

Debtor of the mighty

Caesar belonged to an ancient, though politically insignificant, family. Instead of relying on family relations, he trusted in heretofore unprecedented amounts of money to further his career. By borrowing the money from the most powerful politicians of his day, he ensured that they would support his political career, if nothing else to get their money back – with interest.

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The gens Julia

Caius Iulius Caesar, who was to become one of the most famous dictators of all time, was born into the gens Julia. This ancient Patrician family produced only few consuls in the 5th and early 4th century before slowly fading into political obscurity.



Bust of Caius Iulius Caesar, Altes Museum, Berlin. Photo: Wikicommons / Louis le Grand / <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.en>

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Playing along – but not the first fiddle

The time of Iulius Caesar hardly knew any significant members of the gens Julia. One major reason for this development was the fact that the last Julian consul had sided with Marius. After losing the civil war against Sulla, this was unfortunately the wrong side to be on. Speaking of which, Marius had also been married to Iulia, Caesar's paternal aunt.



Denarius of L. Iulius, 101. Obverse: Roma. Reverse: Victoria in biga.

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Aeneas – Rome – Caesar

Caius Iulius Caesar nevertheless prided himself on his lineage. Even though distinguished military leaders or politicians were largely absent from the family tree, he still had an ace up his sleeve. According to legend, the family directly descended from the son of Aeneas, whom the Greeks called Ascanius, the Romans Iulus. This coin shows how Aeneas rescues his father Anchises and the sacred Trojan palladium from the flames. The wooden statue would later find a new home in the Roman Temple of Vesta.



Denarius of C. Iulius Caesar, 47/6. Obverse: Venus. Reverse: Aeneas carrying his father Anchises and the Palladium.

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Back to the roots

Through the connection with Aeneas, Caesar could trace back his roots to the great Greek epics. It was Roman poet Virgil who would put down the fall of Ilium in verse, the epic that would become the Romans' national poem.



The procession of the Trojan horse in Troy. Painting by Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo, 1760. National Gallery, London. Source:

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Aeneas: Mythical hero, divine son

Caesar's legendary family history was particularly interesting with regard to the fact that Aeneas was the son of Aphrodite, Greek counterpart to the Roman goddess Venus. Even as no-name politician at the beginning of his career, this rendered Caesar superior to the big names in Roman politics. After all, Sulla had merely been a favourite of Venus, not her descendant.



Flight from Troy. Painting by Federico Barocci, 1598. Galleria Borghese, Rome. Source: Wikicommons / Web Gallery of Art/Wetman.

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Climbing the ladder of fame

Caesar's political career did not really take off until 69 BC. In rapid succession, he became quaestor and, in 65, aedile. In this office, Caesar sponsored circus games of spectacular scope. This only became possible by borrowing large amounts of money, exceptionally large amounts of money.



Pollice Verso, painting by Jean-Léon Gérôme, 1872. Phoenix Art Museum. Source: Wikicommons / WarX/Manuel Strehl / <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.en>

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Money paves the way

That in itself was not unusual. All aediles relied on borrowed money. If anything, the amount of money may have been somewhat unusual. What was really new though was the strategy Caesar devised for the elections of the Pontifex Maximus. Instead of bribing the older members of the college of pontiffs into renouncing their candidatures, he spent unprecedented amounts of money on bribing the electorate. With success: Caesar was elected despite all expectations. What the Pontifex Maximus lacked in political power, he more than made up for in religious power: While officials were re-elected annually, the high priest was elected for life. No wonder that on his coins Caesar time and again depicted himself with items specifically linked to priestly duties.



Denarius of C. Iulius Caesar, 49/8. Obverse: Priestly utensils. Reverse: Elephant trampling down on snake.

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Money from a dubious source

Caesar's main creditor was Marcus Licinius Crassus, the richest man in Rome. Among the more conservative members of Roman society, he had a decidedly bad reputation. The senators were as appreciative of his money as they were suspicious of its doubtful entrepreneurial origins – and Crassus was an exceptionally innovative entrepreneur.



