

# Caecilia Metella, Roscius, and Nobility Greed

Syme, Ronald. *Approaching the Roman Revolution: Papers on Republican History*. Edited by Federico Santangelo, Oxford University Press, 2016. [eBook Preview](#)

The parent Roscius was the first man for wealth, birth, and repute not only at Ameria but in the whole neighbourhood, far and wide; like many municipal grandees, he had patrons at the capital; he had assiduously cultivated the favour of certain noble houses, Scipiones, Metelli, and Servilii. At all times a partisan of the aristocracy, *nobilitatis fautor*, he threw all his weight on the right side in the recent disturbances, deeming it his duty (11a) to fight in defence of that rank and dignity which guaranteed his own. When the *nobiles* came back, Roscius was much at Rome, not from any apprehension but joyous and exultant in public places, celebrating the victory.[40]

The son [Roscius], though a person of rudimentary intelligence, knew the value of *clientele*. In his hour of need he sought refuge in the house of Caecillia Metella, a great lady.[41] Her descent is certain, daughter of Balaricus (*cos.* 234 BC) and therefore sister to Nepos (*cos.* 98 BC),[42] but not her precise identity. Now Ap. Claudius Pulcher, the consul of 79 BC, to to wife a sister of Nepos: this is proved by the fact that his children were cousins of the two Metelli (the consuls of 60 and 57 BC), the sons of Nepos (*cos.* 98 BC).[43] Failing other evidence, the lady who protected Roscius might well be identified as the wife of Ap. Cladius Pulcher.[44] The speech for Roscius says nothing, it is true, of her husband or children—and Pulcher's wife had no fewer than six children. Perhaps therefore the Caecilia of the *Rosciana* was not Pulcher's wife, but a sister, otherwise unattested.[45] Certitude (11b) cannot be attained, and Cicero's failure to mention the husband or the children of Caecilia Metella is not conclusive; it does not prove that she had none. Her identity was manifest to the audience. That the advocate should not proclaim or even indicate who her husband was is quite intelligible. It was a political case, but, as Cicero states in his *exordium*, the elder *nobiles* had good reasons for eschewing prominence.[46] Ap. Claudius Pulcher, who had been praetor in 89 BC, was certain to be consul in the near future, even if he had not by now been designated for the next year.

Caecilia Metella was (12) not merely a woman of courage and character—Cicero goes so far as to praise her *virtus*, a masculine quality.[47] Superior sanctity attached to the person of Caecilia and the memory of the *Bellum Italicum* ten years before. When all was disaster and portents, Caecilia revealed a way of salvation. Asking audience of the Senate, she told how Juno Sospita had given counsel in a dream: the goddess complained that her shrine had been desecrated, but would not deny her aid to Rome after proper ceremonies of expiation.[48]

(12a) Caecilia Metella, her family and their allies took up the challenge. There was no choice. One of the most sacred of all *officia* was at stake. If the *nobiles* refused to protect a client, they signed away their honour and forfeited the moral basis of their political ascendancy. Some of the families that came back with Sulla thought only of pride and power, revenge and money. The Metelli were wiser—at least the head of the family. Cicero records an incident that he himself had witnessed, in this very year. The consul Pius intervened at the praetorian elections and begged the Roman people to elect Q. Calpurnius. This man was not a client. Pius asserted the precise opposite, that

Calidus, by his meritorious action nineteen years before when he proposed a bill for the recall of Numidicus, had actually become the *patronus* of the Metelli.[49] *Pietas* could not go further than this, in justifying a *cognomen*. [50]

If the *nobiles* put honour above all things, Sulla could not complain. Their duty was manifest, but they preferred to insist in an inoffensive and invulnerable fashion—not the leading men, but Caecilia Metella and aristocratic youth—so as to preclude the scandal of an open break with their formidable protector.

