

THE

A NEW TRANSLATION

WAR

FOR

GAUL

JULIUS CAESAR

TRANSLATED BY JAMES J. O'DONNELL

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## Introduction

Caesar deserves to be compared with Alexander the Great. No one before or since comes close. Command, conquest, and a lasting legacy set them apart from the likes of mere strivers like Napoleon or Hitler. And the war in Gaul was the making of Caesar.

Have I said that right? Isn't that what you would expect a translator of Caesar to say? It's all entirely true and many have said as much before. But saying *just* that makes you admire him without understanding him, makes you complicit in his ill-doing as well. This translation of his account of the war in Gaul will try to restore *your* objectivity and freedom of judgment. Make of him what you will.

\* \* \* \*

Cormac McCarthy should be the one to write the story of Caesar in Gaul. As insensitive and brutal as McCarthy's Americans afoot in a land of native and Spanish peoples they wrongly took for uncivilized, Caesar's armies had little excuse for what they did and they preferred not to remember it once done. But Caesar told their story coolly. Though people die in droves, horribly, on these pages, the Latin word for "blood" appears only twice, near the end.

The facts of the story must be made clear. A general with something to prove, a career to make, and plunder to be harvested for financial gain was handed an army and a province and a guarantee he would have both for long enough to make serious mischief. He spent nine years battering his way through his province and the rich and promising lands beyond, bullying allies and brutalizing the resistant. By the time he was through, the lands and peoples that obeyed his commands—and those of his successors for another half



millennium—had been vastly increased, and he was poised to make himself master of the world, or at least the world that stretched from the English Channel to Damascus.

He had no business doing any of this. His colleagues admired his chutzpah, knowing that he went far beyond every reasonable moral or legal boundary. His excesses were possible because he was in competition with two other monsters, one of whom fell in battle at the opposite end of the world while Caesar was in Gaul, the other of whom let Caesar go too long, then fought him, then fled, and ended up hacked to death by the minions of a king who thought it prudent to curry favor with Caesar.

But the book Caesar wrote is magnificent: amoral, certainly, but clear, vivid, and dramatic, a thing to be remembered and read for the ages. Books about war often make us sympathize with the wretchedness of the victims. This one forces us to be Romans of the kind its author wanted to be. We read it nervously, cheering for a bullfight we didn't want to attend and don't approve of, admiring the grace of the awesome minuet that floods the sand with blood. There is no denying that this is a great work of literature, one of the greatest, and at the same time, there should be no denying that it is a bad man's book about his own bad deeds. I think it is the best bad man's book ever written.

But many will resist my saying the plain fact. Because his carven prose depends on a deliberately restrained vocabulary and a terse, correct style, the book has been thought suitable for schoolboys for many generations, until about the time Latin schoolmasters discovered finally that women can read too. Now the book is in disfavor, for the wrong reasons: because it is about war, and because it is too easy. But we all need to read books about war if we are to avoid dying in one, and this book is anything but easy.

The best reasons for not teaching this book to the young are that it gets war exactly right and morals exactly wrong, and that it achieves a crystalline purity of style that looks easy from every angle but proves to be sternly difficult and demanding when faced flat on. This is a book for the middle-aged and sober, for those who know that the world is not run according to their tastes and never will be,

for those who listen best to the author who has truly mastered his language, whatever he has to say—and who think that such an author must indeed have something important to say and hear.

The book pretends to be a set of notebooks, *commentarii*, the sort of official memos generals sent home to inform their masters of their deeds, the sort historians could come along and use to construct genial and politically agreeable accounts of great events. The style is meant to look simple and to seduce. When we read it, we are meant to think we are getting the plain facts, direct and unvarnished. The old maxim is *ars est celare artem*—"never let 'em see you sweat" captures the sense of that shopworn Latin phrase. Nobody ever saw Caesar sweat.

Translators of Caesar have always been helpful—much too helpful. Surely, they think, the reader just wants to know what really happened. Caesar would be pleased to think that's what we think he's offering. The effect of this connivance with the general is not only to be found in the maps and diagrams and illustrations that go with the best translations but in the expansiveness and preemptively explanatory construction of every sentence. The translations I've looked at in English generally add almost as many words again as Caesar needed in the original, so that he becomes downright chatty and helpful. No. This book is fiercely austere, for brave and attentive readers, ready to march twenty-five miles a day under full pack and be ready for more tomorrow.

## GAUL

Caesar has us imagine that he has invaded a land of Wild West instability and aggressiveness and tamed it for civilization. No.

Where and what was Gaul? The province Caesar was formally assigned included the Roman territories of Illyricum (the east coast of the Adriatic), Cisalpine Gaul (what is now Italy north of the Apennines and south of the Alps, running from Turin to Venice), and the old Roman "province," both what is now called Provence and the strip of further Roman territory along the Mediterranean coast linking to Spain. The Roman proconsul normally sat at Modena, halfway

between Rimini and Piacenza along the “Emilian Way” (the marching road already plotted out by the Romans in 187 BCE). Caesar would grant citizenship to Cisalpine Gaul’s residents in 49, and Octavian would formally dissolve that province and fold all Italy into a single jurisdiction in 42.

That province of Transalpine Gaul was what the Romans had claimed after the Punic Wars, to secure the coast and a path to Spain. The modern cities of Aix-en-Provence and Narbonne descend from settlements designed to secure the eastern and western segments of their holdings. Strictly speaking, Cisalpine Gaul and that province were the Gaul Caesar was assigned to govern and protect.

