

Cicero's Dream of Scipio

Somnium Scipionis

Translated by Niall McCloskey¹



From the Latin text of Cicero, M.T. *De re publica*. (Ed. James E.G. Zetzel), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1995; Bk. VI, vs. 9-29.

©Niall McCloskey, 1998

Reproduced herein with permission of the copyright owner.

9. You will recall that I went to Africa with the consul M. Manlius [149 BCE]² as military tribune to the Fourth Legion. At that time it was of great importance to me to visit King Masinissa who was an intimate family friend for some very good reasons. When I called on him the old man embraced me tearfully and after a little while he raised his eyes to the heavens and said: “I give you thanks, Great Sun, and to you also, the rest of the Heavenly Beings, that before I depart from this life I see in my kingdom and in my house a P. Cornelius Scipio whose very name gives me renewed vigor. For never has the memory of that superb and unconquerable man³ been absent from my mind.” Then we discussed the affairs of his kingdom and the affairs of our Republic and the rest of that day was spent in animated conversation between us.



¹ [Niall McCloskey was born in Dublin in 1939 and studied at University College, Dublin and the University of Liverpool with A.H. Armstrong. He taught Classics at Fourah Bay College (now University of Sierra Leone) Freetown, 1965–1967, and at the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, 1967–2006.

He is diverting his retirement at the moment with translating Alcinous and Minucius Felix with comments. Suggestions to: niallm@sasktel.net

² Masinissa (c. 240–148 BCE), king of Numidia and ally of Rome in the Second Punic War (218–201 BCE) and the Third Punic War (149–146 BCE).

³ Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus Major (236–184 BCE), Grandfather of the speaker and victorious over Hannibal in the Second Punic War.



10. After a royal banquet we prolonged our conversation late into the night. This time the old man talked of nothing else except Africanus and recalled not only his achievements but also all that he had said. We eventually parted to go to bed and a deeper sleep than usual came on me possibly because I was exhausted by my journey and by having remained awake so late into the night. It was then that Africanus revealed himself to me in that form which I know better from his image than from the man himself because, I believe, of my conversation with Massinissa: our thoughts and conversations often produce images in our sleep as Ennius⁴ wrote concerning Homer about whom in his waking hours he thought and spoke most frequently. When I recognized the image of my grandfather I shuddered but he said: “Be calm and put aside your fear, Scipio, and commit to your memory what I shall say.

11. “Do you see that city which I compelled to submit to the Roman people and which has now revived ancient rivalries and refuses to keep the peace?” (He was pointing to Carthage from a high and prominent place which was shining and clear in the full light of the stars). “You have come here while still barely a soldier to attack that city. Within two years you as consul will destroy it and you will gain for yourself that cognomen which you already have inherited from us. When you have destroyed Carthage you will have a triumph and will be censor. You will undertake commands in Africa, Syria, Asia and Greece. During your absence you will be chosen as consul for a second time and you will bring to an end a very important war and you will overrun Numantia. When you are being driven in your chariot to the Capitol you will discover that the Republic has been greatly disturbed by the policies of my grandson.⁵

12. “In this situation it will be your duty to make available to your fatherland the light of your mind, your genius and your wisdom. Even now I see for you a somewhat uncertain fateful path. In the course of your years the sun shall have completed seven times eight turns and returns and when these two numbers (each of which is perfect but for different reasons) have completed in the circuit of nature the sum of years fated for you then the whole state will turn to you and to you alone and to your name. The Senate, all good men, all the allies and all the Latins will look to you and you will be the one man on whom the security of the state will depend. Indeed it will be proper at that time for you as Dictator to restore the Republic but only if you can avoid the sacrilegious hands of those close to you.” At this point Laelius cried out and the others groaned aloud but Scipio himself laughed lightly and said: “Shush, I beg you. Do not wake me from my dream but listen to the rest for just a little while.⁶

13. “In order that you may, Africanus, be even more assiduous in protecting the Republic, be assured that, for all who have protected their fatherland and have aided and advanced it, there has been allotted in heaven a special place where those blessed ones enjoy eternal life. To that first of gods who rules all the universe there is

⁴ Ennius (239–169), Roman epic poet and dramatist.

