

Life of Cicero and the Fall of the Roman Republic

By Benjamin Wang

It seems like what most people remember of Ancient Rome was its power and its military might in Europe and parts of Asia. The Roman Republic was known for being a successful, strong, and prosperous nation. Nevertheless, the mysteries behind the fall of this progressive civilization still leaves people in wonder. Why did such an advanced system of government and politics fail? A key figure during this period whose life and career can shed light on the last years of the Roman Republic was Cicero, a senator and a key decision-maker in Rome, who had started his life as a simple country boy, but his determination to become powerful never ended throughout his life. Studying the life of Cicero helps us understand the fate of Ancient Rome and its people and hopefully better understand our world and ourselves.

The time Cicero lived was towards the end of the Roman Republic. The Republic endured through wars which eventually evolved into civil wars when great war heroes began to declare war amongst themselves. Along with the fate of Pompey, Julius Caesar, Catalina, and other senators and powerful men, Cicero's lifelong mission to save the Republic and the SPQR system inevitably failed. On the 3rd of January, 106 BCE, Marcus Tullius Cicero was not one of the elites who could quickly get into the Roman Senate. In his book *The Life and Times of Rome's Greatest Politician: Cicero*, Anthony Everitt talks about the town Arpinum, where Cicero lived for the early stages of his life. "Arpinum was an out-of-the-way spot, and it took up to three days to journey to the capital in comfort," Everitt suggests that the town, Arpinum, was very far away from the capital at the time. The long-distance and the arduous journey to rise from a lower-ranking life did not stop Cicero's passion for politics.

However, famous as an eloquent speaker that was highly talented in many areas of politics, Cicero might have never fully grown out of his starting point as a nervous country boy. From taking the risk of getting into the Roman Elite society as a country boy to his career climax of becoming the savior of the Senate during the Catilinarian Conspiracy, Cicero had been marvelously successful pursuing his dream. Towards the end of his era, his mission veered into saving the Roman Republic in a state of emergency. Although Cicero's task, in the end, did not succeed, his legacy still made him prominent. People often wonder why, at critical moments of his career, nervousness always let Cicero be more alert to his surroundings, and this led to his fatal mistake, choosing Octavian to ally with, who betrayed Cicero and ended the Republic. Four impactful events happened in Cicero's life: Cicero's entrance to elite society, taking the role of Rome's greatest

orator, and his stand in the demise of the Roman Republic were all influencers in his ambitious journey, but the Catilinarian Conspiracy was what defined Cicero.

Early Life

His path into becoming a politician started early on. For as long as he could remember, Cicero knew he was different from the other boys that lived in his town. Most young boys like him chose to play around and grow crops to harvest on a farm. Unlike carefree individuals at the time, the young Cicero learned the realities of the Roman world. “In the first place, he was fairly lucky to survive; as many as one in five children died in their infancy, and only about two thirds of those born reached maturity.” Cicero understood how lucky he was to live as a Roman citizen in a far-away province and to be from a wealthy family, and he decided not to waste the luck. Cicero took the risk of going to Rome, the capital, to study more about politics. Later, Cicero’s obsession led him to go across the Mediterranean Sea to continue his study in Greece. This passion supported Cicero throughout his political journey.

His path to success was built on his talents and his family wealth. After Cicero’s arrival in the capital to study law at the age of seventeen, it was at first hard for him to fit in. Cicero became a pupil for many mighty senators with his family connections, effectively climbing up the social ladder. More importantly, during the time, Cicero mastered the law forms and started to become famous with his speeches. In addition, Cicero gained interest in writing poetry. Everitt exclaims, “Cicero wrote poetry in his adolescence and as early as the age of fourteen, completed a work in tetrameters called *Pontius Glaucus*. Although it has not survived, we know that it told the story of a Boeotian fisherman who eats a magic apt subject for someone who had dreams of making his way in the world by means of his chief talent, a strikingly persuasive way with words.” In making this comment, Everitt argues that not only did Cicero excel in public speaking, but he also had talent in poetry.

