

Assassination of Julius Caesar

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The **assassination of Julius Caesar** was the result of a conspiracy by many Roman senators. Led by Gaius Cassius Longinus, Decimus Junius Brutus, and Marcus Junius Brutus,^{[1][2]} they stabbed Julius Caesar to death in a location adjacent to the Theatre of Pompey on the Ides of March (March 15), 44 BC. Caesar was the dictator of the Roman Republic at the time, having recently been declared *dictator perpetuo* by the Senate. This declaration made several senators fear that Caesar wanted to overthrow the Senate in favor of tyranny. The conspirators were unable to restore the Roman Republic. The ramifications of the assassination led to the Liberators' civil war and, ultimately, to the Principate period of the Roman Empire.

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Location	Outside the Senate, Rome, Roman Republic
Date	March 15, 44 BC
Target	Gaius Julius Caesar
Attack type	Stabbing
Perpetrators	Gaius Cassius Longinus, Marcus Junius Brutus, Decimus Junius Brutus Albinus and over thirty other Senators of the Roman Republic.

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Background

Biographers describe tension between Caesar and the Senate, and his possible claims to the title of king. These events were the principal motive for Caesar's assassination.

The Senate named Caesar *dictator perpetuo* ("dictator in perpetuity"). Roman mints produced a denarius coin with this title and his likeness on one side, and with an image of the goddess Ceres and Caesar's title of *Augur Pontifex Maximus* on the reverse. According to Cassius Dio, writing over 200 years later, a senatorial delegation went to inform Caesar of new honors they had bestowed upon him in 44 BC. Caesar received them while sitting in the Temple of Venus Genetrix, rather than rising to meet them.^[3]

Suetonius wrote (almost 150 years later) that Caesar failed to rise in the temple, either because he was restrained by Cornelius Balbus or that he balked at the suggestion he should rise.^[4] Suetonius also gave the account of a crowd assembled to greet Caesar upon his return to Rome. A member of the crowd placed a laurel wreath on the statue of Caesar on the Rostra. The tribunes Gaius Epidius Marullus and Lucius Caesetius Flavus ordered that the wreath be removed as it was a symbol of Jupiter and royalty. Caesar had the tribunes removed from office through his official powers.^[5] According to Suetonius, Caesar was unable to dissociate himself from the royal title from this point forward.^[6] Suetonius also gives the story that a crowd shouted to him *rex* ("king"), to which Caesar replied, "I am Caesar, not Rex".^[6] Also, at the festival of the Lupercalia, while he gave a speech from the Rostra, Mark Antony, who had been elected co-consul with Caesar, attempted to place a crown on his head several times. Caesar put it aside to use as a sacrifice to *Jupiter Optimus Maximus*.^[5]

Plutarch and Suetonius are similar in their depiction of these events, but Dio combines the stories, writing that the tribunes arrested the citizens who placed diadems or wreaths on statues of Caesar. He then places the crowd shouting "*rex*" on the Alban Hill with the tribunes arresting a member of this crowd as well. The plebeian protested that he was unable to speak his mind freely. Caesar then brought the tribunes before the senate and put the matter to a vote, thereafter removing them from office and erasing their names from the records.

Suetonius adds that Lucius Cotta proposed to the Senate that Caesar should be granted the title of "king", for it was prophesied that only a king would conquer Parthia.^[7] Caesar intended to invade Parthia, a task that later gave considerable trouble to Mark Antony during the second triumvirate.

His many titles and honors from the Senate were ultimately merely that: honorary. Caesar continually strove for more power to govern, with as little dependence as possible on honorary titles or the Senate. The placating and ennobling of Caesar did not allay ultimate confrontation, as the Senate was still the authority granting Caesar his titles. Formal power resided in them, resulting in tension with Caesar.

Brutus began to conspire against Caesar with his friend and brother-in-law Gaius Cassius Longinus and other men, calling themselves the *Liberatores* ("Liberators"). Many plans were discussed by the group, as documented by Nicolaus of Damascus:

The conspirators never met exactly openly, but they assembled a few at a time in each other's homes. There were many discussions and proposals, as might be expected, while they investigated how and where to execute their design. Some suggested that they should make the attempt along the Sacred Way, which was one of his favorite walks. Another idea was to do it at the elections, during which he had to cross a bridge to appoint the magistrates in the Campus Martius. Someone proposed that they draw lots for some to push him from the bridge and others to run up and kill him. A third plan was to wait for a coming gladiatorial show. The advantage of that was, because of the show, no suspicion would be aroused if arms were seen. The majority opinion, however, favored killing him while he sat in the Senate. He would be there by himself, since only Senators were admitted, and the conspirators could hide their daggers beneath their togas. This plan won the day.

