

THE TERM *NUMEN* IN CICERO'S WORKS *

This paper, as the title indicates, tries to understand and interpret the notion of *numen* in Cicero's works, this author's significance in this particular investigation being supported, on the one hand, by the fact that his works record a high number of occurrences of *numen*, and, on the other hand, by the consideration that one finds here helpful evidence for determining this notion. Granted that the concept is very disputed ¹ and that the best known methods used in its interpretation (the ethnographical approach of H. J. Rose, followed closely by H. Wagenvoort, and the thesis of the Indo-European tripartition of G. Dumézil) are equally misleading and speculative in their treatment of sources, a careful philological analysis of the texts (supported by a contextual one) should give better results in discovering the meanings of this notion.

In order to understand such a complex concept and its uses in the first century B.C. it is important to start from the information the contemporary Latin authors themselves offer regarding the word's meanings. Thus, two passages of importance, one found in Cicero's *De finibus*, the other in Varro's *De lingua Latina*, give valuable insight with respect to the meanings the term was attributed in the Republican Period:

* I would like to thank Frieda Edelstein and Jörg Rüpke for their thorough reading and generous criticism of an earlier draft of this paper. Any remaining failings and errors are my own.

1. Cf. H. J. ROSE, "*Numen* inest: 'Animism' in Greek and Roman Religion", *HTR* 28 (1935), p. 237-257; Fr. PFISTER, s.v. *numen*, *RE* XVII² (1937), col. 1273-1291; H. J. ROSE, *Ancient Roman Religion*, London, Hutchinson's University Library, 1949; S. WEINSTOCK, Review of H. J. Rose's *Ancient Roman Religion*, *JRS* 39 (1949), p. 166 sq.; H. J. ROSE, "*Numen* and *Mana*", *HTR* 44 (1951), p. 109-120; H. WAGENVOORT, *Roman Dynamism: Studies in Ancient Roman Thought, Language and Custom*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1947; P. BOYANCÉ, "Les origines de la religion romaine. Théories et recherches récentes", *IL* 7 (1955), p. 100-107; G. DUMÉZIL, *La religion romaine archaïque*, Paris, Payot, 1966; D. FASCIANO, "*Numen*, réflexions sur sa nature et son rôle", *RCCM* XII (1971), p. 3-20; W. PÖTSCHER, "*Numen* and *numen Augusti*", *ANRW* II, 16, 1 (1978), p. 355-392.

In *Fin.*, V, 49, Cicero presents a Latin version of a passage from the *Odyssey*, XII, 184 sq., about the Sirens and their seductive promises of knowledge. The verses of interest here are the following:

*Nos graue certamen belli clademque tenemus,
Graecia quam Troiae diuino numine uexit,
omniaque e latis rerum uestigia terris.*

We know of the terrible fight and war disaster that the Greeks brought to Troy by divine will, and about all the traces of the events from all over the world,

where the group *diuino numine* is used as a translation of the Homeric θεῶν ἰότητι (“will² of the gods”). One can draw two conclusions from this passage: (1) *numen* may simply mean “will”, (2) the adjective *diuinus*, *-a*, *-um* is used as an equivalent of the possessive genitive (a literal Latin translation would have been *deorum numine*).

Another useful clue regarding the meanings of this term in the Late Republican Period can be found in the explanations of Cicero’s contemporary Marcus Terentius Varro regarding a fragment from Accius, *Ling. Lat.*, 7, 85:

Numen dicunt esse imperium, dictum ab nutu, <quod cuius nutu> omnia sunt, eius imperium maximum esse uideatur: itaque in Ioue hoc et Homerus et A <c> cius aliquotiens.

People say that *numen* means *imperium* [“power”], being derived from *nutus* [“nod”], because the *imperium* [“power”] of the one, at whose *nutus* [“nod”] all things exist, seems to be the greatest: and thus Homer and, a number of times, Accius use this word about Jupiter.

