Cicero avant les lettres: descriptions of his life in the early fourteenth century (Giovanni Colonna's De viris illustribus and the anonymous Vita Trecensis)

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CHAPTER 15

Cicero *avant les lettres*: Descriptions of His Life in the Early Fourteenth Century (Giovanni Colonna's *De viris illustribus* and the Anonymous *Vita Trecensis*)

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Abstract

The chapter looks at two short biographies of Marcus Tullius Cicero that were written at the beginning of the fourteenth century: the anonymous *Epythoma de vita gestis scientie prestancia et libris ac fine viri clarissimi et illustris Marchi Tulli Ciceronis* and the vita of Cicero that is included in Giovanni Colonna's *De viris illustribus*. Both biographies still show medieval traces in that they contain unsystematic and erroneous information about Cicero's life; yet both also show a renewed interest in Cicero's political biography. It is argued that especially the anonymous *Epythoma* is innovative in its focus on Cicero's political career which is presented as an example of someone becoming part of Rome's nobility through wisdom.

Keywords

Cicero – Giovanni Colonna – Vita Trecensis of Cicero – vir illustris – biography

The discovery of Cicero's *Letters to Atticus* by Francesco Petrarca in 1345 is often considered a major turning point for a renewed acknowledgment of Cicero's political biography.[1] This is true in the sense that the letters gave Petrarch and future generations of readers access to a wealth of personal information about Cicero's life and about his involvement in the political crisis of the late Roman

1 For the idea of an immediately renewed interest in the person of Cicero after the discovery of the Atticus letters, cf. Zieliński T., *Cicero im Wandel der Jahrhunderte* (Leipzig: ^{4}1929) 170–171; and Gawlick G., *Cicero: Person und Lehre im Urteil der Jahrhunderte*, ed. L. Kreimendahl (Stuttgart – Bad Cannstadt: 2022) 20.

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Republic – information that could be used to reconstruct the biography of the man from Arpinum in a much more detailed way than in the preceding centuries. Yet it took almost 70 years until large-scale humanistic biographies of Cicero were written that made ample use of the new source of information: Leonardo Bruni's *Cicero novus* of 1413, followed shortly afterwards by Sicco Polenton's *Scriptores illustres linguae Latinae* (composed in the 1430s), in which no fewer than seven books are dedicated to Cicero (six of which to his biography). These two texts are the most conspicuous examples of the humanists' interest in Cicero not only as the major model for writing excellent Latin but also as an historical figure that stands for exemplary ethical leadership.[2] But both postdate not only the new circulation of the Atticus letters by several decades, but also the rediscovery of the second major Ciceronian epistolary collection, the *Ad familiares*, in 1392, that soon came into the possession of Coluccio Salutati. Salutati was an important mediator for the fifteenth-century biographies.[3] His interest in Cicero's exemplary biography is visible, for example, in an epigram written for a cycle of famous men depicted in the Aula Minor of the Palazzo Vecchio:[4]

> Inclitus eloquii latialis Tullius autor,
> ingenium cuius habuit par[5] Roma triumphis
> imperioque suo, Catilinam fregit. at ipsum
> Antonii gladius libertatemque peremit.

2 Cf. Hankins J., *Virtue Politics: Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge, MA – London: 2019); on Cicero as a source of this concept see esp. 45–48. On the *Cicero novus*, cf. Pade M., *The Reception of Plutarch's Lives in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Copenhagen: 2007) 154–165; and Jansen L.M., "Bruni, Cicero, and their Manifesto for Republicanism", in Pieper C. – Velden B. van der (eds.), *Reading Cicero's Final Years: Receptions of the Post-Caesarian Works up to the Sixteenth Century; with Two Epilogues* (Berlin – New York: 2020) 155–173 for a (in my view convincing) interpretation of the text along the lines set out by Hans Baron (Baron H., "The Memory of Cicero's Roman Civic Spirit in the Medieval Centuries and in the Florentine Renaissance", in id., *In Search of Florentine Civic Humanism: Essays on the Transition from Medieval to Modern Thought* [Berkeley: 1988] 94–133); *contra* Ianziti G., "A Life in Politics: Leonardo Bruni's *Cicero*", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 61 (2000) 39–58.

3 It seems that Salutati played a crucial role in divulgating both major epistolary corpora. His copies are extant for both, whereas Petrarch's copy of the Atticus letters is lost; cf. Reynolds L., *Texts and Transmission: A Survey of the Latin Classics* (Oxford: 1983) 136–139; and Marsh D., "Cicero in the Renaissance", in Steel C. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Cicero* (Cambridge: 2013) 306–317, at 307–308.

4 Quoted from Hankey T., "Salutati's Epigrams for the Palazzo Vecchio at Florence", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 22 (1959) 363–365, at 365. All translations throughout the chapter are my own.

5 The edition of Hankey prints 'per'; I corrected into 'par'.

> The famous authority of Latin eloquence, Tullius, whose talent Rome considered equal to its triumphs and empire, subdued Catiline, but Antony's sword killed him and killed freedom.

The last verse is especially striking, as it equates Cicero, the master of eloquence, with liberty (when the one dies, the other is extinct as well) and thus transforms him into a political symbol that is 'designed to underline Florentine commitment to republican freedom'.[6] The verses by Salutati thus nicely illustrate the growing interest, in particular, in Florentine humanism for Cicero as an icon of Roman Republicanism, which the propagandistic writings of the time closely connected to the constitution of Florence.

