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### The Battle of Alesia

Luke Matias

*Parkland College*, lukematias3@gmail.com

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Luke Matias

Professor Marsh Jones

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### The Battle of Alesia

The Battle of Alesia of 52 BC was one of the last major engagements of the Gallic Wars, a conflict between the Roman Republic and Gallic tribes between 58 and 51 BC (Sadler and Serdiville 13). The wars were primarily fought by Roman armies under the command of Gaius Julius Caesar, at the time a former Roman consul who was given governorship over provinces which bordered Gaul. Tensions between the Romans and the neighboring Gallic tribes led Caesar to begin a series of military campaigns in Gaul. The climactic engagement in this war, The Battle of Alesia, occurred when Vercingetorix, king of the Arverni tribe, united the Gallic tribes and began an uprising against the Romans in Gaul. This battle would end in Roman victory, with Vercingetorix surrendering to Caesar and the eventual “expansion of the Roman Republic over the whole of Gaul” (Carruthers 4). In this paper, I will explain the situation which led to the Gallic Wars and the major players on both sides of the battle. I will also discuss the circumstances which led to the siege and battle at Alesia, and the aftermath and repercussions from the event.

An important caveat that hangs over any explanation of the Battle of Alesia is that there are few sources that give a proper historical account and context of the Gallic Wars. One of the only sources that explains the happenings of this time in detail are those found in the *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* by Julius Caesar. While in some forms a comprehensive and

detailed source on the matter, it must also be noted that Caesar had an agenda with his account of the wars. He was not only a general but a politician, with personal motivations that would have influenced his portrayal of the events on paper. Whatever biases involved in the writing of his account of the Gallic Wars, it must also be noted that his was one of only few reliable written sources available to historians. Sadler and Serdiville state that the Gallic peoples “did not leave a written record, theirs was an oral society” (7). The few pieces of historical evidence by the Gauls of that time lie in their art, ruins, and any oral traditions that were passed down over generations and eventually recorded after the fact. This leaves most of the intricacies of the event up to the account of Julius Caesar, the winner of the conflict. Carruthers says that Caesar’s account “...is a pertinent and only slightly tendentious and altogether the most important historical source regarding the conflict” (4).

Rome in the years before, during, and shortly after the Gallic Wars was known after the fact as part of the Late Republic era. Roman influence stretched from modern day Spain to Syria, yet the Roman government was beginning to crack under various internal and external pressures. Conflicts between Romans and Gallic tribes in the Roman provinces of Cisalpine and Transalpine Gaul shortly after 112 BC led to the consular election of Marius. While ultimately successful in defending Rome, he would be known as “the first of a series of warlords who were to dominate the last century of the republic” (Roberts and Westad 228). Years later, his nephew, Julius Caesar, would be elected as consul in the year 59 BC, relying on political support from “the First Triumvirate, an informal alliance linking him to Gnaeus Pompey and Marcus Licinius Crassus” (Sadler and Serdiville 13). Caesar would gain notoriety as a radical reformer, and his strong political action such as the passing of land reform bills gained him much disdain amongst

members of the senate (“His Year: Julius Caesar (59 B.C.E.),” 06:21 - 12:05). At the end of his term as consul, Caesar would be awarded governorship over the provinces of Illyricum, Cisalpine Gaul, and Transalpine Gaul.

The provinces within Gaul contained a variety of tribes of different cultures, beliefs, and people. The Gallic people as seen by Romans, and especially writers like Julius Caesar and Tacitus, were a loosely organized, uncivilized group of savage barbarians. Today, historians like Sadler and Serdiville understand that the Gallic people were “a culture endowed with enormous wealth and fascinating complexity” (30). There is much historical evidence to show how Gallic tribes were more like the Romans than even the Romans thought. For example, political organization amongst some Gallic tribes had some similarities to Rome, with “a smaller, more aristocratic assembly, a council of nobles,” which would be responsible for overseeing the livelihoods of countless citizens of the tribes (Sadler and Serdiville 40). Cultural values were placed in the warriors, and the respect and status given to tribal chiefs and kings like Vercingetorix were granted only amongst those who reached the upper echelon of a competitive society. While complex and developed as any group of people were, Gallic tribes suffered most from the difficulty at which it was for them to unify. “Disunity... was a fatal weakness. The Gauls could never put communal interest, however that might be defined, above local loyalties” (Sadler and Serdiville 49). The competition amongst and even within certain tribes allowed for a volatile system that could potentially reap great profits for the one who controlled the region. Caesar understood this, and when given the opportunity, Caesar would be the one to step foot into Gaul and begin the Gallic Wars.

