THE RISE OF JULIUS CAESAR

By LILY ROSS TAYLOR

WHEN Caesar was born, probably in 100 B.C., it is doubtful whether anyone at Rome would have expected a son of this secondary branch of the patrician Iulii Caesares to rise to great eminence in the state. The family, to be sure, was very old; it was said to have come to Rome from Alba Longa when King Tullus Hostilius destroyed the city, and the Iulii kept the tradition alive by maintaining associations with Alba and the Alban gods. But, in spite of the family’s antiquity, the nobility of the Iulii, to paraphrase Cicero on another patrician, was better known to men of letters and to historians than it was to the voters. It was not even very well known to men of letters and historians, for the ten or eleven Iulii who reached high office in the fifth and fourth centuries hardly average a line apiece in the six books that Livy devotes to their period—books crowded with vivid stories of patrician families like the Fabii, the Manlii, and the Valerii.

The first Iulius with the cognomen Caesar known to us, a praetor in the Hannibalic War, was presumably a descendant of this fifth- and fourth-century family. The Iulii Caesares of the next century were in two branches, which were registered in different tribes and were not always associated politically. They were on opposite sides in the civil war between Marius and Sulla. A member of the branch that was originally more important, the family of Mark Antony’s mother, reached the consulship in 157. This branch, finding no record of great achievements in their shadowy republican ancestry, perhaps invented the claim that the supposed founder of their house, Iullus, the Iulus of Virgil, was a son of Aeneas and a grandson of Venus. They put the image of Venus on their coins and emphasized their Trojan origin by becoming patrons of Ilium. Gaius Caesar followed their lead when, in the funeral oration for his aunt, he boasted of his family’s descent from Venus, a claim made known later for all time by Virgil.

In spite of the prominence of their cousins, Gaius Caesar’s immediate ancestors had not risen above the praetorship. But his family had improved its position by marrying into the plebeian nobility, which was more important at the time than the dwindling patricians. His grandmother came from the Marcii Reges, a house that, as Caesar declared in the same funeral oration, claimed descent from King Ancus
Marcius, and his mother belonged to the old consular house of the Aurelii Cottae.

But the really important marriage in the family was that of Caesar's aunt Julia to Gaius Marius, a 'new man' from Arpinum, and an able soldier of great ambition. Marius' remarkable victories and the support of his loyal soldiers and of many knights helped him to win not one but six consulships in the years 107 to 100. He was further aided by tribunes of the plebs who, in the Gracchan tradition, submitted their bills directly to the people, without senatorial authority. Hence Marius was considered a popularis, a demagogue, and was therefore condemned by the 'good' men, the senatorial loyalists who liked to call themselves the optimates. In Marius' sixth consulship, the year of Caesar's birth, the contest between Marians and optimates broke out into armed combat, combat that was quelled for a time, but was renewed after the Social War in the bitter civil strife of the eighties.

Caesar's father and uncle, with a minority of the nobles, belonged to the party of Marius. It was not actually, as it is sometimes called, the 'popular party', for parties at Rome were shifting groups, formed on a personal, not an ideological, basis. Doubtless under the influence of Marius, the uncle became consul in 91; and Caesar's father, who did not go beyond the praetorship, was the founder of a colony composed almost certainly of Marian veterans. Some indication of Marius' influence is also to be found in the marriages of Caesar's sisters and in Caesar's own first marriage to the daughter of a rich knight—alliances not with old families, but apparently into houses that Marius expected to use in building a new nobility.

As for Caesar, his career was almost ended by the dominance of the Marians, who were in control of Rome from 87 to 82. The office of flamen Dialis, the most sacred of the Roman priests, was vacant, and the Marians found in the young Caesar a patrician to fill the place. This patrician priest and his patrician wife were surrounded by taboos and curious religious obligations. The flamen of Jupiter could not spend more than a night or two a year away from Rome; he could not mount a horse, look upon an army, or see a dead body. His whole life and that of his wife had to be devoted to the service of Jupiter. One wonders what the young Caesar was like when the Marians picked him out for a priesthood that would have debarred him from an active political and military career. In order to hold it, Caesar divorced the daughter of the rich knight and married the patrician Cornelia, daughter of Cinna, who, after the death of Marius in his seventh consulship, was tyrant of Rome. But Caesar was never inaugurated as priest of Jupiter; the courageous
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*pontifex maximus*, later slain by the Marianists, perhaps refused to carry out the ceremony.

