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Julius Caesar

Roman ruler

Julius Caesar (born July 12/13, 100? bce, Rome [Italy]—died March 15, 44 bce, Rome) was a celebrated Roman general and statesman, the conqueror of Gaul (58–50 bce), victor in the civil war of 49–45 bce, and dictator (46–44 bce), who was launching a series of political and social reforms when he was assassinated by a group of nobles in the Senate House on the Ides of March. He is one of the major figures of Classical antiquity.

Caesar changed the course of the history of the Greco-Roman world decisively and irreversibly. The Greco-Roman society has been extinct for so long that most of the names of its great men mean little to the average, educated modern person. But Caesar's name, like Alexander's, is still on people's lips throughout the Christian and Islamic worlds. Even people who know nothing of Caesar as a historic personality are familiar with his family name as a title signifying a ruler who is in some sense uniquely supreme or paramount—the meaning of *Kaiser* in German, *tsar* in the Slavonic languages, and *qayṣar* in the languages of the Islamic world.

Caesar's gens (clan) name, Julius (Iulius), is also familiar in the Christian world, for in Caesar's lifetime the Roman month Quintilis, in which he was born, was renamed "July" in his honor. This name has survived, as has Caesar's reform of the calendar. The old Roman calendar was inaccurate and manipulated for political purposes. Caesar's calendar, the Julian calendar, is still partially in force in the Eastern Orthodox Christian countries, and the

Gregorian calendar, now in use in the West, is the Julian, slightly corrected by Pope Gregory XIII.

Family background and career



Julius Caesar*Julius Caesar*, marble sculpture by Andrea di Pietro di Marco Ferrucci, c. 1512–14; in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.

Caesar's gens, the Julii, were patricians—i.e., members of Rome's original aristocracy, which had coalesced in the 4th century bce with a number of leading plebeian (commoner) families to form the nobility that had been the governing class in Rome since then. By Caesar's time, the number of surviving

patrician gentes was small; and in the gens Julia the Caesares seem to have been the only surviving family. Though some of the most powerful noble families were patrician, patrician blood was no longer a political advantage; it was actually a handicap, since a patrician was debarred from holding the paraconstitutional but powerful office of tribune of the plebs. The Julii Caesares traced their lineage back to the goddess Venus, but the family was not snobbish or conservative-minded. It was also not rich or influential or even distinguished.**iterranean during the Punic Wars**The Punic wars led to the destruction of Carthage.

A Roman noble won distinction for himself and his family by securing election to a series of public offices, which culminated in the consulship, with the censorship possibly to follow. This was a difficult task for even the ablest and most gifted noble unless he was backed by substantial family wealth and influence. Rome's victory over Carthage in the Second Punic War (218–201 bce) had made Rome the paramount power in the Mediterranean basin; an influential Roman noble family's clients (that is, protégés who, in return, gave their patrons their political support) might include kings and even whole nations, besides numerous private individuals. The requirements and the costs of a Roman political career in Caesar's day were high, and the competition was severe; but the potential profits were of enormous magnitude. One of the perquisites of the praetorship and the consulship was the government of a province, which gave ample opportunity for plunder. The whole Mediterranean world was, in fact, at the mercy of the Roman nobility and of a new class of Roman businessmen, the equites ("knights"), which had grown rich on military contracts and on tax farming.

Military manpower was supplied by the Roman peasantry. This class had been partly dispossessed by an economic revolution following on the devastation caused by the Second Punic War. The Roman governing class had consequently come to be hated and discredited at home and abroad. From 133 bce onward there had been a series of alternate revolutionary and counter-revolutionary paroxysms. It was evident that the misgovernment of the Roman state and the Greco-Roman world by the Roman nobility could not continue indefinitely and it was fairly clear that the most probable alternative was some form of military dictatorship backed by dispossessed Italian peasants who had turned to long-term military service.

