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Author(s): A. G. Russell

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CAESAR: DE BELLO GALLICO, BOOK I, cc. 1-41

By A. G. RUSSELL

It is hoped to print from time to time short articles on books set by the examining bodies: it is intended that these should provide materials for understanding the background and grasping the main purpose of the book.

Rome and Gaul

FROM about the fourth century B.C. Rome had a long-standing alliance with the Greek colony of Massilia (Marseilles) whose territory was constantly raided by southern Gallic tribes; these incursions called for military intervention from the Romans from the middle of the second century, culminating in a series of successful campaigns, the enlargement of Massilia's territory, the founding of the colony of Aquae Sextiae (Aix, 30 miles north of Marseilles), and the annexation of southern Gaul in 121 B.C. after the defeat of the Allobroges and Arverni. The province stretched from the Pyrenees up to Tolosa (Toulouse), then the frontier skirted the Cevennes to the Jura Mountains and the south-west corner of Lacus Lemannus (Lake Geneva); then it came in a south-south-easterly line to the Mediterranean coasts, by the Maritime Alps. It formed a very valuable corridor from Italy to Spain, and through it ran the Via Domitia beyond the Rhône; in 118 B.C. Narbo Martius (Narbonne) was founded, and so flourishing a Roman civilization grew up that Pliny later described it as 'Italia verius quam provincia'.

From 110 B.C. barbarian invasions led by the Cimbri and Teutoni threw all Gaul into confusion; a Roman general, Cassius Longinus, had been defeated in 109 B.C. by the Helvetic tribes (i. 12), in Gallia Transalpina Marius had trained his legionaries, while in 102 B.C. Aquae Sextiae had been the scene of the defeat of the Teutoni. Roman prestige was restored in the province, but there was no annexation beyond the present boundaries, although various tribes, especially the Aedui, were treated as 'Friends of the Roman People'. Rome refused to

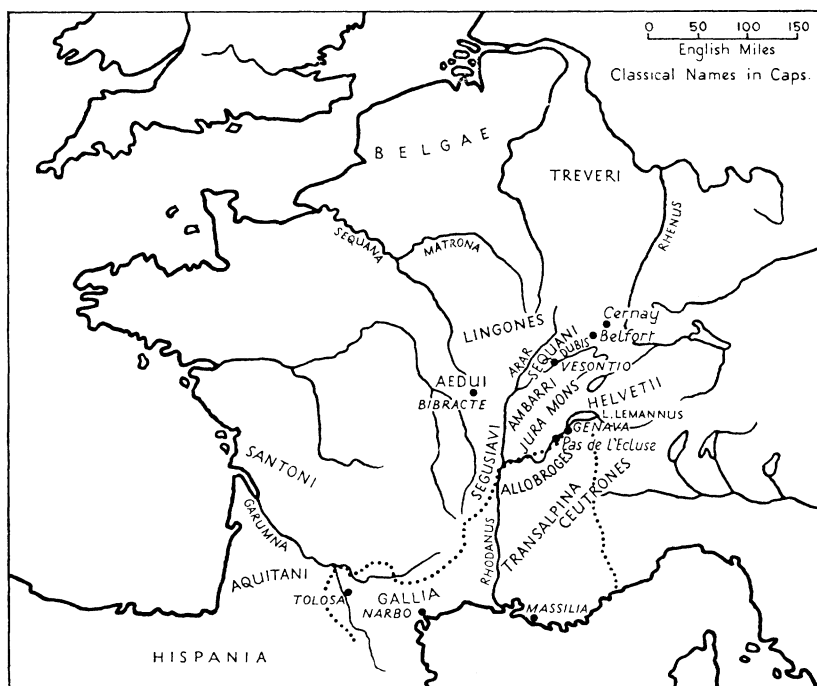
interfere in the constant internal struggles for political power which took place among the disunited tribes. There was further trouble about 77 B.C., when Sertorius extended his influence from Spain and offered resistance to Pompey on his march to crush that revolt. A period of misgovernment followed, the greatest offender being M. Fonteius, brought to trial and defended by Cicero, whose speech gives evidence of the extent of Romanization over the southern part of the country: 'referta Gallia negotiatorum est, plena civium Romanorum' (*pro Font.* 5). In 66 B.C. Calpurnius Piso (*pacificator Allobrogum* as Cicero calls him) had to subdue a rising of that tribe whose envoys in Rome, in 63 B.C., were so much in the limelight owing to the part they indirectly played in the detection of Catiline's conspiracy, and again in 62 or 61 B.C. they revolted, only to be crushed by C. Pomptinus.

