

Background to Caesar's Assassination

Latin settlers founded the city of Rome in the middle of the 8th century B.C. Monarchs, beginning with the legendary king, Romulus, ruled Rome for the next 250 years. The king held absolute power; the Senate was mainly an administrative institution that carried out the wishes of the king. There were no dynasties within the Roman monarchy. When the reigning king died, the Senate nominated a new king. The Roman people would then vote on whether to accept or reject the nominee.

The period of monarchy came to an end in 509 B.C. through a popular uprising that expelled the last king, Tarquin the Proud. Tarquin's reign was remembered as a tyranny that justified the abolition of the monarchy and the establishment of the Roman Republic, which would last for the next 500 years. In place of the king, the Romans would now elect two consuls who would hold power jointly. At first, as substitutes for the king, the consuls were more powerful than the Senate, but gradually the power of the consuls was reduced, making the Senate the most powerful organ of government.

The increasing size of the Roman Empire eventually caused the Roman Republic to come to an end. The Roman Republic, as constituted, could not properly govern such a large empire; nor did the patricians, or nobles, who controlled the Senate and therefore the government, consider making changes. The Senate did not want one person to become too powerful, as Tarquin had centuries before. The specific problem for the Republic was that the new professional soldiers, who were needed to maintain the empire, were loyal to their individual generals out in the provinces and not to Rome itself. But limiting the power of those who commanded armies ultimately proved impossible.

In 49 B.C. the Roman general Julius Caesar embarked upon civil war, using his army to seize power and make himself dictator. He was first declared dictator for one year, then for ten years, and finally for life. To some Roman senators, Caesar's ambition and tyranny knew no bounds—perhaps he would even become “king.” He was a threat to their position as well as to the Republic itself. As a result, a group of senators crowded around and stabbed Caesar to death on the Ides of March in 44 B.C.

Caesar's death plunged Rome into another civil war. Those who killed Caesar, men such as Marcus Brutus, Cassius Longinus, and Decimus Brutus, ended up on the losing side and paid with their lives. A final civil war occurred twelve years later in 31 B.C. This was between Octavian, Julius Caesar's adopted son, on one side, and Antony and Cleopatra on the other. Mark Antony, considered one of Rome's best generals, had taken up with the Egyptian queen, Cleopatra VII, and formed an alliance. But Octavian won the civil war.

Octavian then became the first Roman emperor and changed his name to Augustus. Octavian respected the Senate and allowed the Romans to believe the Republic continued to exist when in fact he had all the power. Octavian knew the Republic had been too weak to manage a large empire, so he quietly ended it, replacing it with a dynastic monarchy. Emperors would rule for the remaining 500 years of Roman history.