The traditional competition among members of the Roman nobility for office and the spoils of office was thus threatening to turn into a desperate race for seizing autocratic power. The Julii Caesares did not seem to be in the running. It was true that Sextus Caesar, who was perhaps the dictator's uncle, had been one of the consuls for 91 bce; and Lucius Caesar, one of the consuls for 90 bce, was a distant cousin, whose son and namesake was consul for 64 bce. In 90 bce, Rome's Italian allies had seceded from Rome because of the Roman government's obstinate refusal to grant them Roman citizenship, and, as consul, Lucius Caesar had introduced emergency legislation for granting citizenship to the citizens of all Italian ally states that had not taken up arms or that had returned to their allegiance.

Whoever had been consul in this critical year would have had to initiate such legislation, whatever his personal political predilections. There is evidence, however, that the Julii Caesares, though patricians, had already committed themselves to the antinobility party. An aunt of the future dictator had

married Gaius Marius, a self-made man (*novus homo*) who had forced his way up to the summit by his military ability and had made the momentous innovation of recruiting his armies from the dispossessed peasants.

The date of Caesar the dictator's birth has long been disputed. The day was July 12 or 13; the traditional (and perhaps most probable) year is 100 bce; but if this date is correct, Caesar must have held each of his offices two years in advance of the legal minimum age. His father, Gaius Caesar, died when Caesar was but 16; his mother, Aurelia, was a notable woman, and it seems certain that he owed much to her.

In spite of the inadequacy of his resources, Caesar seems to have chosen a political career as a matter of course. From the beginning, he probably privately aimed at winning office, not just for the sake of the honors but in order to achieve the power to put the misgoverned Roman state and Greco-Roman world into better order in accordance with ideas of his own. It is improbable that Caesar deliberately sought monarchical power until after he had crossed the Rubicon in 49 bce, though sufficient power to impose his will, as he was determined to do, proved to mean monarchical power.

In 84 bce Caesar committed himself publicly to the radical side by marrying Cornelia, a daughter of Lucius Cornelius Cinna, a noble who was Marius's associate in revolution. In 83 bce Lucius Cornelius Sulla returned to Italy from the East and led the successful counter-revolution of 83–82 bce; Sulla then ordered Caesar to divorce Cornelia. Caesar refused and came close to losing not only his property (such as it was) but his life as well. He found it advisable to remove himself from Italy and to do military service, first in the province of Asia and then in Cilicia.

In 78 bce, after Sulla's death, he returned to Rome and started on his political career in the conventional way, by acting as a prosecuting advocate—of course, in his case, against prominent Sullan counter-revolutionaries. His first target, Gnaeus Cornelius Dolabella, was defended by Quintus Hortensius, the leading advocate of the day, and was acquitted by the extortion-court jury, composed exclusively of senators.

Caesar then went to Rhodes to study oratory under a famous professor, Molon. En route he was captured by pirates (one of the symptoms of the anarchy into which the Roman nobility had allowed the Mediterranean world to fall). Caesar raised his ransom, raised a naval force, captured his captors, and had them crucified—all this as a private individual holding no public office. In 74 bce, when Mithradates VI Eupator, king of Pontus, renewed war on the Romans, Caesar raised a private army to combat him.

In his absence from Rome, Caesar was made a member of the politico-ecclesiastical college of pontifices; and on his return he gained one of the elective military tribuneships. Caesar now worked to undo the Sullan constitution in cooperation with Pompey (Gnaeus Pompeius), who had started his career as a lieutenant of Sulla but had changed sides since Sulla's death. In 69 or 68 bce Caesar was elected quaestor (the first rung on the Roman political ladder). In the same year his wife, Cornelia, and his aunt Julia, Marius's widow, died. In public funeral orations in their honor, Caesar found opportunities for praising Cinna and Marius. Caesar afterward married Pompeia, a distant relative of Pompey. Caesar served his quaestorship in the province of Farther Spain (modern Andalusia and Portugal).

