Catilinarian conspiracy

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The Catilinarian conspiracy – one aristocrat's plot to overthrow the Roman state, kill key political figures, seize power for himself, and erase debts – stands out as one of the most vibrantly documented historical events to have contributed to the fall of the Roman Republic. Catiline's (Lucius Sergius Catilina: 108–62 BCE) attempted *coup d'état* of 63 was, in the end, foiled by a series of private betrayals and political deals and exposed, in series of dramatic orations, by Cicero (*see* CICERO, MARCUS TULLIUS) – one of the consuls of 63 and, at that time, the most powerful political and forensic orator in Rome. The collapse of the plot signaled a victory for the state – and, at least temporarily, for Cicero. So too, however, did it mark a turning point in the history of the Roman Republic, and the shockwaves of the conspiracy – the attitudes it revealed and changed – contributed to events that led to the fall of the republic and the subsequent rise of the Principate and, ultimately, the empire.

Our primary sources for the conspiracy are Cicero's *Catilinarian Orations* (henceforth *Catilinarians*), dating to the period of the conspiracy, and SALLUST's *Bellum Catilinae* (henceforth *BC*), dating to some twenty years after it. The *Catilinarians*, a group of four speeches delivered during the critical days of the conspiracy, are a stylistically complex combination of forensic, political, and epideictic oratory. As such, they stand as testaments to Cicero's oratorical skill and political self-interest, and allow us to trace the background of the conspiracy and the progress of its collapse. The first oration urges the Senate to action against Catiline; the second presents Catiline's flight from Rome as a personal and political victory before the Roman people; the third enjoins the people to celebrate its close scrape with bloody rebellion; the fourth lays the foundation for some of the senators (including Cato the Younger) to argue for the execution of the conspirators.

Sallust's *BC*, which may be dated tentatively to ca. 42 BCE, gives us a different view of the conspiracy. Whereas Cicero's *Catilinarians* sought to deprive Catiline of a voice, Sallust's monograph gives voice to the aggressor and highlights the senatorial debates over execution hinted at in Cicero's fourth *Catilinarian*. Although ostensibly written as a historical account, that Sallust prefaces his work with a bitter criticism of contemporary politics – and his own retreat from such, to be dated shortly after the period of the conspiracy – makes this work as problematic a source as Cicero's.

Although now often represented as a single man's desire to overthrow the state for personal and political motives, the Catilinarian conspiracy was rooted in decades of political and economic unrest. In the years leading up to the conspiracy, Catiline – as well as many others of the patrician class – had suffered a decline in social and economic fortune due to the debts incurred in the aftermath of the Social War (*see* SOCIAL WAR, ROMAN REPUBLIC). Catiline had served in the Social War (91–87 BCE) with POMPEY (106–48) and Cicero, and had held a praetorship in 68; he followed this praetorship with two years as a governor of Africa. Charges of corruption attended Catiline's return from Africa, and although he was eventually acquitted with the help of Publius CLODIUS PULCHER (ca. 92–52) and indeed almost with the help of Cicero himself, these charges had prevented his standing for consul for both 65 and 64. Charged twice, Catiline twice escaped conviction: these events have traditionally been referred to as the "First Catilinarian Conspiracy," but scholarship has conclusively shown that no such first "conspiracy" occurred (Gruen 1969). In increasingly dire straits and driven headlong by ambition and necessity, Catiline tried to secure the consulship for 63 but was defeated – in spite of having gained the support of fellow aristocrats eager for a cancellation of debts – by Cicero.

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Cicero's *Catilinarians* portray Catiline's plan as one driven by pure hatred of the state and desire for personal power. Yet, it is likely that Catiline's motivations for the *coup*, ego-driven as they were, were in no small part also economic in origin. For although he counted many from the lower classes among his followers, he garnered considerable support from his fellow patricians, many of whom had fallen into massive debt. The increasingly unstable years of the Late Republic had created a volatile atmosphere in which an otherwise treasonable action could be presented as patriotic.

If the background to the conspiracy is relatively complex, Catiline's plans for the takeover were nonetheless simple. Within Rome, he sought to raise a band of armed henchmen while in the countryside he gathered a large group of disaffected – and heavily indebted – Sullan veterans. On the night of October 27, the veterans, led by the centurion Gaius Manlius, were to march on Rome and, the next day, to engage in a dual uprising, with Catiline's urban henchmen, in which power would be seized and several republican leaders – Cicero among them – assassinated in their homes in the early hours of November 7.

The plot was foiled, in no small part because of the personal betrayal of Quintus Curtius, one of the conspirators, who informed Cicero of the plan via his mistress Fulvia. The assassins who appeared at dawn on the November 7 were frightened away by the guards Cicero had placed at his doorstep. The conspirators were repulsed, and the tide of the conspiracy shifted in favor of the republic. Once informed of the conspiracy, Cicero negotiated an agreement with the Allobroges, a Gallic tribe that had previously struck a deal with Catiline, for a classic double-cross. The conspirators within Rome were arrested and executed without due process: Sallust's *BC*, chapters 51 and 52, reproduces (or invents) two vibrant and opposing speeches delivered by Caesar and Cato, the former arguing for leniency, the latter for stringency.

When Catiline learned that the plot had been discovered, he moved his army to the Abruzzo, hoping to make a secret escape into Gaul. The republican forces quickly moved their camp and met Catiline's army at the base of the mountains through which the army would have to pass in flight. A bloody battle ensued – Roman citizen against Roman citizen – and by the end of the day Catiline and many of his fellow conspirators had been killed. The conspiracy was foiled. Rome, it appeared, and Cicero, had won.

The aftershocks of this event would reverberate for years. Cicero's earlier push to execute the conspirators – all of whom were Roman citizens – without due process gave leverage to his political enemies, and helped lead to his *relegatio*, a kind of exile, for a year. His home on the Palatine Hill was relegated to the state by the same Clodius who had defended Catiline against charges of corruption, and many of the possessions of his other estates were taken and distributed among his political enemies. Upon his return to Rome, Cicero was able to regain his home and argue successfully for compensation for his property. However, this Cicero – once consul, the "First Man of Rome" – returned a fallen, bitter, and disempowered individual. With the subsequent rise of Caesar's power, continued internal violence in Rome, and increasing opposition between the factions of Caesar and Cato, the face of the republic had changed forever.

SEE ALSO: Army, Roman Empire; Cato the Younger; Exile; Gladiators; Sallust; Senate, Roman Republic and Empire.

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