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Caesar's Campaigns in Gaul (58-50 BC)

Caesar's *Commentaries on the Gallic War (De Bellum Gallico)* provide a uniquely in-depth account of Gaul and its people. While cultural descriptions are secondary to military matters in Caesar's campaigns, the reader gains a familiarity with settings, tribes, and personalities unavailable in Strabo, Tacitus, or other ancient writers. Caesar's personal record of the Gallic War included seven books on the campaigns from 58 to 52 BC, ending with the defeat of Vercingetorix. An eighth book was later added by Aulus Hirtius after Caesar's death, linking events of the Gallic War to those of the Civil War (50-48 BC).



[**Fig.1:** Commemorative coin of Julius Caesar, Late Republican era, ca. 43 BC]

Written in an uncluttered, factual style, Caesar's *Commentaries* are much closer to a memoir or historical outline than a formal history. Indispensable as a source on the Gallic War, the work is also the only report by a military commander of antiquity describing his own campaigns. In terms of cultural reporting, Caesar's account is also invaluable, being the only primary source on the Celts of Gaul, Germany and Britain during the 1st century BC, and compares with Tacitus' account *Germania*, written a century and a half later (AD 98).

Caesar's life: Cnaeus Julius Caesar was born about 100 BC into a patrician Roman family, the Julii. Caesar's father was a brother-in-law of the Consul Marius, victor of the Cimbri-Teutonic campaigns of 109-101 BC, and later defeated by Sulla in 82 BC. Caesar's family ties with Marius caused a brief exile at the start of his military and political career. After several commands in the east, Caesar won a quaestorship (financial office) in 69 BC, then in 62 BC gained the office of Praetor and earned a triumph in Spain. In 59 BC Caesar was elected to a consulship and given command of Cisalpine Gaul and Illyricum for an unprecedented term of five years. Upon the sudden death of the governor of Transalpine Gaul, that province was quickly added to Caesar's command. Later, in 55 BC, Caesar's tenure was extended for another five years, permitting long military campaigns in Gaul.

The Gallic War: As of about 60 BC, Roman impact north of Provence had been relatively slight, consisting mainly of trading relations along major rivers such as the Rhône and Garonne. Bordering tribes such as the Helvetii, Sequani, Bituriges, Aedui, and Arverni were minting their own Greek-inspired coinage to facilitate trade with Rome, and had developed primitive state systems with elected magistrates. The rest of Gaul, however, remained on a pre-state level, and were among those termed "Barbarians" by the Greeks and Romans.

Caesar's campaigns in Gaul began in 58 BC, when the Helvetii and several neighboring peoples began a

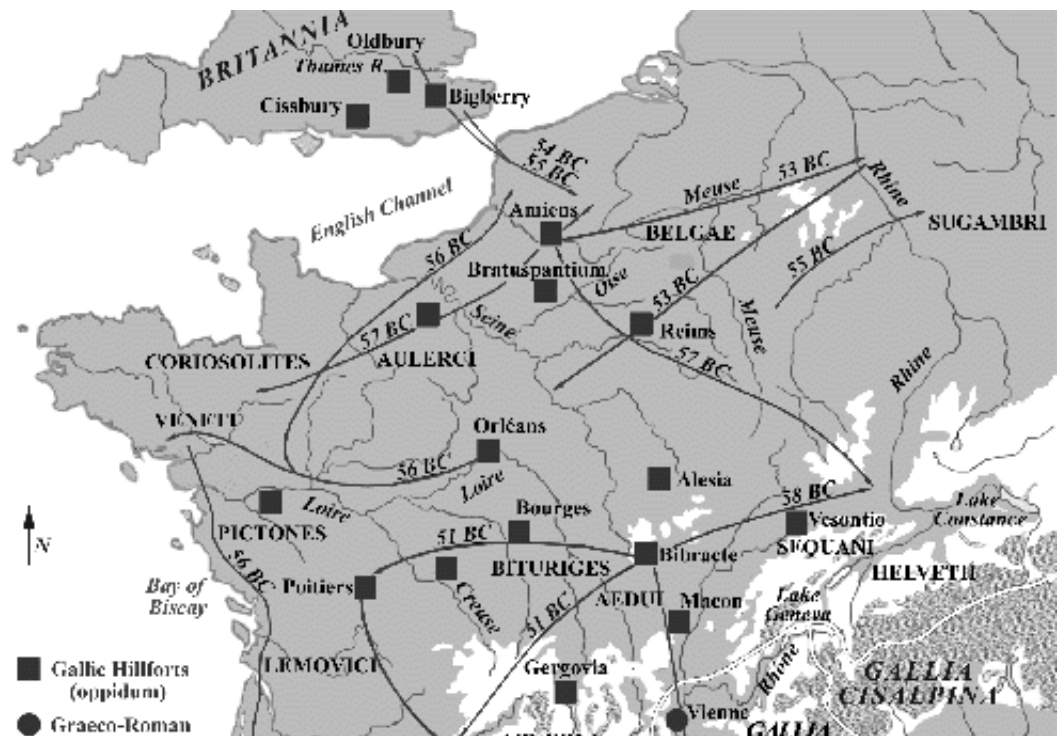
mass migration from their homes in Switzerland. Caesar forbade their passage through Roman territory and marched against them. Once the Helvetii had been driven back to their homes and their leader, Dumnorix, was defeated, Caesar then turned on Ariovistus and his tribe, the Sequani, who had been threatening the Aedui, allies of Rome. Ariovistus was quickly defeated in a single battle. Thus began eight successive years of largely successful campaigns that would secure the regions of Gaul for Roman control.