Caesar was elected one of the curule aediles for 65 bce, and he celebrated his tenure of this office by unusually lavish expenditure with borrowed money. He was elected pontifex maximus in 63 bce by a political dodge. By now he had become a controversial political figure. After the suppression of Catiline's conspiracy in 63 bce, Caesar, as well as the millionaire Marcus Licinius Crassus, was accused of complicity. It seems unlikely that either of them had committed himself to Catiline; but Caesar proposed in the Senate a more merciful alternative to the death penalty, which the consul Cicero was asking for the arrested conspirators. In the uproar in the Senate, Caesar's motion was defeated.

Caesar was elected a praetor for 62 bce. Toward the end of the year of his praetorship, a scandal was caused by Publius Clodius in Caesar's house at the celebration there of the rites, for women only, of Bona Dea (a Roman deity of fruitfulness, both in the Earth and in women). Caesar consequently divorced Pompeia. He obtained the governorship of Farther Spain for 61–60 bce. His creditors did not let him leave Rome until Crassus had gone bail for a quarter of his debts; but a military expedition beyond the northwest frontier of his province enabled Caesar to win loot for himself as well as for his soldiers, with a balance left over for the treasury. This partial financial recovery enabled him, after his return to Rome in 60 bce, to stand for the consulship for 59 bce.

The first triumvirate and the conquest of Gaul

The value of the consulship lay in the lucrative provincial governorship to which it would normally lead. On the eve of the consular elections for 59 bce, the Senate sought to allot to the two future consuls for 59 bce, as their proconsular provinces, the unprofitable supervision of forests and cattle trails

in Italy. The Senate also secured by massive bribery the election of an anti-Caesarean, Marcus Calpurnius Bibulus. But they failed to prevent Caesar's election as the other consul.

Caesar now succeeded in organizing an irresistible coalition of political bosses. Pompey had carried out his mission to put the East in order with notable success, but after his return to Italy and his disbandment of his army in 62 bce, the Senate had thwarted him—particularly by preventing him from securing land allotments for his veterans. Caesar, who had assiduously cultivated Pompey's friendship, now entered into a secret pact with him. Caesar's master stroke was to persuade Crassus to join the partnership, the so-called first triumvirate. Crassus—like Pompey, a former lieutenant of Sulla—had been one of the most active of Pompey's obstructors so far. Only Caesar, on good terms with both, was in a position to reconcile them. Early in 59 bce, Pompey sealed his alliance with Caesar by marrying Caesar's only child, Julia. Caesar married Calpurnia, daughter of Lucius Piso, who became consul in 58 bce.

As consul, Caesar introduced a bill for the allotment of Roman public lands in Italy, on which the first charge was to be a provision for Pompey's soldiers. The bill was vetoed by three tribunes of the plebs, and Caesar's colleague Bibulus announced his intention of preventing the transaction of public business by watching the skies for portents whenever the public assembly was convened. Caesar then cowed the opposition by employing some of Pompey's veterans to make a riot, and the distribution was carried out. Pompey's settlement of the East was ratified *en bloc* by an act negotiated by an agent of Caesar, the tribune of the plebs Publius Vatinius. Caesar himself initiated a

noncontroversial and much-needed act for punishing misconduct by governors of provinces.

Another act negotiated by Vatinius gave Caesar Cisalpine Gaul (between the Alps, the Apennines, and the Adriatic) and Illyricum. His tenure was to last until February 28, 54 bce. When the governor-designate of Transalpine Gaul suddenly died, this province, also, was assigned to Caesar at Pompey's instance. Cisalpine Gaul gave Caesar a military recruiting ground; Transalpine Gaul gave him a springboard for conquests beyond Rome's northwest frontier.

