

# The Ascent of Mount Ventoux

A Letter from Petrarch to Dionisio da Borgo San Sepolcro

Accessed via [Francesco Petrararch: Father of Humanism](#)

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Annotations

Today I made the ascent of the highest mountain in this region, which is not improperly called Ventosum. My only motive was the wish to see what so great an elevation had to offer. I have had the expedition in mind for many years; for, as you know, I have lived in this region from infancy, having been cast here by that fate which determines the affairs of men. Consequently, the mountain, which is visible from a great distance, was ever before my eyes, and I conceived the plan of some time doing what I have at last accomplished to-day. The idea took hold upon me with especial force when, in re-reading Livy's *History of Rome*, yesterday, I happened upon the place where Philip of Macedon, the same who waged war against the Romans, ascended Mount Haemus in Thessaly, from whose summit he was able, it is said, to see two seas, the Adriatic and the Euxine. Whether this be true or false I have not been able to determine, for the mountain is too far away, and writers disagree. Pomponius Mela, the cosmographer - not to mention others who have spoken of this occurrence - admits its truth without hesitation; [Livy], on the other hand, considers it false. I, assuredly, should not have left the question long in doubt, had that mountain been as easy to explore as this one. Let us leave this matter one side, however, and return to my mountain here, - it seems to me that a young man in private life may well be excused for attempting what an aged king could undertake without arousing criticism.

When I came to look about for a companion I found, strangely enough, that hardly one among my friends seemed suitable, so rarely do we meet with just the right combination of personal tastes and characteristics, even among those who are dearest to us. This one was too apathetic, that one over-anxious; this one too slow, that one too hasty; one was too sad, another over-cheerful; one more simple, another more sagacious, than I desired. I feared this one's taciturnity and that one's loquacity. The heavy deliberation of some repelled me as much as the lean incapacity of others. I rejected those who were likely to irritate me by a cold want of interest, as well as those who might weary me by their excessive enthusiasm. Such defects, however grave, could be borne with at home, for charity endures all things, and friendship accepts any burden; but it is quite otherwise on a journey, where every weakness becomes much more serious. So, as I was bent upon pleasure and anxious that my enjoyment should be unalloyed, I looked about me with unusual care, balanced against one another the various characteristics of my friends, and without committing any breach of friendship I silently condemned every trait which might prove disagreeable on the way. And - would you believe it? - I finally turned homeward for aid, and proposed the ascent to my only brother, who is younger than I, and with whom you are well acquainted. He was delighted and gratified beyond measure by the thought of holding the place of a friend as well as of a brother.

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**To what extent was Petrarch's decision to climb Mount Ventoux a humanistic endeavor? Explain.**

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# Letter from Petrarch to Cicero

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Accessed via [Francesco Petrarch: Father of Humanism](#)

**CONTEXT:** *Marcus Tullius Cicero was a famous Roman orator and politician who lived from 106-46 B.C. Petrarch discovered several manuscripts of Cicero's writings that had fallen into obscurity. In this letter, Petrarch grapples with the discrepancies between what Cicero wrote about civic virtue and some of the actions that he took in his own life and career.*

Annotations

Your letters I sought for long and diligently; and finally, where I least expected it, I found them. At once I read them, over and over, with the utmost eagerness. And as I read I seemed to hear your bodily voice, O Marcus Tullius, saying many things, uttering many lamentations, ranging through many phases of thought and feeling. I long had known how excellent a guide you have proved for others; at last I was to learn what sort of guidance you gave yourself.

Now it is your turn to be the listener. Hearken, wherever you are, to the words of advice, or rather of sorrow and regret, that fall, not unaccompanied by tears, from the lips of one of your successors, who loves you faithfully and cherishes your name. O spirit ever restless and perturbed! in old age--- I am but using your own words---self-involved in calamities and ruin! what good could you think would come from your incessant wrangling, from all this wasteful strife and enmity? Where were the peace and quiet that befitted your years, your profession, your station in life? What will-o'-the-wisp tempted you away, with a delusive hope of glory; involved you, in your declining years, in the wars of younger men; and, after exposing you to every form of misfortune, hurled you down to a death that it was unseemly for a philosopher to die? Alas! the wise counsel that you gave your brother, and the salutary advice of your great masters, you forgot. You were like a traveler in the night, whose torch lights up for others the path where he himself has miserably fallen....

