

Bob the Builder?



In our Latin class we have just been reading and translating a letter by Cicero. Famous for his oratory and for his blistering attacks in the Senate against those he regarded as endangering the Republic he paid the ultimate price for his outspokenness when he incurred the wrath of Mark Antony who had him executed in 43 BC, cut off his head and hands and had them displayed in the Forum. But in this letter Cicero is preoccupied with a more mundane problem and one with which most of us can identify, - difficulties with the builder.

The letter is directed to his brother, Quintus, who is an officer in the army of Julius Caesar serving in Gaul and who will take part in the second invasion of Britain in 54BC. Quintus has arranged for the building of a posh villa in Arpinum to be ready when he eventually returns to Italy from his military service. In his absence his brother, Marcus Cicero the orator, is given the job of keeping an eye on what is happening at the building site. He is not impressed by what he has found there.

One of the characteristics of Cicero's style, indeed of the Latin language in general, is the ability to condense a wide spectrum of meaning in very few words. There is a splendid example of this in the opening line of the letter. Cicero spells it out to his brother quite bluntly. The builder he has chosen, one Diphilus by name, is utterly useless: **offendi Diphilum Diphilo tardio rem**: which we might paraphrase as: *"even by the abysmally low standards which Diphilus sets himself this current job is a disgrace."* The man doesn't even know how to use a plumb line properly. The columns which he has built for the new colonnade are not even straight and are in the wrong position. Cicero orders them to be demolished and rebuilt. So concerned is he that he appoints a "hard man" who will be permanently on site to monitor the hopeless Diphilus.

The ability of Latin to compress meaning into a few words has carried over into modern English where we make use of many Latin phrases just to exploit their economy: **ad hoc, post mortem, infra dig.(short for infra dignitatem), nil desperandum, exit, in absentia, corpus delicti, alma mater, magnum opus, modus operandi, and of course etcetera, etcetera.**

If Diphilus eventually managed to construct something inhabitable and which met the approval of Cicero it might well have looked something like this:



One can only be envious, however, of the site that the very wealthy Quintus chose for his new villa. In his day it was called Arpinum, today Arpino, and is splendidly situated half way between Rome and Naples.



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Footnote:

(If anyone is interested in joining our Latin class all new faces are very welcome. The class is entirely stress-free and good humoured led by a first class teacher. As well as classical texts we also look at medieval and later documents in Latin. We meet on Friday afternoons at Moldgreen Methodist church. Next term starts at the end of January and the term lasts for eight weeks. Further information from me on: dwcbramley@talktalk.net.)