

## Catiline's Family background

Catiline was born in 108 BC to one of the oldest patrician families in Rome. Although his family was of consular heritage, they were then declining in both social and financial fortunes. Virgil later gave the family an ancestor, Sergestus, who had come with Aeneas to Italy, presumably because they were notably ancient; but they had not been prominent for centuries. The last Sergius to be consul had been Gnaeus Sergius Fidenas Coxo in 380 BC.<sup>[1]</sup> Later, these factors would dramatically shape Catiline's ambitions and goals as he would desire above all else to restore the political heritage of his family along with its financial power.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Military career

An able commander, Catiline had a distinguished military career.<sup>[3]</sup> He served in the Social War with Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus and Cicero, under Gnaeus Pompeius Strabo in 89 BC. During Gaius Marius, Lucius Cornelius Cinna and Gnaeus Papirius Carbo's regime, Catiline played no major role, but he remained politically secure. He later supported Lucius Cornelius Sulla in the civil war of 84 BC–81 BC. Then in the early 70s BC he served abroad, possibly with Publius Servilius Vatia at Cilicia. In 73 BC, he was brought to trial for adultery with the Vestal Virgin, Fabia,<sup>[4]</sup> but Quintus Lutatius Catulus, the principal leader of the Optimates, testified in his favor, and eventually Catiline was acquitted.<sup>[5]</sup>

He was praetor in 68 BC and for the following 2 years was the propraetorian governor for Africa.<sup>[6]</sup> Upon his return home in 66 BC, he presented himself as a candidate for the consular elections; however, he was prevented from becoming a candidate on technical grounds by the current consul, Lucius Volcanius Tullus.<sup>[7]</sup> Subsequently, a delegation from his province appealed to the Senate alleging abuse of power while governor.<sup>[8]</sup> He was finally brought to trial in 65 BC, where he received the support of many of the most distinguished men in Rome, including many of the consulars.<sup>[6]</sup> Even one of the consuls for 65 BC, Lucius Manlius Torquatus, demonstrated his support for Catiline.<sup>[9]</sup> Cicero also contemplated defending Catiline in court.<sup>[10]</sup> Eventually, Catiline was acquitted.

## First Catilinarian Conspiracy

In all likelihood, Catiline was not involved in the so called First Catilinarian Conspiracy; however, several historical sources implicate him in it. There does not seem to be a single account that is represented in all of the sources, rather it seems that the accounts represent a collection of rumors accusing and implicating different political figures in attempts to tarnish their names. As it pertains to Catiline, much of the information originates in Cicero's speech *In Toga Candida* which was given during his election campaign in 64 BC. Only fragments of this speech still exist.

The consuls-designate, Publius Autronius Paetus and Publius Cornelius Sulla, were prevented from entering office because of *ambitus*, electoral corruption, under the *lex Calpurnia*.<sup>[11]</sup> Thus, the two other leading candidates, Lucius Manlius Torquatus and Lucius Aurelius Cotta, were elected in a second election and were to enter office on January 1, 65 BC. Supposedly, Catiline, incensed because he was not allowed to stand for the consulship, conspired with Gnaeus Calpurnius Piso and the former consuls-designate to slaughter many of the senators and the new consuls the day they assumed office. Then they would name themselves the consuls for 65 BC and then Piso would have been sent to organize the provinces in Spain.<sup>[12]</sup> Alternatively, Gaius Suetonius claims that Julius Caesar and Marcus Licinius Crassus directed the conspiracy, but he fails to mention Catiline's involvement. Instead of assuming the consulship, Crassus is accused of planning to become dictator and intending to name Caesar "magister equitum".<sup>[13]</sup>

Later, in 62 BC after Catiline's death, Cicero defended Publius Sulla in court after he was indicted for being a member of the second conspiracy. In order to free his client of implication in the First Catilinarian Conspiracy, he places the blame solely on Catiline, who had conveniently waged war against the Republic in the previous months.<sup>[14]</sup> In the end, Publius Sulla was acquitted, Catiline's name was further tarnished, and Cicero received a large loan to purchase a home.<sup>[15]</sup> It is not clear who participated in this alleged conspiracy, as the different accounts accuse different people, but Catiline's association with it appears to have been developed after the Second Catilinarian Conspiracy. Cicero's accusations prior to 63 BC are likely unfounded, since Rome had no penalty for libel. Furthermore, Catiline had little motive to participate in this conspiracy, especially since he had been denied very little. He still held the aspiration of obtaining the consulship legitimately the next year, and the conspiracy involved the murder of the consul, Manlius Torquatus, who supported Catiline. It is unlikely that Catiline would have been involved in the First Catilinarian Conspiracy or if, indeed, it even existed at all.

