

Session 3 booklet: Caesar and the Catilinarian conspiracy

1 Hispania

As soon as Caesar returned to Rome, he started working on what was the obvious next step of his career, and sought election to several junior magistracies. He started with the military tribunate in 72 BC, and he went on to reach the quaestorship in 69 BC. This latter success entailed two important consequences: it entitled him to join the Senate, and it enabled him to take up a junior provincial command in the following year. He spent a whole year in the province of Hispania Ulterior, working on the staff of the propraetor C. Antistius Vetus: it was an excellent opportunity for him to become familiar with an important province in the Western part of the empire, administer justice in the region, and forge new clientelae. His special bond with Hispania Ulterior would last throughout his life, and played an important role in his victory in the Civil War.

2 The Marian link

By that time, Caesar had emerged as a distinctive personality in his own right - both as a clever member of the nobility who was able to exploit all the opportunities that his standing offered, and as a maverick who accompanied his ambition with a very characteristic, and fairly unusual approach to politics. A case in point is provided by the famous eulogies that he gave in 69 BC at the funerals of his aunt Julia, the widow of Gaius Marius, and of his wife Cornelia, who was the daughter of Cinna. The ceremonies became the opportunity for very important political statements. The speech in honour of Julia contained significant references to the family tradition (Suet. *Caes.* 6):

When quaestor, he pronounced the customary orations from the rostra in praise of his aunt Julia and his wife Cornelia, who had both died. And in the eulogy of his aunt he spoke in the following terms of her paternal and maternal ancestry and that of his own father: 'The family of my aunt Julia is descended by her mother from the kings, and on her father's side is akin to the immortal Gods; for the Marcii Reges (her mother's family name) go back to Ancus Marcius, and the Julii, the family of which ours is a branch, to Venus. Our stock therefore has at once the sanctity of kings, whose power is supreme among mortal men, and the claim to reverence which attaches to the Gods, who hold sway over kings themselves.' – trans. from the Loeb edition (1913)

But there was an equally important visual *coda* to the ceremony. In the Roman tradition, it was customary to accompany the funeral procession of a member of the nobility with the portraits of the most prominent members of the family. There was a problem with Julia, though: her husband and son were the arch-enemies of Sulla, they were proscribed, declared public enemies, and their memory was quite simply cancelled from the public arena. It was one of the first instances of that procedure that became so frequent in Roman political practice in the centuries to come – the so-called *damnatio memoriae*, the 'condemnation of memory'. At the end of a civil war, or after the deposition of a hated emperor, any historical record of the defeated had to disappear; even a casual reference became taboo. Caesar had no hesitation in

disregarding the condemnation of the Marii, and in displaying their portraits in Julia's procession. Large sectors of the Roman populace, who had supported Marius in the past, were delighted with this decision, and praised Caesar for his courage.

It was, as usual, a calculated risk on Caesar's part. Paradoxically enough, his choice to reassert his family connection to the great popular leaders fitted very well in a political context that was changing rapidly. In 70 BC, under the consulship of Pompey the Great, one of the main tenets of the Sullan constitutional reform was undone for good: the powers of the tribunes of the plebs, which Sulla had significantly curtailed, were restored, and this traditional plebeian magistracy, created in the fourth century BC with the specific purpose of defending the people's interest against the arbitrary actions of the Senate and the magistrates, regained its central place in the institutional machinery. The role of the people and of popular assemblies regained importance too: Caesar realised it, and knew that his links with the Marian tradition – still so attractive to a considerable part of the plebs – could prove invaluable. It is not surprising, therefore, that in 65 BC, after his election to the aedileship, he used his power over town-planning to order the restoration and/or reconstruction of the monuments erected by Marius after his numerous military victories, which Sulla had duly destroyed after his victories.