Between 58 and 50 bce, Caesar conquered the rest of Gaul up to the left bank of the Rhine and subjugated it so effectively that it remained passive under Roman rule throughout the Roman civil wars between 49 and 31 bce. This achievement was all the more amazing in light of the fact that the Romans did not possess any great superiority in military equipment over the north European barbarians. Indeed, the Gallic cavalry was probably superior to the Roman, horseman for horseman. Rome's military superiority lay in its mastery of strategy, tactics, discipline, and military engineering. In Gaul, Rome also had the advantage of being able to deal separately with dozens of relatively small, independent, and uncooperative states. Caesar conquered these piecemeal, and the concerted attempt made by a number of them in 52 bce to shake off the Roman yoke came too late.

Great though this achievement was, its relative importance in Caesar's career and in Roman history has been overestimated in Western tradition (as have his brief raids on Britain). In Caesar's mind his conquest of Gaul was probably carried out only as a means to his ultimate end. He was acquiring the military manpower, the plunder, and the prestige that he needed to secure a free hand

for the prosecution of the task of reorganizing the Roman state and the rest of the Greco-Roman world. This final achievement of Caesar's looms much larger than his conquest of Gaul, when it is viewed in the wider setting of world history and not just in the narrower setting of the Greco-Roman civilization's present daughter civilization in the West.

In 58 bce Rome's northwestern frontier, established in 125 bce, ran from the Alps down the left bank of the upper Rhône River to the Pyrenees, skirting the southeastern foot of the Cévennes and including the upper basin of the Garonne River without reaching the Gallic shore of the Atlantic. In 58 bce Caesar intervened beyond this line, first to drive back the Helvetii, who had been migrating westward from their home in what is now central Switzerland. He then crushed Ariovistus, a German soldier of fortune from beyond the Rhine. In 57 bce Caesar subdued the distant and warlike Belgic group of Gallic peoples in the north, while his lieutenant Publius Licinius Crassus subdued what are now the regions of Normandy and Brittany.

In 56 bce the Veneti, in what is now southern Brittany, started a revolt in the northwest that was supported by the still unconquered Morini on the Gallic coast of the Strait of Dover and the Menapii along the south bank of the lower Rhine. Caesar reconquered the Veneti with some difficulty and treated them barbarously. He could not finish off the conquest of the Morini and Menapii before the end of the campaigning season of 56 bce; and in the winter of 56–55 bce the Menapii were temporarily expelled from their home by two immigrant German peoples, the Usipetes and Tencteri. These peoples were exterminated by Caesar in 55 bce. In the same year he bridged the Rhine just below Koblenz to raid Germany on the other side of the river, and then crossed the Channel to

raid Britain. In 54 bce he raided Britain again and subdued a serious revolt in northeastern Gaul. In 53 bce he subdued further revolts in Gaul and bridged the Rhine again for a second raid.

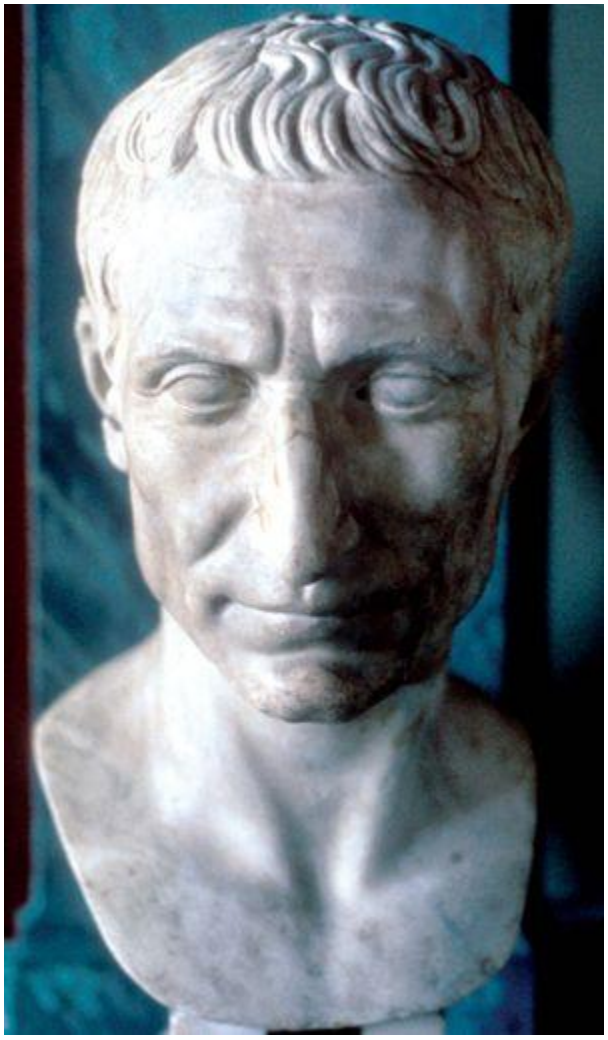
The crisis of Caesar's Gallic war came in 52 bce. The peoples of central Gaul found a national leader in the Arvernian Vercingetorix. They planned to cut off the Roman forces from Caesar, who had been wintering on the other side of the Alps. They even attempted to invade the western end of the old Roman province of Gallia Transalpina. Vercingetorix wanted to avoid pitched battles and sieges and to defeat the Romans by cutting off their supplies—partly by cavalry operations and partly by "scorched earth"—but he could not persuade his countrymen to adopt this painful policy wholeheartedly.

