

The Suppression of the Druids in Caesar's *Gallic War*

The truthfulness of certain political and military elements in the narrative of Julius Caesar's *Bellum Gallicum* have long been subject to scrutiny (Welch and Powell 1998; Rambaud 1966), yet discussions of his ethnographic descriptions of the Gauls, Germans, and Britons were for some time restricted to questions of interpolation (Gesche 1976). Perhaps because of this limited scope of inquiry into Caesar's ethnographic passages, they have rather recently been deemed by a senior Celtic archaeologist as some of the most detailed and reliable literary evidence for druids, that venerably mysterious group of Celtic priests, in antiquity (Aldhouse-Green 2010). Among historians and philologists, however, Caesar's representation of northern European peoples and geography has come under renewed scrutiny of late (Creer 2019; Allen-Hornblower 2014; Schadee 2008; Krebs 2006; Riggsby 2006), and there is an emerging consensus that Caesar tailored his portrayal of these peoples and their lands to exoticize the reports he sent back to Rome and to create a stronger sense of immediacy for his Gallic campaign and his forays into Germany and Britain.

Germane to these ethnographic digressions, the role of the druids in Caesar's Gaul remains ambiguous. This group of elite priests was a favorite target in the lurid ethnographic writing of Tacitus and the verses of Lucan, and even by Caesar's time the druids' mysticism and penchant for human sacrifice had been commented on by several Greek ethnographers and travel writers. Caesar's discussion of the druids, on the other hand, is comparatively brief, and he mentions only the druids' most basic ritual functions and place at the top of the governing structure of Gallic society. But despite the power and influence Caesar so blithely ascribes to the druids, they are conspicuously absent from his narration of the events of his eight years in the northern Europe. The Aeduan leader Diviciacus, for example, is a staunch ally of Caesar's who

figures prominently in the first four books of the *Gallic War*, but we have to turn to an offhand mention of him by Cicero to learn that he was, in fact, a druid (Cic. *Div.* 1.90), a detail Caesar never mentions despite his profession that he trusted Diviciacus most among the Gauls. Moreover, Caesar observes that druidism itself is believed to have originated in Britain and that Gallic druids would cross the English Channel to memorize the ancient lore of their British counterparts, yet no druids appear in Caesar's accounts of the island—or in those detailing his time in Gaul, for that matter.

It seems odd, then, that Caesar neglects to identify *any* individual druids in the *Gallic War*, even when other sources aver that he worked closely with at least one druid and Caesar's own discussions of the druids suggest that they wielded considerable influence in Gallic society. Odder still, Caesar professes that druidic religious practices like human sacrifice and nature worship had by his time ceased thanks to the Romans' civilizing influence, yet literary works a century later assert that those practices were ongoing and several imperial decrees outlawing the practice of druidic religion—first among Roman citizens, then more generally—speak to the druids' enduring influence among the Gauls.

While puzzling, these omissions might suggest an effort on Caesar's part to downplay the importance of the druids in the political hierarchy of Gallic society. In keeping with the recent scholarship that views Caesar's depiction of the Gauls with suspicion, it seems that any implication that the Gauls did not rely entirely on fractious citizen assemblies for their political dealings—that they were in fact presided over by a highly trained, collegial body of educated priests who convened yearly—would have suggested a much more organized and powerful Gaul than Caesar thought it in his interest to depict. This truncated explanation of the druids' role in Gallic society is thus another intriguing example of his ability and inclination to censor

information about barbarian society, and could mean that our current understanding of the ancient druids is more problematic than previously thought.

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