

Notes on Quiz #9: Crossing the Rubicon

1. What is the significance of Caesar crossing the Rubicon River? What happened afterward?

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. Discuss Cleopatra's role in Roman affairs during this period.

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. What is the Principate? What kinds of powers were granted to the princeps?

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.

EC1. The "Second Triumvirate," established after the death of Caesar, included all of the following EXCEPT:

- (a) Octavian
- (b) Antony
- (c) Lepidus
- ✓ (d) Vercingetorix

EC2. What did Caesar and Sulla 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).

EC3. What kinds of reforms did Caesar institute while in power? Do you think he was good for Rome?

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.