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CICERO AND POLITICAL TREES

1. Introduction: Cicero and trees

That Cicero used and represented trees for a variety of purposes has long been acknowledged: to adorn and shade his own gardens – whether in the urban *hortus* or in his countryside villas¹, to provide farmable products², to create the suggestive atmosphere of leisure and intellectual rigour in his philosophical dialogues³, and to indicate divine presence at crucial narrative moments⁴. Trees and the representation of trees had a function, even if the agricultural outcome was sometimes postponed to the next generation: in *De senectute*, Cicero has his interlocutor Cato cite Caecilius Statius on planting trees for the next generation, as a reference to both farming and philosophy⁵. Moreover, the interlocutor “Cicero” uses trees in *De legibus* as an illustrative example of the “virtue” of a concrete thing

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¹ Trees in Cicero’s gardens: Cic. *dom.* 62 (reference to Cicero’s Palatine house and his Tusculum villa) with Marzano 2022, 22-23. Shade as a characteristic aspect of especially the plane tree: Cic. *carm. fr.* 22, 10; 22, 13; *de orat.* 1, 28; 3, 17-18 (on shade generally). (Plin. *nat.* 12, 6 scoffs at the import of a tree only *umbrae gratia*). On Cicero’s gardens in his house and countryside villas, see Marzano 2022, 17-28, and within a wider setting of countryside villas, see Marzano 2014, 82-101; Hartswick 2018. For Roman garden rooms in context, including political uses, see Kuttner 1999b.

² Trees for farming: Cic. *Cato* 57, 59 (trees must be planted in an orderly manner, exemplifying and symbolising the well-run farm and the virtuous farmer). See also Matlock in this volume.

³ The settings, especially, of the dialogues *De oratore* (1, 28), *De re publica* and *De legibus* (1, 1 – 2, 7) with (select) discussion in Linderski 1989; Görler 1988; Zetzel 2021, 19, 29; Marzano 2022, 19-21 (plane tree).

⁴ E.g. Cic. *leg.* 1, 1 on Marius’ oak as place of divine omen (with Plut. *Mar.* 36, 5-6). See also Tsouni (438) and Degl’Innocenti Pierini in this volume.

⁵ Cic. *Cato* 24, with the interlocutor “M.” making a reference to the same Caecilian statement in *Tusc.* 1, 31.



(even if a misnomer), and it is evident that trees provided Cicero and his contemporaries with metaphors similar to those used today⁶.

I am not proposing here to examine all of Cicero's usages of trees – real, symbolic or otherwise – but rather to home in on Cicero's arboreal attitudes within a wider context of “botanising rulers”⁷, triumphing trees⁸, Roman euergetism and spectacle⁹, and sacred trees – that is, the uses of trees within the triangulation of politics, military and religion¹⁰. Cicero's perspective on trees as delightful in nature and gardens, as evocative in dialogic settings and as illustrative of socio-economic, political and intellectual status played out within this triangulation as well as within the early days of what Hallett has called the “greening” of early Augustan Rome and Marzano has termed the «Augustan horticultural revolution»¹¹.

I shall start by discussing trees within a Roman political-military context, then within the political-religious context, and finally, and by way of a conclusion, Cicero's ideas of and engagement with what I call “political” trees¹².

2. *Trees and Roman politics*

Trees were grown, captured, displayed and used for political purposes long before the Romans: in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia and Greece, plants could be made to symbolise military conquest, territorial expansion, power and control¹³. Among the array of plant species and types of symbolism, the associations of palms and laurels with victory were

⁶ Cic. *leg.* 1, 45 (and more uses of trees in philosophical arguments: *nat. deor.* 1, 99; 2, 82; *Tusc.* 1, 56). Cic. *Att.* 15, 4, 2 (SB 381) argues that the tree has been felled (Caesar killed) but not uprooted (Marcus Antonius still alive and acting as did Caesar), and you see how it is sprouting (Marcus Antonius taking more power for himself, especially at the time of writing; end May 44 BC). Cicero argued that this metaphorical use was common outside of the elite: Cic. *de orat.* 3, 155, *orat.* 81 with Armstrong 2019, 175. Cicero has his interlocutor Balbus discuss the meanings of *natura* in *nat. deor.* 2, 81-82.

⁷ Totelin 2012.

⁸ Östenberg 2009, 184-188. Or Macaulay-Lewis' (2008, 207) «triumphal plants».

⁹ On spectacle as political in Rome, Bell 2004.

¹⁰ Armstrong 2019, 35-38 offers a concise summary of this triangulation.

¹¹ Hallett 2021; Marzano 2022, 88-129.

¹² For discussions of what was a tree in Roman perspective, see Fox 2023, 5-9.

¹³ Macaulay-Lewis 2008, 205-206; Totelin 2012; Howe 2019; Marzano 2022, 50-55.

adopted by the Romans¹⁴. Laurel crowns and palm branches were given to victors in sport competitions and paraded by Roman triumphators to signal their feats¹⁵. In terms of arboreal conquest, Sulla in 86 BC cut down the sacred groves and the shady trees of the Academy and Lyceum of Athens to furnish his siege engines, thereby demonstrating the practical use of wood but little respect for the symbolic values of these particular woods¹⁶. By contrast, his two successors in the wars against Mithridates, L. Licinius Lucullus and Cn. Pompeius Magnus, are recorded in our sources as introducing new plants to Rome and Italy as a result of their conquests in the East. On Lucullus, Pliny writes:

Cerasia ante victoriam Mithridaticam L. Luculli non fuere in Italia, ad urbis annum DCLXXX. is primum invexit e Ponto, annisque CXX trans oceanum in Britanniam usque pervenere; eadem [ut diximus], in Aegypto nulla cura potuere gigni.

*Before the victory of Lucius Lucullus in the war against Mithridates, that is down to 74 BC, there were no cherry-trees in Italy. Lucullus first imported them from Pontus, and in 120 years they have crossed the ocean and got as far as Britain; but all the same no attention has succeeded in getting them to grow in Egypt*¹⁷.