Since Caesar was being groomed for this unwarlike priesthood, he seems to have had no part in the terrible struggle for supremacy between Sulla and the Marian forces. On the side-lines he must have witnessed the crimes and the murders committed by both sides, and what he saw then may well explain the calculated policy of mercy that Caesar adopted in a later civil war.

Sulla, victorious in 82, seems at once to have had plans for Caesar, not as an ineffective priest of Jupiter, for he saved Caesar from that fate, but as a representative of Sulla’s own class, the patriciate. But Caesar firmly refused to divorce Cinna’s daughter in order to make a proper marriage, such as Sulla was arranging for other nobles. The story is that Caesar then had to flee from Sulla’s agents, who were carrying out the brutal proscriptions, and that, as a result of the pleas of the Vestal Virgins and of his mother’s relatives on the Sullan side, his life was spared, though his property and his wife’s dowry were confiscated.

Caesar did not stay in Rome to witness the organization of the Sullan constitution, which, by various measures, including the reduction of the tribunate of the *plebs* to impotence, was designed to establish a government controlled by the Senate. Instead, he went out to seek a military career, not under the Marians still fighting in Spain, but on the staff of the Sullan governor of Asia. Thus he began a decade of compromise with the Sullan system. Caesar quickly won the confidence of his commander and served as his emissary at the court of Nicomedes of Bithynia.

More important, because of its political implications, was the decoration that Caesar won from his commanding officer at the siege of Mitylene, the rare distinction of the civic crown, a wreath of oak leaves, awarded for saving the life of a Roman citizen. The political significance of the civic crown for Caesar’s career, as Dr. Helen E. Russell has pointed out, can be deduced from Livy’s account of the enrolment of new members of the depleted Senate after the battle of Cannae, an action carried out by a dictator who, as a former censor, was evidently following regular procedure. This dictator enrolled all holders of magistracies in descending order to the quaestors, and all the men who had spoils captured from the enemy or who had been awarded the civic crown. We know that when Sulla, as dictator, filled the ranks of the Senate after the murders and deaths of the civil war, he made membership automatic for quaestors. He may have done the same thing for possessors of enemy spoils and of the civic crown. In that case,
the young Caesar would at once have become a senator, a status at least suggested by a legateship he held several years later. It is also not unlikely that either under Sulla’s law or by special senatorial action, for which there are certain parallels in the sources, Caesar was permitted to be a candidate for office before he reached the age specified by law. That would explain why Caesar held the praetorship and consulship two years earlier than the legal age, and would remove the strongest argument against accepting 100 B.C. as the date of his birth.

On receiving the news of Sulla’s death in 78, and of impending revolution, Caesar, who by this time had transferred to the staff of another Sullan commander, abandoned his military service and returned to Rome. But, on examining the situation, he did not join the leader of the revolution, M. Aemilius Lepidus, whose programme included the restoration of the full powers of the tribunes of the plebs. Instead, Caesar, now, I believe, a member of the Senate, occupied himself with contacts in Rome and with the prosecution of a provincial governor, always a favourite method of attracting public notice for a young man who hoped to rise in politics. And though he lost the case, Caesar made a good showing in his speeches, which in their published form placed him among the great orators of Rome.

Ostensibly to perfect his oratory under Cicero’s great teacher, Molo of Rhodes, Caesar left Rome after two or three years to return to the East. Much besides study was crowded into the next two years or more, which extended his military experience and widened his knowledge of the empire. On the way out Caesar was captured by pirates, and, after he was ransomed, raised a force, captured the pirates, and crucified them. He made another journey to the Bithynian court. At the outbreak of the Mithridatic War in 74, Caesar organized an expedition and expelled the king’s agent from the cities of Asia. It was either before Caesar’s return to Rome in 73 or in the following year that he served as legate, apparently of Mark Antony’s father, whose mission was to clear the sea of the pirates that Caesar knew so well. He does not seem to have stayed long enough to be involved in the disastrous failure of the expedition.

