

Two Ancient Accounts of the Conspiracy to Kill Caesar: Nicolaus of Damascus and Plutarch

Nicolaus of Damascus (born c. 64 B.C.)

(Life of Augustus, by Nicolaus of Damascus, translated by Clayton M. Hall, 1923.)

At first a few men started the conspiracy, but afterwards many took part, more than are remembered to have taken part in any earlier plot against a commander. They say that there were more than eighty who had a share in it. Among those who had the most influence were: Decimus Brutus, a particular friend of Caesar, Gaius Cassius, and Marcus Brutus, second to none in the estimation of the Romans at that time. All these were formerly members of the opposite faction, and had tried to further Pompey's interests [Pompey was a rival general], but when he was defeated, they came under Caesar's jurisdiction and lived quietly for the time being; but although Caesar tried to win them over individually by kindly treatment, they never abandoned their hope of doing him harm. He on his part was naturally without grudge against the beaten party, because of a certain leniency of disposition, but they, using to their own advantage his lack of suspicion, by seductive words and pretense of deeds treated him in such a way as to more readily escape detection in their plot. There were various reasons that affected each and all of them and impelled them to lay hands on the man. Some of them had hopes of becoming leaders themselves in his place if he were put out of the way; others were angered over what had happened to them in the war, embittered over the loss of their relatives, property, or offices of state. They concealed the fact that they were angry, and made the pretense of something more seemly, saying that they were displeased at the rule of a single man and that they were striving for a republican form of government. Different people had different reasons, all brought together by whatever pretext they happened upon.

At first the ringleaders conspired; then many more joined, some of their own accord because of personal grievances, some because they had been associated with the others and wished to show plainly the good faith in their long standing friendship, and accordingly became their associates. There were some who were of neither of these types, but who had agreed because of the worth of the others, and who resented the power of one man after the longstanding republican constitution. They were very glad not to start the affair themselves, but were willing to join such company when someone else had initiated proceedings, not even hesitating to pay the penalty if need be. The reputation that had long been attached to the Brutus family [Decimus and Marcus descended from the same ancient family] was very influential in causing the uprising, for Brutus's ancestors had overthrown the kings who ruled from the time of Romulus, and they had first established republican government in Rome. Moreover, men who had been friends of Caesar were no longer similarly well disposed toward him when they saw people who were previously his enemies saved by him and given honors equal to their own. In fact, even these others were not particularly well disposed toward him, for their ancient grudges took precedence over gratitude and made forgetful of their good fortune in being saved, while, when they remembered the good things they had lost in being defeated, they were provoked. Many also hated him because they had been saved by him although he had been irreproachable in his behavior toward them in every respect; but nevertheless, the very thought of receiving

as a favor the benefits which as victors they would readily have enjoyed, annoyed them very much.

Plutarch (c. A.D. 45-125)

(*Great Books of the Western World*, volume 14, "Plutarch," the Dryden Translation, Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952, pages 805-808.)

And indeed it seems without doubt that [Marcus] Brutus might have been the first man in the commonwealth, if he had had patience but a little time to be second to Caesar...

But Cassius, a man of fierce disposition, and one that out of private malice, rather than love of the public, hated Caesar, not the tyrant, continually fired and stirred him [Marcus Brutus] up. Brutus felt the rule an oppression, but Cassius hated the ruler...

When Cassius went about soliciting friends to engage in this design against Caesar, all whom he tried readily consented, if [Marcus] Brutus would be head of it; for their opinion was that the enterprise wanted not hands or resolution, but the reputation and authority of a man such as he was, to give, as it were, the first religious sanction, and by his presence, if by nothing else, to justify the undertaking; that without him they should go about this action with less heart, and should lie under greater suspicions when they had done it; for if their cause had been just and honorable, people would be sure that Brutus would not have refused it...

From this time they [Marcus Brutus and Cassius] tried the inclinations of all their acquaintances that they durst trust, and communicated the secret to them, and took into the design not only their familiar friends, but as many as they believed bold and brave and despisers of death...

[Another] thing that was thought convenient was to gain the other Brutus [Decimus Brutus]...a man himself of no great bravery or courage, but considerable for...the great confidence that Caesar put in him. ...[Decimus Brutus] seeking an interview with [Marcus] Brutus himself alone, and finding that he was their captain, he readily consented to partake in the action. And among the others, also, the most and best were gained by the name of [Marcus] Brutus...

But a meeting of the Senate being appointed, at which it was believed that Caesar would be present, they [the conspirators] agreed to make use of that opportunity; for then they might appear all together without suspicion; and, besides, they hoped that all the noblest and leading men of the commonwealth, being then assembled, as soon as the great deed was done, would immediately stand forward and assert the common liberty...

Here it was chiefly that any one who had known what they had purposed, would have admired the unconcerned temper and the steady resolution of these men in their most dangerous undertaking...