

A Commentary on Julius Caesar's De Bello Gallico 6.14.

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This Commentary will focus on Julius Caesar's *De bello gallico* and in particular passage 6.14 regarding the Druids and their spheres of influence over the wider Celtic population. This is a key and 'essential work on the Celts'¹ written by a man known to have had first-hand knowledge of the Celtic peoples. He conquered Gaul in a campaign that lasted nine years and briefly forayed into Britain on two separate occasions.² On the face of that evidence, at first glance, one could reasonably assume that they were dealing with a relatively reliable source whose author had direct if not personal knowledge of the people it is describing.

The paper will attempt a critical assessment of the passage in question, examining the authors influences, motives and intentions for the piece. In addition, it will analyse how these affect the apparently dependable nature of the source and its reliability in relation to our understanding of pre-Roman Celtic religion.

The passage opens with a description of the Druids as not going to war or paying tributes. Caesar describes an 'exemption from military service' and a dispensation in all matters.' This implies that the Druids see themselves as of a higher status than others, or moreover, that Caesar himself wants to portray them as such. The use of the words 'exemption' and 'dispensation' along with the distasteful tone of the language would seem to infer an unfairness to these practices. Perhaps an attempt by the author to depict the Druids as discriminatory to his audience. Indeed, in the next sentence this is reiterated when he ascribes 'great advantages' to the 'profession'.

Caesar speaks of 'a great number of verses' that had to be learnt and committed to memory by the druids in training and that some remained in this preparation for up to 'twenty years.' Although we have to look at Caesar's work through modern eyes and treat it with scepticism, these are statements that must be considered plausible at the very least. No written evidence of the Druids or their supposed teachings survives and if we take Caesar's statements as true it would seem this has always been the case.³ Furthermore, the motif of oral tradition is one that has rich echoes throughout Celtic folklore and literature in both Ireland and Wales.⁴ This can also be seen with the Welsh bards of the medieval period, who committed to memory a substantial volume of material as well as story tellers in Ireland right into modern times.⁵ Does this then represent the same oral tradition described by Caesar himself or a mere coincidence that it frequently occurs in Celtic lore? It has even been propositioned that the Druids survived in Ireland until the coming of Christianity⁶ and there are striking similarities between classical accounts from Gaul and the social system embedded within the Ulster

¹ P. Freeman 'Caesar, Gaius Julius' in *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. By J.T.Koch, (Santa Barbara, Denver and Oxford: ABC-CLIO 2006) p.323.

² Ibid p.312

³ J. T. Koch 'druids [1] accounts from the classical authors' in *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. By J. T. Koch, (Santa Barbara, Denver and Oxford: ABC-CLIO 2006) pp.611-614.

⁴ M. Aldhouse-Green, *The Celtic Myths: A Guide To The Ancient Gods And Legends* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd 2015) P.44.

⁵ B. Cunliffe, *The Celts: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2003) p.56.

⁶ M. Green, *Dictionary Of Celtic Myth And Legend* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd 1992) p.87.

Cycle.⁷ This is to such an extent, that according to Barry Cunliffe, ‘It is difficult not to accept that they both sprang from the same source.’⁸

Although these Druidic customs were forbidden to be committed to writing, Caesar does tell us that in ‘almost all other matters’ both ‘public and private’ Greek letters are used. In Caesar’s opinion this is to prevent ‘their doctrines’ being ‘divulged among the mass of the people’ or to ‘those who learn’. Again here, Caesar paints the Druids as a type of secretive, powerful, elite who wield and maintain control by manipulation of the ignorant. In reality the Celtic people could quite as feasibly have been embracing of a long-established druidic order as a key part of their religious practices. The key in this instance is in the words powerful and elite. These would be precisely the type of people a regime would want deposed first upon conquering a territory so there is no coincidence in seeing the Druids described in this light by the author.

As a second explanation for the lack of written material, Caesar also states his opinion that ‘it occurs to most men’ that ‘dependence on writing’ relaxes ‘diligence in learning thoroughly’. This could potentially be interpreted as begrudging praise⁹, possibly reflecting his own people’s reliance on writing and how this can detriment other areas, namely memory.

Caesar describes as a ‘leading tenet’ of the Druids the idea that the soul does not die but is somehow reincarnated or passed ‘from one body to another’. This is another constantly reoccurring Celtic mythological theme¹⁰ and Caesar is not the first to have written of this.¹¹ The idea of rebirth is seen frequently in Celtic literature, for example, the Cauldron that is able to bring the dead back to life in the Mabinogi. This is also a scene which is probably depicted on the Gundestrup Cauldron.¹² These trends in the vernacular literatures and mythology hint at traces and links to matters described in the passage by Caesar himself. The rebirth concept is also responsible, according to the author, for the Celtic warrior’s extreme bravery as the ‘fear of death is disregarded’. It could also be argued that what Caesar is describing here can perhaps be seen surviving to a later period in the form of the heroic ethos, prevalent in later literature such as *Y Gododdin*. Physical features of a belief system that encompasses the idea of the rebirth concept can be seen in archeology. Grave goods recovered from Celtic sites such as Hallstatt¹³ dating to before the Roman conquests of Gaul and Britain would seem to support this idea and uphold what Caesar describes as an already established principle.

