

Cicero's personal omens: *Pater Patriae* and *Electus Diuorum*

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Abstract

Should the modern reader go through the works of Ancient Romans, he would be baffled by the several hundreds of omens narrated in those living words of the Roman World. Through those works written by and about men of whom we have more questions than answers, we are left with a series of omens, tell-tale of the belief that gods sent signs of what the future held regarding Rome and its leaders.

By the time of Cicero, and to his great distress, the Republic was in crisis as the consequences of the Empire's expansion were felt. The political changes of the Late Republic also resulted in the rise of personal omens regarding the future of the city's political leaders, omens showing their predestination to greatness or their looming death. Cicero was no exception.

This paper provides a brief symbolic analysis and explanation of those omens and, more importantly, uses those omens' constructed narrative to effort a better understanding of Cicero's image being conveyed, in which context, and by whom. Additionally, those omens are used as a case study for the dominant narrative constructions of Late Republican personal omens. Thus, the aim is to provide a better understanding of Cicero and his omens' place in his time, of how they are part of a broader phenomenon of late republican omens, and of how the operation and manipulation of popular opinion, political propaganda and Roman religion worked together to construct such portrayal of him.

Keywords: Cicero; Omens; Roman Religion; Roman Republic; Symbolic Thought

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So much of Rome, from Roman individual and collective behaviour to Roman literature and even Roman civic, familiar and individual daily life was built upon the idea that the world had an encompassing divine element. A powerful and vital, but extremely fragile, bond between Rome and its Gods. Gods who should be understood as citizen gods (Scheid, 1985, 51; Ando, 2008, 6; and Scheid, 2011), an integral part of the community they thus protected (*Cic. N.D.* 1.115–16). Religion and politics were inseparable in Ancient Rome.

So, that perceived importance of the bond between gods and Rome explains why Romans put so much emphasis on acquiring ritual and divinatory knowledge about the gods, and on using that growing and mutable knowledge to discern the state of the *pax deorum* (Ando, 2008, 14–17). Because of the importance of divination, ancient authors left records of several hundreds of omens, tell-tale of the belief gods sent signs of what the future held to the Urbe and its leaders, a phenomenon transversal to the varied periods of Roman history (Engels, 2007 and Wagner, 1898). Those omens are necessarily the byproduct of their time and the world they were part of. As Cicero said at the beginning of his *De Divinatione*: *gentem quidem nullam video neque tam humanam atque doctam neque tam immanem atque barbaram, quae non significari futura et a quibusdam intellegi praedicique posse censeat*² (*Cic. Div.* 1.2.). Romans put such importance into prodigies and omens that they were of the first events to be recorded by Romans, in the *Annales Maximi* (Hornblower and Spawforth, 1999, 98). In the very own legend of Rome's foundation, the disagreement regarding the founding location of the city was settled by Romulus and Remus through the taking of auspices, meaning, the consultation of the gods (*D.H.* 1.86; *Liv.* 1.6–7; *Plut. Rom.* 9).

In the works of Livy and several other authors who wrote about the early and mid-republican period, those omens were almost exclusively public prodigies, addressed to the whole community (Rasmussen, 2003; Engels, 2007, 745–768; Aldea Celada, 2010, 287). Yet, as the consequences the Empire's expansion were felt in every area of the Republican system, from the social and economic tissue to the political behaviour and dynamics of the elite, more non-civic/non-traditional forms of divination were brought into the public sphere (de Castro, 2017, 101–108). So, as the Republic starts to near its end, we notice an intensification of omens involving, for example, astrologers, dreams, and what is usually labelled inspired, or non-ritual, diviners (following the terminology and conceptualization of Bouché-Leclercq, 1879, 107). Accompanying this rise of non-ritual divination, there was also a gradual diminishing of public prodigies and a gradual but steady increase of omens regarding the future of the most important leaders of Rome (Santangelo, 2013, 235–272; Engels, 2007, 778–797; Aldea Celada, 2010, 287).

