

COIN STRUCK BY
MARCUS METTIUS,
PLUTARCH, AND
SUETONIUS

"I CAME, I SAW, I CONQUERED"

JULIUS CAESAR AND THE ROMAN TRIUMPH

In February of 44 BCE, the Roman Senate declared Julius Caesar dictator of Rome for life. According to the Greek writer Plutarch, the Senate also offered Caesar a crown, but he turned it down. Caesar knew how much Romans had hated the idea of kings since the reign of Tarquin the Proud, 500 years before.

One month later, Julius Caesar was dead, murdered in the Senate. Why? This ancient coin may provide the answer.

On it, we see the face of Julius Caesar, a thin, handsome man with fine features, the perfect image of a noble Roman. Caesar himself had ordered the coin to be made, so it probably looks very much like him. He was the first living Roman to be depicted on a coin—by tradition, leaders and heroes received this honor only after their deaths. On the dictator's head is a laurel wreath, a symbol of victory. When Caesar's enemies saw this coin, they began to question his plans. Did he intend to become Rome's king after all? Did he plan to set up a monarchy with his children and grandchildren ruling after him? This fear haunted many senators as they watched Caesar's power and popularity grow.

Soon after the coin appeared, a group of senators met to plot his murder.

In early March, people reported bizarre happenings: strange birds seen in the Forum and odd sounds heard there. Then, when Caesar was sacrificing to the gods, one of the animals was found to have no heart! Many believed that these happenings were omens—warnings of disasters to come.



Coin of Caesar struck by Marcus Mettius, 44 BCE

On March 15, the day known in Rome as the Ides of March, Caesar went to a meeting of the Senate. As usual, he had no bodyguards. On the way, a soothsayer—a "truth teller" who can tell the future—stopped him with a warning: "Caesar, beware the Ides of March." (The Romans called the middle day of the month the "Ides"; it usually fell on the 15th.) The dictator ignored him and walked on. But when he arrived at the meeting place, a group of senators—mostly old friends and men he had pardoned and promoted—surrounded him. They quickly closed in and, drawing their knives, began to stab him. Bleeding from 23 brutal wounds, Caesar fell and died at the base of a statue he had commissioned: a statue of Pompey—his rival and friend.

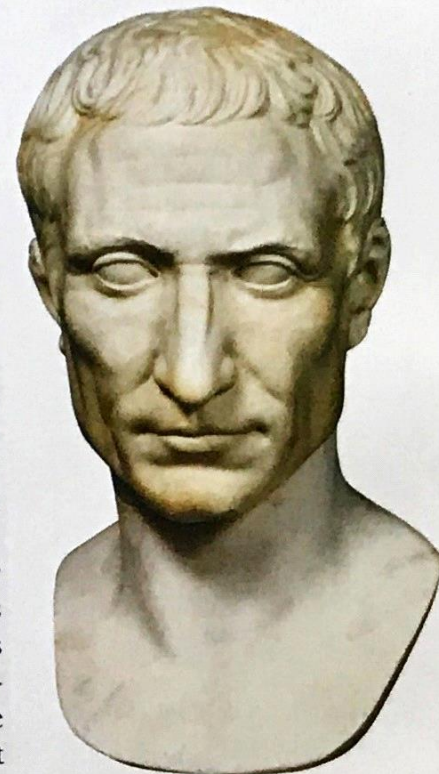
Who was this man who stirred such a powerful mix of love, admiration, fear, and hatred?

Julius Caesar was born into a noble family, but he always supported the rights of the common people. He was the plebeians' favorite politician. They believed that he understood and cared about their needs. He did, but he was no saint. He was practical, strong willed, and hungry for power. Street-smart, he made very few mistakes, and he knew how to take advantage of the mistakes of his enemies.

In 60 BCE, Julius Caesar wanted to become a consul, but he was broke. He had already spent everything he had (or could borrow) to pay for his political career up to that point. He needed money and he needed help. So he made a bargain with two other men who also needed something: Cicero's friend Pompey and Crassus, the richest man in Rome. The three formed the First Triumvirate.

The Triumvirate was a political deal. Each member gained something from it. Crassus had arranged for his wealthy friends to collect taxes in the provinces—Rome's possessions beyond the Italian peninsula. This was a profitable position because tax collectors kept some of the money for themselves. Joining the alliance of power let Crassus protect these moneymaking deals. Pompey joined to make sure that his soldiers stayed loyal to him. As a member of the Triumvirate, he could guarantee that they would be rewarded for their service.

Plutarch, *Life of Caesar*,
110 CE



In this bust, sculpted late in his life, Julius Caesar has hair. But other pictures show that he was bald by then.

