

CAESAR, THE GERMANI, AND ROME:  
ETHNOGRAPHY AND POLITICS IN  
THE *DE BELLO GALLICO*

At the opening of *De bello Gallico* Caesar gives a description of hostile tribes which is surprisingly positive. They are said to be uncivilized and restless, as we might expect. But he does not judge these characteristics negatively. Rather, he contrasts them favourably with the ‘effeminacy’ of Gaul allies (1, 1):

Horum omnium fortissimi sunt Belgae, propterea quod a cultu atque humanitate provinciae longissime absunt, minimeque ad eos mercatores saepe commeant atque ea quae ad effeminandos animos pertinent important, proximique sunt Germanis, qui trans Rhenum incolunt, quibuscum continenter bellum gerunt. Qua de causa Helvetii quoque reliquos Gallos virtute praecedunt, quod fere cotidianis proeliis cum Germanis contendunt.

Of all these people [the inhabitants of Gaul] the Belgae are the most courageous, because they are farthest removed from the refinement and civilization of [our] province, and are least often visited by merchants introducing those goods that make men’s spirits effeminate, and also because they are the nearest to the Germani dwelling beyond the Rhine, with whom they are continuously at war. For the same reason the Helvetii too excel the rest of the Gauls in manliness, since they contend with the Germani in almost daily battles.

At first glance, we might suppose that we can make short work of this passage. Caesar is simply saying that the hostile tribes are a powerful threat that the Gaul allies could not handle on their own, and a suitably glorious enemy for him.

However, things are not so simple. Caesar also gives an explanation of the putative state of affairs he describes, and says that the enemy’s manliness (*virtus*) is due to their lack of contact with Roman civilization. By giving this explanation, which is not required either by his goal of justifying Roman intervention or enhancing his own glory, Caesar seems to be making a general claim about civilization. What is the point of this addition and the criticism of civilization it implies?

This paper will try to answer this question. I will argue that this passage and others like it throw light on Caesar's views concerning society and civilization. Here, in fact, Caesar is using his enemies as a way of reflecting on an alternative and more valuable model for Rome itself.

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As indicated in my introduction, commentators have tended to think that the opening of the work says nothing of particular interest about Caesar. Two arguments have been put forward to the effect that it does not. The first argument is that Caesar's point about civilization being a source of corruption is not Caesar's, but an ethnographic *topos*, that of the so-called noble savage, which he takes over from Greek sources without thought.<sup>1</sup> The second argument is that Caesar's point, though perhaps not just a careless borrowing from his sources, merely serves the purpose of playing up the threat posed by his enemies.<sup>2</sup>

The first argument does not bear scrutiny. To begin with, it rests on the assumption that Latin authors are unintelligent translators of the Greeks. This assumption is both implausible in general and still more in this particular case. Caesar is the first author known to identify the Germani as an ethnic group distinct from the Gauls.<sup>3</sup> While the idea that savages are noble is not new, it is Caesar's choice to employ it in his representation of the Germani, and we need to explain why he made this choice. Indeed, more than this, as I will show in the next section, Caesar develops the

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<sup>1</sup> G. Walser, *Caesar und die Germanen: Studien zur politischen Tendenz römischer Feldzugsberichte* (Wiesbaden 1956) 334–339; J. J. Tierney, "The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius", *Proc. Royal Irish Academy* 60 (1969) 212–217; A. Lund, *Zum Germanenbild der Römer: eine Einführung in die antike Ethnographie* (Heidelberg 1990) 63–66. They identify Posidonius as a source. A. O. Lovejoy, G. Boas, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (New York 1965) provide a sample of ancient 'primitivistic' texts.

<sup>2</sup> E. Polomé, "César et les croyances germaniques", in: D. Poli (ed.), *La cultura in Cesare* (Rome 1993) 3–16; J. Barlow, "Noble Gauls and their Other in Caesar's Propaganda", in: K. Welch, A. Powell (eds.), *Julius Caesar as Artful Reporter* (London 1998) 157–158; C. Torigian, "The Logos of Caesar's *Bellum Gallicum*", in: Welch, Powell, *op.cit.*, 49–50.

<sup>3</sup> Posidonius is the only known earlier author who talks of Germani, but he failed to distinguish them from the Gauls: D. Timpe, "Die germanische Agrarverfassung nach den Berichten Caesars und Tacitus", in: V. H. Beck (ed.), *Untersuchung zur eisenzeitlichen und frühmittelalterlichen Flur in Mitteleuropa und ihrer Nutzung* (Göttingen 1979) 20–21; I. G. Kidd, *Posidonius, 2nd volume: the Commentary* (Cambridge 1988) 323–326; A. M. Riggsby, *Caesar in Gaul and Rome* (Austin, Texas 2006) 50–51.

noble-savage idea in a new and creative way, well beyond any pre-existing literary *topos*, and this calls out for explanation.

Moreover, the source-critical argument neglects to take account of an important feature of our text. Caesar's words imply a criticism not of civilization in general, but of Roman civilization in particular, in a way that jars in several respects with what a Roman audience might have expected him to write.

Caesar lists three factors that make hostile tribes better warriors than Roman allies: (1) They are distant from the 'refinement and civilization' (*cultus atque humanitas*) of '[our] province'. (2) They are not visited by merchants who bring wares that 'make men's spirits effeminate' (*effeminare animos*). (3) They absorb *virtus* through interaction with the Germani dwelling east of the Rhine.

As regards (1), Caesar does not just say that hostile tribes are distant from Gallia Narbonensis. He says that they are distant from its *cultus atque humanitas*. Caesar's prose is usually poor of rhetorical figures, and his making use of a metonymy here suggests deliberate emphasis. By his day *humanitas* has an unambiguously positive connotation: one is not properly human if one does not have a certain standard of good breeding.<sup>4</sup> Yet Caesar has *cultus atque humanitas* responsible for his Gaul allies' inaptness to fight, thus using these terms in a derogatory way.<sup>5</sup> This interpretation gains support from his asymmetric use of language. The antonym of *humanitas* is *feritas*. However, when Caesar is to refer to the tribes that do not possess *humanitas*, he does not attribute *feritas* to them, but rather *fortitudo* (in the adjectival form *fortissimi*) and *virtus*.<sup>6</sup> Both terms are positive in their connotations. This is the first way in which what Caesar has written is jarring.