Whatever the date of this legateship, Caesar was called back to Rome in 73 by a signal honour. He was elected a member of the college of pontifices, a priesthood of great prestige, with none of the taboos and restrictions of the flamen Dialis. This election shows the position Caesar held in the nobility. Under the Sullan constitution the old method of electing priests had been restored. They were now chosen not by popular election but by the priests themselves, who functioned as a
club and refrained from choosing men who were at enmity with any of the members. The pontifices who elected Caesar were powerful members of the Sullan senatorial nobility. The most illustrious was Q. Lutatius Catulus, restorer of the Capitol, son of a bitter enemy of Marius. Catulus and his colleagues evidently considered Caesar a 'good' young man, free from the demagogy they associated with Marius.

But Catulus and the other pontifices soon realized that they were wrong, for the 'good' young man speedily turned into a popularis in the best Marian tradition. There had already been attacks on features of the Sullan constitution, and the status of the tribunate of the plebs had been slightly improved. But the tribunes were still seeking the law-making power by which, in the generation before Sulla, the will of the senatorial majority had repeatedly been overruled. And Caesar, as military tribune, almost certainly in the year 71, threw himself vigorously into the fight. That brought him into contact with Pompey, who, with fresh laurels from his Spanish victories, had been accepted as a candidate for the consulship, although he had held none of the lower offices. And Pompey promised that he would, as consul, restore the full powers of the tribunate.

When Pompey fulfilled his promise as consul in 70, Caesar instigated a tribune to propose perhaps the first law passed under the restored powers, and spoke from the rostra himself in support of the law. It provided for the return of the exiled adherents of Lepidus, among them Caesar's brother-in-law, Cinna's son. The unknown Plotius who proposed this bill is the first of a long line of tribunes whom Caesar used in the next two decades to gain his ends in opposition to the Senate.

One may ask why Caesar changed his course, and whether it was conviction or policy that had made him a 'good' man for a decade. I suspect that it was policy, that, with his sure sense of timing in politics, he waited to join the fight for the destruction of the Sullan constitution until Pompey's championship made victory sure. Close relations with Pompey are indicated by Caesar's support of the bills proposed by tribunes to give Pompey his great commands against the pirates and against Mithridates.

But Caesar's association with Pompey did not lead him to seek military experience as one of Pompey's big staff of legates. Caesar's business now was city politics, and he curtailed his tours of duty in Farther Spain, both as quaestor in 69–68 and as governor in 61–60. His activities in Rome included resuscitation of the memory of Marius, pursuit of Sullan profiteers, and a carefully planned attack on the prestige of eminent Sullan nobles, particularly Catulus. When Caesar's aunt,
Marius’ wife, and his own wife, Cinna’s daughter, died in 69, he seized the opportunity to revive the memory of both Marius and Cinna. He praised both women from the rostra, and brought forth, from the oblivion to which Sulla had consigned them, the images of Marius, and probably of Cinna too. Four years later, as curule aedile, he restored to the Capitol the splendid trophies of Marius’ great victories, an act enthusiastically welcomed by the people, who must still have included many of Marius’ old soldiers. Caesar tried in vain to have the right to hold office given back to the Marians proscribed by Sulla. As president of the murder court in 64 he condemned men who had received rewards in the proscriptions, at the same time pardoning one of the worst offenders, Catiline, whom he was then supporting for the consulship.

A vigorous attack on the authority of the Senate was made in 63, when, at Caesar’s instigation, the tribune Titus Labienus, his future legate in Gaul, accused of treason an aged senator supposed to have slain an inviolable tribune in the year of Marius’ sixth consulship. The trial in the centuriate assembly was a sham, and the assembly was dissolved without action, but, as Cicero’s defence of the accused makes clear, it had served, through its indictment of senators of long ago, to attack the prestige of the Senate of that day, and perhaps in particular of Catulus, the son of one of Marius’ unrelenting foes.

