

Caesar

LIFE

Gaius Julius Caesar was born at Rome on 13 July 100 B.C. to a patrician family of ancient nobility. Since he was related nonetheless to Marius and Cinna, he was persecuted in his youth by the Sullans. After Sulla's death, in 78 B.C., he returned to Rome from Asia, where he had served in the army, and began his forensic and political career. He was quaestor in 68, aedile in 65, pontifex maximus in 63, praetor in 62, and propraeator in Further Spain in 61. In 60 he entered into a secret agreement with Pompey and Crassus, called the first triumvirate, which divided power among the three. He held the consulship for the first time in 59, acting energetically and disregarding his colleague Bibulus. Beginning in the next year Caesar held the proconsulship of Illyria and Romanized Gaul (Cisalpine and Narbonensis). Using as a pretext alleged provocations and border violations committed in the Gallic area under his jurisdiction by tribes engaged in vast migrations, he undertook the conquest of the entire Celtic world, presenting it as a defensive, preventive operation. The conquest of the Gauls took seven years, and with it Caesar acquired the basis for a vast personal power. Blocked through legal quibbles by his opponents, who tried to prevent him from passing directly from the proconsulship in Gaul to his second consulship, Caesar invaded Italy at the head of two legions, thus starting the civil war (10 January 49). In August of 48 he defeated the senatorial army led by Pompey at Pharsalus in Thessaly; afterwards he suppressed other hotbeds of Pompeian resistance in Africa (battle of Thapsus, 46 B.C.) and in Spain (battle of Munda, 45 B.C.). In the meantime, having become absolute master of Rome, he had held, at times simultaneously, the dictatorship and consulship from 49 on. On 15 March 44 he was assassinated by a group of aristocrats who were firm in their loyalty to the Republic and were troubled by the autocratic, regal tendencies Caesar had been showing.

WORKS

Preserved works: *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*, in seven books, plus an eighth book written probably by Caesar's lieutenant, Aulus Hirtius, to complete the account of the Gallic campaigns; *Commentarii de Bello Civili*, in three books; a verse epigram on Terence (fragment 9 in Morel's *Fragmenta Poetarum Latinorum*).

Lost works: various speeches (in one of them, the funeral eulogium over his aunt Julia, he asserted the descent of the *gens Iulia* from Iulus-Ascanius and so from Aeneas and Venus); a treatise on problems of language and style, *De Analogia*, finished in the summer of 54; various youthful verse compositions (a poem, *Laudes Herculis*, and a tragedy, *Oedipus*, as well as a collection of memorable sayings, the *Dicta Collectanea*) and a poem (*Iter*) on the expedition to Spain in 45; and a pamphlet in two books against the memory of Cato of Utica (*Anticato*), written as a reply to the eulogium of Cato written by Cicero (*Laus Catonis* [see p. 176]).

Spurious works: besides the eighth book of the *De Bello Gallico*, we have three works of the so-called *Corpus Caesarianum*, namely, the *Bellum Alexandrinum*, the *Bellum Africum*, and the *Bellum Hispaniense*, accounts of the last events of the civil war, actually composed by unknown officers of Caesar's.

SOURCES

The authentic and spurious works of Caesar; the *Life of Caesar* by Suetonius and the one by Plutarch; speeches and letters of Cicero; Appian, *Bella Civilia*; Cassius Dio, books 36–44.

I. THE COMMENTARIUS AS A HISTORIOGRAPHIC GENRE

Authors of commentarii

The term *commentarius*, a calque on the Greek *hypomnema*, indicated a type of narration intermediate between the collection of raw materials (in Caesar's case, the personal notes, the reports to the Senate on the course of the Gallic campaigns, etc.) and their elaboration in the artistic form typical of true historiography, that is to say, enriched with stylistic and rhetorical embellishments. We have already referred to the composition of *commentarii* by important politicians, such as Scourus and Sulla (see p. 123); and Cicero also wrote various *commentarii*, both in Latin and in Greek, on his own consulship, with the aim of offering to some historian—whom in fact he never succeeded in finding—the material, to be shaped and organized into a proper historical narrative in the sense we have seen.

