CAIUS JULIUS CAESAR was born into a patrician family in Rome on 13 July, 100 BC. A quick-witted and intelligent boy, he was brought up with many advantages. Yet his family was not rich by the fabulously wealthy standards of many at that time. Lack of money could prove to be a handicap to any ambitions that the young Caesar might have for a life at the forefront of Roman society.

Caesar proudly claimed to be descended from Venus (Aphrodite) and Anchises, father of Aeneas and ancestor of Romulus, the founder of Rome. His mother, Aurelia, was from a powerful family, although they had plebeian roots. The Caesars lived in modest circumstances in an unremarkable area of the city where Julius received the usual schooling for a boy of his background. It seems he had a facility with languages. The usual military training of a patrician youth would have been part of his normal routine — mastery of sword and spear were expected and he appears to have been a particularly good horseman.

At around the age of 14 Caesar was engaged to marry Cornelia who was, according to the Greek writer Plutarch, from a family of the equestrian caste. Despite being lower on the social scale, her family was rich, which had to be a consideration for Caesar's parents when they chose her as a wife for their son. A year later, Caesar's father died.
However impeccable his aristocratic background and however much Julius proved to have a fine and able intelligence, lack of money was a constant problem. Nevertheless, the family did have some influential connections. Caesar’s favourite aunt, Julia, had married M. Marius in 113 BC (see panel). Marius was an influential politician, who did not tolerate fools and vigorously opposed the arrogance of the patricians in the Senate.

He was a fine if impetuous general and was involved in reforming the Roman army. He was also a leading democrat, intent on confronting the conservative wing of the Senate. He had cleared his way to political prominence despite being born outside Rome to a family that did not even have the right to vote.

Because of his contentious nature, the influence Gaius Marius could wield for Caesar was something of a double-edged sword. The ambitious young man had to make some moves for himself. Caesar decided to abandon Consilia and instead married Cornelia, the daughter of Lucius Cornelius Cinna (130–84 BC), a politician of note who had been elected consul since 87 BC. The young Caesar may have decided this union was an astute move into the political arena.

The conflict between Marius and Sulla (see page 34) provided the backdrop and the political experience that helped young Caesar’s gradual rise to power. Sulla became a consul in 88 BC and was subsequently sent by the Senate to confront King Mithridates of Persia. Taking advantage of his absence, Marius pushed through reforms of the Senate, cutting back its power and influence.

When Sulla learned about this, he returned at the head of his army, crushed Marius and his supporters and declared himself sole ruler – dictator – of Rome. It was the first time that a Roman general had ever used his military command against the city. Sulla restored the privileges of the Senate, reformed and weakened the public institutions, and had a number of his opponents killed. He was a ruthless political operator and to stand in his way was to invite danger.

Caesar was a man on the rise and Sulla considered him a potential enemy. Through his family ties to Marius, who died in 86 BC, he was connected to the Democrat Party, and through his marriage he was connected to Cinna, an outspoken enemy of Sulla.

Despite his youth, Caesar was proven to be a good public orator. His speeches were greeted with delight by those who were opposed to the conservative patrician power brokers. In the host of political infighting, Sulla began a campaign to destroy the ambitious young man through intimidation and threat. It was a true baptism of fire.

Sulla stripped Caesar of his inheritance and ordered him to divorce Cornelia, but the young man refused and was forced into hiding. Sulla used...
his secret agents to try to find him, so Caesar had to move every night to avoid the assassination squads. It was only because of the intervention of his family and friends that he was not killed during Sulla's killings. Sulla pardoned him reluctantly and according to Suetonius said to the relatives: "Very well, take him but do not forget that the man you want me to spare will one day be the ruin of the party we have long defended. There are many Matutinii in this Caesar."

CAESAR AND THE PIRATES

In an area of the Mediterranean that was dominated by pirates, located in kidnap, extortion and blackmail. The families of victims if they didn't pay the ransom demanded the victim would never return. When Sulla's capture, Caesar was taken to their stronghold, where it seemed he took him for a wealthy Roman. They had no idea that they had one of the most distinguished and brave soldiers in the Roman army with very little money. He was, after all, a very young man. When the teacher told him that he had asked as much as 20 talents in ransom paid to be offended - "Are 50 at least," he demanded. He was sent Caesar's travelling companions back to Rome with the emblem. They said they had only 60 days to collect the money and would die. It appears that the pirate chief and Caesar got on well, joked, played games, talked and ate together like good friends.

