

Assignment 1 – HPCS 4006 – Celtic Religions.

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Critical analysis of a short piece on ‘Celtic’ Religions written by a Greek or Roman author.

De Bello Gallico

Introduction

This essay will provide a critical analysis of three sections of De Bello Gallico as written by Julius Caesar. It will begin by looking at the historical context of the period in which Caesar was writing before looking specifically at the quoted extracts and considering the historical accuracy of the passages.

Historical context to the extract.

‘De Bello Gallico’ from which the extract was taken is a personal account of the Gallic wars that Caesar conducted throughout mainland Europe during the period 58-52 B.C. Caesar was a general of the Roman army at the time when the old Roman Republic was struggling to survive and was heading towards civil war. Caesar was an excellent strategist and could see that successful wars against the Gauls of Europe and the tribes of what is now Germany, would help his own political ambitions. Ultimately the Roman Republic collapsed and was replaced by the Roman empire, with the first Roman Emperor, Augustus, taking control in 31 B.C. To this end, Caesar conducted wars throughout Europe to expand the reach and influence of Rome. However, prior to this Caesar had taken control of Rome and installed himself as dictator until his assassination in 44 B.C.¹

Caesar's various military campaigns through Europe would have brought him into contact with various different Gaulish tribes. On a superficial level, it could then easily be argued that the accounts that Caesar documented within ‘De Bello Gallico’ should be accurate as he had first-hand experience and knowledge of the Gauls and their practices, including presumably those of the Druids. However, as has been noted above, Rome itself was going through a period of turmoil with the Roman Republic crumbling and heading towards civil war. This must then raise the first question regarding ‘De Bello Gallico’, namely is it historically accurate, or did

¹ Britannica, *Roman Empire* (2021) <<https://www.britannica.com/place/Roman-Empire> > [accessed 15 March 2021].

Caesar elaborate upon what he found and upon his accounts of the Druids and pre-Roman ‘Celtic’ religious practices in order to further his own political ambitions within Rome?

In the introduction to her translation of the *De Bello Gallico*, Carolyn Hammond, the Dean of Caius College Cambridge, notes that Scholars take differing approaches to *De Bello Gallico*. She notes that some accept the writings as historically accurate transcriptions of what Caesar did and encountered whilst others view the works as “propagandist manipulation of the material for personal political advantage”.² From this, we could conclude that the answer to the question as to how historically accurate *De Bello Gallico* is would depend entirely upon the point of view of the individual. This also then raises questions regarding how we might regard the work in relation to ‘Celtic’ religions. If we take the view point that Caesar was elaborating on the power of the Druids with the ultimate aim of using this to gain political advantage within Rome, then we would need a degree of scepticism when assessing the accuracy of the accounts within *De Bello Gallico*. If we look at the paper written by J Tierney for the Royal Irish Academy, we can see that Tierney has this somewhat sceptical viewpoint of Caesars writings when he notes that Caesars accounts “arbitrarily reduced to two classes, Druids and Nobles”.³ Tierney also notes within the same paper that “Caesar had no interest in Gallic ethnography” and that he “notes down a number of sketchy and incoherent notes”.⁴ From this, we could draw the conclusion that any of Caesars writings in relation to ‘Celtic’ religion may not be accurate.

Analysis of extracts from *De Bello Gallico*

If we now examine the first section of the extract, from 6.14, we can gain the impression that Caesar held the Druids, and by inference the Gauls, in high regard. He describes how the druids diligently learn all of their 20 years of training and commit it to memory rather than it being written down.

² Carolyn Hammond, ‘Introduction’ in *Caesar The Gallic War*, ed. by Carolyn Hammond (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. xi-xliii (p. xxxi).

³ J Tierney, ‘The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius’, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy: Archaeology, Culture, History, Literature*, 60 (1959/1960), 189-275 (p. 213).

⁴ Ibid.

