

**CICERO IN THE DIGITAL CLASSROOM**



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«CICERO GOES FURTHER»  
REFLECTIONS ON A NEW DIGITAL COMMENTARY ON CICERO'S  
*PRO SEXTO ROSCIO AMERINO*

1. *Introduction*

In September 2020, we launched the final, complete version of an online commentary on Cicero's *Pro Sexto Roscio Amerino* in Dutch and in nine months the site has had more than 130.000 visits (more than 600.000 page views). In a questionnaire distributed to the users, 97% of respondents state that they are happy or even very happy with the online commentary. The online commentary is the product of a decade in which a group of Cicero-researchers in the Netherlands decided first to collaborate, then to involve a larger community of classicists and educational institutes and finally to ask for the funding for technical support<sup>1</sup>. In this presentation we will discuss the development of this project (Section 2), the form and content of the online commentary (Section 3), its current use (Section 4), and we will end with a discussion of future maintenance and amplification of the project within and outside the Netherlands (Section 5).

2. *The Project: shaping the commentary in collaboration*

This is a story of spontaneous collaboration based on shared interests of a group of Cicero researchers (Lidewij van Gils, Christoph Pieper, Jörn Soerink, Olga Tellegen-Couperus and Rogier van der Wal) who met at a conference on Classical Rhetoric in 2011 and decided, initially with-

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<sup>1</sup> We have benefitted from a number of critical and creative meetings with members of the Dutch Society of Classicists (VCN: [www.vcnonline.nl](http://www.vcnonline.nl)), a library specializing in Ciceronian scholarship (Tresoar: [www.tresoar.nl](http://www.tresoar.nl)), an Institute for Translation of Literary texts (Stichting Literair Vertalen: <https://literairvertalen.org>) and a Classical Association aimed at promoting knowledge about the classical past to a large audience (Nederlands Klassiek Verbond: [www.nederlandsklassiekverbond.nl](http://www.nederlandsklassiekverbond.nl)).

out a goal or plan, to continue the fruitful discussion after the end of the conference in informal meetings.

We already knew that first year undergraduate students were often not yet ready for the scholarly commentaries we used as classicists, which often meant that we ourselves prepared annotated texts for those students in order to help them in their first year. So we decided to read through a Ciceronian speech together and write down the outcome of our discussions in the form of a commentary for this level. In addition, we supposed that such a commentary might be of interest to other groups, for instance to advanced students in the last years of secondary education who might need an extra challenge, but also to a broader audience at the final level of a Dutch gymnasium with an interest in Latin texts or the speeches of Cicero and their rhetorical and judicial aspects<sup>2</sup>.

In order for the reader to better understand our project's intended audience, we provide a brief introduction to Classical teaching in Dutch gymnasia. In the Netherlands, the curriculum called gymnasium consists of six years of secondary education over which Latin and Greek are studied in approximately 800 hours of lessons each plus a similar number of hours for homework. In their final year, all Dutch students prepare for a national exam in which they translate an unseen passage of Latin and answer questions on 20 pages of Oxford Classical Text (OCT), a prescribed reading that changes every year. In the penultimate year, teachers select 30 OCT pages comprising different authors and genres different from what the students will read for their final (national) examination.

Having decided on the target group, we agreed on the *Pro Sexto Roscio Amerino* as a first text to be commented on, because we imagined it would be appropriate for the audience we had defined. Moreover, this speech reflected the various subdisciplines we represented as a team: it is the first prominent case in which the young Cicero showed his rhetorical talent; its date during Sulla's dictatorship makes it highly political; and the plea is rich in judicial details. Additionally we supposed that Cicero's youth might make the speech more accessible especially to students, and that an early speech would limit contextual notes to the first period of his life.

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<sup>2</sup> The relevance of studying the target audience of a commentary is also underlined by Anderson 2016, as are the possibilities of online commentaries to differentiate between (slightly) different audiences.

The url we chose was [www.cicerogaatverder.nl](http://www.cicerogaatverder.nl), which translates as «Cicero goes on» or «Cicero goes further», a playful hint of the new form of the full digital commentary in which new generations could study Cicero. The site, in open access, was built by Websteen.nl who had already proven to be a reliable and creative company, able to translate our didactic demands into an engaging website<sup>3</sup>.

