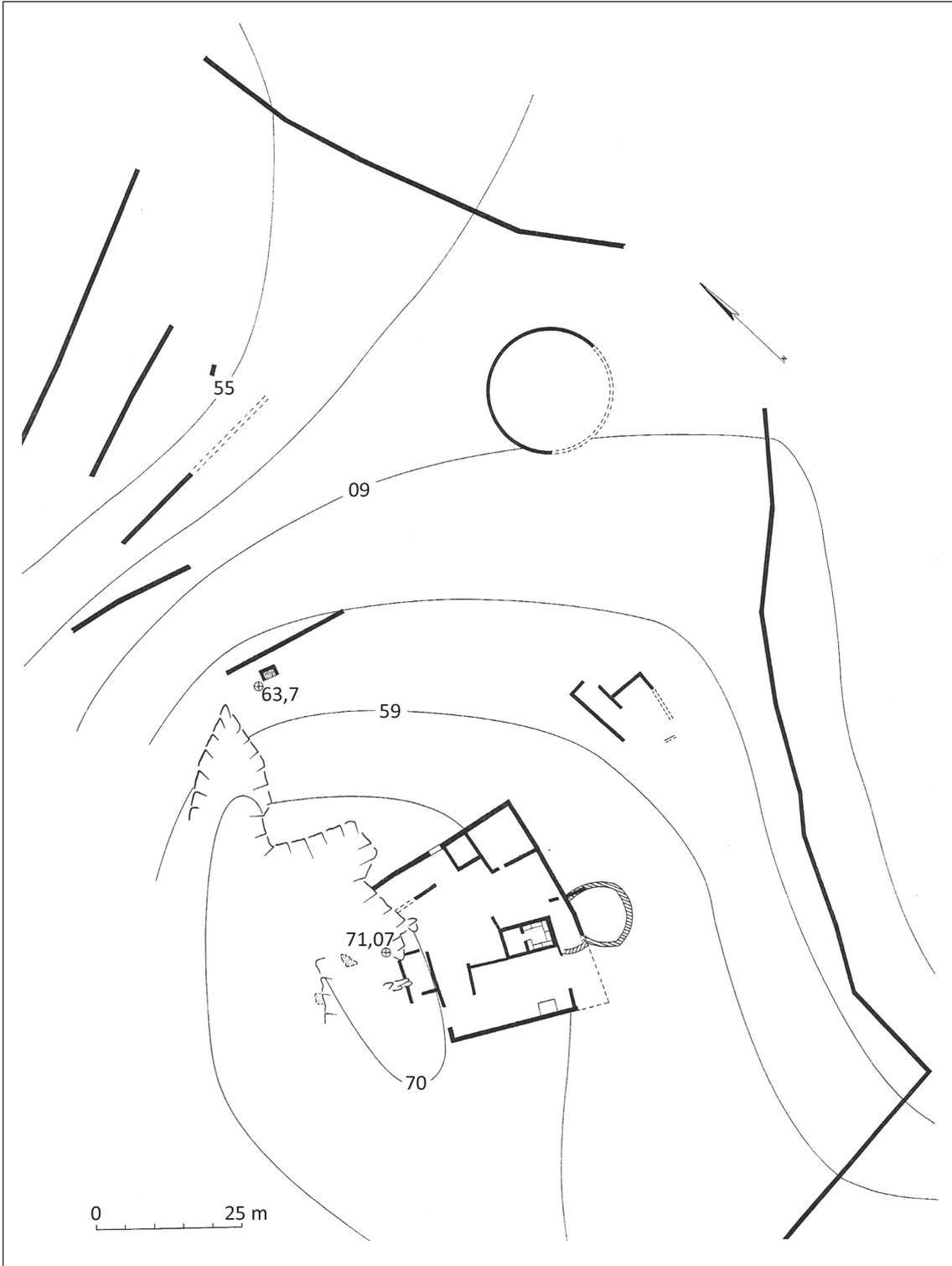


Fig. 3: The LE 16 farm, threshing floor, and agricultural terraces, Legrena.

house's administration and organization, along with the optimization of agricultural production. Socrates' praise of farming has been portrayed as "the earliest extensive eulogy of rural life in Greek prose".¹⁰ The closer examination of the issue carried out in this study includes two main key points. The first is the identification of the agricultural practices revealed throughout the dialogue and their correspondence to the actual rural landscape of Attica in the 4th century BC. In addition, it attempts to re-evaluate the pedagogical significance of the text, in order to understand the motivation for writing such a work for the farmers in that given historical period.