By using the plural *dicunt*, the Latin author emphasizes the general character of his assertions, the fact that by a *communis opinio*, *numen* was thought to signify *imperium* and to derive from *nutus* “a nod made in order to express a command or a will”³. The choice of this synonym is motivated by *<quod cuius nutu> omnia sunt, eius imperium maximum esse uideatur*, from which it obviously follows that of all the meanings of *imperium*, one should opt for – as the most appropriate – “power”.

It is worth noting that in order to indicate the connotation of power, Varro does not use the word *potestas*⁴, which is more general and abstract,

2. H. G. LIDDELL, R. SCOTT, s.v. ἰότης, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 1985, p. 832.

3. A. ERNOUT, A. MEILLET, s.v. *nuo*, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine*, 1939, 3^e éd. 1951, vol. 2, p. 802.

4. As we find, for instance, in Festus’ work, where, in addition, the connection of the term with a deity is pointed out; *De uerborum significatu*, p. 179 L: *numen quasi*

but rather *imperium* which is a more concrete and authoritative power, usually a military power, but not always.

Given the interdependence between Roman religion and politics, we believe that the choice of the noun *imperium* as a synonym for *numen* is clarified by Th. Mommsen in his treatise on public law. The German historian considers that *imperium* signifies the highest public power which includes jurisdiction as well as military command:

*Die Amtsgewalt heisst den Römern imperium und potestas. Imperium, dessen Ableitung unklar ist, bezeichnet in seinem allgemeinsten technischen Werth die oberste mit Commando und Jurisdiction ausgestattete Amtsgewalt, im Gegensatz einerseits zu dem absoluten Verbotungsrecht, wie es dem Volkstribun zukommt, andererseits zu dem untergeordneten Befehlsrecht der niederen Beamten sowie der Beauftragten des Oberbeamten*⁵.

Also, by equating *numen* with *imperium*, even without a specified holder, the special nature of the one who possesses *numen* is underlined, because the mere use of the term *imperium* (“a power of a higher rank”) reflects the attribution of *numen* to a creature of superior nature. What’s more, Varro deems it important to add that the notion is used not only by Accius, but also by Homer in respect to the highest god, Jupiter (*itaque in Ioue hoc et Homerus et A<c>cius aliquotiens*). As in the Ciceronian passage already quoted, *numen* is once more related to Homeric perception, and so both these authors connect it to poetic language and mythical theology. Unfortunately, Varro does not give any further explanation regarding the Greek word considered to be equivalent to *numen*, but it seems clear that unlike Cicero, he does not think about ἰότης, for, on one hand, the sense of this word is different from the Latin *imperium*, and on the other hand, the term is never used in the Homeric poems in relation to Jupiter alone, but rather about gods in general – θεῶν ἰότητι (the structure translated by Cicero) recurs, for instance, seven times.

Thus, as the two quoted passages indicate, in the Late Republic *numen* was understood and used with two different but logically closely linked senses, namely “will” (ἰότης) and “power” (*imperium*). These meanings have been recorded in several of Cicero’s works, more precisely, in his speeches, but also in his political and philosophical essays. In most cases, the notion is used with respect to a specified god or to the whole divine community without any specification regarding the exact identity of its members, being also employed in a series of standard structures. The most

nutus dei ac potestas (cf. W. M. LINDSAY [ed.], *De verborum significatu quae supersunt cum Pauli epitome*, Leipzig, Teubner, 1913).

5. Th. MOMMSEN, *Römisches Staatsrecht*, vol. I (Handbuch der Römischen Alterthümer), Leipzig, Verlag von S. Hirzel, 1887, p. 22.

frequent attributive noun of the term *numen* is the common substantive *deus / diuus* in the genitive plural, with or without the epithet *immortalis*: *numen deorum / diuom +/- immortalium* (*Rab. Perd.*, 5; *Dom.*, 125; *Dom.*, 141; *Scaur.*, 17; *Phil.*, XI, 28; *Phil.*, XIII, 12; *Phil.*, XIII, 22; *Leg.*, I, 21; *Nat. Deor.*, II, 95; *Nat. Deor.*, III, 92; *Diu.*, II, 29; *Diu.*, II, 36; *Diu.*, II, 47; *Diu.*, II, 63; *Diu.*, II, 124).

