

# Overview - Julius Caesar

## Gaius Julius Caesar

Encyclopedia of World Biography, December 12, 1998

- **Born:** July 12, 100 BC in Rome, Italy
- **Died:** March 15, 44 BC in Rome, Italy
- **Nationality:** Roman
- **Occupation:** Emperor

Gaius Julius Caesar

Gaius Julius Caesar (100-44 BC) was a Roman general and politician who overthrew the Roman Republic and established the rule of the emperors.

At the time of Julius Caesar's birth the political, social, economic, and moral problems created by the acquisition of a Mediterranean empire in the 3d and 2d centuries B.C. began to challenge the Roman Republic. The senatorial oligarchy that ruled Rome was proving inadequate to deal with these new challenges. It could not control the armies and the generals and was unwilling to listen to the pleas of the Italian allies for equal citizenship and of the provinces for justice. The system also had no real answers for the growth of an urban proletariat and the mass importation of slaves. Caesar saw these inadequacies of the Senate and used the problems and dilemmas of the period to create his own supreme political and military power.

Caesar was born on July 12, 100 B.C. His father had been only a moderate political success, attaining the praetorship but not the consulship. Caesar's mother came from plebeian stock. The family could claim a long, if not overly distinguished, history. It was a patrician family on his father's side and therefore one of the founders of Rome and was entitled to certain traditional privileges and offices. However, in comparison with many other leading Roman families it had produced few distinguished people.

### Early Training

Caesar received the classic, rhetorically grounded education of a young Roman at Rome and in Rhodes. He was considered one of the most cultured and literate of Romans by such an expert as Cicero himself. Caesar followed the traditional Roman practice of conducting some prosecutions in order to gain political attention. He served as a young officer in Asia Minor and was quaestor (financial official) in Farther Spain (69 B.C.).

Caesar first rose to political prominence in the internal struggles that followed the revolt of Rome's allies--the "Social Wars"--after Rome refused to grant them full citizenship in 90. Caesar's family was related to the revolt's leader, Gaius Marius, and joined his faction. Caesar married Cornelia, the daughter of Cinna, one of the leading Marians, and was nominated for the

priesthood of flamen dialis. However, Marius died, and his followers were defeated by the Roman general Sulla. Caesar was spared in the proscriptions that followed the victory of Sulla, even though he refused to divorce Cornelia, to whom he remained married until her death in 69.

## **First Political and Military Successes**

In the following years Caesar emerged as one of the leading political and social personalities of Rome. Cultivated, charming, and handsome, vain about his appearance, he made his love affairs the talk of Roman society. He recognized the urban proletariat as one of the major sources of political power and cultivated this group assiduously. He maintained Marian connections, and in 65 B.C., when he was aedile, he restored the triumphal monuments of Marius that had been dismantled under Sulla. Caesar was famous for his hospitality and was often heavily in debt. His aedileship was especially noted for its lavish displays and games.

Caesar's first really important electoral success was his election as pontifex maximus in 63 B.C. This was regarded as the chief religious office in Rome and had important political possibilities.

Caesar was elected praetor for 62 B.C. and served his propraetorship in Farther Spain. For over a century Spain had provided Roman governors the opportunity for a triumph. Caesar was quick to take advantage of the situation by waging a successful campaign against some native tribes in Lusitania. His political enemies accused him of provoking the war--he would not have been the first Roman governor in Spain who had done so--but he was nevertheless awarded the right of a triumph for his victory.

## **First Triumvirate**

In the meantime a political crisis was developing in Rome. Pompey had returned from the East after having eliminated Mithridates and made major political settlements. He was having difficulty persuading the Senate to ratify these settlements and provide compensation for his veterans. Caesar at the same time was setting his sights on the consulship for the year 59 B.C. He returned from Spain in 60 B.C. and waived his right of triumph in order to campaign for election. He won, together with a representative of the senatorial oligarchy, Bibulus. The Senate immediately moved to block his hopes of future political power by voting as his postconsular area of responsibility the care of the woodlands of the Roman state, a command with no possibilities for military glory. Caesar, desiring more glamorous political and military opportunities, saw that he would need allies to circumvent his senatorial opponents.

Out of the specific problems of two of Rome's great men and the general ambition of the third grew the political alliance known as the First Triumvirate. Pompey brought wealth and military might, Crassus wealth and important political connections, and Caesar the key office of consul along with the brains and skill of a master political infighter. Caesar was to obtain the necessary settlements for Pompey and was in turn to receive a choice province. The alliance was further cemented in 58 B.C. by the marriage of Caesar's only daughter, Julia, to Pompey.

Caesar showed soon after his election that he intended to ignore Bibulus, his weak consular colleague, by using the political and religious machinery to advance Pompey's requests. Caesar's

land bills indicated an intelligent effort to solve the problem of Rome's urban proletariat by returning people to the land. Pompey's veterans were settled on their own land allotments; and Caesar received as a reward the governorship of the provinces of Cisalpine Gaul, Illyricum, and Transalpine Gaul for a period of 5 years after his consulship.

