

CLCS4009

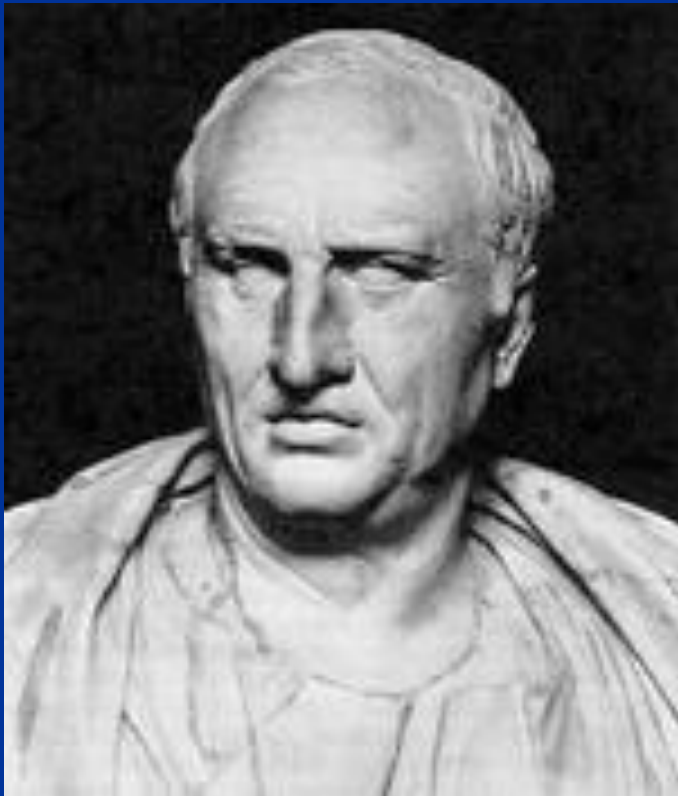
READING ANTIQUITY: A SURVEY OF
ANCIENT LITERATURE

Lecture 22:

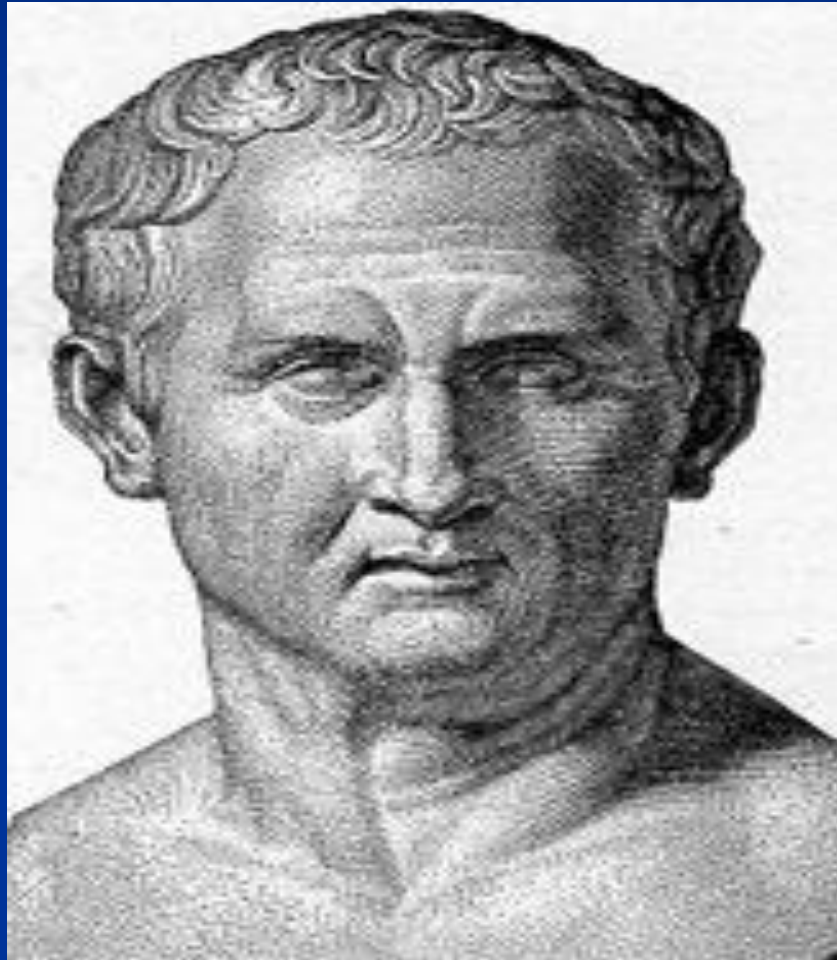
Constructing Roman
Religion:

Cicero's *On Divination* and *On
the Nature of the Gods*

Dr. Crystal Addey



Marcus Tullus Cicero



Marcus Tullus Cicero

- Born on January 3, 106 BC and murdered on December 7, 43 BC.
- Orator, lawyer, politician and philosopher (and a prolific writer).
- His life coincided with the decline and fall of the Roman Republic, and he was an important actor in many of the significant political events of his time.
- He was elected to each of the principle Roman offices (quaestor, aedile, praetor, and consul) on his first try and at the earliest age at which he was legally allowed to run for them. Having held office made him a member of the Roman Senate.

Cicero addressing the Roman Senate



Cicero's Works

- Philosophic writings: in chronological order, include *On Invention*, *On the Orator*, *On the Republic*, *On the Laws*, *Brutus*, *Stoic Paradoxes*, *The Orator*, *Consolation*, *Hortensius*, *Academics*, *On Ends*, *Tusculan Disputations*, *On the Nature of the Gods*, *On Divination*, *On Fate*, *On Old Age*, *On Friendship*, *Topics*, *On Glory*, and *On Duties*.
- Speeches: made by Cicero as a lawyer and a Senator. About 60 survive (see Lectures 12 and 13)
- Letters: approximately 900 letters to and from Cicero (mostly from) survive (see Lecture 23).

Some Thoughts from Cicero

"Knowledge of the universe would somehow be ... defective were no practical results to follow." (*from "De Officiis"*)

"Your wisdom, in public estimation, consists in this: you consider all your possessions to be within yourself and believe human fortune of less account than virtue." (*from On Friendship*)

"For friendship is nothing else than an accord in all things, human and divine, conjoined with mutual goodwill and affection, and I am inclined to think that, with the exception of wisdom, no better thing has been given to man by the immortal gods." (*from On Friendship, 20*)

Cicero's *On Divination*:

Composition, Structure and Form

- Date of Composition: intended to supplement his earlier work, *De natura deorum* (*On the Nature of the Gods*), finished c. 45 B.C. Date uncertain but Book 1 partly written before the assassination of Caesar. The work was not completed and published until after that event.
- Structure: Dialogue form
- Book 1: Quintus Cicero (Cicero's only brother): Arguments for divination
- Book 2: Marcus Cicero: Arguments against divination.

The Dialogue Form

- Some important precedents: philosophical dialogues of Plato; the philosophical, cultural, ethical dialogues of Plutarch.
- Later dialogues on philosophy and religion:

The *Hermetica*

Iamblichus' *De Mysteriis* and Porphyry's *Letter to Anebo*

Cicero on Divination

- Quintus defines divination as: “the foreknowledge and foretelling of events.” (1.1)
- “by its means men may approach very near to the power of the gods.” (1.1)
- Two classes / kinds of divination:
- Artificial: depends partly on conjecture and partly on long-continued observation: e.g. Astrology, augury, divining by portents, omens, thunder, lightning and other natural phenomena.
- Natural: divination by means of dreams and prophecies by those ‘inspired’ (seers, prophets etc.)

Modern views of Cicero's *On Divination*

- Most modern scholars: Both Cicero himself and the Roman elite more generally (in the first century B.C.) were sceptical about divination, augury etc. Cicero's *On Divination* is taken as evidence of this.
- Book 2: seen as expressing Cicero's personal view: a sceptical view. Divination is to be continued only for reasons of political expediency.

Divination and political expediency

“He [i.e. Cicero] was himself an augur, and in his book *On the Republic* had written in favour of maintenance of the rites of augury and of auspices. But these practices were engrafted on the Roman constitution and he advocated their observance because of his belief in obedience to law and because, as a member of the aristocratic party, he thought augury and auspices the best means of controlling the excesses of democracy.”
W. A. Falconer (in the introduction to his translation (1923) of Cicero’s *De Divinatione*, Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p.216).

