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# Understanding Caesar's Ethnography: A Contextual Approach to Protohistory

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# Understanding Caesar's Ethnography: A Contextual Approach to Protohistory

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## INTRODUCTION: PROTOHISTORY, CLASSICAL TEXTS, AND COLONIAL DISCOURSE

The Celts of western and central Europe[1] flourished during the height of Greek and Roman civilization, and yet there is a methodological schism between the study of the Mediterranean world and that of the "peripheral" Europeans. Our appreciation of classical society stems primarily from the plentiful written texts – texts that provide us with minute details of society, religion, and politics from the words of the people who actively participated in that culture. The study of the Celts, on the other hand, is more oblique: our primary source is archaeology, and what little textual evidence we do have derives from Mediterranean historians and geographers. In anthropological terms, classicists study sources written from an emic perspective, while archaeologists study sources written from the etic.

The European Iron Age is unusual because it requires a methodology that bridges the familiar divisions between historian and archaeologist. In early investigations of the Celts, archaeological excavation was seen as a tool used to give physical illustration to classical accounts of Celtic life. The ancient texts were thought to hold the real *truth* of Celtic society – a truth that was archaeology's job to unearth.

In the past two decades, however, this perception has changed dramatically, and archaeologists use Greek and Roman texts rarely, if at all. This is in part a reaction to criticisms of the reliability of ancient sources and a realization of how these texts have been used to distort our perceptions of the archaeological record. Much ink has been spilled on this topic, with the result that many archaeologists now choose to gloss over or simply ignore documentary evidence. This is not a result of ignorance but rather a result of methodology having failed to keep pace with theory. I would like to try to redress this imbalance and begin a debate on how to use the ancient texts correctly, so that they are a help rather than a hindrance to the archaeologist.

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1 While many would argue against the use of the term 'Celt' (see Chapman 1991, Merriman 1987, and Fitzpatrick 1991, 1996), for convenience and readability I will use 'Gaul' to refer to native peoples of modern France and 'Celt' to refer to the loosely connected peoples across Iron Age Europe.

# THE NATURE OF PROTOHISTORY AND THE CLASSICAL TEXTS

Our most complete textual sources for the European Iron Age come from Greek and Roman authors. While the Celts had some ability to write, the exact nature of their literacy is uncertain. Caesar mentions that the Helvetii kept extensive lists of supplies and people during their migration (Caes. *BG*. I.29). He later notes (Caes. *BG*. vi.14) that the Druids were capable of writing but used the Greek rather than an indigenous alphabet and preferred to transmit important information orally. It seems that the Celts also used rather ephemeral materials like clay tablets (Caes. *BG*. I.29) and papyrus (Prosdiscimi and Solinas 1991) for writing, which suggests that they may have been more prolific than our surviving examples indicate. While we have evidence for a somewhat literate aristocracy, only fragments of indigenous writing remain, and those do not provide significant cultural insight.

Our reliance on foreign sources for information on the Celts creates a unique situation. We study the relationship between these two cultures largely from the perspective of the more literate, dominant society because conquerors are the writers of history. While archaeology has given this period a great deal of illumination, for many the classical texts provide the Celts with the kind of nuances not available in the examination of postholes and bones. At the same time, however, it must be remembered that these texts do not come from the Celts themselves but from an outside source, one with biases and self-interests rather than any modern notion of ethnographic objectivity.[2]

Christopher Hawkes (1951, 1954) drew an important methodological distinction for the European Iron Age and for similar situations throughout time. There is a practical difference between the "text-free" mode of archaeology, which is necessarily employed in prehistoric studies, and the "text-aided" investigation of periods that—at least in part—rely on historical texts, whether they are direct or indirect (Hawkes 1954:155-156). At the same time, however, we must keep in mind that not all texts were created equal. The term *protohistory* was developed by Hawkes to demonstrate the limitations of the texts available and to illustrate the necessary conjunction of anthropological/archaeological and historical logic in these contexts.

Protohistoric archaeology is challenging because it lies between history and prehistory. While classical archaeology is approached largely from a historical perspective, with written sources dominating the archaeology, prehistory can rely only on archaeological and anthropological methods. Protohistory is not so much a chronological period of transition between the two as a combination of different approaches to understanding. The overwhelmingly dominant position of written sources is not acceptable in this context, but neither can these texts be ignored; rather, the informed use of both history and archaeology is necessary.

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2 One could certainly debate the objectivity of even modern ethnography. However, the ideas of objectivity and scientific pursuit at least provide a model for research that was not in the awareness of ancient authors.

# Classical Texts and Colonial Discourse

The study of colonial archaeology has begun, in our postcolonial/postimperialist age, to focus on the native cultures involved rather than simply on the colonizers. Critical examination of "colonial discourse"– texts written by colonialists about indigenous peoples all over the world during many different historical periods–is a part of this larger interest. Its study focuses on colonial and imperial texts as the products of general perceptions of the Other, the savage, the barbarian. Rather than looking only at the historical context, post-colonial theory suggests that texts written by imperialist actors form a genre created from shared beliefs about conquest and "barbarians."

There is also a tendency on the part of the colonist towards ignorance or denial of the impact that their presence often has upon indigenous societies. Contact with a more complex or more powerful culture frequently disturbs native life in a number of ways that are not always obvious. Settlements may grow or they may disperse, while mining, farming, and production often increase in response to trade with the imperial nation, only to collapse a generation or two later. Colonial discourse does not recognize that phenomena like these are a result of outside influence, but instead portrays the native culture as having always existed just as they are observed (Miller, Rowlands, and Tilley 1995).

This attitude is common in Roman ethnography. The Roman concept of barbarians focused on the idea of bounded, homogenous societies in which only migration or invasion could produce change (Webster 1996:8). Strange or "alien" customs were explained through contacts with foreign and exotic peoples, so that barbarity increased with one's distance from Athens or Rome. To the classical historian, the static boundaries of geography easily became the immutable boundaries of demography and ethnicity.

