

CICERO ATT. 5.21.14 AND THE *ROMANA MYSTERIA*

L. RICHARDSON, JR

ON THE IDES OF FEBRUARY, 50 B.C. Cicero dispatched to Atticus in Epirus a long letter covering important matters of interest to both and touching on others.¹ He was at that time at Laodicea holding assizes for the districts of Cibyra and Apamea and had scheduled additional assizes for various districts of his very extensive province to continue through June. He wanted to inform Atticus of his intended itinerary for the rest of his tour of duty as governor, as well as addressing various topics of interest and business, some of which already had a history in their correspondence. At the end of the letter he turns to domestic affairs and winds up asking whether there will be intercalation in the calendar of Rome this year and when the Roman mysteries will fall: *cum scies Romae intercalatum sit necne, uelim ad me scribas certum quo die mysteria futura sint.*²

A few days later, on 20 February, he wrote to Atticus again, this time an even longer letter in reply to a letter he had just received from Atticus.³ In this he considers at length his relations with Appius Claudius Pulcher, Brutus' investments and agents in Asia Minor and Cyprus, the threat of war with Parthia, and Atticus' queries about points in his *De Re Publica*. But again at the end of his letter he returns to the question of the date of the mysteries: *faciesque me in quem diem Romana incidunt mysteria certiore et quo modo hiemaris.*⁴

Intercalation was always an important matter, since when it occurred, it would affect the calendar for the months following February, and every governor would need to know how to set up his schedule and date certain documents. The decision whether or not to have an intercalary month rested with the college of *pontifices* and theoretically depended on astronomical observations made on or shortly after the first of January. The *pontifices* might have their own reasons for deciding for or against intercalation, but when Cicero wrote, the calendar was already skewed at least two months out of agreement with the solar year,⁵ so it would seem logical to expect that there would be intercalation. The matter of the identity and date of the "Roman mysteries" has puzzled scholars and editors.

In a footnote to his discussion of the worship of Bona Dea this was taken by Wissowa to refer to the December celebration of nocturnal rites in her honor,

¹ Att. 5.21.

² Att. 5.21.14.

³ Att. 6.1.

⁴ Att. 6.1.26.

⁵ Cf. Att. 5.20.5.

which had features in common with mystery religions, and to mean that the date of this festival was not fixed but decided annually.⁶ In 63 B.C. it had fallen on the night of 3/4 December,⁷ but that is the only year for which we have a firm date. It does not figure in any of the surviving calendars and is not mentioned by Degrassi.⁸ But Cicero says nothing about Bona Dea, and Wissowa's introduction of her rites as the reference intended by Cicero was based solely on the use of the word *mysteria*, which seems wholly inadequate evidence. But in this he was apparently building on a suggestion originally made by Warde Fowler working from other evidence.⁹ Wissowa's interpretation has more recently been endorsed by Scullard,¹⁰ but without further evidence or argument, and seems to be the prevailing opinion about Bona Dea today.

On the other hand Tyrrell and Purser offer a note concerning possible explanations of the phrase in our passage, especially the rites of Bona Dea, and conclude that it is unlikely that these were meant.¹¹ Nor would Cicero have been apt to have any special interest in Bona Dea. Shackleton Bailey was similarly baffled.¹² To add to the confusion the only festivals that fell within the intercalary month were the Regifugium and the Equirria, and the dates of these, too, as the Fasti Antiates Maiores prove, were unaffected in their relation to the Kalends of March by intercalation.¹³

More recently K. J. Rigsby has proposed that the *Romana mysteria* might be the Liberalia on 17 March.¹⁴ Although he recognizes that this identification entails grave difficulties, not least a clear contradiction in the second letter, he thinks these might be offset by Cicero's expressed interest in the Liberalia, when he was proposing to award his nephew, Quintus, the *toga virilis*.¹⁵ But again any attempt to see the Liberalia as having to do with mysteries is strained.

But *mysteria* need not necessarily refer to religious mysteries. In its extended or metaphorical sense the word appears at least as early as the time of Lucilius,¹⁶ and it is so used by Cicero even in formal oratory, when in his defense of Murena he describes knowledge of the Roman calendar as having formerly been the *mysteria* of jurisconsults.¹⁷

⁶ Wissowa 1912: 217, n. 1.

⁷ Cf. Plut. *Cic.* 19 and Cass. Dio 37.35.4 in relation to the meeting of the senate on the Nones of December.

⁸ Degrassi 1963: 533–546.

⁹ Warde Fowler 1899: 255–256, where the evidence under discussion is *Att.* 1.12.3.

¹⁰ Scullard 1981: 199–201.

¹¹ Tyrrell and Purser 1914: 187; cf. 205.

¹² Shackleton Bailey 1968: 238. He observes only: "They cannot well be the festival of the foundation of Bona Dea's temple nor yet the Cerealia, since these had fixed dates (Marquardt, *Röm. Staatsverwaltung*, 3.345, 500), which would not be affected by intercalation."

¹³ Degrassi 1963: 314–316.

¹⁴ Rigsby 1996.

¹⁵ *Att.* 6.1.12.

¹⁶ Lucilius 652 Marx, 599 Krenkel.

¹⁷ *Mur.* 25.

The true understanding of Cicero's words is quite simple. He is joking.¹⁸ Not only was the question of whether there would be intercalation or not up to the *pontifices*, but they had to decide whether the intercalary month of twenty-seven days would begin on the day following the Terminalia (23 February) or on the second day after the Terminalia.¹⁹ Although many early calendars had recourse to intercalation to make the adjustment between lunar and solar years, only the Roman republican calendar seems to have depended on the capricious whim of a priestly college for its date of commencement. Such decisions could well be called *Romana mysteria*. But it took nearly seven weeks for a letter from Rome to reach Cicero in Cilicia.²⁰ Writing on the Ides of February, he could hardly hope to be able to correct his calendar to agree with that in Rome until well after the intercalary month, or lack thereof, was past. This must mean that he depended on the local calendar for most purposes, as must other governors elsewhere. But from the time when he set out for Cilicia Cicero was intent on ending his governorship and leaving his province at the earliest possible date, and that was *a.d. III Kal. Sext.*, 30 July,²¹ which would depend on the calendar in Rome. No wonder he was anxious to know how this was officially fixed.

DEPARTMENT OF CLASSICAL STUDIES
DUKE UNIVERSITY
BOX 90103
DURHAM, NC 27708-0103
U.S.A.

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¹⁸ Cicero's fondness for jokes in his correspondence with Atticus seems too well known to require documentation. It ranges from the pseudonyms with which he disguises or characterizes persons under discussion to more elaborate jests such as describing the incident on the Via Appia in which Publius Clodius was killed as "the battle of Leuctra" in dating this long letter (*Att.* 6.1.26).

¹⁹ See, e.g., Michels 1967: 160-162.

²⁰ Cf. *Att.* 5.19.1.

²¹ Cf. *Att.* 5.9.2, 11.1, 13.3, 14.1, 15.1, 18.3, 21.9; 6.3.1.