

JULIUS CAESAR TEACHERS' NOTES

Permission is granted for the
Teachers' Notes to be used
by students on their school /
college computers.

JULIUS CAESAR TEACHERS' NOTES

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Julius Caesar was born on July 13 100BC, at a time when Rome ruled all the Italian peninsula, and had conquered most countries surrounding the Mediterranean. The Romans were brilliant engineers, building a network of roads that criss-crossed the peninsula, making travel efficient, and allowed troops to move quickly during times of war. Farming was one of the most important industries, and new crops, fruits and vegetables were introduced throughout the empire. Wine, olive oil, fish, ceramics, fine building stone and metals were traded. Large estates, usually owned by absentee landlords, were run by bailiffs and worked by slaves. There were also some independent and tenant farmers.

Politically, Rome was a democracy where male citizens voted annually for magistrates to run the government. The Senate had 600 life members, all either serving magistrates or ex-magistrates. Magistrates were unpaid, so career politicians had to be wealthy, or have wealthy patrons.

The typical political career path for any young Roman noble was to join the army between the age of eighteen and twenty, to serve for approximately ten years. During this time, he would become a military tribune, then quaestor. Twenty quaestors were chosen annually and automatically became Senators, who then were eligible to be elected as Tribunes. At a minimum age of thirty-seven, four aediles were elected as administrators and to stage public games. At age forty, they could become one of the eight praetors. As well as presiding over law courts, praetors could govern a province, and later command an army. Finally, the two consuls were elected at a minimum age of forty-three. This was the highest office in the empire. Consuls held Imperium, a Latin word which broadly translates as 'power to command.' After their one-year term as consul, they could be elected a censor, with two appointed every five years. A dictator could be appointed for six months. This supreme power was entrusted into the hands of a general in times of acute national crisis only.

There were three classes in Roman society. The senatorial or patrician class ruled the empire. The equites were wealthy businessmen. The plebeians included everyone from well-to-do tradesmen down to the poorest citizens. The rich lived in villas or town houses in areas close to the Forum. Poorer Romans lived in tenements in the crowded, dirty and dangerous Subura district. One third of Rome's population were slaves, who could be legally bought and sold. They provided the workforce, employed mostly as farm labourers or household servants.

MILITARY & POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN ROME

The Legion was the core of the army, commanded by a legate, (a general) who was also a senator. Under him were six military tribunes, who were senators' sons or young men of substance. The legion comprised around 6000 men, subdivided into ten cohorts.

Each cohort was further divided into six centuries, with each commanded by a centurion. Centurions were the backbone of the army, the leaders in battle, organisers and disciplinarians in camp.

The cavalry force comprised about 300 men and was commanded by a non-Roman aristocrat or a Roman praefectus. Auxiliaries, archers and slingers operated separately. Following the army were the camp followers, mostly slaves. They prepared food, looked after clothing, equipment and bedding.

During the first century BCE, Rome was rocked by two civil wars. In 91BCE the Italian states, who provided troops for Rome, demanded citizenship, called the franchise.

After a bloody conflict, the Social War, Rome finally relented. From 88 to 82BCE, another civil war further destabilised Rome. A bitter rivalry developed between the two consuls Gaius Marius and the aristocratic Lucius Cornelius Sulla.

Marius repeatedly attempted to undermine Sulla's power. It reached a flash point when Sulla was in Naples preparing for a war, and Marius took control of the troops Sulla had left behind in Rome. A furious Sulla returned with his army, the first instance of a Roman commander leading his troops against Rome. Marius fled to Africa, and Sulla's forces entered the city almost without resistance. Sulla ordered that thousands of Marius' supporters be put to death and strengthened the power of the conservative senate.

Later, with Sulla away on military campaigns, Marius returned to Rome and organised his allies to murder many of Sulla's supporters. But Marius became gravely ill and died during this time. Sulla returned and declared Marius' followers enemies of the state and, in a single day, 6,000 were executed and their properties confiscated. In 82BCE Sulla had himself elected as "dictator for the purpose of restoring the state", a position he held for two years. He died four years later but his dictatorship marked the beginning of the end of the Roman Republic.

