

The First Conspiracy of Catiline

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In 64 B.C.E., when Cicero delivered his now famous *Oratio in Toga Candida*, he exposed the event that had, up to that time, largely been ignored by the Roman senate: the First Catilinarian Conspiracy.¹ From this initial speech through his four orations against Catiline down to his works on his consulship, Cicero frequently mentions this first conspiracy.² Although modern scholars have begun to doubt whether this “First Conspiracy of Catiline” ever even took place, they are still left with the question of why this conspiracy is mentioned in several primary sources, specifically the writings of Cicero and Sallust. In order to answer this puzzling question, scholars have begun to advance theories concerning the motives of these writers along with what sources were available for their use. Ultimately, scholars have tried to reconcile the many inconsistencies that exist in primary sources concerning the First Conspiracy of Catiline in order to reconstruct this period of Roman history.

Most notably, scholars disagree on the details surrounding what really happened during this tumultuous time of the First Conspiracy. The majority of scholars agree that the Conspiracy probably never occurred precisely how it is recorded in the primary sources of Sallust and Cicero; one goes as far as to say the Conspiracy was a complete fabrication.³ However, such a view is rare; most scholars simply interpret the primary sources in different ways. It is important to note, though, that Roman historians believe the topic of the Catilinarian Conspiracy has

¹ The First Catilinarian Conspiracy was the first attempt of Lucius Sergius Catilina (Catiline) to overthrow the Roman Republic. After being defeated in the consular election, Catiline, angry and bitter, purportedly instigated a conspiracy to murder Roman senators and take over control for himself. For a simplified review of the First Conspiracy, see Erich S. Gruen, “Notes on the ‘First Catilinarian Conspiracy’”, *Classical Philology* 64, no. 1 (1969): 20.

² Several of Cicero’s writings acknowledge the First Conspiracy or talk about it extensively. For his four orations specifically targeted at Catiline, see Cicero, *Catilinarians*, trans. Andrew Dyck (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Cicero’s *Oratio in Toga Candida* is a personal attack against Catiline which mentions his personal life and his role in the First Conspiracy. Cicero is also mentioned by Plutarch’s *The Parallel Lives*, which is a work detailing the lives of famous Greek and Romans.

³ The biggest proponent of this theory is E.J. Phillips, who argues that Cicero, who had a long history of enmity towards Catiline, simply fabricated the First Conspiracy in order to discredit Catiline’s bid for power. See E.J. Phillips, “Catiline’s Conspiracy,” *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 25, no. 4 (1976), for a detailed discussion of Phillips’s revisionist theory. For a detailed discussion of the tense relationship between Cicero and Catiline, see Charles M. Odahl, *The Catilinarian Conspiracy* (New Haven, CT: College and University Press, 1971).

received far too much attention, and such attention has exaggerated the importance of this time in history.⁴

Although it has become commonplace to call this conspiracy after Catiline, it is interesting that the most scholars agree that Catiline had little to do in the conspiracy which bears his name. The true originator of the conspiracy, Gnaeus Piso, approached Catiline to be part of a conspiracy he was planning; Catiline agreed. Catiline played no role in the First Conspiracy other than being one of the members who would carry out part of the plan envisioned by Piso.⁵ Yet, although Piso is often cited as the instigator of the conspiracy, his name is never attached to the conspiracy in any lasting way.

However, many factors combined which ultimately led to the naming of the Conspiracy after Catiline. For one, Piso was killed shortly after the Conspiracy took place, which meant that future references to the Conspiracy would have no enduring effect.⁶ More importantly, Catiline would eventually instigate the Second Conspiracy, and his leadership in this conspiracy would be the deciding factor in why the First also bears his name. The First Conspiracy is often only cited in primary sources discussing the Second Catiline Conspiracy, so it makes sense that authors such as Cicero and Sallust would mention Catiline's other revolutionary activities, even if these activities are exaggerated and falsified.

Yet another theory circulating says that Catiline and Piso were both bystanders of a conspiracy that was orchestrated by Julius Caesar and Marcus Crassus. Both Catiline and Piso were in extreme debt when Caesar and Crassus approached them with an idea to seize control of

⁴ Gruen, 20.

⁵ Odahl, 37

⁶ Piso was sent to Spain with an army soon after the First Conspiracy fell apart, and his soldiers murdered him shortly after arriving. Ibid., 39

the senate.⁷ If the First Conspiracy had proven successful, Crassus would have become dictator with Caesar as *magister equitum*.⁸ Plans that sent these men to the highest rung of power can only mean that they planned the First Conspiracy and let less famous men carry it out.