The following year, 57 BC, Caesar moved north and conquered the Belgae. As they had been regarded the bravest of the Gauls, Caesar had shown the strength of the Romans and his own leadership skills in defeating them. This advance also served to drive a wedge between the Germans and Central Gaul. Meanwhile, Caesar had sent Crassus to subdue the northwestern tribes of Armorica (Normandy and Brittany).

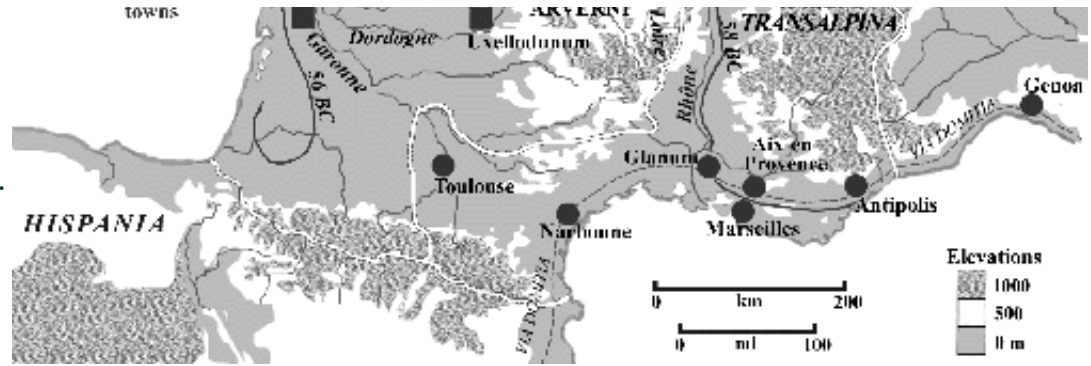
Crossing the Rhine and the Channel: Uncertain of Gallic loyalty in Armorica, Caesar spent most of 56 BC there suppressing rebellious tribes. In perhaps the most daring campaign of the Gallic War, Caesar crossed the Rhine in 55 BC after defeating German tribes on its Gallic (western) banks. He then thoroughly devastated the lands of the Sugambri. After only 18 days in Germany, Caesar dramatically marched to the coast and prepared a fleet for an invasion of Britain, the first of two [landings by Caesar](#). In August, late in the season, a force of two legions made the Channel crossing to Dover. After being battered to near disaster by tides, storms and hostile Celts, Caesar returned to Gaul just in time to suppress a revolt among the Belgae.

A major force of five legions (half of the army in Gaul) was prepared for a second invasion of Britain in July of 54 BC. After a successful landing, the Romans marched as far as the Thames and secured tribute from several British tribes, among them the Trinovantes under Cassivellaunus. Before a permanent camp could be established in Britain, Caesar had to return to Gaul in September, as the Belgae had convinced many Gallic tribes to rebel. After a few skirmishes at the end of 54 BC, Caesar spent all of 53 BC subduing the resurgent Belgae and other rebellious tribes in the north such as the Nervii, Menapii, and Treveri near the Rhine, as well as the Senones and Carnutes.

