

Caesar's Corny Commentaries: Provisions as Power in *The Gallic War*

"Famine makes greater havoc in an army than the enemy, and is more terrible than the sword." (Vegetius, *Rei Militaris Instituta*, 3.3.1)

As Rome's armies set out on wars of conquest and pacification, famine became one of Rome's greatest fears, but also its harshest tool. Hunger took a significant hold on the Roman conception of military matters. In the mad rage that followed the breach of Jerusalem's last walls, Josephus attributes a curious turn of pity to the soldiers on behalf of those who died of hunger, before they return to skewering helpless men, women and children en masse (BJ 6.402). Similarly, Julius Caesar describes the Gallic War in terms of the procurement and management of corn. Though the Roman siege engines took several Gallic camps, these were but episodic victories, whereas the legions' domination of hunger reigned throughout. Caesar's flashy moments in the heat of battle garner the most attention in discussions of his self-aggrandizement in *The Gallic War*. However, Caesar constructs his narrative so that the interplay of food and famine show that his victories and ultimately, the pacification of Gaul, relied on his superior ability to control the Gallic food supply.

The prevalence of Caesar's references to corn within such a carefully constructed work indicates the importance of the subject not only to the author, but also to his audience. These references, laconic but often pregnant descriptions of how the various armies secured food (or failed to), permeate his account of the war. Few units set out before Caesar has guaranteed their corn supply. Moreover, the basic justification for his attack of the Helvetii – the threat to the Province – rests on the "important, corn-producing areas" within it (BG 1.10).¹ The famously sparse prose of Caesar does not leave room for extraneous elucidations of esoteric logistical concerns. Rather, the inclusion of these details indicates the broad acknowledgement of the significant well-managed victuals exercised in a well-managed army. By its very repetition, provisioning becomes a rhetorical device that demonstrates Caesar's superior military competence in an area of recognized importance outside of active warfare. As the legionnaires *qua* construction workers feature prominently on Trajan's column to illustrate the fundamentality of tasks besides sword-swinging to the outcome of campaigns,² so do Caesar's corn discussions show his mastery over all the arts of a conqueror.

Caesar uses hunger to demonstrate not only military inferiority, but also lack of civilization among his foes, weaving it into the complex tapestry of ethnography in his work. His first campaign ends when the Helvetii capitulate not to his prowess of arms, but to their own stomachs (BG 1.27). The plight of this forlorn vestige of the once proud tribe contrasts with the proud mustering of the German Suebi in their home country. Caesar's plan to starve them by drawing the local cattle from the fields relies on his consideration that these "ignorant barbarians, would be affected by the lack of food supplies" (BG 6.10). Such reasoning resounds in Caesar's historiographic successors, and even in modern

¹ Quotations from Caesar, *The Gallic War*, trans. Carolyn Hammond (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

² J.E. Lendon, *Soldiers and Ghosts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 250-1. (cf. photograph 245-6).

sources. Adrian Keith Goldsworthy uses the Germans' ignorant oversight of carrying supplies, revealed in Tacitus' *Germanicus*, to support his general thesis that they could not mount a guerilla war against Rome.³ Despite such subsequent legitimization of his assertion, Caesar's assumption fails to yield results, forcing him to mask the problematic development with the largest digression of his book – fittingly, an ethnography. When Caesar returns to his German foes (BG 6.29), it is he, not they, who is strapped for food. That he uses his anxiety about the corn supplies to justify his retreat reveals the extent to which such concern implied strong leadership. He excuses his own failure to provision by stating that, “the Germans hardly practice agriculture” (*Ibid.*), another thrust at their lack of civilization.

As he used poor provisioning to indicate barbarism, so did Caesar use the way that Roman commanders dealt with dearth to define an image of strong leadership and place himself within it. Caesar repeatedly renders occurrences as *exemplum*, exhibiting two alternative opinions indicating by favorable or disastrous outcomes, which was the proper path to take.⁴ At 5.28-9, Sabinus and Cotta, joint commanders in a winter camp, argue over whether they should abandon the isolated fortifications or stay to withstand the assault threatened by the Gallic chief Ambiorix. Caesar's acknowledged absence from the scene, and the death of its witnesses, attest to the argument's nature as a rhetorical construction. Caesar makes hunger the symbolic seal on Cotta's argument, placing it at the end of his speech. This does not persuade Sabinus or the right-minded centurions, “but [Cotta] raised his voice so that a large number of soldiers could hear him.” This demagoguery prevails, but entails a brutal massacre. The demagogue's destruction represents a theme common among ancient historians from Thucydides to Livy, but the capitulation to the fear of hunger, a bodily desire, offends a particularly Roman mentality.