### 3. *The online commentary: form and content*

When thinking about the format of our commentary, we were especially inspired by the authors of the online Dickinson College Commentaries (DCC, <http://dcc.dickinson.edu/home-page-latin>). In particular, we imitated their decision to accompany the Latin text with several tabs that led users to different types of annotations<sup>4</sup>. In our case, we decided to have in principle three tabs for all *capita*: (1) annotations on language and grammar in order to facilitate translation; (2) annotations on rhetorical style and strategies; and (3) explanations of the historical and judicial background. For some paragraphs we added a fourth tab entitled “Media”, in which we included links to external sites (see below for an example), maps of Central Italy and the Forum in the times of the trial (which were designed for us by Susanne Opitz), and – for the beginning of the *exordium* – audio files of the Latin text. The challenge of the online format was to keep the explanations as short as possible. For some background information, this turned out to be difficult. Therefore we decided to include eleven thematic essays on broader themes linked to our commentaries *ad loc.*<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> In 2011 Websteen also developed [www.quamlibet.nl](http://www.quamlibet.nl) which contains innovative didactic material in the field of Latin and Greek at various levels. In both projects Websteen built the website according to our wishes with a Content Management System for us, as researchers. Moreover, they took care of hosting and maintaining the sites for at least five years.

<sup>4</sup> Needless to say, the excellent commentaries (Dyck 2010 and Landgraf 1914<sup>2</sup>) have been constant points of reference and the source of endless inspiration.

<sup>5</sup> The themes of these essays are: *amicitia*, the concept of framing, the *pisteis entechnoi*, the proscriptions, Cicero’s intended audience, the dichotomy between city and countryside, the system and practice of criminal justice in Republican Rome, Sulla, the transmission of the text, theatrical aspects of the speech, and Cicero’s self-fashioning.

The question whether our website should also include a translation was controversial, as it might seem to undermine its didactic aim<sup>6</sup>. Nevertheless, we decided to add a literary translation by Rogier van der Wal for three reasons: first, we realized that translations of the speech are freely available on the internet anyway and that it would therefore be artificial to exclude it as a digital tool; second, our literary translation (which takes more liberties than a school translation normally would) could be a useful tool for reflection on what it means to translate a text; and third, we wanted our site to be accessible to users who are interested in the speech but do not (yet) know enough Latin to be able to read it fully in the original.

*Cicero gaat verder*

HOME | OVER ONS | ACHTERGRONDIRFORMATIE | CONTACT

Exordium | Narratio | Digressio | Argumentatio-1 | Argumentatio-2 | **Argumentatio-3** | Peroratio | Thema's

## Argumentatio-3

Paragraaf 131

placet igitur in his rebus aliquid imprudentia praeteriri? non placet, iudices, sed necesse est. etenim si Iuppiter optimus maximus cuius nutu et arbitrio caelum terra mariaque reguntur saepe ventis vehementioribus aut immoderatis tempestatibus aut nimio calore aut intolerabili frigore hominibus nocuit, urbis deleuit, fruges perdidit, quorum nihil pernicii causa divino consilio sed vi ipsa et magnitudine rerum factum putamus, at contra commoda quibus utimur lucemque qua fruimur spiritumque quem ducimus ab eo nobis dari atque imperitri videmus, quid miramur, iudices, L. Sullam, cum solus rem publicam regeret orbemque terrarum gubernaret imperique maiestatem quam armis receperat iam legibus confirmaret, aliqua animadvertere non potuisse? nisi hoc mirum est quod vi divina adsequi non possit, si id mens humana adepta non sit.

VORIGE

VOLGENDE

Vertaling

Is het dan acceptabel om in zulke gevallen uit onwetendheid iets over het hoofd te zien? Nee heren rechters, dat is niet acceptabel maar noodzakelijk. Want als de algoede en oppermachtige Jupiter, door wiens bevel en heerschappij hemel, zee en

RETORICA | **CONTEXT** | TAAL | MEDIA

In deze alinea vergelijkt Cicero Sulla's heerschappij met de macht die Jupiter over de wereld heeft. Dat doet hij in een van de langste en retorisch meest versierde zinnen van de hele speech, mede door de epische sfeer die Cicero met de Jupiter-vergelijking oproept. Het is opvallend dat deze twee kanten opgaat: Jupiter is niet alleen de weldadige, maar ook de vernietigende god. Dat past bij andere passages van de speech waar Cicero's houding tegenover Sulla ambigue is.

