A Note on C. Cornelius Cethegus

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The present study argues that C. Cornelius Cethegus, the follower of Catiline in the conspiracy of 63 BCE,1 participated in the revolt of Lepidus and the Sertorian War by joining the rebel camps. This can be inferred by combining the evidence of Sal. Cat. 52.33 and Cic. Sul. 70: while the former acknowledges that Cethegus fought against his fatherland on two occasions, the latter attests to how he attempted to slay Q. Metellus Pius while the commander was leading the military operations against Sertorius in Hispania in the ’70s.

Most of the information that has reached us on Cornelius Cethegus derives from sources on the Catiline conspiracy and details the role he played within the plot.2 Cethegus belonged to the Cornelii Cethegi, a prominent Roman family that had given four consuls to the Republic between the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE but was in political decline by the 1st century BCE.3 Modern scholars agree that Cethegus entered the Senate in the ’60s, probably after holding the quaestorship,4 and became one of the main leaders of the conspiracy that attempted to overthrow the res publica in 63.

1 All dates are BCE unless otherwise specified.
2 On Cethegus’ involvement in the Conspiracy, see Sal. Cat. 17.3-4, 32.2, 43.3-4, 44.1, 46.3, 47.4, 48.4, 50.2, 52.33, 55.6, 57.1; Cic. Cat. 3.3.8, 4.9-10, 6.14, 7.16, 10.25, 4.6.11, 13; Sul. 53, 70, 75, 76; Plu. Cic. 16.1-3, 18.2, 19.1-2, 22.3, 8, 30.4; Flor. 2.12.4; Luc. 2.543; Ampelius 19, 31; App. BC 2.2-5, 15. Prosopographical entries on C. Cornelius Cethegus: RE 89, 1278-1279 (Münzer); Drexler 1976, 332-334; Kananack 2012, 307-308.
3 M. Cethegus cens. 209, cos. 204 (MRR I, 285, 305); C. Cethegus cos. 197, cens. 194 (MRR I, 332-333, 343); P. Cethegus cos. 181 (MRR I, 383-384); M. Cethegus cos. 160 (MRR I, 444).
4 It is generally accepted that Cethegus was a senator by 63 (Sal. Cat. 17.3; App. BC 2.2; Flor. 2.12; Pareti 1964, 354; Drexler 1976, 333; Ryan 1994; Carsana 2007, 46; Vacanti 2018, 100). However, it should be noted that Sallust’s list (Sal. Cat. 17.3) of the eleven Catilinarians who belonged to the senatoriori ordo, which records the name of Cethegus, also includes several ex-senators and descendants of senatorial families who were not members of the Senate (Linderski 1963; Ryan 1994).
When Catiline, after being denounced by Cicero in the autumn of that year, fled Rome to meet his army in Etruria, he left P. Cornelius Lentulus Sura and Cornelius Cethegus in charge of affairs in the Urbs, tasking them with making arrangements to commit a massacre in the City at the moment that Catiline arrived with his army from the North; notably, Cethegus had to assassinate Cicero at the entrance to his home. In the meantime, Cethegus, while procuring swords and daggers to commit the crime, behaved with extreme fervor, encouraging his companions to take action as soon as possible with the aim of occupying the Senate house and setting fire to the City. However, Cicero discovered the conspirators’ plans, and the main leaders were imprisoned. On 5 December 63, after a Senate session in which Cato the Younger made the case for the capital punishment of the plotters, Catiline’s followers, Cethegus included, were executed without trial.

While the involvement of Cethegus in the Catilinarian Conspiracy is well-documented, his life story before that is not entirely known. It is unclear whether he had previous political affiliations or whether he played a role in the civil conflicts of the ’80s and ’70s. However, prosopographical research might shed some light on his political career before 63 and the rebellious activity he engaged in throughout his short life. It might be possible to discover that he likely participated in the revolt of Lepidus (78-77) and, eventually, in that of Sertorius in the Iberian Peninsula between 77 and 72. Although no modern studies on the Sertorian War, such as those by Schulten, Gabba, Spann, Konrad, or García Morá, have addressed this possibility, Erich Gruen did claim that Cethegus was a “sympathizer of Sertorius” in *The Last Generation of the Roman Republic*, though he commented but briefly on this character, and the laconic sentence cited in n. 6 could be interpreted in different ways. Therefore, to some extent, the idea that Cethegus was a follower of Lepidus and Sertorius would not only be original but also consistent with both the literary accounts and the conflictive context of the ’70s.

