

The Druids according to Caesar – An analysis of the ethnographic representation of the Druids and the religious practices of the people of Gaul within Caesar's *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*

The *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* is a collection of seven books written by Julius Caesar, purportedly penned over the seven years that he was overseeing a military campaign in Gaul (Balston, 1957), and is one of the very few surviving classical ethnographies of the Celtic order known as the Druids. This paper serves as a critical analysis of Caesar's account of who the Druids were and how they facilitated religious practices in Gaul. Despite the clear biases of his work, it will be seen that the role of the religious leader that was attributed to the Druids by Caesar does align well with other classical views of their function. Furthermore, it can be seen that the importance of the night imagery and religious rites to the Gauls is also congruent with classical and archaeological sources. Therefore, Caesar's *De Bello Gallico* can be said to give a meaningful sense of who the Druids were, and how the people of Gaul viewed religion.

Historical Context of De Bello Gallico

Phillip Freeman, a renowned ancient world historian, contends that there are three questions needing to be asked when analysing the validity of classical evidence:

1. What is the background of the author?
2. What are the Author's motives?
3. What are the author's sources? (Freeman, 2001)

Caesar's background has already been somewhat addressed: He was waging war against the Gallic, Germanic and Brittonic tribes (Balston, 1957). This, in turn, informed his motives behind writing the *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*; it is commonly accepted within academia that *De Bello Gallico* was not intended as a work of history, but instead as a propaganda tool. As pointed out by J. P. D. V. Balston, this can be most obviously seen through its name; The use of 'commentarii' in the work's title indicates that these are commentaries, Field-Marshal's reports of battles, rather than 'anales' or 'historia' meant to document humanitarian fact (Balston, 1957).

The intended audience and context of the publication of *De Bello Gallico* further enlightens us as to Caesar's motivations. There is debate as to whether these books were released yearly to the people of Rome, as a current report of the progress of the invasion of Gaul, or whether the whole work was released after Caesar's return (Kimbrough, 2014). In any case, the yearly authorship of the works allowed Caesar to adapt his writing to reflect the current state of politics in Rome, thus making it more palatable to his audience, the Roman public (Goldsworthy, 2006). Even the use of ethnography within *De Bello Gallico* was strategic, as it served to further justify to the Roman senate and populace that the people of Gaul were barbaric savages in need of civilisation by Roman conquest (Creer, 2019). At the time of the Gallic War, Caesar was facing the prospect of prosecution on his return to Rome due to his questionable means of passing through laws in his time as Consul (Kimbrough, 2014). This, along with his absence from Rome, threatened his position of power. As such, it is accepted that *De Bello Gallico* was written as a propaganda piece to strengthen plebian support for Caesar in his absence, to keep his position and power secure.

While it may be tempting, then, to dismiss Caesar's entire ethnography as fiction, given his clear ill intentions, there is a compelling argument that there was motivation for Caesar to be truthful in his accounts. Lying completely can be easily contradicted by other sources, thus putting your whole work at risk of being written off as false. However, if you include the essence of the truth in your work, and then shroud it in imagery that twists the narrative to your desired point of view, then you end up with a piece of propaganda that is easier for the public to digest and is less readily dismissed by those who scrutinize it. This view is backed up by French philosopher and sociologist Jacques Ellul, who studied propaganda at length and concluded that it "*operates instead with many different kinds of truth— half truth, limited truth, truth out of context.*" (Ellul, 1968). As such, even though we are aware that *De Bello Gallico* is a highly biased piece of work, we cannot dismiss Caesar's ethnography of the Druids as false outright.

This leads us to consider Freeman's third and final question – what were Caesar's sources? On first instinct one may suggest Caesar himself, after all, he was present in Gaul whilst he presided over the invasion. However, it is believed within current academic thought that many of the observations presented in *De Bello Gallico* were actually those of his subordinates and of Posidonius (MacKillop, 2005). Posidonius of Apamea was a first century Greek Stoic, and prolific writer, who visited Gaul and wrote detailed ethnographies of the tribes that he

encountered (Freeman, 2001). None of his writings have survived to the modern day, but Freeman argues that the extent to which Posidonius was revered and quoted, coupled with his reported dedication to careful research and representation of facts, is proof that he is a reliable source. We cannot say for certain which parts of *De Bello Gallico* are Caesar's own lived experience, which are the experiences of his men, and which are gaps filled in by the lost work of Posidonius, but we can say with some degree of certainty that all of the sources had first-hand experiences with the Celtic people.