Next note that the expression 'make men's spirit effeminate', once again a rhetorical figure, in (2). By 'effeminacy', the antonym of *virtus*,

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<sup>4</sup> I. Heinemann, "Humanitas", *RE* Supplb. 5 (1931) 282–310; D. Gagliardi, "Il concetto di *humanitas* da Terenzio a Cicerone. Appunti per una storia dell'umanesimo romano", *P&I* 7 (1965) 187–198; V. R. Giustiniani, "Homo, Humanus, and the Meanings of 'Humanism'", *JHI* 46 (1985) 167–195.

<sup>5</sup> A comparable criticism of *humanitas* is in Tacitus, *Agr.* 21. The term has a positive connotation in Caesar's presentation of one of his legate as *adulescens summa virtute et humanitate* at 1, 47, but the expression is formulaic. A closer parallel is, then, at 4, 3: the Ubii, a German tribe settled nearby Gaul and more exposed to trade, are *humaniores* than the rest of the Germani. Similarly at 5, 14 Britons settled near the coast are *humanissimi*.

<sup>6</sup> The Germani are *homines feri ac barbari* at 1, 33, but see below my observation concerning the difference portraits Caesar offers of the Germani in the ethnographic parts and the narrative respectively.

Caesar indicates a physical and moral softening which he ties to *luxuria*, self-indulgence,<sup>7</sup> and which, as it happens, goes together with the *cultus atque humanitas* previously attributed to Romanised Gauls. Foreign merchants are held to be responsible. But the ultimate responsibility lies with the Romans, who opened up Gaul to civilization, and who had already undergone this softening. As M. Griffin puts it: “When Caesar writes, ‘The Belgae [...] effeminacy’, we know that he is thinking of the effect of those amenities and luxuries on the Romans themselves”.<sup>8</sup> Thus the antonomasia ‘Province’ (*provincia*) for Gallia Narbonensis is not just a variant for the plain geographical indication, but is intended to emphasise the role of Romanization as a source of decadence.

The ‘effeminacy’ of civilized Gauls is contrasted with the *fortitudo* of hostile tribes, who are neither neighbouring Gallia Narbonensis nor visited by merchants. In (3) Caesar gives a positive reason for their being superior to Romanised Gauls, namely their proximity to the Germani’s tribes dwelling east of the Rhine. Thus Germania provides a second pole, equal but opposite to Rome. Rome spreads ‘effeminacy’, while Germania spreads *virtus* by forcing its neighbours to permanent warfare. Caesar is not the first Latin author to attribute *virtus* to non-Romans,<sup>9</sup> but no one else has gone so far as to imply that barbarians might be superior to the Romans in respect of it.

In the opening of the work Caesar does not tell us why the Germani are such remarkable champions of *virtus*. He will do so in a later digression (6, 21–24 *passim*). Here he says that they are trained from boyhood to endure toil and hardship (*student labori et duritiae*), and that they abide in a condition of want, poverty and suffering (*inopia, egestas, patientia*).

At the end of this digression he adds that the Gauls also possessed *virtus* before they came into contact with Rome, and that those of them who

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<sup>7</sup> See 4, 2 and Caesar’s paraphrase of the same idea at 2, 15.

<sup>8</sup> M. Griffin, “*Iure Plectimur: The Roman Critique of Roman Imperialism*”, in: T. C. Brennan, H. I. Flower (eds.), *East and West* (Cambridge, Mass. 2008) 85–111. Could Caesar be saying that Rome is a source of other people’s corruption, without being itself corrupt? After all, this is what Tacitus says in the passage referred to in note 5. But, first, Tacitus does think that Rome is itself corrupt. Secondly, there is plenty of evidence that first-century BC Rome was seen as corrupt by the Latin authors themselves (e. g. Sallust).

<sup>9</sup> M. A. McDonnell, *Roman Manliness: Virtus and the Roman Republic* (Cambridge 2006) 160–161; see also W. V. Harris, “Can Enemies too Be Brave?”, in: M. G. Angeli Bertinelli, A. Donati (eds.) *Il cittadino, lo straniero, il barbaro, fra integrazione ed emarginazione nell’antichità* (Rome 2005) 465–472. Caesar in *BG* attributes *virtus* thirty-one times to individual barbarians or groups of them, still more often than to Romans (figures from McDonnell, *op. cit.*, 302 n. 28).

have been spared from the contamination, a tribe called Volcae Tectosages, still do. Furthermore, the frugal lifestyle of these Volcae Tectosages not only enable them to excel in *virtus*, but also in civic virtue, *iustitia*. To the extent that their lifestyle is the same as the Germani's, it follows that the Germani too excel in *iustitia*. Indeed justice, in the form of social justice, is an essential ingredient of the picture Caesar has just drawn of their system in a part of the digression on which I will comment shortly.

Thus Caesar's description of the Germani in this ethnographic digression is unconditionally favourable. It is not so if we look at the *De bello Gallico* as a whole, including the narrative. But this consideration only makes it all the more remarkable that no reference to negative features is found in the ethnography.<sup>10</sup>

This unconditionally favourable character, together with the fact that the subject is an entire *natio*, not an individual, sharply distinguishes Caesar's picture of the Germani from the 'mixed' portraits that combine negative and positive features, which Latin historians are sometimes found giving of negative heroes, both Roman (e. g. Sulla or Catilina) and Barbarian (Hannibal).<sup>11</sup>

In fact, the description Caesar gives of the Germani is not only favourable, but also idealized. This has induced scholars to explain it away as voicing a *topos* concerning primitive societies, to which Caesar conforms without thought and conviction. From my examination of the opening of the work, however, it has emerged that Caesar's use of this *topos* is actually carefully thought over and perhaps even deliberately provocative. I shall explore the possibility that he appropriates it and, as we shall see, develops it in a creative way, for conveying his idea of what a well-functioning society ought to be like.

