

Notes on Quiz #9: Crossing the Rubicon

1. When Caesar said “the dice are cast” (i.e., “there is no turning back now”), he was referring to
 - a. the gambling debts he had incurred
 - b. the war with Vercingetorix and the Gauls
 - c. crossing the boundary of his province into Italy
 - d. the formation of the “First Triumvirate”

In 49 BCE Caesar and Pompey’s increasing power as warlords personally controlling great swaths of the Roman empire led senate extremists to attempt to pass the “ultimate decree” against Caesar and have him declared a public enemy. Though vetoed by Caesar’s ally Antony, who held a plebeian tribuneship that year, this move by the senate spurred Caesar to action. The tribunes were forced to flee, and Caesar used the defense of the sacred rights of the tribunes as his pretext to end the current government of Rome. — Caesar took the nearby city of Rimini, across the boundary between his province (Cisalpine Gaul) and Italy proper. This boundary was a minor river called the Rubicon. Caesar knew that this would be understood as him invading Italy, and that there was no turning back. Thus his famous use of the quote from Menander, “The die is cast.”

2. All of the following are true of Cleopatra VII, the last reigning pharaoh of Egypt, EXCEPT:
 - a. After being defeated by Octavian, she survived to be led in chains through the streets of Rome
 - b. Caesar had made her sole ruler after her brother, Ptolemy XIII, mistakenly beheaded Pompey
 - c. She had a son with Caesar named Caesarion
 - d. Depicting him as Cleopatra’s lackey helped Octavian turn the Romans against Antony

Cleopatra was secured on the throne of Egypt by Caesar, who then developed a relationship with her that produced a son, Caesarion. This son was intended to be the first Roman pharaoh of Egypt. — After Caesar’s death, Antony sought to use Egypt as a base of operations, making use of its wealth and resources. He became involved with Cleopatra and eventually married her, spurning his Roman wife, Octavia, the sister of the man he was sharing power with, Octavian. Octavian was able to use Antony’s marriage to a foreign queen and rejection of a virtuous noblewoman to turn the nobles against Antony, while presenting himself as a champion of Roman values. — Antony and Cleopatra declared war on Octavian, but were defeated at the battle of Actium (31 BCE). Antony was killed, and Cleopatra committed suicide to avoid being paraded through Rome in chains at Octavian’s triumph.

3. The Julian calendar refers to
 - a. the schedule of executions under Caesar
 - b. the timeline of Caesar’s rise to power
 - c. the system of leap years every four years
 - d. the list of Caesar’s honors and when they were granted

Caesar instituted a number of reforms favorable to the common people, including a sweeping debt relief measure that was much needed after the disruption of the civil wars. He also reformed the calendar, which had been falling behind the seasons; this resulted in the Julian calendar still in use today (with minor modifications). However, Caesar’s rule was divisive. He ruled on behalf of the people against the nobles, rather than on behalf of all Romans. This faction rule created frictions and animosity that all but guaranteed a renewal of civil war.

4. The “Second Triumvirate,” established after the death of Caesar, included all of the following EXCEPT:
- Octavian
 - Antony
 - Lepidus
 - Cicero

The Second Triumvirate consisted of Antony, Caesar’s lieutenant; Octavian, Caesar’s heir; and Lepidus, the pontifex maximus. It was the legal government of Rome for ten years, from 43 to 32 BCE. Lepidus was forced out in 36 and Antony turned against Octavian, leading to Octavian’s victory at the Battle of Actium.

5. Stages in Octavian taking power in Rome included
- accepting the title Augustus, indicating great respect
 - adopting the Second Settlement, granting him the powers of consuls, tribunes, and censors
 - taking the role of princeps, or first speaker in the senate
 - all of the above

The principate gave Octavian, now called Augustus, the authority to act on behalf of the Roman state, but did not quite create a governmental office. Instead, starting with what historians call the Second Settlement Augustus was granted a bloc of powers associated with offices of the Republic for five or ten year intervals. The most important of these were (a) the imperium and the powers of a consul; (b) the powers and privileges of the plebeian tribunate, including the veto, the right of appeal to the people on behalf of a citizen, and sacrosanctity; and (c) the powers of a censor, which included conducting the census and ordering the membership of the senate. He also afterwards acquired the title of pontifex maximus, which put him in control of the state religion. — More generally, the princeps was the person in whom the people, the soldiers, and the nobles invested their faith and loyalty after the brutality and divisions of the civil wars, creating strength and unity of identity where the actual government of Rome and institutions like the senate had failed to do so.

Optional Extra Credit

EC. What did Sulla and Caesar have in common? How were they different?

Sulla and Caesar both led armies against Rome and claimed the dictatorship, which they used to institute reforms. — They differed in that Sulla was a conservative (optimatus) and Caesar was a populist. Sulla resigned his dictatorship, but Caesar did not (and was assassinated when he assumed perpetual dictatorship).