Certainly Caesar was bending all his energies to discredit Catulus. The great contest between the two men came in the year 63, when Caesar became Catulus’ rival for the office of pontifex maximus. The head of the college of pontifices, who was chosen from the members, was a semi-magisterial officer with important power and dazzling prestige. It was a great advantage (an advantage that Catulus lacked) to have an ancestor who had held the office, and the story that Julus had been pontifex maximus of Alba may have been invented by Caesar at this time. Caesar’s support of a law transferring back to the people the right of electing priests, the last relic of the Sullan constitution, as well as the abundant funds for bribery supplied by Caesar’s close associate of these years, M. Licinius Crassus, brought victory over Catulus and established Caesar as one of the greatest figures of Rome.

There was a vindictiveness in Caesar’s attacks on Catulus that one finds during his civil career only in his subsequent attitude toward the man who succeeded Catulus as leader of the optimates, M. Porcius Cato. Not content with his defeat of Catulus at the polls, as praetor in the following year, Caesar tried in vain to have Catulus’ name erased from the Capitol, accusing him of embezzling public funds in the building operations.
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The distinction of the chief priesthood had no effect on Caesar's espousal of popular causes. That was clear on the famous Nones of December 63, when he took a stand against the death penalty for the Catilinarians. Whether or not he was involved in the conspiracy (he probably was not), he realized, and was to prove later, that the people could be roused over the execution of citizens without trial. In the published version of the speech delivered at this same meeting, the consul Cicero, recognizing his own danger, tries to placate Caesar by attributing to him not demagoguery, but genuine concern for the welfare of the people (animum vere popularem saluti populi consultatem). But there was plenty of demagoguery in Caesar's activity in the following year. It included not only attacks on Catulus, but a contest with Cato, who had emerged in the Catilinarian discussion as the new leader of the optimates.

If there was any chance, as Cicero seems vaguely to have hoped, that Caesar could be won over to the 'good' men, Cato ended it, for by his obstructionist tactics in the Senate he not only prevented Caesar from celebrating a Spanish triumph, but at the same time blocked the plans of Crassus and Pompey, thus preparing the way for the famous deal made by the three men. And so, as consul in 59, Caesar, acting like a tribune (as his enemies said), obtained from the people, in defiance of the Senate, the measures his associates demanded and, through a tribune, secured for himself an army and a five-year command in a province at the gates of Italy.

If he could win great victories—and Caesar, if no one else, knew that he could—he now had the weapons with which he had seen Marius and Sulla and Pompey win primacy in the state. He had a wide knowledge of the empire and its problems, but only slight experience in commanding troops, for his raids on pirates, on cities of Asia, and even on the mountain fastnesses of Portugal hardly counted. The chief scene of his fighting had been the Forum and the Campus. We know only a small part of the story, a story of a life of movement, of initiative, of swift decision, of painstaking political organization, of the use of almost any means to gain his end.

Caesar's ancestry had not helped him greatly, but he had made good use of Venus, perhaps of Iulus, and of Ancus Marcius. His Marian associations had almost wrecked his career, but he had known how to derive advantage from them later. He owed much to the relatives and friends who had saved him from Sulla, to Sulla himself, who had rescued him from the priesthood of Jupiter, to the Sullan commander who had awarded him the civic crown, and to the Sullan pontifices who, by
electing him to their college, had made him eligible for the powerful high priesthood. When he abandoned his course as a 'good' man, and set out on what Cicero calls the *via popularis*, he was deeply indebted to Pompey, the leader in the destruction of the Sullan constitution, and to Crassus, who placed his great wealth and powerful friends at Caesar's disposal. The journey took Caesar, as it had taken Marius, to the heights; but the sovereignty of the people, the theme of endless tribunical orations, was lost on the way. How little Caesar cared about the loss was clear when in 49 he pushed aside the tribune of the plebs who barred the doorway of the Treasury; when in 44 he brought low two tribunes who opposed his honours; when, as dictator, he repeatedly made a mockery of the assemblies in which a sovereign people had once passed its laws and elected its magistrates. Yet there had been something prophetic in the words of Cicero in the fourth speech against Catiline; for, at the same time, in his statesmanlike measures, Caesar, with understanding of the problems of empire, manifested a deep concern for the welfare of the people of Rome, of Italy, and also of the provinces that he tried to amalgamate with Italy—in short, of all the people over whom, in everything but name, he had established a *regnum*.