De vergelijking moet voor de luisteraars verrassend zijn geweest omdat het ongepast is een machthebber in de Romeinse republiek met de almachtige goden te vergelijken. Normaliter werd een *dictator* voor zes maanden benoemd; Sulla daarentegen schijnt tot *dictator perpetuus* gemaakt te zijn (zie thema *Sulla*), wat zeer ongebruikelijk was en waardoor zijn positie enigszins leek op die van een monarch (in een speech in de jaren 50, *De haruspicum responsis*, noemt Cicero zijn bewind ook *regalis*, 'koninklijk'). Het prijzen van een heerser door hem met Jupiter te vergelijken kennen we dan ook uit latere lofredes op keizers; zo vergelijkt Ovidius Augustus vaak met Jupiter. Zie ook §22.

**cuius nutu ... perdidit**: een retorisch zeer gestilleerde zin met veel *tricola* (*caelum terra mariaque; nocuit deleuit perdidit*) of 'vierslagen' (*ventis tempestatibus calore frigore*), alliteraties (*ventis vehementioribus*) en verheven woorden (*nutu*). Het effect is dat het lijkt alsof Cicero woorden uit epische teksten over de macht van Jupiter aan elkaar rijgt (of hij inderdaad citaten gebruikt, weten we niet omdat de meeste epische teksten uit de derde en tweede eeuw v.Chr. verloren zijn gegaan). Natuurlijk was Cicero ook in staat om zelf zo'n oölitische

Ill. 1: Commentary for par. 131 (<https://cicerogaatverder.nl/argumentatio-3/131/>)

<sup>6</sup> In fact, users of the site who have filled in a questionnaire (see section 4) have sometimes suggested that it would have been better not to include a translation (probably teachers) or to provide a more literal, instead of literary, translation (probably students).

In order to give one example of what the commentary looks like, we turn to the famous *laus Sullae* in paragraph 131, which Catherine Steel has labelled «one of the most interpretatively challenging parts of the speech, since we must decide whether we think that Cicero is sincere in drawing this analogy between Sulla and Jupiter, or that he is not and perhaps even that this passage is an addition to the speech, not delivered at the trial but added to the written version after Sulla had retreated from public life in order to convey Cicero's opposition to the Sullan regime and offer a sarcastic comment on its effects»<sup>7</sup>. In a complex and elevated sentence Cicero compares Sulla's influence on the earth to that of Jupiter<sup>8</sup>:

etenim si Iuppiter optimus maximus cuius nutu et arbitrio caelum terra mariaque reguntur saepe ventis vehementioribus aut immoderatis tempestatibus aut nimio calore aut intolerabili frigore hominibus nocuit, urbis delevit, fruges perdidit, quorum nihil pernicii causa divino consilio sed vi ipsa et magnitudine rerum factum putamus, at contra commoda quibus utimur lucemque qua fruimur spiritumque quem ducimus ab eo nobis dari atque impertiri videmus, quid miramur, iudices, L. Sullam, cum solus rem publicam regeret orbemque terrarum gubernaret imperique maiestatem quam armis receperat iam legibus confirmaret, aliqua animadvertere non potuisse?

*In fact, if Jupiter, greatest and best, whose nod and will governs heaven, earth, and seas, has often done grievous harm to men by furious winds, violent storms, excessive heat or unbearable cold, destroyed their cities and ruined their crops, we do not attribute any of these disasters to the divine will and a desire for causing destruction, but to the mere force and the mighty agency of nature. But, on the other hand, the advantages of which we avail ourselves, the light which we enjoy, the air we breathe, these are favours given to us and bestowed upon us by Jupiter. Why then, gentlemen, should we be surprised, if Sulla, at the time when he alone guided the republic and swayed the world, when he was strengthening by laws the majesty of his supreme power which he had regained by force of arms, should unavoidably have allowed a few things to pass unnoticed?*

We will use this elaborate sentence to illustrate the four tabs of our commentary. The first tab includes annotation to help the users with the grammar and words. In order to convey an idea of the level we have been aiming at, here are few examples of these lemmas:

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<sup>7</sup> Steel 2017, 457-458.

<sup>8</sup> Cic. *S. Rosc.* 131. Translation Freese 1930.

