

GAIUS JULIUS CAESAR

Early Life

Born in Rome on July 12 or 13, 100 BC, Caesar belonged to the prestigious Julian clan, one of Rome's wealthiest patrician families. His father, Gaius Julius Caesar, was a praetor (an important position in government). His mother, Aurelia, was more well known as the sister of Julia, the wife of Gaius Marius, who was at the time the leader of a group of Romans known as the Popular group (Populares, a political party supporting farming reform and opposed by a group of Senators known as the Optimates).

When young Julius (as he preferred to be known, dropping his real first name, which was Gaius just like his father's) was 15, his father died. He spent a few years making a name for himself in the military and then got married, to a woman named Cornelia, who was the daughter of an important man in the Popular group. A few years into their marriage, Cornelia gave birth to a daughter, Julia.



Things changed when Lucius Cornelius Sulla ruled the Roman government as dictator. For one thing, Sulla ordered Julius to divorce Cornelia, since she was from the family of one of Sulla's enemies. Caesar refused and instead went into hiding, in order to avoid a certain death sentence for refusing to obey the dictator's wishes. He was eventually pardoned and later returned to Rome when Sulla died, in 78 BC.

Julius continued to grow as a soldier, distinguishing himself in battle against Rome's many enemies and saving the lives of fellow soldiers in the process. He was also kidnapped in 75 BC and held for ransom by pirates from Cilicia, a nearby land. When he found out that they were asking 20 talents to be paid for his release, he is said to have insisted that he was worth at least 50.

At 22 years old, Caesar was unable to gain political office, so he left Rome again and went to Rhodes, where he studied rhetoric. In 74 BC, while still absent, he gained admittance to the pontificate, which was an important college of Roman priests. He returned to Rome in 73 BC, a persuasive speaker.

He was elected military tribune in 72 BC. He was also making a name for himself as a lawyer and public speaker. He was elected quaestor in 68 BC and, therefore, got a seat in the Senate. He also married Pompeia, Sulla's granddaughter and sister of a powerful general named Pompey.

Triumvirate

In 71 BC Pompey the Great, who had earned his epithet in service under Sulla, returned to Rome, having defeated the rebellious Populares general Sertorius in Spain. At the same time Marcus Licinius Crassus, a rich patrician, suppressed in Italy the slave revolt led by Spartacus. Pompey and Crassus both ran for the consulship—an office held by two men—in 70 BC. Pompey, who by this time had changed sides, was technically ineligible, but with Caesar's help, he won the office. Crassus became the other consul.

In 69 BC, Caesar was elected quaestor and in 65 BC *curule aedile*, gaining great popularity for his lavish gladiatorial games. To pay for these, he borrowed money from Crassus. This united the two men, who also found common cause with Pompey. When Caesar returned to Rome in 60 BC after a year as governor of Spain, he joined forces with Crassus and Pompey in a three-way alliance known as the First Triumvirate; to cement their relationship further, Caesar gave his daughter Julia to Pompey in marriage. Caesar continued to rise in the rankings of government, being elected pontifex maximus (chief priest) and then praetor. He also continued his military successes and was elected consul, in 60 BC. Thus backed, Caesar was elected consul for 59 BC despite Optimate hostility, and the year after (58 BC), he was appointed governor of Roman Gaul.

Gallic Wars

At that time, Celtic Gaul, to the north, was still independent, but the Aedui, a tribe of Roman allies, appealed to Caesar for help against another Gallic people, the Helvetii, during the first year of his governorship. Caesar marched into Celtic Gaul with six legions, defeated the Helvetii, and forced them to return to their home area. Next, he crushed Germanic forces under Ariovistus (fl. about 71–58 BC). By 57 BC, following the defeat of the Nervii, Rome was in control of northern Gaul. (A last revolt of the Gauls, led by Vercingetorix, was suppressed in 52 BC.)