The Gallic Wars began as a response to a massive migration of people known as the Helvetii. In 58 BC, the Helvetii people, joined by neighboring tribes consisting of the Raurici, Tulingi, Latobrigi and Boii tribes, intended to travel west from what is now modern-day Switzerland to invade Gaul and settle the new land. Caesar was quick to capitalize on this new development in Gaul. “He dashed to the province, sending the single legion stationed there to break the vital bridge across the Rhone... One legion wasn’t going to be enough so he raised two more hurriedly in Italy and swept up another three veteran formations from garrison duty” (Sadler and Serdiville 55). After some skirmishes, a pitched battle was fought in which the Roman legions defeated the Helvetii and their allies, reversing their migration. In the same year, he also had to contend with a German tribe crossing the Rhine, led by their king Ariovistus. Caesar wrote that after his victory against the Helvetii, numerous Gallic tribes pledged their allegiances to Rome and asked for intervention against the invading Germans:

After these had been violently struggling with one another for the superiority for many years, it came to pass that the Germans were called in for hire by the Arverni and the Sequani. That about 15,000 of them had at first crossed the Rhine: but after that these wild and savage men had become enamored of the lands and the refinement and the abundance of the Gauls, more were brought over, that there were now as many as 120,000 of them in Gaul. (Carruthers 43)

Meeting Ariovistus and his army, Caesar managed to defeat the tribe and forced Ariovistus and his remaining troops back across the Rhine, preventing further invasions by the Germanic peoples for the time.

The following year, in 57 BC, rumors began to circulate that the northern Belgae tribes were creating a plot against the Romans in Gaul. Upon confirmation of this rumor from one of his trusted subordinates, Labienus, Caesar marched his eight legions towards Belgae territory. The first Belgae contact with the Romans were of the Remi tribe. Carruthers states that, upon arrival, “[the Remi people] surrendered themselves and all their possessions to the protection and disposal of the Roman people: and that they had neither combined with the rest of the Belgae, nor entered into any confederacy against the Roman people” (61). The Roman army managed to beat back an ambush led by the Nervii tribe, consolidating control over the Belgae. Another victory against the Aduatuci tribe marked another successful campaign in Gaul for Caesar and his legions.

The following years from 56 to 54 BC saw a change in doctrine for the occupying Romans. No longer were Caesar’s legions fighting expeditionary campaigns to pacify the Gallic tribes, but now they found themselves establishing permanent garrisons and settlements to incorporate themselves firmly into the region. 56 BC featured one conflict against the seafaring Veneti tribe, which was swiftly dealt with and the tribe found pacified. All this success in the region was crucial for Caesar’s agenda, as Sadler and Serdiville explain:

Caesar could report that Gaul was quiet. He needed to. His armies had won a number of significant victories without suffering any serious reverses. Profits from these actions flowed back to the centre but war is an expensive business... Caesar was fighting on two fronts, only one in Gaul, the other, just as deadly, in Rome. A constant string of victories and rewards were needed from one to keep the other quiescent. (58)

Caesar flexed his power with further military victories and expeditions. He defeated Germanic

tribes attempting to migrate into Gaul and built a bridge across the Rubicon to add to his list of accomplishments. In 55 and 54 BC, he used loose justifications of Brittonian involvement in Gallic military affairs to launch two expeditions to Britain, dazzling the Romans back home and bringing many slaves and wares to boot.

Constant oppression and defeats by the Roman invaders had built up a lot of resentment within the Gallic tribes. It was under this stress that in the winter of 54 - 53 BC, several Gallic tribes under the command of a prince named Ambiorix revolted against the Roman occupying forces. "Ambiorix of the Eburones targeted the easternmost forward base, a single rookie legion... Ambiorix conned the officers with promises of safe conduct and they fell for it, leading to a general massacre" (Sadler and Serdiville 59). Caesar's successes had been tainted by the destruction of an entire legion, and through the period of 53 BC, he campaigned to reassert control over the revolting Gallic tribes. Subsequent victories over the Nervii, Senones, Menapii, and Treveri, as well as a second crossing of the Rhine quelled the danger. Carruthers stated that by the end of the campaigning season of 53 BC, "all the forces of the Eburones and the Nervii which had assembled, [departed]; and for a short time after this action, Caesar was less harassed in the government of Gaul" (154).

It had been 6 years since the Gallic Wars had begun. Then, in the spring of the year 52 BC, a young king of the Arverni tribe called Vercingetorix began to unite the Gallic tribes and rise up in the largest revolt the region had seen. Vercingetorix, despite his youth, was a clearly capable leader and warrior. Sadler and Serdiville state how "Caesar admits his opponent was a young man of considerable talent; in his abilities 'second to none'" (60). He successfully consolidated power within his own tribe against his opponents and won the crown with popular

support. From there, Vercingetorix facilitated diplomatic relations with other tribes. “He quickly attaches to his interests the Senones, Parisii, Pictones, Cadurci, Turones, Auleri, Lemovice, and all the others who border on the ocean” (Carruthers 184). Gallic supporters of the Roman rule were targeted by the revolting armies, forcing Caesar’s hand to protect his holdings in Gaul. Sieges in the towns and fortifications of Gorgobina, Vellaunodunum, and Noviodunum allowed the Romans the chance to gain back some form of control over the shifting region.

