

Hail to the Conqueror! In the years after the Punic Wars, Rome continued to look for new areas to conquer and new peoples to govern. The young men of Rome's most powerful families were eager to gain fame by leading a Roman army in battle.

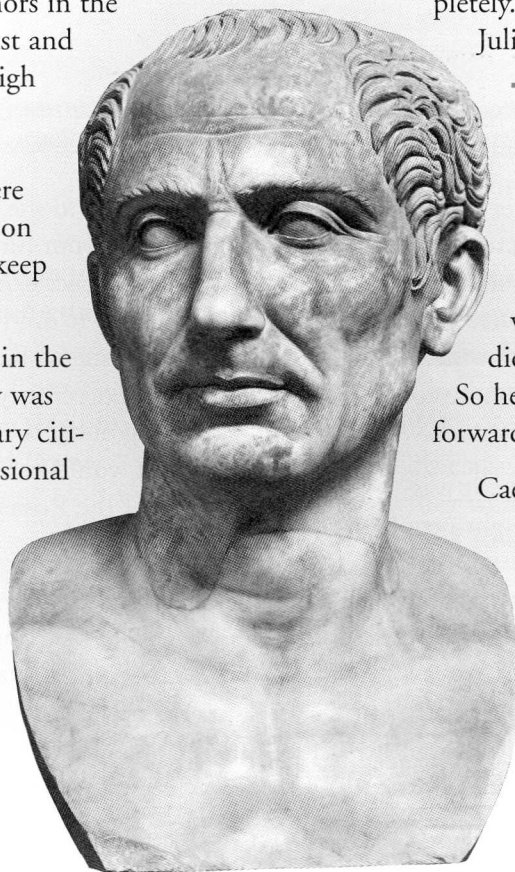
They looked forward to the wealth, honor, and power they would gain if they were successful. Julius Caesar, who lived from 101–44 B.C., was one of these ambitious young men.

Caesar belonged to a patrician family, but he was not wealthy. He knew that if he was going to get ahead in life, he would have to do it through military advancement. Caesar lived at a time when the Roman Republic was beginning to have some problems. The consuls and the Senate still ruled, but governors in the provinces were not always just and often forced people to pay high taxes. People in some of the conquered territories were unhappy about how they were governed. Rome had to rely on the strength of the army to keep the republic together.

There had been changes in the Roman army, too. The army was no longer manned by ordinary citizens. It had become a professional army. This meant that the men who joined the army did so to further their careers. They were willing to fight, but mostly they wanted to get rich and gain higher status. They felt more loyalty to the generals who could lead them to victory than they did to Rome itself. If one of these generals had

wanted to lead the army against Rome, he could have. The Senate was aware of this, and so they had made a law that the army could not come into the city of Rome itself.

The army had always been important to the Roman Republic, but now it was more important than ever. The generals who led the army were extremely powerful and could do great good or great harm. It was just a matter of time before someone tried to take over the republic completely. It turned out that that man was Julius Caesar.



July, the seventh month of our modern calendar year, is named for Julius Caesar.

The Rise to Power

Caesar was tall and well-built. He had dark-brown eyes and liked to look good. He kept his hair trimmed and his face clean-shaven. It bothered him that he was almost bald, and people who didn't like him teased him about it. So he combed what hair he had left forward on the top of his head.

Caesar was intelligent and had a good sense of humor. He could be charming and courteous when he wanted to be. But Caesar was also a very ambitious and determined man. He could be ruthless, and he was also arrogant.

Caesar commanded part of the Roman army, but this was not enough for him. He wanted as much power as he



This fifteenth-century illustrated French manuscript depicts Caesar's troops during the Gallic Wars.

could get. Caesar knew that in order to get what he wanted, he would have to be victorious in battle so that his soldiers would be more loyal to him than to Rome. He would also need to have political allies in Rome. If he helped others get some of the power they wanted, then he could use them to get the power that he wanted.

To become powerful at this time, it was important to be popular with the right people in Rome. So Caesar spent money entertaining others and making friends. Once he was popular, Caesar entered into an alliance with two other powerful Roman men named Pompey (PAHM pee) and Crassus (KRAS us). They helped one another to pass laws they wanted and schemed to keep the power that their enemies wanted to take from them. Caesar became powerful enough to be elected consul in 59 B.C.

Next, Caesar became one of the most successful generals the Roman army had ever seen. He

helped to expand the Roman Republic in Europe. It took him about nine years to fight the Gallic Wars, which gave Rome power in Gaul (modern-day France). He even invaded Britain in 55 B.C., although Rome would not conquer the island until the next century. Much of northern Europe was coming under the control of the Mediterranean world and would be influenced by the culture and laws of the Romans.

After he had conquered Gaul, Caesar decided that he wanted to be elected consul again. However, the first time he had been consul he had been proud and arrogant. He had also done some things he should not have done. Worse, his alliance with Pompey and Crassus had broken down. Pompey, in particular, realized that Caesar was using him; he did not trust Caesar anymore and wanted to get Caesar out of power.