But the Gaul of Caesar’s book is all the Gaul Rome didn’t rule when he arrived. Real Gaul for us is approximately modern France, bounded by Alps, Rhine, Atlantic, Pyrenees, and Mediterranean. Caesar created that Gaul, most notably in his pithy opening sentence about “all Gaul” and “three parts.” What he says there is, like much in this book, moderately true and entirely self-serving. Gaul for him was what he wanted it to be.

The leading nations among the Gauls were the Sequani, Haedui, Arverni, and Bituriges. They were all to be found in central Gaul. Aquitaine and Brittany were home to smaller, poorer peoples. Between the Seine and the Loire was the hotbed of a certain Gallic spirit, among the Carnutes and Senones. Modern Chartres was the site of the annual festival of Gallic religious observation, led by the druids who fascinated Caesar. It was there that Vercingetorix, himself from the Auvergne, found resonance for his call to arms in 52 BCE.

Well on in the commentaries (at 6.12), Caesar tells a story of old rivalry between the Haedui and the Sequani in which the Haedui had been worsted and subjected to their neighbors. But at the very beginning (see 1.31) he names both the Haedui and the Sequani as the leading peoples of the Gaul. In fact, readers should pay particular attention to the Haedui throughout, just as readers of Thucydides should always keep an eye on the Corinthians. They were almost always loyal to Rome and Caesar, but they were adept at playing Caesar and Rome to their own ends. Watch as you read how often

they are the ones to alert Caesar to a supposed threat and how often Caesar's actions wind up confirming the Haedui in their place of power and prestige, both among Gauls and with Romans. They loom very large in the years 58–57, disappear from the narrative in 56 and 55, then return to view when Vercingetorix does, in the first pages of the seventh commentary on the year 52. Might not a Haeduan aristocrat after Vercingetorix's fall be pleased with a Gaul that had been reshaped for Haeduan benefit by the great general?

And beyond Gaul lay Germany. Gaul was Caesar's to conquer, Germany was the other threatening world that lay beyond. His Germany (colorfully described in his sixth commentary) is as much a place of his imagination as his Gaul is.<sup>1</sup> Great rivers bind people together more than they separate them and it's clear that people moved back and forth across the Rhine with ease. But the river made a convenient tactical boundary for Caesar, so that's where he divides his worlds. (He came to rely on "German" troops to support his own.)

In the heartland, a Gallic nation was a tiny community of oligarchs, big men with land and influence, lording it over a population limited in means and cultural capacity. The Gallic nations were smaller, less urbanized, less literate, less monetized, and therefore less imperial and less able to trade to their advantage than Rome was, but in many other ways very similar to Rome.

The peoples of the Roman province, stretched along the Mediterranean coast from the Alps to the Pyrenees, were far further advanced as measured by Rome. Nonetheless, it would be fully a century from the end of Caesar's time in Gaul before the emperor Claudius made his famous speech in 48 CE to extend the possibility of membership in the Senate to citizens from the three Gauls. Till then, Roman presence in Gaul was a Roman army facing in

<sup>1</sup> The first paragraph of Caesar's first commentary contains the first Roman mention of "Germans." The polymath Greek geographer Posidonius, who died at a great age at about this time, is the other earliest writer to mention a people by that name. Cicero picks up the word in his oration toadying to Caesar on consular provincial assignments in 56. The Germans qualify as what we now call an "imagined community" after Benedict Anderson's work.

two directions, keeping out Germans and policing mostly complacent Gauls.

We get a snapshot of Gaul just before Caesar in the career of Marcus Fonteius, proconsul in the 70s. He worked in the shadow of Pompey, who was fighting rebels in Spain and drawing on Gaul as a source of supplies. Fonteius laid heavy taxes on the Gauls, which they paid by borrowing money from Romans, landing heavily in debt to Roman loan sharks. Fonteius was also accused of taking a cut himself. Cicero in a speech defending Fonteius against well-founded accusations of corruption speaks of Gaul (by which he means the province) as chock-full of Roman citizens and Roman businessmen.

The Transalpine province was an afterthought added to Caesar's responsibilities when he had already been assigned Illyricum and Cisalpine Gaul. The natural expectation would have been that he might have to police the Sequani just outside the province's boundaries. The planned migration of the Helvetians at the beginning of his time in Gaul was a godsend to Caesar, offering the pretext for a wider war.

From out of the past, the Cimbri and the Teutones played a helpful role as bogey men, looming in the minds of senators at Rome, readily invoked by Caesar to justify his bold actions. Their rampage through Gaul and into Italy, lasting from 113–101 BCE, had been the crowning success of the general and consul Marius and the making of his younger rival Sulla. Rome successfully defended itself against an enemy of uncertain scale and ambitions; Marius and Sulla created the autocratic national security state that Caesar would finally command alone. The "new model army" that Marius created was larger (and capable of being made larger still), more professional, and more loyal to its generalissimo than the armies of old.

The Roman story of that war did not emphasize how much Rome had earned hostility by its own actions in southern Gaul leading to the establishment of the province. The bloody scale of the ultimate victory and the destruction of the Cimbri and Teutones as peoples were certain to have both terrified and enraged the Gauls who observed it. The culminating battle of Vercelli (between Turin and

Milan) in 101 ended with Sulla victorious and reports of 140,000 enemy killed and another 60,000 captives destined for slavery at best.

Caesar's own creation of "Gaul" was a long-, long-lasting achievement. His Gaul is roughly today's France, his Germania roughly today's Germany. Like Menachem Begin, he created facts, facts we still deal with.

## WAR

War is a mad, unnatural thing. Killing is hard work and dangerous; the life surrounding the few days of actual battle is arduous. Romans feared "barbarians"—but what did the barbarians think of Romans? "Watch out, watch out, the civilized people are coming, and you know how appalling *they* can be!" Reading Caesar is good for us if we are appalled and slightly stunned by the spectacle and by the way we are expected to take the spectacle in stride, as though it's the sort of thing good, smart people engage in, the sort of thing that's morally and culturally superior to mere barbarism.

