

Between Narrative and Interpretation: Writing History in the Ancient World

Unit 7: Julius Caesar

Introduction

Gaius Julius Caesar was not simply one of the most significant figures in Roman history – the conqueror of Gaul, the ‘perpetual dictator’ who led the Republic to the collapse and was killed on the Ides of March of 44 BC. He is also one of the most important historians of antiquity. The subject of his historical work are his own military campaigns, and the focus is unapologetically on his own achievements – but their focus is much wider, as this survey will show.

It would be difficult to summarise the life and career of Julius Caesar in a few lines – any summary would be ungenerous or reductive. He was born in 100 BC in a prominent patrician family, which claimed direct descent from Venus and Aeneas; despite his aristocratic background, he soon joined the ranks of the political coalition that is known amongst modern historians as *populares*, whose main agenda was to contrast the supremacy of the senatorial elite and advocate a heavier involvement of the people in government. Like many ambitious members of the Roman nobility, he soon started making his way through the *cursus honorum*, the series of magistracies that every member of the Roman elite was expected to follow. Caesar gained considerable popularity in Rome, especially with the plebs, and it was this factor that persuaded the two leading figures of the political scene at the time, Pompey and Crassus, to consider an alliance with him. The outcome was the so-called ‘first triumvirate’, a political partnership that was formed in 60 BC and which shaped the destiny of Roman politics for about a decade. One of its consequences was Caesar’s rise to the consulship in 59 BC, and his taking up the governorship of Cisalpine and Transalpine Gaul in the following year.

It was the beginning of a seven year long tenure in the region, which led to the gradual conquest of most of Transalpine Gaul, after a complex and lengthy campaign that may be regarded as one of the most impressive achievements of the Roman military. Caesar's success in Gaul and his increasing ambition made the prospect of his return to Rome less and less palatable to Pompey and the Senate. The two former allies gradually found themselves increasingly distant, and ultimately heading for a clash that was bound to take the form of a civil war. When Caesar crossed the river Rubicon and headed for Rome, in January 49, Pompey and his supporters left Rome and crossed over to Greece; Caesar pursued them there, and the deciding battle took place at Pharsalus, in Thessaly, in 48. After completing his victory by defeating contingents of Pompeians in Africa and Spain, Caesar was the sole master of the political scene in Rome. Between 46 and 44 he could mainly concentrate on a wide-ranging strategy of reforms, which he could carry out without any serious restraints, from his position of dictator for life: a magistracy that, while formally in continuity with the tradition of the Republic, already had a distinctive monarchical flavour. The opposition that Caesar's regime prompted was, if subterranean, very strong, and its outcome was as striking as it could possibly be: the murder of the dictator in March 44, as he was entering the Senate.

Caesar as a man of letters

In light of such a demanding and successful career, it would no doubt be surprising to see how intense Caesar's literary activity was. We can get a full summary of his work from a famous chapter of Suetonius' *Life of Divus Julius* (54-55): it ranged across a number of different genres, from drama to linguistics, from political polemic to historiography. We will focus on the latter, for obvious reasons. Caesar was the author of two important historical works: the *Commentarii de bello Gallico*, in eight books, and the *Commentarii de bello civili*, in three books. Along with these two works, whose authorship is certain, the manuscript tradition presents five shorter texts under Caesar's name: the eighth book of the *Commentarii de bello Gallico*; a monograph on the *Bellum Alexandrinum* (the campaign fought by Caesar in Egypt in 47); one on the *Bellum Africum* (war against Pompey's associates in North Africa in 46); one on the *Bellum Hispaniense* (campaign against the Pompeians in

Spain in 45). For stylistic and/or chronological reasons, it is unlikely that Caesar was the author of these texts, although it may be argued that at least some of them were based on his own notes, taken during the campaigns, and were later edited by some of Caesar's officials, like Aulus Hirtius, who has often been identified as the possible author of these writings.

The dating of Caesar's works has been intensely debated, and the ways in which the works were composed prompt a number of questions too. The *de bello Gallico* is perhaps the most problematic text, because knowing about the date of its publication would help us understand how Caesar dealt with his counterpart (or indeed his enemies) at Rome, and how this splendid piece of propaganda fit within his wider strategy. Some scholars have argued that the *commentarii* were published year by year: this would make sense from a political point of view, and it would also make sense in light of the original meaning of the word *commentarius*, which is that of 'report, journal, diary'. One of the original meanings of the word is that of report filed by a magistrate at the end of his office, usually put to the disposal of the Senate and the people. In the late second century, the word was also used to indicate the autobiographies published by some prominent political figures, like Gaius Gracchus, Rutilius Rufus, or L. Cornelius Sulla. Surely Caesar played on this ambiguity: his *commentarii* can be read as official, or formal reports, but have a clear focus on the figure of Caesar and his take on the events. The hypothesis of a gradual publication of the *commentarii* seems preferable to the thesis of a publication in one instalment, which would have taken place between 51 and 50, at a critical time for the Republic, when the controversy between Caesar and Pompey became increasingly intense. The dating of the *de bello civili* is even more problematic: some scholars argue that it was published during Caesar's dictatorship, others have not ruled out a posthumous publication.