Also, scholars argue that Caesar and Crassus were the men who sent Piso to Spain after the failed First Conspiracy. Sending Piso to Spain was one of the main objectives of the Conspiracy because Caesar and Crassus were seeking a *point d'appui* against Pompey.⁹ Moreover, it is interesting to note that the Conspiracy was hushed up after its failure, and Piso was sent to Spain regardless of the fact that Caesar and Crassus did not gain control. Scholars argue that Crassus used his wealth and authority to force the senate to forego an investigation and send Piso to Spain.¹⁰

Despite the possible involvement of Caesar and Crassus in the First Conspiracy, they soon disappeared into the shadows; this is one reason why scholars argue that the two men were possibly not involved in the First Conspiracy. However, it is important to note that the First Conspiracy was divided into two attempts.¹¹ After the failure of the first attempt, Crassus especially lost faith in the men he had induced to carry out the conspiracy. Although they continued to support any further attempts, both men distanced themselves from the conspirators in order to await a more favorable time to attack.¹²

⁷ E.T. Salmon, "Catiline, Crassus, and Caesar," *The American Journal of Philology* 56, no. 4 (1935), 306.

⁸ Francis L. Jones, "Crassus, Caesar, and Catiline," *The Classical Weekly* 29, no. 12 (1936), 89.

⁹ A *point d'appui* is a French term which means the area where troops are gathered before battle. During this time, Crassus, Caesar, and Pompey were involved in a political alliance called the *First Triumvirate*. Although an alliance, Crassus and Caesar were becoming increasingly concerned about Pompey's growth of power and hoped to gain territory from which to launch an offensive if it came to war. Salmon, 306.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Those scholars who maintain that the First Conspiracy did occur explain the failure of the first attempt by explaining that Catiline, who was in charge of signaling the gangs to begin the slaughter of the senators, gave the signal before the gangs were ready to move forward. Sallust mentions this failed first attempt in his work *Catiline's Conspiracy*. For an English translation in addition to an explanation of Sallust's work, see Sallust, *Catiline's Conspiracy, The Jugurthine War, Histories*, trans. William W. Batstone (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹² Jones, "Crassus, Caesar, and Catiline," 89.

Although many primary sources comment on the First Conspiracy, Sallust and Cicero are the two Roman authors who devote entire works to this topic. However, the motives of both authors have been significantly questioned; Cicero had a personal vendetta against Catiline, and Sallust used a lot of Cicero's writings to inform his own opinions on the First Conspiracy.¹³ Such distortion on the part of both of these authors leads most modern historians to dismiss works by Cicero and Sallust that detail the First Conspiracy. However, these works do allow historians to generate theories on why Catiline was chosen as the man behind the Conspiracy.

Certainly, Catiline had personality traits that could have easily transformed him into a revolutionary leader; in fact, such personality traits ultimately would.¹⁴ Catiline often proposed extreme measures, and his hotheaded behavior could have easily led those in the Roman senate to believe he was bent on revolution.¹⁵ Shortly before the Conspiracy took place, Catiline was put on trial for extortion, which also did not help him escape blame once details of the plan were exposed.¹⁶

At one point in time, Cicero wished to align himself with Catiline in order to gain political favor. Both men were rising to power around the same time, but the political climate in Rome at the time did not allow for much political division. After the failure of the First Conspiracy, Cicero had wanted to align with Catiline in the consular elections in order to defeat

¹³ Sallust's primary source *Catiline's Conspiracy* mostly deals with the Second Conspiracy of Catiline, but he does refer back to the First Conspiracy as a precursor for what would eventually happen a few years later. However, he does use Cicero's writings as a source of historical facts for his writings on the conspiracy. Instead, he uses the accusations in Cicero's writings in order to direct his own work. Cicero's enmity towards Catiline began when Catiline refused Cicero's offer as a lawyer during his extortion trial, which is mentioned briefly in the following section.

¹⁴ Although the First Catilinarian Conspiracy failed, Catiline's Second Conspiracy was almost a success. Catiline managed to gather troops before the conspiracy was exposed by Cicero. The Second Conspiracy is much more famous than the First; one of the more detailed discussions is Lester Hutchinson, *The Conspiracy of Catiline* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1967).

¹⁵ Phillips, 442.

¹⁶ Also, It is also important to note that Catiline bought his way out of a guilty verdict in this trial. Odahl, 42.

Gaius Antonius Hybrida.¹⁷ However, Catiline was not interested in such an alliance, and although Cicero ultimately won the consulship, he held this past reproach against Catiline.