But what actually happens in warfare? A war is outwardly a collection of battles, but the battles are not where the real action is. A real victory doesn't take place on the day of the battle, but the next day or the next week. The victory is won when the defeated commander decides not to risk another battle. He may be short on manpower or food, or perhaps he is not confident that his men will have the will to respond well if he commands them. Or is it won when a community decides not to muster forces and fight but to pay protection money instead and settle for subservience?

Caesar did not overwhelm Gaul. He was at a significant numerical disadvantage in facing his opponents. At his maximum strength, he had perhaps 60,000 men in arms with him, to fight up and down a country of populous and prosperous communities extending some 500 × 300 miles. Even if he could fight successfully, he could never garrison every town and every river crossing adequately to defeat all comers—unless he broke their spirit, unless he made their commanders see that resistance was futile. Yet by the time he left he was

sure that he had pacified *all* of his Gaul, and in an important way he had.<sup>2</sup>

In the first weeks of 49 BCE, Caesar left Gaul to pursue his glory back in Italy and moved on to the civil wars he would fight in Greece, in Egypt, in Africa, and in Spain. He would return to Gaul himself only briefly in 49, to see to the subjugation of rebelling Marseilles, part of Rome's settled domains for decades. But the huge, fractious, unhappy new territories that he bludgeoned into submission from 58 to 50—all throughout the civil war, none rebelled. They were beaten, and stayed beaten. They had been persuaded that Rome could and would muster the troops to face any uprising and that when successful Rome would be pitiless. The atrocities of war that we will review in these years were strategically vital to Rome's success. They showed the Gauls that a civilized people would stop at nothing to secure their conquest of the barbarians. The conquest remained secure for four hundred years at least, about the length of time separating us from Shakespeare's last plays and the settlement of Jamestown in Virginia. War is good for some things.

And war is good for generals in particular. Among the many important things Caesar doesn't talk about in his commentaries is the astonishing wealth that bled from Gaul into his own pockets during these few years. Any attempt to quantify the riches Caesar garnered will fail, but Cicero's estimate of what the next governor of Gaul might expect after Caesar's death was *pecunia infinita*—money beyond measure. Plutarch said that Caesar sacked 800 towns in Gaul; one of his modern students can only count eight mentioned in these pages. His bag men had to be busy travelers.

Even if 800 exaggerates, Caesar was busy in ways he does not tell us. Already by 54, he was using the proceeds of conquest to begin work on what would become his grand forum in Rome, with his friends Oppius and (for that moment) Cicero leading the development work, buying up land at very high prices. It remained a prior-

<sup>2</sup> Well, he says repeatedly that he's done it. *De bello Gallico* 2.1 (early 57), 3.7 (early 56), 6.5 (early 53), 7.1 (early 52, just before all hell broke loose) and (Hirtius saying it for him) 8.24 and 8.46 (end of 51).

ity and preoccupation for the rest of Caesar's life. The dedication in 46 BCE of the temple in that forum of Venus Genetrix embedded Caesar's ancestry legend in the cityscape on a grand scale, as good a moment as any to select as the beginning of the serial dynasties of Caesars that would last many centuries. There were friends to be rewarded as well, potential friends to be bribed, enemies to be bought off, troops to be rewarded and equipped. There was no end to the money to be spent. War is good for some things.

What did Caesar leave behind in Gaul when he went off to his great war with Pompey and the Senate? We should first not ignore the small colony of ex-soldiers settled at Nyon on Lake Geneva a few miles above Geneva itself—a watchpost to keep an eye on Helvetians and Germans, but also the nose of the camel of military settlements that would soon enough be a primary vehicle of the Romanization of Gaul under Caesar's successors.

Caesar's successor was *intended* to be Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus, from a powerful family with longstanding ties (probably including economic ties) with Gaul—not a bad choice, but fiercely opposed to Caesar. (His great-great grandson would be the emperor Nero.) On his march south into central Italy, Caesar confronted and captured Ahenobarbus at Corfinium, in the mountains east of Rome, where he was on his way toward Gaul. Caesar grandly released his prisoner; Ahenobarbus fought against him again at Marselles a few months later and died on the battle field of Pharsalus, brave, resourceful, and unlucky.

After Ahenobarbus was out of the picture and until his own death, Caesar named all the successors we know of. During that period, a rebellion among the Bellovaci had to be squashed in 47–46, but had little consequence. In 39, we see Octavian's closest colleague, Agrippa, serving as proconsul and campaigning in both Aquitaine and the Rhineland, but we know of no other governors over the area in the troubled time before the battle of Actium resolved Rome's wars in favor of Octavian in 31 BCE. In his turn, Octavian regularized organization of the provinces on more settled lines with only occasional small outbursts of resentment. Perhaps



the only substantial concern after Octavian's death was an uprising Tiberius faced in 21 CE.

Patience and persistence prevailed, and Gaul was effectively a part of Rome, without any major insurgency, until Roman inattention left it to shape a new identity under the Franks in the fifth century CE. This great and surprising fact is a measure of Caesar's success. His decision not to punish the Arverni and the Haedui after Vercingetorix undoubtedly helped: he could have been short-sighted and vindictive, but for all the blood that was shed at his behest, Caesar always knew that generosity was a powerful weapon as well. The settlement Caesar imposed was sufficiently generous and sufficiently respectful of the existing powers in Gaul to be apt for stability.

