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Caesar's Final Aims: Development of the Dictatorship

In 49 B.C., Caesar crossed the Rubicon under arms, thus declaring war on the Senate and the people of Rome. This event marked a crucial turning point in the history of the Roman Republic, as the following years saw a new kind of dictatorship emerge. Sulla had previously been appointed *dictator legibus faciendis et rei publicae constituendae causa* in 82 B.C. under the *Lex Valeria*, after which he proceeded to establish a variety of constitutional reforms.¹ However, he essentially followed the traditional pattern of the Roman dictator and abdicated at the end of 81 B.C., despite the undetermined timeline of his appointed office.² This was not the *cursus* that Caesar would follow. He would be declared *dictator perpetuo* in 45 B.C.;³ a title that gave Caesar power unseen in Rome since the regal times. The outcome of Caesar's political career has been the cause of much debate in the scholarly world; historians are greatly divided as to what his true aims were.⁴ Through the use of literary and archaeological evidence, I will argue that Caesar's aims changed over time, and that he did indeed consider the possibility of deified rulership. It is impossible to know what Caesar sought for certain, but with the evidence that is available, it is possible to develop the most probable case through the analysis of particular events and structures which Caesar encountered before and during his dictatorship. Initially, the outbreak of the Civil War will be explored, which will be followed by a discussion of Caesar's monarchical aspects, and how these elements can provide a view of Caesar's long-term goals, which changed over time.

The eruption of the Civil War is very relevant to this paper, as Caesar crossed the Rubicon entirely aware of the repercussions that would follow, and because this is inevitably the *élément déclencheur* of Caesar's political supremacy. The cause of this outbreak is not the main focus of this essay; what is more central to this discussion is the political tension between Caesar and Rome in the years directly leading up to the start of the war. The outcome of the war is well known, but it is unclear whether at this point in time Caesar intended to implement a dictatorship. The evidence does not provide a clear-cut answer to this question, but it does offer a view of the most probable scenario. Salmon's argument is that "Caesar had no intention of taking the consulship until he knew what his position was likely to be at the end of it. At the end of a consulship in 49, as a result of Pompey's provincial legislation of 52, he would be a *privatus* ["private citizen"]..."⁵ This indeed seems to be the case, as the literary evidence for Caesar's fear of impeachment is

1 Plut. *Sull.* 33

2 Ibid, 34

3 Plut. *Caes.* 57

4 Carson plays down Caesar's aims to inconsistent decisions, particularly because he did not clearly secure a successor; he also sees developments that some scholars would consider important as novelty, such as Caesar's image appearing on coins while he was still alive (R. A. G. Carson, "Caesar and the Monarchy," *Greece & Rome* Second Series vol. 4, no. 1 (1957), 46-53). Ehrenberg sees his final goal as that of a deified ruler – the kind that Augustus would eventually become. He concludes that Caesar became the first Roman emperor, but nevertheless dismisses the idea that Caesar was following the Hellenistic monarch model (Victor Ehrenberg, "Caesar's Final Aims," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* vol. 68 (1964), 149-161); this theory, along with Carson's will be discussed further.

5 E. T. Salmon, "Caesar and the Consulship for 49 B.C.," *The Classical Journal* vol. 34, no. 7 (1939), 394-395

extensive.⁶ Consuls were unimpeachable, and Caesar could not afford to be a private citizen for the period in between the end of his proconsulship and the consular elections of 49, regardless of his possibility to stand *in absentia* for the office. It appears that it is only because Caesar was declared an enemy of the state⁷ that he was forced to march on Rome. The argument that he did so purely to preserve his *dignitas* seems far-fetched; regardless of whether or not Caesar believed that his honour had been attacked by the legislations proposed in the Senate, or that he was being denied the rights he was owed due to his achievements,⁸ it is certain that he was “desperate to avoid prosecution.”⁹ Caesar was more concerned with his political career and his well-being than with preserving his honour, as he himself relates: “I am prepared to resort to anything, to submit to anything, for the sake of the Republic (*causa rei publicae*).”¹⁰ Indeed, it appears more likely that his hand was forced by the Senate’s actions than by his own search for recognition. Furthermore, it seems that Caesar was anxious to avoid any military confrontation with Pompey’s forces; he agreed to disarm himself provided Pompey did the same, as C. Scribonius Curio promoted in the Senate.¹¹ Suetonius also provides a convincing case for Caesar’s weak political circumstances, and his desire to lay down his command provided that his counterpart follow him in his actions:

But seeing that everything was being pushed most persistently, and that even the consuls elect were among the opposition, he sent a written appeal to the senate, not to take from him the privilege which the people had granted, or else to compel the others in command of armies to resign also.¹²

His offer was not accepted, which prompted him to ask the Senate to permit him to keep “two legions and Cisalpine Gaul, or at least one legion and Illyricum, until he was elected consul.”¹³ Leaning on the Law of the Ten Tribunes, Caesar wished that his proconsulship be extended until the consular elections, which, as Salmon puts it, “was quibbling.”¹⁴ Caesar needed to buy some time, and particularly needed to avoid the law courts, which led him to state that it had not yet been ten years since he had held his last consulship, and therefore could not accept the office, justifying why he required an extension of his proconsulship until he would be eligible.¹⁵ Through these various political attempts at protecting himself, it is clear that Caesar was in no shape to be concocting a master plan of political supremacy over Rome, particularly not by means of war; Caesar had sent back a legion that Pompey had lent him, and another when Rome asked for troops to wage a war against

6 Suet. *Iul.* 30.3; Cic. *Fam.* 8.14; App. *B Civ.* 2.25

7 Plut. *Caes.* 30

8 C. Meier, *Caesar* (Berlin: 1982) paraphrased from G. R. Stanton, “Why Did Caesar Cross the Rubicon?” *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* vol. 52, no. 1 (2003), 67

9 Stanton 2003, 94

10 Caes. *B Civ.* 1.9

11 Plut. *Caes.* 30

12 Suet. *Iul.* 29

13 Ibid

14 Salmon 1939, 390

15 Caes. *B Civ.* 1.32 on Pompey’s laws; 3.1 on Caesar now being eligible for the consulship, once already dictator

Parthia.¹⁶ He himself relates this event, tying it into his request for disarmament.¹⁷ It is most probable that the Senate’s lack of cooperation with his requests forced his hand, and inevitably led to the start of the Civil War. The aims of Caesar, at least during this period, seemed to be very *ad hoc*; a lack of political power had to be compensated for by military power, which was Caesar’s only way out. It is only when he took Rome that his long-term aims changed, and his goals broadened immensely.

As Ehrenberg states, “nobody doubts that Caesar had a quasi-monarchical position when he died. The question really is whether he was satisfied with that or wanted more.”¹⁸ Indeed, there is no doubt that Caesar held supreme rulership of Rome during his dictatorship; he established countless political and social reforms, such as reorganizing the calendar, adding more Senators, creating new patrician families, and increasing the number of praetors, aediles, quaestors, and minor magistrates as well.¹⁹ He essentially controlled the political system in Rome, and the *cursus honorum* was now entirely dependent on his favour. Cassius Dio provides an account of the vastness of his importance, as well as the extravagant honors that he had received:

They moreover voted that he should sit in the senate upon the curule chair with the successive consuls, and should always state his opinion first [...] and that he should have the appointment of the magistrates and whatever honours the people were previously accustomed to assign. And they decreed that a chariot of his should be placed on the Capitol facing the statue of Jupiter, that his statue in bronze should be mounted upon a likeness of the inhabited world, with an inscription to the effect that he was a demigod.²⁰