⁵ Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus (c. 165–133 BCE), revolutionary tribune, assassinated by conservative senators.

⁶ Scipio was called on by the Senate and the people to restore order in the aftermath of the Assassination of Tiberius Gracchus. Many attributed his sudden death at the height of the crisis to foul play.



no earthly institution more pleasing than the assemblies and gatherings of men ruled by law which are called cities and the rulers and protectors of these are sent from heaven and to heaven return.”

14. At this point although I was frightened less by the fear of death than by fear of the attacks of my friends I asked him whether he himself and my father Paulus⁷ and the others whom we consider dead were really still alive. “Indeed,” he replied, “these men live and have flown away from the chains of the body as if from prison since what you call life is the real death. Do you not see your father Paulus approaching?” When I saw him I wept profusely but he embraced and kissed me and ordered me to cease weeping.

15. At last I restrained my weeping and was able to begin to speak: “O noblest and most excellent of fathers, since this life is the true life as I hear from the lips of Africanus himself why do I tarry on Earth, why do I not hurry from here to come to you?” “That is not the way of things,” he said. “Unless the god whose temple is all that you see has freed you from the restraints of the body entry here cannot be opened to you. All men are born bound by this law: They should be the guardians of that globe which you see in the middle of this temple and which is called Earth. For this a soul is given them from the eternal fires which you call stars. These are rounded globes and are animate with divine minds and complete their circuits and orbits with miraculous speed. Because of this you and all pious men must retain your souls in the constraints of the body. Unless at the command of him who gave you that body you must not depart from the life of men since otherwise you would be perceived as a fugitive from the human condition assigned to you by god.

16. “Scipio, cultivate the virtues of justice and piety, as your uncle and I, your father, did since, when these virtues flourish in parents and their children, they are also most active in the state. A life of that kind is the way to heaven and into the company here of those who have already lived but are now released from the body and occupy this place which you call as you learned from the Greeks the ‘Milky Way’ and which you now can see.”

There was indeed a circle shining with a remarkable brightness among the flames. As I examined it everything seemed to be remarkably clear and wonderful. There were stars which we never see from here and their size was such as I had never before suspected. The smallest of these, farthest from the heavens and closest to Earth, is the moon which shines with another’s light. The spheres of the stars far exceeded the size of Earth. Indeed so small did the Earth seem to me that I was ashamed of our empire through which we touch, as it were, merely a point of it.

17. As I peered at the Earth more closely Africanus asked: “How long will your mind be fixed upon the ground? Do you not see what temple you have entered? All things are joined together in nine circles or, better, spheres. The outermost of these is the heavenly sphere which embraces all the others. It is the highest god himself who protects and contains all the others. In it also are the eternal revolving circles of the stars. Below it are the seven spheres which revolve with a contrary motion to that of

⁷ Lucius Aemilius Paulus (c. 220-160 BCE), successful general and father of Scipio.



the heavens. One of these spheres is that planet which people on Earth call Saturn. After it is the planet called Jupiter whose glow brings prosperity and health to men. Then comes the planet, red and threatening to the lands which you call Mars. Below it the sun occupies the region almost in the exact middle, the mind and guide of the universe, the first of all lights and their controller and of such a size that it pervades and fills all things with its light. It is followed as if by companions first by the circuit of Venus and then the circuit of Mercury and in the lowest sphere the moon revolves burning with the light of the sun. Below this there is only the mortal and destructible except the souls which the gods have given to the human race: only above the moon all things are eternal. The sphere in the centre of all, the ninth sphere, is the Earth: it does not move and is the lowest and things are carried towards it because of their natural weight.”