The Bituriges insisted on standing siege in their town Avaricum (Bourges), and Vercingetorix was unable to save it from being taken by storm within one month. Caesar then besieged Vercingetorix in Gergovia near modern Clermont-Ferrand. A Roman attempt to storm Gergovia was repulsed and resulted in heavy Roman losses—the first outright defeat that Caesar had suffered in Gaul. Caesar then defeated an attack on the Roman army on the march and was thus able to besiege Vercingetorix in Alesia, to the northwest of Dijon. Alesia, like Gergovia, was a position of great natural strength, and a large Gallic army came to relieve it; but this army was repulsed and dispersed by Caesar, and Vercingetorix then capitulated.

During the winter of 52–51 bce and the campaigning season of 51 bce, Caesar crushed a number of sporadic further revolts. The most determined of these rebels were the Bellovaci, between the Rivers Seine and Somme, around Beauvais. Another rebel force stood siege in the south in the natural fortress of

Uxellodunum (perhaps the Puy d'Issolu on the Dordogne) until its water supply gave out. Caesar had the survivors' hands cut off. He spent the year 50 bce in organizing the newly conquered territory. After that, he was ready to settle his accounts with his opponents at home.

Break with Pompey and the collapse of the triumvirate



Julius Caesar Marble bust of Julius Caesar; in the Vatican Museums, Vatican City.

During his conquest of Gaul, Caesar had been equally busy in preserving and improving his position at home. He used part of his growing wealth from Gallic loot to hire political agents in Rome.

Meanwhile the cohesion of the triumvirate had been placed under strain. Pompey had soon become restive toward his alarmingly successful ally Caesar, as had Crassus toward his old enemy Pompey. The alliance was patched up in April 56 bce at a conference at Luca (Lucca), just inside Caesar's province of Cisalpine Gaul. It was arranged that Pompey and Crassus were to be the consuls for 55 bce and were to get laws promulgated prolonging Caesar's provincial commands for another five years and giving Crassus a five-year term in Syria and Pompey a five-year term in Spain. These laws were duly passed. Crassus was then eliminated by an annihilating defeat at the Parthians' hands in 53 bce. The marriage link between Pompey and Caesar had been broken by Julia's death in 54 bce. After this, Pompey irresolutely veered further and further away from Caesar, until, when the breach finally came, Pompey found himself committed to the nobility's side, though he and the nobility never trusted each other.

The issue was whether there should or should not be an interval between the date at which Caesar was to resign his provincial governorships and, therewith, the command over his armies and the date at which he would enter his proposed second consulship. If there were to be an interval, Caesar would be a private person during that time, vulnerable to attack by his enemies; if prosecuted and convicted, he would be ruined politically and might possibly lose his life. Caesar had to make sure that, until his entry on his second

consulship, he should continue to hold at least one province with the military force to guarantee his security.