The Helvetii

Caesar classes the Helvetii as of Celtic race; the boundaries of their territory were the Rhine, the Jura Mountains, and Lake Lemman, roughly the northern part of Switzerland; in that small area, 240 by 180 Roman miles, was crowded a large population which Caesar, on the strength of documents found later in their camp, gives as 368,000, of whom 92,000 were capable of bearing arms. The confederacy was made up of five tribes: the Helvetii with 12 towns and 40 villages, 263,000; the Tulingi (36,000); Latovici (13,000); Raurici (23,000), and the Boii (32,000). Their already small territories were made still smaller by pressure from German tribes, and the Helvetii were thus in the awkward predicament of having the Romans to the south and the Germans to the north. Throughout non-Roman Gaul, nationalist sentiment was growing; the Sequani had defeated Rome's allies, the Aedui,—even among this tribe anti-Roman intrigues, under Dumnorix, had as their object an alliance with Orgetorix, a Helvetian, and Casticus, a Sequanian.

In 61 B.C. under the influence of Orgetorix the Helvetii determined to migrate from their present narrow confines westwards, through the lands of Sequani and Aedui, passing Tolosa in the

far south-west corner of the Province, towards the Santoni who lived on the Atlantic coast and in the fertile valley of the Charente. Two years were allowed for their preparations, and we know from Cicero's letters to Atticus (*ad Att.* i. 19 and 20) that in 60 B.C. Rome, alarmed at the prospect, levied troops



CAESAR: GALLIC WAR, I. 1-41

With acknowledgements to the *Cambridge History*, vol. ix, Map 13.

and sent envoys, but soon an appearance of tranquillity was restored. In 59 B.C. Ariovistus, the German leader, was momentarily recognized as a Friend of the Roman People, largely through Caesar's own influence.

In spite of the death of Orgetorix, the Helvetii determined to carry out his plan of migration; they burnt their villages and surplus corn, and arranged a rendezvous on the right bank of the Rhône opposite Geneva for 28 March 58 B.C. in the consulship of L. Piso and A. Gabinius, and the proconsulship of Gaius Julius Caesar.

Caesar and Gaul

Caesar had returned from Spain in 60 B.C., and, joining in coalition with Pompey and Crassus, became consul for 59 B.C. Transalpine Gaul was governed by Metellus Celer, who had been rather disappointed in his military ambitions when Gaul quietened down in 60 B.C. Metellus died, and in April (probably) 59 B.C. Afranius stepped into the vacant governorship, while in May Vatinius, a tribune and political supporter of Caesar, proposed a bill before the Popular Assembly by which the governorship of Cisalpine Gaul and, in addition, Illyricum was conferred on Caesar. The Senate had previously hoped to sidetrack his dangerous energy by giving him the unimportant *provincia* of 'woods and forests', but the Lex Vatinia conferred exceptional powers. He was allowed to have his own staff, independent of Senatorial interference; he could found colonies as he wished, and—most important—his term of office, normally for one or two years, was prolonged to 28 February 54 B.C. At the death of Metellus, Pompey proposed to the Senate that he should also have Transalpine Gaul. The Senate agreed. So Caesar began his real military career with a province which stretched from beyond Toulouse, up to Geneva, included the whole northern frontier of Italy along the Po, as well as half the Dalmatian seaboard. To control it he had but four legions, one stationed near Geneva, at the northern danger-point, and the other three at Aquileia on the extreme east of the Cisalpine Province: two more he subsequently enrolled when the Helvetian invasion became menacing. His *legati* included Titus Labienus, but Book I contains the names of no other member of his staff, though sixteen in all are mentioned in the Commentaries.

