

# JULIUS CAESAR

## 102 B.C.-44 B

Without a doubt the most significant figure in the history of Rome, Julius Caesar paved the way both for the end of the republic and the creation of the empire under his nephew Octavian, or Augustus Caesar. As a general he led military operations in Britain and elsewhere, and as dictator of Rome, he put through valuable reforms. But his actions, including his celebrated affair with Cleopatra, earned the distrust even of his closest friends, who conspired in his assassination.

Caesar was born on July 13, 102 B.C., to an aristocratic but not wealthy family. During his childhood, Rome was caught in a struggle between the aristocratic party, led by Sulla (137-78 B.C.), and the popular party, which—though its members were aristocrats as well—favored a greater distribution of power. With his aunt Julia's marriage to the popular party leader, Marius (c. 157-86 B.C.), Caesar became linked with that faction, and he further increased his standing by marrying Cornelia (d. 67 B.C.), daughter of Marius's ally Cinna (d. 84 B.C.) They later had a daughter, Julia.

Sulla established a dangerous example, one Caesar himself would later imitate, when in 88 B.C. he marched his troops into Rome. This ultimately meant the end of Marius's power, and Sulla demanded that Caesar divorce Cornelia. Caesar refused, and had to go into hiding. His mother's family convinced Sulla to relent, and Caesar returned to Rome and entered the army.

While serving in Asia Minor in 80 B.C., Caesar earned a high military decoration for bravery in the battle to take Mitylene on the isle of Lesbos, and went on to take part in a war against pirates from Cilicia. Following the death of Sulla, Caesar went back to Rome in 77 B.C., but soon after earning a name for himself as prosecutor in an important legal case, he traveled to Rhodes for further training in rhetoric. On the way, he was captured by Cilician pirates and held for ransom. After his release, he led a force to victory against the pirates, then—without being commanded to do so—led a successful attack against Mithradates of Pontus (r. 120-63 B.C.). Soon after this, he gained his first elected office as military tribune.

Cornelia died in 67 B.C., and within a year, Caesar remarried. Again the marriage had a political angle: Pompeia was the granddaughter of Sulla, and Caesar wanted to establish closer ties with Crassus (c. 115-53 B.C.), a leading figure in the aristocratic party.

To get ahead in Rome, a politician had to spend money on bribes and lavish entertainments for fellow politicians and the Roman citizens. As *aedile*, a type of

magistrate responsible for all manner of public affairs, Caesar heavily outspent his colleague Bibulus (d. 48 B.C.), sponsoring the most magnificent set of gladiatorial games Rome had ever seen. Later, he obtained a position as governor in Spain, where he made back all the money he had spent—probably by means that were less than honorable.

Meanwhile Pompeia became involved in scandal when a character named Pulcher got into an all-female party at her house disguised as a woman. Caesar promptly divorced her. He was soon elected consul with Bibulus, but by then it was clear that only three men in Rome really mattered: Caesar, Crassus, and Pompey (106-48 B.C.)

The latter had just returned from his defeat of Mithradates, and together the three formed the First Triumvirate in 60 B.C. Pompey even married Caesar's daughter Julia to solidify their bond, but despite their mutual claims of loyalty, the alliance was an uneasy one.

The conflict would be delayed for many years, however, while Caesar went to Gaul. Anxious to gain military glory, he went looking for war, and he soon had one when the Helvetii, from what is now Switzerland, tried to cross Gaul without permission. He drove them back, then dealt with the Suebi from Germany. Next, as a means of preventing the Celts of Britain from aiding their cousins on the mainland, he led the first Roman invasions of that island in 55 and 54 B.C. In the course of these campaigns, Caesar killed perhaps a million people, but eventually placed all of Gaul firmly under Roman control.



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Julia died in 54 B.C., breaking the bond between Caesar and Pompey, and in the following year, Crassus was killed in Asia. Soon Pompey ordered Caesar back to Rome, and Caesar, knowing he would be killed if he went back alone, brought his army with him. By crossing the River Rubicon, a shallow stream which formed the boundary between Cisalpine Gaul and Italy, he passed a point of no return, making conflict with Pompey inescapable.

Pompey moved his forces to Greece in order to regroup, while Caesar defeated Pompey's legions in Spain. The two met in battle at Pharsalus in Greece in 48 B.C., and though Caesar's armies won, Pompey managed to escape. He fled to Egypt, where he was killed, and Caesar, hot in pursuit, soon had his attention diverted by Cleopatra

(69-30 B.C.). They began a romance, and Caesar aided her in war against her brother, Ptolemy XII (r. 51-47 B.C.).

At the same time, Mithradates's teenaged son Pharnaces (r. 63-47 B.C.), taking advantage of Caesar's distraction in Egypt, had attempted to regain his father's kingdom in Pontus. Caesar went to Asia Minor, and destroyed Pharnaces's army in just five days. Afterward, he made his famous report of his victory: "I came, I saw, I conquered"; or in Latin, "*Veni, vidi, vici.*"

In 47 B.C. Caesar returned to Rome, where he assumed the powers of a dictator, and quickly pushed through a series of reforms. Most notable among these was his effort to reduce unemployment by requiring that every landowner hire one free man for every two slaves working in his fields. He increased the membership in the senate from 300 to 900, and included Celtic chieftains from Gaul in Rome's legislative body.

Caesar managed to combine the authority of numerous political offices, giving himself more power than any Roman leader had ever enjoyed; yet he seemed to want more. He placed his portrait on coins, an honor previously reserved only for the gods, and declared that the month of his birth would no longer be called Quintilis but "Julius" or July. Instead of standing before the senate when he spoke to them, as rulers had always done before, he sat—more like a monarch than a citizen. His junior colleague Mark Antony (82?-30 B.C.) even tried to convince him to wear a crown.

Had Caesar accepted the crown, it would have been such an offense to the Romans' views on government that he would have been an instant target for assassination. As it was, assassination was not long in coming. Just before leaving for a campaign in Persia, Caesar planned to address the senate on the Ides of March, or March 15, 44 B.C. Unbeknownst to him, however, a group of some 60 influential Romans—led by his supposed friends Brutus (85-42 B.C.) and Cassius (d. 42 B.C.)—had joined forces to assassinate him. As he entered the senate chamber, the assassins jumped at him with daggers, stabbing him 23 times. It would fall to Caesar's nephew Octavian (63 B.C.-A.D. 14) to avenge the murder, which he did on his way to assuming power and establishing what would become the Roman Empire.

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