18. As I looked at these things I was dumbfounded but when I recovered myself I asked: “What is this great and so alluring sound which fills my ears?” He replied: “It is the sound which is produced by the motion of the spheres themselves. They are separated by unequal intervals but they are arranged in an exact proportion and the treble is moderated by the bass to produce variable sounds equally. Movements [of the magnitude of the movements of the spheres] cannot be performed in silence and nature brings it about that at one end of the universe they sound in the treble, at the other end in the bass. As a result the highest star-bearing circuit of Heaven whose movement is swifter moves with a treble, lively sound, the lowest, that is the lunar circuit, with the deepest bass. The Earth, the ninth sphere, remains motionless in one place and occupies the central point of the whole universe. The other eight orbits produce seven distinct sounds with their intervals since two of them [Venus and Mercury] move at the same speed. This number seven is almost the key to all things. Learned men have imitated it on strings and in songs and thereby have opened a passage-way for their return to this place like those others who devoted during their human lives themselves and their intellectual genius to the study of the divine.

19. “When however men’s ears are filled with this sound they become deaf. Hearing is the dullest of our senses as can be seen from the fact that the people who live at the place where the Nile plunges down from very high mountains near the place called Katapouda have no sense of hearing because of the magnitude of the sound. Similarly the music generated by the revolving of the whole universe is so great that the ears of man cannot receive it. Again you cannot look directly at the sun since it will overcome your sense of sight with its rays.”

20. Even as I was wondering at these things I kept turning back my eyes to the Earth. Africanus spoke: “I see that even now you still are thinking about the place and home of men. If ever it seems small to you, as it is, always think back on these heavenly realities and despise the merely human things. For what fame or glory can you look for from the speech of men? You can see that Earth is inhabited only in a few small regions and that in between these, as it were, blots there are large empty



spaces. The inhabitants of Earth are so isolated from each other that nothing can pass between them. Some of them live in the same longitude as you but some in the opposite latitude, others in the same latitude as you but in the opposite longitude. From men living in this manner you cannot expect to win glory.



21. “You can see this same Earth surrounded and encircled by several zones. Two of these are separated from each other by the greatest possible distance and are upheld by the opposite poles of the Heavens. Both of them you can see are frozen while the central and widest zone is burnt by the heat of the sun. Two of the zones are habitable. The southern zone in which those who live there must walk upside down has no importance for the Roman people. Look now at the northern zone which you inhabit and mark how little of it involves the Romans. For the territory inhabited by you is confined by its northern and southern limits: it is surrounded by what you call the Atlantic or the Great Ocean. Even that you can see is very small for such a large name!

22. “These are the lands inhabited and known to you. Surely you do not think your reputation or the reputation of any Roman could escape these limits and climb the Caucasus Mountains which you can see or swim across the Ganges? Who will hear your name at the remaining regions, north, south, east or west? When you subtract these regions you can see in what near confines your glory wishes to spread itself. And for how long will those who do speak of us continue to do so?

23. “Moreover, even if the children of future generations wish to hand on to posterity the fame of any one of us which they inherited from their fathers the floods and conflagrations which must occur at predetermined times make it impossible to attain even a temporary fame, much less an eternal glory. What does it matter that your descendants will be ignorant of you since your ancestors were equally ignorant of your deeds? Those ancestors were as many in number as your descendants will be and were certainly better men.

24. “Consider also that none of those who can hear of your reputation has a memory that endures for even a year. Men measure a year by the return of the sun, that is, by the return of one star. When all the stars return at the same time to the place from which they began they restore the heavens to the same appearance and this occurs only at very long intervals. When that happens the true year[the Great Year] can be said to be turning. In the course of that year I would not dare to say how many generations of men are contained. When the sun suffers eclipse in the same quarter of heaven and on the same day of the year as once it seemed to men to do at the time the soul of Romulus made his way here and when all the constellations have been called back to the positions they held then you may consider the years to have come full circle. But of that year scarcely a twentieth part has passed.