This is the conclusion that may be drawn from two passages, one in Sallust (*Cat.* 52.33) and one in Cicero (*Sul.* 70). According to the former, when Cato the Younger supported the execution of the followers of Catiline, he claimed that Cethegus, despite his youth, had already waged war against his homeland on at least one previous occasion: *ignoscite Cethegi abundescentiae, nisi iterum patriae*

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5 Schulten 1926; Gabba 1954; Spann 1987; Konrad 1994a; García Morá 1991. The other ancient accounts that refer to Cethegus do not challenge the above interpretation.

6 Gruen 1974, 418-419: “Another patrician of a prominent family joined the crew: C. Cornelius Cethegus. A young man practiced in insurrection, he had once, so it seems, been a sympathizer of Sertorius.”
bellum fecit; since one of these bella was the Conspiracy itself, we are bound to wonder about the earlier one. Cicero, for his part, claimed that Cethegus had made a trip to Spain and had wounded Q. Caecilius Metellus Pius: quis de Gaio Cethego atque eius in Hispaniam profectione ac de volnere Quinti Metelli Pii cogitat cui non ad illius poenam carcer aedificatus esse videatur? The circumstances of Cethegus’ attack on Metellus need to be established.

Different commentators have analyzed Cicero’s statement and put forward two different explanations. According to the first interpretation, which is argued for by Vretska, Berry, and Ramsey, Cethegus went to Hispania from Rome before 71, intending to assassinate Metellus Pius while the latter was directing military operations against Sertorius, but his attack failed. According to the second interpretation, which is defended by van Oothegeem, Havas, and Drexler, Cethegus was a member of Metellus’ staff during the bellum Sertorianum and wounded him as an act of treason. Nevertheless, whereas the romantic notion of a young man traveling to the West to murder a Roman dux should be automatically discarded, it is difficult to explain how an officer (Cethegus) in the consilium could try to kill his commander-in-chief (Metellus) and get away scot-free.

Hellegouarch and McGushin have interpreted Sallust’s reference to the two wars waged by Cethegus against Rome (iterum patriae bellum fecit) as a reflection of Cethegus’ previous participation either in Catiline’s first plot or in the Civil War between the Marians and Sullans. However, while Catiline’s first attempt—which, if it took place at all, was at most a political maneuver to

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7 Sal. Cat. 52.33: “Cethegus is a young man; forgive him, if he has not twice made war against his country” (trans. Batstone 2013).
8 Cic. Sul. 70: “Who thinks of Gaius Cethegus and his departure for Spain, and of his assault upon Quintus Metellus Pius, without believing that our prison was built for his punishment?” (trans. MacDonald 1977).
10 Van Oothegeem 1967, 214; Havas 1974; Drexler 1976, 333. Based on a fragment of Sallust (Hist. 1.47R, I follow Ramsey 2015) that acknowledges that Catiline served as legate in an otherwise unknown war and led the siege of an unattested city, Havas (1974) argued that both Catiline and Cethegus fought in the Sertorian War under the command of Metellus Pius. Nonetheless, more plausible solutions have been proposed to explain the Sallust fragment, with Catiline serving as legate in 82 in the siege of Praeneste (Maurenbrecher 1893, 18, MRR II 72), or, more likely, in 80 in Aesernia or Nola (Keaveney and Strachan 1981; MRR III, 72; Funari and La Penna 2015, 165-166), or in 77 in Alba Fucens (Urso 2019).
seize power—cannot be considered a bellum at all.\textsuperscript{12} Cethegus’ involvement in the Civil War should be ruled out as well, because it is difficult to conceive that a proscribed Marian could have entered the Senate in the ’60s. More importantly, Cato presents Cethegus as an adulescens; as Vretska and Ryan have pointed out, Cethegus, as a junior senator, must have been between the ages of 33 and 35 at the time of the Catiline conspiracy of 63.\textsuperscript{13} He would therefore have been only 14-16 years old at the end of the bellum civile in 82.

