

LIFE OF A  
COLOSSUS  
ADRIAN  
GOLDSWORTHY

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ADRIAN GOLDSWORTHY

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# MAP LIST

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The Roman Empire in the first century BC,

The City of Rome-central area, Forum etc.

Gaul and its tribes

Battle of Bibracte

Battle vrs Ariovistus

Battle of the Sambre

The coastline of Britain and Gaul

Siege of Alesia

The Italian campaign 49 BC

Battle of Ilerda

The lines at Dyrrachium

Battle of Pharsalus

Alexandria

attle of Thapsus

Battle of Munda



# INTRODUCTION

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The story of Julius Caesar is an intensely dramatic one, which has fascinated generation after generation, attracting the attention of Shakespeare and Shaw, not to mention numerous novelists and screenwriters. Caesar was one of the ablest generals of any era, who left accounts of his own campaigns that have rarely—perhaps never—been surpassed in literary quality. At the same time he was a politician and statesman who eventually took supreme power in the Roman Republic and made himself a monarch in every practical respect, although he never took the name of king. Caesar was not a cruel ruler and paraded his clemency to his defeated enemies, but in the end he was stabbed to death as a result of a conspiracy led by two pardoned men, which also included many of his own supporters. Later his adopted son Octavian—fully Caius Julius Caesar Octavianus—became Rome's first emperor. The family line perished with Nero in AD 68, but all later emperors still took the name of Caesar, even though there was no link by blood or adoption. What had simply been the name of one aristocratic family—and a fairly obscure one at that—became effectively a title symbolising supreme and legitimate power. So strong was the association that when the twentieth century opened, two of the world's great powers were still led by a kaiser and a tsar, each name a rendering of Caesar. Today the Classics have lost their central position in Western education, but even so Julius Caesar remains one of a handful of figures from the ancient world whose name commands instant recognition. Plenty of people with no knowledge of Latin will recall Shakespeare's version of his dying words, *et tu Brute* (in fact, he probably said something else (see p.508–9) but that is by the way). Of other Romans only Nero, and perhaps Mark Antony, enjoy similar fame, and from other nations probably only Alexander the Great, the Greek philosophers, Hannibal and, most of all, Cleopatra remain so high in the public consciousness. Cleopatra was Caesar's lover and Antony one of his senior lieutenants, and so both form part of his story.

Caesar was a great man. Napoleon is just one of many famous commanders who admitted that he had learned much from studying Caesar's campaigns. Politically he had a huge impact on Roman history, playing a key role in ending the Republican system of government, which had endured for four and a half centuries. Although he was fiercely intelligent and highly educated, Caesar was a man of action and it is for this that he is remembered. His talents were varied and exceptional, from his skill as an orator and writer, as framer of laws and as political operator, to his talent as soldier and general. Most of all there was his charm that so often won over the crowd in Rome, the legionaries on campaign and the many women whom he seduced. Caesar made plenty of mistakes, both as commander and as politician, but then which human being has not? His great knack was to recover from setbacks, admit, at least to himself, that he had been wrong, and then adapt to the new situation and somehow win in the long run.

Few would dispute Caesar's claim to greatness, but it is much harder to say that he was a good man, or that the consequences of his career were unambiguously good. He was not a Hitler or a Stalin nor indeed a Genghis Khan. Even so one source claims that over a million enemies were killed during his campaigns. Ancient attitudes differed from those of today, and the Romans had few qualms about Caesar's wars against foreign opponents like the tribes of Gaul. In eight years of campaigning at the very least Caesar's legions killed hundreds of thousands of people in the region, and enslaved as many more. At times he was utterly ruthless, ordering massacres and executions, and on one occasion the mass mutilation of prisoners whose hands were cut off before they were set free. More often he was merciful to defeated enemies, for the essentially practical reason that he wanted them to accept Roman rule and so become the peaceful tax-paying population of a new province. His attitude was coldly pragmatic, deciding on clemency or atrocity according to which seemed to offer him the

greatest advantage. He was an active and energetic imperialist, but having said that he was not the creator of Roman imperialism, merely one of its many agents. His campaigns were not noticeably more brutal than other Roman wars. Far more controversial at the time were his activities in Rome and his willingness to fight a civil war when he felt that his political rivals were determined to end his career. His grievances had more than a little justice, but even so when Caesar took his army from his province into Italy in January 49 BC he became a rebel. The civil wars that followed his assassination finally brought the Roman Republic to an end. Its condition may already have been terminal because of Caesar's own actions. The Republic fell and was replaced by the rule of emperors, the first of whom was his heir. During his dictatorship Caesar held supreme power and had generally governed well, bringing in measures that were sensible and statesmanlike and for the good of Rome. Previously the Republic had been dominated by a narrow senatorial elite, whose members all too often abused their position to enrich themselves by exploiting poorer Romans and the inhabitants of the provinces alike. Caesar took action to deal with problems that had been acknowledged as real and serious for some time, but which had not been resolved because of a reluctance to let any individual senator gain the credit for the act. The Republican system was pretty rotten and had been troubled by violence from before Caesar's birth, and civil war from early in his life. He won supreme power by military force and we know that he employed bribery and intimidation at other stages in his career. His opponents were no different in their methods and were as willing to fight a civil war to destroy Caesar's position as he was to defend it, but that is only to say that he was no better or worse than they were. After his victory he ruled in a very responsible manner and in marked contrast to the senatorial aristocracy—his measures were designed to benefit a much broader section of society. His regime was not repressive and he pardoned and promoted many former enemies. Rome, Italy and the provinces were all better off under Caesar than they had been for some time. Yet if he governed responsibly, his rule also effectively meant the end to free elections, and however just his rule was, in the end monarchy would lead to emperors like Caligula and Nero. It was the wealthy elite at Rome who tended to write the histories and Caesar's rise meant a reduction in the power of this class. Therefore, many sources are critical of him for this reason.

