VETTIUS AND THE CONSPIRACY OF 59 B. C.

WILLIAM GEORGE FLETCHER *

In a hurried letter to Atticus, written in the latter part of 59 B. C., Cicero unfolds the details of a strange plot. In brief, the letter contains, in part, this information. Vettius, the Titus Oates of the time, became involved in a scheme to harass a number of the Optimates. After prying himself into the intimacy of the younger Curio, he informed the latter that he intended to do violence to Pompey. Curio immediately reported this to his father, who subsequently brought it to the attention of Pompey. On being summoned before the Senate (by Pompey), Vettius denied any association with Curio but disclosed that he (Curio), Paullus, Brutus, the Lentuli (father and son), C. Septimius, and Bibulus were all privy to a plot to do violence to Pompey. The fact that Bibulus had some days previously warned Pompey to be on guard against plots against his person,1 and the fact that one of the alleged conspirators, Paullus, was known to be in Macedonia at the time and thus beyond implication, immediately suspcioned the evidence of Vettius in the eyes of the Senate and by a decree of that body the informer was placed in chains on

---

* Department of Ancient Languages and Literatures.

1 The occasion upon which Pompey was warned by Bibulus is pertinent in view of the tradition and present condition of the text of Cicero's Correspondence. In the letter (Cicero, Correspondence, ad. Att. II, 24, 2) the text runs as follows: quod totum irissum est, Vettio pugionem defuisse, nisi ei consul aedissit, eoque magis id eicientum est, quod a. d. III Id Mai. Bibulus Pompeium fecerat certiorum ut caveret insidias et. This is the reading adopted by most of the editors, including Tyrrell and Purser. But this reading relies solely upon a sixteenth century emendation in the second edition of Ascensius and the edition of Cratander and has no manuscript authority whatsoever! The text of most of the MSS. here is a. d. III Id. diei, with a small group reading decembris in place of diei. This latter reading seems quite out of the question due to the date of our letter. Constans (Revue de Philologie, troisième série, V [1931], 239 ff.) has shown that the emendation of diei into Mai(as) and the further generally accepted deletion, suggested by Manutius, of the cum in the passage of the same letter (ad Att. II, 24, 3: ut in foro cum gladiatoribus Gabini Pompeium adorirentur), imply the existence of two conspiracies, one in May-June 59, (since the presumed 'gladiatorial games' of Gabinius would have taken place before the ludi Apollinares, July 6-13) and the other in September of 59. But the total evidence to hand on the Vettian affair makes no distinction between two different conspiracies and, in fact, points in the opposite direction entirely. In short, Constans has made a pretty sound case for the retention of both these MSS. readings. (His reading a. d. III eius diei seems much more preferable to a. d. III Id. [diei], eius here being interpreted as the original in cursive which, in the archetype, has been misread as Idus and thus abbreviated to Id.) Thus Bibulus' information was passed on a few days before the September debacle, and not five months previously.
the technical charge of being in possession of a dagger. On the follow-
ing day, however, Caesar produced the informer on the rostra
and there, after omitting the name of Brutus from his list, Vettius
charged Lucullus, C. Fannius, L. Domitius, and indirectly Cicero
with complicity in the affair — also, on being called back again before
the people, Piso and M. Laterensis. At the time of Cicero's writing,
the informer's trial before Crassus Dives on a charge of vis was pend-
ing.2

Apart from Cicero's own account of the affair, which occurs in
the letter mentioned above, in Pro Sestio 132, in very brief mention,
and in the In Vatiniurn 24-26, there are also varying accounts in
Suetonius, Appian, Cassius Dio, Plutarch, and in the Bobiensen
Scholia at the Pro Sestio passage just cited.

