

## Discussion Prompts

- 1) After reading Winks and Mattern-Parkes, what do you think are the most significant periods in the rise of Rome as a power, and why? What potential problems did the Romans face?
- 2) What kinds of windows to Roman history does Suetonius' portrait (perhaps with the assistance of the documentary) of Julius Caesar open for you? In other words, what can we learn about Roman history from Suetonius' work?

## Works Reviewed:

(The Ancient Mediterranean World)

(I, Caesar: Julius Caesar)

(Suetonius, 1: 1)

Suetonius, in his *12 Caesars*, illustrates the significance that political instability, conquest, class and status played in the Roman Empire through his examination of the life of Julius Caesar. Not only does it help illustrate significant values in the lives of Aristocrats and commoners, but it the values that helped create and shape the Roman world at large. It illustrated how political instability of the ruling class of aristocrats shaped the direction of Roman history and political institutions. In it we see how the political intrigues, and aristocratic rivalries, in an attempt to gain power and wealth, would impact the country's institutions and its people through its conquests and civil wars. In some ways, the story of Julius Caesar is the story of Rome itself.

It also painted a rich picture of politics and democracy in the first century BCE and the role that politics played in the collapse of the Roman Republic. The rivalries of the Aristocratic ruling class, in their quest for power and material wealth, engaged in schemes, intrigues and wars, both foreign and domestic, to achieve those ends.

I found it interesting that his story of Caesar begins with the story of the misgivings of Dictator Sulla regarding this new upstart, Julius Caesar. In it he said, "There are many Mariuses in the fellow Caesar" (Suetonius, 1:1). From the start, Suetonius uses a reference to another epic Roman rivalry, one that devolved into a civil war. In this way, Suetonius sets a theme for the chapter, one of an individual of enormous ambition and bent on the acquisition of political power, wealth and glory. In this ways, Caesar represented the Roman political system as a whole.

Suetonius shows a political world in which an individual like Caesar can climb and achieve those goals, if he can survive the rough and tumble politics of the Roman Republic. The political world of Rome is dominated by the aristocratic class in a political environment of constantly shifting political allegiances. Significant of these is the formation, then dissolution of the alliance between Caesar and Pompey (Suetonius, 1:27-35). Frequently these shifts result in rivalries that have the potential to expand and grow, and in this case, lead to a civil war. Most often though, this played out as typical political wrangling and slander, but sometimes they slipped into even more corrupt practices. Politicians would embroil themselves in plots, schemes and intrigues, sometimes in dramatic fashion with significant stakes. Losers of these political games could lead to removal from office, loss of property, imprisonment or even death. Roman politics was not for the feint of heart. Frequently, bribery, intimidation (Suetonius, 1:20) and other forms of graft and corruption would be employed by politicians to both gain and maintain power. Both the Suetonius text and the video described an electorate that was more than willing to be bribed with payments or land or swayed through populist policies and public works projects that would benefit them. Julius Caesar was a master of both, even as it put him a great political and financial peril.

Suetonius also showed the role that conquest and war played in Roman politics. Conquest and military victories earned you the love of the people and the promise of great wealth for yourself and the Republic. His conquest of Gaul, epitomized this value in the Roman world (Suetonius, 1:22-25). This love and adoration of the plebeians was a fickle sort, and Caesar knew it. I found it interesting when Suetonius described how Caesar had taken fewer chances as he reached the pinnacle of power when he realized, "he could not possibly gain more by winning yet another battle than he could lose by a defeat" (Suetonius, 1:60), illustrating the reality of the popular politics. He could maintain his power and his army, in an aristocracy that would not accept him (I, Caesar: Julius Caesar, 15:12) through glories on the battlefield, populist policies and "Bread and Circuses" both before and after his conquest of Gaul and after being named Imperator.

### **Responses to peers:**

Caesar's conquest of Gaul preceded another civil war, as this conquest amplified long held suspicion and fears about him by powerful aristocrats. His increased popularity with the citizenry of Rome and the great wealth he extracted from Gaul made the Senate that despised him consider him even more dangerous to the Republic. Enter political plots and schemes here.

We frequently associate expansion with war. One sovereign power conquering another autonomous people, but Prof. Corley's post made me reflect and consider the role expansion and successful conquests might play in sowing the seeds of CIVIL discontent and conflict, and the potential for civil war. I looked to our own American Civil War. I'm aware that we're talking about very different eras, different peoples and traditions and trying to be careful about overgeneralizing and just looking to see if any comparisons can be made, or common themes or threads. In the United States, a war of conquest, The Mexican War, inadvertently led to a series of political crisis and strife and ultimately, civil war. The spoils of that war, the Mexican Cession would raise questions regarding the newly annexed territory would rip the country in two as it grappled with the issue of Slavery and its place in the new territories. Different causes and issues to be sure, but both wars raised questions of political power and its limits. Both had two powerful factions that were highly suspect of each other's strength and motives.

Anyone else have any thoughts on other civil wars for consideration that may shed some light? Perhaps, this is more about faction than expansion?