

Pompey: The Rising Sun

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Introduction

Towards the end of the Roman Republic, there were several men who appeared as if they were going to seize control of Rome - and indeed some of them managed to do so for a short time. One of these men was Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus, usually known as Pompey the Great or just Pompey. Through military successes and alliances (including by marriage), Pompey skipped most of the steps on the standard Roman career path and jumped straight to the top, and was arguably the most powerful man in Rome at the pinnacle of his career.

In this discussion we will be taking a broad overview of the early life of Pompey, up to the formation of the First Triumvirate with Caesar and Crassus. We will examine some of the key events in this period from his perspective, including his early military campaigns and his relationship with Caesar and Crassus.

Given the volume of surviving literary and archaeological evidence, and the substantial amount of activity (particularly military campaigns) during this period, we will mention briefly or skip altogether some of the events which occurred and the people involved in them. Suggestions for further reading are provided at the end for those who wish to examine the period in more detail, or from a different perspective.

A future talk, *Pompey: The Setting Sun*, will discuss Pompey's later life and his eventual eclipse and defeat by Julius Caesar.

Background

Born in 106¹ in Picenum,² there was nothing particularly special about Pompey's birth or his parents that marked him out for future success.³ His mother was Lucilia⁴ and his father was Pompeius Strabo,⁵ of whose early career we know little. He was a quaestor in 104 and praetor in or by 92. In 89,

¹All dates are BC unless otherwise indicated.

²Picenum no longer exists as a region, and does not map directly to a part of modern Italy. Its closest areas today are Marche and Abruzzo.

³We do not appear to have any record of omens observed at Pompey's birth, or any prophetic remarks during his early life, unlike those for Caesar (described by Sulla as someone who would later ruin the Republic (Suetonius *Julius Caesar* 1)) and Octavian (Suetonius *Augustus* 94, Cassius Dio *Roman History* 45.1-2). We can only speculate as to whether this is because the records are lost, or that no one thought to invent omens later because Pompey ultimately did not reach the same heights as Caesar and Octavian.

⁴Details of Lucilia are scant to say the least, though apparently she was 'of senatorial stock' (Velleius Paterculus *History of Rome* 2.29).

⁵Roman naming conventions during the Late Republic involved a *nomen gentilicium* (roughly equivalent to an English surname or family name), a *praenomen* (a forename, of which perhaps 15-30 were common amongst well-known families) and sometimes a *cognomen* (no equivalent in modern English - it can be a nickname of sorts but also a hereditary name used to distinguish between different branches of the same family). Usually the combination of three names - if available - is sufficient to distinguish between father and son, such as Gnaeus Pompeius Strabo (Pompey's father) and Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus. This is not always the case though, as Tiberius Claudius Nero was the full name of the father of the second emperor

Strabo was elected to the consulship – the first time his family had reached this office and therefore making him a *novus homo* ('new man').⁶ Strabo was a highly competent military commander, but not particularly popular with his men.⁷ He commanded troops throughout the Social War (91-88), in which several Italian cities fought against Rome as a result of what they saw as oppressive behaviour and a refusal to grant them Roman citizenship.⁸

After the Social War, another civil war erupted between the followers of Marius and those of Sulla. Marius was in Rome and Sulla had left (as consul) for his command in Pontus, but Marius succeeded in having Sulla's command transferred to him. Sulla then decided to take his army and march on Rome (for the first but not the last time). Strabo returned at the request of the Senate, but did not commit to either side for some time, although he eventually appears to have joined Sulla at the Colline Gate and fought against the Marians.

Strabo put up a strong defence against the Marians, but died soon after.⁹ This left Pompey, aged twenty three, inheriting the estates of his father and the loyalty of his legions. He was put on trial as a result of accusations that his father had misappropriated public property,¹⁰ but was acquitted and married the daughter of the judge shortly afterwards.¹¹ At this point, Pompey might have been expected to run for office - no doubt he could have been elected quaestor, and therefore been enrolled in the Senate - but for now he remained an equestrian.¹²

Sulla and Lepidus

Despite their defeat, and the death of their figurehead in 86, the Marians once again took advantage of Sulla's absence to seize control in Rome, effectively continuing the civil war. At this point, Pompey decided to join Sulla - not as an individual with nothing to offer except his personal loyalty, but as the head of an army.¹³ Pompey held no office and had no authority (via legislation, from the Senate, or via delegation from another command) to raise troops, however he had the charisma and, just as importantly, the money, to convince men to serve with him and cover their pay and provisions.¹⁴ On

and of the emperor himself.