After this failed alliance, Cicero had to make his own name for himself. As a *novus homo*,¹⁸ Cicero did not have a patrician name on which he could rely to gain political support. Cicero knew he had to gain support from the conservative group in the senate in order to win the consular election, so he cast Catiline in a bad light in order to do this. These electoral groups were wary of Cicero as a *novus homo*, so Cicero presented Catiline as a man unworthy of election due to his personal life.¹⁹

Ultimately, Catiline provided plenty of opportunities for Cicero to question his loyalty to both the Roman Republic and the principals that made up an honorable Roman man. Cicero often used his opponents' past misdeeds while campaigning, and Catiline's life furnished such examples for Cicero to use. One scholar doubts whether or not Catiline would have even been implicated in the First Conspiracy had it not been for the fact that he was Cicero's opponent in the consular election of 63 B.C.E.

However, another scholar, Gruen, argues that Cicero does not connect Catiline to the conspiracy that was instigated by Piso. Instead, Cicero's four anti-Catilinarian speeches were completely due to Catiline's Second Conspiracy. Furthermore, Gruen claims that the Ciceronian testimonies from 65 B.C.E. to 63 B.C.E. are the only reliable guides for reconstructing this part of Roman history. His argument relies on the fact that Catiline would not have aligned with Piso regardless of what type of plan Piso was engineering because the two men were on opposite

¹⁷ Batstone, 7.

¹⁸ A *novus homo*, or new man, was a self-made man in Roman politics. Cicero was not born into a patrician family, so he had to find support based on his own merit. The electorates in the senate were opposed to the rise of a *novus homo* in the senate, so Cicero had to ensure their support in order to win election. Odahl, 46.

¹⁹ Catiline was beginning to hang out with the riff-raff in society: debtors and criminals. Ibid.

sides of the political spectrum.²⁰ Although such a theory is certainly an innovative approach to this topic, it is not one that has gained much support.

After implicating Catiline several times in his writings, Cicero then begins to blame Crassus and Caesar when he is no longer in competition with Catiline. Crassus was beginning to gain favor by linking himself with both Caesar and Pompey, and Cicero saw this early on. Cicero saw implicating Crassus as a way to secure the second most powerful place in the state.²¹ Additionally, if Cicero had been able to successfully diminish Crassus's reputation by showing his place in the First Conspiracy, Pompey would obviously see this. Such an achievement, repressing a revolutionary movement, would render Cicero invaluable to the leader in Rome.²²

Later, Cicero would ask writers to exaggerate and elaborate in writings about the First Conspiracy.²³ Sallust dismissed a lot of Cicero's writings on the conspiracy due to the claims Cicero made that even Romans knew to be false.²⁴ Sallust had motives in his writings that were not concerned with stating who participated in the First Conspiracy. Instead, he was more concerned with writing about who did not participate in the conspiracy, specifically Julius Caesar.

Throughout his work *Catiline's Conspiracy*, Sallust exonerates Caesar by omitting his name from any discussion of the First Conspiracy. In order to do this, he significantly exaggerates Catiline's role in the conspiracy by leaving out details which possibly included the work of Caesar.²⁵ Sallust approaches the Catiline Conspiracy with such a bias that his work has often been discredited by scholars. Sallust himself states that his work is merely a case study of

²⁰ Gruen, 24.

²¹ Waters, 210.

²² Ibid., 211.

²³ Cicero asked Sallust to do this, but Sallust instead disregarded Cicero's works on the First Conspiracy. Batstone, xxi.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Jones, "The First Conspiracy of Catiline," 416.

what happens when virtue is forgotten.²⁶ For this reason, he does not bother with whether or not the First Conspiracy is true; he is more concerned with the fact that it provides an example of the decline of Roman virtue.

In his later orations, Cicero also points to Caesar and Crassus as being the instigators of the First Conspiracy. In his work *De Consiliis*, Cicero charged Crassus with being the instigator of the plot, saying, “After [Caesar and Crassus] have failed in their attempt to cut the sinews of Roman citizens with [Piso] . . .”²⁷ Such a charge was unlike Cicero, who, before this, had often cited Catiline as the sole conspirator of the First Conspiracy. However, Cicero often changed his views depending on against whom he needed to ensure opposition.²⁸

Ultimately, Caesar and Crassus saw the characteristics of Catiline that would work in their favor. On top of this, both men knew Catiline was heavily in debt and would probably agree to the conspiracy since money was involved.²⁹ One scholar puts it best when he asks how a few ruined debtors planned to completely take over the government by simply assassinating the consuls.³⁰ Such a revolutionary plan needed the support of powerful men, and Caesar and Crassus were these men. Cicero’s condemnation of first Catiline and then Crassus and Caesar simply show that he shifted his opinions depending on the political situation.

