

Rumors True and False in Cicero's *Letters*
Doug C. Clapp (Samford University)

The letters of Cicero indicate that ‘*rumor*’ existed for Cicero as a source of information with no particular prejudice toward its validity as a statement of truth. Rumors could be true or false, and the fact that Cicero uses the term ‘*rumor*’ does not indicate a higher probability of falsehood. Cicero appends the adjective ‘*falsus*’ when he chooses to indicate that the information is clearly inaccurate.

This conclusion is evident in Cicero’s despair as he wonders in the midst of the civil war when Caesar will return from Alexandria (*ad Att.* 11.25). Cicero characterizes as ‘*non firmus*’ a ‘*rumor*’ originating in a letter from Servius Sulpicius Rufus which suggested that Caesar had departed. By describing a rumor as uncertain, Cicero opens the possibility of a rumor that conveys verifiable information. He adds that later sources supported the rumor’s proposition: *nuntii confirmarunt*. Cicero concludes, however, with despondent agnosticism: *Quod verum an falsum sit, quoniam mea nihil interest, utrum malim <ne>scio*. The validity of the rumor is a flip of a coin. The label ‘*rumor*’ describes how the information was transmitted but not how trustworthy that information might be. The same perspective informs Cicero’s decision in November 44 BC to return to Rome even as he considers the whereabouts of Antony (*ad Att.* 16.12): *etsi varii rumores multique quos cuperem veros, nihil tamen certi*. Cicero hopes that several of the rumors being bandied about do, in fact, accurately represent current circumstances. These favored rumors might well be true, but, because they are rumors, their status remains uncertain.

Rumors that are certainly untrue receive the unambiguous designation ‘*falsus*.’ Not surprisingly, Cicero makes clear that attacks on his character are nothing more than such untrue rumors spread by his political opponents: *quin non nulla de me falsis rumoribus a meis obtrectatoribus me indigna ad te delata sint* (*ad Fam.* 10.34a; see also *ad Fam.* 11.28). In fact, the phrase ‘*falsus rumor*’ only occurs in these two passages in which Cicero rejects the lies spread by his enemies.

Cicero’s nemesis Antony supplies an intriguing comparison in his letter to Cicero preserved as *ad Att.* 10.8A. Antony professes his concern for Cicero, a concern which is corroborated by his rejection as false of the rumor swirling about Cicero’s intentions: *non extimuissem rumorem qui de te prolatus est, cum praesertim falsum esse existimarem*. Antony categorically denies any truth to the rumor of Cicero’s imminent departure from Italy. Of course, Cicero soon left Italy to join Pompey. The false rumor was, as it turned out, true.