The Classical rural landscape of Attica was structured by three basic elements:¹¹ the farmhouses, the primary agricultural nuclei and engines of economic activity which often include a tower (circular or square in plan); numerous installations (i.e. cisterns, threshing floors, extensive systems of terraces); and the crops that were cultivated. The latter refers namely to the renowned Mediterranean triad of cereals, grape and olive trees, as well as other supplementary crops of minor importance. Accordingly, an evaluation of the *Oeconomicus* should be attempted on the basis of the three fundamental elements of the rural economy: the farmhouse, the agricultural landscape, and the optimization of production.

Regarding the farmhouses, Xenophon is quite explicit when he refers to their internal arrangement. He indicates the segregation of the spaces destined for the slaves according to sex, so as to prevent childbearing without their master's consent (9.5); he also provides information on the functional arrangement of the products and the utensils stored (9.3). However, as far as the external form of the building is concerned, he is not enlightening at all and only proposes the ideal orientation of the house (9.4). Two farmhouses, in Vari¹² and in Ano Liossia,¹³ both have their facades towards the south, and are characteristic cases of this rule which validate the author's suggestion. What is noteworthy is the absence of any mention of towers in the text. Archaeological research has identified these architectural elements in high numbers throughout the countryside of Attica (figs. 1. 2. 4).¹⁴

Only a small part of the *Oeconomicus* (16–19) discusses issues relating to the second and third axes of the agronomic theme: the installations, and the practices and techniques of cultivation. The text does not reveal any strict systematization of agricultural knowledge. Of the products belonging to the Mediterranean triad, only two are mentioned. Moreover, the reference to specific agricultural practices is rudimentary, although Socrates urges Ischomachus three times to expound on cultivation techniques (15.1–3; 15.6–9; 15.13).

Cereal farming in Classical Attica is confirmed not only by a multitude of written sources, but also by the presence of numerous threshing floors that date to that period (fig. 1–3). The text describes some general principles for this cultivation (16–18), and the author provides information on the processes of sowing, harvesting, and threshing. The cultivation is given particular attention and is dealt with in this text more extensively than in any other. However, this subject is certainly not discussed with the same

gravity that occurs later in the texts of the Roman period.¹⁵ The cultivation of vines, although considered particularly demanding, is examined quickly and without scrupulousness. Unlike Pliny the Elder, who presents and analyzes all three main cultivation techniques,¹⁶ the *Oeconomicus* only mentions the technique of trenches (19.2–3). At least two cases of ancient vineyards have been identified in Attica that were cultivated using this method and these probably date to Classical times.¹⁷ The cultivation of the olive tree was widespread in Attica during the Classical period. Extended areas were shaped by constructing agricultural terraces for the cultivation of olive trees, mainly in the southern parts of the peninsula (fig. 4). Although this is confirmed by a great variety of ancient written sources together with archaeological evidence, mentions of this crop are very minor in Xenophon's text (19.13). It is also well known that a range of secondary, complementary products were cultivated in the soil of Attica, such as vegetables and legumes. As for the olive tree, the dialogue of the *Oeconomicus* does not offer any particular information regarding these products. There is only a small part devoted to fruit trees but this does not take into account the special techniques required for each species (19).

Based on the factors mentioned above, it would not be wise to support that the text aims to systematize agricultural knowledge or that Xenophon's purpose was to exhaustively present cultivation techniques that could be useful to the farmer, at least not in the systematic way that this occurred later in Latin agronomic literature. His work lacks the scientific negotiation of agriculture that is present in Columella and the encyclopedic view of agricultural issues that characterizes Pliny the Elder. It is clear that the dearth of references to some widespread agricultural strategies, which are archaeologically encountered within the rural landscape of Attica, is problematic. The absence of any mention of agricultural terraces is a striking example. During the 5th and 4th century, the design and construction of such installations played a key role and constituted a widespread practice which aimed at serving the very high demand for olive oil. Despite the fact that they have been identified in many parts of Attica, nowhere are they mentioned in the *Oeconomicus*.

