PROLOGUE

THE HISTORY OF ROME

ANCIENT ROME IS important. To ignore the Romans is not just to turn a blind eye to the distant past. Rome still helps to define the way we understand our world and think about ourselves, from high theory to low comedy. After 2,000 years, it continues to underpin Western culture and politics, what we write and how we see the world, and our place in it.

The assassination of Julius Caesar on what the Romans called the Ides of March 44 BCE has provided the template, and the sometimes awkward justification, for the killing of tyrants ever since. The layout of the Roman imperial territory underlies the political geography of modern Europe and beyond. The main reason that London is the capital of the United Kingdom is that the Romans made it the capital of their province Britannia – a dangerous place lying, as they saw it, beyond the great Ocean that encircled the civilised world. Rome has bequeathed to us ideas of liberty and citizenship as much as of imperial exploitation, combined with a vocabulary of modern politics, from 'senators' to 'dictators'. It has loaned us its catchphrases, from 'fearing Greeks bearing gifts' to 'bread and circuses' and 'fiddling while Rome burns' – even 'where there's life there's hope'. And it has prompted laughter, awe and horror in more or less equal measure. Gladiators are as big box office now as they ever were. Virgil's great epic poem on the foundation of Rome, the *Aeneid*, almost certainly found more readers in the twentieth century CE than it did in the first century CE.

Yet the history of ancient Rome has changed dramatically over the past fifty years, and even more so over the almost 250 years since Edward Gibbon wrote *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, his idiosyncratic historical experiment that began the modern study of Roman history in the English-speaking world. That is partly because of the new ways of looking at the old evidence, and the different questions we choose to put to it. It is a dangerous myth that we are better historians than our predecessors. We are not. But we come to Roman history with different priorities – from gender identity to food supply – that make the ancient past speak to us in a new idiom.

There has also been an extraordinary array of new discoveries – in the ground, underwater, even lost in libraries – presenting novelties from antiquity that tell us more about ancient Rome than any modern historian could ever have known before. We now have a manuscript of a touching essay by a Roman doctor whose prize possessions had just gone up in flames, which resurfaced in a Greek monastery only in 2005. We have wrecks of Mediterranean cargo ships that never made it to Rome, with their foreign sculpture, furniture and glass destined for the houses of the rich, and the wine and olive oil that were the staples of everyone. As I write, archaeological scientists are carefully examining samples drilled from the ice cap of Greenland to find the traces, even there, of the pollution produced by Roman industry. Others are putting under the microscope the human excrement found in a cesspit in Herculaneum, in southern Italy, to itemise the diet of ordinary Romans as it went into – and out of – their digestive tracts. A lot of eggs and sea urchins are part of the answer.

Roman history is always being rewritten, and always has been; in some ways we know more about ancient Rome than the Romans themselves did. Roman history, in other words, is a work in progress. This book is my contribution to that bigger project; it offers my version of why it matters. *SPQR* takes its title from another famous Roman catchphrase, *Senatus PopulusQue Romanus*, 'The Senate and People of Rome'. It is driven by a personal curiosity about Roman history, by a

conviction that a dialogue with ancient Rome is still well worth having and by the question of how a tiny and very unremarkable little village in central Italy became so dominant a power over so much territory in three continents.

This is a book about how Rome grew and sustained its position for so long, not about how it declined and fell, if indeed it ever did in the sense that Gibbon imagined. There are many ways that histories of Rome might construct a fitting conclusion; some have chosen the conversion of the emperor Constantine to Christianity on his deathbed in 337 CE or the sack of the city in 410 CE by Alaric and his Visigoths. Mine ends with a culminating moment in 212 CE, when the emperor Caracalla took the step of making every single free inhabitant of the Roman Empire a full Roman citizen, eroding the difference between conqueror and conquered and completing a process of expanding the rights and privileges of Roman citizenship that had started almost a thousand years earlier.

SPQR is not, however, a simple work of admiration. There is much in the classical world – both Roman and Greek – to engage our interest and demand our attention. Our world would be immeasurably the poorer if we did not continue to interact with theirs. But admiration is a different thing. Happily a child of my times, I bridle when I hear people talking of 'great' Roman conquerors, or even of Rome's 'great' empire. I have tried to learn to see things from the other side too.

In fact, *SPQR* confronts some of the myths and half-truths about Rome with which I, like many, grew up. The Romans did not start out with a grand plan of world conquest. Although eventually they did parade their empire in terms of some manifest destiny, the motivations that originally lay behind their military expansion through the Mediterranean world and beyond are still one of history's great puzzles. In acquiring their empire, the Romans did not brutally trample over innocent peoples who were minding their own business in peaceable harmony until the legions appeared on the horizon. Roman victory was undoubtedly vicious. Julius Caesar's conquest of Gaul has not unfairly been compared to genocide and was criticised by Romans at the time in those terms. But Rome expanded into a world not of communities living at peace with one another but of endemic violence, rival power bases backed up by military force (there was not really any alternative backing), and mini-empires. Most of Rome's enemies were as militaristic as the Romans; but, for reasons I shall try to explain, they did not win.

Rome was not simply the thuggish younger sibling of classical Greece, committed to engineering, military efficiency and absolutism, whereas the Greeks preferred intellectual inquiry, theatre and democracy. It suited some Romans to pretend that was the case, and it has suited many modern historians to present the classical world in terms of a simple dichotomy between two very different cultures. That is, as we shall see, misleading, on both sides. The Greek city-states were as keen on winning battles as the Romans were, and most had little to do with the brief Athenian democratic experiment. Far from being unthinking advocates of imperial might, several Roman writers were the most powerful critics of imperialism there have ever been. 'They create desolation and call it peace' is a slogan that has often summed up the consequences of military conquest. It was written in the second century CE by the Roman historian Tacitus, referring to Roman power in Britain.

The history of Rome is a big challenge. There is no single story of Rome, especially when the Roman world had expanded far outside Italy. The history of Rome is not the same as the history of Roman Britain or of Roman Africa. Most of my focus will be on the city of Rome and on Roman Italy, but I shall take care also to look in at Rome from the outside, from the point of view of those living in the wider territories of the empire, as soldiers, rebels or ambitious collaborators. And very different kinds of history have to be written for different periods. For the earliest history of Rome and when it was expanding

in the fourth century BCE from small village to major player in the Italian peninsula, there are no accounts written by contemporary Romans at all. The story has to be a bold work of reconstruction, which must squeeze individual pieces of evidence – a single fragment of pottery, or a few letters inscribed on stone – as hard as it can. Only three centuries later the problem is quite the reverse: how to make sense of the masses of competing contemporary evidence that may threaten to swamp any clear narrative.

Roman history also demands a particular sort of imagination. In some ways, to explore ancient Rome from the twenty-first century is rather like walking on a tightrope, a very careful balancing act. If you look down on one side, everything seems reassuringly familiar: there are conversations going on that we almost join, about the nature of freedom or problems of sex; there are buildings and monuments we recognise and family life lived out in ways we understand, with all their troublesome adolescents; and there are jokes that we 'get'. On the other side, it seems completely alien territory. That means not just the slavery, the filth (there was hardly any such thing as refuse collection in ancient Rome), the human slaughter in the arena and the death from illnesses whose cure we now take for granted; but also the newborn babies thrown away on rubbish heaps, the child brides and the flamboyant eunuch priests.