Nicolaus writes that in the days leading up to the assassination, Caesar was told by doctors, friends, and even his wife, Calpurnia, not to attend the Senate on the Ides for various reasons, including medical concerns and troubling dreams Calpurnia had:

...his friends were alarmed at certain rumors and tried to stop him going to the Senate-house, as did his doctors, for he was suffering from one of his occasional dizzy spells. His wife, Calpurnia, especially, who was frightened by some visions in her dreams, clung to him and said that she would not let him go out that day. But [Decimus] Brutus, one of the conspirators who was then thought of as a firm friend, came up and said, 'What is this, Caesar? Are you a man to pay attention to a woman's dreams and the idle gossip of stupid men, and to insult the Senate by not going out, although it has honoured you and has been specially summoned by you? But listen to me, cast aside the forebodings of all these people, and come. The Senate has been in session waiting for you since early this morning.' This swayed Caesar and he left.

Caesar had been preparing to invade the Parthian Empire, (a campaign later taken up by his successor, Mark Antony) and planned to leave for the East in the latter half of March. This forced a timetable onto the conspirators. Two days before the actual assassination, Cassius met with the conspirators and told them that, should anyone discover the plan, they were to turn their knives on themselves.^[8] His successors did attempt the conquests of Parthia and Germania, but without lasting results.

Ides of March

On the Ides of March (March 15; see Roman calendar) of 44 BC, the conspirators staged a game of gladiatorial sport at Pompey's theatre. The gladiators were provided by Decimus Brutus in case their services were needed. They waited in the great hall of the theatre's quadriportico.^[9] Mark Antony, having vaguely learned of the plot

the night before from a terrified *Liberator* named Servilius Casca,^[10] and fearing the worst, went to head Caesar off at the steps of the forum. However, the group of senators intercepted Caesar just as he was passing the Theatre of Pompey, located in the Campus Martius (now adjacent to the Largo di Torre Argentina), and directed him to a room adjoining the east portico of the Theatre of Pompey.^[11]

According to Plutarch, as Caesar arrived at the Senate, Lucius Tillius Cimber presented him with a petition to recall his exiled brother.^[12] The other conspirators crowded round to offer their support. Both Plutarch and Suetonius say that Caesar waved him away, but Cimber grabbed Caesar's shoulders and pulled down Caesar's toga. Caesar then cried to Cimber, "Why, this is violence!" ("*Ista quidem vis est!*").^[13] At the same time, Casca produced his dagger and made a glancing thrust at the dictator's neck. Caesar turned around quickly and caught Casca by the arm. According to Plutarch, he said in Latin, "Casca, you villain, what are you doing?"^[14] Casca, frightened, shouted "Help, brother!" in Greek ("*ἄδελφε, βοήθει*", "*adelphe, boethei*"). Within moments, the entire group, including Brutus, were stabbing the dictator. Caesar attempted to get away, but, blinded by blood in his eyes, he tripped and fell; the men continued stabbing him as he lay defenseless on the lower steps of the portico. According to Eutropius, sixty or more men participated in the assassination. Caesar was stabbed 23 times.^[15] Suetonius relates that a physician who performed an autopsy on Caesar established that only one wound (the second one to his chest that pierced his aorta) had been fatal. This autopsy report (the earliest known post-mortem report in history) describes that Caesar's death was mostly attributable to blood loss from his stab wounds.^[16]

Caesar was killed at the base of the Curia in the Theater of Pompey.^[17]

