

Assignment 1

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(i) Write a critical appreciation of Caesar's *De Bello Gallico* critically analysing his interpretation of the Celtic religious practices and comparing this with what is known from other early sources.

Gaius Julius Caesar (100 – 44 BC) wrote his *Commentaries on the Gallic War* (*Commentarii de Bello Gallico*) between the years 58 and 50 BC, when he was proconsul.¹ Caesar's views on Celtic religious practices occur particularly in Book 6, chapters 13 – 18 where he writes about Druids and various rites. The main reason for Caesar to write these *Commentaries* was to 'make sure that people knew about his achievements' as he was away from Rome for a number of years, and also because there was 'a tradition for Roman generals to celebrate their achievements by writing commentaries – a genre that was seen as distinct from history'.² Although Caesar had first-hand experience of the Celts in Gaul, he followed Posidonius (c. 135 – 51 BC) and other classical authors in his writings.³ Ronald Hutton claims that our impressions of the Druids depend upon images 'produced by ancient Greek and Roman authors'.⁴ However, Caesar and these classical writers viewed the Celts from outside their society, and their varying perspectives should be borne in mind when reading about them. It appears as though these Celts wrote almost nothing about themselves and their esoteric practices, though, so these are probably the only written records of them. It is advisable, then, to read these accounts with a critical eye.

At the beginning of *De Bello Gallico* Caesar explains that Gaul was divided into three parts, inhabited by the Belgae, the Aquitani, and the Celts or Gauls in the third part. He adds that they differ from each other 'in language, customs and laws'.⁵ The name Celt or Gaul, state James Greenough *et al*, was rather a geographical than racial term, and that before Caesar's time, the Romans made no distinction between German and Gaul.⁶ Caesar asserts that throughout Gaul, there

¹ William. A. McDevitte and William S. Bohn (translators) *Julius Caesar. Caesar's Gallic War: De Bello Gallico*, 1st edition (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1869).

<<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.02.0001>>. [Accessed 9th February 2025].

² Adrian Goldsworthy, *Caesar: The Life of a Colossus* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2006), p. 224.

³ The writings of Posidonius have not survived, but we know about what he wrote from later authors, such as Athenaeus (2nd – 3rd century AD), who were able to use his work.

⁴ Ronald Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe: the History of the Druids in Britain*, (New Haven, Connecticut, USA: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 11.< <https://r2.vlreader.com/EpubReader?ean=1780300159790#>>. [Accessed 20th February 2025].

⁵ McDevitte and Bohn, *De Bello Gallico*, Book 1, chapter 1.

⁶ James Bradstreet Greenough, Benjamin Leonard D'Ooge and Moses Grant Daniell, 'Origin and Early History' in *Commentary on Caesar's Gallic War* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1898).
<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0017%3Atext%3Dintro%3Achapter%3D1>. [Accessed 11th February 2025].

are two orders of men ‘who are of any rank and dignity’, and they are the Druids, who are engaged in sacred things, and the knights.⁷ The Druids conduct private and public sacrifices, and ‘interpret all matters of religion’, says Caesar.⁸ One can understand why such matters were of importance to Caesar, because for the Romans, according to Robert Ogilvie, ‘most of the things which were vital for the well-being of society were thought of as functions of a god or as gods functioning’.⁹ Roman religion, however, ‘was concerned with success not with sin’, and this is likely to have been significant for Caesar, because he wanted to show how successful he was.¹⁰

Miranda Aldhouse-Green points out that Nora Chadwick denies the Druids as ancient clergy. Chadwick states that they ‘were philosophers rather than priests’, although Aldhouse-Green suggests that Caesar ‘is describing the essential function of priests’, which includes ‘the dissemination of knowledge and wisdom, not least about the craft of religion’.¹¹ According to Aldhouse-Green, then, Caesar is correct about the Druids regarding religion. Caesar states that the Druids conduct private and public sacrifices’. If any crime has been committed such as murder, or if there is a dispute about inheritance, the Druids ‘decree rewards and punishments’, and they interdict from the sacrifices anyone who has not submitted to their decision.¹² Sacrifice for the Romans was a religious function, and it was connected to prayer. Ogilvie explains that prayer could be made as part of a straightforward request, or as an offering if a god ‘performed a certain request’.¹³ The Romans believed that sacrifice – a way of making something holy – was the ‘most effective means of influencing the gods’, so it is fairly clear why Caesar understood this ritual to be important for the Druids.¹⁴