Character of Caesar's Commentarii

Caesar without doubt aimed at placing himself in this tradition. Both Cicero (*Brutus* 262) and Hirtius in the preface to the eighth book of the *De Bello Gallico* speak of Caesar's *Commentarii* as a work written to offer to other historians the material out of which to construct their own narrative. As in the case of Cicero, but for different reasons, these historians were never found. Cicero and Hirtius himself emphasize that no one would have dared to attempt to rewrite what Caesar had already said with incomparable simplicity. In fact Caesar's attitude may have concealed a certain trickery: beneath the humble clothing, the *commentarius* as he conceived and practiced it probably came close to *historia*. This is evidenced by his dramatization of certain scenes and by his recourse to direct speeches in certain passages. But Caesar is admirably restrained in giving dramatic effect to his narrative, avoiding gross, vulgar effects and especially clumsy rhetorical

frills. The use of the third person also tends in this direction, detaching the protagonist from the emotionality of the *ego* and setting him in the drama of history as an independent character.

2. THE GALLIC CAMPAIGNS IN CAESAR'S NARRATION

The work commonly referred to as *De Bello Gallico* was probably originally *C. Iulii Caesaris Commentarii Rerum Gestarum*. The subtitle with the reference to the Gallic campaign was probably added after the death of the author, in order to distinguish these *commentarii* from the ones on the civil war and from the others that made their way into the *Corpus Caesarianum*.

Summary of the *De Bello Gallico*

The seven books of the work cover the period from 58 to 52, during which Caesar systematically subjugated Gaul. The conquest developed in phases, successes alternating with serious setbacks, which Caesar's account diminishes or justifies but does not conceal. The first book, about the events of 58, deals with the campaign against the Helvetii, whose migratory movements had given Caesar the pretext for launching the war, and against the German leader Ariovistus. The second book tells of the revolt of the Gallic tribes, the third of the campaign against the peoples on the Atlantic coast. The fourth book recounts operations against the infiltrating German peoples, who had crossed the Rhine (Usipeti and Tencteri, pitilessly massacred), and against the rebel Gallic leaders, Indutiomarus and Ambiorix. Also in the fourth book and then in the fifth Caesar gives an account of his two expeditions against the Britons, in 55 and 54, who were accused of aiding the Gallic rebels. Yet the conquest of Gaul is not utterly secure: in particular the peoples of Gallia Belgica offer vigorous resistance, which Caesar succeeds in crushing only through a campaign of extermination and devastation, narrated in books 5 and 6. With this revolt scarcely suppressed, a general insurrection breaks out in 52, headed by Vercingetorix, king of the Arverni. After a new campaign of devastation and massacre on the part of the Romans, the Gallic resistance comes to an end with the storming of Alesia, where Vercingetorix is captured (book 7).

Date of composition and style of the *De Bello Gallico*

There is disagreement among scholars over the dates of the composition of the *De Bello Gallico*. According to some, it was written straight off in the winter of 52/51; others prefer to think of a year-by-year composition during the winters, when military operations were suspended. This second hypothesis is favored by the existence of certain contradictions within the work, which in part have been exaggerated but which nonetheless remain difficult to explain if one supposes a composition that was carried out in a short stretch of time; this hypothesis, moreover, more than the other, seems to make sense of the perceptible stylistic evolution that has been detected in the *Commentarii*. Such an evolution seems to advance from the bare, unadorned style of the true *commentarius* towards a style that increasingly allows the typical ornaments of *historia*; thus in the second half of the work one finds more frequent use of direct discourse and recourse to a greater variety of synonyms, which denotes a certain expansion of the traditional vocabulary. In the first half of the *De Bello Gallico*, by contrast, Caesar is

indifferent to using the same words, repeated more than once and at a short interval. Some have wanted to explain this on the grounds that Caesar the linguist adhered to the analogists' theories (on which see below), which would have led him towards a rigorous terminological propriety according to which each thing should be designated by a single name.