As for the exact meaning of the notion in the Ciceronian texts (“will” or “power”), it can be deduced only from the context; thus, the meaning “will” is more likely to be ascribed to *numen* in the following passages:

— *Phil.*, XIII, 12;

Mihi quidem numine deorum immortalium uidetur hoc fortuna uoluisse ut actis Caesaris firmis ac ratis Cn. Pompei filius posset et dignitatem et fortunas patrias recuperare.

It seems to me that by the will of gods fate wanted this, so that, Caesar’s acts being confirmed and ratified, the son of Cn. Pompeius may gain back his father’s dignity and fortune.

— *Fin.*, IV, 11.

Cum cognitum habeas quod sit summi rectoris ac domini numen, quod consilium, quae uoluntas.

Because you already know what is the will of the supreme ruler and master, what is his intention, what is his wish,

where this meaning is confirmed not only by the context, but also by the nouns *consilium* and *uoluntas*, two near synonyms with which the term *numen* is paralleled, all three revolving around the idea of “will”, which is expressed clearly enough through the works and deeds of the gods (*deorum opera et facta*), so that it can be understood by those humans who take note of them.

Whereas “power” seems a more suitable meaning for *numen* in *Dom.*, 141:

Magna uis est cum in deorum immortalium numine tum uero in ipsa re publica.

Great might is to be found, on the one hand, in the power of the immortal gods, and on the other hand, in the state itself.

In many passages, however, it is difficult to discern which one of these two closely connected meanings (“will” or “power”) is used, and to decide whether “the will of the gods” or “the power of the gods” is thought to rule the world and all the things in it. What seems to be important in the end is the effective and authoritative character of this *numen*, be it understood as “will” or as “power”:

Diu., II, 36: *Deorum enim numini parere omnia.*

All things yield to the will / power of the gods.

Har. Resp., 19: *Deorum numine omnia regi gubernarique.*

All things are commanded and governed by the will / power of gods.

This kind of passage, where *numen* in singular is attributed to the whole divine community, confirms and brings to light the general character of the notion.

Different types of adjectives are also used as subordinate terms to *numen* in order to indicate or to underline the ties of the concept to the divine realm:

— possessive adjectives: *suo*, *uestrum*;

Catil., II, 29: *Hic praesentes suo numine atque auxilio sua templa atque urbis tecta defendunt.*

They [*i.e.* the gods], present here, protect by their power and aid their temples and the city's roofs.

Note here the double use of the same possessive adjective, the first related strictly to the gods, the second expressing the nexus between the gods (*sua*) and the city (*templa*); in fact, one can observe that a threefold possession (*suo*, *sua*, *urbis*) is involved, which envisions, in descending order, the divine world (*suo numine atque auxilio*), both the divine and the human world (*sua templa*), and the human world (*urbis tecta*).

Catil., III, 19: *Nisi di immortales omni ratione placati suo numine prope fata ipsa flexissent.*

Unless the immortal gods, placated by all means, changed, as I may say, fate itself through their power.

Dom., 104: *O di immortales! – uos enim haec audire cupio – P. Clodius uestra sacra curat, uestrum numen horret, res omnis humanas religione uestra contineri putat?*

Oh, immortal gods – because I want you to hear this – Publius Clodius takes care of your rites, trembles at your power, thinks that all human things are preserved by the piety toward you.

— the qualifying adjective *diuinum*: *numen diuinum* (*Dom.*, 140; *Dom.*, 143; *Mil.*, 83, *Fin.*, I, 41).