This is a world we will begin to explore through one particular moment of Roman history, which the Romans never ceased to puzzle over and which modern writers, from historians to dramatists, have never ceased to debate. It offers the best introduction to some of the key characters of ancient Rome, to the richness of Romans' discussion of their own past and to the ways in which we continue to recapture and try to make sense of it – and to why the history of Rome, its Senate and its People still matter.

CHAPTER ONE

CICERO'S FINEST HOUR

SPQR: 63 BCE

OUR HISTORY OF ancient Rome begins in the middle of the first century BCE, more than 600 years after the city was founded. It begins with promises of revolution, with a terrorist conspiracy to destroy the city, with undercover operations and public harangues, with a battle fought between Romans and Romans, and with citizens (innocent or not) rounded up and summarily executed in the interests of homeland security. The year is 63 BCE. On the one side is Lucius Sergius Catilina ('Catiline' in English), a disgruntled, bankrupt aristocrat and the architect of a plot, so it was believed, to assassinate Rome's elected officials and burn the place down – writing off all debts, of rich and poor alike, in the process. On the other side is Marcus Tullius Cicero (just 'Cicero' from now on), the famous orator, philosopher, priest, poet, politician, wit and raconteur, one of those marked out for assassination – and a man who never ceased to use his rhetorical talents to boast how he had uncovered Catiline's terrible plot and saved the state. This was his finest hour.

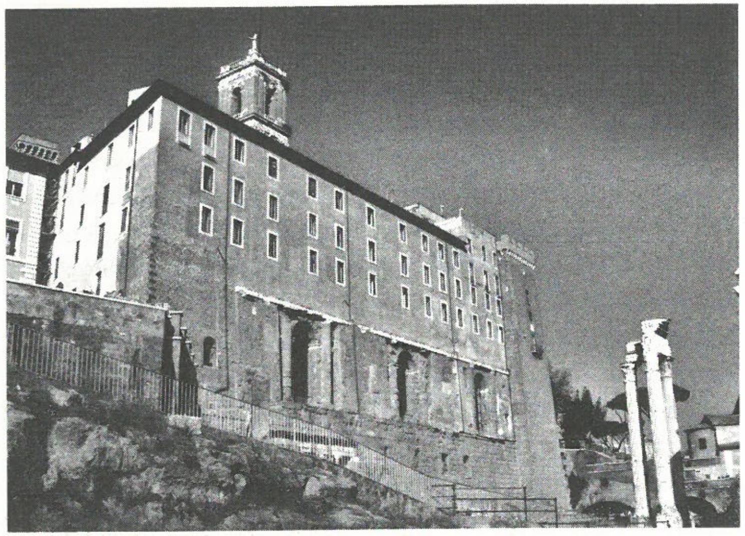
In 63 BCE the city of Rome was a vast metropolis of more than a million inhabitants, larger than any other in Europe before the nineteenth century; and, although as yet it had no emperors, it ruled over an empire stretching from Spain to Syria, from the South of France to the Sahara. It was a sprawling mixture of luxury and filth, liberty and exploitation, civic pride and murderous civil war. In the chapters that follow we shall look much further back, to the very start of Roman time and to the early exploits, belligerent and otherwise, of the Roman people. We shall think about what lies behind some of those stories of early Rome that still strike a chord today, from 'Romulus and Remus' to 'The Rape of Lucretia'. And we shall be asking questions that historians have asked since antiquity itself. How, and why, did an ordinary little town in central Italy grow so much bigger than any other city in the ancient Mediterranean and come to control such a huge empire? What, if anything, was special about the Romans? But with the history of Rome it makes little sense to begin the story at the very beginning.

It is only in the first century BCE that we can start to explore Rome, close up and in vivid detail, through contemporary eyes. An extraordinary wealth of words survives from this period: from private letters to public speeches, from philosophy to poetry – epic and erotic, scholarly and straight from the street. Thanks to all this, we can still follow the day-to-day wheeling and dealing of Rome's political grandees. We can eavesdrop on their bargaining and their trade-offs and glimpse their back-stabbing, metaphorical and literal. We can even get a taste of their private lives: their marital tiffs, their cash-flow problems, their grief at the death of beloved children, or occasionally of their beloved slaves. There is no earlier period in the history of the West that it is possible to get to know quite so well or so intimately (we have nothing like such rich and varied evidence from classical Athens). It is not for more than a millennium, in the world of Renaissance Florence, that we find any other place that we can know in such detail again.

What is more, it was during the first century BCE that Roman writers themselves began systematically to study the earlier centuries of their city and their empire. Curiosity about Rome's past certainly goes back further than that: we can still read, for example, an analysis of the city's rise to power written by a Greek resident in the mid second century BCE. But it is only from the first century BCE that Roman scholars and critics began to pose many of the historical questions that we still pose even now. By a process that combined learned research with a good deal of constructive invention, they pieced together a version of early Rome that we still rely on today. We still see Roman history, at least in part, through first-century BCE eyes. Or, to put it another way, Roman *history*, as we know it, started here.

Sixty-three BCE is a significant year in that crucial century. It was a time of near disaster for the city. Over the 1,000 years that we will be exploring in this book, Rome faced danger and defeat many times. Around 390 BCE, for example, a posse of marauding Gauls occupied the city. In 218 BCE the Carthaginian warlord, Hannibal, famously crossed the Alps with his thirty-seven elephants and inflicted terrible losses on the Romans before they eventually managed to fight him off. Roman estimates of casualties at the Battle of Cannae in 216 BCE, up to 70,000 deaths in a single afternoon, make it as great a bloodbath as Gettysburg or the first day of the Somme, maybe even greater. And, almost equally fearsome in the Roman imagination, in the 70s BCE a scratch force of ex-gladiators and runaways, under the command of Spartacus, proved more than a match for some ill-trained legions. The Romans were never as invincible in battle as we tend to assume, or as they liked to make out. In 63 BCE, however, they faced the enemy within, a terrorist plot at the heart of the Roman establishment.

The story of this crisis can still be traced in intimate detail, day by day, occasionally hour by hour. We know precisely where much of it happened, and in a few places we can still look up to some of exactly the same monuments as dominated the scene in 63 BCE. We can follow the sting operations that gave Cicero his information on the plot and see how Catiline was forced out of the city to his makeshift army north of Rome and into a battle with the official Roman legions that cost him his life. We can also glimpse some of the arguments, controversies and wider questions that the crisis raised and still does. The tough



1. The heavy arches and columns of the '*Tabularium*', built into Michelangelo's Palazzo above, is still a major landmark at one end of the Roman Forum. Constructed just a couple of decades before Cicero was consul in 63 BCE, it must then have seemed one of the most splendid recent architectural developments. Its function is less clear. It was obviously a public building of some kind, but not necessarily the 'Record Office' (*tabularium*) that is often assumed.

response by Cicero – including those summary executions – presented in stark form issues that trouble us even today. Is it legitimate to eliminate 'terrorists' outside the due processes of law? How far should civil rights be sacrificed in the interests of homeland security? The Romans never ceased to debate 'The Conspiracy of Catiline', as it came to be known. Was Catiline wholly evil, or was there something to be said in mitigation of what he did? At what price was revolution averted? The events of 63 BCE, and the catchphrases created then, have continued to resonate throughout Western history. Some of the exact words spoken in the tense debates that followed the discovery

of the plot still find their place in our own political rhetoric and are still, as we shall see, paraded on the placards and banners, and even in the tweets, of modern political protest.

