

Julius Caesar

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Julius Caesar was a renowned general, politician and scholar in ancient Rome who conquered the vast region of Gaul and helped initiate the end of the Roman Republic when he became dictator of the Roman Empire. Despite his brilliant military prowess, his political skills and his popularity with Rome's lower- and middle-class, his rule was cut short when opponents — threatened by his rising power — brutally assassinated him.

Early Life of Gaius Julius Caesar

Gaius Julius Caesar was born on or around July 13, 100 B.C., to his father, also named Gaius Julius Caesar, and his mother Aurelia Cotta. He was also the nephew of the famous Roman general Gaius Marius.

Caesar traced his bloodline to the origins of Rome and claimed to be a descendant of the goddess Venus through the Trojan prince Aeneas and his son Iulus. Despite his allegedly noble heritage, however, Caesar's family was not wealthy or particularly influential in Roman politics.

After his father died suddenly in 85 B.C., Caesar became head of his family at age 16 — right in the middle of a civil war between his uncle Marius and the Roman ruler Lucius Cornelius Sulla. In 84 B.C., he married Cornelia, the daughter of an ally of Marius. Caesar and Cornelia had one child, a daughter named Julia.

In 82 B.C., Sulla won the civil war and ordered Caesar to divorce Cornelia. Caesar refused and went into hiding. His family intervened and convinced Sulla to spare Caesar's life; however, Sulla stripped Caesar of his inheritance.

Despite the reprieve, Caesar left Rome, joined the army and earned the prestigious Civic Crown for his courage at the Siege of Mytilene in 80 B.C. After Sulla's death in 78 B.C., Caesar returned to Rome and became a successful prosecutor widely known for his oratory skills.

Pirates Capture Caesar

In 75 B.C., as he crossed the Aegean Sea in route to Rhodes to study philosophy and oratory, murderous pirates captured Caesar. Reportedly, Caesar acted more like a domineering leader with the pirates than their captive.

After his ransom was paid, the pirates let him go. But Caesar hired a private fleet to hunt them down and had the pirates crucified for their crimes.

Political Rise

Caesar soon began his political career in earnest. He became military tribune and then quaestor of a Roman province in 69 B.C., the same year his wife Cornelia died. In 67 B.C., he married Pompeia, a granddaughter of Sulla and relative of Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus (Pompey the Great), with whom he formed an important alliance.

In 65 B.C., Caesar became aedile — an important Roman magistrate — and produced lavish games in the Circus Maximus which endeared him to the public but threw him heavily into debt. Two years later, he was elected Pontifex Maximus.

Caesar divorced Pompeia in 62 B.C. after a politician incited a major scandal by disguising himself as a woman and making his way into a sacred women's festival hosted by Pompeia.

The First Triumvirate

One year later, Caesar became governor of Spain. A series of successful military and political maneuvers, along with the support of Pompey and Marcus Licinius Crassus (known as the richest man in Rome), helped Caesar get elected as senior Roman consul in 59 B.C.

Caesar, Crassus and Pompey soon formed an informal alliance (strengthened by the marriage of Caesar's daughter Julia to Pompey) known as the First Triumvirate. The union terrified the Roman Senate who knew that a partnership between three such powerful men would prove unstoppable. They were right, and the triumvirate soon controlled Rome.

Caesar in Gaul

Caesar was appointed governor of the vast region of Gaul (north-central Europe) in 58 B.C., where he commanded a large army. During the subsequent Gallic Wars, Caesar conducted a series of brilliant campaigns to conquer and stabilize the region, earning a reputation as a formidable and ruthless military leader.

Caesar built a bridge across the Rhine River into Germanic territories and crossed the English Channel into Britain. But his great successes in the region caused Pompey to resent him and complicated the already-strained relationship between Pompey and Crassus.

As Caesar conquered Gaul, the political situation in Rome became increasingly volatile, with Pompey its lone consul. After the deaths of Pompey's wife (and Caesar's daughter) Julia in 54 B.C. and Crassus in 53 B.C., Pompey aligned with Caesar's opponents and ordered him to give up his army and return to Rome.