If, as I will argue, Cethegus supported the Sertorian camp, there are two occasions on which he could have travelled to Spain (Cic. Sul. 79: in Hispaniam profectione): in 83-82, when Sertorius departed for Hispania as proconsul, and in 77, when the remnants of Lepidus’ army arrived in the Iberian Peninsula to join Sertorius’s forces. The former option should be discarded, since, as stated above, Cethegus was too young in 83-82 both to participate in the Civil War and the first stages of the Sertorian War. Nevertheless, Cethegus was old enough—around 18-20—to support Lepidus in the revolt waged by the consul in 78-77. A new narrative of his political activity, or at least the most plausible one, can now be reconstructed. In keeping with Cato’s statement (iterum patriae bellum fecit), the first of the two wars that C. Cethegus tried to launch against Rome was that of Lepidus. After the failure of the uprising, he likely went to Hispania in 77 with the remaining Lepidani to join the Sertorian forces, as evidenced by Cicero’s mention of his “departure for Spain” (in Hispaniam profectione). Cethegus may then have attempted to kill Metellus, the proconsul who had been sent by Sulla in 79 to suppress the revolt of Sertorius, in the course of one of the many encounters that took place during the war in Hispania. It is interesting that Cicero, by employing two conjunctions, atque and ac, in the sentence atque eius in Hispaniam profectione ac de vulnere Metelli, accused Cethegus of two different crimes against the Republic:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} It is important to note that, while Sallust employs bellum up to 29 times to describe the Catilinarian Conspiracy (Kananack 2012, 201), including three instances in Cato’s speech (Sal. Cat. 52-5, 24, 33), he never used this term whilst dealing with the first plot of Catiline (Sal. Cat. 18-19). The same applies to the other ancient sources on the first conspiracy (Cic. Sul. 11, 68; Mur. 81; D.C. 36.44.3-5; Ascon. 66, 92), which tend to use coniuratio (Cic. Sul. 67, 81; Liv. Per. 103; Suet. Iul. 9). On the appearance of bellum in Sallust’s De Catilinae coniuratione see Kananack 2012, 201-209, 218-223.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Vretska 1976, 601. See also Dyck 2008, 176. Ryan (1994, 258), based on Appian’s reference to Cethegus and P. Cornelius Lentulus Sura as οἱ τότε τῆς πόλεως ἐστρατηγοῦσι (App. BC 2.2), has proposed an alternative that differs slightly from the one above: since Cethegus was not praetor in 63, probably stood for and obtained the quaestorship in 64, and was of a similar age to Cato, he must have been born between 97 and 95, making him 13-15 years old at the end of the Civil War. Konrad 1984, 153-154, n. 15, advises caution; he points out that the term adulescens/adulescentia was sometimes applied to individuals who were in their forties (examples in TLL, 46).
\end{itemize}
first, his journey to Hispania, and, second, the attempted murder of Metellus. Cethegus, instead of traveling to assassinate Metellus, as some scholars have argued, would have gone to the Iberian Peninsula along with the Lepidani to take refuge among the Sertorians—first crime—before attempting to slay the enemy commander—second crime.

The literary accounts refer to only one occasion on which Metellus Pius was wounded during the Sertorian War, when he was struck by a spear at the battle of Segontia (76 BCE). Who was to blame? If we again refer to Cicero (Sul. 70), who accused Cethegus of having assaulted Metellus, and we combine his speech with Plutarch and Sallust’s reports, we may conclude that the future follower of Catiline did not try to end Pius’ life when he was in his army; Cethegus attacked Metellus—or at least was accused of that by Cicero—when he was fighting for the Sertorians, but only managed to wound him. Even though it is possible that Cicero grounded his allegation on a rumor, and the tale of Cethegus wounding Metellus was a mere fabrication, the passage from pro Sulla does point to some reliable events, such as the joining of the Lepidani with Sertorius or the assault on Metellus, and consequently attests Cethegus’ endorsement for the rebel camp during the Sertorian War.

We have no further information about Cethegus’ activities in the conflict. It is clear that he was not involved in the assassination of Sertorius, as he would have been executed by Pompey along with the other plotters. On the contrary, he went back to Rome, whether after switching to Metellus during the conflict, after receiving the pardon from Pompey, and/or under the amnesty of the lex Plautia de reditu Lepidanorum that was passed in the late ’70s to grant a safe return to Italy to Lepidus and Sertorius’ followers. Since Cethegus was not proscribed and belonged to an important noble family of the

15 Although it could still be argued that the attack on Metellus may have come from within his army, both Plutarch’s passage, in which he describes how “all the Romans who saw this happen or heard of it were filled with shame at the thought of abandoning their general, and were roused to anger against the enemy (καὶ θυμὸς ἅμα πρὸς τούς πολεμίους παρέστη, Plu. Sert. 21.2, trans. Pelling and Scott-Kilvert 2010), and Sallust’s fragment, which describes “the generals being so eager and ready (avidis atque promptis) that Metellus was wounded with a blow of a spear” (Sal. Hist. 2.55R, trans. Ramsey 2015), clearly suggest that the assault came from the Sertorian side.
16 Plu. Sert. 27; Pomp. 20; App. BC 1.113-115.
17 App. BC 1.112,520.
18 Cic. Ver. 2.5-153.
19 On the lex Plautia de reeditu Lepidanorum, see Suet. Jul. 5; Gel. 13.3.1; Taylor 1941; García Morá 1992.
Roman Republic, he was able to continue his political career until he entered the Senate,²⁰ plausibly as quaestor in 63 as Ryan has argued,²¹ and rebel once more against the res publica along with Catiline.

