

Cicero, Catiline, and Conspiracy

Vying for control, Lucius Catiline conspired to become Rome's monarch, while Cicero worked to expose and thwart his plans and keep Rome's Republic alive.

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This is the sixth installment in a series of articles on the rise and fall of the Roman Republic.

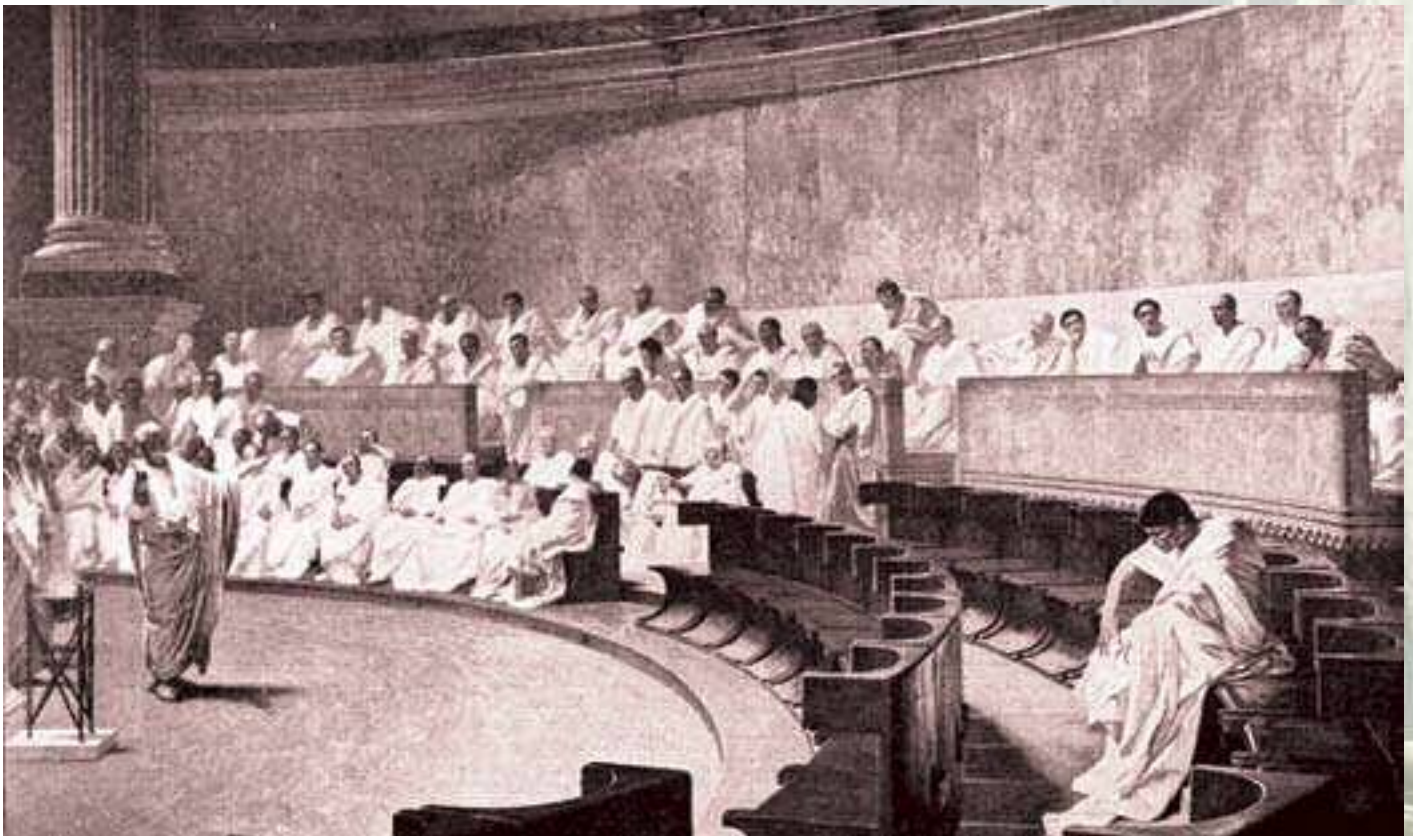
Sometime in the year 75 B.C., a boat sailed from Italy bound for the island of Rhodes in the eastern Mediterranean. The boat's most important passenger was a 25-year-old Roman advocate, who was sailing with his entourage. The advocate, Caius Julius Caesar, was already well known in the Roman capital for his flowing and persuasive oratory and for having logged a string of successful prosecutions of corrupt governors. The young

Caesar was sailing to Rhodes to improve his rhetorical skills under the tutelage of the legendary Appolonius Molo, a noted philosopher and rhetorician.