Portrait, discovered in the Licinia family tomb in Rome, possibly associated with Marcus Licinius Crassus. Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen. Photo: Wikicommons / Diagram Lajard / <http://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/deed.de>

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Caesar and the Catiline conspiracy

Caesar, who tended to disagree with the general Roman trend, also did so in the Catiline conspiracy. Until this day, no light has been shed on the exact details of this 'conspiracy' – if it ever existed. Be that as it may, Caius Iulius Caesar was the only senator to speak up for Catiline and against the death penalty. Considering his inferior rank at the time of the conspiracy this constituted a scandal. However, his speech was so convincing that he would have almost succeeded in his cause, had it not been for Cato the Younger, who understood himself as the voice and moral conscience of the younger reactionaries. In this affair, Caesar had made more than one bitter enemy.



Cicero denouncing Catiline. Historicising fresco by Cesare Maccari, 1888. Villa Madama, Rome. Photo: Wikicommons.

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All thanks to a guarantor

In 61 BC, Caesar's enemies attempted to keep the newly appointed praetor from visiting his province Hispania Ulterior by prompting his creditors to call in their money immediately. The debt is estimated at 6 million denarii, which roughly corresponds to a tenth of Rome's annual income. The intention behind this move was clearly political because every Roman knew that a debtor would only be able to pay back the money after returning from his province. But Caesar was lucky. His biggest creditor, Marcus Licinius Crassus, supported him. Maybe because he wanted his money back. Maybe because he had recognised his debtor's political potential. Crassus vouched for Caesar and Caesar travelled to Spain.



Map of the Roman provinces in Hispania. Source: Wikicommons.

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Lusitania involuntarily pays Caesar's debts

The obvious reason for Caesar's expedition to Spain was of course money. And money could only be won in a lucrative war. This time, the Lusitanians were the victims. They had large resources of silver and gold. By the time Caesar's term in office ended, Lusitania had become part of the Roman Republic. And Caesar had lined his pockets so thoroughly that he never suffered from financial worries again.



The Roman province of Lusitania. Source: Wikicommons / Alexandre Vigo / <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/deed.de>

12 Debtor of the mighty Triumvirate – Pompey

On his return to Rome, Caesar had to confront the fact that most of the senate was working against him. He had broken too many rules. His solution to the problem was ganging up on the senate with other outsiders, the rich Crassus, who would have loved to lead a big military campaign someday, and military commander Pompey. The latter had won considerable victories but was now at a loss to provide for his veterans. Caesar promised them his support in exchange for theirs, including that of their respective clients, for his election as consul.



Denarius of Cn. Pompeius Magnus. 49. Obverse: Hermaphrodite's bust. The reverse alludes to Pompey's victories: The dolphin stands for his war against the pirates, while the eagle symbolises Jove, who granted him the victories. The sceptre symbolises rule.

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New paths to old power

Already in Antiquity, people were aware that Caesar deviated from the well-trodden path to achieve his goals. Plutarch for instance wrote about him: 'He was unsparing in his outlays of money, and was thought to be purchasing a transient and short-lived fame at a great price, though in reality he was buying things of the highest value at a small price. We are told, accordingly, that before he entered upon any public office he was thirteen hundred talents in debt. Again, during his aedileship, he furnished three hundred and twenty pairs of gladiators, and by lavish provision besides for theatrical performances, processions, and public banquets, he washed away all memory of the ambitious efforts of his predecessors in the office. By these means he put the people in such a humour that every man of them was seeking out new offices and new honours with which to requite him.'



Ta sage instruction sert de riche couronne
 A Trajan, esleué par dessus tous humains.
 Si les grands te portoient au cœur & dans leurs mains,
 Vertu viuroit au lieu de Venus & Bellone

Plutarch, illustration taken from the French translation of 'Vitae Parallelae' by Jacques Amyot, 1565. Source: Wikicommons.