Although we have limited contemporary evidence for Lucullus' famed suburban *horti* in the Campus Martius, scholars have argued that Lucullus may have planted the imported cherry trees in these gardens and thus highlighted his botanical conquest to anyone visiting, including

¹⁴ Although Fox 2023, 70-71 argues for Roman roots in the cultural relationship between flora and territory.

¹⁵ Palms in Roman contexts: *Fasti triumphales: Inscriptiones Italicae* 13, 1, 36; Liv. 10, 47, 3; Suet. *Cal.* 32, 2; Plut. *quaest. conv.* 8, 41-45. Nussbaum 2021 emphasises that palm branches were associated with victory and triumph whereas palm trees were associated with Eastern territories, especially Judaea. Roman triumphators also wore the *toga palmata*: Polyb. 6, 53, 7; Val. Max. 9, 1, 5; Mart. 7, 2, 7-8, and the Romans bestowed this toga on foreign kings seen as allies of Rome (Cic. *Q.fr.* 2, 11 (SB 15); Dion. Hal. 5, 35, 1; Liv. 27, 4; 30, 15; Tac. *ann.* 4, 26 with Edmondson 2008, 25-26). Laurels: *RRC* 402 (*aureus* celebrating one of Pompey's triumphs and featuring laurel wreath encircling the obverse); Cic. *Pis.* 39; *fam.* 2, 10, 2 (SB 86) (*laureola*), 15, 6, 1 (SB 112) (*lauream*); Liv. 2, 47, 10-11; 5, 28, 13; 45, 1, 6-7; Plin. *nat.* 15, 127; 15, 133-135; App. *Mithr.* 77, with Fox 2023, 94-101. Laurels were also prizes in poetry competitions, and Hor. *carm.* 3, 30; Ovid, *am.* 2, 12, 1-6 play on this double use.

¹⁶ Plut. *Sull.* 12, 3; App. *Mith.* 30.

¹⁷ Plin. *nat.* 15, 102-103 (trans. Loeb).

social and political peers¹⁸. Together with other exotic and luxurious items taken from the East as well as general extravagances of Lucullus mentioned by Plutarch, the trees will have helped to underline Lucullus' military achievements and elite status¹⁹. Indeed, Marzano builds on Hillman's argument about Lucullus' continued political engagement after his return to Rome in 66 BC to contend that Lucullus built his extensive and luxurious *horti* not simply for personal enjoyment but also for competitive display and therefore political impact²⁰.

That competition was especially with his successor and the eventual victor in the Mithridatic Wars, Pompey. Pompey's third triumph in September 61 BC was extraordinary not only for rivalling all earlier triumphs in size and magnificence, but also for parading plants among the conquered nations and plundered booty, as Pliny highlights²¹:

Romae eam [ebenus, f.] Magnus Pompeius triumpho Mithridatico ostendit.

*Ebony was exhibited at Rome by Pompey the Great on the occasion of his triumph over Mithridates*²².

Sed omnibus odoribus praefertur balsamum, uni terrarum Iudaeae concessum, quondam in duobus tantum hortis, utroque regio, altero iugerum viginti non amplius, altero pauciorum. ostendere arborum hanc urbi imperatores Vespasiani, clarumque dictu, a Pompeio Magno in triumpho arbores quoque duximus. servit nunc haec ac tributa pendit cum sua gente.

¹⁸ Von Stackelberg 2009, 76-78; Totelin 2012, 134-136; Marzano 2022, 28-38 on Lucullus' *horti*; 61-64 on Lucullus' import of the cherry tree; Fox 2023, 73 on the delay between Lucullus' return to Rome and his triumph, making it "impossible" to display the cherry tree in his procession.

¹⁹ Plut. *Luc.* 39-40. For the wider contexts of Plutarch's depiction and Lucullus' image as a luxury-seeking politician within republican competitive culture, see Lundgreen 2019.

²⁰ Hillman 1993; Marzano 2022, 34-38. Also von Stackelberg 2009, 77 argues Lucullus' continued influence on Roman politics. On the politicisation (or not) of *horti* in the late republican and early imperial periods, see Wallace-Hadrill 1998.

²¹ See Plin. *nat.* 7, 97-98 and App. *Mithr.* 17, 116-117 for further descriptions of Pompey's triumph.

²² Plin. *nat.* 12, 20 (Loeb edition); cf. Solin. 52, 52. Östenberg 2009, 185 emphasises that these were ebony trees, not logs, because Pliny has *eam* for *ebenus, f.*, not *id* for *ebenum, n.* which means the log. In the triumph, there was also a golden display of a pyramidal model of a paradisaical mountain, entwined by a vine, and with figures of deer, lions and either fruit or fruit trees (*nat.* 37, 14): *pomis* can mean both the fruits and the trees on which they hang (cf. *nat.* 5, 240). Although these were not live fruits or trees, they underlined the botanical conquest, too. On the pyramidal model, see Kuttner 1999a, 345; Macaulay-Lewis 2008, 208.

But every other scent ranks below balsam. The only country to which this plant has been vouchsafed is Judaea, where formerly it grew in only two gardens, both belonging to the king; one of them was of not more than twenty iugera in extent and the other less. This variety of shrub was exhibited to the capital by the emperors Vespasian and Titus; and it is a remarkable fact that ever since the time of Pompey the Great even trees have figured among the captives in our triumphal processions. The balsam-tree is now a subject of Rome, and pays tribute together with the race to which it belongs²³.

The ebony trees displayed in Pompey's triumph were there to exhibit both the reach of Pompey's conquest, and the level of control exercised²⁴: Pompey was the master of everything living and inanimate. Pompey's spoils also included Mithridates' library of botanical treatises collating information and specimens from across all Mithridates' lands and subjects, and Pompey had these translated into Latin²⁵. Translations of important treatises had precedents in the Latin version of Mago's agricultural treatises in Punic in the second century BC, but Pompey's appropriation of knowledge was also a further act of control over the enemy, his empire and his data²⁶.