Historians have long argued whether Caesar undertook the government of Roman Gaul with the definite object of bringing the remainder of the country under Roman sway. In the face of the Helvetian danger he must have realized that the passage of so large a host through Roman territory would inevitably be interpreted as weakness on the part of the Romans; damage would certainly be caused *en route*, while the German danger

would be brought nearer by their occupation of the lands left vacant by the Helvetii. He knew, too, of the flux and re-flux of feeling in independent Gaul, the existence of pro- and anti-Roman factions in many tribes, and no doubt, like Edward I in Scotland, he might hope to fish profitably in troubled waters. The danger in which the Aedui stood was common knowledge—they had been badly defeated by anti-Roman tribes in the battle of Admategobriga, and since the consulship of Messalla and Piso (61 B.C.) the Instrument of Instructions issued to the governor of Cisalpine Gaul had ordered him 'so far as public interest would allow, to protect the Aedui and other friends of the Roman People' (i. 35).

On the other hand, Caesar's disposition of his legions at the beginning of 58 B.C. does not show any mature plan of conquest: there was only one near the scene of action, he had hurriedly to summon the other three from a point far distant and, probably on his own responsibility, enrol two more. It is likely that the scheme did not really take shape until the death of Metellus gave him Transalpine Gaul, and until he had time to appreciate the whole situation on his arrival and to realize how dangerous would be the existence of a formidable Helvetian power in south and central Gaul. Then having dealt with the Helvetii the German problem loomed still larger, and as Cicero said (*De Prov. Cons.* 13. 22), 'he concluded that he would not only have to wage war with the tribes who already were visibly in arms against the Roman People, but also to bring the whole country of Gaul beneath our sway'.

The Campaign

There has been much discussion as to the actual route of the Helvetii. For them to reach their destination in the west of Gaul there were two points of exit from Switzerland—the northern passes over the Jura would take them out of their direct line, hence they chose that which lay through the province in preference to the narrow pass which followed the right bank of the Rhône and debouched into the lands of the Sequani, who not unnaturally feared the passage of so large a host. Caesar refused their request for leave to cross the province after he had

gained an interval of ten or eleven days, till 9 April, for consideration, and used it in raising levies and fortifying the most important points along the 19 miles of river-bank between Lake Geneva and the Pas de l'Écluse. Attempts to pass these lines failed and the Helvetii were forced to take the Sequanian route. The internal state of Gaul was responsible for their being able to do this; Caesar realized previously the hostility of the Allobroges and the danger they might cause if the Helvetii marched through them (i. 6)—he was now to learn that the anti-Roman faction of the Aedui had persuaded the already hostile Sequani to give them permission to go through the narrow gap. Recognizing the inadequacy of his forces, he left Labienus in charge of his lines, returned to his Cisalpine troops, mustered them, and after forced marches over Mont Genève through Dauphiny, crossed the Rhône at its junction with the Saône (Flumen Arar), to learn that the Helvetii had threaded their way through the pass and the Sequani, had crossed the Saône, and were ravaging the lands of Rome's allies, the Aedui.

This gave Caesar his pretext and motive for future operations. There was still a force of Tigurini on the east bank of the Saône, and they were the first to feel the weight of his arm, after a night march which he made to attack them in the valley of the Formans, a few miles north of the river junction. The alarm of the Helvetii amounted to panic when they saw their pursuer cross in one day a river whose passage had occupied them nearly twenty, and they tried to open negotiations which Caesar rejected. So the march went on northwards for fifteen days, with barely five or six miles separating the forces, in spite of Caesar's difficulties with his Gallic cavalry and his supplies of food. Used to the Mediterranean climate in which corn is a winter crop, he was soon feeling a shortage, augmented to a certain extent by the intrigues of Dumnorix whose sympathies all lay with the Helvetii.