# The Case of Caesar's Gallic Wars

Caesar wrote *De Bello Gallico* in a very clear, concise way that departed from the elaborate prose that was popular in contemporary Roman rhetoric. This *commentarius* style was commonly used for military and official correspondence with the Senate, and reflects Caesar's main purpose of keeping the Senate and aristocracy, as well as the *plebians* who were his largest supporters, continually informed of his military actions. Caesar's texts were not meant to be a history, or a geography and ethnography in the style of the Greeks. The fact that his *Commentaries* include even a small amount of ethnographic material on the Gauls is largely accidental—Caesar's focus was the conquest rather than the conquered people.

Embedded in his narrative of the war are scattered observations on Gallic society and culture. Caesar was a general above all else, and his emphasis on Roman military actions colors every aspect of his descriptions. Thus we learn a great deal about how the Helvetii organized themselves because their migration across Aeduan lands supposedly gave impetus for war, not because Caesar found them intrinsically interesting. The Aeduans are described similarly well, as they were close allies of Rome from the start and became a focal point during the rest of the campaigns. Outside of these militarily directed observations, Caesar had insufficient time and experience to focus on what most ethnographers, both ancient and modern, would consider the essentials of understanding a foreign society. And so we are left with a brief section in Book 6 (sections 13-30) as

the only fragments of Caesar's text meant purely for description and clarification of Gallic society.

There are a number of unique considerations when it comes to Caesar's ethnographic section. One seemingly endless argument centers on the possibility that Caesar borrowed much of this material from the earlier Greek historian Posidonius (see Tierney 1960, Nash 1976). While only small fragments of Posidonius' texts remain, Strabo and Athenaeus borrowed large sections of his works. Several excerpts from Book Six of *De Bello Gallico* are similar to Posidonius' work; it is possible that Caesar borrowed the material from Posidonius because the latter was so well known for his ethnographies, a subject that Caesar had little knowledge of. This is certainly a contentious suggestion, however, and it has garnered considerable resistance (Tierney 1976, Dunham 1995).

Why, with all these problems of interpretation, do archaeologists focus so closely on Caesar's words? Caesar spent more time in Gaul than any other ethnographer of his time. He lived in the Aeduan settlement of Bibracte during the winter of 52 B.C. and camped throughout the Gallic countryside for seven years. He negotiated with Gallic leaders and fought alongside the soldiers of Gallic tribes allied with Rome. His texts are also relatively early; only Strabo, Diodorus Siculus, Poseidonius, and Caesar himself provide information on the pre-provincial history of Gaul. Of these sources, Caesar offers the most complete and lengthy account of the Gauls, giving us a plethora of observations on all aspects of life in Gaul.

I will explore Caesar's *De Bello Gallico* as a case study in the usefulness of classical texts in Iron Age archaeology. A more developed sense of the meaning of protohistory and its necessary practical application is needed if we are to grasp the full importance of the information that is available to us in the ancient sources. In this study, I hope to create a working model for utilizing ancient sources so that they may be applied in their historical and archaeological context. The careful and appropriate use of Greek and Roman texts can only help increase our knowledge of Celtic society.

# CAESAR'S COMMENTARY ON GALLIC SOCIOPOLITICAL ORGANIZATION

When considering Caesar's ethnography, it is important to remember that "Caesar used Roman terms to define Iron Age Gaul" (Dunham 1995:110). In the investigation of foreign cultures, there is a basic linguistic barrier: the culture must be interpreted and filtered through the language and cultural assumptions of the observer. Caesar's observations on the Celts utilize a Roman vocabulary and were meant to be read by a Roman audience. A large part of correctly interpreting Caesar's narrative lies in understanding how he used the Latin language to describe totally foreign customs and institutions. To do this, we must consider how a Roman audience interpreted his words while keeping in mind the historical circumstances behind Caesar's comments.

## POLITICAL UNITS AND ORGANIZATION

Caesar's most complete mention of the basic organization of Gallic society occurs in the first sentence of his ethnographic section:

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*In Gallia non solum in omnibus civitatibus atque in omnibus pagis part-*
*ibusque, sed paene etiam in singulis domibus factiones sunt....*

(Caes. *BG*. vi.11)

In this sentence Caesar demonstrates the influence of factions on every facet of life in Gaul, from "every state and every village and district [to] practically each individual household as well" (Caes. *BG.,* trans. Carolyn Hammond). In this deceptively simple statement, Caesar divides all of Gaul into three political units: the *civitates, pagi,* and *domi.*

The *civitas* is generally translated as state or tribe, although state seems to be the more accurate of the two (see Arnold and Gibson 1995). While there is some degree of self-defined distinction between *civitates*, as suggested by the word *tribe*, there is also a sense of larger cohesion, particularly in the organization of *concilia*, which we will explore later. The term *state* more fully describes the extent of social complexity and political organization and lacks the implication of ethnicity and boundedness that *tribe* insinuates.

The *civitas* is the largest permanent social unit, where political councils are held and most negotiations, particularly those with Rome, are made. This is the highest level of organization, power, and stability within Gallic society. The *civitas* of the Helvetii included nearly 300,000 people (*BG*.i.29) who had joined the migration into Gaul and even more who had stayed behind in their homeland.

*Pagi* are the next unit of organization. As smaller segments within the *civitates*, the *pagi* held similar functions but on a more local scale. Caesar mentions *pagi* only when they are directly involved in the war as independent actors, separate from their governing *civitates*. However, we can see that they had a good deal of political power. We see *pagi* separate themselves from the *civitates*, and they can even arrange treaties on their own (*BG*.iv.22). The *pagi* must have had some degree of autonomy and internal leadership in order to accomplish either of these actions.