That the structure of the noun phrase has *diuinus* as an attributive adjective implies a more general connotation due to the joining of the possessive value (cf. *amor paternus* = *amor patris*) with an explanatory, qualifying value, inherent to this class of words. The prevalence of the

possessive character is obvious in the already quoted fragment from the *Fin.*, V, 49.

In those instances where the owner is expressed by the genitive of a generic noun with no further specification of the divinity's name, the possessive relation is weaker.

Diu., I, 120: *Quanto id deo est facilius, cuius numini parent omnia.*

How much easier this is for a god, to whose will / power all things yield.

The highest degree of particularization is to be found in the passages where *numen* is attributed to a single divinity, whose name is specified:

Verr., II, 4, 111: *Cereris numen, sacrorum uetustatem, fani religionem istius sceleratissimi atque audacissimi supplicio expiari uolebant.*

By the punishment of this very mean and impudent man they wanted to restore the power of Ceres, the antiquity of the rites, the sanctity of the sanctuary.

Deiot., 18: *Iouis illius hospitalis numen numquam celare potuisset.*

He could never have concealed this from the power of Jupiter, the hospitable.

Tusc., II, 23: *Iouisque numen Mulciberi adsciuit manus.*

The will / power of Jupiter summoned the hands of Mulciber.

Tusc., II, 25: *Sed longe a leto numine aspellor Iouis.*

But I am driven away from death by the will / power of Jupiter.

The last two fragments are from a Ciceronian translation of an unfortunately lost Aeschylean tragedy.

In almost all these passages *numen* is used in singular, with the exception of one instance which can be found in a poetic fragment, where the form *numina* is employed, probably due to metrical reasons:

Diu., II, 63: *Aurigeris diuom placantes numina tauris.*

Appeasing the gods' powers by sacrificing steers with gilded horns.

What is even more significant, this verse is a translation of *Il.*, II, 306, where by *diuom numina* the author is rendering a single Greek word, ἄθρόνατοι, using this binary structure as an equivalent for *dei* or *immortales*⁶.

A noticeable use of the word is to be found in the context given by *Rab. Perd.*, 5:

6. Cf. P. BERRETTONI, "Numen in Lucrezio", *Studi e saggi linguistici* V (1965), p. 125.

Deinde uos, Quirites, quorum potestas proxime ad deorum immortalium numen accedit, oro atque obsecro.

Then I beg and implore you, citizens, whose might comes very near to the power of the immortal gods.

Here Cicero links the *potestas* of the people with the *numen* of the gods, that is, to use Varro's clarification of *numen* (*Ling. Lat.*, 7, 85), the *potestas* of the people and the *imperium* of the gods. Relevant here is the choice of the two notions in accord with their possessors (*potestas* related to the people, *numen* / *imperium* to the gods), supporting thus Mommsen's aforementioned explanation. Even if in this case *numen* is attributed only to the gods by setting side by side *Quiritium potestas* and *deorum numen*, this passage can be considered the inception of a use of the same notion with regard to human beings (*infra, Red. Pop.*, 18).

In a similarly constructed statement, Cicero connects *uirtus humana* with *numen deorum*, thus expressing once more the close relationship between politics and religion, and, at one stroke, setting off the comprehensive character of this notion (just as *uirtus* seems to be the essential quality that defines men, a quality implied by the etymological link *uir* - *uirtus*, so too *numen* seems to be the indispensable attribute - *diuinitas* - of the gods):

Rep., I, 12: *Neque enim est ulla res, in qua propius ad deorum numen uirtus accedat humana, quam ciuitatis aut condere nouas aut conseruare iam conditas.*

And there is no other situation where human virtue may come nearer to the power of the gods than in founding new cities or in saving those already founded.

Starting with this type of perception and structure, *numen* is then directly attributed to the Roman people and the gods:

Red. Pop., 18: *Primum, qua sanctissimi homines pietate erga deos immortalis esse soleant, eadem <me> erga populum Romanum semper fore numenque uestrum aequae mihi graue et sanctum ac deorum immortalium in omni uita futurum.*

To begin with, I will always exhibit vis-à-vis the Roman people the same piety that the most respectable men show to the gods, and for all my life your power will be as venerable and sacred as the one of the immortal gods.