The evidence of Suetonius, in his life of Julius Caesar, is un-
certain due to a lacuna in the text.3 From the corrupt passage it is
evident, however, that someone bribed an informer to come upon
the rostra and declare that he had been suborned by certain men to
murder Pompey — all for the apparent purpose of incriminating the
Optimate faction. This unknown instigator may possibly have been
Caesar in the original, complete version, and, as a matter of fact, his
name has been supplied in some editions.4 At least this much of the
Suetonian account is certain: the indicium proved to be a frost;
there was even current a suspicion of double dealing, and the in-
former was believed to have been carried off by poison.5

Plutarch relates that Pompey, after joining the alliance of Crassus
and Caesar, secured the ratification of his acta by force and drove
Lucullus and Cato from the forum. There followed a hot resentment
of this in the ranks of the Optimates, whereupon Pompey's party (pre-
sumably the triumvirs) produced Vettius, pretending to have ap-
prehended him in a design against Pompey's life. The informer
divulged certain names (not given by the author) before the Senate,
but particularly named Lucullus as his suborer before the people.
It was soon apparent that the accusations were groundless and the

2 Cicero. Correspondence, ad Att. II, 24, 2 ff.
3 See the text of Ihm (Teubner).
4 Cf. the Loeb edition of Rolfe. The presence of this lacuna has been too much neglected.
It cannot be established with any degree of certainty that Caesar's name should be sup-
plied here, nor, in the interests of objectivity, should one be too prone to assume that
Caesar is referred to (as is Holmes, The Roman Republic, I, 480; Meyer, Caesars Monarchie
und das Principat des Pompeius, 87, n. 1; Tyrrell and Purser, The Correspondence of
Cicero, I, p. 320, n. 2).
5 Suetonius, de Vita Caesarum, Julius, 20.
fact that, a few days later, the body of Vettius was found thrown out from prison and bearing obvious signs that he had been done to death, enhanced the dubiety of the charges and the belief that the Pompeians had been responsible for the whole affair.⁶

Cassius Dio attributes the plot to kill Pompey and Caesar to Cicero and Lucullus, who, he says, were angered at the way in which Caesar had cemented his position by bestowing his daughter upon Pompey and marrying Piso’s daughter. According to this writer, Cicero and Lucullus were spared only by the fact that Vettius, in his denunciation, charged Bibulus also with complicity in the plot. Since it was known — according to Dio — that Bibulus had revealed what was going on to Pompey, it was suspected that the information regarding the other persons named was likewise false and that the instigation of the affair lay with the party of the triumvirs who were trying to calumniate their opponents. Speculation was rife over the whole incident since nothing definite was proven. Vettius, after appearing before the people and naming only (Dio is careful to say μὸνος here) Cicero, Lucullus, and Bibulus, was thrown into prison and treacherously murdered.⁷

Appian’s account is more dramatic. He relates that after Caesar had secured the enactment of his agrarian law and others, Vettius rushed into the forum with drawn dagger and said he had been sent by Bibulus, Cicero, and Cato to kill Pompey. Moreover, he declared that the dagger had been given to him by Postumius, the lictor of Bibulus. The incident was immediately open to suspicion but Caesar used it to inflame the mob; Vettius was thrown into prison pending his examination on the morrow, but during the night was treacherously slain. Caesar ascribed the plot to his opponents and as a result was furnished with a guard by the people. Bibulus retired to his house to ‘watch the sky’!⁸

The account given in the Scholia Bobiensia resembles fairly closely the version in Cicero’s letter except that the only names specifically mentioned in this source as conspirators are Cicero, C. Piso and the two Curios. We have also the added information here that Vettius perished in prison at the order (so rumor had it) of

⁶ Plutarch, Lucullus, 42, 6f.
⁷ Cassius Dio, Roman History, 38, 9.
⁸ Appian, Bellum Civile, II, 12.
those very men who had suborned him for the task.\(^9\) (Scholia Bobiensia, [Hildebrandt, Teubner, 1907], Pro Sestio 132.)

The accounts of Cicero in the two primarily important, longer passages (i.e., the letter and the In Vatiniunm)\(^10\) are practically identical with the notable exception that in the speech against Vatinius he ascribes to Vatinius the instigation of the whole plot and has him produce Vettius upon the rostra, while in the letter to Atticus he is inclined to believe that Caesar engineered the design and records that it was Caesar who first brought Vettius into the forum to divulge information. This discrepancy might seem at first sight to invalidate Cicero's entire evidence but one or two things ought to be kept in mind. In the first place the instigation of the Vettian affair was not a known fact. Secondly, the incrimination of Vatinius in the plot is contained within a speech and Cicero's speeches are not the place to look for his true opinions.\(^11\) As a prosecutor, it was his duty to get a case against his man and to paint the accused as blackly as possible by summoning forth every argument which might be conveniently twisted to inculcate him. Consequently, the evidence of the In Vatiniunm, though attractive for a possible solution of the vexed problem of the origin of the whole affair, can scarcely be considered valid.