His captors that if he regained his freedom he would come back and only the ransom but the lives of the entire pirate gang. Too the pirate the very idea was a deadline for the ransom loomed, even the pirate chief seemed to believe that the money should arrive and he would be able to let his victim go without. After 38 days, the money was paid. Caesar was free. His captors of his promise, telling them that they would have done it before he was going to return and kill them. They laughed in their faces. They didn't believe that Caesar would dare to return. They had underestimated this man as other, better men did in the future.

The Political Career Begins

In 68 BC, Cornelia died while giving birth to her stillborn son (the couple already had a daughter named Julia). Caesar was broken-hearted. In the same year his Aunt Julia also died. He used the money to make his first openly political move, giving the funeral in honour of the two women while ensuring that the funeral mask of Marius was paraded as a direct signal of his opposition to Sulla's changes in the constitution. He also remarried, taking Sulla's granddaughter, Pompeia, as his bride.

The same year Caesar was elected to the position of quaestor in southern Spain and Portugal. While there he attacked independent tribes and made enough money to settle his debts. He returned to Rome and was elected as aedile (magistrate) in 65 BC. Caesar was climbing the political ladder at the same time as ensuring his connections with people of influence. The great general Pompey (Magnus Pompeius) wanted to continue the war in the east, a plan that was supported by Caesar, who gained himself a powerful ally in doing so. At about the same time he made a friend of Marcus Licinius Crassus (c.115–53 BC), a fabulously wealthy Roman, who provided much financial support for this politician on the rise.

Caesar needed to ensure that he had a source of funds if he was to make his next ambitious move. The populace were always volatile which made them difficult to keep calm. His position as aedile meant that he had the responsibility for the daily running of the growing city and also had to organize and fund the Roman games. Caesar could not afford to get things wrong. The moment of maximum risk and of maximum potential gain had arrived and Caesar made a spectacular decision. He risked all on creating the most magnificent games he could not afford it. It was a triumph. Caesar owed hundreds of gold talents at the end of it, although Caesar paid off the debt.

In his book The Twelve Caesars Suetonius describes Caesar as a man given to plots and plotting. In 63 BC a conspiracy to overthrow the magistrates and seize the consulship was revealed by the senator consular Marcus Tullius Cicero. The leader of the conspiracy was said to be Lucius Catalinus (Cataline) of the patrician party. Cicero's revelation was enough for five important Roman
men to be sentenced to death. Caesar was vehemently opposed to this judicial murder but he had against him a consistent and long-time personal enemy, Marcus Porcius Cato, the leader of the patrician Optimates party.

The two men met in public and debated their arguments. Caesar lost the discussion and the five men were promptly executed. Caesar was left with bad blood between himself and Cato and Cicero. Caesar very much wanted a command in Egypt, where the pharaoh Ptolemy XIII had been deposed. As Ptolemy was a client of Rome, Caesar felt it was right that his rule be re-established. It would be an opportunity to build up his funds as Ptolemy was offering a large indemnity to whoever would help him. The ruling patricians vetoed his request. But Caesar had his revenge. He used his position as aedile to arrange an exhibition of all the public monuments commemorating the victories of Marius, who stood for everything the patricians despised. He also prosecuted the men who had made money by bringing in Roman citizens outlawed during Sulla’s massacres.

The First Triumvirate

In 62 BC Pompey returned to Rome from his wars in the east, where he had achieved great triumphs. He had defeated Mithridates in Persia, added Syria and Judaea to the list of Roman territories and made vast amounts of money. There was a natural fear that he would do as Sulla had done and arrive with his army and become dictator. He disbanded his troops to whom he had promised grants of land from the Senate as reward for their service.

Cato led the Senate in refusing to give Pompey any of the things he had promised his soldiers. The city was in turmoil as Crassus prepared his forces in case Pompey made a move on the city. Crassus did not trust Pompey as they had their differences when they had served as consuls.

However, in 60 BC Caesar brokered a peace between the two men and the trio formed a secret alliance, swearing to oppose any legislation of which any of them disapproved. In 59 BC Caesar was elected to the highest Roman office when he became consul, and that year he married his third wife, Calpurnia, having divorced Pompeia. Using a series of questionable tactics, the Triumvirate came to dominate the Senate. They made the position of Caesar’s fellow consul impossible; they bribed a man to testify that members of the Senate had tried to make him assassinate Pompey and they forced another senator, Lucullus, to his knees to beg Caesar’s pardon for opposing his policies. The Triumvirate was flexing its muscles.

