

## *Pro Balbo, Viro Forti*

Cicero's *Pro Balbo*, delivered in 56 BCE in defense of L. Cornelius Balbus, is rarely read by scholars, and when it is read, it is generally placed alongside the *Pro Archia* and used as evidence for grants of citizenship (e.g. in Brunt 1982 and Sherwin-White 1973). The more recent work of Barber (2004) provides a detailed rhetorical analysis of the speech. I take a different approach and examine an aspect of the speech's cultural background: the frequent references to the war hero of Roman declamation, a school exercise and art form which was becoming increasingly popular near the end of the Republic. I argue that Cicero is consciously using the trope of the war hero's prize (*viro forti praemium*), a fictional law in which a man who performed exceptionally well in a war defending the state would be rewarded with a grant of anything he wanted.

Although this law had a few parallels in the real world such as the triumph or the reward for the prosecution of serious crimes against the state (see Alexander 1985), the complete freedom to choose a reward would have made it exceptionally problematic in reality, and there is no evidence that any version of this law existed at Rome (Bonner 1949, 88-89). Balbus, the defendant in the (real) case defended by Crassus, Pompey, and Cicero in 56, was charged with having obtained Roman citizenship illegally. Balbus was from the allied city of Gades, and had been awarded citizenship by Pompey following his service in the Sertorian War in 79-72 BCE. According to Cicero, Balbus was a surrogate target for Pompey, and the case was likely being prosecuted to gauge how much power Pompey really had at Rome.

Over the course of the speech, Cicero regularly refers to the grant of citizenship as a *praemium* and calls Balbus a *vir fortis*, loaded terms which I argue both Cicero and his audience would have linked to declamation. This serves two purposes: the tacit connections Cicero makes

between the case at hand and the fictitious but popularly known law adds subconscious support for Balbus, and the general perception that declamation is frivolous adds to the ridiculousness of the accusation that Cicero plays up elsewhere in the speech (especially Cic. *Balb.* 5-8). It bolsters Balbus's reputation by associating him with the war hero, and Pompey's by providing a cultural precedent for granting these rewards.

All told, an examination of the declamatory theme of the *vir fortis* in Cicero's *Pro Balbo* provides a new lens with which to view the speech. Cicero appears to be having fun with the speech, playing on a trope used in declamation for its entertainment value rather than legal value. And while he uses military language to describe the career of Balbus, its use is more in line with the war hero of Roman declamation than the language of the Roman military. Finally, given that Cicero produced this speech not long after Luca and likely under duress from Caesar, the declamatory language was a way for Cicero to get some enjoyment out of defending an otherwise serious and relatively technical accusation that he may have been pressured into writing in the first place.

#### Bibliography

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