CAESAR'S BACKGROUND & RISE TO PROMINENCE

He was a descendant of two old Roman families, the Julians, on his father's side, and the Aurelians on his mother's. However, despite being patricians, his family was poor and lived in the Subura, a rough part of the city. His mother, Aurelia, was the landlord of a tenement in an insula. His father reached the position of praetor but died when Caesar was only 15.

Despite their modest circumstances, Caesar's parents ensured he received a traditional upper-class education, befitting a Roman noble. At a young age, a tutor (paedagogus) taught him reading, writing and arithmetic. His secondary education included history, philosophy, geometry, music, astronomy and classical Greek literature. Caesar, like most young Romans, became fluent in Greek and Latin.

Caesar used his family connections, political alliances and marriages to further his career. Caesar married four times, but it was well known that he had many mistresses as well. His first wife was Cossutia, who he married at a young age to please his father.

After his father's death in 83BCE, he divorced Cossutia and married Cornelia, the daughter of Lucius Cornelius Cinna. Cinna was elected as a consul four times, and had joined forces with Marius in taking control of Rome. Cornelia bore Caesar's only legitimate child, Julia. When Cornelia died, Caesar married Pompeia, the granddaughter of Sulla and a relative of Pompey the Great.

This was a political marriage only, which Caesar used to gain the support of a group of senators, the Optimates, who had previously supported Sulla. Caesar divorced Pompeia citing infidelity, and was reported to have said: *"The wife of Caesar must be above suspicion"*. In 59BCE he married his last wife Calpurnia, the daughter of Lucius Pisa, who then nominated his new son-in-law as a candidate for consul.

His paternal aunt Julia was married to Gaius Marius, one of the most powerful men in Rome at the time. Marius' great wealth and influence revived the Julian family fortunes. But this connection also created enemies. When Sulla was in power, he ordered Caesar to divorce Cornelia, whose father Cinna had supported Marius. When Caesar refused, Sulla proscribed him and he was listed among those to be executed. Caesar went into hiding, but his influential friends and relatives eventually secured him a pardon. At the age of 20, Caesar joined the military.

In 80BCE, he won the highest military decoration for bravery at the siege of Mytilene on the island of Lesbos. Later, in the provinces of Asia and Cilicia, he gained valuable experience in provincial warfare and administration. On returning to Rome, Caesar gained a reputation as a legal advocate. To further his education he set off to Rhodes to study rhetoric, but was captured by pirates. After being ransomed and released, he recruited private troops, captured the pirates and had them crucified.

Caesar's early political career was typical for a Roman politician with his family background. In his first years of military service he served as a junior to a legate, next as a military tribune and then as a quaestor in Spain. As a quaestor, Caesar was able to attend meetings of the senate. He was extremely popular when elected aedile in 65BCE, but went into debt financing magnificent public games. The following year, Caesar used bribery, financed by his supporters, to become Pontifex Maximus. He also took no part in a conspiracy by Catiline to take the consulship from Cicero. However, he earned a lifetime of hostility from Cicero by opposing the execution of Catiline's accomplices. Caesar's association with men of influence would have a dramatic effect on his ambitions. In 62BCE, as praetor, he supported measures in the senate that were extremely favourable to Pompey the Great. Without great personal wealth, Caesar was always in debt. His friendship with the richest man in Rome, Marcus Licinius Crassus, helped pacify his many creditors. Caesar's appointment as Governor of Further Spain and the resulting military success restored his finances, and with the support of Pompey and Crassus, he was elected as a consul in 60BCE.

Question 1: How did his family background prepare him for his prominent role?

Question 2: What methods did he use to further his political career?

THE FIRST TRIUMVIRATE & THE GALLIC WARS

Caesar joined Pompey and Crassus in a secret coalition called by modern historians as “The First Triumvirate”. To their enemies, however, it was “the three-headed monster.” In 62BCE, Pompey had returned victorious from Asia, but was unable to get the Senate to ratify his wish to grant land to his veteran soldiers.