The third social division suggested by Caesar is that of the *domus*. Roymans suggests that the *domi* are essentially extended families, incorporating slaves, clients or patrons, and friends(Roymans 1990:17). He also contends that simply because Caesar mentions the existence of factions among the *domus* they are politically meaningful. However, this is the only time in his commentaries that Caesar uses the word *domus* in the sense of a familial household rather than a physical residence or a homeland. Given the context, it is likely that Caesar is merely trying to emphasize the extent of factions and internecine fighting in Gallic society rather than to define a significant political unit. We can be sure that *domi* were socially influential, as family ties and kinship are in any society, and were probably somewhat involved in the political sphere. However, they are never mentioned as having political power or authority separate from that of their *pagus* or *civitas*, and it seems a safe assumption that the *domus* had no more than the usual importance given to families.

## SETTLEMENT ORGANIZATION IN GAUL

Caesar mentions two definite divisions of settlement: the *oppidum*, or town, and the *vicus*, a village or hamlet. Most commonly, however, Caesar refers to settlement organization in a hierarchical expression: *oppida*, *vici*, and *aedificia* (commonly translated as either private buildings or country estates), suggesting a three-tiered system of settlement. This expression is most often used when burning is taking place (*BG.* i.5, ii.7, viii.5), either by Caesar or the Gauls themselves.

Caesar speaks most often of the *oppida* as central places of administrative importance. He does not directly relate them to the *civitas* or *pagus*, but his descriptions show several *oppida* occurring within a single *civitas*. It therefore seems that *pagi* controlled their own territories and built *oppida* as central places for these territories (Roymans 1990:30). The existence of several *oppida*, each acting as its own administrative center, within a *civitas* certainly fits this theory and explains the autonomy enjoyed by the *pagi*.

Caesar places much less emphasis on the *vici* and *aedificia* in his accounts, presumably because they lack the official authority of the *oppida*. Caesar mentions *vici* and *aedificia* together, without *oppida*, more often than he mentions all three, showing that he saw a strong similarity between the two smaller types of settlement. His descriptions of the two suggest a rural setting; *aedificia* are connected with fields several times (*BG.* iv.38, vii.64), and he mentions that Gallic settlements are often surrounded by trees (*BG.* vi.30). Thus we can see that the *oppida* acted as large governing units while the *vici* and *aedificium* were smaller, agricultural towns and private rural settlements.

*Government and Political Institutions*

Caesar has a relatively refined vocabulary when referring to Gallic leadership that reflects the Roman preoccupation with law and order as well as Caesar's familiarity with the upper classes of Gaul, the aristocracy with whom he negotiated and among whom he lived. His commentaries display a thorough knowledge of the leadership systems of Gaul that proved essential to his victories in the region.

Caesar mentions two governing assemblies in Gaul, the *concilium* and the *senatus*. Caesar uses the term *concilium* most often to refer to large conventions that exist above the level of *civitates* and that include either all Gaul (*BG.* i.30, i.31, vi.3, vii.75) or regions therein (*BG.* ii.4). Generally speaking, the *concilia* were grand councils, formed out of necessity or in relation to a specific need rather than permanent governing bodies (*BG.*i.30, i.31, ii.10, iv.19). Caesar uses the adjectives *omnia* or *multitudo* when speaking of a council of all free men in Gaul, and Roymans has suggested that, essentially, this was a way for the leadership to test public opinion, particularly in times of antagonism with Rome (Roymans 1994:30).

The *senatus*, in contrast, was certainly a more firmly established governing body, operating at the level of *civitates* or *pagi*, with somewhat regular sessions, whose importance Caesar equates closely with the Senate of Rome. He uses the same term for both institutions and gives the Gallic *senatus* definite prominence as he negotiated entirely with the senate in the case of the Remi and Senones (*BG.*ii.5, v.53). Their importance is also shown in that the senate is mentioned often in conjunction with the *principes*, or leading men, of a *civitas* (*BG.*ii.5, iv.11). We can conclude that the Gallic senate was a primary source of leadership, governing a *civitas* alongside an elected official or, occasionally, a

king. It has been suggested that the *senatus* was a council of elders or nobles within a *civitas* (Roymans 1994:32, Dunham 1995:113) but, as Caesar mentions this specifically only once (*BG*. iii.16), we cannot accept it as commonplace.

## Political Leadership

Caesar also gives us an overview of upper-level leadership positions held by individuals in Gallic society, the individuals with whom he worked most closely. His most commonly used terms, and probably the most enlightening in terms of political organization, are *magistratus*, *princeps*, and *rex*. We cannot determine a great deal about the magistrates beyond the fact that they were elected officials whose duties ranged from chief magistrate with the highest power among their people (*BG*. i.16, i.19) to a group of elected officials with jurisdiction limited to organizing troops and acting as judges (*BG*. i.4, i.17,). The Aedui annually elected a *summus magistratus* or *Vergobret*, who maintained highest authority among them (*BG*.i.16, i.17, vii.32). Of course, while the responsibilities and power of magistrates varied between *civitates* and *pagi*, it seems that much of Gaul had adopted the custom of electing public officials in some capacity by Caesar's time.

The *principes* have a more defined role as "first men" and aristocratic heads of state (*BG*.i.30). For the Nervii, the Remi, and the Treveri, *principes* were the primary leaders, and there is little or no mention of magistrates among them (*BG*.ii.3, ii.13). The *principes* were certainly widespread, as Caesar mentions taking with him one *princeps* from each *civitas* on his voyage to Britain. Many are mentioned as descending from aristocratic families and several tried to regain the kingship that their ancestors supposedly held, as with Orgetorix, among others (*BG*.i.2, ii.6, vii.39). This suggests that the *principes* are nobles who have gained authority and influence over the people of their *pagus* or tribe (Dunham 1995:112).

