

Sallust's Motivation and Cicero's Influence in the Writing of the *Bellum Catilinae*

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1. Introduction/Framing

In 80 BC, at the age of 26, the future Roman statesman Marcus Tullius Cicero defended one Sextus Roscius from accusations of patricide. For Cicero, the stakes were high for challenging such a strong accusation, as patricide was seen as a horrific crime in the public eye of Rome. For one, if Cicero were to lose his defense, he would be the one to blame for Roscius' consequential harsh punishment, *Poena Cullei*. Reserved only for patricide, this type of sentence involved wrapping the perpetrator's head in wolf skin and their beaten body sewn into a sack with live animals—namely snakes, dogs, chickens, and monkeys; only then was the body bag thrown into the water, preventing the traditional and honorable burial that most Romans had.¹ Furthermore, Cicero decided to blame the murder on some men with close relations to Sulla, the dictator of the republic and an influential man easily able to silence him. Ultimately, the amateur lawyer won his first public case and used its high stakes to bring himself public recognition. Cicero acknowledges this in one of his works: *Itaque prima causa publica pro Sex. Roscio dicta tantum commendationis habuit ut non ulla esset quae non digna nostro patrocinio videretur* (“My defense of Sex. Roscius, which was the first public cause I pleaded, met with such a favorable reception, that I was looked upon as an advocate of the first class, and equal to the greatest and most important causes”).² This fame kickstarted Cicero's public career, facilitated his rise to consulship in 63 BC, and foreshadowed one of the most notable events of his political career: the Catilinarian conspiracy.

To this day, the most well-known portrayal of Catiline lies within the words of Cicero's four *Orationes in Catilinam*. In this series of speeches, Cicero openly accuses Catiline of conspiring to assassinate senators on the day of the election. First, he reveals the details of Catiline's plan by stating: *cum te Praeneste Kalendis ipsis Novembribus occupaturum nocturno impetu esse confideres...* (“When you made sure that you would be able to seize Praeneste on the first of November by a nocturnal attack...”).³ Throughout his work, Cicero consistently portrays Catiline as a malevolent fiend and a significant threat to the republic, describing him as *furentem audacia, scelus anhelantem, pestem patriae nefarie molientem, vobis atque huic urbi ferro flammaque minitantem...* (“mad with audacity, breathing wickedness, impiously planning mischief to his country, threatening fire and sword to you and to this city...”).⁴ Due to his reputation as an orator and a senator, the Roman people held Cicero's words in high regard, and his account became established as the undeniable image of Catiline. It proves all the more noteworthy as, although Cicero did not back his orations with much concrete evidence, his words appealed to the Senate, the Roman people, and even Catiline himself. While addressing the Senate in his first oration, he uses rhetorical speech to make Catiline personally reconsider his place in the State, ultimately persuading him to leave the city on his own accord. Cicero's personal involvement and pursuit of popularity were part of why he chose to write about the conspiracy. To this end, he even published his public speeches as literature for readers to enjoy.⁵

However, one other significant account of the Catilinarian conspiracy exists, one written by Gaius Sallustius Crispus; because of the importance that Cicero's *orationes* had as a source of information about the conspiracy, Sallust uses Cicero as a significant reference, mentioning him countless times throughout his *In Catilinam*. Therefore, one must first frame Cicero's account of the conspiracy in order to understand how Sallust uses him as a basis for his arguments. Yet, Sallust did not write on the event until nearly twenty years after the conflict had been resolved. What can account for this delay? In this analysis, I intend to attribute Sallust's motivation to social and personal, biographical reasons. I will consider Cicero's history and influence on Sallust's *Bellum Catilinae*, as I argue that the former can explain much of the latter.

2. Social/Historiographical

Much of Sallust's intentions stem from his perceived sense of duty towards becoming a historian. In the early chapters of *Bellum Catilinae*, Sallust thoroughly discusses the merit of such an occupation. He establishes two categories of people in history: those who take action and those who take record of said actions, emphasizing that both are deserving of recognition. He claims: *vel pace vel bello clarum fieri licet; et qui fecere et qui facta aliorum scripsere, multi laudantur*

(“both in peace and in war it is possible to obtain celebrity; many who have acted, and many who have recorded the actions of others, receive tribute of praise”).⁶ Categorizing himself as the latter archetype, Sallust expresses in his work that he aims to make himself a historian worthy of others’ appreciation. To further develop the presumed reputation of historians, he describes the hardships that come with producing historical works, lamenting: *tamen in primis arduous videtur res gestas scribere: primum quod facta dictis exaequanda sunt; dehinc quia plerique quae delicta reprehenderis malevolentia et invidia dicta putant* (it yet seems in the highest degree difficult to write the history of great transactions: first, because deeds must be adequately represented by words; and next, because most readers consider that whatever errors you mention with censure, are mentioned through malevolence and envy”).⁷ By describing these difficulties, Sallust hopes to earn the understanding and admiration of others who view his work. In this sense, historians are honorable as nobody wants to be one, distinctive because being the scribe is just as difficult as becoming the heroic army general. These comments reveal what he wants to accomplish with his narration while simultaneously leading the reader to admire his words.

