

# Julius Caesar

By Vickie Chao

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Ancient Rome had many famous people. Julius Caesar, undoubtedly, was one of them.

Julius Caesar was born on July 13, 100 B.C. (some say 102 B.C.) At the time, the Roman society divided its citizens into two large groups. One was for the nobles. The other was for the commoners. Though Caesar's family belonged to the first category, they had lost their fame and fortune a long time ago. The harsh reality forced them to live in an apartment house in a less reputable area in Rome.

Luckily, all hope was not lost. When Caesar was about 10 years old, his aunt, Julia, married a very rich man named Gaius Marius. Through him, the financial woes that the Caesars had suffered earlier became a memory of the past.

Marius started out his career in the army. As he gained prominence over time, he began pursuing a political life. Politicians in ancient Rome all had one position in mind - consul, and Marius was no exception. He won his first consul election in 108 B.C. and then five more times from 104 B.C. to 100 B.C. After concluding his sixth term in the office, he announced his intention to retire. Though he officially had bowed out from the public, Marius kept a close tab on what was going on in Rome. When he heard that his archenemy, Lucius Cornelius Sulla, was preparing for the war against the king of Pontus in Asia Minor (today's Turkey) in 87 B.C., he decided to come out of his retirement. He convinced the senate that he was a better candidate for the job than Sulla.

As the news of switching commandership reached Sulla, he was very angry. He was not going to sit back and let Marius be in charge. Thus, instead of accepting the new decision, he led his troops back to Rome and forced Marius and his supporters to flee. With Rome now under Sulla's control, he took back the right to lead the military campaign against Pontus and departed once again. After Sulla was gone, Marius returned to Rome. He recovered his influence in no time. Teamed up with Lucius Cornelius Cinna (Caesar's father-in-law), the duo persecuted Sulla's supporters. They won the consul election in 86 B.C. The celebration of victory was short-lived because Marius died a few days later. Cinna became the effective ruler of Rome for the next couple of years. He died in 82 B.C.

Upon Cinna's death, Sulla made a triumphant return to Rome. He secured an appointment from the senate and became dictator in 81 B.C. With things going his way now, Sulla began his revenge. He proscribed and outlawed anybody who opposed him. As Marius' nephew by marriage and Cinna's son-in-law, Caesar was the obvious target. To save his own life, he put on a disguise and went into hiding outside of Rome. His relatives and supporters persuaded Sulla to change his mind and spare Caesar. Although Sulla agreed at the time, he regretted the decision years later.

In spite of Sulla's pardon, Caesar did not return to Rome. He joined the military and stationed in Asia Minor until Sulla died in 78 B.C. While spending his time guarding the Roman Republic's territory, Caesar won many important battles and quickly became known for his genius in military operations. After Sulla's death, he came back to Rome and began trying his hands as a politician.

Caesar, by all accounts, was a great orator (public speaker). As a legal advocate, he prosecuted former governors notorious for extortion and corruption. His tough stand on crime won him lots of support from the commoners. For the next few years, Caesar took one position after another and slowly climbed up the political ladder. In 69 B.C., he won an election and became *quaestor* (treasurer) to the governor in Lusitania (today's Portugal and southern Spain). En route to this new post, he saw a statue of Alexander the Great and wept. When asked why he was so upset, he said that when Alexander was his age, he already had conquered so many nations. He felt ashamed because he had done nothing memorable to speak of. As if the realization was not depressing enough, he soon got two more blows in his personal life. Both his beloved wife and Aunt Julia died! Alas, 69 B.C. was indeed a difficult year for Caesar.



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Though stricken by his personal loss, Caesar decided to remarry in 67 B.C. for political gain. This time, he chose Sulla's granddaughter, Pompeia Sulla, to be his next wife. The marriage, however, did not last long. They divorced five years later.

Caesar was an extravagant spender. Over the years, he had accumulated a lot of debts. His personal financial crisis reached a boiling point by 63 B.C. He eventually had to rely on his friend to pay off some of his balance. After the creditors backed off a bit, he once again took up a position in Lusitania; this time he was the governor. The year was 61 B.C. While stationed in this faraway place from Rome, Caesar developed a remarkable reputation as a military commander. He fought and won numerous battles against the rebellious local tribes. Upon his triumphant return to Rome, he decided to run for the office of consul. To achieve his goal, he decided to seek help from Marcus Licinius Crassus and Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus ("Pompey the Great"). With much negotiation, the trio set up an alliance (later became known as "The First Triumvirate"). In their deal, Crassus and Pompey would use their considerable wealth and influence to help Caesar win the election, and once elected, Caesar would lobby for their own political interests. To further strengthen the bond, Caesar allowed Pompey to marry his daughter, Julia Caesaris. Crassus, Pompey, and Caesar's arrangement worked out beautifully. Caesar became consul in 59 B.C. True to his words, he helped champion the causes beneficial to Crassus and Pompey. Caesar married for the third time during his one-year term in office.

After Caesar finished serving as consul, he spent most of his time in the next couple of years outside of Rome. Using his brilliance, he conquered many lands and helped to expand the Roman Republic's already vast territory. Among his achievements during this period, the most famous were perhaps the two invasions of Britain - first in 55 B.C. and second in 54 B.C.