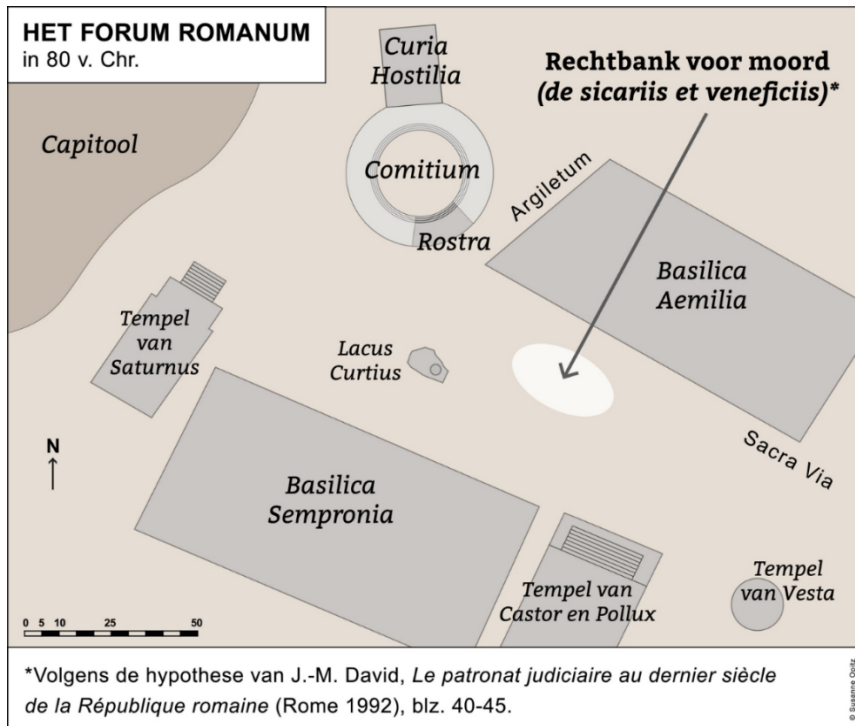
*contra*: the adverb «in contrast to» (*i.e.* not the preposition «against»); the following sentence is still part of the long *si*-clause.

*quibus utimur ... qua fruimur. uti* («use») and *frui* («enjoy») are both *verba deponentia* and both are constructed with an ablative complement.

In our rhetorical commentary (second tab), we explain among other things that the complexity of the syntax fits the elevated character of the passage. We highlight the high stylistic register of the passage *cuius nutu ... perdidit* in which Cicero uses *tricola* (*caelum terra mariaque; nocuit deleuit perdidit*) or *tetracola* (*ventis tempestatibus calore frigore*), alliteration (*ventis vehementioribus*) and elevated diction (*nutu*). We suggest that the effect is an almost epic language, which perhaps in part quotes (now lost) poetic descriptions of Jupiter's might. We also remind our users that Cicero was a versatile poet himself, for whom such epic diction was easily within his stylistic reach. Finally we suggest that the comparison with Jupiter must have been very surprising for the audience, as it sounds more like royal propaganda than a specifically Republican eulogy. As a well-known parallel, we refer to Ovid's comparing Augustus with Jupiter in his *Fasti* and exile poetry.

In our commentary on context (third tab), we highlight a fact that students and teachers on schools often tend not to realize: that a speech does not consist of words alone, but also of *actio*, which is only accessible to us indirectly through the words of the speech or through rhetorical theory. In the case of this paragraph we suggest a possible element. We recall the setting of the speech, which was delivered in front of the Basilica Aemilia in the Forum. From there, Cicero could see the Capitol with the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus (which had been burnt down in 83 BCE, *i.e.* only three years before the speech was held, and which Sulla had just started to rebuild) and at the same time Sulla's gilded equestrian statue on the *rostra*. We suggest that Cicero might have made a gesture that invited the audience to look up to the Capitol (Jupiter) and then turn its gaze to the *rostra* (Sulla) in order to strengthen the connection between Rome's protecting deity and the almost omnipotent dictator. In order to make this aspect of the speech more visual, we added a link to the background essay on Rome's legal system, where users can find a map of the forum with the spot on which the trial was held:





Ill. 2: The Roman Forum in 80 BCE; © Susanne Opitz  
(<https://cicerogaatverder.nl/themas/strafrechtspraak/>)

Finally, under the fourth tab “Media”, we added a link to the exceptionally useful website *Digitales Forum Romanum* by Susanne Muth and her team at the Humboldt Universität in Berlin (<http://www.digitales-forum-romanum.de/gebaeude/republikanische-rostra/>), the three-dimensionality of which makes the sightlines even more intuitive.

