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FIRST COMMENTARY

58 BCE

Caesar departed for Gaul in early 58 BCE, leaving behind a newly enriched imperial city stumbling into what would be the worst decade of its history—until the decade that followed it. Caesar would enrich himself and Rome even more, while the governability of the whole was in free fall toward ruin. For three of the nine years Caesar would spend with his army, Rome did not manage to conduct consular elections until the new consular year had already begun. The three generalissimos dandling the empire on their knees would all die violently—Crassus with his army in 53, Pompey on the run from Caesar in 49, and Caesar at the base of a statue of Pompey in 44. Rome’s chance for stable government lay hidden at this moment thirty miles south of Rome in the person of a four-year-old boy whose father had just died.

The consuls in 58 were Lucius Calpurnius Piso Caesoninus and Aulus Gabinius. Piso was Caesar’s father-in-law and also earned a different fame by being the likely builder of the Villa dei Papiri in Herculaneum, where he was the patron of the Epicurean philosopher Philodemus. We benefit from that patronage because his villa had the good luck to be inundated with the ash of Vesuvius in 79 CE, and a considerable trove of literature, including works of Philodemus, remained there to await modern technology’s ability to recover them, an effort still in progress.

But the tribune Clodius was the lawmaker in evidence as the year began and passed his precedent-setting grain law in January, along with a law removing a ban on *collegia*. In theory they were beneficial

burial societies organized by likeminded businessmen, tradesmen, or neighbors, but they had been banned because they also became a vehicle for thugs and groups engaged in more or less organized crime. Clodius used them as his own private militia.

Caesar crossed the *pomerium*, the sacred narrowly-drawn boundary of the city, to take up his command (a general had always to leave his army outside that *pomerium*) but lingered close to the city to watch the political situation. He knew the praetors Ahenobarbus and Memmius would attack his consular acts of the year before on grounds that he had gone against the auspices. (Caesar's intransigent colleague Bibulus had made sure there were always negative auspices to ignore!) Caesar published three speeches against the two praetors, while keeping a wary eye on Cicero, who he thought might join the attack. Clodius hated Cicero, so Caesar was glad in these weeks to join the rising outrage that the demagogue was whipping up against the orator, notionally for putting Roman citizens to death without full due process at the end of the Catilinarian insurgency four years earlier.

In the third month of the year, Clodius organized an assembly (*contio*) outside the *pomerium* in the Circus Flaminius for a debate on Cicero's case. Caesar and the consuls spoke in terms that made it clear to Cicero that he could not withstand the forces against him, and so he fled the city for the safety of exile in mid-March. Clodius spent a month proposing and revising a formal ban, which was approved on April 24 by the *concilium plebis*, the people's assembly over which the tribune held sway. (Exile was enforced by a law saying the condemned could be killed at will if he did not withdraw a certain distance, usually hundreds of miles, from the city. An exile who kept his distance could live quite comfortably.)

When Caesar saw that nothing would come of the challenges to his consular acts and that Cicero was taken care of, he left in late March, traveling rapidly toward Geneva, covering some five hundred miles in about eight days. (In haste, a carriage could take him something like seventy-five miles a day if needed.) If he were ever to return to Rome and avoid the destructive rage of his rivals for power, he would have to come back with undeniable success, strong military

support, and a lot of money. Failing that trifecta, he still needed money—to set himself up in protected obscurity on a Greek island somewhere. Gaul was a means to an end.

What did he find when he arrived there?

First of all, he had hurried past a good part of what he was responsible for. Cisalpine Gaul was the heart of his responsibility, and he was charged as well with maintaining Roman rule in Illyricum, the eastern coast of the Adriatic. He had veered north to the outermost edge of his domains, to Geneva, where the lake narrows to become the beginning of the Rhone river that flows west to Lyon, then south to the Mediterranean. The Gallic nation on Rome's side of the Rhone there was the Allobroges, mainly peaceable enough apart from a flurry of rumors of insurgency two years earlier. A very good luxury hotel now stands on the first few yards of territory that then lay outside Rome's rule facing the narrow channel of water that is the nascent Rhone.

Caesar knew as he made this journey that he had an army, at least. He was authorized one legion (about 5,000 soldiers) for Transalpine Gaul and three for northern Italy and Illyricum. Not long after his arrival, he recruited two more legions, paying for them himself. In 57, he would recruit two more.

At a distance of two hundred years, a historian could describe the military situation calmly: "While this was going on in the city, Caesar found no hostility in Gaul, but everything was absolutely quiet. The state of peace, however, did not continue, but first one war broke out against him of its own accord, and then another was added, so that his greatest wish was fulfilled of waging war and winning success for the whole."¹

"Of its own accord" rather stretches a point. Caesar very consciously *chose* to be alarmed and take action when he heard that the Helvetians (a name we never translate, though we very reasonably could, as "Swiss") were restless in their lands north of lake Geneva and were packing up to move to the west of Gaul, quite a bit further out of Roman way than where they already lived. They presented

¹ Cassius Dio 38.31.

themselves to the new proconsul very respectfully, with no more than a bit of attitude, and asked his kind permission to make their way west just inside the boundaries of his province, crossing that narrow channel at Geneva and then making their way down the narrow and sometimes steep valley of the rising Rhone toward Lyon, where they would bend a bit northwards and continue toward the open, or at least seizable, land in the far west, around and north of Toulouse. In response, Caesar mildly requested a two weeks' delay to consider the issue. What he actually meant was that he needed time to move his troops into place and force the Helvetians to take a more difficult and more northerly route through the lands of the Sequani.