This alliance between Pompey, Crassus and Caesar was cemented when Caesar’s daughter Julia married Pompey. In order to do this, Caesar broke her previous engagement to a fellow Roman who had given him much support in the recent struggles against the Senate.

Caesar was now in a position to ensure that he got exactly what he wanted. He had raised all the money he had on political deals and bribery, and he needed to rebuild his funds. He wanted to be given a large province to control or an undefended country to engage in battle. Initially, the Senate gave him Cisalpine Gaul to govern, but Caesar wanted more, so he was given Transalpine Gaul as well.

With his affairs in Rome in the hands of Pompey and Crassus, Caesar now looked to the rest of Gaul. Once he had conquered Gaul, he could return to Rome a wealthy man and implement the greatest and most ambitious of his plans. Caesar saw no limit to what he could achieve. The Gallic campaigns would make him wealthy enough to buy and blackmail, to extort and to capsize the Romans into doing what he wanted. If they refused he would have a loyal, tried and tested army under his control. Pompey would perhaps stand in his way, but Caesar had no fear of him. Sulla had shown him that the path to victory lay in creating loyal legions. To do that all he had to do was lead them to victory.
The Gallic Wars, 58–51 BC

Caesar spent seven years in the conquest of Gaul, an area that included all of modern France, Switzerland and northern Germany (see panel). Plutarch claims that 800 towns were destroyed and a million lives were lost on the side of the Gauls. The Senate might have had great misgivings about allowing this clever and ambitious man free reign in Gaul, but they may well also have hoped that at 40, he might fail, be disgraced and ruined.

There were those in the Senate already at work trying to separate Pompey from his fellows in the Triumvirate. Crassus was anxious to go to war in Syria and Pompey had misgivings about the way in which Caesar had consolidated his hold on the institutions of law and order in Rome. For the moment Pompey held his peace, but as Caesar later realized matters were not entirely under control in the city.

Catalpiae Gaul was the corridor along both banks of the River Po, which had been settled by Celtic tribes from Gaul. The Romans controlled a corridor along the Mediterranean that allowed them to move freely across the Rhone down into their Spanish colonies. As a result of pleas by some Gallic settlements, Caesar attacked the Helvetii, 400,000 of whom had moved from their homes on the west of Switzerland to invade Gaul. Caesar barred them north along the Arar (the Saone) and totally defeated them at Albrac (Aurigny). Then he dealt with the German tribes, 20,000 of which had moved into Gaul under their leader Ariovistus. Caesar demanded that Ariovistus remove his troops from Gaul. The German chief refused. Caesar had to work hard on the morale of his army to persuade them to confront the terrifying German warriors. Being the natural leader he was, Caesar’s confidence spread to his men.

Caesar’s troops occupied a fortress at Vesontio (Besançon) and drove the Germans back across the Rhine after destroying their army in the south of Alsace. One of the key aspects of his campaigns was the speed at which Caesar moved his troops. They thought nothing of a three-day

opposite: A triumphal arch at Carpentras showing Gallic prisoners-of-war in chains with their weapons beside them. First century AD.
forced march before going straight into battle.

At the Rhine, Caesar gained the confidence of the Trebiac nobles. He may have bribed them, but they agreed to act as border guards to keep their own countrymen behind the line of the river.

After a winter in camp among friendly tribes, the legions turned against the Belgae who had formed a confederacy. At the River Axoma (Aine), the confederacy fell apart and Caesar mopped up each tribe separately. It was an easy campaign, except when the Nervii surprised his legions as they made camp. Caesar had to pull the men together by stepping into the ranks himself and fighting alongside his legionaries. The Nervii were almost annihilated as a result.

Caesar insisted his commanders the confidence that they could take on any enemy in any place. In the north and west the Veneti were as at home on the sea as any Bretons. He sent a lieutenant to take them on. The lieutenant had ships built and raided the enemy fortresses along the coast until the Veneti surrendered. Meanwhile in the south-west the Aquitan were defeated by Publius Crassus, another of Caesar's young officers and the son of his wealthy ally. At the same time Caesar marched north against the tribes near the Channel coast and wintered there.

There were attacks on three fronts and each resulted in victory for Caesar. It was a masterly campaign. He determined to invade Britain where, according to Suetonius, he believed a conquest "was most likely to enrich him and furnish suitable material for triumphs. They say he invaded Britain in the hope of getting pearls that he could weigh in his own hand. He was always a most enthusiastic collector of gems, carvings and pictures and also of slaves of exceptional figure and training. He paid so much for these slaves that he forbade the entry into his accounts."