Whatever its rights and wrongs, 'The Conspiracy' takes us to the centre of Roman political life in the first century BCE, to its conventions, controversies and conflicts. In doing so, it allows us to glimpse in action the 'Senate' and the 'Roman People' – the two institutions whose names are embedded in my title, *SPQR* (*Senatus PopulusQue Romanus*). Individually, and sometimes in bitter opposition, these were the main sources of political authority in first-century BCE Rome. Together they formed a shorthand slogan for the legitimate power of the Roman state, a slogan that lasted throughout Roman history

2. SPQR is still plastered over the city of Rome, on everything from manhole covers to rubbish bins. It can be traced back to the lifetime of Cicero, making it one of the most enduring acronyms in history. It has predictably prompted parody. '*Sono Pazzi Questi Romani*' is an Italian favourite: 'These Romans are mad'.

and continues to be used in Italy in the twenty-first century CE. More widely still, the senate (minus the *PopulusQue Romanus*) has lent its name to modern legislative assemblies the world over, from the USA to Rwanda.

The cast of characters in the crisis includes some of the most famous figures in Roman history. Gaius Julius Caesar, then in his thirties, made a radical contribution to the debate on how to punish the conspirators. Marcus Licinius Crassus, the Roman plutocrat who notoriously remarked that you could count no one rich if he did not have the cash to raise his own private army, played some mysterious part behind the scenes. But centre stage, as Catiline's main adversary, we find the one person whom it is possible to get to know better than anyone else in the whole of the ancient world. Cicero's speeches, essays, letters, jokes and poetry still fill dozens of volumes of modern printed text. There is no one else in antiquity until Augustine – Christian saint, prolific theologian and avid self-scrutiniser – 450 years later, whose life is documented in public and private fully enough to be able to reconstruct a plausible biography in modern terms. And it is largely through Cicero's writing, his eyes and his prejudices that we see the Roman world of the first century BCE and much of the city's history up to his day. The year 63 BCE was the turning point of his career: for things were never quite so good for Cicero again. His career ended twenty years later, in failure. Still confident of his own importance, occasionally a name to conjure with but no longer in the front rank, he was murdered in the civil wars that followed the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BCE, his head and right hand pinned up in the centre of Rome for all to see – and to mangle and maim.

Cicero's grisly death presaged a yet bigger revolution in the first century BCE, which began with a form of popular political power, even if not a 'democracy' exactly, and ended with an autocrat established on the throne and the Roman Empire under one-man rule. Though Cicero may have 'saved the state' in 63 BCE, the truth is that the state in the form he knew was not to last much longer. There was another revolution on the horizon, which would be more successful than Catiline's. To the 'Senate and Roman People' was soon added the overweening figure of the 'emperor', embodied in a series of autocrats who were part of Western history, flattered and abused, obeyed and ignored, for centuries. But that is a story for later in *SPQR*. For now we shall put down our feet in one of the most memorable, meatiest and most revealing moments in the whole of Roman history.

Cicero versus Catiline

The conflict between Cicero and Catiline was partly a clash of political ideology and ambition, but it was also a clash between men of very different backgrounds. Both of them stood at, or very near, the top of Roman politics; but that is where the similarity ends. In fact, their contrasting careers offer a vivid illustration of just how varied political life in Rome of the first century BCE could be.

Catiline, the would-be revolutionary, had the more conventional, more privileged and apparently safer start in life, as in politics. He came from a distinguished old family that traced its lineage back centuries to the mythical founding fathers of Rome. His ancestor Sergestus was said to have fled from the East to Italy with Aeneas after the Trojan War, before the city of Rome even existed. Among his blue-blooded forebears, his great-grandfather was a hero of the war against Hannibal, with the extra claim to fame of being the first man known to have entered combat with a prosthetic hand – probably just a metal hook that replaced his right hand, lost in an earlier battle. Catiline himself had a successful early career and was elected to a series of junior political offices, but in 63 BCE he was close to bankruptcy. A string of crimes was attached to his name, from the murder of his first wife and his own son to sex with a virgin priestess. But whatever his expensive vices, his financial problems came partly from his repeated attempts to secure election as one of the two consuls, the most powerful political posts in the city.

Electioneering at Rome could be a costly business. By the first century BCE it required the kind of lavish generosity that is not always easy to distinguish from bribery. The stakes were high. The men who were successful in the elections had the chance to recoup their outlay, legally or illegally, with some of the perks of office. The failures – and, like military defeats, there were many more of those in Rome than is usually acknowledged – fell ever more deeply into debt.

That was Catiline's position after he had been beaten in the annual elections for the consulship in both 64 and 63 BCE. Although the usual story is that he had been leaning in that direction before, he now had little option but to resort to 'revolution' or 'direct action' or 'terrorism', whichever you choose to call it. Joining forces with other upper-class desperadoes in similar straits, he appealed to the support of the discontented poor within the city while mustering his makeshift army outside it. And there was no end to his rash promises of debt relief (one of the most despicable forms of radicalism in the eyes of the Roman landed classes) or to his bold threats to take out the leading politicians and to put the whole city to flames.

Or so Cicero, who was one of those who believed he had been earmarked for destruction, summed up his adversary's motives and aims. He was of a very different stock from Catiline. He came from a wealthy, landed background, as all high-level Roman politicians did. But his origins lay outside the capital, in the small town of Arpinum, about 70 miles from Rome, or at least a day's journey at the ancient speed of travel. Though they must have been major players locally, no one in his family before him had ever been prominent on the Roman political scene. With none of Catiline's advantages, Cicero relied on his native talents, on the high-level connections he assiduously cultivated – and on speaking his way to the top. That is to say, his main claim to fame was as a star advocate in the Roman courts; and the celebrity status and prominent supporters that this gave him meant that he was easily elected to each of the required series of junior offices in turn, just like Catiline. But in 64 BCE, where Catiline failed, Cicero succeeded in winning the race for the next year's consulship.

That crowning success had not been an entirely foregone conclusion. For all his celebrity, Cicero faced the disadvantage of being a 'new man', as the Romans called those without political ancestry, and at one stage he even seems to have considered making an electoral pact with Catiline, seedy reputation or not. But in the end, the influential voters swayed it. The Roman electoral system openly and unashamedly gave extra weight to the votes of the rich; and many of them must have concluded that Cicero was a better option than Catiline, whatever their snobbish disdain for his 'newness'. Some of his rivals called him just a 'lodger' at Rome, a 'part-time citizen', but he topped the poll. Catiline ended up in the unsuccessful third place. In second place, elected as the other consul, was Gaius Antonius Hybrida, uncle of a more famous Antonius ('Mark Antony'), whose reputation turned out to be not much better than Catiline's.

By the summer of 63 BCE, Cicero appears to have got wind of definite danger from Catiline, who was trying his luck as a candidate again. Using his authority as consul, Cicero postponed the next round of elections, and when he finally did let them go ahead, he turned up at the poll with an armed guard and wearing a military breastplate clearly visible under his toga. It was a histrionic display, and the combination of civilian and military kit was alarmingly incongruous, rather as if a modern politician were to enter the legislature in a business suit with a machine gun slung over his shoulder. But it worked. These scare tactics, combined with Catiline's vociferously populist programme, made sure that he was once more defeated. Claiming that he was a down-and-out standing up for other down-and-outs could hardly have endeared him to elite voters.

