

AGE OF THE CAESARS

60 B.C TO 14 A.D.

FIRST TRIUMVIRATE TO DEATH OF AUGUSTUS

ERA SUMMARY – AGE OF THE CAESARS

Populares and Despotism—The terms *populares* and *optimates* are often used to describe political alignments in Rome during the late Republican period, but this can be misleading. The *populares* are usually presented as favoring policies benefitting the landless classes whereas the *optimates* are presented as looking after the 'rich'. However, to understand the transition of Rome from a Republican to an Imperial government, it is necessary to recognize that in spite of its 'liberal' political program, many of the leaders of the *populares*, or "party of Marius", were intentionally working to replace the republican government of Rome with a military dictatorship. Under Julius Caesar and his successor Augustus, they succeeded.

The leaders of both political parties were powerful and wealthy. The important difference was not in their policies or political philosophies, but in the manner in which they intended to assume power and rule. For over 400 years Roman magistrates had been elected, served limited terms, and had been granted explicit powers associated with particular offices. From the age of Julius Caesar, the nominal rulers were emperors and generals, appointed rather than unelected; and the real rulers were behind-the-scenes prefects, ministers and money-changers, accountable to no one. The population, stripped of all real political power, was kept pacified by "bread and circuses", while the ruling class, no longer Roman by birth or allegiance, conspired against them. The critical conflict was never rich vs. poor, or patrician vs. plebeian; it was always democracy vs despotism.

After Sulla—In the years following the Marius-Sulla wars, the Marian loyalists suffered severe setbacks. Not only were many of their leaders dead or exiled, but Sulla's reforms had put political power squarely back into the hands of the Senate. The *optimates* were supported by most Romans and the party could not be dislodged by popular appeal. On the other hand, the changes that Marius had made to the military, which transformed Rome's army from citizen soldiers into professional forces, opened another path to power. Now that Rome was surrounded by enemies, war was almost constant and the loyalty of career soldiers was to military leaders rather than politicians. It was natural, therefore, for ambitious power-seekers to look to the military for a career.

The two most important generals in the era before Julius Caesar were [Crassus](#) and [Pompey](#), both Sulla loyalists, but of significantly different character. Pompey was highly respected, popular with the people, and ruled as consul three times (non-consecutively), yet he deferred to the senate, and retired from public life several times. Crassus gained enormous wealth by dubious means and used his wealth to purchase political power and military offices. Military adventures prominent at the time were the Mithriatic War in the east, the Sertorian War in Spain, the Slave Revolt of Spartacus, and the Cilician Pirates in the Mediterranean.

Conspiracies of Catiline and Lepidus— In addition to these external threats, at least two political conspiracies that menaced the government of Rome were put down. The Catiline Conspiracy, a plan to overthrow the Senate by murdering senators and staging riots, was exposed by Cicero. A great many politicians associated with the party of Marius, including Julius Caesar, were implicated in the Catiline conspiracy but never punished. Another dangerous rebellion occurred in 77 B.C. when Lepidus, a leading *populares* general was relieved of his command and turned his army back toward Rome, exactly as Julius Caesar did 27 years later. The Lepidus rebellion was put down by Pompey, the same general who had supported him in his bid for consul a year earlier. This Lepidus was the father of the general who formed the Second Triumvirate with Anthony and Octavio in 43 B.C.

Julius Caesar—Julius Caesar's political career was not a spontaneous development. He had had been groomed as a promising leader of the *populares* faction from a young age. His aunt was the wife of Marius and his second wife was the daughter of Cinna, but he was also closely related by family marriages to Sulla, Mark Antony, and many other prominent leaders of the age. Julius Caesar was promoted to an important office as a priest of Jupiter when only 18, and was well-positioned to assume other offices until the proscriptions of Sulla devastated his patrons. Caesar survived Sulla's purges, but his political prospects were temporarily stymied. He progressed through the usual political offices, but his career did not flourish until he made an alliance with Crassus, the richest man in Rome. It was Crassus who funded Julius Caesar's political campaigns from his election as Pontifex Maximus to his five-year appointment to a military office in Gaul.