However, the first attempt on Britain in 55 BC gained little and the second very little more. Dio Cassius wrote in Roman History: "From Britain he had won nothing for himself or the state except the glory of having conducted an expedition against its inhabitants. Romans at home magnified his achievement to a remarkable degree."

Which was exactly what he wanted. Caesar needed the mob behind him and the best way to achieve that was to make sure they had historic victories to celebrate. His victories. As Plutarch noted in his Caesars he had the courage to push the boundaries of the empire beyond the known world. In this he had achieved the sort of fame and adulation that he knew would serve him well when he returned to Rome.

He had achieved the two things he set out to do. He had subdued the Gauls taking vast amounts of loot as a result. He had continually sent news to Rome of his progress and of his gains and the citizens of the city were eager for him to return in triumph.

Most importantly for him he had forged a bond between himself and his soldiers that would serve him well in the future. Plutarch again sums up this achievement by retelling a story, which puts Caesar in a good light.

He was so much master of the good-will and willing service of his soldiers that ordinary men were charged under his command and displayed a courage past defeating. They would go into any danger where Caesar's glory was concerned. In Britain, when some of the resent officers had got into a bog where they were assaulted by the enemy, a common soldier, whilst Caesar stood and looked on, threw himself in the middle of them, and bravely rescued the officers and beat off the barbarians.

In the end this brave soldier swam and waded out of the bog. In the clinging mud he lost his shield. Caesar and his officers were in that country and met him with delight. But the soldier, ashamed and in tears, threw himself down at Caesar's feet and begged his pardon for having let go his shield.

This love of honour and passion for distinction were inspired in them by Caesar who by his exemplary distribution of money and honours, showed them that he did not keep up wealth from the wars for gratifying his private pleasures. That he looked upon all as due to deserving soldiers as in much increase to his own riches.

... Added to this was, there was no danger to which Caesar did not willingly expose himself, no labour from which he plucked an exemption.

Plutarch's story may or may not be true, but is no doubt how the legions saw their leader under whose command they gained loot, fame, honour and victory. Caesar continued to consolidate his victories over the various tribes in Gaul. Some agreed to give him hostages, others conceded victory and gave him gold, others promised to join him. Caesar even created a legion from Gaule who wanted to fight under his command. But there were those who still refused to bend the knee and others who were ready for revolt if a suitably charismatic leader appeared.

In 52 BC the Arverni from southern Gaul, found such a leader in a warrior called Vercingetorix. He had decided that confronting the Roman army head-on was a foolish tactic and began to use a scorched-earth policy to decimate the Roman legions food or shelter wherever they moved. Caesar and his legions harried him through the Loire valley, crossed the Cevennes in the dead of winter and took Bourges, which the inhabitants had refused to burn as Vercingetorix had demanded. Former allies of Rome joined Vercingetorix in a general revolt. It was essential for Caesar to destroy this warrior chief. He turned south and Vercingetorix attacked the Romans and was forced to retreat to an untenable impregnable fortress near Dijon called Alesia.

Here Caesar demonstrated his formidable military talents and here the battle for Gaul was won and lost. After it over Caesar took reprisals of a savage nature on those tribes who had betrayed him, took hostages from all the tribes and also took tribute in slaves and jewels, in corn and horses, in gold and land. Gaul would not revolt or threaten Rome in his lifetime. Caesar turned and crossed the Alps into Cispaline Gaul and headed towards the River Rubicon, the boundary that stood between him and Rome.

In Rome they saw Caesar's ambition and were afraid. Pompey and the Senate forbade Caesar to advance into Italy from Gaul. Caesar knew that the Senate was not going to make him an officer of state for a further term. He also knowing if he abandoned his army to return to Rome he would not survive. Even Pompey had turned against him since his wife Julia, Caesar's daughter, had died. Camped on the other side of the River Rubicon with the XIII Legion, Caesar had to make up his mind.
LEFT: The Romans fighting against British warriors during Caesar's invasion 55-54 BC.
THE BATTLE OF ALESIA

The final battle between Vercingetorix and Caesar and his legions is an epic example of the skill and leadership of the Romans and the courage of those they had to defeat to secure their territories. Caesar was constantly aware of the activities of the leader of the Arverni and in 53-52 BC Vercingetorix led a massive revolt of Gallic tribes against the Romans. Vercingetorix persuaded these tribes to unite in an alliance against Rome. His warriors used the tactic of attacking and then retreating into prepared fortifications. Vercingetorix also razed the ground behind him if he was forced to retreat. He destroyed all villages and farms and any sources of supplies and food for the enemy. This was a serious threat to the Roman army, which was accustomed to living off the land.

