

The Catiline Conspiracy, Oct-Dec 63 BCE

Questions to Consider:

1. What problems exist in Rome that make Catiline such an appealing leader to the people?
2. Why might the aristocrats and “new men” of the Senate fear Catiline?
3. How is the Catiline Conspiracy another form of the “Gracchan Sedition” and a symbol of the deepening class warfare?
4. What evidence is there that Catiline, himself, plotted to commit these acts of treason?
5. Could Cicero and his optimate peers in the Senate be using the Catiline conspiracy to give popular support to protecting their own class interests, or do they have what is best for the state in mind?
6. Should rumor be considered as evidence of a plot?
7. Should Catiline be given a trial by a jury of his peers?
8. Should Catiline and his followers be exiled in the typical Roman fashion, or should the Ultimate Decree be allowed as a method of saving Rome from being burned and the government being overthrown?

Evidence Against Catiline:

- **Sallust** claims that in the first century BCE the Romans had become for the first time terribly immoral, and it is this climate of immorality and licentiousness that had supposedly produced Catiline:
 - ...the love of irregular gratification, open debauchery, and all kinds of luxury, had spread abroad with no less force. Men forgot their sex; women threw off all the restraints of modesty. To gratify appetite, they sought for every kind of production by land and by sea; they slept before there was any inclination for sleep; they no longer waited to feel hunger, thirst, cold, or fatigue, but anticipated them all by luxurious indulgence. Such propensities drove the youth, when their patrimonies were exhausted, to criminal practices; for their minds, impregnated with evil habits, could not easily abstain from gratifying their passions, and were thus the more inordinately devoted in every way to rapacity and extravagance.
 - In so populous and so corrupt a city, Catiline, as it was very easy to do, kept about him, like a body-guard, crowds of the unprincipled and desperate. For all those shameless, libertine, and profligate characters, who had dissipated their patrimonies by gaming, luxury, and sensuality; all who had contracted heavy debts, to purchase immunity for their crimes or offences; all assassins or sacrilegious persons from every quarter, convicted or dreading conviction for their evil deeds; all, besides, whom their tongue or their hand maintained by perjury or civil bloodshed; all, in fine, whom wickedness, poverty, or a guilty conscience disquieted, were the associates and intimate friends of Catiline. And if any one, as yet of unblemished character, fell into his society, he was presently rendered, by daily intercourse and temptation, similar and equal to the rest. But it was the young whose acquaintance he chiefly courted; as their minds, ductile and unsettled from their age, were easily ensnared by his stratagems. For as the passions of each, according to his years, appeared excited, he furnished mistresses to some, bought

horses and dogs for others, and spared, in a word, neither his purse nor his character, if he could but make them his devoted and trustworthy supporters.—*Conspiracy of Catiline* (13-14)

- **Sallust** claims that was just Catiline warming up, because subsequently he had taken to murdering people just for the hell of it, according to Sallust.
 - The young men, whom, as I said before, he had enticed to join him, he initiated, by various methods, in evil practices. ...If a motive for crime did not readily occur, he invited them, nevertheless, to circumvent and murder inoffensive persons, just as if they had injured him; for, lest their hand or heart should grow torpid for want of employment, he chose to be gratuitously wicked and cruel.—*Conspiracy of Catiline* (16)
- **Cicero**, the Consul who exposed the plot of Catiline and had his house attacked and burned down by Catiline's followers, and who gave three speeches to convince the Senate of the necessity of execution without trial, said this:
 - "When, O Catiline, do you mean to cease abusing our patience? How long is that madness of yours still to mock us? When is there to be an end of that unbridled audacity of yours, swaggering about as it does now? Do not the nightly guards placed on the Palatine Hill—do not the watches posted throughout the city—does not the alarm of the people, and the union of all good men—does not the precaution taken of assembling the senate in thus most defensible place—do not the looks and countenances of this venerable body here present [the senate], have any effect upon you? Do you not feel that your plans are detected? Do you not see that your conspiracy is already arrested and rendered powerless by the knowledge which every one here possesses of it? What is there that you did last night, what the night before—where is it that you were—who was there that you summoned to meet you—what design was there which was adopted by you, with which you think that any one of us is unacquainted?"
 - Shame on the age and on its principles! The senate is aware of these things; the consul sees them; and yet this man lives. Lives! aye, he comes even into the senate. He takes a part in the public deliberations; he is watching and marking down and checking off for slaughter every individual among us. And we, gallant men that we are, think that we are doing our duty to the republic if we keep out of the way of his frenzied attacks.
 - You ought, O Catiline, long ago to have been led to execution by command of the consul. That destruction which you have been long plotting against us ought to have already fallen on your own head."—*First Speech Against Catiline* (1-2)
 - What? Did not that most illustrious man, Publius Scipio [Nasica], the Pontifex Maximus, in his capacity of a private citizen, put to death Tiberius Gracchus, though but slightly undermining the constitution? And shall we, who are the consuls, tolerate Catiline, openly desirous to destroy the whole world with fire and slaughter? For I pass over older instances, such as how Caius Servilius Ahala with his own hand slew Spurius Maelius when plotting a revolution in the state."—*First Speech Against Catiline* (2-3)
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- **Cicero** did not yet execute Catiline because he was trembling with fear, as in fact he makes very clear, repeatedly, in his speech. Here are some examples:

