

Synopsis of *Julius Caesar*

Marcellus and Flavius, the city tribunes, criticize the commoners of Rome for celebrating Caesar's military defeat of Pompey. During the celebration a soothsayer warns Caesar to beware the Ides of March. A race is held for the Feast of Lupercal, and, while Caesar watches, the senator Cassius pulls Brutus aside. He tells him that Caesar has become dangerously powerful. At the same time, Caesar speaks with Antony, admitting he believes Cassius is not to be trusted. Another senator, Casca, approaches Cassius and Brutus to tell them Mark Antony just offered Caesar a crown three times, but Caesar refused it. Upon the third offer, Caesar fell to the ground in a fit of epilepsy. After recovering, Caesar executes Marcellus and Flavius for pulling decorations off of his statues.

That night there is a thunderstorm. Casca meets Cicero and tells of his strange visions, mostly of burning images. Cassius arrives and claims the thunderstorm is a good sign for their plan to assassinate Caesar. Casca agrees to help Cassius and

tells him there is a band of senators supporting their cause. While pleased, Cassius wants the support of Brutus before taking action.

Brutus is unable to sleep; his fears that Caesar will become a tyrant keep him awake. Cassius and his cohorts arrive at Brutus' house and persuade him to join their cause. Once the men leave, Brutus's wife, Portia, begs Brutus to tell her what is happening. At Caesar's house, his wife, Calpurnia, warns Caesar not to go out because of a terrible dream she had during the storm. Caesar agrees to stay home but changes his mind when the Senator Decius says he will be mocked for cowering at home. On their way to the Senate, Artemidorus tries to warn Caesar of danger with a

note, but Caesar ignores him. At the Senate, Marc Antony is distracted so that the senators may descend upon and murder Caesar. Brutus speaks to the crowd, explaining that Caesar was killed for being too ambitious. Antony speaks next and incites the commoners to riot in protest over Caesar's murder. Antony also reads Caesar's will in which he leaves money and his gardens to all private citizens. In the riots that follow the poet Cinna is murdered, being mistaken for the conspirator Cinna.

Antony and Octavian, Julius Caesar's nephew, form a triumvirate with Lepidus to rule Rome. Cassius and

Brutus rally together an army to overthrow the new leaders. Brutus learns that his wife killed herself by swallowing hot coals and is then told the triumvirate has killed 100 senators. Brutus and Cassius prepare to meet Antony's army at Phillipi. That night, the ghost of Caesar appears to Brutus and tells him they will meet at Phillipi. The battle ensues and Cassius learns that his comrade, Titinius, has been captured. Upon hearing

this news, Cassius commits suicide. Titinius was not captured and upon hearing that Cassius is dead, kills himself with Cassius's sword.

As the battles rages on, Antony gives orders that Brutus must be captured, dead or alive. Exhausted, Brutus finds a place to catch his breath with a few of his remaining followers. He asks each of them to kill him, but they all refuse. Eventually Brutus realizes his only option is to fall on his own sword. When Octavian and Antony arrive, Strato explains how Brutus died. Mark Antony pays tribute to Brutus' noble spirit, saying, "This was the noblest Roman of them all." Octavian tells his soldiers to stand down; the battle is now over. **S**



Eric Hoffmann, Robert Slattel, Ted van Griethuysen, Philip Goodwin, and Robert G. Murch in the Shakespeare Theatre Company's 1993 production of *Julius Caesar*. Photo by Richard Anderson.

Following the Leader

Rome went through three distinct governments at a time when most other countries were simply ruled by monarchies. Rome began as a monarchy, but it transitioned to a Republic and then to an Empire within its first 700 years. The turbulent story of Roman politics began with the twins Romulus and Remus. They were born in 771 B.C.E., and it was said their father was Mars, the god of war. Their mother was believed to be a descendant of the survivors from Troy, a city destroyed by the Greeks. When the twins were young men, Romulus killed Remus in a dispute over who should rule their people and give the capital city its name. As king, Romulus was commander in chief of the military and appointed himself chief judge. He also created the senatorial class. It is unclear if the senators were intended to maintain a balance of power as in a constitutional monarchy (where the head of state's power is limited by an elected body) or if their purpose was to support the king as the nobility would in an absolute monarchy. What is known is that the monarchy did not follow primogeniture: the throne automatically passing down to the king's oldest son. When the king died, the senate was put in charge for a period called the *interregnum* (meaning literally: between kings.) Senators would take turns ruling for terms of five days, while the senate chose a new king from among their ranks. Once a king was elected, he was king for life. There were seven kings in all. Romulus was revered by his people to the point that he was deified. After a rainstorm he disappeared, and a Roman Senator said he saw Romulus ascending into the heavens. The Romans made him the deity Quirinus, the representative of the Roman People's spirit. Unfortunately, his kingly successors were not quite so deserving of the people's love as they became more corrupt and