\* \* \* \*

A word about the mostly faceless. To be Caesar's soldier in Gaul was no walk in the park. There was, first of all, the walking itself, hundreds of miles of it. Then there was the sleeping in camp facilities (at best) as a way of life. Roman camps were well designed and executed and summer nights in Burgundy and Alsace were not all that unpleasant, but a soldier's life was a desirable one mainly if grinding rural or urban poverty was your alternative. Then there was the fighting. On average, Caesar had his forces in Gaul, or some of them, engage the enemy half a dozen times a year, two or three of those times in concerted pitched battles with much risk to life and limb. Much like the American military in its recent adventures, Caesar reported huge numbers of enemy losses and few on his own side, and given his advantages of discipline, tactics, and weaponry, this is not implausible. But still there were wounds sustained, injuries from breaks and falls and sprains, and colleagues to bury.

On the other hand, there were opportunities. At various points, we see Caesar sharing the prizes of conquest with his soldiers. After Vercingetorix's defeat, Caesar even tells us (7.89) that he parceled out one slave apiece to every one of his soldiers. Some of them will

have stayed with their new owners, milling in with the traders and other camp followers that accompanied and supported the army. And some of those camp followers were slave-traders, happy to take surplus human stock off a soldier's hands for cash, to take away for resale lucratively elsewhere. (Caesar regularly speaks of the army's "baggage," the collection of necessary and personal belongings that had to be wrangled from one place to another, a source of risk when men in crisis thought of saving their skins first and their packs a close second.) A Roman soldier was not so unlike a Keralese construction worker in the Persian Gulf today, enduring challenging circumstances for the relatively sound assurance that after his service was over, he would be able to settle somewhere to farm and marry on better terms than would ever have been possible for him without his time in service. It was a tough life, but better than many of the alternatives.

The Roman army was now a mainly professional force, with relative amateurs in the most senior officer ranks. The majority of the soldiers who marched with Caesar came from his recruiting ground in northern Italy. The legion was the largest unit he managed, made up of cohorts; it was the cohort that gave soldiers their comrades and their command structure. Cavalry were never as formally organized, and non-Roman soldiers, called auxiliaries, would be organized as best they could. (See "Caesar's Implicatures" below for a brief overview of the technicalities of the Roman army.)

And there were victims. Caesar regularly demanded that a defeated nation supply him not only with tribute but also with hostages of suitably high rank as pledges of good behavior. The curious fact of Roman history, to which Caesar is no exception, is that hostage-taking very, very rarely led to any harm befalling the hostages. They were humiliated and discommoded, to be sure, by degrading removal from their communities, but Caesar seems to have parked them all in Haeduan country at the town of Noviodunum (modern Nevers: BG 7.55) and ignored them. At the time of the great insurrection of 52, the Haedui, Caesar's allies and enablers and unreliable subjects, are said (BG 7.63) to have executed the hostages there—why?

And then there were still other victims. Observe how each year Caesar selects places for his troops to quarter for the winter. In doing so, he guaranteed that the communities on which he foisted them would eat less, suffer abuse, especially for women, and endure petty and grand assaults on their peace and dignity until spring put the soldiers on the road again. War's victims aren't all found on the battlefield.<sup>3</sup>

## BARBARIANS AND GODS

The Latin word *barbarus* echoes Greek βάρβαρος, supposedly onomatopoeic for the inarticulate babbling of the uncivilized. Riggsby 151–52 has cataloged its use in the BG with a surprising result. Hostile or negative use of the term is almost entirely confined to a handful of passages placed in the mouths of Gallic speakers (first: Diviciacus the Haeduan at 1.31). Indeed, the *only* passage in Caesar's narrating voice that Riggsby categorizes as similarly hostile is 4.10, a paragraph that I have for other reasons deleted as a likely later interpolation. For Caesar in the remainder of the work, the word is a neutral descriptor for people living far from the benefits of civilization—often Germans.

Caesar consistently refers to each named Gallic people as a *civitas*, which modern translators often render as “tribe,” a word whose English resonance is one or two steps culturally lower than *civitas*. Its root in *civis*, “citizen,” the abstract *civitas* denotes a body of citizens and becomes in modern languages the primary word for an urban community: *città*, *cit  *, *ciudad*, *city*. With the best recent translators I regularly use “nation,” offering the same merited respect that is now shown to native American peoples.<sup>4</sup> Caesar's Gaul, on his own showing, is a civilized place.

<sup>3</sup> The almost completely invisible place of women in the *Gallic War* rarely earns even a footnote. No woman is named in its pages, though one paragraph mentions marriage politics. For the rest, women are seen in numbers beseeching, grieving, and/or being slaughtered.

<sup>4</sup> As best I can tell, naming Gallic and native American communities “tribes” goes back no further than the nineteenth century.

Caesar's landscapes are singularly lacking in divine presence. In the sixth commentary, his account of Gallic customs makes frequent reference to their gods in comparison to Roman deities, but apart from that the pickings are slim. I count half a dozen incidental mentions of gods and religion in action and the closest thing to a religious action is the prayer of a dauntless standard-bearer of the tenth legion about to leap into the waves and wade ashore in Britain. Whatever Caesar's own views and practices (as *pontifex maximus*: see below), his soldiers assuredly invoked divine protection and support however they could—as did his enemies. We hear nothing of that.

## CAESAR

Who was Caesar? He told us himself, in a speech he gave for an aunt's funeral in 69 BCE, when he was a pushing young man on the make from a has-been family.

My aunt Julia's family on the mother's side went back to the kings, on the father's side to the gods. Her own mother was of the Marcius Rex family that began with Ancus Marcius [fourth of the seven kings of Rome in the legendary age 753–509 BCE], while the Julii, *our* family, sprang from the goddess Venus. The family is marked by the holiness of the kings, who were rulers among men, and reverence toward the gods, by whom even kings are ruled.<sup>5</sup>

Kings and gods—not bad ancestry. The claims of course are humbug. But Caesar became Rome's highest priest in 63 BCE, was nearly a king when he died, and was venerated as a god thereafter.

