

The Romans, on the one hand, did not conceal the fact that the art of rhetoric is not meant to teach the truth, but to help individuals reach their goals. The audience in the forum, therefore, was susceptible of every measure an orator could take to make them laugh, cry, or arouse anger, and the outcome of a trial depended on such “artificial proofs” as much as on the material evidence. On the other hand, they attached great importance to the past, presented in either dark or bright colours. For that reason, among the most effective ways of convincing an audience was to compare the present situation with one which had already taken place. As a result, an orator must have had at his disposal the *exempla* – examples of famous persons, events, and sayings, a customary part of rhetorical handbooks. The aim of the project is, above all, to investigate whether or not the description of the references to the past, which can be found in the handbooks, complies with how Cicero – the greatest Roman orator – availed himself of them.

Due to the fact that mythical, legendary, and historical personages were not alluded to only in the form of the *exemplum*, which escapes the modern scholars’ notice, the metaphor and the simile shall as well be the subject of the present study. First, I will determine as precisely as possible the role each of the three stylistic devices played as a medium of the past in ancient rhetorical theory. Next, I will analyze all the examples occurring in Cicero’s *De oratore* and in Quintilian’s *Institutio oratoria* in order to check if they are used in the same way in the actual speeches. Finally, I shall make an attempt to refute some hasty assertions, current in modern scholarship, regarding the orator’s use of historical *exempla*, e.g.: did Spartacus indeed, like Hannibal, represent a “dangerous enemy at the gates of Rome”? Was Orestes just a byword for a madman? What judgements did Cicero form publicly on the Gracchi brothers and why? These are only some of the questions which I intend to answer.

In the last decades, the studies of historical *exempla*, with some exceptions, have been focused above all on such authors as Livy and Valerius Maximus. Their objectives, however, differed from the orator’s principal aim, i.e. to convince the hearers. In the case of the former, most generally, the examples served as either moral lessons for his readers or as precedents employed by the characters of the *Ab urbe condita*. The *Facta et dicta memorabilia* of the latter, on the other hand, is a compendium written under the reign of the emperor Tiberius, aimed at providing the contemporaries with a quick and suitable access to the memorable deeds and sayings from the past. The original – non-literary application of this device was no longer apparent in the literature of the Augustan and the early imperial periods. In order to grasp its fundamental function, one needs to turn the attention to Cicero. There are a few outdated dissertations devoted to the subject, which are still a point of departure for many modern scholars. Since F. de Saussure, however, and thanks to the discoveries of the semioticians, who enriched the terminology regarding the relations between the signs, there have been theoretical tools much more precise and fit for examining the phenomenon in question. And yet no one has so far undertaken systematic studies thereof, which would combine both the theory and practice.

If someone would search for an analogy from the ancient times of some communication situations involving the “claiming of the past”, which we face today especially in politics, Cicero’s orations are what one would have to consider in the first place. In the times when on every step someone tries to convince us to do something, recommend, offer or sell something to us by using every possible means of persuasion, we should turn to the greatest expert on manipulating the audience. Since approximately fifty of his speeches came down to us (five volumes in the Oxford edition), the research material is promising.