Vercingetorix then shifted the strategy of the campaign. Rather than attempt to beat Caesar in a decisive engagement, the Gallic armies would engage in asymmetric, guerrilla style warfare. Anything that could not be used for the war effort that might be found in Roman hands would be burned to deny the enemy. “From this point on, the campaign of 52 BC was very different in complexion to those fought before. There had been blood and tears enough but this was to be warfare on a scale and intensity Gaul had never witnessed” (Sadler and Serdiville 65). Caesar quickly ran into a supply problem as his legions were being deprived of food from the scorched earth strategy adopted by Vercingetorix. The Roman siege of the Gallic fortress of Avaricum provided the weary legionaries with much needed food but was not much of a loss for the Gallic tribes. The next siege of the Gallic town of Gergovia ended in defeat for Caesar, who had to regroup his legions. Vercingetorix took this opportunity to attempt an ambush on Caesar’s regrouping legions, but this proved to be a costly mistake. A poorly planned cavalry charge led to a rout of the Gallic armies, who took several casualties. “Vercingetorix withdrew all of his survivors, streaming towards the refuge of the Mandubii capital of Alesia... For the first time Vercingetorix had been badly defeated. For the first time Caesar had demonstrated absolute tactical superiority” (Sadler and Serdiville 73).



The Battle of Alesia, therefore, began as a regrouping effort on the part of Vercingetorix's previous blunder. To Vercingetorix's benefit, the city of Alesia was a very well defended location. Jean-Paul Savignac states that "The city proper was at the top of a hill to a great height, so that one could see well that it was impossible to take otherwise than in an orderly siege" (73). Rather than committing to scaling the walls, Caesar decided to instead build a large wall around Alesia to prevent Vercingetorix's army from leaving. Vercingetorix managed to send word of his predicament to a Gallic relief force who would break the Roman siege. Caesar, having caught wind of this development, elects to make a second wall facing outward. This meant that on the inner side, Caesar was blocking Vercingetorix from leaving, and on the outer side, Caesar was preventing the relief force from encircling him. These walls were very sturdy and suitable for the plains around Caesar's army. According to Luccisano et al., "In the plain and the valleys, the rampart is built with the earth extracted from the ditches and clad with clumps of sod taken from the strip of land that exactly matches the footprint of the ditches and reductions" (81). Despite the protection from the walls, the legions still had to spread their men all along the circle to contend with attacks from both sides. On the final day of battle, the relief force actually broke through the outer wall, but a Roman cavalry charge led by Caesar himself successfully routed the Gallic relief force from Alesia. The next day, Vercingetorix proclaimed his surrender.

The climactic Battle of Alesia proved a bitter end to an otherwise well fought campaign on the part of Vercingetorix, his Gallic allies, and all the Gallic tribes throughout the entirety of the Gallic Wars up to that point. For the first and only time over the period from 58 to 52 BC, Gallic resistance against Roman control was strong enough that the real possibility of a unified, independent Gallic region could exist. As it turns out, this possibility was extinguished the

moment Vercingetorix regrouped in Alesia. Caesar, as controversial of a figure as he is, proved that he was unmatched when he was given the tools necessary to wage war on his own means. Against even the unlikely competence of Vercingetorix, Caesar played to the strengths of his Roman legionaries, constructing strong fortifications and forcing the enemy into a situation where Vercingetorix would have to fight to get out of. For the Gallic tribes, Alesia marked the end of any sense of resistance, and the beginning of most of the Gallic region as a Roman province for centuries. For Vercingetorix, he would find himself a captive under Roman custody for over half a decade before being executed in a triumph honoring Caesar and the Gallic Wars. In death, he would become a national hero and symbol for the French, admired for his bravery and fight against the Roman oppressors. For Caesar, it was a great boon to his political career, having pacified the Gallic tribes and flexed his ability as a commander in the field. Though as brutal and oppressive as Caesar and his regime was upon the Gallic people, his talents proved he was more than capable to do much more. For the Roman civilization, Alesia gave its winner the power and notoriety that would lead to civil war, the downfall of the Roman Republic, and the rise of the Roman Empire. Unfortunately for Caesar, he would not live to see it. Caesar, through a complicated mess of politics and scheming, would die on the senate floor on the Ides of March in 44 BC. “The master of the world died in a river of his own blood, brought down by his fellow senators in a squalid act of murder... And on the day before his murder... where the topic discussed happened to be ‘the best sort of death’ - and ‘let it come swiftly and unexpectedly’, cried Caesar” (Sadler and Serdiville 96). The Battle of Alesia stands today as the climactic engagement of an eight-year war, a showcase of battlefield strategy, and the interplay of politics and warfare that would forever change the European continent.

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