Caesar also states that:

They likewise discuss and impart to the youth many things respecting the stars and their motion, respecting the extent of the world and of our earth, respecting the nature of things, respecting the power and the majesty of the immortal gods.⁵

The quote above would imply that Caesar had a level of admiration for the druids and what they achieved through their training. This could be seen as an example of where Caesar may have elaborated on his accounts for the purposes of justifying his actions throughout Gaul and so gaining political advantage. Historical record shows that Caesar's physical actions with his wars against the Gauls ultimately led to the abolition of the druids and their practices being decreed as illegal within the Roman empire, albeit much later in 54AD during the reign of Emperor Claudius.⁶

We shall now look at the second section of the extract, from 6.16, which relates to human sacrifice. Within this section of the text, Caesar recounts that the Druids of the Gaulish nations do practice human sacrifice in the form of sacrificial burning of humans who have committed theft or some other crime.⁷

In his book about Caesar, Dr Adrian Goldsworthy notes that the Roman Republic had outlawed human sacrifice for religious purposes in 97 B.C. i.e. before Caesar conducted his Gallic wars.⁸ In view of this and making note of the political turmoil that was taking place in Rome during Caesar's Gallic wars, which ultimately led to the collapse of the Roman Republic and the creation of the Roman Empire, it could again be argued that Caesar was elaborating upon and embellishing events relating to human sacrifice that he may have witnessed or heard of, purely to justify his military campaigns and gain political leverage for his own ambitions. As has been noted by Celia Schultz in the Journal of the American Academy of Religion, Romans often described human sacrifice amongst others as a way of highlighting the other groups, in this case the Celts, un-Romanness so that the Celts would be

⁵ Julius Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, 6.14

⁶ History Learning Site, *The Romans and The Druids* (2021) <https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/ancient-rome/the-romans-and-the-druids/#:~:text=Therefore%2C%20they%20were%20not%20simply,Emperor%20Claudius%20banned%20the%20Druids.> [accessed 16 March 2021].

⁷ Julius Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, 6.16.

⁸ Adrian Goldsworthy, *Caesar*, (London: Orion publishing Ltd, 2007), p. 243.

seen as un-civilised and violent, whilst the Romans themselves would be seen as enlightened, thus further justifying the military campaigns that Caesar conducted.⁹

To examine this further we need to look for any archaeological evidence for human sacrifice within Gaul. Dr Goldsworthy notes that the evidence for this within Gaul is not conclusive although did exist within the Germanic tribes and within Britain.¹⁰ We do know however that archaeological excavations within the village of Acy-Romance in the north eastern region of what is now France, have uncovered human remains that have been buried in small wooden boxes, with the body almost folded into the box such that the head is between the feet and the shoulders by the knees.¹¹ This is an unusual position for a human body to be placed into and is not consistent within what can be found in other gravesite excavations. The next obvious question when presented with this is to ask why was the body placed in this way rather than just being buried after death? Did this have elements of ritualistic sacrifice to it such that the body needed to be presented in a specific way?

In the final section of the text, 6.17, Caesar writes in relation to the specific gods that the Gauls worshipped. The text makes particular reference to the Gauls worshipping Mercury and lists some of the attributes of Mercury as being “the inventor of all arts”, and that Mercury has “great influence over the acquisition of gain and mercantile transactions”.¹²

The first obvious question in relation to this section is to why would Caesar be using the names of Roman gods when talking specifically about the gods that the Gauls worshipped?

John Koch notes that Caesar did use Gaulish names when referring to other topics within *De Bello Gallico*, such as places and individuals.¹³ Accepting this to be the case, why would Caesar not use Gaulish names when referring to gods? Within the same book, Koch also quotes the work of Dillon and Chadwick from 1967 who note that Caesar was “equating Gaulish deities with Roman Gods”.¹⁴ In this way we might forgive Caesar for not using a Gaulish name for a god and instead using a Roman name as it could have made it easier for

⁹ Celia Schultz, ‘The Romans and Ritual Murder’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 78.2 (2010), 516-541 (p. 520).

¹⁰ Adrian Goldsworthy, *Caesar*, (London: Orion publishing Ltd, 2007), p. 243.

