

# LIVIA THE AUCTOR AND THE SYMBOLISM OF GRAFTING

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The article discusses a passage in book 15 of Pliny's *Natural history* which lists Livia among the creators of new fruit cultivar. It argues that Livia's unique position within and outside her family explains why she appears to be the only woman remembered for her direct involvement in arboriculture. The article then discusses grafting, which in ancient Rome was charged with many symbolic meanings, and contextualises the appearance of Livia in horticultural discourse within the ideology of the Augustan era and the increased interest in horticultural matters at that time.

In a passage of book 15 of the *Natural history*, the book devoted to fruit and nut trees, Pliny explicitly names Livia as the *auctor*, or the creator, of a new type of fig to which she gave her name.<sup>1</sup> He writes:

ad nos ex aliis transiere gentibus, Chalcide, Chio [...] nigra et Rhodia est et Tiburtina de praecocibus. Sunt et auctorum nomina iis, Liviae, Pompei: siccandis haec sole in annuos usus aptissima. (Plin. HN 15.69–70)

Figs have been introduced among us from other countries, for instance, Chalcis and Chios [...] among figs that ripen early, those of Rhodes and Tivoli are also black. Early figs also have the names of the persons who created<sup>2</sup> them: Livia and Pompey. These figs are the best to be sun-dried for use throughout the year. (tr. Rackham (1968), slightly modified)

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<sup>1</sup> This article stems from a paper I gave for the Cambridge Philological Society in January 2020. I am grateful to the audience for their comments and questions. I wish to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their useful suggestions which have improved the article. Any remaining shortcomings are my own.

<sup>1</sup> See also Columella Rust. 5.10.11; 10.414; Ath. 3.75.

<sup>2</sup> Rackham's translation in the Loeb edition (1968) renders this as those who 'introduced them'. I take *auctor* in this and in other passages in which Pliny discusses fruit varieties to mean both the creator of the new cultivar and the producer. It is equally possible to understand the word as meaning 'promoter' and thus take the passages to mean that the fruit in question was named after the notable individuals because they preferred a specific variety and gave it popularity.

Several sections earlier, at 15.49, Pliny had introduced the context within which the creation and naming of new fruit varieties should be understood:

Reliqua cur pigeat nominatim indicare, cum conditoribus suis aeternam propagauerint memoriam, tamquam ob egregium aliquod in uita factum? Nisi fallor, apparebit ex eo ingenium inserendi nihilque tam paruum esse quod non gloriam parere possit. (Plin. HN 15.49)

Why should I hesitate to indicate by name the remaining varieties of fruit, seeing that they have extended the memory of those who established them for all time, as though on account of some outstanding achievement in life? Unless I am mistaken, the recital will reveal the ingenuity exercised in grafting, and will show that nothing is so trifling as to be incapable of producing glory. (tr. Rackham (1968), slightly modified)

Pliny here makes an explicit connection between developing new fruit types and grafting. The passage displays fascinating lexical choices, since the terms *egregius* ('distinguished', 'eminent'), *gloria* ('glory', 'renown'), *aeterna memoria* ('eternal remembrance') are more typically found in reference to military achievements, the elite's traditional avenue to fame. Instead, Pliny suggests that developing new fruit varieties and naming them is a pursuit that can ensure glory and posthumous commemoration.

In the *natural history*, Pliny connects horticulture and military expansion repeatedly. For example, he reports on novel plants encountered abroad during Rome's military conquests and then transplanted to Italy (e.g. L. Licinius Lucullus and the cherry tree from Pontus) or displayed in the triumphal processions by famous generals and emperors, as if the plants were captives of war.<sup>3</sup> These plants are often humanised by Pliny, even using the legal language of citizenship, e.g. at HN 12.14: '[S]ome fruit trees in Italy are still *peregrinae* – "foreign" – others have become *incolae* – "inhabitants". In the wider context of Pliny's association of horticulture with military deeds, both the Greeks and the Romans considered agriculture to be 'conducive to the development of good character traits'<sup>4</sup> preparing the landholder for political and military life. To put it with Long, '(agriculture) was a discipline appropriate to the praxis of political and military leadership'.<sup>5</sup> However, the mention in the passage quoted above of achieving 'glory' and 'immortal remembrance' by selecting and naming new fruit varieties moves the discourse to a different symbolic level because these actions do not occur in an explicit military

3 Plin. HN 12.111: '[I]t is a remarkable fact that ever since the time of Pompey the Great even trees have figured among the captives in our triumphal processions' (tr. Rackham (1968)), in the discussion of the *balsamum* plant from Judea, displayed in Rome by Vespasian and Titus, presumably during their triumph. For Lucullus and the cherry tree: Plin. HN 15.102; see also HN 15.47: Sex. Papinius Allienus (cos. 36 CE) imported to Italy the *zizipha* ('jujube tree') from Africa and tuberes ('azerole') from Syria; HN 15.91: L. Vitellius, governor of Syria 34–37 CE, brought back new varieties of fig and introduced into Italy the pistachio plant, while his colleague, the *eques* Pompeius Flaccus, introduced the pistachio to Hispania.

