Cicero, On the reply of the haruspices 19

On the superiority of the Romans because of their religious beliefs and their pietas.

Name of the author: Cicero
Date: 56 BCE
Place: Rome
Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Literary genre: Discourse

Reference: On the reply of the haruspices

Commentary:
This text is an excerpt from the speech On the reply of the haruspices which may have been pronounced in front of the Senate in May 56 BCE (on the dating, Lenaghan, A Commentary, p. 22-28). Concerning the general context preceding its pronouncement, it is important to remember that on 20th March 58 BCE Cicero was condemned to exile because of the manoeuvres of the consul Lucius Calpurnius Piso and of Cicero's worst enemy, the plebeian tribune Publius Clodius Pulcher. He was sanctioned for having condemned to death Roman citizens without having judged them properly, after the failure of the Catiline conspiracy. Thanks to Pompey’s mediation, on 4th September 57 BCE, Cicero was back in Rome. From that moment onwards, even if he was not as much invested in the political life as had been the case in the 60’s, he remained influential and he wanted to demand compensation for the damages caused on his estates during his absence. Actually, some of his villae had been plundered and Clodius ordered both the destruction of his house on the Palatine and the erection of a shrine of Libertas on it. Even if Cicero recovered his estates thanks to a decision of the Senate at the end of the year 57 BCE, his tense relations with Clodius continued. In addition, the renewal of the alliance between Caesar, Pompey and Crassus during the conference of Luca in April 56 BCE led Cicero to distance himself from the triumviri, especially from Pompey. After a short tour in his villae between April and May of the same year, Cicero hastily came back to Rome as Clodius criticised him anew. Actually, as an earthquake occurred in the countryside around Rome, the haruspices (namely priests whose role was to interpret the will of the gods which could manifest itself through the entrails of sacrificed animals or through prodigies, such as thunderbolts or unusual happenings) were consulted, by the order of the Senate, to interpret this prodigy by giving a formal response called a responsum. They concluded that the gods would had been offended because of some profanation of sacred places. Clodius attributed this divine anger to the fact that Cicero had been allowed to reconstruct his house on the previous location of the shrine of Libertas. Cicero reacted to this attack and pronounced the speech On the reply of the haruspices to incriminate Clodius of sacrilege.

This text is an excerpt from the beginning of Cicero’s response to the haruspices. In the first sentences, Cicero gives some general assessments about the existence of gods. First, he imagines the case of a man who, despise looking up to the heavens, fails to perceive that gods exist and who attributes to fate all that occurs (19.3). The observance of the “celestial order” and of the “beauty of the universe” is also presented in later works of Cicero as the elements which should enable every man to recognize the existence of “some excellent and eternal nature” (aliquam aeternamque naturam) which “deserves the respect and homage of men” (Cicero, On Divination II.148; see Lenaghan, A Commentary, p. 109). In the treatise On the Nature of the Gods II.153, Cicero lists all the astrological tools of men which are presented as means to understand the gods and thus to display pietas, namely a greater sense of respect for the gods. In this passage of his speech On the reply of the haruspices, Cicero has a less confident perception of the understanding of the gods as he shouts out “who is so insane that... he attributes to fate what occurs because of such an intelligence that one can hardly follow the order and the necessity” (19.3). The actions and the controls of gods on everything in the universe is presented by Cicero as something so complex and complete that their understanding remains difficult, even for somebody who believes in them. But through this sentence he seems also to criticize men who explain the existence of everything through some kind of fate, casus, which would blindly govern the world. The second point Cicero makes, after that concerning the existence of the gods, is about divine providence: “... or, when he has understood that gods exist, fails to understand that it is by their divine power (eorum numine) that this great empire (hoc tantum imperium) has been created, extended and preserved?” (19.4). Through this sentence, Cicero may have criticized the Epicureans who taught that the gods did not interfere in the physical world and in human life. The orator not only counters such
a conception but he also explicitly presents the numen, namely the divine power of the Roman gods, as the main cause of Rome’s greatness, symbolised here by the exceptional size of its empire. Such a relationship between the divine providence and the greatness of Rome’s imperium is recalled by Cicero in a later speech, written in 52 BCE, In Defence of Titus Annius Milo 83. This idea that it is the power and the will of the gods which were at the origin of, and which had fostered the prosperity of Rome but also its domination on a large part of the Mediterranean world, is an idea which was actually one of the key ideological justifications of the origin of Rome’s power and hegemony (Lenaghan, A Commentary, p. 109). Thus, if we connect the first remark of Cicero, about the existence of the gods and the absurdity of thinking that worldly affairs would be governed by some fate, with his second remark, that the divine power of the Roman gods would be the main cause of Rome’s greatness, Cicero may be trying to discredit the notion – especially Greek hostility to Rome’s hegemony – which pretended that Rome’s imperium had been established by Tychê or Fortuna, namely by chance. Fifty years later, in his Roman Antiquities, of which the first book had been published in 7 BCE, Dionysius of Halicarnassus presents, from a perspective quite similar to that of Cicero, the opinion of some hostile Greeks who believed that Rome’s empire was the result of fate: “... and it would be not through reverence for the gods and justice and every other virtue that, with the passing of time, she arrived at world domination, but through some chance and the injustice of Fortune, which would considerably give out her greatest favours to the most undeserving (Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Roman Antiquities I.4.2: ... ?? ??? ????????? ?? ?? ??????????? ??? ??? ????? ??? ?? ?????? ???????? ?? ????? ??????? ??????? ??????? ??????? ??????? ?? ??????????? ?? ???? ?????? ??????? ??????? ??????? ??????? ??????? ?? ??????????? ?? ??????? ??????? ?? ??????? ??????? ??????? ??????? ??????? ??????? ?? ??????? ??????? ?? ??????? ??????? ?? ??????? ??????? ?? ??????? ??????? ?? ??????? ??????? ?? ??????? 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this virtue as the main reason why they are favoured by the gods who reward them by supporting their domination on earth. The connection between the exceptional religious virtue of the Romans and the establishment of Rome's hegemony and glory, a point that will be made by Dionysius of Halicarnassus fifty years later, is here suggested by Cicero.