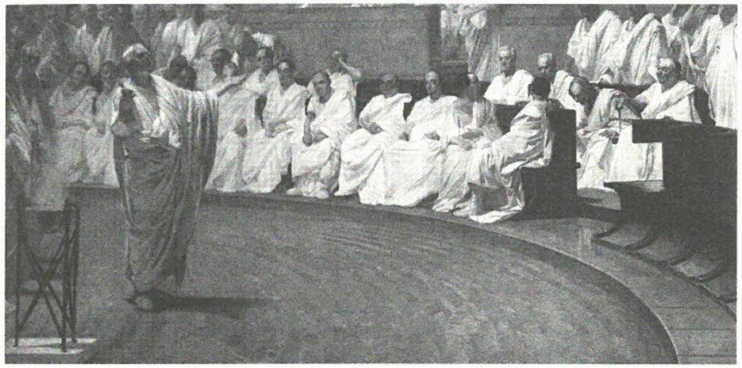
Soon after the elections, sometime in the early autumn, Cicero began to receive much clearer intelligence of a violent plot. For a long time he had been getting trickles of information through the girlfriend of one of Catiline's 'accomplices', a woman named Fulvia, who had more or less turned double agent. Now, thanks to a further piece of treachery from the other side, and via the wealthy Marcus Crassus as intermediary, he had a bundle of letters in his hands that directly incriminated Catiline and referred to the terrible bloodshed that was planned – information soon supplemented by definite reports of armed forces gathering north of the city in support of the insurrection. Finally, after he dodged an assassination attempt planned for 7 November, thanks to a tip-off from Fulvia, Cicero summoned the senate to meet the next day so that he could formally denounce Catiline and frighten him out of Rome.

The senators had already, in October, issued a decree urging (or allowing) Cicero as consul 'to make sure that the state should come to no harm', roughly the ancient equivalent of a modern 'emergency powers' or 'prevention of terrorism' act, and no less controversial. Now, on 8 November, they listened while Cicero went through the whole case against Catiline, in a blistering and well-informed attack. It was a marvellous mixture of fury, indignation, self-criticism and apparently solid fact. One minute he was reminding the assembled company of Catiline's notorious past; the next he was disingenuously regretting that he himself had not reacted to the danger speedily enough; the next he was pouring out precise details of the plot – in whose house the conspirators had gathered, on what dates, who was involved and what exactly their plans were. Catiline had turned up to face the denunciation in person. He asked the senators not to believe everything they were told and made some jibes about Cicero's modest background, compared with his own distinguished ancestors and their splendid achievements. But he must have realised that his position was hopeless. Overnight he left town.

In the senate

This encounter in front of the senate between Cicero and Catiline is the defining moment of the whole story: the two adversaries coming face to face in an institution that lay at the centre of Roman politics. But how should we picture it? The most famous modern attempt to bring before our eyes what happened on that 8 November is a painting by the nineteenth-century Italian artist Cesare Maccari (detail below and plate 1). It is an image that fits comfortably with many of our preconceptions of ancient Rome and its public life, grand, spacious, formal and elegant.

It is also an image with which Cicero would no doubt have been delighted. Catiline sits isolated, head bowed, as if no one wants to risk getting anywhere near him, still less to talk to him. Cicero, meanwhile, is the star of the scene, standing next to what seems to be a smoking brazier in front of an altar, addressing the attentive audience of



3. In Maccari's painting of the scene in the senate, Cicero is in full flood, apparently talking without the aid of notes. It nicely captures one of the defining aspirations of the Roman elite: to be a 'good man skilled in speaking' (*vir bonus dicendi peritus*).

toga-clad senators. Everyday Roman clothing – tunics, cloaks and even occasionally trousers – was much more varied and colourful than this. Togas, however, were the formal, national dress: Romans could define themselves as the *gens togata*, 'the race that wears the toga', while some contemporary outsiders occasionally laughed at this strange, cumbersome garment. And togas were white, with the addition of a purple border for anyone who held public office. In fact, the modern word 'candidate' derives from the Latin *candidatus*, which means 'whitened' and refers to the specially whitened togas that Romans wore during election campaigns, to impress the voters. In a world where status needed to be on show, the niceties of dress went even further: there was also a broad purple stripe on senators' tunics, worn beneath the toga, and a slightly narrower one if you were the next rank down in Roman society, an 'equestrian' or 'knight', and special shoes for both ranks.

Maccari has captured the senators' smart togas, even though he seems to have forgotten those significant borders. But in almost every other way the painting is no more than a seductive fantasy of the occasion and the setting. For a start, Cicero is presented as a white-haired elder statesman, Catiline as a moody young villain, when actually both were in their forties, and Catiline was the elder by a couple of years. Besides, this is far too sparsely attended a meeting; unless we are to imagine more of them somewhere offstage, there are barely fifty senators listening to the momentous speech.

In the middle of the first century BCE, the senate was a body of some 600 members; they were all men who had been previously elected to political office (and I mean *all men* – no woman ever held political office in ancient Rome). Anyone who had held the junior position of quaestor, twenty of them elected each year, went automatically into the senate with a seat for life. They met regularly, debating, advising the consuls and issuing decrees, which were, in practice, usually obeyed – though, as these did not have the force of law, there was always the awkward question of what would happen if a decree

of the senate was flouted or simply ignored. No doubt attendance fluctuated, but this particular meeting must surely have been packed.

As for the setting, it looks Roman enough, but with that huge column stretching up out of sight and the lavish, brightly coloured marble lining the walls, it is far too grand for almost anything in Rome in this period. Our modern image of the ancient city as an extravaganza of gleaming marble on a vast scale is not entirely wrong. But that is a later development in the history of Rome, beginning with the advent of one-man rule under the emperors and with the first systematic exploitation of the marble quarries in Carrara in North Italy, more than thirty years after the crisis of Catiline.

The Rome of Cicero's day, with its million or so inhabitants, was still built largely of brick or local stone, a warren of winding streets and dark alleys. A visitor from Athens or Alexandria in Egypt, which did have many buildings in the style of Maccari's painting, would have found the place unimpressive, not to say squalid. It was such a breeding ground of disease that a later Roman doctor wrote that you didn't need to read textbooks to research malaria – it was all around you in the city of Rome. The rented market in slums provided grim accommodation for the poor but lucrative profits for unscrupulous landlords. Cicero himself had large amounts of money invested in low-grade property and once joked, more out of superiority than embarrassment, that even the rats had packed up and left one of his crumbling rental blocks.

A few of the richest Romans had begun to raise the eyebrows of onlookers with their plush private houses, fitted out with elaborate paintings, elegant Greek statues, fancy furniture (one-legged tables were a particular cause of envy and anxiety), even imported marble columns. There was also a scatter of public buildings designed on a grand scale, built in (or veneered with) marble, offering a glimpse of the lavish face of the city that was to come. But the location of the meeting on 8 November was nothing like that.

Cicero had summoned the senators to meet, as they often did, in a temple: on this occasion a modest, old building dedicated to the god Jupiter, near the Forum, at the heart of the city, constructed on the standard rectangular plan, not the semicircular structure of Maccari's fantasy – probably small and ill lit, with lamps and torches only partly compensating for a lack of windows. We have to imagine several hundred senators packed into a stuffy, cramped space, some sitting on makeshift chairs or benches, others standing, and jostling, no doubt, under some venerable, ancient statue of Jupiter. It was certainly a momentous occasion in Roman history, but equally certainly, as with many things in Rome, much less elegant in reality than we like to imagine.

Triumph – and humiliation

The scene that followed has not been re-created by admiring painters. Catiline left town to join his supporters who had scratched together an army outside Rome. Meanwhile, Cicero mounted a clever sting operation to expose the conspirators still left in the city. Ill-advisedly, as it turned out, they had tried to involve in the plot a deputation of men from Gaul who had come to Rome to complain about their exploitation at the hands of Roman provincial governors. For whatever reason – maybe nothing more profound than an instinct for backing the winner – these Gauls decided to work secretly with Cicero, and they were able to provide clinching evidence of names, places, plans and some more letters with incriminating information. Arrests followed, as well as the usual unconvincing excuses. When the house of one of the conspirators was found stuffed with weapons, the man protested his innocence by claiming that his hobby was weapon collecting.

