



*For Professor Margarita Buzalkovska-Aleksova at the occasion of her retirement
In otio tumultuaris; in tumultu es otiosa.¹*

Rethinking Cicero's phrase *cum dignitate otium*²

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ABSTRACT

There is a large disagreement regarding Cicero's phrase *cum dignitate otium*. Indeed the interpretations of modern scholars have found little common ground. The aim of this paper is to study the meanings of *dignitas* and *otium* separately, to describe in outline the main views on the phrase *cum dignitate otium* and to give a fresh perspective on the subject.

Key words: Cicero, cum dignitate otium, Roman politics, rhetoric

¹ I have taken this sentence from the *Rhetorica ad Herrenium* (4.21) and made a minor change (instead of *otiosus* I have used *otiosa*, in order to adjust the gender), having in mind that Professor Buzalkovska-Aleksova is a real free spirit, which is one of the reasons we all love her.

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1. Introduction

According to extant sources this phrase appears only in Cicero's writings, in the period between 56 and 54 B.C., after his exile and restoration. First, it occurs in Cicero's judicial speech *Pro Sestio*, delivered in 56 B.C. Just a year after the prosecution of Sestius there is a variation of the same phrase in Cicero's rhetorical treatise *De Oratore*. Finally, Cicero uses it in the famous letter to Lentulus (*Fam.* 1.9) in 54 B.C.

This paper will attempt to address two questions: First, is Cicero really the author of the phrase? And second, does the phrase invariably mean the same thing during the period of three years (56-54 B.C.)?

2. Meanings of the *dignitas*

Dignitas had an overwhelming importance for members of Roman upper classes in the republican times.³ It contained a man's good name, his reputation and standing. Thus, it had moral and/or political connotations. The *dignitas* of one the same person could 'grow and advance' through time, as Tacitus said for his own *dignitas*.⁴ In turn, someone's *dignitas* could shift to the opposite direction, as it was the case with Cicero after his exile, in 58-57 B.C.⁵

In addition, there were *gradus dignitatis*⁶ and it could be spoken of *princeps dignitate*.⁷ Thus, the *dignitas* of a senator was greater than that of

³ For example, at the beginning of the year 49 B.C. Caesar said to Pompey's envoys that his *dignitas* was something on which he would stake his life (*Caes. B.C.* 1.9.2).

⁴ *Tac. Hist.* 1.1.

⁵ Speaking of his conduct in 58 B.C., two years later, in the *Pro Sestio* Cicero says: '*cum omnia semper ad dignitatem rettulisset*' (*Sest.* 48). But, in October 54 he writes to Quintus: '*nullam esse rem publicam...nullam in ullo nostrum dignitatem*' (*Q. fr.* 3.4.1). In the year 46, after a long period of silence, Cicero successfully defended Marcellus and Ligarius. Cn. Plancius wrote to congratulate him on the recovery of his *dignitas* and Cicero replied: '*ne vestigium quidem ullum est reliquum nobis dignitatis*' (*Fam.* 4.14.1).

⁶ *Cic. Rep.* 1.43.

⁷ *Cic. Phil.* 1.34.

a member of the equestrian order.⁸ Let us take a look at a few examples of the use of the *dignitas* in Cicero's writings that will provide more evidence for such a socially determined meaning.

In the *Pro Roscio Amerino* (80 B.C.), in front of the senators, the word *dignitas* denotes members of the upper classes:

Quis enim erat, qui non videret humilitatem cum dignitate de amplitudine contendere? (*Rosc. Am.* 136)

'For was there anyone who could not see that men of low birth were contending with men of rank for the possession of the highest honours?' (Freese 1930, 245)

In the *In Verrem* (70 B.C.) Cicero praised senators with the following words:

Hunc ordinem (*sc. senatorium*) si dignitate antecellere non existimabas, ne hoc quidem sciebas, iudicare? (*Verr.* 2.3.93)

'You may have thought nothing, Verres, of the supreme respect due to the senatorial order: were you not even aware that it judges in our courts?' (Greenwood 1935, 113)

We see that the word *ordo* and *dignitas* are in collocation, and that the *dignitas* of senators is much greater than the *dignitas* of others.

