

# JULIUS CAESAR IN RENAISSANCE LITERARY BIOGRAPHY

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## ABSTRACT

Caesar's life and achievements are known from many ancient sources, including Caesar's own writings. Medieval authors provide partial accounts of his military campaigns, and he was credited during this period with marvelous exploits, achieving fame as a great builder. Yet no commentaries survive from the Middle Ages and no *vitae Caesaris* intended to form part of an *accessus* or to stand on its own. Renaissance interest in biography as a genre and the production of humanist commentaries on the *corpus Caesarianum* suggest that new biographies of Caesar may have appeared at this time. The avenues explored yielded a biography by Johannes Rhellicanus in a commentary framework, supplementary biographical material assembled by Juan Luis Vives, and a more sophisticated use of biographical material from the ancient world and change of emphasis that leads to an image of Caesar as the multi-talented 'Renaissance man'.

**Key words:** Biography. Commentaries. *De viris illustribus* collections. Petrarch. Johannes Rhellicanus. Juan Luis Vives.

## Julio César en la biografía literaria del Renacimiento

## RESUMEN

La vida y las gestas de César se conocen a partir de diversas fuentes antiguas, incluyendo sus propios escritos. Los autores medievales suministran informaciones parciales sobre sus campañas militares, y se le atribuyen en este periodo proezas formidables, incrementado su fama como un gran constructor. Sin embargo no hay constancia de que se haya conservado ningún comentario de época medieval y no hay ninguna *vita Caesaris* integrada en un *accessus* o bien concebida como obra independiente. El interés del Renacimiento en la biografía como género y la producción de comentarios humanísticos sobre el *corpus Caesarianum* inducen a pensar en la posible existencia de biografías nuevas de César en este período. Las vías objeto de indagación se centran en una biografía de Johannes Rhellicanus en el marco de un comentario, en el material biográfico suplementario reunido por Juan Luis Vives, y en un uso más sofisticado del material biográfico del mundo antiguo y un cambio de énfasis que conduce a forjar una imagen de Cesar como un hombre del Renacimiento, con un talento polifacético.

**Palabras clave:** Biografía. Comentarios. Colecciones *De viris illustribus*. Petrarca. Johannes Rhellicanus. Juan Luis Vives.

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Any number of circumstances may have an impact on the biographical tradition of a classical author. Some scenarios in Antiquity, Late Antiquity, and the Middle Ages were more likely than others to prompt the composition of *vitae*, namely: if the author in question were regarded as a poet or philosopher;<sup>1</sup> if enduring posthumous popularity meant that an author was read in the schools; and if the author were the subject of at least one medieval commentary whose *accessus* usually had a section dealing with the *vita auctoris*.

Taken in a biographical framework, Julius Caesar presents an interesting, indeed perhaps an unusual case. There are many sources in the ancient world which tell us about Caesar's life and achievements. First and foremost, we have from Caesar himself the *Commentarii de bello Gallico* in seven books and *Commentarii de bello civili* in three books. These accounts of his military exploits are continued by Aulus Hirtius (book 8 of *De bello Gallico*) and the anonymous authors of the *Bellum Alexandrinum*, *Bellum Africanum*, and the *Bellum Hispaniense*. Then there are the lengthy biographies of Suetonius and Plutarch. All this is supplemented by information in various passages from the works of such contemporaries as Cicero or later writers like Pliny the Elder, Appian, Dio Cassius, Solinus, Eutropius, and Orosius; they often provide personal information and anecdotes, i.e., the kind of 'chatty' material missing from Caesar's *Commentarii* which are written in the impersonal style of the third person singular and are therefore formal in character.

Consequently we know what Caesar looked like, the way he dressed, the pains he took to conceal his baldness, where he lived, the company (both male and female) he kept, and so forth. He was recognized as a person of remarkable ability and someone who possessed an equally remarkable combination of virtues and vices. In other words, there were the ingredients at hand to render him a

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<sup>1</sup> To judge from the *vitae* that survive, someone writing in either or both of these genres usually attracted much more biographical attention than a person who wrote other kinds of works. Although Caesar is reported to have written some verse, his poetic output was certainly not sufficient to warrant his classification as a poet *per se*. In addition, his *Commentarii* do not contain the striking sayings likely to be found in philosophical writings and thus constituting fodder for biographers.

legendary figure. Yet all this was not enough to generate the production of separate and mostly anonymous medieval lives in Latin like those attached to Virgil, Ovid, and Statius. If such Latin lives ever existed for Caesar, presumably they too might have contained to some degree accounts of otherwise unattested miraculous feats or facts previously unknown (and of doubtful authenticity) about his parents, his childhood, his early education, and so forth.

