

# Caesar's Violence in Gaul

## Traditional and Genocidal Narratives on the Roman Conquest of Gaul

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**Trigger Warnings:** Discussions of violence, war, imperial and genocidal intent.

### Abstract:

*This historiography examines the differing portrayals of Caesar's violence in Gaul during the Gallic Wars. It aims to compare and contrast traditional bibliographic narratives with more recent texts analyzing specific events from a genocidal perspective. These texts include a critical article considering the extent of genocide during the conflicts, an archaeological paper arguing that the Romans were indeed genocidal, a traditional biography of Caesar's life, and a somewhat bibliographic historical critique from the perspective of a significant Gallic resistance leader. It also views how these unique texts utilize and interpret their shared primary source. The events this article focuses on are the massacre of two Germanic tribes, the persecution of a Belgic tribe, and finally the destruction of a Gallic town. By emphasizing the circumstances of the native inhabitants of Gaul, who have often been overlooked in favor of the imperialist Roman viewpoint, this article discusses an alternate lens through which to view this conflict and the human cost of Caesar's conquests.*

The Gallic Wars, fought between 58 and 50 BCE, were a series of military campaigns waged by the Roman Republic against several Celtic and Germanic tribes in the ancient region of Gaul. The Roman forces were commanded by Gaius Julius Caesar, who showcased his strategic brilliance alongside his brutality. For Caesar, these conflicts were a pathway to achieve personal prestige and fortune,<sup>1</sup> yet this came at the cost of extreme violence against the native populations, including non-combatants, entailing massacres and enslavements. Over time, historians have interpreted and portrayed Caesar's actions during the Gallic Wars in various ways. This historiography will examine these differing perspectives, comparing and contrasting traditional biographies that glorify his military genius with modern academic articles assessing the morality of his actions.

Caesar provides firsthand accounts of his Gallic campaigns in *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* (commonly translated as *Commentaries on the Gallic War*), the most important primary sources related to the Gallic Wars. However, they are barefacedly shaped by Caesar's perspective, serving as pieces of propaganda.<sup>2</sup> In them, he justifies his military actions by portraying the conflicts as necessary and inevitable,<sup>3</sup> proudly exaggerating the scale of the violence he enacted.<sup>4</sup> Though these sources provide a morally and factually questionable representation of historical events, historians still extensively rely on them. While carefully recognizing their overstatements and dramatizations, they use these texts to

contextualize the Gallic Wars and, more recently, to analyze a narrative of genocide associated with them.

One scholar who uses these primary sources to support his argument is Tristan Taylor, whose 2012 article "Caesar's Gallic Genocide," examines instances of Caesar's mass killings and enslavements during the Gallic Wars, questioning whether they should be classified as genocidal. Taylor argues that, while "Caesar expressed no intention to destroy these peoples," he was nonetheless unhesitant to use violence against them to achieve his goals.<sup>5</sup> Taylor concludes that the "spectrum of mass violence," Caesar employed against the Germanic and Celtic peoples was primarily driven by ruthless imperialist ambition rather than genocidal intent.<sup>6</sup> Another source that analyzes the morality of Caesar's actions during these conflicts is Nico Roymans' 2019 article, "Conquest, mass violence and ethnic stereotyping." Roymans uses archaeological evidence to examine these conflicts' demographic and material-cultural impacts on the native populations. He also argues that the Romans' xenophobic attitudes towards Germanic peoples contributed to the extreme violence Caesar inflicted during the Gallic Wars, which Roymans explicitly labels as genocides.<sup>7</sup>

However, not all scholars have used Caesar's commentaries to argue if the Roman general should be considered a genocidal figure. J.F.C. Fuller, in his 1965 biography *Julius Caesar: Man, Soldier, and Tyrant*, presents a different perspective on Caesar's actions in Gaul. Fuller describes Caesar's life in three main stages: his early years, his major military campaigns, and his later position as dictator of Rome. He praises Caesar as a military leader, classifying him among the greatest generals of the classical age.<sup>8</sup> His criticisms of Caesar during the Gallic Wars focus primarily on his poor organization and overreliance on improvisation<sup>9</sup> rather than the mass violence he widely employed. The article "Vercingetorix," published by G. B. Malleon in 1889, provides a contrasting view to Fuller's by primarily describing the later years of the Gallic Wars from the perspective of Vercingetorix. Through his historical critique, which includes bibliographic

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<sup>1</sup> Braman, "Caesar's invasion of Britain," 3.

