

IB Extended Essay

May 2021

An Examination of Accuracy of Julius Caesar's *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*

Research Question: To what extent were Julius Caesar's writings in *Commentarii de Bello*

Gallico accurate?

Subject Area: Classical Greek and Latin Studies

Word Count: 3876

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Introduction

Estimated Word Count: 568

Julius Caesar's *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* is a collection of Julius Caesar's written accounts of his conquests in the Gallic Wars. It contains descriptions of battles, logistics, and simple facts and figures. It is split up into seven original books of varying lengths which are all narrated from the third-person point of view.

The Gallic Wars took place from 58 BC to 50 BC. It was in 59 BC that Caesar had secured the position of proconsul over Cisalpine Gaul, Illyricum, and then also Transalpine Gaul (Von Ungern-Sternberg, Jürgen). Caesar's Gallic Wars took place amidst the Crisis of the Roman Republic, a period of immense political instability and social unrest. In the greater context of the time period, in 59 BC it was only 50 years prior when several Gallic tribes made an incursion into northern Italy, only to be rebuffed by Gaius Marius (Walter, Gerard). It was also only 28 years prior that the series of civil wars between Gaius Marius and Lucius Cornelius Sulla had ended.

The purposes of Caesar's conquests of Gaul were to consolidate power and relieve himself of his personal debt which he had developed through his consistent use of bribery as a political tactic ("The Life of Julius Caesar"). It was widely known that certain parts of Gaul were very wealthy, and Caesar planned to exploit this fact through his conquest. Caesar intended to consolidate power by depicting himself as a war hero. His conquests were meant to show the Roman populace that he was a great general that tamed the foreign, uncivilized, and dangerous provinces to the north. It was for this purpose that Caesar wrote in the third person point of view

so that he could lend his writing an air of objectivity (“Caesar's Gallic War”) as if it had been written by a historian and not himself.

In order to properly examine any author, Julius Caesar included, one must hold an understanding of the author himself. Growing up, Gaius Julius Caesar enjoyed the standard education and life of any child of a moderately influential family. His father who was governor of the province of Asia, died around the same time Caesar came of age. Caesar’s initial career saw him become the *Flamen Dialis* or High Priest of Jupiter. However, this also coincided with the civil wars between Marius and Sulla. Sulla’s eventual victory led to Caesar losing his title due to his family’s support for Marius. The loss of his priesthood, however, allowed him to begin his political and military career (“The Life of Julius Caesar”).

He advanced through the political ranks, at different points serving as Aedile, Praetor, Quaestor, and Pontifex Maximus. Then in 60 BC, he relinquished his military command so as to run for consulship. With the support of Marcus Crassus and Gnaeus Pompeius, he became consul in 59 BC and formed the First Triumvirate. It was during his consulship of 59 BC that he secured his territories in Gaul, and at the end of his term, in order to avoid prosecution for some of the questionable tactics he employed during his consulship, such as bribery, intimidation, and illegal imprisonment (“Gaius Julius Caesar: Consul”), he left immediately for his provinces in Gaul. It was there, with four legions under his command, that he began his conquest of Gaul in 58 BC, so as to alleviate his debts and grow in power (“The Life of Julius Caesar”).

Exploration

Subsection 1 - Examples/Proof of Accuracy

Estimated Word Count: 688

In order to explore the accuracy of *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*, the first natural step is to examine a few of the instances within the text where Caesar writes with confirmable accuracy. The best way to do this is to look at times where Caesar provides specific and verifiable facts that can be checked through corroborations with modern sources. There are two great points that will be examined in this section in which Caesar provides ample opportunities to do this. The first is when Caesar provides very specific facts and figures about his disembarkment and landing in Britannia. The second is Caesar's description of the battle of Alesia.

In the fifth book, Caesar writes about how he invaded Britannia, and he provides several specific facts as to how he did it. Modern archeological evidence has not only confirmed that he did, in fact, sail to Britannia through the discovery and excavation of his launching and landing sites but is also able to corroborate several of the specific facts that Caesar provides. A 2018 article in *Current Archeology* describes how archeological evidence was found that proves a 1st century BC Roman presence in Britain, which must have been Caesar because no other Roman excursion is recorded. About the site, the article says "near the bottom of the ditch we found a mix of mid-1st-century BC pottery, human and animal bone, and the tip of an iron weapon. When conserved, the object was revealed to be a Roman spear or pilum" (Krakowka). Such facts prove a Roman presence, and the article then confirms it was Caesar when it says, "the flat-bottomed ditch is very similar in size and shape to the Roman siege works at Alésia"

(Krakowka). It was Caesar who fought at Alesia, so, evidence similar to that found at Alesia proves that it was Caesar.