The absence of lives of this kind is all the more curious if we remember that, during the Middle Ages, Caesar was certainly not forgotten. Vernacular works credited Caesar with marvelous exploits, and he acquired a reputation as a great builder.<sup>2</sup> I suggest that some of the various factors responsible for the lack of medieval *vitae Caesarianae* are:

- 1) Some long-lasting (though not universal) confusion regarding the authorship of Caesar's writings. Manuscripts of the *Bellum Gallicum* ranging from the ninth to the twelfth century contain subscriptions recording the name of a certain 'Julius Celsus Constantinus' who has read and corrected the text of books 1-8.<sup>3</sup> This gave rise to the belief in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance that Celsus was actually the author as well. Such a misunderstanding is perhaps another reason why we lack medieval biographies of Caesar—and it would have been very difficult indeed to write a biography of 'Julius Celsus Constantinus' since this personage is otherwise unknown.
- 2) The omission of Caesar from the lists of authors to be read in the medieval schools.<sup>4</sup>
- 3) The apparent lack of medieval commentaries on the entire corpus Caesarianum and therefore no *accessus* with a biographical section.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> H. NEARING, Jr., «Local Caesar Traditions in Britain» *Speculum* 24 (1949), pp. 218-227; P. HESS, *Li roumanz de Julius Caesar. Ein Beitrag zur Cäsargeschichte im Mittelalter*, Winterthur 1956.

<sup>3</sup> The text of the subscriptions is conveniently provided by W. HERING (ed.), *C. Iulii Caesaris Commentarii rerum gestarum*, vol. 1, Leipzig 1987, pp. XVI-XVII.

<sup>4</sup> This applies throughout the Middle Ages; see, e.g., G. GLAUCHE, *Schullektüre im Mittelalter. Entstehung und Wandlungen des Lektürekanons bis 1200 nach den Quellen dargestellt*, Munich 1970 and R. BLACK, *Humanism and Education in Medieval and Renaissance Italy. Tradition and Innovation in Latin Schools from the Twelfth to the Fifteenth Century*, Cambridge 2001, where Caesar's name never appears as a school author.

<sup>5</sup> A survey and listing, with brief descriptions, of commentaries on the corpus Caesarianum, is found in V. BROWN, «Caesar, Gaius Julius», F. E. CRANZ and P. O. KRISTELLER (eds.), *Catalogus translationum et commentariorum. Mediaeval and Renaissance Latin Translations and Commentaries. Annotated Lists and Guides*, vol. 3, Washington, D. C. 1976, pp. 87-139. To the best of my knowledge, no new commentaries have been located since the publication of this article.

- 4) The loss of the first quaternion in the early manuscript of Suetonius' *De vita Caesarum* from which all other witnesses are derived. With the absence of the prologue and the beginning of *Divus Iulius*, the text starts when Caesar is fifteen years old and has lost his father. Consequently, there is not the usual section on ancestry that is found at the beginning of the other lives, and we have surely lost at least some information on Caesar's early life. If medieval biographers did not rush to fill the void, the answer may be simply that the lacuna in the Suetonian text was not recognized until perhaps the beginning of the sixteenth century (see part II below).

This, then, was the situation by the time of the Renaissance. Biographically speaking, humanists were more ecumenical than their ancient and medieval predecessors since their interests extended to classical authors who were neither poets nor philosophers. They were also keen practitioners of biography as a genre. These new developments, coupled with the appearance of commentaries on the corpus Caesarianum, suggest that an exploration is in order vis-à-vis the possibility that new lives of Caesar were composed. If this turns out to be the case, who wrote the lives and where are they found? What was their focus? Do they reveal a specifically Renaissance attitude to Caesar? The number of potentially useful sources is very large and so, in this article, my investigations have been confined to three groups: commentaries on the *Bella* of Caesar and his continuators; fifteenth-century commentaries on Suetonius' *De vita Caesarum*; and collective biographies of the *De viris illustribus* genre.<sup>6</sup> I will be principally concerned with the picture these groups portray of *Caesar togatus*, i.e., Caesar in a 'civilian' role as opposed to Caesar in the military role that was often fiercely debated in the Renaissance.

## I

While no medieval commentaries on Caesar have yet been located, medieval historians record Caesar's military activities and his accomplishments. These sources include Flodoard of Rheims (*Historia Remensis ecclesiae*), Aimoinus of Fleury (*Historia Francorum*), the *Gesta episcoporum Cameracensium*, and the *Historia Tornacensis*. A biographical treatment, however, is usually reserved for an encyclopedia. One such example in the thirteenth century is the *Fabularius* of

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<sup>6</sup> It would have been appropriate to consider as well commentaries on Plutarch's *Life of Caesar*, but the first commentary in Latin is that of Wilhelm Xylander and it appeared in 1561 (kind communication of Dr. Marianne Pade), too late for our purpose.