The dictator's last words are a contested subject among scholars and historians. Suetonius himself says he said nothing,^[13] nevertheless, he mentions that others have written that Caesar's last words were the Greek phrase "*καὶ σύ, τέκνον*;"^[18] (transliterated as "*Kai su, teknon*?" : "You too, child?" in English).^[19] Plutarch also reports that Caesar said nothing, pulling his toga over his head when he saw Brutus among the conspirators.^[20] The version best known in the English-speaking world is the Latin phrase "*Et tu, Brute?*" ("You too, Brutus?");^{[21][22]} this derives from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (1599), where it actually forms the first half of a macaronic line: "*Et tu, Brute? Then fall, Caesar.*" This has no basis in historical fact. Shakespeare was making use of a phrase already in common use at the time.^[23] According to Plutarch, after the assassination, Brutus stepped forward as if to say something to his fellow senators not involved in the plot; they, however, fled the building.^[24] Brutus and his companions then marched to the Capitol while crying out to their beloved city: "People of Rome, we are once again free!". They were met with silence, as the citizens of Rome had locked themselves inside their houses as soon as the rumour of what had taken place had begun to spread. According to Suetonius, all the conspirators made off, and he (Caesar) lay there lifeless for some time, and finally three common slaves put him on a litter and carried him home, with one arm hanging down.^[25]

A wax statue of Caesar was erected in the Forum displaying the 23 stab wounds.^[26] A crowd who had amassed there started a fire, which badly damaged neighboring buildings. In the ensuing years a series of civil wars resulted with the end of the Republic and the rise of imperial Rome.

Portentous events



Woodcut manuscript illustration by Johannes Zainer, c. 1474



La Mort de César (ca. 1859–1867) by Jean-Léon Gérôme, depicting the aftermath of the attack with Caesar's body abandoned in the foreground as the senators exult

Virgil wrote in the *Georgics* that several unusual events took place following Caesar's assassination.^[27]

Who dare say the Sun is false? He and no other warns us when dark uprisings threaten, when treachery and hidden wars are gathering strength. He and no other was moved to pity Rome on the day that Caesar died, when he veiled his radiance in gloom and darkness, and a godless age feared everlasting night. Yet in this hour Earth also and the plains of Ocean, ill-boding dogs and birds that spell mischief, sent signs which heralded disaster. How oft before our eyes did Etna deluge the fields of the Cyclopes with a torrent from her burst furnaces, hurling thereon balls of fire and molten rocks. Germany heard the noise of battle sweep across the sky and, even without precedent, the Alps rocked with earthquakes. A voice boomed through the silent groves for all to hear, a deafening voice, and phantoms of unearthly pallor were seen in the falling darkness. Horror beyond words, beasts uttered human speech; rivers stood still, the earth gaped upon; in the temples ivory images wept for grief, and beads of sweat covered bronze statues. King of waterways, the Po swept forests along in the swirl of his frenzied current, carrying with him over the plain cattle and stalls alike. Nor in that same hour did sinister filaments cease to appear in ominous entrails or blood to flow from wells or our hillside towns to echo all night with the howl of wolves. Never fell more lightning from a cloudless sky; never was comet's alarming glare so often seen.

Aftermath of the assassination

Two days after the assassination, Mark Antony summoned the senate and managed to work out a compromise in which the assassins would not be punished for their acts, but all of Caesar's appointments would remain valid. By doing this, Antony most likely hoped to avoid large cracks in government forming as a result of Caesar's death.

Simultaneously, Antony diminished the goals of the conspirators.^[28] The result unforeseen by the assassins was that Caesar's death

precipitated the end of the Roman Republic.^[29] The Roman lower classes, with whom Caesar was popular, became enraged that a small group of aristocrats had sacrificed Caesar. Antony, who had been drifting apart from Caesar, capitalised on the grief of the Roman mob and threatened to unleash them on the Optimates, perhaps with the intent of taking control of Rome himself. But, to his surprise and chagrin, Caesar had named his grandnephew Gaius Octavius his sole heir, bequeathing him the immensely potent Caesar name as well as making him one of the wealthiest citizens in the Republic.^[30] Upon hearing of his adopted father's death,

Octavius abandoned his studies in Apollonia and sailed across the Adriatic Sea to Brundisium.^[28] Octavius became *Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus* or Octavian, the son of the great Caesar, and consequently also inherited the loyalty of much of the Roman populace. Octavian, aged only 18 at the time of Caesar's death, proved to have considerable political skills, and while Antony dealt with Decimus Brutus in the first round of the new civil wars, Octavian consolidated his tenuous position. Antony did not initially consider Octavius a true political threat due to his young age and inexperience, but Octavius quickly gained the support and admiration of Caesar's friends and supporters.^[28]