Although scholars such as Jones and Walter question Catiline’s role in instigating the First Conspiracy, several nonetheless agree that Catiline played some type of role in it. Relying on the theory of Crassus and Caesar gaining control after the conspiracy, some scholars argue that Catiline was just one of many men who was assigned to do miniscule tasks. Catiline was

²⁶ Ann T. Wilkins, *Villain or Hero: Sallust’s Portrayal of Catiline*. (New York: Peter Lang, 1994).

²⁷ In *Parallel Lives*, while detailing the life of Crassus, Plutarch notes that many Romans did not believe Cicero’s charge in *De Consiliis*.

²⁸ Early on, Cicero used Catiline as the instigator of the conspirator because he was running against Catiline for office. Now, since Cicero is trying to lessen the dignity of Crassus and Caesar, he cites them as the instigators of the First Conspiracy. See Jones, “The First Conspiracy of Catiline.”

²⁹ Catiline’s debt is due to his paying off of the judges for an innocent verdict in his extortion trial.

³⁰ Jones, “The First Conspiracy of Catiline,” 411.

responsible for raising the gangs which were ultimately to execute the senators. Cicero mentions this slaughter of the senators, and Sallust explains that Catiline gave the gangs the signal for execution much too early.³¹ Thus, scholars conclude that Catiline's role in the First Conspiracy was simply related to gathering men together who were upset with the senate.

However, the majority of scholars have ultimately concluded that Catiline had no real motive to participate in the First Conspiracy. First, Catiline was standing for office at the time he was said to have come up with the conspiracy. Catiline was sure in his birth and ability, and he was not very concerned with losing the election. For this reason, scholars argue that Catiline would not have already elaborately planned out the First Conspiracy.³²

Furthermore, an alleged victim, Lucius Manlius Torquatus, defended Catiline during his extortion trial in 65 B.C.E. It does not make sense that Catiline would then target him in the conspiracy.³³ As noted, Cicero had also wanted to support Catiline during this trial as his lawyer; Catiline's refusal led to much enmity between the two men. Ultimately, scholars are unable to reconcile Catiline's role in Roman politics with his involvement in the First Conspiracy.

Lastly, Gruen, mentioned earlier for revisionist approach to analyzing Cicero's works, argues that the First Conspiracy certainly did not take place. Although most scholars agree that the details surrounding the First Conspiracy have been seriously misconstrued and exaggerated, Gruen maintains that the details were simply a matter of consular candidates endeavoring to tarnish the names of their opponents. Gruen accepts the idea of bribery and bitterness in the aftermath of Catiline's loss, but he argues that the idea of "murky plots with 'big men' in the

³¹ Ibid., 419.

³² Such an argument can be applied to the Second Conspiracy due to the fact that Catiline was bitter over his loss in the earlier consular election.

³³ Batstone, 7.

background and ‘straw men’ in the forefront- much less conspiracy, murder, and revolution” are ideas that should be dismissed from this period of Roman history.³⁴

Ultimately, Catiline is attached to the First Conspiracy solely because he would later instigate the Second Conspiracy. Yet, the character of these two conspiracies are remarkably different. This leads one historian, Walter, to argue for putting distance between Catiline and the First Conspiracy. For Walter, it makes no sense that embittered men would see a solution to their problems by taking control of the government. Although Walter does not completely discredit the theory of the First Conspiracy, he nevertheless stresses that the First Conspiracy was the result of men wanting power; the Second was due to Catiline’s bitterness.³⁵ In this way, Walter introduces yet another approach to analyzing Catiline’s intent to conspire against the government.

Although Catiline’s name has been attached to the First Conspiracy, most scholars presently agree that he was not involved in this conspiracy in such a way that would merit it being named after him. The writings of Cicero and Sallust have magnified this part of Roman history; in turn, the role of Catiline in the conspiracy has been debated in the academic world. Catiline was certainly a man who had the ability to change politics, but scholars do not believe he was the revolutionary mastermind behind this first conspiracy, if indeed such a conspiracy even occurred. The fact that Catiline would later instigate a true conspiracy has often led Roman writers to connect him to the First Conspiracy, but such an argument is being questioned by scholars.

³⁴ Gruen, 22.

³⁵ Walter, 83.

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