

Cicero: *The Verrines* and the Persephone myth

Context

Timeline:

106 BCE: Cicero born

81: Cicero delivers his first surviving oration in a civil trial, *Pro Quinctio*

80: Cicero's first appearance in a criminal trial, *Pro Roscio Amerino*

75: Cicero (aged 30) becomes a quaestor in western Sicily; henceforth a member of the senate

73-71: Spartacus' slave revolt; Verres governor of Sicily

70: prosecution of Verres for extortion (*res repetundae*) and the *Verrine Orations*; Verres goes into exile> second action not delivered.

◦ Second action

- 1) Verres' career before his Sicilian governorship,
- 2) Verres' administration of justice while governor of Sicily
- 3) Verres' management of the grain tithes,
- 4) Verres' art collecting,
- 5) Verres' military actions in Sicily.

1) "I feel, gentlemen, that I have too long been engaged with charges of one type, and perceive that I must beware of surfeiting your ears and minds therewith" (*Verr.* 2.4.105)

◦ vivid description (*enargeia*; *evidentia*)

◦ poetic "digression" of the rape of Proserpina (Ceres' statue: *Verr.* 2.4.105–15)

2) "They [the Sicilians] hold that ... Libera, whom they also call Proserpina, was carried off from a wood near Henna, a place which, lying in the midst of the island, is known as the navel of Sicily. Ceres, the tale goes, in her eager search for traces of her lost daughter, lighted her torches at the fires that burst forth from the peak of Aetna, and roamed over all the earth carrying these in her hands. Henna, the traditional scene of the event I speak of, is built on a lofty eminence, the top of which is a table-land, watered by perennial springs, and bounded in every direction by precipitous cliffs, round which are numerous lakes and copses, and flowers in profusion at all seasons: one feels that the landscape of itself confirms the story, familiar to us from childhood, of how the maiden was carried off. There is indeed in the neighbourhood, facing north, a bottomless cave, from which, we are told, father Dis suddenly issued in his chariot; he seized the maiden, carried her away thence with him, and suddenly, not far from Syracuse, plunged underground" (*Verr.* 2.4.106-107)

3) "My charge is this: That this very Ceres, the most ancient and sacred of all, the fountain-head of all the cults of the goddess among all nations and peoples, was stolen by Gaius Verres from her own temple and her own home." (*Verr.* 2.4.109)

4) "So extreme was their distress that one might fancy that another king of the shades had come to Henna, and not abducted Proserpina but carried Ceres herself away" (*Verr.* 2.4.111)

5) "You have listened to the official witnesses ... telling how the countryside is a lonely wilderness, how the farmers have fled from their farms, how the whole land has become a neglected and abandoned desert. Though this is the result of many and various wrongs done them by Verres, yet in

the belief of these Sicilians the sacrilege committed against Ceres is the chief reason why all the crops and fruits of Ceres in that part of the world have come to nothing" (*Verr.* 2.4.114).

6) "if I shall seem to go too deeply into the religious history involved, forgive me: the importance of the affair forbids my handling with superficial haste so horrible a charge" (*Verr.* 2.4.105)

7) "I will weary you no further with this description; for some time I have had an uneasy feeling that you may think it unsuited to a court of law and to the style in which advocates are accustomed to plead" (*Verr.* 2.4.109)

◦ signs of *libido* (Verres as tyrant): cf. virgin at Lampsacus, 2.1.63–85; 2.4.116; rape through art: e.g. statues at Messana (2.4.3–7); statue of Diana (2.4.74–7). Mythic rape of Persephone>quasi-rape of Ceres through treatment of statue: helps suggest Verres' sexual exploitation of females

8) "not large but of extraordinary charm, with the appearance and clothing of virgins" (*Verr.* 2.4.5)

9) "the house of a panderer and amidst the customs of a prostitute" (*Verr.* 2.4.7)

10) "quite large and tall, but nevertheless, for all its magnitude, its age and appearance were that of a virgin" (*Verr.* 2.4.74–5, statue of Diana from Segesta which Verres wants to have)

◦ effect of his actions> desolation; as if re-enactment of Ceres' reaction to abduction of Proserpina

11) "It seems clear that in this elaborate and poetic account the orator not only intended to impress upon the minds of his audience a further instance of Verres' outrages against the innocent; at the same time—and intimately connected with the images created by the narrative—he wished them to read in the story an allegory for Verres' rape of Sicily itself." (Vasaly 1993: 124)

Bibliography

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