3 The *populares*

Exploiting the memory, the tradition and the rhetoric of the *populares* did not mean subscribing to an ideology, or to forging a party allegiance. It is always misleading to talk about parties with reference to the Roman Republic; and it is equally misguided to assume that the ideology of the *populares* was a coherent framework of values, behaviours, or policies. While it is fair to say that there was a tradition in Roman politics that advocated a heavier involvement of the people and the popular assemblies in the decision-making process, it should be regarded as an ever-changing paradigm, which could, and had to be adapted to circumstances and the changing historical context. Moreover, there was no such thing as 'party allegiances': a Roman politician could find himself supporting a 'popular' or an 'optimat' agenda at different stages of his career, and not always on grounds of their convictions. Pompey the Great is a case in point: he started his career as a valued (if not always close) associate of Sulla, he later played a crucial role in dismantling the Sullan 'constitution', and he ended his life fighting against Caesar as the leader of the Optimates and the champion of the authority of the Senate. A similar pattern may be detected in Caesar's career: he was a *popularis* by family tradition and possibly by convictions too; his difficult time after Sulla's victory probably consolidated that allegiance; at the same time, he devoted much of his energies to a revision of the traditional agenda of the *populares* (agrarian law, cancellation of debts, reform of the courts, etc.) and tried to forge a new compromise between innovation and tradition, which – as we shall see in more detail – was forcefully reflected in the legislative programme that he pursued during his dictatorship.

At any rate, being a *popularis* – or being regarded as such – was not incompatible with a certain liking for extravagance and ostentation of wealth. Caesar was famously keen on large expenditure, and on expensive commodities; he also paid special attention to the care of his body. According to some reports (Suet. *Caes.* 13.1; Plut. *Caes.* 5.8), he had run into heavy debt by the end of the Sixties – not an uncommon practice for ambitious members of the Roman political elite. Somehow, Caesar managed to combine this reputation for prodigality with an image of the incorruptible politician, which he consolidated with his continual involvement in

the prosecution of high-profile corruption cases. Again, this was a safe bet if one was interested in gathering political support.

4 Catiline

The issue of debt was one of the main factors that brought about the great political crisis that marked the end of the Sixties: the Catiline conspiracy. Caesar's role in this crucial, and yet somehow rather elusive event was no doubt significant, and is worth discussing in some respects. A summary of the background is necessary. In 67 BC, Pompey the Great, the most renowned general of his time and the most powerful man in Rome, was busy fighting campaigns in the Greek East, first against the pirates and later against King Mithridates; he would not come back until 61 BC. The absence of the great man persuaded several figures to try their luck; some adventurers were especially active. The formidably rich and equally ambitious M. Licinius Crassus, a former supporter of Sulla, was keen to establish himself as the new leading figure of Roman politics; but, although he was convinced of the contrary, he lacked the necessary military credentials. It is unclear if he was involved with the attempted *coup d'état* of 65 BC, when P. Atranius and P. Sulla, two consuls elect who were prevented from taking up office after being convicted for electoral corruption, sought to get hold of them with the support of a patrician, L. Sergius Catilina, an ambitious man who, after having played a significant role in the Sullan proscriptions, had managed to run into heavy debt in barely more than a decade. The plot failed, basically because of the incompetence of the conspirators; the later attempt of the legitimate consuls to suppress it was blocked by the tribunician veto – a detail that suggests that the support of the authors of the conspiracy was more widespread than originally thought. Rumour had it that Caesar was involved in the plot too (Suet. *Caes.* 9); and the same rumour circulated about his role in the second conspiracy of Catiline, which was the defining event of 63 BC.

5 63 BC

The event that led to this second, much wider conspiracy was Catiline's decision to stand for the consulship in 63 BC. For him, a consulship and the ensuing provincial command were the only possible way out of his difficult financial situation. Catiline could almost certainly rely on the unofficial support of Crassus and Caesar, and on the votes of a significant part of the Roman populace. His bid was narrowly unsuccessful, though: the propertied classes, which included the Senate and the equestrian order, rallied behind two other candidates, C. Antonius Hybrida and the ambitious Marcus Tullius Cicero, a capable orator from Arpinum, in Latium (the hometown of C. Marius), whose family had never produced a consul before. This defeat left Catiline without any serious prospect of securing power by legal means, and under the increasing pressure of debt – a problem that he shared with a significant number of senators. Catiline also knew that thousands of veterans that Sulla had quartered in the colonies he had founded throughout Italy had not made the most of their war booty, and were paying the price for a serious financial crisis that was affecting the whole of Italy, partly determined by the widespread issue of debt, and partly by the significant impact that fifteen years of near-continuous warfare (the Social War first, and two Civil Wars) had made on the peninsula. There was a space for a revolutionary attempt: Catiline had the ruthlessness and talent to pursue it,

and several members of the political elite were prepared to look at him with interest, waiting in the wings.

