CICERO

Commentary and Readings in Latin and English by

Moses Hadas

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By Moses Hadas

For no national group is it so easy to choose a single representative author as it is for Rome. Not only in the volume and scope of his work but in its form and spirit, in its strength and weakness, Cicero is the perfect embodiment of Latin literature. In that literature concern for the practical and devotion to the service of Rome are central motives, to preoccupation with beauty for its own sake and to hard speculative thinking, both characteristic of the Greek literature from which the Latin was an offspring, the Romans were indifferent.

If Rome's mission was to secure order and spread civilization, as Vergil's famous To Romaean senators lines at the end of the sixth Annals declare, Cicero is our best example of that mission in operation. The heart of his career was a traditional order and administration, and he is the single greatest conservative and transmitter of Roman cultural values to European posterity. His was the language which gave shape to civilized discourse in the countries of Europe, and his popularizations transmitted so much of the philosophic thought of the ancients as the Middle Ages were prepared to receive. For the centuries during which Europe was a cultural unit, its unifying force, so far as an individual would provide one, was Cicero.

The personality of Cicero as well as the facts of his public career are easy to read from the extensive body of private correspondence which he has left behind, no other figure of antiquity, and few of modern times, stands so clearly revealed. If we find in his good deal of a trimmer and inordinately vain, we might well ask how many comparable figures in history would better pass scrutiny under such merciless light. If his views of politics and society were limited, we must recognize that it was inevitable for a man of his background to identify the interests of the state and of civilization with those views. For his fathering and his compromises there is one sufficient answer: he suffered death for his views. He is the shining example of the lawyer and politician in a republic making of his profession an art and of his politics statesmanship. And he transcended the ordinary measure of lawyer and politician by his concern for the cultural values of the race, he was not merely a patron of learning but set his own hand to propagating the wisdom of the past and making it accessible to all.

In shaping the modes of European thought and expression the contributions of Cicero are beyond calculation. Assimilation into our own culture, it is true, has already completed the direct usefulness of much of his work. Treatises on rhetoric are caviar to the general, and only amateurs of antiquity or of forensic oratory are likely to be much concerned with the bulk of Cicero's orations. But in his philosophical essays Cicero may still be read not merely as a record of antiquity but as a guide to thought and conduct. No one could maintain that Cicero is a giant in speculative philosophy or that he created systems of thought. He is the first to admit that his essays are mere adaptations from the Greek: "They are mere drafts, produced with little labor; I contribute only the worse, of which I have a great abundance" (To Atticus 12.52).

And the Greeks from whom he borrowed were not themselves "first philosophers," for the Sophists and Epicureans, Academics—who were concerned not with explaining the universe so much as with helping men adjust themselves to it. It is in his selection and presentation that Cicero performs his great service. Not only did he transform the knotty treatises of the Greeks into lucid and delightful and witty essays, but by his selection and distribution of emphasis he informed the whole of his work with his own characteristic outlook.

It is the personal element in Cicero's writings that gives them peculiar relevance to ourselves. We too respect culture and ideals, are impatient of subtleties, suspicious of certainties, think of utilities and ends. Like Cicero we are confronted by the imperious problem of civilized existence in a great commonwealth founded upon justice and common aspirations and threatened by revolution. Cicero's thought is directed toward providing distinctions which should make it possible for thoughtful men to adjust to the greater commonwealth, yield its aspirations devoted loyally, and yet maintain personal integrity. If he were a closet philosopher his work would not have this relevance; and if political vicissitudes had not interrupted his public career he would not have written philosophy at all. He wrote the essays only in periods of enforced retirement from public life and as an inadequate surrogate, and he himself says, for the more important contributions to the Roman state which his retirement prevented him from making. The writing of philosophy was the second best service he could perform for Roman patriotism. The Romans, he explains at the beginning of the Tusculan and elsewhere, had no philosophic literature, though they were fully the peers of the Greeks in intellectual capacity and their superiors in morality, because they had been preoccupied for more important matters. But it would be becoming for Rome to possess the ornament of a philosophic literature also, and since no other avenue of service was open and his achievements in oratory suggested his fitness for the task, he would now undertake to supply the want. But the essays are patriotic in sense other than supplying a becoming ornament. For one thing, the Roman constitutions are justified, as in the Republic; for another, the Epicus, who were become associated with political subervience, are constantly refuted. But most of all, the essays make it possible for a man of thoughtful temper to be at the same time a good Roman.