⁶Romans put great emphasis on the idea of inherited characteristics, making the assumption that if a man had ancestors who had held magistracies – and particularly the consulship – he too would be destined for great things. A *novus homo* might therefore be looked down upon by the existing noble families, who could trace consuls back through the generations, but there were several such men in the Late Republic. However, they were not all alike - Cicero and Marius started at the same point but had very different career paths.

⁷It is not clear exactly why Strabo appears to have been so unpopular, as success on the battlefield would often result in loot for the victors - a good way to keep men on side. Was he perhaps a harsh disciplinarian - maybe stricter than other generals about allowing women to join the camps and baggage trains (sensible from the point of view of maintaining order and discipline, but perhaps not great for morale)? Did he fail to share out the rewards of success fairly? Or perhaps he just wasn't good with people - though Marius and Pompey managed to remain popular with the troops whilst working them hard.

⁸The *bellum sociale* comes from the Latin *socii* for allies, as it was the allies of Rome who fought. A more accurate translation might be 'war of the allies', but the Social War is the one that is used in most modern texts.

⁹Several explanations are given for the cause of death - struck by lightning, succumbed to plague (entirely plausible in a time without infection control or antibiotics), or perhaps he was assassinated or killed by his disgruntled troops. Orosius claims Strabo was 'struck by a thunderbolt' and that other men died of the plague (5.19.18), whereas Velleius Paterculus reports that the plague swept through the army and Strabo died - implying that this was the cause of death (*History of Rome* 2.21). Appian has Strabo killed by lightning, along with other men (*Civil Wars* 1.68)

¹⁰Plutarch *Pompey* 4

¹¹The favouritism of the judge towards his soon to be son-in-law caused people to break into a wedding song as soon as the verdict was announced, and Pompey was married a few days later (Plutarch *Pompey* 4).

¹²Equestrians formed the second class in the property-based system at Rome, one rung below senators. Unlike senators - who were in theory, if not always in practice, forbidden from engaging in commerce - equestrians were often businessmen, and although the minimum property requirement was lower, some of the wealthiest men could be found in this class. The name comes from the Latin word *equites* (horse), as until the Late Republic equestrians were required to serve as cavalrymen in the legions.

¹³Plutarch *Pompey* 6, Velleius Paterculus *History of Rome* 2.29

¹⁴The legality of Pompey's action in raising what was effectively a large private army - albeit one used for the benefit of the state - is debateable. As he was not a magistrate (or pro-magistrate), he would not have held the *imperium* required to

his way to Sulla, Pompey defeated several Marian armies, thus proving his military skills.¹⁵ Sulla was somewhat surprised to see Pompey,¹⁶ but he welcomed the new recruits and saluted their general as *imperator* – a high honour for a young man who was acting on his own initiative rather than any official instructions.¹⁷

Pompey continued to serve Sulla, being dispatched to Gaul to take over from Metellus who was struggling in his command – although Pompey diplomatically refused to relieve Metellus, who was many years his senior, and instead served under him.¹⁸ Sulla then proposed that his step-daughter should marry Pompey, purely for political reasons.¹⁹ Pompey appears to have been reluctant, but divorced his existing wife to accommodate Sulla's request.²⁰

After a brief stint in Africa, Pompey's legions were recalled to Rome by Sulla, who may well have been growing disturbed about the rapid rise of this potential rival (or replacement). Despite the fact that Sulla may have held private concerns about Pompey, he made a public show of welcoming his return, and publicly saluted him as *Magnus* ('the Great'), although it would be several years before Pompey began to use this title himself.²¹

Pompey followed up on this warm welcome by demanding a triumph for his achievements.²² Sulla initially refused, pointing out, quite correctly, that only a praetor or consul could celebrate a triumph, and Pompey was neither. In fact, Pompey was not even a senator, let alone a senior magistrate, and there does not appear to have been any legal reason why he ought to be granted a triumph.