Even if Xenophon is very selective in revealing cultivation techniques, some advice underlies the text: this is an economic practice that is particularly important because it accentuates the agricultural process as a means of enrichment. The writer portrays transaction of land as the ideal means of enrichment for the Athenian citizen of the 4th century BC (20.22–29). This can be interpreted directly within the historical and social context that gave birth to the *Oeconomicus*. The indirect consequences of the Peloponnesian War, which affected agricultural life, are mainly reflected in rural land and the status it acquired as a commercial product. This practice of commercialization contributed to a general modification of the traditional rural and social model, according to which the land was inherited from one generation to the next.¹⁸ In the years of Xenophon, when the matter of self-sufficiency was of paramount importance, the land became the object of financial speculation for the wealthy citizens of Attica, who found

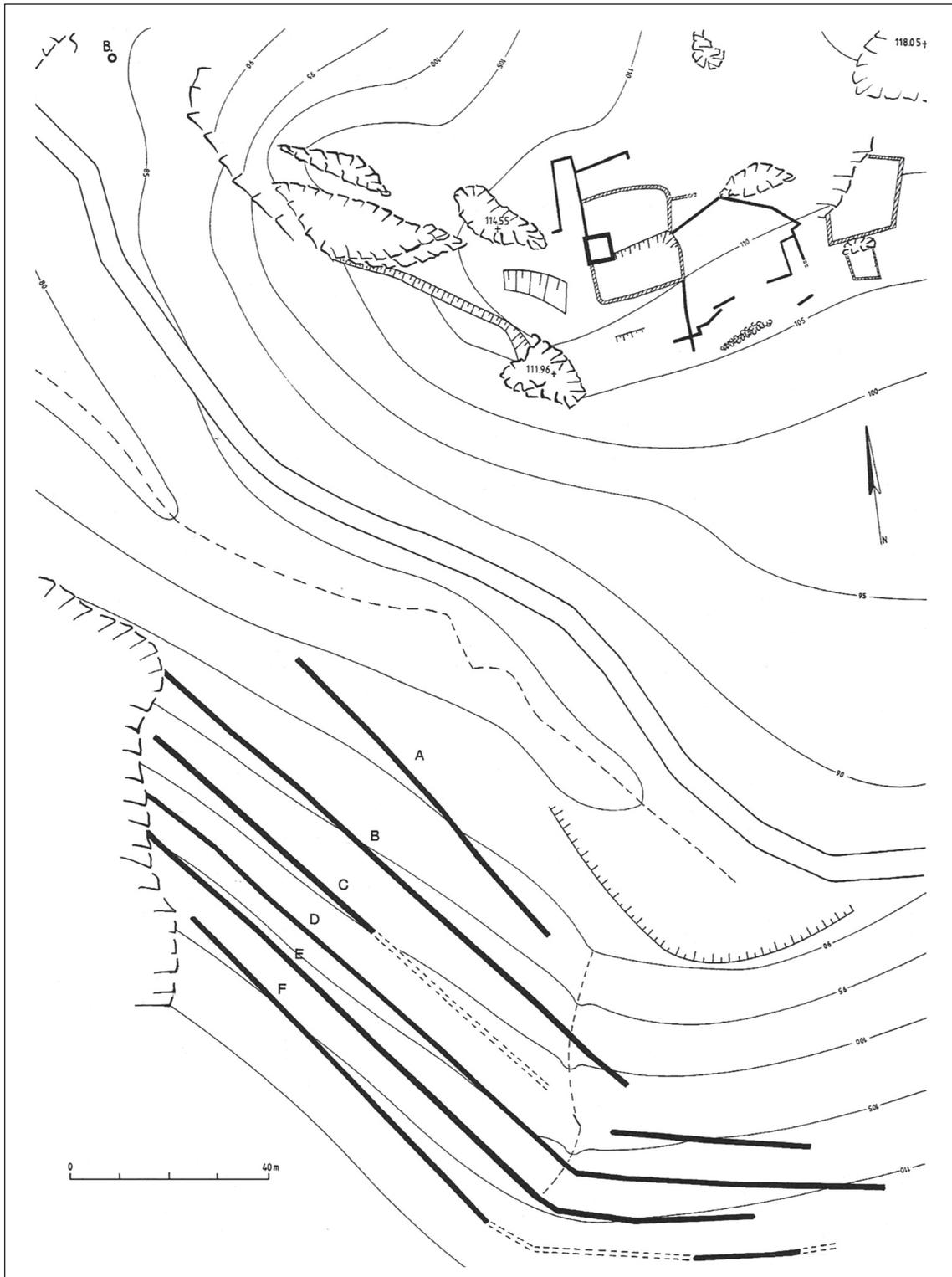


Fig. 4: The PH 33 farm and the agricultural terraces (A–F), Hagia Photini.

opportunities to purchase and exploit land plots. After they improved and made them fertile, they then sought to sell the plots at good prices in order to buy new ones. In other words, land itself had become a product, which, like many others, could result in a significant profit as a traded object. The purchase of an uncultivated field is the best possible economic practice, as the author suggests at the end of his text. Xenophon focuses more on this general principle than on any other specific technical instruction. This practice could prove to be particularly useful, considering that written works were directed primarily at the upper strata of the social structure,¹⁹ to wit those who could afford to be involved in such transactions.