4 Long (2001) 16.

5 Long (2001) 16.

context. Some scholars have considered Pliny's statement as ironic but, as I explain later, I do not believe this was the case.<sup>6</sup>

In book 15, Pliny lists many varieties of apple, pear, cherry and fig, which had been named after prominent (male) Romans who had 'created' them. Pliny does not explicitly say that these people *grafted* the new cultivars – he does not use the verb *inserere*. However, the connection between prominent individuals and the creation of new fruit which, as we shall see, could only have happened by vegetative propagation, is unmistakably stated using the noun *auctor*. *Auctor* and its derivative *auctoritas* are two poignant words closely associated in many ancient writers. These terms cover a range of meanings and are often difficult to translate with just one word,<sup>7</sup> as already pointed out by Cassius Dio when he noted the difficulty of expressing *auctoritas* with a single Greek word.<sup>8</sup> *Auctor* is connected to the stem *aug-*,<sup>9</sup> which denotes 'vegetal growth in a divinized nature'.<sup>10</sup> The *auctor* is thus 'he that brings about the existence of any object, or promotes the increase or prosperity of it, whether he first originates it, or by his efforts gives greater permanence or continuance to it',<sup>11</sup> and can be variously rendered in English as 'creator, maker, author, inventor, producer, father, teacher, composer, leader' and the like. *Auctor* and *auctoritas* are also key concepts in technical and scientific thinking – combined with other semantic expressions in relevant texts, they help shape the author's 'scientific self'.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, when Pliny defines Livia or other notable Romans as *auctor* of a new fruit variety, he is also implying their knowledge and authority in a specific field. The idea of knowledge is further stressed when these noble individuals *name* the new cultivars: naming, systematising and ordering something new, making it part of the known natural world requires knowledge of the new object (the plant in this case) and its relationship to other elements of the natural world. We find several notable individuals or Roman *gentes* mentioned in the *natural history* in discussions of the creation and naming of new cultivars. Pliny tells of Gaius Matius (Augustus' friend and the 'inventor' of topiary art) and his new apple cultivar, the *Matiana*; of cherry and pear varieties named *Aproniana*, *Lutatia*, *Pliniana*, *Dolabelliana* (names which refer to important Roman families: the *Apronii*, *Lutatii*, *Plinii* and the *Cornelii Dolabellae*) and of apples bearing the name of the *gentes* *Claudia*, *Caecilia*, *Lutatia*, *Scaudia* and *Pomponia*.<sup>13</sup> In this list of notable men and famous *gentes*, Livia's name stands out.

6 E.g. Lowe (2010) 479.

7 For usage and semantic range, see TLL 'auctor', 'auctoritas'.

8 Dio Cass. 55.3.5. As observed by Ziolkowski (2009) 425: 'In the classical Latin usage of both *auctor* and *auctoritas*, juridical and political senses occupied center stage. The *auctor* stood as guarantor of a truth that he announced or a right that he held [...], while *auctoritas* represented the guarantee itself or the credibility of such a witness'.

9 *Aug-* + *-tor* = *auctor*; see the verb *augeo*, 'to wax, increase, strengthen, bring forth that not already in existence'. A Latin dictionary

10 Ziolkowski (2009) 424.

11 As defined in Lewis and Short, A Latin dictionary.

12 See e.g. von Staden (1994).

13 Marzano (2014) 225–8.

The mention of Livia in the context of arboriculture and the creation of a new variety of fig is remarkable for two reasons. First, in the literary works we have, she is the only woman credited with creating a new fruit variety.<sup>14</sup> Second, selecting specific fruit traits conducive to creating a new variety required vegetative propagation techniques, among which grafting was the most important.<sup>15</sup> Many texts of Latin literature, most famously Vergil's second *Georgic*, display a deep fascination with grafting.<sup>16</sup> It was seen as a potent symbol of human ingenuity and ability to control nature. These traits, too, commonly characterise men, not women. In Latin literary texts, the only other female figure to my knowledge directly connected to grafting and cultivating fruit trees is Pomona in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, not a 'simple' woman but a nymph.<sup>17</sup>

Livia Drusilla, Augustus' wife, achieved a unique position during her long life. She received many unusual honours, and her station greatly transcended what was typically allowed and expected of a *matrona*. The critical dynastic role Livia had acquired as the mother of Tiberius, after the death of all the other possible heirs of Augustus, also continued after her death: subsequent Julio-Claudian emperors viewed her as a means of further legitimising their positions. This article argues that Livia's unique position within and outside her family explains why she appears to be the only woman remembered for her direct involvement in arboriculture.

