**The Gangs of Rome, Primary Sources**

This handout contains a number of sources on various gangs, riots, and other violent activities in Rome. The late 60s and 50s were particularly violent in the city, resulting in a number of deaths, riots, postponed elections, etc.

62 BCE

27 1 When the people were about to vote on the law[[1]](#footnote-1) in favour of Metellus[[2]](#footnote-2) there were armed strangers and gladiators and slaves drawn up in the forum, and that part of the people which longed for Pompey in their hope of a change was present in large numbers, and there was strong support also from Caesar, who was at that time praetor. 2 In the case of Cato [the Younger], however, the foremost citizens shared in his displeasure and sense of wrong more than they did in his struggle to resist, and great dejection and fear reigned in his household, so that some of his friends took no food and watched all night with one another in futile discussions on his behalf, while his wife and sisters wailed and wept. 3 He himself, however, talked without fear and with confidence with all and comforted them, and after taking supper as usual and passing the night, was roused from a deep sleep by one of his fellow tribunes, Minucius Thermus; and they went down into the forum, with only a few people accompanying them, but many meeting them and exhorting them to be on their guard. 4 Accordingly, when Cato paused in the forum and saw the temple of Castor and Pollux surrounded by armed men and its steps guarded by gladiators, and Metellus himself sitting at the top with Caesar, he turned to his friends and said: "What a bold man, and what a coward, to levy such an army against a single unarmed and defenceless person!" At the same time he walked straight on with Thermus. 5 Those who were occupying the steps made way for them, but would allow no one else to pass, but Cato with difficulty drew Munatius along by the hand and brought him up; and walking straight onwards he threw himself just as he was into a seat between Metellus and Caesar, thus cutting off their communication. 6 Caesar and Metellus were disconcerted, but the better citizens, seeing and admiring the countenance, lofty bearing, and courage of Cato, came nearer, and with shouts urged one another to stay and band themselves together and not betray their liberty and the man who was striving to defend it.

28 1 And now the clerk produced the law, but Cato would not allow him to read it; and when Metellus took it and began to read it, Cato snatched the document away from him. Then Metellus, who knew the law by heart, began to recite it, but Thermus clapped a hand upon his mouth and shut off his speech. 2 At last, seeing that the men were making a struggle which he could not resist, and that the people were giving way and turning towards the better course, Metellus ordered men-at‑arms, who were standing at a distance, to come running up with terrifying shouts. This was done, and all the people dispersed, leaving Cato standing his ground alone and pelted with sticks and stones from above. Here Murena,[[3]](#footnote-3) who he had denounced and prosecuted, came to his relief, 3 and holding his toga before him, crying to those who were pelting him to stop, and finally persuading Cato himself and folding him in his arms, he led him away into the temple of Castor and Pollux.

When, however, Metellus saw the space about the tribunal empty and his opponents in flight through the forum, being completely persuaded that he had won the day, he ordered his armed men to go away again, and coming forward himself in orderly fashion attempted to have the law enacted. 4 But his opponents, quickly recovering from their rout, advanced again upon him with loud and confident shouts, so that his partisans were overwhelmed with confusion and terror. They supposed that their enemies had provided themselves with arms from some place or other in order to assail them, and not a man stood his ground, but all fled away from the tribunal. 5 So, then, when these had dispersed, and when Cato had come forward with commendation and encouragement for the people, the majority of them stood prepared to put down Metellus by any and every means, and the senate in full session announced anew that it would assist Cato and fight to the end against the law, convinced that it would introduce sedition and civil war into Rome.

29 1 Metellus himself was still unyielding and bold, but since he saw that his followers were completely terrified before Cato and thought him utterly invincible, he suddenly rushed off into the forum, assembled the people, and made a long and invidious speech against Cato; then, crying out that he was fleeing from Cato's tyranny and the conspiracy against Pompey, for which the city would speedily repent in that it was dishonouring so great a man, he set out at once for Asia, intending to lay these accusations before Pompey. 2 Accordingly, Cato was in high repute for having relieved the tribunate of a great burden, and for having in a manner overthrown the power of Pompey in the person of Metellus. But he won still more esteem by not allowing the senate to carry out its purpose of degrading Metellus and deposing him from his office, which course Cato opposed, and brought the senate over to his views. For the multitude considered it a token of humanity and moderation not to trample on his enemy or insult him after prevailing completely over him, and prudent men thought it right and advantageous not to irritate Pompey.