<sup>2</sup> Riggsby, *Caesar in Gaul and Rome*, 191.

<sup>3</sup> Ademma, *Speech and Thought in Latin War Narratives: Words of Warriors*, 108–112.

<sup>4</sup> Henige, "He came, he saw, we counted: the historiography and demography of Caesar's Gallic numbers," 215–236.

<sup>5</sup> Henige, "He came, he saw, we counted: the historiography and demography of Caesar's Gallic numbers," 215–236.

<sup>6</sup> Taylor, "Caesar's Gallic Genocide: A Case Study in Ancient Mass Violence," 328–329.

<sup>7</sup> Roymans, "Conquest, mass violence and ethnic stereotyping: investigating Caesar's actions in the Germanic frontier zone," 457–458.

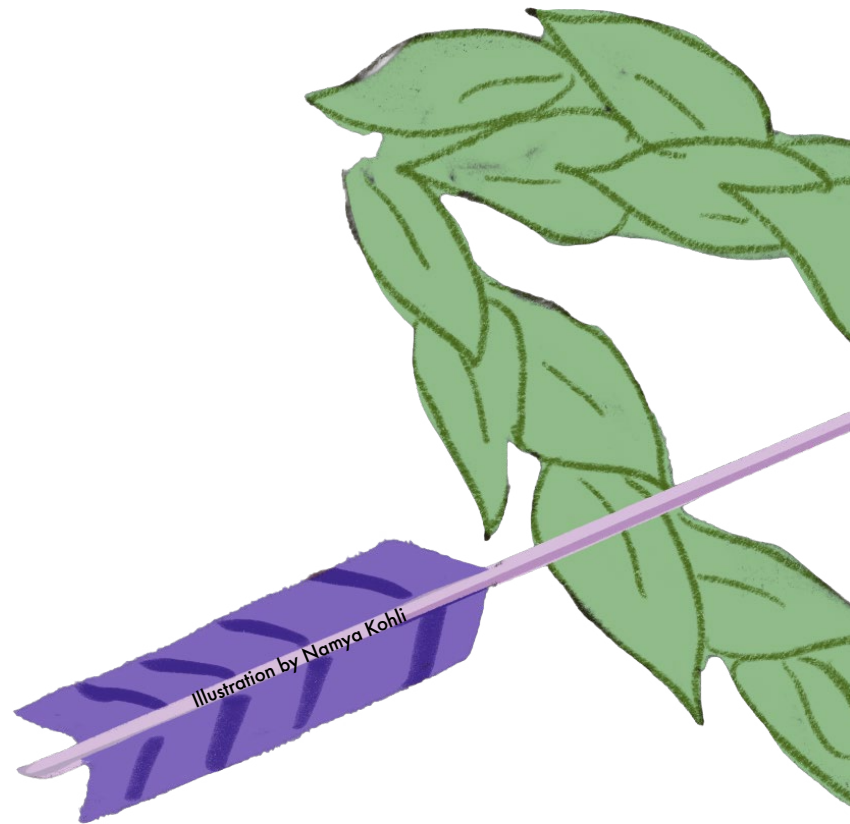
<sup>8</sup> Fuller, *Julius Caesar: Man, Soldier, and Tyrant*, 324.

<sup>9</sup> Fuller, *Julius Caesar: Man, Soldier, and Tyrant*, 316.

elements, Malleson attributes the failure of Vercongetorix's resistance against Caesar to the lack of true unity among the Gallic tribes.<sup>10</sup> These sources reflect the traditional perspective of Caesar, which, while occasionally acknowledging the negative aspects of his actions during the Gallic War, is unconcerned with the genocidal nature of his campaigns.