So there is evidence that supports the idea that Caesar invaded Britannia, but the same article is also able to corroborate the specific facts that Caesar provides. In book five of *de Bello Gallico*, Caesar writes about the preparation for launch, specifically saying that “about six hundred ships ... and twenty-eight ships of war, had been built” (Caesar 5.2). He then goes on to say “with five legions and a number of horse, equal to that which he was leaving on the continent, set sail at sunset” (Caesar 5.8). Those are very specific details, but the archeological evidence confirms them. The *Current Archeology* article says that “Caesar’s description of an open shore is consistent with Pegwell Bay, and with 600 ships and an army of perhaps 20,000 men and at least 2,000 horses to land in a single day” (Krakowka). With 4,000 to 5,000 men in a legion, the five legions that Caesar writes of could easily be 20,000, and the number of ships that Caesar writes about is confirmed to be spot on.

Similarly, Caesar’s account at the battle of Alesia can be confirmed as well. Caesar, when writing about the wall around Alesia claims that it was eleven Roman miles long (Caesar 7.69). That is an extremely specific figure and given that the Roman only had about 30 days to construct fortification, it seems unlikely. However, modern archeological evidence confirms that “he set his industrious soldiers to building a new wall around the walls of Alesia. This tactic, called a circumvallation, was entirely new. The wall they built was ten miles long” (“The Great Circumvallation of Alesia”). Ten modern miles is almost exactly 11 Roman miles, which indicates that, once again, Caesar’s account was accurate.

The purpose of these pieces of evidence and modern corroborations is to show that at a basic level, Caesar's account was accurate. His wars in Gaul did occur, and, for the most part, he related them accurately. He really did sail to Britannia with 5 legions and 600 ships, and he really did build a 10-mile wall around Alesia in 30 days. His commentaries were not entirely a fabrication. However, this essay will continue to investigate whether or not it may have comprised some smaller fabrications and inaccuracies.

Subsection 2 - Examples/Proof of Inaccuracies

Estimated Word Count: 721

In order to provide a comprehensive exploration of the work from all angles, several instances of inaccuracy in Caesar's *de Bello Gallico* must also be examined. There will be two instances specifically examined in this section. The first is from book one and provides numbers for a battle which Caesar won. The second is in book six and is a description of moose that Caesar encountered in Britannia.

The first instance describes how Caesar found a ledger of sorts which contained in it the number of men from each Gallic tribe that had joined the fight against Caesar. Caesar specifically writes:

“In the camp of the Helvetii, lists were found, drawn up in Greek characters, and were brought to Caesar, in which an estimate had been drawn up, name by name, of the number which had gone forth from their country of those who were able to bear arms; and likewise the boys, the old men, and the women, separately. Of all which items the total was: Of the Helvetii [lit. of the heads of the Helvetii] 263,000. Of the Tulingi 36,000. Of the Latobrigi 14,000. Of the Rauraci 23,000. Of the Boii 32,000. The sum of all amounted to 368,000” (Caesar 1.29).

Right away, the clearly-noticeable problem with this account is that those numbers are unbelievably high.

Their veracity was investigated by David Henige in his book on the numbers that Caesar presents at various points. He writes that “as unlikely as these numbers are, the way that Caesar

purportedly learned it is even more extraordinary. He wrote that ‘[i]n the camp of the Helveti were ... records [*tabulae*] written out in Greek letters, wherein was drawn up a register of names [*tabulis nominatim*] ... Why record the names of all the members of the tribe? ... how would it have been possible to do this for so many ... And why Greek letters, and by whom?’ (Henige 217). So, not only are the numbers that Caesar provides infeasible because other ancient historians, such as Orosius, place the number the Gauls much lower than Caesar at closer to 157,000 (Henige 218), but the way in which Caesar acquired the information is infeasible. It simply does not make sense for Caesar to have found a ledge containing such valuable information, and it makes even less sense for it to have been written in Greek. It is true that, in this case, there is no modern evidence to deductively prove that Caesar was not writing accurately, but common sense can be used to deduce that his number must be exaggerations because if they weren’t, then during the battle with these supposed 368,000 enemies, Caesar’s army would have had to kill about 1,000 enemy soldiers for every minute of battle (Henige 233), which is simply implausible.

The second instance is Caesar’s description of an animal that he encountered in Britannia. He writes:

“there are also [animals] which are called moose [*alces*]. The shape of these, and the varied color of their skins, is much like roes, but in size they surpass them a little and are destitute of horns, and have legs without joints and ligatures; nor do they lie down for the purpose of rest, nor, if they have been thrown down by any accident, can they raise or lift themselves up. Trees serve as beds to them; they lean themselves against them, and thus reclining only slightly, they take their rest;” he then goes on to say “when they have leant

upon them, according to their habit, they knock down by their weight the unsupported trees, and fall down themselves along with them” (Caesar 6.27).