On 5 December, Cicero summoned the senate again, to discuss what should be done with the men now in custody. This time the senators met in the temple of the goddess Concord, or Harmony, a sure sign that affairs of state were anything but harmonious. Julius Caesar made the daring suggestion that the captured conspirators should be imprisoned: either, according to one account, until they could be properly tried once the crisis was over or, according to another, for life. Custodial sentences were not the penalties of choice in the ancient world, prisons being little more than places where criminals were held before execution. Fines, exile and death made up the usual repertoire of Roman punishment. If Caesar really did advocate life imprisonment in 63 BCE, then it was probably the first time in Western history that this was mooted as an alternative to the death penalty, without success. Relying on the emergency powers decree, and on the vociferous support of many senators, Cicero had the men summarily executed, with not even a show trial. Triumphantly, he announced their deaths to the cheering crowd in a famous one-word euphemism: *vixere*, 'they have lived' – that is, 'they're dead'.

Within a few weeks, Roman legions defeated Catiline's army of discontents in North Italy. Catiline himself fell fighting bravely at the front of his men. The Roman commander, Cicero's fellow consul, Antonius Hybrida, claimed to have bad feet on the day of the final battle and handed over leadership to his number two, raising suspicions in some quarters about exactly where his sympathies lay. And he was not the only one whose motives were questioned. There have been all sorts of possibly wild, certainly inconclusive, speculation, going back to the ancient world, about which far more successful men might secretly have been backing Catiline. Was he really the agent of the devious Marcus Crassus? And what was Caesar's true position?

Catiline's defeat was nonetheless a notable victory for Cicero; and his supporters dubbed him *pater patriae*, or 'father of the fatherland', one of the most splendid and satisfying titles you could have in a highly patriarchal society, such as Rome. But his success soon turned sour. Already on his last day as consul, two of his political rivals prevented him from giving the usual valedictory address to a meeting of the Roman people: 'Those who have punished others without a hearing,' they insisted, 'ought not to have the right to be heard themselves.' A few years later, in 58 BCE, the Roman people voted, in general terms, to expel anyone who had put a citizen to death without trial. Cicero left Rome, just before another bill was passed specifically singling him out, by name, for exile.

So far in this story the *Populus(Que) Romanus* (the *PQR* in *SPQR*) has not played a particularly prominent role. The 'people' was a much larger and amorphous body than the senate, made up, in political terms, of all male Roman citizens; the women had no formal political rights. In 63 BCE that was around a million men spread across the capital and throughout Italy, as well as a few beyond. In practice, it usually comprised the few thousand or the few hundred who, on any particular occasion, chose to turn up to elections, votes or meetings in the city of Rome. Exactly how influential the people were has always – even in the ancient world – been one of the big controversies in Roman history; but two things are certain. At this period, they alone could elect the political officials of the Roman state; no matter how blue-blooded you were, you could only hold office as, say, consul if the Roman people elected you. And they alone, unlike the senate, could make law. In 58 BCE Cicero's enemies argued that, whatever authority he had claimed under the senate's prevention of terrorism decree, his executions of Catiline's followers had flouted the fundamental right of any Roman citizen to a proper trial. It was up to the people to exile him.

The sometime 'father of the fatherland' spent a miserable year in North Greece (his abject self-pity is not endearing), until the people voted to recall him. He was welcomed back to the cheers of his supporters, but his house in the city had been demolished and, as if to drive the political point home, a shrine to Libertas had been erected on its site. His career never fully recovered.

Writing it up

The reasons why we can tell this story in such detail are very simple: the Romans themselves wrote a great deal about it, and a lot of what they wrote has survived. Modern historians often lament how little we can know about some aspects of the ancient world. 'Just think of what we don't know about the lives of the poor,' they complain, 'or of the perspectives of women.' This is as anachronistic as it is deceptive. The writers of Roman literature *were* almost exclusively male; or, at least, very few works by women have come down to us (the autobiography of the emperor Nero's mother, Agrippina, must count as one of the saddest losses of classical literature). These men were also almost exclusively well off, even though some Roman poets did like to pretend, as poets still occasionally do, that they were starving in garrets. The complaints, however, miss a far more important point.

The single most extraordinary fact about the Roman world is that so much of what the Romans wrote has survived, over two millennia. We have their poetry, letters, essays, speeches and histories, to which I have already referred, but also novels, geographies, satires and reams and reams of technical writing on everything from water engineering to medicine and disease. The survival is largely due to the diligence of medieval monks who transcribed by hand, again and again, what they believed were the most important, or useful, works of classical literature, with a significant but often forgotten contribution from medieval Islamic scholars who translated into Arabic some of the philosophy and scientific material. And thanks to archaeologists who have excavated papyri from the sands and the rubbish dumps of Egypt, wooden writing tablets from Roman military bases in the north of England and eloquent tombstones from all over the empire, we have glimpses of the life and letters of some rather more ordinary inhabitants of the Roman world. We have notes sent home, shopping lists, account books and last messages inscribed on graves. Even if this is a small proportion of what once existed, we have access to more Roman literature – and more Roman writing in general – than any one person could now thoroughly master in the course of a lifetime.

So how is it, exactly, that we know of the conflict between Catiline and Cicero? The story has come down to us by various routes, and it is partly the variety that makes it so rich. There are brief accounts in the works of a number of ancient Roman historians, including an ancient biography of Cicero himself – all written a hundred years or more after the events. More important, and more revealing, is a long essay, stretching over some fifty pages of a standard English translation, which offers a detailed narrative, and analysis, of the *War against Catiline*, or *Bellum Catilinae*, to use what was almost certainly its ancient title. It was written only twenty years after the 'war', in the 40s BCE, by Gaius Sallustius Crispus, or 'Sallust', as he is now usually known. A 'new man' like Cicero and a friend and ally of Julius Caesar, he had a very mixed political reputation: his period as a Roman governor in North Africa was infamous, even by Roman standards, for corruption and extortion. But despite his not entirely savoury career, or maybe because of it, Sallust's essay is one of the sharpest pieces of political analysis to survive from the ancient world.

Sallust did not simply tell the unfolding story of the attempted uprising, its causes and its upshot. He used the figure of Catiline as an emblem of the wider failings of first-century BCE Rome. In Sallust's view, the moral fibre of Roman culture had been destroyed by the city's success and by the wealth, greed and lust for power that had followed its conquest of the Mediterranean and the crushing of all its serious rivals. The crucial moment came eighty-three years before the war against Catiline, when in 146 BCE Roman armies finally destroyed Carthage, Hannibal's home base on the north coast of Africa. After that, Sallust thought, no significant threats to Roman domination were left. Catiline may have had positive qualities, as Sallust accepted, from bravery in the front line of battle to extraordinary powers of

endurance: 'his ability to withstand hunger, cold or sleep deprivation was incredible'. But he symbolised much of what was wrong with the Rome of his day.

Behind Sallust's essay lie other vivid documents, which ultimately go back to the hand of Cicero himself and give his version of what happened. Some of the letters he wrote to his closest friend, Titus Pomponius Atticus – a wealthy man who never entered formal politics but often pulled the strings from the sidelines – mention his initially friendly relations with Catiline. Mixed in with domestic news, about the birth of his son ('Let me tell you, I have become a father ...') and the arrival of new statues from Greece to decorate his house, Cicero explains in 65 BCE that he was contemplating defending Catiline in the courts, in the hope that they might later work together.

