ABSTRACT

This paper provides an historiographic sketch of the ancient Roman historian, Sallust (c. 86 B. C. E. – 35 B. C. E.) and explores the impact of Sallust’s chequered political career on his historical works. The paper will argue that despite certain biases prompted by his expulsion from the Roman Senate, Sallust’s books Concerning the Conspiracy of Catiline and The Jugurthine War should not be dismissed as unreliable. Since the precise conditions that prompted Sallust’s removal from Rome’s Senate are unclear, it would be erroneous to impugn upon his works’ historicity on that basis. After all, Sallust never overtly justified himself in his writings. Rather, he narrated incidents in which he himself was uninvolved. Therefore, there was little motivation for Sallust to publish outright fabrications in his works. However, Sallust’s political career did engender biases which scholars should bear in mind. Sallust’s works are filled with rancour against the Senate and politicians from Rome’s old nobility. Also, Sallust through his writing likely aimed to support his patron, Gaius Julius Caesar. Essentially, Sallust gives vital insight not just for the political turmoils of Rome’s Late Republican Period, but moreover the marked impact of politics upon iterations of Rome’s past.

BIOGRAPHY

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SALLUST: CORRUPT POLITICIAN AND HISTORIAN

The Roman historical author Gaius Sallustius Crispus (c. 86 B. C. E. – 35 B. C. E.), known to modern English scholars simply as Sallust, had a chequered political career. His eventual expulsion from Rome’s Senate had a strong influence on his surviving works, *De Coniuratione Catilinae* (*Concerning the Conspiracy of Catiline*) and *Bellum Jugurthinum* (*The Jugurthine War*). While bearing the impact of his political corruption in mind, this paper will suggest that Sallust’s books should not be altogether dismissed as unreliable. The evidence for Sallust’s corrupt dealings is lean. It is therefore spurious to attack him on that basis. Moreover, since Sallust never overtly attempted to claim innocence through his writings, he had little motivation to embed falsehoods in his histories. Yet historians should be aware of certain biases which permeate Sallust’s writings as a result of his political career. Bitterness at having been expelled from Rome’s political life prompted Sallust’s hostility toward the Senate and the noble classes in Rome. Similarly, Sallust’s devotion to his political patron, Julius Caesar, strongly influenced his work.

It should be noted at the outset that several historiographic problems emerge in dealing with Sallust. First, the scarcity of surviving evidence for the periods which Sallust examined frustrates any attempt to corroborate his findings. Besides Sallust, the only literary evidence for the Jugurthine War comes from Plutarch’s biographies of Marius and Sulla. Plutarch himself used Sallust as a source.¹ Sallust’s narrative therefore strongly influenced Plutarch’s account of the war, despite minor discrepancies between the two authors. Similar issues exist for *Coniuratione Catilinae*, where the only other evidence comes from Cicero’s speeches, upon which Sallust undoubtedly drew.² It is therefore inevitable that they should agree.³ Sallust’s other historical writings, such as his *Historiae*, exist only in fragments. This hampers contemporary understanding of his methodology and influences.⁴ These problems do not automatically render Sallust’s work suspect, though it ought to be noted that it is difficult to definitively substantiate any claims regarding his accuracy.

The surviving evidence for judging the extent of Sallust’s corruption is highly lacunose.⁵ Modern scholars should not therefore be quick to dismiss Sallust’s writing as the testament of a dubious character. Much of the evidence against Sallust is based upon pseudo-Cicero’s *Invectiva in Sallustium*, *Invective Against Sallust*.⁶ *Invectiva in Sallustium* is a very problematic source, since it was almost certainly a grammarian’s exercise accompanied by rebuttal and contains many inconsistencies.⁷ Thus, it was perhaps intended as an aid in the study of rhetoric and not intended to be taken literally. Other than this, the greatest external evidence for Sallust’s expulsion from the Senate comes from Cassius Dio, who wrote centuries after the fact. Crucially, Dio did not list the precise reasons for Sallust’s incrimination by Pulcher in 50 B. C. E.⁸ It would be out of character for Dio to exclude such particulars, since he normally reported Senatorial malpractice in detail.⁹ It is thus likely that Dio had limited evidence to illustrate Sallust’s extortion in this instance. In the case of Sallust’s 46 B. C. E. governorship of Numidia, Dio again gives little concrete evidence. Instead, Dio moralised generally about Sallust’s hypocrisy.¹⁰ Moreover, extortion charges presented a convenient means of removing one’s political enemies in the Late Republic. As evident in the famous case against Publius Rutilius Rufus, these charges were not always valid.¹¹ Thus while Sallust ought not be exonerated, such ameliorating factors should be considered.