A less confident man might have accepted Sulla's argument, or suggested the compromise of a procession short of a triumph. Pompey was undeterred though, and is reported to have pointed out to Sulla that 'more people worship the rising than the setting sun'²³ – a rather unsubtle comparison between his position and that of Sulla. Perhaps mindful of the fact that Pompey had recently commanded several legions of trained men who might expect a triumph for their general, Sulla agreed to Pompey's demand and declared 'let him triumph'.²⁴

Despite this praise, Sulla and Pompey fell out after Pompey supported Marcus Aemilius Lepidus for the consulship, and as a result was left out of Sulla's will.²⁵ This proved to be a poor decision by Pompey, as Lepidus later refused a recall by the Senate from his province in Gaul, and yet again an army marched on Rome. Pompey made up for his lack of political judgement (after being made propraetor as a legate under the consuls' army) by defeating (and executing - for which he earned the enmity of some senators) Brutus, commander of one of Lepidus' armies. He then refused to disband his troops, and instead 'requested' that he be sent as proconsul to fight Sertorius in Spain. As with his praetorian authority, this was highly irregular - usually a proconsul would be former consul, not a

command men and enforce military discipline.

¹⁵Plutarch *Pompey* 8

¹⁶According to Appian, Pompey was thought to be against Sulla, but his arrival with troops quashed that suspicion (*Civil Wars* 1.80).

¹⁷Soldiers would often hail a victorious general as *imperator*, which is where the English (via Old French) emperor derives from. However, in the Republic and early Empire, *imperator* reflected military command rather than a political position, and even Cicero, self-proclaimed 'saviour of the Republic' (Cicero *Pro Cnaeo Plancio* 36.89), received this accolade on one occasion.

¹⁸Plutarch *Pompey* 8

¹⁹Plutarch *Pompey* 9, Plutarch *Sulla* 33

²⁰Marriages made for political purposes were common in Rome. This fact, combined with the risk of death during childbirth, meant that an ambitious man could end up marrying several times – Pompey had at least five wives (that we know of) during the course of his life.

²¹Plutarch also suggests that it was the troops in Africa who first proclaimed Pompey in this manner, but that Sulla's use gave it the official stamp of approval (Plutarch *Pompey* 13).

²²Plutarch *Pompey* 14

²³Plutarch *Pompey* 14

²⁴Appian records this episode as being less of a confrontation, merely noting that Sulla allowed Pompey a triumph (*Civil Wars* 1.80).

²⁵Plutarch *Sulla* 38

young man who was not even eligible to stand as quaestor.²⁶ However, regardless of the constitution and precedent (and, it could be argued, Pompey's recent receipt of praetorian authority had in itself set a precedent), the Senate had little choice but to grant Pompey the command and title he desired.²⁷

Sertorius and Spain

Even though the Marians had been defeated in Rome, they had not ceased to be a problem for the Republic. Quintus Sertorius had started a rebellion in Spain, and was joined some of the Marian survivors. Sertorius however positioned himself not as a rebel or outlaw, but as a loyal Roman citizen resisting the illegitimate (as he saw it) regime. By 77, Sertorius had inflicted defeats on all the Sullan forces sent against him, and was in a position to invade Italy.²⁸ As well as this, there were likely pro-Marian men still in Italy who would support him, even though Sulla had died the year before.²⁹

No one seemed particularly keen on taking on Sertorius at this point, least of all the two consuls for 77.³⁰ Pompey therefore obtained the proconsular authority he had requested, despite not coming close to the requirements (normally a proconsul would be an ex-consul, as proconsul in this context means 'in place of a consul').³¹ Pompey initially set off for Gaul, where he secured a number of early victories against Sertorius' lieutenants.

Sertorius himself however turned out to be harder to defeat. A canny commander who knew the terrain well and used it to his advantage, Sertorius effectively fought a form of guerilla warfare against Pompey, who was more comfortable with open battles and suffered some heavy defeats early on.³² Pompey made little headway initially, and ended up writing to the Senate requesting additional money - with the thinly-veiled threat that if this was not sent, he might have to return to Italy.³³ The Senate complied, and Pompey now started to have more success against Sertorius - though the war continued for some time.

As time went on, the Romans within Sertorius' army grew more disaffected, possibly due to a combination of being treated equally to his native troops, and also by the prospect of having to continue fighting other Romans. There was a steady stream of defections to Metellus, who appears to have given the men a free pardon and welcomed them with open arms.³⁴

After all this fighting however, Sertorius was brought down from inside by one of the oldest tricks in the book. A subordinate, Marcus Perpenna Veiento (also referred to as Perpenna), who thought that

²⁶The *cursus honorum* ('course of offices') laid down the order in which the various offices (or magistracies) in the Republic must be held, together with minimum ages and time limits before holding the same office again. After Sulla the *cursus honorum* was: quaestor (automatic enrollment in the Senate), aedile (optional), praetor, consul, and finally censor. Although the censorship was technically a higher office, the consulship was the magistracy to which every Roman with political ambitions aspired.