**Plutarch, *Life of Cato***

**59 BCE**

I have received several letters from you, which showed me with what eagerness and anxiety you desired to know the news. We are bound hard and fast on every side, and are no longer making any difficulty as to being slaves, but fearing death and exile as though greater evils, though they are in fact much smaller ones. Well, this is the position-one unanimously groaned over, but not relieved by a word from anyone. The object, I surmise, of the men in power is to leave nothing for anyone to lavish. The only man who opens his mouth and openly disapproves is the young Curio. He is loudly cheered, and greeted in the forum in the most complimentary manner, and many other tokens of goodwill are bestowed on him by the loyalists; while Fufius is pursued with shouts, jeers, and hisses. From such circumstances it is not hope but indignation that is increased, for you see the citizens allowed to express their sentiments, but debarred from carrying them out with any vigour. And to omit details, the upshot is that there is now no hope, I don't say of private persons, but even of the magistrates being ever free again. Nevertheless, in spite of this policy of repression, conversation, at least in society and at dinner tables, is freer than it was. Indignation is beginning to get the better of fear, though that does not prevent a universal feeling of despair. For this Campanian law[[4]](#footnote-4) contains a cause imposing an oath to be taken by candidates in public meeting that they will not suggest any tenure of public land other than that provided in the Julian laws. All the others take the oath without hesitation: Laterensis is considered to have shown extraordinary virtue in retiring from his canvass for the tribuneship to avoid the oath. But I don't care to write any more about politics. I am dissatisfied with myself, and cannot write without the greatest pain. I hold my own position with some dignity, considering the general repression, but considering my achievements in the past, with less courage than I should like. I am invited by Caesar in a very gentlemanly manner to accept a legation, to act as his legatus, and even an "open votive legation" is offered me. But the latter does not give sufficient security, since it depends too much on the scrupulousness of Pulchellus[[5]](#footnote-5) and removes me just when my brother is returning; the former offers better security and does not prevent my returning when I please. I am retaining the latter, but do not think I shall use it. However, nobody knows about it. I don't like running away; I am itching to fight. There is great warmth of feeling for me. But I don't say anything positive: you will please not to mention it. I am, in fact, very anxious about the manumission of Statius and some other things, but I have become hardened by this time. I could wish, or rather ardently desire, that you were here: then I should not want advice or consolation. But anyhow, be ready to fly here as soon as I call for you.

Cicero, *Letters to Atticus* 2.18

6 Bibulus,[[6]](#footnote-6) however, would not yield, but having gained the support of three tribunes, hindered the enactment of the law.[[7]](#footnote-7) Finally, when he had no other excuse for delay left, he proclaimed a sacred period for all the remaining days of the year alike, during which the people could not legally even meet in their assembly. 2 Caesar paid but slight attention to him and appointed a fixed day for the passage of the law. And when the populace had already occupied the Forum by night, Bibulus came up with the following he had got together and succeeded in forcing his way through to the temple of Castor, from which Caesar was delivering his speech. The men fell back before him, partly out of respect 3 and partly because they thought he would not actually oppose them. But when he appeared above and attempted to speak in opposition to Caesar he was thrust down the steps, his fasces were broken to pieces, and the tribunes as well as others received blows and wounds.

4 Thus the law was passed. Bibulus was for the moment satisfied to escape with his life, but on the next day tried in the senate to annul the act; nevertheless, he accomplished nothing, since all were under the spell of the multitude's enthusiasm and would do nothing. 5 Accordingly he retired to his home and did not appear in public again at all up to the last day of the year. Instead, he remained in his house, and whenever Caesar proposed any innovation, he sent formal notice to him through his attendants that it was a sacred period and that by the laws he could rightfully take no action during it. 6 Publius Vatinius, a tribune, undertook to place Bibulus in prison for this, but was prevented from doing so by the opposition of his colleagues. Bibulus, however, held aloof from all business of state in the manner related, and the tribunes belonging to his party likewise no longer performed any public duty. 7 Now Metellus Celer and Cato, and through him one Marcus Favonius, who imitated him in everything, for a time did not take the oath of obedience to the law (a custom which began, as I have stated, on an earlier occasion, and was then continued in the case of other preposterous measures) and stoutly refused to approve it, Metellus, for instance, referring to Numidicus as an example. 2 When, however, the day came on which they were to incur the established penalties, they took the oath, perhaps because it is but human nature for many persons to utter promises and threats more easily than they actually carry them out, or else because they were going to be punished to no purpose, without helping the state at all by their obstinacy.

