

Session 1 booklet: Caesar and Sulla

1 Introduction

Gaius Julius Caesar was born on 12th or 13th of July, 100 BC. The very fact that we know his date of birth is quite exceptional, given the usual quality of the historical record for this period, and it is indicative of how rich and detailed the evidence is for the life of this man. Those who set out the life of this extraordinary man can rely on a body of material on the whole wider than for most other periods of ancient history.

2 Family connections

Caesar was born in difficult times, and his family connections determined in many ways his position in this troubled world. He was a member of the *gens Julia*, one of the most ancient patrician families, and one of those that claimed direct descent from Iulus, Aeneas' son, and ultimately a connection to Aeneas' mother, the goddess Venus. The Julii belonged to the select number of 'Trojan families', the *familiae Troianae*, but they had not left as deep a mark on the Republic's history as their rank would have suggested. They were definitely part of the Roman elite, but not at the level of influence of a family like the Metelli, who dominated Roman politics in the last quarter of the second century BC.

The branch of the Caesares obtained some high political offices around the beginning of the first century BC. The father of our Caesar, also called Gaius Julius Caesar, reached the praetorship (the Republic's second most senior elective magistracy) in 92 BC and was subsequently governor of the province of Asia. Inscriptions record his efforts on behalf of the city of Ilium, the descendant of Troy, which was going through a difficult financial situation in this period. The desire to cultivate the family tradition of the Julii's descent from Aphrodite and Aeneas was obviously part of this special relationship: we will see that Julius Caesar pursued it even more keenly in his lifetime. Caesar *senior* died in 85 BC leaving a teenage son without the political, financial and moral support that he could have received from a father with a promising career. This year was also very difficult for the Republic, as were most of the Eighties. A civil war was in the making at the time: Rome was controlled by the political faction led by Cinna and Marius the Younger – the son of the great man – while Sulla was fighting a war against Mithridates, the king of Pontus, in Greece and Asia Minor. Sulla had obtained that command through violence in 88 BC, after Marius had tried to usurp it. After Sulla's departure to the east to fight Mithridates, he had been declared a public enemy by the new masters of the political scene in Rome. Caesar's family connections led him right into the tense network of allegiances and rivalries that were the fabric of this period. The sister of Caesar's father was none other than the wife of Gaius Marius, the great general who reached the consulship seven times between 107 and 87 BC, and whose final act was a bitter struggle with Sulla over the Mithridatic command. Marius' attempt to secure that attractive military commission despite Sulla's legal entitlement to hold it was unsuccessful, as it led to a civil war; after Sulla's departure, Marius had gained control of the political scene in Rome, and had Sulla declared a public enemy. In contrast to Caesar's family connections on his father's side, through his mother Aurelia he had Sullan connections – she was related to the Aurelii Cottae,

a plebeian noble family that had a Sullan allegiance. However, despite this the political position of his father and the family connection with Marius put young Caesar firmly on the side of the Mariani.

3 The 80s

Being on the Marian side apparently entailed some political, or even ideological commitment. Generally speaking, the Mariani styled themselves as members of the Roman elite who were keen to enhance the role of the people and its assembly, and to reduce the supremacy of the Senate, in a tradition that dated back at least to the Gracchi; their arch-enemy, Sulla, styled himself as the great champion of Republican traditions, and the defender of the power and authority of the Senate. While ideas and programmes were important, the political clash had a lot to do with the individuals' personal ambitions – the clash between Sulla and Marius was triggered by the dispute over a much-coveted military command – and the allegiance to one side or another could be heavily determined by one's family connections. In Caesar's case, the family connections made an allegiance to the side of the Mariani almost inevitable; and the fact that the Marians were in control of all political offices between 87 and 83 BC made it almost natural that this ambitious teenager would seek connections with this part of the Roman elite.

The opportunity to make those bonds even stronger presented itself very soon: in 84 BC the vacancy of an important priesthood – the post of *flamen Dialis*, the most senior priest of Jupiter and a member of the college of the *pontifices* – was created by the suicide of L. Cornelius Merula, who had refused to form a political alliance with Cinna. Caesar was chosen to take up his post by Cinna, who after Marius' death was the new strongman in Rome. The *flamen dialis* was traditionally expected to be married to a patrician, and Caesar found a suitable fiancée in Cornelia, the daughter of Cinna himself. His political allegiance was by then very clear, and it was very frequent and even usual for the members of the Roman elite to strengthen a political alliance by arranging a marriage. It was also quite frequent for ambitious young Romans to take up a priesthood even before reaching the age at which they became eligible to stand for elective magistracies. We will see that later in his career Caesar would use his priestly position to prepare his rise to the upper spheres of Roman politics; his political career is a good example of how deeply interwoven politics and religion could be at Rome.

