ALWAYS I AM CAESAR

W. Jeffrey Tatum
Always I am Caesar
For Angela Aslanska and Robin Seager
ALWAYS I AM CAESAR

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CHART 1  THE FAMILY OF JULIUS CAESAR

- Sex. Julius Caesar (cos. 157)
- L. Julius Caesar (pr. by 129)
  - Sex. Julius Caesar (pr. 123)
  - ?
  - Sex. Julius Caesar (cos. 91)

- JULIA = GAIUS MARIUS
  - CAESAR
    - Julia = M. Atius Balbus
      - ? = (1) L. Marcius Philippus (2) = (2) Atia (1) = C. Octavius
        - (cos. 56)
        - (pr. 61)

- C. Julius Caesar = Marcia
  - C. Julius Caesar (pr. ca. 93)

- GAIUS OCTAVIUS/AUGUSTUS
  - CATO = Marcia
  - Octavia
CHART 3  CATO AND HIS CONNECTIONS

Q. Servilius Caepio  
(cos. 140)

M. Livius Drusus  
(cos. 112)

Servilia = Q. Lutatius Catulus  
(cos. 102)

Q. Servilius Caepio  
(cos. 106)

Junia = LEPIDUS  
= P. Servilius Isauricus  
(cos. 48)

Junia = CASSIUS

M. CALPURNIUS BIBULUS  
(cos. 59)

Q. Servilius Caepio  
(pr. 91)

Q. Servilius Caepio = (1) Livia  
(2) = M. Porcius Cato

D. Junius = (2) SERVILIA  
(1) = M. Junius Silanus  
(cos. 62)

Brutus = AHENOBARBUS  
(cos. 54)

Porcia = DOMITIUS

Atilia = (1) CATO  
(2) = Marcia

Mam. Aemilius Lepidus  
Livianus  
(cos. 77)

Q. LUTATIUS CATULUS  
(cos. 78)

M. CALPURNIUS BIBULUS  
(cos. 59)

M. Livius Drusus  
(cos. 112)

Servilia = Q. Lutatius Catulus  
(cos. 102)
Map 1   The Mediterranean in the time of Caesar.
Introduction

“The one debt we owe to history,” as Oscar Wilde insisted, “is to rewrite it.” In the case of Julius Caesar, even if we are not quite prepared to declare ourselves fully paid up, we can hardly be described as falling into arrears. From antiquity to the present day Caesar has remained a favorite subject of biographers, scholarly and amateur alike. And it would be as difficult as it would be remiss to investigate Roman history – or for that matter European history – without at least acknowledging his lasting influence. Caesar abides in all the arts, as a versatile topic and symbol in products of high as well as popular culture, and he remains a potent platform for political discourse about militarism or power or ambitions of an autocratic or hegemonic quality. He is evocative and useful because he is so instantly available to everyone.

Even a legend can be stretched too thin, however. Less accessible than Caesar’s reputation is the man himself and the society he both challenged and transformed. Merely to mention Rome, in most circumstances, is to conjure empire – and emperors, of which species Caesar is routinely deemed the author. Hence the familiar transformation of his name into a title: Kaiser and Czar. This is a reality that does not so much enlarge Caesar as it urges his reduction, making him into an uncomplicated figure – the tyrant who gets his way by force of arms, a representation of Caesar that inescapably diminishes his actual merits as a soldier or a general or a politician. It was this very simplification that made possible the purposes to which Caesar was put in the American Revolution, when every patriot was a Brutus striving to free the colonies from the imperial oppression of a British king who could by no stretch of the imagination be likened to Caesar in any but the most tenuous symbolic terms. By then, however, and long before, Caesar had been diluted to Caesarism, which rendered him available to political polemic in nearly any context. This same impulse
allowed Caesar to cross the Atlantic, where the opponents of Andrew Jackson could attack Old Hickory as a nineteenth-century Caesar whose personal arrogance, contempt for political restraint and imperialist ambitions threatened the American republic with ruin. In our own century, similar complaints, again invoking the image of Caesar, have been aimed at George W. Bush in publications like the *Washington Post*, *Harper’s Magazine* and, in an instance of luscious and timely revenge for King George, the *Guardian*. Caesar was a man of great capacity and talent, but not a hint of that is operative when Caesar or his reputation is deployed as a term of abuse. Caesar, there can be no missing it, still stands for imperialism and autocracy.