What, then, of the rhetorical argument? This can be dealt with much more briefly. According to this argument, since Caesar's goal is to defend his campaign and to magnify his army and himself, his portrait of hostile

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<sup>10</sup> There is no hint that Caesar condemns the Germani's practice of training the youth by having them pillage neighbouring villages (6, 23). Comparable practices in Sparta provide an antecedent. Tacitus' picture of the Germani is more nuanced (*Germ.* 4, 3; cf. 26, 2; 45, 4), and yet Tacitus too identifies them as bearers of positive values (E. O'Gorman, "No Place like Rome: Identity and Difference in the *Germania* of Tacitus", *Ramus* 22 [1993] 146–149). Caesar's attribution of fierceness and treachery to the Germani in the narrative at 1, 33 is instrumental and required to justify controversial aspects of his campaign.

<sup>11</sup> A. La Penna, "Il ritratto 'paradossale' da Silla a Petronio", *RFIC* 104 (1976) 270–293, discusses this style of portraying individual enemies, which he describes as 'paradoxical'.

tribes as noble savages should not be read in isolation, but rather as contributing to his representation of them as formidable enemies.<sup>12</sup> I have already admitted that Caesar might have this kind of agenda in mind. But did he need to have them noble in order to have them dangerous?

Caesar wrote a treatise *De analogia*, in which he argued the thesis that “the choice of words is the fountain-head of eloquence” (Cic. *Brut.* 153). If he had meant to say that his enemies are *iracundi*, *furiosi*, *temerarii* or the like due to their *feritas*, he would have used these words. Seneca, *De ira* 2, 15, for one, sharply distinguishes *fortitudo*, which he denies to the Germani, from *audacia* and *temeritas*, which in his view they have in common with animals.

The reason why commentators are reluctant to allow that Caesar actually meant what he writes is perhaps the following. The noble savage is a nice subject to write verses about or to provide intellectual fodder, but Caesar is neither poet nor philosopher, but politician. So, the line of thought goes, he cannot seriously claim, let alone believe, that.

But Caesar is, after all, to all appearances, fond of his Germani. He praises not only their *virtus*, but their life system as a whole. And in fact this commitment to use of the idea of the noble savage need not be ‘philosophical’ or ‘poetic’. To start with, there are laudatory references to endurance of hardship (*duritia*) and commitment to toil (*labor*) elsewhere in Caesar’s own *oeuvre* and in anecdotes about him (Plut. *Caes.* 17; Athen. 6, 273 b). Further, endurance of hardship is characteristic of Marius, his military and political hero (Sall. *Iug.* 100).

Indeed, these values are hardly idiosyncratically Caesarian. They are an integral part of the ideology of an influential tradition stemming from Cato the Elder, who identified *duritia* and *industria* (= *labor*), together with *parsimonia* (somewhat comparable with the Germani’s *inopia*, *egestas*, *patientia*) as the cornerstones of a healthy education (Cat. F. 128 and F. 17 on *labor*). In this sense, then, Caesar’s Germani provide a living *exemplum* of a character type that embodies widely endorsed virtues, and his admiration for their system of life can be regarded as a variant of Cato’s *laus temporis acti*.

We are entitled, then, at least to see how far we can get if we seek a reflection of Caesarian themes in his use of the idea of the Germani. For the remainder of this paper, then, I will set myself to reconstructing these themes.

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<sup>12</sup> McDonnell (n. 9) 303; Harris (n. 9); Barlow (n. 2) 158. See also Riggsby (n. 3) 68–70, whose interpretation is, however, more elaborate.

### Farming is anti-social

I have suggested that Caesar's Germani provide a living *exemplum* of the same character type of ideal man as Cato's warrior-farmers. There is, however, a substantial difference between Caesar's and Cato's instantiations of this character type of ideal man. Not only do these instantiations carry so to speak a different passport, but also, above all, they have a different job. Cato's ideal type works the land. Caesar's Germani, by contrast, fight and hunt, but go in for agriculture very little, if at all.

If Caesar had wished to hint at a parallelism between his Germani and Cato's warrior-farmers, we would have expected him to play down this difference. But in fact he is keen to emphasise it, with the sentence *agri culturae non student* opening his account of the economy of the Germani (6, 22 *init.*):

*Agri culturae non student, maiorque pars eorum victus in lacte, caseo, carne consistit. Neque quisquam agri modum certum aut fines habet proprios; sed magistratus ac principes in annos singulos gentibus cognationibusque hominum, qui una coierunt, quantum et quo loco visum est agri attribuunt atque anno post alio transire cogunt.*

They show no interest in agriculture, and the greater part of their food consists of milk, cheese, and meat; nor has any one a fixed quantity of land or his own individual limits; but the magistrates and the chiefs (*magistratus ac principes*) each year assign to the clans and the groups of kinsmen who have assembled together as much land as, and in the place in which, they think proper, and the year after compel them to move elsewhere.

In addition to lack of interest in farming, Caesar says that the Germani have implemented a form of communal land-ownership. Archaeology lends no support to his report of a difference in the economies west and east of the Rhine,<sup>13</sup> and while there was indeed a less developed civilization to the north, the so-called Jastorf culture,<sup>14</sup> there is no evidence that this other civilization had a social organisation of the sort Caesar reports.

The picture he draws is, rather, a generalization from his account of the war-economy system of the Suebi at 4, 1.<sup>15</sup> However, there is a difference here too. The Suebi are "the most warlike tribe of all the Germani" (*ibidem*),

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<sup>13</sup> M. Rambaud, *L'art de la deformation historique dans les commentaires de Cesar* (Paris 1953) 335; Timpe (n. 3) 13; P. S. Wells, *The Barbarians Speak* (Princeton 1999) 113–114.

<sup>14</sup> Wells (n. 13) 114.