Thus, considering Freeman's framework for analysing the validity of classical sources, we are left with the conclusion that there is likely some truth within Caesar's work. However, the extent to which can only be argued for after reviewing further sources and the scant archaeological evidence that we have left of the lives of the people of Gaul. In doing so, we can provide context for any "*different kinds of truth*" that were used by Caesar to justify his actions to the people of Rome. And, as such, we can uncover a sense of who the Druids actually may have been and how they facilitated religious practices for the ancient Gauls.

The Druids

The name 'Druid' is translated from the Latin plural *druides* or *druidae* and, although no written record of this survives, was said by Roman writers to be derived from the native name for the figures in question (Piggott, 1968). Caesar states that "*Throughout all Gaul there are two orders of those men who are of any rank and dignity... of these two orders, one is that of the Druids.*" (**Caesar 6.13**). Their function in that society is described as being "*engaged in things sacred, conduct the public and the private sacrifices, and interpret all matters of religion*" (**Caesar 6.13**). They also were said to pass judgement on matters of justice, and the public were said to take great heed in following their verdicts (**Caesar 6.13**). Ignoring such judgements was punishable by excommunication and being barred from engaging in religious rites, and these people essentially became outcasts.

From his first mention of the Druids, Caesar is clear of their significance in the religious practices of Gallic society. This is echoed work of the ancient Greek historian Diodorus Siculus, in which he says that "*Philosophers, as we may call them, and men learned in religious affairs are unusually honoured among them and are called by them Druids.*" (**Diodorus Siculus**

5.31.2). Diodorus makes sure to emphasize that these people were so honored by the Gauls that he finds it unusual, which is particularly interesting given that his own culture already held high regard for their own philosophers (Jocelyn, 1977). We can conclude from this that either Diodorus was surprised that the people of Gaul had the cognizance to value their Druids as highly as the Greeks valued their philosophers, or that the Druids were simply more revered by their own people. Either way, we can conclude that Diodorus and Caesar were in agreement over the role and importance of Druids in Gallic society.

The importance of the Druids is also echoed in Strabos' *Geographica*, in which he states that "*The belief in the justice [of the Druids] is so great that the decision both of public and private disputes is referred to them*" and that they had "*by their decision, prevented armies from engaging when drawn up in battle-array against each other*" (**Strabo 4. 4. 4**). This exemplifies the extent of the authority of the Druids, and further backs up Caesar's image of the druid as the respected religious leader.

Caesar states that the Druids spread their teachings between themselves and the lay people through the oral tradition, and in fact did not write their practices down at all (**Caesar 6.13**). He does make it clear that this was not due to illiteracy, as "*in almost all other matters, in their public and private transactions, they use Greek characters*" (**Caesar 6.13**). Caesar then speculates the reasons for this being to maintain the sanctity of the knowledge and to press its importance onto those to whom it was taught. This is not mentioned by any other classical sources. There is also no written record of Druidic knowledge until the medieval period (MacLeod, 2001) However, it would be a logical fallacy to assume that the absence of evidence is evidence of absence. Therefore, we cannot verify the validity of this statement by Caesar.

The image of the Druid that we can at least somewhat corroborate is that of an honoured sage, a font of religious knowledge, and an ethical and spiritual guide to the people of Gaul. The remaining portion of this paper will explore the specific beliefs and religious rites of the Gallic Celts that Caesar described.

Gallic Religious Beliefs

Although in a previous chapter Caesar made it clear that Druidic teachings were deemed by the Gauls to be too sacred to be written down, he divulged one of them anyway. Caesar wrote that the Druids taught that the soul is immortal and is reborn into a new body after a person dies

(**Caesar 6.14**). This belief is akin to Pythagorean Metempsychosis, which is the belief that the soul is immortal and transmigrates into a new body upon death (Huffman, 2024). Strabo corroborates this, stating that the Druids “*assert that the soul is indestructible*” (**Strabo 4. 4. 4**). Caesar muses that the reasoning behind this belief is that “*men by this tenet are in a great degree excited to valor, the fear of death being disregarded*” (**Caesar 6.14**). This set the notion of Gallic rebirth apart from Pythagorean Metempsychosis, as elegantly described by 19th scholar Alfred Nutt: “*The Greek philosopher and his disciples said, like Buddha,: Be virtuous that you may not be born again; the Gaulish Druid said: Be brave... because you will be born again*” (Jevons, 1898)

