

## Session 4 Booklet: Caesar in Gaul

### Part 1: Caesar's campaign

#### 1 Introduction

The importance of the decade that Caesar spent in Gaul is not limited to Roman history. The conquest of Transalpine Gaul created a new, powerful centre in the structure of the empire, which soon became an interesting laboratory for the encounter and the contamination of Roman and indigenous cultures. Gaul would eventually become one of the richest and liveliest regions of the Roman Empire; the leading role that it played in the history of the European continent is, to an extent, the consequence of Caesar's political decision to conquer Transalpine Gaul at once and to include it into the empire in its entirety. Despite its momentous consequences, Caesar's coming to Gaul had a number of contingent reasons, which all played a significant part in his decision to invest so much time and effort in the conquest of the new province. Due to his Marian connections on his father's side, Caesar was keen to revive the myth of Marius' victories against the Cimbrians and the Teutons, two Germanic populations, towards the end of the second century BC. Secondly, he could already claim some familiarity with the Gallic world, as he had numerous *clientelae* in Cisalpine Gaul (corresponding to most of Northern Italy, especially the Po Valley); the cultural affinities between the two regions were no doubt significant, and Caesar could reasonably hope, to an extent at least, to make sense of Transalpina thanks to his familiarity with Cisalpina. Most importantly, Caesar was keen to expand his consensus base beyond Rome, and realised that a loyal and devoted army could be a formidable tool. A five-year command, along with the prospect of victory, a rich war booty, and possibly a series of land assignments, was exactly what a general in his position needed in order to garner his soldiers' favour. Caesar's biographers, Suetonius and Plutarch, insist at length on Caesar's ability to create a special bond with his soldiers, which seemed to be based on a shrewd combination of authority and camaraderie, and was accompanied by Caesar's proverbial keenness to share his soldiers' dangers.

#### 2 The sources

Most of what we know about Caesar comes from friendly sources, whose main concern is to portray the great man in a favourable light. The problem is especially serious for the Gallic campaigns, for which the main source is obviously Caesar's own "journal" of war, the *Commentarii de bello Gallico* (on which more later); an alternative narrative from the Gallic enemy simply does not survive. Despite this structural shortcoming, the development of Caesar's initiatives in the region can be reconstructed quite accurately.

#### 3 The Helvetii

There is no need to go through it in much detail, as it is readily available elsewhere; it will be useful, however, to summarise the main steps of the operation. The first front with which Caesar busied himself was the attempt of the Helvetii, a population based in what is now called the Swiss plateau, to migrate *en masse* to West Gaul, with the aim of escaping the pressure of

the Germanic populations who were seeking to settle beyond the Rhine River. Caesar's count of the manpower of the Helvetii – 368,000 people (*BG* 1.29.1) – gives the sense of what was at stake. The Helvetii were contained by the consolidation of Roman positions on the Rhone; their eventual attempt to settle up north, in the territory of the Aedui, long-time allies of Rome, was rebuked too by Caesar's memorable victory at Bibracte (near modern Autun, in Burgundy) in the summer of 58 BC. The Helvetii were compelled to return to their territory.

#### **4 The Germani**

The second threat that Caesar had to face was more substantial: the pressure of the Germani, led by their king Ariovistus, had reached the western bank of the Rhine, and threatened the Aedui and the Sequani, another Gallic population. Caesar was successful again (September 58 BC) – but the conflict had moved up to the territory of modern Alsace, and Caesar took the opportunity to spread it even further. In 57 BC we find fighting in Brittany and Normandy, with a naval confrontation in the Channel; in 56-55 BC he was in the Rhine region again. The impressive military record of this period was remarkable, but not immune from some horrible crimes. The most despicable one was the massacre of a number of German envoys who came to him for talks in 56 BC, which he followed, profiting on the confusion caused, with the massacre of an entire division of soldiers, including women and children. The tone of Caesar's own account is instructive (*BG* 4.15):