(13) They turned up in force at the trial of Roscius. Rising to speak, Cicero at once explains why so many men of distinction and eloquence are present yet constrained to silence. They know their duty, but fear the *iniquitas temporum*. Such was their dignity and authority—that, if any of them touched on politics, as he needs must in this case, his utterances would be accorded an importance out of all proportion.[51]

Three aristocratic names emerge in the course of the speech. The most illustrious is that of P. Scipio.[52] Is he P. Scipio Nasica, the praetor of 94 BC, whose father (*cos.* 11 BC) had married a Metella?[53] It is not very likely. The line was unlucky—the parent died in Africa, and the son never reached the consulate....

(14) In the same sentence with P. Scipio, the orator appeals to a Metellus—*te nunc appello, P. Scipio, te Metelle*. [55] Propriety suggests that he too be furnished with a *praenomen*. The simplest solution would be M(arce), giving M. Metellus, praetors in 69 BC.[56] One manuscript, however, though not among the best, has Q(uinte0).[57] If this be accepted, an embarrassing plethora surges up. Q. Metellus Nepos (*cos.* 98 BC), was dead, and so perhaps was Q. Ceter (*tr. pl.* 90 BC), who adopted the elder son of Nepos.[58] There remain Q. Creticus (*cos.* 69 BC) and the two sons of Nepos, with identical *praenomina*, namely Q. Ceter (*cos.* 60 BC) and Q. Nepos (*cos.* 57 BC), the *duo Metelli* who not many months later were to prosecute M. Lepidus the proconsul of Sicily.[59] If the Metellus in question was in fact a Quintus, the principle of preferring youth (which will be justified below) turns the choice toward one of the *duo Metelli*. Which of them, who can say? And if one of them was present in court, was not his brother also?

(15) The Third *nobilis* is M. Messalla.[6] The choice lies between the consuls of 61 and 53 BC, Niger and Rufus. It is easily made. Cicero commends Messalla for having taken in hand all the public and official arrangements for the defence of Roscius while Caecilia Metella worked in private: youth and modesty alone had deterred him from speaking. The excuse, hardly valid for Niger, who was only two years younger than Cicero, would be more than ample for Rufus—ten years on a computation from the date of his consulate. He was, therefore, about five years junior to Cicero.

The prominence of a noble matron and a noble youth in a suit that was nominally private but in fact political is highly significant. Expedience forbade the participation of men in the first rank of public dignity, such as Metella's husband, Ap. Claudius Pulcher, or P. Servilius Vatia, whose imminent consulate might be surmised though it was probably not yet known. Cicero in his *exordium* refers to the presence in court of *nobiles* who have precedence before him in years as well as in talent and authority. (16) No members of this class seem to be named, but only his juniors. The important role assumed by M. Messalla may perhaps be taken for guidance. Messalla

was about twenty-one. The unidentified Metellus, if he be either Celer or Nepos, belongs to the same age group. Had P. Scipio Nasica (*pr.* 94 BC) been still alive, it would have been peculiarly incongruous to mention him in such company. His son, consul in 52 BC, might seem a little young. But his unmatched ancestry put him ahead of any Metellus in his own generation;[63] and, on the other hand, despite that pedigree, his expectation of the consulate may have been frustrated for a year or two under the rule of the three dynasts until Pompeius Magnus took him up, married his daughter, and rescued him from prosecution.

The defence of Roscius looks like a concerted rally of the younger *nobiles*. Their elders prudently eschewing publicity.[64] Only three of the young men happen to be named. The Servilii were also among the patrons of Roscius' family; but the son of P. Servilius Vatia had perhaps not yet put on the *toga virilis*. Ap. Claudius Pulcher (*cos.* 54 BC), who was available, many have not been impressed by the municipal upstart whom his mother and her friends enlisted on the side of aristocratic *virtus* and *fides*, creating thereby the occasion for an oratorical triumph; he was later to display a singular apathy on the subject of Cicero. Other men were present. (16a) Q. Hortensius had been counsel for the prosecution the year before when Cicero spoke for P. Quinctius.[65] His eminence as an orator went back to a striking debut in 95 BC, and he now had few rivals. Hortensius was eight years older than Cicero. It would be a tempting speculation, what he thought of the *Rosciana*....