My chapter, however, is not dedicated to what happened after the discovery of the *Letters to Atticus*. Instead it asks how much interest in Cicero's political personality there was in the generation before Petrarch's find. I will focus on two sketches of Cicero's life that stem from the beginning of the fourteenth century: the anonymous so-called *Vita Trecensis* included in ms. Troyes, Médiathèque du Grand Troyes 552, and the biography of Cicero in Giovanni Colonna's *De viris illustribus*. I will consider how these two texts describe and evaluate Cicero's political engagement and his public persona. In order to do justice to them, it is good to recall that somehow during the Middle Ages, knowledge and interest in Cicero's political biography was lost.[7] The scattered information that was still available stemmed from encyclopaedic works of Late Antiquity such as Jerome's *Chronicle* and the collection of witty Ciceronian *dicta* in Macrobius' *Saturnalia*, enriched with some excerpts from Cicero's writings, some pieces of information transmitted in authors like Seneca, Lactantius, or Augustine, and some invented elements stemming from a pseudo-Ciceronian tradition. Only the Catilinarian affair was still relatively well known (via the intermediary Sallust). Yet also on this occasion, the politician was not placed in the foreground: most medieval writers depicted Cicero as a successful orator rather than as an active politician.[8] Vincent of Beauvais' *Speculum historiale*

6 Rubinstein N., "Classical Themes in the Decoration of the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute* 50 (1987) 29–43, at 31; Mabboux C., *Cicéron et la Commune: Le rhéteur comme modèle civique* (*Italie, XIII^e–XIV^e s.*) (Rome: 2022) 210, speaks of a 'martyr civique'.

7 Cf. Schmidt P.L., "Bemerkungen zur Position Ciceros im mittelalterlichen Geschichtsbild", *Ciceroniana* n.s. 11 (2000) 21–36; Cizek A., "*Ingenium et mores Ciceronis*: Zum Bild Ciceros im mittelalterlichen Schrifttum", *Ciceroniana* n.s. 13 (2009) 141–163; Herren M.W., "*Cicero redivivus apud scurras*: Some Early Medieval Treatments of the Great Orator", in Deusen N. van (ed.), *Cicero Refused to Die: Ciceronian Influence through the Centuries* (Leiden – Boston: 2013) 39–45.

8 Cf. Mabboux, *Cicéron et la Commune* 196.

or ps.-Walter Burley's *De vita et moribus philosophorum et poetarum* are good examples of this scattered and unsystematic approach to the fragments of Cicero's biography. In Vincent's huge work, a reader could obtain information about Cicero in three chapters. In 5.116 the consular fight against Catiline and his year in exile are briefly mentioned. In 6.1, Cicero is inserted into a chronological list of several Roman consuls from Brutus until Caesar; Vincent justifies his selection by adverting to the criterion of memorable events that happened under their respective consulates ('quorum temporibus aliqua memorabilia contigerunt'). He then explains his procedure by citing three names and three wars related to them: 'ut temporibus Scipionum bella Punica, tempore Marii Iugurthinum, tempore Ciceronis Catilinarium' (for example, the Punic Wars in the times of the Scipios, the war against Jugurtha in the time of Marius, and the Catilinarian war in the time of Cicero).[9] The longest piece of information about Cicero's life appears in 6.6, where he is said to have fought under Caesar's command in Gaul (a confusion with his brother Quintus, see below), lived as a philosopher in search of god, and refused to remarry after the divorce from Terentia, because a man cannot serve both wisdom and a woman; as a consequence, Terentia engaged with his enemy Sallust.[10] On the other hand, from the few sentences dedicated to Cicero's life in ps.-Walter Burley, one could learn that he was a very noble man who lived in the age of Julius Caesar, was a learned philosopher and did not believe that married life could be combined with love for wisdom. Put more generally, what interests both authors is not Cicero's biography as such; instead they offer the reader a selection of quotations ('flores') excerpted from several works by Cicero.[11] The biographical details only serve as a brief introduction for this anthology or (in the case of Vincent's chapters 5.116 and 6.1) as very general chronological overviews of major developments in Roman history.

It is this tradition in which the two texts I discuss in this chapter are rooted, but (as will become clear) to which they also introduced a considerable number of innovations. I start with Petrarch's older contemporary Giovanni Colonna and his collection *De viris illustribus*. I do so, even if his vita of Cicero was probably written after the anonymous biography in the Troyes manuscript, because I hope to show how Colonna, a renowned historian and friend of the 'father of humanism' Petrarch, is still rather medieval in many ways, as

9 I quote Vincent's text from: Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum quadruplex sive speculum maius*. Part 4: *Speculum historiale* (Graz: 1965 [photomechanical reprint of the ed. Douai: 1624]).

10 Cf. Mabboux, *Cicéron et la Commune* 201–202.

11 For Vincent's working method as a compiler, see Schuller S., "*Excerptoris morem gerere*: Zur Kompilation und Rezeption klassisch-lateinischer Dichter im *Speculum historiale* des Vinzenz von Beauvais", *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 29 (1995) 312–348, at 316–320.