Caesar was not a moral man; indeed, in many respects he seems amoral. It does seem to have been true that his nature was kind, generous and inclined to forget grudges and turn enemies into friends but he was also willing to be utterly ruthless. He was an inveterate womaniser, disloyal to his wife and his numerous lovers. Cleopatra is by far the most famous of these—and the romance may have been genuine on both sides, but it did not stop Caesar from having an affair with another queen soon afterwards, or from continuing his pursuit of the aristocratic women of Rome. He was extremely proud, even vain, especially of his appearance. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that from a young age Caesar was absolutely convinced of his own superiority. Much of this self-esteem was justified, for he was brighter and more capable than the overwhelming majority of other senators. Perhaps like Napoleon he was so fascinated by his own character that this made it easier to enthrall others. Also like the French emperor there were many contradictions in his character. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle once wrote of Napoleon that: 'He was a wonderful man—perhaps the most wonderful man who ever lived. What strikes me is the lack of finality in his character. When you make up your mind that he is a complete villain, you come on some noble trait, and then your admiration of this is lost in some act of incredible meanness.'<sup>1</sup> There is something of the same odd mixture with Caesar, although perhaps he was less extreme.

It is striking that while today academics are supposed to be trained to examine the past dispassionately, it is very rare to meet an ancient historian who does not have a strong opinion about Caesar. In the past some have admired, even idolised, him, seeing him as a visionary who perceived the huge problems facing the Republic and realised how to solve them. Others are far more critical

and view him as merely another aristocrat with very traditional ambitions who scrambled to the top regardless of the cost to law and precedent, but then had no clear idea of what to do with his power. Such commentators tend to emphasise the opportunism that marked his rise to power. Caesar certainly was an opportunist, but the same has surely been true of virtually every successful politician. He believed strongly in the power of chance in all human affairs and felt that he was especially lucky. With hindsight we know that Octavian—these days more often referred to as Augustus—created the system through which emperors would rule the Roman Empire for centuries. Debate rages over the extent to which Caesar's years in control of Rome began what Augustus was able to complete, or whether a false start and only provided an example that his adopted son consciously avoided in an effort to escape the same fate. Opinion remains fiercely divided and it is unlikely that this will ever change. The truth probably lies somewhere between the extreme views.

The aim of this book is to examine Caesar's life on its own terms, and to place it firmly within the context of Roman society in the first century BC. It is not concerned with what happened after his death, and there will be no real discussion of the differences between his regime and that which evolved in the years when Augustus held power. Instead the focus is on what Caesar did, and on trying to understand why and how he did it. Hindsight is obviously inevitable, but it does attempt to avoid assuming that the Civil War and the collapse of the Republic were inevitable, or the opposite extreme which claims that there was nothing wrong with the Republic at all. There has been a tendency in the past for books to look at Caesar either as a politician or as a general. This distinction had no real meaning at Rome, in contrast to modern Western democracies. A Roman senator received military and civilian tasks to perform throughout his career, both being a normal part of public life. Neither one can fully be understood without the other, and here the two will be covered in equal detail. This is a long book, but it cannot hope to provide a full account of politics at Rome during Caesar's lifetime nor does it attempt a complete analysis of the campaigns in Gaul and the Civil War. The focus is always on Caesar, and no more description is provided for events in which he was not personally involved than is essential. Many points of controversy are skimmed over—for instance, the details of particular law or trial at Rome, or topographic and other questions related to military operations. However interesting, such points would be digressions unless they have a significant part to play in understanding Caesar. Those so inclined will be able to find out more about such things from the works cited in the notes collected at the end of this book. Similarly, as far as possible the main text avoids direct mention of the many distinguished scholars who have written about Caesar and a discussion of their specific interpretations. Such things are a major and essential concern in an academic study, but are tedious in the extreme for the general reader. Once again the relevant works are cited in the notes at the end of the book.

For all his fame, and the fact that he lived in probably the best documented decades of Roman history, there are still many things we do not know about Caesar. Most of our evidence has been available for some time. Archaeological excavation continues to reveal more about the world in which Caesar lived—at the time of writing on-going work in, for instance, France and Egypt is likely to tell us a good deal more about Gaul in Caesar's day and the Alexandria of Cleopatra. However, it is unlikely that any discoveries will radically alter our understanding of Caesar's career and life. For this we are largely reliant on the literary sources in Latin and Greek that have survived from the ancient world, occasionally supplemented by inscriptions on bronze or in stone. Caesar's own *Commentarii* on his campaigns survive and provide us with detailed accounts of his campaigns in Gaul and the first two years of the Civil War. They are supplemented by four extra books written after his death by his officers, which cover his remaining operations. In addition we have the letters, speeches and theoretical works of Cicero, which provide us with a wealth of detail for this period. Cicero's correspondence, which includes letters written to him by many of the leading men of the Republic

was published after his death and contains a handful of short messages from Caesar himself. We know that complete books of correspondence between Cicero and Caesar, as well as another consisting of exchanges between Cicero and Pompey, were published, but sadly these have not survived. The same is true of Caesar's other literary works and published speeches. It is always important to remind ourselves that only a tiny fraction of one per cent of the literature of the ancient world is available today. There are some deliberate omissions from Cicero's published letters, most notably his letters to his friend Atticus in the first three months of 44 BC. Atticus was involved in the release of the correspondence, but this did not occur until Augustus was established as master of Rome. It is more than likely that the missing letters contained something that might have implicated Atticus in his involvement in the conspiracy against Caesar, or more probably suggested either knowledge of it or subsequent approval, and that these were deliberately suppressed to protect himself. Another near-contemporary source is Sallust, who wrote several histories, including an account of Catiline's conspiracy. During the Civil War Sallust had fought for Caesar and been reinstated to the Senate as a reward. Sent to govern Africa, he was subsequently condemned for extortion, but was let off by Caesar. More favourable to Caesar than Cicero, Sallust wrote with the benefit of hindsight and his opinion of the dictator seems to have become rather mixed. Ironically, given his own career—though he always strenuously denied any wrongdoing—his theme was that all of Rome's ills were caused by moral decline amongst the aristocracy, and so inevitably this coloured his narrative. Cicero, Sallust and Caesar were all active participants in public life. Caesar in particular wrote to celebrate his deeds and win support for his continuing career. Neither he nor the others were dispassionate observers keen only to report unvarnished fact.