Cassius Dio 38.6-7

**58 BCE**

When in the Aurelian tribunal you[[8]](#footnote-8) were openly enrolling not only freemen but slaves also, got together out of all the streets in the city, were you not at that time preparing for violence? When by your edicts, you ordered all the shops to be shut, were you aiming not at the violence of the mob, but at a modest and prudent gathering of honourable men? When you were having arms collected and carried to the temple of Castor, had you no other object beyond using violence to prevent others from being able to achieve anything? But when you tore up and removed the steps of the temple of Castor, did you then, in order to be able to act in a moderate manner, repel audacious men from the approaches and ascents leading to the temple? When you ordered those persons who, in an assembly of virtuous men, had spoken in defence of, my safety, to come forward, and had driven away their companions and seconders by blows and arms and stones; then, no doubt, you showed that violence was excessively disagreeable to you.

[55] Oh, but this frantic violence of a demented tribune of the people could easily be crushed and put down by the virtue and superior numbers of the good citizens. What? When Syria was given to Gabinius, Macedonia to Piso,[[9]](#footnote-9) boundless authority and vast sums of money to both of them, to induce them to place everything in your power, to assist you, to supply you which followers, and troops, and their own prepared centurions, and money, and bands of slaves; to all you with their infamous assemblies, to deride the authority of the senate, to threaten the Roman knights with death and proscription, to terrify me with threats, to threaten me with contests and murder, to fill my house with their friends, which had heretofore been full of virtuous men; through fear of proscription; to deprive me of the crowds of good men who used to associate with me, to strip me of their protection; to forbid the senate, that most illustrious body, not only to fight for me, but even to implore men, and to entreat them in my behalf, and, changing their garments, to lament my danger,—was not even this violence?

Cicero, *On his House* 54-55

34 In the presence and sight of these same consuls,[[10]](#footnote-10) a levy of slaves was held before the tribunal of Aurelian, under pretence of filling up the *collegia*, when men were enrolled according to their streets, divided into groups of ten, and stirred up to violence, battle, slaughter, and plunder. It was while these same men were consuls, that arms were openly carried into the temple of Castor, and the steps of the temple were pulled up; armed men occupied the forum and the assemblies of the people; slaughters and stonings of people took place; there was no senate, no magistrates were left; one man using arms and piratical violence seized on all the power of all the magistrates not by any power of his own, but having bribed the two consuls to desert the republic by the treaty respecting the provinces, he insulted every one, domineered over every one, made promises to some held down many by terror and fear and gained over more by hope and promises.

Cicero, *In Defence of Sestius* 34

18 It was not yet openly known that the republic had fallen, when you thought fit to arrange its interment. At one and the same moment my house was plundered and set on fire, my property from my house on the Palatine Hill was taken to the house of the consul who was my neighbour, the goods from my Tusculan villa were also taken to the house of my neighbour there, the other consul; when, while the same mob of workers were voting, the same gladiator proposing and passing laws, the forum unoccupied, not only by virtuous men but even by free citizens, and entirely empty, the Roman people utterly ignorant of what was going on, the senate beaten down and crushed, there being two wicked and impious consuls, the treasury, the prisoners, the legions, allies and military commands, were given away as they pleased.