The pro-Roman party led by Diviciacus and Liscus revealed the state of affairs, but so awkward was Caesar's situation that he was forced to patch up a reconciliation, at the same time giving orders that Dumnorix should be watched. A carefully planned concerted movement between Caesar and Labienus

to attack the enemy went awry owing to a faulty reconnaissance by an experienced centurion, and finding his supplies short, Caesar abandoned the pursuit and marched north to the Aeduan town of Bibracte, eighteen miles away, there to re-provision. The site is marked now by Mont Beauvay, near Autun. The Helvetii had probably turned west by this time, but in a mad moment, hearing of the change of Roman plan, pursued their former pursuer, and came up about seven miles south of Bibracte between him and the town, hoping to cut him off from his supplies.

There in the hills the final battle was fought; only the four veteran legions were engaged on the Roman side in this, Caesar's first great battle. The Helvetii advanced to the attack in massed formation, brushing aside the Gallic cavalry and assaulting the Romans on the hills. The attack failed, but as the Romans pursued, a force of Boii and Tulingi, 15,000 in number, attacked them, probably on the right flank, with such success that the main body joined in the fight again, directing their efforts on the first and second Roman lines while the third turned and beat off their new assailants. The battle lasted from early afternoon until evening, till eventually the Helvetii retired to the hills as the Boii and Tulingi made a last desperate stand round their wagons, which were not carried till late on in the night after a terrific mêlée.

130,000 Helvetii had meanwhile retreated northwards to the territory of the Lingones between Auxerre and Dijon, but Caesar's messages forbade help being given to them. After a three days' halt he followed up to see that his instructions were being carried out, and on the way was met by envoys whose pleas for mercy he respected. Six thousand made an abortive attempt to reach the Rhine but were brought back and as Caesar meaningly says 'treated as enemies!' How to deal with the Helvetii was Caesar's next problem; the Germans would be only too willing to occupy the vacant lands—a situation Rome could not tolerate—so the emigrants were ordered back to Switzerland and provision provided for them by the Allobroges: 110,000 returned. The Boii, whose valour the Aedui recognized and possibly hoped to use, were settled in Aeduan

territory, most likely to the south-west, and in the end treated by them as equals.

The position of Caesar was a curious one; he had no expressed authority to be beyond the borders of his province, he had come unexpectedly into a position in which the Gauls looked upon him as the arbiter of their fate, and he risked being entangled in their internal conflicts. The Gallic chieftains assembled to congratulate him, and put him in a situation from which he could not withdraw without loss of prestige to Rome. The information they gave him in a secret meeting was so startling that he might well be nervous as to the next step. For centuries the Romans had had rather nightmare fears about the northern tribes: the early Gallic invasions had been unpleasantly recalled to mind by the Cimbri and Teutoni; these had given place to the Germans in popular fancy. What the Gauls told him about them gave a clue to the grim background of Gallic politics. Ariovistus had come into Gaul some time before 63 B.C.—the actual date is uncertain, some authorities putting it as early as 71 B.C.—when the Arverni and Sequani had foolishly invited him to help them against the Aedui. Only 15,000 had at first crossed the Rhine: the defeat of the Aedui had put the Sequani in the power of their enemies, for Ariovistus had settled in their territory, and had taken a third of their lands for an additional 23,000 invaders. In fact, the Gauls went in fear and trembling of Ariovistus and only dared to complain to the Romans in secret.

The German leader was in a strong position. He had received official recognition from the Senate in an honorific title, he had a large army to face Caesar's comparatively small one, and his own prestige in Gaul was great. He could afford therefore to return a contemptuous answer to Caesar's first embassy, which was sent when Caesar realized the danger that the Germans might cause to Rome's possessions as soon as they became accustomed to crossing the Rhine and carrying their arms farther afield. Ariovistus refused a personal interview and inquired what business it was of the Romans. Caesar replied by quoting the Senate's decree of 61 B.C. instructing him to protect the Aeduan interests and added to it an ultimatum,

demanding that no more Germans should cross the Rhine, the Aeduan hostages should be returned and no warlike action should be taken against them. This put Ariovistus on his mettle and in a defiant mood he demanded the same privileges as the Romans claimed for themselves, told Caesar that he would treat the Aedui as he liked, and dared him to bring Roman troops into action against his own warriors.

