

scripta 13.1: Caelius Rufus fears the outbreak of civil war

In 50 BC, Cicero was away from Rome governing the province of Cilicia (in modern-day Turkey). This text is an adapted extract from a letter written to him in August of that year by his friend Caelius Rufus.

Caelius Rufus updates Cicero on the deteriorating political situation in Rome. He fears that the disagreement between Pompey and Caesar is likely to erupt into civil war. The senate, the consuls and Pompey have all decided that Caesar must stand down from his military command in Gaul and return to Rome as a private citizen if he wishes to be elected consul for 49 BC. Caesar has said that he will only give up his military command if Pompey does the same.

In this letter, Caelius Rufus shares his uncertainty about whom to support: personal connections tie him to both men and support for one risks alienating the other.

Regarding the Republic, I've often written to you that I don't see peace lasting another year and - because this stand-off is getting closer - the danger it poses is getting more obvious. This is what is before us: Pompey has decided that it is necessary for Caesar to hand back his army and provinces; otherwise, he will not be consul. Caesar, however, believes that he can not be protected if he steps back from his military command. Caesar puts forward the following condition: it is necessary for both of them to hand back their armies.

And so it is that those best friends of old and their distasteful alliance is breaking down into outright conflict. When it comes to my own situation, I do not know what to do: indeed I think that you too are worried by the same conundrum.

In this conflict, I see that Pompey has with him on his side the senate, and also the men who make the laws. Caesar will gather up all those who are either living in fear or in false confidence. I see that large-scale disagreements hang over us, in which fighting and violence will give the verdict. Each of these two men is ready in their resolve and with their armies. Fortune puts before you a remarkable show, but not one without its own risk.

- a) Why does Cicero's friend - Caelius Rufus - believe that civil war is inevitable?
- b) Explain why Caelius Rufus finds it difficult to work out whether he should support Pompey or Caesar.
- c) Caelius Rufus is worried about the prospect of civil war. Find as many details as you can from this letter which suggest there are difficult times ahead.
- d) Do you think Caelius Rufus' letter is likely to be honest? What do you think are the factors which may have influenced what he chose to write?