6 Caesar in 63 BC

The position of Caesar *vis-à-vis* Catiline is still an open problem, and it is doubtful that it will ever be solved. It should perhaps be approached by looking at the increasing activism of our man in the year 63 BC. Caesar was the key supporter of a controversial agrarian bill put forward by the tribune Servilius Rullus. Agrarian laws were a typical feature of the agenda of the great leaders of the *populares*, at least since the Gracchi; apparently, Rullus's proposal was exceptionally broad in scope, not least because it entailed the creation of a committee of ten men who were in charge of the land assignments. Caution is essential on this matter, not least because the primary source of information for this bill comes from two speeches given by Cicero in his capacity as consul; speeches which vociferously opposed the passing of the bill. We can get a flavour of the tone of these impressive rhetorical pieces from this opening paragraph of the speech given to the Senate (*agr. sen.* 2-3):

See, now, in the second chapter of this law, how that profligate debauchee is disturbing the republic,--how he is ruining and dissipating the possessions left us by our ancestors; so as to be not less a spendthrift in the patrimony of the Roman people than in his own. He is advertising for sale by his law all the revenues, for the decemvirs to sell them; that is to say, he is advertising an auction of the property of the state. He wants lands to be bought, in order to be distributed; he is seeking money. No doubt he will devise something, and bring it forward; for in the preceding chapters the dignity of the Roman people was attacked; the name of our dominion was held up as an object of common hatred to all the nations of the earth; cities which were at peace with us, lands belonging to the allies, the ranks of kings in alliance with us, were all made a present of to the decemvirs; and now they want actual ready money paid down to them. I am waiting to see what this vigilant and clever tribune is contriving. Let the Scantian wood [a state-owned estate in Campania], says he, be sold. Did you then find this wood mentioned among the possessions that were left, or in the pasture lands of the lessors? If there is anything which you have hunted out, and discovered, brought to light out of darkness, although it is not just, still use that, since it is convenient, and since you yourself were the person to bring it forward. But shall you sell the Scantian wood while we are consuls, and while this senate is in existence? Shall you touch any of the revenues? Shall you take away from the Roman people that which is their strength in time of war, their ornament in time of peace? But then indeed, I shall think myself a lazier consul than those fearless men who filled this office in the times of our ancestors; because the revenues which were acquired by the Roman people when they were consuls, will be considered not able to be preserved when I am consul. - trans. by C. D. Yonge (1856).

The bonds between Rullus, Caesar and Crassus are carefully alluded to in a number of parallel sources, but not in this speech; it is indicative of Caesar's standing that Cicero did not decide to attack him directly in his speeches on the agrarian bill. The interest of someone like Caesar in having the agrarian bill passed and, presumably, in being appointed to the board in charge

of the land assignments was obvious: that job would have put him in control of an extraordinary amount of land, which he could have distributed with very few checks and balances to a number of people, and have used to build a base of consensus and support that would eventually be comparable to that of Pompey. As we shall see in due course, the issue of land distributions was crucial throughout the late Republic: land was the most precious commodity to anyone who intended to build a coalition of significant support, and it became even more significant when personal armies emerged as the obvious tool one had to negotiate space on the political scene.

7 Pontifex maximus

Cicero's choice not to attack Caesar is a symptom of the fact that no one could afford to ignore this new, extraordinary political player. Another key episode of the year 63 BC made this all the more apparent. Another associate of Caesar, the tribune Titus Labienus, passed a law that undid one of last surviving tenets of Sulla's legislation: the appointment of priests was given back to popular election, and not by co-optation. Sometime later, the post of *pontifex maximus*, the highest priesthood in Rome became vacant, and an election was held. Such a prestigious post was usually assigned to some old statesman, who was expected at least to have held the consulship – but Caesar decided to ignore this unwritten tradition, and decided to stand for election. He was aware of the gamble he was taking, and of the clout of his opponents; for this reason he did not hesitate to spend significant amounts of money trying to buy himself electoral support. His biographers related a conversation with his mother, as he was on the way to the assembly that led to his election, in which Caesar allegedly told her that she would next see him either as a pontiff, or as an exile – one of the many references that the ancient sources make to Caesar's famous luck (Plut. *Caes.* 7.3). The gamble was successful, and Caesar found himself in the highest religious office of the Republic at thirty-seven, surrounded by a widespread consensus that put him on the most powerful side of the Roman elite. He even decided to make the most of it, and stood for the election to the praetorship for the year 62 BC.