Cicero traveled to the province of Sicily as one of the twenty quaestors of Rome. Quaestors, the lowest ranking position in the Roman Republic at the time, were assigned to keep track of the state treasury and audits of the province. But it did not mean that this job was not important. Cicero was welcomed by the Sicilians while building up connections and influence in this province. He demonstrated kindness, honesty, integrity, and many other respectful acts to gain the locals’ favor. Therefore, the residents in Sicily asked Cicero to help prosecute a governor of the province, Gaius Verres, who had severely governed the province before. The prosecution was a success for Cicero. After lengthy periods of collecting evidence and taking control of the province, he won, and everyone in the province of Sicily loved him. Cicero proudly returned to Rome, gaining a lot of information about the province while obtaining confidence and support in Sicily. Being

quaestor offered Cicero lots of change to his life, and it was when he returned to Rome that he started to become Rome's greatest orator ever. Cicero had taken another step further into his journey to being Rome's best politician, and his experience as quaestor both helped him thoroughly.

Rome's Greatest Orator

After he arrived in Rome finishing one year of quaestorship in the province of Sicily, Cicero became one of Rome's most outstanding lawyers and successfully won a series of dramatic court battles. The name, Cicero, had already spread across the capital, as everyone heard his speeches. Everitt describes Cicero's skill as an orator, writing, "His style was fluent and technically accomplished. He wrote quickly and easily, as many as 500 lines a night, and could turn his hand to unpromising subjects such as a translation of a Greek work on astronomy by Aratus." Everitt's point was that Cicero quickly became well known since he showed talent in writing and speaking while also winning many brutal court battles. In addition, Cicero's passion now fully expressed how he determined to become a politician.

Everitt describes Cicero's life living around the Forum. "Almost all the major incidents in Cicero's career unfolded in a space hardly larger than two football fields, a square in the center of Rome. This was the Forum, where advocates addressed juries and politicians." With the money he obtained after winning many court battles, Cicero owned the most prominent house in the space, Palatine Hill, from where the whole Forum could be seen. Not only was this useful for Cicero because he lived so close to the Forum and his work, but it also showed Cicero's power at the time. The Forum of Rome was small and compact, which meant only people with wealth and power could secure a house in that key location.

Despite his success as a public speaker and lawyer, Cicero's natural personality was quite the opposite. Cicero had nervousness and anxiety before important events. However, he did not let this weakness stop him from advancing further in the political game, as he knew that the existing system gave him such an opportunity.

Catilinarian Conspiracy

Cicero's exceptional performance both in helping to govern citizens in far-away provinces and in court as a lawyer made him a young Roman politician everyone looked up to. In his book *Life of Cicero*, Anthony Trollope describes Cicero's return to Rome after a period of traveling during which Cicero worked on his oration skills "Cicero's life for the next two years was made conspicuous by a series of speeches which were produced by his exile and his return. These are remarkable for the praise lavished on himself, and by the violence with which he attacked his enemies." Here, Trollope describes how Cicero made many remarkable speeches as a famous orator after his return. The comment further proves Cicero's aptitude

and ability to write and speak in front of an audience. At this time, the consulship was near for Cicero. There was an opportunity for Cicero to run for consul, one of the most dignified positions in the government, which had a one-year term. Cicero seized the valuable opportunity when the Republic was about to go through a state of reform. In 63 BCE, Cicero was elected consul by a unanimous vote. Cicero began his year as a consul by opposing many reform bills that would have been harmful to the existing system. Everything went so well for Cicero as consul to the point that the co-consul did barely anything. After Cicero's consulship, the Catilinarian Conspiracy, one of Cicero's most outstanding achievements, was about to begin.

Unlike many other conflicts between rivalries in the period, such as between Caesar and Pompey, the battle between Catiline and Cicero did not occur in the form of fighting but instead in a series of speeches. The battle in court between Marcus Tullius Cicero and Lucius Sergius Catilina played out in the Senate, for which Cicero and Catiline are well-remembered nowadays. It was doubtless to say that Cicero made many other great speeches in court, but the one against Catiline was the most memorable, leading to the downfall of Cataline. If Catiline had instead won the battle, the Republic could have lasted for an even shorter period.