## **Intervening years**

During 64 BC Catiline was officially accepted as a candidate in the consular election for 63 BC. He ran alongside Gaius Antonius Hybrida whom some suspect may have been a fellow conspirator. Nevertheless, Catiline was defeated by Cicero and Antonius Hybrida in the consular election, largely because the Roman aristocracy feared Catiline and his economic plan.<sup>[16]</sup> The Optimates were particularly repulsed because he promoted the plight of the urban plebs along with his economic policy of *tabulae novae*, the universal cancellation of debts.<sup>[17]</sup>

He was brought to trial later that same year, but this time it was for his role in the Sullan proscriptions. At the insistence of Cato the Younger, then quaestor, all men who had profited during the proscriptions were brought to trial. For his involvement, Catiline was accused of killing his brother-in-law Marcus Marius

Gratidianus, carrying this man's severed head through the streets of Rome and then having Sulla add him to the proscription to make it legal. Other allegations claimed that he murdered several other notable men.<sup>[18]</sup> Despite this, Catiline was acquitted again, though some surmise that it was through the influence of Caesar who presided over the court.

Catiline chose to stand for the consulship again in the following year.<sup>[19]</sup> However, by the time of the consular election for 62 BC, Catiline had lost much of the political support he enjoyed during the previous year's election. So, he was defeated by two other candidates, Decimus Junius Silanus and Lucius Licinius Murena, ultimately crushing his political ambitions. The only remaining chance of attaining the consulship would be through an illegitimate means, conspiracy or revolution.<sup>[20]</sup>

## Second Catilinarian Conspiracy

### Composition of the conspiracy

But at power or wealth, for the sake of which wars, and all kinds of strife, arise among mankind, we do not aim; we desire only our liberty, which no honorable man relinquishes but with life.

From Manlius' message to an approaching army as recorded in Sallust's *Bellum Catilinae* (XXXIII)

Catiline began to attach many other men of senatorial and equestrian rank to his conspiracy, and like him many of the other leading conspirators had faced similar political problems in the Senate.<sup>[21]</sup> Publius Cornelius Lentulus Sura, the most influential conspirator after Catiline, had held the rank of consul in 71 BC, but he was cast out of the senate by the censors during a political purge in the following year on the pretext of debauchery.<sup>[22]</sup> Autronius was also complicit in their plot, since he was banned from holding office in the Roman government. Another leading conspirator, Lucius Cassius Longinus who was praetor in 66 BC with Cicero, joined the conspiracy after he failed to obtain the consulship in 64 BC along with Catiline. By the time that the election came around, he was no longer even regarded as a viable candidate. Gaius Cethegus, a relatively young man at the time of the conspiracy, was noted for his violent nature. His impatience for rapid political advancement may account for his involvement in the conspiracy.<sup>[23]</sup> The ranks of the conspirators included a variety of other patricians and plebeians who had been cast out of the political system for various reasons. Many of them sought the restoration of their status as senators and their lost political power.

Promoting his policy of debt relief, Catiline initially also rallied many of the poor to his banner along with a large portion of Sulla's veterans.<sup>[24]</sup> Debt had never been greater than in 63 BC since the previous decades of war had led to an era of economic downturn across the Italian countryside.<sup>[25]</sup> Numerous plebeian farmers lost their farms and were forced to move to the city, where they swelled the numbers of the

urban poor.<sup>[26]</sup> Sulla's veterans had spent and squandered the wealth they acquired from their years of service. Desiring to regain their fortunes, they were prepared to march to war under the banner of the "next" Sulla. Thus, many of the plebs eagerly flocked to Catiline and supported him in the hope of the absolution of their debts.

### Course of the conspiracy

He sent Gaius Manlius, a centurion from Sulla's old army, to manage the conspiracy in Etruria where he assembled an army. Other men were sent to take other important locations throughout Italy, and even a small slave revolt began in Capua. While civil unrest was felt throughout the countryside, Catiline made the final preparations for the conspiracy in Rome.<sup>[27]</sup> Their plans included arson and the murder of a large portion of the senators, after which they would join up with Manlius' army. Finally, they would return to Rome and take control of the government. To set the plan in motion, Gaius Cornelius and Lucius Vargunteius were to assassinate Cicero early in the morning on November 7, 63 BC, but Quintus Curius, a senator, who would eventually become one of Cicero's chief informants warned Cicero of the threat through his mistress Fulvia. Fortunately for Cicero, he escaped death that morning by placing guards at the entrance of his house who scared the conspirators away.<sup>[28]</sup>