How such private letters ended up in the public domain is something of a mystery. Most likely, a member of Cicero's household made copies of them available after his death and they quickly circulated among curious readers, fans and enemies. Nothing was ever *published*, in quite our sense, in the ancient world. Almost a thousand letters in all survive, written both to and by the great man over the last twenty years or so of his life. Revealing his self-pity in exile ('All I can do is weep!') and his anguish on the death of his daughter after childbirth while covering topics from thieving agents, through society divorces, to the ambitions of Julius Caesar, they are some of the most intriguing documents we have from ancient Rome.

Equally intriguing a survival, and perhaps even more surprising, is part of a long poem that Cicero wrote to celebrate the achievements of his consulship; it is no longer complete, but it was famous, or infamous, enough that more than seventy lines of it are quoted by other ancient writers and by Cicero himself in later works. It includes one of the most notorious lines of Latin doggerel to have made it through the Dark Ages: '*O fortunatam natam me consule Romam*' – a jingle with something of the ring of 'Rome was sure a lucky state / Born in my great consulate'. And, in what has been seen as a major, if slightly hilarious, lapse of modesty, it seems to have featured an 'assembly of the gods' in which our superhuman consul discusses with the divine senate on Mount Olympus how he should handle Catiline's plot.

By the first century BCE, reputation and fame in Rome depended not just on word of mouth but also on publicity, sometimes elaborately, even awkwardly, orchestrated. We know that Cicero tried to persuade one of his historian friends, Lucius Lucceius, to write a celebratory account of his defeat of Catiline and its sequel ('I am extremely keen,' he said in a letter, 'that my name should be put in the limelight in your writing'); and he also hoped that a fashionable Greek poet, whose tricky immigration case he had defended in the Roman courts, would compose a worthy epic on this same subject. In the event, he had to write his own verse tribute – to himself. A few modern critics have tried, not very convincingly, to defend the literary quality of the work, and even of what has become its signature line ('*O fortunatam natam* ...'). Most Roman critics whose views on the topic survive satirised both the vanity of the enterprise and its language. Even one of Cicero's greatest admirers, a keen student of his oratorical techniques, regretted that 'he had gone quite so over the top'. Others gleefully ridiculed or parodied the poem.

But the most direct access that we have to the events of 63 BCE comes from the scripts of some of the speeches that Cicero gave at the time of the uprising. Two were delivered to public meetings of the Roman people, updating them on the progress of the investigations into Catiline's conspiracy and announcing victory over the dissidents. One was Cicero's contribution to the debate in the senate on 5 December which determined the appropriate penalty for those under arrest. And, most famous of all, there was the speech that he gave to the senate on 8 November, denouncing Catiline, in the words that we should imagine coming out of his mouth in Maccari's painting.

Cicero himself probably circulated copies of all these soon after

they had been delivered, laboriously transcribed by a small army of slaves. And, unlike his efforts at poetry, they quickly became admired and much-quoted classics of Latin literature, and prime examples of great oratory to be learned and imitated by Roman schoolboys and would-be public speakers for the rest of antiquity. They were even read and studied by those who were not entirely fluent in Latin. That was certainly going on in Roman Egypt four hundred years later. The earliest copies of these speeches to survive have been found on papyrus dating to the fourth or fifth century CE, now just small scraps of what were originally much longer texts. They include the original Latin and a word-for-word translation into Greek. We must imagine a native Greek speaker in Egypt struggling a little, and needing some help, in getting to grips with Cicero's original language.

Many later learners have struggled too. This group of four speeches, *Against Catiline* (*In Catilinam*) or the *Catilinarians*, as they are now often known, went on to enter the educational and cultural traditions of the West. Copied and disseminated via the medieval monasteries, they were used to drill generations of pupils in the Latin language, and they were closely analysed as literary masterpieces by Renaissance intellectuals and rhetorical theorists. Even today, in mechanically printed editions, they keep their place in the syllabus for those who learn Latin, and they remain models of persuasive oratory, whose techniques underlie some of the most famous modern speeches, including those of Tony Blair and Barack Obama.

It did not take long for the opening words of Cicero's speech given on 8 November (the *First Catilinarian*) to become one of the best known and instantly recognisable quotes of the Roman world: '*Quo usque tandem abutere, Catilina, patientia nostra?*' ('How long, Catiline, will you go on abusing our patience?'); and it was closely followed, a few lines later in the written text, by the snappy, and still much repeated, slogan '*O tempora, o mores*' ('O what a world we live in!', or, literally, 'O the times, O the customs!'). In fact, the phrase '*Quo usque* *tandem* ...' must already have been firmly embedded in the Roman literary consciousness by the time that Sallust was writing his account of the 'war', just twenty years later. So firmly embedded was it that, in pointed or playful irony, Sallust could put it into Catiline's mouth. '*Quae quo usque tandem patiemini, o fortissimi viri?*' ('How long will you go on putting up with this, my braves?') is how Sallust's revolutionary stirs up his followers, reminding them of the injustices they were suffering at the hands of the elite. The words are purely imaginary. Ancient writers regularly scripted speeches for their protagonists, much as historians today like to ascribe feelings or motives to their characters. The joke here is that Catiline, Cicero's greatest enemy, is made to voice his antagonist's most famous slogan.

That is only one of the wry ironies and pointed, paradoxical 'misquotations' in the history of this distinctive phrase. It often lurked in Roman literature whenever revolutionary designs were at stake. Just a few years after Sallust, Titus Livius, or 'Livy', as he is better known, was writing his own history of Rome from its beginning, originally in 142 'books' – a vast project, even though an ancient book amounted to what fitted onto a roll of papyrus and is closer to the length of a modern chapter. What Livy had to say about Catiline has been lost. But when he wanted to capture the civil conflicts of hundreds of years earlier, in particular the 'conspiracy' of one Marcus Manlius, who in the fourth century BCE was supposed to have incited the Roman poor to rebellion against the oppressive rule of the elite, he went back to a version of the classic words. '*Quo usque tandem ignorabitis vires vestras?*' ('How long will you go on being ignorant of your strength?') he imagined Manlius asking his followers to get them to realise that, poor though they were, they had the manpower to succeed.

The point here is not merely about an echo of language. Nor is it just about the figure of Catiline as a byword for villainy, though he certainly plays that part often enough in Roman literature. His name came to be used as a nickname for unpopular emperors, and half a

century later Publius Vergilius Maro (or 'Virgil', as he is now usually known) gave him a cameo role in the *Aeneid*, where the villain is pictured being tortured in the underworld, 'trembling at the face of the Furies'. More important is the way that the conflict between Catiline and Cicero became a powerful template for understanding civil disobedience and insurrection throughout Roman history and beyond. When Roman historians wrote about revolution, the image of Catiline almost always lay somewhere behind their accounts, even at the cost of some strange inversions of chronology. As his carefully chosen words hint, Livy's Marcus Manlius, a nobleman turning to doomed revolution, supported by an impoverished rabble, was largely a projection of Catiline back into early Roman history.