To be sure, Caesar's Julii were an old family of the good sort, faded away into mere respectability. None of his real ancestors had done anything noteworthy in a couple of hundred years. Technically they counted as “patrician,” superior to the mere “plebeian,” but real dignity and influence was won in other ways. There were plenty

<sup>5</sup> Suetonius, *Julius* 6.1. Suetonius wrote Caesar's life about 150 years after his death. I quote him not as gospel truth, but he surely had accurate information lost to us and at least represents a view from within the Roman establishment.

of nobodies of good family about. Though Caesar could boast ten consuls in his family, eight of them were no more recent than the fifth century BCE. His chance for advancement lay in whom else he knew and was related to. (If Cicero was the quintessential “new man” from a family that had never known power, we should think of Caesar as new-from-recycled-materials.) That had to do with how the world had changed in his time.

As late as the time of the Scipios and the Gracchi in the second century BCE, prominent leaders could emerge from the pack of oligarchs at Rome and make spectacular careers or meet violent ends, but short terms of office and constitutional checks and balances ensured a reversion to norm after meteors flared. Two new consuls were elected every year, from a group of families small enough to be envied but large enough to be at odds with each other as often as not. It was only with the rise of the great general Marius (consul, fabulously and unprecedentedly, seven times, between 107 and 86 BCE) that we see the future start to emerge.

That future depended on individual leaders who secured their own power outside the ordinary channels and sustained themselves on the public stage for decades, sometimes even living to retire sumptuously. Marius created this type when he reinvented the Roman army. No longer would it suffice to have prosperous citizens enter the military for limited terms—Rome’s ambitions needed more army than that and more “sword fodder” who could easily be squandered in battle.<sup>6</sup> Marius let anyone serve and be paid, as long as he was a citizen, and this made for armies big enough for a Rome with imperial reach. Marius won wars in Africa and, tellingly for Caesar’s future, in Gaul, then stepped aside as virtual civil war followed in the 90s, returning for his last consulship in 86 in the midst of real civil war between himself and the next claimant to a glorious future, the dictator Sulla.

<sup>6</sup> Drew Faust, *The Republic of Suffering* (2008), recounts how expendable ordinary American soldiers were up to the time of the Civil War, when they began to earn the dignity of individual burial and tombstones; as late as World War II, this American respect for mere soldiers baffled Soviet generals still lacking such scruples.

Sulla advanced Marius' strategy for self-aggrandizement by inventing the practice of offering his troops the prospect of land ownership (most of them now were too poor to own anything) if they served him long enough and well enough. A Roman general who returned successfully from war was acclaimed with the title *imperator*. From Sulla forward, *imperatores* mattered increasingly more than consuls.

Sulla was a ruthless brute, who survived Marius (who died of natural causes in 86) and through a spectacularly bloody reign of terror forced Rome into a new political and social normalcy. Then he retired after his second consulship in 80, dying two years later and leaving the senators in the city to take their turns in the consulship and make their hash of things.

Caesar was born in 102 or 100 BCE, just as Marius was completing his series of victories over the Teutones and Cimbri. He began thinking of public life in the age of speciously restored republicanism after Sulla. When barely of an age to wear the toga of manhood, he was marked by ambition. People spoke of him as a candidate for the prestigious priesthood of Jupiter called *flamen dialis* in perhaps 84–83 BCE. He made a patrician marriage to Cornelia, the daughter of the consul Cinna, but Sulla, at the peak of his power, did not like the family alliance and ordered a divorce. Caesar bravely and dangerously refused and had to light out for the territories—in this case, Sabine mountain country east of Rome, where he contracted malaria while hiding out but survived, and survived again by buying off bounty hunters with cash. On pleas from the college of Vestal Virgins and distinguished relatives who would soon hold the consulate, Sulla forgave Caesar. In after years he was conveniently said to have said that there were a lot of Mariuses in that boy.

The 70s and 60s BCE were a time when Rome was not so much stable as stunned, its politicians unimaginative and mainly inert. The next generalissimo was making his way forward in the person of Pompey, but it took him till the year 70 to attain consulship at age 36 (even that was precocious). Caesar's military career began then, as a junior officer in several of the campaigns of the time, perhaps even the war against Spartacus and his rebellious fellow slaves in

Italy. He won the “civic crown” awarded for saving a citizen’s life fighting on enemy ground. (The crown was an oak leaf assemblage and this may have been the first time when Caesar noticed that such distinctively honorable headgear offered a good cover for the thinning hair about which he was said to be hypersensitive.) The great story told from those days was how he was captured by pirates and ransomed by family, then raised a force to go after the pirates. When he captured them, he was kind enough to order their throats slit before having them crucified.

Caesar also spent some of the decade on military service in Roman police actions in the near east, and he passed some time with king Nicomedes in Bithynia—mainland Anatolia a little east of what would become Constantinople, rather the frontier of Roman reach in those days but a perfectly civilized place to be a king’s guest. That visit spawned rumors that the king had been smitten with the young Roman and made him his sexual favorite. Thirty years later, Roman soldiers marching in Caesar’s great triumph in 46 BCE would sing bawdy songs about his time with Nicomedes, but they also sang with cruel envy of the enthusiasm with which he spread his attentions among the women of Gaul, a topic unmentioned in these commentaries.

