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| **The Assassination of Julius Caesar, 44 BC** | | |
|  | **Background Information**  **I**n January of 49 BC, Julius Caesar led his army across the Rubicon River in Northern Italy and plunged the Roman Republic into civil war. Caesar's rival, Pompey, fled to Greece. Within three months, Caesar controlled the entire Italian peninsula and had defeated anyone loyal to Pompey in Spain.  Caesar now pursued Pompey to Greece. Although outnumbered, Caesar crushed the forces of his enemy, but not before Pompey escaped to Egypt. Following Pompey to Egypt, Caesar was presented with his rival's severed head as a token of friendship from the Egyptians. Caesar defeated his remaining rivals in North Africa in 47 BC and returned to Rome with his authority firmly established.  Caesar’s power continued to grow, and in February 44 BC, he declared himself dictator for life. This act, along with his constant effort to decorate himself with the symbols of power, turned many in the Senate against him. Sixty members of the Senate concluded that the only solution to the problem was to assassinate Caesar.  **Death of a Dictator**  *Nicolaus of Damascus wrote the following account of the murder of Caesar a few years after the event. He was not actually present when the assassination occurred but had the opportunity to speak with those who were. He was a friend of Herod the Great and gathered his information during a visit to Rome. His account, presented below, is considered reliable.*  **The Plan:**  "The conspirators never met in the open, but they assembled a few at a time in each other’s homes. There were many discussions and proposals, as might be expected, while they investigated how and where to carry out their plan. Some suggested that they should make the assassination attempt as he was going along the Sacred Way, which was one of his favorite walks. Another idea was for it to be done at the elections during which he had to cross a bridge to appoint the magistrates; some could push him from the bridge while others would run up and kill him. A third plan was to wait for a coming gladiator fight. The advantage of this would be that, because of the fight, no one would be suspicious if weapons were seen. But the majority favored killing him while he sat in the Senate, where he would be by himself, and where the many conspirators could hide their daggers beneath their togas. This plan won the day."  **Brutus Persuades Caesar to Ignore his Apprehensions:**  "...Caesar’s friends were alarmed at certain rumors they heard and tried to stop him from going to the Senate house, as did his doctors, for he was suffering from occasional dizzy spells. His wife, Calphurnia, who was frightened by some visions in her dreams, clung to him and said that she would not let him go out that day. But Brutus, one of the conspirators who was then thought of as a close friend, came up and said, 'What is this, Caesar? Are you a man that pays attention to a woman's dreams and the idle gossip of stupid men, a man who would insult the Senate by not going out? The Senate, which has honored you and has been specially summoned by you? Listen to me, cast aside the warnings of all these people, and come. The Senate has been in session waiting for you since early this morning.' This swayed Caesar and he left."  **Bad Omens:**  "Before he went inside the Senate, priests brought up the victims for him to make what was to be his last sacrifice. The omens were clearly unfavorable. After this unsuccessful sacrifice, the priests made repeated other ones, to see if anything more encouraging might appear than what had already been revealed to them. In the end, they said that they could not clearly see what the gods wanted, for there was some evil spirit hidden in the victims. Caesar was annoyed and abandoned the sacrifices, though the priests still continued with their efforts.  The conspirators who were present were delighted at all this, though Caesar's friends asked him to put off the meeting of the Senate for that day because of what the priests had said, and he agreed to do this. However, some attendants came up, calling him and saying that the Senate was waiting for him. He glanced at his friends, and Brutus approached him again and said, 'Come, good sir, pay no attention to the babblings of these men. Do not postpone what Caesar and his mighty power has arranged. Make your own courage your positive omen.' He convinced Caesar with these words, took him by the right hand, and led him in to the Senate which was quite near. Caesar followed in silence."  **The Attack:**  "The Senate rose in respect for Caesar when they saw him entering. Those who were a part of the conspiracy stood near him. Right next to him was Tillius Cimber, whose brother had been banished by Caesar. Pretending to make a humble request on behalf of his brother, Cimber approached and grasped the mantle of Caesar’s toga. Caesar wanted to get up, but was prevented by Cimber and became exceedingly annoyed.  That was the moment for the men to set to work. All quickly unsheathed their daggers and rushed at him. First, Casca struck him with the point of the blade on the left shoulder a little above the collarbone. Caesar rose to defend himself, and in the uproar, Casca shouted out in Greek to his brother. His brother heard him and drove his sword into Caesar’s ribs. After a moment, Cassius made a slash at Caesar’s face, and Decius pierced him in the side. The attack continued; the conspirators were just like men doing battle against him.  After the assassination,  the senators fled,  leaving Caesar's body  on the Senate floor. Here  it laid for a few hours  before three slaves  carried it to his wife.  Under the mass of wounds, he fell at the foot of Pompey's statue. Everyone wanted to have had some part in the murder; not one of them failed to strike his body as it lay there, until, wounded thirty five times, he breathed his last."  **References:**     Nicolaus of Damascus' account appears in Workman, B.K. They Saw it Happen in Classical Times (1964); Suetonius, The Twelve Caesars (Penguin Classics), translated by Robert Graves (1957). |  | |