Caesar's commissioning to the flamine of Jupiter was a short-lived affair, though. By 83 BC, Sulla's victorious army had returned to Italy from the Greek East; a civil war ensued between the two Roman armies, whose leaders both claimed to be the legitimate representative and champion of the *res publica*; by November 82 Sulla was the sole master of the Republic, a position that was formalised by his accession to the dictatorship. Although the constitutional fabric of the Republic was formally left untouched, Sulla was in a position to prevent anyone from reaching public office if he wanted to, or indeed to persuade those who already held a post to resign from it. Caesar was an obvious target, and indeed Sulla – who valued priesthoods as a formidable tool of political control – annulled his appointment to the flamine, and also urged Caesar to divorce Cornelia (Plut. *Caes.* 1.1):

‘The wife of Caesar was Cornelia, the daughter of the Cinna who had once held the sole power at Rome, and when Sulla became master of affairs, he could not, either

by promises or threats, induce Caesar to put her away, and therefore confiscated her dowry.’ – trans. from the Loeb edition (1919).

4 Under Sulla

This decision was to be expected; what prompts questions, and indeed was discussed by many commentators already in antiquity, is why Sulla decided to spare Caesar’s life. The dictator had virtually power of life and death; his victory was followed by the proscriptions, the legalised massacre of thousand of members of the Roman and Italian elite who had fought against Sulla, whose property was treated by the victor as his war booty and duly confiscated. Sulla could rely on the cooperation of a vast network of killers and spies, who would locate and eliminate his enemies even if they happened to leave Rome and hide elsewhere. According to both Suetonius and Plutarch, the main biographers of Caesar, the plan of killing Caesar was devised and seriously considered both by Sulla and some of his associates; only the intercession of C. Aurelius Cotta, Caesar’s maternal uncle, and of some Vestals, and Caesar’s cautionary escape to the countryside of Sabina, where he would change his hiding place every night, stopped the plan from being enacted. Sulla was apparently unhappy about this outcome, and he blamed his associates for not realising that Caesar was a deadly threat to the supremacy of the Optimates that he had just restored, and that the spirit of many a Gaius Marius lived in him (Suet. *Caes.* 1). It could be true, but it may well be a posthumous tradition, forged by a source friendly to Caesar.

As a matter of fact, despite the loss of the flaminiate and a pretty difficult time during the proscriptions, Caesar seems to have been able to continue his career without much difficulty. He did not even divorce Cornelia, who bore him a daughter, Julia, in about 76 BC, and remained his wife until her death, in 69 BC. He knew, of course, that Rome was not the most comfortable place for a *popularis* like him in the years that followed the Sullan restoration, and he decided to make the most of the connections and loyalties that his father had forged during his tenure in Asia. Exploiting the paternal *clientelae* was a customary practice for an ambitious member of the Roman elite, and Caesar was no exception. We find him in the staff of the then propraetor of the province of Asia, M. Minucius Thermus, on whose behalf he dealt with Nicomedes IV, the king of Bythynia (a kingdom in northern Asia Minor); Caesar’s special relationship with this monarch and his time at the court prompted much gossip back in Rome, which was echoed even three decades later in the chants that Caesar’s soldiers sang on their way back from Gaul (‘Caesar subjected Gaul, Nicomedes subjected Caesar’). Leaving these jibes aside, it was a valuable apprenticeship for Caesar, who went on to serve on the staff of Servilius Vatia, the governor of the neighbouring province of Cilicia. It was another formidable chance to consolidate his military experience; the developments of these years show his ability to interpret a political situation was already remarkable. He cautiously left Rome when Sulla was firmly in power; and he was shrewd enough to realise that it would have been unwise of him to join the ill-fated revolt of M. Aemilius Lepidus, the ‘subversive’ consul of 78 BC, who set out to start an uprising against the Sullan restoration, and was defeated in a few months’ time; his priority was to build his political and military credentials in the administration of two provinces that the Sullan victory against Mithridates had stabilised only in part.

