Panel
Uses of Narrative in Caesar's *Bellum Gallicum*
Aislinn A. Melchior (University of Puget Sound),
Rex Stem (University of California, Davis), co-organizers

Panel Description

The scholar T. Rice Holmes in the introduction to his commentary on Caesar's *Bellum Gallicum*, written around 1900, explains at length why he thinks a bust owned by the British Museum is an accurate portrait of Caesar:

> This bust represents, I venture to say, the strongest personality that has ever lived, the strongest which poet or historian, painter or sculptor has ever portrayed. In the profile it is impossible to detect a flaw. Not less remarkable than the power of the countenance are its delicacy and fastidious refinement. The man looks perfectly unscrupulous; or, if the phrase be apt to mislead, he looks as if no scruple could make him falter in pursuit of his aim….

Subsequent evaluations of Caesar have been more measured. Beginning with the publication of M. Rambaud's *L'art de la déformation historique dans les commentaires de César* (1953), the pendulum swept the other way and the majority of work on Caesar for many years explored his writings for their propagandistic elements. This had the salutary effect of drawing more attention to Caesar's nuance than this school text, read by many as their first "real" Latin, had generally received. There is currently an upwelling of interest in Caesar's works that ventures beyond the historical and biographical into the historiographical, investigating his work with both historical and literary tools. This panel aims to contribute to furthering what we feel is a promising trend in Caesar studies and to explore the written world of Caesar's *Bellum Gallicum*.

It has long been recognized that the description of Caesar's *Bellum Gallicum* as *commentarii* is in itself a rhetorical move. The first two panelists explore this claim from two different directions. The first speaker will situate Caesar's work within the ongoing discussion of the writing of history that was occurring in the first century BCE, contextualizing it within the statements and letters of Cicero, Caesar, and Sallust, and will argue that Caesar's writings belong in the monographic tradition. Our second panelist will argue to the contrary that observable features of the text – specifically the use of didactic *exempla* – point instead to the norms of annalistic history.

The example in the second paper of Sabinus' many failings leads into the paper by our third speaker, who will discuss the limits of autonomy in Caesar's army. This panelist will consider Caesar's claims in the *Bellum Gallicum* concerning what he expected from his subordinate officers. The commander's role also features prominently in the fourth paper, which reads the building of the bridge over the Rhine as a battle narrative. Eschewing any discussion of the engineers who did the work, Caesar draws attention instead to his own decisions and creates a technological triumph that shows him to be a crosser of boundaries who can overleap the very structures that he had used to shape the geography at the opening of his narrative.

While the fourth paper shows Caesar crossing the limits imposed by nature, the final paper looks at the limits Caesar imposed upon his own narrative and how he achieved closure in a work that depicted an ongoing conflict. This paper argues for an underlying pattern of vengeance within the work and explores it as a literary, rather than a propagandistic, element. The foil of both Rice Holmes and Rambaud, Caesar the narrator succeeds by being as deft as he is scrupulous.

The *Bellum Gallicum* and the Development of the Historical Monograph in the Late Republic

Debra L. Nousek (University of Western Ontario)

> Pulchrum est bene facere rei publicae, etiam bene dicere haud absurdum est; vel pace vel bello clarum fieri licet; et qui fecere et qui facta aliorum scripsere multi laudantur. Ac mihi quidem, tametsi haudquaquam par gloria sequitur scriptorem et auctorem rerum, tamen in primis arduom videtur res gestas scribere…
>
> (Sall. *Cat*. 3.1-2)

Such were Sallust's observations about the importance of historiography to Roman senators –those men most likely to have both participated in the making of history and to have the *otium* and *ingenium* to undertake a literary project. Sallust was of course justifying his own career, but he was far from the first to combine political and literary ambition. In the late Republic, two men stand out as *principes* of politics and literature, namely Caesar and Cicero. This paper will argue that the *Bellum Gallicum* is not only the result of Caesar's desire to promote his *res gestae* for political gain, but that in fact the *BG* arose as a product of theoretical debates concerning the interplay between *res gestae* and *res scriptae*. The innovative intellectual milieu of the 60s and 50s B.C. reveals the extent to which educated Romans were interested in the development of Latin literature. Cicero's letters to his brother, for instance, show considerable interest in literary matters, and especially in historiography (e.g. *Q. fr*. 2.12.4). That Caesar and Cicero were engaged in just such a debate is clear from references showing that Caesar dedicated his linguistic treatise *De Analogia* to Cicero (quoted in Plin. *NH* 7.30), a treatise written in response to Cicero's *De Oratore* (published, respectively, in 54 and 55 B.C.), as well as from numerous references in Cicero's correspondence with Caesar and others (*Q. fr*. 2.16.5; 3.1.25).