8 The Conspiracy

Thus, to go back to the Catiline conspiracy, it is important to note that Caesar went through this major political crisis a few months after rising to the highest pontificate. His political and religious rank enabled him to follow the events with some detachment, and yet with all the interest they required. The development of the conspiracy was quite peculiar. Preparations started shortly after Catiline's electoral defeat; a revolutionary army was recruited, mostly in Etruria, where the majority of the impoverished Sullan veterans were; Cicero, who as consul was in charge of maintaining public order in Rome and Italy, was briefed of the events throughout the best part of the year, but he was reluctant to act, because he knew that a significant part of the Senate was not hostile to Catiline, and passing a decree for the repression of the revolt could have been problematical at that stage. It was only towards the end of October, when the revolutionary army was about to launch an attack on Rome that events were precipitated: Crassus, who is thought to have been one of Catiline's supporters, let Cicero have an anonymous letter that outlined the action plan of the conspirators. It was a signal that Catiline had lost the support of a key member of the senatorial elite.

On October 21, Cicero could denounce the conspiracy in the Senate, in the first of the four Catilinarian speeches that are the main ancient source for these events, along with the historical monograph written by Sallust in the Forties. The Senate put the consuls in charge of the repression, and Catiline – who was in the Senate when Cicero unveiled the plot ! – escaped to Etruria, where he took the lead of the insurrection. When at the beginning of December, five members of the conspiracy were arrested in Rome, they were surrendered into the custody of five senators who were prepared to keep them under house arrest: Caesar and Crassus were among them. The attitude of the two men to the conspiracy was clearly more complex than it appeared: on December 4th it was alleged on the Senate's floor that Crassus was still exchanging letters with Catiline as late as December 63 BC. The claim was made on the eve of the Senate's session in which the fate of the arrested Catilinarians was meant to be decided. Crassus chose not to take part; Caesar, on the contrary, did turn up, surrounded by the gravitas that his newly acquired role of *pontifex maximus* entailed.

8 The Conspiracy

8.1 The Senate Meeting

It was a crucial day, and Sallust's account turned it into what is probably the most famous Senate session in Roman history (Sall. *Cat.* 50-53). It soon became apparent that a significant part of the assembly wanted to punish the five Catilinarians with capital punishment. Caesar expressed a different opinion in a speech that Sallust recorded, or indeed rewrote, with superb skill: its main point was that the death penalty should not be imposed, both because life imprisonment would have been much more effective, and because conferring legal authority upon the consuls to kill a citizen was a measure without precedents, which ran against a long-standing tradition (Sall. *Cat.* 51.37-43):

Our ancestors, Fathers of the Senate, were never lacking either in wisdom or courage, and yet pride did not keep them from adopting foreign institutions, provided they were honourable. They took their offensive and defensive weapons from the Samnites, the badges of their magistrates for the most part from the Etruscans. In fine, whatever they found suitable among allies or foes, they put in practice at home with the greatest enthusiasm, preferring to imitate rather than envy the successful. But in that same age, following the usage of Greece, they applied the scourge to citizens and inflicted the supreme penalty upon those found guilty. Afterwards, when the state reached maturity and because of its large population factions prevailed; when the blameless began to be oppressed and other wrongs of that kind were perpetrated: then they devised the Porcian law and other laws, which allowed the condemned the alternative of exile. This seems to me, Fathers of the Senate, a particularly cogent reason why we should not adopt a new policy. Surely there was greater merit and wisdom in those men, who from slight resources created this mighty empire, than in us, who can barely hold what they gloriously won. Do I then recommend that the prisoners be allowed to depart and swell Catiline's force? By no means! This, rather, is my advice: that their goods be confiscated and that they themselves be kept imprisoned in the strongest of the free

towns; further, that no one hereafter shall refer their case to the senate or bring it before the people, under pain of being considered by the senate to have designs against the welfare of the state and the common safety. – Trans. by J. C. Rolfe (1931).