his vita depends on the major sources available throughout the Middle Ages. For the collection as such, Jerome's *De viris illustribus* and Vincent of Beauvais's *Speculum historiale* were the most important sources,[12] but as W. Braxton Ross has shown, especially for the pagan men included in his serial biographies, he relies on a variety of additional sources. Colonna distinguishes himself from his predecessors Vincent of Beauvais or ps.-Walter Burley by increasing the number of personal details given.[13] A certain critical spirit towards the previous medieval tradition is visible already in the first words of Colonna's vita: 'Tullius, qui et Marcus Cycero' (Tullius, who is also called Marcus Cicero).[14] Colonna here corrects the erroneous distinction between two different persons that we find in several medieval authors: on the one hand the teacher of rhetoric Tullius and on the other the consul Marcus Cicero. It is possible that he relies on ps.- Burley for this, whose chapter on Cicero similarly begins with 'Tullius Marcus, cognomento et Cicero'.[15] But in spite of this clarification, the biography shows how deeply the traditional image of the 'magister Tullius' was still engraved in Colonna's mind. He recounts that Cicero, after his study trip to Greece, opened a school of rhetoric in Rome: 'Demum Romam rediens oratoriam docuit multosque ex Romanis nobilibus habuit auditores adeo ut Salustii Crispi scola relicta omnes ad audiendum eum convolarent. Et ex hoc Salustius Tulium plurimum carpit […]' (Then, returning to Rome, he taught rhetoric and had many Roman noblemen among his students. He was so successful that all left Sallustius Crispus' school and hurried to study with Cicero. Therefore Sallust slandered Tullius a lot […]).[16] The curious passage, for which I have not yet been able to find a close parallel,[17] is not only a remarkable proof that for Colonna, Cicero was still a *rhetor*. It also explains why Cicero and Sallust were allegedly so hostile to each other. Colonna offers an aition for the existence of

12 Cf. Ross W.B., "Giovanni Colonna, Historian at Avignon", *Speculum* 45 (1970) 533–563, at 545.

13 Cf. Ross, "Giovanni Colonna" 540.

14 I quote the text from Ross, "Giovanni Colonna" 559–563, at 559.32.

15 Cf. Knust H. (ed.), *Gualteri Burlaei Liber de vita et moribus philosophorum. Mit einer altspanischen Übersetzung der Eskurialbibliothek* (Tübingen: 1886) 318–328, at 318.

16 Ross, "Giovanni Colonna" 560.4–6.

17 The idea of Cicero as a teacher might have been suggested to medieval readers via an erroneous understanding of passages like Cicero, *De fato* 3, where Cicero's interlocutor Hirtius praises him for the fact that he has not abandoned his oratorical exercises ('quoniam oratorias exercitationes non tu quidem […] reliquisti'), or *Tusculanae disputationes* 1.7, where Cicero says that in his old age he has dared to offer classes ('scholae') like the Greeks – by which he means his philosophical treatises –, and defines them as his declamations of old age ('[…] ut iam etiam scholas Graecorum more habere auderemus. […] ut enim antea declamitabam causas, quod nemo me diutius fecit, sic haec mihi nunc senilis est declamatio'). I thank Ingo Gildenhard (Cambridge) for the suggestion.

the pair of invectives by Sallust and Cicero, which are now proven to be spurious (they stem most probably from an imperial declamatory context), but which were considered authentic and even ranked among Cicero's most popular works in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.[18]

With this observation we can pinpoint Colonna's working method, which still shows traces of medieval encyclopaedias in that his biography of Cicero is organised in an additive way, roughly following the chronology of Cicero's life, but without an overall narrative structure. Instead he compiles quotations about and evaluations of Cicero from several well-known sources, especially Lactantius, Macrobius, Valerius Maximus, and (quite regularly) Seneca.[19] After briefly mentioning Cicero's political career and his success as a teacher of rhetoric, he includes a passage about the philosopher Cicero, who is hailed as the only Roman imitator of Plato.[20] The same Lactantius is also quoted at length in order to prove that Cicero's philosophy is compatible with Christianity.[21] There follows a list of witty sayings by Cicero, all quoted from the second book of Macrobius' *Saturnalia*. The next section deals with Cicero's military achievements, as, according to Colonna, Cicero fought with Caesar in Gaul (for the same confusion with his brother Quintus in Vincent of Beauvais, see above), then with Pompey during the Civil War. After Caesar's victory, Cicero is said to have acted as a mediator of peace ('actor pacis').[22] The last section is dedicated to his withdrawal from politics and to his death. Throughout all sections, Colonna relies heavily on quotations from the aforementioned authors, even if sometimes the emerging image is not fully consistent.[23] This is especially the

18 Cf. Novokhatko A., *The Invectives of Sallust and Cicero: Critical Edition with Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Berlin – Boston: 2009). On their popularity in the late Middle Ages, cf. Mabboux, *Cicéron et la Commune* 68. The hostility between the two was an element of Cicero's life that interested medieval readers; in Vincent of Beauvais' *Speculum historiale* 6.6 it is mentioned as one of only two details of Cicero's biography: he quotes from Jerome's *Contra Iovianum* that Cicero, after the divorce from Terentia, refused to remarry, whereas Terentia married his enemy Sallust ('nupsit Sallustio inimico eius'). Unlike Colonna, however, Vincent gives no reason for the enmity.

19 Colonna did not distinguish between the elder and the younger Seneca, as is also visible in his life of Seneca; cf. Ross, "Giovanni Colonna" 542.

20 Ross, "Giovanni Colonna" 560.3, quoting Lactantius, *Divinae institutiones* 1.15.16.

21 Ross, "Giovanni Colonna" 560.23–561.11. As in many of Colonna's lives, the pagan authorities are not regarded as opponents, but as predecessors of Christian thinkers. Cf. Schürer M., *Die Enzyklopädie der berühmten Männer und Frauen. Domenico Bandini, sein* Fons memorabilium universi *und die kompilatorische Biographik der Renaissance* (Tübingen: 2017) 164. Schürer links this closely to Colonna's Dominican background.

