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A Portrait of Julius Caesar

When Julius Caesar was born in the year 100 BC, Rome was a republic. When he died fifty-six years later, Rome was a dictatorship on its way to becoming an empire. Julius Caesar was in large part responsible for this transition.

Although born into a patrician family and therefore assured of elite status in Roman society, his family was at the lower rung of the social ladder without influence and prestige. Caesar's accomplishments in later life were a result of his own unbridled ambition, talent and a little luck.

He became a spell-binding orator able to sway others to his will through the force of his words. He was an accomplished writer who eloquently advertised his own achievements. He was a brilliant military leader, who over nine years of continuous fighting conquered Gaul adding modern-day France, parts of Switzerland and the Low Countries to Rome's possessions. With the strength of his victorious legion backing him up, Julius Caesar marched on the city of Rome and grabbed the reigns of power. Julius Caesar was a man who changed history.

The Roman historian Suetonius provides us with some insight into the character and personality of Julius Caesar:

"He was tall, of a fair complexion, round limbed, rather full faced, with eyes black and piercing; he enjoyed excellent health except toward the close of his life when he was subject to sudden fainting fits and disturbances in his sleep. He was likewise twice seized with the 'falling sickness,' while engaged in active service.

He was extremely nice in the care of his person, and kept the hair of his head closely cut and had his face smoothly shaved. His baldness gave him much uneasiness, having often found himself on that score exposed to the jibes of his enemies. He used therefore to brush forward the hair from the crown of his head, and of all the honors conferred on him by the Senate and People, there was none which he either accepted or used with greater pleasure than the right of wearing constantly a laurel crown.

It is said that he was particular in his dress, for he wore the (special toga only Roman senators could wear) with fringes about the wrists, and always had it girded about him, but rather loosely.

[He was a notable lady's man, and indulged in many intrigues; he was especially intimate with Servilia, the mother of Marcus Brutus,] for whom' he purchased in his first consulship . . . a pearl which cost him 6,000,000 sesterces and in the Civil War, besides other presents assigned to her -for a trifling consideration -some valuable farms that had been set up at public auction.

He was perfect in the use of arms, an accomplished rider, and able to endure fatigue beyond all belief. On a march he used to go at the head of his troops, sometimes on horseback, but oftener on foot, with his head bare in all kinds

of weather. He would travel post in a light carriage without baggage, at the rate of one hundred miles per day; and if he was stopped by floods in the rivers, he swam across, or floated on skins inflated in the wind, so that he often anticipated the tidings of his movements.

Often he rallied his troops by his own personal exertions, stopping those who fled, keeping others in their ranks, and seizing men by the throat, turned them again towards the enemy, although numbers [of his men] were [sometimes] so terrified that an eagle bearer thus stopped made a thrust at him with the spearhead (on the eagle), and another on a like occasion left the standard in his hand."

References:

References: Suetonius' account appears in: Davis, William Stearns, Readings in Ancient History vol. 1 (1912); Tingay, Graham, Julius Caesar (1991).

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