3. THE NARRATION OF THE CIVIL WAR

The De Bello Civili:

a) *Date of composition*

The *De Bello Civili* is divided into three books, the first two of which narrate the events of 49 and the third, those of 48, without quite covering entirely the events of the latter year. The times of composition and publication are even more uncertain than for the *De Bello Gallico*; indeed it has been questioned whether the account of the civil war was published by Caesar while he was alive or by someone else only after his death. The latter hypothesis, even if it seems unacceptable, may gain strength from the fact that the work appears unfinished: the narrative leaves the outcome of the war in Alexandria in suspense. Apart from this and other minor difficulties, it is generally believed that the *De Bello Civili* was written in the second half of 47 and 46 and then published in the same year, 46.

b) *Political tendencies*

Caesar's political tendencies come to light, of course, in the work. He does not let the opportunity go by to aim a blow at the old ruling class, represented by a clique of corrupt men. Caesar has recourse to a sober satire—a stylistic innovation in respect to the *De Bello Gallico*—in order to unmask the base ambitions and the petty intrigues of his adversaries, men such as, for instance, Cato or Lentulus Crus, off whose tongues roll words such as "justice," "honesty," and "liberty" but who are motivated by personal rancor or eagerness for profit. The satiric representation culminates in the picture of the Pompeian camp before the battle of Pharsalus: certain of the imminent defeat of Caesar, his opponents decide the punishments that are to be inflicted, divide up the possessions of those who are to be proscribed, and fight over the political offices, sometimes even coming to blows.

c) *Reassurance of the traditionalists*

Nonetheless, one does not find in the *De Bello Civili* the precise points of a program of political reform for the Roman state. Caesar's chief aspiration is to dissolve the image of him that the aristocratic propaganda had created before the public, presenting him as a revolutionary, a continuator of the Gracchi or, still worse, of Catiline. He wants to reveal himself as the man who has always kept within the limits of the law and defended them against the abuses of his enemies. The audience for his propaganda is the moderate, "right-thinking" stratum of Roman and Italian public opinion (the same audience that Cicero would address in the *De Officiis* [see pp. 195 f.]), which sees in the Pompeians the defenders of the republican constitution and of legality and which fears social upheavals. It is a stratum on which aristocratic propaganda had a strong influence, but one that might also be detached from the aristocratic party, the very goal at which Caesar aimed. This explains the tendency in more than one passage to reassure the

landowning classes, in regard, for instance, to a burning question such as the debts that weighed upon both the plebs and the dissolute members of the aristocracy. Caesar justifies some of his emergency measures but at the same time emphasizes how there should be no expectation from him of *tabulae novae*, that is, provisions for the cancellation of debts of the sort Catiline had proposed in his day. The desire to reassure creditors is also made clear by Caesar's dwelling upon the suppression of the movement that sought far more drastic measures in favor of the debtors, a movement stirred up by Caelius Rufus, the person Cicero had defended in the *Pro Caelio* (see pp. 183 f.).

d) Pax and
clementia

. By emphasizing that he always kept within the limits of the law of the Republic, Caesar also insists on his own constant desire for peace; the unleashing of the civil war is owed only to the Pompeians' repeated rejection of serious negotiations. Another basic theme of the work is Caesar's clemency towards the defeated, which is contrasted with the cruelty of his opponents. After Marius and Sulla many expected new proscriptions, new bloodbaths. Caesar is careful to reassure the people, and at the same time to disarm the hatred of his enemies. Finally, one cannot forget the true monument that Caesar erects in these *commentarii*, as well as in the *commentarii* on the Gallic War, to the loyalty and bravery of his own soldiers, whose attachment he repays with sincere affection. The praise Caesar gives to the members of his army probably cannot be separated from the process of social advancement, including admission into the Senate, of the *homines novi* of military origin, but Caesar is also thinking of posterity when in his work he preserves the names of centurions or plain soldiers who distinguished themselves in acts of particular heroism.

e) Glorification of the
soldiers

4. CAESAR'S TRUTHFULNESS AND THE PROBLEM OF HISTORICAL DISTORTION

Objectivity and
tendentiousness in
the *Commentarii*

The unadorned style of Caesar's *Commentarii*, the rejection of rhetorical embellishments characteristic of true *historia*, the notable reduction of evaluative language—all contribute greatly to the apparently objective, impassive tone of Caesar's narration. Beneath this impassivity, however, modern criticism has discovered, so it believes, tendentious interpretations and distortions of the events for the purpose of political propaganda. Some undoubtedly have pushed this too far, but the connection of the *commentarii* with the political struggle is equally beyond doubt. The connection is more immediate in the *De Bello Civili*, where the urgency of the burning themes of the day is alive and evident, than in the *De Bello Gallico*. The interpretation is unquestionably a forced one that regards the latter as written and published for the purpose of supporting Caesar's candidacy for his second consulship.