The other side of the story

Might there not be another side to the story? The detailed evidence we have from Cicero's pen, or point of view, means that his perspective will always be dominant. But it does not necessarily mean that it is true in any simple sense, or that it is the only way of seeing things. People have wondered for centuries quite how loaded an account Cicero offers us, and have detected alternative views and interpretations just beneath the surface of his version of events. Sallust himself hints as much. For, although his account is heavily based on Cicero's writing, by transferring the famous '*Quo usque tandem*' from the mouth of Cicero to that of Catiline, he may well have been reminding his readers that the facts and their interpretations were, at the very least, fluid.

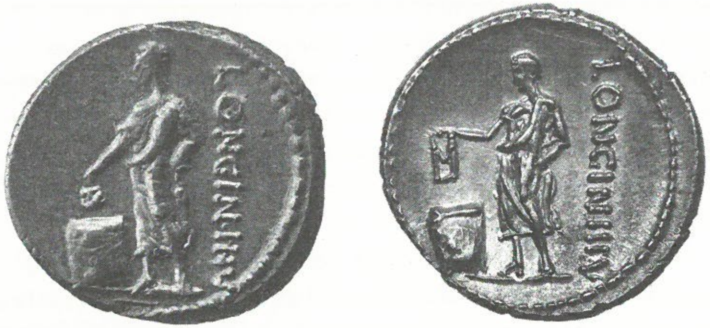
One obvious question is whether the speech we know as the *First Catilinarian* really is what Cicero said to the assembled senators in the Temple of Jupiter on 8 November. It is hard to imagine that it was a complete fabrication. How would he have got away with circulating a version that bore no relationship to what he had said? But almost certainly it is not a word-for-word match. If he spoke from notes and the ancient equivalent of bullet points, then the text we have presumably lies somewhere between what he remembered saying and what he would have liked to have said. Even if he was reading from a fairly complete text, when he circulated the speech to friends, associates and those he wanted to impress, he would almost certainly have improved it somewhat, tidying up the loose ends and inserting a few more clever one-liners, which might have been missed out or slipped his mind on the day.

A lot hangs too on exactly when it was circulated and why. We know from one of his letters to Atticus that Cicero was arranging for the *First Catilinarian* to be copied in June 60 BCE, when he must have been well aware that the controversy over his execution of the 'conspirators' was not likely to go away. It would have been tempting and convenient for Cicero to use the written text of the speech in his own defence, even if that meant some strategic adjustments and insertions. In fact, the repeated references, in the version we have, to Catiline as if he were a foreign enemy (in Latin *hostis*) may well be one of the ways in which Cicero responded to his opponents: by referring to the conspirators as enemies of the state, he was implying that they did not deserve the protection of Roman law; they had lost their civic rights (including the right to trial). Of course, that may already have been a leitmotiv in the oral version of the speech given on 8 November. We simply do not know. But the term certainly took on far greater significance – and I strongly suspect was given far greater emphasis – in the permanent, written version.

These questions prompt us to look harder for different versions of the story. Never mind Cicero's perspective, is it possible to get any idea of how Catiline and his supporters would have seen it? The words and the views of Cicero now dominate the contemporary evidence for the mid first century BCE. But it is always worth trying to read his version, or any version of Roman history, 'against the grain', to prise apart the small chinks in the story using the snatches of other, independent, evidence that we have and to ask if other observers might have seen things differently. Were those whom Cicero described as monstrous villains really as villainous as he painted them? In this case, there is just about enough to raise some doubts about what was really going on.

Cicero casts Catiline as a desperado with terrible gambling debts, thanks entirely to his moral failings. But the situation cannot have been so simple. There was some sort of credit crunch in Rome in 63 BCE, and more economic and social problems than Cicero was prepared to acknowledge. Another achievement of his 'great consulate' was to scotch a proposal to distribute land in Italy to some of the poor in the city. To put it another way, if Catiline behaved like a desperado, he might have had a good reason, and the support of many ordinary people driven to desperate measures by similar distress.

How can we tell? It is harder to reconstruct economics than politics across 2,000 years, but we do get some unexpected glimpses. The evidence of the surviving coins of the period is particularly revealing, both of the conditions of the times and of the ability of modern historians and archaeologists to squeeze the material they have in ingenious ways. Roman coins can often be precisely dated, because at this period they were newly designed each year and 'signed' by the annual officials who were responsible for issuing them. They were minted using a series of individually hand-cut 'dies' (or stamps), whose minor differences in detail are still visible on the finished coins. We can calculate roughly how many coins an individual die could stamp (before it became too blunt to make a crisp image), and if we have a large enough sample of coins we can estimate roughly how many dies had been used altogether in minting a single issue. From that we can get a rough and ready idea of how many coins were produced each year: the more dies, the more coins, and vice versa.



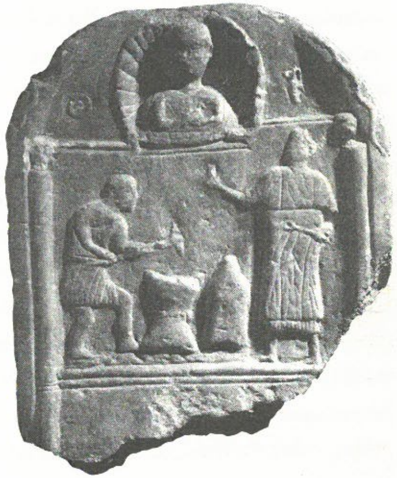
4. This silver coin was minted in 63 BCE, its design showing one of the Roman people voting on a piece of legislation, casting a voting tablet into a jar for counting. The differences in detail between the two versions well illustrate the differences in the die stamps. The name of the official in charge of the mint that year, Longinus, is also stamped on the coin.

According to these calculations, the number of coins being minted in the late 60s BCE fell so sharply that there were fewer overall in circulation than there had been a few years before. The reasons for this we cannot reconstruct. Like most states before the eighteenth century or even later, Rome had no monetary policy as such, nor any financial institutions where that kind of policy could be developed. But the likely consequences are obvious. Whether he recklessly gambled away his fortune or not, Catiline – and many others – might have been short of cash; while those already in debt would have been faced with creditors, short of cash themselves, calling in their loans.

All this was in addition to the other long-standing factors that might have given the humble or the have-nots in Rome an incentive to protest or to join in with those promising radical change. There was the enormous disparity of wealth between rich and poor, the squalid living conditions for most of the population, and probably for much of the time, even if not starvation, then persistent hunger. Despite

Cicero's dismissive descriptions of Catiline's followers as reprobates, gangsters and the destitute, the logic of some of his own account, and of Sallust's, suggests otherwise. For they either state or imply that Catiline's support evaporated when it was reported that he intended to burn the city down. If so, we are not dealing with down-and-outs and complete no-hopers with nothing to lose – and everything to gain – from total conflagration. Much more likely, his supporters included the humble suffering poor, who still had some stake in the survival of the city.

Cicero, inevitably, had an interest in making the most of the danger that Catiline posed. Whatever his political success, he held a precarious position at the top of Roman society, among aristocratic families who claimed, like Catiline, a direct line back to the founders of the city, or even to the gods. Julius Caesar's family, for example, was proud to trace its lineage back to the goddess Venus; another, more curiously, claimed descent from the equally mythical Pasiphae, the wife of King Minos, whose extraordinary coupling with a bull produced the monstrous Minotaur. In order to secure his position in these circles, Cicero



5. This Roman tombstone of the fourth century CE illustrates one simple way of striking a coin. The blank coin is placed between two dies, resting on an anvil. The man on the left is giving this 'sandwich' a heavy blow with a hammer to imprint the design on the blank. As the tongs in the hands of the assistant on the right suggest, the blank has been heated to make the imprinting easier.

was no doubt looking to make a splash during his year as consul. An impressive military victory against a barbarian enemy would have been ideal, and what most Romans would have dreamt of. Rome was always a warrior state, and victory in war the surest route to glory. Cicero, however, was no soldier: he had come to prominence in the law courts, not by leading his army in battle against dangerous, or unfortunate, foreigners. He needed to 'save the state' in some other way.

