

WORDS VERSUS SWORDS

CICERO AND THE CRISIS OF THE REPUBLIC

Everyone in first-century BCE Rome knew Marcus Tullius Cicero's name. He served as a consul—Rome's top office—and his fiery speeches drew crowds of listeners. When Cato the Younger, the great grandson of Cato the Censor, called Cicero “the father of his country,” everyone cheered. Yet Cicero's letters show that he sometimes couldn't decide what to do. And he worried a lot about his children. When his daughter Tullia died, he was heartbroken. He wrote to his best friend, Atticus, about his sadness:

I have isolated myself, in this lonely region. . . . In the morning, I hide myself in the dense . . . forest and don't come out until night. . . . My only form of communication now is through books, but even my reading is interrupted by fits of crying.

Cicero wrote hundreds, maybe thousands, of letters. Amazingly, 900 of them have survived, more than 2,000 years later. They include letters to his friends and to other politicians, in addition to those that he wrote to his brother and his unruly, playboy son. In them, we learn about family problems, deaths, and divorces—not to mention his opinions on almost everything.

Like many grown-ups, Cicero liked to give advice, and his letters are generously sprinkled with hints, warnings, and words of wisdom. He was often pompous, even conceited, but he showed his feelings in his writing, even when his honesty made him seem weak or afraid.

Some of Cicero's letters report on the latest happenings in Rome. His words give us the best picture we have of life in the 1st century BCE. He wrote about simple things: the weather, gladiatorial games, and the price of bread. But he

also described wars, riots, scandals, and the plots of scheming politicians.

Many of Cicero's speeches and essays have also survived. They tell us what he thought about friendship, education, law, patriotism, and loyalty—to name a few of his topics. In an essay on duty, he described what a gentleman should and should not do. According to Cicero, it was just fine for a gentleman to own a farm, but he mustn't do the actual digging, planting, or plowing himself. In fact, a true gentleman would *never* work with his hands.

Cicero was a snob. He looked down on workers—even shopkeepers. He said that “they couldn't make a profit unless they lied a lot. And nothing is more shameful than lying.” He disdained fishermen, butchers, cooks, poultry sellers, perfume makers, and dancers because their work appealed to the senses of taste, sight, and smell. What would he say about hairdressers, movie stars, and rock stars if he were alive today?

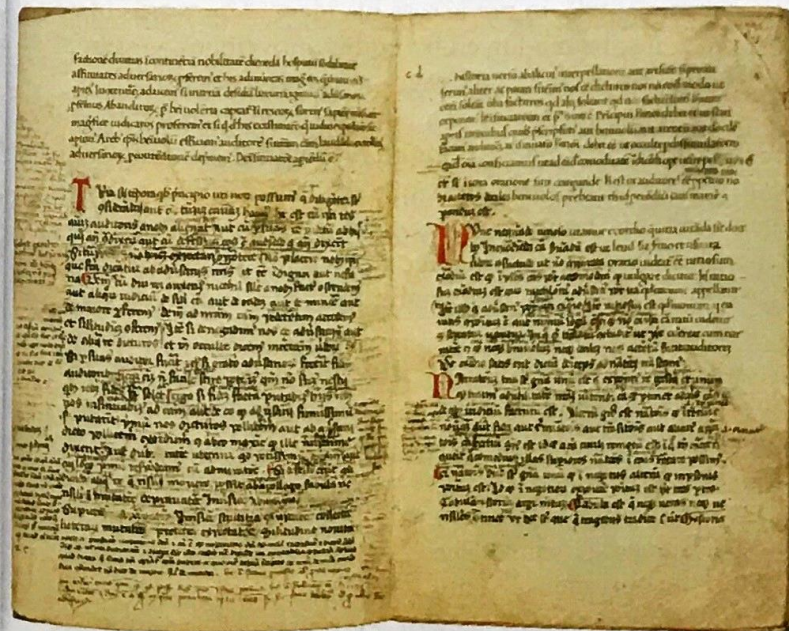
Cicero was born in 106 BCE in the small town of Arpinum, not far from Rome. He came from a wealthy family that was

66 APPIAN, CICERO,
AND PLUTARCH

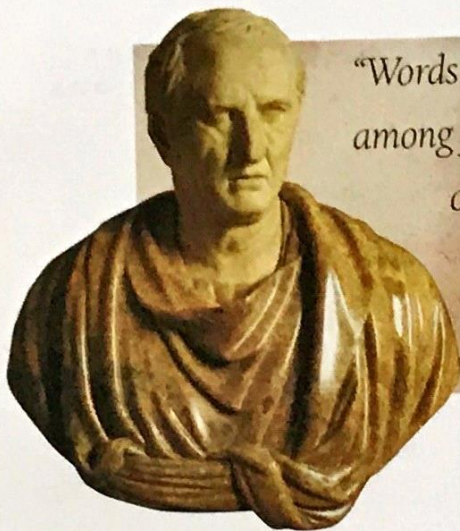
66 Appian, *Civil Wars*, 160 CE

66 Cicero, *Letters to Atticus*, 45 BCE

66 Cicero, *An Essay about Duties*,
44 BCE



This copy of Cicero's handbook, *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (dedicated to Herennius), comes from 15th-century Italy. Educated people were still writing in Latin, copying Cicero's style.