Most Biographies of Julius Caesar emphasize his extraordinary personal qualities, but in fact he did not act alone. Caesar was promoted and patronized by many of the prominent political leaders of his age, and he had unlimited funds available for bribery, military provisions, or anything else needed to advance his objectives. Until the death of Crassus in 53 B.C., Caesar was largely under the influence of his financial network. When he marched on Rome, he was following the exact playbook of Lepidus, who had attempted a military take over a generation previously. Far from being a political or military genius, Julius Caesar was extraordinarily well-connected and had every advantage and opportunity to succeed, and had he failed, another military leader would have arisen to pave the way for despotism.

The First Triumvirate—In 60 B.C. [Crassus](#), [Pompey](#), and Caesar put aside their political differences and formed the First Triumvirate, an informal arrangement in which the three leaders maintained effective control, while preserving the forms and appearance of Republican. They divided the empire into three regions of influence: Crassus held power in the east, Caesar in Hispania and later Gaul, and Pompey in Rome. It is important that Crassus and Caesar, who represented the political interests that sought to replace the republic with a military dictatorship, took charge of foreign commands and commanded most of the Roman legions, while Pompey, who represented the senators, was left to govern the largely peaceful regions of Italy.

Seven years later, Crassus perished on an ill-fated campaign in Parthia, while Caesar's [Conquest of Gaul](#) was very successful. In the six years 58-52 B.C., Caesar brought the entire region of Gaul (modern France, Belgium, and Switzerland), under his sway. He shared his wealth with the army

and with key allies in Italy, and his generosity brought him unbounded prestige and popularity. Caesar's enemies, who were aware of the danger he posed to the republic tried to deprive him of his legions and bring him back under control. But Caesar had already broken numerous Roman laws, and acted against the will of the Senate. Had he submitted to the request to lay down arms he could have been stripped of his honors and tried for war crimes. The "die was cast" long before he crossed the Rubicon.

The Caesarean Civil War—In 49 B.C. Caesar marched into Roman territory with his army, thereby provoking the Caesarean Civil War. At the time, Pompey had limited military resources to defend Rome so he and many senators withdrew to the south and tried to recruit an army to meet Caesar. But Caesar was able to rally even more forces, both among legions stationed in Gaul and new recruits in Italy. After a minor skirmish, Pompey withdrew to the east, leaving Caesar the master of Italy.

After setting up his agents in Rome, Caesar spent most of 49 B.C. in Spain and Africa, where he had many allies. He consolidated his control of the legions in the west and bestowed Roman citizenship to the citizens of Cadiz, the wealthiest city in Hispania, before returning to Rome and electing himself consul. In the following year he defeated Pompey at Pharsalus, and brought Egypt and much of the east under Roman control. He granted Roman citizenship to selected foreign allies, and in Rome spent money lavishly to appease the masses. By packing the senate with loyalists, and controlling the "Roman Mob", Caesar made the return to tradition Republican government virtually impossible, so even when he was assassinated, the senatorial party was unable to resume normal government.

Augustus and his Associates—Who exactly would assume control of the Roman Empire after the death of Julius Caesar was a problem that took at least fifteen years to resolve, and the 'official story' emphasizes the conflict between Augustus, the Nephew of Caesar, and Mark Anthony, one of his leading generals. However, many of the "behind the scenes" characters, seem to have interesting relations among each other, and their actual influence on events may be under-appreciated. There are many unasked and unanswered questions. For example, Augustus was married in quick succession to Clodia, the daughter of Mark Antony's wife Fulvia, then Scribonia, the daughter of a wealthy plebian family also connected to Mark Antony, then Livia, the daughter of yet another wealthy plebian family who was already married and eight months pregnant. Yet he stayed married to Livia for over fifty years in spite of the fact that they had no children together and she was accused of plotting the deaths of several of his biological nephews and grandsons.