The description that he provides is almost comical. The animal is definitely recognizable, however, there are certain parts of his description that do not seem quite right.

The two instances of inaccuracy that have been examined both represent different types of inaccuracy. It needs to be understood that *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* is a long work written for a multitude of purposes. So, even in the realm of inaccuracies, there are many different types, and in order to attain a complete understanding, all types must be examined. What those types are and the implications that they bring will be examined later in this paper.

Subsection 3 - Evaluation of the Overall Accuracy of the Text

Estimated Word Count: 417

As was previously stated, the accuracy of *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* is not clear-cut. In fact, the question of the definitive accuracy of *de Bello Gallico* has been a point debated by scholars for a long time. Historian Harry Burton relates one argument that “the first book of the Commentaries is obscure and misleading, that it does not describe the real situation in Gaul or state what actually happened, and that these defects are in a way intent” (Burton 147). On the other hand, there are those views about the same book that would say that Caesar did do a good job of capturing the many cultural and political nuance of the different parts of Gaul and that “Caesar does not represent the Gauls as a static group in terms of culture and civilisation” (Midford, Sarah). Because there are many different opinions that come from many different places, the best way to investigate the overall accuracy of the work is a balanced discussion.

There are instances of both accuracy and inaccuracy in *de Bello Gallico* and they exist in different ways. Concerning the accuracies, Caesar’s accounts of what happened on a wide scale appear to be correct. He really did engage in the battle he said he did, he really did sail to Britannia, and he really did encounter all the different tribes and cultures that he writes about. As for the inaccuracies, they seem to exist within the more specific, and often quantitative details about what happened. The number of enemies his army defeats and the time that they defeat them in do not seem to be entirely true. He also often leaves out the number of troops that he lost in various battles. Now, that’s not to say that every quantitative fact that Caesar provides is false. There are more than plenty of instances where Caesar provides numbers that seem perfectly accurate, like the length of the wall at Alesia or the number of ships that sailed to Britain.

However, there are also several inaccuracies that pertain to non-quantitative details, such as Caesar's descriptions of fauna like the moose or his specific descriptions of Gallic practices which seem slightly inaccurate. Overall, the accuracy of *de Bello Gallico* is not a definitively answerable question. Caesar's account consists of a mix of accuracy and inaccuracy. However, to put it simply, it could be said that all of the major events that Caesar recount did in fact happen, but some of the smaller details are not entirely accurate.

Subsection 4 - Are the inaccuracies Intentional or Unintentional

Estimated Word Count: 469

It has been said that there are inaccuracies of multiple different types within *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*. The following question then is why are there inaccuracies. Are they intentional? Are they accidental stemming from a lack of knowledge on Caesar's part? As it was stated in the previous section, the answer is probably a mixture of both, and in order to find that answer, both types of inaccuracies that have been identified should be examined.

First, it has already been established that Caesar's accounts of battles relate impossibly high figures for the number of enemy soldiers, as exemplified by his description of the ledger in book one. The natural first instinct is that these impossible figures are embellishments. David Henige writes that "Caesar's commentaries exemplify and exploit a topos ... in which warfare is envisaged at the triumph of godliness and civilization, as represented by the few, over godlessness and barbarism, represented by numberless faceless masses" (Henige 228). He brings up the idea that Caesar was trying to conjure the image that countless barbarians in unfathomable numbers threw themselves in waves at the Romans, only to ultimately fall before those for whom conquest is a birthright. Caesar has everything to gain by embellishing these numbers. Also, it is important to look at how he learns of the impossible figures. Caesar would have learned if the numbers he found were inaccurate and thus he would not have included them. It is just not feasible for any of the numbers to be purposefully inaccurate. So, it is perfectly in order to assume that any inaccuracy pertaining to the number of enemies conquered was most certainly intentional.

The second type of inaccuracy that was examined was more detail-oriented and mostly non-quantitative, of which the example was Caesar's description of a moose in book six. Obviously, the existence of the moose is not inaccurate and there is no reason to assume that Caesar did not encounter them in Britain. Rather, it is the details of his description of them that seem inaccurate. Caesar writes things like "[they] have legs without joints and ligatures" and "trees serve as beds to them" (Caesar 6.27). The possible reasons as to why these inaccuracies would be intentional are scarce. Of course, Caesar could be trying to paint a picture of a foreign land with strange beasts that do not resemble anything the Romans are familiar with. However, that seems unlikely. It is much more probable that this and other inaccuracies like it are unintentional.

It has already been established that, while the larger events of *de Bello Gallico* are accurate, not everything is true. However, as had demonstrated, not all inaccuracies were intentional and thus impactful to the credibility of Caesar. Some inaccuracies certainly were intentional, but it is important to note that not all were.