It is undeniable that by this point, Caesar was a monarch. Moreover, I believe that it was only when he became dictator that his goals broadened into a more detailed plan. As stated above, he did not initially intend to become *dictator perpetuo* when he crossed the Rubicon, but having been proclaimed such, he started to look to the future and to much greater things. Ehrenberg writes that “Caesar was a *rex*, though not by name, and we do realize that the nomenclature is by no means unimportant.”²¹ Though his official title was never *rex*, Caesar was unofficially designated as *rex* in the literature. Cassius Dio characterizes his attire as ‘regal,’²² and Cicero, in his *pro rege Deiotaro* enumerated the *regiae laudes* while facing Caesar in his house: “to be brave, just, severe, magnanimous, bountiful, beneficent, noble.”²³ The fact that Cicero depicts the ideal Hellenistic model when addressing Caesar is telling. Cicero continuously refers to Caesar in regal terms, calling him a *coronatus*,²⁴ and saying that he was worse than Alexander and Romulus, both kings, in one

16 App. *B Civ.* 2.29; Plut. *Pomp.* 56; Cass. Dio 40.65

17 Caes. *B Civ.* 1.9 “when I sent a dispatch to the Senate proposing that all should give up arms I failed to obtain even this request. Levies are being held throughout Italy, two legions which had been filched from me under the pretence of a Parthian war are being held back, the state is in arms.”

18 Ehrenberg 1964, 149

19 Suet. *Iul.* 40-41

20 Cass. Dio 43.14

21 Ehrenberg 1964, 153

22 Cass. Dio 44.11

23 See Ehrenberg 1964, 153

24 See Carson 1957, 52

of his letters to Atticus.²⁵ This brings me to my view that Caesar wanted to model himself in the way of the Hellenistic kings that he was being compared to, but in a hybrid Roman form. *Rex* in Rome had a similar connotation to that which τύραννος (tyrant) had in Athens, since it recalled the era when Etruscan kings ruled over Roman citizens, it was therefore a term which Caesar desperately avoided. This can be seen in various literary sources, such as this passage from Appian:

Another story was going the rounds, that there was a Sibylline prophecy that the Parthians would never submit to Rome unless a king were to march against them. As a result some had the nerve to say that as far as the Romans were concerned, he ought to be called their dictator or commander-in-chief or any other title they use as a substitute for 'king,' but that in the case of the peoples subject to Rome he should openly be called king. This suggestion too he declined...²⁶

A similar description of the events is seen in Cassius Dio and Suetonius.²⁷ Here Caesar refuses to be called 'king,' even if only by the subjects of Rome. All three sources agree that he denied the honour of being designated in a regal manner, but this should be considered as a development of this regal form, modeled on the Greek kings and yet distinctly Roman. It is essentially this model which flourishes in the Augustan era with the principate; Augustus was in all purposes a *rex*, but was designated as *princeps*, "first-man," which integrated him into the Roman social sphere and permitted him to be the supreme ruler in a less abrasive manner. In the provinces he was worshipped as a god, but was still not a king, which is essentially the model that Caesar was aiming to achieve, though he himself seems to have attempted to introduce deified representation in Rome as well.

Similarly to Augustus' title of *princeps*, Caesar continued to be called *dictator*, which also integrated him into Roman tradition. The term *dictator*, however, carried a certain baggage which Caesar needed to deal with. Sulla had brought more monarchical implications to dictatorship, which prompted Caesar to distance himself from Sulla in order to secure his political supremacy, and to somewhat mask his real political authority. Cicero relates Caesar's words in regards to Sulla ("whom I shall not imitate"),²⁸ something that is also found in Suetonius.²⁹ "What was to distinguish Caesar from Sulla was *miseritordia et liberalitas*, in short the famous *clementia*."³⁰ The Romans' assumptions of titles as is shown through both Caesar's refusal of the title *rex* and his justification of his status as *dictator perpetuo*, does require special attention, but is not an important factor in determining the *type* of power which he possessed. It was important to seem to perpetuate the Republic in order to receive public support by distancing oneself from the oppressive kings of the early Republic and, in Caesar's case, from a more recent 'tyranny' that was still very fresh in the public's mind. This is the image that Caesar attempted to portray, though unsuccessfully, as his assassination later denotes.³¹ Suetonius,