In any event, the presence of distortions in both works is undeniable. It is never a matter of large-scale falsifications, but of omissions of greater or lesser importance, a certain way of presenting the relations between events.

Caesar relies on very clever devices, almost perfectly concealed. He attenuates, insinuates, lightly anticipates or postpones, and arranges the topics in such a way as to justify his own failures.

The Gallic War as a defensive war

In a manner consistent with these tendencies of Caesar's narrative, the *De Bello Gallico* on the whole cannot be read as a glorification of the conquest. As we have seen, Caesar emphasizes instead the defensive needs that compelled him to undertake the war. It was, after all, the established custom of Roman imperialism to present wars of conquest as necessary for protecting the Roman state and its allies from dangers that arose abroad. In addition to the Romans, Caesar addresses the Gallic aristocracy, to assure them of his protection against the lawless men who behind their flaunted ideals of independence conceal their aspiration to tyranny. In the *De Bello Gallico* Caesar stresses how his actions have always remained within the laws; he presents himself as a political moderate from whom revolutionary outbursts certainly should not be expected.

Charisma and luck

In both works he makes evident his abilities in military and political action, but he does not create a halo of charisma about himself. In this he may have behaved differently from the way he behaved in *unwritten* forms of propaganda, which were addressed to the less educated, less shrewd populace. Luck is an element that plays a large part in his narrative, but it is not presented as a protecting divinity. It is, rather, a concept that serves to explain sudden changes in a situation, an imponderable factor that sometimes aids Caesar's enemies too; it is, above all, what lies beyond man's abilities of foresight and rational control. Caesar attempts to explain events through human and natural causes, to grasp clearly their inner logic, and he practically never has recourse to divine intervention.

5. THE CONTINUATORS OF CAESAR

Hirtius, Bellum Alexandrinum, Bellum Africum, Bellum Hispaniense

Caesar's lieutenant Aulus Hirtius wrote book 8 of the *De Bello Gallico* in order to link up its narrative with that of the *De Bello Civili* by recounting the events of 51 and 50. The *Bellum Alexandrinum* is probably also owed to Hirtius. We may presume that these works, with their sober, unadorned manner, respect the stylistic tradition of the commentary more consistently than the authentic works of Caesar. The Caesarian style, as we have seen, sometimes pushed the commentary towards *historia*. It did not reject the demand for sobriety, and yet it attained levels of lapidary elegance and of suggestiveness that remain unknown to Hirtius and the other continuators. Still, as far as we can tell, the genre of the *commentarius* was not very stable, and in those continuators of Caesar it opens itself to various influences. The *Bellum Africum* is often covered with an archaizing patina, whereas the *Bellum Hispaniense*, with its lack of balance and its discrepancies of tone, shows sporadic affectations of style against a background of popular, colloquial language, not without decidedly vulgar features. Its anonymous author is rightly identified as a *homo militaris* with a rudimentary rhetorical training that encouraged his vain literary ambitions.

6. LINGUISTIC THEORIES

Caesar as orator

The loss of Caesar's speeches is one of the gravest losses suffered by Latin literature, to judge by the enthusiastic opinions of those ancients who could read him, such as Quintilian, Tacitus, and others. In the passage of the *Brutus* already mentioned Cicero appears, to some extent, to contrast Caesar's style in the *Commentarii* with that in his speeches, in which rhetorical ornaments would not have been a defect. The judgment is not completely reliable, because Cicero's purpose (see p. 188), given that he could not deny the force of Caesar's oratory, was probably to trace this style back to non-Atticist models, emphasizing the rhetorical ornaments and minimizing elegance as a source of the speeches' success with the audience. Caesar's oratorical style probably avoided "swellings" (*tumores*) and excessively gaudy colors, but the adroit use of the ornaments saved him from the excesses of a spare, jejune style such as was dear to the extreme Atticists.