25. “If therefore you ever despaired of returning to this place in which good and outstanding men have all things, think of how little value is glory among men which can scarcely endure a small part of one year? If you wish to look aloft and consider this



place and eternal home do not yield to the demands of the masses nor place the hope of your life in human rewards. Rather let virtue itself draw you to the true glory by its own light. Leave what others say about you to them. They will gossip anyhow and gossip is limited to those narrow regions which you see and never has any lasting power. A man's reputation is overturned by his death and is erased by the neglect of posterity."

26. When he had finished, I said: "If for those who have deserved well of the fatherland a path as it were lies open to the entrance of heaven, now that such a great reward has been revealed to me, I shall strive all the harder although from my boyhood I have walked in your footsteps and the footsteps of my father and I have not been a disgrace to your fame." He replied: "Continue to strive thus and bear this in mind that you are not mortal, only your body is. That appearance you wear is not you but simply a form which can be traced out by a finger. Know that you are god since god is any being who acts, who thinks, who remembers, who has foresight, who rules, controls and moves the body which it has command over in the same way as god rules the Universe. Just as the eternal god moves the universe which is partly mortal, so does the immortal soul move the destructible body.

27. "For what is always in motion is eternal since it is necessary that what brings motion to something else and itself derives its motion from outside itself have an end of life when there is an end of motion. Only that which moves itself is never deserted by itself and is destined never to be deprived of motion. There is no source for the First Principle of things since it is from the Principal that all other beings come. The First Principle itself cannot derive from any other thing. What derives from something other than itself cannot be the First Principle. What was never derived can never cease to be. For if a First Principle were destroyed it will not be reborn from any other being nor will it create another First Principle from itself if it is the case that all things have their origin in the First Principle. So it happens that the First Principle of motion comes from that which is self-moving and can neither be created nor die. Otherwise all heaven would fall and all nature come to an end of necessity and would not find any other power by which it would be put in motion as it was impelled in the beginning.

28. "Since it is clear that what is self-moving is eternal, who can deny that the same nature is given to souls? Anything which is moved only by an external power is inanimate but the animate is moved by its own intrinsic motion. This is the nature and power proper to souls. And if it is the only self-moving being out of all the rest it is certainly not created and is eternal.

29. "Make use of this soul for the highest ends. The highest concerns are for the safety of the fatherland and the man whose soul has been devoted to such concerns will fly more quickly to this place and to his true home. And he will do this even more swiftly if even during the time when he is in the body he will look outside himself and by contemplating the external universe separate himself from the body. But the souls of those who have given themselves over to the pleasures of the body have made themselves, as it were, the flunkies of their appetites by obeying the orders and whims of desire: such men violate the laws of both the gods and men. When their



souls are separated from their bodies they flutter around the Earth and do not return to this place until they have endured many generations of suffering.”

He departed and I was freed from my dream.



The Vision of a Knight by Raphael, 1504-5

In this painting a knight lies asleep. In his dream there are two beautiful women. One woman, dressed in soft flowing clothes, offers him flowers. The other woman, dressed in dark clothing, offers the knight a sword and a book. The path behind the pretty woman runs beside a river. The other path leads up a steep mountain. Raphael was thinking about choices. Should the knight take the easy road, or should he try to change things?⁸

⁸ After <http://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raphael>



Macrobius on Scipio's Dream

Translated by Thomas Taylor

Taylor T. (Tr. & Comm.). *Select Works of Porphyry*: Endnote 1 by T. Taylor "On the Homeric Cave of the Nymphs." (1st ed. 1823); Frome: The Prometheus Trust, 1999 (2nd ed.); pp. 162-63; [Macrobius' 12th chapter of his comment on Scipio's dream.]

