

Cicero on Mathematics¹

Contributed by Adi Ben-Israel

- 9 iii. Neque enim te fugit, artium omnium laudatarum procreatricem quamdam, et quasi parentem eam, quam *φιλοσοφίαν* Graeci vocant, ab hominibus doctissimis iudicari; in qua difficile est enumerare, quot viri, quanta scientia, quantaque in suis studiis varietate et copia fuerint, qui non una aliqua in re separatim elaborarint, sed omnia, quaecumque possent, vel scientiae pervestigatione, vel disserendi ratione, comprehenderint.
- 10 Quis ignorat, ei, qui **mathematici** vocantur, quanta in obscuritate rerum, et quam recondita in arte, et multiplici subtilique versentur? quo tamen in genere ita multi perfecti homines exstiterunt, ut nemo fere studuisse ei scientiae vehementius videatur, quin, quod voluerit, consecutus sit. Quis musicis, quis huic studio litterarum, quod profitentur ei, qui grammatici vocantur, penitus se dedit, quin omnem illarum artium paene infinitam vim et materiam scientiae cogitatione comprehenderit?

Cicero, *De Oratore*, I. iii. 9–10

- 9 iii. For indeed you cannot fail to remember that the most learned men hold what the Greeks call 'philosophy' to be the creator and mother, as it were, of all the reputable arts, and yet in this field of philosophy it is difficult to count how many men there have been, eminent for their learning and for the variety and extent of their studies, men whose efforts were devoted, not to one separate branch of study, but who have mastered everything they could whether by scientific investigation or by methods of dialectic.
- 10 Who does not know, as regards the so-called **mathematicians**², what very obscure subjects, and how abstruse, manifold, and exact an art they are engaged in? Yet in this pursuit so many men have displayed outstanding excellence, that hardly one seems to have worked in real earnest at this branch of knowledge without attaining the object of his desire. Who has devoted himself wholly to the cult of the Muses, or to this study of literature, which is professed by those who are known as men of letters, without bringing within the compass of his knowledge and observation the almost boundless range and subject-matter of those arts?

¹Quoted from p. 9 of *Cicero III*, Loeb Classical Library, No. 348, Harvard University Press, 1942, 479 + xxviii, ISBN 0-674-99382-9. The English translation, a bit long-winded, is due to E.W. Sutton and H. Rackham.

²The Greek root is *μαθημα* (mathema), meaning science, knowledge or learning, a meaning retained in the words *polymath* and *philomath*. By *mathematicians* Cicero means not just mathematicians (such as there were in 1st Century BC), but scientists and learned people in general.