8 The Conspiracy

8.2 Cato

According to Sallust, who was a committed admirer of Caesar, the speech made a tremendous impact on the assembly. Only the intervention of Marcus Porcius Cato, the grand-nephew of the great Censor, who shared with his ancestor a steady reputation for honesty and incorruptibility, could turn things around. On the one hand, Cato restated the point, already made by other speakers before him, that those who plotted against the Republic were in fact forfeiting their right to be treated as citizens, and deserved to be punished without mercy; on the other hand, he argued that Caesar's attitude betrayed objective complicity with the conspirators, and that making the case for a restrained repression of the conspiracy was tantamount to supporting it. Cato, of course, knew that plenty of rumours had circulated about Caesar's ties to Catiline and his followers. If we are to believe Plutarch, Cato's stern attitude to Caesar could even take a grotesque turn (Plut. *Brut.* 5.3-6):

It is said also that when the great conspiracy of Catiline, which came near overthrowing the city, had come to the ears of the senate, Cato and Caesar, who were of different opinions about the matter, were standing side by side, and just then a little note was handed to Caesar from outside, which he read quietly. But Cato cried out that Caesar was outrageously receiving letters of instruction from the enemy. At this, a great tumult arose, and Caesar gave the missive, just as it was, to Cato. Cato found, when he read it, that it was a wanton bit of writing from his sister Servilia, and throwing it to Caesar with the words 'Take it, thou sot,' turned again to the business under discussion. So notorious was Servilia's passion for Caesar. – trans. from Loeb edition (1918).

9 Cicero and Caesar

At any rate, Cato's proposal was approved, and the conspirators were sentenced to death: an unprecedented decision, as far as Roman citizens were concerned. Caesar realised that the climate on the Senate's floor was not favourable for him at all; for this reason, he refrained from taking part in other sessions for several weeks to come. He was still praetor for the year 62 BC, of course, but the suspicion of his involvement in the conspiracy stuck to him even after the defeat and death of Catiline in the battle of Pistoriae in February 62 BC. Things, in fact, got worse, as two former conspirators, turned into key-witnesses, a knight called L. Vettius and a senator called Q. Curius, included Caesar in a list of senators who had allegedly supported the conspiracy. Caesar defended himself in the Senate, and sought and found a supporter in Cicero. The orator had already tried to defend Caesar and Crassus from the rumours that circulated about them. This was not because of his goodwill, of course, but for specific political reasons: he intended to isolate Catiline, and he also intended to preserve his relationship with two of the

most prominent political figures of the day. In Caesar's case, the desire to protect the dignity of the highest pontiff might have played a role too. Whatever his motives may have been, Cicero's defence of Caesar in 62 BC was successful, or at least it avoided more serious problems. However, Cicero apparently discussed the involvement of Caesar and Crassus in the conspiracy in a pamphlet that he wrote in 59 BC. We do not know much about this work: not even the date of its publication, since according to Dio Cicero chose not to publish it until after his own death, while according to Plutarch it appeared soon after the death of Caesar (Dio 39.10.2-3; Plut. *Crass.* 13).

The collaboration between Caesar and Cicero in the aftermath of the conspiracy was just an episode in a long and complex relationship between two exceptional figures, and two deeply different incarnations of the spirit of their own time. For both of them, the year 63 BC was a watershed; and it was so for the Republic too, in a number of ways. It was the year of Cicero's consulship and of the Catiline conspiracy: the moment around which Cicero built his personal myth, the point of time in which he claimed so often to have saved the Republic from certain destruction. Cicero definitely overstated his merits, although the portrait that Sallust painted of his efforts is ungenerous for the opposite reasons. Cicero was right, however, in depicting the crisis triggered by the conspiracy as a defining moment in the history of the Roman Republic. The political, legal, and moral issues that it raised accompanied the remaining decades of the Republic and its eventual fall. The very existence of the conspiracy and the widespread involvement of parts of the senatorial elite show that something about the fabric of the Republic itself was not working any longer. The stakes were quite simply too high; the personal ambition of the players and the rewards that power could secure were simply too large to be contained within the familiar set of rules of the Republican game. The Catiline conspiracy was a symptom of the imminent changes that were announcing themselves; the factors that made it possible – economic and financial instability; hunger for land; willingness of many to fight in a private army – did not fade away with the defeat of Catiline and his plans. The fact that Caesar probably played a role at the beginning of the conspiracy, and later withdrew, provides plenty of food for thought.