The Germans when, upon hearing a noise behind them, they looked and saw that their families were being slain, throwing away their arms and abandoning their standards, fled out of the camp, and when they had arrived at the confluence of the Meuse and the Rhine, the survivors despairing of further escape, as a great number of their countrymen had been killed, threw themselves into the river and there perished, overcome by fear, fatigue, and the violence of the stream. Our soldiers, after the alarm of so great a war, for the number of the enemy amounted to 430,000, returned to their camp, all safe to a man, very few being even wounded. Caesar granted those whom he had detained in the camp liberty of departing. They however, dreading revenge and torture from the Gauls, whose lands they had harassed, said that they desired to remain with him. Caesar granted them permission. – trans. by W. A. McDevitte. and W. S. Bohn (1869).

The German war being finished, Caesar thought it expedient for him to cross the English Channel, for many reasons...

#### **5 Britain**

The bonds between some Gallic populations and the inhabitants of the South of Britain were quite close at the time. Moreover, the fascination that the great island held for the Roman general was profound. For this reason and Caesar took the opportunity to cross over to the island. The impact of his two missions to Britain, in 55 and 54 BC, was however modest: the limited familiarity with the geography of the island, the inclement weather, and the inexperience of Caesar in handling a large fleet made the campaign much shorter than it should have been, and Caesar left Britain after having obtained the formal submission of some local

populations, especially those who lived in Cantium (modern Kent). The myth of his British campaign, though, was duly echoed by a number of poets in the decades to come; for example, the *carmen* 11 of Catullus, a poet from Verona, whose father was, incidentally, a personal friend of Caesar (although Catullus was not terribly interested in politics):

Furius and Aurelius, companions of Catullus,  
whether he penetrates the furthest of the Indies,  
or the shore where the beating of the eastern  
waves resonates far and wide,

whether he penetrates into the Hyrcanos or the gentle Arabs,  
or the arrow-carrying Parthians,  
or the seven fold Nile  
which colours the plains,

whether he will go across the great Alps,  
intending to see the great monument to Caesar,  
or the Gallic Rhine or the horribly  
distant Britain,

you who are prepared to try all these things,  
and whatever else the will of the gods will bring,  
announce to my girl a few  
nasty words.

Let her live and let her flourish with her adulterers,  
whom having embraced 300 of them at the same time, she owns and keeps them,  
truly loving none of them, but repeatedly breaking the groins of  
all of them;

nor, let her no longer look back for my love as before,  
which by her fault, has fallen,  
just like the farthest flower of the field  
has been killed by a passing plow.

- Trans. by Bryn Stromberg (1997)

## 6 Revolt in Gaul

The campaign in Britain was not the best idea from a strategic point of view. Its unintended side effect was the revival of anti-Roman activities in Gaul. It was, in fact, the beginning of a widespread attempt to put an end to the Roman presence in Gaul – although there were plenty of individuals and communities that were prepared to collaborate with Caesar. The revolt took a number of years to repress from 55 to 51 BC, when the charismatic leader of the revolt, Vercingetorix, surrendered himself to Caesar after the siege of the city of Alesia, which the rebels had elected as their headquarters. Vercingetorix' choice was generous, as it avoided retaliation on his fellow tribesmen. The village of Ambiorix, another Gallic leader who did not

surrender, and continued a guerrilla-style war against Caesar, was devastated by Caesar with great fierceness, as a personal vendetta against that elusive enemy (Caes. BG 8.24.4).

With the defeat of Vercingetorix, and the conquest of Gaul, the remit of Caesar's Gallic command was for all practical purposes over. However, the nature itself of Caesar's success, the commitment of the army to the personal cause of its general, the huge war booty, and the changes that had intervened at Rome in the eight years that Caesar had spent in Gaul made the prospect of an 'orderly transition' simply unviable.