The most concrete evidence for Sallust’s guilt actually came from his own hand. Sallust did not pretend incorruptibility, nor did he directly defend his actions. Rather, he made the point that corruption was endemic to Late Republican politics.¹² As he said:

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¹ Plut., *Comp. Lys. et. Sull.* 3. Here, Plutarch made it clear to the reader that he was familiar with Sallust’s literary corpus.
⁸ Dio Cass. 40.63.
⁹ Syme, *Sallust*, 34.
¹⁰ Dio Cass. 43.9.
¹¹ Syme, *Sallust*, 34.
But initially, as a young man I was carried off with enthusiasm toward public life like many, and therein were many obstacles against me. For shamelessness, bribery and greed thrived in place of honour, self-control, and strength of character. And although my purpose was unaccustomed to such evil arts and despaired them, among such sins I was steered toward corruption and captured by ambition in my weak-willed youth. At that point I could dissent from the evil ways of others. Nonetheless, the same lust for office led me to the same hatred and bad reputation which afflicted the others.\textsuperscript{13} (Own translation)

Sallust’s scrupulousness as a writer is somewhat redeemed by this admission of guilt. Moreover, since he focussed on historical periods in which he did not directly participate, Sallust had little reason to pervert the truth in his writings.

However, scholars should not approach Sallust uncritically, since his political career strongly impacted his work. Indeed, though he never outright declared blamelessness, Sallust may have selected the historical theme of moral decline in order to increase his ethical reputation. Doing so would have deflected attention from his own illegal dealings by making himself appear a paragon of virtue.\textsuperscript{14} According to Sallust, he started his career as an innocent man and was subsequently led astray from righteousness.\textsuperscript{15} Writing moralistic histories thus provided an historical backdrop for Sallust’s own rapacity and deferred some degree of personal responsibility.

Moreover, Sallust’s political career had a potent influence over his historical works. Sallust’s account of Senatorial dealings should be treated with caution as he showed continual hostility toward the Senate, particularly its aristocratic members.\textsuperscript{16} Ultimately, this may be attributed to Sallust’s anger at his treatment by the Senate, and perhaps frustration at his own stunted political career. This bias is more apparent in \textit{Bellum Jugurthinum} than \textit{Coniuratione Catilinae}. Yet Sallust’s contempt for the old oligarchy manifested itself in both works through his focus on the careers of \textit{novi homines}, or ‘New Men’ in politics. This is hardly surprising, considering that Sallust was one himself.\textsuperscript{17} However Sallust did not exempt New Men from criticism.\textsuperscript{18} Instead, he revealed his predisposition towards them by iterating the circumstances which led New Men to power.\textsuperscript{19}

In \textit{Bellum Jugurthinum}, Sallust’s hostility toward the Senate is apparent from the outset. Though he never criticised the Senate as an institution, Sallust rarely mentioned the Senate or its members without attaching a pejorative adjective.\textsuperscript{20} He declared that the war against Jugurtha attracted his interest ‘because it was this time that the first defiance was offered against the conceit of the nobility.’\textsuperscript{21} Indeed, in Sallust’s view, it was Senatorial repression of plebeian \textit{libertas} in the wake of Carthage’s destruction which began the downfall of Roman \textit{virtus}.\textsuperscript{22} Moreover, Sallust frequently attacked \textit{nobiles’} personal characters through his writing. In Sallust’s view, belonging to the aristocracy automatically impugned a person’s character, as may be seen through his characterisation of Metellus Numeridicus.\textsuperscript{23} Even when ostensibly praising the actions of noblemen, he inserted criticism. For instance, when Scaurus refuses a bribe from Jugurtha, Sallust simply said that Scaurus ‘held his spirit back from the greed to which he was accustomed.’\textsuperscript{24} Sallust continually describes Scaurus with particular venom.\textsuperscript{25}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{13} Sall. Cat. 3. \textit{Sed ego adolescentulus initio sicii plerique studio ad rem publicam latus sum, ibique mihi multa adversa fuere. Nam pro pudore, pro abstinentia, pro virtute audacia, largitio, avaritia vigeabant. Quae tametsi animus aspernabatur insolens malarum artium, tamen inter tanta vitia imbecilla aetas ambitione multa adversa fuere. Nam pro pudore, pro abstinentia, pro virtute audacia, largitio, avaritia vigeabant. Quae tametsi animus aspernabatur insolens malarum artium, tamen inter tanta vitia imbecilla aetas ambitione multa adversa fuere.}
  \item \textsuperscript{14} G. M. Paul, “Sallust” in \textit{Latin Historians}, 86.
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Sall. Cat. 3.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Lofstedt, \textit{Literary Portraits}, 101; Syme, \textit{Sallust}, 125.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} G. M. Paul, “Sallust” in \textit{Latin Historians}, 85.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Sall. Jug. 4.7.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Sall. Cat. 23.
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Sall. Jug. 5. \textit{Quia tunc primum superbiae nobilitatis obviam itum est.}
  \item \textsuperscript{22} Sall. Jug. 41-42; Earl, \textit{Political Thought}, 15.
  \item \textsuperscript{23} Sall. Jug 43; 64; G.M. Paul, “Sallust” in \textit{Latin Historians}, 101.
  \item \textsuperscript{24} Sall. Jug. 15; G.M. Paul, “Sallust” in \textit{Latin Historians}, 100; \textit{Is postquam videt regis largitionem famosam impudentemque, veritus, quod in tali re solut, ne polluta licentia invidiam accenderet, animum a consuetu lubidine continuit.}
\end{itemize}
Such anti-Senatorial wrath perhaps impacts upon Sallust’s credibility as a military historian. Though he provided vivid impressions of battle, he was perhaps more keen to show the failings of the upper classes in quelling Jugurtha. After all, in his view, ‘the avarice of the magistrates had crushed our hopes in Numidia while increasing those of the enemy’ prior to Metellus’ taking command. At length, he ruminated on the military failings of Bestia and the Postumi Albini, especially their predisposition towards taking bribes. Though Sallust was highly complimentary of Metellus’ command skills and personal virtues, Sallust represented Metellus’ campaigns as ineffectual by having him constantly lean on Marius for support.