In the *Pro C. Rabirio perduellionis reo* (63 B.C.), speaking about Rabirius, the senator, Cicero said as follows:

Nam me cum amicitiae vetustas, cum dignitas hominis, cum ratio humanitatis, cum meae vitae perpetua consuetudo ad C. Rabirium defendendum est adhortata, tum vero, ut id studiosissime facerem, salus rei publicae, consulare officium, consulatus denique ipse mihi una a vobis cum salute rei publicae commendatus coegit. (*Rab. Perd.* 2)

'For my part, then, while the friendship which I have long enjoyed with my client, the high position which he

⁸ Cic. *Dom.* 74.

occupies and the practice which I have followed all my life incline me to defend him, considerations of the public welfare, you have committed to my charge, compel me to exert in his defence the utmost zeal.' (Hodge 1927, 453)

Consequently, there is convincing evidence that in Cicero's writings the word *dignitas* could denote the dignity of the upper classes, senatorial order (*ordo senatorius*) or senators themselves, which is relevant for our conclusions at the end.

3. Meanings of the *otium*

The word *otium*, unlike *dignitas*, has more than one meaning, and its use changed over time.⁹ Plautus uses the word rather often, and in most cases it has the meaning of 'time', 'occasion', or 'free-time'.¹⁰ However, only once, in the *Amphitruo* the word *otium* has political connotations within the phrase *pax atque otium* (*Amph.* 207-209).¹¹

On the other hand, the sensuous undertones of *otium* could be traced in Terence:

ego hanc clementem vitam urbanam atque otium
secutus sum et, quod fortunatum isti putant,
uxorem numquam habui. ille contra haec omnia. (*Ad.* 42-44)

'I have led this easy life of town without a calling and, a thing which men at the clubs call a blessing, without even taking a wife. His career has been the very opposite.'
(Sargeant 1912, 221)

Furthermore, the word *otiosus*, a derivative from the *otium*, suits the Terentian man-about town, and is comically borrowed by a slave:

noster mali nil quicquam primo; hic Phaedria
continuo quondam nactus est puellulam
citharistriam, hanc amare coepit perdite.

⁹ For a more detailed analysis of the meaning of *otium* see Laidlaw, 1968.

¹⁰ The word *otium* has this meaning at a number of places: *Capt.* 183, *Cas.* 544, *Merc.* 374, *Most.* 788, etc.

¹¹ For a detailed study of the origin and meaning of the phrase *pax atque otium* see Dimitrijević [Димитријевић], 2014.

...

operam otiosi nos dabamus Phaedriae. (*Phor.* 80-82, 87)

'Our lad was up to no mischief at first, but that Phaedria at once came across a slip of a girl, a cithern-player, and fell desperately in love with her... Having nothing on hand we helped Master Phaedria.' (Sargeaunt 1912, 15)

In the classical period the word *otium* could mean 'peace', 'relief after war', *otium ab hostibus*, as Sallust wrote of the period after the great wars in the second century B.C.¹² It could also mean 'freedom from internal disorder', *otium domesticum*,¹³ while when applied to individuals it could denote a person who was 'retired, politically inactive'. For example, in Cicero's letter to Atticus we read:

me ambitio quaedam ad honorum studium, te autem alia minime reprehenda ratio ad honestum otium duxit. (*Att.* 1.17.5)

'Ambition led me to seek official advancement, while another and perfectly laudable resolution led you to seek an honourable privacy.' (Shuckburgh 1908, 46)

We see that Cicero portrays himself as ambitious and politically active, while Atticus is described as a person who prefers to stay away from politics.¹⁴ It is possible that Cicero also had in mind their different social positions, i.e. the fact that Cicero became a senator, while Atticus stayed in the equestrian order, which will be touched upon again at the end of this paper.

4. Interpretations of the phrase *cum dignitate otium*

First, the phrase *cum dignitate otium* appears in the *Pro Sestio* (98), Cicero's judicial speech, delivered in March 56 B.C., after Cicero's exile

¹² Sall. *Iug.* 41.4.

¹³ Cic. *Leg. Agr.* 2.9.

¹⁴ It must be added that Cicero used the same term to explain his devotion to scholarship and writing when he was forced to withdraw from public life in 50's and 40's, but for him it was only a consolation; it lacked *dignitas*. Cf. Cic. *Fam.* 4.4.4; *Acad.* 1.11; *Off.* 2.4, 3.3.

and restoration. It was a part of the so-called 'digression on the Optimates' or the *ethica digressio* (96-143), unique among the speeches for its size and scope (May 1988, 99).