Considering the brief periods of retirement which Cicero devoted to his essays—the bulk were written between the death of Tullia in 45 and his return to political activity in 44—his output is astonishing.

The category in which Cicero shows his greatest technical competence, deals with rhetoric. In our world rhetoric has fallen upon hard times. We seldom use the word except in a disparaging sense, and usually with the prefix 'huck,' to denote huckstering in art and oratory. Cicero's essays are written with the same thought, the same keenness, the same care, as the speeches of a statesman. What is so much the more astonishing is that Cicero, who was not himself a statesman, should have written such oratory, and that the oration as a form has not been obliterated by the new age.
expert knowledge and keen perception as fully as the Roman revolution is illuminated by the private correspondence of Cicero. He was a diligent correspondent; he might write three letters to Atticus in a single day, and did not like to have a day go by without a letter. There being no regular postal service, a letter might be written elaborately at leisure to await the chance of a messenger, or one might be written hastily while a messenger waited at the door-step. Some of the longer and politically significant letters may have been carefully revised; the great bulk are untouched. So frank are the letters, indeed, that scholars hostile to Cicero have been able to draw up damming bills of indictment on the basis of the information they supply, and a French scholar of standing has recently argued at length that the collections were made by an enemy of Cicero for the specific purpose of discrediting him.

But only a Don Quixote or an insulated monk could reproach Cicero for his political maneuvering in an age when ambition was not only condoned but approved. In appraising Cicero’s inordinate self-conceit we must remember that he was a ‘new man’ who had made headway against the entrenched exclusiveness of the aristocracy. Promotion was meat and drink to him. A constant of his inamissible appetite for applause, which a modern might attribute to an inferiority complex, was a dash of hero worship for those who had indeed arrived and of awe for aristocracy of blood even when the individual aristocrat was contemptible. The weak mortal who wrote the letters does sometimes fall short of the professions of the ethical preacher; but Cicero is surely not alone in this inconsistency, and in his day the fault was venial. For his vacillation and opportunism the blame is partly on the exigencies of political life and its accepted standards, but partly also, surely, on Cicero’s Academic criteria in philosophy and his training as a lawyer. He was always able to see the merit in either side of a question, and his advocate’s eloquence naturally tended to heap up arguments of probability on the side which happened to be expedient. But even to readers unconcerned with the personality of Cicero and with the fascinating web of contemporary politics the wide and humane range of interests in these letters, in literature, in art, and most of all, in people, make them one of the more attractive legacies from antiquity.

We now turn to specimens of Cicero’s work in various kinds and first to oratory. The most familiar of Cicero’s speeches, because of their traditional place in the school curriculum, are those against the conspirator Catiline, delivered in 63 BC, the year of Cicero’s consulship. First we shall have brief selections from the first Catilinarian in Latin, and then an English translation.


fortes, satis facerei rei publicae videmus, si istius fororos ac tela vitiumus.

How much further, Catiline, will you carry your abuse of our seniority? will your reckless temper baffle our restraint? What bounds will you set to this display of your uncontrolled audacity? Have you not been impressed by the safety guards upon the Palatine, by the watching of the city? Will you not repeated by the alarm of the people, by the rallying of all loyal citizens, by the convening of the senate in this safely-guarded spot, by the looks and the expression on the faces of those assembled here? Do you not perceive that your designs are exposed? Do you not see that your conspiracy is now fully known and detected by all who are here assembled? What you did last night and the night before, where you were then and where you summoned, and what plans you laid, do you suppose that there is one of us here who does not know? All that you haveiend for days are these! The senate is well aware of the facts; the consul can perceive them all: but the criminal still lives. Lives? Yes, lives, and even comes down to the senate, and even down to you. And, above all, you insults out of the way of his reckless words and bloody deeds. No, Catiline, long ere now you should yourself have been led by the consul’s orders to execution; and on your own head should have been brought down the destruction which you are now devising for us.