The first example of Caesar's extreme violence this historiography will examine occurred against the Usipetes and Tencteri. In his commentaries, Caesar describes how these two Germanic tribes were pushed across the Rhine River and settled in Northern Gaul shortly before the Roman military arrived in 55 BCE.<sup>11</sup> Upon learning of Caesar's approach, the tribes sent a message expressing their desire to avoid conflict and requesting permission to remain in Gaul. Caesar, however, rejected their plea and positioned his military forces around them instead.<sup>12</sup> When the Usipetes and Tencteri sent a sizeable delegation of their leaders to apologize and seek peace with the Romans, Caesar had the delegation arrested.<sup>13</sup> Left without their leaders, the remaining Germans – primarily composed of "boys and women,"<sup>14</sup> – panicked and desperately attempted to escape.<sup>15</sup> Despite this, Caesar ordered their massacre, boasting in his commentaries that he allegedly killed 430,000 of them.<sup>16</sup>

The sources analyzing this event from a genocidal perspective offer differing interpretations. Taylor states that Caesar's massacres during the Gallic Wars should be viewed as extreme deterrents and collective punishments rather than attempts to commit genocide.<sup>17</sup> While these actions might seem genocidal,<sup>18</sup> he argues that instances of mass violence like that committed against the Usipetes and Tencteri should be understood within the broader context of Roman expansionism. Taylor suggests these actions should be viewed as harsh "exercise[s] of Roman imperialism," in Gaul rather than deliberate efforts to eradicate these peoples.<sup>19</sup> Roymans, by contrast, settles on a more condemnatory view of Caesar's actions. He agrees with Taylor by asserting that while "Caesar did not display a conscious policy of ethnic cleansing," the results of his actions had



<sup>10</sup> Malleson, "Vercingetorix," 40.

<sup>11</sup> Dewey, *Caesar's Commentaries on the Gallic War*, 170.

<sup>12</sup> Roymans, "A Roman massacre in the far north: Caesar's annihilation of the Tencteri and Usipetes in the Dutch river area," 168–169.

<sup>13</sup> Roymans, "A Roman massacre in the far north: Caesar's annihilation of the Tencteri and Usipetes in the Dutch river area," 169.

<sup>14</sup> McDevitte and Bohn, *The Gallic Wars, Book IV*, Chapter XIV.

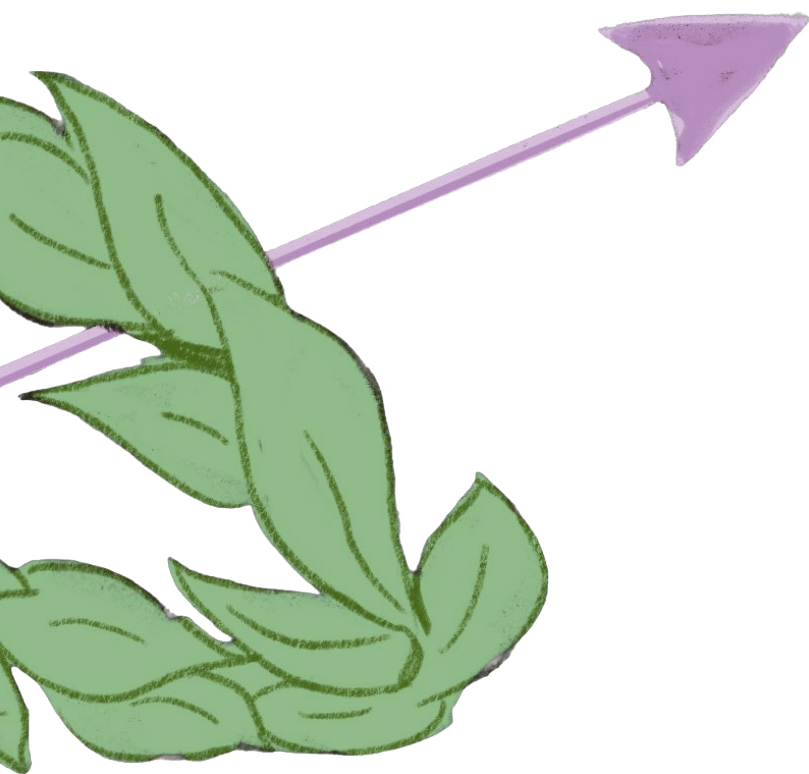
<sup>15</sup> Roymans, "A Roman massacre in the far north: Caesar's annihilation of the Tencteri and Usipetes in the Dutch river area," 168–169.

