Carsten Savage

Professor Lieberman

Disasters of the Ancient Mediterranean

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The Battle of Gergovia

In *Annales I*, Tacitus describes the brutality of Lucilius, a centurion who enjoyed whipping his legionaries so much that when one vine-staff broke, he would request another (1.23). Centurions, Tacitus suggests, were intimidating warriors; to the Roman legionnaires, they could be absolutely frightening. Yet, Julius Caesar lost no fewer than forty-six centurions and seven hundred soldiers in 52 B.C. to Vercingetorix at Gergovia, a heavily-fortified town located in southern France and controlled by the Arverni tribe. The battle was disastrous. Nonetheless, Caesar transformed the defeat into a political tool by showcasing exemplary Roman virtue and leadership. Julius Caesar's presentation of the Battle of Gergovia in Book VII of *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* is partial to Rome because Caesar's agenda and status as proconsul color his assessments of the events. Consequently, Caesar both glorifies Rome and downplays the significance of the defeat to please his elite Roman audience.

Caesar's portrayal of the Aedui, Arverni, and the Roman legions is biased as a consequence of both Roman propaganda and his desire for a respectable reputation among the Roman elite. Caesar sought to paint the Gallic Wars as a preventive war, and he does so in his description of Gergovia. Caesar writes that he ordered the captives Eporedirix and Viridomarus, soldiers of the enemy Aedui tribe, to return home and greet their brothers (7.40). Upon seeing the generosity on behalf of Rome, the Aedui "[laid] down their arms to deprecate death" (7.40). To his audience, Caesar has one message: He seeks peace, and his only objective is ensuring

Rome's protection—no matter what the people back home say. The proconsul proudly states that those he could have killed were "spared through his kindness" (7.41), a phrase that reinforces his inherent benevolence. Yet, there is a deeper connotation: Caesar believes himself a just leader who can handle extreme power responsibly. In his demonstration of his morality, the proconsul has begun convincing the Roman elite that initiating the Battle of Gergovia was no rash, blood-thirsty decision.

Caesar draws comparisons between the two armies to necessitate the Battle of Gergovia. As they are marching towards their camp after having delivered the Aedui captives, messengers inform them that their camp has been assaulted by an army of Gauls (7.41). Caesar is thus able to justify the subsequent battles. While his honorable soldiers were marching back to camp, the treacherous Aedui covertly attacked his camp and ruined any chance to establish peace between the two factions. Caesar hints that the Gauls took advantage of civilized, benevolent Rome; there was no choice but to engage the Gauls in war. In comparison, the Aedui and Arverni—as proven by their rashness—are men who "consider a slight rumor as an ascertained fact" (7.42) and would attack Caesar's legions regardless of the legitimacy of their cause. Caesar may not be proud of the forthcoming conflict, but he convinces the audience that it was inevitable.

Through his literature, Caesar is able to soften the defeat at Gergovia by emphasizing the Roman soldiers' virtues and his own military prowess, creating a sense of hope. Caesar writes that Vercingetorix's soldiers had the high ground, and Caesar—out of concern for the safety of his enthusiastic soldiers (7.49)—sounded the trumpet to signal retreat. The legions did not hear it, however, and thinking "nothing so difficult that their bravery could not accomplish it" (7.47), mounted Gergovia's wall and met the enemy (7.47). Caesar draws the attention away from the soldiers' error of judgement and towards the courage and zeal of his men. He reinforces this in

his statement that the Gauls depended on “position and numbers” (7.50) while his men on “their bravery” (7.50), praising the attributes of the Roman soldier and alluding to the glory of Rome. By these means, Caesar is able to overshadow his men’s mistake.

Once it is obvious that the Roman legions are being decimated in a losing battle, Caesar decides to focus on individual examples of Roman heroism, as demonstrated by his recount of centurion Marcus Petreius. He writes that the centurion ordered his legion to retreat and then barreled into the enemy forces, “[saving] his men by his own death” (7.50). He implies that there are many heroes among Romans; crises are the moments during which they emerge, displaying the unmatched bravery of the Roman soldier in the face of the enemy. The proconsul is careful not to describe any acts of fearlessness or skill among Vercingetorix’s forces—an expected bias due to his allegiance and position. The descriptions of his legions establish an optimistic tone as Caesar transforms the disaster into an unlikely source of confidence and pride.

Caesar concludes his description of the Battle of Gergovia with a message to Rome’s political elite: He and his men have learned from their military failure. During a meeting, the proconsul tells the legions that although he “admired the greatness of their courage” (7.52), he is disappointed that they thought “they knew more than their general concerning victory” (7.52). Caesar accomplishes two reputation-reinforcing feats. He simultaneously demonstrates that he is an empathetic leader and subtly shifts the blame wholly onto his soldiers; if only they had listened to him, Rome would have been victorious. By transforming the disaster into a learning experience, Caesar conveys to the Roman politicians that he is a capable, evolving political force who will not repeat his mistakes and can be trusted with more power.

Due to Caesar’s bias, Book VII creates just as many questions as it answers. Since it is the only existing record of the battle, most of the details concerning Vercingetorix’s forces are

unknown. A Roman during the 1st century BC may not have been concerned with the enemy, but to modern scholars, the lack of sources is frustrating. They do not know the losses that Vercingetorix's army suffered, nor do they understand the king's tactics in any real detail. What were examples of courage and selflessness on the part of the Gauls? Did the Aedui and Arverni believe it was possible to defeat—or at least drive away—the republic? The lack of sources from the Gauls' point of view, therefore, makes modern interpretations of the Battle of Gergovia inherently historically inaccurate and ironic; comics and movies celebrating the Gauls' victory must rely on a Roman source. If both Caesar and Vercingetorix had written accounts of what they experienced at Gergovia, historians would have a far superior comprehension of the battle.

As a proconsul of Rome, Caesar naturally allowed his pride in his civilization to bias his retelling of the Battle of Gergovia. He chose to describe the battle in a way that would benefit him politically, meticulously selecting specific moments and people to glorify the Republic and please his powerful audience. To truly understand the conflict, however, this is not sufficient; regardless of how detailed and historically-accurate Caesar's account may be, the need for another perspective will always persist.

Works Cited

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