## **Part 2: Caesar as a Writer**

### **1 Introduction**

Having briefly outlined Caesar's activities in Gaul, it is worth considering his *Commentarii* as our main source for the study of the Gallic War. The discussion of this work can prove valuable for a number of reasons. The two most significant are probably: first, Caesar was not simply a politician and a general, but a significant intellectual in his own right, and an outstanding writer; secondly, a critical reading of his *Commentarii* is the first step for the understanding and assessment of what Caesar did in his Gallic campaigns; of the (often blurry) distinction between his political and military achievements and the atrocities that he committed.

### **2 Suetonius' Opinion**

In order to appreciate the breadth of Caesar's literary and intellectual work, we should read in full Suetonius' summary of his outputs (ch. 55-56):

In eloquence and in the art of war he either equalled or surpassed the fame of their most eminent representatives. After his accusation of Dolabella, he was without question numbered with the leading advocates. At all events when Cicero reviews the orators in his *Brutus*, he says that he does not see to whom Caesar ought to yield the palm, declaring that his style is elegant as well as transparent, even grand and in a sense noble. Again in a letter to Cornelius Nepos he writes thus of Caesar: "Come now, what orator would you rank above him of those who have devoted themselves to nothing else? Who has cleverer or more frequent epigrams? Who is either more picturesque or more choice in diction?" He appears, at least in his youth, to have imitated the manner of Caesar Strabo, from whose speech entitled "For the Sardinians" he actually transferred some passages word for word to a trial address of his own. He is said to have delivered himself in a high-pitched voice with impassioned action and gestures, which were not without grace. He left several speeches, including some which are attributed to him on insufficient evidence. Augustus had good reason to think that the speech "For Quintus Metellus" was rather taken down by shorthand writers who could not keep pace with his delivery, than published by Caesar himself; for in some copies I find that even the title is not "For Metellus," but, "Which he wrote for Metellus," although the discourse purports to be from Caesar's lips, defending Metellus and himself against the charges of their common detractors. Augustus also questions the

authenticity of the address "To His Soldiers in Spain," although there are two sections of it, one purporting to have been spoken at the first battle, the other at the second, when Asinius Pollio writes that because of the sudden onslaught of the enemy he actually did not have time to make an harangue.

He left memoirs too of his deeds in the Gallic war and in the civil strife with Pompey; for the author of the Alexandrian, African, and Spanish Wars is unknown; some think it was Oppius, others Hirtius, who also supplied the final book of the Gallic War, which Caesar left unwritten. With regard to Caesar's memoirs Cicero, also in the *Brutus* speaks in the following terms: "He wrote memoirs which deserve the highest praise; they are naked in their simplicity, straightforward yet graceful, stripped of all rhetorical adornment, as of a garment; but while his purpose was to supply material to others, on which those who wished to write history might draw, he haply gratified silly folk, who will try to use the curling-irons on his narrative, but he has kept men of any sense from touching the subject." Of these same memoirs Hirtius uses this emphatic language: "They are so highly rated in the judgment of all men, that he seems to have deprived writers of an opportunity, rather than given them one; yet our admiration for this feat is greater than that of others; for they know how well and faultlessly he wrote, while we know besides how easily and rapidly he finished his task." Asinius Pollio thinks that they were put together somewhat carelessly and without strict regard for truth; since in many cases Caesar was too ready to believe the accounts which others gave of their actions, and gave a perverted account of his own, either designedly or perhaps from forgetfulness; and he thinks that he intended to rewrite and revise them. He left besides a work in two volumes "On Analogy," the same number of "Speeches criticising Cato," in addition to a poem, entitled "The Journey." He wrote the first of these works while crossing the Alps and returning to his army from Hither Gaul, where he had held the assizes; the second about the time of the battle of Munda, and the third in the course of a twenty-four days' journey from Rome to Farther Spain. Some letters of his to the senate are also preserved, and he seems to have been the first to reduce such documents to pages and the form of a note-book, whereas previously consuls and generals sent their reports written right across the sheet. There are also letters of his to Cicero, as well as to his intimates on private affairs, and in the latter, if he had anything confidential to say, he wrote it in cipher, that is, by so changing the order of the letters of the alphabet, that not a word could be made out. If anyone wishes to decipher these, and get at their meaning, he must substitute the fourth letter of the alphabet, namely D, for A, and so with the others. We also have mention of certain writings of his boyhood and early youth, such as the "Praises of Hercules," a tragedy "Oedipus," and a "Collection of Apophthegms"; but Augustus forbade the publication of all these minor works in a very brief and frank letter sent to Pompeius Macer, whom he had selected to set his libraries in order. – trans. from the Loeb edition (1913).