#### 4. The use and evaluation of the online commentary

Our collaborative project started ten years ago with the vague ambition of learning from each other and sharing our knowledge with others, but soon our project resulted in a number of positive side-effects, like a one-day conference on the *Pro Sexto Roscio Amerino* in 2016, which attracted teachers of classics in secondary education, col-

leagues from universities and students at both levels<sup>9</sup>. When we launched a still incomplete version of the website on that occasion, we were approached by the selection committee for the final examination of Latin in secondary education. We were asked to propose a number of passages which would make up a coherent corpus of approximately 20 OCT pages for the final examination in May 2021, and so it happened for the first time in the history of Dutch gymnasia that the *Pro Sexto Roscio Amerino* was proposed as the text for the national examination. This has meant that between September 2020 (which was also when the final version of the website was launched) and May 2021 circa 7800 gymnasium students in their final year started their preparation and thereby made ample use of the digital commentary. This massive use of the online commentary may have been caused by the pandemic.

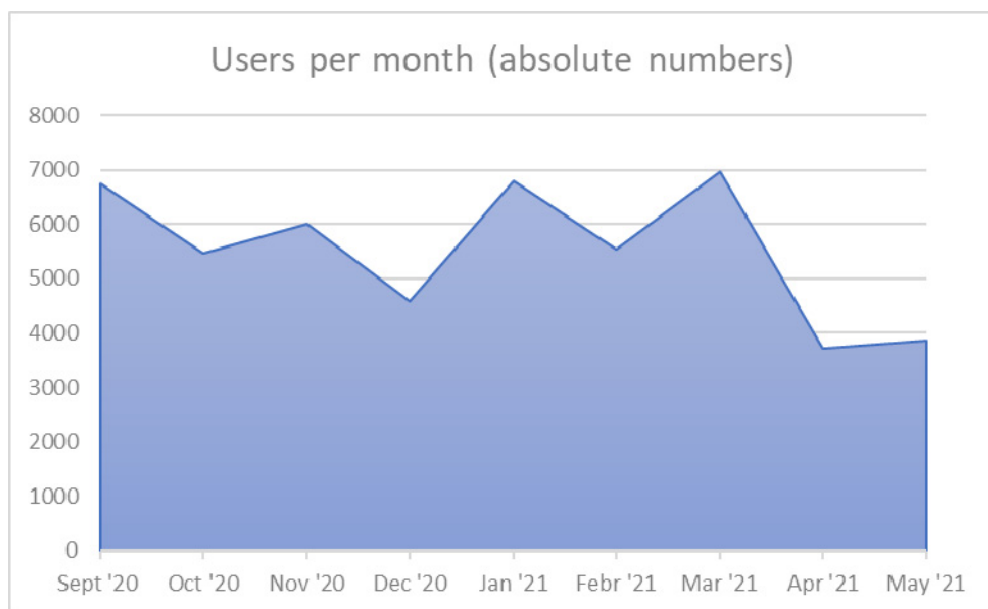
In order to reach teachers of classics in the Netherlands and the Flemish part of Belgium (including their students), we have published short notices about our online commentary in professional journals<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, via two other announcements we have reached out to a larger audience of people outside the schools who are interested in the Ancient World and/or who may simply enjoy reading a famous speech of Cicero<sup>11</sup>. The actual use and appreciation of the online commentary has been measured through Google Analytics and a questionnaire in Qualtrics that we linked to the home page of the online commentary. The numbers of individual users were around 6000 per month from September 2020 and they remained high until May 2021. (Small) dips were visible during national school holidays (in October, December, February and May), which confirms the active use for school preparation.

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<sup>9</sup> Another outcome was our co-authorship of an Introduction of circa 190 pages about Cicero in a popular series of academic introductions to a broad range of topics (*Elementaire Deeltjes*), destined for a public audience: van Gils-Pieper-Tellegen-Couperus-van der Wal 2018.

<sup>10</sup> In the Dutch «VCN-bulletin» (van Gils-Soerink 2020a) and «Prora» (van Gils-Soerink 2020b).

<sup>11</sup> «Hermeneus» (van Gils-Soerink 2021) en Rechtshistorische Courant, februari 2021, <http://www.law.ugent.be/grond/courant/jaargang2021.html>, 6.