¹¹ Ralph Haussler, *Iron age ‘Celtic’ Sanctuaries* [video]. 2019 <<https://uwtsd.hosted.panopto.com/Panopto/Pages/Viewer.aspx?id=b0bf958d-26e5-47cb-80b3-a9f501324d87>> [accessed 25 March 2021].

¹² Julius Caesar, *De Bello Gallico* 6.17

¹³ John Koch and Fernando Fernandez, ‘Some Epigraphic Comparanda Bearing on the ‘Pan-Celtic God’ Lugus’, in *Celtic Religions in the Roman Period*, ed. by Ralph Haussler and Anthony King (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2017), pp. 37-56 (p. 40.).

¹⁴ Ibid.

the readers of his work back in Rome to understand by giving them a frame of reference that was familiar to them. This can be further backed up by looking at a quote from Bernhard Maier who stated:

Caesar assumes that it is only man-made institutions which differ from one people to another, whereas the gods everywhere were the same.¹⁵

This theory can also be seen within Caesar's own writings when he states that "respecting these deities they have for the most part the same belief as other nations".¹⁶

As was noted when discussing section 6.14, Caesar appears to hold a level of respect for the Druids of Gaul. We can see this again towards the end of section 6.17 where Caesar writes that:

they compute the divisions of every season, not by the number of days, but of nights; they keep birthdays and the beginnings of months and years in such an order that the day follows the night.¹⁷

This again raises the question as to what Caesar had to gain with his writings. It is known and accepted that Caesar did actually travel through Gaul and even into southern Britain. As such it would seem reasonable to accept that Caesar's accounts could be considered accurate. However, if he did hold the Druids in such respect as could be seen in these extracts, why then would he seek to destroy the Gauls and the culture that supports the druids? In the book 'The Celtic World', David Rankin an emeritus professor in ancient philosophy at the University of Southampton noted that although Caesar would have witnessed life within Gaul, what he saw was not necessarily life as the Gauls would have lived and stated:

His purpose was to dominate Gaul and exploit it for his own purposes, not to comprehend Celtic society in any greater depth than seemed conformable to the achievement of his ends.¹⁸

From this it becomes even more important that we question the motives of Caesar's writings and just how accurate they may have been.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Julius Caesar, *De Bello Gallico* 6.17

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ David Rankin, 'The Celts Through Classical Eyes', in *The Celtic World*, ed. by Miranda J. Green (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 21-33 (p. 29).

Additional historical context

Although going outside of the text extracts from *De Bello Gallico*, it is perhaps useful to also look at the work of the Greek Historian, Posidonius. The writings of Posidonius do not survive intact and are known and understood from reference to other classical writers such as Strabo and Diodorus. In his paper ‘The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius’, Tierney notes that Caesar took writings from the works of Posidonius and placed them into *De Bello Gallico*, without making reference to Posidonius as the source, and at the same time making amendments to the writings which Tierney described as “debateable omissions and additions”.¹⁹ It is known that Posidonius travelled into Gaul and so would have seen Gaulish life first-hand, as indeed Caesar did. David Rankin notes that Posidonius “did not regard the Celts as mere primitives” and that Caesar made use of this as it suggested even greater accomplishment on his part by overcoming a formidable foe.²⁰

Conclusions

We can see from a superficial reading of the three sections of *De Bello Gallico* that Caesar may well have had a level of respect for the Gauls and the Druids. However, if we then examine the deeper motives that may have underpinned his writings, we can start to understand that what Caesar wrote may have been coloured specifically for the Roman audience and to justify the military campaigns that he conducted through Gaul, and that these were specifically to further his own political ambitions. This does not mean that all of Caesar's writings should be discounted as propaganda, merely that they should be treated with caution and cross-referenced with regard to other classical accounts of the time period and also to the historical and political context of the period.

Word Count: 1989

¹⁹ J Tierney, ‘The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius’, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy: Archaeology, Culture, History, Literature*, 60 (1959/1960), 189-275 (p. 198).

²⁰ David Rankin, ‘The Celts Through Classical Eyes’, in *The Celtic World*, ed. by Miranda J. Green (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 21-33 (p. 28).

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