Caesar’s own military achievements at this stage, though, were no more grandly important than the “whaling voyage by one Ishmael” that inserts itself among the headlines in opening chapter of *Moby-Dick*. The great news of the decade was the final settling of the hash of king Mithridates of Pontus, the “poison king” who proved to be Rome’s last great adversary in the extension of empire. Pompey’s greatness was secured by defeating him in 66, though Mithridates escaped and remained a marginal force to reckon with until he lost his last battle on a Crimean promontory in 63. With his defeat, the income from Rome’s provinces was doubled. Perhaps six years Caesar’s senior, Pompey would now have the presumptive right of greatest precedence until Caesar could build an army and make some money. It’s important to realize that in Pompey’s decade and a half Caesar was always the rising star. He never had any military achievement to match that of Pompey, not even his defeat of Ver-

cingetorix in 52—a defeat the book you are about to read rather magnifies, undoubtedly to ensure that Caesar’s greatness would equal Pompey’s. (Their other rival, Crassus, was sure he could make his name with vast conquest on the eastern frontier—and so that is where he died.)

Caesar’s speech about his sainted aunt Julia took place in 69 BCE. It was important not because of kings and gods, but because of Marius, because aunt Julia had been Marius’ wife. Her funeral was a sort of coming-out party for Marius’ followers, who had been in subdued abeyance since Sulla’s victories and Marius’ death a decade and a half earlier. Caesar making that speech associated him not with the hereditary patrician aristocracy but with the ambitious plebeians on the make whom Marius had exemplified.

If Caesar had genuinely useful connections, they came from his mother’s side of the house. Her uncle had been consul a few years before she married Caesar’s father, as her grandfather had been consul before that. Those family connections and the remaining partisans of Marius were the people Caesar could start with as he made his way toward the greased pole of Roman political advancement. Caesar’s wife Cornelia had died in 69, so when back in Rome, he married Pompey’s daughter in 67 (“hold your friends close, your enemies closer”). Sober traditional men like the younger Cato and the rising Cicero (from Marius’ home town, but otherwise a nobody himself) counted on the stunned old order remaining what it was. Not so Caesar. He was more imaginative and he took chances.

In these shabby years, the two most important bad boy might-have-beens of Caesar’s age both came to bad ends, Catiline and Clodius. Caesar was astute enough to use them, in some ways even support them, but to escape their fate. They roused the rabble, each in their own way, and contributed to making “the people” a more considerable, if volatile, force in politics. Caesar’s generosity made them *his* volatile force. He served as curator of the Appian Way and then as curule aedile in the mid-60s, spending lavishly on public spectacles and public buildings, without worrying too much about where the funds would come from. Caesar was always an astute politician, a brave soldier, and a successful orator and writer, but the



way in which he excelled every other Roman of his time and times before was in his ability to spend money to the benefit of his reputation in the eyes of the Roman people. Now, if not before, everyone knew who he was and paid attention.

Catiline could have been a somebody in Roman politics, but he was headstrong and impatient. When it became clear that the way to consulship was not opening for him, he aspired to power by other means. Just whether and how there was a “first Catilinarian conspiracy” in 66 BCE, as some claimed, is dubious, but the allegations Cicero made about two years later tell us at least that Catiline was already pushing and maneuvering then. He was a candidate for consul in 64 to serve for the year 63, campaigning on what now seems a wild program of debt cancellation; he lost to Cicero. Cicero’s move to crush him in the fall of 63, ending in Catiline’s exile and death and the military suppression of his allies, is all too famous. What Catiline really aimed at and with what plausibility may be debated—an outright coup?—, but his fall was the making and the unmaking of Cicero at least. Cicero was proud to have rescued the republic and puzzled that doing so won him so many enemies—so many that he was sent into exile five years later for having put Roman citizens to death without due process. He returned a few months later (we’ll follow his story while Caesar is in Gaul) and had another fifteen years to perform the role of senior statesman, but he was never an independent force and ended badly himself when the triumvirs who succeeded Caesar decided he was no longer useful. His head and hands were nailed up to public ridicule in the forum.

But Caesar, Caesar slipped through the Catilinarian moment adroitly and unscathed. It’s hard to know exactly how he did this because our best source, Sallust’s famous little book on Catiline, dates from twenty years later, after Caesar and Cicero were dead, and Sallust had axes to grind.<sup>7</sup> What is clear is that Caesar came closer than any other senator to supporting Catiline, speaking up, in Cicero’s hour of histrionics, for moderation and restraint, speaking

<sup>7</sup> The position Caesar is seen to take in Sallust is diametrically opposed to the position his heirs the triumvirs were taking at the moment when Sallust wrote.

against the death penalty. But by the time Cicero stood up for his first Catilinarian oration, the fix was in and Catiline was doomed. Caesar's speech for moderation came after Cicero had given three of his four great orations and is paired by Sallust at least with a counterproposal of great strictness from the ever-austere, ever-unrealistic Cato. If that's really how it went, Caesar could not have been happier with the chance to show himself on the side of "the people" without having to pay a price for doing so. Some were certainly irritated by his position, but few if any were angered, and he lived to rise further.

And Caesar had something else on his mind in 63, for that was the year in which he seized the opportunity to put himself forward, still not quite forty years old, for the grave and reverend office of *pontifex maximus*, an office we could call "high priest" of Roman religion were it not that the words "priest" and "religion" are both highly misleading in such a context. "Chairman of the board of governors of Roman ritual practices" might be a better title, and it was a job with much patronage to dispense—perfect for the man making his way by shows of generosity. Getting this job cost him a fortune in, well, bribes would be the word for it, and it was a near-run thing. Suetonius tells us that when he left the family home for the critical vote, he told his mother that if he came home at all that evening, he would be *pontifex maximus*—otherwise he would need to go into exile. He came home. And Suetonius' account says that though his two opponents were much older and more distinguished, he got more votes from *their* voting districts than they got from all the voting districts together.