And also for personal decadence. Here the evidence is all too abundant, from casinos to toga parties to popular television programming. The historical evidence for Caesar’s sensuality and prodigality and womanizing is not hard to come by. His political rivals emphasized Caesar’s perversities
in lip-smacking detail— and the poet Catullus scored multiple successes by lampooning the great general’s disgusting license and licentiousness. This Caesar, however, does not always sit comfortably with his imperial reputation. It is as if the ambitious conqueror of the Gauls and or of the Roman republic seems too busy, too efficient or perhaps too valorous to luxuriate in the company of wanton eastern queens or of immoral young men. Even Cicero once said of Caesar that the man was too dissolute to represent a genuine danger to Rome.

Yet this is the same Caesar who was not merely a brilliant military commander but a skillful politician, an eloquent orator, a gifted writer and an inspired reformer. In his own day many saw in Caesar Rome’s final opportunity to eliminate its factionalism, to repair its economy, to give lasting order and stability to its empire—in short, they saw in Caesar a statesman blessed with the talent and the will to usher in the fulfillment of Rome’s true destiny. This was especially the expectation of the masses. After his death, the common people of Rome began to worship Caesar as a god, idolatry that their betters could do nothing to suppress. On the contrary, the idea of Caesar’s divinity caught on and was passed on to his political heirs, becoming one of the essential emblems of the empire and subsisting until Christianity elbowed it out of the way. Christianity hardly spelled the end for the idea of Caesar as something superhuman, however, even if did shunt this article of faith away from the multitude and into the ranks of the elite. Indeed, there has been no shortage of intellectuals for whom Caesar represented nothing less than the perfection of the Roman spirit, the very embodiment of natural superiority, the ultimate Great Man—which are all merely more in the way of simplifications for all their grand and banging formulations. And so we get multiple Caesars: conqueror, autocrat, libertine, god—and Übermensch. Not an easy figure to take in all at once. He is instantly available only in smaller bits.

One of the purposes of this book is to examine Caesar’s career by way of a selection of different perspectives, such as his professional rise, his political success, his conquest of Gaul, his relationships with women, his elevation to supreme power and beyond that to the condition of a god. Although I begin at Caesar’s beginnings and I conclude with the state of affairs established by his heir and successor, Augustus, this is neither a biography nor a linear historical narrative. Instead, in each chapter there is an attempt to understand central aspects of Caesar’s life within a pertinent slice of Roman habits, concepts and expectations. There is a reason for this approach. One of the greatest challenges in comprehending Caesar lies in
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the difficulty of distinguishing the singular qualities of the man from the
typical attributes and instincts of his time and class. It is all too easy to
regard Caesar as unique, a superman or at the very least a new stage in the
evolution of Roman aristocratic politicians, in which case Caesar’s histori-
cal role more or less explains itself without any reference to its situation.
Caesar triumphed because, being Caesar, what else could he do? It is no
improvement on this to let Caesar be subsumed entirely by his context, that
is, to regard Caesar as little more than a symptom of all that was charac-
teristic, for good or for ill, of aristocratic Roman society in the first century
BC. Matters are more elusive than that, and it is hoped that the following
chapters will offer some introduction to the problems of sorting out
Caesar’s individuality and the circumstances in which he asserted it with
such enduring consequences.

Caesar matters in the first instance because he was the agent of a cata-
clysmic political transformation that forever altered the politics, and the
society, of Europe and the Mediterranean. From end of the sixth century
BC until Caesar crossed the Rubicon, Rome was a republic. Each year mag-
istrates were elected by the people, and all legislation in Rome was enacted
by popular vote. Government relied on the executive capacities of magis-
trates and on the guidance of the Roman senate, a body composed of all
former magistrates. The senate, the magistrates and the people, in their
dynamic combination, constituted the Roman republic – and it was this
state that dominated Italy and soon thereafter gained mastery of much of
the Mediterranean world. And it was this state that Caesar overthrew.
Caesar made himself master of Rome and dictator for life. He gathered into
his hands all meaningful sources of power and prestige, which he held until
he was slain on the Ides of March in 44 BC. It is for this reason that later
generations designated him the first of Rome’s emperors, though in actual-
ity that distinction belongs to his heir, Augustus, who, like his predecessor,
emerged from another civil war as a permanent autocrat. Augustus, unlike
Caesar, was not assassinated, and on the occasion of his death imperial
power passed seamlessly to his adopted son, Tiberius. Thereafter Rome was
the Roman empire, the durable imprint of which persists in Europe and,
by extension, everywhere in the world that has been shaped by a European
presence. This shift from republic to empire is one of the very few historical
episodes that can fairly be called epoch making, and, although the event
was not entirely of Caesar’s doing, it was certainly Caesar who was the
essential catalyst of this upheaval, a reality that was understood immedi-
ately in Rome. Since that time, Caesar has not dropped from the discourse
of political theory or of political polemic.
Caesar and Roman Society: A Very Brief Introduction