<sup>15</sup> Rambaud (n. 13) 335; Timpe (n. 3) 18; Lund (n. 1) 63; Riggsby (n. 3) 60.

and hence, we would think, the least fond of farming. Yet according to Caesar they do not neglect this activity even in wartime. We would assume that less warlike Germani tribes would pursue it on a larger scale. By contrast, Caesar does not only extend the Suebi's system to the Germani as a whole, regardless of any ongoing war in which they might be engaged, but he also emphatically states that they show no interest in agriculture, which is not said of the Suebi themselves.

According to the mainstream interpretation, there is nothing remarkable here: the system Caesar attributes to the Germani as a whole is the reflection of the stereotype of a primitive society, and, therefore, he cannot but have them unfamiliar with the economy characteristic of civilization.<sup>16</sup> But there is a difference between Caesar's Germani and the stereotypical noble savage. To start with, the noble savage does not usually choose to be such. Naivety and simple-mindedness are a part of the cliché. Accordingly, as soon as the savage comes in contact with civilization, he loses his nobility at once.<sup>17</sup> Caesar's Germani, by contrast, do not only choose to live in the way they live (as the Nervii and the Suebes also do in *BG*, albeit with reference to individual items only), but, still more than this, give an elaborate argument to the effect that it is only by adopting their system that *virtus* can be preserved (6, 22 *fin.*):

Eius re multas adferunt causas: ne adsidua consuetudine capti studium belli gerendi agri cultura commutent; ne latos fines parare studeant potentioresque humiliores possessionibus expellant; ne accuratius ad frigora atque aestus vitandos aedificent; ne qua oriatur pecuniae cupiditas, qua ex re factiones dissensionisque nascuntur; ut animi aequitate plebem contineant, cum suas quisque opes cum potentissimis aequari videat.

For this enactment [of communal land ownership and annual rotation] they put forward many reasons: the fear that they may be tempted by continuous association to substitute agriculture for their warrior zeal; that they may become zealous for the acquisition of broader estates, and so the more powerful may drive the lower sort from their possessions; that they may construct their houses with too great a desire to avoid cold and heat; that some passion for wealth may spring up, from which cause divisions and discords arise; it is their aim to keep common people under control by being fair to them, when each man sees his own conditions made equal to those of the more wealthy.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Lund (n. 1) 63–66.

<sup>17</sup> Strabo 7, 301, referring to the Scythians. The Medians at Hdt. 9, 122 choose to avoid a comfortable life, but they are neither noble savages nor in a state of primitiveness.

<sup>18</sup> There is a word play between *aequitate animi* as indicating the people's contented state of mind, and the fairness by which their *magistratus ac principes* achieve this goal by making the conditions of life of both the rich and the poor equal (*aequari*).

As the argument goes, agriculture and private property bring about socially negative consequences that wise political leadership would wish to prevent.

There is no parallel for such argument in the ethnographic tradition,<sup>19</sup> and the list of consequences mentioned (concentration of land in the hands of a few people, greed of the *potentiores*, civil discord, social pressure of the *plebs* for a redistribution of wealth) recalls the situation of contemporary Rome so closely that none of Caesar's Roman readers could fail to spot an allusion.<sup>20</sup>

Of course, the Germani themselves hardly bothered about, or even knew of, the social problems of contemporary Rome. They are hardly the authors of the argument Caesar attributes to them. Caesar himself is, and his alluding to the situation in Rome provides yet another argument against the hypothesis that he is merely restating, without thought, a literary *topos*. He did think about it. But what is the point of this allusion?

Key is the fact that Caesar's allusive description of the crisis of contemporary Rome is not a neutral description, but a politically oriented interpretation: this crisis is due to the greed of large land-owners and to the incapability, or unwillingness, of the political leadership to restrain them. Could it be that he thereby intended to contribute to an ongoing debate?

The agrarian question was a major issue in Caesar's day, with the politicians conventionally labelled as *populares* (henceforth simply *populares*) urging a redistribution of land, and the *optimates* defending the *status quo*. The goal Caesar's Germani pursue, that of social and economic justice, agrees with that which the *populares* claimed to be pursuing. However, while the *populares* proposed to achieve this goal by returning to the old system of small land-ownership, it is a corollary of the Germani argument that the crisis Rome faces is the actualisation of latent potentialities that Rome's agricultural model carried from the beginning. It follows that the *popularis* proposal of returning to small land-ownership is not a remedy, but a way of perpetuating problems.

It is tempting, then, to interpret this argument as signalling Caesar's dissatisfaction with the policy of the *popularis* tradition, and, beyond that, with Cato's ideology of farming. Cato at *Pr.* 3–4 claims that farming and nothing else produces good citizens and soldiers, and that profit from agriculture is legitimate and causes no social resentment, whereas the

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<sup>19</sup> Riggsby (n. 3) 68.

<sup>20</sup> Nor, for that matter, have at least some commentators failed to spot the allusion; cf. R. von Pöhlmann, *Geschichte der sozialen Frage und des Sozialismus in der antiken Welt* II (Munich 1925) 451; Walser (n. 1) 60; Timpe (n. 3) 25. It is unfortunate that no one of them went further.

merchant is greedy, and hence a threat to society.<sup>21</sup> Caesar's Germani do not only make the opposite point that farming undermines one's warlike attitude, but also that it encourages greed and thereby civil discord, just like trading in Cato's view. The polemical echo is hardly a matter of coincidence.

While it is easy to detect a criticism of established patterns of Roman political thought, it is, by contrast, less easy to assess what positive point Caesar is getting at. Caesar himself was a leading *popularis*, and, as a consul, introduced an agrarian bill in line with the traditional policy of this tradition. Neither abolition of agriculture nor of land-ownership were items on his agenda. Thus there is a gap between his construal of this fictional society and his actual policy. How shall we deal with it?

In the remainder of this paper I will first take a closer look at the Germani fictional society, and then argue that Caesar's construal of this society is in keeping with aspects of his own policy and/or political rhetoric.