Objections to the orthodox view

- Cicero was an augur himself (a practitioner of divination).
- Are belief and disbelief appropriate terms to discuss Roman religion?
- Literary theory: problematises any easy relationships between author and text.
- Divination as political expediency: does this reverse the 'embedded' nature of Roman religion?

Objections to the orthodox view

(2)

- The dialogue form itself: based on the philosophical methods of the academy; to view issues from both sides and to explore all of the philosophical possibilities.
- Socrates: “The unexamined life is not worth living.”
- From an ancient philosophical perspective, Cicero’s questioning and enquiry into divination could be seen as making his commitment to divination stronger and based on his own reasoning rather than opinions of others (CA).

The conclusion of *On Divination*

- “It is characteristic of the Academy to put forward no conclusions of its own, to approve those which seem most like the truth, to compare arguments, to draw forth all that may be said on behalf on any opinion, and without asserting its own authority to leave the judgement of those listening entirely free. We shall hold to this method, inherited from Socrates, and if it is agreeable to you, my dear brother Quintus, we shall follow it as often as possible in our future discussions.”
“Nothing could please me better,” Quintus replied.
When this was said, we arose.”

The arguments of Books 1 and 2

- Modern scholars often see the arguments of Book 2 as more philosophically convincing and ‘rational’ than those of Book 1 – many of the arguments for divination are based on experience (experiences when divination worked).
- The nature of divination: grounded in experience. Epistemological claims (Clifford Ando: Roman divination is based on empirical experiment and repeated observation).
- Bk 1: grounds divination firmly in Roman history, myth and legend.

Constructing Religion in the Late Republic

‘De Divinatione is a work of much greater importance for the history of religion than any exclusive concentration on its author's views has ever revealed. Its most striking positive feature is the fact that it is a dialogue about religion; that, over two books, an argument is sustained specifically on the subject of divination. This amounts to a clear indication of one of the most important religious developments of the late Republic. Not only was it a period characterized by intense interest in religion, as has been so well documented by Momigliano and Rawson; but it was, more crucially, the period when 'religion', as an activity and a subject, became clearly defined out of the traditional, undifferentiated, politico-religious amalgam of Roman public life.” (Mary Beard 1986, 46)

Constructing Religion

“So with *De Divinatione* (and its related dialogues), for the first time, we find developed verbal arguments specifically on state religion. 'Religion' had now been defined as a subject of Roman discourse.”
(Mary Beard, 1986, 46)

Cicero, *On the Nature of the gods*

- Dated to around 45 B.C.
- Another example of philosophical dialogue.
- This work takes the form of an imaginary conversation (supposed to have taken place in 77/76 in the house of Gaius Aurelius Cotta) – the interlocutors also include Gaius Velleius, Quintus Lucius Balbus and Cicero himself.

Cicero, On the Nature of the gods: Structure

- Introduction: Cicero explains the purpose of the work.
- Book 1: Velleius (Epicurean position) speaks first.
Cotta's reply to the Epicurean position.
- Book 2: Balbus (Stoic position) makes a case for the Stoic position (there are gods, what they are like, the universe under their control, they care for human welfare).
- Book 3: Cotta's commentary on Balbus' exposition of Stoicism.
- Cicero's verdict: Stoic speaker has best argument.

Cicero, *On the Nature of the gods*

- Religion and ethics: If the Epicureans are correct, that the gods are not concerned with the world and make no difference to it, such gods cannot honestly be worshipped.
- Is the Stoic system, which endorses detailed divine control of human affairs, better? Some Stoics identified the divine and nature, meaning that everything that happens is determined by the nature of things, leaving little room for freedom of choice.
- Thus, morality necessitates discussion of problem of providence – the effect, if any, of the gods on human affairs.

Further Reading

- Cicero, *On Divination (De Divinatione)*, trs. W.A. Falconer, Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923.
- Cicero, *The Nature of the gods*, trs. H.C.P. McGregor, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972.
- Mary Beard, “Cicero and Divination: The Formation of a Latin Discourse,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 76 (1986), 33-46.