The question of how much one can trust the sources ‘for a true picture of the ancient Celts’, though, goes right back to classical times, and is one which Philip Freeman asserts is ‘crucial’.¹⁵ Freeman states that ‘Posidonius is well known to Celtic scholars as the ultimate source of much of our information on the ancient Gauls’ (through Athenaeus and others), but points out that questions

⁷ McDevitte and Bohn, *De Bello Gallico*, Book 6, ch. 13.

⁸ Ibid. ch. 13.

⁹ Robert Maxwell Ogilvie, *The Romans and their Gods* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969), Pimlico edition, 2000, p. 11.

¹⁰ Ogilvie, *The Romans and their Gods*, p. 17.

¹¹ Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *Caesar's Druids* (New Haven, Connecticut, USA: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 19. <<https://r3.vlreader.com/EpubReader?ean=1780300165883#>>. [Accessed 12th February 2025].

See also Nora K. Chadwick, *The Druids* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), p. xviii.

¹² McDevitte and Bohn (translators) *Julius Caesar. Caesar's Gallic War*, Book 6, chapter 13.

¹³ Ogilvie, *The Romans and their Gods*, p. 37.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 41.

¹⁵ Philip Freeman, ‘Classical Ethnography and the Celts: Can We Trust the Sources?’ in *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, Vol. 20/21 (2000/2001), pp. 22-28, p. 22. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41219586?read-now=1&seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents>. [Accessed 14th February 2025].

need to be asked about the background, motives and sources of such commentators.¹⁶ The ethnographic writings of Posidonius show ‘his stoic interest in detailed, careful research coupled with a theory of tribal or racial characteristics as a driving factor in human history and culture’.¹⁷ It looks as though the work of Posidonius can be relied upon to give an accurate picture of the ancient Gauls, because Athanaeus, who copied some of his text, has been shown to faithfully reproduce the writings of earlier authors whose works have survived.¹⁸ To Posidonius, Celts ‘are passionate, volatile, brave and clever’, who make great warriors and skilled poets, and Posidonius knew about their customs by going there to see for himself.¹⁹ Regarding the accuracy of this view, Freeman asserts that Posidonius ‘had a particularly ethnic-driven agenda’, but he did not bend the facts to fit with his own theories.²⁰ However, Hutton notes Jane Webster’s point that as Posidonius only visited one corner of Gaul, his reports might only have been true for that region; thus all aspects of the ‘Posidonius tradition’, that the Druids could be both respected and abhorred, have been called into question.²¹

Caesar states that the Druids do not go to war and have an exemption from military service. One of their leading tenets, however, is that ‘souls do not become extinct, but pass after death from one body to another’ and accordingly, men are ‘in a great degree excited to valor, the fear of death being disregarded’, which agrees with what Posidonius said about the Celts being brave.²² Caesar also said that they respect the stars and their motion, as well as the earth and the power of the immortal gods.²³ In the words of Greenough *et al*, the Gauls were ‘high-spirited and brave to utter recklessness and contempt for death’.²⁴ According to Diodorus Siculus (*fl.* 1st century BC) the Gauls ‘are terrifying in aspect’ and their voices are harsh.²⁵ Siculus says that they are boastful, and they extol themselves and ‘depreciate all other men’.²⁶ He does concede, however, that they have sharp wits and are clever at learning. Hutton comments that the doctrine of souls was thought to have ‘the practical benefit of inducing Gallic warriors to fight with reckless courage’, because death was not considered to be their end, but merely ‘the entry to a new life’.²⁷

¹⁶ Freeman, ‘Classical Ethnography and the Celts’, pp. 23-24.