Of the many reasons Caesar had for opposing the Helvetians (e.g., ambition and greed), the one he chose to emphasize then and after was a crudely simple one: wild and wicked invaders had come toward Rome from Gaul fifty years earlier, so he had to act to make sure history did not repeat itself.

This first commentary tells the story of what happened next. Things don't go well for the Helvetians. A people in mass migration, young and old, male and female, moving at oxcart speed, are ambushed twice and quickly tamed and sent back where they came from. Even Caesar can't make this victory look challenging. Once defeated, the Helvetians, perhaps 100,000 in number, trudge wretchedly home, on short rations, to remake their lives in the ruins they had left behind. They disappear from Caesar's story until they supply a few troops to the great revolt recounted in the seventh commentary.

Beyond the Helvetians lay another enemy, conveniently queued up and almost waiting for Caesar—on his telling. Led by Ariovistus, whom Caesar had recognized the year earlier in his consulship as a friend of the Roman people, this was a warband that had elbowed across the Rhine to pillage and intrude upon the Sequani along the river south of Strasbourg. There are problems with that story, exacerbated by our hearing from Caesar that Ariovistus' friendship with the Roman people went so far as to put him in communication with Caesar's enemies back in Rome. To be sure, the speech that Caesar attributes to Ariovistus in 1.44 is a pretty fair rendition of an anti-

Caesar position that has a lot to be said for it. On Caesar's telling, Ariovistus was the wicked German enemy of Gallic peace, but we can see that he was also a player in a very domestic Roman political story. We could believe it if he thought that he had been led off on this expedition precisely so that a convenient barbarian could do him in. Of course, by the time Caesar's commentary tells this story for him back at Rome a few months later, Caesar's victory is a shot across the bow for those enemies, to know what they must reckon with. What is ostensibly a story about Germans is also a story about domestic Roman politics.

This battle story does not go quite as easily as the first with the Helvetians. Caesar's troops are not now chasing a people in migration but directly facing a serious army. Whatever actually happened, Caesar the writer takes the opportunity to present Caesar the dauntless commander, rallying his troops from sluggardly cowardice to the peak of combat energy with a dramatic speech. Well, he says, if you lot can't be counted on, at least the tenth legion will support me! (This is the first of four moments for the tenth legion in the commentaries where they appear as the favorite child.²) The troops rally; they win a decisive victory; and the dastardly Germans run pell-mell for the Rhine, tails between legs, just as one might hope. (This is the first place in the commentaries to observe that Caesar's ostensible knowledge sometimes runs a *little* further than perhaps it might reasonably have been expected to. Just who Ariovistus' followers really were and where they went to ground should be open to doubt.)

While Caesar made his way into Gaul, Rome remained a snakepit. The question of Egypt—how it would subserve Rome best—flared up again. The most lucrative solution was for king Ptolemy to be accepted as Rome's ruler of his own land and for him to pay substantial tribute. That was the deal that had been cut in Caesar's consulship, but a difficulty lay in Ptolemy's ability to produce the tribute. The simple Roman solution was enacted by Clodius, passing a bill to annex Cyprus to Roman authority, then sending everyone's enemy, Cato the Younger, as plenipotentiary to implement the subjugation.

² Tenth legion: 1.40–42, 2.21–25, 4.25 (Britain), 7.47–51.

Trapped by his citizenly loyalty, Cato departed on the mission. The purpose of the annexation was to seize Cyprus' resources to pay the king's promissory note.

With Caesar safely on his Gallic campaigns, Cicero was no longer really a threat. He could come back, tamed and harmless, could he not? Pompey began floating this idea during the summer. Ten years later, in the midst of civil war, Pompey would tell Cicero that it was Caesar's doing, strings pulled from Gaul, that made the movement for return go so slowly. Clodius, feeling the ground cut out from under him, sent his toughs into the streets and there was even talk that there had been an assassination plot against Pompey. Pompey wisely withdrew from public life and remained in his house—"mansion" or "compound" might be better words—for the rest of the year.

And so Caesar's first year in Gaul drew to a close. Probably in late September, he set his troops to winter among the Sequani, the people he had just supposedly rescued from Ariovistus' depredations, while he himself returned to Cisalpine Gaul. The Sequani will not be so much as mentioned again until the sixth commentary for the year 53, but they play their part here. By settling his troops among them, outside the official boundaries of the Roman province, Caesar indicated most clearly his expansionist aims. With Helvetian and German hash settled, there was no excuse for that choice except imperialism.

Observe now Caesar's dealings with the Haedui, powerful and influential in central Gaul, with a capital city called Bibracte not far from modern Autun in Burgundy. They had "friended" (as we now say) the Helvetians, but washed their hands of them as they went down to disaster. Then most importantly it was they who put Caesar on the warpath against Ariovistus. The story of the threat to Gallic stability by the German wild men is all theirs. When all is done for Caesar, after many vicissitudes, the Haedui will prove to be doing just fine. Caesar never lets on that he knows their game.

On October 29, Pompey arranged for eight tribunes to bring forward a vote on Cicero's recall, but it was vetoed by one of the

other two. Pompey then sent Sestius to Caesar to get his approval for the recall, but he still replied carefully, observing that it wouldn't help relations between Pompey and Caesar for Cicero to come back on fire for vindication. The matter would string on for most of another year.