Caesar next refers to the druids imparting their teachings onto the youth which is once again an example of him showing the Druids as having extreme power across all reaches of society. Of these teachings he mentions by name the ‘stars’, ‘earth’, ‘the nature of things’ and ‘the power and majesty of the immortal gods’. As these are central themes of much later Celtic

⁷ B. Cunliffe, *The Celts: A Very Short Intro*, p.61.

⁸ Ibid p.61.

⁹ Ibid p.57.

¹⁰ M. Green, *Dictionary Of Celtic*, p.175.

¹¹ B. Cunliffe, *The Druids: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010) p.76.

¹² M. Green, *Dictionary of Celtic*, p.175.

¹³ R. Karl, ‘Hallstatt [1] The Archaeological Site’ in *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. By John T. Koch, (Santa Barbara, Denver And Oxford: ABC-CLIO 2006) pp.884-887.

literature that had their origins deeply rooted in oral tradition passed down over centuries, it would seem more than coincidence that they all appear in this passage of text.

Caesar writes in the third person throughout the passage and this makes it appear as though all details described in the piece had been observed by Caesar himself through his own eyes. Effectively he creates a narrative, albeit one that is made to suit his own agenda and self-glorification. This should not simply be taken at face value, however. In fact, there is substantial evidence that some of Caesar's work is derived from that of Poseidonius¹⁴ which in itself poses questions for the consistency of the source and its reliability.

From the analysis of the text, it would appear that it contains an element of fact. The reality is that Caesar can be historically identified as having first-hand knowledge of the Celts and the Druids as well as their practices, even to the point of having a Druid acquaintance¹⁵. This fact cannot be dismissed lightly, but that does not mean that everything he describes should automatically be accepted as fact.

As shown above, Caesar refers to various religious practices and beliefs that would appear to be used by the Celts at the time of Caesar's conquest. In some cases, we even have physical evidence of this such as burial practices. Furthermore, we have demonstrated how certain motifs appear in much later material, suggesting that they also survived, passed orally, as Caesar describes the druids as doing, long past the Roman occupation of the lands in question.

While these links are most certainly extant, one has to be astutely aware of Caesar's undoubted personal and political bias when dealing with this source. To Caesar, his whole *De bello gallico* will have been an opportunity to justify his own personal involvement as well as that of the empire in the wars in Gaul.¹⁶ According to John Collis, speaking of *De bello gallico* as a whole:

Some of Caesar's description of the Gaul's is clearly derived from Poseidonius, and though his information may be exaggerated for political ends or personal aggrandisement, and also some is anecdotal, nonetheless his narrative gives us greater detail of the course of the conquest and of his opponents than we have for any other phase of Roman expansion.¹⁷

In the passage analysed, 6.14, it is apparent that Caesar is creating an image of the all-powerful Druid and it is this power that was his main concern¹⁸. For Caesar in a newly conquered territory, it is power-wielding classes like Druids who would have caused him the most concern as they are able to organize and influence people into such things as rebellion. Caesar, therefore, has a genuine reason to over emphasize the importance of the Druids as well as the extent to which their control and influence extended over the general population. This way they could be viewed as a threat to civilized Roman society and thus eradicated legitimately in the eyes of the Roman public.

In conclusion, passage 6.14 of *De bello gallico* can be seen to contain some hints of fascinating links from Celtic religious practices of the pre-Roman era. These links have

¹⁴ J. Collis, *The Celts: Origins, Myths & Inventions* (Gloucestershire: Tempus Publishing Ltd, 2003) p. 20.

¹⁵ Cunliffe, *The Celts: A Very Short Intro*, p.88.

¹⁶ Collis, *Origins, Myths & Inventions*, p.20.

¹⁷ Collis, *Origins, Myths & Inventions*, p.20.

¹⁸ Cunliffe, *The Druids: A Very Short Intro*, p.77.

clearly visible similarities to material in the Vernacular literatures of Ireland and Wales as well as archeological evidence. This particular passage also illustrates, on the other hand, how Caesar's choice of words and use of language when describing the Druids and religious practices is ultimately geared to portray them as best fits his own agenda. With this bias in mind, extreme caution is needed when using this material in a context of understanding Pre-Roman, Celtic religious beliefs and or practices.

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