25 Cic. *Att.* 12.45

26 App. *B Civ.* 2.110

27 Cass. Dio 44.15; Suet. *Iul.* 79

28 Cic. *Att.* 9.7

29 Suet. *Iul.* 77

30 Ehrenberg 1964, 150-151

31 Suet. *Iul.* 80 on Brutus' recalling his ancestral lineage, seeking to free the Republic from tyranny and restore it to its rightful place – L. Junius Brutus had killed Tarquinius Superbus and thus led to the creation of the Republic

though he accepts that Caesar's aims were different from Sulla, also cites the dictator's words on the *res publica*: "*nihil esse rem publicam, appellationem modo sine corpore ac specie*."³² Stating outwardly that the Republic was now a name without a body or form would have necessarily caused a great draw back in perpetuating civil support for Caesar; however, this passage is much denser than it appears. Morgan has developed the topic extensively, and her analysis seems correct; if Caesar wanted to perpetuate his rulership and attain a monarchical status, it would be foolish to outright state that the Republic was no longer functional in such a way. Morgan supplies a much more sophisticated analysis of the passage by relating it to a grammatical critique of the use of *res publica* in the time of Caesar. She posits that he was concerned with the way the term was used, not so much with the actual political system. He believed that the word was being used as a means of propaganda; the term itself being particularly vague, it had lost meaning throughout the years, and this is what Caesar was noting when he stated that it no longer had a body or form. "As Collins puts it, 'in Caesar's words there is no break with the *res publica*, but rather the use of the *res publica* as a slogan'."³³ Some scholars have interpreted Caesar's words as being an open claim to the futility of maintaining a fictional Republic,³⁴ and thus asserting his monarchy publicly. However I believe the nuanced portrait that Morgan presents accurately shows the political workmanship required in order to maintain political supremacy in Rome, thus depicting the means by which Caesar sought his ultimate goal of the deified ruler. Caesar most definitely sought kingship at this time, and regardless of how he was called, his final aims were to attain a rulership similar to that of the Hellenistic kings, such as Alexander the Great. Through his political rhetoric, Caesar's aims can be identified as kingly, and this is further developed with the archaeological evidence, the physical portrayals of Caesar and the religiosity surrounding the man.

Carson believes that there is not enough proof to posit that Caesar was deified prior to his death.³⁵ However, the various forms of evidence that are available seem to confirm this. There is an extensive list of statues found in the literary sources depicting Caesar in various forms some of which have divine connotations, and Toynbee³⁶ provides the evidence of seven statues in different contexts, which date to prior to Caesar's death:

Caesar himself and the Greek historian Cassius Dio mention a statue set up in 48 B.C. in the temple of Victory at Tralles in Asia Minor³⁷ [...] a bronze statue on the Capitol, with an inscription entitling Caesar 'Demi-God', decreed by the Senate after his return from Africa in 46 B.C.;³⁸ an ivory statue for display in the Circus, a statue inscribed 'to the Invincible God' in the temple of Quirinus, and

(Liv. 1.60).

32 Suet. *Iul.* 77 "The Republic is nothing, it is merely a name without a body or a form."

33 J.H. Collins, "On the date and interpretation of the *Bellum Civile*," *AJPh* vol. 80 (1959), 120, as quoted by Morgan, Llewelyn, "'Levi Quidem de re...': Julius Caesar as Tyrant and Pedant," *The Journal of Roman Studies* vol. 87 (1997), 29

34 Ehrenberg 1964, 151 "In a different sense he proved again that he was not a second Sulla, no illiterate in politics, not concerned with maintaining the empty form of the *res publica*."