So the brilliant career continued. In 62, Caesar served as praetor, departing for Spain in 61. As he was in that transition, the great comedy of Rome's other might-have-been, Publius Clodius, erupted. Clodius was another crowd-pleaser with poor impulse control. In December 62, enamored of Caesar's wife (Pompey's daughter), he tricked himself out in drag and slipped into Caesar's house during the festival of the Good Goddess (*Bona Dea*), which was a ladies-only event. A serving girl detected him and raised an alarm. This was the opportunity for Caesar to divorce his wife with the famous remark

that Caesar's wife should be above suspicion. Tried for impiety but not for adultery (which would carry a severe penalty), Clodius was acquitted after Caesar left for Spain. Caesar never let an opportunity slide past: now he was quit of Pompey's daughter and Clodius was grateful to him for not prosecuting the adultery. The upshot was that Clodius was now willing to front for Caesar in pleasing the mob without Caesar needing to take responsibility for Clodius' acts.

In 60, Caesar returned to Rome mid-year for the consular elections. He prevailed, in tandem with an unsympathetic colleague, Bibulus, and prepared for his year by coming to a meeting of the minds with Pompey and Crassus, the only two serious rivals for power. Ducks in a row, he moved quickly in office to make his mark, most notably with a land law that gave state land to Pompey's veterans, on the view that the teeming city would be better served if an appreciable number of destitute trained killers were relocated and put to work farming. In the end, Caesar forced through a law approving the resettlement and including the public land in Campania that had been held by the city of Rome since Capua was destroyed in 211 during Hannibal's war. He also made sure that Pompey's acts in Asia in preceding years were formally approved and he promised recognition of the throne of king Ptolemy XII in Egypt as a faithful Roman client. The prospective client showed his gratitude in advance with promises of a vast bribe to support Pompey and Caesar. (By the next year, that deal frayed badly, as we shall see.) These measures were steamrolled past the other consul, Bibulus, who tried in every way to obstruct them, then in the spring withdrew to his home and avoided public appearances for the rest of his year. Others lay low as well.

In March of 59, meanwhile, the deplorable Clodius requested and received a transfer from patrician to plebeian status as a step toward winning election as a tribune of the people in December, a role in which he could win favor with the populace and, now, serve Caesar's ends. The balance of the year for Caesar was contentious, but he got his one important prize in May: confirmation of a five-year appointment as proconsul, that is to say, governor for the provinces of Illyricum and Gaul, with four legions and the right to ap-

point his own legates. Gaul was much on people's minds in 60 and 59, as when Cicero reported to Atticus<sup>8</sup> the senate's concern that the Helvetians looked like trouble and would need stern preventive measures. An arranged marriage between Pompey and Caesar's daughter sealed his security as he prepared to leave the city for what would turn out to be nine years.

One gnaw that needed swatting was Cicero, always concerned to show himself to be his own man, at least until he found someone else to curry favor with. In 59, Cicero, in a speech defending his former co-consul Gaius Antonius on a charge of misconduct during his governorship in Macedonia, chose to bewail some aspects of the political situation. Or that's how Cicero put it, while others took his words as "a most bitter attack upon Caesar, whom he held responsible for the suit against [Antonius]," and "even went so far as to heap abuse on him." Whatever the facts, Cicero could claim after his exile that it was within three hours of the speech that Clodius had been legally adopted into a plebeian family, thereby giving him the status he wanted.<sup>9</sup> If we view Cicero not from his point of view but from Caesar's, the sequence of Caesar's acts amounted to excellent management—that is to say, defanging—of Cicero and his possibility for serious mischief. To believe Cicero, moreover, Caesar even offered him a post as a legate on his staff in Gaul, with the immunity from prosecution that military service would bring. If Cicero had gone along, there is little doubt he would have returned as Caesar's man—a wealthy man, but not his own. (At the same moment, Pompey was encouraging Cicero to stay and tough it out. Neither Pompey nor Caesar cared what Cicero actually did.)

The future was adumbrated in August 59 when the German king Ariovistus was recognized as a friend of the Roman people. He had resettled into northern Gaul from Germany three years before. In 58, Caesar would fight him in Gaul, unsure just how much treacherous communication his enemies back in Rome had

<sup>8</sup> Cicero Epp. Att. 1.19.2.

<sup>9</sup> Cassius Dio 38.11 reports the politics; Cicero *de domo* 41 offers his spin. Dio's excellent history of Rome extends to 229 CE, and has good but not impeccable sources.

with their supposed ally. Was there really a plot against Pompey's life in the summer of 59? Who might have been behind it? Caesar? Cicero? The man who brought the accusation was found dead in prison. And in August 59, Clodius took office as tribune. His year in that role significantly exacerbated the air of barely controlled violence that marked Roman public life, but his considerable achievement was the establishment of a program of grain distribution for the Roman people. There would be a third of a million people getting free bread before Caesar died.

The year ended ugly, when Clodius as tribune intervened to prevent the outgoing consul Bibulus, seeking one last moment of re-crimination, from delivering a speech on his last day as consul.

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So at the conclusion of his consulship, beneficiary of an uneasy bargain with his elders and betters Pompey and Crassus, Caesar went off to Gaul as proconsul with a remarkable five-year mandate. His enemies wanted him prosecuted for what he had done as consul, but he eluded them long enough to take up command and the immunity that came with it. The threat would hang over his head and play a part in the way his Gallic time ended.

There were several possible outcomes for a proconsul's adventure.