Caesar the analogist

It is Cicero again in any event who recognizes that Caesar acted as a purifier of the Latin language, "correcting a faulty, corrupt usage by a pure and irreproachable one." Caesar expounded his linguistic theories in the three books *De Analogia* (on the notion see pp. 124 f.), written in 54 and dedicated to Cicero, who certainly did not share those theories. As far as one can tell, the treatise expressed the desire for a rational and ascetic handling of Latin. The few fragments preserved show how Caesar laid down as the basis for eloquence the sensible choice of words, for which the fundamental criterion is analogy, rational and systematic selection, as opposed to anomaly, the accepting of that which gradually becomes customary in the *sermo cotidianus*. The choice should be limited to the *verba usitata*, the words already in use; Caesar advised the writer to avoid odd and unusual words as the steersman avoids a reef. The congruence is evident between these prescriptions and the spare, precise style of the *Commentarii*. Caesar's analogism is concern for simplicity, order, and especially clarity, to which he sometimes is willing to sacrifice even gracefulness. We have seen that Cicero recognized the greatness of the *Commentarii*. But Caesar's linguistic theories could not have won his agreement, and the fact that Caesar dedicated his essay to him is no more an indication of shared literary views than is Cicero's dedication of works such as the *Brutus* or the *Orator* to the Atticist Brutus (see p. 188).

7. LITERARY SUCCESS

Antiquity

For the most part, Caesar's *Nachleben* has been, not literary, but political. "Kaiser" and "czar" designate forms of power, not styles of writing, and if Napoleon studied Caesar's *Commentaries* in his last years on the island of Saint Helena, it was surely not only with a view to their grammar and diction. But this was not always the case: Caesar's contemporaries took him seriously not only as a general and statesman but also as a writer. Although Asinius Pollio cast doubt upon his veracity, both proponents such as A.

Hirtius (*De Bello Gallico* 8 *praef.*) and opponents such as Cicero (*Brutus* 262) could praise the style of his memoirs for its perfect lucidity and freedom from rhetorical artifice. Later, Quintilian refers to his speeches but not to the *Commentaries*, perhaps for the very same reason. Through most of the rest of antiquity, however, Caesar's works did not have an easy time. The peculiar character of the *Corpus Caesarianum*—their author's unexpected death had left his writings unfinished, incomplete, and unrevised, and they were subsequently supplemented by Hirtius and other loyal followers—posed considerable philological problems, with which ancient scholarship wrestled, not always with success. His lucid style made him uninteresting for the grammarians, who almost never cite him. The contents of his work had the same effect upon the church fathers. It was only the historians, for example, Livy, Nicolaus of Damascus, Plutarch, Tacitus, Appian, Dio Cassius, and Ammianus Marcellinus, who appreciated his qualities and sometimes exploited his materials (though they often diverged from his own account of events). But Livy also came to overshadow and supplant him as a historical source for the events of this period; it is not even certain that Lucan, who felt such keenly fascinated horror for Caesar, ever read him. Curiously, Orosius attributes the *Bellum Gallicum* to Suetonius, and the same attribution is found in some manuscripts.

Middle Ages

In the Middle Ages, Caesar was not a school author and was not widely known. Until the twelfth century he is relatively rare in medieval catalogues except in France. And those few medieval authors who had read him—mostly French and German—seem to know only his memoir of the Gallic War (which also became known in the East after Maximus Planudes translated it into Greek around 1300).

Renaissance

The Renaissance rediscovered Caesar not only as a military strategist and a canny, ambitious politician but also as a writer. Petrarch wrote a biography of him, and in the fifteenth century Andrea Brenzino forged a speech of Caesar's to his soldiers. In the following century, in England Arthur Golding translated him, in Germany Nicodemus Frischlin based a school drama, *Helvetiogermani*, upon book 1 of the *Bellum Gallicum*, and in France Montaigne, praising him in terms similar to Cicero's, adopted him as a model for prose style, thereby paving the way for the new rational style of French classicism, which was to culminate in such writers as Descartes. Since then, and especially starting in the nineteenth century, the *De Bello Gallico* has become one of the standard school texts for beginning students of Latin prose, not only because of its deceptively easy style, perhaps, but also because it treats matters of national interest to French, German, and English readers and provides models of dedication to the state and obedience to authority. We cannot know how many potential readers Caesar has thereby lost.

Modern period

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