Conrad of Mure (1210–81), which he completed in 1273.<sup>7</sup> The work was intended to help his students deal with the names they would encounter in the poems of Ovid. Conrad's sources for his treatment of Caesar are Ovid, Lucan, Solinus, Otto of Freising, and Honorius of Autun. The biography in the *Fabularius* opens with praises of Caesar for his military ability, courage, speed in reading and writing; it then goes on to list very rapidly his innumerable (*innumera*) accomplishments in and outside Rome, his victories over the Gauls and Pompey, his assumption of civil power, and, finally, his death at the hands of Brutus and Cassius once he had attained monarchical rule. Conrad concludes his treatment with various etymologies of the cognomen 'Caesar', Caesar's adoption of Octavian, the change in name to 'Iulius' of the month formerly known as 'Quintilis', and listings of the Hebrew, Egyptian, Greek, and Roman names of some or all the months. The etymologies differ from the Renaissance versions reported below inasmuch as Conrad believes our Julius to be the first to be known as 'Caesar' and consequently that he was so called because he was delivered by caesarean section or himself had a thick head of hair (*caesaries*) at birth or his father killed an elephant (Greek *ceson*) on the day his son was born.<sup>8</sup>

It will be clear even from this brief summary that (a) Conrad's biography of Caesar is a somewhat helter-skelter compilation ending in digression rather than an organized treatment; and (b) equal attention is paid to Caesar's military and non-military achievements, with literary accomplishments conspicuously absent from the latter.

The earliest commentary on any work in the corpus Caesarianum is written in the margins on fols. 9r-72v of Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Reg. lat. 763, saec. XV beside the text of *Bellum Gallicum* and covers books 1-7. It begins with a comment on 1.1 *Gallia* and so is not preceded by an *accessus* or any other kind of prefatory material. The anonymous commentator provides

<sup>7</sup> T. VAN DE LOO (ed.), *Conradi de Mure Fabularius*, Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis 210, Turnhout 2006, pp. 340-342.

<sup>8</sup> Since these are the standard etymologies also in the Renaissance, it is worthwhile to cite the sources for them so as to show the various interpretations (and deformations) throughout the centuries:

Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia* 7.9.47: «Auspiciatus enecta parente gignuntur, sicut Scipio Africanus prior natus primusque Caesarum a caeso matris utero dictus, qua de causa et Caesones appellati.»

*Scriptores historiae Augustae*, *Ael.* 2.3-4: «Et quoniam de Caesarum nomine in huius praecipue vita et aliquid disputandum, qui hoc solum nomen indeptus est, Caesarem vel ab elephanto, qui lingua Maurorum 'caesai' dicitur, in proelio caeso eum, qui primus sic appellatus est, doctissimi viri et eruditissimi putant dictum, vel quia mortua matre, sed ventre caeso, sit natus, vel quod cum magnis crinibus sit utero parentis effusus, vel quod oculis caesiis et ultra humanum morem viguerit.»

many geographical explanations and, to a lesser extent, also deals with technical and military terms. There is no annotation *per se* that could be considered even remotely biographical.<sup>9</sup>

It was not until nearly midway through the sixteenth century that a biography of Caesar finally appeared in the framework of a commentary. This is the work of Johannes Müller Rhellicanus (Johann Müller Rhellikan, ca. 1473–1542), a Swiss scholar, who followed the usual pattern and commented on the entire corpus. His efforts were published posthumously in 1543. As was logical, he began with the earliest work and therefore the biography forms part of the commentary on the *Bellum Gallicum*. Of the eleven commentaries on the *Bellum Gallicum* (Rhellicanus' is the fourth in terms of chronology), it is the only one to be thus equipped. Clearly commentators did not feel obligated to provide the reader with this kind of information, and the fact that Rhellicanus did so merits consideration of his *vita Caesaris* and its place in his methodology.

The *vita* is found in the several pages entitled 'Commentaria Praefatio' that precede the commentary.<sup>10</sup> Despite the title, the 'Praefatio' proceeds along the lines of a typical medieval *accessus*. Indeed, Rhellicanus makes his intention plain from the very beginning: he states that an orderly methodology is of paramount importance in all human activity and hence he will use the Servian model consisting of six components, the first of which has to do with the author's life (the heading Rhellicanus uses is 'auctoris vita'). This choice of format is all the more curious since Caesar does not figure in any of the collections of medieval *accessus* that I have explored to date.<sup>11</sup>

Rhellicanus announces that his sources are the accounts found in Plutarch, Suetonius, Eutropius, and Appian, with pride of place given to Suetonius. He

<sup>9</sup> For a brief description of ms. Reg. lat. 763, see E. PELLEGRIN et al. (eds.), *Les manuscrits classiques latins de la Bibliothèque Vaticane*, vol. 2.1, Paris 1978, pp. 106–107.

