

of Letters' would arguably flourish among ruling Roman provincials of the High Empire, penetrating deep into a Christianising world of late antiquity.

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## CICERO'S LETTERS IN CONTEXT

SPÄTH (T.) (ed.) *Gesellschaft im Brief. Ciceros Korrespondenz und die Sozialgeschichte*. (Collegium Beatus Rhenanus 9.) Pp. 430, ill. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2021. Paper, €72. ISBN: 978-3-515-13095-0.  
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Pity poor Cicero. Whenever he put stylus to tablet, writing one of his hundreds of letters, he could not simply inform his correspondent of what was going on in his life, let alone express his thoughts and feelings. Instead, he had to develop a careful strategy for how best to represent himself in his epistle, endeavouring to put on an optimal performance of Cicero the superior politician, eminent man of letters, and circumspect friend and *paterfamilias*.

This, at least, is the impression one gets from the volume under discussion, the result of a joint research project of the universities of Basel, Bern, Freiburg, Strasbourg and Mulhouse that ran from 2009 to 2013. The declared goal – so we are told by Späth, the volume editor, in the introduction – was to develop a new approach to Roman social history, using as the body of evidence the correspondence of Cicero. Späth acknowledges the narrowness of this focus: the letters are a treasure trove of information, but mostly concern a very small stratum of Roman society. For 'social history' read 'mores of the aristocracy'.

As it happens, the volume's methodology, laid out by Späth, moves away from viewing Roman society as a stable stratified system of social classes or fixed practices and ideologies. Nor are the contributors interested in Cicero as a person, approaching him instead as a 'chronotope'. Accordingly, the letters are not studied as sources that provide information about Roman society or about Cicero, but instead as spaces where society is constantly negotiated and constructed and where the author's persona is being represented and performed in ever-changing ways.

For an edited volume the book is remarkably coherent, with almost every contributor on board with the methodological programme. Apart from a historiographical piece (J. von Ungern-Sternberg) on three classic treatments of Roman social history (by Gaston Boissier, Matthias Gelzer and Eugen Täubler), the chapters (written in German or French) treat such pivotal times in Cicero's life as his exile (L. Diegel), his governorship in Cilicia (M. Coudry) and the months after the Ides of March (Späth); focus on spaces such as *horti* (I. Hilbold) and the *domus* (A.-C. Harders) and groups of people such as slaves and freedmen (M. Spurny, S. Berger Battegay); and examine epistolary topics and techniques such as the citation of *exempla* (M. Humm), invective (A. Thurn), the discussion of books and writing (F. Reich), and the response to death (S. Froehlich).

Despite the editor's expressed hope of having identified new topics, questions and approaches, the pay-off of the volume's methodology is decidedly underwhelming. By moving solely on the intratextual level of the letters' verbal construction and representation,

we learn little about the actual workings of Roman mid-first-century upper-class society, apart from what we already knew, namely that it was densely networked and highly competitive. As for Cicero's strategies of self-representation, these predictably turn out to be highly adaptable to both circumstances and addressees. We are further told that Cicero was generally aiming at presenting himself in the most positive light imaginable, whether as politician, patron, intellectual or head of the household – an insight that will surprise no one.

Many of the contributors are at pains to reject the idea that the letters might be used as evidence for Cicero's actual feelings. Thus, for example, Berger Bategay, apropos of Cicero's reflections on his emotions concerning the death of his slave Sositheus, reminds us sternly that we cannot know to what extent these are comparable to 'einer auf der Grundlage moderner Subjektivität gestalteten Introspektion' (p. 295). While this is strictly speaking correct, and scholarship has long moved away from viewing the letters (or any verbal utterance) as one-to-one expressions of interior states, there is something faintly ludicrous about the insistence that Cicero must always have been playing a strategic role – even when lashing out during his exile or wallowing in grief after Tullia's death.

Take, for example, Spurny's chapter on Cicero's letters to Tiro during the latter's bouts of illness. Spurny is guided by scepticism throughout, but it is telling that she ultimately considers more inherently plausible the thesis that Tiro was suffering from malaria than the assumption that Cicero really felt the concern for his slave that the letters express. Spurny makes a good case for the former: in addition to her classical training, she is a practising physician and provides extremely valuable information about the symptoms of malaria and its geographical spread in antiquity. Far less convincing, however, is her contention that Tiro's illness simply afforded Cicero an opportunity for a 'perfekte Repräsentation' (p. 274) and for the 'Performanz eines römischen *paterfamilias* bzw. *patronus*' (p. 275). By showing his concern for Tiro, thus Spurny, Cicero was able to rake in cultural capital and prove himself a properly caring slaveholder.