Subsection 5 - Exploration of the Reasoning behind Intentional Inaccuracies**Estimated Word Count:** 579

Caesar would not have included intentional inaccuracies on a whim. In fact, the whole point of them being intentional is that Caesar must have had a reason to include them. To uncover these reasons, one must look back at the reason why Caesar went to Gaul and wrote *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* in general. He went to Gaul to consolidate power and to relieve himself of debt. Now, writing *de Bello Gallico* would not help with his debt, however, it would help him gain power in more ways than one. By writing *de Bello Gallico* Caesar knew that he would not only gain political and military power in his own time, but it would also help toward the goal for which all great men throughout history have strived; it would help secure him a legacy and cement his place in history. Caesar did not write *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* just to be a war hero but also to play the roles of scientist and historian.

In many ways, Gaul and its provinces represented the frontier to the Romans. By braving that frontier and recording what he saw, Caesar believed that he could go down in history as a historian like Herodotus or Thucydides. Evidence that Caesar wanted to be a historian can be plainly seen in the fact that he included descriptions of things like moose or the specific cultural practices of different Gallic tribes. *De Bello Gallico* is not just a military account, and if Caesar really only wanted to gain military and political power, then it would have just been a military account.

So then, the question of how this fact pertains to intentional inaccuracies arises. When Caesar exaggerates or includes false details about how Rome tamed Gaul while writing from the position of a historical or scientific scholar, he is essentially writing about how Roman culture,

Roman history, and Roman scientific innovation triumph over those of Gaul. Caesar not only gets to be a great historian but also wins over the people of Rome with a powerful display of nationalism and the unstoppable of the might of Rome.

Ultimately though, the paramount reason for Caesar's writing of *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* was to win over the Roman people by propping himself up and thus gaining political power. Caesar's writings were sent back to Rome as he wrote them. Every time one of his writings would arrive, the influential members of the Roman populace would be treated to tales of conquest and victory in which Julius Caesar was the hero and star. This, then, provides the greatest reason for the inclusion of intentional inaccuracies. As David Henige wrote, "Caesar occasionally found it expedient to subordinate accuracy to effect" (Henige 215-216). He embellishes, he changes details and numbers, and at some points, he may even lie; however, it is all to make his account more majestic and fantastical. It is also noteworthy that Caesar does this while simultaneously conveying an air of authority and objectiveness. That is why all of the commentaries are written in the third person in a matter-of-fact tone. Caesar wants it to seem as though the reader has no reason to doubt him of his account because after all, it is just a dutiful and reflective relation of what happened in Gaul. The most significant reason for Caesar's inclusion of intentional inaccuracies is that he wanted to paint a picture of himself as an unstoppable hero who conquers all in the name of Rome.

Conclusion

Estimated Word Count: 434

Julius Caesar's *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* contains many different types of both accuracies and inaccuracies. In this paper, examples of those different types were examined and investigated. With regard to the accuracies, the veracity of Caesar's account of one of the larger events or plot points was examined. That was his sailing to and landing in Britannia. By using modern archeological evidence, Caesar's account was corroborated. An example of Caesar providing accuracy in a smaller quantitative detail was also examined. That was his description of the wall around Alesia. It was also confirmed using modern archeological evidence. With regard to the inaccuracies, this paper looked at an example of when Caesar provided inaccurate quantitative details and an example where he provided an inaccurate description of something completely foreign to him. The former was the ledger Caesar found which numbered the Gallic troops to be over 350,000, and the latter was Caesar's description of Moose in Britannia. The examination of examples of different types of both accuracies and inaccuracies provided a comprehensive investigation of the entire text.

With that investigation as a background, conclusions could be drawn about the overall accuracies of *de Bello Gallico*. Now, as was proven by the investigation it is impossible to definitively label *de Bello Gallico* as accurate or inaccurate because it is a mixture of both. That sentiment has been reflected by numerous professional opinions and the continued debate on the topic. The best way to label the accuracy of *de Bello Gallico* would be to say that the major event and plot points are accurate, however some, but not all, of the minor details, are inaccurate.

The question then shifts to whether or not the inaccuracies were intentional and what the implication of that is for Caesar and the text as a whole. The inaccuracies exemplified by the impossible figures that Caesar presents in book one are most likely intentional embellishments. While those inaccuracies exemplified by Caesar's inaccurate description of moose are more likely to be unintentional mistakes. The intentional mistakes, in particular, are significant because they are proof of Caesar's ambitions to gain power in both the form of political control and historical legacy. He wanted the people of Rome to see him as a scientist or historian, and most importantly, he wanted them to see him as an incredible military commander who is destined to lead Rome. So, while Julius Caesar's *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* is largely accurate, there are many inaccuracies, and many of those were purposefully written in, and through a historical lens, can be seen as proof of Caesar's desire for power.

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