Ironically, the most complicated of Caesar's terms is the one that translates easily into our own tongue: *rex*. The idea of kingship in modern society, as well as in Roman society, generally focuses on a hereditary (aristocratic) central ruler with a considerable amount of power. In republican Rome, it also carried the connotation of tyrranical rule, as the half-mythical Etruscan kings of early Rome were thought to have been oppressive and dictatorial. In Gaul, however, "kings" rarely fit this notion of a hereditary, all-powerful ruler, and indeed they often defy it.

Caesar mentions ten kings in Gaul by name, of whom only a few are actually hereditary monarchs. Commius, for example, was appointed king of the Atrebates by Caesar when they were defeated, having been chosen for his loyalty to Caesar and his influence in the region (*BG*. iv.21). Ariovistus was appointed king and friend by the Roman senate, an honor which Caesar makes clear was to be repaid by loyalty and other "signal services" from the Germans (*BG*. i.31, i.35, i.42). Caesar also appointed Cavarinus to the kingship of the Senones. His brother had been king before Caesar's arrival, and the Senones were so upset by the new appointment that they attempted to assassinate Cavarinus (*BG*. v.54).

Even when the kingship was not imposed directly upon the Gauls by Rome, the Roman influence was felt among many Gallic kings. Teutomatus of the Nitiobriges, for example, was a hereditary monarch, but his family connection with the Roman senate (*BG*. vii.31, vii.46) certainly helped him to retain his power. Indeed, there are only two instances in which Caesar does not mention the influence of Rome or the senate. The first

is the dual kingship of Ambiorix and Catuvolcus, where Ambiorix complained that he had no more authority over his people than they over him (*BG*.v.24). Caesar (*BG*.ii.4) also talks of the Suessiones, whose previous king, Diviciacus, had enjoyed the greatest power of any man in Gaul. By Caesar's time Galba had been elected to replace Diviciacus and was entrusted with control of the war, due to his "just and cautious nature" (*BG.* ii.4).

There are also a few instances where *rex* refers to power that is accumulated over time, rather than simply inherited or appointed. Elected officials are sometimes called *rex,* perhaps because their office replaces the institution of kingship in that they hold more power and "kingly" duties (*BG.* vii.32). It also seems that at this time it becomes easier for aristocratic families to gain enormous power and wealth through the system of clientship. In this way, local leaders or chiefs could gain wider and more "kingly" power. So it seems that, even in areas where Caesar and Rome had not had a direct impact on the Gallic kingship, the hereditary office had lessened in power and supremacy.

Caesar repeatedly demonstrates that the strongest kingships during the conquest are those that he himself appointed and that were close allies of Rome. Thus it seems that most Gallic kings were not established hereditary monarchs at all, but leaders who used their patrons and friends in Rome to political advantage. At the same time, Caesar mentions only one case (Cavarinus) where the people rejected his choice, and he repeatedly emphasizes that many of his appointees were descended from nobility and even that their ancestors were kings.

It is probable that in most (but certainly not all) Gallic tribes, a kingship had existed in the past that lapsed in the previous generations. From Caesar's actions, and from the general lack of resistance to them, it seems that it was politically beneficial to Caesar as well as to the local aristocracies to reconstitute the monarchy in order to develop close ties between Gallic leadership and Rome. Rome instituted a similar process in nearly all of its provinces, where the sons of the aristocracy (the next generation of leadership) were sent to Rome for schooling. Roman control over the aristocracy was vital, and Caesar's references to his appointed kingships are more enlightening in terms of Roman techniques of political control than as an accurate reflection of the situation in Gaul.

## THE PEOPLE: CLASS AND STATUS

Caesar very clearly states that there are only two classes of men among the Gauls worth consideration: the *druides* and the *equites*. The rest are merely laborers and slaves without status or political power (*BG.* vi.13). His description of druids states that they were not simply priests but also fulfilled a wide variety of public roles, in particular that of judge (*BG.* vi.13-14). It is difficult to appreciate druids fully in the grander scheme of Caesar's observations because they are only mentioned in his ethnographic section. While he emphasizes their dominance in society here, Caesar never mentions druids during everyday observations in Gaul. This limited use of the term 'druid' has been suggested as a way of acknowledging debt to Poseidonius (Tierney 1960), but Caesar also mentioned that the druids did not involve themselves with matters of war, and it is possible that he rarely mentioned them because they never entered his sphere.

There is a great deal of overlap in descriptions of *druides* and secular public officials like *principes* and *magistri*. While Cicero describes Diviciacus as a druid (*De Divinatione*

1.41.90)*,* Caesar refers to him as an Aeduan *principes* (*BG*. i.3). Caesar also describes members of the Aeduan *senatus* as *sacerdotes*, or priests (*BG*. vii.33). Ancient historians repeatedly mention the mixture of secular and sacred duties; more recently, Nora Chadwick (1966) noted that no classical author refers to druids exclusively as priests.

While Caesar tells us that extensive training (as long as twenty years) was a requirement to become a druid, there is no mention of birth as a factor in this. It is possible that druids, who were extremely influential in all areas of Celtic life, gained their position entirely through achieved status rather than birth. However, since Caesar points out such a great divide between the common laborers and the *druides* and *equites,* it seems more likely that one had to be born into a certain status in order to begin druidical training.

The *equites*, commonly referred to as knights or warrior-princes, are more easily investigated, as Caesar routinely makes reference to them throughout his text. He explicitly states that they derive status primarily from birth and wealth as well as an extensive system of clientship (Caes. *BG*. vi.15). Here we can have little doubt that ascribed status, stemming directly from kinship ties, is the first determining factor in determining *eques* rank. Personal achievement is not without its influence here, however, and wealth and clientship make up the other two factors. The number of clients an *eques* has is based largely upon the first two factors, birth and wealth. This suggests that wealth was injected directly into the patron/client relationship in order to gain support and influence in the community, and that in addition *equites* were due, or even inherited, clients based on their ancestry (Crumley 1976:15).