35 Carson 1957, 50

36 J. M. C. Toynbee, "Portraits of Julius Caesar," *Greece & Rome* Second Series vol. 4, no. 1 (1957), 4

37 Caes. *B Civ.* 3.105; Cass. Dio 41.61

38 Cass. Dio 43.14

another statue on the Capitol, all voted by the Senate in 45 B.C.;³⁹ and statues in the cities of the Roman world, in all the temples of Rome, and two on the rostra, all ordained in 44 B.C.⁴⁰ From the elder Pliny we hear of a cuirass-statue in the Forum,⁴¹ from Appian of a statue of him as a god in the temple of Clementia.⁴²

The iconography present during Caesar's reign is prolific. Not only are there many statues of him across Rome and its provinces, but the inscriptions found on these statues enforce the view that he was seeking to become a deified ruler. The statue in the temple of Victory, though it was in a Roman province, still denotes a link between Caesar and the deity of victory. More significant is the statue on the Capitol, in the foremost religious area of Rome, among the temples of Jupiter, Juno and Minerva. The religious implications of this statue were made more considerable with an inscription denoting Caesar as a 'Demi-God.' The fact that the Senate decreed the statue is less important, considering that Caesar essentially controlled the entire political system, yet the portrait that he had established of himself was very similar to that of the Hellenistic monarchs.

Caesar had rejected the title of 'king,' and yet he represents himself in this way. Along with these portraits representing the 'divine Iulius,' there seems to have been a cult to Caesar in Rome during his lifetime.⁴³ During the Roman Empire, emperors would be worshipped in the provinces while they were alive, and on some occasions in Rome after their deaths, provided that they were deified (e.g. Augustus, Claudius). Fundamentally, this recalls the principle of 'modest' rulership that is the monarchical model used here. It is perhaps the case that Caesar's principle mistake was to create a cult to himself in Rome during his lifetime, which inevitably publicized his supremacy to a degree which the Romans could not accept, thus prompting them to plot his assassination. Although Caesar essentially controlled political competition, he still permitted aristocrats to rise through the echelons. He even added more magistracies, which makes scholars wonder why the Senators murdered him if they still had the opportunity to become consuls and censors? It seems that the deified portrait of the man contributed to the eventual conspiracy, as it was fundamentally in opposition with Republican models.⁴⁴

39 Ibid 43.45

40 Ibid 44.4

41 Plin. *NH.* 34.18

42 App. *B Civ.* 2.106

43 Cic. *Phil.* 2.110 "*est ergo flamen ut Iovi, ut Marti, ut Quirino, sic divo Iulio M. Antonius?*" (As then Jupiter, and Mars, and Quirinus have priests, so Marcus Antonius is the priest of the god Julius).

44 See particularly Jeremy Tanner, "Portraits, Power, and Patronage in the Late Roman Republic," *The Journal of Roman Studies* vol. 90 (2000), 28 "In the following year, the level of prestige marked by the honours Caesar was offered (presumably through the initiative of his supporters) and accepted raised Caesar to the level of the gods, through the material used for portraits (ivory, on the model of the great chryselephantine cult statues), their placement (in the temple of Quirinus), and their use (carried in processions of statues of gods in the opening ceremonies of games in the circus). One of these statues was placed on the Capitol alongside those of the former kings of Rome, celebrated for their contributions to the foundation of Rome and the construction of its most important religious and social institutions. Here also stood a statue of Brutus the Tyrannicide, who had slain the last of the Tarquins and thereby created the Republican system of government. It was the clash between the evident aspirations represented by the placement of the statue of Caesar, and its collocation with the statue of Brutus the Tyrannicide, which acted, according to Dio (43.45), as the first stimulus to the younger Brutus' participation in the plot to murder Caesar."