Caesar refused and, in a bold and decisive maneuver, directed his army to cross the Rubicon River into Italy, triggering a civil war between his supporters and those of Pompey. Caesar and his armies pursued Pompey to Spain, Greece and, finally, Egypt.

Julius Caesar and Cleopatra

Hoping to prevent Caesar from invading Egypt, the child pharaoh Ptolemy VIII had Pompey killed on September 28, 48 B.C. When Caesar entered Egypt, Ptolemy gifted him Pompey's severed head.

Caesar soon found himself in the middle of a civil war between Ptolemy and his Egyptian co-regent Cleopatra. Caesar became her lover and partnered with her to overthrow Ptolemy and make her ruler of Egypt. The pair never married but their long-term affair produced a son, Ptolemy XV Caesar, known as Caesarion.

Dictatorship

Caesar spent the next few years wiping out his enemies and what remained of Pompey's supporters in the Middle East, Africa and Spain.

In 46 B.C. he was made dictator of Rome for ten years, outraging his political opponents and setting the stage for the eventual end of the Roman Republic. Caesar began making several drastic reforms to benefit Rome's lower- and middle-class, including:

1. regulating the distribution of subsidized grain
2. increasing the size of the Senate to represent more people
3. reducing government debt
4. supporting military veterans
5. granting Roman citizenship to people in Rome's far-flung territories
6. reforming the Roman tax codes
7. creating the Julian calendar

Julius Caesar Quotes

Many people still consider Caesar a great leader with keen insights into human nature. Over the centuries, many of his words have become famous quotes, such as:

- "I came, I saw, I conquered."
- "Caesar's wife must be above suspicion."
- "The die has been cast."
- "If I fail, it is only because I have too much pride and ambition."
- "In the end, it is impossible to become what others believe you are."
- "As a rule, men worry more about what they can't see than about what they can."
- "No one is so brave that he is not disturbed by something unexpected."
- "The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones."
- "There are no tricks in plain and simple faith."
- "Which death is preferable to every other? The unexpected."

Assassination

Caesar declared himself dictator for life in 44 B.C. However, his crusade for absolute power didn't go over well with many Roman politicians. Fearing he would become king, a group of senators conspired to end his life.

On the Ides of March (March 15, 44 B.C.), the senators, led by Gaius Cassius Longinus, Decimus Junius Brutus Albinus and Marcus Junius Brutus, stabbed Caesar 23 times, ending both his reign and his life as he fell bleeding onto the Senate floor at the feet of a statue of Pompey.

Caesar's assassination at age 55 made him a martyr and incited a cycle of civil wars resulting in the downfall of the Roman Republic and the rise to power of his grandnephew and heir Gaius Octavius (Octavian) — later known as Augustus Caesar — to emperor of the Roman Empire.

Shakespeare Play: 'The Tragedy of Julius Caesar'

In 1599, William Shakespeare wrote *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*, a play based on Caesar's life. Set in 44 B.C., it tells the story of a Roman politician named Brutus who plots with others to assassinate Caesar. It also portrays Caesar's brutal murder and the aftermath.

The play is thought to have made its debut in 1599 at the Globe Theater in London and continues to mesmerize audiences to this day, inspiring songs, novels, films, television shows and even comedy acts. It has also provided many well-known quotes — attributed to Shakespeare, not Caesar — including:

“Et tu, Brute?”

“Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears.”

“The fault dear Brutus, is not in our stars but in ourselves.”

“Beware the Ides of March.”

“Death, a necessary end, will come when it will come.”

Sources

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On March 15, 44 B.C. a group of Roman senators murdered Julius Caesar as he sat on the podium at a senate meeting. The dictator fell bleeding to his death from 23 stab wounds before the horrified eyes of the rest of the house. It was a little after noon on the Ides of March, as ...read more

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Nero

Perhaps the most infamous of Rome's emperors, Nero Claudius Caesar (37-68 A.D.) ruled Rome from 54 A.D. until his death by suicide 14 years later. He is best known for his debaucheries, political murders, persecution of Christians and a passion for music that led to the probably ...read more

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You've probably of heard the soothsayer's warning to Julius Caesar in William Shakespeare's play of the same name: "Beware the Ides of March." Not only did Shakespeare's words stick,

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