These somewhat cavalier views on death may also feed into the darker side of religious practices that Caesar reports on, that of the human sacrifices. In *De Bello Gallico*, Caesar states that the Druids facilitated human sacrifices to gain favour from the Gods on behalf of people “*who are troubled with unusually severe diseases, and they who are engaged in battles and dangers*”. (**Caesar 6.16**). The reasoning that Caesar prescribes to the need of human sacrifice is “*because they think that unless the life of a man be offered for the life of a man, the mind of the immortal gods can not be rendered propitious*” (**Caesar 6.16**). The preferred victims of such rites were said to be thieves and robbers, as they were seen as “*more acceptable to the immortal gods*”, but Caesar did note that when there was a lack of such people, the innocent were sacrificed instead. This sentiment is also echoed by Diodorus, in which he states that “*their criminals they keep prisoner for five years and then impale in honour of the gods*” (**Diodorus Siculus 5.32.6**).

Caesar gives an example of one such sacrificial rite: “*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*” (**Caesar 6.16**). A similar picture is painted by Strabo, who states “*they prepare a colossus of hay and wood, into which they put cattle, beasts of all kinds, and men, and then set fire to it.*” (**Strabo 4. 4. 5**). The nature of such a ritual is not conducive of archeological evidence, as ignited organic materials do not leave behind such a trace that would be detectable thousands of years later. However, sites such Gournay-sur-Aronde and Ribemont-sur-Ancre have presented evidence of ritualistic animal sacrifice and inner sanctums containing human skulls and other offerings, dating back to the third century B.C.E (Price, 2013). As such, whilst the exact nature of the Gallic sacrifice rites cannot be empirically proven,

there is evidence to attest that some sort of religious rites involving the dead took place and had deep significance to the people of Gaul.

The Deities of Gaul

When discussing the deities worshipped by the Gauls, Caesar refers to them by conflating them with their most similar Roman God equivalents. He states that Mercury was the most worshiped deity, and that he was regarded 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.*” In Roman religion, Mercury was typically more associated with commerce and communication than the arts (Rüpke, 2007), however seems that Mercury was the closest approximation to a God of both arts and trade that Caesar could comprehend. The importance of trade to the Gauls was also highlighted by Strabo, who wrote that they were fond of “ornament” (**Strabo 4. 4. 5**), indicating that there was an economy for luxuries, not just the swapping of essentials. This could in turn back up Caesar’s claim that the Gauls would worship a mercantile God.

Caesar’s evaluation of the Gallic Gods continues into the next chapter, in which he states that “*All the Gauls assert that they are descended from the god Dis, and say that this tradition has been handed down by the Druids*” (**Caesar 6.18**). He goes on to say that, as a result of this belief, night held important symbolic significance to the Druids and the people of Gaul: “*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*” (**Caesar 6.18**). The choice to separate this fact from the rest of his commentary on the Gallic Gods by moving it to its own chapter may very well indicate its importance as a concept to the people of Gaul. There is archaeological evidence that attests to the significance of the night and lunar imagery to the Gallic people; gilded lunar symbols were found etched into a very short sword, found in Saint-André-de-Lidon (Fitzpatrick, 2007). As the sword was far too short to be anything but symbolic, this shows that its purpose must have been ceremonial. Other like swords were found across the Gallic region, thus lending more credence to Caesar’s account of the importance of night to the Gauls.

To conclude, Caesar’s appraisal of the druids as religious leaders of the Gauls is supported by other classical ethnographies of these peoples. Furthermore the importance religious rites to the Gauls is also shown through other classical and archaeological sources. However, the

exact nature of such religious rites, and whether they featured unwilling human participants as sacrifices, is undeterminable. Finally, we can see classical and archaeological evidence behind Caesar's account of different Gallic Deities. It must therefore be concluded that Caesar's *De Bello Gallico* captures the essence of the religiosity in Gallic society.

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