The letter, then, being a strictly contemporaneous document and a confidential communication of Cicero's, would be our best source for the details of the conspiracy insofar as the known facts are concerned, and this furnishes us with a convenient check upon the data contained in the other sources. If the first place, as regards the personnel of the supposed conspiracy, it is to be noted that the individuals actually named, cumulatively, in the other authors, all occur in Cicero's list with the single exception of Cato (mentioned

\(^9\) That Vettius met his end through violence seems to be attested by all the later, non-Ciceronian sources.

\(^{10}\) The Pro Sestio merely mentions the affair, stating that Vatinius attacked Cicero in the assembly during the former's interrogation of Vettius and linked his (Cicero's) name with other prominent citizens who were supposed to be members of an alleged conspiracy.

\(^{11}\) On this topic in general see Tyrrell and Purser, op. cit., I, p. 4; cf. also Cicero, Pro Cluentio 139. Cicero hardly considered Caesar a mitem hominem et a cade abhorrentem (Cicero, Pro Sestio 132). This action of Cicero's in shifting the blame for the Vettian plot to Vatinius has sometimes been attributed to the fact that Cicero at this time was unwilling to provoke Caesar (How, Select Letters of Cicero, II, 115; Holmes, op. cit., I, 481). However, in a letter to Lentulus (ad Fam. I, 9, 7) Cicero intimates that he was attacking Caesar as well as Vatinius. It should also be remembered that the next month after the Vatiniun interrogation, Cicero proposed in the Senate that the whole question of Caesar's Campanian land scheme should be made the subject of a senatorial investigation. (Cicero, ad. Fam. I, 9, 8).
by Appian). It seems reasonable to conclude that Cato could not
have been mentioned by the informer and that Appian is in error
here. Cicero certainly was present in the Senate when Vettius made
his disclosures and he undoubtedly heard the man’s subsequent evi-
dence in the assembly. His details of the whole proceedings in the
letter are very precise and certain and it is difficult to imagine his
oversight of such an important figure as Cato, if that person had been
named. It is not difficult to imagine, however, why Appian, writing
much later, might have thought Cato involved since the latter was
categorically opposed to the Caesarian faction and might naturally
be assumed to have been a party to such a plot directed against hated
political opponents. Dio’s statement, that the informer mentioned
only three persons, in the light of Cicero’s evidence, must be con-
sidered incorrect.

This letter — and others — furnishes some good evidence re-
garding the troubled chronology of the year of Caesar’s consulship.
Dio must be wrong, for instance, in placing the Vettian affair before
the trial of Antonius. He remarks that in consequence of this epi-
sode, Cicero became suspected by Caesar and Pompey and he con-
firmed their suspicion in his defense of Antonius. We know from
Att. II, 2, that the jurors for the trial of Antonius were being selected
in December of the year 60 B.C., so the trial must have been early
in 59. Epistle II, 24 to Atticus gives us the first information of the
Vettian affair. Tyrrell and Purser date this letter in October and
other scholars no earlier than August. It is quite obvious, therefore,
that the Vettius episode was somewhat later than the trial of An-
onius. Dio, however, is correct in placing the affair after the marriage
of Pompey and Julia for in Att. II, 17, dated about the first of May,
we learn that Cicero has heard of the nuptials.¹²

Appian connects the Agrarian Laws with the Vettian affair and
intimates that the retirement of Bibulus was due to this latter inci-
dent. Now Plutarch (Pomp. 48) says that Bibulus remained in his
house for eight months of his term as consul. This would make his
retirement effective about the end of April. Moreover, we know from
Suetonius (Jul. 20) that Bibulus retired, disgusted with the Senate,
after complaining before that body of Caesar’s high-handed action
regarding the first Agrarian Law and after finding the conscript
fathers were too cowed even to express an opinion. Thus, the re-

¹² The statement of Dio, that Cicero and Lucullus undertook to kill Pompey through the
services of Vettius, because they were displeased at the marriage, must be untrue.
tirement of Bibulus followed closely upon the first Agrarian Law. This law must have been passed early in the year, since Metellus Celer swore to observe it (Dio 38, 6) and he died in the first part of April. Bibulus' retirement, then, was a good deal prior to the Vettian affair and must have occurred in April, perhaps toward the end of that month.