Crassus had originally blocked Pompey's efforts, but Caesar persuaded the two men to work together, promising to support their interests if they, in return, helped him get elected to the consulship. In 60BCE, Caesar and Marcus Bibulus were elected as the consuls. That same year, Caesar's daughter Julia married Pompey, strengthening the triumvirate.

With Pompey in the East and Crassus in Asia Minor, Caesar was appointed proconsul of Gaul after his consulship was over. He left Rome in 58BCE and did not return for 9 years. During this time, he conquered most of what is now central Europe, opening up these lands to Mediterranean civilization.

Caesar's ambitions during his proconsulship was military glory, and the opportunity to improve his finances. He governed three provinces, the peaceful Illyricum, Cisalpine Gaul and Transalpine Gaul. It would take from 58 to 51BCE to completely subdue Gaul.

He carried his conquests far beyond the guidelines as set out by the senate. Caesar justified his campaigns by claiming they were punitive expeditions, or because of a need to subdue the volatile Gauls. When the Helvetii tribe attempted to move through the Aedui territory to the Atlantic coast, Caesar refused. This provided him with an excuse for war outside his province. The Helvetii were defeated, as were other German tribes infiltrating Gaul. Revolts were put down in Aquitania and the lands of the Veneti and Uenelli. These campaigns were conducted during the summer months. During the winter, Caesar would return to Cisalpine Gaul in Northern Italy, and manipulate Roman politics through his supporters.

In 55 BCE, Caesar made the first Roman crossing of the English Channel. The three-month expedition to Britain was ill-prepared and achieved little. The second invasion a year later was more successful but there were no long term benefits.

In 52BCE, Vercingetorix of the Avernii united the Gauls, and threatened Caesar. A scorched earth policy was used to deprive the Romans of food. It was only after the Roman army besieged the city of Avaricum and massacred the inhabitants that it was able to replenish its supplies. Finally, the Siege of Alesia was the decisive battle of the Gallic Wars. It is regarded as one of the great military successes of classical history, achieved against enormous odds. The Roman army besieged Alesia, with Vercingetorix and 80,000 men trapped inside for a month. A 14 kilometre wall, three lines of reinforced trenches, palisades and turrets surrounded the city. The Gauls who had remained outside the walls, mustered 250,000 troops and 8,000 cavalry, attacking the Roman army of 70,000. The Gauls initially gained the upper hand.

But the introduction of the Roman cavalry, which attacked the enemy from behind, turned the tide. Vercingetorix surrendered and was imprisoned. He was then displayed in triumph and finally executed.

During the Gallic Wars, Caesar's armies conquered 165,000 square kilometres of territory for the Roman Empire. An annual tribute of 400,000 gold pieces was paid to Rome by the subdued nations. Caesar had acquired a personal fortune as well, and his popularity was immense. He also wrote seven books about the Gallic Wars.

Caesar's great success in Gaul can be attributed to his relationship with his army. His personal charisma secured the faithful service of officers and legionaries.

He bonded well with his soldiers, addressing them personally, referring to them as 'comrades'. The troops often sang affectionate, ribald songs about him on parades. Caesar rewarded all his troops handsomely after each battle. But it was his skill in analysing logistics, terrain and enemy movements, in taking advantage of the unexpected, and his undying affection for his army, that made him one of history's greatest commanders.

Question 1: What was Caesar's role in the First Triumvirate?

Question 2: To what extent did Caesar's success in Gaul further his aspiration for political glory?

THE CIVIL WAR

During Caesar's absence in Gaul, Pompey consolidated his power in an alliance with the Optimates, the senatorial aristocracy within the senate. The death of Caesar's daughter during childbirth in 54 BCE, and Crassus' death a year later at the hands of the Parthians, caused Caesar's relationship with Pompey to become increasingly strained. With the conquest of Gaul effectively completed, Caesar set up an efficient provincial administration to govern the vast territories. The Optimates in Rome attempted to cut short Caesar's term as governor of Gaul and made it clear that he would be immediately prosecuted for voting irregularities in his first consulship. Caesar tried to counter this situation by running for consul in absentia and therefore avoiding prosecution. Pompey supported opponents of Caesar's bid for a second consulate.

