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Cesare
(lit. "Caesar")
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SUNRISE OVER JULIUS CAESAR'S ROME

It is dawn on a March day in 58 BC. Rome is awakening, caressed by the sun as it rises above the peaks of the Apennines. Its rays reach the seven hills first, each one characterized by its own events in the history of the Eternal City, as if the sun wanted to pay tribute every morning to the long life of Rome.

Then, the sunlight descends upon the streets, still shrouded in darkness. It is a very different metropolis from the one we usually picture for the Roman era. We never think about it, but Caesar's city isn't the one we see in postcards. The Colosseum, the Pantheon, the Baths of Caracalla, many aqueducts, and the Imperial Forums don't exist yet… And even the Roman Forum doesn't have many of its famous buildings, such as the Basilica Julia and the Basilica Emilia. There are no arches of Titus, Septimius Severus, or Constantine, as photographed by tourists nowadays. There are no Egyptian obelisks – yes, the very ones that now tower over the Pantheon, Trinità de' Monti, and Piazza del Popolo – because they are still... in Egypt. There is no Stadium of Domitian (the future Piazza Navona) or Theatre of Marcellus. It is truly another city.

It will take decades, sometimes entire generations, for these monuments to emerge in the city's skyline. We are in the Republican Period, without all the marble structures that will be erected during the Imperial Period. Hypothetically, if Caesar were to mingle with a group of tourists visiting Rome today, he would be stunned…

The city was very different back in his time. There are many temples and palaces, of course, but it lacked the monumentality that Rome would later experience under the emperors, especially Trajan, 150 years later. In comparison, Caesar's city was austere and anonymous, made of tall, often dilapidated wooden buildings, with dark alleys and streets that were muddy in the winter and dusty in the summer. That Rome would basically seem unrecognizable to us, more like a medieval wooden city than the capital of the nascent Roman superpower.

And then there is another surprising aspect: even though it looked so different, Caesar's Rome no longer exists today. It will be swept away by Nero's famous fire more than a century later. If Caesar had walked through the capital after it was rebuilt, even he would have felt disoriented by the incredible changes of the many places he used to know so well.

But all this is yet to happen. The city that lies before Caesar is the one he knows by heart. He is watching it wake up on this March morning in 58 BC.

Did we say 58 BC? This is obviously the date according to the modern custom of placing the birth of Christ as the starting point. But if you were to ask Caesar what year it is, he would reply: "It's 695... as of a few days ago." Because Caesar, like all Romans from his time, considered year

zero to be the birth of Rome (*ab Urbe condita*), which took place with Romulus and Remus in 753 BC. Moreover, the Roman New Year doesn't start on January 1 but on March 1 (*Dies Natalis*).

It might seem like a minor detail, but from the beginning of this story, it is essential to remember that we are in a different era from our own, with different ways of living and of considering life in all its aspects. Many of the events we will describe in the following chapters will give us a different impression from what a Roman or a Gaul might have thought back then. Everyone is a product of their time, as is their way of thinking. And, for those who travel through history, the golden rule is to observe and describe while being careful not to recount the events of the past with the ink of the present. You will see that often everything is... so very different. Even the simple passing of time, as we have seen, has different points of reference.

And time seems to stand still for Caesar. He is forty-two years old. He has been stuck at the gates of Rome for two months. He gets up every morning just before dawn, he leaves his tent in the legionary camp, and he watches the sun rise. And, thanks to the rays that gradually illuminate his features, we can try to describe his face.

CAESAR'S REAL FACE

What do you imagine Julius Caesar looks like? We all picture a thin, slender man with white hair, a gaunt face, a slightly aquiline nose, and light eyes with a penetrating, almost icy gaze... In short, an alpha male with an unpredictable instinct but always a winner. It is impossible, however, to imagine Caesar telling a joke or doing an impression. It is impossible to see him making a mistake, let alone crying uncontrollably or ranting when drunk... But Caesar is also this, as we will discover on our journey in his footsteps. He is a man like any other. He has his values, qualities, and talents, but also his flaws, naivety (like when he gets lost in the fog while looking for the Rubicon to cross...), weaknesses, and mistakes: the last, major one will make him underestimate the seriousness of the conspiracy against him and will lead him straight into the arms of his assassins. The problem with Caesar, like all great figures in history, is the myth that surrounds him after his death, which prevents us from seeing the man himself.