²⁷Some Senators may have felt that there was a good chance that Pompey would overreach himself and meet his end in battle, and so granting him the command was an opportunity to rid themselves of an uppity young man. If this was the case, the gamble backfired spectacularly.

²⁸We must be cautious here - the accounts of the war were written after and may have exaggerated the danger posed by Sertorius in order to justify the action taken against him, and to make Pompey's eventual victory look all the greater. However, even allowing for some exaggeration, it seems likely that Sertorius posed a threat to Rome.

²⁹As with Marius, the supporters of Sulla continued to be known as Sullans for some time after his death.

³⁰D. Junius Brutus and Mamercus Aemilius Lepidus

³¹Lucius Marcus Philippus, the senator who proposed that Pompey be granted the command, commented that Pompey was going as *pro consulibus*, which in this context could be read as 'in place of both consuls', implying that both the consuls for the year were useless (Plutarch *Pompey* 17). Sertorius boasted of an early defeat of Pompey in similar terms (Orosius 5.23.8), and Cicero also praises Pompey and quotes Philippus (*Pro Lege Manilia* 22.62).

³²Frontinus *Stratagemis* 2.5.31, Plutarch *Sertorius* 18, Appian *Civil Wars* 1.109

³³Plutarch *Pompey* 20

³⁴Appian *Civil Wars* 1.112. The question of whether Metellus had the power to pardon is debateable. Arguably desertion or becoming a turncoat came under army discipline, and commanders in the field had wide powers when it came to punishing or rewarding soldiers. It is not clear if any sanctions had already been imposed on the deserters, such as stripping them of citizenship, which a general might not have had the authority to cancel or reverse. In any case, given the lack of central administration, it might not have been officially recorded anywhere that a given soldier had deserted.

he would make a better leader, invited Sertorius to a dinner party and then had him killed whilst he and his bodyguards were relaxed and under the influence (of copious consumption of alcohol).³⁵ Unfortunately for Perperna, he lacked Sertorius' ability to keep the army together, and was soon lured into a battle which Pompey won convincingly. Perperna attempted to bargain for his life by handing over letters supposedly from men in Rome encouraging Sertorius to invade Italy. Pompey however showed great discretion, burning the letters without reading them and putting Perperna to death before he could disclose their contents.³⁶

Spartacus and the slave revolt

Slavery was a key part of many ancient civilizations and empires, and Rome was no exception. The life of a slave varied drastically - some were used as secretaries,³⁷ or teachers for the owner's children, and were treated reasonably (though this of course does not excuse the practice), and might hope to be freed at some later date.³⁸ However, others were forced to work in fields or mines - 'encouraged' by the occasional use of force (and even more unpleasant abuses of the power imbalance) - which would have been a miserable and in many cases short-lived existence, and probably closer to the mental image of 'slavery'. Some slaves also served as gladiators, forced to fight in arenas for the entertainment of the masses.

In 73, a small number of gladiators, led by a Thracian named Spartacus, escaped their training school and started to gradually accumulate followers. Spartacus' initial success against the praetor, Claudius Glaber, sent to 'deal' with the revolt boosted his profile, and brought recruits in even larger numbers. As prisoners taken after a battle were often sold into slavery - a lucrative business for the victorious army - this meant that many of the recruits had recent military experience fighting against Roman legions.

Two more praetors, Varinius and Cossinius, were sent out against Spartacus, and both were defeated. By this point the Senate was extremely concerned - this was no longer a minor local revolt but a potential revolution that was spiralling out of control. At this point Marcus Licinius Crassus stepped in and offered his services to bring the rebellion to an end.

Crassus was not a brilliant military commander - certainly not the equal of Pompey - and would ultimately meet his end years later on a foolhardy and unnecessary military expedition against the Parthians.³⁹ However, what he lacked somewhat in military skill, he more than made up for with business acumen. In the years leading up to the slave revolt, he had deployed funds wisely, including: buying cheap property confiscated during the proscriptions of Sulla,⁴⁰ selling property to men who needed to meet the minimum wealth requirement to become or remain senators, running a fire brigade (with a twist - he would buy a property on fire at a cheap rate and then put out the fire), and lending money to men looking to stand for election.

