

## Pompey's rise to power

Julius Caesar's ruthless ambition and exceptional career played a central role in bringing the Roman Republic to an end, but Caesar's enemy in that war, his former ally and son-in-law Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus, deserves equal attention. In many ways Pompey's career was more remarkable: Pompey was a Roman who received military commands on a scale previously unimaginable, at an age younger than was in any way typical, and who was elected consul at the age of 35 even though he had held no previous office on the *cursus honorum*.

## Sulla's influence



Figure 13.1A Bust of Sulla

Sulla (left) and Gaius Marius (right) both contributed to the civil wars in the 1st century BC. Their actions paved the way for Pompey to later utilise the military for political ends. Both busts are thought to be copies from c. 40 BC. The bust of Sulla is currently housed in the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen, Denmark. The bust of Gaius Marius is contested and may represent another Roman. It can be found in the Munich Glyptothek.

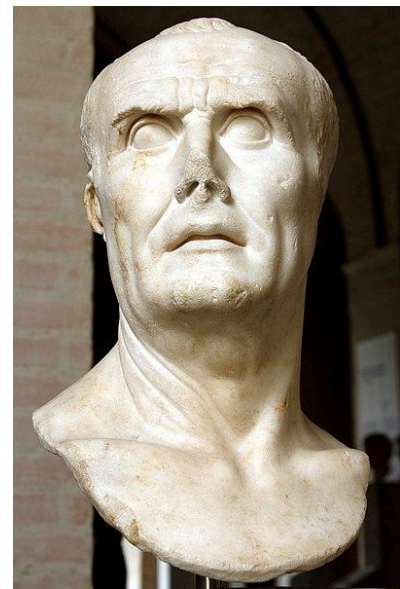


Figure 13.2B Bust of Gaius Marius

Pompey's extraordinary rise to power took place against the backdrop of the power struggle that had gripped Rome from 83 to 81 BC, between the two powerful generals and rivals Lucius Cornelius Sulla and Gaius Marius.

In 88 BC, Marius, a famous but now elderly general, competed against his former deputy, Sulla, for a prestigious and lucrative new command in the east. Sulla was granted the command and departed. Marius then managed to persuade the senate to transfer the command to him. When he found out about this, Sulla turned his army around and marched on Rome. This was the first time in Roman history that a military commander had used Roman legions to win political power.

in Rome. A chilling precedent had been created: Cicero would later write in a letter to his friend Atticus that he had heard Pompey say countless times, 'If Sulla could do it, why not I?'

### **Pompey's early career**

Pompey's extraordinary achievements rested on exceptional military skill and his association as a young man with Sulla, the most powerful person in Rome at that time. Pompey had served in Sulla's army with distinction and the biographer Plutarch reports that it was Sulla who encouraged others to hail Pompey as 'Magnus' or 'the Great'.

It was because of his success fighting for Sulla in Sicily and Africa that Pompey was first awarded the honour of a triumphal celebration, aged only 25. At first, Sulla opposed this, arguing that only a consul or praetor could celebrate a triumph. Plutarch tells us that Pompey, with the arrogance of youth, replied that more people worship the rising than the setting sun. Sulla, astounded by Pompey's boldness, granted him a triumph.

Pompey went on to win military victories, including in Spain and in the Third Servile War against the army of Spartacus, the gladiator and rebel slave whom you read about in Chapter 5. Marcus Licinius Crassus - the richest man in Rome at the time - had already won a decisive battle against Spartacus in Southern Italy in 71 BC, but it was Pompey, returning from Spain, who dealt with the 5,000 survivors from Spartacus' army that fled north, and notified the Senate that the war was over. In recognition of their military successes, Pompey and Crassus were elected consuls for 70 BC.

At the time, it must have seemed that these two men would become the dominant forces in the Republic for years to come, with the sort of preeminence that had been held by Sulla and Marius. There was little indication that a young senator named Julius Caesar, would first ally with them, then outstrip them both in ambition and achievement.