I bid you Catiline pursue the course you have begun. Quit Rome at last and soon; the city gates are open: depart at once: your camp under Manlius’ command has too long been awaiting with anxiety the arrival of its general. Take with you all your associates, or, at least, take as many as you can, free the city from the infection of your presence. You will relieve me from serious apprehension by putting the city sail between yourself and me, you cannot possibly remain in our society any longer. I will not hear, I will not endure, I will not allow it. Our hearty thanks must be rendered to the immortal gods especially to Jupiter the Stabiliator, from the most ancient times the special protector of this city, for that we have so often eluded this brutal man, this base, and vindictive enemy of our country but the supreme interests of the state must not be too frequently imperilled in the person of a single man.

What object indeed is there in this city, Catiline, in which you can feel any pleasure? There is not a man in Rome, outside your band of desperate conspirators, who does not fear you, not a man who does not hate you. Is there any form of personal immorality which has not stained your family life? Is there any scandal to be incurred by private conduct which has not attached itself to your reputation? Is there any evil passion which has not glared from your eyes, any evil deed which has not stained your hands, any outrage of vice that has not left its mark upon your soul? Can the light of the sun, Catiline, can the breath of heaven be pleasant to you, when you know that every member of this house knows well that on the 31st of December in the consulship of Latinus and Tullus you had posted yourself in the Comitium with a dagger in your hand? When they know that you had got together a band to murder the consul and the leading men in Rome? When they know that your criminal and reckless design was frustrated, not by any reflection or apprehension on your part, but only by the good fortune of Rome?

But at the present moment what sort of life is yours? I will address you in terms so mild that I shall be thought to feel towards you, not the indignation which I ought to feel, but a pity which you ought not to expect. A few moments ago you came into the senate-house. Did a single person in this crowded assembly, did a single one of your friends and relations here give you any welcome? If you know that such a thing as this has never happened to any one within human memory, are you waiting for positive insults, when you are already extinguished by that impressive silence? What do you infer from the fact that your approach emptied all the benches near where you are sitting, and that all the ex-consuls, when you have so often destined for massacre, as soon as you sat down left the seats in that part of the house absolutely empty and bare? In what spirit do you intend to accept these intimations? Why, I protest, if my own slaves feared me in the way in which all your fellow-citizens fear you, I should feel it high time to flee from my own house. Do you not implore to flee from the city? And if I saw myself exposed unjustly to suspicions so grave, and giving such deep offence to my fellow-citizens, I should prefer to be deprived of the sight of those fellow-citizens to thus remaining the object of their hostile glances. And do you, when your guilty conscience forces you to recognize the universal indignation against you as justly felt and long deserved, do you hesitate to avoid the night and presence of those whose thoughts and feelings you so bitterly offend? If your own parents were afraid of you and hated you, and you could not console them by your flight, you would probably with some place far from their sight. At the present moment your country, which is the common mother of us all, hates you and fears you and has long been convinced that your one thought is to work some murderous treason against her. Will you not then quail before her authority, will you not submit to her decision, will you not fear her power to punish?

Yet why do I speak? Is it possible that anything can influence you? Is it possible that a man like you will ever reform? That you will ever turn your thoughts to flight? That you will ever contemplate exile? Would in fact that heaven might inspire you with such a thought? Though I see clearly, if you are alarmed at my words and wake up your mind to go into exile, what a storm of unpopularity it will bring down upon your head, if not at the present moment while the memory of your crimes is still fresh, at any rate in future ages: but it is well while, if only the disastrous consequences are confined to my private fortunes, and do not involve results which are dangerous to the state.

Too long already, my lords, have we been environed by the perils of this treasonable conspiracy, but it has astonished that all these crimes, this ancient recklessness and audacity has not been made an end and burst in full force upon the year of my consulship. If then out of the whole gang this single villain only is removed, perhaps we shall think ourselves for a brief period freed from care and alarm, but the real danger will only have been driven under the surface, and will continue to infect the veins and vital organs of the state. As men stricken with a dangerous disease, when hot and toasting with fever, often seems at first to be relieved by a draught of cold water, but afterwards are much more gravely and severely af-
flicted; so this disease, which has seized the state may be temporarily relieved by the punishment of Catiline, but will return with greater severity if his associates are allowed to survive. Let the disposal then be made to cause them to separate themselves from the loyal, let them hurl together in one place, let there be a wall, as I have often said, to sunder them from us. Let them cease to play plots to assassinate the consul in his own house, let them cease to crowd menacingly round the City Praetor's judgment-seat, let them cease to beseech the senate-house with drawn swords and prepar
their grenades and matches for firing the city: in short, let the political principles of every man be visibly written upon his forehead. I promise you this, my lords, that in me and my colleague there shall be found such energy, in you yourselves such resolution, in the Roman knights such courage, in all loyal men such unanimity, as at Catiline's departure from Rome you shall see everything that is evil exposed and brought to light, sternly repressed and adequately punished.