On the following day, Cicero convened the Senate in the Temple of Jupiter Stator and surrounded it with armed guards.<sup>[29]</sup> Much to his surprise, Catiline was in attendance while Cicero denounced him before the Senate; however, the senators adjacent to Catiline slowly moved away from him during the course of the speech, the first of Cicero's four Catiline Orations. Incensed at these accusations, Catiline exhorted the Senate to recall the history of his family and how it had served the republic, instructing them to not believe false rumors and to trust the name of his family. He finally accused them of placing their faith in a "*homo novus*", Cicero, over a "*nobilis*", himself. Supposedly, Catiline violently concluded that he would put out his own fire with the general destruction of all.<sup>[30]</sup> Immediately afterwards, he threw himself out of the Senate house, and he rushed home. That night, Catiline complied with Cicero's demand and fled Rome under the pretext that he was going into voluntary exile at Massilia because of his "mistreatment" by the consul; however, he arrived at Manlius' camp in Etruria to further his designs of revolution.<sup>[31]</sup>

Besides, soldiers, the same exigency does not press upon our adversaries, as presses upon us; we fight for our country, for our liberty, for our life; they contend for what but little concerns them, the power of a small party. Attack them, therefore, with so much the greater confidence, and call to mind your achievements of old.

From Catiline's speech to his army as recorded in Sallust's *Bellum Catilinae* (LVIII)

While Catiline was preparing the army, the conspirators continued with their plans. The conspirators observed that a delegation from the Allobroges were in Rome

seeking relief from the oppression of their governor. So, Lentulus Sura instructed Publius Umbrenus, a businessman with dealings in Gaul, to offer to free them of their miseries and to throw off the heavy yoke of their governor. He brought Publius Gabinius Capito, a leading conspirator of the equestrian rank, to meet them and the conspiracy was revealed to the Allobroges.<sup>[32]</sup> The envoys quickly took advantage of this opportunity and informed Cicero who then instructed the envoys to get tangible proof of the conspiracy. Five of the leading conspirators wrote letters to the Allobroges so that the envoys could show their people that there was hope in a real conspiracy. However, a trap had been laid. These letters were intercepted in transit to Gaul at the Mulvian Bridge.<sup>[33]</sup> Then, Cicero had the incriminating letters read before the Senate the following day, and shortly thereafter these 5 conspirators were condemned to death without a trial despite an eloquent protest by Julius Caesar. Fearing that other conspirators might try to free Lentulus and the rest, Cicero had them strangled in the Tullianum immediately. He even escorted Lentulus to the Tullianum personally.<sup>[34]</sup> After the executions, he announced to a crowd gathering in the Forum what had occurred. Thus, an end was made to the conspiracy in Rome.

The failure of the conspiracy in Rome was a massive blow to Catiline. Upon hearing of the death of Lentulus and the others, many men deserted his army leaving him with some 10,000 men, about two Legions worth. He and his ill-equipped army began to march towards Gaul and then back towards Rome several times in vain attempts to avoid a battle. Inevitably, Catiline was forced to fight when Quintus Caecilius Metellus Celer with three legions in the north blocked his escape. So, he chose to engage Antonius Hybrida's army near Pistoria (now Pistoia) hoping that he would lose the battle and dishearten the other Republican armies.<sup>[35]</sup> Catiline may have still believed that Antonius Hybrida was conspiring with him, which may have been true as Antonius Hybrida claimed to be ill on the day of the battle.<sup>[36]</sup> Nevertheless, Catiline himself bravely fought as a soldier on the front lines of the battle. Once he saw that there was no hope of victory, he threw himself into the thick of the fray. When the corpses were counted, all Catiline's soldiers were found with frontal wounds, and his corpse was found far in front of his own lines.

## Legacy

Catiline was found far away from his own soldiers among the corpses of his enemies. It would have been a glorious death if he had thus fallen fighting for his country.

— *From Florus' Epitome de Tito Livio (II.xii)*

After Catiline's death, many of the poor still regarded him with respect and did not view him as the traitor and villain that Cicero claimed he was.<sup>[37]</sup> However, the patrician element of Rome certainly viewed him in a much darker light. At the insistence of Cicero, Sallust wrote an account of the conspiracy that epitomized Catiline as representative of all of the evils festering in the declining Roman republic.

In his account, Sallust attributes countless crimes and atrocities to Catiline, but even he refuses to heap some of the most outrageous claims on him, particularly a ritual that involved the drinking of blood of a sacrificed child.<sup>[38]</sup> Later historians such as Florus and Dio Cassius, far removed from the original events, recorded the claims of Sallust and the aforementioned rumors as facts.<sup>[39]</sup> Up until the modern era Catiline was equated to everything depraved and contrary to both the laws of the gods and men as Sallust so eloquently described.

