



The Ancient World: Extraordinary People in Extraordinary Societies

Gallic Wars

Date: 58–50 BCE

Locale: Gaul (modern France and the Low Countries)

Related civilizations: Republican Rome, Gaul

Significance: A major conquest by Rome, this war was also central to the career of Julius Caesar and thus to the fall of the Roman Republic. The resulting partition of Gaul from Germania helped form the modern nations of France and Germany.

The painting depicts the surrender of the Gallic chieftain after the Battle of Alesia (52 BCE).



Background: Romans had fought off attacks by Celtic tribes from Gaul and northern Italy since the fourth century BCE. The Romans eventually established a foothold in Italy and in southern Gaul (modern Provence) and founded provinces. Tensions between Romans and the tribes continued, however, and Julius Caesar arranged a five-year governorship of the Roman provinces for himself and soon found an opportunity for war.

Action: In 58 BCE, a large group of Helvetii (from modern Switzerland) attempted a migration westward near Roman territory and fought tribes allied with the Romans. Caesar engaged and defeated them. Then, at

the request of certain Gallic tribes, he engaged and defeated Ariovistus, a German chieftain who had also invaded Gaul.

Caesar spent most of 57 BCE fighting Belgian tribes in northeast Gaul, while a sub-commander brought the tribes of the northeast coast to formal submission. In the following year, several of the maritime tribes revolted and were subdued only after considerable difficulty. The tribes of Aquitania (southwestern Gaul) were also beaten by Roman forces.

In 55 BCE, Caesar repulsed another incursion by Germans. Then he crossed the Rhine in force to terrorize the tribes on the other side. This adventure was followed by a small invasion of Britain, from which Caesar retired after declaring victory. Back in Rome, Caesar's command was extended for five years.

The next year's campaigns began with a much larger invasion of Britain. After initial difficulties, the Romans were able to obtain the surrender of several tribes. However, Caesar was forced to return to Gaul when a major uprising broke out behind him in northwest Gaul. Roman forces, in scattered encampments, were attacked and in one case annihilated. Caesar, along with his lieutenant Titus Labienus, was able to restore the situation and engage in reprisals.

In 53 BCE, the reprisals continued. In response to German-supported resistance, Caesar again crossed the Rhine on a terror campaign. The Germanic Sugambri nonetheless invaded and were repulsed only after threatening another Roman encampment.

The following year was marked by an uprising of most of Gaul led by the leader Vercingetorix. After a serious repulse at the stronghold of Gergovia, Caesar cornered Vercingetorix at Alesia, where he defeated the besieged troops and a large relieving force. Some resistance continued for the next two years, most notably in central Gaul in 51 BCE, but Caesar and his lieutenants put it down decisively.

Virtually the only source of information is Caesar's own account. Although there is no reason to question the general outline, his veracity in detail has been a matter of considerable dispute.

Consequences: Gaul was quickly integrated into the Roman Empire, ending centuries of conflict. The wealth, glory, and military loyalty Caesar gained in Gaul enabled him to seize his dictatorship.

See also: Alesia, Battle of (10.3331/CWEP_0507); Britain (10.3331/CWEP_1030); Caesar, Julius (10.3331/CWEP_0541); Celts;

Gauls (10.3331/CWEP_1053); Germany (10.3331/CWEP_1054); Rome, Republican (10.3331/CWEP_0738); Vercingetorix (10.3331/CWEP_1099).

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