Caesar’s Gallic Wars and the Archaeological Record

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Historical Background
- *De Bello Gallico* (The Gallic War) is Julius Caesar’s account of the massive military campaigns he led in Europe from 58 BCE to 51 BCE. Caesar sent his commentaries to Rome every winter, detailing his numerous victories and occasional defeats.
- *De Bello Gallico* provides important information about the political, social, and cultural traditions of indigenous Europeans.
- Archaeology has revealed a more nuanced picture, enhancing our understanding of Europe during the Iron Age and early Roman Period.

Disparities between Caesar’s Accounts and the Material Evidence
- Gauls and Germans: Caesar describes two distinct groups separated by the Rhine.
  - La Tène is a specific style of ornamentation found on both sides of the Rhine. This style emerged during the mid-5th century BCE.
  - Rhineland groups were also characterized by similar pottery, elaborate inhumation burials, ornate *fibulae* (special pins used to keep clothing in place), and *oppida* (naturally fortified villages).
- The distinctions between “Gauls” and “Germans” were first made by Caesar. In the textual tradition, these labels functioned both to glorify his martial victories and justify his defeats. Implicit in *De Bello Gallico* is Caesar’s assertion that Gauls were more civilized and could therefore be conquered and assimilated; Germans, however, were wild and could not be successfully integrated.
- “Then too I saw that it was dangerous for Rome to have the Germans gradually getting into the habit of crossing the Rhine and coming into Gaul in vast numbers. Once they had occupied the whole of Gaul I did not imagine that such a fierce and uncivilized people would refrain from moving out, ... pressing on into Italy” (*Bel. Gal.* 1.33).
- Expansive forests filled with fantastical creatures.
- Caesar frequently references immense forests, but pollen testing has revealed that widespread clearing had begun prior to Roman occupation.

Possible Explanations for Caesar’s Inaccurate Reports
- Personal political motives.
  - Caesar strove to gain experience and improve his reputation in Rome.
  - Caesar intentionally fostered dissent amongst the tribes.
- Preconceived notions.
  - The concept of a “tribe” was more familiar to the Romans than the complex social system which actually existed.
  - Mass migrations, previous invasions, Greek sources, “periphery theory”.
- Incomplete understanding.
  - The social and political conditions were distorted due to stress caused by Roman presence.
  - Translation errors and intentionally misleading intelligence.

Explanations for a Distorted Archaeological Record
- Scholarly bias.
  - 19th century nationalist movements played a significant role in establishing precedents.
  - Texts have been used to guide archaeological investigations.
- Roman sites are easier to detect than native settlements.
  - Consequently, less effort has been employed in locating and excavating indigenous sites and interpreting indigenous artifacts.
- Romano-centric emphasis.

Lessons for the Present
- Every ancient text must be read critically, because many classical authors were not entirely objective in their observations. They had a variety of motivations for producing their works and developing their focuses within them.
- We must readjust our approach to archaeology, both in the focus of excavations and the interpretation of artifacts. There needs to be a less Romano-centric emphasis, as well as a greater acknowledgment of the indigenous Europeans’ sophistication and social complexity.
- The results of these efforts will be a deeper understanding of, and appreciation for, Europe’s history and ancestral heritage.

Select Bibliography

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