Caesar got what he wanted, too. He not only became consul, but the next year he became governor of Gaul (France), a province about the size of Texas. There, Caesar established himself as a major power. He spent almost ten years conquering Gaul, pitting his loyal, well-trained army against the Gauls, who were mostly independent tribes fighting among themselves. Beginning in 58 BCE, Caesar and his troops moved through the region and overcame it, bit by bit. In the process, Rome built roads, captured over a million prisoners, and took huge amounts of money and treasure from the native peoples.

Caesar's success in Gaul made him rich and even more ambitious. This worried his rivals and enemies in Rome. They knew that he favored the Gracchi brothers' plan for taking land from the rich and giving it to the poor. This made him even less popular with the aristocrats.

By 50 BCE, the Triumvirate had ended. Crassus had been killed in battle, and Pompey had become very jealous of Caesar's **military** success and his great popularity. Pompey had married Caesar's daughter, Julia, but when she died in childbirth, the bond between the two men was broken. Before Caesar returned from Gaul, Pompey sided with the Senate to declare his former father-in-law an enemy of the State. The Senate demanded that Caesar give up his army and return to Rome. Knowing that he would be arrested if he obeyed, he refused. But now his life and career were at stake. Did he dare go back to Italy at all?

In January of 49 BCE, Caesar's forces were camped just north of the Rubicon, the river that marked the boundary between Gaul and Italy. As soon as Caesar heard the Senate's ruling, he slipped away from the camp with a few trusted men. It was night, and everyone else was feasting. No one noticed that he was missing. When he reached the banks of the Rubicon, he paused, thinking about his next step. After a moment, he declared, "The die is cast" and crossed the river. This was his way of saying that his mind was made up and wouldn't be changed. Now he was ready to meet his former ally, the great general Pompey, in battle.

Caesar was never one to stand around, waiting for someone else to do something. Decisive as always, he began

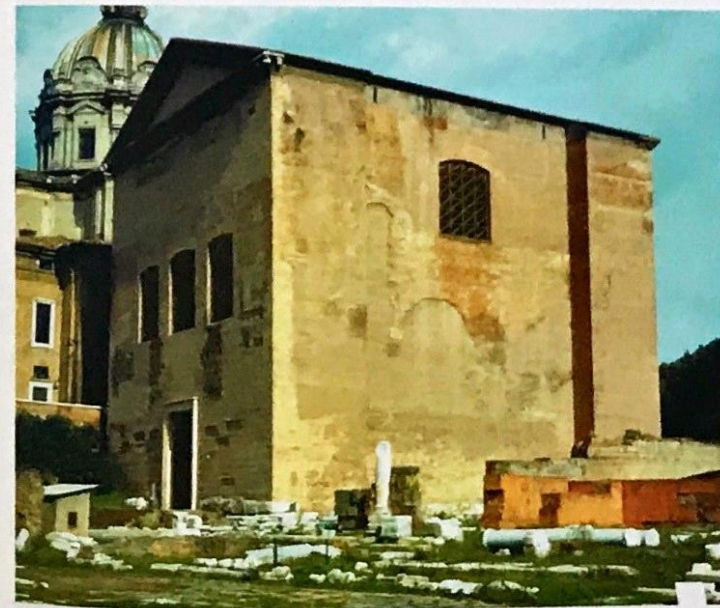
"Military" comes from the Latin word for soldier, *miles*. If a person is militant, he or she behaves like a soldier and is ready to fight.

66 Suetonius, *Life of the Deified Julius*, 130 CE

his march right away. He set out in the dead of winter with a single legion of soldiers. He knew that by marching on Rome he would start a civil war. What he didn't know—and couldn't have known—was that this war would last for nearly two decades and destroy the Republic.

Pompey would have liked more time to train his troops; they were not as battle-ready as Caesar's army. When Caesar's troops entered Italy, Pompey's soldiers panicked and many deserted. Pompey gathered what troops he could and escaped from Rome just before Caesar arrived. Caesar had Pompey on the run.

Caesar entered Rome for the first time in nine years. He found the government in chaos. Again, he didn't hold back but set to work right away. He asked the Senate to join forces with him to avoid more bloodshed. He chose Mark Antony as his chief lieutenant—next in command. Then, delegating power to other trusted generals, Caesar himself set out for Greece. There he defeated Pompey's army in 48 BCE.



This solid, rectangular building normally housed the Senate's meetings. But because it was closed for repairs, the Senators gathered in the Theater of Pompey on the Ides of March, 44 BCE.

MATH, ROMAN STYLE

Roman numbers were written in two ways: in words and symbols. We do the same. We can write "one" or its numeral, 1. The Romans wrote *unus* or its numeral, I. Two (*duo*) = II. Three (*tres*) = III. Four (*quattuor*) = IV. Five (*quintus*) = V. Six (*sextus*) = VI. Seven (*septem*) = VII. Eight (*octo*) = VIII. Nine (*novem*) = IX. Ten (*decem*) = X.

