

## **Cicero: saviour of the Republic or just of his own reputation?**

Most of what we know about Cicero comes from his own writings, and he was certainly not shy about creating and defending his own reputation. Here Gesine Manuwald looks at how he crafted a picture of his own consulship for contemporary and future audiences.

### **Getting started: Cicero on his consulship**

Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BCE), the famous Roman orator and politician, was also a prolific writer. Lots of his work – speeches, letters, treatises – survives, giving us an unusually clear picture of the last few decades of the Roman Republic.

Of course, as a leading statesman, Cicero played a part in the events he documents and took sides; he was not a neutral observer. We therefore have to be cautious as we approach the detailed record he left: we need to ask constantly (then as now!) whether the self-presentation of an ambitious politician can be trusted, how facts can be separated from boasting and tendentious presentation, and how Cicero's aim to protect his own reputation interferes with his presentation of the events.

In this article, we will consider these questions by looking at Cicero's consulship in 63 BCE. Cicero was deeply proud to have reached this highest rung of the Roman political ladder as a newcomer to politics (a *homo novus*, a 'new man') and in the earliest year in which he was eligible according to Roman laws on minimum ages for each magistracy (*suo anno*, 'in his year').

Having reached office, Cicero was equally proud of having dealt successfully with challenging situations during his consular year. In particular, as consul, he foiled Catiline's conspiracy to overthrow the state. Merely supported by a decree of the Senate, he had some of the conspirators executed without trial – an act which he claimed had saved the Republic, but which also left him vulnerable to charges of overstepping his authority.

So how did Cicero try to shape the reputation of his dramatic year as consul? An obvious example is a letter to his friend T. Pomponius Atticus in 60 BCE. In this letter, Cicero outlines a meaningful selection of the speeches he had delivered as consul three years earlier:

‘I’ll send my little speeches, both those you ask for and some more besides, since it appears that you too find pleasure in these performances which the enthusiasm of my young admirers prompts me to put on paper. Remembering what a brilliant show your countryman Demosthenes made in his so-called *Philippics* [speeches against king Philip of Macedon] and how he turned away from this argumentative, forensic type of oratory to appear in the more elevated role of statesman, I thought it would be a good thing for me too to have some speeches to my name which might be called ‘Consular.’ ... I shall see that you get the whole corpus, and since you like my writings as well as my doings, the same compositions will show you both what I did and what I said. Otherwise you shouldn’t have asked – I was not forcing myself upon you.’

Cic. *Att.* 2.1.3; approx. 3 June 60 BCE [trans. D.R. Shackleton Bailey]

Cicero seems to think that these speeches marking the major events during his consular year give a good overview of his consulship, though he concludes with feigned modesty, claiming that he only presented himself to Atticus in this way because the latter had asked him.

### **On the one hand ... Cicero’s self-portrait**

What picture of Cicero’s consular year emerges from this process of considered selection of speeches a few years later? The extract demonstrates that Cicero assembled these speeches with the intention to make himself ‘appear in the more elevated role of statesman’, like the Greek orator Demosthenes (384–322 BCE), his great model: he was trying to shape his own reputation. Of course, the letter to Atticus was itself written with an eye to posterity. We see in Cicero’s collected

letters, as in his surviving speeches, a deliberate process of selection and editing to present a carefully managed version of the author to posterity.

The passage confirms that Cicero saw his consular year start in January with his inaugural or *Agrarian Speeches* (against a bill of the Tribune of the People P. Servilius Rullus) and conclude with the *Catilinarian Orations* (against the conspirators around Catiline, who planned to change the political system in Rome). The four *Catilinarian Orations* that Cicero lists are selected out of several given during the events surrounding the conspiracy. In addition to arranging practical measures, Cicero tried to fight Catiline with his oratory and by involving all Roman citizens in his actions and uniting them in their opposition to Catiline – there are two speeches to the People here as well as two to the Senate. Throughout the speeches Cicero stressed that he had accepted great dangers without hesitation, enjoyed the support of the gods, and had done everything he could for the Republic. Nevertheless, Cicero was more than pleased when his initiatives were acknowledged and appropriately honoured by the Senate, as he mentions in a couple of speeches.

After the suppression of the Catilinarian conspiracy, Cicero saw himself as the saviour of the Republic; he repeated this view in the Senate and on many later occasions. By fighting the Catilinarian conspiracy successfully, as he thought, he believed that he had finally been accepted by the establishment despite his social background and his lack of military experience. Accordingly, he stresses at the end of both the second speech to the People and the second speech to the Senate what he has achieved and that he does not wish for more than for his consulship to be remembered; what he really wants is for people to know that the Catilinarian conspiracy was suppressed because of what he had done.

Cicero also made efforts to promote his glory in other literary genres, both by writing pieces himself and by encouraging others to do so. As he says in the same letter to Atticus, Cicero wrote a sketch of his consulship in Greek (as did Atticus), meant as a basis for works by others (which did not materialize). At about the same time Cicero produced a narrative epic in hexameter verse, entitled *De consulatu suo* ('*On his consulship*'), which only survives in fragments. Writing a historical epic about contemporary events was not unprecedented in ancient Rome; but writing about one's own achievements and presenting them as divinely supported was unusual.