22 Ross, "Giovanni Colonna" 562.9.

23 *Contra* Mabboux, *Cicéron et la Commune* 206, who thinks that Colonna 'ne cherche pas l'exaustivité, mais la *cohérence biographique*' (my emphasis).

case in the evaluation of the philosopher Cicero. At the beginning of the biography he is unconditionally praised as the Roman Plato.[24] Towards the end, however, Colonna questions his status as a philosopher by quoting Seneca's criticism of Cicero, who in a passage from a (now lost) letter to Atticus had written that he was dying as a semi-free man in his villa in Tusculum ('moror in Tusculano meo semiliber') – a sentence which reveals that, in Seneca's view, Cicero has disqualified himself as a philosopher, because a wise person should always be free in spirit.[25] The discrepancy of judgment between the Lactantian and the Senecan passages does not seem to worry Colonna, however – both are part of the Ciceronian tradition and therefore deserve to be quoted.

Generally, biographical details are not very accurate: the trip to Greece is not dated exactly, but mentioned after the consulship, thereby suggesting that it took place afterwards and not in the early 70s BCE. Even the Catilinarian conspiracy, the best known part of Cicero's biography in the Middle Ages because of Sallust's monograph and because of the success of the *Catilinarians*, is absent. Cicero's life seems somehow de-historicised in the sense that we do not read much about interactions with contemporary politicians like Clodius, Verres, or Catiline (only Pompey and Caesar are mentioned).[26] Certain historical events, such as Cicero's participation in the Civil War, his return to Rome after Pompey's death, his retirement after Caesar's death, and the agreement among the triumvirs to have Cicero and other Romans proscribed, seem to be narrated not for their own sake but as brief introductions to quotations Colonna wants to include (a joke from Macrobius in the case of Pompey's army camp, a passage from Cicero's own *Pro Marcello* during Caesar's dictatorship, the 'semiliber'-passage from Seneca for Cicero's fate in 44/43 BCE, and a passage from Seneca's *Consolatio ad Marciam* for the proscriptions).[27]

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24 The admiration for Cicero by Lactantius, whom Pico and Erasmus later called the *Cicero Christianus*, was well known in the Middle Ages via the judgment of Jerome, who saw Lactantius' works as a kind of *epitome* of Cicero's philosophical treatises (Jerome, *Letter* 70.5) and who qualified Lactantius' style as deeply rooted in that of Cicero (*Letter* 58.10).

25 Ross, "Giovanni Colonna" 562.21–30; cf., Seneca, *De brevitate vitae* 5.2–3.

26 Cf. Mabboux, *Cicéron et la Commune* 206.

27 Cf., e.g., the one sentence contextualising the rather lengthy treatment of Seneca's 'semiliber' quotation: 'Demum cum Cesar coniurantibus Bruto et Cassio et aliis senatoribus esset occisus et bellis civilibus iterum renascentibus, Tullius iam etate confectus in Tusculano suo secessit et otio vacabat et licteris' (Furthermore, when Caesar was killed during a conspiracy led by Brutus, Cassius and other senators and when civil war broke out again, Tullius, already consumed by old age, withdrew to his villa in Tusculum and dedicated his time to leisure and literature); Ross, "Giovanni Colonna" 562.19–22.

But this is only one side of the coin. If one compares Colonna's working method to that of his medieval predecessors, one notes an increasing number of biographical details that have found their way into the vita. Three elements especially stand out. Firstly, Colonna finds it important to stress that Cicero's exceptional intelligence and eloquence allowed him to achieve dignity in society. This is visible from the first sentence of the biography:[28]

> Tullius, qui et Marcus Cycero, Arpinas genere Rome tamen continuo[29] moratus ubi propter ipsius singularem prudentiam et eloquentiam per diversa officia usque ad dignitatem pervenit consulatus.
>
> Tullius, who is also called Marcus Cicero, was born in Arpinum, but nevertheless lived continuously in Rome. After having fulfilled different offices there, he attained the dignity of the consulship because of his extraordinary intelligence and eloquence.

The *cursus honorum* is not further specified at this stage, but the emphasis on Cicero's dignity pops up again when, after Pompey's defeat, Caesar allows Cicero to return to Rome and to be reinstated to his previous form of dignity ('Roman rediit atque in pristino statu dignitatis restitutus est').[30] Cicero's career can be seen as proof that an intellectual can build his career on 'prudentia' and 'eloquentia' – something that many authors of the period, especially Italian ones within a communal context, found extremely interesting.[31] Secondly, Cicero's military experience and achievements (under Julius Caesar in Gaul and under Pompey in the Civil War) are emphasised more clearly than one would expect today. The importance which Colonna attaches to Cicero's attempt to foster peace in Rome is underscored by the fact that he was not driven by contempt for military deeds; he is seen to have changed his mind after the gruesome civil war, and he henceforth propagated peace on the basis of his own experience

28 Ross, "Giovanni Colonna" 559.32–34.

29 I follow the MS of the Bibloteca Apostolica Vaticana Barb. lat. 2351, fol. 132v in writing 'continuo' (abbreviated as 'ꝯtinuo'); Ross prints '†ganuo†'.