The text suggests that there is an interdependence between *numen* and *pietas*, i.e. that *pietas* is conditioned by the existence of *numen* in the recipient of reverence (*pietas erga deos* / *deorum immortalium numen* - *pietas erga populum* / *numen uestrum*).

The use is then extended to the senate (*numen senatus*), in a phrasing where *numen* is no longer directly and explicitly linked to the divine world; however, as the sacred character of the notion persists at the implicit level because of its constant association with the gods, *numen* seems to denote the “divine power”:

Phil., III, 32: *Magna uis est, magnum numen unum et idem sentientis senatus.*

Great is the force, great is the divine power of the senate whose members hold one and the same opinion.

This assertion enhances thus the sacred nature of the state and its institutions and at the same time, grants an emotional charge – the role of which was not to be neglected in the *ars dicendi* – in order to attract the benevolence of the listeners.

Cicero enlarges even more the sphere of the owners of *numen*: he attributes *numen* not only to the senate and the Roman people, but also to the laws: *Diu.*, I, 19, *elapsae uetusto numine leges* (“the laws of an old sacred power fell off”), in an unusual formula, where *numine* is used as an *ablativus qualitatis*.

Unlike the passages already quoted, where *numen* is usually ascribed to one or more specific gods, or to a prestigious community – the use being always marked either by a genitive or by a possessive or qualifying adjective – a very special structure is used in *De natura deorum*. In his lecture on Stoic theology, Lucilius Balbus alludes to a *numen praestantissimae mentis*:

Nat. Deor., II, 4: *Quid enim potest esse tam apertum tamque perspicuum, cum caelum suspeximus caelestiaque contemplati sumus, quam esse aliquod numen praestantissimae mentis quo haec regantur? Quod ni ita esset, qui potuisset adsensu omnium dicere Ennius «aspice hoc sublime candens, quem inuocant omnes Iouem» – illum uero et Iouem et dominatorem rerum et omnia motu regentem et, ut idem Ennius, «patrem diuumque hominumque» et praesentem ac praepotentem deum?*

At first sight, the structure *numen praestantissimae mentis* seems to be similar to the one found in Lucretius (3, 143-144, *cetera pars animae per totum dissita corpus / paret et ad numen mentis momenque mouetur*), where the poet ascribes *numen* to *mens*. However, in Cicero’s text *mentis* does not seem to be a possessive genitive (“power belonging to a supreme intelligence”), but rather a *genetivus qualitatis*⁷. This interpretation is

7. Cf. P. BERRETTONI, *l.c.* (n. 6), p. 127 sq., who likewise discusses the two possible interpretations of the genitive in this passage (*una volontà appartenente ad*

confirmed also at the macro-contextual level by identifying Jupiter with this “power of supreme intelligence / power possessing supreme intelligence”, or even “divinity of supreme intelligence / divinity possessing supreme intelligence”⁸. The latter meaning is quite unexpected for the Republican age, for the term is normally used in this sense only beginning with the poets of the Augustan age⁹; thus the quoted passage can be regarded as proof that this semantic transformation had already begun in Republican times¹⁰. H. Rackham seems to agree with the interpretation of the genitive as descriptive, since he renders the passage as follows:

For when we gaze upward to the sky and contemplate the heavenly bodies, what can be so obvious and so manifest as that there must exist some power possessing transcendent intelligence by whom these things are ruled? Were it not so, how comes it that the words of Ennius carry conviction to all readers “behold this dazzling vault of heaven, which all mankind as Jove invoke”, ay, and not only as Jove but as sovereign of the world, ruling all things with his nod, and as Ennius likewise says “father of gods and men”, a deity omnipresent and omnipotent?¹¹

Despite the *pater diuumque hominumque* formula it is clear that this Jupiter has nothing in common with Jupiter Capitolinus, rather he should be identified with the supreme non-personal Stoic divinity, one with the sky, a deity who rules the world: *dominatorem rerum et omnia motu regentem*.