**NOTE ON SOURCES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY**

For the period before 63, when we have the first contemporary evidence in the writings of Cicero and Sallust, the chief sources for the life of Caesar are the biographies of Suetonius and Plutarch, both of which are mutilated at the beginning; Plutarch's lives of Pompey and Crassus; Velleius Paterculus ii. 41–43; and scattered material in the historians Appian and Dio and in other imperial writers. For an analysis of the sources, see H. Strasburger, *Caesars Eintritt in die Geschichte* (Munich, 1938). The loss of the beginning of Suetonius' biography has deprived us of the consular date for Caesar's birth. But Suetonius elsewhere, and also Velleius, Plutarch, and Appian indicate that the year was 100, while Eutropius, who says that Caesar was fifty-six at the time of the battle of Munda, would suggest 102 or perhaps 101. Mommsen argued tentatively for 102, and is followed by T. Rice Holmes, *The Roman Republic* (Oxford, 1923), i. 436–42. On the meaning of *Cinnae quater consulis* (Suet. *Div. Ital. i. 1*), which I mistakenly used as evidence for the date of Caesar's birth, see H. Last, *Class. Rev.* lvi (1944), 15–17. I accept the year 100 for Caesar's birth, and refer for an explanation of the peculiarities of his career to a study available only in microfilm, viz. Helen E. Russell, *Advancement in Rank under the Roman Republic as a Reward for the Soldier and the Public Prosecutor* (University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1955), 25–53. For Caesar's nomination as *flamen Dialis*, his election to the pontificate, the date of the lex Plotia and of his quaestorship, and for other events in his early career, see my paper, 'Caesar's Early Career', *Class. Philol.* xxxvi (1941),
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THE MICHAEL VENTRIS MEMORIAL FUND

Michael Ventris died at the age of 34 last September in a motor accident. His discovery that the Linear B texts of Knossos, Pylos, Mycenae, and other sites were Greek ranks as one of the most brilliant achievements of scholarship, and has been internationally acclaimed a feat of the same order as that of Champollion in deciphering the Egyptian hieroglyphs. The brilliance of this discovery is matched by its importance; it will take years to work out the consequences of the new knowledge, which proves that Mycenaean civilization was Greek-speaking, gives us texts contemporary and comparable with texts from the adjoining civilizations of Egypt and the Near East, and shows us the state of the Greek language half a millennium before our earliest Greek literature.

Michael Ventris was trained and practised as an architect, and there lay ahead of him a career of exceptional promise. He had an uncanny gift for languages ancient and modern, and was fired to study the Linear B texts by a lecture given by Sir Arthur Evans which he heard when he was a schoolboy at Stowe. He was, moreover, a man of remarkable personal charm. Accordingly many of his friends and colleagues feel that others may wish to join them in forming some memorial to his genius and personality; and a distinguished group of scholars, with the societies concerned with his two main interests, architecture and Greek studies, has issued an appeal for support for a Michael Ventris Memorial Fund. This would be administered by a trust representing the two interests, and used to found a memorial award or scholarship open both to post-graduate students who were working on subjects connected with Mycenaean civilization and to students of architecture. Contributions should be made out to the Michael Ventris Memorial Fund, and sent either to the Secretary, Architectural Association, 34–36 Bedford Square, London, W.C. 1, or to the Secretary, Institute of Classical Studies, 50 Bedford Square, London, W.C. 1.