<sup>10</sup> G. JUNGERMANUS (ed.), *C. Iulii Caesaris quae exstant ex nupera Viri docti accuratissima recognitione*, Frankfurt 1606, pp. 1–4. This edition contains (pp. 1–579, paginated separately) all previously printed commentaries on Caesar, together with other kinds of non-commentary material (lists of variant readings, the Greek translation of the *Bellum Gallicum*, notes on the building of a bridge across the Rhine and the war machines used at the siege of Marseilles, etc.). Unless otherwise noted, citations from commentaries by other humanists are also based on this edition, which is widely available.

<sup>11</sup> Published texts: R. B. C. HUYGENS (ed.), *Accessus ad auctores. Bernard d'Utrecht. Conrad d'Hirsau, Dialogus super Auctores*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Leiden 1970. Unpublished texts: Augsburg, Stadt- und Universitätsbibliothek, 4<sup>o</sup> Cod. 21, saec. XV; Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale, 21891, saec. XV/XVI; Copenhagen, Det Kongelige Bibliotek, Fabricius 29 2<sup>o</sup>, saec. XIII, fols. 5vb–6rb (kind communication of Prof. Frank T. Coulson who is preparing an edition of the various *accessus* in this codex). Admittedly my investigations have not been exhaustive.

remains true to his word. His biography of Caesar is essentially a skeletal summary, and sometimes a paraphrase, of the Suetonian *Divus Iulius*, interspersed with a few quotations from Plutarch, Appian, and Cicero. Thus he begins by reporting that Caesar was fifteen years old when his father died. (No reference is made to the fact that the *Divus Iulius* begins incomplete). Understandably enough, Rhellicanus does not recount in full Caesar's exploits in Gaul or his struggle against Pompey since these will be considered in his commentaries on the *Gallic War* and the *Civil War* respectively. Instead, the emphasis is definitely on personal details, especially the extraordinary side to Caesar's character as reflected in the unusual combination of virtues and vices. Any other references to Caesar's military prowess are couched in the same vein, for instance, the exemplary caution he showed in making inquiries with respect to the geography of Britain before invading that island. The biography concludes with a fairly long account of Caesar's death, taken (often verbatim) from Suetonius.

Starkly absent from the remaining Renaissance commentaries on any work in the corpus Caesarianum is any kind of prefatory material (except, of course, for a dedicatory letter addressed to a patron if required by the circumstances). As a rule, these commentaries, like that already mentioned in Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Reg. lat. 763, plunge into the heart of the matter immediately with the explanation of the first lemma, which may consist of a word from the title (*Commentarii*) or the text itself. Thus Rhellicanus' *accessus* stands out even more.

For the sake of completeness, we should observe that, in the edition of the commentary on Caesar by Johannes Glandorp (1501-1564) which was published posthumously at Leipzig in 1574 by his student Reiner Reineccius, one of the three notes preceding the first lemma concerns the etymology of the cognomen 'Caesar'. Three possibilities are given with no sources specified: caesarean section; a full head of hair (*caesaries*) at birth; an elephant named 'Caesa' or 'Caesar' whom the first to bear the cognomen 'Caesar' had killed in the Punic War. The second note records the testimony of Suetonius, Pliny the Elder, Cicero, and Quintilian to Caesar's eloquence and vigorous intellect.<sup>12</sup> Whether Glandorp himself would have approved of precisely the placement and arrangement of this material is an open question since Reineccius says in the

<sup>12</sup> IUNGERMANUS (ed.), *C. Iulii Caesaris quae exstant*, pp. 130-131.

dedicatory epistle that Glandorp never prepared this commentary for publication, thereby leaving the impression that he had composed another better, more polished commentary.<sup>13</sup>