## **Proconsul in Gaul**

At the time Caesar took command, Roman control in Gaul was limited to the southern coast, the area known as Gallia Narbonensis. However, Rome had political relations with tribes beyond the actual border of the province. Caesar quickly took advantage of these connections and the shifting power position in Gaul to extend the sphere of Roman control. At the request of the Aedui, a tribe friendly to Rome, Caesar prevented the Helvetii from migrating across Gaul and then defeated Ariovistus, a German chieftain, who was building his own political power among the Sequani, a rival tribe to the Aedui. From there, Caesar extended Roman arms north with military victories over the Belgi (57 B.C.) and the Venetic tribes on the north coast of Gaul (56).

Meanwhile political strains had appeared in the alliance of Caesar, Pompey, and Crassus. Caesar's 5-year command was coming to a close, and political enemies were demanding his recall to make him explain his often high-handed actions in Gaul in provoking war with the native tribes. Crassus had been viewing with jealousy the power base that Caesar was building in Gaul and desired his own military command.

The three men met at the northern Italian city of Luca in April 56 B.C. and recemented their political ties. Caesar received a 5-year extension of his command. Pompey and Crassus were to have another consulship, after which Crassus would assume the important post of governor of Syria and Pompey would receive the governorship of Spain.

## **Revolt in Gaul**

Caesar turned his energies to Gaul again. He decided to undertake an expedition against Britain, whose tribes maintained close contacts with Gaul. These expeditions in 55 B.C. and 54 B.C. were probably not a complete success for Caesar, but they aroused great enthusiasm at Rome. For the first time Roman arms had advanced over the sea to conquer strange, new peoples.

Caesar probably thought that his main task of conquest was complete. However, in 52 B.C. Gaul arose in widespread rebellion against Caesar under Vercingetorix, a nobleman of the tribe of the Arverni. Caesar's power base was threatened.

At the same time the political situation in Rome was equally chaotic. The tribune Clodius had been murdered, and his death was followed by great civic disorder. Pompey was called upon to assume the post of sole consul for 52 B.C. Caesar had crossed the Alps to watch more closely the changing conditions in Rome, and when the news of the Gallic revolt reached him, he recrossed the Alps, still partly blocked by winter, and rallied his divided army. He won a striking victory by capturing the Gallic town of Avaricum but was repulsed when he tried to storm the Arvernian stronghold of Gergovia. This defeat added Rome's old allies, the Aedui, to the forces of Vercingetorix. However, Vercingetorix made the mistake of taking refuge in the fortress of

Alesia, where Caesar brought to bear the best of Roman siege techniques. A relieving army of Gauls was defeated, and Vercingetorix was forced to surrender. He was carried to Rome, where he graced Caesar's triumph in 46 B.C.

## **Dissolution of the Triumvirate**

Caesar's long absence from Rome had partially weakened his political power. He naturally kept numerous contacts in Rome through agents and through extensive correspondence. Profits from his conquests were used for building projects to impress the people and for personal loans to leading figures such as Cicero in order to win their allegiance. Caesar's conquests were well publicized; his Commentaries, which described the campaigns in a controlled, matter-of-fact, third-person style, circulated among the reading public at Rome. Recent scholarship has emphasized the propaganda aspects of the Commentaries, even claiming that Caesar seriously distorted facts to justify his actions. Certainly, Caesar sought to place his conquests in the best possible light, stressing their basically defensive nature and the importance of defending friends and allies of Rome against traditional Roman enemies. He had made extensive additions to the Roman Empire (about 640,000 square miles) at the expense of peoples who had long been enemies of Rome.

Pompey, on the other hand, had remained in Rome and strengthened his political position by appearing as a savior in a time of chaos. Other tensions in the alliance were Julia's death in 54 B.C., which removed an important bond between the two men; and the death of Crassus in 53 B.C., which left Pompey and Caesar in a confrontation of power.

Caesar's second term as governor ended in 50 B.C. His enemies were awaiting the day when he lost the immunity of an official position and could be prosecuted for various actions during his consulship and proconsulship. This was the traditional republican method of breaking a political opponent by securing his condemnation and exile. Caesar countered this by requesting to stand for the consulship for the year 49 B.C. in absentia, thus moving directly from proconsulship to consulship without being exposed to the vulnerability of a private citizen.

## **Civil War**

In 52 B.C. the bill allowing Caesar to run for consul in absentia was passed, but its effect was vitiated by a decree of the Senate which would have forced Caesar to yield his provinces to a successor before he was elected consul. The majority of the senators wanted peace but were pushed along by a determined minority who wanted to destroy Caesar. Pompey was caught in a dilemma. He did not want civil war, but he also did not want to yield his prime position in the state. Finally Caesar's opponents in the Senate won. A decree was passed in January 49 B.C. demanding that Caesar yield his province and return to Rome as a private citizen to stand for the consulship.

