

ASCONIUS' *MAGNI HOMINES*

During his defence of C. Cornelius in 65 B.C. Cicero alleged that when C. Manilius had been brought to trial earlier that year, he had broken up the court by violence at the instigation of *magni homines*¹⁾. Asconius identified the *magni homines* as Catiline and Cn. Piso. His identification, however, has been challenged by Gruen²⁾ on two accounts: 1) Catiline and Piso were not sufficiently prominent to merit description as *magni homines*; 2) they were both hostile towards Pompey and are therefore unlikely to have collaborated with the Pompeian Manilius. Underlying Gruen's arguments is the tacit assumption that Asconius' identification is conjectural. Certainly, since Asconius says that Cicero *seems* to mean (*uidetur significare*) Catiline and Piso, it might be supposed that he was only guessing³⁾. But he also uses this expression when noting the conflicting accounts given by Cicero of the part played by Scipio Africanus in the decision taken in 194 B.C. to set aside separate seats for senators at public games, although the qualification *uidetur* is in fact unnecessary⁴⁾. In this passage the words *uidetur significare* probably serve no other purpose than to provide variety from the more usual *significat*. It is quite possible that Asconius employed this expression for the same reason apropos of the *magni homines*, since he had used *significat* several times already in his commentary *In Cornelianum*. Consequently his identification can be shown to be a conjecture – and an erroneous one at that – only by adducing historical proof that Catiline and Piso cannot have been the *magni homines* referred to by Cicero.

Gruen argues that, since Catiline was only of praetorian rank and Piso was a mere quaestor, Cicero would not call them *magni homines*. However, this is far from certain. Cicero usually applies *magnus* to persons as a term of praise, often in conjunction with another laudatory epithet⁵⁾. He uses it to describe the

1) Asc. 53 St.: *Dicit de disturbato iudicio Maniliano: Aliis ille in illum furorem magnis hominibus auctoribus impulsus est, qui aliquod institui exemplum disturbandorum iudiciorum rei p. perniciosissimum, temporibus suis accommodatissimum, meis alienissimum rationibus cupierunt. L. Catilinam et Cn. Pisonem uidetur significare.*

2) E. S. Gruen, *CP* 64 (1969), 23–4.

3) Cf. Asc., 42, 45 St.

4) Asc., 55 St.

5) *Amplius* (*Pro Lege Manilia* 37); *clarus* (*Pro Plancio* 66, *Phil.* 9, 4; 13, 41); *excelsus* (*Pro Murena* 60); *fortis* (*Pro Sestio* 143, *Pro Balbo* 60, *Phil.* 14,

general greatness of Cn. Octavius (*cos.* 165 B.C.) and Decimus Brutus, as well as, more specifically, the moral excellence of Cato the Younger⁶). His most frequent use of *magnus* is in generalisations, where a *magnus homo* is in effect a conservative, a *bonus*. He seldom employs it in an unfavourable context, but a close parallel to the passage in the *Pro Cornelio* occurs in the *Verrine Orations*, where he mentions the friendship of Hortensius and other *hominum magnorum atque nobilium* enjoyed by Verres⁷). Obviously his use of *magnus* in generalisations has no bearing on its application in the *Pro Cornelio* and the remaining examples are too few and imprecise to establish what other characteristics, if any, he regarded as essential to a *magnus homo*. But it is clear that *magnus* was not a particularly strong word in Cicero's vocabulary; it was not one of his favourite or most colourful epithets and, when he did employ it, he usually felt the need to reinforce it with another adjective. When this is considered together with the fact that exaggeration is a regular feature of oratory, it will be realised that in the context of a speech the term *magnus homo* need not necessarily denote a really outstanding public figure. Gruen assumes that Cicero's use of *magnus* depended entirely on rank. If so, since Decimus Brutus was only an ex-praetor, Catiline would qualify as a *magnus homo*. But undue emphasis must not be placed on the formality of rank. Not only is there no indication that Cicero's use of *magnus* was governed solely by considerations of rank, but it must be remembered that power and rank did not automatically go hand in hand. Some politicians, such as Caesar and Cato the Younger were able at an early age to exercise an influence out of all proportion to their rank and conversely some consulars like L. Volcacius Tullus made little impression on politics. Nor must Catiline's own importance be under-estimated. Not only was he a patrician who numbered prominent *nobiles* among his *amici*, but he had a reputation as a man of abundant energy and must naturally have attracted attention as a prospective candidate for the consulship⁸). Of the young noble Cn. Piso little is known, but his attack on Pompey in the law courts won him sufficient notoriety to merit a reference in Valerius Maxi-