With these ominous words of warning, Catiline, to the true preservation of the state, to the mischief and misfortunes of yourself and to the destruction of those attached to you by every sort of crime and treason, get you gone to your unholy and abominable campaign. Then shall thou, great Jupiter, who hast been established with the same rites as this city, whom we mightly the Stalbisher of this city and empire, keep this man and his associates far from thy flames and from the other temples, far from the buildings and the walls of the city, far from the lives and fortunes of the citizens; and these men who hate the loyal, who make war on their country and pillage Italy like brigands, who are linked together by bonds of guilt and by complicity in abominable crimes, thou shalt greatly afflict in life and in death with punishments that shall never cease.

One of the most delightful of Cicero's essays is that on Old Age. After pleasant exchanges between the several interlocutors Cato says:

When I reflect on the subject of old age, I find that the reasons why old age is regarded as unhappy are four: one, it withdraws us from active employment; another, it impairs physical vigor; the third, it deprives us of nearly all sensual pleasures; and fourth, it is the verge of death. Let us see, if you please, how much force and justice there is in these several reasons.

Then he proceeds to discuss and refute these objections one by one. Here is the refutation of the last:

There remains the fourth reason, which more than the others seems to make my time of life anxious and perturbed—the approach of death, which certainly cannot be far removed from old age.

Wretched old man, not to have learned in a long life that death is to be despised! Death is wholly negligible if it extinguishes life altogether, and even desirable, if it conducts the soul where it will be immortal; surely no third possibility is imaginable. Why then should I fear death if I shall be not unhappy or else be happy? Even so, is anyone so foolish, however young he be, as to be sure he will live till evening? Youth has many more chances of death than age. The young are more liable to disease, their sickness is more serious, their cure more difficult. Few reach old age; were it not so life would be better and wiser. Intelligence and reason and prudence reside in the old, and let us have no fear there could be no community at all. But to return to the imminence of death—can it be urged as a charge against age when you see that it is shared by youth? The death of my own excellent son, and of your brothers, Scipio, men born to the highest expectations, taught me that death is common to every age. Yet a young man hopes to live long and an old man can entertain no such hope. The hope itself is foolish, what can be more stupid than to take things uncertain for certain, false for true? "An old man has nothing even to hope." There he is in better case than the young, for what the one has never at all, the other wishes to live long, the other has lived long.

And can we, in heaven's name, call anything human relieved? Grant the very latest term of life; suppose we reach the age of the king of Tartessus—it is recorded that the king of Cadiz ruled eighty years and lived a hundred and twenty—still nothing that has an end is long. When the end comes what has passed has flown away, and all that is left is what you have achieved by virtue and good deeds. Hours, days, months, years, glide by; the past never returns, and what is to come we cannot know. With whatever span is allotted us we should content. There is no need for an actor to perform the whole play to give his audience satisfaction, enough to play his own role well. Nor need the wise man continue to the last curtain. A short span is long enough to live well and honorably; if you live on you have no safe reason to mourn your advancing years than have farmers, when the sweetness of spring is past, to lament the coming of fall and winter, spring signifies youth, and points to the fruits to come, the other seasons are appropriate for harvesting and storing the crop. The harvest of old age, as I have often said, is in the memory and abundance of blessings previously acquired. Moreover, all that falls out according to nature must be reckoned good, and what accords better with nature than for old men to die? Nature struggles and rebels when the young die. When they die it is as if a violent fire is extinguished by a torrent, not the old die like a spent fire quenched of its own accord and without external effort. Uprooted apples must be wrenched from the tree, but all from their own accord when ripe and mellow; so from the young, it is force that takes life, from the old, ripeness. So agreeable is this ripeness to me that as I approach death nearer I feel like a voyager at last in sight of land and on the point of reaching harbor after a long journey.