“Words cannot express . . . how bitterly we are hated among foreign nations because of the . . . outrageous conduct of the men whom we have sent to govern them.”

Cicero, Roman orator, *On the Manilian Law*, 66 BCE

well known in the region. But because none of his ancestors had ever served in the Roman Senate, Cicero was considered a “new man”—an outsider, not a genuine aristocrat.

As a teenager, Cicero traveled and studied in Greece, North Africa, and Asia. While in Athens, he began his training as an orator—a skilled public speaker—convinced that this would be important in his political career. He was right. He understood that an orator needs a good memory and a huge store of information. But he said that it wasn’t enough just to spout off a string of facts. An orator should use an actor’s skills to put across his ideas. The words of a speech, “must be reinforced by bodily movement, gesture, facial expression, and by changes in the voice itself.”

When the aspiring young politician finished his travels, he settled in Rome. Although he hated the corruption that he saw among the city’s officials, he wanted to join their club. He hoped to become a magistrate and convince the others to govern once again with honor and justice—to forget their own ambitions and work for the common good.

Cicero wasn’t a coward. He never hesitated to point out the crimes that he saw, even if high-ranking officials had committed them. His first legal case pitted him against a top lawyer. Against all odds, he won. This victory made his reputation as the young man who beat an old pro.

In 75 BCE the people elected Cicero quaestor, an assistant to the governor of Sicily, when he was 30 years old—the youngest age the law allowed. Even though his ancestors

“ Cicero, *On the Orator*, 55 BCE

had never held major office in Rome, Cicero climbed the ladder of success very quickly. He did it through hard work and **innate** brilliance. But Rome was like a boiling pot of trouble in Cicero’s day, just as it had been when the Gracchi brothers were alive. Fierce battles still raged in the streets because so many people were hungry and jobless.

Riots and corruption had threatened Rome’s security in the age of the Gracchi. Afterward, the situation grew even worse. German tribes moved south into Roman territory in southern Gaul (modern France), where they defeated Roman armies in three frightening battles. This was the first time since Hannibal that foreign invaders had threatened Italy. Faced with new enemies, Rome desperately recruited soldiers. The consul Gaius Marius enlisted a new army, even accepting poor men who owned no land. Although soldiers usually supplied their own equipment, Marius gave uniforms and weapons to these new recruits.

Marius defeated the foreign invaders, but the victory turned into a disaster for the Republic. Men who had once roamed the city in angry mobs now eagerly joined the army. There, they would be fed and paid. And they knew that after the war was over, their generals would give them a reward of land or money. No wonder the soldiers felt a greater loyalty to their generals than to the Roman state that had failed them! Ruthless generals took advantage of the situation. They led their armies against one another, each hoping to gain control of the city. These civil wars rocked the Republic again and again.

Cicero was determined to save the Roman Republic. He gathered strong allies, especially men who could recruit soldiers. One of the men whom he enlisted in the cause was Pompey, a powerful general. Pompey and Cicero had been friends since they were both 17 years old, and they had helped each other over the years. Cicero’s orations in the Forum helped Pompey to gain support for his military ambitions. After Cicero spoke on Pompey’s behalf, the Assembly gave Pompey a fleet of 500 ships and an army of 125,000 men to command against the pirates who threatened Rome in the eastern Mediterranean. He was victorious

“Innate” comes from the word *innatus*, which means “born in.” An innate skill is not something you learn; you’re born with it. Cicero’s determination was an innate trait—he was born that way!

“Civil” comes from the word *civis*, which means citizen. A civil war is fought between the citizens of a single country, such as the wars that raged in Rome in the final decades of the Republic.

within a few months and became Rome's leading commander—thanks to Cicero's speech.