30 Ross, "Giovanni Colonna" 562.7–8.

31 The interest in Cicero's 'ingenium' as a key competence for a 'homo novus' can already be observed earlier in the Middle Ages, e.g. in John of Salisbury, cf. Cizek, "*Ingenium et mores Ciceronis*" 144–154. Regarding the Italian *comuni* in the thirteenth century, much has been written about Brunetto Latini's civic interest in Ciceronian rhetoric; cf. Bolduc M., *Translation and the Rediscovery of Rhetoric* (Toronto: 2020) 115–191; on rhetoric and civic consensus more generally Hartmann F., "Il linguaggio del consenso nell'elaborazione della retorica comunale", in Alberzoni M.P. – Lambertini R. (eds.), *Costruire il consenso: Modelli, pratiche, linguaggi* (*secoli XI–XV*) (Milan: 2019) 145–158.

as a soldier. It is possible that the medieval image of the 'Roman knight' Cicero as a representative of good chivalry may have influenced Colonna as well. In any case, by elaborating on the theme, Colonna gives more credit to Cicero as a public figure involved in the politics of his time. This is a clear development compared to the impression one gets from a text like ps.-Walter Burley, in which Cicero is 'the best and most learned philosopher' (who happened to live in the time of Julius Caesar).[32] Thirdly, Colonna shows remarkable interest in Cicero's heroic death as the seal and symbol of his life. The passage on his flight from the proscriptions and his death covers more than 25% of the text.[33] Also in this case, Colonna did not himself compose most of the text; rather, it consists of an explicit quotation from Seneca's *Consolatio ad Marciam* (see above) and an implicit one from Valerius Maximus, whose version of Cicero's death at the hands of Popillius is reported verbatim. Valerius Maximus extols Cicero as a heroic victim, thereby focusing on his two-fold exemplary status both as orator and politician.[34] The fact that Valerius attributes fullest dignity ('amplissima dignitas')[35] to Cicero is in line with the two previous occurrences of the term 'dignitas' in Colonna's biography; dignity (a term that carries heavy political tones) thus becomes the most consistent feature of Cicero's biography.

Colonna's vita of Cicero is not the first one that gives a slightly more historical context to the works and words of Cicero. My second example probably predates Colonna's text by about 30 years: the *Epythoma de vita gestis scientie prestancia et libris ac fine viri clarissimi et illustris Marchi Tulli Ciceronis* (Summary of the life, deeds, intellectual excellence, works and death of the very famous and illustrious Marcus Tullius Cicero), transmitted in manuscript 552 of the Médiathèque du Grand Troyes (formerly Bibliothèque municipale

32 Cf. the beginning of ps.-Walter Burley's entry on Cicero (Knust [ed.], *Gualteri Burlaei* 318): 'Tullius Marcus, cognomento et Cicero, Romanus vir nobilissimus inter consules Romanorum, Julii Cesaris tempore claruit, qui philosophus maximus et studiosissimus fuit valde' (Marcus Tullius, also called Cicero, a very noble Roman man living amidst the consuls of the Romans, reached the height of his life in the time of Julius Caesar; he was a very eminent and learned philosopher).

33 Ross, "Giovanni Colonna" 562.30–563.20 = 36 out of 134 lines in the edition.

34 Valerius Maximus 5.3.4; cf. for the double focus of the passage on Cicero's eloquence and political merits cf. Murray J., "Exemplary Biography: Reading Valerius Maximus Writing the Life of Cicero", *Mnemosyne* 76 (2023) 287–306, esp. 295–299: Valerius 'links Cicero's decapitated head to the eloquence for which Cicero was famed, and secondly, he mentions his severed "right hand of peace", which alludes to Cicero's accomplishments during his consulship, when he claimed to have saved the Republic from bloodshed' (299). On Cicero's rehabilitation in the time of Emperor Tiberius, cf. also Wiegand I., Neque libere neque vere: *Die Literatur unter Tiberius und der Diskurs der* res publica continua (Tübingen: 2013); and Pieper C., "Bruttedius Niger, Cicero und das Forum: Die Konstruktion eines ciceronianischen Erinnerungsortes", *Hermes* 149 (2021) 342–363.

35 In Colonna, the quotation is at Ross, "Giovanni Colonna" 563.12–13.

in Troyes), fols. 120r[a]–122v[a], and sometimes referred to as the *Vita Trecensis*. The manuscript was copied around 1330 and came into Petrarch's possession in 1342,[36] but the text of the *Epythoma* itself is normally dated to around 1300; it has tentatively been attributed to the intellectual circle of the Paduan "proto-humanist" Lovato Lovati.[37] Even though it was not conceived as part of a collection of serial biographies, its title, which identifies Cicero as a 'vir illustris', closely links it to Colonna's vita. According to its recent editor Jean-Yves Tilliette, the biography is a milestone compared to the medieval tradition: whereas Vincent of Beauvais or ps.-Walter Burley mostly offered ample lists of quotations from Cicero's works, 'la *Vita trecensis* s'efforce de donner à l'orateur romain une personnalité, un visage'.[38] As Tilliette has shown, the technique with which this is achieved is similar to Colonna's working method: the anonymous author constructs a patchwork of quotations or summaries of almost all authoritative texts from (late) antiquity about Cicero that were available at the time.[39] The structure does not strictly follow the chronology of Cicero's life, but seems associative in parts. On the first two pages of Tilliette's edition, for example, diverse aspects are treated in the following order: Cicero's origin and political career; a list of events and people that were contemporary with his birth, which is erroneously dated to 116 BCE (Ptolemy, Varro, Pompey, and the War against Jugurtha – the list seems to reflect the importance of Jerome's *Chronicon* as a source text); the colour of Cicero's skin; his first court case and his teacher in rhetoric; his wife and his wish not to remarry after the divorce; Terentia's marriage with Sallust as reason for the enmity between Sallust and Cicero; his children; his participation in the Gallic War and in Pompey's

36 Cf. Billanovich G., "Quattro libri del Petrarca e la biblioteca della cattedrale di Verona", *Studi Petrarcheschi* n.s. 7 (1990) 233–262; and Refe L., "Petrarch and the Reading of Cicero's *De natura deorum* in the Ms. 552–2 of the Médiathèque du Grand Troyes", in Manuwald G. (ed.), *The Afterlife of Cicero* (London: 2016) 17–29.