The solution, however, was not dreaded starvation, but action. Severus Galba, faced with a similar situation, follows his centurion in a sortie that leads to an astounding victory (BG 3.3-6). Moreover, when Caesar's unsuccessful stratagem of starving an advancing army came crashing back in his face during his climactic campaign against Vercingetorix, his decisive response further enhanced the image he sought to construct. This Gallic leader's complex strategy combining ‘slash and burn’ defense, coupled with an offensive system of ambushes (cf. 7.15, 7.65) puts Caesar in a dire predicament. In 7.55 he reveals how the perfidious Aedui leaders capture “all [Caesar's] Gallic hostages, his corn, his funds, his own baggage and that of the army,” destroying what corn they could not carry. Like the Helvetii mentioned above, the Romans have lost their supplies to the enemy, but they do not capitulate. Rather, this hyperbolized description of their losses serves to make his troops' successful extrication more glorious.

When, during the seventh book, the dining tables have inexplicably turned against the Gauls, Caesar completes his complementary depictions of the Gauls' barbarism and his personal brilliance in the field. Attempting to lift the siege of Avaricum, Vercingetorix finds himself without food (7.18). Caesar gives no justification for this, despite the fact that Vercingetorix controls the very lands that Caesar's troops are trying to forage, which must therefore be plentiful with corn. A literalist explanation

³ Andrew Keith Goldsworthy, *The Roman Army at War 100 BC - AD 200* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 46. Contrasting Caesar's concern about Gallic tactical maneuvering (BG 5.15), Goldsworthy notes, “In any study of Rome's opponents, it immediately becomes clear that these were markedly inferior in organization, discipline and tactics to the Roman army,” making guerilla war the only possibility of success, 41.

⁴ Cf. 6.40 for another example. This narrative tool would resound in Livy's history,

could explore Vercingetorix's unwillingness to exact the same type of tribute from his countrymen, or his inability to establish a system sophisticated enough to effect it. On the other hand, living off the people is precisely the expectation that Caesar ascribes to the Gallic commander. Therefore, one may better interpret their shortage as a rhetorical exigency, foreshadowing the grim situation at Alisia.

The narrative at Alisia presents several contradictions that require an interpretation deeper than that of Gallic barbarism to comprehend Caesar's meaning. Caesar clearly intends a connection when, at 7.71, he identifies the Gallic food supply as sufficient for 30 days, and then at 7.74, states that he gathered 30 days of food for his camp. The Gauls run out of food before he does, despite the fact that he states that by rationing, the food could even have lasted longer. A literalist interpretation would argue that his sources were mistaken, or perhaps even that the Gauls were incapable of rationing. Rationing constituted an attribute of Roman military administration unusual even among the army's most refined foes, who often required their troops to acquire their own food,⁵ and therefore such a system would be inconsistent with the barbarism of the Gauls. Conversely, one could argue that the crisis is a mere literary device to permit the speech of Critognatus. In the context of Caesar's narrative, however, this event represents the pivotal episode of the longest book. Caesar presents his opponent as capable of systematized distribution of food in order to elevate him above the barbarous practices of his people, forging a suitable foe by utilizing the same framework he has employed for self-aggrandizement throughout.

Few examples of Caesar's rhetorical acumen as potent as Critognatus' speech (BG 7.71) still remain, and so it has been the center of many debates about his work.⁶ In the midst of a tirade about the Gaul's need to fight for its freedom, many strangely Roman devices emerge.⁷ Stranger still, however, and the subject of most commentary, is the reference to cannibalism. Despite his sharp ethnic distinctions, Caesar makes no other reference to the barbarism of the Gauls – or the Germans for that matter – as being so deplorable that they would consider eating each other. Rather, the speech performs a rhetorical function in the narrative to portray the absolute desperation in the camp, of which Caesar is the cause. Caesar's siege has been so complete, his domination of access to food so dominant, that these relatively civilized people are considering eating their weak. Caesar, critically, does not take the town by force. The crucial victory of his narrative is delivered to him from the starving hands of his most terrible foe.

Retaining the power of distribution gave Caesar control over both his own troops, and dependant peoples. Rationing allowed Caesar to assume the role of patron, on whom his troops relied for their basic needs. The impact this loyalty may have had on later political developments is outside the scope of this essay, but within *The Gallic War*, the proconsul took a clear interest in augmenting this image by giving his narrated self an active role in gathering the corn supply. Reprimanding his subordinates' presumption in refusing his order to follow Ariovistus, he emphasizes that any anxiety over corn supplies would have to be "pretended" unless they doubted Caesar's "commitment" (1.40). Throughout the conquest, he exercises this position on subject peoples to varied effect. The women of the Mandubii who flee to his mercy and his food stores from Alesia, receive only his snub (BG 7.78).

⁵ Jonathan Roth, *The Logistics of the Roman Army at War (264 B.C.-A.D. 235)*, (Boston: BRILL, 1999), 14.