² Translation (by Falconer, 1923): Now I am aware of no people, however refined and learned or however savage and ignorant, which does not think that signs are given of future events, and that certain persons can recognize those signs and foretell events before they occur.

We have material and written evidence of the importance the elite put into influencing and courting the public opinion, and the vital role it played in the political behaviour of the elite (see, for example, Vanderbroeck, 1987; Brunt, 1988; Millar, 1998; Morstein-Marx, 2004; Rosillo-López, 2017). Besides the existence of a sort of “election guide” such as the *Commentariolum Petitionis* of Quintus Tullius Cicero, Marcus Tullius Cicero himself shows that reality by conveying the anxiety of the elite when it came to the “popular” element of Roman political life, writing that *nihil est incertius volgo, nihil obscurius voluntate hominum, nihil fallacius ratione tota comitiorum*³ (Cic. Mur. 36).

Cicero’s omens, just like other late-republican omens, need to be studied and analyzed by also taking under consideration that reality, and, thus, the possible use of omens to influence public opinion and, consequentially, to shape the construction process of medium and long-term collective memory (Wildfang, 1997; Vigourt, 2001, 377-462; Ripat, 2006; and de Castro, 2017, 112-166).

Therefore, from the Late Republic, we are left with several personal omens regarding the fate of men such as Marius, Silla, Pompey, Julius Caesar, Octavianus or Cicero himself (Engels, 2007, 544-714). Omens showing their predestination to power, to leadership, their *Felicitas* and divine support, or their looming deaths. This paper will focus on the omens recorded by ancient authors regarding Cicero. We shall attempt to understand not only what image of Cicero is conveyed by those omens and the possible political and propagandistic intents behind them, but also how those personal omens of Cicero need to be understood as a part of that wider trend in Late Republican omens.

Regarding Cicero’s birth, Plutarch writes that:

τεχθῆναι δὲ Κικέρωνα λέγουσιν ἀνωδύνως καὶ ἀπόνως λοχευθείσης αὐτοῦ τῆς μητρὸς ἡμέρᾳ τρίτῃ τῶν νέων Καλανδῶν, ἐν ᾗ νῦν οἱ ἄρχοντες εὐχονται καὶ θύουσιν ὑπὲρ τοῦ ἡγεμόνος. τῇ δὲ τίτθῃ φάσμα δοκεῖ γενέσθαι καὶ προειπεῖν ὥς ὄφελος μέγα πᾶσι Ῥωμαίοις ἐκτρεφούσῃ. ταῦτα δὲ ἄλλως ὀνειράτα καὶ φλύαρον εἶναι δοκοῦντα ταχέως αὐτὸς ἀπέδειξε μαντεῖαν ἀληθινὴν ἐν ἡλικίᾳ τοῦ μανθάνειν γενόμενος, δι’ εὐφυΐαν ἐκλάμπας καὶ λαβὼν ὄνομα καὶ δόξαν ἐν τοῖς παισίν, ὥστε τοὺς πατέρας αὐτῶν ἐπιφοιτᾶν τοῖς διδασκαλείοις ὅφει τε βουλομένους ἰδεῖν τὸν Κικέρωνα καὶ τὴν ὑμνουμένην αὐτοῦ περὶ τὰς μαθήσεις ὀξύτητα καὶ σύνεσιν ἱστορῆσαι, τοὺς δ’ ἀγροικοτέρους ὀργίζεσθαι τοῖς υἱέσιν ὀρῶντας ἐν ταῖς ὁδοῖς τὸν Κικέρωνα μέσον αὐτῶν ἐπὶ τιμῇ λαμβάνοντας.⁴ (Plut. Cic. 2.1-2)

³ Translation (by Clark, 1908): “Nothing is more uncertain than the common people, — nothing more obscure than men’s wishes, — nothing more treacherous than the whole nature of the comitia.”