Most other sources are much later. Livy wrote during the reign of Augustus and so some events were still within living memory, but the books covering this period have been lost and only brief summaries survive. Velleius Paterculus wrote a little later and there is some useful material in his brief narrative of the period. However, a good deal of our evidence for Caesar was not written until the early second century AD, over one hundred and fifty years after the dictator's murder. The Greek writer Appian produced a massive history of Rome, of which two books cover the civil wars and disturbances from 133 to 44 BC. Plutarch was also Greek, but his most important work for our purposes was his *Parallel Lives*, biographies pairing a famous Greek and Roman figure. Caesar was paired with Alexander the Great as the two most successful generals of all time. Also of relevance are his lives of Marius, Sulla, Crassus, Pompey, Cicero, Cato, Brutus and Mark Antony. Suetonius was a Roman who produced biographies of the first twelve emperors, beginning with Caesar. Cassius Dio was of Greek origin, but was also a Roman citizen and a senator who was active in public life in the early third century AD. He provides the most detailed continuous narrative of the period. All of these writers had access to sources, many of them contemporary to Caesar and including some of his own lost works, which are no longer available. Yet we need always to remind ourselves that each was written much later, and we cannot always be sure that they understood or accurately reflected the attitudes of the first century BC. There are some notable gaps in our evidence. By a curious coincidence the opening section of both Suetonius' and Plutarch's biographies of Caesar are missing and so we do not know with absolute certainty in which year he was born. Each author had his own biases, interest or viewpoint, and made use of sources that were in turn prejudiced and often open to propaganda. Care needs to be taken when using any source. Unlike those studying more recent history, ancient historians often have to make the best of limited and possibly unreliable sources, as well as balancing apparently contradictory accounts. Throughout I have attempted to give some idea of the process.

Some aspects of Caesar's inner life remain closed to us. It would be interesting and revealing to know more about his personal and private relationships with his family, his wives, lovers and friends.

In the case of the latter it does seem that for much of his life and certainly in his last years he had no friend who was in any way his equal, although he was clearly close to and fond of many of his subordinates and assistants. We also know next to nothing about his religious beliefs. Ritual and religion pervaded every aspect of life in the Roman world. Caesar was one of Rome's most senior priests and regularly carried out or presided over prayers, sacrifices and other rites. He also made the most of the family tradition that claimed descent from the goddess Venus. We have no idea, however, what any of this meant to him. He was rarely, if ever, restrained from doing anything because of religious scruples and was willing to manipulate religion for his own benefit, but that does not necessarily mean that he was entirely cynical and had no beliefs. In the end we simply do not know. Part of the fascination with Caesar is because he is so difficult to pin down and because mysteries remain, for instance, as to what he really intended in the last months of his life. In his fifty-six years he was at times many things, including a fugitive, prisoner, rising politician, army leader, legal advocate, rebel, dictator—perhaps even a god—as well as a husband, father, lover and adulterer. Few fictional heroes have ever done as much as Caius Julius Caesar.



THE RISE TO  
THE CONSULSHIP

**100—59** BC

## CAESAR'S WORLD

‘For, when Rome was freed of the fear of Carthage, and her rival in empire was out of her way, the path of virtue was abandoned for that of corruption, not gradually, but in headlong course. The older discipline was discarded to give place to the new. The state passed from vigilance to slumber, from the pursuit of arms to the pursuit of pleasure, from activity to idleness.’

– *Velleius Paterculus, early first century AD.*<sup>1</sup>

‘The Republic is nothing, merely a name without body or shape.’

– *Julius Caesar.*<sup>2</sup>

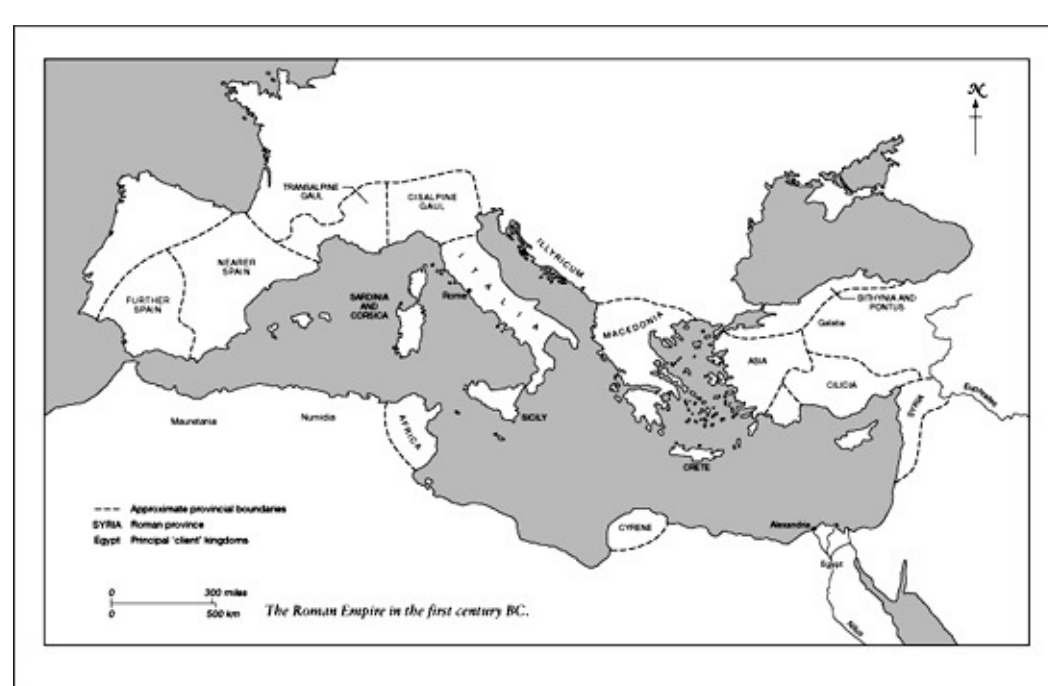
By the end of the second century BC, the Roman Republic was the only great power left in the Mediterranean world. Carthage, the Phoenician colony whose trading empire had dominated the West for so long, had been razed to the ground by the legions in 146 BC. At almost the same time, Alexander the Great's homeland of Macedonia became a Roman province. The other major kingdoms that had emerged when Alexander's generals had torn apart his vast but short-lived empire had already been humbled and had dwindled to shadows of their former might. Many of the lands in and around the Mediterranean—the entire Italian Peninsula, southern Gaul, Sicily, Sardinia and Corsica, Macedonia and part of Illyricum, Asia Minor, much of Spain and a corner of North Africa—were directly ruled by the Romans. Elsewhere Rome's power was acknowledged, however grudgingly, or at the very least feared. None of the kingdoms, tribes or states in contact with the Romans could match their power and there was no real prospect of their uniting in opposition. In 100 BC Rome was hugely strong and very rich and there was nothing to suggest that this would change. With hindsight, we know that Rome would in fact grow even stronger and richer, and within little more than a century would have conquered the bulk of an empire that would endure for five centuries.