### Livia, an extraordinary woman

Livia Drusilla was remarkable in many ways.<sup>18</sup> Married to Augustus for about fifty years, she must have been as politically shrewd as her husband. She helped him transform the Roman state and promote, in celebrating the peace and return to a golden age, the importance of the family, simplicity and marital harmony. She linked her name to euergetic building projects that were transforming Rome, such as the *Macellum Liviae* and the *Porticus Liviae*, and restorations of temples such as those consecrated to *Fortuna Muliebris* and *Bona Dea Subsaxana*.<sup>19</sup> Above all, she participated in political life probably more than any previous woman in Rome. As she had responsibility for the welfare of her family and husband, whose prominence attracted continual public scrutiny, Livia played an important role in promoting conjugal harmony and peace in general, through, for example, the cult of *Concordia*. Her public role and unique standing were well captured in the attribution *Romana princeps* in the *Consolatio ad Liviam*, written by an anonymous Roman *eques* after the death of Livia's son Drusus in 9 BCE, or in Ovid's expression

14 It can be said that Livia also 'grafted' the Claudian line represented by her sons Tiberius and Drusus onto the Julian line.

15 For a treatment of Roman arboriculture, from an ideological and practical point of view, see Marzano (2022); for the cultivation of the fig in classical and Arab-Andalusian agronomic literature, Carabaza Bravo (1995).

16 Lowe (2010); see further discussion below.

17 *Ov. Met.* 14.623–771.

18 On Livia and her image, see Bartman (1999) and Barrett (2002).

19 On Livia's building activity and her direct financial involvement in these projects, see Purcell (1986) 88–89; Barrett (2002) 199–205.

*femina princeps*.<sup>20</sup> Even more explicit are Cassius Dio's words, stating that during the reign of her son Tiberius she had:

πάνυ γὰρ μέγα καὶ ὑπὲρ πάσας τὰς πρόσθεν γυναικάκας ὄγκωτο, ὥστε καὶ τὴν βουλὴν καὶ τοῦ δήμου τοὺς ἐθέλοντας οἴκαδε ἀπασομένους ἀεὶ ποτε ἐσδέχεσθαι, καὶ τοῦτο καὶ ἐς τὰ δημόσια ὑπομνήματα ἐσγράφεσθαι. (Cassius Dio 57.12.2)

a very exalted station, far above all women of former days, so that she could at any time receive the senate and such of the people as wished to greet her in her house; and this fact was entered in the public records. (tr. Cary (1924))

Livia received several exceptional honours during her life – some were traditional male prerogatives – that distinguished her among all the other *matronae* of Rome and marked her public role. In 35 BCE, together with Octavia, Octavian/Augustus' sister, Livia received two honours never before awarded: the freedom from legal *tutela* and the *sacrosanctitas* or inviolability of the body accorded to the tribunes of the *plebs*.<sup>21</sup> Livia and Octavia were also awarded the right to be commemorated with public statues, another novelty in the case of living women. Later, in 9 BCE, Livia was granted the *ius trium liberum*, a right given, according to Augustus' legislation on marriage of 18 BCE, to freeborn women who had borne at least three children. Livia thus had the right to inherit and was exempt from legal guardianship. Livia had already received the exemption from *tutela* in 35 BCE; the reiteration of this privilege by the senate was a significant honour. Together with a small group of *matronae*, she was also exempted from the *Lex Voconia* in 9 CE, enabling her to inherit more than 100,000 sesterces at a time. She was further granted, possibly on the occasion of her illness in 22 CE, the right to use the *carpentum*, the ceremonial two-wheeled vehicle. Finally, after the death of Augustus, as the priestess of his cult, she gained the right to be preceded in public by a *lictor*, the traditional prerogative of magistrates holding *imperium*.

