

## The Greater Hope of the Veneti and Limits of Geographic Synergies (B. Gall. 7.1–16.1)

At the end of his second year of his Gallic campaigns, Caesar twice informs the reader that all of Gaul had been pacified (2.34 and 3.7.). So confident was he of his position, that after committing his forces to their winter quarters scattered throughout the pacified land, he sets out for Italy and Illyricum. Yet that peace was not to endure. During his absence, the Veneti, an influential people bordering Ocean, dissatisfied with the terms of their earlier surrender (2.34), attempted to coerce P. Crassus into negotiations by unlawfully detaining two individuals appointed by Crassus to seek grain from the states scattered in the area (3.8.2). Due to his absence, Caesar was unable to respond directly, but ordered preparations made for a maritime war against the Veneti and their allies (3.9.1). Though many have speculated about Caesar's obvious suppression of political facts associated with that trip and Caesar's motives for a renewal of war (Lazenby 1959; Levick 1998; Stevens 1952), Caesar's account focuses instead on the nature of the people against whom he is about to lead his legion. His account of the Veneti, grounded in a standard geographical deterministic framework, focuses on the unique synergy created between a people and their environment that threatens to resist Roman domination.

This paper employs a geographic hermeneutic of this episode, analyzing the ways in which Caesar builds layer upon layer of standard geographic and ethnographic topoi—intricate descriptions of land and seascape, weather and tides, the way in which nature shapes their both habitations, habits and even naval technologies, in fact, so detailed and impressive is the description of ships that one author describes this section as an “ethnography of ships” (Erickson 2002). In this way, I argue, Caesar first reveals the limits of Roman knowledge and experience, leading to a protracted engagement with an “amphibious” enemy (Schadee 2008, 166) at one

with and protected by its environment. Thus, the turning point, leading eventually to victory over the Veneti and their maritime allies, comes at a moment when Romans discover a way, through modified grappling hooks, to disconnect their ships from their nature (i.e. to disable their sails) and prevent their maneuvers and retreats, enabling the better trained marines to engage the Veneti in hand to hand combat. And so Caesar informs the reader that “the remaining contest was in the *virtus*, by which our soldiers easily won” (3.14.8). But Caesar does not put the *virtus* directly within the soldiers themselves, at least not wholly. It must be elicited from them by the power of the presence of the commander himself, who, with his infantry were watching the naval battle from the hills above (3.14.8-9). In this way, Caesar suggests that he himself is the force that meets nature itself and to which nature ultimately must submit. And indeed, the final victory comes then comes when nature does submit in the form of a sudden dead calm at sea, preventing the escape of the sail borne Veneti ships.

#### Bibliography

- Erickson, Brice. “Falling Masts, Rising Masters: The Ethnography of Virtue in Caesar’s Account of the Veneti.” *Amercian Journal of Philology* 123, no. 4 (2002): 601–22.
- Lazenby, J. F. “The Conference of Luca and the Gallic War: A Study in Roman Politics 57-55 B.C.” *Latomus* 18, no. 1 (1959): 67-76
- Levick, Barbara. “The Veneti Revisited: C. E. Stevens and the Tradition on Caesar the Propagandist.” In *Julius Caesar as Artful Reporter: The War Commentaries as Political Instruments*, edited by Kathryn Welch and Anton Powell, 61–83. London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1998.

Schadee, Hester. "Caesar's Construction of Northern Europe: Inquiry, Contact and Corruption in De Bello Gallico." *Classical Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2008): 158–80.

Stevens, C. E. "The « Bellum Gallicum » as a Work of Propaganda." *Latomus* 11, no. 1 (1952): 3–18.