(16b) The Valerii are not named by Cicero among the families in whose *clientele* was Roscius of America. His champions in the first instance are the Metelli. But young Messalla also turns out to be very active. No tie of kinship is known, now or later; and the Valerii Messallae had languished in obscurity during the predominance of the Metelli—there might even be a feud, dating back to a prosecution in that period.

This is remarkable. There is more. Sulla's fifth and last wife was a Valeria. Plutarch says that she was the sister of Hortensius—that is to say, half-sister.[69] On this showing, it could be argued that Hortensius' mother had married twice, that M. Messalla Rufus[70] (*cos.* 53 BC) was a uterine brother of Q. Hortensius (*cos.* 69 BC). But Plutarch is wrong. Rufus was Hortensius' nephew;[71] the father of Rufus had married Hortensius' sister. Valeria, therefore, was either the sister-in-law or the niece of Hortensius. Some favour the former alternative, on arguments of age, here inconclusive.[72] The latter is perhaps preferable. Anyhow, it matters little. The choice concerns the genealogical tables rather than political history. Sulla's Valeria was either the aunt or the sister of the young man who made himself so conspicuous at the trial of Roscius. (17) The only evidence comes from a Plutarchian anecdote. Sulla celebrated his victory with lavish games and shows in the autumn of 81 BC.[73] During the festivities, his wife Caecilia Metella fell ill and died. Only a few months later, Sulla happened to be present at a show of gladiators. Seated not far away was a gay young lady, recently divorced, Valeria by name. She stole up behind him, filched some thread of his toga and returned to her place: she wanted a piece of his luck, tangible and potent. Sulla made enquiry about her identity and circumstances. Smiles were exchanged and glances of complicity. Wedlock ensued.

(18) The date of Sulla's marriage to Valeria might be put after his abdication. All that there is to go on is Plutarch's statement—the idyllic scene at the gladiatorial show occurred a few months after

the death of Caecilia Metella. There is no guarantee that the biography has not compressed the interval between Sulla's bereavement and Sulla's remarriage.[74]...

The ten years' war in Italy closed with the triumph of a party, with confiscation and murder. A Certain Sex. Roscius of America, a supporter of the *nobilitas*, so it is averred, and exultant in their victory, fell by the hand of an assassin at Rome. By birth, rank, and fortune, he was by a long way the first many not only in America but in all the country round. Members of the family had the dead man's name put on the proscription (18) list, so as to acquire his property easily and cheaply—Roscius owned no fewer than thirteen rich farms, most of them close to the river Tiber, and they tried to fix the guilt of the crime on Roscius' son.[128] Fortunately, the young man was sheltered and succoured by a lady called Caecilia Metella, some of the *nobiles* took an interest in a case that touched the duties and the prestige of their class, a promising advocate was secured, and justice triumphed in the eloquence of Cicero.[129]

Another speech from Cicero's early career, the *Pro Vareno* of which only fragments survive, gives more than a hint of the things that might go on in Umbria during or after the proscriptions.[130] L. Salarius, and one of his own name, C. Varenus, were the victims, while CN. Varenus had been wounded. The person who set on foot the prosecution was C. Ancharius Rufus of the *municipium* of Fulginiae. The name *Varenus* is not merely Umbrian in type, but it happens to be attested in an office-holding family at Fulginiae.[131] This time, Cicero was not successful, despite an oration of considerable power and skill. Varenus was condemned. One can only guess at some horrible and complicated game of greed, intrigue, and murder with poverty for the prize in the fat lands between the Fulginiae and (19) Mevania....

The remarkable figure of Caecilia Metella receives close consideration in Schultz 2006, especially for her involvement in a major religious development during the Social War: her audience with the seate, at which she reported a dream concerning Juno Sospita, was no business as usual. The *clientele* bond between the Metelli and Sex. Roscius is also recognized by Badian 1958:252, who appears to extend it to the nobiles. Dyck 2010 prints *te nunc appello, P. Scipio, te, M. Metelle* at § 77—'the simplest solution', in S.'s view. Hinard 2006 prints *Metelle*.