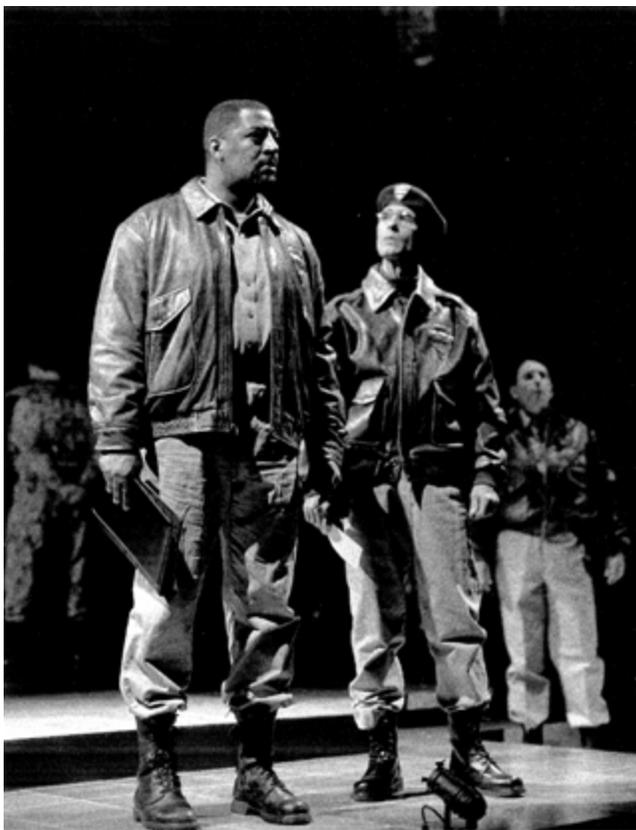
power-hungry. The seventh king, Tarquin the Proud, was the son of Rome's fifth king, Lucius Tarquinius Priscus. Tarquin's father-in-law, Servius Tullus, was elected the sixth king, but Tarquin and his wife plotted to have Tullus killed. After Tarquin ascended to the throne, the Roman people grew tired of the destruction caused by the kings and overthrew the monarchy, establishing the Roman Republic to rule in its place.

The Roman Republic lasted more than 500 years and depended on the Senatorial class to rule, with two elected Consuls at the helm. The Consuls held much

of the same power as the kings but were elected to one-year terms, thereby limiting their influence. Sulla was a Senator and eventual Consul who did not want to give up his limited power. He came from a noble but impoverished family and made friends with rich, but low-born people. He inherited enough money from these friends that he was able to bribe his way up the ladder in politics. In the Social War, a war caused by Rome's allies revolting from Rome's rule in 91 B.C.E, he distinguished himself as a general and was consequently elected Consul for the first time in 88 B.C.E. Because of his influence over the military, Sulla marched on Rome twice and the second time succeeded in having himself proclaimed dictator for life in 81 B.C.E. His rule was one of enormous bloodshed, killing 1,500 nobles and 9,000 Romans in all. In a stunning move,

he retired after only two years and died of liver failure in 78 B.C.E. His state funeral was unmatched until Augustus Caesar's in 14 C.E.

After Sulla the Republic returned to normal, but there were fewer than 30 years until the reign of the next dictator. Julius Caesar was a contemporary of Sulla's who was imprisoned by the dictator for refusing to



Derrick Lee Weeden and Mark Murphey in the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's 2002 production of *Julius Caesar*. Photo by David Cooper.

divorce his wife, a relation of Sulla's enemy. When Sulla stripped Caesar of his priesthood in 82 B.C.E, Caesar joined the military and began one of the most impressive military careers in history. He proved to be a great tactician and commanded an infantry of more than 40,000 men. He earned their respect by living under the same conditions as his men, proving he needed no special treatment.

