

CICERO, DIONYSIUS OF HALICARNASSUS

The Mythology of the Farmer-General

Source: Cicero, *de sen* 16. Translated by Evelyn S. Shuckburgh. In *Two Essays on Old Age & Friendship*. Golden treasury series. London: Macmillan, 1903. Dion. Hal. *RA* 10.17. Translated by Earnest Cary. In *The Roman Antiquities of Dionysius of Halicarnassus*. Loeb classical library. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1937.

Cicero: *On Old Age* 16

Cicero is holding forth on the ancient Roman ideal of the farmer-citizen and, by extension, the farmer-general.

I might continue my list of the delights of country life; but even what I have said I think is somewhat overlong. However, you must pardon me; for farming is a very favorite hobby of mine, and old age is naturally rather garrulous—for I would not be thought to acquit it of all faults.

Well, it was in a life of this sort that M'. Curius, after celebrating triumphs over the Samnites, the Sabines, and Pyrrhus, spent his last days.¹ When I look at his villa—for it is not far from my own—I never can enough admire the man's own frugality or the spirit of the age. As Curius was sitting at his hearth the Samnites, who brought him a large sum of gold, were repulsed by him; for it was not, he said, a fine thing in his eyes to possess gold, but to rule those who possessed it. Could such a high spirit fail to make old age pleasant?

But to return to farmers—not to wander from my own métier. In those days there were senators, i.e., old men, on their farms. For L. Quinctius Cincinnatus was actually at the plough when word was brought him that he had been named Dictator.² It was by his order as Dictator, by the way, that C. Servilius Ahala, the Master of the Horse, seized and put to death S. Maelius when attempting to obtain royal power.³ Curius as well as other old men used to receive their summonses to attend the Senate in their farm-houses, from which circumstances the summoners were called viatores or “travelers.” Was these men's old age an object of pity who found their pleasure in the cultivation of the land? In my opinion, scarcely any life can be more blessed, not alone from its utility (for agriculture is beneficial to the whole human race), but also as much from the mere pleasure of the thing, to which I have already alluded, and from the rich abundance and supply of all things necessary for the food of man and for the worship of the gods above. So, as these are objects of desire to certain people, let us make our peace with pleasure. For the good and hard—working farmer's wine—cellar and oil store, as well as his larder, are always well filled, and his whole farm house is richly furnished. It abounds in pigs, goats, lambs, fowls, milk, cheese, and honey. Then there is the garden, which the farmers themselves call their “second flitch.” A zest and flavor is added to all these by hunting and fowling in spare

hours. Need I mention the greenery of meadows, the rows of trees, the beauty of vineyard and olive—grove? I will put it briefly: nothing can either furnish necessities more richly, or present a fairer spectacle, than well—cultivated land. And to the enjoyment of that, old age does not merely present no hindrance—it actually invites and allures to it. For where else can it better warm itself, either by basking in the sun or by sitting by the fire, or at the proper time cool itself more wholesomely by the help of shade or water? Let the young keep their arms then to themselves, their horses, spears, their foils and ball, their swimming—baths and running—path. To us old men let them, out of the many forms of sport, leave dice and counters; but even that as they choose, since old age can be quite happy without them.

Dionysius of Halicarnassus: *RA* 10.17

Cincinnatus was made suffect, or replacement, consul in 460. The story of his being at his plow when called is told naming both to the suffect consulship (here, by Dionysius) and, two years later, to the dictatorship (by Livy).

The war⁴ with the brigands being thus ended, the tribunes rekindled the civil strife once more by demanding of the surviving consul the fulfillment of the promises made to them by Valerius, who perished in the fighting,⁵ with regard to the introduction of the law.⁶ But Claudius⁷ for a time kept procrastinating, now by performing lustrations for the city, now by offering sacrifices of thanksgiving to the gods, and again by entertaining the multitude with games and shows.

When all his excuses had been exhausted, he finally declared that another consul must be chosen in place of the deceased; for he said that the acts performed by him all would be neither legal nor lasting, whereas those performed by two of them would be legitimate and valid. Having put them off with this pretence, he appointed a day for the election, when he would nominate his colleague. In the meantime the leading men of the senate, consulting together in private, agreed among themselves upon the person to whom they would entrust the magistracy.

And when the day appointed for the election had come and the herald had called the first class, the eighteen centuries of knights together with the eighty centuries of foot, consisting of the wealthiest citizens, entering the appointed place, chose as

¹ M'. Curius Dentatus, consul 290 and 275, famous for frugality and incorruptibility.

² In 458 BCE.

³ During Cincinnatus's second term as dictator, in 439 BCE.

⁴ I.e., the slave uprising of 460. Cf. Livy III.19.1-3.

⁵ P. Valerius Publicola, consul 460, was killed during the slave uprising.

⁶ One of the tribunes of 462, C. Terentilius Harsa, proposed that a commission be appointed to gather up the law, and to publish it to the whole people. This would have eliminated the stranglehold the patricians had on drafting and administering law, which was unpublished and secret prior to the Twelve Tables.

⁷ C. Claudius, consul 460 (i.e., the surviving consul).

consul L. Quinctius Cincinnatus, whose son K. Quinctius the tribunes had brought to trial for his life and compelled to leave the city. And no other class being called to vote—for the centuries which had voted were three more in number than the remaining centuries—the populace departed, regarding it as a grievous misfortune that a man who hated them was to be possessed of the consular power. Meanwhile the senate sent men to invite the consul and to conduct him to the city to assume his magistracy.

It chanced that Quinctius was just then plowing a piece of land for sowing,⁸ he himself following the gaunt oxen that were breaking up the fallow; he had no tunic on, wore a small loin-cloth and had a cap upon his head. Upon seeing a crowd of people come into the field he stopped his plough and for a long time was at a loss to know who they were or what they wanted of him; then, when some one ran up to him and bade him make himself more presentable, he went into the cottage and after putting on his clothes came out to them.

Thereupon the men who were sent to escort him all greeted him, not by his name, but as consul; and clothing him with the

purple-bordered robe and placing before him the axes and the other insignia of his magistracy, they asked him to follow them to the city. And he, pausing for a moment and shedding tears, said only this: "So my field will go unsown this year, and we shall be indicate danger of having not enough to live on." Then he kissed his wife, and charging her to take care of things at home, went to the city.

I am led to relate these particulars for no other reason than to let all the world see what kind of men the leaders of Rome were at that time, that they worked with their own hands, led frugal lives, did not chafe under honorable poverty, and, far from aiming at positions of royal power, actually refused them when offered. For it will be seen that the Romans of to-day do not bear the least resemblance to them, but follow the very opposite practices in everything—with the exception of a very few by whom the dignity of the commonwealth is still maintained and a resemblance to those men preserved. But enough on this subject.

⁸ Compare Livy's description (III.26.8 ff.) of Cincinnatus' humble activities at the time of his appointment to the dictatorship.