Quid est igitur propositum his rei publicae gubernatoribus, quod intueri et quo cursum suum derigere debeant? Id quod est praestantissimum maximeque optabile omnibus sanis et bonis et beatis, cum dignitate otium. Hoc qui volunt, omnes optimates, qui efficiunt, summi viri et conservatores civitatis putantur. Neque enim rerum gerendarum dignitate homines efferri ita convenit, ut otio non prospiciant, neque ullum amplexari otium, quod abhorreat a dignitate. (*Sest.* 98)

'What then is the mark set before those who guide the helm of state, upon which they ought to keep their eyes and towards which they ought to direct their course? It is that which is far the best and the most desirable for all who are sound and good and prosperous; it is "peace with dignity." Those who desire this are all reckoned as "Aristocrats," those who achieve it as the foremost men and the saviors of the State. For just as it ill befits men to be so carried away by the dignity of a public career that they are indifferent in peace, so too it is unfitting for them to welcome a peace which is inconsistent with dignity.' (Gardner 1958, 169)

The generally accepted view is that Cicero played a central role in Roman politics after his return from exile, but before the conference at Luca in April 56 B.C., and that the conference at Luca was a turning point in Cicero's career. This view is, among other testimonies, based on the *Pro Sestio*, for it has been suggested by Meyer and subsequently largely accepted that the *Pro Sestio* was a political pamphlet of the *optimates* (Meyer 1963 [1922], 135). However, without an intention to examine Cicero's political role after the exile more closely, I would like to express my disagreement with this standard interpretation, following the view expressed by Mitchell (1969). Namely, Mitchell has successfully argued that Cicero was 'more observer and commentator than actor' even before the conference at Luca (Mitchell 1969, 320). After his return

from exile Cicero was undergoing a transformation. He made his way back to Roman politics, but the things would have never been the same. It is highly possible that from the very beginning of the year 56, the danger of Clodius, again in office, now as aedile, was apparent. If we adopt this viewpoint, it could be assumed that Cicero mentioned the *optimates* so frequently because he felt a lack of his own *auctoritas* and needed to talk about the *auctoritas* of the *optimates*.

Second, the phrase was used at the beginning of Cicero's dialogue *De Oratore*, finished in 55 B.C.:

Cogitanti mihi saepe numero, et memoria vetera repetenti, perbeati fuisse, Quinte frater, illi videri solent, qui in optima re publica, cum et honoribus, et rerum gestarum gloria florerent, eum vitae cursum tenere potuerunt, ut vel in negotio sine periculo, vel in otio cum dignitate esse possent. Ac fuit quidem, cum mihi quoque initium requiescendi, atque animum ad utriusque nostrum praeclara studia referenda, fore iustum et prope ab omnibus concessum arbitrarer, si infinitus forensium rerum labor, et ambitionis occupatio, decursu honorum, etiam aetatis flexu, constitisset. (*De Orat.* 1)

'When, as often happens, brother Quintus, I think over and recall the days of old, those men always seem to me to have been singularly happy who, with the State at her best, and while enjoying high distinctions and the fame of their achievements, were able to maintain such a course of life that they could either engage in activity that involved no risk or enjoy a dignified repose. And time was when I used to imagine that I too should become entitled, with the universal approval, to some opportunity of leisure and of again directing my mind to sublime pursuits beloved of us both, when once, the career of office complete and life too taking the turn towards its close, the endless toil of public speaking and the business of canvassing should have come to a standstill.' (Sutton and Rackham 1942, 3)

As we can see, at the beginning of this work Cicero speaks about his old unfulfilled wish to enjoy an honourable retirement from politics, *otium cum dignitate*. From Cicero's sentence it remains unclear whether he did not enjoy the *otium* at all, or he enjoyed the *otium*, but without honour and dignity – *otium sine dignitate*. The linguistic content was the same, but with a different order of components. It is possible that Cicero purposely avoided the hiatus from the phrase *cum dignitate otium*.¹⁵

Finally, Cicero uses the phrase in the famous letter to Lentulus in 54 B.C.:

De quo sic velim statuas, me haec eadem sensurum fuisse si mihi integra omnia ac libera fuissent ... numquam enim <in> praestantibus in re publica gubernanda viris laudata est in una sententia perpetua permansio; sed ut in navigando tempestati obsequi artis est etiam si portum tenere non queas, cum vero id possis mutata velificatione adsequi stultum est eum tenere cum periculo cursum quem coeperis potius quam eo commutato quo velis tamen pervenire, sic, cum omnibus nobis in administranda re publica propositum esse debeat, id quod a me saepissime dictum est, cum dignitate otium, non idem semper dicere sed idem semper spectare debemus. (*Fam.1.9.21*)