Yet Sallust mollified his condemnation of the Senate somewhat by criticising the proletariat and Plebeian assembly also. He broadly characterised the poor as ‘satisfactorily pleased by the very ideas of revolution and turmoil.’ Similarly, Sallust showed that both elites and Plebs were to some extent responsible for the downfall of political ethics in the wake of the destruction of Carthage in the Third Punic War. He wrote: ‘Arrogance due to success by this point seized the plebs as often as the nobility.’ Applying criticism to both the Senate and Plebs gave his work the appearance of balance. To some extent, this results from Sallust’s conscious imitation of Thucydides’ style.

On the other hand, it should be noted that such dismissals were generic epithets commonly applied to the Plebeian classes by Roman political writers. Deploiring the mob’s supposed fickleness had been a convention of Greco-Roman historiography since the Classical period. It may be argued therefore that Sallust criticised the proletariat out of deference to the mandates of the historical genre. Sallust also made it clear that though responsibility was shared, he considered the Senate more culpable for the spread of corruption—after all, for Sallust, the mob only follow the Senate’s lead.

This becomes particularly clear in his digression on Opimius’ suppression of the Gracchi.

Furthermore, whatever criticisms Sallust had of Tribunes were outweighed by praise. Though Sallust’s scathing portrayal of Baebius shows that Tribunes are not immune to criticism, he nonetheless dealt with Tribunician misdemeanours only briefly. At one point, he glossed over some Tribunes’ abusing the power of veto, not even naming the perpetrators. He thus spared Tribunes the ignominy he reserved for the Senate. Indeed, Sallust gave substantial voice to the Tribunes by assigning extended speech to the Tribune Memmius. Sallust put in Memmius’ mouth an extended attack on the old nobility, while simultaneously silencing the Senate by denying its members direct speech. The vindication of Tribunes originated from Sallust’s career: the most successful point in Sallust’s career had been his Tribunate in 52 B. C. E. As the Tribunate was traditionally a check on Senatorial power, Sallust also used Tribunes as champions of his anti-Senatorial agenda.

Scholars should also be aware of Caesar’s probable influence over Sallust’s work. Though the exact point when Sallust became a partisan of Caesar is unknown, it is likely Sallust owed his governorship of Numidia and reinstatement to the Senate in 46 B. C. E. to Caesar’s patronage. Sallust’s gratitude to Caesar emerges subtly through his writing. He hardly wrote panegyrics for Caesar, but instead characterised him favourably and echoed his policies. This is most clear in Coniuratione Catilinae. Sallust challenged the contemporary rumour that Caesar had been involved in the Catiline conspiracy by assigning Caesars an extended speech. He