He had many things about him which served to allure men to the gratification of their passions; he had also many things which acted as incentives to industry and toil. The vices of lust raged in him; but at the same time he was conspicuous for great energy and military skill. Nor do I believe that there ever existed so strange a prodigy upon the earth, made up in such a manner of the most various, and different and inconsistent studies and desires.

From Cicero's *Pro Caelio* (V)

While the Romans despised Catiline for everything he did, they still viewed his character with a degree of respect. Well after Catiline's death and the end of the threat of the conspiracy, even Cicero reluctantly admitted that Catiline was an enigmatic man who possessed both the greatest of virtues and the most terrible of vices. Catiline spoke with an eloquence that demanded loyalty from his followers and strengthened the resolve of his friends. Without doubt Catiline possessed a degree of courage that few have, and he died a particularly honorable death in Roman society. Unlike most Roman generals of the late republic, Catiline offered himself to his followers both as a general and as soldier on the front lines.

While history has viewed Catiline through the lenses of his enemies, some modern historians have reassessed Catiline.<sup>[citation needed]</sup> To some extent Catiline's name has been freed from many of its previous associations, and even to some the name of Catiline has undergone a transformation from a traitor and villain to a heroic agrarian reformer. Thus, some view Catiline as a reformer such as the Gracchi who met similar resistance from the government.<sup>[citation needed]</sup> However, many place him somewhere in between, a man who used the plight of the poor to suit his personal interests and a politician of the time no more corrupt than any other.

## **Fiction**

- At least two major dramatists have written tragedies about Catilina: Ben Jonson, the English Jacobean playwright, wrote *Catiline His Conspiracy* in 1611; *Catiline* was the first play by the Norwegian 'father of modern drama' Henrik Ibsen, written in 1850.
- Steven Saylor has written the novel *Catilina's Riddle*, where the plot evolves around the intrigue between Catilina and Cicero in 63 BC.

- Catilina's conspiracy and Cicero's actions as Consul figure prominently in the novel Caesar's Women by Colleen McCullough as a part of her Masters of Rome series.
- Catiline by Brandon Winingham (ISBN 9780595679966) records the true actions of Catiline and his group as detailed through the speeches of Cicero as well as Bellum Catilinae by Sallust while inserting a fictional background story highlighting the unknown discussions of the conspiracies and private planning.

## Footnotes

1. ^ Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae* V.1; Vergil, *Aeneid* V.121
2. ^ Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae* V.3
3. ^ Cicero, *Pro Caelio* XII
4. ^ She was later to become the Chief Vestal and to marry Publius Cornelius Dolabella as his first wife, per McCullough.
5. ^ Cicero, "In Catilinam" III.9; Asconius 91C
6. ^ *a b* Cicero, *Pro Caelio* IV
7. ^ Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae* XVIII.3
8. ^ Asconius 85-87, 89C
9. ^ Cicero, *Pro Sulla* LXXXI
10. ^ Cicero, *Epistulae Ad Atticam* I.2
11. ^ Cicero, *Pro Sulla* XLIX; Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae* XVIII.2
12. ^ Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae* XVIII.5; Asconius 92C; Dio Cassius XXXVI.44.3
13. ^ Suetonius, *Divus Julius* IX
14. ^ Cicero, *Pro Sulla* LXVIII
15. ^ Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* XII.12.2-4
16. ^ Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae* XXIII.5-XIV.1
17. ^ Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae* XXI.2
18. ^ Asconius 84C
19. ^ Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae* XXVI.1
20. ^ Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae* XXVI.5
21. ^ Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae* XVII
22. ^ Dio Cassius XXXVII.30.4; Plutarch, *Cicero* 17.1
23. ^ Cicero, *In Catilinam* III.16 IV.11
24. ^ Cicero, *In Catilinam* II.8 IV.6; Cicero, *Pro Murena* LXXVIII-LXXIX; Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae* XXXVII.1
25. ^ Cicero, *De Officiis* II.84
26. ^ Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae* XXXVII
27. ^ Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae* XXVII.1-2 XXX.1-2; Cicero, *Pro Murena* XLIX
28. ^ Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae* XXVII.3-XXVIII.3
29. ^ Cicero, *In Catilinam* I.21
30. ^ Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae* XXXI.5-9
31. ^ Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae* XXXII.1 XXXIV.2; Cicero, *In Catilinam* II.13

32. ^ Cicero, *In Catilinam* III.4; Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae* XL
33. ^ Cicero, *In Catilinam* III.6; Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae* XLV
34. ^ Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae* LV.5-6
35. ^ Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae* LVI-LXI
36. ^ Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae* LIX
37. ^ Cicero, *Pro Flacco* XXXVIII
38. ^ Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae* XX
39. ^ Florus, *Epitome de Tito Livio* II.xij; Dio Cassius XXXVII.30.3