¹⁷ Freeman, ‘Classical Ethnography and the Celts’, p. 24.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 23-24.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 24.

²⁰ Freeman, ‘Classical Ethnography and the Celts’, p. 24.

²¹ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, p. 16.

²² McDevitte and Bohn, *De Bello Gallico*, Book 6, chapter 14.

²³ *Ibid.* ch. 14.

²⁴ Greenough *et al*, ‘Character and Customs’, *Commentary on Caesar’s Gallic War*.

²⁵ William P. Thayer, compiler of *The Library of History* by Diodorus Siculus (1st century BC). Translation by Charles Henry Oldfather. Text in the public domain: Loeb Classical Library edition, 1939, Book 5.31.1.

<https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Diodorus_Siculus/5B*.html>, updated 29 April 2023. [Accessed 18th February 2025].

²⁶ Diodorus Siculus, *The Library of History*, Book 5.31.1.

²⁷ Ronald Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, p. 12.

Caesar notes that many embrace the ‘profession’ of Druids, and many are sent to it by their parents and relations.²⁸ Some of them remain in their training for twenty years, continues Caesar, and learn a ‘great number of verses’ by heart.²⁹ They do not ‘regard it lawful to commit’ such learning to writing, apparently for two reasons; first, they do not wish their doctrines to be ‘divulged among the mass of the people’, and secondly because by depending on writing, they are less diligent in learning thoroughly, and relax their use of memory.³⁰ For almost all other matters, such as private and public transactions, they use Greek characters, explains Caesar. Goldsworthy states that their power rested on their training, which ‘made them experts in matters of religion, law and tribal custom’.³¹ As a result of not writing their beliefs down, Goldsworthy points out that very little is known about them, which has ‘given plenty of scope over the centuries for the vacuum to be filled with romantic invention’.³²

Caesar states that the nation of the Gauls is devoted to ‘superstitious rites’ and on that account, those who are troubled with severe diseases and those ‘who are engaged in battles and dangers, either sacrifice men as victims, or vow that they will sacrifice them’, and employ the Druids to perform those sacrifices.³³ The reason for this is that unless the life of a man is offered for the life of a man, ‘the mind of the immortal gods can not be rendered propitious’.³⁴ Caesar explains further that others have huge figures with limbs formed of osiers, which are filled with living men and when they are set on fire, the men perish in the flames. They regard the oblation of those taken in theft, robbery or any other offence to be ‘more acceptable to the immortal gods’, but if such a supply is not available, then they ‘have recourse to the oblation of even the innocent’.³⁵ This description arguably inspired the 1973 film *The Wicker Man*, directed by Robin Hardy.³⁶ Goldsworthy comments that some scholars ‘dismiss such stories as Greek and Roman propaganda’, but ‘the Romans themselves had offered human victims to the gods’ when the Cimbri threatened Italy, and the Senate ‘only outlawed the practice in 97 BC’.³⁷ Furthermore, Roman society found it

²⁸ McDevitte and Bohn, *De Bello Gallico*, Book 6, chapter 14.

²⁹ Ibid. ch. 14.

³⁰ Ibid. ch. 14.

³¹ Goldsworthy, *Caesar*, pp. 242-243.

³² Ibid. p. 243.

³³ McDevitte and Bohn, *De Bello Gallico*, Book 6, ch. 16.

³⁴ Ibid. ch. 16.

³⁵ Ibid. ch. 16.

³⁶ Robin Hardy (dir.), *The Wicker Man* [Film]. UK: British Lion Films. (1973). See also Lee Adams, ‘The Wicker Man Retrospective: A Burning Passion’, *Art of the Movies*, 2023, < https://artofthemovies.co.uk/blogs/original-movie-posters/the-wicker-man-retrospective-a-burning-passion?srltid=AfmBOorth8DHqgx4PvSiwwlz-VUyD82C5bcqAv4365NOZcWr31mFt_pz > [Accessed 25th February 2025].