Roman numerals are easy to figure out once you understand the system. One, two, and three are like marks in the sand, but four (IV) is written to show that it is one less than five (V). Nine (IX) is the same. It's one less than ten (X) and eleven (XI) is one more than ten. Any numeral written before a bigger one means, "subtract." Written after, it means, "add."

“ Plutarch, *Life of Caesar*, 110 CE

WHAT WAS IT WORTH?

The basic Roman coin was the silver *denarius*—worth about a day’s pay for an ordinary laborer. Everyday purchases were made with less valuable coins made of bronze. Gold coins were rare and were equal to 25 silver *denarii*. Caesar’s gift of 100 *denarii* (the plural of *denarius*) was a huge amount of money, almost half a year’s pay for an ordinary laborer.

“ Plutarch, *Life of Caesar*, 110 CE

Plutarch reports that when Caesar saw the dead Romans lying on the field, he groaned and said: “They made this happen; they drove me to it.”

News of Caesar’s victory was greeted back home with wild excitement. His popularity soared, and Rome elected him to a second consulship.

Meanwhile Pompey had escaped to Egypt, arriving in the midst of a civil war between 15-year-old King Ptolemy XIII and his older sister, Cleopatra VII. Ptolemy believed that Caesar would follow his rival to Egypt, and he was right. So he prepared a surprise for the general. Hoping to please Caesar and lure him to his side against Cleopatra, Ptolemy’s advisors captured Pompey and cut off his head. Then they pickled it in brine. They expected Caesar to be delighted, but they were wrong.

When Caesar arrived in Egypt, Ptolemy presented Caesar with Pompey’s pickled head—the head of the noble Roman who had been his rival but also his friend and former son-in-law. Disgusted and pained, Caesar turned away and wept. He commanded that Pompey’s body be buried with honor. And he ordered the execution of the Egyptians who had murdered a great leader of the Roman people.

Caesar then restored Cleopatra to her throne and defeated her brother in battle. On his way back to Rome, Caesar passed through Asia. There, he squashed a rebellion in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). In a letter to a friend, he made light of the victory. The letter had only three words: “*Veni, vidi, vici.*” (“I came, I saw, I conquered.”) Plutarch says that this brief message matched “the sharpness and speed of the battle itself.” Caesar’s fans later made placards with these three words written on them, which they carried in his triumphal procession into Rome.

When Caesar returned to Rome, he was proclaimed dictator. Then he began the work of healing Rome’s terrible war wounds. He gave 100 *denarii* to every citizen and pardoned his own enemies, even those who had supported Pompey against him, including Cicero and Brutus. (Caesar was especially fond of Brutus. In his youth, Caesar had been

in love with Brutus’s mother, and he always looked out for her son. Brutus did not return the favor.)

During four years of almost absolute power, Caesar passed many laws to control debt, reduce unemployment, and regulate traffic in Rome. He levied taxes on foreign imports to boost Rome’s economy. He put unemployed Romans to work building a new Forum and a large public building named in his family’s honor: the Basilica Julia. He planned the first public library and built embankments along the Tiber to protect the city against floods. He revised the old Roman calendar, replacing it with the one that we use today, beginning with January.

Julius Caesar was perhaps the most extraordinary of all ancient Romans—a senator, military leader, and dictator of Rome. But he was also a poet, a brilliant historian who wrote about his military victories, and the only orator of his day who could compete with Cicero. His personal charm brought him the loyalty of men and the love of women.

Caesar’s body, covered by his toga, lies at the feet of Pompey’s statue in this 19th-century painting. With their arms and daggers held high, his assassins celebrate their victory.



66 Suetonius, *Life of the Deified Julius*, 130 CE

In the end, he was killed at the height of his powers by men he thought were his friends. It was particularly sad that Brutus was among the assassins. According to Suetonius, Caesar, as he was dying, turned to Brutus and said, "You too, my son?"

Brutus didn't feel guilty about betraying Caesar. He was proud of it. His ancestor was the Brutus who had expelled the last king, Tarquin the Proud, from Rome. Brutus issued a coin to celebrate the Ides of March as Caesar's assassination day. The coin shows the deadly daggers that had killed Caesar and the "cap of liberty" traditionally worn by slaves after they were freed. Brutus bragged that he had saved Rome from slavery.

But the murder of Julius Caesar did Rome no good. The city faced another 13 years of civil unrest and war. Assassination *did* help Caesar's reputation, though. In his will, Caesar left a gift of money to every Roman citizen. More than ever, he was the common man's hero, so admired that later rulers of Rome adopted the name Caesar.

Brutus and his friends thought they were serving Rome and saving the Republic by killing a man who had become too powerful, a man they feared might make himself king. They were shortsighted. The Republic was already dying . . . almost dead. Rome would soon be dominated by a single ruler. That man would be Caesar's great-nephew and heir, Augustus Caesar.