According to Gallic Wars, which he wrote after the events, Caesar called his men together and told them that their objective was to destroy these warriors, to capture their baggage trains and scatter their cavalry. He wrote that when he described his vision of how this campaign would be fought, his cavalry shouted out: "we shall swear by the most sacred oath that any one of us who has not ridden through the enemy's army twice shall be cast out, shall have no access to his children, his parents or his wife..."

The Romans confronted the Gauls, routed them and took some of their leaders, but they failed to capture or kill Vercingetorix. He, having lost his cavalry, was now forced to fight from a fixed point. He fortified the town of Alesia, which was already well protected. The settlement stood on a hill, protected on two sides by rivers and surrounded by a wall against which the Gauls piled stone walls six feet high.

The Romans protected their positions below the city with a trench that was 1.1 miles (1.8 km) long. They built towers along a wall behind the trench and set guards. The scene is described in Gallic Wars.
sharpened and fire-hardened stakes projecting a few inches above the ground. These were secured with tamped clay and then the whole covered with brushwood and twigs to hide them. Eight rows of these were dug. The soldiers called this "the lip" because it looked like the flower. In front of these, stakes a foot long with iron hooks were entirely sunk into the ground. These all faced the encircled enemy in the city.

Now he turned and made exactly the same fortification behind him. He had created a secure place that could be defended by a few soldiers if his men were called away for any reason. Vercingetorix was walled inside his defences.

Caesar now ordered every man to provide himself with forage and corn for 30 days. He heard from spies that debates were held inside the enemy camp. Some wanted to confront the enemy as a matter of honour. Others counselled caution.

The first argument won. Bringing out ladders and bundles to cross the ditches the Arverni advanced from their fortress to the Roman army waiting for them.

The Gauls were overconfident when they killed some Romans. Caesar ordered the German cavalry to show themselves and the Gauls panicked. The Romans attacked ruthlessly as the German cavalry surrounded the Gallic archers and slaughtered them where they stood. The Gauls retreated. The Arverni returned to the attack at midnight and were thrown back from the Roman fortifications by slings, arrows and stones and because of the stakes that defended the ramparts. The Roman field commanders sent in reinforcements and, in the dark, the Gauls impaled themselves on the stakes and "died in front of the ditches.

Later Vercingetorix attacked yet again with scaling ladders, hooks, and movable siege towers and for a time it seemed as if victory would be his. But Caesar was watching it all from a hilltop and sent fresh men to reinforce the most threatened places.

The Gauls cannot penetrate the Roman fortress. The Romans advanced into their enemy in the almost impregnable formation known as the "tortoise". The Gauls gave way. But now the Romans in the front line are exhausted.

Caesar sends Labienus with six cohorts to relieve these men. Caesar shows himself to them... "The thin faced, purple clad warrior..."

Still the Gauls come on and with huge numbers of missiles and, fighting from the siege towers they have brought with them, they fill in the ditches with clay and bundles, and tear down the ramparts with hooks.

The Romans stand steady as ordered. They are fighting hand to hand now using their swords and knives and as they do so Caesar sends in more cavalry to the rear of the Gauls. They turn to run and are trapped between the foot soldiers and the cavalry and a great slaughter ensues.

It was a timely tactical move. Now comes perhaps the noblest moment recorded by Caesar and it does not concern him but his enemy, Vercingetorix.

As his men fled from the slaughter Vercingetorix called together his council and spoke to them:

"I understand this war, not for myself but for the cause of our freedom. Since we have not had victory on our side I offer myself to you. You must see me as you feel is best. Either offer me alive to the Romans so that I may atone for them for what we have done under my leadership. Or kill me and give them my body... Either way you may not suffer for what we have tried to do together."

Seven years after Vercingetorix surrendered at Alesia, Caesar was granted a Triumph by the Senate. He rode through the streets of Rome and in the procession behind him followed the booty from his campaigns, the battle standards his men had won, the prisoners and slaves they had captured, the horses, chariots, and the riches he had gained were displayed as the legions marched with him. Among this booty was the greatest commander the Gauls had ever had.

Vercingetorix was still a young man. He was dressed in his armour on that day. His helmet was placed on his head but his hands and ankles were chained. And when Caesar had soaked up the tears of adulation from the crowd the Gaul's great chieftain was taken to the prison that had been his home for seven years and was duly strangled. Mercy to a brave enemy was not in Caesar's character.