Sallust continues to cherish the value of good historians, as he notes what made the success of the Greeks in the past. He observes how the actual works of the Athenians appear less than what their historians render them as, concluding: *Ita eorum, qui fecere, virtus tanta habetur, quantum eam verbis potuere extollere praeclara ingenia...* (“Thus, the merit of those who have acted is estimated at the highest point to which illustrious intellects could exalt in their writings...”).⁸ Sallust recognizes the lack of objectivity in the tales about Athenian glory but accepts it as a necessary factor in spreading the global prominence of Greece. He goes on to compare the Athenians to the Romans, pointing out the lack of these writers who would give a name to the State: *At populo Romano numquam ea copia fuit, quia prudentissimus quisque maxime negotiosus erat: ingenium nemo sine corpore exercebat, optumus quisque facere quam dicere, sua ab aliis bene facta laudari quam ipse aliorum narrare malebat...* (“But among the Romans there was never any such abundance of writers; for, with them, the most able men were the most actively employed. No one exercised the mind independently of the body: every man of ability chose to act rather than narrate, and was more desirous that his own merits should be celebrated by others, than that he himself should record theirs...”).⁹ By comparing the two societies, Sallust plays further into the idolization of historians, in that the Romans are in need of people like him to step up to preserve the legacy of Rome.

Sallust also believed the uniqueness of the historical event to be enough of a reason to write about it after it had passed. Once again in his introductory chapters, he writes: *nam id facinus in primis ego memorabile existumo sceleris atque periculi novitate...* (“for I think it an enterprise eminently deserving of record, from the unusual nature both of its guilt and of its perils...”).¹⁰ Justifying his writing by honoring the significance of the event imitates a similar logic as that of Thucydides—a prominent Greek historian—in his description of the Peloponnesian War. While the event’s *novitate* primarily refers to the mere strangeness of the story, Sallust may be mentioning his reading of Cicero’s account instead. After all, Sallust ought to have seen a different side of the story as opposed to Cicero’s interpretation, else he would not have published his work in agreement with the famed statesman.

Evidently, the historically and politically significant nature of the conspiracy and personal obligation to historiography provide some resolution to questions about Sallust’s motivation. However, the chronology of his behavior is still left up for debate. One possible argument for this phenomenon relates to Sallust’s potential criticism of Cicero. While the politically-motivated Cicero focused on persuading the Senate to stand with him against Catiline, he left out many critical facts about the whole conspiracy. On the other hand, Sallust prided himself on providing a truthful account, mentioning many points Cicero left out in his orations. For instance, Sallust describes Catiline’s co-conspirators in considerable detail, significant characters whom Cicero fails to discuss: *Cum hoc Catilina et Autronius circiter Nonas Decembris consilio communicato parabant in Capitolio Kalendis Ianuariis L. Torquatam consules interficere...* (“Catiline and Autronius, having concerted measures with this Piso, prepared to assassinate the consuls, Lucius Cotta and Lucius Torquatus, in the Capitol, on the first of January...”).¹¹ Unlike Cicero, Sallust was unattached to the political climate surrounding the conspiracy, providing details—dates, names, and a whole chronological narrative—which Cicero had only vaguely mentioned or outright left out.

Furthermore, Sallust had a history of conflict with Cicero, opposing him while holding office. He was expelled from the Senate for immorality in 50 BC, giving him a potential bias against the government. Based on his previous conflicts with Cicero, one may argue that Sallust wrote his version of the conspiracy to challenge Cicero’s popularity. While Sallust mentions the consul numerous times throughout the *Bellum Catilinae*, Cicero is not represented as the grand savior of the republic he makes himself out to be in his own orations. Writing all four of his speeches from a first-person perspective, Cicero often focused on highlighting himself as a heroic patriot. For example, he stated: *quod reliquum est, iam non possum oblivisci meam hanc esse patriam, me horum esse consulem, mihi aut cum his vivendum aut pro his esse moriendum...* (“As to the future, I cannot now forget that this is my country, that I am the consul of these citizens; that I must either live with them, or die for them...”).¹² This tone puts the validity of Cicero’s words into question, as he may

have had self-serving goals in mind while outing Catiline. On the other hand, Sallust belittles Cicero's self-declared accomplishments in hindering Catiline's destructive plans to the point where Cicero plays no significant role in the plot of Sallust's story. In reality, Cicero's characteristics are not omitted but rather not embellished in Sallust's monograph.¹³