⁴ Translation (by Perrin, 1919): It is said that Cicero was born, without travail or pain on the part of his mother, on the third day of the new Calends, the day on which at the present time the magistrates offer sacrifices and prayers for the health of the emperor. It would seem also that a phantom appeared to his nurse and foretold that her charge would be a great blessing to all the Romans. And although these presages were thought to be mere dreams and idle fancies, he soon showed them to be true prophecy; for when he was of an age for taking lessons, his natural talent shone out clear and he

So, it is said that Cicero's birth was relatively easy for his mother and that it occurred on the 3rd of January. Then, Plutarch also writes that a supernatural figure appeared to the baby's nurse, his caretaker, and told her that Cicero would be a great blessing for Rome. Additionally, Plutarch also writes about Cicero's prodigious level of intelligence, as it was showcased during his childhood and early education. The easiness of his birth and the impressive level of intelligence shown by Cicero from an early age are meant to establish how unique Cicero was, and how he was above regular children. This goes hand in hand with the heroization that was made of Roman leaders during the Late Republic and, especially, during the Empire, a heroization that, as Fernando Lozano Gómez has already argued in one of his papers, has clear parallels with the heroization of mythological super-human figures (Lozano Gómez, 2008, 159-162).

On the other hand, the message received by Cicero's nurse and the fact that his birth-day was on the same day that, during the empire, the magistrates would make offerings to the gods in the name of the emperor's well-being, establishes Cicero's predestination to leadership.

The uncovering and destruction of the Catiline conspiracy became the most defining moment of Cicero's career and resulted in his receipt of the title *Pater Patriae*. And yet, his execution of the conspirators without a proper trial allowed Clodius to prompt his exile in 58 BC and his posterior return in the following year.

It is only natural that such episode plays a pivotal role in the omens of Cicero, whether because it was one of the most defining moments of his career, or because Clodius' actions afterwards demanded some sort of positive propaganda supporting the actions of Cicero.

*nam ut illa omittam, visas nocturno tempore ab occidente faces ardoremque caeli, ut fulminum iactus, ut terrae motus relinquam, ut omittam cetera quae tam multa nobis consulibus facta sunt ut haec quae nunc fiunt canere di immortales viderentur, hoc certe, Quirites, quod sum dicturus neque praetermittendum neque relinquendum est.*⁵ (Cic. Catil. 3.18)

won name and fame among the boys, so that their fathers used to visit the schools in order to see Cicero with their own eyes and observe the quickness and intelligence in his studies for which he was extolled, though the ruder ones among them were angry at their sons when they saw them walking with Cicero placed in their midst as a mark of honour.

⁵ Translation (by Yonge, 1856): For to say nothing of those things, namely, the firebrands seen in the west in the night time, and the heat of the atmosphere,—to pass over the falling of thunderbolts and the earthquakes,—to say nothing of all the other portents which have taken place in such number during my consulship, that the immortal gods themselves have been seeming to predict what is now taking place; yet, at all events, this which I am about to mention, O Romans, must be neither passed over nor omitted.

This passage is from one of Cicero's speeches denouncing Catiline, and in it, we can see how Cicero mentions several negative prodigies that had happened throughout the year and that, according to him, were omens of Catiline's nefarious conspiracy. This alleged association between the prodigies and Catiline's conspiracy is also made by later authors such as Pliny⁶, Plutarch⁷ or Julius Obsequens⁸, so we can conclude that such interpretation offered by Cicero was adopted by the Roman elite and crystalized in Roman literary memory.

But the gods did not limit themselves to the announcement of the looming threat over the Republic, they also showed their support for Cicero, the electee of the gods to stop Catiline and his conspiracy against the community:

ταῦτα τοῦ Κικέρωνος διαποροῦντος γίνεται τι ταῖς γυναιξὶ σημεῖον θνούσαις, ὁ γὰρ βωμός, ἤδη τοῦ πυρὸς κατακεκοιμῆσθαι δοκοῦντος, ἐκ τῆς τέφρας καὶ τῶν κεκαυμένων φλοιῶν φλόγα πολλὴν ἀνῆκε καὶ λαμπράν. ὑφ' ἧς αἱ μὲν ἄλλαι διεπτοήθησαν, αἱ δ' ἱεραὶ παρθένοι τὴν τοῦ Κικέρωνος γυναῖκα Τερεντίαν ἐκέλευσαν ἢ τάχος χωρεῖν πρὸς τὸν ἄνδρα καὶ κελεύειν οἷς ἔγνωκεν ἐγχειρεῖν ὑπὲρ τῆς πατρίδος, ὥς μέγα πρὸς τε σωτηρίαν καὶ δόξαν αὐτῷ τῆς θεοῦ φῶς διδούσης.⁹ (Plut. Cic. 20.1)