Rome's rise from a purely Italian power to Mediterranean superpower had been rapid, shocking even so to the Greek-speaking world, which had in the past scarcely regarded this particular group of western barbarians. The struggle with Carthage had lasted over a century and involved massive losses, whereas the defeat of the Hellenistic powers had taken half the time and been achieved at trifling cost. A generation before Caesar's birth, the Greek historian Polybius had written a *Universal History* with the express purpose of explaining just how Rome's dominance had been achieved. He had himself witnessed the closing stages of the process, having fought against the Romans in the Third Macedonian War (172–167 BC), then gone to Rome as a hostage, living in the household of a Roman nobleman and accompanying him on campaign to witness the destruction of Carthage. Although he paid attention to the effectiveness of the Roman military system, Polybius believed that Rome's success rested far more on its political system. For him the Republic's constitution, which was carefully balanced to prevent any one individual or section of society from gaining overwhelming control, granted Rome freedom from the frequent revolution and civil strife that had plagued most Greek city-states. Internally stable, the Roman Republic was able to devote itself to waging war on a scale and with a relentlessness unmatched by any rival. It is doubtful that any other contemporary state could have survived the catastrophic losses and devastation inflicted by Hannibal, and still gone on to win the war.<sup>3</sup>

Caesar was born into a Republic that was some four centuries old and had proved itself in Rome's steady rise. Rome itself would go on to even greater power, but the Republican system was nearing a

end. In his own lifetime Caesar would see the Republic torn apart by civil wars—conflicts in which he himself was to play a leading role. Some Romans felt that the system had not outlived Caesar, many naming him as its principal assassin. None doubted that the Republic was no more than a memory by the time that Caesar's adopted son Augustus had made himself Rome's first emperor. For all its earlier, long-term success, the Roman Republic was nearing the end of its life by the close of the second century BC with some signs that not everything was functioning properly.

In 105 BC a group of migrating Germanic tribes called the Cimbri and Teutones had smashed an exceptionally large Roman army at Arausio (modern Orange in southern France). The casualties from this battle rivalled those of Cannae in 216 BC, when Hannibal had massacred almost 50,000 Roman and allied soldiers in a single day. It was the latest and worst of a string of defeats inflicted by the barbarians, who had been provoked into fighting by the first Roman commander to encounter them, back in 113 BC. The Cimbri and Teutones were peoples on the move in search of new land, not a professional army engaged in an all-out war. In battle their warriors were terrifying in appearance and individually brave, but they lacked discipline. At a strategic level the tribes were not guided by rigid objectives. After Arausio they wandered off towards Spain, not returning to invade Italy for several years. This temporary relief did little to reduce the widespread panic at Rome, fuelled by fond memories of the sack of the city in 390 BC by large, fair complexioned and savage warriors—in this case Gauls rather than Germans—but the Romans retained a deep-seated fear of all northern barbarians. There was widespread criticism of the incompetent aristocratic generals who had presided over the recent disasters. Instead they insisted that the war against the tribes must now be entrusted to Caius Marius, who had just won a victory in Numidia, ending a war that had also initially been characterised by corruption and ineptitude in high places. Marius was married to Caesar's aunt and was the first in his family to enter politics, and had already achieved much by being elected as one of the two consuls for 107 BC. The consuls were the senior executive officers of the Republic, charged with the most important civil responsibilities or military commands for the twelve months during which they held office. Ten years were supposed to elapse before a man was permitted to hold a second consulship, but Marius was voted into the office for five consecutive years from 104 to 100 BC. This was both unprecedented and of dubious legality, but did have the desired result, as he defeated the Teutones in 102 BC and the Cimbri in the following year.<sup>4</sup>



Marius' successive consulships violated a fundamental principle of Roman public life, but the



could be interpreted as a necessary expedient to guide the State through a time of crisis. In the past the Republic had demonstrated a degree of flexibility, which had helped the Romans to deal with other emergencies. Far more disturbing was the recent tendency for political disputes to turn violent. In the autumn of 100 BC, a senator called Memmius, who had just been elected to the consulship for the following year, was beaten to death in the Forum by the henchmen of one of the unsuccessful candidates. This man, Caius Servilius Glaucia, along with his associate Lucius Appuleius Saturninus had employed threats and mob violence before to force through their legislation. They were widely believed to have arranged the murder of another of their rivals in the previous year. Memmius's lynching was blatant and prompted a swift backlash. Marius, who up until this point had been content to use Saturninus for his own purposes, now turned against him and responded to the Senate's call for him to save the Republic. Arming his supporters, he blockaded Saturninus and Glaucia's partisans on the Capitoline Hill, and soon forced them to surrender. Marius may have promised the radicals their lives, but the general mood was less inclined to lenience. Most of the captives were shut in the Senate House when a crowd mobbed the building. Some climbed onto the roof and started tearing off the tiles, hurling the heavy projectiles down into the interior until all the prisoners had been killed. To protect the Republic, normal law had been suspended and violence was crushed by greater violence. This was a far cry from the, admittedly idealised, picture of the perfectly balanced constitution presented by Polybius, although even he had hinted that Rome's internal stability might not always endure. To understand Caesar's story we must first look at the nature of the Roman Republic, both in theory and in the changing practice of the closing decades of the second century BC.<sup>5</sup>

## THE REPUBLIC

Tradition maintained that Rome had been founded in 753 BC. For the Romans this was Year One and subsequent events were formally dated as so many years from the 'foundation of the city' (*ab urbe condita*). The archaeological evidence for the origins of Rome is less clear-cut, since it is difficult to judge when the small communities dotted around the hills of what would become Rome merged into a single city. Few records were preserved from the earliest periods and there were many things that even the Romans did not know with certainty by the time they began to write histories at the beginning of the second century BC. The tales of the City's early days probably contain some measure of truth, but it is all but impossible to verify individuals and particular incidents. Clearly, Rome was first ruled by kings, although it is hard to know whether any of the seven individual monarchs recorded in tradition were actual figures. Near the end of the sixth century BC—the traditional date of 509 BC may well be accurate—internal upheaval resulted in the monarchy being replaced by a republic.