Caesar's commentary reveals a highly stratified aristocracy. Some level of parentage was probably necessary in order to be either an *eques* or a druid. The importance of birth, however, was certainly greater among the *equites*, as was the importance of wealth. The druids gain nearly all of their power and influence through extensive training; wealth and clientship are never mentioned among them, although the druids held great power among their people. Among the aristocracy, we see a complex web of achieved and ascribed rank, where kinship is the most basic prerequisite but the attainment of wealth and prestige (sacred or secular) is the true basis for power.

Overall, then, Caesar presents us with a much more detailed, hierarchical view of Gallic society than is obvious at first glance. Once we confront both the meaning of the Latin and the unusual context of many of the observations, we see a complex social structure and a complex people emerge. This is a highly stratified society, from the variety of settlements to the internal divisions among the powerful aristocracy. Perhaps the most important point that Caesar illustrates, however, is that social and political structure, and therefore the basis for power and leadership, differs among the various *civitates* and *pagi* across Gaul. Druides and equites are classes that he sees as spreading across the whole of Gaul, while kingships, *magistrati*, and *principes* are regional leadership institutions, formed sometimes as a direct result of Roman intervention. It is this diversity of leadership and governance that made the Gauls such an unpredictable foe and what makes them a formidable subject for study today.

# ARCHAEOLOGY AND SOCIOPOLITICAL ORGANIZATION IN GAUL

Many aspects of culture are ephemeral. Social organization, political alliances, unwritten languages, and religious beliefs disappear with the people who create and maintain them. Archaeology often cannot reveal these important elements, and thus the classical texts become useful as a means of filling in the gaps. However, the study of the Iron Age has been largely "text-led" rather than "text-aided." Until the early 1980s, archaeologists accepted without question Greek and Roman accounts of druidic religion and human sacrifices without looking critically at the remains of sanctuaries and cemeteries across Europe. There have been more attempts lately to explore more deeply, particularly through archaeological investigation, statements that in the past had been accepted without question.

This exploration has been particularly successful in France, where most *oppida* have been investigated to some extent due to their prominence in the texts.[3] Regional surveys have led to the discovery of smaller settlements, contemporary with the *oppida,* situated in the lower-lying valleys across France. The combination of intensive investigation of *oppida* and large-scale surveys of the hinterland has allowed for a broader sense of the variety within Gallic society. This is part of a larger trend in archaeology of looking beyond the wealthy and powerful elite in order to more fully understand every aspect of a culture. In this way we become less dependent on the ancient sources for insight into the more problematical areas of culture.

## SETTLEMENT EVIDENCE

Caesar's most-mentioned settlement type, the *oppida,* are so large and visibly defended that many have been correctly identified with his textual references for more than a century and a half. Unfortunately, those *oppida* that feature most prominently in Caesar's text were excavated very early on using antiquated techniques. The sheer size of these sites ensures that there is plentiful evidence for modern re-excavation to discover, but a fuller understanding of the true function of *oppida* awaits the complete excavation of one or more of these monumental settlements. Work in this direction is being carried out at Mont Beuvray, Caesar's Bibracte, and will continue for many years to come.

In order to understand *oppida* more completely, we must consider earlier settlement types. The earliest Iron Age (Hallstatt period, c.700-500 B.C.) brought with it large, heavily defended hillforts very similar in appearance to the *oppida*. These massive sites, like the *oppida,* have not yet been completely excavated, but the general conclusion is that they housed a much smaller population and focused more intently upon agriculture than their later counterparts. Both the settlements and the graves of this

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3 However, due to the enormous size of the oppida, none has been excavated completely, and nearly all have been only briefly examined.

period point to huge material wealth (often linked to salt mines) among the aristocracy - so much so that the richest graves are commonly referred to as "princely" tombs.[4]

The La Téne period (c. 500 B.C. to the Roman conquest) is considered to be fully Celtic and is named for a common metalworking and art style found across Europe. By 500 B.C. most of the large hillforts had been abandoned, and there is a shift towards far less ostentatious settlements. In fact, settlement evidence is quite rare in much of France during La Téne I (c. 500-250 B.C.), although "systematic micro-regional surveys" of the Aisne valley suggests that settlement density was actually much higher than previously thought (Demoule and Ilet 1985:203). These settlements, however, are mostly small, dispersed villages that remain largely unexcavated. Thus most of our knowledge of La Téne I France is limited to cemeteries, of which over 400 have been found.[5] More people are buried with prestigious grave goods than in previous periods. Two-wheeled carts, Greek and Etruscan vessels, beautifully made weapons, and elaborate gold jewelry become increasingly common (Collis 1984a:114). The fabulous wealth of the Halstatt burials was slowly being distributed over a larger number of people so that individual burials seem poorer compared with the earlier examples, but their number increased dramatically. La Téne I burials are also organized and ranked according to family grouping rather than being segregated by sex as in the Hallstatt period (Buchsenschutz 1995:557), suggesting a developing aristocracy based more on descent than wealth.

It is not until the middle of La Téne II, in the late third century B.C., that we see a marked increase in settlement complexity in most of Gaul and particularly in eastern central Gaul. Towns appear along the Saone, Doubs, and Rhine that show flourishing trade and craftsmanship activity. Most are relatively small (4-5 hectares), while the well-documented site of Levroux (Indre) represents a larger, more centralized example at 20 hectares (Buchenschutz 1988 and 1995:568 – 570). The houses on these sites are generally poorly preserved, but the nearby refuse pits contain evidence of highly skilled artistry in bronze, iron, wood, and glass. Indigenous coin production first occurs in the more southern sites at this time, indicating the beginning of a movement away from bartering with raw materials towards more sophisticated and extensive trade with the Mediterranean (Fitzpatrick 1993:274). A major part of this trade, amphorae, mostly of Dressel Ia type imported from the ports of Cosa and Pompeii, also occur in large quantities at towns and other sites along the rivers. Thus we can see that small, largely agricultural villages and hamlets were gradually replaced by more complex towns, where craft production and trade existed alongside agriculture.