Livia also seems to have performed a significant symbolic role in Augustus' triumph in 29 BCE. According to Ovid and the anonymous author of the *Consolatio ad Liviam*, she had prepared and adorned the triumphal chariot.<sup>22</sup> The *Consolatio* implies that this had been Livia's particular responsibility. It has been suggested that she might have adorned the chariot with laurel branches from the grove located at her suburban villa Ad Gallinas Albas,<sup>23</sup> a grove which only Augustus and his family could touch. Furthermore, it is possible that the adornment of the chariot had been a public event that preceded the triumphal procession, a ritual that involved Livia as the recipient of the sacred laurel branch that 'had been sent from heaven'.<sup>24</sup>

20 *Consolatio ad Liviam* 356; Ov. Tr. 1.6.25; Pont. 3.1.125.

21 Barrett (2002), 136–8.

22 Ov. Pont. 3.4.95–6; *Consolatio ad Liviam* 26.

23 Flory (1998).

24 Plin. HN 15.130: *missa a caelo*. See Flory (1998) 491. See below for further discussion about this portent.

As a powerful woman, she also attracted much criticism. Some ancient sources depicted her as scheming and ruthless – Tacitus’ depiction is particularly negative.<sup>25</sup> She was accused of having masterminded the murder of her grandson Germanicus and was even suspected of engineering her husband’s death when he was ill: rumours that she had poisoned him circulated at the time.<sup>26</sup>

As mentioned, Pliny saw grafting and naming new fruit varieties as a way to secure future remembrance. Livia is the only woman he names when discussing the creation of new fruit varieties. Whether she actually grafted the plants herself or practised any form of gardening at all is not the point. It was perfectly normal to attribute to an estate owner or slave master the horticulture developed on their property.<sup>27</sup> Latin agronomists routinely deny the agency of the servile personnel engaged in the cultivation of plants on rural estates. In Varro, for example, there is an interesting distinction: slaves who maintain herds are construed as shepherds (*pastores*), but those engaged in field cultivation are never recognised as farmers (*agricolae*), but rather called *servi*, *mancipia* or *instrumenta vocalia*.<sup>28</sup> So, whether the *figus liviana* or the *figus pompeiana* mentioned by Pliny were directly cultivated by Livia or Pompey or were more likely developed on their estates by others and then given fame by association of the fruit with such illustrious names, the result was the same: Livia or Pompey were remembered in the sources as the trees’ *auctores*, their ‘inventors’. The attribution most likely circulated during Livia’s lifetime: there is mention of a Livian fig among the various types of figs listed in a fragment of Cloatius Verus’ work preserved in Macrobius.<sup>29</sup>

Given that the literary discourse about arboricultural feats focused on prominent Roman men, it is very likely that Livia’s unique status as *auctor* of the *figus liviana* had as much to do with her transit into the male – and public – sphere in other areas of action as it did with her social prominence. Great interest in grafting and horticulture had arisen, as exemplified, for instance, by the number of literary works on these topics composed in the early first century CE.<sup>30</sup> The fig is also a symbolic tree, strictly connected with the early history of Rome: the *figus ruminalis* (a wild fig tree) stood close to the Lupercal, where Romulus and Remus were suckled by the she-wolf.<sup>31</sup> In the Old Testament the fig is frequently used as a symbol of a nation’s flourishing (Mi 4:4; Joel 2:22), and in the New Testament Jesus uses the fig tree as a symbol of spiritual fruitfulness (e.g. Matt 7:16b; Lc 6:44).<sup>32</sup> While the wood of the fig tree was considered inutilis and weak – indeed it is not suitable for furniture making or to use

25 See e.g. Barrett (2001).

26 Tac. Ann.1.5; Cass. Dio 56.30.1–2. More on this below.

27 Hardy and Totelin (2016) 40.

28 Nelsestuen (2015) 71.

29 Macrobius Sat. 3.20. Cloatius was a lexicographer thought to have been active in the early Augustan period.

30 See writers such as Valerius Messalla Potitus (cos. 29 BC), Sabinus Tiro, Iulius Atticus and Iulius Graecinus, who authored *œpurika*, literally works on ‘garden stuff’ or treatises on other specific branches of agriculture (viticulture). They were active in the Augustan era specifically or Julio-Claudian period more generally: Thibodeau (2011) 220.