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33. Sall. Jug. 42; Paul, Historical Commentary, 128.
34. Sall. Jug. 34, 37.
35. Sall. Jug. 73.
36. Sall. Jug. 31; Earl, Political Thought, 689.
38. Earl, Political Thought, 1.
39. Lofstedt, Literary Portraits, 98.
40. Dio Cass. 43.9; 43.47; Suet. Jul. 43; Syme, Sallust. 39.
41. Earl, Political Thought, 83.
42. Sall. Cat. 49; 51.
furthered this by having Caesar suggest the radical idea of life imprisonment for the conspirators. Thus, Sallust not only absolved Caesar of involvement in the conspiracy, but he embellished this by having Caesar propose the only possible course of action to avoid the acrimony of executing Roman citizens. Sallust also perhaps replicated Caesar’s opinions by praising Caesar and his political opponent Cato equally. On the one hand, praising both Caesar and his political enemy substantiated his claim to impartiality. However, it is equally likely that Sallust simply replicated Caesar’s *clementia* toward Cato as described by Plutarch, though it should be considered that Sallust avoided using this term to describe Caesar.

Caesar’s influence arguably pervades Sallust’s characterisation of Marius in *Bellum Jugurthinum* also. It is possible that in constructing the character of Marius, Sallust again simply mirrored Caesar’s stance. After all, Caesar had publicised his link to Marius by including Marius’ image in the funeral procession of his aunt, Julia. Since Marius was related to Caesar by marriage and boosted Sallust in his early career, it is probable that Sallust sought to honour his patron by glorifying Caesar’s family. Sallust expressed regard for Marius clearly through Marius’ character sketch: Sallust described Marius as ‘A man of an industrious nature, integrity and great military knowledge. An ardent will in war, he was at home temperate: a conqueror of desire and wealth, avid for glory alone.’ Moreover, he glossed over Marius’ later proscriptions and questionable conduct. Conversely Sallust increased the impression of Marius’ virtue by demonizing Marius rival, Sulla. Although the later careers of Marius and Sulla held many similarities, Sallust condemned Sulla outright but criticised Marius comparatively lightly. Indeed, *Coniuratione Catilinae* as well as surviving fragments of Sallust’s other works show considerable hostility towards Sulla.

Sallust’s pro-Marian agenda again damages his reliability as a military historian. For instance, it is curious that Sallust never depicted Marius losing a battle in the Jugurthine War. Though he stressed Marius’ tactical rashness, Sallust never actually showed the consequences. Indeed, Sallust portrayed even Marius’ mistakes as victories, creating the impression that Marius operated by divine providence as suggested by his inclusion of the Utican prophecy. Sallust also excused Marius’ ruthlessness in dealing with enemies, sparing Marius the usual condemnation reserved for those guilty of corrupt conduct.

Yet Sallust’s pro-Marian affectation is understated and may only be detected through close reading. His work did not altogether eschew criticisms of Marius. Sallust was particularly uncomfortable with Marius’ smear campaign against Numidicus, and also his obsession with popularity. However, Sallust arguably counterbalanced such criticisms on a subtextual level. He gave Marius voice by attributing him the longest speech of the text. Simultaneously, he silenced Marius’ political opponents by not attributing them speeches. Perhaps the greatest evidence for Sallust’s pro-Marian inclination comes from the last lines of the text. He added an appendum to *Bellum Jugurthinum*, saying that Rome had come to rely on Marius for defence against attack from the Cimbri—in Sallust’s view, Marius by his actions had proven himself ‘the one hope and resource for our civilisation.’ This last section referring to the Cimbri’s invasion of Italy is irrelevant to the Jugurthine War, which essentially ended with Jugurtha’s capture. By terminating his narrative at the arguable height of Marius’ career rather than the Jugurthine war’s actual ending, Sallust subtly increased the impression of Marius’ magnificence.

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43. Sall. *Cat.* 51.
51. Sall. *Jug.* 63; 95.
52. Sall. *Cat.* 5; 11; 37.
54. Sall. *Jug.* 63; 92.
There is no doubt that Sallust’s questionable political career impacted upon his writings, but this should not negate his viability as an historical source. Since the exact circumstances of Sallust’s corruption and subsequent expulsions from the Senate are unclear, it would be spurious to question his credibility on this basis. Sallust did not directly justify himself in his writings: rather, he focussed upon events in which he was not actively involved. This being the case, he had little reason to promulgate outright lies in his work. However, Sallust’s political career did engender biases which scholars should bear in mind. Sallust’s work is permeated by rancour against the Senate and politicians from old noble families. Simultaneously, through his histories Sallust perhaps sought to vindicate his patron, Julius Caesar. In *Bellum Jugurthinum* this is particularly apparent through his portrayal of Caesar’s relative, Marius. Overall, Sallust provides important insight not only for Roman political affairs, but also their impact upon conceptualisations of the past.