Cicero, To the Senate *On his Return*

**57 BCE**

I am very well aware that you long to know what is going on here, and also to know it from me, not because things done before the eyes of the whole world are better realized when narrated by my band than when reported to you by the pens or lips of others, but because it is from my letters that you get what you want—a knowledge of my feelings in regard to the occurrences, and what at such a juncture is the state of my mind, or, in a word, the conditions in which I am living. On the 3rd of November the workmen were driven from the site of my house by armed ruffians: the porticus Catuli, which was being rebuilt on a contract given out by the consuls, in accordance with a decree of the senate, and had nearly reached the roof, was battered down: the house of my brother Quintus was first smashed with volleys of stones thrown from my site, and then set on fire by order of Clodius, firebrands having been thrown into it in the sight of the whole town, amidst loud exclamations of indignation and sorrow, I will not say of the loyalists—for I rather think there are none—but of simply every human being. That madman runs riot: thinks after this mad prank of nothing short of murdering his opponents: canvasses the city street by street: makes open offers of freedom to slaves. For the fact is that up to this time, while trying to avoid prosecution, he had a case, difficult indeed to support, and obviously bad, but still a case: he might have denied the facts, he might have shifted the blame on others, he might even have pleaded that some part of his proceedings had been legal. But after such wrecking of buildings, incendiaries, and wholesale robberies as these, being abandoned by his supporters, he hardly retains on his side Decimus the marshal, or Gellius; takes slaves into his confidence; sees that, even if he openly assassinates everyone he wishes to, he will not have a worse case before a court of law than he has at present. Accordingly, on the uth of November, as I was going down the Sacred Way, he followed me with his gang. There were shouts, stone-throwing, brandishing of clubs and swords, and all this without a moment's warning. I and my party stepped aside into Tettius Damio's vestibule: those accompanying me easily prevented his roughs from getting in. He might have been killed himself. But I am now on a system of cure by regimen: I am tired of surgery. The fellow, seeing that what everybody called for was not his prosecution but his instant execution, has since made all your Catilines seem models of respectability. For on the 12th of November he tried to storm and set fire to Milo's house, I mean the one on Germalus: and so openly was this done, that at eleven o'clock in the morning he brought men there armed with shields and with their swords drawn, and others with lighted torches. He had himself occupied the house of P. Sulla as his headquarters from which to Conduct the assault upon Milo's. Thereupon Q. Flaccus led out some gallant fellows from Milo's other house (the Anniana) : killed the most notorious bravoes of all Clodius's gang: wanted to kill Clodius himself; but my gentleman took refuge in the inner part of Sulla's house. The next thing was a meeting of the senate on the i4th. Clodius stayed at home: Marcellinus was splendid : all were keen. Metellus talked the business out by an obstructive speech, aided by Appius, and also, by Hercules! by your friend on whose firmness you wrote me such a wonderfully true letter! Sestius was fuming. Afterwards the fellow vows vengeance on the city if his election is stopped. Marcellinus's resolution having been exposed for public perusal (he had read it from a written copy, and it embraced our entire case—the prosecution was to include his violent proceedings on the site of my house, his arson, his assault on me personally, and was to take place before the elections), he put up a notice that he intended to watch the sky during all comitial days. Public speeches of Metellus disorderly, of Appius hot-beaded, of Publius stark mad. The upshot, however, was that, had not Milo served his notice of bad omens in the campus, the elections would have been held. On the i9th of November Milo arrived on the campus before midnight with a large company. Clodius, though he had picked gangs of runaway slaves, did not venture into the campus. Milo stopped there till midday, to everybody's great delight and his own infinite credit: the movement of the three brethren ended in their own disgrace; their violence was crushed, their madness made ridiculous. However, Metellus demands that the obstructive notice should be served on him next day in the forum: "there was no need to come to the campus before daybreak: he would be in the Comitium at the first hour of the day." Accordingly, on the 20th Milo came to the forum before sunrise. Metellus at the first sign of dawn was stealthily hurrying to the campus, I had almost said by by-lanes: Milo catches our friend up "between the groves"[[11]](#footnote-11) and serves his notice. The latter returned greeted with loud and insulting remarks by Q. Flaccus. The 21st was a market day. For two days no public meeting. I am writing this letter on the 23rd at three o'clock in the morning. Milo is already in possession of the campus. The candidate Marcellus is snoring so loud that I can hear him next door. I am told that Clodius' vestibule is completely deserted: there are a few ragged fellows there and a canvas lantern. His party complains that I am the adviser of the whole business: they little know the Courage and wisdom of that hero! His gallantry is astonishing. Some recent instances of his superhuman excellence I pass over; but the upshot is this: I don't think the election will take place. I think Publius will be brought to trial by Milo—unless he is killed first. If he once puts himself in his way in a riot, I can see that he will be killed by Milo himself. The latter has no scruple about doing it; he avows his intention; he isn't at all afraid of what happened to me, for he will never listen to the advice of a jealous and faithless friend, nor trust a feeble aristocrat. In spirit, at any rate, I am as vigorous as in my zenith, or even more so; in regard to money I am crippled. However, the liberality of my brother I have, in spite of his protests, repaid (as the state of my finances compelled) by the aid of my friends, that I might not be drained quite dry myself. What line of policy to adopt in regard to my position as a whole, I cannot decide in your absence: wherefore make haste to town.