The most probable was simply: nothing. Plenty of Roman senators went out to take nominal command of armies and govern provinces in those days. Their main goal was to enrich themselves with some discreet show of military victories allowing a little plunder, plus some less discreet milking of the locals. A governor named Verres in Sicily just about the time Caesar was making his name was a good example of what was possible in the line of enrichment, but we know of it because Cicero used the hapless Verres to make his own career by attacking the corruption in a series of speeches for the prosecution. Verres may have gone a bit far, but one should sympathize with him a little as he went off into post-Cicero exile. Wasn't

it unfair to single out one among many practitioners of normal Roman governance?

The second most probable outcome of such an assignment was more stark: the governor would come back dead. As soon as Caesar indicated that he would take active command and pursue an ambitious military strategy, a grisly end rose sharply in his prospects. What was he thinking of?

The least likely outcome people would have thought of was the one that did in fact—almost—occur. That would mean military success, plunder with enrichment, and then return to a political environment that would eat him up alive. Prosecution, jealousy, infighting, conspiracy: all perfectly normal. When Caesar's time in Gaul did finish, he was threatened with prosecution immediately on his return, prosecution that should have ended his career. His rational strategy was to safeguard his new wealth and make his way to a safe and luxurious exile.

What Caesar actually did—win battle after battle, enrich himself improbably, build a strong network of political allies, and return to chase all his rivals—literally—from the city—was just too improbable to imagine. But he did it. And in doing it, he made himself the Caesar of history. If any of the other more probable things had happened, we would remember him as a nonentity. One well-placed arrow or axe-stroke in Gaul would have sealed his fate as a nobody.

We know him because he prevailed, and we know him so well because he wrote about it so well.

The introduction to each commentary below will review the political and military situation of each year and the accompanying footnotes will fill in the details. But what was it like for Caesar to go off to fight in Gaul at this point?

He would remain in his assigned province north of the Rubicon river for fully nine years, with his base of operations either Modena or Ravenna. He would be in that region almost every winter, usually to hear legal cases that had sprung up across the province.<sup>10</sup> In the

<sup>10</sup> He tells us explicitly he did this at the end of 58 (1.54), 57 (2.35), 55 (5.1), and 53 (6.4); he remained with the troops in Gaul for the winter of 54/53 to stabilize the mili-

spring of each year, he would make his way up to Gaul for the year's campaigning, on the standard ancient practice of avoiding military activity during the wet winter months when food supplies were limited and travel soggy and impeded. From his headquarters, four hundred miles would take him comfortably into Gaul, a distance he could cover in horse-drawn carriage in a few days at a pinch, but a week perhaps was a more normal journey. If he crossed the Alps heading northwest and came to Geneva or Lyon, it was another four hundred miles to Normandy, the English Channel, or the Rhine—again, another week or so of travel with some urgency. Troops, afoot, moved much more slowly, hence his practice of positioning them as carefully forward as he could when they went into winter quarters, a practice that repaid his care until the ambushes of late 54.

He commanded his troops through legates and sometimes praetors who led the actual legions, while he had his own staff of secretaries around him. Montaigne, writing of Caesar, observed that the great Albanian general of the fifteenth century Scanderbeg thought that ten to twelve thousand men was the right size for an army—thus a little less than three Roman legions. That professional judgment deserves respect inasmuch as Scanderbeg still had a sense for the span of control that was *possible* for a general who depended on rumor, runners, and range of vision to know what was before him and offer timely direction.

Caesar was a general who lived and fought with his troops, though his way of living was considerably more comfortable than theirs. He shows us vignettes of himself engaged at some risk in battle and Suetonius tells a particularly delightful if suspicious story of Caesar learning that his men were being surrounded in their camp in Germany and venturing in to take up active command by dressing in Gallic clothes—presumably the distinctive *bracae* (English: “britches”) that toga-bearing Romans found so exotic.<sup>11</sup>

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tary situation that had deteriorated sharply with the assaults on his camps and deaths of his legates that year. In 52 and 51, he was back in Gaul, and at the end of 50 was back in northern Italy monitoring the situation at Rome and preparing to make his way back to Rome.

<sup>11</sup> Suet. *Jul.* 58.1.

Caesar kept in close touch with affairs back at his provincial headquarters when he was in farthest Gaul, and with affairs at Rome. Three or four secretaries or agents waited on him at all times and we get the story that he dictated letters while on horseback, sometimes several at once. He was always fully informed about Roman affairs and always acting with a view to the effect on his Roman audience, but he rarely mentions such concerns in the commentaries.

He was in the main successful. Suetonius<sup>12</sup> assessed his work and saw only three real reverses that he faced in his nine years: almost losing his ships in a storm off Britain, the losses of the legates Sabinus and Cotta and many of their troops in the ambushes of 54, and the loss of a legion in battle at Gergovia during the great uprising of 52, followed by the great victory at Alesia that brought the insurgency of Vercingetorix to an end.

Do those successes mean he was a “great general”? If we judge a general by the success of his troops on the battlefield—setting aside the inevitable costs of war in blood and treasure, setting aside all the ethical constraints that we regard as essential to civilization, and setting aside any consideration as to whether to be a “great general” it is necessary to have met even the minimal standards of fighting a just war—then if you force me to answer the question I will say, yes, he was. But then I will insist you allow me to ask you how one can be a “great general” without being at the same time a war criminal.

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The Caesar we meet in his *commentarii* is a fighting machine, a general who thinks only of strategy and tactics. If you read *only* Caesar’s account, you are watching a very artificial performance. In the pages that follow, I will be at pains to present that story in a context that lets you see Caesar the man and politician, not just the general he wanted you to see. Inevitably, some will feel disappointed by the deflation that results.

<sup>12</sup> Suet. *Jul.* 25.