Beating the Catilinarian Conspiracy was with no doubt Cicero's only hope of saving the Roman Republic that was standing on one leg. In her book *Tenor of Our Times*, Grady P. Moore states about Cicero in the Catilinarian Conspiracy, "Above anything else, the events of the Catiline Conspiracy were fundamental in Cicero's development into both an avid enemy of the imperial system and a major player on the Roman Political stage. The Catiline Conspiracy was the attempt of Lucius Catiline, a notable patrician and member of the Senate, to overthrow the Republic and establish himself asking." Both men in this case were senators, but with ideologies that were different. Everyone would think that the senators of the highly advanced political system of Ancient Rome would not want to end the Republic, but in 63 BCE, that was what Catiline wanted. There were problems in the Republic when Cataline thought justified bringing about the end of its existence. After losses in battles to conquer more land, the Roman Republic was in a deadly crisis. The territory was limited, and therefore many soldiers could not obtain land after fighting for the Republic. The phenomenon became led to more and more severe, causing the fall of the Roman Republic might have been near. As Mary Beard states about the two opponents, Cicero and Catiline, in her book *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome*, "On the one side is Lucius Sergius Catilina, 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, 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.” Two powers were then about to clash, both trying to take the role of consul.

Cicero was and still is widely known for being Rome’s greatest politician of all time. Of the thousands of speeches in front of audiences, the four speeches of the Catiline Orations that Cicero gave in opposition to Catiline were considered the most famous speeches Cicero made. These speeches aimed to defeat Catiline and stop him from being elected consul in 63 BCE. In order to gain political power, Cicero also participated in the election, hoping to run for consul. Cicero was already known as Rome’s greatest orator, but motivation made him strive to become a better speaker. In his first oration to Catiline in the Senate, Cicero spoke aloud many interesting philosophical questions that readers still talk about today. In his speech, Cicero announced, “Shame on the age and on its principles! The Senate is aware of these things; the consul sees them; and yet this man lives. Lives! aye, he comes even into the Senate. He takes part in the public deliberations; he is watching and marking down and checking off for slaughter every individual among us. And we, gallant men that we are, think that we are doing our duty to the Republic if we keep out of the way of his frenzied attacks.” The essence of Cicero’s argument was that he thought Catiline would end the Senate and cause the Roman Republic to fall. This was the first oration that Cicero made to defeat Catiline in the election for consul in 63 BCE.

In 63 BCE, the Second Catilinarian Conspiracy (also known as the Catilinarian Conspiracy) started. Catiline, who had failed to become consul the year before (64 BCE), knew that this was his last chance to use his knowledge to become a senator. The crowd of nobles that had supported him the year before had decreased in number, so it was even more challenging for Catiline to gain power as consul. Nevertheless, Catiline believed that there were supporters for him, many plebeians (the poor Roman Citizens) who had lost their farms due to Sulla’s reforms and migrated to Rome. Because Catiline’s reform supported many of these plebeians, they supported Catiline in the consul election in 63 BCE. During this time, Catiline started designing a conspiracy to assassinate Cicero. Catiline sent centurions to help aid the conspirators, but unluckily for him, one of Cicero’s men found out about Catiline’s plan and told Cicero. Cicero decided to physically terminate the threat by sentencing the conspirators to death without a trial, leading to “Cicero’s finest hour” to save the Republic.

According to Mary Beard writing in *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome*, Cicero was questioned by many, “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?”¹¹ This famous rebuttal showed that Cicero saw Catiline as a ‘terrorist’ and had the idea of prosecuting Catiline outside the due processes of the beloved system, in the name of saving the system. As a great defender of the Roman Republic, this kind of contradiction showed that Cicero himself might have

buried a seed that led to the eventual collapse. Unfortunately, this happens again and again in human history. Many experts around the world are still debating on this controversy Cicero faced two thousand years ago.