When Cicero was elected consul in 63 BCE, he was conceited enough to believe that his consulship would be the turning point for the ailing Republic. Could its troubles all be over? He thought so. Once elected, he opposed the *populares*, who supported the reforms of the Gracchi brothers. He spoke for the aristocrats in the Senate and tried to create an alliance of the rich—nobles and businessmen—against the poor. One *popularis* politician, Lucius Catiline, organized a rebellion. Cicero squelched it and executed the rebel leaders without a trial. He later paid a high price for his actions. His enemies watched and waited. In the end, Cicero's old friend Pompey deserted him and made new alliances. Cicero told him: "You have given us a strong hope of peace. We have this good news because of you. And I've told everyone so. But I must warn you that your old enemies are now posing as your friends."

Pompey paid no attention to Cicero's words. By 60 BCE, he had teamed up with the *popularis* politician Julius Caesar and the millionaire Crassus. The three formed a **triumvirate** and shared the power among themselves. Together, they controlled the Senate, the people . . . Rome itself. Many Romans, including Cicero, were shocked to learn of it. But, arrogant as ever, Cicero refused to cooperate with this First Triumvirate. He called it "a three-headed monster." Now Cicero's longtime enemies saw their chance, and they persuaded the Assembly to banish Cicero from Rome. Later Pompey intervened on his behalf, and Cicero was called back in 57 BCE.

Cicero stayed loyal to Pompey and fought at his side when a civil war broke out between Pompey and Caesar. Caesar won and became the most powerful man in Rome. After Pompey's death, Caesar pardoned Cicero and allowed him to return to his beloved Rome.

A few years later Cicero landed in trouble once again. By this time, all three members of the Triumvirate were dead, and Mark Antony held the reins of power in Rome. Cicero, outspoken as usual and still fighting to save the Republic,

64 Cicero, *Letters to his Friends*, 62 BCE

tres + vir = "three" + "men"
A triumvirate is a council of three people. Although the First Triumvirate was really a private political deal, the Romans had other triumvirates such as the "Board of Three" that carried out public executions.

delivered passionate speeches against Antony. He spoke, privately and publicly, against him. He begged Antony to put the good of the Republic above his own desires. He used his own record to try to convince Antony: "I defended the Republic as a young man. I will not abandon it now that I am old. . . . Nor will I tremble before your sword. No, I would cheerfully offer myself to its blade, if the liberty of the city could be restored by my death."

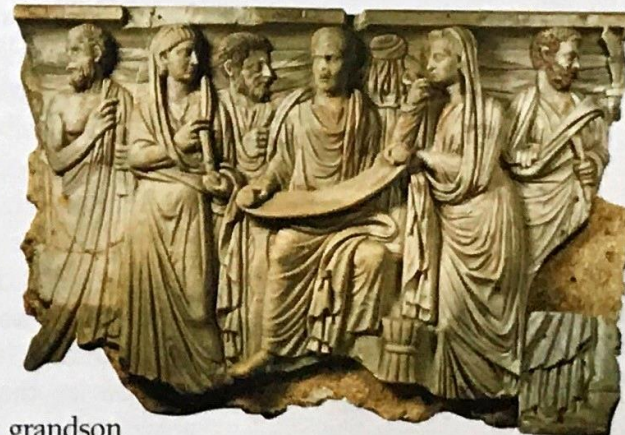
Mark Antony was not impressed by Cicero's brave, unselfish words. Instead, Antony convinced his ally, Caesar's great-nephew Octavian, that Cicero was a threat and should be killed. Antony's soldiers tracked down the aging orator at his seaside villa and murdered him. Then, in an act of terrible cruelty, the general gave orders for Cicero's head and hands to be cut off and displayed in the Forum where he had so often spoken.

Cicero's voice was silenced, and yet his writings remained. He is honored today as a man of genius and a master of words. He was both. Perhaps he was in the right place at the wrong time. Generals, not orators, ruled Rome in the 1st century BCE.

During his own lifetime, Cicero was known as a great statesman, orator, and man of action. But he died a bitterly disappointed man. He had failed to do what he most wanted to accomplish: to save the Roman Republic. Not even Cicero's enemies, though, could doubt his love for Rome. Plutarch, writing many years after Cicero's death, tells a story about Octavian—after he had risen to great power as the emperor Augustus Caesar. The emperor found his grandson reading a book written by Cicero. Knowing that his grandfather had agreed to let Mark Antony's soldiers murder Cicero, "The boy was afraid and tried to hide it under his gown. Augustus . . . took the book from him, and began to read it. . . . When he gave it back to his grandson, he said, 'My child, this was a learned man, and a lover of his country.'"

64 Cicero, *Second Philippic*, 43 BCE

A teacher, surrounded by his students, reads from a scroll made from papyrus reeds from Egypt. Like other Greek and Roman writers, Cicero wrote his books on papyrus.



64 Plutarch, *Life of Cicero*, 110 CE