### **Pompey's continuing military success**

Soon after his consulship, Pompey was awarded an extraordinary military command and the challenge of ridding the Mediterranean of pirates in order to re-establish the security of Rome's crucial trading routes. This command gave Pompey vast power over the entire Mediterranean, up to 80 km of inland territory all around it, and the right to raise armies, fleets and to appoint his own lieutenants. Pompey raised a force of unprecedented scale, gathering together 120,000 soldiers, 4,000 cavalry and 270 ships. Within 80 days he had achieved the seemingly incredible task of defeating the pirates.

It was no surprise that after this he was handed full command to wage war in the east against King Mithridates of Pontus (in modern-day Turkey), Rome's longest standing enemy of the 1st century BC. The scale of Pompey's victories was eye-watering and Plutarch claimed these

eastern conquests added an additional 35 million **drachmas**<sup>1</sup> to Rome's annual 50 million tax revenue.



**Figure 13.3C Tetradrachm of Mithradates VI**

This coin shows Mithradates VI, ruler of Pontus (120-63 BC) was minted around 125 BC. The stag, berries and leaves on the obverse indicate the wealth and prosperity of Pontus. This coin is a tetradrachm, a silver coin equivalent to four drachmae. It is currently in a private collection.

### A political alliance: Pompey, Crassus and Julius Caesar

Pompey's success was a double-edged sword. As part of his command in the east, Pompey had made many settlements with different cities and rulers which now needed retrospective approval by the senate in Rome. In addition, he needed the senate to approve the land distribution promised to his soldiers as reward for their military service. Many of Rome's senatorial elite, however, had begun to disagree with the scale of Pompey's power and opposition to his requests began to grow.

The solution to this was an informal power alliance - often referred to by historians as the first triumvirate - between Pompey, Crassus and Julius Caesar in 60 BC. While this solution worked to the advantage of the three men involved, it ultimately eroded the power of the senatorial elite. These three men realised that between them they could wield enough power to steer the affairs of the Republic and achieve their own ends. As one of the incoming consuls for 59 BC, Caesar was able to propose laws and influence senatorial debate; Pompey had huge popular support and could use his veteran soldiers to persuade or intimidate political opponents; Crassus, as the wealthiest man in Rome, could use his money to fix elections or offer a well-placed bribe when it was required.

At the end of Caesar's consulship he was awarded governorship of two provinces, Illyricum (part of modern-day Albania) and Cisalpine Gaul (in modern-day northern Italy); Pompey's support had added a third province - Transalpine Gaul or *Gallia Narbonensis* (in what is now southern France) - to the mix. As discussed in Chapter 9, this gave Caesar the opportunity to launch a conquest of Gaul and the arena to build the personal wealth and military power which would facilitate his eventual rise to be dictator at Rome.

### Relationships disintegrate

<sup>1</sup> Plutarch wrote in Greek and recorded these totals in **drachmas**, the rough equivalent of the Roman denarii. For context, it is thought that under Caesar, a Roman soldier was paid 225 denarii per year.

During Caesar's time in Gaul, relationships deteriorated between Pompey, Crassus and Caesar. A meeting between all three in 56 BC temporarily stabilised things and Pompey and Crassus won the elections as co-consuls for 55 BC. In late 54 BC, however, Pompey's wife, Julia, died in childbirth: Julia was Julius Caesar's daughter and her death broke an important personal link between these two men. In 53 BC, Crassus suffered a crushing defeat against the Parthians at the Battle of Carrhae. His army of 40,000 soldiers was annihilated by 10,000 highly mobile Parthian cavalry who left an indelible stain on Rome's honour by capturing a number of precious legionary emblems. Cassius Dio, a historian writing in the early 3rd century AD, claims that when the Parthians found Crassus' dead body, they poured molten gold into his mouth, savagely mocking the end to the richest man on earth. Crassus' death marked the permanent end to the delicate balance of power between these three men.

As Chapter 13 sets out, the breakdown in this alliance meant that the rivalry between Pompey and Caesar would soon reach an impasse, driving Rome into civil war.



**Figure 13.4D** 16th century plate showing the death of Crassus

This 16th century plate shows the point at which Crassus was killed by having molten gold poured down his throat by Parthians in 53 BC, after being defeated in the Battle of Carrhae. The Parthians may have decided to kill him in such a brutal way to mock Crassus' greed. The plate is currently on display at the Louvre in France.