Inasmuch as what follows is not a biography of Caesar, it will be useful to offer here a very concise summation of Caesar’s life and career, if only to give us a framework on which to hang the chapters to come. Specifics and their dates are recapitulated, in tabular form, at the end of this book. I should also explain a few of the more conspicuous peculiarities of Roman culture that will recur in almost every chapter. The most obvious of these is that the Romans employed Latin (and Greek): exhibits of either language are translated whenever they are alien to our own usage (and most are listed in the book’s index along with any other technical terms necessary for describing Roman society). I will not often refer to dates in accordance with Roman practice, the sole exception being the Ides of March, which is simply March fifteenth. More frequently, however, I will discuss money in terms of Roman currency. The Romans in our period, although they employed coins in a variety of weights, tended to rely on the sesterce (sestertius) as their basic unit of reckoning. It is not really possible to convert ancient currency into modern amounts, owing to the deep differences between their economic systems and our own. For our purposes it will perhaps be enough to observe that in Rome an ordinary laborer could be expected to earn three to six sesterces for a day’s effort, on the basis of which income he could only just barely scrape by, that Roman soldiers were paid a salary of 1,200 sesterces each year (of course this does not include their share of the spoils of war and other depredations), that a fortune of 40,000 sesterces sufficed to make one eligible for the First Class in Rome, which comprised Rome’s most prosperous citizens, and that the super rich in Rome were the Knights, whose minimal worth was set at 400,000 sesterces (though many were vastly wealthier than that), and the senators, whose wealth was expected to (and regularly did) exceed a million sesterces.

Roman names require some explanation, not simply because their system of nomenclature was different from ours, but also because it was so unimaginative that Romans are easy to confuse (this was true even for the Romans themselves). Every Roman man bore at least two names, his first name (praenomen) and the name of his clan (nomen). The Romans had very few first names, many of which were simply based on numerals, and so this name was infrequently used on its own (when it was so used, it usually indicated a degree of intimacy). Many Romans also had a third name, called a cognomen, some of which were hereditary, others of which
were honorific. Unlike the first name, the *cognomen* was often used on its own to indicate a specific Roman. Naturally, there were various protocols for particular situations. In the case of Caesar, his name was Gaius Julius Caesar. We call him Caesar, as did his contemporaries, but his family were the Julii, the Julians. In practice, Romans are sometimes referred to by their *nomen*, sometimes by *cognomen*, sometimes more fulsomely. Some Roman names have been anglicized by custom. Consequently, instead of describing Caesar’s great rival as Gnaeus Pompeius we usually refer to him as Pompey, or as Pompey the Great, inasmuch as he immodestly gave himself the *cognomen* Magnus (‘the great’). Similarly, Marcus Antonius (who did not have a *cognomen*) is more familiar in English as Mark Antony. Because Roman families recycled the same names, including first names, so routinely, we sometimes distinguish individual Romans by referring to the highest office they reached in politics (e.g. Sextus Julius Caesar (cos. 157) indicates the man who was consul in 157 BC and not any other Sextus Julius Caesar). This is the practice observed in the genealogical tables that appear in this book. Women in Rome generally had only one name, the clan name in its feminine form: consequently, Caesar’s daughter was named simply Julia. For the sake of ease and clarity, in the index to this book all Romans are listed both by *nomen* and by their more familiar designation (if they have one): for instance, Marcus Porcius Cato can be found under the heading *Cato* as well as under *Porcius*.

Let me turn now to a very rapid and entirely basic run through Caesar’s life. Caesar was born in 100 BC to an ancient patrician family. Romans were unevenly divided between plebeians (the bulk of all Romans) and patricians. In early Rome, the patricians had been a privileged caste. By the late republic, however, although patrician status carried a degree of social cachet, not least because by then there were fewer than twenty patrician families who subsisted, it carried nothing like its original importance. More important, as we shall see, was *nobility*, descent (and especially recent descent) from a forebear who had won the consulship, Rome’s highest magistracy. This was a category that included plebeians, and it outshone patrician rank. Caesar’s family had in any case not distinguished itself in recent generations. Never the less, as we shall see in the first chapter, Caesar enjoyed important family connections, and they helped to see him through the first great crisis of his life, the civil war between Gaius Marius and Lucius Cornelius Sulla.

Marius, who was Caesar’s uncle, was a great military hero. He had triumphed after his victory in North Africa and, far more important, he had saved Italy from invasion by powerful Germanic tribes, in recognition of