Crassus' business interests would no doubt have been threatened by the slave revolt, which may explain some of his enthusiasm beyond the general lust for power and glory that affected most Roman politicians. However, his clinching argument to the Senate was probably the fact that he offered to

³⁵Velleius Paterculus *History of Rome* 2.30, Appian *Civil Wars* 1.113, Plutarch *Pompey* 20, Plutarch *Sertorius* 26

³⁶Appian *Civil Wars* 1.115. Burning the letters was an interesting decision - on the one hand it would have relieved the senators involved (assuming the letters were genuine), but on the other hand it deprived Pompey of useful material to pressurise them later.

³⁷See particularly the close relationship between Cicero and his secretary Tiro, with the Robert Harris novels (*Imperium*, *Lustrum*, and *Dictator*) told from Tiro's point of view.

³⁸Freeing a slave was not entirely altruistic, since the freedman would likely become a 'client' of his former master, supporting him in elections etc.

³⁹This would result in the loss of legionary standards, which would not be recovered until the time of Augustus.

⁴⁰The proscriptions were lists of men who could be hunted down and killed without legal consequences, and their property was seized and auctioned off, usually at knock-down prices (Plutarch *Sulla* 31). Antony, Octavian and Lepidus would revive this practice many years later, with Cicero one of the names on their list.

raise six legions at his own expense - he was later known for saying that no man could consider himself rich unless he could afford his own army.⁴¹

Although Spartacus put up a good fight, Crassus managed to push him gradually into the south of Italy and intended to cut him off from all supplies - effectively besieging him at the bottom of the country. However, the need for a quick victory was pressing, as the Senate had recalled Pompey from Spain to assist.⁴² Crassus did not want to share the glory of crushing the revolt, and pushed forward faster - eventually managing to defeat Spartacus. Unfortunately for Crassus, some men escaped and ran into Pompey, who easily defeated them and then claimed to be the man who had finished the revolt (technically true but Crassus naturally did not see it this way).⁴³

Crassus worked out some of his anger by crucifying 6,000 captives along the Appian Way, to discourage future revolts. Pompey returned to Rome and had no difficulty persuading the Senate to vote him another triumph (for the defeat of Sertorius, not Spartacus), whereas Crassus had to make do with the lesser ovatio as his victory was not against a foreign power.⁴⁴

First consulship

Pompey now had his eyes set on the consulship - effectively skipping all the intermediate steps on the *cursus honorum*.⁴⁵ He did not meet any of the prerequisites - including the minimum age of 42 - which Sulla had only recently reinstated and strengthened.⁴⁶ However, he was approached by Crassus with an offer - why not stand for the consulship together, there being two positions to fill? The combination of one of the richest men in Rome and a successful general popular with the People proved unbeatable, and Pompey and Crassus were duly elected (*in absentia*, as they had to remain outside of Rome until their triumph and ovatio - permission for which Caesar would be refused many years later).⁴⁷

Although their consulships started with high hopes, Pompey and Crassus soon fell out and each objected to the measures brought in by the other man. By the end of their terms the two were barely talking to one another, although a reconciliation was achieved after a man claimed to have had a dream where Jupiter told him that Pompey and Crassus should end their consulship as friends.⁴⁸ Despite this, Pompey did manage to reinstate the powers that the tribunes had held prior to Sulla's reforms.⁴⁹

Pirates

We know little of what happened to Pompey immediately after his consulship, but the story picks up again in 67. By this point piracy in the Mediterranean had become such a problem that it was affecting

⁴¹Plutarch *Crassus* 2

⁴²It is unclear whether Crassus requested these reinforcements (Plutarch *Crassus* 11) or the Senate ordered Pompey to assist on its own initiative (Appian *The Civil Wars* 1.119). One possibility is that Crassus realised that Pompey was going to be sent for anyway, and decided it would look better if he made the suggestion, rather than opposing it.

⁴³Plutarch *Pompey* 21

⁴⁴An ovatio was similar to a triumph, but significantly toned down and seen as a lesser prize. It could be granted in cases such as that of Crassus, where the victory was over slaves rather than foreign armies.

⁴⁵This was not unprecedented - Scipio Africanus and Scipio Aemilianus had skipped steps on the *cursus honorum* during the Second and Third Punic Wars respectively.

⁴⁶Livy explicitly mentions that Pompey had not been quaestor (*Periochae* 97.6).

⁴⁷The *pomerium* was a religious boundary around Rome, which a general could not cross at the head of an army, as they would lose their *imperium* by doing so. This is not the same as the boundary crossed by Caesar when he effectively declared war on Rome (the Rubicon, a river marking the boundary between Gaul and Italy).

⁴⁸Plutarch, *Crassus* 12, Plutarch *Pompey* 23.