Power play

While Caesar was in Gaul, his agents attempted to dominate politics in Rome. This, however, threatened Pompey's position, and it became necessary for the triumvirs to arrange a meeting at Luca in 56 BC, which brought about a temporary reconciliation. It was decided that Caesar would continue in Gaul for another five years, while Pompey and Crassus would both be consuls for 55 BC; after that, each would have proconsular control of provinces. Caesar then went off to raid Britain and put down a revolt in Gaul. Crassus, ever eager for military glory, went to his post in Syria. Provoking a war with the Parthian Empire, he was defeated and killed at Carrhae in 53 BC. This removed the last buffer between Caesar and Pompey; their family ties had been broken by the death of Julia in 54 BC.

Civil War

In 52 BC, with Crassus out of the way, Pompey was made sole consul. Combined with his other powers, this gave him a formidable position. Jealous of his younger rival, he determined to break Caesar's power, an objective that could not be achieved without first depriving him of his command in Gaul. In order to protect himself, Caesar suggested that he and Pompey both lay down their commands simultaneously, but this was rejected; goaded by Pompey, the Senate summarily called upon Caesar to resign his command and disband his army, or else be considered a public enemy. The tribunes, who were Caesar's agents, vetoed this motion, but they were driven out of the Senate chamber. The Senate then entrusted Pompey with providing for the safety of the state. His forces far outnumbered Caesar's, but they were scattered throughout the provinces, and his troops in Italy were not prepared for war. Early in 49 BC, Caesar crossed the Rubicon, a small stream separating his province from Italy, and moved swiftly southward. Pompey fled to Brundisium and from there to Greece. In three months, Caesar was master of all Italy; his forces then took Spain and the key port of Massilia (Marseille).

In Rome Caesar became dictator until elected consul for 48 BC. At the beginning of that year, he landed in Greece and smashed Pompey's forces at Pharsalus. Pompey escaped to Egypt, where he was assassinated. When Caesar arrived there, he installed Cleopatra, daughter of the late King Ptolemy XI (c. 112–51 BC) as queen. In 47 BC, he pacified Asia Minor and returned to Rome to become dictator again. By the following year, all Optimate forces had been defeated and the Mediterranean world pacified.

Dictatorship and Assassination

The basic prop for Caesar's continuation in power was the dictatorship for life. According to the traditional Republican constitution, this office was only to be held for six months during a dire emergency. That rule, however, had been broken before. Sulla had ruled as dictator for several years, and Caesar now followed suit. In addition, he was made consul for ten years in 45 BC, and he received the sanctity of tribunes, making it illegal to harm him. Caesar also obtained honors to increase his prestige: He wore the robe, crown, and scepter of a triumphant general and used the title *imperator*. Furthermore, as Pontifex Maximus, he was head of the state religion. Above all, however, he was in total command of the armies, and this remained the backbone of his power.

As a ruler, Caesar instituted various reforms. In the provinces, he eliminated the highly corrupt tax system, sponsored colonies of veterans, and extended Roman citizenship. At home, he reconstituted the courts and increased the number of senators. His reform of the calendar gave Rome a rational means of recording time.

A number of senatorial families, however, felt that Caesar threatened their position, and his honors and powers made them fear that he would become a *rex* (king), a title they, as Republicans, hated. Accordingly, in 44 BC, an assassination plot was hatched by a group of senators, including Gaius Cassius and Marcus Junius Brutus. On March 15 of that year, when Caesar entered the Senate house, the group killed him.

Achievements

Scholarly opinion of Caesar's accomplishments is divided. Some regard him as an unscrupulous tyrant, with an insatiable lust for power, and blame him for the demise of the Roman Republic. Others, admitting that he could be ruthless, insist that the Republic had already been destroyed. They maintain that to save the Roman world from chaos a new type of government had to be created. In fact, Caesar's reforms did stabilize the Mediterranean world. Among ancient military commanders, he may be second only to Alexander the Great.