The most interesting problem posed by the *commentarii* is the contribution that they make to the definition of the historiography in Roman culture. Until Caesar, history could fall into some familiar categories: the annalistic account, mainly focussed on political events, in a year after year discussion, written in Greek or Latin;

the discussions of facts of contemporary politics, which could have a monographic approach, like Coelius Antipater's history of the Second Punic War; the autobiographical account, focussed on the achievements of an individual. Caesar's work did not obviously belong in any of these constituencies. At the same time, it blended all the known sub-genres of Roman historiography into something new: an account that was mainly focused on an individual, was clearly focussed on one specific event, and had an annalistic structure. It was an obviously ambitious and daring operation; however, Caesar managed to make it appear as an almost unassuming, unpretentious endeavour. He chose a style that made little concession to the conventional rhetoric of Hellenistic historiography, with little use of speeches, and a sparing use of pathetic themes. The outcome was definitely unusual, even for an experienced reader like Cicero, who – despite his differences with Caesar – was very impressed with his literary effort, and expressed a judgment that, while partly off the mark, is very instructive (*Brutus* 262, written in 46 BC):

They are wholly admirable (I say): they are nude, upright, and attractive (*nudi recti uenusti*), with all rhetorical adornment stripped out as if it were clothing. He desired to give others the raw material to draw on if they wanted to write history; but perhaps this was a fool's favour, for it would a fool who will wish to apply the curling-tongs to that material. He put sensible people off writing, for in history there is nothing so attractive as a pure, splendid brevity.

A non-rhetorical history?

Cicero was especially interested in Caesar's work, because he himself had tried to write a *commentarius* on his own achievements, or to persuade his friend Luceius to write one (see Cicero, *Letters to his friends* 5.12). The idea that history was meant to be a work of rhetoric, which had to be stylistically ambitious and carefully crafted, and that the historical record could be presented in an unassuming way for the sake of the historians to come was not new, and did survive for centuries to come; however, it is pretty obvious that Caesar did not limit himself to breaking the

ground for his successor, but intended to set out his own agenda, and make sure that it became the dominant one. To do so, he was prepared to create a new literary genre.

The literary characteristics of Caesar's work are clearly identified. We have already mentioned the annalistic structure of his narrative, which applies to both works, with only one exception: the crucial year 49, which started with the crossing of the Rubicon, takes up two books of the *de bello civili*. The main attribute of the narrative is a manifest tendency towards clarity, and the unapologetic use of a dry, factual style. The vocabulary is kept deliberately simple, with no attempt to avoid repetition if necessary, and no interest in creating variety (Caesar was a committed supporter of analogy in matters of grammar and style). The impression is that Caesar is talking business throughout his work, and that his style reflects this choice consistently. There is an intrinsic irony about this decision of our author. The whole point of the *commentarii* is to tell readers how Caesar won a war or a campaign; yet, the tone of the narrative is characteristically sober. Most strikingly, the protagonist and the author of the narrative always appear in the third person: the narrative is supposed to reflect detachment, and to appear as an unbiased account of the events, no matter if Caesar was personally involved in them. An explanation for this curious choice may be found in the contingent nature of the *commentarii* and their circulation: if Caesar sent them over to Rome during his tenure in Gaul, and they were read out in the Senate or elsewhere, using the third person would have made sense from a practical point of view. But there is surely another level of explanation. The use of the third person created a divide between Caesar the character and Caesar the author: it put Caesar the character at the forefront, and conferred Caesar the author the gravity

and the high ground that he needed. By using the third person, Caesar was placing himself above the events that he dealt with, and that he had taken part in.