- “There are here,—here in our body, O conscript fathers [i.e. members of the Senate], in this the most holy and dignified assembly of the whole world, men who meditate my death...(9)
- Leave the city at last the gates are open; depart... you will deliver me from a great fear, when there is a wall between me and you. (10)
- ...if I order you to be put to death, the rest of the conspirators will still remain in the republic...(12)
- ...what is there, O Catiline, that can now afford you any pleasure in this city? for there is no one in it, except that band of profligate conspirators of yours, who does not fear you...(13)
- ...now that I should be wholly occupied with fear of you alone, that at every sound I should dread Catiline, that no design should seem possible to be entertained against me which does not proceed from your wickedness, this is no longer endurable. Depart, then, and deliver me from this fear; that, if it be a just one, I may not be destroyed; if an imaginary one, that at least I may at last cease to fear.” (18)
- **Cicero:** “We have now for a long time, O conscript fathers, lived among these dangers and machinations of conspiracy; but somehow or other, the ripeness of all wickedness, and of this long-standing madness and audacity, has come to a head at the time of my consulship. But if this man alone is removed from this piratical crew, we may appear, perhaps, for a short time relieved from fear and anxiety, but the danger will settle down and lie hid in the veins and bowels of the republic. As it often happens that men afflicted with a severe disease, when they are tortured with heat and fever, if they drink cold water, seem at first to be relieved, but afterwards suffer more and more severely; so this disease which is in the republic, if relieved by the punishment of this man, will only get worse and worse, as the rest will be still alive.”

Evidence Supporting Catiline:

- **Catiline** roused his followers with the following speech:
 - “...Who in the world, indeed, that has the feelings of a man, can endure that they should have a superfluity of riches, to squander in building over seas and leveling mountains, and that means should be wanting to us even for the necessaries of life, that they should join together two houses or more, and that we should not have a hearth to call our own? They, though they purchase pictures, statues, and embossed plate; though they pull down new buildings and erect others, and lavish and abase their wealth in every possible method, yet cannot, with the utmost efforts of caprice, exhaust it. But for us there is poverty at home, debts abroad; our present circumstances are bad, our prospects much worse; and what, in a word, have we left, but a miserable existence?
 - “Will you not, then awake to action? Behold that liberty, that liberty for which you have so often wished, with wealth, honor, and glory, are set before your eyes. All these prizes fortune offers to the victorious. Let the enterprise itself, then, let the opportunity, let your poverty, your dangers, and the glorious spoils of war, animate you far more than my words. Use me either as your leader or your fellow-soldier; neither my heart nor my

hand shall be wanting to you. These objects I hope to effect, in concert with you, in the character of consul; unless, indeed, my expectation deceives me, and you prefer to be slaves rather than masters.”

- ...Catiline then promised them the abolition of their debts; a proscription of the wealthy citizens; offices, sacerdotal duties, plunder, and all other gratifications which war, and the license of conquerors, can afford.—*Conspiracy of Catiline* (20-21)
- **Historian:** Clearly, Catiline was leading a class war... Imagine, for example, that you were a slave in Republican Rome. We have seen what the lives of Roman slaves were like. Thus, if Catiline would have freed you, I would venture that you would not have cared much whether he really felt compassion towards you or merely wanted to be king—*he had freed you*, and you would naturally much prefer to be free than to be a brutalized slave. Therefore, a demagogue—even if he was really dishonest—was infinitely preferable to an honest oppressor, but you might not guess any such thing given that the [modern language] characterizes Catiline as a ‘demagogue,’ and given that your speech community has taught you that demagogues are supposedly bad. And yet you might begin to suspect, all the same, that Catiline would not have been so bad for ordinary folk.
- **Cicero** did not yet execute Catiline because he was trembling with fear, as in fact he makes very clear, repeatedly, in his speech. Here are some examples:
 - “There are here,—here in our body, O conscript fathers [i.e. members of the Senate], in this the most holy and dignified assembly of the whole world, men who meditate my death...(9)
 - Leave the city at last the gates are open; depart... you will deliver me from a great fear, when there is a wall between me and you. (10)
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- **Historian:** In order to put Cicero’s imprecations against Catiline in context, what we need is the real Cicero, of course, not the fictional Cicero imagined by Grant and other classical scholars so that their readers will never notice the horror that was Rome. The real Cicero addressed Catiline as follows: “On my honor, if my slaves feared me as all your fellow-citizens fear you, I should think I must leave my house” (1.17). How to interpret this? Clearly, all of Catiline’s fellow-citizens did not fear their ‘demagogue.’ If that had been the case, Cicero would not have

been so afraid of Catiline, and would have been able to act against him immediately, as he clearly wished. Nor would Sallust have written that “most of the young men, and especially the sons of the nobility, favored the schemes of Catiline,” or that Catiline had “attached to his cause great numbers of men of all classes.”

- The true referent of Cicero’s term “fellow-citizens” is easily identified. The audience for Cicero’s words was composed of the aristocratic “fellow-citizens” who had all the formal power, the same ones sitting in the senate house when Cicero, according to him, delivered those words. It is these men that Cicero alleged were all in fear of Catiline. And yet, as we saw above, even Cicero admitted that Catiline had some supporters in the senate. The clearest interpretation of Cicero’s speech, therefore, is that he is whiny and shrill—scared out of his wits. This is why Cicero cannot stop the flow of accusations against Catiline, as the consul has a terrible urgency to wound Catiline’s prestige. It is also, of course, why Cicero later wrote down what he supposedly said on the senate floor—no doubt embellished—and published it.
- **Caesar:** “Whatever befalls these prisoners will be well deserved; but you, Fathers of the Senate, are called upon to consider how your action will affect other criminals. All bad precedents have originated in cases which were good; but when the control of the government falls into the hands of men who are incompetent or bad, your new precedent is transferred from those who well deserve and merit such punishment to the undeserving and blameless.”
- **Suetonius** wrote in his *The Twelve Caesars*, When the Catilinian Conspiracy came to light, the whole House, with the sole exception of Caesar, the Praetor-elect, demanded the death penalty for Catiline and his associates. Caesar proposed merely that they should be imprisoned, each in a different town, and their estates confiscated.