<sup>16</sup> Dewey, *Caesar's Commentaries on the Gallic War*, 188.

<sup>17</sup> Taylor, "Caesar's Gallic Genocide: A Case Study in Ancient Mass Violence," 328–329.

<sup>18</sup> Taylor, "Caesar's Gallic Genocide: A Case Study in Ancient Mass Violence," 318.

<sup>19</sup> Taylor, "Caesar's Gallic Genocide: A Case Study in Ancient Mass Violence," 329.



the same effect.<sup>20</sup> Unlike Taylor, however, he does not believe that the context of Roman imperialism excuses the genocidal nature of Caesar's actions. Roymans also suggests that Caesar and his soldiers were morally justified and motivated by a cultural and historical prejudice against the 'barbarians' living beyond their borders, particularly the Germanic peoples, enabling the Romans to use extreme violence against them.<sup>21</sup> For Roymans, the slaughter of the Usipetes and Tencteri represented one example in a broader pattern of genocidal violence perpetrated by Caesar.

Fuller, writing from a traditional, bibliographic perspective, offers a unique view into this incident. He praises Caesar's strategic brilliance in subduing the Usipetes and Tencteri leaders, describing it as "cunning bordering on genius."<sup>22</sup> When discussing the massacre itself, Fuller directly quotes Caesar's account of the flight and subsequent slaughter of the women and children.<sup>23</sup> He recognizes the immorality of the act, mentioning how the incident represents an inglorious moment

in Caesar's campaign,<sup>24</sup> aligning with Taylor and Roymans in this way. However, his condemnation is immediately undermined when he praises Caesar again, calling the massacre "one of the most complete victories in history."<sup>25</sup> Ultimately, while Fuller attempts to portray the violence as immoral, the praise he bestows upon Caesar makes his criticism seem insincere. The brutality exemplified during this massacre would continue throughout Caesar's campaigns, notably against the Eburones.

From 54 to 53 BCE, the Eburones, a Belgic tribe, revolted against the Roman military stationed in northern Gaul. The uprising was sparked when the nearby Roman winter camps requisitioned resources from the local population, despite the poor harvest that year.<sup>26</sup> In response, Caesar returned to Gaul the following spring with ten legions,<sup>27</sup> intent on hunting down Ambiorix, the revolt's instigator and the surviving king of the Eburones. However, Caesar's motivation extended beyond his desire for revenge against the Belgic leadership. In his commentaries, he expresses an intense determination to eradicate "the race and name," of the Eburones entirely.<sup>28</sup> He describes his intention to destroy the Eburones' foodstuffs, shelters, and inhabitants so thoroughly that no survivors could return to normalcy after he finished.<sup>29</sup> This led to a "severe and systematic"<sup>30</sup> campaign that targeted the rebellious Eburones and their broader population. Despite this widescale destruction and mass violence, Ambiorix still managed to evade Caesar.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Roymans, "Conquest, mass violence and ethnic stereotyping: investigating Caesar's actions in the Germanic frontier zone," 457.

<sup>21</sup> Roymans, "Conquest, mass violence and ethnic stereotyping: investigating Caesar's actions in the Germanic frontier zone," 457.

<sup>22</sup> Fuller, *Julius Caesar: Man, Soldier, and Tyrant*, 120.

<sup>23</sup> Fuller, *Julius Caesar: Man, Soldier, and Tyrant*, 120.

<sup>24</sup> Fuller, *Julius Caesar: Man, Soldier, and Tyrant*, 120.

<sup>25</sup> Fuller, *Julius Caesar: Man, Soldier, and Tyrant*, 120.

<sup>26</sup> Burns, *Romanization and Acculturation: The Rhineland Matronae*, 43.

<sup>27</sup> Burns, *Romanization and Acculturation: The Rhineland Matronae*, 36.

<sup>28</sup> Dewey, *Caesar's Commentaries on the Gallic War*, 343.

<sup>29</sup> McDevitte and Bohn, *The Gallic Wars, Book VIII, Chapter XXIV*.

<sup>30</sup> Burns, *Romanization and Acculturation: The Rhineland Matronae*, 39.