Old age has no fixed term, and one may fitly live in it so long as he can observe and discharge the duties of his station, and yet despise death. Fearless of death, old age may transcend youth in courage and fortitude. Such is the meaning of Solon's answer to the tyrant Pisistratus, who asked the grounds of his bold resistance: "Old age" was Solon's reply. That end of life is best when, with mind and faculties unimpaired, Nature herself takes apart what she has put together. The builder of a ship or house is best able to tear it down, and so Nature who compacted man can best effect his dissolution. What is newly compacted is hard to tear apart, old fabrics come apart easily. It follows that old men should neither be avid of their brief remaining span nor desert it without cause. Pythagoras forbids us to desert our post and charge in life without the order of our commander, God.

I do not see why I should hesitate to tell you my own feelings about death, for I seem to have a clearer view of it than the nearer I approach it. I believe, dear friends, that your excellent fathers and my very good friends are living, and that life too which alone deserves the name of life. As long as we are shut up in this bodily prison we are performing a heavy task laid upon us by necessity, for the soul, celestial by birth, is forced down from its exalted abode and plunged, as it were, to earth, in a place unaccidental to its divine nature and its eternity. I believe that the immortal gods implanted souls in human bodies to provide overseers for the earth who would contemplate the heavenly order and have share in the moderation and constancy of their lives. To this belief I have been impelled not by reason and arguments alone, but by the distinguished authority of the greatest philosophers. I learned that Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans, virtually our countrymen and sometimes called Italian philosophers, never doubted that our souls were emanations of the universal divine intelligence. I was impressed also by the discourse on the immortality of the soul delivered on the last day of his life by Socrates, who the oracle of Apollo had pronounced the wisest of men. I need say no more. This is my conviction, this my belief. Such is the rapid movement of our mind, such their memory of the past and foresight of the future, so many are the arts, so profound the sciences, so numerous the inventions, that the nature which embraces these cannot be mortal; and since the soul is always active and has no source of motion because it is self-moving, it can have no end of motion, for it will never cease itself; and since the nature of the soul is unconfined and has no mixture heterogeneous and unlike itself, it is indivisible and hence cannot perish. Furthermore, it is a strong proof of our knowledge just to see that child born the first time and to recall remembering them. This, in substance, is Plato's argument.

Let me now, if you will, give my own sentiments. No one will ever convince me, Scipio, that your father Paulus, or your two grandfathers Paulus and Afric anus, or the latter's father and uncle, or other illustrious men whom I need not name, would have undertaken such noble enterprises which were to belong to the memory of posterity without a clear perception that posterity belonged to them. Or do you suppose, to take an old man's privilege of boasting, that I would have undertaken such vast labors, day and night, at home and abroad, if I were going to limit my glory by the bounds of my life? Would it not have been better to pass a quiet and leisurely life, far from toil and strife? But my soul somehow always strained to look forward to posterity, as if it would really live only when it departed from life. Were it not that souls are immortal, men's souls would not strive for enduring fame in proportion to their transcending merit. The fact that the wisest men die with perfect calmness and the foolish with great perturbation proves that souls are aware of posterity. We all keep a part of our souls in the place of the more distant objects and perceive that they are going to a better state, while those of fuller vision cannot see beyond death.

0 glorious day when I shall go to join that divine company and consulate of men and immortals! I shall join not only the men I have mentioned but also my son Cato, than whom no better man was ever born nor one who surpassed him in filial duty. He was the most pious young man, and his excellent fathers and my very good friends are
cause my heart was untroubled, but because I found solace in the thought that the parting and separation between us would not long endure.

For these reasons, Scipio, old age sits lightly on me—that is what you and Laelius wondered at; and I find it not irksome but actually agreeable. If I err in believing men’s souls to be immortal, I err willingly, and as long as I live I do not wish an error which gives me such satisfaction to be wrested from me. If I shall have no sensation in death, as some palty philosophers think, I have no fear that the dead philosophers will ridicule my error. But if we are not going to be immortal, it is desirable for a man to be erased in proper season; nature imposes a limit upon life as upon all else. Old age is the closing act of life, as of a drama, and we ought to leave when the play grows wearisome, especially if we have had our fill.

Such are my views on old age. I pray you attain it, so that you may be able to verify what you have heard from me by experience.