'I should like it to be clear to you that my attitude would have been just the same if I had had a completely open and untrammelled choice... Unchanging consistency of standpoint has never been considered a virtue in great

¹⁵ 'Marked avoidance of ... hiatus in prose was found already in Trasymachus and Gorgias, but was first systematically cultivated by Isocrates' (Wilkinson 1963, 20). The earliest Roman rhetorical hand-book known to us, the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* precepts the avoidance of frequent clashes of vowels (*Rhet. Her.* 4.18). On the other hand, Cicero recognised that Latin differed from Greek because a final long vowel as well as a short was elided...before an initial vowel, even by the illiterate (*Orat.* 150). Furthermore, he confesses that Romans cannot keep their vowels apart even if they wish (*Orat.* 162). Indeed, the analysis of Laurand has shown that in most cases Cicero did not actually avoid a collision of vowels (Laurand 1907, 114-116).

statesmen. At sea it is good sailing to run before the gale, even if the ship cannot make harbour; but if she *can* make harbour by changing tack, only a fool would risk shipwreck by holding to the original course rather than change and still reach his destination. Similarly, while all of us as statesmen should set before our eyes the goal of peace with honour to which I have so often pointed, it is our aim, not our language, which must always be the same.' (Shackleton Bailey 2001, 145)

In this letter Cicero declares that he is happy to enjoy the *cum dignitate otium* which is not in accordance with his words in the *De Oratore* just a year before. One would wonder why Cicero puts this phrase particularly in this letter to Lentulus in the year 54 B.C. It could be assumed that this phrase perfectly fits the apology of Cicero's actions and that it reflects his feelings about his lost political role. Although this is a rational explanation, it is not totally convincing. Since there is a dozen of Cicero's letters to Atticus from the same period which also contain his observations about his own position in that period, why would have Cicero chosen particularly this phrase? Unlike the majority of Cicero's letters to Atticus, this letter to Lentulus is rhetorically highly polished and adjusted to a much wider audience. Thus, in my opinion, the key of Cicero's use of this phrase lies not just in its meaning, but also in its rhetorical value. It might be of some importance that the phrase *cum dignitate otium* contains the iambic ending, which has been perceived as one of Cicero's rhythmical patterns.¹⁶

Now, I will give an overview of the most important views on the subject, presented in chronological order.

Remy (1928) argues that the expression in the *Pro Sestio* applies to the State and government, whereas in two other cases it applies to individuals. When applied to the State, it means that the government ought to be strong and respected (*dignitas*) and the governed ought to enjoy tranquility (*otium*).

In Wegehaupt's (1932) view, *dignitas* approaches the meaning of *salus* and contains the notion of political freedom. If it refers to its

¹⁶ The phrase *pax atque otium* is another example of the same pattern (Dimitrijević [Димитријевић], 2014).

undisturbed duration, *dignitas* corresponds to *otium*, and *cum dignitate otium* is a uniform conception of Roman conservatism.

Boyancé (1941) assumes that *dignitas* and *otium* in the expression *cum dignitate otium* in the *Pro Sestio* apply to individuals. Furthermore, he relates the expression to Cicero's *De Re Publica* and to Peripatetic philosophy. He argues that the formula *cum dignitate otium* in paragraph 96 in the *Pro Sestio* stands as a kind of reconciliation between two conflicting philosophies of life – on the one hand, addiction to tranquility, and on the other, devotion to duty. According to Boyancé, its primary inspiration is the Peripatetic discussion of *σχολή* in connection with the controversy between Theophrastus and Dicaearchus about contemplative and active life.¹⁷

In my opinion, Boyancé is right in his contention against Remy and Wegehaupt that the *dignitas* in the phrase *cum dignitate otium* in the *Pro Sestio* is the *dignitas* of individuals no less than of the State. He was also right in assuming a tension between the *dignitas* and the *otium*, but did not find a clue for this puzzle.