So, this omen, narrated both by Plutarch and Cassius Dio¹⁰, allegedly occurred during the Catiline conspiracy and deepened the idea of divine protection and divine support that Cicero enjoyed as a soon to be saviour of the Republic, with the fire of Vesta, the very sacred flame of Rome, shooting up and burning brightly and highly, a prodigy taken by the Vestal Virgins, the ones responsible for keeping the fire burning at all times, as a sign from Vesta's support and protection of Cicero.

In addition to the existence of omens not so innocently favourable of Cicero's actions against the Catiline conspirators, there are also reported omens that were deemed as divine messages of Cicero's speedy return to Rome after his exile. One of them is written by Cicero himself in one of his simulated philosophical conversations about divination in the *De Divinatione*:

⁶ Plin. Nat. 2.137.

⁷ Plut. Cic. 14.4.

⁸ Obseq. 61.

⁹ Translation (by Perrin, 1919): While Cicero was in this perplexity, a sign was given to the women who were sacrificing. The altar, it seems, although the fire was already thought to have gone out, sent forth from the ashes and burnt bark upon it a great bright blaze. The rest of the women were terrified at this, but the sacred virgins bade Terentia the wife of Cicero go with all speed to her husband and tell him to carry out his resolutions in behalf of the country, since the goddess was giving him a great light on this path to safety and glory.

¹⁰ D.C. 37.35.3-4.

*Venio nunc ad tuum. audiavi equidem ex te ipso, sed mihi saepius noster Sallustius narravit, cum in illa fuga nobis gloriosa, patriae calamitosa, in villa quadam campi Atinatis maneres magnam [...] cum autem experrectus esses hora secunda fere, te sibi somnium narravisse: visum tibi esse, cum in locis solis maestus errares, C. Marius cum fascibus laureatis quaerere ex te, quid tristis esses, cumque tu te patria vi pulsum esse dixisses,prehendisse eum dextram tuam et bono animo te iussisse esse lictorique proximo tradidisse, ut te in monumentum suum deduceret, et dixisse in eo tibi salutem fore. tum et se exclamasse Sallustius narrat reditum tibi celerem et gloriosum paratum, et te ipsum visum somnio delectari.*¹¹ (Cic. Div. 1.59)

So, we are told that Gaius Marius appeared to Cicero in a dream, supporting him and sharing that he would soon return to Rome. The dream is interesting in terms of its potential political use as propaganda because Marius was some decades before the leader of the faction of the *populares*, a faction to which Clodius belonged, and opposed to the Optimates of Cicero. So, one of the historical leaders of the faction that, in a way, drove Cicero out of the city appears to him in a dream and lends him his support, blessing his return to Rome.

Moving on, the occurrences narrated by Plutarch in the following excerpt also support Cicero's return from exile:

ἐφ' οἷς ἀθυμήσας ὥρμησεν ἐπὶ Βρεντέσιον, κάκειθεν εἰς Δυρράχιον ἀνέμῳ φορῶν περαιούμενος, ἀντιπνεύσαντος πελαγίου μεθ' ἡμέραν ἐπαλινδρόμησεν, εἴτ' αὖθις ἀνήχθη. λέγεται δὲ καὶ καταπλεύσαντος εἰς Δυρράχιον αὐτοῦ καὶ μέλλοντος ἀποβαίνειν σεισμόν τε τῆς γῆς καὶ σπασμόν ἅμα γενέσθαι τῆς θαλάττης. ἅφ' ὃν συνέβαλον οἱ μαντικοὶ μὴ μόνιμον αὐτῷ τὴν φυγὴν ἔσεσθαι: μεταβολῆς γὰρ εἶναι ταῦτα σημεῖα.¹² (Plut. Cic. 32.3)