Still, it would be legitimate to ask why no source explicitly connects Cethegus with a Sertorian past. On the one hand, it should be noted that, while the literary accounts inform us of the presence of former Sertorians in Rome after the war in Spain and the enactment of the lex Plautia,²² we only know the name of one individual, L. Cornelius Cinna, who was pardoned by this law and went back to the City. In fact, with regards to Cinna himself, although his political career and involvement in Caesar’s assassination are recounted by several sources, only Suetonius mentions but briefly that he supported the Lepidan and Sertorian sides in the respective conflicts.²³ Therefore, the scant information about Cethegus would represent the rule rather than the exception. On the other hand, it should be taken into account that Sallust and Cicero, either for narrative or rhetorical purposes, focus exclusively on the role that Cethegus played in the Catiline conspiracy, and, in general, they pay no attention to his activity prior to the plot. Nonetheless, it is possible that Sallust mentioned Cethegus in the Historiae, a work that, while narrating, among other topics, the Sertorian War, has only left some fragments. Regarding Cicero’s political speeches, these were delivered to a Roman audience that, in all probability, already had knowledge of Cethegus’ rebellious past; that would explain the absence of explicit—and unnecessary—references to his participation in the civil wars of the 70s.

By examining the case of C. Cornelius Cethegus, we can draw several preliminary conclusions, as well as putting forward some questions that might be answered in the future. Firstly, although the example of Cethegus seems, a priori, exceptional, it is possible that other Catilinarians had previously taken part either in the Lepidan revolt and/or the Sertorian War. Secondly, as it may be inferred by contrasting the story of Cethegus with that of other followers of Lepidus and Sertorius, in the post-Sullan period only proscription hindered—legally—the possibility of pursuing a political career, since

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²⁰ Unlike Cinna’s son, who was pardoned through the same law (Suet. Jul. 5), but, due to his status of proscribed, did not hold a magistracy until the age of Caesar. A discussion of the differences between the proscribed and hostis status of the Sertorians can be found in Konrad 1988.


²² Cic. Ver. 2.5-152.

²³ Suet. Jul. 5. Other sources on Cinna: App. BC 2.121, 126; Val. Max. 9.9.1; D.C. 44.10, 55.14; Sen. Cl. 1.9.3; Ben. 4.30.2; Cic. Phil. 3.26; Zon. 10.12; Suet. Jul. 85; Plu. Brut. 18.6, 20.11, Caes. 68.6.
Cethegus, who was never proscribed, could reach the quaestorship in the '60s despite having participated in two revolts against the Republic. Thirdly, Sallust reports that the sons of the proscribed endorsed the cause of Catiline with the aim of recovering their political rights.\textsuperscript{24} Cethegus' political affiliations and connections while fighting along with the exiles of the Sullan regime could partly explain the involvement of the \textit{liberi proscriptorum}, who had their own agenda, in the Catiline conspiracy. This association might also help to clarify the animosity towards Cicero—and his assassination attempt too—that Cethegus and some of the conspirators showed, as the orator, during his consulship, had opposed the restitution of the rights of the offspring of the proscribed.\textsuperscript{25} Finally Cethegus, who can be clearly accounted among the Catilinarian \textit{iuvenes} who preferred war to peace according to Sallust,\textsuperscript{26} endorsed the causes of Lepidus, Sertorius and Catiline likely driven by the aspiration of overthrowing the existing status quo, thus displaying a series of political inclinations and actions that were deemed by many ancient sources as extremist and insane.\textsuperscript{27} His execution on December 5th of 63 ended the life of a committed rebel.\textsuperscript{28}

\section*{Bibliography}


\textsuperscript{24} Sal. \textit{Cat.} 37.9. Until the year 49 the sons of the proscribed could not stand for public offices (Vell. 2.28.4; Plu. \textit{Sull.} 31.4; D.C. 30-35,109.12; Sen. \textit{Ben.} 5,16.3; Suet. \textit{Jul.} 41.2). On the \textit{liberi proscriptorum} see Vevaldi 1981; Hinard 1985, 87-100; Holwell 2018.

\textsuperscript{25} Animosity towards Cicero and attempted murder: Sal. \textit{Cat.} 43.3; App. \textit{BC} 2.3; Plu. \textit{Cic.} 16.2. Cicero's opposition to the claims of the sons of the proscribed: Cic. \textit{Pis.} 2.4; Quint. \textit{Inst.} 11.1.84.

\textsuperscript{26} Sal. \textit{Cat.} 17.6.

\textsuperscript{27} Sal. \textit{Cat.} 32, 43.4; Luc. 2,543; Ampelius 19, 31; Plu. \textit{Cic.} 19.1; Cic. \textit{Sul.} 76; Cat. 3,7,16, 4,6,11, 13.

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