Pompey's display of trees inspired subsequent *triumphatores* to continue the feature of arboreal captives. Kuttner and Marzano argue that Pompey might even have introduced balsam alongside ebony, but that seems to go against what Pliny says in the passage about the balsam²⁷. A later artist seems to have followed Pliny, too: the Renaissance artist, Nicolò Giolfino's (circa 1476 – 1555) depiction of Pompey's triumph from ca. 1520 includes the famous elephants, standards and captives, as well as some botanical specimens (figures 1 and 2, 396)²⁸.

²³ Plin. *nat.* 12, 111-112.

²⁴ In terms of reach, India even though ebony was also found in Ethiopia: Pliny discusses the ebony trees in Pompey's triumph in his section on trees from India, and both Vergil (*geor.* 2, 116-117, *sola India nigrum / fert hebenum*) and Solin. 52, 52 thought it was Indian ebony: *Hebenum ex India Mithridatico triumpho Romae primum Magnus Pompeius exhibuit*. On the question of which kind of ebony and the various symbolic implications, see Marzano 2022, 56-58, but Östenberg 2009, 185-186 is not in doubt that it was Indian ebony.

²⁵ Plin. *nat.* 25, 7; see discussion in Totelin 2012, 133-134.

²⁶ Mago: Colum. 1, 1, 10; Varro *rust.* 1, 1, 10; Plin. *nat.* 18, 5.

²⁷ Kuttner 1999a, 345; Marzano 2022, 56-58. Macaulay-Lewis 2008, 213, Östenberg 2009, 185, Beard 2009, 339 n. 13, Totelin 2012, 122 and Fox 2023, 74 (discussing the balsam import further 74-76) disagree with Kuttner and Marzano, too.

²⁸ Giolfino's painting of Pompey's triumph was previously displayed in the Palazzo Pompei, the family manor of the aristocratic Pompei family, likely to boast of their alleged ancient ancestor and their own grandeur; see Petrella 2002, 132.

The branches held by the elephant rider (left) and the attendant walking alongside the horse-drawn carriage (right) look very similar, and are probably meant to illustrate the same plant. Obviously, Giolfino had not seen Pompey's triumph with his own eyes and he will have relied on other visual representations or literary descriptions, including of the plants carried in the triumph. If we look closer at these plants and compare them with modern depictions of the ebony (left) and balsam (right) trees (figure 3, 397), it seems that Giolfino depicted the ebony as part of Pompey's triumph: although the modern botanical illustration shows the leaves with a slightly less acute apex, the similarity is striking. While this is no evidence of Pompey's actual triumph, it is suggestive not only of Giolfino's interpretation of Pliny, possibly via one or more intermediate sources, but also of how important these plants were considered for Pompey's triumph in the later reception²⁹.

While Lucullus could have planted his imported cherry trees in his *horti*, Pompey could not have continued the display of his ebony trees in the *porticus* garden forming part of his large theatre complex or his more private *horti* close by simply because these heat-loving trees could not be acclimatised to Italy³⁰.

Pompey's theatre complex consisted of a temple to Venus Victrix (*AED. VENERIS* on Lanciani's drawing, figure 4, 397), situated at the apex of the *cavea* of the theatre proper³¹. Behind the stage (*scaenae frons*), the *porticus* garden stretched (ca. 135 by 180 meters) with colonnaded buildings and *exedrae* on three sides. At the end of the *porticus* garden was a *curia* (a senate building, mentioned in literary sources), likely the central

²⁹ On the ubiquity of Pliny's work in Renaissance Italy and in Italian Renaissance art, see McHam 2013, especially 3-21 (reception of Pliny from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, and the significance of the printing press for circulating his work), 207-213 and 225-253 (Pliny's influence on motifs in Renaissance Italian art). With this ubiquity in mind, it is plausible that Giolfino's painting was inspired by engagement with Pliny's description of Pompey's triumph.

³⁰ Marzano 2022, 65 on the impossibility of acclimatising ebony (and balsam) to Italy; on the *horti Pompeiani* being close to the *porticus Pompeiana*, see Russell 2016, 156-162. Östenberg 2009, 188 seems to suggest that Pompey's captive trees were replanted in Rome. Mabblerley 2008, 277 (*diosphyros*) shows that the *genus* generally grows in tropical regions.

³¹ R. Lanciani's *Forma Urbis Romae*, originally published in print (1893-1901), can be accessed online (<https://sights.seindal.dk/other-images-sources/lanciani-forma-urbis-romae/>) and as a pdf (<https://rometheimperialfora19952010.files.wordpress.com/2014/08/carta-archeologica.pdf>).

*exedra*³². Lanciani's drawing shows the complex superimposed on the street plan of his day, and it is possible even today to follow the curve of the *cavea* in the piazza di Grotta Pinta, via del Biscione and piazza Poliarola in the southern *centro storico* of Rome.

The outline of the theatre complex was captured on the Severan marble plan, too (figure 5, 398). On the assemblage, the *porticus* garden with its colonnades, *exedrae* and axes is clearly indicated.

Virtual reconstructions – based on the marble plan, archaeological excavations, ancient descriptions of the complex and knowledge about similar architecture – give an impression of the complex, including the *porticus* garden (figure 6, 398).

The reconstruction in figure 6 shows double rows of trees in the *porticus* garden, which is a possible interpretation of the four rows of dots shown on the marble plan, and seems corroborated by archaeological evidence³³. Certainly, this would fit with the literary sources mentioning the plane trees – another Eastern species – and myrtle comprising a *duplex nemus* (double grove) in the *porticus* garden³⁴. Another interpretation of the dots is that they indicate columns or statue bases, because we know the *porticus* garden also contained sculptured fountains and themed groups of female sculptures, all evidently designed to evoke Hercules and Alexander the Great as Pompey's role models, to signify Pompey as a cultured patron of civilising arts, and to exemplify Pompey as the great – *magnus* – Roman conqueror rivalling Alexander's feats³⁵.