This opposition can be traced directly to Sallust's words and even how he structures the piece. For instance, Sallust claims: *non fuit consilium socordia atque desidia bonum otium conterere, neque vero agrum colundo aut venando, servilibus officiis, intentum aetatem agere* ("it was not my intention to waste my valuable leisure in indolence and inactivity, or, engaging in servile occupations, to spend my time in agriculture or hunting").¹⁴ Sallust sees a life of retirement into *servilibus officiis* as mundane and wasteful, directly contrasting Cicero's beliefs. In his last work, Cicero states: *Omnium autem rerum, ex quibus aliquid acquiritur, nihil est agri cultura melius, nihil uberius, nihil dulcius, nihil homine libero dignius* ("But of all the occupations by which gain is secured, none is better than agriculture, none more profitable, none more delightful, none more becoming to a freeman").¹⁵ In comparison, Cicero sees a life of agriculture as superior to any other occupation. These minor conflicts of ideas reveal a larger picture of Sallust's mild criticism of Cicero.

Juxtaposing the two accounts exposes Cicero's orations as more of a rhetorical and direct attack on Catiline's character than an accurate representation of the event. By challenging a man of Cicero's stature (and his ultimately widely-accepted narrative), Sallust rewrites himself out of the typical obscurity of retirement back into Roman relevancy.

3. Personal

Sallust's personal background also directs him towards becoming a historian and writing about the Catilinarian conspiracy. Born in 86 BCE in Amiternum, Sallust became the first member of his family to pursue a noteworthy political career and become a member of the Senate—making him a *novus homo*, a first-generation politician. He was elected *tribunus plebis* in 52 BCE, an influential political position capable of convening the plebs, proposing legislation, conducting prosecutions, summoning the Senate, and vetoing the bills of other magistrates.¹⁶ While Sallust held this status, one Titus Annius Milo—with the support of Cicero—ran for consulship against Julius Caesar. Milo was accused of murdering Clodius Pulcher, an aspiring praetor, and Cicero defended the suspect heavily. After Sallust publicly denounced Cicero for his defense of Milo, Sallust was expelled from the Senate in 50 BCE, maintaining his political rank for merely two years. His losses did not cease there, as when he turned towards pursuing a life in the military, he failed to command a legion under Caesar (49 BCE), settle disputes as praetor (47 BCE), and thrive as a state governor of *Africa Nova* (46-44 BCE).¹⁷ These political and military failures ultimately led him to retire from his political aspirations and become a historian. Sallust expresses his newfound goals, writing in the *Bellum Catilinae*: *Igitur ubi animus ex multis miseriis atque periculis requievit et mihi reliquam aetatem a re publica procul habendam decrevi... eo magis quod mihi a spe metu partibus rei publicae animus liber erat...* ("When, therefore, my mind had rest from its numerous troubles and trials, and I had determined to pass the remainder of my days unconnected with public life... as my mind was uninfluenced by hope, fear, or political partisanship...").¹⁸ By affirming a break away from his busy life, Sallust implies that he provides his account for the sole purpose of telling history. Towards the end of the section, he adds: *Igitur de Catilinae coniuratione, quam verissime potero, paucis absolvam...* ("I shall accordingly give a brief account, with as much truth as I can, of the Conspiracy of Catiline...").¹⁹ These words confirm his intention to prioritize truthfulness in his writing; whether he writes *verissime* or not is up to the interpretation of his words.

To justify the course of his actions, Sallust imposes his personal beliefs regarding how one can succeed in their own life. He opens the *Bellum Catilinae* with the statement: *omnis homines, qui sese student praestare ceteris animalibus summa ope niti decet, ne vitam silentio transeant veluti pecora, quae natura prona atque ventri oboedientia finxit...* ("It becomes all men, who desire to excel other animals, to strive, to the utmost of their power, not to pass through life in obscurity...").²⁰ Sallust establishes a social dynamic revolving around achieving virtue: lower beings or "animals" are satisfied with living in normalcy and silence, while humanistic qualities come with striving for glory. His assertion of *omnis homines* rationalizes his sudden initiative to become a historian, hoping to be remembered in history through his writings. As Sallust utilizes *silentio* in introducing this idea, he inadvertently produces two interpretations: on the one hand, he could be describing the act of passing through life without being spoken about (in silence), providing a passive meaning to the message. On the other hand, Sallust may have been offering up the active connotation—living (silently) without leaving any verbal record or impact on the world.²¹ No matter his intention with the word, he believed it was a personal and human obligation not to live through life idly but to seek ways to impact society and be remembered for it.