37 Cf. Schmidt P.L., *Die Überlieferung von Ciceros Schrift* De legibus (Munich: 1974) 179–185; and Tilliette J.-Y., "Une biographie inédite de Cicéron, composée au début du XIV[e] siècle", *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 147 (2003) 1049–1077, at 1055.

38 Tilliette, "Une biographie" 1055. The aspect of Cicero's 'visage' is to be taken quite literally: the *Epythoma* describes Cicero's outward appearance as red and pale ('ruffus et candidus'); cfr. Mabboux, *Cicéron et la Commune* 204 and Tillette, "Une biographie" 1060 for a possible misunderstanding of Priscian as the source of this curious piece of information. Cf. also Baron, "The Memory" 115: 'Although the details of Cicero's political career were still unknown, in this early fourteenth-century biography [Cicero] is clearly a Roman statesman as well as an author'.

39 For the patchwork character, which is typical of the Middle Ages, cf. Tilliette, "Une biographie" 1059: '[la vie] ne contient pratiquement pas une phrase qui ne soit de seconde main'. He also lists the authorities that are quoted.

military campaign, and the consulship. After the lengthy section on his consular year, the *Epythoma* quotes the Ciceronian jokes from Macrobius, then gives a list of Cicero's works before turning to his exile and death. The end of the vita consists of seven of the twelve epigrams dedicated to Cicero in the *Anthologia Latina*,[40] the eulogy by Pliny, *Naturalis historia* 7.116–117,[41] and some scattered final anecdotes. Therefore, the structure of the *Epythoma* would not have been particularly helpful for a reader interested in precisely reconstructing Cicero's political biography. Furthermore, the *Vita Trecensis* does not show a greater awareness regarding historical flaws than did Giovanni Colonna. There are errors of fact, too: for instance, Cicero's father was a blacksmith ('faber ferrarius'), and Cicero had two daughters.[42]

Nevertheless, the difference from Colonna is substantial when it comes to the anonymous author's focus on biographical details; there are many more of them, and they do not mainly serve as introductions to quotations about Cicero, but instead are regularly reported for their own sake. Additionally, they focus more often on Cicero's specific *political* virtues and deeds, whereas the philosopher receives decisively less attention (except for the catalogue of Cicero's works).[43] This can be seen from the very start. Like Colonna, after mentioning Cicero's family background, the anonymous author stresses that he built his career with the aid of his 'sapientia'. But unlike Colonna, this is explicitly linked to his low origin and thereby given social and political overtones:[44]

> Unde Salustius dicit eum fuisse hominem novum, hoc est infini generis, et quamquam in scolis pauperimus sua tamen sapientia patris inopiam superavit adeoque bone indolis extitit ut, quod nulli plebeio erat licitum, ipse sibi acquisiverit proprium, scilicet quod inter filios nobilium liberales didicit artes.

40 Cf. Keeline T.J., "Cicero at the *Symposium XII Sapientum*", in Berno F.R. – La Bua G. (eds.), *Portraying Cicero in Literature, Culture, and Politics: From Ancient to Modern Times* (Berlin – Boston: 2022) 119–142.

41 Cf. Citroni Marchetti S., "Cicero as Role-Model in the Self-Definition of Pliny the Elder", in Cairns F. – Gibson R. (eds.), *Papers of the Langford Latin Seminar 16* (Prenton: 2016) 315–337, at 322–323.

42 I quote from Tilliette, "Une biographie" 1064–1077, at 1064. The first error results from a confusion with Demosthenes (whose father according to Martianus Capella, *De nuptiis Mercurii et Philologiae* 5.429, was a blacksmith); the second could eventually be explained by the fact that the anonymous author could not imagine a woman being divorced and being married to a second husband afterwards: cf. Tilliette, "Une biographie" 1060, where Tilliette also summarises other errors.

43 Tilliette, "Une biographie" 1069–1072.

44 Tilliette, "Une biographie" 1064.

> Hence Sallust says that he was a 'homo novus', i.e., of low origin, and although he was the poorest boy in school, nevertheless he overcame his father's poverty and proved to be so talented that he acquired for himself what no other plebeian had achieved, namely, to learn the liberal arts among the children of the nobility.

Cicero's career is here presented as an example of someone becoming part of Rome's nobility through wisdom. The emphasis on this aspect is strong: Cicero is characterised as a 'homo novus'; he rises above his father's poverty, and is unique in having gone to school with children of the Roman nobility, although he was of plebeian origin.[45]

While the focus on Cicero's social advancement might not be political in the narrow sense (although it is a necessary condition for him becoming a politician), other moments of the biography explicitly emphasise his political persona. An instructive example is the passage dealing with his consulate, which (in contrast to Colonna's life) receives ample attention in the text. Cicero's election to the consulship is again seen as an effect of his innate intelligence that helps him gain social advancement.[46] The text marks this special moment as the highlight of his career with a lengthy description of the reasons for his election, which are taken from Sallust's *Coniuratio Catilinae* 23.5–24.1. In this passage Sallust focuses on the envy ('invidia') of the nobility, a theme that goes back to Cicero's own works: since the 50s BCE he had constantly defined his political opponents as envy-driven enemies of the cause of the 'boni'.[47] By inserting this Sallustian quotation the *Epythoma* shows a genuine interest

45 This is obviously another example of an error in the biography (Cicero's father was from the equestrian order); but the clear dichotomy between nobles and plebeians helps the author to drive home his point of Cicero's spectacular social advancement. Tilliette, "Une biographie" 1062 identifies the fact that Cicero is presented as a role model for intellectuals in the Italian *comuni* as one of the two major concerns of the anonymous compiler; cf. for a similar interest in Colonna above.

