

Heroes and Villains of Ancient Rome

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Portraits in Ancient Rome

History often paints colourful pictures of the leaders of ancient Rome as either heroes or villains. But are these pictures realistic portraits?

Or were these people more complex than we are led to believe? When reading about the past, it is important to understand that many historical accounts are a mix of fact and fiction.

In this book, we look at four famous figures from the time of ancient Rome: Julius Caesar, Queen Cleopatra of Egypt, Augustus Caesar and Nero, and explore whether history shows them as they really were.

*"What we wish,
we readily believe ..."*

Julius Caesar,
Commentarii de Bello Gallico

If we examine historical accounts written at or around the time when these people were alive, we can sometimes get a clearer and more accurate image of the past. These **contemporary** histories are called primary historical sources of information.

Primary historical sources can be written accounts, poems, art or even visual depictions on coins. Ancient Roman historians, such as Suetonius, Tacitus and Plutarch, wrote about the important people and leaders who shaped their world.

However, often these primary histories are not simply factual accounts describing who these people were or what they did.

These portraits are an artist's impression of what these ancient leaders looked like, based on statues of them.



Julius Caesar
(100–44 BCE)



Queen Cleopatra of Egypt
(69–30 BCE)



Augustus Caesar
(63 BCE–14 CE)



Nero
(37–68 CE)

Sometimes, accounts by ancient historians were created to make particular leaders look good, perhaps because the historians were scared they would be punished if they didn't write them that way! There are also historical accounts that deliberately focus on and exaggerate the bad deeds and nature of a person. Often, these accounts were written after the person had died. Deliberate, or intentional, **distortions** of the truth are called conscious historical bias.

Historical bias can also be unintentional. For instance, Suetonius and other ancient Roman historians wrote from positions of **privilege**. These historians were male, were free citizens, and were very wealthy. The lives of most women, **enslaved** people and the poorer, common people are absent from their writings. They didn't think of these people as important. These inaccuracies are called unconscious historical bias.

The Roman Empire Under Augustus Caesar



Julius Caesar and Augustus Caesar greatly expanded the Roman Empire to include places like Britannia (England), Gaul (now France) and Aegyptus (Egypt).

Ancient Rome describes both the **Roman Republic** (properly known as the Senate and People of Rome, *Senatus Populusque Romanus*) and the **Roman Empire** (*Imperium Romanum*).

753 BCE The city of Rome is founded.

509 BCE The Roman Republic is established.

27 BCE The Roman Republic ends.

The Roman Empire is established.

476 CE The Roman Empire falls to Germanic tribes.

BCE

1 CE

CE

a timeline of the rise and fall of Rome

Julius Caesar

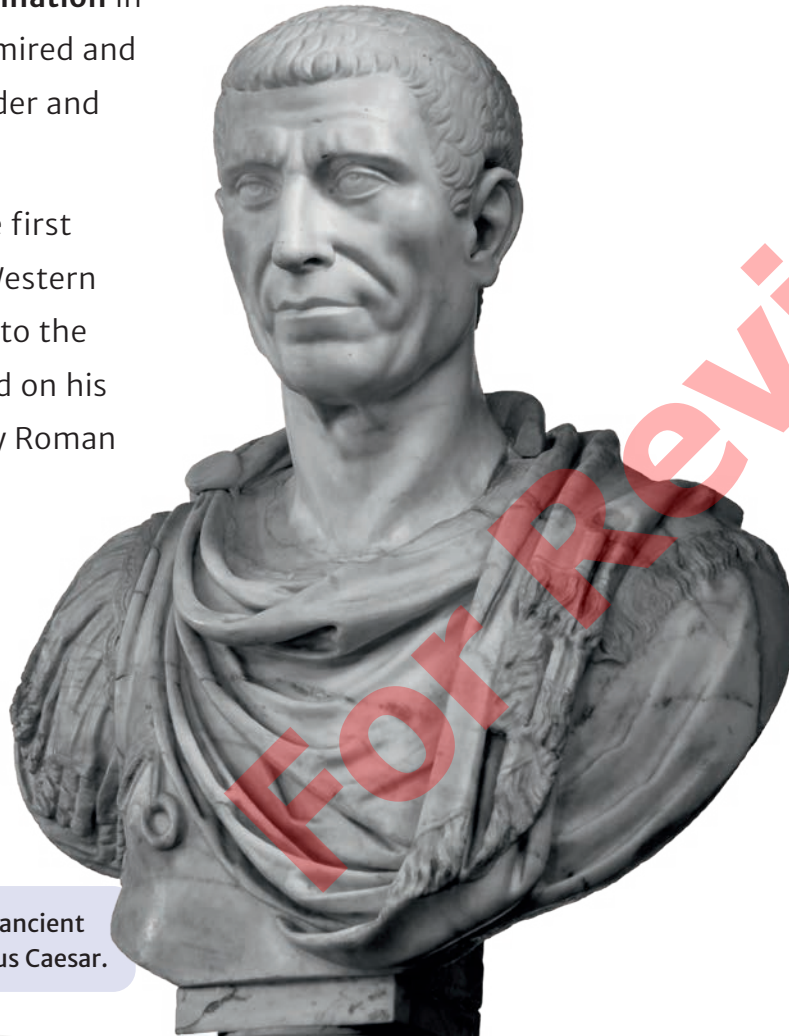
(12 July 100 BCE – 15 March 44 BCE)

Gaius Julius Caesar was a Roman general and politician who governed the Roman Republic from 48 BCE until his death by **assassination** in 44 BCE. He was both admired and feared as a powerful leader and military genius.

Julius Caesar created the first version of the modern Western calendar, gave his name to the month of July and passed on his title of “Caesar” to every Roman emperor that followed.

“Veni, vidi, vici.”
(I came, I saw, I conquered.)

Julius Caesar,
from Suetonius



This is one of many ancient marble busts of Julius Caesar.

Before governing the Roman Republic in 48 BCE, Julius Caesar led his army on a **campaign** in Gaul (the ancient name for western Europe) for eight years (58–50 BCE). He defeated many of the **Gallic** tribes, stealing their lands. Caesar even wrote a rather heroic and glowing description of himself and his **military** conquests in his book *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* (*Commentaries on the Gallic War*), which you can still read today!



Julius Caesar leads his army in Gaul.