Apart from the question of whether Cicero, and the Romans in general, were never guided by any other motivations than how to shore up their social standing, the concept of a 'performance' implies an audience. Spurny suggests that, when penning his get-well notes to Tiro, Cicero was already thinking ahead to the publication of his letters, but given the private nature of the correspondence and the low status of the recipient, this seems unlikely. (In fact, it has been plausibly suggested that the only reason we have the letters to Tiro is because he was the editor of the collection *Ad familiares*, setting himself a monument in Book 16.) While it has been established that many Ciceronian letters were destined for readers beyond the primary addressee and were accordingly passed around, many of the volume's contributors are far too ready to assume that all the letters were publicly available. In reality, a large number of Cicero's performances must have played to an audience of one, whether Atticus or Tiro.

There is one chapter in the volume that breaks free from the dreary view of Cicero's correspondence as a self-contained space of relentless role-playing and uses it – rather daringly, one feels – as evidence for what was really going on in Roman upper-class society. J.B. Meister argues attractively against the *communis opinio* that, despite Cicero's swift rise through the *cursus honorum*, the members of the old nobility looked down their noses at the *novus homo*, who, for all his political success, simply lacked the social and cultural *savoir faire* that distinguished a true aristocrat. According to Meister, such a scenario is anachronistic, using modern ideas of the 'Aufsteiger' or parvenu who will never gain acceptance to the traditional elite. As Cicero's letters and other sources show, there was in the late Republic no specific aristocratic habitus that would have served as a marker of social differentiation; Cicero and the members of the old nobility shared the same ideals of

*urbanitas*; and what indicated social success was solely the achievement of *honores*. Meister's well-written piece is provocative, and his argument may well be disproved (or, most likely, we will indeed never be able to map the myriad social distinctions at work in Roman or any other society) – but as a contribution to Roman social history, it is, in the context of this volume, a most welcome breath of fresh air.

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## CICERO'S PHILOSOPHY

ATKINS (J.W.), BÉNATOUÏL (T.) (edd.) *The Cambridge Companion to Cicero's Philosophy*. Pp. xviii + 335. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. Paper, £24.99, US\$34.99 (Cased, £74.99, US\$99.99). ISBN: 978-1-108-40403-7 (978-1-108-41666-5 hbk). doi:10.1017/S0009840X2200275X

Thanks to the many different senses attributed to the word 'philosophy', which is no longer understood as pure theoretical speculation, Cicero's philosophy has been revalued and rehabilitated in recent decades after being underrated, if not forgotten, in the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries. This important trend of recent scholarship is faithfully reflected and effectively set out in this Companion, which guides Cicero's works into the twenty-first century, offering the possibility of reading or re-reading them in the light of the latest research. The eighteen contributions from an interdisciplinary team of scholars share the conviction that Cicero is not a mere eclectic populariser, but a thinker who not only transmits doctrines of the Hellenistic philosophical schools that would otherwise have been lost, but discusses them with great expertise; he verifies and reworks them as part of his programme of educating the Roman ruling class; his sceptical method enables himself and his readers to choose, with informed judgement, *quid sit in quaque re maxime probabile* (*Tusc.* 4.7). The variety of approaches does not prejudice the volume's unity, which is sharply brought out in Bénatouïl's introduction and the mutual references among the authors.

The first four chapters deal with the social contexts of Cicero's philosophical oeuvre. Since Cicero is not interested in theoretical elaboration, but rather exploits philosophy in the late Roman Republic to change its culture and politics (C. Moatti), the stages of his project are traced not only in the philosophical works but also in the letters (which document the experimental dimension of his thought: S. Aubert-Baillet) and the speeches (rooted in philosophical culture, though they do not display it out of consideration for his audience: C. Steel). The core of this intellectual revolution is the pedagogic aim that C. Brittain and P. Osorio identify in the 'Academic dialogues' of 45–44 BCE, but also trace *in nuce* in the 'Platonic dialogues' of the 50s: Cicero does not write to communicate his position, but systematically implements the methods of the sceptical Academy (*disputatio in utramque partem* and suspension of assent) in order to stimulate the reader's judgement; therefore, the two scholars conclude persuasively, the appropriate terrain for judging the dialogues 'is Academic pedagogy, rather than skeptical epistemology' (p. 28).