Although Xenophon is constantly trying to convince the reader that his text is of pedagogical value, it becomes obvious that it is not particularly enlightening in terms of agricultural procedure. So, where does its educational significance actually lie? The concept of teaching in his work is broad and involves miscellaneous aspects. Initially, he says that economy is knowledge, just like that of the doctor, the metallurgist, and the carpenter, whose object can be defined and transmitted (1.1–2). The dialogue between Critobulus and Socrates in the first part makes clear that economy is something that can definitely be taught (2.12). Furthermore, Ischomachus teaches his wife, whom – not surprisingly – he never names,²⁰ everything she needs to know to manage the house correctly (7; 8).²¹ The given instructions pertain to the diverse tasks within the house, the supervision of the slaves (7), and the proper arrangement of all the household items (8). He does not just teach her, but also encourages her to adopt the role of teacher later (10.10).

Beyond the general tasks of household management, agriculture is also a subject of teaching and learning, albeit not in a thorough way, as was stated earlier. Convenience and its empirical character are presented as the main characteristics of agriculture.²² There are persuasive arguments developed throughout the dialogue to substantiate these features. The knowledge of agriculture can pass from mouth to mouth for one to learn all its secrets: “for if I am fit to manage the farm, I presume I can teach another man what I know myself”, states Ischomachus (12.4). He also clearly affirms that “agriculture is such a humane, gentle art that someone has but to see her and listen to her, and she at once makes him understand her” (19.17). He adds subsequently that, “agriculture herself gives many lessons in the best way” (19.18). Here it is patently suggested that agricultural knowledge is more a product of experience than something taught through a theoretical approach: a theoretical approach that Xenophon never uses systematically in the *Oeconomicus*. This is a key quote, which gives the author’s reason for not providing a detailed presentation of all cultivation practices. However, it does elucidate that, much more than any prospective instructor, engagement with the object is actually the best possible way to learn how to do something. Although experience is the primary way of teaching agriculture, some parts of the text state that engaging in agriculture is also a logical process, in which everyone can participate, as they already possess the necessary knowledge (16.8; 18.10).

But economy and agriculture are not the only things that can be taught; a careful look at the second part of the dialogue reveals abundant reasons to teach and learn one thing or another. The spirit of teaching is diffused as everything seems to be the potential object of a didactic process: from husband to wife, from parents to children, and from master to slaves.²³ This becomes evident in plentiful passages, with the widespread use of the verbs *διδάσκειν* (teach), *παιδεύειν* (educate) and their derivatives. Teaching in the *Oeconomicus* corresponds not only to practical issues related to the house or the field, but expands to abstract concepts such as ‘loyalty’ (12.6), ‘care’ (12.10), and ‘justice’ (14.3). The concept of teaching runs through the whole text as a leitmotif.

For the contemporary reader, the *Oeconomicus* is the most important testimony of rural life of the Classical period. However, its author more likely aimed to lecture Athenians on how to become successful citizens based on agriculture than how to become good farmers. Having endeavored to meticulously look behind the words of the dialogue’s three main characters and trace possible agricultural practices, it was ascertained that Xenophon did not intend to write a truly practical text for the farmers of his time. The actual cultivation techniques occupy a comparatively small percentage of the total text. If someone seeks to identify specific lucrative practices and tips for cultivating crops, he will be disappointed; the text offers only a few general guidelines and does not provide technical details on how to achieve maximum profit and increased production. At the same time, there is a notable absence of widely used techniques, such as the construction of towers and agricultural terraces, which are particularly characteristic of Attica’s rural landscape. Also, there is a striking lack of references to a series of other practices related to farming and rural life, like beekeeping and animal husbandry, to mention a few. Contrary to the writings of many of the Roman agronomists, Xenophon limits himself to general advice, without quantifying each area of agricultural production, from the construction of the farmhouse to the equipment of each installation.