Caesar was also wise in politics. When Caesar was elected Consul, two powerful men in Rome were at odds, Crassus and Pompey. Caesar knew that befriending one would antagonize the other. He worked hard to reconcile them, and, when he proposed a new law to redistribute public lands to the poor, Crassus and Pompey filled Rome with soldiers so no Senator dared challenge Caesar. This powerful union became the formation of the first triumvirate. Though it was not legal, the combination of Crassus' money, Pompey's man power and



The cover page of *Julius Caesar* from the 1623 First Folio.

Caesar's popularity let the three rule the Senate. After Crassus' death, Pompey and Caesar battled for control of Rome. When Caesar proved victorious, the Roman Republic was at an end.

As politics evolved, so too did Rome's military. In the time of the monarchy, most soldiers were land-owners who could provide their own armor. The king led the soldiers (known as hoplites, coming from the Greek *hoplon*, meaning armor) himself. As Roman territories expanded, more men were needed. The requirements for admission into the army relaxed by about 107 B.C.E. Men without land and urban citizens began to join, though slaves and freedmen served only in times of emergency. Soldiers were not well-paid, but the incentive to serve was that they were awarded land at the end of their service (which lasted six to seven years). Controlling the military meant controlling Rome. The Senate could pass all the laws it wanted, but they were meaningless if the military did not obey them. One of Caesar's tactics to stay in the army's good graces was to double soldiers' pay to 225 denarii a year. While this bribery would not have worked so well with the land-owning soldiers of the past, this newer, poorer army was much easier to control if a general had the funds.

Despite Caesar's extreme popularity with the military, his defeat of Pompey alarmed the Senators. He erected a statue of himself in the temple of Quirinus, a move interpreted as seeing himself as an equal of the gods and the kings of Rome. He also minted new coins with his likeness on them, making him the first living Roman to appear on currency. (A trend continued by the Emperors of Rome beginning in 27 B.C.E.) This, along with other political moves such as appointing consuls himself, bypassing the election of the Senate — prompted the Senators to plot his assassination. Though Caesar was an ordinary name during his lifetime, it became the imperial title of Roman Emperors and even transformed to *Kaiser* in Germany and *Czar* in Russia. Though Caesar's rule as dictator was but a brief five years, the impact of his reign is one that has yet to be matched. 

CAST OF CHARACTERS

JULIUS CAESAR

Julius Caesar was born on July 12 or 13, 100 B.C.E. into an aristocratic family, the *gens Julia*. Although noble, their family was not one of particular political influence. In 85 B.C.E. Julius's father died, making him head of the family at the age of 15. Caesar's first important appointment was as the high priest of Jupiter; he was stripped of this position due to civil war. Caesar fled Rome, and, when the war ended, Caesar joined the army and began a brilliant military career. His triumphs on the battlefield led to enormous popularity with the people of Rome, but his relationship with the Senate was strained. Caesar made the most of what he had and formed an unofficial coalition with Pompey and Crassus: the first Triumvirate. Pompey was a man with armies at his disposal, Crassus had money, and Caesar had the love of the people. Caesar's only daughter, Julia, was married to Pompey to solidify their relationship. When she died in childbirth and Crassus died shortly after, Caesar and Pompey's relationship quickly dissolved. Pompey married the daughter of one of Caesar's enemies, and Caesar decided he would rule Rome himself. He was in Gaul at the time (modern-day France) with four legions. Bringing troops back to Rome without orders to do so was treason. When Caesar brought his men to the Rubicon River, the border of Roman territory, any man who crossed would be considered a traitor by the Roman Senate. The legions crossed the river, and Pompey fled Rome. Caesar chased him to Egypt where the pharaoh killed Pompey, trying to please Caesar. When Caesar was presented with the head of his rival, he flew into a rage. He disposed of the pharaoh and reinstated Cleopatra to the throne of Egypt. Cleopatra bore him a son, Caesarion, and, although Caesarion was his only living child, Caesar named his nephew, Octavian, to be his successor. Caesar returned to Rome and ruled for less than a year as dictator before a band of senators, including his close friend Brutus, murdered him on March 15 in 44 B.C.E.



Caesar, Julius: marble portrait bust.