Livia is thought to have exercised far more direct power than a normal Roman wife, but she was by no means the only curious influence on Augustus. Little is known of Marcus Agrippa, his close friend and favorite general other than that he came from a wealthy but obscure family. Yet Agrippa married the only biological daughter of Augustus and essentially ruled with imperial powers in the east after the death of Mark Antony. His grandson was Caligula.

Another mysterious, but very powerful ruler during the reign of Augustus was Maecenas. Like Agrippa, he came from obscure origins, but was extremely wealthy and had enormous influence in both diplomatic and financial matters. Maecenas is known as a great patron of the arts and literature, but the most extraordinary and ominous thing about him was that he held

no official office in Rome whatsoever, but controlled enormous wealth, both public and private. His diplomatic services were used to resolve both foreign and domestic conflicts, and he had great influence over Augustus in all matters. Maecenas perfectly represents the real rulers of the Roman Empire: wealthy, unelected, behind-the-scenes, luxurious, decadent, and utterly unaccountable to the Roman people.

CHARACTERS – AGE OF THE CAESARS

FIRST TRIUMVIRATE

Julius Caesar	100–44 BC	Conquered Gaul, prevailed in civil war. Mastermind of Roman empire. Killed by senators.
Pompey	106–48 BC	Very renowned general. Defeated pirates. Led opposition to Caesar in civil war.
Crassus	110–53 BC	Very wealthy general. Fought Spartacus. Formed triumvirate with Pompey and Caesar.
Cicero	106–43 BC	Orator. Leader of aristocratic party. Put down Catiline conspiracy. Well known writer.
Catiline	108–62 BC	Led conspiracy to overthrow Senate; discovered and put down by Cicero.
Cato (the younger)	95–46 BC	Highly principled republican who opposed Caesar, killed self after defeat of Pompey.
Clodius	93–52 BC	Violent enemy of Cicero. Populist rabble-rouser and demagogue.

SECOND TRIUMVIRATE

Augustus Caesar	63–14	First emperor. Reigned for over fifty years. Established the Imperial system.
Cassius	d. 42 BC	Mastermind of conspiracy to assassinate Caesar. Committed suicide at Philippi.
Marcus Brutus	84–42	Leader of conspirators to assassinate Caesar. Committed suicide at Philippi.
Antony	83–30 BC	With Octavius, led empire after Caesar's death. Liaison with Cleopatra caused downfall.
Fulvia	77–40 BC	Wealthy and scheming Roman matron. Married to Clodius, then to Mark Antony. Enemy of Cicero.
Cleopatra	70–20 BC	Queen of Egypt. Lover of both Caesar and Mark Antony.

AUGUSTAN AGE

Maecenas	70–8 BC	Advisor and ambassador of Augustus. Patron of art and literature.
Virgil	70–19 BC	Great epic poet of the Augustan age. Wrote <i>The Aeneid</i> .
Horace	65–8 BC	Great lyric poet and satirist of the Augustan age.
Agrippa	63–12 BC	Most trusted general and advisor of Augustus Caesar. Married Augustus's daughter Julia.
Livia	58–29	Wife of Augustus Caesar. Empress of Rome for over fifty years.
Livy	59–17	Roman historian. Wrote <i>History of Rome from its Founding</i> .
Julia Caesara	39–14	Profligate daughter of Augustus Caesar. Fell from grace and was banished from Rome.
Hermann	16–21	Hero of Germany. Annihilated three Roman legions at the <i>Battle of Teutoburg Forest</i> .