Coins also offer another source of evidence for the understanding of Caesar's aims. Caesar was the first Roman to have his face printed on coins in Rome during his lifetime, and though Carson dismisses this as 'novel,' saying that "the appearance of Caesar's head, therefore, though novel, is the logical development of the process and, though symptomatic of his uniquely pre-eminent position, does not necessarily identify him as a king,"⁴⁵ it is clear that this is a significant sign of not just Caesar's pre-eminence but also of his supremacy. These three coins (see Annex) can be dated prior to Caesar's death, and they contribute to the iconography of Caesar as the supreme ruler of Rome. Fig. 1 was minted in Bithynia in 48-47 B.C. and shows Caesar "with somewhat idealized profile, and with a slightly upward-tilted glance that reminds us of the Alexander portraits."⁴⁶ It seems appropriate to depict Caesar in such a Greek area, but this nonetheless adds to the dictator's image throughout Roman territory. Fig. 2 is a coin from 46 B.C. minted in Corinth, Caesar's colony, and Fig. 3 is the most significant coin, as it was issued by the official moneyers in the capital (the *quattuoviri*).⁴⁷ The third coin shows Caesar with the title *pater patriae*, 'father of the fatherland,' which was awarded to him shortly before his death.⁴⁸ These coins cannot be taken as lightly as Carson has seen them; if the title of a ruler was so scrutinized, one would assume that other representations of kingship would be equally surveyed. As mentioned previously, it is likely that Caesar was assassinated due to his overenthusiastic self-representation as a 'monarch,' and the evidence surrounding his portrayals in art seems to lead to this conclusion. Caesar's aim to obtain supreme rulership in a Hellenistic model inevitably led to his demise, as the clash between this type of rule and Roman standards was too aggressive for the Roman aristocracy to endure.

Caesar, prior to crossing the Rubicon and asserting his dictatorship in the city of Rome, seems to have had no distinct plan for sole rulership. It is only when he captured the city and was given the title of dictator that his ambitions began to expand. His political weakness during the 'negotiations' with the Senate in 50 B.C. show that he wanted to avoid military confrontation, and his lack of certainty concerning Pompey's allegiances led him to question his exception in the Law of the Ten Tribunes of 52 B.C. As can be seen in Suetonius' account,⁴⁹ this law was remarkably ambiguous, as Pompey intended it to preserve Caesar's privileges, but the law itself did not reflect this *beneficium*. Even though Caesar tried many times to find a compromise with the Senate, it is inevitably their reactions that launched the Civil War. Once Caesar had control of Rome, he began to implement all of his political reforms, and subsequently became, in all aspects but the title, a king. *Rex* is not the appropriate word to describe Caesar's aims, or what he achieved, as the connotations behind it do not match with what appear to have been his ultimate goals. Dictator is also unsuitable, as it implies either the temporary office of the past, or Sulla's own political supremacy. *Dictator perpetuo*, as he

45 Carson 1957, 52-53

46 Toynbee 1957, 5

47 See Toynbee 1957, 5 for the dating of these coins and their provenance.

48 Cass. Dio 44.4

49 Suet. *Iul.* 28 "And it was true that when Pompey proposed a bill touching the privileges of officials, in the clause whereby he debarred absentees from candidacy for office he forgot to make a special exception in Caesar's case, and did not correct the oversight until the law had been inscribed on a tablet of bronze and deposited in the treasury."

was called shortly before his death, is more fitting, but one can only speculate that perhaps the title of *princeps* may have suited his situation more. The way Caesar was portrayed in sculpture and coinage, coupled with the apparent religious cult that surrounded him, leads to the conclusion that Caesar's aims were in fact something similar to the principate, albeit with a deified representation of the man in Rome herself. Though it is impossible to assert with certainty, his actions as well as his portrayals lean towards this type of rulership as a long-term goal. It is true that Augustus ruled over the Roman populace in a less abrasive manner, as has been suggested above, but inevitably there are many commonalities between the two regimes, and it seems that this is what Caesar was ultimately striving towards.

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Appendix



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