MARK ANTONY

Mark Antony was born in 83 B.C.E. into the *Antonia gens*. He was the son of a famous rhetorician who died when Antony was a small child. Antony's mother, Julia Antony, was a member of the Julian family, making Antony a distant cousin of Julius Caesar. Antony spent his youth free of parental supervision and gained a reputation for being wild and dangerous. He eventually had to run away from Rome because of the enormous debts he accumulated. He escaped to Greece where he studied rhetoric until he was summoned to take part in the Aristobulus campaigns, where he established himself as a capable soldier. He eventually came to serve on Caesar's staff and became Caesar's most trusted, if not wisest, advisor. Upon Caesar's ascension to dictator, Antony was made Master of the Horse, Caesar's right hand man. After Caesar's assassination, Antony used his training in rhetoric to deliver Caesar's eulogy. He incited the common people to riot, attacking the assassins' houses. Antony and Octavian, Caesar's nephew and appointed heir, formed the second triumvirate with Lepidus. Lepidus was a Roman senator who had been extremely close to Julius Caesar and whose father had died in a rebellion against the Roman Republic. To secure his relationship to Octavian, Antony married Octavian's sister, Octavia. Antony had formed a relationship with Cleopatra in Egypt and abandoned a pregnant Octavia for the queen. He and Cleopatra had three children together. Antony's fatal move was to declare Caesarion, the son of Cleopatra and Julius Caesar, to be the legitimate heir to the Roman Empire. Octavian, to save his own claim, marched the Roman Army on Egypt. Antony committed suicide by falling on his sword, thinking that Cleopatra had already done the same. She died a few days later, famously killing herself with asps.



Roman coin depicting Mark Antony, circa 40–30 B.C.E.

BRUTUS

Marcus Brutus came from an influential patrician family and was the nephew of Cato the Younger, a Roman senator famous for his immunity to the corruption of the Senate. Brutus's political career began as an assistant to Cato, who at the time was governor of Cyprus. Brutus' family was close in a way to Caesar's (Brutus' mother, Servilia, is believed to have been Caesar's mistress). When Caesar crossed the Rubicon, Brutus chose to support Pompey. Upon Pompey's defeat, Caesar pardoned Brutus and allowed him to return to Rome as a senator. Brutus is most famous for being one of Caesar's assassins, immortalized by Shakespeare's line, "Et tu, Brute?" (You too, Brutus?) Initially, Brutus and the other assassins were able to reach a compromise with Octavian and Mark Antony. Brutus was allowed to keep his status as a senator as long as he left Rome. He lived in Crete for two years until Octavian was elected consul. Octavian declared Caesar's assassins to be murderers, and war was declared. At the second Battle of Philippi, Brutus' forces were defeated, and he took his own life by falling on his sword. Unlike Shakespeare's telling of the events, it was not until hearing of her husband's death that Brutus' wife, Portia, committed suicide.



Brutus falling on his sword, an engraving from Geoffrey Whitney's *A Choice of Emblemes*.



Caesar Augustus Surrounded by the Fine Arts, by Hyacinthe Collin de Vermont, ca. 1748.

OCTAVIAN

Octavian was born Gaius Octavian in 63 B.C.E. in Rome. His mother, Atia, was a niece of Julius Caesar's. At the age of 19, Octavian attempted to sail to join Caesar in the fight against Pompey. He was shipwrecked but still managed to cross hostile territory to Caesar's camp, enormously impressing his great uncle. When Caesar was murdered, Octavian was at Apollonia in Illyria (modern day Albania). He learned he had been named Caesar's adopted son and took on the name Gaius Julius Caesar. The title "Augustus" was given to him by the senate, meaning "to increase." Upon finding Antony in an uneasy truce with Julius Caesar's assassins, Octavian built up a private army and eventually reentered Rome with eight legions. Octavian, Mark Antony and Lepidus formed the second triumvirate. The triumvirate did not last long, and war broke out, leaving Octavian the victor and emperor of Rome. He had only one child, a daughter named Julia, with his second wife, Scribonia. He divorced Scribonia the same day Julia was born in order to marry Livia. His successor was not one of Julia's three sons, who all died young. Instead, Livia's son, Tiberius, succeeded Augustus when he died in 14 C.E. 

Brutus' Dilemma

While Elizabethan audiences had never been ruled by a tyrant, they were certainly familiar with the destruction the struggle for power could cause a country. The War of the Roses, a civil war for the crown of England, lasted 30 years, and had taken place only 100 years before. When *Julius Caesar* was first performed in 1600 C.E., Elizabeth's subjects were uneasy about the fact that their queen had no children to make the succession certain. In *Julius Caesar* Brutus believes that Caesar's successor upon his death would be the return of the Roman Republic. While blood must be shed, he sees Caesar as the only necessary casualty. What he has to determine is if the benefits of killing one man outweigh the potential dangers of letting him live.