One of Cicero's abiding interests was considering the proper way to write Roman history (*Fam*. 5.12; *De Orat*. 2.63-4; *De Leg*. 1.5-8). Although Cicero did not himself compose a historical work –at least one that he would deem truly historical –it is clear from his comments in the letter to Lucceius (*Fam*. 5.12) that he advocated a monograph form for his own *res gestae* (*civilem coniurationem ab hostilibus externisque bellis seiungeres*; *Fam*. 5.12.2). But Cicero was greatly concerned that someone else should write up the definitive account of his consulship, since he believed (§8) that autobiographical history ([*scribere*] *ipse de me*) was a course of last resort, often criticized, about which an author had to be circumspect.

Caesar had other ideas: the *Bellum Gallicum* showed Cicero (and others) that one *could* successfully compose a narrative of one's own *res gestae*; there was no need to seek out a separate historian for the task. Caesar's own innovative elements stand out as a response to Ciceronian precepts: the *BG* is a concise account of a significant event, written from a distinct perspective (the famous third-person narrator), and one that reveals some of the *temporum varietates fortunaeque vicissitudines* highlighted by Cicero as important to historiography (*Fam*. 5.12.4). Some years later, in 46 B.C., Cicero voiced his opinion of the style of the *Commentarii* (*Brut*. 262) which he regarded as *nudi*, *recti*, and *venusti*. Was this enough to persuade Cicero that Caesar's approach to historiography was valid? We do not know, but we do know that the Caesarian-style historical monograph lived on for a short while in the works of Sallust and others. Sallust indeed may well have taken his cue from Caesar in both politics and literature.

Making an Example of Sabinus (*BG* 3.17-19, 5.26-37)

Rex Stem (University of California, Davis)

This paper advocates that one of Caesar's narrative purposes in writing his commentaries on the Gallic War was to present historical *exempla* for the instruction and benefit of his Roman audience. He presents the narrative as a contemporary annalistic historian might have written it: in the third person, and with a focus on assigning praise and blame. His presentation of his achievements is undoubtedly meant to enhance his own political standing, but one reason why it would have this effect is because he is describing – to his fellow Roman citizens – his successful leadership of the Roman army at war. He explains *how* he wins, thereby indicating to his readers how to follow his example. Yet that example is not only about him, for he amply recognizes how Roman victory results from each component of the Roman army functioning in its own exemplary way. Those who come to embody their proper role effectively increase the likelihood of victory; those who do not risk failure and defeat. This paper examines how this fundamental lesson is reinforced through Caesar's characterization of one individual *legatus*: Quintus Titurius Sabinus.

In one of the most dramatic episodes of the *Bellum Gallicum* (5.26-37), Sabinus and his fellow legate Cotta are besieged in their winter quarters before the enemy chieftain Ambiorix offers an escort out of the region. Cotta questions listening to an enemy as a friend, and advocates informing Caesar and preparing defensive works (5.28). But Sabinus argues that Caesar was too distant to come to their aid, Ambiorix's offer fit the situation, and famine was to be feared if they were besieged (5.29). After further divisive and reproachful talk, the Roman legion, leery of danger and acting like Ambiorix was their friend, accepted Sabinus' counsel (5.30-31). After the Romans are then ambushed, Sabinus, *qui nihil ante providisset* (5.33), surrenders his weapons in order to parley with Ambiorix and is killed ignominiously (5.36-37). When Ambiorix then moves on to attack the legion wintering under the command of Quintus Cicero (5.38-52), he attempts the same strategy, but Cicero responds by sending messengers to Caesar, strengthening the defensive fortifications (5.40), and making only one response to the offer of an escort: "that it was not the custom of the Roman people to accept terms from an armed enemy" (5.41). Caesar's narrative pointedly demonstrates through Cicero's actions the errors in Sabinus' judgment (and vindicates the instincts of Cotta). Further, after Caesar has come to the relief of Cicero's legion, he publicly praises Cicero to his men – and to his readers – while openly finding fault with Sabinus for his *temeritas* (5.52). The juxtaposition of these episodes has made *exempla* of them both.