Julius Caesar was not Appolonius' only pupil of note. Another young Roman, Marcus Tullius Cicero, also spent significant time with the master rhetorician at about the same time. Appolonius, it is said, spoke no Latin, but he was so impressed with both Cicero's command of Greek and with the young man's rhetorical ability that he allegedly told him: "You have my praise and admiration, Cicero, and Greece my pity and commiseration, since those arts and that eloquence which are the only glories that remain to her, will now be

transferred by you to Rome." True to the prediction of the old Greek scholar, Cicero became Rome's greatest orator, as well as her greatest statesman and man of letters — and an able foil for the rising ambitions of Julius Caesar and his confederates.

In the wake of the dictatorship of Sulla, other ambitious men besides Julius Caesar were jostling for power in Rome. Licinius Crassus, the vanquisher of Spartacus and reputed to be Rome's wealthiest citizen, was one of them. Gnaeus Pompeius, also known as Pompey, was another. Pompey had been an able military leader for the Sullan forces and cemented his reputation with the destruction of the Cilician pirates in 67 B.C. But in the years between 70 and



Cicero denounces Catiline in the Roman Senate, in Maccari's famous rendition. Cicero was Rome's greatest statesman and orator, as well as a formidable man of letters (many of his voluminous letters, speeches, and commentaries have come down to us). He proved more than a match for the conspiratorial cunning of Catiline.

Never had the Roman state been so ripe for overthrow. In addition to declining moral standards, Rome was bankrupt. Italy had been emptied of most of her military forces, including their strongest leader, Pompey, who was fighting a second war against a rejuvenated Mithridates.

60 B.C., the greatest threat to the republic came not from charismatic generals but from a subtler source — a clever, amoral intriguer who formed a conspiracy to overthrow the republic.

Master of Deceit

Lucius Catiline was a dissolute patrician and senator gifted with good looks, intelligence, boundless energy, and tremendous personal magnetism. Catiline could, the

historian Sallust (and Catiline's contemporary) tells us, "endure hunger, cold, and want of sleep to an incredible extent. His mind was daring, crafty, and versatile, capable of any pretense and dissimulation. A man of flaming passions, he was as covetous of other men's possessions as he was prodigal of his own.... His monstrous ambition hankered continually

after things extravagant, impossible, beyond his reach."

Disaffected with republican government and determined to replace it with a monarchy, Catiline formed a secret society to prepare for a revolution. In morally decrepit Rome, he had no trouble attracting a following. Sallust informs us: "Amid the corruption of the great city Catiline could easily surround himself, as with a bodyguard, with gangs of profligates and

criminals. Debauchees, adulterers, and gamblers, who had squandered their inheritances in gaming-dens, pot-houses, and brothels; anyone who had bankrupted himself to buy impunity for his infamous or criminal acts; men convicted anywhere of murder or sacrilege, or living in fear of conviction; cut-throats and perjurers, too, who made a trade of bearing false witness or shedding the blood of fellow citizens; in short, all who were in disgrace or afflicted by poverty or consciousness of guilt, were Catiline's intimate associates."

Catiline specialized in corrupting youth, procuring mistresses for them, encouraging the practice of unnatural vice, and even training them in the art of forging documents. He enlisted many veterans of the Sullan dictatorship in his movement, men who had expended their spoils since the death of their leader and wished to renew the despotism which had once rewarded them.

Never had the Roman state been so



Conspiracy unmasked: Some of the leaders of the Catilinarian conspiracy are brought before the Senate, under Cicero's orders, to be tried for treason and sedition.

ripe for overthrow. In addition to declining moral standards, Rome was bankrupt. Italy had been emptied of most of her military forces, including their strongest leader, Pompey, who was fighting a second war against a rejuvenated Mithridates. Many of Rome's political leaders, including Crassus, Pompey's bitter rival, were aware of and sympathetic with Catiline's designs. Catiline, having assembled a considerable following throughout Italy, as well as a core of confidants in the Senate, began organizing and training his recruits, preparing for an armed overthrow of the republic. Only one man stood between Catiline and his goal of absolute power: Cicero.

Defender of the Republic

In 63 B.C., Cicero defeated Catiline in the consular election, and the latter immediately began plotting Cicero's demise. He sent a band of assassins to Cicero's house, but Cicero, having been warned that his life was in danger, barricaded himself inside and frustrated the plot. In spite of these events, however, it appears that Cicero had not yet learned the full extent of Catiline's conspiracy. Nevertheless, Cicero did deliver, on November 8th, the first of four orations in opposition to Catiline in the Senate. According to Sallust's version of events (which does not agree with Cicero's), Catiline sat in smug silence as the great Roman orator heaped invective on him. When Cicero sat down, Catiline rose to defend himself. He invoked his high birth and his years of public service; how could anyone, he asked, take the word of this upstart immigrant (Cicero was a native of Arpinium, about 70 miles from Rome) against that of a patrician like himself?