⁴⁹Velleius Paterculus *History of Rome* 2.30, Livy *Periochae* 97.6. Sulla rightly saw that the tribunes were a threat to the power of the Senate, as they could veto actions by any magistrate. Reinstating these powers was popular with the People though, and no doubt improved Pompey's standing with them.

trade and the supply of grain to Rome.⁵⁰ The situation was now dire, and the tribune Aulus Gabinius proposed, via the *lex Gabinia*,⁵¹ that a commander should be appointed with sole authority to deal with the pirates, together with sufficient resources (men and money) to take them on everywhere simultaneously. Gabinius did not explicitly say who he thought this commander should be, and asked only for approval in principle, but the Senate quickly realised that Pompey was the intended recipient and refused the proposal.⁵² Unfortunately for the Senate, the People - no doubt distressed by the impact of the pirates on the grain supply - charged into the Senate House and demanded that the command be established and given to Pompey.

Pompey responded by giving a speech in which he disingenuously made out that he was tired from his previous campaigns, and suggested that another man should be found instead of always relying on him.⁵³ This poorly disguised attempt to show reluctance had no effect, and Gabinius moved that Pompey should be granted the command. Another tribune, Trebellius, attempted to veto the proposal - an action which he was legally entitled to⁵⁴ - but Gabinius retorted that by doing so Trebellius was going against his oath of office and should be deposed.⁵⁵ A vote was held, and as the results came in Trebellius saw that he was likely to lose and sensibly withdrew his veto, and Gabinius let the matter drop.

Pompey set off with a huge army and fleet,⁵⁶ and divided the area of operations into thirteen districts, each with an assigned commander and troops. The pirates were quickly rounded up and subdued,⁵⁷ but instead of having them executed Pompey dispersed them amongst towns and ensured that they had land to farm in order to discourage them from returning to piracy. Such a quick and decisive victory further boosted Pompey's popularity amongst the People, and no doubt increased the concerns of the Senate too.

Mithridates

Pompey was then recommended for the ongoing war against Mithridates - a slippery and long-term enemy of Rome who had been beaten but not vanquished. Amongst his supporters for this command was none other than Cicero, probably the greatest orator of the Late Republic (though we must be wary of survivorship bias in the sources).⁵⁸ In taking over this command, Pompey replaced the existing proconsuls of Bithynia, Pontus, and Caelicia, and effectively had authority to make war and peace

⁵⁰Cassius Dio records that 'the corn supply was cut off entirely' (*Roman History* 36.23).

⁵¹Laws passed in Rome were usually given the name *lex* ('law') followed by the name of the proposer.

⁵²Cassius Dio *Roman History* 36.23-24

⁵³Pompey's speech is recorded by Cassius Dio (*Roman History* 36.25-26). We must be careful of reading too much into such speeches, as they are rarely a verbatim transcript of what was said. Often the author of the report was not even present when the speech was delivered - this is definitely the case with Dio writing centuries later - and thus need to be treated with caution. Thucydides was transparent enough to draw attention to this issue: 'I have found it difficult to remember the precise words used in the speeches' ... 'so my method has been, while keeping as closely as possible to the general sense of the words that were actually used, to make the speeches say what, *in my opinion*, was called for by each situation.' (Thucydides 1.22, emphasis added).

⁵⁴After the restoration of the powers of tribunes, their power of vetoing a proposal made by any magistrate was reinstated. This caused tribunes to once again become powerful tools, as anyone wanting to oppose a proposal need only convince one tribune to join their side, and forcing a proposal through effectively required unanimity.

⁵⁵A similar tactic was used by Tiberius Gracchus, who went all the way after a stubborn tribune, Octavius, refused to withdraw his veto (Plutarch *Tiberius Gracchus* 11, Appian *Civil Wars* 1.12).

⁵⁶500 ships, 120,000 infantry and 5,000 cavalry (Plutarch *Pompey* 26). Appian claims the same number of infantry but only 270 ships and 4,000 cavalry (*The Mithridatic Wars* 14.94.) Regardless of the exact numbers, this was a force significantly larger than the traditional consular army of 2-4 legions (10,000-20,000 men).

⁵⁷Plutarch claimed that: 'In less than three months, piracy was completely driven from the seas' (*Pompey* 28). This may be an exaggeration given the constraints on how quickly troops could move around in ancient times, but in any event the war was clearly over in short order.