Matters of authority

There were other tools to confer Caesar's viewpoint further claims to authority. The careful recording of his speeches is an obvious way to make Caesar's view as central as necessary. What was less obvious was Caesar's ability to switch from direct to indirect speech when the case required. The use of direct speech was necessary when certain emotions needed to be conveyed, or indeed channelled as directly as possible; the use of the indirect speech, on the contrary, was appropriate to make sure that the narrative as factual and swift-paced. The speech delivered by Caesar before Pharsalus is the exception that confirms (*BC* 3.85, transl. W. A. McDevitte-W. S. Bohn):

These matters being settled, when the signal for marching was given, and the tents struck, it was observed that shortly before, contrary to his daily practice, Pompey's army had advanced further than usual from his entrenchments, so that it appeared possible to come to an action on equal ground. Then Caesar addressed himself to his soldiers, when they were at the gates of the camp, ready to march out. 'We must defer,' says he, 'our march at present, and set our thoughts on battle, which has been our constant wish; let us then meet the foe with resolute souls. We shall not hereafter easily find such an opportunity.' He immediately marched out at the head of his troops.

Caesar's intervention gives the reader the full extent of the crisis, and has the indirect effect of conferring Caesar's words the aura of authority and objectivity; however, the speech is brief and factual, significantly shorter than the speeches given by Pompey and Labienus to their army a few chapters later.

Ethnography and imperialism

While Caesar's *Commentarii* were undoubtedly intended to support the political agenda of their author, the work on the Gallic War was also supposed to be the account of the conquest of a new part of the empire. Like every process of conquest, the campaign in Gaul included a cultural dimension: the encounter between the Roman and the Gallic culture, and the necessity of understanding and bridging those differences. For this reason the *commentarii* on the Gallic War are not concentrated only on military matters, and include a number of important geographic and ethnographic sections. Their aim was to enable Caesar's Roman readership to familiarise themselves with the complex reality of Transalpine Gaul, a world that most will not have known at all, or may have read about from Greek authors. The very opening of the work is a famous overview of the geography of Gaul, which enables the reader to appreciate what challenges the geography and culture of the region posed to the conquerors (*BG* 1.1, transl. W. A. McDevitte-W. S. Bohn):

The whole of 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 valor, 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 Pyrenaean mountains and to that part of the ocean which is near Spain: it looks between the setting of the sun, and the north star.

The importance of cultural factors becomes even more prominent in other moments of the work, and notably when the discussion of the cultural differences between Gauls and Germans is tackled (*BG* 6.11-28).

Some scholars have speculated that the excursuses on cultural history were not written by Caesar, but are later insertions (or interpolations). There is no evidence to support this claim: in fact, the style of the ethnographic sections is typical of Caesar, and the recognition of the importance of these factors is a testimony to the understanding of the challenges posed by his own victory, and the change in the structure of the empire that it brought about.

Caesar's credibility

The nature of Caesar's work inevitably poses the problem of its historical credibility. The issue has been intensely debated, since Caesar's times. Suetonius mentions the judgement that Asinius Pollio, a former supporter of Caesar who later turned to historiography, expressed on the reliability of Caesar's narrative (Suet. *Div. Jul.* 56.4, transl. J. C. Rolfe):

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.

There was probably an element of political polemic in Pollio's judgement. Pollio had detached himself from Caesar, and had not followed his political heir Octavian in his rise to monarchy; he was certainly a critic of Caesar's legacy, if not of his policies.

This statement found a number of supporters in modern scholarship. The most distinguished one is the French scholar Maurice Rambaud, who labelled Caesar's work as one of the most misleading and tendentious examples of Western historiography. There may well be a bulk of historical truth in the account of the campaign that he produced, as Caesar was in charge of a part of the campaign, and had access to a number of official records. However, he did not witness many of the events that he discussed; on many occasions he had to rely on the accounts of his officials, and he often shaped the account of those events by over-dramatising them.

According to this interpretation, even leading figures of the Gallic camp like Ambiorix or Vercingetorix was overemphasised in order to stress the importance of the role of Caesar.

Rimbaud's interpretation has found many critics, the most prominent being the German scholar Hans Oppermann, who rightly pointed out that it is based on an assumption of principle: Caesar may well have had an interest in misleading his readers, but he surely was not the only source that could provide information about the development of the campaign. We should not think that, since we know so relatively little about late Republican history, those who lived in that period could rely on a minimal range of sources. We should give Caesar some credit, at least as far as the basic accuracy of his account is concerned.