On the Descent of the Soul from Heavens to Earth



As soon, therefore, as the soul gravitates towards the body, in this first production of herself, she begins to experience the material tumult, that is, matter flowing into her essence. And this is what Plato remarks in the *Phædo*, that the soul is drawn into body, staggering with recent intoxication; signifying by this the new drink of matter's impetuous flood, through which the soul becoming defiled and heavy, is drawn into a terrene situation. But the starry cup, placed between Cancer and Lion, is a symbol of this mystic truth, signifying that descending souls first experience intoxication in that part of the heavens, through the influx of matter. Hence, oblivion, the companion of intoxication, there begins silently to creep into the recesses of the soul. For if souls retained in their descent to bodies the memory of divine concerns of which they were conscious in the heavens, there would be no dissension amongst men, concerning divinity. But all, indeed, in descending drink of oblivion; though some more, and others less. On this account, though truth is not apparent to all men on the earth, yet all exercise their opinions about it: because *a defect of memory, is the origin of opinion*. But those discover most, who have drunk least of oblivion: because they easily remember what they had known before in heavens. Hence, that which is called *lectio* by the Latins, is called by the Greeks *αναγνώσεις*, or repeated *knowledge*; because when we learn any truths, we recognize what we naturally knew, before material influxion, rushing into the body, had intoxicated the soul. But it is this *hyle* or matter which composes all that body of the world, which we every where perceived adorned with the impressions of forms. Its highest and purest part, however, by which divine natures are either sustained or composed is called *nectar*, and is believed to be the drink of the gods: but its more inferior and turbid part is the drink of souls. And this is what the ancients have denominated the river of *Lethe*.



About Scipio's Dream⁹

The Dream of Scipio is a dream-vision written by the Roman philosopher Marcus Tullius Cicero in which Publius Cornelius Scipio Aemilianus meets his grandfather by adoption, Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus (236–184 BCE) hero of the Second Punic War against Hannibal's Carthage. The Dream of Scipio forms a digression within the sixth book of Cicero's *De re publica*, his treatise on the laws and polity of the Roman republic. Comparisons have been drawn between this concluding section of Cicero's work and the Myth of Er which appears in Plato's "Res publica" and to which "De re publica" is said to respond.

In the brief but compressed work Scipio Aemilianus travels through the planetary spheres. Digressions upon cosmology, dream-interpretation, prophecy, time-cycles, geography and doctrine upon the nature of the soul are included in it as well as advancing Pythagorean thought and the idea of the *Music of the Spheres*. *Somnium Scipionis* was studied by the Roman philosopher Macrobius (395–423); his *Commentary* upon Scipio's Dream was valued throughout the Middle Ages. The Dream of Scipio was known to the early Christian era philosopher Boethius. Chaucer was also acquainted with it, referencing the work explicitly in his Parliament of Fowles and the Nun's Priest's Tale.

The 16-year old composer Mozart wrote a short opera entitled *Il sogno di Scipione* (K126) based upon Scipio Aemilianus' inter-planetary journey through the cosmos.

Manuscript illustrations¹⁰

Page 4: Diagram in folio 25 recto. The Universe, the earth in the centre, surrounded by the seven planets within the zodiacal signs, carried on the shoulders of four giant male figures (Barker-Benfield No. 1).

Page 5: Folio 34 recto. Initial N: "Nec excogitatas a nobis lineas . . ." Diagram: The five zones of the earth (Barker-Benfield No. 3).

Page 8: Folio 46 verso. Initial E shaped in the form of a writing man, probably representing Macrobius himself. The first words of the text are written on his tablets: *ex his*.

Further reading

- Anon. *Cicero's Somnium Scipionis*. Santa Barbara: Theosophy Weekly: Pocket Pamphlet Series, No 1; [scanned copy available upon request].
- *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, (DREAMS) X pp. 246-64; [republished in our Blavatsky Speaks Series.]

⁹ After http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Somnium_Scipionis

¹⁰ From a 12th century manuscript of Macrobius' *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis* (Parchment, 50 ff.; 23.9 x 14 cm; Southern France). Date: c. 1150. Source: Copenhagen, Det Kongelige Bibliotek, MS. NKS 218 4.

