

Pleasurable Annals? Another Look at Cicero, *Leg.* 1.6

In the course of a discussion on early Roman historiography at the beginning of the *de Legibus* Cicero has the character 'Atticus' beg him to take up the writing of history:

quamobrem aggredere, quaesumus, et sume ad hanc rem tempus, quae est a nostris hominibus adhuc aut ignorata aut relicta. Nam post annales pontificum maximorum, quibus nihil potest est iucundius, si aut ad Fabium aut ad eum qui tibi semper in ore est, Catonem, aut ad Pisonem aut ad Fannium aut ad Vennonium uenias, quamquam ex his alius alio plus habet uirium, tamen quid tam exile quam isti omnes?

Therefore take up this task, we beg of you, and find the time for a duty which has hitherto been either overlooked or neglected by our countrymen. For after the annals of the chief pontiffs, than which nothing can be more pleasurable, when we come to Fabius or to Cato (whose name is always on your lips), or to Piso, Fannius, or Vennonius, although one of these may display more vigour than another, yet what could be more lifeless than the whole group?

Nearly all scholars ignore the manuscript reading *iucundius* and opt for emendation, usually Orsini's *ieiunius*, which is accepted by both Powell (2006) and Dyck (2004).

This paper argues that the manuscript reading should be retained.

It is not difficult to see why editors have felt that emendation was necessary: Atticus is exhorting Cicero to take on the task of writing history, because it demands literary skill, style and polish, just the things that the Greeks, but not the Romans, have displayed in abundance. Since the second part of the sentence expresses a critical stance towards the early Roman historiographical tradition *tout court*, it is held that Atticus cannot here praise the *pleasures* of the *Annales Maximi* in a sentence that is at pains to point out the shortcomings of the entire early tradition. The discussion here also has clear associations with *De Oratore* ii.51-4, where a similar belief about the stylistic deficiencies of the early Roman historians is expressed. The adoption of *ieiunius*, therefore, which can easily be justified on palaeographical grounds, seems to give the sentence both a kind of internal consistency and a congruence with what Cicero expresses on the topic elsewhere.

There are three reasons, however, to think the usual interpretation wrong. First, the speaker. As is well known, Atticus was himself a historian and his special interest lay in chronology and genealogy; indeed, his chronographical *Liber Annalis* was considered a marvel of its kind, concise but also accurate and full. Moreover, it was in no way ridiculous to consider chronographical works delightful or pleasurable (cf. Nepos *Att.* 18.4; Plat. *Hipp. Mai.* 285D), and it seems very likely that the author of a *Liber Annalis* could find – or plausibly claim to find – *nihil iucundius* than a perusal of the *Annales Maximi*.

Second, it is not necessary that 'Atticus' here be Cicero's mouthpiece or that he agree with remarks made by other characters in Cicero's other dialogues. Disagreement is part and parcel of dialogic form (Fox 2007): note, for example, the different ways in which between Cicero and Atticus in the *Brutus* discuss the death of Themistocles (*Brut.* 42-44).

Finally, the argument that *iucundius* cannot be right given the overall ‘negative’ tone of the sentence fails to see the full import of how Atticus separates, in a clause beginning with *post*, the *Annales* from the named individual historians. Why, if the entire early tradition was dreadful, do the *Annales Maximi* need to be separated in a clause of their own, and why make a *separate* point that they were jejune or lacking in pleasure? If, on the other hand, Atticus had something positive to say about the *Annales*, then putting them in a clause of their own has purpose because he wants to say something different about the actual historians whom he mentions.

In sum, then, ‘Atticus’ adopts an independent tone here, giving an opinion that could well have been held by the historical Atticus, though probably quite far from Cicero’s own opinion. As in the *Brutus* Atticus is here a foil for Cicero’s views, and Cicero is at pains to show the quite different beliefs about history and historiography in the Roman world.

Bibliography

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