The political system of the Roman Republic evolved gradually over many years and was never rigidly fixed. Resembling more modern Britain than the United States of America, Rome did not have a written constitution, but a patchwork of legislation, precedent and tradition. The expression *res publica*, from which we have derived our word republic, literally means 'the public thing' and can perhaps best be translated as 'the State' or the 'body politic'. The vagueness ensured that it meant different things to different people. Caesar would later dismiss it as an empty phrase.<sup>6</sup> The looseness of the system permitted considerable flexibility, which for centuries proved a source of strength. At the same time its very nature ensured that any new precedent or law, whether good or bad, could easily modify forever the way that things were done. At the heart of the system was the desire to prevent any one individual from gaining too much permanent power. Fear of a revival of monarchic rule was

widespread and most deeply entrenched among the aristocracy, who monopolised high office. Therefore power within the Republic was vested in a number of different institutions, the most important of which were the magistrates, the Senate and the Popular Assemblies.

Magistrates had considerable power, the most senior formally holding *imperium*, the right to command troops and dispense justice, but this was essentially temporary and lasted only for twelve months of office. It was also limited by the equal power of colleagues holding the same office. There were two consuls each year and six praetors holding the next most important magistracy. A magistrate could not seek re-election to the same post until a ten-year interval had elapsed, nor could he stand for the first place until he had reached the age of thirty-nine for the praetorship and forty-two for the consulship. There was no division between political and military power and the magistrates performed both military or civil tasks as necessary. The most important duties and military commands went to the consuls, the lesser to the praetors. Most senior magistrates were sent out to govern a province during their year of office. The Senate was able to extend a consul or praetor's *imperium* as a pro-magistrate—proconsul or propraeor respectively—on an annual basis. This was frequently necessary to provide the Republic with the number of provincial governors needed to control a large empire, but it did not alter the essentially temporary nature of power. An extension of more than two years was extremely rare. Therefore, while the offices themselves wielded great power, the individual consuls and other magistrates changed every year.

In contrast the Senate's importance was based less on its formal functions than its sheer permanence. It consisted of around 300 senators and met when summoned by a magistrate, usually the consul when one was present. Senators were not elected, but enrolled—and very occasionally expelled—from the Senate by the two censors, who every five years carried out a census of Roman citizens. It was expected that these would enrol anyone elected to a magistracy since the last census, although there was no legal obligation to do this. However, there were comparatively few offices to hold, and many senators, perhaps half, had never been elected to a magistracy. Senators had to belong to the equestrian order, the wealthiest property-holding class listed in the census. Their name, *equites*—‘knights’, derived from their traditional role as cavalymen in the Roman army. However, the vast majority of equestrians never sought to enter public life and the Senate tended to be drawn from an informal inner elite within the class. Wealthy, and given a prominent role in guiding the State, they were therefore men who had a strong vested interest in preserving the Republic. Debates were dominated by the ex-magistrates, for procedure dictated that the former consuls be asked their opinion first, followed by the former praetors and so on down to the most junior posts. Individuals who had served the Republic in a prominent position possessed huge influence or *auctoritas* (see p. 524) and the collective prestige of the Senate as a body was based to a large extent on the inclusion of such men. The Senate did not have the power to legislate, but the decrees resulting from its debates went to the Popular Assemblies for approval with a very strong recommendation. It also acted as an advisory council for the magistrates when these were in Rome, decided which provinces would be available for each year, and could grant *imperium* as a pro-magistrate. In addition, it was the Senate that received foreign embassies and despatched ambassadors, and also sent commissioners to oversee administrative arrangements in the provinces, giving it a critical role in shaping foreign affairs.

The various voting assemblies of the Roman people possessed considerable power within the Republic, but had little or no scope for independent action. They elected all magistrates, passed laws and had formally to ratify declarations of war and the peace treaties concluding a conflict. All adult male citizens were able to vote if they were present, but their votes were not all of equal value. In the *Comitia Centuriata*, which elected the consuls and had a number of other important functions, the people were divided into voting units based upon their property as registered in the most recent census. Its structure had its origins in the organisation of the archaic Roman army, where the

wealthiest were best able to afford the expensive equipment required to fight in the more conspicuous and dangerous roles. Inevitably there were fewer members in the most senior voting units or centuries simply because there were fewer rich than poor. Each century's vote was supposed to carry equal weight, but those of the wealthier classes voted first and it was often the case that a decision had already been reached before the poorest centuries had had their say. Other assemblies were based on tribal divisions, again determined by the census, and here the inequalities were similarly great if of slightly different character. Each tribe voted according to a majority decision of those members present. However, the urban tribes, which included many of Rome's poor, usually contained on the day of any vote far more citizens than the rural tribes, where only the wealthy members were likely to have travelled to Rome. Therefore in most respects the opinion of the more prosperous citizens had far greater impact on the outcome of all votes than that of the more numerous poor. None of these assemblies provided an opportunity for debate. Instead they simply chose from a list of candidates voted for or against a particular proposal. Assemblies were summoned by a magistrate, who presided over them and dictated their business. Compared to the Assembly of Athens in the later fifth century BC, the democratic elements within the Roman system might seem tightly controlled, but that does not mean that they were unimportant. The outcome of voting, particularly in elections, remained unpredictable.

Only those registered as equestrians in the highest property class in the census were eligible for a political career. Reaching the magistracies depended on winning favour with the electorate. At Rome there was nothing even vaguely resembling modern political parties—although given the stifling impact of these, this may well have made it more rather than less democratic than many countries today—and each candidate for office competed as an individual. Only rarely did they advocate specific policies, although commenting on issues of current importance was more common. In the main voters looked more for a capable individual who once elected could do whatever the State required. Past deeds stood as proof of ability, but where these were lacking, especially at the early stages of a career, a candidate paraded the achievements of earlier generations of his family. The Romans believed strongly that families possessed clear character traits and it was assumed that a man whose father and grandfather had fought successful wars against Rome's foes would prove similarly capable himself. Aristocratic families took great pains to advertise the deeds of their members, past and present, so that their names sparked recognition amongst the voters. The combination of their fame and wealth allowed a comparatively small number of families to dominate the ranks of the magistracies and, in particular, the consulship. Even so, it was never impossible for a man, even one who was the first of his family to enter the Senate, to become consul. Someone who achieved this feat was known as a 'new man' (*novus homo*). Marius, with his unprecedented string of consulships, was the greatest of these, and for most 'new men' a single term was a sufficiently difficult achievement. Politics was highly competitive and even members of established families needed to work to maintain their advantage. The number of each college of magistrates declined with seniority, so that the struggle for office became even harder as a man progressed up the ladder. By simple arithmetic, only one-third of the six praetors elected each year could hope to become consul. This fierce competitiveness ensured that long-term political groupings were rare, and permanent parties unimaginable, for no one could share a magistracy.