In Wirszubski's (1954) view, the explanation of the meaning and purpose of *cum dignitate otium* is to be sought in the first place in Roman politics and not in Greek philosophy. The expression should be observed as a political slogan, a product of political practice, not political theory. Wirszubski says that 'Cicero treats Roman politics not as a philosopher, but as a politician' (Wirszubski 1954, 3). At this point, we could raise the issue whether it is really possible to draw such a distinctive line between roles or occupations of one the same man.

The fact that the phrase *cum dignitate otium* appears only in Cicero's writings could be considered as no more than an accident. Furthermore, similar expressions, *otium cum libertate* and *otium cum servitio*, are found in Sallust's version of the speech made by the consul Lepidus in 78 B.C.¹⁸ Thus, Balsdon pointed out, 'Was Sallust having fun? ...Or did Lepidus in fact use those expressions?' (Balsdon 1960, 46). In that case, as Balsdon wisely argued, Cicero would have experimented with a similar

¹⁷ For a detailed account of Cicero's preoccupations with the circumstances and manner in which the philosopher should become involved in the state see Reydams-Schils 2005, 83-113.

¹⁸ Sall. *Hist.* 1.55.9.

expression in 56, or even earlier. It is also very likely that someone else might have spoken of *cum dignitate otium* before him.

For May (1988) the phrase *cum dignitate otium* is credo of the *optimates* and it represents a kind of tranquility linked with dignity in both the state and Cicero's own life. It is linked with Cicero's idea of the alliance between the Senate and the Roman knights during his consulship in 63 B.C., the so-called *concordia ordinum*.

In Wood's (1988) view, Cicero's speech *Pro Sestio* 'is primarily a manifesto' (Wood 1988, 62), an effort of outlining a political platform for the *optimates*, and *cum dignitate* is its slogan. We have already seen that the *Pro Sestio* could hardly been viewed as a political manifest of the Optimates, and thus it is also the case with the phrase *cum dignitate otium*. Wood argues that the practical means of securing *cum dignitate otium* is on the one hand, the creation of a *concordia ordinum* and on the other, a *consensus bonorum*, a union of like-minded men from both the upper and lower classes (Wood 1988, 198). In my opinion, it is unlikely that Cicero first invented two slogans, and then coined the third to be founded on the latter.

5. Concluding remarks

It is time to provide the answers for the questions posed at the beginning. First, there is the question of the authorship of the phrase *cum dignitate otium*. In my opinion, it is possible that someone before Cicero coined the phrase, but still its components and the period in which it appeared (56-54 B.C.) give us a notion that it was product of Cicero's views on the present political situation and his role in it. An additional argument for this thesis is Cicero's own statement in the letter to Lentulus 'id quod a me saepissime dictum est' (*Fam.* 1.9.21).

Let us turn to the second question – the meaning of the phrase. It seems that the phrase itself had the same meaning throughout the period 56-54 BC, even though the context, where and how it was used on those three occasions (and in those three genres) vary.

The political context changed after the conference at Luca in April 56, but Cicero's role stood unchanged. There is no sharp division in Cicero's position between the days of the trial of Sestius and after that, but he explained the idea of *cum dignitate otium* very differently in the *Pro Sestio*, on the one hand, and in the *De Oratore* and in the letter to

Lentulus, on the other. On the first occasion, Cicero wants to show himself as one of the *optimates* who should be the defenders of the Roman constitution and restorers of its original moderation and balance. He acts as a statesman-gubernator, steering the ship of state. On the two other occasions, there is 'the same steersman with the same object in view...But this time the seas are too strong and he must change course' (Balsdon 1960, 50). Cicero in fact intimately changed course even before the trial of Sestius, though for a while his words stayed the same.

I have to admit that a number of issues remain unaddressed. For example, does Cicero in his use of the *otium* rely on the use of the word *ἡσυχία* in the fourth-century Attic oratory?¹⁹ And if he does, how big are those influences, parallels or connections? Finally, if we agree that the phrase *cum dignitate otium* was one of Cicero's favorite slogans,²⁰ could this phrase be conceived as a kind of reconciliation between the senatorial (*dignitas*) and equestrian order (*otium*), similar to *concordia ordinum* and *consensus bonorum*?

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¹⁹ I have noticed that Demosthenes used the words *εἰρήνη* and *ἡσυχία* side by side twice in the Third Olynthiac Oration (in passages 7 and 25), which could be an inspiration for Cicero's frequent pairing of the *pax* and *otium*, but have not examined this question more thoroughly.

²⁰ For a fuller explanation of this statement see e.g. Wood 1988, 210.

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