In many ways, these towns foreshadow the emergence of later Iron Age *oppida*. The French *oppida* (heavily fortified, largely urban sites at least 25 hectares in size[6]) emerge

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4 This wealth was not limited to 'princes.' The most lavish Hallstatt burial found, the Vix tomb (Côte d'Or), belonged to a woman.

5 The impact of illegal looting has been felt heavily in the Champagne region, where it has been estimated that less than 5% of the total burials are able to be investigated

6 25 hectares  is roughly equal to 60 acres. Most oppida fall between 100 and 250 acres, while the largest can measure up to 1,500 acres (P.S. Wells 1999:51).

in late La Téne II and early La Téne III (c. 125 to 55 B.C.), at which time many of the earlier trading and agricultural towns had been occupied for only a generation or two. The abrupt move was a result of deliberate planning, as *oppida* completely relocated the convenient and profitable lowland settlements to inaccessible hilltops with no previous settlement evidence. Levroux, for example, was abandoned for an *oppidum* built two kilometers away. Aulnat, in the Auvergne, was similarly replaced by the *oppidum* of Gergovie, a site more than twice the size (150 ha). This shift towards truly enormous, heavily defended sites occurs at roughly the same time across France.

While the *oppida* are similar to the Hallstatt hillforts in form, they are more like the La Téne II towns in function. Because such a small percentage of each *oppidum* has been excavated, it is difficult to estimate the population living in these sites. We do know, however, that the oppida are largely urban in nature (Collis 1984a, 1984b, 1995). For example, there is evidence (from household middens) of complex manufacturing, with a much larger scale of production than previously seen (Wells 1999: 111-113). Perhaps more telling is the shift from elaborately decorated, highly individual commodities towards more standardized, mass-produced, and purely functional goods.

Adouze and Buschenshutz (1991) have gone so far as to suggest that the development of such enormous, specialized manufacturing and trading settlements—arising in response to Roman economic demands—essentially constituted the first stage of the Roman conquest. Certainly, a large economic surplus was required to support the creation of these sites—the ramparts alone at Kelheim took an estimated 1.5 million manhours to build—and it is likely that this surplus came from a complex system of trade intensification across Europe and the Mediterranean (Haselgrove 1988 and Brun 1995) starting in the second century BC. Coinage was also produced in the *oppida*, with each minting its own coins. The enormous breadth of trade in this period can be seen in the wide distribution of Gallic coinage, which stretches across much of Europe.

There is a certain amount of evidence that the oppida were spatially segregated, with differentiation between areas of craft production, from iron and bronze to wood, glass, and pottery manufacture. Manching has produced several long rectangular buildings, most likely warehouses, and smaller buildings near the center of town that seem to be craftspeople's homes and workshops (Collis 1984b: 104-111), much like the medieval burghage system. Villeneuve St. Germain, situated near Soissons, was divided into four quadrants, one of which was reserved for industry (Collis 1995: 165). Again, trade seems to dominate all aspects of the organization and creation of the *oppida*.

While the *oppida* have dominated archaeological research for over a century, contemporary low-lying villages are only just beginning to be uncovered and as such are difficult to compare to the *oppida* in terms of function. However, we do know that they exist and can be found across most of France. These smaller, nucleated settlements seem to fit well with Caesar's mention of *vici* (Roymans 1990:11). At this early stage in investigation, these sites do seem to fit the basic description of villages, although we can only conjecture about the specifics.[7] Even with this superficial investigation, we can see that

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[7] Knowledge of and interest in these sites have only really grown in the past five years. Because there are such enormous amounts of land between the oppida, fieldwork in the lowlands has mostly focused on surveying at the regional level instead of intensive excavation at the site level.

Mediterranean prestige goods were not limited to the *oppida*, but occasionally occur in the more rural sites also. It remains to be seen whether these goods were distributed from the elite living in the *oppida* or whether they represent direct contact with Roman traders. The answers to many other questions will also likely be answered in the next decade as investigations continue.

While evidence does exist for *oppida* and *vici*, identifying *aedificia* in the archaeological record is more difficult. Aerial photography has located small, square double enclosures that occur mostly in northern Gaul. One of these, a 22m x 12m structure that appears to have been a single large dwelling, has been excavated at la Verberie. Other sites have revealed two or three smaller nucleated buildings surrounded by double ditch-and-rampart constructions that are often connected to extensive field systems. These are, however, isolated findings as many of the excavated sites either date to an earlier period or have not produced complete plans (Wightman 1985:16). There is another problem in that the sites discovered so far have been restricted largely to Belgic Gaul. It is not certain whether the *aedificia* represent a regional development or simply have yet to be found in the rest of Gaul.

Some have suggested that these country villas did not actually exist, and that *oppida, vici,* and *aedificia* occur only in the same pattern because they are formulaic rather than factual (Ralston 1988:790 and Dunham 1996). Since they are only used together in describing burning programs, it is possible that the phrase is simply an expression emphasizing the extent of the devastation.[8] A more compelling argument is that the *aedificia* are no longer visible because, like some ritual centers, they continued to be in use through the Roman period and were replaced by more permanent stone structures, which obliterated the remains of wooden buildings (Buchsenschutz 1995:236). Their existence as rural farming estates would also explain how the *oppida* were supplied with food and how large areas of agricultural land were used.

## POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS AND LEADERSHIP

Unfortunately, the most intriguing aspect of Caesar's commentary, the political leadership, is not archaeologically visible. The burial evidence, which can be helpful in detecting complex, rigid hierarchies (see Saxe 1970, Parker Pearson 1999), is largely restricted to cremation, and grave goods are lacking during this period. There is also very little evidence for public buildings or even centrally located open fields within the *oppida* that would indicate a permanent governing body like a senate. Mt. Beuvray (Bibracte) is one site where public buildings were thought to be found, but most scholars agree that the evidence is not conclusive and indeed probably stems from pre-World War II excavations in which multiple strata of habitation were taken as a single layer that appeared more complex than the likely reality (Ralston 1988).

However, a lack of evidence does not necessarily disprove a hypothesis, and this seems to be an occasion where we can accept Caesar's comments without too much dissent. The senate, magistrates, and "kings" were composed of the very people that Caesar

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8 This is similar to the references to civitates, pagi, and domi, where the mention of families was probably inserted to emphasize the existence of factions rather than to highlight their political importance.

was in contact with, the ones that he negotiated with. These are also the nuances of societies that are nearly always lost to the archaeologist and can only be illuminated through direct observation. The absence of public buildings is cause for concern, but entirely logical when we remember what small portions of *oppida* have been excavated. The important thing in this instance is not to attempt to test archaeologically the invisible aspects of culture, but to consider carefully the context and to place provisional trust in Caesar's observations.

## THE PEOPLE: CLASS AND STATUS

Archaeology is useful more for illustrating the everyday lives of all varieties of people than for providing the generalizations of behavior found in ancient ethnography. This is where we see the biggest flaw in Caesar's observations. As mentioned above, Caesar had a great deal of contact with the aristocracy and leadership of Gaul, but regarded those who were not *druides* or *equites* as "reduced to a condition resembling slavery, without rights and without any participation in affairs. Overwhelmed by the weight of debts and taxes, victims of the violence of the aristocracy, they themselves voluntarily passed into servitude to the nobles" (*BG*. vi.13, trans. Carolyn Hammond). In fact, the archaeological record provides us with a much more diverse picture of all classes of Gallic citizens.

To begin with, Caesar does not mention the emerging middle class, for which there is overwhelming archaeological evidence. This development is most often viewed from an economic standpoint, a model in which increasing trade, particularly with Italy in the late second century BC, led to increased wealth and competition and thus a more hierarchical society based on economic control (Crumley 1974:75, Collis1884a, Wells 1999, Brun 1995). High volumes of trade across Europe and the Mediterranean required a heavy investment in production for the Gauls, and we see this even in pre-*oppidum* settlements like Aulnat. As settlements shift their focus towards trade and manufacture, Gallic society becomes more stratified and accommodates a lower class of rural farmers, a middle class of artisans and merchants, and an aristocracy.

In the *oppida* this stratification is visible in the spatial patterning of structures. The smaller workshops are centrally located, densely packed, and seem to have had both a manufacturing and habitation function. On the other hand, the upper-class dwellings were larger, contained by a courtyard, and spread out towards the periphery of the *oppida* (Collis 1984b:150). At Villeneuve St. Germain, the largest dwellings are enclosed by palisades and located together in a separate quadrant of the site (Collis 1995:165). These wealthy living areas also show evidence of manufacturing, which indicates that the aristocracy had some amount of control over lucrative commerce. This and the spatial patterning of production within *oppida* suggest a very rigid social hierarchy based on trade and manufacture.

Caesar's comment that those people who were not *druides* or *equites* lacked status may refer to the rural population. Farming was negligible within *oppida* although we do find a great number of what seem to be storage units for grain (Reynolds 1995:190). It seems that the lowland settlements were used as agricultural centers that supplied the needs of the *oppidum*'s inhabitants. The size of rural sites like la Verberie suggest that at least a part of the rural population were far above slave status, contrary to Caesar. His

misinterpretation of the situation could hardly be due to a lack of observation, as his military expeditions led him through large swathes of countryside. It seems likely, then, that he included this statement in order to gain sympathy for his cause in Rome (Levick 1998:71).

In contrast to his perceptions of the rural population, Caesar certainly had a good understanding of the aristocracy in Gaul. We can see this in his appreciation of the nuances of achieved and ascribed status. He mentions aristocratic status throughout his text, ostensibly because it is so often enmeshed in military and diplomatic affairs. However, even given that Caesar was primarily in contact with the aristocracy, it seems impossible that he would fail to miss the many merchants and craftspeople, especially while he lived in Bibracte.

However, the problems in Caesar's comments on social organization that are hardest to resolve occur in his ethnographic section. We should return to Nash's suggestion that similarities between Caesar and Posidonius exist only because they wrote within a few generations of each other (Nash 1976). This contention does not bear weight, due to the rapid social changes occurring during that time in Gaul. A span of sixty years, considering the historical and social context, would be sufficient for considerable changes to occur in the region. It is certainly plausible that Caesar did make use of Posidonius but failed to recognize changes in Gallic society because he shared the common belief that barbarian societies were traditional and timeless. To this, we should add the implausibility that Caesar would have had any contact with Gallic people who were not soldiers or members of the aristocracy, and we can see how easy it would be for him to repeat outdated material without realizing its inaccuracies himself.

At the same time, we should not go too far in disregarding Caesar's commentary on social and political organizations in Gaul. His texts illuminate many aspects of society that we would not be able to see from the archaeological record alone. We are able to understand an active and complex aristocracy that would not otherwise be visible. Caesar gives us details in areas where the archaeology can only provide an underlying skeleton.

Yet neither can we ignore the overlying context of the situation, both in Gaul and Rome. The Gallic state had developed very quickly and fell into the hands of Romans just as quickly. The situation that Caesar describes is a brief sliver of time; we cannot think of pre-*oppidum* settlements as fitting into the model of *civitas, pagus,* and *domus* because this complex hierarchy was the result of abrupt social change. Caesar's texts provide us with a snapshot of definite social reality, but a snapshot is just that: a frozen moment in time. The dynamic forces behind late Gallic society are neither mentioned nor deeply understood by Caesar, and they remain for the archaeologist to discover.