¹¹ Translation (by Falconer, 1923): I come now to your dream. I heard it, of course, from you, but more frequently from our Sallustius. In the course of your banishment, which was glorious for us but disastrous to the State, you stopped for the night at a certain country-house in the plain of Atina. [...] But you awoke about the second hour and related your dream to him. In it you seemed to be wandering sadly about in solitary places when Gaius Marius, with his fasces wreathed in laurel, asked you why you were sad, and you replied that you had been driven from your country by violence. He then bade you be of good cheer, took you by the right hand, and delivered you to the nearest lictor to be conducted to his memorial temple, saying that there you should find safety. Sallustius thereupon, as he relates, cried out, 'a speedy and a glorious return awaits you.' He further states that you too seemed delighted at the dream.

¹² Translation (by Perrin, 1919): Disheartened at this treatment, he set out for Brundisium, and from there tried to cross to Dyrrhachium with a fair breeze, but since he met a counter-wind at sea he came back the next day, and then set sail again. It is said, too, that after he had put in at Dyrrhachium and was about to land, there was an earthquake accompanied by a violent convulsion of the sea. Wherefore the soothsayers conjectured that his exile would not be lasting, since these were signs of change

Through the natural world, regularly present in roman omens (de Castro, 2017, 59-83), the gods themselves show their support for Cicero and, thus, condemn his exile and the actions of Clodius.

So, when we look at Cicero's omens collectively, we start to discern the transversality of a constructed narrative, which was the predestination of Cicero to power, his enjoyment of divine support and protection, and even divine sanction for his execution without a trial of Catiline's fellow conspirators.

Cicero's omens aren't the only ones to express such constructed narrative and imagery. Two excerpts of Plutarch are interesting in this regard:

οἱ μὲν οὖν περὶ τὸν Μάριον ἐν παρασκευαῖς ἦσαν: ὁ δὲ Σύλλας ἄγων ἕξ τάγματα τέλεια μετὰ τοῦ συνάρχοντος ἀπὸ Νώλης ἐκίνει, τὸν μὲν στρατὸν ὁρῶν πρόθυμον ὄντα χωρεῖν εὐθὺς ἐπὶ τὴν πόλιν, ἐνδοιάζων δὲ τῇ γνώμῃ παρ' ἑαυτῷ καὶ δεδοικῶς τὸν κίνδυνον. ὁ δὲ μάντις Ποστούμιος θύσαντος αὐτοῦ καταμαθὼν τὰ σημεῖα, καὶ τὰς χεῖρας ἀμφοτέρως τῷ Σύλλᾳ προτείνας, ἡξίου δεθῆναι καὶ φυλάττεσθαι μέχρι τῆς μάχης, ὥς, εἰ μὴ πάντα ταχὺ καὶ καλῶς αὐτῷ συντελεσθεῖη, τὴν ἐσχάτην δίκην ὑποσχεῖν βουλόμενος. λέγεται δὲ καὶ κατὰ τοὺς ὕπνους αὐτῷ Σύλλᾳ φανῆναι θεὸν ἦν τιμῶσι Ῥωμαῖοι παρὰ Καππαδοκῶν μαθόντες, εἴτε δὴ Σελήνην οὖσαν εἴτε Ἀθηνᾶν εἴτε Ἐνυώ. ταύτην ὁ Σύλλας ἔδοξεν ἐπιστᾶσαν ἐγχειρίσαι κεραυνὸν αὐτῷ, καὶ τῶν ἐχθρῶν ἕκαστον ὀνομάζουσαν τῶν ἐκείνου βάλλειν κελεῦσαι, τοὺς δὲ πίπτειν βαλλομένους καὶ ἀφανίζεσθαι. θαρσύνσας δὲ τῇ ὄψει καὶ φράσας τῷ συνάρχοντι μεθ' ἡμέραν ἐπὶ τὴν Ῥώμην ἡγεῖτο.¹³ (Plut. Sull. 9.3-4)