Caesar and his army were camped on the Italian side of the Rubicon River which, in summer, is a mere trickle. The senate continued to reject Caesar's offers of compromise and he was ordered to disband his army or be declared a public enemy. In response, he marched his army across the Rubicon in early 49 BCE. By crossing into Italy proper and marching on Rome, he precipitated yet another civil war. His veteran army quickly overran Italy, forcing an unprepared Pompey to withdraw to Greece.

Once in Rome, Caesar established a senate, and declared himself as Dictator. Later that year, a lightning campaign secured Spain from Pompey's allies. He then crossed into Greece, and engaged with Pompey in two battles.

At Dyrrhachium, Caesar's troops were forced to withdraw from the conflict. Later, at Pharsalus in August 48 B CE, Caesar's hardened veterans defeated Pompey's troops despite being vastly outnumbered. Pompey escaped to Egypt. Caesar, upon his arrival in Egypt, was informed that Pompey had been assassinated by agents of Ptolemy, the Egyptian co-regent. Caesar was beguiled by Ptolemy's sister Cleopatra, who became his mistress. After Ptolemy's death in battle, Cleopatra ascended the Egyptian throne. Caesar continued his campaign against Pompey's allies, defeating Pharnaces the king of Bosphorus, at Zela. The victory prompted Caesar to boast: "veni, vidi, vici": "I came, I saw, I conquered".

Caesar still faced much resistance from Pompey's former allies. At Thapsus in 46BCE he defeated the Optimates, who had joined forces with King Juba of Numidia in North Africa. Caesar returned triumphant to Rome. Nevertheless, he still had to quell a new resistance from Pompey's sons in Spain. In March 45 BCE they met in battle at Munda.

With the battle in the balance, it was Caesar's courage, determination and self-confidence that enabled him to lead his troops to victory when he came close to defeat.

Question 1: Was Caesar an opportunist when he crossed the Rubicon, or was it a carefully planned move to gain control of Rome?

THE DICTATORSHIP - POLICIES & REFORMS

The time Caesar spent subduing his enemies meant that he was seldom in Rome. But, he was securely in control. He was assisted in governing by his trusted lieutenants, Mark Anthony and Lepidus. Caesar was bestowed many honours. Significantly, in 44 BCE he was declared dictator for life. As well, he was appointed prefect of morals and was honoured with the minting of the first Roman gold coins in his image. Politically he enlarged the senate from 600 to 900 members, and increased the number of magistrates, praetors, aediles and quaestors. But, Caesar governed more like a general than a politician, promoting many of his supporters. Some senators disliked being required to swear an oath of allegiance to him personally. Although he nominally used the political structure, he often simply announced his decisions, with the Senate frequently unable to debate or vote. The legal system, which was unwieldy after many centuries of contradictory statutes, was reduced to a manageable civil code.

He permitted only senators and knights to serve on juries, rejecting patrician and proletariat control which provided a more balanced judicial system. His policy of clemency allowed troops once loyal to Pompey, to be enrolled in the army, with officers pardoned and readmitted into the senate.

Caesar embarked on a series of reforms to transform the Roman empire. Colonisation was promoted in Carthage and Corinth and thousands of Rome's poorest citizens were transported to the new colonies. Criminal penalties were increased and citizenship, with all its benefits, was granted to doctors and teachers, many of whom were Greek.

Economically, the number of people receiving the corn dole was halved. Caesar reformed the tax system, permitting provinces to collect and pay tribute without middlemen. Soldiers were paid bounties and pensions and their pay was increased. As Pontifex Maximus or head priest, he introduced the Julian Calendar on January 1, 45 BCE. This defined a year as being 365 and a quarter days. Public libraries were provided, and scholars and historians were commissioned to collect and classify Greek and Latin books on a comprehensive scale.

Caesar's plans for the future were grand. The Pontine marshes, 100 kilometres to the south of Rome, were to be drained to create more agricultural land. As well, Rome's harbour at Ostia was to be deepened to improve shipping. Caesar was about to embark on a campaign to conquer Parthia, which stretched from present day south-eastern Turkey to the east of Iran. He wished to avenge the death of his great supporter Crassus and the defeat his army suffered there. But fate would intervene.