Shakespeare's choice for Brutus as the center of the struggle may very well have had to do with the historical Brutus' ancestry. Brutus was descended from one of the first Consuls of Rome who had overthrown Rome's monarchy. In the play, Mark Antony offering Caesar a crown serves as a catalyst, prompting Cassius to devise a plot to assassinate Caesar. It also persuades Brutus that Caesar is becoming too power-hungry and may be a danger to Rome.

The Roman fear of the monarchy could be traced 500 years before the time of Caesar. Rome was ruled by kings who became more and more corrupt and grotesquely abused their power and their people. The last straw occurred during the rule of Tarquin the Proud.



Frederick Tyrone Power as Brutus (ca. 1913).

Photograph by Horace Groves.

His son, Sextus Tarquinius, raped a noblewoman named Lucretia. Lucretia called her family together, revealed to them what had happened and then killed herself. Her kinsman, Lucius Junius Brutus, displayed her body in Rome to incite the people to riot, and the monarchy was overthrown. The Roman Republic was established with Lucius Junius Brutus serving as the first Consul.

This story, familiar to Elizabethan audiences, was a frequent subject in art, literature and lore. Shakespeare wrote the epic poem *The Rape of Lucrece* four years before writing *Julius Caesar*. Many audience members would have known that Brutus was descended from Lucius Junius Brutus. While in the play Brutus receives only late-night visits from conspiring Senators, the historical Brutus found messages urging him to kill Caesar written on the busts of his ancestors!

Shakespeare's Brutus sees his situation as impossible: by agreeing to join the assassination plot, he is a murderer. In permitting Caesar to continue as a dictator, he feels he is abandoning his responsibility to the Roman Republic by putting the fate of all Rome in the hands of one man. While there is no guarantee that Caesar will become as corrupt as the kings who came before, Brutus realizes there is always a chance.

*But 'tis a common proof,
That lowliness is young ambition's ladder,
Whereto the climber-upward turns hi face;
But when he once attains the upmost round,
He then unto the ladder turns his back,
Looks in the clouds, scorning the base degrees
By which he did ascend. So Caesar may.*
Act 2, scene 1

Brutus is able to build a convincing argument that, in Caesar's case, murder is justified. However, his confidence does not last long. Shakespeare seems determined to present Brutus as both a hero and a villain throughout. In the play, Brutus tries to convince the Roman people he has done them a great service by murdering Caesar. Yet Mark Antony's speech incites the Roman people to revolt against the assassins. Though he believed he was doing what was right and naively believed he could restore the Republic, Brutus is consumed with grief. The Battle of Philippi, he sees Caesar's ghost, which tells him they will meet in the battle. During the battle, Brutus witnesses the destruction he had hoped to spare Rome. He asks his comrades to kill him, but none will do so. Finally, with Strato's help, he is able to run on his sword. Mark Antony enters, and, upon discovering what Brutus has done he does not rejoice. Recognizing Brutus' moral dilemma he declares, "This was the noblest Roman of them all."



Friends, Romans, Countrymen ...

What was it like to be a Roman?

The Roman Republic began in 509 B.C.E. and lasted for 450 years until the ascent of the Roman Empire. The republican government operated under the principle that sovereignty should be determined by popular consent. This was a unique system of government at the time, however Roman society was structured so only the privileged had the opportunity to rule. Voting was divided by "tribes." Each social caste belonged to a different tribe. The votes of the higher castes were counted first; and elections were often decided before the lower castes even had a chance to vote. The highest position in the Senate was that of Consul. The position was dictated by the principles of collegiality and annuality. Collegiality meant that there were always two consuls who had equal power and could veto each other's decisions. Annuity meant that a consul could serve only a one-year term so that no single person became too powerful.