Fall of the Roman Republic

In the days after Caesar's death, Cicero began nurturing Octavian and providing Octavian support for a position in the political office. Being provided help by Cicero, Octavian quickly gained power and became enemies with Mark Antony. Swiftly, the assassins were all killed by order of Caesar's nephew, Octavian. Cicero did not play a part in Caesar's assassination, but he claimed that Caesar was a tyrant and supported Caesar's assassination, although he was still at home when the assassins killed Julius Caesar. In the aftermath of the assassination, the battle between the two generals began. Cicero was controlling the Senate, which was encountering many difficulties. Cicero quickly realized that he had to choose one person to become allies with to save his country. Octavian was Caesar's grandnephew, but he was still young, and Cicero did not dare to choose Mark Antony because he thought Mark Antony could have been overly powerful and a tyrant like Caesar. As we look back into Cicero's early stages of life, we can see that Cicero was not an aristocrat nor an elite member in the society of Rome when he walked into the Capital of the Roman Republic. Cicero always had a bit of nervousness and anxiety in his blood, and when it came to choosing a man that could save the Roman Republic, his choice may have been motivated by the fact that Octavian was so young and therefore less threatening to Cicero and more impressionable. However, Octavian always believed that he should do what his uncle did, but in another way that the Senate might approve. For the moment, Octavian was more potent than Mark Antony, and the question is, if Cicero did choose Mark Antony, would the Roman Republic have been saved?

The Second Triumvirate began, with Octavian and Mark Antony starting to reconcile, becoming friends in order to make Cicero back off. This reconciliation, a successful one for the two, led to Cicero's death. Mark Antony and Octavian planned on killing Cicero in order to take control of Rome. This triumvirate brought the end of the Roman Republic and the Rise of the Roman Empire. Octavian, therefore renamed himself, becoming "Augustus," meaning the son of a god. The exciting part is, Octavian did not intend to be a dictator, but the Senate awkwardly gave Octavian control over Roman territory. Hysterical as it is, the Senate thought that Octavian was trying to save the Roman Republic from attacks by Mark Antony. Octavian intentionally proposed Mark Antony to be a very dominant man that would lead his army to conquer the Roman Republic in order for the Senate to drop into his trap. In the end, the Senate made Octavian dictator for life, and Rome's first emperor, Augustus was born.

Going back to the most critical moment of Cicero, we never know what would have happened if Cicero was more confident when he chose who to partner with him. When Cicero made his decision, there might have been other reasons he chose Octavian instead of Mark Antony that we never knew of. Similarly, we do not know whether history would change if he chose otherwise. While the battle between Cicero and Pompey, and Cicero's role in the fall of the Roman Republic might have decided the direction of the mighty country, the Catilinarian Conspiracy was perhaps the most influential moment that defined Cicero in many ways and evidenced his doomed future.

In over 60 years, starting from when he was born, Cicero showed that he was different from others of his age. Many assailants tried to challenge Cicero's value to the Roman Republic and his role as the widely known orator. Cicero endured numerous wonderful and joyful moments in his life, but the fall of the Roman Republic would be memorable. Starting from protests that advance into brutal civil wars, a once magnificent political system fails to keep a country in order. Cicero should always be remembered for his excellent speeches in court, while his state, the Roman Republic, started to become a corrupt and decayed civilization. Cicero's influence on his eloquence in speaking still impacts readers now, while we learn history to try to make sure such a thing similar to the fall of the Roman Republic might not happen ever again. Learning history is to seek the truth of the world that we live in and learn lessons of what our ancestors did wrong in the past to prevent scenes from occurring again. Humans are not perfect. Humans are not all superheroes. Like Cicero, he did not follow the due processes of law when killing the conspirators in the Catilinarian Conspiracy. Similarly, humans make mistakes, and humans make unreasonable decisions because they have feelings. Understanding this and emphasizing human factors help us understand the world, hence understanding each other better.

Citations

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[5]p.40, *The Life and Times of Rome's Greatest Politician: Cicero*, Anthony Everitt

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[7]p.7, *Life of Cicero*, Anthony Trollope

[8]p.205, *Tenor of Our Times*, Grady P. Moore

[9]p.206, *Tenor of Our Times*, Grady P. Moore

[10]p.21, *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome*, Mary Beard

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