But what did he really look like? Describing Gaius Julius Caesar is no easy feat. All we have are busts and statues (?) that aren't always identical; moreover, we are also well aware that they are propaganda portraits. We have coins depicting his profile: they are certainly not photographs, but they can still be useful because they give us an idea of his main features as seen by his contemporaries. Then we have descriptions of his physical appearance, which, unfortunately (and incredibly), are extremely rare. Basically, only Suetonius, Plutarch, and a few others offer us some sporadic elements to help us create a sketch of him, which is still rather vague.

Suetonius is the only one who mentions the color of his eyes. Here is how describes him: "He is said to have been tall of stature with a fair complexion, shapely limbs, a somewhat full face, and keen black eyes." He therefore has dark eyes, which are actually very dark and very sharp. The ancient author also confirms that his gaze is penetrating and intelligent.

Let's continue. Examining the marble busts and the coin portraits, we find many of the features described by Suetonius: a square, protruding jaw and a high, broad forehead with deep

wrinkles. He has hollow cheeks and prominent cheekbones, which increase the impact of his face when he talks to someone. There are deep wrinkles on both sides of his face, which start at his nostrils and go down to the sides of his mouth, giving him a certain personality: little dimples probably appear when he smiles, the kind that add charm to a man's smile. His nose is prominent and slightly arched, just a little aquiline. It is the type of nose that definitely gives him character. The lips are thin and tight. Let's add to this a prominent Adam's apple and small ears with lobes attached to his head. The combination of all these features creates a rather strong face, the kind that is memorable and tends to inspire awe. In short, Caesar seems to have a certain *physique du rôle* for being a leader, at least as far as his face is concerned.

But we have to be careful not to fall into a trap. Some of these features were purposefully accentuated in his statues, due to their significance in Roman culture and morality. They create a sort of "political makeup": the wrinkles on the forehead, the furrowed eyebrows, and the thin lips convey *gravitas et severitas* (gravity and sternness), two values that are very important to Roman mentality in Caesar's time. They accentuate the characteristics of a strong and authoritative man or, as they used to say back then, *vir fortis et gravis*.

One thing is certain. Julius Caesar has a receding hairline and might be starting to go bald. Apparently, his hair is thick at the sides but thinning from the top of his head forward, except perhaps for a small "tuft" above his forehead. All this seems to be a problem for him, just as it is for many men today (which contributes to "humanizing" Caesar even more…). Suetonius confirms this: "[…] his baldness was a disfigurement which troubled him greatly, since he found that it was often the subject of the gibes of his detractors. Because of it he used to comb forward his scanty locks from the crown of his head."

Quoting words attributed to Cicero, Plutarch adds that Julius Caesar took great care of his hair.

Suetonius also specifies that: "He was somewhat overnice in the care of his person, being not only carefully trimmed and shaved, but even having superfluous hair plucked out, as some have charged."

In short, aside from being tough, Caesar is also a refined man, perhaps even vain. He marches for days without the opportunity to wash; he engages in grueling war campaigns, furious battles against enemy warriors, and carnages with bladed weapons. But when he lays down his arms and armor, he takes care of his body and hair, using (we imagine) perfumed oils and ointments, and waxing (?) or shaving (?) his body hair.

These "two sides" of Caesar, which is extremely modern, shouldn't surprise us. Firstly, because he is a Roman man and, therefore, belongs to a civilization that greatly values bodily care: people go to the baths once a day, they use exotic oils and essences... Moreover, he is a nobleman and, for this reason, appearing extremely well-groomed is also a status symbol, as well as a habit. The Romans were certainly not the first to take care of their appearance. All the great cultures of the past, from the Greeks to the Egyptians, the Hellenistic world, and the Persian, Indian, and Islamic worlds in general, always associated nobility with bodily care. The Gauls didn't, they actually saw these Roman habits as a sign of weakness.