Several speeches, a grammatical treatise, some poetic works, a tragedy, a collection of dicta, and most importantly the *Commentarii*: the literary production of Caesar was both very wide and recognisably ambitious. Suetonius refers to the *Commentarii* as if they were a unitary work, with a coherent purpose; the differing opinions on the historical and literary value of

these works mentioned by Suetonius give us a clear idea of the reactions that Caesar's work prompted, which were perfectly coherent with the reactions that Caesar's policies caused. This is ironic, as Caesar's ostensible intent was to produce a factual and reliable account of the wars he was involved in, so that, as Cicero put it, others could use his material to produce more literarily ambitious works. The claim of being accurate and unbiased is of course a misguided one, but it seems to have been in Caesar's agenda when he decided to give his work the title of *commentarii*. The meaning of the Latin word is quite complex: it could be that of a 'note of service', produced by a Roman commander for the Senate's perusal – but this meaning would not be thinkable, of course, for the *commentarii de bello civili*. Another attested meaning is that of 'diary', or collection of writings put together by a notable personality, including thoughts about political or philosophical issues. Finally, the word *commentarius* can be regarded to mean simply 'notes', produced to offer a summary of an historical event, which is offered to future historians to be presented in a more embellished form. The ambiguity of the term must have been clear to Caesar himself, who possibly envisaged his work as a combination of all these different literary genres, and as something new in the Roman literary panorama.

### 3 The Organisation of the Work

The unassuming, but by no means casual stylistic composition of his work was in fact accompanied by a very solid and subtle construction. The organisation of the material is very precise: each book of the *de bello Gallico* is devoted to a different year, while for the *de bello civili* the exceptionally dense year 49 BC takes up two books, and the year 48 BC takes up the third one. The main asset of Caesar's narrative technique is the dry and factual tone of the narrative. Caesar's unspoken assumption is that he does not need to overemphasise, or openly dramatise the events he talks about, nor does he need to go at any great length to assert his authority: he was a direct witness of the events. One of the few concessions that Caesar makes to the traditional rhetorical repertoire of ancient historiography is the liberal use of speeches that he makes: in the tradition initiated by Thucydides, he uses speeches as an invaluable vantage point for the understanding of a situation, or a certain individual. However, he is less comfortable than most ancient historians with the use of direct speech, at least in the first books of the *de bello Gallico*; and only one speech of Caesar is presented in the direct form throughout the work (B.C. 3.85). Another prominent feature of Caesar's works is his interest in geography and ethnography. Some important sections of the *de bello Gallico* are devoted to some important excursus on these themes, which have the clear aim of providing the Roman audience of the *commentarii* with the information and the intellectual tools to make sense of the world that Caesar came to terms with and finally conquered. The opening chapter of the *de bello Gallico* (1.1) is a clear example of the challenge that Caesar tried to address:

All Gaul is divided into three parts, one of which the Belgae inhabit, the Aquitani another, those who in their own language are called Celts, in our Gauls, the third. All these differ from each other in language, customs and laws. The river Garonne separates the Gauls from the Aquitani; the Marne and the Seine separate them from the Belgae. Of all these, the Belgae are the bravest, because they are furthest from the civilization and refinement of [our] Province, and merchants least frequently resort to them, and import those things which tend to effeminate the mind; and they are the nearest to the Germans, who dwell beyond the Rhine, with whom they are

