Marcus Tullius Tiro: A Kick-Ass Secretarial Sidekick

Marcus Tullius Cicero (106 BCE to 43 BCE) was one of the most famous Romans of his day. Statesman, orator, lawyer, and writer, Cicero promoted true republican principles. Much of his career was spent composing and delivering political speeches in the Roman Senate, where he held the offices of quaestor, aedile, praetor, and finally consul. But Cicero himself gave great credit to the work of his slave and assistant, Marcus Tullius Tiro.

In an October, 2012 blog entry, Ben Rawlins of Life Well Lived named Tiro the #1 Most Kick-Ass Sidekick in History. So who was Tiro, and what was it like to be the personal assistant to a prominent Roman such as Cicero?

Marcus Tullius Tiro died in 4 CE, and was said to be 99 years old at his death. No historical records confirm his birth date or place, but it is commonly supposed that he was born a slave and came to Rome from Arpinum with the family of Cicero. Little is known of Tiro’s formal education, but he probably was sent to the ludus litterarius, a forerunner of the modern elementary school, to learn reading and writing. However his early education took place, Tiro was certainly literate. His daily tasks included taking dictation, writing letters, and transcription. But more than that, Tiro was an active participant in Cicero’s political climb to the top. Researcher Zach Bankston (2012) described Tiro as “a literary collaborator, a debt collector, a superintendent of sorts, a secretary, a financial overseer, a political strategist, a recipient and
content-generator of Cicero’s famed practice of letter-writing, and a connected component of Cicero’s social scheming” (p. 203).

At the height of his master’s career, a typical day for Tiro might begin by greeting visitors to Cicero’s modest villa and performing a sort of business “triage” to determine who Cicero might or might not want to see that day. In addition to his role on the Senate floor, Cicero was a lawyer and man of business who acted on behalf of many of his neighbors and acquaintances. Tiro would interview visitors and prioritize their requests for Cicero’s attention. When clients and colleagues met with Cicero, Tiro would likely be on hand to take notes in matters of business and might consult earlier documentation to confirm details for both parties.

Taking dictation and transcribing speeches would have also been a daily activity for Tiro. In order to do his job most effectively, Tiro developed his own system of early shorthand for Latin (later called Tironian shorthand). Although his original manual does not survive, Anthony DiRenzo describes Tiro’s method as an abstract system of standardized symbols which used abbreviated prepositions to speed up transcription. Latin words were truncated and combined with existing Greek shorthand symbols to form common phrases, and even sentences (DiRenzo, p. 160). In addition to its obvious efficiency, this system would have enabled writing to be done with a degree of secrecy. Cicero studied Tiro’s method and sometimes used it in his own correspondence (DiRenzo, p. 161). DiRenzo relates that Cicero’s speeches usually consisted of an elaborate, memorized introduction, followed by an outline from which he could extemporize. In the wake of the most effective speeches, Cicero had Tiro transcribe his oratory and produce multiple written copies which could be distributed to colleagues and thus become part of their library collections.
Roman society of the era valued the spoken word. Tiro’s skill at shorthand marks an important shift. “Writing was Cicero’s way of legitimizing his speaking; and Tiro, in a sense, became his master’s voice” (DiRenzo, p. 161).

Tiro’s work day would also have included writing and transcribing letters for Cicero’s wide audience of correspondents, both business and personal. He also accompanied his master to business meetings and social gatherings as his personal assistant.

In his daily work Tiro would have used an iron stylus to take notes on a wax tablet and later transcribed these rough works onto papyrus, using homemade ink derived from wine dregs, soot, resin, and cuttlefish secretions (Di Renzo, p. 157). The wax surface of the tablet could be re-smoothed and used again.

Codices were still uncommon in the era of Cicero, so most works were available in scroll format. Scrolls consisted of lengths of papyrus glued or sewn together and rolled into cylinders. Strips of papyrus were attached at one end with appropriate identifying information (in some cases title or author, in other cases the subject or first line of text). Researcher John Clark reports that these end strips served much the same purpose as today’s spine labels (Clark, p. 31). Private libraries of the day were arranged in a style similar to their larger counterparts, with pigeon holes or small cells designed to hold scrolls with their labeled ends exposed. These shelves lined the room in some cases but were seldom built into the wall. They were more often detached pieces of furniture that varied in height from 3-6 feet (Clark, p. 35).

Tiro would have been familiar with the contents of Cicero’s private library and probably copied many scrolls that went into the collection. Household libraries in Rome contained not only records of important speeches in the Senate, but also legal contracts, home records, recipes,
family histories, home remedies, and religious rites. In an article for *Classical World*, William Johnson relates that in the spring of 56 BCE, Cicero wrote a letter to his lifelong friend, Atticus, in which he talked about his plans to reorganize his neglected library (Johnson, p. 471). This project probably included tasks such as scanning unlabeled scrolls to see what they contained and tagging them with title information, refurbishing damaged items, performing an inventory to see what might be lacking in the collection, and arranging the contents in some organized fashion. For this task, Cicero could afford to hire a knowledgeable expert named Tyrannio, a freedman and grammarian, to oversee the project (Johnson, p. 470). Tiro would have had access to his master’s private and newly organized library.

Cicero both loaned and borrowed scrolls from the libraries of other acquaintances, including Atticus, Varro, Sulla, and Lucullus (Casson, p. 73). Tiro may have been put to the task of copying these items for the collection of Cicero or his colleagues. When leaving the villa on business, Tiro might have commonly carried a scroll box, or leather pouch to hold speeches, contracts, and other items his master might need to consult.

At the time of his manumission, Tiro took the first two names of his master, and became Marcus Tullius Tiro, a freedman. After the death of Cicero, Tiro published some of his former master’s works and even wrote books of his own, including his notes on grammatical usage and a four volume biography of Cicero. These books are referenced in the writings of Plutarch but did not survive.

Tiro’s system of Latin shorthand contributed to the accuracy and value of many library collections. He is also credited with training other scribes in his method of transcription. It is easy to see the impact this must have had on scholarly communications of the day. Of course, it
also had its detractors. DiRenzo quotes a letter in which Seneca took a Stoic’s view: “Shorthand symbols by means of which even a rapidly delivered speech is taken down and the hand is able to keep up with the quickness of the tongue, are inventions of the lowest slaves. Philosophy is far above this . . .” (DiRenzo, p. 159).

Tiro’s life represents a profound transformation in the professional culture of Rome. Cicero, famous for his public oratory, would likely be less famous without the records of Tiro. Administrative skills were transitioning, and documentation was playing a more important role in business and government. Talents such as shorthand, translation, and elegant grammar would continue to lift the social value of secretarial assistants, and provide records of value to libraries both public and private.
Works Cited


http://www.lifewelllived.co.uk/2012/10/