No one becomes powerful without making enemies, and Caesar had made some strong ones.

Now these enemies were determined to keep Caesar from becoming consul again. They told Caesar that if he wanted to be elected consul, he had to come to Rome for the election. They also reminded him that he was not allowed to bring his army into Rome. But Caesar knew that if he went to Rome without his army, Pompey would have him arrested. Caesar faced a difficult situation. He wanted to be consul again, but it seemed impossible without breaking the law and taking at least part of his army into the city.

Dictator for Life

Caesar was not afraid to do things the hard way. In 49 B.C. he gathered his army and marched toward Rome. By crossing the Rubicon River, the northern boundary of Italy, he showed the Senate that he would fight them for power. Caesar understood that now there was no turning back. Legend has it that when he crossed the Rubicon he said, "The die is cast." Today, we use the phrases "the die is cast" and "crossing the Rubicon" to mean taking decisive action and going beyond the point of no return.

Caesar's actions started a civil war. Caesar and his army now had to fight it out with other parts of the Roman army. The existence of the Roman Republic itself was at stake.

Caesar quickly took control of Italy, but Pompey and his army managed to escape. Caesar had to spend some time chasing them down. Caesar and Pompey clashed in Spain as well as in Egypt. At last, in 44 B.C., Caesar achieved what he had wanted all along. He became the **dictator**, or absolute ruler, of Rome.

The Romans had known dictators before. In fact, they felt that in times of emergency, a dictator was necessary. But dictatorship was seen

as a temporary thing, to be used only in wartime. Legally, dictatorships could only last six months.

vocabulary

dictator the absolute ruler of a city or country

Caesar had something else in mind. He thought the idea of a temporary dictator was silly. What kind of foolish person would willingly give up ultimate power simply because the Senate told him to? Caesar was not going to give up the power he had gained. He made sure that everyone knew he meant to be the ruler for a long time. He had his face put on coins (something only kings did at this time) and the month of Quintilis was renamed Julius (July) in his honor.

Caesar had always loved the attention that he got from being a public figure. Nothing pleased him more than to have the privilege of wearing a laurel wreath, the symbol of conquerors and victors. But opponents said it looked like he was wearing a royal crown.

During the five years since Caesar had crossed the Rubicon, he had gained absolute power. True, he had to spend a lot of his time making sure that his enemies could not overthrow him, but he had also genuinely tried to improve things for people. Caesar had plans to make more people Roman citizens, stop corruption, improve the court system, and help people avoid falling into debt. He seemed to work constantly. He dictated letters while he was riding to battle. He worked quickly and tirelessly, but there was simply more work than one man could do.

Out of Touch

Caesar found it difficult to give other people things to do. In part, this was because he distrusted everyone and wanted to be in complete control. But it was also true that many government officials wouldn't cooperate with him because they were horrified by the bloody civil wars that pitted Roman against Roman. Many blamed Caesar for the collapse of the republic.

The pressures of being dictator began to make Caesar sick. He was exhausted, tense and irritable. He began to feel dizzy and suffered from convulsions and blackouts. Accounts from the time said he suffered from epilepsy. Epilepsy is a disease of the nervous system that causes sudden convulsions and blackouts.



Vincenzo Camuccini, an eighteenth-century Italian artist painted this scene of Julius Caesar's assassination.

Although Caesar had been an excellent general, he was not an especially good dictator. He was arrogant and offended many powerful Romans. He even dismissed his bodyguards, saying that no one could possibly want to murder him since his death would only bring about chaos.

This showed that Caesar was seriously out of touch. He did not recognize how much some people hated him. Then, in February of 44 B.C., Caesar went even further. He had the Senate vote him dictator for life.

There had long been powerful people in Rome who did not like the fact that Caesar had become dictator. Once he declared himself dictator for life, even more people grew angry with Caesar. They blamed him for destroying the republic—and they were prepared to do something about it.

The Betrayal

Caesar never seemed to realize how much pain he had caused the Roman people when he forced Roman to fight against Roman in the civil wars he started. He never seemed to realize that Romans were proud of the republic and did not want to see the days of the kings brought back. This shortsightedness caused his downfall.

About a month after he was made dictator for life, Caesar was murdered in the Senate house by several members of the Roman Senate. There were about 60 conspirators altogether, although only a handful actually drove their weapons into Caesar. The leaders of the assassination plot were Brutus (BROOT us) and Cassius. Tradition has it that as he was being stabbed, Caesar noticed Brutus among the men surrounding him and said, “Et tu, Brute?” (et tu BROO tay?) This is Latin for “You too, Brutus?” He had considered Brutus a friend, and he was shocked that Brutus had joined the conspiracy against him.

Caesar had destroyed the republic in his quest for power, but he had not had the time—or perhaps the ability—to put a new form of government in its place. His assassination ended his rule and left the leaders of Rome to try to figure out who should rule in his place.

Julius Caesar is remembered today as a great general who did much to increase the power of Rome. Although he destroyed the Roman Republic, he also paved the way for the Roman Empire. He is the link between the republic that Rome had been and the empire it would become.