Vercingetorix: Gallic resistance culminated in the following year (52 BC) under the Arverni warrior Vercingetorix. Having begun in central Gaul, in the territory of the Carnutes, rebellion quickly spread to the borders of Transalpina. Caesar marched to secure his province in the south and then returned northwards against the rebellious tribes. After several small sieges and battles, Vercingetorix and the Gauls were cornered and besieged at the oppidum of Alésia. Though Caesar was ultimately victorious, the size



of the relief army shows that most of central and northern Gaul had risen in revolt, including the Aedui who had traditionally been pro-Roman. After the defeat of Vercingetorix, Gallic resistance would never again rise in great force. Through 51 and 50 BC, Caesar was involved with "mopping-up" efforts in Gaul, including a siege at Uxellodunum.



[Fig.2: map showing the campaigns of Caesar in Gaul, 58-50 BC.]

Caesar's Ethnography: During military descriptions, much of what Caesar says about the Celts is generalized. Often, for example, even the Romanized border tribes are characterized as if they were the more distant barbarous tribes (Books 2-4). This probably served as propaganda to justify Caesar's extending his offensive more than strictly necessary to safeguard the Province, and helped build support and funding for his large army for several years. Yet Caesar's account also focuses specifically on the native cultures. His most substantive description of the Celts comes in Book 6, where he devotes ten chapters to the Gauls and eight to the Germans. He specifies two basic classes among the Gallic Celts, the uppermost consisting of Druids and Knights, and the lower made up of commoners. The Knights or warrior elite were judged by the number of vassals they maintained, with commoners said to live as slaves to the Druids and Knights.

The Druids: As the learned priests of the Gauls, Druids also served as judges and teachers. Caesar reports that the Gauls were "extremely devoted to superstitious rites" and that many human sacrifices were conducted, generally according with Strabo's accounts: "...they who are troubled with unusually severe diseases, and they who are engaged in battles and dangers... 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..." [BG 6.16].

Caesar paints one particularly vivid picture of sacrifices involving wood frameworks, involving "...figures of vast size, the limbs of which... they fill with living men, [when] set on fire, the men perish... in the flames." [BG 6.16]. The Druids also took up to twenty years memorizing verses, not because they lacked writing (since the Gauls used the Greek alphabet), but to train their memories and because, in Caesar's view, "...they did not desire their doctrines divulged among the mass of the people." [BG 6.14]

Mercury and other gods: Caesar also provides key information on Late Iron Age Gallic religion in Book 6 of his *Commentaries*, including much of what is known about their gods. Foremost was a Celtic equivalent of Mercury, Roman god of commerce: "...they 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." [BG 6.17]. Archaeological findings accord well with Caesar's historic reference to the prevalence of Celtic images of Mercury, which have been found in sites throughout France, Germany, and Britain.

The Gauls also worshipped variant forms of Jupiter, Apollo, Minerva, and Mars. They claimed descent from the god Dis (deity of death and ruler of the underworld). As such, Caesar points out, their calendar is based on nights, rather than days, so that "...they keep birthdays and the beginnings of months and years in such an order that the day follows the night." [BG 6.17]

Caesar also reports in Book 6 (ch.21-28) on the Germans, whose customs differed greatly from those of the Gauls. The Germans had no Druids and paid little regard to sacrifices. Their gods consisted only of forces that directly benefit them, "the sun, fire, and the moon." For Germans, life was based on "...hunting and in the pursuits of the military art; from childhood they devote themselves to fatigue and hardships. " [BG 6.21]

German social organization was largely informal, with temporary warchiefs chosen only as needed. Their warlike, isolationist tendencies distinguished them from the more civilized Gauls of Caesar's day, although he notes that previously, the Gauls had been more warlike than the Germans.

Posidonius, Strabo, Diodorus, Pliny, and Polybius: Other important sources on the Gauls include Posidonius, a Stoic Greek philosopher and geographer whose writings are now lost, but with whom Caesar may well have been familiar. Posidonius' early 1st century BC comments on Celtic life in Gaul influenced Strabo and Roman contemporaries of Caesar including Diodorus Siculus (fl. ca. 44-40 BC). Other, still earlier source material came from Polybius (200-118 BC) who wrote on the wars with Hannibal and the Gaesatae Invasion, and who also (like Caesar) refers to inhabitants of Gaul interchangeably as "Gauls" and "Celts."

Strabo (64 BC-AD 25), whose *Geography*, written ca. 20 BC, is the most complete of any retained from antiquity, devotes all of Book 4 to Gaul. While parts are taken directly from Caesar, he also provides considerable independent detail on the Narbonnaise, Lyonnaise, Aquitania, and the Belgae, some derived from Posidonius. Also using both Posidonius and Caesar was Pliny the Elder, who wrote a history of the German War in ca. AD 60 (now lost).

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