Caesar and the Pirates

In 75 BC, Julius Caesar was captured by Cilician pirates, who infested the Mediterranean Sea. The Romans had never sent a navy against them, because the pirates offered the Roman senators slaves, which they needed for their latifundia in Italy. Consequently, piracy was common. In chapter 2 of his "Life of Julius Caesar," the Greek author Plutarch of Chaeronea (46-c.120) describes what happened when Caesar encountered the pirates.

On the way to the island of Rhodes to study philosophy and oratory (public speaking), Caesar was kidnapped by Cilician pirates in the Mediterranean Sea. When they demanded a ransom of twenty talents, he laughed at them, saying they did not know whom they had captured. Instead, he ordered them to ask for fifty. They accepted, and Caesar sent his followers to various cities to collect the ransom money.

In all he was held for 38 days, and he used the time to write poems and speeches which he read aloud to the pirates. If they failed to admire his work, he would call them illiterate savages to their faces, and would often laughingly threaten to have them all crucified. These pirates were about the most bloodthirsty people in the world at the time, but Caesar treated them so highhandedly that, whenever he wanted to sleep, he would send to them and tell them to stop talking. The pirates grew fond of Caesar and attributed his freedom of speech to a kind of simplicity in his character or boyish playfulness.

However, the ransom arrived from Miletus and, as soon as Caesar paid the pirates and been set free, he immediately manned some ships and set sail from the harbor of Miletus against the pirates. He found them still there, lying at anchor off the island, and he captured nearly all of them. He took their property as spoils of war and put the men themselves into the prison at Pergamum. ... He went to Pergamum, took the pirates out of prison, and crucified the lot of them, just as he had often told them he would do when he was on the island and they imagined that he was joking. However, since they had treated him well, he had their throats cut before they were crucified to lessen their suffering.

Caesar Crosses the Rubicon

On January 7, 49 BC, the Senate demanded Julius Caesar to hand over his ten well-trained legions to a new governor. Caesar heard the news in Ravenna, and knew that he had to make a choice between prosecution and rebellion; preferring the dignity of war over the humiliation of unfriendly politics, Caesar chose to rebel, quoting his favorite poet Menander, 'the die is cast'.

On January 10 or 11, 49 BC, his army crossed the river Rubico (a.k.a. the Rubicon River), a river in northern Italy forming part of the boundary between Cisalpine Gaul and Italy. In so doing, he invaded his own country of Italy, which the Senate declared to be an act of civil war.

The Rubicon was a relatively minor waterway in northern Italy. Roman legionaries, slaves, generals, and whoever else might be traveling with a Roman army could easily cross it on foot. However, since ancient times, the Rubicon River had marked the northernmost boundary of Rome, a boundary between Rome and its northern neighbor, Gaul. A Roman general could not go across the boundary while at the head of his army. For such a man to lead his troops in battle gear into the heart of Rome was against one of the oldest laws on the Roman law books. It was treason.

Treason was an offense against the Roman government, against the very heart of Roman society. Treason was punishable by death. Someone who committed treason would inevitably be hunted down by Roman soldiers and dragged to the Roman Senate, where he would be tried, with the very likely outcome of a guilty verdict and a death sentence.

In 49 BC, the frontiers of Rome were expanding. The young general, Julius Caesar, was making quite a name for himself in Gaul, which is mostly what we now call France. Caesar and his army had spent several years of hard fighting defeating the native Celts and Germanic peoples of Gaul, including the Helvetii. Now Caesar ruled the area with an iron fist. Elsewhere in the Republic, Pompey, the other surviving consul of the First Triumvirate (Crassus had been killed in 53 BC), was conquering vast territories in the east and south. At the time that Caesar's army arrived in northern Italy, Pompey and his army were in Spain, relatively far away by ancient transportation standards.

By this time, Pompey and Caesar had grown quite jealous of each other. An attempt to smooth things over was made when Caesar's daughter Julia married Pompey. This worked only for a short time, however, because Julia died in childbirth; and, since no blood ties kept the men together anymore, the rivalry intensified. By this time, also, Caesar had become such a favorite of the common people of Rome (who outnumbered the wealthy) that "Caesar" was a well-known name throughout much of the Republic. Pompey, on the other hand, was a master general and favorite of the wealthy and of the Senate, but he considered himself much more than Caesar's equal, both in governmental terms and on the battlefield.