The proconsul now had two choices. He could bow to the will of the Senate and be destroyed politically, or he could provoke civil war. Caesar chose the latter course and led his troops over the Rubicon, the small river that divided Cisalpine Gaul from the Roman heartland. At the beginning the greater power seemed to rest with Pompey and the Senate. Most men of prestige,

such as Cato and Cicero, joined Pompey's cause. Pompey had connections with the provinces and princes of the Roman East, where he could draw enormous resources. Furthermore, he was defending the cause of the Senate and the established order at Rome.

However, Caesar had at his command a tough and experienced army, as well as an extensive following in Italy. Most of all, he was fighting for his own interests alone and did not have to face the divisions of interest, opinion, and leadership that plagued Pompey.

Pompey quickly decided to abandon Italy to Caesar and fell back to the East. Caesar secured his position in Italy and Gaul and then defeated Pompey at Pharsalus on Aug. 9, 48 B.C. Pompey fled to Egypt and was killed by the young pharaoh, Ptolemy. Although his rival was eliminated, much work remained to be done to make Caesar's position secure.

Caesar followed Pompey to Egypt and became involved in the dynastic struggle of the house of Ptolemy. Caesar supported Cleopatra, but caught in Alexandria without sufficient troops, he was nearly destroyed before reinforcements could arrive. The main result of this sojourn was the affair that developed between Caesar and Cleopatra, which ultimately resulted in a son, Caesarion.

Caesar still had numerous unconquered enemies in Africa and Spain. Turning first to Africa, on April 6, 46 B.C., at Thapsus he crushed a republican army led by Cato the Younger, his old and bitter enemy. Cato retreated to Utica, where he committed suicide rather than surrender to Caesar. Caesar moved into Spain and on March 17, 45 B.C., defeated the sons of Pompey at Munda.

## **Consolidation of the Empire**

Meanwhile Caesar had to define his political position in Rome. He adopted a policy of special clemency toward his former enemies and rewarded political opponents with public office. For himself he adopted the old Roman position of dictator. However, what had been traditionally a 6-month emergency magistracy he turned into an office of increasing duration.

There has been much debate about what political role Caesar planned for himself. He certainly regarded the old oligarchic government as inadequate and desired to replace it with some form of rule by a single leader. Significantly, just before his death, Caesar was appointed dictator for life. About the same time, he began issuing coins with his own portrait on them, a practice unparalleled in Rome up to that time.

Caesar was planning major projects and reforms. Public works, such as a new, massive basilica in the old forum complex, were progressing. Even more grandiose schemes, like the draining of the Pontine marshes, were planned. New colonial foundations were under way, including settlements in Carthage and Corinth, both destroyed by the Romans in 146 B.C. Among his reforms was the reordering of the inadequate Roman calendar.

However, Caesar's restless temperament was not satisfied by administration and legislation at Rome. He was preparing equally extensive military campaigns. Trouble was brewing in Dacia across the Danube, and the Parthians had not been punished for the destruction of Crassus' army.

## **Death and Legacy**

In Rome dissatisfaction was growing among the senatorial aristocrats over the increasingly permanent nature of the rule of Caesar. A conspiracy was formed aimed at eliminating Caesar and restoring the government to the Senate. The conspirators hoped that, with Caesar's death, government would be restored to its old republican form and all of the factors that had produced a Caesar would disappear. The conspiracy progressed with Caesar either ignorant of it or not recognizing the warning signs. On the Ides of March (March 15), 44 B.C., he was stabbed to death in the Senate house of Pompey by a group of men that included old friends and comrades-in-arms.

With Caesar's murder Rome plunged into 13 years of civil war. Caesar remained for some a symbol of tyranny, and for others the heritable founder of the Roman Empire whose ghost has haunted Europe ever since. For all, he is a figure of genius and audacity equaled by few in history.

## **Source Citation:**

"Gaius Julius Caesar." *Encyclopedia of World Biography*. Detroit: Gale, 1998. *Gale Biography In Context*. Web. 4 Jan. 2011.

Document URL

<http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/bic1/ReferenceDetailsPage/ReferenceDetailsWindow?displayGroupName=K12->

[Reference&prodId=BIC1&action=e&windowstate=normal&catId=GALE%7C00000000MQUT&documentId=GALE%7CK1631001079&mode=view&userGroupName=mmlin\\_s\\_ccreg&jsid=052a01b1f0831dd2b05dc9a7f28189b2](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/bic1/ReferenceDetailsPage/ReferenceDetailsWindow?displayGroupName=K12-Reference&prodId=BIC1&action=e&windowstate=normal&catId=GALE%7C00000000MQUT&documentId=GALE%7CK1631001079&mode=view&userGroupName=mmlin_s_ccreg&jsid=052a01b1f0831dd2b05dc9a7f28189b2)

**Gale Document Number:** GALE|K1631001079