³² Cic. *div.* 2, 23; Caes. *bell. civ.* 1, 3 (with Russell 2016, 184-185); 1, 6; Nic. Dam. 83; Asc. 52C; Plut. *Caes.* 66, 1-2, *Brut.* 14; Suet. *Caes.* 80, 4, *Aug.* 31, 5; App. *bell. civ.* 2, 115.

³³ Coarelli 2007, 285 who says that traces of such trees were discovered below Teatro Argentina (for the location of this in relation to the theatre complex, see Lanciani's map on figure 5, 398).

³⁴ (Plane) trees in the *porticus*: Prop. 2, 32, 11-16; Ov. *ars* 3, 387; Mart. 2, 14, 10; 5, 10, 3-6. On the *porticus* itself: Vitr. 5, 9, 1; Mart. 6, 9; 11, 1, 9-12. Kuttner 1999a, 364-367 has even argued on the basis of Greek epigrams that at least one of the plane trees in the *porticus* had a trained vine on it. Fox 2023, 122-123 on the width and height of the plane trees over time. Myrtle and *duplex nemus*: Mart. 2, 14; 3, 59 with Kuttner 1999a, 368-370 who argues that the myrtle was original whereas the boxwood mentioned by Martial might have been an Augustan introduction into the garden. Gleason 1994, 19 thinks the myrtle only probable, and adds laurel (Suet. *Caes.* 81, 3) as another possible plant in the garden. On the symbolism of myrtle in Roman culture and Vergil's poems, see Armstrong 2019, 152-155.

³⁵ For analyses, see Gleason 1990, 1994; Kuttner 1999a; Miles 2008, 234 (who argues that Pompey's sculptural displays outside of the temple followed the precedent of Q. Caecilius

Nevertheless, there was room for both botanical and inanimate specimens in this vast space and the literary evidence emphasises the pleasant shade and impressive array of the planting, as well as the activities that could take place under them – from civilised strolls to prostitution and anything in between. Indeed, Pompey’s «garden museum», in Kuttner’s words³⁶, and his «botanical imperialism», to borrow Marzano’s apt formulation³⁷, formed part of the wider political culture of late republican competitive elite display in both its processional and more permanent manifestations³⁸. Davies even argues that «the complex presented Romans with a choice between a beneficent superhuman and an out-of-touch senate»³⁹. Pompey’s complex was designed to impress and the trees, as the ebony trees in his triumph, helped to display his territorial conquest, his power and control over the conquered civilisations, and his extraordinary beneficence in sharing the spoils with the people of Rome. His building complex formed part of a wider competition of status and power through physical display, especially but not exclusively with Julius Caesar⁴⁰, and of a “building boom” in the City of Rome and beyond⁴¹, both of which continued under and were eclipsed by Augustus.

That trees formed part of elite self-presentation is clear also from Cicero: he took considerable care to populate his Tusculum villa and garden with appropriate *accoutrements* to illustrate his social and intellectual status (figure 7, 399)⁴², and famously yet perhaps elliptically stated that intellectuals such as Varro and himself needed only a library and a garden to thrive⁴³. Moreover, Cicero evidences arboreal appropriation as part of elite competition and self-representation. In his speech arguing for the return of his property upon his return from exile, his *De domo sua* from 57 BC,

Metellus Macedonicus); Spencer 2010, 167-171; Davies 2017, 225-334 and 2018, 491-500 (the *porticus* garden within the theatre complex); Marzano 2022, 38-42, 48-49, 65-66.

³⁶ Kuttner 1999a, 345-350.

³⁷ Marzano 2022, 50-68. Cf. Plin. *nat.* 25, 7 on Pompey’s seizure of Mithridates’ property, including a bookcase of treatises on medicinal plants and their properties, ordering his freedman Lenaeus to translate these into Latin; a further botanical imperialism, discussed in Totelin 2012, 133-134.

³⁸ On the campus Martius and its transformation by Pompey: Coarelli 1997, 539-579.

³⁹ Davies 2017, 234.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Davies 2017, 215-275 with copious evidence.

⁴¹ The “building boom” is evidenced and discussed in Maschek 2018, 174-226 with reference to Pompey’s complex 188-189.

⁴² E.g. Cic. *Att.* 1, 6, 2 (SB 2); 1, 8, 2 (SB 4); 1, 9, 2 (SB 5).

⁴³ Cic. *fam.* 9, 4 (SB 180); Shackleton Bailey 1977, II, 316-317 *ad loc.* was puzzled.

Cicero explicitly states that the trees in his Tusculum villa were transferred to the adjoining estate of the consul Gabinius upon his exile:

Nihil erat latum de me: non adesse eram iussus, non citatus afueram: eram etiam tuo iudicio civis incolumis, cum domus in Palatio, villa in Tusculano, altera ad alterum consulem, transferebatur: scilicet eos consules vocabant: columnae marmoreae ex aedibus meis inspectante populo Romano ad socrum consulis portabantur: in fundum autem vicini consulis non instrumentum aut ornamenta villae, sed etiam arbores transferebantur, cum ipsa villa non praedae cupiditate – quid enim erat praedae? – sed odio et crudelitate funditus everteretur. Domus ardebat in Palatio non fortuito, sed oblato incendio: consules epulabantur et in coniuratorum gratulatione versabantur, cum alter se Catilinae delicias, alter Cethegi consobrinum fuisse diceret.

No measure had been passed bearing on myself; I had not been called upon to appear; I had not failed to answer any summons. Even in your judgement I was a citizen untainted, when my house on the Palatine and my villa at Tusculum were being made over one to each of the two consuls (the nominal consuls, that is to say), when the marble columns were being taken down from my apartments and handed over to the consul's mother-in-law, while to the consul's estate adjoining were transferred not merely the furniture or ornaments of the villa, but even the very trees, while the villa itself was razed to the foundations as a sacrifice not to the greed of booty – for what did it amount to as booty? – but to merciless hatred. My house on the Palatine was ablaze, by no mere accident, but by deliberate arson; the consuls were feasting and enjoying the congratulations of their fellow-conspirators, one of them asserting that he had been Catiline's minion, and the other that he was cousin to Cethegus⁴⁴.