In many ways the system worked well, providing the Republic each year with a new crop of magistrates, all eager to do great deeds on Rome's behalf before their twelve months of office expired. The formal power of *imperium* lasted only for this time, but a man's successes would greatly enhance his *auctoritas*. Like so many Roman concepts this term is hard to translate in a single English word, for it combined authority, reputation and influence with sheer importance or status. *Auctoritas* endured after an office was laid down, though it could be diminished by a man's subsequent behavior.

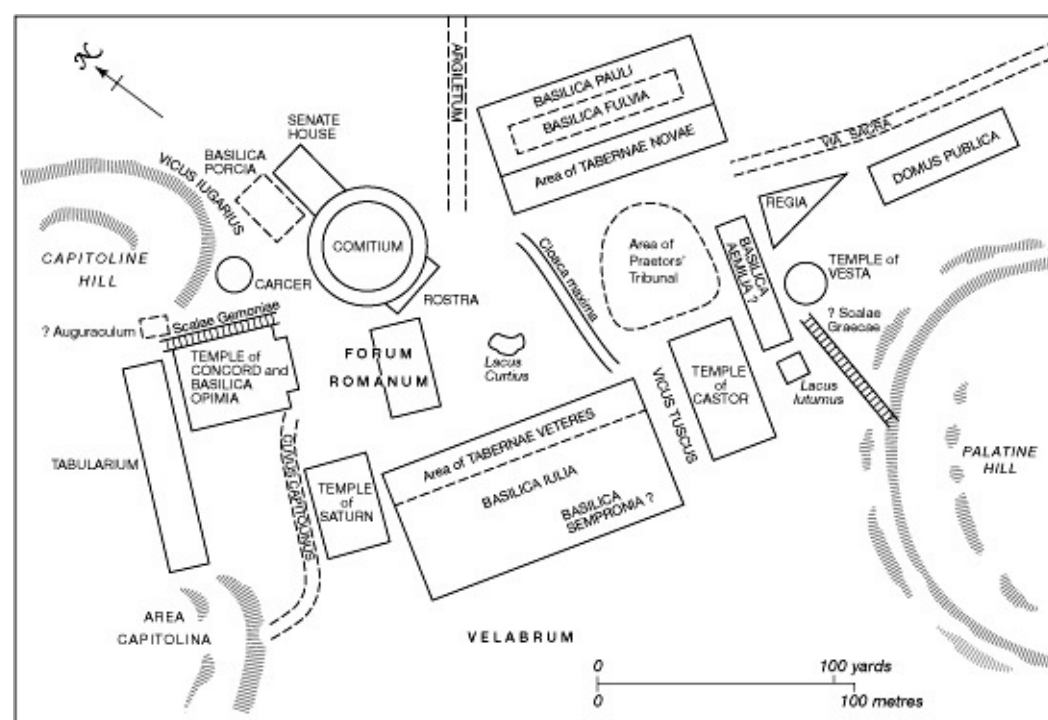
or eclipsed by that of other senators. It determined how often and how early a man's opinion would be sought by the magistrate presiding over a meeting of the Senate, and the weight his view would carry with others. *Auctoritas* existed only when it was acknowledged by others, but men were aware of their status and could at times use it bluntly. In 90 BC the distinguished former consul and censor, and current senior senator (*princeps senatus*), Marcus Aemilius Scaurus was accused of taking bribes from a hostile king. His prosecutor was the undistinguished Quintus Varius Severus, who, although a Roman, had been born in the city of Sucro in Spain. As the key to his defence, Scaurus turned to the court and the watching crowd and asked a simple question. 'Varius Severus of Sucro claims that Aemilius Scaurus, seduced by a royal bribe, betrayed the *imperium* of the Roman people; Aemilius Scaurus denies the charge. Which of the two would you rather believe?' In reply Varius was jeered from the court and the charge dropped.<sup>7</sup>

Competition did not stop when a man won the consulship. His subsequent status depended on how well he performed in the office in comparison with other consuls. Leading an army to victory over an enemy of the Republic was a great achievement, especially if it was acknowledged by the award of a triumph on his return to Rome. In this ceremony the victor rode in a chariot through the centre of the city as part of a procession including his captives, the spoils won and other symbols of success, as well as his own soldiers parading in their finest equipment. The general was dressed in the regalia of Rome's most important deity, Jupiter Optimus Maximus, even to the extent of having his face painted red to resemble the old terracotta statues of the god. Behind him stood a slave holding the victor's laurel wreath over the general's head, but also whispering a reminder that he was a mortal. It was a great honour, commemorated for ever by hanging laurel wreaths (or carving their likeness) in the porch of a man's house. Such an achievement was highly valued, but it was also compared to the victories of other senators. It was important to have won better and greater battles over stronger and more exotic enemies for this enhanced a man's *auctoritas* in relation to other former generals. Most men had won and completed their first consulship by the time they were in their mid forties, and could expect to live on and remain active in the Senate for decades. Their continued prominence in public life depended on their *auctoritas*, and in time might further add to this. Competition was at the heart of Roman public life, senators struggling throughout their careers to win fame and influence for themselves, and prevent others from acquiring too much of the same things. The annual election of new magistrates and the restrictions on office-holding helped to provide many senators with the chance to serve the Republic in a distinguished capacity, and prevented any one individual from establishing a monopoly of glory and influence. All aristocrats wanted to excel, but their deepest fear was always that someone else would surpass all rivals by too great a margin and win a more permanent pre-eminence, raising the spectre of monarchy. Too much success for an individual reduced the number of honours available for everyone else to contest.