### The Germani society reassessed

The system that Caesar attributes to the Germani is usually interpreted as a form of nomadic communism. This is not right. There is no private land-ownership among them, and yet they are annually assigned a portion of land for private use. Private use of land, even if it is by clans rather than individuals, constitutes a departure from the *topos* of primitive communism, which envisages no boundaries whatsoever. Relatedly, there is also a departure from the idea of nomadism. Caesar does not say that the Germani have no stable territory, but, rather, that they annually rotate from one to another estate, one understands, within one and the same territory. So much so that they are said to take pride in the fact that neighbours do not dare to settle but at a certain distance.

It follows that Caesar's Germani do practise *some* agriculture. He says that they 'show no interest' in it,<sup>22</sup> and attributes to them a distinctively pastoral diet based on dairy products and meat.<sup>23</sup> Yet, at the same time, he says that rotation serves the purpose of preventing people from taking excessive care of their land. This concern presupposes that they do take

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<sup>21</sup> The adjectives *periculosus et calamitosus* are usually understood as indicating the danger that traders themselves face, but the context suggests that the danger too that they pose to society is in view.

<sup>22</sup> The verb *studere* at 6, 22 is ambiguous between 'practising' and 'being fond of'. I adopt the second meaning because, as a matter of fact, the Germani do practice some agriculture, as Caesar himself goes on to say.

<sup>23</sup> B. D. Shaw, "Eaters of Flesh, Drinkers of Milk", *Ancient Society* 13 (1982) 5–31, discusses the polarity between civilization and savagery in connection with diet.

at least some care of it. Caesar calls their farms *possessiones*. The term does not indicate actual ownership (*dominium*), but it does entail a certain degree of control, at least a temporary one.

Thus Caesar's Germani practise a form of *unsettled* agriculture. This is not because they do not own the land. (Ordinary tenants are not owners, and yet they take care of their estates no less than owners would do.) Rather, this is because they are forced to move annually from one to another estate. Absence of private ownership is a part of the picture insofar as it provides the legal framework that entitles their leaders to make them rotate.

On closer inspection the land in Caesar's fictional Germani society is not so much communally owned, as in a primitive society, as state-controlled: the *magistratus ac principes* decide the size and the location of the land to be assigned to clans 'as they think proper', and the *magistratus ac principes* again 'compel' (*cogunt*) people to rotate annually from one to another estate. Caesar might have said, but does not, that the Germani as an unqualified whole organise themselves in such and such a way. Rather, he emphasises the role of their leaders from the very outset. It is these people who redistribute wealth from the rich to the poor in order to make them equal, and it is these very same people, not the Germani as a whole, to whom Caesar attributes the argument to the effect that settled agriculture is bad.

Thus the Germani system is in fact quite elaborate. Its essence is permanent military engagement, affirmative action against social inequality, control by the political leadership over society including the upper classes.<sup>24</sup> The way in which Caesar conveys his idea of society in describing this putative system is not, I suggest, to be sought in the minutiae of this description, which perhaps elaborate on second-hand reports. Rather, we should attend to the core idea of a militarised, egalitarian, and authoritarian society. It is in these respects that the Germani society reflects his idea of what a well-functioning society ought to be like. First, then, the military.

### The Military

That a Roman author, and Caesar in particular, should be fond of a warlike society is not surprising. There was not another ancient society arguably as engaged in warfare as Rome was, and Caesar himself, a 'man of the army' in his own words (Plut. *Caes.* 3), was planning a major campaign against the Parthians after the Gallic and the civil war. Thus both Rome as such and Caesar's Rome can be said to be in a state of permanent warfare.

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<sup>24</sup> I disagree with Riggsby (n. 3) 61, that the Germani society is politically not organized.

To be in such a state requires that a large part of the active male population be constantly ready to man the army and fight. However, the system of small land-ownership advocated by Cato was not suited to this. For Cato's warrior-farmers are professional farmers whose job is to take care of their land. Cato does claim that they provide *milites strenuissimi* to the army. However, the historical counterparts of these characters were different from Cato's representation of them, and they actually resented the levy.<sup>25</sup>

These people's lack of enthusiasm for the army was justified. If ancient sources are to be trusted, the long and distant campaigns in which Rome became more and more engaged, although victorious, resulted in the loss of the properties of several small land-owners, which in turn brought about a dramatic decrease in the number of citizens meeting the income requirements for joining the army. Marius addressed the problem by extending conscription to the poorest citizens. While this reform changed the rules for raising an army, it did nothing to change the 'rules' of society as such, which remained those of an agricultural society. So much so that the expectation of the new soldiers was to be allotted land as the reward for their service.<sup>26</sup>

It is precisely this situation—everybody wanting to be a farmer and the larger the farm the better—that the Germani leaders represent as a danger to be averted. Their solution is straightforward: ban both land-ownership and settled agriculture, so as to turn Cato's warrior-farmers into pure warriors. There is no evidence nor reason to suppose that Caesar ever thought of implementing in Rome the specific measures he attributes to the Germani. However, the idea as such that farming, whatever the status of ownership and/or the length of tenancy, ought to be subsidiary to military service, with war being the primary occupation of the active male population, does nothing more than to formalise the facts on the ground: by Caesar's day, war booty and tributes had become a major source of income for Rome, and Roman agriculture itself was heavily relying on slave labour captured in war.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> P. A. Brunt, "The Army and the Land in the Roman Revolution", *JRS* 52 (1962) 75 n. 66.

<sup>26</sup> Brunt (n. 25) 80–84. But there are exceptions (e. g. App. *BCiv* 5, 3; Dio 48, 2, 3: cf. *ibid.* 81).

<sup>27</sup> It is interesting to observe that Caesar in a speech to his soldiers reported by App. *BCiv* 2, 93–94 expresses contempt for their expectation to be released from service and allotted land. The speech is of course faked, but as any fake speech in ancient historiography is intended to reflect the speaker's views.