⁵⁸Cicero, in his *Pro lege Manilia* (again a law named after its proposer, G. Manilius), devotes an interminable amount of time and pages to praising Pompey in the most sycophantic way imaginable.

more or less as he wished.⁵⁹

Pompey moved slowly but steadily towards Mithridates, but the going was tough - especially as Mithridates could use his cavalry - superior in form and greater in number - to harass Pompey's baggage train. The same problem occurred when Pompey established a camp and sent out foragers - they could not carry out their work safely with the cavalry of Mithridates attacking them repeatedly. However, Pompey eventually managed to trick the cavalry by retreating to a wooded area which was less advantageous for anyone on horseback, and then springing an ambush, making the most of the terrain and the superior Roman heavy infantry.

After this victory, and following the arrival of reinforcements, Pompey turned the tables by surrounding Mithridates and effectively putting him under siege, with the aim of forcing him to surrender or offer battle on terms advantageous to Pompey. Mithridates however was cunning, and had not survived this long without learning a few tricks. Leaving fires burning to suggest that the camp was still occupied, he led his troops out at night, carefully avoiding Pompey's men. At first it seemed as if Mithridates would escape, as his army was smaller, more mobile, and passing through familiar and largely friendly terrain. However, Pompey managed to catch up and attack at night - though Mithridates once again escaped.⁶⁰ Eventually Pompey gave up the chase, satisfied once Mithridates had fled beyond the Black Sea, and turned to other matters. Mithridates eventually ended up taking his own life after the locals rebelled against his final attempt to raise an army against Rome.⁶¹

First Triumvirate

After returning from the East, Pompey expected a grateful populace to grant him a third triumph and ratify all his decisions taken whilst on campaign. He got his triumph, and was as popular as ever with the People, but the Senate stonewalled his attempts at ratification and to distribute land to his discharged veterans. At around this time, Caesar returned from Spain, also expecting a triumph but wanting to stand for the consulship. Strictly speaking he could not do both, as a general could not cross the boundary until the day of his triumph, but a candidate had to present himself in person. The Senate could have granted Caesar permission to stand *in absentia*, as had been the case for Pompey and Crassus in the same situation, but Marcus Cato talk out the proposal - possibly because one of his relatives was going to stand for the consulship and saw little chance of winning against Caesar.⁶² Caesar could of course have kept his triumph and waited until the following year to stand for election, but whether from shrewd political calculation or simple impatience (he often gives the impression of being a man in a hurry), he decided to abandon his triumph and bet on gaining the consulship.

If we are to believe the sources, at some point Caesar brought together Pompey and Crassus, although it is entirely plausible that either of the other two men made the first move. The question remains as to whether this happened before Caesar gave up his triumph - in which case that decision looks more like a political calculation than a reckless gamble - after this point but before the elections - which would have allowed Pompey and Crassus to support him with words and money⁶³ - or after he was elected and had proven his ability.

Regardless of who initiated the alliance, the combination of Caesar, Pompey and Crassus has become known as the First Triumvirate.⁶⁴ Eventually it would end with the premature deaths of all three men,

⁵⁹The distances involved and the slowness of travel would also mean that any messages passed from, say, the Senate would take such a long time to arrive as to be irrelevant, and Pompey could of course claim that they had been lost or severely delayed.

⁶⁰Frontinus *Stratagems* 2.1.12, Cassius Dio *Roman History* 36.48-49

⁶¹Cassius Dio *Roman History* 37.13

⁶²As it happened, Marcus Calpurnius Bibulus did stand for the consulship, and was elected along with Caesar.

⁶³Bribery was common in Roman elections, and Caesar had shown his willingness to buy votes when he ran for the post of *pontifex maximus* (Plutarch *Caesar* 7). Caesar's campaign for the consulship was so heavily contested that even Cato justified bribery on the grounds that the protection of the constitution was at stake (Suetonius *Caesar* 19).

⁶⁴The ordinal is necessary to distinguish this grouping with that of the Second Triumvirate between Octavian, Antony

but at this point they must have seemed like the masters of Rome.

Conclusions

Pompey's early life consisted of one military success after the other, although his political skills were often found lacking and he does not appear to have been able to combine politics, oratory and the military as successfully as some other men - especially Julius Caesar. However, at the formation of the First Triumvirate, Pompey was likely either the most powerful or joint (with Crassus) in the relationship, and his previous military campaigns had resulted in huge wealth and a vast array of clients such as his former veterans who owed loyalty to him. Whilst it is easy to look back with the benefit of hindsight and see that Caesar's rise formed a potential threat to Pompey, and that Pompey should perhaps not have helped the career of the man who would ultimately bring him down, Pompey's actions at the time were reasonable - and indeed he had been helped by another man (Sulla).