What insanity led you to hurl yourself upon Antony?<sup>1</sup> Love of the republic, you would probably say. But the republic had fallen before this into irretrievable ruin, as you had yourself admitted. Still, it is possible that a lofty sense of duty, and love of liberty, constrained you to do as you did, hopeless though the effort was. That we can easily believe of so great a man. But why, then, were you so friendly with Augustus? What answer can you give to Brutus? If you accept Octavius, said he, we must conclude that you are not so anxious to be rid of all tyrants as to find a tyrant who will be well-disposed toward yourself. Now, unhappy man, you were to take the last false step, the last and most deplorable. You began to speak ill of the very friend whom you had so lauded, although he was not doing any ill to you, but merely refusing to prevent others who were. I grieve, dear friend at such fickleness. These shortcomings fill me with pity and shame... What, pray, does it profit a man to teach others, and to be prating always about virtue, in high-sounding words, if he fails to give heed to his own instructions? Ah! how much better it would have been, how much more fitting for a philosopher, to have grown old peacefully in the country, meditating, as you yourself have somewhere said, upon the life that endures forever, and not upon this poor fragment of life; to have known no fasces,<sup>2</sup> yearned for no triumphs, found no Catilines<sup>3</sup> to fill the soul with ambitious longings!--All this, however, is vain. Farewell, forever, my Cicero.

Written in the land of the living; on the right bank of the Adige, in Verona, a city of Transpadane<sup>4</sup> Italy; on the 16th of June, and in the year of that God whom you never knew the 1345th.

<sup>1</sup> Cicero delivered 14 *philippics* (hostile speeches condemning a political actor) against Mark Antony in 44-43 B.C., which led to Antony ordering Cicero to be executed and his head and hands displayed publicly in the Roman Forum.

<sup>2</sup> The fasces was a bundle of sticks carried in front of the consul, the highest public official in ancient Rome. Cicero served as consul in 63 B.C.

<sup>3</sup> Cicero's greatest political triumph was exposing Catiline's plot to assassinate him and overthrow the Roman Republic.

<sup>4</sup> This was the name of the Roman province that included Verona at the time that Cicero was alive.

# Writings from Petrarch Concerning Laura

Accessed via <http://petrarch.petersadlon.com/laura.html>

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## A Note Written in Petrarch's Manuscript of Virgil

Laura, who was distinguished by her own virtues, and widely celebrated in my verse, first appeared to my eyes in my early manhood, in the year or our Lord 1327, upon the sixth day of April, at the first hour, in the church of Santa Clara at Avignon; in the same city, in the same month of April, on the same sixth day, at the same first hour, in the year 1348, that light was taken from our day, while I was by chance Verona, ignorant, alas! of my fate. The unhappy news reached me at Parma, in a letter from my friend Ludovico, on the morning of the nineteenth of May, of the same year. Her chaste and lovely body was laid in the church of the Franciscans, on the evening of the day upon which she died. I am persuaded that her soul returned, as Seneca says Scipio Africanus, to the heaven whence it came. I have experienced a certain satisfaction in writing this bitter record of a cruel event, especially in this place where it will often come under my eye, for so I may be led to reflect that life can afford me no further pleasures; and, the most serious of my temptations being removed, I may be admonished by the frequent study of these lines, and by the thought of my vanishing years, that it is high time to flee from Babylon. This, with God's grace, will be easy, as I frankly and manfully consider the needless anxieties of the past, with its empty hopes and unforeseen issue.

## From Petrarch, The *Canzoniere*, #3

Listen to this poem ([mp3](#)) recited in Italian by [Moro Silo](#)

### ITALIAN

Era il giorno ch'al sol si scoloraro  
per la pietà del suo factore i rai,  
quando i' fui preso, et non me ne guardai,  
ché i be' vostr'occhi, donna, mi legaro.

Tempo non mi pareo da far riparo  
contra colpi d'Amor: però m'andai  
secur, senza sospetto; onde i miei guai  
nel commune dolor s'incominciaro.

Trovommi Amor del tutto disarmato  
et aperta la via per gli occhi al core,  
che di lagrime son fatti uscio et varco:

però al mio parer non li fu honore  
ferir me de saetta in quello stato,  
a voi armata non mostrar pur l'arco.

### ENGLISH

It was on that day when the sun's ray  
was darkened in pity for its Maker,  
that I was captured, and did not defend myself,  
because your lovely eyes had bound me, Lady.

It did not seem to me to be a time to guard myself  
against Love's blows: so I went on  
confident, unsuspecting; from that, my troubles  
started, amongst the public sorrows.

Love discovered me all weaponless,  
and opened the way to the heart through the eyes,  
which are made the passageways and doors of tears:

so that it seems to me it does him little honour  
to wound me with his arrow, in that state,  
he not showing his bow at all to you who are armed.

# From a letter to Giacomo Colonna, Reply Regarding Laura

Translated by Aldo S. Bernardo. State University of New York Press: Albany, New York. 1975. P. 102.

"What in the world do you say? That I invented the splendid name of Laura so that it might not only be something for me to speak about but also an occasion to have others speak of me; that indeed there was no Laura on my mind except perhaps the poetic one for which I have aspired as is attested by my long and untiring studies. And finally you say that the truly live Laura by whose beauty I seem to be captured was completely invented, my poems fictitious and my sighs contrived. I wish indeed that you were joking about this particular subject, and that she indeed had been a fiction and not a madness!

...

This wound will heal in time and that Ciceronian saying will apply to me: 'Time heals all wounds,' and against this fictitious Laura as you call it, that other fiction of mine, Augustine, will perhaps be of help."