Before Cicero's Palatine house was destroyed, an act which Roller has rightly interpreted as physically and symbolically signifying the obliteration of Cicero's socio-political power and status⁴⁵, both this house and his Tusculum villa were stripped of valuables. Although Cicero mentions this plunder in many of his speeches and other works⁴⁶, the passage here is noteworthy because he mentions the trees among these valuables to suggest the extreme hatred and vengeance of his enemies⁴⁷. This fitted into

⁴⁴ Cic. *dom.* 62 (Loeb edition, translation adapted).

⁴⁵ Roller 2010 (summary 137). For the wider symbolism of house destructions, see Bodel 1997, 7-11.

⁴⁶ Cic. *p. red. in sen.* 18; *dom.* 60, 98, 113; *Sest.* 54, 65, 145-146; *Pis.* 26; *Mil.* 87; *Planc.* 95; *Att.* 4, 1, 3, and *Asc. Pis.* 26 (10C).

⁴⁷ The phrase *sed etiam arbores* («even the very trees») underlines the exceptionalism of the attack on Cicero's property and person: the trees were not moveables such as the other

Cicero's broader narrative about his enemies forcing him and the *res publica* into exile so that they could destroy everything left behind. But this arboreal pilfering also suggests that the trees had both monetary and symbolic value, and in several ways: the pilfering was itself a conquest, as much as Pompey's conquest of ebony was, and therefore symbolic of the overthrow of Cicero the alleged tyrant⁴⁸; secondly, the trees could help Gabinius build up a suggestive luxurious or intellectual atmosphere in *his* villa. Cicero's trees were captives in Clodius' and Gabinius' triumph over Cicero, and trees were significant symbols of power and control⁴⁹.

3. *Trees and Roman religion (and politics)*

Antiquarian, poetic, numismatic and material evidence shows that the Romans considered some trees sacred and that trees provided a special link to the divine⁵⁰. Although the nature of this sacredness and what the religious implications actually meant have been discussed by modern scholars⁵¹, the thought that trees had religious potential was so deeply rooted as to furnish credible foundation for a host of authorial, artistic, political and other expressions. The often-quoted passage from Pliny shows a typical antiquarian angle:

Haec [*scil.* arbores] fuere numinum templa, priscoque ritu simplicia rura etiam nunc deo praecellentem arborem dicant. nec magis auro fulgentia atque ebore simulacra quam lucos et in iis silentia ipsa adoramus.

[*Trees*] were the temples of the gods. And even in the present day the country people, preserving in their simple ways the ancient rites, consecrate the finest among their trees to some divinity. Indeed we feel ourselves filled with religious awe no less by sacred groves and their very stillness than by statues of the gods, glittering with gold and ivory⁵².

objects plundered and, the argument seems to be, only the extreme *odium* and *crudelitas* of his opponents could explain the force such an uprooting of immovables demanded.

⁴⁸ Cf. Cic. *dom.* 100 where Cicero likens the shrine to *libertas* built on the site of his Palatine house as one of more *tropaea et de me et de re publica [...] constituta* («trophies erected over myself and over the republic»).

⁴⁹ Marzano 2022, 23 for her take on the episode.

⁵⁰ Hunt 2016; Armstrong 2019; Hallett 2021.

⁵¹ Hunt 2016, 1-28 provides a summary (alongside her own argument); Armstrong 2019, 18-30, 53-113.

⁵² Plin. *nat.* 12, 2; trans. Hallett 2021, 236 (adjusted). On the meanings of *numen*, see Hunt 2016, 177-191.

It is also in Pliny, that staunch tree lover, that we find a discussion of the famous *figus Ruminalis*, the fig tree in the Roman Forum which acted as a sacred *lieu de memoire* of Romulus and Remus, who sheltered under it when suckled by the she-wolf⁵³. Visual representations include a second-century BC denarius, which illustrates the central elements of the story: twins, wolf and tree (figure 8, 399)⁵⁴.

Two further objects exemplify the ubiquity and reach of this story in Roman memory culture and the empire itself: an Augustan-period marble altar from central Italy (figure 9, 400) and a 4th-5th century AD mosaic from Roman Britain (figure 10, 401).

The combined literary tradition about the tree shows variance in its physical spot (Forum or slopes of the Palatine) and precise meanings, a transfer of symbolic meaning from one fig tree to another⁵⁵, and we know that the tree itself cannot have been one specific tree in light of fig trees' short life spans. Nevertheless, Hunt has convincingly argued that «the sacrality of each *figus Ruminalis* was unaffected by its own material make-up, but inescapably dependent on some arboreal matter embodying the *memoria* (memorial tradition) which gave the tree its religious meaning»⁵⁶. Trees held religious meaning, and this meaning mattered for the stories the Romans told (about) themselves.

We can spot this in Cicero, too; not least in his discussion of Marius' oak as a place of divine omen in *De legibus*⁵⁷. Indeed, both the Greeks and the Romans associated the oak with the gods, and omens as one of the communication tools between humans and the divine⁵⁸. Also the plants associated with victory – palm and laurel – were imbued with religious meaning and even dynastic allusion⁵⁹. Suetonius reports that Julius Caesar, when cutting down trees to make space for his camp at

⁵³ Plin. *nat.* 15, 77, with Fox 2023, 1-5.

⁵⁴ For the myth behind the scene, see Wiseman 1995; for the numismatic contexts of this coin, see Yarrow 2021, 43; and for further symbolism of the tree within the narrative of the myth, see Mazzoni 2010, 92-97.

⁵⁵ Hunt 2016, 100-112.