## II

Let us consider next the question of Caesar's biography in the framework of the three earliest printed commentaries on Suetonius' *De vita Caesarum*. The first is the commentary of Domizio Calderini (1447-1478), which was published posthumously in 1480 at Milan. We can deal with this quickly since his notes on the *Divus Iulius* are brief and cover only the beginning of the first chapter to the beginning of the third chapter. Some biographical information is supplied gratuitously, but sparingly, on fol. a2r before the first lemma. It starts with the etymology of the name 'Caesar'; Calderini gives only a single possibility, that is, the name is applied to someone who was delivered by Caesarean section; in this he is silently following Pliny, *Nat. hist.* 7.47. He then notes that Suetonius and Plutarch both omit any information about Caesar's father—obviously Calderini did not realize that both these *Lives* begin incomplete—and so fills the lacuna with Pliny the Elder's notice (*Nat. hist.* 7.181) of the sudden death of Caesar's father at Pisa while putting on his shoes one morning. Calderini ends the short introductory section with the observation that the family of the Iulii also included a tragic poet named Julius Caesar who was mentioned by Pedianus; this is, of course, Asconius Pedianus who refers in a comment on Cicero's *Pro Scauro* to tragedies by Lucius Julius Caesar, consul in 90 B.C.<sup>14</sup> Then come lemmatic comments with identifications of historical figures, glosses on Caesar's Latinity (Calderini supplies synonyms), etc.

Ten years later, in 1490, the commentary of Marco Antonio Coccio Sabellico (1436 [?]-1506) was published at Venice. In the first exhortation addressed to Doge Agostino Barbarigo (1419-1501), Sabellico remarks on fol. 3r that Suetonius' decision to begin the *Divus Iulius* when the subject was an adolescent has been called into question. Such a choice, he says, has been

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<sup>13</sup> BROWN, «Caesar, Gaius Julius», p. 111: «Quia enim Glandorpius in editionem numquam incubuisset, opinionem de se praeuisse videtur, alia ipsum elaboriora et luculentiora conscripsisse quorum hoc brevi commentario tantummodo gustum aliquem dare voluerit.»

<sup>14</sup> A. C. CLARK (ed.) and R. G. LEWIS (trans.), *Asconius. Commentaries on Speeches of Cicero*, Oxford 2006, pp. 48-49, 225-226 (commentary).



explained by the shrewd conjecture [of unnamed persons] that it is not appropriate for the deeds of great men to be mentioned, as it were, in the same breath with the inconsequential events of childhood («Nunc quid sit quod ab adolescentia C. Caesaris uitam scribere sit Tranquillus exorsus in dubium uenire potest; sunt qui coniectura haud inepta non oportuisse dicant summi uiri gesta eius incunabulis et infantiae crepundiis confundi»). This is an ingenious way out of the difficulty. In his comment on the first lemma *Annum agens Caesar*, Sabellico could not resist the allure of the various etymologies of the cognomen and reports, like Calderini, that the name is derived from birth by Caesarean section. He also alerts the reader to the fact that Servius and Aelius Spartianus give further explanations. Then Sabellico follows this up, as did Calderini, with the report by the elder Pliny that Caesar's father died at Pisa one morning while putting on his shoes.

A more sober treatment is given by Filippo Beroaldo the Elder (1453-1505) whose commentary on Suetonius appeared at Bologna in 1493 and is still valuable. In a discussion of the origin of the name 'Caesar' placed before the commentary actually starts, Beroaldo, who was a no-nonsense kind of scholar, simply dismisses the etymological claims previously advanced. Not for him are the assertions that the name is owing to Caesarean section, the slain elephant named 'Caesar', the grey-blue eyes, and the thick head of hair. «For whatever reason this family is called 'Caesar',» he says, quoting silently from *Scriptores historiae Augustae*, *Ael.* 2.5, «it is certain that this name will have enduring fame throughout the world.» He continues with the observation that «it is silly to claim a Caesarean birth for Caesar since he lost his mother Aurelia while he was fighting in Gaul,» i.e., many years later (Beroaldo is implying here that a Caesarean delivery was usually fatal for the mother if she were not already dead when the operation was performed). Vis-à-vis the death of Caesar's father, he resorts to the account of Pliny the Elder already cited for the previous two commentators, i.e., Caesar's father died one morning at Pisa while he was putting on his shoes.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Philippus BEROALDUS (ed.), *Suetonius*, Bologna 1493, fol. iir: «Certe quacumque de causa Caesares nuncupati sint, hoc constat clarissimum et duraturum eternitate mundi nomen istud effloruisse, quod non absurde dici possit nomen super omne mortalium nomen. Iulius autem Cesar qui dictator perpetuo epitheto dicitur ab eruditis, a quo familia et appellatio Caesarum deinceps propagata est, de quo in praesentia commentari auspicamur, non est natus ceso utero materno ut quidam male sentiunt sed matrem habuit Aureliam feminam primariam, quam amisit eo tempore quo gerebat bellum in Gallia. Pater uero et ipse Cesar nuncupatus praetura romani populi functus obiit Pisis morte repentina dum calciatur matutino.»