

## Cicero *Gubernator*: The Ship of State in Cicero's Letters

Among the most common metaphors in Greek and Roman political literature is the so-called “ship of state” metaphor. This metaphor represents the state or body politic as a ship sailing through a stormy sea. Just as the ship must navigate through storms, so too must the state navigate through political strife, war, or despotism. The metaphor was used by a wide variety of Greek authors including Alcaeus, Theognis, Solon, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Plato, Aristophanes, and Demosthenes. Various Roman authors adopted this metaphor for their own purposes, as well, but nowhere is the metaphor so striking as in Cicero's works. Scholarship on this metaphor in Cicero's works has to date focused largely on his political speeches and philosophical treatises. For example, May (1980) discusses the use of the metaphor in Cicero's *Pro Sestio*, while Wood (1988) and Zarecki (2014) explore the metaphor from more philosophical and political perspectives. Fantham (1972) surveys Republican imagery and includes indispensable information on the ship of state metaphor. Cicero's letters offer many valuable instances of the metaphor, and since they span a significant length of Cicero's life, they provide a useful historical context for understanding the metaphor in Cicero's other works as well.

In his letters, the ship of state metaphor reveals Cicero's perceptions of changing political circumstances. I argue that Cicero employs this metaphor in three distinct ways. First, he most commonly uses it to express pessimism about politics or his own life. For example, there are three letters from around the time of Cicero's exile that use the metaphor to express his utter grief, and at the outbreak of civil war, he uses the metaphor to show his lack of faith in Pompey, his *gubernator*. Second, Cicero uses the metaphor at rare moments when he considers once again taking a leading role in politics, such as during the tumultuous times after Caesar's assassination. Third, Cicero uses the metaphor when he believes his friends need to assume control of the

“ship.” He thereby encourages friends when entering political positions and flatters them by expressing his confidence in their leadership. For example, he uses the metaphor to encourage and prepare his brother Quintus for the position of propraetor. Additionally, Cicero uses the metaphor to gain support from Curio in the election of Milo in 53 by encouraging Curio to become a helmsman in their efforts. This examination of the ship of state metaphor in Cicero’s letters will help us better understand the metaphor in his political and philosophical works, as the statesman and his friends navigate the turbulent and ever-changing political waters of the late Republic.

#### Bibliography

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