The chief crux in the matter is the identity of the instigator. This role has variously been assigned by the ancients, as we have seen, to Pompey's partisans (i.e., the party of the triumvirs), to Cicero and Lucullus, to Bibulus, Cicero, and Cato in collusion, and to Caesar, who, in the letter, is Cicero's choice. It should be noted, however, that Cicero is not at all certain here. His remark, Vettius, Caesari, ut perspicimus, pollicitus est, etc. shows this beyond a doubt.

Modern authorities have attributed the plot's origin in turn to Caesar, to adherents of the triumvirs, and finally to the violent young nobles at Rome. The evidence for the view that Caesarian partisans were responsible is evidently taken from the data contained in the speech against Vatinius. The objections to accepting this evidence have already been discussed. If the violent young nobles are to be given the indictment, Cicero may be open to a charge of duplicity in the letter and for the following reason. Cicero was on intimate terms with these men and, in fact, constituted the spearhead of their and other Optimate opposition against the triumvirate faction. It is more than likely that any such plot hatched by the fledglings would have had his ear and at least his passive support. But his confidential letter to Atticus — wherein he surely speaks the

13 Cicero, Ad. Att. II, 5; Pro Cael. 59.
14 Mommsen, History of Rome, (trans. of Dickson), IV, 515; Meyer, Caesars Monarchie etc., 84ff.
15 Napoleon, III, César, I, 399ff; How, Select Letters, II, 115; Cary, Camb. Anc. Hist., IX, 520ff, (Vatinius the possible culprit). The known facts about Vatinius' part in the Vettian interrogation should not be overdrawn. It is true, as the In Vatinius records, that Vatinius produced Vettius upon the rostra. But this action of his was later and appears to be the mental attempt of a yes-man, who, innocent of previous proceedings, thought he saw an opportunity, at the time in question, of gaining favor with Caesar, and seized upon the chance. The pertinent evidence here (as gained from Cicero's letter) is as follows: Caesar first brought Vettius before the people to give his information and after the assembly had been dismissed, Vatinius called Vettius back before the mob and had him make further disclosures.
16 Merivale, History of the Romans Under the Empire, I, 1, 197. Tyrrell and Purser (The Correspondence of Cicero) seem to vacillate, at first taking this view, then a little further on: "We shall most safely agree with Cicero, that the authors of the plot were the triumvirs." (Vol. I, p. 320, n. 2). Cicero doesn't say this at all in the letter.
truth — gives us no inkling of this. In fact, the evidence furnished by the letter points in exactly the opposite direction. Cicero here is obviously very much in the dark about the whole affair, and can only make conjectures regarding its origin.\(^{17}\)

To turn to the case for Caesar. If the omission of the name of Brutus at the time of Vettius' second deposition has any significance at all it should certainly have this negative one, namely, that Caesar could not have been involved in the origin of the affair. Caesar was much too astute a man to bungle in this way. By the same token, if Vatinius had been given the active commission, it is rather unlikely that this same error would have been made, since he would have had instructions from Caesar beforehand regarding the persons to be implicated. The whole thing smacks too much of inefficiency to point to Caesar as the moving force behind the scene. When Caesar felt that his opponents were becoming too dangerous to leave unhindered, he removed them in a thoroughly capable and business-like manner. Cicero was easily banished and the recalcitrant Cato was despatched upon a ready-found mission to Cyprus. Furthermore, the attempt to get the machinery of calumnia into motion through accusations in the first instance against the younger Curio and his band of young men seems to point away from Caesar as the instigator. Curio and the barbatuli were not the really important opponents of Caesar at this time. They held no offices and were not in positions at the time to endanger, seriously, Caesar's political position or ambitions. It is true that during this year they were becoming more and more openly hostile toward Caesar and engaging in a good deal of loose talk against the triumvirs in general. Moreover, that they found favor among the populace for such action is well attested.\(^{18}\) But to assume that Caesar fabricated the clumsy Vettian affair to stifle this gossip seems a bit too finely drawn.\(^{19}\)

In connection with the opposition of the younger men at Rome to Caesar at this time, the 98th poem of Catullus is interesting. In this poem Catullus talks of a malicious prattler. The name given in the best Mss. is Victius or more rarely Vettius.\(^{20}\) This surely must be

\(^{17}\) In the light of this, we can dismiss the statements of Dio and Appian that Cicero, with Lucullus, Bibulus, and Cato, was active in the affair.