He is likely, however, to have made much of his own role. After all, we know that Caesar's handling of the campaign was repeatedly criticised in Rome, especially by Cato the Younger, towards the end of the Fifties; the *Commentarii de bello Gallico* may be read as a self-defence, or at least as an assertion of Caesar's appropriate conduct during the war. The same agenda may be found even more explicitly in the *de bello civili*, where Caesar needed to argue his case for letting a civil war start. In this case, of course, Caesar was in a stronger position, as he wrote and published his work after winning the war. For this reason Caesar could identify himself with the *res publica*, and could even afford to represent his victory as a choral one: hence the space that his soldiers and his officials receive in the narrative, and the measured, but extremely lucid that his opponents receive. The brief portrait of the actions of Crastinus on the battlefield of Pharsalus is just one of the many examples one could choose (3.91, transl. W. A. McDevitte-W. S. Bohn):

There was in Caesar's army, a volunteer of the name of Crastinus, who the year before had been first centurion of the tenth legion, a man of pre-eminent bravery. He, when the signal was given, says, 'Follow me, my old comrades, and display such exertions in behalf of your general as you have determined to do: this is our last battle, and when it shall be won, he will recover his dignity, and we our liberty.' At the same time he looked back to Caesar, and said, 'General, I will act in such a manner to-day, that you will feel grateful to me living or dead.' After uttering these words he charged first on the right wing, and about one hundred and twenty chosen volunteers of the same century followed.

But there is plenty of negative propaganda too in *BC*. Caesar's description of the camp of Pompey after the battle of Pharsalus is an eloquent example of how violent an attack Caesar was able to launch, just with a brief, seemingly factual description of the aftermath of a battle (3.95-96, transl. W. A. McDevitte-W. S. Bohn):

Caesar having forced the Pompeians to flee into their entrenchment, and thinking that he ought not to allow them any respite to recover from their fright, exhorted his soldiers to take advantage of fortune's kindness, and to attack the camp. Though they were fatigued by the intense heat, for the battle had continued till mid-day, yet, being prepared to undergo any labour, they cheerfully obeyed his command. The camp was bravely defended by the cohorts which had been left to guard it, but with much more spirit by the Thracians and foreign auxiliaries. For the soldiers who had fled for refuge to it from the field of battle, affrighted and exhausted by fatigue, having thrown away their arms and military standards, had their thoughts more engaged on their further escape than on the defence of the camp. Nor could the troops who were posted on the battlements, long withstand the immense number of our darts, but fainting under their wounds, quitted the place, and under the conduct of their centurions and tribunes, fled, without stopping, to the high mountains which joined the camp.

In Pompey's camp you might see arbours in which tables were laid, a large quantity of plate set out, the floors of the tents covered with fresh sods, the tents of Lucius Lentulus and others shaded with ivy, and many other things which were proofs of excessive luxury, and a confidence of victory, so that it might readily be inferred that they had no apprehensions of the issue of the day, as they indulged themselves in unnecessary pleasures, and yet upbraided with luxury Caesar's army, distressed and suffering troops, who had always been in want of common necessities. Pompey, as soon as our men had forced the trenches, mounting his horse, and stripping off his general's habit, went hastily out of the back gate of the camp, and galloped with all speed to Larissa.

The complexity of Caesar's work becomes apparent from whatever angle we may want to look at it. Surely this was inevitable, since such a complex man decided to write his own history, without falling into the trap of writing his own biography. For us modern readers, it is one of the most interesting challenges posed by ancient historiography.

Suggested reading:

1. C. Damon, 'Caesar's Practical Prose', *Classical Journal* vol. 89 (1994), 183-195 [JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3297665>]
2. A. Rossi, 'The Camp of Pompey: Strategy of Representation in Caesar's *BC*' *Classical Journal* vol. 95 (2000) 239-256 [JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3298193>]
3. B. James, 'Speech, Authority and Experience in Caesar, *Bellum Gallicum* 1.39-41', *Hermes* vol. 128 (2000), 54-64 [JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4477345>]
4. P. R. Murphy, 'Themes of Caesar's "Gallic War"', *Classical Journal* vol. 72 (1977), 234-243 [JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3296899>]
5. A. Riggsby, *Caesar in Gaul and Rome: War in Words*, Austin 2006 [available through Net Library, www.netlibrary.com]
6. Powell-K. Welch (eds.), *Caesar as an Artful Reporter*, London-Swansea 1999.
7. J. H. Collins, 'Caesar as Political Propagandist', in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* 1.1, Berlin-New York 1972, 922-966.
8. L. Raditsa, 'Julius Caesar and His Writings', in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* 1.3, Berlin-New York 1973, 417-456.
9. F. E. Adcock, *Caesar as a Man of Letters*, Cambridge 1955.
10. M. Rambaud, *L'art de la déformation historique dans les Commentaires de César*, Paris 1966².
11. H. Oppermann, 'Probleme und heutiger Stand der Caesarforschung', in D. Rasmussen (ed.), *Caesar*, Darmstadt 1967, 499-506.

Short assignment: Give a summary of the main structural differences between the *de bello Gallico* and *de bello civili*.