To make warfare the primary activity of the male population does not of course entail that agriculture should be abolished altogether. Not even Caesar's Germani do so. The distinctive feature of their system, as Caesar construes it, is, rather, absence of private ownership. Neither Caesar nor any other *popularis* is found advocating abolition of land-ownership,<sup>28</sup> but it would be wrong to explain this theme away as a purely literary *topos*. For the *populares* did claim the right for the magistrates to expropriate the land and to redistribute it, should social welfare require it.

Expropriation of land was anathema to the *optimates* on the ground that ownership is a natural and inviolable right. According to Cicero *Off.* 2, 85, it is the job of the political leadership to defend it. Now, the Germani society is, for Caesar, just and unspoiled by civilization and therefore more 'natural' than Rome. We may think that, by emphasising their magistrates' control over the land, he is thereby defending the principle that private property is neither natural nor inviolable. As it happens, in the very same context in which Cicero advocates private property, he presents Caesar as a threat to it and a promoter of revolutionary measures (*Off.* 2, 84; see also *Att.* 7, 18, 2).

Thus we have come to my second topic of discussion, whether aspects of Caesar's description of the Germani reflects aspects of his rhetoric as a leading *popularis*. I have already observed that the argument he attributes to their *magistratus ac principes* picks up a theme distinctive of the *popularis* propaganda: that a fair political leadership will prevent the *potentiores* from increasing their properties at the expenses of the *humiliores*, and will redistribute wealth from the former to the latter. In what follows I will focus on another aspect of this topic, namely Caesar's admiring description of a human type trained to hardship and unspoiled by self-indulgence. This features in his ethnography of the Germani, and I will suggest that its presence reflects his allegiance to the rhetoric of the *popularis* tradition.

## The People

Militarism was an integral part of the Roman ideology over and above any political division. However, 'militarism' is not immune to qualification: exactly what one's commitment to militarism consists in may vary

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<sup>28</sup> Yet Tiberius Gracchus was friend of the philosopher Bloxius of Cuma, a upholder of communal property, so perhaps he had some interest in such theories; cf. F. La Greca, "Blossio di Cuma: stoicismo e politica nella Roma dei Gracchi", *Quaderni del Dipartimento di Scienze dell'Educazione dell'Università di Salerno* 5 (1995) 141–177.

with political allegiance. Caesar's praise of his private soldiers and his criticism of high-ranking officers suggests a link to his political agenda. Not only are his soldiers the same common people who had provided earlier *populares* with their social basis of consensus, but also the positive values that he praises in both the Germani and in his own soldiers, i. e. endurance of hardship and commitment to toil, are features of the lifestyle of Roman common people.<sup>29</sup>

By contrast, the members of the élite are, according to the rhetoric of the *populares*, indolent and self-indulgent, and hence unfit to lead a military life.<sup>30</sup> Caesar echoes this motif in the anecdote concerning the cowardice of his high-ranking officers, a cowardice which he contrasts with the *virtus* of his soldiers, whom he judges more worthy of the equestrian rank than those who actually have it.<sup>31</sup> As Plutarch (*Caes.* 9) narrates it:

Seeing that his officers were inclined to be afraid, and particularly all the young men of high rank who had come out intending to make the campaign with Caesar an opportunity for high living (τρυφή = *luxuria*) and money-making, he called them together and bade them be off, since they were so unmanly and effeminate.<sup>32</sup>

Remarkably, Plutarch has Caesar accuse his high-ranking officers alone of joining the army for profit, as if his soldiers had a less material motivation. Perhaps Caesar thought that for his soldiers the choice was a matter of bare survival. Even so, his implicit positing two different orders of motivations conveys an antipathy toward the élite and a sympathy with common people.

Further, Plutarch has Caesar allege his high-ranking officers to be not only greedy, but also 'effeminate'. Thus 'effeminacy', as Caesar understands it, is a feature common to both Roman aristocrats and Romanised Gauls. The opposite feature is the *virtus* of both the Germani and his own soldiers, which he ties to *duritia* and other comparable characteristics.

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<sup>29</sup> H. Mouritsen, *Plebs and Politics in the Late Roman Republic* (Cambridge 2001) 4 and 133–140. The conditions of life of rural common people were even tougher (Cic. *Leg. agr.* 2, 26–27 / 70–71).

<sup>30</sup> Sallust's *Bellum Iugurthinum* provides an instance of this *topos*. See also [Sall.] *Ep. ad Caes.* 10, 9; and Sall. *Cat.* 20.

<sup>31</sup> *Caes.* 1, 39; cf., T. P. Wiseman, "The Publication of the *De bello Gallico*", in: Welch, Powell (n. 2) 2–3. Riggsby (n. 3) 12–14 disagrees.

<sup>32</sup> Plut. *Caes.* 19. Caesar himself at 1, 39–40 does not explicitly speak of 'effeminacy'. Presumably Plutarch is expanding the original report in the light of Caesarian themes that he has found elsewhere.

Cicero enables us to appreciate the social implications of this kind of talk. Cicero does not advocate effeminacy as such, a term which has an intrinsically negative connotation. Yet he puts it on a par with *duritia* as two opposite but equally negative features (*Off.* 1, 129): “two things are to be avoided by all means: effeminacy or softness on the one hand, and toughness or rusticity on the other”. Toughness is not the same thing as endurance of hardship, but the Latin *duritia* does not distinguish between the two, and toughness itself can be seen as the result of being trained to endure hardship.

Cicero’s tying *duritia* with rusticity suggests that the reference is to the way of life of peasants. This interpretation gains support from Cato’s identification of *duritia* as a cornerstone of a rural education, as well as from Marius’ proud claim of *duritia* in connection with his allegedly humble origins from the countryside.<sup>33</sup>

This reference is important because, according to Brunt (n. 25), the ‘rural proletariat’ provides the core of the Roman army in Caesar’s day. Indeed Cicero describes his soldiers as *homines rusticos* (*Ad fam.* 9, 7, 2). When he is in a complimentary mood they are said to be *fortissimos viros civisque optimos* (*ibid.*), but when they take Antonius’ side, they become *homines agrestes, si homines illi ac non pecudes potius* (*Phil.* 7, 9).