<sup>31</sup> Burns, *Romanization and Acculturation: The Rhineland Matronae*, 62.

In contrast to the massacre of the Usipetes and Tencteri, there is more consensus among the sources focusing on the genocidal narrative about this instance. Taylor explicitly states his opinion about this incident, describing Caesar's actions as "undeniably genocidal."<sup>32</sup> Of all the instances of mass violence during the Gallic Wars, Taylor argues that the atrocities Caesar inflicted on the Eburones most closely resemble genocide.<sup>33</sup> He points to Caesar's blatant admission that he intended to destroy the Eburones as an ethnic group<sup>34</sup> as incriminating evidence.<sup>35</sup> Roymans also addresses the Romans' brutality against the Eburones in his article, though less directly than Taylor. He mentions how northern Gaul experienced an especially high degree of Roman violence, particularly due to Caesar's relentless pursuit of Ambiorix.<sup>36</sup> He also emphasizes how the Eburones were heavily targeted by the Romans' scorched-earth policy,<sup>37</sup> a strategy that undoubtedly had long-term consequences on the local population. Ultimately, both authors underscore the significant violence and brutality that the Romans inflicted upon the Eburones.

Like Taylor and Roymans, Fuller briefly touches on the scale of the destruction.<sup>38</sup> However, he minimizes the sheer scale of Caesar's devastation by describing it as a mere

"harassing campaign."<sup>39</sup> While Fuller draws on the same sources as the previously mentioned authors (Caesar's commentaries), he neglects to mention the overtness with which Caesar expresses his desire to exterminate the Eburones. Instead, he only alludes to this using another author's description of Caesar's destructive campaign.<sup>40</sup> In summary, Fuller fails to mention the true extent of Caesar's genocidal intent toward the Eburones and downplays the elements he does discuss. Nonetheless, the violence Fuller does touch upon would reappear as Caesar continued conquering Gaul, notably following the Siege of Avaricum.

In 52 BCE, Caesar faced renewed resistance in his conquest of Gaul when Vercingetorix, the chief of the Arverni tribe, united a diverse coalition of Gauls to revolt against the ongoing Roman annexation.<sup>41</sup> One of the earliest major engagements of this revolt occurred at Avaricum, the largest and most fortified settlement in the territory of the Bituriges tribes,<sup>42</sup> which had been spared from Vercingetorix's thorough scorched-earth campaign.<sup>43</sup> With dwindling supplies due to his army's inability to forage the local area, Caesar chose to besiege Avaricum.<sup>44</sup> When the Romans eventually breached the walls, Caesar claims his troops pillaged the settlement and slaughtered 40,000 inhabitants, noting that "they spared neither (those) worn out with age, nor women nor children."<sup>45</sup>

Taylor highlights the significance of Avaricum's residents belonging to the Bituriges tribes.<sup>46</sup> He argues that this targeted massacre of non-combatants from this specific ethnic group was not committed with the intent of deliberately eliminating the Bituriges entirely. Instead, Taylor suggests that this violence served as retribution for resisting Roman interests,<sup>47</sup> aiming to send a brutal message to the remaining Bituriges and other Gallic tribes. Once again, Taylor asserts that this act of mass violence was driven by imperialist ambition rather than genocidal intent.

Fuller also discusses the bloodshed that transpired at Avaricum. He paints a harrowing scene of the wives and children of Avaricum begging Vercingetorix not to leave them

<sup>32</sup> Taylor, "Caesar's Gallic Genocide: A Case Study in Ancient Mass Violence," 326.

<sup>33</sup> Taylor, "Caesar's Gallic Genocide: A Case Study in Ancient Mass Violence," 329.

<sup>34</sup> Dewey, *Caesar's Commentaries on the Gallic War*, 343.

<sup>35</sup> Taylor, "Caesar's Gallic Genocide: A Case Study in Ancient Mass Violence," 318.

<sup>36</sup> Roymans, "Conquest, mass violence and ethnic stereotyping: investigating Caesar's actions in the Germanic frontier zone," 456.

<sup>37</sup> Roymans, "Conquest, mass violence and ethnic stereotyping: investigating Caesar's actions in the Germanic frontier zone," 443.

<sup>38</sup> Fuller, *Julius Caesar: Man, Soldier, and Tyrant*, 131.