And, speaking of grooming, what do we know about how Caesar dressed? Did he wear sophisticated clothes?

Suetonius gives us an answer: "They say, too, that he was remarkable in his dress; that he wore a senator's tunic with fringed sleeves reaching to the wrist, and always had a girdle over it,

though rather a loose one; and this, they say, was the occasion of Sulla's mot, when he often warned the nobles to keep an eye on the ill-girt boy."

While Cassius Dio writes: "He used to show among all men his pride in rather loose clothing, and the footwear which he used later on was sometimes high and of a reddish color, after the style of the kings who had once reigned in Alba, for he claimed that he was related to them through Iulus." These boots were probably *calceus mulleus* ("red calceus"), which we saw in the aforementioned Battle of Montmort. Caesar justified their use with a direct reference to the kings of Alba Longa, i.e., the heirs of Aeneas. Today, we know that the highest civil officials had the privilege of wearing them along with a purple-trimmed toga.

So yes, Caesar loved to dress in an elegant, sophisticated way, wearing clothes that showed his high rank. But he did it in his personal style: we could say that he was an original dandy. And he certainly did not go unnoticed for another detail: he stood out for his height, as Suetonius says. In an era like the Republican Period, which hadn't yet incorporated many northern ethnic groups into Roman society, the average height of a Roman man was 1.65 meters (5 ft 4 in); so, calling Caesar "tall" meant that he was at least 1.70 meters (5 ft 6 in), if not more. In addition to genetics, his wealthy background probably contributed to his development because he received proper nutrition from an early age.

If we combine all of this information, the resulting picture is a man who takes great care of his appearance and dresses elegantly. He enjoys doing it first and foremost for himself, and then for others. But above all, he loves to be seen. He is a man who strikes you with his strong face full of character, and intimidates you with his dark, penetrating gaze. And, once you are in his presence, he also captivates you with his way of expressing himself. Not only does he speak Latin and Greek fluently, like most Romans, but, according to Suetonius, "he is said to have delivered himself in a high-pitched voice with impassioned action and gestures, which were not without grace." So, it seems that Caesar did not speak hurriedly, slurring his words, nor did he have strong inflections or cadences: his voice must have been clearly audible and pleasant in tone; the way he spoke was clear, articulate, and understandable, just like his style in *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*. Furthermore, he accompanied his words with effective gestures (typically "Italian") that were passionate and "emotional" to just the right degree, and not at all annoying, almost as if they were punctuation marks in his sentences: so much so that he came across as elegant and capable of capturing the attention of those in front of him. He was, therefore, an effective speaker, capable of captivating his audience with his eloquence and gestures. Today, he would have probably been an excellent popularizer on television...

One final aspect concerns the way he walked. It seems that his gait was distinctive and very recognizable. Suetonius informs us that some Greek writers claimed that the son he had from Cleopatra, Caesarion, resembled him both physically and in the way he walked. Unfortunately, however, they do not specify what this looked like... But one thing is certain: even from behind, you would have recognized Julius Caesar by his distinctive gait.

When he left for Gaul, he was forty-two years old and obviously looked significantly younger than many of his statues and busts seen in museums, which were created years later (?), when he reached the height of his power. Therefore, at the time of his departure for Gaul, his hair may have only just begun to turn gray, giving him a salt-and-pepper appearance, and he did not yet have the noticeable receding hairline and baldness from some of his statues.

So, which portrait in our possession today best represents what Caesar looked like in March of 58 BC?

To picture him during his departure for Gaul, we must resort to the portraits considered to be the most faithful, such as the ones on coins minted between 44 and 45 BC or the marble bust commonly known as the “Tusculum portrait,” and try to make them look younger. This process had already been attempted in ancient times in the depictions that are now referred to as the “Chiaramonti-Pisa type.”