31 Varro Ling. 5.54; Plin. HN 15.77.

32 Ferda et al. (2014).

as timber, let alone to burn as fuel – Latin texts report that statues of Priapus, which were placed in gardens to protect them and their produce, were carved out of fig-tree wood.<sup>33</sup> The fruit also had obscene associations: its name was used, both in Greek and Latin, to mean the female genitalia.<sup>34</sup>

Grafting, as an action, was perceived as male by definition; *insero*, to in-graft, can also mean to insert, and the term could take on sexual overtones.<sup>35</sup> Theophrastus, in his classification of male and female trees, usually categorises fruit-bearing trees as female.<sup>36</sup> As these ‘female’ trees, to remain true to type, were propagated mainly by grafting, it is natural that the act of grafting was perceived as male. But it seems fair to say that, for Romans of the early and mid-Republican periods, the *hortus* (= the domestic vegetable garden) had been a typically female space entrusted to the care of the women of the house.<sup>37</sup> By contrast, the cultivation of crops was a men’s responsibility. As stressed by Pliny, who refers to Cato’s authority, in old times the kitchen garden’s status gave the measure of the *mater familias*’ ability since the care of the *hortus* was her responsibility.<sup>38</sup>

With time, and with the emergence of commercial vegetable gardens, the *hortus* was no longer seen as an exclusively female sphere. However, as observed by von Stackelberg, if a man’s presence in the garden was not balanced by an appropriate activity either of the body or the mind, his masculinity could be threatened.<sup>39</sup> Arboriculture and viticulture were probably not subject to this gender ambiguity: they remained a male prerogative throughout. Thus, as Livia was able to appropriate various traditionally male attributes, her active role in arboriculture alluded to by Pliny must be seen as yet another element emphasising her extraordinary passage into the male sphere of action.

As mentioned above, attributing to Livia the creation of a new kind of fig was possible precisely because of her unique status in Roman public life, encompassing several much more essential prerogatives from the exclusively male political and public sphere. Livia *cum tribunicia potestate*, Livia *suis iuris*, ‘Livia the builder’,<sup>40</sup> could then also become ‘Livia the *auctor*’ of a new fruit variety. The naming of the fig after Livia is another indicator of how ideologically charged even mundane activities were. It could also be a remnant of an intentional ‘promotion’ of Livia as engaging in an activity – agriculture – that was traditionally Roman and morally sound, since Livia’s connection with vegetation ‘branched’ out in different directions.

33 Scarpat (1969) 885; see e.g. Hor. Sat. 1.8.1–3.

34 For example, see Ar. Pax 1350; Priap. 50.2; Mart. 1.65.4 and 4.52.2.

35 Hardy and Totelin (2016) 154.

36 Theophr. Hist. pl. 3.8.1.

37 On the *hortus* as a female space and the blurring of gender distinctions in Roman gardens, see von Stackelberg (2009) 70–2.

38 Plin. HN 19.57.

39 Von Stackelberg (2009) 71.

40 Purcell (1986) 89.

It is well known that Livia had received the portent which led to the creation of the sacred laurel grove, from which the wreaths of triumphing emperors were henceforth made, in her suburban villa later named Ad Gallinas Albas. Various authors report the story.<sup>41</sup> A white hen with a laurel sprig in its beak fell into the empress' lap. Livia planted the sprig at her villa at Prima Porta north of Rome and personally tended the plant with religious devotion. The plant turned into a grove visited by subsequent emperors to cut branches to be formed into crowns worn in their triumphs. After the triumph, a branch was returned and replanted in the grove. The new plant was given the name of the emperor who had planted it, in what was most likely an official ceremony for a select audience.<sup>42</sup> This laurel grove became the very symbol of the Julio-Claudian line, suddenly perishing when Nero died.<sup>43</sup> To put it with Flory, 'the grove formed a living family genealogy of the triumphatores of the gens Iulia'.<sup>44</sup> Archaeological investigations at Prima Porta have identified a garden area and other features, leading to the hypothesis that the landscape sculpting of the hilltop was intended to lend great prominence to the villa and its laurel grove.<sup>45</sup> From this same villa come the beautiful wall paintings of the partially subterranean 'garden room', now in the Museo Nazionale Romano-Palazzo Massimo in Rome. The wall paintings, depicting a garden with various trees, shrubs, flowers and birds, with fruits and flowers of all seasons intermingled,<sup>46</sup> transform the room into an imaginary garden pavilion.

Still other references link Livia with vegetation. She is said to have donated to the population of Rome a large trailing grapevine, planted in the Porticus Liviae. This one vine was remarkable because it not only provided shade in the Porticus but also produced twelve *amphorae* of wine each year.<sup>47</sup> After her husband's death, Livia offered a very large cinnamon root in the garden of the temple of Divus Augustus.<sup>48</sup> Cinnamon was linked to the idea of regeneration, and the gift was symbolic. All these various mentions of plants and their care are consistent with the more general and very long literary and philosophical tradition equating the *cura* of trees and plants to that of the state.<sup>49</sup> According to Strabo, Persian elite youths' training included, in the morning, hunting to build military prowess as well as, in the afternoon, activities in the royal gardens: *how to tend to plants* (φυτοργεῖν) and *cut roots* (ρίζοτομεῖν). Plant cultivation was an essential