One of the most famous of the preserved verses is: *o fortunatam natam me consule Romam!* – ‘o happy Rome, born under my consulship’. The line implies that Rome was already at the point of destruction and only (re)born due to Cicero’s efforts. Self-propaganda was more common in ancient Rome than now, but Cicero still seems to have transgressed the boundaries: his epic was already ridiculed in antiquity.

### **But on the other hand ... Opposition and criticism**

At the same time, opposition to Cicero started immediately after his controversial execution of some of the Catilinarian conspirators, in early December 63 BCE. Cicero was not allowed to give the customary speech at the end of his year in office as consul, but only to swear the oath required from magistrates leaving office. Yet Cicero, clever as he was, managed to turn the situation to his advantage by changing the wording of the oath; thus, he was still able to express his favourite idea of having saved the Republic, even though briefly.

Cicero made powerful enemies during his long career. One of them, P. Clodius Pulcher, launched a campaign against Cicero by introducing (as Tribune in 58 BCE) a law exiling anyone who had executed a Roman citizen without trial (as, of course, Cicero could be seen to have done). Cicero had to go into an exile, which proved short-lived, though while he was away, Clodius took control of Cicero’s house and had it demolished.

### **I get knocked down, but I get up again**

After Cicero had been recalled to Rome, he tried to present the exile as a brief blip and an act of self-sacrifice on his part; accordingly, he again started to work on his reputation on the basis of his achievements so far. One of the most famous instances is a letter (which Cicero calls *valde bella* – ‘very delightful’) to his friend L. Luceius, a former politician and historian: in this letter of 55 BCE Cicero tries to persuade Luceius to write a separate historiographical work about the Catilinarian conspiracy. Cicero argues that this is an excellent subject for such a work and also that he ‘cannot wait to see the world learning about him in his lifetime’.

Cicero continued to be proud of his success of dealing with the Catilinarian conspiracy until the end of his life, modelling further enemies on this paradigm and comparing his fight against those with that against Catiline. This attitude becomes especially prominent in the final group of Cicero's speeches, the fourteen *Philippic Orations*, delivered against Mark Antony in 44–43 BCE after Caesar's death; as in the case of Catiline, Cicero saw Mark Antony endangering the Republic and himself once more called to be its defender.

For instance, Cicero opens the *Second Philippic* as follows: 'To what destiny of mine, Members of the Senate, should I ascribe the fact that in these twenty years [i.e. since fighting Catiline in 63 BCE] there was never an enemy of the Republic who did not at the same time declare war on me too? There is no need for me to mention any names. Consult your own memories. Those persons have paid me penalties greater than I should have desired.' [trans. D.R. Shackleton Bailey / J.T. Ramsey / G. Manuwald]

Although Cicero did not have a particular political office at the time, on the basis of his earlier interventions against Catiline, he felt called upon to save the Republic from Mark Antony's desire for power; by referring this controversy to himself, he personalizes the political conflict and presents it as an element of his destined biography.

### **Summing up: don't take politicians at face value**

No doubt Cicero had helped quash the Catilinarian conspiracy in 63 BCE, and he was right that this had been a dangerous moment. But by 43 BCE, after two decades packed with many further threats to the Republic, it is also true that he tended to exaggerate the gravity of that danger and his own heroism in averting it.

If one tries to determine the facts beneath Cicero's self-aggrandizing presentation, it seems that a proportion of the populace agreed with him, was grateful to him for having resolved the situation, and hailed him as a saviour (as the proposal of Senate decrees to honour him shows). At the same time, there was also criticism, taking its starting point from a formal point of procedure (killing Roman citizens without trial), though directed against Cicero as a person and his general policies of retaining the structures of the traditional Republic: this movement acquired such a strength that under Clodius it even led to Cicero's exile. Apart from

the fact that Cicero, as a ‘new man’, was keen to highlight any successes to secure his standing, this propaganda against him explains why Cicero was even more concerned to spread his version of the events during his consulship as widely as possible, both before and after his exile.

So, Cicero may be called a ‘saviour of the Republic’ in a certain sense, but he was also an efficient spin-doctor for himself. Thus, everything that he says about incidents he was involved in needs to be looked at carefully, in order to separate facts from tendentious presentation, just as in the case of modern politicians.

### **Image captions**

A 19<sup>th</sup> century onyx gemstone with a head of Cicero. Metropolitan Museum, New York

Another cameo portrait, possibly of Cicero – this one from his own lifetime. British Museum.

A 16<sup>th</sup> century view of Cicero at work in his study (woodcut by Heinrich Steiner). British Museum.

### **List of Cicero’s consular speeches given in his letter to Atticus**

[*The Agrarian Speeches*]

- (1) delivered in the Senate on the Kalends of January;
- (2) to the Assembly, on the agrarian law;
- (3) on Otho; (4) in defence of Rabirius; (5) on the children of persons proscribed;
- (6) delivered when I publicly resigned my province;

[*The Catilinarian Orations*]

- (7) when I sent Catiline out of Rome;
- (8) to the Assembly the day following Catiline’s flight;
- (9) at a public meeting the day the Allobroges turned informers;
- (10) in the Senate on the Nones of December.

(11 + 12) 'There are two further short pieces, chips, one might say, from the agrarian law.'