3); *gravis* (*Pro Sestio* 105); *persapiens* (*Prov. Cons.* 44); *sapiens* (*Pro Cluentio* 159).

6) Cic., *Pro Murena* 60.

7) Cic., *Verr.* 2, 3, 7.

8) For Catiline's character see Sall., *Cat.* 5, 1-5.

mus⁹⁾ and he was regarded by the Senate as a suitable choice for an extraordinary appointment as *quaestor pro praetore* in Hither Spain¹⁰⁾. Asconius' description of him as a leading trouble maker¹¹⁾, if not entirely a fiction derived from malicious propaganda, gives the impression that he was an influential activist in Roman politics.

The possibility that Cicero might describe Catiline and Piso as *magni homines* cannot therefore be discounted, but were they suitable allies for Manilius? Gruen has emphasized the anti-Pompeian aspects of Catiline. Catulus¹²⁾ and Cn. Piso, both enemies of Pompey, were among his friends and in 64 B.C. he was prosecuted by L. Luceius¹³⁾, a supporter of Pompey, for his crimes under the Sullan regime. Seager¹⁴⁾, on the other hand, has stressed Catiline's Pompeian connections. Catiline appears to have served under Pompeius Strabo in the Social War¹⁵⁾; he escaped expulsion from the Senate in 70 B.C., despite his Sullan crimes, and in 65 B.C. was defended at his trial for extortion by the Pompeian consul L. Manlius Torquatus. Moreover, it must be remembered that he was seeking election to the consulship. As the *Commentariolum Petitionis* makes abundantly clear, it was essential for a candidate to muster support from whatever quarter he could and the backing of the popular ex-tribune Manilius would be an invaluable asset to Catiline. His enmity towards Cicero¹⁶⁾ may have resulted in his losing the support of persons friendly to Cicero and Pompey alike and being prosecuted after the consular elections of 64 B.C. by Luceius. Cn. Piso had a reputation as an enemy of Pompey. It was claimed that thanks to the influence of Crassus he was sent by the Senate to Spain in order to act as a counterweight to Pompey's power in the East¹⁷⁾; but the Calpurnii Pisones had a

9) Val. Max., 6, 24.

10) *ILS* 875. J.P.V.D. Balsdon, *JRS* 52 (1962), 134-5, argues that Piso's appointment was not extraordinary, but Spain was far more important than the parallels cited.

11) Asc., 53 St. Cf. Sall., *Cat.* 18, 4.

12) Orosius, 6, 3, 1: Sall., *Cat.* 35.

13) Asc., 70 St.

14) R. Seager, *Historia* 13 (1964), 344-5.

15) *ILS* 8888.

16) Apparent at the time of his trial for extortion and presumably resulting from a quarrel over his incitement of Manilius to break up the court.

17) Sall., *Cat.* 19, paraphrased by Asc., 71 St. See also Seager, *op. cit.*, 346.