Sabinus is the only one of Caesar's *legati* whom he characterizes so negatively. Perhaps that is because Sabinus was responsible for one of Caesar's most embarrassing losses in the whole of the Gallic War. But looking at Caesar's narrative as an exemplary history reveals an additional motivation for Caesar's pique. In the only other episode featuring Sabinus (3.17-19), he defensively positions himself in his camp until he manages to lure the Gauls into attacking in adverse circumstances by providing information to them from an enemy whom they mistook to be a friend. His coordinated response routs the Gauls and so proves the wisdom of his defensive strategy. Caesar is careful to explain Sabinus' rationale and thereby establish its exemplary value in any similar circumstance: "[Sabinus] was doing this for this reason, because he did not judge that a legate should fight with so great a multitude of the enemy, especially in the absence of his commander-in-chief, unless favorable ground or some other advantage was offered" (3.17). Sabinus' notable failure to learn from his own example illuminates why Caesar makes such an example of him.

Individual and Group Combat Actions in Caesar's Commentaries

Rosemary L. Moore (University of Iowa)

I propose to examine the degree to which individual actions in combat were tolerated if not encouraged in Caesar's armies. Such a discussion would provide a framework for beginning to understand rules of conduct not simply in Caesar's army, but for his period. It would enrich our understanding of the degree to which room for individual glory was accorded to soldiers who acted successfully on the army's behalf, and to what extent they had to receive permission, and so perhaps less glory, in order to take action. Ultimately, it would illuminate the nature of Roman military discipline – in particular the tension between obedience and independent action not simply in one commander's army, but in what must have been intended to represent an example to be followed by others – as well as the interaction of discipline with the desire for military glory and how glory won would be credited.

The evidence itself does not present an obvious and clear picture. Caesar's armies have a well-deserved reputation for outstanding personal courage, but Caesar never mentions any soldier below the rank of centurion by name. Even the *aquilifer* who caused soldiers to overcome their hesitation and follow him during the invasion of Britannia (*BG* 4.25) is anonymous. We have no reason to think that soldiers were not given rewards for courage in Caesar's army, but the focus in responsibility for this is shifted to the officers and the commander: many times throughout the commentaries Caesar or his legates exhort their soldiers to fight because Caesar was watching, or as if he were there. Indeed, Caesar (*BG* 5.33) states outright that while soldiers fought, generals should encourage. Yet there was a mediated role for initiative too. For example, when Caesar's army was hindered by a dangerously flooded river during his Spanish campaign (*BC* 1.64), his soldiers urged crossing because they were eager for the fight. In addition, Caesar's response to his army after their overeager advance at Gergovia (*BG* 7.47, 52) suggests that his armies were given free rein to advance as far as possible, unless, as in this case, they had received specific instructions not to do so. The Roman army in general often had dynamics of competition between soldier and commander, not to mention between commander and officers, such that the attribution of credit was of great interest to all those involved. Yet within this framework there was also the role the general played as overseer of training and discipline, and in particular the one who gave out rewards for courage. K. Welch (1998) has addressed how Caesar presents his subordinates so that his own *virtus* was maximized; in this context I propose to consider the extent to which it was possible that a soldier's courage and initiative could be perceived as a threat to a commander's authority.

Bridging the Rhine (*BG* 4.17)

Robert Brown (Vassar College)

In the preface to the *Gallic War* Caesar uses rivers and the ocean to define the boundaries between tribes and nations (1.1). In the narrative itself, rivers are seen to offer some protection to native peoples but also circumscribe their ambitions and expose them to danger and destruction when they are crossed under arms. By contrast, Caesar demonstrates his own ability to cross such natural barriers at will. The most concentrated example of this theme comes in Book 4, whose narrative high points are the bridging of the Rhine and the first landing in Britain.

Book 1 has established the Rhine as the most formidable river in western Europe (1.2) and the boundary between Gaul and Germany (e.g., 1.44). Caesar's decision to cross the Rhine results from the crossing of German tribes in 55 BCE under pressure from the Suebi. His campaign against these tribes and extension of the campaign beyond the Rhine occupies the first half of Book 4 (1-19). The crossing and re-crossing of the Rhine, both by the Germans and by Caesar, forms one of the main narrative threads in this account. The Germans succeed in crossing into Gaul only through trickery (4.4), and on their return they are slaughtered as they re-cross the river (4.15). Caesar, however, crosses safely and spectacularly in both directions.