Chronology

- 106 Birth of Pompey
- 87 Death of Pompeius Strabo, father of Pompey
- 77 Pompey sent to fight Sertorius in Spain
- 73 Beginning of the slave revolt (The Third Servile War)
- 71 Pompey returns to Italy and defeats the remnants of Spartacus' army
- 70 First consulship of Pompey (with Crassus)
- 67 Pompey sent to fight the pirates
- 66 *Lex Manilia* passed, granting Pompey the command against Mithridates
- 61 Pompey returns to Rome and celebrates his third triumph
- 60 Formation of the First Triumvirate

Sources and further reading

We are fortunate that this time period is well documented, and many of the ancient sources are still available to us. There is also some further reading for those who wish to explore the subject further.

Ancient sources

Our ancient sources are a mixture of Latin and Greek. For those unfamiliar with either language, English translations are available for all the major sources (e.g. Appian, Plutarch) in the Penguin Classics, Oxford World's Classics and Loeb Classical Library series (the latter retains the original language alongside the translation). More obscure sources (e.g. Velleius Paterculus) are only available in the Loeb series, as are some books of authors such as Cassius Dio.

Appian: Roman historian of Greek origin whose *Roman History* covers the beginning of Rome to the time of Trajan (c. 100 AD). Books 8-17, which cover the Civil War and its aftermath, have come to us intact.

Cassius Dio: Roman statesman of Greek origin who wrote a history of Rome from the founding of the city to around 229 AD. Most of the 80 volume work exists only in fragments or quotations in other sources, but books 36-45 have survived in sufficient parts to be useful and cover the period in question.⁶⁵

and Lepidus. Unlike the First Triumvirate, the Second was public (shown on coins of the period as *III VIR R P C*), above board and legalised by the passing of the *lex Titia*.

⁶⁵These books are available as volumes III and IV of the Loeb Classical Library translations of Cassius Dio.

Velleius Paterculus: Roman soldier, historian, and senator who wrote a history of Rome. Although not generally considered a careful historical study, it is useful for its connected narrative of certain periods.⁶⁶

Orosius: Priest who wrote a history from a Christian perspective, approximately five centuries after Pompey.⁶⁷

Suetonius: Private secretary of Hadrian who wrote biographies of twelve men who held the office of emperor or its near equivalent, starting with Caesar.

Frontinus: Roman senator who served in Britain under Domitian, and was also a capable administrator. He wrote about civil engineering (*De aquaeductu*, 'on aqueducts') and his collection of military *Stratagems* contains numerous references to Pompey.

Plutarch: Greek (later Roman) biographer known for his *Parallel Lives* which discuss and compare individuals whom Plutarch felt to be worthy of note, including Pompey (with Agesilaus II, King of Sparta), Caesar (with Alexander the Great) and Crassus (with Nicias of Athens). Care must be taken as Plutarch wrote biographies as opposed to history, and in places he can digress on a moral tangent.

Further reading

Books dedicated to Pompey are few and far between, especially compared to Caesar, however his life is covered in books discussing the Late Roman Republic.

From the Gracchi to Nero: A History of Rome 133 BC to AD 68, H. H. Scullard. Standard undergraduate text for this period, written at a level which is accessible to those with an existing background understanding of the subject.

The Roman Republic, Michael Crawford. Slimmer and less academic alternative to Scullard.

The Making of the Roman Army: From Republic to Empire, Lawrence Keppie. Comprehensive coverage of the composition of the Roman army, its equipment, and the changes from republic to empire.

Pompey: The Roman Alexander, Peter Greenhalgh. One of the few books dedicated to Pompey. The endnotes in particular are useful for specific events in the sources.

Pompey: The Republican Prince, Peter Greenhalgh. Picks up where *The Roman Alexander* leaves off, and takes us to the death of Pompey.

Pompey the Great, John Leach.

Pompey the Great, Robin Seager (2nd edition).

Of the dedicated books, only Seager's is readily available - the others are out of print and have to be sourced second-hand.

Notes

The notes from this and other talks can be found online at: www.ancienthistory.org.uk

⁶⁶Unlike the other authors listed here, Velleius Paterculus is not widely available with an English translation, however it does appear as volume 152 of the Loeb Classical Library, together with the *Res Gestae* of Augustus.

⁶⁷The most up to date English translation of Orosius, with an introduction and notes, is by A. T. Fear and published by Liverpool University Press.