

Caesar's Gaul, Vercingetorix's France: Nationalism and Identity in the 19th Century

After Caesar defeated Vercingetorix at Alesia in 52 BCE, he paraded the conquered Gaul in his triumph in Rome, and produced a denarius, Rome's standard coin, showing Vercingetorix in profile, striking with his unkempt hair, long moustache, and gaunt features. This image gave Romans a close-up view of Rome's enemy, and greatly contributed to Caesar's prestige and renown during the power struggle that engulfed Italy in the 40s BCE.

Caesar's Roman denarii only depicted Vercingetorix; his name existed solely in Caesar's *Commentaries on the Gallic War*. But in 1837, the third issue of the recently founded *Revue de la Numismatique Française* featured the first ancient coin inscribed with the name of Vercingetorix, a Gallic coin likely minted by Vercingetorix himself in 52 BCE. The appearance of this coin in a prominent journal publicized the ancient Gaul to a society looking for national heroes in a century in which national identity was being formed and shaped by symbols, history, and myth. Thus Napoleon III used Vercingetorix's regal lineage to further his own imperial aspirations by erecting a statue of Vercingetorix near Alesia in 1867. Auguste Bartholdi shortly thereafter created a second statue, of Vercingetorix on horseback crushing a Roman soldier, for placement near Gergovie, where Vercingetorix had defeated Caesar earlier in 52 BCE. After France's humiliating loss in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, an amplified display of nationalism paired Vercingetorix with Joan of Arc in a sculpture erected in Ham, France.

The more psychological and nuanced efforts of 19th century French painters focused on transforming Vercingetorix's defeat at Alesia into a virtual victory, reflecting the need for such a transformation in the cascading consequences of France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian

War (Schivelbusch, 2013). Henri-Paul Motte's *Vercingetorix Surrenders* of 1892, and Lionel Royer's painting of 1899, *Vercingetorix Throws Down His Arms at the Feet of Julius Caesar*, both show the disdainful Gaul looking from his horse at the Roman general slouching decadently in a chair. Similar engravings of Vercingetorix's meeting with Caesar are found in popular French history books of the period (e.g., Guizot, 1872); there also arose a cottage industry of books about Vercingetorix (e.g., Correard, 1884).

Medalists likewise turned their attention to Vercingetorix. The little-known 19th century medalist, Defer, produced a magnificent medal depicting Vercingetorix on the obverse, and the 4th century BCE Gaulic leader, Brennus (also defeated by the Romans), on the reverse. Bertholdi himself in 1903 made a bronze medal showing his famous sculpture on the obverse with the patriotic words on the reverse: "A la gloire de l'Auvergne d'ou surgit le premier cri de patriotisme sur le sol de France."

Vercingetorix was brought to life in Caesar's famous war commentaries and commemorated on his coinage. He was rediscovered on Gaulic coins in early 19th century France, and became a symbol of France's national aspirations through sculpture, painting, literature, and medals, and an emblem of the political, cultural, and social changes affecting France during the turbulent decades of the 19th century.

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