Here is the final paragraph in Latin:

O praeclare diem, cum in illo divinum animorum concilium coetacens proficiscar cumque ex hac turba et conludio discedam! Proficiscar emem ad eos, quos volui carissimos, et immolatit facerent me informeris, ut sese iusserat. Quodam die hoc erat, quod animus se desiderasset. Nec dedit mihi nempe animam meam, sed dedit mihi se ipsum, quodam die hoc erat, et dedit mihi se ipsum, quodam die hoc erat.

Next we turn to the treatise on Moral Duties (De officiis) also written in the last year of Cicero's life. The first book deals with the honest, morally good, the second with the virtuous, and the third with conflicts between the honest and the virtuous. The following selections are from the first book.

THE DUTIES OF BLESSES.

Omnino, qui repulcibus preservari sunt, duo Platonis praecepta teneant: unum, ut utilitatem civium sic lucem datur, ut, quemque agant, ad eas referant, omnibus communes occurrunt, totum corpus repulcibus carent, ut, dum partes aliquae sunt, togas deservat. Etsi enim tute, sic praeconatus repulcibus ad utilitates eorum, qui comissi sunt, non ad eorum, quos consueverunt, gerenda est. Qui autem partem civilis, partes sequegent, tertiis necississimis in civitate indifferent, sed eorum, qui comissi sunt, etiam ut apud Athenienses magnae disordines, in nostra repulcibus non simulatores, sed eorum majores ut civitatis, quadrupletas leges et in republicae dignum principatum fugit atque odit, traducetque ut totum repulcibus, neque opes aut potentiam con- secatiuntur, totumque eam sic tuebuntur et omnibus consiliis.

De Off., I xcv, 85, 86.

To Atticus (At Rome)

Puteoli, 12 December, 4 B.C.

What a fearsome guest! and yet I do not regret his visit, for it was very delightful. On the second day of the winter holidays he put up at the villa of Octavius’ stepfather, Philippus. The company so packed the establishment that there was hardly a place left for Caesar to dine in; two thousand men were there. You may be sure I was disturbed as to the manner; but Marcellus came to my relief; he posted guards, made camp in the fields, and protected my villa.

Caesar stayed with Philippus until noon of the next day, nobody was admitted to his presence; no doubt, he was going over his accounts with Balbus. Then (coming to Cicero’s villa) he took a walk on the seashore, at one o’clock a bath. Then word was brought concerning Maecenas; he did not move a muscle of his face. He next took a rub in oil, after which he dined. Since he was undergoing a course of entheces, he ate and drank without fear and with pleasure. The dinner was well got up, and not only that but it was well cooked and well seasoned; the conversation was delightful; and, to take it all, everything went off agreeably.

Asides, in three rooms Caesar’s suite was entertained very bountifully. The ordinary attendants
and the slaves had all they wanted; the more fashionable guests were served right elegantly. In fact, I showed off as a good provider.

As my guest, he is not one to whom one would say: "Pray, my good fellow, on your way back stop off again with me." Once is enough. The talk avoided politics but fell much on literary topics. In short, he was in a charming and agreeable mood. He was to spend one day at Puteoli and another at Baiae. There you have an account of his visit, or shall I say his bilingue, which, though it brought me some trouble, as I have said, occasioned me little annoyance.

O hospitium mihi tam gravis metametem ad monsum periscinde. Sed cum secundis Naturalium ad Philippum vespertinis, villa, festa inceptis, libros recens. Sane sum comatus quid futurus esset postridie, ac nisi Barba Cassius subvenisset: custodes dedit. Castra in agris, villa defensae est. Ilium tertium 

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You will have noticed that this letter contains many Greek words and expressions. In informal communication with his peers, especially with a philhellene like Atticus, a Roman gentleman would use Greek words and expressions as a cultured Briton or German gentleman might use French expressions.

Cicero had no part in the assassination of Caesar on the Ides of March 44 B.C., though he was pleased when he received the news. At once he plunged into political activity in an effort to restore the republic, and this meant hostility to Antony, who was setting himself up as Caesar's successor. His very last speeches were a series against Antony called the Philippics, filled with invective.

After such bitterness there could be no reconciliation. When the triumvirs—Antony, Octavian, and Lepidus—drew up their proscription lists, Antony demanded Cicero's head. He was hunted down and killed on December 7, 43 B.C., "an eloquent man," as Octavian said in later years, "and one who loved his country well."

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