continually waging war; for which reason the Helvetii also surpass the rest of the Gauls in valour, as they contend with the Germans in almost daily battles, when they either repel them from their own territories, or themselves wage war on their frontiers. One part of these, which it has been said that the Gauls occupy, takes its beginning at the river Rhone; it is bounded by the river Garonne, the ocean, and the territories of the Belgae; it borders, too, on the side of the Sequani and the Helvetii, upon the river Rhine, and stretches toward the north. The Belgae rises from the extreme frontier of Gaul, extend to the lower part of the river Rhine; and look toward the north and the rising sun. Aquitania extends from the river Garonne to the Pyrenean mountains and to that part of the ocean which is near Spain: it looks between the setting of the sun, and the north star. – trans. by W. A. McDevitte and W. S. Bohn (1869).

#### 4 Caesar's Ethnography

The famous excursus on the religion of the Gauls (*BG* 6.16-17) is an example of the keen approach of Caesar to issues of cultural history and development, and of his intention to introduce a Roman audience to the peculiarities of Gallic religion. His choice to use the names of Roman gods to refer to the Gallic ones may seem inappropriate or unhelpful to a reader who is used to the standards of modern scholarship, but it is the symptom of an effort to make a foreign religion intelligible to a Roman audience by putting forward a ‘Roman interpretation’ (*interpretatio Romana*):

The nation of all the Gauls is extremely devoted to superstitious rites (*dedita religionibus*); and on that account they who are troubled with unusually severe diseases, and they who are engaged in battles and dangers, either sacrifice men as victims, or vow that they will sacrifice them, and employ the Druids as the performers of those sacrifices; because they think that unless the life of a man be offered for the life of a man, the mind of the immortal gods cannot be rendered propitious, and they have sacrifices of that kind ordained for national purposes. Others have figures of vast size, the limbs of which formed of osiers they fill with living men, which being set on fire, the men perish enveloped in the flames. They consider that the oblation of such as have been taken in theft, or in robbery, or any other offense, is more acceptable to the immortal gods; but when a supply of that class is wanting, they have recourse to the oblation of even the innocent.

They worship as their divinity Mercury above all, and have many images of him, and regard him as the inventor of all arts, they consider him the guide of their journeys and marches, and believe him to have great influence over the acquisition of gain and mercantile transactions. Next to him they worship Apollo, and Mars, and Jupiter, and Minerva; respecting these deities they have for the most part the same belief as other nations: that Apollo averts diseases, that Minerva imparts the invention of manufactures, that Jupiter possesses the sovereignty of the heavenly powers; that Mars presides over wars. To him, when they have determined to engage in battle, they commonly vow those things which they shall take in war. When they have conquered, they sacrifice whatever captured animals may have

survived the conflict, and collect the other things into one place. In many states you may see piles of these things heaped up in their consecrated spots; nor does it often happen that any one, disregarding the sanctity of the case, dares either to secrete in his house things captured, or take away those deposited; and the most severe punishment, with torture, has been established for such a deed. – trans. by W. A. McDevitte and W. S. Bohn (1869).

## 5 Caesar's Style

Caesar's style was, as far as we know, innovative in a number of respects, and, as Suetonius' careful survey shows, it attracted a number of different reactions. Cicero's favourable judgement deserves attention: although it was certainly influenced to an extent by his intention to please Caesar, it is an informed opinion, which came from a great writer, whose approach to issues of style and rhetoric could not be more different from Caesar's. Cicero praises Caesar's brevity, which is however accompanied by a great purity of clarity: a sober and neat account. Elsewhere, Cicero spoke of the *Commentarii* as being *nudi, recti, venusti* – bare, accurate, and beautiful. A great asset of Caesar's style is his choice to use the third person throughout the *Commentarii*. The sense of detachment and elegance it confers to the narrative is very remarkable. It would be simplistic to view the use of the third person as an attempt to enhance the sense of objectivity of the narrative; it is more explainable with the attempt to make the *Commentarii* as widely usable as possible, without distracting the reader with frequent, open references to the involvement of Caesar in the events.