Though the Roman Empire was the largest of its time, only a fraction of those living under Roman rule were Roman citizens. Roman citizenship was granted to those born into legal Roman marriages (only Roman citizens could legally marry) and occasionally granted to cities in the Roman territories. The advantages of Roman citizenship were the ability to vote, hold property, make contracts, enter lawful marriages and to stand trial. The rest of the population fell into three categories: Slaves (*servi*), freedmen (*liberti*) and holders of the "Latin Right." Slaves were considered their masters' property with no individual rights. Most were born as slaves though many were prisoners from Roman conquests in foreign lands. In exceptional cases, Roman citizens could be forced into slavery if they or the head of their household committed a crime or had large debts. It was possible to buy one's freedom from slavery. Freedmen were former slaves granted limited Roman citizenship. People from territories under Roman Law had the "Latin Right," which gave them essentially the status of second-class citizens. Sometimes they were granted the right to vote, sometimes not, depending on the territory and its perceived stability by the Senate. Roman citizens zealously protected their status, making it



An 1864 daguerreotype of the Booth brothers: John Wilkes Booth (left) as Mark Antony, Edwin Booth (center) as Brutus, and Junius Brutus Booth Jr. (right) as Cassius in *Julius Caesar*.

difficult to achieve and maintain. Women were never granted the full rights of Roman citizenship, even in the highest classes. Though they could hold property, they were never given the right to vote.

Roman citizens (*cives*) were further divided into three important castes: *the nobilis*, *equestrians* and the *proletarii*. Anyone who could trace their ancestry to a consul was a noble (*nobilis*). The equestrians were the next caste down but had money, at least enough to maintain a horse (hence the name). The lowest level of society was the *proletarii*, the tradesmen and the poor. It was possible to move between castes, one famous example being Cicero, the great orator. He was born an equestrian but rose through the ranks of the Senate, eventually being elected Consul. The social distinction of greatest importance was between the patricians



Louis Calhern as Julius Caesar and Marlon Brando as Mark Antony in the 1953 MGM film *Julius Caesar*.

and the plebians, a distinction that could not be changed. Patricians could trace their ancestry to one of the patriarchs of Rome. All other citizens were plebians. The posts of priests could be held only by patricians. The priests or *pontifices* made all decisions concerning religious laws, religious sites, adoptions, calendars and records, apart from the Senate. The head priest was the *pontifex maximus*, an elected position at one time held by Julius Caesar. It is rumored he ran only because of the enormous debts he had accumulated. No man holding a public office could be sued for debt, giving many of the members of the senate incentive to remain in office.

The Roman family was divided into two major components; the household and the *gens*. The household included the immediate family living under the same roof, including servants and slaves. The head of the household had *patria potestas* (father's power) over those living with him. He could force marriage and divorce, claim dependents' property as his own and even sell his children into slavery! Groups of related households formed the *gens*. A man could not legally hold property or be considered the head of the *gens* while his father lived.

Legal marriage was a right given only to Roman citizens. Women in the noble and equestrian classes were usually married between 12 and 14. In the lower classes, women often waited until their early 20s to marry. The intention was to delay childbearing so families would be smaller and more manageable. Rome was a cramped city with blocks of dilapidated tenements. They were mostly made of wood, which often collapsed and were susceptible to fires. Cicero was a slumlord and famously said his buildings were in such a bad state even the mice had moved out.

There were no public schools, so sons were either taught by their parents or by an educated slave, *paedagogi*, often of Greek origin. Their lessons about

civic life were carried out in trips with their fathers to city events. The sons of nobles even accompanied them to the Senate. There were private schools, *ludi*, which boys attended from age 7 to 12 to learn the basics of reading and arithmetic. At secondary school they studied Greek and Roman literature. At 16 young men either apprenticed themselves, joined the military or went on to rhetoric school to prepare for legal careers. The education of daughters was never formal. Instruction was usually left to mothers and included those skills necessary to manage a household.

Holidays were abundant; there were 130 holidays a year, and almost half of them included games and shows for the public to enjoy. Entertainment came in the form of gladiatorial fights or horse- and chariot-racing at the Circus Maximus. Sometimes it was flooded to hold staged sea battles! Another way to lift the spirits of the populace was public adomment. When a general accomplished a great military victory, he would advertise his success in the form of new temples or statues in the city. One of Julius Caesar's additions was that of grand gardens, which he left to the citizens of Rome after his death. Despite these "community building" efforts, tensions ran high and riots were frequent. Interruptions in the grain supply led to three food riots in Caesar's lifetime, and mobs gathered often to protest political events.

Despite the power and wealth of the Romans, they were not necessarily an innovative people. They assimilated the customs of the civilizations they conquered. Their system of government, scientific advancements and even their mythology was borrowed from the Greeks. The career of engineer or scientist did not exist in Roman society. A soldier who could manage a large household was the Roman ideal. 