Some Roman commentators noted that the crisis played very much to Cicero's advantage. One anonymous pamphlet, attacking Cicero's whole career and preserved because it was once believed, wrongly, to be from the pen of Sallust, states explicitly that he 'turned the troubles of the state to his own glory', going so far as to claim that his consulship was 'the cause of the conspiracy' rather than the solution. To put it bluntly, one basic question for us should be not *whether* Cicero exaggerated the dangers of the conspiracy, but *how far*.

The most determined modern sceptics have deemed the whole plot not much more than a figment of Cicero's imagination – in which case the man who claimed to be a 'weapons enthusiast' was exactly that, the incriminating letters were forgeries, the deputation of Gauls were a complete dupe of the consul and the rumoured assassination attempts were paranoid inventions. Such a radical view seems implausible. There was, after all, a hand-to-hand battle between Catiline's men and Roman legions, which can hardly be dismissed as a figment. It is much more likely that, whatever his original motives, Catiline – far-sighted radical or unprincipled terrorist – was partly driven to extreme measures by a consul spoiling for a fight and bent on his own glory. Cicero may even have convinced himself, whatever the evidence, that Catiline was a serious threat to the safety of Rome. That, as we know from many more recent examples, is how political paranoia and self-interest often work. We will never be quite sure. The 'conspiracy' will always be a prime example of the classic interpretative dilemma: were there really 'reds under the bed', or was the crisis, partly at least, a conservative

invention? It should also act as a reminder that in Roman history, as elsewhere, we must always be alert to the other side of the story – which is part of the point of this *SPQR*.

Our Catiline?

The clash between Cicero and Catiline has offered a template for political conflict ever since. It can hardly be a coincidence that Maccari's painting of the events of 8 November was commissioned, along with other scenes of Roman history, for the room in the Palazzo Madama that had just become the home of the modern Italian senate; presumably a lesson was intended for the modern senators. And over the centuries the rights and wrongs of the 'conspiracy', the respective faults and virtues of Catiline and Cicero, and the conflicts between homeland security and civil liberties have been fiercely debated, and not only among historians.

Occasionally the story has been drastically rewritten. One medieval tradition in Tuscany has Catiline surviving the battle against the Roman legions and going on, as a local hero, to have a complicated romantic entanglement with a woman called Belisea. Another version gives him a son Uberto, and so makes him the ancestor of the Uberti dynasty in Florence. Even more imaginatively, Prosper de Crébillon's play *Catilina*, first performed in the mid eighteenth century, conjures up an affair between Catiline and Cicero's daughter, Tullia, complete with some steamy assignations in a Roman temple.

When the conspiracy has been replayed in fiction and on stage, it has been adjusted according to the political alignment of the author and the political climate of the times. Henrik Ibsen's first drama, written in the aftermath of the European revolutions of the 1840s, takes the events of 63 BCE as its theme. Here a revolutionary Catiline is pitted against the corruption of the world in which he lived, while Cicero, who could have imagined nothing worse, is almost entirely written out of the events, never appearing on stage and barely mentioned. For Ben Jonson, by contrast, writing in the aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot, Catiline was a sadistic anti-hero, whose victims were so numerous that, in Jonson's vivid imagination, a whole navy was required to ferry them across the River Styx to the Underworld. His Cicero is not particularly likeable either but instead a droning bore; indeed so boring that at the play's first performance, in 1611, many members of the audience walked out during his interminable denunciation of Catiline.

Jonson was being unfair to Cicero's powers of persuasive oratory – at least if the continuing use of his words, quoted and strategically adapted, is anything to go by. For his *First Catilinarian* speech, and especially its famous first line ('How long, Catiline, will you go on abusing our patience?'), still lurks in twenty-first-century political rhetoric, is plastered on modern political banners and is fitted conveniently into the 140 characters of a tweet. All you need do is insert the name of your particular modern target. Indeed, a stream of tweets and other headlines posted over the time I was writing this book swapped the name 'Catilina' for, among others, those of the presidents of the United States, France and Syria, the mayor of Milan and the State of Israel: '*Quo usque tandem abutere, François Hollande, patientia nostra?*' Quite how many of those who now adopt the slogan could explain exactly where it comes from, or what the clash between Cicero and Catiline was all about, it is impossible to know. Some may be classicists with a political cause, but that is unlikely to be true of all these objectors and protesters. The use of the phrase points to something rather different from specialist classical expertise, and probably more important. It is a strong hint that, just under the surface of Western politics, the dimly remembered conflict between Cicero and Catiline still acts as a template for our own political struggles and arguments. Cicero's eloquence, even if only half understood, still informs the language of modern politics.

DEMOKRÁCIA
Quousque tandem

6. In 2012, Hungarian protesters against the Fidesz party's attempts to rewrite the constitution blazoned Cicero's famous phrase, in Latin. But it has not been reused only in political contexts. In a notorious intellectual spat, Camille Paglia substituted the name of French philosopher Michel Foucault for Catiline's: 'How long, O Foucault ... ?'

Cicero would be delighted. When he wrote to his friend Lucceius, asking the historian to commemorate the achievements of his consulship, he was hoping for eternal fame: 'the idea of being spoken about by posterity pushes me to some sort of hope for immortality,' he wrote with a touch of well-contrived diffidence. Lucceius, as we saw, did not oblige. He might have been put off by Cicero's blatant request that he 'neglect the rules of history' to write up the events rather more fulsomely than accurately. But in the end, it turned out that Cicero achieved more immortality for his achievements in 63 BCE than Lucceius could ever have given him, being quoted and requoted over 2,000 years.

We shall find many more of these political conflicts, disputed interpretations and sometimes uncomfortable echoes of our own times in the chapters that follow. But it is now the moment to turn back from the relatively firm ground of the first century BCE to Rome's deepest history. How did Cicero and his contemporaries reconstruct the early years of their city? Why were their origins important to them? What does it mean to ask 'Where did Rome begin?' How much can we, or could they, really know of earliest Rome?

CHAPTER TWO

IN THE BEGINNING

Cicero and Romulus

According to one Roman tradition, the Temple of Jupiter where Cicero harangued Catiline on 8 November 63 BCE had been established seven centuries earlier by Romulus, Rome's founding father. Romulus and the new citizens of his tiny community were fighting their neighbours, a people known as the Sabines, on the site that later became the Forum, the political centre of Cicero's Rome. Things were going badly for the Romans, and they had been driven to retreat. As a last attempt to snatch victory, Romulus prayed to the god Jupiter – not just to Jupiter, in fact, but to Jupiter *Stator*, 'Jupiter who *holds men firm*'. He would build a temple in thanks, Romulus promised the god, if only the Romans would resist the temptation to run for it, and stand their ground against the enemy. They did, and the Temple of Jupiter Stator was erected on that very spot, the first in a long series of shrines and temples in the city built to commemorate divine help in securing military victory for Rome.

That at least was the story told by Livy and several other Roman writers. Archaeologists have never managed firmly to identify any remains of this temple, which must in any case have been much rebuilt by Cicero's time, especially if its origins really did go back to the beginning of Rome. But there can be no doubt that, when he chose to summon the senate to meet there, Cicero knew exactly what he was doing. He had the precedent of Romulus in mind and was using the