Tab. 1: Users per month of [www.cicerogaatverder.nl](http://www.cicerogaatverder.nl).

Source: Google Analytics (20 May 2021)

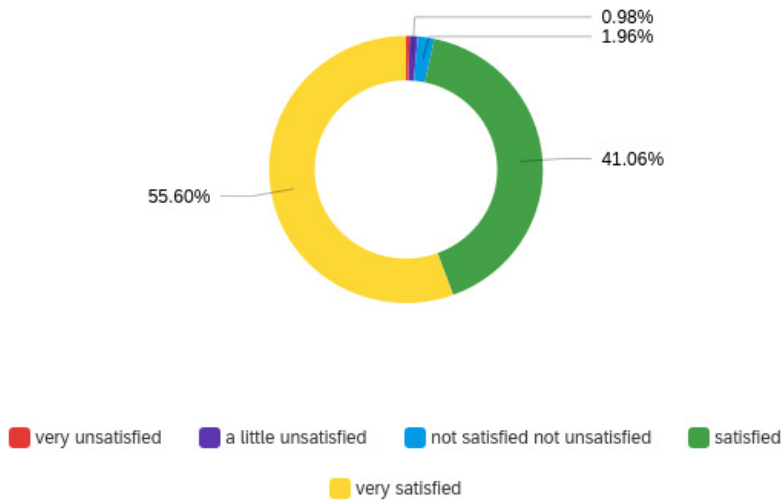
In terms of geographical scope, the site has been visited also from abroad (Belgium mainly, but also in the USA, UK, Italy and Germany more than 50 people have used the site for an average of at least three minutes per session).

Country	Users	Sessions	Pages/ Session	Average Session Duration
Netherlands	34.671	134.488	4,70	8:14
Belgium	1.572	2.935	4,53	5:55
USA	322	382	2,11	3:42
Germany	102	193	4,98	8:14
Italy	86	129	2,03	3:43
UK	66	166	6,08	13:27
...				
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>37.254</b>	<b>138.838</b>	<b>4,68</b>	

Tab. 2: Provenance of users of [www.cicerogaatverder.nl](http://www.cicerogaatverder.nl).

Source: Google Analytics (20 May 2021)

From December 2020, the homepage contained a link to an online questionnaire about the website. It has been filled in by 541 users: 100 are teachers of Classics, 412 students of gymnasia, 11 university students and 18 others who define themselves as «interested». Users seem to be «very satisfied» (56%) or at least «satisfied» (another 41%) with the commentary.



Tab. 3: Satisfaction of users of [www.cicerogaatverder.nl](http://www.cicerogaatverder.nl).

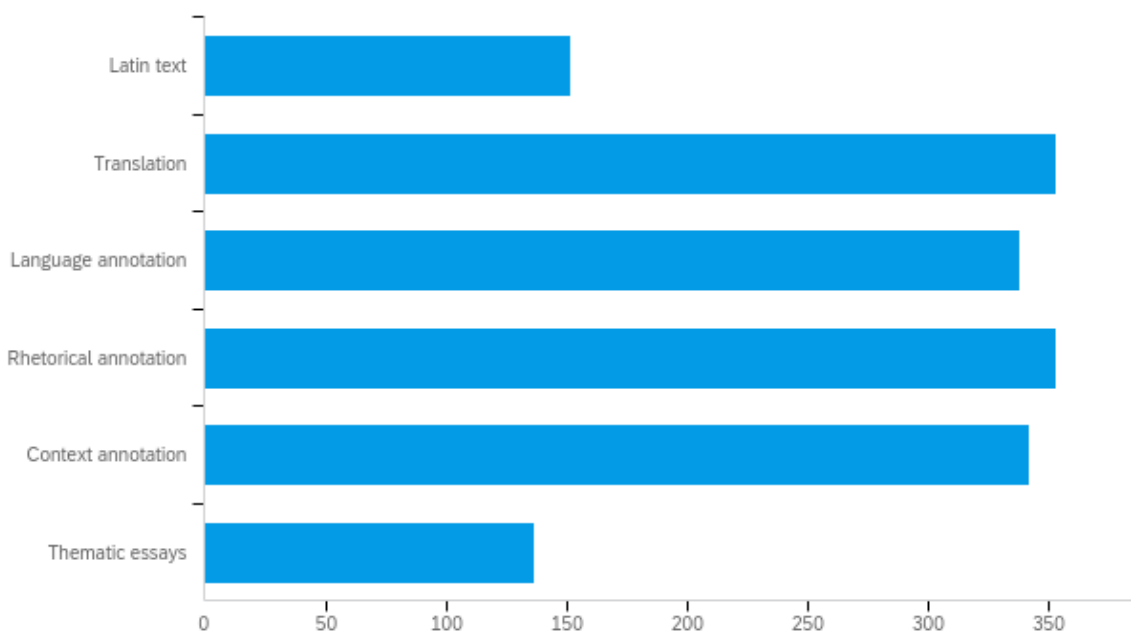
Source: Online questionnaire Qualtrics (20 May 2021)