The Ubii offer him boats for the purpose, but he decides to build a bridge for two reasons (4.17): (i) it was safer; (ii) it was more in keeping with his own dignity and that of the Roman people. The first point is a military truism. The second takes us to the heart of Caesar's narrative strategy, which is to demonstrate military, technological, and cultural superiority over the Germans. The ensuing campaign across the Rhine is uneventful. Caesar ravages some territory but declines battle with the fearsome Suebi. After eighteen days, he re-crosses the Rhine and dismantles the bridge. His narrative solution to this anticlimactic outcome is to highlight the building of the bridge (4.17) and its psychological impact on the Germans (4.18-19). In narrative terms, the building of the bridge substitutes for the glories of a victorious campaign and encapsulates the confrontation between Rome and the barbarian.

The description of the bridge (4.17) is a tour-de-force that combines technical precision with military overtones. Not a word is said of its brilliant engineers. As if it was a battle description, Caesar makes himself the subject of verbs describing the bridge's conception and the steps in its construction, whose organizing principles of alignment, spacing, linkage, and support are reminiscent of a Roman camp or order of battle. The river's unharnessed power, on the other hand, suggests an analogy to the wild and uncivilized German tribes. As the bridge breaks the force of the river, so has Caesar crushed the Germans in the past against seemingly insurmountable odds –and, we infer, can and will do so again. In effect, the building of the bridge substitutes for the decisive battle with the Germans that never takes place. Setting the stage for the much riskier and more ambitious crossing of the English channel, whose description immediately follows (4.20-36), it is, in a larger sense, a demonstration of mastery over nature and the potential for limitless expansion of the Roman empire.

Violence and Closure in *Bellum Gallicum*, Book One

Aislinn A. Melchior (University of Puget Sound)

From the earliest full-scale violence in the *Bellum Gallicum*, Caesar invites us to see his war-making in terms of revenge:

> And so, whether by chance or by a plan of the immortal gods, that part of the Helvetian state which had inflicted such a signal disaster upon the Roman people was the chief one to pay the penalty. In this affair Caesar was avenging not only public but also private injuries, because the Tigurini had killed Lucius Piso, the grandfather of his father-in-law, in the same battle in which they had killed Cassius. (*BG* 1.12)

The triple whammy of god, family and county – unexampled elsewhere in Caesar – insists upon the rightness of the violence exacted against the Tigurini, and helps to establish a tripartite structure that he will repeatedly employ: provocation, response, and resolution – wherein the final element looks back to the first. I term this ring structure a "revenge narrative" and will examine its various instantiations in the first book of the *Bellum Gallicum*. My goal here is to look at the third element "resolution" in book one and explore how Caesar achieves closure in his narrative – particularly in military situations that signally lack it such as the escape of Ariovistus.

One aspect of the *Bellum Gallicum* that has received little attention is that it abounds in closural devices. These step beyond the merely historiographical –"night brought an end to the battle" "the legions were dispatched to winter quarters" – and border upon obsession. Closure in history must always be problematic, for it imposes an end upon a stream of time that does not end. To affect a close, the author must erect a frame that limits his topic, suggesting at once the comfortable iteration of natural process –the sun will rise again and Rome remain eternal – while also bringing the narrative to a comfortable resting point. Ring structure that ties the beginning to the ending is particularly effective at creating a sense of resolution. Caesar uses this underlying structure to great effect. Not only does it frame the entirety of his work – the beginnings of the war, its execution, and its close – but it also frames the smaller incidents within the books themselves. By starting his account with the provocative behaviors of the enemy, the natural drive for revenge carries the reader along and serves as a stimulus both for the Roman soldiers within the story and for the reader conquering Gaul vicariously in Rome. The accomplishment of revenge serves as an emotionally satisfying climax that assures the reader both of his own superiority as a Roman citizen and of Caesar's brilliant support for Roman aims.

The implications of such emplotment of reality are many. First, Caesar is rendered by the structure of his retelling a controller of violence rather than merely a reactive agent. Much of the sense of Caesarian competence derives from his imposition of closure upon his narrative. Second, violence, because it always is framed in this way, appears not only moral but also effective. Thus his goal is not merely to make his little war *iustum*, but to make his own actions appear consequential. By employing this structure and always showing violence within this frame, Caesar suggests that the most direct path is by force of arms. This may not have been mere rhetoric for Caesar but a deeper habit of thought in that it appears to have informed his later choices.