Question 1: What was Caesar's relationship with the senate?

Question 2: What long term effect did his reforms have on the future of Rome?

ASSASSINATION

Caesar's reforms greatly improved his standing with Rome's lower- and middle-classes. But his popularity with some members of the Senate was another matter. Envy and concern over Caesar's contempt for old Republican ideals led many politicians to fear Caesar's aspiration to be king. Historically, Romans had no desire for monarchical rule. A conspiracy to assassinate Caesar was led by Gaius Cassius Longinus and Marcus Junius Brutus, who had been Caesar's protégé.

Brutus was an idealist who was persuaded by Cassius to turn against Caesar, believing his death would return Rome to its former Republican traditions.

It's not altogether clear if Caesar knew of the plot to kill him. There is the myth of a soothsayer warning him: "*beware the Ides of March*". The conspirators had to act quickly, as Caesar was to depart on a military campaign to Parthia on March 18. The Curia, the meeting place of the senate, had been damaged during the civil war, so the senate met in the portico of Pompey's theatre. On March 15 44 BCE, sixty conspirators came to the meeting with daggers concealed in their togas. Caesar was struck 23 times as he stood at the base of Pompey's statue. Legend has it that Caesar said in Greek to Brutus: "*You, too, my child*". After his death, the senators fled, and later slaves carried his body away to be cremated.

The conspirators believed their actions were for the good of Rome and the Empire. Their greatest error was assuming the old Republic would simply reinstate itself after Caesar's murder. Instead, Rome was dealt a great blow and 13 years of civil war ensued. A Second Triumvirate was formed to rule Rome, comprising Caesar's great-nephew and heir Octavian, Mark Anthony and Lepidus.

In 43 BCE, Octavian became consul, and ordered the execution of Caesar's assassins, including the great senator and orator Cicero. In 42 BCE at Philippi in Macedonia, Cassius was defeated by Mark Anthony.

In a second battle, Octavian's army was victorious over Brutus, who then committed suicide. Caesar's death had been avenged. Eventually, the triumvirate disintegrated with Lepidus expelled, with Mark Anthony and Octavian becoming bitter enemies, fighting for control of the empire. Forces led by Mark Anthony were beaten at the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE, and he too committed suicide. Octavian became the first emperor of Rome in 27 BCE, re-naming himself Augustus.

Question 1: What factors contributed to Julius Caesar's death?

EVALUATION

Julius Caesar had possibly more impact on his time than any other Roman. As a military leader, he is generally described as one of the greatest commanders in history. In defeating the Gauls, Caesar changed the direction of Rome's influence, with the empire anchored in Europe, rather than focused on the Mediterranean region.

Caesar has been viewed as: "the callous destroyer of the republic; a far sighted realist; the reformer who fought the conservatives; or the megalomaniac who destroyed Rome's political institutions for his own glory".

When evaluating historical opinions it is important to understand the personal and political bias that the writer may possess. The ancient author Suetonius describes Caesar as: "*a most skilful swordsman and horseman*". Cicero, despite regarding Caesar as 'dangerous to the future of the Republic', showed great respect for his writing and oratory skills: "*Caesar wrote admirably, his memoirs are cleanly, directly and gracefully composed*". "*Do you know any man who can speak better than Caesar*". Alternately, Caesar's books, '*On The Gallic War*' and '*On The Civil War*', were designed to enhance his own reputation. Sallust, an ally of Caesar, wrote glowingly of him but as a historian, his writing is inaccurate and therefore unreliable.

A century later, Plutarch pieced together historical events in his work, *Life of Caesar*. He blames Cassius for persuading Brutus to turn against Caesar. Cassius gathered together senators willing to carry out the assassination, but without Brutus' idealism, the conspiracy could not have succeeded. The influential 19th Century German scholar, Theodore Mommsen, was one of many who elevated Caesar's statesmanship and wisdom into a personality cult. To Mommsen, Roman society was out of control and close to destruction. Caesar alone took control of Rome's destiny, guiding it to become the empire that would rule the ancient world for another 500 years.

Question 1: Was Julius Caesar a success or failure during his time?