We also asked whether users would like to study more classical texts with a similar commentary, and again the response was positive: two thirds of the respondents said they would probably or even certainly be happy to do so, which is especially remarkable for students in their final year of the gymnasium<sup>12</sup>.

In terms of the usage of the four tabs of our online commentary (the Latin text, a translation, comments on the language, the rhetoric and context, and finally longer thematic introductions on selected topics), we heard from some teachers that their students restricted their use to the language annotations. However, the users who took the trouble to fill in the questionnaire tell us they consulted the context annotations, the rhe-

<sup>12</sup> The exact percentages on the question whether users would like to study more classical texts with this type of online commentary were 8% certainly not, 22% probably not, 9% maybe, 14% probably yes, 47% certainly yes.

torical commentary and the (literary) translation on a par with the language notes. The thematic essays are less popular, but about one quarter of the respondents used them as well.



Tab. 4: Parts of the commentary regularly consulted by users of [www.ciceroaatverder.nl](http://www.ciceroaatverder.nl).

Source: Online questionnaire Qualtrics (20 May 2021)

A difficult and much discussed point of our commentary was the scholarly standard of our annotations: what did we expect users to know already and how much information did they need to interpret and appreciate Cicero's text<sup>13</sup>? Our commentary was aimed at a level between secondary and tertiary scholarship, but for this specific peer group there is little comparative material. Yet since 90% responded that the level of the contextual, rhetorical and language annotations was just right, and only 6% that it was too difficult and 4% that it was too easy, the commentary obviously strikes the right balance.

At the end of the questionnaire we put an open question in case there were suggestions, questions or comments, and most took the time to

<sup>13</sup> See Anderson 2016 for a critical discussion of the impact of the selected audience on the shape of the commentary.

write something. Some of this criticism has resulted in the correction of unclear formulations and sporadic infelicities.

### 5. Conclusion

The online commentary on Cicero's *Pro Sexto Roscio Amerino* [www.cicerogaatverder.nl](http://www.cicerogaatverder.nl) has attracted a high number of visitors in the school year 2020-2021, immediately after its completion. An important reason for this quantitative success is the fact that this speech had been selected for the national examination of Latin in May 2021. The consistently high number of visitors combined with the very positive evaluation of the different parts of the commentary by its users shows that the online commentary served its goal of providing a linguistic, rhetorical and contextual background to Cicero's speech. An online questionnaire not only informed us, as authors, about the constant use and positive evaluation of the different parts of the commentary, but the users also sent a clear message that they would like to see more such online commentaries. Apparently the form, content and standard comprise a desideratum both at schools and elsewhere (we even heard from a group of Dutch pensioners who read Cicero's speech with our commentary). Our experience shows that the digital format offers new opportunities for the teaching of ancient languages: a digital commentary can order the material in a way that speaks to a generation of students who have grown up with the internet and are less inclined to use books as reference works. Digital formats can also help the teacher to differentiate within the class, for they allow for a huge amount of self-study. But there are also challenges that have to be solved. How much information should be supplied in the commentary? How can the annotations be linked to reveal thematic links in the text more readily? And then, of course, there is the problem of the maintenance of the site: its costs and responsibility for oversight.

While collaboration on the commentary has been rewarding, it has also been very time-consuming. The positive feedback, however, has encouraged us to continue. At the moment we are working on a new site with a thematic selection of Cicero's letters (and passages from speeches or treatises that are connected to them). Additionally, we are exploring the possibility of an international collaboration in order to create web-

sites with commentaries in several European languages. We therefore hope that the title we gave to our website years ago, «Cicero goes further», will turn out to be a good omen.

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