Despite the success, Caesar had a lot of problems on his hands. Many people in Rome disliked him. They would pounce on any chance to take him down. Of his two staunch supporters from the First Triumvirate, Crassus was dead, and Pompey began to develop a different view of Caesar after he lost his wife Julia Caesaris in childbirth in 54 B.C. Caesar tried to mend the relationship with his opponents. But nothing worked. In early January of 49 B.C., the senate declared him a public enemy. When word reached Caesar, he set out to prepare for war. At the dawn of January 11, he and his men arrived at the northern bank of a small river called Rubicon that marked the official border of the Roman Republic. Right before crossing, he ordered his troops to halt and contemplated his options. If he proceeded, he would trigger a civil war and really make himself a public enemy. If he pulled back, he would face persecution and, most likely, lose his life. Seeing no way out, he marched forward and invaded his own country.

The victory came swiftly. By 48 B.C., the senate appointed him dictator and gave him total control of Rome. Pompey fled to Egypt seeking refuge, but was ultimately betrayed by Ptolemy XIII, the Egyptian pharaoh at the time, who ordered his assassination. When Caesar came to Egypt in pursuit of Pompey, Ptolemy presented him Pompey's head. At the sight of this "gift," Caesar broke down and cried. Caesar lingered in Egypt for several months. During his stay there, he defeated Ptolemy and installed Cleopatra VII (Ptolemy's sister) as the new ruler in Egypt. The two reportedly had an affair.

Caesar left Egypt in 47 B.C. to quash the remaining rebellion forces. Upon his return to Rome, the senate showered him with praise and honors. It appointed him dictator for the next 10 years. It allowed him to hold any public office he wanted. It renamed the month of his birth from Quintilis to July (or Julius in Latin). It made his birthday a national holiday. With his power reaching an all-time high, Caesar minted coins bearing his face. The act was the first in the Roman history, for no living Roman had ever had his image featured on coins. Furthermore, a statue of Caesar with the inscription "To the Invincible God" was put up first in the temple of Quirinus and then in the capital.

In 45 B.C., Caesar was made dictator for life. His influence made many senators very uncomfortable. The spirit of the Roman Republic was to avoid having any one person with absolute control. That is, the spirit of the Roman Republic was to avoid monarchy. As Caesar began to act and to be looked upon as the king, the discontented senators decided to do something about it. On March 15, 44 B.C., they stabbed him in a gathering and laid his body at the foot of Pompey's statue.

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Caesar, in the eyes of many, was a controversial figure. While several of his policies made him immensely popular among the commoners, he always had a strained relationship with the nobles who eventually had him killed. Whether Caesar really intended to be a king or not, it was no longer important. What matters is the legacy he left behind. From the time of his death until now, he has continued to be hailed as one of the greatest commanders in history. His military achievement was as exceptional as that of Alexander the Great!

Julius Caesar

## Questions

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- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Which of the following about Caesar is correct?
- A. Caesar offered his daughter's hand in marriage to his political allies, Marcus Licinius Crassus.
  - B. Caesar was a very frugal man. He never liked the idea of lavish spending.
  - C. Caesar was elected consul for the first time at the age of 41.
  - D. Because of his commoner background, Caesar never won the nobles' support.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Where did Caesar go after he got the pardon from Sulla?
- A. Asia Minor
  - B. Lusitania
  - C. Egypt
  - D. Britain
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Upon seeing whose statue did Caesar weep for not having done anything memorable yet in his life?
- A. Alexander the Great
  - B. Genghis Khan
  - C. Napoleon Bonaparte
  - D. Pompey the Great
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Which of the following events happened first?
- A. Caesar became a legal advocate.
  - B. Caesar invaded Britain.
  - C. Caesar became consul.
  - D. Caesar formed an alliance with Crassus and Pompey.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. How many times did Caesar marry?
- A. Once
  - B. Twice
  - C. Three times
  - D. Four times
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Who killed Caesar?
- A. Sulla
  - B. Augustus
  - C. Senators
  - D. Pompey

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\_\_\_\_\_ 7. Who killed Pompey the Great?

- A. Augustus
- B. Cleopatra VII
- C. Caesar
- D. Ptolemy VIII

\_\_\_\_\_ 8. Which of the following about Caesar is **incorrect**?

- A. He had his face minted on coins.
- B. He died of poison.
- C. His birthday became a national holiday in Rome.
- D. He got appointed dictator for life in 45 B.C.

\_\_\_\_\_ 9. Why did Caesar build an alliance with Crassus and Pompey?

- A. Because he wanted to win the election of consul
- B. Because he wanted to be appointed dictator for life
- C. Because he wanted to get rid of his debts
- D. Because he wanted to be in charge of the military campaign against the king of Pontus

\_\_\_\_\_ 10. How many times did Marius Gaius win the election of consul?

- A. Seven
- B. Eleven
- C. Three
- D. Ten

**Suppose you could travel back in time. If you were in charge of writing a eulogy for Caesar, what would you say?**

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