ἀεὶ μὲν οὖν λέγονται φιλοβασιλικοὶ Μακεδόνες, τότε δ' ὥς ἐρείσματι κεκλασμένῳ πάντων ἅμα συμπεσόντων ἐγχειρίζοντες αὐτοὺς τῷ Αἰμιλίῳ δύο ἡμέραις ὅλης κύριον αὐτὸν κατέστησαν Μακεδονίας, καὶ δοκεῖ τοῦτο μαρτυρεῖν τοῖς εὐτυχίᾳ τινὶ τὰς πράξεις ἐκεῖνας γεγονέναι φάσκουσιν. ἔτι δὲ καὶ τὸ περὶ τὴν θυσίαν σύμπτωμα δαϊμόνιον ἦν ἐν Ἀμφιπόλει θύοντος τοῦ Αἰμιλίου καὶ τῶν ἱερῶν ἐνηργημένων

¹³ Translation (by Perrin, 1916): Marius and his partisans, then, busied themselves with preparations; while Sulla, at the head of six full legions, moved with his colleague from Nola, his army, as he saw, being eager to march at once against the city, although he himself wavered in his own mind, and feared the danger. But after he had offered a sacrifice, Postumius the soothsayer learned what the omens were, and stretching out both hands to Sulla, begged that he might be bound and kept a prisoner until the battle, assuring him that he was willing to undergo the extremest penalty if all things did not speedily come to a good issue for him. It is said, also, that to Sulla himself there appeared in his dreams a goddess whom the Romans learned to worship from the Cappadocians, whether she is Luna, or Minerva, or Bellona. This goddess, as Sulla fancied, stood by his side and put into his hand a thunderbolt, and naming his enemies one by one, bade him smite them with it; and they were all smitten, and fell, and vanished away. Encouraged by the vision, he told it to his colleague, and at break of day led on towards Rome.

κεραυνὸς ἐνσκήψας εἰς τὸν βωμὸν ἐπέφλεξε καὶ συγκαθίγησε τὴν ἱερουργίαν.¹⁴
(Plut. Aem. 24.1)

In those two passages, it is present the notion that an individual could benefit from a special link with the gods, a special kind of divine protection and favour, and divine support for his actions (for example, for Sulla's march on Rome of the first excerpt). This idea (as exemplified by the second excerpt) existed long before the civil wars of the Late Republic and had also been present, for example, regarding Scipio Africanus (Clauss, 1999, 42)

Pliny (*Nat.* 2.23) tells us that the people interpreted the appearance of the *Sidus Iulium* as a portent of Caesar's rise to godhood and that while Octavianus endorsed that interpretation in public, he saw it as a portent of his upcoming rise to power. This passage perfectly showcases the propagandistic use of omens and religion in Late Republican politics, because it showcases both the existence of different and competing interpretations of the same omen by different people and the political exploitation of *prodigia* in an attempt to influence popular opinion.

We can thereby conclude that the narrative constructed by Cicero's analyzed omens is part of a wider trend in the Late Republic divination and politics, where omens came to be used for conveying specific propagandistic religious messages, not because Romans did not believe in their religion less than Christians or Muslims do, but because the omens should be seen, for ancient romans, as a bridge between the chaotic and dangerous "real" world, and that imagined community of gods and men, where the divine elements, as citizen gods and protective deities of the city, took sides, were tribal and, ultimately, had a guiding hand in the historical events through their electees, their chosen ones.

¹⁴ Translation (by Perrin, 1918): Now, the Macedonians are always said to have been lovers of their kings, but at this time, feeling that their prop was shattered and all had fallen with it, they put themselves into the hands of Aemilius, and in two days made him master of all Macedonia. And this would seem to bear witness in favour of those who declare that these achievements of his were due to a rare good fortune. And still further, that which befell him at his sacrifice was a token of divine favour. When, namely, Aemilius was sacrificing in Amphipolis, and the sacred rites were begun, a thunderbolt darted down upon the altar, set it on fire, and consumed the sacrifice with it.

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