³⁷ Goldsworthy, *Caesar*, p. 243. The Cimbri were a migrating Germanic or Celtic tribe.

quite acceptable ‘to watch people being killed for entertainment in the arena, but balked at killing them for the sake of religion’.³⁸

The ancient geographer and historian Strabo (c. 64 BC – c. 24 AD) divided those who are held in exceptional honour into three groups – the Bards, the Vates and the Druids, rather than the two specified by Caesar.³⁹ The Bards are described as singers and poets, while the Vates are called diviners and natural philosophers. The Druids study moral philosophy, says Strabo, as well as natural philosophy. The Druids are entrusted with deciding private and public disputes and in former times, ‘they even arbitrated in cases of war and made the opponents stop when they were about to line up for battle’.⁴⁰ Hutton states, however, that Strabo relied completely on his Greek and Roman sources, and that his account ‘contains serious mistakes of geography’, which casts doubt on its accuracy.⁴¹

According to Strabo not only the Druids, but others also, say that men’s souls and the universe are ‘indestructible’.⁴² Strabo writes about them ‘wearing golden ornaments’, and like Siculus, notes that their ‘boastfulness is much in evidence’.⁴³ He seems to be drawing upon the work of Posidonius when he explains their ‘barbarous and exotic’ custom of hanging ‘the heads of their enemies from the necks of their horses’, which they then nail to the entrances of their homes.⁴⁴ Green emphasises the significance of the head-ritual, and there is archaeological evidence of this at the cliff-sanctuary of Roquepertuse, for instance, where the columns had niches containing human skulls.⁴⁵ Strabo also mentions other sorts of sacrifices undertaken by them, which they would not do without the Druids, such as striking a person in the back with a sabre and then divining from his death-struggle. The one closest to Caesar’s description, though, is one in which they would devise ‘a colossus of straw and wood’, and then throw cattle, wild animals and human beings into it and making a burnt-offering of the whole thing.⁴⁶

Caesar claims that the Gauls worship Mercury in particular as their deity, regarding him as the ‘inventor of all arts’, who guides their journeys and marches, and they believe him to have great

³⁸ Goldsworthy, *Caesar*, p. 243.

³⁹ William P. Thayer, compiler of *The Geography* by Strabo. Translation by Horace Leonard Jones. Text in the public domain: Loeb Classical Library edition, (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1917 – 1932.) Book 4, chapter 4.4. <https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Strabo/4D*.html>. [Accessed 02th February 2025].

⁴⁰ Strabo, *The Geography*, Book 4, ch. 4.4.

⁴¹ Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, p. 14.

⁴² Strabo, *The Geography*, Book 4, chapter 4.4.

⁴³ Ibid. ch. 4.5.

⁴⁴ Ibid. ch. 4.5.

⁴⁵ Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, (Gloucestershire: The History Press, 2014), pp. 13 and 31.

⁴⁶ Strabo, *The Geography*, Book 4, chapter 4.5.

influence over ‘the acquisition of gain and mercantile transactions’.⁴⁷ He continues by saying that they also worship Apollo, Mars, Jupiter and Minerva, and claims that they mostly have ‘the same belief as other nations’, such as Jupiter possessing the ‘sovereignty of the heavenly powers’, and Mars presiding over wars.⁴⁸ Caesar maintains that once the Gauls have decided to fight in battle, they vow to Mars ‘those things which they shall take in war’, and he adds that in many states, ‘you may see piles of these things heaped up in their consecrated spots’.⁴⁹ If anyone were to hide any of those things, they could be tortured as punishment.