41 Plin. HN 15.136–7; Suet. Galb. 1; Cass. Dio 48.52.3–4; cf. 63.29.

42 Kellum (1994) 223.

43 Suet. Galb. 1.

44 Flory (1989) 345.

45 Klynne (2005).

46 Kellum (1994) 215.

47 Plin. HN 14.11, reporting the observation of Valerianus Cornelius.

48 Plin. HN 12.94; Rehak (1990).

49 A famous anecdote is told in Xen. Oec. 4.20–5, about the good king Cyrus: the Spartan statesman Lysander, on visiting Cyrus at his palace in Sardis, is surprised to learn that the king himself had designed the park, spaced the trees and determined the orthogonal intersections, as well as planted some of the trees.



part of the social ideology of the Persian elites and its pedagogy.<sup>50</sup> In the Hellenistic period, several rulers displayed keen interest in plants, their properties and cultivation, and wrote treatises on botany and/or agriculture. The research by Mithridates VI on the medicinal properties of plants as well as on poisons and antidotes is famous.<sup>51</sup> Attalus I, the Pergamene king, authored at least one work on botany. His grandson, Attalus III, was an expert in herbal toxicology and wrote a work on agriculture, a source used by both Varro and Pliny.<sup>52</sup> The learned Juba II of Mauretania wrote on the natural history and geography of Arabia and Libya, including information on their flora, and authored a botanical treatise on the euphorbia plant.<sup>53</sup> The interactions of these rulers with specific plants are pregnant with symbolism in Greek and Roman literature and allude to the ‘rhetoric of power associated with plants in the Hellenistic and Hellenized world’.<sup>54</sup> Totelin observes that Roman generals like Lucullus and Pompey adopted some of these botanical practices – for example, transplanting plants –<sup>55</sup> but that they did not write about plants or have an active involvement in cultivating them.<sup>56</sup> This is, I think, only partially correct, as Pliny’s reference to a fig cultivar created by Pompey suggests. The Julio-Claudian age, and the Augustan period in particular, were characterised by a strong revival of the old conception of plant care as a symbol of caring for the state.<sup>57</sup>

## Elite Romans and arboriculture

Further to creating new fruit cultivars as a way to gain glory and posthumous remembrance, Pliny’s remarkable statement at HN 15.49, cited at the beginning of this article, uses terminology not normally associated with arboriculture. His words should not be taken as ironic – in the *Natural history*, he contrasts the virtues of grafting and developing new fruit varieties with, for example, regrets that the size and cost of simple vegetables have increased beyond the means of the poor people to purchase them.<sup>58</sup> Although at the beginning of book 17 he frames grafting as immoral, in that the ingenious technique introduces adultery even to trees,<sup>59</sup> overall grafting is not as prominent in Pliny’s discourse against luxury as other aspects of horticulture.<sup>60</sup> The development of new fruit

50 Strabo 15.3.18; Fauth (1977) 4–5 for the ‘hunter’ and ‘gardener’ as two ideals for the Persian king.

51 Mithridates is also said to have attempted to acclimate the laurel and the myrtle at Panticapeon: Plin. HN 16.137.

52 Plut. *Demetr.* 20.3; Gal. *SMT* 10.1 = Kühn 12, 252; Just. *Epit.* 36.4.3. See Scarborough (2008); Totelin (2012) 126–31.

53 On the literary and scientific production of Juba II, see Roller (2003), esp. chapters 7, 8 and 10.

54 Totelin (2012) 140.

55 On ‘botanical imperialism’ in imperial Rome, see Pollard (2009).

56 Totelin (2012) 140–1.

57 von Stackelberg (2009) 91.

58 Plin. HN 19.54.

59 Plin. HN 17.8.

60 Pliny offers a unified vision of the physical world of Rome and of the moral price of her vast empire; in the *Natural history*, art is linked to nature and austerity to luxury: Beagon (1992), Carey (2003), Murphy (2004). An important aim of the work is, however, *iuvare mortalem*: Naas (2002) 84.

varieties and transplanting of useful plants are seen mainly in a positive light in the *Natural history*, even though the topic shows the many contradictions and complexities that so often characterise Roman discourse. It is only when he discusses *unproductive* plants that Pliny seems to perceive grafting and vegetative propagation as subversion of the natural order.<sup>61</sup>

It has been said that Pliny's discussion of grafted cultivars 'is also a discussion of aristocratic agriculture and fame in an empire that left few avenues for social recognition to the Roman elite'.<sup>62</sup> However, even if these had been curtailed in the Imperial period, most notably the possibility of obtaining a military triumph, it is still not fully clear why grafting and naming new fruit varieties could be so highly valued.