46 'Nec ob hoc visum est senatui dignitatem pollui consulatus quia licet, ut predictum est, infimi foret generis, eum tamen sublimandum fecerat sapientia sua' (And he did not seem to pollute the dignity of the consulship because of the fact that – even if he was of low birth, as I said before – his intelligence nevertheless made him worthy of being elevated); Tilliette, "Une biographie" 1066.

47 Cf. Achard G., *Pratique rhétorique et idéologie politique dans les discours "optimates" de Cicéron* (Leiden: 1981) 539–546; Jansen L.M., *Cicero, Statesmanship, and Republicanism in Roman Historiography* (PhD dissertation Leiden: 2022) 31–39; and now the thought-provoking study by Mouritsen H., *The Roman Elite and the End of the Republic. The* boni, *the Nobles and Cicero* (Oxford: 2022); on Sallust's use of this Ciceronian motif cf. ibidem 52 (with n. 125).

not only in Cicero's career, but also in the specific circumstances that made it possible.[48] Even though the Catilinarian affair is not actually narrated (the reader is referred to Sallust's and Cicero's treatment instead), ultimately the whole consular year serves to enforce the crucial point about his rise in political office, which is corroborated by a quotation from Augustine's *De civitate dei* 3.30: 'Rem publicam adeo dilexit et rexit[49] ut eum doctor eximius Augustinus dissertum artificem nominet regende rei publice libro tercio qui intitulatur *De civitate dei*' (Cicero loved and ruled the state to such an extent that the extraordinary teacher Augustine in the third book of his *De civitate dei* calls him an eloquent artist in governing the state).[50] Subsequently the anonymous author adds another passage from Augustine (*De civitate dei* 2.21), in which the church father quotes Cicero (*De re publica* 5.1.2) who bemoans the loss of the Roman Republic; a passage which adds to the emphasis on his political agenda.[51]

We can also observe the same tendency later on. After the first biographical section, before listing Cicero's works (i.e., immediately at the beginning of the section *De libris eiusdem Ciceronis*), the author of the *Epythoma* summarises Cicero's achievements both as a politician and a juridical orator:[52]

> Licet autem Tullius *in re publica administranda et defende⟨n⟩da* tantum insudaverit tociensque pro amicis declamaverit tantumque *pro suorum emulorum elidenda invidia* pugnaverit ut vires ei vix credibile sit suppeditasse humanas, sapientie tamen desiderio adeo fervens fuit ad studium et scribendum ut mirum sit quomodo potuerit tantam utrisque operam exhibere.
>
> Tullius sweated so much in governing and defending the state and so often held speeches for his friends and fought so intensely in order to crush the envy of his opponents that it is hardly credible that he had enough energy for all that; and yet he was burning with such a desire to

48 This is also visible in the mentioning of the names of contemporaries (his colleague Antonius, Catiline, Lentulus, Cethegus, Gabinius, and Ceparius), which situate Cicero within a specific historical context.

49 The rhyme of the two words is noteworthy; it gives additional emphasis to the evaluation.

50 Tilliette, "Une biographie" 1066.

51 I therefore disagree with Mabboux, *Cicéron et la Commune* 204, who supposes that 'l'élément central de cette vie reste, ici encore, *la production littéraire*. Les événements romains ne sont décrits que pour mieux expliquer *le rôle d'auteur* de Cicéron' (my emphasis).

52 Tilliette, "Une biographie" 1068; in n. 72 he characterises this passage as a personal comment of the anonymous author ('d'inspiration apparemment plus personnelle').

> study and write that it is a miracle how he could bestow so much attention on both.

Cicero is defined as a political leader and defender of the state (the latter undoubtedly referring to his role in the Catilinarian conspiracy). The sentence reminds readers of the *Epythoma* that Cicero's works must not be seen as detached from Cicero's public life, but should be understood as having been written by the same public persona.

Furthermore, the anonymous author again uses the Ciceronian framing to refer to the opponents' 'invidia'. Invidious hostility against Cicero's political engagement is an important motif of the text. It is mentioned twice when Cicero is elected consul.[53] After the section on Cicero's works, when the narrative thread of Cicero's biography is taken up again, the *Epythoma* gives another proof of the same hostile attitude towards Cicero, even though the word 'invidia' is not used. The focus on his enemies is strengthened by the fact that the anonymous author decides closely to connect Cicero's exile of 58/57 and his death in 43 BCE, thereby presenting the two events as coherent proof of the dangerous snares set by his enemies. It is nothing less than a conspiracy that forces Cicero into exile: 'Hic siquidem – ut Valerius Maximus recitat – inimicorum suorum conspiratione a consulatu et urbe pulsus est' (He, as Valerius Maximus writes, was driven from the consulship and the city by a conspiracy of his enemies).[54] The sentence is explicitly labelled as a quotation from Valerius Maximus' *Dicta et facta memorabilia* (1.7.5), but the anonymous author has made a conspicuous addition: the words 'a consulatu' are not part of the Valerian quote. Their insertion enhances the focus on the *political* dimensions of the animosity toward him and on Cicero's courage in suffering for his political deeds. Furthermore, the transition from his exile to his proscription and death under the second triumvirate is made explicit by the expression 'per sequentia' (as a consequence), which marks the death as a logical consequence of the exile:[55] 'Hec de expulsione Tullii ab urbe et redditu in ea. Videtur enim per sequentia quod postmodum proscriptus sit […]' (So far about Tullius' expulsion from the city and his return to it. As a consequence, it can be seen that afterwards he was proscribed […]).[56]

53 Tilliette, "Une biographie" 1066, see above.

54 Tilliette, "Une biographie" 1072.

55 One finds the *iunctura* from Late Antiquity onwards in philosophical treatises, such as Boethius' commentary on Aristotle's *Analytica priora*, and in several medieval scholastic texts.