These considerations demand a qualification of the ‘wide agreement’ concerning the features that the Germani embody, of which I spoke at the beginning: some of these features, such as *duritia* and, still more, *egestas*, capture distinctive aspects of the life of common people, and were judged in a negative way by members of the élite—*egestas*, far from being a condition of *virtus* as it is for Caesar at 6, 24, induces wickedness (*improbitas*) according to Cicero.<sup>34</sup> But even those features, such as *labor*, that are acknowledged as positive by everyone have different degrees of importance, depending on one’s social pedigree and/or political allegiance. For one, *labor* finds in Cicero little or no recognition.

Thus the Germani way of life, as Caesar represents it, would not be regarded as commendable by just any Roman reader, and Caesar presumably would not expect this. Rather, his praise of hardship and toil, stereotypical as it might seem, can best be explained as contributing to his celebration of common people and attack on the élite.

This explanation gains additional support from the fact that, on closer consideration, Caesar’s point concerning the effeminacy of Romanised

<sup>33</sup> Sall. *Iug.* 100. The theme of *duritia* is evoked in Marius’ self-portrait at *Iug.* 85.

<sup>34</sup> Mouritsen (n. 29) 139–141.

Gauls does not target all Romanised Gauls alike. At 6, 13 he tells us that *plebei* are kept in a state of slavery and vexed by debts and tributes. They could hardly be deemed to afford the luxury goods that he cites as inducing effeminacy. Moreover, a large number of Caesar's private soldiers were Gauls, and we cannot attribute to him the claim, even in implicit form, that his own soldiers are effeminate. Thus his point is likely to apply to the Gaul élite alone, which, I suggest, we can, and should, understand as a projection of the Roman one.

Another element about Gallia Narbonensis integrates the picture. The most important urban centre was the Greek town of Massalia, and Greek traders were active along the river Rhône.<sup>35</sup> Since Caesar ties the decadence of Romanised Gauls to the activity of foreign traders, and since the self-indulgence of the Greeks was a *topos* in Latin literature, it is possible that his reference to *cultus atque humanitas* is an allusion to this Greek influence too.<sup>36</sup>

This hypothesis squares well with my suggestion that Caesar's ultimate polemical target is the Roman élite, since an influential tradition stemming from Cato the Elder tended to present their decadence as running in parallel with their Hellenization. The idea of *humanitas* itself goes back to the philhellenic lobby of the Roman élite in the second century BC, the so-called Scipionic circle.

Caesar's opposition to philhellenism is by now an established theme in secondary literature.<sup>37</sup> However, it would be wrong to explain this opposition away as a token of nationalism. The refinement and elitism of Greek culture were bound to make it intrinsically unsuitable to Caesar's militaristic and populist rhetoric, over and above its foreign origin. Even if we leave aside these unsuitable characteristics, Greek education was an element of differentiation between the élite and those who neither spoke Greek nor could afford to study it. At least this was Marius' rationale for despising Greek education, which he dismissed as a useless pastime of the aristocracy.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> A. Tchernia, "Italian Wine in Gaul", in: P. Garnsey, K. Hopkins, C. R. Whittaker (eds.), *Trade in Ancient Economy* (London 1983) 87–104; R. L. B. Morris, "Mercatores and the *Bellum Gallicum*", *CB* 66 (1990) 83–85.

<sup>36</sup> F. Kraner, W. Dittenberger, H. Meusel (eds.), *C. Iulii Caesaris commentarii de bello Gallico* (Berlin 1960) 1, 81. Pompeius Trogus 43, 4, 1–2 praises the civilizing effects of Massalia on the Gauls.

<sup>37</sup> L. G. H. Hall, "Ratio and Romanitas in the *Bellum Gallicum*", in: Welch, Powell (n. 2) 25–29; see also McDonnell (n. 9) 300–301. Caesar's self-representation as a Hellenistic monarch is later.

<sup>38</sup> Sall. *Iug.* 85, 31; see also 63.

Thus Caesar's opposition to philhellenism can be seen as a part of his attack on the élite and, to this extent, complementary to his favourable attitude to the Germani. It is a conjecture, but a plausible one, that Caesar is alluding to the negative influence of Greek refinement and civilization in the *De bello Gallico* as well.

It is perhaps possible to go even further in this political reading of the opening of the work. The Romanization of Gallia Transalpina dates long before Caesar, as far back as the late second century BC, with Cn. Domitius Ahenobarbus. Following the usual pattern of Roman conquest, local élites were forced to enter a special association, in the form of *clientela*, with the conqueror and his descendants. One of these descendants was Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus, a leading *optimas* in Caesar's day. Whatever the actual degree of 'manhood' of Romanised Gaul élites, it is tempting to think that their unwillingness to help Caesar followed from input received from his domestic enemies at Rome, just as his high-ranking officers' mutiny at Vesontio almost certainly did.<sup>39</sup> The Greek town Massalia itself was to become one of his enemies' strongholds during the civil war, thus confirming the existence of ties between local élites and Caesar's domestic opponents.

Whatever the precise connections making up the web of allusions, Caesar's point concerning the effeminacy of Romanised Gauls induced by civilization and, as it were, consumerism, which at first sight might seem a bare echo of ethnographic stereotypes and peripheral to Caesar's own agenda, takes on a different meaning if read against the political situation at Rome.

### Caesar's agenda

I have suggested that Caesar's description of the Germani reflects features of his views concerning Roman militarism, society and power structures. It is not surprising that Caesar as a politician should want to express a view on these topics as he returns to the political struggle at Rome. But why would he be doing this in a digression of the *De bello Gallico*, which is not a political manifesto, but a bare account of military deeds? We must, then, take a closer look at both the target audience and the agenda of this work.