Although the Republic had become the great power of the Mediterranean world by the end of the second century BC, Rome itself remained the focus of all aspects of political life. There, and only there, could the Senate meet, courts convene or Popular Assemblies gather to elect magistrates or pass legislation. By 100 BC Rome was the largest city in the known world, dwarfing even its nearest rivals such as Alexandria. By the close of the first century BC its population may well have been around the million mark, and even in 100 BC there were certainly several hundred thousand people living there, perhaps half a million or more. We lack the evidence to be more precise, but these numbers at least give some sense of the order of magnitude. Huge though the population was, in an age before any form of transport faster than a man could walk or ride, Rome did not sprawl over as wide an area as most modern cities. Housing, especially in the poorer areas, was very densely packed. Yet at the heart of

Rome in every sense was the open space of the Forum. This was a place of commerce, from the fashionable shops, which bordered on its great buildings and provided the luxuries that were the pride of empire, to the representatives of the big merchant companies and grain suppliers. It was also the place of law and justice, where the courts convened, advocates presented their cases and juries gave their verdict, all in open view. Through the Forum ran the Sacra Via, the route of triumphal processions. More than anything else, it was in and around the Forum that the public life of the Republic was conducted. Magistrates, such as the tribunes, aediles and praetors, had set places in the Forum where they sat to conduct business. When the Senate met it was with very rare exceptions in a building on the edge of the Forum, either the Senate House (Curia) or one of the great temples. Outside the Senate House was the Speakers Platform or Rostra, whose name was derived from its decoration with the prows of enemy warships during the wars with Carthage. From the Rostra speeches were made to informal meetings of the Roman people as magistrates and prominent men sought to persuade them to vote for or against a bill, or to favour someone at an election. At the command of a suitable magistrate, the same crowd of Romans could be told to convene as an Assembly of tribes (either the *Concilium Plebis* or *Comitia Tributa*) and pass legislation. Other than for elections, this almost always occurred in the Forum. In so many ways the Forum was the beating heart of Rome.<sup>8</sup>



The City of Rome—central area, Forum etc. (after CAH<sup>2</sup> ix (1994) p.370). Some of the details are conjectural.

## THE PROFITS AND THE PRICE OF EMPIRE

The Roman Republic was frequently at war, for long periods virtually on an annual basis. Frequent war-making was not unusual in the ancient world, where states rarely needed much more reason to attack their neighbours than a belief that they were vulnerable. The great period of Classical Greek culture, with its flourishing arts, literature and philosophy, had come at a period when warfare between the Greek city-states was endemic. Yet from early on in its history Rome's war-making was distinctive in character, not simply because it was so successful, but through its talent for consolidating success on a permanent basis, as defeated enemies were absorbed and turned into



reliable allies. By the beginning of the third century BC virtually all of the Italian Peninsula had come under Roman control. Within this territory some communities had been granted Roman citizenship and these, in addition to the colonies planted on conquered land, allowed the number of Roman citizens to grow in size far beyond the populations of other city-states. Other peoples were granted Latin status, conveying lesser, though still significant privileges, while the remainder were simply allies or *socii*. Comparatively early on, both Roman and Latin status had lost any real association with particular ethnic or even linguistic groups, and had become primarily legal distinctions. Over time communities not granted such privileges could hope to gain them, progressing by stages from Latin rights to citizenship without the vote, and finally to full Roman citizenship. Each community was tied to Rome by a specific treaty, which made clear both its rights and obligations. Even more obvious was the fundamental fact that Rome was the superior partner in any such agreement and that this was not a settlement between equals. The most common obligation of all types of ally, including the Latins, was to supply Rome with men and resources in time of war. At least half of any Roman army invariably consisted of allied soldiers. In this way the defeated enemies of the past helped to win the wars of the present. Apart from confirming their loyalty to Rome in this way, the allied communities were also allowed a small, but significant, share in the profits of warfare. Since Roman war-making was so frequent—and some scholars have even suggested that the Republic needed to go to war to remind her allies of their obligations—there were plenty of opportunities for both service and profit.<sup>9</sup>

In 264 BC the Romans sent an army outside Italy for the first time, provoking the long conflict with the Carthaginians, who were of Phoenician origin, hence the Roman name of *Poeni* (Punic). The First Punic War (264–241 BC) brought Rome its first overseas province in Sicily, to which was added Sardinia in the conflict's immediate aftermath. The Second Punic War (218–201 BC) resulted in permanent Roman presence in Spain and involvement in Macedonia. The Republic's huge reserves of citizen and allied manpower and the willingness to absorb staggeringly high losses were major factors in securing the victory over Carthage. These conflicts also accustomed the Romans to despatching and supplying armies very far afield, something that was made possible by the creation of a large navy during the First Punic War. The Republic became used to waging war in several widely different theatres simultaneously. In the early decades of the second century BC, Rome defeated Macedonia and the Seleucid Empire. These, along with the Ptolemies of Egypt, were the most powerful of the Hellenistic kingdoms to emerge from the wreck of Alexander the Great's empire. The destruction of both Carthage and Corinth at the hands of Roman armies in 146 BC symbolised Roman dominance over the older powers of the Mediterranean world. More provinces were established in Macedonia and Africa, while elsewhere the conquest of the Po Valley was completed and a presence in Illyricum reinforced. Near the end of the century, Transalpine Gaul (modern Provence in southern France) was conquered, establishing a Roman controlled land link with the provinces in Spain, just as Illyricum provided a connection with Macedonia. Soon Roman roads would be constructed linking one province to another in a monumental but highly practical way. Around the same time, the wealthy province of Asia was acquired. The link between Rome and her overseas provinces was at this time far less intimate than the bonds with the peoples of Italy, and there was no question as yet of widespread grants of Latin or Roman status to the indigenous populations. Communities in the provinces often provided troops to serve with the Roman army, but this was not their most important obligation, which took the form of regular tribute or taxation.