TIMELINE – AGE OF THE CAESARS

- 63 [Cicero](#) discovers and puts down the Catiline Conspiracy.
- 60 Pompey, [Crassus](#), and [Julius Caesar](#) form the **First Triumvirate**.
- 58-51 **Julius Caesar [Conquers Gaul](#)**
- 57 Caesar annihilates the rebellious Nervii at the *Battle of Sabis River*.
- 54 Caesar invades Britain for a second time.
- 52 **Caesar wins a great victory over [Vercingetorix](#) at the *Battle of Alesia*.**
- 54 Death of Caesar's daughter, the wife of Pompey, strains the alliance between the two.
- 53 Death of [Crassus](#) at the *Battle of Carrhae* brings an end to the First Triumvirate.
- 49-44 **Caesar plunges Rome into [Civil War](#) when he refuses to surrender his command.**
- 49 Caesar crosses the Rubicon with his army and marches on Rome unopposed.
- 48 **Caesar defeats Pompey at *Battle of Pharsalia*.**
- 48 Caesar puts [Cleopatra](#) on throne of Egypt at *Battle of Alexandria*.
- 46 Suicide of [Cato \(the younger\)](#) after the Republican cause is defeated at the *Thapsus*.
- 44 **Assassination of Julius Caesar**
- 43 Octavius and [Antony](#) form Second Triumvirate and agree to the murder of [Cicero](#).
- 42 **Defeat of Republican army at *Battle of Philippi*.**
- 40 Octavius marries his sister to Antony to strengthen their political alliance.
- 36 Antony renews his relationship with [Cleopatra](#) and moves to Alexandria.
- 31 **[Octavio defeats Antony](#) at the *Battle of Actium*.**
- 27 Octavius appointed imperator for life and becomes [Augustus Caesar](#).
- 27 Gates of Janus shut. Beginning of *Pax Romana*.
- 0 AD **Birth of Christ.**
- 9 AD **German chieftain [Hermann](#) [Annihilates 3 Roman Legions](#) at the *Battle of Teutoberg Forest*.**
- 14 AD [Tiberius](#), the eldest son of [Livia](#) becomes emperor on the death of Augustus.

RECOMMENDED READING - AGE OF THE CAESARS

CORE READING ASSIGNMENTS *

- Guerber - [Story of the Romans](#) [Conspiracy of Catiline](#) to [Death of Augustus](#) (11)
Macgregor - [The Story of Rome](#) [Cicero Discovers Conspiracy](#) to [Emperor Augustus](#) (23)

SUPPLEMENTAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- Harding - [City of the Seven Hills](#) [Cicero, the Orator](#) to [Rome in the Time of Augustus](#) (4)
Tappan - [Story of the Roman People](#) [Caesar and Triumvirates](#) to [The Reign of Augustus](#) (2)
Weston - [Plutarch's Lives](#) [Julius Caesar](#) to [Brutus](#) (2)
Lansing - [Barbarian and Noble](#) [The Story of Drusus](#) (1)
Lansing - [Patriots and Tyrants](#) [Three Teuton Boys](#) to [Hermann the Deliverer](#) (3)
Russell - [Julius Caesar](#) *entire book*
Francis - [Augustus Caesar](#) *entire book*
Church - [Aeneid for Boys and Girls](#) *entire book*
Upton - [Herman and Thusnelda](#) *entire book*
Morris - [Historical Tales - Roman](#) [Caesar and the Pirates](#) to [Antony and Cleopatra](#) (4)
Church - [Roman Life and Story](#) [A Child of Fortune](#) to [The Empress-Mother](#) (6)
Abbott - [Cleopatra](#) *entire book*
Abbott - [Julius Caesar](#) *entire book*
Church - [In the Days of Cicero](#) *entire book*

EASY READING

- Haaren - [Famous Men of Rome](#) [Julius Caesar](#) to [Augustus](#) (3)
Dalkeith - [Stories from Roman History](#) [Of Julius Caesar: Soldier](#) to [Of Julius Caesar: Dead](#) (4)
Gould - [Children's Plutarch - Romans](#) [Caesar and His Fortune](#) to [Caesar's Friend and Enemy](#) (5)

* Level I and II Study Questions are based on **Core Reading Assignments**.