There does not seem to be a simple equation between the Roman gods and those of the Gauls, though, and Green states that ‘the epigraphic record of the Romano-Celtic period reveals about 400 god-names’, of which over 300 only occur once.⁵⁰ Green claims that this argues for disparateness and demonstrates ‘strong localisation’.⁵¹ The instance Green provides is that Mars is ‘linked with several different Celtic epithets’, which may indicate the ‘uneasiness of any attempt to equate the strictly functional order of Roman gods with the shadowy, multi-functional character of Celtic deities’. This is backed up by the claim that Marie-Louise Sjoestedt ‘would argue that Celtic tribes were too disunited to share a common pantheon’.⁵² Sjoestedt states that ‘fifty-nine different epithets are joined to the name of Mars’, and explains that in the Gallo-Roman period, ‘the native cults became integrated in the imperial religious system’, and a single Roman deity ‘represents a multiplicity of local gods’.⁵³

Barry Cunliffe, citing Proinsias MacCana, says that while ‘Caesar’s account was wrong to imply that a pantheon of Celtic gods with specific names occurred all over the Celtic world’, it was a useful typological index to the main classes of deity that someone might encounter in Gaul in the first century BC.⁵⁴ This means one could expect to find Lugh (Mercury), Maponos (Apollo) and Epona (the horse goddess, for example).⁵⁵ Caesar notes that all the Gauls ‘assert that they are descended from the god Dis’, which is why they compute the divisions of the seasons by the number of nights, not days. The Coligny calendar provides some insight into time for the ‘proper enactment of ritual’, such as Pliny’s description of the ‘cutting of mistletoe from the sacred oak’.⁵⁶

⁴⁷ McDevitte and Bohn, *De Bello Gallico*, Book 6, ch. 17.

⁴⁸ Ibid. ch. 17.

⁴⁹ Ibid. ch. 17.

⁵⁰ Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 32.

⁵¹ Ibid. p. 32.

⁵² Ibid. pp. 32-33.

⁵³ Marie-Louise Sjoestedt, *Celtic Gods and Heroes* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 2000), p. 15.

⁵⁴ Barry Cunliffe, *The Ancient Celts*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 276-277.

⁵⁵ Cunliffe, *The Ancient Celts*, p. 277.

⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 281.

Caesar states that the Druids assemble at a fixed time of the year ‘in a consecrated place in the territories of the Carnutes’, which is reckoned to be the central region of Gaul.⁵⁷ Green suggests that in matters of ritual, the Druids might have had a ‘unifying role in the annual council held in Carnutian territory’, because of the widespread distribution of some iconographic god-forms like horned deities and mother-goddesses.⁵⁸ There is some evidence, then, of these assemblies, although Caesar then says that this ‘institution’, which deals with disputes, ‘is supposed to have been devised in Britain’ and brought over to Gaul from there.⁵⁹ Caesar made two expeditions to Britain, in 55 BC and 54 BC, but it is not clear why he thought people could increase their knowledge of this institution by travelling there to study it.

Caesar’s *De Bello Gallico* was ‘from the beginning acknowledged as one of the greatest works of Latin literature’, even earning praise from Cicero.⁶⁰ The lack of a written account from the Gauls or Druids themselves, entails a dependency on the commentaries from authors such as Caesar regarding Celtic religious beliefs and practices. In turn, it looks as though Caesar drew upon the works of classical writers like Posidonius for some of his information. The *Commentaries* mention some of the gods worshipped by the Celts, like Mars and Apollo, but the situation was apparently much more complicated than this, with variations between different areas. Caesar and the other classical writers mentioned here might have described some of the Celtic practices they knew about, but cannot really explain many of their beliefs, like why the head-ritual was so significant to them. It is important to bear in mind one thing about the *Commentaries*, though, which is that Caesar intended to enhance his social, military and political standing by writing them, and they actually did help to promote his position effectively.

2500 words

⁵⁷ McDevitte and Bohn, *De Bello Gallico*, Book 6, ch. 13.

⁵⁸ Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 33.

⁵⁹ McDevitte and Bohn, *De Bello Gallico*, Book 6, ch. 13.

⁶⁰ Goldsworthy, *Caesar*, p. 225.

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