This issue had already been the object of a series of political maneuvers and countermaneuvers at Rome. The dates on which the issue turned are all in doubt. As had been agreed at Luca in 56 bce, Caesar's commands had been prolonged for five years, apparently until February 28, 49 bce, but this is not certain. In 52 bce, a year in which Pompey was elected sole consul and given a five-year provincial command in Spain, Caesar was allowed by a law sponsored by all 10 tribunes to stand for the consulship in absentia. If he were to stand in 49 bce for the consulship for 48 bce, he would be out of office, and therefore in danger, during the last 10 months of 49 bce. As a safeguard for Caesar against this, there seems to have been an understanding—possibly a private one at Luca in 56 bce between him and Pompey—that the question of a successor to Caesar in his commands should not be raised in the Senate before March 1, 50 bce. This maneuver would have ensured that Caesar would retain his commands until the end of 49 bce. However, the question of replacing Caesar was actually raised in the Senate a number of times from 51 bce onward; each time Caesar had the dangerous proposals vetoed by tribunes of the plebs who were his agents—particularly Gaius Scribonius Curio in 50 bce and Mark Antony in 49 bce.

The issue was brought to a head by one of the consuls for 50 bce, Gaius Claudius Marcellus. He obtained resolutions from the Senate that Caesar should lay down his command (presumably at its terminal date) but that Pompey should not lay down his command simultaneously. Curio then obtained on December 1, 50 bce, a resolution (by 370 votes to 22) that both

men should lay down their commands simultaneously. Next day Marcellus (without authorization from the Senate) offered the command over all troops in Italy to Pompey, together with the power to raise more; and Pompey accepted. On January 1, 49 bce, the Senate received from Caesar a proposal that he and Pompey should lay down their commands simultaneously. Caesar's message was peremptory, and the Senate resolved that Caesar should be treated as a public enemy if he did not lay down his command "by a date to be fixed."

Caesar crosses the Rubicon and the Roman Civil War (49–45 bce)

On January 10–11, 49 bce, Caesar led his troops across the little river Rubicon, the boundary between his province of Cisalpine Gaul and Italy proper. He thus committed the first act of war. This was not, however, the heart of the matter. The actual question of substance was whether the misgovernment of the Greco-Roman world by the Roman nobility should be allowed to continue or whether it should be replaced by an autocratic regime. Either alternative would result in a disastrous civil war. The subsequent partial recuperation of the Greco-Roman world under the principate suggests, however, that Caesarism was the lesser evil.

The civil war was a tragedy, for war was not wanted either by Caesar or by Pompey or even by a considerable part of the nobility, while the bulk of the Roman citizen body ardently hoped for the preservation of peace. By this time, however, the three parties that counted politically were all entrapped. Caesar's success in building up his political power had made the champions of the old

regime so implacably hostile to him that he was now faced with a choice between putting himself at his enemies' mercy or seizing the monopoly of power at which he was accused of aiming. He found that he could not extricate himself from this dilemma by reducing his demands, as he eventually did, to the absolute minimum required for his security. As for Pompey, his growing jealousy of Caesar had led him so far toward the nobility that he could not come to terms with Caesar again without loss of face.

The first bout of the civil war moved swiftly. In 49 bce Caesar drove his opponents out of Italy to the eastern side of the Straits of Otranto. He then crushed Pompey's army in Spain. Toward the end of 49 bce, he followed Pompey across the Adriatic Sea and retrieved a reverse at Dyrrachium by winning a decisive victory at Pharsalus on August 9, 48 bce. Caesar pursued Pompey from Thessaly to Egypt, where Pompey was murdered by an officer of King Ptolemy. Caesar wintered in Alexandria, fighting with the populace and dallying with Queen Cleopatra. In 47 bce he fought a brief local war in northeastern Anatolia with Pharnaces, king of the Cimmerian Bosporus, who was trying to regain Pontus, the kingdom of his father, Mithradates. Caesar's famous words, *Veni, vidi, vici* ("I came, I saw, I conquered"), are his own account of this campaign.