Ancient myth emphasises the importance of grafting in agriculture: according to Macrobius, grafting and the cultivation of fruit trees, along with sowing and other forms of propagation, featured among the teachings that the god Saturn would have given to the early inhabitants of Italy.<sup>63</sup> Grafting is mentioned in the work of all four Latin agronomists (Cato, Varro, Columella and Palladius), but the degree of detail varies; Columella is the author who offers a detailed (and largely accurate) description of various grafting techniques.<sup>64</sup> Grafting also held a prominent place in Latin poetry: its symbolism and allegorical values had multivalent effects, and several texts display a fascination with wondrous and impossible grafts. It is outside the scope of this article to offer a systematic discussion of the grafting theme in Latin literary texts, on which excellent treatments exist.<sup>65</sup> Suffice it to note here that in poets of the late Republic and early first century CE such as Vergil, Propertius and Calpurnius Siculus, grafting and the fascination with far-fetched, even impossible plant combinations, were themes that most poignantly expressed the taming of wild nature, but also evoked the idea of a Saturnian golden age.<sup>66</sup> In some later texts, the biologically impossible grafts described can become a symbol of hubris and violence perpetrated against the natural world. While Pliny is not exempt from the fascination with unusual grafts that can be observed in other authors – for example, he mentions with wonder a tree which had been grafted with an amazing variety of fruits – he overall presents grafting in a very positive light.<sup>67</sup> To fully understand why, we need to remind ourselves of some important points about the practice of grafting in the context of real – not literary – horticulture.

61 See e.g. the case of an evergreen plane tree, HN 12.11–12.

62 Squatriti (2013) 93.

63 Macrobius, Sat. 1.7.25.

64 For mention of many methods of grafting, see Columella Rust. 1. praef. 27; for the benefits of grafting, Rust. 5.10.6. The methods Columella describes are summarised in White (1970) 248–58.

65 On grafting in Latin texts and its symbolism, see Pease (1933), Ross (1980), Pigeaud (1988), Clément-Tarantino (2006) and Lowe (2010).

66 Lowe (2010).

67 Plin. HN 17.120.

## The horticultural context of Roman grafting

Cultivated fruit trees are normally not reproduced from seed but by vegetative propagation, creating clones of the plant. The farmer uses three possible vegetative techniques: rooting of twigs/cuttings, planting of suckers and scion grafting. Domesticated fruit trees are very rarely raised from seeds because seedlings tend to revert to the wild form of the plant, and the fruit produced does not have the same qualities as the parent plant.<sup>68</sup> The most common fruit trees of classical antiquity, such as the quince, apple, pear, plum and sweet cherry, do not lend themselves well to vegetative propagation from suckers or cuttings; their propagation and maintenance rely almost entirely on grafting. Therefore, while grafting may have fascinated some Latin writers, it was a fundamental and standard practice on any farm, from antiquity to the present. Grafting also offers the cultivator a clear advantage: it allows the ‘domestication’ of wild varieties of the same plant through grafting onto it a domesticated variety with desirable characteristics, thus changing adult and commercially worthless plants into productive ones. The best example is grafting the cultivated olive onto wild olives – the oleasters – which, for instance, allowed a quick diffusion of oleiculture in Roman North Africa.<sup>69</sup>

In short, when the goal is to maintain the exact characteristics of the parent plant in common fruit trees, propagation by grafting is essential. This is particularly crucial in commercial agriculture, when the maintenance of the identical fruit genotypes and reproduction of a specific cultivar on a large scale are needed. In addition, the technique is central to the development of fruits with new characteristics or to the domestication of new plants. The continuous selection of fruit plants with desired characteristics and their propagation by grafting allowed, over time, the development of a range of fruit varieties. These developments are reflected in the mention of various fruit varieties found, above all, in the texts of the agronomists and in Pliny’s books dealing with arboriculture. As shown in [table 1](#), over time there was a significant increase in fruit varieties, with Columella and Pliny mentioning the greatest number of fruit cultivars. Indeed, Columella explicitly states that horticulture had gained greater importance in his time, and for this reason he feels compelled to discuss horticulture in greater detail than the earlier writers did.<sup>70</sup>

This interest in grafting and selection of fruit types ought to be contextualised on two very different levels: first there is the practical side of grafting in the context of commercial agriculture. In this discourse, the elite landowners occupy centre stage, not

68 White (1970), 248; Zohary, Hopf and Weiss (2012) 115. For ancient observations about the quality of the fruit deteriorating when the plant is reproduced from seed, see Theophr. *Hist. pl.* 2.4-6 and *Caus. pl.*, 5.3.1. Cf. also *Docs. G.* 2.57-9.