This long-range exchange of compliments took place when Ariovistus was in Upper Alsace; the crisis came when Caesar heard that German raids were beginning again and that fresh hordes were crossing the Rhine; to meet them he marched in the direction of the enemy. His actual starting-point is unknown, but after three days, hearing that Ariovistus was making for Besançon on the river Doubs, he forestalled him after great exertions and fortified the town. This became the scene of one of those strange mass movements which threatened to undermine the morale of the Roman army, which had not as yet met the Germans, and assuming *omne ignotum pro magnifico* worked up a deadly panic. The Gallic tales about the prowess of the enemy first unsettled the senior ranks who were much less accustomed to warfare and had joined Caesar in a mistaken idea of what they were in for. They even spread the report that Caesar was in Gaul to suit his own ambitions and that his present campaign was contrary to Senatorial instructions. The whole army might have collapsed had not Caesar spoken in unvarnished language to the centurions, and by a carefully calculated appeal to the past, a reasoned account of the present situation, and a definite challenge to them restored their spirits. Even in these early days, the 10th was his favourite brigade; his sure judgement did not fail him this time any more than it did on as serious an occasion later.

Caesar left Besançon, and by a circuitous route of fifty miles, avoiding broken country where he might be attacked at a disadvantage, in seven days arrived at a point twenty-four miles from Ariovistus in Alsace. Napoleon III and Colonel Stoffel, who have elucidated most of the disputed points in the topography of Caesar's campaigns, place Ariovistus' camp near Colmar and Caesar's near Cernay. To reach it he passed

through the Gap of Belfort which has seemed to so many generations of French the really dangerous point of entry into their country. In this area the final scene was played out in a memorable encounter.

NOTE ON AUTHORITIES

The bibliography of this subject is vast.

- (a) Contemporary authority is to be found, of course, in Caesar's own commentaries, and in scattered references in Cicero (*Epist. ad Atticum*, i. 19, i. 20, &c.); *pro Fonteio* for the state of Gaul.
- (b) Secondary authorities are Dio Cassius (parts of bks. 37-40); Plutarch's *Caesar*; Suetonius' *Life of Caesar*. There are references in Diodorus Siculus (bk. v), Strabo (bk. iv), Appian (bks. 1 and 2), Livy (Ep. 103), and elsewhere.
- (c) Modern authorities in English: Rice-Holmes, *Caesar's Conquest of Gaul* (indispensable), pp. 46-62, 611-57, &c. *Cambridge Ancient History* (vol. ix, c. xiii); Ferrero, *The Greatness and Decline of Rome*; and numerous foreign works and articles, e.g. Coustain's, *Guide illustré des campagnes de César en Gaule*; Napoleon III, *Histoire de Jules César*. English articles include Howorth, 'The Germans of Caesar' (*Eng. Hist. Rev.*, p. 417, &c.), Rice-Holmes, *Classical Quarterly*, vol. iii, p. 209, iv. 239; Walker, *Classical Journal*, vol. i, p. 213; Warde-Fowler, *Caesar* (an excellent life).

IMITATIONS OF MARTIAL

VIII. 59

Non cenat sine apro noster, Tite, Caecilianus.
bellum convivam Caecilianus habet.

Two Pigs

Our friend his dinner never ate
Without a boar's head, tête à tête.

XII. 7

Toto vertice quot gerit capillos
annos si tot habet Ligeia, trima est.

Unconvincing Narrative

If ye'd number the years of auld Mother Machree
By counting the hairs of her head, then she's three.

T. W. M.