5 The apprentice years

On the other hand, he did not lose his ambition to play a significant role at Rome: by 77 BC he was back, and he took up the prosecution of two leading Sullan associates, Cn. Cornelius Dolabella and C. Antonius, who were both indicted on extortion and embezzlement charges after their governorship in Greece. The choice of the targets was not casual, of course; Caesar was keen to restate his political allegiance, and political prosecutions could be an excellent stepping-stone in the career of an ambitious member of the Roman elite. His case was very well-prepared; so forceful that Caesar's speech against Dolabella was still read in the second century AD. In his fact-finding exercise, Caesar relied on the support and co-operation of a number of Greek cities: another excellent opportunity to build connections and *clientelae* in a province. Both trials were unsuccessful – Dolabella was acquitted by the senatorial jury, and Antonius sought and dodgily obtained immunity – but the political credit that Caesar gathered from this initiative was invaluable.

Surely he also earned quite a few enemies too, as Suetonius says. It should not be overlooked that he was still in his mid-twenties, and that he was not even eligible to stand for the most junior magistracy, the quaestorship. In many ways he was still an apprentice, and it is not surprising that he decided to take some time off and to refine his rhetorical education by a stay at Rhodes, at the school of the great orator Molon. The journey was more complicated than expected. Caesar was kidnapped by one of the many pirate gangs that crowded the East Mediterranean in that period – an endemic problem that threatened both trade and urban life, and which Rome tackled far too late and too slowly. A memorable chapter of Plutarch's biography tells the story of Caesar's captivity and his unusual relationship with his kidnappers (*Caes.* 2). Their aim was the ransom, as it is so often the case: it appears that it was paid by some communities of Asia (including Miletus). This piece of information is very interesting. Why would some Greek cities have agreed to pay for the release of a member of the Roman nobility? There are several possible answers, which are not necessarily contradictory: patrolling that part of the sea fell within the cities' remit, and the payment could be seen as a recognition of their responsibility for failing to secure safety; on the other hand, they may well have tried to buy the friendship and respect of the Roman establishment by helping out one of its most promising members; moreover, the bonds that Caesar's father had created in Asia Minor could have turned useful in bringing about a climate conducive to a positive solution. After his liberation, Caesar devoted some of his time trying to secure the punishment of his kidnappers: his ancient biographers insist at length on his resolve and ruthlessness, possibly following a tradition that portrayed Caesar as a resolute opponent of piracy, no less than his enemy Pompey (Suet. *Caes.* 4.2; Plut. *Caes.* 2.7; Polyaeus, *Stratagemata* 8.23.1).

6 Return to Rome

After his release, Caesar spent some time in Rhodes, and he also took part in the Third Mithridatic War, apparently by his own initiative, without liaising with any of the Roman commanders who were in charge of the war (which lasted from 75 to 65 BC). As soon as he heard that a detachment of Mithridates' forces had entered the province of Asia, he left Rhodes, reached the mainland, rallied some troops locally and took on the enemy. The importance of the episode was surely overemphasised by the pro-Caesarean tradition, but the incident must not be overlooked: it is a small symptom of what was to become an important pattern in late

Republican history, where there is an increasing shift from public to private military initiative. It is also a symptom of Caesar's growing political profile, which was an increasingly good match for his all-consuming ambition.

The events that took place in Rome during Caesar's Eastern journey gave further evidence of his increasing profile. In 74 BC, the death of the pontiff C. Cotta opened a vacancy in the most prestigious priestly college of the Republic; the usual practice was that a new member was to be chosen by the other members of the college. The choice had to take into account a number of criteria, ranging from the political position of the appointee to his family connections and personal experience. Interest or expertise in religious matters was not the paramount consideration, even for the pontificate. Caesar's appointment to the college of pontiffs had a number of implications, which are worth exploring. First of all, it showed that his family connections could still prove useful: Caesar was picked to replace a Cotta, probably a cousin of his mother Aurelia, and that connection certainly played a role. Secondly, his co-optation in the pontifical college was a recognition of his standing, all the more remarkable because it came before Caesar stood for any elective office. The optimates, formerly pro-Sullan members of the college accepted Caesar without any reservation: his pro-Marian past was not seen as an obstacle, and perhaps some elements of the senatorial nobility thought that the best way to deal with Caesar was to have him in their ranks. Finally, Caesar's joining the pontifical college was to have momentous consequences for his future career. For most members of the college, being part of it was a status-symbol; for Caesar, it soon became a formidable opportunity to make an impact on the religious life of the Republic.

When he returned to Rome in 73 BC, Caesar was a promising and relatively distinguished member of the Roman nobility, who had shown remarkable ambition, significant military abilities, and some pretty exceptional political skills, which enabled him to start a political career in the hostile climate that followed Sulla's victory. His exceptional qualities were already obvious; his exceptional destiny was still impossible to foresee.