

Cicero's "Dream of Scipio"

This short philosophical work is the conclusion to Cicero's *Republic*. Class began with discussion of who Scipio was: the son of Aemilius Paullus (victor at battle of Pydna 168BC); adopted to become the heir of the house of Scipio Africanus (retaining the adoptive adjective "Aemilianus"); and a triumphant general assassinated just after the dramatic date of this dialogue in 129BC. We said that the genre of *Republics* has a utopian nature, used to interrogate political problems such as the fall of one's country into tyranny, and how political crises are analogs of problems in the soul. We said that Cicero's *Republic* was written in 52BC at a time when Caesar and Pompey were fighting over Rome, and that Cicero wrote it with Pompey in mind. The Dream begins with Scipio Aemilianus' vision that he is taken up into the Milky Way to observe earthly affairs as the gods see them, where fame, power, and glory fade into insignificance. We said that Macrobius' commentary on this work became a sort of philosophical encyclopedia of the early middle ages.

Aemilianus sees the heavenly bodies arranged in order. Earth is at the center: cold, moist, and mortal. Surrounding it in concentric spheres are (¶17): the moon; Mercury; Venus; the sun; Mars; Jupiter; Saturn; and the *caelum* or "heaven," where everything is hot, fiery, and divine, and where the stars are found. The only divine element on earth is the human soul. We discussed the relation of astronomy to music. The planets revolve and orbit, and while it would seem that the outermost orbits, covering a longer distance, much like a longer guitar string, should make a lower pitched sound, the text proved this assumption wrong. Objects in the

outermost band of the *caelum* are traveling much more rapidly and thus make a higher pitched sound (§18). The earth is the ninth of the astronomical bodies, and being motionless at the center, makes no sound. The sounds of the other eight orbits correspond to a musical octave and produce harmonies which we cannot hear because of their deafening loudness, like the Catadupa (waterfalls) of the Nile (§19).

We said that the harmony of divine music, in turn, is related to philosophy and poetry. At the end of §18, Africanus says that musicians (actually "poets") have imitated the divine harmonies and thus opened up for themselves a path to heaven, as have all those who have cultivated "divine studies," which we said includes philosophy. This special treatment of poets and philosophers is perhaps explained by an earlier discussion about others who will go to heaven. In §13, Africanus says that statesmen who have "preserved, aided and defended" their country, are assured a place in heaven. The gods love statesmen, because "nothing is more pleasing to them than the councils and gatherings of men united in law which we call cities." We discussed how the gods love civilization, presumably because it fosters the development of humankind to live as it was intended to live, in peace and harmony. §13 concludes by saying "the rulers and conservators of these cities, having come from there (heaven), will return there." From this we may conclude that poets and philosophers, like great statesmen are a divine gift to mankind as the rational building blocks of civilization.

We concluded by speaking also about what it means to "become a star" (astral immortality). We spoke of the divine sign that was seen during the funeral games for Caesar in 44BC (eight years after the publication of Cicero's *Republic*).

Romans concluded that the new comet seen in the heavens announced the immortality of Caesar. This became the origin of the Roman belief that "good" or "virtuous" emperors would become gods, i.e., be worthy to be declared "deified" by the senate, and merit the building of temples.

We did not have time to discuss the role of appearance and reality in the "Dream," which seems to be very important. In ¶14, Aemilianus asks Africanus whether his father Paullus and the other departed are still alive in some way. Africanus says that those are alive who have escaped from the chains of the body as if from out of a prison. The dead are truly living, but we, who must live in these bodies, are actually living a kind of death. The status of this dialogue as a dream also raises the question of whether it is more or less real than waking life. At the beginning (¶10), Aemilianus says that he recognized his grandfather Africanus who was more familiar from his "image," i.e., his death mask hanging in the atrium. This theme of a heavenly dream that turns out to be more real than the things of this earth pertains also to the discussion of fame and perspective at the conclusion of the *Dream*. In ¶20, Africanus urges Aemilianus to ignore earthly things and keep his attention only on divine things. Earthly power and glory, even of a Roman triumph, turn out to be meaningless from the divine perspective. In ¶26, Africanus tells him that he is not the person he thinks he is. His human existence consists only of his "mind" or *mens*, i.e., the divine aspect of his soul. We seldom look at the world around us from the perspective of the immortal soul. If we ignore the soul and the divine when we look at the world, we do not see its reality and are taken in by false appearance.