Cicero's powerful oratory, however, had won many allies. The entire Senate shouted down Catiline, calling him an enemy and a traitor. At this unexpected reversal, Catiline became enraged. "Since I am encompassed by foes," he thundered, "and hounded to desperation, I will check the fire that threatens to consume me by pulling everything down about your ears." Saying this, he stormed out of the Senate and fled from Rome — but not before



Rome's rivals: Gallic warriors as they probably appeared in the first century B.C. Catiline's conspirators tried to enlist the help of Gallic tribes living under Roman rule in Italy to support the planned overthrow of the republic.

leaving instructions with his most trusted confidants, led by Cethegus and Lentulus, to "do everything possible to increase the strength of their party, to find an early opportunity of assassinating Cicero, and to make arrangements for massacre, fire-raising, and other violent outrages." He promised them that he would soon return to Rome — at the head of a large army.

Catiline's agents busied themselves with final preparations for what was shaping up to be a meticulously planned and remarkably sophisticated revolution. Many of Catiline's corrupted youth confederates were instructed to murder their fathers, even as 12 conflagrations were to be kindled at picked spots across Rome. Catiline's emissaries fanned out across Roman territories in Italy, seeking allies among non-Roman

subject peoples. Some of them, still smarting from the indignities of the Social War, an unsuccessful bid for independence from Rome on the part of various Italian subject states, agreed to support the revolution. But one group betrayed Catiline — the Allobroges, a Gallic tribe whose territory formed the northernmost portion of the Roman province of Transalpine Gaul. The Allobroges themselves had dispatched envoys to Rome to complain of abuses by Roman administrators and of heavy debts. Yet presented with an opportunity to overthrow their overweening masters, the Allobroges hesitated. Considering the vast resources of Rome, defeat was a real possibility, with the reprisals that would inevitably follow. Perhaps they doubted as well the good faith of their would-be

Cato the Younger urged the Senate: “In heaven’s name, ... wake up while there is still time and lend a hand to defend the Republic. It is not a matter of misappropriated taxes, or wrongs done to subject peoples; it is our liberty and lives that are at stake.”

patron, Lucius Catiline. Whatever the reasons, after considerable debate, it was the Allobroges that dealt Catiline’s conspiracy a crippling setback.

There was in Rome a certain Quintus Fabius Sanga, who acted as the Allobroges’ patron. It was Sanga whom the Allobroges approached with tidings of the impending revolution and the vast conspiracy behind it. Sanga immediately informed Cicero, who instructed the Allobroges to feign sympathy with the conspirators, in order to find out as much as they could about the organization’s membership and plans. They obligingly met with Len-

tulus, Cethegus, and the other core conspirators and requested sealed, written instructions to carry back to their countrymen. Some of Catiline’s men were to accompany the Allobroges back to their homeland. This was communicated to Cicero. The latter arranged to have the party intercepted and arrested, with the understanding that the Allobroges were to be released. Cicero personally interrogated the first

detainees and examined their papers. He then ordered the other chief conspirators in Rome, including Lentulus and Cethegus, to be rounded up.

Debate in the Senate

At this point, Cicero faced a dilemma: he was well aware that the conspirators had many allies in the Senate and elsewhere, allies that would make successful prosecution well nigh impossible. He also understood that, if the leaders of the conspiracy were freed, the republic was likely doomed, so pervasive and well organized had Catiline’s organization become. The Roman public, upon first learning of the conspiracy and its exposure, “praised Cicero to the skies,” in Sallust’s words; but partisans of Catiline were still at work sowing discord and shoring up Catiline’s support base.

Cicero had the conspirators brought before the Senate in order to discuss how to punish them. Instead of unanimity on the need to rid Rome of the band of execrable traitors, Cicero found to his consternation that the Catilinarians had a powerful senatorial patron who was nearly his equal in eloquence and popularity: Julius Caesar. Both Cicero and his able colleague, Cato the Younger, believed Julius Caesar to be a member of Catiline’s band, a belief that was apparently shared by many other contemporaries. The historian Appian also gave some credence to this view, although Sallust — a friend

and unabashed partisan of Caesar — did not. Whatever the case, Julius Caesar’s actions in the Senate on the conspirators’ behalf certainly are more suggestive of trying to help associates than of preserving the republic. “It is not easy to discern the truth,” Caesar told his Senate colleagues, “when one’s view is obstructed by emotions.... You ... gentlemen must take care that the guilt of Publius Lentulus and the others does not outweigh your sense of what is fitting, and that you do not indulge your resentment at the expense of your reputation.” Caesar went on to give a carefully nuanced discourse on the dangers of overreacting and of taking extreme measures without legal coloration. He recommended that, instead of being executed, the conspirators should be deprived of their property and consigned to internal exile in various cities that “are best provided to undertake their custody.”