So here was Caesar, staying in Ravenna, and wanting to consolidate his hold on the hearts and minds of the Roman people (and government). He marched his men to the brink of confrontation and then boldly took them across in history. Some historians differ on exactly how the crossing took place. Suetonius, an ancient Roman historian, had this to say:

Coming up with his troops on the banks of the Rubicon, which was the frontier of his province, he halted for a while, and revolving in his mind the importance of the step he meditated, he turned to those about him, saying: 'Still we can retreat! But once let us pass this little bridge, - and nothing is left but to fight it out with arms!'

Even as he hesitated, this incident occurred. A man of strikingly noble mien and graceful aspect appeared nearby, and played upon a pipe. To hear him not merely some shepherds, but soldiers too came flocking from their posts, and amongst them some trumpeters. He snatched a trumpet from one of them and ran to the river with it; then sounding the "Advance!" with a piercing blast he crossed to the other side. At this Caesar cried out, 'Let us go where the omens of the Gods and the crimes of our enemies summon us! THE DIE IS NOW CAST!'

Thus, the historian Suetonius could seem to be arguing, it was not Caesar who initiated the treason; rather, he was responding to a charge made by another of his men. "The die is now cast" could be interpreted to mean that the decision was made for him and that he had only to go along.

No matter the interpretation, the fact remained that Caesar and his army were now in violation of one of the oldest laws of them all, treason. The outcry was immediate in Rome itself, with the Senate calling for Caesar to disband his army and submit to their authority.

The call went out to Pompey to come defend his beloved Senate against the intrusion by Caesar. The response by both men was telling: Caesar marched his army into Rome, took over the place, and had a new Senate installed, one that included mostly men favorable to his intentions; Pompey, meanwhile, sailed his army to Greece, there to set up a defensive position and await Caesar's attack. The result was the epic Battle of Pharsalus, which resulted in a victory by Caesar, the death of Pompey, and the dawning of a new day in Rome.

- July 13, 100 BC – Birth in Rome; (maybe July 12, 102 BC)
- 84 BC – First marriage to Cornelia (daughter of L. Cornelius Cinna)
- 82 BC – Escapes the persecutions led by Sulla
- 81 - 79 BC – Military service in Asia and Cilicia; tryst with Nicomedes of Bithynia
- 75 BC – Captured by Cilician Pirates
- 73 BC – Elected pontifex
- 69 BC – Quaestor in Hispania Ulterior; wife Cornelia dies
- 67 BC – Marries Pompeia
- 65 BC – Curule aedile (director of the games)
- 63 BC – Elected *pontifex maximus* and *praetor urbanus*; the Cataline conspiracy
- 62 BC – Divorces Pompeia
- 61 BC – Becomes proconsul (governor) of Further Spain
- 60 BC – Elected consul; First Triumvirate
- 59 BC – Elected consul
- 58 BC – Defeats the Helvetii and in Gaul (Gallic Wars)
- 55 BC – Crossing of the Rhine; Caesar invades Britain
- 54 BC – Death of Julia (Caesar's daughter and wife of Pompey)
- 53 BC – Death of Crassus: end of the First Triumvirate
- 52 BC – Battle of Alesia; Death of Clodius; Caesar defeats Vercingetorix
- 49 BC – Crossing of the Rubicon, the civil war starts
- 48 BC – Death of Pompey in Greece; made dictator; second time consul
- 47 BC – Campaign in Egypt; meets Cleopatra VII
- 46 BC – Defeats Cato and Metellus Scipio in northern Africa; third time consul
- 45 BC –
 - Defeats the last opposition in Hispania
 - Returns to Rome; fourth time consul
 - Dictator Perpetuus (for life)
- 44 BC –
 - appointed perpetual dictator
 - February, Refuses the diadem offered by Antony
 - Ides of March (March 15), Assassinated