We have tried to make this summary by combining all the data in our possession. Looking at the images, you will get a perfect idea of Caesar's face, which will accompany you throughout the sections of the book that take place in Gaul.

THE FIRST STEP IN CONQUERING GAUL

So, this is the man who is preparing to change the fate of the world, right up to our own time, determining many of today's political balances, boundaries, and geometries. Now he is standing tall and observing Rome, which stretches out before him in this March dawn. Like a nativity scene that gradually lights up, the countless colors of the city gain strength and definition as the sun's rays grow stronger and stronger. Almost everywhere, wisps of smoke can be seen drifting between the rooftops, carried by a light morning breeze. The thickest wisps come from the baths and temples, where the rituals are starting. The dull background noise of a city coming to life begins to drown out the distant barking of dogs. Beneath that sea of red roof tiles, families are waking up, exchanging their first words, hugging their children, and walking down the stairs of their crowded apartment buildings. Down in the streets, slaves are already circulating for their first deliveries; they pass by the shops that have just opened, where goods to be sold are piling up on the sidewalk. Someone opens a window of one of the dilapidated buildings and furtively empties a chamber pot onto the street. A little further on, slaves are sweeping the paths of the silent gardens of the *domus*: all you can hear is the scratching of their brooms made of broomcorn (?). In the dim light of the peristyles, other slaves are washing marble floors and precious mosaics, while the kitchens emanate the scent of food cooking for a banquet to be held in a few hours... This is Rome.

Caesar knows these atmospheres extremely well. This is his city: it is where he was born, fell in love the first times, began his political career, and became powerful; it is where he was loved and acclaimed by some, and feared and hated by others... Now, however, all this isn't enough for him anymore. He is impatient. He wakes up before dawn every morning with a thousand thoughts running through his head. And every morning he leaves his military tent, greets the legionnaires he meets along the way, and goes to watch the sun as it rises over Rome. He is waiting for something to happen. But what?

He has recently stepped down as consul, a position he had held for a whole year, in 59 BC. You must understand that being consul in Republican Rome is the highest and most coveted position for anyone pursuing a political and military career, such as Caesar. He wasn’t alone in that position. As a rule, there are always two consuls. Once the year is over, the position expires

and they become proconsuls, with the task of governing the provinces assigned by the Senate. Caesar is appointed to Cisalpine Gaul ("On this side of the Alps," the territory between the foothills of the Alps and the Pisa-Rimini line, basically the Po Valley with parts of Liguria and Veneto), Transalpine Gaul ("On the other side of the Alps," then limited almost exclusively to Provence), and Illyricum (roughly the former Yugoslavia, an area that today includes Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, and Albania).

To govern these provinces, he was also granted military command (*imperium*) over four legions: three in Cisalpine Gaul and Illyricum, and one in Transalpine Gaul (also called Gallia Narbonensis after its capital).

As you might have guessed, Caesar has become a very powerful man, with a military force that inspires fear.

He should have already left for the provinces assigned to him, as Roman law and logic dictate. Instead, he stays put and waits... He is camped outside Rome with his legionaries. With his new position and all those soldiers under his command, he is legally not allowed to enter Rome; he must remain outside the sacred boundary of the city, the *pomerium*. And that is what he does.

But knowing that he is there, camped out with his legionnaires, like a bird of prey, is unusual and, above all, disturbing for the opposition in the Senate. Many are wondering what game he is playing… Even Cicero repeatedly emphasizes how Caesar's presence just outside the city constitutes a looming threat. It is intolerable.

It must be said that, in all likelihood, Caesar doesn't have his entire army with him. He is presumably camping out with only a small portion of it (perhaps only his bodyguards, the Praetorian Guard). But with a snap of his fingers, he could still summon around 20,000 legionaries and make them march on Rome...

Why is he standing still? After wanting those provinces so badly, now it seems like he doesn't want to leave. Weird, right? To find out, we need to take a journey into the shadows, diving into the power games of Rome, where secret deals, high-profile murders, and, above all, Caesar's ambition are all intertwined...

English translations of Latin quotes provided by:

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