Many Romans benefited greatly from overseas expansion. For the aristocracy it provided plentiful opportunities to win glory during their magistracies by fighting a war. Campaigns against the tribal peoples in Spain, Gaul, Illyricum and Thrace were frequent. Wars with the famous states of the Hellenistic world occurred less often but were far more spectacular. With warfare so frequent, competition amongst senators focused on having won a bigger or more dangerous war than anyone

else, and the honour of being the first to defeat a people was equally valued. Along with glory came great riches from plunder and the sale of captives as slaves. Some of this wealth went to the Republic and some to the men serving in the army, but since greater shares went to the more senior ranks, it went to the commanders more than anyone else who benefited. Victories won in the eastern Mediterranean were especially lucrative, and during the second century BC a succession of generals returned from such wars to celebrate more lavish and more spectacular triumphs than had ever been seen before. It was at this period that the city of Rome began to be rebuilt in a far more spectacular form. Successful commanders used some of their spoils to construct grand temples and other public buildings as permanent reminders of their achievements. Competition for fame and influence continued to dominate public life, but it was becoming an increasingly expensive business as some men brought back massive fortunes from their victories. Senators from families who had not managed to win commands during the most profitable campaigns had increasing difficulty maintaining the costs of a political career. The gap between the richest and poorest senators steadily widened, reducing the number of men able to compete for the highest magistracies and commands.

It was not only senators who profited from the creation of the empire, but in general it was the wealthy who did best in the new conditions. The Republic did not create an extensive bureaucratic machine to administer the provinces, so that governors had only a small number of officials supplemented by members of their own households with which to govern. As a result, much day-to-day business was left to the local communities and a good deal was carried out by private companies controlled by wealthy Romans. These men were usually members of the equestrian order, for senators themselves were forbidden by law from undertaking such contracts. (This was supposed to prevent business interests from influencing the opinions they expressed in the Senate. However, many may have covertly invested money in companies run openly by equestrians.) Companies headed by such men bid for the right to collect taxes in a region, to sell war captives and other plunder, or to undertake massive contracts supplying the army with food and equipment. They were known as the *publicani* – the publicans of the King James Bible—for undertaking such tasks required by the Republic, but their primary motive was profit and not public service. Once a company had agreed to pay the Treasury a set sum for the right to collect the taxes in a particular region or province, it was therefore necessary for them to collect more than this from the provincials. The company's agents at all levels were inclined to take a cut of the profits, and inevitably the amount actually taken from the population of the province was often substantially higher than the sum received by the Treasury. Yet in the main the Republic was satisfied with this arrangement and resentment on the part of the provincials could, if necessary, be met by the force of the army. Apart from the *publicani*, many other Romans and their agents were active in business in the provinces. Merely being a Roman—and most Italians were taken for Romans by other races—gave merchants (*negotiatores*) considerable advantages, simply through association with the imperial power. The more influential men—once again usually the wealthiest or their representatives—were often able to draw on more direct aid from provincial governors. The activities of traders rarely feature other than peripherally in our ancient sources, but it is important not to underestimate their numbers or the scale of their operations. Such men profited greatly from Roman imperialism, even if it seems extremely unlikely that they had much influence on the decision-making process that directed the Republic's foreign affairs.<sup>10</sup>

Over the generations, an exceptionally high proportion of Roman men served in the army. Not until the government in Revolutionary France introduced mass conscription did a state of comparable size mobilise so much of its manpower over so long a period of time. Until the middle of the second century BC there appears to have been little popular resistance to this, and most men willingly undertook their military duties. For some active service was very attractive, in spite of the extremely brutal discipline imposed on the legions, for there was every prospect of plunder and winning honour

The Romans were also fiercely patriotic and valued this demonstration of their commitment to the Republic. The army recruited from the propertied classes, for each soldier was expected to provide himself with the necessary equipment to serve as a horseman for the very wealthy, a heavy infantryman for the majority, or a light infantryman for the poorer and younger recruits. The heart of the legions consisted of farmers, for land remained the most common form of property. Service lasted until the legion was disbanded, which often occurred at the end of a war. In the early days of the Republic, a spell in the army may well have taken no more than a few weeks, or at most months, for the foe was usually close by and the fighting small in scale and brief in duration. Ideally it allowed the farmer-soldier to win a quick victory and then return home in time to harvest his own fields. As Rome expanded, wars were fought further and further away and tended to last longer. During the Punic Wars tens of thousands of Romans were away from their homes for years. A number of overseas provinces demanded permanent garrisons, so that men unfortunate enough to be posted to somewhere like Spain often had to undergo five or ten years' continuous service. In their absence their own small farms risked falling into ruin, their families into destitution. The situation was worsened as the minimum property qualification was lowered to provide more manpower, since such recruits inevitably lived that much closer to the poverty line. Prolonged military service ruined many small farmers, and the loss of their land meant that such men would in future lack sufficient property to make them eligible for call up to the legions. Concern grew from the middle of the second century BC that the number of citizens liable for the army was in terminal decline.

The difficulties of many small farmers occurred at the same time as other factors were reshaping Italian agriculture. The profits of expansion brought fabulous wealth to many senators and equestrians. Such men invested a good deal of their fortunes in huge landed estates, often absorbing land that had formerly been divided into many smallholdings. Such estates (*latifundia*) were invariably worked by a servile labour force, since frequent war ensured that slaves were both plentiful and cheap. The size of a man's landholdings, the number of slaves who worked them and the lavishness of the villas built for when the owner chose to visit were all new ways in which men could compete in displaying their fabulous riches. In more practical terms, large estates could be devoted to commercial farming, which provided a steady, low-risk profit. In many respects it was a vicious circle, as repeated wars in distant provinces took more citizen farmers away from their land and often left them and their families in penury, while the same conflicts further enriched the elite of society and provided them with the means to create more big *latifundia*. It has proved very difficult archaeologically to quantify the shifts in farming patterns in Italy during the period, and in some areas at least it seems that small-scale farming continued. Nevertheless, significant change clearly did occur over wide areas, and it is certain that the Romans themselves perceived this to be a serious problem.<sup>1</sup>

## **POLITICS AND BLOODSHED**

In 133 BC Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus, one of the ten annually elected tribunes of the plebs, launched an ambitious reform programme aimed at dealing with this very problem. The tribunes differed from other magistrates in that they had no role outside Rome itself. Originally the office had been created to provide the people with some protection against the abuse of power by senior magistrates, but by this time it was essentially just another step in a normal career path. Tiberius was in his early thirties, from a highly distinguished family—his father had been censor and twice consul—and was expected to go far. In his tribunate he focused on the public land (*ager publicus*) confiscated over the centuries from defeated Italian enemies. In both law and theory this was supposed to have



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