

## Ethnography Encountered: The Troubled Ethnographic Framework of Caesar's *Gallic War*

Over a decade before he came, saw, and conquered at Zela in 46 B.C., Julius Caesar was engaged in a similar—if much more extended—enterprise in Gaul and neighboring regions of northern Europe. The events of this campaign were documented in *de Bello Gallico*. While the work's primary focus was on political interactions and battles with the barbarian tribes of northern Europe, Caesar also included multiple ethnographic accounts of these peoples, some of which were the first of their kind in ancient ethnography.

As a genre, ethnography had existed among the Greeks for centuries, but Caesar was one of the first Romans to write in a deliberately ethnographic mode—the only other surviving text predating Caesar that engages in ethnographic inquiry in any length or detail is Cato the Elder's *Origines*, which now exists only in fragments only partially concerned with the Gauls of northern Italy (Williams, 2001; Wolf, 2011). Furthermore, Caesar appears to have been the first author, Greek or Roman, to write an ethnography of the Germans, the first Roman to explore Britain, and one of few ancient authors to have at that point written an ethnographic account of the island's inhabitants. Aside from the uniqueness of much of his subject matter, Caesar's distinctive ethnographic approach stemmed at least in part from the originality of his narrative, since he was first and foremost a conquering general and his interactions with the inhabitants of northern Europe were of a more hostile tenor and prolonged duration than those of Greek travel writers like Strabo.

Caesar was not, however, merely content with covering new geographic and literary ground. The ethnographic sections of the *Gallic War* not only indicate that Caesar was aware of his Greek predecessors within the ethnographic tradition, but also that he was attempting to engage with that tradition in its customary way—by correcting the older accounts of his

predecessors with his own implicitly better one. Most important, however, both the placement and content of the ethnographic sections of the *Gallic War* suggest that Caesar wrote them with the intent of constructing an 'ethnographic framework' by which he could contrast the customs of northern European peoples with those of the Romans and, by association, convey their savagery and ferocity and the threat they posed to Rome. In order to accomplish this, he appropriated the precedents of Greek ethnography for the decidedly Roman purpose of glorifying his victories over the barbarian tribes (Schadee, 2008; Rambaud, 1966; Rawlings, 1998; Riggsby, 2006). In keeping with the rest of his famous career, Caesar did this in big ways.

This paper argues that within the first books of the *Gallic War* Caesar constructed an ethnographic framework by including *topoi* about the Gauls and other barbarians established by earlier writers in the Greek ethnographic tradition, but that he did so to make his own achievements against the Germans, Belgae, and Britons more spectacular. But by Book 7 this mechanism has failed to maintain a clear and comfortable distinction between the civilized Romans and barbarian Gauls because of the Gauls' sudden and surprisingly sophisticated uprising. It is this sudden shift in Gallic hostility and fierceness in Book 7 that suggests the likelihood that Caesar deliberately downplayed the Gauls' fierceness throughout most of the *Gallic War*. In other words, the fate of the ethnographic framework has further and significant implications for Caesar's integrity as a writer and for the date, and way, the *Gallic War* was composed: he started writing, it is argued, as early as 57 B.C. and continued as late as 54 B.C., and deliberately downplayed Gallic fierceness before being taken by the surprise of Book 7 (Krebs, 2013; Wiseman, 1998).

## Bibliography

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