⁵⁶ Hunt 2016, 119.

⁵⁷ Cic. *leg.* 1, 1, with Plut. *Mar.* 36, 5-6. See also in this volume Tsouni (438) and McKnight (469-470).

⁵⁸ Armstrong 2019, 116-131 with particular emphasis on Vergil's exposition of the oak's divine properties.

⁵⁹ Armstrong 2019, 146-151 on laurel.

Munda (45 BC), ordered to preserve a palm tree as an omen of victory, and, when a shoot suddenly grew and in a few days overshadowed the parent trunk, Caesar saw this as a divine sign that only his sister's grandson, Octavius (Octavian), should succeed him⁶⁰. Another story, in Pliny the Elder, recalls that Livia upon her engagement with Octavian received in her lap a white hen dropped by an eagle overhead and that this hen had a laurel branch with berries in its beak which the augurs ordered should be planted and religiously guarded. This laurel thrived and Augustus and his successors would use only laurel from this plant for their triumphal wreaths⁶¹.

The connections between trees, religion and power were exploited further in Augustus' expansive use of trees – physical, pictorial and symbolic – in his supposed “revival” of Archaic Roman religion. Hallett has convincingly shown that part of Augustus' claim to have restored the *res publica*, including a return to its alleged old Italic and religious roots, was built on the planting of trees in and outside the City of Rome in the late 30s and 20s BC and reflected in the myriad depictions of (old) trees and plants in Augustan(-period) art and architecture, not least Augustus' own temples (or the marble altar we have just seen)⁶². It is perhaps not a coincidence that Augustus seems to have focused on home-grown rather than the exotic trees favoured by Lucullus and Pompey. Augustus' greening included oak, laurel and cypresses⁶³, which would signal not only the archaic but also the Italic roots of his regime as opposed to Marcus Antonius' exoticism. Moreover, it is significant for my discussion that the evidence for some of this planting within Rome relates to various porticus-monuments (*porticus Vipsania* planted with laurels; *porticus Liviae* with vine; *porticus Philippi* with some unknown species)⁶⁴, and that Pompey's *porticus* and its grove of plane trees can be seen as the immediate and most important predecessor for these *porticus*-monuments. Many later *porticus*-monuments followed and it is clear

⁶⁰ Suet. *Aug.* 94, 11 with Wardle 2014, 529 and Dio 43, 41, 2-3.

⁶¹ Plin. *nat.* 15, 136-137 with Suet. *Gal.* 1; Dio 48, 52, 3-4 and Flory 1989.

⁶² Hallett 2021.

⁶³ Hallett 2021; Fox 2023.

⁶⁴ *Porticus Vipsania*: Mart. 1, 108, 1-4, and Fox 2023, 115-16; *Porticus Liviae*: Plin. *nat.* 14, 11; *Porticus Philippi*: *Forma urbis Romae* shows dots sometimes interpreted as indicating trees (<https://formaurbis.stanford.edu/fragment.php?record=1&field0=all&search0=philippus&op0=and&field1=all>; accessed 13 January 2023), with Fox 2023, 119-122.

that the features of Pompey's porticus made subsequent generations think of such an architectural space as necessitating a garden⁶⁵. Although the *porticus* buildings were not religious *per se*, Pompey had framed his entire complex in association with the Temple to Venus Victrix at the top of the theatre proper, with the garden's «marble and arboreal columns» (in Spencer's formulation) visually creating an axis from goddess to senate house⁶⁶, and combining religious, military and political messages of Roman supremacy in all these spheres and his own crucial leadership, for contemporaries and future generations.

4. Cicero on political trees and Pompey's porticus

For Cicero, the functions of trees spanned the aesthetic, practical, agricultural, intellectual and divine, and we have also seen how others appropriated his trees for political purposes. But how did he consider the political uses of trees in the City of Rome and, in particular, the extraordinary importation and display of plants from the east during the 60s and 50s BC? Indeed, what did he think of Pompey's theatre complex, seeing that it was the most elaborate example of botanical imperialism and competitive display ever seen in the City of Rome?

Cicero describes his experience of the opening of Pompey's theatre in September 55 BC to his friend M. Marius. Framed as crassly extravagant and physically unpleasant entertainment inflicted on the urban audience, as opposed to Marius' elegant and pleasant home entertainment of his own choice⁶⁷, Cicero goes out of the way to distance himself from what the crowd seems to enjoy (*haec quae ceteri mirantur*, «the things which everybody else admires»; *ea quae sine causa mirantur alii*, «these things which others admire without good cause»)⁶⁸. In Cicero's description, everything was lavish in scale but the actors were past their prime and the audience was *semisomni* (half asleep), the co-

⁶⁵ Gleason 1990, 1994; Hallett 2021, 245-247.

⁶⁶ On this visual link, see Gleason 1994; von Stackelberg 2009, 81-82; Spencer 2010, 169 (citation).

⁶⁷ Wiseman 2015, 87-88 on the lack of choice on the part of the theatre audience as opposed to that of Marius.

⁶⁸ Cic. *fam.* 7, 1 (SB 24). For further discussion of this letter, see Del Giovane in this volume.

pious numbers of props (600 live mules, 3000 mixing bowls, cavalry and infantry equipment of all kinds) not pleasurable, the Greek and Oscan shows too common for excitement, the athletes a waste of time even in the eyes of the benefactor himself, the hunts inhumane and unoriginal, and even the exotic elephants apparently generated a feeling of compassion with their plight rather than wonder⁶⁹. Pliny elaborated on this public feeling, which was aroused by the elephants' cries at being executed on the spot⁷⁰, while other later authors thought the games a major success or described the festivities as the climax of Pompey's career⁷¹. While Cicero's depiction of the games is designed to signal his own intellectual habitus, to nurture his relationship with M. Marius, and to denigrate the grandeur of Pompey's position and benefaction, his letter nevertheless evidences the incomparable superiority of Pompey's position in Roman public life and the mixed emotions this engendered in his seeming peers.