A proof in this sense is that Balbus' affirmation is first quoted, then criticized, and refuted in the third book by Cotta, the representative of the Academy, whose commentary clearly states that the divinity mentioned by Balbus is different from Jupiter Capitolinus:

un'intelligenza trascendente vs. *una volontà [divina] dotata di un'intelligenza trascendente*) and the implications for *numen*.

8. Cf. Fr. PFISTER, *l.c.*, col. 1275 (n. 1).

9. Cf. G. DUMÉZIL, *o.c.*, p. 44 (n. 1): *Ce n'est qu'avec les écrivains augustéens, par l'intermédiaire d'une valeur « puissance divine », qui est comme l'intégrale des volontés particulières du dieu, que numen est devenu d'un part un synonyme poétique de « dieu », d'autre part la notation de chacune des diverses provinciae qui composent le domaine complexe d'un dieu, et en troisième lieu l'expression de ce qu'il y a de plus mystérieux dans l'invisible*; S. WEINSTOCK, *l.c.* (n. 1), p. 167: “*numen* did not mean «divinity» by itself before the Augustan period”.

10. P. BERRETTONI, *l.c.* (n. 6) p.127 sq. considers that both *Nat. Deor.*, II, 4 and *Nat. Deor.*, III, 10 document the transition toward the autonomous use of this notion, when *numen* alone is used to denote “divinity”.

11. Cicero, *De natura deorum. Academica*, with an English Translation by H. RACKHAM (Loeb Classical Library, 268), Cambridge (Mass.) - London, Harvard University Press, 1994.

Nat. Deor., III, 10: *Mandavi enim memoriae non numerum solum sed etiam ordinem argumentorum tuorum. Primum fuit, cum caelum suspexissemus statim nos intellegere esse aliquod numen quo haec regantur. Ex hoc illud etiam : « aspice hoc sublime candens, quem inuocant omnes Iouem » : quasi uero quisquam nostrum istum potius quam Capitolinum Iouem appellet.*

[H. Rackham's translation:] For I have committed to memory not only the number but also the order of your arguments. The first was that when we look up at the sky, we at once perceive that some power exists whereby the heavenly bodies are governed. And from this you went on to quote: "behold this dazzling vault of heaven, which all mankind as Jove invoke", just as if anyone among us really gave the name of Jove to your heaven rather than to Jove of the Capitol.

In sum, one encounters in Cicero's works different meanings of the concept, which argue for its semantic evolution in the Republican Period (from the initial meaning "nod" ¹² to that of "will", "power", and even "divinity"), and imply that the term was already in use for some time. This remark is supported also by the particular status of this notion, *i.e.* its almost exclusive connection with the divine world. And yet *numen* did not originally presuppose a relationship to the divine world ¹³, a proof in this sense being that – when it is not explicitly attributed to a divinity (usually through the genitive *dei* or *deorum*) – the sacred character of the notion is marked by elements indicating its association with the divine sphere (*diuinum*, *sanctum*). But, gradually, as some of Cicero's passages show, the term comes to include the attribute *diuinum* and to express by itself (without any further specification) the sacred character. Thus *numen* as "divine power" is ascribed to the senate (*Phil.*, III, 32) or to the laws (*Diu.*, I, 19). Enlarging the sphere of the sacred by ascribing *numen* (a typical attribute of the gods) to the senate, the Roman people and the laws should be seen as an attempt to increase their prestige in a hyperbolic manner without, however, diminishing the respect toward the gods.

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12. A. WALDE, J. B. HOFMANN, *s.v. numen*, *Lateinisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, vol. II (1954), p. 186.

13. Cf. S. WEINSTOCK, *l.c.* (n. 1), p. 167; P. BERRETTONI, *l.c.* (n. 6), p. 121 sq.

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