As a result, the text cannot be classified as a manual of agricultural production in a strict sense. The *Oeconomicus* really teaches very little about the actual farming practices and instead discusses teaching itself to a much greater degree. Xenophon has chosen to emphasize methods of teaching and persuading for a range of issues related to the domestic and rural economy. The argument that it neither constitutes an itemized economic treatise nor that it aims to teach farmers has been proposed by a number of researchers. Among them, Kronenberg suggested that it was written with farming as an extended metaphor for various political and ethical approaches to life and for the society of Athens.²⁴ Danzig viewed it as an ethical dialogue, disguised as an economic treatise;²⁵ in the same vein, Stevens argued that Xenophon did not intend to showcase his actual knowledge of farming with this work, but to offer an ethical metaphor on human relationships.²⁶ While this had already been documented on the basis of moral philosophy and political theory, it can now also be supported by the archaeological evidence: there is little correspondence between the text of the *Oeconomicus* and the actual archaeological remains of the contemporary agricultural landscape of Attica.

Notes

¹ Isager – Skydsgaard 1992, 4; Margaritis – Jones 2008, 159.

² Describing agricultural life, Homer often underscores both the positive (*Iliad*, 18.541–572) and negative (*Odyssey*, 13.31–35) aspects of rural affairs.

³ Although agriculture is not its main theme, Hesiod’s text maintains its importance. It outlines not only aspects of the ancient Greek rural civilization but also the social background of its era, as well as the values, the celebrations, and the prevailing perceptions of the work.

⁴ Six complete agronomy works survive from the Roman period: Cato’s *De Agri Cultura*, Varro’s *Res Rusticae*, Virgil’s *Georgica*, Pliny the Elder’s *Naturalis Historia*, Columella’s *De Re Rustica*, and Palladius’ *Opus Agriculturae*.

⁵ On Xenophon’s “Socratic” works, see Ford 2008, 29–44.

⁶ It has been supported by some scholars that parts of this work were composed at different periods, see Pomeroy 1994, 5–8.

⁷ On Xenophon’s purposes and motivation, see Pomeroy 1994, 50; Marchant – Todd 2002, xxiv–xxv.

⁸ “It must be the business of the good economist at any rate to manage his own house/estate well”.

⁹ Literally a beautiful and good Athenian citizen. For the term see Bourriot 1995.

¹⁰ Pomeroy 1994, 254.

¹¹ Dimakopoulos 2016, 188–192.

¹² Jones et al. 1973, 355–452.

¹³ Jones et al. 1962, 75–114.

¹⁴ More than 50 rural towers have been found in Attica. The territory of the deme Atene is very characteristic, as there many farmhouses were constructed that include towers, see Lohmann 1993, 138–161. For agricultural towers in Sounion, see Young 1956, 122–146, with further bibliography.

¹⁵ For example, Cato (*De Agri Cultura*, 91; 129) refers in detail to the construction of the threshing floors; he even reveals techniques to prevent damage from ants and vegetation that can sprout at the point.

¹⁶ Namely the planting in trenches (shallow ditches), in holes or excavating the whole field, Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 17.35.

¹⁷ Vordos 2006, 380–387; Raftopoulou 2013, 142–144.

¹⁸ On the economic conditions in Athens in the 4th century BC, see French 1991, 25–27.

¹⁹ Cahill 2002, 224.

²⁰ On the utilitarian, “unerotic” character of Ischomachus’ teaching to his wife, see Eide – Whitaker 2016, 95–97.

²¹ On the wife of Ischomachus, see Stevens 1994, 217–223.

²² In order to prove how easy it was for someone to get involved with agriculture, the author provides the example of Cyrus (4.22). If the Persian king was able to do so, the simple Athenian citizens of 4th century BC could do it as well. For a comparison of *oikos* with the Persian Empire, see Kronenberg 2009, 42–46 and Nelsestuen 2017, 87f.

²³ The guidelines given by the author for the proper management of the farm and agricultural production had no place in the “official” educational system of Athens. The educational program that the male student had to follow did not include the basic knowledge of land use. Therefore, the only way to dissemi-

nate such knowledge was from father to son, from mouth to mouth, and through field experience. See also Griffith 2001, 29.

²⁴ Kronenberg 1994, 66–72.

²⁵ Danzig 2003, 61.

²⁶ Stevens 1994, 209–237. On the description of the *Oeconomicus* as a “comedy of education and an educating comedy”, see Stevens 1994, 227.

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