Apart from the opening of the theatre, Cicero must have experienced the *porticus* garden on his walks to and from the senate meetings which sometimes took place in Pompey's *curia* forming part of the complex; Asconius even says that the senate meetings took place in the *porticus* itself, but that must be a euphemism for the adjoining *curia*⁷². However, we have no extant statements by Cicero on the garden itself.

Over a decade later, and after Pompey's death, Cicero considered Pompey's games and his building complex in his *De officiis* (44 BC) as part of his discussion of acquiring the support and esteem of others, including through financial liberality:

magnificentissima vero nostri Pompei munera secundo consulatu; in quibus omnibus quid mihi placeat, vides.

⁶⁹ Cic. *fam.* 7, 1-3 (SB 24). Seneca (*brev.* 13, 3-7) expressed similar misgivings regarding the elephants, from a similarly intellectual self-presentation. Bell 2004, 151-198 for the significance of elephants in Roman republican public and political life. Plin. *nat.* 8, 70; 8, 71; 8, 84 specifies some of the many exotic animals presented at Pompey's games.

⁷⁰ Plin. *nat.* 8, 21; cf. Dio 39, 38, both with Bell 2004, 171-172; Kachuck 2020.

⁷¹ Vell. Pat. 2, 48, 2; Lucan. 8, 27-31; Prop. 3, 11, 37; Sen. *Marc.* 20, 4; Iuv. 10, 283-286.

⁷² Asc. 51C-52C, *ob has suspiciones Pompeius in superioribus hortis se continuerat; [...]* *Item cum senatus in porticu Pompeii haberetur ut Pompeius posset interesse* («On account of these suspect circumstances, Pompeius decided to keep to the gardens on the higher ground. [...] Again, when the senate was meeting in the Portico of Pompeius, so that Pompey could attend»; transl. Lewis).

*and the events provided by my friend Pompey in his second consulship were extremely magnificent. You can see what I myself would approve in all this*⁷³.

Atque etiam illae impensae meliores, muri, navalia, portus, aquarum ductus omniaque, quae ad usum rei publicae pertinent. Quamquam, quod praesens tamquam in manum datur, iucundius est; tamen haec in posterum gratiora. Theatra, porticus, nova templa verecundius reprehendo propter Pompeium, sed doctissimi non probant, ut et hic ipse Panaetius, quem multum in his libris secutus sum, non interpretatus. Et Phalereus Demetrius, qui Periclem, principem Graeciae, vituperat, quod tantam pecuniam in praeclara illa propylaea coniecerit. Sed de hoc genere toto in iis libris, quos de re publica scripsi, diligenter est disputatum.

*Again, money is better spent on walls, docks, harbours, aqueducts, and everything else that concerns the needs of the nation; and these win greater gratitude from posterity, although what is present – what is in the hand, so to speak – is more pleasurable. On account of Pompey, I am embarrassed to criticize theatres, colonnades and new temples; but the most learned men do not approve of them, as Panaetius himself says (whom I am to a large extent following, though not expounding, in these books) and also Demetrius of Phalerum, who denounces Pericles, the foremost of the Greeks, because he threw away so much money on that splendid propylaea. But I thoroughly discussed the whole topic in the books which I wrote On the Republic [now lost]*⁷⁴.

Indeed, the discussion prior to the first passage makes it clear that the interlocutor Cicero would not approve of such things because the wealth was spent extravagantly (*prodigi*) on things that will be remembered only briefly, at best, and not spent liberally (*liberali*) on worthwhile and longer-lasting things (*off.* 2, 55). Even Pompey's theatre, temple and – notably – his *porticus* («colonnades») should not be approved of, even if given to the enjoyment of the people. Cicero cites philosophical authorities for this view, but his letter to Marius suggests that the criticism was grounded in moral philosophy as well as intellectual *mores*⁷⁵. Moreover, Russell's argument that Pompey essentially privatised a previously public space through his complex might also have been a reason for Cicero's

⁷³ Cic. *off.* 2, 57 (trans. Atkins 1991).

⁷⁴ Cic. *off.* 2, 60 (trans. Atkins 1991).

⁷⁵ Dyck 1996, 448 saw this as another case of a conflict between Roman sentiment and Greek precept. Pagán 2016, 13 certainly reads an attitude against allegedly promiscuous behaviour as the foundation for Cicero's disdain of Pompey's *porticus*.

concern about the purposes of Pompey's seeming *liberalitas*⁷⁶. If the *porticus* was to be criticised, it can only be because of its combination of lavishness for the sake of competitive display and its conduciveness to entertainment needing the shady cover provided by its extravagant array of exotic plants and trees.

Trees could indeed provide pleasure and atmosphere of both physical and intellectual kinds, connect with divine powers and collective memories, and signal social standing and political power, but Cicero's arboreal attitude depended on his attitude to the notions and relationships the trees were made to symbolise, and how these related to his own notions of correct Roman elite behaviour. Although he did not live to see Augustus' "greening" of Rome, he might have been equally suspicious of this even larger-scale botanical appropriation to support monarchical – tyrannical – ambitions.

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⁷⁶ Russell 2016, 153-186.

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Fig. 1



The Triumph of Pompey in Rome, Nicolò Giolfino, about 1520 ([Castelvecchio Museum](#), Verona) – sections.

Fig. 2



The Triumph of Pompey in Rome, Nicolò Giolfino, about 1520 (Castelvecchio Museum, Verona) – details of the two panels.