It has often been assumed that the *De bello Gallico* is addressed to the élite, and that Caesar's agenda is to advertise himself as a worthy

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<sup>39</sup> H. Hagendahl, "The Mutiny of Vesontio", *Classica et Mediaevalia* 6 (1944) 1–40.

member of the club. However, Wiseman casts doubt on this identification of Caesar's target audience. In Wiseman's view, the work, to be read out in public squares, addressed a popular audience, and was intended to sing the praises not of *Romanitas* as such, but rather of that sector of Roman society, the 'People', which both manned his army and formed the basis of his political clientele as a *popularis* leader.<sup>40</sup>

If indeed Caesar's agenda in this work was not, or not primarily, to defend a past campaign or to magnify his military skills, but rather, above all, to enhance his appeal as a *popularis* leader, it is not difficult to see how his ethnographic points fit in it. Indeed my reconstruction of these points has the merit of enabling us to go further and to refine this interpretation as follows.

Caesar's account of the Germani's system does not only convey the idea that a life of toil and hardship deserves respect, but also that it ought to be pursued. But for all that his glorification of these characteristics may strike a sensitive chord with the social pride of his audience, one would assume that these people aimed at improving their life standard, and not at struggling with poverty endlessly. The politicians conventionally labelled as *populares* traditionally met this expectation by pledging land, but this is precisely the kind of policy the Germani's leaders oppose. What they recommend us to do is, rather, to put up with poverty. Caesar does not make this recommendation *in propria persona*, and yet he is, to all appearances, sympathetic with it. What is the point of this?

*Leges sumptuariae*, prohibiting excessive use of jewellery and prodigality in feasts and banquets, were a constant refrain in Rome in connection with wars. Now war for Caesar was not a special event, but a permanent state of affairs to which to prepare ourselves, and indeed the poverty he attributes to the Germani is no religious or ethical dogma, but an integral part of their preparation to war.

As it happens, it is a recurrent theme of the *De bello Gallico* that the tribes that have lost their *virtus* are invariably the prey of those that have preserved it. The Germani are one of these latter and dominant tribes (6, 24):

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<sup>40</sup> Wiseman (n. 31). The idea of a popular audience goes as far back as T. Mommsen, *Römische Geschichte* III (Berlin 1903) 615, who describes Caesar as a democratic general addressing the people. J. Harmand, *L'armée et le soldat à Rome: de 107 à 5 avant notre ère* (Paris 1967) 493, goes so far as to speak of 'military socialism'. Against Wiseman's hypothesis Riggsby (see above note 31) and e. g. J. H. Collins, "Caesar as a Political Propagandist", *ANRW* 1.1 (1972) 939, who speaks of 'posterity'. This line of interpreting the *De bello Gallico* as a purely literary work is also defended by N. DeWitt, "The Non-Political Nature of Caesar's Commentaries", *TAPhA* 73 (1942) 341–352.

Upon the Gauls the neighbourhood of our provinces and acquaintance with overseas commodities lavishes many articles of use or luxury; little by little they have grown accustomed to defeat, and after being conquered in many battles they do not even compare themselves in point of *virtus* with the Germani.

So are the Roman legions themselves.

The rule at which Caesar hints as concerns the microcosm of Gaul, that no middle way is given between enslaving others and being enslaved, is the same rule that the Romans have long been invoking as a justification for their imperialism. As Tiberius Gracchus puts it in a speech he gave in support of his agrarian bill (App. *BCiv* 1, 11):

The Romans possessed most of their territory by conquest, and they had hopes of occupying the rest of the habitable world; but now the question of greatest hazard was whether they should gain the rest by having plenty of brave men, or whether, through their weakness and mutual jealousy, their enemies should take away what they already possessed.

Tiberius, a leading *popularis* just like Caesar, ties the task of reforming society to that of preserving military efficiency. Caesar too in the argument he attributes to the Germani's leaders establishes the same link between their job of social engineering and securing military efficiency. Tiberius and Caesar's Germani (that is, I suggest, Caesar himself) disagree as to whether an army of farmers or a professional one best secures military efficiency, but military efficiency is at the top of the agenda of both. It is against the background of this shared concern that we should understand Caesar's praise of a life of toil and hardship. This is more than a literary *topos*. It is a matter of survival.

## Conclusion

Caesar's *De bello Gallico* is not a piece of literature addressed to an unqualified posterity, but a celebration of the army and the people, addressed to his political audience. Caesar's admiring description of the Germani system, far from being a diversion for the sake of entertaining the reader (Riggbsy), is an integral part of this celebration.

This description picks up primitivistic themes from the ethnographic tradition. But there is no endorsement of primitivism as such. The dichotomy Caesar hints at, here and throughout the rest of the work, is not between developed and primitive societies, but rather between the *feminitas* of the aristocrats dwelling in their luxurious villas and the *virtus* of common people defending their country as it were in uniform.

This description entails admiration not for the Germani as such, but for the system they have implemented. For Caesar is not interested in what passport the bearer of *virtus* carries, but rather in what conditions allow us to preserve or to restore our *virtus*. The Germani's social and economic system is suited to this task, whereas Rome, as Caesar sees it, is ruled by a small group of aristocrats whose self-indulgence is a source of corruption for the entire society, and whose greed jeopardises civil concord and thereby military efficiency. Hence comes the need of a radical change of political leadership.

Roberto Polito

*Milan*

At the opening of *De bello Gallico* Caesar gives a description of hostile tribes which is surprisingly positive. They are said to be uncivilized and restless, as we might expect. But he does not judge these characteristics negatively. Rather, he contrasts them favourably with the 'effeminacy' of Gaul allies, whom he deems to have been spoiled by contact with Roman civilization. I suggest that this passage and others like it throw light on Caesar's views concerning society and civilization. Here, in fact, Caesar is using his enemies as a way of reflecting on an alternative and more valuable model for Rome itself.

Описание враждебных племен в "Записках о Галльской войне" неожиданным образом предстает весьма позитивным, причем враги противопоставляются "изнеженным" галльским союзникам, на которых, по мнению Цезаря, негативно влияет соседство с римской цивилизацией. Такого рода пассажи проливают свет на социальные и политические взгляды Цезаря. Описание врагов отражает его размышления об альтернативной модели общества – лучшего, чем римское.