To combat Brutus and Cassius, who were massing an enormous army in Greece, Antony needed soldiers, the cash from Caesar's war chests, and the legitimacy that Caesar's name would provide for any action he took against them. With passage of the Lex Titia on November 27, 43 BC,^[31] the Second Triumvirate was officially formed, composed of Antony, Octavian, and Caesar's Master of the Horse Lepidus.^[32] It formally deified Caesar as Divus Iulius in 42 BC, and Caesar Octavian henceforth became *Divi filius* ("Son of the Divine").^[33] Seeing that Caesar's clemency had resulted in his murder, the Second Triumvirate brought back proscription,



Deification of Julius Caesar, a 16th-century engraving by Virgil Solis illustrating Ovid's passage on the apotheosis of Caesar (*Metamorphoses* 15.745-850)

abandoned since Sulla.^[34] It engaged in the legally sanctioned murder of a large number of its opponents in order to fund its forty-five legions in the second civil war against Brutus and Cassius.^[35] Antony and Octavian defeated them at Philippi.^[36]

Afterward, Mark Antony married Caesar's lover, Cleopatra, intending to use the fabulously wealthy Egypt as a base to dominate Rome. A third civil war broke out between Octavian on one hand and Antony and Cleopatra on the other. This final civil war, culminating in the latter's defeat at Actium, resulted in the final ascendancy of Octavian, who became the first Roman emperor, under the name Caesar Augustus, a name that raised him to the status of a deity.^[37]

List of conspirators

Some forty people joined in the plot, but about half of their names are lost to history and almost nothing is known about some of those whose names have survived.^[38] The known members are:

- Gaius Cassius Longinus
- Marcus Junius Brutus
- Servius Sulpicius Galba^[39]
- Quintus Ligarius^[39]
- Lucius Minucius Basilus
- Gaius Servilius Casca (brother of Publius Servilius Casca Longus)
- Publius Servilius Casca Longus (brother of Gaius Servilius Casca and the one responsible for the first stab)
- Decimus Junius Brutus Albinus
- Lucius Tillius Cimber
- Gaius Trebonius^[40]
- Lucius Cassius Longinus (brother of Gaius Cassius Longinus)^[41]
- Gaius Cassius Parmensis^[42]
- Caecilius (brother of Bucolianus)^[39]
- Bucolianus (brother of Caecilius)^[43]
- Rubrius Ruga^[39]
- Marcus Spurius^[39]
- Publius Sextius Naso^[39]
- Lucius Pontius Aquila^[39]
- Petronius^[39]
- Decimus Turullius^[44]
- Pacuvius Antistius Labeo
- Lucius Cornelius Cinna (son of 4 time consul of the same name)

Marcus Tullius Cicero was not a member of the conspiracy and was surprised by it, but later wrote to the conspirator Trebonius that he wished he had been "...invited to that superb banquet." He believed that the Liberatores should also have killed Mark Antony.^[45] The conspirators had decided, however, that the death of a single tyrant would be more symbolically effective, claiming that the intent was not a coup d'état, but tyrannicide.

See also

- *Julius Caesar*, a play by William Shakespeare
- *The Ides of March*, a novel by Thornton Wilder



Brutus and the Ghost of Caesar (1802), copperplate engraving by Edward Scriven from a painting by Richard Westall, illustrating Act IV, Scene III, from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*

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2. Plutarch. "Life of Caesar" (http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/e/roman/texts/plutarch/lives/caesar*.html). *University of Chicago*. p. 595. "...at this juncture Decimus Brutus, surnamed Albinus, who was so trusted by Caesar that he was entered in his will as his second heir, but was partner in the conspiracy of the other Brutus and Cassius, fearing that if Caesar should elude that day, their undertaking would become known, ridiculed the seers and chided Caesar for laying himself open to malicious charges on the part of the senators..."
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17. "Spot Where Julius Caesar Was Stabbed Discovered" (<http://www.livescience.com/23900-julius-caesar-assassination-place-discovered.html>). *Live Science*. Retrieved 2017-02-19.
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45. Ad Att. XIV 12

External links

- Account (<http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/caesar2.htm>) of the assassination from Nicolaus of Damascus
- Account (http://www.chlt.org/sandbox/perseus/appian.cw_eng/page.30.a.php) of the assassination from the historian Appian. Section 114 contains a list of conspirators.
- Suetonius, *Life of Julius Caesar* (http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Suetonius/12Caesars/Julius*.html), includes an account of the plot

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