The Ides of March and Caesar's assassination

Caesar then returned to Rome, but a few months later, now with the title of dictator, he left for Africa, where his opponents had rallied. In 46 he crushed their army at Thapsus and returned to Rome, only to leave in November for

Farther Spain to deal with a fresh outbreak of resistance, which he crushed on March 17, 45 bce, at Munda. He then returned to Rome to start putting the Greco-Roman world in order. He had less than a year's grace for this huge task of reconstruction before his assassination in 44 bce in the Senate House at Rome on March 15 (the Ides of March).

Caesar's death was partly due to his clemency and impatience, which, in combination, were dangerous for his personal security. Caesar had not hesitated to commit atrocities against "barbarians" when it had suited him, but he was almost consistently magnanimous in his treatment of his defeated Roman opponents. Thus clemency was probably not just a matter of policy. Caesar's earliest experience in his political career had been Sulla's implacable persecution of his defeated domestic opponents. Caesar amnestied his opponents wholesale and gave a number of them responsible positions in his new regime. Gaius Cassius Longinus, who was the moving spirit in the plot to murder him, and Marcus Junius Brutus, the symbolic embodiment of Roman republicanism, were both former enemies. "Et tu, Brute" ("You too, Brutus") was Caesar's expression of his particular anguish at being stabbed by a man whom he had forgiven, trusted, and loved.

There were, however, also a number of ex-Caesareans among the 60 conspirators. They had been goaded into this volte-face by the increasingly monarchical trend of Caesar's regime and, perhaps at least as much, by the aristocratic disdain that inhibited Caesar from taking any trouble to sugar the bitter pill. Some stood to lose, rather than to gain, personally by the removal of the autocrat who had made their political fortunes. But even if they were acting on principle, they were blind to the truth that the reign of the Roman

nobility was broken beyond recall and that even Caesar might not have been able to overthrow the old regime if its destruction had not been long overdue. They also failed to recognize that by making Caesar a martyr they were creating his posthumous political fortune.

If Caesar had not been murdered in 44 bce, he might have lived on for 15 or 20 years. His physical constitution was unusually tough, though in his last years he had several epileptic seizures. What would he have done with this time? The answer can only be guessed from what he did do in the few months available. He found time in the year 46 bce to reform the Roman calendar. In 45 bce he enacted a law laying down a standard pattern for the constitutions of the *municipia*, which were by this time the units of local self-government in most of the territory inhabited by Roman citizens. In 59 bce Caesar had already resurrected the city of Capua, which the republican Roman regime more than 150 years earlier had deprived of its juridical corporate personality; he now resurrected the other two great cities, Carthage and Corinth, that his predecessors had destroyed. This was only a part of what he did to resettle his discharged soldiers and the urban proletariat of Rome. He was also generous in granting Roman citizenship to aliens. (He had given it to all of Cisalpine Gaul, north of the Po, in 49 bce.) He increased the size of the Senate and made its personnel more representative of the whole Roman citizenry.

At his death, Caesar was on the point of starting out on a new military campaign to avenge and retrieve Crassus's disastrous defeat in 53 bce by the Parthians. Would Caesar have succeeded in recapturing for the Greco-Roman world the extinct Seleucid monarchy's lost dominions east of the Euphrates, particularly Babylonia? The fate of Crassus's army had shown that the terrain

in northern Mesopotamia favored Parthian cavalry against Roman infantry. Would Caesar's military genius have outweighed this handicap? And would Rome's hitherto inexhaustible reservoir of military manpower have sufficed for this additional call upon it? Only guesses are possible, for Caesar's assassination condemned the Romans to another 13 years of civil war, and Rome would never again possess sufficient manpower to conquer and hold Babylonia.