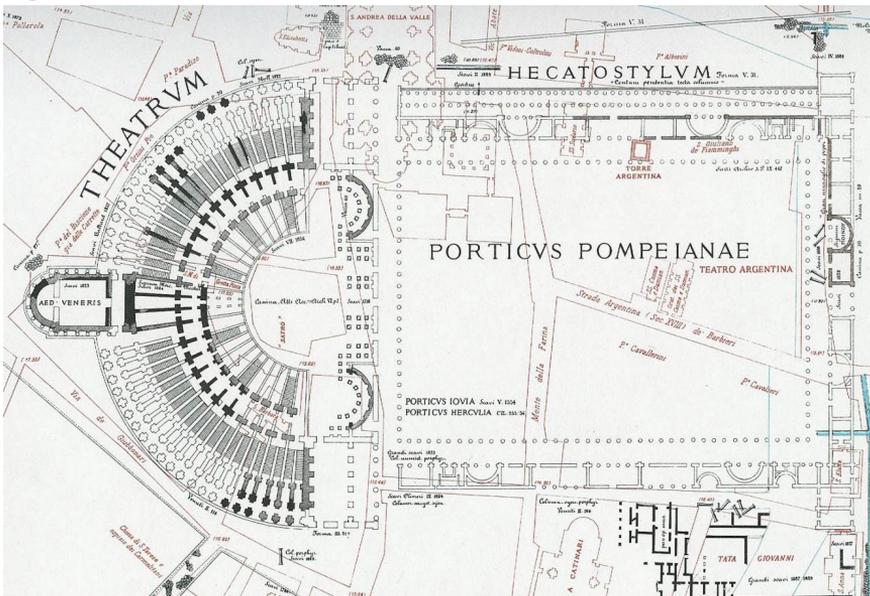
Fig. 3



Left: Ebony: *Diospyros ebenum*, R. H. Beddome, [Flora sylbativa of southern India](#) (1869-74).

Right: Balsam: [Commiphora gileadensis](#), listed as [Balsamodendron ehrenbergianum](#), Petronella J. M. Pas 1881.

Fig. 4



Rodolfo Lanciani, [Forma Urbis Romae](#), *Theatrum Pompeii* (Wikimedia Commons).

Fig. 5

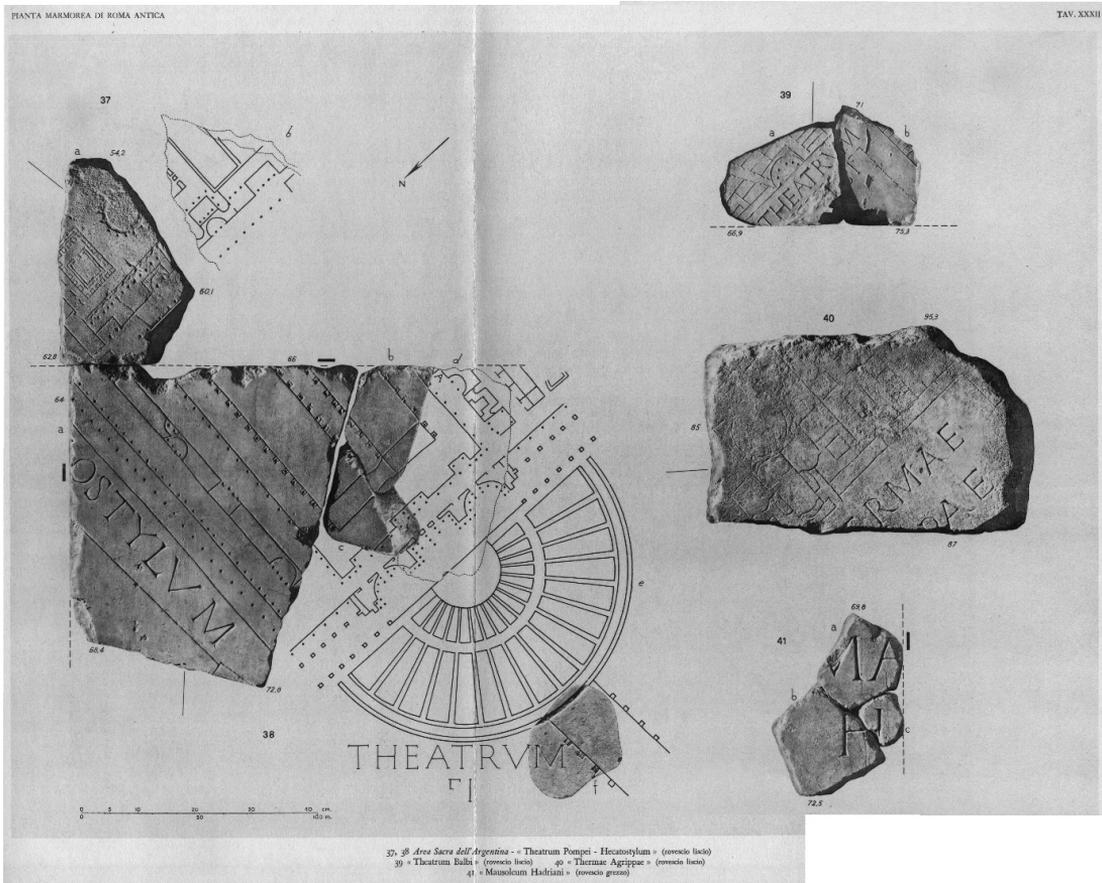
Pianta marmorea di Roma antica, [Forma Urbis Romae](#) Stanford project.

Fig. 6



Pompey's Theatre-complex, reconstruction by Matthew Nicholls, copyright 2023.

Fig. 7



J. M. William Turner (1775-1851), [Cicero at His Villa at Tusculum](#), National Trust Ascott, NTIV_ASCT_1535124-001.

Fig. 8



[Silver denarius](#). Helmeted head of Roma (obverse); She-wolf suckling twins, with tree (*ficus Ruminalis*) behind, one bird perching on trunk and two birds perching on upper branches, Faustulus (left), FOSTLV, SEX PO, ROM[A] (reverse). RRC 235/1c, 137 BC, British Museum R.7560.

Fig. 9



[Marble altar](#), Augustan period; Arezzo Civic Archaeological Museum

Fig. 10



[Mosaic of She-wolf](#), Romulus, Remus and *ficus Ruminalis*, Aldborough, ca. 300-400 AD, Leeds City Museum.