The passage of this text presenting the Romans as unique because of their superior ritual devotion and respect towards the gods has been likened, by John O. Lenaghan, to a text of Polybius (Lenaghan, *A Commentary*, p. 110). In Book VI of his *Histories*, in which he deals with the Roman constitution, Polybius writes: “But, in my opinion, the quality in which the commonwealth of the Romans is most distinctly superior is their religious ideas” (Polybius, *Histories* VI.56.6: ????????? ?? ??? ???? ?????? ??????? ??????? ???????? ??????? ?? ?? ??? ???? ?????????). Even if the global idea of this passage – namely the superiority of the religious convictions of the Romans – recalls the message of Cicero, Polybius’s assessment seems more general than that of Cicero as he does not refer for instance to their ????????, namely their *pietas*. Polybius’s remarks are also more politically-oriented, as it is the ???????? ?????????, the “commonwealth of the Romans,” which is said to be superior because of the religious ideas of the Romans. In the next sentence, Polybius develops this idea and explains that the reason why the Romans’s religious ideas – that he presents as very similar to “superstition” – makes the Roman State strong, is that they help to create a cohesion within the Romans and to maintain a discipline among them (Polybius, *Histories* VI.56.7). Finally, and most importantly, Polybius notices the superiority of the Roman Commonwealth, but he does not affirm, as Cicero, that the scrupulous religious observance of the Romans is the reason why the gods supported Rome and gave Rome such an *imperium*. Polybius seems thus reluctant to explain Rome’s expansion as a divine reward given in return for the right religious observance, for him the role of the Roman religion is indirect as it was one of the elements which enable to maintain unity and discipline inside the Roman people.

The idea expressed in this text according to which the Romans are superior to other peoples because of their respect towards the gods and because of their scrupulous religious observance is not unique in Cicero’s work. Later, in his treatise *On the Nature of the Gods* II.8, Cicero expresses a very similar opinion: “Moreover if we want to compare our own characteristics with those of foreign peoples, we shall find that, while in all other respects we are only the equals or even the inferiors of others, yet with regard to religion, that is, for what concerns the cult of gods, we are far superior” (see Lenaghan, *A Commentary*, p. 110). By emphasizing that it is by the divine power of the gods that the Roman *imperium* has been created, extended and preserved, Cicero implicitly means that *pietas*, the respect of the Romans of their duties toward the Roman gods, was both one of the causes and one of the conditions of the existence and prosperity of Rome.

Keywords in the original language:

- ars
- caelum
- calliditas
- casus
- deus
- divinitus
- Galli
- gens
- Graeci
- guberno
- Hispani
- immortalis
- imperium
- Itali
- Latin
- mens
- natio
- necessitudo
- numer
- ordo
- pietas
• Poeni
• rego
• religio
• robor
• sapientia
• sensus
• supero

Thematic keywords in English:

• divine protection
• prejudices
• Roman hegemony
• Roman piety
• Roman power
• Roman religion
• Roman Republic
• Roman superiority

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