Caesar’s calculated rhetoric swayed many in the Senate, but the debate was not finished. Marcus Cato, known to history as Cato the Younger, arose. Reminding his audience that the men before them planned to “make war on their country, parents, altars, and hearths,” he observed that mere punishment was not enough: “Other crimes can be punished when they have been committed; but with a crime like this, unless you take measures to prevent its being committed, it is too late: once it has been done, it is useless to invoke the law.” He then chided many of the senators for having been “more concerned for your houses, villas, statues, and pictures, than you have for your country.” “In heaven’s name, men,” he urged them, “if you want to keep those cherished possessions, whatever they may be, if you want to have peace and quiet for the enjoyment of your pleasures, wake up while there is still time and lend a hand to defend the Republic. It is not a matter of misappropriated taxes, or wrongs done to subject peoples; it is our liberty and lives that are at stake.”

He contrasted for his audience the moral virtues of the old republic with the paralyzing vices of the present era: “They were hard workers at home, just rulers abroad; and to the council-chamber they brought untrammelled minds, neither racked by consciousness of guilt, nor enslaved by passion. We have lost these virtues. We pile up riches for ourselves while the state



Pompey the Great: Rome’s greatest military leader in Cicero’s time, Pompey vanquished the Cilician pirates and Mithridates, king of Pontus, before subduing Palestine.

is bankrupt. We sing the praises of prosperity — and idle away our lives. Good men or bad — it is all one: all the prizes that merit ought to win are carried off by ambitious intriguers. And no wonder, when each of you schemes only for himself, when in your private lives you are slaves to pleasure, and here in the Senate House the tools of money or influence. The result is that when an assault is made upon the Republic, there is no one there to defend it.”

Having thus rebuked his colleagues, Cato recommended death for the conspirators. The Senators, acclaiming Cato’s courage and, according to Sallust, “reproaching one another for their faintheartedness,” adopted a resolution to put the conspirators to death. Fearing delay, Cicero directed that they at once be taken to the place of execution deep inside the prison, a filthy, sunless chamber called the Tullianum. There, Cethegus, Lentulus, and three other conspirators were put to death by strangling.

Defeat of Catiline

Catiline himself, however, was still at large with a considerable army. Many of his men deserted when they learned that the conspiracy had been exposed and its leaders executed. Even so, more than a few remained faithful to their leader and joined him in a retreat to a remote, mountainous area near Pistoria, a city in the Tuscany region of northern Italy. Waiting nearby for an opportunity to attack Catiline were several legions under Metellus and Caius Antonius, who cornered Catiline and his army against a range of mountains. Out of options, Catiline decided to risk immediate battle to decide the issue. After a rousing speech, he led his men into combat against the veteran Roman legions. Catiline’s men, having resolved to conquer or die, fought savagely and exacted a terrible toll on the government forces. Catiline himself, realizing his cause was lost, decided to die like a Roman and waded into the thick of the affray. His forces were cut down to a man, but many Roman soldiers lost their lives as well. Perhaps 20,000 died in the Battle of Pistoria in January of 62 B.C.; Sallust informs us that Catiline’s body was found far from the place where his vanguards had fallen, surrounded by the bodies of government soldiers.

For the moment, Rome breathed more easily. A deadly conspiracy had been unmasked and uprooted, though at a high cost in lives. The prestige of Cicero and his able colleague, Cato, had never been higher.

But Crassus and Caesar, both of whom had been sympathetic with, and probable participants in, the Catilinarian conspiracy, were alive and well. Julius Caesar in particular was already regrouping from his failure to save the Catilinarians. He was at once subtler and more charismatic than Catiline. He knew that power lay in forging alliances of convenience, and he began to look to Crassus and Pompey for support.

In addition to Caesar’s intrigues, Rome was still beset by economic woes, and the moral turpitude that Cato had condemned was as prevalent as ever. The republic, in spite of the best efforts of Cicero and a dwindling number of republican patriots, was teetering on the brink of collapse. The descent into Caesarism was less than two decades away. ■



Julius Caesar: The man who gave his name to imperial despotism, Caesar was a gifted orator, writer, and advocate besides being a talented military leader.