We must also accept that there are definite discrepancies between the archaeological and the textual evidence, even within this narrow chronology. Some of this is probably due more to simple lack of excavation than to any inherent conflict, but certainly Caesar's lack of recognition for the emergent middle class is puzzling. We must continue to actively pursue both an archaeological investigation and a textual investigation in order to find a happy medium where the two complement each other.

# CONCLUSIONS

With the current emphasis on the limits of ancient ethnography and the recognition of colonial thinking on perceptions of the Other, it has been tempting for many archaeologists simply to ignore the classical texts. In utilizing the words of Caesar and other classical writers incorrectly, one runs the risk of being termed old-fashioned or classicist by the archaeological community. However, this fear of misuse can easily be overcome by archaeologists' gaining a better understanding of the texts rather than discarding them as overly ambiguous. The ancient sources are far too valuable to the knowledge of Iron Age cultures for archaeologists to ignore them.

Caesar's *Commentaries* provide a perfect model of the usefulness and limitations of classical texts. For example, we've seen that his observations on Gallic settlements reflect a situation that matured largely in response to trade pressures from Rome. It was a rapid development, a response to contact with imperial society. His observations on the hierarchical settlements and their relationship to the divisions of *civitas* and *pagi* are not particularly useful in understanding earlier settlement patterns and social organization because they reflect a sudden change in Gallic culture rather than a long-term situation. Yet Caesar makes no mention of the newness of the *oppida* and very likely did not realize himself the impact that Roman trade had on the Gauls.

It is probable that Caesar's denial of the existence of a middle class and his diminution of the importance of the rural lower class stem from Caesar's borrowing from Posidonius. Drawing on earlier sources was certainly commonplace in the ancient world, giving us another consideration when investigating a text. As we've seen with late La Téne Gaul, cultural change and development can occur rapidly; thus an apparent anachronism within a text may indicate an instance of borrowing. This also leads us to the point that the classical sources should be used to illuminate the chronologically relevant time period. By taking a text to represent all Celts at all times, we falsify the reality and produce a timeless, static misinterpretation of a highly mutable and developing society.

Caesar's creation of a cultural barrier along the Rhine demonstrates how political, historical, and even intellectual developments in the classical world can influence attitudes towards the Celts. His manipulation of political ideology and propaganda led Caesar to create a false frontier that would become a reality under Augustus. The social climate of the classical world often colored views of barbarians. The Greek-Persian Wars (c. 490-448 B.C.), for example, led to a more strongly developed sense of Hellenism and a realization of the "barbarity" of all non-Greeks, Persian or not (Hall 1990). The popularity of Stoic philosophy, in which humankind is seen to have fallen from a state of primitive innocence, also had a strong impact on ethnographers from Posidonius to Tacitus. Civil and foreign wars, struggles for personal power in the late Republic and Empire, conservative or expansionist policies in the Senate: each of these are among the many historical circumstances that affected how barbarians were perceived among the Greeks and Romans.

The important considerations aside, Caesar's texts also demonstrate the true value of classical textual sources. His descriptions of status among the aristocracy and of senates and governing councils reveal an extremely complex ruling system that is completely invisible in the archaeological record. *Druides, equites, reges, principes, senatus,* and

*concilia* are just some of the social fixtures of which we would have no knowledge without Caesar's work. While the Roman vocabulary and context of his observations must be carefully considered in circumstances where the archaeology can neither confirm nor deny textual accuracy, Caesar provides valuable insight that would otherwise have been lost to us.

## A CONTEXTUAL APPROACH TO PREHISTORY

The case of Caesar's *De Bello Gallico* has shown that the classical texts, despite problems in interpretation, are indeed an extremely valuable resource in Iron Age archaeology. It has also shown that dealing with these texts requires a highly individualized approach, where context is key not only for the overall work but for every distinct assertion that is made by the ethnographer. This approach is undeniably labor-intensive and interdisciplinary (which creates its own problems). However, the information gleaned from a careful study far outweighs the work involved.

First, it is important to avoid restricting oneself to an overly historical or an overly anthropological approach. Archaeologists would undoubtedly benefit from more thorough study of classical languages and classical texts, while historians focusing on interactions with the Celts are often lacking in an understanding of archaeological and anthropological approaches. While a few recent publications (e.g. Mattingly 1997, Webster and Cooper 1996) aim at redressing the situation, there is still a great deal of room for a comprehensive integration of the two methodologies.

The process of contextual scrutiny can be reduced to a number of considerations that should be investigated for each assertion an author makes. These serve as basic guidelines only and have been created to encourage dialogue and further development:

- The historical background, in both the Mediterranean world and in temperate Europe

- The colonial/imperial context and the various ways in which Greek and Roman cultures impacted the Celtic world

- The historical, social, and political context of individual texts: how, why, and when they were written, and for what audience

- The meaning of the text for its target audience, how Greek and Roman vocabularies were used to describe Celtic societies, the context of the vocabulary in their original language

- The archaeological reality of the author's statements; this involves several of the above considerations as well as an understanding of the pitfalls in interpreting the archaeological record

- The use of literary motifs and appropriation of earlier authors' works that can result in anachronisms and factual inaccuracy

The classical texts, then, are useful tools that merely require a few more caveats than originally thought. By disregarding these texts archaeologists are robbing themselves of information that is often simply not available through excavation. Even when the archaeological evidence is strong, ancient ethnography (when used correctly) can help us to

interpret the archaeology for a fuller understanding of Celtic society. Iron Age archaeologists must avoid the mistakes of the past by neither over- nor under-utilizing classical texts. I have used Caesar as an example of both the benefits and the pitfalls inherent in using classical texts in the hope that a more contextual approach will emerge in the investigation of the ancient sources. A careful study can only help our understanding of this enigmatic period.

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