*Letters to Atticus* 4.3

**56 BCE**

24 And if we wish to recollect those things which have been handed down to us traditionally about each of the gods, we have heard that the Magna Mater[[12]](#footnote-12) whose games were thus violated and polluted, and turned almost to a massacre to the destruction of the city, does roam over the fields and through the groves with a certain degree of noise and roaring**.** 25 Oh immortal gods! How could you speak more plainly to us if you were living among and associating with us? You show us and plainly tell us that those games were profaned. What can be mentioned more deformed, polluted, altered and perverted, than for the whole body of slaves, as if they had been liberated by the permission of the magistrates, to be turned loose into one theatre, and set as guards over another, so that one body of spectators might be exposed to the power of slaves, and that the other might consist entirely of slaves? If during the games a swarm of bees had come on the stage, we should think it necessary to send for the soothsayers out of Etruria; and shall we all see on a sudden such vast swarms of slaves let loose upon the Roman people, blocked up and shut in, and not be moved by that? And perhaps, in the case of a swarm of bees, the soothsayers would warn us from the written books of the Etruscans to guard against the slaves.

[26] That then which we should guard against, if indicated by some disjointed prodigy admitting of different interpretations, shall we not be afraid of when it is its own prodigy, and when the danger is in that very thing from which danger is dreaded? Is this how your father celebrated the Megalesia? Did your uncle celebrate them in such a manner as this? And then he mentions his family, when he would rather celebrate the games after the fashion of Athenio or Spartacus, than like Gaius or Appius Claudius. When these great men were celebrating games, they ordered all the slaves to depart from the theatre. But you turned slaves into one, and turned free men out of the other. Therefore they, who formerly used to be separated from free men by the voice of the herald, now, at your games, separated free men from themselves not by their voice, but by force.

*On the Responses of the Haruspices*

53-52 BCE

*The following is from an ancient commentary* (1st century CE) *on Cicero’s* In Defence of Milo

Titus Annius Milo [Papianus], Publius Plautius Hypsaeus, and Quintus Metellus Scipio sought the consulship [in 53, for 52] not only by bribing openly but using gangs of armed men. There was the greatest possible personal hostility between Milo and Clodius, both because Milo was very close to Cicero and he had used his weight as tribune of the plebs in bringing Cicero back from exile; and because Publius Clodius was exceedingly hostile to Cicero once he had been brought back and was on that account very zealously supporting the candidacies of Hypsaeus and Scipio. Milo and Clodius also often engaged in violence with each other with their gangs in Rome. The chutzpah was equally outrageous on both sides, but Milo generally took the side of the *optimates*. Besides that, in the same year Milo decided to stand for the consulship, and Clodius for the Praetorship (which he knew perfectly well would be less influential, if Milo were consul).[[13]](#footnote-13) In addition, when the electoral assemblies for consul went on for a long time, and were not able to produce a winner due to the very same riotous activities of the candidates, and for that reason in the month of January there were no consuls and no praetors at all, while the assemblies were being dragged out just exactly as before--though Milo wanted the election to be completed as quickly as possible and was expecting that they would be thanks to the efforts of the aristocracy, because he was standing in the way of Clodius, and also in the way of the populus on account of the `gifts' which had been showered on them and the staggeringly huge costs of the theatrical spectacles and gladiatorial fight (on which Cicero remarks he had poured out three inheritances).

**Asconius**

**See also:** Plutarch, *Life of Pompey* 54; *On his House* 110 (in *In Defence of the Republic*)

1. To recall Pompey to deal with Catiline. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Metellus Nepos’ sister, Mucia, was married to Pompey and was tribune for 62. Pompey divorced Mucia on his return from Asia. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Murena had been defended by Cicero and acquitted. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. An agrarian law proposed by Caesar, dividing public land in Campania [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Clodius Pulcher. The diminutive form is not polite. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Caesar’s co-consul. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Caesar’s agrarian law, distributing public land around Campania. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The you is Clodius; the Aurelian tribunal was a structure in the Forum. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The consuls of 58 BCE, who Clodius bribed by getting them the provinces they wanted even though they had already been allotted other provinces. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Piso and Gabinius. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The road down which led alongside the Temple of Capitoline Jupiter towards the Campus Martius. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The Megalesia, which Clodius was overseeing as an aedile when he allowed all of these events to happen. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This was Cicero’s argument; whether it was true or not is hard to say, given how much power Clodius seems to have had even as a tribune. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)