\(^{19}\) It is noteworthy that when Caesar first began to make reconciliatory overtures to this group Calvus and Catullus were apparently the first members he approached (Suetonius, \textit{Julius} 73). Curio, as late as 51 B. C., was still being scornfully neglected (Cicero, \textit{ad Fam. VIII}, 4, 2).

\(^{20}\) See the texts of Merrill (Teubner and Ginn).
Vettius. From the point of view of the palaeographic tradition, we find the name variously given also in the imperial era as Bittius, Vectius, etc. Whether these orthographical discrepancies arose from literal misconceptions on the part of scribes or through local differences in pronunciation is difficult to say. The historical facts, too, would seem to bear out the case here for Vettius — i.e., the Vettius of the affaire in question. Catullus, together with most of the other poetae novi, had been a member of the young radical group first organized about Clodius and his sister. However, loyalties had by this time (59 B. C.) shifted and the group drew itself about Cicero, in violent opposition to the triumvirs. That they were engaging in open abuse and criticism of the triumvirs is shown, for example, by Calvus' epigrams against Caesar and Pompey. It was natural, then, that Catullus should have been alarmed at the unscrupulous antics of Vettius directed against the group, and his fear of the man and his malicious tongue are well portrayed in this epigram.

A careful scrutiny of the evidence points, I think, to Vettius as the instigator, and the sole instigator. With Vettius in the role, some troublesome points become clear. This informer, it will be remembered, did service in his trade for Cicero during the Catilinarian crisis in 63-2 B. C. In the next year (62), we find further that Vettius openly accused Caesar of being sympathetic to Catiline's cause. Caesar at this time was praetor and promptly had Vettius thrown into prison. It seems difficult to believe that Caesar (or a lieutenant) would have commissioned the same Vettius in 59 to carry out such a shady piece of work. This would have meant throwing himself open to the vengeance of Vettius and some nasty disclosures of Vettius before the people against Caesar could have ensued. Caesar wasn't quite so obtuse and so neglectful of popular favor.

Conversely, however, Vettius probably imagined that by concocting such a design, he would ingratiate himself with the erstwhile praetor and probably secure a handsome reward for his services, if successful. That it failed, was the result of Vettius' own incapacities.

21 Kroll, C. Valerius Catullus (Teubner, 1923), ad loc., is inclined to doubt this. Ellis, A Commentary on Catullus (Oxford 1889 [2nd ed.]), accepts the identification.
22 See, for example, Dessau, Prosopographia Imperii Romani, nos. 333, 369, 336, 323.
24 Suetonius, Julius 45; Dio 59, 18; Fragmenta Poetarum Romanorum, Calvus 18; Cicero, Ad Att. II, 3.
25 Dio 37, 41.
26 Suetonius, Julius, 17. Vettius had offered, in this incrimination, to produce an important letter to Catiline in Caesar's handwriting.
Of course, once the affair "broke", Caesar, sensing its potentialities for propaganda, made capital of the whole thing. Here, then, is explained the omission of Brutus' name after Caesar took an interest. Vettius' original inclusion of the name, though indiscreet and unfortunate for Caesar (if our accounts of the Caesar-Servilia relationship be true), was, however, natural in a way. Brutus was known to be a member of the young reactionist group at this time, and it was basically logical to mention him along with the rest. What the dull Vettius apparently failed to foresee was the ill-effect the name would have so far as Caesar's interests were concerned.

That there was any real plot against Pompey or the triumvirs in general is rather unlikely. Much openly-voiced criticism against the triumvirate was going on as we have pointed out. Even Cicero had made bold to remark that the time was ripe for a Brutus or a Servilius Ahala. But the opposition group as yet was too generally cowed, and not sufficiently steeled for such drastic action. The extent of their terror at the prospect of an investigation into their activities, as shown by Cicero's concluding remarks in the letter, and by the closing lines of Catullus' epigram, manifests their irresoluteness in this regard.

27 Cf. the significant remark of Cicero's in the letter: _ut qui illuc factus institutusque venisset._
28 Cicero, _Ad Att. II_, 24, 3.
29 _Vitae taeget;-----modo caedium timueramus etc._
30 _Si nos omnino vis perdere etc._ Cf. also Plutarch, _Caesar_ 14.