long tradition of service in Spain¹⁸) and it may have been this consideration rather than his hostility towards Pompey that determined the Senate's choice. Sallust records two explanations for his murder in Spain, but declines to choose between them. One explanation, evidently stemming from Pompey's enemies, was that the murder was politically motivated and was carried out by Pompey's clients with the connivance of Pompey himself. That Pompey was involved is improbable and the political interpretation of the murder may be without foundation. The alternative explanation, that Piso was killed because of his illtreatment of the natives, is in itself perfectly adequate and may be right. It is therefore possible that the hatred between Piso and Pompey has been exaggerated by the sources. But its existence cannot be doubted and there is no obvious reason why Piso should have supported Manilius. However, it would be wrong to interpret the politics of the 60s entirely in terms of Pompeians and anti-Pompeians. The reality was more complex. The connections of Catiline, which have already been mentioned, show this. So too do those of Cicero. He had openly championed the interests of Pompey and his supporters on several occasions and in 65 B.C. defended the Pompeian ex-tribune C. Cornelius. Yet in the same year he was offered a *legatio*¹⁹), which he intended to use for canvassing, by C. Calpurnius Piso, the governor of Cisalpine and Transalpine Gaul, who, as consul in 67 B.C., had opposed Cornelius' proposals and had repeatedly tried to thwart Pompey's ambitions²⁰). Why Piso should have offered Cicero a *legatio* is not known, but he may have foreseen that, as actually happened, Cicero's services as an advocate might be useful to him at some future date. Even more surprising is the connection between Cicero and L. Domitius Ahenobarbus. Domitius was a young aristocrat who, at an unknown date, married into the family of Cato and in 67/6 B. C. employed gangs of thugs in an attempt to stop Manilius passing his bill to distribute the freedmen throughout all the tribes. He would seem to have little in common with Cicero, who not only supported Manilius' bill to transfer the command against Mithridates from Lucullus to Pompey, but also appears to have

18) E. Badian, *Foreign Clientelae* (1958), 312.

19) Cic., *Att.* 1, 1, 2; D. Stockton, *Cicero, a Political Biography* (1971), 68.

20) Dio, 36, 24, 3; 37, 2-3; 38, 9; Plut., *Pompey* 25, 4; 27, 1; Asc., 48 St.

abused his powers as praetor on Manilius' behalf at the end of 66 B.C.²¹) and undertook to defend him at his trial for extortion the following year. Nonetheless, in 65 B.C. Cicero told Atticus that he relied on the assistance of Domitius above all other in his canvassing for the consulship²²). The reason for this is obscure, but if a shot in the dark may be ventured, it is possible that Domitius was one of the young *nobiles* who were accused of cowardice and indiscipline while on military service in Sicily and were defended there by Cicero in 75 B.C.²³) Certainly Domitius was in Sicily sometime during Verres' governorship (73-1 B.C.)²⁴) and he could conceivably have been there earlier. Whatever their true explanations, these examples should be adequate warning against rigid application of the labels Pompeian and anti-Pompeian. While these terms possess a certain validity, it must be realised that Pompey was only one of a number of factors in the politics of the period. It would be rash to assume on the slight evidence available that Cn. Piso could not have had any connections with supporters of Pompey or any reason for helping them. His attachment to Catiline, or even an unknown tie with Manilius, could have overridden his dislike of Pompey. Hatred for Pompey did not inevitably extend to all who supported him.

It may therefore be concluded that there is no compelling reason why Asconius' identification of the *magni homines* should be rejected. Whether it is a piece of guesswork on his part is not known. But, conjecture or not, it is preferable to other explanations of the *magni homines*. No alternative names can readily be suggested. Nor does it seem at all likely that Cicero was merely scaremongering, since his bitter criticism of the *magni homines* for furthering their own ends at his expense indicates that they were more than figments of his imagination.

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21) Plut., *Cicero* 9, 4-6; Dio, 36, 44, 1-2; E. J. Phillips, *Latomus* 29 (1970), 595 f.

22) Cic., *Att.* 1, 1, 3.

23) Plut., *Cicero* 6, 2.

24) Cic., *Verr.* 2, 1, 139-40. In the 1st cent. B.C. young *nobiles* tended not to do the full five years' military service which had been normal in the previous century. If Domitius was on military service in 75 B.C. and also during Verres' governorship, he may have decided to serve longer than many of his contemporaries usually did in order to dispel any lingering suspicion of cowardice on his part. Or it may be that he was in Sicily during Verres' time in a civilian capacity, perhaps as one of the governor's *comites*.