With such an extensive background in Roman culture, scholars argue that Sallust uses his characterization of Catiline to represent the declining state of Roman morals under the rule of Sulla. His words solidify this narrative, as he starts by illustrating Catiline's character before detailing the rest of the conspiracy, stating: *L. Catilina, nobili genere natus, fuit magna vi et animi et corporis sed ingenio malo pravoque... Corpus patiens inediae, alboris, vigiliae supra quam quouquam credibile est...* ("Lucius Catiline was a man of noble birth, and of eminent mental and personal endowments... His body was able to endure starvation, the frigid cold and a lack of sleep, all to an unbelievable degree...").²² In the

beginning and throughout his work, Sallust depicts Catiline as a good man with more moral ambivalence than the character Cicero had previously portrayed. Sallust then goes on to express his disdain towards Sulla's tyrannical rule, stating: *Hunc post dominationem L. Sullae luibido maxuma invaserat rei publicae capiundae... Incitabant praeterea corrupti civitatis mores, quos pessuma ac divorsa inter se mala, luxuria atque avaritia vexabant...* (“And after the despotic rule of Sulla, an intense lust for seizing control of the republic overwhelmed Cataline... Moreover, the corrupt morals of the State urged him onwards, morals which extravagance and greed (the worst and most contradictory evils) were undermining.”).²³ Sallust’s words paint Catiline as a righteous man, corrupt by the disastrous rule of Sulla. While Sallust represents Sulla as the evil force tempting the mind of Catiline, he indirectly criticizes Cicero and his consulship for allowing Catiline to act up. In viewing the history of the corrupt leadership in Rome, many historians agree that, as Ronald Syme puts it, there was “something radically wrong with a state if a man like Catilina could get so far with impunity... The social diagnosis of Sallust reveals the dominance of wealth—and its corollary, the evil appetites of impoverished aristocrats.”²⁴

Overall, Sallust’s writing of the *Bellum Catilinae* proved to be a personal reinstatement in his life. Within his writing, he subtly refers to some of his values that influence his range of thoughts, from those on Roman politics to standard moral principles.

4. Conclusion

While Cicero established his reputation as a self-made man—a politician whose speeches and writing advanced his own career—Sallust’s motivations for writing the *Bellum Catilinae* appear more ambiguous. While Cicero and Sallust did not live in the same generation, both authors address a common event; therefore, unveiling Sallust’s inspiration to write about the Catilinarian conspiracy requires as much attention to Cicero’s literary and political contributions. Sallust’s emphasis on “pure truthfulness” warrants deeper scrutiny—particularly given his decision to begin his career as a historian by focusing on events that occurred within his lifetime and were enacted by his peers. Sallust’s account challenges that of Cicero’s, putting the history of the conspiracy and Catiline’s character up for interpretation. While both historians carry a potential social, political, or personal bias within their works, acknowledging these pitfalls and comparing both narratives may guide us towards a conclusion. Though, without an answer in the meantime, merely observing such a unique historiographical dynamic may satisfy our natural desire for objective knowledge.

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Notes

1. R. Fan, “Poena Cullei —a Horrific Roman Punishment For Killing Your Parent”, *Medium*, <https://medium.com/crimebeat/poena-cullei-a-horrific-roman-punishment-for-killing-a-parent-74d718188345>: A customary punishment for those found guilty of patricide. Despite the grimness of the procedure, Romans believed it

was the best method for ridding themselves of a criminal, as it was seen as a way of cutting off a curse from the world without contaminating its natural elements.

2. Cic., *Brutus*, 32.
3. Cic., *In Cat.* 1.3.
4. Cic., *In Cat.* 2.1.
5. Cic. *Att.* 1.1.
6. Sal., *Bel. Cat.* 3.
7. Sal., *Bel. Cat.* 3.
8. Sal., *Bel. Cat.* 8.
9. Sal., *Bel. Cat.* 8.
10. Sal., *Bel. Cat.* 4.
11. Sal., *Bel. Cat.* 18.
12. Cic., *In Cat.* 2.12.
13. T. Broughton, "Was Sallust Fair to Cicero?", *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, 67,1936, pp. 34-36.
14. Sal., *Bel. Cat.* 4.
15. Cic., *De Off.* 1.151.
16. M. Cartwright, "Tribune", *World History Encyclopedia*, December 7, 2016. It is interesting that Cicero, with whom Sallust seems to have this constant dialogue, was also a *homo novus*, who, like Sallust, had to work hard to make his name in Roman political life.
17. D. Wasson, "Sallust", *World History Encyclopedia*, October 19, 2020.
18. Sal., *Bel. Cat.* 4.
19. Sal., *Bel. Cat.* 4.
20. Sal., *Bel. Cat.* 1.
21. A. Woodman, "A Note on Sallust, Catilina 1.1", *The Classical Quarterly*, 23.2,1973, p. 310.
22. Sal., *Bel. Cat.* 5.
23. Sal., *Bel. Cat.* 5.
24. Ronald Syme, *Sallust* (n.p.: University of California Press, 2002), 33:136.

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