56 Tilliette, "Une biographie" 1073.

The *Epythoma* paints, in the words of Tilliette, 'le portrait d'un héros pour son propre temps [...]. Cicéron cesse alors de n'être qu'un maître de savoir, dont on lit les livres, pour devenir aussi maître de vie et de liberté'.[57] A final proof of this interest in Cicero's political persona is the fact that towards the end, the text includes seven of the twelve late antique epitaphs for Cicero[58] transmitted in the *Anthologia Latina*; based on the ancient canonisation of Cicero in the schools of declamation, they regularly extol Cicero as both an excellent orator and the saviour of the fatherland.[59] As an example I quote the last in the series:[60]

> Qui tenet eloquii fastigia summa latini,
> qui consul patriam cedibus eripuit
> quique trium sevo vitam dedit ense virorum,
> Tullius in hac est ipse sepultus humo.
> Set brevitas vite pensatur laude perhenni:
> quod mors erripuit [sic], gloria restituit.

He who occupies the summit of Latin eloquence, who as a consul liberated the fatherland from slaughter, and who gave his life to the fierce sword of the triumviri: Tullius himself is buried in this earth. But the

57 Tilliette, "Une biographie" 1063. An interesting detail corroborates the text's eulogistic attitude. The *Epythoma* also quotes the *Moror semiliber*-passage from Seneca, which we find in Colonna (see above). Yet it introduces it differently (as a sign of Cicero's inner conflict in a time of heavy crises of the state), and more importantly still, it omits Seneca's evaluation of it, which criticises Cicero for lacking a true philosophical mind: 'Idem quoque Cicero, ut Seneca recitat libro De brevitate vite, iactatus inter manifestos et partim dubios amicos dum fluctuatur cum re publica, in quadam epistola dicit: "Queris quid agam? Moror in Tusculano meo semiliber". Alia etiam adicit quibus priorem etatem complorat, de presenti conqueritur et de futura desperat et ideo se semiliber [sic] dicat.' (As Seneca says in *De brevitate vitae*, the same Cicero was cast between trustworthy and partly questionable friends, while he was driven hither and thither together with the state. He said in one of his letters: "You ask me what I am doing? I am dying as a semi-free man in my villa in Tusculum." And he adds more in which he complains about the past, bemoans the present and has no more hope for the future, and therefore he calls himself semi-free.); Tilliette, "Une biographie" 1067.

58 Friedrich A., *Das Symposium der XII sapientes: Kommentar und Verfasserfrage* (Berlin – Boston: 2002) 479–498 ascribes them to Lactantius and thus to the early fourth century, but Keeline, "Cicero at the Symposium" 121 rightly opts for caution; he nevertheless confirms the late antique origin; *contra* Mabboux, *Cicéron et la Commune* 200, who attributes them to the ninth century.

59 For this double focus of all twelve epigrams dedicated to Cicero cf. Friedrich, *Das Symposium* 201–202.

60 Tilliette, "Une biographie" 1076 = *Anthologia Latina* 609 Riese^2 = *sap*. 115 Friedrich.

> shortness of his life is recompensed with eternal praise: what death has taken away, renown restores.

Cicero is hailed as the best stylistic model, a glorious consul and a victim of his political opponents. In short: Cicero owes his eternal renown to his written works and to his life, which he dedicated to the service of the state, even at the cost of losing it.

To summarise briefly: the discovery of Cicero's letters in 1345 and 1392, which offered humanists a wealth of new information about Cicero's private life and political biography, fell on fertile ground. In Giovanni Colonna and the anonymous author of the *Epythoma* we find a renewed interest in Cicero's political career and its connection with his rhetorical and philosophical works. But whereas for Colonna the Ciceronian biography seems no more than exactly that – a tool for framing memorable sayings by and about Cicero – the *Vita Trecensis* is more interested in discovering the public figure of Cicero behind his writings. The aim is clearly exemplary: Cicero's moral excellence must become evident. As in Colonna, in the *Epythoma* he is also first and foremost a 'vir illustris', someone to observe in order to learn virtuous behaviour. In this sense, the *Vita Trecensis* especially paves the way for further investigations of Cicero's exemplary biography in the fourteenth century. Giovanni Boccaccio's sketch of Cicero's life in his *De casibus virorum illustrium* will follow a similar path in highlighting that Cicero's political persona is not separable from his output as a writer. Yet, his biography, for all its intention of proving that Cicero during his lifetime became a victim of the vicissitudes of Fortune, also opened new ways of questioning Cicero's uncontested excellence. James Hankins has argued that for Boccaccio the decline of political ethos in Rome began in Cicero's time, 'when there was just enough virtue left in Rome's elites to recognize Cicero's merit'.[61] In his interpretation, Cicero represents a turning point of political virtue, a summit implicit in which is the ever present danger of reversal, of excellence being turned into its opposite. This more nuanced attitude towards Cicero's exemplary status might partly explain why, by the beginning of the fifteenth century, humanists felt the need to reconstruct Cicero's biography in more detail in order to evaluate his political merits on more solid ground. The elaborate biographies written by Leonardo Bruni and Sicco Polenton are the best examples of the continuation of this debate, which I, however, must reserve for another occasion.

61 Hankins J., "Boccaccio and the Political Thought of Renaissance Humanism", in Eisner M. – Lummus D. (eds.), *A Boccaccian Renaissance: Essays on the Early Modern Impact of Giovanni Boccaccio and his Works* (Notre Dame, IL: 2019) 3–35, at 30.

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