<sup>39</sup> Fuller, *Julius Caesar: Man, Soldier, and Tyrant*, 131.

<sup>40</sup> Fuller, *Julius Caesar: Man, Soldier, and Tyrant*, 131.

<sup>41</sup> Matias, "Vercingetorix," 6.

<sup>42</sup> Dewey, *Caesar's Commentaries on the Gallic War*, 372.

<sup>43</sup> Krausz, "Gauls under Siege: Defending against Rome," 165.

<sup>44</sup> Gilliver, *Caesar's Gallic Wars*, 58-50 BC, 51-60.

<sup>45</sup> Dewey, *Caesar's Commentaries on the Gallic War*, 392.

<sup>46</sup> Taylor, "Caesar's Gallic Genocide: A Case Study in Ancient Mass Violence," 320-321.

<sup>47</sup> Taylor, "Caesar's Gallic Genocide: A Case Study in Ancient Mass Violence," 321.



to the Romans.<sup>48</sup> Despite pleas from the innocents, he ignores them and proceeds to leave. While Fuller acknowledges Vercingetorix's excellent leadership abilities,<sup>49</sup> this callous depiction undermines his praise. When the Romans arrived, Fuller reiterates Caesar's justification for his troops' brutality.<sup>50</sup> Fuller then attributes the massacre at Avaricum as a consequence of Vercingetorix's apathy and the short-sightedness of the Buturiges.<sup>51</sup> Rather than placing responsibility for the bloodshed on Caesar and the Romans, as Taylor does, Fuller shifts the blame to the Gauls instead, suggesting that the massacre was an inevitable result of their actions.

Finally, Malleson provides an account of the massacre at Avaricum orientated from the perspective of Vercingetorix. He is more upfront with assigning guilt to Caesar, mentioning how he allowed the inhabitants of Avaricum to be senselessly slaughtered.<sup>52</sup> However, like Fuller, Malleson also assigns blame to the Gauls themselves. He argues that Vercingetorix's failure to convince the Gallic council to destroy Avaricum as part of his scorched-earth strategy<sup>53</sup> contributed to the subsequent Roman massacre. This perspective portrays the Romans as an unstoppable, bloodletting force that could have been avoided if the Gauls had succeeded in razing Avaricum themselves.

Vercingetorix's defeat at the climactic Battle of Alesia in late 52 BCE was a turning point for the Roman subjugation of Gaul. With this last major attempt at Gallic resistance snuffed, the Romans pursued mopping-up operations and politically consolidated the region. Viewing how modern scholars interpret the Gallic Wars in hindsight is like looking through a kaleidoscope of perspectives. The time and academic angle someone researches and writes on it from is certainly one explanation

for the wide variety of interpretations. Another could be the source they almost universally draw upon. Caesar's *Commentaries on the Gallic War*, containing some details that are at best aggrandized and at worst entirely fabricated, force each author to discern the truth between the lines.

The traditional and genocidal narratives on the Gallic Wars offer contrasting perspectives on the same conflicts. Taylor and Roymans, though they are not in complete agreement, both provide a critical postcolonial retrospective on a millennia-old historical discussion, previously sustained by traditional authors like Fuller and Malleson. The academic debate over whether Caesar's extreme violence in Gaul should be considered genocidal challenges the dominant black-and-white understanding of the Gallic Wars, which typically portrays the Romans as an unstoppable military force under Caesar's brilliant leadership. By focusing on the impact on the Gallic population, the genocidal narrative humanizes the Celtic and Germanic tribes inhabiting the region, underscoring the human cost of Caesar's unwavering ambition.

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<sup>48</sup> Fuller, *Julius Caesar: Man, Soldier, and Tyrant*, 137.

<sup>49</sup> Fuller, *Julius Caesar: Man, Soldier, and Tyrant*, 138.

<sup>50</sup> Fuller, *Julius Caesar: Man, Soldier, and Tyrant*, 138.

<sup>51</sup> Fuller, *Julius Caesar: Man, Soldier, and Tyrant*, 138.

<sup>52</sup> Malleson, "Vercingetorix," 20.

<sup>53</sup> Malleson, "Vercingetorix," 19.

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