69 On the grafting of cultivated olive onto wild olive, used as an allegory, see *Rom* 11:24. For the practice in Roman North Africa, see e.g. the epigraphic evidence on imperial estates: *CIL* 8.25902, *CIL* 8.26416 and the third-century CE funerary inscription *AE* 1975.883. On olive cultivation in general: Foxhall (2007). While this study focuses on ancient Greece, much is also relevant to the Roman world.

70 Columella *Rust.* 10. *praef.* 2-3; see Morley (1996) for the growing importance of horticulture in the hinterland of Rome.

**Table 1.:** Number of fruit varieties mentioned in the agronomists (after White (1970) appendix A).

Author	pear	apple	fig	grapevine	olive
Cato	5	4	6	7	10
Varro*	(no mention)	5	4	5	9
Columella	18 (only a selection)	8	17	63	12
Pliny	39	23	29	71	15

\*It must be said that Varro does not discuss fruit varieties in any systematic way; these were not central to the aims of his dialogue. For example, in the case of apples, he mentions only the foreign varieties (White (1970) 262).

simply because of the nature of the surviving written evidence – works of upper-class authors for elite readers – but also because substantial innovation in agriculture, such as the cultivation of new species, was ‘designed to produce great profits for the proprietors rather than to add to the poor man’s repertoire of stratagems for avoiding risks’.<sup>71</sup> These elite owners had a practical interest in grafting and selecting fruit with specific characteristics because this was commercially important.

On another level, the interest in grafting and selecting fruit types encompassed a precise ideological dimension that is exploited and elaborated on. Grafting meant domestication of and control over wild nature – themes that find their way into literary texts such as Vergil’s *Georgics*.

## Conclusions

I have argued that Livia finds a place among the many illustrious Romans whom Pliny lists as the creators of new cultivars of fruit because of her exceptionality as a woman: she reached out of the purely female sphere to encroach on many traditional male domains. That horticultural discourse could be an additional way in which to mark Livia’s uniqueness was due, on the one hand, to the Augustan ideology celebrating a return to the Golden Age, peace and prosperity. This idea of prosperity was celebrated in poetry and in figurative art – for example, in the symbolic importance of the vegetal motifs on the Ara Pacis. Moreover, the increased prominence of horticulture starting from the late Republic further stimulated the development of such horticultural discourse. Other significant influences on the spread of commercial horticulture were Rome’s population growth, urbanisation rates and the return of peace after the civil wars, which permitted long-term planning and investments in the land. In turn, these conditions attracted the interest of several Julio-Claudian intellectuals in horticulture.

<sup>71</sup> Horden and Purcell (2000) 260.

In ancient Rome, grafting was charged with many symbolic and allegorical meanings not only because it could signify human ingenuity and the domestication of wild nature, but also because of its fundamental importance in the daily operations of agricultural estates: to keep the plants true to type, the propagation of many fruit trees relied on grafting. In the late Republic, when plants and gardens acquired a specific ideological dimension,<sup>72</sup> the practical and commercial interest of elite landowners in what was grown on their estates also assumed an ideological dimension. A new type of grape or a new type of apple could be named after their ‘creator’ (i.e. the owner of the estate) and marketed under that name. This ‘creator’ could also gain future remembrance because, as long as that variety was cultivated, his name would last.

If the suggestion is valid that Livia’s exceptionality and appropriation of male prerogatives were also expressed by the active horticultural role attributed to her, it might be possible to explain related information in the ancient sources. Indeed, Livia’s supposed creation of the *figus liviana* probably gave rise to the rumour, in Cassius Dio’s account, that she killed her husband Augustus to assure the succession of her own son, Tiberius. Dio writes that she accomplished this by smearing poison on ripe figs still on trees from which Augustus usually picked the fruit himself.<sup>73</sup> She would have eaten the non-poisoned ones and offered to her husband the poisoned figs. With this rumour, the more unusual association between a woman and the creation of a new cultivar is replaced by a much more familiar literary topos: the association between a woman and poisoned food. In this manner, even the story about the creation and naming of a new fig variety can be normalised according to traditional gender roles and literary tropes; Livia the (male) grafter becomes Livia the (female) treacherous preparer of food.

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<sup>72</sup> Marzano (2014), id. (2022).

<sup>73</sup> Cass. Dio 56.30.12. See also Barrett (2002) 113, who mentions that the murder may have occurred at their villa at Nola.

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