⁶ Andrew M. Riggs *Caesar in Gaul and Rome: War in Words* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2006), 109-110.

⁷ *Ibid.*

On the other hand, after losing their supplies to Caesar's troops, the remainder of the once-proud Helvetii have no option but to accept Caesar's offer to return to their ravaged home and accept the food he orders the Allobroges to deliver (BG 1.28). Caesar's generosity does not extend to those who plead for it, only to those who submit to it – from the former he gains a dependent tribe, from the latter, a slew of dependents.

The order to the Allobroges, meanwhile, demonstrates another way in which he utilized food as a mechanism of control. The Allobroges have a questionable position in relation to Rome at the time of writing, expressed in his own and Cicero's evaluations of them.⁸ Thus, when he describes potential perils to their welfare (1.28), he is constructing a relationship in which they depend on his protection, and in ordering the distribution of their corn supplies, he is exerting control over this fundamental aspect of their society to demonstrate – both to them and to his audience – that he can. This type of instilled dependency arises on a more profound level in Caesar's dealings with the Aedui. Caesar's emphasizes their power, but tries to prove that this power derives and depends on his will (cf. BG 5.55).

The actual situation is more precarious – he often seems to hide a more balanced distribution of power beneath a veneer of prose. His very vulnerability to Vercingetorix's plan results from his inability to extract corn from the Aedui (BG 7.17), forcing him to resort to the foraging parties that the rebel leader targets. For a practice described as relatively rare,⁹ Caesar's troops do a lot of foraging. This may well indicate that his grip on Gaul was not as tight as he would have his reader believe. However, foraging was not a mere act of surrender to unfavorable circumstances.

If the commanders could subject peoples through the management of their food resources, then the legionnaires were apt tools with which to do it. The implements carried by the legionnaire included not only javelins, swords and weapons typically associated with war, but if we presume continuity from Caesar's age to Josephus, equipment to reap the sown lands of the conquered (BJ 3.95). The acquisition of comestibles occupied an entire legion (BG 4.32) not only because it was a massive undertaking,¹⁰ but also because it wreaked great enough havoc on the population to incite resistance. Caesar's legions took their corn and cattle directly from the fields of farmers who had raised it, and the general makes it known that, in Gaul, these farmers were the same men who would form the armies that opposed such forced requisitions (BG 5.1). Indeed, Caesar makes little distinction between foraging or requisitioning and simple pillaging (cf. BG 8.4). At 6.43, Caesar is explicit – his army, whose swords could not reach the Eburones hiding in the forest, could yet get them in the gut; “huge numbers of pack animals and people” engaged in the onslaught of offensive eating, whose destruction ensured that “any people at present in hiding seem likely to die from lack of provisions.” Thus did Caesar overcome the terrain, and for this reason guerrilla warfare was ineffectual.

As the Gallic War progressed, the campaign season grew more and more irrelevant to determining when Caesar's legions took the fields. Winter campaigns accompanied the increasingly permanent winter camps, for these increasingly became the target of revolts. The Gallic soldiers who

⁸ Jane F. Gardner “The ‘Gallic Menace’ in Caesar’s Propaganda” *Greece & Rome*, 2nd Ser., Vol. 30, No. 2, Oct., 1983, (181-189), 182.

⁹ Roth, 130.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 130-2.

nearly overcame Quintus Cicero's northern camp insisted: "they were not of a mind to refuse anything except the provision of winter quartering, which they did not wish to become a fixed practice" (BG 5.41). The camps were not innocent edifices converted into symbols of oppression by the oppressed, but actively oppressive. In addition, the care he takes in describing his distribution of his troops across the country after a poor harvest draws attention to the pressure that these camps exert on the surrounding region (5.24). By purposely sending his troops to winter in areas that had given him the most opposition in the summer (BG 3.29), he uses the camps to punish and quell the populace. The pressure of Roman domination was hardest felt in the winter, but also hardest pressed. That the Carnutes' winter invasion should target "the Roman knight who presided over the corn supply on Caesar's orders" (BG 7.3) garners no surprise – he was the embodiment of Caesar's domination.

Lendon describes Greek warfare as a struggle between the epic virtues espoused in the *Iliad*;¹¹ an analysis of the Roman art of generalship requires a similar division. Caesar proclaims that the sight of him in battle inspired his troops, and the awareness of his oversight infused his men with the will to accomplish deeds brave and great (BG 2.25). His audience surely applauded this majestic dominance, as have centuries of classicists since. However, his mastery of logistics, particularly provisioning, bore equal responsibility for his success in defeating the Gauls, and more for initiating their transformation from conquered peoples to subjects of an Imperial province. This ability to dominate made the Consul into the first man in Rome. Caesar, therefore, made sure his readers knew that he stood behind the Roman triumph over the 'Belly Gallico.'

Dan Ruppel

¹¹ Lendon, 157-8.

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